Buddhist Poetics in Medieval Sri Lanka: The *Muvadev-dā-vata* Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a close reading of the twelfth-century *Muvadev-dā-vata*, one of the earliest Sinhala-language poetic works to model itself on the Sanskrit *kāvya.* While earlier studies of the *Muvadev-dā-vata* have tended to criticize it as a flawed retelling of a Pāli-language *jātaka*, I argue that the poem instead represents an attempt to seriously grapple with rather serious Buddhological questions: *When* ought one renounce their worldly status in favor of spiritual progress? What does that renunciant lifestyle look like? What sort of practice is enjoined, and what does one gain from it? Despite its novel poetic form, in other words, the *Muvadev-dā-vata* offers us valuable insights into changing ideas about Buddhist practice in medieval Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; Sanskrit; Sinhala; poetry; *jātaka*s.

INTRODUCTION[1]

Theravāda history, in the past decades, has experienced something of a "vernacular turn." While it was once the case that Theravāda Buddhism was understood to be properly found only in Pāli-language texts, it is now—thankfully—almost unthinkable to study Buddhism,

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of Michael Ium, a friend and colleague, whose work reminds us to never neglect belief and practice in our institutional and intellectual histories of Buddhism. I am grateful to Tarinee Awasthi, Phusathi Liyanaarachchi, Lawrence J. McCrea, and the editors and anonymous peer reviewers of *Pacific World* for their contributions to this article; any errors remain my own.

past or present, in Theravāda contexts without keeping at least one eye trained on Theravāda languages.[2] Our understanding of what it has historically meant to be a Buddhist in Sri Lanka, for example, is now enriched by studies of Sinhala-language literary works;[3] preaching books;[4] commentaries and glossaries;[5] philosophical works;[6] historical narratives;[7] and more.[8] A field of particular productivity, in more recent years, has been Sinhala-language poetics and poetry, which has yielded fruit on matters of Buddhist politics,[9] gender,[10] social life,[11]

2. Mahinda Deegalle, "Vernacular Buddhism: Neglected Sources in the Study of Sri Lankan Theravada," *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies* 9 (1997): 69–101; Charles Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31–61.

3. Charles Hallisey, "Devotion in the Buddhist Literature of Medieval Sri Lanka" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1988).

4. Mahinda Deegalle, "Buddhist Preaching and Sinhala Religious Rhetoric: Medieval Buddhist Methods to Popularize Theravāda," *Numen* 44, no. 2 (1997): 180–210.

5. Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

6. Charles Hallisey, "In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement: Reflections on the Work of Gurulugomi," in *Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (State University of New York Press, 1992).

7. Stephen C. Berkwitz, *Buddhist History in the Vernacular: The Power of the Past in Late Medieval Sri Lanka* (Brill, 2004).

8. None of these gains, it should be stressed, have come at the expense of Pāli-oriented scholarship, which continues to flourish. The many insights of Gornall's recent monograph on medieval Pāli literature, for example, were made possible thanks to his familiarity with Sinhala-language sources from the same period: Alastair Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism: Pali Literature and Monastic Reform in Sri Lanka, 1157–1270* (UCL Press, 2020).

9. Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Reimagining Buddhist Kingship in a Sinhala *Praśasti*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 2 (2016): 325–341.

10. Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Strong Men and Sensual Women in Sinhala Buddhist Poetry," in *Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality*, ed. Alexandra Cuffel, Ana Echevarria, and Georgios Halkias (Routledge, 2019).

11. Alexander McKinley, "Farming Songs from the Poet King: Translation and Explication of a Sinhala Janakavi Work," *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* 41, nos. 1–2 (2018): 64.

ritual theory and practice,[12] and even attitudes towards supposedly "Hindu" texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[13]

Thus far absent from these studies, however, are the very earliest Sinhala-language *kāvya* poems, composed in the early second millennium to realize the vision of the ca. tenth century *Siyabaslakara* ("Ornaments of Our Own Language"). This manual of poetics, composed by a king named Salamevan (Skt. Śilāmeghavarṇa),[14] articulated a vision of how poetry might be written in Sinhala: modelled on the Sanskrit aesthetics of Daṇḍin's (fl. ca. 700) *Kāvyādarśa*; and ideally on explicitly Buddhist themes.[15] It would not be until well after the dawn of the second millennium that the *Siyabaslakara*'s vision was realized,

12. Alexander McKinley, "A Plague on Buddhist Houses: Retelling Disaster in Sinhala Poetry," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 46 (2023): 289–322.

13. Justin W. Henry, *Ravana's Kingdom: "The Ramayana" and Sri Lankan History from Below* (Oxford University Press, 2022). The body of scholarship cited in this sentence is largely built on the work of the late P. B. Meegaskumbura, Charles Hallisey, and their students, much of which is cited further below.

14. Salamevan was a common regnal name (*biruda*) in medieval Sri Lanka, and the identity of this particular King Salamevan is unclear. See, for one theory, Dragomir Dimitrov, *The Legacy of the Jewel Mind: On the Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhalese Works by Ratnamati: A Philological Chronicle (Phullalocanavaṃsa)* (Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo, 2016), 107–113; cf. Alastair Gornall, "Ratnamati et Ses Œuvres," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 103, no. 1 (2017): 475–491.

15. The Sri Lankan localization of Daṇḍin—beginning with the *Siyabaslakara*, but continued in the later tenth century Sanskrit commentary of Ratnaśrījñāna; the thirteenth century Sinhala-language *Sidatsaṅgarā*; and the thirteenth century Pāli-language *Subodhālaṅkāra*—has increasingly been the subject of study, most recently in a rich collaborative essay by Charles Hallisey, P. B. Meegaskumbura, and Alastair Gornall, "'May It Always Be About Adding Beauty to Beauty': The Story of the *Mirror* in Sri Lanka," in *A Lasting Vision: Dandin's "Mirror" in the World of Asian Letters*, ed. Yigal Bronner (Oxford University Press, 2023). I base my claim that the *Siyabaslakara* enjoins explicitly "Buddhist" poetry on its verse 20, on which see further Charles Hallisey, "Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (University of California Press, 2003), 703–704. As will be made clear in the present article, this "Buddhist" orientation should by no means be misread as an "anti-non-Buddhist" orientation. See further Hallisey, Meegaskumbura, and Gornall, "Beauty to Beauty," 155.

in the composition of three poems based on *jātaka* narratives: the *Sasa-dā-vata* (written ca. 1197–1200), based on the *Sasa-jātaka*;[16] the thirteenth century *Kavsiḷumiṇa* (also called the *Kusa-dā-vata*), based on the *Kusa-jātaka*;[17] and the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, based on the *Makhādeva-jātaka* and frustratingly undatable, but often assumed (admittedly on rather spurious grounds) to be the earliest of the three.[18]

If the *Muvadev-dā-vata* is indeed the earliest Sinhala-language poem extant to be modelled on the *Siyabaslakara*'s vision of a self-consciously Buddhist poetics—and the first articulation of a *jātaka*

16. The *Sasa-dā-vata* was composed by an unnamed poet under the patronage of Līlāvatī of Poḷonnaruva. Līlāvatī ruled in three distinct periods (1197–1200, 1209–1210, and 1211–1212), but based on references to other members of her court in the *Sasa-dā-vata*'s introductory verses it must have been composed within her first reign. On Līlāvatī and her cultural production see Bruno M. Shirley, "A Study of Buddhism, Gender, and Politics in Early Second Millennium Sri Lanka" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2024), chap. 6; on the poem itself, see C. E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo Apothecaries, 1955), 148–151; and Puñchi Baṇdhāra Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya* (Colombo: Cultural Department, 1994), 134–136.

17. The *Kavsiḷumiṇa* was allegedly composed by Parākramabāhu II himself (r. 1236–1270) and is generally regarded as a crowning glory (hence the name) of Sinhala-language poetry: Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 148–151; Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya*, 189–193.

18. Sannasgala suggests that Mahāyānic sentiments (*mahāyānika häňgīm*) and Cōḻa influence (*solīngē balapā̆ma*) both influenced the writing of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, which must place it (according the common narrative that the Mahāyāna were stamped out in 1153) towards the beginning of the twelfth century: Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya*, 112. Against this rationale, see Shirley, "Buddhism, Gender, and Politics," 204–216. Godakumbura suggests that the "simpler method of *Muvadev-dā-vata* when compared with the *Sasa-dā-vata* makes one think it is earlier than the latter; but this in itself is no evidence for judging the relative date of the two poems": Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 146; for similar arguments see S. Paranavitana, "Civilisation of the Polonnaru Period: Religion, Literature, and Art," in *History of Ceylon, Vol 1: From the Earliest Times to 1505*, ed. S. Paranavitana (University of Ceylon, 1960), 580; Labugama Narada, "Sinhalese Muvadev Dā Vata [シンハラ語 Muvadev Dā Vata について]," *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* [パーリ学仏教文化学] 31 (2017): 113. Citations from the *Muvadev-dā-vata* follow the edition of P. Ariyaratna, ed., *Muvadev Dā Vata* (Sarasavi Publishers, 1932); translations are my own.

narrative in Sinhala verse[19]—then it merits considerably more attention as a Buddhist text than it has to date received. To my knowledge, the sole substantial discussion of the poem's Buddhological content, from outside of the field of literary history, is in an article by the Ven. Labugama Narada.[20] *Within* that field of Sinhala literary history, meanwhile, the reception of the *Muvadev-dā-vata* has been generally unfavorable—for reasons not, I suspect, of disinterest to scholars of Buddhism. A particularly pointed example comes from Martin Wickramasinghe's *Sinhala Sāhityayē Nägīma* (translated into English as *Landmarks of Sinhalese Literature*), an equally landmark work of literary criticism.[21] Wickramasinghe sought to delineate "an independent culture in the Island," distinct particularly from the literary culture of Southern India,[22] sadly corrupted by Sanskritic influences in the medieval period, in which "the Sinhalese poets who slavishly imitated their Sanskrit models" created only what "must be regarded as products of an age which marked the beginning of the decadence of Sinhalese culture."[23] While all three of the early *Dā-vata* poems draw Wickramasinghe's ire, the *Muvadev-dā-vata* is apparently particularly offensive for having transformed what he considers "the product of a genuine though primitive Buddhist culture" into mere "artificial poetry," born of "the perverted taste of pundits who sought to win the

19. There are several likely prose antecedents, including *sannaya* glossary/translations such as the *Vesaturu-dā-sannaya* (on the *Vessantara-jātaka*, Jā 547) and the *Jātaka-aṭuvā-gäṭapadaya* (on Buddhaghosa's full commentary to the *jātaka*s). See further Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 35–40. Full translations of the *jātaka*s into Sinhala prose was not complete until the fourteenth century: ibid., 99.

