

Yasodhara and Siddhartha

The Enlightenment of Buddha's Wife

by Jacqueline Kramer

Over 2,500 years ago, in a kingdom nestled in a fruitful region fed by the Ganges River, there lived a king by the name of Suppabuddha and his Queen Pamita. Good news had come to them. The Queen was pregnant!

At the same time, in the nearby kingdom of Kapila, the king's younger brother, King Suddhodana, was also expecting a child. These were not to be ordinary children. Auspicious signs pointed to this being their last round of birth and death, and they both had the signs of either being great secular or great religious leaders. Because of this it was proclaimed that both children were to be sons. But this was not to be the case with King Suppabuddha's child, who was born a female. Disappointed that his child was a girl but honored at her auspicious signs, the king bowed before her. Her name was Yasodhara. A week after her birth her mother died, and the child was schooled and raised by the court tutors and Brahmins.

Thus begins the female enlightenment story of Yasodhara, wife of Siddhartha. For over 30 years as a practicing Buddhist I searched for a mythical role model of a deeply spiritual Buddhist laywoman, only to discover that she was right before me, hidden in plain sight. None of the stories I had read or heard about the Buddha's life said much about Yasodhara, except that she gave birth to his son, Rahula, that Siddhartha left her to seek enlightenment, and that she urged her son to get his inheritance from his father. This led me to believe that Yasodhara was an insignificant pebble Siddhartha tripped over on his path to enlightenment.

My interest in finding female Buddhist role models quickened when I began teaching Buddhism to mothers. Whenever I shared the Buddha's story, no matter how I spun the tale, my students did not feel comfortable when I arrived at the part where Siddhartha leaves his wife and sleeping child to venture beyond the palace gates seeking the end of suffering. They couldn't bring themselves to tell this part of the story to their children. I explained to my students that, "This was a different time and place. These things were not unusual then. Siddhartha did, after all, leave Yasodhara in the care of



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his father and a court that would see to all of her needs. It wasn't as if he was leaving her without rent money or health insurance."

I continued trying to convince myself as well as my students.

"It's only a teaching myth; we mustn't take it literally...."

"Siddhartha's leaving speaks to the need to let go of all our attachments, all we know, in order to seek the unknown...."

Still no sale. Not for my students. Not for me. The idea of a man leaving his wife and child was just too painful.

Yasodhara grew up to be a beautiful, generous, and loving young woman. She questioned why her servants did not eat the same food as the members of the palace. It never seemed fair to her that some had so much while others suffered with so little. When she turned 16 she heard that her cousin Siddhartha was preparing to pick

a bride. All the eligible girls from miles around ventured to Kapila to meet this handsome, intelligent young man. Yasodhara had heard of Siddhartha from her brother Devadatta. Devadatta told a story about how he had shot down a swan in flight. Siddhartha revived the bird and claimed it as his own.

“The bird belongs to the one who saves his life, not the one who takes it,” Siddhartha explained.

When Yasodhara heard this story, she very much wanted to meet this compassionate young man who questioned his culture’s values, the prize of the hunt.

Like all the other eligible girls, Yasodhara took the trip to her cousin’s palace. When she walked into the room where Siddhartha was greeting the young women, his eyes met hers, and Siddhartha felt a deep stirring. He knew he had loved her over many lifetimes. They both felt this ancient recognition and fell deeply in love. Siddhartha got down on one knee and offered Yasodhara his ornament, asking her to be his bride. Yasodhara came back home and told her father the good news. A look of concern for his beloved daughter crossed King Suppabuddha’s face.

He leaned close to her.

“You know, dear daughter, the signs are that Siddhartha will go off and leave his family to pursue enlightenment.”

“Yes father, I know this,” Yasodhara replied, “but I will have none other than Siddhartha for my husband. We have been promised to one another over many lifetimes. This is to be our last and we are to do it together.”

Before I was prompted by the vision of Yasodhara as a fully feminine, fully empowered woman, I searched for female lay Buddhists who found their enlightenment while washing dishes and rocking babies. Most of the female enlightenment stories were of women who had lost their families, left their families, or entered the path when their children were grown. Although there were a few exceptions such as Dipa Ma and Machig Labdrön, I still felt I had not found what I was looking for. I wanted to watch her fold her laundry and nurse her baby in deep mindfulness and emptiness. When I shared this concern with my friend Ayya Tathaaloka, she said, “What about the story of Yasodhara, the Buddha’s wife?” I sat wide-eyed and incredulous as she related details of Yasodhara’s story I had never heard before. The jewel chest was open, and the jewels poured out.

I had only heard Yasodhara portrayed as an appendix

to Siddhartha’s story at best and an impediment to his enlightenment at worst, yet here was Ayya sharing long-forgotten pieces of this magnificent story depicting Yasodhara as a powerful, deeply spiritual woman, an astrological equal to Siddhartha. When asked, Ayya told me that the pieces of the story were gathered from ancient texts such as the Pali Vinaya, the Mulasarvastivada, the Lokottaravada, the Dharmaguptaka, and the Mahisasaka Vinaya. Which pieces came from which source is a tale yet to be told. I also found pieces of the Yasodhara story in the work of the Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya who had expressed a keen interest in creating a more accurate telling of the Buddha’s story. To that end he left me with pieces of the Buddha’s story to illustrate and eventually make into a children’s book. At the time it never occurred to me that, years later, Bante’s writing would shed light on Yasodhara’s story.

