

Crossing to the Farthest Shore: How Pāli Jātakas Launch the Buddhist Image of the Boat onto the Open Seas

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A focus of recent debate in Buddhist Studies has been the extent to which the early Buddhists were involved in maritime activity. This paper takes this discussion as a starting point to explore the use of boats in early Pāli texts. It notes the rarity of nautical imagery in extant Indian literature of the period, and contrasts this with the frequent use of the boat as a simile and metaphor in the *nikāyas*. These early texts, however, exhibit little interest in maritime travel or its imagery. The *Jātakas*, however, select an underlying maritime metaphor for their articulation of the Bodhisatta vow, and include a number of maritime stories that involve the achievements of the Bodhisatta as mariner and hero, as well as other, often unsuccessful, outcomes of voyages undertaken by those who do not follow basic Buddhist principles. This paper examines the few *Jātaka* stories in which the image of the sea voyage is used to demonstrate the nature of the Bodhisatta path and the search for the perfections. These stories, rich in their depiction of sea travel, anticipate the peculiarly Southern Buddhist interest in the image of the boat. This image subsequently features in many forms in the thought, art, practice and narrative of these often coastal and river-based regions.

One of the famous poems of the Pāli canon, dating from the earliest strata of the texts, describes the teaching of the Buddha as like a good boat, an image that recurs throughout the Pāli canon.¹

¹See DP II: 531, *nāvā*.

321. Just as one embarking upon a strong boat, provided with oar and rudder, could bring many others across there, being skilful, thoughtful, and knowing the means thereof.

322. In the same way, one who has knowledge and has developed himself, who is learned and unshakeable, understanding it himself, could make others realize it, if they have the ability to listen attentively (Norman 1995: 35).

The Buddhist tradition is rich in imagery to describe awakening, with the quenching and the quelling of fires, for instance, of *nibbāna*, or the use of a “path” or “road” to describe the means of attaining freedom. The boat, however, is also a central metaphor for the route to the overcoming of the defilements and tendencies: the image of “crossing over” an expanse of water often, though not always, involves a nautical image, in order to reach a “far shore”, taken as the elimination of defilements and attainment of arahatship.²

But what kind of boats are being described? To what extent does the famous image of “crossing over” to the “far shore” apply to seas as well as rivers? In her recent works, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and Maritime Links in Early South Asia* and *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia*, Himanshu Prabha Ray has argued that from the third century BCE Buddhists were largely responsible for opening up the trade routes in the Indian Ocean, as opposed to the Arabs or even Europeans to whom this achievement used to be attributed.³ Her work is closely argued and depends upon fine analysis of archaeological, textual, numismatic and inscriptional evidence that will lie outside the scope of this paper, which takes her research as a point of departure for a literary and doctrinal discussion. It asks how often and in what way the “boat” occurs in other extant Indic literature of the time. It then explores the use of the image in Pāli literature, noting that among texts of this period the presence of a nautical image is distinctively Buddhist. The early Buddhists were from the outset travellers and willing to cross large expanses of India. In most Pāli texts, however, the boat employed

²See Collins 1990: 259–261.

³See Ray 1999 and 2003. These works argue that Buddhist interchanges accompanied the move to increased coastal urbanization, the development of emergent nautical technologies and the establishment of trade routes. Her work contains archaeological and inscriptional evidence supporting this paper. For Western classical sources during this period and the differentiation between riverine and maritime nautical networks, see K.R. Hall 1985: 1–47. For numismatic and early inscriptional evidence for trade and exchange of technologies in South Asia see Bopparachchi 1998. For discussion on seafaring in art and literature, see Schlingloff 1987: 195–218.

for “crossing over” is almost always a riverine one. So the paper then examines how the boat that is described in the canon becomes far more adventurous in the *Jātaka* literature, to become a seafaring vehicle. There an underlying maritime nautical image is used as a framing metaphor, as if the emergent ideal of the Bodhisatta path required and exploited not only riverine travel, but voyages crossing oceans too.

The use of images of boats, both riverine and maritime, as an expression of doctrine not only differentiates the Buddhist tradition from other Indic religious systems of the time but also, through presentation of the skills needed to survive on a boat and the very presence of nautical heroes, contributes to the shaping of a new heroic ideal, that of the Bodhisatta, which rejects notions of caste, status, and privileged access to salvific activity. For whatever reason, Buddhist literature offers us the only narratives from this period that feature to any great extent the nautical or maritime traveller as hero. The paper explores the *Jātaka* use of the topos of the sea voyage and argues that not only is it a motif that distinguishes early Buddhist literature, but that it is used to present a Buddhist ethos still popularly recreated in art, narrative and temple depictions throughout the pre-eminently seafaring cultures of Southern Buddhism.

The Indian background

But first it will be useful to consider the Indic background to the Buddhist interest in the nautical and all its manifestations. For all the Indic traditions, existence is regarded as an ocean, that of *samsāra*. As Steven Collins has demonstrated, imagery of the ocean, with positive and negative connotations, is central to Buddhist explication, a pre-eminence derived from the Vedic texts (Collins 1990: 261). The use of the boat in Vedic literature is, however, less frequent. Himanshu Ray argues: ‘References to the sea occur in Vedic literature and indicate a knowledge of the ocean, though there is little evidence of maritime travel implicit in these’ (Ray 2003: 13). There is perhaps more than she concedes: at least two Ṛg Vedic hymns demonstrate boats as an image of spiritual struggle, even though the doctrine of rebirth over many lives, and the ocean as representing the round of existences, were not expressly formulated when the hymns were composed.⁴

⁴See *Rg Veda* 1.97.8 and *Rg Veda* 7.88 and Wendy O’Flaherty, *The Rig Veda* (Harmondsworth, Middsx.: Penguin, 1981), 215. Grateful thanks to Dr James Benson, Dr Elizabeth Tucker and Professor J. L. and Mary Brockington for discussion and references on this subject.

It is notable, however, that while in extant non-Buddhist Indian literary and narrative traditions from the same period as the early Buddhist texts, sea travel sometimes features, it is not centre stage. Unusually for world epic literature, there are almost no boats or maritime journeys in the *Mahābhārata* or the *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁵ This is in striking contrast to, say, the Babylonian epic poem, *Gilgamesh*, the 18th century BCE Akkadian poem, *Atrahasis*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (3rd century BCE), in all of which a journey by boat and the presence of ships are central to the narrative and frame the enactment of a heroic ideal. The *Rāmāyaṇa* involves epic journeys between two lands separated by a stretch of sea, on established trade routes of Lanka and India. Boats, however, are not involved: Sītā's capture by Hanuman is effected by her being transported magically by the demon; for her rescue by her husband a walkway to Lanka is magically created across from India. The sea is frequently mentioned, but no one enters a boat, nor is one described. The ocean is considered dangerous, and tends to have mildly negative connotations.⁶ While there is a rich and varied maritime literature in India dating back at least to the end of the first millennium, early Indian temples did not depict sea travel, boats or indeed shipwrecks, except perhaps in some coastal regions such as Tamil Nadu.⁷

While historical accident must play a part in the survival of maritime texts from this period, the crucial factor is the high-caste Indian attitude to travel by boat: it was regarded as polluting. Manu's law book is unrelenting, saying that any Brahmin who undertakes a voyage on a boat, whether riverine or maritime, must undergo ritual purification.⁸ This point is constantly reiterated in the *dharmasūtras*.⁹ Sanskrit scholars of high caste must have ignored these strictures: they travelled to Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia from early times, so we do not know how seriously the textual prohibition was taken. Given the great love of ritual, narrative and tradition amongst seafaring classes throughout the world, there must have been many story traditions concerning the sea and sea travel: in-

⁵I am grateful to Dr Nick Allen for discussion on this subject.

