

A place for the Bodhisatta: The local and the universal in jātaka stories

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Jātakas—stories about the past lives of the ‘historical’ Buddha—are often associated with specific locations, both within the land of Buddhism’s birth, and in other parts of Asia. There are records suggesting that such locations became early pilgrimage sites; contemporary sources also make reference to ‘local’ jātakas, which in many cases help to assimilate Buddhism into the local culture through its geography. In this article I will argue that it is the structure of jātaka stories that allows this localisation to take place all over Asia. I contend that since the jātakas themselves are lacking in specific external referents they can easily be given a location, whilst their framing in the ‘present’ time of the Buddha’s teaching career grounds the stories in both time and place, without infringing on the flexibility of the individual stories. This ability to provide centrally legitimated relevance for each and all contributes greatly to the popularity and endurance of the jātaka genre. The layering of meanings must remain if the stories are to accomplish this: if the stories become formally localised, for example by 19th century scholars who celebrate the jātakas’ worth as records of life in early India, the power of the stories to transcend boundaries of time and place for their multiple audiences is lost. Yet if the jātakas were not anchored in the Buddha’s teaching career in the 5th century BCE North India, their significance for Buddhists would in any case be negligible.

Introduction

In the introduction to their edited volume *Pilgrims, Patrons and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions*, Granoff and Shinohara note that:

sacred sites and the cults associated with them often seemed to be precariously balanced between the specific and the denial of that specificity (Granoff, Shinohara 2003, 2).

As I hope to demonstrate, this precarious balance is found in sacred sites associated with jātaka stories, that is stories relating episodes from the previous births of Gotama Buddha, when he was a *bodhisatta* or ‘being destined for Awakening’.¹ At such sites,

¹ I will consistently use the Pāli term *bodhisatta* to refer to Gotama Buddha in his previous births even when discussing non-Pāli sources. The Sanskrit equivalent *bodhisattva*, though frequently used with the same meaning as the Pāli, is also laden with Mahāyāna connotations.

there is an assertion that the events of a *jātaka* quite literally *took place*, allowing the creation of a sacred landscape and an assimilation of Buddhism into local culture. In the texts, the most well-known of which is the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (henceforth JA), a large semi-canonical *jātaka* collection of the Theravāda school which remains very popular throughout Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the locations given to *jātaka* stories are formulaic at best, thus facilitating identifications all over Asia. Simultaneously, the established textual structure of *jātaka* stories, which necessitates an association with the person of the Buddha and the land of Buddhism's birth, gives the stories another level of specificity, which paradoxically brings with it the possibility of universal relevance.

In this article I will begin by outlining some of the roles that local *jātakas* play and have played in Buddhist countries. Following this I will examine how the local appropriation of such stories is made possible by the unspecific geography of *jātakas* in textual sources. As I then go on to argue, the very structure of a *jātaka* provides both these levels—the specific and the universal—thus making the *jātaka* genre the perfect medium through which Buddhism can be localised. The success of such endeavours, however, is endangered by modern discourses on the 'truth' of the stories. A brief examination of such problematic re-evaluations of the specificity of *jātaka* stories will help to draw together the importance of locality to the popularity and endurance of the genre.

Local *jātakas*

That *jātakas* became identified with particular sites in North India, and that such sites became places of pilgrimage, is attested in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims. At the turn of the 5th century CE, Faxian's journey took him past four great *stūpas* each associated with a great sacrifice made by the Bodhisatta. The first (in 'So-ho-to') was where the Buddha ransomed the life of a dove with his own flesh; the second (in Gandhāra) was where he gave away his eyes to a blind beggar;² and the third and fourth (in Takshaśilā) were where he gave away his head to a man and his whole body to a starving tigress who was about to eat her own cubs,³ and where 'kings, ministers, and

² The character of King Sivi (Sibi, Śibi), who in Buddhism is identified with the Bodhisatta, is associated with many acts of self sacrifice. The gift of the eyes is recorded in chapter 2 'Śibi' of Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* (henceforth JM), JA 499 'Sivi-jātaka', and I.8 'Sivirājacariyaṃ' of the Theravādin *Cariyāpiṭaka* (henceforth CP), amongst others. The story of his gift of flesh to ransom a dove is found in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in several relatively late Buddhist sources. See Ohnuma 2007 (pp. 274–5) for a full list of versions, in an appendix to her excellent investigation into the nature and provenance of gift of the body stories in Buddhist texts. Also Grey 1994, 361ff.

