

## Introduction

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### YASODHARĀ: THE WOMAN

Many Sri Lankans of my generation, who grew up hearing folk songs sung to them as lullabies or learned them in school in later childhood, will remember verses from the *Yasodharāvata*. We knew only a few verses, excerpts that had entered the folk repertoire, but the melancholy rhythms of Yasodharā's lament haunted my childhood imagination and left a lasting resonance.

Yasodharā is the name in Buddhist literature for the wife of Prince Siddharta, the Bōdhisattva<sup>1</sup> who later became the Buddha Gautama. Although there is virtually no reference to Yasodharā in the earliest texts of the Pali canon, in the Buddha narrative, as it has come down in the canonical tradition, Yasodharā does appear, first only as the nun Rāhula mātā (mother of Rāhula) and later as Yasodharā or Bimbā, the wife of the Bōdhisattva.

The Buddha narrative's central focus is necessarily on the Bōdhisattva Siddharta. It is his extraordinary birth, his life as a royal prince, his renunciation of the luxuries of that life, his renunciation even of his wife and son whom he loves dearly that are extolled. The story describes also the many years spent in futile and extreme asceticism, his achievement of Buddhahood, his subsequent life as a teacher, and final death. His wife, Yasodharā, appears only as a shadowy figure in that larger, more important, story.

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1. The *Bōdhisattva*, also termed the *Bōsat* in Sinhala, is one who strives through many lives in *samsāra* to cultivate the perfect virtues necessary to become a Buddha.

There is one scene in the life of the Bōdhisattva Siddharta—that of the “great renunciation” (*mahābhīnikmaṇa*)—that appears again and again in literature and art throughout the Buddhist world. It is the scene where the Bōdhisattva goes to bid farewell to his wife and newborn son. Even there, the beautiful Yasodharā is a non-actor. She is asleep. We see her only through his eyes—the young and lovely wife he must leave if he is to keep his resolve to become a Buddha.

Thereafter the figure of Yasodharā disappears from the official Buddha story only to make one last fleeting appearance as part of the entourage of women who go to the Buddha seeking permission to be ordained as Buddhist nuns. There too she is a minor figure, unlike Prajāpati Gōtami, the Buddha’s foster mother, who becomes head of the order. All we are told is that Yasodharā becomes a nun and later an *arahat* (an Enlightened One).

The woman Yasodharā may occupy only a small space in the early Buddha narrative, but her elusive figure has continued to fascinate Buddhists over the centuries. The many retellings of her story in prose and verse, by both monks and laymen throughout the Buddhist world, are evidence of this fascination. These accounts focus on certain critical lacunae in her story, given passing mention in the larger narrative but that provide possibilities for expansion by later monastic and lay commentators.

#### YASODHARĀ IN EARLY SANSKRIT AND PALI BUDDHIST LITERATURE

##### *a) The Pali Yasodharāpadāna*

As the canonical literature develops over time, Yasodharā’s figure takes on a life and a persona. One of the earliest of such extensions concerns her life as a nun. In the Pali *Yasodharāpadāna*<sup>2</sup> (sacred biography of Yasodharā) dated around the first century CE and found among the apadāna texts in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* that deal with the lives of the Elders (monks and nuns) of the Pali Theravada tradition, there is an account of Yasodharā the *arahat*. There we are told that, on the day she is to die, the nun Yasodharā goes to make her final farewell to the Buddha, displays her supernatural magical powers before a gathered assembly of monks, nuns, and laypersons, and then goes on to recount her many acts of devotion to the Bōdhisattva in their journey through *samsāra*.

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2. The *Apadāna* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* edited by M. E. Lilley. London: Pali Text Society, 1925.

There are many versions of the *Yasodharāpadāna* in prose and verse and in several languages. This early Pali collection seems to have provided a space, especially for monks, to imaginatively expand upon her life. The attribution of miraculous powers gives her a further dimension. No longer is she the shadowy figure of the early Buddhist texts. The Apadana transforms her into an exceptional and powerful almost divine being.

*b) Ashvaghosa's Buddhacarita*

Another very early commentary that introduces the figure of Yasodharā, not as a nun but as the grieving wife in the Buddha story, is the Sanskrit poem titled *Buddhacarita* (life of the Buddha) by the Mahayāna monk Ashvaghosa dated between the first and second century CE. In it there is a section titled "Lamenting in the Seraglio"<sup>3</sup> in which the women of the palace, Prajāpati Gōtami, his foster mother, and Yasodharā, his chief queen, lament the Bōdhisattva's departure in his quest for Enlightenment. The theme of Yasodharā's grief and her lament at the departure of her husband is yet another point of possible expansion that captured the imagination of poets very early in their recounting of the Buddha narrative. One is struck by the way in which not just the events of the Bōdhisattva's life but certain themes in the women's laments filter down through these early texts, tenuous threads that surface again and again in much later works in far-flung areas of the Buddhist world.

One such example is Yasodharā's initial anger at the minister Chandaka (s: Canna, pronounced Channa) who returns without the Bōdhisattva. The poet of the *Buddhacarita* has Yasodharā make him the scapegoat for the departure of her lord.