⁶See for instance Goldman and Goldman 2006: 311 (35.50) and 181 (15.1).

⁷Sylvain Lévi (1930: 597-614), argues that the specificity of the goddess Maṇimekhalā to a particular region and, later, a twelfth-century Tamil Nadu poem, supports suggestions that *Jātakas* draw on local legends from throughout India which are now lost. This goddess, who rescues sailors from shipwrecks, appears in the *Mahājanaka-Jātaka* (J 539) and the *Saṅkha-Jātaka* (J 442) and many post-canonical *Jātakas*.

⁸See Doniger with Smith 1991: 60 (3.158) for description of the pollution involved.

⁹See Olivelle 1999: B 2.2, where a sea voyage is categorized alongside such crimes as theft from brahmins, trade, and bearing false witness.

deed Sylvain Lévi argued that sea-going *Jātakas* did draw on such regional stories, though one could not rule out *Jātaka* influence the other way (Lévi 1930). As Peter Skilling notes, the word “influence” is a risky one in South and Southeast Asia, whose cultures and narratives in various contexts develop in tandem.¹⁰ Rather, it is useful to speak of a “pool of signifiers” from which storytellers drew, applicable between traditions, as well as within them.¹¹ Sea tales must have circulated amongst those trading and working on boats; their vestiges probably survive not only in *Jātakas* but also in vernacular narratives, songs and dramas around the sub-continent. It is, however, high-caste Indian narratives and the religious literature that have survived: for a text to survive orally it would need to be considered important. Those reciting texts, composing narratives, poems and epics would be unlikely to venture upon sea travel, or, if they did, would not see it as a ground for heroism, adventure or narrative.

The Jain tradition, a product of the same cultural conditions in which Buddhism arose, with a central doctrine that also ignored caste, like Buddhism rejected the hereditary custodianship of texts and associated rituals. It exhibits some mild interest in imagery of the boat and sea travel.¹² But the metaphor that defines Jain teaching is that of the teacher as *tīrthaṅkara*, usually understood as “ford-maker”. Whether this term necessarily suggests “crossing” an expanse of water has been debated: Padmanabh Jaini, for instance, suggests that the word (*titthiya*), used by the Buddhists to denote other sects, may have simply meant “founder of a group”.¹³ Asko Parpola has argued that it means, “the creator of a safe bathing-place” on the side of a river and, comparing the word *ghat* with Dravidian forms, has posited that there was an ancient Indic cult of the sacred bathing place, still evident in the ghats at Varanasi (Parpola 2003: 523ff). Neither of these riverine images involves boats. From the earliest days of the tradition merchants, sea traders and sailors formed a crucial element in the Jaina population and were prepared to travel, as their presence around the world testifies. Such journeys, however, are less prominent in their early literature, not offering

¹⁰He talks of the importance of not necessarily assuming Indian antecedents in ‘quests for origins’ in early Siamese literature, a point that perhaps also applies to narrative developments within India itself (Skilling 2009).

¹¹See Ramanujan 1991: 22–49. These issues are also discussed in Satyanath 2009: 43–56.

¹²For generous comment about the Jain tradition, I am very grateful to Dr Naomi Appleton, Professor Nalini Balbir and Professor Julia Hegewald.

¹³On the associations of the word *tīrtha* see Jaini 1981. For *titthiya* see PED 302.

material for making philosophical and doctrinal points.¹⁴ Modern Jaina maritime depictions tend to be derived from just one narrative, probably dating from the same period as the early Buddhist stories we are discussing, in which it has a counterpart; it describes a boat capsized and survivors seized by demons.¹⁵ This story, however, concerns an unsuccessful voyage, and focuses primarily on the adventures of the merchants after they land on the island dominated by a demoness, not the journey itself. While such material is inconclusive as evidence for early Jaina texts now lost, the Buddhist counterpart, the *Valāhassa Jātaka* (J 196), focuses more on the adventures at sea than does the Jain version.

For whatever reason, the voyage by boat, though it may sometimes have been undertaken by high-caste Indians and by Jains, who in theory rejected caste, does not appear in non-Buddhist literature extant from this period as an imaginative simile, a central narrative motif or a means of expressing doctrine.

Buddhism, crossing over, and boats

In contrast, metaphors and similes associated with the boat are pervasive in Buddhist doctrine, narrative and art. The early Buddhist stress on the eightfold path and the skilful or healthy mind (*kusala-citta*), not external forms, as the means of obtaining liberation from existence, would not support a rejection of travel by boat. Finding liberation is a way through to what is called the ‘farther shore.’ The boat or ship (*nāvā*), or the raft (*uḷumpa*), bound together with bolts or cloth, or a more makeshift one (*kulla*), perhaps made of reeds, which travels across any kind of water, is a central motif in much early Buddhist discourse.¹⁶ The one who is enlightened is “one who has crossed over” (*tiṇṇa*) a flood, or “gone beyond” (*pāragū*), a term associated with the idea of perfecting.¹⁷ Steven Collins comments on this:

¹⁴Ray gives little discussion of the Jains, but see Ray 2003: 282–3.

¹⁵The Jain story involving the sea can be found in Saras 1997. I am grateful to Dr Naomi Appleton for supplying this reference. The earliest strata of Jain texts are lost, but we can surmise that some version of this story was extant at the time of the *Jātakas*.

¹⁶See DP I 709 (Abh 665, Vin I 230, M I 135 etc.) for *kulla* and DP I 510 for *uḷumpa* (Vin III 63, D II 89).

¹⁷For varied interpretations of *pāragū* see PED 454; for associations of *tiṇṇa* with floods see PED 302.

The image is so common that the epithets *pāraga*, *pāragato*, and *pāragū*, ‘crossing’ or ‘crossed over’ come to be used in these meanings without any explicitly marked simile (Collins 1990: 250).

The word boat (*nāvā*), as explained by the *Vinaya*, refers to any vehicle that is used to cross water (Vin III 49). Boats are often mentioned in the *Vinaya*, and there are no strictures on travelling on them, other than enjoinders that monks and nuns should not make arrangements to travel together (Vin IV 65; Vin IV 72-5). These boats are clearly sometimes large, with several rooms (Vin III 200). Ordinations may be carried out on boats, provided there is water on both sides, presumably so that the site avoids being under the jurisdiction of a particular state. In one ruling the crossing over of monks and nuns (*tiriyaṃtaraṇāya*) to the ‘farther shore’ by boat is allowed (Vin IV 65). The commentary explains that this may involve land after sea travel, though this is not stated in the original text, which implies riverine, not maritime, travel and we can infer that this was a later interpretation of the initial ruling (see VinA 809).

