

Yasodharā,  
the Wife of the Bōdhisattva

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THE SINHALA *Yasodharāvata*  
(*The Story of Yasodharā*)  
AND THE SINHALA *Yasodharāpadānaya*  
(*The Sacred Biography of Yasodharā*)

*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*  
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COVER ART: The Buddha visits his former wife and son, approximately 100-300.  
Pakistan; former kingdom of Gandhara. Frieze; phyllite. The Avery Brundage  
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*To my sisters Damayanthi Ratwatte and Savitri Goonesekere  
with much affection and admiration for their outstanding contributions  
each to their own world.*

## 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!

...

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 *Sanghavedhavastu* 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 Schobar. 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 *Saddharmaratnāvalīya* (Jewel Garland of the True Doctrine), the *Pūjāvalīya* (Garland of Worship), and the *Butsaraṇa* (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.

for the most part unclaimed, they belong to a genre that was often the work of individual authors. Many of them were written down, though we do not know whether by the authors themselves or by later scribes. Several have been found in palm leaf manuscript collections.

The secular poetry of this period was most often composed in four-line, end-rhymed stanzas. The vocabulary was simple, almost colloquial, and the images often repetitive and from a stock repertoire. The metrical patterns were the familiar ones enabling the verses to be sung or chanted. Rules of grammar and syntax were not necessarily always followed, and the end rhymes were sometimes forced. All these features were conducive to a form of storytelling in verse that became quite popular during this period.

These *vamsakatā* (narrative poems) of the secular literature were distinct from the body of religious literature written mainly by monks, transcribed and retranscribed by monks, and preserved in temple libraries over the centuries. The *vamsakatā* dealt with matters of more secular interest, historical events, battles, heroic individuals, or poetic retellings of popular narratives. They were composed most often by laypeople and transcribed by them—as the semiskilled quality of some of the palm leaf scripts suggest. Many of these poems or sections of them were probably transcribed onto palm leaves by local intelligentsia and not necessarily by the authors or at the time they were composed. Many were also preserved in family collections. There are several categories of these narrative poems. There are the *hatan kavi* (battle poems) such as the *Ingrīsi hatana* (Battle against the English). There are *vitti kavi* (poems of events) that recount some tragic or historic event such as the *Āhālepola Kāvya* (which relates the tale of the killing of the children of Āhālepola on the orders of the king). There are love poems such as the *Dunuwila hatana* (about the amorous exploits of a chieftain named Dunuwila), or narrative poems based on religious stories from the *Jātakas* or Buddhist legends. These were all composed in the popular style, often by laymen and women rather than by monks. There are also individual poems by named authors, such as those of the women poets Gajaman Nona and Ran-chagoda Hamine.

These secular poems became very popular. Sometimes the original authors were forgotten, but their poems were sung, handed down, sometimes also written down in palm leaf manuscripts, and finally became part of the folk repertoire.<sup>28</sup>

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28. The *Ingrīsi hatana* has been attributed to the authorship of Veligalle Rala in the eighteenth century. An early version of the the *Yasodharāvata* is claimed to have been written by the eldest daughter of Bopiti nirindu—a minor king of the fourteenth century. Both are also considered anonymous folk poems.

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) and the *Vessantara Kāvya* belong to this last category. Both poems recount an already familiar event from the Buddha stories, but both have as their central interest the laments of the two women faced with loss. In the *Yasodharāvata* (A), Yasodharā mourns the departure of her husband. In the *Vessantara Kāvya*, Madri Devi the mother mourns the loss of her children. It is on abandonment and emotional desolation that the secular poets expand—a theme hardly touched on in the stories as they appear in the religious Buddha narrative of monks. The emotional intensity implicit in the situations no doubt triggered the imagination of secular poets and gave rise to verses that appealed to the experiences of ordinary people.

