

## 547. Vessantara Jataka - in Cambodia

For observing local variations in mainland Southeast Asia, the original translation from Pali of 1988 (reprint 1960), made by Cowell a renowned Pali expert with a group of helpers, is the main textual reference. It is a pure translation disregarding the nationality and cultural conditions of other countries.

### No. 547; Cowell translation

Prince Vessantara, son of king Sanjaya and queen Phusati, at the age of 16 connubial Princess Maddi (or Madri), with whom he has two children: Jali, a boy and Kanhajina, a girl. He loved them all. He was also attached to his beautiful white elephant that his subjects believed was bringing prosperity to the kingdom and rain to the fields. In contrast, a neighbouring kingdom was suffering a terrible drought and its king sent Brahmins to ask for the white elephant. Vessantara granted the request without hesitation (pouring water on their hands to indicate a gift) in an act typical of his customary great charity.

The citizens of Vessantara's kingdom were very distressed at the loss of the great animal and forced King Sanjaya to exile his son. Before leaving the city, Vessantara gave away all his possessions; then with his wife and children. They left on a chariot pulled by white steeds. They met four Brahmins who asked for his horses; after the donation, the gods replaced them with two deer. Subsequently, the fifth Brahmin desired the chariot. Vessantara agreed and continued his travel on foot until he and his family reached a hermitage close to the forest where they started to live simply, eating roots and jungle fruits.

Very soon there appeared a poor Brahmin, Jujaka (or Jujaka), who had a young and beautiful yet demanding wife who desired to have servants for the household. She suggested that her husband ask Vessantara for his two children. As soon as Vessantara saw the old Brahmin he knew he had to make the supreme gift and agreed to give away his two children. They tried to escape and hid under the broad lotus leaves. The father found them and gave them to Jujaka, concluding the gift by pouring water over Jujaka's outstretched hands. The earth shook; the gods were disturbed and raised a great tumult in heaven. At that point, Vessantara knew he had to make the last and supreme gift: his devoted wife. A poor Brahmin appeared to make such a request. However, Sakka descended from Tavatimsa to the *ashram* to stop Vessantara from giving her to anyone.

Praising Vessantara's supreme act of charity and generosity (the gift of his wife) Sakka offered him 8 boons. The first one for Vessantara was to become king, and crave for his royal seat (Cowell 1995: 294).

In the meantime, Jujaka and the children were lost in the forest. However, the *devas* guided him towards the city. When there, the children were recognised. King Sanjaya happily paid a handsome ransom to the old Brahmin to regain his grandchildren. Eventually, the children were reunited with their parents and Vessantara was asked by King Sanjaya to rule the kingdom. Jujaka overindulged in his new wealthy position and died of indigestion.

Of the last Ten Births, the last one called Vessantara Jataka is the most important, thus also called Great Birth. According to Buddhist beliefs, before he could obtain his Buddhahood, Lord Buddha had to perfect himself with the Ten Virtues. This could not be done in a single lifetime but through the ten stages of a virtuous life, as narrated in the last ten births. The Vessantara is the last birth but one, portraying the life of prince Vessantara fulfilling his mission as a Bodhisatta. Thus he had to perfect

himself to a culmination which fitted him to become a Buddha. The life of Prince Vessantara is the highest ideal of faith, touching the heart of those who read or hear it.

The Vessantara Jataka despite being a very long story is composed by two clearly defined threads: one of Vessantara and the other of Jujaka, each with many particular subplots. This dichotomy may indicate the eternal contrast between sacred (asceticism, renunciation) and profane (vulgarity, greed), the conflicts in us.

### ***Considerations on the Vessantara Jataka as a “reverse Jataka”***

After having had the privilege to study some text of the Jataka illustrations in continental Southeast Asia, I have reached some personal conclusions.

Vessantara's donations, starting from the white elephant needed by his people, the horses, the chariot, children and finally wife, are extreme, remote from the “middle” way of generosity advocated by the Buddhist canon. The Last Ten Jataka illustrate also that Theravada required that the king or prince had to establish the well-being of monks (*Sanga*) and the supremacy of the Dhamma in the administration of the country.

Vessantara's extravagant generosity, almost self-indulgence, ignored the possibility to harm people and receivers, disregarding the personal feelings of others. This attitude found in Jatakas transforms giving into a mechanism for merit-making. Giving is not self-interested, but believed to be rewarded; donate in exchange for spiritual benefits.

However, when Vessantara happily donated his beloved children to the Brahmin Jujaka, his son Jali, having heard that he and his sister were donated, ran away to hide under the large lotus's leaves of the pond. Vessantara called him saying “be a steady boat that takes me on the ocean of becoming, for I will cross the farthest shore, and bring freedom to the world and its gods” (Appleton and Shaw, 2015, II: 599), and later a similar locution to his daughter Kanhajinal, asking her and her brother “Help me to attain my greatest wish”. This implies that the donation of his children was a tool to get free from the rebirth cycle and enter the realm of gods. He could not become a Buddha without giving away the children.

Less remembered is Vessantara's grief of seeing his children far too cruelly treated by the Brahmin (Appleton and Ash 2015, II : 603). Grief brought him to think to kill Jujak and take back his children. At the same instant, he realized that this could not be done by a participant in the lineage of Bodhisatta that made equally important sacrifices.

The idea of Vessantara killing the Brahmin was visualized only in some Cambodian murals, where Vessantara is a portrait holding bow and arrow directed toward Jujak, and on a few occasions, the bow is armed with an arrow directed at Jujak with the strength of a hunter.

Affections create conflicts, affections must be deleted through the power of self-knowledge bringing to develop intelligent purposes (mindfulness) and equanimity.

At that moment Vessantara may also have been in the dilemma: being a good father or acting to achieve Buddhahood? But these episodes in the life of Vessantara, are preferably ignored from public knowledge.

The Vessantara Jataka was so popular and well known by people that they could recognize it from a single picture.

This Jataka also had an exceptional role in early continental Southeast Asia, from Borobudur in Java, to Pagan in upper Burma, and at Nakon Pathon in Siam. It may have been that it was made popular by theatrical representations highlighting the generosity of Vessantara interpolated with the comic humour of Jujaka. The Vessantara Jataka was one of the early long narratives, perhaps the oldest, explaining thus the number of different local versions created in time.

## REVERSE JATAKA

As Appleton remarked in 1973, the popularity and priority of the Vessantara Jataka is highly problematic as the Canon considers giving (*dana*) one of the highest, not the highest form of perfection. Furthermore, the attribution of the Vessantara to be the penultimate human birth is simply an assumption.

Amongst the list of perfections (*parami*) on which the Vessantara Jātaka narrative focuses, the perfection of generosity is described above all. On the other hand, to confirm it be the penultimate human rebirth of the Bodhisatta is not without difficulties. This was based on the assumption that the order of 547 allocated to the Vessantara Jataka was the last Jataka in the Pali tradition, but this allocation had been arbitrary and thus not necessarily describing the penultimate life of the Bodhisatta.

In Thailand, the Last Ten Jatakas do not follow the common Pali numbering reported by the first translators of the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. The Thai order is: Temiya J., Mahajanaka J., Sama J., Nemi J., Mahosadha J., Bhuridatta J., Kandahala J.(Candakumara), Vidhura J. and Vessantara Jataka. In the present paper the Pali ordering is followed, meaning that the Mahosadha Jataka is the penultimate as in all text sequences, and not the third as some authors do in Thailand.

Also in Burma, the numbers do not seem to be the same, due to the use of Burmese names attributed to the Jatakas.

A very modern exciting approach is that of the Chiastic Structure of the Vessantara Jātaka: and Interpretation through inverted parallelism in narratives, initiated by the venerable Shi huifēng (2010), a new view of the structure's reading. He perceived that the narrative could be grouped in a reverse way, of which I present my interpreted summary in Table 1

**See Table 1 next page**

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<sup>1</sup> In 1895 Cowell and assistants translated in English 457 Jataka, though previously translated into German by Fossboel.

**TABLE 1**

B	Prologue. Story of the present: The Buddha returns to Sakyans' Kapilavatthu. The Elders are conceited but humbled by the Buddha's twin miracle. A rain falls
1	Story of the past: Vessantara is conceived and born, Queen Phusatī is granted ten boons, and a rain bestows the white elephant apparition. Phusatī gives birth to Vessantara, who marries Maddī, and is consecrated as king.
2	Vessantara gives away many gifts including, the white elephant to Brahmins from Kāliṅga
3	He is banished to exile with his wife Maddī and children Jāli and Kaṇhājinā. He established a hermitage on Mount Vaṃka.
4	The arrival of the corrupt Brahmin Jūjaka from Kāliṅga. Maddī's bad omen dream [nightmare]. Jūjaka claims Jāli and Kaṇhājinā which he takes given away.
5	Sakka (Indra) appears as a Brahmin to replace Jujuk who claimed Maddī, to marry her.
•	<p>This is the central climax, the point when Vessantara affirms to Sakka, that his commitment to giving away everything (children and Maddi), brings him perfect knowledge that - t to his mind - were something dearer by far.</p> <p>Vessantara declares his goal of omniscience: "Both Jāli and Kashnājinā I let another take, and Maddī my devoted wife, and all for wisdom's sake. Not hateful is my faithful wife, nor yet my children are, but perfect knowledge, to my mind that is something dearer by far"</p>
5	Sakka (Indra) returns Maddī to Vessantara, granting her eight boons.
4	Jāli and Kaṇhājinā are miraculously driven to Jetuttara (capital city of the grandparents). Sañjaya has a premonitory dream. He reclaims and reunites the children. Jūjaka is rewarded but later dies.
3	Sañjaya, Phusatī, children, and go on elephants to the hermitage to receive Vessantara.
2	Rain falls on the now reunited family.
1	Vessantara is reinstated as king. Shower of jewels from Sakka. End of the Vessantara Jātaka proper.
B	Conclusion. The Buddha explains the characters and personalities mentioned.

