

Framing the Path to Awakening: Tibetan Adaptations of the Jātaka Genre

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Abstract: *Jātaka* and *avadāna* stories belong to the staples of Buddhist narrative literature. While most *jātakas* follow a relatively stable narrative template, they also allow for some variation depending on their time and place of composition and the audiences they are meant to address. *Jātaka* stories have been told and preserved in a variety of languages and literary forms, from simple prose narratives to complex poems or visual representations. This article focuses on Tibetan adaptations of the *jātaka* genre. It begins with a brief survey of *jātaka* stories translated from Sanskrit or Chinese and contained in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, and then moves on to investigate one specific *jātaka* cycle composed in Tibet within the Bka' gdams pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The frame story is of particular interest, as this is where the Tibetan narrators are perhaps at their most innovative. In these Bka' gdams pa *jātakas*, the narrative frame is shifted from India to Tibet, and the main characters of the frame story are newly converted Tibetan Buddhists and their Indian teacher. This highly original appropriation of the *jātaka* genre demonstrates the important role of narrative literature in the Tibetan adoption and adaptation of Buddhism.

Keywords: *Jātaka*, *Avadāna*, Tibetan Buddhism, Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna

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1. Introduction: *Jātaka* and *Avadāna* Stories

The importance of narratives in the dissemination of Buddhism across Asia can hardly be overestimated. Whether in the Buddhist canons, in commentarial literature, in oral sermons, in visual art, in poetry, or as stage performances—narratives and legends have played a major role in transmitting the message of Buddhism, and they still do so today. Among the Buddhist narrative forms, *jātakas* and *avadānas*¹—the stories about previous lives of Buddha Śākyamuni and other individuals—can claim pride of place as one of the most popular genres of Buddhist narrative. The enormous popularity of *jātakas* is not just due to their usefulness as didactic tools, but also to their sheer variety and entertaining nature. The Pāli *jātaka* corpus, for example, has incorporated a wide range of popular narratives and folk stories and even includes parables without an obvious Buddhist message, such as animal tales known from the Indian narrative cycle of the *Pañcatantra* [Five Books, or Five Chapters], where they illustrate political skill rather than religious values.² The flexibility of the genre also made it possible to adapt the *jātaka* and *avadāna* format to different cultural environments in other regions of Asia, which further contributed to its popularity.

Tibet is no exception in this respect. In the Tibetan tradition, Buddhist narratives and *jātaka* tales contain materials received from South Asia as well as stories circulating along the Silk Roads. Tibetan Buddhist teachers refer back to the *jātakas* taught by the Buddha to explain and legitimise the use of stories in their own

¹ The meaning of Sanskrit *avadāna* and Pāli *apadāna*, and the similarities and differences between *jātaka* and *avadāna*, have been discussed by several scholars. A survey can be found in Appleton, *Jātaka Stories*, 3–5. To this, we may add Fukita’s recent proposal that the original meaning of *avadāna* may have been ‘illustration’ or ‘precedent’ (Fukita, ‘The Original Meaning and Role of Avadāna’).

² Parallels between the Pāli *jātakas* and *Pañcatantra* are listed in Grey, *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories*.

sermons and religious treatises.³ However, in addition to legends of Indian or Indic origin, Tibetan Buddhist storytelling also allowed for the integration of indigenous themes, folk tales, and poetry. The influence between Buddhist narratives and local non-Buddhist narratives went both ways; the epic of King Gesar of Ling may serve as an example of a Tibetan heroic narrative that increasingly integrated Buddhist ideas.

Narratives, including *jātakas*, were cast in a variety of media and literary forms, and Tibetan *jātakas* include translations from foreign languages as well as indigenous Tibetan compositions, phrased in prose, in verse, or in a mixture of both. They were and are transmitted in writing, but also orally by travelling bards, or by Buddhist teachers who still make ample use of legends and stories in their oral instructions today.⁴ This paper will begin with a brief survey of Indian or Indic *jātakas* in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, and then move on to a case study of *jātakas* that are original Tibetan creations, produced during the formative period of Tibetan Buddhism in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

³ One relatively early example may suffice here: the Bka' gdams pa master Po to ba Rin chen gsal (1027–1105) gave a comprehensive explanation of the graded Buddhist path to awakening in form of parables, similes, and anecdotes. His teaching technique became so popular that two of his disciples compiled his parables into two works known as the *Dpe chos* [Dharma Exemplified] and the *Be'u bum sngon po* [Blue Compendium]. Moreover, 'Gro mgon Dpal ldan ye shes (fourteenth c.) added a volume containing further stories related to the *Dpe chos*, the *Gtam rgyud rin chen phreng mdzes*. The introduction to the *Dpe chos rin chen spungs pa* explains: 'Why it was necessary that the Spiritual Mentor Po to ba used many parables to illustrate [the dharma]: Through parables, one will quickly grasp the meaning. The section of the *avadānas* too was delivered by teaching through parables...' (*Dpe chos dang dpe chos rin chen spungs pa*, 15.) The *avadāna* stories ascribed to Buddha Śākyamuni are thus invoked as a model for storytelling in Tibet.

⁴ See, for example, the frequent use of *jātaka* stories and other kinds of parables in Pabongka Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*.