³ The story of King Candraprabha giving his head to a brahmin is found in the *Divyāvadāna* and the *Sūtra of the Wise and Fool*—see Ohnuma 2007, 275–7. The tigress story is found in JM

peoples of all the kingdoms around vie with one another in making offerings' (Legge 1993, 32).⁴ A century later, Songyun writes of the same four sites and also mentions a whole area associated with the *Vessantara-jātaka*.⁵ Unlike Faxian, Songyun records that physical features in the landscape, as well as *stūpa* sites, are explained by such stories, for example:

One li N.E. of the tower, fifty paces down the mountain, is the place where the son and daughter of the Prince persisted in circumambulating a tree (in order to escape from the Brahman who had begged them from their father as slaves). On this the Brahman beat them with rods till the blood flowed down and moistened the earth. This tree still exists, and the ground, stained with blood, now produces a sweet fountain of water (Beal 1869, 195).

In his seventh century travelogue, Xuanzang adds several more *jātaka* sites and includes stories of various supernatural events associated with them.⁶

Several scholars have drawn attention to the fact that such associations with *jātakas* were most popular in (greater) Gandhāra,⁷ a place where no sites could reasonably be associated with the final birth of the Buddha. Lamotte comments, for example:

Alongside Vārāṇasī which also claimed as its own *Jātakas* (the Six-Tusked White Elephant, the Partridge, the Deer and the Hare), Gandhāra was the only one to play the game—somewhat puerile, but profitable to the places of pilgrimage—of the acclimatization of the legends (Lamotte 1988, 335).

Kuwayama adds that using relics and *jātaka* sites was necessary in this region since 'Gandhāra needed something around which Buddhists could gather and upon which Buddhism could find firm roots and ties with Mid-India' (Kuwayama 1990, 962). The identification of local features with *jātakas*, though clearly a calculated endeavour, was skilfully done, thus Foucher comments having visited the site identified by the Chinese pilgrims as that of the *Vessantara-jātaka*:

chapter 1 'Vyāghrī-jātaka', and is also known as the 'Mahāsattva-jātaka'—see *ibid.*, 279–80 for all versions. Though not in the JA or CP this story nonetheless found its way into the *Jinakālamālī*, a Pāli chronicle composed in Thailand in the early 16th century, and is popular in Southeast Asian Buddhism.

⁴ The four *stūpas* are described in chapters 9–11 of Legge 1993, 30–2.

⁵ JM 9 'Viśvamtara'; JA 547 'Vessantara-jātaka'; CP I.9 'Vessantaracariyam'. See Grey 1994, 438ff for the many versions, and Cone, Gombrich 1977, for a study and translation of the JA version. This *jātaka* is believed in the Theravāda tradition to be the antepenultimate birth of the Bodhisatta, and is, according to Gombrich (Cone, Gombrich 1977, i), in many places better known even than the Buddha's biography. Prince Vessantara's boundless generosity leads to him being banished to the forest, where he proceeds to give away his children and his wife.

⁶ For a summary of places associated with *jātakas* see Lamotte 1988, 334–5, and for a study (and revisitation) of those in Gandhāra mentioned by Xuanzang see Foucher 1915.

⁷ Salomon uses 'greater Gandhāra' to refer to the region surrounding the Peshawar valley, including Taxila, Bamiyan and Gilgit. This area is characterised by the use of the Gāndhārī language, the Kharoṣṭhī script, and the Gandhāran artistic style (Salomon 1999).

On the whole their curiosity had ample reason to be satisfied. The *mise en scène* of the Jātaka was, as one sees, quite complete and most cleverly arranged. What doubt could there be, after so many palpable proofs, that this spot was the cradle of both the prince and the legend? (Foucher 1915, 30).

The Gandhāran preoccupation with making Buddhism relevant locally is also evident in the recent manuscript finds, in relation to which Salomon notes:

An important feature of the new manuscripts is the inclusion in some of them of local Gandhāran lore and traditions, which suggests that early Gandhāran Buddhism, and, by implication, perhaps the other regional centers of Indian Buddhism as well were more distinct and localized in their character than has previously been apparent (Salomon 1999, 10).