From this scheme of the story, symmetry becomes evident, as shown by the reversing numerical order. In the Vessantara Jataka's narrative, there is a crescendo in the development of the story, starting from the white elephant to the gift of the children, and they are panicking at hearing that they were sold as slaves, then the gifting of his wife Maddi. This represents the climax of the story. Jujuk was desperate in getting hold of the children, Vessantara felt lost and said to Jali, who obediently had come out from hiding:

*"Be thou [be you] my ship to ferry me safely over the sea of existence. Beyond the words of birth and gods, I will cross and will and be free".*

The gift of his children and wife was another tool for Vessantara to reach Buddhahood. Maddi's gift is an anti-climax to that of the children, despite being the final renunciation, because it was Sakka's pre-arranged simulation. Considering the donation (*dana*) of his children and Maddi are the centre of gravity of the Vessantara Jataka, there is the pattern of getting back in reverse order everything he had been given. This absence of the return of the white elephant to complete the symmetry of the story is well marked.

This Jataka can be perceived as a heroic venture, with the exiled hero encountering fabulous forces creating suffering and misery, until he reaches a decisive victory, that of perfect knowledge, of omniscience. Then the hero returns from this adventure to be anointed king again, the hero-king. Therefore, it presents a general similitude with the Ramayana/Ramakien (Roveda 2016).

Early scholars of the Pali Canon tended to eliminate the mythic and the fantastic. This resulted in an emphasis on those portions of the canon which show Vessantara to have been a practical teacher of ethics, moral training, and common sense — those portions which show him as human rather than divine or superhuman. He did however not consider the suffering of his people deprived of the white elephant, magically bringing prosperity and rain. He did not imagine that his gifts may damage the recipients.

Comments, positive or negative to this Jataka will go on forever since the marvellous story of Vessantara and its morality will be forever part of our Culture.

# Vessantara Jataka in Cambodia

## Vessantara Jataka variations in Cambodia

This Jataka is well known amongst the people of Southeast Asia. A river of scholars has published a wealth of excellent papers on the religious, sociological, ethnological and ritualistic meanings of this Jataka.

In the visual arts, the Vessantara story has produced a great number of papers on manuscripts, murals and cloth (*pra bots*), that are in themselves new 'texts' embodying the popular vision and imagination of the story.

Three different local versions of the *Vessantara Jataka* are known in Cambodia since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

1. The oldest is the ***Satra of King Chea-Ly***, a text found in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cambodia in separate fascicules that were read to children in schools, the base of their popular education. They were not a formal collection and were first published in French by Leclère at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in his books *Contes et legendes*, 1985 and others in *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, 1906.
2. The second version (rendering) of the Vessantara Jataka is the ***Mahavesandor Cheadak***, the classical Pali narrative, more or less localized, considered among the best of Buddhist and Cambodian literature (Leclère 1902: 4).

The Cambodian writers of the Satra King Chea-la story identify Vessantara with Chea-Ly (name used also for his son Jali). This *narrative* is typically subdivided into numerous chapters or *kan*, seven in the Leclère translation and fourteen in *Gnok Thaem* version.

3. The third version is the ***Vessantara of Gnok Thaém*** (1903-1975). The latter included the fourteenth *kan* describing the wedding of Vessantara's children, Cheali and Krishna, brother and sister, a legend that is missing in the Pali version of the Buddhist Institute of Phnom Penh.

Leclère noticed that in this story - as in other legends - the Buddhist content is nil or minimal and that the themes are simple ('abstruse' in Leclère 1895: X).

The third Cambodian rendering of the Vessantara Jataka was written by Gnok Thaém in modern Khmer mixed with Pali, probably in 1966. Gnok Thaém (1903-1975) was a monk who studied Bangkok religious texts and Thai translations from Pali, probably including elements usable for his narrative. Here below I present a summary of the translation from Khmer to French by Gérard Groussin in 2005.

### ***The Satra of King Chea-Ly***

*Chapter I.* The narrative starts with a summary story of 160.000 kings, Tibetan or Pali, or more modestly 50.000 - 82.000, all descending from the Buddha. Then follows a rather complicated story of Chau-Srei-Son-Toch-No (Suddhodana), king of Kalpilavatsu and his son Chau-Sy-Ret-Tat (Siddhartha) who was none other than Chau-Ly (Vessantara) reborn. Since also his son is named Chau-Ly, in my narrative I have tried to make clear who was who in some events.).

*Chapter I-III.* It tells a story very similar to that of the *Vessantara Jataka* but abridged. The figures, however, have different (confusing) names: The king-father Sanjaya is Prea-ba-srey-Sahn-Chey; Vessandar, is Prah Chéa Ly (I); Moddî is Metry-devi and their children Cheali is Chéa-Ly (like his father; we will call him Chéa-Ly II), and Krashna is Hang Ha; the name of Jujuk sounds the same but is written Chu-Chok.

*Chapter IV.* The narrative introduces new stories from the nearby kingdom of Tevolong-ka, where the king had died without heirs. The astrologer and the dignitaries agreed to visit the young prince Chéa-Ly II (Vessandar's son) and ask him to become their king and his sister their queen. Having Chéa-Ly II accepted. The description of the travel through the forest connecting the two kingdoms is short, and Chéa-Ly was given the gift of a white elephant. On the day of the coronation, an enormous festivity was organised, with guests coming from all over the world. The ceremony lasted three days. The young king took the name of Prea-Chau-Chéa-Ly-Kouma and his sister that of Prea-Ak-Meché-Swey-Tepy-Than.

The queen gave birth to a boy called Chau-Sy-Heac-Kouma.

The king and the queen were living in different palaces, according to the seasons. The young prince (Vessanda's son) got infatuated with a servant girl but was discovered by the queen. She begged him to love her at least as his sister because he wanted to follow his passions with other courtesans, he refused, his sister and queen and the two lived apart.

*Chapter V.* The story narrates the death of the king Chéa-Ly II and later of his sister, followed by the story of the sons of Chau-Sy-Heac-Kouma and the presence of 160.000 kings in the genealogy originated by Vessandar.

*Chapter VI* goes back to a lateral branch of the dynasty of the king of Tevolong-ka.

*Chapter VII* deals with Vessandar, father of Chea-Ly (Jeali), who after death went to heaven as a *devata* for 500 million years until he reappeared on earth as the son of *neang* Srey-Moha-Meayea-Leac (Maya). In turn, she gave birth, while in the forest of Salvan-Lumphi (Lumpini), to a boy named Chau-Sy-Ret-Rat-Kouma (Siddhartha) who, when 16 years old, married the girl Pimpea-Tevy, and had a son named Chau-rea-Hol-Kouma (Rahula)

After this digression on the origin of Siddhartha, the narrative returns to the reincarnations of the members of the genealogy of king Chea-Ly some of which were related to the Buddha's family.

### **The Vessantara Jataka of Gnok Thaém**

Another Cambodian rendering of the Vessantara Jataka is that written by Gnok Thaém (probably in 1966) based on the legend circulating at the time which summary is given here below from the translation from Khmer to French by Gérard Groussin in 2005. References are also made to the paper of Dupaigne and Hoc on Vessantara's paintings. I have used the original Pali names and given the Khmer equivalent in parentheses:

**1. Kan dasa bar (dosapor)**, the chapter on the ten wishes. After calling his main queen Sobar (Phusati) to inform her that the time to incarnate on earth has arrived, Sakka (Indra) grants her ten wishes for agreeing to become the mother of Vessantara. Sobar is described as being in the Nandavana celestial park, kneeling with her hands raised above her head facing Indra, usually shown with the traditional blue-green body, granting her request ten wishes as a reward. The wishes were: 1. to marry King Sanjaya, ruler of the Sivi; 2. to have beautiful eyes and eyelashes curved like Indra's bow; 3. to keep the name Sobar; 4. to have a child of exceptional qualities; 5. not to show a large stomach during pregnancy; 6. not to have pendulous breasts; 7. not to have white hair when ageing; 8. to have the power to alleviate the pain of those who suffer; 9. to have a fair influence on the king; 10. to have swans, storks, geese and peacocks singing around her house.

**2. Kan hemaban (hemapean)**, the chapter on the Himavat forest. This chapter includes a lengthy description of the beauty of the forest, its trees and strange animals. It shows Indra asking the future Gautama Buddha who was in the Tusita Heaven before his penultimate rebirth, to incarnate as the child of Sobar and become Prince Vessantara. No illustration is described by Dupaigne and Hoc.

