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Giving Away your Wife and Children: Translating a Jātaka Tale into a Contemporary Narrative

Mark Rivett and Steve Killick

Abstract

This paper describes the process involved in turning a Jātaka tale from an historical text into a story fit for telling to a contemporary audience. The authors are storytellers within the UK storytelling tradition who were invited by an academic translator of the Jātakas to perform the stories as a 'knowledge exchange' event funded by the University of Edinburgh. The paper describes how the storytellers adjusted one of the Jātakas (the *Vessantara Jātaka*) in order to make the story accessible for a twenty-first-century Western audience. The description of the translation process (from text to performance) provides a tool to increase the popularity of the Jātakas in the West, but may also offer insights to the academic translators of the tales about their performativity.

Nanquan Kills a Cat

Once Nanquan saw the monastics of the eastern and western halls arguing over a cat. He held up the cat and said to the monastics, 'If you can say a turning word, I will not kill it.'

No one in the assembly could answer. So Naquan cut the cat in two.

Later he told the story to Zhaozhou. Zhaozhou took off his straw sandals, put them on his head, and walked away.

(Tanahashi and Loori 2005: 243)

Introduction

The Jātaka tales of the past lives of the Buddha have a long and popular history within Asian countries as tales told about the Buddhist path. The breadth and variety of these tales is truly staggering, with the largest single collection – the Pāli *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* – said to contain 550 stories. Indeed, as a collection of stories, this text easily matches the size of other large story collections from Asia such as the *Pañcatantra* (Ryder 2007) and the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Sattar 1994). Within countries such as India, Thailand and Sri Lanka, these stories are well known and feature as cartoons, temple art and even television series. In Western countries, however, they are generally only studied in academia, where they are translated and their social and religious significance is debated (for a review of this scholarly literature, see Appleton 2010: 1–19).

In the USA, some Buddhist teachers have sought to bring the Jātakas to the attention of Western Buddhists (Martin 1990 and 2010). But on the whole, Western

Buddhists do not recognise the relevance of these stories to their religious practice, nor have the stories achieved wider cultural exposure.

Within the West, Buddhism continues to grow as a minority religion. Between the 2001 and 2011 UK censuses, for instance, the numbers ticking the 'Buddhist' box in England and Wales increased by a third, to 248,000 (Office for National Statistics 2012). Authors such as Sutin (2006) and Bluck (2006) have traced the relationship of both the West and the UK to Buddhism and have noted the influence of certain 'schools' within this relationship. The most prevalent 'schools' are originally Mahāyāna in orientation: Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. This may explain why many Western Buddhists do not know about the Jātaka tales, as they occupy a more significant place within the Theravāda tradition (Appleton 2010). There is possibly another reason, which directly connects to the task of storytellers. These tales are stories about the Buddha's past lives and have a number of features that may make them less appealing to a Western Buddhist (or non-Buddhist) audience. For instance, they often have a moralistic intent; they often have a complex cosmology (including realms for gods and demons); and they are fundamentally rooted in a different culture and a different time. Each Jātaka, for instance, is framed with a story about a troublesome event in the Buddha's life. He proceeds to tell a tale about a past life which suggests a solution to the current problem. Finally, he explains which character in the story was a previous birth of one of his followers (or detractors) and which was himself. Miraculous things happen within many stories, and Sakka the king of the gods frequently intervenes to aid the Buddha on his path to enlightenment.

There is some evidence, especially from Western Buddhists themselves, that this kind of cosmology or description of their faith does not fit their Western cultural context. Buddhist practitioner magazines often contain articles that debate the importance of beliefs such as rebirth, karma and even enlightenment as a 'goal' (Wallis, Lief and Goldfield 2008; Coleman 2011). More recently, Batchelor (2010) has asserted that a secular Buddhism needs to emerge in the West, shorn of supernatural beliefs and more similar to the radical Christianity of Cupitt (1997) than to the Buddhism of the Tibetan Lamas. Understandably, within such a conception of the Buddhist path, a series of tales such as the Jātakas may hold little appeal.