2. Tibetan Translations and Adaptations

Indian Buddhist tales and legends were translated into Tibetan from the eighth century onward and were integrated in the two sections of the Tibetan canon, the *Bka' gyur* (pronounced 'Kanjur', and containing the word of the Buddha) and the *Bstan gyur* (pronounced 'Tenjur', and containing treatises and compositions by mostly Indian authors). In addition to purely Buddhist narratives, such as the life story of Buddha Śākyamuni and his previous lives, the Tibetan Buddhist canon even contains translations of a small number of non-Buddhist materials (such as the famous Sanskrit poem 'Meghadūta' [Cloud Messenger] by Kālidāsa),⁵ which demonstrates the great esteem the Tibetan Buddhists developed for Indian narratives and Sanskrit literary compositions.

Like their Pāli and Sanskrit counterparts, the *jātaka* and *avadāna* stories in the Tibetan Buddhist canon are meant to illustrate the effect of karma or, in some cases, the Buddhist pāramitās (perfections). The Kanjur contains several important cycles of pre-birth stories in its Sūtra section (Tib. *mdo*), namely, the *Avadānaśataka* [A Hundred *Avadānas*, Tib. *Rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa*] (D 343/P 1012), the *Karmaśataka* [A Hundred Deeds, or perhaps rather: A Hundred [Stories about] Karma, Tib. *Las brgya tham pa*] (D 340/P 1007), and the *Mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo* [Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish] (D 341/P 1008). The latter, translated from the Chinese by 'Gos Chos grub who was active in Dunhuang in the early ninth century, became particularly popular in Tibet and is often referred to by Buddhist authors.⁶ These three narrative cycles are followed in the canon by several

⁵ Tib. *Sprin gyi pho nya*, contained in the section on language/linguistics (*sgra rig pa*) of the *Bstan gyur*, D 4302/P 5794.

⁶ For unknown reasons, the number and arrangement of the stories in the Tibetan version differ from the Chinese version. See Takakusu, 'Tales of the Wise Man and the Fool'; Baruch, 'Le cinquante-deuxième chapitre du mJañs-blun (Sūtra du sage et du fou)'; Roesler, 'Materialien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des mDzañs blun'.

individual *avadānas*, including the *Sumāghadhāvadāna* [*Avadāna* of Sumāghadhā, Tib. *Ma ga dha bzang mo'i rtogs pa brjod pa*], *Puṇyabalāvadāna* [*Avadāna* of Puṇyabala, Tib. *Bsod nams stobs kyi rtogs pa brjod pa*], and *Candraprabhāvadāna* [*Avadāna* of Candraprabha, Tib. *Zla 'od kyi rtogs pa brjod pa*].

The *Tenjur*, which contains works by Indian Buddhist authors, contains a whole section devoted to *jātakas* (Tib. *skyes rabs*). These include several poetical *jātaka* cycles composed in Indian *kāvya* style: the *Jātakamālās* [Garland of *Jātakas*] of Āryaśūra⁷ and his successor Haribhaṭṭa⁸ as well as Kṣemendra's *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* [Wish-Fulfilling Creeper of Bodhisattva-Avadānas].⁹ The legends of the two *Jātakamālās* are arranged to illustrate the Buddhist pāramitās.¹⁰ Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*, translated into Tibetan in the early translation period (eighth c.), became so emblematic of the genre that the term *skyes rabs* is often used by Tibetan authors to refer specifically to the thirty-four legends of his work. The third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (1248–1339) added sixty-six stories to the collection, thus turning it into a cycle of one hundred *jātakas* (*Skyes rabs brgya pa*).¹¹ His *jātakas* were based on Indian Buddhist legends and emulated Āryaśūra's style, a poetical combination of prose and verse (Skt. *campū*). This enlarged cycle became so popular that it was also visually represented in paintings. The most noteworthy example is a cycle of exquisite paintings and inscriptions in the *skor lam chen mo* (the great circumambulatory) of Zha lu Monastery, executed shortly after the composition of the *Skyes rabs brgya pa* in the fourteenth century.¹²

⁷ D 4150/P 5650; for a critical edition of the first fifteen *jātakas* together with a philological commentary see Hanisch, *Āryaśūras Jātakamālā*.

⁸ D 5152/P 5652; see Hahn, *Poetical Vision of the Buddha's Former Lives*.

⁹ D 4155/P 5655. Its impact in Tibet is discussed in van der Kuijp, 'Tibetan Belles-Lettres'.

¹⁰ Hahn, *Haribhaṭṭa in Nepal*, 12–15.

¹¹ BDRC W1KG16609; see Tropper, *Die Jātaka-Inschriften*, 68–70; Hanisch, *Āryaśūras Jātakamālā*, lxxxii.

¹² Tropper, *Die Jātaka-Inschriften*.