**3. Kan dana (tean kan)**, the chapter on the white elephant. This chapter narrates the gifting of the white elephant by Vessantara to the eight beggars often depicted as less than 8 Brahmins). On the scrolls described by Dupaigne and Hoc, the hands of the beggars are shown raised to receive the 'water offering' from a flask held by the prince in his left hand. In Cambodia, it was traditional to pour a few drops of water inside the monetary to formally ratify a gifting transaction. However, when this is depicted on mural paintings, Vessantara is sometimes shown pouring water on the hands of the gift recipient or directly on the ground. This may be due to a confusion of the Khmer words '*day*' meaning 'hand' and '*dey*' meaning 'earth, ground' (Leclère 1902:64).

**4. Kan vanappavasana (vanappaves)**, the chapter of the exile that narrates the episode of Vessantara leaving the kingdom in exile with his wife Maddi (sometimes spelt as Neang Metri or Motri, Madri (Maddi in Pali), his son Cheali (Jali) and daughter Krasna (Kanhajina). Two main events are usually depicted:

1. Vessantara gives his chariot and horses as a gift to eight begging Brahmins. In the paintings, there are usually only two horses shown, rather than the four as told in the story; the divine deer initially replacing the horse does appear on many murals, but rarely on *preah bot*.
2. Vessantara and Motri continue on foot carrying the children on their hips. This is the usual way to carry children now in Cambodia.

**5. Kan jujaka (chuchuk)**, the chapter on Jujuk (Jujaka). In this chapter, the Brahmin Jujaka is described:

1. Sitting in front of his house while his wife Amittapana, goes to collect jars of fresh water for him; Amittapana returned crying for having been abused by the wives of young Brahmins of the village who reproached her for having married a displeasing old man.
2. Jujuk decides to leave the village.

**6. Kan culaban (cholapuon)**, the chapter on Chetaputta, including two episodes:

1. Chetaputta (the country-man of Ceta) describes to Jujuk the forest that he has to traverse to reach the Vangkat Mountain.
2. Jujuk leaves for the Vangkat Mountain but is soon intercepted by the dogs of the hunter Chetaputta, the guardian of Vessantara's property, forcing him to climb a tree.

**7. Kan maheban (mohapuon)**, the chapter on the big forest.

In this chapter, Jujuk gets lost in his wandering in the forest and meets the hermit, Accutarsi (Accuta). On his knees, in front of Accutarsi, he asks the directions to reach Vessantara, pretending to have a message for him. Then he continues his search.

**8. Kan kumarapabv (komar bap)**, the chapter on the gift of the children. This chapter relates the episode of giving away the children, Cheali (Jali) and Krasna (Kanhajina) one of the most commonly told events of the story. The event is depicted in 2 phases:

- 8a. Vessantara, dressed as an ascetic with a simple tiger skin wrap and with the chignon of a hermit, is shown sitting in the porch of his stone-made hermitage, which has been



miraculously built for him by the gods, with the children on his lap, pouring water on Jujuk's hands to ratify the gift transaction.

8b. The children hide in the pond under the lotus leaves, but soon emerge at the command of their father.

**9. *Kan maddipabv (madri bap)***, the chapter on Maddi or Motri. This chapter narrates how Motri is prevented from returning home by ferocious animals after she had completed the daily collection of fruits and vegetables in the forest. The three beasts are the transformation of gods into a tiger, a panther and a lion. Motri is usually shown begging them to let her pass.

**10. *Kan sakkapabv (sakka bap)***, chapter ofn Indra. In this chapter Indra intervenes taking the form of a Brahmin, but still with his regular hairstyle, to ask Vessantara for the ultimate gift of his wife. Having tested the magnitude of Vessantara's generosity, he reveals his mission and, returning to his divine form, gives Maddi back to her husband. In the meantime, as the night descends, the two children are securely tied up by ropes to a tree on which Jujuk is sleeping and cry because they are terrorised by the jungle. The gods pity them and send two deities in the form of Vessantara and Maddi to cuddle them.

**11. *Kan Maharajapabv (Mohareach bap)***. This *kan* has many events: King Sanjaya and Queen Sobar have found their grandchildren. In the palace the queen hugs Cheali and Krasna, both resting on her lap.

In another pavilion, the King holds the sacred sword, as the symbol of royal power, in his left hand, while raising his right towards Jujuk, who is kneeling on the ground with his hands joined in homage to the King as he is proposing to buy-back his grandchildren.

Having pardoned his son, the King, mounted on royal elephants and followed by the army and accompanied by the Queen and their grandchildren, decides to go to find the hermitage of Prince Vessantara.

**12. *Kan chaksatr (kan chaksat)***, the chapter on the six princes.

1. In paintings, Prince Vessantara and Motri, their two children, together with King Sanjaya and Queen Sobar, are shown happily reunited, composing a family group of six royal personages.
2. King Sanjaya, the Queen, Cheali and Krashna, accompanied by the royal army with many elephants and banners, depart for a trip to find Vessantara and bring him back.

**13. *Kan nagara (nokor kan)***, the chapter on the return to the city.

Vessantara, having accepted the offer to become king, returns with Motri to the Sivi people with great pomp and ceremony. Several episodes are depicted:

When Vessantara accepted his father's invitation to be king again, huge celebrations were organised, with musicians, dancers and acrobats

As soon as Vessantara returns to the city and enters his palace, he decides to set free all the creatures but worries he will not have sufficient gifts to distribute to the population. Therefore, Indra causes a rain of jewels and gold, flooding the city knee-deep. When Vessantara has given all his generous gifts, he dies at last and ascends to heaven where he will wait to be reborn as the Buddha in his last life; this is where the Pali version of the Vessantara story ends (Cowell 1995:305).

**14. Cheali abhiseka.** In Cambodia, the narrative of the *Vessantara Jataka* concludes with a fourteenth chapter, (14<sup>th</sup> fascicule of Gnok Thaen Khmer edition of 2000). This chapter relates how, after the death of Vessantara, Cheali and Krasna are chosen by their people as well as by the kings of nearby kingdoms to become the rulers of all (Leclère, 1906: 23). They are married and anointed (*abhiseka*) king and queen of the world. A son named Sivivakan (Sihanuk-kumara in the Khmer version) is born to them, who became king at the death of his father. The Khmer text continues indicating a lengthy genealogy of kings (Leclère, 1906: 23).

#### **Murals and paintings on scrolls (*Preah bots*).**

Dupaigne and Hoc have shown a rare complete pictorial representation of a homogenous set of *preah bots*, all produced by the same artist. We have seen other sets, usually incomplete and *preah bot* with single episodes, made by different hands and in heterogeneous styles. The set reproduced in this volume shows the main events, although some events are missing. It is interesting to note that the *preah bots* described by Dupaigne and Hoc include a fourteenth painted scroll (1981: 26-35), which does not refer to the Cheali-Krasna story, to an extraneous event of a monk worshipping a glass urn containing a tooth; an event that surely does not belong to the usual Vessantara narrative.

In the *preah bots* the local Vessantara's illustrated by Roveda & Yem (2009), all the 13 *kans* are depicted.

The Vessantara Jataka remains the most inspiring story for Cambodian painters. We have noticed in some nice painted sets of *preah bots* in monasteries of Battambang, that the choice of events is not consistent as some painters have taken the liberty to paint several events of the same *kan*, while for other *kan*, only a single event is depicted, and other events are missing.

The *preah bot* is very large and includes six panels of three superimposed panes on a black background, all depicting events of the Vessantara story. From left to right: 1. The meeting of the gods to decide it is time for a bodhisattva to descend to earth; 2. Indra confers ten wishes to Sobar in exchange for becoming the mother of Vessantara; 3. The gift of the white elephant; 4. Jujuk meeting the hermit Accutarsi; 5. Vessantara asks his children to come out from hiding; 6. Maddi is stopped from returning home by wild animals. This large canvas was meant to be cut into six small canvasses according to the wish of the sponsor.

The importance of the Vessantara narrative is attested to in the legend of Preah Malai. When Preah Malai was in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, the Bodhisattva Maitreya descended from the joyous Pure Land to worship the Culamani stupa with him. He told Preah Malai that for people on earth to make merit they had to listen, in a day and a night, to the story of the bodhisattva Vessantara who had given away everything and then they must give gifts to the temple where the story is recited.

In Cambodian popular culture, the unique episode is when Vessantara, shocked by the view of Jujuk abusing his children, loses his composition and thinks to punish Jujuk. Brandishing his bow, he would like to release a sharp arrow against Jujuk ill-treating children. Popular consensus gives a human dimension to Vessantara. Even if this was only a fleeting thought in the mind of Vessantara, the popular belief goes as far as saying that this wretched reaction forbade Vessantara to become a Buddha. However, this story is apocryphal, not mentioned even in the Khmer edition of Gnok Thaem; it is exceptionally depicted on this *preah bot* and is unknown on murals, possibly, as an artist's freedom.

