Vessantara, Matsi, Kanha and Chali, on their way to the forest; from Phra Phmonlatham Ratchabandit (Chorp Anucharimahathera), Parihata wetsandon chadok (Critical Review of the Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Khrongkan munlanithi hor trai, 1990.
That I can give to other people
I will always tell the truth as it is my nature to do
I do not think to hide them from the sight or knowledge of beggars
my generosity is always glad and merry
It knows only of giving, as I have said.

The path of giving as a way to moral perfection was open to everyone. The story portrays the act of giving to be the ascetic feat par excellence. The fact that the Vessantara Jataka was the final of the five hundred and fifty Jatakas gave added emphasis to the virtue of giving. The story was not only about how much one could give but also about the morality of the giving. It shows that for the morally superior being, the gift overrides attachments to one’s homeland, parents, even wife and children. The *Mahāchat* elevated the act of giving to the status of the supreme virtue among the Thai. As we will see, the connection between the virtue of giving and leadership in Thai political culture was a very close one.

One of the problems in attempting to describe conceptions of authority and political life in Thailand, and in non-Western societies generally, is that most academic studies tend to use the language and concepts of Western political theory. As Anderson has pointed out in his seminal essay, ‘The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture’, the very use of Western terms like ‘power’ in the context of (in this case) Javanese culture, is problematic, because this term is drawn from a ‘Western analytical and interpretative framework’ which has been fundamentally influenced by Western history and culture.45 To a certain extent this linguistic and conceptual problem can never be completely resolved if we are to use Western languages and modern academic interpretative methodologies. It is, however, possible to greatly improve on current understandings of indigenous notions of ‘power’. First, we need to realize that notions of power are culturally embedded. There is no universal concept of power. Second, the divisions commonly made in Western academic studies of social life such as ‘politics’, ‘economics’, ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ must be questioned. Not only do each of these terms have a distinctly Western history and ‘flavour’, but also, as this thesis hopes to show in the case of Thailand, the strict delineation of social life into these categories is highly problematic. It obscures more than it illuminates. In premodern Thailand it is impossible to identify a distinct realm of ‘politics’. Like most other aspects of social life it seems to be saturated with religious conceptions. Third, we need to try and understand how peoples in the societies themselves understand notions of power and authority. This involves the study of the sources from which these indigenous notions arise.

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Lastly, through such study it may be possible to develop a new conceptual knowledge and vocabulary which will better describe power relations in these societies.

This thesis argues that in the Vessantara Jataka, and in the Jatakas generally, there can be found a Thai Buddhist concept of authority. In the Maha chat and in premodern Thai political discourse this concept is referred to as barami, from the Pali parami, meaning ‘Perfection’. When Thai historical documents talk about authority they use the same vocabulary as that found in the Jatakas. The Jatakas were the ‘storehouse’ of indigenous political theory, and the thet maha chat was one of the primary means by which it spread into the popular culture of the Thai.

Although studies of Thai political culture show a relationship between morality, spiritual attainment and power, it is surprising there has been little, if any, attention given to the concept of barami, or to the question of how this concept was popularized. Hanks’ widely influential anthropological study, ‘Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order’ made the important connection between Buddhist ideas of ‘merit’ (bun), morality and power in Thai thinking, but he fails to mention barami. 46 Hanks’ influence can be seen, for example, in Gesick’s article on Buddhist kingship in the reign of King Taksin. 47 Aung Thwin’s study of Burmese kingship touches on a concept which appears similar to the Thai idea of barami. This is not unusual since both Thai and Burmese kingship were deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism. In Aung-Thwin’s study the fundamental concept is the Burmese word hpôn, which derives from the Pali puñña, meaning merit. 48 Hpon translates as ‘glory’ and is an attribute ‘associated with spiritual or morally superior beings....in the context of political power it was charisma’. 49 Wolters’ brief but stimulating essay on cultural continuities in Southeast Asia touches on the term parami (the Pali translation of barami), as the Thai variant of an attribute of ‘personal spiritual prowess’ common to Southeast Asian leaders. 50

Significantly it is Thai scholars, who have been perhaps more aware of the conceptual difficulties in understanding such things, who have in recent times come the


49 Ibid., p. 50.

50 Wolters, O.W., History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982, p. 103.
closest to identifying *barami* as the key notion for indigenous Thai conceptions of power. An M.A. thesis written by Princess Sirindhorn while at Chulalongkorn University which was later published is one of the first Thai works to draw specific attention to the concept of *barami*. The thesis traces in considerable detail the term’s usage and various meanings through the Pali and Thai literature of Thailand’s Theravada Buddhist tradition.\(^5\) The cultural historian Nidhi Aeusrivongse was probably the first Thai scholar to make use of the term *bun barami* in his studies of premodern Thai politics.\(^5\) In his study of the reign of King Taksin, Nidhi attempts to theorize a Thai concept of power by creating his own term ‘*anabarami*’. Nidhi gives the English translation of *anabarami* in parentheses as ‘charisma’, the term first popularised by Weber’s studies of premodern society.\(^5\) Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian is another Thai scholar who is attracted to a more indigenous conceptual vocabulary. In her English language study of Thai-Malay relations prior to the twentieth century, Kobkua rejects the political notions of Western theorists such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau as inadequate for the explanation of premodern Southeast Asian intra-regional relations. She makes frequent references to the notion of *barami*, which she describes as ‘charismatic power’ or ‘meritorious prestige’.\(^5\) Most recently the political scientist Likhit Dhiravegin has also made use of the concept of *barami*. The difference in Likhit’s work is that he has applied the concept to the study of contemporary Thai politics. Likhit’s description of *barami* (albeit confined to footnotes, which is perhaps a reflection of the Western-trained political scientist’s reticence to emphasize non-Western political theory) is ‘a Thai version of charisma’\(^5\).

