

CHAPTER II

The Story of the Path: Indian *Jātaka* Literature and the Way to Buddhahood

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1. Introduction

In the commentator's preface to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, which probably dates to the fifth or sixth century CE, we hear that *jātaka* stories are tales “in which the Teacher, the Leader, desirous of carrying the world across, brought to fruition over a long time the endless conditions for awakening” (*yāni yesu ciraṃ Satthā lokanītharaṇatthiko | anante bodhisambhāre paripācesi nāyako*¹) and that the text illuminates “the unimaginable magnificence of the deeds of a Great Man” (*mahāpurīṣacariyānaṃ ānubhāvaṃ acintiyaṃ*²). We might, therefore, expect this monumental Pāli collection to illustrate the Buddha's path to buddhahood and his pursuit of the perfections that come to be inseparable from discussions of this path. However, we do not have to read many of the 547 stories of the collection before we notice a discrepancy: few of the stories are presented as being about progress on a path, the perfections are barely mentioned, and the stories are not ordered chronologically either in terms of the stories of the past or the frame narratives that are set in the teaching career of the Buddha.

As I argued in my 2010 book *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*, evidence suggests that *jātakas* were not actually composed as part of a multi-life biography, nor as an illustration of a path. Rather, the earliest stories in Pāli texts, embedded in *sutta* and *vinaya*, tend to highlight the inferiority of the Bodhisatta compared to the Buddha. For example, the Bodhisatta teach-

¹ Fausbøll vol. 1, 1

² Idem.

es the way to the heavens, while the Buddha teaches the way to *nibbāna*.³ As *jātakas* were collected together into the great Pāli *jātaka* book, this emphasis on the Buddha—rather than the Bodhisatta or his path—remains, in declarations of the Buddha’s ability to see and reveal past lives, and to tell the right story for every occasion. The Buddha is presented as storyteller *par excellence*, visionary, teacher, and participant in (or observer of) every heroic tale known to the community.⁴ Only later was this collection reframed as exemplifying the Buddha’s long path and his acquisition of the ten perfections.⁵ The preface of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, therefore, represents the end of a process of development in understanding the *jātaka* genre.

Although this understanding of the *jātaka* genre as illustrative of the Buddha’s path did not develop until after the initial collecting together of the stories that later became the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, the definition has nonetheless been very influential. It interplayed in complex ways with developing notions of the *bodhisatta* path and the nature of buddhahood in the Pāli *imaginaire*.⁶ It also participated in the rising emphasis on biographical accounts of varying kinds (including *apadānas* and *vaṃsas*), and influenced the ways in which other *jātaka* texts framed themselves.⁷ For example, the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, a late-canonical Pāli scripture, uses the idea of *jātaka* stories as illustrative of the path to frame its retelling of several stories according to the perfection demonstrated, though the late—and much missed—Lance Cousins long ago demonstrated that the authors were working with a different list of perfections to the ten that became the standard in Pāli tradition.⁸ More famously, the final ten stories of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, which to-

³ Appleton 2010: 47–51.

⁴ Appleton 2015a.

⁵ Appleton 2010: 53–64.

⁶ Ibid.: 85–108. To use Steven Collins’ term, which has become the norm in the study of Pāli Buddhism.

⁷ Ibid.: 109–122.

⁸ In an unpublished conference paper that he shared with me in discussion, Cousins argued that the list of perfections demonstrated in the *Cariyāpiṭaka* (*dāna*, *sīla*, *adhiṭṭhāna*, *sacca*, *mettā*, *upekkhā*, and perhaps *nekkhamma*) may have been combined with the list of six common in Sanskrit literature (*dāna*, *sīla*, *kṣānti*, *vīrya*, *samādhi/dhyāna* [which becomes *nekkhamma*] and *prajñā*) to make the list of ten that became standard in the Pāli tradition. See the discussion in Appleton 2010: 98–103.

gether make up the *Mahānipāta* or “Great Chapter”, have become associated with the ten perfections, and are traditionally understood to narrate the final ten lives of the Buddha. This tradition exists, despite the fact that the ordering of the stories of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* is based on the number of verses contained within each story, and there is no real sense of chronology in the collection as a whole.⁹

In this paper I would like to step outside this Pāli milieu and broaden my study of the generic conventions of *jātaka* stories to other Indian Buddhist texts, asking to what extent the idea that *jātakas* are illustrative of a path has influenced their presentation and reception. For the purposes of this paper I understand a *jātaka* to be a story of a past life of the Buddha, and refer to stories of this definition as *jātakas* regardless of whether or not they are called such in the text, though the latter distinction receives some comment during the course of my discussion. Although this paper forms part of a longer project to understand the *jātaka* genre as it varies across early South Asian texts and contexts, I will limit my comments herein to three important narrative collections from early India, namely the *Jātakamālā*, the *Avadānaśataka* and the *Mahāvastu*, comparing these to one another and to the Pāli tradition that I have just outlined. For each of these textual collections I will be asking two interrelated questions relevant to this volume: (1) To what extent are *jātakas* used to demonstrate the Buddha’s own path to buddhahood? (2) Where this is the case, to what extent is this path deemed to be exemplary and suitable for others to follow? These questions are, of course, closely related to the tension in early Buddhism between advocates of the *bodhisattva* path, and those who understood that it was possible to achieve another form of awakening thanks to the great benefits brought by the extraordinary Buddha.

