

The Tosachāt in Thai Painting

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THE TOSACHĀT IN THAI PAINTING

BY

ELIZABETH LYONS



Mural at Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla



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Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.



Fig. 1
Prince Temiya testing his
strength. Manuscript,
National Museum, Bangkok.

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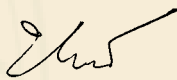
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A scene of the Temptation and Defeat of Mara. Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla

ELIZABETH LYONS

was a specialist in Asian Art who worked in Thailand under the Specialist Program of the United States Department of State. She became interested in Thai painting on her first visit in 1955 and made an extensive photographic survey of this traditional art throughout the country.

She was educated at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Institute of Art of New York University, Brussels and Paris. While living in New York, she was on the staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Art History Department of Queens College. She also worked as a project specialist at the Ford Foundation Office in Bangkok.





Fig. 2 The young prince can not be frightened into speaking. Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi



THE TOSACHĀT IN THAI PAINTING

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In many old Thai wats all over the country the walls are covered in part or from dado to high ceiling with a richly detailed tapestry of painted scenes. The effect is one of quiet and glowing beauty although this has little to do with the primary aims of the murals. Here, as with the great religious art of medieval Europe, the basic intention was to instruct and inspire the layman by showing him moving scenes of spiritual attainments, or to remind him that the conduct of his life will bring future rewards or punishment. The subject matter of the murals, and also of the related paintings, the long banners, small pictures, manuscripts, bookcases, etc. is largely

limited to the life of the Buddha and episodes from the Jātakas, the stories of his previous births. The major exceptions to this general rule include a few stories which Thai tradition has placed almost in the category of the Jātakas (Paññāsa Jātaka) such as Sang Thong, the Prince of the Golden Conch, or scenes from the Triphoum, the Buddhist cosmology of Heaven, Earth and Hell containing a certain amount of Hindu material, or the Lokasanthān, a work written by monks in the First Reign (1782-1809 A.D.) which explains the life, reproduction, habits and death of humans and animals in the world, and occasionally the Rāmākien, the Thai version of the Rāmāyana.





Fig. 3 The shipwreck and rescue of Prince Mahājanaka. Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi



The subject matter may appear to the restricted, yet in the hands of the Thai artist it can include the whole life of ordinary man as well as that of superior beings. The Thais have a deep reverence for the doctrine of the Lord Buddha, but since this is a natural part of living it does not inhibit normal everyday behavior, at least not of the common people. One can see here and there, even in the most sacred scenes, deftly painted vignettes of people working, playing, gossiping, flirting. These minor characters and the animals are free to be themselves and they are shown realistically, often with broad humor.

On the other hand, the poses and gestures of the principal personages, the Buddha, deities, monks and royalty are formal and traditional, stylized for easy recognition in the same way that a movement in the Thai classical dance quickly identifies role and emotion.

When a Thai sees a royal figure shooting an arrow at a young man standing by a deer he instantly recognizes the King of Benares slaying Sāma, a youth who is the only support of blind parents. In another section of the panel he will see the remorseful king leading the old couple to the body of their son, and finally he will see Sāma, restored to life, garbed as the Bodhisattva preaching to the king and he will remember the whole story of selfless devotion.

Most of these wats were painted in the 18th and 19th centuries when literacy was rare among the ordinary public. But if they could not read the lines of script that sometimes identifies the Jātaka, it did not matter. Sāma is identified by the deer fearlessly standing next to him, and the same scenes from the story will be repeated in every painting of it.

In a parallel way, the Christian can identify St. Luke with his ox, Moses with his tablets, or follow the story of Christ in thousands of paintings widespread in time and place.



Fig. 4 The state chariot stops before the sleeping prince.
Wat Kok, Thonburi.

The 547 Jātakas, are as rich a mine of subject matter for the Buddhist painter as the Bible is for the Christian artist. These stories recount the previous lives, as man or animal, of the Buddha and illustrate his path to Enlightenment. Compiled in the early days of the religion and probably recounted orally long before they were written down, they have drawn upon ancient folklore, fantastic legends, unsentimental wisdom and spiritual philosophy. In a few the ingredients seem to be wildly mixed, in others the tale is told simply and the allegory is apt, but all contain a moral and point out the results of a certain kind of behavior.

There is an enormous variety in the stories and each Buddhist country seems to choose for its favorites those which illustrate the virtues which as a nation they hold most honorable. The tales of perseverance appeal to the Chinese, examples of austerity and self sacrifice to the Japanese, and so on. In Thailand, the last ten Jātakas, to the almost total exclusion of the others, are used for teaching and as a subject for painting.



Fig. 5 The King of Benares slays Sāma. Wat Bang Yi Khan, Thonburi.

These ten, known as the Tosachāt, illustrate the virtues by which the future Buddha perfected himself and thus finally achieved enlightenment. The last one, the Mahachāt, or Great Birth, is somewhat of a recapitulation but with the dominating theme of generosity and selfless giving, and it is the single Jātaka most frequently illustrated.*

Although thousands of books have been written about the philosophy of Buddhism it is still difficult for the layman to find a concise account of the Jātakas. The only complete English translation is that of Cowell and Rouse originally printed in 1907. It has been re-issued by the Pali Text Society of London in three large volumes.