20. Labugama Narada, "Muvadev Dā Vata."

21. Martin Wickramasinghe, *Landmarks of Sinhalese Literature*, trans. Ediriweera Sarachchandra (M.D. Gunasena, 1950).

22. See particularly his argument that "the literature of the Dravidian languages developed only after contact with the Āryan culture [of Sri Lanka]. Even if a Dravidian race inhabited this island before the advent of the Āryans, therefore, it is improbable that they influenced the growth of Sinhalese literature and the arts. In fact, prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the island, there is no evidence of the influence of a more highly developed culture": Wickramasinghe, *Landmarks*, 2. On Wickramasinghe in his political context see Harshana Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism* (UCL Press, 2018), 105–106.

23. Wickramasinghe, *Landmarks*, 18.

approval of licentious kings by prostituting their talents before them."[24] For Wickramasinghe—and those who follow his interpretations—these early poems represent the corruption of a properly Sinhala Buddhist culture on the island by external forces: namely, Sanskrit poetics. The dangers of such an influence were, presumably, that Sanskrit was a language used by both theists and Mahāyāna Buddhists, and so the imposition of its literary culture on Theravāda *jātaka* narratives like the *Makhādeva-jātaka* necessarily resulted in a confused and corrupted work.

Against this, I suggest that the *Muvadev-dā-vata* is not best read as a flawed retelling of a set narrative—nor, for that matter, as a deficient attempt to create a Sanskritic *mahākāvya*.[25] Instead, we might do

24. Ibid., 23. On Wickramasinghe's conception of *jātaka*s as folk stories, and his understanding of Sinhala Buddhist culture in general, see Crystal Baines, "In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism and Literary Secularisations in Twentieth-Century South Asia" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2023), 124–125.

25. A very common claim is that the *Sasa-dā-vata* and *Muvadev-dā-vata* are actually *khaṇḍakāvya*s ("poems of [only] a fragment"), making the *Kavsiḷumiṇa* the first true Sinhala *mahākāvya*: Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 144; Wasantha A. Liyanage, "Narrative Methods of Sinhala Prose: A Historical and Theoretical Study of Sinhala Prose from Twelfth Century Narratives to Post-Realist Fiction" (PhD diss., The University of Wisconsin Madison, 2004), 35; Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya*, 115. This follows the more general assumption that any poem which meets some, but not all, of the criteria for a *mahākāvya* laid out in Daṇḍin's *Kāvyādarśa* is "merely" a *khaṇḍakāvya*: see, e.g., Daniel H. H. Ingalls, *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyākara's "Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa"* (Harvard University Press, 1965), 33–39. I am not convinced that this was the case. It is certainly true that Kālidāsa's (fl. fourth or fifth century) *Meghadūta* is explicitly called a *khaṇḍakāvya* in the opening lines of its earliest known commentary, that of Vallabhadeva in the ca. tenth century; the absence of any further discussion or gloss of this term suggests that it may have been well-established even prior to that point. The authors of Lankan poems like the *Muvadev-dā-vata* would therefore likely have been aware of the term—but they do not use it themselves. Nor, for that matter, does Daṇḍin ever suggest that a *kāvya* deficient in certain of his criteria should be considered a *khaṇḍa-*, rather than a *mahā-kāvya*; his verse 1.20 simply tells us that as long as the poem still appeals to experts, it should not be faulted. His earliest commentators (including the Lanka-born Ratnaśrījñāna), and his translators/adaptors in Sri Lanka, all seem to follow suit, and none use the term *khaṇḍakāvya*. We have little reason to believe, in other words, that

better to take our departure point from Naomi Appleton's argument that *jātaka* stories are, at their core, attempts to answer "a fundamental question shared by all Buddhist traditions: how should Buddhists relate to the Buddha's teaching, example and person?"[26] They serve, in other words, as narrative vehicles for the working-out of often rather serious Buddhological questions. The *Muvadev-dā-vata*, despite its novel and transcultural literary form, is no exception to this tradition. The various stories about Makhādeva/Muvadev, in Pāli and then in

a work (like the *Muvadev-dā-vata*) which fell short of the full definition of a *mahākāvya* was considered a *khaṇḍakāvya* in medieval Sri Lanka.

We ought also to consider the possibility that a *khaṇḍakāvya* was a set genre in its own right. Other theorists provide alternative terms for poems less comprehensive than a full *mahākāvya* (see, for example, the term *laghu* in Rudraṭa's *Kāvyālaṅkāra*). Vallabhadeva specifically tells us that *even* a *mahākāvya*, if deficient in some characteristics of a *khaṇḍakāvya*, is not the latter genre (*atha yad etad bhavān vyācaṣṭe kim etad ucyate | mantradūtaśravaṇādyabhāvān* ***mahākāvyam api khaṇḍakāvyavan na bhavati***) (E. Hultzsch, ed., *Kalidasa's Meghaduta with the Commentary of Vallabhadeva* [Royal Asiatic Society, 1911], 1). Ingalls himself notes that *khaṇḍakāvya* in the "classical period" of Sanskrit literature (ca. 300–1200) are extremely limited in scope and style, and mostly consist of "messenger poems" (*sandeśakāvya*, modelled on the *Meghadūta*) and the verse collections called *śataka*s. The former genre was well-known in medieval Sri Lanka, and a large number of Sinhala-language *sandeśa*s were composed particularly in the latter part of the second millennium: Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Sinhala Sandēśa Poetry in a Cosmopolitan Context," in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, ed. Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (UCL Press, 2017), 94–112. We also know of Sri Lankan *śataka* poetry, but this appeared to remain exclusively in Sanskrit: Dehigapse Pannasara Thero, *Sanskrit Literature: Extant Among the Sinhalese, and the Influence of Sanskrit on Sinhalese*, 2nd ed. (Godage, 2016), 180–198. In other words, the specific types of poem which Ingalls calls a *khaṇḍakāvya* were both recognized in Sri Lanka (and, I suspect, more widely) as distinct genres in and of themselves, not merely as deficient *mahākāvya*s.

Given how determined the *Muvadev* and *Sasa-dā-vata* both seem to be in their emulation of the *Siyabaslakara*'s stipulations (as discussed further below), to call either a *khaṇḍakāvya* is, I think, therefore to misrepresent their authors' intent: These were almost certainly understood to be the kind of poetry defined by the *Siyabaslakara*, even if lacking one or two suggested elements of a full *mahākāvya*.

26. Naomi Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path* (Routledge, 2010), 1.

Sinhala, all seek to answer a set of fairly fundamental questions about religious practice: When ought one renounce their worldly status in favor of spiritual progress? What does that renunciant lifestyle look like? What sort of practice is enjoined, and what does one gain from it?

In this article, I provide an analysis of how the unnamed poet of the *Muvadev-dā-vata* seemed to have answered these questions in their own recension. By this I am *not* suggesting that the poem was intended to be in any way didactic or evangelistic, intended to convince others that this particular vision of religious practice was the "correct" one. Nor do I pretend that this gives us insights into anything like "the" Buddhism of the Poḷonnaruva period—if indeed a singular and monolithic Buddhism can ever have been said to have existed in any given cultural context. Rather, I am suggesting that the poet's own understanding of Buddhism necessarily informed their artistic choices, and that by carefully attending to such choices we can therefore trace our way back to the *particular* understanding of this particular expression. In so doing, we gain a new perspective on what it meant to be a Buddhist in medieval Sri Lanka, one perhaps not available to us from other sources.

The first part of this article provides an overview of the poem's core narrative and Sanskritic flourishes. I then turn to what we might call the "cosmology" of the poem, which depicts a far more theistically inclusive worldview than has often been attributed to medieval Sri Lankan Buddhism. The following sections consider significant narrative "deviations" from earlier Pāli recensions made to the poem and argue that we ought to take these as reflective of serious religious positions. In brief, I suggest that they reflect the period's increasing turn towards a more docetic version of a bodhisattva path, informed by yet rivalrous with Śaiva and Mahāyāna forms of religious praxis. By way of conclusion, I then suggest how we might better understand the *Muvadev-dā-vata* in its socio-political context, drawing particular links to Gornall's recent thesis of creativity driven by crisis.[27]

TEXT AND NARRATIVE

The *Muvadev-dā-vata* centers on the titular king Muvadev (Pāli Makhādeva or Maghadeva), a previous rebirth of the Buddha

27. Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*.

