

547. Vessantara Jataka - in Thailand

For observing local variations in mainland Southeast Asia, the original translation from Pali of 1988 (reprint 1960), made by Cowell and Pali experts in 1886, was reprinted. However, now there is a modern translation with comments and an illustration by N. Appleton and S. Shaw (2015), the benchmark for any study on the Last Ten Jataka.

The story has been copied at the beginning of Vessantara Jataka in Cambodia.

Of the last Ten Births, the last one is the Vessantara Jataka one of the most important, thus also named the 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 at a first glance appears to be composed of 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 conflict in us.

Variations in the Thai Vessantara

The Vessantara Jataka despite being a very long story is composed of many clearly defined events in a normal chronological sequence that easily stimulated the imagination of artists, besides having created rituals and celebrations still in use today, especially in Northern Thailand where prince Vetsandon is highly venerated.

In Thailand, the subdivision of the *Vetsandon Jataka* in 13 cantos has felicitated the painting on 13 separate panels plus two panels, one for the prologue (the descent of Pusati from Tavatimsa as the mother of Vetsandon) and another for the epilogue (The Buddha identifying the Jataka's protagonists with those of his personal life). In Northern Thailand, there was the tradition of representing the *Vestandon Jataka* on a single long piece of white cloth. In Cambodia, we have discovered only one example (possibly imported).

Events of the Vessantara Jataka are illustrated on cloth banners, lacquerware, cabinets, manuscripts and temple walls.

Illustrations of Birth stories in Thailand go back several centuries.

The Mons were among the first occupant of Siam and fond of the Jatakas's stories that they were used to decorate the base of the Chedi Chula Paton, near Nakon Pathon.

Later, Some of the ancient Jataka and oldest versions of the Mahajanaka and Nimi Jataka were engraved on stone slabs fixed in the inner corridor of Wat Si Chum (13th- mid 14th c?). Dating is a source of great debate.

Phra Vesandon, Thailand

In Thailand, the Jatakas exerted great influence on Thai society from ancient times, more of what they visually did in Burma and Sri Lanka. The last Great Ten Jātakas are known as '*Thosachat* or *Sip Chat*'. They were the source of Thai literature in various forms and were widely represented on various bases.

Of the *Thosachat*, the Vessantara Jataka is the best known of all others; in Thai tradition, Vessantara is named Vessandon or Vetsandon.

The Vessantara Jataka, known as the *Thet Mahā Chāt* was and still is recited annually. The importance of the recitation was greatly emphasized by Thai kings from 1817 to 1866, who made it part of the state ceremonials. Nowadays, the traditional annual recitation is not always held on a great scale and is not as popular as in ancient times; it still ranks one of the most important religious performances to be seen in the country and has lost nothing of its original magnificence since the time of Ayutthaya.

Ancient recitation of the *Maha Chat* included drollery in scenes of Chuchok and his beautiful wife, with coarse humour overstepping the limits of modesty. These elements were found distasteful to cultured people who reshaped them into a more prosaic recitation losing some of its psychological values.

Almost all Thai religious places have paintings of the Vessantara Jataka, in general, or selected scenes, either on the walls of an ordination hall, on the base of the pagodas, or inside the vihara, on walls and columns, rest houses, and public sights. Scenes were also illustrated in the form of cartoons and others have been used for dramas and movies. The story is also found in a school textbook. Most Thais are familiar with Vessandon and it is still in favour amongst many.

As a result of its popularity, various versions came into existence. Some of them are in Thai verses, some are composed in Pali and paraphrased in the Thai language, and others in prose. However, through time the Pali version was modified by the carelessness of the scribes and the particular needs of the people in each place. Sometimes, according to the occasion, it was found necessary to cut some parts and insert others (venerable Sengpan Pannyawamsa, 1990: 104).

There is also the *Mahā Chāt Kham Luang*, meaning the *Mahā Chāt* royal version. In this type of poem, the one thousand stanzas of the original *Vessantara Jataka* are taken as a text and alternated with the enlarged poetical version. It is for reciting on the festive days after the monks' retreat in the rainy season. The whole poem was to be delivered in a single day but later it was recomposed according to circumstances to suit the listeners, without changing the original meaning. The first composer of the new versions was Khun Luang Hāwat, during the rule of King Song Tham of Ayutthaya, in 1627 CE; it consists of thirteen parts, each including an unequal number of *Pāli* stanzas or *gathās* of the original *Jataka*.

Several excellent pictures of the Vessantara Jataka are reproduced in the book of Bonnie Bereton with Y. Souroay (2010) the very first on Buddhist murals of Northeast Thailand. The paintings, to me, have a folkloristic look full of humour. Simpler than most, image No.25, page 31 has the most gracious event of the donation of the white elephant, in a masterly composed layout with a refined choice of colours. Behind Prince Vessantara, on the elephant in a chair is Maddi only with Jali, the little girl being absent. I guess that in the future, this type of painting will be discovered in Northern Thailand, northeast Laos and Northwestern Burma boundary, if not destroyed before by time or monks' frenzy to rebuild new vihara (named *sim* in the region).

The *Vessantara-jataka* has been popular for a long time amongst the Kengtung (Tai-Khun). The Kengtung Burmese province is adjacent to Northern Thailand, and has many aspects of its culture derived from Chiang Mai and Lanna cultures; its people have their dialect and traditions, quite different from the Burmese. Kengtung is a part of Burma, but its Buddhist culture is more similar to that of the Thai Lanna.

