Academic Article

Creative Media for Moral Drama: An Analysis of the Nine Virtues Reflected in the *Vessantara Jataka*

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Abstract

This article the reflection of nine basic virtues as depicted in the *Vessantara Jataka* story, a revered Buddhist literary work known for its moral significance. The primary objective is to identify and analyze each of the nine virtues embodied within the story. We propose guidelines for applying these virtues through a moral drama, a creative medium intended to promote ethics and inspire audiences. For instance, the character of *Chuchok* serves as a catalyst for *Dana Paramita* (the perfection of giving), enabling Prince Vessantara's acts of generosity to culminate in *Bodhiñana* (enlightenment knowledge). This journey ultimately leads to the highest level of perfection in his tenth life, achieving enlightenment in the realm of giving before his final birth as the Lord Buddha.

Keywords: Nine basic virtues, *Vessantara Jataka*, Creative media, Moral drama

Introduction

The *Vessantara Jataka* is an invaluable literary work, widely recognized as a profound narrative of the *Bodhisattva*'s acts of *Dana Paramita* (the perfection of giving)(Appleton, 2016). Deeply rooted in the culture and spirituality of Buddhist communities worldwide, it serves as a repository of wisdom, encompassing nine fundamental virtues: giving, morality, patience, diligence, loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, truthfulness, and wisdom (Huxley, 1996). These virtues transcend their literary context and function as universal principles for guiding one's life. Through a critical reflection and analysis of this creative presentation, these virtues are re-introduced to society, embodying a way of life aligned with the moral values inherent in human conscience.

In this era of rapid change, contemporary youth primarily engage with social media and online communities, which facilitate swift information retrieval and dissemination. Consequently, those virtues become increasingly crucial, serving as a mental anchor that enables individuals, particularly youth, to navigate life with mindfulness and wisdom. The virtues gleaned from the analysis and reflection of the *Vessantara Jataka* narrative provide invaluable lessons that can be applied to personal development, conscious awareness, and the fostering of a more virtuous society, all guided by these nine fundamental principles.

The nine basic virtues are essential principles that shape individuals into virtuous, high-quality citizens (Pensook, 2010). This process begins with the diligent pursuit of knowledge and learning, which paves the way for self-development and creativity. Developing a life plan establishes a foundation of integrity and trustworthiness within the community. Discipline and loyalty to regulations, alongside a respectful and humble demeanor toward parents, teachers, and benefactors, are also of high priority. Maintaining personal physical and mental health reflects a mindful and responsible approach to oneself. Unity fosters a powerful force that continuously strengthens and enriches the society. Meanwhile, sympathy and a spirit of

sacrifice contribute to the common good. Gratitude and appreciation exemplify benevolence and recognition of those who have shown kindness. These virtues are not merely guidelines for living but also tools for constructing a peaceful and prosperous society. They can be analyzed and integrated with the *Vessantara Jataka* narrative, which represents them through progressively advanced forms of artistic expression.

A theatrical performance of the *Vessantara Jataka*, presented as a morality play, offers a platform for analyzing patterns of social conduct. This analysis incorporates the nine basic virtues into the performance to guide the perspectives, attitudes, and cognitive frameworks of both general and young audiences. By analytically adapting the *Vessantara Jataka* storyline, the performance aims to highlight the significance and value of each virtue. Additionally, it demonstrates methods for applying these virtues in the creation of contemporary morality plays that resonate with audiences and inspire positive social transformation.

Exploring the Nine Basic Virtues

The nine basic virtues are fundamental principles that cultivate positive attitudes among Thai people, promoting kindness, mutual support, and loyalty to rules and responsibilities (Pensook, 2010). These virtues enhance a healthy, peaceful, and progressive society.

1. Diligence: Having perseverance in carrying out one's commitments and a dedication to persistent, earnest effort in one's duties - This involves dedication, perseverance, and resilience in the face of obstacles, along with a genuine passion for one's work.

Figure 1 *Chuchok, Queen Maddi, Chali and Kanha*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

Figure 2 *Queen Maddi, Chali and Kanha*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

2. Frugality: Living a simple and modest life, being mindful of one's financial situation - This includes thoughtful spending and purchasing, practicing of saving, and using resources wisely.

