BSRV 29.1 (2012) 5–16
doi: 10.1558/bsrv.v29i1.5
Buddhist Studies Review ISSN (print) 0256-2897
Buddhist Studies Review ISSN (online) 1747-9681

The Multi-life Stories of Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra

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Abstract

Like Buddhist traditions, Jain traditions preserve many stories about people's past lives. Unlike Buddhist traditions, relatively few of these stories narrate the past lives of the tradition's central figure, the jina*. In Jainism there is no equivalent path to the* bodhisatt(v)a *path; the karma that guarantees jinahood is bound a mere two births before that attainment, and the person who attracts that karma cannot do so willfully, nor is he aware of it being bound. There is therefore no Jain equivalent to the ubiquitous* jātaka *literature. In this paper I will explore what the absence of a* jātaka *genre in Jain traditions tells us about the genre's role in Buddhism. Focusing upon the multi-life stories of Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, I will ask how these two strikingly similar narratives betray some fundamental differences between Buddhist and Jain understandings of the ultimate religious goal and the method of its attainment.*

Keywords
Buddha, Buddhism, Mahāvīra, Jainism, biography

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, in the long distant past, there was a young man who wished to pursue liberation from the cycle of rebirth and redeath. He encountered a fully liberated being, a conqueror of *saṃsāra*, who had founded a community of followers whom he guided and instructed. This great victor predicted that the young man would in fact achieve the same great attainment in the long distant future. After innumerable lifetimes, during which time there were 22 or 23 intervening fully liberated teachers, the young man did indeed achieve this same attainment, and

founded his own religious community, in sixth or fifth century BCE North India.

This story could be that of Gautama Buddha's long career, which began when he made an aspiration to achieve buddhahood at the feet of the past *buddha* Dīpaṅkara. Following Dīpaṅkara's prediction that he would achieve his aspiration and become a fully awakened being, the Bodhisattva (as he then became) experienced many many lifetimes in which he pursued the qualities required for buddhahood (as recorded in the hundreds of *jātaka* stories) and repeatedly renewed his *bodhisattva* vow at the feet of — according to the Pāli tradition — a further 23 past *buddha*s. Eventually he perfected the required qualities, achieved buddhahood, and founded the current Buddhist tradition. This story is found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Nidānakathā* of the Pāli tradition, as part of the longer narration of the Bodhisattva's repeated prediction to buddhahood at the feet of multiple past *buddha*s. It is also found in the *Mahāvastu* and *Divyāvadāna*, amongst other texts, interlinked with the story of a past life of the monk Dharmaruci: In the past he and the aspiring Bodhisattva were friends, but while the latter became a Bodhisattva, the former pursued the worst possible karmic course and spent as long a time in hell and other bad rebirths as the Bodhisattva spent attaining buddhahood. Although the focus of these versions is not so clearly the long path of Gautama Buddha, his aspiration and prediction are still recorded in similar terms to the Pāli tradition.[1] The rest of the story — the Bodhisattva's long path and eventual attainment of buddhahood — is recorded elsewhere, and well known to Buddhists the world over.

In addition to the story of Gautama Buddha, however, the narrative above could also refer to the multi-life story of Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, who was the founder (or re-founder) of Jainism. In a distant past life Mahāvīra was a man named Marīci, the grandson of the first *jina* of this half time-cycle,[2] Ṛṣabha Jina, and the son of its first *cakravartin* (universal emperor), Bharata. Marīci became an ascetic in the company of his grandfather, but found the ascetic practices too arduous and so lessened his observances and vows to a more comfortable level. Nonetheless, he continued to teach the correct Dharma and send all who were capable of the true path to his grandfather, until eventually illness and the desire for an attendant led him to take on a pupil of his own. In due course Ṛṣabha Jina predicted that Marīci would, after 22 intervening *jina*s, become a *jina* named Mahāvīra, meanwhile becoming the first *vāsudeva* (half-*cakravartin*), and a *cakra-*

1. There are many different versions of the story but the general outline remains the same. In the *Buddhavaṃsa* (Morris 1882, 6–16; English trans. Horner 1975, 9–25) and the *Nidānakathā* of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (Fausboll 1877, 1–28; English trans. Jayawickrama 1990, 3–35) the Bodhisattva is called Sumedha, and he is a renouncer who meets the Buddha Dīpaṅkara and immediately begins his practice of the ten perfections required for buddhahood. In the *Mahāvastu* (Senart 1882, 231–238; English trans. Jones 1949, 188–203) he is called Megha, while he is Sumati in the *Divyāvadāna* (Cowell and Neil 1886, 152–254); in both he has a badly-behaved friend (Meghadatta or Mati) who becomes Dharmaruci. This story of Dharmaruci is also preserved in the Pāli *Apadāna*; for a summary and references see DPPN.

