

Lay And Monastic Wisdom: Roles, Expectations, And Exemplars in Suttas Vs. Jātaka Narratives

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This article analyses the role-based construction of 'wisdom' in early Buddhist literature through the lens of prescriptive *sutta* discourse and exemplary *Jātaka* storytelling. With respect to the lay and monastic positions as moral and cognitive exemplars, how do the contrasts between doctrinal education and narrative pedagogy construct social visions, what kinds of wisdom are communicated, and how are these communicated? The *suttas* articulate wisdom (*paññā*) as free discernment of insight, and the monastic exemplars, especially the Buddha and the accomplished disciples, through doctrinal authority and the promise of emancipation, articulate wisdom. The norm of monastic life is the consistent, enduring crucible for the cultivation of this insight and, as her teachings' *sutta*' discretion speaks, of virtue, generosity, stewardship, and lay wisdom' discrimination-making questions. These portrayals suggest the prevailing ideal of genuine, valuable wisdom. Domestic life needs the progress of the *Saṅgha*. The Zen of this life is interdependent, oriented toward support.

In contrast, the *Jātaka* narratives emphasise the socially constructive face of the virtue of wisdom, a combination of the social and the psychological, best illustrated by the virtues of prudence, patience, foresight, truthful speech, and a strategically compassionate approach to conflict, scarcity, and political power. The Bodhisattva, as a king, minister, merchant, parent, ascetic, and even as an animal, makes wisdom role-flexibly and publicly definable, 'proving' itself through ethical deeds and public consequences rather than through doctrinal exposition. The *Jātaka* narratives often emphasize the point that exemplary wisdom can and must be exercised within worldly life and often through good governance, the vertical and horizontal reconnection of social and political spheres, and the morally creative acts of 'repairing' fractured or broken relationships. The textual culture of early Buddhism, in dialogue with these two genres, demonstrates a dual pedagogy. On the one hand, the *Jātakas* nurture the ethical intelligence of the community by embedding wisdom in the ordinary and the civic, whereas the *suttas*, through a prioritization of a particular kind of wisdom, seek to produce transformative insight that ultimately liberates. Collectively, they articulate a social ethic of interdependence in which monastic power and lay agency are separate yet complement and strengthen one another, much like distinct yet interrelated pathways to Buddhist moral formation.

Keywords: Lay–Lay-monastic roles, *Paññā* (wisdom), *Sutta* discourse, *Jātaka* narratives. Ethical exemplars

Introduction

Wisdom is among the most highly emphasised virtues in the Buddhist canon. However, it is not presented as a singular, homogeneous ideal. This raises the question of how Buddhist literature differentiates the portrayal of wisdom for laypersons and monastics. More specifically, what types of understanding are anticipated from practitioners with the work, familial, and civic responsibilities of a householder as opposed to those commanded of a renunciant, who is committed to the discipline of focused, contemplative training? This question is fundamental because the early Buddhist community was not monastic; it relied on lay patrons to support renunciants. This is evident in the literature stemming from this period. Reading across roles for "wisdom" articulates not just the spiritual ideal but also the social ideal: who is granted the authority to know, what testimony of knowledge is sufficient, and how disparate audiences are meant to be persuaded regarding the path.

A fundamental understanding comes from comparing the two major types of Buddhist literature: the *suttas* and the *Jātakas*. The *suttas* are mostly doctrinal and dialogical: they depict the Buddha and one of his disciples in teaching encounters, scripting the correct view, practice, and steps in the context of an *aria* (a liberation goal). Here, wisdom involves discerning

reality and cultivating it through ethical conduct, meditation, and reflection. Jātakas, in contrast, work through narrative and social embedding. They depict memorable situations (court conflicts, friendship dilemmas, generous acts under scarcity, power-juxtaposed risk) and present direct moral exemplars. Rather than using systematic exposition, the Jātakas make wisdom visible through conduct and entail consequences in settings shaped by social life.

