The Aesthetics of the Recitation: thamnorng and lae

The recital of the Vessantara Jataka at the thet maha chat is performed not in a normal reading voice but according to special rhythms and melodies, known in Thai as thamnorng.[45] Each chapter of the Vessantara Jataka is recited in a different thamnorng to suit the 'mood' of the chapter, whether it be serious, as in than kan; pitiful, as in kuman kan and kan matsi; comic, as in kan chuchok; or triumphant, as in nakhorn kan. The thamnorng also varies according to the characters. Styles of thamnorng in the Thai kingdom differ from region to region, reflecting linguistic and artistic variation. The thamnorng is often cited as one of the reasons for the Vessantara Jataka's popularity, for it is through the skilled 'singing' of the text according to the thamnorng that the monk is able to excite the emotion of the audience, even to the point of moving people to tears. Some monks (known as nak thet maha chat) have become famous and widely sought after for the virtuosity and beauty of their recitation style.[46] Yet despite the importance of the thamnorng to the thet maha chat's popularity, even in this area of the verbal utterance of the Vessantara Jataka it is possible to see the underlying intention of the thet maha chat performance of assuring fidelity to the content of the text and hence respect for the authority of the story.

While the thamnorng was certainly an essential aesthetic aspect of the thet maha chat it is clear that traditionally the art of the recitation was subordinate to the purpose of effectively communicating the content of the text, which was held to have been originally related by the Buddha. There were practices and regulations to assure that this was the case. For example, the recitation of the khatha phan is not sung, as was the recitation of the vernacular translation, for the khatha phan were held to be the Buddha's actual utterances.[47] According to the canonical sciptures, Pali text was allowed to be sung but only if the words were rendered intelligibly and in a dignified manner.[48]

---

[45] The singing and chanting of religious texts is not unique to Thailand. Boureau notes that 'until recent times saints' lives were recited - half sung, half chanted in the marketplaces of Italy...' Alain Boureau, 'Franciscan Piety and Voracity: Uses and Strategems in the Hagiographic Pamphlet', in R. Chartier, ed., The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe, trans. L.G. Cochrane., Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989, p. 26.

[46] The charismatic monk of the first half of the nineteenth century, Phra Phuthachan (To), had a reputation as a skilled reciter of kan matsi; cf. "Chanthichai", Phra phuthachan (To), Vol.1, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1983, pp. 28-34.

[47] Ariyaniwat, op. cit., p. 34.

[48] In 1917 the head of the Sangha wrote '...even in the Tripitaka there is verse. Indeed, even some entire scriptures are in verse, like the Dhammapada which explains the heart of the religion. Other sutras like the Atthakavagga and Barayanavagga in the Suttanta also use verse. And soraphanya chanting which is a kind of singing (thamnorng khap) is allowed, except for singing in which the words are

Skilled reciters of the thet maha chat had to learn (which involved years of voice training and memorisation) the correct thamnorng for each kan, as any particular thamnorng was only appropriate to the content of one particlar kan.[49] Of course, the thamnorng could in fact enhance the reception of the message of the text. For example, the pathos of the episode when Matsi is frantically searching for her children in the forest is heightened by the mournful sound of the reciter's voice, often to the point of inducing tears from the audience. It was only when the thamnorng was at odds with the meaning of the text, or when it became an end in itself, that it became a problem in regard to monastic regulations regarding the recitation of the dhamma.

This issue of the relationship between the text and the aesthetic dimensions of the form in which it was communicated - including the thamnorng - was a problematic one, and one which has a history of regulation in the Thai kingdom. In the reign of Rama I in the late eighteenth century a law was promulgated prohibiting recitations of the Vessantara Jataka which were composed in inappropriate forms of verse (kap klorn) and sung in comic fashion.[50] At the turn of the twentieth century the head of the Sangha Prince Wachirayan made a similar pronouncement about all preaching (thetsana) and

---

'drawn out' (siang yut) so that the listener can not understand the meaning...' 'Phra prarop khorng somdet phra maha samana ruang mi thet maha chat pracham pi' (The Sangha Head's Announcement on the Annual Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka), Thalaengkan khana song (Sangha Announcements) Vol. 4, Bangkok, 1917, p. 328. See also the discussion on the monastic regulations regarding the singing of Pali scripture, and where the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka stands in regard to these regulations, in Maha chat: ekasan prakorp kan prachum wichakan lae kan thet maha chat 21-22 minakhom 2524 (The 'Great Life': Conference Papers and the Thet Maha Chat, 21-22 March 1981), Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1981, p. 149ff. In a report of a recitation of the Vessantara Jataka at the Thai court in 1874 published in the court magazine Darunowat particular praise was given to the clarity of the rendition; see 'Thet maha chat', Darunowat, Vol. 1, No.201, 1874, p. 202.

[49] 'Thamniam phra song thet maha chat' (The Monastic Custom of the Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka), Roeng Atthawibun, Phithi thamniam song (Monastic Rituals and Customs), Cremation Volume, Phra Sunthorathamachan (Bua Thammatharo), Bangkok, 1972, pp. 100 - 102.

[50] 'Kot phra song 1' (First Sangha Law), Kotmai tra sam duang (The Three Seals Law), Vol. 4, pp. 167-9: 'Some monks who preach (samdaeng) the Vessantara Jataka have not studied the Tripitaka. They only know the basic story and translate it into kap klorn [a form of verse often used for song]. Then they preach the story with comic and vulgar speech (thoi kham talok kanorng yap cha)...this is most damaging to the religion...these people will not meet Maitreya in the future...When the king ordered the head of the Sangha, the ratchakhana, learned monks and scholars to consult the Tripitaka, it was found that both the preacher and listener to dhamma which was preached in a comic way, turning the dhamma into adhamma, are guilty of a serious offence. Even preaching the dhamma in a singing voice (siang khap) is an offence. And to compose the dhamma into kap klorn verse with beautiful prosody like a song (pleng khap) is inappropriate. Therefore it is a royal command that from now on when monks preach and the people listen to the Vessantara Jataka they must preach and listen to the story according to the full Pali text and commentary (tam wara pali lae atthakatha) in order that they receive the full merit and meet Maitreya in the future...Giving and listening to sermons that are in kap klorn verse and are spoken in a comic and humorous manner are forbidden...'

chanting (suat).[51] In 1917, however, Wachirayan issued a more compromising announcement in regard to the thet maha chat, in which he recognised that a song-like thamnorng encouraged certain kinds of people to listen and to make merit, and that as long as the recitation was intelligible and the reciting monk maintained his monastic dignity, such preaching was acceptable.[52]

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

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the aesthetic elements of the Vessantara Jataka recitation appear to have progressively flourished at the expense of the verbal presentation of the text. This development can be seen in the rise of the 'lae' form of recitation. Lae is a style of melodic and rhythmic utterance in the thet maha chat which differs from the traditional thamnorng in which the Vessantara Jataka was recited. Lae raises the art of recitation to new heights. Some types of lae sung at thet maha chat performances, known as 'lae nork', are actually separate compositions, which bear little or no relation to the Vessantara Jataka text. They are composed in klorn rather than the sacred rai metre. Either composed beforehand or improvised on the spur of the moment by talented reciters, lae are recited during breaks in recital of the Vessantara Jataka proper.[53] Lae occasionally violated monastic regulations for preaching the dhamma referred to above, for the nature of lae singing clearly raises the art of the communication above the object of the communication - the dhamma, and in the case of lae nork even

---

[51] Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan wararot: kan khana song (Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan's Collected Writings: Sangha Affairs), Bangkok, Mahamakut, 1971, p. 7.

