SELF-SACRIFICE FOR A TINY TEACHING:
HEARING AND KNOWING
IN THE ‘VERSE OF DHARMA’ JĀTAKA STORIES

NAOMI APPLETON

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative study of a cluster of stories in which the Buddha-to-be makes a sacrifice – of flesh, family members or wealth – in exchange for a single verse of teaching. The exploration of these stories seeks to establish neither a chronology nor the reasons for variation between versions, though some such analysis is integral to the paper. The aim is rather to explore the themes and concerns that might explain the remarkable prevalence of these stories overall, and their place within early ideas about the Buddha, Bodhisattva and dharma. The paper argues that these tales reveal new perspectives on the oft-studied relationship between Buddha and dharma, and between the Buddha’s physical body and his body of teachings. In addition, they encourage audiences to value the dharma as both a universal truth and a set of teachings available to us; teachings that are worth hearing but – more than that – worth understanding.

1 This research forms part of the project “Comparative Buddhology in Indian Narrative Literature” funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (2020–2023, AH/T009411/1), and I am grateful to the funder as well as my collaborator Chris V. Jones for their support of this work. Versions of this paper were presented in Cambridge in February 2020, UCLA in May 2021, and Oxford in February 2022, and I am grateful to the audiences for their feedback, especially Reiko Ohnuma, who sent comments on the most recent paper by email. I am also indebted to Chris Austin, Brian Black and Jonathan Geen for their discussion of an earlier draft, which gave me much food for thought (if you’ll pardon the pun), and to Natalie Gummer and Chris V. Jones who offered extremely valuable feedback on a later draft. As a very recent learner of Chinese, I am indebted to the excellent online tools for the study of Buddhist texts, including CBETA, the SAT Daizōkyō database, the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, and Michael Radich’s CBC@ database; I am also hugely grateful to Janine Nicol for making the stories of the Liudu ji jing available in English, and inspiring and assisting me as I attempt to learn some Chinese myself. As always, I am overwhelmed by gratitude for the collegiality in my field, and take full ownership for any remaining errors.
Introduction

Once upon a time, in the city of Varanasi, there lived a king called Surūpa, or “Handsome.”2 Surūpa was an excellent king, ruling his subjects with compassion and generosity, and the kingdom was prosperous and happy, a land of plenty. Surūpa had a wife, and a single son, both of whom matched him in looks and virtue (looks and virtue being, of course, inherently linked in the Indian Buddhist karmic system).

But Surūpa was not happy, for he desired teachings. His greatest wish was to hear some dharma – a teaching that encapsulated the Truth with a capital T. But when he asked his ministers to find him someone who could teach him the dharma, they replied that dharma is very hard to find, for it appears only with the arising of buddhas. With no Buddha in the world, there was no dharma to be found. Undeterred, the king had a large golden casket paraded through his kingdom, with the declaration that anyone who could provide a verse of dharma would be given the casket and much more besides. Nobody came forwards.

Śakra, also known as Indra, king of the gods, understood Surūpa’s longing for a teaching, and decided to test his commitment to this goal. He took on the form of a yakṣa, approached the king and offered to teach him the dharma. The king was delighted and begged to hear it. But the yakṣa was hungry, and pointed out that you can’t teach when you’re hungry (a fact that many of us can probably relate to). So the king offered to provide the yakṣa with any food he wished. The yakṣa replied that only fresh flesh would do, and requested that the king give up his only son, Sundara.

The king was distraught. “After such a long time I finally have the chance to hear the dharma, but at a price it is not worth,” he wailed. Hearing this, Prince Sundara interjected, declaring his willingness to be eaten, and insisting that his father should fulfil his longing for the dharma.

2 What follows is a summary of a story found in Avadānaśataka 35, with the verse and some key phrases directly translated. For a full translation see Appleton 2020: 180–183, and for the Sanskrit Speyer (ed.) 1906: 187–192.
So the king, for the sake of the *dharma*, gave away his only son, who was cherished and dear,\(^3\) and entirely without fault.

The *yakṣa* – or rather the god Śakra in disguise – made it look as though he was crunching on the boy’s bones, drinking his blood, and tearing at his flesh, but the king was unmoved, dedicated to the *dharma*. When the *yakṣa* declared “I’m not full!” the king gave him his queen to eat,\(^4\) and again watched as the *yakṣa* ripped her limb from limb and gobbled her up. “I’m still hungry!” said the *yakṣa*: “Feed me your own body!” “But if you eat me,” reasoned the king, “how will I be able to hear the *dharma*? Teach me the *dharma* first, and then you can do with me as you wish.” And so the *yakṣa* spoke this single verse of *dharma*:

Grief is born from what is dear.
Fear is born from what is dear.
For those who are free from what is dear,
there is no grief, and how could there be fear?\(^5\)

The king was delighted with this verse of teaching, and willingly offered himself to the *yakṣa*. Seeing that King Surūpa’s dedication to the *dharma* was so unshakeable, Śakra revealed his true form, and restored the king’s wife and son to him, safe and well. Praising him, Śakra declared that it would surely not be long before Surūpa became a *buddha*.

And Śakra’s prediction was correct, for this story is a *jātaka*, or past-life story of the Buddha, a genre of narrative ubiquitous in Indian Buddhism. King Surūpa is the Buddha in a past life, while he was a Bodhisattva, a being on the path to buddhahood. The story in this occurrence is also an *avadāna*, a story of karmic consequences, and comes from the *Avadānaśataka*, a collection of one hundred multi-life stories from the Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda school of Indian Buddhism, compiled sometime during the first half of the first millennium of the

\(^3\) There is a pun here, as also in other related stories, where *iṣṭa* is used to describe the cherished/sacrificed, as past participle of both *yaj* (to sacrifice) and *iṣ* (to desire, wish, cherish).

\(^4\) Perhaps we are to assume that, like her son, Surūpa’s wife was willing to be sacrificed; however, this is not stated, and the king has no hesitation in offering her.

\(^5\) *priyebhyo jāyate śokaḥ priyebhyo jāyate bhayam // priyebhyo vipramuktāṇāṃ nāsti śokaḥ kuto bhayam iti //* Speyer (ed.) 1906: 191, in my translation.
Common Era. However, similar stories are found across a range of Buddhist schools and textual collections, and in this article I treat them as a “story cluster.” I will explain this notion further below, but in simple terms a story cluster is a group of related stories. In this case the cluster is of stories in which the Bodhisattva makes a great sacrifice in return for a single verse of teaching, and I will refer to such stories as “verse-of-dharma” stories.

In addition to the story of Surūpa there is a second similar story in the Avadānaśataka, this time with the Bodhisattva jumping into a fiery pit in exchange for a verse, and this also occurs in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. Two verse-of-dharma stories, including one close parallel to the Surūpa story and another involving jumping off a mountain, are known in Pāli and vernacular traditions from the Theravāda world. The
Mahāvastu includes a verse-of-dharma story as well as referring to such sacrifices for the sake of the teaching in an account of the stages of the bodhisattva career. More courtly Sanskrit verse-of-dharma stories appear in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā, a kāvya or poetic composition from perhaps the fourth or fifth century CE that includes a story of the Bodhisattva jumping into a fire in exchange for a verse, and in the eleventh-century Avadānakalpalatā, which contains two accounts. One of the stories in the latter text identifies the Bodhisattva with the generous King Śibi, and this tradition is also present in the Tibetan Karmaśataka (Tib. las brgya tham pa), as well as the expansive Chinese Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra (T374). This type of story is also mentioned in the list of great Bodhisattva-deeds in Mahāyāna texts such as the Rāṣtrapālapariprcchā and Bhadrakalpikasūtra, as well as in the 10th century Khotanese Jātakastava. An early Chinese jātaka text, the Liudu ji jing (T152), offers a rather different take on the verse-of-dharma story gods (Berkwitz 2013: 91). See also Fickle 1978: 138–196 for a comparative analysis of this story across different Paññāsajātaka and related versions.


