

MORAL DILEMMA IN THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL: A RE-READING OF VESSANTARA JATAKA TALE

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of various situations of moral dilemma generated by the Bodhisattva ideal of extreme self-sacrifice, with special reference to the career of Vessantara. The analysis focuses on the dilemmas resulting from his marvelous giving of gifts (dana), as a prince of a kingdom, as a royal son to his parents, as a husband and as a father. Emphasis will be directed to the various lines of reasoning, both supportive and oppositional to the gift giving, voiced by the people around him who were directly effected by his generosity. Finally, some possibilities for reconciliation will be explored.

Introductory note

Thai Buddhists in general hold the view that the ideal of a bodhisattva, a being working on becoming a fully-enlightened one in the future, is more central to the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism than to the Theravada School of Thailand. However, many Buddhist scholars have pointed out the fact that the story of Vessantara bodhisattva has been the most popular Buddhist tale in Thai society

throughout her long history.² The tale of the great giving of Vessantara, the penultimate life of Prince Sidhatta the future Buddha, has been transmitted in the *Thet Mahachat* chant festival throughout the kingdom for centuries. It has been popular both among the general populace and among the elite in the royal court. The story of Vessantara's career is also widely depicted in many temple murals in all regions of the land. As a major narrative in Thai cultural life for centuries, the general (pre-critical) understanding of this great Buddhist tale has been one of awe and admiration for his great self-sacrifice. Though there has been some uneasiness expressed in response to the giving away of wife and children of Vessantara, the general orientation of responses seems to be one of admiring acceptance, with the importance of the narrative centering on the generosity of Vessantara.³ The

² Steven Collins. 1998. *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.497-498. According to Brereton's research published in 1995, a recent catalog of Lan Na (Northern) Thai manuscripts, 396 out of 2,700 (14%) were devoted to the Vessantara Jataka. (Ibid., p.,498) Also, please take note of Krompraya Damrongrajapab. B.E.2460. "The Legend of Thet Mahachat", *Mahachat Royal Chant*. Bangkok: Rongpim Thai.

³ See an interesting example of research questioning the moral adequacy of many bodhisattvas, including Vessantara in Rassagala Seewali Thero. B.E.2542. *A Critical Study of Ethical Problems of Bodhisattva's Karuna in Jataka Stories*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University. See also a defense of Vessantara's gift-giving in Phra Pimonlatham (Chob Anujareemahathera). B.E.2533. *Vessantara Jataka Review*. Bangkok: Krongkarn Moonnithi Hortri (Hortri Foundation Project). In my view, a questioning in the first book and a

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dramatic movements of the story are punctuated by each act of giving of Vessantara, beginning with the auspicious elephant, to his giving the seven marvelous gifts, his children and finally his wife, Madsī. In the middle of the story is the departure from his city and the journey toward the forest. At the end, the family reunites and everything given away is restored to Vessantara.

This article is an attempt to “re-read” the story from other perspectives, namely from the perspectives of those around Vessantara, rather than from Vessantara himself. This new center of focus will form the basis for an analysis of the different reasons voiced by the people of Sipi, King Sonchai, Queen Pussadi, Madsī and Ganha-Chalie. By turning the center of analysis to these people’s voices, the different levels of moral dilemma can be clarified and discussed.

The purpose of my analysis is *not* to belittle the great generosity of Vessantara, but simply to open up a new vista for understanding this important *jataka*. In fact, the *ethos* of moral dilemma is clearly expressed in the text and several Buddhist scholars have pointed out some aspects of the moral conflicts *inherent in the text*. I hope that the bringing forth of the various levels of moral dilemma would help provide an intimate point of contact between this great tale and the present generation of audience in contemporary life. I also hope that the two extremes of negation of anything traditional on the one hand, and a non-critical acceptance of anything inherited on the other, would be better balanced in this process of re-

defense in the second one indicate a sense of uneasiness with Vessantara’s seemingly extreme generosity.

orientation and re-appropriation of the story.⁴

Scope of Analysis of a Composite Text

The term “*jataka*” literally means “birth story.” It indicates a set of birth stories narrating the previous lives of the Buddha when he was born in human form or animal performing certain acts of self-sacrifice in order to perfect attributes of a bodhisattva. These tales were collected into one group of texts in the Khuttaka Nikaya, comprising the last section of Sutta in the *Tripitaka*. It is generally understood that these stories were originally folktales used by the Buddha and his disciples for teaching the *dhamma* to the people. Later, these stories were collected and the main characters were infused with the idea of a former birth of the future Buddha.⁵ In other words, the

⁴ See an interesting treatment of similar problems as viewed from within the Confucian traditions in Alan Chan. 1984. “*Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Analects: The Paradigm of Tradition*”, *Philosophy East and West*. Vol.34 No.4, October 1984, pp.421-436. Although the “content” of the problem is different, the need to search for a proper transmission of one’s tradition is always pertinent to a people who wish to avoid the two extreme positions of total negation and uncritical acceptance. In this sense the article by Alan Chan is highly relevant to our discussion in this paper.

⁵ Uthong Prasartwinitchai. B.E. 2545. *Te Cha Su Ne Ma: Roaming the Ten Births Through Mural Paintings*. Bangkok: Khanapuggala Namrin, pp.9-12. According to Uthong, “During the time of the Buddha, these stories were probably folk tales widely known among the peoples. The Buddha and his disciples probably used these tales to teach *dhamma*. Later a connection was created to link these stories with the career building paths of the

Buddhist infusion is a later addition to the original folktales, thus creating a genre called “*jataka*” or birth story. The origins of these tales give rise to the question whether, and to what extent, these birth stories could be analyzed as representing “Buddhist philosophy.” If and when we use these stories as expressing Buddhist philosophy, then do we not need to exercise caution in claiming full philosophical authority for the birth stories, as much as we do for other articulations like the Theory of Dependent Origination or the Three Characteristics of Existence?

Second, we must take into consideration the fact that the Vessantara Jataka Tale has been chanted by popular monk chanters in different regions in the country for centuries. As a result, there are several hundred versions of the same story with different emphasis, elaboration, and interpretation. The “core” or common components remain relatively constant, namely, that the Prince Vessantara gives away the auspicious elephant of his kingdom to Brahmins from a neighboring land, is later expelled from his palace and, together with his wife and children, live in the forest. Again, he gives away his children to an old brahmin by the name of Jujaka, and finally his wife to the Lord Indra disguised as a brahmin. At the end of the story everything given away is returned to him. However, among the different chant versions, the nuances in the interpretations and elaborations are most telling. For example, Amittada in some of the Northern versions does not give in to

her fate of being the wife of an old brahmin as easily as those versions from the central region. When a text is transmitted through so many different oral versions, an analysis which is based on one particular version of the text needs to be credited with only relative authority.

Third, the particular text used for analysis in this article is itself a composite text, collected and selected for reasons of literary merit and because of the cultural and political authority of the composers.⁶ The book *Vessantara Jataka: A Royal Chant* is comprised of 13 chapters composed by distinguished authors like the royal poet Krompra Poramanuchitchinoros, Chao Praya Praklang, and King Rama IV. When this text is analyzed, it is analyzed as a whole, leaving aside the issue of the different authorship collected into one composite text. (It would be very awkward to offer analysis of a passage from one chapter composed by one author and then the analysis to shift to the authority or intention of another when analyzing another chapter in the same book.)

Finally, given my limited knowledge in the Pali language, I still have not cross-checked this particular version of the Vessantara Jataka with the original Pali. Therefore, this article as yet cannot fathom the different nuances of meanings

bodhisattvas in the Buddha’s previous lives. These infusions were achieved by adding the beginning and the ending to the original stories.”

