

The *Vessantara Jātaka* as a Performative Text

The *Vessantara Jātaka* in Thailand is quintessentially a performative text. The story's historical popularity and its impact on Thai political culture and social organization derive from the fact that the story was, from very early times, designed to be communicated in oral form in the vernacular to an audience. Were it not for the fact that the *Vessantara Jātaka* was disseminated in this way the story would never have achieved the popularity or influence it has, and would most likely have remained a little-known subject of erudite monastic scholarship.

Thet Maha Chat literally means "recitation of the Great Life." The "Great Life" refers to the life of Prince Vessantara, the penultimate incarnation (*chat*, from the Pali *jāti*) of the *bodhisatta*, before his rebirth as the Buddha. *Thet* (or *thetsana*) can be translated variously as "recitation," "sermon," "preaching," or more fully, "exposition of the *dhamma*," that is, the religious doctrine contained in the Buddha's teachings.

In trying to account for the *Vessantara Jātaka*'s popularity most scholarship tends to examine the story itself, separate from the medium by which the story was communicated. If we are to understand the way the story was received by audiences in premodern times it is essential to look at the story's meaning in the context of the *Thet Maha Chat*, the ceremonial recitation through which the story became known to people. The performance of this ceremony imparted to the *Vessantara Jātaka* an aura of sanctity and authority that is entirely missing in, for example, modern paperback editions

of the story, which contribute to the common interpretation of the *Vessantara Jātaka* today as a kind of folktale. The various components of the performance enhanced the authority of the story by repeatedly stressing the fact that it was based on the Buddha's own utterances (Pali: *Buddhavacana*). This fact, signified in the recitation in diverse ways, had the effect of raising the story's status to one of religious authority. To understand this process let us examine the various components of the *Thet Maha Chat*.

The Sacred Text

The text that is recited at the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony has its origin in the Pali *Jātaka* Commentary (Pali: *Jātakatthavaṇṇana*, or *Jātakatthakathā*), believed to have been composed in its final form no later than the fifth century AD on the island of Sri Lanka. The *Jātaka* Commentary consists of 547 *Jātakas* (though often referred to as "five hundred and fifty"). The *Vessantara Jātaka* is the final story in the *Jātaka* series.¹ The *Vessantara Jātaka*, as it appears in the *Jātaka* Commentary, comprises two distinct parts: the verses (*khatha*), which are held as having been actually uttered by the Buddha himself, and a prose commentary (*atthakatha*), traditionally attributed to the great fifth-century commentator of the Pali Buddhist tradition, Buddhaghosa. Although the Pali *Jātaka* Commentary has survived intact in Thailand it is *not* this version of the *Vessantara Jātaka* that is recited at the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony, but vernacular translations that have been versified into Thai poetic meters.

For the wider communication of Buddhist teachings the Pali scriptures had to be translated into the vernacular.² This at once created the risk that the translation would distort in some way the meaning of the original Pali text. The changes involved in translation were something monastic scholars were very much aware of. *Vessantara Jātaka* texts composed for recitation were careful to show deference to the changes the content had gone through in translation. Most vernacular recitation versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* interspersed the translated text with the Pali words or phrases, known in Thai as *chunniyabot*, from the original Pali version of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.³ The oldest Thai version of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in existence, the *Maha Chat Kham Luang*, composed in the kingdom of Ayutthaya in the late

fifteenth century and still recited today,⁴ went as far as including the entire Pali original—both commentary and verses—in the translation. The text was structured by placing a phrase in Pali followed by its translation, until the whole of the original has been translated.⁵ Not only did this guarantee the rendering of the Buddha's actual words but it also provided the opportunity for those literate in Pali to check the accuracy of the translation. The drawback of this method of translation, however, was that the amount of Pali the recitation contained, which was unintelligible for the majority of listeners, detracted from the aesthetic appeal of the narrative. For a narrative that could take up to a day to recite in its entirety, that presented a problem. This explains the popularity of the versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* written for recitation in the vernacular.⁶

Despite the fact that countless vernacular translations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* have been made throughout the Thai kingdom, they all shared the same basic narrative structure, since they were anchored by the original Pali version and the requirement that the words first uttered by the Buddha be accurately rendered in the vernacular.⁷ Thus, although communicated to an audience in oral form, the *Vessantara Jātaka* was in no sense an oral tradition, which is the case with most so-called folktales. There are no markedly variant versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* as there are with stories based on oral tradition. On the contrary, the story's form and transmission through successive generations were determined by textual factors, since it was the text which preserved the integrity of the Buddha's words. Indeed, when comparing versions of *Vessantara Jātaka* texts from different regions of Thailand one is struck by their lack of divergence from the same basic narrative.

The Manuscript and Scripts

The *Thet Maha Chat* is a complex process of communication whose message is the words supposedly first uttered by the Buddha. For pre-print societies, the medium that conveyed that message to its audience was of considerable importance, worthy of the message it conveyed. In the case of the *Thet Maha Chat*, the medium consisted of two elements, the palm leaf manuscript, known in Thai as *bai lan*, and the script.