[52] 'Phra prarop khorng somdet phra maha samana ruang mi thet maha chat pracham pi', pp. 327-8.

[53] Collections of such lae composed by monks or laymen for memorisation and later recitation are sold in books, for example, Noi Phiwphan & Phim Norngsutham, Pramuan lae thet siang phaen mai ruang phra wetsandorn phak isan (Collection of 'Lae' in the New Style on the Isan Vessantara), Khorn Kaen, Khlang Nanatham, 1972; Wira Prian, Chumnum lae thet mahaphon (Collecition of 'Lae' Recitations of the Great Forest Chapter), Bangkok, Amnuai San, 1982; Thanangkaro Phikkhu, Pramuan lae thet siang samai mai (Collection of 'Lae' Recited in the New Style), Khorn Kaen, Khlang Nanatham, 1983; Khian Amphaphan (ed.), Lae thet tang tang (Various 'Lae' Recitations), Bangkok, Liang Chiang, 1987 (1954).

the dhamma is absent altogether. In 1937 the Supreme Monastic Council (maha thera samakhom) banned certain kinds of lae from being recited at thet maha chat performances:

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

The efficacy of such regulations is questionable as lae singing in the thet maha chat has become extremely popular during the twentieth century. Indeed lae singing has actually broken away from the thet maha chat and become an autonomous and indeed commercial artform.[55] However, most scholars and monks agree that the growth in the popularity of lae is a relatively recent phenomenon. Sathit notes that in recitations of the Vessantara Jataka presented to king Rama III in the mid-nineteenth century,

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

In and around Bangkok lae singing appears to have first become popular during the nineteenth century,[57] but in the rural regions it would seem that lae is no more than two

---

[54] 'Prakat ham mai hai phiksu samanen thet maha chat talok khanorng sia samanasarup' (Decree Forbidding Monks and Novices from Giving Comical Recitations of the Great Life which are Damaging to Monastic Dignity), in Thalaengkan khana song (Sangha Announcements), Vol. 24, Part 12, March 1937, pp. 873-4.

[55] Phorn Phirom, a former nak thet (skilled reciter) of the Vessantara Jataka, is one of the best known lae singers. Thai country music (pleng luk thung) owes much to the lae style of singing, and many of country music's greatest singers were trained by teachers skilled in lae, who were themselves former nak thet maha chat.

[56] Sathit Semanin, Wisasa, Bangkok, Phrae Phithaya, 1970, p. 111: "...thet tae champho nua nai chadok thi prat lae kawi than rotchana wai, lae nork thi sap pradi si pradon pen mai mi loei, phua dai fang tae nua thae, doi phitsadan thuk phayanchana chon chop thuk kan".

[57] Cf. Thiphawan Bunwira, "Lae khruang len maha chat" (The Lae Style of Singing the Maha Chat) Sinlapakorn, 22, 2, July 1978, pp. 67-70; and Rit Ruangrit, Prachum lae khruang len maha chat (Collection of 'Lae' and Tricks of the Great Life Recitation) Books 1, 2, Bangkok, Wathanaphanit, 1958.

or three generations old.[58] In his study of Buddhism in Northern Thailand Sommai Premchit notes that before the cultural influence of the central Thai in the northern part of the country over the last century, monks at the recital of the Vessantara Jataka would never preach 'ex tempore' (baep pathiphan, one of the skills of a lae singer) but would always recite directly from the text inscribed on the palm leaf manuscript.[59]

The development of lae in the thet maha chat performance is indicative of the declining regard for the textual authenticity of the Vessantara Jataka which has taken place over the last hundred years. This decline can be seen in other changes to the thet maha chat. Increasingly in modern performances of the thet maha chat, the Vessantara Jataka text which is recited is written not in rai form but in klorn. This infers that the accurate rendition of the original text - by implication the Buddha's words - is subordinated to a poetic form whose aim is purely aesthetic.[60] Sometimes, due to time constraints, the Vessantara Jataka text is not even recited in its entirety. On such occasions the reciter often retells large sections of the story in his own words, reciting from the text only certain selected sections. This is a major change from past performances of the thet maha chat where recitation according to the text, and by implication, in conformity with the Buddha's original rendition of the story, was of utmost importance.[61]

---

[58] Pricha Phinthorng informed me that lae in the northeast are only about fifty or sixty years old (Interview, Siritham Publishers, Ubol Ratchathani, 6 October 1992); Phor Yai Khen Lawong informed me that 'there are more lae now than there used to be' (Interview, Ban Tha Sorng Khorn, Mahasarakham, 20 September 1992); Luang Phor Phra Khru Sirithamwichit (Wirat Saensophawan), a nak thet from Maha Sarakham province informed me that lae began only fifty to sixty years ago (Interview, Wat Norngborn, Kosumphisai, Mahasarakham, 2 October 1992); Miller's study of musical forms in northeast Thailand estimates that lae are as recent as fifty years old (T.E. Miller 'Khaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand', PhD Thesis, Indiana University, 1976, p. 86).

[59] Sommai Premchit, 'Khamphi bai lan lae prapheni tang tham luang nai phak nua' (Palm Leaf Manuscripts and the 'Tang Tham Luang' Festival in the Northern Region), Phutthasatsana nai lanna thai (Buddhism in Lanna Thai), Chiang Mai, 1980, p. 126.

[60] Examples of published Vessantara Jataka texts written in klorn form include Sawat Thepthani, Nangsu wetsandorn chadok phak isan (The Northeastern Book of the Vessantara Jataka), Liang Chiang, Bangkok, 1953; Banyen Limsawat, Maha chat kham klorn (The Maha Chat in Klorn Form), Bangkok, 1970; Suthisangkophat Parian, Nangsu wetsandorn chadok kham klorn (The Vessantara Jataka Book in Klorn Verse), Cremation Volume, Saksi Suthisong, Yasothorn, 1987; Maha wetsandorn chadok kham klorn isan phrorm duai yort phra kan phra traipitok lae khatha chinabanchorn lae withi taeng klorn lam lae klorn lam tua yang (The Great Vessantara Jataka in Northeastern Klorn Verse, with the Great Verses of the Tripitaka, with Chinabanchorn Verses, with the Method for Composing 'Lam' Verse and Examples of 'Lam' Verse), by Man Chongrian, Kalasin, 1988.

[61] Luang Phor Phra Khru Sirithamwichit (Wirat Saensophawan), Interview, Wat Norngborn, Kosumphisai, Mahasarakham, 2 October 1992; Sommai Premchit, 'Khamphi bai lan lae prapheni tang tham luang nai phak nua', p. 126.

Ritual

The recitation of the Vessantara Jataka takes place amidst a complex set of ritual requirements whose proper observance is essential to the overall thet maha chat performance.[62] In the ritual, as in other aspects of the thet maha chat, there is a conscious attempt to defer to the Vessantara Jataka text and to the Buddha's original words, and to reproduce in symbols what is said in the text.

