On the Meaning of Jātaka Carved in the Bhārhut Vedikā

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The blessed Lord said:

Numerous births of Mine have already taken place, as also those of yours, Arjuna! I know them all, but you do not.¹⁾

This recognition of numerous births seems to be one of the keys to understand the thoughts of Indian people who live a life in the background of saṃsāra.²⁾ The previous births are quite a long-term process to the present birth, even for the blessed Lord. The ultimate end of his teaching is to preach the salvation out of saṃsāra, but birth stories should be also worth being told to guide those who must bear births and ought to improve them just in the present time. Among Buddhists, such sort of stories have been called 'jātaka' whose narrative elements virtually belong to folklore full of wisdoms based on life-experiences of the common people, although every story seems to be consequentially embellished in Buddhist way.

The aim of this article is to discuss the meaning of 'jātaka' earliest visualized in plastic art in terms of the correlation between art and religion. For the purpose, it is necessary to point out two principles of plastic arts in connection with the eighteen scenes³⁾ with the title of 'jātaka' in the bas-reliefs of Bhārhut Vedikā as the oldest remain of stūpa-art in India. They are lack of 'bodhisatto' not only in inscriptions but also in leading characters acting their own instructive roles and more familiar to the common people, still free from the clear purpose of praising the Buddha himself in the previous births.

(1) First, plastic arts essentially narrate everything in the present tense, and jāataka stories told in the past tense are also presentized. The viewer of jāataka scenes comes to contact with them in the common

dimension of time and space, in which the visual perception of their meanings is repeated as he likes during his appreciation in front of the bas-reliefs.⁴⁾ This visual experience may be a truism, but must be more effective for the viewer to read the moral of jāataka stories, as compared with the auditory experience in which the listener has to recall the plot and its main point of a story by himself against the flow of time.⁵⁾ It may explain the reason why the jāataka scenes in Bhārhut Vedikā are superior in numbers even to the monumental scenes of the Buddha's life.

Moreover, the visual presentization of jāataka stories full of life-experiences leads to the positive affirmation of one's present life in the process of saṃsāra. Especially for those who had never got the chance to look on the moral of their own lives by means of massmedia such as the bas-reliefs of stūpa-art, its visual effects in those days should have been more considerable than we can imagine in modern times.

(2) Secondly, plastic arts unconditionally affirm the worth of everything depicted there, and it may lead to the positive evaluation of one's body not only in jāataka scenes but also in the reality of this world, in spite of its existential agony in saṃsāra to be released by mokṣa or nirvāṇa. Therefore, neither the pessimism of karmic body⁶⁾ nor the view of impurity on body⁷⁾ are out of question, rather one's body is given promise of future as a result of deeds in the present days. The best is to get the body because of its good conditions to come in touch with the teaching of Buddha. It goes without saying that every viewer of jāataka scenes has a human body. In this sense, it may not too much to say that we can extract a sort of existential optimism to encourage one's human birth from the jāataka scenes in which even animals play the leading parts.

Furthermore, every body depicted in jāataka scenes is nearly perpetuated in the form of stone work, along with other kinds of artistic elements such as the design of lotus flowers, the images of Yakṣa or Yakṣi, and the monumental scenes of the Buddha's life. All of them

belong to the stūpa-art, They devote themselves to the stūpa. The stūpa is the container of Buddha śarīra as the monument of his last birth just before parinirvāṇa. In this context, the stūpa-art seems to symbolize the world of saṃsāra in which everybody should follow the Way of Buddha. Above all, jātika scenes are the most popular introduction for the stūpa-worshippers to have faith in Buddhism.

Two principles of plastic arts as stated above are usually subliminal to those who are engaged in artistic works, but both of them can not help coming out in correlation with the subject to be depicted. In the case of a jātika scene, they seem to give full play to their intrinsic positiveness, especially in relation to the recognition of births in saṃsāra as the origin of the conception of 'jātaka'. The Bhārhut Vedikā offers us its earliest example in Buddhist way.

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- 1) Bhagavad Gitā, Ch. IV-5
 - 2) For instance, it seems to be very significant to find out such a Hindi movie song in modern times as "Sau-Baar Janam Lenge" (Lyrics by Asad Bhopali, Music by Ravi, Song by Mohammad Rafi, in the Film "Ustadon Ke Ustad") in which lovers hope to see each other all through the repetition of birth and death even for hundred times.
 - 3) cf. E. Hultsch, *Jātakas at Bharaut*, JRAS, 1912, p. 406.
 - 4) Even some stages of time depicted in the same scene just as seen in 'Miga-jātaka' (Pāli 482) are presentized together.
 - 5) In this article, there is no space to discuss on 'dharmabhāṇaka' who is said to have been a commentator of stūpa-art.
 - 6) cf. SN. PTS., p. 174.
 - 7) cf. Therī 19~20, Thera 567~576.

〈Key words〉 jātika, saṃsāra, plastic arts.

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