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978-1-107-03393-1 - Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-Life Stories

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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Once upon a time, in ancient India, there was a king, who was encouraged by his courtiers to listen to some teachings given by a naked ascetic, one of many wandering teachers of the time. This ascetic taught the king that each being must transmigrate through 84,000 great aeons in order to be purified and thereby liberated from the cycle of rebirth and redeath. Crucially, the ascetic taught that one's actions have no effect on this process, in other words he denied the laws of karma accepted by Buddhist and Jain traditions.

The ascetic's teaching was bolstered by two bystanders, General Alāta and the slave Bījaka, who recalled their past lives as evidence of the inefficacy of karma. Alāta recalled how he had spent his previous life chasing other people's wives, and yet he had been reborn in a wealthy family of high status. Bījaka recalled great acts of charity and generosity in his previous life that had nonetheless resulted in a miserable and low position in his current birth.

The king was rather pleased with this fatalist teaching, for it allowed him to do as he liked with no fear of the consequences, and he therefore began to enjoy himself with the wives of his citizens, leaving his kingdom to descend into a state of moral anarchy. Disturbed by this, and fearing for her father's future, Princess Rucā tried to persuade the king of the error of the ascetic's teaching. She pointed out that karma works over multiple lives, and so a single past life is not sufficient for the creation of a coherent karmic history. As evidence she narrated her own past lives:

Long ago she had been a (male) goldsmith in Magadha, and had gone after the wives of others. At death this negative karma had lain dormant like fire covered by ashes and she took birth as a (male) treasurer in Kosambi, and did many good deeds. The positive karma thus accrued then became hidden, like treasure buried beneath the water, while the earlier bad karma ripened and showed fruit. She was born in a hell realm and experienced severe torment. Next she was born as a billy goat which was castrated and

made to carry people around; then as a monkey, whose father bit off his testicles when he was only a day old; then as an ox, castrated and overworked. Following these animal births, some of the positive karma that had lain hidden ripened and she was born as a human in a good family, though she was neither male nor female. Following this she was born as a heavenly nymph, in which state she recalled all these births and resolved to do good. And finally she was born as Princess Rucā – a good birth, but nonetheless limited by her female state, the result still of those adulterous actions when a goldsmith in Magadha.

Despite his daughter's long autobiography demonstrating the painful consequences of immoral acts, the king remained unconvinced. In a final desperate act Princess Rucā implored the gods to help, and one of the senior gods of the Brahmā heaven came to her aid. This god, called Nārada, terrified the king with displays of magical powers and descriptions of the hell realms, including the thorn tree which fornicators are repeatedly forced to climb. He then soothed the king with instructions for how to attain a heavenly birth, and left him a changed man.

This story is known as the *Mahānārada-kassapa-jātaka*, or simply *Nārada-jātaka*, and is a popular story amongst Theravāda Buddhists, forming one of the final ten stories of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*.¹ It is just one of a multitude of stories preserved by early South Asian traditions that discuss karma and rebirth, giving specific examples of past-life memory. This particular story is a *jātaka*, a story of a past life of the Buddha, yet many of the key themes raised by the *Nārada-jātaka* are central to Jain traditions as well. It contains debate about the nature of karma and its effects upon rebirth, a discussion of past-life memory including the perils of incomplete memory, ethical teaching about the effects of specific actions such as adultery and a glimpse of the heaven and hell realms. This story is therefore an excellent way to introduce the themes of this book, which contains an examination of karma and rebirth in the narrative traditions of early Buddhism and Jainism.

Setting the scene

Before I begin to explore the different aspects of the *Nārada-jātaka*, I should briefly introduce the context of this study. Buddhism and Jainism emerged

¹ Number 544 out of a total of 547 in Fausbøll 1877–96 and Cowell 1895–1907, which represent the Sri Lankan recension. According to the traditional Thai ordering it is number 545, followed only by *Vidhura* and *Vessantara*, and demonstrates the Bodhisattva's acquisition of the perfection of equanimity.