### *The Colonial Period*

Sri Lanka had begun to feel the impact of colonial encroachment as early as the sixteenth century. The Portuguese from 1505 to 1648, then the Dutch from 1648 to 1776, and the British from 1776 to 1815, in turn captured and colonized Sri Lanka's coastal area. All these foreign powers, however, had control only of a section of the country. Native rulers controlled the interior, and so the Buddhist religion and Sinhala literature continued to be patronized by kings and scholars and Buddhist religious works were fostered by the monks and preserved in monasteries. After 1815, however, when the British finally took control of the entire island, the situation changed dramatically. Patronage of the religion (Buddhism) and the native language of the majority of the people (Sinhala) soon ceased, and the colonial establishment set about introducing English as the language of government, and Christianity as the favored religion. Acceptance ensured upward mobility for Sri Lankans and entrance into the lower echelons of the colonial administration.

As a result, one section of the local intelligentsia was slowly absorbed into the colonial English-speaking part of society, was taught to look down on the native language, and ceased to write in Sinhala. The classical works, wherever possible, were preserved by monks in village temples, but remained mostly unread. Over time, these works became almost unintelligible to the lay public. The Sinhala language also began to reflect a significant break. The literary language of classical scholarship remained fixed while the colloquial language spoken by the less sophisticated sections of society changed quickly.

The creative work extant from this period belongs to the secular tradition that had come down from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is a form of popular poetry, often anonymous, composed by villagers expressing the concerns and hardships of their world, or narratives of events, or of individual lives composed by sections of the rural intelligentsia. Most of these poems were sung or chanted and intended to be so. Their popularity arose from the fact that,

though they may have been written down in palm leaf manuscripts, they were also handed down orally. Like all oral literature, they were subject to changes in the recitation and in the transference. Many of the works thus came to be seen as anonymous, and scribes who felt a need to record them also felt free to make changes to the works as they thought fit.

The popular style of these poems, the four-lined end-rhymed stanza, depended for its effect on alliteration, internal rhymes, puns, and melodic patterning. Sometimes a four-line, end-rhymed stanza was intended to stand as an individual poem. In such cases, compression resulted in highly nuanced and suggestive images that set up reverberations of meaning. I give here my attempt at translating such a four-lined love poem.

*Taksalāva sanda mudunen tiyen nā*  
*Duksalāva sīta yata kārakāven nā*  
*Malvelāva baṃbarun rōnata en nā*  
*Makvelāda ada mata nidi noyen nā*

Taxila<sup>29</sup> lies far beyond the moon  
 A whirlpool of grief churns deep beneath my mind.  
 Bees come for honey when it's flowering time  
 Why is it sleep comes not to me, tonight?

The first line conjures up a world of youth, scholarship, and perhaps love associated with the famous Buddhist university of Taxila. The next line suggests tormenting grief at the loss of that world and, more personally, a lost love that the third and fourth lines clearly confirm. The simple Sinhala of the verse with its internal rhymes, alliteration and patterning is extremely powerful and moving.

Longer narrative poems like the *Yasodharāvata* (A), often based on a known story, were in similar stanza form but joined together by a narrative thread. The language and imagery were more standard, drawn from a known repertoire, and the poetic power came more from the manner in which the emotional events were handled and retold than in the originality or intrinsic power of the images.

John Davy,<sup>30</sup> an Englishman writing in the early nineteenth century, comments that in Sri Lanka at the time, not only was there a high rate of literacy but

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29. Taxila was a famous seat of scholarship located in northwest India, but a place name familiar to Sri Lankans as a seat of Buddhist learning.

30. John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of Its Inhabitants with Travels in That Island*. London, 1821; republished in Colombo, Tissara Pyakashakyo Press, 1983, p. 176–177.

that “almost every Singalese is more or less a poet; or at least can compose what they call poetry.” The remark stems no doubt from the fact that most people could compose a four-line end-rhymed stanza and many did—though not all could claim to be poets.

