INTRODUCTION

In 399 C.E. a Chinese Buddhist monk by the name of Faxian set out from his home in Chang'an to undertake a fourteen-year pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy land of India. After following a path westward across the length of China, he eventually worked his way south via the Karakorum trail and entered the northwestern portion of the Indian subcontinent, in the regions of Uḍḍiyāna and Gandhāra (in what is currently northern Pakistan).

At the time of Faxian's visit, Buddhism in this region (under the Later Kuṣāṇas and Śakas) was flourishing, and in addition to the many large monasteries and thriving monastic communities Faxian encountered, there were a number of impressive Buddhist holy sites associated with the biography of the Buddha. But since the original homeland of the historical Buddha lay far away in the central Gangetic plain, this region of northwest India could not lay claim to the more standard and well known episodes of the Buddha's life. Instead, the holy sites of northwest India were of two major types: Some commemorated the events that took place during a purely apocryphal and supernatural nighttime journey the Buddha is said

to have taken to the region in the company of the *yakṣa* Vajrapāṇi, during which he tamed and converted many nonhuman beings by means of his magical powers.[1] (Thus Faxian visited the famous cave in which the Buddha, after taming the *nāga*-king Gopāla, had left an imprint of his shadow as a continuing reminder of his presence.) Most of the northwestern sites, however, were associated with the Buddha's *previous* lifetimes (before his birth as Siddhārtha Gautama) and commemorated the various heroic deeds he had performed while still a bodhisattva. Since northwest India could not be clearly associated with the Buddha's last life, it made sense to localize and acclimatize Buddhism within the region by identifying various northwestern sites as the locales of some of his previous lives, as recorded in the Buddhist *jātakas*.[2]

If we follow Faxian along his journey (by means of the detailed account he left behind),[3] it is striking to observe that virtually all of these sites connected to the Buddha's previous lives commemorate deeds of *bodily self-sacrifice*. Though the bodhisattva of the *jātakas* performs different virtuous deeds, it is the act of bodily sacrifice, above all, that seems to have excited the imagination of those who erected the holy sites of the northwest. In a place called Suvastu, for example, Faxian came across a large *stūpa* "adorned . . . with gold and silver ornaments" and marking the spot where the Buddha, in his previous life as King Śibi, had "cut off a piece of his own flesh" and used it to ransom a dove from the clutches of a hungry hawk.[4] Five days later, in Gandhāra, Faxian encountered another large *stūpa*, similarly adorned with gold and silver, where the same King Śibi "gave away his eyes as alms to others."[5] Seven days later, while visiting a *stūpa* in Takṣaśilā, Faxian informs us that the name Takṣaśilā means "decapitation" and refers to the Buddha's birth as King Candraprabha, who "gave away his head as alms at this place; hence the name."[6] And from there, several days' journey to the east, Faxian and his companions visited yet another *stūpa*, which marked the place where the bodhisattva, born as Prince Mahāsattva, "gave his body to feed a starving tigress."[7] These acts of bodily sacrifice seem to have inspired abundant worship and devotion, for Faxian further informs us that the people of the region referred to these sites as the "Four Great Stupas," where "kings, ministers, and people of different countries vied with one another in making offerings" and "the practices of scattering flowers and lighting lamps at the stupa never ceased."[8] A virtual cult of the bodhisattva's bodily sacrifice appears to have been active throughout the region.

Approximately two hundred years later, in the seventh century C.E., another Chinese Buddhist monk by the name of Xuanzang also made the holy pilgrimage to India, visiting many of the same sites as his predecessor Faxian and writing an even more detailed account of his travels.[9] By this time the situation in northwest India had changed considerably, however. Buddhism had suffered greatly under the ravages of the Ephthalites, or White Huns, and in many of the places where Faxian had described beautiful monasteries and thriving monastic communities, Xuanzang found only neglected and crumbling buildings inhabited by dwindling numbers of monks.

Nevertheless, while traveling through the northwest, Xuanzang once again paid his respects at the same four *stūpas*, his account of them offering us several additional details. The *stūpa* commemorating King Śibi's sacrifice of his eyes, for example, is described by Xuanzang as having "wood carvings and stone sculptures [that] are quite different from work done by human artisans."[10] Xuanzang dates this *stūpa* to the era of King Aśoka, and further informs us that the bodhisattva gave his eyes away at this spot not just once, but in a thousand consecutive lifetimes. The same repetitive quality also characterizes King Candraprabha's gift of his head, for Xuanzang tells us that this king, too, made such a gift "a thousand times in past lives."[11] The potency of this repetitive self-decapitation was such that its effects were still apparent in the time of Xuanzang. "On fast days," he tells us, "[the *stūpa*] sometimes emits a light amid divine flowers and heavenly music," and its powers had recently cured a devout woman suffering from leprosy.[12] Supernatural occurrences also characterized the fourth *stūpa*, commemorating Prince Mahāsattva's gift of his body to the hungry tigress. Xuanzang tells us that because the prince had "pricked himself with a dry bamboo splinter so as to feed the tigress with his blood . . . the soil and plants of this place are dark reddish in color, as if they have been stained by the blood," and "when people come to this spot, they feel nervous and uneasy, as if they had prickles hurting their backs."[13]

Unlike Faxian, Xuanzang does not single out these sites as the "Four Great Stupas." In fact, his account of his travels through the northwest suggests that many additional sites associated with the bodhisattva's bodily sacrifice also existed in this region.[14] Thus, the Mahāvana ("Great Forest") monastery marked the spot where the bodhisattva, as King Sarvadatta, had offered his own head to a wandering supplicant.[15] In the Sanirāja

valley stood a monastery called Sarpauṣadhi ("Serpent Medicine") with an eighty-foot high *stūpa* whose story Xuanzang relates as follows:

> This was the place where a famine occurred with a pestilence when the Tathāgata was [the deity] Indra in a former life. Medical treatment failed to cure the people, who died one after another on the road. With a mind of pity, Indra wished to save them, and so he transformed himself into a huge python lying dead in the valley, and an announcement echoed in the air. Those who heard about it were glad to rush to the spot to cut off pieces of flesh, which were at once replaced, to satisfy their hunger and cure their disease.[16]

