



An Excerpt from *Storied Companions*

by Karen Derris

*After being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, Karen Derris turned to books—particularly, books of Buddhist narrative. In an excerpt from her forthcoming memoir, *Storied Companions* (Wisdom Publications, July 2021), Derris explores the ways that stories can become guides for living with illness, reading Prince Siddhartha’s encounter with the Four Sights in light of her own embodied experience of impermanence.*

Instinctually, I turn to books as my first uncertain step into living with my brain cancer diagnosis. However, I am warned away from reading about my disease as it will, I’m told, throw me into states of terror and despair. I’m not interested in knowing the details of my cancer. Instead, I am searching for guides to help me process new scary experiences and those to come; aside from searching for books to read, nothing else about this is instinctual.

I read memoirs by people who live with cancer, undergo treatment, and move closer to death. I gravitate toward memoirs by people who, like me, have careers as academics. Each of these people integrates their living experiences of cancer with ideas and concepts that shape their minds, outlooks, and emotions.

These authors show me that while living with a terminal disease is new to me, I already have resources to draw upon, to help myself find a way to live well despite my
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increased awareness of the many ways my body—my brain in particular—is changing. These authors drew from the ideas and questions to which they had dedicated their personal and professional lives—for how can practices of the mind be disentangled from the ways the rest of our body lives?

One of my newfound guides is a novelist, another is a philosopher, another is a cultural critic, even a brain surgeon dying from brain cancer. Each of them found a deeply personal way to keep their footing as the ground of the familiar shifted this way and that, up and down, from treatments, declines, reprieves, and into final steps of dying. In these memoirs I see a method I might employ for living with the traumatic certainty of my cancer diagnosis and the also-traumatic vagueness of prognosis and progression.

While I reach out to these memoirs, Buddhist narratives reach out to me. I don't have to search for them.

Stories from many Buddhist literary traditions take up the bookshelves in my office, my home, and more figuratively, my mental library. They have accompanied me for years. I have dedicated my professional life to studying them. Reading and interpreting Buddhist narratives forms and reshapes my mind. They inspire the ways I intentionally aspire to live. These stories expand my understanding of what is real, and they show me the importance of imagination for measuring truth by its effectiveness for positive transformation on the axes of wisdom and compassion. In order to be a good reader, I find that the mythical truths of these Buddhist stories must be given as much weight as materialist, secular perspectives.

Now, I am reading these stories anew as I look for guides for living with my illness as a new, embodied experience of the foundational Buddhist teaching of impermanence.

These stories are of varying lengths and forms. Some grow from an image, a phrase, even just a word. These stories invite us to participate with our imagination and our own experiences. If we do so we might find ourselves stepping

into the space they create for us. In turn, we can, if we wish, take these stories into us. We might tie a piece of a story to our own experience in order to reflect upon who we are and how we experience impermanence—today, tomorrow, years ago—through the guidance of a storied companion that speaks particularly to us.

The stories that naturally occur to me now are those I know over time. These are stories I love. They are the narrative homes of the characters I love.

For readers like me who did not grow up in a Buddhist culture, one of the first Buddhist stories they are likely to encounter is the story of Prince Siddhartha's first journey outside his father's palace. This episode occurs in his final lifetime as a bodhisattva—the one in which he will attain awakening and become a buddha. This is a crucial event for his movement toward nirvana. It is also a narration of events that can be seen as ordinary but rarely reflected upon. It is a story of a sheltered young man when he first time he sees an old person, a sick person, and a dead body.

At Siddhartha's birth, sages foretold his two possible futures to his father, King Suddhodana: If his son were to become aware of impermanence and the suffering it causes, he would leave the royal life to become the world's greatest spiritual leader. If he were shielded from suffering, he would become the world's greatest emperor. Wanting his son to carry forward the family lineage, King Suddhodana kept his son "imprisoned" in his beautiful palace. Not only was he kept from learning of the existence of suffering, the prince was also surrounded by every kind of pleasure, which anesthetized him to the discomforts of ordinary life moments.

As he grows into manhood, Siddhartha asks to leave the palace to see the city. In some versions of this story—and there are many versions—*devas*, celestial beings plant the idea in the prince's thoughts. Without this first of many interventions by the *devas*, he might have remained blissed

out on pleasure, never reaching the final stages of becoming a buddha. The devas know the prince must see forms of impermanence and suffering and reflect upon their causes if he is to find his path to nirvana.