I make passing mention here of the tradition of chants or narrative poems of the origin myths of gods and demons, sung by ritual specialists or shamans in rituals to propitiate such deities and exorcise evil spirits. These chants are familiar only to the families of ritual specialists and handed down by them to their descendants or pupils. The tradition is mostly oral, but occasionally there are claims that they exist in the form of written texts (jealously guarded by the shaman families). There is a considerable body of such poetry (some of it very beautiful) coming down from perhaps the sixteenth or seventeenth century and commonly sung in performances in the villages. However, perhaps because such ritual chants were considered extraneous to the Theravada Buddhist tradition (carefully preserved by monks), they have not been seen as part of the Sinhala literary tradition, even by present-day lay scholars and literary historians. Only anthropologists have so far evinced interest in this body of poetry and while some small portion of it has been recorded by them, most of it will soon be lost to posterity with the dying of the rituals and their specialists.

*The Religious, Literary, and Nationalist Revival of the Late Nineteenth Century*

By the late nineteenth century, there was a powerful anticolonialist, nationalist Buddhist resurgence. One of its expressions was a revival of native literature. Fuelled by the availability of printing, classical literary works that had been preserved in palm leaf manuscripts in Buddhist monasteries were collected, edited, and printed for a public of classical scholars.

Around the same time, there was a spate of publications of cheaper editions in the form of pamphlets and booklets of folk poems and popular narrative poetry. These were sold in the marketplace for an avid local reading public. They were very different from the formal, stylized, and now almost incomprehensible language of the classical literary works. These *kavi kola*, or pamphlet poems as they came to be called, were treated as anonymous and published in cheap editions for quick sale. Sellers of these pamphlets sang them out loud in the marketplace in their attempts to gather an audience and hawk their wares. Crowds often gathered round to listen, and the booklets had an instant market. Printed publications gave a fixed or definitive form to the poems that up to then had been subject to changes and variations in oral transmission. Once printed, the texts became fairly consistent and differed only slightly in the many versions. Thus, today there are several versions of the *Yasodharāvata* (A) poem, many of them still in pamphlet form, but a comparison of several such ‘texts’ provides

only a few not very significant variations. The sellers of these pamphlets in the marketplace have almost disappeared today. The pamphlets can still be found, occasionally, among pavement booksellers, and at pilgrimage centers, but, even so, takers are few.

#### THE PRINTED TEXTS

Many printed ‘pamphlet’ versions of the *Yasodharāvata* exist.<sup>31</sup> They vary little from the popular poem *Yasodharāvata* (A). The earliest extant printed copies in the National Museum Library at Colombo are both dated 1894; one contains 124 verses, the other 130 verses. Neither is very different from *Yasodharāvata* (A), though they begin and end at different points in the poem, which perhaps makes for a significant difference.

Of these two texts of *Yasodharāvata* in the National Museum Library in Sri Lanka, the one dated 1894 consists of 124 verses written by M. D. R Appuhamy and I will call this text *Yasodharāvata* B or Y(B). The other, also dated 1894, consists of 130 verses and I will call it *Yasodharāvata* C or Y(C). What is significant is that version Y(B) starts exactly as my translated version, but ends with what is verse 124 in the *Yasodharāvata* (A) text. It does not have the exhortation to women embodying the patriarchal values with which *Yasodharāvata* (A) concludes—verses 125–130. The break is significant because that is a section which even on a first reading seemed to be clearly the addition of another layer to the poem. The name of the writer, M. D. R. Appuhamy, who was probably transcribing a poem he knew, suggests that he belonged to the traditional literati of the village and was familiar with village folk songs.

The text Y(C), though published the same year, is different. It was published by the Buddhist Publication Society, edited by G. C. M. Suriya, and does contain the exhortation to women to be subservient and obey their husbands in all things. The Buddhist Publication Society was set up to promote a modern interest in Buddhism by the publication of Buddhist texts and commentaries. Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala were two key figures associated with this movement. It was a revivalist as well as a modernist movement to encourage a new Buddhism to fit in with the demands of modern nationalist and (anti) colonial society. But, in doing so, it introduced certain values that were seen as

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31. A discussion of the palm leaf manuscripts appears in the appendix. I deal here only with the printed pamphlet texts.

non-Western because they were drawn from Hindu India, but that dovetailed nicely with the Victorian puritan values (that had seeped into the society after colonial contact and were at the time) regarded as modern. Some of the books published by the Buddhist Publications Society, intended as nationalist revivalist works, disseminated these patriarchal values. The *Yasodharāvata* as published by this society then became the standard version of the poem. It is this text that was republished repeatedly in pamphlet form for sale at markets and fairs.