The practice of storytelling, however, provides a possible alternative to this view. Throughout the history of humanity stories have been told orally, and since the invention of writing they have been committed to palm leaf, birch bark, tablets, papyrus or paper. The act of oral storytelling is an act of creation. But it is also a process of translation and continual adaptation. No story is ever told the same way twice, and the storyteller has to 'bend' the tale to meet the audience. The storyteller needs to add pace, surprise and an ending which satisfies (on some level). The storyteller translates the 'old' story for a new audience and fashions the material so that it echoes with contemporary meaning.

The rest of this paper describes how two storytellers 'bent' one of the Jātakas (the *Vessantara Jātaka*) for a performance of it and other Jātakas at an event funded by the University of Edinburgh. Dr Naomi Appleton in the University's School of Divinity has a research interest in the Jātakas and commissioned a performance of them to make them

available to a wider audience. The storytellers' task was to form the stories into tales that would entertain an audience of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The intention was to experiment with these stories in the way that storytellers do, to discover if a Western audience can enjoy them. We know that the Vessantara story has a long tradition of being told in Asia (Cone and Gombrich 2011), but could it be translated for a Western audience? The paper will outline the rich storytelling tradition in the UK along with the common dilemmas faced by storytellers. It will then describe how the Jātaka tale in question was changed and amended to make it possible to tell it in a limited time-frame and to create an ambiguity which opened up multiple meanings for the listeners whether they were Buddhist or not. First, we will briefly outline the *Vessantara Jātaka* as it has been translated (Cowell et al. 1895-1907; Cone and Gombrich 2011).

The *Vessantara Jātaka*

The story of Vessantara is the final story in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, and is believed, in the Theravāda tradition, to narrate the Buddha's antepenultimate life (his penultimate life being spent in a heaven realm) and his perfection of generosity. As a result of his extraordinarily generous actions in this life, he is subsequently born as a human being ready to become the Buddha. Like all of the final ten stories in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, each of which is believed to demonstrate how the Bodhisatta perfects one of the perfections, it is extremely long. The story meanders around the theme of generosity and includes descriptions of the city, the jungle and a series of 'good deeds'.

The story is set in one of the city-states of ancient India. In this city, the Buddha is born as Prince Vessantara, who is famous for his generosity. Unfortunately, one day Vessantara gives away, to some neighbours, a magical white elephant that was born at the same time as himself. This act of generosity evokes a storm of protest from his own people, who insist that his father banish him. Vessantara's wife decides that she would rather come with him than stay in the city, because she is aware that the life of a widow is not a positive one. So Vessantara, his wife Maddī and their two children (heirs to the throne) leave the city to dwell, with no finery or rich food, in the forest. Vessantara has been punished for doing 'good'.

He accepts this fate with equanimity and decides to devote himself to the ascetic life, giving up intimacy with Maddī and meditating. The story describes him as learning to have no attachments (this is the consequence or purpose of generosity), and describes his status as almost beyond the normal attitudes and behaviours of human beings, who are mired in ignorance, greed and delusion.

The story sets up an idyllic life: the family live in the forest on berries, herbs and roots; Maddī collects the food, while Vessantara looks after the children and meditates; and the children play in the forest and are schooled by Vessantara.

But the idyll does not last. One day a brahmin arrives. He tells Vessantara that he needs some slaves and he would like the children to fulfil this need. Vessantara gives his children away to the brahmin. Not only that, but the brahmin beats the children to make them obey him. Vessantara sees this and does not change his mind. When Maddī comes back from gathering food, she is distraught that her children are gone. Her pain does not

last long before she has other things to worry about. The next day, another brahmin asks Vessantara to give him Maddī herself. Of course, in the interests of generosity, he does.

The story has a happy ending, however. The second brahmin was Sakka, the king of the gods, who pretended to be a brahmin in order to protect Vessantara from *actually* giving away his wife. For another thing, the children get back to their home city, and their grandfather and all the people regret the banishment of the royal family and invite Vessantara to come back to them and be their king. Lastly, of course, Vessantara's behaviour leads him to be reborn in his next human life as Śākyamuni Buddha, to the benefit of all creatures throughout the last two and a half millennia.