It will be noticed by anyone who reads the complete text of the last ten Jātakas in the above edition that the numbering and the order do not completely agree with the Thai version. In this article they are placed in the Thai sequence, preceded by the Pali Text Society numbering. This is numbering system accepted by western language publications and can be used as a reference to specific Jātakas discussed in other works. The Jātaka is also identified by its Pali title followed by a transliteration of its Thai name in the cases where this is different. Below the title is given the moral virtue or perfection that is illustrated.

* See Phya Anuman Rajadhon, Thet Mahā Chāt, No. 21 Culture, New Series.





This brief resume of the Tosachāt is offered primarily as a guide to the subject matter of Thai paintings. Many of the great murals can be enjoyed from as aesthetic point of view for their color and composition, but some knowledge of the stories being told should add a greater dimension of understanding and pleasure.

Fig. 6 The same scene. Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi.



Fig. 7 The journey of King Nemi through Hell. Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi.



Detail of a scene, Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.



Fig. 8 The kidnapped family of King Brahmadatta is brought through the magic tunnel.

538. MUGA-PAKKHA (TEMIYA)

RENUNCIATION

The Bodhisattva, (future Buddha) is born as Prince Temiya Kumāra, son of King Kasiracha of Benares and his Queen, Chandradevi. When he is a month old and sitting on his father's lap, four robbers are brought in for trial and he hears the King sentence them to severe and terrible punishments. Prince Temiya realizes that his father through being a King is guilty of bringing men into hell, and he remembers that he, himself, in a previous birth was a King for twenty years and thereafter suffered eighty thousand years in Hell. He is fearful that he must repeat the experience, but a goddess whispers that he can escape by pretending to be a deaf and dumb cripple. From that day on he does not move or utter a sound.

The King, who has no other heirs, and also his court are disturbed by Temiya's behavior and since the Prince has no outward marks of abnormality they resolve to test him. However, throughout many trials, his will remains firm. He does not cry out for milk or food, shows no fear of fire, wild elephants, snakes, a sharp sword, does not laugh at comic plays, and does not react to loud noises or sudden flashes of light. He does not protest at the sting of insects or great uncleanness. The pleas of his parents do not move him, and pretty girls and fragrant scents have no attraction.

When he is sixteen the fortune tellers predict that he will bring ill luck, and his father reluctantly orders his death and burial. Queen Chandradevi now claims the wish that the King had given her at the birth of the Prince. His life is spared for seven days and the kingdom given to him for that time. Still, he does not speak. At the end of the period he is put in a chariot and taken to the burial ground. When the charioteer begins to dig the grave, Temiya gets out of the chariot, his desire now attained. Having remained motionless for so many years he wishes to test his powers, and picking up the chariot he swings it up over his head with one hand. Vissukama brings heavenly ornaments, Prince Temiya adorns himself and announces to the charioteer that he will become an ascetic.

The charioteer returns to the palace to explain to the King and Queen who come to the burial ground to see for themselves. Prince Temiya, now revealed as a Bodhisattva, sits in the air and explains

the doctrine. His parents are converted, give away their property and become ascetics. An invading King and two neighboring rulers are also converted. They join together in a hermitage, even the animals of the forest are calmed and all are reborn in Heaven.

The identifying scene, although it does not occupy a conspicuous amount of space is that of Prince Temiya holding the chariot turned upside down over his head.

A scene of the prince as a child with his father and the four robbers, the charioteer digging the grave, and Temiya preaching to his parents are usually included. There is almost always one or more scenes of the ordeals he endured, and there is a wide variety of choice in these (Figs. 1, 2).



Figs. 9,10 The Mahosodh Jātaka, battle scene in the center. The famous tunnel lower right. Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.

539. MAHĀJANAKA

PERSEVERANCE

The Bodhisattva is born as Prince Mahājanaka, son of a King of Mithila who was killed by his brother. The pregnant Queen escaped and was adopted by a Brahmin of Kālacampā as his sister.

When Prince Mahājanaka is sixteen he learns his real identity and taking half of his mother's jewels he boards a ship for Suvannabhumi to make his fortune. The ship is wrecked. Mahājanaka, although there is no chance of survival, persists in swimming for seven days and is rescued by a goddess of the sea who carries him to a mango grove in Mithila.

Polajanaka, the murderous brother has died and the throne will go to a man who can please his daughter, Sivali, and also pass certain test. No one appears and the ministers go forth in the state chariot to seek a king. The horses stop before the sleeping Prince; the ministers see the auspicious marks on the soles of his feet and crown him king. Mahājanaka passes the tests easily and marries the Princess Sivali.