⁶ *Vessantara Jataka: A Royal Chant of 13 Chapters*. Bangkok: Dhammabannakarn (Dhammabannakarn Publisher), B.E.2521. Please take note of the preface saying, “Vessantara Jataka is considered a piece of classic Thai literature. This is because it was composed by several leading sages of our land. ... (We can understand) in what way all 13 chapters of this Ten Birth stories are so exquisitely composed and (why they would) enjoy undying appreciation.” Insert added.

presumed to exist in the translation-composition of the 13 chapters. That will need much more effort and perhaps will answer a different set of questions which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Moral Dilemma Defined

The term “moral dilemma” in this article indicates self-contradictory moral requirements established within one and the same particular ethical system. Both moral requirements are “good,” and a negation of either choice would be equally unsatisfactory. In this sense, a moral dilemma is more problematic than a moral conflict as the latter indicates different sets of moral requirements in different ethical universes. A negation of one choice would not create a problem for the whole particular ethical system. It is a matter of choosing one ethical system over another. While in the case of a moral dilemma, one could still be self-contradictory, if one follows the moral requirements of one and the same ethical system. For example, as a bodhisattva Vessantara needs to give away his children, so as to perfect himself to become enlightened in the future. However, as a father, it is immoral of him to create such suffering for his children, simply to fulfill his own wish to be enlightened in the future. Both being a loving father and being a bodhisattva are “good” in the Buddhist ethical system. Thus we have a moral dilemma, not just moral conflict.⁷

⁷ I wish to thank Dr. Warayuth Sriwarakul for this observation that there is no moral dilemma in Kantian ethics as there is always a “way out” of a situation of “moral conflicts.” In his view, Vessantara’s acts of giving do not posit a “moral dilemma” as he does have a choice. However, it is still not clear to me why Vessantara’s choices do not in a very important sense violate other moral requirements within

Situations of Moral Dilemmas in the Text

Before offering an analysis of the moral dilemma in the career of Vessantara, it is necessary to highlight certain passages from the text to illustrate the various situations of moral dilemma, both for Vessantara himself as well as for those around him who are directly effected by his great gift giving. We begin with the moral dilemma generated as a prince and thus putting King Sonchai, his father, into a moral dilemma; then the moral dilemma generated as a royal son to his mother, Queen Pussadi, then as husband to Madsī, then as a father to his children; and lastly, as himself in an interesting episode of emotional inner-fighting with Vessantara himself.

As a Prince

After Vessantara gave away the auspicious elephant to Brahmins from a foreign land, the people of Sipi created an uproar and came in large crowds to petition King Sonchai.

All the peoples of the land, from the city and the up-country, the carriage masters, the craftsmen, the military, gathered in the plaza, started to speak in a

Buddhism itself. If they do, the occasion already constitutes a moral dilemma in my definition. I will therefore, stick to the definition outlined in the article until there is more time to explore this point further. (Dr. Warayuth gave this comment for the presentation of this paper in Thai at the Philosophy Department Seminar in honor of Dr. Wit Witsadawes and Dr. Sunthorn NaRangsi’s 6th cycle commemoration at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 14-15 November 2002.)

loud voice to King Sonchai: Your Royal Highness, Lord of Sipi, now, your son Vessantara has committed wrong, has violated a royal tradition of old. This elephant should have been kept for the kingdom. He has created this rage among the people. If you were to protect him, it could prove dangerous for yourself.

Upon hearing those words, the King was very angry, as if engulfed in fire. He thus said to all the peoples, "My son has committed wrong, has violated a royal tradition of old by giving the auspicious elephant to the begging Brahmins. You use that to accuse him in such anger. However, it would be inappropriate to execute him with a wooden plank (of aromatic wood), neither is it suitable to use a weapon." The peoples then said to the King, "In that case, he should be expelled from the city."⁸

As a Son: A Mother's Defense with Vessantara and Madsī

"O Vessantara, my beloved son! You never have had to face a punishment. You always try to create great benefits. Days and nights, you never overlook one beggar. What is it with the peoples? It is not their business to be so angry with you, accusing you so loudly, disturbing the whole palace. How could your father listen to them?"

"My son, if you are to be expelled from the palace, every day I will hold tight my breasts. I will hang myself to death. You are not guilty at all. Why all this anger in the whole city?"

"Where else can one find such a fine son? Your heart is pure, set only to give."

"You are all duly cultivated in the different arts."

"Your glory is recognized in all directions. Other heads of kingdoms all accept your glory and pay you their tributes in abundance."

"The kingdom is wealthy, the peoples are all happy."

"Why is it that the peoples are jealous and accuse you to your father and cause such anger in him?"⁹

As a Son: A Mother's Defense with King Sonchai

"Our young son has violated (ministerial) protocol in his giving away the auspicious elephant. The penalty is expulsion from the kingdom."

"The auspicious elephant cannot be found in any other land. It was found in our land where our glorious son is. Even if we expel our son from the kingdom, it does not mean that we will have the elephant back."

"How could you listen to foul words from the peoples. They accused our son and your anger could only create more trouble."

"You must exercise great caution now. When there is an emergency the peoples can be of no help. Neither can the elephant. Only your family could sacrifice their lives for you." (Or your family could face death because of you/with you.)

"Our store of marit might yet find us another elephant so auspicious for our kingdom. But where can we find another son so dear?"

⁸ *Vessantara Jataka in 13 Chapters*. Bangkok: Bannakarn. B.E.2521, pp.29-30. (All translation of the text into English is done by the author.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.46-47.

"Once your son is departed from Your Royal Highness, who else could act as your eyes and ears? Our kingdom will be as deserted as a crow's nest (once the chicks are gone.)"

"You yourself are advanced in age. Your throne will be thrown into chaos."

"It is like a mango tree with fruits plentiful. The ripe, sweet-smelling fruits will only drop to the ground, without anyone having even to look up the tree and ask for the fruits. The crowds of peoples would just pick them up and eat them all. All your treasures will be gone as you are without an heir."

"As for the court officials, it is difficult to rely on their loyalty. When we are in power, they come to us, asking to be of use, chorusing words of glory day and night. Once we make mistakes, they would only make things worse. We would be like a royal swan with broken wings falling into a ditch. The crows would come and eat on us."

"If you are displeased with me and choose to believe the peoples, then please punish me to death. Only then you expel our son from the kingdom. Even if our son were guilty, I am beyond blame. Please have mercy on me, your loyal wife. Please forgive our dear son, just for this one time."¹⁰

As a Husband: Madsī Insisting to Depart for the Forest with Vessantara

The followings are Madsī's reasons expressed to Vessantara.

"Is there a tradition of letting a royal husband living in isolation in the

forest? Is it possible for a prince to depart for the forest all by himself?"

"Whichever deep jungle your highness ventures into, I, your faithful servant, will follow you. I will not stay behind. I will spend my life and my body serving your highness in gratitude, until the end of my day."

"Even when the food is scarce, having to live only on fruits, I am willing to endure the hardship in your service."

"I think nothing of using up my life for you, serving you as golden shoes under your royal feet."

"If you were not to allow me to follow you, I, Madsī, will set up a fire and jump into it. Death looks better."

"Death would be better than facing the gossip of the peoples, who would judge me a wife only in time of comfort. When it is a time of trouble, the wife only enjoys her life of leisure in the palace."