This text suggests that the difference between these genres extends beyond stylistic approaches to normative aspects as well. Within the Suttas, wisdom is often framed as liberative insight, with a monastic emphasis, yet still providing the layperson with the opportunity to engage meaningfully through ethical rightness, penetrating questions, and supportive practice. By contrast, Jātakas more frequently represent wisdom as a socially constructive virtue and the ethics of pragmatism, which includes patience, foresight, truthful speech, and a morally integrated, merciful strategy, embodied by role-position flexible exemplars who have come to be viewed as a source of authority through having successfully aligned their moral discourses and actions with the world. Collectively, these representations advocate a dual pedagogy to be enunciated. One would be directed to a renunciant's transformative and ultimate emancipatory vision, and the other to the elaboration of ethical sophistication and the moral imagining of the varied existences of laity.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses a conceptual framework that treats "wisdom" not as a single abstract virtue but as a cluster of capacities whose meaning shifts with literary genre, social role, and communicative purpose. Across both *sutta* and *Jātaka* corpora, the primary term for wisdom is **paññā**, which can be approached here as *discernment*, the ability to see clearly what is wholesome and unwholesome, what leads to harm or welfare, and, in more explicitly soteriological contexts, what conduces to liberation. Alongside **paññā** stands **ñāṇa**, "knowledge," which signals a more definite mode of knowing: realization, comprehension, or certainty, often expressed as knowing things "as they really are." While **paññā** and **ñāṇa** can overlap, distinguishing them helps track a recurring contrast: *suttas* frequently privilege wisdom as insight grounded in contemplative seeing, whereas *Jātakas* often dramatize wisdom as knowing expressed through action and consequence. A third key term, **kusala** ("skillful/wholesome"), frames wisdom in ethical and practical terms: wise discernment is what reliably selects and sustains beneficial intentions, speech, and conduct. Finally, **upāya** (broadly "skillful means/strategy") is used here as a heuristic for the pragmatic dimension of wisdom context-sensitive judgment, adaptability, and the capacity to act effectively without abandoning moral constraints. Even where the term itself is not foregrounded, the logic of strategic, compassionate, and situation-aware action is central to many narrative portrayals of wisdom.

To analyse how wisdom is distributed and valued, the framework also specifies roles and expectations as socially organised sets of duties and permissions. The basic social identities in view are the **householder** and the **renunciant** (monk or nun). These identities carry distinct moral obligations: householders are typically oriented toward the **precepts**, right livelihood, family and civic responsibilities, and the cultivation of generosity and support for religious communities; renunciants are shaped by the **Vinaya**, a stricter discipline emphasising restraint, celibacy, simplicity, and sustained training. The point is not to treat these as airtight categories but to examine how texts narrate the *fit* between a role and a kind of wisdom what each life is portrayed as making easier, more complicated, or exemplary.

words Wisdom Ideals in the Suttas

In the *suttas*, wisdom is most consistently framed as a liberative capacity, and the monastic life appears as its default setting and primary proof. **Paññā** is repeatedly linked to the core diagnostic and explanatory structures of early Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the marks of existence impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Wisdom is not merely intellectual assent but a transformative discernment that "sees" how craving and ignorance sustain dukkha and how the cessation of these conditions opens to release. Accordingly, the *suttas* pair wisdom with a disciplined path of practice: ethical restraint grounds the mind, meditation stabilises and clarifies attention, and right view orients experience toward insight rather than grasping. Monastic expectations follow from this soteriological framing. Renunciation reduces entanglement in acquisition and identity; Vinaya discipline cultivates restraint and heedfulness; and contemplative training is treated as a sustained craft. Monastics are also positioned as custodians of the teaching, carrying an explicit pedagogical role as transmitters, interpreters, and models of the path.

Yet the suttas do not exclude lay wisdom; instead, they portray it as empowered within certain limits. Household wisdom is often expressed through a constellation of virtues suited to the social world: confidence in the teaching, reliable ethical conduct, generosity, and discernment in livelihood and relationships. Lay disciples are praised for recognising wholesome priorities, supporting the Saṅgha, and applying the Dhamma amid domestic obligations. Some narratives highlight lay figures who ask incisive questions, press for clarification, and display ethical clarity in situations involving wealth, power, or family responsibility. Such portrayals grant laypeople meaningful agency: they are not passive recipients but active participants in inquiry and practice. At the same time, a boundary logic recurs. Lay life is frequently described as a potent foundation for merit, virtue, and understanding, but complete liberation is commonly associated with the renunciant trajectory. Even when advanced attainment is attributed to laypersons, the narrative tone often remains careful, implicitly reaffirming that the monastic form is the normative container for the highest realisation.

