

Chiastic Structure of the *Vessantara Jātaka*: Textual Criticism and Interpretation Through Inverted Parallelism

(VEN.) SHÌ HUÌFĒNG (釋慧峰)

FÓ GUĀNG UNIVERSITY, TAIWAN R.O.C.

shihweifeng@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The *Vessantara Jātaka* is not only the most popular of all the Buddhist *Jātaka* tales, but is important in the tradition as a whole, generally considered by the Theravādin tradition to display the epitome of the Bodhisatta's perfection of giving (*dānapāramī*). While most studies have focused on philological approaches, numerous questions as to the text's structure and how to interpret individual parts within that structure have remained unresolved (§1. The received tradition of the *Vessantara Jātaka*). My study shall employ the theory of 'chiasmus' (inverted parallelism) to shed new light on both the key message of the story and also the sub-themes within it (§2. Chiastic structures as textual approach). In terms of textual criticism, I shall first elucidate the chiastic structure of the text and discuss how this structure can provide insights on text-critical readings (§3. Textual criticism: Chiastic units and structure). In terms of interpretation, I shall then see how the structure clearly demarcates the text's scope through its prologue and conclusion with surrounding framework, its paired parallel sub-themes, and its central climax point, all in the light of its chiastic structure (§4. Interpretation: A chiastic reading). Finally, considering broader implications, on comparison with other recently discovered Buddhist textual chiasmi I shall present a tentative hypothesis as to the origins of such structures in the 'bodhisatt(v)a' literary genre (§5. Conclusions: Critical and interpretive implications).

Keywords

Vessantara, *jātaka*, chiasmus, structure

1. The received tradition of the *Vessantara Jātaka*

Modern scholarship of the *Vessantara Jātaka* has taken place in the context of its role within the *jātaka* literary genre. In the Theravādin tradition it features as the last and most significant of the 547 birth stories. This scholarship in turn is situated within the modern text-historical tendency to see the so-called Pāli canon as more original when compared to the traditions of East and Central Asia. While the bulk of scholarship on the *Vessantara Jātaka* has focused on the Pāli text from the Theravādin tradition, this *Jātaka* also exists in several other canonical traditions, such as the Sanskrit *Viśvantara*, the Chinese version named *Xūdàna* (**Sudhāna*), the Tibetan story of *Drimekundan*, as well as versions in Newari, Sogdian, Khotanese, Thai, Burmese, Sinhala and others. A more or less complete bibliography of available versions can be found in Cone and Gombrich (1977, 104–105). They also provide an excellent ‘short essay on the development and diffusion’ of this *Jātaka* (xx–xxxviii). Be this as it may, my own study here also focuses on the Pāli text, as a full multiple language study would require far more space than is here permitted to us.

In an excellent recent study entitled *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism* (2010), Naomi Appleton succinctly reviews and summarizes the contemporary Buddhist studies narrative of this important text (Appleton 2010, 25):

The most famous of these stories, both within and outside Asia, is the *Vessantara Jātaka* (JA 547), which according to Theravāda tradition relates Gotama’s last-but-one birth. In it, the Bodhisatta gives away his wife and children in the perfection of his generosity.

In this *jātaka*, the Bodhisatta in his incarnation as Prince Vessantara, ‘gives great gifts, including the royal elephant, his children and wife, thereby perfecting his generosity (*dāna*)’ (Appleton 2010, 72). Many other scholars, such as Margaret Cone and Richard Gombrich (1977, viii–ix), Steven Collins (1998, 497–502) and others, hold largely the same position. The notion of the perfections (*pāramī*) — in this case generosity (*dāna*) — highlights the role *jātakas* play in elucidating the Theravādin path of the Bodhisatta, the great being (*mahāsatta*), culminating in full awakening (*sammā sambuddha*). However, the combination of the two traditional notions that the *Vessantara Jātaka* on one hand focuses on the perfection of generosity as described above, and on the other hand is also said to be the penultimate human rebirth of the Bodhisatta, is not without difficulties: ‘The popularity and priority of the *Vessantara Jātaka* has puzzled scholars, as the story is not about the perfection considered the highest, nor indeed the highest form of the perfection’ (Appleton 2010, 73; see also Cone and Gombrich 1977, xv). Modern scholarship can contend, of course, that attribution of the text as the penultimate human birth is simply an assumption based on the order of the 547 *jātakas* within the Pāli tradition. That is, that the *Vessantara Jātaka* is the last *text* in the canon does not equate to it being a *chronological* ultimate. Still, the issue of the text’s incredible popularity within the tradition remains (Cone and Gombrich 1977, xv).

Within these mainly Pāli based studies, several core issues have been raised. For example, the question of what constitutes the ‘climax’ of the *jātaka*. Cone and Gombrich (1977, xiii) describe their position as follows:

Having earlier referred to Vessantara’s gift of his family, we have narrowed our reference to his crucial gift by calling it the gift of his children. The gift of his wife

Maddi forms a separate episode which follows the gift of the children, and, being Vessantara's final act of renunciation, it might have been expected to constitute a climax; but the reader will soon find that the episode is in fact rather an anti-climax, and extremely brief compared to the central episode with the children.

An argument is given that in ancient Indian culture, to a male figure such as Vessantara, one's wife may have less 'value' than one's children (xiv–xv). However, they still concede that '[f]rom the literary standpoint it is therefore appropriate that his gift of Maddī should be the turning-point' (xiv). Collins concurs with Cone and Gombrich, stating 'Vessantara first gives away his children — this, along with their mother's discovery of their absence and her grieving for them, is clearly the story's centre of gravity' (1998, 500). Also, though less importantly, there is the question of whether or not the elephant returned at the end of the story is the same as that bequeathed at the start (503; Cone and Gombrich 1977, xxviii).