"If there were to be a danger of death, I, in front of your highness, will rush toward death as a token of gratitude for you."¹¹

In other passages, we find a continuation of Madsī's reasons to follow Vessantara into the jungle. The following are said to Madsī's parents-in-law.

"Nobody cares about my royal husband in trouble. How could I rest in comfort in the palace? The peoples would only laugh at me. I, Madsī, would not know how to look at anyone in the eyes. It is better to endure the hardship in the forest. I will use my hands and legs as knives thrashing clear the bushes in the Himavat. Your royal feet will not be

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.50-52. (Words in parenthesis are added for clarification by this author.)

¹¹ Ibid., p.37.

soiled. If I were to stay behind, I feared being a widow."

"A widow left behind by the husband is a sorrowful existence. It would be natural for her to feel the passion for love inside."

"Having a husband is like having a crystal tiered umbrella above one's head, constantly enhancing one's honor. Being a widow still young can never rest in peace. It is like a deserted gem, soiled with dots of stain, even at low price, it would not attract a buyer. Even if there were a buyer, he would be embarrassed to put the gem on."

"Where else could I ever find a husband like your highness? Even a hundred deaths would not find me another sage like Vessantara."¹²

As a Father: Beseeking Wails from Chalie-Ganha

Chalie suggests to his sister Ganha to hold their breath in embrace, and die together.

"Ganha, my dear sister, why should we live on to face these sufferings inflicted by this Brahmin. He only hits us, giving us pain. A drop of milk never reaches our lips. Ganha my dear sister, let us embrace, hold our breath and die together as an escape from this evil Brahmin."

Ganha wails to her father.

"How could you remain so calm, so silent in the midst of my plea for your help to save my life?"

O! What a pitiful sight! Royal Ganha cries so hard, her tears snaking down her cheeks, beseeking her father,

"My dear father, are you disowning me? How could you remain so calm and silent, letting that despicable Brahmin hit me and drag me on, right in front of your eyes. Was I born daughter of a slave? That Brahmin is no longer a Brahmin, he hits me so hard. This old man is so evil. Perhaps he was a demon disguising himself as a beggar. His beatings cause me unbearable pain. He threatens me, he shouts at me, he causes me pain. He will tear me up into pieces and eat me up. But he cannot do that right away, so he pretends to beat me with the stick until you cannot see me anymore. Then he will break my neck, throw it on the ground. He will tear me to pieces, drink my blood and eat me up. My father, my lord, if you no longer love me, I will bid thee farewell. Don't feel sad if I were to say to you let us not be reborn father-daughter again. Have no doubt that my blood and flesh will be food for this foul Brahmin."¹³

Vessantara's Dilemma with Himself

"My two beloved children are like a calm water, provoked into unsettling waves by the contemptuous beatings of the Brahmin. Vessantara's calm mind is rudely awakened from his equanimity. Ignorance clouds his wisdom. He is frustrated with anger and delusion. His anger ignites immediate intention of violence. He threatens the Brahmin: "Hey, you foul brahmin, you have overstepped your boundary. How could you beat up my children, right in front of me, their father. You Brahmin, I did not come here in the forest empty-handed. I brought with me my sword, bow and arrows." He took up the weapons in his hand, trembling with anger, saying to himself, "Shall I kill this

¹² Ibid., pp.68-71.

¹³ Ibid., pp.230-232.

Brahmin?" He feels great frustration within.

Later on, he reflects on the great tradition of past buddhas and comes to the realization that, "I am here to build my career by perfecting the great children-giving." When his wisdom is regained, he says to himself, "Behold, Vessantara, do not hesitate. You and I are fighting each other. This should not be. I already gave my children away, how is it possible to claim them back?" The Lord Vessantara re-establishes his mind, suppressing his sorrow. When his sorrow wanes, his face becomes radiant and pure. He then looks golden, as if with body molted in gold by someone, having been put there in the ashram."¹⁴

Different Faces of Moral Dilemma in Vessantara Jataka

Vessantara's giving away of the auspicious elephant to brahmins from a foreign land has created great anger among the peoples of Sipi.¹⁵ The text tells us that people from the city, from up-country, the military, the craftsmen all gathered in the city to show their anger, reasoning with the King that Vessantara has "violated royal tradition of the past." Judging from the response of the King, it seems fair to say that the King himself

accepted the reason put forth by the people. As a bodhisattva with intent on future enlightenment, Vessantara's giving of the elephant is "natural." As a prince of the kingdom, he is supposed to protect the interests of the realm, and not to give away the elephant. Is it beyond reason to suggest that in the eyes of the peoples, the elephant does not belong to Vessantara in his personal capacity? The elephant belongs to the kingdom, and therefore, it is not for Vessantara to give it away. Is it not reasonable to conclude that when King Sonchai accepts the proposal of the people to expel Vessantara, he is also accepting the anger of the peoples? Thus, is he, by implication, accepting the *reason* why the peoples are so angry with Vessantara? On the other hand, if Vessantara considers the elephant his own personal belonging, why is it that the people got the wrong idea the elephant belongs to the kingdom? Even so, it does not necessarily mean that the elephant belongs to the people. It could very well belong to the royal household, not the people. If this were the case, why is it that King Sonchai seems to give in to the reasoning of the people?

This moral dilemma of Vessantara has created a situation of moral dilemma for his father as well. As a father, he naturally wishes to protect his own son. As a king, his kingdom's interest is paramount. When King Sonchai "agrees" with the people that Vessantara has violated a "royal tradition" of the past, he has decided to be king first, not first as father to Vessantara. It is important to note that the penalty of capital punishment came from the mouth of the King, not the people. He said, "To execute (Vessantara) with sandal wood plank is inappropriate, neither so with weapon." The focus here seems to be that it is the methods which are inappropriate, not the death penalty itself. The people

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.228-229.

¹⁵ There are attempts to justify Vessantara's action of giving away the elephant as indicating his practical wisdom of protecting his own kingdom in light of a dangerous situation of inter-state competition for dominance. It shows his "political prowess." See, for example, Phra Pimontham (Chob Anujaree-mahathera). B.E.2533. *Prarithat Vessantara Jataka (A Review Of Vessantara Jataka)*. Bangkok: Krongkarn Moonnithi Hohtri, pp.35-41.

then said, "In that case, (Vessantara) should be expelled from the city." King Sonchai seems to accept the verdict, without expressing any protest, or disagreement. He only said, "It is now quite late, let's wait until tomorrow. We will ask him to leave tomorrow." King Sonchai's verdict on Vessantara is a judgment of a king, who needs to protect royal tradition of the past. That royal duty seems to carry more weight than to protect his son as a father. The best he could do as a father was to mitigate the punishment, from the death penalty to expulsion. In the text, there was no description of his doubt, or reluctance or sorrow as a father. In this situation of moral dilemma, King Sonchai's choice is clear. As for Vessantara, the choice between being a royal prince and practicing generosity by giving the elephant is also clear. The aim for future enlightenment is paramount.

The situation is very different when we listen to Queen Pussadi's reasons to protect her son. She is adamant that Vessantara is innocent. It is "none of the business" of the people to put forth such accusation against Vessantara. "King Sonchai only too readily accepted the allegation." In the eyes of the Queen Mother, Vessantara is well-trained in the arts and sciences of a prince. His honor and glory are for all to see. Lords of different minor kingdoms all come to pay their tributes. For this reason, it is unacceptable for the people who are "jealous" of Vessantara to put forth that accusation against him. In the eyes of the Queen mother, it is not the "right" of the people to judge Vessantara. We should also notice that the only guilt of King Sonchai was to "give in" to the people's allegation. Moreover, not only do they not have the "right" to accuse him, they are even "ungrateful," as it is due to

Vessantara's glory, both worldly and dhammic, that "the kingdom is wealthy, the people everywhere happy." If the well-being of the people is due to Vessantara's glory, then the angry expulsion of Vessantara would certainly indicate a severe lack of gratitude on the part of the people. In this sense, the people are guilty, not Vessantara.