Figure 3 *Prince Vessantara accepting his fate and departing to live in the forest*



Note. Adapted from Faculty of Liberal Arts, Yala Rajabhat University. (2018, October 26). *Maha Vessantara Jataka*. Thai Language Program. https://human.yru.ac.th/thai_ba/page/247

3. Honesty: Upholding integrity in professional conduct, including punctuality and the fulfillment of duties - This signifies sincerity, impartiality, and absence from deceit.

Figure 4 *Queen Maddi, Chali and Kanha*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

Figure 5 *Prince Vessantara, Queen Maddi, Chali and Kanha,*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

4. Discipline: Adhering faithfully to the rules and regulations of educational institutions, organizations, society, and the nation - This encompasses a willingness to comply with established norms and self-discipline.

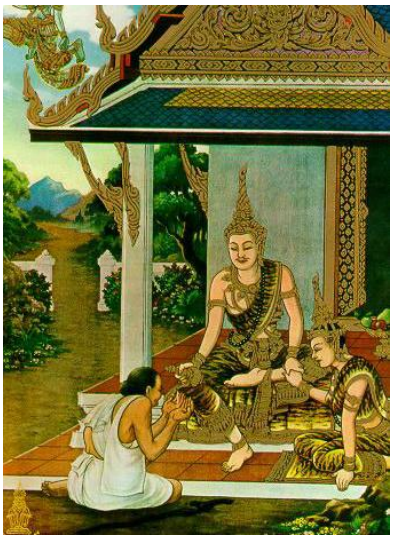
Figure 6 *Prince Vessantara bestowing the elephant, Paccaya-nak, upon the eight Brahmins from Kalinga*



Note. Adapted from Norkaew Phraputthasasana. (2017). *Maha Vessantara Jataka*. Retrieved from https://www.norkaew.net/พระพุทธศาสนา/ประเพณีไทย/ฮีตสิบสอง/เดือนสี่-บุญผะเหวด.html

5. Politeness: Demonstrating humility and respect toward others - This comprises having good manners, avoiding aggression or conflict, and behaving in accordance with cultural norms.

Figure 7 *Indra disguising himself as a Brahmin to ask for Princess Maddi*



Note. Adapted from Norkaew Phraputthasasana. (2017). *Maha Vessantara Jataka*. Retrieved from https://www.norkaew.net/พระพุทธศาสนา/ประเพณีไทย/ฮีตสิบสอง/เดือนสี่-บุญผะเหวด.html

6. Cleanliness: Maintaining personal hygiene, clean living spaces, and healthy environment – This involves a clear and positive mind, devoid of negativity, thereby creating a comfortable atmosphere for oneself and others.

Figure 8 *Queen Maddi attending to Prince Vessantara and caring for Kanha and Jali*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

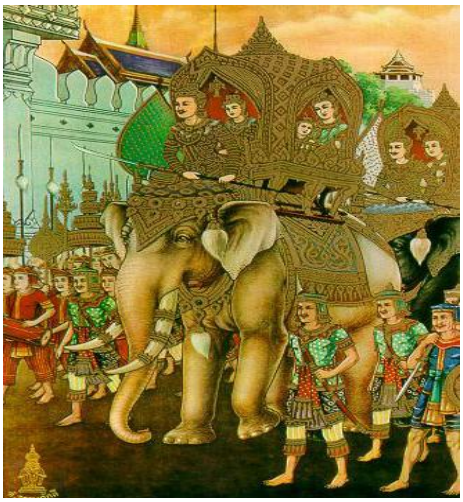
Figure 9 *Queen Maddi caring for Kanha and Jali.*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

7. Unity: Being open-minded and receptive to others' opinions. This involves understanding one's role as both a leader and a follower, collaborating to achieve common goals, and resolving problems peacefully while respecting diversity.

Figure 10 *The return of the Six Royals to Sibi City*



Note. Adapted from Norkaew Phraputthasasana. (2017). *Maha Vessantara Jataka.* Retrieved from https://www.norkaew.net/พระพุทธศาสนา/ประเพณีไทย/ฮีตสิบสอง/เดือนสี่-บุญผะเหวด.html

8. Generosity: Being a giver and having the will to help others. This covers sharing, sacrificing personal comfort for the benefit of others, and maintaining empathy. It also refers to volunteering time, effort, and knowledge to address community needs and bring about positive change.

