

« Once Upon a Time when  
Brahmadatta Reigned in Benares... »  
Reflections on the Jataka Tales with Special  
Attention to the Portrayal of Women

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The Jataka tales, a collection of 547 stories about previous reincarnations of the Bodhisatta, undoubtedly represent one of the most important documents of Buddhist literature. They are equally important as a collection of Indian folk tales. As with other works of Indian literature — and folk literature in general — there are questions as to how these tales were collected, when and by whom they were written down. It is generally accepted that they were transmitted orally over a long period of time. These stories arrived relatively late in Europe, roughly fifty years after the Brothers Grimm in Germany had published their folk and fairy tales in 1812. Many resemble the Grimm's tales in their moral tone and also in their structure. Since my special interest lies in the study of German folk and fairy tales, I embarked with great pleasure on the study of these Buddhist tales. I came across the Jatakas in preparation for a trip to Tibet and I was particularly interested in two points : 1) the reception of the Jatakas in Germany and 2) the negative portrayal of women in these texts.

This paper proposes therefore to look at the Jatakas, their function, part of their history and the cultural climate in Germany at the time they were received. My interest in the portrayal of women in the Jataka tales was inspired by the fact that the Bodhisatta in his many previous reincarnations never appeared as a female, be it human or animal.

When the Jatakas first appeared in German, translated by Julius Dutoit between 1907 and 1922 in Leipzig (Dutoit, 1907-1922), German academics were very interested in Oriental languages,

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literatures, and religions. Numerous publications attest to this, among them Moriz Winternitz's *Geschichte der Indischen Literatur*<sup>1</sup> (which remains authoritative today), publications of Oriental travel stories and of several Indian and Buddhist fairy tale collections (Hertel, 1922 ; Lüders and Lüders, 1921) and other fairy tales from around the world.

That this interest was not confined to Germany but was a European phenomenon, is demonstrated in the collaboration of scholars like Dutoit, T. W. Rhys Davids and others who formed a German-British group around 1900 dedicated to the study of Theravada Buddhism.

Germany had an Oriental Society (*Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*) established in 1845 and dedicated particularly to the study of Sanskrit and Indian literature. From the 1860s onward, all major German universities had chairs for Sanskrit and Indology.

As a philosophical and religious concept, Buddhism became popular in Germany during the second half of the 19th century. By this time, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) already considered the discovery of Buddhism the greatest spiritual event of the 19th century. It was the Oriental scholar Friedrich Mayer in Weimar who had drawn Schopenhauer's attention to Indian antiquity. Under the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, Richard Wagner felt strongly attracted to Buddhism, particularly to the doctrine of salvation and morality of pity. In 1859 he wrote to a friend that he had become a Buddhist (Winternitz, 1983, p. 403). Later that year he wrote to the same friend that he considered Buddhism " a philosophy compared with which all other dogmas must appear petty, narrow and inadequate ! " (Winternitz, 1983, p. 404). This statement echoed what many German intellectuals likely felt about institutionalized religion. For some time, Wagner planned a Buddhist musical drama " The Victors " (about Ananda and the Candala girl Praktri). It would be interesting, but in this context not possible, to further investigate Buddhist ideas in Wagner's operas. As Winternitz (1983, p. 404) points out, throughout Wagner's work, and particularly in the last years of his life, the composer's mind was occupied with thoughts about Buddha and Buddhist views of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Used here in revised transl. : M. WINTERNITZ, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. II, Delhi, 1983.

To mention just one further cultural production with the legend of Buddha as its central theme : in 1900, Ferdinand Hornstein produced his musical drama “ Buddha ” in Munich’s Hoftheater (Winternitz, 1983, p. 403).

In 1903, the first German Buddhist missionary organization was founded by Karl Seidenstücker in Leipzig ; a Berlin branch was established in 1905. These organizations had their own publication, *Der Buddhist*.

Aside from the fascination with Buddhism, the translation and publication of the large collection of Jataka tales was aided by Herder’s generally accepted theory, that folk art forms the basis for all artistic creation. In Germany this led to the collection and study of folk songs and folk tales by, among others, the Brothers Grimm. In addition, it was generally believed that all European folk tales and literatures had their origins in Aryan India. This view explained why one could find so many similar folk tales in different parts of the world.

