

# Understanding Noble women in Jataka stories

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## Abstract

Women in the Buddhist world generally take on more subservient roles than their male counterparts. By and large their culture has trained them to accept their subordinate positions, and the foundations of that culture are directly intertwined with Buddhism. This trend of the subordination of women is present in Buddhist cultures from the ancient past until the present. However, the researcher personally feels that the roles women have been forced to accept are perhaps not inherent in Buddhism, but rather stem from different interpretations of the Buddhist scriptures.

This study is based on the research and examination of documents. It is also a combination of several methods for studying literature. The reader-oriented approach and hermeneutics of interpretation are two of the most effective tools I have employed.

For the Burmese, there are four foremost noblest women appeared in Jataka stories. These four noble women are Amāra (Jātaka No.546); Kanari (Jātaka No.485), Maddī (Jātaka No. 547) and Sambula (Jātaka No. 519). These four noble women illustrate the qualities of true love, compassion and great wisdom, providing an archetype of the ideal mother and wife for Burmese women. Burmese women are inspired to imitate them during the course of their lives, wholeheartedly taking on the different roles a woman has to perform. However, it seems that differing interpretations of the same story can lead to a variety of possibly conflicting conclusions.

This paper is to depict these four noblest women's contribution towards their partner in his path to perfection. It will also remind those who might have forgotten the virtues of these ladies and how these stories might still be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Keywords:** Understanding, Noble women, in Jataka stories

## Introduction

Women in the Buddhist world generally take on more subservient roles than their male counterparts. By and large, their culture has trained them to accept their subordinate positions. This trend of the subordination of women is present in Buddhist cultures from the ancient past until the present. However, the researcher personally feels that the roles Buddhist

women have accepted are perhaps not inherent in the religion, but rather stem from different interpretations of the Buddhist scriptures. For the Burmese Buddhist women, Amāra (Jātaka No.546)<sup>1</sup>; Kanari (Jātaka No.485<sup>2</sup> & 504<sup>3</sup>), Maddī (Jātaka No. 547<sup>4</sup>) and Sambula (Jātaka No. 519<sup>5</sup>) are the noblest women in history. They illustrate practical wisdom, true love, devotion and faithfulness, providing an archetype of the ideal wife and mother. Burmese women are inspired to imitate them during the course of their lives, wholeheartedly taking on the different roles a woman has to perform. However, it seems that differing interpretations of the same story can lead to a variety of possibly conflicting conclusions. Understanding these noble women in Jātaka stories will lead to the admiration on their contributions to the course of Bodhisatta's fulfillment of perfections which in turn will make today's women folk accept their roles positively.

<sup>1</sup> Jātaka No.546. The Maha-Ummagga- Jātaka: A story of four Pretended wise men and one real wise man, of numerous problems which the four failed to solve and the one succeeded, of many attempts of the four to destroy the one and of his final triumph, including wars, battles, sieges, and the description of a wonderful tunnel full of machinery. (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. VI, p.vi)

<sup>2</sup> Jātaka No.485. Canda-Kinnara- Jātaka: Two fairies that dwelt on a beautiful hill, and how the husband was wounded and the wife made lament, until Sakka came to the rescue. (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. IV, p.ix)

<sup>3</sup> Jātaka No.504. Bhāllatiya- Jātaka: Of two fairies, who could not cease grieving for one night they had been pated from each other, and how they were at length consoled. (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. IV, p.xi)

<sup>4</sup> Jātaka No. 547. Vessatara Jātaka: A prince devoted to giving gifts falls into disrepute through giving a magical elephant. He is banished with his family into the forest where he gives away everything he has left, including his two children. Ultimately the children are set free and all ends well. (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. VI, p.vi)

<sup>5</sup> Jātaka No. 519. Sambula- Jātaka: A prince is struck with leprosy and retires into a lonely forest, accompanied by his devoted wife, who carefully watches over him. She is rescued by Sakka from an ogre, and though she is suspected by her husband, yet by her virtue and faith she recovers him of his leprosy. He returns to rule over his kingdom but shows no gratitude to his wife, until at the reproof of his father he asks her forgiveness and restores her to her rightful position. (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. V, p.viii)

## Some Discussions on women in Buddhist Literature

Some relevant discussions on Buddhist women, notably those from the Jātaka stories, will be presented here.

Kornvipa Boonsue who questions the source of gender inequality in Buddhism points out that women's oppression is a product of history. She contends that women's oppression is an extremely complex phenomena in which many dimensions such as economic, social and ideological factors are interlinked<sup>6</sup>. She emphasizes the unconscious aspects of the oppression of women. This area lies in the reciprocity of the relationship between base [practice] and superstructure [ideology], which can be identified with three main myths: the myth of female inferiority, which leads women to perceive themselves as inferior to men both mentally and physically and therefore to believe that they need to be protected; the myth of female subservience to the male, which causes women to perceive themselves as submissive and dependent and justifies their acceptance of male supremacy and the role of the men as head of the household; and the myth of domesticity, which leads women to believe that their aim in life should be marriage, reproduction, and domestic work. These predominant myths are usually detrimental to women's bodies, mental capacities and social behavior.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, she concludes that the oppression of women at the ideological level in the context of Buddhism and Thai society, has made it clear that male supremacy and dominance are neither natural nor an inevitable development, but are the result of a struggle between the female power principle [procreation] and the idea that the male is the dominant source of power. And this is the reason why men restrain women's power by legitimizing a system of strong subjective control over women. This system of controlling women has been manipulated in the name of religion, culture, and society, through social institutions education, Sangha and mass media] in the form of social stereotypes in which Buddhist religion is the source and tool of hegemony<sup>8</sup>. Rita Gross blames patriarchy and advocates androgynous Buddhism. She affirms that patriarchy is the cultural creation of a certain epoch in Human history, not an inevitable necessity of human biology. Therefore, she urges women not just to accept: "You can't do anything about that", but to believe that they can do something about patriarchy even though the task may be immense.<sup>9</sup> For her, feminism as a scholarly method is a critical aspect of the androcentric mindset. Feminism as social vision is critical of patriarchal culture. Androcentrism and patriarchy share the same attitude toward women. In both cases, women are objectified as non-human, are