Śākyamuni. Earlier versions of the Makhādeva narrative appear in the canonical *Maghadeva sutta* (MN 83), and in Buddhaghosa's commentaries on the *Makhādeva-jātaka* (JA 8), and in both the *Nimi-jātaka* (JA 541, also called *Nemi-jātaka*) and *Nimirājacariya* (CPA 6).[28] The core of the narrative (in both the earlier recensions and in the *Muvadev-dā-vata*) is that King Makhādeva discovers, after many years of rule, a single grey hair upon his head and interprets this as a signal to abdicate his throne in order to become a renunciant. In the earlier Pāli recensions, Makhādeva is said to have spent his post-abdication renunciation meditating on the four *brahmavihāra*s, resulting in a subsequent rebirth in the Brahma-realm. This is a common practice described for pre-"Buddhist" renunciants, always leading to a positive rebirth but not, ultimately, to enlightenment; that is reserved only for the noble eightfold path and the true Dharma taught by a fully enlightened buddha (see further below).[29] Additionally, both of the Pāli-language narratives tell us that many generations of Makhādeva's descendants similarly abdicate once their hair begins to grey, in a lineage culminating with King Nimi/Nemi (also a prior rebirth of the Buddha, and the protagonist of the *Nimi-jātaka*).[30]

The *Muvadev-dā-vata* does not mention Nimi, and (as discussed further below) departs from the earlier recensions considerably in its depiction of Muvadev's life as a renunciant. However, the absolute core of the narrative—the moment in which Makhādeva discovers his first grey hair, the subject of the single verse in the canonical *jātaka*

28. Translations of all four texts are widely available and so are not reproduced here. Parallel versions of the Makhādeva narrative are known in other Buddhist traditions; Suttacentral.net identifies T. 744, EA 1.1, Up 2.050, T. 211.38, T. 152.87, MA 67, EA 50.4, and "Other Tibetan 1:kha53a."

29. As Ven. Narada notes, only the *Maghadeva sutta* explicitly concludes that good practice alone, without the noble eightfold path specifically taught by buddhas, does not lead to final enlightenment: Labugama Narada, "Muvadev Dā Vata," 119. However, I do not agree with his conclusion that Buddhaghosa's various commentaries, by virtue of *not* explicitly mentioning this, necessarily suggest that renunciation alone is sufficient for enlightenment.

30. On Nimi generally, across religious boundaries, see Naomi Appleton, *Shared Characters in Jain, Buddhist and Hindu Narrative : Gods, Kings and Other Heroes* (Routledge, 2016), chap. 6. On the connections between the *Nimi-jātaka* and *Makhādeva-jātaka*, see Peter Skilling, ed., *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum; Art, Architecture, and Inscriptions* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 136–138.

account—is preserved, albeit with considerable embellishment. The *Muvadev-dā-vata* itself is rather explicit about this embellishment:

> "At one time Our Lord of Sages was dwelling in the comfort attained through royal splendor; but, at the moment of seeing a grey hair on his head, desired to become a sage."
> —Having briefly shown this *jātaka* thus, like a young sapling; I shall elaborate, like a tree ripe with leaves, fruits, and flowers.[31]

The method that the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s author uses for this elaboration seems to have been explicitly drawn from the *Siyabaslakara.* The *Siyabaslakara*—following Daṇḍin's *Kāvyādarśa*—is concerned with teaching us how the "body" of a poem should be properly ornamented.[32] The following verses (which differ considerably between the two texts) then go on to outline the various types of "body" a poem might have (dividing it, for examples, by its use of metrical verse, prose, or a mixture of the two; or by its choice of narrative content). We might therefore understand the "body" of the poem to consist of its overarching structure. The "ornaments" with which that body is adorned represent various literary techniques and flourishes used to beautify the bare structure, just as the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s "leaves, fruits, and flowers" adorn the tree trunk of the Pāli *Makhādeva-jātaka*.

To illustrate how closely the *Muvadev-dā-vata* hews to the *Siyabaslakara*'s vision, it is worth noting some of the features the latter

31. Vv. 6–7: *apa muniňdēk kalak rajasiri pämiṇi yehen | vesemin isä narak duṭu keṇehi isives ris vī || iti turuṇupälek ev me dā säkevin dakvā | palu pala malini sasiri turuvat vitara pānem.*

32. Compare *Kāvyādarśa* 1.10 (*taiḥ śarīraṃ ca kāvyānām alaṃkārāś ca darśitāḥ | śarīraṃ tāvad iṣṭārthavyavacchinnā padāvalī*) and *Siyabaslakara* 1.11 (*ovun visin peṇini kav sirurut lakarut | kämätiya at däk vū vadan pabaňdehi siruru*), both of which can be translated as "The body and the ornaments of poems are shown by those [earlier sages]: first, the body is a string of words arranged/said [to convey] the desired meaning...."

considers ideal for the "body" of a *mahākāvya*, and their uptake in the former. The *Siyabaslakara* tell us that

> A *mahākāvya* is composed in chapters. What are its characteristics? It begins with a description of the contents, or a benediction (*āśīrvāda*), or a salutation.[33]

We have already noted that the *Muvadev-dā-vata* contains a concise, single-verse summary of its entire plot in its introduction. The very first verses further contain a salutation to the Buddha:

> The ocean for the rivers of the wise,
> the moon for the *kumuda*-flower of the disciplined,[34]
> the sun for the morning dew of *kleśa*s,
> the fire for the forest of *saṃsāra-duḥkha*,
> the lake for the swans of the good,
> the lotus for the honeybees of virtues,
> the ship for the ocean of the five desires,
> the maned [lion] to the elephant-herd of *tīrthika*s,
> the *mantra* to subdue passion,
> the path to the comfort of heaven and liberation,
> the lamp for the darkness of calamity—
> Homage to the threefold world's sole friend![35]

This salutation is particularly distinctive within the poem's overall structure, as its verses alone deploy the distinctive rhyming *sivupada* format (in which each of the four metrical feet end in a shared syllable, in this case *-rā*). The *sivupada* would, by the mid-second millennium, become the dominant style of Sinhala poetics; the remainder of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, however, is written in the simple non-rhyming *gī* verse.[36] Such stylistic shifts often indicate that the poet is calling our attention to particularly significant verses: Here, the more elaborate style adds gravitas to his homage to the Buddha, but it also makes it

33. *Siyabaslakara* v. 21: *saga siyō mahakav kimehi lakuṇu viyat vat | vat nidesa āsi hō namakara hō peraṭa vē*. Cf. *Kāvyādarśa* 1.14: *sargabandho mahākavyam ucyate tasya lakṣaṇam | āśīrnamaskriyā vastunirdeśo vāpi tanmukham*.
34. The *kumuda* flower is said to bloom in moonlight.
35. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, vv. 1–3: *nuvaṇa nī sayurā | vinē kumudu nusayurā | keles tusara diva | yurā bava duk läv agayurā || sat tisara sarā | guṇa biňgu peḷa mahasarā | visā dalanidu pasarā | tit gaja känaṭa kesarā || rā vasa maturā | saga mok suvaṭa yaturā | uvaduru aňduru miturā | namav tiloveka miturā*.
36. On the specific metres, as defined by the (slightly later) *Eḷusaňdäslakuṇa*, see Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 145.

impossible to miss that yet another requirement of the *mahākāvya* is being satisfied.

After its discussion of introductions, the *Siyabaslakara* then goes on to specify further the ideal content of a *mahākāyva*:

> It is [based on] events which [actually] happened in this way,[37] or on events which differ from them [i.e., an established invented story]; it is connected to the fruits of the four activities (*varga*s);[38] the hero is noble (*ulāra*, Skt. *udāra*);
> [it is composed] with descriptions of the city, the ocean, the mountain, the season, the rising of the moon and sun; with great sport in gardens and water; with sport of alcohol and pleasantries;[39]
> with things such as love-in-separation (Skt. *vipralambha*), getting married, and the birth and growth of princes; and also with counsel

37. I.e., on a true story, or on an event described in an *itihāsa* historical narrative. The commentary makes this explicit, glossing *mesē vī yana puvat* as *mesē vīya yana pravṛttiyek hō* [...] *itihāsa kathāvek hō veyi*. H. Jayatilaka, *Siyabaslakara or Sinhalese Rhetoric by King Silāmēghavarṇa, Paraphrased by Ratnamadhvāchārya Mahāthēra* (Lakrivikiraṇa Press, 1892), commentary on v. 22.

38. This refers to the *Dharmaśāstr*ic ends (*artha*s) of wealth (also *artha*), duty (*dharma*), pleasure (*kāma*), and ultimately liberation (*mokṣa*). This verse, and those around it, are taken directly from the *Kāvyādarśa*; cf. that text's 1.15: *itihāsakathodbhūtam itarad vā sadāśrayam | caturvargaphalāyattañ caturudāttanāyakam*. It is worth noting, however, that the old commentary offers a short discussion of the four *varga*s/*artha*s, suggesting that its author at least held some genuine interest in the subject, and this was not simply a token copying of Daṇḍin. He writes, "Here, *artha* means things obtained through conformity with manuals of statecraft (*nītiśāstra*) and with valor (*vikrama*), through things such as the conquest of all four quarters (*digvijaya*) and the overcoming of defilements; *dharma* means skillful *dharma* (*kuśala-dharma*) effected through things such as sacrifice (*yāga*), [being an] ascetic, and worship; *kāma* means pleasure of the five [senses], which ought to be described as enjoyment of marriage, sport in gardens, sport in water and so on; *mokṣa* means *nirvāṇa*, which should be obtained through things such as meditation and ascetics" (*mehi: artthanam digvijayaduṣṭanigrahādiyen vikramayaṭada nītiśāstrayaṭada aviruddhakoṭa pämiṇi vastuvayi; dharmmanam yāgatapasvīpūjādin karaṇa kuśaladharmmayayi; kāmanam vivāhasambhoga udyānakrīḍājalakrīḍādīn varṇṇanīya vū pañcakāmayayi; mokṣanam tapodhyānādin pämiṇiyayutu nirvāṇayayi*). *Siyabaslakara*, v. 22.

