SECTION VIII

REVIEWS
REVIEW ARTICLE

BUDDHIST LITERATURE: SOME RECENT TRANSLATIONS

PETER SKILLING
C/O THE SIAM SOCIETY

The translation of the vast literature of the Buddhists into English, and other modern languages, is a vast project: begun well over a century ago, it is still in progress. Here I would like to review a number of recent contributions, some of them re-translations, to that field. The first four texts under review belong to the jātaka (or avadāna) literature, perennially popular from well before the 1st century B.C., when the jātakas appear in some of the earliest stone sculpture of India (Bhārhat, Sāfchi, and so on), up to, of course, the time of the present translations. The fifth work (The Fortunate Aeon) is intimately related to the jātaka tradition, since it refers by name to numerous traditional jātakas in the course of its discussion of the pāramitās or perfections, since it relates a number of “Mahāyānist” jātakas of its own, and since its description of the biographical particulars of future Buddhas is structurally and stylistically based on an ancient and canonical Buddhological tradition. Like the Pali Jatakn, the Udana, the sixth work under review, belongs to the Khuddaka-nikāya or “miscellaneous” section of the Tipitaka; it is, however, of a different nature, since it is a collection of teachings attributed to the historical Buddha Gotama.


A romanized edition of the jātaka-nidāna was first published by V. Fausbøll in 1877 in the first volume of the The Jātaka together with its Commentary, being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha. A translation by T. W. Rhys Davids of the nidāna or “introduction” and the beginning of the Jātaka properly speaking was published in Trübner’s Oriental Series in 1880; this was reprinted in a “New and Revised Edition by Mrs Rhys Davids” by Routledge in 1925 (minus the Jātaka translations, since a separate translation of the Jātaka as a whole had by then been undertaken), under the title Buddhist Birth-Stories (Jātaka Tales): The Commentarial Introduction Entitled Nidāna-kathā, The Story of the Lineage (repr. Indological Book House, Varanasi and Delhi, 1973).

N. A. Jayawickrama’s translation was originally published in Sri Lanka in 1951. The present edition has a brief and informative preface by Steven Collins, a short but pithy introduction by the translator, and an index. The translator is well qualified, having to his credit a number of other translations from Pali—Chronicle of the Thūpa (1971), Epochs of the Conqueror (1962), and The Inception of Discipline (1962)—plus editions of the Pali Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpiṭaka (1974), the Vināṇṇavatthu and Petavatthu (1977), and the Kathāvatthu Commentary (1979), all published by the Pali Text Society. These titles reveal Jayawickrama to be a specialist in chronicle or narrative literature, and indeed his translation is clear, smooth, and accurate.

The Jātaka-nidāna is a chronicle of the past lives of Gotama as a bodhisatta from the time of his meeting with the past Buddha Dipamkara up to the early period of his career as a Buddha, ending with the donation of the Jetavana monastery (thereby leading up to the first jātaka, which opens there). The chronicle presents the developed Buddhology of the Mahāvihāra branch of the Theravādins (see verse 11): all events must be archetypal and must be embellished by divine or supernatural wonders. It is religious literature and not scripture, and its exaggerations—often more pedantic than inspired—must certainly be taken cum grano salis. Among the uniquely Theravādin characteristics I include the list of 24 (or 27) past Buddhas, the allotment of the duration of the bodhisatta’s career.
to four "incalculables" (asankheyya) and 100,000 aeons, the classification of the perfections into three groups of ten to total thirty, and the arrangement of the chronicle into three epochs (distant, intermediate, and recent).¹

Although to a degree the text is didactic in purpose, its main aim is the glorification of the bodhisatta's career. While the jātakanidāna may not be required reading for the Buddhist practitioner, it is for those who wish to understand the Mahāvihāra Buddhism, either in its own right or as represented in the art of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The jātakanidāna is in part based upon (particularly for the important meeting with Dipaṃkara) and closely related to the Buddhavamsa and its commentary, which are also available in English translation by I. B. Horner under the titles Chronicle of Buddhas (published together with the Cariyāpiṭaka in The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon III, 1975) and The Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning (1978), both published by the Pali Text Society. For the latest phase of Theravādī Buddhism, one may consult Jayawickrama's Epochs of the Conqueror. The "Distant Epoch" contains two sections on the ten perfections according to the Mahāvihāra tradition (pp. 25-32, and 58-61). The presentation of the life of the present Buddha Gotama, as given in the "Intermediate" and "Recent" Epochs, is a summary of events related in the Pali canon itself, with many later embellishments.