The localisation of jātaka stories in this region was thus part of a visible strategy for associating this newly Buddhist land with the activities of the Buddha, and—vice versa—incorporating local features into the newly arrived religion.

Lamotte speaks of the tradition of appropriating jātakas as one whose time passed, as Buddhism pushed further and further away from its homeland, and once ‘it was considered that the Jātakas no longer sufficed to confer an adequate guarantee of authenticity on the new holy land and a story was made up of a journey by the Buddha to the North-West’ (Lamotte 1988, 335). Certainly, traditions of the Buddha’s visits to regions outside of his homeland play an important part in the legitimisation of Buddhism in distant lands. However, this did not replace the tradition of identifying jātakas with particular sites: for example Namobuddha, near Panauti in present day Nepal, remains a popular pilgrimage site with Newar Buddhists, who hold that it is where the Bodhisatta sacrificed himself to the tigress (Gellner 1992, 120). In a part of Eastern Thailand inhabited by the Laopuan people, there is a town associated with the characters and events of the *Mahā-Ummagga-jātaka*, and in several cases other jātakas have been ‘expanded with explanations attached to the story or with episodes invented by the villages to explain puzzling incidents or geographic features in the community’ (Wongthet 1989, 23–4).⁸ Stories are not only adapted to fit localities, but also composed anew, for example the many ‘apocryphal’ jātaka stories found in mainland Southeast Asia.⁹ The localisation of Buddhism in this way is both an oral

⁸ JA 546 ‘Mahā-ummagga-jātaka’, through[?] the story related to Wongthet—of ‘Pra Mahosotha’—is named after the wise hero (the Bodhisatta), who is chief adviser to the king and praised for his great wisdom. Much of the local area is associated with Mahosadha’s wooing of his equally clever wife Amarā(devī)—a minor subplot in the JA but much expanded in the local version.

⁹ See Skilling 2006 (pp. 113–73) for a discussion of such texts. Canonicity is by no means a simple concept in relation to jātaka stories: the JA is actually a commentary on canonical verses, yet remains more popular than the fully canonical CP. Later Southeast Asian collections are often a mixture of reworkings of JA stories and new compositions, and others have sources/parallels in Sanskrit and Chinese sources. Issues of canonicity in relation to such stories are clearly more worrying to Buddhologists than Buddhists.

and literary tradition, in ‘canonical’ and vernacular languages, and can also serve to assimilate Buddhism into local literary traditions. For example, Monius notes in her study of the *Maṇimēkalai*, a sixth century Tamil Buddhist story that is identified as a jāataka of a future buddha:

Through complex and creative processes of translation and elaboration, and through marshaling other local texts to support its worldview, the *Maṇimēkalai* domesticates a great tradition and an immense community, locating the lives and values of the Buddha and his followers in the local literary culture (Monius 2001, 87).

The localization of Buddhism through jātakas is just one way to provide local relevance and authority to an otherwise distant religious movement. This appropriation of narratives provides accessible pilgrimage sites encourages pride in one’s homeland and local culture, and legitimates Buddhism’s presence in lands far from where the Buddha lived and preached. It also facilitates the appropriation of local mythology and narrative, allowing Buddhism to assimilate into its new setting.

Placeless jātakas

We can now see that jātakas have played, and continue to play, a significant role in making Buddhism a local system. The construction of narratives that identify jātakas with specific sites demonstrates a preoccupation with the locality; however, this preoccupation is counterbalanced by a realisation of the larger situation. There appear to be two directions of movement: local stories, motifs, or geographic oddities can be absorbed into a legitimate textual genre of Buddhism and intimately associated with its founder, and stories can be taken from this religious genre and given local significance, reworked to suit the local situation. In both cases there are two layers at play: centralised authority, and local and personal relevance. The former provides the stability and unity of belonging to an established religious group (or even lineage of disciples/followers of the Buddha). The latter makes relevant this religion, which is distant in time and in space (not to mention culture and language¹⁰) from the local people. Each layer complements the other.