11 For Haribhaṭṭa’s text see Hahn (ed.) 2011: number 3, and Khoroche (trans.) 2017: 26–3. For a translation and discussion of the Avadānakalpalatā stories see Granoff 1991–1992. Straube 2009 offers the text of these in Sanskrit and Tibetan, as well as German translation, and also compares the Avadānakalpalatā and Haribhaṭṭa’s text, placing it within a broader context of transmission.


13 T374:12.450a–b; Yamamoto (trans.) 1973–1975: 351–353. See Radich 2019: 535–542 for a discussion of this story in relation to the artistic programme of the sixth-century “Sengchou’s cave,” which is heavily influenced by the Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra; pp. 536–537, n. 62 provides references to the depiction of the story (and its verse) elsewhere in East Asia. The relevant story is only found in Dharmakṣema’s rendition of the text, which is far longer than any other rendition and includes a whole range of other material of likely Central Asian or Chinese origin. I am grateful to Chris Jones for pointing out Radich’s article and helping me understand the Chinese Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra texts, on which see also Jones 2021: 29–33.

14 In the Rāṣtrapālapariprcchā the deed is referred to twice, once in the list of fifty past-life deeds in part 1 (verse 114 in Boucher 2008: 131; Finot (ed.) 1901: 22), and then again in the opening of part 2 (verse 11 in Boucher 2008: 144; Finot (ed.) 1901: 36); it is worth noting that the list of fifty jātakas is not found in the earliest Chinese translation.
in its discussion of the perfection of vigour,\textsuperscript{15} while the fifth century Chinese \textit{Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish} (T202, \textit{Xianyu jing}) offers five such stories as reminders to the Buddha of his commitment to teaching,\textsuperscript{16} and the \textit{Da zhidu lun} (T1509) includes the story in its discussion of the perfection of giving.\textsuperscript{17}

These stories are summarised in Table 1, and form the focus of this article. There are also other occurrences of the story across Asia, where verse-of-\textit{dharma} stories remained popular over many centuries, that are not included here. Further evidence of their popularity may be gleaned from the fact that the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang mentions a site in the northwest of India associated with the events.\textsuperscript{18} This article does not attempt exhaustive coverage, since that would be neither possible in the space nor particularly illuminating.\textsuperscript{19} Rather, it will explore a set of early examples of this widespread story cluster.

\textsuperscript{15} T152:3.32a20–b16. The text is traditionally said to have been translated into Chinese in the mid 3\textsuperscript{rd} century CE, though some stories may be later and there is no evidence of a single Indic precursor. A French translation can be found in Chavannes (trans.) 1910: 213–216, and a full English translation by Janine Nicol is forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{16} The relevant chapter is the opening of the text (T202:4.349a6–352b18) called \textit{Fan­tian qingfa liushi} 梵天請法六事 “The god Brahmā requests the \textit{dharma} on six occasions.” This presumably refers to Brahmā telling six stories to support his case that the Buddha should teach; only five of these stories are about the Bodhisattva’s self-sacrifice for a verse of \textit{dharma}. See discussion below for further details.

\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Da zhidu lun} is a commentary to the larger \textit{Prajñāpāramitāsūtra} traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna, though this attribution is questionable and no Indic version is extant. The gift of body (in this case turned into a lamp) in exchange for a verse is given as an example of inner giving, in contrast to external gifts (T1509:25.143b29–143c10; Lamotte [trans.] 1944–1981: vol. 2, 688–691). The choice of this particular variant is strange since other tales of self-immolation across Buddhist literature tend to be in devotion to a Buddhist shrine or figure, not in exchange for something. The tale does resonate with one in the \textit{Xianyu jing}, however, so it is not an isolated example of this motif.

\textsuperscript{18} The account is brief: “This was the place where the Tathāgata once in a former life forsook his life to hear half a stanza of the Dharma.” Li Rongxi (trans.) 1996: 85.

\textsuperscript{19} The table does provide all the “early” (broadly defined) examples of which I am currently aware, but the list continued to grow even after the article was accepted for publication, and the result is likely still not exhaustive.
Table 1. The ‘Verse of dharma’ Story Cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Sacrifice</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Avadānaśatāka</em> 35, <em>Surūpa</em></td>
<td>son and wife and own life</td>
<td>attachment causes grief</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Avadānaśatāka</em> 38, <em>Dharmaga-veśin</em></td>
<td>jumps into fire</td>
<td>follow the <em>dharma</em> and be good</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya</em> (Tib. and Chin.) *Subhāṣit-</td>
<td>jumps into fire</td>
<td>follow the <em>dharma</em> and be good</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Haribhattach’s Jātakamālā</em> 3, <em>Dharmakāma</em></td>
<td>jumps into fire</td>
<td>give gifts and do good</td>
<td>evil brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mahāparinirvānadhāsuṭra</em> (<em>大般涅槃經</em>, T374)</td>
<td>jumps out of tree</td>
<td>everything is impermanent</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Liudu ji jing</em> (六度集經,T152) 55</td>
<td>pierces his skin with needles</td>
<td>guard your speech, thought and action</td>
<td>Devadatta as ordinary man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Xianyu jing</em> (<em>賢愚經</em>, T202) 1</td>
<td>wife and child; body as lamps; body pierced; jumps into fire; copies text using skin and bone</td>
<td>everything is impermanent in three variations; avoid evil and pursue good in two variations</td>
<td>Vaiśravaṇa as demon; brahmin; Śakra disguised as brahmin; brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Da zhidu lun</em> (<em>大智度論</em>, T1509)</td>
<td>makes body into lamp</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Avadānačalpalatā</em> 53, <em>Subhāṣitaga-veśin</em></td>
<td>jumps off cliff</td>
<td>avoid evil and pursue good</td>
<td>hunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Avadānačalpalatā</em> 91, <em>Śibi-subhāṣit-agaveśin</em></td>
<td>own flesh as food</td>
<td>everything is impermanent</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Karmaśataka</em> (Tib.) 10.9: Two stories about King Śibi</td>
<td>own flesh as food; crushes body between boards full of nails</td>
<td>everything is impermanent</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paññāsajātaka</em> (and also wider Pāli and vernacular literature): Dhammasoṇḍaka</td>
<td>jumps off mountain</td>
<td>everything is impermanent</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paññāsajātaka</em>: Surūpa</td>
<td>wife and son</td>
<td>avoid evil and pursue good</td>
<td>Śakra as demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mahāvastu</em>: Surūpa the king of deer</td>
<td>own life</td>
<td>virtue is better than wealth</td>
<td>Śakra as hunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mahāvastu</em>: <em>Daśabhūmikasūtra</em>, Third Bhūmi</td>
<td>multiple, inc. wealth, land, flesh, family</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>various, inc. brahmin, demon, poor man, hunter, slave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā</em> 1.114 and 2.11</td>
<td>jumps off cliff; jumps into fiery pit</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhadrakalpikasūtra</em> (Tib.): three mentions illustrating perfection of forbearance</td>
<td>servitude; head; jump into fire</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>outcaste; not specified; not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khotanese <em>Jātakastava</em>: at least three separate mentions</td>
<td>jumps of mountain; gives whole earth; jumps into fire</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>demon; brahmin; not specified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *Mahāvastu* is worth a closer examination as a case study in the complexity of this story cluster. In this early narrative collection linked...
to the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda school, we find not only a stand-alone verse-of-dharma story – that of Surūpa the deer who receives a verse of teaching from a hunter – but also a whole series of stories mapped onto a particular stage of the bodhisattva path, namely the third bhūmi: we are told that during this stage of the bodhisattva career, bodhisattvas will do anything in order to access even a small nugget of teaching. Eight specific examples are given – identified as past-lives of the Buddha of our time – including the sacrifice of his wife and son, his head, his heart, all his possessions, the four continents, and the whole of Jambudvīpa, each time in return for a single well-spoken (subhāṣita) verse. In addition, we are told that bodhisattvas will also sacrifice their own eyes, or throw themselves off a cliff, or into a fire, or out of a boat, in return for a teaching. The association of this bhūmi with sacrifice-for-the-teaching is maintained in the Daśabhūmikasūtra that features within the text commonly known as the Avataṃsakasūtra (Mahāvaipulya Buddhaṃsaka to give its full title), though without any illustrative stories.

