

Voyaging to Suvarṇabhūmi: Shipwrecks, Ritual Object and Interlacing of Intangible with Tangible heritage.

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This presentation wishes to situate the representation of shipwrecks, presence of Buddhist ritual object, and narratives of the Jatakas within the larger notion of Suvarṇabhūmi. Where was this Suvarṇabhūmi? Normally this land of gold is identified with mainland Southeast Asia. There are of course different contenders for Suvarṇabhūmi, the main ones being Thailand and Myanmar. But in the eyes of Buddhist devotees throughout the Theravāda world, “*Suvaṇṇabhūmi*” is more than just a name, a mere land of riches and abundance. It is the place where Buddhism was preached. Suvarṇabhūmi is not any one place, it is an idea which encompassed many spaces throughout Southeast Asia. In the Indian context, the image of a land of riches for Southeast Asia persisted in three *Jātakas*, the *Surpāraka*, the *Mahājanaka* and the *San̄kha Jātaka*. These representations of merchants sailing to Suvannabhūmi in the *Jātakas* for wealth bring home two facts, one Suvarṇabhūmi was visualized as a place to venture for quick money in Indian texts and secondly Indians were not averse to taking high sea voyages even at the cost of being ostracized by the society following the dictums of the *Dharmaśāstras*. While there was the prospect of being wealthy, there was a constant fear of losing it all through shipwrecks. The *Jātakas* do illustrate the actual event of shipwreck. Being far removed from the times and space when the *Jātaka* stories were written, circulated and represented through different mediums of artistic expression in South Asia, regions of Southeast Asia continued with vigour the translation of *Jātaka* episodes in various forms of art.

Often an intangible heritage becomes tangible when a form is given to a thought. Here one can cite the example of knowledge of a *Jātaka* story being represented in a sculpture.

The presentation would highlight a few of the stories that travelled from India to Thailand where sculptors gave it a form either in individual stone sculptures or in boundary stones. Buddhist ritual objects such as rounded clay tablets were kind of 'voyaging' objects. They were perhaps the first constituents of Buddhism to move over long distances. Itinerant merchants, missionaries, pilgrims and other travellers carried these items from one region to another. Thus the ritual of offering clay tablets got translated into a cross cultural practice. This presentation would finally demonstrate that the dynamism of the Buddhist network along with the mercantile network kept alive the synergy between regions of India and regions of Southeast Asia.