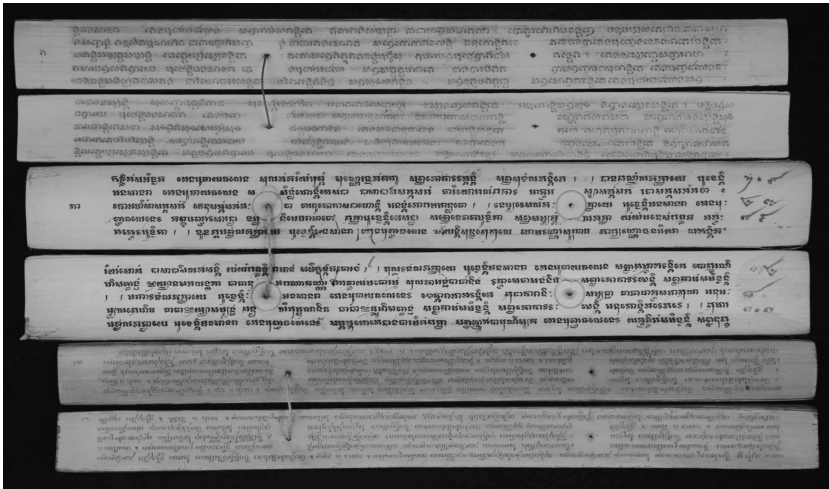


Figure 1.1. *Bai lan* manuscripts of the *Vessantara Jataka*; picture courtesy of the National Library of Thailand.

In recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* monks would read from a *bai lan* manuscript. The *bai lan* is a strip of leaf from the *corypha* palm. The text of the *bai lan* consisted of inscriptions made onto the face of the palm leaf by means of a sharp stylus. The leaf would then be rubbed in ash, which is caught in the incisions and brushed off from the rest of the leaf face, leaving the inscribed text legible against the background of the leaf.⁸ Several leaves were tied together into bundles known as *phuk*, which together made up the complete text. Palm leaf manuscripts were the traditional means of preserving the Buddhist scriptures. In the Thai kingdom the corpus of Buddhist canonical scripture, the *Tipiṭaka*, was preserved in this way until 1893, when the Thai court published the scriptures for the first time in printed folio form.

The *bai lan* manuscript was a sacred object and treated with utmost respect. Today, in areas where older traditions survive, this is still the case. Before reciting its contents the monk will raise the manuscript above his head as a gesture of reverence. It is never held below the waist, and when transported it is placed on the carrier’s shoulder.⁹ In the procession to the place where it is to be recited the *bai lan* manuscript is carried ahead of the monk who will recite

it—symbolic of the reciter’s subordination to the text.¹⁰ On the day of the *Thet Maha Chat* the *bai lan* containing the text to be recited is carried to the place of recital wrapped in expensive cloth (*pha hor phra khamphi*) and sometimes placed in a specially crafted box.¹¹ At the place of recital, in some regions, there is a small stand (“*khakrayia*”) specially designed for the purpose of holding the *bai lan* before and after reading.¹² In the recitation itself the *bai lan* is commonly held between thumb and forefinger, sometimes with the hands pressed together in the traditional attitude of respect. This is despite the fact that for monks experienced in recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* the text has already been memorized,¹³ which underlines the signifying function of the *bai lan* in the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony. Even in the age of mass production of printed materials in book form on paper, the *bai lan* continues to be used in *Thet Maha Chat* ceremonies as the “medium” of the story of the *Vessantara Jātaka*. The only concession that has been made to modern technology is that the text is now usually printed onto the palm leaf by religious publishing houses instead of being incised by local scribes.¹⁴

The script inscribed or printed onto the palm leaf is another element in the process of communicating the *Vessantara Jātaka*. Today, most versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* recited at *Thet Maha Chat* ceremonies are written in the Thai script. This, however, is only a recent innovation. Formerly, recitation versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in different parts of the Thai kingdom were written in the various scripts reserved for religious discourse. This distinguished them from secular or administrative writings that were written using a different script. In the central and southern regions the script used for religious writings was the Khmer script, known in Thai as *khorm*.¹⁵ In the Lao region of modern-day northeastern Thailand and Laos a different script known as *aksorn tham* or *tua tham*—“*dhamma* characters,” based on the Mon script—was in use.¹⁶ In the northern region, which shared close historical and religious relations with the northeast, a variation of the *aksorn tham* script was used. In addition, a number of other scripts were used by the kingdom’s minority peoples exclusively for religious discourse. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the Thai government began implementing a policy of making Thai the exclusive script used for written discourse, religious or secular, throughout the kingdom. This objective was only achieved well into twentieth century with the expansion of the state education system and the Thai publishing industry.

The relatively recent transcription of the *Vessantara Jātaka* into the Thai script—once preserved for “secular” subjects—has in some respects detracted from the text’s status as sacred discourse, since the use of Thai characters (as opposed to the former religious scripts *khorm* or *aksorn tham*) means that text is no longer distinguished from any other kind of literature produced in Thailand. The appearance of the *Vessantara Jātaka* today in book form has had the same effect. As signs that complement the text they communicate, the Thai script and the book have quite different associated meanings to those of the “*dhamma* characters” and the *bai lan*, even though it is the same story that they communicate.

