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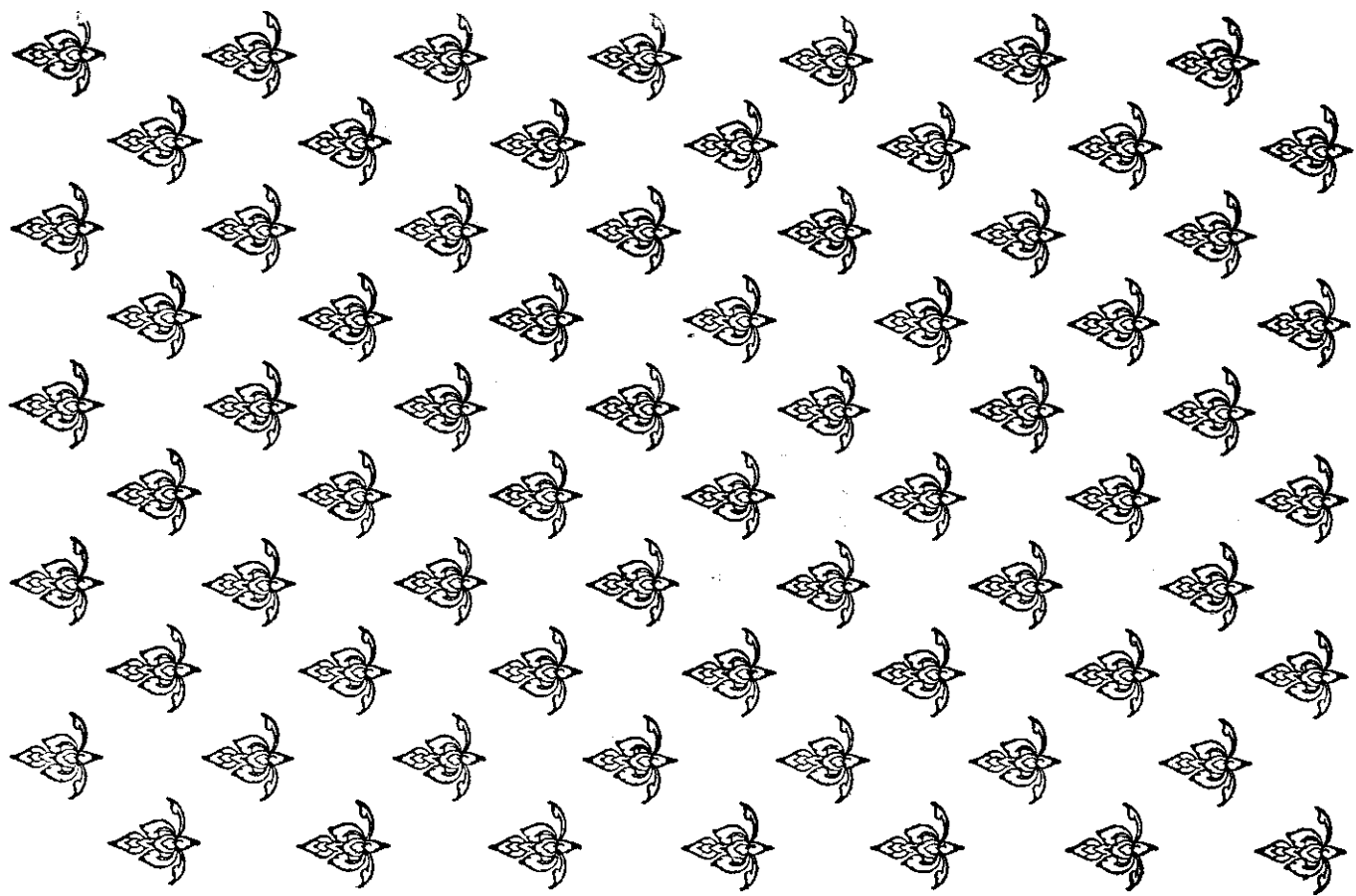
THE MAHĀ CHĀT

by

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THE MAHĀ CHĀT

I. THE STORY

In the opening part of the Introduction to the book "Buddhist Birth Stories" Prof. Rhys Davids gives the following comment:

"It is well-known that among the Buddhist Scriptures there is one book in which a large number of old stories, fables and fairy tales lie enshrined in an edifying commentary; and have been thus preserved for the study and amusement of later times. How this came about is not at present quite certain. The belief of orthodox Buddhists on the subject is this:— The Buddha, as occasion arose, was accustomed throughout his long career to explain and comment on the events happening around him by telling of similar events that had occurred in his own previous births. The experience, not of one lifetime only, but of many lives, was always present to his mind: and it was this experience he so often used to point a moral or adorn a tale."