(A comparison with the life of the Buddha as recounted in other traditions has been made easier by two recent publications. P. E. de Foucaux's classic Le Lalitavistara: L'histoire traditionelle de la vie du Bouddha Cākyamuni, originally published in Annales du Musée Guimet in 1884, was reprinted in a reasonably priced and attractive fascimile edition by Les Deux Océans, Paris, in 1988. A complete English translation by Gwendolyn Bays, based on Foucaux's French but revised in consultation with the Tibetan translation and the Sanskrit original, is available in two handsome volumes as The Voice of the Buddha, the Beauty of Compassion (Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, 1983.). I have only one quibble, and that concerns the headings interspersed throughout the text. For the stories of the 24 Buddhas, especially the first three, they do not quite follow the same format, and it would be helpful if the headings with the names of the Buddhas were numbered. In the second section on the perfections (pp. 58-61), the headings seem to be slightly displaced, since for perfections 2 to 8 the heading of the succeeding perfection comes before the concluding statement on the preceding perfection. For perfections 9 and 10 (p. 61) the headings are misplaced, since 9 follows the verse on the perfection in question and 10 comes in the middle. It would again be helpful if the ten perfections were numbered in both sections. Three minor misprints may be noted: this for this in p. 35 line 5, thisle for thistle on p. 67 note 4, and preching for preaching on p. 116 line 19.

 Needless to say, Rhys David's pioneering edition should not be overlooked by the serious student. The 80-page Introduction contains much of interest, especially on the relations between the jātakas and the folklore of other cultures.


The jātakamālā is of a different order than the jātakas of the Pali tradition: as a non-sectarian poetic work (kātyāya) addressed to the literati of the age rather than the monks alone, it does not pretend to canonical status. The Sanskrit text (in Devānāgari) was published in 1891 by Hendrik Kern as the first volume of the Harvard Oriental Series, under the title The Jātaka-Mālā, Stories of Buddha's Former Incarnations otherwise entitled Bodhisattva-Avadāna-Mālā, by Ārya-cūra (The Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.; repr. 1914, 1943). In 1895 a translation by J. S. Speyer, The Jātaka-Mālā or Garland of Birth-Stories of Āryaśūra (repr. Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1971, 1982), was published as volume 1 of the Sacred Books of the Buddhists (with the material support of "H. M. the King of Siām", that is, King Rāma V), with a foreword by the editor of the series, Max Müller, an introduction by the translator, and a useful synoptical table of the correspondence between the stanzas of the jātakamālā and the scripture verses of the Pāli jātaka”.

Once the Buddha Was a Monkey is an attractively bound and printed volume—a testimony to the publishing skills of The University of Chicago Press. The translation, smooth and readable, brings out the humour and the satire of the original. This is no small accomplishment, since Sanskrit verse delights in dense compounds and rich imagery, of which Ārya-śūra was a master. The introduction deals succinctly with the problems of authorship and date, and with the jātaka and jātukamālā genre; the notes explain various proper names and mythological or sociological concepts. Incidentally, one note is relevant to the much vexed Suvarnabhūmi question (see Two Ports of Suvarnabhūmi: A Brief Note, p. 131 of the present issue).

