

# THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MORALITIES

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## Chapter 8

# NARRATIVE ETHICS: THE EXCESS OF GIVING AND MORAL AMBIGUITY IN THE LAO VESSANTARA-JATAKA

Patrice Ladwig

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom. (William Blake – ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, 1975)

All that I give comes from without, and this does not satisfy me; I wish to give something of my very own. If one should ask my heart, I would cut open my breast, and tear it out, and give it; if one ask my eyes, I would pluck out my eyes and give them; if one should ask my flesh, I would cut off all the flesh of my body and give it. (Jataka 486 (Maha-Ukkusa-Jataka))

### Introduction

Stories of exemplary donors who give away huge amounts of wealth, body parts or even their own life are not uncommon in Buddhism. The most famous of these, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, in which the protagonist loses his right to inherit the throne because of his excessive giving, is expelled from the kingdom and finally gives away his children and wife, is perhaps better known in Laos than the biography of the Buddha himself. Whilst in the field surrounded by

monks with an often profound knowledge of and love for traditional literature and participating in hour-long recitations of this and other stories, Martha Nussbaum’s (2001) idea that narrative poses and attempts to answer questions about how best to live in the world evolved in an almost natural way into a starting point for my enquiry into Lao notions of ethics. The more explicit treatments of ethics and morality in doctrinal Buddhist texts commonly used by scholars as material to analyse ethics may somehow inform the tales, but are ultimately of limited use for anthropological analysis: the refinements and subtleties of the Buddhist canon are of little interest to the average Lao monk and more often than not remain completely obscure for the lay Buddhist. In contrast to that, folk narratives, often performed by monks in a dramatic, hyperbolic and witty way, constitute a body of knowledge that is used by laypeople and monks to discuss ethics, models of the good and virtuous life, matters of law and sometimes also problematisations of these latter that reach beyond simple didacticism.

Although there has been a tendency to move away from a mainly philological approach to Buddhist ethics, the conceptualisation of ethics as being encoded in text and simultaneously affecting people’s praxis and their way of actually reflecting on ethics has only been marginally investigated for the case of Buddhism. Hallisey and Hansen (1996) have applied some theories of narrative ethics to Buddhist texts and I think reading texts not only as pure ethical instructions but as potential areas of reflection with a multiplicity of voices in the text is an approach worth expanding upon. This chapter will therefore explore to what extent some works in literary studies that in different ways emphasise the moral aspects of narratives and the encounter between reader/listener and narrative can be used to rethink some aspects of the study of ethics and its didactics. One of the aims is thus to root ethics in narrative practice and to move to a ‘performative’ approach (Tambiah 1985) that allows for analysis of the conditions of perpetuation and transformation of ethical understandings, including the expression of moral ambiguities and paradoxes in ethics. When taking ritual recitations as a starting point to think about ethics, it is vital to point out that in Laos these are didactic (the monk instructs a layperson), but that they also leave space for one’s own reflections on the topic and even stimulate them. The reception by the audience is not simply passive and not a reproduction of an ethical homeostasis; through their hyperbolic and emotionally loaded aesthetics, ritual and narrative also create a field of discourse that articulates and dramatises conflicts and ethical dilemmas and are therefore places of dialogical exchanges between an idealised moral system and the requirements of the quotidian. The latter point is of particular importance for religions like

Buddhism or Jainism as the translation of the somewhat extreme ascetic system of values and practices into an ethics that is applicable to the lives of laypeople and sufficiently coherent in relation to its ascetic propagators.

After a brief presentation of the story of Vessantara and the context of its ritual performance, I shall first discuss the didactic relationship between monk and lay Buddhist and the position of ethics in that. In the third part, I shall set out to discuss the question of how narrative works on people's understanding of ethics. Following Heim's (2003) idea about the significance of emotions in South Asian Buddhism, I shall primarily focus here on the role of emotions and their importance in Lao Buddhist conceptions of sermon-making and performances of narratives. The recurring themes of pity, fear, strangeness and failure in these stories will play a central role here. The fourth part will relate to concepts of responsibility and sovereignty as topics in the story and discuss Steven Collins's (1998) reading of the story. Here the different voices in the text, the ethical dilemmas of the protagonist and the diverging understandings of some of my informants will serve as examples for a short discussion of Derrida's ideas on responsibility with respect to a Lao Marxist critique of Buddhist kingship. In the same part, the partial moral defeat of the protagonist of the story due to his excessive giving and subsequent interpretations in Buddhist discourse will serve as an example for the potential functions of conflicts in ethical reasoning and the ethical value of failure.<sup>1</sup>

### The Story and Performance

The Vessantara-Jataka (hereafter VJ) is the most important and final 'birth story' (*jataka*)<sup>2</sup> in a series of 547 tales that describe the various rebirths of the entity that later became the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> In a so-to-speak aeon-stretching ethical bricolage including rebirths as matter, animal, woman and men, he finally succeeds in achieving the perfections (*pharami*).<sup>4</sup> The last ten lives of the Buddha-to-be are related to an enumeration of the 10 essential perfections and are the most widely known in Theravada-Buddhism and Laos. Each story represents the perfection of one virtue, with giving (*dana*) being the paramount one.<sup>5</sup> The story of Vessantara and his concluding act of renunciation through giving away his possessions, children and wife are the telos of this process of ethical self-perfection and will lead to Vessantara's rebirth as a Buddha, his enlightenment and the proclamation of Buddhist teachings (*dhamma*).

Researchers like Tambiah (1970: 180), Spiro (1971: 108) and Formoso (1992: 233) agree that the VJ is one of the most-well known stories in Buddhist South-East Asia. Cone and Gombrich (1977: XV) state that people in Sri Lanka know it as well as the biography of the Buddha. In Laos, as in Thailand, Burma and Cambodia, there is a yearly Vessantara festival and during the ritual the full story is recited in the vernacular language by monks without intermission in a performance lasting between twelve and eighteen hours, with monks and laypeople from other temples being invited and treated as guests. The temple is decorated imitating the forest in which Vessantara retreats with his family after being exiled, and some scenes are acted out in theatrical performances by laypeople one day before the festival, a practice which is now often relinquished. Each monk is assigned in advance to a specific part of the text and the recitation is an explicit chanting competition, with a judging audience of laypeople that have heard the story dozens of times and are capable of detailed aesthetic evaluations concerning voice modulation, the expression of emotional, dramatic moments and clarity of recitation. The use of amplifiers and huge speaker systems today facilitates the acoustic irradiation of the whole village area. The audience rewards a good performance with special gifts, the striking of gongs and enthusiastic applause. Because the ritual takes place on different days in each temple, some people may hear the story several times a year. Pictorial expressions of the story feature prominently in temples – around 80 per cent of all graphical depictions in Lao temples are related to that story, usually giving the full story and key scenes arranged in the order of the thirteen chapters. In Thailand the VJ is screened on television, and there are comics and other forms of modern artistic adaptations that sometimes make their way to Laos.