The Narrator

Of critical importance to the authority of the story is the question of the narrator. In the case of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, it is implicit in the text that there is more than one narrator. When the story opens it is apparent that it is the voice of the commentator that is speaking, for the narrative begins with a description of the Buddha’s visit to the kingdom of Kapilavatthu, the seat of his own clan the Sakya, where his father and relatives pay homage to him. After performing a miracle in the Nigrodharama Park, in which he produces a red-colored shower of rain, which drenches those who wished to be made wet and leaves dry those who wished to remain dry, the Buddha remarks that this is not the first time that such a phenomenon has occurred. The Buddha proceeds to relate the story to a group of monks and assembled relatives. Here is the cue that the Buddha is now the narrator. The text of the *Vessantara Jātaka* makes it clear that the story is now being narrated by the Buddha. For example, throughout the text brief interjectory phrases are made by the Buddha, such as “O most pure monks . . .” before the narrative continues.¹⁷ This literary device repeatedly signifies to the audience the original context of the Buddha’s recitation of the story in Kapilavatthu.

But how could one be sure of what the commentator had added in the text and what was the Buddha’s own narration? In the original Pali text of the *Vessantara Jātaka* contained in the Pali *Jātaka* Commentary one finds a mixture of both prose and verse. According to tradition, *only* the verses contained in the *Vessantara Jātaka* are held in

the strict sense to have been uttered by the Buddha, while the prose is attributed to the commentary. Accordingly, only the verses are contained in the corpus of Pali canonical works, the *Tipiṭaka*; they appear in the section titled “*Jātaka*” of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the fifth book of the *Suttanta Piṭaka*. It would be a mistake to consider the question of the division of the *Jātaka* into verses that are held to be canonical and the prose commentary to be a matter that concerned only monastic textual scholars. In fact, the problem is specifically alluded to in a number of ritual elements that make up the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony. For example, the verses, known in Thai as the *khatha phan*, or “one thousand verses,”¹⁸ were traditionally recited at the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony in their entirety, prior to the recitation of the vernacular translation of the *Vessantara Jātaka* proper. In addition, the text of the recitation versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* always specifically mentions at the end of each chapter (known in Thai as “*kan*”) how many verses (*khatha*) that chapter contained.¹⁹ There were, moreover, ritual elements associated with the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony that highlighted the importance of the *khatha phan*. For example, each chapter would be “sponsored” by one or a number of people who would make merit offerings for that chapter of the story. The number of items offered as merit would correspond to the number of canonical verses in the particular chapter for which one was making merit. For example, if one was the sponsor of Nakhonkan, the concluding chapter of the story, the offerings would be in multiples of forty-eight, the number of canonical verses contained in that chapter. This ritual element was, therefore, another reference to the Buddha’s narration of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.

In regard to the narration and status of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, two additional points should be made. Firstly, even in those parts of the text where it would appear that it is the commentator who is narrating, the fact that the prose commentary was traditionally attributed to the famous scholar Buddhaghosa would assure the authority of the narrative. Secondly, to the audience of a recital of the *Vessantara Jātaka* who were unaware of the textual technicalities, it is the Buddha who narrates the story, which consequently guarantee’s the story’s authority. This is corroborated by studies of the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony which commonly acknowledge that one of the reasons for the story’s great popularity is that the *Vessantara Jātaka* is believed to be the literal words of the Buddha.²⁰

The Subject

A further element related to the authority of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, which sets it apart from other tales, is the subject of the story. Two special qualities about Vessantara as the subject of the narrative are reiterated in the various versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* by means of two sets of epithets.

The first set of epithets describes Vessantara as “the Great Being” (Pali: *mahāsatto*; Thai: *mahasat*) or the “Buddha to be” (Pali: *bodhisatta*; Thai: *phothisat*). Other epithets in the royal version of the *Vessantara Jātaka* which convey the same meaning include “*phutthangkun*,” “*phutthaphong*,” “*norsanphetphoththiphong*,” “*norphrachinnasi*.”²¹ The text’s constant references to Vessantara as the *bodhisatta* emphasizes the fact that this is the being who in his next incarnation will be enlightened as Gotama Buddha. By performing the great acts of giving in this incarnation that the *bodhisatta*, the “Buddha-to-be,” will achieve the Perfection of Giving (*than barami*), which will fulfill his quest for the Ten Perfections and thereby enable him to achieve Buddhahood. Throughout the narrative, the Vessantara’s relationship to the Buddha is made explicit. It is as though the Buddha is narrating his autobiography, since it is his origins as a *bodhisatta* that he is recounting.

