

# **The Jākatas in Narratives and Buddhist Art in Lao Culture<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The Jākatas have no little importance in the Laos' cultural way. This article is aimed at the roles and significance of the Jākatas in the way of life of the Laos as apparent in narratives and Buddhist arts. The study reveals that the Jākatas, or stories of the Bodhisattva play important roles and are prevalent in Lao culture. The prominent characteristics of the Jākatas in Lao art is the simple style of presenting Buddhist art, the adaptation of the stories to be compatible to life, ideas and beliefs as well as way of living. Buddhist art in Lao culture is aimed to present spiritual messages about karma and doing good through the Buddhist art that can be perceived through the sense organs and thoroughly reach people, reflecting the wisdom, to represent the identity of the people in Lao culture in respect of society, life, and Buddhist ideas and beliefs.

**Keywords:** Jākata; Buddhist art; Lao culture

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## Introduction

The term Lao culture in this article is used in a broad definition referring to the cultural space of Laos and the Isan region of Thailand, which was formerly called Lan Xang. The cultures in this area are similar. Laos and Isan have strongly related cultures in respect of history, politics and government, kinship, language and culture. Isan used to be a part of Lan Xang and there has been intermigration and thus settlement of the groups of people in the Isan and Lao cultural lineage, resulting in the exchange of art and culture between the left shore of the Mekong River, which is Lan Xang, and the shore of the northeastern or Isan region of Thailand. Hence, in the historical and cultural perspectives, Isan and Laos are inseparable, especially in respect of ideas and beliefs and religion. It is obvious that they share the Buddhist faith and it is Buddhism that is the major inspiration for all kinds of artistic creation – literature, painting, sculpture. Their contents are about Buddhism and thus they are generally called Buddhist art.



**Figure 1:** Laos Cultural Map (Wongthes, 2013)

The Jākatas constitute one scripture of the Tipitaka. The Jākatas

are stories of the past of the Buddha when he was a Bodhisattva who fulfilled all kinds of acts of merit to perfection before he attained enlightenment and became the Buddha. The Jākatas have importance in Buddhist societies because it has been believed since ancient times that they are stories about the Buddha, so they are no ordinary narratives but sacred stories of the prophet.

The Jākatas or the stories of the Bodhisattva are very important ideas and beliefs in Isan and Lao culture. That is, there appear numerous tales, fables, legends, traditions, and rituals relevant and linked to the Jākatas in the form of Buddhist art, especially for the Ten Birth Stories of the Buddha, which is the period of greatest merit-making of the Buddha.

The most conspicuous Jākata in the way of life of the Isan and Lao people is the Vessantara Jākata, which exists in several versions and is used in preaching to the people in the Vessantara Jākata Sermon Ceremony, or Bunpaved Festival, which is one of the 12 heets (traditions) of the Lao people. The Vessantara Jākata also appears in other kinds of Buddhist art, such as mural painting, pata, and Vessantara Scrolls. Nevertheless, the Vessantara Jākata is not the only Jākata to be found. There also appear other Jākatas, both those in the Nipata and those outside the Nipata in the Buddhist art of Lao culture.

In this research article, I aimed to study the roles and importance of the Jākatas in Lao culture by using information on Buddhist art, i.e., narratives and murals, as the main type of information in the analysis and using it as evidence in discussing opinions to indicate the importance and relation of the Jākatas to the way of life of the people in Lao culture.

### **The Jākatas as Buddhist Art**

Buddhist art is art with subject matters about Buddhism, which conveys ideas through symbols and concrete art instead of through the abstract. The principle of Buddhist art is to convey Buddhist dharma with artistic beauty as a tool for comprehending the dharma. Buddhist art has characteristics of art: (1) the passion that inspires artists to convey

certain feelings for others to perceive, (2) the expression of those feelings, through craftsmanship of aptitude and capacity and (3) the works through which the feelings are expressed must have the proportions that are put together into a complete unit; they must have unity. (Pongprapan, 1961: 255-256). Buddhist art is created from faith in Buddhism. At the same time, Buddhist art is created to inspire faith in Buddhism as well. Hence, Buddhist artwork is artwork created from the faith of the creators and the perceivers in Buddhism, and in a manner of speaking, Buddhist art is therefore a major factor for spreading the religion more widely.