### Synopsis of the Story<sup>6</sup>

In his final reincarnation, the Lord Buddha is born as Vessantara, Prince of the Sivirat Kingdom. His mother, Queen Bhudsai, radiates sympathy and charity towards other people while pregnant, and astrologers predict that a Bodhisattava, who has the meritorious *dana-parami* (perfection of generosity), is going to be born. Directly after he is born, Vessantara asks his mother for alms he wants to distribute to poor people. As a child he repeatedly takes off his precious ornaments and other trinkets and gives them away. One day after Vessantara's birth, a magic white elephant is born that becomes Vessantara's riding elephant and protects the kingdom, and wherever it lives there is rain. When Vessantara is sixteen years old, he gets married to Princess Mati and they have two children together, a boy named

Sali and a girl called Kanha. As a grown-up prince, he continues to give alms regularly in order to complete his moral perfection of generosity. One day, Brahmins from the Kingdom of Galinkarat come to Sivirat and report that there is a horrible drought in their country and ask Vessantara for the magic white elephant. After brief reflection, he gives them the elephant. The people of the kingdom are enraged and are afraid that the loss of the elephant will bring drought, poverty and chaos to their kingdom. They laud his compassion and generosity, but say that he is not an appropriate heir to the throne. It is decided that Vessantara is to be temporarily exiled from the kingdom. His wife and children decide to come with him into exile, but before that he makes the 'gift of the 700' [700 horses, 700 carriages, etc.] and gives away all his wealth. Together they wander the forest where Vessantara and Mati take up a life of hermitage and chastity by keeping the ten precepts. One night Mati has a horrible dream and when she tells it to her husband, he knows that somebody is going to come and ask for his two children. He doesn't tell his wife and sends her back to sleep and the next day Mati leaves for the forest to collect food. Vessantara, alone with the two children, is visited by Jujaka, an ugly old Brahmin who is in need of slaves to work in his house and has heard that Vessantara gives away everything he is asked for. Vessantara sees the chance to make a 'gift of the body', but hesitates a moment. Jujaka teases him and ridicules him until he agrees to give away the children. Sali and Kanha run away and hide, but finally after protesting Jujaka receives his gift. He binds them together with a vine and lashes the children until blood oozes out of their skin. The children urge the father to wait until the mother comes back, but Jujaka leaves with the children. The great gift makes the earth shake and the gods in heaven become downhearted and take pity on the children while others silently support Vessantara's decision. When Mati comes back and receives the news, she faints. The god Indra, watching the gift of the children from heaven, transforms himself into an old man and descends to earth in order to ask for Vessantara's wife. Once received, the supplicant exposes himself as Indra and gives Mati back to her husband. Meanwhile Jujaka on his way back home passes through the Sivirat kingdom where Vessantara once was prince. His father, the king, recognizes the children and asks the ugly Brahmin to be his guest and finally manages to buy the children back. Upon hearing the story, some of the nobles of the Sivirat Kingdom blame Vessantara again and say that he is hard-hearted and has no responsibility. But the King manages to convince the nobles and the people to ask Vessantara to come back to the kingdom and a great procession is prepared. The magic white elephant is also returned as the drought in the neighbouring kingdom is over. After the messengers that have been sent to Vessantara's hermitage tell him about the King's decision, he at first refuses to return because he suspects the people of the kingdom are still angry about his actions, but he is finally convinced. While returning to the city, Jujaka, who is still a guest in the Sivirat kingdom, dies because he eats too much while being a guest of the king. Finally, Vessantara and his family are united and he becomes heir to the throne of the kingdom and the country is prosperous because he rules righteously.

### Layperson and Monk: Sermon-making as Ethical Didactics

Although there are many areas of Lao society in which ethics are perpetuated, transmitted and negotiated (family, school, etc.), the relationship between monk and householder is also constitutive for a specific ethical field. The clergy can be seen as an interface mediating between the ethical demands of the quotidian and rather abstract soteriological Buddhist teachings. Monks visit local schools and talk about virtuous behaviour, family values and current topics, like drug addiction (Ladwig 2008). Apart from these more visible and 'official' missions, monks are considered to be advisers, and individuals and families consult them for advice and blessings. The interaction between monk and layperson very often takes on characteristics of sermon-making and preaching. Indeed, the words spoken by a monk even in everyday conversations very often have (in their style of speech and reception by laypeople) features of sermons, which may, depending on context, be properly ritualised or in a one-to-one situation rather less regulated. Whether in a more official ritual sermon or in a sort of counselling situation, every sermon and preaching of the Buddha's teachings is considered a 'gift of the *dhamma*' (*dhammadana*), and actually the preaching and exegesis of the *dhamma*, 'giving' moral precepts and explaining virtuous models of behaviour, is considered one of the main tasks of a Buddhist monk.

An important part of sermon-making is its performance and aesthetics. Preaching in specialised and vernacular language and more specifically chanting are major arts a monk has to master, and the ability to build one's reputation as a monk is very much dependent on being a good speaker, advising people in appropriate language and also being capable of entertaining them and expressing the beauty of language through chanting. The bodily postures a layperson assumes when listening to ritualised preaching like the VJ indicate the respect due to monks as well as the special position they occupy in society. The layperson should ideally kneel in a lower position than the monk, with hands folded continuously. Some people keep this posture up for hours while listening to the recitation and approaching a monk in the temple hall can often only be done by crawling on one's knees. For special occasions like the VJ festival, a sort of pulpit is used on which the monk sits, holding a palm-leaf manuscript from which the text is read out or on which his improvisation is built. The holding of the palm-leaf document<sup>7</sup> in a monk's hands is comparable to the position occupied by the Greek *skeptron*, which signifies a position of authority and clearly imbues the speaker's ritual discourse with symbolic capital (Bourdieu

1991: 109). The words of monks and their effect on the listener are also clearly distinguished from the everyday efficacy of words, even when not always understood semantically (Tambiah 1985).<sup>8</sup> Listening to a sermon is in itself an ethical and meritorious activity that works positively on one's karma and contributes to the cultivation of wisdom; in Lao the term *thammasavannahmay* signifies 'merit received by hearing a sermon'.

Official readings of narratives in the temple are in that sense a form of moral education through the medium of literature. Almost every temple in central Vientiane has readings of a variety of stories during the three months rain retreat. Each evening, twenty to forty people gather in the main hall of the temple and monks read out different stories (often *jatakas*) to the audience. Difficult passages are explained by monks and also discussions about the stories come up and interpretations are put forward. The educational flavour of this textual exegesis is obvious, and discussions about appropriate ethics, values and morality are prominent subjects. Monks can even indulge in spicy commentary, usually not appropriate for them but nonetheless appreciated by the audience.<sup>9</sup>

Because the story is taught in schools, theatre groups play scenes of it and people know it from many other sources, the VJ occupies an important position in the public imaginary throughout Buddhist South- East Asia. The range of topics it touches on and its loaded aesthetics involving hyperbolism, tragedy and even comical elements, and it is one of the crucial narratives that serve as a means of reflecting on a variety of moral, political and even feminist issues. On a popular and also more intellectual level, the VJ has been a yearlong subject of discussions by Thai feminists, reflecting on role models, and competing interpretations of more conservative and reform Buddhists in neighbouring Thailand (Gabaude 1991). Community peasant leaders have often chosen Vessantara as a sort of role model for community mobilisation (Cohen 1983: 105). The more or less detailed knowledge of the story on the part of most Lao is also reflected in sayings and expressions and its significance for other, extra-ritual areas of discourse. If you generously give something away, a friend might say you are '*cai phaver*' ('heart of Vessantara') instead of using the word generous, or a good wife that follows her husband without hesitation is said 'to behave like Vessantara's wife'. Children that listen to their parents and follow their orders are equated with Vessantara's two children that are given away by him. These are the more traditional interpretations that are also elaborated in some Lao commentaries of the story (Vessantarasadok 1972: 2). The story serves as a model for the confirmation of traditional roles, family models and discourses such as

that of respect for the head of the family and it is in that sense very didactic. Monks like to employ it in order to point out the meritorious character of giving, refer to the great rewards Vessantara received through his generosity and motivate the laypeople to follow his example on a more moderate level and make regular donations to the temple. However, there are also critical potentials in the text that move beyond a call for emulation. For example, certain Lao government-inspired interpretations have used the story to reflect on the inadequacy of Buddhist kingship and argue for a more Marxist and 'democratic' point of view, to which we shall return.