The Jātakamālā is a retelling of tales already many times retold, directed at an urbane and courtly audience. The contents of the stories vary. Many involve kings, and Ārya-śūra clearly uses his jātakas as a means to teach the Buddhist ideals of compassion and charity in opposition to the Machiavellian principles of traditional Indian statecraft. Others involve deities: often Śakra takes upon himself the role of putting the Great Being to the test with a variety of disguises and ruses. In "The Lotus Stalks" (19:31, p. 125) the bodhisattva upbears him for doing this: "We are neither friends of yours nor relatives, nor are we your troupe of actors or buffoons. So on what grounds do you, lord of the gods, come here to play tricks on hermits?" But not all of the stories involve divine or supernatural intervention: numbers 18, 20, and 21, for example, are entirely human tales. In story 20, the bodhisattva is shown as naive if highly principled: he renounces
the world as a result of a chain of events starting with his half-deaf mother-in-law’s misinterpretation of her daughter’s words. In some cases the bodhisattva is an animal: a hare (6), a fish (15), a young quail (16), a goose (22), an ape (24), and so on. Such tales—themselves a reworking of fables of hoary antiquity—seek to reveal ideal human virtues by way of contrast. A king, whose life has been saved by the very ibex-bodhisattva he had intended to kill in the hunt, exclaims, “Oh! how sharply his gentleness puts me to shame. It is I who am the animal, the brute rather, and he is an ibex only in appearance” (p. 175). While most of the stories illustrate universal virtues like compassion and forbearance, two are more philosophical in tenor: number 23, which seeks to refute a number of Indian philosophical systems, and number 29, which deals with belief in the afterlife.

I will give one example of the type of story in question. In no. VIII of Hofinger’s translation, the monks ask why Śākyamuni, as a bodhisattva, had to spend six years practising severe austerities. They are referring to a well-known period of the bodhisattva’s quest for enlightenment, which is described in the early scriptures such as the Majjhima-nikāya of the Pali canon. In reply the Buddha relates how, as the brahman Uttara, he once refused to pay homage to the past Buddha Kāśyapa, saying, “How can there be enlightenment (bodhi) for that baid-paled ascetic? Enlightenment is something extremely difficult to attain!” As a result of this verbal karma, Śākyamuni himself underwent difficulties in his quest for enlightenment.

Other past misdeeds of the bodhisattva include killing or murder (I, II, VI, XI), calumny (IV, V), false accusation (VI), and so on. In contrast to the jātaka stories, the bodhisattva is shown here as very human and very imperfect, and no attempt is made to gloss over his misdeeds. The latter task was left to such Mahāyāna texts as the Upāyakaṇḍala-sūtra, which gives an apologetic account of most of the misdeeds.5

Hofinger gives a French translation of the relevant section of the Bhaisajyagūravastu: a prose text dealing with eleven such events, in each case spoken by the Buddha himself in response to a specific question put by the monks; an intervening anonymous verse eulogy of the Buddha; and a concluding versified account of ten events, in an order different from that of the prose, again spoken by the Buddha. The work opens with a brief introduction and a bibliography. At the end of the book are separate indexes of Tibetan and Chinese terms, both cross-referenced with a Sanskrit-Pali-Tibetan-Chinese glossary, and finally an index of proper names and important topics.

The translation is based on a romanized edition of the Tibetan, for which Hofinger has utilized three xylograph recensions: Narthang (N), Peking (P) and Lhasa (Lh). In his pioneering studies over the last decade or so, Dr. Helmut Eimer of Bonn has shown that the available editions of the Tibetan Kanjūr fall into two main redactional groups, and that in order to establish a Kanjūr text with a truly critical edition, more editions than those utilized by Hofinger must be consulted. Since the editions used by Hofinger represent both groups—Narthang along with Lhasa (a 20th century edition based in the main on Narthang), what Eimer calls the “Western tradition”, and Peking the “Eastern tradition”—we at least have representative readings of the two traditions. This is insufficient, however, to thoroughly establish the finer points of the text and its transmission.

The Tibetan text is supplemented by Sanskrit fragments from Gilgit, given when available at the foot of the Tibetan, and by reproductions of the Taishō edition of the corresponding sections of the Bhaisajyagūravastu in I-ching’s Chinese translation and of the Chinese translation of a related avadāna text. Hofinger also reproduces the Taishō text of sūtra 63 of the Chinese Madhyamāgama along with its Pali counterpart, the Ghaṭṭikārā-sutta (Majjhimanikāya 81), as parallels to prose story VIII of his translation.

The present volume is a sequel

Le Congrès du Lac Anavatapta (Vies de Saints Bouddhiques), Extrait du Vinaya des Mūlasarvāstivādin Bhaisajyagūravastu, II: Légendes du Bouddha (Buddhavaśān), (Publications de l’Institut Orientaliste de Louvain 38), MARCEL HOFINGER, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990; 159 pages.