One aspect of the ritual is related to the decoration of the temple. The preaching hall of the temple in which the recitation is to take place is decorated to appear like a forest. Trees, (particularly fruit trees, including sugar cane, banana, and coconut), as well various plants, flowers, ponds, pictures of animals, and even pictures of scenes from each of the thirteen chapters of the Vessantara Jataka, are set up both inside and around the temple.[63] There is an obvious attempt to make the surroundings in which the audience hears the Vessantara Jataka resemble the forests of Mount Wongkot where much of the story takes place.[64] What the text attempts to achieve through aural means, the decoration of the temple does visually. In some regions the visual expression of the story is carried out to the extent of a re-enactment in dramatic form of the events of each chapter, with actors playing out the parts of Vessantara and Matsi, Kanha and Chali, and the rest of the characters of the story.[65] The decorations which surround the 'pulpit' (Thai: thammat) in which the monk delivers the recitation, moreover, probably signify the Banyan Grove in Kapilavatthu where the Buddha actually told the story to his relatives and followers.[66] In reciting from the Vessantara Jataka text words once uttered

---

[62] Ariyanuwat, op. cit., p. 59; Kasem, op. cit., p. 27.

[63] Sathiarakoset (Phya Anuman Rajadhon), Prapheni thai nuang nai thetsakan trut sat (Thai Customs Related to the Sat Festival), Bangkok, Social Science Association of Thailand, 1963, pp. 290-3; Ariyanuwat, op. cit., pp. 17-20; Kasem, op. cit., pp. 27-8; Mani, op. cit., pp. 42-3. In the northeast a cloth, often over ten metres long, is painted with scenes from the thirteen chapters of the Vessantara Jataka, as well as with other scenes such as Malai's journey to the hells and heavens and meeting with Maitreya, the bodhisatta's defeat of Mara, etc., drawn from texts recited at the bun phra wet. The cloth, known as pha phra wet, is paraded before the recital of the Vessantara Jataka and then set up inside the preaching hall; see Somchai Nilathi, 'Pha phra wet: phap sanyalak nai ngan bun maha chat' (The Vessantara Cloth: Symbol in the Great Life Merit-Making Festival), Sinlapa wathanatham (Arts and Culture), 15, 5, March 1994, pp. 88-97.

[64] Kasem, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

[65] Damrong Nuthorng, 'Like maha chat song khruang: ekalak like phak tai' (The Great Life in Folk Dramas: the Character of Southern Folk Drama), Sinlapa wathanatham (Arts and Culture), 13, 3, January 1992, pp. 117-119.

[66] 'Prapheni mi thet maha chat', p. 7; 'Pai fang khao sewana kan ruang thet maha chat' (Listening to a Discussion on the Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka), Lok nangsu (Book World), 4, 8, May 1981.

by the Buddha, the monk already imitates the Buddha; the decoration adds to the general simulating effect.

A further aspect related to the thet maha chat ritual are the offerings (khruang kiriya bucha) presented by the audience at the ceremony. The thet maha chat was traditionally the greatest merit-making occasion of the religious calender. The offerings which confer merit conform to a special formula which is based on the number of canonical verses that make up the Vessantara Jataka - one thousand. Therefore one finds arranged inside the temple offerings such as incense, candles, several varieties of lotus, water hyacinth and other flowers, miang (a kind of sweet-meat wrapped in leaf), betel, tobacco, popped rice ('khao tork'), and paper flags (thong), all in multiples of one thousand.[67] In the bun phra wet among the Lao people one thousand balls of sticky rice are actually paraded around the temple preaching hall by the faithful before the recitation begins.[68] There are six kinds of offering which are essential to thet maha chat ceremonies everywhere - one thousand incense lotuses, flowers, candles, flags (thong) and multi-tiered umbrellas (chatra)[69] - because these are the ritual offerings the future Buddha Maitreya entrusted Phra Malai to tell the faithful to make in honour of the Vessantara Jataka.[70] The paramount importance of the canonical verses is also reflected in another kind of offering: during the recital of each kan, candles and incense are lit in multiples of the number of khatha in that particular kan. For example, when the monk recites than kan, two hundred and nine candles and incense sticks are lit, signifying the two hundred and nine canonical verses found in that chapter of the story.[71] Given that the khatha are the closest symbols of the Buddhist original utterances, these ritual offerings in honour of the khatha underline the authority of these utterances.

Of the ceremony in the Lao speaking regions of Thailand where the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka conforms closest to traditional patterns, Ariyanuwat notes that

> old people traditionally believe that when you hold the bun maha chat, if one sets up the offerings (khruang kiriya bucha) incorrectly or

---

[67] Phra Ariyanuwat, op. cit., pp. 17-18; Kasem, op. cit., pp. 27-8; Sanguan, op. cit., pp. 138-9; 'Prapheni mi thet maha chat', p. 7.

[68] 'Hae khao phan korn', Phra Ariyanuwat, op. cit., p. 26; Pricha, op. cit., pp. 71-2.

[69] Thong and chatra are royal symbols, both for ancient Indic and Southeast Asian monarchies.

[70] As related in the Phra Malai story. See 'Phra malai kham luang', Chao fa thammathibet: phra prawat lae phra niphon bot roi krorng' p. 272; Malai mun malai saen', Maha chat samnuan isan, p. 18.

[71] Phra Ariyanuwat, op. cit., pp. 36-7; Kasem, op. cit., p. 34; 'Prapheni mi thet maha chat', p. 7; Anuman, op. cit., p. 296, pp. 298-9.

> incompletely, catastrophes will take place, such as drought or lightning strikes out of the blue which bring suffering to the villagers. So the ritual (phithi phithan) in setting up the offerings for the Vessantara Jataka (kan taeng khruang maha chat) is strictly adhered to...[72]

Once again it is clear that the ritual associated with the Vessantara Jataka recitation, as with so many other aspects of the thet maha chat performance, is deliberately designed to enhance the authority of the story by reinforcing the fact of the story's origin in the words of the Buddha.

Conclusion

In the same way as the modern discipline of history teaches that attention to one's sources is the basis of accurate and therefore authoritative historical writing, aspects of the Vessantara Jataka and the thet maha chat, including the structure of the text, the script and manuscript, the issue of translation, the metre, the art of the recitation and the ritual, all clearly demonstrate a concern for a primary source - the Buddha's words. It is the Buddha's words which guarantee the story's authoritative status. The Buddha's words guaranteed the story's status as religious truth. For the audience of the thet maha chat the story they were listening to was more than just a 'morality' tale on the virtue of giving, although it was this too. The events recounted in the story were understood to have actually occurred, within the schema of Buddhist history. For this reason Tambiah's anecdote about a villager in northeastern Thailand who told him that a nearby forest in Khorn Kaen province had been the forest where Vessantara had once lived, is hardly surprising.[73] The fact that the events of the story were held to have in fact taken place gave those events a significance they would not otherwise have had. The thet maha chat can be understood as a premodern form of historical discourse, equipped with the forms and rules to assert the authority of that discourse.

This chapter has argued that the thet maha chat performance guaranteed the authenticity of the Vessantara Jataka and thereby raised it to the status of religious truth. Thus far we have been looking at the form of the story; we now need to turn our attention to the content. We need to ask *why* the story's integrity was so important. What was the maha chat saying that made it so important to guarantee that that message

---

[72] Phra Ariyanuwat, op. cit., p. 59.

[73] Tambiah, S.J., The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 286.

was conveyed properly? Why, from the time of the formation of the first political units, did the Vessantara Jataka and its message prove so attractive to Thai rulers? The remainder of this thesis will look at the history of the thet maha chat in premodern Tai Buddhist societies.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISSEMINATION OF THE VESSANTARA JATAKA AND EARLY THAI STATE FORMATION

The Vessantara Jataka counts as one of the oldest cultural artifacts of Indic civilisation in the region now known as Thailand. The arrival of the Vessantara Jataka along with other aspects of Indic culture suggest that the story played some role in the still inadequately understood process by which local chiefdoms in mainland Southeast Asia were transformed into new kinds of communities which increasingly referred to themselves in terms derived from Brahmanical and Buddhist scripture. Although the Vessantara Jataka is well known in all countries which follow Theravada Buddhism, including Burma Cambodia and Sri Lanka, as well as in many areas where Mahayana schools of Buddhism hold sway, the story appears to have been especially popular in those regions which were dominated or influenced by the Tai Buddhist peoples - of whom the modern day central, southern and northern Thai, as well as the Lao and Shan, are the descendants. The Vessantara Jataka, therefore, is not only a Buddhist story but one which appears to have an close association with Tai Buddhist traditions in particular.

