

**Technics and Temporalities:
Two Anthropological Readings of the Vessantara Jataka**

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Dr. Sandra Cate's anthropological research, *Prince Vessantara Jataka Scrolls and the Creation of a Moral Community* provides an interpretive view of Thai/Loa buddhist traditions in the eyes and mind of an American scholar. As an anthropologist studying, "the making of merit through visual practices,"¹ Dr. Cate's reading of Thai/Lao Buddhist morality in the Vessantara Jataka² (VJ) presents a "story in four parts": the making of a moral community, the objecthood of scrolls, ritual performativity of the Phrawet scroll procession, and her final chapter, "Thai/Lao Materiality: A discourse on becoming." My intent herein is to focus upon Dr. Cate's methodology and anthropological approach to address the intersections and departures between her and Patrice Ludwig in his, *Narrative ethics: the excess of giving and moral ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka*.³ I situate my theoretical position between these two scholars on questions of ritual and temporality, ethics and narrativity. It is my intent to weave their widely differing approaches not only in consideration of the texts, but also as an ontological reflection on epistemological methods in Theravāda Buddhist contexts.

The Vessantara Jataka, the last of the biographical past lives of Siddhattha Gotama is told as a tale of *dana*, of giving. The paramount virtue of the Pali Canon's *danaparamis*, or ten perfections, *dana* presents an ideal concept for a discussion of Buddhist ethics and morality in a world of attachment and desire. In the case of the VJ, we are faced with a circular narrative of excessive giving which results in the forfeiture of one's power (in the form of an elephant), one's children (to the wicked brahmin Jujaka), one's wife (to Indra), and one's soul to a material world which ultimately reintegrates the Prince back into his monastic role as, "heir to the throne of the kingdom," whose country is, "prosperous because he rules righteously."⁴

Dr. Cate's analysis of this story is predicated on a revisionist approach to textual readings of the VJ text. Instead, she proposes a reading based on the, "visual and performative means whereby the doctrine comes to life."⁵ In her fieldwork, Dr. Cate goes about this research in a truly

contemporary manner, focusing a video camera on the Phrawet procession of the Khon Kaen village in northeast Thailand. This visual approach to Buddhist morality in the context of VJ scroll processions borrows much from textual notions of narrativity, temporality, and perspective. But it is ultimately through Dr. Cate's Microsoft PowerPoint presentation and her handheld video documentation that I, as a viewer and a student come to know her version of the VJ scroll procession. These terms of knowing are ripe for addressing topics of colonialism, class, and a myriad of complex theoretical issues brought up by trading textual readings for "visual" and "performative" readings within the institutional structures of knowledge and perception embedded within academic notions of visual materiality.⁶

Dr. Cate's interest in how subjectivity is formed in Thai Buddhist traditions emerges from western notions of temporality. In this case, the do or die system of academic merit from which she emerges. A system wrought with Fordist notions of productivity and severe Calvinist work ethics. From her presentation, it is clear to this reader that the VJ scroll procession is an, "act of becoming," both individually and collectively within Khon Kaen Buddhist sangha/ village. From monastic recitation to collective identification, from ritual procession to fluid economic exchange, Dr. Cate reveals the multivalent dynamics of Thai cultural as perceived by an outsider, however situated that outsider may be. Dr. Cate's observations that, "the performance and the story are the same thing in different modes," and that, "the scrolls activate not through site, but through collective touch,"⁷ are also clear to me. But that such observations could be categorized under the term "sociokarma" indicates much more strikingly the high stakes game of anthropological absorption and distancing at play between observer and the observed. If it is this performative approach to Buddhist narrative that can overcome the distinction between the story and the scroll, and by extension to, "overcome the duality of sign and signified,"⁸ I am curious as to how such ambitions might appear to an enlightened being who long ago overcame the dualism of dialectical thinking and subject/ object relations.