Setting the scene

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at roughly the same time in roughly the same area of northeast India, with Gautama Buddha likely to have been a younger contemporary of the *jina* ('victor') or *tīrthāṅkara* ('ford-maker') Vārdhamāna Mahāvīra.² Although these two men seem never to have met, they were doubtless aware of each other's existence, and the traditions that they founded share many ideas, stories and practices with one another.³ During the fifth century BCE, these two men were part of a wider tradition of wandering ascetics, or *śramaṇas*, who rejected their family and societal duties in favour of a personal quest for liberation from the cycle of rebirth and redeath.

Buddhism and Jainism have a common understanding of how the universe operates: people will be reborn many times over as long as they are trapped in *samsāra*, the realm of rebirth, which contains much suffering and discomfort. Rebirths include multiple heavens and hells, as well as the animal realm. The quality of one's rebirth depends upon the actions, or karma, that each individual has performed. Ultimately it is desirable to escape the cycle of rebirth and redeath altogether, by attaining *mokṣa* ('liberation') or *nirvāṇa* ('blowing out').⁴ At certain points throughout the beginningless history of the universe, significant figures are born, attain liberation and found a religious community. These exceptional individuals – *jinas* and *buddhas* – teach others how to attain liberation too. Gautama Buddha and Mahāvīra are the latest in this long line.

Despite this significant common foundation, the two traditions appear to have often been antagonistic neighbours, competing for patronage and followers. Small but significant differences in doctrine and practice provided ample ammunition for each side: Buddhists derided Jains for their pointless ascetic practices, denied that plants have souls and mocked the claims that Mahāvīra and his senior followers were omniscient. Jains, meanwhile, denounced Buddhists' lax practices and loose morals. The early Buddhists and Jains also disagreed over the exact role played by karma in tying individuals into the realm of rebirth and redeath: for Jains, karma was

² Buddhist texts record the Buddha's reaction to news of the death of Mahāvīra. Traditional dating for the life of Mahāvīra places him in the sixth century BCE, but recent scholarship on the dating of the Buddha suggests that both figures must have flourished in the fifth century BCE, with the Buddha dying around 400 BCE and Mahāvīra perhaps two decades earlier (see Bechert 1991–7, especially Gombrich 1992; Norman 2001; Dundas 2002: 24).

³ Both Buddhists and Jains might object to my statement that Gautama Buddha and Mahāvīra 'founded' Buddhism and Jainism respectively, for both traditions assert a long lineage of teachers stretching back into the distant past.

⁴ Although both of these terms are used by both traditions, for the sake of convenience I tend to use the term *nirvāṇa* when discussing Buddhist traditions, and *mokṣa* when referring to attainment of the Jain *siddhaloka*.

conceived of as a material substance that adhered to the soul and weighed it down, obscuring its natural omniscience and bliss and keeping it from attaining *mokṣa*. All actions bound karma, even those that were involuntary, thus in theory there was no such thing as ‘good karma’. For Buddhists, on the other hand, karma was not physical, though it was still a law of the universe. The early Buddhists viewed karma in psychological terms, declaring that it was thirst or craving that led to bondage, and that the fruit of karma depended upon the motivation behind the action. In time these two opposing positions came closer together, as Jains accepted the idea of meritorious action leading to better rebirth, and began to place emphasis on the role of the passions in binding karma.⁵

Both the common heritage and the differing understandings of karma and the appropriate religious life are visible in the narratives preserved by each tradition. In particular, stories of multiple lives, which abound in the literature of both Buddhism and Jainism, have much to reveal about attitudes towards the mechanisms of rebirth and the pursuit of religious goals. It is these stories that form the focus of this book, and one particularly interesting example, the *Nārada-jātaka*, will occupy us during this introduction.

