Crossing to the Farthest Shore: How Pāli Jātakas Launch the Buddhist Image of the Boat onto the Open Seas

Sarah Shaw

Abstract

A focus of recent debate in Buddhist Studies has been the extent to which the early Buddhists were involved in maritime activity. This paper takes this discussion as a starting point to explore the use of boats in early Pāli texts. It notes the rarity of nautical imagery in extant Indian literature of the period, and contrasts this with the frequent use of the boat as a simile and metaphor in the nikāyas. These early texts, however, exhibit little interest in maritime travel or its imagery. The Jātakas, however, select an underlying maritime metaphor for their articulation of the Bodhisatta vow, and include a number of maritime stories that involve the achievements of the Bodhisatta as mariner and hero, as well as other, often unsuccessful, outcomes of voyages undertaken by those who do not follow basic Buddhist principles. This paper examines the few Jātaka stories in which the image of the sea voyage is used to demonstrate the nature of the Bodhisatta path and the search for the perfections. These stories, rich in their depiction of sea travel, anticipate the peculiarly Southern Buddhist interest in the image of the boat. This image subsequently features in many forms in the thought, art, practice and narrative of these often coastal and river-based regions.

Full Text: PDF

Refbacks

There are currently no refbacks.

Copyright (c)