Vessantara Jataka by later scholars as a 'religious' or 'moral' tale - and therefore without 'political' significance - has contributed to this scholarly neglect. It was in this period that the performance of the story reached the height of its popularity at the Thai court. The best known versions of the story date from this time, and many more chronicles and other court documents are available to the historian which attest to its pervasive influence on court culture. Court chronicles, literature, religious scholarship and art are suffused with the imagery and conceptions of the Vessantara Jataka. From the Bangkok period we are, moreover, much better able to judge the story's influence at the local level than previously. Historical records indicate that the performance's great popularity at the Thai court was reflected in the towns and villages of the Thai kingdom. The timing of this rapid growth in the story's popularity then suggests a connection between the Vessantara Jataka and the expansion of the Thai state.

The great surge in the popularity of the thet maha chat took place amidst a general court-led cultural efflorescence during this period. This can be attributed to three factors. First, following the collapse of the Thai state under the Burmese attacks, cultural activity had come to an almost complete halt. The court, the centre of cultural life of the kingdom, had ceased to exist. Burmese forces in the area - and later bandits and looters - had ravaged the kingdom's most sacred cultural treasures, razing Ayuthaya's libraries, sacking and burning temples, stripping the gold from Buddha images and decapitating them. Not only was Ayuthaya's military power ruined, but its status as the centre of Thai 'civilisation' with a rich and illustrious cultural heritage reflecting the prosperity of the kingdom had also been destroyed. Restoration of the court's cultural life was, therefore, one of the main tasks of the new rulers.

A second reason for the resurgence of the court's interest in cultural affairs was that neither Taksin, the half-Chinese military leader who had expelled the Burmese after 1767 and made himself king, nor the Chakri brothers who overthrew him in 1782 and established the new dynasty, had blood links with the old Ayuthayan dynasty. Strictly speaking, they were usurpers of the throne. From the beginning Taksin faced this problem of legitimacy. Taksin was only one of many local lords who had taken advantage of the disintegration of Ayuthaya's power to claim their independence. Such was the case with the rulers of the important cities of Nakhon Sri Thammarat to the South, Nakhon Ratchasima to the northeast, Phitsanulok and Chiang Mai to the north. Where even the authority of the local lord had disappeared, new, charismatic leader figures appeared styling themselves as 'men of merit' (phu mi bun) and acquired large followings, often due to their religious background and appeal. It could be said that Taksin differed from these other leaders only by virtue of his military success first in repelling the Burmese forces, and then in his suppression of all other internal resistance. There is no evidence that Taksin had had a coronation ceremony to proclaim himself

king. He abandoned the ancient and sacred capital Ayuthaya and established his palace - the symbolic centre of the new kingdom - at the previously unremarkable town of Thonburi. For all his military prowess Taksin lacked not only the political alliances but also the cultural and ideological authority which had disintegrated with the fall of Ayuthaya.

The men who deposed Taksin, Chaophraya Chakri and his brother Chaophraya Surasi, had similar problems of legitimacy. They were, like Taksin, not of the Ayuthayan royal line. Their claim to the kingdom, like Taksin's, was based on sheer force of arms, although it received crucial support from powerful sections of the old Ayuthayan nobility.[5] Resurrection of the court's ceremonial and cultural life, particularly during the reign of Rama I, was therefore partly directed at convincing the old Ayuthayan elite of the cultural legitimacy of the new rulers.

A third reason for the court's renewed interest in culture, and particularly in the dissemination of Buddhist narratives about authority like the Vessantara Jataka, was the incorporation into the kingdom of peoples previously independent of Ayuthaya's authority with strong Theravada Buddhist traditions. These included the kingdom of Chiang Mai and its dependencies, the Lao kingdoms, and Cambodia. The court's elevation of Buddhism virtually to the status of the state religion, and the corresponding downplaying of Brahmanical notions of kingship, prevented the potential instability that might have occurred with the incorporation of these Buddhist heartlands.

This chapter, then, documents the popularity of the thet maha chat against the historical background of the Thai kingdom in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It argues that the story's popularity both at court and village level is an indication of its role in the expansion of the Thai state. As in earlier periods of state formation, the story's significance lay in the notions it expressed about authority and social order which were recognised throughout the Tai Buddhist cultural world and which were ritually reaffirmed and disseminated further through the annual performance of the thet maha chat. These notions - the importance for the authority of rulers of the practice of giving; the idea of the ruler as a being constantly engaged in the practice of self-perfection which was the basis of both his moral authority and supernatural powers; and respect for a hierarchical code of familial relations which was the foundation of a stable social order - were cornerstones of the Thai state. Finally we will see how the Vessantara Jataka was connected to a historical framework about the origin of kings, which conflated the genealogy of the Thai kings with that of the Buddha, and thereby provided further ideological support for the new Chakri dynasty. Even today, the story

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[5] See Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Kan muang thai samai phra chao krung thonburi (Thai Politics in the Time of the King of Thonburi), Bangkok, Sinlapa Wathanatham, 1986.

of Vessantara is still recognised by some Buddhist scholars as primarily a story explaining the Buddha's origins.[6]

The Vessantara Jataka and the Thai Aristocracy

The spiritual centre of the new Thai state and the palladium of the Chakri dynasty was the Emerald Buddha, a Buddha image which was housed within a specially constructed temple located within the Grand Palace, the residence of the king. The Emerald Buddha had in fact been captured from the Lao at Vientiane in 1778 by the victorious armies of the Chakri brothers and taken to the then Thai capital, Thonburi. After the overthrow of Taksin the image had been transferred across the river to Bangkok. One of the titles of the holy image, ratanakosin, or 'Indra's Jewel', came to signify the new dynasty and indeed the new state.[7] Possession of the image served to link the Chakri rulers temporally to the person of the Buddha, for the image was considered to be a perfect likeness of the Buddha. The image's peripatetic history, which had seen it reside in most of the great Buddhist centres of Southeast Asia and even northern India, meant that it had a claim as the symbolic centre of the Buddhist world. The image's particular significance to those Tai Buddhist peoples who had been newly incorporated into the Chakri kingdom would have also made it a powerful unifying symbol for the new Chakri Buddhist state. The image's illustrious history, as recounted in the Pali Ratanabimbavamsa (or 'History of the Jewel Image'), was evidently of considerable interest to Rama I, who had the text translated into Thai early in his reign, presumably for recitation and the edification of the Thai elite, and perhaps for further dissemination outside the court.[8]

This central icon of the Thai state became intimately associated with the Vessantara Jataka under the early Chakri rulers. At least from the reign of Rama II the story and the sacred image were at the centre of a royal ritual performed each year. On the first three days of the three-month Buddhist Rains Retreat (khao phansa), the customary time for Buddhist ordination, the Maha chat kham luang would be chanted

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[6] Interview with Phor Yai Khen Lawong, local Buddhist scholar and author of a version of the Vessantara Jataka in the Northeastern (Isan) dialect, at Ban Tha Sorng Khorn, Tambon Talat, Maha Sarakham Province, 20 September, 1992.