The list of sacrifices made in exchange for a verse of teaching during the third bhūmi combines a desire to glorify the unbelievable great deeds of the Buddha of our own time with a desire to systematise the understanding of what it means to be on the path to buddhahood in general. This double purpose is key to understanding the jātaka genre: stories of the past lives of the Buddha of our time (Gautama or Śākyamuni) are not just about his quest for buddhahood, but about buddhahood as a state achievable by others as well; this is true even before and outside the

---

20 On the school affiliation of the Mahāvastu see Tournier 2017: 3–5. As Tournier has shown, the text originated as part of a vinaya. However, taken as a separate text, I suggest it is best viewed as a narrative exploration of buddhology.

21 My thanks to Vincent Tournier for his helpful comments on the Daśabhūmikasūtra (email correspondence May 2020; see also Tournier 2017, especially chapter 2). For the relevant passages of the Avataṃsakasūtra, or, more correctly, Buddhāvataṃsaka, see Cleary (trans.) 1993: 722–723, 726–729. Although the Buddhāvataṃsaka maintains the general association of stage three with seeking even a single verse of teaching (including through leaping into a fire where necessary, amongst other possible sacrifices listed), there are no stories or references to Śākyamuni Buddha’s past-life activities to support this. As such, the Buddhāvataṃsaka will not feature in my analysis; neither will I comment on how self-sacrifice for the dharma fits into discussions of the bhūmis, since this is beyond the scope of the current article.
Mahāyāna literature. Stories such as these therefore imply that sacrifice in exchange for a single verse of teaching is not only something done by our Buddha, but something necessary of all buddhas. As such, these tales speak to fundamental ideas about the relationship between buddhahood and the dharma.

Given how widespread these stories are, and how conceptually interesting they are, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to them thus far. Several scholars have noted the parallels and listed versions, but little has been said about their conceptual content. Although she notes their existence as a sub-genre, Ohnuma excludes them from her study of gift-of-the-body jātaka, as she considers them to constitute an exchange rather than a gift (2007: 49–50). Individual stories have been given some attention: Granoff (1991–1992) has offered a translation and valuable analysis of the two relevant tales in the Avadānakalpalatā, but her comments speak mostly to connections with Brahmanical literature and the theme of initiation into a teaching. In a study of self-sacrifice in the Paññāsajātaka tradition, Sheravanichkul (2008) has pointed out that the two examples therein are part of a wider tendency towards stories of devotional self-sacrifice, in other words sacrifices made to serve the Buddha, dharma or saṅgha. Berkwitz (2013: chapter 3) discusses the sixteenth-century Sinhalese rendition by Alagiyavanna, with a focus on the poetics and politics of this Portuguese-era poet; the same story across Pāli and Thai tradition features in Fickle’s 1978 analysis of Paññāsajātaka traditions. Straube’s 2009 comparison of the stories in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā and the Avadānakalpalatā includes an extensive comparison of different versions in wider Buddhist literature and highlights textual connections and likely influences; however, his concerns are text-historical and philological, and he offers little comment on the conceptual or thematic questions raised by the stories.

It is possible that the lack of scholarly interest in the stories relates to an even more striking absence: there are no such stories amongst the “classical” jātakas of the Pāli Jātakatthavāṇṇanā.²² They are by no

---

²² In this terminology, distinguishing between the “classical” Jātakatthavāṇṇanā and the “non-classical” Paññāsajātaka tradition, I follow Skilling 2006, which also serves as an excellent introduction to the Paññāsajātaka genre.
means absent from Theravāda tradition, for two are found in the South-
east Asian *Paññāsajātaka* collection in both Pāli and vernacular versions,
while Sinhalese literature takes one of these stories to heart for poetic
development in a variety of texts. The stories are also present in the non-
Mahāyāna literature of at least two other schools of Indian Buddhism,
specifically the Sarvāstivāda/Mūlasarvāstivāda (to which the *Avadāna-
śataka* is broadly aligned, and also probably the *Jātakamālā* of Hari-
ḥaṭṭa) and the Lokottaravāda/Mahāsāṅghika *Mahāvastu*. The latter in
particular shares substantial narrative content with the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*,
but stories of sacrifice in exchange for the *dharma* are not amongst this
common material.

It is at least possible that the absence of this type of story from the
*Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* was the result of a choice rather than ignorance. If
this is so, why might the compilers of such a flexible and expansive
collection have decided to exclude examples of this kind of story? There
are three reasons that suggest themselves. Firstly, the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*
has a very specific understanding of the setting of *jātaka* stories. No
*jātakas* in this text take place in times of previous *buddhas* (or even
previous Buddhist traditions, teachings or monastic institutions).23 Sec-
ondly, the focus of the text is largely the glorification of the Buddha (as
visionary, teacher, storyteller, perfected being, revealer of karmic con-
nections) often over-and-above glorifying the Bodhisatta.24 Thirdly, the
collection tends not to embrace gift-of-the-body or self-sacrifice stories,
with only seven such stories found amongst the 547 tales in the text, in
contrast to the high concentration of such stories in Sanskrit traditions
and even in the Southeast Asian *Paññāsajātaka* tradition.25 Overall, then,
we should not be surprised at the absence from the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* of
stories that feature both extreme self-sacrifice and the notion that the

23 That is not to say that there are no true teachings in the *jātakas*, but these are of
course inferior to the full teachings available in the time of a *buddha*. When teachings are
included in the stories, they are usually given by the Bodhisatta himself, or occasionally
by Sakka or by a *paccekabuddha*. For more on *paccekabuddhas* as teachers in the *Jātakat-
thavaṇṇanā* see Appleton 2019a and 2019b.
24 On this see Appleton 2010 and 2015a, and Shulman 2018.
25 As discussed in Sheravanichkul 2008, see especially 774 for the count.
dharma may have existed in times when no Buddha was present in the world.

Regardless of its accuracy, this hypothetical exploration of the motivations of the compilers of the Jātakathavānaṇṇana highlights precisely what is most interesting about the verse-of-dharma story cluster, especially when we consider how widespread such stories are outside this particular collection. Questions arise such as: How can the Bodhisattva access properly true teachings before he has realised the dharma for himself and made it available to others as the Buddha? If there is dharma available, what sort of dharma is it, and is it there independently of buddhas? Is it a properly Buddhist dharma, or just a pithy generic well-spoken verse? How does the Bodhisattva’s sacrifice – of wealth, body, life, or family – in exchange for a verse of teaching relate to other stories in which he makes similar sacrifices but for different reasons? More broadly, what is the relationship between the dharma and buddhahood?

In this article I will attempt to answer some of these questions using the stories listed in Table 1. While I will draw on the stories as individual sources, my approach also treats them as a cluster of related tales that together indicate a shared concern with the relationship between Buddha, Bodhisattva and dharma. My overriding aim is not to comment on individual stories, but rather to explore the themes and concerns that might explain the remarkable prevalence of the story cluster overall. I use “cluster” as a deliberately flexible term, designed to avoid speaking of versions or assuming any chronology or direction of influence, since such concerns are not my interest here. One reason that I find the notion of clusters helpful is that they can nest within one another. So, for example, we can see from Table 1 that there are sub-clusters that depend on what is sacrificed, or on what teaching is received. The whole cluster might also be viewed as a sub-cluster of the wider cluster of jātaka stories in which the Bodhisattva makes a great sacrifice for a range of different reasons. Such relationships between different story clusters can help to illuminate shared and distinctive concerns.