<sup>6</sup> Boonsue, 1986, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Gross, 1995, p. 298

spoken about as if they were objects but not subjects, and are manipulated by others. On both cases, the end results are the silence and the silencing of women. Scholarship proceeds as if women did not exist, or if their existence is noted, they are treated only as objects (Gross, 1995, p. 303). Striving to increase empathy and respect to both one's self and others in a pluralistic world, Gross suggests that change must come from practice. Buddhist institutions should cater those females who have both responsibilities of production and reproduction so that they too might have the chance to practice<sup>10</sup>.

Dr. Naomi Appleton presents a survey of women in the Jātaka Stories in her article "Tempress on the Path: Women as Objects and Subjects in Buddhist Jātaka Stories." She contends that ascetic misogyny is evident in the Jātaka Stories as women are portrayed as obstacles to men's progress on the spiritual path. There is also an androcentric tendency as few female characters are given any voice of their own. She also claims that soteriological inclusiveness is to be questioned as the stories are presented as relating the previous births of Gautama Buddha, whose identity is a male character in every case.<sup>11</sup> In another article, "In the footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism," Appleton blames the Jātaka Stories as the source of the doctrine that excludes women from the Bodhisatta path. She argues that the absence of stories about the Bodhisatta changing sex between births has led to the understanding that a Bodhisatta is always a male. This causes women to believe that they are unable to be Bodhisattas and successfully aspire to Buddhahood. In agreement with the textual tradition, Theravāda Buddhism states that a woman cannot achieve full and complete Buddhahood<sup>12</sup>.

The researcher asserts that the images of women in the Jātaka Stories are perhaps not as tainted as those of Boonsue, nor as refined as those of Gross. A realistic appreciation of these women might be found somewhere between the two extremes. In response to Boonsue, the researcher maintains that not all depictions of women in the Jātakas are as temptresses or object's of male domination and in response to Appleton, the researcher proposes that the Jātaka Stories might not be the only source responsible for reducing women's aspiration to become Bodhisattas. In order to project a more balanced response, the researcher would like to recognize the roles played by female characters in these stories and their contribution towards their partner, the Bodhisatta, in his path to perfection.

Dr. Suwanna Satha-Anand studies moral dilemma in Vessantara

<sup>10</sup> Gross, 1995, p. 311.

<sup>11</sup> Appleton, 2011, pp. 33-51.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Jātaka<sup>13</sup> specifically dealing with why Maddī cannot be a Female Bodhisatta.<sup>14</sup> She points out the two extremes of negation of anything traditional on the one hand and a non-critical acceptance of anything inherited on the other. She proposes a more balanced approach through applying a process of reorientation and re-appropriation of the story. According to Dr. Suwanna, there are two groups of scholarly works on moral issues relating to the Vessanantara Jātaka tale. The first group studies the Vessanantara Jātaka as a literary work of religious, cultural, historical or political significance. The other group includes studies of the Vessanantara Jātaka as part of a larger body of Bodhisatta literature, with special focus on the question of moral conflict or moral inadequacy of the Bodhisattas in the stories. She defines herself belongs to the second group. Suwanna explains that there are three possibilities of reconciling the moral dilemmas:

1) the Bodhisatta's extreme acts of kindness and emotional dimensions are necessary as acts of sympathetic identification of the Bodhisatta with the rest of human beings.

2) These tales of extreme generosity are fictional stories used to make a point and thus should not be taken literally.

3) the tales are meant to illustrate the stories of Bodhisattas who are "special" beings, who are different from us. These tales are to be "worshipped" not to be "emulated" by the audience.

4) Another possibility of compromise or reconciliation might be to view these acts of Bodhisattas as "moral experiments" through their journeys in different lives. They need to try out different moral possibilities to the extreme possibilities of those acts before they come to the realization that only wisdom can lead to enlightenment, not extreme self-sacrifice. In her research on Maddī, Suwanna proposes the logic of interdependence which would allow the possibility of Bodhisattahood for Maddī:

1. A wife is a "life partner" of the husband. Their relationship could be described by the term "equality" or "reciprocal superiority"

<sup>13</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand. "Moral dilemma in the Bodhisattva Ideal: A Re-reading of Vessanantara Jātaka Tale." In *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 7. No. 2 September 2004. Thailand: Chulalongkorn University. 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand. "Maddsi: a Female Bodhisattva Denied?" In Virada Somswasdi and Sally Theobald eds., *Women, Gender Relations and Development in Thai Society, Vol.1*. Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. pp 243-256.1997.

2. A wife, a husband and the children all belong to each other. No one party should assume the ultimate “ownership.”

3. The “self” of the wife is both part of and independent from the “self” of the husband, and vice versa. The ground for negotiation is open to both parties in the relationship.

4. A woman’s and a man’s actions do carry independent meaning and credit.

The researcher believes that the ideas of “moral experience” and “logic of interdependence” are better ways to understand women in the Jātaka stories and make the present day’s women folk happier.