Both the question of the text's 'centre of gravity' and the elephant are related to the overall structure of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, which has not escaped the attention of previous scholars. Sensing the pattern of giving after the 'climax', Cone and Gombrich note that Vessantara 'gets back in reverse order everything he has given' (xiv). Collins, too, sees the duplication of certain scenes, such as the shower of rains in the 'Story of the Present' (*paccuppannavatthu*) when the Buddha humbles his relatives, which is 'taken up twice at the end of the Story of the Past' (*atītavatthu*), first 'when Maddī and the children are reunited', and again at Sakka's rain of jewels on Vessantara's return to the kingdom (Collins 1998, 502). There has been some philological debate about the status of the framing story that leads into the story proper, as to whether or not it originates from the same historical strata. A similar question of stratification between the verse *gāthā* and prose has long been discussed. Here, I tend to agree with Appleton, who, citing Oskar von Hinüber, states that 'since these verses are clearly incomplete without the stories that accompany them, we can assume that they have always circulated with the stories of the past in some (possible quite flexible) form' (Appleton 2010, 7; who references von Hinüber 1998, without page number). Which is to say that, here, I will work with the verse and prose together, and not from an assumption that either can be considered on its own through one or other theory of textual stratification.

Also within the Buddhist tradition itself and between similar narratives, it is worth mentioning another recent work entitled *Rediscovering the Buddha, Legends of the Buddha and Their Interpretation* (2009), by Hans Penner. While focusing on the biography — or rather, hagiography — of Gotama, he situates other important *jātakas* within the longer multiple life trajectory of the Bodhisatta. Penner claims that 'the "biographies" of Vessantara, Gotama, and Mahāsudassana, for example, can be compared as narratives that are constituted by the same structure'; 'In brief, Vessantara goes into exile as an ascetic and returns home as a Universal Monarch' (Penner 2009, 157).

External to the text alone and Buddhist tradition itself, we also have further evidence that is suggestive that clear structures may exist in the *Vessantara Jātaka*. Comparing this South Asian Buddhist classic to the *Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa* of the Hindu epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Gombrich has already demonstrated that they 'are strikingly similar, though not in a way which proves that one has borrowed directly from the other' (Gombrich 1985, 427). He also charts 'the main structural affinities

between the five journeys' of the characters Vessantara, Rāma, Bharata, Jūjaka and Sañjaya between these texts (Gombrich 1985, 433). Most recently, Ajay Rao has drawn from research by Dennis Hudson and Guy Leavitt on structures of the Vedas, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, saying that 'Leavitt also persuasively demonstrates that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is itself an extended ring composition' (Rao 2015, 81). That such Indian epics were originally, and still often are, orally performed and transmitted, provides not only a genre link, but also a consideration when modern studies work with written versions. This is a consideration well observed by Cone and Gombrich (1977, xxi; also Collins 1998, 541–548). The connection between orality and ring composition in the *Rāmāyaṇa* has also been noted by John Brockington (2000, 207, 211). I do not intend here to draw my circle so vast, nor to suggest that this demonstrates let alone proves anything, but merely raise these findings as potential pointers for a direction of investigation, and indicate where broader connections may possibly lie if such investigations are fruitful.

Appleton's point, that many earlier modern studies that are purely philological and structure oriented need to be supplemented with a broader range of methodological approaches, is well made (2010, 8). Here I am not at all attempting to find such things as strata of the text, or to uncover some ur-*Jātaka* by philological or comparative means. Indeed, the very focus of this study here is to apply a particular method for examining the structure of the text as we have it at present. A study is needed which builds on the previously mentioned findings of earlier scholars, which while astutely made, are still begging further examination. That is, a methodology that will give us firmer and more quantifiable evidence to understand the climax of the text and other sub-themes which align around it.

2. Chiastic structures as textual approach

What is that methodology? Several years ago I first hinted at certain structures in the *Vessantara Jātaka* in my doctoral dissertation on the structure of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Orsborn = Shì Huifēng 2012, 389–390). There, only a brief outline of what I propose to do in detail here was given. Penner's structural approach to hagiography through the lives of Gotama, Vessantara or Mahāsudassana, utilizes Arnold van Gennep's theory of liminality evident in various rites of passage. I too shall 'take the myths literally; they mean what they say', which is not to say that I take them in the naïve sense as being descriptive histories (Penner 2009, 121). I have already been particularly struck by the similarities between van Gennep's tripartite structure for rites (van Gennep 1909; see Penner 2009, 161) and Joseph Campbell's three core elements of his 'hero myth' in his now classic *Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell succinctly summarizes the structure of his meta-myth also in a tripartite pattern, as follows (Campbell 1949, 23):

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (x): Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (y): The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (z).

Even a cursory glance at this will remind the reader of the basic form of the *Vessantara Jātaka*: from the prince's banishment into exile, his trials in the hermitage, to his eventual triumphant return. Just as the first and third elements of van Gennep's liminality involve complementary rites of separation and reintegration,

so too Campbell's first and third phases of the hero's journey reflect one another. In textual or narrative terms, this is a type of symmetrical or inverted parallelism.

