

philosophies and his privileging of violent action as the central message of the *Gītā*. Aurobindo's essay likewise lets us explore his attempt to present the *Gītā* as a universal text full of mystical symbolism. However, what is missing in this section are the interpretations by Gandhi and Vivekananda that continue to be read with avid interest even today.

A selection of essays appearing under "Criticism" gives the reader a glimpse into scholarly excursions surrounding the textual, conceptual, and historical aspects of the *Gītā*. Brockington's essay investigates the structural relationship between the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, the date of the *Gītā*, and the thematic connections between its chapters. Sharma's essay explores the lesser-known yet significant literary genre of *Gītāmāhātmyas*. Rudolf Otto's investigation into the transitions in the meanings and uses of the term *yoga* in the Sanskrit textual tradition provides broad relevance and significance. Eric Sharpe's examination of Romantic and Transcendentalist responses to the *Gītā* brings out the historical and intellectual framework within which Western thinkers conceptualized what they understood to be Eastern and Western modes of thought. Finally, the brilliant essay by C. A. Bayly examines the "transnational" movements and intellectual trends in religion and philosophy that impinged upon how the *Gītā* was understood in the West as well as in Indian politics under colonialism. Although it is unrealistic to be exhaustive in the selection of analyses, the ones selected here offer the readers a diverse and rich interpretive aid in uncovering some of the significant textual, historical, conceptual, and political layers surrounding the *Gītā*.

In a nutshell, although this new translation compromises precision in favor of elegance, the supplementary material in the form of footnotes and excerpts from primary and secondary literature enhances the academic value of this volume. It will be a good addition to the existing translations and textbooks on the *Gītā*. New and veteran readers, students as well as instructors, will appreciate the convenience of having the translation, the contexts, and criticisms in one volume. The juxtaposition of these three is also a subtle reminder that the act of reading a primary text, especially a religious text, must never be an isolated but a complex and continuous hermeneutical process drawing upon external references. In the age where textual determinism often leads to violent consequences, it is a welcome reminder.

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Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka. Edited with an introduction by STEVEN COLLINS. Columbia Readings of Buddhist Literature. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. x + 216. \$90 (cloth); \$30 (paper); \$29.99 (ebook).

In a series meant to address ongoing interpretations and productions—broadly conceived—of historically significant Buddhist texts, surely *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka*, the third volume of the series, has a rightful place. For the legend of Prince Vessantara,¹ the man destined to become the Buddha Śākyamuni in his next human rebirth, has for centuries been critically important in virtually the entire Buddhist world. Indeed, the *Vessantara Jātaka* (hereafter abbreviated as VJ) has probably been the most popular Buddhist tale traditionally for Sri Lanka and much of Southeast Asia. Steven Collins, the editor of this volume, is therefore not unjustified in his opening claim that if "one approaches Buddhist textual traditions as civilizational-literary achievements . . . then the story of central historical and ethnographic importance will be that of Vessantara . . ." (p. 1).

This collection of essays on the VJ is very much in line with the welcome shift in Buddhist Studies, perhaps most notably marked by the 1995 publication of *Buddhism in Practice* (which could arguably

1. Proper names from (and the very title of) the *Vessantara Jātaka* will be referred to in their Pali form. This is only out of convenience, and it should be kept in mind—in the spirit of this volume—that these names varied, through translation or transliteration, as Buddhist textual traditions were transmitted through various Asian languages.

be called *Buddhist Texts in Practice*), from examining texts only philologically and doctrinally to studying them as part and parcel of lived and living Buddhist cultures. Collins, borrowing from A. K. Ramanujan's work on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, thus frames the VJ not as a single text preserved in Pali or Sanskrit, but rather as a set of related *tellings*. Any one telling of the VJ is not a variant of some static ur-text from which it and all other versions diverge. Instead, a single telling represents a reinterpretation of an inherited narrative tradition, composed according to a particular agenda and constrained by certain historical and cultural circumstances (pp. 4–6). Although the essayists of this volume do not all follow Collins's terminology by referring to such and such a telling of the VJ, they do adhere to his interpretive framework as a guiding principle: there is no fixed standard VJ, even if the Pali text, which introduces most Western students of Buddhism to Vessantara, is seen as authoritative in specific contexts.

Readers of this volume, and I would include among them specialists in Theravāda Buddhism, will walk away with a thorough appreciation of the diversity of VJ tellings. Among these tellings we have, of course, textual translations.² Louis Gabaude shows how the well-known *Mahachat Kham Luang*, a Thai rendering of the VJ sponsored by King Trailokanat of Ayuthaya in 1482, was subjected to political criticism by twentieth-century Thai intellectuals (pp. 41–42). Lilian Handlin discusses the first complete Burmese translation of the VJ, made by U Obatha in 1815, a telling that, compared to the "original" Pali from which Obatha worked, emphasized Vessantara's human characteristics and was rife with the translator's aesthetic embellishments (pp. 155–65). We also have the VJ depicted visually. Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate contextualize VJ narratives painted on long cloth scrolls from modern northeast Thailand and Laos. The scenes of the VJ portrayed on these scrolls and their written captions exhibit extensive variation (pp. 122–52). And Handlin skillfully compares the function of two visual VJ narratives from Pagan (Burma) from ca. 1100. These two visual tellings were both intended for ritual contexts, tell the same general story, and more or less hail from the same place and time, yet their considerable differences illustrate the array of ways in which the VJ was interpreted and transmitted. The first narrative is a 134-frame terracotta piece inscribed with short Mon captions. Because it was placed around the tower of a large, royally sponsored temple, it would not have been visually accessible (pp. 172–80). The other is smaller (but visible), accompanied by Burmese inscriptions, and told on murals decorating the wall of a Buddhist *gandhakuṭī*, a 'perfume chamber' designed for ritual circumambulation and worship (pp. 165–72).