Amongst the Kengtung the *Vessantara J.* is popularly known as *Tham Vessantara-jataka*. It consists of many stories. The word “*Tham*” derives from the word “*Dhamma*” which is the teaching of the Buddha. Indeed, the Kengtung version of the *Vessantara .J.*, encompasses not only the *Vessantara-jataka* but also many parts of the *Tipitaka* such as *Parami*, *Ubhassa*, *Lokavutti*, *Suttanta*, and *Abhidhamma-pitakas*, *Malai*. The *Tham Vessantara J.* is divided into two parts, one with the *Vessantara gathas* and its full story, the other with the good result as well as the bad result of *Vessantara*. Some people may, with good reason, assume that this version encompasses too many Buddhist things in it (Sengpan Pannyawamsa 1990: 106).

In the Ayutthaya Period, interest in the *Jatakas* texts continued (several references in the Annals), but the first visual representations that survived are in the *Traibhumi* (16-17th c) manuscripts of the National Library (Bangkok). Some walls of the Ayutthaya’s residence of the Patriarch of Wat Buddhasaiwan had scenes of the last Ten *Jataka*, now almost all obliterated.

The interest of a massive group of scholars was and still is polarized on specific aspects of the *Vessantara Jataka*: recitation, rituals, festivities, ceremonies, and performances especially in northern Thailand in an exuberant form, more as entertainment for tourist attraction, losing entirely the original meaning.

Because the main events of the various version of the *Vessantara Jataka* seem to be the same for all the Thai versions (local rendering or telling), I have examined here the events that inspired Thai painters to illustrate them on murals in magnificent monasteries, especially in the “aristocratic style” closely patronized by kings in Thonburi and Bangkok.

We illustrate below a selection of well-preserved murals. the oldest scenes of the *Vessantara Jataka* were probably painted on walls of the residence of the Patriarch of Wat Buddhasaiwan of Ayutthaya, together with scenes of the other last Ten *Jataka* unfortunately extremely defaced by the action of time and neglect.. Several references in the Annals refer to the earliest examples of This *Jataka* seen on manuscripts that are now at the National Library (Bangkok), together with visual representations of the *Traibhumi* (16-17th century). Curiously, little importance was paid to the murals on Wat Chong Nonsi of 1600, but I do (see below)

Below

Pictures of Wat Chong Nonsi (Bangkok; executed towards the end of 1600)

Wat Chong Nonsi (Bangkok; executed towards the end of 1600)



Fig.1 – Wat Chong Non Si (Bangkok) Prince Vessantara and his family initiate their trip on a chariot pulled by deer.



Fig.2 – **Chong Non Si** – Jujuk climbing a tree pursued by the ferocious dogs of the forester; later (top left of picture) he is seen friendly with the forester.

