

Cloud Atlas
Eastern Maps to A Western World
By Cory Collins



A circle has no end or beginning. It contains two equal halves, connected by the diameter and an invisible plane. David Mitchell's novel emulates this eternal, undefined symmetry. His story ends where it begins, connecting twelve half-lives at the book's center and throughout with an invisible force that binds them together. The form can raise more questions than answers as readers circumnavigate the stories intertwined. Nevertheless, Mitchell's novel does more than resurrect and reincarnate characters, details, and narratives, it resurrects morality and storytelling from a distant past and distant land. And through that lens, clearly defines problems much closer to home.

Mitchell uses an Eastern lens through which to tell his story of Western rise and fall. Though the narrative notably shifts between various forms and genres of Western storytelling, it also closely aligns with components and endorsed moralities of quintessential Eastern stories, namely the jataka tales of Buddha (and the Brahman ideal of Hinduism). Through this lens, the wisdom of Eastern gods provide a cloud atlas—a map through which to find what connects these lives and to explain why this human history of suffering reincarnates.

These maps take on a form and morality very similar to Buddha's jataka tales. When famed storyteller Rafe Martin explains the function of these millennia old stories, his words could easily apply to *Cloud Atlas*. The jataka tales, Martin says, revolve around ideas of rebirth, "that every living thing, ourselves included, has been here in one form or another throughout beginning-less time, and that each of us has already taken every form" (214-15). Compare this with a novel in which not only the characters, but also the stories, take on drastically different forms, and yet, contain a certain essence that remains throughout. For the jataka tales, though endorsing reincarnation, do not fail to also endorse the idea of progress. But often, the tales show a progression of problems. Martin explains that the "tales affirm that what we experience now is causally related to our choices, thoughts and actions in the past... Past exertions give rise to present ones...The jatakas show him [Buddha] making efforts and failing, falling down, trying again" (215-216). Mitchell makes the same moves. These characters, loosely connected, reveal a timeline in which the problems of the past compound in the present, until the novel's most distant future almost mirrors its distant past. Similarly, Mitchell's contemporary narrative mirrors stories written thousands of years before him. Yet, even for these stories of Western

influence, conquest, rise, and fall, the Eastern stories of old are surprisingly relevant. As Martin says, "Old as the stories are, they offer some intriguingly modern perspectives...a fundamental continuity among all life-forms...the jatakas were already, 2500 years ago, saying that there are many worlds, many beings, and that all living things are deeply interconnected" (214).

Today, *Cloud Atlas* suggests the same. The boundaries between the stories, the characters, even East and West become blurred by the narrative. Mitchell had spent years in Japan before writing the novel, which potentially influenced the inclusion of such Eastern concepts into a story so dominated by Western narrative (the title even comes from a Japanese composition). Much like Mitchell drifted East, the stories have drifted West, brought to Europe through trade and conquest (Martin 214). Thousands of years later, *Cloud Atlas* suggests the stories can apply to the human condition, no matter the hemisphere. Buddha's journey to salvation and the ideas that permeate Eastern religion provide reasons why this circle has no end—why the human race fails, and falls, into these cycles.

Ultimately, followers of Buddhism seek liberation from these cycles. The jataka tales chronicle the Buddha's own journey toward liberation amid cycles of fallings and failures. To break from the cyclical suffering is to become an arahant, to reach a religious state of being which Asian philosophy expert Soraj Hongladarom claims centers on this singular purpose. He says "The arahant is one who has totally vanquished all causes that would lead to further entanglement in the cycle of birth and rebirth or samsara...the only task that is assigned him, the task of becoming liberated" (Hongladarom 58).

The journey toward salvation, for Buddha in the jatakas and the aspiring arahant, also entails seeking another virtue: the truth. Martin underlies truth's importance in the jatakas, citing one story in which Buddha willingly gives "his own blood to a starving demon in exchange for a verse of truth" (213). Selfless acts such as these permeate the jatakas in the quest to obtain liberation from the endless cycles and to discern the truth of one's place in such a world. *Cloud Atlas* operates similarly, featuring characters trying to escape the forces that bind them, trying to figure out the world that surrounds them. Often they fail. The cycles continue.