When the ceremony of a recitation of the **Vessantara Jataka** is to start and the believers are all assembled, the *achar* or master of ceremony informs the monks that all is ready so that they can enter the *vihara* from the west door, to move to the right near the front of the altar in the *salachan*. The reading then starts and can last until midnight. If unfinished, the ceremony will continue the following day. The popularity of the *Vessantara Jataka* was highlighted by A. Leclère when he wrote that on the occasion of almost any festivity, believers were asked to have this Jataka solemnly read in the *vihara*. For this occasion...“some 20 painted canvas.....were suspended representing the main events of the Vessantara Jataka” (Leclère 1917: 415-417).

### **After Vessantara**

Leclère, after a summary of the Cambodian Vessantara, gave a list of the list of Buddhist kings (1906: 20) that followed after Vessantara until the marriage of the king Suthoton (Sanjaya) and Maha, the future mother of Siddhattha.

In fact, after the death of Vessantara, his children Cheali and Kresna were elected by the people for Tevalongka to rule their kingdom. They were married and the anointment ceremony made them the first kings of the world. Cheali had from her sister a son named Sivivakan who, when his father died, took the throne.

All the male successors of this lineage (82.000) until King Masha Tibati had two sons, Cheysen and Chyotp.

When Chaysen became king he married dame Kobeola-phoson. They had had a boy Siothanu, and a girl Yashothara.

At the same time, Cheyotip became king of Tovalongka and married Kanchayana.

Chyotip succeeded the father and had a son Tip-Kumar and a daughter Kachayana and had 5 sons: Suthothon, Kototon, Swatoton, Amitoton, Sakoton and two daughters Amitta and Palita.

Yashothara married Tipkumar to become queen; they had two sons, Chonatipas and Pandavas and 5 daughters named Vetehika, Kesini, Tharavati, Somavati and Paphavati.

Chonotipas married Sononta who made her queen; they had three daughters, Maha-Maya, Pachapati, Tondapani and a boy Sopaputh.

Naha-Maya married Suthoton and was anointed, queen. She became the mother of the Buddha. The text of Leclere continues with the Maha-Maya life events and her marriage and then the story of the Bodhisatta in Thusita heaven who accepted to retake his existence in the womb of Maha-Maya and be born as Siddhattha. The dream of Maya with the elephant descending and entering the womb of Maya is not reported in the Khmer text examined by Leclere (1906: 29).

The third Cambodian rendering of the Vessantara Jataka is that written by Gnok Thaém in modern Khmer mixed with Pali, probably in 1966. Gnok Thaém (1903-1975) was a monk who studied in Bangkok religious texts and Thai translations from Pali, probably including elements usable for his narrative. In the next chapter, I present a summary of the translation from Khmer to French by Gérard Groussin in 2005.

### **Murals Cambodia.**

We have conventionally separated different groups of illustrations of this very popular story, some on mural paintings, others on painted scrolls (*Pra Bots*).

The Pra (Preah) Bots were studied in collaboration with Yem Sothonon a few years ago and a booklet was printed in 1910.

The temple was built and rebuilt several times and a massive Khmer laterite platform.

It is difficult to specify if the beautiful narrative carved murals were carved at the time of construction and when all the murals of the gallery of the third enclosure murals were not carved contemporaneously by different workshops. The murals were painted centuries later in the two viharas of the Buddhist monastery to the south and north of the marvellous Khmer temple. Both cases are reminiscent of the paintings of the Tep Nimit Mak, a workshop in Phnom Penh around 1900 to paint the walls of the galleries of the Silver Pagoda.

After this, we look at the Vessantara Jataka murals painted in Cambodian viharas before 1975 and after this a mixture of modern images (after 1975). We start with the oldest conception of the visual narrative of Kampong Tralach Leu, possibly the only complete survivor of the Khmer Rouge's destructive power. After the classicism of the murals off Kampong Tralach Leu wAs rebuilt over the previous one in 1925, the murals seem to be older, typical of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After this, we look at the paintings of some old vihara(WEat Sorya) and finally those of Wat Sisowath Ratanaran, of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (around 1960 ?). The murals of this vihara were gently retouched in the 1980s to revive the colours and the faces of the personages, but not the overall design and layout that remains the original one.

Other versions of Vessantara Jataka are presented from two monasteries surrounding the Temple of Angkor Wat, which have refectories a wall of each has visual narratives set in mediaeval India, perhaps because the artists were influenced by TV representations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, produced in India and very popular in Cambodia with the use of TV sets operated from car batteries. Finally, we will look at a constellation of murals in many Cambodian temples. Another "classic" painting is that on the architraves of the porch of the temple of Wat Bakokg, restored by my initiative.

## 1. The Vessantara murals of Kampong Tralach Lau



Fig.1. This nice little ancient monastery can be reached by following the road going east from the village of Ou Russei located on the National road N.5, some 40 Km north of Phnom Penh. The temple was built and rebuilt many times, based on a thick Khmer laterite platform. It was slightly restored (by unknown French people of Phnom Penh) with the condition to the monks keep the windows open during good days to allow air circulation. As a matter of act, air circulation is the best element for the preservation of murals (My last visit was in 2009).



Fig.2 – Kampong Tralach Leu. The gift of the white elephant.



Fig.3 –T Kampong Tralach Leu. The gift of the white elephant and the encounter with two beggars asking to be given the horses.



Fig.4 – Kampong Tralach Leu the donation of the horses that the two beggars are riding away; then the gift of the chariot that a group of beggars push away.



Fig.5 - Kampong Tralach Leu Detail of beggars asking the horses



Fig.6 – **Kampong Tralach Leu** Detail of the deer replacing the horse; they were sent by gods to help but dissolved away after some time.



Fig.7 – **Kampong Tralach Leu** Detail of Amitta being assaulted by jealous girls of the same village.



Fig.8 – **K Kampong Tralach Leu** among Tralach Leu. Vessantara and Madri carrying their children, walking in the forest, probably guided by a local man



Fig.9 - Kampong Tralach Leu. Two devas having taken the form of Vessantara and Madri, give fruits to eat to Jeali and Krishna.



Fig.10 - Kampong Tralach Leu. In his hermitage, Vessantara gives his children to Jujaka





Fig.11 – Kampong Tralach Leu. Detail of Jujaka sleeping in an amok on a tree branch, above the devas sent by Sakka to replace the lost parents of Jeali and Krashna.



Fig.12 – Kampong Tralach Leu. Detail of Maddi, impeded to return home by wild animals.



Fig.13 – Kampong Tralach Leu. The reunion of the children with their grandparents



Fig.14 – Kampong Tralach Leu - Detail of King Sanjaya and his consort affectionately looking at their two grandchildren



Fig.15 – Kampong Tralach Leu. Detail of Jujaka eating without restraint. The waiters present a duck, and later a pig's head.



Fig.16 – Kampong Tralach Leu. Vessantara and Madri climbed on the Wangkat mountain to look at the noisy arrival of troops and elephants.



Fig.17 – Kampong Tralach Leu Elephants carrying female courtier



Fig.18 and 19 - Kampong Tralach Leu Vessantara anointed King and celebration on this occasion

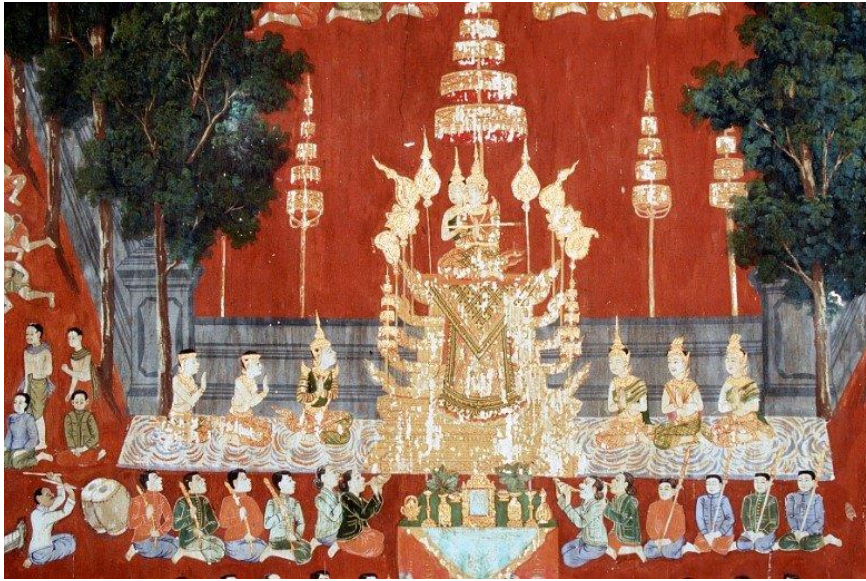


Fig.20– Kampong Tralach Leu. The great celebration of the wedding of Jali with Krashna.

## 2. Wat Soriya

This temple is located in the outskirts of the small city of Pursat on National Road No.5.,

easy to reach. Its murals are dark and difficult to observe accurately. It is interesting to note that panels depicting Jatakas are framed by guardian deities standing on an animal at random and with inscriptions in cursive Khmer. Noticeable are also the shutters painted with clouds or leaves designs. The visual narratives are painted with prevailing orange-ochre, Prussian blue and intense green; many have been washed out and appear out of focus in photographs. For the sake of clarity, we have cut out the panels from the surrounding decorative frame.