*Canto 8:v.31*

Then Yasodharā spoke, eyes red with anger,  
her voice choking by the bitterness of despair,  
her breast heaving with her sighs  
tears streaming due to the depths of her grief:

v.32

"Chandaka where has that joy of my heart gone  
leaving me as I slept helpless at night  
As I see you and Kantaka return

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3. I am using the translation by Patrick Olivelle from *Life of the Buddha* by Ashvaghosa. Clay Sanskrit Library. New York: New York University Press, 2008. The quotations are from Canto 8.

when three had departed  
my heart begins to tremble.

v.33

You have done me an ignoble, cruel and unfriendly act  
so why do you weep here today you heartless man?  
Contain your tears, be of good cheer!  
your tears do not suit your deed!

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v.35

It is better for a man to have a prudent foe  
than a foolish friend, skilled in what is unfit:  
For, calling yourself a friend, you fool  
you have brought this family to great ruin.”

Many centuries later, that anger resonates in a single verse of a Sri Lankan folk poet of the *Yasodharāvata* in the eighteenth or nineteenth century:

v.71

When the minister Canna returned to the city that day  
The queen turned on him—a lioness leaping to the kill.  
“Canna, friend, where is my loved lord today?  
Go bring him to me now. I must see him. I will.”

Again as Pajāpati Gōtami, his foster mother, laments in Ashvaghosa’s poem, she refers to the rigors of the Bōdhisattva’s ascetic life as contrasted with his past comforts.

v.55

Those soft feet of his, with lovely webbed toes,  
tender like lotus fiber or a flower petal,  
With concealed ankles, with whorls on the soles—  
how will they tread on the rough forest ground?

v.56

Accustomed to sitting and lying on the palace terrace,  
decked in priceless clothes, aloe, and sandal paste  
How will his mighty body fare in the forest  
amidst the cold the heat and the rains?

These same ideas surface in the work of the anonymous folk poet of Sri Lanka as part of Yasodharā's (not Gōtami's) lament.<sup>4</sup>

v.81

In the shadows of the forest you now walk,  
There is no resting place for you in that dark.  
Unceasing burns the fire that sears my heart,  
My hand on my heart I beat my breast and weep.

v.98

My lord, on a bed of forest flowers are you sleeping?  
Your tender lovely feet are they now hurting?  
Are there sufficient gods around you, guarding?  
Dear husband, my elephant king, where are you roaming?

As the Ashvaghosa poem indicates, Yasodharā's grief and her lament when she learns of her husband's departure, perhaps because it resonates with the popular tradition of folk laments in many cultures, is another point in the Yasodharā story that began very early to fire the imagination of poets and commentators and continued to do so over the centuries.

*c) Yasodharā in the Mahāvagga*

The *Mahāvagga*, another later canonical text, develops yet another incident. It is said that when the Buddha returned to his parental home of Kapilavastu after his Enlightenment to preach to his kinsmen, Yasodharā was absent. Some accounts say only that she refused to go with the rest of her family to hear her former husband, now the Buddha Gautama, preach. Other accounts also note that when she saw her husband, now a monk, begging for alms in the city street she pointed him out to her son and instructed him to go ask his father for his inheritance. The early texts do not expand on the implications of either action. Is there perhaps an element of residual hurt at a husband who abandoned her? Is there an implied criticism of an absent father in her request that he provide for his son? The questions are neither asked nor answered in the early Buddha narrative.

The *Mahāvagga*, however, does expand on the account of her first meeting with the Buddha after the seven-year separation and paints a poignant picture. The accounts give body to her presence only hinted at earlier and creating the

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4. I quote from my translation of the anonymous Sinhala folk poem that is given in full in the next chapter.

popular perception of her as a woman of great devotion and strength of character. I quote from a translation by Paul Carus, of the text from the *Mahāvagga*.<sup>5</sup> The text states:

Then the king conducted the prince into the palace and the ministers and all members of the royal family greeted him with great reverence, but Yasodharā, the mother of Rāhula, did not make an appearance. The king sent for Yasodharā, but she replied, “Surely if I am deserving of any regard, Siddhatta will come and see me.” The Blessed One having greeted all his relatives and friends asked, “Where is Yasodharā?” And on being informed that she had refused to come he rose straightway and went to her apartments.

“I am free” the Blessed One said to his disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna whom he had bidden to accompany him to the princess’s chamber. “The princess however is not yet free. Not having seen me for a long time she is exceedingly sorrowful. Unless her grief is allowed its course her heart will cleave. Should she touch the Tathagata, the Holy One, you must not prevent her.”

Yasodharā sat in her room, dressed in mean garments and her hair cut. When the Buddha entered she was, from the abundance of her affection, like an overflowing vessel unable to contain her love. Forgetting that the man whom she loved was the Buddha, Lord of the World, the preacher of truth, she held him by his feet and wept bitterly. Remembering however that Suddhōdana was present she felt ashamed and rising, seated herself reverently at a distance.