The Vessantara Jataka differed from the bulk of Buddhist scripture in one important aspect. Unlike much Buddhist writing, which was the preserve of a literate monastic class and was read in the Pali original, the Vessantara Jataka in Tai Buddhist culture was first and foremost a performative text, and appeared at an early time in translation. The form in which the story was best known was its oral recitation in the vernacular, known in Thai as the 'Recitation of the Great Life' (thet maha chat). This recitation of a 'foreign' text, in translation, to what must have been a largely illiterate audience suggests that the Recitation on the Great Life performed some mediating function between centres of power and the peoples over whom they had authority. Moreover at those periods when states were expanding to incorporate new territories and peoples into their sphere of influence the Vessantara Jataka appears to have enjoyed particularly close patronage by the rulers of such states. The story seems to have been part of a more general strategy by rulers to use Buddhism to transcend local attachments - particularly animist beliefs popular throughout Southeast Asia - which hindered the formation of larger political units. It should not, however, be thought that the Vessantara Jataka was merely a tool in the hands of ruling elites with which to 'indoctrinate' subject peoples. Rather the evidence suggests that the story and its dissemination was a means of encouraging people to offer their allegiance to a particular kind of ruler and social order. The Maha chat helped to shape a certain culture of authority among the Thai.

The Dvaravati and Sukhothai States

The earliest traces of the influence of the Vessantara Jataka in the culture of mainland Southeast Asia date from the period of so-called Dvaravati civilisation, lasting from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. Dvaravati is the name given to a number of small chiefdoms dominated by Mon speaking peoples which stretched from the lower Chao Phraya river basin, north to the region around modern day Lamphun, and northeast into the Khorat plateau. What seems to have bound the Dvaravati states together was a common Buddhist culture evident in religious sculpture and paleographic evidence, making Dvaravati one of the early 'Indianised' civilisations of mainland Southeast Asia. Among the artifacts of Dvaravati culture which have survived, archaeologists have identified scenes from the Vessantara and numerous other Jataka stories depicted on sema or boundary stones, found both in the Chao Phraya basin and in the Mun river basin on the Khorat plateau.[1] These boundary stones demarcated sites of Buddhist worship, which were possibly also places of ordination of Buddhist monks. It was into this region of Buddhist culture that Tai speaking peoples migrated in increasing numbers from the sixth and seventh centuries, and which several centuries later they came to dominate politically.

It was not until the decline of the hegemony of the Khmer and Pagan empires in mainland Southeast Asia that the first Tai states began to form. The change was so dramatic that Wyatt has called the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth centuries 'a Tai century'.[2] With the formation of these new Tai states came also a resurgence of Buddhism, this time based on the Sinhalese Theravada tradition with which some Tai groups had come into contact, first through exchanges with the Mon peoples of the Pagan empire and later through direct interaction with the Sinhalese. Theravada Buddhism made extraordinary gains among the Tai and Khmer peoples during this period. To explain this phenomenon scholars have argued that Theravada Buddhism was, compared to Khmer Brahmanism or the Mahayana Buddhism of Jayavaraman VII, more accessible to the broad mass of people.[3] Part of the reason for this popular

---

[1] Piriya Krairiksh, 'Semas with Scenes from the Mahanipata-Jatakas in the National Museum at Khon Kaen', Sinlapa lae boranakhadi nai prathet thai (Art and Archaeology in Thailand), Krom Sinlapakorn, Published on the Occasion of the Hundredth Anniversary of the National Museum, Bangkok, 11 September 1974, pp. 35-65; Piriya Krairiksh, Buddhist Folktales Depicted at Chula Pathon Cedi, with Thai translation by Suphatharadit Ditsakun, Bangkok, 1974; Nor Na Paknam, Sinlapa bon bai sema (Art on Sema-Boundary Stones), Bangkok, 1981, p. 131.

[2] David K. Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 38.

[3] G. Coedès, The Indianised States of Southeast Asia, edited by Walter Vella, translated by Susan Brown Cowing, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1975, p. 33; H.G. Quaritch Wales Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function, with Supplementary Notes, Surrey,

accessibility was the institution of the Sangha or monkhood, through which the religion could be disseminated to a much wider popular base.[4] Theravada Buddhism was also comparatively more tolerant of the existing religious systems, including both the more elite-centred Brahmanism as well as the various local animist beliefs. Its lack of an exclusive deism made the adoption of the religion for animist believers less a formal break from their own religious traditions than the addition of another layer of belief. On the evidence of the inscriptions of the period most Thai accepted animist, Buddhist, and even Hindu forms of religious belief and practice.[5] Importantly, Theravada Buddhism, in the form in which it was adopted and practised by the Thais, was remarkably successful in its ability to integrate different ethnic groups into larger socio-cultural communities. Theravada Buddhism's wide appeal was enhanced due to the absence of prohibitions with regard to food consumption, as well as its lack of a definitive conversion ritual. The kingdom of Sukhothai drew Mons, Khmers, Burmese, Sinhalese, Malays, as well as the dominant Thai into its orbit. The later kingdom of Ayuthaya was even more ethnically diverse. From their inception Theravada Buddhist Thai kingdoms were multi-ethnic polities, and this is a characteristic of Thai socio-political organisation that has persisted until the present day.

While the universalist claims of Theravada Buddhism were no doubt a force for cultural unity, paradoxically its wide appeal, owing to the fact that its social demands were so relaxed, also accounted for its very weakness as a centralizing force. This weakness meant that Buddhism could not be recognised by Thai rulers as the exclusive religion of their domains, but was incorporated into animist, Hindu, and other belief systems. For Thai rulers, stability and social cohesion were perennial problems which required an ecumenic attitude to ideas and their dissemination. Moreover, the forms of Buddhism which rulers did encourage were precisely those which appear aimed at strengthening social bonds. It is in this context that the ruler's interest in the Vessantara Jataka should be seen.

One of the major centres for the dissemination of this Sinhalese Theravada Buddhist culture in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the kingdom of Sukhothai, one of the first significant Tai states. Originally an outpost of the Khmer

---

Curzon Press, 1992 (First publ. 1931), pp. 25, 60. Charles F. Keyes, The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia, New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1977, p. 82; David P. Chandler, A History of Cambodia, Boulder, Westview Press, 1983, pp. 57, 68.

[4] Chandler, A History of Cambodia, pp. 57, 68-9, 80; and Coedès, The Indianised States, p.253.

[5] This eclecticism in Tai religious belief is well expressed in the Ramkhamhaeng inscription; see Prasert Na Nagara and A.B. Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, The Historical Society Under the Patronage of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Bangkok, 1992, (English text) pp. 265-82.

empire, during the thirteenth century Sukhothai broke away from its suzerain and became the centre of a new, culturally distinctive polity. At its greatest extent the hegemony of Sukhothai stretched from Luang Phrabang in the north, to Nakhon Sri Thammarat in the South, Vientiane in the east and Pegu in the west. In the last years of the thirteenth century the kingdom gave a clear indication of its autonomy by sending a mission to the court of the Mongol emperor, whose armies had profoundly disrupted the geopolitical situation in mainland Southeast Asia.