The second set of epithets represents Vessantara and the Buddha himself as descended from a particular lineage (*wong, phong*; Pali: *vaṃsa*) of kings.²² These royal epithets include “*mahasommutiwong*” (“of the race of King Mahāsammata”), “*siwisutthithepphawong*” (“of the pure race of the gods”), “*sisuriyawong*” (“of the race of sun kings”), “*khattiyawong*” (of royal lineage), “*woraratchawong*” (“of the race of kings”), “*thammikarat*” (“Dhamma king”); “*maharat*” (“great king”). The lineage that is implied by these titles is conceived of not only on the basis of consanguinity but also on ties of reincarnation—from whom one was descended in a previous incarnation. This lineage is also described in the fifth-century Sinhalese chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*, which translated from the Pali literally means, “the Great Lineage.” The *Mahāvamsa*, became the model for a genre of religious chronicle widely used by the royal houses of Theravada Buddhist rulers throughout Southeast Asia.²³ As will be explained later, Thai kings up until the reign of King Rama IV also claimed this same lineage of kings as their own. The story of Vessantara, therefore, had both

religious and political significance because of Vessantara's place in the lineage from which Thai kings—and Theravada Buddhist rulers throughout mainland Southeast Asia—claimed descent. That is, Thai kings conceived of themselves as belonging to the same lineage as Vessantara and the Buddha.

Meter

Until recently, vernacular versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* written for recitation at *Thet Maha Chat* ceremonies throughout the Thai kingdom were all written in the same poetic meter, known in Thai as *rai*.²⁴ Early monastic regulations concerning the vernacular translations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* prohibited translations into other kinds of poetic meters.²⁵ What was the reason for this? In his study of the literature of the early Bangkok period, Nidhi notes that *rai* was the meter traditionally reserved for subjects of a sacred (*saksit*) nature, including writings addressed to the gods (*thep*) and spirits, as well as translations of Pali scriptures into the vernacular for recital.²⁶ As a poetic meter, *rai* has very few rules, and can be considered the meter closest to prose, the form of writing closest to ordinary speech.²⁷ One can conclude, therefore, that *rai* had the qualities best suited to two purposes: rendering the content of the original Pali *Vessantara Jātaka* into the vernacular as accurately as possible, as well as in a form that was suitable for oral presentation.

The use of *rai* as the meter of the *Vessantara Jātaka* translation enabled the poet and translator to not only endow the story with the aura of sanctity, but also to convert the Pali into the vernacular without the added burden of having to conform to formal rules of poetic composition, which might otherwise detract from the accuracy of the translation. *Rai*, moreover, was a meter designed to be spoken to an audience, as opposed to being silently read to oneself. This form of verse reflected the particular origin of the *Vessantara Jātaka* as a narrative, since the story was held to have been related by the Buddha to an audience of his relatives and followers.

Thus, the meter in which vernacular versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in the Thai kingdom were written is yet another element of the *Thet Maha Chat* performance where a deliberate attempt has been made to ensure fidelity to what were considered to be the Buddha's original words.

Texts Recited in Conjunction with the *Maha Chat*

Ceremonial recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* all over the country are traditionally accompanied by recitations of a number of other texts. As mentioned above, the *khatha phan*, or canonical verses of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, were always recited in their original Pali usually prior, but sometimes subsequent, to the recital of the vernacular translation of the *Vessantara Jātaka*. This highlighted the importance of the Buddha's original utterances, which are lost in the recital of the vernacular translation. However, a number of other texts were also recited that placed the story of Vessantara within the wider context of the Theravada Buddhist conception of history. This Buddhist-historical context contributed much to the meaning and popularity of the *Vessantara Jātaka* that is not apparent in the story itself.

The most notable of these additional texts was the story of *Phra Malai*, which in both the Lao and northern Thai traditions was recited on the day preceding the recital of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.²⁸ The origin of this work is unclear but it is certainly postcanonical.²⁹ It tells the story of a Sinhalese monk, Malai, endowed with supernatural powers, who visits the various levels of Buddhist hell and heaven. In heaven, Malai meets a succession of divine figures who, the god Indra tells him, have achieved their divinity through the merit of deeds done in their earthly existences. Finally, he meets the *bodhisatta* and future Buddha, Metteya, who entrusts him with a message to carry to people on earth. The message urges the faithful to make merit by listening to the *Vessantara Jātaka* within one day and to pay appropriate respect to the story in the form of ritual offerings. In so doing, they would be reborn in the age when Metteya is incarnated on earth. Metteya then describes how Gotama Buddha's religion will last for five thousand years before a dark age (*kali yuk*) of killing and suffering will appear bringing that world to an end. This will be followed by a new "golden" age when Metteya will appear as the next Buddha.

Although apparently not recited at the ceremonial recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in the central and southern regions of the kingdom, the story of *Phra Malai* was of equal popularity in these regions. Formerly, it was commonly recited on other religious occasions such as cremations. Such was its importance that a Thai prince, Thamathibet, composed a famous version of the tale in the eighteenth century.³⁰ The widespread influence of the *Phra Malai* story with its

millenarian message has long been recognized as one of the reasons for the *Vessantara Jātaka*'s own popularity.³¹ Its message was that listening to the *Vessantara Jātaka* was necessary for one's salvation.