The Tibetan translation of Kṣemendra's above-mentioned *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* in the thirteenth century became a milestone in the study of Sanskrit poetic conventions in Tibet. The translator Shong ston (thirteenth c.) as well as Dpang Lo tsa ba (1276–1342), who revised the translation, had a strong interest in Indian poetics, as demonstrated by their translation of and commentary on Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaḍarśa* [Mirror of Poetics].¹³ Several Tibetan commentaries were written on the *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*. Its legends were retold by various authors¹⁴ and were also represented visually in block prints and paintings.¹⁵

In addition to translating Buddhist narratives, Tibetan authors also began to compose Buddhist stories of their own, both imitating Indian models and developing their own forms of storytelling. This includes the important genre of Tibetan Buddhist life-writing (Tib. *nam thar*). Some of these religious biographies were modelled on the life story of Śākyamuni and subdivided into 'twelve [great] deeds' (Tib. *mdzad pa bcu gnyis*) of the individual in question, following the model of the 'twelve deeds' of the Buddha that had become popular in Tibetan Buddhist circles. Just as the *jātakas* from South Asia extend the life of the Buddha into the past, Tibetan Buddhist biographies from the twelfth century onward also integrated lists or accounts of previous lives of Tibetan Buddhist masters, thus extending the idea of the *jātaka* genre to the Tibetan context.¹⁶ The basic principle of these accounts is the same as in the case of *jātaka* stories

¹³ Dimitrov, *Mārgavibhāga*, 25–60.

¹⁴ van der Kuijp, 'Tibetan Belles-Lettres', 401f.

¹⁵ Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol. II, 442–533.

¹⁶ Early examples of Tibetan Buddhist masters who considered themselves, or were considered, reincarnations of previous named figures are Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192), who regarded himself as an incarnation of King Khri Srong lde btsan (see Hirschberg, 'A Post-Incarnate Usurper?') and Karma Pakshi (1204/6–1283), who was considered a reincarnation of Dus gsum mkhyen pa (see Manson, *The Second Karmaḥpa Karma Pakshi*, 131–32). Van der Kuijp has also drawn attention to an even earlier instance within the Bka'gdams tradition: Chos kyi rgyal po of Kong po (1069–1144) is said to have regarded himself as a reincarnation of Nag tsho lo tsa ba (1011–1064), see van der Kuijp, 'The Dalai Lamas'.

about the Buddha: they show through which actions and experiences in the past the Tibetan Buddhist masters became the accomplished reincarnate lamas that they were in the present.

In his previous lives, the future Buddha is called the *bodhisatta* in Pāli, and it has been argued that this term likely corresponds to the Sanskrit form **bodhisakta*, a being inclined towards awakening, or a 'Buddha-to-be'. However, in later times, its common Sanskritisation as 'bodhisattva' also allowed for the association with the bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which became particularly appealing when applied to the previous lives of Tibetan Buddhist masters. Thus, it became common practice to identify Tibetan Buddhist authorities as emanations of the main bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna, such as Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, or Vajrapāṇi.

3. The *Jātakas* of the *Bka' gdams glegs bam*

This consideration leads over to the main topic of this paper. It concerns a cycle of Tibetan *jātaka* stories which are not about the previous lives of the Buddha, but about the previous lives of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher of the eleventh century. I shall introduce this case in some detail, as it is well-suited to illustrate the way the *jātaka* genre was adopted and modified to serve specific purposes during the formative phase of Buddhism in Tibet. The stories originated within circles of the Bka' gdams pa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, one of the main lineages that emerged during the revival period of Buddhism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and they recount the previous incarnations of the founding figure of the Bka' gdams pa, 'Brom ston Rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas (1004–1064).

The notion of 'Brom ston as the founding figure of the Bka' gdams pa needs to be prefaced with a note of caution. As Dan Martin has very aptly pointed out, it is likely that those who are regarded as the founders of a school or tradition of Tibetan Buddhism did not have any notion of being a founder.¹⁷ The identification of a

¹⁷ [...] we have to stop thinking of most of the reputed founders of Tibetan

founding figure or a foundational event, such as the establishment of a monastic institution, are only understood in this way by later generations who regard themselves as part of the respective tradition. In the case of the Bka' gdams pa, the tradition came to regard itself as a school following the teachings of the Bengali master Atiśa/Adhīśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982–1054),¹⁸ who spent the last twelve years of his life in Tibet. They regard Atiśa's Tibetan disciple 'Brom ston Rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas, or 'Brom ston pa in short, as the 'progenitor of the Bka' gdams tradition', the *bka' gdams kyi mes po*.

The foundation of the monastery of Reting in 1056/57 is in later Bka' gdams histories described as a landmark event that marks the beginning of the school. However, it has been argued that the beginning of a self-definition as Bka' gdams pa is only traceable from approximately half a century later, around the end of the eleventh century after 'Brom ston pa's main disciples had established their own monasteries and began teaching larger groups.¹⁹ The terms used

sects as people who deliberately set about founding them. I think we have to go even further and doubt, rather than assume, the very concept of foundership. It generally takes some time for sectarian identities to become recognized in the culture at large as being meaningful or useful categories. And sometimes it is difficult to zero in on a particular time in history and identify it as the point at which a sect emerged into general consciousness.' Martin, 'The Book Moving Incident', 198.

¹⁸ His honorary title is rendered as 'Atiśa' by some scholars, and as 'Adhīśa' by others. The Tibetan tradition understands the Sanskrit title as an equivalent of Tibetan Jowo (*jo bo*) and Jowoje (*jo bo rje*). The Bka' gdams pa expert Helmut Eimer has argued that the form *atiśa* represents a short form of Sanskrit *atiśaya*, 'his eminence' (Eimer, *Berichte*, 18–22). This form appears like a good match for the Tibetan title *jo bo*, 'the lord'. The other form, *adhīśa* means 'the superior lord' and has been proposed more recently by Harunaga Isaacson and Francesco Sferra (*The Sekanirdeśa*, 70–71, note 51). It corresponds well to the Tibetan title *jo bo rje*, the 'lord of lords' or 'overlord'. Both forms are possible, and I currently do not see sufficient conclusive evidence to decide the case. In this paper I shall use the form Atiśa, not because it is necessarily the correct form, but simply because it seems to be more familiar to most academic readers.