39. In this last clause the *Siyabaslakara* diverges from *Kāvyādarśa* 1.16d, which specifies instead "with the drinking of liquor and delight in pleasure" (... *madhupānaratotsavaiḥ*). The term I translate here as pleasure, *rata*, typically

(*mantra*), the approach of messengers, war, and also the gains of the noble hero.[40]

Very few of these features are present in the earlier Pāli-language Makhādeva narratives; even fewer, to be fair, are present in the Pāli *Sasa-jātaka*, the inspiration for the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s sister poem *Sasa-dā-vata*. Both authors, however, seem to have very intentionally composed their poems to satisfy the *Siyabaslakara*'s requirements for a *mahākāvya*. Of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s 164 chapters, less than half—beginning with verse 91—seem concerned with advancing the poem's core narrative. Preceding this point are elaborate, but non-linear, descriptions of the city (vv. 8–32), the king himself (vv. 33–47), autumn (vv. 48–61), the moon (vv. 62–69), the night (vv. 70–84), and the dawn (vv. 85–90);[41] all are typical features of the Sanskritic *mahākāvya*.

Finally, a note on translation is warranted. The *Muvadev-dā-vata*, like other poems written in "pure" (*eḷu*) Sinhala, contains much wordplay, ambiguity, and double-speak throughout its verses. This is hardly unique to Sinhala-language poetry.[42] But the challenges these verbal

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has a sexual connotation; *Siyabaslakara* does not appear to preserve this, preferring instead to repeat a variant loanword for "sport" (here *keḷiya*, earlier in the same verse *kiḍu*). *Siyabaslakara*, v. 22.

40. *Siyabaslakara,* vv. 22–24: *he vī mesē yana puvateyinan puvat hō | siyuvaga pala sabaňda vä uḷāranā siyō vē || nuvara sayuru giri yū sisi hiru udā vän men | uyan dala kiḍuni mahat avan mana doḷa keḷiyen || peḷaňbum vivāgämum kumarunupätväḍumen | maturu du dū gaman yudu uḷāra nā udeni dū.* Cf. *Kāvyādarśa* 1.15–17: *itihāsakathodbhūtam itarad vā sadāśrayam | caturvargaphalāyattaṃ caturudāttanāyakam || nagarārṇavaśailārtucandrārkodayavarṇanaiḥ | udyānasalil akṛīḍāmadhupānaratotsavaiḥ || vipralambhair vivāhaiś ca kumārodayavarṇanaiḥ | mantradūtaprayāṇājināyakābhyudayair api*.

41. The names and length of these divisions differ slightly between modern editions and translations. However, they are not solely modern interpolations: Similar variants appear in the British Library manuscript OR.6604(14).

42. On such wordplay in Sanskrit, see Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (Columbia University Press, 2010). The range of possible double-meanings is increased by the extreme brevity of many *eḷu* Sinhala terms: *kiya*, to give one example, can be read as Sanskrit *kṣaya* ("house"); *kathā* ("story"); *kriya* (the astrological sign); or *kriyā* ("deed"); a shortened version of the Sinhala noun *katikāvata* (a type of monastic legal text); as the term for the hump of an animal's back; or as the verbal adjective "spoken." See Väliviṭiyē Sorata Thera, *Śrī Sumaṅgala Śabdakoṣaya: A Sinhalese-Sinhalese Dictionary* (Colombo: P. Abhayawickrama, 1952), s.v. *kiya*. Only context

acrobatics pose the translator are heightened by the unique syntax of poetic Sinhala. As is standard for many genres of South Asian poetry, word order is determined primarily by metre; but, unlike Sanskrit or Pāli poetry, *eḷu* Sinhala poetry only optionally and rarely marks case endings. All this combined results in verses with a staggering degree of possible interpretations.[43] To capture even a fraction of these subtleties requires that the translator be as much poet as technician; this is a status I do not arrogate for myself. The translations offered throughout this article therefore present only the shallowest surface reading of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, largely following the modern commentary of Ranjit Vanaratna.[44]

A NON-ATHEISTIC POETICS

The *Muvadev-dā-vata* is very explicitly a *buddhacarita*, intended to extol the past lives and virtues of the Buddha. But this does not mean that it was by any means antithetical to "theist" sects, nor that their presence in the poem should be considered a deviation from properly Buddhist norms. Poetic theory in medieval Southern Asia was decidedly inclusive on matters of religion, even when individual poets and theoreticians belonged to distinctive, mutually exclusive religious orders (such as the Buddhist monk Ratnaśrījñāna, commenting on the work of the presumably Śaiva Daṇḍin).[45]

The standard imagery of those poetics routinely draws upon references we would today class as "Hindu"; the *Muvadev-dā-vata* dutifully

clues, or a generous commentary, can help to distinguish which meaning is intended in *eḷu* poetry.

43. See, for an illustrative example, the rich discussion of the *Siyabaslakara*'s opening verse in Hallisey, Meegaskumbura, and Gornall, "Beauty to Beauty," 149–154.

44. Ranjit Vanaratna, ed., *Muvadev Dā Vata: Vanaratna Vyākhyā* (Samavardhana, 1989).

45. Ratnaśrījñāna rather famously provides no commentary on Daṇḍin's opening verses, which invoke (the nominally non-Buddhist deity) Sarasvatī. Elsewhere, however, he glosses Daṇḍin's use of the term *dharma* (at *Ratnaśrīṭīkā* 1.53) in explicitly brahmanical terms: Yigal Bronner and Whitney Cox, "Sanskrit Poetics through Dandin's Looking Glass: An Alternative History," in *A Lasting Vision: Dandin's* Mirror *in the World of Asian Letters*, ed. Yigal Bronner (Oxford University Press, 2023), 276. The *Siyabaslakara*, despite enjoining an explicitly Buddhist poetics, seems to have no qualms about directly translating

follows suit. We therefore see multiple references to Viṣṇu (under his Sinhala name Uvindu), his consort Śrī, and his aquiline steed Garuḍa—

> Erroneously thinking "Is this the ocean?" when in flight—not once or even twice!—the Garuḍa-king, of he whose chariot is the Garuḍa [i.e., Viṣṇu], descended at once into that choicest city.[46]
> Having seen the distress [of the world] reflected on Viṣṇu's chest, Śrī [caused] happiness to dwell at the feet of that Best of Men.[47]

—enemy kings bowing before Muvadev's sheer luminosity are metaphorically compared to brahmins bathing in the divine river in search of liberation—

> Having bathed in the Milky Way, which is the reflection from the fingernails of that Lord of Men, groups of brahmins, enemy kings, attain the happiness-causing accomplishment of liberation.[48]

—Muvadev's eloquence is said to be so great that it parts the goddess of speech from her own husband—

> While sitting in the womb of a blossoming lotus, which is the mouth of that Elephant among Men, Sarasvatī does not feel the wind of Mahābrahma's cow-tail fan.[49]

—and, of course, numerous unnamed heavenly beings are overwhelmed by the splendor of both Muvadev himself and his city.

> Groups of promiscuous gods, sporting in the Heavenly Ganges, renounce their mental impurities having apprehended the splendor of

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Daṇḍin's opening verses into Sinhala (*Siyabaslakara* v. 1), and even adds references to Mahābrahmā, Śakra, and Bṛhaspati to its list of earlier teachers (*Siyabaslakara* v. 2: *mahabaṁba sakā sura äjarā e kasubu isi | pavara vāmana daṇḍi ā̈ namaṁda kavlakuṇäcaran*). Ruvanmī's old commentary on these verses simply provides glosses with no additional commentary, suggesting that he saw no incongruities necessitating explanation.

46. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 31: *dalanidu hoyi säkī noyek no de gamanhi du | sähī baṭē puravaraṭa guruḷu dadā guruḷu rada.*

47. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 34: *uviṁdu urehi tamā piḷibiṁbu disut nusuhu | satuṭuvä ē naravarā vusu siri pā mulhī.*

48. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 36: *naraniṁdu e saraṇa niyaräs ahas gaṁga tō | nahā rupu raja vip muḷu suvadā säpat mok pat.*

49. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 40: *vasatenaravaraṇā muva pul taṁburu gäbehī | mahabaṁba no lada vidunā sarasaviya val vidunā.*

> that city's moat, splendid in the intoxication of eyes.[50]
>
> Dancing goddesses sung songs of praise for that Ultimate Man, which crushed the pride of the immortal armies, swords in their upraised hands.[51]

Supposedly "Hindu" gods, in other words, are very much at home in an otherwise explicitly Buddhist literary world.