The Jākatas form a scripture in the Tipitaka that tells about the stories of the past lives of the Buddha as a Bodhisattva fulfilling acts of merit in several ways before he attained enlightenment and became the Buddha. The Jākatas are stories that are used in the creation of Buddhist art in different forms since the Buddha has passed away. These artworks are evidence for the importance of the Jākatas as the source of information that can be created into Buddhist art to communicate spiritual messages.

The major reasons why the Jākatas are the source of inspiration for creating Buddhist artwork are that they are stories of the Buddha when he was a Bodhisattva and thus sacred stories and that the main theme of the Jākatas is the concept of deeds and their consequences. Pointing out the consequences of doing good and evil can be a good way to instruct this concept and a factor for beautiful artistic creation.

### **Jākatas in Narratives in Lao Culture**

Narrative is the mode, or method, that man use to communicate story. Narrative is one kind of Buddhist art. It is an elaborately created kind of artwork. Literary works of this kind may be fabricated in the form of poetry and conveyed in the form of narrative through the oral tradition. Especially stories about Buddhism, they are neatly composed. In a way, it is composition to glorify Buddhism.

Narratives about the Jākatas are very important in Lao culture for they are stories about the Bodhisattva that present his merit accumulation. In recounting the Jākatas, although the emphasis is on the plots, the

characters' actions, events that present adventures, and journeys, which offer entertainment as in the nature of tales, Buddhist teachings on different topics are usually inserted for the stories to be different from most tales. The Jākata tales in Lao culture derive from Nipata Jākatas and folktales.

1) Nipata Jākatas – The Jākatas are one of the scriptures in the Tipitaka and Jātaka Commentary. The Jākatas number 547 in all. The major Jākatas that have been composed and told in Lao culture are the Tosachat or Dasa Jākata – The Last Ten Birth Stories of the Buddha, or the last ten incarnations of the Buddha. The awareness of the Jākatas is likely to have come through commentary more than through the Tipitaka because the Jākatas in the Tipitaka are merely short incantations and contain no details of the stories.

The Nipata Jākatas are considered sacred stories because they are stories of the Buddha, so they have been composed in the literary form with an elaborate style and with importance given to the composition through careful selection of words and versification to convey the stories of the Buddha. Therefore, the Ten Birth Stories of the Buddha are used on important occasions, that is, to preach dharma in major traditional religious ceremonies exclusively; they are not stories to be told for enjoyment.

The Jākatas of greatest importance is the Story of the Last Great Incarnation of the Buddha, or the Vessantara Jākata, which has been composed in the form of poetry in various versions and told in the oral tradition. The Vessantara Jākata also has a role in ritual, that is, in the Vessantara Festival, which is one of the 12 monthly festivals held in the 4th month. In this ritual, the Sermon of the Story of the Last Great Incarnation is preached. What makes the Vessantara Jākata popular is the Vessantara's practice of giving, which strongly captivates the hearts of people in society because the Vessantara can give his son and wife, a deed of sacrificing what one cherishes, which is very hard to do.

Some of the major Jākatas of the Ten Jākatas that have been composed and told in the Lao culture are the Mahosadha Jākata, which is told to show the wisdom in giving answers, and the Nimi Jākata, which is

aimed at telling about hell and heaven and show consequences of doing evil. Telling the Jākatas is not only telling the stories of the Buddha, but also teaching ideas about karma, reward for virtue and punishment for evil and samsara.

2) The Jākata stories that are not in the Tipitaka, that is, the Jākatas fabricated by making folktales into Jākatas (such as Paññasa Jākata, a collection of 50 ancient tales told in Southeast Asian culture). Making folktales into Jākatas is a practice existent in every nation reached by Buddhism. It can be regarded as the blending or elevation of folk-tale, which is the original culture, Jākatas or folktales can be made into Jākatas by claiming that the actions of the main character are the actions or stories of the Bodhisattva. That the main character faces problems or has to struggle and go through adventures is due to his karma. The struggle and good deeds of the character is the pathway assumed by the Bodhisattva towards attaining enlightenment and becoming the Buddha in the future. Therefore, a number of folktales can be adapted into Jākatas and there are many Jākatas of this kind.

