

Books Reviews

***Yasodharā, the wife of the Bodhisattva* by Ranjini Obeyesekere. Albany: State University of New York Press. 114pp., Pb. \$14.95, ISBN-13: 9781438428284; Hb \$45.00, ISBN13: 9781438428277.**

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The image of the Buddha's lovely wife lying asleep with their newborn son, Rāhula, and of Gotama taking one last look before going on the journey that will take him to awakening, is one of the most memorable in Buddhist narrative temple art. Its poignancy reveals, as Obeyesekere notes in her preface to this welcome book on two Sinhalese versions of the story, a wife about whom little is known, other than that she is on this occasion, in tranquil sleep. Some mystery about *Yasodharā* has always animated the variety of legends that have accreted around her and her relationship with Gotama in various Buddhist traditions. While some versions emphasize the ungainliness of the dancing-girls on the night of the departure, other, equally significant strands explore the renunciate's hesitancy at the sight of this new mother's embodiment of the fulfillment of the lay life.¹ The scene perhaps hints at a larger metaphor: *Yasodharā* appears as if *samsāra* itself – curiously like the sleeping princess of Western tales – waits for an 'awakening', the return of her husband when he comes as a teacher to help her, their son and other members of the extended family. For all Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, this is a crucial element in the story of Gotama's renunciation and, one suspects, historically must have supported Buddhists' sympathetic engagement with the story of their religion's founder, in legend and literary composition. Perhaps to ensure that no charges of unkindness could be leveled at Gotama, the story – which may of course be based on historical fact – starts to develop in the earliest texts that when he has attained to Buddhahood, he does return, meets her, his son and other members of his family in reunions that are in different sources variously described, and in time they join his larger *saṅgha* and attain enlightenment too.

Ranjini Obeyesekere is unusually well placed to transmit the feeling *Yasodharā* arouses in Sri Lankan Buddhists, particularly amongst laywomen. She taught

1. *Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita* (5.46–67) does not allow the *Bodhisattva* any glimpse or thought of *Yaśodharā*, for instance, on the night of his renunciation when he sees a generic group of 'wives' in ugly disarray. This is presumably to avoid the danger of our sympathies becoming divided: indeed the dramatic momentum of this text is far better sustained by her forceful appearance later, when the Gotama's charioteer returns.

literature for many years in western universities and, as a Sri Lankan, brings a native understanding to the compelling and continued appeal of the legends in a popular devotional setting. This contributes to one excellent quality of the work: the author remembers and recounts the popularity of songs, based on Sinhala and Pāli literary sources about Yasodharā, that for centuries have been sung by and for women as they work and sing in the fields, lull children to sleep and participate in funerary rituals. Anyone whose contact with such material is so knitted into earliest memories operates from assumptions and insights that are themselves important to understand for those interested in the Buddhism of this region. Much of the Yasodharā literature in India occurs in texts that are no longer so intimately linked to centuries of interchange between Buddhist practice and doctrine in daily life, and lack a sense of this continued flow between them: Obeyesekere's first-person link really helps to make sense of the complex way such tales have historically been integrated with songs and customs in Sri Lanka, in this and in early stages of its history. With a scholarly and critical literary sensitivity that is still rather rare in Western scholarship on Pāli literature and Southern Buddhism, the author also relates her impressions to an examination of the varieties of treatment this figure has inspired, in a number of forms. Material about the Buddha's life — and wife — must have always adapted to suit the pre-existent genres and preoccupations of the culture and literary forms of a given region. To readers unfamiliar with Sinhala works and the context of its popular religious story traditions, her communication of such an adaptive monastic and folk creativity, along with her own insights into the varied sources she employs, gives us a real glimpse into the life of Sri Lankan Buddhism. It also suggests ways practitioners might historically have linked Buddhist life-stories to their own local genres, songs and rituals.

