

543. Bhuridatta Jataka

Cowell No. 543

King Brahmadatta of Benares after appointing his son as crown prince became worried that his son would try to seize the throne. He exiled him until after his death when he should take the kingdom by birthright. The young prince saluted and departed to the Yamuna River where he decided to live as a hermit in a simple hut.

One day, a young *naga* widow was wandering along the shore and entered the hut of the prince with the intent of becoming his wife; she succeeded and had a son that they named Sagara Brahmadatta. One day a forester passed by and recognised the prince. He intended to report the find to the king who, in the meantime, had died. In Benares, nobody knew if the son, crown prince, was still alive and if so, where he was. The forester gave full information to the ministers who were able to find the crown prince and invite him to take the throne. He was willing but his *naga* wife refused. She conceded to him to take the children warning that they needed to live in a water environment. The crown prince, having ordered a pool filled with water to be placed on the cart, left his *naga* wife with great regret. In Benares, he was anointed king and immediately he ordered to have a lake built near the palace.

After these episodes, the misadventures of the *naga* princes that saved a large turtle are narrated. They transformed themselves into young men acting as messengers of the *naga* King Dhatarattha sent asking for the hand of King Brahmadatta's daughter, princess Samuddaja. The king strongly refused and Dhatarattha summoned all *nagas*, planned to make war and march on Benares to terrify the citizens and paralyze the city. In hearing this terrible news, King Brahmadatta relented and agreed to give his daughter to king Dhataratta.

She was taken to a wonderful palace and given lavish presents. The *naga* King Dhatarattha ordered that no *naga* was ever to show sign of their serpent nature to Samuddaja. She loved her king husband and had a son named Sudassana and a second one, a Bodhisatta, named Datta. Samuddaja had two more sons named Subhaga and Arittha.

The four princes grew up strong and handsome. When they came of age, they received each kingdom from their father. When they had disagreements they asked the opinion of the supreme *naga* ruler King Virupakkha. Because Datta rose above the others for charm and wisdom, he was given the name of Bhuridatta. He paid regular visits to Sakka in his heaven. He expressed the wish to observe the precepts and behave righteously, living in meditation. To obtain this he had to go to the realm of men and practice alone. He chose a place on the bank of the Yamuna River where, near a great banyan tree, was an anthill on which he coiled himself announcing loudly that he (a *naga*) would observe the Uposatha and keep the precepts at the risk of his life.

It happens that an outcast destitute Brahmin, who had become a hunter for a living, was passing by the anthill together with his son Somadatta when they saw *naga* maidens preparing a wonderful coach for Bhuridatta who had taken a splendid serpent look. The Brahmin approached him with great surprise asking who he was. Bhuridatta admitted to being a *naga* of royal origin. The Brahmin woke up at dawn to see a group of marvellous maidens bringing flowers to Bhuridatta. They played in the water with a marvellous gem granting all desires and illuminated the entire area with radiance. When seen by the Brahmins, Bhuridatta changed his royal *naga* body into that of a common snake. Suspecting that the Brahmin could be a snake charmer and hunter, he immediately invited him and

his son to visit the marvellous world of the *nagas*. The Brahmin and his son Domadatta were exposed to the exciting view of hundreds of *naga* maidens instructed to supply them with everything they wished. However, they decided to leave and return to the simple life in the forest. Eventually, Somadatta revealed their adventure to his mother who complained that he and his father did not bring back any jewels and left her alone with the other children. She kicked both out of the house.

Meanwhile, in the Himalayas, a large Garuda attacked a *naga* and uprooted the *banyan* tree on which the snake was firmly hanging. When Garuda went back to replant the tree, he asked a hermit if his killing would be condemned. Having the ascetic justified the event as necessary to Garuda's survival; Garuda gave him the priceless Alambayana serpent-quelling spell [and a fan to hold in front of his face when chanting]. But the ascetic did not have reasons to use the Alambayana and gave it away to a wandering poor Brahmin who was passing by. The Brahmin was reluctant to accept the spell, but soon he realised that with that spell he could become a snake charmer and earn a living going around the country. One morning he arrived at the shore of the Yamuna and see a circle of thousands of *naga* youths playing joyously and carrying the marvellous jewel granting all wishes. When they heard the Brahmin approaching, quickly disappeared into the ground, unwittingly leaving behind the gem. The Brahmin picked up the gem and continued his wandering until he met the old outcast Brahmin and his son Somadatta. They recognised the gem as the one previously offered to them by Buridhattata. Now, they wanted to trade the gem for Buridhatta. The Brahmin informed them he had found the gem in the Himalayas region, where an ascetic gave him the magic serpent-quelling spell called Alambayana spell; hence his nickname of Alambayana, the Snake Charmer. The outcast Brahmin decided to bring Alambayana to the anthill where Bhuridatta was lying, observing Uposatha. Bhuridatta awoke and recognised the traitor Brahmin and decided to preserve his moral attitude and allow him to be captured.