These birth-stories are called in Thai "Chādok" (*Pali-jātaka*), and there are 550 in number. They have been a storehouse of folklore and literary productions in this country until recent times, and influenced not in the least the life of the people. Of all these birth-stories, the last ten, before the Lord Buddha attained his Buddhahood after a long chain of re-births, are deemed the more important. They are called collectively "Thotsachāt" (*Pali*—Dasa Jāti) or "The Ten Births", a name peculiar only to Thai Buddhism. The last

one called "Wetsandon Chādok" (Vessantara Jātaka) is the most important. It is called Mahā Chāt (*Paṭi*—Mahā Jāti) or the "Great Birth". According to Buddhist belief, before he could obtain his Buddhahood, the Lord Buddha had to perfect himself with the Ten Virtues. These could not be done in a single lifetime but through the ten stages of virtuous life as depicted in the last ten births. A person striving to become a Buddha by perfecting the Ten Virtues is called a Bodhisat—a would-be Buddha or one who seeks enlightenment. Such a Bodhisat cult forms fundamentally the ideal of the Northern Buddhism, the Mahayan Sect. The Wetsandon Chādok, Buddha's last birth but one on earth, portrays the life of Prince Wetsandon fulfilling his mission as a Bodhisat. Thus he had perfected himself to a culmination which fitted him to become a Buddha. Hence the life of Prince Wetsandon is the highest ideal of the faith and one which the people like to hear recited for Prince Wetsandon's supreme sacrifice touches their hearts. The story in brief is as follows:

Wetsandon, the crown prince of a certain kingdom gave away his white elephant as alms to a party of Brahmins from a famine-stricken country. The elephant was a noble animal for the country which possessed it, would know no scarcity of rain. When it was known that Prince Wetsandon had given his magic elephant away, the populace were horrified and appealed to the old king. The old King was very angry but the only thing he could do was to banish his beloved son from the country at once. Prince Wetsandon, accompanied by his consort, Princess Matsi (*Madri*) and his two children left the country. Before he left the city he gave

away all his valuable property to the number of seven hundred of each kind, to the people. Such a gift is called the "Great Donations" which from one of the great sacrifices of a Bodhisat in order to perfect himself before he can attain Buddhahood. Prince Wetsandon also distributed freely, gold and silver to the people before he and his family left the city gates in his horse-drawn chariot. He had not gone very far when a group of Brahmins begged for his chariot and horse. He gladly gave them away, and made the rest of the journey on foot. He carried one of the children, a boy, whilst his wife carried the other, a girl. He and his wife suffered great hardships, even refusing the help of a neighbouring king. At last he made abode with his family in a certain forest and led the life of a hermit.

An aged Brahmin mendicant named Chuchok, by an accident of fortune, had a young but bad-tempered, scolding wife. She was obedient at first to the old man and went out every day to the village well to draw water for domestic use. The women of the village did not like her for doing so and for being such a meek and obedient wife, for their husbands wanted them to do the same, citing this girl as an example of a good wife. However the women did not like to follow this example and this gave rise to many family squabbles. Then the women came in a body and picked a quarrel with the girl as she was, to their belief, the source of their troubles. Injured by foul words and ridicule from her own species, the girl became a shrew and sent her aged husband out to beg of Prince Wetsandon his two children and to bring them back as

slaves. The old man, who could refuse his young and beautiful wife nothing, went on a long journey in search of Prince Wetsandon. After many adventures through big and small forests, he arrived at the hermitage of Prince Wetsandon whose wife was at that time away gathering fruits in the forest and was prevented by divine intervention from coming back in time. The old Brahmin beggar had already left the hermitage with her two children whom her husband had given away. There was a tragic scene of sorrow and pathos to the extreme, but subsequently subdued by the exhortations of Prince Wetsandon to his wife that great merit would accrue as a result of such a supreme sacrifice.

Now Indra the King of Gods, knowing that Prince Wetsandon had nothing left but his wife, became alarmed lest he would give her away also, to some unworthy one. He therefore went to the hermitage disguised as an aged Brahmin and asked Prince Wetsandon for his wife. Prince Wetsandon readily gave her away whereupon the King of Gods revealed himself in his true form and gave back to Prince Wetsandon his wife asking the Prince to take charge of her as a trust. This was to prevent the Prince from giving her away again. After a bestowal of blessings on Prince Wetsandon, the King of Gods departed for Heaven.

