Sinxay as a Jataka Nauk Nibat – A Jataka Outside the Circle

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Recently the Lao literature masterpiece known as Sang Sinxay was translated into English and published under the title of *Sinxay: Renaissance of a Lao-Thai Epic Hero*.¹

Figure 1.1) Mural detail from Wat Chaisi in Khon Kaen, Isan/Thailand. The mural detail shows Sinxay fighting the big snake with the help of his two brothers, Sangthong (with a conch shell body) and Siho (with the body of a lion and head of an elephant). His six half-brothers cower behind Siho.

Sang Sinxay has been praised as one of the greatest masterpieces of Lao literature. Martin Stuart Fox, in the Historical Dictionary of Laos², states that epic poems appeared in Lao literature in the late 16th century or in the beginning of the 17th century, and that Sinxay is the best-known epic poem composed in this period. In the article “Thao Hung or Cheuang: A Tai Epic Poem”, written by Lao scholar James Chamberlain³, he states the following:

“The most respected and authoritative scholar of Lao history and culture, Mahasila Viravong, wrote in 1953 that there are three masterpieces of Lao literature. The first was *Vetsantrasadok*, the story of the Buddha’s life immediately preceding his life as the Buddha, a work he was no doubt obliged to include because of its importance to the national religion; second the . . . poem of *Sang Sin Xay* (Sinxay) written by the poet Pang Kham in the 16th century; and third, *Thao Hung or Cheuang.*”

In *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline*⁴ Martin Stuart-Fox adds:

“Music, dance, theatre and the recitation of epic poetry all flourished in the cosmopolitan Lao capital (in the late 17th century). Literature also experienced a

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second golden age. We can be sure that, although dates of composition of most works cannot be determined with any accuracy, new novels in classical form were composed and edited. We do not know the names of any of the authors of these great epic poems, except for the Xang Sin Xay (Sang Sinxay) by Pang Kham, about whom nothing else is known but his name.”

Not only is Sinxay valued in Laos as a masterpiece of Lao literature, it is equally revered in Isan and is indeed a shared cultural heritage. (See Figure 1.2)

(Figure 1.2) Wat Sanuan Wari in Khon Kaen, Isan/Thailand. (Figure 3.6) Wat Sanuan Wari: The dramatic juxtaposition of the new Bangkok style wat in the background against the older, culturally rich temple in the foreground can be clearly seen. A corrugated metal roof, starkly out of character with the sim, has recently replaced the original roof, which was covered with wooden shingles.

In the late 1600’s, when Sinxay was allegedly written, the northeastern part of Thailand was an integral part of the Kingdom of Lan Xang. When France and Siam negotiated the present borders of Laos in the late 1800s, the northeastern region located west of the Mekong, was allocated to Siam. This region, known as Isan, now lies within Thailand, and accounts for nearly a third of the country’s total area. (See Map 1)
For those who believe Sinxay is a Jataka tale, as most Lao and Thai-Lao Buddhists do, the consensus is that the poem is a non-canonical or apocryphal Jataka, which the Thai and Lao call Jataka nauk nibat. At the beginning of the retelling of Sang Sinxay, the author, believed to be Pangkham, notes the importance of Jataka tales when he writes in the introduction:

“As I write this poem, I will explain the dhamma, a model that people can understand and follow. It is marvelous, a miracle for this world, as are the fifty Jatakas. These are all the Buddha’s previous lives, I tell you the truth.”

While not explicitly stating at the beginning of the story that it is about one of the past births of Buddha, Pangkham indicates this symbolically within the fabric of the epic story itself. However, this in itself is not enough evidence to declare Sinxay a Jataka tale, even one that is nauk nibat, outside the circle. It is the muan sadok at the end of Sang Sinxay, as transliterated by Maha Sila Viravong, which identifies Sinxay as the Buddha, validating the importance of this story as Buddhist literature. The muan sadok is a summary often added to Jataka tales where characters are identified with characters in the life of the Buddha. In the muan sadok for Sinxay, Pangkham writes:

“This (story) is how Sinxay attained uncountable parami. Sinxay was not ordinary; he was the Buddha, teaching us through his actions in this story. He leads beings so they can escape samsara. He wants to share his bui (wisdom) with both the human and the phrom [Brahma] world. Even Siho and Sangthong, they were like the shadows of the Buddha. Both of them could not be seen separate from the Buddha. They were the same as Mahāmoggallāna, with supernatural powers to teach the dhamma. Many of the main characters in Sinxay, such as Soumountha, were in actuality relatives of the Buddha. What I write here is for scholars to increase their understanding.”