Liberation takes on great importance in Mitchell's narrative

—a concept that weighs heavily on all six worlds within the novel. In Buddha's *Cloud Atlas* cameo, he has become a nearly-forgotten relic in the future corporatic world. But his statue captivates Sonmi-451, and keeps the abbess coming back each morning to pray to the ideal he represents. The idea reveals itself in the statue's description; "Weaponry and elements had strafed, ravaged, and cracked his features...the giant was a deity that offered salvation from a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth" (Mitchell 329). He offered salvation, something that Sonmi-451 and all of the interconnected characters of the novel desperately pined for in one way or another—Ewing from his sickness, Frobisher from his newfound poverty, Luisa Rey from her forced silence, Cavendish from the nursing home, Sonmi-451 from her mental and physical enslavement, Zachary from the ghosts of his past—and all of them from the inevitable cycles. Perhaps the only one who succeeds is Adam Ewing, a character notably sans comet birthmark, suggesting he may exist on the periphery of these connected characters. This happens only through a change of heart, and an ideal the Buddha would have heavily endorsed: compassion (Martin 213). "The savage was on a mission not of malice, but of mercy...I could thank my guardian angels and Autua, the last free Moriori in this world, for my deliverance" (Mitchell 506). Ewing's deliverance from ignorance, small-mindedness, and sickness only comes because of Autua's compassion. Autua's deliverance from slavery only happens because of Ewing's (albeit half-hearted) compassion. Without these acts, these good works, neither character is free.

But these characters, like Buddha in the jatakas, seek a deliverance that coincides with verses of truth. At the novel's center, the character of Meronym reveals truth's importance to Zachary, saying, "true true is presher'n'rarer'n diamonds" (Mitchell 274). To these characters, truth proves elusive, requiring great sacrifice to acquire. Even Sonmi-451 acknowledges, "Truth is singular. Its versions are mistruths" (Mitchell 185). But their liberation from the cycles cannot come without truth and guidance, a theme that seems to course throughout the entire narrative, succinctly wrapped up in Timothy Cavendish's spoken wish: "What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds" (Mitchell 373). The novel's title appears, suggesting that finding the truth to the seemingly inexplicable cycles and connections will lead to these characters' liberation. This reveals the ultimate goal, the endgame, of these stories. Obviously, the

stories compound, meaning the characters fall and fail in cycles, falling and failing beneath the moralities endorsed by both the ancient jataka tales and Mitchell's new narrative.

The Buddhist jataka tales reveal selflessness and the importance of deconstructing the ego and sense of self as one such morality necessary for obtaining liberation. As Hongladarom notes, one who has found salvation in Buddhist terms "has totally relinquished any attachment to the self" (53). Selflessness is necessary, he claims, because "The ego...that is the root cause of all sufferings because it sets the putative self...out of everything that functions as its object or content of its thoughts. Sufferings then ensue because there would then arise the need to cherish and protect this alleged self that is now believed to be real" (59). Selfishness betrays the most important tenets of the Eastern philosophy—"selflessness, emptiness, compassion, generosity, and wisdom—that is, Buddhism"—and causes the cycles of humanity to recur and progress to stall (Martin 213). More simply, in Adam Ewing's own words, "For the human species, selfishness is extinction" (Mitchell 508).

The jataka tales support this worldview. "In these stories," Martin explains, "the Buddha does not turn his back on the world and ignore the sufferings around him in order to attain his own peace" (217). Self-sacrifice and compassion become necessary to reach singular liberation. Injecting the self and the ego into the Eastern philosophy creates a dangerous blend of East and West—a blend from which arises not liberation for the self, but servitude for the "others." For example, Nietzsche (heavily quoted in this novel) gleaned much influence from Eastern ideas, but added to it the very Western notions of a self and the will to power. Hongladarom notes that this led to a worldview that "For Nietzsche...has taken aristocratic values, the master morality as opposed to the more common values of the mass, i.e. the slave morality" (54). Such a mindset cannot help one escape the cycles. Grimaldi, in "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery," regurgitates an almost identical message; "Yet how is it some men attain mastery over others while the vast majority live and die as minions, as livestock? ... the will to power" (Mitchell 129). Grimaldi was not one of the good guys.