The Dilemmas of the Story of Vessantara for Western Audiences

In many ways the challenges of this story to a Western audience are obvious. The story offends many of the assumptions that we have about relationships, family, children and even human rights. From this perspective, Vessantara is an example of an anti-hero. He seems selfish in his desire to liberate himself from common human feelings. He seems foolish in his extreme generosity. Moreover, his attitudes epitomise the sexism of societies that subjugate women and children to the whims of men. The happy ending appears to come through the intervention of gods (i.e. out of nowhere), a motif less familiar to Western audiences than to Asian ones. Thus although many of the themes of the story echo those of the life of the Buddha himself (e.g. leaving home and renouncing his family), it seems more likely to alienate Western audiences than attract them to the Jātakas and Buddhism itself.

Having said this, there has been a debate about the story within the Buddhist community over the last millennia. For instance, in the *Milindapañha*, Nāgasena defends Vessantara's actions to King Milinda (Appleton 2010: 70). This proves that there was an ambivalence about what he did. Moreover, the text itself contains this debate. At some moments in the story, Vessantara seems to vacillate. He certainly suffers when he sees his children beaten by the brahmin. Cone and Gombrich (2011) reflect the ambivalence about Vessantara's actions within the various commentaries, and note that some have argued that he knew the children would be safe. But like the claim that Abraham knew God would not actually expect the sacrifice of Isaac, this seems to undermine the pain he is said to have suffered. Other commentators have noted that children are 'given away' to the monasteries in Asia: to educate them. Thus the story may have had an ulterior purpose.

There are thus significant challenges for a Western storyteller who wishes to make an attractive, coherent story out of this tale without damaging its core plot. We will return to this process once we have outlined the place of oral storytelling in contemporary culture and the skills that storytellers bring to their craft.

The Tradition of Oral Storytelling

All societies are believed to have had a tradition of oral storytelling, but with the development of literacy these traditions have often been lost. However, many cultures that have lost their traditions have seen revival movements flourish in recent years. In

the UK, particularly England and Wales, the storytelling revival movement has re-established many forgotten oral traditions (Collins 1999). Arguably, Scotland and Ireland may have more continuity between older traditions and this revival – that is, they did not lose their storytelling traditions. Collins outlines three particular aspects of traditional storytelling: 'bardic' (e.g. public performances), 'fireside' (e.g. within the home or small community) and 'educational' (e.g. in schools). Within the revival movement these in turn have led to stories being told both formally (as an art form) in public centres and informally within daily life and within the 'helping professions'. Equally, oral storytelling has become a valued educational resource (Reedy and Lister 2007). There are an increasing number of professional storytellers working as performers and in schools. The number of storytelling festivals has increased. Storytellers are applying their work to health and therapeutic settings (Dwivedi 1997; Gersie and King 1990; Parkinson 2009). The skills of contemporary storytellers remain similar to those of their predecessors, but they meld oral and written sources. They create stories which use repetition, improvisation and spontaneous interaction with the audience. Oral storytelling has now established itself as an art form separate from, although with similarities to, other art forms such as literature, poetry and drama.

Storytellers would be familiar with the dilemmas posed by the Vessantara story. Stories are passed down between storytellers either verbally or through the reading of texts. Once a storyteller decides to tell a story, he or she must determine both *what* to tell and *how* to tell it. This requires an ability to psychologically 'play' with the story. At times the 'play' may take the story that is *told* far away from the story as it was *handed down*. With stories that are nested within a religious tradition, this may pose problems. The storyteller may not want to alter the story too much; or the listeners might be offended if the main theme is altered. However, throughout history, stories adapt and change. Thus, there are different versions of most traditional stories. For instance, the Cinderella story can be traced back to ancient times (Anderson 2000), as can the Oedipus story (Edmunds 1985). The Jātakas are good examples of such a process of adaptation; for instance, the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* contains a story more commonly known in the West as 'King Solomon's Judgement'. Often the direction of travel of these tales is not known, and indeed they may have arisen spontaneously in several places. Equally, there are often a number of versions of the same story in the same canon. This is certainly true of the Jātakas, which pop up with different messages in other collections (such as the *Pañcatantra*) as well as within other Buddhist texts. Therefore, the real issue is not *whether* to change the story, but *how far* to change it.