Meanwhile Chuchok the old Brahmin mendicant with the two royal children whom he ill-treated, lost his way home on the journey back. The road he took led him to the capital of Prince Wetsandon's father. The old King saw and recognized his two grandchildren and he

gave a large amount of money to the old Brahmin as the price of ransom for his two grandchildren. The old man readily accepted the money, but died later on through his gluttony. The old King whose anger had now cooled and whose paternal feelings towards his son were now revived, together with his queen and a large retinue went to Prince Wetsandon's hermitage and asked the Prince to renounce his hermit's life and return to the palace. This was successful. Prince Wetsandon and his wife came back amid the great rejoicing of the people and a sumptuous festival. Here ends the story.

Many details and incidents of the story which appear to be somewhat exaggerated are omitted if no explanatory comments are given: a thing which cannot be done in such a condensed form. The story of Prince Wetsandon is divided into 13 parts or divisions called in Thai "kan" (*Pali*—Kanda). It is a very well-known story in Thailand and influences immensely the life of the mass of the people. The story serves as an inspiration to Thai poets and artists of the old school. For the story contains noble sentiments, humour, pathos and beautiful descriptive scenes which give play to their power of imagination and artistic expression. The original story is in Pali, but there are, apart from its literal translation, many versions in paraphrase not to mention the versions in other language dialects. The various versions are written generally in a kind of prose-poem in a non-metrical rhyming pattern, which allows a free play on words in a rhetorical manner. The oldest version which dates back some 400 years is used as a subject of literary study in the

Chulalongkorn University. Many of the "kāns" or parts were written by many famous Thai poets. The book as a whole is called "Mahā Chāt" or "The Great Birth", a well known household name in the Thai language.

II. THE CUSTOMS

Every year after the traditional three month term of religious Lent and retreat of Buddhist monks expires, i.e. usually in the latter parts of October, many wats or monasteries have their own "Thet Mahā Chāt" festival. "Thet" means to preach, to give a sermon, but in this instance, to recite or to give a recitative sermon of the Mahā Chāt or the Great Birth story. The recitation may be performed during the Sat (*Pali*—Sarda) or mid-year Autumnal Festival in early October, or on other special occasions such as the raising of funds for the monastery. The reason why it is usually performed after the Lent is obvious. For during the period October to December, food especially fish and prawns, are in abundance, and the people, in particular the countryfolk have a comparative leisure time. In former days the recitation of the Mahā Chāt might be performed at a private residence in special case or in the preaching hall of the village. Nowadays the performance, as far as I know, is confined to the preaching hall within the precincts of a wat. The recitation begins early in the morning and continues sometimes to late midnight. It is the traditional belief of the people that whosoever hears the Mahā Chāt or the Great Life in its complete story, will gain great merit. I think in the old days opportunities of hearing such recitations were rare for want of the texts and monks

who were versed in such a recitation. But here in Bangkok the performance may be carried over many continuous days. The original text of the Great Birth contains a number of gathas or Pali stanzas diffused throughout the story. These stanzas may be collected in the form of one special text. They are called "Gāthā Phan" or the "Thousand Stanzas". Special attention is attached to this Gāthā Phan, as you will learn later on.

Each of the thirteen kans or parts bears a name appropriate to the episodes of the story, and at the end of each recitation there is a performance of music with a particular melody of its own. There are thirteen monks each of whom is trained for each particular kan in its recitation which has its own musical theme. Accustomed to such a melody, many of the people know, when they hear the recitation or the music played at the end of each kan, the progress of the performance. In a village where music cannot be obtained there is no obligation and if there is music and the musicians cannot play the right melody the rule is not strictly adhered to. As long as there is music and noise to mark an interval between each kan, that is all that is required by the people. Each kan must have a sponsor-owner either individually or collectively in number. It is the duty of the owner of a kan to provide a gift for the presiding monk with money and things fit for merit offering. These are called "Kreung Kan" or material things of the kan. They include monk's robes and essential requisites for monks, eatables and sweetmeats and a large quantity of fruits of the season. Any person, apart from the owner, may join in the meritmaking by

contributing money or anything else to the common offering for whichever can he prefers.