The king apologized for the princess saying, “This arises from her deep affection and is more than a temporary emotion. During the seven years that she had lost her husband when she heard that Siddhatta had shaved his head, she did likewise; when she heard that he had left off the use of perfumes and ornaments, she also refused their use. Like her husband she had eaten at appointed times from an earthen bowl only. Like him she had renounced high beds and splendid coverings and when princes asked her in marriage she replied that she was still his. Therefore grant her forgiveness.”

The Buddha spoke kindly to Yasodharā telling of her great Merits inherited from former lives. She had indeed been again and again of

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5. *Mahāvagga*, Vol. XIII, verses 1–V, in *The Sacred Books of the East*. Oxford, 1881–1882, p. 18, quoted in Paul Carus, *Buddha, the Gospel*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1894.

great assistance to him. Her purity, her gentleness, her devotion had been invaluable to the Bōdhisattva when he aspired to attain Enlightenment, the highest aim of mankind. And so holy had she been that she desired to be the wife of a Buddha. This then was her *karma* and it is the result of great merit. Her grief has been unspeakable but the consciousness of the glory that surrounds her spiritual inheritance increased by her noble attitude during her life will be a balm that will miraculously transform all sorrows into heavenly joy.<sup>6</sup>

*d) Bimbā's Lament in the Chengmai Text from Thailand*

The incident described in the *Mahāvagga* is given a different turn in a much later prose version entitled "Bimbā's<sup>7</sup> lament" translated by Donald Swearer (in Lopez 1985) from a Thai text from Chengmai. I include it here as it provides yet another writer's perspective on Yasodharā's situation. The Thai folk account is described as "Yasodharā's lament" but is an interesting contrast to the lament in the Sinhala folk poem *Yasodharāvata* (The Story of Yasodharā), which I translate and discuss at length in chapter 1. Both laments, one in prose and one in verse, come from about the same period (probably between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and both were probably reworkings of earlier versions. In the Sinhala version, Yasodharā's lament, as in the Ashvaghosa text, comes at the point when she first learns of her husband's departure to become a monk. In the Thai text, the lament is placed at the point when the Buddha returns to Kapilavastu to preach his doctrine to his father and kinsmen. In the Thai version, the lament is a complaint made to the servant who has come to convey her father-in-law's message that she should be present at the Buddha's preaching. An extract from this text follows:

Having approached Bimbā, the servant paid her respects and asked "O queen why are you so sad and emaciated?" Bimbā looking at the maid replied, "O servant, come in. I shall tell you why I am so sorrowful nowadays. I am sad because the Lord Buddha, the founder of the religion no longer loves me even though I have done nothing wrong. I faithfully performed all my wifely duties toward him. I must be a person of little merit. I can accept being abandoned, but the Buddha should have sympathy for his son, Rāhula. He is lovable and innocent. His perfection is like that of a lotus standing above the surface of a pond. We have suffered greatly, as if crushed by a mountain.

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6. Paul Carus. *Buddha, The Gospel*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1894.

7. Bimbā is another name for Yasodharā.

O my beloved Rāhula, You were a misfortune for your father from the very beginning. I have suffered as a widow; men look down on me; they do not respect me. A royal carriage is symbolized by its banner; a flame depends upon fire; a river exists because of the ocean; a state devoid of a ruler can not survive. Just so Rāhula, you and I having been abandoned are persons of no account. Everyone accuses you of being illegitimate; and people look down on me as a widow. My suffering brings only tears. How can I continue to live? I am ashamed before everyone. It is better for me to take poison and die or to put a rope around my neck and hang myself from the palace.”

Bimbā continued to sob uncontrollably.

This transcriber then makes the following statement: “Here ends the first chapter of Bimbā’s Lament. I copied this text in the afternoon of *Culasakarāja* 1161 (1799 CE) the year of the snake, the eleventh lunar month, the first day of the waning moon corresponding to the fifth day.”<sup>8</sup>

The manuscript continues, however, suggesting the accretion of another version or text. Bimbā’s complaint continues:

My husband departed without even saying goodbye. He then returned unannounced and did not come to see me. In the past my Lord came to my quarters without telling anyone and came into my bedroom even when the bed was unmade. He was kind to me and was never harsh or angry. . . . Now the Lord Buddha has come to see his father, but did not visit Bimbā, the mother of Rāhula . . . . Though I, Bimbā, married a handsome lord I have truly suffered just like the old saying. This story will be told to future generations. O my servant I am not an evil person. This must be a consequence of evil *karma* in a past life. I’m like a tree that has lost its flowers and its fruit. I have been abandoned but not because of anything I have done.

My Lord decided to take up the religious life and has reached enlightenment. Nothing that I have wanted has come to pass. My husband deserted me a long time ago and became a mendicant, leaving me filled with sorrow for the rest of my life.

O servant, tell my father-in-law what I have said and that I, Bimbā, am unable to come to pay my respects. The king’s son entered

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8. Donald Swearer. “Bimbā’s Lament.” *Buddhism in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955.



the court three days ago. My father-in-law did not send a servant to summon me . . . My lord was not gracious enough to come to my palace. The king knew the reason for this. I do not want to live anymore. O servant, please ask my father-in-law to forgive me.” The servant took Bimbā’s message to the king.<sup>9</sup>

This Thai prose text expresses the same fascination on the part of the author with the feelings of Yasodharā. The Thai version, however, is a more open complaint, a listing of grievances, and refers to aspects of social marginalization that probably went with widowhood and illegitimacy in the society of the time.

