

**Speech by H.E. Mr. Anand Panyarachun**  
**Former Prime Minister of Thailand**  
**Given at the Reception to Introduce the Book “Mahajanaka”**  
**Authored by His Majesty the King**  
**at The Oriental Hotel**  
**June 3, 1996**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is the beginning of a very important week in Thai history. A week, which begins commemorative events in celebration of His Majesty's Golden Jubilee. In the past few weeks I have also been busy doing my own thing. A couple of weeks ago, I was privileged to be invited to be a keynote speaker at an international conference for historians of Asia and the Pacific. And as a humble subject of His Majesty, I thought that the least I could do to join in the celebration of His Majesty's Golden Jubilee was to undertake a certain personal mission and this I did in speaking up on His Majesty's role in the making of Thai history. In the past few days I have also been interviewed by CNN and BBC and also written a column to be published towards the end of the week in an international paper.

I feel that there is a need to fill in the knowledge of the foreign communities, wherever they are, of the love, admiration, respect and reverence we in Thailand have for our King. It is perhaps something, which is not, or can never be, fully comprehended by foreigners, let alone those who might have lived in this country for the past 10 or 15 years. It is something that cannot be easily explained either. You only have to witness it. You only have to feel it and you only have to sense it. Because of the communication that the King has with His own people, irrespective of religion, well-being, profession, He has been able to establish a rapport with His subjects in a way no other monarch can.

So tonight, it is my special privilege to be asked to do another chore, one which I feel, I must admit, embarrassed, one for which I hardly feel qualified. I might have many ambitions in my lifetime, but being a literary critic is not one of them.

The King has reigned over the country for nearly 50 years. Six days from now, He will have reached a milestone. He had to learn a process. He had to do His best under whatever circumstances. The very idea that he had to try His best without expecting any reward or any benefit to Himself. That has been the hallmark of His life.

Nineteen years ago when He listened to a sermon by a high-ranking monk, the sermon was about a Jataka tale. It is a tale, one of many, which depicts the life or former life of Lord Buddha. When He heard that sermon, He was inspired to carry

the message, the moral of that story to the people in general. Because in spite of our saying that we are Buddhists, very few of us have taken the time and trouble to read the Tripitaka or Jataka tales, partly because it is extremely difficult to comprehend. Even the modern versions in Thai also pose difficulties among readers, including myself. He felt that the story had morals from which we could learn and could draw lessons and, in effect, could apply in our own daily life.

Jataka are stories about the Lord Buddha, when he was incarnated as Bhotisatta, sometimes in human form, non-human form, or as an angel, or as a creature. Often when Buddha taught Dharma, he would use the Jataka, which is a story with a Dharmna message, as a teaching tool, as the listeners were not always of the same disposition. There are 2 types of Jataka. One is the Canon Jataka and the other is Non-Canonical Jataka. The Canon Jataka comprises 547 Jataka and is divided into 22 groups. The last and most important group contains 10 Jataka about Bhotisatta in the period immediately preceding Lord Buddha's attaining enlightenment. The said 10 Jataka are about the following: re-nunciation, endeavour, kindness, self-determination, wisdom, morality, forbearance, equanimity, truthfulness and charity. Originally, Jataka in the Tripitaka were composed solely as prayers. Around B.E. 1000 they were adapted into prose for easy understanding. Non-Canonical Jataka do not appear in the Tripitaka. They are 50 Jataka composed by a Buddhist monk from Chiangmai around the period B.E. 2000 - 2200 based on village folklore. From ancient times, Jataka tales have had an important role to play in the Buddhist society. Archeological evidence discovered through the years and certain Buddhist customs bear witness to this.