None of these studies, however, give the source of the idea of *barami*, or explain how the concept was popularised beyond the Thai court. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the term we need to go to the source of the concept, which can

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\(^5\) See Princess Sirindhorn, *Thousabarami nai phutthasatsana therawat (The Ten Perfections in Theravada Buddhism)*, Published by Mahamakot Ratchawithayalai Under Royal Patronage, in Commemoration of 200 Years of the Chakri Dynasty, Bangkok, 1982.

\(^5\) See especially Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Prawatisat ratanakosin nai phra ratchaphongsawadan ayuthaya (Bangkok History in the Royal Chronicles of Ayuthaya)*, Thai Khadi Suksa, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1980; and *Kan muang thai samai phra chao krong thonburi (Thai Politics in the Time of the King of Thonburi)*, Bangkok, Sinlapawathanathem, 1986.


\(^5\) Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations: Traditional Intra-Regional Relations from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries*, East Asian Historical Monographs, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1988, see pp. 8, 28-30, 37-8, 46-8, 206.

be found in Theravada Buddhism. In premodern Theravada Buddhist thinking, a Buddha-to-be, known in Pali as bodhisatta, had to ‘accumulate’ ten kinds of Perfection (barami) in order to achieve a state of moral and spiritual Perfection which was the prerequisite for the attainment of enlightenment and Buddhahood. The Ten Perfections (Thai, thotsabarami; Pali, dasaparami) consisted of the Perfections of Giving, Moral Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Truthfulness, Resolution, Loving Kindness, and Equanimity. In Theravada Buddhism these ideals are explained in great detail in such works as the Buddhavamsa, the Cariyapitaka, and most importantly, the Jatakas. The five hundred and fifty Jatakas were traditionally represented in Theravada Buddhism as stories of the bodhisatta’s accumulation of the Perfections. As mentioned above, the Vessantara Jataka is the most sacred of all the Jatakas among the Thai because it is in this incarnation that the bodhisatta finally achieves the Perfections. Thus in the Jatakas most of the raw material for this indigenous political theory can be found, and the rai maha chat was one of the primary means by which it became known to a popular audience.

In the context of premodern Thai political culture, barami referred to an idealized form of personal authority characterised by moral superiority, spiritual prowess and supernatural abilities. Naturally these qualities drew people around the individual who possessed them, which in turn formed a base for the individual’s power. Barami was considered to derive partly from one’s store of merit in previous incarnations, but it was never constant. Rather it was in a state of flux, depending on the individual’s present spiritual and moral state. One’s barami could wax or wane. The particular form of barami that the Maha chat emphasised above all others was tham barami, or the Perfection of Giving. In Thai political culture leaders are givers, and the relations of obligation that giving creates become another source of political support. Also, in order to be able to give one must possess the resources to give. The elevation of giving to the position of the supreme moral virtue also provided the rationale for wealth accumulation. Thus wealth is a further component of barami. Barami was, of course, an attribute of kings and princes. In documents of the courts of the Tai states of Sukhothai, Ayuthaya, Lanna, Lan Chang and Bangkok, rulers are commonly referred to as bodhisattas and are represented as possessing qualities similar to Vessantara. But barami could also be an attribute of leaders generally. Monks, particularly those who are highly accomplished in ascetic pursuits, are very often regarded as possessing barami. The type of authority which inspired the revolts of the ‘men of merit’, or phu mi bun, in the kingdom’s northeast at the turn of the century, can also be understood as barami. Thus the concept of barami could be as useful to figures in authority as it could be subversive. Finally, barami, at least in its premodern manifestations, appears to have been an exclusively
male attribute, just as political leadership and spiritual attainment have traditionally been regarded in Thai society as male domains.

Once we recognise that the popularity of the Vessantara Jataka among the Thai can be attributed to the crucial role it played in disseminating a certain culture of authority, the reasons why the story fell from favour at the Thai court from the mid-nineteenth century gradually become clearer. By this time the political culture popularised by the *thet maha chat* did not suit the new situation in which the Thai court found itself. The geo-political balance of the region had fundamentally changed. The Thai kingdom had formerly been a ‘superpower’ in mainland Southeast Asia. Now, with the arrival of the militarily superior colonial powers, the Thai court gradually began to realize that indigenous concepts of power, and the political organization of the kingdom to which they gave shape, were becoming obsolete. The political notions that had helped shape intra-regional relations prior to the arrival of the colonial powers were simply not recognised by the British and the French. At the same time, the widespread popularity of such notions in the kingdom’s hinterland - which, by the end of the twentieth century, shared newly defined and unstable borders with colonial states - risked provoking a confrontation with colonial powers which the Thai court might not survive.

Great changes were taking place in the intellectual landscape of the Thai court. For reasons related to the opening up of the kingdom’s economy, which had been taking place since the late eighteenth century, and to the court’s increasing engagement with Western knowledge from the 1830s (particularly the sciences), the epistemological basis of the Thai cultural tradition was being questioned by the Thai court. Belief in miracles, supernatural powers, and mythical beasts, premodern cosmologies and religious-historical traditions, even fundamental Buddhist concepts like rebirth, were all being reassessed in the light of Western rationalism. The Jatakas were one of the first and most deep-rooted elements of that tradition to be found unacceptable according to these new criteria and in the end were rejected by the king and prominent members of the Thai court.