¹⁹ See, for example, Martin, 'The Book Moving Incident', 199–200.

for those who follow the teachings of Atiśa vary and we find terms such as *jo bo pa* (followers of Jo bo [Atiśa]) and *jo bo'i bka' brgyud* (lineage of Jo bo [Atiśa]) alongside *bka' gdams* and *bka' gdams pa*.²⁰ The term *bka' gdams* is also sometimes used for the instructions of the Bka' gdams tradition rather than for the school itself, which makes the term slightly ambiguous in its meaning.

Three of 'Brom ston pa's disciples are regarded as the origin of three main transmission lineages. According to later histories of the Bka' gdams pa school (*Bka' gdams chos 'byung*), Po to ba initiated the lineage of the scriptural tradition (*gzhung pa*), Spyang snga ba the instructional tradition (*gdams ngag pa*), and Phu chung ba the local transmissions that were later compiled into the *Bka' gdams glegs bam* [Book of Kadam], which contains the *jātaka* stories that this paper will examine in more detail. Phu chung ba therefore plays a crucial role for our topic, even though his legacy is frustratingly elusive.

The early period of the Bka' gdams pa school in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is not well documented because orality played a major role and Tibetan literary composition was only just emerging. Most of the extant written literature dates from slightly later periods, and the authors back-project their own state of affairs onto the past. It is therefore hard to pin down when exactly the movement became solidified and from when the identification of the three main trans-

²⁰ The two works mentioned in note 3 presenting the instructions of Po to ba Rin chen gsal (1027–1105), the *Dpe chos rin chen spungs pa* and the *Be'u bum sngon po*, mostly use the designations *jo bo pa* and *jo bo'i bka' brgyud* for Atiśa's tradition. Similar expressions, including *jo bo pa*, *jo bo'i bka' brgyud*, *jo bo'i bka' srol*, and *a ti sha'i bka' brgyud*, are used in the works of the Bka' gdams pa master Sangs rgyas dbon ston (1138–1210) and in early works from the Dwags po bka' brgyud tradition (I thank Dr. Volker Caumanns and Professor Marta Sernesi for this information). Even though the term *bka' gdams pa* is occasionally used, it is not the standard designation for Atiśa's or 'Brom ston pa's tradition in these relatively early sources. This variety of names suggests that while a certain group coherence had already emerged, the group's identity as a 'school' with the name Bka' gdams pa was not fully developed yet.

missions became the mainstream view. However, we can point at specific works in which an attempt at constructing a school identity is particularly visible. The most striking example in this respect is the *Book of Kadam*, in Tibetan known as the *Bka' gdams glegs bam*, or simply the *Glegs bam* (hereafter, *The Book*).²¹

The Book as we know it consists of two main parts: the so-called *Pha chos* [Father Teachings], which is considered to contain teachings of Atiśa addressed to the 'father' of the tradition, 'Brom ston pa, and the so-called *Bu chos* (teachings for the 'sons' Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab and Khu ston Brtson grus g.yung drung). The *Pha chos* is centred around Atiśa's *Bodhisattvamanyāvali* [Jewel Garland of the Bodhisattva, Tib. *Byang chub sems dpa'i nor bu'i phreng ba*], a short work in verse that is based on his earlier *Vimalaratnalekha* [Epistle of Immaculate Jewels, Tib. *Dri ma med pa'i rin po che'i phrin yig*], a letter of Buddhist advice composed during his stay in Nepal. It also contains long dialogue sections outlining the content of the *Jewel Garland of the Bodhisattva* and instructions on the esoteric practice of the *Bka' gdams pa* known as the 'Sixteen Spheres' (Tib. *thig le bcu drug*). At some stage in the redaction process, several biographies of Atiśa were added at the beginning of the *Pha chos*.²² This stage is illustrated in the following diagram:²³

²¹ Major parts of this work have been translated into English. See Jinpa, trans., *The Book of Kadam: The Core Texts*. In her 2004 Ph.D. thesis, Amy Sims Miller analyses its significance in the construction of 'Brom ston pa's legacy, see Miller, 'Jewelled Dialogues'.

²² The transmission and redaction history of *The Book* has been investigated in Ehrhard, 'The Transmission of the *Thig-le bcu-drug*', and more recently by Sernesi, 'Bibliography and Cultural History'.

²³ See Sernesi, 'Bibliography and Cultural History'. *The Book* later underwent further rearrangements.

