

547. The Vessantara Jataka – in Laos

For observing local variations in mainland Southeast Asia, it appears that the original translation from Pali of 1988 (reprint 1960), made by E.B. Cowell is the main textual reference. Cowell made the translations from Pali and was not concerned with regional historical background and the different ways in which the Jataka were going to be interpreted in various cultures.

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 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 was craving for (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 King Sanjaya who 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.

Laotian Vessantara

I had little time to explore Laos and I have information only on the few visual narratives of Luang Prabang's town monasteries. As a general trend, it seems that artists were requested gilded works using stencils as well as plaster reliefs and wood carving. I am illustrating below the gilded stencils of Wat Xieng Thong. Although built in the 16th century, the works were probably executed in the 19th century but restored several times with gold paint instead of gold leaves; and the gilded plaster stuccoes of **Wat Mai**, were executed in 1968 by the Laotian artist (Haiwood 2009: 103) who became a recognized national artist. Some murals with Jataka tales are illustrated from Wat Luang Khuon and also in Luang Prabang (Heywood 2010: 148).



Fig 1 and Fig.2. Vientiane, monastery's name unknown being pictures taken from Internet 2019.

The left one shows most events of the Vessantara Jataka after entering the forest. In the picture to the right only a few events. The readers must be able to individuate each of them.

Wat Xieng Thong



Fig.3 - **Wat Xieng Thong**, Interior of the Wat showing the intense decoration with gold stencils (picture from Internet)

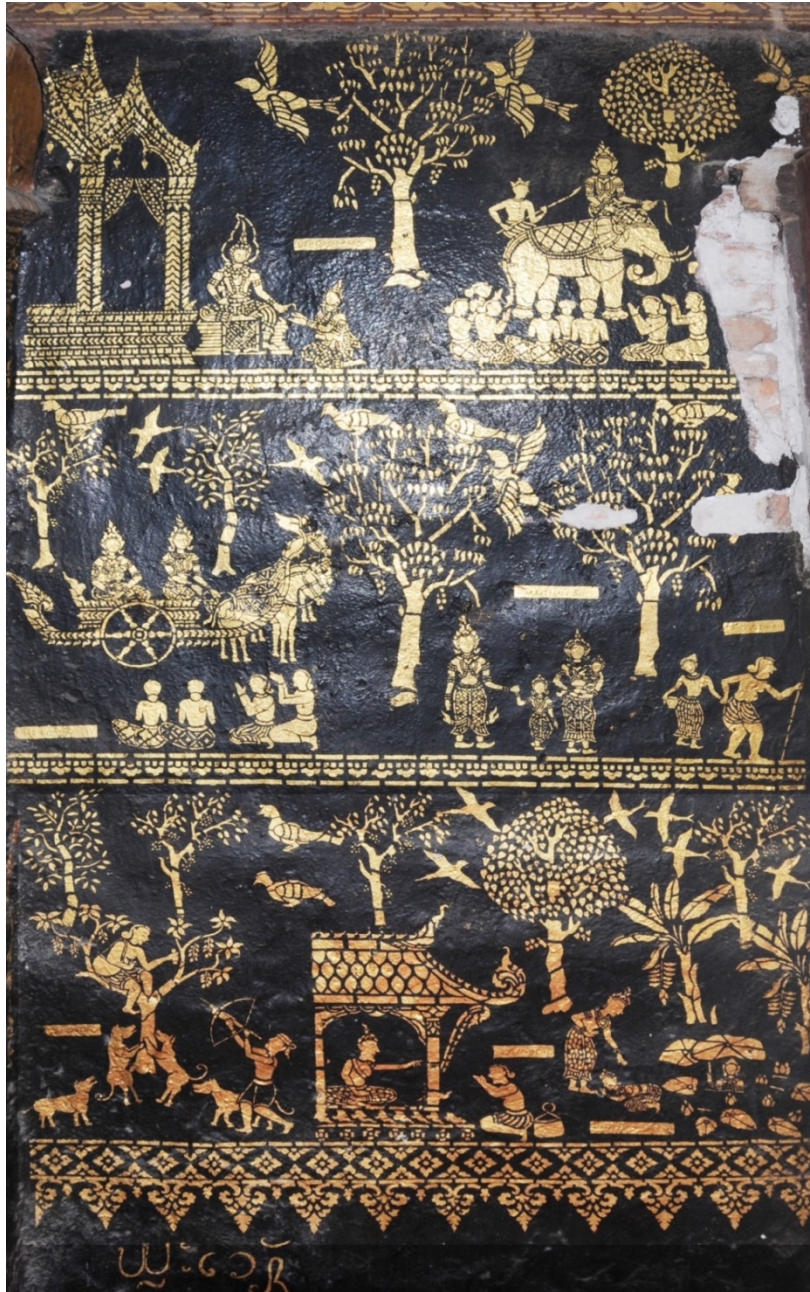


Fig.4 - **Wat Xieng Thong (Luan Prabang)**, First-panel illustrating events of the Vessantara Jataka. The images were defined using gold leaves on stuccoed wood planks.

