

## ABSTRACT

This research is designed to study the nature of Mahavessantara-Jataka tale and its influences on religious lives of Thai people, especially the northern Thai. Among all 550 previous lives of the Buddha, Mahavessantara is the most popular and influential episode of the Enlightened One. It has been known among the Thai since early times, probably at the beginning of Thai history. In addition, it has become an exemplar for ideal Buddhists. Owing to its significance as such, the Jataka was so popular in the past that it had been written in a large number of versions in northern dialect, which resulted in a great collection of palm-leaf manuscripts in northern Thailand, challenging the study by researchers and scholars.

Owing to its diversification, the study is undertaken in order to investigate the roles it played in socio-cultural context. Activities of the study are divided into six chapters as follows:

**Chapter I** : Introduction. It deals with provenance and nature of the problem, purposes of study and methodology; it is substantially a documentary research though some field work is involved.

**Chapter II** : Characteristics of Mahavessantara Jataka. It is conducted to look into the origin and nature of Jataka tale, such as its status as one of the most popular texts in Theravada Buddhism.

**Chapter III** : Mahavessantara in dimension of times. It is aimed to trace development of the tale in relation to a mass organization of the Jataka-reading ceremony, and its changes over times in anticipation that the Jataka helped distinguish culturally the Thai from the rest of the world.

**Chapter IV** : Social and Cultural Influences. It is attempted to investigate its contributions to religious beliefs and practices, literature and morality, and also to consider the tale in respect to art inspiration.

**Chapter V : Conclusion and Suggestions.** It is meant to suggest that the organization of such festival should be continued and modified in order to interest the audience.

**Chapter VI. : Appendix.** This chapter includes 4 appendices, namely a summary of all the thirteen chapters of Jataka story, important materials related to the story of Prince Vessantara, sample of transliteration made of three moving chapters, namely Jujaka, Mahavana or Great Forest, Princess Maddi, and Glossary which is aimed at collectiong some archaic words. To such difficult terms, semantic meanings are provided in order for younger generation to understand them easier.