The court’s ongoing struggle for survival in the colonial era, and the new intellectual trends which were profoundly altering the way the court viewed its own cultural roots, led to the gradual abandonment of the Jatakas and the *thet maha chat*. The modernization of Buddhism, undertaken by the Thai court from the Fourth Reign, saw the Jatakas and other religious scripture which dealt with the themes of the *bodhisatta* and *barami*, such as the Cariyapitaka and the Buddhavamsa, completely marginalised from Thai Buddhist orthodoxy. By the end of the Fifth Reign the Thai court was promoting a very different Buddhism from the one which had existed before, and indeed
from that which still existed outside the royal capital. As for the problem of how to account for the status the Jatakas had once held in the Thai cultural tradition, by the turn of the century the Thai court had set about redefining them as Thai folktales. In this way the Vessantara Jataka became a casualty of modernity.

Structure of Thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter describes the dynamics of the *thet maha chat* ceremony. It argues that in the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka, and in the ritual which surrounds it, conscious attempts are made to defer to the words of the Buddha. This was because the authority and status of the Vessantara Jataka in Thai Buddhism traditionally were dependent on the fact that the story was believed to have originally been told by the Buddha himself. Later in the thesis I outline the attempts by the Thai court to undermine the authority of the Vessantara Jataka by arguing that the belief that the Buddha had related the Jataka stories was ill-founded.

The second chapter traces the early history of the Vessantara Jataka among those Tai peoples influenced by Theravada Buddhism. The story appears in the early states of Sukhothai, Lanna, Lan Chang and Ayuthaya with the arrival of the new, dominant Sinhalese school of Theravada Buddhism. Chapter Three examines the *thet maha chat* during the time it reached the height of its popularity, the period of the early Bangkok kings. In the chapter which follows, I identify an abrupt change in the court’s attitude towards the Vessantara Jataka dating from the Fourth Reign, and its declining influence at the Thai court. The focus of Chapter Five is King Chulalongkorn’s famous essay on the Jatakas, which defined the stories as folktales. Chapter Six is a study of the Wachirayan Library, the institution which was at the heart of the Thai court’s attempts during the Fifth Reign to come to terms with the kingdom’s premodern cultural traditions at a time of rapid modernization. Chapter Seven returns to the Thai court’s concern with the Jatakas by examining the role of the court’s publication of the entire collection of Jatakas as ‘tales’ within the new category of ‘Thai literature’. The final chapter attempts to address the question of the legacy of the seven centuries of influence the Vessantara Jataka has had among the Thai, by looking for traces of the story’s message in contemporary Thai political culture.
CHAPTER 1

THE THET MAHA CHAT: THE VESSANTARA JATAKA
AS A PERFORMATIVE TEXT

The Vessantara Jataka in Thailand is first and foremost 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, communicated to an audience from a text in the vernacular in oral form. Were it not for the fact that the Vessantara Jataka 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) of the bodhisatta, before his enlightenment as the Buddha. Thet (or thetsana) can be translated variously as ‘recitation’, ‘sermon’, ‘preaching’, or more fully, ‘exposition of the dhamma’.

When trying to understand the reason for the Vessantara Jataka’s popularity amongst the Thai most scholarship tends to look at the story itself, separate from the medium by which the story was communicated. But if we are to attempt 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 medium through which the story became known to people. The thet maha chat imparted to the Vessantara Jataka a sense of sanctity and authority which is entirely missing in, for example, modern Thai paperback editions of the story, which contribute to the common interpretation of the Vessantara Jataka today as some kind of folktale. An examination of the various components of the thet maha chat performance suggests that this medium enhanced the authority of the story by repeatedly stressing the fact that it was based on the Buddha’s own utterances. This fact, signified in the thet maha chat in diverse ways, had the effect of raising the story’s status to one of ‘religious truth’. To understand this process let us now examine these various components of the thet maha chat.

The Sacred Text

The text which is recited at the thet maha chat ceremony has its origin in the Pali Jataka Commentary (Pali: Jatakatthavannana or Jatakatthakatha), believed to have been composed in its final form no later than the fifth century AD on the island known today as Sri Lanka. This Jataka Commentary consists of five hundred and forty-seven Jatakas (though often referred to as five hundred and fifty), of which the Vessantara Jataka is
the final Jataka. The Vessantara Jataka, as it appears in the Jataka Commentary, is made up of two distinct parts: verses (khatha) which are held as having been actually uttered by the Buddha himself, and a prose commentary (athakatha), traditionally attributed to the great commentator of the Pali Buddhist tradition, Buddhaghosa. Although the Pali Jataka Commentary has survived intact in Thailand it is not this version of the Vessantara Jataka that is recited at the thet maha chat ceremony, but vernacular translations which have been versified into Thai poetic metres.

For the wider communication of Buddhist teachings in the Thai kingdom it was essential that the Pali scriptures be translated into the vernacular. This was, in fact, a problematic issue, for there was a danger that translation would distort in some way the meaning of the original Pali text. The changes involved in translation were something Thai monastic scholars were very much aware of. For this reason thet maha chat texts are careful to show deference to the changes the content has gone through in translation. Most vernacular recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka until recently interspersed the translated text with the certain Pali words or phrases (known in Thai as chunniyabot) from the original Pali version of the Vessantara Jataka. The oldest ‘Thai’ version of the Vessantara Jataka in existence, the ‘maha chat kham luang’, composed in the kingdom of Ayuthaya in the late fifteenth century and still recited today, went as far as including the entire Pali original - both commentary and verses - in the translation; the text is structured by placing a phrase in Pali followed by its translation, until the whole of the

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1 There was another, distinct collection of Jatakas, known in Thai as the Panyat Chadok (Pali: paññasa jataka) meaning literally ‘Fifty Jatakas’. This collection is believed to have been written in Pali by monks in Chiang Mai from about the fifteenth century AD, and thus were not ‘canonical’ - an important distinction for orthodox Theravada Buddhists. These Jatakas did, however, enjoy considerable popularity in the Thai, Lao, Burmese and Cambodian kingdoms. Many of the classical stories of Thai literature come from the Panyat Chadok. See Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, ‘Kham nam’ (Introduction), in Panyat chadok: prachum nithan tae prathet ni tae boran 50 ruang (The Pannasa Jatakas: A Collection of Fifty Ancient Tales from this Country), Part 1, Samutthakhota Jataka and Suthana Jataka, Cremation Volume, M.R. Lek Siriwong Na Krungtheep, Bangkok, 1924.