The Mahajanaka book in Thai and in English by His Majesty the King is a translation and retelling of the story of King Mahajanaka in the Holy Tripitaka Buddhist scripture. Among the Canon Jataka, the Mahajanaka Jataka has two interesting and different features. First, it is a story about Lord Buddha Incarnated as a merchant who has to practice perseverance in his endeavours. Secondly, it is a story about Suvarnabhumi which His Majesty, I am almost certain, makes very clear is Thailand. The text that has been modified concerns the incident of the mango trees. The story had it that, at the entry of the park, there were standing two mango trees, one bearing fruit and the other barren. The King tasted the delicious mango fruit, then entered the park. When he returned, he saw that the mango tree with the task fruit had been vandalised and felled. As for the other tree, it was still proudly standing. At this juncture, the King left the city to seek supreme tranquility. The story demonstrated that good things of good quality will be the target of greed and will stand always in danger. His Majesty the King was of the opinion that King Mahajanaka's desire to leave the city on a quest for supreme tranquility was not yet opportune, not timely, because Mithila's, that is the name of the city, prosperity had not yet reached an appropriate level. The people still lacked wisdom as well as technical knowledge. They did not see the essence of what is beneficial, not even for their own good. Therefore, an institution of learning had to be set up. His Majesty has a view that King Mahajanaka would have been able to achieve the supreme tranquility more readily if he had completely fulfilled his worldly duties

first. King MahaJanaka practised ultimate perseverance without the desire for reward, which resulted in his gaining the throne and bringing prosperity and wealth to the city of Mithila by the strength of his personal qualities.

His Majesty the King, I assume, saw in this tale a moral lesson for the problems facing Thailand. His literary skills are evident in the choice of appropriate, yet simple, words both in the Thai and English texts that makes the Mahajanaka tale relevant to the contemporary period. Some modifications, of course, were made in the text for the sake of easy understanding. His Majesty has also woven a new scenario where King Mahajanaka contributes to furthering the course of the people's education before he sets off to seek the supreme tranquility. In addition to the text, His Majesty felt that there was the need to use art to assist in the teaching of Dharma. As the substance of the story had already been adapted to make it contemporary, His Majesty asked the artists to create illustrations representative of contemporary Thai art. His Majesty further deemed it appropriate to design the book along the lines of a Western fairy tale, but in the style of contemporary Thai art. Hence, accompanying the text are paintings by 8 prominent Thai artists whose preliminary, renditions and subsequent drafts were all presented for His Majesty's approval. In fact, all the details of the production of the book, from the artwork, choice of type face, column separation, book size, binding and all other relevant details were effected at the express wish of His Majesty. There are also 4 maps drawn end illustrated by His Majesty to show the route taken by King Mahajanaka.

The Royal intention in telling or in re-telling the MahaJanaka tale is to make the teachings of Lord Buddha readily accessible to the people for constructive contemplation on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of his reign. To understand the moral tale, and fully recognise and appreciate the nuances of language, some people might have to persevere more than the others. His Majesty felt that for the reader to gain access to its Dharma, it was necessary to create a feeling of sacredness. In order to make a symbolic object to which people could refer to when discouraged; His Majesty deemed it appropriate for the Mahajanaka medallion to be commissioned to accompany the book. This is the first and perhaps the only time that such a medallion has been consecrated in a royal ceremony by His Majesty.

Let me conclude by recapitulating what I said earlier. - When His Majesty was inspired to write this book some 19 years ago, and it did take literally 19 years to complete it in all details. He would use a very old computer. He would type it Himself. He would use it to draw graphs, to do many things. He might write one sentence or one paragraph a day, but had laid very careful plans as to what type of book he wanted. He saw to it that every minute detail was adhered to and up to His full satisfaction. It took Him 19 years and He knew that He wanted the book to be published during His Golden Jubilee Year. It is a labour of love. It is a labour of perseverance.

Throughout His reign, He has long adhered to Lord Buddha's teachings. I often

joke to my personal friends, that if you live in Thailand and do not have a sense of humour, you will go insane. His Majesty must at all times retain His sense of objectivity, and above all, His perseverance. What, does it imply? To persevere is to enjoy what one is doing. To persevere is not to gain a personal benefit. To persevere is not to lose heart. To persevere is to know the objective. To persevere is to avoid greed and ignorance. To persevere is to accept the realities. I think without His perseverance, without strict adherence to Lord Buddha's teachings, He would not have been able to accomplish the mission that he set out to achieve.