It is significant that at this moment of vigorous religious propagation the Vessantara Jataka reappears in the historical record. From Sukhothai come a number of stone inscriptions (silacharuk) which refer explicitly to the Vessantara Jataka. These inscriptions were public statements made by rulers, and set up in public places.[6] For messages which required wide circulation, copies of the inscription would be made and set up in public areas, both within the royal city itself as well as in the outlying areas of the kingdom.[7] Stone had the advantage of possessing a permanence and a reliability unequalled by other media forms. A number of the inscriptions mentioning the Vessantara Jataka are, in addition, among the oldest examples of Tai writing in existence, which suggests that their intended readership - or audience - was the wider community of Tai language speakers, rather than the élite circle of Pali scholars.

The earliest of these inscriptions is the 'Nakhon Chum' inscription dated 1356, during the reign of King Lithai.[8] The inscription refers to the prophecy of the gradual disappearance of the Buddhist religion. The prophecy in fact was of some antiquity, usually being attributed to the fifth century Sinhalese commentator Buddhaghosa.[9] It predicted five major disappearances to take place within five thousand years of the Buddha's death: that of the Tripitaka or sacred Buddhist scriptures, proper monastic conduct, the achievement of enlightenment and nirvana, the institution of the monkhood, and finally the Buddha's relics.[10] The final extinction of the Buddhist religion would be

---

[6] Nidhi Aeusrivongse and Akhom Phathiya, Lakthan prawatisat nai prathet thai (Historical Sources in Thailand), Bangkok, Bannakit Trading, 1982. pp. 40-5.

[7] For an example see the 'Nakhon Chum' inscription in Prasert Na Nagara and A.B. Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, The Historical Society Under the Patronage of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Bangkok, 1992, p. 465.

[8] Prachum silacharuk (Collected Stone Inscriptions), Vol. I, Inscriptions from the Kingdom of Sukhothai discovered before 1924, Prime Minister's Office, Bangkok, 1978, 'Inscription 3', pp. 59-73.

[9] Craig J.Reynolds, 'Religious Historical Writing and the Legitimation of the First Bangkok Reign', in Anthony Reid and David Marr, eds., Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia, Singapore, Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1979, p. 100.

[10] Prachum silacharuk (Collected Stone Inscriptions), Vol. I, pp. 63-4.

followed by a dark age in which the people, lacking a moral teaching to guide their actions, would commit sins and be condemned to rebirth in hell. Among the sacred Buddhist scriptures prophesied to disappear which were explicitly mentioned in Lithai's inscription was the phra maha chat (the 'Great Incarnation', ie. the Vessantara Jataka). The orality of this text is underlined by the words used in the inscription: 'As for the preaching of the Dhamma such as the Maha chat, no-one will be able to be found to recite it'.[11] This demonstrates that from the earliest times the Vessantara Jataka was a performative text. Unlike other Buddhist scriptures which were accessible only to a literate monastic elite, the custom had been established whereby the Maha chat was recited to an audience.

The pancha antarathan or 'Five Disappearances', as the prophecy became known, later gained widespread recognition among the Thai. The prophecy indicates an attitude to Buddhist knowledge which persisted until recent times. The Buddhist religion was perceived to be in a precarious and deteriorating state. Common experiences of endemic war, political instability and particularly the ravages of a tropical climate on manuscripts which preserved such knowledge would have given much credence to the prophecy. Rulers could be considered to have a moral obligation to preserve and propagate knowledge to their subjects. Rather than being merely a record of the prophecy the inscription encouraged the faithful to follow certain Buddhist practices while they still had the opportunity. The specific mention of the Vessantara and other Jatakas highlights the particular value attributed to them by Sukhothai rulers vis-à-vis Buddhist knowledge as a whole. The connection between the Vessantara Jataka and the apocalyptic thinking of the prophecy suggests the sense of urgency felt by the rulers in their desire for their subjects to attain this knowledge. The decay of the religion was considered to be already underway, and a precise date was even calculated for the disappearance of the scriptures: ninety-nine years after a certain relic was enshrined at Nakhon Chum in 1357, making it the year 1456 AD.[12]

Scripture and Orality in Sukhothai

These scriptural references to the Maha chat raise the whole issue of the place of scripture and its relationship to orality in the Sukhothai kingdom. The value of writing as a medium of communication amongst the Thai at this time tends to be overlooked by

---

[11] 'Thammathetsana an pen ton wa phra maha chat ha khon suat lae mai dai loei', ibid., p. 63. The other specifically mentioned scriptures to disappear were the Patthana and Yammaka, the last two books of the Abhidhamma, the third division of the Tripitaka. Besides the Vessantara Jataka the remaining Jatakas were similarly prophesied to fade from people's knowledge.

[12] Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p. 453.

modern scholars. The creation of a Thai script to express in writing the Thai language was a revolutionary development. It was recognised as such by the Thai themselves. The Ramkhamhaeng inscription states: 'Formerly these Dai letters did not exist. In 1205 [1283 AD]...King Rama Gamhen set his mind and heart on devising these Dai letters'.[13] Scripture was highly valued. Several inscriptions refer to King Lithai's great renown as a scholar: 'Whatever he has to explain, he always does so according to texts'.[14] In the Nakhon Chum inscription mentioned above, the order of 'disappearances' differs from the original order of Buddhaghosa's commentary. Lithai's inscription has the scriptures as the second disappearance (currently underway), whereas in Buddhaghosa's version the observation of the monastic regulations is second to disappear.[15] This suggests the importance Lithai gave to the scriptures over other elements of the religion.

Scripture in the Sukhothai kingdom, such as the Buddhist Tripitaka, the Vedas, the Indic sastra and other Indic literatures, was valued by rulers not only because of its content, but also because of its form, writing. As a medium of communication, a written text had an advantage over the spoken word in that it had a greater potential for the preservation and dissemination of a particular message. Whereas the spoken word was lost as soon as it was uttered, text on paper might last for decades, and on stone, for centuries. The spoken word was effective in reaching audiences only within earshot, whereas texts could be carried across continents. In a largely illiterate society, however, a further factor, oral performance, was required to enable any scripture to be broadcast even more widely. The communication of knowledge preserved in writing was of paramount importance. Knowledge, and indeed scripture itself, was of minimal value to rulers as long as it lacked the means of communication.

Certain kinds of knowledge had a greater potential for oral dissemination than others at the time. According to Brahmanical law it was forbidden under pain of death for the sacred knowledge of the Vedas to be heard by commoners. As a result these scriptures remained the exclusive preserve of the Brahmans and the ruler's court. By contrast the propagation of knowledge contained in the Buddhist scriptures was strongly encouraged in Sukhothai from the start. The first known Sukhothai inscription, Inscription 1 dating from 1292, makes this clear when it states that monks preached (suat) to crowds of lay people.[16] What particular Buddhist scriptures were preached?