Listening to sermons like the VJ is alongside gift-giving (*dana*), meditation (*bhavana*) and the keeping of precepts/moral training (*silatam*), another method that enables the individual to gain merit and cultivate wisdom and virtuous behaviour. Listening to and reflecting on stories is often slotted into the category of 'moral practice'. It is one of the various strategies Lao society offers the individual to actively shape his ethical subjectivity. These technologies or practices of the self (Foucault 1997: 225; 263) are linked to didactics and pedagogies taken care of by the temple qua institution, with monks as specialists who define a specific 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980: 131) and practise an exegesis of ethical standards. The interpretations put forward by monks in, for example, the case of the VJ partially serve as the reproduction of role models and values (practices of generosity, obedience of wife and children, etc.) and often aim at an ethical homeostasis. However, the story itself and discourse surrounding it are much more controversial and mixed than might at first sight be visible. Suggested meanings can be appropriated, interpreted and transformed by the individual as a form of autopoietic practice,<sup>10</sup> and, as will be discussed in the next part, the performance of the VJ also entails sequences that actually open up the text and expose the listener to ruptures and fissures that give room for ambiguities and contrarious interpretations. I shall largely focus on the critical understandings that facilitate a diversity of readings and defy a purely didactic interpretation of the story.

### Excess, Emotions and Hyperbolism

Some Lao and Western interpretations of the VJ postulate that the heroic act of excessive giving is just an exaggeration that in a hyperbolic way reflects the virtue of giving and should inspire laypeople to imitate – on a less drastic level – the exemplary figure's actions. Spiro (1971: 108), for the case of Burma, argues that the story's 'sacrificial idiom provides the charter for and reinforces the Burmese

belief in the religious efficacy of giving' and furthermore sees his excessive giving as a sort of narcissist drive typical of stories of Buddhist monastics (ibid.: 337). Many monks I have asked in Laos about the meaning of the VJ have given similar answers and referred to the exemplary character of Vessantara, but insisted that he was a special case, which should nevertheless make laypeople think about the high value of generosity for self-cultivation. In contrast to these opinions, Egge (2002: 103) poses a legitimate question in relation to the VJ: 'One may ask, however, why stories of what may seem like immoral and insane acts committed against self and family appeal to Theravadin audiences.' In a similar manner, Gombrich (1995: 321) tells of two Sri Lankan monks who say that Vessantara acted in an egoistic way and who think the act morally wrong. So the intuitive response can in many cases be more than simple praise of the acts. Despite Vessantara being an 'exemplary donor' worthy of admiration due to his selflessness, his acts in themselves and their consequences carry an ethical ambivalence with them that is reflected in Buddhist commentary and the statements of Lao laypeople and monks. Why then does the VJ work with such drastic, excessive means, and what role does this hyperbolism have for the listeners' potential ethical readings of the story?

Stories with excessive giving like the VJ actually constitute a subgenre in Buddhist scriptures. Heroic and transgressive acts of giving, and especially 'gifts of the body' (*dehadana*), are themes often used (see Ohnuma 1997). In a *jataka* story when the Buddha is born as King Sibi (see Kharoche 1989), we witness a donation of eyes: here the Buddha-to-be pulls out his eyes and donates them to a blind Brahmin, and in another narrative he roasts his own body, which he then donates as food (Auer-Falk 1990). The VJ deals with donation in a less graphic and drastic way, but the depiction of the dramatic moment of giving is nevertheless a similar stylistic device: the giving away of children (in the Lao story also classified as an inner-body-object donation – *thaannaygay*; they are the 'fruit of his loins') is the climax of the story. In the VJ and many other stories the protagonists' acts are often quite transgressive and as with Vessantara's gift, they are clearly beyond the call for equanimity and modesty so often associated with Buddhism. These acts are not invariably applauded by the witnesses and some stories report of a more ambivalent, even disgusted audience response to these acts (e.g. Heim 2003: 538).

The gift of the magic white elephant, the giving away of the children into slavery to an evil Brahmin and the gift of his wife are the climax of the story and the acts that are most frequently evoked when discussing the story with laypeople and monks. On the one hand,

Vessantara is praised for this final act of renunciation, but his behaviour is also highly questionable. How can the act of giving away one's family, an obvious transgression of moral values, be seen as a meritorious act? In the famous Buddhist commentary, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Dilemma seventy first [1890]),<sup>11</sup> Vessantara's gift is described as just that – excessive and transgressing the moral order:

A hard thing, Nāgasena, was it that the Bodisat carried out, in that he gave away his own children, his only ones, dearly beloved, into slavery to the Brahman. And this second action was harder still, that he bound his own children, his only ones, and dearly beloved, young and tender though they were, with the jungle rope, and then, when he saw them being dragged along by the Brahman – their hands bruised by the creeper – yet could look on at the sight. And this third action was even harder still, that when his boy ran back to him, after loosing the bonds by his own exertion, then he bound him again with the jungle rope and again gave him away. And this fourth action was even harder still, that when the children, weeping, cried: 'Father dear, this ogre is leading us away to eat us!' he should have appeased them by saying: 'Don't be afraid.' And this fifth action was even harder still, that when the prince, Gāli, [Vessantara's son] fell weeping at his feet, and besought him, saying: 'Be satisfied, father dear, only keep Kanhāginā [his little sister]. I will go away with the ogre. Let him eat me!' – that even then he would not yield. And this sixth action was even harder still, that when the boy Gāli, lamenting, exclaimed: 'Have you a heart of stone then, father, that you can look upon us, miserable, being led away by the ogre into the dense and haunted jungle, and not call us back?' – that he still had no pity. And this seventh action was even harder still, that when his children were thus led away to nameless horrors until they passed gradually to their bitter fate out of sight – that then his heart did not break, utterly break! What, pray, has the man who seeks to gain merit to do with bringing sorrow on others! ... And excessive giving is held by the wise in the world held worthy of censure and of blame ... And as king Vessantara's gift was excessive no good result could be expected from it. (Book IV, chapter 9, pp. 114–15)

Although this commentary does not belong in the standard repertoire of the Lao Buddhist, the opinions of some laypeople and monks address similar questions when discussing the story. In some way, Milinda's question is from a moral perspective 'only natural' – how can irresponsible and transgressive behaviour like this be the final and supreme act of renunciation? A friend of mine, a high-ranking monk with an administrative position in the upper echelons of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation, wrote a 'critique' of the story pointing out the failures to adhere to values linked to Vessantara's responsibilities at the level of the state (the gift of the elephant) and particular family values (gift of the children and wife). Although the

story has a clear happy ending, the sequence of dramatic gifts also leads laypeople to the opinion that, at least in these instances, Vessantara acts in a selfish way. A well-educated elderly man I interviewed during a festival in a Vientiane temple told me:

When he gives away his personal wealth [the gifts of the 700], this is a skilful act of generosity and renunciation. But the more he gives away, the more problematic and egoistic his generosity becomes. His drive for giving becomes a burden for other people and it produces considerable suffering. His excessive generosity is almost comparable to a kind of illness. Only in the end are people able to understand it.