Such structures are in fact very common in ancient and classical religious and secular literature, from the Bible to the Greek classics (overview in Welch 1981; Douglas 2007), and even modern classics such as Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham* (1988 [1960]). Parallel textual structures can take numerous forms on micro or macro scales, for example, a few lines of verse or an entire epic. In form, they can potentially be bipartite, that is two reflected or inverted halves, such as:

Simple inverted parallelism: A – B – C... | ...C' – B' – A'

Or, they can be tripartite, having a third element X which is distinctly different from the paralleled and inverted elements A – A', B – B', etc., such as:

Simple inverted parallelism with unique centre: A – B – C... | X | ...C' – B' – A'

With a non-inverted element X in the centre. Or, as follows, with the distinct and unique element X at the end:

Simple inverted parallelism with unique conclusion: A – B – C... | ...C' – B' – A' | X

The first type of tripartite inverted symmetrical form with a clear unique centre can be known as 'chiasmus', 'ring composition', 'introverted parallelism', 'pedimental' or 'step' structures, among other names. Here I shall use the term 'chiasmus' to describe such textual structures, using the name which 'derives from the ancient Greek letter *'chi'* χ, which represents the symmetrical cross-over (X) turning point of the two sides of the chiasmus' (Welch 1981, 7). Above, I have mentioned Rao's use of 'ring composition' (2015). While knowledge of such structures existed in ancient and pre-modern times, modern textual studies utilizing this approach effectively began with Nils Lund (for an example of his work, see bibliography), who's ground-breaking work on chiasmus in the Old Testament has since started 'one of the most salient developments in the study of ancient literature over the past few decades' (Welch 1981, 9). For example, in a recent study of the Islamic Sufi master Rumi's *Mathnawi* by Seyed Safavi and Simon Weightman (2010), the theory of chiasmus dramatically reveals underlying structures in a text previously thought to be quite free of any structure by both the Sufi tradition itself, and modern scholarship (40–43). Recognizing such inverted parallelism in ancient and classical texts can bring about entirely new ways of understanding the text's history and composition, as well as novel strategies of interpretation. Though, if the original author(s) intended such structures, obviously the novelty is only to those who previously have been unable to see it.

Renowned religious anthropologist Mary Douglas has outlined seven main principles of chiasmus in her recent work *Thinking in Circles* (2007, 7), which we may summarize as follows:

1. Prologue: A, sets the scope, anticipates the centre and conclusion.
2. Split into two halves: This is the symmetrical parallelism.
3. Parallel sections: i.e. A – B – C... | X | ...C' – B' – A'.
4. Indicators to mark sections: Key phrases or expressions.
5. Central loading: Turning climax point X holds the key message.
6. Rings within rings: e.g. A – B(a – b – c – x – c' – b' – a) – C..., etc.
7. Conclusion: A', concludes prologue, both structurally and thematically.

In particular, three of these points are most definitive of chiasmus: the initial prologue (A) which is mirrored by the final conclusion (A'), and a climatic central crux (X) in the middle through which the two halves are reflected. In a sense, not only prologue and conclusion but the entirety of the two parallel halves can function to highlight or frame the central crux. Parallel literary units may have the same basic themes, but also be inverted in sense, such as having the same character, but in differing roles of first a fool then a sage. Other of the seven features may or may not be present, such as the complex matter of rings within rings. An eighth point could also be added by Douglas herself, known as a 'latch', which is a secondary conclusion to a chiasmic structure. If a latch is present, 'the first ending will finish the immediate business' as outlined in the prologue, but the 'second ending [i.e. the latch] will set the text as a whole in a larger context, less parochial, more humanist, or even metaphysical' (Douglas 2007, 126). This may make us think of how each *jātaka* is framed by a story of the present (*paccuppannavatthu*). It is worth noting that such structures differ significantly from the dominant narrative structures in modern culture. For example, the Hollywood movie which places the climax very close to the end of the plot, and not at all in the narrative's centre. This can perhaps partially explain why such ancient parallel structures, once so popular, often go unnoticed by modern readers and scholars alike. For example, note the changes of structure from the original books of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954, 1955) to that found in the modern movie format directed by Peter Jackson, particularly at the conclusion of his *Return of the King* (2003).

On the practical issue of the application of chiasmus theory to an actual text, D. A. Dorsey's work with the Hebrew Old Testament provides an excellent three step process (1999, 16–41): '(1) identifying the composition's constituent parts ("units"), (2) analysing the arrangement of those parts, and (3) considering the relationship of the composition's structure to its meaning (i.e. identifying the structure's role in conveying the composition's message).' In terms of my presentation here, however, I feel that the processes of steps (1) and (2) can be covered simultaneously. Together they function as textual criticism, in the classic sense of establishment of the authentic text. Step (3), which interprets meaning, thus functions as a hermeneutic tool to read the now critically established text. Though, in effect, all three steps mutually condition each other, as per the standard hermeneutic circle.

3. Textual criticism: chiasmic units and structure

We may now return to the *Vessantara Jātaka* itself, undertaking first a critical chiasmic analysis (steps 1 and 2) and then an interpretative reading of the material (step 3). Above (§1. The Received Tradition of the *Vessantara Jātaka*) I have already discussed some observations of Cone and Gombrich (1977), Gombrich (1985), Collins (1998) and others that were related to the possible structure of the text. First of all, I shall give my own schematic presentation of the individual textual narrative units that make up the *Jātaka*, which already shows their positions within the structure.

For my own analysis which follows, I have labelled the individual units on either side of the *Jātaka* proper from A — ... — E and conversely E' — ... — A', with the centre as X. In addition, as the story itself is framed within the narrative

context of the Buddha telling the story to explain a given situation in his own present life, I have added [A] and [A'] as frames both before the prologue and after the conclusion of the *Jātaka* proper. We will see that these frames function something like Douglas' 'latch' elements, as they bring the immediate story into a broader context, though they differ from her use of the term in that they are also paired at *start and finish*.