Various kinds of rafts are also described in the *nikāyas*, as in the famous simile of the raft (*uḷumpa*) in the *Alagaddupāma Sutta* in the *Majjhimanikāya*, where the Buddha describes his teaching as a raft which will help the practitioner cross over to the other side of the river but needs to be discarded on arrival.¹⁸ The crossing involved is not always by boat. Indeed the incident in the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, where the Buddha seems to cross over to the other side by magical means, has, it has been argued by Rhys Davids, Norman and An, arisen from a misunderstanding of the associated verse. An also shows, translating the commentary to this passage, that *aṇṇava* refers here to an expanse of water, not the sea.¹⁹ The image suggests that rather than using psychic powers, the Buddha follows the eightfold path by carefully stepping across the river, while those adhering to vows

¹⁸See ‘The Simile of the Snake’ (M I 134-5), *Sutta* 22, in Bodhi and Ñāmile o 2001: 228–9.

¹⁹Yang-gyu An agrees with Rhys Davids and Norman, *metri causa*, that *setuṃ katvāna* is an inserted gloss, and that a misunderstanding of the verse has brought about a misinterpretation in the later prose: *ye taranti aṇṇavaṃ saraṃ setuṃ katvāna visajja pallalāni/kullaṇṇaṃ hi jano pabandhati tiṇṇā medhāvino janā ti*. The Buddha has crossed the pools of greed, hatred and delusion by means of the noble path, while, as Rhys Davids and Norman argue, the vain world looks for salvation by means of rites, ceremonies and gods. The water crossed is “a broad stretch of water which as a minimum is one *yojana* deep.” See An 2003: 62–3 and 62, n.5 and PED 17. M I 134 also uses *aṇṇava* in a context where it suggests a flood or a river rather than the sea. S I 214, according to the commentaries, refers to the four floods (*ogha*) of views, existence, sensuality and ignorance (see Bodhi 2000: 485–6, n.598). See also S IV 157.

and rituals are trying to find boats or rafts, or to create makeshift rafts themselves – a rare mildly negative association of the boat. But there are plenty of “crossings” by boat in the *nikāyas* and other early texts (e.g., A II 201, Dhp 369, Sn 777). In a land where floods are common, it is understandable that escaping and saving others from floods is one of the key images for enlightenment.

This water is almost always explicitly stated to be an expanse of river or flood. If the context of each use is examined carefully there are almost no references to a boat being used to cross the sea. It is implied occasionally, such as in the idea that each of the senses is an ocean which needs to be crossed (see PED 688 *samudda* and S IV 157), but no sea-going boats, sailors or passengers are actually mentioned.

There are two exceptions, both involving similes. One describes the beached sea (*sāmuddika*) boat, which rots away after a long maritime trip, a sight of course that anyone might have seen in a large river mouth. The decay of this boat is compared to how a monk dedicated to *bhāvanā* may easily be weakened by defilements (S III 155=A IV 127). The other seems to be the only explicit reference in the *nikāyas* to a seafaring boat actually at sea. In the *Kevaddha Sutta*, Kevaddha asks the Buddha where the four elements cease, and the Buddha tells a story:

Long, long ago (*bhūtapubbam*), brother, sea-faring traders (*sāmuddikā vaṇijā*) were wont, when they were setting sail on an ocean voyage (*nāvāya samuddam*), to take with them a land-sighting bird. And when the ship got out of sight of the shore they would let the land-sighting bird free (D I 222–3/Rhys Davids 1959: I 282–3).

The bird would fly to all points of the compass; if it found land it would go there, if not it would return. Kevaddha’s returning to the Buddha, the only place he will find an answer to his question, after visiting the many highest heaven realms, is compared to the bird returning to the boat, its refuge in the open seas. The implication of course is that the various realms of existence, however rarefied, are still within *samsāra*, the open seas, and cannot offer the path to liberation: the Buddha is the sea-going boat that offers the only safe haven. It is significant that this sole reference to sea-going merchants, and their voyaging, is prefaced by the word *bhūtapubbam*, a story-telling device, suggestive of an experience alien to those composing this text.²⁰

²⁰For *bhūtapubbam* see PED 507.

Indeed in practice, as Ray briefly suggests (Ray 2003: 21), in the canon the image of a boat is almost always used to describe riverine rather than maritime travel, and the crossing of a flood or large expanse of water like a swollen river. Worldly life “has gone adrift on the great flood; there is none other than myself [the Buddha] to rescue it from the flood”.²¹ The boat serves this purpose, but it is not used afterwards, and is discarded, as in the raft simile. The *Mahāśudassana Sutta* does describe the treasurer of the *Cakkavattin* king on a boat on the River Ganges. From this he can bring a pot of gold out of the waters at any time, because the king asks for it: but it is significant that this fabulous *sutta* describes an earlier birth of the Buddha, and so has a *Jātaka* tone, with the rich visual imagery of crystals, jewels and gold found so frequently in that collection (D II 176). Apart from this, boats are not explicitly suggested as a means for making fortunes, undertaking long-range travel, or crossing oceans.

Ray notes: “The early Buddhist texts, particularly the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the *Suttapiṭaka*, contain vivid accounts of the journeys undertaken by the Buddha and his followers on their missions to preach, and thus are a valuable source for the study of early land routes.” (Ray 2003: 21). While still debated, boundaries are probably to the south the Deccan, to the north possibly Taxila, Sāvātthi and Rājagaha. The first coastal mention appears to be Bharukaccha or Bharuch at the mouth of the Narmada on the west coast.²² As this brief survey has shown, the lack of geographical travel by maritime routes in early canonical texts also applies to the use of imagery and simile.

The Bodhisatta vow and the need to cross oceans

The earliest layers of the *Jātakas* date from the third century BCE and they were finally committed to writing in the fifth century CE.²³ Their evolution occurs during a time, as Ray and others have shown, when India’s complex maritime and mercantile networks were becoming well established, with trade and interchange

²¹ See Ñānamoli 1991a: 130 (Patis I 597).

²² See (Vin 1 60 and *Suttavibhaṅga* I 10.22).