Speaking merely in the scope of Lao culture, there are many folktales adapted into Jākatas, namely, Sinchai, Champa Si Ton, Thao Prachit-Oraphim, Kalaket, Linthong, Suriwong, Phra Lak - Phra Lam, Seewisai, Cockatoo, Khun Tueng, Tang On, and Thao Bae, as well as the stories about orphans.<sup>2</sup> These stories are based on the nature of Jākata. That is, the main characters are claimed to be the Bodhisattva. The prominent characteristic of the Jākatas in Lao culture is they are stories created with local characteristics in terms of culture, customs and traditions, and living so that they can reach the people widely.

Folk Jākatas usually have plots of adventure. The behavior of the main characters can be compared to the behavior of the Bodhisattva who must encounter all kinds of incidents. The stories can be representations of ethical concepts, humorous or satirical stories, or stories exhibiting the consequences of actions, that is, the karmic concept. Jākatas help promote dharmic teaching. They are focused on the concepts of

<sup>2</sup> Stories about orphans such as Thao Kham Kadam, Thao Busaba, Little Ghost Orphan, Kai Kaew the Orphan, and so on.

virtue being rewarded, perfection of virtues/blessedness, and karmic consequences from previous incarnations occurring at the present. The narratives do not fail to obviously manifest these concepts.

### **Recounting the Jākatas in Lao Culture Takes Reading, Listening, and Viewing**

For reading, the Jākatas are stories of the Buddha, so they are regarded as sacred stories. Therefore, the texts of the Jākatas are also regarded sacred texts. Hence, there are Jākatas composed in the literary form for reading, in both poetry and prose. There is a style of literary composition in Lao culture that is composition of long stories in the form of poetry for reading, which are called Nangsue Puen (หนังสือพื้น). These are long stories that tell about the main characters, such as The Story of Thao Kalaket, The Story of Thao Suriwong, The Story of Thao Linthong, The Story of Champa Si Ton, The Story of Chantalad, The Story of Sinsai, The Story of Nang Pomhom, and The Story of Nang Tang On. Other stories are The Story of Phra Lak – Phra Lam, The Story of Thao Kamkadam, and The Story of Phadaeng and Nang Ai, most of which were composed in 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Thidachan, 1994: 51)

Jākatas are composed as long literary works because they have complex plots, many characters, and also supplements for the purpose of teaching Buddhist spiritual principles. In respect of the art of composition, the authors can fully display their literary craftsmanship. Moreover, in Lao culture, the composers also supply the Jākata tales with local atmospheres as well as inserting the ways of life of local cultures, which lends local colour to the Jākatas of the Lao culture.

Another important narrative in Lao culture that should be mentioned is Phra Ram Jākata or Phra Lak - Phra Lam. Phra Ram Jākata is not only important in Lao culture but one can say that it is important in Southeast Asian culture because every culture influenced by Indian culture has to be familiar with this story and has a large number of relevant literary works. Regarding the value and importance of Phra Ram Jākata in Lao culture, Niyada Laosuntorn (2010: 90) concludes that,

*Phra Lam Jākata is a literary work that is widely popular among the Lao people. Apart from being evidence for the relation between standard literary works, India's Ramayana and Laos' Phra Lam Jākata, this Jākata also represents the cultural adjustment of the two nations. Phra Lam is not just a hero in a literary work but he has also become the Lao's hero.*

*The uniqueness of Phra Lam Jākata is that it is an aggregation of the way of life, and the world-views of the author of this literary work. The form of this Jākata is sermon book, in which many beliefs on localities, which exist plentifully in the stories, can be inserted, and the great length of the stories makes it appropriate to include this kind of substance. Proverbs and phaya also play their parts in making this literary work outstanding.*

*If one would compare the Phra Lam stories of different nations that are also influenced by the Ramayana, Phra Lam Jākata is a literary work in which the source of adaptation was obviously modified and it is a literary work that can notably exhibit its identity.*

In reading Jākatas for entertainment and education, the readers must be well equipped with knowledge. Many Jākatas in the literary form, such as the Vessantara Jākata, Sinchai, Champa Si Ton, and Phra Lak - Phra Lam, have become models for literature in the later periods. The Jākata texts are also read and told in the oral tradition to entertain the listeners as well as being the texts used in preaching. The Vessantara Jākata is used to preach in the Bunpaved Festival, which is one of the 12 heets (customs) in Lao culture held in the 4th month of every year. A monk will preach it in tunes that vary from one chapter to another. As for other Jākatas, the reader or narrator may be a man who has been ordained and had education of the monks, or a native artist renowned among the people.