Strangely enough, nearby was yet another *stūpa* where a very similar deed had occurred: during a great famine, the bodhisattva (born once again as the deity Indra) "changed himself into a large *sūma* (water) serpent, and all those who ate its flesh were cured."[17] And finally, the appropriately-named Rohitaka (Red) *Stūpa* marked the spot where the bodhisattva, as King Maitrībala, "drew blood from his body to feed five yakṣas."[18]

Head, eyes, flesh, and blood—the land of northwest India itself was a virtual map of the bodhisattva's gruesome gifts. Over and over again, throughout his long career—whether as king, prince, ascetic, elephant, hare, serpent, or god—the bodhisattva quite literally gave of himself, repeatedly jumping off cliffs or into fires, drowning himself in the ocean, slashing his throat, cutting the flesh from his thighs, ripping out his tusks, gouging out his eyes, or letting mosquitoes drink from his blood. He offered his body as food, as drink, as medicine to cure all ills, as a raft to hang onto in pursuit of the other shore, as ransom for the life of another—or for no good reason at all, but merely because someone had asked. And always with the same motivation—to benefit other beings out of selflessness and compassion, to fulfill the "perfection of generosity" (*dāna-pāramitā*), and ultimately, to win the highest estate of Buddhahood.

Visual depictions of such gifts are scattered throughout the archaeological remains of ancient India and beyond. In a sculptural frieze from Gandhāra, the bodhisattva, born as a noble elephant, kneels down and allows a cruel hunter to saw off his magnificent tusks for the sake of an evil queen who desires them.[19] The same legend is depicted at Ajaṇṭā Cave 17 (see figure 1), except that in this case the elephant himself performs the difficult task, wrapping his enormous trunk around one of his tusks and enduring excruciating pain as he wrenches it out, while the hunter kneels beside him in awe.[20] In another Gandhāran frieze now kept at the British

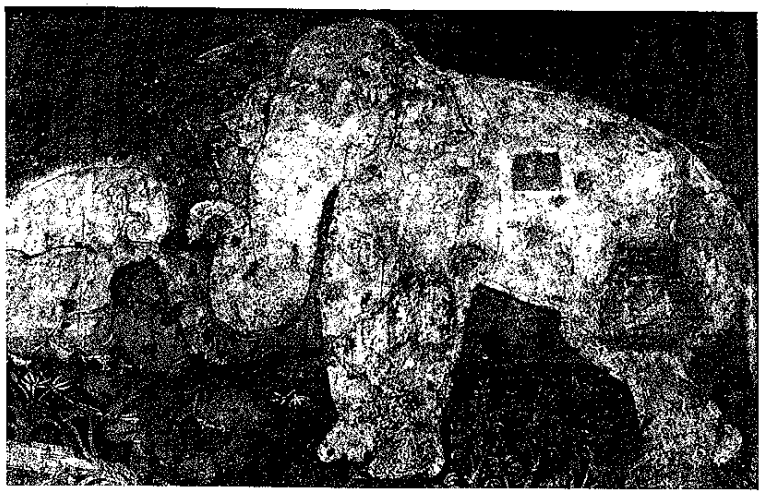

FIGURE 1 The elephant Ṣaḍdanta removes his own tusk on behalf of a hunter. Wall painting, Cave 17 at Ajaṇṭā, ca. late 5th century C.E. Courtesy of Benoy K. Behl.

Museum (see figure 4 in chapter 3), we see King Śibi having a chunk of flesh removed from his thigh and placed on a scale in order to match the exact weight of the dove whose life is being ransomed, while in a painting from Ajaṇṭā Cave 1 we see him heaving his entire body up onto the scale itself, since—through a bit of divine magic—the weight of the dove cannot be matched no matter how much flesh is cut (see figure 2).[21]

For textual references to the bodhisattva's bodily gifts, we need not rely solely on the accounts of Chinese travelers, but can turn to the vast literature of Indian Buddhism itself. In some texts these gifts are merely alluded to in a general way. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra,* for example, says of the Buddha: "When he was still only a bodhisattva, he offered to his enemies who came to kill him his body, his flesh, his head, his eyes, his marrow, and his brain."[22] In other texts, they are enumerated more specifically. The *Lalitavistara, Rāṣṭrapālapariprcchā Sūtra,* and *Jātakastava* of Jñānayaśas, for example, contain long lists of the Buddha's previous births in which multiple instances of bodily sacrifice are briefly summarized and praised.[23] (The bodhisattva of the *Jātakastava* is especially busy; in just twenty verses, he throws himself off two cliffs, drowns himself in the ocean, jumps into a raging fire, and gives away his head, tusks, eyes,

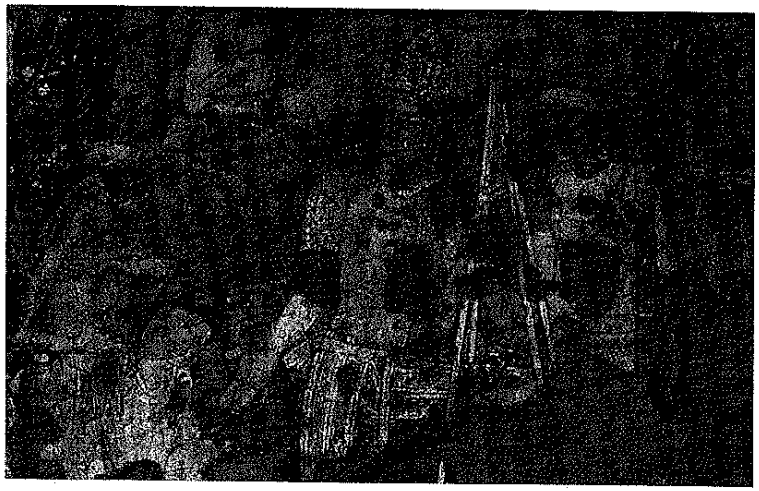

FIGURE 2 King Śibi, unable to cut enough of his flesh to equal the weight of the dove, steps onto the scale itself. Wall painting, Cave 1 at Ajaṇṭā, ca. late 5th century C.E. Courtesy of Benoy K. Behl.

and flesh on three different occasions.) Such descriptions, though brief, do make us privy to certain new and lush details. From the *Jātakastava,* for example, we learn that King Maitrībala's flesh was "cut out in slices with a sword," and after being cut, was "still warm . . . with blood flowing from the apertures of the cloven veins."[24]