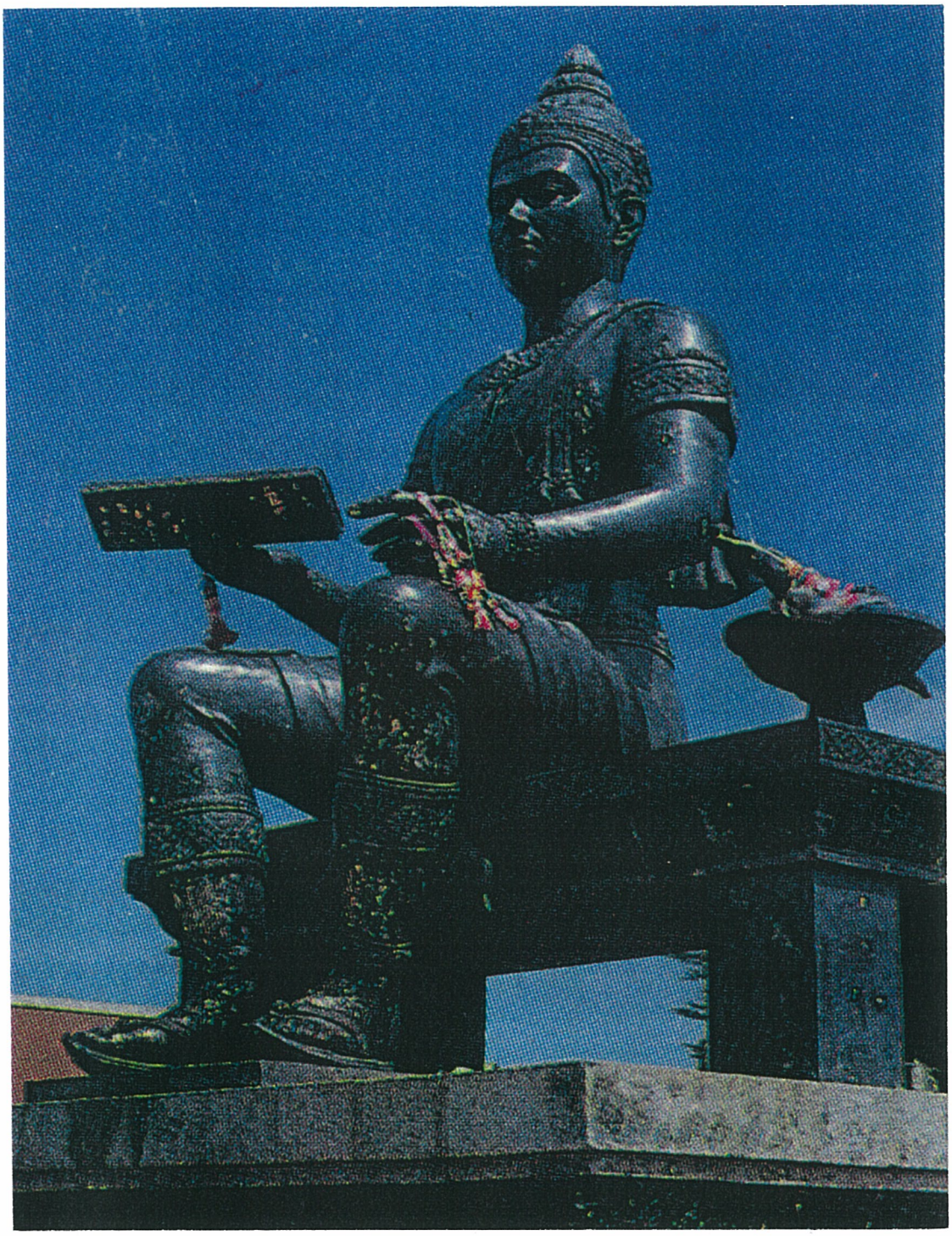
---

[13] Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p. 279.

[14] Ibid., pp. 491-2.

[15] Ibid., pp. 452-3, fn.40.

[16] Ibid., p. 276.



Statue of King Ramkhamhaeng holding a manuscript at Sukhothai Historical Park; from Suchit Wongthet, ed., Charuk phor khun ramkhamhaeng: khrai taeng kan nae? (The Ramkhamhaeng Inscription: Who Really Wrote It?), Bangkok, Sinlapawathanatham, 1988.

The corpus of Theravada Buddhist scripture, the Tripitaka, is often mentioned in the inscriptions. Yet this was a massive volume of scripture, only a minute fraction of which could ever be recited at one time. That is why the references in the inscriptions to the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka are so significant, for it is the only Buddhist scripture specifically mentioned to have been recited.

The Vessantara and other Jatakas, moreover, possessed a structure that made them exceptionally well suited to oral dissemination. While much of the Tripitaka consisted of discursive exposition of doctrine, dialogical exchanges, or metaphysical argument, the Vessantara Jataka was a narrative. Narrative possessed a structure which was, in Ong's words, 'paramount among all verbal art forms'.[17] No other verbal form was more efficient for the verbal communication of doctrine. In cultures that were basically oral - which was the case outside the royal court and Buddhist temples - the narrative was the favoured device because it enabled a substantial amount of knowledge to be contained and transmitted to the listener within a single form.[18] The narrative of the Vessantara Jataka would have been particularly effective as it also incorporated elements of humour, pathos, and excitement, which made it especially attractive to the listener.

Just as the common use of a spoken language created a linguistic community, distinct from peoples who spoke a different tongue, so the sudden appearance of written communications among the Thai in the Sukhothai period also had the effect of creating a new community of users, including writers, readers, and more significantly, audiences of the written Thai language performed orally. These new communities (of which the Sukhothai Thai script was the basis of only one of several, including Mon, Khmer, and various scripts used by peoples in the northern and northeastern regions) were not coterminous with boundaries founded upon military conquest, feudal alliance, or tributary relations. Rather they extended as far as the written communication reached, and thus were potentially far more influential. While most scholars of Sukhothai note the great piety of its rulers in regard to their knowledge of the scriptures and their support of the Sangha, the use of scripture as a means of extending their cultural presence - in the same sense as military campaigning extended military power - is less commonly recognised. Within this cultural presence was contained not merely the comforting and uplifting moral and spiritual guidance of what is often considered to be a religion more concerned with transcendental matters, but more significantly an idealised conception of authority and social hierarchy.

---

[17] Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word, New York, Methuen, 1987, p. 140.

[18] Ibid., pp. 140-1.

The growth of literacy in a community also indicates an increase in hierarchical relations, or at least, the development of a different kind of hierarchy to that in a society where oral communications are dominant. In oral societies hierarchy is limited by the fact that everyone has access to the faculty of speech, though some are naturally more gifted in voice or speech than others, or are selected to receive some special training (as singers, poets, rhetoricians), or are given special sanction to speak denied to others. Orality was still valued in Southeast Asian societies even when literacy had made inroads, and it was not uncommon for rulers to be praised for the 'sweetness' of their eloquence[19], or for the king's voice to be described as 'a lion's roar'[20]. Rather than being mere empty rhetorical flourishes in royal eulogy these qualities signified a ruler's supremacy in an important mode of communication. However in societies where literacy begins to dominate communications a new hierarchy appears based upon the ability to read and write - and indeed to hear - written communications. A telling indication of the growing dominance of writing among the Thai is the praise given in Sukhothai inscriptions to the scholarly abilities of rulers, as well as to the Sangha, a class intimately related to scripture. A new social order was forming based on the use of and access to this new form of communication.

Self-Perfection and Power in Tai Culture

With the kingdom of Sukhothai we catch the first glimpses of the formulation of a Thai Buddhist conception of authority. Much has been made in the scholarship on Sukhothai of the influence of the Buddhist concepts of the dhammaraja and the cakravartin[21], Brahmanical statecraft[22], 'benevolent paternalism'[23], animism and even Mongol

---

[19] See for example, A.C. Milner, Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule, Tucson, Association for Asian Studies, 1982, p. 98.

[20] In Thai chronicles an order or proclamation of the king is often referred to as phra surasihanat, the 'noble lion's roar'.

[21] S.J.Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 84ff.