Much like the jataka tales, *Cloud Atlas* seems to suggest that such selfishness gives rise to the continued cycles of inhumanity, suffering, and rises and falls, that permeate

Western history. Meronym blames civilization's fall on that very idea, telling Zachary that "[Civilization] made miracles ord'nary, but it din't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o' humans, yay, a hunger for more...Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger..." (Mitchell 272). Many of the characters that preceded Meronym seemed ultimately to fail in reaching a complete selflessness and removing that Western mindset. For example, Frobisher, unlike Buddha, leaves the suffering world behind, though he tries to justify it. "People pontificate, suicide is selfishness...No, what's selfish is to demand another to endure an intolerable existence, just to spare families, friends, and enemies a bit of soul-searching" (Mitchell 470). But the suicide represents a singular focus on himself that had revealed itself earlier in the way he used his maestro's wife for sex, in the way he used Sixsmith for pity and funds, etc. Such examples permeate the novel and characters/stories of all forms. Even Luisa Rey has her career in mind. Cavendish obtains minimal empathy for anyone's suffering but his own, despite his ghastly ordeal. And Sonmi-451 becomes temporarily transfixed by the notion that she could be granted a soul or that Hae-Joo Im would call her a person. Perhaps this explains why these characters seemingly reenter the cycles, despite their efforts to obtain liberation and truth.

Sonmi-451, though, does reveal the importance of selflessness perhaps more than any character in the novel aside from Autua (and arguably Meronym). Sonmi proves willing to sacrifice her newly gained self for the betterment of the future successors, an act worthy of arahant status. As Hongladarom explains, "The arahant works better for the benefits of others without being burdened by the sense of self" (62). When Sonmi-451 sees the beauty of the ocean and the world, she lets go of the self, proclaiming that "All the woe of the words 'I am' seemed dissolved there, painlessly, peacefully" (Mitchell 339). She exemplifies selflessness when she reveals that her narrative was planned, that her demise was inevitable, but she endured for the good. She justifies this seemingly unthinkable betrayal of her personal interest, saying, "Why does any martyr cooperate with his judases? ... We see a game beyond the endgame...No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor. Now, my narrative is over" (Mitchell 349). If Sonmi-451 fails to exit the cycle, it is not due to her selfishness. She only briefly knew that she had a self to give. But her story parallels the jataka tales in the sense that her narrative endorses selflessness, action, and compassion in the midst

of suffering. Like Buddha (or even the Christian Jesus that she unknowingly invokes with Judas), her actions and sacrifices as a walking, living doer of good deeds ultimately leads to her godhood. Her morality becomes central to a world that undergoes drastic change, and she is at least rewarded with a liberation from enslavement to a position in which she garners respect and reverence.

The ancient deity of Buddha and the future deity of Sonmi also share the morality of inclusion. In Buddha's time, such an idea shattered the status quo. Hongladarom explains that, "What was revolutionary about the Buddha's teaching was that he set out to destroy the belief in the caste system...open to everyone" (55). The inclusivity of Buddhism subverted ideas of privilege, birthright, and class in favor of merit, measuring one's worth on their good deeds, and quests to achieve salvation. Beyond that, the Buddha and his jataka tales devalued the notion of a soul, giving worth, emotion, and sentience to beings on all rungs of the hierarchal ladder. Philosopher and psychologist Titus Rivas explains where this notion may arise, saying, "Most Buddhist views about personal identity can be summarized by the Pali term *anatta*, which literally means 'no soul'" (226). The jataka tales find more tangible characteristics to be valued, and do not limit the capability to achieve them to high-ranking human beings. Animals also play vital roles. According to Martin, "Animals in jataka tales think, feel, have their own unique views, and their own specialized realms" (214). Because of this, he says, "These stories...regain a felt connection to animals as thinking, suffering, caring, aspiring beings, not machines in fur" (218).

The tales of *Cloud Atlas* reveal a similar devaluation of the soul, and a reevaluation of the hierarchies that plague these societies. "Others" within the narrative often receive treatment or descriptors that render them animalistic or without souls. For example, the natives in Adam Ewing's journals constantly get compared to beasts, even by Ewing himself, such as when he says, "She has a tinge of black blood and I fancy her mother is not far removed from the jungle breed" (Mitchell 6). Centuries later, Sonmi-451 and her fellow fabricants receive similar treatment. Of Boom-Sook, she says, "He addressed me like purebloods speak to a cat" (Mitchell 208). These characters are considered expendable. In Ewing's tale, they are passively cast overboard or whipped in the streets. In Sonmi's story, their death means little to those that rank higher; "Purebloods see

us often but look at us rarely...no one cared if an xperimental fabricant or two got dropped along the path of scientific enlightenment" (Mitchell 210). Connected across time, these characters (as well as examples in the other stories such as the savages in "Sloosha's Crossin' an Ev'rythin' After") exist on the lowest strata of their respective societies, rendered soulless and unimportant.