No doubt, there are many other pamphlet versions of the *Yasodharāvata* printed well into the twentieth century, but most of them vary only very slightly—just an occasional word—from the text I have used for my translation, which has now come to be the ‘fixed’ text. The catalogue of the Sri Lankan National Museum Library records two other pamphlet publications dated 1885 and 1887, but they are missing.

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) that I have translated is considered an anonymous folk poem. The edition I decided to use was by Dr. Sucharitha Gamlath and E. A. Wickramasinghe. It was published in Colombo in 1995 by Godage Brothers, and reprinted in 1998 and 2001. The poem consists of 130 verses with a critical introduction.

Of two other tattered ‘pamphlet’ versions I own, one is entitled *Yasodharāvata*, is anonymous, and is published by A. S. De Silva at the Gunasekera printers in Aluthgama. I shall call it Y(D). There is no date of publication. The cover, a picture of a Madonna-style Queen Māyā with the Bōdhisattva on her lap, both surrounded by halos (could also be intended for Yasodharā sitting with Rāhula on her lap), suggests that it was possibly printed in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century when such Christian iconography had become familiar to the culture. The text is almost identical to the *Yasodharāvata* (A) with only a few minor word changes that I have not considered worth noting. A poem as popular as the *Yasodharāvata* had many printed pamphlet versions, but the text, once fixed in print, did not permit too much variation—unlike the palm leaf manuscripts of earlier times.

The second pamphlet Y(E) is entitled *Yasodharā Sinduva* (Song of Yasodharā) and consists of fifty-two verses. It is a collection put together by G. M. Sala and published by K. A. Dineshami at the Lankābhīnava Press in 1949. What I have is the fifth edition, so the first edition may have been printed in the early years of the century. The cover picture is of Yasodharā in a saree (the style introduced from India in the late nineteenth century) seated in a Victorian-style chair, in conversation with the Minister Canna who is dressed in what seems a vaguely Indian garb. The caption reads, “The Minister Canna conveys news to Queen Yasodharā that Prince Siddharta has become a monk.”

The first thirty-eight verses of this version describe the birth and early life of the Bōdhisattva up to the point of his departure and Canna's return to inform Yasodharā that he has gone. Yasodharā's lament that follows is confined to eight verses (39–46). Though less elaborate, the themes are almost identical to those in the other versions. The next set of verses (47–51) describe events during the Enlightenment, the Buddha's subsequent preaching, and his death. The last verse (52) relates that Yasodharā becomes a nun, dies, and achieves *nirvāṇa*. The verse form is the four-line, end-rhymed stanza, the events described are the same, but the verses are completely different and suggest they may have come from a different source. The pamphlet also contains a collection of other folk poems sung when transplanting and weeding rice fields.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF THE POEM *YASODHARĀVATA* (A)

My close reading of the poem *Yasodharāvata* (A) and a study of the palm leaf and other manuscript versions tend to suggest a text composed of several strata. A kind of poetic stratigraphy or layering seems to have taken place. The first 117 verses read as a clearly narrative poem beginning with the story of the Bōdhisattva's birth and ending with the death of Yasodharā. This I believe is the basic text of the poem *Yasodharāvata* (A). The emphasis on the dreams of childbirth of Queen Māyā, her pregnancy cravings after she conceives, and the verses of lament by Yasodharā when her husband leaves her—all present very feminine concerns and might even suggest a feminine author.