The Thai prose text, as with many other folk texts, indicates possible amalgamations and recompositions. Because palm leaf texts are a collection of loosely tied leaves (most often without any numbering), they can easily have their pages mis-collated. The placing of the events in the Chengmai Thai text suggests that this could have happened. I shall illustrate by isolating each event.

The details of the events described in the Chengmai text (only a part of which I have quoted) are in the following order:

1. Bimbā inquires about the excitement in the city. Is told her husband has returned. Is angry and humiliated that one who was once a prince now begs. She complains of desertion, sobs, and faints.
2. Regains consciousness, goes to the window, and sees the Buddha. There is then a long passage where she exclaims at length on the beauty of his person and points him out to her son. Then she goes to him, says she has come to pay her respects, falls at his feet, and worships him.
3. In a seeming reversal, in the next section she tells her father-in-law that in begging for alms “his actions disgrace and dishonor our family.”
4. The king questions the Buddha on this point. The Buddha gives his reasons for doing so, and the king is converted.
5. The king sends for Bimbā. She makes a long complaint about the Buddha to the servant (section quoted earlier). She refuses to go to him. At this point, the scribe interjects and gives his identity, suggesting it is the end of a text.
6. The text resumes, goes back to the point where the servant conveys the king’s request.

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9. Ibid.

7. Bimbā continues her complaint. Tells the king she cannot come.
8. The king invites the Buddha to visit her.
9. On seeing the Buddha, Bimbā “felt angry and resentful.” She falls at his feet “crying out her unhappiness.”
10. Her sorrow slowly disappears. She regains composure, takes delight in the teaching and becomes a “Stream Enterer.”

One realizes as one reads that perhaps two accounts of the incident have been incorporated into one by a (later) transcriber. The interpolation of one transcriber’s identity that comes in the middle of the lament further confirms such amalgamation.

*e) Yasodharā later in Mahayāna Sanskrit Texts*

There are also the Mahayāna and Sanskrit traditions in which texts such as the medieval period Badrakalpavadāna and the Sanghabedhavastu section of the Sanskrit *Mūlasarvastivāda Vinaya* have even more elaborate stories of Yasodharā. They make no reference to the “great departure” which is so much a part of the Theravada tradition. Instead they expand on Yasodharā’s life in the palace immediately before and after the departure of her husband. The accounts describe her relations with the Bōdhisattva on the night before his departure, the resulting conception, an extraordinary seven years of pregnancy that coincide with his seven year quest for enlightenment, and her sufferings and tribulations during the period of his absence. I make only a passing reference to these texts since they have been translated and commented on by other scholars such as John Tattleman<sup>10</sup> and John Strong.<sup>11</sup>

## YASODHARĀ IN SINHALA LITERATURE

The Sinhala *Yasodharāpadānaya*<sup>12</sup> is a much expanded twelfth or thirteenth century version of the Pali *Yasodharāpadāna*. This text too deals with the events

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10. John Tattleman, *The Trials of Yasodharā: A Critical Edition, Annotated Translation and Study of the Bhadrakalpavadāna*, Doctoral thesis submitted to Wolfson College, Oxford University, 1996.

11. John S. Strong, “A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodharā and Rāhula in the *Mūlasarvastivāda Vinaya*.” *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and South-east Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

12. *Yasodarāpadānaya* edited from the palm leaf manuscript B/5 at the Dharmagaveshana Parshadaya by the monk Dr. Meegoda Pannaloka Thēra and published in Colombo in 2000. The translation is mine.

associated with Yasodharā's final visit to the Buddha. She is now an *arahat* and goes to the Buddha for the ritual farewell performed by *arahats* before they die. There she recounts past lives in which she has been faithful to him amid all adversities and helped him in his quest for *nirvāṇa*, often sacrificing her life for him. The Buddha praises her exceptional devotion and meritorious actions throughout their journey together during uncountable numbers of existences in *samsāra*. He then requests her to display her supernormal powers as an *arahat* (which she has hitherto modestly hidden from the world) for the benefit of a public who have doubts about her being an *arahat*.

Because the Sinhala *Yasodharāpadānaya* is an important text of which there are many palm leaf manuscript versions still found in temple libraries in Sri Lanka, I have included a complete translation and comment on it in chapters 2 and 3.

Another very popular thirteenth century Sinhala work the *Pūjāvaliya* (Garland of Offerings)<sup>1</sup> treasured by generations of Sri Lankan Buddhists and repeatedly transcribed by successive generations of monks, has a chapter that expands even further on the *Yasodharāpadāna*. The writer incorporates much of the earlier *Yasodharāpadāna* material, but in Yasodharā's 'testimony' before the Buddha he adds material from other birth stories not included in the earlier Pali or Sinhala texts.