<i>First xylograph edition of The Book (1538–1539)</i>	
1. <i>Pha chos</i> , ‘father teachings’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-part biography of Atiśa • ‘Seal’ of <i>The Book</i> • Liberation Stories of the Lineage Masters • Explanation of the ‘Sixteen Spheres’ Practice • ‘Brom’s <i>Self-Exhortation</i> • <i>The Jewel Garland of the Bodhisattva</i> • <i>The Jewel Garland of Dialogues</i>
2. <i>Bu chos</i> , ‘son teachings’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twenty <i>jātakas</i> • ‘Seal’ • Two further <i>jātakas</i> • Prophecies • The Vajra Song • Miscellanea

The second part, the *Bu chos* contains twenty-two *jātaka* stories about ‘Brom ston pa’s previous incarnations. They follow the standard format of *jātakas* known from South Asia, with a narrative setting in the present that provides the frame for the story about the events in the past. However, instead of recounting previous lives of the Buddha, they feature the founding figures of the Bka’ gdams tradition. They are rendered by Atiśa to explain how ‘Brom ston pa developed the bodhisattva qualities outlined in the *Jewel Garland of the Bodhisattva*, and the central figure of the bodhisattva in these stories is therefore identified as the previous incarnation of ‘Brom ston pa. The two parts of *The Book* are thus closely related, and even though *The Book* is a compilation of separate parts and was redacted and rearranged over the years, it needs to be understood in its current form as a literary masterpiece creating a coherent vision of the Bka’ gdams tradition. Not much work has been done in this respect, because much of the research to date has focused on the historical aspects of the work’s origin and transmission. A doctoral thesis submitted by Amy Sims Miller in 2004 makes a first attempt to understand *The Book* as a literary unit and unpack its internal logic. However, much remains to be done, and this paper hopes to make a small contribution in this direction. We will see how, through narrative means, the stories contained in the *Bu chos* invest

the tradition with authority by elevating its founding figures Atiśa and 'Brom ston pa to the status of omniscient beings and linking them with the story of the conversion of Tibet brought about by the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

In doing so, *The Book* taps into the myth of Avalokiteśvara's manifestations in Tibet. As is well known, this bodhisattva of compassion plays a particular role in the Tibetan cultural consciousness. He is believed to have manifested in various successive forms, including a monkey forefather of the Tibetan people, as well as Tibet's first Buddhist king Srong btsan sgam po (seventh c.), on a mission to generate, educate, and convert the people of Tibet. This idea became popular in Tibet around the time when the Bka' gdams tradition emerged, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The narratives in *The Book* must therefore be viewed alongside other works from this period propagating the Avalokiteśvara myth, such as the *Bka' chems ka khol ma* [Pillar Testament] and the *Maṇi bka' 'bum* [Collected Teachings on Avalokiteśvara].²⁴

Of particular interest in this respect are the stories about 'Brom ston pa's previous incarnations contained in the *Bu chos*. These are called *skyes rabs* (incarnation accounts), the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit or Pāli term *jātaka*. To fully appreciate the narrative

²⁴ The *Bka' chems ka khol ma*, regarded as the 'testament' of King Srong btsan sgam po, is said to have been extracted from a pillar in the Jo khang temple in Lhasa by Atiśa in 1048, thus establishing a direct link between the Avalokiteśvara mythology and the Bka' gdams pa. The slightly later *Maṇi bka' 'bum* (twelfth–thirteenth c.) develops the Avalokiteśvara narrative further; see Kapstein, 'Remarks on the *Maṇi Bka'-'bum*'. Similar themes were integrated into the fourteenth-century historical work *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* by Sa skya bla ma dam pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, see Sørensen, *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*. The concept of Avalokiteśvara's repeated interventions in Tibetan history was re-deployed later to identify the Dalai Lamas as manifestations of Avalokiteśvara and reincarnations of 'Brom ston pa, who in turn was regarded as a reincarnation of King Srong btsan sgam po. Thus, the Dalai Lama lineage came to be viewed as part of the salvation story of Tibet under the tutelage of Avalokiteśvara.

structure of these stories, it will be useful to compare them against the typical structure of the pre-birth stories of Buddha Śākyamuni preserved in Pāli. Here, the *jātaka* narratives are contained in the para-canonical story collection known as the *Jātakātṭhavaṇṇanā*, and they follow the following recurring pattern:

1. *Paccupannavatthu*, the story of the present, in which Buddha Śākyamuni is in conversation with his disciples. To explain why specific events occurred in the present, he offers to tell a story about the past which will clarify the karmic conditions that led to these events.
2. *Atītavatthu*, the story of the past, renders episodes from previous lives of Buddha Śākyamuni and his disciples. In these stories, the Buddha's previous incarnations are called *bodhisatta*, a being that is due to become a Buddha in a later existence.²⁵ The story of the past also includes stanzas (Skt. *gāthā*), spoken as part of the narrative, which are considered to be earlier than the prose stories and are the only part of the *jātaka* collection that is actually part of the Pāli canon itself.²⁶
3. *Samodhāna*, the identification of the characters in the story of the past with the people of the present. The *bodhisatta* of the past is now Buddha Śākyamuni, and other characters are now his disciples, such as Sāriputta or Ānanda, or other individuals who interact with the Buddha. The Buddha's ability to know the three times—past, present, and future—and to see the karmic connections across time is related to his status as an omniscient, awakened being.

As Naomi Appleton has pointed out in her excellent book *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*:

²⁵ The *bodhisatta* of the Pāli *jātakas* should not be confounded with the Great Bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna such as Avalokiteśvara or Mañjuśrī.

²⁶ The stanzas are part of the *Khuddakanikāya*. For a survey see von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 41–64.