In many Mahāyāna *sūtras,* on the other hand, the bodhisattva's gifts are treated as examples to be imitated, and all bodhisattvas are encouraged to give their bodies away, either literally or figuratively. "I have renounced and abandoned my body to all living beings," the *Nārāyaṇaparipṛcchā Sūtra* advises the bodhisattva to think, "not to mention external things. If any being needs anything for any reason whatsoever, I will give it, as long as it seems right. I will give my hands to whoever asks for my hands, my feet to whoever asks for my feet, my eyes to whoever asks for my eyes. I will abandon flesh, blood, bone marrow, major and minor limbs—not to mention external things . . ."[25] The *Vajradhvaja Sūtra* likewise advises the bodhisattva to renounce his own body, reasoning with himself: "If I should give to this supplicant the intestines, the liver, the heart, or the lungs from my body, or if I should not give them—either way, my body is not permanent; at the end of my life, it is destined for the cremation ground."[26] Such passages remove the act of bodily self-sacrifice from the specific context of Śākyamuni Buddha's biography and begin to place it within the more generic context of the bodhisattva path and vocation.

The bodhisattva's gift of his body appears in many different guises, then, throughout the traditions of Indian Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is first and foremost in the Buddhist literary genres known in Sanskrit as *jātaka* and *avadāna* that such gifts and deeds truly come alive. In these two prominent Indian Buddhist narrative forms, the human stories behind such gifts are told, the heroes are brought to life, and the consequences of their gifts on themselves and those around them are narrated in painstaking detail. It is only through the reading of such fully elaborated stories that we stop thinking of bodily sacrifice as merely "something bodhisattvas do"—routinely, repetitively, as a matter of course—and are instead momentarily drawn into a world in which a *real creature inflicts horrible pain and mutilation upon his own self.* It is only within the context of the story, in other words, that we lose sight of the generic "bodhisattva path"—a cosmological pattern that replays itself in much the same way over and over again throughout time—and instead become embroiled within a smaller and more detailed world concerned with this-or-that king, this-or-that rabbit, and the integrity of this-or-that physical body. Through the skill of the storyteller and the flow of the narrative, the bodhisattva's deeds become visceral experiences for the reader. No matter how many stories one reads in which the bodhisattva agrees to give his body away, one still holds one's breath every time the momentous decision is made. One still feels a shudder run up the spine whenever the bodhisattva cuts open his flesh, and the text dwells almost lovingly on the pain and agony endured. It is only the story that engages us to such an extent that we become as children again, listening to the same tale over and over but experiencing delight upon every retelling.

Thus, in the various Pāli and Sanskrit versions of the *jātaka* involving King Śibi's gift of his eyes, we hear not merely of the gift itself, but of the dramatic events leading to it. King Śibi is described as a generous and compassionate king—one who has six alms-halls established throughout his capital city and distributes six hundred thousand pieces of gold to beggars and supplicants every day, "showering forth a great rain of gifts, like a cloud in the Golden Age."[27] Surely, he is the very model of the generous king! But still—it is not enough; he is unhappy and discontented; something is not right, "so addicted was he to giving."[28] We see him sitting on

his throne, chin in hand, mulling over his gifts, wondering why they no longer satisfy him. What is it that he truly wishes to give?

"I've got it!," he exclaims, suddenly seating himself bolt upright.

Today, when I go to the alms-hall, if any supplicant asks not for an external object, but names something internal, I will give it. If anyone names the flesh of my heart, I will strike my chest with a spear, and as if I were uprooting a lotus with its stalk from a clear pool of water, I will tear out my heart, oozing with drops of blood, and give it to him. If anyone names the flesh of my body, I will strip the flesh off my body as if I were engraving with an engraving tool and give it to him. If anyone names my blood, I will give him my blood, placing it in his mouth or filling up the bowl he holds forth. . . . If anyone names my eyes, I will tear out my eyes, as if I were removing the pith from a palm tree, and give them to him. . . . There is not a single human gift that has not been given by me. Even if someone should ask for my eye, without trembling I will give it.[29]

Sure enough, later that day, a blind old brahmin comes and asks the king for an eye, and King Śibi agrees to give him not one, but both of his eyes. This terrible decision throws his kingdom into chaos; officials and ministers protest, people are torn with grief, and ladies cry and lament. But King Śibi cannot be swayed. He calls his court physician and orders him to remove an eye. The physician reluctantly applies a powdered medication, and the eye rolls around in its socket. He applies another powder, and the eye begins to come out. He applies a third powder, and the eye comes out of the socket and dangles at the end of a tendon. The pain is extreme, blood flows, the ladies cry and lament. "My friend, be quick," says the king. So the physician picks up a knife, severs the tendon, and hands the king his eye, whereupon the king gives his eye to the brahmin, who places it in his own eye-socket. The same procedure is repeated for the second eye, as well. King Śibi is now blind, but the brahmin can see, and King Śibi is at last satisfied. "The eye of omniscient knowledge," he says, "is dearer to me than this eye by a hundred-fold, by a thousand-fold! This is the reason for [my action]."[30]

The story does not end there. Later on we will find out that the blind man was really the god Śakra in disguise, who was merely testing the bodhisattva's virtue. We will also see King Śibi's eyes magically restored to health and hear him preach a sermon on generosity to his subjects. But already we have begun to enter the king's world. What a strange man he

is—but we feel that we know him somewhat; we have entered into his world and listened to him think, all by means of the story. He is no longer just the generic bodhisattva; now he is the proud and magnanimous king and the fallible human being—depressed when his unnatural addiction to generosity cannot be satisfied, stubbornly determined when his subjects oppose him, nearly suicidal (though never regretful) upon becoming blind. The story has given him flesh, and bone, and life.