In a wonderful tour de force, with some ironic tongue-in-cheek comments, the author of the *Pūjāvaliya* has Yasodharā justify even her acts of cruelty toward the Bōdhisattva in a previous birth story familiar to Buddhists as the *Kusa Jātaka*.<sup>14</sup> I quote here a short section from the *Pūjāvaliya* to indicate how yet another author-monk in the thirteenth century brings in his own perspective on the character of Yasodharā. She says:

For a long time in *samsāra* I lived united with you like your shadow. I was always faithful and supportive of you in all the different places we lived. However, women are frail and have little intellect. So you may at times find shortcomings [on my part]. But if you look with wisdom at each of these wrongs you will know that they did in fact help to strengthen your *pāramitā* (perfections or virtues needed to become a

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13. Thera Mayurapada, *Pūjāvaliya*. Colombo: Gunasena and Sons, 1986, chapter 31, pp. 675–717.

14. In the *Kusa Jātaka*, the Bōdhisattva is born as the powerful but hideous King Kusa who falls in love with the extraordinarily beautiful princess Pabāvati. The story deals with her rejection of him and his determined wooing of her.

Buddha). Thus even wrongs done by me were in fact a source of benefit to you.

Leaving out other times, it is said that I treated you harshly in our *Kusa Jātaka* [existence]. You were then born as King Kusa and I as Pabāvati. At a time when I was intoxicated by my own beauty you disguised yourself and threw elephant dung and horse shit at me and sat on your elephant and made mocking gestures and faces at me and taunted me.<sup>15</sup> Then, even though I spoke abusively to you I did so in ignorance. Since there is no demerit in a non-volitional act I did no wrong.

When you hid in the royal pond and grabbed my hand saying, “I am King Kusa” how could I believe that a king could have a face like that—one that shamed the full moon in its [flat] ugliness. You who, in a past birth, had looked enviously at a Paccēka<sup>16</sup> Buddha when he was accepting an offering of flat cakes; because of that wrongful act you were born with an extremely repulsive face like a flat cake, terrifying all who saw it. “How can a king have a face like this? Surely it is a demon” I thought and mocked you as I would a demon. Therefore then too I was not to blame.

Thereafter I took my retinue, left [you, my husband] King Kusa and returned to my [natal] home. That too was a result of a fervent wish I had made in my past. Therefore I was again not to blame. [Pabāvati then goes on to state how her actions, though at the time abusive and hurtful were in fact beneficial to the Bōdhisattva in that it enabled him to cultivate the ten virtues necessary to become a Buddha. She lists them one by one.]

“In that life, because of certain wrongs on my part, my husband in his devotion to me gave over his kingdom to his mother [in order to follow me] and in doing so perfected the virtue of Generosity (*dāna pāramitā*).

After you had won my affection in that life, because of your great love for me, you never sought other women and so observed the Five

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15. The reference is to an incident when Kusa’s handsome younger brother is paraded on the royal elephant to deceive Pabāvati and get her consent to the marriage with the ugly King Kusa. Meanwhile, Kusa, disguised as the elephant keeper, insults Pabāvati for her inordinate pride in her own beauty. She angrily abuses him for insulting her.

16. A *paccēka* Buddha is an enlightened being who, however, does not teach the Doctrine to others.

Precepts (*panca sila*), thereby perfecting the virtue of Moral Conduct (*silā pāramitā*).

In your devotion to me alone, in giving up your kingdom and traveling alone you perfected the virtue of Selflessness (*nekkhamma pāramitā*).

Learning different crafts [and skills] in order to create objects just for me, you perfected the virtue of Knowledge (*paññā pāramitā*).

In traveling four hundred leagues just to find me, you who lived the sheltered soft life of a king perfected the virtue of Effort (*vīriya pāramitā*).

Moreover, you who were king of all Dambadiva, instead of thinking, ‘I will bring her back by force’ bore me no ill will or anger. You bore with patience my angry words and thereby perfected the virtue of Kindness (*karuṇā pāramitā*).

“King Kusa, those who know how to make predictions will tell you that I will never be your wife. Your hope of getting me is like trying to get water to spring from a stone, or getting the wind to blow, or raising your hand to touch the moon. Do not expect to win me. Go back to your home,” I said, deceptively. You said, “As I am a man I will certainly make you my chief queen [some day]. I will not go back to my kingdom without you” and in speaking so adamantly—words that you then later made come true—you perfected the virtue of Truth (*satya pāramitā*).

The [whirling] top you flung in one instant turned for fifteen hours and by your resolve you created various images of your forlorn love for me, for no other creature but me to see. So much so that even god Sakra’s heaven was moved. You thereby perfected the virtue of Resolve (*adhittāna pāramitā*).

When seven enemy kings, ignorant of the kind of person you were, came seeking to marry [me] the chief queen of the king of all Dambadiva, you caught them and tied their hands with your shawl. But showing no anger at the time you let them go and even gave gifts of women. By that act you perfected the virtue of Compassion (*maitri pāramitā*).

In all those situations, unshaken, still as the mountain Mēru, by all you achieved you perfected the virtue of Equanimity (*upekkhā pāramitā*).<sup>17</sup>

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17. *Pūjāvaliya* by Mayurāpada Thēra, extract from chapter 31. The translation is mine.