Fatalism and karma

The *Nārada-jātaka*, like many stories of multiple lives, is concerned with the operation of karma, in other words with actions and their results. That this is a central focus of the story is clear from the character of the naked ascetic Guṇa Kassapa, who leads the king astray with a mixture of materialist and fatalist views. We can pick up the story at the moment the King of Videha asks Guṇa for a teaching:

‘Kassapa, how should a man behave properly towards his parents?
 How should he behave towards teachers? How towards his wives and children?
 How should he behave towards the elders? How towards brahmins and ascetics?
 How should he behave towards his forces, and the populace?
 How should he live correctly and go after death to heaven?
 How do some, established in evil, fall into hell below?’

This powerful question was suitable to be asked of a *buddha*, first of all, or failing that a *paccekabuddha*, disciple of a *buddha* or a *bodhisatta*, but the king

⁵ For a discussion of these developments in early Jain karma theory see Johnson 1995.

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asked it of an ignorant, naked, crooked, ugly, foolish Ājīvika ascetic. He, thus asked, did not give a suitable answer to that question, but like hitting an ox that is progressing or throwing rubbish in a food bowl, he said ‘Hear, Great King!’ and took the opportunity of giving his own false views. Explaining the matter the Teacher said:⁶

Having heard the words of the Videhan, Kassapa said this:

‘Great King, listen to my true and correct path:

There is no fruit, good or bad, in righteous conduct.

Your majesty, there is no other world – for who has come back from there?

There are no ancestors. How are there mothers? How fathers?

There is no one to be called “teacher”, for who will tame the untamed?

Beings are all equal – there is no respect for the elders.

There is no strength or vigour – so whence come exertion and effort?

For beings are fixed in their destiny, as if tied to a boat.

A man receives what he should receive; how then can there be fruit of giving?

There is no fruit of giving, your majesty, and no vigour or capacity for action.

Giving is ordered by fools, and accepted by the wise.

Without choice, fools, imagining themselves learned, give to the wise.’

Having thus described the non-fruiting of giving, in order to explain the non-fruiting of evil he said:

‘There are these seven eternal substances, indestructable and undisturbed: fire, earth, water and wind, happiness and suffering,

and soul – a destroyer of these seven bodies cannot be found.

There is no killer and no destroyer, and nobody is harmed.

Weapons proceed between these substances.

He who takes others’ heads with a sharp sword

does not cut these substances – so where is the evil fruit in that?

All during eighty-four great aeons become purified as they transmigrate.

Before that time has passed not even a well-restrained person is purified.

Even those who have done great good are not purified before then,

and even those who have done great evil would not go beyond that moment.

In the course of time during eighty-four aeons we become pure:

We cannot escape our destiny, as the ocean cannot escape the shore.’

In this way the annihilationist comprehensively and with determination taught his own view.⁷

⁶ In other words the Buddha, who is narrating the story.

⁷ My trans. from Fausbøll 1877–96, vol. 6: 224–7. A translation of the full story can be found in Cowell 1895–1907, vol. 6: 114–26. I am grateful to L. S. Cousins, who read this *jātaka* with myself and Sarah Shaw in Oxford in the summer of 2010. The conversations we had during those meetings helped me to develop both my translation and my analysis of this story.

This passage tells us that Guṇa Kassapa is an Ājīvika ascetic, and so it has been highlighted by scholars as a rare source for our understanding of the Ājīvika tradition, another *śramaṇa* tradition contemporary with Buddhism and Jainism. However, it is clearly a rather crude caricature, with several internal inconsistencies.