26 For further discussion of this terminology and approach see Appleton and Clark 2022.
The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. I will begin by exploring what we learn from this story cluster about Buddhist understandings of the *dharma*, as a rare and precious source of guidance, available to us now in all its richness, but not something to be taken for granted. In the second section I explore the relationship between the *dharma* and buddhahood, noting how *dharma* is shown as both dependent upon the Buddha for its revelation but also true regardless of whether or not it has been made available in the world. This section also includes some reflections on the potential ritual resonances of the stories, as they speak to the distinction between the Buddha’s physical body and his *dharma* body. In the third section I explore the relationship between the *dharma* and bodhisattvahood, in particular how the story cluster serves to emphasise the Bodhisattva’s commitment, his sacrifice and (perhaps more unusually) his humility in accepting some unlikely teachers. As I note in the conclusion to this article, there are many different concerns evident in this cluster of stories, but one key message seems to be the importance of not only receiving, but also understanding and living by the teaching. This message is, of course, a potent one for any Buddhist audience.

**The Rare and Precious dharma**

The most obvious message of these stories is that the *dharma* is precious. There are understood to be extraordinarily long periods of time in which there are no Buddhist teachings or institutions available. Every now and then, a being completes the incredibly long and arduous multi-life path of a *bodhisattva* and becomes a *buddha* – literally an “awakened one” – able to teach the *dharma* to others. In between these rare times when a Buddha’s teachings are active in the world, ordinary beings have little opportunity to progress towards nirvana.27 This is the setting of these stories: the *dharma* is so rare and so precious that the Bodhisattva is

---

27 Although this theme is most clearly evident in non-Mahāyāna traditions, in which there is only one *buddha*-dispensation at a time with long gaps in between, the theme of the rarity of the *dharma* is also prominent in Mahāyāna literature, despite the multiplicity of teaching *buddhas* in other worlds.
willing to die – or to sacrifice his only son and his wife – in order to hear it. The stories of this past time are actually more about the present than the past: told by the Buddha during his own teaching career, they reinforce the urgency of heeding the dharma that is now available. The audiences of the stories are encouraged to respect and honour that dharma, to cherish it while it is still accessible, and to appreciate the sacrifices that the Buddha made in order to make it available to them.

For example, both the *Avadānaśataka* story of Surūpa with which I opened this article, and the text’s other tale of self-sacrifice in exchange for a verse of dharma (the story of Dharmagaveṣin), end with the Buddha exhorting his monastic audience:

> In this way you should train, monks: “We will revere, pay respects to, honour and worship the dharma. Having revered, paid respects to, honoured and worshipped the dharma we will live in reliance on it.” In this way, monks, you should train. 28

While the story of Surūpa has little frame story, the story of Dharmagaveṣin has quite an elaborate setting. We learn that Anāthapiṇḍada traditionally sweeps the Buddha’s monastery, but he goes away and neglects to do this, so the Buddha himself starts to sweep his own quarters, causing some consternation. The Buddha insists that cleaning is a good thing to do, and not something to be avoided even by buddhas, but Anāthapiṇḍada is nonetheless mortified at the turn of events, and therefore stays away from a teaching. The Buddha admonishes Anāthapiṇḍada for missing out on the precious dharma, and praises the dharma extensively, pointing out that the dharma is worthy of veneration even by awakened beings such as himself. 29 The monks express surprise and wonder at the

---

28 Appleton (trans.) 2020: 183, 204. Note that while an injunction to train in a particular way is a stock passage in this text, these are the only two stories that end with the exhortation to honour the dharma (the command to honour the Buddha or the three types of liberated beings is more typical). The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* parallel to Avadānaśataka 38 also ends with this exhortation.

29 Indeed, as Brahmā is said in various texts to have told the Buddha shortly after his awakening, it is a general rule that buddhas revere the dharma; the dharma is the only thing that is worth being venerated by the Buddha. For a more on this see Skilling 2012, and see also the specific context of the *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* discussed below.
Buddha’s praise of the *dharma*, and the Buddha responds (trans. Appleton 2020: 201):

> What is the marvel in this now, monks, if the Tathāgata, who has destroyed greed, hatred and delusion, and is completely free from birth, ageing, sickness, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, melancholy and mental anguish, should be respectful of and reverential towards the *dharma* and speak in praise of the *dharma*? For in times past, when I was affected by greed, hatred and delusion, and was not free from birth, ageing, sickness, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, melancholy and mental anguish, I sacrificed even my own life for the sake of the *dharma*.

He proceeds to tell of his past life as a king called Subhāṣitagaveśin, who – unsurprisingly given his name – was so dedicated to seeking a teaching that he agreed to jump into a fire in exchange for a single verse. The *Śivisubhāṣitāvadāna* of the *Avadānakalpalatā* is also told by the Buddha to explain how “even in my past births I treasured well-spoken words” after hearing – and delighting in – the *dharma* talk of some of his monks (Granoff 1991–1992: 157).

The supreme value of the *dharma* and the pain of being without it is particularly well captured in the Sinhalese tradition surrounding the story of King Dharmasōṇḍaka, who jumps off a mountain into the mouth of a demon in order to fulfil his longing for the *dharma*. As the Sinhalese poet Alagiyavanna puts it in his own sixteenth-century rendition (trans. Berkwitz 2013: 82):

> Like an ocean that has no shore,
> Like a sky that has no sun or moon,
> Like a house in which the lamps went out,
> Like a rutting majestic elephant without tusks,
> Like a lake that has no lotus flowers,
> Like a pearl necklace that has no gem pendant,
> Like a face on which the nose has been cut off,
> The world without *dharma* is not beautiful.

---

30 Here the terms *dharma* and *subhāṣita* are used interchangeably. See further discussion below.
As Berkwitz notes, the poet uses the familiar kāvya motif of longing in separation, but where we might normally find a lover, here the beloved is the dharma.\textsuperscript{31}

The rarity of dharma is directly responsible for its brevity in these stories, but the quality of the teaching is relevant as well as its quantity. Not only did the Bodhisattva have to settle for a single verse of teaching, but the content of the verse seems not to be worth the great effort taken to gain it. In the Avadānaśataka story of Surūpa the verse is at least pertinent – the message is about the benefits of overcoming one’s attachment to what is dear – but given what King Surūpa has just done in order to receive this teaching, one assumes he has already internalised the lesson in the verse. In other stories, the teaching is rather more mundane: in the Avadānaśataka story of Dharmagaveśin (and its Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya parallel), the Bodhisattva-king jumps into a fiery pit in exchange for a verse that tells him, simply, to live according to the dharma and not do any evil.\textsuperscript{32} This is not particularly helpful advice, given what the story has already told us about the lack of access to the dharma and hence the lack of detail on what constitutes good or bad behaviour; one suspects a deliberate use of irony here. The generic morality focus, albeit without explicit reference to the dharma, is shared, with variations, by the stories in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā, Avadānakalpalatā 53, and the Liudu ji jing.\textsuperscript{33}

As can be seen from Table 1, another sub-set, including the other Avadānakalpalatā story, the Karmaśataka and the Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra, have Śakra speak a verse about impermanence; this is at least

\textsuperscript{31} For a discussion of how this motif, significant in Indian poetry including in the bhakti tradition, is used in this and similar Buddhist contexts, see Berkwitz 2013: 83–84.

\textsuperscript{32} dharmam caret sucaritam naiñam duścaritam caret / dharmacārī sukhaṃ śete asmil loke paratra ceti // Speyer (ed.) 1906: 220; “One should live the dharma, behaving well; one should not behave badly. One who lives according to the dharma is happy in this world or the next.” Appleton (trans.) 2020: 202.

