

THE FIFTH PRECEPT

And Its

CONCEPTION

Kumbha Jataka

Story 512

I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from taking any intoxicant (liquor) or drug that causes forgetfulness.



Toddy Palm Drink (Htan Ye)



Drunkard

Introduction: I always wonder how the five precepts come about in the world of Buddhism? Per this Jataka story, it was Wi Tha Kha, who asked Buddha this question. Buddha then gave her the origination of drinking intoxicants in pre-Buddha's time. It is so interesting to know that 500 hundreds of Wi Tha Kha's

female friends were all drunkard reveling, danced, some sang, some stumbled around drunkenly shamelessly before the Buddha and how Buddha subdued them to be a good Buddhist. Wi Tha Kha asked the critical question of the day:

"Venerable sir, what is the origin of this custom of drinking alcohol, which destroys a person's modesty and sense of shame?"

Buddha said it all it all started, long, long time ago, by **Sura** (a hunter) and a **Veruma**, a hermit.

To repeat the five precepts here, as a reminder, the fifth precept comes last for all lay devotees to observe, as a daily routine:

- ¹ I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from killing any living beings.
- ² I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from taking what is not given to me by the owner.
- ³ I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from committing sexual misconduct
- ⁴ I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from telling lies
- ⁵ I pledge to observe the precept of abstaining from taking any intoxicant (liquor) or drug that causes forgetfulness.

This habit of drinking of intoxicant could have been carried with them by the **Ari Monks** to Myanmar in Pre-King **Anawratha** time? This is what the liquor could do for any one who drinks:

"Because of this beverage, falsehoods are spoken with pleasure, and forbidden actions are performed with joy. False courage will lead to danger, and friends will be betrayed. The man who drinks this will dare any deed, unaware that he is dooming himself to hell."

The Great Wi Tha Kha Yahan Ah Ma (Visakha)

Once, while the Buddha was staying at **Jetavana** Monastery in Savatthi, **Visakha**, the wealthy and devout lay Buddhist, was invited by five hundred women she knew to join in celebrating a festival in the city.

"This is a drinking festival," Visakha replied. "I do not drink."

"All right," the women said, "go ahead and make an offering to the Buddha. We will enjoy the festival."

The next morning, Visakha served the Buddha and the Order of bhikkhus at her house and made great offerings of the four requisites.

That afternoon she proceeded to Jetavana to offer [incense and beautiful flowers to the Buddha and to hear the teaching](#). Although the other women were already quite drunk, they accompanied her. Even at the gate of the monastery itself, they continued drinking. When Visakha entered the hall, she bowed reverently to the Buddha and sat respectfully on one side. Her five hundred companions, however, were oblivious to propriety. They seemed, in fact, not to notice where they were. Even in front of the Buddha some of them danced, some sang, some stumbled around drunkenly, and some bickered.

In order to inspire a sense of urgency in them, the [Buddha emitted a dark blue radiance from his eyebrows, and everything suddenly became dark](#). [The women were terrified with the fear of death and instantly became sober](#). The Buddha then disappeared from his seat and stood on top of Mount Meru. From the curl of white hair between his eyebrows he emitted a ray of light as bright as if one thousand moons and suns were rising. "Why are you laughing and enjoying yourselves," he demanded, "you who are always burning and surrounded by darkness? Why don't you seek light?"

The Buddha's words touched their now-receptive minds, and all five hundred women became stream-enterers.

The Buddha then returned and sat down in his chamber. Visakha bowed to him once more and asked, "**Venerable sir, what is the origin of this custom of drinking alcohol, which destroys a person's modesty and sense of shame?**"

In answer to Visakha's question, the Buddha revealed this story of the distant past.

Long, long ago, when [Brahmadatta](#) was reigning in [Baranasi](#), a hunter named [Sura](#) went to the Himalayas from his hometown in Kasi to look for game. In that remote jungle there was a unique tree whose trunk grew to the height of a man with his arms held up over his head. At that point three branches spread out, forming a hollow about the size of a big water barrel. Whenever it rained, the hollow filled up with water. [Around the tree grew a bitter plum tree, a sour plum tree, and a pepper vine](#). The ripe fruit from the plum trees and the pepper vine fell directly into that hollow. Nearby there was a patch of wild rice. Parrots plucked the heads of the rice and sat on the

tree to eat. Some of the seeds fell into the water. Under the heat of the sun, the liquid in the hollow fermented and became blood red.

