



The Best Buddhist Story: Yasodhara's Love and Loss

by Vanessa R. Sasson

In this article, Vanessa R. Sasson, Professor of Religious Studies at Marianopolis College, in Montreal, tells the story of Yasodhara, linked with the Buddha as his wife for countless lives. Yasodhara's story has touched the hearts of countless generations of Buddhists, helping us understand the complexities of love, loss, and liberation in our lived experience.

There is no one version of the Buddha's story. No Bible or authoritative absolute. Instead, Buddhism can boast of thousands of renditions. A library more than a book. The Buddha's story has been told in languages across the world and across generations. And each time, it is told differently. In this sense, the Buddha's story is a story that has no end.

The Buddha's story is, moreover, not limited to textual accounts. It is also recited, performed, sculpted into stone, painted on temple walls. Rituals bring beloved scenes to life. When a Buddha statue is consecrated in Thailand, the story is recited to the image so that the image awakens to its own narrative, carrying the story inside itself. Everywhere one goes, the Buddha's story follows. Changing, adapting, evolving. Alive.

In so many of these many renditions, the Buddha's wife (or widow?) emerges as one of the most fascinating characters. Although some people are surprised to discover Sasson 2021: "The Best Buddhist Story: Yasodhara's Love and Loss", *Insight Journal*, 47: 10–15.

her, she flies off the pages of many hagiographies, soaring through the narrative with passion, force, suffering, and love. Her story is so powerful, so central to the Buddha's own narrative, I would venture to say that his story would never have happened without her. She had to be there, if for no other reason than to prove that he was strong enough to let her go.

We don't know much about her early life. Or, to put it more accurately, the hagiographies generally do not delve into stories of her youth. We are not even sure of her name, with different texts preserving different traditions. Her most common name is Yasodhara, so we will use that name here, but perhaps she had another name, or perhaps there was more than one wife. All the options are on the table because we are not chained (nor can we be) to historical certainty. We are floating through the realms of the Buddhist imagination, where hard facts cannot follow. Where stories soar on wings of the miraculous and the inspired. We do not know what is real and what is not, but it does not matter. With its many variations, Buddhism invites us to experience possibility. And in this possibility, the story tells us (sometimes) that the Future Buddha had a wife known as Yasodhara. And the story says little about her youth.

The only detail the early hagiographies do provide about her (quite systematically in fact) is that she was one of the Buddha's seven co-natals. A mysterious statement, but one that we shall see tells us more than we might at first realize.

In many of the early texts, the Buddha is said to have come into his final birth accompanied by seven "co-natals"—seven beings who are born at the same moment as him, alongside him, almost like birth companions. Each one of these co-natals is destined to play a pivotal role in his closing life narrative—the Mahabodhi tree that will shelter him as he achieves awakening; Kanthaka the horse who will carry him into his Great Departure; Ananda who will become his faithful attendant. Included among these is the Future

Buddha's future wife. In every list I have found, she is there, born alongside him, prepared to take the stage.

Indeed, we soon discover that she is not only with him as co-natal in this life, but that she has been with him in countless past lives as well. The jatakas—stories of the Buddha's previous lives—are filled with accounts of the two of them together, telling us that they have been married more times than anyone can count. Sometimes they fight; sometimes he leaves her; other times she leaves him. But whatever the story, what we realize is that they have lived a story together countless times before. A love story that spans all of eternity (if we want to be wistful about it).

In their final life together, we get to know her just as she is ready to marry. It is their millionth (billionth?) time tying the knot—an act we can imagine having become deeply familiar to them both. But even with all of these weddings behind them, Yasodhara cannot marry the Prince of Sakya just because the families have declared it a go. The prince was sheltered throughout his life, his father famously protecting him from ever seeing or experiencing suffering. Yasodhara's father (so some accounts claim) was not convinced he would make a suitable husband as a result. The Prince never went to battle or even went to school.

And here the fairy tale comes into full force: the prince does not scoff at the insult. Instead, he offers to prove himself publicly. He suggests a competition, with suitors from near and far invited to participate. Any and every sport is acceptable to him. Contestants flood the battlefield, and together they fight for Yasodhara's hand in marriage. Wrestling, boxing, darts, archery, debate. You name it, the Future Buddha competes in it. Unsurprisingly, he wins them all.

It is a competition to rival any medieval King Arthur fantasy. It recalls the great stories of Draupadi, Sita, and Indumati, all of whom also had their weddings decided by displays of masculine prowess. We can imagine her swooning as he wins (or perhaps fuming with feminist

incredulity), but whatever we might see, we cannot deny that a fairy tale (in all its gendered complexity) is the result. Yasodhara and the Future Buddha will finally be wed.

