

Pictorial Chronicle of the Buddha in Sri Lanka

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General foundational juridical person
Literary artist's style painting research society

Introduction

スリランカの仏画伝

Pictorial Chronicle of the Buddha in Sri Lanka

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There are many names for Buddha, so many that those who read Buddhist scriptures for the first time may become confused. Moreover, 'Buddha' is not a proper noun or name in the ordinary sense. Even if you just recall words that come to mind when you think of 'Buddha', you might recall 'Bhagavat', 'Sakkamuni' (or the Sanskrit 'Śākyamuni'), 'Arahant' (or the Sanskrit 'Arhat'), 'Bodhisatta' (or the Sanskrit 'Bodhisattva'), 'Tathāgata,' 'Anuttara,' 'Puruṣadāmyasārathi', or even 'Blessed One'. These are not the proper names of Gotama Siddhattha, who attained enlightenment at the roots of the pippala tree on the banks of the Nerañjarā River. In the first place, it is often past Buddhas who are described in the scriptures with such a wide variety of names and designations.

Secondly, though, and more importantly, all of these seemingly-complex names for Buddhas are nothing more than reflections of general notions of space and time as they have been manifest in the philosophical traditions of India and Sri Lanka, characterised by concepts such as saṃsāra (literally 'wandering', often in reference to cycles of death and rebirth) and nidāna (a polysemous concept often related to causation, often the causes of saṃsāra and its consequent dukkha, or suffering). In Sri Lanka, these concepts and the stories of past Buddhas that illustrate them are recorded in the *Jātaka* (literally 'birth' or 'nativity', stories about the previous births and lives of the Buddha), which is learnt at school.

The 'Buddha' in this book refers to the Buddha who lived in the same kalpa as us, in the 'present world' or 'present universe'. 'Kalpa', from the cyclic cosmology of Indian philosophy, refers to a period between the birth and the annihilation of the universe. In the *Nidānakathā*, the commentarial introduction to the *Jātaka*, we find that 'four asaṅkya and one hundred thousand kalpas' ago, in other words an incredibly long time ago (asaṅkya means 'incalculable' or 'infinite'), an ascetic named Sumedha threw himself before a 'One with Ten Powers' named Dīpaṅkara, and thus the story of the *Jātaka* begins, with a scene in which Dīpaṅkara prophesies to Sumedha that 'Many years from now, you will become a Buddha named Gotama.' Then, in the final story of the *Jātaka*, no. 547, the *Vessantara-Jātaka*, a bodhisatta named Vessantara, who had achieved the most important of the Ten Perfections, the 'Perfection of Dāna' (generosity, charity, almsgiving), reincarnates in the Tusita Deva World, from which

bodhisattas are born before their final rebirth into the human world, and in this way the Buddha-to-be named Gotama manifests in the celestial sphere before his last rebirth, into our world.

The twenty-four Buddhas given names in the first chapter are all fully Buddhas (awakened ones), each of whom prophesy to a devotee that ‘One day you will become a Buddha.’ Each of these devotees is a previous incarnation of the Buddha-to-be Gotama. In other words, the accounts of past Buddhas take place when Gotama Siddhattha of the present world was, in previous incarnations, still a bodhisatta, a practitioner aiming for Buddhahood. Those who practice with the aim of attaining Buddhahood (to become a Buddha who saves sentient beings from suffering) are called ‘bodhisatta’, while those who already have achieved Buddhahood are called ‘Tathāgata’, literally ‘one who has thus gone’, a common epithet for a Buddha in the scriptures and a term the Buddha named Gotama commonly uses in the scriptures to refer to himself.

To understand Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where the texts of the ancient Buddhist scriptures called the *Nikāya*, which includes works such as *Jātaka* and *Buddhavaṃsa*, the ‘Chronicles of the Buddhas’, are still cherished today, knowing of these twenty-four past Buddhas and the ‘Completers of Dāna’ called ‘Vessantarās’ is essential. Therefore, I decided to place two contextualising chapters before the section of Buddhist paintings that follow in this book. The first of these relates the stories of the twenty-four Buddhas and their prophecies that the bodhisatta would in time become a Buddha, and the second chapter recounts the story of the *Vessantara-Jātaka*.

For the publication of the book, Mr. Damith Hettiarachi, a Buddhist painter whom I met in Kandy, Sri Lanka, has made Buddhist paintings which adopt traditional techniques that have been handed down in Sri Lanka. These are inspired by the graceful work of Solias Mendis (1897–1975), who is renowned for his paintings in Buddhist temples, most particularly for the magnificent murals of Kelania Rāja Mahāvihāra. Damith’s laborious work for this book was created after researching the existing murals and other remarkable works in the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition.

For the Buddhist texts, I have adopted an easy-to-read prose style instead of direct translation of original texts in verse, as they appear in the *Jātaka* and *Dhammapada*, for example, because those texts and that style may not be familiar to modern readers.

Even for those with no particular interest in Buddhism, an opportunity to see authentic Buddhist paintings made by a contemporary Sri Lankan artist might be of interest and instruction, and this is among the reasons for bringing this book into the

world. In Damith’s painstakingly-crafted work, we are sure to see the ‘heart’ that we would like to place somewhere at the centre of our daily lives.

Today, when many translations from the *Nikāya* have been published, it is easy to touch the originals directly. In this direct way, also, I hope that you will go to Sri Lanka, where ‘living Buddhism’ is still very much alive, to see with your own eyes the rituals and works that celebrate indigenous divine beings such as Vessantara, the predecessor of the Buddha named Gotama, and Sumana-saman, the guardian deity of the island of Sri Lanka and tireless protector of Buddhism there, as well as many others.

—Kyo Ei-chu, Autumn 2023

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