Verses 118–124 mark a sharp and definite change in rhythm and meter, tone and content. The lines are long and are in a tone of invocation very similar in form and metrical patterning to verses sung by shamans in exorcist or healing rituals or in formal invocations to the deities. They refer to magical powers and superhuman acts attributed to Yasodharā. She is viewed as a powerful deity, an aspect that is elaborated in the *Yasodharāpadāna* manuscripts (composed perhaps by monks) but less well known at the folk level. This aspect of Yasodharā's power seems to be a later addition. It is possible that a monk engaged in the process of transcribing, aware of the accounts in the commentaries such as the *Yasodharāpadānaya*, decided to add this section to the poem.

The final verses (125–130, six stanzas) mark yet another shift in tone, content, and sensibility. This section is a moralistic homily and seems even more clearly the addition of yet another strata to the poem. It is a sermon to women embodying explicit patriarchal values—a moral exhortation. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such values on gender and feminine

roles began to influence and slowly seep into Sinhala society. Their impact was most intense in the latter years of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century with the Buddhist reform movement that spread rapidly among the middle classes.<sup>32</sup> This last section of the *Yasodharāvata* (A) as it is now found in printed versions seems to belong to this period. One of the palm leaf manuscripts (see the appendix) seems to confirm that this section was probably added when the poem went into print at the end of the nineteenth century. I shall substantiate my reading of the poem by the following analysis of its narrative structure.

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) is titled the *Story of Yasodharā*, but there is little biographical information on Yasodharā. The core and the best known section of the poem is the lament of Yasodharā over the departure of her husband, the single most searing event in her life. Thirty verses express Yasodharā's lament at the loss of a beloved husband, her sense of abandonment, her inability to comprehend why her husband left without telling her when she had always supported him in his quest for Buddhahood, and her desperate efforts to come to terms with the finality of his departure, to understand and accept the larger cause that made her husband pursue the course he did. They form the poignant core of the poem and are the feelings of any woman/every woman. Their powerful human appeal has made the poem justly popular among generations of Sri Lankans

In the folk imagination of Sinhala Buddhists, the poem *Yasodharāvata* has always been a poem of love and loss, despair and resignation, and ultimately equanimity born of acceptance. It is framed within the context of the Buddha story, but, while the narrative is important, it is cursorily given not just because the story is familiar to readers or listeners but because the folk poet's interest, as the title suggests, centers on the woman Yasodharā.

The *Yasodharāvata* (A) begins with a brief account of the Bōdhisattva's interminable journey in *samsāra*. It describes the prophecies made by earlier Buddhas about him as well as his decision to leave the heavenly kingdom of the gods to come once more to earth in order to become a Buddha and show humans the path to escape suffering. This long space of infinite *samsāric* time, counted in *asankya* (uncountables) and *kalpa* (eons) is compressed into nine verses (1–9).

The scene then shifts to Queen Māyā, destined to be the mother of the Bōdhisattva. Twenty-one verses (10–30) describe her prophetic dreams about the

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32. See the scholarship on the impact of Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist revivalism in the work done by scholars such as S. Ammunugama, K. Malalgoda, G. Obeyesekere, and H. L. Seneviratne.

child to be born to her; once conception has occurred, they describe her pregnancy cravings. The dreams and the description of the pregnancy cravings are all part of accepted Buddhist lore regarding the birth of the Bōdhisattva. However, the anonymous poet deals with them at length, in elaborate detail. By contrast, the birth, early life, and marriage of the Bōdhisattva until the moment of the *abhinikmana* (the Great Renunciation) are given in a rapid summary of six verses (33–38). It is significant that twenty-one verses are allotted to describe Queen Māyā's dreams and cravings during her pregnancy while twenty-nine years of the Bōdhisattva's early life are summed up in a cryptic account of less than ten verses.