The woman who emerges from this text is not just the devoted wife and companion but a woman with a razor-sharp intellect who with almost legalistic acumen transforms negative material to make a positive case for herself. Each negative act she claims was beneficial in that it did propel the Bōdhisattva Kusa to perform the actions needed to fulfill each one of the Ten Perfections or *dasa pāramitā*.

The Sinhala folk poem *Yasodharāvata* (The Story of Yasodharā) written probably between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE is another very popular poem on Yasodharā that has circulated in Sri Lanka for generations. Unlike many of the earlier commentarial texts, this is probably the work of a secular poet, not a monk. Its very human portrait of the woman Yasodharā has over the years become a part of the folk repertoire of Sinhala poetry. It is the text I have translated, and I shall refer to it hereafter as *Yasodharāvata* (A).<sup>18</sup>

There is another much later (perhaps late nineteenth century) Sinhala text called *Yasodharā Sāntiya* (Yasodharā: An Invocation for Blessings) in which the divine aspect created in the *Yasodharāpadāna* is further developed. In this poem she is treated as a deity and invoked to bring blessings to lay supplicants.

#### THE FOLK POEM *YASODHARĀVATA* (A)

It was only when I read the full text of the Sinhala *Yasodharāvata* (A) as an adult that I realized it was a long narrative poem with many verses totally unfamiliar to me. I had only known those verses called the lament (*vilāpaya*) that belonged to the popular folk repertoire. Perhaps for this reason, when reading the full text of the poem (as it exists today in its printed versions) I had a sense that it represented several strata accumulated over the years as different hands transcribed and shaped it.

The earliest written texts of the version that is popular today were transcribed on palm leaves, which is how Sri Lankan manuscripts were written and preserved until the popularization of printing in Sinhala in the early nineteenth century. Authorship unless stated in the body of a text was invariably anonymous, so texts could be expanded or contracted in the process of transcribing.

In the case of Sinhala folk poetry, additions can easily be made. Folk songs are generally composed in four-line end-rhymed stanzas. The four-line stanza has

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18. S. Gamlath and E. A. Wickramasinghe, eds., *Yasodharāvata*. Colombo: Godage, 1995.

certain basic rhythmic patterns and the language lends itself easily to end rhymes. This makes additions to texts an easy task. Sinhala folk songs, for the most part, have a melancholic strain both in content and melody, perhaps because the villagers' recounting of the hardships of their world reflects the Buddhist worldview of contemplative resignation. Carters, while driving their bulls up steep hills or traveling at night along lonely roads, or farmers keeping watch in tree huts to keep at bay wild elephants and other marauders of their crops, compose such songs. They are an emotional expression of their hardships and experiences and also serve a more practical function by helping them to stay awake. The rhymed verses come easily.

Similarly, when women are transplanting or weeding rice fields and singing as they work, one will sing a verse and another will add to it, vary it, or compose a new verse to follow on. Still others will join in as a chorus, repeating a verse that has just been composed and thus adding new compositions to the already known repertoire. In a printed collection of folk songs published in the early years of the twentieth century there is one four-line stanza that gives an idea of how such compositions were made, and how they remained in circulation precisely because of such communal activities. I give a rough translation:

Ran Ethana's voice fills out the cavern of her chest  
 Punchi Menike sings from the *Yasodharāvata*  
 Pathmavathi, little sister, listens to the song  
 Others say, "Sing us the song of how weeding first began."<sup>19</sup>

The verse suggests that stanzas from the *Yasodharāvata* (A) were so familiar among villagers that when it is Punchi Menike's turn to sing a verse she sings one from the *Yasodharāvata*.

The tradition of funeral laments still extant in remote villages was another communal setting where such compositions were sung or chanted. The *vilāpaya* or lament section of the *Yasodharāvata* (A) was sung as a funeral lament in rural villages and would account for its familiarity with villagers. It is possible that the lament was extracted from the longer poem because of its emotional appeal. It is equally possible that the lament was the core to which later additions were made. I shall explore these possibilities when I discuss the different extant versions of the text later in the book.

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19. J. M. Sala, ed., *Yasodharā Sinduva saba Satana Iriyavvē Sivpada*. Colombo: New Lanka Press, v. 61 (1949), p. 8.

One of the earliest extant Sinhala palmleaf manuscripts of a Yasodharā poem has a verse in the body of the text that states that the author was a woman, the eldest daughter of a minor king of the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> It is a totally different poem from the present-day popular folk poem the *Yasodharāvata* (A). It is significant however, that in this case authorship is claimed. Several other *Yasodharāvata* manuscripts often give the name of the transcriber, not the author. The act of transcribing was itself considered a meritorious act, so the practice was not unusual. However, this *Yasodharāvata* is one of the rare instances among extant prose and verse versions of the *Yasodharāvata*, where authorship is claimed—and by a woman—and so stated in the body of the text.

