

## 547. The Vessantara Jataka - in Burma

Buddhism is an integral part of Burmese culture. While Buddhism has been practised in Burma for around 1500 years and evidence of the religion is found throughout the country, nothing beats the concentration of Buddhist monuments found at Bagan. Bagan represents not only the beginnings of a unified Burmese country but also symbolises Burmese 'ownership' of Theravada Buddhism. The study of Burmese Jataka is quite difficult because of the large amount of not all recognizable, ceramic carved plaques which were added to temples that fortunately are still preserved and dated (C.Galloway 2006).

Charlotte Galloway wrote about art history and visual narrative of the Early Bagan period (1044-1113).

Gordon H. Luce (1956, 1960) affirmed that for the study of Jatakas in Burma it is essential to know the carved plaques of West Phet Leik and Ananda. The confusion of the names (and related numbers) was due to the writing of Pali words in Old Mon and Old Burmese and partly no doubt to carelessness mistakes in copying, as well as to the scribes' limited knowledge of the language. Burma name for the Mugapakkha is Temiya; Khandahala is Candakumara; Maha-ummagga is Mahosadha.

West Phet Leik gives 550 different jataka numbers in contrast to the 547 of the Shrilanka Buddhist texts. Three more Jatakas were described as **VelamaJataka (No.497)**, **Mahagovinda Jataka** (no.498) and the **Sumedapantita Jataka(?)**

Probably these last three Jatakas were eliminated, having the Last Ten Jataka already filled all the perfections (*parami*) needed by a Bodhisatta to achieve Buddhahood.

Galloway, after an idetailed study of Burmese visual narratives of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and before emphasized that visual narratives are a valid and valuable resource for both supporting and refuting historical events and improving on the dating given by Luce assessed local knowledge and archaeology.

In Burma, the Vessantara is well known since the period of pre-Pagan (1600 BC.).

Here, rather than using for reference the works of Gordon H.Luce (1956), for the text, I prefer a Burmese vernacular version named **Wethantaya Jataka** edited by Myat Min Hlaing in 2003.

Before Pagan, the Jataka (known at that time) were part of the Mon Buddhist tradition. In 1070, a complete set of Jataka in terracotta was made to decorate the West Heptleik temple. At Ananda temple (1105CE.) green-glazed terracotta tiles follow the same sequence of Heptleik which may be slightly different from the Sinhalese version. Nayagon and Abeyadana temples have mural paintings, arranged in square panels according to the Sinhalese tradition. Donald Stadner (2005: 160) indicates that at the Mingalazedi stupa, the terracotta plaque of the Vessantara starts on the west side and ends in the middle of the eastern side of the base of the stupa (no pictures).

The most complete depiction of Jataka is at Lokahteikpan temple (early 12<sup>th</sup> c.) with 24 rows of Jataka panels, mainly the Mahosadha and Vessantara.

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 team of helpers, is the main textual reference (reprint 1995).

**Vessantara Jataka, Cowell No. 547.**

Prince Vessantara, son of king Sanjaya and queen Phusati, at the age of 16 married 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 (Indra), taking briefly the shape of the brahmin, 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, which he craved for his royal seat (Cowell 1995: 294), which is – in my opinion - denying the Buddhist principle of not craving, not desiring.

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 by their grandfather King Sanjaya who happily paid a handsome ransom to the old brahmin to regain his grandchildren. Eventually, they were reunited with their parents and Vessantara was asked by King Sanjaya to rule the kingdom. Jujaka overindulged in his new wealthy position, and by overeating, he died of indigestion.

Of the last Ten Births, the last one named 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 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 Burmese version of the Vessantara Jataka or Whethandaya Zat***

Long ago in Sedoktara there was King Thiwirit who had a son named Theinzi<sup>1</sup>. Around the same time, King Madrit had a daughter named Phutthati. Phutthati has 91 incarnations but at the time of Buddha Kassapa she was reborn as the daughter of King Kiki. She was named Thudhamma that in turn was reborn as Phutthati. Just before being re-born in this human world as the future wife of Vessantara she asked for ten gifts from the king of the nats Thagyamin<sup>2</sup> (who she had married). The ten are:

1. be born as queen; 2. have brown eyes like that of a deer; 3 have brown lashes; 4. be named Phutthati; 5. have a son with the fullest charity, without jealousy and craftiness; 6. have no signs of pregnancy; 7. have perfect breasts as a firstborn; 8. have perfect hair; 9. have a cleansed body; 10. to save those that were given the king's punishment.