One way in which we might begin to appreciate the possibilities brought about by the story-form is to compare two different versions of the same story, in this case both composed by the same author, the great Buddhist poet Kṣemendra, who included many such stories in his eleventh-century C.E. Sanskrit collection of versified *jātakas*, the *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* (hereafter *Avadānakalpalatā*). This is the well-known story of the hungry tigress, which differs in its details from one version to the next, but always involves the bodhisattva's sacrifice of his life in order to feed a hungry tigress who is about to devour her own cubs (see figure 3). In *Avadānakalpalatā* 95, Kṣemendra relates this story in the briefest of terms. One day, two criminals who have been sentenced to death are pardoned through the intervention of the Buddha, who then explains to his disciples:

These two were saved by me in a previous birth, as well, when their mother was a hideous tigress. At that time, I was a king's son named Karuṇarekha. I was a bodhisattva and a compassionate friend of all beings. A tigress was once emaciated by hunger and ready to eat her two young cubs. I gave her my own body and thus prevented her from doing so. And now, these same two [cubs] have become thieves through their remaining karma, and have [again] been rescued by me. Their mother was none other than that tigress.[31]

This version of the story is brief and uninteresting, providing all of the essential "facts" but otherwise failing to exploit any of the possibilities of the storytelling form. In *Avadānakalpalatā* 51, on the other hand, Kṣemendra is much more loquacious, telling what is basically the same story again (aside from minor details), but this time in a manner that brings out all of the richness made possible by the characteristics of narrative literature.

One day, so the story goes, the Buddha suddenly smiles. When the deity Śakra asks him why, the Buddha replies that his smile is a result of him remembering some of the deeds from his previous lives that occurred on precisely this spot of ground. He then goes on to relate (speaking

FIGURE 3 Story of the starving tigress, as depicted on an eighteenth-century Tibetan *thangka* now kept in the St. Louis Art Museum (detail). On the lower left, the Buddha relates the story of his previous life as a brahmin ascetic. On the lower right, the brahmin ascetic and his disciple cross a bridge. In the center, they discover and preach to the starving tigress. On the upper left, the bodhisattva is devoured by the tigress while his disciple searches for him. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum, William K. Bixby Trust for Asian Art.

in the third-person rather than the first-person) a series of four of his previous lives, the fourth of which involves the hungry tigress. In order to give one a sufficient taste of this literature, I now quote the episode in full:

[Once upon a time, there was a brahmin's son] named Satyavrata who was highly esteemed by the people. He was learned in all the sciences, his heart was devoted to compassion, he was fond of tranquility, and his mind was opposed to marriage.

A noble birth, the acquisition of virtues,
a mind adorned with discrimination,
and love and compassion for all beings—
These are the marks of those whose karma is good!

Taking delight in his indifference to worldly desires, he went to a hermitage when he was still just a young man. He undertook a vow to serve two great sages and lived comfortably at the hermitage.

Then, in time, when he had attained the pure eye of wisdom, he saw a tigress who was about to give birth. He reflected: "She is afflicted by hunger and will give birth in seven days. Then an intense longing will arise [in her] to eat her own young." Thinking thus about her suffering, he informed the two sages and made a wish, out of compassion, to prevent it.

Then, after seven days had passed, the tigress—exhausted by the weight of the fetuses, and tormented by her long abstinence from food—brought forth her young in pain. Satyavrata saw that the smell of her own blood had produced an intense longing within her, and full of compassion, he thought: "Because of the pain of hunger, this miserable [creature] is prepared to eat her own cub! Alas! Out of regard for one's own welfare, one forgets even the love of offspring! Everyone is tormented by their own suffering, but cool to the torments of others. Rarely is a person born who is especially pained by the pain of others. I will give away my body to rescue this tigress and her young! I cannot endure their copious suffering when their lives are at stake. [And besides:]

Those who abandon their bodies in order to save the lives of others,
treating [their bodies] as if they were [mere] blades of grass—
they have an enduring body of fame,
brought about by the arising of abundant merit!
[For] this [mortal body] is intent upon death.

It is a speck of life, like a drop of water,
trembling on the surface of a lotus leaf
shaken by the advancing wind.

Having thus reflected, that treasure-store of compassion fell down in front of the tigress, and with a bamboo stick, made a wound on his neck that oozed with blood.

For the minds of those who are magnanimous—
which are sweet with compassion
and intent upon protecting the unfortunate—
cannot at all endure the torments of others!

Then the tigress, stimulated by a desire for his blood, fell down upon his broad chest as he lay immobile, tearing into it with the glistening tips of her claws, which seemed to smile with joy, as if they were engraving into his chest the wonder of his noble conduct in this world.

Without moving at all, his body, full of courage, endured with compassion the burden of the terrible and cruel injuries brought about by the attack of the tigress—just as love endures faults, forbearance endures wickedness, wisdom endures a multitude of anxieties, firm resolution endures miserable and unbearable calamity, and ascetic radiance endures affliction. His body was covered with bristling hairs, and as his unblemished chest was torn apart by the sport of the tigress' rows of claws, it looked for a moment as if it were full of shooting rays of light whose purity was as bright as the moon. As he joyfully gazed at the tigress, intoxicated by eating his flesh and drinking his blood, his innate life-force—bewildered at the prospect of a long journey abroad—held its ground for a moment, clinging on in his throat.

[At last, the tigress] was satiated by moving back and forth as if she were circumambulating him, holding her face down continuously as if from bashfulness, and intent upon taking his hand [like a bride]. Thus did she cause excitement to his heart—even though he was hostile to marriage!

Those who are good-hearted have hearts
that are purified by benevolence,
imperturbable, noble by nature,
rivers of kindness and merit,
[enjoying] fame among [all] worlds.
Their very nature is to benefit others,

and although they are completely in control of themselves,
they are also ornamented by compassion for the miserable.

Then, as he was being torn apart by the tips of the tigress' claws, the earth-lady, who is girdled by the playful tides of her four oceans, noticed his unequalled courage and suddenly trembled for a long time, as if with dread at the moment when his life would be destroyed.

[The Buddha concluded]: "I myself was that man Satyavrata, who delighted in compassion. Remembering here and now my own [former] deeds, I gave rise to a smile."