Page numbers in parentheses marked 'VJ_E' refer to the default *English* standard, the Pāli Text Society English translation edition of the *Jātakas*, Vol. VI, translated by Cowell and Rouse (1907); and those marked 'VJ_P' contain the references to the Pāli Text Society *Pāli* edition of the *Jātakas*, Vol. V, edited by V. Fausbøll (1896).

My proposed chiastic structure for the *Vessantara Jātaka* is as in Figure 1:

[A]	Story of the present: The Buddha returns to Sakyans' Kapilavatthu. The Elders are conceited, but humbled by the Buddha's twin miracle. A rain falls.	VJ _E 246; VJ _P 479
A	Story of the past: Vessantara is born, Queen Phusatī is granted ten boons, and a rain bestowing white elephant appears. Vessantara marries Maddī, and is consecrated as king.	VJ _E 252; VJ _P 487
B	Vessantara gives away many gifts. He gives the white elephant to brahmins from Kāliṅga.	VJ _E 253; VJ _P 488
C	Banished into exile with wife Maddī and children Jāli and Kaṇhājinā. Establish a hermitage on Mount Vaṃka.	VJ _E 264; VJ _P 511
D	Corrupt brahmin Jūjaka from Kāliṅga. Maddī's ill omen dream. Jūjaka claims Jāli and Kaṇhājinā, who are given away.	VJ _E 270; VJ _P 521
E	Sakka appears as a brahmin and claims Maddī, who is given away.	VJ _E 292; VJ _P 569
X	Vessantara declares his goal of omniscience: 'Both Jāli and Kaṇhājinā I let another take, And Maddī my devoted wife, and all for wisdom's sake. Not hateful is my faithful wife, nor yet my children are, But perfect knowledge, to my mind, is something dearer far.'	VJ _E 293; VJ _P 570
E'	Sakka returns Maddī, grants eight boons.	VJ _E 294; VJ _P 571
D'	Jāli and Kaṇhājinā led to Jetuttara. Sañjaya has a premonitory dream. He reclaims and reunites the children. Jūjaka rewarded, but later dies.	VJ _E 295; VJ _P 573
C'	Sañjaya, Phusatī, children, and elephant go to hermitage to receive Vessantara.	VJ _E 299; VJ _P 581
B'	Rain falls on the now reunited family.	VJ _E 301; VJ _P 586
A'	Vessantara is reinstated as king. Shower of jewels from Sakka. End of the <i>Vessantara Jātaka</i> proper.	VJ _E 302; VJ _P 588
[A']	Story of the present: The Buddha explains the characters' present personalities.	VJ _E 305; VJ _P 593

Figure 1. Chiastic structure of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.

A question may arise at this point of the analysis that demands a response before we can proceed. It concerns the textual lengths of each of the units that make up the structure. Not only are individual units not of equal length, but even paralleled pairs may differ somewhat in length. In general, the sections in the first half tend to be longer than those of the second. The centre is quantifiably 75% of the way through the story in the Pāli. I believe that this can possibly be explained by reference to the text's status as a work for recitation performance, and findings in Albert Lord's classic study on such oral performance literature. That is, more often than not greater time can be given to the performance or recitation of the start of the text, often through use of variations of standard tropes, and the end is shortened, all mainly due to audience engagement or lack thereof (Lord 2000, 16–17). As Appleton and others have already suggested, the reciters (*bhāṇaka*) of the *Jātakas* 'might double up as storytellers; indeed, their specialism could hardly be anything else' (Appleton 2010, 52). My working maxim here is that sheer length alone is less important in delineating a chiastic literary unit of text than thematic content.

4. Interpretation: A chiastic reading

Having established the above structure of the individual and paired units vis-à-vis the whole, the next task is to read and interpret the text. That is, not only read in the standard linear format, but also synoptically in the sense of reading each unit together with its paralleled pair (Safavi and Weightman 2009, 46–47). The most significant reading will be the three core elements of paired prologue [A] – A and conclusion A' – [A'], which I shall link to B – B'. (By merely delineating fewer but larger literary units, one could easily combine A – B and B' – A' into two, rather than four, units, respectively.) I shall then examine the other paired units B – ... – E | E' – ... – B', which while more clearly displaying an inverted parallel structure, play a less important role in the entire narrative. Finally, I shall then read the unique central climax point X. (Again, as per the prologue and conclusion, by merely creating wider units of the text, one could conceivably meld E – X – E' into a single central point.)

4.1. Framed prologue and conclusion

Let us begin not with the *Jātaka* proper, but the framework around it, that is, the 'conditions' (*nidāna*) story, which I have labelled as unit [A]. This is traditionally referred to as the 'Story of the Present' (*paccuppannavatthu*), as compared to the 'Story of the Past' (*atītavatthu*) which is the *Jātaka* proper. Hajime Nakamura's *Gotama Buddha* (2000, 332–343) provides an excellent presentation of this story in the broader context of the Buddha's life. As mentioned above, while aware of the debate around whether or not this framework story was *originally* part of the *Jātaka*, as Appleton (2010, 7) and von Hinüber (1998) suggest, the framework most likely circulated with the story proper in some form or another from very early times. I shall work with the received version of that which is present today.