The “ Indo-Germanic ” or “ Aryan ” connection was strongly promoted in Germany for more than a century, beginning with the Romantic school around 1800. The Grimm believed in an Indo-Germanic treasury of folk and fairy tales, which had its basis in an archaic period (Kutzer, 1963). Clemens Brentano inspired Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm to collect folk and fairy tales in Germany. In 1812, the first volume of their collected tales was published. The theory, that motifs or whole stories were spread by transmission from people to people, was, however, opposed among others by J. Bédier who promoted the “ Polygénésie des contes ”, which states that under similar conditions different groups of people created similar fairy and folk tales (Kutzer, 1963, p. 291). Today, it is widely accepted that both factors come into play. Tales, like certain ones in the Arabian Nights collection, can be traced from India via Islam to the West, while other folk tales or single motifs emerge in different cultures at about the same time.

It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Europeans had access to this wealth of colorful literary Indian texts, the Jatakas. V. Fausböll (1877-1879) deserves credit for bringing the collection to the attention of European scholars. He edited and published it in. A translation of the first forty Jatakas from the Pali language into English was undertaken by Rhys Davids in 1880 and the complete collection was subsequently translated by various scholars under

the editorship of G. B. Cowell (1973).<sup>2</sup> It is not possible in this context, to report on all existing collections of the Jatakas. It seems noteworthy that the first French translation was based on Chinese texts (Chavannes, 1934).

The *Jataka* — as mentioned — are a collection of 547 stories written in Pali, recounting the previous births of the Bodhisatta (*jati* means birth). We know from scenes in bas-reliefs and inscriptions on stupas in Amaravati, Bharhut and Sanchi that many of the tales already existed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Around forty Jatakas can be identified in Bharhut.

The collection comprises many genres like fables with wise morals ; ballads in dialogue form about basic questions of human existence ; fairy tales describing the relationships between humans and animals ; legends about the conversion of kings and about kings renouncing their status and becoming ascetics ; amusing tales ; novellas and novels, many involving the lower classes, but also involving outcasts like robbers and particularly mean-spirited and wicked women ; stories preaching the right comportment or criticizing its absence, and fairy tales in which magic plays a strong role.<sup>3</sup> Scholars agree that many are of much older Indian origin and were early adaptations of popular stories used as didactic literature in the teaching of Buddhism. The number of stories attributed to Gotama Buddha, that were actually told by him (if any), can not be determined. Jones agrees with others that the text collection, as we know it today, was most likely compiled around the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Ceylonese monks (Jones, 1979, p. 6). With the spread of Buddhism, the Jatakas were soon found in several Asian countries in the same form or in variations.

The Jatakas form part of the *Tipitaka* (or “ three baskets ”) containing the canon of Theravada Buddhism, compiled around the time of King Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Each of the Jatakas consists of verses as well as narratives. Verses form the essential canonical part, and the prose text provides an illustration and a commentary. Some verses do not make sense without the stories. This gives rise

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<sup>2</sup> All further statements refer to this edition. See bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> A comparative study about the uses of magical items, the function of magic and the different values given to magic in the *Jataka* and in the Grimm tales could lead to interesting results.

to the assumption that narrative and verses formed units from the start (Jones, 1979, p. 6).

The Jatakas are very important documents, critical to the practice of the lay Buddhist. As Jones points out, the average lay person was illiterate. Even if he could read, the approximately forty volumes of the Theravada Canon were not accessible to him. The lay Buddhist needed an intermediary : the monk. And the stories were used by preachers to convey norms of ethical, social and religious behaviour in an accessible format. Even though some of the stories are of a more entertaining nature, the majority illustrate Buddhist virtues like compassion, generosity, wisdom, patience, justice and truthfulness. The stories promote the monastic ideal but also the ideal of a good life in the world. They preach adherence to the five precepts : abstaining from taking life, from stealing, from misconduct in sensual actions, from false speech, and from liquor that causes intoxication (Jones, 1979, p. 49-50). The Jataka stories teach the doctrine of karma and rebirth to unsophisticated believers as simply “ the doctrine of reward and punishment ” (Jones, 1979, p. 40). Merits from former lives, like giving alms or showing friendship are rewarded, evil deeds and attitudes are punished by rebirth in a lower life form.

The 547 texts are organized into 22 books according to the number of verses contained in each Jataka (e.g. the first 150 Jatakas contain one verse, the next 100 texts have two verses and so on). All Jatakas are numbered and have titles. Unfortunately there is no set principle of naming them. Titles derive from the subject of the tale, the name of one of its characters or its first words. Some Jatakas share the same title.