⁹ For example, the first story of the *Mahānipāta*, the *Mūgapakkha-jātaka* or *Temiya-jātaka*, begins with the Bodhisatta recalling a recent past birth in a hell, which would be impossible according to later understandings of the *bodhisatta* path. Nonetheless, the high place of these ten stories is not arbitrary: after all, at some stage a decision was made to preserve them at a far greater length than others in the collection. For a discussion of the developing traditions surrounding the *Mahānipāta* stories, see the introduction to Appleton and Shaw (trans.) 2015.

2. *Jātakamālā*

A well-known collection of *jātaka* stories, renowned for its elegance, is the *Jātakamālā* of Ārya Śūra, a collection of thirty-four stories retold in Sanskrit prose and verse dating from around the fourth century CE. Thirty of the stories have parallels in the Pāli collection, in some cases sharing whole verses and phrases, suggesting a common source. Of the four stories that do not have a Pāli parallel (1, 8, 18, 30), three relate the bodily sacrifice of the Bodhisattva, a theme not prominent in the Pāli collection; these include the famous story of the hungry tigress with which the collection begins. The basis on which the stories were selected or grouped and ordered is not made explicit. Although later traditions record that Ārya Śūra intended to write one hundred *jātakas*, ten illustrating each of the ten perfections,¹⁰ there is little indication that this is the case, and indeed the word perfection (*pāramī* or *pāramitā*) does not feature in the text. However, certain of those qualities that we know from lists of perfections—whether from the list of six that became associated with the Mahāyāna or the ten of the standard Pāli tradition—do feature, with *dāna* (generosity), *śīla* (good conduct) and *kṣānti* (forbearance) having particular prominence. The first ten stories of the collection address *dāna*, with smaller clusters focusing on, for example, the power of truth (14–16), or the importance of renunciation (18–21).

An important hint at the purpose of the *Jātakamālā* is found in the four-verse prologue, in which Ārya Śūra states he wishes his poem to celebrate “the glorious deeds performed by the sage in his previous births” (*pūrvaprajanmasu muneś caritādbhutāni*; 1.1), and follows by saying that “these deeds have become the signposts by which the way to buddhahood is pointed out” (*ślāghyair amībhir abhilakṣitacihnabhūtair ādeśito bhavati yat sugatatvamārgaḥ*; 1.2). Ārya Śūra thus appears to understand the *jātaka* genre as demonstrating the amazing multi-life path of the Buddha. The celebration of his past lives pays honour to the Buddha’s great achievements, but it also outlines a path, albeit not one with any obvious chronology or progression, and it thus implicitly seems possible—even desirable—that others follow in the Buddha’s footsteps. However, later in the same introductory stanzas the Buddha’s actions are also described as being without peer or

¹⁰ This tradition, which is found in Tibetan and Mongolian sources, is discussed in Khoroché’s introduction to his translation, pp. xi–xii.

“inimitable” (*naivānvagamyata*; 1.4), and Ārya Śūra offers homage to “the one without equal” (*tam asamaṃ*; 1.4).

These introductory verses to the *Jātakamālā* thus provide us with a helpful starting point for our exploration, for they demonstrate a key tension that is present even when *jātaka* stories are understood to illustrate a path. On the one hand, the stories are understood as demonstrating how amazingly wonderful and perfect the Buddha is—and has been in past lives too. As such he is lauded as inimitable and worthy of praise and awe. However, on the other hand the stories are understood as constituting a path that serves explicitly or implicitly as a model for Buddhists to aspire to. This tension is present in some of our other *jātaka* texts too, as we will shortly see.

3. *Avadānaśataka*

The next text that I would like to explore is the *Avadānaśataka*, a collection of one hundred stories in Sanskrit, mostly prose (with some verses), dating from perhaps the second to fourth centuries CE and probably aligned with the Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda school. The collection is divided into ten decades of ten stories each, and two of these decades—the second and fourth—contain stories of the Buddha’s past lives, though these are not explicitly labelled *jātaka* stories. As I explored in a recent article,¹¹ these two decades contain very different understandings of the *jātaka* genre. In many ways these two generic types further illustrate the tension we just identified in the *Jātakamālā*.

