

SELF-SACRIFICE FOR A TINY TEACHING:
HEARING AND KNOWING
IN THE ‘VERSE OF DHARMA’ JĀTAKA STORIES¹

NAOMI APPLETON

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative study of a cluster of stories in which the Buddha-to-be makes a sacrifice – of flesh, family members or wealth – in exchange for a single verse of teaching. The exploration of these stories seeks to establish neither a chronology nor the reasons for variation between versions, though some such analysis is integral to the paper. The aim is rather to explore the themes and concerns that might explain the remarkable prevalence of these stories overall, and their place within early ideas about the Buddha, Bodhisattva and *dharma*. The paper argues that these tales reveal new perspectives on the oft-studied relationship between Buddha and *dharma*, and between the Buddha’s physical body and his body of teachings. In addition, they encourage audiences to value the *dharma* as both a universal truth and a set of teachings available to us; teachings that are worth hearing but – more than that – worth understanding.

¹ This research forms part of the project “Comparative Buddhism in Indian Narrative Literature” funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (2020–2023, AH/T009411/1), and I am grateful to the funder as well as my collaborator Chris V. Jones for their support of this work. Versions of this paper were presented in Cambridge in February 2020, UCLA in May 2021, and Oxford in February 2022, and I am grateful to the audiences for their feedback, especially Reiko Ohnuma, who sent comments on the most recent paper by email. I am also indebted to Chris Austin, Brian Black and Jonathan Geen for their discussion of an earlier draft, which gave me much food for thought (if you’ll pardon the pun), and to Natalie Gummer and Chris V. Jones who offered extremely valuable feedback on a later draft. As a very recent learner of Chinese, I am indebted to the excellent online tools for the study of Buddhist texts, including CBETA, the SAT Daizōkyō database, the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, and Michael Radich’s CBC@ database; I am also hugely grateful to Janine Nicol for making the stories of the *Liudu ji jing* available in English, and inspiring and assisting me as I attempt to learn some Chinese myself. As always, I am overwhelmed by gratitude for the collegiality in my field, and take full ownership for any remaining errors.

Introduction

Once upon a time, in the city of Varanasi, there lived a king called Surūpa, or “Handsome.”² Surūpa was an excellent king, ruling his subjects with compassion and generosity, and the kingdom was prosperous and happy, a land of plenty. Surūpa had a wife, and a single son, both of whom matched him in looks and virtue (looks and virtue being, of course, inherently linked in the Indian Buddhist karmic system).

But Surūpa was not happy, for he desired teachings. His greatest wish was to hear some *dharma* – a teaching that encapsulated the Truth with a capital T. But when he asked his ministers to find him someone who could teach him the *dharma*, they replied that *dharma* is very hard to find, for it appears only with the arising of *buddhas*. With no Buddha in the world, there was no *dharma* to be found. Undeterred, the king had a large golden casket paraded through his kingdom, with the declaration that anyone who could provide a verse of *dharma* would be given the casket and much more besides. Nobody came forwards.

Śakra, also known as Indra, king of the gods, understood Surūpa’s longing for a teaching, and decided to test his commitment to this goal. He took on the form of a *yakṣa*, approached the king and offered to teach him the *dharma*. The king was delighted and begged to hear it. But the *yakṣa* was hungry, and pointed out that you can’t teach when you’re hungry (a fact that many of us can probably relate to). So the king offered to provide the *yakṣa* with any food he wished. The *yakṣa* replied that only fresh flesh would do, and requested that the king give up his only son, Sundara.

The king was distraught. “After such a long time I finally have the chance to hear the *dharma*, but at a price it is not worth,” he wailed. Hearing this, Prince Sundara interjected, declaring his willingness to be eaten, and insisting that his father should fulfil his longing for the *dharma*.

² What follows is a summary of a story found in *Avadānaśataka* 35, with the verse and some key phrases directly translated. For a full translation see Appleton 2020: 180–183, and for the Sanskrit Speyer (ed.) 1906: 187–192.

So the king, for the sake of the *dharma*, gave away his only son, who was cherished and dear,³ and entirely without fault.

The *yakṣa* – or rather the god Śakra in disguise – made it look as though he was crunching on the boy’s bones, drinking his blood, and tearing at his flesh, but the king was unmoved, dedicated to the *dharma*. When the *yakṣa* declared “I’m not full!” the king gave him his queen to eat,⁴ and again watched as the *yakṣa* ripped her limb from limb and gobbled her up. “I’m still hungry!” said the *yakṣa*: “Feed me your own body!” “But if you eat me,” reasoned the king, “how will I be able to hear the *dharma*? Teach me the *dharma* first, and then you can do with me as you wish.” And so the *yakṣa* spoke this single verse of *dharma*:

Grief is born from what is dear.
 Fear is born from what is dear.
 For those who are free from what is dear,
 there is no grief, and how could there be fear?⁵

The king was delighted with this verse of teaching, and willingly offered himself to the *yakṣa*. Seeing that King Surūpa’s dedication to the *dharma* was so unshakeable, Śakra revealed his true form, and restored the king’s wife and son to him, safe and well. Praising him, Śakra declared that it would surely not be long before Surūpa became a *buddha*.

And Śakra’s prediction was correct, for this story is a *jātaka*, or past-life story of the Buddha, a genre of narrative ubiquitous in Indian Buddhism. King Surūpa is the Buddha in a past life, while he was a Bodhisattva, a being on the path to buddhahood. The story in this occurrence is also an *avadāna*, a story of karmic consequences, and comes from the *Avadānaśataka*, a collection of one hundred multi-life stories from the Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda school of Indian Buddhism, compiled sometime during the first half of the first millennium of the

³ There is a pun here, as also in other related stories, where *iṣṭa* is used to describe the cherished/sacrificed, as past participle of both *yaj* (to sacrifice) and *iṣ* (to desire, wish, cherish).

⁴ Perhaps we are to assume that, like her son, Surūpa’s wife was willing to be sacrificed; however, this is not stated, and the king has no hesitation in offering her.

⁵ *priyebhyo jāyate śokaḥ priyebhyo jāyate bhayam / priyebhyo vipramuktānāṃ nāsti śokaḥ kuto bhayam iti* // Speyer (ed.) 1906: 191, in my translation.

Common Era.⁶ However, similar stories are found across a range of Buddhist schools and textual collections, and in this article I treat them as a “story cluster.” I will explain this notion further below, but in simple terms a story cluster is a group of related stories.⁷ In this case the cluster is of stories in which the Bodhisattva makes a great sacrifice in return for a single verse of teaching, and I will refer to such stories as “verse-of-dharma” stories.

In addition to the story of Surūpa there is a second similar story in the *Avadānaśataka*, this time with the Bodhisattva jumping into a fiery pit in exchange for a verse, and this also occurs in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.⁸ Two verse-of-dharma stories, including one close parallel to the Surūpa story and another involving jumping off a mountain, are known in Pāli and vernacular traditions from the Theravāda world.⁹ The

⁶ On the genre categories *jātaka* and *avadāna* as they relate to the *Avadānaśataka* see Appleton 2015b. In sum, the stories in this text are never referred to as *jātaka*, though those of the fourth chapter, including this one, are similar in form and often content to *jātakas* found in related texts such as the *Jātakamālā* collections. Hence the label *jātaka* is still relevant, especially since other stories of this cluster are found in texts explicitly labelled *jātaka*. For a discussion of the potential dual school affiliation of the *Avadānaśataka* see Demoto 2006 and Muldoon-Hules 2017: 179–186.

⁷ For more on the notion of a story cluster see below and Appleton and Clark 2022. The cluster, as we will see, crosses traditional genre categories, since relevant stories are found in both *jātaka* and *avadāna* texts, though all are *jātakas* in the sense that they involve the Bodhisattva.

⁸ For *Avadānaśataka* 38 see Speyer (ed.) 1906: 213–222 and Appleton (trans.) 2020: 197–204. In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* the story survives in Chinese and Tibetan, and I am grateful to Sue Roach for a translation of the latter (from the *Kṣudrakavastu*, Derge THA 172a5–175a7), which shows it to be very close to *Avadānaśataka* 38, including in its frame narrative. This is no great surprise, given the well documented relationship between the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and *avadāna* literature. See also the German summary in Panglung 1981: 177.