These role differences are reinforced through pedagogical dynamics. Most suttas stage teaching as a flow from the Buddha or senior monastics to lay audiences: instruction, correction of wrong views, and guidance in practice. However, the tradition also preserves meaningful exceptions moments where laypeople offer insight, pose questions that sharpen the teaching, or correct misunderstandings. Precisely because these reversals are relatively rare, they function as significant signals: wisdom is not owned by status alone, even if the suttas tend to organise its fullest expression around monastic discipline and renunciation.

Wisdom Ideals in Jātaka Narratives

In Jātaka narratives, “wisdom” is most often rendered not as a technical doctrine to be mastered but as moral intelligence enacted in the thick of social life. The stories repeatedly stage situations where the right course of action is uncertain, risky, or costly, and wisdom appears as the capacity to navigate these pressures without surrendering ethical integrity. Rather than foregrounding analytical exposition, Jātakas make wisdom visible through plot: practical reasoning that anticipates consequences, foresight that recognises danger before it matures, diplomacy that prevents escalation, patience that refuses reactive violence, and even cleverness that outmanoeuvres deceit while remaining anchored in non-harm. The ethical world of the Jātakas is rarely idealised. Characters face betrayal by friends, scarcity and poverty, volatile kingship, family conflict, and the temptations of status and wealth. Within this landscape, wisdom is measured by conduct under stress, how one speaks when provoked, what one chooses when survival or advantage is at stake, and whether compassion can be preserved amid competition. The result is an emphasis on “worldly effectiveness” that does not reduce wisdom to mere success: the wise act is effective precisely because it remains morally sound, producing outcomes that restore trust, limit harm, or secure long-term welfare.

A distinctive feature of Jātaka ethics is the fluidity of the central exemplar. The Bodhisatta is not fixed as a monastic teacher but appears across a broad spectrum of identities: layman and ascetic, minister and king, merchant and parent, and even animal figures who embody discernment more clearly than humans around them. This shifting form functions as a narrative argument: wisdom is adaptable across social stations, and moral excellence is not restricted to one institutional identity. A king may need restraint more than brilliance; a minister may need courageous honesty more than obedience; a householder may need generosity more than accumulation. Even animal births underline the same point by stripping away formal authority and making wisdom legible through action alone. Renunciation is frequently honoured—ascetic figures can appear as moral beacons, and withdrawal from greed and violence is often praised—but it is not always required for narrative resolution. Many stories end not with leaving the world but with transforming one’s way of inhabiting it: choosing just governance over tyranny, truthful speech over manipulation, and generosity over hoarding.

Because of this design, Jātakas tend to build a lay-centered moral economy. They spotlight household virtues friendship, reciprocity, gratitude, hospitality, and giving—as core sites where wisdom is cultivated and tested. They also develop a sustained ethic of power: kingship becomes a laboratory for wisdom expressed as restraint, fairness, and justice, where the highest skill is governing without cruelty and hearing counsel without pride. The audience effect is crucial: these stories function as public moral education, embedding wisdom in scenarios familiar to community life and making lay exemplars admirable, memorable, and imitable. In doing so, the Jātakas broaden the social imagination of Buddhist

wisdom, presenting it as a virtue that can be practised and publicly recognised within the ordinary roles that most people inhabit.

Direct Comparison: Roles, Expectations, Exemplars

A direct comparison of suttas and Jātaka narratives shows that the two genres do not merely describe the same “wisdom” in different literary styles; they frequently prioritise different criteria for what wisdom is, who can embody it, and how it is recognised. In the suttas, wisdom is most centrally the insight that uproots ignorance and reorients life toward liberation. Mini-evidence for this lies in the way sutta scenes repeatedly return to explanatory frameworks—impermanence, dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths—and present wisdom as a seeing that dissolves craving and wrong view. In Jātakas, by contrast, wisdom is most often virtue-informed practical intelligence: the capacity to act rightly and effectively amid worldly constraints, producing flourishing, social harmony, and karmically wholesome outcomes. Mini-evidence appears in narrative resolutions where patience prevents violence, truthful speech repairs trust, and foresight averts disaster; wisdom is judged by what it accomplishes without moral compromise.