The stories of the second decade all begin with a situation—usually some great act of praise or service for the Buddha—that puzzles the monks. In order to explain, the Buddha tells a story of the time of a past *buddha*, and of some person in the past who performs some act of service towards this *buddha*; this person is then revealed to be none other than the present Buddha. For example, the Buddha’s praise of a past *buddha* led to him being praised, and the Buddha’s offering of a boat ride to a past *buddha* led to him receiving one. In the concluding formulae to each of these stories, the Buddha explains the fruiting of deeds and exhorts his monks to pay honour to their teacher.

In contrast to the second decade, the stories of the fourth decade tell of

¹¹ Appleton 2015b. I revisit and further develop some of these questions in relation to the notion of buddhahood in a forthcoming book on the first four chapters of the text: Appleton 2020.

the Buddha's impressive actions in a past time uninhabited by past *buddhas*. For example, story 31 begins with the monks being troubled by illness, while the Buddha remains perfectly healthy. When they express wonder at this he tells of how in the past he had been a king who was so determined to cure an epidemic amongst his citizens that he killed himself in order to be reborn as a great curative fish, and then allowed the citizens to eat him alive. The Buddha concludes by teaching that the monks should cultivate compassion towards all beings. The other stories of the fourth decade contain similar events: the surprise of the monks at some peculiar situation or unexpected teaching is met with a story of the Bodhisattva's extraordinary actions in the past. Each story ends with a different moral teaching, but the overall message is that the monks should emulate the Bodhisattva's great qualities, which include generosity, compassion, friendliness, merit, reverence for the *dharma*, and respect for one's parents.

Neither decade of the *Avadānaśataka* that contains *jātakas* presents a chronological path or any sense of progression towards buddhahood, indeed there is no obvious ordering principle within any of the decades. The six perfections are not mentioned at all in the fourth decade, and only appear in the second decade stories in a formulaic list of the accomplishments of a *buddha*. (They also appear elsewhere in the text in the same formula, as well as in predictions of future buddhahood in another chapter.¹²) The Buddha-to-be is also not generally referred to as a *bodhisattva*, but only called such at certain points in four tales of the fourth decade (stories 31, 36, 37 and 38). It is therefore difficult to see the stories as illustrative of the *bodhisattva* path, though there is evidence that some of the Buddha's actions were considered exemplary for Buddhist audiences.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between the two decades is that in the fourth decade the Buddha's followers are exhorted to follow his example, while in the second decade they are told to take the stories as a reason to praise, honour and entrust themselves to the Buddha and his teachings. Once again we see the central tension that is present in many *jātaka* texts, between the stories as illustrating the glorious and awe-inspiring path of the Buddha, and the idea that this path can—and should—be emulated by the Buddha's followers. Strikingly, in this text it is extreme stories of bodily sacrifice—

¹² Predictions of buddhahood are found in stories 1–10 and 20. The numerical list of the accomplishments of a *buddha* is found in stories 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 23, 50, 56, 79, 80, 81, 92.

such as jumping into an oven in return for a verse of the *dharma*, or dying in the act of saving one's herd—that are said to inspire emulation, while the stories of simple gifts to *buddhas* of the past inspire praise and faith.

Whatever their differences, all twenty of the *jātaka* stories of the *Avadānaśataka* are *avadānas*; indeed, the stories are not called *jātakas* at all in the text and need to be viewed within the generic concerns of the *avadāna*. In accordance with the understanding of the *avadāna* genre in this text (which is not necessarily consistent with other texts and contexts), the stories are primarily concerned with the workings of karma.¹³ As such, we might ask what the stories tell us about the relationship between the Buddha's path and karmic fruition. Many of the stories demonstrate how the honour and service received by the Buddha results from similar acts of service performed by him for past *buddhas* in previous lives. In addition, two stories (36 and 39) show the Buddha-to-be doing bad deeds in the past, and while in the former he experiences the fruits in a hell realm, in the latter he at least appears to experience the negative karmic fruition in his final life.¹⁴ That karmic merit is relevant even to *buddhas* is further reinforced by the frame story of number 34, the tale of the ever-generous King Śibi. In this delightful little narrative, a monk is struggling to thread a needle in order to mend his robe and cries out in frustration, "Who in the world desires merit?" (*ko loke puṇyakāma iti*; 182–3) to which the Buddha, who happens to be passing, responds that he does. When the monk, somewhat flustered, points out that the Buddha has accumulated the six perfections over innumerable aeons, the Buddha insists that he is never satiated (*trpta*) with merit. Thus the *Avadānaśataka* makes clear that even *buddhas* are affected by karmic merit (and, perhaps, demerit) and that the pursuit of merit is not made irrelevant by the pursuit of the perfections or the achievement of awakening.