Figure 11 *Prince Vessantara bestowing Kanha and Jali upon Jujaka.*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

9. Gratitude: Recognizing and valuing the kindness and support of benefactors, such as parents and teachers. This involves expressing appreciation through actions, words, and sincere remembrance.

Figure 12 *Prince Vessantara bestowing Kanha and Jali upon Jujaka.*



Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

Analysis of the Nine Basic Virtues in the *Vassantara Jataka* Moral Drama

The *Vessantara Jataka* moral drama can be analyzed through its performance patterns, which are based on literature. Information for comparison is obtained by applying each virtue to the narrative, thereby allowing viewers to perceive and examine them during the performance. The *Vessantara Jataka*, which consists of 13 cantos (Panniam, 2013), can be summarized and analyzed as follows:

1. Diligence is a fundamental virtue, representing persistence and committed effort toward the attainment of goals. *Vessantara Jataka* portrays this virtue through contrasting characters. In the *"Chuchok"* canto, the Brahmin couple demonstrates diligence in their work, whereas *Chuchok* himself is depicted as a lazy freeloader who takes advantage of their efforts. This contrast sets the stage for the conflict arising from his greed and lack of personal effort. In the "*Vanapravesa*" canto, *Queen Maddi* embodies true diligence. She faithfully serves her husband, *Prince Vessantara*, cares for their children (*Chali and Kanha*), and tirelessly gathers fruits from the forest to sustain her family during their exile. Her actions highlight diligence as a virtue of self-sacrifice and dedication to family.

2. Frugality is the practice of avoiding wasteful spending and making wise use of resources. This virtue is illustrated in the "*Vanapravesa*" canto. Despite his royal background, *Prince Vessantara* lives a simple, non- extravagant life in the forest. He accepts his exile with contentment and demonstrates the ability to live prudently, prioritizing needs over desires. This highlights that frugality extends beyond financial management, encompassing the contentment with living a simple life and making mindful choices.

3. Integrity: an essential component of societal unity, is powerfully demonstrated in the "*Maddi*" canto. *Queen Maddi*'s unwavering loyalty to her husband, *Prince Vessantara*, serves as a testament to her steadfast adherence to her moral principles. Even in the midst of profound suffering and hardship, her devotion remains absolute. Her unwavering commitment strongly signifies an example of marital loyalty and moral fortitude.

4. Discipline is crucial for maintaining both individual conduct and societal order. This virtue is most evident in the "*Himavanta*" canto. Following the public outrage over *Vessantara*'s donation of the felicitous white elephant, *King Sanjaya* prioritizes public peace. He consents to the populace's demands by exiling his own son. This difficult decision demonstrates the king's commitment to social discipline, even at the cost of personal and familial bonds, and underscores the importance of a ruler's duty to the people.

5. Politeness represents gentility and respect. In the "*Sakka*" canto, *Lord Indra* appears in the guise of a Brahmin and addresses *Prince Vessantara* with profound deference. This act of humility from a celestial being exemplifies the virtue of politeness, showing that true respect and good manners are virtues that transcend social hierarchy.

6. Cleanliness is a virtue that reflects carefulness and order. In the "*Maddi*" canto, *Queen Maddi*'s diligent care extends to the physical well-being of her family. She meticulously tends to *Prince Vessantara* and their children, ensuring a clean and orderly environment. Her actions serve as a reminder of the significance of cleanliness in sustaining not only physical health but also family and social harmony.

7. Harmony is beautifully illustrated in the "*Nagara*" canto. The citizens of Sivi, who once demanded *Prince Vessantara*'s exile, later unite to request his return. This collective action is a powerful representation of unity and reconciliation. It shows how people can overcome past conflicts to restore peace and prosperity, thereby highlighting the essential role of harmony in sustaining a thriving society.

8. Generosity, the act of giving without expectation, is vividly illustrated in the "*Danakanda*" canto. Prince *Vessantara*'s magnanimity, extending to giving away all of his possessions and even his children, underscores the ultimate virtue of altruism. This act of profound generosity is depicted as a factor ultimately leading to his future attainment of Buddhahood, symbolizing the highest form of self-sacrifice.

