Jataka Tales and Ajanta Murals: 'Sacred Beauty' in Buddhist Words and Images

By J. Bruce Long

ABSTRACT

The question as to the proper and most acceptable view of the relationship between Religion and the Arts is as old as humankind itself. Prior to the beginning of the Renaissance in the West in the mid-15th century, however, it was well-nigh universally recognized that Religion and the Arts were all but inseparable, and not only that but that they actively worked together to form a single, but complex mode of human expression. The pre-modern view of Religion and the Arts as intermingled strands of a single cord, provides the hermeneutical frame for this paper.

The specific focus of this paper will be the story of the Great Renunciation of King Mahajanaka, ruler over Mithila, and a previous incarnation of The Buddha, as that story is recounted through two different, but interrelated modes of human communication -- the prose narrative in the Jataka Stories and the wall-paintings pertinent to that story located in Cave I at Ajanta, a Buddhist temple site in North Central India.

Following a brief account of the author's personal visit to the caves during a research year in India, the paper covers ad seriatum, the following topics: (1) The Loss and Rediscovery of the Caves in the 19th century, (2) The Design and Execution of the Caves and the Murals, (3) An Account of the Mahajana Jataka story, (4) A Description of the Paintings Illustrative of the Jataka Story, (5) A Thematic Analysis of the Mahajanaka Jataka Story, (6) Thematic Contrasts between the Jataka Story and the Ajanta Murals, and (7) Social and Cultural Values in the "Mahajanaka" Cycle.

The conclusion of this study of a single Jataka story and the paintings that purportedly illustrate it, is that, while there are numerous thematic parallels between the story and the murals, in the end, it is difficult to determine whether these two accounts of the story of Mahajanaka's renunciation are, essentially, two versions of the same story or two different stories, with numerous common themes. We are left with this troublesome question, partly, by virtue of the fact that we do not know with any degree of certainty whether the story-tellers and the artists were working from the same literary source or different ones. If either one or both of the versions of the story were oral, in nature, we may never be in a position to formulate a conclusive position regarding this question.

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
John Keats (1795-1821), 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Whenever anyone reaches up to the Release, /i.e,Truth/
called the Beautiful, then he knows, indeed, what Beauty is.
Digha Nikaya iii, 34

As Sumeru is the chief of the mountains,
as Garuda is the chief of those born from eggs,
as the King is the chief of men, even so in this world
is the practice of painting the chief of all the arts.
Vishnudharmottara-purana, 3rd khanda, xliii, 39

Introduction

The provocative presence of the term "culture" in the title of this conference, grants us a most spacious field in which to interpret any and all aspects of the Buddhist tradition. One benefit of investigating an aspect of the Buddhist tradition within such a broad interpretative framework, is that we can observe its religious and aesthetic values, in parallel and, thereby, gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between these two defining features of the tradition, as that relationship is reflected in the single story and panel of paintings investigated in this paper.

In this paper, we will explore a specific aspect of the early Buddhist religious and cultural tradition in India by examining two distinct but interrelated modes of expression – i.e., the narrative story and a series of pictorial wall paintings or murals. Specifically, the subject of our inquiry will be the tale of King Mahajanaka, King of Mithila, in the province of Videha, as that story is portrayed through two different methods of story-telling: namely, (1) a narrative form known as a *Jataka* tale, concerning one of the previous births of the Buddha, and (2) a series of murals that, supposedly, illustrate selected episodes of the same story.

The basic constituent of the first mode of expression is *words*, care-fully chosen and arranged in an order appropriate to the communication of an pre-established message; the root ingredients of the second mode of communication is *graphic representations of people, places and events in pictorial images,* images envisioned, designed, spatially arranged, sketched and, finally, painted in such a powerful fashion that they exercise a com-pelling effect on the mind and heart of the viewer 1500 years after their original creation.

We will discover in the course of this investigation that the juxta-position of these two "versions" of the Mahajanaka story will reveal a clear and compelling exemplification of the complex interweaving of "the reli-gious" and "the artistic" within the Buddhist tradition in such an intimate fashion that the two strands of cultural meaning are virtually indistin-guishable – no Truth, without Beauty, and no Beauty, without Truth.

A Personal Aside: On First Seeing the Ajanta Caves

I first saw the Ajanta Caves[1] through the auspices of a guided tour provided by the Department of the Archaeological Survey of India during a research year in India.

To catch sight, at a single glance, of the panorama of the Ajanta caves, all twenty-nine of which nestle precariously, side-by-side, a third of the way up a sheer wall of solid rock that towers 250 feet above the riverbed below, is to experience one of the most emotionally compelling views in all the world of the combined handiwork of natural processes and human industry.

I shall never forget first catching sight of the cave entrances from some mile or two distance from the site, and thinking to myself that the tiny entrances to the caves, that collectively form a horseshoe-shaped configuration at the termination of the river

below, resembled a string of black onyx stones set gracefully into a huge stone necklace that had been created by Mother Earth.

I imagined to myself, as we approached the caves, that the Buddhist monks who, sometime during the 2nd-1st centuries BCE, settled on this place as an ideal site for a string of Buddhist monasteries, must have traveled far and wide, before discovering a place of such perfect structural integrity and natural beauty as this. The high standards that the monks and artists set for themselves in their search for an acceptable site for a permanent monastic community must have been inspired by something like the statement of the Buddha himself, recorded in the *Majjhima Nikaya,*[2] in which he spoke of the uncompromising care he himself took in finding an agreeable place that would be a quiet haven of peace, a pleasurable feast to the eyes, and an ideal place for extended periods of deep and transformative meditation.

> Still in search, O Bhikkhus, of what is wholesome,
> Seeking the supreme state of sublime peace,
> I wandered by stages through the Magadhan country
> Until eventually I arrived as Senanigama near Uruvela.
> There I saw an agreeable piece of ground, a delightful grove
> With a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks
> And nearby a village for alms resort. I considered:
> 'This is an agreeable piece of ground, this is a delightful grove,
> with a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks
> and nearby a village for alms resort. This will serve
> for the striving of a clansman intent on striving.
> And I sat down there thinking; 'This will serve for striving.[3]

Loss and Rediscovery of the Ajanta Caves

The Ajanta Caves are located in the Western Ghats Mountains in the state of Maharashtra, approximately 62 miles northeast of the modern city of Aurangabad in a region known as the Deccan. After centuries of obli-vion and neglect, these magnificent rock-hewn caves were re-discovered in 1819 from a hilltop on the opposite side of the deep ravine containing the Waghora River. Some say the caves were discovered by a group of officers of the Madras army,[4] while others contend that they were discovered, by chance, by a party of British army officers on a tiger hunt in the forest. The cave site was later named after the small modern village called, Ajintha, located just three miles from the caves.[5]

Between the time when the caves were abandoned around the 8th century CE and their rediscovery in 1819, the entire site was completely obscured by mud and forest vegetation. Estimates of the actual number of caves varies, ranging from 29 to 30, depending on how one counts the openings in the rock cliff. In fact, two of the so-called "caves" are little more than shallow indentures in the face of the stone wall.[6]

With no connection to the chronology of the excavation of the caves, archaeologists have numbered the caves in serial order from east to west, beginning with Cave I. According to Sheila Weiner, "Not only do we not know with certainty in what order the caves were excavated, we do not even know how long it took them to excavate them, who sculpted the decorations and figures, or who did the paintings."[7]

Such is often the case with ancient archeological sites, both East and West. **(See figure #1)**

The first historical reference to the caves appears in the "travel-ogue" of the famous Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, who traveled overland to India, between 629 and 634 CE., in order to gather a collection of Buddhist Sanskrit texts, later to be translated into Chinese back in his homeland.[8]

The first scholarly presentation on the caves was made by James Fergusson, in a paper read before the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1846.[9] In response to great interest in preparing copies of these paintings, Major R. Gill prepared executive drawings of each painting at the site. Unfortunately, all but five of these drawings were destroyed by a fire in the Crystal Palace in London, where they were being exhibited in 1866.[10] Indian, European, and American scholars have copied, studied, described, interpreted, and worked conscientiously over time to preserve these paintings from the ravages of time and the inhumanity of man.[11]

In 1951, the Government of India declared the caves, along with a number of other notable monuments in the former Princely States, to be national treasures and two years later, the caves were taken over by the Archaeological Survey of India. In 1954, Madanjeet Singh, with an agreement between the Government of India and UNESCO, prepared 580 transparencies, to form a comprehensive photographic record of all the paintings and sculptures that grace these elegant cave temples.[12]

The Design and Execution of the Caves and the Murals

The visitor is overwhelmed not only by the wealth of the visual stimuli, that pervade these caves, inside and out, but by the feat of the excavation itself; for these are not natural caves. They were carved out of a solid wall of rock in architectural forms, based on structural prototypes now nonexistent, but which in some instances are depicted in the elaborate architectural forms which appear in the paintings.[13] Hence, these twenty-nine caves of varying sizes and degrees of complexity were excavated over a period of 8-9 centuries with simple hammers and chisels and doubtlessly were executed by hundreds, even thousands, of day-laborers. **(See figure #2, Behl 15)**

Four of the finished caves (IX, X, XIX, and XXVI) are *caityas* or meeting halls where, perhaps, both monks and lay-people gathered to worship and meditate. The other twenty-five caves were created as monsoon retreats (*varsha-vasas* or *viharas*) at which hundreds of Buddhist monks gathered once a year during the rainy reason for instruction in the *dharma* and the *vinaya* and to engage in a concentrated period of meditation for the three months of retreat. This complex of caves was continuously inhabited from c. 200 BCE to c. 650 CE.[14] They vary in size from a few feet in circum-ference to Cave X which measures 40 x 100 feet in size.