The Vessantara story, according to Collins, is both realist drama and allegory: its characters are both realistic representations of human beings going through a narrative sequence, and textual embodiments of values, emotions and aspirations.

Collins confirms that the Vessantara Jātaka also highlights conflicts of value. The narrative of his fulfillment of the Perfection of Generosity weaves its way through two conflicts: socially, between the ascetic values of renunciation and the mundane need for prudential government; and psychologically, between the aspiration to mental detachment, to a love universalized and depersonalized, and the immediate joys and ties of particular affection, filial, and marital and paternal<sup>15</sup>.

In the above mentioned studies, the scholars agree that the Jātaka Stories have contributed tremendously to the world of Buddhism by demonstrating the connections between the Buddha and the Dhamma, and the possibility for all humans to strive for Buddhahood. Although some scholars contest the historical authenticity of the Jātaka Stories, especially the commentarial aspects, and claim that many of the stories are not entirely Buddhist in purpose and origin, there is nevertheless an overall appreciation of the important role these stories have played in the formation of Buddhist history and Buddhist culture in general.

In general, the focus of scholarly examinations of the Jātaka Stories is on the Bodhisatta as the protagonist. The researcher, on the other hand, would like to approach the Jātaka Stories from another angle, focusing instead on the female companions of Bodhisatta. She would like to propose that women play important parts in the life of their partners. The researcher will therefore examine the ways in which the female compan-

<sup>15</sup> Collins, 1998, p. 49.

ions of the Bodhisatta actually helped him to achieve his final goal of complete Buddhahood.

This study will focus more in detail on female characters and the emphasis will be more on literary appreciation of the Jātaka Stories. Rather than examining the historical, critical aspect, the researcher will study the roles these female characters play in either helping or hindering the Bodhisatta on his path to perfection.

### **Images of Women in the Jātaka Stories**

In her Master's thesis, *Buddhism and Gender Bias: An Analysis of a Jātaka Tale*,<sup>16</sup> Ms. Kornvipa Boonsue depicts a very negative picture of women in Buddhism. Using expressions such as, "woman as an object under male possession", "woman and the image of feminine morality", "man the decision maker, woman the follower" and so on, Boonsue argues that Buddhism itself gives rise to gender bias in Thai society. She also remarks that the role of Buddhism in Thai history was instrumentalized to serve political purposes more than its original function as an alternative route to liberation from suffering for mankind<sup>17</sup>.

In her thesis, Boonsue asserts that Maddī, the wife of Vessantara, was seen as an object under male possession to be given away as an ultimate donation to fulfill the perfection of generosity. Maddī was portrayed as the image of feminine morality when she joined her husband, taking along with her their two children. Maddī collected roots and fruits for the family to eat, and gave her husband more time to meditate. But even though Maddī is the subsistence earner for the whole family and is thus economically independent, she still subordinates herself to Vessantara's wisdom and the power of his knowledge, which according to the story is not the domain of women.<sup>18</sup>

According to Boonsue, Maddī played a big role in Vessantara's achievement but she did not receive any credit for her contribution. All appreciation and honor were given to Vessantara, even for what was achieved via Maddī's painful sacrifices, faithfulness, and virtue, as well as the physical and mental pain inflicted on his children.<sup>19</sup> As a conclusion to this chapter, Boonsue comments that,

<sup>16</sup> Kornvipa Boonsue. (1986). A research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of Development Studies of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Boonsue, 1986, p. 45

“From a feminist perspective, how could one consider this kind of merit accumulation as the ultimate step. It is in fact very inhumane and the way in which Vessantara wanted to prove his detachment from worldly things is very selfish. He thought only of himself and of the benefit to himself alone. He did not consider the feelings of his wife and his children, as he explained to Maddī: “Both Jali and Kanhajina I let another take, And Maddī my 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”<sup>20</sup>.

Boonsue argues on the ideological level, however, that this is the way to rationalize and mystify the privilege, arbitrary power, and superiority of the male sex. As religious texts, these stories have been preserved by men and the stories are used to project the stereotype of the ideal woman. This ideal, also influenced by Hinduism, considered women fit for two things, namely, procreation and the kitchen. Despite the importance of these roles, women’s status was on the whole low and without honor. Women were also portrayed as more miserly and envious, as well as more strongly attached to worldly objects than men, and their knowledge was not considered to be equal to that of men<sup>21</sup>. In her conclusion of the analysis of Vessantara Jātaka, Boonsue affirms that “in the political and civil society the Jātakas reflected the operation of the gender stereotypes where hegemony has been absorbed by the mass. Where women’s consciousness is formed under the conditions of subordination and oppression, women will internalize a sense of inferiority as inherent in their own nature. And the moral value of femininity is offered as compensation for their inferiority.”<sup>22</sup>

In terms of social action and everyday life in Thai society, Thai women accept Maddī as their ideal image and they themselves submit to being passive victims of patriarchal power. Also the concept of beauty persuades women to confine their interest in their own physical self.<sup>23</sup> As can be seen by her strong fiery language and tendency to take the most negative interpretation, Boonsue is definitely not in favor of the traditional depictions of women in the Jātaka Stories.