Thus if we learn something about the path to buddhahood from the *jātakas* of the *Avadānaśataka* it is that it involves merit. This merit may result from

¹³ The majority of stories explain the great benefits of acts of merit, often with a formulaic combination of gift plus vow. For a helpful exploration of the "rupalogical" and "dharmalogical" dimensions of these acts of merit, see Strong 1979.

¹⁴ In *Avadānaśataka* 39 the Buddha is prevented from crossing a line in the sand until Anāthapiṇḍada discharges a debt on his behalf. This is because in a past life the Buddha-to-be gave surety for Anāthapiṇḍada's gambling debt but never paid it. However, the wording of the text leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not the Buddha *chose* to be bound by his debt, in order to teach about the consequences of deeds. See further discussion in Appleton 2015b.

positive encounters with *buddhas* of the past, as in the stories of the second decade, or from actions carried out in a time with no *buddhas*. The emphasis of these stories may be on the connection between past and present, rather than on a chronological or systematic path, yet the tales do still exemplify something of the route to buddhahood. And those of the fourth decade at least encourage others to emulate the virtuous deeds of the Bodhisattva.

4. *Mahāvastu*

We have now seen two early Sanskrit texts that present *jātaka* stories as in some way illustrating the path to buddhahood, whether for the purpose of inspiring awe or encouraging emulation, or a potentially paradoxical mixture of both. However, we would be wrong to conclude that this is the mainstream understanding of the *jātaka* genre amongst early Buddhist communities. As I have already mentioned, the understanding of the *jātakas* as illustrating the path to buddhahood was only applied in the later layers of the Pāli *jātaka* literature, while earlier layers highlighted the greatness of the Buddha as being far superior to his past lives, and as being the source of all stories and participant in all heroic tales. Another text that uses *jātakas* to comment on the Buddha's "present" life is the *Mahāvastu*, a broadly biographical and buddhological composition in Buddhist Sanskrit prose and verse from the first half of the first millennium CE that once formed part of the *vinaya* of the Lokottaravādin School.¹⁵ The text is tricky to navigate, containing an exploration of the ten *bhūmis*, the life of Dīpaṅkara Buddha, and the life of Śākyamuni Buddha including his early community.

There are 41 stories labelled as *jātakas* in the *Mahāvastu*, and a few others that would certainly count as such but are not given that label, and many of these resonate with tales found in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. The reason given for telling the stories varies, as does the form each *jātaka* takes, though the basic structure that puts them in the mouth of the Buddha and ends with him identifying the births is recognisably standard. These *jātaka* stories are not ordered as a prelude to the Buddha's final life, and not presented as illustrative of his path. Instead, they are told during the account of the Buddha's final life, in order to illustrate how apparently curious experiences are either explained by or paralleled in his past lives. For example, a cluster

¹⁵ For the latest scholarship on the history of the text and its contents, see Tournier 2012 and 2017.

of eight *jātaka* stories surround his wooing of his wife Yaśodharā in the past (*Mahāvastu* 2.48–72 and 82–115), in parallel to his present-life experiences.¹⁶ Another two clusters of four stories, including the longest *jātaka* contained in the *Mahāvastu*,¹⁷ illustrate Māra’s multiple attempts to destroy the Buddha in his past lives, and the latter’s repeated escape (*Mahāvastu* 2.237–55 and 2.419–3.33). Some of the *jātakas*, especially those that feature later on in the Buddha’s life story, show the Buddha-to-be performing *bodhisattva*-like actions, such as sacrificing himself in return for a verse of teaching (*Surūpa-jātaka*, *Mahāvastu* 2.255–257), speaking in praise of merit (*Puṇyavanta-jātaka*, *Mahāvastu* 3.33–41) or crossing an illusory hell pit in order to fulfil a gift (*Vijitāvin-jātaka*, *Mahāvastu* 3.41–47). However, such stories are not the majority, and neither are they integrated into any presentation of a path; indeed, even these tales are framed as parallels to the present, to show how the Buddha also valued the teachings or spoke in praise of good deeds in the past.¹⁸

In addition to showing how “present” experiences have happened in the past too, another key motivation for these *jātaka* stories is explaining something in the karmic history of somebody that the Buddha has encountered, and a few of the *Mahāvastu jātakas* are really about other characters altogether. Indeed, four of the stories that are explicitly labelled *jātakas* do not even feature the Buddha in the identification of the births.¹⁹ In addition, there

¹⁶ A few later stories also address this theme, indeed more than a quarter of the *jātaka* stories overall focus on the Buddha’s relationship with his wife, with only one suggesting his indifference to her: the Śyāmā-jātaka, told during the account of the Buddha’s renunciation (*Mahāvastu* 2.166–177).