They can tell the stories according to the original plots, but they can also adapt the stories, shortening or lengthening them, or switch stories, switch the plots in each chapter as well as using their voices to lend the appropriate tune and rhythm to each part of the stories, sometimes like preaching or singing lays, producing aesthetic sensation in the listeners as well as appreciation of the heroic deeds of the Bodhisattva.

Besides relating stories, Jākatas appreciation can also occur through performance, such as Mor Lam (หมอลำ) performances, performances accompanying music, and dance, which still have the contents of Jākatas as a component. There may be performances of the Vessantara Jākata and Sinsai, for instance. With the passing down being done through the oral tradition, it is possible to reach a large number of people. The performance of Jākata allowed the readers who were commoners to understand the contents of the Jākata more because there were behaviors performed in accompaniment to the narration. The listeners got to see and hear the entire stories concretely through the acting, tones of voice and movement, which produced entertainment with teachings inserted.

Therefore, the perception of Jākatas in Lao culture is mostly through listening and seeing, that is, Jākatas are read/told in families, in leisure time, in funerals, in praying in traditional religious ceremonies and entertainment performances. Thus, this culture of Jākata perception in Lao culture can reach the population to a great degree.

Pewlawan Thidachan (1994: 51) discusses the importance of Jākatas to the Lao people that Lao literature has been wide and reached deep into the life and spirit of the Lao people for a long time and it is suitable to the level of the general Lao public. Although they live in the countryside, most Lao people love beauty and enjoyment. Lao literature has fun contents and at the same time it is ancient and corresponds to Buddhist beliefs, Buddhism being important in the mind of the people. Hence, literature is also a tool for spreading the religion.

One can say that Jākatas are tales with Buddhist teachings inserted. Apart from entertainment, telling Jākatas in the oral tradition

makes it easier to insert didactic stories, implantation of knowledge and ideology to the members of society. However, the beauty and humor through narrating and singing are plays the important part that can lead to ideas about dharmic messages.

### **Jākatas in Mural Painting in Lao Culture**

Mural paintings or hup-tam (หูปแต้ม) in Lao means drawing or painting. Artworks of this kind usually appears on the walls of sim (ซิม), or Isan Ubosoth (Ordination hall) as well as ho-trai (หอไตร) or library halls, ho-jak (หอแจก), or teaching halls and small buildings.<sup>3</sup>

Isan has a long history of mural paintings, at least about 2,000 years. These paintings are paintings that have existed since the Prehistoric Time or what scholars refer to as “prehistoric paintings”, that is, paintings on the interior of caves such as paintings at Phu Phrabat Ban Phue, Udon Thani and paintings at Pha Tam, Khong Jiam, Ubon Ratchathani, which are mostly images of animals, humans, hands, geometric shapes, and other symbols from prehistoric time to historic time. Many groups of Isan painters have been found. Study revealed that Isan painters often painted images on chapels and cloth pieces. (Buasri, 2004: 4)

Jākatas in painting is the same as Jākatas in literary works and narratives, that is, they come from the Jākatas in the Nipata and folktale Jākatas that have been created into paintings to convey stories and concepts about the Bodhisattva. However, it can be found that in mural paintings there are also Buddhist historical stories. Buddhist history and Jākatas are related. That is, Jākatas or the stories of the Bodhisattva are stories of the past lives of the Buddha before his enlightenment. Therefore, when he was Prince Siddhartha, he was still regarded as the Bodhisattva.

The Nipata Jākatas that are present in mural paintings are the Tosachat and the most important story is the Vessantara. Every temple with mural painting has this story. It is considered the most important one

<sup>3</sup> “Sim” in Lao-Lan Xang art is a Ubosoth, that is, a place regarded as the sacred precinct of the temple used for performing deeds of Buddhist monks. Formerly, it used to be used only by monks and not open to the general public to use. Sims are often built as small buildings with enough space for the number of monks. (Sakchai Saising, 2013: 108)

because it is the last life of the Buddha before he was eventually born Prince Siddhartha and attained enlightenment. Besides reflecting giving, the story is also heartrending and it is the Jākata that plays a role in the Bunpaved Festival.