The purpose of the Jātaka-nīdāna and the Jātakamālā (as well as the Buddhavamsa and Carittāpiṭaka, mentioned above, and the Lokānanda-nītaka, to be reviewed below) is the glorification of Gotama or Śākyamuni as a bodhisattva or a Buddha through the recounting of his noble deeds. In contrast, the “Buddhavāduṇa” is an attempt to grapple with a hagiographical problem: the undeniable fact that the early scriptures and traditions of the various schools of Buddhism relate that in his final life the Buddha underwent certain negative experiences. Since every effect must have a karmic cause, the Buddha, like anyone else, must have committed wrong deeds in previous
to Hofinger's earlier study, Le Congrès du Lac Anavatapta (Vies de Saints Bouddhas), Extrait du Vinaya des Mulasarvastivadin Bhaiṣajyavastu, I: Légendes des Anciens (Śāhvāra-pādana) (Bibliothèque du Muséon 34, Louvain, 1954; second edition, Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain 28, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982). This work gave a French translation of the past lives of the elders (śhavīra) or arhants, as spoken by each in verse at Lake Anavatapta (hence the title) in the presence of the Buddha, based on Hofinger's edition of the Tibetan text of the relevant section of the Mulasarvastivadin Bhaiṣajyavastu, along with the Gilgit Sanskrit fragments and a reproduction of the Taishō edition of I-ching's Chinese translation. Since in the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya the text dealt with in the work under review follows directly upon that presented in the earlier work, Hofinger has now completed the translation of an important section of the Bhaiṣajyavastu.

It is unfortunate that the author seems to have been unaware of a number of important printed sources and related researches, all published a considerable time before his own work. He does not refer to Heinz Bechert's Die Anavatagathā und die Śṭhaviragathā (in Sanskrittexte aus den Turfanfunden VI, Bruchstücke buddhistischer Verssammlungen I, Berlin, 1961), which gives the Tibetan text (based on five editions) of the "eulogy of the Buddha" (Bechert 206-208 = Hofinger 48-50) and the verse text on the ten past misdeeds of the Buddha—side-by-side with the Pali parallels from the Apadāna and German translations of two Chinese versions (Bechert pp. 210-243 = Hofinger 50-54)—followed by a German translation of the Tibetan (pp. 244-247), all accompanied by detailed notes. As for prose story VII in Hofinger's translation (pp. 102-115, "Nandipāla et Uttara"), Ernst Waldschmidt, in his "Central Asian Śūtra Fragments" (in Heinz Bechert, ed., The Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition, Göttingen, 1980, p. 143), gave a brief description of the Nandipāla-sūtra and its parallels. While, as noted by Hofinger, the story is not given in the Gilgit manuscript of the Sanskrit Bhaiṣajyavastu—which refers the reader to sūtra version in the Madhyângama—the Mulasarvastivadin version (referred to by Waldschmidt) is in fact repeated in full in the Sanghabhedavastu; it is preserved in Sanskrit, and was published by Raniero Gnoli in The Gilgit Manuscrypt of the Sanghabhedavastu, Part II, Rome, 1978, pp. 21-30. The Lokottaravādaṃ version (also referred to by Waldschmidt) was published in 1882 by Sénart in the Mahâvatu 1, pp. 317 foll., and translated by J. J. Jones in The Mahâvatu, volume I, London, 1949 (repr. 1973), pp. 265-285. The Upâyakausalya-sūtra (in Chang, op. cit., pp. 442, 449-452) gives a detailed account from a Mahâyâna perspective. Furthermore, Hofinger does not refer to the Kanjur studies of Eimer and others. These are all serious omissions, which detract from the comparative apparatus given in Hofinger's notes.