A short essay, “The History of Sinxay Literature,” included by Maha Sila Viravong in his 1969 golden-covered edition, supports the muan sadok in Sinxay. In this essay, Maha Sila writes:

“In the original Sang Sinxay the writing begins with the use of some Pāli words, Evam me sutam akang sa ma yang pha ka va raja ka he vi ha ra ti ve lu va ne, which can be translated as, ‘Thus have I heard the Buddha speak at Veluvan temple in Rajakhue [Rajagaha] kingdom.’ At that time, many people were having discussions about the Buddha, including many who thought he had magical powers. The Buddha over-hearing their discussions told the monks that he didn’t have any magical abilities, but in his previous life when he was a simple man, he had extraordinary powers. It was then he told the story about his life as Sinxay.”

James Brandon confirms the importance of magical powers in Jataka tales when he writes in his book, Theatre in Southeast Asia: “A common attribute of Jataka stories, in addition to the fact that the hero is Buddha in a former life, is the great magic power which the hero comes to possess through knowledge of Buddhism.” In fact, Sinxay is one of

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5 A Jataka (stories concerning the past lives of the Buddha) outside the circle/section
many birth stories of the Buddha that have been adapted to fit local culture in countries such as Laos and Thailand.

At the beginning of this article, we state that Sinxay is considered a Jātaka nauk nibat. *Nibat* is the Lao-Thai word corresponding to the Pāli term *nipata*, meaning “section,” which can also refer to the section of the Pāli Buddhist canon that includes the 547 canonical Jātaka tales translated by the Pāli Text Society. In a strict interpretation, any Jātaka tale outside the 547 canonical Jātaka tales can be referred to as Jātaka nauk nibat, even those verified to be in the Southeast Asian collections of 50 Jātakas, known as *Hasipsat* or *Pannysa Chadok* (Lao).

While doing research in Laos and Isan, I was told numerous times, including in a 2012 interview with His Holiness Phra Achan Maha Phong Samaleuk, Supreme Patriarch of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization⁹, that Sinxay resided somewhere in a Lao collection of 50 Jātakas, but I was never able to corroborate this. Nor was Maha Sila able to verify this claim as he stated in his essay on “The History of Sinxay Literature” in his transliteration of Sang Sinxay.¹⁰ “Many people have told me that Sang Sinxay was in the collection of the fifty Jātakas, but even in searching the Bangkok National Library, I was never able to locate a Jātaka collection that had Sang Sinxay.”

Accepting the hypotheses that Sinxay is a Jātaka tale, albeit a Jātaka nauk nibat, I want to briefly explore in this article the essential Buddhist connections with Sinxay, especially what it means for the story to be a Jātaka tale, an often overlooked and underappreciated form of dhamma. I will also look at the antagonist, Nyak Koumphan, from a Tibetan Buddhist (Tantrayāna) point of view using the Wheel of Life¹¹ to show how the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion at its center influenced Nyak Koumphan’s misguided actions.

While Sinxay is a Theravāda Jātaka, all three of the main Buddhist traditions, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantrayāna, can be used to explain the Buddhist connections with Sinxay. Of the 350 million Buddhists in the world, approximately 38 percent are Theravāda Buddhists, 56 percent are Mahayana, and 6 percent are Tantrayāna (Tibetan). In the Closing Address to the Global Buddhist Congregation 2011 in New Delhi,¹² the Dalai Lama addressed the perception of differences between the different yānas (vehicles) of Buddhism; Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantrayāna. He seemed to imply that there was no reason for any Buddhist to feel as if his/her yāna was superior to another.