2. Jains believe that Jambūdvīpa (the continent on which we live) is subject to a beginningless and endless time cycle consisting of two halves: one upward (the *utsarapiṇī*) and one downward (the *avasarpaṇī*). Each half time-cycle is sub-divided into six *kāla*s of varying qualities. It is a universal law that 24 *jina*s are born during each half time-cycle. For further detail see Jaini 1979, 29–34.

vartin (universal emperor). Filled with pride at this prediction, Marīci continued his imperfect asceticism and bound much bad karma.[3]

After a large number of intervening births, Marīci was born in a royal family but became an ascetic. Mocked by his cousin for his emaciated appearance, he vowed to have the strength to kill him in a future life. This opportunity arose two births later, when he was born as the first *vāsudeva*, named Tripṛṣṭa. In an amazing display of strength he killed a fierce lion — his cousin reborn — with his bare hands. Later, enacting the standard narrative for each of the nine *vāsudeva*s that appear during each half time-cycle, he battled with and killed his multi-life adversary — the *prativāsudeva* — in the company of the *baladeva*, his (Tripṛṣṭa's) half-brother, who remained a pious Jain layman devoted to the principles of non-harm. As with all *vāsudeva*s (which include Lakṣmaṇa and Kṛṣṇa at other points in the time-cycle), this act of violence resulted in birth in a hell realm. This was followed by a multitude of animal and hell births, before he eventually achieved human birth once more and acquired some good karma. Next he became a *cakravartin*, then a god, and once more a king-turned-ascetic; in this birth he finally bound the karma that guarantees jinahood, and he achieved this, as Mahāvīra, two births later.[4]

The start and end points of the stories of these two figures are very similar, as are the numbers of *buddha*s and *jina*s that appear in between prediction and attainment, at least if we take the Pāli tradition as our parallel. However, it is also clear that there are some rather striking differences between the multi-life stories of the Buddha and Mahāvīra. I propose to take the two stages of the story — prediction and path — in turn and examine what these overlapping narratives can reveal about Buddhist and Jain attitudes towards the operation of karma, the relevance of intention, and the attainment of the ultimate religious goals. As contemporary and closely-related traditions, Jainism and Buddhism can shed much light on one another's understandings of key religious ideals. The multi-life story of their founders is just one place in which we may find fruitful comparative material.[5]

PREDICTION

A close comparison of the two figures' multi-life stories is made compelling by the initial prediction to liberation that is made of each character in a distant past life.

3. For Jains karma is a physical substance, often compared to dust, which is bound to the soul (*jīva*) and thereby keeps the soul trapped in the realm of *saṃsāra*. Removing this karma and preventing the influx of new karma, largely achieved through immobility asceticism, results in the soul returning to its natural condition of omniscience and bliss, and rising up to the realm of liberated souls at the top of the universe. See Dundas 2002, 93–105.

4. I have summarised the story from Johnson's translation of Hemacandra's twelfth-century *Triṣaṣtiśalākāpuruṣacaritra*, or 'Lives of the Sixty-Three Illustrious Men' where it is found in Book 1, Chapter 6 (in the *Ṛṣabhacaritra*) and Book 10, Chapter 1 (in the *Mahāvīracaritra*). On the other sources for this story see note 15 below.