The vivacity and dynamism of these images are very theatrical and extraordinary. The layout is on 3 registers. The visual storytelling starts from the top left register, where, Sakka in his Heaven convinces Sobar (*a deva*) to descend on earth to start the Vessantara genealogy. Then the narrative comes to earth with the event of Vessantara donating the white elephant and being exiled for this by his father King Sanjaya. With his family, Prince Vessantara leaves to exile on a chariot pulled by two steeds that he donates to two Brahmins; they proceed by foot. At the right of the second register initiates the story of Jujuk and his wife. He is then (left third register) shown dealing with Jujuk dealing with the irate forester and his ferocious dogs causing him to climb a tree, Then Jujuk is kneeling in front of a hermit asking directions to reach Vessantara. Then, suddenly, the register terminates with Vessantara looking for his sons hiding in a pond since he had already donated them to the Brahmin. The narrative disregards the chronological event's sequence. The chronology of events is confused.

Fig.5 – **Wat Xieng Thong (Luan Prabang)**. Another panel depicts (from the top left) Madri being impeded to return home by 3 ferocious animals. The following morning, Maddi can return to the hermitage where Vessantara tells her that he has donated their two children to a Brahmin. She faints on the floor and Vssantara tries to revive her (right end of the first register). The register below shows is not in chronological sequence because Vessantara is depicted donating to Jujuk his two children (left side of the second register, which are immediately depicted already in the arms of two *devatas* sent by Sakka to protect them, alone at night in the forest. while Jujuk is sleeping in his *hammock* suspended between branches of a tree. Then, two children holding hands are depicted climbing a mountain In the lower register, probably Vessantara and Madri going to the top hoping to see the arrival of the grandparents' help. They will arrive and celebrate with great joy the reunion with the two kids, deciding to return at once to the capital on board elephants, escorted by the army.

Wat Pa Mai (Luang Prabang)

Wat PaMai – The left panel of the left eastern door illustrates several scenes of the Vessantara Jataka.

At the centre, in the Royal Palace is King Sanjaya, flanked by the queen and a prince receiving a delegation with two children (wearing crown), all kneeling on the ground. Around them, a great cooking activity takes place for the celebration, and perhaps to bring food to one of the houses on tilts where Jujuk is hiding. To the left, over the roof of a house, the plaster carving shows the small scene of Vessantara, sitting on a rock, pouring water on the hands of Jujuk to complete the transaction of donating him his two children.

At the base of the weathered mural panel is a row of wild animals including rhinoceros and lions, never living in Laos. The narrative does not respect at all the textual chronological sequence of events. Furthermore, Vessantara events are quite difficult to individuate amongst a crowd of ornamental scenes or local legends.



Fig.1. **Wat Pa Mai (Luang Prabang)** - Left side of the entrance wall of the porch (veranda). There are two entrance doors on the eastern wall of the porch of the congregation hall (*Sim*); the space in between them is filled with large narrative stucco with events of the Vessantara Jataka. Since the entire surface has been gilded, it is difficult to read the photographs and some are not readable in the reflected light.



Fig.2. **Wat Pa Mai** – Detail of the left side of the entrance wall of the porch (veranda)



Fig.3. **Wat Pa Mai** - Right side of the entrance wall of the porch (veranda). The people of the country create processions to venerate the return of the Prince or King. The wild animals made at the base indicate the forest or jungle.



Fig.4. - **Wat Pa Mai.** Vessantara and Maddi proceeding by foot.



Fig.5 and 6 - **Wat Pa Mai.** The King Father and queen Mother bring the children back to the palace where they will be reunited with their parents.



Fig.7 – **Wat Pa Mai** -The gift of ten chariot , Vessantara and Maddi walking in the forest, both sculpted below the gift of the white elephant(top left of picture).



Fig.8 – **Wat Pa Mai** -Then gift of his wife to the Brahmin (instantly Sakka puts an end to this sacrifice of Vessantara)



Fig.9 – **Wat Pa Mai.** Vessantara asks his children to come out from hiding in the lotus pond (containing crocodiles and hippopotamuses!!)



