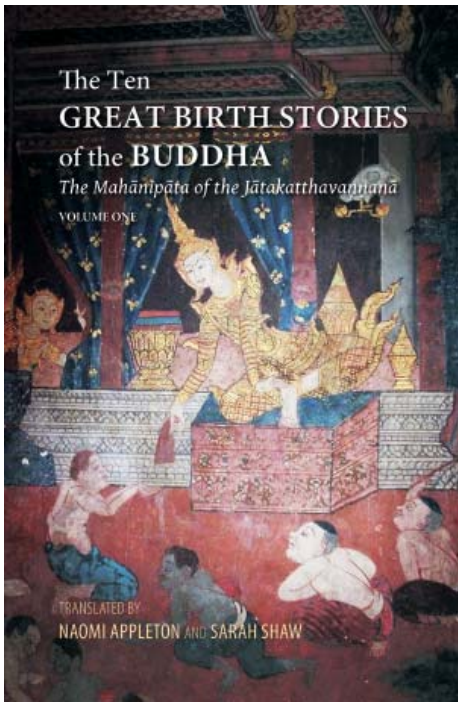
Reviews

The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha: The Mahānipāta of the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā translated by Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw. Two volumes. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books in cooperation with Chulalongkorn University Press, 2015.) ISBN: 9786162151125. 3,000 Baht.



Flying horses, magic gem-wielding ascetics, magical snakes, seductive dancers, lecherous Brahmins, green gods, crippled children who can suddenly pick up chariots over their heads, and talking frogs that hide in princesses' hair – these are just some of the characters and creatures that are commonplace in the last Ten Birth Stories (*dasajātaka*) of the Buddha. The new English translation—the first serious one in over a century—of the ten most important stories in Southeast Asian Buddhism (and well-known in many other Buddhist lineages in South Asia, the Himalayas, and East Asia) by Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw is a momentous literary accomplishment. It is the most important English translation of a set of Pali texts to come out in years, not because of its rarity or linguistic complexity, but because of its literary, artistic, historical, and religious importance to tens of millions of Buddhists.

The last ten *Jātakas* are undoubtedly the most important Pali Buddhist stories in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. They are subject to thousands of mural depictions or bas reliefs in South and Southeast Asia, and have tellings in numerous vernacular languages. They, more than any other Buddhist texts, are the basis for ethical narratives throughout the region. Having an accessible, accurate, and dynamic translation of them in a beautifully-produced two volume box set is cause for celebration. They should be required reading for all courses in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, Pali literature, Buddhist art history, Buddhist literature, and Southeast Asian cultural history.

Published in honor of the Sixtieth Birthday of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand (herself a scholar of the *Jātakas*) by Silkworm Books in cooperation with Chulalongkorn University Press, this collection of ten stories including the Temiya, Janaka, Sāma, Nemi, Mahosadha, Bhūridatta, Canda, Nārada, Vidhura, and

Vessantara *Jātakas* in over 500 pages can be read by students of religious and epic literature as a way of rethinking the way Buddhism has been traditionally taught in the West. Until recently, the *Jātakas*, have largely been studied as quirky folk stories that are fantastic tales designed to entertain children and the "unlettered masses." They were often criticized by foreign scholars of Buddhism as not teaching the timeless values of Buddhism through didactic ethical treatises, but being salacious and distracting stories. The history of their reception has been well-documented over the past decade and I hope that the work of Naomi Appleton, Arthid Sheravanichkul, Peter Skilling, Steven Collins, Toshiya Unebe, Sandra Cate, Yohei Shimizu, Kazuko Tanabe, Leedom Lefferts, Bonnie Brereton, Richard Gombrich, Sarah Shaw, Lilian Handlin, myself, and others has helped elevate them to their rightful place in the pantheon of great world-epic stories. They might not reflect the cold rationality of Buddhism as imagined in the Victorian era, that never actually existed, but they are ethical tales of great insight, complexity, and vigor. Appleton and Shaw's edition retains that vigor while providing a reliable translation that can be used in Pali language courses to help guide students. The footnotes are informative and show the restraint of seasoned translators who aim for clarity for the reader instead of overbearing philologists' chest-beating.

Not only is the translation excellent, but the translators have also given scholars and students valuable tools for understanding the history and reception of these stories. First, they made the important decision to ask Peter Skilling, one of the most respected scholars of Pali and Thai literature (as well as Tibetan and Sanskrit), to write the foreword. He offers a short history of the importance of the last ten *Jātakas* in artistic depictions in early Indian Buddhism (especially at Ajanta, Bharhut, and Sanchi), as well as their literary value, citing the work of the Indian poet Haribhaṭṭa, who wrote: "A preacher of the dharma, having first recited one of the sermons of the Buddha, afterwards illuminates it in detail by telling a *jātaka* of the Bodhisattva—in the same manner as one illuminates a picture-gallery by the light of a torch—and (thereby) creates utmost happiness in the mind of his audience…" (xx). Skilling also points out the importance of the *Jātakas* in the inspiration of other vernacular texts.