[T]he very concept of a *jātaka* is inextricably tied up in the Buddha's biography, and can be traced back to the moment of the Buddha's awakening. According to several well-known passages in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the Bodhisatta had three different realisations during each of the three watches of the night in which he became awakened. In the first watch of the night he saw his previous births:

I recollected manifold past lives [...]: 'I was there so-named, of such a race, with such an appearance, such food, such experience of pleasure and pain, such a life term ... and passing away thence I appeared here' – thus with details and particulars I recollected my manifold past life. This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night.

[... I]n the second watch of the night the Bodhisatta saw the effects of actions:

I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, happy and unhappy in their destinations. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions...²⁷

What the Buddha here realises is the functioning of karma that determines where and how a being is reborn, and how their circumstances and experiences are shaped by their past actions. This understanding of karma across lives prepares him for the insight that constitutes his awakening, namely, why beings suffer in the cycle of rebirth, and how this can be remedied. He is now an awakened being, a Buddha, with a full understanding of the causal chain between past, present, and future. He has therefore gained the ability to teach others how to end the cycle of rebirth by eliminating the conditions driving the chain of rebirth after rebirth. The knowledge about previous lives, such as those rendered in *jātakas*, was the first step towards awakening, and *jātakas* will become a means to teach others about the karmic chain of cause and effect across lives.

With this background in mind, we can now return to the *jātakas* of the *Bu chos* within *The Book*. Their structure follows the structure known from Indian *jātaka* stories. Here, however, the stories are

²⁷ Appleton, *Jātaka Stories*, 44–45.

not told by the Buddha, but by Atiśa, who is in conversation with his closest Tibetan disciples, and the main character in the stories of the past is not the *bodhisatta* of the Pāli *jātakas*, but previous incarnations of Atiśa's Tibetan student 'Brom ston pa. The stories themselves are not borrowed from India but are original Tibetan creations. Nevertheless, they follow established narrative patterns and are in accordance with the general spirit of the *jātakas* as they illustrate how past behaviour and past virtues have led to the behaviours and virtues of the characters in the present.

The stories of the past are usually set in India. However, they are not entirely consistent in maintaining the Indian setting. For example, the first story²⁸ begins in the Indian city of Varanasi but then continues in Mdo khams in Eastern Tibet. The names of the main characters are mostly Indian, sometimes rendered phonetically and sometimes in a Tibetan translation of the Indian name. On occasion, the *jātakas* incorporate Indian or Indic materials alongside genuinely Tibetan elements. For example, the twenty-first story of the *Bu chos*²⁹ consists of a narrative cycle about a parrot who prevents the lady of the house from committing adultery. The parrot does this by telling her intriguing stories which keep her at home in the evenings, eager to hear more, instead of going to meet her lover. The idea is the same as in the Indian story collection known as the *Sukasaptati* [Seventy Tales of the Parrot], but the stories themselves are different from their Indian counterparts. Most of the tales of the Tibetan version are set in India, but sometimes this Indian setting is abandoned. For example, the third tale presents a story about a certain Prince Gesar who is equipped with magic objects that enable him to achieve his aims: magic boots, a magic bag that can produce food, a magic cloak that makes him invisible, and a magic flower that can transform humans into monkeys and vice versa. Some of these magic items resemble those

²⁸ 'Dge ba'i bshes gnyen pa bram ze'i khye'u gsal bar ji ltar skye ba bzhes pa'i le'u', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 1–24.

²⁹ 'Bshes gnyen pa sprul pa'i bya sro long kun tu rgyur ji ltar skye ba bzhes pa'i le'u', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 657–701.

of the Tibetan epic hero King Gesar, which demonstrates that some Tibetan narrative motifs have found their way into the *jātaka* stories of the *Bu chos*.

Moreover, the stories of the *Bu chos* introduce elements that relate to historical events within the Bka' gdams tradition. They refer to the bodhisattva's incarnation as 'Brom ston pa, the foundation of the monastery of Reting (Tib. Rwa sgreng), and the emergence of the Bka' gdams tradition itself. For example, the fifth story³⁰ explains how 'Brom ston pa in his previous incarnation as Prince Dkon mchog 'bangs went on a quest to find the wisdom *dākinī* Gsang ba ye shes and bring her home as his bride. In this context, she makes a pledge to stay with him in the future, and we are told that later Dkon mchog 'bangs incarnated in Tibet as King Srong btsan sgam po and Gsang ba ye shes as the princess of the Tang dynasty who became his wife in 641. Later, he incarnated as 'Brom ston pa, and Gsang ba ye shes took up permanent residence in a large rock near 'Brom ston pa's monastery of Reting. This rock is still venerated as the seat of the wisdom *dākinī* Gsang ba ye shes today.

In the sixth story³¹ we learn how, in his previous incarnation as Dad pa brtan pa, 'Brom ston pa won the support of two serpent spirits (Skt. *nāga*, Tib. *klu*) who would later reside at Reting monastery. The story also introduces the figure of 'Phying dkar ba, the main protector deity of the monastery of Reting. The nineteenth *jātaka* of the *Bu chos*³² presents the story of 'Brom ston pa's birth as Lha'i rgyal po and introduces a certain sage Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna, a manifestation of a bodhisattva, who will later come to Tibet. In the course of events, extensive prophecies are made about the appearance of Buddha Śākyamuni as well as the future Buddhist kings of Tibet, the foundation of the monastery of Reting, and some of the main

³⁰ 'Dge ba'i bshes gnyen pa yul bde ldan du rgyal bu dkon mchog 'bangs su sku skye ba bzhes pa'i le'u', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 97–205.