She was satisfied and was born the queen of King Madarit<sup>3</sup>. When Prince Theinzi came to age he married Phuttati.

The king of the nats Thagyamin had an 'embryo-Buddha' to give her as a prize. When expecting, Phuttati did many gifts, and as soon as the baby boy was born, he predicts he will give charity. Because the boy was born on the outskirts of the city close to the merchant's area<sup>4</sup> he was called Wethantaya.

The same day he was born, a mother elephant from the nearby kingdom of Kalingarit brought her a baby white elephant named Phytisyato, as a gift to the baby boy. King Theinzi had 2400 thousand nurses to take care of his son Wethantaya.

When 16 years old, prince Wethantaya married Maddi, the sister of King Madrit. From that day Wethantaya started to donate daily enormous quantities to charity. Queen Maddi gave birth to a son, who was caught in a gold net and so named Prince Zali, and the daughter was caught with a baldaquin of black wood; she was named Ganhazain.

In the kingdom of Kalingarit<sup>5</sup> (there was pestilence and famine. People asked to have back the white elephant believed to cure all their problems. Eight wise brahmins were sent to King Wethantaya who immediately made the charity of the white elephant together with lots of gold and jewels.

The people panicked and asked king Theinzi to deport Wethantaya. The latter was defended by ministers and celebrated by donating to the ministers 700 elephants, 700 horses, 700 coaches, 700 cows, 700 male slaves and 700 women slaves, complete with food and drinks.

This was too much for the people of the kingdom. Outraged, they managed to have Wethantaya expelled. Eventually he, his wife and their children left on a chariot pulled by 4 horses, after the charity was done by Wethantaya, they left for Mount Wingaba<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding to Prince Sanjaya, son of King Sivi

<sup>2</sup> Sakka in other versions

<sup>3</sup> King Madda

<sup>4</sup> Vessa Street in other versions, hence Vessantara

<sup>5</sup> Kalinga

<sup>6</sup> Mount Vanka

Soon four Brahmins asked for the gift of the four horses. Wethantaya let them loose and donated them to the beggars. To push the coach, four nats metamorphosed into four oxen to pull the chariot, but soon after one Brahmin came to ask for the gift of the chariot. Wethantaya donated instinctively. The 4 oxen disappeared. Wethantaya and his family had to proceed by foot; Wethantaya carried Zali and Maddi Gahnazain<sup>7</sup>.

They reached the town of Ceta Taing and spent some time at the gate of the city. Prince Ceta and relatives came out to see them and ask Wethantaya to stay; he refused and continued his trip towards Wingaba Mountain the next day. When, after many adventures, they found the Mountain, they discovered a hermitage built for them by the nat Withagyon, where they settled down.

There was a Brahmin named Zuzaka<sup>8</sup> in a village of the Klingarit kingdom. He had entrusted money to some Brahmin friends but they had spent it. In reward, they offered Zuzaka their beautiful daughter Amittabon. The girls of the village did not like her and abused her. She urged Zuzaka to get her a maid, a slave. He thought of the generosity of Wethantaya who was staying on the Wingaba Mountain and immediately departed in that direction. He went lost and was attacked by the dogs of the hunter Seta but was released. He asked for directions from the hermit Assuta who give him directions to find Wethantaya. When he reached the place, he waited until Wethantaya was alone, without Maddi, to ask to be given his children as servants, and depart immediately before the return of Maddi.

The children were hiding in a pond, but obeyed their father and came out. Wethantaya poured the water of libation and donated it to Zuzaka. The hearth trembled. The brahmin tied the two children with wines, pulling them away and bleeding.

Wethantaya thought of killing the Brahmin with his knife and saving the children, but soon regained his composure and sat silently on a rock, like a golden statue. The worried Maddi, was forbidden to come back to the hermitage by wild beasts until the following morning. Distraught by the donation of the children she fainted. The kings of the nats, Thagyamin, come in the guise of a Brahmin asking to have Maddi donated as charity. Without hesitation, the king agreed, but the Thagyamin blessed Wethantaya and gave Maddi back to him.

Showing his true self, Thagyamin permitted Wethantaya to express 8 wishes: 1. that his father would make him king as before; 2. that, when King, he will never kill any prisoner; 3. That all young and old should make their living depending on him; 4. Nobody should indulge in the whims of their wives and be content with just one wife, never looking at another's wife with sensual desire; 5 that his wife and relatives had no disease, living long and enjoying kingship; 6. that food like meat would be served to them; 7. That all the treasures be endlessly given in charity; 8. that after his death from this world he will be reborn in the Tusita reign of the nats, and that he will be reborn for the ultimate time and attain Enlightenment. The Thagyamin granted all his wishes. Maddi returned to the hermitage with Wethantaya.