A comparison of the Sanskrit Sanghabhedavastu version of story VIII with the Tibetan Bhaiṣajyavastu as edited by Hofinger shows that the two are very similar, the only major difference being that the former introduces Uttara first, and then Nandipāla, while in the latter the order is reversed. It also reveals a number of mistranslations, and shows that many of the Sanskrit equivalents of the Tibetan given by Hofinger in parentheses or in the notes are wrong. It is beyond the scope of this review to go into full detail: a new edition of this section, with the Tibetan of both the Sanghabhedavastu and the Bhaiṣajyavastu and the Sanskrit of the former, compared with the counterparts in the Chinese Madhyângama, the Pali Majjhima-nikâya, the Mahâvatu, and other related sources such as the Upâyakausalya-sūtra and the Vyâkhya-yukti, would certainly be a valuable undertaking, since it would throw light on the transmission of an ancient and canonical jātaka according to four Śrâvaka schools—the Mulasarvastivâdins (Sanghabhedavastu, Bhaiṣajyavastu), the Sarvâstivâdins (Madhyângama), the Theravâdins (Majjhima-nikâya), and the Lokottaravâdins (Mahâvatu)—and its interpretation in the Mahâyâna (Upâyakausalya-sūtra, Vyâkhya-yukti). I will limit myself here to one important passage. On p. 106, "Au contraire, ce Bienheureux lui-même étant Buddha, a purifié tous les dharmas" corresponds to text p. 37 'on kyung bcom ldan 'das de ri'd sngs rgyas yin te' dis chos thams cad sangs byas so, with a variant for the adopted reading (that of Narthang) sngs byas so given in the footnote as sngs rgyas so (Lhasa and Peking). That sngs rgyas so is the correct reading is clear from the Sanskrit of the Sanghabhedavastu (p. 23), api tu buddhâ sa bhagavân, buddhâc cânena sarvadharmâ iti. The passage may therefore be rendered as: "That very Blessed One is indeed awakened (or enlightened), because he has awakened to (or realized) all dharma."

The phrase is significant as a Mulasarvastivadin "definition" of the term Buddha.

I note here a few other mistranslations or points needing clarification that have come to my attention:

—pp. 85, 91, "le gain de l'accumulation (saṃcayalābha)"

"Saṃcayalābha" is Hofinger's reconstruction of the Tibetan tshogs rie'd pa (see note 6 to p. 85, where the final pa is omitted). The correct Sanskrit form is labdhasambhârâni, as found repeatedly in extant Vinaya and Avadâna literature, and given by Hofinger himself from the Gilgit manuscript on p. 27 of the text. It signifies that past karma will bear fruit when the appropriate complex of conditions (sambhâra) obtains (labdha), that is, "when conditions are ripe".

—p. 88, "l'absence de toute moralité aboutit à coup sûr au malheur": text pp. 22-23 thams cad tshul ma yin pas s âng bsgal bar gyur ta re:

Here the Sanskrit is not available. Two merchants are at sea: one, who has lost his ship laden with gems because he had loaded it carelessly, is attempting to sink the other's ship out of sheer envy, in order to deny the other his profit. The latter catches him in the act. From the context
tskul seems not to mean "moralité" (more regularly tshul khrims), but rather "method" (Sanskrit naya?), or figuratively "sense." Thus the intended victim says: "Do not scuttle the ship! It is utterly senseless (perverse, idiotic, futile: since we will both perish) and will certainly lead to misery."

—p. 88, "dont l’esprit était attaché (abhivinīśṭa) à la jalousie"; text p. 23 phrag dog la mngon par zhen pa’i blo can: The Sanskrit equivalent of the whole phrase, īṣyānīśṭa-buddhīḥ, taken from text p. 28 (where the Tibetan is the same with the omission of the final can), is given on translation p. 95. Thus, despite the Tibetan prefix mngon par, which usually translates abhi-, the correct form seems to be simply niśṭa.