In our estimate, the murals were painted in the early-muddle 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig.21- Decorative frieze over some Buddhist painted scenes.



Fig.22 – **Wat Sorya** - At the centre of the picture, in the royal palace the king's father and his queen and all the courtiers lament the departure of prince Vessantara and his family. Soon the Prince donates his white horses to beggars, but *devatas* send deer to replace them; eventually, also the royal chariot is given away by Vessantara who has to proceed by foot, with Maddi, each carrying one of their children.

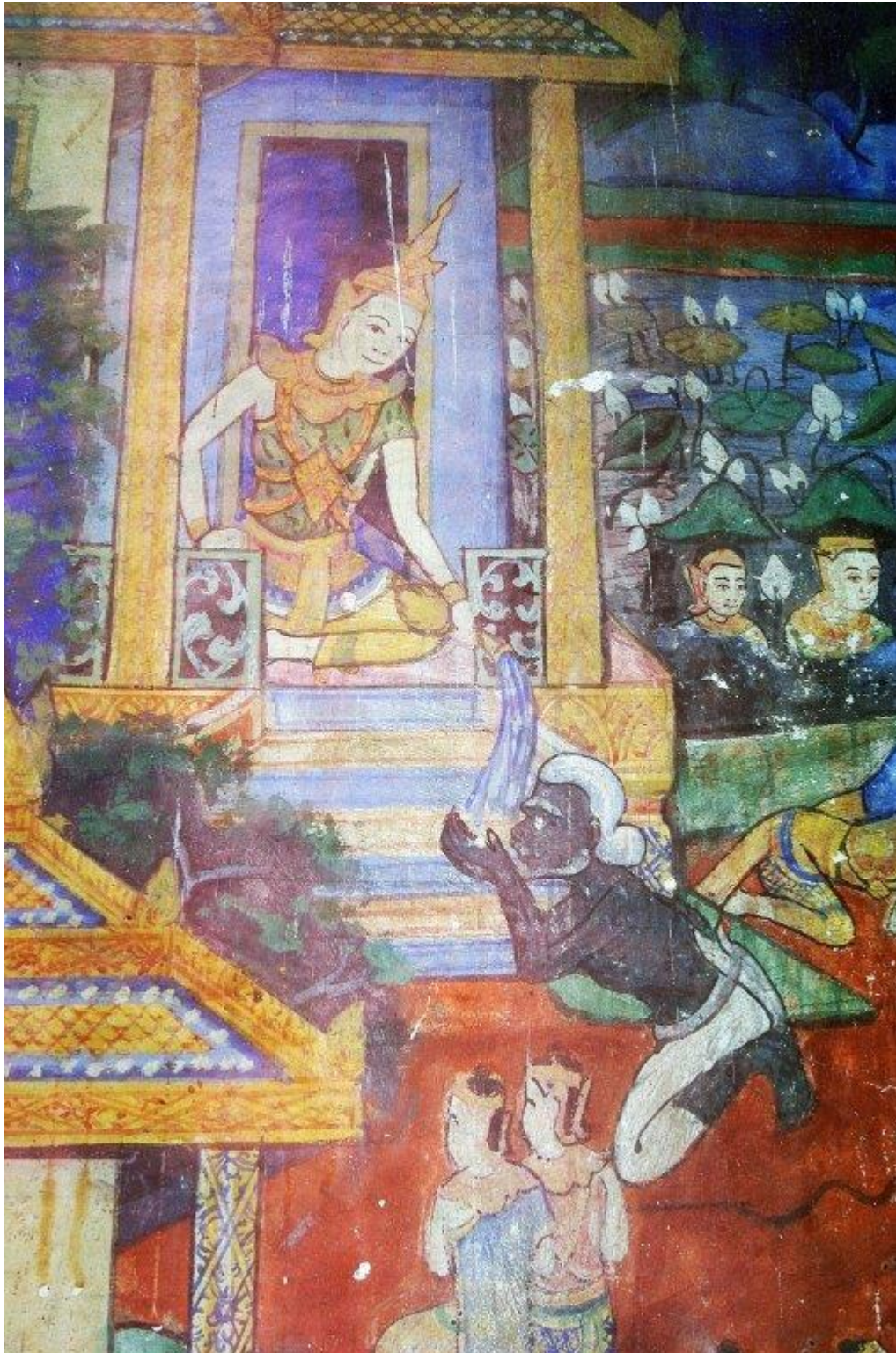


Fig.23 -Wat Sorya. Detail of Vessantara pouring water over Jujuk's hands to formalise the donation of his two children.



Fig.24 – **Wat Sorya** - To the lower left, Vessantara is giving the gift of his children to Jujaka, shown walking away with them. To the lower right, Jujaka asks a hermit directions on where to find Vessantara. To the lower right of the picture Jujak reaches the Accuta hermitage then (upper higher, to the left) Jujuk meets the forester with hi ferocious dogs causing Jujuk to climb a tall tree. Eventually, they made peace and Jujuk is invited to eat and drink with the forester on a round rock over the ground level. The left side of these scenes is all devoted to Vessantara in his princely palace being visited by the Brahmin Jujak several times asking for donations and Vessantara standing near a small pond where his children are hiding.



Fig.25 – **Wat Sorya** - On the upper part of the panel, Amita, wife of Jujaka, is abused by the village's girls for having married such an old crippled man. Below, in a palace, a King and a Queen are shown holding children on their laps and receiving offerings. Outside the palace's gate, Vessantara and Madri walk carrying their children. Note. The visual temporal sequence is not well understood.





Fig.26 – **Wat Sorya** - Maddi collecting fruits for her family; when she is allowed to return to the hermitage and hears the children were gone, she faints in the arms of Vessantara. (To the right of the picture)

Vessantara is in the process of donating Maddi to a kneeling Brahmin, but Sakka will descend from the sky, cancel the gift and explain that that was the ultimate trial for testing Vessantara's generosity and detachment from earthly emotions.



Fig.27 – **Wat Sorya** - to the right of the picture, in the courtyard outside the Palace, King... And his queen rejoices at being reunited with their shown and grandsons.



Fig.28 – Prince Vessantara is anointed king with a grand celebration. Notice Apsara dancing in a small pavilion. In the Palace to the right. The King-father and Queen-mother, watch together with their grandchildren.

### 3. Murals of Sisowat Ratanaram.

This well-kept monastery by a friendly abbot is located on the western side of the Bassac river in the Kandal province touched to the west by the Mekong River. The monastery is difficult to find and reach. Driving south of Phnom Penh on road No.2 when reaching Ta Khmau city will have to search for road No.21 and drive south past many small villages until the post for the ferry (almost impossible to find, it is better to ask villagers about the ferry), that crosses the Bassac to the small village opposite, and walk south for 15 minutes until reaching the monastery.



Fig.29 – **Sisowat Ratanaran**. Photograph of the western wall of the vihara with the original coat of arms of King Sisowat who sponsored most of the monastery. The picture was taken in October 2002, just before the complete restoration.



Fig.30. Sisowat Ratanaram. The gift of the white elephant



Fig.31 – the gift of horses and chariot



Fig.32 – Sisowat Ratanaram. Village scene of Jujuk and Amitta



Fig.33- Jujaka being given the children that he takes away. Maddi in the forest (top centre picture)



Fig.34 – Sisawat Ratanaram. The triumphal return of the Six, escorted by the army.



Fig. 35 – Sisowat Ratanaram. Jujuk, having returned the children to King Sanjaya, Jujaka is fed by a queue of waiters



Fig.36 –Sisowat Ratanaram. The anointment of Jeali and Krashna to king and queen, calling a magnificent festivity

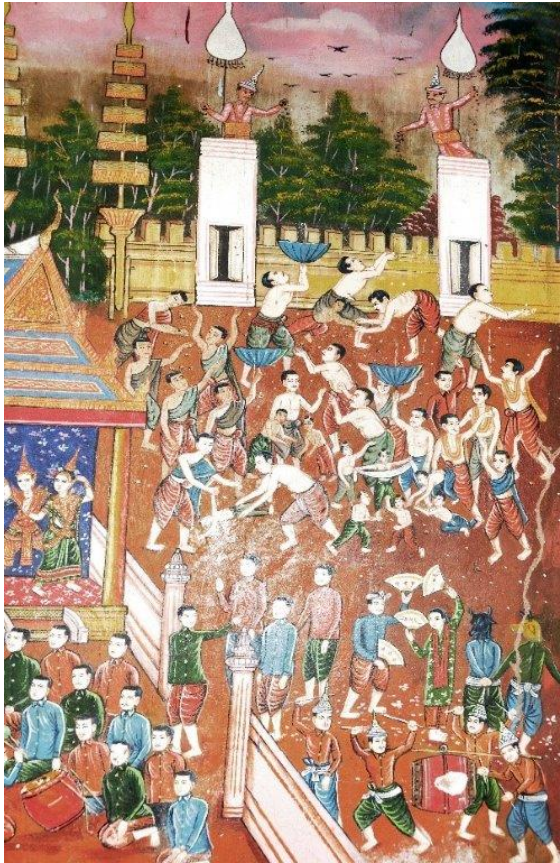


Fig.37 – Sisowat Ratanaram. Ras\in of gold and jewel dropped to make happy the poor, by order of the king.