The context of the framework of unit [A] is the Buddha's first return to the Sakyan capital of Kapilavatthu, where he dwelt at the Banyan Park (*nigrodhārāma*). The Sakyan elders sent the children and youths to venerate him first, while they merely sat without paying respect, thinking him to be their younger kinsman. The Buddha, knowing their haughty pride, performed the twin miracle

(*yamakapātihāriya*), which moved his father, the king Suddhodana, to pay obeisance in the manner he did when the prince first encountered the sage Asita, and again when as a young boy he meditated beneath the tree at the ploughing festival. The remaining Sakyans could then not help but pay respect too, their hearts humbled and awed. The heavens then opened, and rain showered upon the assembled Sakyan clan. The Buddha states, 'This is not the first time, Brethren, that a great shower of rain has fallen upon my kinsfolk' (VJ_E 247; VJ_P 480).

The *Vessantara Jātaka* proper then begins, my unit A. The story starts with a lengthy outline of several generations of royal lineage, including a reference to the renunciation and liberation of a princess under Kassapa Buddha (VJ_P 481; VJ_E 248). While this otherwise minor comment may appear to be mere indulgence in aristocratic fancy, Collins (1998, 553) suggests that it may form a link to the greatest 'felicity' of the Buddhist tradition, that of *nibbāna*, one which connects back to Gotama in the present, and to the climax of the story which also refers to ultimate omniscience, a quality of Buddhahood. At the end of the family history, we learn of the Bodhisatta's descent from the heavens to be conceived in the womb of Queen Phusatī of Jetuttara. The queen is granted ten boons by Sakka at the prince's birth. Both before and after the birth, much alms and gift giving is performed. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly considering the preceding framework, a white elephant (*nāga*) appears in the royal stables on the day of his birth. This elephant is endowed with the power to bestow rains, thus leading to the prosperity of the nation. Prince Vessantara grows up and is consecrated as king of the Sivi in Jetuttara.

Moving out of the immediate prologue, in unit B, this auspicious elephant is given by Vessantara to neighbouring Kāliṅga for the express purpose of relieving drought (which implies that Jetuttara is now also at risk). The consternation caused by the loss of the elephant leads to Vessantara's fall from public and royal grace, and his separation from family and kin (in unit C, below).

Turning now to the end of the *Jātaka*, in unit B', the rain bringing elephant has now been returned (but see C' below, for discussion), pacifying the outrage of the people of Jetuttara. The separated family has also already been reunited (in unit C'), whereupon a divine shower of rain falls upon them all.

In the conclusion at unit A', Vessantara is reinstated as the king of the Sivi people in Jetuttara. Here, he continues his generosity which inspires even the gods to shower jewels upon the city, furthering their wealth and good fortune. Thus ends the story proper, wherein ultimately those separated are reunited and that which is lost is reclaimed. Everyone in the story lives happily ever after, as they say.

There is still the final framing element, unit [A'], after the story proper is finished. This takes an entirely standard *jātaka* form, with simple allusion to which of the characters in the story of the past is which present day relation or disciple of the Buddha. The story is not explicitly brought back to the circumstances of the newly awakened Buddha returning to Kapilavatthu, but is entirely generic. In Douglas' terminology, this may act similarly to a 'latch'. We are told of the present life characters who were the characters in the *jātaka* of the past, such as Maddī who is now (predictably) Yasodharā, Jāli who has become Rāhula, Sañjaya who is now Suddhodana, and so forth. I shall return to this below (at §4.3. Central Climax Point), when I connect this framework of the story of the present with the climatic point at the centre of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, through my chiastic reading.

Paying attention to the key elements, themes and structures within the *Jātaka*, the connections seem fairly clear: The Buddha — or rather Prince Gotama — had several years hence gone forth from the Sakya clan, leaving father and step-mother, wife and child, kinsmen and relatives behind. On his return, some explanation was expected, if not demonstrated. The rain, as symbolized by the elephant, represents not just material wealth and prosperity of abundant harvest. An elephant — a *nāga* — is also synonymous with a holy sage, such as either the Bodhisatta or the Buddha himself. I believe that other connotations include the royal consecration or anointment by water is also relevant here. The start of the story involves secular kingship, but the end indicates righteous *Dharma* kingship. Another potential symbolism of the ‘rain’ metaphor could be that of teaching the *Dharma* itself, that is, just as the rain cloud showers forth rain which nourishes the plants of the earth, so too the teacher teaches the *Dharma* which spiritually nourishes sentient beings. This is, of course, exactly what Gotama’s return to Kapilavatthu entails for the Sakyans, His claim of *Dharma* kingship and teaching of the *Dharma*. The characters in the *Jātaka* thus so closely match those of the present Gotama incarnation that an explanation is barely needed. The implied message is also that the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu will all live happily ever after, due to Gotama’s return, just as did the Sivi of Jetuttara on Vessantara’s reinstatement.

4.2. Two parallel halves

The bulk of the two parallel halves are the paired literary units B — B’, C — C’, D — D’, and E — E’ (we have already covered the first). Let us now look at each of these to confirm the parallelism, and to read and interpret them chiasmically. This material I shall cover more briefly, as the critical element is really the central climax point, which I shall cover last of all.

Unit C is Vessantara’s banishment into exile with his wife Maddī and two children — Jāli and Kaṇhājīnā — from Jetuttara to a wilderness hermitage on Mount Vaṃka. The banishment, while ordered by his father the king, is due to the people’s displeasure at the loss of the white elephant as a gift to brahmins of Kālīṅga (as discussed above). The familial separation is between these four and their parents — Sañjaya and Phusatī — and the Sivi people. In the parallel, unit C’, Sañjaya and Phusatī, along with the children and the people of Jetuttara, along with some or other returned elephant (see below), all go forth to the hermitage to receive Vessantara and Maddī.