In her book “Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analy-

<sup>20</sup> Cowell E. B. and Rouse W. H. D, 1978: No 547:293

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

sis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism,” Rita Gross asserts that the maleness of the Buddha was rooted in the Jātaka literature, which is often evaluated as quite misogynistic. “Though this literature includes many stories of previous lives of the Buddha in which he was still an animal – a male animal – stories in which he was female are either non-existent or extremely rare. ... To see more affinity between male humans and female animals than between female and male human beings must be an extreme form of androcentric consciousness in which, more than is usually the case even for androcentrism, women are seen as outside the norm, as a foreign object but not a human subject.”<sup>24</sup> Gross analyzes that there is more than one theme or motif of misogyny in stories of attempted seduction and temptation. One cannot generalize that women are viewed as temptresses or that they are sexually insatiable, any more than one could make the reverse claim, that men should be evaluated as raping aggressors insensitive to women’s autonomy. Gross opines that many stories, narrating a complete description of various human wants and dilemmas, make such easy stereotypes and generalizations inaccurate.<sup>25</sup>

Suwanna argues that if we just rely on the text itself, Maddī is the only one in the entire story who “shares” the hope of Vessantara’s future enlightenment. “In this sense, Maddī’s acceptance and understanding of Vessantara’s great giving offers his giving the possibility of justification and perhaps reconciliation from within the story itself. Her total devotion to her husband thus creates the possibility of moral justification within the time frame of the text itself.” This is different from other possibilities of reconciliation which need to take into account the future of Vessantara, and use that future time frame to re-work moral consideration back into the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

Suwanna suggests that one possible approach to understand the controversial idea of Vessantara’s ‘generosity’ is the adoption of a “Challenge with respect” attitude which does not belittle or bedevil a text and its tradition, and yet does not rest content with conservative transmission of the message. As a result, the rich cultural and religious tradition existing in the Vessantara Jātaka can live on and provide a meaningful cultural cosmos for people in Thai society who are now braving the future.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Four Noble Women in the Jātaka Stories and their Contribution to the Bodhisatta’s Fulfillment of Perfections

<sup>24</sup> Gross, 1995, p. 42

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Suwanna, 2004, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Women in the Jātaka Stories definitely contribute in various ways to the Bodhisatta's path to enlightenment. They paved the way for his realization of the perfections. This was done both directly and indirectly. The researcher would defend that the acts of female characters are channeling the Bodhisatta to the path of virtues. By looking at positive and values found in the acts of female characters, the contributions of these women in virtue will come to light.

### **Wisdom**

Amarā, the wife of Mahosadha, was well-known for her practical wisdom. Lady Amarā is a young girl of beauty and brain with all the marks of good luck. The wise sage, Mahosadha fell in love with her at first sight. Starting from answering her name, her marital status of whether she was single or married, to helping out Mahosadha in his escape from the anger of the king, she showed her practical wisdom. Once, Mahosadha tested Amarā leaving her at the gatekeeper's house and asked his men to buy her services. Amarā refused saying:

“That is not worth the dust on my master's feet.” The men came back and told the result. He sent them again, and a third time; and the fourth time he bade them to drag her away by force. They did so, and when she saw the Great Being in all his glory she did not know him, but smiled and wept at the same time as she looked at him. He asked her why she did this. She replied, “Master, I smiled when I beheld your magnificence, and thought that this magnificence was not given you without cause, but for some good deed in a former life: see the fruit of goodness! I thought, and I smiled. But I wept to think that now you would sin against the property which another watched and tended, and would go to hell: in pity for that I wept.”

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After this test, Mahosadha was convinced of her chastity, so he sent her back to the gatekeeper's house and wearing his tailor's disguise went to fetch her. The next day, he announced that he had found a wife and she was greatly honored. The king sent a thousand pieces of money and the townspeople sent all kinds of presents. Lady Amarā divided the gifts sent by the king into halves, and sent one portion back to the king; in the same way she divided all the gifts sent to her by the citizens, and returned half, thus winning the hearts of the people. From that time the Bodhisatta lived with her in happiness, and instructed the king in things temporal and

<sup>28</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, p. 184

spiritual (Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, p. 185) Lady Amarā is Mahosadha's soul mate who helped him out in time of need, consoled and advised him in time of trouble. (Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, p. 185)

## Love

A kinnare (fairy) named Candā (No. 485 Candā-Kinnara Jātaka) the wife of the Bodhisatta, showed her love and devotion to her husband. When Candā discovered that her husband had been shot lifeless by the king, she was unable to bear the great pain of sorrow and cried out with a loud voice. The king thought the male fairy was dead and so approached Candā. She realized it must be the king who shot her husband dead and cried out:

“You evil prince –ah, woe is me! – my husband dear did wound,

Who there beneath a woodland tree now lies upon the ground.

...

“And may thy wife look on and see the loss of lord and son,  
For thou upon my harmless lord for lust this deed hast done.”

The king comforted her saying:

“Weep not nor grieve: the woodland dark has blinded you, I ween:  
A royal house shall honor thee, and thou shalt be my queen.”<sup>29</sup>

When Candā heard this she was furious and threatened to kill herself rather than being the king's bride. The king came back to his senses and left. Candā called out for help from higher beings and Sakka came in disguise as an old Brahmin thereby regaining the life of her husband.<sup>30</sup> In No. 504 Bhallatiya Jātaka, Bhallatiya<sup>1</sup> the king of Benares saw these two fairies, who wept for seven hundred years in sorrow because they were parted for one night because of a storm. It made him reflect that although these fairies were not even human, they were still capable of such emotional depth, whereas he the lord of a kingdom left all his magnificence and went hunting in the forest because of a trifling incident with the queen. He therefore saw the folly of his ways and repented.<sup>31</sup>

Maddī, the wife of Vessantara, was Vessantara's cousin and married him when he reached the age of sixteen. Vessantara had attained mastery of

<sup>29</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. IV, p. 181

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

all sciences was bestowed with the kingdom. They had two children, Prince Jāli and Princess Kaṇhājīnā. Vessantara was devoted to the perfection of generosity.<sup>32</sup>