The Ajanta caves15 were excavated in two historical phases, separated by over 400 years. The earliest phase of construction was promoted by the exponents of Early Buddhism, during an aniconic period of Buddhist thought,[16] when it was believed inappropriate to represent the Buddha in anthropomorphic form. Instead, he was

represented by abstract symbols such as the *stupa*, a set of footprints, an empty throne or a simple tree representing the spot where the Buddha sat in his quest of Enlightenment.

The second phase of excavation, which lasted from the fifth through the sixth centuries CE, is a kind of visual record of the transition through the proto-Mahayana and Mahayana periods which initiated the use of cultic images to represent the person of the Buddha and then introduced the figure of the *Bodhisattva* to represent previous incarnations of The Buddha.[17]

The earliest caves in the complex, namely, Caves IX and X (both *chaityas*) and Cave XV (a *vihara*), have been dated by means of the decipherment of inscriptions and the interpretation of the aniconic patterns of symbolic representation. The earliest caves manifest stoically simple interiors, with walls and ceilings composed of rough-hewn and unornamented stone surfaces. The figures that appear in these caves are dressed and coiffed in a style reminiscent of the *stupas* at the more ancient Buddhist sites at Sanchi and Barhut, indicating that they may well date back to the second century BCE, perhaps, prior to the earliest signs of a separation between the Early Buddhism and Mahayana.

The second group of caves (I-V, XII-XXVII) was excavated during the supremacy of the Vakatakas and the Guptas, and was completed by the 7th century CE at the latest. Both of these periods were times of highly imaginative cultural creativity in many of the arts. According to the in-scriptions in certain of the caves, Varahadeva, the minister of the Vaka-taka king, Harishena (c. 475-500 CE),[18] dedicated Cave XVI to the Buddhist *Samgha*, while Cave XVII was the gift of the prince, a feudatory. An inscription in Cave IV records that the Buddha image was the gift of a man named, Abhayanandi, who hailed from Mathura, a great distance from the Ajanta site.

The quarters excavated during the Mahayana period are clearly definable by their larger, grander and more elaborately decorated accom-modations. But, more telling that the more spacious rooms and the more elaborate ornamentations on the walls and ceilings, these caves are distinguished by the presence of extraordinarily charming, graceful, and colorful tableau of groups of human figures representing, not the Buddha himself, but a *Bodhisatta* (Skt.: *Bodhisattva*). Many of the murals were created as illustrations of certain *Jataka* stories concerning the previous incarnations of The Buddha.[19] These stand as embodiments of the lofty ideals of moral and spiritual development that the monks were expected to strive to embody.

The walls of these caves literally explode in all directions with representations of bird, animal and maritime creatures, diverse ethnic types and classes of people of both genders, participating in the lively activities of daily street scenes, court gatherings, and cameo moments that enliven everyday life.

If a viewer could take in, at a glance, the entire panorama of sculptural and mural images that grace each of these caves, that person could witness a drama that would approach in visual scope and dramatic complexity, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as a presentation of the grand drama that is human life.

The entire panoply of murals in the *Ajanta* caves exhibits many of the guiding principles contained in the primary canonical manual for the visual arts, the *Vishnu-dharmottara-purana*. It is beyond question but that the various artists who designed and executed these extraordinary artworks were intimately acquainted with this artistic manual in minute detail. But it must also be said that one of the reasons the *Ajanta* paint-ings are so outstanding in their complexity and exquisite beauty is that the artists never got bogged down in the formalism of any manual governing the production of the visual arts but were allowed considerable creative latitude in the design and execution of these images from one project to another.

Ajanta occupies a unique position in the history of Indian art, because of the fact that it is the earliest existing site that combines painting, sculpture and architecture, to form a complex religious site of immense grandeur.[20]

Milo C. Beach waxes eloquent in his estimation of the historical and cultural importance of these caves by observing that Ajanta, provides virtually the only remaining evidence of the diverse styles of painting that first developed in India and from there, traveled with Buddhism into the Himalayan regions and then, via the Silk Roads, across Central Asia into China, Japan and Korea.[21]

Beach continues,

> "Here, the artistic creations, dating from a period when certain schools of Buddhism were just begin-ing to invent architectural forms and imagery appro-priate to their beliefs, include nothing that has been repeated by rote; throughout, the art of Ajanta reveals the freshness of new invention, and it stands virtually alone in its ability to illuminate these early periods of a pan-Asian development."[22]

The Mahajanaka Jataka – The Story of a King's Renunciation of the World

The *Mahajanaka Jataka*[23] is a narrative account of a turning-point in the career of one of the *Bodhisattas* or future Buddhas, in the person of a provincial ruler over a small state in North Central India.[24] This story appears as number 539 out of 547 such tales and appears toward the very end of the entire collection.[25]

The Mahajanaka Jataka is among the longest, most complicated and most engaging of all the *Jatakas*.[26] It is, also, rich in familial, royal, lite-rary, cultural and religious elements that reflect graphically the social and religious conditions of the time. The story tells of a king's coronation as emperor of the realm, his subsequent disenchantment with the mundane world, followed by his vow to abandon that world in search of spiritual liberation.[27,28]

The epigram that introduces this story states that a large group of monks were assembled in the Hall of Dharma, discussing the Tathagata's Great Renunciation. The Buddha came to the hall and finding that this was the subject of their conversation, told them that he had performed the Great Renunciation once before in his prior incarnation as King Maha-janaka. And, at this point, the Master began to relate the

story of his previous experience of the Great Renunciation in exquisitely graphic detail.[29, 30]

Here, then, is the story, of the Great Renunciation of King Maha-janaka of Videha, in relatively abbreviated scope:[31, 32]

Mahajanaka's father, Aritthajanaka, the king of Mithila, in the kingdom of Videha, was killed by his brother, Polajanaka, who then usurped the throne. On hearing of his father's death and dethronement, at the hands of his own brother, Mahajanaka acquired a merchant ship and set sail for Suvanna-bhumi (Skt.: *Suvarna-bhumi*, or "Golden Land") with a large bulk of merchandise with the intention of acquiring sufficient wealth to recover his lost kingdom. But, his journey was cut short by a huge storm at sea. Overwhelmed by the storm, his ship went down, with all his crewmen and cargo still onboard. The goddess Manimekhala, whom the Lords of the Four Quarters had delegated to serve as the Guardian of the Sea, brought Mahajanaka back to Mithila.[33]

Once back home, he married the usurper's daughter (his first cousin), Sivali, who bore him a son named Dighavu-kumara. Mahajanaka assumed the throne of Mithila and ruled for four short years. By all accounts, he was a wise king and a benefactor to his people.

This version of the account of the King's Great Renunciation departs in many important respects with regard to the events that led up to the breakup of the King's satisfaction with his life and the loss of all hope of finding happiness in this world. No mention here of the pleasure ride by the young prince through the city streets where he encountered disturb-ing examples of poverty, illness and death and not a word about an initial encounter with a yogi, the sight of which opened the King's eyes to other possibilities for a meaningful and satisfying life.

Instead, there is a relatively bland story about two mango trees located in the royal garden—one, heavily laden with sweet, nutritious fruit and the other devoid of fruit altogether. The king himself partook of the fruit of the first tree. Hearing that the king has eaten of the tree, many of the citizens of the realm also took fruit from that tree. The people continued to rob the tree of its fruit and vegetation until it was completely decimated. The text observes, ". . . and those who did not take fruit, broke the boughs of the tree with sticks and stripped off the leaves, till the tree stood all broken and battered, while the other one stood as beautiful as a mountain of gems."