[22] Quaritch Wales, Siamese State Ceremonies, p. 60; A.B. Griswold, Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art, Fine Arts Department, Bangkok, 1967, p. 12: Keyes, The Golden Peninsula, p. 76.

[23] This image of kingship was popularised in Thailand by Prince Damrong in an essay of 1926 titled 'Ancient Forms of Government in Siam', see David A. Wilson, Politics in Thailand, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1962, pp. 86-8; see also Fred W. Riggs, Thailand: The Modernisation of a Bureaucratic Polity, Honolulu, East-West Center Press, 1966, pp. 79-80; and Akin Rabibhadana, The Organisation of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period 1782-1873, Data Paper No.74, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1969, p. 40.

elements[24] in Thai social integration. In all this literature the Vessantara and other Jatakas have been ignored or else treated as moral parables whose function was merely to teach morals to the common people. In one of the most influential works on Sukhothai, Griswold writes that 'representations of the Jatakas, more than any other category of Buddhist art, are intended for the edification of the general public'.[25] Following Griswold, Gosling writes more recently that 'the Jatakas are ancient Indian folktales, which, because of their moralistic teachings and popular appeal have been incorporated into the Buddhist canon...Sukhodayans arranged the Jataka scenes...where they would entertain and edify one and all'.[26]

The tendency of modern scholarship to see the Jatakas as moral or religious fables ignores several points. Firstly the Vessantara Jataka and most of the popular Jatakas are stories which deal at length with the kinds of authority rulers hold, and the relations between rulers and people. This makes them, in the language of modern scholarship, 'political'. Secondly we know that rulers made great efforts to portray themselves in the likeness of characters in the Jatakas. And thirdly their political character is strongly suggested by the fact that, unlike much of the conceptualisation of authority mentioned above, we have evidence that rulers were actively disseminating the Jatakas to their subjects, through oral recitation as well as pictorial representation. Were the stories merely moral tales it is unlikely that rulers would have expended the time and effort in their dissemination.

In 1361 a stone inscription erected by King Lithai (this time in Pali), displays the first explicit reference to a connection between the Vessantara Jataka and Sukhothai rulers. The inscription states that in the practice of Giving (than) the king is like Vessantara; in the practice of Wisdom (panya) he is like Mahosadha; in the practice of Moral Conduct (sin) he is like King Silava; and in the practice of Renunciation he is like Janaka.[27] The key to understanding these references is the Jatakas, for that is where these personages are found. The subject of the over five-hundred stories contained in the Jatakas is the many incarnations of the bodhisatta, or the future Gotama Buddha, and his 'accumulation' of barami, often translated as 'Perfection' or 'Virtue'. It was the

---

[24] Coedès, The Indianised States, p. 197.

[25] Griswold, Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art, p. 27.

[26] Betty Gosling, Sukhothai: Its History, Culture and Art, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 45.

[27] Ibid., 'Inscription 6', p. 101; also Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, pp. 515-7. In the latter work the translation of the inscription omits 'Mahosadha' on the grounds that the text is unclear, while the former work gives the alternative translation of the Pali 'Janaka' as 'his [Lithai's] father'.

possession of barami that was the prerequisite for enlightenment. In the Pali tradition there were ten kinds of barami. First in the order of Perfections was (in Thai) than barami, or the Perfection of Giving; followed by sin barami, the Perfection of Moral Conduct; nekkhamma barami, the Perfection of Renunciation; panya barami, the Perfection of Wisdom; viriya barami, the Perfection of Exertion; khanti barami, the Perfection of Patience; satcha barami, the Perfection of Truthfulness; adhitthan barami, the Perfection of Resolution; metta barami, the Perfection of Loving Kindness; and ubekkha barami, the Perfection of Equanimity. The four characters mentioned in the inscription are all incarnations of the bodhisatta, and are representative of the bodhisatta's practice of four different kinds of barami.

In likening himself to these characters King Lithai was enunciating a model of royal authority based on the example of the bodhisatta's accumulation of barami as described in the Jatakas. Inscriptions of the period repeatedly refer to the desire of kings and other royal personages to achieve enlightenment by 'perfecting' themselves in these ten virtues. The possession of all the Perfections in theory produced the 'perfect' being, ie. a Buddha. The pursuit of self-perfection as exemplified in the Jatakas became an integral part of a Thai conception of power. Idealised in the concept of barami, in practice self-perfection entailed the ruler's regular practice of alms giving, periods of sexual abstinence, fasting, meditation, and other acts of asceticism and self-denial. There is a sense in which royal self-perfection lay on the dividing line between engagement and detachment from the world. Whereas the cakravartin monarch was a secular ideal, and the buddha the spiritual ideal, as a bodhisatta the ruler overcomes the dichotomy between the two. It set a pattern for Thai kingship to oscillate between, in Tambiah's words, the 'World Conqueror' and the 'World Renouncer'. As Tambiah bluntly puts it, 'kings must be good killers before they can turn to piety and good works'.[28] Lithai is a good example. He had come to power through force of arms.[29] In 1361 he entered a monastery where an inscription says he rejected 'the attractions of the cakravartin', and vowed to attain enlightenment in order to lead all creatures out of 'the three realms of existence'.[30] The following year for unknown reasons he left the monkhood and led a military campaign to subjugate the principality of Nan.[31]

---

[28] Tambiah, World Conqueror, p. 522.

[29] Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, Inscription 4, English trans. p. 490.

[30] Ibid., Inscription 4, pp. 496-7.

[31] Griswold, Towards a History of Sukhothai Art, pp. 37-8.

As a moral guide for rulers the concept of barami differed from the so-called thotsaphitaratchatham or 'Ten Kinds of Royal Dhamma', which was another code of royal conduct propagated primarily through the Vessantara[32] and other Jatakas and referred to in Sukhothai inscriptions.[33] While the thotsaphitaratchatham was a code aimed at guiding the behaviour of the ruler towards his subjects, the ten kinds of barami all concern the ruler's conduct of his own self. The Perfections are more introspective and supramundane. On the face of it the accumulation of barami would seem to be a more selfish activity, and not suitable as a royal form of moral behaviour. Yet at the same time it could have been popularly perceived to be a far higher order of royal conduct, since enlightenment (in a future incarnation) and the salvation of humanity were its ultimate objective.

How widespread was knowledge of the Jatakas and the model of royal self-perfection they expressed in the Sukhothai kingdom? In 1972 a set of reliefs of the Jataka illustrations were discovered dating from the mid-fourteenth century, complete with captions in the Thai language.[34] The reliefs were clearly designed for public viewing and were probably originally attached to one of the major temples in the city, Wat Mahathat. Besides visual representation (which was limited to one scene of the story) we know from brief references in the inscriptions of Nakhon Chum and 'Wat Hin Tang' that the custom of reciting the 'Maha chat' ('Great Life') to an audience already existed.[35] The 'White Elephant Pond' inscription of 1380 in Thai mentions royalty listening to the dhamma of the 'thotsachat', or the last ten Jatakas (the last being the

---

[32] Though no version of the Vessantara Jataka survives from Sukhothai, later versions in Thai refer to Vessantara's practice of the 'Ten Kinds of Royal Dhamma': Maha chat kham luang, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1973, p. 338; Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1988, p. 324.