—p. 89, "un humble pratya$kabuddha, qui a de la compassion pour les méprisables... apparait comme l’unique pur champ d’offrandes (dānaka$etra) du monde"; text p. 23 rang sans gyag dman pa dang/ ngan pa la sīling brtsa ba can... jig rten gyi yon gnas gcig pu dag ‘byung bar ‘gyur ro: This is part of a stock phrase. A complete Sanskrit example, which corresponds perfectly to the Tibetan of the Bhaṭṭācāryya-yavasūṭu, is found in The Gilgit Manuscript of the Sāyaṇāsanscrito-vatostu and the Adhikaraṇavatostu, (ed. Raniero Gnoli, Rome, 1978, p. 32.8): asati buddhānam utpāde pratya$kabuddhā loka utpādayante hinadīnānakampakāḥ prāntasāyaṇāsanabhaktā ekadāksiṇīḥ lokasya. Hofinger’s "un humble pratya$kabuddha, qui a de la compassion pour les misérables... apparait" contains two errors: humble (hīna, Tib. dman pa) does not modify pratya$kabuddha, but rather belongs with the following phrase as clearly seen from the Sanskrit: pratya$kabuddha is plural rather than singular, as seen in both the Sanskrit and the Tibetan (dag ‘byung bar ‘gyur ro). The whole phrase is a general statement about the arising of pratya$kabuddhas. Another problem is Hofinger’s reconstruction of yon gnas as dānaka$etra (also at p. 122 and in the glossary, p. 145): the correct Sanskrit equivalent is daksīṇīya. The whole passage may be translated thus: "When there is no arising of Buddhhas, pratya$kabuddhas arise in the world. They have compassion for the lowly and the wretched, and cleave to (Tib. here "delight in") remote dwelling-places. They are the sole receptacle for the offerings of the world." The idea is that pratya$kabuddhas arise only when there is no Buddha in the world; in the absence of a Buddha, and thereby of the samgha or community, the only worthy recipients of offerings, for the making of merit in the Buddhistic sense, are the pratya$kabuddhas.

—p. 90, "qui était bien propre"; text p. 24, gtsang zhing bsdod pa’i bza’ ba dang/ bca’ ba... This phrase is consistently mistranslated by attaching the adjective gtsang (pure, clean = Skt. sūci) to the preceding noun, when in fact it belongs with the following phrase: "wholesome and tasty food and beverage". The mistranslation occurs once on p. 90, "son bol à aumônes, qui était bien propre", and three times on p. 109: "le roi Krīśṇa, bien pur", etc. The Sanskrit of the latter, which occurs in story VIII, is available in the Sanghabhedavastu, as mentioned above.

—p. 96, "un roi nommé Brahmatatā commençait à régner et sa prospérité, d’après ce qu’on a dit, devait s’accroître"; text p. 29, rgyal po tshangs sbyin zhes bya ba rgyal srid byed du ‘jug stel/ ‘byor pa dang zhes bya ba nas rgyas par bya ste = brahmadatto nāma rāja rājaṁ kārayati ‘diḥham ceti vistaraṇa: This is an abbreviation of a stock passage. It should read: "A king named Brahmadatta came to the throne: wealthy, and so on (ceti, zhes bya ba rnas) [to be repeated as before] in full (vistareṇa, rgyas par bya ste)." The abbreviation of stock passages is also somewhat confused at pp. 91 and 120.

—p. 101, "Doctes [messieurs]"; text p. 34, shes ldan dag: The note to this phrase says "le texte sanskrit porte simplement bhavantaḥ ‘messieurs’; that is, where the Tibetan has shes ldan dag, "doctes" ("learned ones"), the Sanskrit has bhavantaḥ, "messieurs" ("sirs"). There is however no discrepancy, since shes ldan dag is the standard Tibetan equivalent of bhavantaḥ in such a context. The Tibetan translation is presumably based on a tradition transmitted by the Indian pāṇḍitas and co-translators, but I have not yet found a text which attempts to justify the derivation.

—p. 115, "durant six années, j’ai pratiqué des austérités pour l’origine de l’Éveil (bodhimala)"; text p. 45, byang chub kyi sīling par dka’ ba lo drug spyad do = bodhimule šadvarṣaṇī duśkaraṇa caritam: Here the locative phrase byang chub kyi sīling por = bodhimala would better be taken as “in the vicinity of the bodhi-tree”, where Śākyamuni practised austerities for six years.

Despite these drawbacks, Hofinger’s Légendes du Bouddha is a valuable contribution to the study of the Buddhology of the Mulasarvāstivādins, since it brings together at least some of the source materials, and sometimes offers useful information in the notes. The Sanskrit equivalents given in parentheses or in the footnotes must, however, be treated with extreme caution, and story VIII in particular must be checked against other available versions.