When one employs some sort of 'emotional Geiger counter' and carefully observes the reactions of the audience during the performance, it becomes clear that the intensification and production of certain emotional states is indeed a main feature of VJ recitations, and both the chanting education of monks and the reactions of the audience confirm that. The invocation and intensification of emotions such as horror, pain, grief as intended reactions towards these ethically ambivalent acts are an essential part of the VJ. In the 1972 Lao edition of the VJ the author of the preface invites the audience to 'share the sensations of the difficulty of Vessantara's sacrifice and take pity on him, his children and wife' (Vessantarasadok 1972: 2). A teacher at the Buddhist College in Vientiane, has been running a course specifically designed for chanting training for the VJ. In his work, Boundteun (2003, 2004: 4) gives explicit instructions as to how the chanters should use voice-modulation techniques to make the audience cultivate [feelings of] the heart and sensations which are depicted in the story' and then he lists 'domains of emotions', which include admiration, awe, love, fear, calm, grief, suffering, pity and, most interesting for the analysis here, an emotion that is said 'to make the heart feel *phalaad*'. *Phalaad* translates as strange, bizarre, abnormal, extraordinary (Reinhorn 2001: 1336, 1394). When I asked about the latter emotion, he stated that the recitation should inspire awe and admiration for Vessantara's acts, but also a feeling that provokes perplexity and confusion. This strangeness and bizarreness that in the case of inner-body-object donation stories are likely to occur are an important component of the VJ and other Buddhist narratives. Maria Heim (2003: 538), also referring to Nussbaum's work on ethics, has skilfully suggested that in South Asian Buddhist literature these rhetorical devices of 'horripilation' are based on concepts of emotions and aesthetics that move emotions into the centre of processes of accessing and interpreting the story. For her, this particular view of

emotions in Buddhist narrative confirms 'that such terrible events invoke emotional experience but also that such events are morally ambiguous in themselves; the texts lead us – through emotion – to a place of moral bewilderment' (Heim 2003: 545). In current Lao Buddhism we seem to encounter a similar idea: the audience of the VJ is both with the protagonist and against him – it admires his generosity and is filled with awe for his heroic renunciation of family life (trying to approach 'selflessness'), but also shocked by the excess that is a result of his selfish striving for perfection.<sup>12</sup>

The reactions of the audience during the recitation are at times quite emotional: the chanting of the monks is accompanied by a steady appreciation of the scenes depicted. When arriving at a particular dramatic or intense passage of the story, an enthusiastic audience moans, groans, sighs, applauds, strikes gongs and throws rice about. At the climax of the story, which illustrates the essential acts of giving away children and wife, women sometimes start weeping and run out of the temple hall.<sup>13</sup> The scene of the excessive gift reflects the difficulty of the decision and the ambivalence of the situation:

Vessantara's eyes were filled with tears, as Jujaka pulled his children away and lashed their tiny bodies repeatedly with the rough and tough vine. While they left whimpering tearfully, he was heartbroken, as the moon was moved into the mouth of Rahu. He went to his cottage and muttered: 'My children will confront a violent fate. No one will take care of them ... Their tiny legs, feet and soles which are used to stepping along a short way and on smooth ground, will walk a distant way and rough ground; they will swell, blister and be bruised painfully. This old man is cruel, I have given him my children; I have not hindered him from taking them away, and they have agreed to go with him without resistance ... Why do I not untie the knot that I have knotted myself? I should pick up my sword, bow and arrows, and force him to give back my children. No, I won't do that. I will continue to do what I have done in order to gain meritorious perfection, to reach nirvana – for my children, my family, and myself'. ('Luang Phavetsandoon' 2002: 46)

One woman whom I asked in a temple in Luang Phrabang why she started crying explained:

It is like I can't stand the suffering of the father, mother and children. When Jujok [the evil Brahmin] starts hitting the children and they are tied together with a jungle rope, it breaks my heart and I have to cry. Otherwise it would drive me crazy. Giving away your own children and seeing them mistreated – this must be one of the most horrible things that can happen.



The reactions of the audience and the feelings of the protagonist are embedded in ambivalence. The heroic act of giving away the children is by no means a firm decision without thought for the suffering of the children and the harshness of the decision. In the end, the quest for moral perfection in order to reach nirvana is stronger, but is taken only after considering the use of weapons to get the children back. Vessantara here seems to be momentarily estranged from his usual rational calculation,<sup>14</sup> a point to which I shall return in the next part.

Martha Nussbaum has dealt with situations similar to that of Vessantara in Greek tragedy, which she calls 'tragic conflicts'. In these situations 'we see wrong action without any direct compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitments would otherwise dispose him to reject it. The constraint comes from the presence of circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfilment of two valid ethical claims' (Nussbaum 2001: 25).<sup>15</sup> These dilemmas can be stylistic means to evoke certain feelings in the audience. Although a comparison between Buddhist notions of narrative and ancient Greek ones might seem a bit far fetched, the feelings of pity and fear play an important part both in Aristotle's *Poetics* (see part XI), with its fundamentally ethical approach to narrative, and in the VJ. In Aristotle's philosophy of virtue ethics, emotions are closely connected to judgement and belief and their cultivation is an important part of moral education. Nussbaum, referring to Aristotle's treatment of emotions and ethics, supports the view that 'emotions become intelligent parts of the moral personality, which can be cultivated through a process of moral education. Such a process will aim at producing adults who not only control their anger and fear, but experience anger and fear appropriately, towards the appropriate objects at the appropriate time in the appropriate degree' (Nussbaum 1998). In this view, the invocation and experiencing of emotion are thus a didactic practice that can contribute to the cultivation of virtuous behaviour, or, as Geertz (2005: 83) has put it for the Balinese cockfight, 'a kind of sentimental education'.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the emotional and ethical didactics that can be ascribed to literature and narratives like the VJ, I think Lao or Buddhist understanding reaches beyond Nussbaum's thesis. The VJ here exposes a conflict that is quite common in cultures divided between a professional ascetic ethics designed for monks and renouncers and the values of the householder with obligations towards wife and children. For the Buddhist Steven Collins, the VJ is one of Buddhism's most compelling stories when it comes to presenting the 'subtle, but rueful and triumphalist acceptance of the disparities between temporal power, in every sense of the word, and the ascetic quest for the timelessness'

(Collins 1998: 445). Thus it is not only about appropriate moments and spaces in which emotions can be articulated and thereby be an element of ethical didactics, but also about conflicts of value systems, in which feelings are not just easily 'worked off' in mimetic experience. The question of whether the conflict is finally resolved in the story is a vital one. Is there a cathartic effect involved in which the audience, led at first through feelings of pity, fear and strangeness, is finally relieved? Aristotle's claim (*Poetics*, IV) that the audience is purified in catharsis 'through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions', is, in my opinion, only partially true for the VJ. The story has a happy ending and ultimately all Vessantara's sacrifices materialise in his ethical perfection, but the act of giving nonetheless remains essentially both cruel and egoistic and heroic and selfless. Only a stringently consequentialist interpretation ('the positive outcome legitimising the means') could classify his behaviour as ethically appropriate.