The local-ness of jāataka stories thus relies upon the fact that jātakas are not a local genre, but a well-attested Buddhist phenomenon. It also relies upon the fact that most stories do not contain a concrete association with any specific place. This is not to say that specific places (and names and times) are not mentioned within stories. In the JA, each jāataka begins with a description of the setting in which the events took place, the

¹⁰ For reasons of brevity, I am not including issues relating to vernacularisation or canonical imitation in this study, both of which also play their part in locating jātakas.

vast majority beginning ‘In the past, when Brahmadata was ruling in Varanasi, the Bodhisatta took birth as ...’ According to Jones, 395 of the 547 jātakas in the JA take place during Brahmadata’s reign (Jones 1979, 23). In a passage in the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* studied by Schopen, instructions are found for monks who cannot remember the actual situations of certain discourses:

‘... those who forget the name of the place, etc., must declare it was one or another of the six great cities, or somewhere where the Tathāgata stayed many times. If he forgets the name of the king, he must declare it was Prasenajit; if the name of the householder, that it was Anāthapiṇḍada ... of the place of a story of the past, that it was Vāraṇasī, of the king, that it was Brahmadata ...’ (Schopen 1997, 575).

Schopen suggests that the JA must have been guided by a similar injunction (ibid., 578); the result is a very formulaic set of locations. As well as Varanasi, several other locations recur, as time and time again ascetics retreat to the Himalayas, and young brahmins are sent to Takkaṣilā for their education. Such standard formulae locate most jātakas in North India, yet this rather spurious precision betrays a lack of interest in the ‘true’ location of the events of the story. Where places are specified, they are not given in detail (there is no reference to how to find the place in contemporary times), and many are not given a location at all. In the early textual sources, the association between jātakas and specific places appears rather irrelevant, making later associations all the more straightforward.

Although apparently very specific, the formulaic nature of the places in jātakas also allows them to shift locations or become associated with several locations simultaneously. A good example of this is the *Aśvarāja* story, a jātika that relates how some merchants are shipwrecked on an island, seduced by demonesses, and eventually rescued by a flying horse (the Bodhisatta). There are many different versions of this story, and the variations between them include the location. Initially, the association is with Sri Lanka, and the story is even recounted by Xuanzang as a story of the origin of the Sinhalese people, but the Newar version moves this location to the Himalayas to transform the story into a warning for traders planning a trip to Tibet (Beal 1884, 2: 240–6; Lewis 2000, 54–80).¹¹ The *Vessantara-jātaka*, though strongly associated with a pilgrimage centre in Gandhāra, is also believed by some to have taken place in northeast Thailand (Jory 2002, 897). In addition, the flexibility of the setting of a jātika is evident in the pictorial representations of jātakas found in temples and on manuscripts, which tend to reflect the land and culture contemporary with the painting, with no concern for the historicity or place of the stories. Thus we see the Bodhisatta in 18th century Burmese court dress, or

¹¹ See Appleton 2006 for a full bibliography of versions, as well as an analysis of some of the main variations.

travelling in a clipper ship, and, as Griswold points out, ‘the happy anachronism serves as a reminder that the lessons the tales teach are timeless’—we might, of course, add that they are placeless.¹²

Some people argue that it is essential that jātakas are not associated with any specific place, for it is this that allows them to function as fables or folktales. For example, one of Sri Lanka’s leading psychiatrists, Dr. D.V.J. Harischandra, provides a host of examples of how he uses jātakas in therapy (Harischandra 1998). His appreciation of the worth of the *Jātaka-Pota* (the Sinhalese version of the JA) is primarily due to it being a hugely diverse collection of ancient stories which can be effectively used in ‘bibliotherapy’ and ‘psychodrama’ (therapeutic role-play). Harischandra notes that the non-specific nature of the time and place of the stories is significant, for this allows the reader/hearer to identify more easily with the characters and story. In jātakas, not only is the location of the story of the past very formulaic, in both time and place, even the characters are not given proper names. In many cases they are referred to simply as ‘the hare’, ‘the merchant’, and so on; in other cases they are given a name that is a simple reflection of their appearance. There is a similar policy in fairytales, with characters such as Goldilocks and Cinderella (ibid., 95). For child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, such vagueness is essential in allowing fairy stories to resonate with ‘everyman’, thus ‘facilitating projections and identifications’ (Bettelheim 1976, 40).¹³

Just as the lack of character names allows individuals to identify with people in jātakas, so also the lack of specific place allows communities to do the same. A beginning such as ‘In the past, when Brahmadatta was ruling in Varanasi’, or ‘Once upon a time in a land far far away’, does not distance the story from the audience, but actually allows it to come closer. In any case, although many jātakas texts appear to provide a location for each jātakas story in this formulaic way, in reality traditions outside of this text accept many different ideas about where the stories occurred. Thus locality and universality are in a careful balance. And this careful balance, as we are about to see, is reflected in the structure of jātakas themselves.

