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*Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire.* By Steven Collins. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-5215-7054-9. Pp. xxiv+684.

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The *Vessantara Jataka* is one of the most popular Jatakas of the Buddhist tradition. It is the story of the Buddha's penultimate human birth, and thus is the last story in the Jataka series. Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisatta, is torn between the duties of this world, and the quest for Nirvana. He tries to give everything away, including his children and his wife, in order to fulfil the ideal of generosity and detachment, and yet he does so with heart-wrenching tears and cries. In the end, all is returned to him, his kingdom, his status and his family, and he rules in righteousness for the rest of his life. The question the reader must ask is this: Which lifestyle is being presented as the ideal here? On the one hand, Vessantara renounces everything and embraces the life of an ascetic, thereby giving the message that the life of an ascetic or renunciant is spiritually more advanced than the life of a wheel-turning king. On the other hand, Vessantara returns to his life as a monarch and abandons asceticism. Which lifestyle is the more beneficial? Or perhaps that is the wrong question. Maybe the message is that both lifestyles are forever doomed to being in competition?

In this book, Collins uses this Jataka to illustrate the quest for awakening in the Buddhist tradition and the tension this quest causes as the hero struggles to transcend mundane existence in a mundane context. He weaves the tale of the tragic hero Vessantara throughout the book, and uses it beautifully in order to illustrate the problem Pali Buddhism wrestles with throughout its texts of achieving the extraordinary in an ordinary world.

The book begins with a comprehensive examination of method. He defines his terms and sets the scene. In Part 1, Collins provides the reader with an excellent analysis of the concept of Nirvana as it is presented in the Pali literature. He examines Nirvana in many lights, and attempts to determine what the authors of this literature were imagining when making references to it. He asks important questions: Can one desire Nirvana? What is the difference between Nirvana and cessation? And what would Nirvana be like? He notes that the literature refers to Nirvana with a variety of conflicting images, such as a flame, a city, land, the ocean or even as health, and consequently that these conflicting images may only bring us farther away from understanding what Nirvana means. At the same time, the literature speaks of Nirvana as being the cessation of desire. What, then, is the difference between cessation and Nirvana? And furthermore, is Nirvana endless, eternal, permanent? And if so, is this view of Nirvana appealing? Is Nirvana nothing more than a kind of exalted death? Is this the highest aim of Buddhism? Collins does not necessarily answer all of these questions, but the brilliance of the book lies in his finding the right questions to ask.

One of the most important points Collins raises in this work is an etymological one. He argues that perhaps we should not be talking about Nirvana as a noun, but rather as a verb. He apologizes for the inelegance of the term, but suggests that we ought to speak of the Buddha “nirvanizing” rather than attaining or entering into Nirvana. This suggestion is one of the most provocative claims in the book, for such a small change in etymology might fundamentally challenge our understanding of the concept.

After examining the concept of Nirvana in the first part, Collins in the next section of the book moves onto the concept of millennialism in the Pali Canon, looking particularly at Metteya as he has been presented in the texts and discussing how millennialism is relevant to a tradition that believes in the beginningless and endless nature of the universe. He also examines the stories of some of these future Buddhas, with particular emphasis on Metteya, and ends with, among other things, the idea of optimism—that is, if there are Buddhas to come, then we are forced to conclude that the universe must presently be teeming with countless bodhisattvas or Buddhas-to-be today.

The book closes with the *Vessantara Jataka*. In this final chapter, Collins weaves the information he has gathered throughout the book and uses it to analyze this famous Jataka tale which he had been referring to throughout. I found this final section to be the most rewarding one to read, as it was both intriguing and enlightening. With infinite wisdom and knowledge, Collins takes up the tension between the ascetic and the king—a tension that often characterizes Pali literature. He offers countless examples, primarily taken from the Jatakas, in which he points out the text’s inherent disapproval of kingship as compared to monastic livelihood. Time and again, the Buddha in his previous lifetimes renounces the throne in order to seek something higher. And yet there are also countless passages in the literature in which the mere presence of a wheel-turning monarch creates harmony amongst people, animals, and nature. Trees drip with jewels, lakes flower with boundless lotuses, and lions lie down with hares. Basically, sometimes it seems as though the literature condemns lay life, even that of a wheel-turning king, and at other times, the texts are perfectly aware of the necessity of a king and of lay life in general, if for no other reason than because the monastic community cannot survive without it. It is this tension, this constant struggle between the *dhamma* as applied by monks and the *dhamma* as applied by kings, that he is pointing to, and making obvious in the final section of the book. He does not try to solve this tension, but rather only makes expose it. Solving the tension, I presume, must be impossible, for were it not, it would have been solved a long time ago.

This is a fantastic work. It is highly informative, intriguing, and thoroughly researched. I recommend it without reservation for anyone interested in the Pali literature. The only criticism I have is that the author might have made this one colossal work into a few smaller ones. Otherwise, this is an excellent accomplishment.