Like the jataka tales, however, Cloud Atlas bestows them worth. Cloud Atlas bestows them the ability to think, to feel, to show compassion, and ultimately, to rise above those that supposedly rank above them in society. Sonmi-451, for example, has no soul as her society defines it. "Catechism Seven," she recites, "A soul's value is the dollars therein" (Mitchell 325). Without one, in the corpocracy, Sonmi is literally worthless and without value, a cog in the machine. The narrative, obviously, plays out much differently. First, she reveals that fabricants do indeed possess personalities and differences. She explains to the interviewer, "Because you cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none. But make no mistake: even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same wombtank are as singular as snow-flakes" (Mitchell 187). Second, Sonmi-451 reveals her sentience and her ability to be thinking, feeling, and compassionate. Hae-Joo Im notices this propensity within her, causing him to note, abandoning societal definitions, "These ... existential qualms you suffer, they just mean you're truly human" (Mitchell 232). Third, Sonmi becomes a hero, a vehicle for change, and a being so transcendent that she rises to the status of god centuries later. She comes to recognize that the hierarchal ladder means nothing. She discovers she can rise above it. The supposedly soulless "fabricant" overcomes those that devalue her; "If losers can exploit what their adversaries teach them," Sonmi says, "Losers can become winners in the long term" (Mitchell 225).

The narrative of Cloud Atlas bestows value on more characters than just Sonmi that otherwise would receive little value from their own societies. For example, Autua, a member of a tribal, lesser race in Ewing's tale, ultimately saves Ewing's life, changes Ewing's perspective, and through his action, inspires Ewing's telling change of heart: "If we believe humanity is a ladder of tribes, a coliseum of confrontation, exploitation and bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being" (Mitchell 508). Even Robert Frobisher, not quick to see the suffering of others aside from himself, suggests a moment in which an animal seemed

beyond a "something," writing in his letter to Sixsmith, "Dhondt [the driver]...gave a ha! Of relief that he hadn't killed someone that also expressed dismay at having killed something...It cried, Sixsmith, just like a two-day-old baby" (Mitchell 443).

In this way, Cloud Atlas mirrors the traditions of Eastern storytelling in which beings otherwise undervalued or lost in the categorization of soul and sans-soul receive a voice and perspective, therefore eliciting empathy and worth. Martin claims that "The jatakas take this perception through the eyes of other lives and make it their foundation" (214). Mitchell does the same. He provides his readership with a perspective that otherwise would go ignored by the societies these characters fall within. Even Cavendish relates a story that otherwise would be lost in the corridors and caged minds of a modern-day nursing home. Instead, Mitchell gives them a voice, and therefore feeling, and therefore a soul. This narrative device reveals an endorsed morality of inclusion that also permeates the jataka tales and teachings of Buddha, perhaps most succinctly wrapped up in the simple voice of Zachary; "Welcomin' strangers was Sonmi's way, yay, welcomin' should be free or not at all" (Mitchell 251). The lesson: everyone and everything has value. Or as David Mitchell, himself, said in an interview, "Your own acts can have as much influence as anyone else's."

That very realization underlies the third morality that permeates both the jataka tales and the six narratives of Cloud Atlas. Both collections of stories feature characters that fight against nihilism and succumbing to the inevitable cycles. Both value the notion of life-affirmation –that the present moment matters. Hongladarom explains this Buddhist belief in life affirmation and not dwelling on the cycles/reincarnations: "The arahant would also not care whether he will eventually return time and time again. That would not be a cause for worrying because all of the returns lie either in the past or the future...what matters is the now; only the now is real. The now is real no matter how many times it has happened in the past" (62). The task facing the arahant, Hongladarom claims, is to overcome the temptation to lose hope in the face of a past that constantly recurs, saying one must "become wholly anti-nihilistic (indeed, life affirming) types by overcoming the dire situation of the Eternal Recurrence" (64).