5. I am not the first person to notice this parallel. In his large comparison of Buddhist and Jain traditions, *Āgama aura Tripiṭaka* (2005), Nagraj devotes a short chapter to the stories of Sumedha and Marīci (126–134). However, although he brings together some interesting material, there is little analysis. His motivation seems to be to highlight parallels, rather than to probe deeper into the possible reasons behind the subtle and not-so-subtle differences that remain. Jaini (1981) has also made a few comments on the parallel. He is, however, mistaken in saying (p. 96): 'The first Buddha and the first Tīrthaṅkara of each age makes a prophecy concerning the identity of the last one'. This is based upon a misreading of the *Buddhavaṃsa*, which actually mentions 27 past *buddha*s.

However, the reason for the prediction, and the actions that precede and follow it, subtly separate the two characters, as well as reflecting the two traditions' different attitudes towards intentionality, karmic responsibility, and omniscience.

The first key difference is the fact that whereas the Bodhisattva-to-be himself wishes for — and even asks for — his prediction to buddhahood, Marīci makes no such aspiration. Taking the Buddhist tradition first, the Bodhisattva-to-be makes a clear aspiration — referred to in the *Mahāvastu* and *Divyāvadāna* versions as a *praṇidhāna* or vow — to become a fully awakened *buddha*. His desire to attain buddhahood is sincere and clearly expressed, and is accompanied by an act of service to Dīpaṅkara Buddha, whom he has only just met by chance. Marīci, on the other hand, is a family member of the first *jina* Ṛṣabha, and goes forth in his community long before he is predicted to any great attainments. He makes no aspiration to become a *jina*, and indeed is somewhat half-hearted in his efforts to progress on his spiritual path.

In addition to the extent of aspiration, the nature of the two predictions is also somewhat different. Dīpaṅkara's prediction is made to the aspiring Bodhisattva, and acts as confirmation of what the latter has already declared — that he will become a *buddha* in the future. In contrast, Ṛṣabha Jina's prediction of Marīci's attainments is made at the request of another person, in fact his father, the *cakravartin* Bharata, who asks about the future attainments of any member of Ṛṣabha's retinue after Ṛṣabha has named all the significant characters (*jina*s, *cakravartin*s, and so on) of the coming age. Marīci only hears about his predicted future from his father later on, for he is not present at the time. Furthermore, the prediction is not simply to jinahood, but also includes the very worldly — and morally dubious — attainments of *cakravartin* and *vāsudeva*.

The role of intention is clearly important here. As is well known, in early Buddhism the key ethical (and karmic) determinant of an action is its intention, and the Buddha famously declared that karma *is* intention. One implication of this is that certain powerful statements of intention — such as aspirations or vows — can be particularly potent in karmic terms. Thus Dīpaṅakara's prediction of the eventual buddhahood of Gautama is a confirmation of the potency and efficacy of the aspiring Bodhisattva's vow. And this vow is a very positive one, for it involves delaying the achievement of Awakening for many many lifetimes in order to become a Buddha who can help others achieve Awakening too. In contrast, for Jains *all* actions are karmicly significant, not just those that are intended and consciously performed.[6] Although aspirations can still be significant in Jain terms, they are rarely entirely positive. Aspiring to become a *jina* may involve some good karma, especially if the aspiration is to help others by teaching, but it also involves an aspiration to have power, and to build up asceticism in exchange for that power, and so ultimately it is negative (Jaini 1981, 99).

The prediction of the two characters' future attainments also reveals something of the two traditions' understanding of the omniscience of their religious leaders. In both narratives the prediction of future attainments is necessarily true, and not simply a statement of likely developments in the future. The early

6. According to Jain karma theory every action — even breathing — results in more karma being bound to the soul. That is not to say that good and bad actions are not differentiated in Jainism, for good actions, which are closely related to good mental states, will bind less harmful karma than bad actions and for a shorter time, but ultimately the ideal is to eliminate all karma.

Buddhist tradition demonstrates some ambivalence towards the idea that the Buddha (and by extension all *buddha*s) was completely omniscient, and seems to have been especially wary of the possibility that predictions of the future might compromise the notion that people are free to act and responsible for their own karma. Nonetheless the prediction by Dīpaṅkara Buddha is powerful because, as Sumedha reasons in the *Buddhavaṃsa* (II, 110, my translation):

> The words of Buddhas are not duplicitous. Conquerors do not speak in vain.
> There is no untruth amongst Buddhas. Certainly I will become a Buddha!