“In the past, because of the names so-called ‘[Theravada],’ ‘Mahayana’ and ‘Tantrayana,’ people got the impression these three yanas (vehicles) are something really different and separate. That is totally mistaken. As I mentioned briefly this morning, the Theravāda tradition, or Pāli tradition, is the foundation of Buddhadhamma (the dhamma/teachings of the Buddha... In other words, first comes the ground floor; that’s the Pāli tradition - bhikshu (monk) practice, self-discipline, sila. Then comes the first floor, the Prajñaparamita Sutras . . . a kind of abhidharma - the teachings about wisdom, the six paramitas (far-reaching attitudes, perfections) or ten paramitas. Then on top of that, the Buddhist Tantrayana - visualization of deities based on practice of vipassana, samatha, and bodhicitta (a mind aimed at attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all). So these are the ground floor, first floor, and second floor, like that. Without a ground floor

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⁹ Interviewed at the Ho Thammasapha, Wat Ong Teu, Vientiane.
¹¹ The Wheel of Life (“Sipa Khorlo” in Tibetan), depicted in the entryway to most monasteries, is a graphical aid to the delu-sion of the mind, a complex pictorial representation of how desire chains us to samsara, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
(Theravāda tradition), you cannot build the others. So I think the Buddhist brothers and sisters here should know that.”

In the same address, the Dalai Lama often refers to Theravāda Buddhism as the Pāli tradition, since Pāli is the liturgical language of Theravāda Buddhism, while Mahāyāna Buddhism uses Sanskrit as its liturgical language. The differences in spelling are often minor, for example, dharma (Sanskrit) instead of dhamma (Pāli), and bodhisattva (Sanskrit) instead of bodhisatta (Pāli).

The Jātaka, a Pāli word, which translates literally as “birth story,” originated in the India region as a result of efforts within the Buddhist religious community to encourage a greater participation in Buddhist thinking and practices by the laity. In Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path13, Naomi Appleton defines Jātaka tales as “A story told by the Buddha that in some way illustrated the actions he undertook whilst on the long path to Buddhahood. Jātakas were thus associated with biography and the gradual acquisition of the perfections by the Bodhisatta.”

In The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta14, Sarah Shaw, like Appleton, defines the Jātaka tale from a Theravāda perspective. “A Jātaka is a story about a birth of the Bodhisatta, the being destined to become the present Buddha in his final life. The 547 stories (the Jātakas included in the Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka in the Pāli Canon) all evolve from one vow: the determination made by the Bodhisatta, at the feet of the last Buddha, Dipankara, to postpone his own enlightenment and freedom from the endless round of existences until he is ready to become a Buddha himself and teach others.”

This takes countless lifetimes, and it’s in these lives, where, as Shaw adds, “the Bodhisatta tries to build the strengths, resources and experience ready for his final birth. It’s these endeavors that form the basis of the Jātaka stories and confer the unusual abilities that make him in his last life not just an arahat, an awakened one, but a Buddha, capable of leaving a teaching behind for others.”

This hard work leads to the gradual acquisition of perfections. Appleton adds in her book: “The perfections provide a bridge between the person of the Buddha (who is a buddha because he has acquired all the perfections) and Buddhists who strive to follow both his example and teachings.” The importance of building bridges, most often in the form of alliances, is one of the major themes in Sinxay. The word used by Pangkham for the building of these highly valued alliances throughout Sinxay is saphanthong, literally meaning golden bridge.

My research has taken me from the southern part of Laos to the middle and northern parts of the country. Surprisingly, a majority of the murals of Sinxay I located are in the remote northeastern Huaphan Province, and I wondered what the reason could be. Historically, Huaphan Province has had a much smaller percentage of Buddhists compared to the lowland areas of Vientiane. The southern part of Laos, where Sinxay has always been much more popular, was considered part of the heartland of the Kingdom of Lan Xang in the late 1600s, when the poem was written. I conjectured that since Huaphan Province was the base for the Pathet Lao during the Secret/Vietnam War and the enemy they were fighting was the United States, the juxtaposition of “little” Sinxay against his enemy, the much bigger Nyak Koumphan could be intended as a metaphor, proof that David can win over Goliath.

All the murals at wats in Huaphan Province illustrate a similar scene: Sinxay to the left of the entrance to the sim, shooting his arrow at Nyak Koumphan to the right of the door, partnered with an image of the Buddha. (See Figure 1.3 and 1.4)

13 Appleton, Naomi. 2010. Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path. Ashgate. 65, 146
In *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path*, Appleton writes about the importance of this association. “Jātakas are part of the sacred and cosmic biography of the Buddha, and they symbolically provide cosmological completeness… and are the dhamma-kāya of the Buddha, shown… in temples as a partner to the image of the Buddha.”