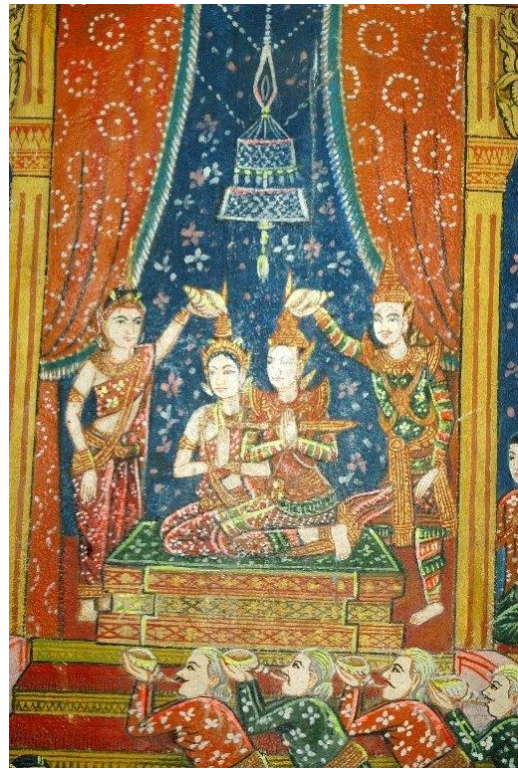


Fig.38 –Detail of Jeali and Krashna.



Fig.39 – Sisowat Ratanaram. Detail of musicians.

#### 4. Vessantara set of *Pra Bots* from Wat Balath, a monastery of Battambang



Fig.40



Fig.41



Fig.42



Fig.43



Fig.44



Fig.45



Fig.46



Fig.47



Fig.48

This set of pictures belongs to a monastery of Battambang that want to be anonymous. It includes 11 canvas painted as *Preah Bots*, made in 1989 by an artist that signed with his initials N.R. He was very well known and appreciated in the area since he produced also the set that we reproduce in the following pages.



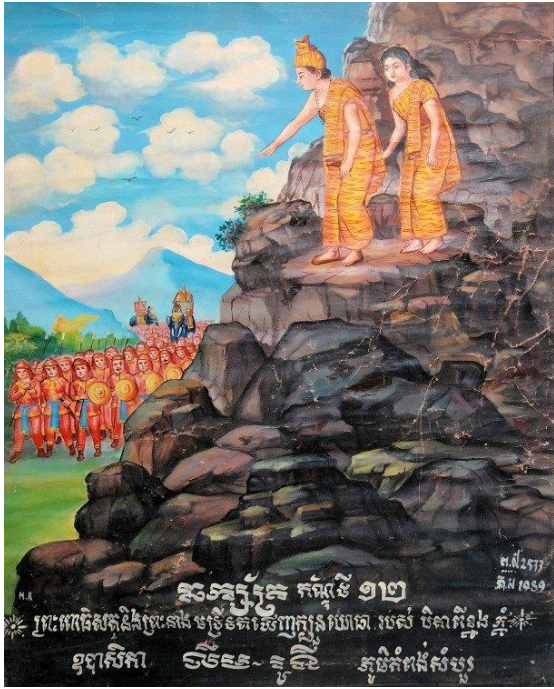


Fig.49. Vessantara and Madri on Mount Vekunt.

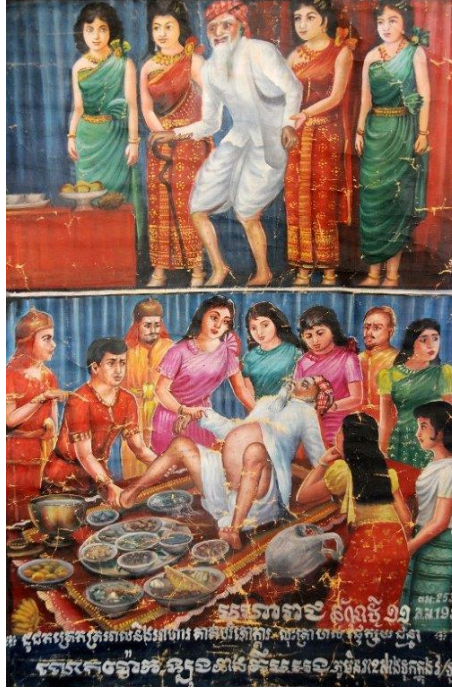


Fig.50. Jujuk dies of overeating.

## 5. Vessantara set of *Phra Bots* of the monastery Kampong Preang



Fig51 - Kanpong Preang (Battambang) 59 Special events from the Vessantara Jataka.



Fig.52 -



Fig.53 -

**Kanpong Preang (Battambang)** - Detailed explanation of the Preah Bots painting are written in my book of 2010 written in cooperation with Yem Sothon.



Fig.54

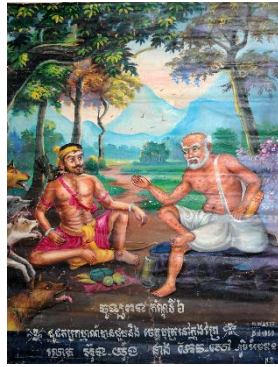


Fig.55

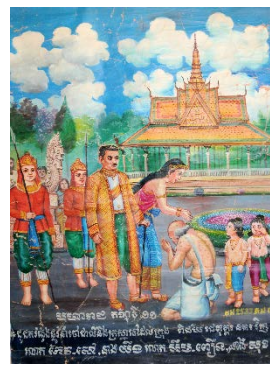


Fig.56



Fig.57



Fig.58

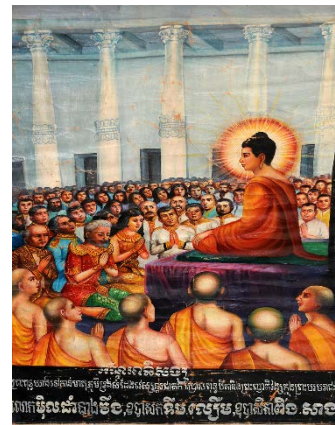


Fig.59

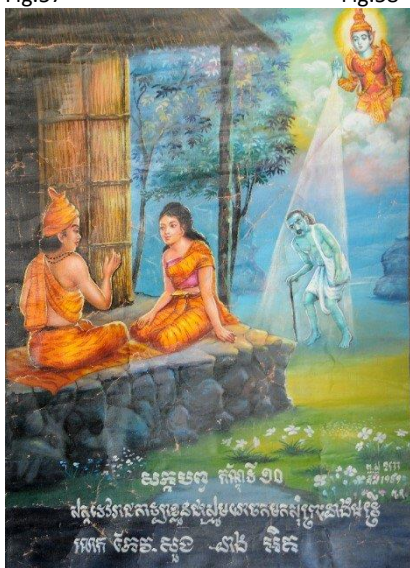


Fig.60 - Indra "descending" to earth

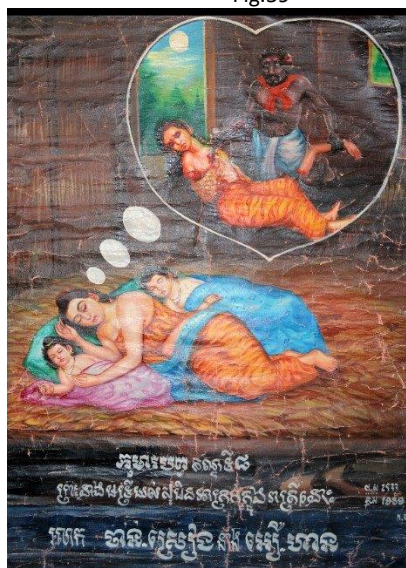


Fig 61. The nightmare of Maya. A dark ugly man wearing a tanned garment and red flowers in his ear, armed with a dagger, entered her bed chamber and threw her to the ground, extracted out her two eyes, cut off her two arms, and broke her chest to extract her heart. This is the first representation of a nightmare we have seen in Cambodian paintings or other south Asia countries. It seems influenced by comic strips with bubbles helping the reading.

Signed N.R. and dated 1989.

Another nightmare is narrated in the *Sanghabhdevastu* , where Yashodhara suffered a non-auspicious dream in which her matrilinear lineage was cut off, her magnificent bracelet smashed, and her teeth fell out, and her hair's braid was undone. Furthermore, the dream said that happiness had left her house, the moon eclipsed Rahu, and the sun rose in the East and set there again to the East (Strong 1997: 115).

The painting represented here is a *Pra Both* dated 1989 by an artist signing N.R.

## 5. Cambodia's selected murals of Vessantara Jataka

from various monasteries, painted after 1975.



Fig.62 – A rare depiction of the episode when Vessantara desired to kill Jujuk for ill-treating his children.

