



Surūpa-avadāna of the Avadānaśataka depicted at Borobudur. Photograph courtesy of Anandajoti Bhikkhu, CC-BY-SA 3.0.

Bodily Sacrifice for a Single True Verse: Implications of a Cluster of the Buddha's Past-Life Stories

Wednesday, May 19
12:00PM – 1:00PM (PST)
RSVP for Online Access

Across various Buddhist texts we find, again and again, a story of how the Buddha in a past life (as Bodhisattva) made a great sacrifice in exchange for a single verse of true teaching. Although we can interpret such stories as simply glorifications of Buddha or dharma, more interesting questions also arise, such as: How can the Bodhisattva access properly true teachings before he has realised the dharma for himself and made it available to others as the Buddha? If there is dharma available, is it a properly Buddhist dharma, or just a pithy generic well-spoken verse, and is it there independently of buddhas? How does the Bodhisattva's sacrifice – of wealth, body, life and family – in exchange for a verse of teaching relate to other stories in which he makes similar sacrifices for other reasons? Why is no such story found in the huge Pāli jātaka collection? In this paper I will offer some preliminary answers to these questions, and explore the implications of this cluster of stories for our understandings of the relationship between the dharma and buddhahood.

Co-Sponsored by UCLA Center for Buddhist Studies



Naomi Appleton is Senior Lecturer in Asian Religions at the University of Edinburgh. Her primary research interest is the role of stories in the construction, communication and challenge of religious ideas in early India. She has a particular passion for jātaka stories (stories of the Buddha's past lives) but also enjoys exploring the ways in which the narrative traditions of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions interact. She is the author of three monographs and many other articles and books on related themes, including translations of Pali and Sanskrit narrative texts.