**Table 1:** Tales in Mural Paintings in Lao Culture<sup>4</sup>

Name	Jākata
Wat Phochainaphung, Loei	Tosachat Sinsai Kalaket
Wat Maha That, Loei	Vessantara
Wat Pho Chai, Nong Khai	Tosachat Phaya Kankak
Wat Son Vanavaree Patanaram, Khon Kean	Vessantara Sinsai
Wat Srabuakeaw, Khon Kean	Vessantara Sinsai Phra Lak-Phra Lam
Wat Chai Sri, Khon Kean	Vessantara Sinsai
Wat Machimawitayaram, Khon Kean	Vessantara
Wat Pratuchai, Roi-ed	Vessantara Sinsai Phra Lak-Phra Lam
Wat Malapirom, Roi-Ed	Vessantara
Wat Jakavarn Phumipinit, Roi-Ed	Sinsai
Triphum Kanajarn Temple, Roi-Ed	Vessantara Phra Lak-Phra Lam
Wat Prasitchaiyaram, Kalasin	Tosachat
Wat Udon Pracharat, Kalasin	Vessantara
Wat Pa Rerai, Mahasarakham	Vessantara Phra Lak-Phra Lam
Wat Photharam, Mahasarakham	Vessantara Sinsai
Wat Yangthuangvararam, Mahasarakham	Phra Lak-Phra Lam Pajit - Orapim
Wat Tan Ruang, Mahasarakham	Vessantara Sinsai
Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubon Ratchathani	Vessantara Pajit-Orapim Chulapatum Sinsai
Wat Huawiang Rang Sri, Nakhon Phanom	Tosachat
Wat Pho Kham, Nakhon Phanom	Tosachat Suriwong
Wat Budha Sima, Nakhon Phanom	Tosachat Phra Lak-Phra Lam Sinsai Sutana

4 This information is collected from;

1) Database of Archeological Site in North-Eastern Thailand, Faculty of Archaeology Silpakorn University.

2) Pairoj Samosorn. 1989. E-sarn Mural Paintings. Khon Kean: Office of Culture, Khon Kean University.

3) Wiroj Srisuro. 1993. Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples. Bangkok: The Toyata Foundation.

4) Sakchai Saising. 2013. Stupa, Buddha Image, Mural Painting and Sim of Lao and Esarn Arts. Bangkok: Museum-Press.

5) Waralan Boonyasurat. 2013. Admiring the architecture, Temples in Luang Prabang. 3rd edition. Bangkok: Muang Boran.

Wat Latthikawan, Mukdaharn	Tosachat
Wat Sri Maha Pho, Mukdaharn	Vessantara
Wat Tha Riep, Buriram	Vessantara Sinsai
Wat Oub Mong, Vientiane	Phra Lak-Phra Lam
Wat Xieng Thong, Laung Prabang	Tosachat Sutana
Wat That Noi, Laung Prabang	Sutana
Wat Long Koon, Laung Prabang	Tosachat
Wat Pa Huak, Laung Prabang	Jambupati
Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham , Laung Prabang	Vessantara
Wat Jumkhong Surintraram, Laung Prabang	Vessantara

An example of the Jākatas in the Tosachat that appears in mural paintings is the Temiya Jākata, which portrays Phra Temiya listening to his father giving a penalty to the wrongdoer and Phra Temiya's body being carried by the king's men to bury without success. (Figure 2). There is also the Nimi Jākata, which illustrates heaven and hell, when Nimi the noble king gets on Indra's royal carriage with Phra Matalee the coach taking him to heaven, but Nimi asks permission to see hell first. (Figure 3). The paintings show cruel images of hell more than images of heaven, making people afraid of sin. Another Jākata found in mural painting is the Bhuridatta Jākata when Alampai casts a spell to capture Phra Bhuridatta and presented him before the people. (Figure 4).