Each Jataka is organized into four parts, beginning with an introduction, in which the story is placed in the context of the Buddha's life (e.g. where and under what circumstances he told the story). Jataka no. 1, the Apannaka-Jataka, begins as follows : “ This discourse regarding Truth was delivered by the Blessed One, while he was dwelling in the Great Monastery at Jetavana near Savatthi. ” The introduction is followed by the story from the past, the former life of the Bodhisatta (future Buddha). The stories from a previous life all begin like “ Once upon a time when Brahmadata was king of Benares... ” (no. 158) or with slight variations. Three hundred ninety five Jatakas begin like this. Although the king and the city of

his court are named, the beginning echoes a fairy tale<sup>4</sup>. Such a beginning might, however, give the story more authenticity as a real example of someone's actions and the consequences of such actions, namely punishment or reward.

Embedded in this story are verses containing Buddhist doctrine. At the end, the Buddha discloses the identities of the individuals in the story: "... the Master concluded by identifying the Birth as follows..." (no. 1).

Jones (1979, p. 20) notes how remarkable it is that :

in spite of the tremendous diversity of forms which the bodhisatta assumes, he never once appears as a woman or as a female animal. Even when he appears as a tree-spirit or fairy, he is always masculine. That this is no accident becomes clear when one scrutinizes the animal births. Animals held to be especially sacred in Hindu literature, like the elephant and the monkey, are well represented... The most sacred animal of all, however, is conspicuous by its absence. The bodhisatta appears three times as a bull, twice as an ox, once as a buffalo, but not once as a cow.

In general the tales portray a negative image of women. We know from legends that it was Ananda who persuaded the reluctant Master to allow women into the Buddhist order. Very significant is Jataka no. 263, which describes the Bodhisatta as repulsed by women and, even as a baby, preferring the care of a man. This rejection of women does not, however, necessarily suggest that all women have to be portrayed negatively.<sup>5</sup> There are a few examples of virtuous women like the girl who gave her scarlet robe to a monk in a previous life and was reborn with such beauty that she became a threat to the virtuousness of the Bodhisatta (no. 527). Or the story of the extremely beautiful girl, who, in her former life, had been a holy man. She eventually married the Bodhisatta, and — as the story goes — “ they did not regard one another with the eye of sinful passion ” and lived their lives together as saintly ascetics (no. 328). In the first case, the merits lead to beauty and beauty

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<sup>4</sup> “ Once upon a time ” is the beginning of most Grimm fairy tales, however, they do not situate the tale in a realistic setting. These tales — also moral instructions in many cases — did not have to be authenticated like the Jatakas in their context of religious instruction.

<sup>5</sup> A comparative study of the portrayal of women in Grimm tales and in the Jatakas could render interesting results, also in respect with the special nature of the Jataka among folk tales.

leads to temptation — which is negative. (Several stories illustrate this theme like nos. 66, 167 and 263.) In the second case, the virtuous woman acquires her merits not even as a woman but as a man. She leads her life as an ascetic which can not be seen as exemplary for the average woman.

Let us further examine examples of positive images of women. In an introductory story, Buddha talks about a woman “deeply rooted in goodness” and says that she “scorned all temporal things.” When her parents do not allow her to become a nun, she marries and later gets permission from her husband to join a nunnery, and becomes a saint (no. 12). Also, in Jataka no. 234, a wife follows the Path and becomes a saint. Here, as in other examples, either wives become sisters and subsequently saints. In some Jatakas, women follow the teachings of the Master, repent and are saved, as in the story of the Bodhisatta’s mother, who is described as a “passionate woman, cruel, harsh, shrewish, illtongued”. These are negative traits which are criticized in other Jatakas (e.g. no. 241). In yet another story, the Bodhisatta, reborn as the king of a deer herd, is saved by the sacrifice of his doe, a figure which is not further mentioned. The Bodhisatta, as the hero of the story, has to survive to teach a human king to give up hunting and killing animals. Several Jatakas, like no. 67, depict intelligent women. In this example, the woman saves her husband, her son and her brother. In story no. 31, we find four women in the Bodhisatta’s house with the telling names of Goodness, Thoughtful, Joy, and Highborn. Among these women, Goodness is the most remarkable. She insists on being a partner in the community’s good work, which the men want to deny her. But the explanation given to the men by the Bodhisatta is that “save the Realm of Brahma, there is no place from which women are excluded...” (79). And evidently, “goodness”, “thoughtfulness”, “joy” and being of noble character (“highborn”) are desirable qualities in women. Very few women are considered to have these qualities.