Having heard the Conqueror speak of his past conduct, Śakra's mind was amazed and his face stood motionless.[32]

Here, we have the same basic theme as before—the bodhisattva's gift of his body to a hungry tigress—yet the characters and their actions have now been vividly brought to life. We see the tigress, her belly heavy with the weight of her cubs, bringing them forth in great pain, giving rise to an insatiable hunger brought about by the smell of her own uterine blood, and finally ripping into the bodhisattva's flesh with utter abandon, satiating her hunger until she is drunk with blood and joy. And we see the bodhisattva himself—a calm, dispassionate, and wise renunciant, but at the very same time, a true bodhisattva, so full of compassion for the miserable beast and so excited by the opportunity to help her that she actually appears to him like a bashful bride, circumambulating the wedding-fire and "causing excitement to his heart, even though he was hostile to marriage." The use of such erotic imagery within the context of a body being ripped to shreds underscores for us just how *odd* this bodhisattva's values really are. Other paradoxes are also evident: The bodhisattva's neck is violently torn open and oozes with blood, yet at just the same time he is described as being "sweet with compassion"—as if the oozing blood itself were transformed, through his great compassion, into sweet, delicious nectar. The act of self-sacrifice is gory and bloody, with repeated images of claws ripping flesh—but it is also a fantastic spectacle, full of "shooting rays of light" and making the earth herself tremble like a fainthearted woman. Standard Buddhist doctrinal themes are also brought to life: the impermanent and unsatisfying human body becomes a drop of water clinging hopelessly onto a shaking leaf, while the attachment-to-self afflicting all unenlightened beings becomes a desperate mother ready to devour her own young.

On the other hand, even though they are duly mentioned, virtually no attention at all is paid in this version to the two sages with whom the bodhisattva lives—but they will similarly be brought to life in yet further versions of the same tale. In one version,[33] in which the bodhisattva is a prince rather than an ascetic, these two sages are replaced by the two older brothers of the bodhisattva, who, in spite of being royal princes themselves, are also men full of fear: even before entering the forest where they will encounter the hungry tigress, one brother says that he is afraid of being destroyed by a wild animal, while the other brother says that he is afraid of being separated from their parents—exactly the fate that their younger brother will later willingly and gladly undergo (whereupon we watch these two brothers utterly fall apart as a result of their enormous grief). In another version,[34] they are not only fearful but foolishly boastful—two sages who assure the bodhisattva that *they* will provide the hungry tigress with food, only to use their magical powers to fly away in fright once they realize how vicious the tigress really is. We also discover that one of these sages was a previous birth of the future Buddha Maitreya, and it was his failure to act in the same exalted manner as Śākyamuni that made him lose the cosmic race toward perfect Buddhahood. The highest and most exalted beings within the Buddhist universe are thus intimately connected to a single, long-ago human episode involving three ascetics wandering around in a lonely forest.

Same story, different versions—and a myriad of ways in which the awesome, cosmic pattern of the bodhisattva's repetitive bodily self-sacrifice is individualized, brought to life, and placed within a universe that *matters to us*. It *is* an awesome deed, to be sure, but perhaps it becomes something we can actually imagine when it is related to us in a simple, first-person voice and involves one's life as a lowly rabbit—such as we find in *Cariyāpiṭaka* 1.10 from the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pāli Canon. Here the Buddha explains:

> When I was a hare living in the woods, feeding on grass, leaves, vegetables, and fruit, and abstaining from injuring others, a monkey, a jackal, an otter cub, and I lived in the same neighborhood and were seen [together] morning and evening. I instructed them as to virtuous and sinful deeds, saying, "Shun the sinful and stick to the virtuous!"
>
> Seeing the full moon on an Observance Day, I told them: "Today is an Observance Day. Prepare gifts to give to one who is worthy of gifts. After giving gifts to one who is worthy of gifts, observe the Observance Day."

> "Very well," they said to me, and after preparing gifts in accordance with their ability and their means, they searched for one worthy of gifts.
>
> Seated [there], I thought about a worthy, suitable gift: "If I should find someone worthy of gifts, what will be *my* gift? I have no sesame seeds, beans, rice, or clarified butter [to offer]. I live on grass, and it is impossible to give [someone] grass. If someone worthy of gifts comes to me for food, I will give him my own self! He will not leave [with an] empty [stomach]!"
>
> Understanding my intention, [the god] Śakra came to my dwelling disguised as a Brahmin in order to test my generosity. When I saw him, I was delighted, and I spoke these words:
>
> "It is indeed wonderful that you have come to me for the sake of food. Today I will give you an excellent gift that has never been given before! [But] you are endowed with moral virtue, and it is not suitable for you to injure others. [So] come, gather various types of wood, and light a fire. I will cook my own self, and you will eat [my] cooked [body]!"
>
> "Very well," he replied, and with a delighted mind, he gathered various types of wood and fashioned a great pyre out of a womb of burning embers. He lit the fire there in such a way that it would quickly grow great.
>
> Shaking my dusty limbs, I approached to one side. When the great pile of wood was blazing and roaring, I jumped up and fell into the middle of the flames.
>
> Just as cool water relieves the anxiety and fever of whoever enters into it, and gives them satisfaction and joy, so did the blazing fire, when I entered it, relieve all of my anxiety, as if it were cool water.
>
> My outer skin, my inner skin, my flesh, my muscles, my bones, and the sinews of my heart—I gave my whole entire body to the Brahmin.[35]

What a delightfully silly image—four little animals gathered together in the woods, listening intently to a sermon preached by a bunny rabbit, followed by the bunny rabbit himself, full of shame due to his poor food-gathering abilities, diving headlong into a blazing fire in order to feed a solitary Brahmin wanderer. And yet the Brahmin wanderer is really the great deity Śakra in disguise, the bunny rabbit is the bodhisattva himself, the blazing fire that ought to consume him magically becomes like cool, fresh water, and, as the *Cariyāpiṭaka* itself later informs us, this single deed constituted the bodhisattva's "fulfillment of the perfection [of giving]" and thus directly contributed to Śākyamuni's Buddhahood.[36]

In *Avadānakalpalatā* 104, by contrast, Kṣemendra turns the rabbit into a significantly more austere figure, and a much more sophisticated preacher. In this version, the rabbit lives in the forest with an ascetic, but when the

forest is suddenly afflicted by drought, the ascetic becomes determined to leave it and go to a village where there will be more food. The rabbit dissuades him, however, by speaking eloquently and poetically about the dangers of ordinary, worldly life within a village. "O Holy Man, rich in austerities," he says,