In the *Bun Pha Wet* (as the Lao refer to the festival of the recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka*), traditionally the next text to be recited was the *Phothisat ban ton*, "the first part of the *bodhisatta* story." This text describes the five Buddhas—Gotama Buddha is the fourth—who were believed to have appeared in the present aeon or era ("*kap*"; Sanskrit: *kalpa*), known as the "*phattharakap*" (Sanskrit: *Bhadra kalpa*), "the auspicious era."³² The place of *Vessantara* in the *phattharakap* is crucial since it is the *bodhisatta*'s great acts of giving in his incarnation as *Vessantara* that allows him to achieve rebirth as Gotama Buddha in his next incarnation.³³ This broad religious-historical context provided by texts such as the *Phothisat ban ton* thus imbued the *Vessantara Jātaka* with added significance beyond merely the events related in that story.

In the early hours of the following day another text is recited, called "*Sangkat*," which translates as "era" or "age."³⁴ It begins with the *bodhisatta*'s resolution to the Buddha Dipankara to become a Buddha, four *asaṅkheyyas* ("incalculable periods of time") and one hundred thousand *kap* ("aeons") before he becomes enlightened. It goes on to relate the life of Prince Siddhattha, and gives an account of his defeat of Mara, his achievement of enlightenment, and his teaching of the *dhamma*. *Sangkat* also records the Buddha's conversation with his disciple Ananda on the future of the Buddhist religion, and its decline and eventual disappearance at the end of five thousand years.³⁵

The recital of *Sangkat* in the *Bun pha wet* ceremony in the northeast appears to be an elaboration of a custom once common to preaching in all regions called *Bork Sakarat*,³⁶ meaning "to state the era." In the *Bork Sakarat* the monk who is to give the sermon makes a series of mathematical calculations stating the number of years, months, and days that have elapsed since Gotama Buddha had passed away to *nibbāna* until the actual day of the sermon. He also states the present date according to various dating systems, and how many years, months, and days are left to the end of religion founded by the Buddha, which was prophesied to last exactly five thousand years from the time of the Buddha's *nibbāna*.³⁷ Let us take an example from a northeastern *Vessantara Jātaka* recitation:

I will calculate and read out the course of time (*ayukan*) of the Buddhist religion. It is two thousand five hundred and nineteen years (*watsa*—rainy seasons) since the great Sakyamuni, the all-knowing Buddha, passed away into *nibbāna*. The remainder, counting from Visakha day,³⁸ is eight months and twenty-seven days. Now I will state the present date (*patchuban kan*). This is a *hawaii si* year,³⁹ the 8th year of the minor era (*atthasok*), the winter season, the third month, the thirteenth day of the waxing moon, Tuesday. As for the course of time of the Buddhist religion in the future, two thousand four hundred and eighty years are left. The remainder counting from Visakha is three months and two days. These three parts of the course of time of the Buddhist religion add together to make five thousand years.⁴⁰

According to Roeng Atthawibun, the custom of *Bork Sakarat* was officially changed in 1941 under the modernizing Phibun Songkhrum government. According to the new formula, monks stated only the number of years since the Buddha's *nibbāna*, and abandoned the calculation of the number of years remaining of the Buddhist religion.⁴¹ One can clearly see the historically contextualizing function of *Bork sakarat* and *Sangkat* in the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony. They placed the audience within a historical framework defined by the origins of the Buddha as a *bodhisatta* at the beginning of the present aeon and the life-span of the Buddhist religion through to its decline and disappearance.

In both the *Bun Pha Wet* and the *Tang Tham Luang*, as the ceremony is known in northern Thailand, the recital of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in the vernacular is traditionally followed (or sometimes preceded) by a text known as *Anisong phra wetsandorn*, or "The Vessantara Reward," meaning the benefit one receives for the merit-making act of listening to the *Vessantara Jātaka*. This text is also held as having been originally preached by the Buddha after finishing relating the *Vessantara Jātaka*.⁴² In more detail than the *Phra Malai* story, *Anisong phra wetsandorn* tells of the future riches and good fortune that await those who have listened to and made merit (by giving offerings) for the recitations of each of the thirteen chapters (*kan*) of the *Vessantara Jātaka*. The rewards for having paid respect (*bucha*) to each section of the story closely follow the events related in each chapter. They are often the same rewards that Vessantara himself received for his

actions in that particular chapter of the story. For example, according to one version of the text, those who made merit offerings for the final chapter of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, *Nakhorn Kan* (“The City Chapter”), would be reborn as great kings with armies. They would enjoy all kinds of pleasures. Their father, mother, and relatives would be with them. All their sufferings would cease . . .⁴³ The rewards listed in *Anisong phra wetsandorn* also include, as in the *Malai* story, meeting the next Buddha Metteya in a future incarnation.