\textsuperscript{33} For example, Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā has: pradānapaṭubhir nityaṃ śile ca vimale sthitaiḥ / atyantāvīryasamnāhaili prāpyate padam aksayam // which Khorochen (2017: 29) renders as “Those who are ever intent on giving, who remain morally pure, who arm themselves with boundless valor – they reach the imperishable state.” Avadānakalpalatā 53 contains a teaching about the importance of virtue and avoiding bad deeds, while the Liudu ji jing verse relates the importance of doing good in body, speech and mind. The Mahāvastu story of Surūpa the deer tells us that the dust on the feet of a virtuous man is worth more than a mountain of gold.
a teaching that has a specifically Buddhist flavour, including resonating with the deathbed teaching of the Buddha himself.  

The more generic morality verses might lead us to question the extent to which the verses of dharma available in the distant past are Buddhist teachings at all. Collins’ distinction between “quotidian” and “supererogatory” modes of dharma, which he refers to as “dhamma 1” and “dhamma 2” is helpful here. As he argues (2020: 8), in jātaka stories “there is no Buddha, so naturally no dhamma 2” being taught in the same way as in sutta or vinaya. Rather, the wisdom in jātaka stories is necessarily of the quotidian variety. This interpretation does not align with every Buddhist framework relevant to these stories, but it does help us to see the tension in how the verses were understood to relate to the fuller dharma of the Buddha.

In support of this interpretation it is worth noting that not all of our stories consistently refer to the verse as “dharma,” but instead (or additionally) use the more generic term “subhāṣita” or “well-said.” This may be influenced by the classical view that the proper dharma (Collins’ dhamma 2) is completely lost between Buddhist dispensations, so only more generically well-spoken sayings can be heard. In some traditions

34 Again the verses, while sharing the theme of impermanence, are not the same in the different occurrences, and indeed the Xiānyu jīng offers three different variations on the theme associated with three different sacrifices. As Radich notes (2019: 538–539), the verse in the Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra is the same as is found in the mainstream Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra in T7, and largely overlaps too with the account of the parinirvāṇa in the Śānyuktāgama of T100, in the latter of which the verse is spoken by Śakra; a similar verse is also spoken by Sakka in the Pāli Diṭhanikāya account of the Buddha’s passing. In stories that echo this verse, we might be inclined to consider it a particularly powerful teaching, and certainly a deliberately inter-textual reference.

35 Collins 2020: 9 defines this precisely as “the doing of something that is morally praiseworthy, but the not doing of which is not blameworthy.”

36 The Mahāvastu refers to subhāṣita rather than dharma. In both Avadānāsataka stories the kings seek the dharma, but the king in the story of Dharmagaveṣin is called Subhāṣitagaveṣin. Similarly King Dharmakāma in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā seeks the dharma and receives a subhāṣita verse. The Avadānakalpalatā uses the term subhāṣita but this is revealed to be the teaching of the Buddha and lighting the way to awakening. As such, there seems not to be a clear distinction between the two terms. After all, one assumes that if it is truly “well said” then it must be the dharma; indeed, this is more or less stated in some Pāli texts, such as in the Aṅguttaranikāya book of the eights (IV.164 in the Pali Text Society edition).
such well-spoken verses can be associated with great sages of the past, such as in the *Apadāna* tradition in which the famous rhinoceros horn verses of the *Suttanipāta* are said to be *subhāṣita* and attributed to *pacceka buddhas*, independently awakened beings present in times of no Buddhism. However, we run the risk of reading too much into the distinction between *subhāṣita* and *dharma*: in several of the texts there is no clear distinction between the two terms, suggesting that it may simply be the case that the *dharma* is understood to be expressed in *subhāṣita* verses.\(^{37}\) Whether we call the teaching *dharma* or *subhāṣita*, the message is the same: only a small and mundane teaching is available during such lean times. Compare this, we are implicitly told, with the *dharma* made available by the Buddha, with all its riches, its forms and genres, its profundity and depth, its beauty and subtlety, yet also its availability and ability to draw in hearers at whatever level. How very lucky we are, the stories tell us, to live in a time when the *dharma* is *fully* available.\(^{38}\)

This tension is made explicit in the story cluster as it is found in the *Xianyu jing* (T202, “Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish”), where it features right at the start of the text. The opening scene is shortly after the Buddha’s awakening, at the famous moment when the god Brahmā has to intervene in order to persuade the Buddha to teach. As he says, the Buddha’s reluctance is strange given that, “World Honoured One, for uncountable aeons in the past, you constantly gathered *dharma*-medicine for sentient beings, even to the extent that you gave yourself, your wife and your child for the sake of a single verse.”\(^{39}\) In order to remind the

\(^{37}\) In emailed comments following an outing of this paper in February 2022, Reiko Ohnuma suggested that perhaps the term *subhāṣita* is meant to subtly highlight the fact that it is the words (“well-said”) that are possessed, and not necessarily the meaning (the *dharma*). I very much appreciate this nuanced reading, which certainly makes sense for some, if not all, of the stories under discussion.

\(^{38}\) The brevity of verses does not, of course, necessarily imply they lack potency. There are ample Buddhist practices that involve short empowered textual extracts or verses that can be ritually efficacious. There is also a famous series of *Dhammapada* verses about how even a single word of *dharma* is better than a hundred verses of empty words (v. 102 and the surrounding, in chapter 8). Such an interpretation is potentially relevant to the sub-cluster where the verses are about impermanence, and resonate with the Buddha’s deathbed teachings, but the potency of the verse seems of little concern even then.

\(^{39}\) 世尊往昔無數劫時，恒為眾生採集法藥，乃至一偈，以身妻子而用募求 (T202:4.349a18–20).
Buddha of his great commitment to the dharma, Brahmā tells him of some of these past lives. In the first of these the Bodhisattva was a king who fed his wife and son to a god in disguise as a demon (in this case, the god Vaiśravaṇa rather than the usual Śakra) in exchange for a teaching about impermanence. As Brahmā, still narrating, points out: “If the World Honoured One behaved like this for the sake of the dharma in the past, how can he now wish to enter nirvana early without saving others first?” Brahmā goes on to narrate four more occasions on which the Buddha-to-be made a great sacrifice for the sake of a verse of dharma. This is a pleasing case of jātaka stories being used to remind the Buddha himself of his magnificent qualities. It also serves to remind the audience of the great commitment the Buddha has maintained over his multiple lifetimes, in order to make the dharma available to us all.

While these stories are of a distant past time, with clear implications for the present, the resonances extend into the future as well, for the audience is well aware that the dharma made available by the current Buddha will eventually be lost, bit by bit, text by text, verse by verse, until it too disappears from the world. For while the dharma itself is not impermanent, its accessibility is, at least in this world. Following its loss, there will be a long period of no Buddhism, and we will await a new Buddha to make the dharma available again. As such, the identity of a buddha is inherently caught up in the dharma.

40 The king is called Xiu lou po 修樓婆, so presumably this is a rendition of the Surūpa story; my thanks to Janine Nicol for pointing this out, and for her help with navigating this text. Given the Indic precedent, I have assumed one wife and one child are sacrificed, though the Chinese is less specific.
41 世尊昔日為法尚爾, 云何今欲便捨眾生早入涅槃而不救濟 (T202:4.349b22–23).
42 As a king he makes his body into lamps, and – in another lifetime – pierces his body with nails, in exchange for a verse about impermanence from a visiting brahmin; in both lifetimes Śakra subsequently visits, and witnesses an act of truth that restores the Bodhisattva’s body to health. In the next story the Bodhisattva is a prince who jumps into a fire in exchange for a verse about virtuous conduct from Śakra disguised as a brahmin; the fire turns into a lotus pool. And, finally, he is a teacher of sages who copies teachings using his own skin for paper, his bones as a stylus and blood as ink, in exchange for a verse about virtuous conduct of body, speech and mind. A sixth story, of a past birth as King Śibi, illustrates the Buddha’s willingness to help other beings. This collection would appear to be attempting a comprehensive account of the different variations in the narrative. These summaries are based on the Chinese text; for a discussion of the Tibetan see Straube 2009: 330 especially n. 2.
Dharma and Buddha

The relationship between the physical body of a Buddha – his rūpa-kāya – and the body of teachings – his dharma-kāya, has been much discussed in Buddhist literature and scholarship, and other types of Buddha-body also play an important role especially in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, where the dharma-kāya is considered the true and enduring body of a buddha. This relationship is another lens through which we might understand those stories in which a physical body is sacrificed in return for a dharma teaching.