Much later after a long reign when his son is made viceroy, King Mahājanaka notices that the mango trees which are full of fruit are constantly plundered and the barren ones are left alone; Through this he becomes aware that possessions bring sorrow. For four months he leads the life of an ascetic in the palace and then resolves to renounce the world and become a hermit. Sivali follows him and attempts to dissuade him from his purpose. After a series of apt encounters illustrating the peace of the solitary life, the King vanishes into the forest alone and Sivali returns to live as an ascetic in the royal gardens of Mithila.

The dominate scene in this Jātaka is of the shipwreck. Mahājanaka is seen doggedly swimming, usually among voracious fish and sea monsters. He then appears being carried through the air by the sea goddess.

The secondary scene is that of the state chariot stopping in front of the prince sleeping in a grove of trees.

The minor episodes are those of the tests, usually Prince Mahājanaka pulling a bow, and later as King leaving the palace to become as ascetic, sometimes followed by the protesting Sivali (Figs. 3, 4).



Fig. 11 Same scene, Wat Bang Yi Khan, Thonburi.



Fig. 12 The Naga kingdom. Bhuridatta Jātaka. Carved wooden bookcase, National Museum, Bangkok.



Fig. 13 The capture of Bhuridatta in Naga form. Manuscript, National Museum, Bangkok.

540. SĀMA (Suwannaśām)

LOVING KINDNESS

Dukulaka, the son of a village chief and Parika, the daughter of another village chief have complied with a pact made by their parents and have married each other, but they do not consummate the marriage and go to live as ascetics in a forest hermitage. They are under the protection of Indra (referring to the world of men) who foresees great danger in store for them and sends them a son, Sāma, who will take care of them. When the boy is sixteen his parents lose their eyesight from the breath of a poisonous snake. Sāma thereafter faithfully looks after them.

One day King Piliyaka of Benares, hunting in the forest, sees Sāma filling a waterjar while the deer, unafraid, drink from the same pool. Thinking the youth must be a god or a naga the King wounds him with an arrow so he will not escape. Without reviling his attacker Sāma falls dying to the ground. When the King learns who he is and that he is the only support of his blind parents he is filled with remorse. Vowing to protect and care for Sāma's parents the King goes to tell them of their son's death at his hands. They do not speak one word of resentment but ask to be led to their son's body. There, Parika makes a solemn Act of Truth; the poison ebbs from Sāma's

body and he is restored to life. At the same time, through divine intervention, his parents regain their eyesight. Sāma then preaches to the marvelling King on how the gods care for those who cherish their parents. They are all reborn in the Brahmin world.

The main scene is that of the King in royal attire loosening his arrow at Sāma who has been filling his water jar at a pond while deer drink or stand tamely by his side. He is often seen falling after the arrow has struck.

This episode usually occupies the center of the space allotted to the Jātaka. On the top will be a scene of the rustic hermitage with Sāma and his blind parents. Below will be the blind couple with the body of their son, the remorseful King looking on sadly. Indra, enclosed in a winged or flaming border is seen above them. Next to this scene will be the concluding one, Sāma seated crosslegged on an alter preaching to the King and his parents.

According to the space available or the inclination of the artist, the King may be seen spying on Sāma before he shoots, or leading the parents to his victim. Occasionally the old couple are seen recoiling from the maiming breath of the serpent (Figs. 5, 6).



Fig. 14 Indra destroys the sacrificial pyre. Manuscript, National Museum, Bangkok.



Fig. 15 The crowd revolts and kills the evil Kandahāla.
Wat Bang Yi Khan, Thonburi.



Fig. 16 Through the prayers of the devout princess the Bodhisattva appears and converts the king. Gold and black lacquer book chest,
Wat Si Khom Kham, Phayao.

541. NEMI RESOLUTION

The Bodhisattva is reborn as Nemi-Kumāra or Prince Hoop destined to round off the family of 48,000 kings who had renounced the world. When he inherited the throne he became known as Good King Nemi, renowned for his righteousness and generosity.

One day doubt came to his mind as to which was better; leading a holy life or giving alms. Indra himself answered that the holy life is better but one must do both.

The gods in the Tāvātimsa heaven heard of the good king and wishing to meet him sent Matali, the heavenly charioteer to fetch him. On the way to their abode the charioteer takes him on a tour of the various sections of Hell and past the great mansions of Heaven, all of which are graphically or poetically described.

King Nemi stayed in the Tāvātimsa heaven for seven days discoursing with the gods and then returned to tell his subjects what

he had seen and heard. Later, when his barber found the first white hair he retired, handing over the throne to his son Kalara-janaka who renounced the world and brought the Makhadeva dynasty to its ordained end.

King Nemi is always seen in a great golden chariot flying through the air. Below and around him are the scenes of Hell and the Heavenly Mansions. Sometimes Hell is given as much space as Heaven and its tortures are depicted with evangelical fervor, but in the majority of the paintings the glowing, glittering palaces and the conversation with gods are emphasized.

Generally speaking, mural scenes of Hell, painted in drab colors, are half hidden on the rear wall behind the main image of the Buddha, or tucked into a dark corner. For those who respond more to punishment than to inspiration, or need to be reminded of the consequences of wrong doing there is the sermon of Phra Malai whose visit to the poor wretches in Hell are recounted in thousands of illustrated manuscript books (Fig. 7).