Guṇa begins his teaching by stating that there are no ancestors and no other world, and that there is no merit or sin resulting from actions. These early verses reflect the materialist – rather than the fatalist – position, since they deny the continuity of a person after death. These views are similar to those placed in the mouth of Ajita Kesakambalī in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the second discourse of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.⁸ In this text the patricidal king of Magadha, Ajātasattu (Sanskrit Ajātaśatru), visits the Buddha and describes to him the positions of six great religious teachers of the time. Jainism, materialism and various aspects of Ājīvikism are recounted here, and this text thus forms an early source for our understanding of rival śramaṇic traditions. The materialist view that there is no other world and that there are therefore no karmic consequences was clearly dangerous to Buddhist and Jain communities since it encouraged irresponsible behaviour. The Buddha took great pains to deny that he was an annihilationist (Pāli *ucchedavāda*), the same term of abuse used to refer to Guṇa.⁹

After espousing materialist views Guṇa proceeds to voice some doctrines which we know to be characteristic of the Ājīvikas, namely the impossibility of affecting one's destiny (*niyati-vāda*), the seven eternal substances and the purification of beings through eighty-four great aeons (though other sources state this process takes eighty-four *thousand* great aeons). In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* the first and last of these doctrines are ascribed to Makkhali Gosāla, who was revered as one of the early proponents of Ājīvikism. The doctrine of the seven eternal substances, along with the declaration that even cutting off a person's head is of no consequence, is put forward by Pakudha Kaccāyana. Although these two men are portrayed in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* as rival teachers, their doctrines are consistent with one another, and both appear to have been associated with the Ājīvika school.¹⁰ And all of their doctrines, along

⁸ See Walshe 1995: 91–109.

⁹ For a detailed assessment of the relationship between the six heretics and the Ājīvika tradition see Basham 1951, especially ch. 2.

¹⁰ However, Basham (1951: 17) notes that Pakudha is not named as a teacher by the later Ājīvika tradition. It is worth noting that the portrayals of Ājīvika doctrine in Buddhist (and Jain) texts are unlikely to be fair or accurate. It is difficult to believe that an entirely fatalist religion could survive with a severe ascetic path for two thousand years as Ājīvikism did. Bronkhorst (2011: 15) suggests an alternative interpretation: whereas Jains practised immobility asceticism for two reasons – to prevent new karma from adhering to the soul and to burn off existing karmic residue from past

with the materialist ideas of Ajita Kesakambalī, are placed in the mouth of Guṇa, the *Nārada-jātaka*'s catch-all heretic.

The Ājīvika position is far from the Buddhist one, which denies that any substances are eternal, and sees the voyage through *samsāra* as directed by karmically significant actions, which are defined as those with wholesome or unwholesome intention. However, the Ājīvika position is not so incompatible with early Jain doctrine, perhaps due to the close interaction between the two traditions in the time of Mahāvīra and the Ājīvika teacher Makkhali Gosāla.¹¹ Jains accept the eternity of the soul, though this is tempered by the impermanence brought by constant modifications. In addition, the number eighty-four thousand is preserved in Jain cosmology, referring to the number of different possible beings that one can be born as. Although the efficacy of karma is central to the Jain position, in some sources this is interwoven with the idea that a soul transmigrates in turn through each of these eighty-four thousand rebirth possibilities.¹²

The *Nārada-jātaka* thus reminds us of the close interaction between several different teachers and doctrines circulating during the time of the Buddha and Mahāvīra. Not only were Buddhists responding to and refuting Jain teachings, and vice versa, but both were engaged in an ideological battle against other groups that, although they have not survived to the present time, represented strong competition in the early centuries BCE. Most of all, early Jain and Buddhist teachers, including the Buddha and Mahāvīra, needed to strongly refute any challenges to the doctrine of karma. Fatalism and materialism, with their denial of karmic consequences, were the ultimate enemies. Multi-life stories could be used to refute these positions by showing karma in operation, though, as the *Nārada-jātaka* demonstrates, the operation of karma may not immediately be apparent if one's memory is insufficient.

actions – Ājīvikas only performed asceticism for the first reason, and considered karma once bound to be unchangeable. In other words they had a fatalist view in terms of the effects of past actions on the present and future, but still held that one's present actions were important. Obeyesekere (2002: 107), on the other hand, has argued that Ājīvikas believed in the law of destiny that led to the slow eventual purification of all beings *and* the idea that extreme asceticism can dramatically shorten this process.

