



# Women in the Jātaka Collection

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# What do we mean by “the Jātaka Collection”?

- *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* or *Jātakatthakathā*, ie the Commentary on the Jātaka
- approx 550 stories, in Pāli
- ordered by increasing number of verses
- past lives of Buddha, told by him
- story of present, story of past, verse, connection of births
- dates: up to 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE but older components

# Other Jātaka Collections...

- *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra (34 stories, Sanskrit, 4<sup>th</sup> century?)
- two sets of ten stories in the *Avadānaśataka* (2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century, Sanskrit)
- *Cariyāpiṭaka* (Pāli, 35 stories, late-canonical)
- Pāli and Southeast Asian vernacular collections, modeled on *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*
- lots embedded in other texts too, eg in *vinaya*

# Why is the Jātaka Collection relevant to a study of women in Buddhism?

- large collection of narrative, so lots of material
- female characters with varied portrayals
- lots of misogyny!
- some women with supportive or even leading roles
- the Buddha is never female in his past lives

# Ascetic misogyny

- Sponberg (1992: 35) calls *jātakas* “the most blatantly misogynous texts of the Pāli literature”
- 536. Kuṇāla Jātaka and other examples
- explanations:
  - women viewed as endangering monks’ celibacy
  - sign of male composition / transmission?
  - sign of non-Buddhist origins of the text?

# J536 Kuṇāla Jātaka

No man who is not possessed should trust women, for they are base, fickle, ungrateful and deceitful.

They are ungrateful and do not act as they ought to; they do not care for their parents or brother. They are mean and immoral and do only their own will.

Though a man may be their loving, kind and tender companion for a long time; though he may be dear to them as their own life, yet in time of distress or misfortune they leave him. Therefore I do not confide in women.

The mind of women is like that of a monkey, going from one place to another like the shadow of a tree. The heart of a women is unsteady like the rim of a wheel.

Women are [sticky] like gum, are all-devouring like fire; they are clever deceivers and impetuous like a river. They go both to the man they love and to him they dislike just as a boat goes to both banks of a river.

They do not belong to one man or two: they are laid out like goods in the bazaar. He who should think “they are mine” might just as well try to catch the wind in a net.

quoted from W. Bollee (trans.) *Kuṇāla Jātaka* (London: Luzac and co. 1970) p.160

# More examples of misogyny...

- 61-67 all about women
- 61: mother of the Bodhisatta is old and decrepit, but still lustful and murderous
  - verse says women are “bold and lustful, all-devouring like fire”
- 62: gambling king seduces girl to win at dice
  - “All rivers wind, all forests are made of wood;  
All women, given opportunity, do no good.”

# and more....

- 63. Girl seduces then betrays the hermit who rescued her from the river, and runs off with robbers.
  - verse says women are angry, ungrateful, malicious and treacherous
- 64. Bodhisatta (as teacher) explains that women are as hard to predict as the path of fishes in the water.
- 65. He explains women are open to all, like roads and taverns!



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# Women in positive (albeit largely supportive) roles

- Ten final lives as best portraits of good women
- The Buddha's wife, eg in Janaka Jātaka, Mahosadha Jātaka, Candakumāra Jātaka, Vessantara Jātaka
- The Buddha's mother, eg in Temiya Jātaka and Sāma Jātaka
- Also (maternal) goddesses, eg in Temiya, Janaka, Sāma

# Women in leading or independent roles

- The Buddha's wife as having an independent path, with parallel perfections, eg. Vessantara Jātaka or Janaka Jātaka
- Uppalavaṇṇā as an independent woman
  - e.g. in 66: Mudulakkhaṇa Jātaka
  - ascetic Bherī in the Mahosadha Jātaka

# The Buddha's maleness in past lives

- remarkable stability across multiple lifetimes
- sex-change NOT the norm (in contrast to Jain multi-life stories, for example)
- female birth as the result of bad karma
  - eg Nārada Jātaka
- so is the Buddha's maleness a sign of his advanced karma?

# Excluding women from the Bodhisatta path:

- Nidāna-kathā and other texts affirm you must be male in order to become a Bodhisatta
- Must you remain male throughout your Bodhisatta career? (after all, you don't have to remain human...)

*Nidāna-kathā* (and commentary on *Apadāna*, *Buddhavaṃsa*  
and *Cariyāpiṭaka*) says of the Bodhisatta path:

Thus the men, perfect in all parts, fixed on Awakening,  
transmigrate for a long time through hundreds of millions of eons.

They are not born in the Avīci hell, nor in the space between the worlds,  
nor do they become demons or beings tormented by hunger and thirst.

nor do they become small animals, even when arising in the bad realms.

When born among men they are not blind at birth,  
nor are they deficient in hearing or dumb.

The accomplished men, fixed on Awakening,

**do not take female form**, nor do they become hermaphrodites or neuters.

Freed from the deadly misdeeds, everywhere associating with the pure,  
with no use for wrong views, they understand the workings of *kamma*.

Living in the heavens they do not arise as non-conscious gods,

and there is no cause for rebirth amongst the gods of the pure abodes.

Good men, bent on renunciation, detached from the world in birth after  
birth, they conduct themselves for the benefit of the world, fulfilling all the  
perfections.

# But hang on a minute....

- An alternative list (in *Apadāna* commentary and *Sutta Nipāta* commentary) does not mention women.
- Women are excluded also in the *Mahāvastu* (a Lokottaravādin text).
- Two separate traditions, two different views about women.
- Might the Jātaka collection be responsible?

# Story of the last female birth...

- Idea of maleness of path cemented in story of his last female birth (not included in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* but circulating separately, in *Paññāsa Jātaka*, Chinese *Ekottarika Āgama*, *Scriptural Collection on the Six Perfections* and *Sūtra on Wise and Fool*).
- Bodhisatta-to-be (female) predicted to receive a prediction to buddhahood, when she is male!
- Why does all this matter anyway?



# Compositional history and notions of genre

- Can we justify misogynous contents as simply products of different time and place?
- Can we label them “non-Buddhist”?
- Should we read stories in the same way we read “systematic” texts?
- Ability of stories to carry several meanings, e.g. “All women are demonesses”

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