The question here is whether narrative, in order to be ethically efficacious, has to offer solutions to conflicts in order to give guidance to the reader/listener. Hegel, dealing with Greek tragedy and dilemmas similar to that of Vessantara, claims that the 'true course of dramatic development consists in the annulment of contradictions viewed as such, in the reconciliation of the forces of human action' (cited in Bradley 1950: 71), through a sort of dialectics of conflict resolution. I think approaches like that would fail to consider the effect the recitation of VJ is meant to have on the audience. In the end the VJ does not offer an exemplary world in which ambiguity is eliminated. The recitation of the story is not a constant process of affirming how the world should be ideally, but it deals with the confrontation of an excessiveness that exposes and points to ethical rifts primarily through the evocation of certain emotional states of bizarreness and bewilderment. The exposition of a dilemma in which none of the options can be correct is an essential feature of how narrative can address problems and conflicts of spheres of value. In some readings of the VJ, there is no 'point of closure' in the narrative, no catharsis that purges the dilemma. Instead, there is an intentionally and emotionally augmented rupture that exposes the listener to an ethical dilemma. In conceptualising the ethical efficacy of narrative, Gibson (1999: 8) proposes that 'the point is not to purge a paradox, either by reining back one's sceptical critique, or by leaping into some magic sublation beyond antagonism of suspicion and affirmation, but rather to find productive ways of living and thinking within and through paradox'. In that perspective, the ethical efficacy of narratives like the VJ is partially based on the fact that the listener is emotionally conducted into an ambiguous emotional state where ethical judgements are destabilised

or temporarily suspended.<sup>17</sup> This 'non-response' (Ricoeur 1991: 283)<sup>18</sup> adds new elements to the process of a potential ethical autopoiesis.

### Sovereignty, Responsibility and Failure

The feelings of pity and fear provoked by the performance of the VJ have their roots in the failure of the protagonist to find a medium path between the quest for salvation and its absolute demands and on the other hand the burdens of the social world, in which one has a family, children and even a political position.<sup>19</sup> In the VJ, the evaluation of generosity, as a paramount value in Buddhism, goes through a gradual transformation with changes in intensity. Vessantara's acts of generosity become increasingly alienating for the other characters in the story (and the listener). From simple acts of lauded generosity when he is still a king, we move on to the realm of Buddhist kingship and politics (the magic white elephant and Vessantara's exclusion from society) and finally to the sphere of family and body-object donation. By following this linear ascension of excessive generosity, Vessantara himself gets closer to a realm that, one could say, is ethically pure because it is beyond the ethics of the quotidian.

Interestingly, Vessantara's excess has some strong Nietzschean connotations. He appears as a sort of Buddhist *Übermensch* who increasingly moves away from the 'justice of commoners', which according to Nietzsche (1994: 49) is based on the principle of reciprocity. For Vessantara there is no reciprocity in the immediate social realm; he gives everything without hesitation and increasingly becomes a parasite of the social domain.<sup>20</sup> What he gets from his acts of gift-giving are the 'transcendent' rewards that will enable him to become the future Buddha. He is, though, still caught between the two realms and, as can be seen in his reaction to giving away the children, there is still doubt and guilt. His free gifts make enemies and he is expelled from his own kingdom because of giving away something of which he was not sole proprietor. He is a lawbreaker in that sense, someone 'who has broken his contract and his word to the whole' (Nietzsche 1994: 50), and is consequently exiled. In a sort of Bataille economy of excess, he increasingly alienates himself from Nietzsche's slave economy, which is grounded in the law of equal returns, and enters what Schrift (2001: 116) calls a 'higher, noble economy'. The depiction of the basic attitude of this excess fits the VJ quite well: '[It] is the feeling of fullness, of power that seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of wealth that would give and bestow: the noble human being, too, helps the unfortunate, not, or

almost not, from pity, but prompted more by an urge begotten by an excess of power' (Nietzsche 1994: 166). In the VJ, Nietzsche's ideas of master and slave morality clash. Vessantara creates and represents new values, transgresses traditional values and arouses fear and insecurity among his subjects, and receives his punishment for that.

This excess and this 'reckless' striving for sovereignty beyond the social world also have some political implications regarding responsibility and ethics. In Vientiane I met a few very well-trained monks and laypeople who used the VJ as a field of reflection on the vanished institution of Buddhist kingship.<sup>21</sup> These were mostly members of the Communist Party's mass organisation and trained in Marxism-Leninism, but also fervent Buddhists, who used stories such as the VJ for reflecting on contemporary society. A friend of mine, who had been a monk for seventeen years and then disrobed and was given the opportunity to study literature in Vietnam, gave me a good summary of this view of responsibility in Buddhist kingship and the way the VJ problematises this:

I think there is nothing wrong with generosity and it's important in our culture. But it depends what one gives and in what context. As a king, Vessantara has responsibility for the kingdom and all the people living in it. They pay taxes, are his subjects and the kingdom flourishes until he gives away the magic white elephant. Although the elephant was born on the same day as Vessantara, it's strictly speaking not his personal property. It is the *ming-khwan* [magic symbol; essence] of the kingdom and it is necessary to protect it and make the rice fields fertile. The elephant is the property of the people. Vessantara knows that, but still gives it away without any conditions when the Brahmins from the other kingdom beg for it. The people are right to demand his dethronement, because he has acted in a highly irresponsible manner. A king cannot simply do what he wants to do, he has to care for the people and listen to them. That is sometimes the problem with kingship.

What at first sight might be seen as a crude Marxist interpretation of a story, with an argument drawing on property relations and the 'voice of the people', is actually a well-informed opinion, equally present in Buddhist literature, but here presented in novel guise. As Collins (1998: 414f.) has shown, the relationship between worldly responsibility/power and an ascetic Buddhist philosophy is not an unproblematic one, although they draw power from each other and are symbiotic. The responsibilities of a king always involve a partial violation of moral precepts: one has to punish delinquents, make war, extract taxes and do all sorts of other morally reprehensible things when confronted with the social world. The monk and the ascetic, outside society, are often not exposed to these problems. It is easy to locate Theravada-Buddhist texts

from all periods and regions that take a very critical stance on kingship and compare kings to thieves and other phenomena that can bring danger and ruin, contrasting this with the pure lifestyle of the monk and renouncer (Collins 1998: 423).<sup>22</sup>

Thus, to complete his perfection, Vessantara has to move out of the sphere of normal morality and move into a realm where he, with the help of excessive giving, becomes a perfected sovereign, not bound to society by the responsibilities of kingship or family ties, but now capable of being reborn as the Buddha, who will declare the *dhamma*. For that, however, he has to leave the rules of the social world behind him, and transgress, or betray, the ethics of kingship and the household. The possibility of becoming the most ethically perfected being is bound up with the ethics of betrayal, a sort of 'possible-impossible aporia'. Similar to Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard's treatment of the story of the son sacrifice demanded of Abraham<sup>23</sup>, the absolute call for ethical perfection (or in Abraham's case the absolute duty towards God and the simulation of an ultimate sacrificial test) makes Vessantara move beyond rational calculation and planning into a moment of 'madness' (Derrida 1992: 26, 1996: 65) inherent in the decision and beyond the possibility of acting fully responsibly:

In both general and abstract terms, the absoluteness of duty, of responsibility, and of obligation certainly demands that one transgress ethical duty, although in betraying it one belongs to it and at the same time recognizes it ... duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery and betrayal) while still recognising, conforming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely the order of human ethics and responsibility ... I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all others, to the ethical or political generality. (Derrida 1996: 66, 70)

This moment of madness or, less drastically, the opaqueness of the subject's decision to himself is triumph and failure at the same time. This failure is a result of a collision with a value regime in a social world that demands responsibility for one's family and kingdom; nevertheless, in the sense of fulfilling an ascetic ideal, Vessantara becomes an actor of truth, renouncing everything he has. How do less Marxist-inspired Lao Buddhists view this problem? People were here often distinguishing between the positive long-term effects of Vessantara's excessiveness and the immediate moment of the giving. The story has a happy ending and all of Vessantara's sacrifices ultimately lead to his ethical purity and his achievement of the perfections. His children are liberated, the evil Brahmin dies, the people love him again and he rules the kingdom with the righteousness of the *dhamma*. Still, the moment of decision is seen as

an unavoidable failure by many Lao. During one of the recitations a man told me:

If you think about the difficulty of his decision, what options did he have? He also loves his wife and children, but he also wants to attain enlightenment. He acts incorrectly in some sense in order to advance on the path of enlightenment. I pity him for that, but through this big sacrifice he becomes the Buddha and will be able to show humanity the way out of suffering. And in the end, when he was Vessantara, he was a being with much merit, but still a human, and as humans we sometimes fail.

In some sense the pity and compassion the audience shows for the protagonist during the performance is also an approval of his failure. The feeling of 'strangeness' discussed in the previous section is also accompanied by pity and compassion, and people in the audience repeatedly referred to the immense difficulty of Vessantara's decision. Instead of having a perfect and flawless exemplary figure in the story, the audience is confronted with a doubting protagonist who through his excessive acts exposes himself, puts himself at risk. Is there a moral lesson to be learnt from this exposure and the partial failure of the protagonist in the story? At first, a protagonist that has an absolute clear and calculable subjectivity with the capacity to judge everything in an appropriate way would perhaps be too tedious. Furthermore, though, witnessing the failure of others in narrative (or real life) and understanding the difficulty of some decisions, or the sheer impossibility of making a just decision in certain situations, also allow the option of recognising one's own opacity and thereby cultivating patience and compassion. Even when there is no option of eliminating my own emotional ambivalence, which is eventually involved in judging the actions of the other, there is nevertheless the possibility of recognising that 'I am exposed to the other, whom I cannot completely predict or control' and seeing this 'exposure as a sign of a shared violability' (Butler 2003: 95). An exemplary figure that is human in the sense that it fails to accomplish perfection without producing suffering and carrying out acts that are at least ambivalent is probably more accessible for the listener than a completely perfected being. The sharing of the suffering resulting from failure in narrative and the pitying of the protagonist is therefore ethically relevant for the listener.

## Conclusion

By participating in ritual recitations like the VJ, the listener is exposed through the rhetoric and aesthetics of chanting to a range of emotional states. The situations the listener is led through touch on basic values, such as generosity, responsibility and failure, and comfort the audience. In the VJ and other Buddhist narratives, the role of emotions such as pity, fear and bizarreness is didactic in the sense that they are invoked and augmented. The story and the performers not only teach the listener through the generation of particular emotional states what is an appropriate experience and the ethical evaluation of an action, but moreover expose the listener to radical situations without necessarily pointing to an ethical model. This differentiates the role of emotions in narrative from a pure emotivist<sup>24</sup> approach to ethics. Instead, narrative here opens up a gap of strangeness and bizarreness in which conflicting regimes of values can be thought through and reflected upon; narrative understanding enables us to deal with complexity in that sense (Carrithers 1992: 91). Emotions that are invoked in the VJ are not only a posteriori expressions of ethical reasoning and do not merely sustain them, but are also intentionally employed to destabilise the listener and decentre his basis of ethical judgement. In contrast, the position of emotions in the ethics of Western moral philosophy (especially deontological traditions)<sup>25</sup> has been partially one that is considered to be 'potentially destructive of moral rationality and consistency' (Williams 1973: 207). Indeed, it is just this aspect of emotions that in the case of the VJ recitation is used as an instrument for enhancing ethical reflection on conflicting regimes of value.

Buddhist stories and their recitations, which involve excessive dramatic giving or gifts of the body and make use of 'horripilation', bear some resemblance to Antonin Artaud's concept of the 'theatre of cruelty' (1988). Artaud intended to remove the spectator from the everyday and use symbolic objects to work with the emotions of the audience, attack the audience's senses through an array of technical methods and acting so that the audience would be brought out of their desensitisation and forced to confront themselves. The use of the grotesque, the ugly and pain in this form of 1930s French avant-garde theatre might be driven by other motives, but it shares the strategy of destabilisation and the undermining of the audience's sense of security through the invocation of strangeness and bizarreness. This invocation opens up space for what Ricoeur (1988: 120f.) calls the reconfiguration of the listener/reader through narrative and the option of designing one's own views about specific topics (ibid.: 127). This also postulates a certain 'porousness of the reading [listening] subject' (Gibson 1999:

183). Hence, when looking at the ethical contents of narrative recitations like the VJ, they also have the potential to become a vehicle for reflecting on the nature of responsibility concerning the political sphere and family values in contemporary society.

Talking about the didactic effect the recitation of the VJ is intended to have on the audience, there is also the element of ambiguity that facilitates a decentred reading, as mentioned above, a visible striving for ethical homeostasis. More conservative readings of the narrative insist on the fact that the obedience of wife and children is exemplary behaviour despite the protagonist's failures. Here Vessantara's transgression is framed in terms of excessive, but still skilful selflessness in the quest for an ascetic life. The emphasis here is more on Vessantara as an exemplary figure whose acts are extraordinary and inspire awe but can also perhaps be taken as an ethical model for a Buddhist's behaviour in social life, though in less intense form and transformed into generosity towards Buddhist institutions. As Lambek (2000: 317) puts it for religion and ritual in general, 'religion at its best attempts to provide a space and direction for moral practice, to enlarge opportunity and access; at its most limited, it aims to make a virtue out of constraints.' In some cases the narrative can also inspire practices that are quite mimetic in their relation to the exemplary figure. The donation of body objects, which in the VJ is only indirectly dealt with (the children as a part of Vessantara's body), has in the other *jataka* story mentioned (King Sibi's eye donation) more direct effects in real life, as for example documented for Sri Lanka, where monks recite the story on festival days in order to motivate laypeople to donate their eyes or bodies for organ transplantations or medical research (Simpson 2004: 847).<sup>26</sup>

Hallisey (1996: 37) has suggested that the search for a unitary theory of ethics in Buddhism is a task that many have focused on, but which cannot be accomplished 'simply because Buddhists availed themselves of and argued over a variety of models'. He instead pleads for an 'ethical particularism'. When moving away from strictly canonical text material and if one includes a broader range of narratives in the analysis, stories like the VJ can reveal a complex moral universe with all its situations, paradoxes and contingencies. Important here, however, is that the use of the text in performance and the didactics and pedagogies involved are taken into account: which institutions, places and occasions are chosen and to what extent they prescribe a moral understanding (rules, duties, etc.) and at the same time leave space for ethical autopoiesis. As discussed, Buddhist monks, qua respected authorities and performers, 'instruct' laypeople through the recitation of narratives, and their performance and the subsequent commentary can aim at a reproduction of values and

actions by, for example, pointing to exemplary figures like Vessantara. However, the openness of both text and the listening/reading subject and a space of emotional indeterminacy create the basis for a dialogical relationship. In a performative manner, the relationship between the idealised moral system of the text and ethical reasoning is negotiated and concatenated. Vessantara's narrative about the achievement of perfection on the road of excess therefore simultaneously contains elements of an ethical homeostasis and the potential for an ethical reconfiguration.