Specifically, I am suspect of two claims which Dr. Cate makes, one by way of Leedom who suggests that the post-processional VJ recitation is often anticlimactic, and the other being that the scroll, when blessed, is ascribed to, "the soul or ego of the Buddha."⁹ These claims are wrought with western notions of intensity, productivity, and the attribution of objecthood

through recursive reification of the material realm. We would be remiss to ignore the obvious anthropological indicators of meaning - objects - which drive the material world and its relationship to Buddhism. However, in this case I would suggest that *it is much more a matter of subjective experiences of the temporal*, rather than the material that propels Dr. Cate's research forward and likewise my analysis of Buddhist narrativity. As such, it is not insignificant that Dr. Cate's research focuses on the end of the story of the VJ, the Nakhon,¹⁰ Prince Vessantara's triumphal return from the forest. In her words, "the procession not only relocates spatially the villagers, it re-temporalizes them. It shifts them through past, present, and future."¹¹

Ironically, this is also the locus of Dr. Cate's stated differentiation with Ladwig, whom she claims focuses primarily upon, "the moral ambiguity of giving away one's wife."¹² However simplistic such a position, I will attempt to integrate this comment into a reading of Ladwig to bring his significance to bear on my critique of Dr. Cate. Ultimately, for Cate to suggest that Ladwig ignores the performative, temporal, and autopoietic reading of Buddhist narrative ethics reveals a lack of understanding of his thesis articulated in *Narrative ethics: the excess of giving and moral ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka*, a highly ambitious text which reveals much about the nature of ethical ontologies in relation to the Vessantara Jataka.

Ladwig's textual reading is, in many ways, more generous and thorough in its unearthing of Buddhist narrative ethics particularly in regards to Lao lay / monk relations. As he states so succinctly, "folk narratives, often performed by monks in a dramatic, hyperbolic and witty way, constitute a body of knowledge that is used by laypeople and monks to discuss ethics, models of good and virtuous life, matters of law and sometimes also problematizations of these latter that reach beyond simple didacticism."¹³ Ladwig's words lend sophistication to the inherent performativity of Buddhist culture, and its own self-reflection outside of western observations. As Ladwig notes, texts are not simply ethical instructions but rather, "areas of reflection with a multiplicity of voices in the text." Ladwig, citing Tambiah, also takes a performative approach that allows for, "the expression of moral ambiguities and paradoxes in ethics."¹⁴ That Ladwig concludes his research with the claim that Prince Vessantara's story contains elements of both, "ethical homeostasis *and* potential for an ethical reconfiguration," reveals how closely his beginning parallels his ending.

Ladwig's reliance on hyperbolic emotionality and the loaded aesthetics of the VJ do not, in my mind, betray his commitment to a reading of ritual and narrative as places of "dialogic exchange," instead reinforcing my belief that the researcher was more deeply imbedded in the culture with which he sought intellectual identification. Ladwig's notion of, "the potential functions of conflicts in ethical reasoning and the ethical value of failure," are situated throughout his conversations with Lao people in regards to key scenes of the story. Here, *the value of the oral exchange between subject and object of study can not be underestimated*. In this way, Ladwig's anthropological means reflects and respects Buddhist oral tradition as its ends. That Cate and Ladwig encountered uniquely different cultures in terms of nationality and class, and that they chose unique objects of study (one VJ recitation and the other VJ scroll processions) is apparent. But I am lead to believe that Ladwig put greater effort into his anthropological approach by bridging those differences through clearly documented oral exchange.¹⁵

While Cate finds "disinterested"¹⁶ audiences, Ladwig explores the VJ recitation as an experience leading the lay listener through emotions to a place of moral bewilderment. He writes of an audience, "shocked by the excess that is a result of this selfish striving for perfection."¹⁷ Where Cate ends, Ladwig begins. His address of emotions spawned by the VJ recitation are broad in scope: admiration, awe, love, fear, calm, grief, pity, and suffering; but also, following the instructions of a teacher at the Buddhist College in Vientiane who compels his students to, "make the heart feel *phalaad*", (translated as strange, bizarre, abnormal, and extraordinary) Ladwig leads us to an awareness of the perplexity and confusion caused by the VJ's explicit narrative deployment of the Lao concept of *thaannaygay*, or inner-body-object-donation, as the giving away of one's own body, the "fruit of his loins" in a form of ritual self-supplication. Here, the terms of Vessantara's spiritual investment could not be more clearly articulated.