On learning of the decimation of the tree by his subjects, the King was greatly moved and declared,

> This tree keeps its bright green /fruits/
> because it had no fruit, while the other tree is
> broken and battered because of its fruit.
> This kingdom is like the fruitful tree, but the
> ascetic life is like the barren tree;
> it is the possessor of property who has fears,
> not he who is without anything of his own.
> Far from being like the fruitful tree,

I will be like the barren tree,
leaving all my glory behind,
I will give up the world and become an ascetic[34]

So psychologically debilitating was the King's disappointment, that he decided to forsake his throne and all of the responsibilities and pleasures that were attendant to that position and seek a life of total renunciation. For the next four months, he lived in seclusion on the top floor of the palace as a Buddhist recluse and never again showed himself in public to his ministers or subjects.[35]

After a four-month retreat, he instructed his attendant to acquire for him some yellow robes and an earthenware vessel. He asked his bar-ber to cut his hair and beard. He put on the robe, put the beggar's bowl in his bag, took up his walking-stick and the next day went out of the palace to begin the new phase of his life as a *sramana.*

On hearing her husband's decision to forsake the world, family and throne, Sivali became despondent and sought to divert the King from his vow by staging a large dance performance, complete with orchestra and a company of scantily-clad female dancers.[36]

Mahajanaka witnessed the performance but, unmoved by the entire spectacle, continued in his determination to pursue the path of renuncia-tion, much to the disappointment of his family, his court and the entire kingdom.

He, later, announced to his family and courtiers his decision to give up his throne and take up the life of a homeless wanderer (sramana). His closest subjects and ministers listened to him in disbelief and bewilder-ment. One fateful day, King Mahajanaka called for his horse, and road out from the palace with a large crowd of his subjects lining the streets to bid him a final farewell. He retired to the lofty heights of Himavat to cultivate his vow of renunciation.[37]

A celestial Sage (*rishi*) named, Narada, thought to himself, "This king has made the Great Renunciation vow, but he cannot withstand the pleadings of his subjects who follow him, led by the queen, Sivali. In case they put a hindrance in his path, I will give him an exhortation to solidify his resolve." So by his divine power, he stood in midair in front of the king and spoke these words to strengthen the king's resolve:

Do not think that you have already crossed (over to
the other side), while still bound by the body;
There are still many foes standing before you—
You have not won the (ultimate) victory as yet.

And the sage continued,

High thoughts of self, low thoughts of self;
Neither this nor that is fitting for a sage;
May virtue, knowledge and the law protect
the course of your pilgrimage.

> Narada, then, returned through the atmosphere to his celestial abode. After he had departed, another ascetic named, Migajina, who had also just emerged from an ascetic trance, beheld the Great Being (Mahajanaka) and resolved to present him with an exhortation, as well, in order to disperse the multitude of assembled subjects. So he appeared in the air above him and said,
>
> Horses and elephants, together with those creatures
> Who dwell in both the city and the countryside,
> You have left all of them, O Janaka: you are
> Now contented with (nothing more than) an earthen bowl.

After receiving the exhortation from Migajina to remain faithful to his vow, still firm in his resolve, Mahajanaka, counseled his wife, Sivali,

> I've (decided to) leave behind all my subjects, family
> Home, and native land;
> but the nobles of Videha, Dighavu
> (who has been) trained to undertake command,
> do not be afraid, O Queen of Mithila,
> for they will remain near to you to give you
> their full support.

And further,

> If you would instruct our son to rule,
> and if he sins in thought, word and deed,
> you will, surely, come to an evil end—
> this is the destiny that I decree for you.
> As the wise proclaim, 'A beggar's portion,
> gained as alms,' is all we need.[38]

After making two attempts to turn the king away from his vow (first, by means of the dance performance and then, by setting fire to all the towns and villages in the kingdom), Sivali continued to follow the king in the course of his flight into the forest. In hopes of persuading his wife to abandon her determination to divert him from his vow and return home, the king approached a grove of munja grass near the road. He cut a stalk of the grass and addressed his distraught wife with this stern declaration,

> See, Sivali, this stalk of grass cannot be joined again,
> Even so, our relationship cannot be reunited.
> Like a full-grown stalk of munja grass,
> Live on, O Sivali, alone.

This lengthy and rather baroque tale draws to a close with the presentation of a few facts that are not depicted in the Ajanta murals:

The King then departed from his wife. In a profound state of grief, she collapsed into a state of unconsciousness on the roadside. The ministers revived her and told her that the king was nowhere to be found. Whereupon, she, then,

constructed a shrine, worshiped the King with flowers and perfumes and returned home, disconsolate.

The *Bodhisatta* retired to Himavat and in a period of seven days had perfected all the Faculties and Attainments and never again returned to his kingdom. Meanwhile, back in Mithila, Queen Sivali arranged for her son's coronation as the new king, after which she herself adopted the very form of ascetic existence that she had so vigorously tried to persuade her husband to abaondon. "But she herself, having adopted the ascetic life of a rishi, dwelt in the /mango/ garden and practiced the preparatory rites for producing mystic meditation, until at last she obtained absorption (*samadhi*) and became destined to be born in the Brahma world."

There is no question but that this story in the form presented here represents an earlier version of the story that has been greatly expanded, and richly ornamented with new details. This custom of greatly elaborat-ing the contents of an existing story and thereby, not only enriching the details of the story but also elevating, more and more, the veneration of the central character—in this case, a Bodhisattva incarnated as King Mahajanaka -- is a pervasive feature of Indian story-literature throughout its history.[39]

A Description of the Paintings Illustrative of the *Mahajanaka Jataka*

All historical, epigraphic and iconographic evidence supports the claim that Cave I was excavated during the rule of Harishena, the ruler of the Vakatakas, sometime between 450 – 550 CE. The stylistic evidence points to this period for the creation of the shrine, as well. On the same basis, it appears to be somewhat earlier than Cave II, which has inscriptions that can be dated around the first half of the sixth century.[40] This fact would suggest that the probable date of Cave I was the latter half of the fifth century.[41]

The artistic and dramatic highlight of the artwork in Cave I is a collection of ten murals that recount pictorially the *Jataka* tale[42] concerning the decision of King Mahajanaka, to renounce his crown and all of his familial and social responsibilities in order to take up the life of a wandering ascetic (*sramana*).

Cave I, then, is a *vihara* or monastery, and is one of the larger of the 29 or so caves that constitute the Ajanta complex. The main hall of this cave measures 64 ft. x 64 ft. and contains fourteen dark cells which served as residential quarters for Buddhist monks during the heyday of this monastic venue.[43]

We now turn to a consideration of the manner in which the artists gave concrete representations to their visions in the murals, by the manner in which they illustrated this story on the left-hand wall of this cave.

The primary incidents in the story of Mahajanaka, as these are graphically illustrated in Cave I, are as follows:

1. A representation of the King's departure from his palace, dressed in full royal regalia, mounted on the back of an elephant, on his way to listen to the sermon

of an ascetic on the subject of The Path of Pure Renunciation. **(See figure #3; Ghosh, Plate XII)**

2. The robed ascetic preaches a sermon on The True Path of
   a. Renunciation to the King, who listens devotedly with gracefully
   b. folded hands, while surrounded by family and courtiers. In this
   c. detail, the ascetic is pictured in the teaching posture, while below
   d. two antelope are listening with rapt attention to the discourse.
   e. This small pictorial footnote testifies to the fact that even the
   f. non-human world was captivated by teaching regarding the Path
   g. of Renunciation. **(See figure #4; Behl 85)**

3. The King feels a deep, life-changing conviction in his heart that
   a. the worldly life will no longer be a dependable source of mean-
   b. ing and happiness for him, personally. He, therefore, returns to the palace, determined to renounce the worldly life. In this detail, the King is listening to the ascetic's words devotedly, with folded hands. **(See figure #5; Behl 85)**

4. Finally, the King announces his decision to abandon the palace,
   a. with his mother standing behind him, obviously perplexed and
   b. anxious about her son's decision. **(See figure #6; Behl 87)**

5. On hearing of her husband's decision to forsake his crown and
   a. family for a life of renunciation, the King's wife, Sivali and her
   b. maids fall into a state of profound and debilitating dejection.
   c. In hopes of distracting her husband from his decision to pursue
   d. his vow, Queen Sivali orders the performance of an elaborately-
   e. staged dance, complete with a female dancer, six musicians and a
   f. crowd of appreciative observers. **(See figure #7; Behl 90-1)**[43]

6. A display of a portion of the orchestra and dancers assembled for the purpose of arousing hedonistic feeling in the heart of the king, showing a lead female dancer in gorgeous sensuous cos-tume, her body forming a graceful "S-curve," flanked by two flautists, an accompanist clapping her hands in rhythm with the music and the head of a drummer seated below. **(See figure #8; Behl 94-95; Ghosh, Plate XI)**

7. The King and Queen sit next to one another in the royal
   a. pavilion, the Queen gazing intently into the King's eyes in hopes of learning of his response to the performance.
   b. **(See figure #9; Behl 92)**

8. The King, is, undistracted by all the colorful diversions of the dance performance and calls for his horse and rides out into the night to undertake a life of radical renunciation, leaving all worldly concerns and attachments behind, together with his family and courtly retinue. **(See figure #10; Behl, 96)**[45]

9. In one of the most compelling of all paintings at Ajanta, the
    a. King is seated on a raised platform, wearing nothing but a loin
    b. cloth, receiving from two attendants the *snataka*, or ritual bath,
    c. which will purify him, inside and out, in preparation for
    d. assuming the ochre robe of an ascetic. **(See figure #11;**
    e. **Behl 98-9)**[46]

10. Women bearing offerings for the King who has now become a
    a. *bhikkhu*. The entire scene is pervaded by a sense of solemn
    b. veneration being paid to the new *bhikkhu*. **(See figure #12**;
    c. **Behl, 101)**[47]

A Thematic Analysis of the *Mahajanaka Jataka*

Disregarding for the moment the numerous thematic divergences between the *Jataka* tale and the paintings, the paintings, purportedly, illustrate selected episodes in that story, and there are, indeed, a sufficient number of parallel incidents in the two sets of "narratives" to enable us to attempt a brief analysis of the *thematic structure* that inform both the *Jataka* story and the cave paintings.