It is interesting, however, to notice the different reasons used when Queen Pussadi is talking to Vessantara and Madsa and when she is reasoning with King Sonchai. The speech to her husband king started with admission of their "young" son's guilt. But the phrase for the violation has been changed from "royal tradition of the past" to "violation of some ministerial regulation." This initial saying emphasizes the fact that their son is still "young" and his guilt is far from grave, as the admitted violation is one of violation of some administrative regulation, not the sacred royal tradition. Then Queen Pussadi brings up the problem of the future of the throne, the foreseeable danger which could confront the King himself and his family, the untrustworthiness of the court officials, and the uselessness of losing the son after having already lost the elephant, the possibility of finding another elephant, but perhaps not another son (especially one like Vessantara). All her reasons are crucial and sound, especially for the royal household, which needs to exercise great caution against possible adversity and instability. The expulsion of a prince would only create great uncertainty and instability for the future of the throne. If the king has to balance out the small guilt or mistake of his young son against the great possible calamities against the throne and the kingdom as a whole, how should he decide? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to forgive the mistake of Vessantara than

to execute the expulsion penalty? It is very interesting to note that at that point the King remains silent, does not utter a word of agreement or disagreement. But the expulsion penalty has been earlier agreed upon between the King and the people. A King does not go back on his word. Even if all the possible calamities were to pass, the expulsion must take place.

Vessantara's giving away of the elephant to the brahmins from a foreign land has created a tense and risky situation in his own kingdom. It led to the confrontation between the King and the people. King Sonchai had to leave aside his being a father, had to decide against the reasoning plea from his Queen, had to face imminent danger for himself and his family. In time of crisis, Queen Pussadi warned her husband, "Would the elephant help us? Your wife and children could die (because of) with you."¹⁶ The dangers are threatening at every corner, the danger to the family, to the throne, to the kingdom, loss of loyalty from the court officials. King Sonchai seems to accept all these possible calamities when he gave his word to the people of Sipi that the expulsion penalty for Vessantara is imminent.

¹⁶ Ibid., p51. It is interesting to note the ambiguity here in the text. It says, "Once in time of great risk and imminent crisis, would the people or the elephant help us? Only your wife and children could die with (or because of) you." In Thai the last phrase could mean both "Your wife and children could die because of you," as well as "Only your wife and children could die with you." The context here seems to put a stronger indication to the latter meaning. That is, if we were to understand that because neither the elephant nor the people would be around to offer help, therefore, only the family would die together."

As for Vessantara, it seems that the possible risk of chaos in the kingdom does not sway his determination in the least. It might be more accurate to say that the text does not give evidence of Vessantara's anxiety or concern here. The next scene in the text takes place in the early morning of the next day. After Vessantara is bathed and properly-dressed, the text describes him thus, "His face is pure for building up the career for future enlightenment. He came out to the "Dana-Pavilion" (Pavilion for Charity), he gives command to give away the money, the clothes, All the Magnificent Gifts of Seven Hundreds."¹⁷ This same stern determination to perfect the virtue of Vessantara's giving will become evident again and again in his further giving.

This expulsion penalty of Vessantara has become a nightmarish storm which blows everything asunder in the life of Madsī. Madsī herself insists on leaving the city to live in the forest with Vessantara. Early on both King Sonchai and Queen Pussadi forbid Madsī to follow Vessantara to the forest, especially with the two royal children. But Madsī is adamant that she and the children have to go with Vessantara. She begins her reasoning with the necessity to uphold a husband-wife tradition. "Whence possible to find a customary practice of letting a royal person live alone in the forest?" Then she gives further reasons to follow Vessantara: to take care of him, to show him gratitude to the extent that she would gladly sacrifice her life for him. She says, "I think nothing of sacrificing my life for you. I will use my life as golden shoes

¹⁷ Ibid, p59. The Magnificent Gifts of Seven Hundreds indicate seven types of fantastic gifts, seven hundred each, to be given freely to all. They are: elephants, horses, carriages, court ladies, cows, male slaves, female slaves

protecting your royal feet." If they would not let her go, she would consider it better to, "set a fire, jump into it and die." This death would be better than what? The *jataka* tells us that for Madsī, death would be, "better than staying behind and letting the people gossip about her regarding her clinging to her husband only in time of comfort. Once in time of trouble, (in Madsī's perception) in the eyes of the people, Madsī just refuses to share the suffering and would only enjoy her royal existence in the palace." For Madsī, this possibility of contemptuous gaze from the people would be a life much more horrible than to die in a fire. Madsī's real life lies in the "gaze" of the people. If she were to have to endure such harsh judgment from the people, she no longer wishes to continue her physical existence.

In the midst of the tense situation Vessantara does not forget to grant Madsī permission to remarry another prince in his absence. This gracious gesture suggests that Vessantara does not plan to come back. It could be a journey with no return. Vessantara says this to his Queen, "If there should be a prince who wishes you to be his Queen, be sure to serve him well in every way. Do not yearn for me."¹⁸ Madsī responds:

"For me, having a husband is like having a crystal umbrella over my head constantly enhancing my honor. A young widow can only be restless, like a soiled precious jewel which would not fetch a good price. Even if there were someone who would be willing to buy it, it would only create shame. A woman with two husbands is not pure."

Although Madsī insists on being a loyal wife who strictly follows the rules of tradition, she does admit to having a natural sexual need, even as a widow. She says, "A widowed woman left lonely by herself, would only yearn for passion of love." But this natural desire carries no weight when it confronts her "real (cultural) life" as dictated by tradition. As a traditional wife, she must serve and protect her husband everywhere he goes. Madsī declares, "Even if there were extreme suffering or grave danger, I would rush forward to die first as an illustration of my gratitude for you." This great sacrifice on Madsī's part would be nothing compared to much greater sacrifices she would make later on as events unfold in the story. Later she would submit to the children-giving of Vessantara as well as the giving away of herself to Lord Indra in disguise. All these "*anumothana-dana*" or "*bless-the-giving*" of Madsī are so great even the gods in the heavenly spheres could not remain still. "*They all clasped their hands, sang words of praise for Madsī and showered her with heavenly flowers.*"¹⁹ It would be interesting to pose a hypothetical question here. What would have happened if Madsī refused to bless the giving of Vessantara both in the cases of children-giving and wife-giving? How would the *Jataka* proceed? How could an explanation of Vessantara's great giving be possible?

So far the difficult confusion has not resulted in any emotional turmoil in

¹⁹ Ibid., p.267. Please see an analysis of Madsī's great sacrifices without due credit in Suwanna Satha-Anand. 1997. "*Madsī: A Female Bodhisattva Denied?*" in Virada Somswasdi and Sally Theobald (eds.). *Women, Gender and Development* vol.I. Chiangmai: Chiangmai University Women's Studies Center, pp.245-256.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.36.