For C — C’, I have already mentioned the theme of separation from and reunion with family and kin as the broader context of this *Jātaka*. However, if we parallel this with Gotama’s situation, there are differences: For example, Vessantara goes into exile with wife and children; and his parents and kinsmen go to receive him in the hermitage before they return home. If we were to accept the ‘story of the present’ as the outer framework for the whole story proper, one could suggest that this implies that ultimately Gotama’s family will also renounce, which occurs later in the long term hagiographical account. Also, there is almost the implication that just as Vessantara was banished by kinsmen and father, that Gotama’s father and kin are also somehow partly responsible for his leaving home. However, this would require more evidence to show an entire parallelism between the story of Vessantara and that of Gotama, above and beyond the mere

framework of the ‘story of the present’, which while itself is part of the received tradition, we cannot fully ascertain as being original to the *Jātaka*.

Detailing C’, I above said ‘some or other returned elephant’, in that there is some debate about whether this is the original blessed tusker whose gifting to Kālīṅga led to Vessantara’s troubles in the first place, or some other elephant. In our English translation, a footnote is added with reference from the commentary, stating ‘The people of Kāsi had returned him to Sañjaya, ruin having fallen in their country; he trumpeted with joy because he expected to see his mother again’ (Cowell and Rouse 1907, 299 n1). This seems to imply that it was the same elephant, but can we believe this traditional exegesis? I agree with Cone and Gombrich in that ‘*paccaya*’ is likely not the *name* of the beast (1977, xxviii), which rules this out as evidence to support such a reading. Collins further argues that it seems quite unlikely that it is the same creature, because while the story itself perhaps covers only months or years, the elephant on return is described as being both born at the same time (*sahajātā*) as Vessantara and also sixty years old (*saṭṭhihāyano*) at the end of the story (Collins 1998, 503, 519–520). However, Cone and Gombrich counter that it is a ‘misinterpretation’ to read *sahajātā* as ‘born at the same time’, but rather it is ‘of equal birth’, that is, royal. Moreover, the phrase *kuñjaro saṭṭhihāyano* — ‘elephant of sixty years’ — appears to be a stock phrase, occurring numerous times in the *Vessantara Jātaka* alone. On purely philological evidence alone, it is thus still difficult to convincingly demonstrate whether or not this is the same elephant. Here, while my chiastic reading also cannot *prove* the case, where units C — C’ feature the reunion of all the other main characters within the story (excepting Jūjaka, who has his own entrance and exit at D — D’), it would seem more than fitting that it should indeed be the same worthy tusker. Perhaps the commentators cited by Cowell and Rouse also sensed this need in the narrative for the resolution of one of the original protagonists of the whole saga.

As the story progresses in unit D, we are introduced to the corrupt old brahmin Jūjaka of Kālīṅga. He is shamed by his young wife — acquired in payment of a debt — to find servants, lest she be unfaithful to him. So, hearing of Vessantara, he seeks to beg for the children as his slaves. Maddī has an ill-omened dream where a man clad in black dismembers her and rips out her heart. This foretells the brahmin’s visit during her absence where Vessantara gives him the children, though doing so in great pain and distress. Jūjaka drags them away to the forest, heading home for Kālīṅga. By unit D’, the gods have caused Jūjaka to unwittingly lead the children instead to the city Jetuttara of their grandfather, Sañjaya, all the while protecting them from grave harm along the way. Here it is Sañjaya’s turn to dream, though this premonition is auspicious, in which a man gifts him blossoms as earrings. The king arranges to have the children buy their own freedom from the brahmin, at the price previously set by Vessantara at the time of their giving away. Jūjaka, so rewarded, appears to now have no need to return to his young wife, but gorges himself and promptly dies through his gluttony.

In D — D’, the paralleled entrance and exit of Jūjaka is clear enough, likewise the matched ill and auspicious dreams, and the separation and return of the children. Other parallels can also be drawn, I believe, such as the virtuous and faithful marriage between Vessantara and Maddī, versus that of Jūjaka and Amittātapana. There is also a contrast between just Jetuttara and conniving Kālīṅga, to where,

recall, the white elephant was gifted which precipitated the drama in the first place.

Drawing tighter around the centre now, we reach unit E. Sakka, witnessing the preceding events, plans to disguise himself as a brahmin and beg of Vessantara none other than dearest Maddī herself: ‘Thus I will enable him to attain the supreme height of perfection’ (VJ_E 292; VJ_P 568), all fully intending to return her immediately thereafter. Note that the ‘supreme height of perfection’ (*pāramikūṭaṃ*) does not explicitly state ‘giving’ (*dāna*). Though, while *dāna* is not the last perfection, according to the Theravāda tradition, any of the perfections can be of three degrees, as ‘perfection’ (*pāramī*), ‘intermediate perfection’ (*upapāramī*) and ‘ultimate perfection’ (*paramatthapāramī*). Sakka *qua* brahmin describes Vessantara’s generosity ‘As a great water-flood (*vārivaho*) is full and fails not any day’ (VJ_E 293); where *vārivaho* is elsewhere attested as ‘rain-cloud’ (see PED), directly connecting to the rains and white elephant themes at units A – A’.

At unit E’, Maddī is immediately returned to Vessantara by Sakka, who praises her virtues and their harmonious pairing. The god also grants eight boons to the Bodhisatta, which include all manner of worldly yet noble aspirations, such as reclamation of the throne, as well as family felicity. These boons also reflect the ten boons granted his mother, Phusatī, at the time of his birth, in unit A. (Recall that Campbell’s core tripartite formula also features ‘boons’.) Classic chiasmic structures connect prologue and conclusion not only to each other, but also interlock them with the central theme. In this sense, we can read E – X – E’ as a broader centre than X alone, merely depending on how we delineate each of the literary units.