The links between these two types of buddha-body have already been explored in relation to jātaka literature, in particular with reference to the many stories in which the Bodhisattva gives away a part of his body, or sacrifices his life. Bodily sacrifice, we must note, is often presented as a necessary part of the path to buddhahood, though it is not normally in exchange for dharma, but rather to satisfy the needs of a petitioner or to save the life of another being. The literature of Indian Buddhism abounds with stories of the Bodhisattva offering his head, eyes, flesh and blood to various animals, demons, or the god Śakra in disguise (usually as a brahmin), and such stories are understood to demonstrate the Bodhisattva’s lack of attachment to his body, his compassion for others, and his amazing resolve to give whatever is asked of him.

As Ohnuma has noted (1998, see also 2007), such stories often communicate an equivalence between the physical body of the Bodhisattva and the dharma body of the Buddha. Take, for example, jātaka stories in which the Bodhisattva feeds himself to a hungry tigress to prevent her eating her own cubs, or offers his flesh as medicine to save his citizens, or kills himself in the ocean in order to enable his body to serve as a raft to save his fellow shipwrecked merchants. Such deeds are mirrored in the final life of the Buddha, whose dharma is often described as satiating and nourishing, a curative medicine, and a raft to help people across the ocean of rebirth and redeath to the further shore of nirvana. Often the beneficiaries in the past-life and in the narrative present time of the

43 Works on this theme are too numerous to cite in anything close to fullness, but see, for example, Harrison 1992, Radich 2007, and Xing 2005.
Buddha are also the same, for example the shipwrecked merchants saved by the Bodhisattva’s body as a raft are the same five men who first hear the dharma from the newly awakened Buddha and become the first five arhats. Such parallels between past and present beneficiaries further underscore the relationship between the Buddha and the beings that he helps. As Ohnuma argues (1998: 331), “The events taking place in the story of the past serve as extended metaphors for the concepts experienced in the story of the present, lending to them a concreteness and physicality that they would otherwise lack.” This echoing of past and present allows us to appreciate the equivalence between the Bodhisattva’s gift of the body and the Buddha’s gift of the dharma, or rather the ability of the first to transform into the ability to perform the second.

Gummer (2014) further notes that this equivalence allows certain Mahāyāna sūtras (particularly the Golden Light Sūtra and Lotus Sūtra) to offer paths to salvation that don’t require bodily sacrifice of all bodhisattvas; instead, reciting the sūtra text is the sacrifice of a body of words that, when ingested, can transform one into a buddha in the same way as repeated bodily sacrifice transformed Śākyamuni, the Buddha of our time. These interesting Mahāyāna developments aside, non-Mahāyāna traditions also acknowledge that the availability of the dharma now makes the extraordinary bodily self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva unnecessary, for Buddhists instead have access to the path taught by the Buddha as well as the great “field of merit” brought by the Buddhist community.45

How can this framework help us to understand those stories in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices his flesh and blood not to save the lives of others, but in exchange for a single, often disappointingly mundane, verse of teaching? We might see a similar message in terms of the Buddha’s

44 As in the Pañcakānam Bhadravargikānāmjātaka of the Mahāvastu, discussed by Ohnuma 1998: 332. As she notes (pp. 331–335), the “good group of five” first arhats feature frequently as the beneficiaries in Indian jātaka stories, further underscoring this parallel between past and present experiences.

45 Ohnuma (2007: chapter 1, especially pp. 35–44) even maps this distinction onto her definition of the jātaka and avadāna genres, with the former exhibiting the “perfections” required of a bodhisattva in times of no Buddhism, and the latter the “devotions” possible when Buddhist institutions and teachings are available. Although I do not consider Ohnuma’s distinction to be quite so clear cut, it is an important framework within the literature.
body. It is no accident, I would argue, that in several of the stories the Bodhisattva is called Surūpa, which literally means “of good body.” It is as if the story wishes to reinforce the physical bodily perfection that is exchanged for something which – despite its brevity and lack of profundity – is worth far more than this sack of bones.

According to the Buddhist karmic system, of course, physical perfection is associated with moral perfection. Doing good will lead you to a better body, right up to the perfect body of the “great-man” (mahā-puruṣa) – a universal emperor or a buddha, with his distinctive physical marks. The Buddha’s body is therefore not just any body, but a perfect body, and the Bodhisattva’s body is very often a similar reflection of virtue. King Surūpa’s handsomeness is not an incidental detail, but a sign of his goodness. Yet even such a handsome (and virtuous) body is worth less than the dharma. This message is arguably emphasised further by the verse offered in a sub-set of the stories, where the dharma itself is a teaching about impermanence, a teaching that applies most obviously to the body. As many have noted, the dharma-kāya is often presented as enduring and imperishable, in direct contrast to the physical body, even the physical body of a buddha.

These ideas about the body, and about the superiority of the dharma to the physical form of the Bodhisattva, are similar to the broader genre of bodily-sacrifice jātakas. However, there are differences too, which might be interpreted in various ways. Rather than a transformation of the Bodhisattva’s physical body into the Buddha’s dharma-body over multiple lifetimes, as in Ohnuma’s analysis, in the verse-of-dharma stories the Bodhisattva’s body appears to be exchanged for the superior dharma within a single lifetime. In addition, rather than offering up a mirroring or hierarchy, in which the Buddha’s dharma is a superior body to the Bodhisattva’s physical form, these stories of self-sacrifice for the sake of receiving the dharma actually suggest the separateness of the Buddha and dharma. To put it another way, the Buddha’s dharma-body is not his, in these stories; rather, the dharma is shown to pre-exist his buddha-hood. Not only does the Bodhisattva go to great lengths to access it, but

46 On the role of virtue in the creation of perfect bodies see Mrozik 2007.
47 For a discussion of this tendency and its pitfalls see Harrison 1992.
even the Buddha still reveres it, and encourages all his followers to do so too.

However, if we look through the lens of ritual and sacrifice, the difference might not be so stark. As Gummer has shown, it can be helpful in Buddhist literature (especially Mahāyāna sūtras but also more broadly) to view the Buddha as a cosmic dharmic king, and the dharma as a potent ritual substance, the Buddha’s “vital, sovereign essence.”\(^\text{48}\) The repeated self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva, she argues, is a ritual act that results in the Bodhisattva “ritually cooking his supremely sovereign buddha body through his own efforts” (Gummer 2021: 182). According to this framework, the exchange of the Bodhisattva’s body for a portion of dharma is just one part of the longer process of transformation from bodhisattva-body to dharma-body that also features at the heart of Ohnuma’s analysis.

Are these stories trying to move away from the more usual focus of the jātakas on the glorious Buddha, and encourage audiences to remember that the dharma is more important? Do they want us to see the dharma as independent truths underlying existence, there (albeit inaccessible) regardless of whether or not a buddha is around to teach them, and revered by the Buddha himself even after his realisation of them? Or are they exploring (and creating) a sacrificial realm in which a realisation of the dharma in the form of a measly mundane verse is a potent part of the bodily transformation that takes place as the Bodhisattva comes to be identified with dharma? Given the ability of narrative to hold possibilities without resolution, and to explore ideas without systematisation, we might be wise to assume that all these analyses are correct.

