

# The Story of Prince Vessantara

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## Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: generosity, non-attachment

## Notes for teachers

The Story of Prince Vessantara, a tale of extraordinary generosity, is one of the most important narratives in the Buddhist world. Despite its ethically troubling centrepiece – when the hero gives away his children as slaves – the story is popular as the subject of sermons, art, literature and ritual. Annual ritual recitations or reenactments take place across Southeast Asia.

This story is a jataka tale, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. (For more information about the jataka genre see separate resource sheet on [www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/](http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/)) Indeed, in the Theravada tradition the Buddha's time as Vessantara is understood to have been his final human life before the one in which he attained buddhahood. As a result, he is understood to be very close to perfection in this story, and this is likely to be the reason why the story has such a central place in Theravada culture and religion.

Generosity or giving is a key value in Buddhism. It demonstrates important Buddhist virtues such as **detachment** (towards the thing given), **compassion** (for the recipient in need) and **faith** (when the gift is given to a member of the Buddhist community or the Buddha himself).

In early India the most worthy recipient of a gift was a **brahmin** (a member of the Hindu priestly caste), which explains why most recipients of the Buddha-to-be's generosity in Indian Buddhist stories are brahmins (or gods in disguise as brahmins). **Shakra** (also known as Indra, and found in Hindu and Jain stories as well as Buddhist ones) is a god that is well known for testing the virtue of humans.

For Buddhists, the most worthy recipient of a gift is a member of the Buddhist monastic community or the Buddha himself (either in person or as an image or bodily relics). Giving a gift to the monastic community is compared to planting a

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seed in a fertile “field of merit” since it results in much positive karmic fruition (and so a happy rebirth). It also ensures the survival of the community, which is reliant entirely on donations.

For the Buddha in his past lives, however, there are not normally any Buddhists to give to, since he is living in a time before Buddhism (or, more accurately, between Buddhist dispensations). Instead, he tends to practice more extreme forms of giving, such as giving away body parts, sacrificing his life, or giving away his wife and children. These gifts are made to all sorts of recipients whether “worthy” or not. This extreme giving demonstrates his extraordinary resolve to attain buddhahood, but it is not usually considered necessary for normal Buddhists to emulate him, as they can instead give more moderate gifts to the Buddhist community.

Buddhists have discussed the ethical problems surrounding Vessantara’s gift of his children for around two millennia. Common justifications for his actions include: (1) Vessantara knew the children would be fine, so it was okay. (2) He had to give away what was asked of him, otherwise he would not be a proper Buddha-in-the-making. (3) It might seem harsh but it was for a much greater good – the achievement of buddhahood and the founding of the Buddhist tradition – and both the wife and children (reborn as members of the Buddha’s family) received the benefits of the Buddha’s teaching and achieved nirvana.

Although the story is not treated as a model to be followed by all Buddhists (rather it emphasises the awe-inspiring acts of the Buddha), some minor form of emulation does occur: In some parts of Southeast Asia, parents “give away” their children to the monastery as ordinands, though often the ordination is only temporary.

Using this story alongside other related resources:

You could consider reading this story alongside the story-cycle of King Shibi, which tells of bodily gift-giving, another important form of generosity practised by the Buddha-to-be.

Another helpful comparison is with the Hindu story of the Ramayana, which shares key features, though it explores different values. Hindu values are much more pro-family and emphasise duty. For Buddhists, especially at the time of the Vessantara story’s composition, the emphasis is on the necessity of detaching from family.

You might also consider discussing this story alongside the Old Testament narrative of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son.

There is a powerpoint presentation to accompany this resource.

## Questions for Discussion

### Comprehension of the story

Why does Vessantara give away his magical rain-bringing elephant? (Was he right to do so?)

Why did the citizens not want Vessantara to keep giving stuff away? Were they justified in asking for him to be exiled?

Why did Vessantara's father agree to exile Vessantara? Was there another possible solution to the problem of his excessive giving?

What is the role of Maddi in the story? Why does she insist on following Vessantara to the forest? Why does she accept his need to give away her children and even herself?

Is it important to the story that Vessantara gets all his family back again at the end?

### Application to other contexts

What sorts of gift are good to give?

Does it matter who receives the gift, or whether the gift is useful to the person receiving it?

Is generosity always a good thing? Is it sometimes in conflict with other values?

### Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the importance of giving?

Why is giving important in Buddhism?

Should all Buddhists give the same sorts of gifts as the Buddha did in his past lives?

Are there other ways in which Buddhists might learn from the Buddha's actions?

Does it matter whether or not the events in the story actually happened?

This story is believed in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia) to be the last of the jataka stories. After his lifetime as Vessantara, the Buddha-to-be was born as a god for a while, then again as a human, in which lifetime he became the Buddha ('Awakened One'). What does this add to the story? How does Vessantara show that he is ready for buddhahood? What qualities does he demonstrate?

This story makes a lot of Buddhists uncomfortable, because everyone is shocked by the idea of giving away one's children and wife. How might Buddhists justify such an extreme gift?