²³ *Jātakas*, once neglected in academic circles, are now arousing increased scholarly interest. A key work in this regard has been the classic translation and introduction to the last and pre-eminently influential story, Cone and Gombrich 1977. Two excellent recent studies on *Jātakas* are Skilling 2008 and Appleton. For a succinct discussion of the evolution of *Jātakas*, see Gombrich’s introduction to the *Vessantara* story (Cone and Gombrich, 1977). See also Appleton 2010: 41-64 and Skilling 2008b.

of goods, coins, material cultures and technologies becoming widespread.²⁴ Buddhist teaching travelled by sea, to Sri Lanka, continental Southeast Asia and Indonesia, a period during which, Kenneth Hall observes, the pursuit of gold, the development of more sophisticated ship building and navigation techniques and a growing commercial ethos were fostering both the dissemination of Buddhism and an underlying sense in the narrative traditions that “the activities of common men, including their economic activities” were worth addressing.²⁵

It is also during this time that we see the emergence of the Bodhisatta vow, and an ethos dependent on the development of the perfections over many lifetimes. This undertaking may need many types of rebirth, in many lands, conditions and regions. So in the *Jātakas* there is not only a greater geographical spread of locations for stories but also far more reference to travel between them. Indeed, *Jātakas* helped to provide Buddhist validation of various regions throughout Southeast Asia: the Buddha Gotama himself may not have been able to visit regions such as Gandhāra or Namobuddha, near Panauti in Nepal, but there are stories in which the Bodhisatta, his earlier self, is said to be there: as Naomi Appleton has shown, such attributions helped a number of areas to establish their own links with the Buddha through his past lives as the Bodhisatta, when he might have lived or travelled there. So how do these various elements work together in the stories and how does sea travel contribute to the description of the Bodhisatta and his path?²⁶

The importance accorded to sea travel in these tales is evident from the preamble and frame story, the *Jātaka-nidāna*, where the image of the boat becomes a defining feature of the Bodhisatta path to Buddhahood. The commentarial prose describes how the Buddha to be, many aeons earlier, took the Bodhisatta vow. Seeing the earlier Buddha, Dīpaṅkara, he decided not to become enlightened at that time, but rather to develop the ten perfections to become a Buddha himself.

...I would rather, like Ten Powered Dīpaṅkara, seek for the highest, complete awakening. I will embark on the ship of *dhamma* (*dhamaṇāvā*) and take the great mass of people across the ocean of existence (*saṃsārasāgara*): afterwards I will attain to complete *nibbāna*. This would become me (Shaw 2006: 1; J I 14).

²⁴See Ray 2003, Bopearachchi 1998 and Hall 1985: 1-47.

²⁵See Hall 1985:37 and for some early comment, Lévi 1929.

²⁶On the way localities have come to ‘adopt’ *Jātakas* as validation of their own Buddhist connection, see Appleton 2010: 118ff.

While the canonical status of the *Jātaka-nidāna* verses that state this intention are unclear, they speak of an undertaking to take the *dhammanāvā* across a “stream of *samsāra*” (*sotasamsāram*), suggesting that the idea in the later prose of the ocean boat comes a little later (J I 14). Maybe it appears in the prose because of the content of the stories. Within these, canonical verses do describe sea voyages in boats. At a crucial point in the last story, the *Vessantara Jātaka* (J VI 547), the Bodhisatta, about to give his son away, makes a renunciation of that which is most beloved. (It recalls the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac.) He asks the boy to support him in his endeavour to attain the perfections:

Come my dear son, fulfil my Perfection; consecrate my heart; do what I say. Be a steady boat to carry me on the sea of becoming (*bhavasāgara*). I shall cross to the further shore of birth, and make the world with its gods cross also.²⁷

In this tale, that which is given freely is returned. Even though the story involves no travel by sea, the boat here is clearly a maritime one. For the Bodhisatta path and the cultivation of the perfections, which must involve many kinds of rebirth in the many regions where Buddhism is rapidly spreading, it seems natural that existence (*bhava*) is seen not as a river but more as an ocean (*sāgara*). This represents a major development: it is an ocean that is “crossed” for a work encompassing many lifetimes and involving many other beings and regions, a movement towards far-ranging travel which we see reflected in the content and orientation of some stories.

The Stories

Only a handful of *Jātaka* stories are exclusively devoted to sea journeys. But like riverine voyages they are shown as often precarious, but common ventures. The stories provide important historical information on nautical life of the period. They indicate that the seagoing boat is being absorbed into Buddhist understanding, thought and imaginative life. Many introduce boats and sea voyages as bringing merchants and passengers good fortune. In the *Cullakasetṭhi Jātaka* (J 4), for instance, a merchant organizes a public relations exercise beside a boat which

²⁷ Gombrich discusses this passage as ‘an implicit hint that Vessantara is doing something dubious for the sake of a greater good – ends are invoked to justify the means.’ (Cone and Gombrich 1977: xxiii–xxiv).

he has purchased on credit, persuading people to spend large amounts of money for part shares after “building the market” through carefully placed rumours. The boat “scam”, the culmination of a series of comparable tricks, is clearly regarded as the most prestigious of his money-making exercises. In other stories, the heroes such as the unfortunate Mittavinda and the fortunate Bodhisatta heroes, Saṅkha in the *Saṅkha Jātaka* (J 431) and Janaka in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* (J 539), go to sea with the express intention of finding wealth. Although they meet with very varied degrees of success, this attitude was presumably widespread. Many of the tales involve shipwreck (J 186, J 196, J 360, J 442, J 539) or, in the case of the set of stories about Mittavinda, someone being put out to sea from a boat as an unlucky passenger.²⁸ The Bodhisatta, who appears in each story, is not always in the boat, though he features in every tale. But when he does go to sea, there is also a chance for that rarity in Indian literature: a literary hero who is either a passenger in a ship, able to exercise skill in means at times of danger, or a professional sailor, whose heroism arises from his knowledge and understanding of seafaring. In such tales, we see what was presumably a manifestation of an established nautical folk tradition: islands haunted by demons and demonesses, or filled with goddesses, seas full of gems, monsters and rescuing deities. While not realistic, these motifs suggest a pre-existing folklore about the sea, its dangers, its adventures, and its providing wealth and good fortune. What is distinctively Buddhist about these ventures, however, is the way the *Jātaka* worldview provides an arena for Buddhist principles and doctrine.

Justin Meiland has noted an important feature of *Jātaka* style: that exploring particular motifs in a number of ways permits a varied and rich perspective on doctrinal points.²⁹ We can see this phenomenon in the sequence of tales about Mittavinda, which exhibit another particularity of *Jātaka* literature, whereby one story is retold with slight variations.³⁰ They are the *Losaka Jātaka* (J 41), three entitled the *Mittavinda Jātaka* (J 82, J 104, J 369), and the *Catuvāra Jātaka* (J 439). The stories are prompted by a story from the present about a monk who is ‘difficult to speak to’ (*dubbacabhikkhu*), indicating an earlier predisposition, except for the minor variation that the *Losaka Jātaka* involves a monk, now an *arahat*, who in

²⁸See Shaw forthcoming 2013.

²⁹See Meiland 2004: 88.

³⁰Stories include *Jātakas* 41, 82, 104, 369, 439. For discussion of this sequence, see Jones 1979: 8–10; Feer 1963: 5.

the past did not listen to those who wished him well.³¹ The stories all give partial accounts of the young man's adventures; none gives the entire plot, and accounts do not always match. But if we take a composite view, the storyline is roughly as follows. A young man behaves badly and goes to sea, but when his ship comes to a mysterious standstill, lots are cast to find the unlucky element. His name is drawn, in one account seven times and in another three, and he is cast into the sea (J 41, J 439). In some versions, he experiences sojourns on magical islands peopled by kindly goddesses and filled variously with crystal, gold and silver (J 41, J 439).³² Although the goddesses advise him to stay while they leave for a few days, he travels on, searching for more (J 41, J 439), full of craving (*taṇhā*: J 439). But his propensity to bad behaviour catches up with him. In some versions he mistakenly takes the four gates of the entrance to the Ussada hell for a city (J 369, J 439) where he can be king (J 439). In *Jātaka* 41, he ends up enslaved after apparently stealing a goat. In the hell stories he suffers great torments and the Bodhisatta, a *deva*, tells him that he can no longer experience the great island palaces he has just visited (J 82, J 104, J 369, J 439); in one version the Bodhisatta appears as a human who tells him he should have listened to others (J 41). In each story, the Bodhisatta tells the protagonist that he could have avoided misfortune if he had not been overcome by excessive greed (*aticcho*: J 104, J 369:), or not listened to others (J 41, J 439) and then been overcome by greed (J 439).³³ No one of these stories recounts a series of events entirely consistent with the others; all share some features with others.