Much like characters in Cloud Atlas struggle to discard the self

and the will to power, they also struggle to discard another Nietzsche ideal –nihilism. They face the same daunting task as Buddha once did in his own quest toward liberation; they must maintain their sense of a present purpose rather than dwell on the past or the future. Liberation cannot be reached if they believe it impossible. But the past's ever-present presence threatens to make it seem so. Sonmi-451 refers to this eternal recurrence as "a cycle as old as tribalism" in which "ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only "rights," the only law, are whatever is willed by the most powerful" (Mitchell 344). Similar thoughts pervade Robert Frobisher's mind as he nears his suicidal death. He writes to Sixsmith :

You find indelible truths at one's core. Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortes'll lay Tenochtitlan to waste again, and later, Ewing will sail again. Adrian'll be blown to pieces again, you and I'll sleep under Corsican stars again, I'll come to Bruges again, fall in and out of love with Eva again, you'll read this letter again, the sun'll grow cold again. Nietzsche's gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities...We do not stay dead long (Mitchell 471).

His thoughts did not simply dwell on the past. He also found no hope, no purpose in how he could affect the future. He says of such an idea, "How vulgar, this hankering after immortality, how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn't, the wolves and blizzards would be at one's throat all the sooner" (Mitchell 82). Frobisher succumbs to this nihilism, dwells on his pointlessness, the past, the present, abandons the present, and perhaps for those reasons, his music and his birthmark re-enter the eternal recurrence.

Other characters face this obstacle of feeling pointless in the face of a cyclical past and inevitable future. For example, Timothy Cavendish seems to be talking about more than card games when he describes his hatred for Patience, remarking that "The outcome is decided not during the course of play but when the cards are shuffled, before the game even begins. How pointless is that?" (Mitchell 368). Others overcome this pervasive notion, such as Sonmi-451, who displays a desire to lead a purposeful existence in her here and now. Like Buddha, she does not seek to avoid adversity; she seeks purpose. Sonmi attempts to define happiness in the face

of this, saying, "If, by happiness, you mean the absence of adversity, I and all fabricants are the happiest stratum in corpocracy. However, if happiness means the conquest of adversity, or a sense of purpose, or the exercise of one's will to power, then of all Nea So Copros's slaves we surely are the most miserable" (Mitchell 188).

In the face of this search for purpose, Mitchell's narrative provides hope in characters who do overcome their nihilism. They seem to embody a message (hinted at earlier) that Mitchell, himself, once gave in an interview about *Cloud Atlas*. On feeling a part of life inevitable, Mitchell said, "I would hope that people might feel that although it can seem that what happens to you is out of your hands, and that you don't have any influence on the way life goes, certainly not on the way the life of the nation goes...everything that does happen to you is done by hands...your own acts can have as much influence as anyone else's." The two characters who presumably could evade failing and falling into the cycles that bind them –Adam Ewing and Meronym –carry the torch of this message.

Ewing's lack of a comet-shaped birthmark and his sudden change in heart and purpose suggests he may not be as closely linked to the loosely connected reincarnations of characters that follow. Obviously, there is significance to the fact that his words end Mitchell's narrative. He faces the nihilistic thoughts of his father –that fear that his life would amount "to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean" (Mitchell 509). Ewing does not succumb. Instead, in life affirmation, and in hope, he asks, "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 509).

If those final words prove significant, so too does the central story in Mitchell's narrative –the looking glass on either side of the mirror's reflections – "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After." Meronym exists in the latest future to which Mitchell allows the reader perspective, leaving alive the bleak (but present!) hope that her future will not require another reincarnation of the comet-carrying characters. Her good deeds are numerous, from seemingly developing a genuine sensibility with the natives to her selfless, fearless act to save Zachary from a heinous life or death. Amidst uprising and turmoil, which feels like yet another inevitable rise and fall of inhumanity, Meronym leads Zachary to escape. Approaching shore, he notes, "I seen the school'ry was razed, yay, jus' a black shell now, the last books an'

the last clock" (Mitchell 298). All at once, symbolically, there is no history or concept of time for these people to dwell on. Zachary finds himself in a world where only the present matters, reinforcing the Buddhist provision: only the now is real. The story defeats time with its hopeful ending. Because Meronym saves Zachary, he lives. Because he lives, Zachary passes on the true story of Sonmi-451 to a people that had worshiped her but forgotten her. In this moment resides hope. The final pages of the story allow the chance that this civilization, armed with this single piece of their past, may learn from the compassion of Sonmi (this Buddha-like cross between human and deity) and start a new cycle. There is hope that the comet finally hit, destroyed, and wiped out that old world.