¹⁷ The *Kuśa-jātaka*, which is recounted twice, in prose (*Mahāvastu* 2.419–96) and then verse (3.1–27). The first is introduced as being another occasion on which Māra’s army was routed by the Buddha’s cough, though there are many other preoccupations at play in the story, especially once we reach the verse version.

¹⁸ Rahula (1978: 91) states that the majority of the *jātakas* of the *Mahāvastu* are about the qualities of the Bodhisattva. It is true that the stories tend to paint the Buddha-to-be in a fairly positive light, but the focus is usually on a repeated action, and many of these are rather mundane. Thus although it is possible to say they are about the qualities of “the Bodhisattva”, meaning the Buddha in his past lives, we cannot really say they are about the qualities of “a *bodhisattva*”.

¹⁹ The *Anaṅgaṇa-jātaka* (2.271–276) explains the karmic merit acquired by the householder Jyotiṣka during his past life as a merchant named Anaṅgaṇa. The first of the two *jātakas* of Ajñāta Kauṇḍinya (3.347–349) explains what meritorious deed allowed him to be the first to learn the *dharma*. The *Yaśoda-jātaka* (3.413–415) tells

is little sign of the perfections here, with the six together only mentioned once, in a comment about the qualities of all *buddhas* (*Mahāvastu* 3.226), the perfection of wisdom mentioned twice (*Mahāvastu* 1.170; 3.67), and a single mention each of the perfections of generosity (*Mahāvastu* 1.102) and forbearance (*Mahāvastu* 2.368).

These observations about the place of the *jātaka* stories in the *Mahāvastu* will not be surprising to anybody familiar with the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, for there too we barely hear of the perfections, and we see little notion of the *jātakas* functioning as part of the preparation for buddhahood. That is not to say that the *jātakas* in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and *Mahāvastu* do not have biographical agendas, of course, but there is little sense of a path, exemplary or otherwise, and the stories function primarily to augment the final-life biography of the Buddha and demonstrate his skills as visionary and teacher.

In addition to the forty-something *jātaka* tales that are found in the narration of the Buddha's final life, however, there are two other types of *jātaka* tale in the *Mahāvastu*, albeit not labelled as such. The first is found in discussions of the four stages of the path to buddhahood, which are exemplified through tales of different past existences of Śākyamuni Buddha. We learn that during the "ordinary" stage of his *bodhisattva* career (*prakṛticaryā*), the person who would later become Śākyamuni was a universal emperor who planted the necessary roots of merit during the time of the Buddha Aparājitaḍhvaja. In the time of another past *buddha*, known as Śākyamuni, the one who would become the Śākyamuni Buddha of our time made his first vow during a lifetime as a merchant caravan leader, marking the "resolving" or "vowing" stage of his career (*praṇidhānacaryā*). The third stage, in which he was "conforming" to his vow (*anulomacaryā*), is marked by his birth as a universal emperor in the time of the Buddha Samitāvin. And the final stage, in which his progress became irreversible (*anivartanacaryā*), involves the Bodhisattva's vow and confirmation at the feet of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara. Each of these past lives is recounted in varying levels of detail during the opening portion of the *Mahāvastu*, as are several others in which the Bodhisattva made offerings to *buddhas* of the past and repeated his vow. These stories are

of Yaśoda's gift to a *pratyekabuddha* in the past, which earned him the ability to master the powers. The *jātaka* of the three Kāśyapas (3.432-434) is told to explain the good karmic roots planted by these important converts during the time of a past *buddha*. In all cases the stories might be more aptly labelled *avadānas*.

reminiscent of the formulaic stories found in the Pāli *Buddhavaṃsa*, as well as resonating with the second decade of the *Avadānaśataka*.

The third type of *jātaka* found in the *Mahāvastu* is found in the explanation of the ten *bhūmis* that follows the discussion of the four stages. Most of the *bhūmis* are explained in general terms, but a few contain stories of Śākyamuni Buddha's past-life exploits. Thus in the section on the third *bhūmi* we find eight very short accounts of occasions on which the Bodhisattva gave extraordinary gifts in return for a verse of wisdom (*subhāṣitā gāthā*), followed by four more references to general actions he carried out to that end, making twelve allusions in total (*Mahāvastu* 1.91–95). All these examples are provided in order to illustrate the general principle that *bodhisattvas* in this stage will do anything to acquire nuggets of wisdom.²⁰ Similarly, in the account of the fifth *bhūmi* we hear of ten past *buddhas* who were honoured by the Bodhisattva during this stage of his own career (*Mahāvastu* 1.111–120). The formulaic accounts of a gift plus a vow are reminiscent of the earlier discussion of the four stages. Five more *jātaka* tales are recounted during the discussion of the seventh *bhūmi* to illustrate how *bodhisattvas* of this stage constantly teach against killing (*Mahāvastu* 1.128–133).