546. MAHA-UMMAGGA (MAHOSODH)

WISDOM

King Videha of Mithila who has four sages in his court dreams that a fifth, and the wisest of all, is about to be born. This is Mahosodh whose gifts become apparent at the age of seven when he teaches carpenters how to build a large hall.

Most of this long and involved Jātaka concerns the many tests of wit and wisdom by which the jealous four sages try to disprove Mahosodh. One of these trials is strikingly similar to the Soloman classic.

Two women both claim a child as their own, Mahosodh orders each to take the child by a hand and a foot and try to pull him over a line. When he cries out in pain the real mother lets go.

Other examples are more in the nature of riddles or clever tricks. The King asks for a white bull with horns on its legs, a hump on its head and a voice three times. Mahosodh sends a crowing cock.



Scene of the Wetsandon Jātaka. Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.



Fig. 17 The appearance of the Bodhisattva as the ascetic Narada. Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi.

When he is asked to replace the thread running in an octagonal course through a large gem, he smears one end with honey, ties a fine thread to an ant and sets him free in the opening at the other end.

The major episode of the Jātaka is the plot of a neighboring ruler, Brahmadata to conquer all the surrounding kingdoms. He attacks and lays siege to Mithila but Mahosodh cleverly frustrates him. Brahmadata then sends poets to sing the praises of his beautiful daughter, Pancalacandi, knowing that King Videha will come to ask for her hand and can thus be captured.

Mahosodh is ordered to make arrangements for the marriage. The sage knows there must be a plot and sends his parrot to make friends with Brahmadata's mynah and learn the details. Forewarned, he builds a palace for King Videha outside of the city's gates and digs a tunnel from the mouth of the river into Brahmadata's palace. During the feast of celebration, Mahosodh kidnaps Brahmadata's mother, the Queen Mother Talata, his Queen, Nanda, and his daughter; he then rescues King Videha from the plot to kill him and leads them all through the tunnel safely back to Mithila.

Later the Queen Mother and the Queen are returned, the families are reconciled and when Videha dies, Mahosodh goes to the court of Brahmadata as his counselor.

Brahmadatta's attack on Mithila is never omitted in illustrating this Jātaka and it is frequently a masterpiece of intricate composition. Often many of the warriors are foreigners, French, Portuguese, Indian, Japanese etc. painted with an observant eye for characteristic detail. They are not necessarily on the side of the villain since foreign soldiers, particularly Portuguese and Japanese since the 16th century had often served the Thai kings as an honor guard.

Almost always included at the edge of the battle scene is a view of the tunnel and the three hostages. The tunnel is described as a marvel of engineering and is usually shown brilliantly lit with crystal chandeliers and luxuriously furnished.

Subsidiary scenes may include the King with his four sages and some of the tests of Mahosodh. One of the more frequently illustrated shows a dignitary bowing in front of the youthful sage. Mahosodh has actually tricked him into picking up a glass bowl but the apparent gesture of respect wins a battle of negotiations for Mahosodh (Figs. 8-11).

543. BHURIDATTA

MORAL PRACTICE OR KEEPING THE PRECEPTS

This is an involved and confusing Jātaka undoubtedly drawing from many legends of nagas, garudas, magic jewels and spells. The main points are as follows :

The Bodhisattva is born as Bhuridatta, son of a Naga king of the underworld and an earthly wife. Bhuridatta, anxious to be reborn in the world of Indra takes the vows and, lying every day on top of an ant hill, observes the fast.

One day he meets two Brahmins, father and son, whom he befriends and takes to the Naga world for a year of great luxury. It is the father who for a magic jewel later betrays Bhuridatta to another Brahmin, Alambayana. The latter has learned a spell for subduing Nagas and when he is guided to Bhuridatta captures him, crushes his bones and puts him in a basket so he may make him perform in the village market places.

After Bhuridatta has been absent for a month, his three brothers and his step-sister go in search of him. He is discovered by one of the brothers who is disguised as an ascetic with the step sister in the shape of a frog hiding in his matted hair. The brother challenges Alambayana to a duel of magic. The frog spits out three drops of poison which burst into terrible flames. The heat changes Alambayana into a leper and, frightened, he sets Bhuridatta free. Bhuridatta assumes a radiant form, the treacherous Brahmins are punished, and the Nagas are converted to the right views.

Obviously this Jātaka has a number of episodes which lend themselves to fantastic and dramatic imagery. The identifying scenes are the capture of the Naga and his performance in the market place. If only one is shown it is that of the capture. The Naga is sometimes shown as a large snake with an ordinary, or nearly so, serpent's head, and sometimes in the traditional royal Naga form with single or multiple dragon-like heads framed in a fan shaped hood.

Other scenes depicted are the Bodhisattva in human or Naga form lying on the ant hill, performing in the market place, the duel of magic and the fabulous palace of the Naga world (Figs. 12, 13).