Yasodharā certainly captures the imagination. Obeyesekere's brief introduction to some sources and early texts relating to the figure demonstrates that from the outset she seems to have been a challenging but magnetic figure to place and describe. This first section, which gives a brief overview of material from the *Mahāvagga* (e.g. Vin .I.82), the Pāli *Yasodharāpadāna*, Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*, the Chengmai text, 'Bimbā's lament' and various Sinhala literary sources, mentions the slimness of the very early material, but the prime focus of attention, helpfully supported by lengthy quotation, is the way that the story starts to evolve with strong, recurrent features, despite great differences in plot and emphasis, in a number of contexts and literary forms. The aspect of the lament, variously employed, is a recurrent strand in these works, with the exception of the early Pāli sources, surfacing in different ways as the plotline changes. This clear and well-constructed section provides a good preliminary to the two different works that form the bulk of the work, though perhaps from a scholar's point of view more detail of the way the earliest references treat this figure would have been a helpful addition to a discussion which focuses primarily on one strand in the manifold and diverse evolution of the Yasodharā/Yasodharā legend.

As the author points out, however, the range of material is complex, with many variations in the legends, and this part of the book provides a fascinating preparation for the material that forms the substance of the work. Some of the depictions are certainly not sugary and are even rather funny: for instance, commenting on her extended quote from the *Pūjāvīlaya*, a thirteenth-century

Sinhala work, Obeyesekere notes: 'In a wonderful tour de force, with some ironic tongue-in-cheek comments, the author of the *Pūjāvāliya* has Yasodharā justify even her acts of cruelty toward the *Bodhisattva* in a previous birth story familiar to Buddhists as the *Kusa Jātaka*' (p.13). She then quotes extensively from the work, in which, for instance, Yasodharā justifies the famous incident in which she had thrown dung at her husband, in that rebirth smitten with ugliness (*Jātaka* 531), on the grounds that, as he looked so awful, it did not occur to her he might be the *Bodhisattva*, and 'Since there is no demerit in a non-volitional act I did no wrong!' This engaging and humorous account, which twists all incidents in her favour, demonstrates, as Obeyesekere notes, 'a razor-sharp intellect who, with almost legalistic acumen, transforms negative material to make a positive case for her herself' (p.14). Obeyesekere is a balanced commentator, however: the quote also includes much material in which Yasodharā eulogizes and delights in the various ways her husband has also pursued the perfections, in order to liberate them both, and the author manages to put across, in this and in comment on the other quotes she has chosen, something of the particular flavour of each, often highly differentiated version of the story.

The real contribution of Obeyesekere's book, however, is in the new translations of and lucid introductions to the Sinhala texts she has chosen. The first is the anonymous *Yasodharāvata*, 'The Story of Yasodharā', also known as *Yasodharā vilāpaya*, 'Yasodharā's Lament', which has been found by the author in various forms - palm-leaf and other manuscripts, pamphlets and books - whose slightly varied content suggest to her a layering of various versions over a period of time. The poem appears to have origins in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, when the rich osmosis operating between monastic popularization of Pāli texts, educated lay poetic composition and folk improvisation around favourite themes produced numerous Buddhist narratives and songs, many of which are still circulated and remembered in familial lines and rituals. Creative compositions as the result of this balance, which seems a bit like a finely tuned eco-system, thrived even into colonial times. The clearly somewhat puzzled nineteenth-century English visitor, John Davy, observes: 'almost every Singalese is more or less a poet; or at least can compose what they call poetry' (quoted on pp.23-24). Obeyesekere makes careful study of metre, rhythm and content, which, linked with her consultation of the various forms of the text, lead her to the conclusion that the poem that is widely circulated now is primarily the product of this early fertile period, in which revisions and additions were common as palm-leaf versions were naturally replaced, but also contains significant later additions. These are most notably verses 118-124, whose rhythm and content suggests the influence of both the *Apadāna* commentary and ritual healing usage and in the final verses (125-130), whose slightly formulaic metre and homily on female conjugal piety betray, she says, what appears now as the somewhat leaden influence of late nineteenth-century Buddhist reform (see pp 27ff). It is this fuller version that was widely circulated when the poem was first distributed in pamphlet form.