Fundamentally, what we will refer to as the "Mahajanaka scenario," reflects the structure of all *bona fide* narratives. Namely, a central "heroic figure," possessed of larger-than-life virtues status, or power, suffers one or more serious dislocations, due either to a mistaken judgment on his part or a criminal act against him by another person. In this story, it is a crime against the prince that brings him misfortune. He responds to this egregious situation by struggling to regain his lost position and having succeeded in doing so, lives for a period in peace and prosperity. This portion of the narrative structure could be reflected in any storyline, ranging from an ancient Greek heroic tale, to a modern American short-story.

In the first stage of the Mahajanaka story, the young prince experiences a number of serious setbacks: the murder of his father by his brother, the brother's usurpation of the throne, his attempts to recover the lost throne from his brother, his shipwreck at sea and his return home to marry his brother's daughter, Sivali. At the end of Act I, he is living a life of unexcelled power and prosperity, and given the Buddhist nature of this story, we can assume that this good fortune came to him as a result of a combination of "right effort" and "good karma."

But, at this point, our story takes a dramatic departure from the archetypal heroic tale. Mahajanaka experiences a profound loss of confidence in the lasting value of life in "this world" and comes to realize the impossibility of finding true and enduring happiness within the realm of "conditioned things." As a result, he falls into what Soren Kierkegaard would call a state of "existential despair" and loses all hope of success and happiness in his existing lifestyle.

In response to this existential jolt, he reverses the course of his life through a conscious and intentional decision to sacrifice everything that he has *had* and everything he *has been*, in favor of a higher, more satisfying and more enduring gain.

This stage of his transformation might be described as a transition from a state of "have" to a state of "have-not," from a lofty and powerful social and political position in the world, in which he has everything of a materialistic and pleasurable nature that a person could desire – social position, political power, wealth, and the respect and esteem of his fellow human beings that can be expected to accrue to a person of such a lofty position. From a worldly point of view, he descends from a pinnacle of power, wealth and authority to a lowly and disenfranchised status of existence.

The second stage begins with the king's decision to "give it all up," to abandon the worldly life to which he was born in order to gain the highest prize of all—spiritual liberation from suffering and rebirth. By taking his life into his own hands, through a karmic decision, he abandons the world of wealth, power, pleasure and self-advancement, in favor of the uncompromising pursuit of personal emancipation. The doctrinal under-pining of this story holds that in taking this bold step of self-denial, he actualizes his "Bodhisattva-hood" and thereby, transforms himself into a perfect model for all other human beings to emulate and imitate in their own quest for spiritual fulfillment. That is the true calling of the *Bodhisattva*.

And, it is the pursuit of this model of complete and uncompromising renunciation, followed by moral and spiritual self-cultivation that
King Mahajanaka undertook as a *Bodhisattva*, to which this *Jataka* story and these wall paintings, each in their own way, attempt to give expression.

Thematic Contrasts between the Jataka Story and the Ajanta Murals

When the written narrative and the pictorial representations are placed side-by-side for comparison, it immediately becomes evident that, while the verbal and the pictorial scenario share numerous elements in common, there are also many elements that are distinctive to each. And that, furthermore, many of these thematic divergences may be significant enough to suggest that the story represented in the paintings may not be *the same story*, structurally and thematically, as the story recounted in the *Jataka* tale that we have available to us.

Specifically, there are many episodes in the story version that make no appearance whatever on the cave walls. Examples of this situation would include the following: the usurpation of the throne from Maha-janaka, the shipwreck of the King, the parable of the two mango trees, the intervention of the two sages, Narada and Migajina, to support the king in maintaining his vow, the Queen's act of setting fire to all the villages in the kingdom in an attempt to discourage the king from pursuing his vow, and finally, the Queen's own retirement to a life of mendicancy, ultimately, to prepare for her own rebirth in the world of the Brahma.

On the other hand, there are a number of events in the murals that either do not appear at all in the story or receive scant attention in comparison to their treatment in the murals. Regarding the scenes that appear in the murals but not in the Jataka story: a representation of the King mounted on an elephant, enroute to hear the sermon of an ascetic; a brilliant representation of the King and Queen, accompanied by a group of subjects, listening attentively to the ascetic's sermon; a highly colorful painting

representing a young prince undergoing a ritual ablution (either prior to his coronation as emperor or before his assumption of the life of a wandering ascetic); and a group of women presenting alms-offerings to the King who has now become a wandering monk.

These discrepancies between story and pictures suggest, at least, two conclusions: either the artists who designed the murals, did not consult and illustrate the *Pali* version of the Jataka story as we have it today, or their selection of events to be illustrated in the murals were based on one or more *oral* versions of the story current at the time, that are no longer available to us.[48]

In any case, the *graphic* complexities of the paintings are mirror reflections of the *verbal* intricacies of the story. Neither the *Jatakas* nor the murals could be accused of exercising verbal economy in their presentation of thematic and ornamental details. With regard to the narrative version, toward the end of the *Jatakas*, the stories are extremely long, highly detailed, and, even, wordy. For their part, the storytellers could never be accused of verbal stinginess. It would seem that the point of these tales was never to get to the point, by-pass the minutiae and get out, but rather, to include as many details about the main character and his experiences, as possible, in order to invest the story or paintings with a maximum of edifying potency and emotional impact.

For their part, the murals represent each dramatic moment in the scenario in extravagant detail, with attention to everything from general features of the environment and architectural ornamentation, to the facial features of the personages present, their clothing and jewelry, and even their individual emotional responses to the event in progress. Indeed, the modern viewer has to marvel at the range and variety of human emotions that are registered on the faces of many of the figures in these paintings – ranging from quiet acceptance, and deep devotion, to profound melan-choly and unrestrained joy. This fact is most clearly evidenced in the murals showing the King announcing his vow of mendicancy to his court and in the picture of the dance performance.

It might not be too far-fetched to describe both the *Jatakas* and the murals as *verbal* and *pictorial cinemas*, movies that are congealed into words and images, in which the cast of characters, the dramatic action, and the physical environment are all represented in lively and highly imaginative detail. Not only have the artists succeeded splendidly in capturing the character and spirit of the events being pictured. They have also taken great care to leave behind a graphic testimony to the quality of peoples' lives: the visual richness of the royal wardrobes, the physical ornamentation of the ceremonial bath chamber, and the highly picturesque jewelry that graces the curvaceous torso of the dancer. In their determination to present all of the situations in culturally-specific detail, the artists have left little to the viewer's imagination.

Now, to the question as to whether or not the narrative and pictorial accounts of the Mahajanaka scenario represent the same story or different stories. We submit a tentative answer to this question. The words and images can be construed as telling fundamentally the same story, given the presence of an impressive collection of events common to them: namely, the King's listening to the ascetic's sermon, the his

experience of disenchantment with the world and his vow to pursue a life of total renunciation, the announcement of his decision to his family and courtiers and their subsequent despondency, his wife's attempt to dissuade him from holding to his vow by scheduling a dance performance, the dance performance itself, and the King's departure from the palace to pursue his vow.

These half-dozen or so themes can be said to constitute a **narrative structure** that carries not only the character of the story but also the central meaning that it is meant to communicate. But the central hermeneutical question is this: how many novel elements can be introduced into the structure of an existing tale, without altering its essential structural and verbal integrity, and, thereby, transforming it into a different story, with a different "message?" The attempt an answer to this question here would take us far beyond the purpose of this paper.

One final thought concerning the relationship between the verbal and the pictorial artifacts: when the numerous and significant divergencies between the narrative and the artwork are evaluated with regard to both structure and content, one possible conclusion might be that the ten-or-so paintings in Cave I at Ajanta, that scholars have almost unanimously agreed are illustrative of the Great Renunciation of King Mahajanaka as recounted in the *Jataka* story #539, may not, in fact, pertain to the Mahajanaka story but may represent some other story of unidentified origin – perhaps even a story of an original non-Buddhist source and nature.[49]

Social and Cultural Values in the *Mahajanaka* Cycle

Even a brief inventory of the episodes from the *Jataka* stories, highlights those incidents that must have seemed to the artists at that time to be most representative of the crucial *turning-points* in development of the Buddha's birth stories. In hermeneutical terms, the particular set of incidents that are pictured in this series of paintings, must have represented in the minds of the artists a kind of *structural* or *interpretative framework,* which itself is made up of a cluster of symbolic "moments," that present the *central meaning* or *message* of the story. In this sense, this structure stands as a kind of "first-level" interpretation of the entire story on the part of the artistic designer(s).