Ladwig's focus on excess, emotions, and hyperbolism paves the way for addressing complex issues of affective embodiment, thus providing a means to discuss a variety of ethical models within the complex moral universe of Buddhism, and the Vessantara Jataka in particular. But what I find most compelling about Ladwig is his open-endedness in regards to Buddhist narrative ontologies. Borrowing from Hallisey, Ladwig suggests that a unitary theory of ethics

in Buddhism cannot be accomplished, “simply because Buddhists availed themselves of and argued over a variety of models.”¹⁸ For Ladwig, the importance lies in the complex dynamics of cultural and pedagogical exchange. He concludes,

Important here, however, is that the use of the text in performance and the didactics and pedagogies involved are taken into account: which institutions, places and occasions are chosen and to what extent do these prescribe a moral understanding (rules, duties etc.) and at the same time leave space for ethical autopoiesis.¹⁹

This space of becoming is the least a distanced observer can attribute to other peoples cultures, whatever the material means - text or scroll, buddha body or buddha relics.

In conclusion I wish to return to my previous statement that, *it is much more a matter of subjective experiences of the temporal rather than the material*, in my current analysis of Buddhist narrativity and temporality. In the case of Cate and Ladwig, distinct approaches to temporality reveal radically different research outcomes. To fully unpack my theory would require a larger study of cultural conceptions of time impacting our perceptions, our bodies, and the spaces we inhabit. In consideration of the limits herein, I present my ideas in shortened form.

What I wish to address are notions of circular and linear time in regards to narrativity, and specifically in regards to the circularity of the Vessantara Jataka. In the west, narrative circularity is defined as the repetition of certain plot points within a sequence. Plot points are repeated to reinforce meaning and to provide a temporal shift to enhance narrative intensity. Put more simply, a circular narrative is a story that ends back at the beginning. In this light, Vessantara’s triumphal return (the nakhon) is a circular narrative resulting in the princely return to his monastic kingdom of origin.

Models of circularity permeate Buddhism: rebirth, ritual circumambulation, recitations, scrolls, mandalas, turning the wheel of dhamma (dhammachakka), the circularity of stupa architecture, yogic chakras (circles), and the concept of galactic polity being just a few examples of the circular nature of Buddhist histories and traditions. In fact, the terms of circular engagement are

canonical. For example, Buddhists generally agree that the original turning of the wheel occurred when the Buddha taught the five ascetics who became his first disciples at the Deer Park in Sarnath. However, in Theravāda Buddhism, this was the only "turning of the wheel", and later developments of the Buddhist doctrine which do not appear in the Pali Canon are not accepted as teachings of the historical Buddha. Thus, the turning of the wheel takes on significant canonical weight. For Buddhists and Hindus the concept of circularity is culturally prominent, giving rise to form in music and mathematics, not to mention agrarian and ritual influences of the temporal cycles of the earth, sun, and moon.

In the West, a similar notion of ontological circularity is known as the *eternal return*, a concept which posits that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur in a self-similar form an infinite number of times. The concept has roots in ancient Egypt, and was subsequently taken up by the Pythagoreans and the Stoics. However, with the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity, the concept fell into disuse, in favor of linear notions of temporality established by the Roman Empire. In modernism, Friedrich Nietzsche resurrected the concept of the eternal return on the grounds that it provides a reason for affirming life after the decline of theism. As Carl Jung goes so far as to claim, the dwarf in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* references the idea of the eternal return when Nietzsche writes "'Everything straight lies,' murmured the dwarf disdainfully. 'All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.'"²⁰