With the devas' prodding, Prince Siddhartha makes it impossible for his father to prevent him from leaving the palace grounds; in some versions he sneaks out of the palace with the direct intervention of the gods. But in acquiescing to his son's trips outside, Suddhodana doesn't give up on his years of shielding Siddhartha from impermanence and suffering: he merely shifts tactics. The king orders his city cleaned and decorated. In order to hide all signs of suffering, he commands that all the old, sick, and dead people in the city should be hidden away where his son will not be able to see them.

As this story is told in the *Buddhacharita* (a Sanskrit biography of the Buddha), when Prince Siddhartha leaves the palace, the procession route is bursting with healthy people, flowers, and banners, precisely as the king commands. In verse after verse the poet describes beautiful women leaning over their balcony railings, trying to catch their first sight of the prince. These descriptions of beauty swallow up the few verses that describe the three forms of impermanent bodies, effectively replicating the king's goal of hiding them. Like the Bodhisattva, we have to be attentive readers in order to stay focused on the presence of the old person, the sick man, and the corpse; otherwise, their descriptions will be swallowed up by the many verses describing the beautiful city and healthy crowds.

However, the rich, detailed descriptions also help me imagine the scene right in front of me and then stepping into it, confident I'd be unnoticed. If I first joined the throngs along the procession hoping to catch sight of the prince, my cancer-stricken brain would make my body feel off balance and in danger of falling, as I sometimes do. Perhaps I might find a spot to sit along the procession route—but then the king's men would easily see me and pick up my sick body

and deposit me in an alleyway, making sure I'm out of sight. The devas wouldn't leave me there. In an existential tug of war, they would lift me up and return me to the procession route. They know that the Bodhisattva has to see the suffering caused by impermanence. My sick body is just the omen they need.

On the Bodhisattva's path, despite the efforts of his father, he still sees the old person, the sick person, and the dead person. He tunes out the enchanting noise of women's tinkling jewelry to hear the sick person crying out. He sees the old person stumbling as the crowd shoves her this way and that. He sees the dead body carried in its procession to the funeral grounds.

Seeing each these forms of suffering shock and disturb the prince. "Will this happen to me too?" he asks his companion and chariot driver, Channa.

"Yes," is Channa's straightforward and deeply true response.

I wonder whether we could generate a similar existential bolt if we shifted the focus of the story from Siddhartha's point of view to those of the old person, the ill, or dying person? For people whose impermanence is pronouncedly embodied, what would they say to Siddhartha beyond "Yes, this happens to all people"? If it were me in that crowd, I'd say, "This is happening to me right now! Most people don't acknowledge their own impermanence. I *feel* my own impermanence!" I feel it intensifying every day. I can no longer ignore impermanence. I am crashing into it, or it into me.

This scene from the Buddha's life has been depicted in many Buddhist artistic traditions. The painting that I see in my mind's eye is on a central pillar of a *vihara*—the main hall—at the royal temple of Wat Suthat in Bangkok. Every surface of the hall is painted with narratives of the Buddha's previous lifetimes as the Bodhisattva, including this final one.

In the mural, beneath a flying deva's guiding presence, Prince Siddhartha is shown in his chariot moving

through the city. There they are: the old, sick, and dead bodies. Channa drives the chariot, looking determinedly forward, eager to get the prince back to the curated experiences within the palace.

In stark contrast, the prince's head strains over his shoulder in order to see these three suffering people for as long as possible. Each figure in the narrative mural is miniature but detailed. The old person, bent at the waist, could be saying, "I've so much farther to walk, where is my cane?" The sick person's head is thrown back, mouth open, gasping in agony, as though crying out "help!" The dead body is represented as a skeleton outlined in black. We will all dissolve to this.

This tiny scene is one small part of the total path to awakening, but seeing it is the crucial event that helps the Bodhisattva realize the reality of impermanence and the suffering it causes.