In the hot season, flocks of thirsty birds went there to drink. Swiftly becoming intoxicated, they wildly spiraled upwards, only to fall drunkenly at the foot of the tree. After sleeping for a short time, they woke up and flew away, chirping merrily. A similar thing happened to monkeys and other tree-climbing animals.

The hunter observed all this and wondered, "What is in the hollow of that tree? It can't be poison, for if it were, the birds and animals would die." He drank some of the liquid and became intoxicated the same as they. As he drank, he felt a strong desire to eat meat. He kindled a small fire, wrung the necks of some of the partridges, fowls, and other creatures lying unconscious at the foot of the tree, and roasted them over the coals. He gesticulated drunkenly with one hand as he stuffed his mouth with the other.

While he was drinking and eating, he remembered a hermit named [Varuna](#) who lived near there. Wishing to share his discovery with the hermit, Sura filled a bamboo tube with the liquor, wrapped up some of the roast meat, and set out for the hermit's leaf hut. As soon as he arrived, he offered the hermit some of the beverage, and both of them ate and drank with gusto.

The hunter and the hermit realized this drink could be the way to make their fortune. They poured it into large bamboo tubes which they balanced on poles slung across their shoulders and carried to Kasi. From the first border outpost they sent a message to the king that drink-makers had arrived. When they were summoned, they took the alcohol and offered it to the king. The king took two or three drinks and became intoxicated. After a few days, he had consumed all that the two men had carried and asked if there was any more.

"Yes, sire," they answered.

"Where?" asked the king.

"In the Himalayas."

"Go and fetch it," ordered the king.

Sura and Varuna went back to the forest, but they soon realized how much trouble it was to return to the mountains every time they ran out. They took note of all the ingredients and gathered everything needed, so that they were able to brew the alcohol in the city. The citizens began drinking the liquor, forgot about their work, and became poor. The city soon looked like a ghost town.

At that point the two drink-makers left and took their business to Baranasi, where they sent a message to the king. There, too, the king summoned them and offered them support. As the habit of drinking spread; ordinary business deteriorated, and Baranasi declined in the same way as Kasi had. Sura and Varuna next went to Saketa, and, after abandoning Saketa, proceeded to Savatthi.

At that time the king of Savatthi was named Sabbamitta. He welcomed the two merchants and asked them what they wanted. They asked for large quantities of the main ingredients and five hundred huge jars. After everything had been combined, they put the mixture in the jars and tied a cat to each jar to guard against rats.

As the brew fermented, it began to overflow. The cats happily lapped up the potent drink that ran down the sides, became thoroughly intoxicated, and lay down to sleep. Rats came and nibbled on their ears, noses, and tails.

The king's men were shocked and reported to the king that the cats tied to the jars had died from drinking the escaping liquor.

"Surely these men must be making poison!" the king concluded, and he immediately ordered them both beheaded. As Sura and Varuna were being executed, their last words were, "[Sire, this is liquor! It is delicious!](#)"

After putting the drink merchants to death, the king ordered that the jars be broken. By then, however, the effects of the alcohol had worn off, and the cats were playing merrily. The guards reported this to the king.

"If it had been poison," the king said, "the cats would have died. It may be delicious after all. Let us drink it."

He ordered that the city be decorated and that a pavilion be set up in the courtyard. He took his seat on a royal throne under a white umbrella and, surrounded by his ministers, prepared to drink.

At that moment, [Sakka](#), the king of the gods, was surveying the world and wondering, "Who is dutifully taking care of his parents? Who is conducting himself well in thought, word, and deed?"

When he saw the king seated in his royal pavilion, ready to drink the brew, he thought, "If King Sabbamitta drinks that, the whole world will perish. I will make sure that he does not drink it."

Sakka instantly disguised himself as a brahmin and, carrying a jar full of liquor in the palm of his hand, appeared standing in the air in front of the king. "Buy this jar! Buy this jar!" he cried.

King Sabbamitta saw him and asked, "Where do you come from, brahmin? Who are you? What jar is that you have?"