[7] For example, the history of the reign of Rama I was titled Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 1, 'The Royal Chronicle of the First Reign of the Ratanakosin Kingdom'.

[8] See Phra Phromratchapanya, Ratanaphimphawong: tamnan phra kaew morakot (History of the Jewel Image: Chronicle of the Emerald Jewel), translated from the Pali into Thai by Saeng Manawithun, Cremation Volume for Phra Phutthiwongwiwat (Wong Thanawangsamahathera), Bangkok, 1987, (no pagination).

(suat) by a team specially trained in the melodies and rhythms of the chant, in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha before the sacred image.[9] The custom survives at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha until this day.[10] The version chanted is that which was supposedly composed by King Boromatrailokanat, the fifteenth century Ayuthayan king. The chronicles mention that in 1812 under Rama II six 'chapters' of the Maha chat kham luang which had disappeared after the fall of Ayuthaya were rewritten by royal command, perhaps specifically for recitation at the ceremony at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.[11]

This retelling of the story of the Buddha's penultimate life, in front of the kingdom's most sacred Buddha image, during the Rains Retreat - a time symbolic of worldly renunciation - and with the most senior aristocracy, monks and court officials of the Thai kingdom in attendance, suggests that the occasion had immense political significance. It took place at the most sacred and potent time of the seasonal cycle, and at the symbolic heart of Buddhist kingdom, both of which would have augmented the authority of the message being communicated. Politics is also not far below the surface in the actual content of the text being publicly recited. The Vessantara Jataka depicted a particular kind of Buddhist ruler who was at the same time both within and outside of worldly affairs, and whose authority depended on this very paradox: the king's activities in the worldly life were ostensibly designed for future Buddhahood. The chanting of the story thus publicised among the Thai elite an ideal of Buddhist authority, and by association helped to affirm the Thai ruler himself as a bodhisatta king, or future Buddha.

It seems that even before the ceremony in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha was devised the thet maha chat had already become a regular royal ceremony. The royal thet maha chat differed from the chanting of the Maha chat kham luang in that it was a much more public occasion. Its purpose was manifold. Not only was it an occasion for the expression of the ideals contained in the Vessantara Jataka through its recitation to an audience, but as a public ceremony it was also an opportunity for the ritual demonstration of royal authority. Royal thet maha chat were always extremely ostentatious occasions, and this aspect is recorded faithfully in the chronicles, which

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[9] Chulalongkorn, King, Phra ratcha phithi sip song duan (The Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months), Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1971, pp. 520-529.

[10] Today the story is recited on the first three days, the middle three days, and the final three days of the Rains Retreat; Interview with one of the chanters, Temple of the Emerald Buddha, 11 October 1992.

[11] Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 2 (Royal Chronicle of the Second Reign), Book 2, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1962, pp. 197-8.

seem to delight in describing the elaborate and expensive decorations involved in these ceremonies. In particular they were occasions for great displays of alms giving, which, as the Vessantara Jataka taught, was the principle path to Buddhahood - as well as to the royal throne. The Royal Chronicle of the First Reign records a particularly spectacular thet maha chat which took place in 1807 involving the whole palace, which vividly shows the exhibitionary nature of the ceremony. Thirteen giant baskets (krachat), 33 feet wide and 47 feet high, one for each of the thirteen 'chapters' (kan) of the story, were set up in public outside the royal palace to receive alms.[12] Besides the great gifts of alms presented by the king, other alms-givers competed amongst themselves to make the most munificent offering. One of the king's senior consorts actually presented a child to the monks as alms, in imitation of Vessantara's gift of his children to the brahman.[13] Honorary offerings had also been sent by Siam's tributary territories, with the rulers of the Malay, Cambodian, and Lao states sending the traditional symbols of tributary submission, the gold and silver trees.[14] Here formal tributary obligations were mixed up with the general celebration of the act of giving. The involvement of not only the king and the palace but also the king's tributary vassals and the people of the royal capital thus made the thet maha chat a state occasion. The royal thet maha chat was a spectacle, a display of the prosperity of the kingdom evident in the alms-giving, and of the splendour of the royal court.

Other accounts of royal thet maha chat ceremonies which have survived (though of later periods) reveal the same ostentatious character of the royal ceremony. On one occasion during the reign of King Mongkut, a life-size Chinese junk, with great multi-tiered alms baskets set up on deck in place of the masts, was erected outside the walls of the Grand Palace.[15] Again in 1891, under King Chulalongkorn, the thet maha chat was organized with great spectacle, with an even bigger Chinese junk being set up to receive offerings of alms.[16] The fact that the alms-giving activities were located *outside* the walls of the Grand Palace is a further indication of the public nature of the occasion.

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[12] Gerini, G.E., A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Maha Chat Ceremony, Bangkok, 1892, pp. 32-3.

[13] Chaophraya Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnak), Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 1 (Dynastic Chronicle of the First Reign), edited by Damrong Rajanubhab, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1983, p. 205.

[14] Gerini, A Retrospective View, p. 33

[15] Ibid., p. 30.

[16] Ibid., p. 31.

The imitation Chinese junks associated with this ritual alms-giving in the royal thet maha chat ceremonies had special significance. The boat is an important metaphor in the Vessantara Jataka. When Vessantara explains to his son Chali why he must give him to the Brahman he uses the boat as a metaphor for this superlative act of alms giving. By performing the gift of his children to the Brahmin, Vessantara will have achieved that ideal of freedom from all worldy attachments which will enable him to achieve enlightenment, and in so doing the means to convey all living creatures to Nirvana. The gift is therefore like a boat which will carry its passengers across the sea of endless rebirth to the distant shore of Nirvana:

Phra luk oei chao mai ru reu phra biturong banchong rak phra phothiyan wang
cha yang sat hai kham huang mahanaphop songsan hai thung fak
Pen yiang yang yort yak thi cha kham dai...
...phor hen tae na chao phra phi norng thang sorng ra
Chao chong ma pen mahasamphao thorng thammachat...
...kor cha laen rari luai chuai pai chon thung muang kaew
An klao laew khu phra amata maha nakhorn naruphan[17]

My son, do you not know that your father is determined in his desire for enlightenment?
That he wishes to help all living things to cross over the great sea of Becoming to the other side
This is the hardest sea to cross...
...Your father sees you two children
As the great golden boat...
...which will steadfastly sail me to the bejewelled city
the timeless, great land of Nirvana

But the boat also had a less metaphoric and more literal significance to the early Bangkok rulers. One has only to think of the economic importance of the junk trade to the early Bangkok kings to see how powerful the association of the boat as a means of salvation was to the early Bangkok merchant kings.[18] Rama III, who had amassed great wealth from the junk trade actually constructed (or restored) a temple, Wat Yannawa, which had a life-sized junk situated inside the temple grounds. The junk housed two cetiya, or receptacles of relics of the Buddha. At the stern of the boat there were statues

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[17] Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan (The Thirteen Chapter Version of the Great Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1988, 'Kan Kuman' pp. 210-12.