This image of the smaller, “underdog” Sinxay matched against the larger Nyak Koumphan is reinforced in a 1976 poem by Sau Desa, included in the essay “Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study,” by Peter Koret. The poem refers to the Lao National Day, which commemorates the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in 1975.

*The Second of December, the day of precious moonlight, the victory of wide renown*

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December translates as “crossbow, great, brave, and long”
(The bow) is stretched, the arrow drawn, aimed, and fired
The “nyak” giants have died in great numbers
The precious day has been transformed into our national day

Curious about this possible metaphoric meaning, we talked to a number of monks residing at these temples. We asked them specifically about the juxtaposition of Sinxay and Nyak Koumphan on either side of doorways entering sims, and none of the monks said anything about them having to do with reminding the laity of the might and superiority of the Pathet Lao over the imperialistic Americans.

What they did tell us was that the images should remind the laity that the dhamma, represented by Sinxay, will always conquer the three poisons of lobha (greed), dosa (hate), and moha (delusion) represented by Nyak Koumphan. The monks added that the bow and arrow of Sinxay represented the concentrated focus (will power) needed by the laity to achieve the goal of liberation and the extinguishing of the three poisons.

Even though Sinxay was diminutive in stature, the three poisons represented by Nyak Koumphan were no match against the hero’s arrows and sword, which he used to easily cut through all the delusions and obstacles he met while on his quest to rescue Soumountha.

In the Mahāyāna Buddhist there is a rich tradition of symbolism seen in Nepal and Tibet, that includes the Tibetan Wheel of Life (See Figure 1.5), a symbolic representation of samsara found on the outside walls of Tibetan Buddhist temples and monasteries in the Indo-Tibetan region (Tibet, India, Nepal, Bhutan.)

(Figure 1.5) Tibetan Wheel of Life Painting. Painting in author’s collection.

Many believe it was the Buddha who came up with the concept of this painting, in order to help ordinary people better understand the essential teachings of Buddhism, similar to the role of Jātaka tales. The three poisons of greed, hate, and delusion (represented in Sinxay by Nyak Koumphan) are graphically displayed in the center of the Tibetan Wheel of Life as a rooster, representing greed; a snake, representing anger and hate; and a pig, representing delusion and ignorance; all endlessly chasing one another’s tails. (See Figure 1.6)
Nyak Koumphan is a complex character. He is often identified as symbolizing Mara, the “Evil Demon” in superhuman form and is the antithesis of Sinxay, the bodhisatta hero. Not only did he abduct Soumountha, he sacrificed millions of his nyak soldiers while trying to defeat and kill Sinxay. (See Figure 1.7)

While these actions were reprehensible, his undying love and respect for Soumountha can be seen as admirable. *Peaceful Action, Open Heart: Lessons from the Lotus Sutra*, Thich Nhat Hanh says that one of the great insights of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that anyone can become a Buddha. “We all have the capacity to become a fully enlightened Buddha. And while on the path to becoming a fully enlightened Buddha, we are all bodhisattvas.” From a Mahāyāna perspective, even Nyak Koumphan has this potential, though in Sinxay we clearly see how the three poisons have enslaved his mind. However, there is always hope. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s words again,

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“The Dharma is like a powerful lamp, helping people to see deeply into their situation and re-leasing them from suffering . . . The various skillful means used by the Buddhas to teach beings are all aimed at one goal: to bring everyone, regardless of their spiritual capacity or attainment, whether they are... monastic or layperson, man, woman, or child, into the bodhisattva path.”
importance of this symbiotic relationship among Jātakas, laity, and Buddhism when she writes, in *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*¹⁹:

“Jātakas in fact contain teachings aimed at many audiences that work on many different levels, and that defining Jātakas as simple moral stories for the edification of the laity is misrepresentative. Stories do, of course, provide us with material quite different to explicitly philosophical and doctrinal texts, but the evidence they provide is not less important for a full understanding of Buddhism.”

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