Thus Sumedha can take comfort from the Buddha's words, although he is also aware that the prediction does not mean he can simply rest on his laurels; rather he must now diligently pursue the qualities necessary for buddhahood over countless lives. The future is assured, but must still be worked for. Ṛṣabha Jina's prediction of Marīci's future is also necessarily true, for *jina*s are omniscient, in the sense that they have simultaneous vision of everything as if time and space have collapsed, and so there is no possibility of them being wrong. Ṛṣabha's statement is therefore not a prediction so much as a vision into a time that only he can access, and this vision includes the identities of all the future *jina*s as well as other significant figures.

While both statements about the future are equally true, Ṛṣabha Jina's prediction is a simple statement of fact, with no agency in the story. In contrast, Dīpaṅkara Buddha's prediction is necessary to the beginning of the Bodhisattva's career, and kick-starts the Bodhisattva's pursuit of buddhahood. Although the distinction is subtle, Dīpaṅkara's prediction could be said to have an effect on a future that is not yet known, whereas Ṛṣabha's prediction is simply a statement about something as if it has already happened, since from his perspective it has. The agency of the prediction is of course closely linked to the agency of the potential religious leaders. Because Ṛṣabha's prediction is not related to any aspiration on Marīci's part, and indeed is simply part of a much larger set of names of future characters reeled off by the Jina, there is no sense that the prediction requires any actions in order to be fulfilled. Indeed, Ṛṣabha Jina's omniscient vision appears to encourage apathy, for Marīci sees the prediction as removing any concerns about his own lax conduct, for everything is going to be okay in the long run. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, is receiving a helping hand on a path that he has already embarked upon.

The passive characterisation of Marīci is further contrasted with the active participation of the Bodhisattva when we consider that the Bodhisattva made an active choice to pursue buddhahood rather than arhatship. It is said that at the time of his aspiration he could have become an *arhat*, but instead of taking this easier option, he pursued the longer and more arduous path to buddhahood, in order to eventually help other beings escape *saṃsāra*. Thus in the *Buddhavaṃsa* (II, 54-56, my translation) we hear:

> While lying on the ground, this thought occurred to me:
> 'If I so wished, I could today burn off my defilements,
> But what is the point in my here realising the Dharma myself, unknown?
> Having become all-knowing, I will become a Buddha [in the world] with its gods.
> What is the use of crossing over alone, a man of visible strength?
> Having become all-knowing, I will carry across [the world] with the gods'.

His aspiration is thus selfless and admirable, as is his decision to turn away from the immediate benefits of becoming an *arhat*. Marīci, on the other hand, is shown as wasting his opportunity to properly pursue asceticism in the company of the *jina*. He is said to be 'free from painful and evil meditation, adorned with right belief' though his soul is 'stained with karma like a fine cloth with mud' (Johnson 1931–1962, vol. 1, 352). Although we are not told that he could have achieved arhatship in that lifetime, the implication is that he made a mistake by rejecting the possible benefits of austerities. His own father, the *cakravartin* Bharata, managed to become an *arhat* after a long military and royal career, yet Marīci's constant false asceticism gets him nowhere. Instead of reducing his karmic load through properly-performed ascetic activities, Marīci in fact binds to himself further bad karma by taking on a pupil of his own and falsely telling him that he is a teacher of the Dharma. Thus even in the rare moments when Marīci is an active character, his actions propel him away from, rather than towards, his eventual attainment.

Given that Ṛṣabha Jina's prediction is simply a statement of fact, whereas Dīpaṅkara Buddha's is a confirmation of the efficacy of a karmicly potent vow made by an individual deeply committed to a particular achievement, it is no surprise that the responses of Marīci and Sumedha to their predicted futures is somewhat different. Once the Bodhisattva receives his prediction to buddhahood he is delighted, one could even say proud, yet he uses the predicion to encourage further work and progress. In the *Buddhavaṃsa* he specifically considers each of the ten perfections that he will need to practise over countless lives, examining their characteristics. In contrast, the prediction of Marīci's future greatness only serves to increase his negative karmic load further, because it prompts him to consider all the great people in his family – his grandfather the *jina*, his father the *cakravartin*, and himself, who will in future lifetimes achieve both of these high states. He reasons (Johnson 1931–1962, vol 1, 353):

> 'My family alone is superior to all families, like the sun to the planets, like the moon to the constellations'. By taking pride in his family in this way, Marīci made low-family karma for himself, like a spider making a web.