It is the sub-title, however, that really captures the poem, which Obeyesekere situates in the context of Sinhala literary, religious and political history: the poem is composed in the genre of the lament, and exploits features from this folk form that align it with other Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian literary works of the early modern period. Indeed as her scholarly and far-ranging comments note, lament

genres and rituals are frequent in world literatures, including the English, in the ninth-century poem, ‘The Wife’s Lament’;² thriving South Indian funerary laments also suggest the form pre-dates Buddhist compositions, though dates for such possible influences are unclear (see p.19). Such poems are often subtle examinations of the process of grief, working through stages as a kind of reflection: indeed this one is certainly not just some bitter, fruitless exercise in bewailing one’s lot. As Obeyesekere indicates, an internal parallel is created between the struggles of Gotama, whose hesitancy and regret at leaving his wife are lyrically explored, and that of Yasodharā’s first-person account of her abandonment. The first part of the poem records the events of the *Bodhisatta*’s birth, with, incidentally, an eye for the feminine detail of pregnancy and a delight in early childhood events that lead Obeyesekere to infer that the author may also be a woman. Gotama’s anguish is then described by him:

50. For one wife and one child shall I give up my quest?
Or save countless creatures from the *samsāric* round?
No, today I’ll leave all I love, become an ascetic.
What a radiant lovely child is my Rāhula!
51. By the power of our past resolves you and I are now prepared.
You are paramount among women, Bimbā my queen.
No more will we walk together on the *samsāric* round.
I will come back a Buddha. Wait for me.

A great deal of literary care has gone into this depiction: Obeyesekere draws the reader’s attention to the assonance and repeated sibilants of a verse of particular lyricism, that is especially popular, providing in the introduction the original along with her own translation:

61. Her gentle face that soothes with soft kisses
The lovely child held closely in her arms
Is a golden star that shines beside a full moon.
Like a moon he leaves now, thinking of his son.
- Sōma guṇa sisila simba sanasana muhu na*
Pēma guṇa sobana kumarun vadā gena
Pun sanda langa sitina ran tharuvak lesi na
Pun sanda men vaditi kumarun sihi kara na (p.29).

By the time we move to Yasodharā, our sympathies are engaged. But her sad reproaches for her errant husband are not accorded to his departure, as they are, for instance, in the *Buddhacarita* or the Thai ‘Bimbā’s lament’. For, in the underlying story of this poem, as in Pāli texts, the renunciation has been implicitly supported by Yasodharā’s many lifetimes accompanying her spouse in his quest for the perfections. Renunciation is not itself considered grounds for recrimination. So Yasodharā’s ‘lament’ of bitterness and regret dwell upon his secrecy, and her searing denunciations recount the ways in which she feels he has thus betrayed his trust:

2. In J. Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 1986), 81–94.

73. You left resolved, your mind set upon becoming a Buddha.
I too made a firm resolve to be always your wife.
We made our joint resolves and you gave me your hand.
Why then did you leave today without a word?

Recollecting the various lives that they have spent together, including a charming account of them both being squirrels (v. 78, p. 48), in which the *Bodhisatta* saves their children from a flood, Yasodharā describes the extent of her support:

92. In countless animal lives we perfected the Virtues,
I have always been true to you, my love,
Why then do you do this to me now?
Am I not your Bimbā, your nectar-like Yasodharā?

Obeyesekere's translation and introduction make this version of the Yasodharā legend, and the rather mellifluous style of Sinhala poetry, moving and real for the modern reader. Sinhala folk compositions are not well known or appreciated in the West and her historical comment, literary background and first-hand experience of the genres from her childhood are helpful. Her description of the way the lament sections have traditionally been employed, improvised and added to by women, with the emotional and melancholic strain that she says characterizes Sinhala folk songs, is also a welcome mix of personal observation, technical description of Sinhala literary devices, and, in accounts of funerary rituals and rice-working methods, ethnographic record of a vibrant rural and agrarian culture already in danger of decline. Discussing the gaps in the legend, which, her descriptions show, have always inspired elaboration, she aligns the poem with other Sinhala laments, about Vessantara and other Buddhist themes, and describes it as an exploration of the process of loss, grief and abandonment, for any woman or man, in any situation, where the hardness of loss and separation is confronted: a conclusion borne out by the continued popularity of these lament sections at funerals, to which both sexes listen.