Statues from across the Buddhist world depict Prince Siddhartha in what is called the "pondering pose," reflecting on the reality he encountered outside the palace walls. He sits with his crowned head bowed, one arm resting on a crossed leg, his hand on one of his cheeks. The posture is always lifelike, no matter the details of the particular statue. His body folds inward, supporting itself under the weight of his head and the burden of his crown. He sees nothing now but what his downward glance affords. He is, I imagine, replaying the sight of those impermanent bodies.

Even as Suddhodana sees his son in this state of despondency, he still doesn't give up. He tells the prince's friends to take him to a pleasure garden for another dose of sensual delight, but Siddhartha now refuses to eat the beautiful feasts or interact with the gorgeous, seductive women. The only thing he sees and willingly takes in is the fourth sign, a renunciant, who he saw on his last trip outside the palace.

This is another kind of body. Such a person willingly and deliberately changes their body by shaving their head,

removing their jewels, and wearing only robes sewn from rags. They move through the world in a different way and for a different purpose. Seeing this body inspires the Bodhisattva to find a path to alleviate the willful ignorance of impermanence and the suffering it causes.

Seeing just these four kinds of bodies changed the bodhisattva's life completely. On our first read, we might find this story impossible to believe. How could a person not see any forms of suffering into adulthood? But we can use our own experiences as a foundation to begin to see how material reality intertwines with imagined reality in this story—as they do in much of Buddhist literature. In the narrative worlds, something need not be real to be true. While it may seem as though Siddhartha lives in a Sleeping Beauty–like castle, and it may feel impossible to relate his highly curated experience to our chaotic lives, connections are plentiful. Most teenagers are locked to their phones, looking at selfies taken by influencers in luxurious settings rather than following the news of starving children displaced by war or natural disasters. And then how many of us cross the street rather than walk by the body of a homeless person? How many times have I found myself silently saying, “I just can't look at people suffering with extreme illness and bodily suffering?” Many of us look away from the disabled, too.

Prince Siddhartha, our Buddha, saw those who were feeling the embodiment of their impermanence. He held them with his gaze. For those of us who are feeling impermanence eroding ourselves, being seen can feel like being held. His focused gaze, his embrace, is so accepting; he places himself in the position of the sick person, aged person, and dying person. “Will this happen to me too?” In my new acute experience of illness, others' willingness to see my embodied suffering, and my efforts to see others, feels like an ethical, healing act.

I want people to know that cancer is changing me and my life, but it isn't obvious to see; it is hard for many people to hear when I do have the courage to talk about my situation.

I want to tell my own story, I am lonely, and I want people to know what I am going through—but I hesitate. I destroy the fun at several dinner gatherings by answering someone’s question of why I’d cut my hair with a short explanation that most of it fell out from full brain radiation.

Sometimes I feel like I am being cruel by honestly answering a simple question: “You look great! How are you?” “Not so good...I have brain cancer.” People tear up, retreat into corners, ignore me for months.

Maybe, like Prince Siddhartha, being confronted by my cancerous body led to an experience of existential shock for friends and acquaintances too. Maybe, like him, they wonder, “This is happening to Karen. Could this happen to me too?” Hearing that I had a brain tumor for the first time was my existential crisis. I remember pleading, beginning to cry, with the oncologist who gave us the results of my very first MRI scan: “But I have a one-year-old child!” As if that had anything to do with it. As if just that truth should change the MRI and render the tumor invisible and unknown again.” How could this be happening? It is happening!” Eighteen years later, it still is. Dying has come much closer now since my diagnosis of progression to grade IV brain cancer, glioblastoma. All cancers are destructive. This one can be, and usually is, a monster.

I still regularly see the tumor in my brain on my bimonthly MRI scan. “It’s all in my head”—really. I still think of my brain as my mind: the source of my delight in thinking, learning, interpreting. It rarely occurs to me, even now, that it is an organ with mutating cells and tissue that are healthy or unhealthy. These regular MRIs are the imprecise tool my oncologist has to assess if my tumor is changing. Has it grown, thickened on one side or the other? He is always on the lookout for new tumors emerging in other parts of my brain too.

Sometimes, fear overcomes me when a new brain scan approaches. I need to hold the hand of a companion by my side. I reach out in front of me for a memoirist who knew what is like to repeatedly ask the question *when*. When will this cancer kill me? I feel the hand of one of my Buddhist storied companions who sees me and takes me across time and space, guiding me through fear towards living with love.

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