Secondly, storytellers know that they must forge a tale that can grip an audience for a set length of time. Western audiences would be less familiar with listening to a sustained storytelling piece of several hours without the storyteller editing the story into a more manageable time frame. In fact storytellers are used to adjusting stories. This allows for different rhythms, climaxes and mysteries to be built into the story. It is probable that in the past, the Jātakas would have been told like this: long evenings devoted to the meandering plot, while there would be breaks for talking, eating and drinking. For our performance, we thought that this pattern would be too unfamiliar for

the audience, and so we decided to construct a performance around five different twenty-minute stories representing the variety of the tales in the Jātakas, starting with animal fables and finishing with *Vessantara*. This meant *Vessantara* had to be shortened. Those who know the story might regard this as a distortion of its essence.

The third element of the storyteller's art is to fit the tale to the audience. Asian audiences would know this story (as Western ones know Cinderella) but Western ones do not. Telling a story to an audience that knows the story has its own challenges; but telling a story to a new cultural audience is equally challenging. The interaction between teller and listener helps shape the nuances of the tale and also influences the pace with which it is told. Humorous aspects of the story encourage laughter; participation may be elicited, especially in guessing what will happen next, or in third-person asides. We knew that the audience for the Jātaka tales would be varied: Buddhist and non-Buddhist members of the public had been invited. The version of *Vessantara* told, therefore, had to have an appeal for a varied group: it had to *mean* something different for different people. This, perhaps more than anything, demonstrates how telling stories in the twenty-first century in a Western context differs from how the Jātaka tales might have been told in their indigenous cultures. In a contemporary storytelling milieu, the teller tries to tell a story rich with different interpretations, and leaves the meaning of the story to be understood by the listener. In other words, a simple message that 'generosity is a virtue above all others' would not have fitted the context. Of course, the personality of the storyteller also influences what is told and how it is told. Thus not only the audience but the teller has to have a relationship with the story. This relationship may evolve – it may change through time, and through the hearing/telling of the story again and again.

Translating *Vessantara*

As mentioned above, the storyteller has to have his or her own relationship with the story that is told. For us both, it was the ambiguity inherent in *Vessantara* that made it attractive to us. Some might see it as a story about a man who sacrifices everything for what he believes to be a greater good, only to lose what is most dear to him. Others might see it as a tale that challenges the limits of generosity. Buddhists may also see it as a parable about the role of the 'perfections' in their spiritual practice. For a Western audience, there is a strangeness about the story, possibly rooted in its divergence from Western values, that intrigues the listener. The teller of the story had to find a way of encouraging as many of these different interpretations as possible. Accordingly, various changes (translations) were undertaken.

Emotional Engagement

There is a considerable literature about the role of emotions in storytelling. Some have argued that the simplicity of written stories allow the teller to elaborate the emotional and psychological experience during the telling (Thomas and Killick 2007). *Vessantara* was therefore constructed to bring out the emotional experience of the characters, and

thus to engage the sympathies of the audience. Initially, the main character was described as impressive:

> Vessantara gave away everything he could. He was renowned for helping all his people. While he dwelt in the palace, no one need want for anything.

Care was taken to emphasise Vessantara's intentions in his generosity, and this seeded (as happens in stories), but did not predict, what would happen later:

> Vessantara knew that generosity was the royal road to enlightenment.

The story of Vessantara's birth, in which he is said to have emerged from his mother's womb with a coin for each of the midwives, was told in a jokey way – perhaps poking fun at the miraculous background. This emphasised not his otherworldly nature but his down-to-earth human nature. However, the audience's sympathies were gradually questioned as Vessantara gave away the white elephant and then the goods that he and his family had taken away with them in their exile. Indeed, the storyteller asked the audience to guess what would happen when brahmins asked Vessantara first for the horses they had taken with them, and then for the wagon, and then for the clothes, food and tents. As in most oral storytelling, the repetition of actions gave pace to this part of the story:

> No sooner were Vessantara and his small family a hundred feet outside of the city gates than a brahmin came up to him. 'Great generous Vessantara, I have need of a horse. Can I please have one of yours?' What do you think he did? ... Very soon he had no horses left! Then guess what happened?