¹¹ Jains and Ājīvikas share a focus on asceticism, a respect for nudity as a part of that asceticism and an emphasis on the need to refrain from harm. In addition, Mahāvīra and Makkhali Gosāla were reputedly companions in their early years as ascetics. It is perhaps for these reasons that Ājīvika ascetics are said in the *Bhagavati Sūtra* (I, 2; Lalwani 1973–85, vol. 1: 48–9) to be able to be reborn as high as the Acyuta Heaven, the twelfth heaven, higher than many other rival religious groups. This position contrasts dramatically with the Buddha's statement in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (71. *Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta*; Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 589) that he only knows of one Ājīvika in the past ninety-one aeons who has made it to heaven, and he did so because he believed in the efficacy of karma.

¹² This feature of Jain cosmology is discussed in Jaini 1980: 228. I explore this idea in relation to the narrative materials in Appleton 2011b: 232–7.

Memory

The reason Alāta and Bijaka are convinced by the ascetic's argument that actions have no results is that they remember a single past life. Although a vision of the past should allow them to see karma in action, the limitation of their memory in fact means that they are led towards an incorrect understanding. Had they been able to see beyond their immediate past birth they would know that actions do affect one's future lives, as the princess later demonstrates. This need for sufficient memory is another theme that runs through multi-life stories in both Jain and Buddhist traditions.

One key message of the *Nārada-jātaka* is that karma operates over a long series of lives, and so simplistic understandings of karma are erroneous. Two images are used to explain the gradual or delayed fruiting of actions: bad actions, we are told, may remain dormant 'like fire covered by ashes' (*bhāsmacchannova pāvako*) whereas good actions that do not immediately bear fruit are 'like treasure [buried] near/in the water' (*nidhīva udakantike*) or 'like treasure buried in the earth' (*pathaviyaṃ nihitanidhi viya*). Princess Rucā uses both these images when describing her own previous births, in an attempt to convince the king that karma is more complex than a single action in a single birth. She recalls:

I remember my own faring on through seven births,
and seven yet to come, where I will go when I pass on from here.
In that seventh previous birth of mine, King of Men,
I was the son of a goldsmith in the city of Rājagaha in Magadha.
Having made an evil friend, I did great evil;
harassing the wives of others, we lived as if we were immortals.
That karma laid down remained like fire covered with ash,
and by other actions I was born in the Vāṃsa country;
In a rich, wealthy and prosperous treasurer's family in Kosambī,
I was the only son, Great King, honoured and revered constantly.
There I associated with a friend who delighted in good works;
wise and learned, he established me in good.
I observed the fast on many fourteenth and fifteenth nights;
That karma laid down remained like treasure hidden in water.
Then this fruit of the evil actions done in Magadha,
caught up with me, as if I had enjoyed a ruinous poison.
Falling from there, Videhan, I for a long time in the Roruva hell,
suffered on account of my own actions. That memory gives me no pleasure.¹³

¹³ My trans. from Fausbøll 1877–96, vol. 6: 236–7.

As the princess goes on to explain, she then experienced a series of painful rebirths as castrated animals followed by birth as a human of neither male nor female sex. Her memory of all these past lives was attained while she was enjoying a subsequent life as a heavenly nymph, in which state extensive past-birth memory was naturally available to her.

The princess appears to be the only person in the royal household who appreciates the complex ways in which karma operates. She is so isolated in her views that she has to eventually call upon a god to come and defend her position. However, if we step out of the narrative for a moment we discover that she is supported in her teachings by the commentator responsible for the prose portions of this story.¹⁴ Clearly uncomfortable with the incomplete memory of Alāta and Bijaka, the commentator fills in the background to their lives, thereby providing another lesson in the operation of karma for the story's audience. Thus the story reads:

Hearing the words of Kassapa, Alāta said this:
 'What the venerable sir says, this pleases me.
 I too remember a former birth, journeyed through by me.
 I was formerly a cruel butcher called Piṅgala.
 In prosperous Vārāṅāsi I did much evil:
 I killed a great many beings – buffaloes, pigs and goats.
 Disappearing from there I am born now in a wealthy general's family.
 There is indeed no evil fruit, for I am not gone to hell.'