[18] Nidhi has pointed out how Chao Phraya Phra Khlang (Hon), a poet who was also a senior figure at the court of Rama, in his version of this chapter of the Vessantara Jataka describes the boat as a Chinese junk. The intimacy of the description no doubt reflected the poet's own close association with the junk trade; Nidhi, 'An nuang ma chak maha chat muang phet', (On the Phetburi Vessantara Jataka), Pak kai lae bai rua: ruam khwam riang wa duai wannakam lae prawatisat ratanakosin (Quill and Sail: Collected Essays on Early Bangkok Literature and History), Bangkok, Amarin, 1984, pp. 320-1.

of Vessantara, and his two children, Kanha and Chali.[19] On the inside walls of the junk was inscribed the text of the Vessantara Jataka.[20] This curious association of signs points to a link between on the one hand, the theme of giving in the Vessantara Jataka, which showed that the activity of giving was both a means of attaining royal power as well as an essential activity of the good ruler for the well-being of his subjects; and on the other the king's conduct of trade and commerce, which was another kind of exchange, but which had a similar effect of bringing wealth and power to rulers and prosperity to the kingdom. The Vessantara Jataka's ideal of the king as the greatest giver in the kingdom thus provided ideological justification for the acquisition of wealth. For the early Bangkok kings the junk trade was the means by which they were able to accumulate such large amounts of wealth and thus fulfil the ideal of king so widely disseminated by the Vessantara Jataka.

Rama I's thet maha chat seems to have been the model for such performances of the Vessantara Jataka held by later kings of the Chakri dynasty. The royal chronicles record a number of particularly grand thet maha chat performances, such as that of 1851, the year of his coming to the throne, when King Mongkut organized a thet maha chat ceremony of similar proportions to that of his grandfather Rama I, in honour of the first three kings of the Chakri dynasty.[21] The thet maha chat was also performed at the so-called 'Front Palace' (wang na), which was the palace of the Prince who traditionally had direct responsibility for the kingdom's defence, who often inherited the throne of the king proper (wang luang), and whose status in the kingdom was such that he was often referred to by the foreign community (mistakenly) as the 'Second King'.[22] The 'Front Palace Prince' during the Fourth Reign, Pin Klao, (whose royal title showed him to be of equal status with the king proper, Mongkut), was reputed to be a skilled reciter of the Vessantara Jataka, and he even personally instructed those who wished to learn its

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[19] These statues are said to have been destroyed by Allied bombing raids over Bangkok during World War Two; cf. Damrong Rajanubhab, 'Prawat wat yannawa' (History of Wat Yannawa) in Chumnum phra niphon somdet krom phraya Damrong Rajanubhab (Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's Collected Writings), Bangkok, Bannakit, 1991, pp. 42ff.

[20] Atchara, 'Kan fun fu phra phuttha satsana nai samai ratanakosin torn ton', p. 32, n. 4); Prawat wat samkhan thang phutthasatsana torn thi 7 (History of Important Buddhist Temples, Part 7), Religious Affairs Department, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1986, p.276.

[21] Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 4 (Royal Chronicle of the Fourth Reign), 2nd ed., Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1978, pp. 77-80.

[22] At least from the reign of King Pin Klao, Mongkut's younger brother, and technically his equal in rank; Latthi thamniam tang tang (Beliefs and Customs), Krom Sinlapakorn, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1972, pp. 551-2, 569-574.

ได้รับอนุญาตจาก สำนักงานลูก ส.ธรรมภักดี

โครงการมูลนิธิหอไตร

กัณฑ์ที่ ๘. **กุมาร** ๑๐๑ พระคาถา

พระเวสสันดรตรัสเรียกลูกกัณหาชาลีขึ้นจากสระที่ซ่อนองค์ เพื่อนำไปให้ทานแก่เฒ่าชูชก

Vessantara calls the children from where they are hiding in the lotus pond, to give them to Chuchok; from Phra Phimonlatham Ratchabandit (Chorp Anucharimahathera), Parithat wetsandon chadok (Critical Review of the Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Khrongkan munlanithi hor trai, 1990.

intricate rhythms and melodies.[23] Again we see the clear association between the Vessantara Jataka and kings - or would-be kings. It will be remembered that at the beginning of the story Vessantara is a prince, and through his feats of alms-giving eventually becomes king.

Indeed, knowledge of the story - and public demonstration of this knowledge - by would-be kings was ritualised by the Thai court. At least by the Second Reign a custom had been established whereby the presumed heir to the throne who had entered the monkhood as a novice, memorised and recited in front of an audience a chapter (kan) from the Maha chat. In 1817 the novice Prince Mongkut, at the time technically first in line to the throne, recited a chapter from the Vessantara Jataka to his father, King Rama II.[24] Prince Chetsadabodin, Mongkut's half-brother who later managed to assume the throne ahead of Mongkut, also invited the young Mongkut to recite at an elaborate thet maha chat ceremony held at his palace. Later when Mongkut himself was king, he had his son and chosen successor, the young Chulalongkorn, recite a chapter of the Vessantara Jataka which Mongkut had himself composed specially for the occasion.[25] In 1891 King Chulalongkorn, in turn, had the 'Crown Prince' his son Prince Wachirunhit, also recite the same chapter from the Vessantara Jataka.[26] The new Crown Prince after Wachirunhit's untimely death, Prince Wachirawut (Vajiravudh), later Rama VI, had also trained to give a recital, but his departure to England to further his education prevented him from actually giving it.[27]

The custom of reciting a chapter from the Maha chat was eventually extended to all young males of the aristocracy and nobility. Special teachers were used to train the

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23 Thiphawan Bunwira, 'Lae khruang len maha chat' (Popular Tunes in the Maha Chat), Sinlapakorn (Journal of Fine Arts), 22, 2, 1978, p. 63.

24 Damrong Rajanubhab, Phra ratcha phongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 2 (Dynastic Chronicle of the Second Reign), Book 2, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1962 (1st publ. 1916), p. 17. The chapter was 'kan matsi'.

25 Damrong Rajanubhab, Prawat bukkhon samkhan (Biographies of Important People), Bangkok, Bannakit, 1988, pp. 54-5; Phra ratcha phithi sip sorng duan, p. 75; the chapter was Sakkabap kan.

26 Gerini, A Retrospective View, p. 31. The rank 'Crown Prince' had been newly created by Chulalongkorn after the British model, in order to minimize the potential of political instability in the royal succession.