[33] While the thotsaphitharatchatham bear some resemblance to the Ten Perfections, they are clearly directed more at relations between ruler and subject: than - giving to individuals, sin - moral conduct, borichak - generosity to the public, atchawa - honesty, matthawa - gentleness, taba - determination, akkotha - aversion to anger, awihingsa - non-aggression, khanti - patience, and awirothana - justice. For Lithai's adherence to these principles see Inscriptions 3 (p. 462), and 5 (p. 508), in Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies. Though no version of the Vessantara Jataka survives from Sukhothai, a version believed to date from the fifteenth century Ayuthayan kingdom refers to Vessantara's practice of the 'Ten Kinds of Royal Dhamma', Maha chat kham luang, Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1973, p. 338.

[34] Gosling, Sukhothai: Its History, Culture and Art, pp. 45-9; Charuk samai sukhothai (Sukhothai Inscriptions), Bangkok, Krom Sinlapakorn, 1983, pp. 381-440; Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p. 347.

[35] Cf. Prachum silacharuk, Vol. 1, p. 63, and 'Silacharuk wat hin tang', Charuk sukhothai (Sukhothai Inscriptions), Krom Sinlapakorn, Bangkok, 1983, pp. 189-192; Gosling, Sukhothai, p. 59.

Vessantara Jataka), which was 'extremely sweet to hear'.[36] Although it is unclear whether such recitations were in Thai or Pali, and how widespread they were, from the Nakhon Chum inscription mentioned above we can get some idea of the value attached to the 'reciting' - and therefore the dissemination - of the Vessantara Jataka. The propagation of Jataka knowledge may also have occurred via the famous treatise on Buddhist cosmology attributed to King Lithai, the Trai phum phra ruang, which, at least in the versions of the last two centuries, we know was recited in the vernacular to lay audiences.[37] The treatise includes references to great feats performed in the accumulation of the Perfection, including those of King Nimi of the Nimi Jataka, who was taken on a tour of the various hells[38]; King Sivi of the Sivi Jataka, who plucked out his eyes as an offering of alms (than) to the god Indra[39]; Prince Vessantara of the Vessantara Jataka who gave away his kingdom's white elephant[40]; and Sasapandita of the Sasapandita Jataka, who threw himself into a fire and offered his flesh as alms for Brahmans to eat.[41]

While Lithai is best known for his piety, he has also been seen by scholars as both a successful military leader and an effective statesman.[42] He briefly revived the fortunes of the Sukhothai kingdom after a period in which most of its vassal states had broken away from its control. While military campaigns were a factor in this success it is likely that his activities in the religious sphere may also have been in pursuit of the same end, the consolidation of royal authority. Certainly the 'ideological' output of Lithai's reign was much greater than that of any other Sukhothai king. 'State formation' took place in more than just the realm of military action. From the documentary evidence it appears that activities in the sphere of culture and ideology were pursued by Tai rulers just as vigorously. This was no mere adjunct to the 'real' world of military conquest, dynastic alliances, trade relations, or taxing powers. The potential of cultural

---

[36] Inscription of wat traphang chang phuak, Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, p. 201.

[37] See C.J.Reynolds, "Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History, with Special Reference to Nineteenth Century Cultural Change", Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 35, no. 2, 1976, pp. 207-8.

[38] Trai phum phra ruang khorng phraya lithai (King Lithai's Trai Phum Phra Ruang), Bangkok, Sinlapabannakan, 1970, p. 20.

[39] Ibid., p. 238.

[40] Ibid., p. 240.

[41] Ibid., p. 241.

[42] Prasert and Griswold, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, pp. 427-432.

dissemination to form communities and hierarchies was as great if not greater than these activities more commonly considered appropriate to ruling elites. Through the media of scripture and oral performance, words and ideas could travel through territory and reach more people faster than a levied army ever could. The Vessantara and other Jatakas were in the vanguard of this cultural activity. Through their dissemination by the media of text and recitation they were forming communities which recognised these representations of ideal hierarchical relations. The power of these media were partly dependent on a ruler's sponsorship of education in literacy, support of the Sangha, and the production of texts, and to that extent they served the ruler's ideological interests. However, they also opened opened up opportunities for others to use these media for their own purposes.

Self-perfection was not exclusively a royal activity. In theory the objective of enlightenment which required such rigorous personal conduct was open to anyone, man or woman, prince or peasant. Inscriptions from the period mention that princes as well as queens and princesses performed similar acts of piety with the same professed objective.[43] In the Jatakas the bodhisatta has accumulated the Perfections in incarnations as an animal as well as a commoner, though incarnations as royalty or a Brahman are far more common.

For those who wished to follow the path of self-perfection the Sangha was the principal means to this end. The Sangha provided not only the material support necessary for such activity, but also the knowledge and the opportunity to train oneself in these disciplines. For this reason the Sangha was potentially a dangerous institution for rulers. The history of the Thai is littered with rebellions and even royal coups which were launched by figures from out of Buddhist monasteries. At the same time, however, the Sangha could also be said to function as an apparatus by which non-royal aspirations to self-perfection were guided through the monastic regulations, control of ordination, the abbot's authority, etc. Outside such a regulatory apparatus individuals could prove threatening to incumbent rulers. The idea of self-perfection translated into conceptions of hierarchy, with the king at the apex because of his barami accumulated in previous incarnations. An individual's practice of self-perfection was a potential challenge to the existing hierarchy.

During this period there is no purely 'political' writing. Rather, what we would call politics is expressed in 'religious' or 'moral' terminology. There is no clear separation between the modern notion of political and religious realms. The Sukhothai period shows a flourishing of this political-religious writing. One of the conduits of this discourse of authority conceptualised in moral terms must surely have been the Sangha, which received generous royal patronage and which appears to have increasingly dominated secular as well as religious affairs in Sukhothai following the reign of

---

[43] Ibid., pp. 65-6.

Lithai.[44] While other conceptions of royal authority certainly appear in Sukhothai inscriptions, it was the idealisation of authority in terms of the bodhisatta and barami which would have had the greater influence among the general population, given the widespread familiarity with the Jatakas in popular culture. Where Buddhism would otherwise appear a religion more concerned with supermundane matters, the Jatakas provided much of the language and conceptualisation for what modern scholars would call a political philosophy.

Than: a Thai Ethic of Giving[45]

The dominant theme of the Vessantara Jataka is than barami, the Perfection of Giving. Vessantara achieves the Perfection of Giving by giving away his kingdom's white elephant, his own personal riches (the 'Great Gift of the Seven Hundreds'[46]), his two children and his wife. To the modern mind Vessantara's desire for giving is extreme, and indeed, in certain cases morally disturbing. Excerpts from a nineteenth century Thai version of the story convey some of this sense. As soon as he is born Vessantara utters the words,

> *Sap an dai khorng rao thi banda mi*
> *phra luk ni cha bamphen than*
>
> All the wealth that I possess
> I, your son, will give as alms[47]

Several times in the story Vessantara states that even were a beggar to ask him for his flesh and blood, heart and eyes, he would not hesitate to give them.[48] Vessantara's generosity and capacity to give is described as greater than all the waters in the ocean,[49]

---

[44] Gosling, Sukhothai, p. 80.

[45] I use McClung's phrase derived from his study of dana in the Buddhist canonical and commentary literature; see L.G. McClung, 'The "Vessantara Jataka": Paradigm for a Buddhist Utopian Ideal', PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 1975, Chapter 2, pp. 91-135.

[46] In Thai, sattasadokmahathan, which consisted of seven hundred elephants, horses, carriages, women, cows, female and male slaves.

[47] Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, p. 16; Maha chat kham luang, p. 27.

[48] Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, pp. 18,31,254; Maha chat kham luang, pp. 27-8; 37.

[49] Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap sip sam kan, pp. 202-3; Maha chat kham luang, pp. 189-90.