Perhaps the most striking of these references, given our received wisdom about the Poḷonnaruva period, appears in a verse intended to illustrate the size and whitewashed splendor of Muvadev's palace:

> Entering inside the great palace, Hara doubted: "Is this Kailāsa, so large and white?!"
> In its luminescence, the half-moon decorating his tresses appeared full.[52]

The references to Kailāsa and the half-moon locks make it clear that this is a reference to Śiva himself, visiting Muvadev's city; the commentary preserved in the British Library manuscript specifically glosses Hara as Īśvarayā (Skt. Īśvara), a standard epithet for Śiva. This would seem, however, to defy our standard understanding of religious dynamics in the Poḷonnaruva period, according to which Sinhala-speaking Buddhists (like the author of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*) were properly antagonist to Śiva and his Tamil-speaking worshippers.[53] Our standard histories of Sri Lanka mark the advent of this period with the defeat (in ca. 1070) of the then-incumbent Cōḻa governors by Vijayabāhu I, who thenceforth ruled independently from Poḷonnaruva. Later retrospective accounts (the thirteenth century *Mahāvaṃsa* extension, the fourteenth century *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya*, and to a lesser extent the thirteenth century *Pūjāvaliya*) would paint the period of Cōḻa dominion as a time of violent crisis for the Buddha's *śāsana* in Sri Lanka; modern historians

50. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 32: *mana doḷa haḷa saleḷu sura kän madov keḷiyē | nuvan rasaye sasiri siri pämiṇi ē pura piri.*
51. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 46: *naṭata devaṁbun yasa gī gā ē naravarā | haḷē puvaḷa amara sen asigat digathi tamā.*
52. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 12: *paḷa hela kelesa hoyi läṁgeta rudu pahakus hara | daḷa lakaḷa kalā sisī rasnī lada pabasarā.*
53. See, influentially, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Vijayabāhu I, The Liberator of Laṅkā," *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 4, no. 1 (1955): 45–71.

(and politicians) have tended to rather uncritically accept a stark and hostile dichotomy between "Sinhala Buddhists" and "Tamil Śaivas."

More recent research on the supposed Sinhala Buddhist/Tamil Śaiva dualism of the Poḷonnaruva period, however, complicates this picture and provides more context for the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s casual invocation of Śiva. The Cōḻa influence on Poḷonnaruva's architecture is well-documented; crucially, it seems that theist temples (*devālaya*s) continued to be patronized and maintained alongside Buddhist *stūpa*s and *vihāra*s well after Vijayabāhu's declaration of independence.[54] Poḷonnaruva's surviving art is also suggestive of the extent to which theist ("Hindu") gods were accepted in a nominally Buddhist cosmology: The Galpota inscription of King Niśśaṅka Malla (r. ca. 1187–1196), in which he famously declares himself to be a "Buddhist king" against "non-Buddhist" rivals of the Pāṇḍya and Cōḻa dynasties, is adorned with what is unmistakably an image of Lakṣmī/Śrī, the consort of Viṣṇu.[55] Clearly, there was no obvious contradiction between "being Buddhist" and invoking the visual iconography of (what we would consider) "non-Buddhist" deities. And while the influence of Tamil literature on Poḷonnaruva-period poetics is understudied, the inscriptional use of Tamil by kings as late as Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–1187) strongly suggests that it was also employed as a courtly language.[56] We already have strong evidence that Pāli-language texts moved freely across the Palk Strait;[57] we might therefore reasonably speculate that

54. Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, "South Indian or Sri Lankan? The Hindu Temples of Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka," *Artibus Asiae* 70, no. 1 (2010): 25–45.
55. Shirley, "Buddhism, Gender, and Politics," 14–15.
56. Ibid., 36–39, 203–204.
57. Anne M. Blackburn, "Review of Giulio Agostino, *The Ornament of Lay Followers: A Translation of Ānanda's 'Upāsakajanālaṅkāra'* (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2015)," *Vienna Journal of South Asian Studies* 58 (2022): 246–251; Alastair Gornall, "How Many Sounds Are in Pāli? Schism, Identity and Ritual in the Theravāda Saṅgha," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 42, no. 5 (2014): 511–550; Petra Kieffer-Pülz, "Die Klassifizierung des Alkoholverbots in der buddhistischen Rechtsliteratur der Theravādin," in *Im Dickicht der Gebote: Studien zur Dialektik von Norm und Praxis in der Buddhismusgeschichte Asiens*, ed. Peter Schalk and Max Deeg (Uppsala Universitet, 2005), 153–224. On Buddhism in the Tamil country more generally see Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Tamil-language literary (and devotional) texts continued to circulate in Poḷonnaruva. That the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s poet was so familiar with the iconography of Śiva, and assumed that their audience would be able to follow the metaphor, should therefore not surprise us in the least.

All of this evidence challenges the assumption that there existed, in the Poḷonnaruva period, distinct and mutually exclusive (if not outright hostile) "Sinhala Buddhist" and "Tamil Śaiva" religious cultures, and that therefore a poem written in Sinhala about a former life story of the Buddha ought not to dally with the latter. If we *did* maintain such an understanding, then the invocation of Śiva—let alone the various other deities present in the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, and the *Siyabaslakara*, and throughout Sinhala-language literature—would indeed appear a problem in need of explanation. The wider contexts both of the Poḷonnaruvan kingdom, and of premodern South Asian literary culture in general, however, belie this assumption. To be "Buddhist"—at least according to the unnamed poet of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*—is by no means meant to be atheist, or to exclude particular "rival" deities like Śiva.

NOVELTY IN THE NARRATIVE

The verses quoted above help us better understand the interreligious context in which the *Muvadev-dā-vata* was produced. This was not, as modern critics like Wickramasinghe might have it, the result of Sanskrit or Hindu "impositions" upon a properly Buddhist (meaning either Pāli- or Sinhala-language) narrative; it was an intentional move on the poet's behalf to position a Buddhist narrative in a transcultural and trans-sectarian world of poetics. However, this does not mean that the *Muvadev-dā-vata* is simply an unimaginative "recycling" of earlier narrative ideas. Rather, the poem suggests the extent to which later medieval poets felt comfortable going beyond the material presented in earlier sources, in service of novel literary ends. While the material discussed in the preceding sections could be taken as "additions to" the core narrative—to return to the poet's own metaphor, merely "leaves, fruits, and flowers" used as decoration—these points of originality constitute a horticultural intervention in the very trunk of the "tree" itself.

These innovative narrative points might well be taken, by the poem's critics, as "deviations" from a "canonical" plot. We ought to

bear in mind that all evidence suggests that the *jātaka* narratives themselves, as we have access to them in Buddhaghosa's *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, were only "fixed" relatively late.[58] Even today we have access to at least three versions of the Makhādeva narrative (two canonical, MN 83 and CPA 6, and one post-canonical, JA 9) which conflict on at least minor plot points. In other words, there is no "canonical" Makhādeva narrative; there are only varied attempts to make sense of his renunciation.

The first of these deviations is Makhādeva's reaction to finding a single grey hair on his head, which then prompts his abdication and renunciation. In one Pāli-language account of this moment, Makhādeva's reaction is portrayed as one of absolute existential dread, experienced on a very somatic level:

> And as [the king] said, "Then having removed that hair, friend, place it in my hand," [the barber] removed it with his golden scissors and placed it in the king's hand. At that time, the king still had 84,000 years of life remaining—but even so, having seen that hair, it was as though the King of Death had approached and stood near him, or as though he himself had entered a flaming leaf-hut, and having been overcome by *saṃvega*[59] while reflecting on this, thought, "You fool, Makhādeva! Grey hairs have arisen before you were able to rid yourself of the impurities." To him, as he twisted his mind around this appearance of the grey hairs, arose an internal fire; drops of sweat poured from his body; his clothes pressed down on him and felt as though they ought to be removed. He thought, "This very day, having set out [from the householder life], I shall go on to wander [as a mendicant]." Having given the barber the gift of a village, which produced 100,000 [units of revenue], having had his eldest son summoned, said, "Grey hairs have arisen on my head; I have become old. And though human pleasures (*kāma*s) have been consumed by me, I will now seek out divine pleasures. For me it is the time for renunciation. You, take up this kingdom; I, having set out, will take up the religious life (Pāli

58. Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*, 6–7.

59. This is a significant emotion in Buddhist thought, suggesting something like an existential anxiety produced by contemplation of mortality. For Buddhists, this is actually a *positive* emotion, as it provides the necessary motivation for spiritual progress.

> *samaṇa-dhamma*, Skt. *śramaṇa-dharma*) dwelling in the Maghadeva Mango Tree Grove."[60]

The sheer shock of Buddhaghosa's Pāli recension is a stark contrast to the later telling of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*. In our medieval poem, Muvadev still has an extreme bodily reaction—but here it seems to be one of excitement, or even joy:

> Stepping back, half-kneeling, and performing an *anjali*, spoke without delay the royal barber to the Lord of Men, having seen a grey hair on [the latter's] head.
> At those words, he [the barber] was comforted by the tears of joy and whole-body horripilation he witnessed of that Excellent Lord of Men.[61]

We ought to pay particular attention to this term "horripilation" (*lomudeha*, from Skt. *loma-udaya*, "the rising of hair"). In Sanskrit poetics and dramaturgy horripilation is a signal (*abhinaya*) of extreme emotional arousal: typically either from fear or from (sexual) desire.[62] To complement "tears of joy" (*satuṭu kaṅdula*), and to reassure and comfort the barber, we might wonder which is intended here: the kind of