Jones, who discusses the sequence in detail, argues that there is too much variation in the *kamma* involved for one, J 41, to be related. In J41, the protagonist has been a monk who has cheated others and experienced many hells before being born in a beggar family and running away to sea; in J 439 he is born to wealthy parents, but is intractable to his parents' attempts to help him behave well and for instance hits his mother. Feer and Jones, noting some muddles in the way the stories are cross-referenced, argue that *Jātaka* 41 should be excluded from the

³¹Not listening to the advice of others is an offence against the monastic rules (Rule 12 *dubbacasikkhāpadam*, Pruitt and Norman 2001: 19-21).

³²These are alluded to in other stories.

³³The verses read: *laddhā satasahassāni, atirekāni vīsati / anukampakānaṃ nātīnaṃ, vacanaṃ samma nākari || laṅghim samuddam pakkhandi, sāgaraṃ appasiddhikaṃ / catubbhi aṭṭhahjagamā, aṭṭhāhipi ca soḷasa || soḷasāhi ca bāttimsa, aticchaṃ cakkamāsado / icchāhatassa posassa, cakkam bhamati matthake ||* (J IV 4).

grouping, particularly as it makes no reference to hells.³⁴ But the story does feature a monk who does not take advice, has the same name, runs away to sea, is the ‘unlucky’ passenger chosen by lot, is set adrift on a raft, and visits magical islands peopled by kind goddesses, of comparable type, whose advice he ignores. The ending is different: he ends up enslaved after appearing to steal a goat, but his *kamma* is also related to him by the Bodhisatta, who tells him he should have listened to others. Here we have a slight problem. Feer and Jones argue J 439 to be the primary narrative, from which the others may or may not derive. But this assumption that there is a “true” original version of the story, and that one version is the correct one, is a difficult position to maintain in the light of recent work that points out the fluidity of motif in oral literature. As Ramanujan observes with regard to the Rāmāyaṇa, “I prefer the word tellings to the usual terms versions or variants because the latter can and do typically imply that there is an invariant, an original or Ur-text..., the earliest and most prestigious of them all” (Ramanujan 1991: 24–5). *Jātaka* 41 certainly seems to absorb another story strand in a number of different incidents and features whereby the hero is badly behaved in a different way, but also draws on variants of a narrative thread that was perhaps widely known at the time, with a pool of variable motifs clustering around it. A protagonist (Mittivind(ak)a) behaves badly, goes to sea but is unlucky, is cast off on a raft and yet meets with good fortune on magical islands of jewels and kind goddesses. But he does not listen to advice, and/or becomes greedy, and so comes to grief.

In this group of stories, the ocean (*samudda*) offers many possibilities, both in its enchanted islands and in its capacity to lead to a lower hell. It is not the seas that provide misfortune in these tales, however, but the protagonist’s bad *kamma* and bad judgment, however variously and diversely explained. This makes him unlucky to other sailors, and colours his continued bad behaviour and greed. In some of the stories he encounters the gems and gold so greatly desired by the mercantile sailing classes at the time.³⁵ As the Bodhisatta points out, despite his misfortunes, the magical islands could have given him great fortune. Steven Collins has demonstrated the way the heavens or “the beautiful place” or “lovely spot” embody the “felicities” possible on the way to *nibbāna*, and represent the kinds of

³⁴See Feer 1963, 5 and Jones 1979: 8–10.

³⁵For the search for gold during this period, see Hall 1985: 36.

good fortune that arise for those who keep *sīla*.³⁶ These havens do not undermine, but rather complement and support progress on the path to salvation.³⁷ These islands seem a “beautiful place” of this kind. Indeed, *nibbāna* is famously described as an island, and the islands the protagonist comes across promise wealth and happiness (S III 42 and D II 100).³⁸ But it is as if the voyage at sea amplifies bad tendencies there already. While these islands are like heaven realms, employing the crystal, silver and gold and other gems found in visualized “past life” texts such as the *Mahāsudassana Sutta* (D II 169–199), the protagonist cannot enjoy or take benefits from such idyllic conditions. Rather, the stories suggest, if these heavenly environments are approached with a poor moral character (*sīla*), intoxication may affect the judgment, so that through excessive desire one ignores advice and will be unable to recognize the entrance to hell: indeed in one version the protagonist mistakes the wheel of torture on a hell being’s head for a lotus and even argues with him to take it from him (J 439; Ja IV 3). So Mittavinda’s refusal to take advice and greed impel his travels, and he inevitably falls into misfortune. The practice of *sīla*, the ability to listen to others, and the avoidance of greed are perceived as essential in training discrimination, in sea travel, life and spiritual cultivation, so that the gates of hell and its torments are not mistaken for the pleasant cities and lotus blooms perceived by Mittavinda’s wrong view.

So what is it that ensures safety at sea, and the production of wealth rather than a meeting with disaster? In the *Valāhassa Jātaka* (J 196) the island of Lanḅā offers a less safe haven than the enchanted islands of the Mittavinda sequence. Here, five hundred shipwrecked merchants are entertained by some demonesses, masquerading as humans, who hope to eat them up. One merchant realizes their trick, and persuades two hundred and fifty of the traders to escape. They are rescued by the Bodhisatta, reborn as a magical horse, while the others are left to their grisly fate. At the end of the tale, the Buddha compares the ill-fated two hundred and fifty to followers of the Buddha who ignore advice; the rescued merchants are those that pay attention to advice, and so find fortunate rebirths. So, shipwrecks may occur on the dangerous ocean: the one who is attentive, however, avoids mishap and finds his way home.³⁹

³⁶See Vism VII 33 for *sundaramundaras*, and, for discussion of *nibbāna* as a ‘place’, Collins, 1998: 224.

³⁷For heavenly realms as enactments of mental states, see, for instance, Gethin 1998: 112–132.

³⁸A useful study of the use of the image of the island as expressive of *nibbāna* is given in Pasanno and Amaro 2009.

³⁹On the many variations of this tale, see Appleton 2006.

In all these stories the Bodhisatta has been commentator, or intercessor, not a sea traveller himself. In others it is the Bodhisatta himself who is the maritime passenger or the sailor, and we see positive outcomes from the voyage at sea, sometimes material, and sometimes in the sense that it has offered an arena for the hero to test his heroism, resourcefulness and vigour – and so develop the perfections. Many *Jātakas* involve misfortune and shipwrecks, caused by many and various supernatural, moral and practical considerations: in one story the wreck is caused by fish maddened by a divine player of music who is masquerading as a human (J 360). But various factors are involved in survival, which indicate that even the wreck is being exploited as a chance to demonstrate Buddhist values, which ultimately bring success.