9. Gratitude, the recognition and reciprocation of kindness, is exemplified in the "*Kumara*" canto. *Chali*, *Prince Vessantara*'s son, demonstrates a profound sense of gratitude by accepting his fate and caring for his younger sister, *Kanha*. Despite the hardship of being given away, his actions reflect a deep-seated appreciation for his father's decisions and embody love and compassion toward his siblings.

Table 1 *Synthesis and Dramatic Analysis of the Nine Basic Virtues in the Vessantara Jataka Cantos"*

Virtue	Corresponding Canto / Character	Dramatic Analysis & Moral Reflection
1. Diligence	"Chuchok" & "Vanapravesa" Cantos (Queen Maddi)	Queen Maddi tirelessly gathers fruits in the forest to sustain her family, embodying self-sacrifice and unwavering dedication to her household. In contrast, Chuchok represents sloth and exploitation.
2. Frugality	"Vanapravesa" Canto (Prince Vessantara)	Despite his royal lineage, Prince Vessantara adapts contentedly to a humble ascetic life in the wilderness, prioritizing essential spiritual needs over luxury.
3. Integrity	"Maddi" Canto (Queen Maddi)	Queen Maddi's absolute loyalty and truthfulness to her husband during severe hardship demonstrate profound moral fortitude and devotion.
4. Discipline	"Himavanta" Canto (King Sanjaya)	King Sanjaya prioritizes state order and societal peace by upholding civil demands over personal paternal affection, banishing his own son for the greater good.

Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

Table 1 (continue) *Synthesis and Dramatic Analysis of the Nine Basic Virtues in the Vessantara Jataka Cantos"*

Virtue	Corresponding Canto / Character	Dramatic Analysis & Moral Reflection
5. Politeness	"Sakka" Canto (Lord Indra)	Lord Indra disguised as a humble Brahmin addresses Prince Vessantara with utmost reverence, illustrating that genuine respect transcends social and celestial hierarchies.
6. Cleanliness	"Maddi" Canto (Queen Maddi)	Meticulous physical care of the hermitage and children reflects a harmonious, disciplined environment that fosters mental purity and spiritual clarity.
7. Harmony	"Nagara" Canto (Citizens of Sivi)	The reconciliation between Prince Vessantara and the kingdom highlights how collective understanding, forgiveness, and unity restore societal peace and prosperity.
8. Generosity	"Danakanda" Canto (Prince Vessantara)	Giving away royal possessions and family members represents supreme altruism and absolute self-sacrifice required for attaining Bodhiñana (enlightenment).
9. Gratitude	"Kumara" Canto (Prince Chali & Princess Kanha)	Prince Chali willingly accepts his hardship out of filial devotion, protecting his younger sister and honoring his father's sacred spiritual vow.

Note. from Bunyaphithak et al. (2024)

Application of the Nine Basic Virtues in Daily Life

The *Vessantara Jataka* is a valuable literary work for understanding morality, with the nine basic virtues being especially applicable to daily life. (Huxley, 1996) This section provides a revised overview of these virtues, simplified for broader accessibility and improved for academic clarity. (Pensook, 2010).

1. Diligence

Diligence is a fundamental quality for success, characterized by perseverance—the unwavering commitment to a task, where one continues to push forward consistently despite obstacles. It provides the fortitude to persist even in the face of exhaustion and disappointment. Diligence also involves focused determination, allowing one to concentrate fully on the task at hand. Furthermore, it entails taking ownership of one's responsibilities and executing them to the best of- one's ability. Finally, diligence is fueled by an insatiable curiosity—a thirst for knowledge that enhances continuous learning and personal growth.

Application: Practicing diligence in work and study requires setting clear goals, persevering through challenges, and cultivating oneself to achieve proficiency in one's duties.

2. Frugality

Frugality is essential for building long-term financial security. It comprises using all resources—whether money or belongings—wisely and thoughtfully, without extravagance. Practicing frugality requires appreciating the worth of one's possessions and ensuring they yield maximum benefit. Frugality also encompasses prudent spending, consistent saving, maximizing the use of current possessions, and strategically investing for future goals. Developing a budget is a key discipline for optimizing spending and attaining the best possible financial outcomes.