3 The recital of the Maha chat kham luang version of the Vessantara Jataka takes place every year during the Rains Retreat period in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace.
Monk reading from a palm leaf manuscript; picture courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Thai Collection.
original has been translated. Not only did this guarantee the rendering of the Buddha’s actual words but it also provided the opportunity for those fluent in Pali to monitor the accuracy of the translation. The negative aspect of this method of translation, however, lay in the realm of communication. The amount of Pali the recitation contained, being unintelligible for the majority of listeners, must have detracted from the coherency of the narrative. For a narrative which could take up to a day to recite in its entirety, this certainly presented a problem. This explains the superior popularity of the ‘thet’ versions (with only occasional Pali words or phrases) of the Vessantara Jataka during the nineteenth century.

Despite the fact that countless vernacular translations of the Vessantara Jataka have been made throughout the kingdom, they all share the same basic narrative structure, for they are always ‘anchored’ by the original Pali version, and the requirement that the words first uttered by the Buddha be accurately rendered in the vernacular. Thus although communicated to an audience in oral form, the Vessantara Jataka 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 Jataka as there are with stories based on oral tradition. On the contrary, the story’s form and ‘transmission’ through successive generations was thoroughly determined by textual factors, since it was the text which preserved the integrity of the Buddha’s words. Indeed, when comparing versions of Vessantara Jataka texts from different regions of Thailand one is struck by their lack of divergence from the same basic narrative. Fidelity to the Buddha’s words was a primary concern in the thet maha chat text and its oral performance.

1. 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 which

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4 Cf. Damrong’s introduction in Maha chat kham luang (Royal Version of the Great Life), Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1973, p. 3.

5 See King Chulalongkorn’s comments (written in 1888) on the recitation of the Maha chat kham luang, in Phra ratcha phithi sip sorrng duan, phra ratchaniphon nai phra bat somdet phra chula chorm kiao chao yu hua (Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months by King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok, Sinlapa Bannakan, 1973, p. 527; and G.E Gerini, A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Maha Chat Ceremony, Bangkok, 1892, pp. 15-16.

6 The author/translator of a recent vernacular version of the Vessantara Jataka (Khen Lawong, Wetsandorn chadok chhabap isan (Isan Version of the Vessantara Jataka), Mahasarakhom Cultural Centre, Mahasarakhom, 1993) stressed to me the utmost importance of correctly rendering the meaning of the original Pali, and criticised past scribes or authors for their inaccurate translations (Interview, Phor Yai Khen Lawong, October 1992).
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 of the message - the Vessantara Jataka - consisted of two elements, the palm leaf manuscript, known in Thai as *bai lan*, and the script.

In the language of semiology the *bai lan* used in the *thet maha chat* could be said to act as a sign, whose signified was the sanctity of the text with which it was inscribed. The *bai lan* is a strip of leaf from the corypha palm. The text of the *bai lan* consists of inscriptions made onto the face of the palm leaf by means of a sharp 'stylus'. The leaf is then rubbed in ash or soot which is caught in the incisions, and brushed off from the rest of the leaf face, making the inscribed text legible against the background of the leaf. Several leaves are tied together into bundles, known in Thai as *phuk*, which together make up the complete text. Palm leaf manuscripts appear to have been the traditional means of preserving the Buddhist scriptures, and in the Thai kingdom the corpus of Buddhist canonical scripture, the Tripitaka, was preserved in this way until 1893 when the Thai court published the scriptures for the first time in printed book form.

The *bai lan* was a sacred object and treated with utmost respect. Today, in areas where older traditions remain, this is still the case. Before reciting its contents the monk will raise the *bai lan* above his head as a gesture of reverence. The *bai lan* is never held below the waist, and when transported it is placed on the carrier’s shoulder. In the procession to the place where it is to be recited the *bai lan* is carried ahead of the monk who will recite it - clearly symbolic of the reciter’s subordination to the text. On the day of the *thet maha chat* the *bai lan* containing the text to be recited is carried to the

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7 Thus in manuscript collections around the country, texts on administrative matters or other secular subject are written on a different type of manuscript, sometimes referred to in Thai as *samut khoi*.


9 **Samana bai lan thuap pathet khang thi 1** (First National Conference on Palm Leaf Manuscripts), Vientiane, 1988, p. 2; Pricha Phinthong, *Praphepi boran thai isan* (Ancient Thai-Isan Customs), Ubon Ratathani, Siritam, 1991, p. 79; Phra Ariyanuwat Khemchari, *Rabiap boran praphepi tham bun maha chat phak isan* (Traditional Guidelines for the Isan Region’s Maha Chat Merit-Making Festival) Cremation Volume, Chao Khan Phra Sarakham Muni, Mahasarakham, 1963, p. 50. Traces of this respect traditionally paid to the written word have survived into modern times. Thai friends tell me of the practice in their schooldays whereby teachers taught their pupils to bow in the attitude of deep respect (krap) before their books when they had finished reading them - the same sort of bow one would make to one’s parents, a monk, a Buddha image, or the king. School children were also taught not to leave books lying on the floor where they might be stepped on, nor to drop them, and that books were to be kept in a high place.

place of recital wrapped in expensive cloth (pha hor phra khamphi) and sometimes placed in a specially crafted box. At the place of recital, in some regions, there is a small stand ("khakravia") specially designed for the purpose of holding the bai lan before and after reading. 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 (Thai: pranom mu). This is despite the fact that for monks experienced in recitations of the Vessantara Jataka the text has already been memorised, which underlines the signifying function of the bai lan in the thet maha chat ceremony. Even today in this 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 Jataka. 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.