The second work translated and introduced in the book is the *Yasodharāpadānaya*, a narrative reworking of and improvisation around material that can be found in *Apadāna* verses that date from around the first or second century CE. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the author says, it was customary for monks to popularize material from the *Apadāna*, as well as works involving a great deal of narrative, such as the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, for the laity, in prose form, with some elaboration and shifts of emphasis as they adapted tales for their audience. This work appears to date from this period, and while its content is broadly similar to the original, Obeyesekere points out that it places far greater emphasis on acts of devotion on the part of Yasodharā, now a nun, and on the various psychic powers she is capable of manifesting: perhaps rather like a goodbye fireworks display! The Pāli and the Sinhala work describe a very different Yasodharā from the distraught and bewildered wife. According to Pāli versions, Yasodharā eventually becomes a nun herself, and, in accordance with *Apadāna* conventions, visits the Buddha before her death, whose time she has chosen herself, pays her respects and is invited by him to offer a last demonstration of her powers and teaching. In this version, realizing that she and Gotama are currently set to die on the same day in two years' time, she decides to attain *parinibbāna* herself that very day, to

avoid bringing a double loss to his followers in two years' time. So, aged 78, she visits the Buddha, asking him to forgive any transgression. He says: 'There is no woman comparable to Yasodharā in this entire Buddha era. This revered person is one who has the knowledge to see unaccountable eons of past lives' (p.65). Affirming her arahatship and extolling her great skills in meditation and knowledge, he says some still doubt her ability, so asks her to speak and teach, so that her great attainments do not go unacknowledged. She recounts details of her long association with the Buddha, and proceeds to perform the extraordinary miracles described in the *Apadāna*: she rises into the sky, changes into a Garuda bird,

which had a neck the size of Mēru rock, two eyes as big as moons, a right wing as large as the continent on the East (*purvavideha*), a beak as big as the rock of the universe (*sakvala*) and a Garuda body so large as to cover the entire universe so that it looked as if wrapped with a canopy on which the universe was painted without leaving even a sliver of space. (p.67)

After various other manifestations of power, she creates a Brahmā figure in the universe, and announces: 'I am not a god or Brahma. I am but a noble woman who in *saṃsāra* was the devoted companion of Gautama Buddha' (p.68). After this demonstration, she teaches the assembly more about the couple's association, through many lives. The Buddha responds by extolling at great length her virtues until, finally, she pays homage, leaves for the nunnery and dies, attaining *parinibbāna*. The Buddha leads her funeral.

For all Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the renunciation and the events that follow it constitute just one aspect of the vast, loosely connected narrative that forms an essential support to the many lives of the *Bodhisatta* described in the *Jātaka* and *Apadāna* literature. In both works Obeyesekere translates, Yasodharā is a willing accomplice to the *Bodhisatta/Bodhisattva* through many lifetimes. In these she is always his spouse, living in the same species and station in which he finds himself too, and Rāhula often their son. Both works also make explicit the initial vow that instigated their union over so many lifetimes, Yasodharā's willing partnership with the *Bodhisatta* in his search for the perfections over their many different existences and Yasodharā's implicit collusion with the renunciation itself. Indeed it is striking that in Pāli versions of the legend and in these two Sinhala works, one looks in vain for some features of the 'abandoned wife' of Indian literature. Aśvaghōṣa's bereft heroine, the stately and eloquently indignant Yaśodharā of the *Buddhacarita* and Nanda's enticingly dishevelled wife, Saundarī, make laments that suggest, or insist upon, the superior virtues of marriage and lay happiness.³ In both Sinhala versions, Obeyesekere stresses, Yasodharā is or has been actively complicit with the *Bodhisatta's* search and departure, however aggrieved she might be at its manner and timing.

As a literary and popular heroine, Yasodharā has from the earliest times been a gift for the composer of texts: her character is thinly drawn at the outset, her presence suggested but not explored in early sources, and an air of mystery surrounds her life-story, her complicity with the Buddha's path, her admission to the Buddhist order, her relationship with Gotama after her enlightenment and

3. See *Buddhacarita* 8.31ff, 9.27. For Saundarī's ornate *kāvya* style lament, see 'The Wife's Lament' (*Bhāryā-vilāpa*) in Aśvaghōṣa's *Saundarananda*, translated in L.Covill, *Handsome Nanda* (New York: New York University Press and the Clay Sanskrit Library, 2007), Canto 6.