Is it really proper for a wise man like you
to abandon an ascetic grove?
The grounds of a village are teeming with people
who are immersed in all kinds of distress
as a result of being separated [from whatever they are attached to].
They are breeding grounds for the trouble caused
by the demon known as "delusions of the household life."
The household is crowded with servants;
it is rattled by the chain called "wife";
it is made intolerable by the fetter called "son";
it firmly strangles one with the snare called "relatives."
It is made terrible by its crowds of wicked people;
it is a great darkness that envelops one in stupidity.
What wise man, having abandoned the household,
would ever touch it again?
The sorrow that results from being separated from what one loves
is a constant source of bewilderment.
Food that is salty with material wealth
only makes one's thirst grow greater.
People whose minds are made stupid
by their habitual, wicked desire for sensual pleasures
dwell in the house called "field of mental afflictions"
and see their welfare come to ruin.
[But] in a deserted forest,
those who are satisfied by sublime tranquility
do not have minds shaking with intoxication
by the passionate liquor of sensual enjoyments;
or eyes full of tears welling up
from the smoke of separation from loved ones;
or burning pain brought about
by the heat of anger and fighting.
When men have an aversion to tranquility,

they continually long for the village
because of the distress caused by the forest,
or they fondly remember the forest
because of the distress caused by the village.
Please don't look longingly upon the village,
for the village is unfavorable to discipline!
And how much more does contact with the village
bind those who are attached to sensual pleasures!
You'll be able to get fruit right here, sooner or later.
And for now, you can survive on my own clean flesh![37]

Same basic scenario, but no longer is he an insignificant bunny rabbit worrying about how to gather food; now he is a most talented Buddhist preacher (superior even to the human ascetic) whose sermon skillfully gives voice to the enduring Buddhist themes of the pitfalls of worldly life and the benefits of renunciation. Bold images such as the "rattling chain called 'wife'" and the "intolerable fetter called 'son'" also remind us that this particular preacher is the future Buddha himself, and the simple plotline involving a rabbit jumping into a fire here recedes somewhat into the background.

In yet other cases, however, such sermons might be kept to a minimum, while the plotline itself becomes significantly more complicated and capable of conveying complex ideas by means of its very intricacy. Consider, for example, the twenty-sixth story in the (Tibetan) *Sūtra of the Wise and the Fool,* a story with a complicated pedigree[38] but clearly related to several Sanskrit parallels. While this story resembles the other stories I have discussed, its depiction of the act of bodily sacrifice is clearly more complicated than we find in the cases of King Śibi, the tigress, or the hare. Once again, in order to provide a sufficient taste of this literature, I will translate this delightful story in full:

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was [once] dwelling at Veṇuvana, at Kalandakanivāpa, in Rājagaha. At that time, the Venerable Ānanda got up from his seat, arranged his robes, put his knees on the ground with his palms joined, and requested the Blessed One thus:

"I ask you to explain this. Why is it that as soon as the Blessed One [first] turned the wheel of the dharma in the world, the five monks headed by Kauṇḍinya were the very first to taste the nectar of the dharma?"

The Blessed One said to Ānanda: "Previously, these five monks were the first to eat my flesh and be satiated. Therefore, in this life as well, they were the first to taste the flavor of the dharma and be liberated."

Ānanda requested of the Blessed One: "Please tell us what these five monks previously did." The Blessed One spoke to Ānanda, [and he told him a story of the past].

• • •

Formerly, in the past, a long time ago, immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable eons ago, here in Jambudvīpa, there was a king named Śudolagarne who ruled over the 84,000 or so minor kings of Jambudvīpa. At one time, a soothsayer predicted that no rain would come to the country for a period of twelve years. Hearing this news, the king was greatly afflicted by suffering, thinking about how much food there was and for how many years it would feed so many people if such a great famine arose. He gathered all the minor kings and ministers together and consulted with them, calculating how much grain was in the storehouse and how many people were present. But when they calculated [how much grain] must be given directly to each person [in order to last] for twelve years, [they saw that the grain they had] would not last for twelve years, and they announced this in a bell-ringing proclamation.

Then, later on, a great famine arose and many people died. The king thought about what he could do to save many people's lives. [One day, the king], the queen, and the royal retinue went walking in the park and stopped somewhere to rest. After the queen and all of the numerous people [in the retinue] had fallen asleep, [the king] got up from his couch, bowed down in the four directions, and made a solemn vow, as follows:

"In this country, a famine has arisen, and all the food is gone. May I abandon my body through hunger, and after I have died, may I be reborn as a giant fish! May everyone feed on my flesh and be satiated!"

Having made this solemn vow, he climbed up into a tree. He threw his body from the tree into an abyss. After dying there, he was miraculously transformed into a giant fish, five hundred *yojanas* [long], [swimming] in a great river.

At that time, there were five woodcutters in the country who came to the riverbank to gather wood. The giant fish saw them and said to them in a human voice:

"If you are hungry, then cut off my flesh and eat as much as you want! Even after you are full, take home with you as much as you can carry! You will be the first to eat my flesh and be satiated; therefore, later on, as well, when I have attained complete enlightenment, you will be the first to taste the food of the dharma!

[Go and] tell the people of the country that anyone who is hungry should take as much of my flesh as they wish."

So the five men cut up his flesh and ate it, and told the people of the country [to do likewise]. The word spread from one to another until everyone in Jambudvīpa gathered to cut up his flesh and eat it. When one side of his ribs was completely exhausted, [the fish], on his own accord, turned over [and offered] the other side. Similarly, when the top half of him was not yet completely exhausted, he offered the bottom half. With the fish turning over and over in this way, from his belly to his back, everyone cut his flesh and ate it for a period of twelve years. [During this time], everyone gave rise to thoughts of compassion, and thus, everyone who ate his flesh, even after dying, was reborn as a god in heaven.

• • •

"Ānanda," [the Buddha concluded,] "the king who became a fish at that time and on that occasion is now me. The five woodcutters who were the first to cut and eat my flesh are [now] the five monks headed by Kauṇḍinya. The many beings who later ate my flesh are [now] 80,000 *devas* and my liberated disciples. At that time, I gave [my body] to those five men first and saved their lives, and therefore, in the present time, as well, I taught the dharma first to them, and by means of the limbs of my dharma-Body, I extinguished the fire of the three poisons."