Appleton and Shaw also provide a clear and instructive introduction. Indeed, for students and scholars, this should be the first thing one reads when approaching the *Jātakas*. They make several important points that I only have space to mention briefly. They correctly point out that the Thai tradition (started largely in the early 20th century with the writing of the Sangharat, Prince Jinavarasiriwadhana) of associating each of the last ten *Jātakas* with a specific "perfection" (Thai: *barami*) does not necessarily match up with the purported contents of the Jātakas themselves nor with the Burmese or Sri Lankan traditions. These differences are clearly identified with helpful charts (6, 8). The Thai tradition seems to be inspired more by the *Cariyāpiṭaka* than the *Jātakanidāna*, although it is not merely derivative of these earlier Pali text lineages from South Asia. Second, even though the *Jātakas* always have the bodhisattva (future Buddha) as the main character, other characters often steal the show. For example, Khaṇḍahāla, Rucā, Indra/Sakka, Vimalā, Jujuka, Maṇimekhalā, and others are often the movers of the plot, while the bodhisattva seems removed at many times. These ancillary and supporting characters are often the ones that provide the intense emotional content of the *Jātakas.*

I would have liked Appleton and Shaw to discuss the role of the god *Indra/Sakka* a bit more, although admittedly they discuss him more than most scholars of the *Jātakas* have before (9, 22-24). The large number of images, shrines, and artistic depictions of Indra (including a modern comic book series in Thailand) are a direct result of his role in the Jātakas, and his impact on Southeast Asian culture cannot be underestimated. Appleton and Shaw also have two informative sections on kingship (while strategically avoiding any extensive commentary on the present king of Thailand's interest in the *Jātakas*, especially the Janaka, even though they allude to it on pages 37 and 46) and the literary qualities of the stories (24-25). However, I found it strange that they did not cite the extensive work by Holt (1991), Tambiah (1976), and many others on the counterpointing of renunciants and kings in popular Buddhist stories.

One of the most interesting parts of their introduction is where they astutely point out the importance of women in the last ten Jātakas. Although they acknowledge that women are often depicted as flighty and weak at best, and often dangerous temptresses at worst in many *Jātakas*, there are some women who are complex figures, like the nun Uppalavaṇṇa, who appears in five stories (9). Appleton and Shaw also emphasize that mothers, like the mother of the Bodhisattva Temiya and Sīvalī, the wife of Janaka, are not to be discounted as simply passive observers of their powerful sons (19). To support their argument, this complexity is also seen in artistic depictions of the *Jātakas*. For example, in a recent paper at the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeology and Art History (Paris, 2015) Jessica Patterson demonstrated that female characters like the goddess Maṇimekhalā (mentioned on page 38) are depicted in art and text as tender and motherly, intelligent and insightful, as well as aggressive seductresses all within the same story. I would also add that women in the *Jātakas* often provide some comic relief. For example, Forrest McGill of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco showed me several 19th century Thai paintings where Jujuka's wife appears as a powerful woman criticizing her lecherous husband and where her female friends mock their marriage by encouraging her to use dildos to replace him. The *Jātakas* certainly inspire a wide range of interpretations and adaptations!

This two-volume work is also a model of the value of collaborative work, something Buddhist Studies lacks. Shaw and Appleton both bring their strengths to this study and translation. Appleton is no stranger to the study of the *Jātakas*. Her 2010 book, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), was an excellent overview and literary analysis of the genre. She followed that up with her expansive *Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-life Stories* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and she even runs a very useful blog about Pali and Sanskrit narrative studies: https://naomiappleton.worpress.com/. I have benefited from following her work for many years and reviewed her first book on the *Jātakas* in 2011. In that review I had one major criticism: "I would have liked to have seen a more extensive discussion of murals, dramatic and performative devices and styles, musical scores, comic books, films, sermons, and other cultural expressions of the *jātakas*." Shaw is also no stranger to the study of the way texts are used in dynamic modern contexts in places like Thailand. Among her many publications is her contribution to the excellent book, *Illuminating the Life of the Buddha: An Illustrated Chanting Book from Eighteenth-century Siam*

(Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2013), written jointly with Naomi Appleton and Toshiya Unebe, where she traces the detailed history of a single manuscript. Working together, Shaw and Appleton have rendered my earlier criticism moot. They offer a lengthy (well, as lengthy as one can be permitted in an introduction to a translation) description of the various ways that the last ten *Jātakas* have been depicted in art, especially in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (35-47). Here we see their past work with Thai mural specialist, Toshiya Unebe, as well as their consultation with Burmese art historian Lilian Handlin and Thai specialists like Arthid Sheravanichkul and Peter Skilling, as being really helpful. They also cite recent work done on Lao and Northeast Thai depictions of the *Jātakas*. Not only is this section a welcome addition to the study of the *Jātakas,* but they also include almost 200 color plates of these murals that bring the stories alive for readers. My only major criticism here is that they failed to consult the many important studies of *Jātaka* texts*,* murals and reliefs written in Thai and Japanese. They also did not consult closely studies in the Burmese, Khmer, Lao, or Sinhala languages. However, this introduction is not necessarily designed for Buddhist Studies specialists (although I think specialists will learn a lot from this work) and is meant to expose these extremely important stories to English-speaking students and those interested in comparative literature.

In the end, students and scholars will delight in reading Appleton and Shaw's beautiful translation and thorough and insightful introduction. In my opinion, these translations are, alongside Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit's translation and study of the *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* epic (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), evidence of the vibrancy of literary studies in Buddhist South and Southeast Asia today. It should be the primary introduction to the genre for many years to come.

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