Where the Buddha was previously born, seen and heard: Transmission and transformation of rebirth narratives in art and text within and beyond Gandhara

FINAL SCHEDULE:

ROM, August 27-28, 2017 [JN, August 14, 2017]

Sunday, August 27

10:00 AM – Noon

Simhala-Sārthavāha Avadāna (Story of the Merchant Simhala) Newar Buddhist Scroll-reading by Naresh Man Bajracharya

9:30: Doors open to Signy and Cléophée Eaton Theatre Auditorium, Level 1B
Free event does not include museum admission (no RSVP required, seating on first-come basis); Use President’s Choice School Entrance: http://www.rom.on.ca/en/whats-on/presidents-choice-school-entrance

10 a.m. Welcome (Deepali Dewan, South Asian Arts and Culture Curator, ROM); remarks by Kunjar Sharma (Honorary Counsel General of Nepal); informal introduction and contextualization by Christoph Emmrich; main presentation and scroll reading by Naresh Man Bajracharya; Todd Lewis, “Painting in the Vernacular: Newar Paubha Traditions of Displaying Domesticated Buddhist Narratives”

12:00 Lunch for conference participants in RBC Glass Room (4th floor)

1:00 p.m. Roundtable on “Buddhist Rebirth Narratives in Literary and Visual Cultures of Gandhara”

Jason Neelis (Rebirth Stories in Gandharan Ritual Landscapes) and Tim Lenz (Bypassing Previous Births), David Jongeward (Jātaka survey results and new identifications), Abdul Samad (Peshawar Museum and other collections in Pakistan), Susmita Basu Majumdar (Kolkata and Chandigarh collections)

a) Transformation of Visual Narratives and Ritualized Storytelling Practices (Afternoon session, 2:00 – 6:00 p.m.)

i. Pia Brancaccio, “Buddhist Narratives from the Stūpa at Bharhut: Rethinking the Relationships between Visual and Textual Sources”

ii. Suchandra Ghosh, “Depictions of Buddha’s rebirth narratives: Understanding their presence and absence in the context of the Buddhist sites in India”

iii. Monika Zin, “The placement of the “former deeds” in the image programmes of Buddhist sanctuaries”
iv. Christian Luczanits, “Conceptions of Previous Births in Early Tibetan Art”

v. Sarah Richardson, “Previous Births Along the Path to Perfection: Rangjung Dorje’s Organized Vision Painted at Shalu”

vi. Alexandra Green, “Visual paritta: the lives of the Buddha as recitation and protection in late Burmese and Thai art”


[6:00 – 7:30 p.m. Reception in Eaton Court (3rd floor)]

Monday, August 28 (RBC Glass Room)

b) Narrative Interpretations in Literary Media (Morning session, 9:00 a.m. to 12:00)

i. Reiko Ohnuma, “When Animals Speak: Speaking Animals in the Pāli Jātakas”


[Break at 10:30 am]

iv. Amber Moore, topic: Newar version of the Mañicūḍa Avadāna called the Mañīšailamahāavadāna

v. Christoph Anderl, “The Mahāsattva Jātaka in China: Continuities and Discontinuities in the transmission of the Birth Story”

[12:00 – Lunch in RBC Glass Room]

c) Buddhas’ Lifestories (Afternoon session I, 1:00- 3:00 pm)

i. Naomi Appleton, “Jātaka Stories and Pratyekabuddhas in Early Buddhism”

ii. Lilian Handlin, “The Buddhavamsa in the Burmese Gotama story – from time intervals counted in kalpa(s) to betel chewing time”

iii. John Strong, “Previous-birth stories and accounts of the Buddha’s miracles at Śrāvastī”

[Break at 3:00 p.m.]

d) Gandhāran Art and Artefacts (Afternoon Session II, 3:30 – 5:00 p.m.)

vi. Wannaporn Rienjang, “Behind the Scene: Gandharan Relic Deposits and the Narratives of the holy ‘Bodies’”

vii. Kurt Behrendt, Topic: Dīpankara Jātaka in Gandharan Art and Archaeology

Closing remarks by Mark Engstrom (ROM)

ROM galleries remain open until 5:30 p.m.