One of the fundamental principles of the science of hermeneutics is that every product of the human imagination is historically and geographically *contextual.* As such, every cultural entity (whether it be a physical object such as a stone axe, an elaborate landscape painting or an immaterial "object" such as the Buddha's teaching about "no-self," defines and clarifies the time, place and circumstances of its place in the historical scheme of things. This is to say, everything that is not a *natural phenomenon* (such as trees, water, stones, clouds, sunlight, etc.), is a product of the human mind and as such, reflects the existing social and religious conditions of the time of its creation.

Even a body of materials such as the teachings of The Buddha, believed by his followers to be true in all respects and universally applicable to all manner of human conditions, such teachings do, nonetheless, reflect the defining ideas, values and worldview of the time and place in which those teachings were promulgated, namely,

northeastern India during the 6th century BCE. One has only to view the basic teachings of The Buddha *vis-à-vis* a comparable body of teachings derived from any non-Indian culture, to grasp indelibly the peculiarly *Indian* character of both the nature of specific teachings and The Buddha's governing worldview.

Hence, applying this hermeneutical principle to the subject matter dealt with in this paper, we find that even a cursory survey of some of the primary religious and cultural symbols that appear in the *Mahajanaka Jataka* series of paintings provides us with a window on the cultural situation at the time of the execution of these paintings.[49] But further treatment of this topic will have to be reserved for another occasion.[50]

Conclusion

In conclusion, what can we say, with some degree of confidence, were the most likely motivations for creating these extraordinary works of art and what functions might they have performed for those who frequented these caves? A number of possibilities come to mind: in addition to bringing a great deal of personal satisfaction, to say nothing of large quantities of merit (*punna, punya*), to both the artists and the patron(s) responsible for these 'productions', the *Ajanta* paintings, more than likely, were intended to function in much the same way as stained-glass windows functioned in Medieval Christian cathedrals—namely, to tell a story or communicate a moral or spiritual message to the illiterate devotees.

But there is also a second factor to be considered: the art works were produced primarily for the benefit of both monks and pilgrims to serve as venues of worship and meditation. This is certainly a large part of their cultural legacy, that they were not only great works of art but also repositories of moral and spiritual truths that continue to speak to believer and non-believer alike, almost 2,000 years after their creation.

In his introduction to the classical Sanskrit manual on Indian painting, Dr. C. Sivaramamurti describes the *spiritual* motivation of the professional Indian painter in moving terms, "The painter in India was almost like a yogi lost in his art . . . . He created his masterpieces, not in the spirit of imposing his personality on an admiring world with a desire for personal honour and fame, but obliterated himself, almost deriving supreme satisfaction in that his art was an offering to God."[51]

> We will conclude, then, where we began, with an observation about the intricate interweaving of "religious" and "artistic" perceptions and conceptions in the creation of both the *Jataka* stories and the cave paintings.

One of the epigrams of this paper composed of the concluding lines of John Keat's, "Ode to a Grecian Urn," is explicitly epitomized in the Mahajanaka *Jataka*, as recounted in both the narrative account and in the murals. This study has clearly demonstrated that the storytellers and artists, alike, blended almost indistinguishably a profoundly creative knowledge of both Truth and Beauty and have presented that knowledge in exquisitely beautiful forms of expression.

These masters of "word" and "image," employed their respective tools in a most masterful way in order to reflect the veracity of the Buddha's life and teachings in extraordinarily creative forms. The brilliant combination of elements of the "truthful" and the "beautiful" suggest that the originators of these stories and artworks could have joined John Keats in chorus to sing the immortal words of the two concluding lines of his extraordinary poem:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Those same persons could also echo the Buddha's words quoted at the top of this essay:

Whenever anyone reaches up to the Release / i.e., Truth/,
called the Beautiful, then he knows,
indeed, what Beauty is.

Notes

1. Behl, 14-25; Burgess, James, "Rock-temples of Ajanta," *IA*, III, 1874, 269-74; Fergusson, J. and Burgess, J. *The Cave Temples of India.* London, 1880, 280-349; Smith, Vincent A. "The Caves of Ajanta and the frescoes therein," *Journal of Indian Art*, XV, 1913, 55-56; Havell, E.B. *Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India.* London, 1915, esp. 140-55; Fabri, C. "Frescoes of Ajanta – An Essay," *Maarg*, IX, 1, 1955, 61-76.

2. 1. 163-67, trans. by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodi.

3. According to William Crooke, "The site is lonely and picturesque, and, at the same time, close to a main line of ancient traffic, thus combining the three leading characteristics which guided the excavators of the rock caves of Western India in selecting places for their establishments." ERE, 258.

4. Gupte, 32; Ghosh, 2; Weiner, 1.

5. "Early Descriptions of the Ajanta Caves and their Discovery," in Behl, 14, 238-53.

6. Caves 29-30 are unfinished and almost inaccessible. The Ajanta paintings are discussed briefly by the famous art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art.* New York: Dover Publication, 1965 and *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon.* New York: The Noonday Press, 1964.

7. *Ajanta. Its Place in Buddhist Art*, 2 At the very most, we can deduce the approximate times when various caves were excavated, based upon surviving numismatic evidence relating to the donors and through an examination of various styles of painting that seems to have appeared early or late in the history of Indian Buddhist artwork.

8. Anthony C. Yu, *The Journey to the West.*, 3 vols., trans. & ed., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978. It is interesting to note that the Chinese pilgrim never actually visited Ajanta, personally, but, amazingly, described the Ajanta site in generally accurate terms and he did so just as the entire cave site was about to go into decline. His description is as follows, "In the east of this country (mo-ha-la-ch'a=Mahaaraashtra) was a mountain range, ridges one above

another in succession, its tiers of halls and storeyed terraces had the cliff on their back and faced the ravine. This monastery had been built by A-chee-lo of West India . . . . Within the establishment was a large temple above 100 feet high in which was a stone image of the Buddha about seventy feet high; the image was surmounted by a tier of seven canopies unattached and unsupported, each canopy separated from the one above it by the space of three feet. The walls of this temple had depicted on them the incidents of Buddha's career as Bodhisattva, including the circumstances of his attaining bodhi and the omens attending his final passing away, all great and small were delineated. Outside the gate of the monastery, on either side north and south was a stone elephant." T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, London, 1905, II, 239-40.

9. "On the Rock-cut Temples of India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, VIII (1846) 30-92, particularly, 55-60 and 90. An excerpt of this paper is reprinted in Behl, 242-53.

10. Crooke, 258.

11. Behl, 50.

12. Singh, Mandajeet, *India – Paintings from the Ajanta Caves* (UNESCO, World Art Series, New York, 1954; Singh, M. *Ajanta: Painting of the Sacred and the Secular*. New York, 1965; Singy, M. *The Cave Paintings of Ajanta*. London, 1965; Ratan Parimoo, Deepak Kannal, *et al. The Art of Ajanta, New Perspectives*, 2 vols., New Delhi, 1991.

13. Weiner, 2.

14. Weiner, 2-4.

15. Concerning scholarly studies of the Ajanta caves as a whole, consult: Crooke, Wm., "Ajanta," *ERE,* vol. 1, 257-8; J. Griffiths, *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta* . (2 vols.), London, 1896-97; Behl, Benoy . *The Ajanta Caves. Artistic Wonder of Ancient Buddhist India.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998; A. Ghosh, *Ajanta Murals*. An Album of Eighty-five Reproductions in Colour. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967; Rowland, Benjamin, *The Art and Archiitecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. London: Harmondsworth, 1956; Debala, Mitra, *Ajanta: Painting of the Sacred and the Secular*. New Delhi, 1964; Weiner, Sheila L. *Ajanta: Its Place in Buddhist Art*. University of California Press, 1977; Spink, Walter, "The Archaeology of Ajanta," *Ars Orientalia*, XXII (1991); Spink, *Ajanta. A Brief History and Guide*. Ann Arbor , MI: Asian Art Archives, University of Michigan; Fergusson, J. *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, rev., ed. & enlarged by J. Burgess & R. Phene Spiers, 2 vols., London, 1910, (esp. vol. I, 125-208 concerning rock-cut caves, including Ajanta); Yazdani, G. *Ajanta. The Colour & Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography.* 4 vols, London, 1930-35 (reprinted Delhi: Swati Publications, 1983); and Schlingloff, Dieter, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings. Identifications and Interpretations.* Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987.

16. Compare Y. Krishan, 20-22; Behl, 26-7.

17. Weiner, 3 and "Origin of the Buddha Image: Hinayana vs. Mahayana," Y. Krishan, 51-70; Behl, 27-30. The latest caves have been dated around the time of the Chalukya kings (11th century).