Now the recitation of the version of its whole thirteen parts takes too long to come to a conclusion. It begins early in the morning and does not come to an end before midnight. It is therefore, on special occasions, curtailed. Only the Gāthā Phan or the Pali Thousand Stanzas are recited as a whole. Such a recitation alone is not popular with the people. Although the hearing of such sacred words recited may give rise to mystical feelings, the people do not understand them and their emotions are not satisfied. The people want something more. They want to hear the voice of their favourite presiding monk, to hear his melodious voice which is familiar to them, for many are able to recite too. They want to live in love and hate, in happiness and sorrow, to be sad or to be in humour, and to raise their imaginative mind to a higher plane and ideal, which the various characters of the story manifest. Hence the reciting of the Pali Thousand Stanzas only, does not appeal to the masses. They want the recitation to be performed in full both the version and the stanzas. To recite the version alone, if I am right, is not tolerated by the people. For the contents in the version are more of a secular nature, and in fact in some parts of the story, the reciter has to display his wit and additions of his are thrown into the recitation which sometimes border on drollery and vulgarity. The orthodox people frown. As I am writing the story from its psychological point of view, it is irrelevant therefore to discuss the professed faith in its purity. The religion of the intellectual and of the mass, though identically one and the same, is not exactly

the dame. It is the emotion that counts as a driving force to the living religion. For what a people may be said to believe as shown by its behaviour, is the thing I have in mind. No religion of the people is pure without its bits and traces of older belief and temperament, more or less, absorbed, and no religion can be fully understood from the point of view of outsiders. I can now go on with my story with ease.

It has been a tradition here from the King downwards to have his eldest and beloved son, enter the Faith as a "nane" (*Pali*—*samanera*) or novice during his boyhood, and once to become temporarily a monk for at least three months of the year when he reaches his manhood at the full age of twenty years. The popular belief is that when a son becomes a novice, the gates of hell are shut for the mother of that son, and for his father when he becomes a monk. This belief is important in a sense. For it contributes a living force to the Faith, not to say to that of the wat or monastery which has been a comparative centre of learning and spiritual training up to the present day. The novice, apart from learning and observance in certain cases, is to be initiated in the recitation of the Great Birth. There is a certain kan or parts of its story which has a popular and favourite melody and one which the father of the novice wishes his son to learn and recite. When he has mastered the kan with its melody, he is invited to give a recitation of that kan at his parents' house. It is a great day for there is a gathering of the family, also of friends and neighbours to hear the recitation of the Great Birth by the novice. As a rule the novice will recite

only the kan or part he is able. This is done as a special instance and has nothing to do with the ordinary recitation I am describing. Such a performance, it is believed, is done in imitation of one episode of the Lord Buddha's life, when after having attained his Buddhahood, the Buddha came back to his country and preached a sermon to the gathering of his family and Kinsmen and recounted his last birth as Prince Wetsandon. The imitation is deemed to be a highly meritorious act, and it has been done with great psychological display by the family of the novice. They are proud of the novice's ability and the friends and neighbours join in the rejoicing. This custom is seldom done nowadays. Many Kings and Princes of the present dynasty have, in the past, entered the Faith as a novice and have performed such a recitation of the Great Birth to the monarchs, their august forefathers.

III. THE PREPARATION

Before the Thet Mahā Chāt or the recitation of the Great Birth takes place, the monks of the wat where the performance is to be held, and certain leading members of the village or other communities, discuss the date and production of the performance. When everything has been planned as to who will be the owner of which particular kan or which part of the recitation, circular invitations are made out in advance, in order that the invited persons may have ample time to prepare and arrange the presentation gifts. Sometimes more than one family or other persons combine as a single owner of their particular kan. Each owner vies

with the other for the performance. They want to be the best in this matter of merit-making. For such an occasion comes but once a year. The village which does not have the Thet Mahā Chāt performed, suffers "loss of face", and nobody, if he can, will refuse the invitation to participate in the common merit-making of their own wat in their own village.

Now suppose you accept the invitation to be one of the owners of the thirteen kans, you have to prepare and arrange both food and other essentials as offerings for the occasion. There will be bustle and merriment in the house on the eve of the recitation which is going to take place, the cooking of food and the preparing of sweetmeats both for merit-making and for feeding the people. For on such an occasion, neighbours will come to help you. It is a custom that neighbours should help one another on such occasions which require neighbourly help. You need not ask them to come, for they will come voluntarily, and etiquette requires that you return this help to them when opportunity arises. This custom has gradually disappeared in Bangkok and other progressive places where money is everything and the spirit of neighbourly help is somewhat lacking.

