

Vanessa R. Sasson
Marianopolis College

CHILDREN IN
THE PALI CANON

INTRODUCTION

- Little research available on children in Buddhism
- Possible explanations:

1. Emphasis on adulthood and celibacy

“Since developing enlightened attitudes is so basic to Buddhism, its central space is the meditation hall, not the fields, the hearth, the sacramental table, the sacrificial alter or the bazaar. People fare best in the meditation hall as adult individuals, which is why Buddhism is not especially oriented toward or focused on families and children, however important these concerns are to some Buddhists.”

Rita Gross, *Soaring and Settling*, 127.

2. The Buddha left his son behind
3. The Vessantara Jātaka



THE PRECOCIOUS BODHISATTA

VESSANTARA JĀTAKA



PERFECTING GENEROSITY

“The Great Being came from his mother’s womb free from impurity, open-eyed, and on the instant holding out his hand to his mother, he said, ‘Mother, I wish to make some gift; is there anything?’”

When Vessantara turns 5, the king gives his son a necklace worth 100,000 coins, “but he... gave it away to his nurses, nor would he take it back when they wished to give it to him.” This happened 9 times. Whatever he received from his father, he gave away.

When he was 8, he thought to himself, “All that I give comes from without, and this does not satisfy me; I wish to give something of my very own. If one should ask my heart, I would cut open my breast and tear it out, and give it; if one ask my eyes, I would pluck out my eyes and give them; if one should ask my flesh, I would cut off all the flesh of my body and give it.”

TEMIYA JĀTAKA



[Wat Phrang Lampang Luang, Thailand]

THE DECISION

At one month of age, after watching his father condemn four prisoners, he thinks to himself: “My father, through his being a king, is becoming guilty of a grievous action which brings men to hell.”

He then realizes: “I was a king (in a past life) for twenty years and then I suffered 80,000 years in the Usada Hell... If I become king I shall be born again in hell and suffer great pain there.”

A goddess watching over him gives him the following advice to avoid having to take the throne: “If you really desire to escape, then pretend to be a cripple, although not really one; though not deaf, pretend to be deaf; and though not dumb, pretend to be dumb.”

THE TESTS

For the next 16 years, Temiya does not speak or move on his own. His family members refuse to believe him. They test him using increasingly extreme measures. For example,

- ✘ They with-hold milk and food
- ✘ When he is 5, they place him in a hut and set fire to it
- ✘ They set a wild elephant on him, and eventually also venomous serpents
- ✘ They throw elaborate parties, but he did not smile
- ✘ They set a man with a sword against him
- ✘ They blow conch shells into his ears and beat drums
- ✘ They smear him with molasses and leave him in a dirty place to be swarmed by flies that bite him
- ✘ They do not bathe him for a year

Each time, he does not respond, but thinks to himself that all of these disturbances are nothing as compared with the suffering of hell.

MAHĀ-UMAGGA JĀTAKA

The story begins when the king has a dream. There are four pillars of fire at the four corners of the palace, but a fifth pillar shoots up and overshadows the others. The four ministers interpret this to mean that a fifth sage is coming...

The Bodhisatta is born with a plant in his hand. He explains (as a newborn) that it is medicine. His mother gives it to her husband, a merchant, and he is immediately cured after 7 years of illness.

The Bodhisatta grows up surrounded by thousands of other boys who were born on the same day. When he is 7, he commissions a hall to be built to protect them from animals and the weather when they play.

The hall includes the following : a place for strangers, lodging for the destitute, another for destitute women, another for priests, one for merchants to stow their goods, a space for sports, a court of justice, and a hall for religious assemblies

TESTS & RIDDLES

The king eventually sends for Mahosaddha and his father by means of a riddle. The father goes first and sits down in front of the king. The son arrives second and asks his father for the seat. The father agrees. The king is horrified.

Mahosaddha's response: "What, my lord! Do you think that in all cases the sire is better than the sons?"

The text then provides a caveat: "No one knows better than the Bodhisatta the value of parents. If one asks why he did so, it was not to throw contempt on his father, but when the king sent the message, 'send the better horse or the more excellent horse,' he did thus in order to solve that problem and to make his wisdom to be recognized, and to take the shine out of the four sages."

The Bodhisatta was only 7 years old.