_Dharma and the Bodhisattva Path_

We have, inevitably, moved from a discussion of the Buddha’s relationship with the dharma to a discussion of the Bodhisattva’s relationship

\(^{48}\) Gummer 2021: 174. I am grateful to Natalie Gummer for a discussion of this aspect of her work and its relevance to this story cluster over email and video call. As she notes, according to this analysis the brevity and mundanity of the verse might be irrelevant because it is a ritual verse.
with the dharma. After all, these stories present themselves as being about the Bodhisattva and – whether implicitly or explicitly – the bodhisattva path. If we take the Bodhisattva as our focal point, I would suggest that these stories have three further things to tell us: Firstly, they show us that the Bodhisattva sought and valued teachings, and wished to have access to the dharma, both for his own benefit, and for the benefit of others. Secondly, they highlight that this commitment led him to sacrifice what was precious to him, whether wealth, family members or his own body. Such sacrifices, as we have already noted, are part of a broader genre of jātaka stories, and may be illuminated by this wider context. Thirdly, the stories suggest that the Bodhisattva was humble enough (or, perhaps, desperate enough) to accept teachings from unusual teachers, such as demons, evil brahmins, and hunters. These three qualities – commitment, sacrifice and humility – are particularly highlighted when the stories are referred to in lists of praiseworthy deeds of the Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva’s devotion to the dharma immediately tells us something important about the Bodhisattva, even if we know nothing about the content of the verse, or of any other details. That the stories still have value in this case is highlighted by those texts that present very short references to the deeds of the Bodhisattva, namely the Daśabhūmikasūtra of the Mahāvastu, the Khotanese Jātakastava, and the Mahāyāna Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchāsūtra and Bhadrakalpikasūtra. Because of the focus on the Bodhisattva’s own deeds, and because of the brevity of the accounts, we rarely discover, in such texts, who offered the teaching or what the teaching consisted of. While such texts may tell us less about the dharma than the longer stories we have already examined, they do share with the wider cluster of stories a concern to highlight the Bodhisattva’s great commitment to the dharma. In some sense the source of the dharma or even its content is rather irrelevant.

As immediately becomes clear when you read such verses, what matters in these short references is the sacrifice made by the Bodhisattva. The list in the Daśabhūmikasūtra of the Mahāvastu makes it clear that multiple sacrifices are made by all bodhisattvas and that specific stories recount our own Buddha-to-be’s demonstration of this. For each of these examples we learn briefly who the Bodhisattva was (e.g. King Surūpa; a minister called Sañjaya; a merchant called Vasundhara), what he
offered (e.g. his son and wife; his heart; all his possessions), and to whom (a rākṣasa; a piśāca; a poor man). This formulaic list gives no information about the contents of the teaching nor how the exchange came about. This kind of brief formulaic account is also found in other lists of great deeds of the Bodhisattva, for example in the Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchāsūtra, where the Buddha declares:

Indifferent to my body, I threw myself from a rocky slope for the sake of the well-spoken [dharma]. I was without regard for my body or my life on account of enlightenment (1.114, trans. Boucher 2008: 131).

Similarly, but in the second person this time, the Khotanese Jātakastava documents how:

For the sake of one śloka into the mouth of the yakṣa you threw yourself from the peak of a mountain. You had no fear when you saw the open mouth, the tongue darting like a flame, the sharp tusks (v. 36, trans. Dresden 1955: 426).

The emphasis in both of these accounts is clearly on the great fearless deed of the Bodhisattva. Likewise, later in the same text we learn:

As people discard the lotus garland withered by the sun’s rays, so you gave up sovereignty over the continents, even your own life, for the Law’s [dharma’s] sake, at that time.

For the sake of one śloka you entered into the fire, as into a lotus pond an elephant descends. You calmed in your mind longing and greed thirsting for the Law [dharma]. Therefore, homage to you at your feet (vv. 104–105, trans. Dresden 1955: 436).

The Bhadrakalpiṣṭasūtra likewise notes three extraordinary deeds done in exchange for a teaching, said to demonstrate the perfection of forbearance or patience (kṣanti), with no concern for the content of the teaching that is received in exchange.49 In all these texts, the account of the

49 The idea of sacrifice in return for a teaching is mentioned three times during the long discussion of the six perfections: at 2.105 (brahmin serves an outcaste), 2.139 (sage *Devarāja offers his head) and 2.158 (jumps into fire). Only the first of these explicitly mentions the Bodhisattva’s participation. References are to the 84,000 translation of the Tibetan by the Dharmacakra Translation Committee 2022. For a discussion and the text of the first and second of these, including parallel passages in Chinese, see Skilling and Saerji 2019, especially 142–143, and 162–163.
Bodhisattva’s sacrifice takes centre stage: we are left in awe of all the amazing things that he has sacrificed, all for the single purpose of accessing a verse of teaching.

In addition to his acts of sacrifice, another sign of the Bodhisattva’s unshakeable commitment to seeking a verse of teaching is his willingness to be taught by unusual teachers. This aspect of the story is crucial enough to appear even in most of the very short accounts we have just been exploring. The people who offer the teaching are usually low-ranking: demons of various kinds, hunters and other low-caste men. As Ohnuma notes in her analysis of gift-of-the-body stories, the Bodhisattva’s willingness to offer bodily gifts to unworthy recipients demonstrates his particular virtue, for he does so “not for the sake of merit, but purely out of generosity and compassion” (2007: 60). Such gifts go beyond the laws of karma and merit-making that would prioritise service of high-ranking individuals such as brahmins, and thereby emphasise the Bodhisattva’s otherworldly aims. While this analysis holds for our cluster as well, there is an additional implication: that the Bodhisattva is humble enough to accept a teaching from a flesh-eating yakṣa or a hunter.

The evil recipients are often not quite what they seem, however. In many of the stories in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices himself or his family in return for a verse of teaching, the being offering the teaching is said to be Śakra in disguise, and after the Bodhisattva has proven his commitment, his sacrifice is undone: his body is preserved, and his family restored to him. The presence of Śakra in disguise is a common motif more broadly in jātaka stories, and indeed in wider Indian literature. Often, Śakra takes disguise as a brahmin – that embodiment of ideal recipient – and asks for a seemingly impossible gift, such as the Bodhisattva’s last meal in a famine, his wife, or his eyes. In the standard appearance of this motif Śakra is testing the Bodhisattva’s commitment to virtue, either out of pure curiosity, or a desire to help in the practice of that virtue, or else out of fear that the Bodhisattva may be seeking to oust him from his position as king of the gods through his practice of virtue.50

---

50 For an exploration of the characterisation of Śakra across Indian traditions see Appleton 2017: chapter 2.
After the Bodhisattva demonstrates his unshakeable resolve, Śakra usually restores what has been lost.

How does this motif of Śakra in disguise operate in our cluster? Instead of Śakra disguised as a good recipient or teacher (a brahmin), he is disguised as a terrifying yakṣa. This is presumably to enforce the fear and loathing that the Bodhisattva should feel at the possibility of receiving teachings from such a being. Just as the Bodhisattva doesn’t care about the qualities of the recipient of his extraordinary gift-giving, so too he will accept a teaching from any being who has one. At the same time, the fact that the teacher is not actually a flesh-eating yakṣa prevents us from thinking such beings might actually teach the dharma; instead, there is an implicit understanding that Śakra, as long-lived and pious king of the gods, might reasonably actually have a single verse of teaching to share. And meanwhile, this motif of the test makes for an easier audience experience, for the audience can anticipate that there is no real danger to the Bodhisattva – or indeed, to his family members, even though he believes that he is really making a terrible sacrifice.