The script inscribed or printed onto the palm leaf is another element in the process of communicating the Vessantara Jataka, and was therefore traditionally imbued with the sanctity appropriate to the ‘message’ it rendered readable. Today in the kingdom of Thailand most versions of the Vessantara Jataka recited at thet maha chat ceremonies will be written in the Thai script. This, however, is only a recent innovation. Formerly recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka in the Thai kingdom were written in various ‘sacred’ scripts, distinguishing them from ‘secular’ or administrative writings which were written in a different script. In the central and southern regions the script reserved for sacred writings was the Khmer script, known in Thai as khorm; 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; and in the northern region a different set of characters again were used, which were also known as aksorn tham. In addition there were a number of other scripts in use by the kingdom’s minority peoples reserved exclusively for religious discourse. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the Thai government began implementing a policy of

11 ‘Nor. Por.’, "Prapheni mi thet maha chat" (The Custom of Reciting the Vessantara Jataka), Maha wetsandam chadok samnuan thetsana 13 kan p. 9; Phra Ariyanuwat, op. cit., pp. 49-50.


14 The religious publishing house ‘Sor Thammaphakdi’, based in Bangkok, is one well-known publisher of printed bai lan versions of the Vessantara Jataka.

making the Thai script the sole script used for written discourse throughout the kingdom. This was only achieved around the mid-twentieth century with the expansion of the state education system.

The ‘dhamma’ scripts in which recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka were traditionally composed, gave written form to words originally uttered by the Buddha, a fact which is made explicit in the Vessantara Jataka text with constant references to the fact that the Buddha is narrating the story. The hai lan together with the sacred characters with which it is inscribed, therefore, serve as reminders of the important fact (and one often overlooked today) that the Vessantara Jataka was part of the dhamma. While dhamma is often translated as ‘the Buddha’s teachings’, another valid translation might be rendered as ‘absolute truth’. In Buddhist thinking the Buddha’s enlightenment is considered to be his perception of this absolute truth (the dhamma), and his teachings were the communication of that truth. The sacred characters, or the ‘dhamma characters’, and the hai lan must therefore be understood as important signs of this absolute truth of which the Vessantara Jataka is a part. They guarantee the authenticity of the story.

The relatively recent transcription of the Vessantara Jataka into Thai characters has detracted considerably from the text’s status as sacred discourse, because in terms of the characters which ‘carry’ the text, i.e. Thai, it can not be distinguished from any other kind of written discourse produced in Thailand. The appearance of the Vessantara Jataka today in book form has had the same effect. As signs which complement the text they communicate, the Thai script and the book have quite different associated meanings to those of the ‘dhamma characters’ and the hai lan, even though it is the same story that they communicate.

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16 Horner has written, ‘Primarily Dhamma means the natural state or condition of beings and things, what supports them, the law of their being, what it is right for them to be, the very stuff of their being...So Dhamma also means truth...hence the Buddhist Doctrine Dhamma or saddhamma, the Teaching itself... cf. The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikaya), Vol.1, ‘The First Fifty Discourses (Mulapannasa)’ translated from the Pali by I.B.Horner, Pali Text Society, London, 1954, p. xix. Childers’ Pali dictionary also lists ‘truth’ as one of the definitions of dhamma: cf. A Dictionary of the Pali Language, by Robert Caesar Childers, Kyoto Book Company, Kyoto, 1976, p.118.

17 The sacredness of these ‘dhamma’ scripts is reflected in many cultural practices. Tattooing in the central region, for example, used khorn characters to protect the bearer from various dangers. Khorn was also used in the texts and magical spells of the ‘science’ known as saivasa. In medicine, pieces of hai lan text with khorn characters were sometimes ground up and mixed with medicines to improve their effectiveness, a potion known as ‘ya long khun phra’ (cf. Saman sohem, “Maha chat chabap muang phetburi kan chuchok: kan suksa choeng wikho” (The Chuchok Chapter of the Phetburi Version of the Maha Chat: An Analysis), M.A., Eastern Languages, Sinlapakorn University, 1985, p. 10, footnote 20). I have been told by a monk of a man who once accidentally stepped on a hai lan text and as a result developed a sore on his ear; the man had to perform a ceremony of forgiveness for his indiscretion before the sore would heal properly.
2. The Narrator

Of critical importance to the status of the story is the question of the identity of the narrator. In the case of the Vessantara Jataka 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 it 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-coloured 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, and proceeds to tell 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 Jataka makes it clear that the story is being narrated by the Buddha. For example, throughout the text brief interjectory phrases are, as it were, ‘put into the mouth’ of the Buddha, such as “O most pure monks...”, before the narrative continues.\(^{18}\) This 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 Jataka contained in the Pali Jataka Commentary, one finds a mixture of prose and verse. According to tradition, only the verses contained in the Vessantara Jataka were 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 Tripitaka; they appear in the section titled ‘Jataka’ of the Khuddakanikaya, which is the fifth book of the division of the Suttanta Pitaka. It would be a mistake to consider this a matter which concerned only monastic textual scholars. Indeed, this problem can be seen to be specifically addressed in a number of elements of the \textit{thet maha chat} ritual. For example, the verses, known in Thai as the \textit{khatha phan}, or ‘one thousand’ verses,\(^{19}\) were traditionally recited at the \textit{thet maha chat} ceremony in their entirety, prior to the recitation of the vernacular translation of the Vessantara Jataka proper. There were, moreover, ritual elements associated with the \textit{thet maha chat} ceremony which highlighted the importance of the \textit{khatha phan}. In addition, the text of

\(^{18}\) See phrases such as “Du korn song phu song sin sangworn...” and similar expressions in \textit{Maha wetsandom chadok sammuang thetsana 13 kan}, and \textit{Maha chat sammuang isan}.