In the *Saṅkha-Jātaka* (J 442), the Bodhisatta is a Brahmin so generous he runs out of money to give alms, so he decides to go to sea and obtain more wealth. A *paccekabuddha*, foreseeing that the man will suffer shipwreck, also divines that he will not meet with misfortune if he has made a gift to an ascetic. So he pretends that he has burnt his feet in the desert, and elicits from the sailor the gift of his own shoes. When shipwrecked, rather than praying uselessly to the gods, as all the others do, the Bodhisatta covers his body with oil, eats a large quantity of sugar and ghee, climbs up the mast, gets his bearings in the right direction, with his attendant, and casting away fear of the underwater fish, leaps out into the sea. He and his attendant swim for seven days. The goddess Maṇimekhalā has been appointed by the Four Great Kings to protect anyone who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem, or keeps *sīla*, or who looks after their parents. When she sees Saṅkha swimming, she realizes that his prior act of generosity requires her to come to his aid and she addresses him at sea, unseen by the attendant, bringing a golden plate of food. He turns it down, as it is the *uposatha* day. She offers to rescue him, explaining that his gift of his shoes has ensured her intercession. In a canonical verse, she conjures up a magical boat (Ja V 20): it is, the prose explains, made of the seven gems, eight hundred cubits in length, with masts of sapphire, cords of gold, silver sails and golden oars and rudders, filled with precious gems. She pilots the brahmin, now very wealthy, and his attendant, to safety.⁴⁰

The story is prompted by the great generosity of a lay follower and is an example of the fruits it brings: indeed the *Jātaka-nidāna* singles it out as demonstrating that perfection (Ja I 45). But, as Meiland notes with regard to the wreck in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, a number of conditions enable safe deliverance from

⁴⁰See Levi 1930: 597–614 and Ray 2003: 270–271.

this shipwreck (Meiland 2004: 69). Although the goddess helps him in response to his gift, the hero's clear-headedness ensures his preliminary survival, and his strength his ability to swim. Such supernatural intervention is frequent in Jātaka literature, as is over-determination, of a kind found in classical Greek literature, whereby gods intervene, for good or ill, where appropriate corresponding actions or mental states occur in human or animal protagonists.⁴¹ So, gods and goddesses frequently help those who keep the precepts, observe the uposatha day, and those who have performed good kamma in the past which is now ready to yield its result (*vipāka*).⁴² Here a generous act and nature predispose the hero to common sense: the skilful or healthy mind (*kusala citta*) is also described as greatly resourceful (*upāyakusala*), a peculiarly Jātaka virtue. These attributes are presented in the tale as just as important as strength or vigour. There is also an implied critique of contemporary brahminic values: this hero, for the sake of generosity, breaks the rules. By choosing to go to sea, considered polluting by brahmins, he is already acting unusually; and likewise he does not take recourse to useless prayers when a wreck occurs. Richard Gombrich has demonstrated the dependency of Buddhist discourse on biting satire of brahminic practice: we can infer something of that here too.⁴³

So such tales offer examples of the attribution of events to multiple supporting conditions that so often characterizes Buddhist narrative causality. The emphasis is on individual volition: as a result of a temperament disposed to generosity, it is implied, the sailor's mind is more alert and he is able to act with common sense and forethought at the crucial moment, rather than follow the usual brahminic pattern of prayer and ritual when all seems lost. Clearly all of this represents a very different kind of heroic ideal than that offered by the brahminic code.

These elements, and indeed many consonant narrative motifs, are more fully demonstrated in the most famous Buddhist story concerning the Bodhisatta and his survival after a shipwreck at sea, the *Mahājanaka-Jātaka* (J 539). The "Great Ten" (*Mahānipata*) stories (J 538–J 547) that complete the *Jātaka* collection have in the course of history been singled out as particularly significant; each story comes to be associated with an (occasionally varied) attribution to one of the ten

⁴¹ See Jones 1979: 174–180, and J 316, J 485.

⁴² In the 'Great Ten' *Jātakas*, two obvious examples are in the *Mūgapakkha-Jātaka* (J 538), where the goddess of the parasol offers advice to the baby Bodhisatta, disgusted at the thought of being king, and the *Sāma-Jātaka* (J 540), where a local goddess saves the Bodhisatta by an act of truth when he seems to be dead.

⁴³ See Gombrich 1996: 27–64 and Gombrich 2009.

perfections too.⁴⁴ Despite a stated link with renunciation (*nekkhamma*) in the “Story from the Present”, this tale has historically been linked to strength or vigour (*virīya*), an attribution made as early as the *Jātaka-nidāna* (J I 46). This association has persisted to this day. In this renowned tale, the shipwreck acts as a preliminary testing ground not just for a fortunate rescue, but for a test of skill, strength and vigour in preparation for the assumption of kingship and authority.

The story recounts the adventures of a young prince, Janaka, the Bodhisatta. He is brought up in exile when his father, the king of Mithilā, is killed by his brother, Polajanaka, who then assumes the throne. At sixteen he finds out his own story, and despite his mother’s objections goes to sea to make his fortune. But the ship is wrecked. Janaka, following much the same sort of procedure as Saṅkha, cleverly saves himself by again smearing oil, eating sugar and climbing the mast, while not falling into the useless prayers tried by the other, doomed passengers (J VI 34). This tale is specially associated with *paccekabuddhas* and imagery associated with them, so it is hardly surprising that he makes his bid for safety alone.⁴⁵ He too swims for seven days, is rescued by Maṇimekhalā after an extensive interchange, again in canonical verses, in which he defends his valiant efforts by saying, “Do you not see, goddess, the visible fruit of deeds?/ For I am crossing (*tarām*) and I can see you near me.// So, I will struggle according to my ability and strength,/ I will do what is to be done by men” (Ja VI 36). The goddess is deeply impressed by his resolve on the “measureless sea”, an echo of his Bodhisatta vow: she takes him to “his heart’s delight”, Mithilā, where he is found by the magical horse who selects the king, and after a series of tests of his suitability to rule, assumes the kingship, marries the princess, and invites his mother to return. Again, although the story is associated with strength, we see the *Jātaka* ethos: the wakeful and attentive observation of practicalities, rather than vows, precepts and prayers, will offer the means of deliverance and the solution to major problems; heavenly intercessions come to those who keep precepts and are generous, not those who follow the brahminic pattern of offering meaningless prayers.

Janaka’s ordeals are presented as a preparation for his assumption of the throne, an association emphasised by the fact that Polajanaka becomes mortally ill the day Janaka sets to sea and dies on the day of the wreck (Ja VI 34). The *Jātaka* attitude towards kingship is ambivalent and highly nuanced, as if a number of different

⁴⁴On the complexities of attributions of the last ten in the *Jātaka* collections, see Appleton 2010: 71ff.