The *jātakas* that are alluded to or (briefly) recounted during the discussion of the four stages and ten *bhūmis* are clearly considered to exemplify the path of a *bodhisattva*. Śākyamuni Buddha is taken as the central example, and his relations to past *buddhas* and extraordinary acts of commitment to his path demonstrate both his awesome qualities and his place in a long lineage of similarly awesome beings.²¹ These stories are not labelled as *jātakas*, however, unlike the stories that are told to explain or parallel events in the Buddha's final life. Intriguingly, during the discussion of the fourth *bhūmi* the elder monk Mahā-Kātyāyana informs his fellow monk Kāśyapa that "the *jātaka* stories told by the Conqueror apply to the eighth *bhūmi* onwards" (*jātakāni jinabhāṣitāni imāṃ aṣṭamāṃ bhūmīm prapadyanti*, *Mahāvastu* 1.105). Although this might be taken to indicate that the stories recounted in discussions of the third, fourth and seventh *bhūmis* are not considered

²⁰ A similar sentiment is behind *Avadānaśataka* 35 and 38, and indeed number 35, the story of Surūpa, is alluded to directly in this passage of the *Mahāvastu*.

²¹ Indeed, one might see the *Mahāvastu* as being structured around the placing of Śākyamuni in his lineage, most explicitly making the comparison between Śākyamuni and Dīpaṅkara, thereby demonstrating that *buddhas* can be emulated, if only by other *buddhas*.

jātakas, an inconsistency remains, for in the same passage he states that “beginning in the eighth *bhūmi*, *bodhisattvas* renounce all their belongings and make difficult sacrifices” (*aṣṭamāṃ bhūmiṃ prabhṛti ... bodhisatvāḥ sarvasvaparityāgāṃś ca parityajanti duṣkaraparityāgāṃś ca kurvanti*, *Mahāvastu* 1.105), yet we have already heard about the impressive acts of sacrifice performed by the Bodhisattva in exchange for a teaching in the third *bhūmi*.

That there is some inconsistency in the presentation of *jātaka* stories should not surprise us by this point in our enquiries. The *Mahāvastu* adds to the evidence already explored that there are multiple ideas about the function of the Buddha’s past life stories in early Indian Buddhism. Even within this single—albeit long and complex—text, we find several distinct emphases. The stories that are called *jātakas* tend to mirror or explain events in the final life of the Buddha, ignoring any ideas of progress or chronology or the path to buddhahood. Another set of stories about the Buddha’s encounters with *buddhas* of the past are told to illustrate the long career of a *bodhisattva*, involving as it does the repetition of a vow at the feet of an extensive lineage of perfected beings. In addition, some stories are told about Śākyamuni Bodhisattva’s exemplary deeds in the past, occasionally in times without other *buddhas* present, in order to illustrate the qualities of *bodhisattvas* at various stages in their career. As in the *Avadānaśataka*, interactions with past *buddhas* tend to involve straightforward acts of giving or service, while the more extreme acts of self-sacrifice are reserved for times without a *buddha* present.

The *Mahāvastu*, being a complex and many-layered text, thus provides us with three different rationales for *jātaka* stories, only two of which associate the stories with the path to buddhahood. These two types, involving gifts to past *buddhas* and extraordinary acts on the *bodhisattva* path, mirror the two decades of the *Avadānaśataka*, as well as the distinction between the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka* in the Pāli tradition. Given the absence of *buddhas* in our own world at present, we might assume, as the *Avadānaśataka* suggests, that it is those stories set in a time with no past *buddhas*, in which the Bodhisattva performs amazing acts of self-sacrifice, that should inspire emulation by Buddhists.

5. Conclusion

What can we learn from these rather different presentations of *jātaka* stories? On a very basic level we are reminded that the *jātaka* genre varied in

use both within texts and across different texts, and that generic associations evolved over time. The earliest examples we have of *jātaka* stories in Pāli and Sanskrit suggest that the stories were not initially told as illustrative of a path, and certainly not associated with a regular list of “perfections” that needed to be fulfilled in order to attain buddhahood. Rather, it would appear that many of the Buddhists who compiled and preserved *jātaka* stories in the early period were less interested in the path to buddhahood, and more interested in glorifying their Buddha, as master storyteller, who overcame his karmic bonds, who served many *buddhas* in the past, and who can see all past lives of himself and others.