\(^{19}\) This is a nominal figure, the actual number of verses appears to be less than this. In Fausböll’s romanised text the number is 786; cf. The Jataka together with its Commentary being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha, for the First time edited in the Original Pali by V.Fausböll, Vol.VI, Pali Text Society, London, 1964, p. 593.
the recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka always specifically mentions at the end of each chapter (known in Thai as kan) how many khatha (verses) that chapter contained.20

In regard to narration and the status of the Vessantara Jataka two additional points should be made. Firstly, even when it would appear that it is the commentator who is narrating in the name of the Buddha, the fact that the 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 text which was unaware of the textual technicalities, it is the Buddha who narrates the story, which consequently would imply that the story was true. This is, in fact, corroborated by studies of the thet maha chat, which commonly acknowledge that one of the reasons for its great popularity is that the Vessantara Jataka is believed to be the words of the Buddha.21

Thus for the audience of the thet maha chat the authenticity of the story of the Vessantara Jataka is underlined by the notion, which is implicit in the text, that the Buddha is the narrator.

3. The Subject

A further element related to the authority of the Vessantara Jataka, the qualities which set it apart from other stories or tales, is the subject of the story. The subject of the Vessantara Jataka is, as its name implies, Prince Vessantara. However, there are two special qualities about Vessantara as a subject which are reiterated throughout the various Thai versions of the Vessantara Jataka by the use of two basic sets of epithets in conjunction with the proper noun Vessantara. The first set includes such epithets as ‘the Great Being’ (Pali: mahasatto; Thai: mahasat) or the ‘Buddha to be’ (Pali: bodhisatta.

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20 See Maha wetsandorn chadok samnuan thetsana 13 kan: Maha chat samnuan isan.

21 See for example "Prapheni mi thet maha chat", written in 1894, in Maha wetsandorn chadok samnuan thetsana sip sam kan, p. 5; Prakhong Nimmanhemin, Maha chat lanna: kan suksa nai thana thi pen wannakhadi thong thin (The Lanna Great Life: A Study of Its Status as Local Literature), Foundation for the Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, Bangkok, 1983, p. 2.
Thai: phothisat).\textsuperscript{22} The second set of epithets refers to Vessantara as a man descended from a particular lineage (wong, phong) of kings.\textsuperscript{23}

By referring to Vessantara as the bodhisatta we are constantly made aware of the fact that this is the being who in his next incarnation will be enlightened as Gotama Buddha. It is 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, thereby enabling him to achieve enlightenment. Throughout the narrative, therefore, the subject’s relationship to the Buddha is explicit. It is as though the Buddha is narrating his autobiography, since it is his origins as a bodhisatta which he is recounting.

The second set of epithets reiterates Vessantara’s status of being of royal descent and demonstrates also that the Buddha is descended from the same lineage (wong) of kings, since the lineage is conceived not only on the basis of consanguinity but also on ties of reincarnation. For this reason the story can be seen to be not purely religious or moral, but also political, both in the sense that it is a story of a king, and because it is part of a larger story of a royal lineage. This lineage is described in the fifth century Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahavamsa, which translated from the Pali literally means, ‘the Great Lineage’. The Mahavamsa became the model for a genre of religious chronicle widely used by the royal houses of Theravada Buddhist rulers throughout Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{24} As will be explained in subsequent chapters of this thesis, this same lineage of kings was one which Thai kings up until the reign of King Rama IV also claimed as their own. The story of Vessantara was one which had special significance because of Vessantara’s place in the lineage from which Thai kings - and Theravada Buddhist rulers throughout mainland Southeast Asia - claimed descent. The political importance of this lineage for contemporary rulers was, therefore, yet another factor underlying the authenticity of the story.

\textsuperscript{22} Other epithets in the royal version of the Vessantara Jataka, (see Maha weisandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan), which have the same meaning include phutthangkun, phutthaphong, nornaphetphothiphong, norphrachinnasi. In northeastern versions the epithets thammikarat, and ton wiset are also used (see Maha chat kham isan); and in northern version ton kaew also appears (see Maha chat phak phayan chabap soi sangkorn samnum ek (The Sol Sangkorn Version of the Northwestern Great Life), edited by Phra Thammarachanuwat (Fu Attasivathera), Sor. Thammaphakdi, 1955.

\textsuperscript{23} These royal epithets include mahasommutiwong, (‘of the race of King Mahasammatha’); siwisutthithipphawong, (‘of the pure race of the gods’); sisuriyawong (‘of the race of sun kings’); khattiyawong, woraratchawong, (‘of the race of kings’); thammikarat, (‘Dhamma king’); maharat, (‘the great king’).

4. Metre

Until recently, vernacular versions of the Vessantara Jataka for recitation at thet maha chat ceremonies all over the Thai kingdom were all written in the same poetic metre, known in Thai as rai. Early monastic regulations concerning the vernacular translations of the Vessantara Jataka prohibited translations into other kinds of poetic metres. What was the reason for this? In his study of the literature of the early Bangkok period Nidhi notes that rai was the metre 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. As a poetic metre rai has very few rules, and can be considered the metre closest to prose, which is itself the form of writing closest to ordinary speech. One could conclude, therefore, that rai had the qualities best suited to rendering into the vernacular the content of the original Pali Vessantara Jataka in the most accurate form, as a well as in a form suitable for oral presentation.