⁹ For a Pāli *Paññāsajātaka* rendition of Surūpa see Horner and Jaini (trans.) 1985: 190–199, and for a Thai *Paññāsajātaka* rendition of Dhammasoṇḍaka see Baker and Phongpaichit (trans.) 2019: 175–180. As Berkwitz (2013: 70–71) notes, the story of King Dharmasoṇḍa is found in the Pāli *Sahassavatthupparāṇa* (10th–11th c.) and *Rasavāhīnī* (13th c.), as well as in the Sinhala *Saddharmālaṅkāraya* (late 14th c.). That it was considered authoritative and important is clear from the decision of poet Alagiyavanna to compose his own rendition, at a time when most poetic *jātakas* were based on stories from the classical *Jātakathavaṇṇanā*. There is an intriguing plot twist in the account of Alagiyavanna: After the Bodhisatta jumps off the mountain into the demon’s (or rather Sakka’s) mouth, he is caught by Sakka and taken to heaven, where he *preaches* the *dhamma* to the

Mahāvastu includes a verse-of-*dharma* story as well as referring to such sacrifices for the sake of the teaching in an account of the stages of the *bodhisattva* career.¹⁰ More courtly Sanskrit verse-of-*dharma* stories appear in Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā*, a *kāvya* or poetic composition from perhaps the fourth or fifth century CE that includes a story of the Bodhisattva jumping into a fire in exchange for a verse, and in the eleventh-century *Avadānakalpalatā*, which contains two accounts.¹¹ One of the stories in the latter text identifies the Bodhisattva with the generous King Śibi, and this tradition is also present in the Tibetan *Karmaśataka* (Tib. *las brgya tham pa*),¹² as well as the expansive Chinese Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (T374).¹³ This type of story is also mentioned in the list of great Bodhisattva-deeds in Mahāyāna texts such as the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā* and *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*, as well as in the 10th century Khotanese *Jātakastava*.¹⁴ An early Chinese *jātaka* text, the *Liudu ji jing* (T152), offers a rather different take on the verse-of-*dharma* story

gods (Berkwitz 2013: 91). See also Fickle 1978: 138–196 for a comparative analysis of this story across different *Paññāsajātaka* and related versions.

¹⁰ The *Surūpajātaka* (not the same story as others of this name, but rather about a deer) is at Senart (ed.) 1882–1897: vol. 2, 255–257, and Jones (trans.) 1949–1956: vol. 2, 240–242. The mentions in the *Daśabhūmikāsūtra* are in the discussion of the third *bhūmi*, at Senart (ed.) 1882–1897: vol. 1, 91–95, and Jones (trans.) 1949–1956: vol. 1, 72–75; see further discussion below.

¹¹ For Haribhaṭṭa's text see Hahn (ed.) 2011: number 3, and Khoroché (trans.) 2017: 26–3. For a translation and discussion of the *Avadānakalpalatā* stories see Granoff 1991–1992. Straube 2009 offers the text of these in Sanskrit and Tibetan, as well as German translation, and also compares the *Avadānakalpalatā* and Haribhaṭṭa's text, placing it within a broader context of transmission.

¹² Jampal and Fischer (trans.) 2022: section 10.9.

¹³ T374:12.450a–b; Yamamoto (trans.) 1973–1975: 351–353. See Radich 2019: 535–542 for a discussion of this story in relation to the artistic programme of the sixth-century “Sengchou's cave,” which is heavily influenced by the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*; pp. 536–537, n. 62 provides references to the depiction of the story (and its verse) elsewhere in East Asia. The relevant story is only found in Dharmakṣema's rendition of the text, which is far longer than any other rendition and includes a whole range of other material of likely Central Asian or Chinese origin. I am grateful to Chris Jones for pointing out Radich's article and helping me understand the Chinese *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* texts, on which see also Jones 2021: 29–33.

¹⁴ In the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā* the deed is referred to twice, once in the list of fifty past-life deeds in part 1 (verse 114 in Boucher 2008: 131; Finot (ed.) 1901: 22), and then again in the opening of part 2 (verse 11 in Boucher 2008: 144; Finot (ed.) 1901: 36); it is worth noting that the list of fifty *jātakas* is not found in the earliest Chinese translation

in its discussion of the perfection of vigour,¹⁵ while the fifth century Chinese *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* (T202, *Xianyu jing*) offers five such stories as reminders to the Buddha of his commitment to teaching,¹⁶ and the *Da zhidu lun* (T1509) includes the story in its discussion of the perfection of giving.¹⁷

These stories are summarised in Table 1, and form the focus of this article. There are also other occurrences of the story across Asia, where verse-of-*dharma* stories remained popular over many centuries, that are not included here. Further evidence of their popularity may be gleaned from the fact that the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang mentions a site in the northwest of India associated with the events.¹⁸ This article does not attempt exhaustive coverage, since that would be neither possible in the space nor particularly illuminating.¹⁹ Rather, it will explore a set of early examples of this widespread story cluster.

of the text (see Boucher 2008: 108–110). For discussions of the *Bhadrakalpika* and *Jātakastava* occurrences, with citations, see below.

¹⁵ T152:3.32a20–b16. The text is traditionally said to have been translated into Chinese in the mid 3rd century CE, though some stories may be later and there is no evidence of a single Indic precursor. A French translation can be found in Chavannes (trans.) 1910: 213–216, and a full English translation by Janine Nicol is forthcoming.

¹⁶ The relevant chapter is the opening of the text (T202:4.349a6–352b18) called *Fantian qingfa liushi* 梵天請法六事 “The god Brahmā requests the *dharma* on six occasions.” This presumably refers to Brahmā telling six stories to support his case that the Buddha should teach; only five of these stories are about the Bodhisattva’s self-sacrifice for a verse of *dharma*. See discussion below for further details.

¹⁷ The *Da zhidu lun* is a commentary to the larger *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna, though this attribution is questionable and no Indic version is extant. The gift of body (in this case turned into a lamp) in exchange for a verse is given as an example of inner giving, in contrast to external gifts (T1509:25.143b29–143c10; Lamotte [trans.] 1944–1981: vol. 2, 688–691). The choice of this particular variant is strange since other tales of self-immolation across Buddhist literature tend to be in devotion to a Buddhist shrine or figure, not in exchange for something. The tale does resonate with one in the *Xianyu jing*, however, so it is not an isolated example of this motif.

¹⁸ The account is brief: “This was the place where the Tathāgata once in a former life forsook his life to hear half a stanza of the Dharma.” Li Rongxi (trans.) 1996: 85.

¹⁹ The table does provide all the “early” (broadly defined) examples of which I am currently aware, but the list continued to grow even after the article was accepted for publication, and the result is likely still not exhaustive.

Table 1. The ‘Verse of *dharma*’ Story Cluster

Text	Sacrifice	Teaching	Teacher
<i>Avadānaśataka</i> 35, Surūpa	son and wife and own life	attachment causes grief	Śakra as demon
<i>Avadānaśataka</i> 38, Dharmaga- veṣin	jumps into fire	follow the <i>dharma</i> and be good	Śakra as demon
<i>Mūlasarvāstivāda</i> <i>Vinaya</i> (Tib. and Chin.) Subhāṣit- agaveṣin	jumps into fire	follow the <i>dharma</i> and be good	Śakra as demon
Haribhaṭṭa’s <i>Jātakamālā</i> 3, Dharmakāma	jumps into fire	give gifts and do good	evil brahmin
<i>Mahāpari- nirvāṇamahāsūtra</i> (大般涅槃經, T374)	jumps out of tree	everything is impermanent	Śakra as demon
<i>Liudu ji jing</i> (六度集經, T152) 55	pierces his skin with needles	guard your speech, thought and action	Devadatta as ordinary man
<i>Xianyu jing</i> (賢愚經, T202) 1	wife and child; body as lamps; body pierced; jumps into fire; copies text using skin and bone	everything is impermanent in three variations; avoid evil and pursue good in two variations	Vaiśravaṇa as demon; brahmin; brahmin; Śakra disguised as brahmin; brahmin
<i>Da zhidu lun</i> (大 智度論, T1509)	makes body into lamp	not specified	brahmin
<i>Avadānakalpalatā</i> 53, Subhāṣitaga- veṣin	jumps off cliff	avoid evil and pursue good	hunter
<i>Avadānakalpalatā</i> 91, Śibi-subhāṣit- agaveṣin	own flesh as food	everything is impermanent	Śakra as demon