18. In Cave XVII there is an extant inscription that informs us that the magni-ficient *vihara* was donated by this emperor, "While that moon among princes, Harishena, whose face resembles a lotus . . . and who does what is beneficial for (his) subjects . . . is protecting the

earth . . . (He excavated) this monolithic excellent Hall, containing within a Chaitya of the king of ascetics (the Buddha) and possessing the qualities of stateliness." Cited in Behl, 29.

19. According to Benoy K. Behl, "The mural paintings of Ajanta are not frescoes, as they are sometimes mistakenly described, for they were not painted on wet lime plaster. These murals were executed with the use of a binding medium of glue applied to a thin coat of dried lime wash. Below this surface wash were two layers of plaster covering the stone walls. The first was a rough, thick layer of mud, mixed with rock-grit, vegetable fibres, grass and other materials; the second was a finer coat consisting of mud, rock dust or sand and finer vegetable fibres, which provided a smooth surface for the lime wash on which the paintings were made," p. 35.

20. Weiner, 2

21. "Foreword," in Behl, 10.

22. Behl, 10

23. For a detailed description and interpretation of the *Mahajanaka Jataka,* see G. Yazdani, *AJANTA. Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography*. Delhi: Swati Publications, reprinted 1983, 4 vols; vol. 1, 15-26. This same *Jataka* has also been popular in Thailand and is the subject of temple paint-ings in Bankok. See Elizabeth Wray, *et al., Ten Lives of the Buddha. Siamese Temple Paintings and Jataka Tales*. New York: Weatherhill, 31-40, illustrated with three color plates.

24. Any attempt to date the origin of the Mahajanaka story is guided by, at least, two facts, (1) this story appears in the sixth and final volume of Fausboll's edition of the Pali text, the very volume that contains the longest and most recent of all the stories, and (2) the presence of illustrations of this story on the 3rd century B.C. bas reliefs at the Bharahat *Stupa* or *Bharhat*, Pl. XLIV. Another significant point is that the title of this story, inscribed on the *bas relief* reads: *janako raja sivali devi*, ('The Story of) King Janaka and his Queen, Sivali'.")

25. When the original *Jatakas* were gradually being formed at the hands of Buddhist monks, most of the stories were adopted *in toto* from more ancient non-Buddhist folklore in North India. See Rhys Davids, 207-8. Concerning the *Jataka* tales as a specific genre of storytelling, see the following: M. Winternitz, "Jataka," *ERE, vol. 7, 491-4;* Davids, Mrs. Rhys, *Buddhist Birth-Stories (Jataka Tales)*. Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1973; Jones, J. G. *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha. The Jataka Stories in Relation to the Pali Canon.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979; Sen, Benoychandra, *Studies in the Buddhist Jatakas (Tradition and Polity).* Calcutta: Saraswat Library, 1974; Khoroche, Peter, *Once the Buddha was a Monkey. Arya Sura's Jatakamala*. The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

26. Stories of this practice of a king retiring from the world to prepare himself for the next stage of his spiritual journey is not unique to Buddhism, specifically, or to India, more generally. During the sixth century, the Chinese emperor, Hsiao-yen, decided to forsake his rulership and become a Buddhist monk. He converted to Buddhism in 504 CE, took ordination in 519, and as a Buddhist vow decided to take no concubines. In 529, it is reported that he put off his emperor's robes, and donned a Dharma-robe. On four occasions, he went to the monastery to sell himself as a servant and three times he returned to the palace within three days time. But at the age of 83, he gave himself uncompromisingly to the temple and retired to a monastic life until the time of his death in 549. By all accounts, he ruled effectively for forty years and was responsible for persuading Chinese Buddhists to pursue vegetarianism. I am grateful to my colleague, Darui Long, at the University of the West for providing me with this information.

27. See Cowell, vi, 19-37.

28. The classical literary recounting of the Life of the Buddha, in which the story of the Great Renunciation of Gautama is a thematic turning-point, is to be found in such Sanskrit texts as *Mahavastu* ('The Great Story', 1st century B.C.), the *Lalitavistara* ('The Graceful Description', 1st century BCE,), and in Ashvaghosha's poem, the *Buddhacarita* ('The Acts of the Buddha', 2nd century CE), trans. by E.H. Johnston, Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1936 and reprinted in Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972, 61-80; and in the Pali *Nidanakatha* ('Introductory Tale', 2nd or 3rd century CE), the latter serving as an introductory commentary to the *Jatakas.*

For excerpts from the *Mahavastu* and *Buddhacarita*, see Edward Conze's *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth, 1959), 19-66; for the *Nidanakatha*, consult Jayawic- krama, *The Story of Gautama Buddha.* See also, *The Go-sho-hing-tsan-king or A Life of Buddha*, by Asvaghosha, trans. by Samuel Beal, Oxford University, 1883, reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass, 1966, 47-58, and in *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Samghabhedavastu, Being the 17th and Last Section of the Vinaya of the Mula-*
sarvastivadin, ed. Raniero Gnoli (Rome: Istitute Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977), 1:78-119, a version of which is presented in *The Experience of Buddhism. Sources and Interpretations*, ed. by John S. Strong, Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1995, 9-12.

29. This popular legend of the Great Renunciation is not in the Pali Tipittaka but is based on the story of the young noble, Yasa (*Vinaya i. 7)* and is expanded in the *Lalitavistara* and the later commentary of the *Jataka* tales. Quoted in F. L. Woodward, *Some Saying of the Buddha.* Oxford, 1973, p. 3. There is also a brief reference to this episode in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta.*

30. The central episodes of the story of the Life of the Buddha are to be found as early as the Sutra and the Vinaya literature. For the Nikayas, see especially the *Mahapadana* (Digha-Nikaya ii. 1-54, *Mahapari-nibbana* (Digha-Nakaya ii. 72-168), *Bhayabherava* (Majjhima Nikaya i. 16-24), *Ariyapariyesana* (Majjhima Nikaya i. 160-75), and *Mahasaccaka* (Majjhima Nikaya i. 237-51) *Suttas*. Many of the Pali materials on this subject have been collected in Nanamoli, *The Life of the Buddha* (Kandy, 1992). Finally, see Frank Reynolds, 'The Many Lives of the Buddha', in Donald Capps and Frank Reynolds (eds.), *The Biographical Process* (The Hague, 1976), 37-61, for additional examples. See also Mrs. Rhys Davids, trans., *Buddhist Birth Stories. Jataka Tales.* Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1973, 168-79.

31. Adapted from E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, trans., *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1895, 1990, Vol. VI, No. 539, 19-37. According to a Ceylonese scholar commissioned by the Rev. Spence Hardy to analyze the number of times a *Bodhisatta* appears in the *Jatakas* as a particular character, the *Bodhisatta* appears 85 times as a king, more numerous than any of the other characters listed. See Table VII in *Buddhist Birth Stories. Jataka Stories*. Trans. by Mrs. Rhys Davids, Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1973, 246.

32. It should be noted that in the earliest, pre-canonical *Jataka* tradition, the Buddha in his previous births was never identified with animals of any sort, nor even with an ordinary human being, but only with famous sages, teachers or, in this case, a king of more ancient times. Rhys Davids, 207.

33. The account of the king's shipwreck, according to the *Jataka* text, is as follows: ". . . . /In his sixteenth year, Majanaka/ thought to himself, 'I will seize the kingdom that once belonged to my father'. He inquired of his mother as to whether she possessed any currency and

promised, 'I will take only half of it and will go to Suvanna-bhumi and gather sufficient wealth while there to retake the kingdom from my brother'.

He persuaded her to give him half of her wealth and with the money in-hand, he set sail with a group of merchants, bound for Suvanna-bhumi. Seven days into the voyage, having gone too violently in its course, the ship sank in the middle of the ocean, with the crew weeping and lamenting. The crew became food for fishes and tortoises and the water surrounding the ship turned blood-red." Adapted from Cowell, *op. cit.,* vi, 24-25.

34. Cowell, vi, 28-29. This notion that possessions can bring the owner only fear and grief is a prevalent belief in both the Hindu and Buddhist *sramana* traditions. It is stated at numerous points in the *Mahabharata, Ramayana* and many other Sanskrit texts, that the unenlightened worldling lives a life filled with greed and longing before acquiring wealth and fear and distrust after acquiring wealth, lest he lose that wealth through either personal misuse or theft. The underlying ideas here are most vividly expressed in the Buddha's Second Noble Truth, to the effect that the source of Suffering or Perpetual Dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) is greed or hunger (*trsna, tanha*).

35. A small representation of an every-day domestic scene, that is rarely reproduced in books on Ajanta, appears as part of a bas relief panel at Barhut. A young servant woman is seated under a wooden shed performing a manual task. Yazdani (*Ajanta*, vol. 1, 17) states that she is pounding spices, but Schlingloff (181) believes that she is preparing raw cotton to be spun into cloth. Next to her is another woman listening to the gentle roar coming from a conch shell and a third woman is holding an unidentified wooden frame. The entire scene represents, graphically, a scene from the ordinary domestic life in early India and creates an ambience of quiet pursuit of daily tasks and a sharing of life with loved-ones that contrasts sharply with the world pervaded by greed and fear.