Vessantara. When he realizes that he will be expelled from the city after giving away the auspicious elephant, his reaction is:

*"Not only the auspicious elephant I would give. Even internal gifts which are much more difficult to give, I would certainly do it. If there were to be a beggar begging for my arms and legs, my heart, my eyes, I would willingly cut them off or cut them out for him. This is in exchange for future enlightenment. The expulsion penalty is nothing. Even if the people were to be so angry that they demanded my life, I would not hesitate to devote myself to giving."*²⁰

It looks like Vessantara is not worried in the least about the prospect of great calamities which are to befall him. But it is important to note that his concern does not include the grave consequence for the lives of his parents, for his wife and children. The merit of giving the elephant away is evaluated as something of lower value than the greater merit of giving parts of his body or his own life away. The recipient could be *any one* who would simply ask. From one perspective, it could be said that Vessantara's concern is very limited, so limited that it could be paradoxically viewed as being selfish in his great self-sacrifice. When viewing his acts from the perspective of a traditional society, it could be impossible to see any moral value in his great generosity.²¹ And

yet from another perspective, these acts of great generosity are part of a "tradition of Buddha-to-be." All bodhisattvas who aim at future enlightenment need to go through this.²²

All the moral dilemmas so far illustrate limited emotional drama. Intensive emotional elements are highlighted for Vessantara himself and probably for the audience as well, only when it comes to the greatest giving of all, namely, the giving away of his children. The overwhelming agony of Ganha and Chalie are well depicted in this saying of the brother to his younger sister in the following. *"Let's tightly embrace, hold our*

the necessity of the first type of morality, as indicated in the life of Prince Siddhatta, who had to leave his family and court life behind to search for the truth of enlightenment. This is achieved so that all peoples of all times could benefit from his great achievement. On the other hand, Buddhism does not negate the tentative necessity of the second type of morality to keep the "normal" course of a society possible. Please see a very interesting article on this distinction in Patrick Olivelle, "Amrta: Women and Indian Technologies of Immortality," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* vol.25 no.5, October 1997, pp.427-449.

Please see a systematic evaluation and categorization of different acts of giving of a bodhisattva, from external gifts of things material, to internal gifts of bodily organs, to life of a bodhisattva in Ven. Rassaḡala Seewali Thero. 1999. *A Critical Study of Ethical Problems of Bodhisattava's Karuna in Jataka Tales*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn-Rajavidyalaya University, pp.38-41.

²⁰ Op.Cit., pp.33-34.

²¹ Some scholars explain this paradox as indicating two systems of morality. One is based on the idea of a "self" as an individual, the other is based on the idea of a "person" whose existence is intrinsically inter-twined with other human beings in webs of relationships. In a way, Buddhism highlights

²² Please investigate the question of King Menander to Venerable Nagasena on the reasons why a bodhisattva needs to do what Vessantara does in this Jataka in Bhikkhu Pesala. 1998. *The Debate of King Milinda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, pp.82-83.

breath and die together. This is the way to escape this evil old man." Even at this moment, Vessantara remains calm. The father's calmness in the face of this impending tragedy proves too much to bear for the children. Ganha the daughter wails unceasingly to her father, but to no avail. She finally pronounces a severing of their father-daughter relationship in (this and?) future lives. She announces, "Father, please hold no grudge against me. Have no doubt that we will not be reborn father-daughter in future lives." The pathetic depiction of the pain and suffering the two children have to go through under Jujaka's harsh treatment is gradually intensified when the depiction of Jujaka himself is gradually changed. Jujaka has been transformed from a rather "poor" husband whose wife makes demands for domestic help otherwise she would leave him, to a despicable old man (depicted as an ugly elderly), to a pain-inflicting old brahmin whose heart is hardened with malice, to a "devil", to a "ghost" who is ready to break the necks of the children and then eat them up. This depiction of a gradual transformation of Jujaka the poor husband to Jujaka the dark devil on the verge of becoming a cannibal "naturally" increases the level of sympathy solicited from the heart and mind of the audience who by this time would be despising Jujaka and pouring out their hearts to Ganha and Charlie. At this point the *jataka* wrenches our tears thus:

"Oh! Woe to Ganha! She cries so hard her tears trail down her cheeks. She beseeches her father 'Father, my dear father, have you cut me off? How could you be so calm and silent? How could you let this despicable old brahmin hit me and drag me away right in front of your eyes? It is as if I were born daughter of a slave...Father, he is no longer a brahmin.

*This brahmin might have been the devil who disguised himself to beg for me from you. He hits me so hard, it hurts so badly I could die. He shouts, he yells, he inflicts pain, he might mutilate me and eat my flesh... He pretends to hit me with a stick, but when we are no longer in your view, he will break my neck, throw me on the ground, rip my body apart and drink my blood...*²³

The virtue of generosity, a key virtue in Buddhism, when performed to the utmost, beyond the common practice of custom and convention, painfully brings about chaos in all kinds of human socio-political relationships. These conflicts and this chaos could bring about great dangers, so catastrophic that Vessantara could lose everything, including those so dear and close to him. Please note that the acts of giving, in all these cases, do not, *in themselves*, indicate a giving up of life. But the tragic consequences of the giving has led to the contemplation of suicide by Vessantara's mother, Madsī and the two children. King Sonchai had to face the possibility of great danger in confrontation with the people of Sipi. Queen Pussadi has challenged the King to "please kill me first before you expel Vessantara." Madsī protested to the parents if not allowed to follow Vessantara to the forest, "I, Madsī will set up a fire, jump into it and die. That would be better for me." Ganha and Charlie said to each other, "You and I, let's embrace tightly, hold our breath and die together. This is the only escape from this old despicable brahmin." And yet, it is clear from the *jataka* that Vessantara's calmness becomes emotional turmoil only after the children were given away, when

²³ Op.Cit. (footnote no.12).

Jujaka still kept hitting them in full view of the father. This is an act of serve disrespect. Ganha and Chalie are children of royal brood. They need to be treated properly. In the *jataka*, one of the most emotional scenes is depicted thus:

"His (Vessantara's) calm is disrupted. Avijji clouds his wisdom. He becomes agitated, angry and throws these words at Jutaka, Hey! Hey! Jutaka! This Brahmin is contemptuous." How could you hit my children right in front of me? Eh!Hermit! I did not come to the forest unarmed. I brought with me the sword and the bow. He then grasps the bow and the arrow tight in hands with intent on killing the Brahmin...Moments later, he takes hold of himself, reflecting on the noble tradition of past buddhas. Then he realizes, "I am building up this career (of a bodisattva) of children-giving." Once he regains his wisdom, the royal hermit begins teaching himself," Look, Vessantara, neither waiver nor hesitate. You and I fighting each other? That is not desirable." At that moment, he regains tranquility, letting go of his sorrow. When he is calm again, his face becomes pure, his body looks as pure as a pure gold Buddha, exquisitely designed and finely cast, having been put there in the hermitage (by an unseen artist).²⁴

Vessantara's intense conflict with himself at this moment is expressed in a situation where a father has to witness the beating of his own children. This is not merely a matter of the physical pain inflicted on the children. It implies a feeling that Jujaka is a dark devilish old brahmin who does not have the "rights" to inflict verbal abuse on

"children of royal blood." It is a violation not only of the physical body, but also a transgression of the cultural taboo. The misery from the physical pain is increased, is added to the dark contempt expressed (symbolically) on the royalty of the children. This intense anger is elevated to ill intent, so unbearable that Vessantara, who has remained so calm throughout the narrative, rushes forward to grasp his weapons with an intent to kill Jujaka. And then, his wisdom regains its control (Earlier the text told us that Vessantara's calmness could be compared to still water which was agitated and thus disturbing the fish in the pond). At this time, Vessantara's humanity as a father has been transformed by his "knowledge" of traditions of past buddhas. Vessantara, of human flesh and blood, who is still capable of anger and emotional agitation of a moment earlier, has been transformed into a human golden Buddha. In other words, this intricate depiction has pointed to the transformation of a human person into a human-like gold statue.²⁵

Perhaps this is the scene with ultimate dramatic effect in the entire *jataka* tale. Later on, when Vessantara gives away his wife, who willingly accepts his great vow to achieve enlightenment in the future, his last act of giving does not solicit the same emotional intensity as this one. The image of Madsa's willing acquiescence to her husband's wish depicts a pure and intense dignity. This female dignity is so complete, all the gods in heaven could not

²⁴ Op.Cit. (footnote no.13)

²⁵ Given the time frame of this particular *jataka* tale, technically, one cannot say that Vessantara has become a golden buddha statue. As Vessantara has yet to be reborn Prince Siddhatta who then would become enlightened and thus become the Buddha.

remain still. They all appear and sing songs of praise for the great devotion of Madsī. The atmosphere of pain, suffering and misery so prominent in the giving of the children is conspicuously absent here. The next great moment of emotional intensity in the story will recur only when the whole family reunite in the forest before they all return home to the city.