4.3. Central climax point

All this finally brings us all to the central climax point itself, the unique critical crux of unit X. Here, Vessantara affirms to the brahmin (Sakka) his commitment to giving, by giving away Maddī while pouring water upon his right hand. This is yet another use of water to sanctify a rite, following the ancient Indian practice. The *Jātaka* verses at this point describe Maddī as not being dismayed at all, but rather silently accepting and deferring to Vessantara, thinking ‘He knows best the reason why’ (VJ_E 293; VJ_P 570). The last four lines of the verses are Vessantara’s own explanation of his extreme act of generosity, the English of which I produce here in full (VJ_E 293), along with the Pāli (VJ_P 570):

Both Jāli and Kaṇhājina I let another take,
And Maddī my devoted wife, and all for wisdom’s sake.
Not hateful is my faithful wife, nor yet my children are,
But perfect knowledge, to my mind, is something dearer far.

*Jāliṃ kaṇhājinaṃ dhītaṃ, maddiṃ devīṃ patibbataṃ;
Cajamāno na cintesiṃ, bodhiyāyeva kāraṇā.
Na me dessā ubho puttā, maddī devī na dessiyā;
Sabbāññutaṃ piyaṃ mayhaṃ, tasmā piye adāsahan’ti.*

This verse, our chiasmic structure would tell us, is the heart of the story. A question may arise at this point, however: is this central climax indeed the ‘perfection of giving’ (*dānapāramī*), as classic and modern readings of this tale assure us? The term ‘giving’ (*dāna*) is not directly used in the verse, though ‘relinquish-

ing' (*cajamāno*) is. Still, verses are confined by metrical and other restraints, so we cannot give too much weight to this alone. In this translation, 'wisdom' is *bodhi*, and 'perfect knowledge' is *sabbanññuta*, both of which are largely used to refer to the awakened omniscience of a Sambuddha. Wisdom (*paññā*) is also one of the perfections in both the Theravādin and Mahāyāna traditions, though it has a different status in each, the fourth of ten and the last of sixth, respectively. While related terms such as *bodhi* and *sabbaññuta* can and do have specific distinct technical senses, in general they could be considered in this same category. But it seems hard to argue that such wisdom is the central focus of the text, as it plays little or no part in the prologue and conclusion (which we would expect from a standard chiastic form), or in any of the paralleled sub-themes for that matter.

We can say that the particular type of 'giving' at the crux of the story is less in the usual sense of the term, where it is to benefit the recipient. Rather, it is the relinquishing of attachments for the sake of the higher, the ultimate goal of liberation, *nibbāna*. In terms of the later developed Theravādin system of ten perfections, perhaps this is as much renunciation (*nekkhama*; Skt: **naiṣkramya* in PED) as giving (*dāna*). With its oft used Buddhist sense of abandoning the lifestyle of the householder, this would accord well with the general themes of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, both in the 'story of the present' of Gotama's return to the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu, and also the 'story of the past' of Vessantara's exile into the forest (even though accompanied by wife and children). I am well aware that the notion of assigning the various *jātakas* to particular perfections is itself a later tradition. However, our chiastic reading of this central point — itself within the context of prologue and conclusion — does suggest a sense of giving that shades into such renunciation. This giving-cum-renunciation itself is importantly associated with, and done for the sake of, the ultimate goal of full Buddhahood. In the standard later Theravāda list of the ten perfections, *paññā* is placed immediately after *nekkhamma*.

Chiastic centres are only such in relation to the prologue and conclusion, and remaining structure. Therefore, if we consider the broader contextual framing of units [A — A'] of the 'story of the present' (see above, §4.1. Framed Prologue and Conclusion), we can also read this as representing the message of Gotama to his Sakyan family and kinsmen on his first return to his homeland after his midnight renunciation years before: I left you to seek awakening, just as Vessantara gave away all for awakening. We need merely substitute the names of Yasodharā and Rāhula for the names of Maddī and the children, and can also substitute the other members of his direct family and clan such as Suddhodana for Sañjaya and the Cetaputto for Channa, and so on. This is the standard chiastic way of reading the centre of a chiasmus as pointing to the end of the story, with the standard *jātaka* attribution of characters in the 'story of the past' with the 'story of the future' (VJ_p 593; VJ_E 305). The resolution of roles past to present only occurs at the framing conclusion [A'], but the central climax anticipates this, as per Douglas' criteria #1 (2007, 7) (see above at §2. Chiastic Structures as Textual Approach).

5. Conclusions: Critical and interpretive implications

So ends my chiastic reading of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, that is, a reading and interpretation of the text which is consciously aware of its inverted parallel structure and the significance of that structure for determining meaning. We may now

return with some reflections on our understanding of the text as discussed at the beginning of this essay, to see if any light can be shed on them through such a chiasmic reading.

One of the most fundamental explanations of the text is that it epitomizes the Bodhisatta's perfection of generosity (*dānapāramī*). It is already known that this exact term only appears once in the actual text, when Vessantara foresees Jūjaka's request. Though, due to the frequency and extremity of gift giving, this attribution seems understandable. For a chiasmic text, however, sheer quantity alone is, however, insufficient to indicate the central theme. All the parallel elements A – A', B – B', etc. appear at least twice, whereas the core, X, only once. Our core in this case gives us a nuance to this giving, showing it to tend heavily toward renunciation (*nekkhamma*), which would later become another of the ten perfections in the Theravādin tradition. We must keep in mind, too, that the *raison d'être* of this giving cum renunciation is the intention to attain the perfection of gnosis and awakening, another theme that would only later gain greater emphasis as various vehicles (*yāna*) of Buddhist practice emerged.