27 Damrong Rajanubhab, 'kham athibai' (Explanation), Maha chat phra ratchaniphon nai ratchakan thi 4 (The Fourth Reign King's Version of the Maha Chat), Cremation Volume, Morm Chao Chongkonni Wathanawong, Bangkok, 1965, (1st publ. 1920), pp. kor-khor.

princes in the vocal art of the story's recitation.[28] Indeed the custom became so popular that Prince Damrong noted later that almost every prince of the somdet phra chao luk thoe and phra chao luk thoe rank (mostly Mongkut's sons) who had been novices during the Fourth and Fifth Reigns (1851-1910) had recited a chapter, using King Mongkut's own version of the Maha chat. Among these were most of the highest ranking members of the court of the Fifth Reign, including Damrong himself, Sangha head Prince Patriarch Wachirayan, Foreign Minister Thewawong (Devawongse), the king's Private Secretary Sommut Amoraphan, Narathip Praphanphong, Naritsaranuwattiwong, Phichit Prichakorn, Phanuphanthuwongworadet, and many others.[29] Oral performance of the thet maha chat was an integral part of the education of the sons of the Thai aristocracy and future rulers of the kingdom, once again illustrating the connection between the Vessantara Jataka and authority in the Thai kingdom.

The early Bangkok period was the golden age for the composition of recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka at the Thai court. Court poets competed to create the most beautiful versions of the story - ie. versions which would be rendered orally by the reciters in the most pleasing manner - while nevertheless keeping closely to the basic structure and meaning of the Pali original. It should not be forgotten that the thet maha chat was a performance, and the aesthetics of the performance was highly valued. Among the poets whose versions of chapters of the Vessantara Jataka are now regarded as classics of the Thai language are Chaophraya Phra Khlang (Hon), who was Rama I's minister in charge of Trade and Foreign Affairs and a poet of great repute, Prince-Patriarch Paramanuchit, head of the Sangha in the Third Reign, Phra Thepmoli (Klin), another senior monk, King Mongkut himself, and many others whose work has not survived.

There is no doubt therefore that the Vessantara was highly valued knowledge for Thai kings and the Thai elite in general. Yet we know that the story was most certainly not confined to the Thai court, as was the case with other examples of high culture. The story's permeation of popular culture seems to have been equally deep.

The Maha chat in Popular Culture

One measure of the general popularity of the thet maha chat throughout the kingdom is in the first of the so-called 'Sangha Laws'. Between 1782 and 1801 Rama I issued an

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[28] Maha chat phra ratchaniphon nai ratchakan thi 4, p. kor.

[29] Maha chat phra ratchaniphon nai ratchakan thi 4, pp. kor-khor; and Maha chat phra niphon krom somdet phra paramanuchit chinorot (wen tae kan mahaphon kap kan matsi) (Prince Paramanuchit Chinorot's Version of the Maha Chat, Not Including Mahaphon and Matsi Chapters), National Library, Bangkok, Thai Printing, 1918, pp. 27-9.

unprecedented set of laws designed to give the Chakri court greater control over the Sangha and over the kingdom's religious affairs in general. Following the collapse of the kingdom of Ayuthaya the organisation of the Sangha, like other institutions of the Ayuthayan kingdom, had fallen into disarray. During the reign of Taksin the Sangha had become divided and highly politicised, with the king stripping several senior monks of their ranks for insubordination. Moreover many of the rebellions and uprisings subsequent to the fall of Ayuthaya, during Taksin's reign, and indeed through into the twentieth century, were led by religious figures, and conceptualised in religious, often millenarian terms. If protest against the authority of the Thai king was informed by religious belief, then court surveillance and suppression of deviant religious activity was a defence against such outbreaks. It was under these circumstances that the king directly intervened in the affairs of the Sangha, a rare occurrence in Thai state - religious relations.[30]

The first of these ten special 'Sangha laws' (kot phra song), issued in 1782, prohibited so-called 'buffoonish' (talok khanorng) performances of the thet maha chat:[31]

> At this time the entire populace of the kingdom are holding recitations of the Vessantara Jataka. However they do not respect the story as part of the Dhamma. They listen only to the buffoonish poetry, which is of no benefit to them. Some of the monks who recite the story have not studied the Tripitika. They know only the parts which have been put into song-verse (kap klorn), which they then recite in a bufoonish and obscene manner. They are interested only in fame and riches. They have never desired to study and pass on the knowledge of the Dhamma. This is damaging to the religion and encourages people to be careless in teaching the Dhamma. Such people will suffer long torment in the four hells...
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> So from now on the king orders that monks who give sermons and the people who listen to the recitation of the Maha Chat Jataka, must recite and listen to only the Pali canonical verses and the Commentary...the recitation of and listening to sermons in song-verse or the expression of buffoonish words for comic purposes is strictly forbidden...[32]

The regulation was addressed to all royal officials, including both military and civilian authorities, the Krom (Ministry) heads, the Front Palace, City officials, and the Sangha authorities and abbots both within Bangkok and in the kingdom's First, Second and Third Class cities of the Western, Eastern, Southern and Northern regions of the

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[30] David K. Wyatt, 'The "Subtle Revolution" of King Rama I of Siam' in David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside, eds., Moral Order and the Question of Change, pp. 22-3.

[31] 'Kot phra song 1' (Monastic Regulation Number 1), Kotmai tra sam duang (The Three Seals Law), Book 4, pp. 164-9.

[32] Ibid., pp. 167-9.

kingdom, and 'everywhere'.[33] Violators of the law along with their relatives were liable for unspecified punishment.[34]

This regulation, then, gives us the first indication of the thet maha chat's popularity at the beginning of the First Reign. The court's crackdown on such buffoonish recitations of the Vessantara Jataka, the fact that it was the very first of the Sangha laws and enacted in the critical year of Rama I's seizure of power, and the promulgation of the law through all the kingdom's agencies, all indicate the importance the court attached to the proper performance of the thet maha chat. If the story's value in the eyes of the court derived from the ideas it expressed in regard to authority and social order, then the 'buffoonish' treatment of the story in some popular recitations implied an attack not just on a religious story but on those very ideas of authority that underlay the rule of the Thai king and order within the Thai kingdom.

The effectiveness of the law is difficult to judge from the existing records. Perhaps rather than a 'law' (kot) it should be regarded more as an articulation of an elite norm. But it certainly did not impede the popularity of the thet maha chat in the villages and towns of the new, greater Thai kingdom. Other references in documents of the Early Bangkok period, for example in the long narrative Khun chang khun phaen, bear witness to the pervasiveness of the thet maha chat outside the court.[35] Many extant versions of the story written in the northern Tai dialect from around the region of Chiang Mai also date from this era.[36]

The law's ban on the versification of the story for the purposes of singing the text seems also to have had little effect. In any case, for many audiences this was the principal attraction of the thet maha chat in the first place. Monks became famous for their skill in reciting particular chapters of the Vessantara Jataka, and would receive invitations to perform at thet maha chat ceremonies far and wide. The principal device employed to attract and entertain the audience was the monks' distinctive melodic and rhythmic style of reciting the verse (known as thamnorng maha chat). The thet maha chat was unique for its 'singing' style of preaching Buddhist scripture. This style of

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[33] These were the terms for grading towns and cities according to their distance from and relative importance to Bangkok.

[34] Ibid., pp. 164, 169.