By using rai as the metre of the Vessantara Jataka translation the poet and translator not only endows the story with the aura of sanctity, but is able to convert the

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25 My analysis is based on the following versions: Maha wetsandorn chadok sammuang thetsana sip sam kan; Phetburi province version: Maha chat muang phet (The Phetburi Version of the Great Life), transcribed from the Khrom script into Thai by Saman Sohem, Office of the National Culture Council, Bangkok, 1980; Northern version: Maha chat sammuang ek soi sangkorn (The Soi Sangkorn Version of the Northwestern Great Life), edited by Phra Thammarachanuwat (Fu Athasiwo), Sangan Printing, Chiang Mai, 1965; on the use of rai in northern versions see also Mani Phayormyong Phapheni sip song duan lanna thai (The Lanna Thai Twelve Month Ceremonies), Vol. 2, Chiang Mai, 1986, ‘Phapheni tang tham luang’, p. 34; northeastern Versions: Maha chat sammuang isan, Lam phra wet - thet maha chat ru maha wetsandorn chadok phak isan (The Vessantara Book - the Great Life Sermon or the Northeastern Version of the Vessantara Jataka), edited by Phithun Maliwan, Cremation Volume, Somdet Phra Phuthachan (At Asaphopmahathera), 14 April 1990, Wetsandorn chadok chabap isan (Isan Version of the Vessantara Jataka), Khen Lawong, Mahasarakham Cultural Centre, 1993; see also Anupha Atswanipiyanon, ‘Kan suka mahawetsandorn chadok chabap thong thin isan chak ton chabap wat klang khok khor changwat kalasin’ (A Study of a Northeastern Local Version of the Vessantara Jataka from a Manuscript in Wat Klang Khok Kho, Kalasin Province), Masters Degree thesis, Eastern Languages, Graduate School, Sinlapakorn University, 1985; I have not been able to find a published version of the Vessantara Jataka in Southern dialect in the rai metre, although I have seen such versions in manuscript form at the Institute of Southern Studies (Sathanab thaksin khadi suksa) in Songkhla province.


28 Ibid., p. 22.
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 metre designed to be spoken to an audience, as opposed to being silently read to oneself. This reflects also the particular origin of the Vessantara Jataka as a narrative, since the story is held to have been related by the Buddha to an audience of his relatives and followers.

Thus the metre in which vernacular versions of the Vessantara Jataka in the Thai kingdom were written is yet another element of the thet maha chat performance where a deliberate attempt appears to have 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 Jataka 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 Jataka were always recited in their original Pali usually prior (but sometimes subsequent) to the recital of the vernacular translation of the Vessantara Jataka. This highlighted the importance of the Buddha’s original utterances, which are lost in the recital of the vernacular translation. However, there were also other texts recited which 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 Jataka which is not apparent in the story itself.

The most notable of these additional texts was the story of Malai, which in both the Lao and northern Thai traditions was recited on the day preceding the recital of the Vessantara Jataka.\(^2^9\) The origin of this work is unclear but it is certainly post-

canonical. It tells the story of a Singhalese 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, Maitreya, who entrusts him with a message to carry to people on earth. This message urges the faithful to make merit by listening to the Vessantara Jataka within one day and by paying appropriate respect to it (in the form of ritual offerings) in order to be reborn in the age when Maitreya is incarnated on earth and achieves enlightenment. Maitreya then describes how Gotama Buddha’s religion will last five thousand years before a dark age (kali yuga) of killing and suffering will appear bringing that world to an end. This will be followed by a new ‘golden’ age when Maitreya will appear as the next Buddha.

Although not recited at the thet maha chat in the central and southern regions of the kingdom, the story of Malai seems to have been 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, Thammathibet, composed a version of it in the eighteenth century. The widespread influence of the Malai story amongst the Tai peoples with its millenarian message has long been recognised as one of the reasons for the Vessantara Jataka’s own popularity. Listening to the Vessantara Jataka was held to be necessary for one’s future salvation.

In the bun pha wet (as the Lao call their festival of the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka) traditionally the next text to be recited was the Phothisat han 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 (kap), known as


32 See ‘Prapheni mi thet maha chat’, (written by a member of the Thai court in 1894), pp. 5-6. King Rama I’s Sangha laws in the late eighteenth century mention the connection between Malai’s message and the performance of the thet maha chat in the Thai kingdom, see ‘Kot phra song I’, Kotma tra sam duang, Book 4, pp. 165-9.
the phatharakap, ‘the auspicious era’.\textsuperscript{33} The place of Vessantara in the phatharakap is crucial, since it is the bodhisatta’s great acts of giving in the incarnation as Vessantara that allows him to achieve enlightenment as Gotama Buddha in his next incarnation.\textsuperscript{34} It is this broad religious-historical context provided by texts such as the Phothisat ban ton which fills the Vessantara Jataka with added significance beyond the events in the story.

In the early hours of the following day another such text is recited, Sangkat, which translates as ‘era’ or ‘age’.\textsuperscript{35} It begins with the bodhisatta’s resolution to the Buddha Dipankara to become a Buddha, four asankheyas (‘incalculable periods of time’) and one hundred thousand kap (‘aevons’) before he becomes enlightened. It goes on to relate the life of Prince Siddhattha, and gives an account of his defeat of Mara and final 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.\textsuperscript{36}

The recital of Sangkat in the bun pha wet appears to be an elaboration of a custom common to preaching in all regions called bork sakarat,\textsuperscript{37} meaning ‘to tell the era’. Bork sakarat entailed the monk who was to give the sermon making a complicated mathematical calculation and then stating the number of years, months, and days which

\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Pricha Phinthorn, Siritham Publishing, 6 October, 1992. The era is auspicious because five Buddhas have appeared; see Maha wetsandorn chahap 13 kan (Thirteen Chapter Version of the Great Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1988, p. 350. The five Buddhas of the phatharakap are Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, Gotama, and the future Buddha Maitreya.