Application: Applying frugality in daily life means using available resources efficiently, avoiding unnecessary or wasteful spending, and carefully considering the necessity and benefits before making any purchase.

3. Integrity

Integrity is a fundamental virtue, representing honesty with oneself and others in all duties. This honesty is the foundation for building trust and credibility. Integrity extends beyond simply not lying and it involves being genuine in the expression of thoughts, feelings, and intentions, without pretense or deception. Keeping one's word and fulfilling promises demonstrates reliability. It also means being true to oneself, embracing both strengths and shortcomings, and acting in accordance with sound principles. Integrity ensures that one never cuts corners or engages in fraud for personal gain.

Application: Practicing integrity in daily life involves maintaining honesty, telling the truth, and keeping promises. This includes not lying, honoring commitments, and respecting the privacy of others.

4. Discipline

Discipline is the driving force that propels life toward established goals in a systematic and efficient manner. It is not limited to the observance of rules but also encompasses self-control, effective time management, and consistent action, even in the absence of motivation.

Application: Applying discipline in daily life comprises setting clear goals and striving to achieve them, whether related to work, study, or personal development.

5. Politeness

Politeness is a virtue that showcases respect, humility, and attentiveness to the others' feelings. It is expressed through words, gestures, and actions. Politeness naturally cultivates positive connections and understanding. It entails acting with proper deference and demonstrating excellent manners toward everyone, whether parents, teachers, elders, or those younger.

Application: Practicing politeness in daily life means behaving with humility, respect, and good manners toward everyone, regardless of age or status.

6. Cleanliness

Cleanliness is a guiding principle for living that extends beyond physical hygiene. It includes maintaining a clean and orderly environment, such as public spaces and nature, by not littering. Crucially, it also refers to cleanliness of mind—keeping one's thoughts free from greed, anger, and envy, while adopting a positive and constructive outlook.

Application: Applying cleanliness in daily life involves maintaining hygiene of both body and mind, serving as an example for others, and helping to create a more livable and sustainable community.

7. Harmony

Harmony is a virtue that signifies the orderly unification of people with a shared purpose. It is the binding force that connects people and is vital for peaceful coexistence. Harmony is not limited to sharing physical space, but encompassing unity of heart, common goals or feelings, and mutual cooperation to achieve them. It requires accepting differences, respecting one another, and showing willingness to compromise.

Application: Practicing harmony in daily life comprises cooperating in household responsibilities, making collective decisions, working collaboratively as a team, listening to others' opinions, participating in community service, and respecting the law as a contribution to national development.

8. Generosity

Generosity is the act of giving without expectation. It is crucial for building good relationships and fostering connections. Generosity involves helping others in difficulty through physical effort, emotional support, or wisdom. It is about sharing possessions, knowledge, and experiences, as well as providing encouragement with kind and uplifting words. Importantly, generosity is rooted in empathy— understanding others' feelings and responding with readiness to support them for the greater good.

Application: Applying generosity in daily life contains giving without expecting anything in return, sharing resources, and offering help, whether through material support, financial assistance, or emotional care.

9. Gratitude

Gratitude is a noble virtue that reflects awareness of the kindness bestowed by benefactors, such as parents, teachers, and elders, while involving reciprocating that kindness with sincerity. It is a fundamental basis for building good relationships and demonstrates a good character.

Application: Practicing gratitude in daily life involves showing respect and appreciation toward benefactors, including parents, grandparents, teachers, and mentors. This includes helping and caring for them, following their teachings, and reciprocating their kindness through sincere actions and heartfelt words.

Discussions and Conclusion

The nine basic virtues in the *Vessantara Jataka* are valuable moral foundations that guide individuals in Thai society toward ethical conduct and harmonious coexistence (Huxley, 1996; Pensook, 2010). These virtues can be creatively applied in modern moral dramas to reflect contemporary life, inspire audiences, promote ethical values, and encourage personal development. They also support the cultivation of moral character and positive attitudes, which are important for building a peaceful society. By promoting these values, communities foster the growth and development of the younger generation and encourage social progress rooted in wisdom, compassion, and mutual support. Ultimately, such efforts contribute to the creation of a more virtuous and prosperous society.

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