[35] Cf. Sepha ruang khun chang khun phaen: phra ratchaniphon phra bat somdet phra phutthaloetlanaphalai (The Ballad of Khun Chang and Khun Phaen), Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1971, pp. 54ff.

[36] Cf. Rai chu nangsu boran lanna ekasan microfilm khorng sathaban wichai sangkhom, mahawithayalai chiang mai phor sor 2521-2533 (Catalogue of Ancient Lanna Literature on Microfilm, University of Chiang Mai Social Research Institute, 1978-1990), Chiang Mai, 1990, pp. 239-280.

recitation made listening to the lengthy narrative, which went on from before dawn until late at night on the same day, not only endurable but highly entertaining for audiences. Each chapter had a different style of recitation, a different vocal repertoire, and it was rare that any one monk could master the complete repertoire. So thet maha chat performances usually involved several monks, and sometimes even novices.

The charismatic monk Somdet Phra Phuthachan (To), who was close to the Thai court in the mid-nineteenth century, was a reknowned performer, and is known to have preached in village temples as well as at the royal court. His rendering of the Matsi chapter of the Vessantara Jataka, in which Matsi frantically searches the forest for her children, was reputed to have moved audiences to tears.[37] Monks had to train for many years in order to become skilled in the arts of recitation - much in the manner of Western opera singers. Monks who were accomplished in reciting the Maha chat were sometimes known by the title of 'maha' (or 'the great').

It was not purely for the love of performance that monks became nak thet or 'reciters' of the Vessantara Jataka. The alms giving at the thet maha chat was the greatest of any festival of the year. It was an opportunity for the local 'big men' to flaunt their wealth and gain face in the eyes of the community.[38] The alms giving which took place at thet maha chat ceremonies, ostensibly for personal merit-making, was also a competition for social status in which the whole community was involved. It appears to bear a certain similarity to Mauss' 'agonistic' contest of giving in 'archaic societies', in which gift giving took the form of a kind of 'war of wealth'.[39] During the thet maha chat ceremony the audience would attempt to outdo each other in their alms-giving. Because of the large amounts of money involved, it was an opportunity for skilled monks to become very wealthy, a situation recognised in Rama I's Sangha Law. It remained a problem through to the Fourth Reign, when King Mongkut issued a pronouncement criticising the 'opportunists' who organised thet maha chat ceremonies purely for selfish financial gain.[40]

The court's concern with rogue monks performing the thet maha chat for fame and riches came amidst the general concern with religious figures who often became

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[37] "Chanthichai", Somdet phra phuthachan (To), Vol. 1, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1983, pp. 28-34.

[38] Chanthichai's account of the performance given at a small village by Somdet To is a good illustration of this; ibid., Vol. 1, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1983, pp. 28-34.

[39] Marcel Mauss, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. Ian Cunnison, London, Cohen and West, 1950, p. 35.

[40] Nangsu chotmaihet - The Bangkok Recorder, Vol. 1, November 18 1965, No. 18, 'Ruang niyai khorng luang', p. 161.

leaders of local or even regional revolts. It is worth bearing in mind the similarity of these provincial monastic figures reciting the Vessantara Jataka, and the situation at the royal court where young would-be kings and sons of the aristocracy and nobility were also reciting the story amidst great pomp and ceremony. There was a potential, therefore, for these local recitations to greatly enhance the status of local power figures. The great alms giving that these ceremonies occasioned could also provide these figures with financial power and a network of obligations which had the potential to pose a challenge to the state authorities.

For the Vessantara Jataka was a story not specifically about the power of the Thai king, but about authority and social order in general. This was one of the reasons for its popularity at local level. Local figures, regional lords, even the rulers of tributary states like the Chiang Mai kings, were happy to patronise the Vessantara Jataka because it could disseminate images of kingship and authority which enhanced their own power: the idea of the benevolent ruler and the greatest giver, the supreme moral being, and a future Buddha, whose ascetic abilities endowed him with supernatural powers. The great alms which took place in the thet maha chat ceremony worked to support the local Sangha, and thus indirectly aided central authority. And the Vessantara Jataka's message about adherence to one's duty in the hierarchy of kin relations also promoted social order based on seniority and gender. So the kind of authority the Vessantara Jataka idealised was a decentralised and therefore potentially unstable one. It was suited to the conditions of a 'premodern' Southeast Asian kingdom where direct royal administration was impossible for all but the most adjacent areas to the royal city. The thet maha chat helped create a cultural community in which the authority of the Thai king could be understood by diverse and dispersed rural communities in the same cultural terms. It thereby actied as a cohesive force. On the other hand, it also provided the opportunity for local figures to take advantage of the same concepts of authority and thus become a threat to the integration of the Thai kingdom. This was a perennial problem which the court had to deal with on an ad hoc basis, until the arrival of the colonial powers in the later nineteenth century necessitated a fundamental change in the type of political order used to hold the kingdom together.

For local, rural audiences the attraction of the thet maha chat was manifold. The recitation of the story had developed into a highly refined vocal art which was greatly popular with the people. Different regions developed their own highly distinctive vocal styles of recitation, and Maha chat texts were written in the local vernacular. Through this art audiences were attracted to the story and its ideas and values widely inculcated. Yet while local power figures could use the story to enhance their own authority, at the same time it provided a moral code by which they would be judged by those under their authority.

Amulet of the charismatic nineteenth century monk Phra Phutthachan (To), renowned for his supernatural abilities and famed reciter of the Maha chat, with bai lan manuscript; from Chaem Choetcharat, Somdet 5 phaendin ('Somdet' of the Five Reigns), Bangkok, Chomrom phra khruang phuthakhom, (undated)

Let us now look more closely at this moral code and how the figure of Vessantara became the model for supreme political authority in the Thai kingdom, the Thai king.

Kingship and the Ten Perfections

A number of scholars have shown how prior to the mid-nineteenth century Thai kings were directly referred to as bodhisattas or future Buddhas, and were represented in documents emanating from the court as possessing qualities similar to those of the bodhisatta.[41] As bodhisatta the kings were depicted as being committed to the accumulation of the Ten Perfections, or barami, in the same way as Gotama Buddha had done in his previous incarnations when he was a bodhisatta. For example, the lengthy and elaborate names which kings assumed on their enthronement often included the title 'nor phutthangkun' or 'nor somdet phra phuttha chao', meaning 'one who will in the future become a Buddha' - the same appellation of the bodhisatta in the Vessantara Jataka.[42] In performing meritorious deeds Thai kings were said to 'phoem phra barami', 'sang phra barami', or 'bamphen barami' - increase their barami, or Perfections, in the hope of attaining enlightenment at some time in the future, and thereby delivering all living beings from suffering.[43] King Taksin was praised by sections of his clergy for his accumulation of the ten kinds of barami (namely Giving, Moral Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Exertion, Patience, Truthfulness, Resolution, Loving

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41 See S.J.Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against A Historical Background, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976; Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Prawatisat ratanakosin nai phra ratchaphongsawadan ayuthaya (Bangkok History in the Royal Chronicles of Ayuthaya), Thai Khadi Suksa, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1980, pp. 50-65; and Kan muang thai samai phra chao krung thonburi, pp. 114-6; Atchara, 'Kan fun fu phra phutthasatsana'; Saichon, 'Phutthasatsana kap naew khwam khit thang kan muang'; Phimphada Yangcharoen and Suwadi Thanaprasitphathana, Kan suksa lae phon krathop tor sangkhom thai samai ton ratanakosin (por.sor. 2325-2394) (Education and Its Effects on Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period), Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University, 1986; Princess Sirindhorn, Thotsabarami nai phutthasatsana therawat (The Ten Perfections in Theravada Buddhism), Published by Mahamakut Ratchawithayalai Under Royal Patronage, in Commemoration of 200 Years of the Chakri Dynasty, Bangkok, 1982.