¹² A.B. Griswold’s introduction to Wray, Rosenfield, Bailey 1972. An example of the latter may be found on an illustration of the *Mahājanaka-jātaka* at Wat No, Suphanburi (plate 6, p. 34). Freely portraying the Bodhisatta/Buddha in contemporary settings is also a feature of Burmese paintings—Herbert 1993, 12.

¹³ See also Bettelheim 1976, 62 for a discussion of the vague nature of place and time. The fact that the Bodhisatta is always a male character might restrict the identifications of ‘everywoman’, though there are other female characters in both jātakas and other Buddhist stories. For an examination of the portrayal of women in jātakas and their exclusion from the bodhisatta-path see Appleton forthcoming.

Jātakas of the Jeta Grove

In the jātakas of the JA there are actually two settings and two sets of characters. In addition to the ‘story of the past’ (*atīta-vatthu*—considered to be the jātika proper), the ‘story of the present’ (*paccuppanna-vatthu*) gives the occasion on which the Buddha told the jātika, for example whilst staying in the Jeta Grove, in order to instruct a wayward monk. At the end of the jātika, in the *samodhāna* (‘connection’), he reveals which of the characters in the story are actually those involved in the ‘present’ situation, including, of course, himself. The story of the present might in some cases be representative of an actual historical situation, but in most cases it is deeply formulaic and clearly as much a part of the carefully constructed narrative as the story of the past. Although not all jātakas in the JA have an elaborate story of the present, and other jātika texts are much less likely to have a frame story at all, this basic structure is nonetheless always present. A jātika is a story of an event in a previous lifetime of the Buddha, as remembered and told by the Buddha.¹⁴ It is thus necessarily *buddhavacana*, and so the ‘story of the present’, or at least the setting in the teaching career of the Buddha, is always implicit.

In the JA, the location in which the Buddha tells a jātika is more often than not the Jeta Grove—in fact Feer counted 410 stories where this is the case (Rhys-Davids 1999a, 245). Most often the audience is the *saṅgha*, though sometimes kings or laypeople. The setting is thus explicitly one of Buddhist instruction; this compensates somewhat for the lack of explicit Buddhist content in the vast majority of jātika stories. The setting is also both historically and geographically specific and can be verified by visiting the places in which the Buddha taught; the location of the story-telling is thus accessible, at least in theory. The setting of all the stories is in one region and one time period, in contrast to the cosmic cycles traversed in the jātakas and made explicit in related texts that outline the patterns of the births of the previous buddhas.¹⁵ The very specific nature of the setting of the stories thus allows the flexibility to remain within the individual jātakas, whilst authenticating them and drawing them into a verified and accessible Buddhist milieu.

This set structure established in the JA allowed the absorption of many stories into this specifically Buddhist genre. Almost any story could become a jātika with the simple association of one character (or even a totally silent and uninvolved

¹⁴ This is not an entirely unproblematic definition, though it is in accord with the vast majority of primary and secondary literature on the subject. There is not room to discuss the issues here; they are discussed in full in my PhD thesis.

¹⁵ In the Theravāda canon, the *Buddhavamsa*, which is elaborated upon in the *Nidānakathā* to the JA, provides an account of the 24 previous buddhas. It is at the feet of these past buddhas that the person who later becomes Gotama Buddha is predicted to buddhahood.