³¹ 'Dge ba'i bshes gnyen pa yul bham ga lar rgyal bu dad pa brtan par sku skye ba bzhes pa'i le'u', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 206–303.

³² 'Chu bo ya mu na'i gling du / dge ba'i bshes gnyen pa lha'i rgyal por sku skye ba bzhes pa'i le'u', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 479–536.

teachers of the Bka' gdams pa school. The logic of the narrative suggests that the stories are set in the distant past, prior to the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, but the exact time is not specified. The prophecies make ample use of the well-known trope of *snyigs ma'i dus*, the degenerate times in which the Buddhist dharma is in decline and the intervention of bodhisattva kings and Buddhist masters is needed to protect the people of Tibet. Thus, they integrate the main figures of the Tibetan Bka' gdams pa tradition into the wider picture of Buddhist history and give them a significant role in the unfolding of dharma on earth.

A particularly striking feature is the way in which the narrative frame of these *jātaka* tales is constructed. While Indian *jātakas* form part of the life story of Buddha Śākyamuni and his disciples, the stories of the present in the *Bu chos* are set in Tibet. They take place at the hermitage of Brag Yer pa in Central Tibet, and the main dialogue partners are Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna and his Tibetan disciples 'Brom ston pa and Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab, sometimes joined by other disciples or lay patrons.

The frame story of the first *jātaka* may serve as an example. Atiśa's disciple Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab asks 'Brom ston pa how he developed the mental qualities of a bodhisattva, and more specifically how he managed to give up all doubt. This is a reference to the first stanza of Atiśa's poem *Bodhisattvamanyāvali*, which is included in the *Pha chos* of *The Book* and starts: 'Give up all doubt and strive with dedication in your practice'.³³ In response, 'Brom at first declines Rngog's request to explain how he developed this quality in his past lives. First of all, he says he is just an ordinary person and he is not sure that he really *has* given up all doubts. Secondly, he does not have any knowledge about his previous lives. Rngog appeals to Atiśa saying that surely 'Brom had developed this specific bodhisattva quality, and he asks Atiśa to reveal how this had happened so that he and future generations could learn from it. Atiśa explains: 'His good qualities are so great that they are difficult for others to comprehend.

³³ 'The tshom thams cad spang bya zhing // bsgrub la nan tan gces su bya //', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Pha chos*, 607.

Therefore, you should not speak of them to others. However, I shall explain some of this, so that you can grasp them'.³⁴

The theme of secrecy comes up repeatedly in the *jātakas*, and on various occasions Atiśa and 'Brom ston pa explain that the knowledge of the past and the workings of karma across lives are difficult to grasp and profound, and should therefore not be revealed to others or put down in writing. While Indian *jātaka* stories are widely and freely disseminated, the *jātakas* of the *Bu chos* are thus given the aura of esoteric knowledge. At first sight, this may seem odd, as the stories themselves do not contain anything that would usually fall within the realm of esoteric transmissions. Is the call for secrecy an attempt to create the notion of an inner circle of those who are initiated into this knowledge, inclusive only of those who were present when the stories were told, and including the reader of the *Bu chos* stories who is thus integrated into this exclusive circle? Or is it an attempt to pre-empt potential criticism of the way 'Brom ston is elevated to bodhisattva rank in these narratives? By saying that the workings of karma are difficult to understand and that individuals without faith will not have the capacity to grasp this profound knowledge, any doubt about the incarnation stories can be dismissed as ignorance. Or is the call for secrecy and the injunction against writing them down an attempt to explain why the stories were not publicly known for several generations, until *The Book* was finally compiled in writing at Narthang in 1302?

Any and all of the above motivations may have played a role. In this context, we also need to consider how the *jātakas* are embedded in the narrative programme of *The Book* as a whole. They are told to illustrate specific verses of the *Bodhisattvaṃyāvali* contained in the first part of *The Book*, the *Pha chos*. The *Pha chos* itself contains a long section of dialogues that are exclusively devoted to an elucidation of the *Bodhisattvaṃyāvali* by explaining how the bodhisattva qualities described in the poem are embodied by 'Brom ston pa.

³⁴ 'Yon tan shin tu che ste gzhan gyi blor shor bar dka' / khyod kyis gzhan la bshad du mi rung / khyod rang gzung bar bya ba'i phyir cung zad bshad kyis...', *Bka' gdams glegs bam, Bu chos*, 2.

These dialogues are presented in a question-and-answer format. They begin with fairly tangible and ordinary topics, but the conversation gradually shifts to a more sublime level. While the beginning is set in the hermitage of Brag Yer pa or at Atiśa's residence in Snye thang, in the course of the conversation, Atiśa uses his magic powers (Tib. *rdzu 'phrul*) to create a palace of light, where the remainder of the questions and answers take place. Eventually, 'Brom ston reveals his heart, which is seen to contain the four main meditation deities of the Bka' gdams pa tradition.³⁵ The scene shifts into what is called *dag snang* (pure vision) in Tibetan. The clan name 'Brom is changed into a 'secret' name consisting of the mantra syllable 'Bhrūṃ, and in the final sections of the dialogues Atiśa addresses 'Brom ston pa as 'Bhrūṃ rje (Master 'Bhrūṃ). Here, we have indeed entered an esoteric level that is not accessible to beings with ordinary perception. Given that in the arrangement of *The Book* the *jātaka* stories of the *Bu chos* follow the dialogues of the *Pha chos* and illustrate their meaning by explaining the conditions generated in the past, they must be considered part of this esoteric knowledge too. This adds an additional layer of reasons why they are presented as an esoteric knowledge, reserved for the chosen few who are able to understand them.