Furthermore, when we consider the scope as delineated by the framing of [A – A'] and A – A', we see another important theme which I feel has been largely overlooked in the understanding of the text. That theme is one of separation from *and reunion* from family and kin, not mere separation as giving alone. Ultimately, all will be reunited again, though the original relationships will be transformed at reunion due to the content of the central point X. That is, for Vessantara (A – A), while reinstated as king, he has now demonstrated his ability to give up and renounce everything. For Gotama ([A – A']), which brings us to the broader framework, the 'latch' as it were, his renunciation and giving up of the status of a worldly prince and heir apparent is now matched by his return as a *Dharma* king. His former family relationships will now all transform as his worldly subjects become his spiritual disciples.

Finally, we have uncovered several other minor but largely neglected thematic elements due to their prominence at the prologue, conclusion, and centre. One of these is the notion of the elephant (*nāga*) as rain bringer; matched by the sage's teaching of *Dharma* which brings spiritual harvests. I also feel that while still unproven, the elephant at the end of the story could quite likely have been intended to be the original rain-bestowing elephant at the start of the story. Another theme is the role of the gods, who arrange all the behind-the-scenes details, and grant boons to the virtuous, safeguarding them from harm. Likewise the role of dreams – good or bad – as portents of significant events. None of these sub-themes are unknown in Buddhism, in fact they are very common, and I do not at all mean to claim that I have first discovered them here. But seeing them in their structural role within a chiasmic inverted story helps bring them more clearly into relief and elucidate more clearly some of their characteristics.

Beyond the *Vessantara Jātaka* itself, a broader question that lies behind almost every discovery of chiasmus is that of intentionality. Are such structures consciously built into the text? For example, for memorization? Studies on oral tradition, such as those of Albert Lord, may show a connection according to Douglas (2007, 12). Several scholars have already discussed the earlier oral qualities of *jātakas* such as this (Cone and Gombrich 1977, xxi–xxii, xxvi; Collins 1998, 541). Are they natural 'hard-wired' forms, perhaps traceable to some kind of fundamental

human psychology behind all such narrative forms? We could thus hypothesize why chiasmus is found across cultures, places, and times, and the now emerging field of Indian chiasmi further widens this range. Campbell's meta-myth approach seems to support such a position, as would Roman Jakobson (in Douglas 2007, 40, 125). From an emic perspective, the Buddhist notion of cyclic time and cyclical events as the nature of things (*dhammatā*) could suggest a sense of deeper meta-structure. Either of these would support the fact that alternate versions of the text have the same key elements, though details may vary. Such full circle structures are also very fulfilling both emotionally and intellectually, even if only perceived subconsciously. Not only is the entirety of the story's narrative plot tension resolved (especially at prologue and conclusion), but each specific event is resolved in turn, every character exits the scene in the exact reverse order to their introduction into the greater narrative. (For example, see Tolkien's original *The Return of the King*, 1955.) With such (hidden) structural perfection, no wonder this text is so popular. A shift from oral to textual tradition may freeze the otherwise rigid structure with flexible specifics into the given versions of a text that we have today. It may also explain why such classically common forms are now so difficult to identify — modern readers (or viewers) are more accustomed to a climax right before the end of the plot, than at the centre. (For example, compare Tolkien with Jackson, 2003.)

Another issue that warrants examination is the relationship between chiasmic structures, which in their simplest forms are tripartite, and that of the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal structures of van Gennepe and others' 'rites of passage'. I refer the interested reader to Penner's insights raised earlier in his *Rediscovering the Buddha* (2009). A similar question of *ritual* intentionality may be raised to textual intentionality. All of these issues may help us, as Appleton suggests, break free from a purely text historical or philological methodology, to see the performance of the text and how it functions in ritual contexts. This may provide new vistas on the old question of the primacy of myth or text (narrative). I shall leave aside further probing of such questions here, but may return to reconsider these once further examples of Buddhist chiasmi have been unearthed and analysed, so that we may draw on a broader and richer range of actual demonstrated case studies.

My earlier discovery several years ago of very clear chiasmic structures in the smaller (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā*) *Prajñāpāramitā* included such strict yet complex constructions as rings within rings, and an entire *avadāna* as a latch formation (Orsborn = Shì Huifēng 2012). While there are differences between *jātakas* and *avadānas*, they are nearly synonymous in many circumstances. Another forthcoming paper will consider textual chiasmus and rhetorical apophysis in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, another well-known early Mahāyāna *sūtra* which also ends with an *avadāna* (Shì Huifēng, forthcoming). Between these few examples — an early Mahāyāna *sūtra* featuring an *avadāna*, a second Mahāyāna *sūtra*, and this study of a *jātaka* in its form preserved by the Theravāda — there are obvious commonalities in terms of genre, despite their differences. Together, they may raise some important questions, such as whether similarly structured texts may originate within the same tradition of reciters (*bhāṇaka*); or different groups which nonetheless have similar methods of textual generation and preservation; and whether categorization of texts by so-called philosophical schools such as 'Theravāda' versus 'Mahāyāna',

or by differing canonical languages, may be less helpful than envisioning a more commonly shared ‘*bodhisatt(v)a literature*’ genre that spans such schools and linguistic boundaries. My hypothesis at this point, as I attempt to delve deeper into the possible existence of an underlying model for such chiasmic structures in this broad genre of texts, is that they may be derived from the biography – or rather, the hagiography – of the Buddha himself. I shall have to leave this topic for a separate study in the future, though, as it rapidly looms into a far larger scope than anything I can attempt here.

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