**Figure 2:** Temiya Jākata, Wat Latthikawan, Mukdaharn (Silpakorn University, 2013)



**Figure 3:** Nemi Jākata, Wat Latthikawan, Mukdaharn  
(Silpakorn University, 2013)



**Figure 4:** Bhuridatta Jākata, Wat Huawiang Rang Sri, Nakhon Phanom  
(Silpakorn University, 2013)

Nonetheless, there appears a Jākata in the Jātaka Commentary that is not from the Tosachat, namely, the Chulapatum Jākata, which is the 193rd Jākata, at Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubon Ratchathani. The Chulapatum Jākata tells about the Bodhisattva in the incarnation of Phra Patum Kumara. His father banishes him together with his wife and brother from the city, afraid that his son will usurp the throne. Phra Patum Kumara's wife fell in love with a robber, so she made up her mind to kill Phra Patum Kumara but he was saved from death through the help of Phraya Hia and could return to rule city. As for his wife and the robber, they became beggars.



**Figure 5:** Chulapatum Jākata, Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubon Ratchathani  
(Muangboran Journal, 2013)

The communication of Jākatas through paintings in order to reach the commoners was very important. Painting is concrete manifestation, which enables the viewers to imagine the abstract.

Paintings at temples were also close to commoners. They were present in the way of life of the commoners who went to the temples to listen to dharma. Moreover, some commoners were illiterate. Thus, the paintings permitted them to see images showing the behaviors of the Bodhisattva in his working towards perfections, doing good and helping humans as well as images of heaven and hell showing the consequences of doing good and doing evil. The paintings, together with the monks at the temples who performed their duty of teaching Buddhist dharma using the paintings as a medium, allowed the commoners to understand the messages of the Jākatas more clearly.

The Jākatas outside the Nipata that appear in the mural paintings that are very important Jākatas in Isan culture are Sinsai and Pra Lak - Pra Lam. These stories have been depicted in many places. For example, at Wat Chai Sri, Khon Khan, the whole Sinsai story was depicted into exquisite images and the Pra Lam story was depicted in great detail at Wat Sa Bua Kaew and Wat Pa Rerai.

Sinsai is an important literary work in Isan and Lao cultures, for its being an ancient story with a long history since the time of the Lan Xang Kingdom. It is widely popular in both the poetic and prose forms and it is a story that clearly represents the social and cultural conditions of Isan culture. Sinsai is revered as a hero and esteemed as the Bodhisattva in Jākata narratives.

The story is about the Bodhisattva in the incarnation of Sinsai. His father banishes him from the city, believing him to be the cause of bad luck, so he has to journey through the forest with his mother and brother Siho (lion) and Hoi-Sang. All of them encounter difficulties and torment during the journey but Indra is there to help. Sinsai, Siho, and Hoi-sang journey to help their aunt according to their father's request. On their way the three fight with devils and a giant snake and overcome a battle with giants with magical power and courage. (Buasri, 2004: 12)



**Figure 6:** Sinsai, Wat Son Vanavaree Patanaram, Khon Kean  
(Prasatvinitchai, 2008)

Phra Lak - Phra Lam (Lao version of Ramayana) originated from the Indian epic Ramayana. It is a story about the adventure of Phra Lam and Phra Lak. The account is well-known in Thai and Lao cultures as well as Southeast Asia.

The story of Phra Ram Jākata is about the Bodhisattva in the incarnation of Phra Lam when he reigns over Srisattanak. One day he sets out on a journey with his brother Phra Lak to perform an arrow divination so that Sita can become his wife. Thanks to Phra Lam's merit, he can lift the arrow, so Sita can become his wife. However, before returning he does not bid farewell to the hermit Chao Laksi, Sita's foster father, which makes him very angry, so he curses the two to become separated. As the three journey back to Srisattanak, Thotsakan plays a trick impersonating a golden deer and abducts Sita. Phra Lam and Phra Lak go in search for Sita, encountering several various obstacles on the way. They wage war in Lanka and triumph over Thotsakan and successfully bring Sita back to Srisattana.





**Figure 7:** Phra Lak-Phra Lam, Wat Pa Rerai, Mahasarakham  
(Sirindhorn Isan Information Center, Mahasarakham University, 2013)

For the Jākatas in the mural paintings in Lao culture, apparently, there are creations according to the plots presenting the adventurous experiences of the Bodhisattva, Sinsai, and Phra Lak and Phra Lam. The stories share common characteristics, that is, there are many complex occurrences and many characters and they show the capability of the heroic main characters, which can be compared to the capability in the Bodhisattva's behavior. As for beauty, the mural paintings in Lao culture have a simple style of conveyance focused on the presentation of the stories.

