



Teaching and Learning Guide for *Avadānas* and *Jātakas* in the Newar Tradition of the Kathmandu Valley: Ritual Performances of Mahāyāna Buddhist Narratives

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Author's Introduction

To familiarize students with the sources and world view of the vast majority of Buddhists – householders – the tradition's popular stories are the essential texts to survey. Reflecting their significance, Buddhist monasteries have many texts in their various collections. These works, in classical languages and vernacular retellings, provide a wealth of insight about the times of their composition (close to that of the Buddha): social groups, kingship, details of material culture, popular folk traditions, and the 'feel' of everyday life. The *jātakas* (stories of the earlier lives of the future Buddha Gautama) and *avadānas* (edifying tales of exemplary figures) are narratives that portray actions and consequences, showing how the doctrine of karma works in specific instances. Some are animal stories; some involve spirits and gods; most have the drama of human actors. Clearly, Buddhist exponents redacted countless stories from the vast oral narrative tradition present in its South Asian places of origin, and they fit them into their own doctrinal tradition. Central were the stories charting the slow perfection of moral living undergone by the future Buddha across many lifetimes as animal, deity, and human. Since the Buddha's prime teaching for householders is to live moral lives, these stories provide many examples of how to face and make ethical decisions. Many are entertaining, including slapstick scenes. Episodes from these stories are found in the earliest Buddhist art, a tradition that continues until the present day in the paintings decorating monastery walls and in the publications of Buddhist organizations. This article provides a case study in one such tradition, from the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, to examine the most popular Buddhist tales found there.

Author Recommends

I Canonical and vernacular Buddhist narratives: Jātakas and Avadānas

1. Chalmers, Robert. *The Jātaka: Vols 1 & 2*. [entire Pali collection of 547 stories]. New York: Forgotten Books, 2007.

The full collection of *jātakas* from the Pali Canon, from the shortest ones of several paragraphs, to the longest that read as small novellas. (Books reprinted in this series provide inexpensive source texts.)

2. Jones, J.J. *The Mahāvastu, as Translated from the Buddhist Sanskrit*. New York: Forgotten Books, 2012. [1950–1956]

An important large text that interweaves the narrative of the Buddha's life with many tales of his previous births.

3. Khoroché, Peter. *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Arya Sura's Jātakamāla*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

An accessible translation of a widely read collection of *jātaka* stories attributed to a famous Buddhist scholar.

4. Lienhard, Siegfried. *Manicūdāvadānoddhrita*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1963.

An English translation of one of the major Buddhist narratives associated with the Kathmandu Valley.

5. Obeyesekere, Ranjini. *The Jewels of the Doctrine: Stories of the Saddharma Ratnavaliya*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

An example of a vernacular text from Sri Lanka that is a collection of popular stories told by its monk preachers and elders. Some stories are domesticated in local sites.

6. Tatelman, Joel. *The Heavenly Exploits: Buddhist Biographies from the Divyāvādāna*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Stories from the Buddhist Sanskrit tradition that were influential in Indian Buddhist culture.

7. Richard Gombrich & Margaret Cone, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977.

This long narrative recounts the last birth before the future Buddha was born as Siddhārtha among the Shākhyas. It has been the source of many cultural performances in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

8. Lefferts, Leedom and Sandra Cate. *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum*. Singapore: Asian Civilizations Museum, 2013.

A beautifully illustrated study of how this *jātaka* is a text that is 'lived in' by devotees in Theravada Southeast Asia.

II *On story literatures in the study of religions*

9. Wiggins, James B. ed. *Religion as Story*. New York: Harper, 1975.

A collection of articles highlighting the centrality of narratives in the history of religions.

10. Loy, David R. *The World Is Made of Stories*. Boston: Wisdom, 2010.

A collection of quotes exploring the meaning of 'story' and stories' roles in human life from a variety of perspectives, centered in a Buddhist world view.

Online Materials

1. <http://www.clear-vision.org/schools/Teachers/teacher-info/Buddhist-stories.aspx>

This site contains a wealth of materials for teachers adapted from tradition sources to present Buddhist thought and art to students from age 6–17 years.

2. <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/sacred/stories/>

A web site created by the British Library that presents story narratives from the world major religions.

3. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/buda/hd_buda.htm

A thematically-organized site highlighting the Metropolitan Museum of Arts' Buddhist collection, curated by leading scholars. Includes the art of popular tales.

Sample Syllabus (Excerpt)

From a seminar on Theravada Buddhism, a unit on traditional narratives. (A paper assignment from this course is also included below.)

TOPIC SIX: POPULAR NARRATIVES

Class 15. Dharma Stories: Jātakas and Avadānas

Required reading

Caroline Rhys-Davids, *Stories of the Buddha*, 1–30; 159–240

Classes 16 and 17: Student-led discussion: Stories and the Popularization of Buddhism

Required reading

Caroline Rhys-Davids, *Stories of the Buddha*, assigned cases

Theravāda Buddhism, 72–81



Focus Questions

1. What are the three tradition components of the Buddhist *jātaka* narrative? How does the context of the story told relate to the content?
2. Read a selection of animal *jātaka* tales featuring ten different species. Besides the fact that the animals speak, to what extent do these stories reflect a scientific world view regarding animal behaviour?
3. Surveying a collection of *jātaka* stories (such as the *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Arya Sura's Jātakamāla*), how do the stories told by the Buddha relate to the main teachings such as the Four Noble Truths?
4. Imagine that you are a Buddhist monk who has been invited to preach a sermon on the coming full moon day, when householders will flock to the monastery to hear the Dharma. Choose one *jātaka* to use as a text in support, and write a sermon on compassion and non-violence.
5. In some instances, the behavior of the future Buddha in his path toward his final human life when he realizes Enlightenment may *not* be a model for householders. Considering the actions of the bodhisatta in the *Vessantara Jataka*, his last birth before being born in Lumbini, discuss this issue.

Seminar Activity

PAPER: ANALYSIS OF JĀTAKA STORIES

Guidelines

1. Based upon the thematic assignment given in class, write a paper describing and analyzing two stories drawn from the course textbook, *Stories of the Buddha*. One must involve the *bodhisatta* as animal, one as human.

For each story,

1. summarize the plot concisely;
2. identify and define the main Buddhist teaching conveyed; (you must use proof text passages drawn from *Buddhism in Translations*, the *Dhammapada*, *Milindapañha*, etc.); and
3. discuss how the story's doctrine(s) might have had special significance for specific groups in a Buddhist community.
4. In a final page,
 - (a) identify an additional narrative from the *Stories of the Buddha* that highlights one of the major themes in your story. Pick well to make the most cogent comparison; and
 - (b) summarize how all the stories cited can be related.

Format

Typed, double-spaced, 1" margins, 12 pt. pitch, Maximum length: 5 pages.

Well-crafted essays are the goal.

DUE: Draft due as part of the Oral Presentation in class on October 24.

Note: Oral presentation is part of the grade assigned for the paper.

Final paper due: 10/26, by noon via electronic submission.