Fig.10 – **Unnamed temple**.-Photograph illustrating Madri forbidden to return to her hermitage by wild animals. This picture belongs to the GEKE project of restoration of Laotian temples (zone of Luang Prabang), directed by Dominique Guglieri, with photographs by Babel & Wenzel in 2002.

Wat Taleo Koao MaiKao

This monument was a *wihan* (*temple*) located in south-central Laos, and that survived the bombing of 1969 by US air forces. A new *wihan* was built 5 km away from Ban Taleo Mai village and the original site was left essentially untouched for the ensuing half a century and is photographed here. The formerly painted decoration is reminiscent, in style and colours, of the Thai temple of the Wat Sanuan, Khon Kaen Fig.63-5 of Bonnie Pacala Berereton 2010.

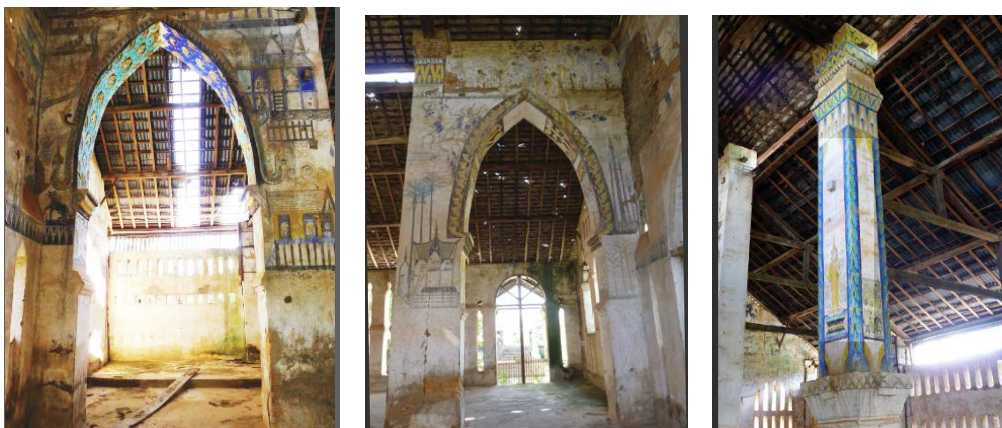


Fig.11. Wat TaleoKoao Maiko - general view of the temple, emptied before demolition.

Wat Taleo Koao MaiKao. Thanks to the courtesy of Dr Alan Potkin and our common interest in researching Laotian temples, he donated the present pictures of this temple just before it was demolished. Regrettably what is left does not allow us to recognize/reconstruct any visual narrative. Uniquely, there were images of the Vessantara Jataka and the local version of the *Ramakien*.

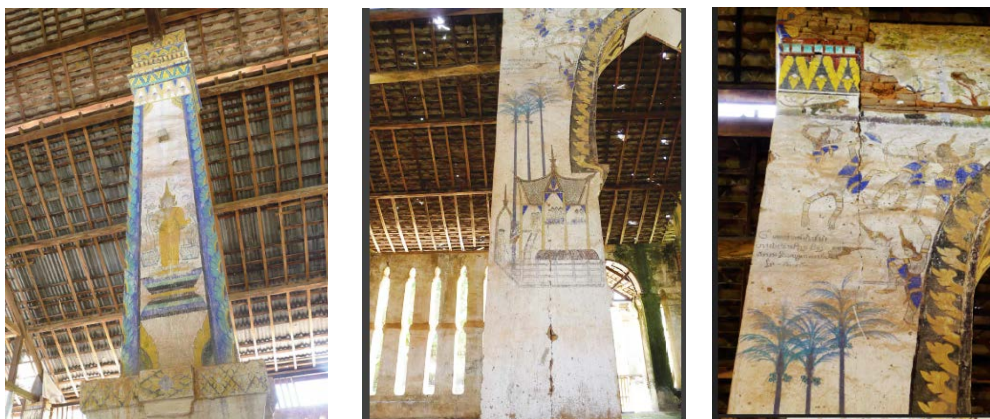


Fig.12. **Wat Taleo Kao**, Savannakhet Province, Laos - general view of the temple's elements all vividly painted.