### Notes

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1. Instead of giving a 'complete' interpretation of the story, I have largely followed my Lao informants in identifying central themes of the story (generosity, responsibility, failure, emotions, etc.) and discussed key scenes with them, focusing on the acts of giving that constitute the various climaxes of the story. Obviously, a number of different readings are possible, and my intention is not to give a thorough philological account of the story, but rather to see what potential ethical claims and problematisations the story of Vessantara might contain. I also emphasise alternative interpretations that go beyond the pure mimetic understanding of the story (see the third part for further details).
2. I have transliterated Pali and Lao terms.
3. For a translation of the oldest remaining Pali version from Sri Lanka, see Gombrich and Cone (1977). Oskar von Hinüber (1998) has written an excellent philological discussion of the origins and form of *jatakas* as a part of Buddhist literature. The significance of *jatakas* in 'modernised' versions seems to have undergone some crucial changes as, for example, attested for Thailand. Patrick Jory (2002: 892) speaks of 'the *jatakas*' marginalization in Thai Buddhism'. He traces the significant shifts of their position and interpretation under the reign of King Chulalongkorn and Thailand's encounter with modernity and orientalist scholarship in the nineteenth century.
4. In Pali the word *parami* (perfection) literally signifies 'having reached the other shore' (Kawamura 2004), but in Lao it is also used in the sense of 'charisma'.
5. In the list of the ten perfections and other enumerations of virtues, *dana* (giving, generosity) is usually stressed as the most important one. This does not come as a surprise as the order of monks is largely dependent on donations of laypeople and the very existence of Buddhism has been dependent upon the gift, ranging from daily alms-giving to large-scale donations of plots of land and incredible amounts of

- wealth. On a general level, the giving of gifts (*dana*) and the practice of generosity constitute, along with *sila* ('moral undertaking', 'keeping precepts') and *bhavana* (exercise of contemplation/meditation), one of the three elementary meritorious acts in Theravada Buddhism that lead to a gradual approximation of the soteriological goal of nirvana and better rebirths (Rajavaramuni 1990: 48). Giving in its different forms is a way of renouncing the material world. Hibbets (2000: 30) therefore concludes that the gift is often 'described as 'primarily an ethical category', but one probably has to distinguish different kinds of gifts and rewards. Ohnuma (2005) postulates that in doctrinal Buddhism the gift of, for example, alms to monks is not directly reciprocated, but only in the form of 'transcendent' karmic rewards. In practice, however, laypeople often expect a direct return and an effect in this life. Egge (2002: 3) insists that giving in Buddhism is not only the practice of generosity, but also an act of worship directed towards the recipient. Vessantara's gifts and the cases of 'gifts of the body' (*dehadana*, i.e. donating one's limbs, eyes and other body parts) are again of another kind, and extreme acts of heroic giving are described in many *jatakas* (Ohnuma 1997). What is interesting here is that givers like Vessantara – living in a time before the clergy was established – often do not take into account the status of the receiver (*supatra*, 'worthy vessel'), as later became common in Buddhism. The practice of giving remains a prominent focus of discussions about what defines 'proper' Buddhism. For *dana* practice in contemporary Thailand and a criticism thereof as being based on materialism, see Gabaude (2003).
6. Although the story is part of the Buddhist canon, it occupies an interesting middle position between canonical text and folk narrative (Ohnuma 2004). It is usually adapted to the local context and there are multifarious vernacular forms to be found in Laos that are connected to different chanting styles. The basic story outline is kept in each of them, but the extensive depictions of nature in it are variations and one also finds references to local customs (like specific Lao rituals) in the text that distinguish it from the original Pali version (A. Boundteun, personal communication, December 2004). I here use an unpublished Lao-English prose version adapted from a version from Luang Phrabang in the north of Laos by an anonymous author ('Luang Phavetsandoon' 2002).
  7. The physical form of the text preached is also significant: palm-leaf manuscripts are written in a special script (*dtoo tham*), which has a greater number of letters than normal Lao script. Although the words used in the chanting and writing are mostly normal Lao with a higher frequency of technical Pali terms, most people are convinced that only monks and very learned people can master the script. Palm-leaf manuscripts are in themselves containers of merit and auspiciousness and always have to be placed higher than other objects. The chanting of monks based on these manuscripts is believed to have a direct, 'physical' effect on the listener, increase his positive karma and protect him. This belief might derive from the fact that in a form of esoteric Buddhism the human body itself is made up of different constitutive letters that all together make up the Buddhist *dhamma*. The correct pronunciation of the syllables of a text can in some schools of Theravada Buddhism be a means of salvation and purification. (Bizot and Lagirarde 1996), or in less ambitious understandings be a source of blessing and protection. The knowledge kept in palm-leaf manuscripts can almost be appropriated by being able to pronounce the letters, even when they are not understood semantically. In recent years more and more books have been used for chanting the VJ, and monks in the provinces have been quite upset to discover that in the capital palm-leaf manuscripts are now rarely used. Hence there are now differing and competing notions of textuality.
  8. The extent to which the texts and the recitation of the VJ are really understood in this context is debatable. The holiness of the words that give access to a source of

- merit beyond semantics has led some observers to doubt the scrutiny with which people listen (Koret 1996: 113; 121–122), but this may also depend on how fervently or seriously one takes one's belief. The VJ is highly poetic in style and has a lot of special Pali vocabulary that makes it hard for the average educated Lao to grasp everything. According to my experience, people attending the ritual understand between 50 and per cent of the chanting. However, everybody knows the story and the visual depictions in the temple, the more prosaic forms of it taught at school and its screenings on Thai TV ensure that most people know it by heart.
9. Since the economic liberalisation of the mid-90s, however, other leisure-time options (like watching Thai TV) have taken over much of Lao people's evening entertainment and most temples in the centre have abolished these evening sermons. The further one goes into the suburbs of Vientiane, the more widespread the practice still is. On Thai television and on the rarely watched Lao television there are also some programmes that feature Buddhist sermons and preaching, as on the radio.
  10. Here I largely follow Faubion's (2001b: 89f.) discussion of Foucault's technologies of the self as an interplay between institutions (or, in general, the environment) that represent certain values and truths and the appropriation and transformations of these meanings through a sort of autopoietic practice. The latter term is used by Faubion (ibid.: 100) in the sense of Luhmann's (1990: 9–10) system theory and gives rise to change in the system through the appropriation and inclusion of new elements beyond pure reproduction; i.e. the subject not only blindly follows the practices that society offers, but also uses them to attain certain states of freedom and wisdom and to form its own ethical subjectivity. On the latter point and its use for anthropology see also Laidlaw (2002).
  11. *The Questions of King Milinda* is a long conversation between the Greek King Milinda, who rules parts of northern India, and the Buddhist monk Nagasena about the essentials and problems of Buddhism. In Laos it is known under the name *Milinda Panha*. Many of the questions posed by Milinda can be seen as representative of the interrogation of difficulties with some Buddhist teachings. Nagasena, as a monk, defends the *dhamma*, but has some difficulty in answering the question and replies that Vessantara certainly loved his wife and children, but that he loved enlightenment more. Furthermore, Nagasena replies that there is nothing negative about excessiveness in general and refers to the excessive hardness of diamonds which is a sign of high quality.
  12. There is an interesting interplay between selflessness and selfishness at work here. In order to practise selflessness, i.e. giving away and renouncing, Vessantara has to be selfish. The action itself is therefore caught up in contradiction.
  13. This is an audience at its best, however. Depending on the location, the skills of the monk and the appreciation of the audience, one might also witness rather unspectacular performances with a present but inattentive audience more involved in chatting and other distracting activities.
  14. In other scenes Vessantara is rather instrumental and just waits for an occasion to give away his children. When his wife has a dream the night before the children are given away, he knows that the Brahmin will come to ask for the children and immediately sees that as a chance to perform a body-object donation. He does not tell his wife, though, and just says that she should forget the dream.
  15. One could argue that Vessantara's dilemma is not the one of Greek tragedy because there is still a choice he can make and escape in the dilemma, namely just not giving away his children and wife and not attaining perfection. But the fact that he has waited for aeons to realise the ten perfections and that this is the ideal occasion almost puts him under a form of pressure that moves his decision-making into a similar domain.
16. Geertz also draws a nice parallel between theatrical performance and emotions:
 