The scope of tellings of the VJ is most apparent in modern performative contexts, and it is here that this volume makes its greatest contribution. On the Pali VJ, and for a modern Lao context, Patrice Ladwig remarks that the "refinements and subtleties of the Buddhist canon are of little interest to the average Lao monk, and more often than not remain completely obscure for the lay Buddhist" (p. 53). Ladwig hence turns to the VJ as a folk narrative, which is how most Lao encounter the story. Lao monks train to chant specific sections of local vernacular forms of the text, and they are judged by their skills in recitation and ability to entertain audiences. During and after such public performances, lay audiences in Laos have space to reflect on Buddhist ethics and process the complex dilemmas of the VJ on an emotional level (pp. 53–80). Monks in Thailand similarly train to recite the VJ as folk narrative. As Katherine Bowie reveals, the most popular part of the VJ recited for lay audiences in northern Thailand is the chapter on Jūjaka, the antagonist. Unlike in other regions of Thailand, Jūjaka in northern Thai recitations elicits laughter, and the monks specializing in the Jūjaka chapter are evaluated, among other factors, by their comedic delivery. The monastic performers in northern Thailand have great latitude to add their own narrative episodes and witty rhymes, making the possible variety of just this one chapter of the VJ seemingly infinite.

Performative contexts also allow Buddhist participants to create homologies between themselves and the characters within the VJ, and between their external actions and the internal plotlines of the text. During the Bun Phra Wet festival, which celebrates the life of Vessantara, especially the spiritual merit he is thought to have earned from his prodigious generosity, Thai-Lao and Lao villagers travel from the forest to their local Buddhist temple. While doing so, the villagers carry scrolls portraying the VJ (as well as introductory panels depicting other Buddhist stories significant in the area), includ-

2. Collins provides an extremely helpful synopsis of extant textual versions of the VJ, including information on translations into Western languages, in his introduction on pp. 19–23.

ing scenes of Vessantara's own journey from the forest. As Lefferts and Cate demonstrate, through the procession of the cloth scrolls the Buddhist villagers intentionally parallel Vessantara's triumphant return from the forest to rule his city. After the procession reaches the temple, the scrolls are hung in the meeting hall of the temple, which is decked out with props to recreate the setting of the VJ, and monks recite the text as a form of theater. Christoph Emmrich details similar performative homologies in Nepal. In this case, the VJ is read as part of a liturgy venerating the bodhisattva (Lokanātha) Avalokiteśvara. Emmrich explains how the participants of the liturgy identify with characters within the text, who are not part of the VJ itself but the story framing it. The characters in the frame story actually worship Avalokiteśvara, providing a model for the liturgy occurring outside of the text. And as the worship of Avalokiteśvara in the frame story is said to produce merit resulting in the birth of Vessantara, so the performance of the external liturgy is thought to be able to bring a male child to sponsoring participants. Here too, then, we see that the VJ is a rich, living text amenable to constant re-creation and reinterpretation (pp. 183–209). The VJ today is clearly not the sole domain of royal patrons or male literati, and we can safely assume, I think, that this has always been the case.

But the cliché that a great strength can also be a great weakness duly applies here. There are so many tellings of the VJ, and there is so much ground covered in these essays—historical periods, geographical areas, various cultures, textual media, performative contexts, and so on—that there is little holding this volume together. I am of the mind that what is published as a book—even an edited volume of essays like this one—should *read like a book*, with a logical sequence from beginning to end. As it stands, this volume is really a collection of disparate works, and it appears that there was little effort made to harmonize them. If the VJ, as Collins suggests, is so complex—he likens it to *Hamlet* (p. viii)—that we could never plumb its depths, then rather than publishing a seemingly random selection of essays, it might behoove us to interrogate the text from a certain perspective, or at least to limit discussion to particular themes. In his introduction, Collins teases the reader with fruitful avenues of interpretation that might guide a more organized volume. One relates to the concept of *atidāna*, which can either mean 'great generosity' or 'excessive generosity'. The question is how Buddhists have interpreted and continue to interpret Vessantara's gift of his family members. Collins refers to the *Milindapañha*'s hedging its answer to this problem by allowing for both definitions of *atidāna* (pp. 7–11). Unfortunately, though, this important issue is almost completely absent throughout the rest of the volume, only being addressed sporadically by Ladwig (pp. 61, 64, 69–70, 73). Collins also broaches the critical topic of gender, both with respect to the VJ itself and also its external use and interpretation (pp. 16–19). But the only sustained treatment gender receives in this volume is by Justin McDaniel, who quite cogently argues for reading the VJ as a love story involving Vessantara and Maddī, his wife (pp. 81–99; but also see pp. 43–45, 190–91, 199–201).

I do not believe the kind of volume I am suggesting is something that the editor, or this whole series on Buddhist texts for that matter, aimed to produce. So I suppose my criticism is directed less at this particular volume on the VJ than at a species of academic publication. Indeed, volumes made up of a haphazard collection of essays are legion in the humanities. But since the VJ certainly has enough fodder for much future scholarship, perhaps others will organize essay collections that read well in book form, from cover to cover. In the meantime, *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka* provides a solid starting point for future work on the VJ, and several of its essays will be treasured for years to come.

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Reading the Mahāvamsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravāda Buddhist History. By KRISTIN SCHEIBLE. South Asia across the Disciplines. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. viii + 223. \$60 (cloth).

In *Reading the Mahāvamsa*, Kristin Scheible discusses two Buddhist texts that have occupied the attention of scholars for generations. The *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* were seized upon by Orientalist