Usually there is a big basket made of bamboo in the shape of a huge blooming lotus flower with its many coloured-apper petals pasted on, together with other decorations. This basket is called "Krachat Yai" or 'big basket' and is used as a carrier for things offered as merit-making. It is sometimes so big that it takes a number of persons to carry in a procession from the house to the wat. If there are a

great number of things as offerings, the basket is used for food, sweetmeats and fruits, as the case may be, while the other things such as monks' robes and other requisites are put in special valuable vessels or carriers. On the actual day when the recitation is to take place and when the time arrives, all the offerings are carried in a procession with music and other performances as the case may be. You know the approximate time when the recitation of the kan of which you are the owner, is to take place. Suppose it is the first or second kan, then you have to reach the wat in time, early in the morning. If it is a later kan, say the tenth or eleventh, the time will be in the evening and you can gauge the approximate time. There will be crowds of people along the route to witness the procession. If you are a wealthy man and your offerings are mean, there will be gossip in the village and you will "lose face", which psychologically, you do not desire. If there are many wealthy owners of different kans or parts of the recitation, it will be a great day. For there will be competition among themselves as to whose offerings and procession are the best and most costly because everyone wants to "gain face" as much as possible. I speak here of the custom of the village life of the people which, essentially, is all alike. You will not be able to see such things as I describe in present-day Bangkok or in other progressive towns. Everything has changed due to the progress of time. The traditional Thet Mahā Chāt is still a living force but the aspect of the merry side is now on the wane. Many of the younger generation whose attitude of mind tends to subordinate the traditional to the novel,

view the performance of the Thet Mahā Chāt unappreciatively. Certainly, they are right in a sense. To hear such recitations take too long a time and the droning sounds are too monotonous for them to appreciate. There is nothing provided by way of contrast. This is more then they can tolerate. In order to save this old tradition from being lost altogether, a novel way is introduced in Bangkok to-day when a theatrical performance of each episode of the story is given just before the recitation takes place of each kan. This is to attract the attention of the people. It is an innovation in place of the merrier side of the custom which is not now to be seen in Bangkok. Strange to say, the Thibetan has a play depicting the life of Prince Wetsandon as an annual performance.

We will leave the procession as narrated in suspension for the time being, and describe what happens at the wat when the Thet Mahā Chāt is to take place.

IV. THE WAT AND THE PERFORMANCE

The entrance into the wat on the day of the Mahā Chāt recitation is made as a sort of gate decorated with branches of trees. This is called the "Pratu Pa" or the "Forest Gate". Along the path after passing the forest gate, a sort of ceremonial fence called "Rachawat" or King's fence (Yazanat in Burmese) is erected at intervals and decorated with flags and banana trees. Usually banana trees with bunches of ripe fruit are preferred. On reaching the preaching hall there is another forest gate. Sometimes the

path in question is made in a sort of maze or labyrinth in order to confuse those who have to pass along the passage. This maze is called "Khao Wongkot", the name of the mountain where Prince Wetsandon had his hermitage. In the preaching hall every post is decorated with a banana tree or sometimes with a sugar cane tree. There hang in some preaching halls thirteen paintings depicting the life of Prince Wetsandon as narrated in the thirteen kans or parts. These may be profitably compared to those of the pictures of the Way of the Cross as seen in the Roman Catholic Church. In some places, the preaching hall is hung all over with homemade toys made of interlaced leaves and split bamboo or of wood, in the shape of birds, fish, etc. They are sometimes painted. These toys are distributed to the children after the recitation ends. There are also small flags in various colours to the number of one thousand, which is equal to the Gāthā Phan or the Thousand Stanzas.

Now we can go on which the description of the procession which we left off in the last chapter. Arriving at the wat the procession passes the Forest Gate into the path leading to the preaching hall. If the path is made into a maze there will certainly be fun when get into a blind passage and become confused. You may even have to pay a fee to the guide if you are in a hurry to reach the preaching hall. When the procession arrives at the preaching hall, and if the preceding kan or part is still in progress, it means that you are before time. You will have to wait outside until the preceding kan comes to an end. Then you carry all your offerings to their proper place in the preaching hall, a place