Ānanda and the great assembly were delighted and rejoiced at the Blessed One's words.[39]

In this case, we have *two* separate instances of bodily self-sacrifice, along with a miraculous transformation. The king first sacrifices his life in order to transform himself into a gigantic fish, and the fish then sacrifices its life by allowing all beings to feed on his flesh. This seems to change the nature of the self-sacrifice itself. In fact, if we consider all of the stories I have discussed thus far, it is possible to place this instance of self-sacrifice on the far end of a continuum of bodily destruction and/or transformation: in the story of the tigress, an ascetic's body is wholly ripped to shreds and lost for good; in the story of the hare, the outside world itself (in the form of the fire) refuses to destroy the hare's body at all; in the story of King Śibi, the eyes are pulled out but later magically restored in a better and more powerful form than before; and now finally, in the story of King Śudolagarne, the act of self-sacrifice actually *transforms* the ineffectual human body into a gigantic creature whose flesh heals thousands of other beings. The image of the dispassionate bodhisattva who is willing to throw away his worthless body on behalf of other beings gradually gives way to another,

quite different image: that of a boastful bodhisattva who is determined to physically force the transformation of his body into something monstrous and almost grotesquely effective. Clearly, the act of bodily self-sacrifice is more complicated than it first seems.

There is a further complexity in this story, as well, in the intriguing identifications made between past and present characters: the five woodcutters who were the very first to feed on the fish's flesh were subsequently reborn as the Buddha's first five disciples (headed by Kauṇḍinya), who were "the very first to taste the nectar of the dharma." There are no lengthy sermons or extended doctrinal reflections, yet from these identifications (and similar identifications made in other stories), it is possible to discern, as I have done elsewhere,[40] an underlying message about the nature of Buddhahood and the path that leads to it: the bodhisattva gives away his physical body and enacts a physical salvation of beings, the story suggests, whereas the Buddha gives away a *spiritual* body—the body of dharma—and enacts a *spiritual* salvation of beings. An intriguing parallel—but also hierarchy—is thus drawn between the bodhisattva's gift of his physical body in the past and the Buddha's gift of his dharma-body in the present, between life-saving food and soul-saving nectar, between physical satiety and spiritual satisfaction.

Complex plotlines, intriguing identifications, beautiful imagery, and so many different elaborations of the same basic theme. Perhaps we can now understand why the theme of the bodhisattva's gift of his body proved to be such a compelling one in the literary traditions of Indian Buddhism.[41] In the Pāli Canon preserved by the Theravāda school (whose roots extend back to perhaps the third century B.C.E. but whose final codification and commentarial appendages were not completed until the fifth century C.E.), there are several such stories (for example, those of King Śibi, the hare, and the elephant) contained in the *Jātaka* collection of verses (the tenth book of the Khuddaka Nikāya), together with its prose commentary, the *Jātakaṭṭhakathā* (hereafter "Pāli *Jātaka* collection"). Two of these stories (those of King Śibi and the hare) are also related more briefly in the *Cariyāpiṭaka* (the fifteenth book of the Khuddaka Nikāya), where they are celebrated as paradigmatic instances of the bodhisattva's *dāna-pāramitā,* or "perfection of generosity."

Nevertheless, although the theme of the bodhisattva's bodily sacrifice would become quite popular in the later Theravāda tradition of Southeast Asia (there are many such stories, for example, in the 15th–16th century *Paññāsa Jātaka*),[42] in the earlier tradition represented by the Pāli Canon,

it does not seem to have attained much prominence—overshadowed, perhaps, by the complete dominance within this tradition of the *Vessantara Jātaka,* which is another story involving extreme generosity (in this case, the gift of one's wife and children).[43] In the Sanskrit tradition, on the other hand, stories involving the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice seem to have become something of a minor obsession, the same stories appearing over and over again in story-collections of diverse provenance. This would include, for example, relatively earlier collections such as the *Avadānaśataka,* the *Mahāvastu,* the *Divyāvadāna,*[44] Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* (now extant only in Chinese),[45] and the *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra, as well as later collections such as the *Jātakamālās* of Haribhaṭṭa and Gopadatta,[46] Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā,* and the (much later) *Mahajjātakamālā*[47]—texts which range in date from perhaps the first century C.E. to relatively recent times, come from both Mainstream and Mahāyāna origins,[48] and vary in style all the way from simple Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit prose attributed to no individual author to elegant, literary Sanskrit composed at the courts of kings by named and celebrated poets.

In some cases, gift-of-the-body stories appear in unexpected places—such as the version of the tigress-story contained in the eighteenth chapter of the Mahāyāna *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra* (which is otherwise a typical Mahāyāna *sūtra*)—while in other cases, the theme is developed at great length and merits its own, independent text, such as we find in the *Maṇicūḍāvadāna,* a long rendition of the story of King Maṇicūḍa, and in the *Lokānandanāṭaka* of Candragomin, a dramatic play in five acts (again dealing with King Maṇicūḍa) that is now extant only in Tibetan. Finally, some story collections preserved in languages such as Chinese and Tibetan and having a very uncertain relationship to any presumed Indic originals might also be included within this general grouping, since the stories themselves clearly draw on Indic tradition and often run parallel to stories existing in Sanskrit or Pāli. Two such collections I will refer to throughout this book are the Chinese *Liudu ji jing* (*Sūtra on the Collection of Six Perfections,* T. 152), which is supposed to have been translated by Kang Senghui between 222 and 280 C.E. but which has no extant Indic original,[49] and the Tibetan *mDzangs bLun* (commonly known as the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Fool*), which is a collection of stories that were supposedly heard orally in some Indic language by eight Chinese monks living in Khotan, transcribed by them in Chinese in 445 C.E., and subsequently translated into Tibetan, Mongolian, and Oirat versions.[50]

How can texts of such diverse provenance, existing in different social, historical, cultural, and literary contexts, be brought together merely by sharing the single theme of the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice? Does it, indeed, make any sense to view them as a single grouping? In this book, I will be advancing precisely this argument. Despite each story's individual flavor (some of which I have tried to convey through the excerpts given above), the premise of the book as a whole is that the gift-of-the-body theme itself has its own internal logic and significance, and was conveyed through a set of conventions that seem to have remained remarkably consistent over wide areas of space and time, and in spite of significant linguistic and stylistic diversity. In fact, as I will argue, gift-of-the-body stories might best be seen as constituting a discrete subgenre of Indian Buddhist narrative literature—a subgenre that is worthy of a close and careful reading that gives due weight to the literary forms of the stories and takes them seriously as crafted pieces of literature.