Clearly, it would be as unfair to attribute linearity to the research outcomes of Dr. Cate, as much as it would be to ascribe circularity to the textual interpretations of Patrice Ladwig. Yet I am led to believe that Ladwig was aware of these circular forms in considering matters of ethical ambiguation in the reading of the VJ, while Dr. Cate was not. I do not believe that Dr. Cate has ignored the eternal return, in fact I imagine she seeks to embody these notions in her research. To me, the real problems arise as a result of the video camera and the computer, both tools of globalization, as much as technologies of the self encapsulating a whole of western metaphysics inextricably linked to complex networks of issues ranging around the body, temporality, power, and ontologies of becoming. As Ladwig notes, borrowing the words of Buddhologist Steve Collins, "the VJ is one of Buddhism's most compelling stories when it comes to presenting the

'subtle, but rueful and triumphalist acceptance of the disparities between temporal power, in every sense of the word, and the ascetic quest for the timelessness.'"²¹

As Soraya Murray has recently noted, "electronic information communications technologies mold imaginaries and thus shape power."²² Western notions of temporality and materiality have always presented complex challenges to the study of Buddhist traditions. If current anthropological models are any indication, it appears that performative and visual readings emerging from scopic regimes of power might suffer similar fates as textual interpretations of the past.

Endnotes:

1 Dr. Sandra Cate lecture in Boreth Ly's Arts and Politics of Theravāda Buddhist Traditions, February 11th, 2009. Derived from her anthropological fieldwork with Dr. H. Leedom Lefferts in the Isan district of Northern Thailand, November 2007 - May 2008

2 Knowledge of the Vessantara Jataka on the part of the reader is assumed, and is henceforth written as "VJ", following Ladwig

3 Patrice Ladwig, Narrative ethics: the excess of giving and moral ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka, in M. Heintz, and J. Rasanayagam, eds., *The Anthropology of Moralities* (forthcoming).

4 From Ladwig's synopsis of the VJ, HAVC-163B reader pg 378.

5 Dr. Sandra Cate lecture, February 11th, 2009.

6 My issue with Dr. Cate is not a tit for tat* on situated knowledge, rather an intuitive reading. It is the distanced perspective in her documentary style I found most troubling. I have no doubt Dr. Cate's intent is sincere, and that her own rigorous telling of the research is ethically grounded if not cinematically flawed. Her static shots juxtaposed with a handheld aerial perspective on the Khon Kaen procession reveals an anthropological dilemma which long predates the video camera, and is a facet of anthropological fieldwork which may forever plague academic readings of other peoples cultures. From the epistemological position of Heisenberg, by knowing intimately our subject of study, we have already altered its outcome. This is not a statement about the limitations of Dr. Cate's ability to measure a system, but rather about the nature of the system itself.

7 Dr. Sandra Cate lecture, February 11th, 2009.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 According to Dr. Cate, the nakhon aspect of the VJ can take up to 35% of the entire scroll indicating its narrative weight in the scroll procession. From a geographical perspective, it is also worth mentioning that the Nakhon Ratchasima is a city in the north-east of Thailand and gateway to Isan, our area of study, revealing its regional influence as both city and narrative conclusion.

11 Dr. Sandra Cate lecture, February 11th, 2009.

12 Ibid.

13 Ladwig, HAVC-163B reader pg 375

14 Ibid.

15 This was not made completely clear by Dr. Cate. Although I assume some degree of local language skill on her part, that aspect of her anthropological exchange was not clearly imbedded in her presentation as it was with Patrice Ladwig.

16 It is worth mentioning that Ladwig also notes the existence of “unspectacular performances”. Ladwig, reader pg 383, footnote 14.

17 Ladwig, HAVC-163B reader pg 383

18 Ladwig, HAVC-163B reader pg 390 citing Hallisey.

19 Ladwig, HAVC-163B reader pg 390

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Adrian del Caro and edited by Robert Pippin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

21 Ladwig, HAVC-163B reader pg 385

22 Soraya Murray, VPS Seminar lecture, February 11th, 2009.