When Vessantara gave away the royal elephant to the Kali, he was thus banished by his own people to the forest. Maddī was given the choice as what to do with her life. The first choice came from her husband, Vessantara, who said to her: “Be kind, O Maddī, to thy sons, thy husband’s parents both, to him who will thy husband be, do service, nothing loth. And if no man should wish to be thy husband, when I’m gone, go seek a husband for thyself, but do not pine alone.”<sup>33</sup>

Maddī replied, “My king, that thou alone shouldst fare: Whatever journey thou shalt go, I also will be there. Give me the choice to die with thee, or live from thee apart. Death is my choice, unless I can live with thee where thou art....So with my boys I’ll follow thee, wherever thou mayst lead, Nor shalt thou find me burdensome or difficult to feed.”<sup>34</sup>

Even though Maddī was released by her husband and allowed to take another man, Maddī still opted for death rather than being parted from her husband. She stated that she would not be a burden to him, and indeed later in the story it is seen that she was the sole provider for the whole family.

The second choice came from Maddī’s mother-in-law. The queen was worried how such a tender princess could endure the hardship of the forest<sup>35</sup>. So, when Vessantarabid farewell to his parents, his mother asked him to leave Maddī and the children behind. To this, Vessantara replied: “Even a slave against her will, I would not take away: But if she wishes, let her come; if not, then let her stay.”<sup>36</sup>

The third choice came from her father-in-law. On hearing his son’s words the King tried to persuade Maddī to remain behind with children, comparing the comfort of the palace with the hardship she would face in the forest. To this Maddī replied that she would accept all the hardship willingly as she had already resolved to go. She uttered in verse,

“Though all the hill and forest grass, through clumps of  
bulrush reed,

<sup>32</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, p.252.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

With my own breast I'll push my way, nor will complain indeed.  
She that would keep a husband well must all her duties do;

Ready to roll up balls of dung, ready for fasting too ...

The wife who shares her husband's lot, be it rich or be it poor,

Her fame the very gods do praise, in trouble she is sure ...

When the great lord of Sivi goes forth to banishment,

I will go with him; for he gives all joy and all content."<sup>37</sup>

When the king asked Maddī to leave her children at the palace in the care of their grandparents, Maddī answered that her children, Jāli and Kaṇhājinā, were most dear to her heart and that they would dwell in the forest with her. She showed all respect to her husband's parents and bid farewell to others urging not to feel sorry for them.

<sup>38</sup>

From the very beginning, it is clear that Maddī made her own choice whether to follow her husband or to remain behind in the palace. The situation is not at all congruent with Kornvipa Boonsue's accusation that Maddī was treated like a material object. In fact, considering the social context of ancient India at that time, the freedom of choice offered to Maddī was indeed unusually progressive.

Along the journey to the forest, the caring attitude of Vessantara is evident. When they reached the place where they had to leave the carriage and go on foot, the Bodhisatta said to Maddī: "Maddī, you take Kaṇhājinā, for she is light and young, But Jāli is a heavy boy, so I'll bring him along." So saying Vessantara carried his boy and Maddī her daughter, and they went on the journey talking together on the road in joy and all content.<sup>39</sup> This information challenges the hardcore feminist accusation that Vessantara was not a caring husband.

When they were settled in the forest, the productive and reproductive duties (to use Collin's term) of gathering and producing food and looking after children were carried out solely by Maddī. The cares and worries of Maddī as a wife and mother are vividly portrayed in the nightmare she had the night before Jūjuka arrived to ask for the children. She recounted her dream and sought comfort from her husband, who, even though he knew

<sup>37</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, p. 263

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

what would happen, tried to console her. Another interesting question is why did Vessantara lie to Maddī? We can suppose that perhaps he did not want her to suffer and that he hoped to lessen the burden of her sorrow by keeping her in the dark as to the truth of the situation.

The following day when Maddī went into the forest in search of food, bad omens manifested in her dropping the spade and basket, the trees bearing no fruits and her own state of great distress. Also when it was time for her to return home, wild beasts stopped her way home. Maddī lamented and prayed to the gods with an Oath of Truth: "... I am a banished prince's wife, a prince of glory fair; As Sitā did for Rāma, so I for my husband care. ... So Jāli and Kaṇhājinā be given once more to me!"<sup>40</sup>.

When the gods realized it was time to let her go the beasts disappeared. As Maddī neared their hut, where the children usually came to welcome her, she cried out loud and went to Vessantara and asked about their children. But the Bodhisatta did not say a word. Once again she went searching for the children by the light of the moon at the place where they used to play, trembling and weeping.<sup>41</sup>

As she could not find them once again she asked the Bodhisatta. Still there was complete silence from him. So she went searching again. After three rounds of search she had traveled about fifteen leagues and it was near dawn. She went back to her husband and lamenting, fell down upon the earth. Thinking she was dead, the Bodhisatta pulled her in his arms and sensing she was still alive, sprinkled some water on her. When she came back to her senses, he explained that he gave away the children to a Brahmin who came begging for them. It was a greater gift than giving away cattle, wealth or grain. This gift of children was commended by the miracle of the earth rumbling. Therefore, Maddī should rejoice in his great act of generosity.<sup>42</sup>

At this point, Sakka disguised as a Brahmin, came to test the Bodhisatta by asking for his wife. To this the Bodhisatta did not reply but thought – "Yesterday I gave away my children to a Brahmin, how can I give Maddī to you and be left alone in the forest!" Then he remarked,

"The face of Maddī did not frown, she did not chafe or cry,

But looked on silent, thinking, He knows best the reason why.