Because of his pride, as well as his predicted future as a *cakravartin* and *vāsudeva* and the violence entailed therein, Marīci's long multi-life-story will inevitably involve a large amount of suffering in hell and in other unfortunate births.

PATH

A comparison between the multi-life stories of Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra need not stop at the aftermath of their predictions to spiritual leadership. Since the two figures were contemporary religious teachers, with largely comparable final-life biographies (which I will not examine here), and since there is a tradition that links the number 24 with the number of past teachers in both religions, a wider comparison is appealing. To what extent do these two characters, embarking on their long path, have similar experiences?

Let us begin by addressing the question of the number of past *buddha*s and *jina*s. In Jainism there are 24 *jina*s in each half time-cycle, and Mahāvīra is the 24th in the current cycle. In a Pāli tradition that begins with the *Buddhavaṃsa*,

Gautama Buddha encounters 24 past *buddha*s and becomes therefore the 25th, although there are in fact another three past *buddha*s mentioned in this text who were prior to Dīpaṅkara and did not meet Gautama-to-be. Although there is a wider tradition of infinite past *buddha*s, these 24 took on special significance in some Theravāda countries as they are the *buddha*s who predicted Gautama's buddhahood.[7] Gombrich (1980) has argued that the Buddhists took the notion that there were 24 past *buddha*s from the Jains, whose tradition of earlier *jina*s, and specific regard for the number 24, seems to predate the equivalent Buddhist understanding.[8] However, Ohira (1994) has argued the reverse, proposing that the notion and the number were borrowed by the Jains from the Buddhists, and suggesting an early link between the popular *jātaka* genre and the idea of past *buddha*s.[9] Even if we set aside the question of where the notion of past *buddha*s and *jina*s first came from (if indeed it had only a single source), we are still left with a puzzle over the origin of the number. The idea of 24 *buddha*s first appears in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, which might date to the early post-Aśokan period, and certainly to no later than the fifth century. Several Śvetāmbara scriptures enumerate 24 *jina*s, but their dating is unknown, and Ohira (1994, 479) argues that they all belong to the fourth or fifth centuries CE, though the number seems to be fairly commonplace by this period. We cannot therefore base an argument for priority on this small selection of texts of debatable age.[10] Given that we cannot trace the source for, nor positively determine the direction of, this numerical tradition, it is perhaps best to move on to a more fertile area of enquiry, namely the behaviour of the potential religious leaders during their past lives.

Without ignoring the important stories of the Buddha's bad karma such as those discussed by John Strong elsewhere in this volume, I do not think it very contentious to say that Buddhists generally conceived of the Buddha's long path in positive terms. They did not, for example, tell stories of his time in hell realms, or in the realm of the hungry ghosts. Indeed, in both Pāli and Sanskrit traditions some negative births, such as female birth, birth in the worst of the hells,

7. Thus, for example, Sri Lankan temples will often portray the 24 *buddha*s on the wall, with the Bodhisattva kneeling beside each one. However, in Myanmar the traditional depiction is of 28 *buddha*s, in other words including those mentioned in the *Buddhavaṃsa* who did not meet the Bodhisattva.

8. Gombrich (1980, 64) argues: 'There does not appear to have been a period before Jainism acquired the theory of the twenty-four Tīrthaṃkaras, or any reason why the doctrine should not have been part of Mahāvīra's own teaching. That the analogous Buddhist doctrine of previous Buddhas was influenced by Jainism seems much more likely than that the Jains borrowed their doctrine from the Buddhists. In particular, the precise number 24, apparently original in Jain doctrine, probably entered Buddhism only some centuries after the Buddha'. Unfortunately Gombrich cites no sources as evidence for this argument, and Ohira (1994) argues that the list of 24 *jina*s is not actually found in the earliest Jain texts.

9. The core of Ohira's argument is that there is no particular preference for the number 24 in Jain texts, and that the number was chosen simply because it was already being used by the Buddhists and it allowed for the accommodation of the nine *jina*s already known from the earliest scriptures. However, the argument is somewhat speculative to say the least.