'If, to quote Northrop Frye again, we go to see Macbeth to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed, a kind of moral autocosm, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low.' (Geertz 2005: 86).
  17. Asking Buddhist laypeople whether Vessantara's behaviour is correct from a moral point of view was mostly answered with responses of the nature 'Yes, but...' Most informants admitted that an ethical evaluation of his action is very hard to accomplish, and some monks answered that his actions cannot be evaluated at all.
  18. Arguing in the context of the larger historical approach, Ricoeur states: 'The non-answering to the moral problems of an epoch is perhaps the most powerful weapon which literature has in order to influence morality and change practice' (1991: 283).
  19. Indeed, 'abandoning' one's family was one of the first things the abbot of the monastery where I was ordained explained to me.
 

'Monks don't have families in the sense others have it. I still have a father and a mother and we see each other now and then. But they can never really comfort you or embrace you. In the ordination ceremony you have left your family behind; the circle we closed around you when the ceremony was at its end represents that. You have entered the monk's homelessness, and you are not a householder any more'.

Vessantara does not become a monk in the story, but a hermit who lives according to similar standards. Although he takes his wife with him, they live in chastity according to the monastic rules – an arrangement that is prone to give rise to conflicts. The failure of Vessantara is therefore also rooted in the fact that he sets out to live in both orders, a liminal state.
  20. By using others as gifts to achieve his own ends and not only giving his personal belongings, the VJ also portrays a sort of parasitic relationship of unequal exchange. The excess has to be paid with gifts extracted from domains that are beyond the property of the giver. Serres (1982: 35f.) has argued that the parasite is a catalyst for complexity, because it interrupts the normal flow of things and introduces a break into the system, which can then lead to transformations. In that sense, the achievement of Buddhahood entails a parasitic component. See also Brown (2002: 15–17) for an exegesis of Serres's idea of the parasite and exchange.
  21. Laos was a kingdom for more than 600 years and Buddhism and kingship were from the beginning intricately intertwined, with the king usually supporting the clergy and vice versa. This configuration of power has been labelled the 'two wheels of the *dhamma*' (Tambiah 1977; Smith 1978). Buddhism is indeed imbued with ideas of kingship and the Buddha was a prince himself, who abandoned the luxuries of his palace and his family after seeing the suffering in the world. In the case of Laos it does not come as a surprise, then, that the disappearance of kingship after the socialist revolution of 1975 (the king was arrested, sent to a 're-education camp' and died there) brought some problems of political legitimisation (Evans 1998) and stimulates discourses like the one inspired by the VJ.
  22. Other birth stories of the Buddha take a much more explicit stance than the VJ; in the 'Birth story of the dumb cripple' (*Muggapakkha/Temiya Jataka*), still very popular in Sri Lanka, the Buddha is born as a king again, but tries to escape kingship. He

reflects: 'I was a king here for twenty years, and as a result cooked for eighty thousand years in hell, now I have been born again in this criminal house'. Then a deity comes to give him advice and says: 'Dear Temiya, don't be afraid. If you want to escape from here, act as if you can't walk properly, even though you can; act as if you are deaf and dumb, even though you are not' (Collins 1998: 425f.). In order to escape his responsibility, he fakes being handicapped and unable to rule. Not all stories contrast the strict ethics of the ascetic with that of the more worldly householder or king like this, but there is often a certain ironic critique involved.

23. The case of Abraham, on which Derrida builds his argument, is in some respects, however, fundamentally different from that of Vessantara. Abraham follows his duty towards a monotheistic God ('the wholly Other') and the sacrificial lamb could be put to death. Vessantara does not follow God (who is absent in Buddhism), but only a personal striving for self-perfection, and his gifts are in that sense not put to death, but just given away or enslaved. One could therefore speculate that Vessantara has a different kind of freedom of choice from Abraham.
24. Emotivism denies that moral judgements can be true or false, maintaining that they merely express an attitude or an emotional response. I think Nussbaum's idea is different from that, as there is a basis for ethical judgement (Aristotle's virtues, or *eudaemonia*) and emotions are constitutive of that.
25. Although Kant gives emotion a certain place in his idea of virtue, he rejects, for example, pity as a morally significant emotion. His 'sympathy with joy and sadness' (*sympathia moralis*) (Kant 1971: 6: 456) is an inborn capacity that cannot enhance correct decision-making. For him, with an apprehension of duty that is based in rationality and rational decision-making, emotions are secondary products of ethical reasoning.
26. For the case of autopsy-body donation in Thailand, Wongthes (2000: 8) even finds that there is even a problem of an oversupply of bodies. In Laos, where hospitals are chronically underfunded and even quite simple operations often cannot be carried out, this topic has as yet no real significance. In the past, however, people donated their bodies as meditation objects to the local monastery where monks than sat around the decomposing body in order to meditate and realise suffering and the perishability of life. This was abolished in Laos after the revolution in 1975, but continues in Thailand (Klima 2002).

## Chapter 9

# ADOPTING AN OBLIGATION: MORAL REASONING ABOUT BOUGAINVILLEAN CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES IN NEW IRELAND

Karen Sykes

This chapter elaborates a case study in the various negotiations over the moral value of obligation, whereby people justify and challenge the state's responsibility to provide social services for children in Papua New Guinea (PNG) after a decade of violent political conflict within Bougainville Island. Just as Gluckman (1955, 1963) used the ethnographic case study to illuminate how a person's actions could seem unreasonable in the eyes of state courts but be reasonable within the detailed description of the paradoxes of their specific situation, I use this case study to show that apparently difficult reasoning about obligations is actually sensible when the PNG state meets responsibilities to citizens. Gluckman demonstrated the universal presence of the 'reasonable man' in his careful ethnography, thereby toppling assumptions about the impossibility of self-government in the post-colonial nation. Like Gluckman, I argue that the moral value of obligation for the 'reasonable man' is grounded in neither cultural Western rationality, but firmly situated in detailed ethnographic