

The Vyāghrī-Jātaka Story Known in Sri Lanka and its Relation to the Northern Buddhist Versions

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On the wall of a rock cave at Aluvihāra temple in Mātale, Sri Lanka, are several painted stories of the Bodhisattva, or *jātakas*, of which no Pāli version is known. One of them is the Vyaggha-jātaka (Vyāghrī-jātaka), one of the most popular and favorite *jātaka* stories, in which the Bodhisattva offers his life to save a hungry tigress. In the canonical Pāli *jātaka* collection there is a story entitled Vyaggha-jātaka (Ja no. 272), but this is a totally different story and has no relation to the famous story discussed here. As for the Vyāghrī-jātaka, in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices his body as food to save a tigress that is starving after giving birth to her cubs, although no textual version has so far been found in Sri Lankan Buddhist literature, the story itself is very popular even among today's Sri Lankan Buddhists. Although it is not known when or how this story, which seems to belong to Northern Buddhist tradition, was brought to Sri Lanka, there is evidence that the story was already known on the island in the 5th century: Fa-xian, who stayed in Sri Lanka from ca. 410-412 C.E., relates that at the Tooth-relic festival in Anurādhapura a royal messenger proclaimed the meritorious deeds of the Bodhisattva, during which Fa-xian clearly heard mention of the Vyāghrī-jātaka (投身餓虎). Beside this, Fa-xian also records his visit to the *stūpa* erected to commemorate the Bodhisattva's corporal sacrifice for a hungry tigress. According to his description, the place of the *stūpa* is two days' journey eastward from Taxila: obviously a place in the area of Gandhāra. The tigress story with which Fa-xian is acquainted seems to be neither the famous version in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* nor the similar version in the "Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish," but most probably is that preserved in the *Fo-shuo pu-sa tou-shen [yi]-e-hu qi-ta yin-yuan jing* (佛說菩薩投身[餒]餓虎起塔因緣經, "Sūtra on the Origin of Erecting a Stūpa where the Bodhisattva Gave his Body to a Hungry Tigress"). This *sūtra* of the tigress story is unique and proper names in the text show clear association with Gandhāra. In this presentation, this as yet not-well-researched text will be analyzed and the tigress story known in Sri Lanka will be discussed in comparison with Northern Buddhist versions.