Sonmi's journey as a being both enslaved and deified follows the final morality of Buddhism and jataka tales that Mitchell mirrors in his novel. Buddha strived to be both lord and servant. Hongladarom describes a Buddhist master as one who "is a lord and a servant at the same time and he is good and skillful at both, since from the standpoint of Emptiness, the master realizes there is no individual ego and he does not find any essential differences between himself and others" (57-58). The abbess remembers this quality of Buddha chiefly in "An Orison of Sonmi-451"; "Siddhartha is a dead man and a living ideal. The man taught about overcoming pain, and influencing one's future reincarnations" (Mitchell 332). The characters most closely linked to following the aforementioned moralities of Buddhism also follow this dichotomous existence.

Sonmi-451 literally begins her life as a servant at Papa Song's before Zachary's people make her a lord of their land. Much as the abbess told Sonmi of Buddha, Meronym has to tell Zachary that his god also lived a mortal life. She says to Zachary, "She was Sonmi, Zachry. Sonmi the freakbirthed human what your ancestors b'lieved was your god" (Mitchell 277). Oddly enough, Meronym also seems to embody something similar to this lord/servant paradigm. Zachary believes her to belong to a race superior, even leading him to ask, "Why's a Prescient's life worth more'n Valleysman's?" (Mitchell 267). For the first time, Meronym loses her calm, replying, "I'm just human, Zachry, like you, like anyun!" (Mitchell 267). Despite her anger, she fulfills both roles. Her "magic" medicine gives her power over life and death and saves the life of Zachary's sister. At the same time, she does so at the will of the people around her, and

out of compassion for the little girl.

Even Adam Ewing displays aspects of living this dichotomy. On one hand, he forges an originally diminutive relationship with Autua that Henry Goose compares to a "loyal gundog and its master" (Mitchell 37). By the end of the narrative, however, Ewing is enslaved by Goose's medicine, then indebted to Autua's mercy. It forces a turnaround in which he pledges to become a public servant, saying, "I shall pledge myself to the Abolitionist cause, because I owe my life to a self-freed slave and because I must begin somewhere" (Mitchell 508).

In this realm of opposites, Buddhism meets another Eastern philosophy in Mitchell's novel –the Hindu ideal of Brahman. The jataka tales and teachings of Buddha avoided delineated definitions of good and evil, suggesting that he lived as simultaneously both. Seeking salvation, there is only purpose, meaning "that both good and evil are conceptual formations which are ultimately empty of their inherent characteristic. One thing is good (or bad) only to the extent that it serves some desired purpose" (Hongladarom 66). The notion correlates almost perfectly with Meronym's attempt to define what makes one human. She implores to Zachary, "List'n, savages an' Civ'lizedsim ain't divvied by tribes or b'liefs or mountain ranges, nay, ev'ry human is both, yay... Some savages what I knowed got a beatsome Civ'lized heart beatin' in their ribs" (Mitchell 303). Meronym purports the belief that humans are both good and evil. Her relaying of this very notion coincides with the discovery of her own comet birthmark, connecting her to the wisdom and dichotomy of Sonmi (Mitchell 303).

Mitchell parallels this Buddhist jataka trope, oddly enough, by evoking a central ideal of another Eastern religion –Hinduism's Brahman. Hester Van Zandt reads Emerson's poem "Brahma", his personal re-creation of the Brahman ideal to the unconscious Margo Roker. Rivas describes this ideal as "Transpersonal...it amounts to the assumption that our real selves –which would go beyond our individual personalities –would all be identical and consist of one single divine spiritual essence or soul" (227). Rather than separating human beings into good and evil, or other dichotomies, Brahman suggests a singular essence that unites all beings. The speaker of Emerson's poem, presumably the god Brahma, evokes this dualism, suggesting that the slayer is also slain, that shadow is also sunlight, that fame

and shame, hope and doubt, are simultaneous (Mitchell 433). In a moment that almost painfully suggests the poem's significance to the themes of the novel, it literally reawakens Margo Roker (Mitchell 433).