For Alambayana using the magic spell received indirectly from Garuda, easily managed to capture Bhuridatta, and crush his bones forcing him into a basket. Later he commanded him to perform in front of villagers, asking for money for the entertainment. Despite his great suffering, Bhuridatta did not feel anger toward his tyrannical master.

Meanwhile, the mother and wives of Bhuridatta missed him and sent his brothers to search for him. Assuming the form of ascetics some searched in the world of the gods, others in the Himalayan forests and the elder, Sudassana, in the world of humans. They finally found Bhuridatta in Benares where he was performing in the marketplace. Bhuridatta's sister had earned magic; one day she disguised herself as a poisonous frog and concealed it in Sudassana's chignon. Bhuridatta saw his brother in the crowd and went to him, placed his head on his brother's foot and wept.

Sudassana confronted Alambayana and threatened him with three drops of poison that his sister spat into his hand, commanding him to release Bhuridatta at once. The evil Alambayana crept away and Bhuridatta, the prince of the *nagas*, assumed a radiant human form standing before the crowd in all his glory. The brothers revealed themselves to the king of Benares as their nephews and great festivities took place before they returned to the kingdom of the *nagas*.

The Jataka narrative continues with the other adventures of the treacherous outcast Brahmin being almost drowned by Subhaga and then taken to the *naga* kingdom. Meanwhile, Alambayana had become a leper. Bhuridatta was taken to the sickbed after the torture he had suffered. Surrounded by all the *nagas*, he held a sermon strong condemning the Brahmins, the Vedas and the *khattiya* rules (warrior class) who rule arbitrarily based on delusion. Both blindly hang along the path they pretended emitted by the gods. The entire notion of the cast is absurd. What is important is to live righteously.

When the king of the *nagas* died, Bhuridatta continued keeping the precepts scrupulously observing Uposatha; at the end of his life, he was reborn in heaven.

The oldest Cambodian murals illustrating the Bhuridatta Jataka are those of Wat Tralach Leu, painted probably in the early 20th century, of which very few survived neglect, humidity and insects. In Cambodia, artists were fascinated by the big snake coiled around a termite nest, and people capturing him by magic. Only at Sisowat Ratanaran, a complex story is depicted exemplifying the ability of painters to depict events in sequence.

Illustrations of the Bhuridatta Jataka in Cambodia



Fig.1 **Kampong Tralach Leu.** Bhuridatta is being forced into the basket. One of the men is holding the magic Alambayana fan. PREVIOUS PAGE



Fig2 – **Kampong Tralach Leu.** Two men carry Bhuridatta in a basket (painted 1921-25).



Fig.3- Wat Kien Swai Krav. The capture of Bhuridatta (Early 1900)



Fig.4 – Wat Bakong. The capture of Buridatta (painted around 1960)



Fig.5 – Wat Bakong, The training of Bhuridatta



Fig.6 – **Sisowat Ratanaram**. The capture of the snake is shown at the top of the picture. The snake is captured and bought to the city to perform unusual figures in public surrounded by dancing men and then in front of the royal palace, where Bhuridatta is finally freed by his brother Sudassana in front of the king and the queen (painted in the 1920s but restored several times)



Fig.7 – **Lovek Tep Pranam** . A representation of Bhuridatta was captured using the Alambayana magic fan. The style is quite a westernised copy of French heroic pictures of the revolution.



Fig.8 - **Wat Bakong**. Detail of the fan of Fig.4, needed when pronouncing the Alambayana spell.



Fig.9 – Wat Prasat Andedt. The capture of the snake. Fig10 – Wat Einkosei. The capture, always holding the magic fan (both after 1975)



Fig.11 – Wat Sopheas. (after 1975)



Fig 12 – Wat Lolei, contemporaneous painting (2002)



Fig.13 – Wat Sneng - Sudassana asking Alambayana to free Bhuridatta in front of the king (1960s)



Fig.14 – Wt Prei Dong Heum. During the public performance of Bhuridatta imposed by the snake-charmer Alambayana, Sudassana (one of Bhuridatta's brothers) appeared in the shape of an old Brahmin. He ordered Alambayana to free the snake. Due to his resistance, Sudassana menaced him with 3 drops of venom on his hand's palm. Then he ordered to dig three pits, in which he dropped the 3 drops of the magic medicines. There was a terrible explosion and Alambayana, nearest to the fire, become a leper. Bhuridatta emerged radiant beautifully adorned as Sakka. (around 1960s), not in the picture.