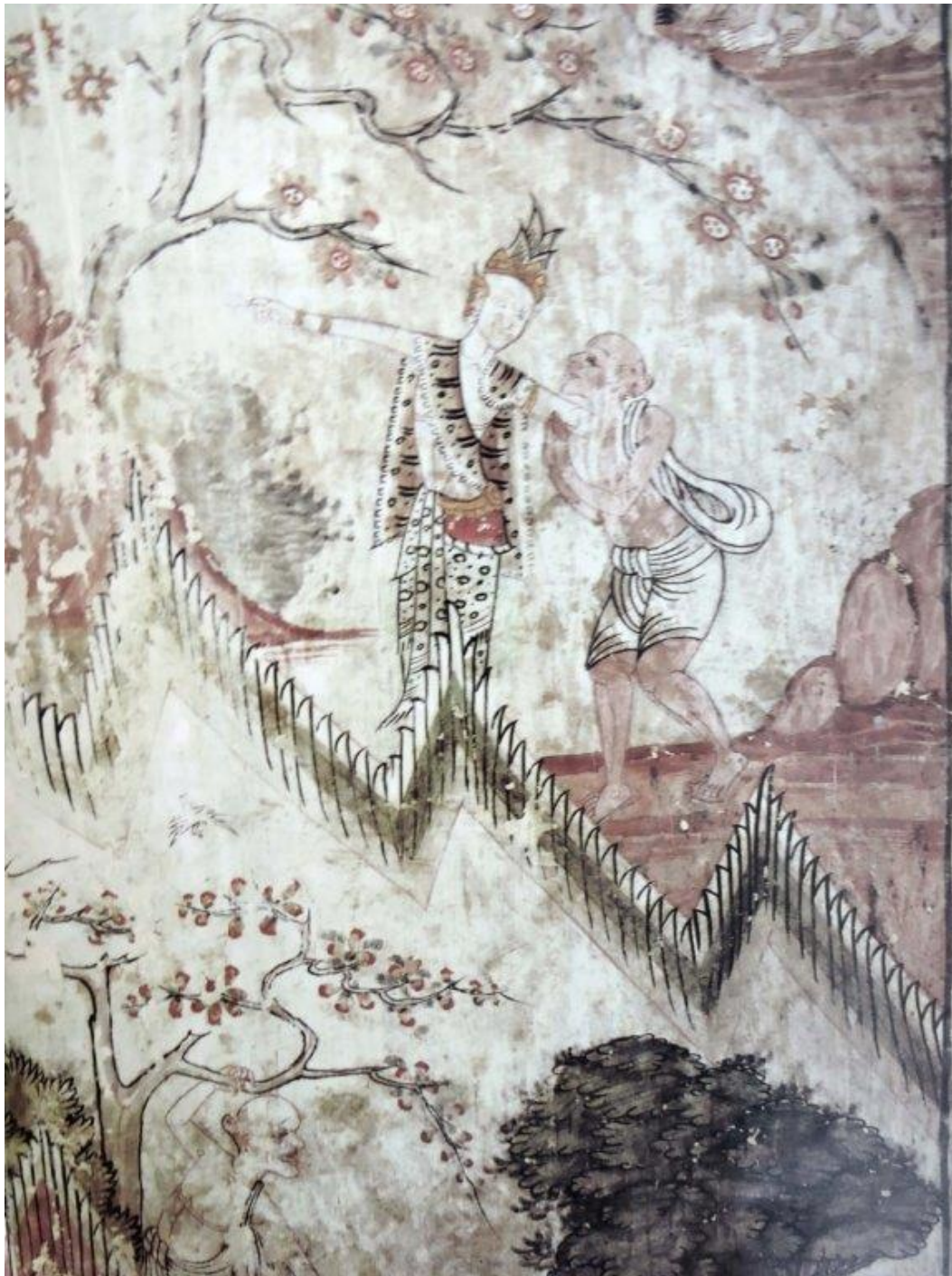


Fig.3 **Chong Nong Si.** Jujuk receives information on the whereabouts of Vessantara from the sage hermit Accuta.

Wat Mai Tepnimit, of Early Rattanakosin Period.

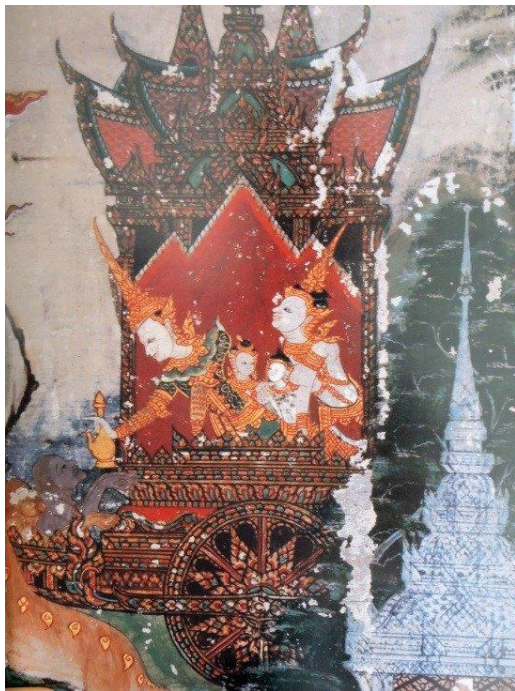


Fig.4. **Wat Mai Thepnimit.**- Vessantara and his family going to exile on the royal chariot pulled by deer, Vessantara in the process of ratifying the gift of the chariot by pouring water on the hands of the beggars



Fig.5 – **Wat May Tepnimit** – Jujuk encountering the hermit Accuta and receiving instruction on the way to follow for reaching Vessantara hermitage.



Fig.6. **Wat May Tepnimit** - Vessantara starts to pour water on the hands of a Brahmin to donate his wife. (sitting to our left). The Brahmin then revealed himself being the god Indra sent to test the ultimate generosity of Vessantara.



Fig.7 - **Wat May Tepnimit** – Another display of Vessantara donating his wife. She was previously kept away by wild animals in the forest (Only two visible;(a brown bear and a striped tiger) Maddi seems to be painted patiently waiting to be freed.