'Both Jāli and Kaṇhājinā I let another take,

<sup>40</sup> (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. VI, p. 288)

<sup>41</sup> (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. VI, p. 290)

<sup>42</sup> (Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. VI, pp. 290- 292)

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.”

Maddī looked up at Vessantara and said:

“From maidenhead I was his wife, he is my master still:  
 Let him to whom so he desire or give, or sell, or kill.”

Then Sakka, seeing her excellent resolution, gave her praise and gave the Bodhisatta boons. From then on Vessantara and Maddī lived happily together in a hermitage given to them by Sakka<sup>43</sup>.

### **Faithfulness**

Sambula, the chief consort of prince Sothhisena (No. 519 Sambula Jātaka) was extremely beautiful. When Sothhisena was struck with leprosy and the physicians failed to cure it, he was banished to the forest. Sambula followed to serve him. Though Sothhisena made many attempts to stop her, she refused to return, saying, “I will watch over you, my lord, in the forest”.

When she came back late one evening because a goblin fell in love with her and tried to seize her, her husband Sothhisena accused her of adultery. To this she proved her innocence and her love for him with an act of truth, filling a pot of water and swearing: “May Truth for aye my shelter be, As I love no man more than thee, And by this Act of Truth, I pray, May thy disease be healed today<sup>44</sup>. As soon as the water was sprinkled over Sothhisena, the leprosy disappeared from his body at once and he was completely cured.<sup>45</sup>When she had performed the Act of Truth and sprinkled the water over her husband, his leprosy disappeared immediately and they therefore returned to their country. When Sothhisena became the king of Benares, he merely conferred on Sambula the rank of chief consort but no honor was paid her, and he ignored her very existence and took his pleasure with other women. Sambula, through jealousy of her rivals, grew thin and pale of countenance and her veins stood out upon her body. On seeing her in this condition, her father-in-law asked for the reasons. Sambula replied that his son, her husband, caused her the pain, saying,

<sup>43</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. VI, pp. 293 - 295.

<sup>44</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. V & VI, pp. 50 - 51.

<sup>45</sup> Cowell, *The Jātaka*. Vol. V & VI, p. 52.

“A woman may in softest robes be drest,  
 And be with food in rich abundance blest,  
 Fair though she be, yet if an unloved wife,  
 Best fix a rope and put an end to life.  
 Yea the poor wretch on bed of straw that lies,  
 If she find favor in her husband’s eyes,  
 Enjoys a happiness unknown to one,  
 Rich in all else, but poor in love alone.”<sup>46</sup>

When the father-in-law knew the story, he confronted his son immediately and exhorted him thus, “Dear Sitthisena, when you were crushed by the disease of leprosy and hid yourself in the forest, she went with you and ministered to your wants, and by the power of truth healed your sickness, and now after she has been the means of your being established on the throne, you do not even know where she sits or when she rises. This is very wrong of you. An act of treachery to a friend like this is a sin.” And reproving his son, he repeated: “A loving wife is ever hard to find, As is a man that to his wife is kind: Thy wife was virtuous and loving too; Do thou, O king, to Sambula be true”<sup>47</sup>. Sitthisena repented and asked for forgiveness from his wife and conferred power on her saying he and his maidens would be obedient to her command. Thenceforth the pair lived happily together<sup>48</sup>.

## Discussion

Amarā, the wife of Mahosadha (in No. 546 Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka), is known for her wisdom and her chastity. The scene where the two lovers Mahosadha and Amara first met and the way they enquired and replied shows the practical wisdom of everyday life.

The actions of Candā in No. 485 Candā-Kinnara Jātaka and the two fairies in No. 504 Bhallatiya Jātaka demonstrate great power of love. In these two Jātaka Stories, Candā, the female fairy, cursed the king for killing her husband and swore to commit suicide if she were to be taken by him. This made the king come back to his senses and thus respect her for

<sup>46</sup> Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. V, pp. 52 -53

<sup>47</sup> Cowell, The Jātaka. Vol. V, p. 53

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

her love to her spouse.

Maddī is described by Boonsue as an object under the man's control, whose feminine morality was to be tested,<sup>49</sup> whereas Rita Gross completely ignores Maddī. However, Dr. Suwanna questions "Why do women rarely get credit for their work and support? Why is Maddī not considered a Bodhisatta too? What does that omission imply?"<sup>50</sup> From my personal perspective, Maddī as a wife and a mother had her own plights and choices to make. She chose to follow her husband and served him with loving care. She experienced the delight of rearing her children and the distress of being separated from them. She also rejoiced when she learned the greater cause of her husband. Maddī is not an object, but the subject of her own choice and at the same time the partner in perfection of the Bodhisatta.

Sambula in No. 519 Sambula Jātaka, is an inspiring role model for faithfulness, great endurance and true devotion to her companion.

The Buddha intended to use stories as a means of teaching a deeper meaning. It is therefore important that the reader looks beneath the surface of each character's depiction and interaction in order to ask: Why? In doing so, one will see the portrayal of women as constructive forces as a means of edifying and inspiring the readership, while the portrayal of women as destructive forces is a didactic tool used to warn of the dangers of sensuality and lust.

Furthermore, emphasis on individualism in this modern age is a useful tool for dissolving some of the gender-based misconceptions built up over centuries of cultural development. Rather than concluding that a particular character is 'good' or 'bad' (to take the most commonplace example) on the basis of their gender, one recognizes that each individual, be they male or female, is indeed a product of their own karmic actions and independently responsible for their own choices. The Jātaka Stories provide ample instances of both male and female characters in both negative and positive roles. In the modern age it would no longer seem appropriate to say that because one woman (or man) sinned, then all women (or men) are sinners. Instead, it is necessary to gather information, and keeping an open-mind, form flexible conclusions that do not fall into the age-old trappings of gender bias, but rather appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of particular characters as an autonomous expression of individuality.

