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Under the Bodhi Tree



A decorative illustration in the top left corner featuring a green vine with several red and yellow flowers. The vine curves upwards and then downwards, framing the title.

The Buddha-To-Be

Long ago, in a life before now, the Buddha-To-Be was born in a wealthy family and given the name, Sumedha. When his parents died, they left him all their wealth— mansions, servants, store houses of grain, fields, gardens, orchards, elephants, camels and herds of cattle. Sumedha noticed that at their death, they were were not able to take a single coin with them. He wondered, Is there a Path that leads beyond the sufferings and difficulties of this worldly world? I must find it.” And he gave away all his riches and wealth and entered the forest as a hermit. There, he ate wild food and wore clothing made from bark. For days upon days, he sat in meditation absorbed in bliss.

One morning he was roused from bliss by the distant sound of music and by the vibration of thousands of fearless feet. Sitting with his legs folded, he rose high into the air and flew over the forest until he came to a road.

Workers dotted the road as far as the eye could see. Sumedha called down to them. “What’s happening? Why do you work so hard like bees? Why is the road being strewn with golden sand and perfumes? Why the cart of flowers of every kind and color?”

“O Wise Sumedha, haven’t you heard? Burning Lamp Buddha is visiting our great city,” the road workers answered, leaning on their shovels and looking into the brilliant blue sky where Sumedha was hovering.

Speechless with joy, Sumedha descended, grabbed a shovel, and set to work on the muddy road. A Buddha is coming, he thought. A real live Buddha!

Then faintly, then louder came music...drums! And flutes! And strings! And voices! And there up ahead, Sumedha saw Burning Lamp Buddha moving slowly forward, wreathed in ever-changing colors of dazzling light— now blue, now orange, now green, now pink.

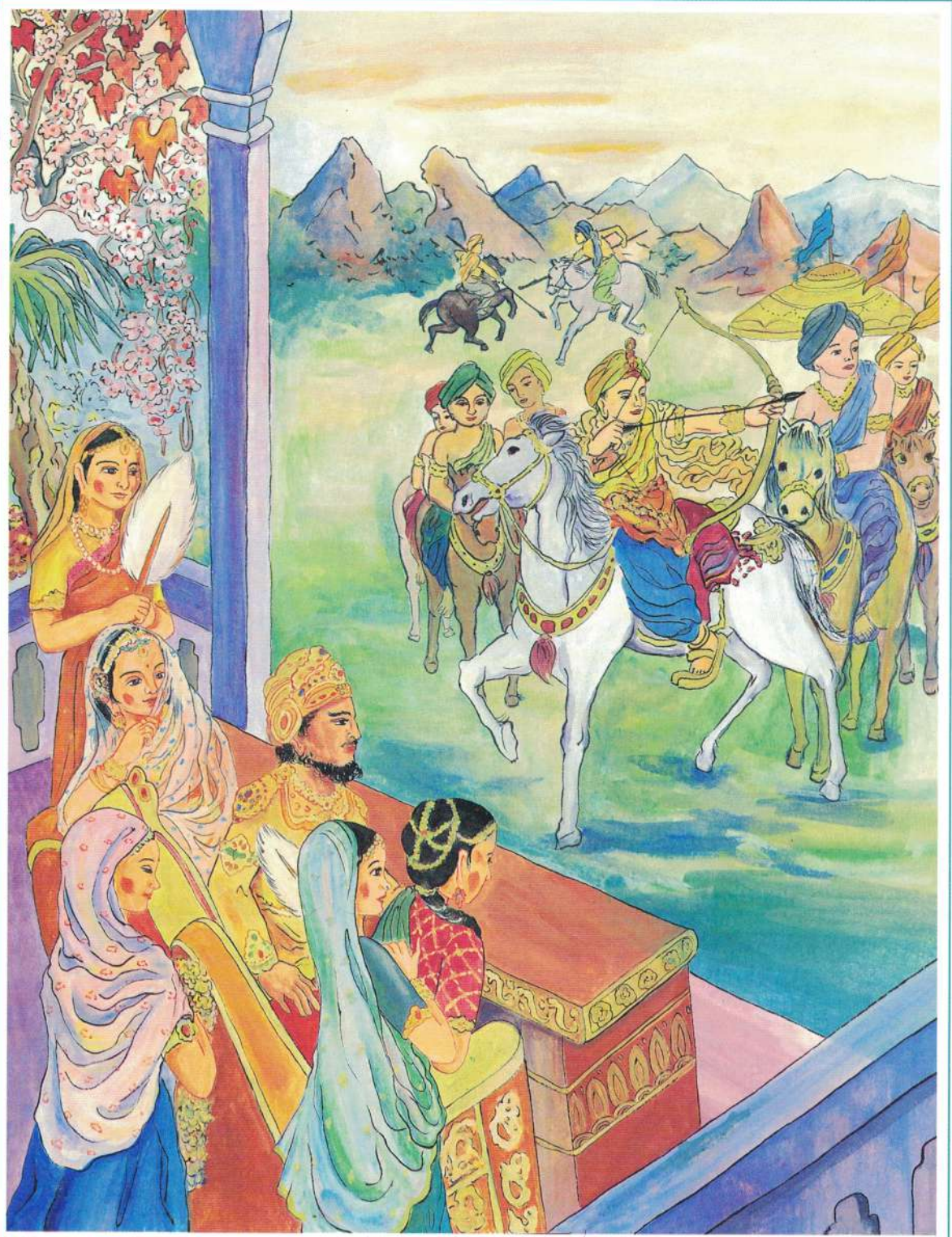
“I want to become a Buddha and help all living beings,” said Sumedha, and he spread his cape over a muddy spot in the road and lay upon it. Then letting down his long hair, he stretched it out so that it made a bridge over the mud. “Let the Buddha walk on my hair to keep from soiling his feet.”