even her name, which itself has been the subject of various creative adaptations, being variously Bimbā, Yasodharā and, in Pāli texts, usually Rāhulamātā. As Obeyesekere describes her, within the lyrical and endearingly emotional Sinhala vernacular traditions, little attention is accorded to ornate description of her clothes, grieving disarray, or the kind of details of her palatial background that one might expect from Sanskrit poetry, though her beauty is lovingly and simply portrayed. Her drama is one of straightforward lament and of fidelity that has been apparently betrayed. In accordance with the *Apadāna* tradition, the prose narrative recounts, however, a breath-taking display of her psychic command, mastery in shape-shifting and her eloquent survey of her lives with the *Bodhisatta*, as well as her own teaching. Gotama pays tribute to her varied excellencies and knowledge before her death, perhaps also an important finishing touch to the story for Sri Lankan women, some of whom may have felt their own personal sacrifices had been unacknowledged and that such a figure could offer inspiration for their own personal practice.

There has been some substantial scholarship on Yasodharā/Yasodharā in recent years, though much of it is not well known: Joel Tatelman did a doctoral thesis at Oxford on the Mediaeval text, the Nepalese *Badrakalpa avadāna*, and Sally Mellick Cutler compiled a critical edition of selected portions of the Pāli *Apadāna* for hers, which includes an excellent translation of the *Yasodharā* section on which the second work in Obeyesekere's book is based.⁴ Donald Swearer has brought the Thai 'Bimbā's lament' to scholarly attention.⁵ With regard to her earlier 'selves', John Strong has discussed the familial connectivity of all the *Bodhisatta/Bodhisattva's* family, described through many lifetimes,⁶ while Richard Gombrich, Steven Collins and Justin Meiland have studied her role as Maddi in the *Vessantara-Jātaka*, as well as her presence in other *Jātakas*.⁷ This book is the first to my knowledge, however, that really investigates how one cultural setting has regarded the Buddha's wife in her last lifetime, and integrated it to the Buddhist ritual and practice of a particular region.

As a 'good read' it introduces a useful resource to those familiar with Southern Buddhism but is accessible to the newcomer. It also demonstrates, through Obeyesekere's skill at evoking her own cultural context, that the story of Yasodharā stands as a genuinely powerful myth, in the literary sense of the term: a story endlessly susceptible to reinterpretation, in this case by offering a figure on whom all women can focus their preoccupations and concerns.

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4. See J. Tatelman, *The Truth of Yasodharā, A Critical Edition*, Annotated translation and study of the *Badrakalpa-avadāna*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 1996 and S. Mellick Cutler, *A Critical Edition with Selected Portions of the Pāli Apadāna (Yasodharāpadāna)*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 1997.
 5. See D. Swearer, 'Bimbā's Lament', *Buddhism in Practice*, Donald Lopez ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 541–542.
 6. See J. Strong, 'A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodharā and Rāhula in the *Mūlasārvastivāda Vinaya*', *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and South East Asia*, Juliane Schobar ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 113–128.
 7. See M. Cone and R.F. Gombrich *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: a Buddhist Epic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), xviii ff; S. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 519ff and J. Meiland, *Buddhist Values in the Jātakas, with particular reference to the theme of Renunciation*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2003, *passim*.

Constantly refashioned and recreated in Buddhist regions, she has remained in Asia an enduringly popular figure, despite being almost unknown in the western world. She seems to develop and evolve, with highly distinct identities, perhaps a little like Buddhism itself, in different settings. In these two versions, well explained by Obeyesekere, she is communicated as a peculiarly Sri Lankan Buddhist heroine: strong, loyal and down-to-earth, capable of acting as a willing sustainer and supporter of her husband, significantly in both the lay and the monastic life, yet with an eloquent command of her own position and purpose. In the poem, her struggle between vulnerable, human emotions and loyal heroism make her a figure with whom Sri Lankan women would empathise; in the narrative, as an *arahat*, she emerges in this translation as a majestic and highly individual teacher, capable of great power and mastery of mental states. This is a touching and absorbing book, a reflection of the author's own rich experience of Sri Lankan culture and the global literary tradition, and also, of course, of the continued appeal and stature of a folk heroine who still seems to leave an enigmatic trail of questions behind her.