In the meantime, Zuzaka was wandering around the forest with the children. At night he slept at the top of a tree while tying the children at its feet.

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<sup>7</sup> Jali and Kanhajina

<sup>8</sup> Jujuka

Then same time King Theinzi had a strange dream: during an assembly, a black man presented him with two bunches of lotuses that he wore two on his ears, and the petal fell on the king's chest.

The next day the king sat in a huge assembly when Zuzaka came forward with the children. The King recognized his grandchildren and brought them to him. Zuzaka pretended to have taken care of the children. Hearing the true story from Zali the King remunerated Zuzaka with generosity; Zuzaka started an incontinent enjoyment of riches and food until he fell dead eating. King Theinzi, the king father, and his grandchildren reunited. Zali wanted to find his father and escort him back with Maddi. The king prepared an expedition. They reached a site near Wethantaya hermitage on Mount Wingaba

Hearing the sounds, Wethantaya took Madi up the mountain to see, fearing enemies. King Theinzi rode the white elephant to reach his son who was sitting on a rock, quiet and pleasant. Wethantaya and Madi paid obeisance to the King Father and Queen Mother. When Madi saw her children fainted. Later everybody rejoiced.

The king of the nats Thagyamin caused a rain that wetted only those who wanted to be wet. Then the King Father and Queen Mother asked Wethantaya and Maddi to come back home to a parallel kingship. Wethantaya and Maddi renounced the hermitage and claimed their royal place. Victory celebrations were held on Mount Wingaba for a month. Later, they returned to the capital where King Wethantaya gave charities all his lifetime and to the six monasteries. In his next life, he ascended the nat plane of Tuthita. Here ends the narrative of Myat Min Hlaing.

As I mentioned earlier, I do not take into consideration illustrated manuscripts because the work will be enormous and endless. The illustration of the Vessantara Jataka that I could see in Myanmar are rare, apart from the unbelievable and almost unreadable murals of Loka-heikpan (Bagan).

I did not have sufficient times to go around and research selected Jataka (Last Ten) in Myanmar but I strongly believe that discoveries and more research will be made in the future. So little has been published on Burmese Vessantara iconography that anything available is used at the end of this paper<sup>9</sup>. The Google page on Vessantara shows a lot of illustrations, mainly from manuscripts that I do not consider in this paper.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Google page on Vessantara shows a lot of illustrations, mainly from manuscripts that I do not consider in this papers.*



*Illustrations of this Jataka in Burma.*



Fig.1 – Pagan, Loka-heikpan, west vestibule all covered by murals (identification of Jataka?)





Fig,2 and 3 - **Bagan**, Ananda temple. Plaques illustrating some events of the *Vessantara Jataka* according to G.H.Luce, 1970, III: page328



Fig.4 - (photo Eijiro Mori)



Fig5. Carved wood panels around a shrine of the **Golden Palace Monastery(Mandalay)**  
On the lower right part of the gilded panel, in a royal palace probably in which King Father sends into exile Prince Vessantara (Fig.6). To the left, the carriage with Vessantara 's family is carved leaving the palace. On the diagonal ascending layout (Fig.7) is probably shown the story of Jujuk begging Vessantara to be gifted his two children. Vessantara is kneeling in a small hermitage with a pyramidal roof (Fig.7), holding a water pitcher in his left hand, meaning that the donation has been ratified. The figure near the Prince holding a child may be a *deva* sent by Sakka to protect the children at night. Soon after a palm tree, Jujuk is shown pulling

the reluctant children, of which the last is shown grabbing the tree not to be taken away by the bad Brahmin.

The conclusion of the story, if carved, may have been on the other side's panel.



Fig.6 **Golden Palace Monastery (Mandalay)** Detail of Vessantara pouring water on Jujuk hands. To the right two men riding an elephant (white elephant) seem to run away.



Fig.7 – **Golden Palace Monastery(Mandalay)** Detail of Vessantara going into exile together with his family on a cart pulled by horses. On the ascending road, there is, at the base, Vessantara again pouring water on Jujukhands to ratify the gift of his wife. Then Jujuk is pushing away the reluctant children; he seems to have an animal face (monkey,pig?)

**Yangon. Shwedagon Pagoda,** Shrines on the ground floor around the Southeast side of the Stupa. with an illustration of one of the all carved Jatakas including the Vessantara.