The scene shifts again to the moment when the Bōdhisattva, about to leave for a life of asceticism, is told the news of the birth of his son. In the story familiar to Theravada Buddhists, this is a very poignant moment of crisis in the Bōdhisattva's life. He goes to see his wife and newborn son, is about to enter but does not, pauses on the threshold, steps back, turns, and leaves. The *Yasodharāvata* poet elaborates on this moment. In ten verses (43–52) the poet expresses the conflicting pull. On the one side is his love and concern for a wife who has given him unstinting love and support throughout their *samsāric* existences. There is the attraction of her beauty, the human bonds that draw him to his first sight of his first child, and the strong desire to speak to his wife before he leaves. Against this is the self-knowledge that he must leave without allowing himself even that minimal luxury if he is to keep his resolve to strive for Buddhahood. Some of the most beautiful and often quoted verses in the poem are the simple description of the sleeping queen and her son. It is impossible to capture the softness expressed in the alliteration of 's' sounds in the following verse (61):

*Sōma guṇa sisila simḥa sanasana muhu na*<sup>33</sup>  
*Pēma guṇa sobana kumarun vadā gena*  
*Pun sanda langa sitina ran tharuvak lesi na*  
*Pun sanda men vaditi kumarun sibi kara na.*

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.

The Bōsat's lingering silent farewell to his wife and child, along with his resolution and irresolution, are expressed in verses 46–50.

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33. *simḥa sanasana* (soothe with kisses) has a soft 's' sound used alliteratively for the entire line.

From long ago I fulfilled all the Virtues  
 I practiced 'giving' to be a Buddha, to save all beings.  
 She is lovely, moon-like, pre-eminent among women—  
 Shall I say one word to my dear queen?

My lovely queen sleeps on her golden bed.  
 Shall I draw near look at my baby by her side?  
 Her arm cradling him is a golden vine,  
 My eyes are drawn to my lovely sleeping queen.

The baby sucks his milk from that jeweled dome.  
 What more is there to see, what is the use?  
 You never failed me, not in thought or deed.  
 His mind holds firm, his eyes fill with tears.

You've wept more tears for me than the seas hold water  
 Does this wide world hold a woman as good as you?  
 Today I leave you in order to become a Buddha.  
 I must destroy desire, be firm in my resolve.

For one wife and one child do 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 an amazingly lovely child is my Rāhula!

It is the folk poet's ability to create a human portrait of the Bōdhisattva, torn between the decision to leave the palace and his human ties of love for his wife and newborn child, that gives balance to the poem. Otherwise Yasodharā's long and despairing lament and reproaches that follow soon after would seriously undermine the Buddhist worldview of the total poem by presenting the Bōdhisattva's act as one of heartless cruelty.

The emotional balance of the poem comes from the interplay between the two parallel sections in the narrative poem. One describes the pain of parting the Bōdhisattva feels as he goes to see his sleeping wife and newborn son before his final departure, and the other depicts Yasodharā's grief at his departure. Their individual expressions of pain and grief exemplify very human emotions—a man determined to leave those he loves for a higher cause and a woman's sense of abandonment and despair at the loss of a loved husband. Yasodharā's grief is exacerbated by what she sees as a breach of trust. After all the years they spent together in *samsāra* when she had helped her husband in his efforts to reach this goal, he has now left without telling her. Again and again the verses come back to this reproach. At this point, the readers' knowledge (from the earlier verses in

the poem) that the Bōdhisattva left without waking her because he was himself too human and unsure of the power of his own emotions, helps the reader to modify criticism of the Bōdhisattva. The Bōdhisattva has to leave without a word to her because the ties of passion are still strong and he is still very human. He must leave without waking her if he is to keep to his resolve and find a solution to the suffering of mankind. Yasodharā's own grief, however, is also tempered by her continuing love and her equally human, womanly concern for the welfare of the beloved. This concern enables her finally to come to terms with her loss.

The Buddhist worldview is also strengthened by the description of Yasodharā's grief as process—a forward movement from her first almost manic attack on Canna, whom she tries to hold responsible for her husband's departure, to a mood of resignation and acceptance as she turns to a life of Buddhist meditation. Slowly, the poet leads us beyond the recurring question—why did you leave without a word to me? Yasodharā's grief is not anger at his departure. She has known from the beginning that to be a Buddha was his goal and she has shared his life and his efforts toward that goal in all their past existences in *samsāra*. She has done so with a full knowledge of what it means. What she cannot understand is that on this one occasion he has gone leaving her behind, alone, and without a word to her. It is as an answer to this recurrent question that the poet's account of the Bōdhisattva's hesitations, his human ambivalences and desires, takes on significance. They help to modify what might otherwise seem cruelty on his part and legitimate reproach on hers.