Fig.15 Wat Einkosei – The liberation of Bhuridatta, as in the previous picture. (the 1960s')

Illustrations of the Bhuridatta Jataka in Thailand



Fig16 – Wat Yai Intharam. The liberation of Budhiratta by Sudassana magic.



Fig.17 – Wat Suwannaram. On the upper right part of the picture, we can see the real ascetic who had received the magic spell from Garuda written on a fan. Ignoring its magic properties the ascetic gave the fan away to two men, one certainly an outcast Brahmin (later known as Alambayana). Below this scene, Alambayana appears out from the forest trees to the shore of the Yamuna and sees a circle of thousands of *naga* youths playing joyously and carrying the marvellous jewel granting all wishes. When they heard the Brahman approaching, quickly disappeared into the ground, unwittingly leaving behind the gem and Buridatta to resume instantly his snake form coiled on the anthill. At the bottom right, a couple of *Kinnarae* enjoy the spectacle.



Fig.18 – **Wat Suwannaram.** This deteriorated mural shows a scene similar to the previous one, with the difference, that the Brahmin and another dark-skin (two men) are peering out from the forest trees to spy on the beautiful maidens playing with Bhuridatta. Note also that the Brahmin who had received the magic spell from Garuda together with a fan, is giving it to a single man, the outcast Brahmin later known as Alambayana (see detail in Fig.20).



Fig.19 – Wat Suwannaram. Detail of the two men (a Brahmin and his son Somadatta) discovering a group of beautiful girls playing in the water in front of Bhuridatta's anthill. Frightened they plunge into the waters to return to their realm of the *nagas*.

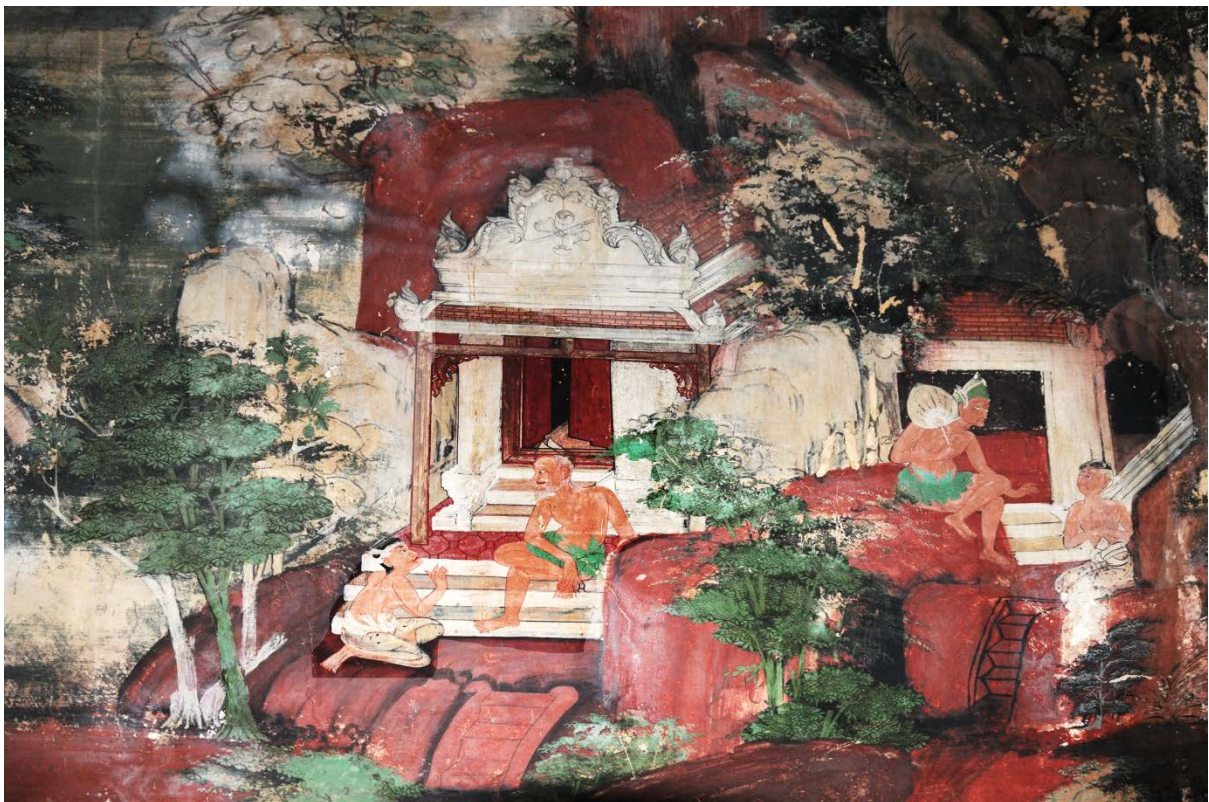


Fig.20 – Wat Suwannaram. Detail of the ascetic giving away Garuda's magic spell and fan (right), allowing that enchant any type of snake, allowing him, to become a professional snake Charmer.