Text	Sacrifice	Teaching	Teacher
<i>Karmaśataka</i> (Tib.) 10.9: Two stories about King Śibi	own flesh as food; crushes body between boards full of nails	everything is impermanent	Śakra as demon
<i>Paññāsajātaka</i> (and also wider Pāli and vernacular literature): Dhammasoṇḍaka	jumps off mountain	everything is impermanent	Śakra as demon
<i>Paññāsajātaka</i> : Surūpa	wife and son	avoid evil and pursue good	Śakra as demon
<i>Mahāvastu</i> : Surūpa the king of deer	own life	virtue is better than wealth	Śakra as hunter
<i>Mahāvastu</i> : <i>Daśabhūmika-sūtra</i> , Third Bhūmi	multiple, inc. wealth, land, flesh, family	not specified	various, inc. brahmin, demon, poor man, hunter, slave
<i>Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchā</i> 1.114 and 2.11	jumps off cliff; jumps into fiery pit	not specified	not specified
<i>Bhadrakalpika-sūtra</i> (Tib.): three mentions illustrating perfection of forbearance	servitude; head; jump into fire	not specified	outcaste; not specified; not specified
Khotanese <i>Jātakastava</i> : at least three separate mentions	jumps of mountain; gives whole earth; jumps into fire	not specified	demon; brahmin; not specified

The *Mahāvastu* is worth a closer examination as a case study in the complexity of this story cluster. In this early narrative collection linked

to the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda school,²⁰ we find not only a standalone verse-of-*dharma* story – that of Surūpa the deer who receives a verse of teaching from a hunter – but also a whole series of stories mapped onto a particular stage of the *bodhisattva* path, namely the third *bhūmi*: we are told that during this stage of the *bodhisattva* career, *bodhisattvas* will do anything in order to access even a small nugget of teaching. Eight specific examples are given – identified as past-lives of the Buddha of our time – including the sacrifice of his wife and son, his head, his heart, all his possessions, the four continents, and the whole of Jambudvīpa, each time in return for a single well-spoken (*subhāṣita*) verse. In addition, we are told that *bodhisattvas* will also sacrifice their own eyes, or throw themselves off a cliff, or into a fire, or out of a boat, in return for a teaching. The association of this *bhūmi* with sacrifice-for-the-teaching is maintained in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* that features within the text commonly known as the *Avataṃsakasūtra* (*Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka* to give its full title), though without any illustrative stories.²¹

The list of sacrifices made in exchange for a verse of teaching during the third *bhūmi* combines a desire to glorify the unbelievable great deeds of the Buddha of our own time with a desire to systematise the understanding of what it means to be on the path to buddhahood in general. This double purpose is key to understanding the *jātaka* genre: stories of the past lives of the Buddha of our time (Gautama or Śākyamuni) are not just about his quest for buddhahood, but about buddhahood as a state achievable by others as well; this is true even before and outside the

²⁰ On the school affiliation of the *Mahāvastu* see Tournier 2017: 3–5. As Tournier has shown, the text originated as part of a *vinaya*. However, taken as a separate text, I suggest it is best viewed as a narrative exploration of buddhology.

²¹ My thanks to Vincent Tournier for his helpful comments on the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* (email correspondence May 2020; see also Tournier 2017, especially chapter 2). For the relevant passages of the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, or, more correctly, *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, see Cleary (trans.) 1993: 722–723, 726–729. Although the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* maintains the general association of stage three with seeking even a single verse of teaching (including through leaping into a fire where necessary, amongst other possible sacrifices listed), there are no stories or references to Śākyamuni Buddha’s past-life activities to support this. As such, the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* will not feature in my analysis; neither will I comment on how self-sacrifice for the *dharma* fits into discussions of the *bhūmis*, since this is beyond the scope of the current article.

Mahāyāna literature. Stories such as these therefore imply that sacrifice in exchange for a single verse of teaching is not only something done by our Buddha, but something necessary of all *buddhas*. As such, these tales speak to fundamental ideas about the relationship between buddhahood and the *dharmā*.

Given how widespread these stories are, and how conceptually interesting they are, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to them thus far. Several scholars have noted the parallels and listed versions, but little has been said about their conceptual content. Although she notes their existence as a sub-genre, Ohnuma excludes them from her study of gift-of-the-body *jātakas*, as she considers them to constitute an exchange rather than a gift (2007: 49–50). Individual stories have been given some attention: Granoff (1991–1992) has offered a translation and valuable analysis of the two relevant tales in the *Avadānakalpalatā*, but her comments speak mostly to connections with Brahmanical literature and the theme of initiation into a teaching. In a study of self-sacrifice in the *Paññāsajātaka* tradition, Sheravanichkul (2008) has pointed out that the two examples therein are part of a wider tendency towards stories of devotional self-sacrifice, in other words sacrifices made to serve the Buddha, *dharmā* or *saṅgha*. Berkwitz (2013: chapter 3) discusses the sixteenth-century Sinhalese rendition by Alagiyavanna, with a focus on the poetics and politics of this Portuguese-era poet; the same story across Pāli and Thai tradition features in Fickle’s 1978 analysis of *Paññāsajātaka* traditions. Straube’s 2009 comparison of the stories in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā* and the *Avadānakalpalatā* includes an extensive comparison of different versions in wider Buddhist literature and highlights textual connections and likely influences; however, his concerns are text-historical and philological, and he offers little comment on the conceptual or thematic questions raised by the stories.

It is possible that the lack of scholarly interest in the stories relates to an even more striking absence: there are no such stories amongst the “classical” *jātakas* of the Pāli *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*.²² They are by no

²² In this terminology, distinguishing between the “classical” *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and the “non-classical” *Paññāsajātaka* tradition, I follow Skilling 2006, which also serves as an excellent introduction to the *Paññāsajātaka* genre.

means absent from Theravāda tradition, for two are found in the Southeast Asian *Paññāsajātaka* collection in both Pāli and vernacular versions, while Sinhalese literature takes one of these stories to heart for poetic development in a variety of texts. The stories are also present in the non-Mahāyāna literature of at least two other schools of Indian Buddhism, specifically the Sarvāstivāda/Mūlasarvāstivāda (to which the *Avadānaśataka* is broadly aligned, and also probably the *Jātakamālā* of Hari-bhaṭṭa) and the Lokottaravāda/Mahāsāṅghika *Mahāvastu*. The latter in particular shares substantial narrative content with the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, but stories of sacrifice in exchange for the *dharma* are not amongst this common material.

It is at least possible that the absence of this type of story from the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* was the result of a choice rather than ignorance. If this is so, why might the compilers of such a flexible and expansive collection have decided to exclude examples of this kind of story? There are three reasons that suggest themselves. Firstly, the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* has a very specific understanding of the setting of *jātaka* stories. No *jātakas* in this text take place in times of previous *buddhas* (or even previous Buddhist traditions, teachings or monastic institutions).²³ Secondly, the focus of the text is largely the glorification of the Buddha (as visionary, teacher, storyteller, perfected being, revealer of karmic connections) often over-and-above glorifying the Bodhisatta.²⁴ Thirdly, the collection tends not to embrace gift-of-the-body or self-sacrifice stories, with only seven such stories found amongst the 547 tales in the text, in contrast to the high concentration of such stories in Sanskrit traditions and even in the Southeast Asian *Paññāsajātaka* tradition.²⁵ Overall, then, we should not be surprised at the absence from the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* of stories that feature both extreme self-sacrifice *and* the notion that the

²³ That is not to say that there are no true teachings in the *jātakas*, but these are of course inferior to the full teachings available in the time of a *buddha*. When teachings are included in the stories, they are usually given by the Bodhisatta himself, or occasionally by Sakka or by a *paccekabuddha*. For more on *paccekabuddhas* as teachers in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* see Appleton 2019a and 2019b.

²⁴ On this see Appleton 2010 and 2015a, and Shulman 2018.