There are some exceptions to the motif of Śakra-in-disguise, however. In the story of Dharmakāma in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā, the person offering a teaching is another stock narrative character – an evil brahmin – and the Bodhisattva’s life is only saved through his own virtue, when the fiery pit into which he has willingly jumped magically transforms into a lotus pool. Because the evildoer was in fact a real human being, the story also tells us that the Bodhisattva then uses an act of truth to prevent the brahmin from entering hell. This story thus follows a rather different pattern, one in which all the agency is with the Bodhisattva, despite his dependence on an unlikely source for a verse of dharma. In addition, it shows us the added complication of a real encounter of this sort: someone has to harm (or genuinely seek to harm) the Bodhisattva, and the karmic repercussions of such intentions are severe.

Another exception to the divine-test framing is the story of Subhāṣita-gaveśin in the Avadānakalpalatā, in which the Bodhisattva seeks the dharma from a hunter. Unlike the hunter-teacher in the Mahāvastu story of Surūpa the deer, who is Śakra in disguise, this hunter in the Avadānakalpalatā is actually really a hunter, and a nasty one. The Bodhisattva is a king who wishes to hear good words, and his courtiers
send him to a hunter known to be full of great sayings. The Bodhisattva
gives the hunter a valuable necklace in payment, but, worrying that he
might ask for it back again, the hunter insists that the Bodhisattva must
also jump off a cliff. The Bodhisattva’s life is saved only thanks to
a deity breaking his fall.

In order to understand this variant, we need to take account of the
text’s composition and concerns. For a start, the text is rather late
(11th century) and, as Granoff points out (1991–1992), influenced by both
a courtly setting and Brahmanical Hindu literature. She argues that this
particular story is probably influenced by the many tales of unusual
teachers and challenging transmission initiations in texts such as the
Mahābhārata, for example Arjuna’s quest for weapons and initiation as
Although Granoff doesn’t note this particular possibility, there is also
resonance with the story of the brahmin ascetic Kauśika who is sent to
a hunter to learn about the dharma (Sukthankar et al. 1933–1966: 3.197–
206), though it is noteworthy that Kauśika’s teacher is a much more
moral hunter than the Bodhisattva’s teacher. Indeed, the Mahābhārata
story is more about the ability of unlikely people to have attained higher
knowledge, a theme found across a range of narratives in that text. This
Avadānakalpalatā story, along with the one in Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā,
instead emphasises the possibility of gaining insight from teachers who
know the words of – but do not live by – true teachings.51

This theme is spelled out to us in the Liudu ji jing. Here, the human
teacher of the verse is a past-birth of Devadatta, the Buddha’s murderous
and schismatic cousin. The text emphasises that the Bodhisattva was
delighted to have his body pierced all over with needles (the price of the
teaching in this case) in order to receive the verse, and after hearing it
his body was magically restored to health. At the end of the story, the
Buddha explains that “The one who gave the Bodhisattva the verse, he
is now Devadatta. Even though Devadatta knew the Buddha-verse first,
he was like a blind man holding a lamp – it did not illuminate things for

51 My thanks to Brian Black for this observation.
him, so what was the use of it to him?” Setting aside the banality of the verse once again (a simple teaching to avoid doing evil in body, speech or mind) we see here that the emphasis is clearly on the need to understand or live by rather than simply possess a teaching.

These exceptions, alongside the brief references to stories that do not explain whether the demons or other teachers were really Śakra or not, reinforce the Bodhisattva’s commitment and virtue. This virtue demonstrated by the Bodhisattva is only enhanced by the fact that the teachers are inferior beings or of evil intent. Indeed, the very fact that he needs a teacher at all, rather than being able to realise the dharma for himself, reminds us that he is not yet a buddha. However, these exceptions do introduce an additional dimension, or even challenge, in that they beg the question of how such low-ranking or even malevolent beings had access to such precious teachings. How can a violent and greedy hunter know the dharma as well as the king of the gods? How does Devadatta know the truth before the Buddha? And if he really knows it, why does he ignore the teaching himself?

We have come full circle, and returned to the question of what we might learn from these stories about the dharma. It is clearly one thing to know some words of the dharma, and another thing to follow its lessons. The hunter in the Avadānakalpalatā example knows the dharma, but doesn’t understand it; likewise Devadatta in the Liudu ji jing. Meanwhile King Surūpa of the Avadānaśataka understands the dharma intuitively, but lacks access to the words of the dharma. The current Buddhist community have access to both the words and the meaning, in extensive teachings, and should not – such stories take pains to remind us – take this for granted.

---

52 授菩薩偈者，今調達是。調達雖先知佛偈，猶盲執燭炤，彼不自明，何益於己（T152.3.32b13–15). I am grateful to Janine Nicol for her (as yet unpublished) translation of this story, and for guiding me through my own reading of it in Chinese. The identification of the teacher as Devadatta in this case might perhaps be influenced by the famous story in chapter 12 of the Lotus Sūtra in which Śākyamuni-to-be receives the sūtra from Devadatta in a past life.
Conclusion

We have now explored multiple stories of the Bodhisattva’s sacrifice in exchange for a verse of the dharma, paying attention to what we might learn about the dharma, about the Buddha, and about the Bodhisattva (and more broadly the bodhisattva path). Although there is scope for far more research into these stories, especially as more occurrences come to light, each with their own interpretive twist, a few preliminary conclusions do present themselves, especially if we treat the cluster as a whole.

On the most basic level, these stories remind their audiences how precious the dharma is, and how lucky we are to be living in a time in which more than one measly verse of it is available. They also remind us of the extraordinary lengths to which the Buddha (and indeed all buddhas) had to go in order to access the dharma and communicate it to us. As well as emphasising the Bodhisattva’s desperation for the dharma and his willingness to learn from any source, these stories remind us that it is one thing to know the dharma, and another thing to understand it. Often the Bodhisattva appears to have a better understanding of the dharma than his teacher, even if he lacks the words.

While other stories of the Bodhisattva’s quest for buddhahood often suggest a transformation of the oft-sacrificed physical body of the Bodhisattva into the far superior dharma-body of the Buddha, this particular cluster of jātaka stories seems instead to emphasise the distinction between Buddha and dharma. The Buddha, we are told, reveres the dharma. As Bodhisattva, he made extreme sacrifices in order to access even a tiny portion of dharma. Although only a single verse was available to him, it was there independently of his own buddhahood or teaching, and he sometimes received it from a highly unusual teacher. At the same time, this apparent separateness is elided when we see the acquisition of even this brief nugget of dharma as part of the longer quest of the Bodhisattva to identify himself with the dharma in order to become a buddha: the separation is now all in the past. The differences between Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna (especially but not only Theravāda) readings here might account for the story cluster’s absence from the classical Pāli Jātakatthavaṇṇanā.
As such, while the stories on one level remind us that the dharma is in some sense independent of the Buddha or Bodhisattva, they simultaneously reinforce the closeness of the relationship between Buddha and dharma. They inspire gratitude for the Bodhisattva having made so many sacrifices in order to access the dharma, and to the Buddha for having made extensive and clear teachings available to the world. While it is one thing to know a single verse of general morality, it is quite another to realise the full dharma in all its complexity and beauty, and teach it in ways that others can understand.

The presence of these stories across a whole range of Buddhist texts indicates that they operated on a variety of levels, communicating the need to properly appreciate the quality and quantity of dharma now on offer, as well as the amazing commitment of the Bodhisattva in realising and then sharing it. The idea that everything – riches, family, body and life – is worth less than a single verse of dharma is certainly a potent one, and, one assumes, a powerful incentive to listen and practice.

**Bibliography**


T = Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大蔵経. Collected and edited under the direction of Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaisoku 渡邊海旭. Vols. 1–85. Issaikyō kankōkai 一切経刊行會. Tokyo, 1924–1932. Texts cited by text number, followed by volume, page, register (a, b, or c), and line number.