542. KANDAHĀLA

FORBEARANCE

The future Buddha is born as Chandrakumard, the son of King Ekaracha of Pupphavati. The King's Chaplin, a Brahmin named Kandahāla is made a judge but he becomes corrupt, takes bribes and settles cases unjustly. Chandrakumard once intervenes and reverses a wrong decision to the joy of the people. The King hears of it and appoints him judge in the place of Kandahāla who vows to have revenge.

One night the King dreams of heaven and asks Kandahāla to interpret it. The Brahmin tells the King that the way to heaven lies through the great sacrifice of his family and possessions. In this way he hopes to get rid of Chandrakumard.

The King accepts the plan and makes elaborate preparations for the sacrifice. Several time he wavers and all are released, but Kandahāla goads him on and he renews his terrible decision. At the last moment, when Chandrakumard is about to be killed, the Queen Chanada makes "An Act of Truth". Indra hears, appears with a blazing mass of iron and frightens the king. The crowd now revolts, kills Kandahāla and crowns Chandrakumard as King Ekaracha is banished but Chandrakumard forgives him and takes care of him. All those who approved of the sacrifice are condemned to hell.

The main scene is that of a crowd at the site of the intended sacrifice; Indra appearing over their heads with a flame in his hands.

It is not always easy to identify the other scenes but they may include the King and the Brahmin, a court trial, and the Queen pleading with the King (Figs 14, 15).

544. MAHĀNĀRADAKASSAPA (NARADA)

EQUANIMITY

Angati, the King of Videha, summons his three ministers one full moon night of spring and asks them to suggest ways to spend such pleasant hours. Their answers range from the enjoyment of earthly pleasures to listening to the advice of a wise man. Alata, one of the ministers, (the Buddha's evil cousin, Devadatta, reborn) suggests they consult the ascetic, Guna.

They meet Guna in the Deer Park and the King asks how he may fulfill the laws toward parents, teachers, wife, children, aged, monks, Brahmins, army and peasants so as to get into heaven.

Guna, who knows nothing, answers there are no other worlds, no consequences of sin, it is useless to give, etc. Angati believes this false doctrine, stops giving alms and embarks on a life of pleasure.

Rujā, the King's daughter an only child, tries to dissuade him saying, "a fool who associates with fools plunges deep into folly" and tells him that man can cause his fate to rise by his good deeds.



Fig. 18 The ogre general Punnaka attempts to kill the sage Vidhura but is finally converted by him. Painted wooden panel, early 19th century. Private collection, Bangkok.



Fig. 19 Vidhura clings to the tail of Punnaka's horse. Ubon Ratchathani.

He will not listen. She prays to the gods to come and dissuade her father from his foolish conduct. The Bodhisattva appears in the guise of an ascetic, Narada, and finally converts the King.

This final scene has the only dramatic action of the story and is used as the identifying episode. The Bodhisattva dressed in an antelope hide decorated with silver and carrying a golden bowl on a golden pole is shown flying through the air to meet the King. His bowl contains a lump of gold which he gives to Rujā who will use it for alms.

Other scenes may show the King and his three ministers in a pavilion, and Rujā pleading with her father (Figs. 16, 17).

545. VIDHURAPANDITA (WITON)

TRUTH

King Thananjaya of Indrapatta has a minister, Vidhurapandita, who is famous for his wisdom. The Queen of the Nagas hears of him and wishes to listen to his discourse. She knows, however, that her husband will not cause him to be brought to the Naga court without good reason. She pretends to be ill and says that the only cure will be the heart of Vidhura. Finally Varuna, the Naga King, asks his daughter, Irandati to find a suitor who will get the sage's heart, Irandati entices Punnaka, an ogre general, to go after Vidhura.

Punnaka flies to Indrapatta on his magic horse, and challenges King Thananjaya to a chess game. The King bets everything except his body and his white umbrella against the magic horse and a great jewel that Punnaka borrowed on route to the court. By the use of magic Punnaka wins the game and thus also wins the power over Vidhura who admits he is the property of the King.

Punnaka intends to kill Vidhura and remove his heart but he wants to do it without actually laying a hand on the sage. He makes Vidhura cling to the tail of his horse as they fly through the air on the way back to the Naga kingdom, and he tries to frighten him with loud noises and horrible sights into loosening his grip. Vidhura holds on and finally Punnaka stops on a mountain top and hurls him into the void.

Vidhura is not injured; moreover he realizes that Punnaka has misunderstood the desire of the Queen for his heart; the "heart" of a sage being his wisdom. Vidhura prepares a richly decorated seat on the mountain and invites Punnaka to listen as he explains the laws of a good man. The ogre general is converted to truth and wishes to set his captive free but Vidhura orders him to continue the journey.



Fig. 20 The Wetsandon Jataka. Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.

The sage meets the King and Queen of the Naga kingdom and wisely interprets the Truth to them. Later Punnaka takes him back to Indrapatta, he resumes counselling the King, all abide in his teaching and are eventually reborn in the Brahmin world.