42 See Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan (The Great Vessantara Jataka: the Thirteen Chapter Edition), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1988; for the names of the first three kings of the Chakri dynasty which include the title maha phutthangun see Somphong Kriangkraiphet, Prapheni thai lae ruang na ru (Thai Customs and Things Worth Knowing), Bangkok, Phrae Phithaya, 1964, pp. 613-616.

43 Another phrase of similar meaning commonly found in these works is 'sang phothisomphan'.

Kindness, and Equanimity[44]), after the model of the Buddha's own accumulation of the ten barami during his existence as a bodhisatta.[45]

Of the two Chakri brothers who later deposed Taksin, a First Reign chronicle wrote that

> ...There were two royal kings who had previously resided in Ayuthaya. They were bodhisattas, future Buddhas. They possessed much bunya barami which they had accumulated [from previous incarnations]. They were men of great faith and wisdom. They desired only enlightenment...[46]

According to the chronicles of the time it was the power of their barami (usually expressed as 'duai decha phra barami') that enabled kings to defeat their enemies and perform supernatural feats such as causing the rain to fall, or the earth to quake. Such manifestations of royal power are commonly recorded in historical works written from the late eighteenth up to the mid-nineteenth centuries. For example, among the many miraculous royal feats recorded by the Royal Chronicle of Thonburi, King Taksin is depicted as having calmed a storm which threatened his fleet through the power of his barami accumulated in past incarnations.[47] The same chronicle's account of the king's campaign to oust the Burmese from Chiang Mai records that

> When the king moved the royal army [to Chiang Mai] the Burmese army fled. It was a miracle. The Burmese army had fled because of the power of the king's barami. The monks of Chiang Mai said that on the morning of the king's arrival a miracle occurred when the earth quaked in Chiang Mai city.[48]

In a passage from another historical account from the early nineteenth century, the accession of King Rama I to the throne in 1782 by dethroning the reigning king in a

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[44] In Thai: than barami, sin barami, nekkhamma barami, panya barami, viriya barami, khanti barami, sacca barami, adhitthan barami, metta barami, upekkha barami.

[45] Saichon, 'Phutthasatsana kap naew khwam khit thang kan muang', p. 186.

[46] Somdet Phra Wanarat, Sangkhitiyawong: phongsawadan ruang sangkhayana phra thammawinai (Sangitiyavamsa: Chronicle of the Recensions of the Scriptures), Translated by Phraya Pariyatithammathada (Phae Tanlaksamon), Cremation Volume, Somdet Phra Phuthachan (Wanathitiyan Mahathera), Bangkok, 1978, p. 424.

[47] See 'Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung thonburi' (The Royal Chronicle of the Kingdom of Thonburi), in Prachum phongsawadan (Collected Histories), Vol. 40, pt. 65, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1969, p. 41.

[48] Ibid., p. 64.

bloody coup is represented using the vivid metaphor of the bodhisatta's defeat of Mara (the embodiment of evil and delusion) through the power of his barami.[49] The same metaphor is also used in a late eighteenth-century chronicle in describing King Naresuan's famous victory over the Burmese Uparacha in 1593: the Uparacha is represented as Mara and Naresuan as the bodhisatta.[50] This metaphor is a particularly effective one as the image of the defeat or subduing of Mara (drawn from texts on the progress of the bodhisatta) is probably the best-known of all images in Theravada Buddhism, and is often depicted graphically on the walls of temples.

Princes or vassals who submitted to the overlordship of the king were said to phung phra barami, or 'to come under the protection' of the king's barami. Defeated armies are depicted as being unable to stand up to the king's barami. Enemies of the king were said not to 'believe in' the king's barami. The king's barami was also reflected in the kingdom's prosperity; and if disaster struck such as famine or epidemic, this showed that the king's barami was failing, and at such dangerous times kings had to make great displays of merit-making (usually alms-giving) to prove their legitimacy.[51] Another way was to 'test' one's barami ('siang phra barami'). For example, the following incident from the reign of King Taksin is recorded in the Royal Chronicle compiled in the Fourth Reign:

> ...having paid respect to the sacred Buddha image at Wat Klang Doi Khao Kaew the king addressed the monks "do you remember, monks, when I was at Rahaeng I lifted a great jewelled bell up and pledged to put my barami to the test? I said that if in the future I was truly to achieve the victory of enlightenment, when I hit the jewelled bell it would crack at the spot which I touched, and then I would build a stupa containing a Holy Relic. After I made this pledge and hit the bell a crack did appear at just that spot, a miracle for all to see". The monks blessed the king, affirming his words.[52]

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[49] Chotmaihet khwam song cham khorng krommaluang narintharathewi (phor.sor.2310-2381) lae phra ratchawichan nai phra bat somdet phra chula chorm klao chao yu hua (Recorded Memoirs of Princess Narintharathewi (1777-1838) and Commentary by King Chulachormklao), Cremation Volume, Phrachao Boromawongthoe Phraongchao Wapibutsabakorn, Bangkok, March 1983, pp. 15, 185.

[50] Sunait Chutintaranond, 'The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writing', The Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 80, Part 1, 1992, p. 92; 'Phra ratchaphongsawadan chabap phanchanthanumat' (The Phanchanthanumat Version of the Royal Chronicle), Prachum phongsawasan (Collected Histories), Vol. 38, Part 64, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1969, pp. 252-3

[51] Atchara, 'Kan fun fu phra phutthasatsana', pp. 33-5.

[52] Phra ratchaphongsawadan chabap phra ratchahatthalekha (The Royal Autograph Version of the Royal Chronicle), Vol.2, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1973, pp. 374-5; the same incident is recorded in 'Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung thonburi', p. 75.

The representation of kings as bodhisattas accumulating the Perfections was not, moreover, limited to written documents. Besides the bodhisatta's defeat of Mara, one of the most common subjects for temple artists was the last ten Jatakas - the thotsachat. Each of these ten Jatakas was supposed to represent the attainment by the bodhisatta of one particular Perfection (barami), and appropriate scenes from each Jataka were chosen for painting. These scenes were painted in order around the walls inside the temple, in the manner of the Stations of the Cross in Christian churches. In many temples the Vessantara Jataka would be given prominence, with the temple walls displaying scenes from all thirteen chapters (kan) of the story.[53] In these illustrations of the Vessantara and other Jatakas painted from the late Ayuthaya and early Bangkok periods the bodhisatta is commonly depicted dressed in garments and regalia identical to those worn by the Thai kings.[54] Such illustrations are significant not merely for their aesthetic value; they also helped to disseminate through visual means the conception of the king as bodhisatta.