One of the earliest scholars to address the gift-of-the-body theme in any detail was Har Dayal, who collected, summarized, and discussed a series of gift-of-the-body stories in his classic work *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature.*[51] But despite the usefulness of his discussion, I cannot share his opinion of the value of such stories or the manner in which they should be read. "The idea of giving away one's limbs has given rise to some curious stories," he states, "which are intended to be highly instructive and inspiring, but which are simply silly and puerile."[52] A few pages later, he continues:

> The heroes and heroines of these stories give away wealth, limbs, life, wives and children in a spirit of exaggerated and fantastic philanthropy. The lack of a sense of proportion and harmony is the fatal flaw of the Indian temperament as exhibited in literature and religion. The Indian thinkers and writers often push a good idea to such extremes that it becomes grotesque and ridiculous. But we can read these quaint parables with pleasure and interest, if we appreciate their spirit without thinking too critically of the details.[53]

"Thinking critically of the details" is precisely what I aim to do herein. Instead of abstracting the "spirit" of the gift-of-the-body theme from the context of the stories in which it is developed, I aim here to treat the theme *as it is developed within the* jātakas *and* avadānas *themselves.* I am interested not merely in the meaning and significance of the gift-of-the-body theme, but also in how this theme reveals and unfolds itself within the world of

Indian Buddhist storytelling. We know that bodhisattvas tend to give away their bodies, but how does this actually occur? What kind of beings are they, why do they do such things, how do the people around them react to their deeds, does it hurt—and what happens next? It is the *stories* and not the theme alone that captivate my attention, and this book is a first attempt to problematize and analyze the reactions that I—and perhaps other audiences—have experienced as a reader of these tales.

The book is based on a highly idiosyncratic (and by no means complete) corpus of Indian Buddhist gift-of-the-body stories preserved in Pāli and Sanskrit (with a few Tibetan and Chinese translations for support) and classified as either *jātakas* or *avadānas.* The stories in question date anywhere from perhaps the third century B.C.E. to the late second millennium C.E. and are drawn from the narrative literature of both the Mainstream and Mahāyāna traditions. They include several of the most famous and well-known gift-of-the-body tales—such as those of King Śibi, the elephant, and the tigress—and many less prominent tales as well. A full description of the corpus is given in the Appendix.

My discussion can be divided naturally into two halves. In chapter 1, which is methodological and introductory in nature, I lay out my argument in favor of approaching gift-of-the-body stories from a genre-based perspective and through a largely ahistorical approach. I then situate my corpus of gift-of-the-body stories within the larger context provided by the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres, arguing that gift-of-the-body stories should be treated as a distinct subgenre within this larger context, proposing a definition of the gift-of-the-body subgenre, and distinguishing it from several other, closely related subgenres. This chapter thus sets the literary and conceptual background for chapters 2 and 3.

In chapter 2 I begin my analysis of the tales by looking closely at the genre's conventions of plot: What are some of the major plotlines employed within gift-of-the-body stories? How does each plotline "work," how do different plotlines relate to each other, and how do variations in the plotline serve to bring different emphases to the fore? This analysis is continued in chapter 3, where I turn from conventions of plot to conventions of rhetoric: What kind of rhetorical and ideological logic underlies the gift-of-the-body genre? What do these stories wish to argue, and how do they go about doing so? How do they use the narrative form to acknowledge, confront, and grapple with various alternative ideologies that are directly opposed to their own, most cherished ideals? These two chapters together provide the reader with a close analysis of the genre and make a conscious

attempt to complicate our perception of these seemingly "simple" stories and instead demonstrate to the reader their complexity, nuance, and ideological power.

After examining my corpus in terms of genre, in the second half of the book, I move away from a strictly genre-based approach (though without losing sight of the literary forms of the stories) to examine more closely some of the major religious issues that come to the fore within gift-of-the-body tales. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the "gift" portion of the gift-of-the-body theme. The bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice is usually explicitly conceived of as a type of "gift" (*dāna*)—indeed, as a most extraordinary type of gift and a fulfillment of the bodhisattva's "perfection of generosity" (*dāna-pāramitā*). These two chapters thus attempt to situate the gift-of-the-body theme within the larger context of Buddhist ethical discourse on gifts, gift-giving, and the virtue of generosity: What kind of gift is the bodhisattva's gift of his body, and how does it bring together several different Buddhist ideals of generosity? Since *dāna* constitutes a profoundly important concept in Indian Buddhist thought whose many contours are just beginning to be untangled, in chapter 4 I first set the context for this discussion by proposing two different conceptual schema by means of which the many notions of *dāna* put forth in Indian Buddhist literature might be classified. In chapter 5 I then turn to the gift-of-the-body theme itself and attempt to situate it within this larger discourse, arguing that the theme is multivocal and flexible in nature and relates to the larger discourse in a variety of different ways (and again paying ample attention to the types of narrative strategies that allow for this degree of flexibility).

Chapter 6, in contrast, focuses on the "body" portion of the gift-of-the-body theme. The bodhisattva's gift is not just any gift, but specifically a gift of his *body*. Thus this chapter discusses several prominent Buddhist lines of thinking about the body—both the ordinary human body and the very special body of the bodhisattva—and demonstrates how they are invoked within gift-of-the-body stories, once again arguing for the genre's multivocality and flexibility as brought about through the narrative form. Chapters 5 and 6 together thus begin to move away from an intensive focus upon the stories themselves to demonstrate how the stories relate to wider spheres of Buddhist intellectual discourse.

Finally, chapter 7 briefly points toward several further contexts of interpretation that might be brought to bear on the gift-of-the-body theme—including kingship and its legitimation, the category of sacrifice, the category of the ritual offering, and the Buddhist discourse on death—while

the Conclusions offer a summarizing discussion of the major points made throughout the book.

In speaking of the hundreds of versions of the Rāmāyaṇa epic that have crisscrossed their way across ancient and modern India, A. K. Ramanujan once observed that the Rāmāyaṇa is not just a series of "texts" or "stories" or "versions," but instead a set of cultural resources—or what he termed a "pool of signifiers" that each individual version dips into to bring out a "unique crystallization."[54] Each "version" has its own unique internal logic and necessity, but relies for its ability to convey meaning on the overall "pool" from which it draws. I find this to be a most felicitous image for thinking about Buddhist gift-of-the-body stories. It is my hope that within these pages I have thrown some light on both the art and artistry of individual "crystallizations" and the basic "pool of signifiers" from which all such stories draw.