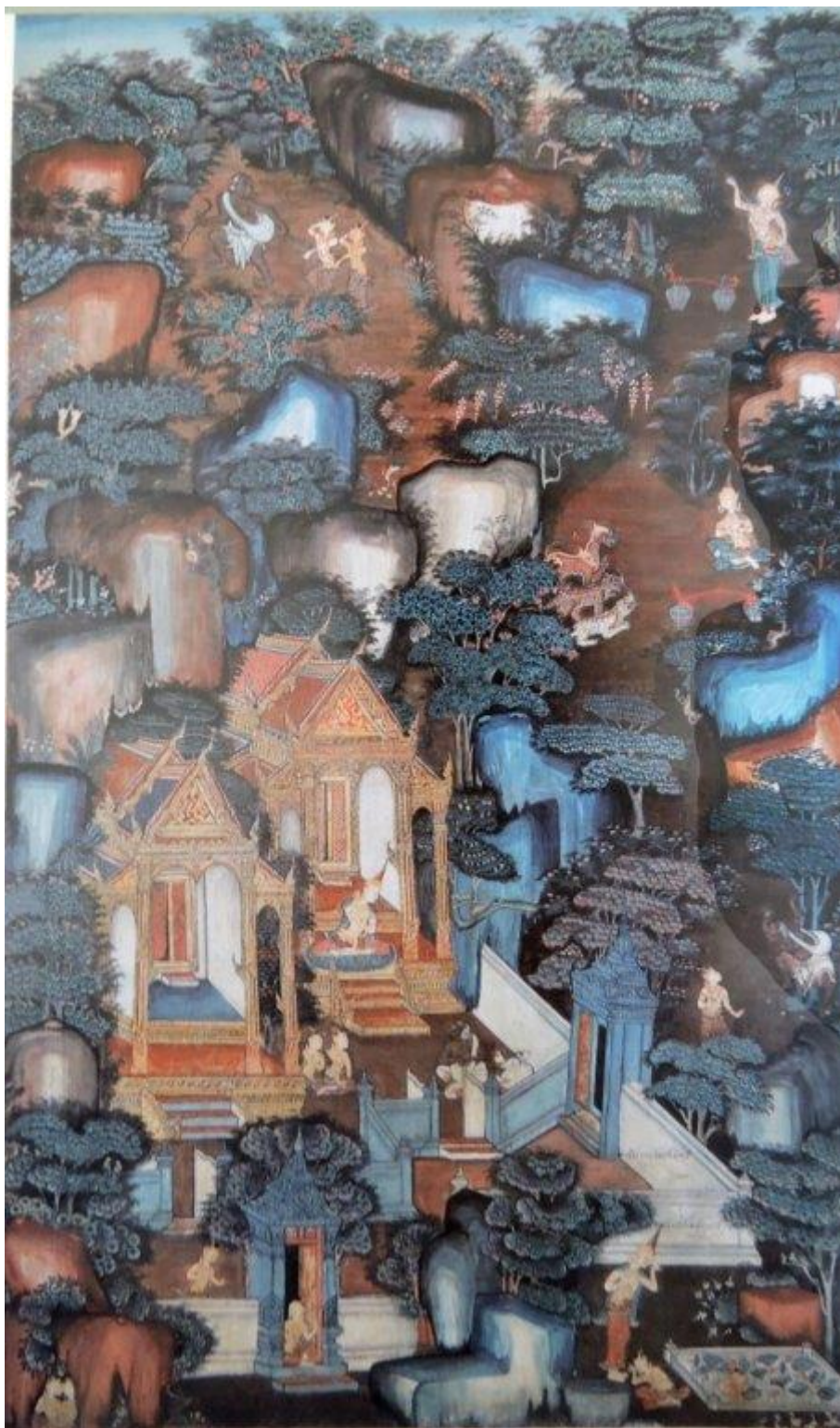


Fig.8 - Wat **Bankhunthainnai (Bangkok)** – Most of the episodes of the second half of the Vessantara Jataka are depicted here in a network mode of representation evident when following my description. The main attraction of the panel is the large royal palace on the right wing of which Vessantara alone is listening to the request of Jujuk kneeling in the courtyard, while the two children in royal attire sit to the left watching the scene. Kit was about their donation. Below this, with remarkable lapses in time (bottom right of the picture) there is a square pond with lotus leaves from which Jeali comes out from hiding, while his sister Khajina is still in. Vessantara stands near the repented son, admonishing him for having disobeyed his father's order to go away with Jujuk. Moving the middle edge of the picture shows partially the figure of Jujuk with his large white sash, pulling a figure, probably Jeali. Looking further up the picture Maddi is shown when she was impeded from returning home by 3 wild beasts causing her to sit on the ground in desperation, and above

this, Maddi is shown collecting fruits from the forest and (below) impeded to go home by 3 scary wild animals. To her left Jujuk is depicted running in the forest pulling the children in desperate conditions.



Fig.9 -**Wat Kreurawan (Thonburi, Bangkok)** – A few events of the Vessantara Jataka are depicted in the hundreds of tableau on the four walls of the *ubosoth*. In this picture, in a royal pavilion is depicted the moving scene of the adults (parents and grandparents) putting to sleep the princely children just recovered from the slavery of Jujuk.



Fig.10 - **Wat Kreurawan**—Vessantara asks his children to come out from hiding in the pond. Jujuk is waiting inside the royal compound.



Fig.11 – Wat Kositaram (Bangkok). Vessandon on his way to donate the white elephant (in frontal perspective, rare in Asian art)



Fig.12 – **Wat Kositaram**. There is a very unusual and puzzling depiction in the grand scene of the return of King Sanjaya and his queen, Vessandon, Maddi, Jeali and Khajina. After the trip on elephants, they are now all rejoicing in the Royal Palace. Entirely out of context, in the yard of the royal palace stands a man in a modern colonial jacket but in Thai trousers. He seems to be admonishing two children, both with modern white shirts, kneeling in front of him. One child has an arm raised with the finger-pointing to a horseman who seems quietly escaping through the city's door. Unfortunately, the mural is washed out in this area, making us guess that the man in white is a tutor of royal princes and the lady with the umbrella is also (As western) a teacher. Out of context, the tutor may be enacting Vessandon talk to his children when out of the pond.



Fig. 13 -**Wat Nai Rong**.Noi Palace scene with King Sanjaya dealing with Jujuk. In the upper half of the painting, in the dark-green forest, various figures are scattered; soldiers to the left and the right the Vessantara family reunited near the hermitage. The second half of the 19th century. Further details in Fig.14,15



Fig.14 -**Wat Rong Noi**. In the detail of the previous Fig.17. King Sanjaya gives orders to pay the ransoms to Jujaka; the two royal children are carried to the King's hippy-back by two persons; Jujaka is abused and beaten.

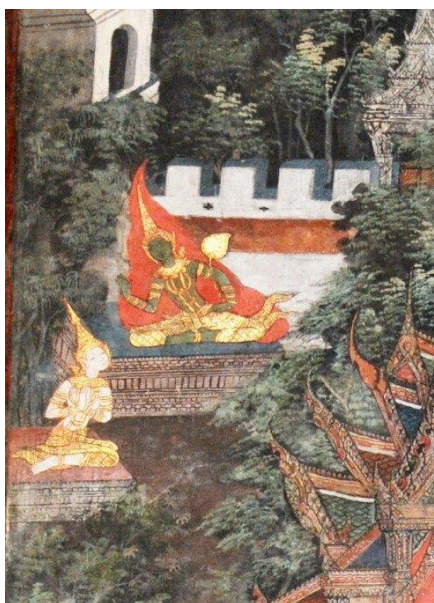


Fig.15 Detail of Sakka (Indra) appearing to Maddi or Vessantara to explain why he had agreed to the prince gifting his wife to some Brahmin.



