

Abstract

This thesis deals with the possible interpretations of the jātakas stories (Buddhist sacred biographies genre). The author focuses on the *Jātakatthavannana* collection, part of the Pali canon, which is an important text for early and Theravada Buddhism. A characteristic feature of the jātakas is that Siddhartha Gautama of the Śākya clan, better known under his title Buddha, tells us about his previous births, in which He is called Bodhisattva. In accord with Buddhist cosmology, Bodhisattva is born in different forms: as human, animal and mythical creatures.

In the jātakas stories symbolic links can be seen to the psychological, social, ethical, political, religious and philosophical themes of cultures in which they were told. In the early jātakas motives known from fables and mythologies of other cultures are also found. Their meaning, however, is given another shade or is completely different. The semantic value of themes is largely determined by the position they have in the configuration of relations between symbols, which is different for different cultures (as is shown by the author on a particular case). Due to this fact, the author adopts two following approaches. First, the author does not strive to find the original form of the jātakas tales and is not interested in their linguistic development. Second, the emerging themes are compared across the individual stories.

The thesis evaluates different theoretical approaches to the jātakas. Structuralism proved to be the most efficient interpretation tool, provided it takes into account the Bodhisattva's ability to integrate different social roles (King and ascetic). Author proposes the theory that Buddhism can use the very structure of narrative to address philosophical and religious issues. On another level, this symmetry corresponds to the linking of sensory and ideological poles of the symbols, which the author demonstrates by pointing to the role played by symbol of a specific form of the gift, self-sacrifice, in the cult of stupas. Author's own interpretations are preliminary and are intended to show the direction which research can take.

Key words

jātakas stories, sacred biography, Indian narratology, Buddha, Bodhisattva