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) that I translate is an anonymous poem. It is titled the “Story of Yasodharā” but the biographical element is slight. The story line deals mainly with the life of the Bōdhisattva, not Yasodharā. The best known verses of the poem, however, are the lament of Yasodharā over the departure of her husband. A good part of the rest of the poem also deals with feminine concerns—the dreams of childbirth of the mother of the Bōdhisattva, and her pregnancy cravings—all described at some length, and give it a feminine perspective, even if one cannot claim a feminine author for this particular poem.

#### THE TRADITION OF LAMENT IN SINHALA POETRY

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) is today both a popular folk poem and sung as a funeral lament. The tradition of lament is not unfamiliar to folk societies and goes back in time. Laments have been described as “texted performances of grief conventionally required in many societies at funerals” by James M. Wilce who worked in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> It can sometimes take the form of an individual lament for the loss of a loved one as in the Old English poem, “The Wife’s Lament” composed, scholars believe, around the ninth or early tenth century in England.<sup>22</sup> It can also take the form of communal mourning at a death of a loved one or close

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20. K. D. Somadasa, ed. *The Catalogue of the Hugh Neville Collection of Sinhala Manuscripts in the British Library*, vol. 3. London: Pali Text Society, 1990, p. 164. See also appendix A.

21. James M. Wilce, “Genres of Memory and the Memory of Genres: Forgetting, Lament in Bangladesh,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 44: 159–185.

22. Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986, pp. 81–94.



kinsman. In the latter case, the lament comprises of both patterned formalized expressions of grief as well as interjections of more personal experiences.

Different cultures may structure this balance differently. Isabel Nabokov<sup>23</sup> has a detailed account of funeral laments in a rural South Indian village where the laments follow a traditional pattern, but the interpolations are of an extremely personal nature. In the remote village of Laggala in central Sri Lanka, where even as late as the 1950s formal doctrinal Buddhism had only begun to make inroads, laments were a common expression of mourning at funerals. They consisted of chanted verses interrupted by certain standard exclamations uttered loudly, such as, “Alas, my child is gone!” “O when will I ever see him again!,” accompanied by standard gestures like breast-beating or holding one’s head with one hand and swaying up and down. The formal laments could be interjected, however, with completely mundane statements like “Give that visitor a chair” or “Has the rice been brought from next door?” and the lament would resume with the very next breath.

Verses of lament from folk poems such as the *Yasodharāvata* (A) and the *Vessantara Kāvya* are generally chanted by groups of villagers seated at night around the body of a dead person awaiting burial. In the former, a wife mourns the loss of her husband. In the latter, a mother, the wife of Vessantara, mourns the loss of her young children. Among the Catholic communities in the coastal area of western Sri Lanka, laments still form so important a feature of funerals that mourners are hired to ‘perform’ them. In such situations, as with the case of “skilled cry women” in Finland<sup>24</sup> “who could safely deliver souls to Tuonela—the world of the dead”—the lament is more ritualized and its content more standardized.

It is possible, since laments are so widespread an expression of mourning in folk societies around the world, that in Sri Lanka too the lament (*vilāpaya*) may have been of pre-Buddhist origin. Its inclusion in a Buddhist framework is likely to have been a natural development once Buddhism took root in the society. There is the other possibility that, like so many other cultural exchanges between Sri Lanka and South India over the centuries, the tradition of lament was introduced through somewhat later South Indian contact.

Today, however, the modern Buddhist stress on the doctrinal attitude to death has resulted in a shift in the manner of mourning and the elimination of

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23. Isabel Nabokov, *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

24. Tolbert (1944), 91. Quoted in J. M. Wilce, “Genres of Memory and the Memory of Genres: Forgetting, Lament in Bangladesh,” op. cit.

*vilāpa* at Buddhist funerals. *Vilāpa* or laments may still be a feature of funerals in rural Sri Lanka, but even there the beating of breasts and the loud exclamations seem to be giving way to the more formal communal chanting of verses. These verses are still sometimes from folk poems like the *Yasodharāvata* (A), but now, increasingly, they are verses from certain Buddhist Pali *suttas* (stanzas from the canon). Even that practice is dying out in urban parts of the country where women's weeping is subdued and grief is expressed with ever more "protestant Buddhist"<sup>25</sup> restraint.

The existence of several other popular laments in Sinhala poetry suggests that the tradition may have been much more pervasive in earlier times. One such lament is associated with the rituals for the goddess Pattini that are thought to have come to Sri Lanka from Southern India.<sup>26</sup> There is a section in the *Pattini Hälle* (The Tale of Pattini) where the goddess finds her husband killed by the evil king of Madurai and chants verses of lament as she weeps over his dead body. Her *vilāpaya* (verses of lament), sung by the ritual specialist dressed in female clothes, enacting the role in the ritual arena, are some of the most moving verses in the Pattini rituals.

Similarly, there is the lament of Kuveni, in the *Kuveni Hälle* (The Tale of Kuveni). She was the legendary queen of the island before the introduction of Buddhism. When Prince Vijaya, the mythical ancestor of the Sinhala race, came to the island from India, he met Kuveni, married her, and was made by her the ruler of the island. Vijaya later sought to legitimize his rule by bringing high caste 'queens' from India as wives for himself and his men and banished Kuveni from his court. The lament of the banished Kuveni is a complaint against this act of desertion and broken faith.