Fig.16 – Detail of the first reunion of the Vessantara family at the hermitage.

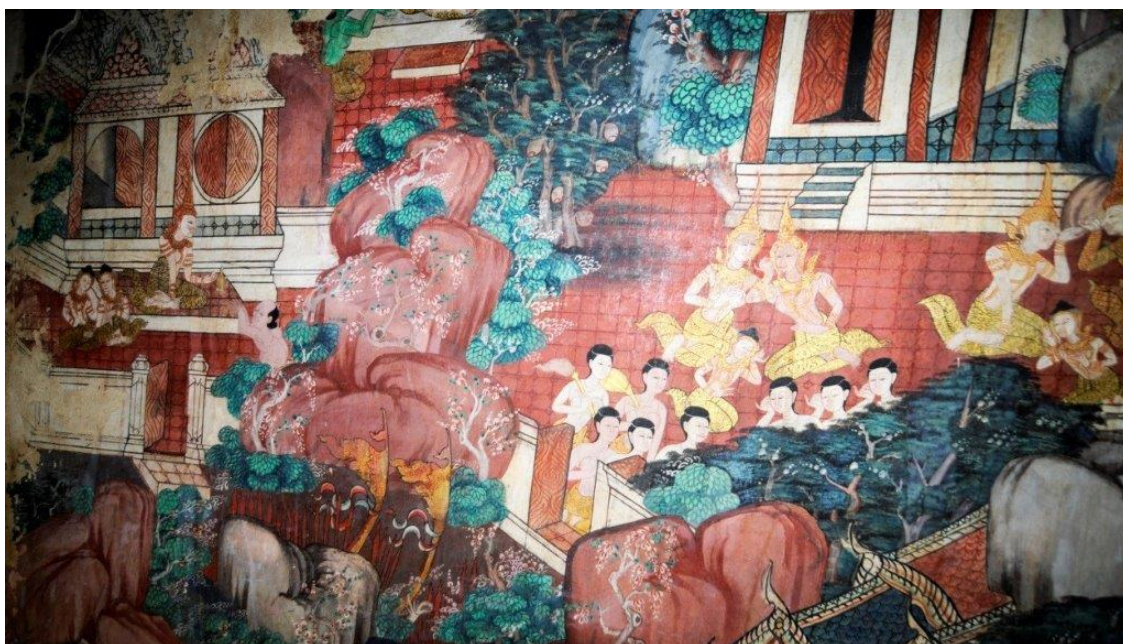


Fig.17

– **Wat Khong Kkaam (Ratchaburi)** - On the right of the picture is the rejoicing of the reunion in front of the royal palace. To the left are two scenes better shown in the details below.

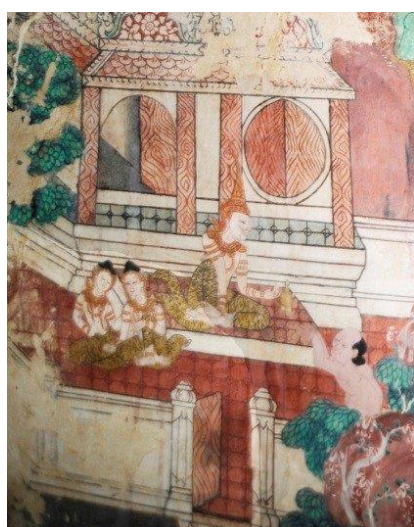


Fig.18 – The gift of the children

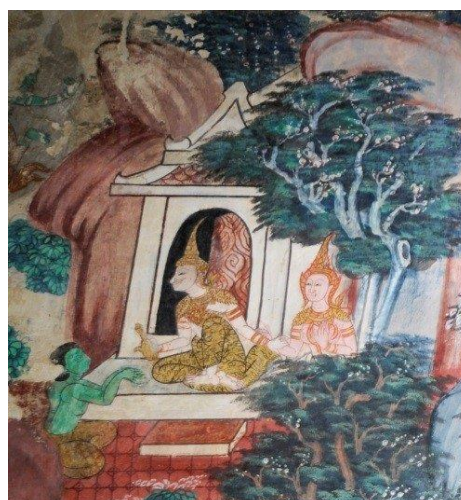


Fig.19 – The gift of the wife.



Fig.20 - Maddi collecting berries, soon to be Stopped from going home by wild animals.



Fig.21 - In **Wat Saket (Bangkok)**, the heaven to the left, Indra is asking Sobar to become the mother of Vessantara, in the central (red) heavenly palace the gods observe Vessantara donating the white elephant (pinkier than white here) to eight Brahmins; then Vessantara escapes with his family on a chariot pulled by deer (magically replacing the horses previously donated). Vessantara is thus forced to proceed by foot carrying Jaly, and his wife Madri carrying Katharina because lighter.



Fig.22 – Detail of Vessantara and Family going into exile; on the bottom left of the picture Jujuk is given directions by the hermit Accuta, while on the right Jujaka has climbed a tree to escape the dog of a forester.