**Jākatas: Buddhist Art in Conveying Spiritual Messages and the Center that Holds the Ideas and Beliefs of the People in Lao Culture together.**

From what has been discussed so far, obviously, Jākatas are of great importance in Lao culture as Buddhist art. By means of literary and painting arts, they lead the perceivers to the knowledge and understanding of Buddhist concepts. Buddhist art is the work of man's perseverance, which takes manual and mental labor to present Buddhist art perceptible

through the auditory and visual senses.

Buddhist stories can convey dharmic messages, as Silpa Bhirasri (2010: 26) mentioned about religious beauty or aesthetics that

*Beautiful Buddha or Greek deity icons or other excellent artworks, when read, seen, or listened to, certainly lead our hearts towards the sublime, inducing in us immediate emotional response to beauty like magnetic power that overpowers our feelings entirely. This is because the objects that we look at or the voices that we hear reach in and become associated with the desires in our hearts, motivating us to seek only things of sublime goodness and beauty. The emotional responses occurring inside us as a result of the beauty in those things are not due to their beauty or delicacy. Excellent artworks, besides having complete elements and methods of creation, also need to represent lofty truth, which is thoughts that elevate the spirits of the spectators, readers, or listeners.*

Jākata is a “strategy” for expounding dharma. That is, Jākatas, which are tales with lessons, are used as a tool for teaching dharma. As a teaching strategy, Jākata serves as example. It is a kind of allegory supplemented with the sermon style. Mural paintings in chapels generally may be done for beauty, sacredness, and as an instrument for conveying the messages and understanding of Buddhist stories, the typical subject matters being with Buddhist history and/or Jākatas. One can say that tales and paintings are Buddhist arts that induce concepts, thoughts and beliefs about Buddhism and induce comprehension of stories about the Bodhisattva and karmic concepts. They are also vehicles for publicizing literary works and paintings.

Jākatas are stories about the Bodhisattva before he attained enlightenment and became the Buddha. Hence, Jākatas can be identified as stories about the Bodhisattva accumulating merit, performing meritorious

acts or building virtues and knowledge so that he can eventually attain Buddha's enlightenment. Jākatas are sacred stories. The appearance of Jākatas in tales and paintings thus lends sacredness to the stories and images. Even though the stories and images have the local simplicity, when they appear in the context of Buddhism, they certainly contain moral value. Even if they are native stories that have been elevated to the level of Jākatas, the people still have faith in them and be touched by them because the Jākatas are integrated with the ideas, experience, and beliefs of people in society. They are of the nature of folk art as Silpa Bhirasri (2010: 167) mentioned

*Folk art may either refers to artworks created by the local people themselves or those actually created by artists who can see the living, traditions based on myth, or other things created by the local people.... Therefore, this kind of art is full of characteristics displaying feelings and thoughts in a way that they can be easily grasped and it is regarded as a heritage of the people in a nation or certain areas. It is a mirror that effectively reflects features of Buddhist intellect and the spirit of the people of whatever nation.*

Folk Jākatas are very significant to the contexts of creation and appreciation. Even illiterate people can understand dharmic concepts through listening to narratives and contemplating paintings about Jākatas. Folktales are also closely related to the way of life of the local people with shared cultural understanding. Jākata is therefore an important kind of Buddhist art that is used as information and a tool in conveying dharmic messages.

There are more Jākata paintings apparent than stories from the history of the Buddha because Jākata are stories of those who are persevering in doing good, accumulating merit so as to become buddhas in the future. The Jākata convey the insight that every human can learn the ways to do good from the Bodhisattva, which inspires faith and encourages good conduct in the footsteps of the Bodhisattva.

Buddhist dharmic messages have essential role to Lao culture. They are foundation of ideas and beliefs and concepts about living, which are widely accepted. The Buddhist worldview emphasizes the notion that life is full of suffering and the guidelines for eliminating or being free from suffering mainly through one's own efforts because in Buddhism it is believed that for everything that happens to humans, there is "karma" as the cause. All things occur as consequences of actions according to karmic law.