The Vessantara story is really popular in Buddhist countries, especially in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos, Burma/Myanmar, etc) where it is regularly recited and re-enacted, and illustrated on temple walls or painted scrolls. Why do you think it is so popular?

Using the story in comparison with other narratives:

How does the story of Vessantara compare to the story-cycle of King Shibi? Are both heroes demonstrating the same kind of generosity? Which is most extraordinary?

How does the story of Vessantara compare to the Ramayana?

Both are stories of exile and separation from beloved family, and both were composed in a similar region and at a similar time. What do the similarities and differences in these two stories tell us about the similarities and differences between Buddhist and Hindu values and ideals?

### **Sources / Further Reading**

This version is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 547. There are two good translations of the full (long) story available: Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* (The Pali Text Society 2011, or OUP 1977), and the final story in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm, 2015). Both also contain useful introductory material. An older translation is available here: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6013.htm>

If you want to explore different dimensions of the story see Steven Collins (ed.) *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

## The Story of Prince Vessantara

*The Buddha told this story of the past:*

Long ago, there was a prince named Vessantara. He was renowned for being a generous child, indeed as soon as he was born he asked for a present to give to the midwives who had helped deliver him! When he was grown up, and married with a son and daughter, his father decided to let him rule over the kingdom. But Vessantara gave lots of the state wealth away. He even gave away a magical rain-bringing elephant to a neighbouring kingdom where they were having a drought. This was too much for the people, who did not like to see their country's wealth disappear. They demanded that the king strip Vessantara of his status and exile him to the forest.

Vessantara, his wife Maddi (who insisted on going too) and their children prepared for their exile. They set off in a carriage, but soon some men came and asked for the horses, and Vessantara gave them away. Some gods took disguise as deer and pulled the carriage a little further, but then another man asked for the carriage, and Vessantara gave it away. The family proceeded on foot, Vessantara carrying their son and Maddi their daughter. They set up a new life in a forest hermitage.

Meanwhile, in a neighbouring city, a young woman was always getting teased when she fetched water, for she was married to an old and ugly brahmin.\* She had heard of Vessantara's generosity, and decided to ask her husband to seek out the exiled prince and ask for servants, so that she could avoid having to go to the well again. Unable to endure her nagging, the man, named Jujuka, set out towards the forest. In due course he approached Vessantara's hermitage.

At that time Maddi was out in the forest gathering fruits and roots for their meal, and Vessantara was sitting by the hermitage, while the children played nearby. Seeing the brahmin approaching Vessantara rose from his seat and greeted him warmly. "What can I offer you?" he asked. "I would like your children as slaves," replied Jujuka. Although Vessantara loved his children deeply, he rejoiced at the chance to make such a significant gift. He called the children over and presented them to Jujuka, pouring water on his hands to seal the gift. The brahmin tied them up and led them off, the children wailing and crying out to their father to relent, or

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\* A brahmin is a member of the Hindu priestly caste. In early India it was considered a very good thing to give a gift to a brahmin.

at least to let them stay long enough to say goodbye to their mother. But Jujuka insisted on taking the children there and then. Maddi, meanwhile, had been delayed in the forest by gods disguised as wild animals.

When Maddi returned and could not see her children she was distraught. She looked for them everywhere, calling out to them and worrying that they had been lost or hurt. She begged Vessantara to tell her what had happened, and eventually he did. After her husband had explained that he had given the children away to a brahmin, Maddi became calm, and accepted that the gift had been necessary.

The next day another brahmin appeared in the forest. Just as before, Vessantara welcomed him and asked what he could give. The brahmin replied that he would like Maddi, Vessantara's wife. Vessantara agreed to this gift, and Maddi also willingly accepted that the gift should be made, so he handed her over. But as soon as he had done so, the brahmin revealed himself as the god Shakra<sup>†</sup> in disguise, come to help Vessantara perfect his generosity. He returned Maddi to her husband and praised Vessantara highly for his commitment to giving.

Meanwhile Jujuka, trying to lead the children back to his home, was getting lost in the forest, and somehow found himself in the city over which Vessantara's father was ruling. The children were recognised, and the brahmin dragged before the king. The king ransomed the children from Jujuka by giving him large quantities of wealth and food, and so freed his grandchildren. Soon afterwards Jujuka died from overeating, and, since nobody knew where he was from, all his wealth returned to the king.

The king was very upset at what had happened to Vessantara and his family, and deeply regretted exiling his son. He and his wife, along with their grandchildren, set out to invite Vessantara and Maddi home. The family reunion was emotional, and there was much celebration!

When Vessantara re-entered his city, the gods rained jewels down from the heavens so that he would never run out of things to give away.

*The Buddha explained the connection between the past and the present: "At that time I was Prince Vessantara, and my family then is my family now."*

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<sup>†</sup> In Buddhism gods have long lives and special powers, but they eventually die and are reborn according to their karma. Shakra often likes to test human beings.