²⁵ As discussed in Sheravanichkul 2008, see especially 774 for the count.

dharma may have existed in times when no Buddha was present in the world.

Regardless of its accuracy, this hypothetical exploration of the motivations of the compilers of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* highlights precisely what is most interesting about the verse-of-*dharma* story cluster, especially when we consider how widespread such stories are outside this particular collection. Questions arise such as: How can the Bodhisattva access properly true teachings before he has realised the *dharma* for himself and made it available to others as the Buddha? If there is *dharma* available, what sort of *dharma* is it, and is it there independently of *buddhas*? Is it a properly Buddhist *dharma*, or just a pithy generic well-spoken verse? How does the Bodhisattva’s sacrifice – of wealth, body, life, or family – in exchange for a verse of teaching relate to other stories in which he makes similar sacrifices but for different reasons? More broadly, what is the relationship between the *dharma* and buddhahood?

In this article I will attempt to answer some of these questions using the stories listed in Table 1. While I will draw on the stories as individual sources, my approach also treats them as a cluster of related tales that together indicate a shared concern with the relationship between Buddha, Bodhisattva and *dharma*. My overriding aim is not to comment on individual stories, but rather to explore the themes and concerns that might explain the remarkable prevalence of the story cluster overall. I use “cluster” as a deliberately flexible term, designed to avoid speaking of versions or assuming any chronology or direction of influence, since such concerns are not my interest here.²⁶ One reason that I find the notion of clusters helpful is that they can nest within one another. So, for example, we can see from Table 1 that there are sub-clusters that depend on what is sacrificed, or on what teaching is received. The whole cluster might also be viewed as a sub-cluster of the wider cluster of *jātaka* stories in which the Bodhisattva makes a great sacrifice for a range of different reasons. Such relationships between different story clusters can help to illuminate shared and distinctive concerns.

²⁶ For further discussion of this terminology and approach see Appleton and Clark 2022.

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. I will begin by exploring what we learn from this story cluster about Buddhist understandings of the *dharma*, as a rare and precious source of guidance, available to us now in all its richness, but not something to be taken for granted. In the second section I explore the relationship between the *dharma* and buddhahood, noting how *dharma* is shown as both dependent upon the Buddha for its revelation but also true regardless of whether or not it has been made available in the world. This section also includes some reflections on the potential ritual resonances of the stories, as they speak to the distinction between the Buddha's physical body and his *dharma* body. In the third section I explore the relationship between the *dharma* and bodhisattvahood, in particular how the story cluster serves to emphasise the Bodhisattva's commitment, his sacrifice and (perhaps more unusually) his humility in accepting some unlikely teachers. As I note in the conclusion to this article, there are many different concerns evident in this cluster of stories, but one key message seems to be the importance of not only receiving, but also understanding and living by the teaching. This message is, of course, a potent one for any Buddhist audience.

The Rare and Precious *dharma*

The most obvious message of these stories is that the *dharma* is precious. There are understood to be extraordinarily long periods of time in which there are no Buddhist teachings or institutions available. Every now and then, a being completes the incredibly long and arduous multi-life path of a *bodhisattva* and becomes a *buddha* – literally an “awakened one” – able to teach the *dharma* to others. In between these rare times when a Buddha's teachings are active in the world, ordinary beings have little opportunity to progress towards nirvana.²⁷ This is the setting of these stories: the *dharma* is so rare and so precious that the Bodhisattva is

²⁷ Although this theme is most clearly evident in non-Mahāyāna traditions, in which there is only one *buddha*-dispensation at a time with long gaps in between, the theme of the rarity of the *dharma* is also prominent in Mahāyāna literature, despite the multiplicity of teaching *buddhas* in other worlds.

willing to die – or to sacrifice his only son and his wife – in order to hear it. The stories of this past time are actually more about the present than the past: told by the Buddha during his own teaching career, they reinforce the urgency of heeding the *dharma* that is now available. The audiences of the stories are encouraged to respect and honour that *dharma*, to cherish it while it is still accessible, and to appreciate the sacrifices that the Buddha made in order to make it available to them.

For example, both the *Avadānaśataka* story of Surūpa with which I opened this article, and the text’s other tale of self-sacrifice in exchange for a verse of *dharma* (the story of Dharmagaveṣin), end with the Buddha exhorting his monastic audience:

In this way you should train, monks: “We will revere, pay respects to, honour and worship the *dharma*. Having revered, paid respects to, honoured and worshipped the *dharma* we will live in reliance on it.” In this way, monks, you should train.²⁸

While the story of Surūpa has little frame story, the story of Dharmagaveṣin has quite an elaborate setting. We learn that Anāthapiṇḍada traditionally sweeps the Buddha’s monastery, but he goes away and neglects to do this, so the Buddha himself starts to sweep his own quarters, causing some consternation. The Buddha insists that cleaning is a good thing to do, and not something to be avoided even by *buddhas*, but Anāthapiṇḍada is nonetheless mortified at the turn of events, and therefore stays away from a teaching. The Buddha admonishes Anāthapiṇḍada for missing out on the precious *dharma*, and praises the *dharma* extensively, pointing out that the *dharma* is worthy of veneration even by awakened beings such as himself.²⁹ The monks express surprise and wonder at the

²⁸ Appleton (trans.) 2020: 183, 204. Note that while an injunction to train in a particular way is a stock passage in this text, these are the only two stories that end with the exhortation to honour the *dharma* (the command to honour the Buddha or the three types of liberated beings is more typical). The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* parallel to *Avadānaśataka* 38 also ends with this exhortation.

²⁹ Indeed, as Brahmā is said in various texts to have told the Buddha shortly after his awakening, it is a general rule that *buddhas* revere the *dharma*; the *dharma* is the only thing that is worth being venerated by the Buddha. For a more on this see Skilling 2012, and see also the specific context of the *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* discussed below.

Buddha's praise of the *dharma*, and the Buddha responds (trans. Appleton 2020: 201):

What is the marvel in this now, monks, if the Tathāgata, who has destroyed greed, hatred and delusion, and is completely free from birth, ageing, sickness, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, melancholy and mental anguish, should be respectful of and reverential towards the *dharma* and speak in praise of the *dharma*? For in times past, when I was affected by greed, hatred and delusion, and was not free from birth, ageing, sickness, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, melancholy and mental anguish, I sacrificed even my own life for the sake of the *dharma*.

He proceeds to tell of his past life as a king called Subhāṣitagaveṣin, who – unsurprisingly given his name – was so dedicated to seeking a teaching that he agreed to jump into a fire in exchange for a single verse.³⁰ The *Śivisubhāṣitāvadāna* of the *Avadānakalpalatā* is also told by the Buddha to explain how “even in my past births I treasured well-spoken words” after hearing – and delighting in – the *dharma* talk of some of his monks (Granoff 1991–1992: 157).

The supreme value of the *dharma* and the pain of being without it is particularly well captured in the Sinhalese tradition surrounding the story of King Dharmasonḍaka, who jumps off a mountain into the mouth of a demon in order to fulfil his longing for the *dharma*. As the Sinhalese poet Alagiyavanna puts it in his own sixteenth-century rendition (trans. Berkwitz 2013: 82):

Like an ocean that has no shore,
 Like a sky that has no sun or moon,
 Like a house in which the lamps went out,
 Like a rutting majestic elephant without tusks,
 Like a lake that has no lotus flowers,
 Like a pearl necklace that has no gem pendant,
 Like a face on which the nose has been cut off,
 The world without *dharma* is not beautiful.

³⁰ Here the terms *dharma* and *subhāṣita* are used interchangeably. See further discussion below.