Illustrations of this Jātaka are usually dominated by the Black Mountain. Vidhura, clinging to the tail of the flying horse is seen on one side, and being thrown off the cliff on the other side. In the center he is seen sitting crosslegged on the throne preaching to Punnaka.

The other scenes sometimes shown are the chess game and the audience with the King and Queen of the Naga world (Figs. 18, 19).

547. VESSANTARA (WETSANDON)

CHARITY

This last Jātaka known in Thailand as the Mahā Chāt or Great Birth is usually recited in wats at the close of Lent.* The version chanted over a three day period is made up of 1000 verses in 13 cantos.

Many sets of small paintings on cloth, paper or wood exist of the Mahā Chāt. The majority consist of thirteen individual illustrations, one for each canto, but a few sets have a larger number, doubling the illustrations of certain cantos or adding a prologue, (the descent of Pusati from Heaven to become the mother of Prince Wetsandon) or an epilogue, (the Chulamani chedi in Heaven indicating that the cycle of rebirth has come to an end with the Buddha).

The captions indicate the subject of the individual paintings. Any number of the same scenes are also used in the mural paintings.

Giving Away the Elephant. Prince Wetsandon was born with the virtue of generosity and even as a child gave away all the ornaments of his cradle. Now a young man he is approached by a delegation of Brahmins from a drought stricken area who beg for the kingdom's white elephant which has the magic power to cause rain to fall. He gladly gives it to them, pouring water over their hands to symbolize the gift.

The King Sending the Prince into Exile. The gift of the elephant angers the local citizens and they persuade the King to exile his son. Wetsandon's wife, Madsī, his young son Jāli, and his daughter, Kanhā insist on joining him in exile. The royal family is shown sitting in a pavilion in classic attitudes of sorrow.

Giving Away the Chariot. They leave the city in a richly ornamented chariot drawn by fine horses. Wetsandon gives the horses away to a group of poor Brahmins, but the gods change themselves into deer and pull the chariot until he gives that away, too.

In a painting these two scenes are often merged into one, the horses being led away at the bottom of the picture, while at the top another group of ragged Brahmins approach the deer and chariot.

Carrying the Children. Wetsandon and his wife continue their way on foot, she holding the girl and he carrying the boy because, as he says, "Jāli is heavier." They pass by a town where they are invited to remain as King and Queen but Wetsandon refuse.

The first scene is always illustrated; their reception at the town appears only in the extra-number sets and very rarely in a mural.

Mocking of Chuchok's Wife. In another village there is an old Brahmin called Chuchok. His wife is a pretty young girl who had married him to repay the debt her family owed. Her faithful care of the rather repulsive Chuchok only provokes the ire of the other village wives since it makes their husbands demand the same uncomplaining attention. When she goes to the well for water they tease and mock her until she is miserable.

There is plenty of rough village humor in this scene and the taunting is conveyed by rude and explicit gestures.

Chuchok's Journey to the Hermitage. Chuchok's wife refuses to fetch water from the well any longer and insists he must find a servant. He has no money and as a last resort decides to test the fabled generosity of Wetsandon by asking for his children. He asks the way through the forest of a wise hermit, and by tricking the forester who guides the path, arrives at the hermitage.

* See Phya Anuman Rajadhon, Thet Mahā Chāt, No. 21 Thai Culture, New Series.



One part of this scene usually shows the rishi pointing out the direction to the hermitage, another shows Chuchok treed by the forester's dogs. The old Brahmin passes himself off as a messenger from the King inviting Wetsandon to return and is allowed to climb down and continue his way.



Fig. 21 Prince Wetsandon gives away his wife. Manuscript, National Museum, Bangkok.

Madsi Prevented from Returning to the Hermitage.

When Chuchok arrives Madsi is on the mountain gathering vegetables and berries. The gods, knowing that she will not understand the test of Wetsandon's generosity and will prevent him from giving away the children, turn themselves into wild animals and hold her at bay.

Madsi is shown kneeling beside her basket, obviously frightened of the animals who appear before her. The tiger and the leopard are usually done in a realistic manner, but the non-native lion is derived from the traditional stylized animal of all Buddhist art.

Giving Away the Children. Wetsandon is at first shocked and angry when Chuchok asks him for the children as servants. Then he realizes that he has only given away his material possessions, never anything which was a part of his own being. He explains this to the children and asks them to help him in the great sacrifice. Jāli assents gladly, Kanhā is reluctant. Wetsandon, stipulating that they may be ransomed for a large sum, gives them to the Brahmin.

Wetsandon is shown seated on the porch of the hermitage, the children kneeling in front of him while he pours water over the hands of the Brahmin, thus symbolizing the act of giving something which can not be carried away in the hand.

This scene may be combined with the previous one of Madsi and the animals. There may also be inserted a scene of Wetsandon calling the children out of the lotus pond where they have hidden when they overhear Chuchok's request.

Chuchok and the Children. Old Chuchok takes the children away, driving them ahead of him through the forest and treating them cruelly. They escape once and return to the hermitage, but Wetsandon will not let them break a bargain and makes them return to Chuchok.