Fig.23 - Wat Saket. Jujuk meets the hermit and asks for directions and he is told where to find Vessantara. To the right is a village scene



Dig.24 – Wat Sutut (Bangkok). The lower part of the panel is between two windows. For the scene in counter-clock reading. Bottom right Jujaka sleeping on a tree under which two devas are taking care of the children, Then the army's cortege is depicted coming to take Vessantara and Madri back to the Palace. Vesandon raises his arm indicating to Madri the arrival of the cortege. To the lower left is the reunion scene of the family inside the beautiful hermitage g built by Sakka 's divine architect)



Fig.25 – **Wat Sutat**. On the upper left portion of the panel, other events of the Jataka are illustrated; the gift of the children, the children hiding in the lotus pond; Maddi stopped by wild animals to return home. The small white palace at the left edge is where Indra dispenses Vesandon from donating Madri. The most visible element is the cortege of soldiers with elephants Probably brought back as a royal figure at the end of the procession.



Fig.26 – **Wat Dararam**. Jaly pays respect to his father by exiting from hiding in to the lotus' pond.

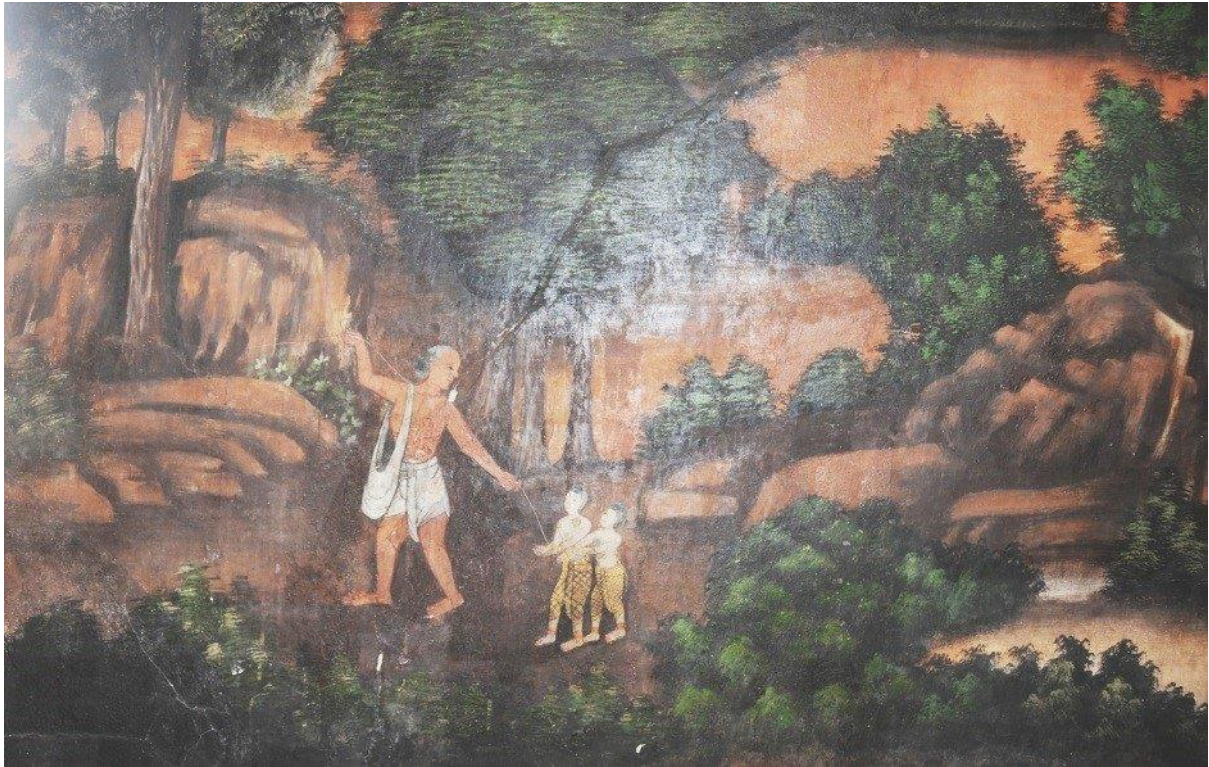


Fig.27 – Wat Dararam. Jujuk takes away the children bound by wine's ropes.



Fig.28 – Wat Dararam. Madri is stopped to return to Vesandon hermitage by3 wild beast to discover the absence of her children.



Fig.29 – Wat Dararam. In hearing that the children are gone, Maddi faints in Vesandon 's lap.



Fig.30 - Wat Suwan Dararam – Sakka (Indra), shown first in a red cloud in the sky appears then in the form of a Brahmin approaching Vessantara to ask for a gift from his wife Madri. Having Vesandon agreed, Sakka resumes his forms to reveal that the plot was meant to test the extreme generosity of Vessantara.



Fig.31 – | **Wat Suwan Dararam.** In the royal place King Sanjaya orders to pay the ransom to Jujuk who is unwelcomed by the local people. A cortege of soldiers and elephants is being organised to go to recover Vessantara and Madri.



Fig.32 – The cortege taking the royal family back to the capital.



Fig.33 -**Wat Suwannaram (Bangkok)**. A most comprehensive representation of three events of the story. On the right of the panel, King Sanjaya gives the order to pay the ransom to Jujuk. The two children kneel in the royal courtyard not far from Jujuk who is held by guards to be taken away. To the left of the panel, later the king is boarding a black elephant from a specially built gilded platform. He may be the first to depart in search of Vesandon. Behind him, in a small pavilion with curtains, Jealy and Kanhajina kneel at the side of the Queen, possibly waiting for their turn to leave. To the top left of the picture in a rich pavilion, Jujuk is embracing a girl, another is fanning him at the sound of a small female orchestra (detail in the following figure).