This section of the story began to seed doubt about Vessantara's actions. Moreover, just before the banishment, the storytelling brought Maddī into the tale by emphasising her selfless devotion to her husband:

> When Maddī heard that Vessantara had to be exiled she wept with distress. She loved him with all her heart and couldn't be without him. 'I will come with you,' she said. 'After all, what are the luxuries of the palace compared to the temple of the forest?'

The audience's sympathies for Maddī were increased by a short reflection on the plight of an abandoned wife:

> 'Besides,' said Maddī, 'what would I do alone here? A wife without a husband is nobody. An appendage, a worn out snake skin.'

Here, the natural post-feminist Western cultural response contributed to a questioning of Vessantara's generosity and brought his longsuffering wife (and children) into the picture.

Nevertheless, the storyteller did not want the tale to paint a picture of Vessantara as a selfish man. He wanted the audience to retain some sympathies for him, however

tenuous. As Vessantara gave away his children, the ambiguity of his purpose was emphasised:

> 'There is no greater gift than one's children,' said Vessantara. 'They are not ours to keep.' And as he spoke, that feeling of joy you feel when you give away something precious to someone else, almost overwhelmed his soul. Just like at Christmas!

The storyteller chose to tell the story by constantly playing with the sympathies of the audience.

Again, the trauma of the giving away of his wife and children was told so that real distress could be experienced. Both Vessantara's and his family's suffering was portrayed:

> The pain of seeing his children go was strong. He almost cried out 'Stop!' while his children cried pitifully as they were led away.

But again ambiguity was also crucial:

> Vessantara turned to his son and asked him: 'Would you deny me the boat to ferry me across to the other shore of enlightenment?'

This ambiguity was sustained until the final moments of the story. Everything actually works out. Vessantara gets his kingdom, his family and his wealth back. Thus the story finished with the line:

> This just goes to show that you only get to keep what you give away.

Essentially, the emotional engagement with different characters rises and falls, but in the end the audience are not told by the storyteller who was right and who was wrong. They must make up their own minds.

Contemporary Motifs

Oral stories often happen 'Once upon a time', but they also frequently contain enough contemporary references to ensure that the audience connect the themes of the story to their own lives. In the telling of *Vessantara*, a tale whose themes are quite alien to Western audiences, contemporary references were added. As noted above, generosity was connected to Christmas (the performance was in November). The storyteller evoked a response by noting Maddī and the children's role in the story. But we also decided to use the giving away of the white elephant to allude to current debates about state welfare:

> The people were horrified to hear that their prince had given away their elephant to foreigners. 'What will he do next?' they asked. 'Will he invite all these foreigners to live in our fair city and take all our food, our money?' They threatened to riot and rebel if the king did not heed them ... So Vessantara had to be banished because he sought to help his neighbours.

The concept of rebellion was also aimed to remind listeners that all over the Arab world, revolution was rife. This contemporary backdrop also justified the people changing their mind when they decided to take Vessantara back. The most recent past has suggested that people change sides all the time, and the reason for the original rebellion is frequently forgotten:

> When the people saw the children, they felt sad that they had lost their generous prince. 'It was the fault of the foreigners,' they said. 'But for them, our prince would be with us and so would his family.' And guess what happened? They all decided to invite Vessantara back!