What is apparent in this brief account of some of the other works commonly recited in conjunction with the *Vessantara Jātaka* is the predominance of narrative texts that set out a historical framework for the Theravada Buddhist religion. These narratives serve to place the *Vessantara Jātaka* within the greater narrative of the origins, key events, and future of the Buddhist religion. These include the coming of the Buddhas prior to Gotama Buddha; Gotama Buddha’s own origins as a *bodhisatta* who resolved to become enlightened at the feet of the first Buddha, Dīpankāra; the *bodhisatta*’s defeat of Mara and enlightenment; the Buddha’s teaching of the *dhamma*; his *nibbana*; the five-thousand-year duration of the Gotama Buddha’s religion; the monk *Phra Malai*’s travels to the heavens; and finally, the coming of the new Buddha, Metteya. The additional stories recited in the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony situate the audience within that greater narrative, in the time scheme of Gotama Buddha’s religion. The stories offer the audience the hope of a future incarnation when the Buddhist religion is renewed by the teaching of the new Buddha Metteya, by listening to and worshipping the story of the *bodhisatta* in his incarnation as *Vessantara*.

The *Vessantara Jātaka*’s significance, therefore, should be interpreted within the context of this whole complex of Buddhist narrative. One cannot attribute the popularity of the *Vessantara Jātaka* to this story alone. The meaning it conveyed derives at least partly from the position it occupied within the overall historical framework of the Buddhist religion as expounded in these supplementary texts.

The Aesthetics of the Recitation: *thamnong* and *lae*

When a monk recites the *Vessantara Jātaka* at the *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony he does so not in a normal reading voice but in a form of “singing” performed according to specially developed rhythms and

melodies. These are known in Thai as *thamnornng*.⁴⁴ Each chapter of the *Vessantara Jātaka* is recited in a different *thamnornng* to suit the “mood” of the chapter. For example, in the chapter titled *Than Kan*, when Vessantara makes his great acts of giving that lead to his exile, the tone is serious and dignified; in *Kuman Kan* and *Kan Matsi* it is pitiful; in *Kan Chuchok*, a crowd favorite for the fun it pokes at the Brahmin Chuchok, it is comic,⁴⁵ while in the final chapter, *Nakhorn Kan*, the tone is triumphant. The *thamnornng* also varies according to the characters. Styles of *thamnornng* differ from region to region, reflecting linguistic and artistic variation. The *thamnornng* is often cited as one of the reasons for the *Vessantara Jātaka*'s popularity, for it is through the skilled singing of the text that the monk is able to excite the emotions of the audience, even to the point of moving people to tears. Some monks known as “*nak thet maha chat*” become famous and widely sought-after for the virtuosity and beauty of their recitation style.⁴⁶

While the *thamnornng* was an essential aesthetic aspect of the *Thet Maha Chat*, traditionally the art of the recitation was subordinate to the purpose of faithfully and accurately communicating the content of the text, since it was held to have been originally related by the Buddha. There were practices and regulations to assure that this was the case. For example, the recitation of the *khatha phan* (the “thousand verses”) is not sung, by contrast with the recitation of the vernacular translation, since the *khatha phan* were held to be the Buddha's actual utterances.⁴⁷ The orthodox view normally held that Pali text was allowed to be sung, but only if the words were rendered intelligibly and in a dignified manner. Yet the issue remained controversial. The kingdom's religious authorities were often called upon to give rulings on how or to what extent the text of the *Maha Chat* should be sung. For example, in 1917 the head of the Sangha affirmed the practice of singing the *Maha Chat*, citing that

even in the *Tipiṭaka* there is verse. Indeed, some scriptures are entirely in verse, like the *Dhammapada*, which explains the heart of the religion. Other sutras like the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Parayana vagga* in the *Suttanta* also use verse. And *soraphanya* chanting which is a kind of singing (*thamnornng khap*) is allowed, except for singing in which the words are drawn out (*siang yuet*) so that the listener cannot understand the meaning.⁴⁸

It took years of vocal training and memorization of the *Maha Chat* to develop the necessary skill to sing the correct *thamnornng* for each *kan*, as each *kan* (chapter) had its own distinct *thamnornng*.⁴⁹ Of course, the *thamnornng* could in fact enhance the reception of the message of the text. For example, the pathos of the episode when Matsi is frantically searching for her children in the forest is heightened by the mournful sound of the reciter's voice, often to the point of inducing tears from the audience. It was only when the *thamnornng* was considered to be at odds with the meaning of the text, or when the *thamnornng* became an end in itself, that it became a problem in regard to monastic regulations regarding the recitation of the *dhamma*.