6:00- 9:00 p.m. Conference dinner in C5 for presenters, roundtable and workshop participants, with Imran Siddiqui (Pakistan Consul General), ULM Jauhar (Sri Lanka Consul General)]

Abstracts

Christoph Anderl, “The Mahāsattva Jātaka in China: Continuities and Discontinuities in the transmission of the Birth Story”

My focus will be on the transformation which took place in China, specifically, the interpretation of the story in the context of filial piety.

Naomi Appleton, “Jātaka Stories and Pratyekabuddhas in Early Buddhism”

In this paper I will explore the role of pratyekabuddhas (Skt) or paccekabuddhas (Pāli) in early Indian jātaka stories, using a variety of Pāli and Sanskrit sources. Usually rendered as ‘solitary buddha’, a pratyekabuddha is said to attain awakening without access to teachings, during a time between the dispensations of full buddhas, and to refrain from making his realization known to others. He is often associated with a solitary form of renunciation, and with learning from signs rather than verbal teachings. Although pratyekabuddhas are by no means unique to jātaka literature, they can serve as important role models and/or fields of merit for laypeople during this narrative time of no Buddhism. This paper asks what we can learn from the portrayal of pratyekabuddhas in early jātaka tales, and how pratyekabuddhas interact with the long multi-life story of the most recent Buddha.

Kurt Behrendt, Topic: Dīpankara Jātaka in Gandharan Art and Archaeology

Pia Brancaccio, “Buddhist Narratives from the Stūpa at Bhārhut: Rethinking the Relationships between Visual and Textual Sources”

The paper will offer a careful re-examination of the vedikā reliefs decorating the Bhārhut stupa to gain a better understanding of how early Buddhist audiences grasped the narrative of Śākyamuni’s life and the many jātaka tales. The paper will consider the particular use of inscriptions labeling scenes, characters, and places to propose that diverse visual and oral repertoires of regional nature must have played key roles in the formation of a narrative framework for the life of the Buddha represented at Bhārhut.
Suchandra Ghosh, “Depictions of Buddha’s rebirth narratives: Understanding their presence and absence in the context of the Buddhist sites in India”

Depiction of rebirth narratives forms an important element of Buddhist art and jātaka stories. Along with Bhārhat, other Buddhist sites in present day India like Sanchi, Amaravati, Mathura, Kanaganahalli, Phanigiri, Ajanta etc. provide us with a rich repertoire of images and labeled inscriptions. Though rebirth narratives showing an interplay of oral, written and visual tradition is predominant, there are sites where we are devoid of such rebirth narratives, a case in point could be Pauni in Maharashtra. Located between Bharhat and Amaravati, Pauni is a site which also had not been studied with great attention. Were there certain cultural contexts within which the narratives circulated and represented in visuals? How do we explain the silence of these narratives in Pauni, which has otherwise the tradition of donative records? To address the question of presence or absence of such narratives, it is imperative that we try to find out a pattern of depiction of the rebirth narratives in sites where they are visible, look at their chronological and geographical distribution and then try to locate the reason of their absence in some sites. The question of localization of some stories is also important in this context. Though we have depictions of the stories in most of the sites, it is worth investigating the absence, even if it is for a single site.

Alexandra Green, “Visual paritta: the lives of the Buddha as recitation and protection in late Burmese and Thai art”

Buddhist biography is an important part of Thai and Burmese art with stories and iconic moments represented in a wide variety of media. In Thailand, the Buddha images in different postures indicate the days of the week to which people make offerings to ensure good fortune and ward off evil. Banner and wall paintings portray the ten great jātaka stories that are hung in temples to gain merit. In Burma, the 28 Buddhas of the Past, the ten great jātakas, the eight victories, and various other incidents in the Buddha’s lives are depicted in numerological groups for protective purposes. Many of these images from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries are structured to resemble chants, mimicking gāthās in visual form. They are therefore both visual and textual in nature, indicating the inseparable relationship between word and image in these contexts.