A Critical Reflection of the Bodhisattva Ideology

In the Thai and international scholarship on moral issues relating to the Vessantara Jataka Tale, there are basically two groups of scholarly works.

One group includes studies of the Vessantara Jataka Tale as a literary work of religious, cultural, historical or political significance. Some works relate this tale with the Thai political culture, some with court rituals, others with the history of the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism.²⁶

²⁶ Please see outstanding examples of works in this category in the followings. Krompraya Dhamrongrajanupab. B.E.2460. *"The Legend of Thet Mahachat", Mahachat Royal Chant*. Bangkok: RongpimThai. Also see, Sombat Chantornwong. B.E.2523. "The Political Meanings of Mahachatkumluang." in Sombat Chantornwong and Chaianan Smudavanich. *Political Thoughts and Thai Society*. Bangkok: Thammasat Univeristy. Also see Suwanee Chuansanit. B.E.2519. *A Cultural Analysis of Vessantara Jataka Tale*. An M.A. thesis of the Department of Thai Language, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University. Also, Patrick Jory. 1996. *A History of the Thet Maha Chat and Its Contributions to a Thai Political Culture*. A Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Australian National University. And lastly, Prapod Assavavirulhakarn. B.E.2546. *The Way of Bodhisattva: A Way for the Many*. Bangkok: Faculty of Arts Publication Project, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

The other group includes studies of the Vessantara Jataka Tale as part of a larger body of bodhisattva literature, with special focus on the question of moral conflict or moral inadequacy of the bodhisattvas in the stories.²⁷ As the scope of this article is more closely related to the issues raised in this second group of works, I will relate my discussion more closely with works produced under this category.

In this second category of works, there are basically three main academic positions. First, the work by Ven.Rassagala Seewali Thero points to the moral inadequacy of many actions performed by bodhisattvas in the *jataka* tales. He has selected 10 from the over 500 stories for special analysis. His observations are that there are instances of obvious lack of compassion on the part of the bodhisattvas, although compassion is the central virtue not only in Buddhism, but especially in the practice of all bodhisattvas.²⁸ He cites several instances of moral weakness of bodhisattvas, but only two will be given here. In the Chullapatum Jataka, there is the story of a bodhisattva whose 7 brothers got lost in the forest. When out of food to

²⁷ Please note the following works in this second category. Reiko Ohnuma. 2000. *"Internal and External Opposition to the Bodhisattva's Gift of His Body"*, Journal of Indian Philosophy. Vol.28 no.1 February 2000, pp.43-75; Ven.Rassagala Seewali Thero. B.E.2542 (AD.1999). *A Critical Study of Ethical Problems of Bodhisattva's Karuna in Jataka Stories*, Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University. Steven Collins. 1998. *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of Pali Imaginaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁸ Ven.Rassagala Seewali Thero. Op.Cit., p.4.

sustain life, the 7 brothers agree among themselves that they will kill one of the wives each day and share the food with the rest. They start with the wife of the youngest brother first. The bodhisattva, when he receives his portion, keeps his portion and eats only from the portion of his wife. When the time comes to the killing of his wife, he distributes the saved portions of earlier days and thus saves the life of his wife. In the middle of the night, he and his wife run away.²⁹ The critical observation of Ven.Rassagala is that as a bodhisattva, why not sacrifice his own life first as food for the rest? Why partake of the flesh from the wives of his brothers to save his own life and then cheat on the agreement when it comes to his wife's turn?³⁰ In his analysis this is a clear example of moral weakness.

In the case of Vessantara, Ven.Rassagala makes the observation that the giving of the children is highly problematic because "Madsī holds equal rights to the two children."³¹ Moreover, the giving away of the children has caused extreme misery and suffering for his wife and children. He asks how it is possible for a bodhisattva not show any compassion in this kind of situation.³²

It is interesting to note that Phra Seewali Thero's critical observation of the bodhisattvas' actions is not only that they are violating the principle of compassion, which is the core of Buddhist ethics, but oftentimes, the bodhisattvas themselves

are falling short of what an "ordinary" person would do in the same situation.³³ However, we can see that the analytical approach of his work sees certain actions of the bodhisattvas as themselves an "ethical problem." How could these actions be those of a bodhisattva, as they are supposed to be filled with a higher quality of compassion than others? The ethical problem here is that the bodhisattvas are "not good enough," as they have violated the most basic virtue in Buddhist ethics.

Another thought-provoking approach is used by Professor Reiko Ohnuma whose article focuses on the giving away of the body (body parts or lives) of the bodhisattvas. She points out that "giving" is a basic virtue in Buddhism, but if the giving is conducted to the extreme, like the giving of flesh and blood, of bodily parts or of lives to others, the "virtue" of giving could create many problems for those closest to or related to the bodhisattvas. From this perspective, extreme giving becomes an ethical problem, when the giving is too extreme for a society. She uses a poignant comment by Professor Har Dayal from the widely-quoted *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (1932), as a starting point for her own analysis.

"The heroes and heroines of these stories give away wealth, limbs, life, wives and children in a spirit of exaggerated and fantastic philanthropy. The lack of a sense of proportion and harmony is the fatal flaw of the Indian temperament as exhibited in literature and religion. The Indian thinkers and writers often push a

²⁹ A summary of a longer version by this author from Ibid., pp.87-88.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p.96.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p.87.

good idea to such extremes that it becomes grotesque and ridiculous"³⁴

The teaching on the Middle Path is a corner stone for a system of practice which avoids extremes, both of self-indulgence and self-torture. In this sense, it is odd to see that all the acts of giving of bodhisattvas must include extreme generosity as indicated in the theory of "The Five Givings:" namely, the giving of wealth, children, wife, body-parts and life. In the Sivijakata, King Sivi thinks to himself: "There is not a single external object that I have not given, (yet) external gifts (*bahira-dana*)"do not satisfy me; I want to give an internal gift (*ajjhattika-dana*)." The context clearly suggests that "internal gifts" are vastly superior to "external gifts," and cites, as examples of "internal gifts," the flesh of the heart, the flesh of the body, the blood, and the eyes.³⁵ The giving of these "internal gifts" leads to several types of arguments against them provided by the people affected by the giving. Professor Ohnuma gives 4 different groups of those people.

- 1) Officials and ministers
- 2) Females close to the bodhisattva (such as mothers, wives and lovers)
- 3) Commoners (such as the king's subjects, a man's friends and companions or the members of an animal-king's herd)
- 4) Minor deities (such as the deity of a hermitage, the deity

of a city-gate, the deity of a tree, or the deity of a pleasure-park).

