

Reinterpretations of the Vessantara Jataka: Maddi's Role in the Mon Buddhist Worldview

Aung Min Thein

Abstract

The Vessantara Jataka, among the most celebrated narratives in the Theravada Buddhist canon, has been predominantly interpreted through an androcentric framework that privileges King Vessantara's perfection of generosity (*dana parami*) while systematically suppressing Maddi's spiritual agency, moral authority, and epistemological significance. This study challenges that androcentric closure by examining how Mon Buddhist women in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand, a diasporic community displaced from Myanmar in the late 1940s, actively reinterpret Maddi's role as spiritually autonomous, morally authoritative, and epistemically significant within their Buddhist worldview. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's reconceptualization of religious agency as its primary analytical framework, the paper argues that conventional feminist frameworks, premised on a liberal conception of agency as autonomy and resistance, are epistemologically inadequate to account for Mon women's interpretive engagement with Maddi's narrative role. Mahmood specifically reframes agency as the capacity to inhabit and enact normative religious structures rather than resist them, providing a more analytically precise framework for understanding how Mon women constitute themselves as pious Buddhist subjects through their interpretive

engagement with the Jataka tradition, not against it. This study draws on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Wangka village, Sangkhlaburi. Findings are derived from semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of eight Mon Buddhist women, analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Three interpretive themes emerge: Maddi reframed as a moral co-agent possessing independent spiritual perfections; an intra-traditional ethical critique of Vessantara's *dana* grounded in Buddhist maternal ethics; and Maddi's narrative silence reinterpreted as strategic moral agency rather than passive submission. This paper contributes the concept of piety-grounded hermeneutical agency to feminist Buddhist hermeneutics, advancing analytical frameworks beyond secular liberal feminism for understanding subaltern Buddhist women's interpretive practices.