Modern paintings of a new monastery in Lamphun (near Cheng Mai).



Fig.34 - Madri is forbidden to return home by lions and tigers



Fig.35 - Vesandon is in the process of donating his wife to a Brahmin when Indra intervenes (to the left)



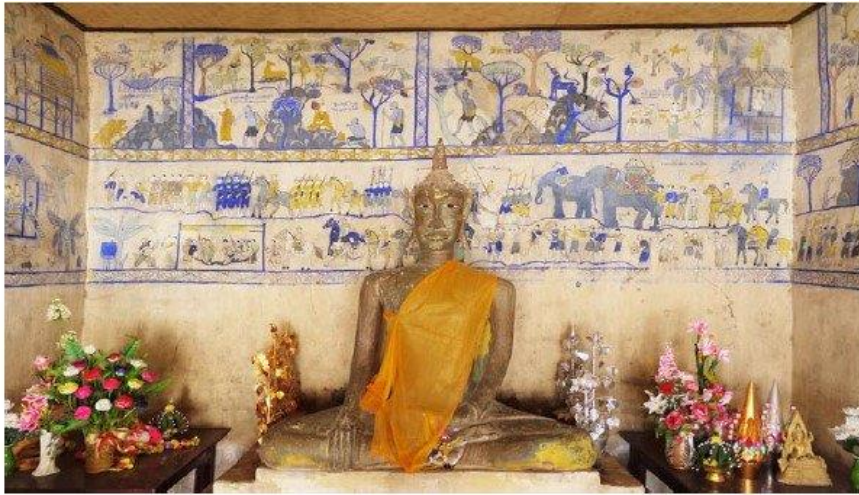
Fig.36 –The happy reunion, the King Father and Queen Mother rejoicing with Vesandon and Maddi who are holding their children in their lap.



Fig.37,38 - New monastery in Lamphun – Top: Jujuk is on his way to search for Vesandon to ask for the gift of his two children to work as a slave for his wife Amitta . Below: Jaly comes out from hiding in the lotus pond to please his father. These two modern paintings make one remember the pleasant classic illustrations in the style of the Rattanakosin Period.

Wat Sanuanwari Photharam, Kon Kaen Province (central eastern Thailand)

Thanks to the cooperation and generosity of Dr Alan Potkin, of the University of Northern Carolina, I can examine a rare monastery, in terminal conditions Fig.39 -. More details on the e-address below.



Interior wall paintings of Wat Sanuanwari Photharam, in Khon Kaen Province (Isaan), Thailand. Interactive stitched cylindrical Virtual Reality (VR) panorama. Click to open! May require Flash/Shockwave player from <adobe.com> to correctly load and run.

<https://cultivateunderstanding.com/Digital Media/Vat Taleo Kao eBook/Vat Taleo PDFs/rahu page.pdf>



Fig.40 – Southern wall. Read from right to left. The carriage with all the Vessantara, soon donated to four begging Brahmins, then the latter walking away with carriage and horses. The panel to the left of the brown shift displays a palace with nice elaborate roof, in a garden, probably the residence of the wealthy cousin Cheta, who offers hospitality, but the Vessantaras soon departed (all pictures courtesy Alan Potkin).

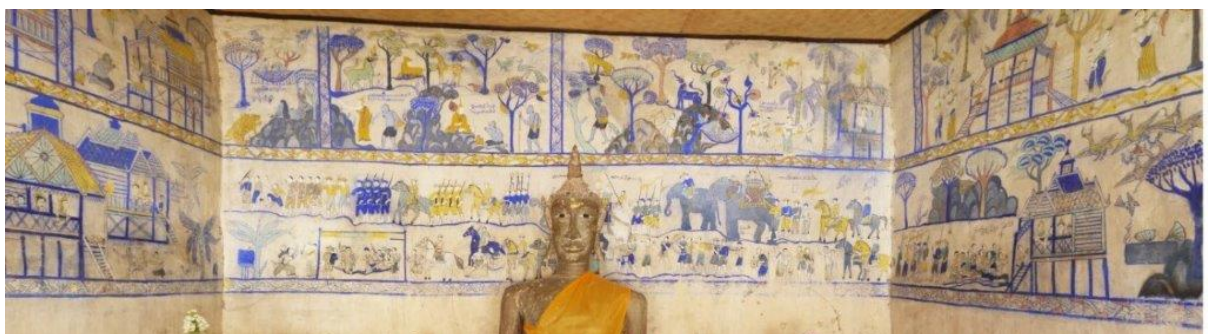


Fig.41 (see below)

Fig.41 - Western wall. On the lower register are many people following a formal army. On the upper register the adventures of Jujuk to find Vessantara are illustrated from right to left until he reaches Vessantara's hut shown at the beginning of the southern wall.

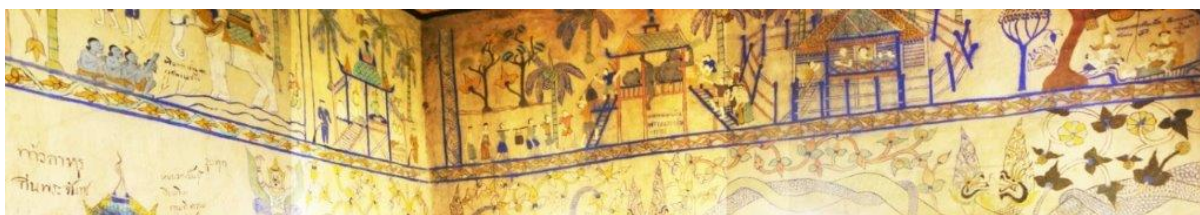


Fig.42 – Northern wall. Read from right to left. At night, in the Royal palace are the Vessantara. To the left on a high open pavilion is Jujuk enflated by food, and servants cuing to bring more food. To the extreme left is painted the white elephant.