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60. JA 9: *tena hi me samma taṃ palitaṃ uddharitvā pāṇimhi ṭhapehī ti ca vutte suvaṇṇasaṇḍāsena uddharitvā rañño pāṇimhi patiṭṭhāpesi. tadā rañño caturāsīti vassasahassāni āyu avasiṭṭhaṃ hoti. evaṃ santepi palitaṃ disvāva maccurājānaṃ āgantvā samīpe ṭhitaṃ viya attānaṃ ādittapaṇṇasālaṃ paviṭṭhaṃ viya ca maññamāno saṃvegaṃ āpajjitvā bāla maghadeva yāva palitassuppādāva ime kilese jahituṃ nāsakkhī ti cintesi. tassevaṃ palitapātubhāvaṃ āvajjentassa antoḍāho uppajji sarīrā sedā mucciṃsu sāṭakā pīḷetvā apanetabbākārappattā ahesuṃ. so ajjeva mayā nikkhamitvā pabbajituṃ vaṭṭatī ti kappakassa satasahassuṭṭhānakaṃ gāmavaraṃ datvā jeṭṭhaputtaṃ pakkosāpetvā tāta mama sīse palitaṃ pātubhūtaṃ mahallakomhi jāto bhuttā kho pana me mānusakā kāmā idāni dibbe kāme pariyesissāmi. nekkhammakālo mayhaṃ tvaṃ imaṃ rajjaṃ paṭipajja ahaṃ pana pabbajitvā maghadevaambavanuyyāne vasanto samaṇadhammaṃ karissāmī ti āha.*
61. *Muvadev-dā-vata* vv. 95–96: *päsuḷuva aḍa däṇiva kara miṭusak kī hiňgu | magul kapu naraniňduhaṭa narak nahamā is'hī || etepulen ohu as väsī satuṭu kaňdulenī | siyalaňga lomudehen san keremin ē niriňdu saňda.*
62. For a useful overview of *abhinaya*s in dramaturgical thought see Anuradha Kapur, "Abhinaya," in *The Routledge Companion to Performance-Related Concepts in Non-European Languages* (Routledge, 2024). The *Muvadev-dā-vata* is far from the earliest Buddhist literary work to mention, or even enjoin in its readers, horripilation: see, on the *Vessantara-jātaka,* Maria Heim, "The Aesthetics of Excess," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003): 537–538.

somatic terror experienced by the Pāli-language Makhādeva, or something more ecstatic? Either way, it is clear that Muvadev's emotional response is rather extreme, and at least *partially* characterized in a positive light.

This subtly recasts the moment of discovering that one has entered old age. In the earlier recensions of the tale, the grey hair serves as an apparently unwanted reminder that time has passed, that Makhādeva is now old, and that so much of his life has been wasted on worldly pursuits without making spiritual progress. This realization *frightens* him into seeking out the divine pleasures of the renunciant lifestyle. In the *Muvadev-dā-vata*, however, the excitement of the titular king suggests instead that he has been eagerly anticipating this moment: dutifully passing his days as a king, perhaps, until he has reached the stage of his life at which he can (finally!) hand over the crown and turn instead to the greater joys of what is to come. This hints, perhaps, at a degree of foreknowledge on Muvadev's part. This is far from the only text from this period to reinterpret older narrative in such a "docetic" light, in which the protagonists seem to eagerly anticipate their own future renunciations and merely go through the motions of their own (mis)adventures.[63] In Alastair Gornall's analysis of the *Jinālaṅkāra*, a similarly docetic "karmic determinism" seems to dictate the course of the young Siddhartha Gautama's life, assuring his success even as he appears to struggle against Māra.[64] This stands in some slight tension, as Gornall discusses, with the "orthodox" position articulated in the canonical *Katthāvatthu* and its commentary, that buddhas' successes are *not* guaranteed from the moment of their birth—let alone from much earlier on the bodhisattva path.[65] In both works, it seems, standard narratives of the Buddha's lives seem to have been taken as vehicles to explore rather fine-grained doctrinal points about enlightenment.

The second significant departure from the original telling occurs once Muvadev has left his palace behind. In the *jātaka* story we are simply told that Makhādeva goes to a nearby mango grove (named

63. On such docetic themes in (much earlier) Mahāyāna literature, see Jonathan Silk, "The Fruits of Paradox: On the Religious Architecture of the Buddha's Life Story," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003): 863–81.

64. Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, chap. 9.

65. Ibid., 195.

after himself) and contentedly lives out his days there as a mendicant. In our medieval poem, however, things are not so simple. The eighth chapter of the poem consists almost entirely of verses describing how nature itself seeks to conform to Muvadev's wishes for a peaceful place of meditation:

> Gently shaking the bee-swarmed blossoming Śāl tree, the wind blew [only] little by little, in accordance with that Best of Men's intentions.
> The bevy of nectar-craving swans, although drinking nectar from the lotus and water-lily, suddenly ceased the long, sweet sounds [they had made] earlier.
> Although seeing rows of trees—fit for leaping and fruit-laden!—the troop of monkeys didn't even jump, afraid of rustling the branches in the forest.
> Unlike before, the swarm of bees, desiring sweet nectar, delighted and delirious with fragrant honey in their forest-work,[66] did not make a sound.
> Subdued by the qualities (*guṇa*) of the Master of the World, who is unsubdued by "self,"[67] the birds and the four-legged groups alike abandoned their prior cravings and were subdued.
> Dwelling thus in the auspicious and pleasing forest-garden, the Lord of Men captured the mind of every craver, like a corporeal[68] *dharma*.[69]

This seems rather far from the "forest of asceticism" (*tava vena*, Skt. *tapo-vana*) into which Muvadev had earlier told us (in v. 105) he wished to retire. Despite his strong desire for the mendicant lifestyle, Muvadev is apparently such an excellent king that nature itself wants to be his

66. Vanaratna suggests both *ghaṭa* and *samūhaya* for *geḷē*, clearly interpreting it as a group of forests. As only one forest has been mentioned, I am choosing to take *ghaṭa* in the sense of *karmaṇi*, "busyness."

67. Once again, here we see a docetic theme: Despite being many lifetimes away from his eventual enlightenment as Siddhartha Gautama, Muvadev is still described as *already* being "unsubdued by self."

68. Or "disguised."

69. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, vv. 128–133: *nihiya tanavālā biňgunavalā supul sal | hamulū suḷaňga mada mada risinu ē naravarā || puvada pul piyum miyuru mīlol has peḷa | noma lī komala digu räv pera kal seyin yuhuvā̆ || däka da vetä pananaṭa nisi palini bara räk peḷa | sā muva muḷu noma pinī sā lelavana biyen vana || peres noma biṇi miyuru mīlol biňgu muḷu | suvaňda muvaradinavalā ramaṇī pul vana geḷē || novama tamā visī diyahimiyā guṇa visī | perasē lol dähä tamā visī siyot sivupu kän || vesemin mesē somi ramaṇi val uyanhī | dahamak seyin ves gat niriňdu muḷu lō sit gat*.

subject. As Muvadev himself is said to acknowledge in the following verse, this rather defeats the point of renouncing kingship:

> "Dwelling here, what city-lordship was abandoned by me?" Thinking thus, he left behind the endeavor in that forest, which blossoms even without light.[70]

What are we to make of this description of the mango grove, entirely without precedent in the earlier Makhādeva narratives? This level of subject-flattery is fairly typical of Sanskrit literature, which explicitly aims to valorize the exemplary qualities of its protagonists. Modern scholars have often compared the *Muvadev-dā-vata* to the works of Kālidāsa (fl. fourth or fifth century);[71] we might look particularly closely at a scene in the *Kumārasambhavam*, in which Śiva's own meditation is similarly respected by the forest:

> Although hearing then the singing of the *āpsara*s, Hara remained absorbed in meditation; for obstacles (*vighna*s) cannot break the concentration (*samādhi*) of those who are lords of their own self. Then Nandi, standing at the door of the creeper-bower with a golden staff on his left forearm, disciplined the Gaṇas, with just a finger at the corner of his mouth, "Do not be mischievous!" At his will, the entire forest-grove stood like a scene laid out in a painting: The trees did not waft, the river gentled, the birds were speechless, the roaming of beasts stilled....[72]

The *Kumārasambhava* relates the birth of Śiva's son Kartikeya, who today is considered one of Sri Lanka's principle guardian deities (under

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70. *Muvadev-dā-vata*, v. 134: *mehima vasata kavara pura isuru mā duhuyē | vī ē nurusvā len bihivä supul van geḷen*.

71. Godakumbura suggests that the poet was particularly inspired by Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, *Śakuntala*, and *Raghuvaṃśa*, and Māgha's *Śisupālavadha*: Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, 145. Sannasgala similarly suggests Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava* and *Raghuvaṃśa*, as well as Kumāradāsa's *Janakiharaṇa*, as potential points of inspiration: Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya*, 144. No specific parallels are drawn by either Godakumbura or Sannasgala, and the general point seems to be only the (extremely plausible) notion that the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s author was familiar with a wide canon of well-regarded Sanskrit works.

72. *Kumārasambhava* 3:40–42: *śrutāpsarogītir api kṣaṇe ‹smin haraḥ prasaṃkhyānaparobabhūva|ātmeśvarāṇāṃnahijātuvighnāḥsamādhibhedaprabhavo bhavanti || latāgṛhadvāragato 'tha nandī vāmaprakoṣṭhārpitahemavetraḥ |mukhārpitaikāṅgulisaṃjñayaiva mā cāpalāyeti gaṇān vyanaiṣīt || niṣkampavṛkṣaṃ*

the names Skanda or Kataragama). While it is unclear how well-established the Kataragama cult would have been in the time of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s composition,[73] it is as least *plausible* that the *Kumārasambhava*, so well-known throughout wider South Asia, would have circulated among Sri Lanka's Śaiva devotees and literati alike. We might therefore consider the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s novel account of the forest taming itself before the bodhisattva Muvadev's meditative prowess as something like a Buddhist response to theist accounts of religious efficacy: Anything that Śiva and Nandi can do, in classics of Sanskrit poetry, the Sinhala-language poetic hero Muvadev can do better.