One further crucial aspect needs to be addressed here. We saw that in the life story of Buddha Śākyamuni, the knowledge of his previous lives immediately preceded his awakening. In Indian Buddhism, the knowledge of the past and the future is considered one of the supernatural knowledges (P. *abhiññā*, Skt. *abhijñā*), alongside such abilities as reading other people's minds or the ability to hear human and divine voices. These can be obtained through meditation and are not reserved for the Buddha alone. Only the last of the six supernatural knowledges, the knowledge of how to eliminate the defilements that bind sentient beings to the cycle of existence, is specific to a fully awakened Buddha.³⁶ Knowledge of the three times, past present and future, is, however, a necessary element of the omniscience ascribed to a Buddha.

³⁵ Namely, Buddha Śākyamuni, Avalokiteśvara, Acala, and Tārā.

³⁶ Appleton, *Jātaka Stories*, 45.

Atiśa's ability to recount the stories of previous lives and explain their karmic connections with the present therefore characterises him as an accomplished Buddhist practitioner with supernatural knowledge. We may even go one step further. Within the narrative structure of the *jātakas*, Atiśa takes the position in which we would normally expect to find Buddha Śākyamuni. Like Buddha Śākyamuni, Atiśa is asked for instruction, tells the story of the past, and makes the connection with the present by identifying the main characters of the story with the individuals in the present. Like the Buddha of the Indian *jātakas*, he is the omniscient narrator. This is a powerful narrative way of replacing the figure of the highest authority in the Buddhist tradition—the Buddha himself—with the Indian authority of the Bka' gdams tradition, Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrīñāna. The correspondences in the narrative structure are shown in the table below.

Pāli <i>Jātakas</i>	<i>Jātakas</i> of the <i>Bu chos</i>
1. <i>Story of the present</i> : Śākyamuni and his disciples	1. <i>Story of the present</i> : Atiśa and his disciples
2. <i>Story of the past</i> told by the Buddha and dealing with his past lives	2. <i>Story of the past</i> told by Atiśa and dealing with 'Brom ston pa's past lives
3. Gāthā verses	3. Verses from the <i>Bodhisattvaṃyāvali</i>
4. <i>Identification</i> : Characters from the story of the past = the Buddha and his audience	4. <i>Identification</i> : Characters from the story of the past = Atiśa, 'Brom ston pa, and other disciples of Atiśa

Atiśa occupies the role of the omniscient narrator, a role that would normally be reserved for the Buddha, and the *jātaka* stories place 'Brom ston pa in the role of the bodhisattva, the Buddha-to-be, as the main character in the stories of the past.

4. Conclusion

The narrative elevation of teachers active in eleventh-century Tibet to a rank similar to the Buddha, accomplished by literary means, is a bold move, and this specific literary device is, as far as I am aware, unparalleled within the Tibetan literature of this period. The creators of *The Book* must therefore be seen as innovators of the tradition. They played an active part in the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism by creatively adapting narrative norms to their own context.

The *jātaka* stories use a well-known narrative pattern for their own ends, shifting the focus from India to Tibet, and putting the founding figures of the newly emerging Bka' gdams tradition centre stage. The narrative pattern employed in these stories imbues the Buddhist teachers of Tibet with authority and superhuman knowledge, parallel to that of the Buddha, and elevates figures of Tibetan history to the status of major players in the history of Buddhism itself.

The narrative format conveys its message discretely, without having to give explicit explanations of this shift. The deliberate use of the *jātaka* frame is all it takes to shift the emphasis of the story from India to Tibet and to make Buddhism something truly Tibetan, with its destiny playing out on the Tibetan plateau, and driven by figures of authority within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Buddhism thus becomes part of the story of Tibet, in step with the general process of adoption and assimilation of Buddhism that took place in Tibet during the Buddhist revival period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Buddhist narrative was a powerful tool in this process, and attention to narrative patterns helps us to understand better why and how Buddhism gained such great popularity on the Tibetan plateau during this period. Similar processes of adoption and adaptation can be observed concerning other forms of narrative and other Asian countries.

Narrative was thus instrumental in spreading the message of Buddhism in different societies and environments by integrating the universal message of the Buddhist doctrine into the local and specific cultural contexts of those who narrated the stories and their audiences.

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Abbreviations

- BDRC Buddhist Digital Resource Centre, <https://library.bdrc.io/>
 D Derge blockprint edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. See Secondary Sources, Barber, A. W., ed. Numbers correspond to those in Ui, Suzuki, Kanakura, and Tada, eds., *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons*.
 P Peking blockprint edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. Numbers correspond to those in the Otani catalogue. See Secondary Sources, Suzuki, ed., *The Tibetan Tripitaka*.

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