

## *The Compassion of Buddha's Consuming Horse Feed for Three Months*

This is a story about the “Compassion of Buddha's Consuming Horse Feed for Three Months” in Volume 108 of *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*.

There was a Brahmin who resolved to make offerings to the Buddha and His accompanying monks but later reneged on his commitment. The Buddha knew that the Brahmin had changed his mind, but still went on to the place where the offerings would have been given if the Brahmin had done what he said with the intention to help liberate the 500 horses at that place. These 500 horses had already learned the great Dharma of the Bodhisattva Vehicle and made offerings to numerous Buddhas in their past lifetimes as humans; unfortunately, through carelessness and inadvertence, they later associated themselves with uneducated mentors, performed unwholesome deeds, and were reborn, as a result, into the animal path. The World-Honored One saw that the conditions to liberate these 500 horses were ripe and He wanted to use this opportunity to help them. The Buddha also wanted to use this opportunity to tame and soften the minds of the 500 accompanying monks while at

the same time preventing the Brahmin who reneged on his initial resolve from falling into the evil paths.

These 500 horses had a strong connection with the Great Bodhisattva Sun-Store. When the Great Bodhisattva Sun-Store was a human in one of his past lives, he had already instructed and advised the 500 then-young horses to bring forth their Bodhi minds and strive to achieve Buddhahood. In order to help liberate these horses in this life, the great horse—the Great Bodhisattva Sun-Store, having manifested himself as a horse—mingled comfortably among them. Through his supernatural and commanding power, he was able to make the horses understand, recall, and bring forth their forgotten Bodhi minds (aspiration to enlightenment) as well as atone for the numerous unwholesome deeds that they had committed in their past lives. Using the voice of a horse, he preached and taught them to repent their unwholesome and evil deeds, and to pay homage to Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and monks. He also advised them to spare half of their feed to give as offerings to the monks. As the result of their sincere repentance and righting of their past misdeeds, these 500 horses managed to completely eradicate their bad karmas in three months. Along the way, they also accumulated great virtues from their offerings to the Sangha Jewel, including the half of their feed, and they brought forth pure faith in the Three Jewels. Consequently, they were reborn in the Tuṣita Heaven as

princes upon their deaths and were able to continue to learn and practice the Buddha Dharma.

Due to their association with perverse mentors in their past lives, these 500 horses were taught and inculcated with wrong views while they thought and believed that they were practicing and supporting the true Dharma. Due to wrong views, they performed various unwholesome deeds, practiced for years in vain, and eventually descended into the evil paths.

Usually, beginners in Buddhism do not possess the ability to discern the true meaning of the doctrine. If they associate themselves with perverse mentors, they can be easily misled and take the wrong path. Even the skilled and experienced bodhisattvas who have been practicing for a long time should stay away from perverse mentors to avoid giving the wrong impression that they agree with the wrong teachings of perverse mentors and, hence, preventing sentient beings from being able to distinguish between the perverse and good mentors. Having the opportunity to be taught and guided by good mentors is utterly important when one is learning and practicing Buddhism!

From the above, we can see that followers of the Buddha should reflect daily on whether they have kept and observed the precepts, repent and correct any misdeeds, seize every opportunity

to make offerings to the Three Jewels to cultivate virtues, and bring forth pure faith in the Three Jewels. These are the Four Objects of Indestructible Faith in the Buddha, Dharma, sangha, and precepts. If one can do all of the above, one will become better able to resonate with the truth and be led toward realizing the truth. Therefore, one must truthfully take refuge in the Three Jewels and the precepts while on the path of practicing Buddhism. If one can have strong faith on the Buddha, Dharma, sangha, and precepts, one will gradually perfect the Four Objects of Indestructible Faith.

The World-Honored One was also good at observing people's intellect and capacity. He knew that the sensual desire of 400 of the 500 monks would be strengthened if the 400 monks continued to enjoy delicacies during the summer retreat. On the other hand, their minds would not be filled with desire if they consumed coarse food like the horse feed. As a result of eating horse feed and diligently practicing pure celibacy, all of these monks were free from lustful desire and realized arhat fruition after three months of the summer retreat. This further enhanced and amplified the virtue of the offerings made by the 500 horses. From all these, we can see the immeasurable and boundless compassion and skillful means of the World-Honored One in benefiting and guiding sentient beings!

Venerable Ananda was concerned when he saw the World-Honored One had to consume the feed offered by the great horse and thought: “The Tathāgata has the noble lineage of a Wheel-Turning Noble King, and He has become a Buddha since He became a monastic and learned and practiced the Way. How could He be eating inferior horse feed like lowly people?” The World-Honored One knew what Venerable Ananda was thinking so He expounded: “Even if a Tathāgata consumes the most inferior food, it still tastes better than the wondrous food and drink of all heavenly beings.”

The three-month consumption of the horse feed by the World-Honored One was not due to karmic retribution. The consumption of the horse feed was a demonstration of the World-Honored One’s practicality in subduing the mental activities of the 500 monks so that they could lose sensual desire and also help liberate the 500 horses so that the horses could bring forth their bodhisattva nature. From this story and the related teachings, we know that the incredible actions of rescuing sentient beings performed by the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are usually not easily understood by ordinary people. Therefore, without first acquiring a clear comprehension of the context, one should never make improper comments or arrive at the conclusion that the Tathāgata ate horse feed for three months due to His karmic consequences. One’s

Dharma cultivation in future lives will be seriously hindered if one makes illusory and frivolous speech.

From this story, we can understand and appreciate the World-Honored One's immeasurable and boundless wisdom and skillful methods for assisting sentient beings' liberation. By eating horse feed, in addition to assisting the 500 horses' liberation, the World-Honored One helped hundreds of monks realize arhat fruition while also saving the Brahmin from the karmic retribution of evil paths. Such an act of compassion and wisdom is truly the best exemplary model for the disciples of the Buddha. Therefore, when faced with various pleasant and supportive or unpleasant and adverse conditions and situations, we should learn from the wisdom and skillful means of the World-Honored One and transform all adverse situations and conditions into supportive ones to accomplish virtuous and wholesome deeds in the process of teaching and guiding sentient beings.