Changing the Plot

Because Vessantara needed to be shortened, we chose to move very quickly to the giving away of the white elephant: this in many ways is the start of the plot, from where the story's unravelling begins. We also made the decision not to include Sakka at all. There were many reasons for this, not least the fact that the gods of Eastern stories would not be familiar to the audience. Having made this decision, we created a new twist to the plot. In the original story, Maddī is taken not by a real brahmin, but by the god Sakka in disguise. Sakka is trying to protect Vessantara and Maddī both. Rather than follow this plot, we decided to have Maddī taken by another brahmin, just as the children were taken earlier. This set up a series of repetitions, and also conformed to the view that the brahmins were evil and selfish in contrast to Vessantara, Maddī and the children, which is a refrain within the tale. But having decided to do this, we then needed to find a way for Maddī to find her way back to her home. Here we used a typical oral storytelling device: the skill of the children in getting the brahmin to take them back to the palace was repeated by Maddī as well.

> Somehow, just like the children who led that wicked brahmin back to the palace, Maddī did the same. The one was rewarded with such rich food that he ate himself to death. The other had wanted wives upon wives, and he got them. I know he died, but from what, I leave to your imagination.

These changes, in many ways, made the story conform to the norm of many oral stories. Often what happens to one character also happens to another. Moreover, the same characters keep on doing the same thing. Thus it is possible that some in the audience had guessed what would happen, although the response suggested many had not.

In many ways we kept true to the basic structure of the story; perhaps after we have worked with the story more we will be more adventurous and change it more.

Audience Reaction

The storytellers have now told *Vessantara* on two occasions, and the audience reaction has been slightly different each time. The first time, the story was told to a totally Buddhist group. Interestingly, this group saw the tale as primarily a teaching tale, and

spent some time afterwards debating the place of 'attachment to people' within the Buddhist spiritual path. What the story captured for them was the conflict between devotion to the Dharma and their own families and emotional lives. Again, this theme is reflected in contemporary Buddhist writings (Coleman 2011) and is probably not confined to the Buddhist spiritual tradition. For us, the storytellers, this created some complexity, as we were there as tellers of tales, not as spiritual teachers.

The performance in Edinburgh was to a wider group: some Buddhists came and at least one monk, but there were also people who regularly attended storytelling events. Because this was an 'outreach' activity by the University, written feedback was collected. After the performance, people were also invited to ask questions about the stories. The overwhelming responses were enthusiasm and a recognition that people did not know of these stories. Equally, the stories, and *Vessantara* in particular, aroused people's curiosity. There was a feeling of discomfort within the auditorium during the telling of this story. This is also part of the experience. One person responded to the question on the feedback form 'What will you take away from this show?' with the words, 'My children'. After the tales, the listeners wanted to know if all the Jātakas were 'sexist' and if the Buddha was ever born female. They wanted to know how the stories could be traced to the Buddha's life, and how they could have been passed down through the generations. The conclusion has to be that the Jātakas can continue to have a place in a Western oral storytelling tradition and that they stimulate a variety of responses.

Conclusions

In this paper we have only discussed the adaptation of one of the Jātakas that were told in the performance. But from this we can comment on a number of lessons to be learnt from the experience. Firstly, what we have shown is that these stories work as *stories told*. They are not only historical texts of interest to translators and spiritual teachers. We will therefore continue to work on these stories to fashion them for a wider Western audience, and we will seek to perform them whenever we are hosted to do so. These stories might function as a cultural education for many non-Buddhists, where the strangeness of the setting provides a new context for the common themes of humanity's struggles to live and love well. Basically, these are good tales! Secondly, we would hope that the place of the Jātaka tales within the Buddhist tradition can continue to be promoted within the Western Buddhist Sangha. This rich collection of stories deserves to be more widely developed by the various Buddhist schools that exist in the West. Thirdly, the collaboration between an academic translator and two storytellers has shown that each can learn from the other. The storytellers can learn about the context in which these stories were told and the nuances of plot that emerge from various translations. The translator can learn how the stories can be lifted from the page and filled with life. This might reflect back upon the way the story is translated and understood as a spoken tale. The way the plot shifts, the humorous side-stories, the poetic use of language, the repetition and the shocks – all these factors point to a tale designed for oral telling. We therefore hope that these two communities can continue to nurture each other.

> But what is Zhaozhou's meaning? How do you say a turning word that would save the cat? The turning points of these two adepts are subtle and profound. Leap free of the words if you really want to see into them.
>
> (Tanahashi and Loori 2005: 244)

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