witness¹⁶) with the Bodhisatta and the placing of the story within the teaching career of the Buddha. Thus the collection has parallels in Greek myth and fable and pan-Indian stories (including Indian epic),¹⁷ and the result is an incredibly diverse collection. The absorption of stories was not limited to the JA, however. Instead, the established structure of the jātakas of the JA—what Skilling therefore suggests we call the ‘classical jātakas’—was later emulated in numerous ‘apocryphal’ stories and collections. Skilling records many of these in mainland Southeast Asia, some well defined collections in the canonical language (such as the text edited and translated by the Pali Text Society under the title *Paññāsajātaka*) and others circulating in the vernacular languages, often with no real fixed form (Jaini 1981–3; Horner, Jaini 1985–6).¹⁸ The ‘apocryphal’ nature of these stories allows them to incorporate material that would not be acceptable in the JA. For example, one story portrays the Buddha-to-be as a female character, before the vow made at the feet of Dīpaṅkara Buddha made rebirth as a woman impossible.¹⁹ It is because the structure of jātakas is maintained that such additions to the collection are possible.

Just as jātakas can domesticate and localise Buddhism precisely because the jātaka genre provides a centralised and universal context, so the very specific setting of the stories in the teaching career of the Buddha allows diversity to prosper. The stories of the present provide anchorage in both space and time, so the jātakas themselves are never really floating free, though they are allowed a great deal of flexibility. That they remain on a long chain is crucial to their popularity and endurance. Unfortunately, this has lately not been appreciated.

Jātakas of the Orient

When jātakas began to be studied by Western scholars in the late 19th century, there was a great interest in their ‘historical’ worth. The first scholar to examine thoroughly the JA, T.W. Rhys-Davids, described it as ‘full of information on the daily habits and customs and beliefs of the people of India, and on every variety of the numerous questions that arise as to their economic and social conditions’ (Rhys-Davids 1999b,

¹⁶ It is a common misconception about jātaka stories (encouraged by the texts themselves) that the main character (the ‘hero’) must be the Bodhisatta. In the JA especially, stories are included where the Bodhisatta merely passes by and makes a comment, or doesn’t say or do anything at all. He also lies, steals, murders, and commits sexual impropriety.

¹⁷ The direction of movement is of course hotly contested, but the point here is that the collection is able to be immensely diverse and inclusive because of its set structure.

¹⁸ See Skilling 2006 for an examination of the whole tradition.

¹⁹ The timescale of the JA, though vast, is limited to the period after the first prediction to buddhahood, as is made explicit in the *Nidānakathā*. According to Theravādin buddhology, after this time it is impossible for the Bodhisatta to be born as a female, so none of the jātakas of the JA portray him even as a female animal.

189), and throughout the past century many scholars have seen the collection primarily as ‘a storehouse of information about life and society in ancient India’ (Sen 1974, i.). As was the case for Indian texts in general, few scholars wanted to take an approach to jātakas that saw them as literature. Their literary value was seen as minimal, thanks to the large amount of repetition and omission, as well as the sometimes crude contents. In any case they were stories—low culture—thus the only other interest in them was as folklore, albeit as ‘the most reliable, the most complete, and the most ancient collection of folklore now extant in any literature in the world’ (Rhys-Davids 1999b, 208). In addition, the jātakas were presented as having little of Buddhist relevance to them, since they were deemed to be pre-Buddhist and solely for the entertainment or edification of the laity, as a ‘basic instrument of popular education’ (Pierce 1969, 245).

These strands of scholarship on jātakas opened up interest in the stories, yet simultaneously shut off many interesting avenues of research; only recently have jātakas been seen as worthy of serious academic study as examples of religious literature. Such scholarship has also influenced attitudes towards jātakas within South and Southeast Asia. In a Sri Lankan journal, Peris ended an article on the (often morally-dubious and un-Buddhist) characterisation of the Bodhisatta in the jātakas of the *Jātaka-Pota* with the conclusion:

That they are to any extent genuine past-birth experiences of the Buddha, brought to light by his power of past-birth recollection, is thus not possible to be maintained as an educated view—and much less as an educated Buddhist view. To go beyond this and indiscriminately accept them as reflecting the Bodhisatta character would indeed be positively naive—if it were not also positively damaging of it (Peris 1996, 62).

Such a conclusion betrays a preoccupation in contemporary Sri Lanka with establishing Buddhism as a ‘rational’ religion, with some testable foundation.²⁰ The ‘truth’ of the stories is thus under question as intimately related to their value.