That said, the genre still tells us something rather interesting about developing understandings of the Buddha’s long career. The *Jātakamālā* presents *jātaka* tales as illustrative of the great qualities of the Buddha in his past lives, implying at least the possibility of emulation by Buddhists, alongside their awe at the Buddha’s magnificent deeds. The *Avadānaśataka* separates these two responses: the second decade stories suggest that the appropriate audience response is to praise the Buddha and to live in reliance upon him, while the tales of the fourth decade advocate emulation of the Buddha’s deeds. These exemplary deeds include extraordinary acts of sacrifice and compassion, in contrast to the simple acts of service to *buddhas* of the past found in the second decade. The *Mahāvastu*, meanwhile, contains *jātaka* stories (and references to *jātaka* stories) in its discussion of the path to buddhahood, to demonstrate both the Buddha’s interactions with *buddhas* of the past and his great deeds at different stages of the path. In neither the *Avadānaśataka* nor the *Mahāvastu*, however, are these stories labelled as *jātaka* tales, while those stories that are labelled as such in the *Mahāvastu* show little concern for illustrating a path.

There are several intertwined conclusions to be drawn from this diversity. First of all, we must address the question of labels. Why, we must ask, do some stories of the Buddha’s past lives get preserved with a label other than *jātaka*? In relation to the *Avadānaśataka* the answer can be straightforward: the text is a collection of *avadānas*, or karmic consequence tales, and so all the stories are labelled according to that over-arching identification. However, when we look at the *Mahāvastu* we see that this assessment may be too simple. It is notable that in the *Mahāvastu* it is those stories that share their form—and, often, their content—with parallels in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* that are labelled *jātakas*. The form in this case requires a story to be told by the Buddha about a time in the past without any *buddhas* and with an identi-

fication of his character at the end. It may be significant that the two stories that are told by someone other than the Buddha about his past lives are not labelled *jātaka*.²² Although this might be taken to indicate a reasonably established generic understanding of a *jātaka*—one shared with the Pāli tradition—the four *Mahāvastu* stories that are labelled *jātakas* but do not feature the Buddha suggest otherwise. In any case, of course, we cannot be certain when these labels were appended to the stories. Nonetheless the labels help us to trace the different types of story told of the Buddha’s past lives and the different place they might have in relating his path.

Closely related to this, we must be mindful of the distinction between stories in which past *buddhas* are present and those in which they are absent, for this appears to be a very important distinction within the early Indian texts. When the Buddha-to-be meets a *buddha* of the past, he usually engages in an act of service or makes an offering, and often this is accompanied by a vow, which in turn is often confirmed by a prediction made by the past *buddha*. This formula is familiar not only from the Sanskrit texts examined above (though in the *Avadānaśataka* a vow is only found in three of the ten stories), but also from the Pāli *Buddhavaṃsa*, which also forms the basis for the biographical preface to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, known as the *Nidānakathā*. From an early period we see these tales carefully establishing the Buddha in a long auspicious lineage, with the many *buddhas* of the past often named. In contrast, in times without a past *buddha* the Buddha-to-be often demonstrates more extraordinary virtues, such as sacrificing himself out of compassion for others or in exchange for teachings.

I am not, of course, the first to notice this distinction. Frank E. Reynolds laid out the two types as providing two different lineages of the Buddha in a 1997 article, for example, and John S. Strong built on this in his exploration of the Buddha’s role in ending (and transforming) lineages.²³ For Strong, *jātakas* in which the Bodhisattva serves past *buddhas* exhibit “chronology without progression”, whereas the stories without *buddhas* provide us with “progression without chronology”.²⁴ While this is a helpful observation that certainly has currency in some textual collections, it does not map very

²² *Mahāvastu* 1.267-70 has the story of past relations between the Buddha and the brahmin Vāgīśa, told by the latter; 3.204-224 has the tale of the Buddha’s past life as Mahāgovinda, partly related by Pañcaśikha, who has heard it from Brahmā.

²³ Reynolds 1997; Strong 2011.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2011: 181.

neatly onto either the *Avadānaśataka* or *Mahāvastu*. As I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere²⁵ none of the stories of the *Avadānaśataka* exhibit any sense of chronology, and neither do they show much interest in the Bodhisattva's progress towards buddhahood. In the *Mahāvastu*, in contrast, there is a fairly clear chronology in those stories that are found in explications of the stages of the *bodhisattva* path, and there is also a general sense of progress along the path, regardless of whether or not there are past *buddhas* present. The *jātakas* that feature in the Buddha's final-life story, however, are concerned with neither chronology nor progress.

