Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism

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With contributions by art historians and textual scholars, along with an introduction by an expert in Buddhist narrative literature, *Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism* is one of the earliest attempts to bring studies on images and texts in dialog with each other, especially in the context of early Buddhist narrative traditions.[1] The volume focuses on different forms of *jātaka* tales and covers the geographical area of primarily South, but also Central and East, Asia. By exploring the role of narratives in Indian Buddhism, the work suggests that visual and verbal forms of narrative expressions ought to be treated as collaborative rather than just corroborative.[2] Departing from the traditional practice of comparing images and texts only to validate or invalidate accounts in each other, the interdisciplinary approach employed in this book instead brings together oral/aural, imagery, and textual narratives to examine how they inform and interact with each other. This approach also questions, as Appleton states, "the perceived insufficiency of visual narrative modes" (9), since visual narratives are often not acknowledged in their

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[1] Previous works that have explored the relationality of visual and textual sources in early Buddhism include, for instance, Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (USA: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Y. S. Alone, "Buddhist Theory of Representation," in *Art and History: Texts, Contexts, and Visual Representations in Ancient and Early Medieval India*, ed. Mahalakshmi Ramakrishnan (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., 2020), 311–330; and Ratan Parimoo, *Life of Buddha in Indian Sculptures* (New Delhi: D. K. Print World Ltd., 2010).

[2] According to Appleton, verbal sources are oral or textual, both primarily preserved in texts (3).

own right and are deemed "explained" (8) once we recognize their corresponding text.

In the introduction, Appleton outlines how careful investigation of visual and verbal narratives alongside each other can help us understand shared narrative visions in early Buddhist traditions. To employ this approach, she suggests using the concepts of intertextuality and intervisuality. Appleton emphasizes that the concept of intertextuality, typically understood as a shared relationship between texts, can also be applied to images and across images and texts: implying that an image and a text are influenced not only by other image(s) and text(s) but also by each other. With the perspective that intertextuality occurs across different narrative media, we can understand the intervisuality of narratives, namely the visual in narratives, or imagined affect and audience response to different forms, expressions, and media of narratives. Thus, examining a narrative within and across images, texts, and oral tradition can help us comprehend the narrative vision of a story. The following three sections in the volume demonstrate us some of the ways in which these concepts can be applied to early Buddhist narrative traditions, while also highlighting the advantages of this approach.

The first section, entitled "Visual Narratives," explores the relationship between different forms of visual narratives, and between visual and textual narratives, beginning with Flavia Zaghet's study. Zaghet's study emphasizes the importance of studying visual sources on their own terms and cautions against prioritizing textual components to understand images. Through the comparison of iconographic and stylistic patterns of four narrative reliefs from Sanchi Stūpa 2 with other visuals at the same site and other sites, Zaghet disputes the traditionally argued disconnect between the earlier Stūpa 2 and the later Stūpa 1 established on the basis of textual narratives. She instead proposes that Stūpa 2 is contemporaneous with Stūpa 1, both dating between the end of the first century BCE and

the mid first century CE. Her analysis also helps understand the narrative intent of some previously unidentified narratives on the reliefs. By examining the narrative content of the reliefs alongside narrative texts, she identifies a specific mode of visual narration, which she calls "the spotlight mode." In this mode, the focus of storytelling shifts from depicting a series of events to a main figure. Zaghet suggests that the distinctive narrative mode in the reliefs indicates their function as a "practical model of religious change" (49). The spotlight method is used as a metaphorical language to highlight the *saṃgha*'s role in managing "practical" problems, such as water management during the end of the first century BCE, intended to gain economic support for the monasteries.

In the next chapter, Madhulika Reddy's examination of five paintings depicting scenes from the *jātaka*s in the Ajanta caves shows how the painters combine the vision of oral, visual, and textual narratives to evoke veneration of the embodied virtues of the Buddha. Visualizing the viewer's experience as a form of *darśana*, the painters create a human-divine contrast by depicting distinct physical characteristics of the Buddha. The contrasts are intended to affect human response to the Buddha's distinctive bodily features, which showcase his moral virtues. By evoking cognitive and emotional impact, the visual encounter makes abstract Buddhist virtues, which Reddy calls "intangibles" (58), tangible for the viewer, effecting not only veneration of the Buddha's embodied virtues but also faith.

In the final chapter of this section, Monika Zin explores what she terms "sermon scenes" depicted in the paintings in the Kucha caves in Central Asia. Her study suggests that the scenes bring together oral teachings, images, and textual narratives to affect the viewer's visual experience of the teachings and demonstrate the Buddha's glory. Putting together various media of narrative expression, including the portrayal of the Buddha-as-teacher, the content of his sermons, the audience, and

jātaka scenes in the same image, the painters depict the visual scene of a Buddha actively involved in teaching. Zin also identifies a particular mode of narrative expression in the scenes, calling it a "telegraphic style," in which the main narrative's content is reduced to a minimum in order to incorporate numerous narratives within a single image. She argues that this narrative mode is influenced by the Indian style of conflated representation which highlights the grandeur of the figure depicted at the center of the image.

The second section, entitled "Narrative Networks," further explores the interplay between visual and verbal forms of narratives. First, Sonya Rhie Mace's chapter examines the significance of a stone relief portraying the nun Utpalavarṇā at Kaushambi. This portrayal is notably uncommon, as monks and nuns are rarely depicted in early Buddhist art. Mace argues that Utpalavarṇā's inclusion alongside characters, including a demonic figure, who are viewed as problematic for the monastic community may be intended to depict her as a threat to the norms of the monastic order. She supports this interpretation by drawing upon the text that includes the closest content of this story: the story of Utpalavarṇā in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*. The text portrays her as a transgressor for publicly displaying her magical powers, resulting in the creation of a rule prohibiting nuns from publicly demonstrating magic.