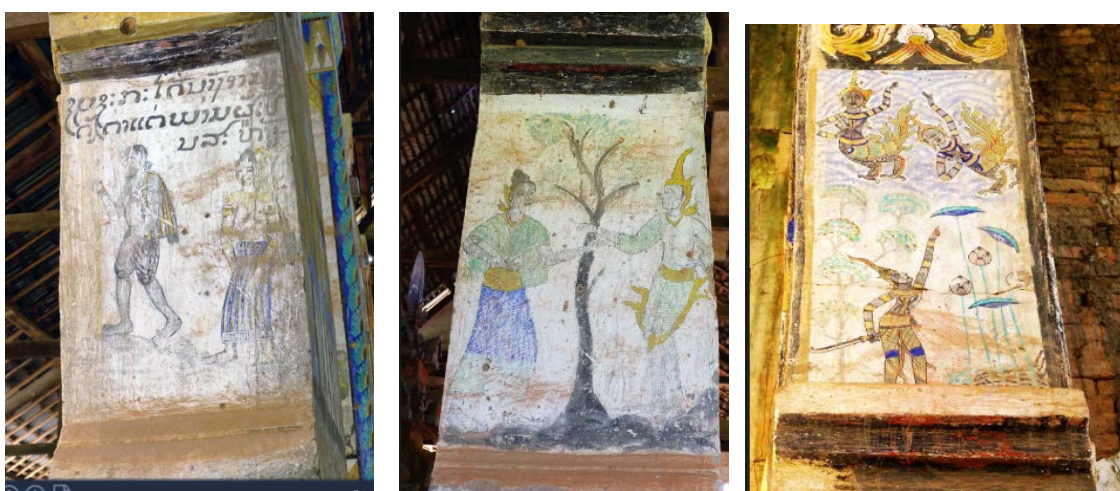


Fig.13– **Wat Taleo Kao**, Images are printed on the base of the column of a temple to be demolished;. the left may refer to the Vessantara Jataka, the other two may be part of Thai Rama' epic locally named *Pra'Ram Pra'Lak*.



Fig.14 – Detail of a sort of monster Rahu eating the moon(?) painted over one of the main door arches. The transparent bowl seems to include a nice gazelle (not a rabbit).



Fig.15 – **Taleo Kao**. The main wall over the opening of the altar. Over the strange image of Rahu, the large wall was originally entirely painted but now it is difficult to prove even if the palace painted to the middle left of the picture, 2 floor with blue roof and staircase was the royal palace of prince Vessantara who has just gifted the white elephant (missing now) on which 4 Brahmins were sitting (their heads still visible). This first register was probably all devoted to the Vessantara Jataka.



Fig.15 – **Taleo Kao**, full view of the same wall with the view at the top triangular space of a spectacular tree with the lower branches protecting houses with people and elephants at both extremities.



Fig.16 – **Wat Taleo Kao** - The absit at **Taleo Kao**, Suwannaket province, Laos, near the bother with Thailand, before demolition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appleton, Naomi, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 1010.

Appleton Naomi, Shaw Sarah, *The Ten Great Birth Stories of Buddha*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2015 (2 Vol.s)

Baker Chris (Ed.), *The Society of Siam*, selected articles of the Siam's Society centenary, TheSiam Society , Bangkok, 2004

Bautze-Picron Claudine, *The Murals of Temple 1077 in Pagan (Burma) and their innovative Features*, 2010: Orchid Press ,Chiang Mai, 2003

Bautze-Picron Claudine, *The Buddhist Murals of Pagan*, Weatherhill, Trunbull, USA, 2003

Bernon de, Olivier, Circulation of texts in Mid-Nineteenth Century Cambodia: A new Reading of Inscription K.892 (vat Ta Tok), in Peter Skilling (ed.), *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2012

Boisselier Jean, *Thai Painting*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, New York & San Francisco, 1976

Brerenton Bonnie P., *Thai tellings of Phra Malai*, Arizona State University, 1995

Coedès George, *Le temple D'Angkor Wat*, Vol.II, Mem.EFEO, ,Paris, 1932

Cowell, E. B. and W. H. D. Rouse. *Trans. 2005 [1907]. The Jātaka: Or, Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. Vol. VI, edited by E. B. Cowell. London: The Pali Text Society. by The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1995

Dupaigne B, and Khing Hoc Di, *Les Plus Ancienness Peintures Datées du Cambodge, Quatorze Episodes du Vessantara Jataka (1877)*Arts Asiatiques XXXVI, 26-35,Paris,1981

Eco, Umberto, *Language des signes, l'écriture et son double*, Gallimard,Paris, 1989

Fausbøll, V. Ed. 2004 [1896]. *The Jātaka, Together with its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*. Vol. V. London: The Pali Text Society

(Ven.) Shì huifēng, *Chiastic Structure of the Vessantara Jātaka: Textual Criticism and Interpretation through Inverted Parallelism*,EQUINOXONLINE, © Equinox Publishing Ltd 2015

Galloway Charlotte Kendrick, *Burmese Buddhist Imagery of the Early Bagan Period (1044-1113)* A thesis (2 Vol) submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The AustralianNational University November 2006