It is here that we might expect the story to end. After countless lifetimes of seeking each other out, reaching for each other across the sands of time, after taking rebirth together one last time (I always picture them holding hands during their descent into their respective wombs, but that is not quite how the tradition would have it), Yasodhara and the Crown Prince of Sakya are married. It is time to declare happily-ever-after and roll out the credits.

But the Future Buddha is the Future Buddha, so happily-ever-after is not where the narrative heads (at least not yet). One day (years into their marriage), the Future Buddha sneaks out of the palace and encounters the Four Sights (old age, sickness, death, and renunciation). The experience proves to be the narrative's turning point. He realizes that he cannot stay shackled to his samsaric existence a moment longer. He has to run away, find the answer to human tragedy. He must destroy his marriage, abandon his father's house, leave the subjects he was otherwise destined to rule. This is the very opposite of happily-ever-after, and we now realize that we were only just partway through.

Unfortunately, the night of the Four Sights is also the night his wife gives birth to their one and only son. While he contemplates suffering, she is in the throes of labor, experiencing suffering directly. When he returns from the Sights, he goes to see her and finds her asleep with their newborn son tucked into her arms. According to one text, the Future Buddha stands at the threshold, staring at them both, wanting to touch his son just once before he goes. But then he realizes that if he does, it will wake his wife, and he will no longer be able to leave.

This is, in my view, one of the most evocative moments in the Future Buddha's life story. It is a moment of extraordinary humanity, concern, perhaps even of ambivalence. Most of all, it is a moment of love. The Future

Buddha longs for his son. And he believes he won't be able to make his Great Departure if she wakes.

We don't know why he feels this way about her waking—perhaps he is afraid that she will sound the alarm and the doors will be locked against him? The text does not say. With its typical brevity, the text invites us to speculate and interpret for ourselves instead. It does not explain his reasons or tell us more about how he felt.

But we know that the Future Buddha and his wife were linked for lifetimes. A bond so strong, it carried them through the process of rebirth time and again. He could not possibly be afraid of her, but he could be afraid of himself, of losing his determination the moment she opens her eyes. The Future Buddha is about to make his Great Departure and he has to make it alone. He has to abandon her—an act that must have required every superhero power he had. The greatest Great Departure ever known.

Buddhist readers usually follow the Future Buddha at this point, watching him struggle in the forest, heroically seeking the answer to suffering with every teaching he can find, but her story is not over yet. Some of our earliest Buddhist storytellers follow Yasodhara, watching her wake up to the news of his Departure, watch her as she struggles with the loss of her husband, expressing her pain in every possible way. Some texts tell us that she sobbed with anguish; others, that she railed at the gods, at the chariot driver, and even accused the mythical horse Kanthaka of betraying her by letting her beloved husband get away. In later texts, she wanders through the palace gardens listlessly, remembering the time they spent together on the swings, or how they watched the geese float by. In all of these texts (and so many more), Yasodhara expresses the loss that we all understand when we watch our loved ones go.

Non-attachment is, without a doubt, one of the most pivotal concepts in Buddhist literature. It is on every page, in every sermon, depicted in story form on every temple wall (or just about). Life is suffering; attachment (thirst/craving) is

the cause. If we ever hope to be free, attachment is what we must abandon. We must let go.

And yet, the best Buddhist stories (at least in my view) are the stories that speak of attachment, that reveal the full spectrum of human emotion. When Yasodhara expresses her loss, our hearts break for her. Not because we are upset with her for not abiding by basic Buddhist teachings. Not because we want to wag our fingers and say, “I told you so.” But on the contrary—because we understand her. We all know what loss feels like. We know what it is like to want to hurl our dishes against the wall. We know suffering. We know samsara, even though Buddhism tells us that we should get out.

In fact, I would go one step further: not only do we know suffering, but we understand it better than we understand awakening. The Buddha as the Buddha is perfect. Perhaps even unbearably so. He knows everything, sees everything, and never makes any mistakes (or so the texts claim).

But Yasodhara makes every mistake. She clings, she cries, she holds on, and she accuses. She falls in love and won’t let go even after she has been left behind. Yasodhara is us, her relationship to the Future Buddha a symbol of the tug-of-war we all find ourselves in.

Which is why, I think, so many of the early writers gave their love story, in all its tragedy, a moment in the limelight. Yasodhara’s loss captures her audience, fills our imagination, touches our hearts. Her loss is a story we love to tell. It is a story of romance, passion, hurt, betrayal. It is the best story.

Better, in some ways (if you will forgive me), than his.