As Berkwitz notes, the poet uses the familiar *kāvya* motif of longing in separation, but where we might normally find a lover, here the beloved is the *dharma*.³¹

The rarity of *dharma* is directly responsible for its brevity in these stories, but the quality of the teaching is relevant as well as its quantity. Not only did the Bodhisattva have to settle for a single verse of teaching, but the content of the verse seems not to be worth the great effort taken to gain it. In the *Avadānaśataka* story of Surūpa the verse is at least pertinent – the message is about the benefits of overcoming one’s attachment to what is dear – but given what King Surūpa has just done in order to receive this teaching, one assumes he has already internalised the lesson in the verse. In other stories, the teaching is rather more mundane: in the *Avadānaśataka* story of Dharmagaveṣin (and its *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* parallel), the Bodhisattva-king jumps into a fiery pit in exchange for a verse that tells him, simply, to live according to the *dharma* and not do any evil.³² This is not particularly helpful advice, given what the story has already told us about the lack of access to the *dharma* and hence the lack of detail on what constitutes good or bad behaviour; one suspects a deliberate use of irony here. The generic morality focus, albeit without explicit reference to the *dharma*, is shared, with variations, by the stories in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā*, *Avadānakalpalatā* 53, and the *Liudu ji jing*.³³ As can be seen from Table 1, another sub-set, including the other *Avadānakalpalatā* story, the *Karmaśataka* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, have Śakra speak a verse about impermanence; this is at least

³¹ For a discussion of how this motif, significant in Indian poetry including in the *bhakti* tradition, is used in this and similar Buddhist contexts, see Berkwitz 2013: 83–84.

³² *dharmam caret sucaritam nainam duṣcaritam caret | dharmacārī sukham śete asmil loke paratra ceti //* Speyer (ed.) 1906: 220; “One should live the *dharma*, behaving well; one should not behave badly. One who lives according to the *dharma* is happy in this world or the next.” Appleton (trans.) 2020: 202.

³³ For example, Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā* has: *pradānapaṭubhir nityam śīle ca vimale sthitaiḥ | atyantavīryasaṃnāhaiḥ prāpyate padam akṣayam //* which Khoroché (2017: 29) renders as “Those who are ever intent on giving, who remain morally pure, who arm themselves with boundless valor – they reach the imperishable state.” *Avadānakalpalatā* 53 contains a teaching about the importance of virtue and avoiding bad deeds, while the *Liudu ji jing* verse relates the importance of doing good in body, speech and mind. The *Mahāvastu* story of Surūpa the deer tells us that the dust on the feet of a virtuous man is worth more than a mountain of gold.

a teaching that has a specifically Buddhist flavour, including resonating with the deathbed teaching of the Buddha himself.³⁴

The more generic morality verses might lead us to question the extent to which the verses of *dharma* available in the distant past are *Buddhist* teachings at all. Collins' distinction between "quotidian" and "supererogatory"³⁵ modes of *dharma*, which he refers to as "dhamma 1" and "dhamma 2" is helpful here. As he argues (2020: 8), in *jātaka* stories "there is no Buddha, so naturally no dhamma 2" being taught in the same way as in *sutta* or *vinaya*. Rather, the wisdom in *jātaka* stories is necessarily of the quotidian variety. This interpretation does not align with every Buddhist framework relevant to these stories, but it does help us to see the tension in how the verses were understood to relate to the fuller *dharma* of the Buddha.

In support of this interpretation it is worth noting that not all of our stories consistently refer to the verse as "*dharma*," but instead (or additionally) use the more generic term "*subhāṣita*" or "well-said."³⁶ This may be influenced by the classical view that the proper *dharma* (Collins' dhamma 2) is completely lost between Buddhist dispensations, so only more generically well-spoken sayings can be heard. In some traditions

³⁴ Again the verses, while sharing the theme of impermanence, are not the same in the different occurrences, and indeed the *Xianyu jing* offers three different variations on the theme associated with three different sacrifices. As Radich notes (2019: 538–539), the verse in the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* is the same as is found in the mainstream *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* in T7, and largely overlaps too with the account of the *parinirvāṇa* in the *Samyuktāgama* of T100, in the latter of which the verse is spoken by Śakra; a similar verse is also spoken by Sakka in the Pāli *Dīghanikāya* account of the Buddha's passing. In stories that echo this verse, we might be inclined to consider it a particularly powerful teaching, and certainly a deliberately inter-textual reference.

³⁵ Collins 2020: 9 defines this precisely as "the doing of something that is morally praiseworthy, but the not doing of which is not blameworthy."

³⁶ The *Mahāvastu* refers to *subhāṣita* rather than *dharma*. In both *Avadānaśataka* stories the kings seek the *dharma*, but the king in the story of Dharmagaveṣin is called Subhāṣitagaveṣin. Similarly King Dharmakāma in Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā* seeks the *dharma* and receives a *subhāṣita* verse. The *Avadānakalpalatā* uses the term *subhāṣita* but this is revealed to be the teaching of the Buddha and lighting the way to awakening. As such, there seems not to be a clear distinction between the two terms. After all, one assumes that if it is truly "well said" then it must be the *dharma*; indeed, this is more or less stated in some Pāli texts, such as in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* book of the eights (IV.164 in the Pali Text Society edition).

such well-spoken verses can be associated with great sages of the past, such as in the *Apadāna* tradition in which the famous rhinoceros horn verses of the *Suttanipāta* are said to be *subhāṣita* and attributed to *paccekabuddhas*, independently awakened beings present in times of no Buddhism. However, we run the risk of reading too much into the distinction between *subhāṣita* and *dharma*: in several of the texts there is no clear distinction between the two terms, suggesting that it may simply be the case that the *dharma* is understood to be expressed in *subhāṣita* verses.³⁷ Whether we call the teaching *dharma* or *subhāṣita*, the message is the same: only a small and mundane teaching is available during such lean times. Compare this, we are implicitly told, with the *dharma* made available by the Buddha, with all its riches, its forms and genres, its profundity and depth, its beauty and subtlety, yet also its availability and ability to draw in hearers at whatever level. How very lucky we are, the stories tell us, to live in a time when the *dharma* is *fully* available.³⁸

This tension is made explicit in the story cluster as it is found in the *Xianyu jing* (T202, “Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish”), where it features right at the start of the text. The opening scene is shortly after the Buddha’s awakening, at the famous moment when the god Brahmā has to intervene in order to persuade the Buddha to teach. As he says, the Buddha’s reluctance is strange given that, “World Honoured One, for uncountable aeons in the past, you constantly gathered *dharma*-medicine for sentient beings, even to the extent that you gave yourself, your wife and your child for the sake of a single verse.”³⁹ In order to remind the

³⁷ In emailed comments following an outing of this paper in February 2022, Reiko Ohnuma suggested that perhaps the term *subhāṣita* is meant to subtly highlight the fact that it is the words (“well-said”) that are possessed, and not necessarily the meaning (the *dharma*). I very much appreciate this nuanced reading, which certainly makes sense for some, if not all, of the stories under discussion.

³⁸ The brevity of verses does not, of course, necessarily imply they lack potency. There are ample Buddhist practices that involve short empowered textual extracts or verses that can be ritually efficacious. There is also a famous series of *Dhammapada* verses about how even a single word of *dharma* is better than a hundred verses of empty words (v. 102 and the surrounding, in chapter 8). Such an interpretation is potentially relevant to the sub-cluster where the verses are about impermanence, and resonate with the Buddha’s deathbed teachings, but the potency of the verse seems of little concern even then.

³⁹ 世尊往昔無數劫時，恒為眾生採集法藥，乃至一偈，以身妻子而用募求 (T202:4.349a18–20).

Buddha of his great commitment to the *dharma*, Brahmā tells him of some of these past lives. In the first of these the Bodhisattva was a king who fed his wife and son to a god in disguise as a demon (in this case, the god Vaiśravaṇa rather than the usual Śakra) in exchange for a teaching about impermanence.⁴⁰ As Brahmā, still narrating, points out: “If the World Honoured One behaved like this for the sake of the *dharma* in the past, how can he now wish to enter nirvana early without saving others first?”⁴¹ Brahmā goes on to narrate four more occasions on which the Buddha-to-be made a great sacrifice for the sake of a verse of *dharma*.⁴² This is a pleasing case of *jātaka* stories being used to remind the Buddha himself of his magnificent qualities. It also serves to remind the audience of the great commitment the Buddha has maintained over his multiple lifetimes, in order to make the *dharma* available to us all.

While these stories are of a distant past time, with clear implications for the present, the resonances extend into the future as well, for the audience is well aware that the *dharma* made available by the current Buddha will eventually be lost, bit by bit, text by text, verse by verse, until it too disappears from the world. For while the *dharma* itself is not impermanent, its accessibility is, at least in this world. Following its loss, there will be a long period of no Buddhism, and we will await a new Buddha to make the *dharma* available again. As such, the identity of a *buddha* is inherently caught up in the *dharma*.