Lilian Handlin, “The Buddhavamsa in the Burmese Gotama story – from time intervals counted in kalpa(s) to betel chewing time”

The scholarly interest in the Buddhavamsa has focused on the text’s legitimization of the Buddha Gotama, by association with a lineages of his predecessors. But like other Pali texts, the Buddhavamsa for the Burmese since the 11th century serviced other tasks. The vamsa’s resonance for the Burmese is attested in how over the centuries the lineage was integrated in the Gotama story, becoming its most important and stable component. The text’s centrality first appears in Pagan’s material and inscriptive record, subsequently in structures endowed during the Nyaung Yan and Konbaung dynasties, and, since the 15th century, in a variety of literary genres, also informing how the Burmese conceived their own history. By then, this Pali text, believed by the Burmese to have been rehearsed at the First Council, went native in multiple Burmese literary forms. The paper investigates the Buddhavamsa’s contributions to conceptualizing the Buddha’s rebirths, by showing how its content encouraged enhancements that added three additional bodhisatta rebirths to the 27 listed in the Buddhavamsa, and how the Buddhavamsa at the same time was made to be more future oriented, even though its core format presented Metteyya as an afterthought, to ameliorate its focus on the long gone past. Pali commentarial practices enabled the Buddhavamsa’s Burmese interpreters to place texts in conversation with each other - they preserved the Buddhavamsa as they had it, but changed its orientation. Serving as a temporal and narrative frame to structure the bodhisatta path, the Buddhavamsa also provided a template for how to feature rebirth narratives in the Gotama story and make a time line covering gazillions of year more accessible. These and other reasons account for the text’s presence in almost all Pagan so called gandhakutis, and later in what contemporaries called uddesika cetiyas.

My paper is focused on the version of the “Sroṇa Koṭikaṇḍa Avadāna” that is found in the Mūlasarvāstivādavinayā (The Law Code of the Mūlasarvāstivādins). In this version of the avadāna, the titular character's progress along the Buddhist path is described. In this description of the path, one of the steps is repeated, perhaps unnecessarily, and perhaps erroneously (śrotāpanna > sakṛdāgāmin > anāgāmin > arhat becomes śrotāpanna > sakṛdāgāmin > anāgāmin > arhat). In this paper, I investigate the full range of implications arising from this atypical description of the Buddhist path. My conclusions revisit several lines of inquiry in the study of Indian Buddhist monasticism, including Schopen's notion of the "incompetent" monk, discrepancies between normative and non-normative sources, and the textual history of the avadāna genre of Buddhist literature.

Todd Lewis, “Painting in the Vernacular: Newar Paubha Traditions of Displaying Domesticated Buddhist Narratives”

Since the late Malla era (ended 1769), Newar Buddhist teachers have commissioned paintings for display during the holy summer monsoon month of Gumla. Based on Sanskrit texts, but likely drawing upon vernacular recensions, painters working with Vajracarya pandits produced a variety of long hanging paintings (paubha) that still attract crowds of devout visitors who visit the monasteries. The paper surveys the continuing paubha displays, noting the varying jātakas and avadānas chosen for depiction; it also examines those extant in museum collections across the world. Special attention will be focused on showing and analyzing a newly relocated and extraordinary example of this genre: a hanging painting sized 3’ x 20’ long, one that contains several narratives in three panels, its central account derived from the local mythological history, the Swayambhu Purāṇa.

Christian Luczanits, “Conceptions of Previous Births in Early Tibetan Art”

In early Tibetan art, depictions of the previous births of the Buddha play only a limited role, but when they appear their coverage is extensive. In Alchi, Ladakh, a cycle of birth stories dating to the early 13th century covers the walls of the courtyard in front of the Main Temple of the ancient monastic complex. Having been repainted in the recent past, largely following the original composition, these paintings have not yet been the focus of any more detailed study and their source is not yet identified. These depictions emphasise the narrative aspect of the stories.