Fig.21 - Bangkok National Library. A deva, plays celestial music knowing the capturing, the ill-treating, the suffering until the liberation by magic will bring Bhuridatta to the higher state of Bodhisatta.



Fig.22 – Bangkok National Library. An Attempt to capture a snake holding a Sward and trying to capture the snake by the tip of the tale inevitably fails without the magic fan.

Illustrations of the Bhuridatta Jataka in Laos



Fig.23-Wat Xieng Thong. Probably the liberation of Bhuridatta



Fig. 24 – Wat Xieng Thong. Various scenes of the Bhuridatta Jataka, from his capture to liberation.

Illustrations of the Bhuridatta Jataka in Burma

In Burma, this story is named Buridat Jataka and is narrated below.

The son of king Byamadat of Baranathi married a widow *naga* with whom he had a son Thagara, and a daughter, Thamodaza. Later the prince was invited to take the place of his dead father.

He consulted with *naga* wife who refused to go with the prince but allowed him to take the children that needed to live in water for serving. So the father had a lake built for them. Once when the prince and princess were playing in the water, they met a turtle who plotted to have the princess Thamodaza marry the King of the *naga* Datarahtha.

The father of the girl, by now king of Baranathi said that the marriage between men and *naga* was inept, angering the king of the *naga* who sent a multitude of *nagas*¹ to frighten the people of Varanasi, without arming them. Eventually, the marriage of princess Thamodaza with the king of the *naga* took place in a paradise-like nation created for them. She gave birth to four sons named Thudattana, Datta, Thubawga and Arista. Datta was an embryo Buddha (Bodhisatta). *Nagas* could change from human to serpent form at their own will.

On many occasions, Datta replaced his father in state functions and settled disputes amongst the *nats*. For his wisdom, he was named Bhuridatta and had to serve daily the king of the *nats*. However, he could not respect the sabbath due to the music and female *nagas* around him.

Therefore he decided to retreat to a place near the Yamuna River, in an anthill where he could respect the Sabbaths and give the charity of his body and limbs. At that time a Brahmin Nethada and his son Thomadat were deer-hunting and had to spend the night on a tree. They saw female *nagas* making flowers carpet for Bhuridatta and when they played music, Nethada and son descended the tree to enquire. Bhuridatta admitted to being a powerful *naga* and invited the two to the *naga* kingdom.

The story continues as in the Pali text; however, no mention of the name Alambayana is made; here he is simply referred to as the snake-charmer.

¹The love adventures of *nagas* are narrated in another Jataka (No.121).

Nagas are very powerful beings living in underground kingdoms, able to change into humans at will. Kings and princes and princesses are usually handsome. They are immensely rich of jewels, of which they like to adorn. Their love affairs show a preference for humans, usually of the opposite sex (Bhuridatta Jataka). Exceptionally they have same-sex affairs, like that of the *naga* King in love with a young monk as that of Jataka No.121 translated by Garret-Johnes for the first time in 1979???) Any psychoanalyst would read an overt homosexuality.



Fig.25 – Monastery of the **Golden Palace, Mandalay**.



Fig.26 – Monastery of the **Golden Palace, Mandalay**. Detail I of Bhuridatta being venerated in the royal palace, before he went to the anthill (lower centre). The anthill under a large *Bahjan* tree is probably carved to the bottom left.



Fig.27 – Monastery of the **Golden Palace, Mandalay**. Detail of the panel's lower left where is the figure of the Brahmin Nethada walking towards the gate of the city carrying a basket in which he squashed Bhuridatta. Higher on the panel, two men are shown forcing Bhuridatta to perform and entertain in a pavilion near the King's palace. To the left of the king are two figures in praying attitude, perhaps Buridatta brother and sister paying reverence to the king after freeing Buridatta.



Fig.28 and 29,30 (next page) –ANANDA TERRACES:Mahanipata Jataka scene. Various events of Buddhadasa with Alambayana in the *Bhuridatta Jataka* No.543 (From G.H. Luce, 1970, III: , page 327)

NOTE

For the study of Jataka in Burma the Book of **Gordon H, Luce** published on Art of SIAE 1960/70 is of fundamental importance, so much so that thought imperative to present a very short summary for my Burmese readers, examining his 3 volumes, the Third having the illustrations that are most important for the Last Ten Katakas, the Mahanipata that are the topics of my book.



Fig.29



Fig.30



Fig.31 – Alambahiana tries to collect Bhuridatta by force. Modern postcards are available in Yangon.