On all the panels, the figures were carved in wood, then stuccoed and painted, then applied on wood planks. The vivacity and dynamism of these images are very theatrical and extraordinary.



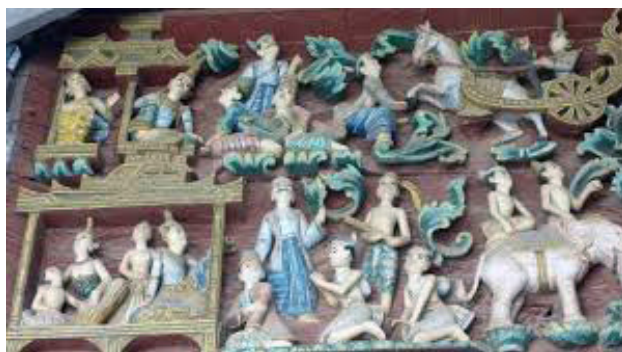


**Fig.8 – Golden Palace Monastery(Mandalay)** The narrative is on two superimposed registers. Starting from the lower-left corner, two figures (brahmins?) are shown when Vessantara (half cut out in the picture) is donating the white elephant; then the elephant is driven away by the two brahmins. Following this, Vessantara his wife and children leave on the royal chariot, soon to be stopped by the brahmin Jujuk asking for the gift of the horses. To the extreme right, the narrative goes to the episode of Vessantara pouring water on the hands of the brahmin Jujuk to bind the gift of his children, seen walking away into the forest with the two children bound together with wines (to the extreme right of the picture). The upper register contains 3 carvings of chariots that are probably part of the events pictured below, 3 or 4 semi-naked brahmins ask for the gift of the chariot that is driven away by a figure with a pointed hat, similar to that of the king. He may be a nat following a local legendary tradition. One of the semi-naked brahmins could be Jujuk escaping the dogs of the forester by trying to climb a tree. In short, the upper register is difficult to decode essentially because the visual narrative is not in chronological sequence



**Fig.9 - Golden Palace Monastery(Mandalay).** On the lower register Jujuk kneels in front of the kneeling Vessantara, but on a higher level, pouring water on his hands to ratify the donation of the two children that are sitting on the ground below their father. Then the proud tall figure of Maddi, carrying baskets on a pole, is illustrated when in the forest, she is forbidden to move by 2 aggressive wild animals.

To the extreme right, Jujuk is walking away with the two children bound with heavy wines. The upper register illustrates Vessantara refreshing fainted Maddi with a fan, then the two are shown inside their small hermitage. To their left is the royal chariot driven by a man with a pointed hat (as above) that we cannot explain; then Jujuk, semi-naked over a piece of furniture trying to escape the forester's ferocious dogs. Then are the images of 3 semi-naked brahmins seen in the above picture (Fig.8) asking for the gift of the chariot



**Fig.10 – Golden Palace Monastery(Mandalay).** On the lower register, in a palace, Vessantara and Maddi are shown with their two children (lower-left corner), obviously before Vessantara's gift of the white elephant

and going to exile. On the upper register, a brahmin asks for the donation of horses and carriage. The two children are protected by the deva that has invisibly directed them to their grandparents (top left part) welcoming them from an open pavilion.



Fig.11 – Burmese Kammavaca (dated 1929). Vessantara departs with his family on the royal chariot, being stopped by beggars. At the centre, Jujuk is shown as a handsome young man (wearing his usual sash) meeting the forest guardian Cheta, asking clemency for trespassing and hospitality. The right, Vessantara is pouring water on the hands of Jujuk, certifying the gift of his two children.



Fig.12 - The second page dedicated to Vessantara should be read from left to right, showing the scene of Jujuk holding captive the two children with a rope. Then a large royal palace depicted with a central treble-roof tower and, to the left, the scene of King Sanjaya, in a large room of the palace with his queen, giving an order to his steward to pay Jujuk the amount asked for releasing of the children. To the extreme left, a lonely Jujuk seems to drop his hand in a container, when looking sick.



Fig.13- The young prince Jali who had joined the army of King Sanjaya sent to find Vessantara on Mount Vanka



## Vessantara Jataka's Images from the internet



Fig.14 –from the Internet, Two brahmins running away with the gifted horse gifted by Vessantara., The gods temporarily replace the horses with deer. (both these fine plantings are from manuscripts). Jujuk abuses the children

Fig.15 – From the Internet. Maddi is impeded to return home by ferocious beasts.



Fig.16 – The elephant gift (not much white).



Fig.17 – The Vessantara family departs on the royal chariot but beggars ask for the gift of the horses