in front of the preaching canopy. There is bustle and ado during such times when the offerings of the preceding kan which has ended, are taken out and the offerings of the next kan are carried in. Some of the people who have heard the recitation will come out and the new audience will go in. There is music marking the end of a kan and there is more music marking the beginning of another kan. As already described, there are small coloured flags equal to the number of a thousand of the Gāthā Phan. The number of these thousand gathas is distributed unevenly among the thirteen kans. Suppose your kan has, say 80 gathas or stanzas then you have 80 flags sticking in rows on both sides of the place where the offerings are placed. Besides the small flags, there are also small beeswax candles equal in number to that of the small flags. There are flowers for offering too. In some cases when there is a special kan in which the whole Gāthā Phan or the Thousand Stanzas are recited alone as a whole, the owner of such a kan has flowers, usually lotus flowers and small candles to the number of a thousand, as an offering. In former days lotus flowers grew wild in certain parts of the country. There is a place some thirty miles up the Menam Chao Phya River where lotus were in abundance during the season. This was the place where the Kings obtained their lotus flowers for offering purposes. That place is now known as Prathum Thani (*Pali* - Paduma Dhani) or commonly called "Muang Prathum", the Lotus Town.

Now when the preaching or recitation is to begin, candles and incense sticks as provided, will be lit, and an act of worship is made to the Buddhist Three Gems, i.e.

the Buddha, his Law and his Body of the Clergy or Sangha. The presiding monk will pronounce an act of faith and give the usual five observances, which acceptance is binding to the receiver for at least that whole day and night. After such rite has been performed, the preaching or recitation may then begin.

As has already been said, the first kan or part starts early in the morning. It has been the custom that the presiding monk must be the abbot of the wat where the recitation takes place. Apart from the usual offering there must also be offered, a boiled pig's head complete with its four legs and tail, and a "Bai Sri Pak Cham", a sort of ritual-boiled rice in a big earthen bowl. Nobody can give me a reasonable explanation of this offering, except that it is merely a tradition and a custom. Here I venture a conjecture. It is a custom among well-to-do people to have a "Bai Sri" and a boiled pig's head, as an offering to the guardian spirit or nats in Burmese of the place, when an important undertaking is to be carried out and a successful issue is desired. This has nothing to do with Buddhism but is a survival of the belief of primitive days. The guardian spirit of the place where an important undertaking is to take place must be propitiated beforehand. The boiled pig's head with the four legs and the tail is nothing but a supposedly whole pig. It is easy to hoodwink the unseen, if you think so. Now you will understand why the abbot is the first person to perform the recitation for the abbot himself is the tangible guardian of the place.

The recitation of the first kan takes place early in the morning, therefore the congregation are few in number, with the exception of the owner of the kan and his party,

and a few old people who wish for merit. There will gradually be more people in the congregation in the succeeding kans until the fifth kan describing the scene of Chuchok, the aged Brahmin mendicant and his shrew, the young and beautiful wife. There is much drollery and humour which naturally attracts the people. If the reciting monk is well-known for his wit and humour, the place is packed to the utmost, for people from far and near, come to hear the recitation. The young men will ask for encores and more money contributions will willingly be made by the congregation. We call such monetary offering "Tit Thian Kan Thet" or the "sticking (of money) for the reciting kan to the candle": the custom of sticking money to a big beeswax candle provided for the purpose. In former days such recitations with additional of drollery and humour in some cases overstepped the limits of modesty and were distasteful to cultured minds. Through the progress of time such things are now seldom to be found, for moral ideas have changed, but the need of humour is still there with the folk. While here in Bangkok the recitation in some wats has the tendency to be more prosaic and has become monotonous thus depriving much of its psychological value of display and ceremony which the mind needs as well.

After the recitation ends with the thirteenth kan, there is a supplementary kan giving an exposition of the "Four Noble Truths" as preached by the Lord Buddha after he had recounted his last "Great Birth" to the audience. The preaching of the "Four Noble Truths" is usually done on the next day after the recitation and may be preached by one, two or four monks in the manner of a dialogue, if required. Here ends a concise description of the Thet Maha Chāt.

There is a monograph "A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Thet Maha Ch'at" by G.E. Gerini, Bangkok 1892 A.D. which gives the story in its academic aspect. In the North and North Eastern Regions of Thailand and also in the Laos Kingdom, the Thet Mahā Chāt forms an important and popular Festival. The ceremony is of the same pattern but with its own peculiarity due to various forces, geographically, historically, and culturally. I am told that the Shans have the Thet Mahā Chāt also, but so far as I know, there is no article written in English relating to this ceremony. There are traces probably of Mahayanism influence in certain details of the Thet Mahā Chāt Festival and Ceremony but for want of available data, I am compelled with regret to leave out though an important one, as to the original development of the Thet Mahā Chāt.

By courtesy of the Burma Research Society, Rangoon.