Yasodhara was not passively given to Siddhartha, she chose to be with him, and he chose to be with her. Not once, but twice, Siddhartha knelt before her asking if she would be his wife. Even though Yasodhara knew that Siddhartha would someday leave, even though everyone told her that the four heavenly messengers would call him away from palace life, she was not deterred from intermingling her destiny with his. Was there even a choice?

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The two deeply spiritual and compassionate beings had helped and supported one another over many lifetimes. Their compassion showed in their shared concern about inequalities in their culture and their shared dream of abolishing the caste system. Siddhartha not only honored and respected Yasodhara, he felt great joy in her presence. They played and laughed and made love and shared dreams of a better world for 13 years before the birth of their son. When it came time for Siddhartha to leave the palace in pursuit of enlightenment he did not abandon a helpless wife and child, but went out to

seek the end of suffering for her, for his son, and for all sentient beings. On the brink of enlightenment herself, Yasodhara understood this. Yet, she was also a mortal woman and would miss her beloved companion.

It didn't dawn on me how accurate my students' intuitions about the negative power of the old Yasodhara myth were until a paragraph from Sid Brown's book, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun—Even Against the Wind*, a biography of a Thai Buddhist nun named Maechi Wabi, jumped out of the page at me. When Wabi was a little girl her father deserted her family for another woman, leaving his wife and four children in poverty without sending any money or making contact for several years. He eventually came back to them promising, upon his return, that he would, "care for the children and not leave again unless it was to go forth as a monk." Her father stayed for one year, fathered another child, and then left to become a monk. This led to a life of grueling hardship for the wife and children he left behind and a deep distrust of men in Wabi.

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though there are Vinaya rules stating that a man must get permission from his wife to become ordained, how is a woman, made to feel inferior since birth, going to oppose her husband's wishes? What sort of life would she face if she said, "No, I do not want you to leave us." It's not hard to see how some men could view the story of Siddhartha leaving Yasodhara as a model for how to leave the responsibilities of family life and be virtuous at the same time.

After Siddhartha left, Yasodhara heard that he had relinquished his fine clothing and had taken to wearing simple yellow robes. She too donned simple yellow robes

and gave up wearing jewels. When she heard that he was taking only one meal a day, she also took only one meal a day. When she heard he slept on low, hard beds, she gave up the luxurious palace beds and slept as he did. And when she heard he had given up garlands and perfumes she did so as well. As Siddhartha pursued enlightenment outside the palace gates, Yasodhara joined him on the path within hearth and home. This was, after all, to be her last round of birth and death as well. She was a laywoman raising her son, but that did not change her auspicious destiny. Staying home did not mean she could not join her beloved husband on his journey towards enlightenment. Although they each played different roles in the enlightenment story, he seeking enlightenment outside the palace while she stayed within, their intent and focus remained in alignment.

The myths a culture adopts have a pivotal role in shaping that culture. We learn about who we are, how to treat others, the planet, and ourselves from our myths. They are the wombs in which the seeds of our ethical systems grow. We do not know definitively how Siddhartha and Yasodhara's lives unfolded. The telling of their stories is not history, it lives in the realm of myths designed to teach Buddhist principles. As we import Buddhism to the West, we need to carefully examine which myths we are adopting.

It is remarkable how little is known about the story of Yasodhara in the West, how many details have been dropped along the way. We have subsisted on a diet of predigested tales from cultures that are often less than female-friendly, yet shards of light from other more ancient visions, closer to the bone visions, are there to be mined.

I was led to believe that Yasodhara was incidental to the story of the Buddha's enlightenment at best, and a bitter deterrent at worst. But this was just one telling of the tale, and not necessarily the most credible one. Would a compassionate couple, both on the brink of full enlightenment, desert and resent one another? It turns out that the ancient story of Siddhartha and Yasodhara is more subtle and textural than that. When some of the details are put back in place, the story offers us a role model of feminine enlightenment and of enlightened relationship—co-conspirators, plotting to ease the suffering of the world.

Each symbol in the story of the Buddha's life has been carefully chosen; the four heavenly messengers,

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the awakening under the rose apple tree and the Buddha's bowl swimming upstream on the day of his enlightenment. As a more female-friendly culture we can invite the details of Yasodhara's story back into the story of the Buddha's life. Including Yasodhara's story can offer us a view of two different paths leading to the same place, *parinibbanna*. It is important for the future of Buddhism in the West that we pass along models of the enlightened feminine for both our sons and our daughters. We are fortunate that the story of Siddhartha and Yasodhara does this with grace and beauty.

Although her father and father-in-law asked Yasodhara to stay at the palace and rule the two kingdoms, she was drawn to fulfill her spiritual destiny. She entered the order of nuns at the same time as Mahapajapati Gotami. Rahula joined the order of monks as well. Among the hundreds of Bhikkhuni Arahants, Yasodhara was one of the Buddha's 13 great Bhikkhuni disciples. She attained

supernormal powers and was able to recall infinite eras of the past. One night Yasodhara came to the Buddha and said, "Tonight I am going to die." She came to thank him for showing her the path. She told the man who was once her husband and had become her teacher, "I am my own refuge." Then she preceded her husband into the deathless realm.

Thus I have heard. ❖

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