It is remarkable how many Jatakas deal with the “wickedness of women.” By far the most frequent complaint against women is that they are temptresses and therefore hindrances to holiness. Many stories are responses to the complaints of monks who have passionate feelings for women, including their former wives. This was seen as the most severe problem for many monks, which attests more to the weakness of men than to the wickedness of women.

The theme of Jataka no. 64 illustrates this point. Women are called “sinful and wicked” and the conclusion is : “No heed should be paid either to their likes or to their dislikes” (Cowell, 1973, p. 159). To ignore women is a piece of advice given in several stories. It seems significant that even in the stories for lay Buddhists, the lives of good fathers and husbands are not as valuable as those of monks or ascetics.

Women in the Jatakas are generally described as unfaithful. One example can be seen in no. 65, where the verses offer an extremely harsh commentary :

Like highways, rivers, courtyards, hostelries,  
Or taverns, which to all alike extend  
One universal hospitality, —  
Is womankind ; and wise men never stoop  
To wrath at frailty in a sex so frail. (Cowell, 1973, p. 161)

The narrator of many of the stories seems to have — on occasion — felt great pleasure in exaggerating women’s wickedness. One of several examples is that of a queen, accused of adultery with 64 footmen, who is said to have accused a chaplain of rape (no. 120). In Jataka no. 145 a wife’s “misconduct” is lamented. She is described as a “bold, bad wife” with a “stream of lovers.” The list of wicked women tricking their husbands is long.

Women are also seen as vain, coquettish, proud and demanding, as in no. 147, where a wife wants a safflower colored robe, for which the husband is asked to steal dye. He is discovered and impaled, and he dies thinking of his poor wife. Likewise, no. 386 describes a queen who wants to find out the secret of a charm her husband possesses. Even when he tells her that disclosing it would cause his death, she insists. He tells her the secret, but by Sakka’s divine intervention, he is saved. The dedication and devotion of men to their wives as well as to religious practices is often pointed out, which speaks favorably of men in contrast to the negative characteristics seen in women. It cannot be overlooked with how much delight women’s often harsh punishment for their misdeeds is described as in Jataka no. 207. A Queen is reborn as a “dungworm” because of her “intoxication with her beauty” and her failure to commit “virtuous acts.”

Jataka no. 269 provides an interesting list of categories of wives. Seven kinds of wives are listed : destructive, dishonest and

proud wives end up in hell. The motherly, sisterly, friendly and slavish (i.e. patient) wives go to heaven.

Women are seen as incapable of friendship, because of the interference of jealousy, as Jataka no. 157 describes in the story about a lioness and a female jackal.

These examples all suggest that women ought not to be trusted. Wickedness and all the other character defects are seen as innate in women. Men are hindered in their religious devotion by carnal passion and advised to avoid women. However, since the monks most likely preached to women as well as to men, there are also guidelines for the behavior of women. Jataka no. 536 is an extensive and complex text, in which the cuckoo Punnamukha is instructed about “ the forty different ways a woman makes up to a man,” the “ eight grounds a woman despises her lord ” and the “ nine grounds a woman incur[s] blame ” (Cowell, 1973, p. 232-233). This last list provides a code of behavior for virtuous women in their daily lives. They should not frequent parks, gardens, river banks ; they should not visit the “ houses of kinsfolk or of strangers ” ; they should not wear “ cloth worn by gentlemen ” ; they should not drink strong drinks ; they should not look around and not stand in front of the door. All this points at a life confined to the house in the service of their husbands.

The Jatakas suggest that family life was not highly valued. The ideal for women, as well as for men, was monastic life. In several stories men and women abandon their families and social obligations to become monks, nuns and ascetics. This seems even quite normal for kings.

If we look at Jataka no. 262, which warns men about the nature of women, it is obvious that women are a powerful force to be reckoned with even if they are considered a negative force.

Where women rule, the seeing lose their sight,  
The strong grow weak, the mighty have no might.  
Where women rule, virtue and wisdom fly :  
Reckless the prisoners in durance lie.  
Like highway robbers, all they steal away  
From their poor victims, careless come what may —  
Reflection, virtue, truth, and reasoning  
Self-sacrifice, and goodness — everything.  
As fire burns fuel, for each careless wight  
They burn fame, glory, learning, wit, and might.  
(Cowell, 1973, p. 226)

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