### **Implications of Females' Contribution to the Present Society**

<sup>49</sup> Boonsue, 1989, pp.35-37

<sup>50</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai . "Maddī: A female Bodhisatta" in *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads*. Post Books. Bangkok. p. 199. 2001.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the world is becoming increasingly connected through the forces of globalization. However, human beings are becoming more and more individualistic and compartmentalized, thus causing mutual lack of trust and a loss of social contract. Also, the new proliferation of feminist movements, rather than empowering women, seems to have brought on a crisis of lack of self-esteem. While radical feminists seek to end all kinds of women's oppression, socialist feminists blame patriarchal systems of male domination as the cause of women's oppression. Existentialist feminists reject the woman's body, marriage and motherhood as the primary location of oppression, whereas postmodern feminism emphasizes the positive side of Otherness - of being excluded, disadvantaged, unprivileged, rejected, unwanted, abandoned, dislocated, and marginalized. (Amporn Srisermbhok, 2003, pp. 12-24) These movements make women angry and they are thus unable to find peace with their lives. They cannot reconcile their ideals with the present reality they are faced with. The result of this is inner-conflict and a desire to affect great change without an open-minded, moderate appreciation of the situation. Therefore, their attempts at improving the situation often lead to increased antagonism, both on the external and internal plane.

In my opinion, the ideology of liberal feminists who put more emphasis on the liberal values of individual dignity, equality, autonomy, and self-fulfillment can help to make women's lives more meaningful and acceptable. A re-reading of the Jātaka Stories can shed new light on the value of women's roles in terms of self-respect and females' fundamental freedom to make their own choices.

## **Be Happy**

Since the term feminism is itself defined as recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women, many women in the present age feel themselves inferior. New identification of the stereotypes of myth, culture and the attitude about the differences between female and male have brought a sense of conflict into the forefront of women's minds. In the past these differences were taken for granted as "natural". It was assumed that men were strong, brave, intelligent, protective, heroic, devoted and active, whereas women were thought to be weak, submissive, passive, less intelligent, and dependent. These stereotypes have been and still are highly influential on a worldwide scale, even in advanced societies. As a consequence of this new awareness, women these days are often dejected and lacking in confidence.

The researcher believes that a re-reading of the Jātaka Stories can change women's attitudes towards themselves. The female characters in the Jātaka Stories confirm that women are not inferior: they have their place and their roles to play. The Jātaka Stories also show that women have the right to determine the course of their own life through making their own choices.

As supporters of the Bodhisatta, these women show their love, faithfulness, and devotion to their love ones. Women of the contemporary age can also learn to coexist with their loved ones in healthy balanced relationships where mutual appreciation of each other's roles is a basis for long lasting trust and understanding. In the union of two individuals, both parties should not only assert their own personal autonomy, but must also learn to compromise and find the middle-ground in order to maintain mutual well-being.

The view of Dr. Suwanna is useful in clarifying the contribution of ancient Buddhist women to modern day relationships. She claims that the equal partnership model of a couple could turn the table around for Maddī. Maddī, as a devoted wife and bread earner of the family, was a "Life partner" to Vessantara. It then follows that a wife, a husband, and children all belong to each other and no one party can assume the ultimate "ownership". By choosing the logic of interdependence, the possibility of giving due credit to Maddī, and to women in general, is opened.<sup>51</sup> Only through recognizing their own intrinsic worth can women hope to achieve happiness, both on the personal level and on the greater societal level.

### **Be Kind**

Women still think that patriarchy causes inequality and they get angry with the so-called antagonistic force, namely "men". This attitude can drive them to another extreme of total rejection of men, which sees them as enemies. As a result of such an attitude, some feminists become unhealthily aggressive and lose their balance of mind.

The revenge stories of womankind in the Jātakas remind us that unwholesome deeds, carried out under the influence of jealousy and anger, are hurtful both for oneself, one's partner and others who are involved. Contrary to this, kindness, love, devotion, and truthfulness bring about the reunion of lovers, resurrection of loved ones and forgiveness or rescue of the victimized parties. So, what would be a better choice: be kind and true to your course or be aggressive?

### **Be Positive**

person wearing green glasses will perceive the whole world as being green. Likewise, one whose mind is tainted by ignorance will perceive the world through a veil of distortion. One who begins with the premise that life is unfair will feel that life is unkind to them. However, if one is content and happy with oneself, life will become bearable and one will be inspired to pursue one's goals. Accepting a liberal feminist per-

<sup>51</sup> [quoted in Sanisuda Ekachai. (2001). "Madsī: A Female Bodhisattva" in *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroad*, pp. 197 -202]

spective is not about being complacent, or going against the trend to egalitarianism. The beauty of this attitude is to help all members of the human community to have a strong sense of personal dignity and self-fulfillment.

Can female characters in the Jātaka be a resource in teaching this attitude? The story of the devoted wife (Sambhula) who took all pains to look after her husband was suffering from a serious illness, and who later forsaken by him, did not lose faith and was finally restored to a position of dignity, affirms that a positive attitude will bring forth a positive outcome.