A diametrically opposed approach can be observed in another cycle of previous birth stories illuminating the first part of the sutra section of an incomplete Tibetan Buddhist canon of the 14th century in Namgyal Monastery in Mustang, Nepal. Based on the Jātakamāla of Āryaśūra, it is the type of birth that is emphasised in these depictions, while the narrative itself commonly plays no role at all.

I will present these cycles and reflect on their difference in the light of their respective spatial, historical, and religious contexts as well as in relation to other birth story depictions in early Tibetan Art, among them the cycle at Shalu Monastery.

Amber Moore, “Maṇiśailamahāvadāna: The Emergence of Vajrayoginī and a Newar Kingdom in Nepal”

The Maṇiśailamahāvadāna, written in the Newar language and mixed with Sanskrit songs of praise, includes a familiar legend of the Buddha reborn as Manicuḍa, a generous king who gives away the jewel embedded in his own head. This story however, also tells of the coming into being of Vajrayoginī, the creation of the Kingdom of Sankhu in Nepal and the lineage of Vajracarya priests at a the Gumbāhā forest monastery. A text which has several versions but no known source, the Maṇiśailamahāvadāna also contains important historical details and prescriptive instruction for pilgrimages that have long been practiced at this site located along a critical route for trade and transmission between India, Nepal and Tibet.

Bhante Jinananda Nugegalayaye, “Recitation of Uraga Jātaka as a method of alleviating suffering from death in rural villages of southern Sri Lanka”

This paper discusses Uraga Jātaka (No:354) as a method of mindfulness on death as Bodhisatta and his family practiced and investigate the application of the narrative by some village people in Southern Sri Lanka use the
narrative at the funeral houses to overcoming suffering. Uraga Jātaka is a narrative that reflects the impermanence of life and demonstrates how Bodhisatta cultivated some Paramitas such as perseverance, mindfulness and wisdom. The research highlights the recitation and telling the story with the participation of deceased family in different occasions during the funeral. It discusses the scope of meditation on death and the possibility of it from sitting posture to practical death situation. Due to the gradual changes of education system, economy and culture, Uraga Jātaka has been rarely reciting at the funeral occasions today. I am a senior Buddhist monk for a quarter century and experience that Uraga Jātaka has been as an influential story of Bodhisatta and it is applied to alleviate suffering by some villagers in Southern Sri Lanka.

Reiko Ohnuma, “When Animals Speak: Speaking Animals in the Pali Jātakas”

The Pali Jātakaṭṭhakathā contains many stories that might be described as “animal fables,” featuring highly anthropomorphized animal characters who think, speak, plan, and reason, much in the manner of human beings. Their use of human language and the fact that they speak, not only to each other but also (in many cases) to the human beings they encounter, sharply distinguishes them not only from the more naturalistic animals depicted elsewhere in Buddhist literature, but also from the Buddhist doctrinal view of animals as a lowly realm of rebirth, devoid of wisdom, rationality, and moral agency. How, then, should we interpret the animal fables of the Pali jātakas and their depiction of animals who speak? Are these animals just allegorical human beings, or does their animality continue to matter? Why do they speak, and what do they choose to speak about? This presentation will focus particularly upon several jātakas that explicitly reflect upon the differences between human language and animal cries, and the difficulties of translation across the human-animal divide.

Sarah Richardson, “Previous Births Along the Path to Perfection: Rangjung Dorje’s Organized Vision Painted at Shalu”

When the Tibetan temple of Shalu (Zhwa lu) was expanded in the middle of the fourteenth century, a new set of paintings of one hundred rebirth stories were added to the large interior circumambulatory passage. These painted and inscribed stories had been collected by the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284-1339), who, building on Āryaśūra's Jātakamāla, “completed” it by selecting ten stories for each of the ten perfections. This extensive visual and literary depiction at Shalu saw the stories in a grid-like composition of rectangular painted narratives and lengthy Tibetan inscriptions, a specific reinvigoration of the genre in fourteenth century Tibet. This paper will examine the rhetorical power of the organized and edited set, showing how this text may have provided a perfect opportunity for explaining the power of an organized book by enabling visitors a physical and visual passage through one.