It is in relation to this concept of perfectibility, of the king's status as a bodhisatta accumulating the Perfections, that the Vessantara Jataka was of special relevance to the Thai kings. The Vessantara Jataka marks the completion of the bodhisatta's accumulation of the Perfections which he had begun countless lifetimes previously. Attainment of the Perfections was the prerequisite to enlightenment, which would be achieved in the following incarnation. It is understandable then that the bodhisatta's incarnation as Vessantara was the most popular model for Thai kings to emulate, for like Vessantara they too could be considered to be bodhisattas, who in their next incarnation

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[53] See for example, Wat Khongkharam, Thai Wathanaphanit, Bangkok, 1978; Chitrakam fa phanang thonburi (Thonburi Wall Paintings), Society for the Conservation of National Art Treasures and Environment, Bangkok, 1980; Wat Chongnonsi, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1982; Wat Suwannaram, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1982; Wat Ratchasittharam, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1982; Wat Dusidaram, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1983; Buddhaisawan Chapel, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1983; Sombat Plainoi, Mural Paintings, trans. Panit Boonyawatana, ed. Malithat Pramathattavedi, Office of the National Culture Commission, Bangkok (No Date); for Jataka paintings in Northeastern temples see Wannipha Na Songkhla, 'Kan anurak chitrakam fa phanang phak isan' (The Preservation of Isan Wall Painting) in Sing faeng ren yu nai chitrakam fa phanang isan (Things Hidden in Isan Wall Paintings), Conference, Khorn Kaen University, 2 - 4 December 1983, pp. 1-7; Saengarun Kanokphongchai, 'Khati khwam chua ruang maha chat chadok: kan plian plaeng lae kan sup nuang sathorn chak phap chitrakam fa phanang korani suksa chapo phap chitrakam fa phanang nai phra ubosot wat suwannaram' (Beliefs Related to the Vessantara Jataka: Change and Continuity Reflected in Wall Paintings, A Case Study of the Wall Paintings in the Chanting Hall of Wat Suwannaram), M.A. Thesis, Sinlapakorn University, Bangkok, 1989; For an example of a temple with carved wooden reliefs of the Vessantara Jataka fixed around the outside walls of the temple see Wat kut bang khem: bot mai sak cham lak lai (Wat Kut Bang Khem: Carvings in a Teak Chapel), Office for the Promotion of National Identity, Bangkok, 1990.

[54] Nidhi, 'Phra pathom somphothikatha kap khwam khluan wai thang satsana nai ton ratanakosin' (The Phra Patomsomphothikatha and Religious Change in the Early Bangkok Period), Pak kai lae bai rua, pp. 403-4.

were destined to achieve enlightenment. Rama I's great gifts of alms during the grandiose thet maha chat ceremony mentioned above was, in the words of one account, 'intended to speed the king on the way to attain Buddhaship at some future existence when he would be enabled, in accordance with the Gospel of Salvation preached by Gotama Buddha, to lead all sentient beings to the attainment of Nirvana, thus emancipating them from the evils of continued rebirths'.[55]

Of all the Perfections, the Perfection of Giving was given pride of place. Vessantara's great feats of alms-giving became a model for kings to emulate. In the chronicles it is in the activity of alms-giving that kings most ostentatiously demonstrated their piety. The extent to which kings sought to model themselves on Vessantara was sometimes extraordinary. For example, King Taksin is recorded as having said to his monks on the subject of his dedication to alms-giving:

> Even were you to desire my own flesh and blood I would carve out my flesh and blood and give them as alms.[56]

This is an almost verbatim repetition of Vessantara's words to his wife Matsi, on his devotion to the Perfection of Giving:

> If anyone should desire my skin, flesh, blood, heart and both eyes
> I would not flinch from cutting them out and giving them as alms...[57]

Similarly, on the coronation of King Rama III in 1824 a chronicle records that the king went to great lengths to imitate the bodhisatta Vessantara by symbolically 'giving' away to a monk (in a staged ritual) the king's own son and daughter.[58] The same chronicle describes how the king also performed the 'Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds'

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55 Gerini, A Retrospective View, p. 33.

56 'Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung thonburi', p. 33.

57 Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, (kan matsi), p. 254. See also p. 18 (kan himaphan): "If beggars desire my heart, flesh, and blood I would cut them out and give them as alms". The author of the former verse, Chaophraya Phra Khlang (Hon), was head of the royal treasury in the reign on Rama I. This may go some way in explaining the verse's similarity to that taken from the Thonburi chronicle (in which Taksin's alms-giving prowess is referred to) which was revised in the reign of Rama I.

58 Atchara, Kan fun fu phra phutthasatsana, p. 32. The king's son and daughter were returned to the king later. Note that in the Questions of King Milinda, one of the best-known commentaries in Theravada Buddhist countries, all bodhisattas were required to give away their wife and children just as Vessantara had done; see Milinda's Questions, Vol.II, translated from the Pali by I.B.Horner, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol.XXIII, Pali Text Society, London, 1964, pp. 95ff.

(satasadokmahathan) in imitation of Vessantara's gift to the citizens of Sivi.[59] Older chronicles document kings of earlier periods performing the same feat.[60] The often stated desire of kings for enlightenment by way of great deeds of charity such as Vessantara's was, moreover, reinforced by orthodox belief based on religious texts, which held that all bodhisattas either past, present or future, had similar 'careers', and that in their penultimate incarnation they would give away their wife and children to achieve the Perfection of Giving just as Vessantara had done.[61] It is surely due to this idealization of the bodhisatta-king that in the reign of King Rama III we see great respect accorded to the Jataka stories generally. One of the clearest illustrations of this respect is the inscription of the entire five hundred and fifty Jatakas upon the walls of Wat Phra Chetuphon, one of the kingdom's highest ranking temples, in this reign.[62]

The extent of the Thai kings' identification with Vessantara can also be seen in peculiar customs such as, for example, naming the king's white elephant, itself one of the most potent symbols of the king's barami[63] and simultaneously a guarantor of the kingdom's prosperity, after Vessantara's white elephant, 'Patchai Nakhen'.[64] Parallels between the Vessantara Jataka and the conduct of kings were also noticed by observers. One early nineteenth century account of the often difficult relations between the wang

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[59] See Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 3 (Dynastic Chronicles of Bangkok, the Third Reign), Vol. 1, Bangkok, 1961, p. 120. The 'Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds' was made up of seven hundred elephants, seven hundred horses, seven hundred chariots, seven hundred noblewomen, seven hundred female slaves, seven hundred male slaves, and seven hundred cows. For the original 'Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds' by Prince Vessantara see Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, pp. 54-6.