When we analyze the arguments or criticisms put forth by these four groups of people, we could detect that the basis of their arguments is a particular benefit for a particular time, for a specific group of people or beings. They could be a particular benefit for a group of women close to the bodhisattva, or a particular benefit for a kingdom, or a particular benefit for a people, or a particular benefit for a local deity. All the while, the argument put forth by the bodhisattva would be the necessity of increasing his perfections, a tradition of past bodhisattvas and therefore the present giving is necessary as a fulfillment of requirements necessary for future enlightenment. The broader or universal benefits of all beings in the future provide a crucial argument from the view of the bodhisattva.³⁶

The overall analysis of Professor Ohnuma is based on the Buddhist idea of the Middle Path as critique of the extreme giving of bodhisattvas. Another point is the analysis of various reasons or criticisms put forth by those affected by the gift giving. All of the reasons provided by these people or beings could be broadly categorized as reasons of convention. The extreme giving of "internal gifts" reflects a "goodness" so extreme that it is unacceptable by the society of the time. The "virtue" of the extreme giving lies beyond the bounds of the convention.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., pp.47-64.

³⁴ Reiko Ohnuma, Op.Cit., pp.43-44. Professor Ohnuma's analytical approach has served as an inspiration for the approach used in this article.

³⁵ Ibid., p.45.

³⁷ Ibid., pp.57-64. It is interesting to note the different opinions of those past masters of exegesis of the acts of gift-giving of the bodhisattva. Professor Ohnuma brings out these different voices both from within the tales or the texts themselves, as well as those voices

Thus it becomes an act of kindness which results in extreme suffering for the bodhisattva as well as for those people around him. Moreover, oftentimes, the recipient of the gifts is so undeserving. The most obvious case is that of Jujaka in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale*. On this point, Professor Ohnuma provides an interesting observation that the more undeserving the recipient (that is, he is greedy, evil, ugly), the more obvious is the greatness of the gift-giving.³⁸

This point of the need for an imbalance or deliberate dissonance of the moral polarity of the gift giver and the recipient could be viewed from two angles. First, from the perspective of the dramatic effect of the tale, it could be said that when the moral degradation, the physical ugliness, the devilish intent of Jujaka are juxtaposed to the great sacrifice, the lavish generosity and the high royal standing of Vessantara, a feeling of disgusting dissonance could be created in the audience. It could be a feeling of strong aversion for Jujaka, a feeling of strong moral support for Vessantara, a feeling of condemnation of evil and approval of good. From another angle, it could be said that the undeserving nature of the recipient confirms the principle of *giving without discrimination*. The universality of the principle is explicitly manifest when the most undeserving (someone like Jujaka) recipient receives the most valuable (namely the royal children) gift, from the most generous Vessantara. This possibility indicates the “anyone” element of the universal principle. This principle is truly “universal” as Jajaka is the manifestation

of the worst possible recipient among all the possible “equal” recipients.

At this point one might wonder if there could not be possibilities of reconciling these different moral dilemmas as put forth by the people around Vessantara. Professor Ohnuma has pointed out three possibilities. First, it could be argued that these extreme acts of kindness which involve intense emotional dimension are necessary as acts of sympathetic identification of the bodhisattva with the rest of human beings. The emotional intimacy is necessary to illustrate the “closeness” of the bodhisattva with the people, not the emotional detachment of an arahat. Second, these tales of extreme generosity could be viewed as an illustration of a mental deed not actual physical giving of gifts. These tales are allegorical tales to be grasped as a fictional story to make a moral point. They are not meant to be taken literally. They merely illustrate the giving up of the self of the bodhisattva, when the “self” is expressed through the bonds or ties of relationships with people around him as well as his own body and life. Lastly, the tales are meant to illustrate the stories of bodhisattvas who are “special” beings, who are different from us. These tales are to be “worshipped” not to be “emulated” by the audience.³⁹ Another possibility of compromise or reconciliation might be to view these acts of bodhisattvas as “moral experiments” through their journeys in different lives. They need to try out different moral possibilities to the extreme possibilities of those acts before they come to the realization that only wisdom can lead to enlightenment, not extreme self-sacrifice. It is relevant to point out here the

from the exegetical literature. My article deals only with the voices from within the tale of Vessantara.

³⁸ Ibid., pp.60-61.

³⁹ Ibid., pp.64-66.

in the life of Siddhatta, he leaves his wife and child, and does not "give" them away. There is also no giving of body parts or the life of the Buddha. These various experiences of moral experiments finally lead a bodhisattva to the Middle Path. The "Middle" is not easily or readily found.

It could be said that the explanation and analysis of Professor Ohnuma indicates a critique of the giving of the body of the bodhisattva from the view that these acts of extreme generosity are actually "too good."⁴⁰ Unlike the analysis of Venerable Rassagala Seewali Thero, who focuses on the acts of bodhisattva which are not "good enough," Professor Ohnuma's analysis points to the opposite. In the following investigation we can see a possibility of explaining the dilemmas expressed in these two approaches. We would begin with the question: Is there any possibility of other "good" which is beyond the "good" defined in a society through the various forms and levels of relationships?

An eminent Buddhist scholar, Professor Steven Collins suggests that in order to evaluate the "right" or "wrong" of the acts of Vessantara, one needs to make a distinction between two levels of morality, one "mundane," the other "ideological-transcendental."⁴¹ Professor Collins sees the *Vessantara Jataka Tale* both as a realist drama and an allegory. From one

perspective, the audience should feel great empathy with and sympathy for the sufferings of different people in the story. The feelings need to be grounded in the "reality" of the story of people with flesh and blood who go through pain and suffering. On the other hand, these "realist" dramas need to be understood as allegory as well. This is because the sufferings of the people are "believable" and "real," but the decision of extreme generosity of Vessantara illustrates a narrative technique in presenting a "morality play."⁴² It is this ambiguity in the story itself which makes the story so powerful as a religious narrative. One could imagine that the feelings of moral uneasiness could pose a challenge to a "normal" common sensical feeling of conventional morality. Professor Collins points out the fact that this highly emotional *jataka tale* forces the audience to face the dilemma of one of the key virtues of Buddhism, namely that of giving or *dana*. When this most highly valued virtue is performed to the extreme, it seems to become other than virtue, creating pain, suffering and chaos for everyone in the whole political entity. The political entity itself is threatened. This is a challenge to all the "goodness" (of people performing their moral duties in their different roles in their different relationships) in a common social world. All this goodness is inevitably related to familial, social and political relationships.⁴³

If the audience were to consider Vessantara "wrong" in his great generosity, they would have to admit that the moral wrongness of Vessantara is not a

⁴⁰ Although Professor Ohnuma begins her analysis with the cases of body-giving of different bodhisattvas, her analysis includes the case of Vessantara, in the sense that Vessantara's giving is an extreme act of generosity performed for a most undeserving recipient, that is, someone like Jujaka.