Regardless of its literary inspiration, this scene seems to pose something of a conceptual problem for Muvadev: Can he really be said to have "renounced" in favor of diligent asceticism if he's still treated, in practice, as a king? More generally, perhaps, this speaks to a broader conceptual issue in devotional literature: How does one balance veneration of a hallowed figure with a sufficiently miserable description of that figure's painful journey to eventual apotheosis? Ought "ideal" figures be subjected, even in literary representations, to starkly "non-ideal" circumstances?[74] The author of the *Muvadev-dā-vata* seems to

nibhṛtadvirephaṃ mūkāṇḍajaṃ śāntamṛgapracāram | tacchāsanāt kānanam eva sarvaṃ citrārpitārambham ivāvatasthe.

73. Obeysekere, who has extensively studied the modern cult, seems to suggest historical origins in "waves" of *pantāram*-caste immigration from South India in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, but also in a "continuing" and "long-time" presence of *āṇḍi* mendicants: Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Fire-Walkers of Kataragama: The Rise of Bhakti Religiosity in Buddhist Sri Lanka," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (1978): 459. While, thanks particularly to the work of both Obeyesekere and John Holt, we have detailed historical studies of origins of Sri Lanka's other principal deities—namely Viṣṇu, Pattinī, Nātha (variously conflated with both Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya), and Saman—more serious consideration of Kataragama/Skanda's origins is sorely needed. See John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (Oxford University Press, 1991); John Clifford Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004); Alexander McKinley, *Mountain at a Center of the World: Pilgrimage and Pluralism in Sri Lanka* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

74. This question is, of course, eons beyond the scope of the present paper. I will note only by way of reference that such questions seem to have seriously preoccupied later commentators and re-tellers of Rāma's narrative on the

have offered a rather straightforward solution to this apparent problem: to simply introduce a second, yet-more-ascetic forest in which Muvadev can meditate. The poem therefore tells us that Muvadev leaves the mango grove (in which all earlier versions of this narrative conclude) and travels to the Himālayas, which promise a more suitable renunciant experience. While the remaining chapters of the poem are still effulgent with praise for Muvadev and for his surroundings, the emphasis shifts considerably: There are no more courteous bees silencing their humming for his convenience. Instead, a more traditionally ascetic experience is described: We are told, for example, that the wind (albeit a perfumed wind) strips his body of heat (v. 143), and that streams of water evaporated in the heat of the sun's harsh splendor (v. 147).

Nonetheless, these two departures from earlier recensions—the altered emotional response to the discovery of a grey hair, and the "non-ascetic" experience in the mango grove necessitating a *second* forest of renunciation—demonstrate the extent to which the *Muvadevdā-vata*'s author felt comfortable moving *beyond* that earlier material and presenting a novel version of the narrative. To a certain extent, these changes may have been intended to accommodate tropes typical of Sanskrit literature: namely, the valorization of the protagonist. But more significantly, they also appear to have been involved in the working-out of thoroughly Buddhist concerns and articulating a more docetic vision of the path to buddhahood, superior over other forms of religious praxis.

SOTERIOLOGICAL REORIENTATIONS

Once Muvadev reaches the Himālayas, we see one final significant departure from the earlier Pāli recensions of the Makhādeva narrative. These earlier narratives describe Makhādeva's meditative practices as being oriented towards the four *brahmavihāras*—*maitrī* (Pāli *mettā*, "loving-kindness"), *karuṇā* ("compassion"), *muditā* ("sympathy"), and *upekṣā* (Pāli *upekkhā*, "equanimity")—and thus attaining the four *dhyāna*s (Pāli *jhāna*s, advanced meditative states) and achieving rebirth in the Brahma-realm. All of these narratives offer up a fairly standard account of the ideal religious practice available to pre-enlightenment

subcontinent: see particularly Sheldon Pollock, "Rāma's Madness," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 29 (1985): 43–56.

mendicants: meditate on the four *brahmavihāra*s and attain the *jhāna* states. As the *Maghadeva sutta* (MN 83) in particular clarifies—and as many other canonical sources re-articulate—this kind of practice does not, itself, lead to enlightenment, but merely to positive rebirths. Implicitly, it must also have provided some positive step forward on the Buddha's own bodhisattva path to eventual enlightenment, as did all of his *jātaka* stories; but this is not the lesson which the canonical texts, or Buddhaghosa, wished for us to take away from these narratives.

The *Muvadev-dā-vata*, however, seems to describe a rather different religious practice once its own titular king reaches his final destination in the Himālayas. Rather than meditating on the four *brahmavihāra*s, we are told—in the final verse of the ninth chapter—that he instead engaged primarily in ascetic practices (*tapas*):

> While our World-Father, dwelling thus, performed *tapas* excellently, the fierce, fear-inspiring animals of that forest had their mouths up-turned with loving-kindness.[75]

Not only is Muvadev's own practice described differently, the focus seems to have shifted from all four of the *brahmavihāra*s as meditation practices to just one, *mettā*, as the *product* of Muvadev's practice. The final chapter—titled, in Vanaratna's edition, "Signs of Loving-Kindness and the Brahma-World" (*met lakara hā bamba lova dinīm*)—provides a series of illustrations of the positive effects of Muvadev's presence on the forest-dwellers. In each case, the natural order of things is again reversed, and predators seem to extend particular loving-kindness

75. V. 154: *vasana semehi yehen tava koṭa apa diya piyā | metumuva vī ē venē bihi suṇu säḍa muva geṇē.*

(*met*, Skt. *maitrī*, Pāli *mettā*) to their usual prey. The cumulative effect of these successive verses merits their being presented in full:

> At that time a horrific serpent, unable to enter an anthill as it had done prior, sought the intense heat betwixt the wings of a delightful peacock.[76]
> Leaving their caves, heedless of their fear of the jackals who had descended to drink, crabs frolicked in the sweet-smelling river-water, rising slowly to the height of [Muvadev's] neck.
> Cherishing the baby animals, who were shivering in the breeze, within his own great coils, the serpent was happy and comforted.
> The mountain-cloud, bedecked with golden creepers of lightning, thundered; [but] the thunderbolt itself, the violent Lord of Beasts, did not fall on the heads of the musk-damp game.
> Archer-women, having slowly but confidently held the necks of leopardesses, counted the marks on their bodies, saying tender and beautiful words.
> Deer walk as they please on the path frequented by tigers,[77] sipping water from the thorns and putting their mouths among the copper leaves.
> Having seen a frog, fainted in the harsh rays of the sun, at once the fierce serpent gave him respite in the umbrella-shade of his hood.
> The musk-moist perfumed elephant-lord, joining the bees with his trumpeting, did not uproot in play the abundant seven-leaved tree with its dense flowering branches.
> The forest-serpent, marked with an uplifted hood of dense branches, was not seized by the fierce fire-claws of Garuḍa, the forest-fire.[78]

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76. Vanaratna takes *gora* (cf. Skt. *ghora*) as "poisonous" (*viṣa äti*); while it can have this meaning (particularly as *ghorara*) I prefer the more literal "horrific."
77. Literally "behavior" (*saraṇa*, Skt. *caraṇa*).
78. Vv. 155–163: *peresa ekal tuṁbas no vanī gora bujaňgamā | räsiru monara piyā gäbä gana huṇusumä puluddē || pänaṭa baṭa sigalū biya nogena nikma guhen | nihiya ḍähä aga naňgalē naḷa keḷiya gaňda gaňgalē || suḷaňganī vevlana muva pollanaṭa pem koṭa | hevä tamā daḷa daraṇehi sänahī dāra tosmin || ran liya vidunvul gal veleheni sasalā | nohiṇī rudu migiňdu seṇa medenada daḍät mudunē || genä giṇuhu nihiya maladu kaňdaṭahi yehen | beṇemin soňda bolaňda bas valaňgana näňgehī kabara || muvo risise äviditi valaňgana saraṇa hasarehi | yehen pänuraminūlē muva lamini taṁba pallē || däka samaga kurirā̄ rivi tedin leḍa mäḍiyan | sätapavī gora bujaňgamā peṇa sat sevanehi tamā || medenada gaňda gijiňdu saha gum biňgu väla siyō | nu upuḷa lela vipul räk supul gana sā satpat || gana sā hivī peṇa peḷa lakuḷu val bujaňgan | no gat läv gini guruḷu kuriru dalakiňdu pasuren.*

Here, just like in the mango grove, we see the natural world reconfiguring itself around Muvadev. But while the mango grove's upturning of the natural order was somehow too "kingly," in the Himālayas it takes a form apparently more acceptable to the poet: an illustration, perhaps, of the great strength of Muvadev's *mettā*.

This leaves us with an important question, however: why this particular focus on *tapas* and *mettā* alone, in place of the four *brahmavihāra*s (including *mettā*) of the earlier Pāli-language Makhādeva narratives? One strong possibility is that this reflects a strengthening re-orientation, in this period, of Theravāda praxis towards the bodhisattva path.[79] The goal of this path is not attainment of the higher meditative states (*dhyāna*s, *jhāna*s), easy rebirth in the Brahma-realm, and eventual enlightenment as an *arhat*—all of which meditation on the four *brahmavihāra*s is said to help accomplish. Nor is it, as the earlier Pāli sources enjoin, meditation more directly on the Buddha's teachings, perhaps leading immediately to arhatship within a single lifespan. Rather, bodhisattvas aspire to remain within the circle of rebirth cultivating, over many lifetimes, the specific virtues (Skt. *pāramitā*s, Pāli *pāramī*s, usually "perfections") required of an independently enlightened buddha.