10. Having visited a number of Buddhist and Jain temples it is hard to avoid speculating that the number 24 works so well visually — with examples in both traditions of four neat rows of six figures or a similarly symmetrical depiction — that this might well have been an influence just as strong as the textual traditions. However, this is mere speculation, and would require investigation by an art historian.

or as a small animal, are explicitly said to be impossible from a particular stage of the *bodhisattva* path.[11] These lists differ in the details but the overall message is clear: being a *bodhisattva* makes *good* karma and *good* rebirths inevitable. Such good rebirths can include positions of worldly power, and indeed there are many *jātaka* stories in which the Bodhisattva is a king, just as Mahāvīra-to-be enjoys an occasional royal birth. However, one cannot imagine a *jātaka* story recounting how the Bodhisattva was driven by extraordinary hatred to kill his multi-life adversary and was subsequently born in hell, as happens in the multi-life-story of Mahāvīra. (Indeed, one is reminded rather of the multi-life-story of Devadatta, the Buddha's trouble-making cousin.)

The *bodhisattva* path, then, is a positive one, fuelled by a positive aspiration and ending in the ultimate positive attainment of buddhahood. The *jātaka* stories recount multiple tales of the extraordinarily good actions of the Bodhisattva, and betray a focus especially on the perfections, perhaps most clearly the perfection of generosity, which is prominent in the infamous *Vessantara-jātaka* as well as the many stories of bodily self-sacrifice popular throughout the Buddhist world.[12] As I have argued elsewhere (2010, Chapter 3), the association between the *jātaka* genre and the perfections does not go back to the beginning of the genre's history, and indeed the Pāli collection in particular contains many stories of more morally dubious or inconsequential actions. However, a strong tradition nonetheless emerged that the stories illustrate the long path to perfection that was steadfastly pursued by the Buddha during those of his countless past lives when he was a Bodhisattva. *Jātaka*s, whatever their origins or history, became inextricably linked to ideas about the *bodhisattva* path and the qualities required for the attainment of buddhahood.

As may be suggested by Mahāvīra's multi-life-story, there is no equivalent genre of narrative in Jainism. There are some stories of the past lives of *jina*s – other *jina*s as well as Mahāvīra – but these do not narrate a path or any self-directed progress towards an ultimate goal. As P.S. Jaini noted over thirty years ago, this is because there is no equivalent to the *bodhisattva* path in Jainism: the attainment of jinahood is karmically determined, but the karma in question is bound a mere two births before that attainment, and the binding of this karma cannot be successfully aspired to and neither does the person have any idea that it has been bound (Jaini 1981). As a consequence, for most of the 24 *jina*s of this time cycle, we find records of only two past lives, that in which the karma was bound and the one intervening birth, which is almost inevitably as a god.[13] Even

11. For a discussion of the exclusions in various Pāli commentarial sources, in which they apply from the very beginning of the *bodhisattva* path, see Endo 1997, 260–264 and Appleton 2010, 93–97. The *Mahāvastu* preserves a similar list of states into which an irreversible *bodhisattva* (one that has reached the eighth *bhūmi*) cannot be born: Senart 1882, 102–104; English trans. Jones 1949, 81–82.

12. In the Theravāda tradition the standard list is of ten perfections: giving (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*viriya*), forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In the Indian Mahāyāna tradition the number is more usually six: giving (*dāna*), morality (□*īla*), energy (*vīrya*), forbearance (*kṣānti*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*).

13. Of the 24 *jina*s, only Ṛṣabha (1), Śānti (16), Nemi (22), Pārśva (23) and Mahāvīra (24) have lifestories that extend beyond two lifetimes into the past. For a discussion of some of these multi-life stories and their relation to the *jātaka* genre see Appleton, forthcoming.

in cases such as Mahāvīra's, where we have a longer multi-life account, the narrative clearly undermines any idea we might have that aspiring to jinahood is a good thing, or that progress towards it can be directed.