[Commentary:] It is said that having honoured the reliquary of Ten-Powered [Buddha] Kassapa with a garland of anoja-flowers, at the time of death he was impelled by a different karma. Transmigrating in *samsāra*, by the result of a certain evil deed he took birth in a butcher's family, where he did great evil. At the time of his death, the meritorious karma, which had remained for a long time like fire covered by dust, made an appearance. Having been reborn here in accordance with that he attained this splendour. Remembering that birth, but unable to remember beyond the immediate past, he thought: 'I am reborn here having made butcher-karma' and having established that view he said 'What the venerable sir says . . .' and so on.¹⁵

¹⁴ We do not know who this commentator is or when he was working, for although the commentary to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* was not finalised until perhaps the fifth century CE, it relied on earlier works. The verses are considered to constitute the scriptural core of the *jātaka*, but much of the prose commentary is essential to the story, so it is unlikely that a purely verse *jātaka* text ever existed. In Fausbøll's edition of the text he differentiates between word commentary, which is largely linguistic, and the narrative commentary. In subsequent translations it has been standard to omit the word commentary. These passages of karmic explanation are actually embedded in the word commentary and are therefore usually overlooked.

¹⁵ My trans. from Fausbøll 1877–96, vol. 6: 227.

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Similarly in the case of the slave Bījaka, who remembers great acts of generosity in his previous life as a treasurer, the commentator adds:

It is said that in the past time of Kassapa Buddha, he was searching for an ox that had perished in the forest when he was asked the way by a certain monk who had got lost. He was silent, and when asked again he became angry and said: 'So-called slave-mendicants are noisy! You must be a slave – you are so garrulous!' Not giving fruit then, that action remained like a fire covered with ashes. At the time of death another karma attended. He transmigrated in *samsāra* according to his karma and by the fruit of one skilful action he became the aforementioned treasurer in Sāketa and was generous and so on and made merit. Then his karma, which had remained like treasure buried in the earth, gained an appearance and saw fruit. The bad karma made by being rude to that monk gave its results in his present birth. Thinking 'I was born in the womb of a waterpot-slave by the fruit of preceding good action' he spoke thus.¹⁶

Like the princess, the commentator demonstrates through concrete examples the ways in which karma bears fruit over multiple lives.¹⁷

What is not clear from the commentator's words is how he is able to correctly perceive the past lives which he narrates, and indeed he appears to shrug the responsibility for this onto other people by introducing the stories with *so kira*, which indicates probability and hearsay, and is glossed as 'people say' or 'I have heard' in Pāli commentaries.¹⁸ In contrast Princess Rucā's past-life memory is explained as something she attained during a birth as a nymph (Pāli *accharā*; Sanskrit *apsaras*) in the Heaven of the Thirty Three. According to Buddhist tradition, memory of past lives is something available to the inhabitants of the heavenly realms; thus gods are often shown recalling the actions that led to their happy state, or returning to their former friends and family to advise them. This ability is not passively acquired, however; gods must *look* at their past in order to see it.¹⁹ This is generally in accordance with the Buddhist understanding of supernormal knowledge; even the Buddha, who is said to be all-knowing, has to turn his attention towards a question in order to see it. Gods and *buddhas* are not the only beings able to see their past lives: according to the early Buddhist

¹⁶ My trans. from Fausbøll 1877–96, vol. 6: 228.

¹⁷ In contrast to the princess the commentator describes *good* karma remaining like fire covered by ashes, and *bad* karma like buried treasure.

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion and commentarial references see under *kira* in Margaret Cone's *A Dictionary of Pāli*.

¹⁹ The commentary uses the term *oloketi* to emphasise that she wanted to know something, looked, and then remembered.