Despite debates about the ‘truth’ of the stories, jātakas remain incredibly popular in Sri Lanka, whether in sermons, children’s books, television programmes, radio plays, or films. However, in Thailand the influence of the Western scholarly agenda on its narrative collections was more strongly felt. Jory tells of how in 1904 King Chulalongkorn published an essay about jātakas that was heavily based upon Rhys-David’s book *Buddhist India*. His essay was widely circulated and strongly influenced Thai attitudes to and interpretations of jātakas. His main aim was to disassociate

²⁰ I was lucky enough to have a conversation with Professor Peris in which he outlined some of the reactions to this article and others where he argues for Greek influence on jātakas and *vamsa* material (University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, May 2007). I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at the University of Peradeniya who helped me to understand the place of jātakas in Sri Lankan culture better during two visits between December 2006 and May 2007.

jātakas from Buddhism and Thailand, by showing that they are in fact merely pre-Buddhist Indian folktales:

No longer acceptable as stories of the Buddha's former lives, the Jatakas were now to be read either as parables with a moral, or for those with more scholarly interests, as folktales (*nithan boran*) containing a wealth of information about how ancient peoples of foreign countries lived (Jory 2002, 897).

King Chulalongkorn achieved this by introducing a new conception of both time and place—the stories were delocalised and made 'foreign', and the idea of linear historical time allowed for their designation as 'pre-Buddhist', a conception of time that is alien to the jātakas. By so doing, King Chulalongkorn reduced the relevance of jātakas to Thai Buddhists.²¹

Conclusion

Viewing jātakas in terms of their historically and geographically specific origins, instead of their historically and geographically vague events, has the potential to undermine their relevance for Buddhists. We must be wary of the idea that whether or not the stories actually took place is more important than any metaphorical, allegorical, or psychological content the stories might have. An example of this attitude is provided by Copleston, Bishop of Colombo, who wrote in 1884 that the stories of the present did have some worth as ethical guides:

These are the examples and proofs of virtue which, regarded as historical, do credit to Buddhism—ininitely more credit than fictitious accounts of exaggerated and unnatural applications of the rules of virtue on the part of stags or of hares, or of human beings in some other stage of the world (Copleston 1884, 111).

His interpretation that the stories need to be at least 'regarded as historical' to give them any worth is to a certain extent mirrored in Buddhism; we saw, for example, that tying a story to the time and place and person of the Buddha gave it legitimation.²²

²¹ Jory (2002) argues that the king's redefinition of jātakas was a political move, a way of re-defining political powers, and thus the very power of jātakas over the populace was central to his reforms. The current place of jātakas in Thailand is ambivalent—they are still present in art, theatre, and sermons, yet their popularity is slight in comparison with other Theravādin countries.

²² It is of course worth pointing out that different societies and individuals regard different events as historically plausible; for many Buddhists both the story of the present and the jātika proper (the story of the past) are historically plausible, if not actually statements of historical fact. A Buddhist might in any case note that speculating about where jātakas took place does not aid spiritual progress and refer to the Buddha's declaration that asking questions that are not conducive to the spiritual path is akin to a man refusing to be treated for a poisoned-arrow wound until he knows the height of the person who shot him and the variety of feather on the arrow (found in the 'Cūḷamālunkya Sutta' *Majjhima Nikāya* 63). The famous 'unanswered questions' do not, of course, include the reality of his previous births, but the analogy is still, I think, a fruitful one.

This legitimate and specific setting is, however, counterbalanced by the flexibility of the stories of the past, which have the potential to show the Bodhisatta's actions in times and places far away from 5th century BCE North India. Such flexibility makes the stories a rich source for our understanding of specific local concerns.

Wherever the jātakas did or did not take place, there is much of value—to both Buddhists and Buddhologists—to be found in the stories, if one looks in the right places. Just one of these places has been examined here: as we have seen, the location of jāataka stories is in a very precarious balance, and where this balance has been tipped—by local sites or stories—much can be revealed about the complex interaction of local cultures and Buddhism, or as McDaniel puts it, ‘the simultaneous processes of Buddhist acculturation and the construction of a regional cultural independence’ (McDaniel 2000, 160). The careful balance must not be tipped too far, however: the layers of narrative must be allowed to coexist, as they have done for more than two millennia, if we are to come to a nuanced understanding of the place of jātakas in diverse historical and social contexts.

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