If jinahood is not fuelled by strong aspiration and many lives of dedicated pursuit of special qualities, then how is it that some people become *jina*s and others simply *arhat*s? The answer given by the Jain commentarial tradition is that some souls are marked out as those which will become *jina*s whereas others are not, just as some souls have the inherent capacity to attain *mokṣa* whereas others are destined to wander forever in the realm of *saṃsāra* (Jaini 2003, 16–18; see also Jaini 1977). Thus the attainment of jinahood, as opposed to another form of *mokṣa*, is no indicator of long-term effort, but is rather an inherent capability of the soul, present throughout that soul's beginningless existence. Furthermore, the activities required for the binding of the karma that guarantees jinahood, several lists of which circulate within the tradition, are all activities that can be undertaken within a single lifetime, for example devotion to the *jina*s, learning the ancient scriptures, and practising austerities (Jaini 1981, 98). In contrast, the Buddhist perfections are qualities that require gradual improvement over multiple lives.

Given these doctrinal differences, it is no surprise that the multi-life stories of Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra are so very different. Marīci did not have a clear intention to become a *jina*, and once he believed he would become one his path — if we can even call it that — became much harder. His long multi-life biography is not a reflection of the difficulty of the path to jinahood, nor does it highlight the greatness of his ultimate achievement. Rather, it shows the uncontrollable nature of karma, and the perils of pride or complacency. Marīci had the chance to make real spiritual progress in the community headed by Ṛṣabha Jina, but instead he chose a wrong path, one that led him to spend multiple lifetimes in hell. In contrast, Gautama Buddha's long story, that takes broadly the same amount of time as Mahāvīra's, demonstrates the difficulty of his chosen path, the steadfastness of his aspiration, and his unshakeable determination to pursue the perfections over a multitude of lifetimes, as illustrated in *jātaka* stories. In other words the Bodhisattva's path is propelled by his intention, aspiration, determination; the jina-to-be's path is propelled by the unstoppable force of his karma and the inherent propensities of his soul.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen from examining these two biographies, there is a striking contrast between the stories in terms of the nature of the prediction, the actions that precede and follow the prediction, and the experiences between prediction and attainment. Whereas the Bodhisattva makes a sincere aspiration and uses the prediction of his eventual achievement of buddhahood to encourage him on his long and arduous path, Mahāvīra-to-be is actually harmed by his prediction, which in any case he does not seek. But whilst these contrasts are striking, the similarities in narrative structure are equally so, for each character meets a religious leader of the past and receives a prediction, which is fulfilled after a similar number of intervening leaders. Given the possibility that the followers of each tradition were aware of one another's beliefs, practices and stories, one has to ask why these stories overlap so strongly.

Although it is well known that Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra were contemporaries, and that the Buddhist and Jain traditions emerged out of a similar social and religious context, the question of historical influence is a thorny one given the difficulty of assigning reliable dates to anything in ancient India. One partially-datable phenomenon, however, is the popularity of *jātaka*s, which are depicted on the *stūpa*s at Bhārhut in perhaps the second or first century BCE. Textual sources are difficult to date, but it is notable that some isolated *jātaka* stories are found in the *sutta*s in the four main *Nikāya*s of the Pāli scriptures, as well as being found in large numbers in scriptures from other Buddhist schools such as the *Mahāvastu* and *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. In contrast, only one past-life story of a *jina* appears in the *aṅga*s of the Śvetāmbara Jain scriptures, arguably the oldest surviving scriptural corpus which is not in any case accepted by the Digambara tradition as authentic.[14] The rest appear primarily in the later genre of Universal Histories, of which the earliest extant examples date from the ninth century, though many of the narratives are drawn from commentaries on a ritual text (the *Āvaśyaka*) from perhaps a couple of centuries earlier.[15] It is thus tempting to ask if past-life stories of *jina*s were included as a response to a powerful Buddhist genre? Could it be that Mahāvīra's multi-life story was composed as a deliberate parallel to the Buddha's, to show the different conceptions of karmic forces? It is difficult to tell to what extent Jain scholar-monks were aware of the narratives of their competitors, but it is very tempting to see the development of Mahāvīra's long lifestory as in some way influenced by an awareness of — and explicit rejection of — the Buddhist *jātaka* genre.