Both types of *jātaka*—with and without *buddhas* of the past—can serve to demonstrate the Buddha's path, albeit not in a systematic form, but they may offer different lessons in terms of emulation. As Reiko Ohnuma has commented,²⁶ the distinction between these two different types of story serves to highlight the great benefits brought by a *buddha*, who activates a powerful field of merit that means it is no longer necessary to give away one's own body. Indeed, the many *avadāna* stories that demonstrate the extraordinary benefits that come from a simple gift to a Buddha or Buddhist object (such as a *stūpa* or Buddha-image) align with the *jātakas* in which the Buddha himself experiences such benefits.²⁷ This would imply that Buddhists should emulate the simple acts of service or devotion practiced by the Buddha in, for example, the second decade of the *Avadānaśataka*. Yet it is not these, but rather the more extreme acts of the fourth decade that are presented as worthy of emulation.

Another area of consideration is what it even means to emulate a great deed of the Buddha-to-be. Being inspired to follow the example of the Buddha may not, of course, imply that one has become a *bodhisattva*, for some of the tales allow for the possibility of a weaker form of emulation. Thus in the fourth decade of the *Avadānaśataka* the lesson that is presented to the monks at the end of each story is a general one which does not require extraordinary resolve. For example, after a story of the Bodhisattva giving

²⁵ Appleton 2015b: 21

²⁶ Ohnuma 2007: 43.

²⁷ While I find Ohnuma's analysis very valuable, I do not agree with her mapping of these two types of story onto *jātaka* (times of no *buddha*) and *avadāna* (times of merit-making in the dispensation of a *buddha*). As we have seen, the *Avadānaśataka* labels both sorts as *avadānas*, while the *Buddhavaṃsa* stories were eventually included in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* through the *Nidānakathā*.

away his last mouthful of food the monks are told to give gifts and make merit (*Avadānaśataka* 32), while the Bodhisattva's bodily sacrifice in return for a verse of the *dharma* should inspire the monks to revere the *dharma* (*Avadānaśataka* 35 and 38). As the *Mahāvastu* (1.105) acknowledges, extraordinary acts of sacrifice are only performed by advanced *bodhisattvas*. Emulation may therefore be merely a weak reflection of the Buddha's actions, just as the Bodhisattva's gift of his eyes as King Sivi has inspired Sri Lankan Buddhists to donate their corneas at death.²⁸ Presenting *jātakas* as exemplary does not necessarily imply that they are advocating a *bodhisattva* path, though of course this can come into play in some textual contexts. Indeed the placing of Śākyamuni in a lineage of *buddhas* implies both that emulation is possible and that it is rare.

Finally, we might ask whether or not those *jātakas* that are not presented as exemplary, such as those that pepper the Buddha's final life story in the *Mahāvastu* and many of those in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, have anything to tell us about Buddhist paths. A repeated refrain from the *Mahāvastu* might give us a clue to how we might interpret such stories. Seven of the *jātaka* stories in this text end with the words: "Thus the Blessed One, free [now] from affliction, fear and sorrow, related in the midst of his community of monks this birth of his, the immeasurably great suffering of the ups and downs of his former conduct."²⁹ Is the message here that *jātaka* stories illustrate the tedious round of rebirth, the repeated ups and downs of life that bring about suffering? If this is indeed the case, we might see the inclusion of *jātaka* stories in texts that emphasise the eventual liberation of the Buddha (including both the *Mahāvastu* and the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*) as using the tales to amplify the importance of that attainment. They are the mundane backdrop from which the Buddha finds escape. As such the stories exemplify *saṃsāra* rather than the path out of it, but in so doing they inspire Buddhists to follow the path taught by the Buddha.³⁰

It should now be apparent that there are many different insights that a study of *jātaka* stories can contribute to our understanding of how Buddhist

²⁸ Simpson 2004: 843–847.

²⁹ *evam idam aparimitaṃ bahuduḥkhaṃ | uccanīcaṃ caritaṃ purāṇaṃ || vigatajvaro vigatabhayaśoko svajātakaṃ | bhagavāṃ bhāṣati bhikṣusaṃghamādhye || – Mahāvastu 1.282, 2.94, 2.188, 2.237, 3.26, 3.90 and 3.300.*

³⁰ I make a similar argument in relation to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* in Appleton 2010, 117–118.

paths were conceived of. Stories, as many scholars now acknowledge, have the important ability to *explore* ideas as much as they outline or communicate them. *Jātakas* are not, of course, the only genre of Buddhist narrative that is used to explore paths—many people have experienced the power of a good story of karmic consequences, for example, or the story of grieving Kisagotamī or the reformed murderer Aṅgulimāla—but the *jātaka* genre is uniquely able to shed light on conceptions of the path to buddhahood. In particular, *jātaka* stories speak to an important question that is central to Buddhist ideology and practice: Is the Buddha’s path one that others can follow? The answers to this question may not be straightforward, but they are certainly valuable.

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