⁴⁵On this story, see Meiland 2004: 69 and Shaw 2006: 222ff.

possible types of kingship were being explored, tested and aligned to a Buddhist ethos whereby the teaching must co-exist with good governance and a stable state. Positive examples include the Makhādeva (J 9) and the Mahāsudassana (J 95) model, of the universal monarch, though some element of renunciation, literal in the case of the *Makhādeva Jātaka*, metaphorical in the case of the *Mahāsudassana Jātaka*, in that the king renounces only at death, is required of the king at the end of his life.⁴⁶ But there are also highly negative views of monarchy, both of misusers of its authority and of the position itself. The last ten *Jātakas*, in which the Bodhisatta only has human or higher rebirths, explore the notion of kingship with a Shakespearean range and depth. The *Mūgapakkha Jātaka* (Temiya), for instance, the first of them (J 538), shows the Bodhisatta appalled at the prospect of kingship because of the terrible *kamma* he must earn as a result of administering punishment. The story culminates in the king and all his subjects simply forsaking the city and palace and living as renunciates – as Collins has shown, a triumphant exposition of the kind of Utopian “felicities” possible for those who follow the Buddhist path.⁴⁷ In the *Sāma Jātaka* (J 540) a renegade king is responsible for shooting the Bodhisatta, and is instructed by him afterwards to return to his kingdom and fulfil the ten duties of the king (J VI 94–5).⁴⁸ Vessantara, who employs a maritime image to address his son to describe his Bodhisatta path, as we have seen, finds himself king at the end of the tale, despite his monumental acts of generosity in giving his kingdom, elephant and family away. In this final *Jātaka*, the Buddha’s penultimate life spent fulfilling the perfections before taking a final rebirth, the world of *samsāra* cannot be rejected or left behind, and the king, the “prosperity of the kingdom” must be reinstated: but it is like a last tribute to the lay life, before the Bodhisatta ascends to the Tusita heaven and then takes rebirth as the Buddha-to-be. As Gombrich notes: “his reward is both on earth and in heaven; and the supreme reward of Buddhahood is still to come” (Gombrich and Cone 1977: xxv).

The *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, however, despite its first part, represents one of the many rejections of kingship afforded by the *Jātakas*. The Bodhisatta endures many ordeals on his way to his accession, and the waters of the sea test his suitability to rule, allowing him to find his “heart’s delight”: when installed as king, he

⁴⁶See Shaw 2006: 26–30 and 75–79 on this subject. The *Mahāsudassana Sutta* shows the king practising *jhānas* on the four divine abidings before his death too (D II 186–7).

⁴⁷See Collins 1998: 433ff and, for further discussion, Shaw 2006:179–188.

⁴⁸On this tale and the king see Shaw 2006: 278–9

says, “I see my own self, who was brought out of the water to dry land.// A wise man should work on and not become discouraged./I look at myself, for what was wished for has come to be” (J VI 43). But this is not enough. As king, Janaka, haunted by the path of *paccekabuddhas*, yearns for renunciation, and the second part of the tale shows him taking up the renunciate life, rejecting all the hard earned fruits of the first part of the story. His perfection of vigour, however, is the result of his early efforts, and indeed perhaps lies also in his withstanding the temptations of the regal life of sensual pleasure and luxury; this aspect is emphasized by the fifth century CE Ajanta cave I paintings, which lovingly dwell on all the beautiful wives that he leaves behind, who, in the story, eloquently bemoan his departure (J VI 53–5). The ocean in this story, and the boat journey across it, bring short term disaster, in the wreck, but ultimately, in accordance with his *kamma*, bring the Bodhisatta to his rightful inheritance – which he rejects for the renunciate path. In the popular imagination, however, it is the drama at sea which is the most memorable evocation of this story. The scene with the swim and the goddess has come to be emblematic for the tale, and the perfection with which it is associated. Thai paintings, particularly in manuscript art, nearly always choose this scene to depict the tale (see Wray et al. 1972: 34). This is evident in Burmese depictions too, in the terracotta glazed tiles that individual patrons have commissioned around the base of the Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon (Rangoon).

One last tale establishes the world of oceans and boats as an arena for the enactment of the Bodhisatta’s search for the perfections. It is the *Suppāraka-Jātaka* (J 463), assigned by its “Story in the Present” to the perfection of wisdom (*paññā*). In this story the Bodhisatta actually takes rebirth as a sailor. But he is blinded by salt, and becomes instead a king’s assessor, capable of telling the value of goods and animals simply by touch. After some time, he is persuaded to go back to sea. For this mariner, the seas are full of wealth, and each new ocean gives up different precious gems of different colours. As they reach each one, the captain recognizes it and throws out ballast while secretly making stores of the gems. His anticipation that the ship will capsize if he tells his passengers of the hidden wealth, as they will overload the boat, demonstrates his perfecting his wisdom; so does, in *Jātaka* style, his trained intuition in knowing the waters and the seas they encounter. Finally they reach a terrifying place, at the end of the world, where vertical waves threaten to engulf the ship. The Bodhisatta makes an act of truth, stating that he has never harmed any other being (Ja IV 142). Hence the boat avoids shipwreck by sailing through the sky back home. The captain distributes all the wealth and



Figure 1: The scene in the sea with Janaka and the goddess Manimekhalā, protective deity of the seas, on an eighteenth-century Siamese *samut khoi* (folding book) now in the Bodleian Library (Ms. Pali a. 27 R). By permission of Bodleian Library (Picture courtesy of Naomi Appleton).

jewels to the passengers, and everyone goes home with plenty of wealth. As in the case of the magical boat of the *Saṅkha Jātaka* and the wonderful islands that welcome Mittavinda, travel at sea offers great “jewels” in the form of the seven kinds of gems we see so often in subsequent Buddhist mythology. The Bodhisatta, however, unlike Mittavinda, knows how to exercise control in the midst of the great wealth and “jewels” that can be found in the ocean. His wisdom is intuitive, and based, as his declaration of truth attests, on non-harm, demonstrated in his care for his passengers. He does not become intoxicated, and brings good fortune, wealth and good luck to those whom he takes on his “boat”. This gives an anticipation of his role in his final life, and an enactment of an uncourtly heroism different from that demonstrated in contemporary Sanskrit drama and poetry.



Figure 2: Glazed terracotta tile, c. 1900, Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon (Rangoon), showing Janaka's rescue from the sea (Picture courtesy of Lucy Shaw).

Richard Gombrich says, “Summaries of the Buddha’s teachings rarely convey how much use he made of simile or metaphor” (Gombrich 1996: 65). Such a method is part of his *pariyāya* teaching. This, as Gombrich notes elsewhere, “means ‘way round’ and so ‘indirect route’ but it refers to a ‘way of putting things’... *pariyāya* refers to metaphor, allegory, parable, any use of speech which is not to be taken literally” (Gombrich 2009: 6). As Flores notes, the “Buddha is a master of images, and he frequently speaks as a poet or parable-teller, preferring to cast his message as a lyric or a story to illustrate what could also be stated discursively” (Flores 2008: 7). The “ocean” of the *Jātakas* is, from the time of the canonical verses, an imaginative world that threatens monsters, demonesses, wrecks, and even gateways to hell, but also offers wealth and opportunity. Shipwrecks are frequent, as they must have been at the time, but so are the means of finding good fortune and an arena for the enactment of the Bodhisatta’s search for the perfections. The kind of imagery used is found rarely in the *suttas*, but is prevalent in

the world of the *Jātakas*: crystals, gems, jewels, and precious stones emerge from waves, are used to construct magical ships, or are found on islands which, like that in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, are filled with spirits. This *Jātaka* vocabulary for describing the fruits of good *sīla*, generosity and keeping the *uposatha* day aligns its imagined world with many other Buddhist visualised texts, such as the *Mahā-sudassana Sutta* and the *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*.