Ginsburg, Henry, *Thai Manuscript painting*, The British Library, London, 1989

Ginsburg, Henry, *Thai Art and Culture*, The British Library, London, 2000

Green Alexandra: *From Gold Leaf to Buddhist Hagiographies: Contact with Regions to the East Seen in Late Burmese Murals*, Journal of Burma Studies, Vol. 15, No. 2, December 2011

Jummong Srinuam, *Wat Yai Suwannaram*, Muang Boran, Bangkok 1984

Harris, Ian, *Cambodian Buddhism, History and Practice*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2005

Kawasaki Ken and Visakha, *Jataka Tales of the Buddha*, 3 vols, Ajith Printers Ltd., Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka, 2009

Krairiksh Piriya, *The art of the Buddha Era*, private printing, Bangkok 2012

Luce G.H., *The 550 Jatakas in Old Burma (Myanmar)*”, *Atribus Asiae*, Vol. 19, No. 1956

Luce G.H., *Old Burma – early Pagan*, *Artibus Asiae*, 3 vols, 1969-70

Matics K.I., Hell Scenes in Thai Murals, *JSS* 67(2) Bangkok 1979: 35-39

Maxwell Thomas S. and Poncar Jaroslav, *Of Gods, Kings and Men*, Edition Panorama, Germany, 2006

Nafylian J. and C., *Peintures Murals des Monastères Bouddiques au Cambodge*, UNESCO, Paris 1997

Na Na Pak Nam, *Wat Chong Nonsi*, Muang Boran, Bangkok, 1982

Nandana Chutiwongs, *Iconography of Avalokitesvara in Mainland South East Asia*, Felicitation Volume, SPAFA (Bangkok) and Abhinandanamālā (Colombo), 2010.

Neelakanta Sarma Pandit, *Un album thaïlandais d'iconographie indienne*. Arts Asiatiques. Vol. 26, Paris, 1973

Osborn M., *Chiastic Structure of the Vessantara Jātaka: Textual Criticism and Interpretation Through Inverted Parallelisms*, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 2015

Peltier Anatole-Roger. *Iconographie de la légende de Brah Malay*. Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Tome 71, Paris, 1982. pp. 63-76

Penner, Hans H.. *Rediscovering the Buddha: The Legends and Their Interpretations*. New York: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195385823.001.1>, 2009

Phya Anuman Rajadon, *Thet Maha Chat*, Fine Arts Department, Thai Culture Series No.21, Bangkok 1990 (first edition 1969)

Prince Dhaninivat, *The Rama Jataka, Lao version of the story of Rama*, collected articles of the *JSS*, Bangkok, 1969

Prince Dhaninivat, *The Rama Jataka, Lao version of the story of Rama*, collected articles of the *JSS*, Bangkok, 1969.

Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Thet Maha Chat*, Fine Arts Department, Thai Culture Series No.21, Bangkok 1990 (first edition)

Ray Niharranjan, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, Orchid Press, Bangkok. 2002

Reynolds Frank E and Reynolds Mani B., *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, University of California, Berkley, 1982

Roveda Vittorio, *Sacred Angkor, Narrative Reliefs of Angkor Wat*, Weatherhill & River

Roveda Vittorio, *Khmer Mythology*, Weatherhill & River Books, Bangkok, 1997

Roveda Vittorio, *Images of the Gods*, River books, Bangkok, 2005

Roveda Vittorio and Yem Sothon, *Buddhist Painting in Cambodia*, River Books, Bangkok, 2009

Sengpan Pannyawamsa Ven., *The Tham Vessantara*, Phd at the Palin and Buddhist stidies of Kelamiya University, 2007Books, June 2002

Shì huìfēng *ChiasticStructure of the Vessantara Jataka: Textual Criticism an Interpretation through Inverted Parallelism*, 32.1 (2015) 143–159, Equinoxonline, Buddhist Studies Review ISSN (online) 1747-9681

Sirisambhand Napat and Gordon Alec, *Thai Women in Pali and Buddhist studies*, University of Kwslniya, 2007

Skilling Peter, *Jataka and Pannasa-jataka in South-East Asia*, Journal of Pali Text Society, 28: 113-173, Bangkok 2006

Stadner Donald M, *Ancient Pagan*, River Books, Bangkok 2005

Wray, Elizabeth, Rosenfield Claire, Dorothy Bailei. *The lives of the Buddha*. Weatherhill. New York, 1996

Yangrod Wilairat, *Cosmology and Cosmo-geography in Thai Murals*, in *Abhinandanamālā*,