[60] For the performance of this feat by King Prasat Thong in 1638 (but in multiples of one hundred) see 'Chulayutthakanwong' (Chronicle of Minor Battles), Prachum phongsawadan (Collected Histories), Vol. 41, part 66, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1969, p. 84; and for that of eighteenth century king Boromakot see 'Kham hai kan khun luang ha wat', in Kham hai kan chao krung kao, kham hai kan khun luang ha wat, lae phra ratchaphongsawadan krung kao chabap luang prasoet aksoranit (Testimony of the People of the Old Capital, Testimony of Khun Luang Ha Wat, and Luang Prasoet Aksoranit version of the Royal Chronicle of the Old Capital), Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1972, p. 384.

[61] See, for example, Milinda's Questions, a Pali commentary well known in Thai Buddhism: Milinda's Questions, p. 95.

[62] Prachum charuk wat phra chetuphon (Collection of Inscriptions from Wat Phra Chetuphon), Cremation Volume, Somdet Phra Ariyawongsakhotayan, Phra Sangkharat (Pun Punnasiri), Bangkok, 1974, pp. 3, 109-118.

[63] The white elephant was sometimes referred to as 'khu phra barami' or 'partner' of the king's barami; see Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 2, Part 2, p. 191.

[64] Eg. Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung kao chabap luang prasoet, p. 457; for Vessantara's white elephant see Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap 13 kan, p. 17.

luang (Royal Palace) and the wang na (Front Palace) in the First Reign, which is sympathetic to the wang na, compares the wang na king when he entered the monkhood to Vessantara, and the wang luang king to Sanjaya, who in the Vessantara Jataka had sent his son into exile.[65]

For the Thai kingdom the Vessantara Jataka was the classic performative text about kingship, or more specifically, a Buddhist formulation of authority based on the ideal of perfectibility. This explains why the narrative received such attention from the Thai kings, from the great state ceremonial recitations performed annually at the Thai court to the education of the children of the Thai aristocracy and nobility with its ideals. The story's illustration of the exemplary ruler accounts for the extent to which it, along with the rest of the Jatakas, was the most widely disseminated of all Buddhist scripture in popular culture. The attempts by the court to regulate popular recitations of the Vessantara Jataka in the First Reign would appear in this light to reflect the court's concern that the integrity of the story - which expounded a set of ideals upon which political authority in the Thai kingdom was based - be properly respected by the kingdom's subjects. Indeed, a very immediate concern for political authority, to which the Vessantara Jataka was perceived to contribute, would appear to have been behind this particular regulation, for it came in the same year as the Chakri brothers' coup against Taksin, a time of considerable instability in the Thai kingdom when the need for political authority was never greater.[66]

Models of authority and their dissemination were also essential for the integration of newly conquered peoples into the greater Thai state. Integration into the Thai kingdom required more than just military control but also a process of drawing these peoples more closely into the cultural orbit of the Thai monarchy. For example, after the successful completion of the war between the Thai and the Vietnamese over hegemony in Cambodia in the mid-nineteenth century, King Rama III ordered a number of texts to be sent to the country, among which archival sources specifically mention the Vessantara Jataka and the last ten Jatakas, the 'thotsachat', which described the

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[65] Saichon, 'Phutthasatsana kap naew khwam khit thang kan muang', p. 139; cf. Chotmaihet khwam song cham khorng kromaluang narintharathewi, p. 273.

[66] Appropriately the law begins by stating the king's credentials as a bodhisatta king:

> 'The King [Rama I] has resolved himself to achieve the omniscience of enlightenment. Endowed with the wisdom of great compassion (prakorp duai mahakarunayan) he constantly keeps in mind his duty to aid all the world's living creatures...'; Kotmai tra sam duang, Vol. 4, p. 165.

bodhisatta's accumulation of the Ten Perfections.[67] The Thai court was concerned to reassert the cultural hegemony of the Thai in Cambodia after the devastation of a protracted war and the forced imposition of Vietnamese cultural norms.[68] Unless one appreciates the connection between culture and authority in the regional politics of nineteenth century mainland Southeast Asia the Thai concern about such cultural matters which is so evident in the sources of the time appears strange. The imposition of Vietnamese culture had included the teaching of Vietnamese language, the use of Vietnamese weights, measures, fashions and coiffures, a disdain for Buddhism, and most importantly the imposition of Vietnamese Confucian bureaucratic models.[69] This latter action was a direct attack on traditional Cambodian - and Thai - notions of authority since it devalued kingship and the social order that supported it in favour of Vietnamese bureaucratic authority. When Thai hegemony was returned to the area from 1847 the Cambodian king immediately set about restoring the ceremonial aura of (Thai sponsored) kingship in Cambodia with the performance of elaborate court ceremonies and the restoration of Buddhist monasteries.[70] The dispatch of Jataka texts to Cambodia by the Thai court, almost certainly for royal ceremonial performances as well as popular recitations, was part of the restoration of the ideological foundations of Thai Buddhist authority in Cambodia.[71]

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[67] Chotmaihet ratchakan thi 3 chor.sor.1211/2 (Records of the Third Reign, 1849-50); the other texts sent by the Thai king included various other Pali religious scriptures and a number of legal works. We know that the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka was performed in Cambodia at least by the mid-eighteenth century (most probably because of Thai political and cultural influence), see David P. Chandler, 'An Eighteenth Century Inscription from Angkor Wat', Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 59, Part 2, July 1971. pp. 157-9 (I am grateful to Puangthong Rungsawasdisab for bringing these references to my attention). See also Damrong's edition of a nineteenth century Khmer version of the Vessantara Jataka in Thet maha chat kham khamen: kan mahaphon (Recitation of the Khmer Version of the Vessantara Jataka: Mahaphon Chapter), Cremation Volume, Phra Sanit Somkhun (Ngoen), Bangkok, 1920, pp. kor. - khor. For other Khmer versions of the Vessantara Jataka see Catalogue du Fonds Khmer, par Au Chhieng, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1953.

[68] For the Thai concern regarding Vietnamese cultural influence in Cambodia under the Emperor Minh Mang see 'Wa duai hetkan muang khamen torn set songkhram thai kap yuan' (On the Cambodian Situation After the War Between the Thai and the Vietnamese), Prachum phongsawadan (Collected Histories), Vol. 31, Part 56, pp. 166-7.

[69] David P. Chandler, A History of Cambodia, Boulder, Westview Press, 1983, pp. 128-31.

[70] Chandler, op. cit., p. 135.

[71] A Khmer Maha chat manuscript published by Damrong in 1920, obtained from the Cambodian Sangkharat (Sangha Head) 'Thiang' who received his education in Bangkok in the Third Reign, is likely to date from about this period; Thet maha chat kham khamen, (kan mahaphon) (Khmer version of Thet maha chat: Mahaphon chapter), Cremation Volume for Phra Sanit Somkhun (Ngoen), Bangkok, Sophonphiphatthanakan, 1920, pp. 'kor-khor'.