These different definitions shape who is most regularly depicted as wise. Suttas typically elevate the Buddha, arahants, and trained monastics as primary models because the standard for wisdom is transformative insight validated by disciplined practice and doctrinal clarity. Lay exemplars indeed appear sharp questioners, generous patrons, morally discerning householders—but they are often framed as participants within a teaching economy rather than as the default authorities. Jātakas invert that emphasis through a polymorphic exemplar: the Bodhisatta appears as king, minister, merchant, parent, ascetic, or animal, demonstrating that wisdom can inhabit many forms of life. Mini-evidence here is structural: the stories do not require formal renunciant status for the exemplar to be credible; credibility arises from ethical action, strategic restraint, and outcomes that benefit others.

Expectations for each role follow accordingly. In suttas, monastics are expected to embody strict discipline, sustained meditative development, and a teaching or custodial responsibility toward the Dhamma. Laypeople are commonly guided toward ethical livelihood, generosity, support of the Sangha, and gradual training that fits household obligations—an arrangement that affirms lay agency while marking the monastic vocation as the paradigmatic context for the highest attainment. In Jātakas, lay figures are often granted stronger ethical agency: wisdom proves itself through relationships, reciprocity, and the challenges of power. The ascetic ideal still appears and is respected. Still, the stories frequently validate wise action within society, suggesting that moral excellence can be enacted through good governance, responsible householding, and courageous integrity rather than through withdrawal alone.

Conclusion

This comparison of suttas and Jātaka narratives shows that early Buddhist literature sustains more than one authoritative idiom of wisdom, shaped by genre, audience, and social function. In the suttas, wisdom is most consistently prioritised as liberating insight: discernment that penetrates the conditions of suffering and loosens the grip of ignorance, craving, and wrong view. Because this form of wisdom is presented as the culmination of sustained ethical restraint, meditative cultivation, and doctrinal clarity, monastic life becomes the central institutional location for its fullest expression. Laypeople appear in these texts as genuine participants in wisdom—capable of ethical discrimination, incisive questioning, and serious practice yet the overall framing often preserves a hierarchy of spiritual specialisation in which renunciation and disciplined training remain the normative pathway toward the highest realisation.

Jātakas, by contrast, dramatise wisdom as virtuous competence enacted across social roles. The wise person is not primarily recognised by their ability to articulate doctrine but by their capacity to act skillfully and compassionately in complex circumstances: sustaining patience under provocation, using foresight to prevent harm, speaking truthfully despite risk, and choosing generosity over self-interest. Through the Bodhisatta’s role-fluid appearances—as king, minister, householder, ascetic, or even animal Jātakas make wisdom publicly legible and widely imitable. They depict moral excellence as something that can be practised within the ordinary structures of family, friendship, livelihood, and

governance. In doing so, they render lay exemplars more prominent and accessible, and they affirm that ethical intelligence in the world is itself a serious religious achievement, even when it does not culminate narratively in renunciation.

What this comparison reveals is not a contradiction between two competing visions of Buddhist wisdom, but a set of complementary pedagogies working in tandem within Buddhist textual culture. The suttas function as a normative discourse of liberation, clarifying the path and authorising wisdom through transformative insight and disciplined practice. The Jātakas function as a moral narrative pedagogy, cultivating communal virtues and social discernment by embedding wisdom in recognisable human dilemmas. Together they map a moral ecology in which monastic authority and lay agency are distinct yet mutually reinforcing: renunciants model the trajectory toward release and safeguard doctrinal clarity, while householders model how wisdom can govern speech, power, and relationships in everyday life. Read side by side, these genres broaden the meaning of wisdom without diluting it, showing how Buddhist ideals address both ultimate liberation and the ethical craft of living well with others.

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