The music stopped. The voices and the laughter of the children stopped. Sumedha slowly opened his eyes. Light surrounded him, and he could faintly hear a voice say, “The hermit, Sumedha, lying here in the mud, has made a great vow.”

And standing there among the thousands of monks and nuns, men and women, elders and children, Burning Lamp Buddha made a prediction for Sumedha. “Far, far in the future, you will become a Buddha! Your name will be Siddhartha. You will be born in the city of Kapilavastu. Your mother will be Queen Maya and your father, King Suddhodana. You will leave the palace and sit under the Bodhi tree. When the morning star appears, you will become enlightened.”



Under the Bodhi Tree



The Royal Contest



But when the just and goodly King Suddhodana proposed marriage between the youths, Yashodhara's father, King Suprabuddha, said, "It is the custom of our clan to marry our daughters to warriors who are brave and wise. Prince Siddhartha lives a life of luxury and is too delicate. What will he do when war breaks out? Let there be a contest to put his strength to the test."

So King Suddhodhana proclaimed seven days of royal contests. On each day of the event, the sports arena was filled with hundreds of noble princes who came to test their skills and to win the hand of Princess Yashodhara. An eager crowd waited for the contests to begin.

The first contest of the first day was in archery. One by one, the noble princes notched their arrows and took their turn, but not one was able to hit the target. When Devadatta stepped up for his turn, the crowd silenced. A wicked grin spread slowly across his face as he held his long bow ready. And being the fine archer that he was, he carefully sighted the target and sent his arrow flying straight into the bull's eye.

The crowd roared, "The winner is Devadatta!"

Yashodhara's heart sank. Sitting next to her father in the front row of the arena, she remained silent. She did not want him to know how she felt. But inside she cried, "Where is Siddhartha? I'll die if I have to marry Devadatta."

Suddenly an arrow went flying over the heads of the crowd. It split Devadatta's arrow in two. The crowd cheered! The drums rolled! "It is Prince Siddhartha. He has won!" Yashodhara smiled.

On the following days, there were contests in everything from poetry and math to running and jousting. In academics, his answers silenced the judges. Running as swift as a deer, he took first place. He sliced down a tree with one stroke of his sword. With a mere touch of his pole, in jousting, he knocked his opponents off their elephants, as if they were straws. Riding Kanthaka, he left the others far behind in horse racing.

"It's easy for Siddhartha to win riding Kanthaka," said Devadatta. "Bring out the wild black horse. Let's see who wins!"

Aniruddha was the first to mount the wild-eyed horse. The horse exploded, kicking and bucking, throwing him to the hard ground. Just in time, Nanda pulled him out from under the horse's sharp hooves, saving his life. Other princes tried their luck, but were thrown off like hot coals. When it was Siddhartha's turn, he walked slowly up to the horse, whispering softly. Gently holding onto the mane with both hands, he slid up onto the horse's wet back and rode around the arena, stopping in front of Yashodhara and her father. The crowd cheered, tossing jewels and flowers into the air.

Yashodhara's father said to her, "Prince Siddhartha will make you a fine husband."

The seed of jealousy continued to ripen in the heart of Devadatta. Glaring with hatred at Siddhartha, he sneaked away from the wild crowd.



UNDER THE BODHI TREE

The Buddha was born as a prince. This story tells what happened on the day he was born and what sad event took place a few days later. We find out what the diviners read in his fortune, and why his father, the king, was so concerned about not letting his son see the world beyond the palace. We learn about the gifts and friends that the king gave him in order to keep him happy. We find out what the prince saw that made him leave the palace when he finally went out to take a look at the world.

How the Buddha made his escape, what difficulties he met in his quest, and how he overcame everything, including the demons who came to test him in all sorts of ways, all this and more, is told in this richly illustrated book.