These Brahman opposites, creating a single essence, help unify the characters otherwise so loosely connected by birthmarks and little else. Coupled with Meronym's definition of humanity, Emerson's "Brahma" reveals that the characters intertwine in their ability to coalesce into a singular definition of history and what it means to be human. The novel refuses to paint these terms black and white, as evident by the changing forms and range of experience, but also evident by the dichotomies they represent. Some characters, like the speaker of "Brahma", embody hope and purpose, while others succumb to doubt and nihilism. Some perform good deeds, others more than questionable, and others do both. There are slayers, such as when Zachary slits his enemy's throat, when Sonmi destroys an ideology entrenched in her culture, when Frobisher ends his own life. And there are the slain, such as when the other tribe takes Zachary captive, when Sonmi faces her execution, and again, when Frobisher ends his own life. In these novel, "the artist", and presumably the human, "lives in two worlds" (Mitchell 445). As Zachary says, in such a "busted world", "the right thing ain't always possible" (Mitchell 301). Instead, both good and evil must exist.

This notion of the Buddhist good/evil paradigm, or the Brahman essence, awakens the reader just as it awakens Margo Roker. It reveals a through-line otherwise evasive that connects these half-lives and makes them singular. It makes the story whole. As mentioned before, the self is an illusion in these Eastern philosophies, but as Hongladarom notes, "it does not make sense to either affirm or deny that there is a self in the past and in the future that is one and the same as this present one...However, the similarities are no less important" (68). The jataka tales, and Cloud Atlas's narrative, do not endorse dwelling on the past, but they do endorse learning from it. To know that others have come before, existed as both slayer and slain, have faced these cycles, fallen, and failed is to have a guide—a cloud atlas.

The jataka tales of old aspired to create such a guide, one that could navigate one through the despair of eternal recurrence and take them toward liberation. Through storytelling, the tales sought to provide "a vision of our

actual place and role in the multileveled universe of all living beings, human and nonhuman alike" (Martin 214). The stories of Buddha's life as both man and god, seeking truth and liberation, endorsed the moralities of compassion, selflessness, inclusivity, and life-affirmation, in the hopes that one who follows this roadmap will find their own salvation.

Obviously, David Mitchell did not necessarily, or consciously, re-create the entirety of this myth in his writing of Cloud Atlas. But the novel's Eastern influence cannot be ignored, and when used as a lens through which to view the cyclical, circular novel, provides a unifying essence to a scattered story of varying forms, genres, and beings. It provides a Brahman, a unifying essence, a connection to the fact that all of these characters sought what the jatakas once promised. They sought a guide, a way to connect the disjointed, and an explanation for eternal recurrence. Zachary sought these answers in a god named Sonmi, Frobisher in self-composed music, and Cavendish in an invisible map of the ineffable. Little did they know they lived within the very Cloud Atlas they sought—a work of fiction.

Perhaps this final connection between the jataka tales of Buddha and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas remains the most important: they do not try to re-create history and fact. Instead, they purposefully blend truth and fiction. Rafe Martin claims that the Buddha mythology never pretended to be fact, and because of that, remains very much true. "Myth, as I am using it," he explains, "means, essentially, something so true it cannot be put into one final linguistic or imagistic form. It underlies all forms" (219). In creating a guide, a cloud atlas if you will, Mitchell replicated this formula. He could not write a history book; that would undermine the dualism and the gray areas. He could not give a single perspective in a single form, for this novel was a story of the world. He could not rely on the facts to tell the truth. As Isaac Sachs says moments before his death, "The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming...The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies and legitimacy to the imposition of will...the actual future and the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone" (Mitchell 392-393). So instead, Mitchell had to blend the boundaries of truth and fiction as he blended the boundaries of good and evil. Mitchell had to resurrect an Eastern tradition to tell this tragic Western story, so that his tales might inspire the same reaction that Rafe Martin claims the jataka tales elicit:

"These stories are so inexplicably strange, that they might just be...true!" (221).

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