The illustration shows the Chuchok sleeping in the branches of a tree, safe from snakes and scorpions. He has tied the children up for the night at the foot of the tree. The gods, however assume the shape of the parents, loosen the bonds, hold and comfort the children until morning.

Wetsandon Giving Away his Wife. When Madsi returns from the mountain she finds the children gone; Wetsandon fearing to add to her grief will not speak. She falls into a death-like faint. He tenderly arouses her and explains the sacrifice. Later, his giving is put to another crucial test when an old man appears and ask for his wife. This is actually Indra, the god, who has assumed an old man's form. After Wetsandon has passed the test, Indra resumes his divine form and returns Madsi, binding her over to the care of Wetsandon so there will be no repetition of the sacrifice.

Wetsandon is again shown on the porch of the hermitage pouring water over the hands of the old man. Madsi is kneeling beside him and Indra is shown descending over their heads in a flame shaped cartouche.





Fig. 22 The joyful return of Prince Wetsandon from exile. Painting on cloth, mid 20th century. Wat Phra Luang, Don Mun Village, near Phrae.

The scene of Wetsandon reviving Madsī from her faint is sometimes also placed within this panel.

The Children With the King. The Death of Chuchok.

Chuchok finally loses the children and they make their way back to the palace of their grandparents, the King and Queen. When he hears their story the King is angry with Prince Wetsandon but Jāli explains the ultimate test of generosity and the King, at last, understands and orders that he be brought back from exile. He then pays the Chuchok the sum agreed for the ransom of the children.

The first episode shows the King and Queen with the children in a pavilion or courtyard of a resplendent palace. The courtiers, the public and the Brahmin in his rumpled white clothes surround the main figures.

In the second episode, the Chuchok having collected the ransom money spends it lavishly on wine, women and food, and dies of gluttony. This scene is usually done with a lusty humor and imagination. The ugly Brahmin reclines on silken pillows surrounded by pretty girls and mountains of food, and finally the vultures carry off his pot-bellied body.

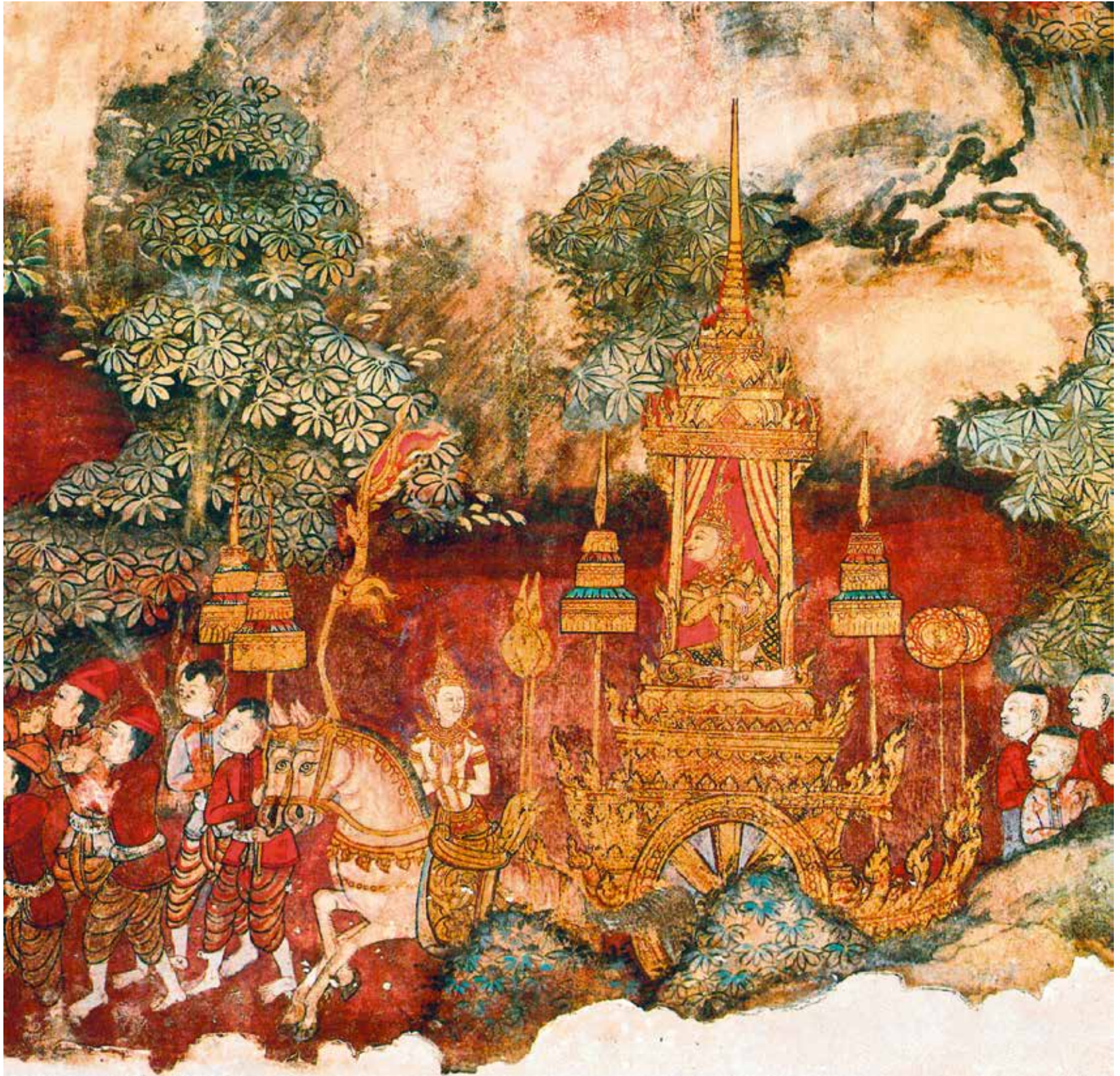
These two scenes are often omitted from either the murals or the sets of small paintings. If they are used, they may be done singly, combined in one unit, or one or both may be tucked in to the next scene which in most cases is the last one.