The relationship between the text and the *thamnornng* was a problematic one, and one that has a long history of regulation. In the reign of Rama I in the late eighteenth century, as the new dynasty was reestablishing political order, the *very first* monastic law it promulgated was to prohibit recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* that were composed in inappropriate forms of verse (*kap klorn*) and sung in comic fashion:

Some monks who preach (*samdaeng*) the *Vessantara Jātaka* have not studied the *Tipitaka*. They only know the basic story and translate it into *kap klorn* [a form of verse often used for song]. Then they preach the story with comic and vulgar speech (*thoi kham talok kanornng yap cha*) . . . This is most damaging to the religion. . . . These people will not meet Metteya in the future. . . . When the king ordered the head of the Sangha, the *ratchakhana*, learned monks and scholars to consult the *Tipitaka*, it was found that both the preacher and listener to the *dhamma* which was preached in a comic way, turning the *dhamma* into *adhamma*, are guilty of a serious offence. Even preaching the *dhamma* in a singing voice (*siang khap*) is an offence. And to compose the *dhamma* into *kap klorn* verse with beautiful prosody like a song (*pleng khap*) is inappropriate. Therefore it is a royal command that from now on when monks preach and the people listen to the *Vessantara Jātaka* they must preach and listen to the story according to the full Pali text and commentary (*tam wara pali lae atthakatha*) in order to receive the full merit and meet Metteya in the future. . . . Presenting and listening to sermons in *kap klorn* verse, or are spoken in a comic and humorous manner, are forbidden.⁵⁰

At the turn of the twentieth century the head of the Sangha, Prince Wachirayan, made a similar pronouncement about all preaching (*thetsana*) and chanting (*suat*).⁵¹ In 1917, however, Wachirayan issued a more compromising announcement in regard to the *Vessantara Jātaka* recitations, in which he recognized that a song-like *thamnornng* encouraged certain kinds of people to listen and to make merit, and that as long as the recitation was intelligible and the reciting monk maintained his monastic dignity, such preaching was acceptable.⁵²

Such regulations and pronouncements demonstrate a clear concern that in the performance of the *Thet Maha Chat* the literal meaning of the text of the *Vessantara Jātaka* was not to be subordinated to the artistic quality of its rendition. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, this corresponds with a general concern for the integrity of the *Vessantara Jātaka* evident in many other aspects of the *Thet Maha Chat* ritual. Yet it is equally clear that the aesthetics of the *Vessantara Jātaka* recitation contributed significantly to the ceremony's popularity. There appears to have been a constant tension between these two aspects of the *Thet Maha Chat* performance: the art of the recitation and the desire for verbal accuracy of the rendition.

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the aesthetic elements of the *Vessantara Jātaka* recitation appear to have progressively flourished at the expense of the verbal presentation of the text. This development can be seen in the rise of the "lae" form of recitation. *Lae* is a style of melodic and rhythmic utterance in the *Thet Maha Chat* that differs from the traditional *thamnornng* in which the *Vessantara Jātaka* was recited. *Lae* raises the art of recitation to new heights. Some types of *lae* sung at *Thet Maha Chat* performances, known as "*lae nork*," are actually separate compositions, which bear little or no relation to the *Vessantara Jātaka* text. They are composed in *klorn* rather than the sacred *rai* meter. Either composed beforehand or improvised on the spur of the moment by talented reciters, *lae* are recited during breaks in the recital of the *Vessantara Jātaka* proper.⁵³ *Lae* occasionally violated the monastic regulations for preaching the *dhamma* referred to above, because the nature of *lae* singing clearly raises the art of the communication above the object of the communication—the *dhamma*, and in the case of *lae nork* even the *dhamma* is absent altogether. In 1937, the Supreme Monastic Council (*Maha Thera Samakhom*) banned certain kinds of *lae* from being recited at *Thet Maha Chat* performances:

[L]ately the *Thet Maha Chat* has become a comic affair because the reciter brings in new material which is not part of the original text, and changes the *thamnong* into a racy tune (*lot phon*). Sometimes the reciter only starts with a little of the text from the *Maha Chat* and then just sings various kinds of *lae*. The reciter behaves comically which is damaging to monastic dignity. . . . The monastic council therefore unanimously decrees that reciting *lae* outside the *Maha Chat* which are raucous (*samrak*), obscene (*yap lon*), and which have a racy tune, as well as comic behaviour which is damaging to monastic dignity, are forbidden.⁵⁴

The efficacy of such regulations is questionable, as *lae* singing in the *Thet Maha Chat* became extremely popular during the twentieth century. Indeed, *lae* singing has actually broken away from the *Thet Maha Chat* and become a commercial art form in its own right.⁵⁵ However, most scholars and monks agree that the growth in the popularity of *lae* is a relatively recent phenomenon. Sathit notes that in recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* presented to King Rama III in the mid-nineteenth century,

only the content of the *Jātaka* which scholars and poets had originally written was recited. There were no elaborate *lae nork*. This was so that the audience would hear in detail only the real content of the *Jātaka*, to the extent of every syllable of each *kan*.⁵⁶

In and around Bangkok, *lae* singing appears to have first become popular during the nineteenth century,⁵⁷ but in the rural regions it would seem that *lae* is no more than two or three generations old.⁵⁸ In his study of Buddhism in northern Thailand, Sommai Premchit notes that before the cultural influence of the central Thai in the northern part of the country over the last century, monks at the recital of the *Vessantara Jātaka* would never preach by improvising new content (“*baep pathiphan*,” one of the skills of a *lae* singer) but would always recite directly from the text inscribed on the palm leaf manuscript.⁵⁹