Wannaporn Rienjang, “Behind the Scene: Gandharan Relic Deposits and the Narratives of the holy ‘Bodies’”

Relics that are deposited inside stupas are a focal part of Buddhist ritual activities. Relics in the form of cremated bone fragments, in particular, reinstate the existence of the historical Buddha or other Buddhist venerables. They are also generally believed as representing the ‘bodies’ of the Buddha that are scattered across the Buddhist world. Unlike sculptures, relics can move far, thus played a vital role in the spread of Buddhism. These ‘bodies’ generally comprise minute bone fragments accompanied with beads, all of which placed inside layers of relic containers. Each of these objects has their own life story. They thus form a narrative to the ‘bodies’ of whom they represent. This presentation looks at the lives of the objects that constitute what we call ‘relics’. It also looks at how the form of these ‘bodies’ changed through time. The area of concern in this presentation is the western and eastern edges of greater Gandhara: the Kabul region and ancient Nagararahara in eastern Afghanistan and Taxila in Pakistan.

Andy Rotman, “In Praise of a Fool: Rebirth Narratives and the Odd Logic of Transformation”
My paper examines “The Story of a Lonesome Fool” (Cūḍāpakṣa-avadāna) to understand how the main character, Panthaka, whom the Buddha, the monastic community, and even Panthaka himself recognize to be “a fool, an absolute fool, an idiot, a complete idiot,” is presented as a model for spiritual development. Versions of the story occur in various Pāli and Sanskrit materials, but I focus on the lengthy account preserved in the early Sanskrit anthology known as the Divyāvadāna. In this version, Panthaka is a paragon of stupidity: as a child, he is unable to remember even the first two words of the Gāyatrī mantra, and later, as a monk, he is unable to memorize even a single verse in three months. And yet he surpasses his monastic cohort in spiritual attainments. As the Buddha explains, “Panthaka is foremost among those monks who are my disciples in skillfully transforming the minds of others.” But how?


John Strong, “Previous-birth stories and accounts of the Buddha’s miracles at Śrāvastī”

The most famous miracle in the Buddha’s life story is unquestionably the display of supernatural powers he puts on in the town of Śrāvastī - a feat that is said to be accomplished by all buddhas. Yet, although the "Great Miracle" is a crucial part of the Buddha's biography, none of the many versions of the tale (in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, or Tibetan) appears to contain any bona fide previous-life stories. This does not mean that there are no connections to jātaka literature. One version of the story is actually included in the Pali Jātaka Commentary. Another is followed in its anthology by a jātaka that may help explain it. Moreover, some episodes of the Śrāvastī story may be seen to have "jātaka-like" functions. Yet there seems to be a reticence about explicitly including references to previous births of the Buddha. In this paper, after a brief introduction to the Śrāvastī narratives in general, I will explore their various degrees of connection to jātakas, and the reasons for their apparent reticence in making them-- as part of a broader effort to raise questions about the relationship between the two genres of "previous" and "final" lifestories of the Buddha.

Monika Zin, “The placement of the “former deeds” in the image programmes of Buddhist sanctuaries”

The testimony by the Earth Goddess, being called upon by the Bodhisatva in the crucial moment of his struggle for enlightenment, refers to deeds in his former lives, the jātakas. Representations of the Māravijaya accompanied by depictions of the jātakas, however, are rare in art – among the known examples the earliest is found in Bhārhat. Besides this occurrence the jātakas seem to be depicted without carrying any particular doctrinal concept. In the paintings at Ajanta for instance they are merged – quite unreflected – with illustrations of episodes from the last life of the Buddha ... or have we just not been able to understand their underlying coherence?