In the *Vessantara Kāvya* (Poem of Vessantara), the Bōdhisattva, in his life as King Vessantara, seeks to perform the Act of *Dāna* (generous giving) by not refusing any request made to him. He gives away his kingdom, all material possessions, and, when asked, even gives away his two young children. The most moving and best known verses in the poem are those describing the lament of Madri Devi, the wife of the Bōdhisattva Vessantara, as she mourns the loss of her two young children. She combs the forest looking for them and accosts the wild creatures that live there for information about her missing children.

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25. The term is now used to describe the transformations that took place in early twentieth century interpretations of Buddhist doctrine influenced by Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala.

26. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Though laments may go back to a much earlier pre-Buddhist tradition of mourning, scholars believe that the *Kuveni Hälle*, the *Yasodharāvata* (A), and the *Vessantara Kāvya* in the forms in which they exist today, were composed during what historians refer to as the Kandy period in Sinhala literary history (seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries). The kings of Kandy then still controlled the central areas of the island, even though the coastal areas were under Western colonial control. Many of the verses of the *Yasodharāvata* (A) use vocabulary and speech patterns found even today among villagers in the Kandyan area. The inclusion of long laments, however, within the body of what would otherwise be a narrative poem suggests that the tradition of laments may have an older origin.

In all these laments, the narrative persona, if not the actual author of the poem, is a woman. Yasodharā, Kuveni, Pattini, and Madri Devi are all women faced with loss. The laments are therefore the expression of loss in very feminine terms. They are often embedded in a larger narrative that provides a context for the lament, but it is these verses that are excerpted and sung especially at funerals and are therefore the most popular and best known sections of the poems.

The tradition of laments may have come from India or may have had pre-Buddhist origins, but the Sri Lankan laments referred to are now very much a part of a Buddhist tradition or have been incorporated into that tradition. Therefore, while being expressions of grief over a loss, they also express resignation and acceptance of what Buddhists believe to be a necessary condition of *samsāric* existence. The core verses that form the lament in the poem *Yasodharāvata* (A) are sung at rural funerals in order to help mourners achieve that acceptance. The verses speak of grief and loss, but there is also an emotional progression, a slow movement toward resignation and final acceptance of a situation that cannot be changed or reversed, a loss that cannot be recovered. It is perhaps this sense of finality—such as comes from Yasodharā's knowledge that her husband Siddharta will not, cannot, ever come back to her as her husband—that makes the verses of her lament both a powerful vehicle for grief as well as an acceptance of and resignation to loss. The Buddhist resignation, the hard but necessary acceptance of the inevitability of the parting, is what enables the singing of the verses to bring solace to mourners.

#### THE *YASODHARĀVATA* (A) IN THE CONTEXT OF SINHALA LITERARY HISTORY

##### *The Early Period*

Sinhala literature has a long history. The earliest extant works that have survived come from about the seventh century CE, but the tradition goes back much

further to about the third century BCE. This very early literature consisted for the most part of Buddhist religious writings or accounts of kings who supported Buddhism. That early literature is now lost, but evidence from extant Pali and Sanskrit sources such as the fourth and sixth century Sri Lankan chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahavaṃsa*, composed in Pali from existing Sinhala sources, and the colophons to fifth century Pali translations such as the *Dhammapa-datṭhakathā* that claim as their source earlier Sinhala works, indicate the existence of such a literature.

What has been preserved of early Sinhala literature (until about the twelfth century CE) is essentially a religious literature, the work mainly of scholar monks, preserved by them and strongly influenced by the classical Sanskrit and Pali traditions with which they were familiar. There was very likely also a secular literature at the time, but such manuscripts were probably of no importance to the monks and not preserved in temple libraries. The existence of a body of graffiti poems scribbled on the wall of the rock fortress at Sigiriya and dating from between the seventh and the eleventh centuries CE suggests, however, that such a secular literature did exist.<sup>27</sup>

Between the tenth and twelfth centuries, Sinhala literature was strongly influenced by the Sanskrit classical tradition and even the language became heavily Sanskritized. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, however, there was a move away from the Sanskritic influences of earlier classical scholarship, and what might be termed an intermediate literary tradition developed. The works preserved from this period were still mainly religious and composed by monks, but the style had changed. The writings, especially the prose, began to reflect the language used in popular sermons for lay audiences. They were still written in a formal style, but less heavily classicist and closer to colloquial speech, with images drawn from daily life. The *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (Jewel Garland of the True Doctrine), the *Pūjāvaliya* (Garland of Worship), and the *Butsarāṇa* (Refuge in the Buddha) are three major works that belong to this tradition.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, two fairly distinct styles can be distinguished in the literature. One was that of the classical writings of the scholarly tradition and the other was that of a secular literature of both prose and poetry written in a more colloquial form, composed by a local intelligentsia writing for a more popular readership. The popularity of these secular works meant that they soon passed into the folk repertoire and several versions and variations were introduced. Though the authorship of these secular writings is

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27. Senarat Paranavitana, *The Sigiri Graffiti*, London: Published for the Government of Ceylon by Oxford University Press, 1956.