⁴⁰ The king is called Xiu lou po 修樓婆, so presumably this is a rendition of the Surūpa story; my thanks to Janine Nicol for pointing this out, and for her help with navigating this text. Given the Indic precedent, I have assumed one wife and one child are sacrificed, though the Chinese is less specific.

⁴¹ 世尊昔日為法尚爾，云何今欲便捨眾生早入涅槃而不救濟 (T202:4.349b22–23).

⁴² As a king he makes his body into lamps, and – in another lifetime – pierces his body with nails, in exchange for a verse about impermanence from a visiting brahmin; in both lifetimes Śakra subsequently visits, and witnesses an act of truth that restores the Bodhisattva’s body to health. In the next story the Bodhisattva is a prince who jumps into a fire in exchange for a verse about virtuous conduct from Śakra disguised as a brahmin; the fire turns into a lotus pool. And, finally, he is a teacher of sages who copies teachings using his own skin for paper, his bones as a stylus and blood as ink, in exchange for a verse about virtuous conduct of body, speech and mind. A sixth story, of a past birth as King Śibi, illustrates the Buddha’s willingness to help other beings. This collection would appear to be attempting a comprehensive account of the different variations in the narrative. These summaries are based on the Chinese text; for a discussion of the Tibetan see Straube 2009: 330 especially n. 2.

Dharma and Buddha

The relationship between the physical body of a Buddha – his *rūpa-kāya* – and the body of teachings – his *dharma-kāya*, has been much discussed in Buddhist literature and scholarship, and other types of Buddha-body also play an important role especially in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, where the *dharma-kāya* is considered the true and enduring body of a *buddha*.⁴³ This relationship is another lens through which we might understand those stories in which a physical body is sacrificed in return for a *dharma* teaching.

The links between these two types of *buddha*-body have already been explored in relation to *jātaka* literature, in particular with reference to the many stories in which the Bodhisattva gives away a part of his body, or sacrifices his life. Bodily sacrifice, we must note, is often presented as a necessary part of the path to buddhahood, though it is not normally in exchange for *dharma*, but rather to satisfy the needs of a petitioner or to save the life of another being. The literature of Indian Buddhism abounds with stories of the Bodhisattva offering his head, eyes, flesh and blood to various animals, demons, or the god Śakra in disguise (usually as a brahmin), and such stories are understood to demonstrate the Bodhisattva's lack of attachment to his body, his compassion for others, and his amazing resolve to give whatever is asked of him.

As Ohnuma has noted (1998, see also 2007), such stories often communicate an equivalence between the physical body of the Bodhisattva and the *dharma* body of the Buddha. Take, for example, *jātaka* stories in which the Bodhisattva feeds himself to a hungry tigress to prevent her eating her own cubs, or offers his flesh as medicine to save his citizens, or kills himself in the ocean in order to enable his body to serve as a raft to save his fellow shipwrecked merchants. Such deeds are mirrored in the final life of the Buddha, whose *dharma* is often described as satiating and nourishing, a curative medicine, and a raft to help people across the ocean of rebirth and redeath to the further shore of nirvana. Often the beneficiaries in the past-life and in the narrative present time of the

⁴³ Works on this theme are too numerous to cite in anything close to fullness, but see, for example, Harrison 1992, Radich 2007, and Xing 2005.

Buddha are also the same, for example the shipwrecked merchants saved by the Bodhisattva's body as a raft are the same five men who first hear the *dharma* from the newly awakened Buddha and become the first five *arhats*.⁴⁴ Such parallels between past and present beneficiaries further underscore the relationship between the Buddha and the beings that he helps. As Ohnuma argues (1998: 331), "The events taking place in the story of the past serve as extended metaphors for the concepts experienced in the story of the present, lending to them a concreteness and physicality that they would otherwise lack." This echoing of past and present allows us to appreciate the equivalence between the Bodhisattva's gift of the body and the Buddha's gift of the *dharma*, or rather the ability of the first to transform into the ability to perform the second.

Gummer (2014) further notes that this equivalence allows certain Mahāyāna *sūtras* (particularly the *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra*) to offer paths to salvation that don't require bodily sacrifice of all *bodhisattvas*; instead, reciting the *sūtra* text is the sacrifice of a body of words that, when ingested, can transform one into a *buddha* in the same way as repeated bodily sacrifice transformed Śākyamuni, the Buddha of our time. These interesting Mahāyāna developments aside, non-Mahāyāna traditions also acknowledge that the availability of the *dharma* now makes the extraordinary bodily self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva unnecessary, for Buddhists instead have access to the path taught by the Buddha as well as the great "field of merit" brought by the Buddhist community.⁴⁵

How can this framework help us to understand those stories in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices his flesh and blood not to save the lives of others, but in exchange for a single, often disappointingly mundane, verse of teaching? We might see a similar message in terms of the Buddha's

⁴⁴ As in the *Pañcakānam Bhadravargikānāmjātaka* of the *Mahāvastu*, discussed by Ohnuma 1998: 332. As she notes (pp. 331–335), the "good group of five" first *arhats* feature frequently as the beneficiaries in Indian *jātaka* stories, further underscoring this parallel between past and present experiences.

⁴⁵ Ohnuma (2007: chapter 1, especially pp. 35–44) even maps this distinction onto her definition of the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres, with the former exhibiting the "perfections" required of a *bodhisattva* in times of no Buddhism, and the latter the "devotions" possible when Buddhist institutions and teachings are available. Although I do not consider Ohnuma's distinction to be quite so clear cut, it is an important framework within the literature.

body. It is no accident, I would argue, that in several of the stories the Bodhisattva is called Surūpa, which literally means “of good body.” It is as if the story wishes to reinforce the physical bodily perfection that is exchanged for something which – despite its brevity and lack of profundity – is worth far more than this sack of bones.

According to the Buddhist karmic system, of course, physical perfection is associated with moral perfection. Doing good will lead you to a better body, right up to the perfect body of the “great-man” (*mahā-puruṣa*) – a universal emperor or a *buddha*, with his distinctive physical marks.⁴⁶ The Buddha’s body is therefore not just any body, but a perfect body, and the Bodhisattva’s body is very often a similar reflection of virtue. King Surūpa’s handsomeness is not an incidental detail, but a sign of his goodness. Yet even such a handsome (and virtuous) body is worth less than the *dharma*. This message is arguably emphasised further by the verse offered in a sub-set of the stories, where the *dharma* itself is a teaching about impermanence, a teaching that applies most obviously to the body. As many have noted, the *dharma-kāya* is often presented as enduring and imperishable, in direct contrast to the physical body, even the physical body of a *buddha*.⁴⁷

These ideas about the body, and about the superiority of the *dharma* to the physical form of the Bodhisattva, are similar to the broader genre of bodily-sacrifice *jātakas*. However, there are differences too, which might be interpreted in various ways. Rather than a *transformation* of the Bodhisattva’s physical body into the Buddha’s *dharma*-body over multiple lifetimes, as in Ohnuma’s analysis, in the verse-of-*dharma* stories the Bodhisattva’s body appears to be *exchanged* for the superior *dharma* within a single lifetime. In addition, rather than offering up a mirroring or hierarchy, in which the Buddha’s *dharma* is a superior body to the Bodhisattva’s physical form, these stories of self-sacrifice for the sake of receiving the *dharma* actually suggest the *separateness* of the Buddha and *dharma*. To put it another way, the Buddha’s *dharma*-body is not *his*, in these stories; rather, the *dharma* is shown to pre-exist his buddhahood. Not only does the Bodhisattva go to great lengths to access it, but

⁴⁶ On the role of virtue in the creation of perfect bodies see Mroziak 2007.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this tendency and its pitfalls see Harrison 1992.

even the Buddha still reveres it, and encourages all his followers to do so too.

However, if we look through the lens of ritual and sacrifice, the difference might not be so stark. As Gummer has shown, it can be helpful in Buddhist literature (especially Mahāyāna *sūtras* but also more broadly) to view the Buddha as a cosmic dharmic king, and the *dharma* as a potent ritual substance, the Buddha's "vital, sovereign essence."⁴⁸ The repeated self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva, she argues, is a ritual act that results in the Bodhisattva "ritually cooking his supremely sovereign buddha body through his own efforts" (Gummer 2021: 182). According to this framework, the exchange of the Bodhisattva's body for a portion of *dharma* is just one part of the longer process of transformation from *bodhisattva*-body to *dharma*-body that also features at the heart of Ohnuma's analysis.