⁴¹ Steven Collins, *Op.Cit.*, pp.528-529.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.528.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“criminal” act. It is not an evil act with an intention to hurt or destroy others. On the contrary, the tragedy of the whole story lies precisely in the goodness of the act, put to extreme. If, on the other hand, the audience were to consider that Vessantara is “right” in his generous gesture, the view has to come from another level of consideration. Professor Collins names this level “ideological-transcendental.” This level of “goodness” is necessary for the achievement of future enlightenment. It is interesting to note that while Phra Rassagala Seewali Thero emphasizes that many of the bodhisattvas’ acts are not “good enough,” and Professor Ohnuma indicates that other acts (of extreme giving of body) are “too good” for society to tolerate, Professor Collins’ analysis points to the paradox that an act which is “too good” *is a necessary wrong*, so that a “higher” good is possible in the future. This “higher good” might not be readily perceivable from one particular point in time or from a particular view from any member of the society in the story, but that is not so important when a future greater good demands these smaller sacrifices. From this analysis then, there is no need to “defend” the moral feasibility of Vessantara’s acts, as they are actually necessary to achieve a higher goal in the future. Although at the end of the story, everything given away by Vessantara *is returned* to the entire royal family at the final reunion, this could be seen as a “compromise” with the audience, more than a suggestion that “actually”, at the end of the day, Vessantara did not give anything to anybody.⁴⁴

Possibilities of Reconciliation?

⁴⁴ See an interesting analysis of the end of the story of Vessantara in Ibid., pp.526-527.

It is interesting to note that all three analytical approaches outlined above utilize a common criterion as a conceptual framework to “evaluate” the acts of giving of Vessantara and other bodhisattvas. That criterion is developed from a temporal basis which *lies beyond* the text itself. In other words, the use of the Middle Path as a critique of extreme giving of the bodhisattvas, actually indicates a principle which was discovered by the Buddha, who is the future birth of Vessantara in particular and other bodhisattvas in general. One other criterion of “wholesome” giving is giving which does not incur suffering neither for oneself nor for others, is a teaching which was developed by the Buddha only after his enlightenment. All these criteria belong to a different time frame, namely, the future time framework, which is yet to come. These criteria maybe familiar for the reader in her/his world, but certainly they have yet to come into existence in the textual world of the *jataka tales*.⁴⁵ In this sense, the historical truth of the Buddha’s enlightenment in the future (of the text) which is a fulfillment of the ardent wish of the bodhisattva, especially of Vessantara, has become a crucial reference or a key condition in explaining the moral dilemmas of Vessantara. But this possibility lies in the world of the reader, not in the world of the people who are directly affected by the acts of Vessantara. All three authors whose works are discussed here assume this post-story reader’s world. These authors already possess one important piece of

⁴⁵ See the complicated relationships between the textual world and the reader world as conditions for discussing the truth and meaning of religious narratives in Gary Comstock. 1993. “*The Truth of Religious Narratives*”, *Philosophy of Religion* (34).

knowledge which is not in any of the texts, namely, that the Buddha did actually attain enlightenment. The Buddha's enlightenment has actually, throughout Buddhist history, helped innumerable people alleviate or get rid of their suffering. This enlightenment (presumed in the reader's world of the three authors) was a "direct" result of life of the bodhisattvas under study. From this perspective, the meanings of the suffering of those in the jataka tale, whether those of the people of Sipi, or those of Queen Pusadi, or those of Mudsior those of Ganha and Chalie, all present an additional layer of meaning from the point of view of the audience or the reader's world. That additional layer of meaning helps provide a basis for understanding the "necessity" of those sacrifices. Those sacrifices did work. They did produce the intended results, namely, the enlightenment of the Lord Buddha.

However, if we consider the meaning of the text by focusing merely on the temporal framework of the text itself, we will see that the future possibility of enlightenment is only a possibility. It is still merely an ardent wish of a bodhisattva who is still on the path. It is not yet a "knowledge" that enlightenment will result. There is no prior knowledge of the enlightenment of Prince Siddhattha. A key question here is then: Do the people around Vessantara share this strong "hope" with him? If we consider the arguments and criticisms put forth by King Sonchai, Queen Pusadi, the people of Sipi, and the children, all do not indicate the sharing of that hope. They all criticize him (in the case of King Sonchai, the people and the children) or defend him (as in the case of Queen Pusadi) on the basis of conventional morality. It is only Queen Madsī who explicitly joins Vessantara in

his wish for future enlightenment. The giving of the children and the giving of Madsī herself are accepted by Madsī, ultimately because she shares the value of Vessantara's future pursuit. Madsī's devotion is total as she gives up all there is of her present life, for a vision of her husband. Perhaps in this we could say that Madsī is the only one in the entire story who "shares" his hope of future enlightenment. In this sense, Madsī's acceptance and understanding of Vessantara's great giving, offers his giving the possibility *of justification and perhaps reconciliation from within the story itself*. Her total devotion to her husband thus creates the possibility of moral justification within the time frame of the text itself. This is different from other possibilities of reconciliation which need to take into account the future of Vessantara, and use that future time frame to re-work moral consideration back into the narrative.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the analysis of Professor Collins ultimately leads to the transformation of Vessantara's moral dilemmas into a moral paradox. In other words, if the criteria for moral evaluation of Vessantara's generosity needs to posit two levels of moral consideration, one mundane, the other ideological-transcendental as discussed earlier, the one act which is "wrong" at the mundane level is actually "right" from the perspective of the transcendental, then perhaps the question of moral dilemma as self-contradictory rules of moral judgment, needs to be re-understood under a different concept. If the wrong of an act at one level is necessary for the right of the same act at another level, then we have a paradox, not a moral dilemma. From this angle then, the extreme giving of Vessantara needs to be wrong, in order for it to be right. The

wrongness of the act becomes the *locus* for the rightness of the same act. In this sense then, perhaps a reconciliation is no longer called for because a moral dilemma has been transformed into a moral paradox.

Our next question is if we accept that the future success of enlightenment *justifies* the suffering and pain of the people around Vessantara, including himself, then perhaps it means we also accept that Buddhist ethics is utilitarian in nature. (The greater happiness of a greater number of people is the criterion for moral right and wrong.) As the number of people who follow the Buddha's path and alleviate their suffering is larger than those who suffer in the *jataka* tale, then Vessantara's moral act is justified. However, if we follow this line of logic, will we not incur for Buddhist ethics the same criticisms leveled against Utilitarianism? In other words, even if larger numbers of people actually benefit from the Buddha's enlightenment, where lies the possibility of justice for those fewer people around the life of Vessantara?

One last point, which can not be dealt with here, is the question: *How* should people in this 21st century interpret the meanings of this complicated and controversial *jataka* tale? *How should we interpret the rich and confusing messages put forth in this national text?* There are new questions posed by human rights advocates, by feminist scholars who see the acts of Vessantara as perhaps unacceptable.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Please see an example of constructive engagement with Vessantara Jataka and others in Uthong Prasartwinitchai, Op.Cit. Also see an interesting analysis of the cultural meanings of giving in Thai society in Mukhom Wongthes. 2000. "The Gift of the Body as the 'Gift of Knowledge': Body Donation in

Which questions are *fair* and *legitimate*? Which are not? Which questions do the present readers have the "right" to ask and which are anachronistic? All these questions require further reflection. Perhaps one strategy is useful, namely, the attitude of "challenge with respect."⁴⁷ This attitude, which does not belittle or bedevil a text and its tradition, and yet does not rest content with conservative transmission of the message, needs to be adopted so that a cultural and religious text and tradition so rich as the *Vessantara Jataka* can live on and provide a meaningful cultural cosmos for people in Thai society who are braving the future now.

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⁴⁷ Please see a discussion of the attitude of "challenge with respect" as a basis for inter-religious dialogue and for a dialogue between philosophy and religion which could be applicable to the study of ancient religious narratives which have been transmitted to later generations for centuries, like Vessantara Jataka in Suwanna Satha-Anand. B.E.2545. *Faith and Wisdom: A Philosophical Dialogue with Religion*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.

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