The development of *lae* in the *Thet Maha Chat* performance is indicative of the declining regard for the textual authenticity of the *Vessantara Jātaka* that has taken place over the last century. This decline

can be seen in other changes. Increasingly, in modern performances of the *Thet Maha Chat* the *Vessantara Jātaka* text that is recited is composed not in *rai* form but in *klorn*. This infers that the accurate rendition of the original text—by implication, the Buddha's words—is subordinate to a poetic form whose aim is purely aesthetic.⁶⁰ Sometimes, due to time constraints, the *Vessantara Jātaka* text is not even recited in its entirety. On such occasions the reciter often retells large sections of the story in his own words, reciting from the text only certain selected sections. This represents a major change from past performances of the *Thet Maha Chat* where recitation according to the text in conformity with the Buddha's original rendition of the story was of utmost importance.⁶¹

Ritual

The recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka* takes place amid a complex set of ritual requirements whose proper observance is essential.⁶² In the ritual, as in other aspects of the *Thet Maha Chat*, there is a conscious attempt to defer to the *Vessantara Jātaka* text and to the Buddha's original words, and to reproduce in symbols what is said in the text.

One aspect of the ritual relates to the decoration of the temple. The preaching hall of the temple in which the recitation is to take place is customarily decorated to appear like a forest. Trees (particularly fruit trees, including sugar cane, banana, and coconut), as well various plants, flowers, ponds, pictures of animals, and even pictures of scenes from each of the thirteen chapters of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, are set up both inside and around the temple.⁶³ There is an obvious attempt to make the surroundings in which the audience hears the *Vessantara Jātaka* resemble the forests of Mount Wongkot, the scene where much of the story takes place.⁶⁴ What the text attempts to achieve through aural means, the decoration of the temple does visually. In some regions the events of each chapter are reenacted in dramatic form, with actors playing out the parts of Vessantara and Matsi, Kanha and Chali, and the other characters in the story.⁶⁵ The decorations that surround the "pulpit" (Thai: *thammatt*) in which the monk delivers the recitation probably signify the Banyan Grove in Kapilavatthu where the Buddha actually told the story to his relatives and followers.⁶⁶ In reciting from the *Vessantara Jātaka* text words once uttered by the Buddha, the monk already imitates the Buddha; the decoration adds to the general simulating effect.



Figure 1.2. A monk recites from the *Vessantara Jataka* at a *Thet Maha Chat* ceremony at Wat Parinayok Worawihan, Bangkok, 2015. The temple is decorated to resemble the forest of Mount Wongkot where Vessantara and his family were exiled. Photo by Pravej Tuntrapirom.



Figure 1.3. In the foreground a *phum kathin* (“Kathina money tree”) made of banknotes stuck onto small sticks represents offerings of *than* by the faithful. Photo by Pravej Tuntrapirom.

Another important element of the ritual recitations of the *Vessantara Jātaka* are the merit offerings (*khruang kiriya bucha*) presented by the audience at the ceremony. The *Thet Maha Chat* was traditionally the greatest merit-making occasion of the religious calendar. The offerings that confer merit conform to a special formula based on the number of canonical verses that make up the *Vessantara Jātaka*: nominally, one thousand. Therefore, one finds arranged inside the temple offerings such as incense, candles, several varieties of lotus, water hyacinth and other flowers, *miang* (a kind of sweetmeat wrapped in leaf), betel, tobacco, popped rice (*khao tork*), and paper flags (*thong*), all in multiples of one thousand.⁶⁷ In the *Bun Phra Wet* ceremonies held in the northeast and among the Lao, one thousand balls of sticky rice are paraded around the temple preaching hall by the faithful before the recitation begins.⁶⁸ There are six kinds of offering that are essential to *Thet Maha Chat* ceremonies everywhere: one thousand incense sticks, lotuses, flowers, candles, flags (*thong*), and multitiered umbrellas (*chat*).⁶⁹ These are the ritual offerings that the future Buddha Metteya (Thai: "Mettrai") entrusted the monk Phra Malai to tell the faithful to make in honor of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.⁷⁰ The paramount importance of the canonical verses is also reflected in another kind of offering. During the recital of each *kan*, candles and incense are lit in multiples of the number of *khatha* in that particular *kan*. For example, when the monk recites the *Than Kan* chapter, 209 candles and incense sticks are lit, signifying the 209 canonical verses found in that chapter of the story.⁷¹ Given that the *khatha* are the closest symbols of the Buddhist original utterances, these ritual offerings in honor of the *khatha* underline the authority of these utterances. On the ceremony in the Lao-speaking regions of Thailand where the recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka* conforms closest to traditional patterns, Ariyanuwat notes that

old people traditionally believe that when you hold the *Bun Maha Chat*, if one sets up the offerings (*khruang kiriya bucha*) incorrectly or incompletely, catastrophes will take place, such as drought or lightning strikes out of the blue which bring suffering to the villagers. So the ritual (*phithi phithan*) of setting up the offerings for the *Vessantara Jātaka* (*kan taeng khruang maha chat*) is strictly adhered to.⁷²

Once again, it is clear that the ritual associated with the *Vessantara Jātaka* recitation, as with other aspects of the *Thet Maha Chat* perfor-