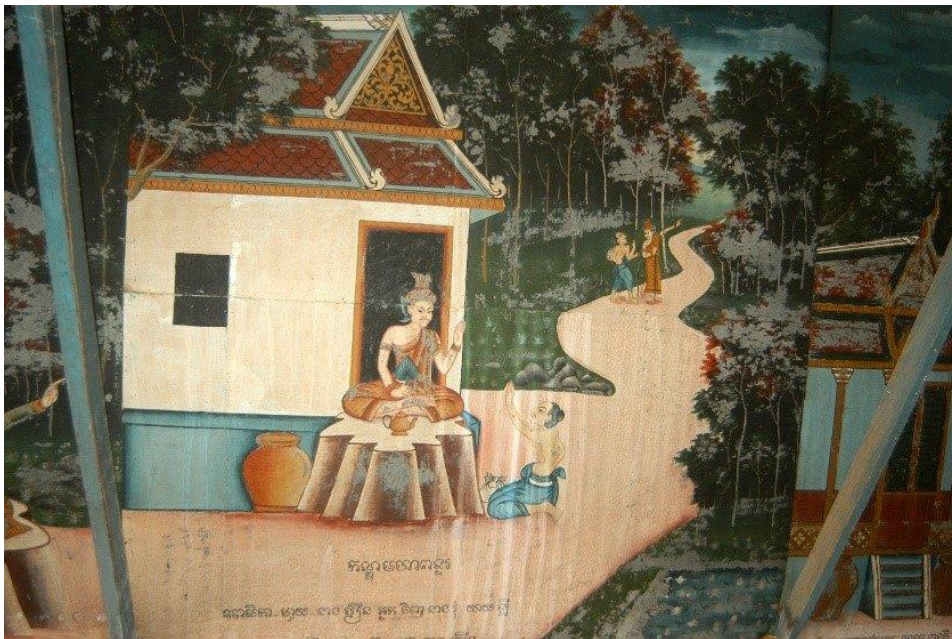


Fig.63 – Wat Kun Moech (Siem Reap). The hermit giving directions to Jujuk (probably painted around the 1960s)



Fig.64 - Wat Kun Moch (Siem Reap) - Vessantara donated his children to Jujaka (painting on zinc plate on the wall under the inner roof)



Fig.65 – Wat Kien Sway Krav (Phnom Penh)- Madri inn the forest being impeded to return home by wild beasts (19<sup>th</sup> century ?).



Fig.66 – Wat Kien Sway Krav (Phnom Penh). Vessantara gifts his children; on the left Jujuk sleeping on a tree and the children below are protected by *devas*. At a closer look, Vessantara holds a bow.



Fig.67 – Wat Kien Sway Krav (Phnom Penh) - The hermit showing Jujaka the direction to follow for reaching Vessantara.



Fig.68 - Wat Kien Sway Krav (Phnom Penh). Vessantara and Madri on the mount Wanka to observe the arriving soldiers.

## 6. Angkor Wat, refectory (*salachan*) of the Northern Monastery.



Fig.69 – Sakka entrusting Sobar to become Vessantara's mother



Fig.70 – The prince and his wife in Indian costumes



Fig.71 - Beggars asking the chariot



Fig.72 – Jujaka sleeping in an amok on a tree.



Fig.73 – Detail of the occupants of the chariot.

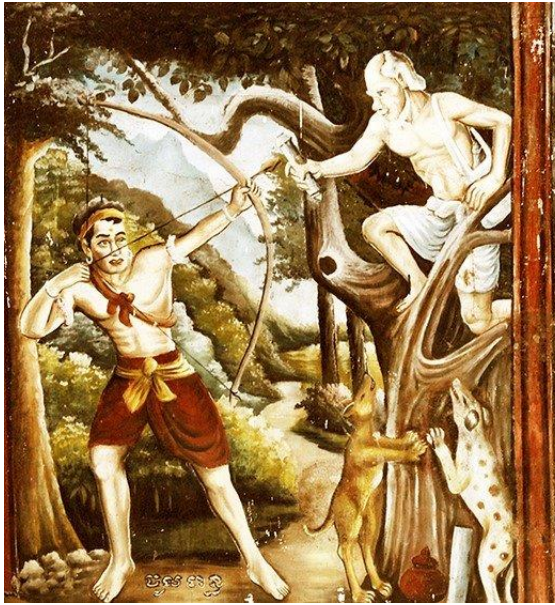


Fig.74 - Chetaputta menacing Jujaka



Fig.75 –Jujuk and his wife Amitta

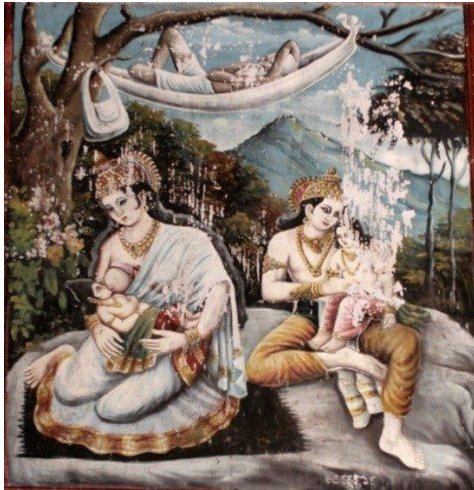


Fig.76 – Devas protecting the children under Jujuk sleeping on the tree in his hammock.



Fig.77 –The happy reunion of the Six.

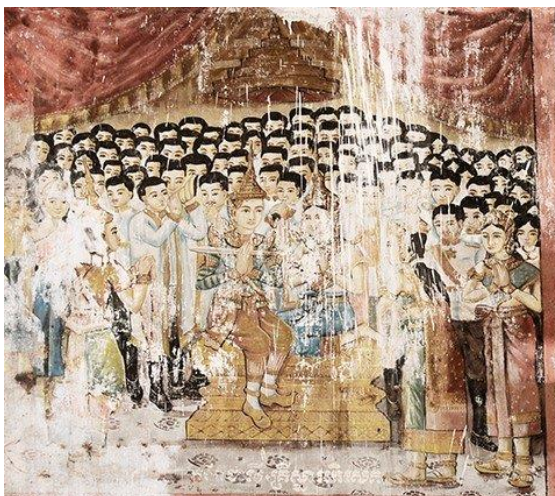


Fig.78 - The *abhisheka* of Jeali and Krashna

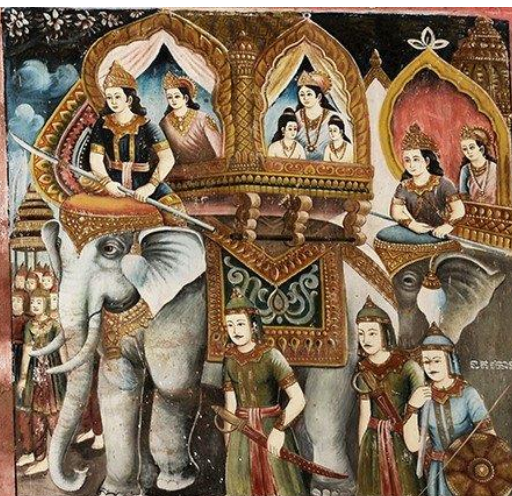


Fig.79 – The return of the Six.



## 7. Angkor Wat, refectory (*salachan*) of the Southern Monastery.

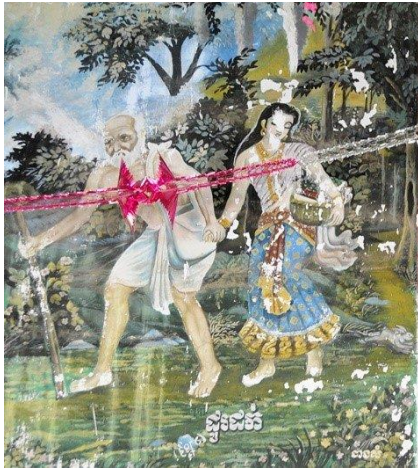


Fig.80 - Jujuk and wife

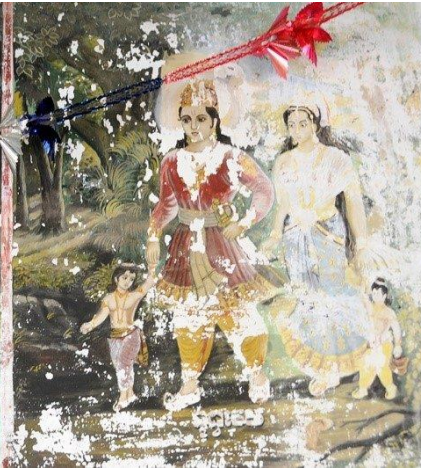


Fig.81 –Vessantara with Madri and their children

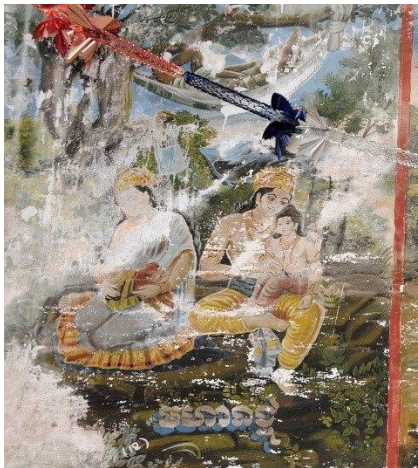


Fig.82 –Two devas protecting the children



Fig.83 –Vessantara gifting his children



Fig.84 - Jujaka meeting Accutarsi



Fig.85 – Jujaka meeting Chetaputta



Fig.86 - Maddi is impeded to return by three beasts

Fig.87 –Jeali obeys his father to exit from hiding



Fig.88 –Detail of Jeali exiting the pond while Krahsa is still inside.