We get some understanding of Jain attitudes towards the Buddhist *jātaka* genre from a medieval (perhaps tenth century) Jain Tamil work called the *Nīlakēci*.[16] In this text a Jain nun called Nīlakēci enters into debate with key religious figures, including several close followers of the Buddha and later the Buddha himself. In several of these debates she challenges the genre of *jātaka* stories, claiming they are ridiculous since they show a foolish Bodhisattva giving away his body parts

14. Both Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains state that the oldest scriptures are lost, and while the former nonetheless compiled a set of core scriptures, the Digambaras rejected their authenticity. For a good overview of the scriptural contents, as well as the dispute over their authenticity, see Dundas 2002, Chapter 3.

15. The *Āvaśyaka-cūrṇi*, which is the earliest narrative commentary on the *Āvaśyakasūtra*, is ascribed to Jinadāsa (sixth or seventh century) and is further supplemented by the sub-commentaries of Haribhadra (eighth century) and Malayagiri (eleventh or twelfth century). For an overview of the *Āvaśyaka* tradition in English see Balbir's contribution to Granoff 2008, 71–73. It is likely that the narrative corpus represented by the *Āvaśyaka* tradition formed the source for much of the material that makes up the *Mahāpurāna* texts, dubbed in English the Universal Histories. These texts relate the history of the current half time-cycle, with a focus upon the lives of the 63 illustrious men: 24 *jina*s, 12 *cakravartin*s, and 9 sets of *vāsudeva*s, *prativāsudeva*s and *baladeva*s. The earliest of these texts are the *Caüppaṇṇamahāprusacariya* by the ninth-century Śvetāmbara monk Śīlaṅka, and the Digambara *Triṣaṣṭilakṣaṇaśrīmahāpurāṇ asaṅgraha* or *Mahāpurāṇa* of Jinasena and Guṇabhadra from the same century. The most well-known text of this genre in scholarly circles, perhaps partly because it is the only one available in a full English translation, is the twelfth-century Śvetāmbara *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacaritra* of Hemacandra (Johnson 1931–1962). For an overview of the Jain genre of *purāṇa*s see Cort and Jaini in Doniger 1993.

16. My understanding of this text is largely based upon the English summary provided by Chakravarti in the introduction to his 1994 edition of the text.

to people who can make no use of them, or to headless men who cannot in any case have survived their decapitation long enough to request a new head! She suggests that the stories contradict the Buddhist non-acceptance of an essential soul or self, since they show an individual progressing through multiple lives, and she asks how it can be that Buddhists can revere the Bodhisattva in the form of an animal and yet still eat meat.[17] Given the time Nīlakēci spends ridiculing the *jātaka* genre, it is clear that it was a lively part of Buddhism at the time. This text suggests that not only did the Jains not feel the need for a *jātaka* genre of their own, they openly mocked the Buddhist love of these stories.

Regardless of the tricky question of historical influence, the lack of a Jain *jātaka* genre can therefore tell us much about Buddhism. By looking at how the two traditions found different ways of understanding the past lives of their founders, our assumptions about the *jātaka* genre are forced into the open. The comparison highlights the way in which *jātaka*s take their meaning from understandings of the *bodhisattva* path and rely upon the possibility of pursuing a self-intentioned future. It reminds us how closely entwined the narrative and doctrinal aspects of the traditions are. We can see how integral the *jātaka* genre is to Buddhist doctrine and practice, and we can begin to appreciate it as a unique genre that marks Buddhist narrative out from its counterparts. As specialists in Buddhism it is all too easy to forget that Buddhism did not emerge in isolation, but rather in dialogue with and opposition to other religious movements such as Jainism, Brahmanical Hinduism and Ājīvikism. A study of how two traditions approached similar questions, such as I have here attempted, can therefore be very revealing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research for this article was supported by a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship.

ABBREVIATIONS

DPPN G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*. http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/dic_idx.html

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17. Her critique of gift-of-the-body *jātaka*s occupies Chapter 2, when she is in debate with the Buddhist nun Kundalakesi. The other criticisms are largely found in Chapter 3, when she debates with the Buddhist monk Arkachandra, though some of the arguments show up again in her discussion with Moggallāna in Chapter 4 (Chakravarti 1994).

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