The Return of Wetsandon. The King and the court set off for the forest to bring Wetsandon back from exile. They remain at the hermitage for a month, feasting and being entertained until a smooth road has been prepared back to the city for the triumphal procession.

Wetsandon and Madsī are often shown standing on a hilltop watching the arrival of the King and Queen on elephants, escorted by soldiers, an eager messenger riding ahead.

Sometimes only a royal procession is shown and it is difficult to tell whether it is on its way to the hermitage of returning to the city with the exiled couple. In either case it is one of the most colorful scenes in the Jātaka with the richly ornamented elephants, the court in royal attire and the soldiers in full dress uniforms winding in a serpentine line through the mountains.

This generally is the last episode of the story in either a mural or the usual set of thirteen pictures, but there are two other scenes that make an occasional appearance. The less frequent of the two is an illustration of the dancers and acrobats entertaining the court at the forest hermitage. The other shows the King and Queen, Prince Wetsandon, Madsī and the children reunited at the court. The happy faces of the crowd and the joyful postures and gestures of the royal family are in expressive contrast to the earlier scene of sorrow in the same setting (Figs. 20, 21, 22).



Detail of a scene, Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi

The finest paintings of the Tosachāt can be found in the Thonburi area just across the river from Bangkok. Wat Suwannaram is at the mouth of the Bangkok Noi Canal; Wat Dusit (the Tosachāt is in the old bot, not the main viharn), Wat Daowadueng, and Wat Bang Yi Khan can be easily reached by ferry boat from the landing just above the National Museum. One can also drive to Wat Dusit and walk to the others from there.

These wats, plus Wat Yai Intharam in Chonburi and Wat Matchimawat in Songkhla all date within the First Reign and early Second Reign, late 18th century and early 19th. They are so similar in style that it is obvious they were painted by the same school of artists. While no scene is identical they all follow a general pattern of composition and certain details appear in each like a common idiom. In the Mahosodh Jātaka, for example, the same soldiers fight in Songkhla, Chonburi and Thonburi. Most of them have an exaggerated facial structure, a broad face, flattened nose with prominent nostrils, a wide mouth partly open and undoubtedly yelling insults at the enemy. The same foreign types, Dutch, Portuguese, French, Japanese also appear.

There is some difference in uniform quality. The amount of wall space covered with murals in the First Reign was enormous and there could not have been a large number of master artists. An analysis of style and details seems to indicate that several different artists worked on the same wall, the most skillful painting the important figures while the background of rocks, trees, and walls was relegated to the apprentices. The greatest variation can be seen in this area. In some murals the trees are only an amorphous mass of dark green crudely stippled with a lighter color. In others, particularly Wat Matchimawat in Songkhla, the trees are clearly identifiable as to species, the different type of leaves neatly drawn with botanic accuracy.

There are certain local elements in the murals, either of costume or customs or architecture. In northern painting the common people wear a Burmese type of dress, in the south a Malay sarong may appear. In Songkhla the Chinese houses along the waterfront are faithfully depicted. These still exist in fact although in a crumbling state and largely hidden by modern warehouses. There are also foreign sailors, especially blond Dutchmen who must have stood out in a small community. The sailors watch with fascination the snake performing in the market place in the Bhuridatta Jātaka, and in the Mahosodh Jātaka one of the captured princesses is a charming strawberry blonde dressed in hoopskirts.

Outside of the wats already mentioned other Tosachāt scenes in the Bangkok area can be found at Wat Sraket, Wat Pho, Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok. Wat Plap, Wat Khrua Wan (all 547 Jātakas) in Thonburi, Wat Chompu Wek in Nonthaburi; they can of course, be found in other sections of the country but are usually in very poor condition.

Perhaps the finest and best preserved of the Tosachāt murals are those of Wat Suwannaram. We feel that it is not an exaggeration to say that portions of this painting such as the procession of soldiers and elephants bringing Prince Wetsandon back from exile can compare in composition and execution with the great but better known murals of Europe.



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