The next chapter investigates the complex relationships between visual and verbal *jātaka* stories. To examine the complexity, Appleton and Chris Clark propose a new model, termed "story clusters" (168).[3] The model involves first grouping together clusters of stories based on the

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[3] Appleton and Clark base their model on A. K. Ramanujan's concept of a "pool of signifiers" in the context of the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: see A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 22–48, as cited in Appleton and Clark's chapter in the volume.

"shared signifiers" in both visual and verbal representations of the story, then examining the relationship between the subclusters within and across the clusters to understand the significance of the story, its similar and different characters, themes, and aspects of the plot. By applying this model to the textual and visual "versions" of the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva story, Appleton and Clark group together visual and verbal story clusters to understand the vision(s) of the narrative. They form clusters of stories discussing, for instance, the gift of tusks by a Bodhisattva elephant and the multi-life entanglement between an elephant king and his jealous wife. These clusters help identify subclusters of the same, similar, and different versions of the stories. Analyzing the clusters and subclusters collectively, Appleton and Clark suggest that the narrative illustrates the virtues of the Bodhisattva and multi-life bonds between the Bodhisattva and the elephant, among others.

In section two's last chapter, John S. Strong explores three textual accounts of individuals encountering images of the Buddha's life story. His study highlights that the interpretation of visual and verbal narratives depends on the interpreter's level of familiarity with the subject. The first example discusses how King Ajātaśatru reacts emotionally upon looking at, and hearing accompanying explanation about, wall-paintings depicting the Buddha's death. Ajātaśatru's appropriate reaction indicates that his interpretation is informed by his close familiarity with Buddhist tradition. The second example discusses two seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuits' interpretation of Chinese Buddhist illustrations and their accompanying Chinese explanation. While they identified the image correctly, their interpretation includes ideas specific to their own culture. The third example describes how seventeenth and eighteenth-century European observers misinterpret a Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrimage site as depicting the story of Adam and Eve, despite having received relevant information from the local Buddhist informants. This example shows that sometimes

the interpretation of an image can be completely different from what the creator intended.

The final section, entitled "Narrative Visions," explores the visual elements of verbal narratives and how both interact with each other to realize a combined narrative vision. In his analysis of two textual narratives, David Fiordalis discusses the significance of what he calls "narrative figuration" (214): the narrative technique of using visual imagery and metaphor to portray embodied figures. Verbal narratives use this technique to illustrate the Buddha as a spiritual authority. The story of King Kapphiṇa in the *Avadānaśataka* uses imagery of the Buddha transforming into a wheel-turning king, performing wonderous acts, and giving a sermon, and combines it with metaphors such as "supreme sovereign" and "preeminent king of kings" (219) to establish his special status and authority. Similarly, the story of the Brahmin Sela in the Pāli Canon uses the visual imagination of the Buddha's bodily gestures, such as the display of his tongue and penis, to illustrate his possession of the thirty-two marks and extraordinary powers. As Fiordalis argues, both stories demonstrate "the Buddha's transfiguration of temporal power into spiritual authority" (230).

The following chapter, by Natalie Gummer, discusses the role of narration in creating an imaginative experience, termed "*performative* narratives" (242), to effect *darśana* of *buddha*s and *buddha*-fields. Focusing on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, she explains how the act of narrating the *sūtra* is equated to performing sacrificial rituals that makes "apparently [present-day] absent *buddha*s [imaginatively] present through narrative, to perform and thus produce the conditions for readers/listeners to have a transformative vision (*darśana*) of sovereign *buddha*s" (240). The imaginative realization through the narration of the *sūtra* demonstrates its ritual power, creating for the audiences and practitioners a "visual-

imaginative-ritual encounter" (258) with *buddha*s and *buddha*-fields through auditory, mental, and verbal practices.

In the final chapter of this volume, Jonathan Walters's study highlights perceptions of the multi-sensorial experience of worship in early Buddhist traditions. By comparing stories from the *Sutta-nipāta* with *Apadāna* and other related *Khuddaka-nikāya* texts, he argues for a shift in perspective towards the senses. While the former presents the senses as obstacles, the latter incorporates a multi-sensorial focus in narratives. This new perspective in *Apadāna* is part of a larger process concerning the perceptions of the multi-sensorial experience of worship. The multi-sensorial focus in *Apadāna* overlaps with the construction of *stūpa*s adorned with narrative art, indicating that "[n]ot just telling or hearing stories; the experience of worship itself would have been multi-sensorial" (283).

To conclude: As one of the first endeavors to compile a volume featuring contributions exploring the interplay between visual and verbal narratives, this volume presents itself as a valuable resource for students and researchers interested in the collective study of narratives, narrativity, oral tradition, visual depictions, and texts of Buddhism and beyond. The contributions highlight the significance of studying oral/aural, visual, and textual narratives together and show us some ways in which we can accomplish it. Zaghet, Reddy, and Zin underscore the benefits of investigating different visual forms together, while also drawing on textual and oral narratives. Mace, Appleton, Clark, and Strong suggest some ways in which we can examine the visual and verbal forms alongside each other. Fiordalis, Gummer, and Walters explore the visual and oral aspects of textual narratives and their relationship with visual narratives. While employing these approaches, all the contributions emphasize the significance of treating each form of narrative expression in its own right. These suggested approaches are also evident inside the book: the authors' careful use of images and texts alongside each other seems to give the

reader/audience a similar narrative visualization of the relationship between the visual and verbal as this volume motivates us to explore.

Notes on the Contributor

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