"Listen!" Sakka replied. "This jar does not contain butter, oil, molasses, or honey. Listen to the innumerable vices that this jar holds.

"Whoever drinks this, poor silly fool, will lose control of himself until he stumbles on smooth ground and falls into a ditch or cesspool. Under its influence, he will eat things he'd never touch in his right mind. Please buy it. It is for sale, this worst of jars!

"The contents of this jar will distract a man's wits until he behaves like a brute, giving his enemy the fun of laughing at him. It will enable him to sing and dance stupidly in front of an assembly. Please buy this wonderful liquor for the obscene gaiety it brings.

["Even the most bashful will lose all modesty by drinking from this jar. The shyest man can forget the trouble of being dressed and can shamelessly run nude around the town. When he's tired, he'll happily rest anywhere, oblivious to danger or decency. Such is the nature of this drink. Please buy it. It is for sale, this worst of jars!"](#)

"When one drinks from this, one loses control of one's body, tottering as if one cannot stand, trembling, jerking, and shaking like a wooden puppet worked by another's hand. Buy my jar. It's full of wine.

"The man who drinks from this is prey to every danger because he loses his senses. One might burn to death in one's bed, stumble into a pack of jackals,

drown in a puddle, become reduced to bondage or penury—there is no misfortune that drinking this may not lead to.

"Having imbibed this, men may lie senseless on the road, soiled with their own vomit and licked by dogs. A woman may become so intoxicated she will tie her beloved parents to a tree, revile her husband, and in her blindness even abuse or abandon her only child. Such is the merchandise contained in this jar.

"When a man drinks from this jar, he can believe that the entire world is his and that he owes respect to no one. Buy this jar. It is filled to the brim with the strongest drink.

"Addicted to this drink, whole families of the highest class will squander their wealth and ruin their name. Buy this jar, sire. It is for sale.

"In this jar is a liquid which makes tongue and feet lose control. It creates irrational laughter and weeping. It dulls the eye and impairs the mind. It makes a man contemptible.

"Drinking this will create strife. Friends will quarrel and come to blows. Even the old gods were susceptible and lost their heaven because of drink. Buy this jar and taste the wine.

"Because of this beverage, falsehoods are spoken with pleasure, and forbidden actions are performed with joy. False courage will lead to danger, and friends will be betrayed. The man who drinks this will dare any deed, unaware that he is dooming himself to hell. Try this drink, sire. Buy my jar.

"The one who drinks this brew will sin in thought, word, and deed. He will see, good as evil and evil as good. Even the most modest person will act indecently when drunk. The wisest man will babble foolishly. Buy this lovely liquid and become addicted. You will grow accustomed to evil behavior, to lies, to abuse, to filth, and to disgrace.

"When thoroughly drunk, men are like oxen struck to the ground, collapsing and lying in a heap. No human power can compete with the poisonous power of liquor. Buy my jar.

"In short, drinking this will destroy every virtue. It will banish shame, erode good conduct, and kill good reputation. It will defile and cloud the mind. If you can allow yourself to drink this intoxicating liquor, sire, buy my jar."

When the king heard this, he realized the misery that would be caused by drinking alcohol. Overjoyed at being spared the danger, he wished to express his gratitude. "Brahmin," he cried, "you have outdone even my mother and father in caring for me! In gratitude for your excellent words, let me give you five choice villages, a hundred serving women, seven hundred cows, and ten chariots with pure-bred horses. You have been a great teacher."

"As chief of the thirty-three gods," Sakka replied, revealing his identity, "I have no need of anything. You may keep your villages, servants, and cattle. Enjoy your delicious food and be content with sweet cakes. Take delight in the truths I've preached to you. In this way you will be blameless in this world and will attain a glorious heavenly rebirth in the next."

With these words, Sakka returned to his own abode.

King Sabbamitta vowed to abstain from alcohol and ordered that the jars be smashed. From that day on, he kept the precepts and generously dispensed alms. He lived a good life and was indeed reborn in heaven.

Later, however, the habit of drinking alcohol spread across India, and many people were affected.

The Buddha here ended his lesson and identified the Birth: "At that time Ananda was the king, and I myself was Sakka."