Fig.89 - The return of the Six

Fig.90 –The Six reunited

## 8. Wat Bakong murals on the architraves of the Porch.

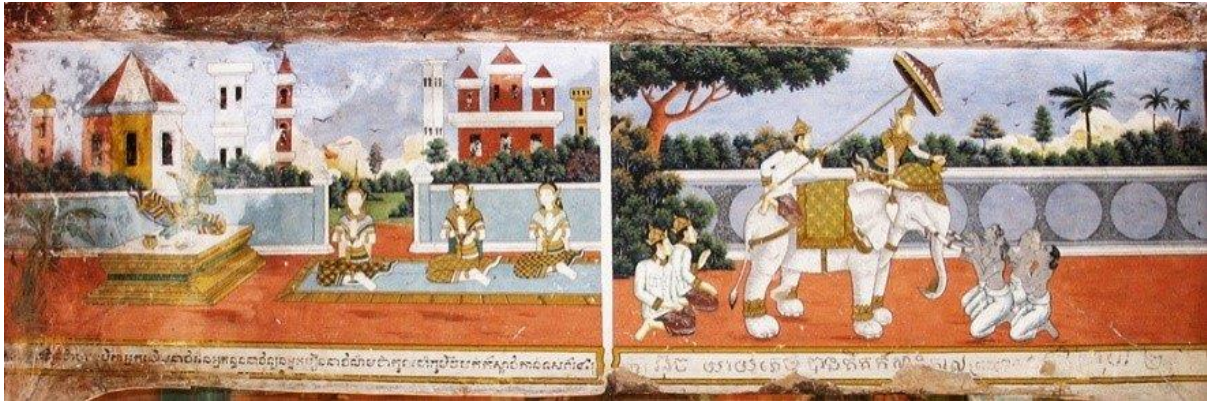


Fig.91 –Indra conceding Sobar wishes

Fig.92 – The gift of the white elephant



Fig.93 – the departure on the chariot and after his donation, Vessantara and Maddi have to walk.



Fig.94 – Jujaka choosing Amitta who is attacked by the village's girls. Jujaka escapes Chetaputta dogs.



Fig.95 – Maddi impeded to return by while beasts. Vessantara concludes the donation of his children to Jujuk.



Fig.96 – Jujuk taking away the children. Two protecting devas under the tree where Jujuk is sleeping in his hammock. The reunion of the Six outside the royal palace.



Fig.97 - Triumphal return of the Six to the capital. The soldiers are in modern uniforms and have modern weapons. The flag has the faint image of Angkor Wat temple (in use until 1948).



Fig.98 – Detail of Jujuk climbing a tree to escape the dogs of Chetaputta.



Fig.99 – Jujaka asking for directions to the hermit Accutarsi.



Fig.100 - Detail of the soldiers escorting the Six back to the capital.

## 8. Images from various other Cambodian temples



Fig.101 – Wat Kdei Dong (Kampong Thom). Vessantara giving away his two white horses



Fig.102 – Wat Kdei Dong. Vessantara giving away his chariot



Fig.103 – Wat Kdei Dong. Vessantara and Madri leave their royal entourage to proceed by foot into the forest



Fig.104 – Wat Swaidakum (Siem Reap). The conflation of scenes: The white elephant taken away, and later the white horses and chariot. Jujak abuses the two children. A *deva* (Sakka) intervenes to help Vessantara who agreed to donate his wife.



Fig.105 – Wat Swai Meas (Siem Reap). To the left: Jealy obeys his father. To the right: Vessantara is shown holding a bow and arrow thinking to punish Jujaka for beating his children.



Fig.106 – Way Yacantho (Campong Xham).The royal cortege with the army and elephants escorting the Six royals back to the capital.

## 9. Vessantara set of decorative posters from Kampong Speu



Fig.107

## 10. Kampong Speu, posters decoration.



Fig.108 - Kampong Speu



Fig.109 – Kampong Speu. Decoration of the Vessantara Jataka posters, displayed for some celebrations

## 11.Vessantara Phra Bots of Chang Ham Hoy



Fig.110 – Jujaka-Chetaputta



Fig.111 –Jujaka- Accutarasi



Fig.112 –Vessantara pours water on Jujaka'a hand to ratify the gift.



Fig.113 – Devas protecting



Fig.114 – Vessantara gifting his wife



Fig.115 –Madri and the beasts



## 12. Longvek, Tep Pranam salachan



Fig.116– Longvek -kThe misadventures of Jujaka

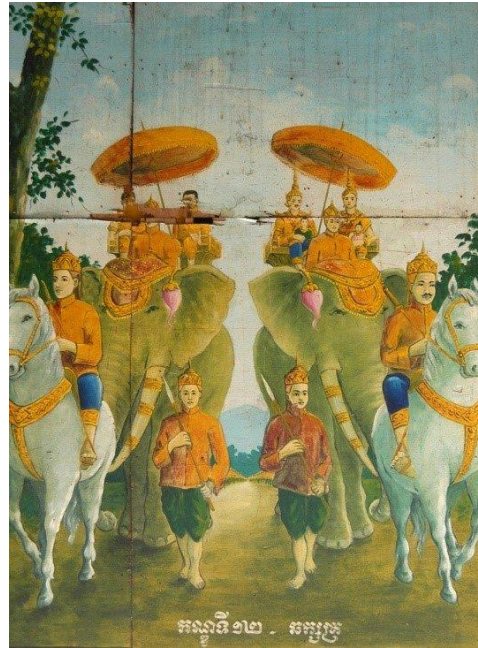


Fig.117 – The royal return

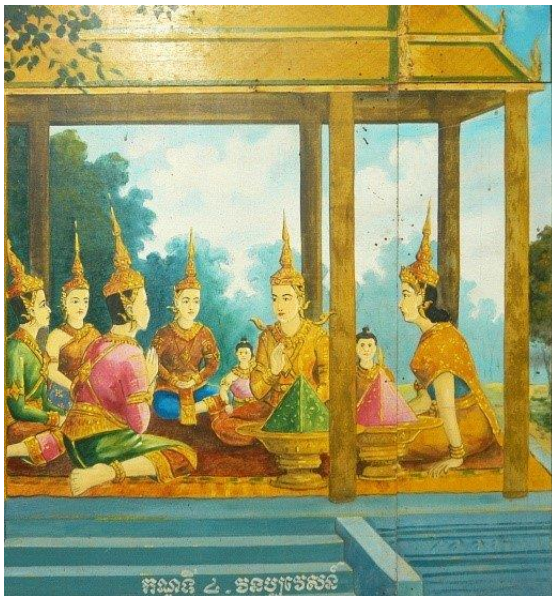


Fig.118– Longvek, Tep Pranam. The finding of the two children.  
These paintings were made on slant cardboard probably before 1975.

### 13. Siem Reap. Wat Preah Prom

#### Three-dimensional rendering of a Vessantara Jataka episode

The scenes reconstructed here is that of Vessantara looking at Jujuk taking away and his children and maltreating them



Fig.119 –Temporary reconstruction of Vessantara’s hut. The figures’ are painted on one metal sheet



Fig120 - Siem Reap, Wat Preah Prohm courtyard. 3-D reconstruction of the scene when Vessantara after having gifted his children to Jujuk, for an instant only thought to kill Jujuk because he was ill-treating beating his children when taken away lamenting and crying.



Fig.121 - Vessantara, armed with bow, looking at Jujaka taking away his children



Fig.122 – images of Jeali and Krashna.





Fig.124 -Roka Kandal refectory (*salachan*)- The previous three pictures are part of a very long painted banner or Preah Bot. (October 2003)



Fig.125 - Roka Kandal refectory. Selected paintings on canvas representing key elements of the Last Ten Jataka. (October 2003). Here I have selected the three main donations of Prince Vessantara.



Fig.126 \_Wat Bo Krav – the upper register shows the Khmer version of an episode of the Mahosadha and the other two on Bhuridatta.Jat; the lower register has 3 scenes of the Vessantara starting from Amitta being attacked by the jealous girls of her village; then the scene of Jujuk climbing a tree to escape the ferocious dogs of the forester; then Jujuk asking directions to a hermit. The importance of these elements is that they were painted con the wood planks of the vihara’s walls, suggesting a poor country monastery. or a peripheric monastery,



Fig.127 – **Phum Prasat** – an extraordinary painting of Maddi being impeded to return home by three wild animals blocking her passage, The size and the detail of the animal are quite astonishing, considering also the refined painting of Maddhi seems to transmit to all a sense of quietness, silence and acceptance of her destiny while the animals are pacific, waiting for the divine order to spread into the forest.