36. According to the *Jataka* text: "Queen Sivali sent for seven hundred concubines, and said to them, 'It is a long time, four full months, since we last beheld the king. However, we shall see him today; please adorn yourselves and display your many graces and blandishments and put forth your best effort to entangle him in the snares of passion.' Attended by this great company of dancers, Sivali went to the palace to see the king. She encountered him as he was walking to the family quarters but did not recognize him. Thinking that he was a Paccека-Buddha come to instruct the king, she greeted him and stood to one side (as an act of reverence). Then the Bodhisattva (who was actually King Mahajanaka in a magical guise), came to the palace where the dancers had gathered." Cowell vi, 30-31.

37. According to the *Jataka* text: "At that time (when Mahajanaka made the decision to renounce) an ascetic named, Narada, renowned for his possession of the five supernatural faculties, (i.e., faith, vigor, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom) was abiding in the Golden Cave in Himavat. After existing in a state of ecstasy for a period of seven days, he arose from his trance and proclaimed triumphantly, 'Oh, the bliss! Oh, the bliss'! As he gazed with his divine eye to see if there was anyone in the land who was seeking for this bliss, he saw Mahajanaka, the potential Buddha."

38. Cowell, vi. 34. There is a small bas relief on the railing at Barhut, illustrating this moment in the Mahajanaka story. It depicts the King and his Queen standing in front of the arrow-maker's bench. The King is raising the first two fingers on his right hand to make emphatic his statement to the craftsman. The craftsman is putting the finishing touches on an arrow that he has just removed from the fire and is examining its rectitude with only one eye open. In answer to a question put to him by the King, he responds that one can judge the rectitude of a thing much more accurately with a single, sharply-focused eye that with both eyes open. The King draws from this statement the insight that salvation can be obtained only in solitude. See A.

Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art.* Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972, 52, Plate VI,5. Rhys Davids (198) points out that the custom of picturing several scenes of the same story on the same panel is not confined exclusively to Indian art. "The Greeks did the same, and it was common in Europe at the time of the revival of the arts after the dark ages."

39. This trend toward the expansive multiplication of literary details is most dramatically represented in an Indian story collection, entitled, *Katha-sarit-sagara* (*The Ocean of Story*), which some scholars, including this one, believe may have been the original repository of stories that were adopted and adapted by early Buddhist story-tellers in the work now known as the *Jatakas*. I wish to thank my colleague, K. Warnasuriya, for his insights into this scholarly theory.

40. Behl, 65.

41. This *vihara in Cave I,* inarguably, contains some of the most arresting and awe-inspiring paintings anywhere on the Indian Subcontinent. The visitor will find there highly elaborate, even baroque, representations of some of the most widely revered of all *Jataka* stories. For example, (1) *Sibi Jataka,* about a king who showed a willingness to cut off pieces of his own flesh to feed a starving hawk;
(2) *Ananda's Conversation*, the poignant account of the long-delayed conversion of The Buddha's cousin, (3) *Sankhapala Jataka*, about the Bodhisattva's birth as the King of the Nagas, who after enjoying the pleasures of the serpent world for a period, realized the futility of carnal pleasures, and gave his body to a group of hunters who'd had an unsuccessful hunt, only to be rescued by a passing merchant, and then returned as a *Bodhisatta* to the Naga world, (4) the humble presentation of flower offerings to the two Bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani, (5) *Maha-Ummagga Jataka*, picturing the presentation of four severed heads, from an unknown source, on a silver platter, (6) *Bodhisattva Padmapani*, regarded, almost universally, as the crown jewel of Indian mural painting, the deeply pacific figure of the Bodhisattva, Padmapani, a lotus flower nestled lightly in his upturned right hand, his eyes gently half-closed, befitting a sage ensconsed in deep motionless meditation, (7) the horrifying temptation of the recently-enlightened Buddha by Mara, (8) *Campeya Jataka*, the story of a Bodhisattva born as the Serpent King, who was bewitched by a snake-charmer to perform a sensuous dance in the court of Ugrasena, King of Varanasi and who delivered a sermon to edify his royal guest as penance for his sin, (9) *The Miracle of Sravasti*, in which the Buddha performed a number of miracles in order to persuade six ascetics of the validity of his teachings, and, (9) finally, the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, the most spectacular and dramatically-arresting of all painting sequences in Cave I, or for that matter, at the Ajanta cave site, as a whole.

42. A list of all the *Jatakas* represented in Bharhut, Ajanta and Borobudur is provided by S. Oldenburg in *JRAS* , (1896), 623ff. and JRAS, xviii (1897), 183ff.

43. Gupte, 55.

44. In the painting depicting the dance before King Mahajanaka, each individual has a distinctly individual facial expression that sets each dancer apart from all the others. As Benoy Behl, again, remarks concerning various aspects of this panorama, "The realism and inexhaustive variety of feelings and expressions of the figures are a source of constant wonder." 93.

45. Ironically, in this scene, he is surrounded by numerous other figures, which doubtlessly represent the multitudes of his people who gathered along the streets of the capital city to witness the king's Great Renunciation. This image contrasts dramatically the Great Departure of Gautama, who made his exit alone (except for his horseman, Chandaka), in secrecy, and in

the middle of the night. This scene is unique in all of Indian art, by virtue of the fact that the entire orchestra and the dancers are all women. The orchestra is composed of seven musicians: two flautists, two cymbalists, two drummers and one stringed-instrument player. Consult A. Gosh, Pl. XI, Behl, 95., Gupte, Pl. E, Monochrome Plate, VI.

46. Other scholars have reached a different interpretation of this painting, i.e., that the king was preparing for his Great Renunciation from the palace to don the saffron robe. I find this interpretation of the ritual bath scene to be extremely doubtful. It is difficult to imagine that, after he had announced to the entire palace his intention to give up his throne and undertake a life of asceticism and having seen the looks of surprise and consternation on the faces of his family and courtiers (as seen in the Plate on p. 88 of Behl), the King would have submitted himself to a ritual bath before leaving the palace or, for their part, his servants would have given him such a bath to celebrate his departure. Such an interpre-tation seems quite out of character with the overall drift of the story.

47. Some scholars believe that this ceremonial bath was preparatory to his coronation as king; others contend that it was preparatory to his undertaking a life of renunciation. It is impossible to determine the occasion precisely, given the absence of written records.

48. A specific example of this principle is noted by a 19th century historian of India who observes that when the Buddhist monks took over the pre-existing stories that came to be known as the *Jatakas,* they altered many details to conform to Buddhist needs, especially, the descriptions of life in the pre-Buddhist materials were made to conform to the times when Buddhism had become firmly established in India. He states conclusively, ". . . there are remarkably few traces of Buddhism in those /early/ stories, and . . . they do not describe the condition of Indian in the third or fourth century B.C., *but an older one*. . . /Hence/ the description of the political, religious, and social conditions of the people clearly refer to the ancient time before the rise of the great Eastern dynasties of the Nandas and the Mauryas, when Pataliputra had become the capital of India. "*Proceedings* of the Royal Academy at Gottingen, 1897 and 1901; quoted in T.W. Rhys Davids. *Buddhist India*, 202-3. See also Richard Fick, *Sociale Gleiderung in Nordostliche Indian zu Buddha's Zeit*, vi-vii, referred to briefly in the same work by Rhys Davids, 202.

49. Consult M. K. Dhavalikar, *Ajanta. A Cultural Study.* Poona: University of Poona, 1973.

50. Consult M. K. Dhavalikar, "The World of Ajanta," in *AJANTA. A Cultural Study*. Poona: University of Poona, 1973, 140-44, Ingrid Aall, Ajanta: an artistic appreciation," in Ghosh, 8-13, "Conclusions," Weiner, 108-118 and "Ajanta: Social and Cultural Background," in Om D. Upadhya, *The Art of Ajanta and Sopocani. A Comparative Study (An Enquiry in Prana Aesthetics)*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, 49-54.