Jākatas present the images of the Bodhisattva going through various life events, experiencing and learning about life in different conditions and events both good and evil before accomplishing his goal. All this is steps leading to the understanding of life. As karma determines human destiny and explains how events in life transpire, karma is also the cause for meeting with occurrences both good and bad. Thus, if one would like to meet with happiness in life, one must do good deeds so that they will reward one with good consequences. The fact that Jākatas appear in temple mural paintings that are painted around the principal Buddha images implies that before attaining enlightenment and becoming the Buddha, the Buddha had to go through suffering, endure and persevere through different situations. This was in order to build and accumulate the knowledge and wisdom of being a Buddha, that is, the enlightened one. It also implies that his past lives are a contributing factor for his enlightenment. Thus, painting is essential in permitting one to see the way of life and merit accumulation of the Buddha.

Jākatas are a concrete illustration of the series of events both good and bad that the Buddha had to encounter in his life. Only through doing good can one meet with good things. This abstract concept of karma has been concretely manifest through narratives and paintings in Lao culture. In the context of the appreciation of art in the people in Lao culture, listening and viewing are the primary means, so Buddhist art has the functions of evidently exhibiting the dharmic concept of karma and enabling it to reach the population thoroughly.

The Vessantara Jākata is widely popular in Lao culture. It appears

in the forms of tale, literary work, painting, and ritual because it shows the importance of the concept of the Bodhisattva's height of generosity. What he gave was what is so hard to sacrifice – what is dear to one, so the giving in the Vessantara Jākata is not merely giving things but giving what one holds dear. It is the absolute sacrifice of attachment, and the reward of this tremendous giving is the very pathway towards becoming the Buddha in the next life. The popularity of the stories of the Bodhisattva reflects that people believe in performing meritorious acts, accumulating merit, especially through giving, which will permit one to see Phra Sri Ariyametrai. In the Buddhist society of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, especially for Buddhists in Laos and Buddhists in the Isan region of Thailand, there is the culture that they have shared for a long time, namely, the Twelve Heets, and the Sermon of the Story of the Last Great Incarnation is an important tradition to observe. It has been established as a part of the community's way of life for the people to come together to make merit according to their basic beliefs in respect of faith in Buddhism, which emphasize the beliefs in karma and giving in the way of life of people in Lao culture.

Buddhist art and Buddhist concepts that are part of society, especially for tales and paintings, are concrete spiritual supports of Buddhist teachings and faith. They are cultural heritages that induce community power as well as pride in one's identity. Buddhist arts from Jākatas both in the forms of narratives and paintings as already discussed reflect the roles and significance, as well as influence of Jākatas. They have the style of native art, which can effectively touch the hearts of the people in Lao culture and correspond to their lives, experience, ideas, and beliefs.

### **Conclusion: The Important Roles of Jākatas in Narratives and Buddhist Art in Lao Culture**

The importance of Jākatas in Buddhist art in Lao culture is in their being inspiration for artistic creation and their being sources of contents and strategies in creating Buddhist artwork aimed at relating the stories of the Bodhisattva and presenting ideas about karma, especially for

narratives and paintings. Both are concrete spiritual supports in respect of teachings and belief in the Buddha and Buddhism and are expressions of strong faith in Buddhism.

Buddhist art is the process of creating stories, events, and images for the readers, listeners, and viewers to be able to get into the worlds of the stories that are told and get to the main points of what the creators want to communicate. The interesting thing about Jākatas is that they exhibit the experience of human life in different dimensions in a manner that relates to the feelings and experience of the listeners and viewers. Therefore, in Lao culture, the plots of Jākatas are adapted to the local style, lending cultural identity to them, and the Jākatas reflect Buddhist beliefs and social and cultural conditions as well as the way of life of people in this region.

Although the identities of people in Isan and Lao cultures are different in elements that are details and their Buddhist arts are dissimilar in time and place, in the shared context as already discussed, related identities of these groups of people in terms of ideas and beliefs as well as culture tied together by Buddhism are obviously reflected through their distinctive Buddhist arts. The Jākatas in Buddhist art in Lao culture reflect that Buddhism is the essential core to which the Isan and Lao peoples adhere for guidelines of practices in their way of life.

To sum up the main messages of this article, Jākatas is the center that holds together the ideas and beliefs of people in Lao culture through Buddhist art, which induces understanding, faith, and wisdom to be developed into guidelines for conducting oneself in ways that correspond to Buddhist principles, morality and ethicality and are in harmony with the way of life and ideas and beliefs shared by people in Lao culture.

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