\textsuperscript{34} The recital of this text in the bun pha wet seems to be rare nowadays, and altogether absent from recitations in the northern, central and southern regions of Thailand. It is, however, still recited in some localities, see Kanchana Suwapti, ‘Phi ta khon: suksa charo karani amphoe dan sai changwat loei’ (The Ta Khon Ghosts: Case Study of Dan Sai district, Loei Province), Masters Thesis, Sirinakarinwirot University, Mahasarakham Campus, 1991, p. 107. On the recital of phothisat ban ton in former times see Phra Phothiwongwachan (Tissu Uan)’s early twentieth century account, ‘Kan ao bun phra wet’ (Performing the Vessantara Merit-Making Festival), Latthi thammiam tang tang (Beliefs and Customs), Book 2, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1972, p. 450; Ariyanuwat, op.cit., p. 27; Kasem Bunsu, Prapheni thet maha chat (The Festival of the Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Religious Affairs Department, 1973, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{35} See ‘Kan ao bun phra wet’ Latthi thammiam tang tang, p. 451; see also Ariyanuwat, op. cit., pp. 26-7; Kasem, op.cit., p. 47; for the text of Sangkat see Maha chat samnian isan, pp. 27-37.

\textsuperscript{36} The order of disappearance as stated in Sangkat is as follows: After five hundred years monks will not follow the Vinaya; after one thousand years no arahants will appear; after two thousand years no-one will memorise the Tripitaka and preach the five nikayas; after three thousand years the monkhood will not meet together to take the monastic vows; after four thousand years; no monks will teach meditation; after five thousand years no one will give monastic robes. Maha chat samnian isan, pp. 34-5; Lam phra wet - thet maha chat ru maha wetsandorn chahap, pp. 247-276.

\textsuperscript{37} ‘Sakarat’ is the Thai word for the Lao ‘sangkat’.
had elapsed since Gotama Buddha had passed away to nibbana until the actual day of the sermon; the present date according to various dating systems; and how many years, months and days were 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 nibbana.38 The following example comes from a northeastern Vessantara Jataka 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 nibbana. The remainder, counting from Visakha day,39 is eight months and twenty-seven days. Now I will state the present date (patchuban kan). This is a hawai si year,40 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.41

According to Roeng Atthawibun the custom of bork sakarat was officially changed in 1941 under the Phibun Songkhram government. Under the new formula monks stated only the years since the Buddha’s nibbana, and abandoned the calculation of the number of years remaining of the Buddhist religion.42 One can clearly see the historically contextualising function of bork sakarat and Sangkat in the thet maha chat ceremony. They place the audience within a historical framework defined by the origins of the Buddha and the life-span of the Buddhist religion.

In both the bun pha wet and the tang tham luang today, the recital of the Vessantara Jataka in the vernacular is traditionally followed (or sometimes preceded) by a text known as Anisong phra wetsandorn, meaning ‘reward’ for a merit-making act. This text is also held as having been originally preached by the Buddha himself after

38 See Roeng Atthawibun, Rabiap prapheni song wa dusai rabiap baep phaen lae sut an pen prapheni song (Regulations and Rituals of the Sangha), Bangkok, 1973, pp. 193-7.

39 The day of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and nibbana.

40 A particular year in a traditional Tai calendrical system; I am grateful to Dr. A.V. Diller of the Australian National University’s Faculty of Asian Studies for this information.

41 Lam phra wet - thet maha chat ru maha wetsandorn chadok, pp. 268-9.

finishing preaching the Vessantara Jataka. In more detail than the Malai story, Anisong tells of the future riches and good fortune that will come to those who have listened to and made merit (by giving offerings) for each of the thirteen chapters (kan) of the Vessantara Jataka. The rewards for the faithful for having paid respect (bucha) to each chapter closely follow the action of each chapter, and 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, those who made merit offerings to nakhorn kan would be reborn as great kings with armies; they would enjoy all kinds of pleasures; their father, mother and relatives would be with them; and all their sufferings would cease... The rewards cited in Anisong also include, as in the Malai story, meeting the next Buddha Maitreya in a future incarnation.

What is apparent in this brief account of some of the most common texts to be recited in conjunction with the Vessantara Jataka is the predominance of narrative and texts which set out an historical framework of the Theravada Buddhist religion. These narratives serve to structuralise the Vessantara Jataka: they situate it within the context of the overall story of the origins and future of the Buddhist religion - including 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 Dipankara; 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 ascetic Malai’s travels to the heavens; and finally the coming of the new Buddha, Maitreya. The additional stories recited in the thet maha chat also make clear the position of the audience within that greater narrative, which is somewhere within the time scheme of Gotama Buddha’s religion, with the hope of a future life in the religion of Maitreya by the worshipping of the Vessantara Jataka.

The thet maha chat, therefore, should not be interpreted on the basis of the story of Vessantara alone, but in association with a whole complex of Buddhist narrative. One can not attribute the popularity of the Vessantara Jataka merely to the story. 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.

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43 It is also known as Anisong phra wet, or in the Lao regions, Salorng pha wet. For the text of Anisong in the bun pha wet see Maha chat samnuan isan, pp. 241 - 248, Lam phra wet - thet maha chat ru maha wetsandorn chadok, pp. 287-294.

44 Maha chat samnuan isan, pp. 246-7.