For Yasodharā, as she goes through the formal patterns of lament, remembering their past lives in *samsāra*, recounting the many times when they did things together, her love and care of him, his concerns for her and their child's welfare in past lives, all help to bring a certain comfort, though the contrast to the present keeps coming forcefully back. The poet's focus is very much on the woman—her despair, her feelings of abandonment, and her attempts to come to terms with the finality of her husband's departure.

Verses 103–117 take up the narrative. They relate the incidents associated with the Enlightenment, the Buddha's return to his father's kingdom to preach, the ordination of Rāhula, Yasodharā's decision to become a nun, her death, and the building of a *stūpa* in which her ashes are commemorated. All the incidents related are part of the familiar Buddha story. The Buddha's being present at her cremation and raining flowers on the bier is a poignant touch that comes from the *Yasodharāpadāna*.

The final two sections of the poem, verses 118–124 (which refer to events that occurred prior to her death but appear here after the event), and verses 125–130 (consisting of the homily), I consider later additions to the poem.

MODERN CRITICS OF THE *YASODHARĀVATA*

There has been a fair amount of criticism about the poem and Yasodharā's response to her husband's departure. On the one hand, traditional critics see her as the epitome of the good wife, who, even in the face of being abandoned by her husband, can still only wish him well. That is how the Buddha narrative presents her. Yet there are spaces within the narrative itself that provide possibilities for a more complex rendering of the character and reactions of Yasodharā.

As to be expected, early monks writing the Buddha narrative at first eliminate references to Yasodharā. The doctrinal concern is with the Buddha and his teachings. With time, she enters the story first as the nun and an *arabat*. Then later commentators and especially the folk poets fill in the lacunae elided in the earlier narratives with their own imaginings of her as the abandoned wife. Not only do they give a more complex and nuanced rendering of both the Bōdhisattva and Yasodharā but they present them in human, understandable terms.

Ediriweera Sarachchandra, a leading Sinhala critic, quotes verses 77, 78, 79, 82, 88, 98, and 100 of the *Yasodharāvata* (A) and states:

In this set of verses queen Yasodharā does not lament about her own grief. She controls her sorrow and calls forth blessings on her husband. She asks how one who grew up amid the sheltered comforts of a royal palace can live in a forest. What can he eat? Can he sleep in comfort? Will he suffer from the heat of the sun? These verses reveal the genuine love of a village woman for her husband and child and a concern for their needs without a thought for herself. The reader's feelings are drawn to her for this reason.<sup>34</sup>

Sucharita Gamlath, another critic, asks: "What does Sarachchandra consider 'genuine love'? That a woman should not think of herself but of the needs of her husband and child? That she should sacrifice her entire life for them? Should her husband do the same for her? Sarachchandra and others maintain a curious silence on that question. For nearly half a century the 'Sarachchandra school' of critics have all interpreted these verses in this manner." Dr. Gamlath attributes such an interpretation to the patriarchal worldview that has pervaded Sri Lankan society. He claims, however, that the reader's sympathy for Yasodharā arises for a very different reason. It is because we are moved by pity for her fate as a victim

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34. E. R. Sarachchandra, quoted in S. Gamlath and E. A. Wickramasighe, eds., *Yasodharāvata*. Colombo: Godage, 1995, pp. 65–67.

of a patriarchal society. “The desire to liberate her from the powerful grip of such a fate springs up in us.”<sup>35</sup>

I think both critics (who represent two ends of a spectrum) fail to see the poem in its entirety. Dr. Sarachchandra excludes several verses in the lament where Yasodharā does sob and weep and mourn her loss. He ignores the fact that there is implicit blame in her repeated question, “Why did you leave without a word to me after all the years we spent together striving to attain your goal?” He excerpts only those verses that do permit the kind of interpretation he has chosen to make. Similarly, Dr. Gamlath, writing in a world and at a time more sensitive to a feminist viewpoint, sees Yasodharā merely as a victim. The power of the poem for him is a sense of pity for her fate.