Fig.43 – Southern wall triangular edge; Then left of the wood post, Maddi collecting fruits in the forest but ferocious beasts impede her to return home Maddi. When she is told that the children have been given away, she drops faint to the floor attended by Vessantara. In a hut with stepped pavilions Vessantara is painted again with Jujuk asking to be donated Vessantara's wife. Sakka intervenes walking away with Vessantara to explain him the reason of this request and misunderstanding. Vessantara and Maddi walk away (on the corner of next wall).

Thau Lahu devouring the disk of the moon. From Vat Samuamwari Photharam, of which the interior walls are almost completely devoted to illustrating the Vessantara Jataka (or Phavet in Lao, Vetandon in Shan).



"The text calls him Thau Lahu. 'Thau' is sir, mister etc., and in Lao language Rahu is written Lahu, following Lao pronunciation. Phirachan follows Thai writing rules (note in: coincidence I also used the Talo Rahu I think it is) whatever the rabbit

Tentative interpretation. From the study of the murals of this temple, especially the interactive cylindrical photo kindly supplied by Alan Potkin in April 2019 and (to whom goes my most sincere gratitude), I have reached a tentative interpretation of events painted.

Events do not follow the textual sequence presenting problems for the reading direction and interpretation. I make some comments Firstly the layouts with registers demarcation in heavy blue, the same blue used in Laotian temples and provincial Thai visual narrative.

Secondly, remarkable is the drafting excellence of some scene (the head of the military parade, the horses donated by Vessantara, etc.) and finally the masterly ability to condense the story only on the upper walls of a small shrine. Unusual is the decorations under the murals, over the doors and at the side of walls of many dark ogres, probably Rahu, an image/symbol left over by Khmer culture. Amongst the paintings there are many writings that an expert could read and verify the interpretation.

Fig.44

Wat Sanuanwari Photharam, wall-by-wall description (Fig.40, 41, 42 and 43).

WESTERN WALL. According to the picture of the spherical exam of the walls (of Alan Potkin), the wall behind the original Buddha's statue is painted on two registers of which the lower depicts - in my interpretation - the attempt to prepare a formal army in view to escort all the Vessantara back to the capital. Some men have spears, and banners possibly to follow and integrate with the proper army depicted at the front of the parade, with western uniforms, some yellow, others blue, carrying rifles; two leaders are composed riding a horse. Elephants painted at the extreme right will join the escort.

SOUTHERN WALL. The murals start with Jujuk kneeling in front of Vessantara twice asking for the gift of the children, the second time perhaps because the children were gone hiding. Vessantara descended the stairs in the yellow robe, holding a large stem of a lotus. Jujuk having been granted the gift departs pulling the children with great energy. When he has to drag them over rocks, he makes such an effort to break and split his trousers exposing the genitals! Vessantara was alone in his hut because Maddi has fainted stiff on the ground when he told her that the children were gone, donated to the Brahmin. He takes her in his arms to pacify and comfort her. Disregarding the narrative sequence in time Maddi is painted again when collecting fruits for the family, and then impeded to return home by wild beasts. When finally she reaches Vessantara and hears the children are away, donated to Jujuk. Maddy faints stiff to the ground, soon attended by Vessantara who takes her in his arms. The final illustration is of Jujuk asking Vessantara for the gift of his wife, Vessantara was perplexed but agreed. However, Sakka intervened to nullify the gift explaining it was the final Vessantara test to prove his determination to become a Bodhisatta.

The door arch of the murals is below the mural narrative are decorated by two tiger-looking animals amongst trellises.

EASTERN WALL. The eastern wall with the main entrance door has the narrative starting from the left where is painted a large tree on which Jujuk has fixed his hammock to sleep safely. Below him, two celestial nurses (sent by Sakka) feed and comfort the children in the darkness of the forest.

To the left of this scene is a large house surrounded by a palisade and palm trees. It must be the residence of the King's father. Two royal adults (the grandfather and grandmother of the kids) and two children look out from the windows. Close to this palace is a large open pavilion occupied entirely by Jujuk's enflamed body, possibly dying of indigestion. A cue of servants waits in front of his hut carrying lots of food and drinks

NORTHERN WALL. The second panel illustrate the gift of the white elephant, an event that represents the beginning of the story. The following panel shows Vessantara and his family going away on a carriage pulled by 2 steeds. Four Brahmins ask for it as a gift, and Vessantara gives them the royal chariot so that he and his family have to proceed on foot in the forest, where Vessantara will be allocated by Sakka a nice hermitage. The mural displays the Brahmins going away with the horses and carriage, frightening the forest's animals (tiger).

Vessantara, Maddi and the two children continue the trip on foot, the prince carrying Jali and Maddi Khaina. They reached a habitation with a tiled roof and top pinnacle, surrounded by a palm tree with birds and peacocks on the ground that could be the house of the cousin Cheta, a wealthy and hospitable man, but they leave soon presumably to reach the hermitage promised by Sakka.

The lower register has mountains with a hut occupied by the Vessantara family. In front of the house is a group of worshipers while other men walk away to reach the military procession (?)