51. See*The Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara.* New Delhi, 1978, cited in Behl, 35.

Abbreviations

AB	*Art Bulletin*
AO	*Ars Orientalia*
ERE	*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*
ER	*Encyclopedia of Religion*
IA	*Indian Antiquary*
JIA	*Journal of Indian Art*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
M	Marg

Bibliography

Ashvagosha Bodhisattva	1966	A Life of the Buddha. Transl. From the Chinese by Samuel Beal (Fjo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
Behl, Benoy K	1988	The Ajanta Caves. Artistic Wonder of Ancient Buddhist India. New York; Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers.
Burgess, James	1879	"Notes on the Bauddha Rock Temples of Ajanta." Archaeological Survey of Western India. IX. Bombay: Government Central Press.
Cohen, Richard	1998	"Naga Yaksini Buddha: Local Deities and Local Buddhism in Ajanta," History of Religion, 37(4), 361-400.
Conze, Edward	1959	Buddhist Scriptures. New York: Penguin Books.
Coomaraswamy, A. K.	1927	History of Indian and Indonesian Art. London: Edward Goldston.
_____.	1938	"The Nature of Buddhist Art," in Benjamin Rowland, Jr. The Wall-Paintings of India, Central Asia & Ceylon.pp. 3-38.
_____.	1972, 1980	The Origin of the Buddha Image. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Plublishers Pvt. Ltd.
Dehejia, Vidya	1972	Early Buddhist Rock Temples A Chronology. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
Dhavalikar, M. K.	1973	Ajanta. A Cultural Study. University of Poona.
Feer, M. L.	1963	A Study in the Jatakas. Translated by G.M. Foulkes from the Journal Asiatique. Calcutta: Susil Gupta Pvt. Ltd.
Fergusson, James	1967	History of Indian and Eastern Architecture. 2 vols. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1899. Reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
Foucher, A.	1972	The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology. Varanasi.
Ghosh, A. (ed.)	1967	Ajanta Murals New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
Gupte, R. S. and B. D. Mahajan	1962	Ajanta, Ellore and Aurangabad Caves. Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co.

Johnston, E. H.	1972	The Buddhacarita or The Acts of the Buddha. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint.
Jones, John Garrett	1979	Tales and Teaches of the Buddha. The Jataka Stories in Relation to The Pali Canon. London: George Allen & Unwin.
Khoroche, Peter	1989	Once the Buddha was a Monkey. Arya Sura's Jatakamala. Translated from the Sanskrit. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Krishan, Y.	1996	The Buddha Image. Its Origin and Development. Delhi: Mkunshiram Manoharlal.
Lamotte, Etienne	1988	History of Indian Buddhism. Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, Universite catholique de louvain.
Rhys Davids, T. W.	1973	Buddhist Birth-Stories. New and Revised Edited by Mrs. Rhys Davids, Varanasi: Indological Book House.
_____.	1903	Buddhist India. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
Schlingloff, Dieter	1988	Studies in the Ajanta Paintings. Identifications and Interpretations. New Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
Sen, Benoychandra	1974	Studies in the Buddhist Jatakas. Tradition and Polity. Calcutta: Saraswat Library.
Smith, Vincent A.		A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon. 3rd ed., revised and edited by Karl Khandalavala. Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons, n.d.
Spink, Walter	1975	"Ajanta's Chronology. The Crucial Caves," Ars Orientalis, X, 166-67.
_____.	1967	"Ajanta to Ellore." Marg. XX, 2.
Upadhya, Om D.	1994	The Art of Ajanta and Sopocani. A Comparative Study (An Enquiry in Prana Aesthetics). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
Warder, A. K.	2000	Indian Buddhism. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
Weiner, Sheila L	1977	Ajanta. Its Place in Buddhist Art. Berkeley: University of California.
Yazdani, G.	1931-55	Ajanta. 4 vols. London: Oxford University Press

Picture Illustrations

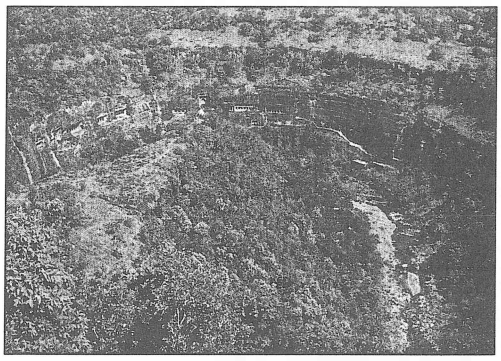

Fig. 1 – Panoramic View of the Ajanta Cave Site

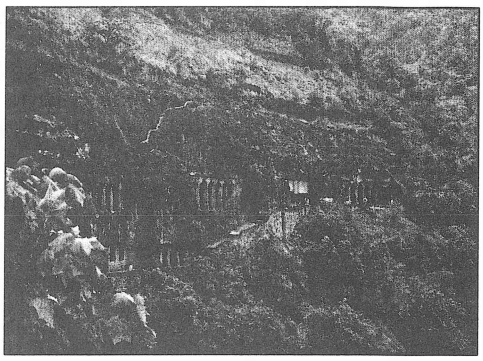

Fig. 2 – Detail of Selected Cave Entrances

Fig. 3 – Mahajanaka on Elephant-back En Route to Hear an Ascetic's Sermon on the Path of Pure Renunciation

Fig. 4 – Ascetic Preaching to Mahajanaka and his Retinue

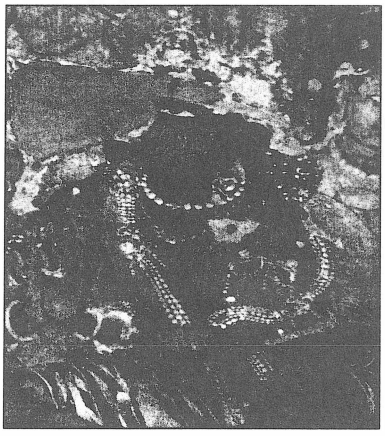

Fig. 5 – Mahajanaka Listens Devotedly to the Ascetic's Sermon

Fig. 6 – The King Announces to his Court his Vow to Renounce the World.

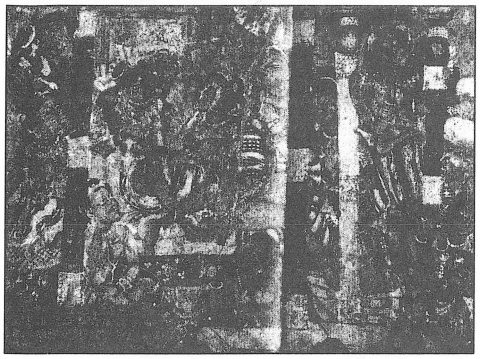

Fig. 7 – The Dance Performance (wide shot)

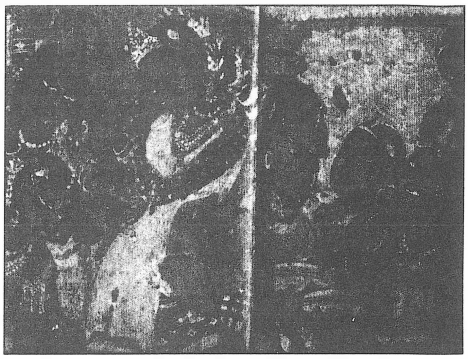

Fig. 8 – Dancer, Musicians and Spectators (detail)

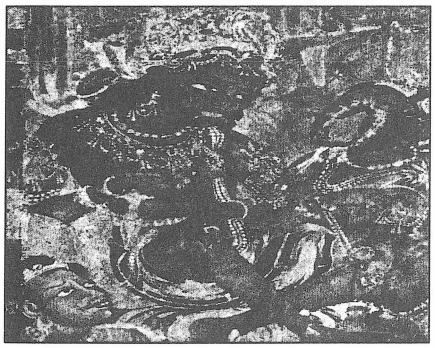

Fig. 9 – King and Queen Witnessing the Dance Performance (detail)

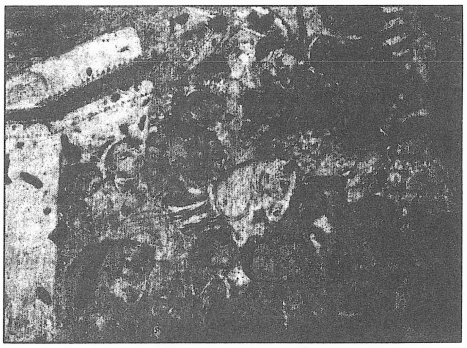

Fig. 10 – The King on Horseback Departing the City for a Forest Retreat

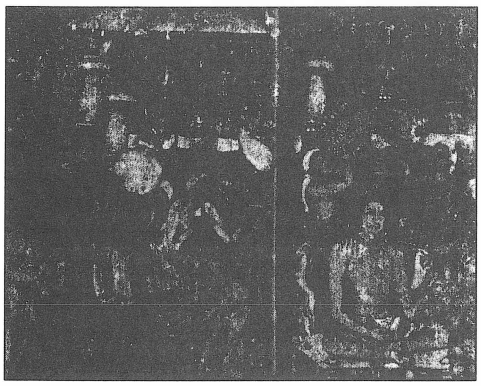

Fig. 11 – The Ritual Bath of the King Before he Assumes the Robes of a Monk

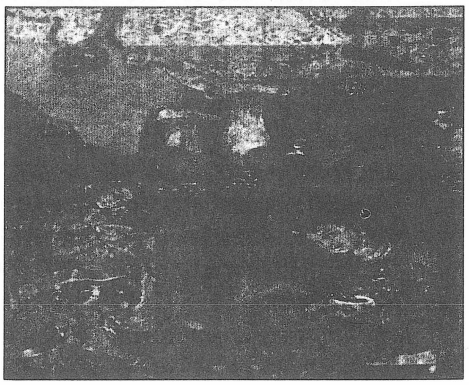

Fig. 12 – 3 Women Present Alms to an Ascetic who may be Mahajanaka