In fact every person is responsible for their own destiny. The Lord Buddha gave the example of those who are born in darkness and go towards darkness, those who are born in darkness but go towards the light, those who are born in the light but go towards darkness and those who are born in the light and go towards the light.<sup>52</sup> This shows clearly that regardless of what situation one is born into as a result of previous kamma (karma), one continually has the opportunity to decide how to live their lives. If one chooses to live with a positive attitude, then one will go towards the light. If one chooses to live with anger, ill-will and dejection, then one will go towards darkness. It is up to each individual, be they male or female, to make this decision for themselves.

For those with an open-minded, positive attitude the representation of women in the Jātaka Stories can serve both inspirational and didactic purposes.

## Conclusion

The researcher would like to end this study by comparing two stories of modern time. One is a short story titled “Matsii, by Sri Dao Ruang”<sup>53</sup> and the other is the life story of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 1991.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> in Tamonata Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya 4.85 (PTS A ii 85)

<sup>53</sup> (Transl. Susan Fulop Kepner, *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women*. University of California, 1996)

<sup>54</sup> She is a Burmese opposition leader who was put under house arrest for 24 years by the Burmese regime and was recently released and now reconciles with the new Burmese government. She is the daughter of a Burmese national leader, grew up abroad like an exile and married to Dr. Michael Aris and has two sons. When she decided to return to Burma she asked her husband to let her go if her country needed her. The National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the election in 2015.

The story of “Matsii” by Thai author Sri Dao Ruang, tells the story of a young girl of 19 years who was left with three children by her husband for another wife. She tried to abandon her children at a bus stop but was caught by the police and then interrogated. She insisted on her intention to leave the children and enter nun hood. The police officer, irritated by her lack of maternal responsibility, asked her what sort of person would abandon their own children in this way. She quickly retorted, “Well, Phra Wetsandon<sup>55</sup> did it!” For that answer, she was sent to a mental institution.

A first glance contemplation of this story will probably lead the readers to form a negative perception of the young mother, because the use of language and character portrayal paints the picture with an attitude of disapproval. However, by employing the principles of reader response theory, which focuses on the perception the story engenders in the mind of the reader, different conclusions might be reached. Just as in psychological experiments one person looks at a splatter of paint on a piece of paper and sees a rabbit, another person might see a tree and yet another person might see two people holding hands. In the same way, an array of letters splattered across the pages of a book can evoke a variety of different responses in the reader’s mind. There might be a portion of the readership that empathizes with the young woman’s position, understanding that she has been left by her husband with the enormous task of raising three children. From this perspective, the blame would be more like to fall on the husband, thus acquitting the young mother from the position of villain.

It might also be interesting to compare the case of this young mother attempting to abandon her children with the famous case of Aung San Suu Kyi who also left her children in order to help the Burmese nation. On her recent trip back to England, in an interview<sup>56</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was questioned about the family life she chose to shut out when she left for Burma. She explained that it wasn’t her sacrifice, it was her choice. And also, it was not her husband’s sacrifice because he was an adult. But for her sons, they had to make a big sacrifice and she admitted that she never felt good about that. The researcher believes that no one would blame her for her decision or think of her as being irresponsible, because the sacrifice her sons had to make in growing up without their mother was compensated for by the contribution Aung San Suu Kyi made to the Burmese nation.

Comparing these two contrasting examples of a mother leaving

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<sup>55</sup> Thai name for Prince Vessantara (Jātaka No. 547)

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.itv.com/news/2012-06-19/a-day-of-memories-for-aung-san-suu-kyi/>  
18/10/2012.

her children, it is interesting to note that it is not the act of leaving one's children in itself that is considered shameful. Rather it is the intention of the mother, the complex set of causes and conditions surrounding that decision, and the perspective of the receiver of information that turns the act of abandoning one's children into a positive or negative force. A poignant case is that of Vessantara who has throughout history received both the harshest of criticism and the most lauding of praise for his decision to give away his two children to a Brahmin who came begging for them. Also Maddī, who eventually agreed to this donation of their children, was motivated by a complex set of internal and external factors, in particular a deep appreciation for her husband's lofty spiritual goal of Buddhahood. Therefore, rather than regarding her as a partner in crime, it would perhaps be more fitting to accredit her with a share of the merit in helping her husband to perfect his virtues and thus attain the supreme state of Buddhahood.

Indeed, such moral malleability can be witnessed throughout the Jātaka literature whereby switching between perspectives of different characters, taking into account previously unconsidered information and appreciating of the mind frame of the reader can give rise to a range of different, sometimes conflicting and often unexpected conclusions. For this reason it is necessary to be open and flexible in one's approach to the Jātakas and to draw conclusions only tentatively, leaving space for new information, unconsidered opinions and the necessary limitations of one's own conditioned perspective.

There are many people whose duties in life do not permit them to take up the monastic vocation. In such a case, they can find expression of their virtue in the support of their loved ones. For example, in my case as an ordinary Buddhist lay woman, I realize that I myself cannot become a Bodhisatta or enlightened as I must still play a supportive role to my loved ones, which will consequently lead to my own happiness and acceptance of my position. Being a "paramī phe phet," a Burmese term meaning a companion in fulfilling the Perfections (paramī), gives me the strength to accept my status and condition. As such, I am neither feminist nor anti-feminist. I simply aim to defend the Jātaka Stories as important for the Burmese people and show that the women in these stories are not as bad as most people think. I would like to broaden the understanding of women's roles in the Jātakas to show that indeed there are a majority of positive portrayals to be found in this body of literature. If one's mind is not clouded by the narrowness of a strictly feminist (or indeed any -ist) approach, then flexibility of interpretation becomes possible and one can learn to skillfully interpret these texts, respecting and appreciating the messages that are being conveyed to us on historical, literary, religious and social levels.

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