Are these stories trying to move away from the more usual focus of the *jātakas* on the glorious Buddha, and encourage audiences to remember that the *dharma* is more important? Do they want us to see the *dharma* as independent truths underlying existence, there (albeit inaccessible) regardless of whether or not a *buddha* is around to teach them, and revered by the Buddha himself even after his realisation of them? Or are they exploring (and creating) a sacrificial realm in which a realisation of the *dharma* in the form of a measly mundane verse is a potent part of the bodily transformation that takes place as the Bodhisattva comes to be identified with *dharma*? Given the ability of narrative to hold possibilities without resolution, and to explore ideas without systematisation, we might be wise to assume that all these analyses are correct.

***Dharma* and the Bodhisattva Path**

We have, inevitably, moved from a discussion of the Buddha's relationship with the *dharma* to a discussion of the Bodhisattva's relationship

⁴⁸ Gummer 2021: 174. I am grateful to Natalie Gummer for a discussion of this aspect of her work and its relevance to this story cluster over email and video call. As she notes, according to this analysis the brevity and mundanity of the verse might be irrelevant because it is a ritual verse.

with the *dharma*. After all, these stories present themselves as being about the Bodhisattva and – whether implicitly or explicitly – the *bodhisattva* path. If we take the Bodhisattva as our focal point, I would suggest that these stories have three further things to tell us: Firstly, they show us that the Bodhisattva sought and valued teachings, and wished to have access to the *dharma*, both for his own benefit, and for the benefit of others. Secondly, they highlight that this commitment led him to sacrifice what was precious to him, whether wealth, family members or his own body. Such sacrifices, as we have already noted, are part of a broader genre of *jātaka* stories, and may be illuminated by this wider context. Thirdly, the stories suggest that the Bodhisattva was humble enough (or, perhaps, desperate enough) to accept teachings from unusual teachers, such as demons, evil brahmins, and hunters. These three qualities – commitment, sacrifice and humility – are particularly highlighted when the stories are referred to in lists of praiseworthy deeds of the Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva's devotion to the *dharma* immediately tells us something important about the Bodhisattva, even if we know nothing about the content of the verse, or of any other details. That the stories still have value in this case is highlighted by those texts that present very short references to the deeds of the Bodhisattva, namely the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* of the *Mahāvastu*, the Khotanese *Jātakastava*, and the Mahāyāna *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchāsūtra* and *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*. Because of the focus on the Bodhisattva's own deeds, and because of the brevity of the accounts, we rarely discover, in such texts, who offered the teaching or what the teaching consisted of. While such texts may tell us less about the *dharma* than the longer stories we have already examined, they do share with the wider cluster of stories a concern to highlight the Bodhisattva's great commitment to the *dharma*. In some sense the source of the *dharma* or even its content is rather irrelevant.

As immediately becomes clear when you read such verses, what matters in these short references is the sacrifice made by the Bodhisattva. The list in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* of the *Mahāvastu* makes it clear that multiple sacrifices are made by all *bodhisattvas* and that specific stories recount our own Buddha-to-be's demonstration of this. For each of these examples we learn briefly who the Bodhisattva was (e.g. King Surūpa; a minister called Sañjaya; a merchant called Vasundhara), what he

offered (e.g. his son and wife; his heart; all his possessions), and to whom (a *rākṣasa*; a *piśāca*; a poor man). This formulaic list gives no information about the contents of the teaching nor how the exchange came about. This kind of brief formulaic account is also found in other lists of great deeds of the Bodhisattva, for example in the *Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchāsūtra*, where the Buddha declares:

Indifferent to my body, I threw myself from a rocky slope for the sake of the well-spoken [*dharma*]. I was without regard for my body or my life on account of enlightenment (1.114, trans. Boucher 2008: 131).

Similarly, but in the second person this time, the Khotanese *Jātakastava* documents how:

For the sake of one *śloka* into the mouth of the *yakṣa* you threw yourself from the peak of a mountain. You had no fear when you saw the open mouth, the tongue darting like a flame, the sharp tusks (v. 36, trans. Dresden 1955: 426).

The emphasis in both of these accounts is clearly on the great fearless deed of the Bodhisattva. Likewise, later in the same text we learn:

As people discard the lotus garland withered by the sun's rays, so you gave up sovereignty over the continents, even your own life, for the Law's [*dharma*'s] sake, at that time.

For the sake of one *śloka* you entered into the fire, as into a lotus pond an elephant descends. You calmed in your mind longing and greed thirsting for the Law [*dharma*]. Therefore, homage to you at your feet (vv. 104–105, trans. Dresden 1955: 436).

The *Bhadrakalpikasūtra* likewise notes three extraordinary deeds done in exchange for a teaching, said to demonstrate the perfection of forbearance or patience (*kṣanti*), with no concern for the content of the teaching that is received in exchange.⁴⁹ In all these texts, the account of the

⁴⁹ The idea of sacrifice in return for a teaching is mentioned three times during the long discussion of the six perfections: at 2.105 (brahmin serves an outcaste), 2.139 (sage *Devarāja offers his head) and 2.158 (jumps into fire). Only the first of these explicitly mentions the Bodhisattva's participation. References are to the 84,000 translation of the Tibetan by the Dharmacakra Translation Committee 2022. For a discussion and the text of the first and second of these, including parallel passages in Chinese, see Skilling and Saerji 2019, especially 142–143, and 162–163.

Bodhisattva's sacrifice takes centre stage: we are left in awe of all the amazing things that he has sacrificed, all for the single purpose of accessing a verse of teaching.

In addition to his acts of sacrifice, another sign of the Bodhisattva's unshakeable commitment to seeking a verse of teaching is his willingness to be taught by unusual teachers. This aspect of the story is crucial enough to appear even in most of the very short accounts we have just been exploring. The people who offer the teaching are usually low-ranking: demons of various kinds, hunters and other low-caste men. As Ohnuma notes in her analysis of gift-of-the-body stories, the Bodhisattva's willingness to offer bodily gifts to unworthy recipients demonstrates his particular virtue, for he does so "not for the sake of merit, but purely out of generosity and compassion" (2007: 60). Such gifts go beyond the laws of karma and merit-making that would prioritise service of high-ranking individuals such as brahmins, and thereby emphasise the Bodhisattva's otherworldly aims. While this analysis holds for our cluster as well, there is an additional implication: that the Bodhisattva is humble enough to accept a teaching from a flesh-eating *yakṣa* or a hunter.

The evil recipients are often not quite what they seem, however. In many of the stories in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices himself or his family in return for a verse of teaching, the being offering the teaching is said to be Śakra in disguise, and after the Bodhisattva has proven his commitment, his sacrifice is undone: his body is preserved, and his family restored to him. The presence of Śakra in disguise is a common motif more broadly in *jātaka* stories, and indeed in wider Indian literature. Often, Śakra takes disguise as a brahmin – that embodiment of ideal recipient – and asks for a seemingly impossible gift, such as the Bodhisattva's last meal in a famine, his wife, or his eyes. In the standard appearance of this motif Śakra is testing the Bodhisattva's commitment to virtue, either out of pure curiosity, or a desire to help in the practice of that virtue, or else out of fear that the Bodhisattva may be seeking to oust him from his position as king of the gods through his practice of virtue.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For an exploration of the characterisation of Śakra across Indian traditions see Appleton 2017: chapter 2.

After the Bodhisattva demonstrates his unshakeable resolve, Śakra usually restores what has been lost.

How does this motif of Śakra in disguise operate in our cluster? Instead of Śakra disguised as a good recipient or teacher (a brahmin), he is disguised as a terrifying *yakṣa*. This is presumably to enforce the fear and loathing that the Bodhisattva should feel at the possibility of receiving teachings from such a being. Just as the Bodhisattva doesn't care about the qualities of the recipient of his extraordinary gift-giving, so too he will accept a teaching from any being who has one. At the same time, the fact that the teacher is not actually a flesh-eating *yakṣa* prevents us from thinking such beings might actually teach the *dharma*; instead, there is an implicit understanding that Śakra, as long-lived and pious king of the gods, might reasonably actually have a single verse of teaching to share. And meanwhile, this motif of the test makes for an easier audience experience, for the audience can anticipate that there is no real danger to the Bodhisattva – or indeed, to his family members, even though he believes that he is really making a terrible sacrifice.