Many of the *jātaka* narratives, particularly those of the *Mahānipāta* collection, have been traditionally interpreted as narratives in which the Buddha cultivated particular perfections: the *Temiya-jātaka* for renunciation (*nekkhama*), for example; or the *Vessantara-jātaka* for generosity (*dāna*).[80] Few of these associations are explicit in the core Pāli narratives, and later commentaries and retelling often disagree with one another over *which* specific perfection a given *jātaka* is intended to demonstrate. We might read the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s extended ending, expanding on Muvadev's incredible *mettā*, as one more of these attempts to read a perfection into a *jātaka* story: This was a past life in which the bodhisattva-who-became-Śākyamuni developed and demonstrated his *mettā*. Significantly, perhaps, *mettā* is only considered a *pāramī* in Theravāda lists of perfections and is not included in the

79. Jeffrey Samuels, "The Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda Buddhist Theory and Practice: A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka Opposition," *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3 (1997): 399–415; Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 124.

80. Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw, trans., *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha: The Mahānipāta of the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (Silkworm Books, 2015), 3–7.

Mahāyāna list.[81] It is therefore plausible that the *Muvadev-dā-vata* was re-fashioned as an account of a decidedly "Theravāda" bodhisattva path.[82]

The earlier Pāli Makhādeva narratives seemed to be explicitly didactic. They concluded by valorizing their protagonist's *brahmavihāra* meditation as an efficacious way to secure good future rebirths, and by warning their audiences that this efficacy did not (unlike following the Buddha's own teachings) extend to the more lofty soteriological goal of enlightenment. In so doing, these narratives sought to inspire particular religious practices in their reader-hearers: They were not just narratives *about* the past lives of the Buddha but were, in Appleton's words, *seriously* Buddhist narratives.[83] We might do well to interpret the novel ending of the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s narrative as a similarly

81. The Theravāda list is (in Pāli): *dāna* ("generosity"), *sīla* ("discipline"), *nekkhamma* ("renunciation"), *paññā* ("wisdom"), *viriya* ("effort"), *khanti* ("quiescence"), *sacca* ("truth"), *adhiṭṭhāna* ("resolution"), *mettā*, and *upekkhā*. The Mahāyāna list is (in Sanskrit): *dāna*, *śīla*, *kṣānti*, *vīrya*, *dhyāna* (here "meditation" or "concentration"), and *prajñā* ("wisdom").

82. Historians of Sri Lankan Buddhism are divided on the extent to which any individuals in the early second millennium would have identified themselves as explicitly "Mahāyāna." The long-standing narrative, informed particularly by the fourteenth-century *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya*, is that Mahāyāna practice was confined to monks of the Abhayagiri- and Jetavana-*nikāya*s, and was stamped out following the 1165 subordination of those *nikāya*s to the anti-Mahāyāna Mahāvihāra-*nikāya* under King Parākramabāhu I: see, most classically, S. Paranavitana, "Mahāyānism in Ceylon," *Ceylon Journal of Science: Section G. Archaeology, Ethnology, Etc.* II, no. 1 (1928): 35–71. While it is true that Chinese travel accounts only report Mahāyāna sympathies within the former two *nikāya*s, and not the latter, it is increasingly evident that we cannot take a retroactive account from the fourteenth century as hard evidence of Mahāyāna suppression in the twelfth: Sven Bretfeld, "Theravāda: Sectarianism and Diversity in Mahāvihāra Historiography," in *Routledge Handbook of Theravāda Buddhism* (Routledge, 2022); R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (University of Arizona Press, 1979); Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*; Shirley, "Buddhism, Gender, and Politics." It remains unclear when, if ever, the Mahāyāna can be said to have "died out" in Sri Lanka. Regardless, knowledge of this "rival" form of Buddhism—whether in Sri Lanka or in neighboring polities like the Khmer—must have been available to the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s author.

83. Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*, 11–12.

serious exhortation towards practice: one that urges its audience to follow in Muvadev's footsteps, and to develop perfections among themselves. The composition of the *Muvadev-dā-vata* was not only a significant moment in Sinhala literary history—it was an articulation of a particular vision of Buddhist practice.

CONCLUSIONS: KINGLINESS BEYOND KINGSHIP?

We ought to ask, however, why this *particular* narrative was chosen to be the vehicle of such a moment, or such a vision. Other literary works from early second millennium Sri Lanka take as their inspiration more well-known *jātaka*s: particularly the *Sasa-jātaka* (inspiration for the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s sister-poem, the *Sasa-dā-vata*) and the *Vessantara-jātaka* (inspiration for the earlier *Vesaturu-dā-sannaya*, and the slightly later prose works *Butsaraṇa* and *Dahamsaraṇa*).[84] Art historical evidence confirms these narratives' popularity: While much of the art from the Poḷonnaruva period has since been lost, cave murals at Diṁbulāgala, dated to the twelfth century, included what are clearly scenes from both the *Sasa-jātaka* and *Vessantara-jātaka*.[85] But we have less evidence for the popular reception of the *Makhādeva* narrative prior to its being incorporated into the *Muvadev-dā-vata*: There are no known murals from premodern Sri Lanka of Makhādeva coming to terms with his advancing years. Why, then, was *this* narrative selected to be the subject of what is one of the earliest—if not, following the general scholarly consensus that the *Muvadev-dā-vata* predates the *Sasa-dā-vata, the* earliest—*mahākāvya* written in the Sinhala language?

One possibility, advanced by Ven. Labugama Narada, is that the extensive praise shone on Muvadev in the "Description of the King" (*rada vänum*) was intended to reflect on the period's other glowing exemplar of Buddhist kingship, the historical monarch Parākramabāhu I of Poḷonnaruva (r. ca. 1153–1186).[86] This parallel, however, is little substantiated within the poem itself. All of the verses praising Muvadev are, despite their translation into Sinhala, based on relatively generic tropes of Sanskrit poetics, and I identify no unique parallels with the

84. On the *Vessantara-jātaka* see Liyanage, "Narrative Methods," 154.
85. Mahinda Somathilake, "Painted Jataka Stories of Sri Lanka," *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 6 (2013): 143.
86. Labugama Narada, "Muvadev Dā Vata." I do not read Japanese myself, and so my engagement with Narada's arguments are unfortunately cursory.

eulogies to Parākramabāhu found in his own inscriptions[87] or in colophons of works which he had patronized.[88] If the *Muvadev-dā-vata* was intended to praise of Parākramabāhu, it did so only in the most generic of ways.

Such praise would also, I suspect, rather miss the wider point made by the *Muvadev-dā-vata*: that worldly kingship itself ought to be, at the appropriate time, renounced in favor of asceticism. Parākramabāhu, as far as we know, did not follow Muvadev's suit;[89] nor did any of the other monarchs of the later Poḷonnaruva period, who seem to have all either died early or were violently overthrown as the island plunged into political crisis. Amidst such crisis, perhaps, a more explicitly Buddhist configuration of the world—in which "worldly kingship" was merely a

87. We might, tentatively, draw a parallel between the inscriptional epithet "[he] who has the might (*parākrama*) of a lion, in crushing the skulls of elephants, which are enemy kings" (*rupurajamataňgakumaṁba danalayehi siṃhaparākrama äti*) (Shirley, "Buddhism, Gender, and Politics," 198–199), and the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s description of Muvadev as "A sword-lion, adorning the peak of the Lord of Mountains, which is the forearm of the Lord of Men, [who] removed the heads of elephants, the violent pride of his fallen enemies" (v. 31, *naraniňdu saňdu giriňdu buja kaḷu lakuḷu kagasī | hī rupu ät mudunehī daḷa dap mola kabala gat*). It is true that no Lankan monarchs before Parākramabāhu had been known to use this particular epithet in their inscriptional corpus—but in wider Southern Asia the king/lion to enemy/elephant analogy was so widespread as to be almost *passé*.

88. These works include the Pāli-language commentaries of Poḷonnaruvē Śāriputra, and the decidedly Sanskritized *Jinālaṅkāra*: Kate Crosby, "Sāriputta's Three Works on the Samantapāsādikā," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 28 (2006): 49–59; Shirley, "Buddhism, Gender, and Politics," 194–196; Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, chap. 9. While the colophon to the latter text was excluded from the modern edition of the poem, Dimitrov and Gornall have shown that it forms an authentic part of the original: Dimitrov, *Legacy of the Jewel Mind*, 272; Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 209n15.

89. It is worth noting that none of the retrospective accounts on which we typically rely for the period (the *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Pūjāvaliya*, and to a lesser extent the *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*) explicitly state that Parākramabāhu's reign ended with his death. They all instead simply say that he reigned for thirty-three years, and then that after him Vijayabāhu II took the throne. It is therefore *possible* that he did, indeed, voluntarily abdicate in favor of ascetic retreat. This seems unlikely, however, given the repeated succession crises which subsequently plagued the island.

temporary step on the path to a higher soteriological goal—may well have appealed to the *Muvadev-dā-vata*'s author. As Alastair Gornall has recently, and persuasively, argued, the early second millennium was a period of considerable tension between royal authority and the authority of the Buddha as manifested in powerful monastic institutions, often negotiated in literary and didactic writings which sought to subordinate earthly kings into more transcendent hierarchies with the Buddha himself at the apex—and themselves not far below.[90] When a figure like Muvadev—both the Buddha himself in a previous life *and* a powerful king—twice rejects kingship (of both a conventional and a more magical kind) in favor of asceticism, and does so with somatic joy, this is, I think, a powerful statement, and perhaps a powerful reminder to "real-world" kings about the limits of their kingship.

90. Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*.