One feature highlighted in *Jātaka* tales, is the pragmatic virtue of “skill-in-means”, a peculiarly Buddhist notion, as an attribute of the healthy, good and skilful (*kusala*) mind, a mind that does not become intoxicated by beauty or lose clarity at times of danger. The skilled practitioner, exemplified by the Bodhisatta, uses this at times of trouble: he is a good sailor, deals with difficulty with resourcefulness, navigates his mind well, and so is in a position to help others.

Southern Buddhism and boats

The implications of the use of the boat in Buddhist literature are manifold and multivalent. Other Buddhist literature in subsequent centuries continues a distinctive, if only occasional, use of the image of the boat. The subject warrants further study, but such an interest does not appear to be addressed in the literature of other Indic traditions of this time. In the second century BCE *The Questions of King Milinda* (*Milindapañhā*), the boat, mast, ship's carpenter and anchor are all extolled in various ways as metaphors for the practice of meditation and the Buddhist eightfold path, in precise and technically detailed analogies that appear to have no contemporary counterparts (Miln 377-80). The image of the boat is used by the fifth-century CE monastic commentator, Buddhaghosa, who although brahmin by birth, undertook the sea journey from India to Anuradhapura, in Sri Lanka. In the section on the cultivation of *jhāna*, the skilled meditator is compared to a mariner:

A too clever skipper hoists full sails in high winds and sends his ship adrift, and another, not clever enough lowers his sails in light wind and remains where he is, but a clever skipper hoists full sails in a light wind, takes in half his sails in a high wind, and so arrives safely at his desired destination (Ñāṇamoli 1991b: 134 and Vism IV 136-7).⁴⁹

⁴⁹Buddhaghosa seems to have been a recorder of an established tradition rather than an innovator: the metaphor may not have been his own.

Historically, in Southern Buddhism boats feature repeatedly as symbols of the teaching, and boat travel is frequent. Late, very popular para-canonical *Jātakas* have a strong bias towards maritime adventures: many such stories recount events involving loss, separation, the getting of wealth and reconciliation in association with boats, both riverine and maritime.⁵⁰ The goddess Maṇimekhalā is a frequent intercessor, saving those who have followed the Buddhist path from perils. Such tales, that “recycle” many *Jātaka* maritime tropes, such as the clever escape from shipwreck and Maṇimekhalā’s rescue of those who keep precepts, are often depicted in temple art.⁵¹

Ray notes that “Representations of boats in art and architecture is an integral part of the importance attributed to seafaring activity by society” (Ray 2003: 63). From that point of view, as she demonstrates, the early Buddhists clearly valued sea travel, for their artefacts can be cited as evidence: boats are depicted on coins, seals, and sealings, on Sātavāhana coins, in Caves 1 and 2 at Ajanṭā (Ray 2003: 63ff) and on a Bharhut roundel (see Ray 1998: 176).

In more recent times the maritime and the nautical often feature in Thai temple art, particularly after the 1782 move of the capital to Bangkok, with its close proximity to the sea and strong riverine transport systems. In the city, boats were used commonly in the nineteenth century as the most effective means of transport: monks conducted their almsrounds round Bangkok by boat and even built boats themselves (Tiyavanich 2003: 45-51). Indeed one of the nineteenth-century codified Buddha life postures compiled in the reign of Rama III is of the Buddha sitting “Western style” in a boat, on his way to see his family.⁵² Boats influence art in all sorts of ways: Wat Arun, the riverine Temple of the Dawn, was refurbished in the early nineteenth century by Rama II, who saw its dilapidated state, and employed porcelain and china used as ballast by ships from China to decorate the

⁵⁰See Jaini 1981–3. Boats feature as pivots of the action in: *SumbhamittaJātaka* (no.5), *SamudagghosaJātaka* (no. 6), *SaṅkhatarājāJātaka* (no 10), *SattadhanuJātaka* (no. 20), *Candakumāra-Jātaka* (no. 21), *RatanapajjotaJātaka* (no. 23) and *VaḍḍhanaJātaka* (no.44).

⁵¹See Skilling 2006: 113–173. The *Suphamitra-Jātaka* describes two royal children lost in a river who are nurtured by a fisherman. Their mother, the queen, is captured for seven years by sailors who fail to defile her because she is protected magically by her virtue. The family is eventually reunited. It is shown in Wat Pipitharam, Cambodia; the *Rathanabachodha-Jātaka* involves more royal separations by shipwreck and eventual reunions (for depictions of these, see Roveda and Yem 2009: 120–2).

⁵²See Matics, 2004: 96–7. The gesture is number 22 of a series developed in King Rama III’s reign in Siam, and shows the Buddha crossing a river in a boat on his way to see his father after the enlightenment.

whole surface of the *stūpa* (O’Neill 2008: 112-115). Boats feature prominently in the temple art of Wat Saket and Wat Suthat. In Cambodia many temples have modern life-sized boats in their precincts, containing statues of the Buddha and his followers, symbolically guiding others through the ocean of existence.⁵³ In Burma some ordinations have historically been conducted on barges or boats, such as those arranged by Dhammaceti in 1476 (Stadtner 2011: 155). In the absence of an ordination ground Southern Buddhist ordinations still occasionally take place on boats, as water is regarded as a space not bound by local or national jurisdiction.⁵⁴

As has been demonstrated, albeit briefly, *Jātakas* took the early Buddhist metaphor of the boat, already distinctive, out from the rivers and floodwaters of India into the open seas. Their underlying journey rests on a metaphor of crossing the ocean of existence, perceived as the mind itself; the boat is the means of crossing. Most Southern Buddhist locations are riverine and maritime in orientation, with sea or river trade routes that still exist to this day. These have historically been essential for communication, economic stability, and livelihood. So it is hardly surprising that the image of the boat, as a means of getting wealth, of finding adventure and as a craft for “crossing over” vast seas as well as rivers, has continued to be popular and indeed is regarded as an apt image for the teaching itself. The ocean, and the boat that travels in it as well as on rivers, is an arena for getting wealth, heroic struggle, practical skill in means, and the transmission of the teaching. From the time of the *Jātakas*, the largely sea-going and riverine regions of Southern Buddhism have in highly diverse ways integrated one of their most important practical means of transport into the teaching.

⁵³See Roveda and Yem 2009: 180–181.

⁵⁴The Oxford Buddha Vihāra organized one such ordination on a barge on the Isis, Oxford, UK, in October, 2010.

Abbreviations of Pali Text Society editions

D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
J	<i>Jātaka</i> (where the number of the story is given, this is placed in brackets with J: eg J 539).
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
Patis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
S	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
VinA	<i>Vinaya-atthakathā</i>

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