There are some exceptions to the motif of Śakra-in-disguise, however. In the story of Dharmakāma in Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā*, the person offering a teaching is another stock narrative character – an evil brahmin – and the Bodhisattva's life is only saved through his own virtue, when the fiery pit into which he has willingly jumped magically transforms into a lotus pool. Because the evildoer was in fact a real human being, the story also tells us that the Bodhisattva then uses an act of truth to prevent the brahmin from entering hell. This story thus follows a rather different pattern, one in which all the agency is with the Bodhisattva, despite his dependence on an unlikely source for a verse of *dharma*. In addition, it shows us the added complication of a real encounter of this sort: someone has to harm (or genuinely seek to harm) the Bodhisattva, and the karmic repercussions of such intentions are severe.

Another exception to the divine-test framing is the story of Subhāṣita-gaveṣin in the *Avadānakalpalatā*, in which the Bodhisattva seeks the *dharma* from a hunter. Unlike the hunter-teacher in the *Mahāvastu* story of Surūpa the deer, who is Śakra in disguise, this hunter in the *Avadānakalpalatā* is actually really a hunter, and a nasty one. The Bodhisattva is a king who wishes to hear good words, and his courtiers

send him to a hunter known to be full of great sayings. The Bodhisattva gives the hunter a valuable necklace in payment, but, worrying that he might ask for it back again, the hunter insists that the Bodhisattva must also jump off a cliff. The Bodhisattva's life is saved only thanks to a deity breaking his fall.

In order to understand this variant, we need to take account of the text's composition and concerns. For a start, the text is rather late (11th century) and, as Granoff points out (1991–1992), influenced by both a courtly setting and Brahmanical Hindu literature. She argues that this particular story is probably influenced by the many tales of unusual teachers and challenging transmission initiations in texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, for example Arjuna's quest for weapons and initiation as a pupil of Śiva disguised as a hunter (Granoff 1991–1992: 167–171). Although Granoff doesn't note this particular possibility, there is also resonance with the story of the brahmin ascetic Kauśika who is sent to a hunter to learn about the *dharma* (Sukthankar et al. 1933–1966: 3.197–206), though it is noteworthy that Kauśika's teacher is a much more moral hunter than the Bodhisattva's teacher. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* story is more about the ability of unlikely people to have attained higher knowledge, a theme found across a range of narratives in that text. This *Avadānakalpalatā* story, along with the one in Haribhṭṭa's *Jātakamālā*, instead emphasises the possibility of gaining insight from teachers who know the words of – but do not live by – true teachings.⁵¹

This theme is spelled out to us in the *Liudu ji jing*. Here, the human teacher of the verse is a past-birth of Devadatta, the Buddha's murderous and schismatic cousin. The text emphasises that the Bodhisattva was delighted to have his body pierced all over with needles (the price of the teaching in this case) in order to receive the verse, and after hearing it his body was magically restored to health. At the end of the story, the Buddha explains that “The one who gave the Bodhisattva the verse, he is now Devadatta. Even though Devadatta knew the Buddha-verse first, he was like a blind man holding a lamp – it did not illuminate things for

⁵¹ My thanks to Brian Black for this observation.

him, so what was the use of it to him?”⁵² Setting aside the banality of the verse once again (a simple teaching to avoid doing evil in body, speech or mind) we see here that the emphasis is clearly on the need to *understand* or *live by* rather than simply *possess* a teaching.

These exceptions, alongside the brief references to stories that do not explain whether the demons or other teachers were really Śakra or not, reinforce the Bodhisattva’s commitment and virtue. This virtue demonstrated by the Bodhisattva is only enhanced by the fact that the teachers are inferior beings or of evil intent. Indeed, the very fact that he needs a teacher at all, rather than being able to realise the *dharma* for himself, reminds us that he is not yet a *buddha*. However, these exceptions do introduce an additional dimension, or even challenge, in that they beg the question of how such low-ranking or even malevolent beings had access to such precious teachings. How can a violent and greedy hunter know the *dharma* as well as the king of the gods? How does Devadatta know the truth before the Buddha? And if he really knows it, why does he ignore the teaching himself?

We have come full circle, and returned to the question of what we might learn from these stories about the *dharma*. It is clearly one thing to know some words of the *dharma*, and another thing to follow its lessons. The hunter in the *Avadānakalpalatā* example knows the *dharma*, but doesn’t understand it; likewise Devadatta in the *Liudu ji jing*. Meanwhile King Surūpa of the *Avadānaśataka* understands the *dharma* intuitively, but lacks access to the words of the *dharma*. The current Buddhist community have access to both the words and the meaning, in extensive teachings, and should not – such stories take pains to remind us – take this for granted.

⁵² 授菩薩偈者，今調達是。調達雖先知佛偈，猶盲執燭炤，彼不自明，何益於己 (T152:3.32b13–15). I am grateful to Janine Nicol for her (as yet unpublished) translation of this story, and for guiding me through my own reading of it in Chinese. The identification of the teacher as Devadatta in this case might perhaps be influenced by the famous story in chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sūtra* in which Śākyamuni-to-be receives the *sūtra* from Devadatta in a past life.

Conclusion

We have now explored multiple stories of the Bodhisattva's sacrifice in exchange for a verse of the *dharmā*, paying attention to what we might learn about the *dharmā*, about the Buddha, and about the Bodhisattva (and more broadly the *bodhisattva* path). Although there is scope for far more research into these stories, especially as more occurrences come to light, each with their own interpretive twist, a few preliminary conclusions do present themselves, especially if we treat the cluster as a whole.

On the most basic level, these stories remind their audiences how precious the *dharmā* is, and how lucky we are to be living in a time in which more than one measly verse of it is available. They also remind us of the extraordinary lengths to which the Buddha (and indeed all *buddhas*) had to go to in order to access the *dharmā* and communicate it to us. As well as emphasising the Bodhisattva's desperation for the *dharmā* and his willingness to learn from any source, these stories remind us that it is one thing to know the *dharmā*, and another thing to understand it. Often the Bodhisattva appears to have a better understanding of the *dharmā* than his teacher, even if he lacks the words.

While other stories of the Bodhisattva's quest for buddhahood often suggest a transformation of the oft-sacrificed physical body of the Bodhisattva into the far superior *dharmā*-body of the Buddha, this particular cluster of *jātaka* stories seems instead to emphasise the distinction between Buddha and *dharmā*. The Buddha, we are told, reveres the *dharmā*. As Bodhisattva, he made extreme sacrifices in order to access even a tiny portion of *dharmā*. Although only a single verse was available to him, it was there independently of his own buddhahood or teaching, and he sometimes received it from a highly unusual teacher. At the same time, this apparent separateness is elided when we see the acquisition of even this brief nugget of *dharmā* as part of the longer quest of the Bodhisattva to identify himself with the *dharmā* in order to become a *buddha*: the separation is now all in the past. The differences between Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna (especially but not only Theravāda) readings here might account for the story cluster's absence from the classical Pāli *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*.

As such, while the stories on one level remind us that the *dharma* is in some sense independent of the Buddha or Bodhisattva, they simultaneously reinforce the closeness of the relationship between Buddha and *dharma*. They inspire gratitude for the Bodhisattva having made so many sacrifices in order to access the *dharma*, and to the Buddha for having made extensive and clear teachings available to the world. While it is one thing to know a single verse of general morality, it is quite another to realise the full *dharma* in all its complexity and beauty, and teach it in ways that others can understand.

The presence of these stories across a whole range of Buddhist texts indicates that they operated on a variety of levels, communicating the need to properly appreciate the quality and quantity of *dharma* now on offer, as well as the amazing commitment of the Bodhisattva in realising and then sharing it. The idea that everything – riches, family, body and life – is worth less than a single verse of *dharma* is certainly a potent one, and, one assumes, a powerful incentive to listen and practice.

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