7-year old arahants

OTHER PRECOCIOUS CHILDREN

Samkicca, Pandita, Sopāka and Revata

THE STORY OF THE FOUR NOVICES

SAMKICCA

His mother dies while he is still in the womb. Her body is cremated, but the womb remains untouched. They set fire to the womb again, but when they return, they find him sitting inside a lotus flower, unharmed.

When he turns 7, he learns about his miraculous survival and decides to become a monk. He is delivered to Sariputta for training and while he is getting his head shaved, he attains arahanthood.

He is then sent to accompany 30 older monks into the forest, and saves them from a group of 500 thieves. These thieves convert and become his disciples. Samkicca is, throughout this narrative, just 7 years old.

Many years later, his own novice Atimuttaka enters a forest when he is about 7 years old and is captured by 500 thieves. Like his teacher, he survives the incident and they too convert and become his disciples.

PANDITA

While his mother is pregnant with him, she craves making food offerings of choice redfish to the community. When she gives birth, those in the household who were deaf or dumb regain their capacities.

When he turns 7, he asks his mother for permission to join the order. She accepts and stays with him at the monastery for 7 days. On the 8th day, he goes out with Sariputta for alms.

He sees ordinary phenomena and develops insight. Instead of doing the almsround, he asks Sariputta for permission to stay behind and practice. He asks for choice redfish as his meal.

Choice redfish winds up being offered to Sariputta. By the time he returns to his student, Pandita has become an arahant.

REVATA

He is Sariputta's youngest sibling. His three sisters and two brothers have all joined him as monastics, so only Revata remains at home.

When he turns 7, the mother decides to marry him off to ensure that he too does not become a monk.

Revata sees his bride's grandmother and is repulsed by old age. He escapes the wedding and runs to the monastery to join the order, against his parents' wishes. Sariputta gives permission in the parents' stead.

WHY 7 YEAR-OLDS?

From the *Milindapañha*:

“He who is born as an animal, O king, even though he regulate his life aright, will not attain to insight into the Truth, nor he who is born in the Preta world, nor he who holds wrong views, nor the deceitful man, nor he who has slain his mother, or his father, or an Arahāt, nor he who has raised up a schism in the Order, nor he who has shed a Buddha’s blood, nor he who has furtively attached himself to the Order, nor he who has become a pervert, nor he who has violated a sister of the Order, nor he who, having been guilty of one or other of the thirteen grievous offences, has not been rehabilitated, nor a eunuch, nor an hermaphrodite—and whosoever is a human child under seven years of age, even though he regulate his life aright, will not attain to insight into the Truth. To these sixteen individuals there is no attainment of insight, O king, even though they regulate their life aright.’

BUT WHAT IS THE REASON THAT A CHILD CANNOT ATTAIN INSIGHT, ASKS THE KING

“The following is the reason, O king, for my saying that an infant, even though he regulate his life aright, cannot attain to insight. If, O king, one under seven years of age could feel passion about things exciting to passion, could go wrong in things leading to iniquity, could be befooled in matters that mislead, could be maddened as to things that infatuate, could understand a heresy, could distinguish between content and discontent, could think out virtue and vice, then might insight be possible to him. But the mind of one under seven years of age, O king, is powerless and weak, mean, small, slight, obscure, and dull, whereas the essential principle of Nirvāṇa is transcendental, important, weighty, wide-reaching, and extensive.”

REDEFINING CHILDHOOD (ANGUTTARA NIKĀYA)

We have heard, Master Gotama: “The ascetic Gotama does not pay homage to brahmins who are old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, come to the last stage; nor does he stand up for them or offer them a seat.” This is indeed true, for Master Gotama does not pay homage to brahmins who are old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, come to the last stage; nor does he stand up for them or offer them a seat. This is not proper, Master Gotama.’

It then occurred to me: These venerable ones do not know what an elder is or what the qualities that make one an elder are. Even though someone is old—eighty, ninety, or a hundred years from birth—if he speaks at an improper time, speaks falsely, speaks what is unbeneficial, speaks contrary to the Dhamma and the discipline, if at an improper time he speaks words that are worthless, unreasonable, rambling, and unbeneficial, then he is reckoned as a foolish childish elder.

“But even though someone is young, a youth with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, if he speaks at a proper time, speaks what is truthful, speaks what is beneficial, speaks on the Dhamma and the discipline, and if at a proper time he speaks words that are worth recording, reasonable, succinct, and beneficial, then he is reckoned as a wise elder.



Thank you.