The “folk” poet, however, has a more complex and more sensitive rendering of the situation. Verses 71–102 all deal with Yasodharā and her varying reactions to her husband’s departure. The folk poet sees it neither as a one-dimensional uncritical acceptance on her part of her fate, which is how the Buddha story is narrated, nor as a pitiful victim of a patriarchal world, which is how Dr. Gamlath would have us see her, but as a very human woman faced with a terrible loss—a kind of death. However, like all human beings faced with the finality of a loss, she too tries to cope in the many ways women have—by recalling past happiness, mourning present absence, reproaching the lost love, questioning her own possible shortcomings. At the same time, because of her own great love, she wishes that no ill befall the loved one in this or any other existence. Having run through the gamut of emotions, the poet describes Yasodharā as achieving a degree of resignation. There is an acceptance of the reality of loss and an attempt to reconcile to it through the means provided by the culture—which in this context is one of Buddhist meditation and the striving to achieve *nirvāṇa*. This is what the ‘work of mourning’ helps to achieve and why rural women at funerals use this poem as a lament even today. The strength of the poem is in the range and complexity of emotions depicted, not just in a patriarchal or feminist reading of it.

The poem *Yasodharāvata* (A), though not considered part of the Sinhala literary canon, which consists of mostly classical works, is embedded in the popular imagination. Written in simple four-line stanzas with images that are neither new nor startling because they come from a popular repertoire, the poem nevertheless has a haunting cadence and an emotional power that has moved successive generations of readers and listeners by its very simplicity.

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35. Sucharita Gamlath and E. A. Wickramasighe, eds., *Yasodharāvata*. Colombo: Godage, 1996, pp. 69–71.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE POEM

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*Yasodharāvata* (The Story of Yasodharā)  
Also Known as *Yasodharā vilāpaya* (Yasodharā's Lament)

Through uncountable eons of measureless time<sup>1</sup> he perfected the  
Virtues to become a Buddha.<sup>2</sup>  
For yet more multiples of measureless time he perfected those same  
Virtues  
For still more eons multiplied uncountable times he strove to become  
a Buddha.  
Then as a bud matures and comes to bloom, he became a Buddha.

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1. To indicate vast periods of *samsāric* time Buddhist cosmology deals in *asankya* (uncountables or immeasurables) and in *kalpa* (loosely translated as eons), all of which are ironically counted. The literal translation of the first line thus would be: "For four uncountables (*asankya*) times a hundred thousand eons (*kalpa*) he resolved to fulfil the Perfections." The second line refers to 'sixteen uncountables' and the next line to 'twenty-four uncountables'. It is as if by counting 'uncountables' one can make the concept of infinity imaginatively realizable. I have avoided the literal translation and tried to convey only the sense of vast periods of *samsāric* time, which is what the poet seeks to convey.

2. There are ten Perfections (*pāramita*) or virtues, that one must tirelessly cultivate throughout one's *samsāric* existences in order to become a Buddha. They are Generosity, Morality, Renunciation, Wisdom, Effort, Patience, Truthfulness, Resolution, Kindness, and Equanimity. The poet tries to indicate the enormity of that endeavor by the length of the time period involved. Here, I use the term Virtues (capitalized) instead of Perfections, which is how it is commonly translated.

2

Limitless the oceans of *samsāra* that he crossed  
 Boundless the wealth he gave away, even his eyes, flesh, head<sup>3</sup>  
 Tireless the single-minded efforts that he made  
 Countless the times he gave his life to be a Buddha.

3

Back in the days of the Buddha Dīpankara<sup>4</sup>  
 The Bōsat was born as the hermit Sumedha<sup>5</sup>  
 “That hermit by the marsh,” proclaimed Dīpankara,  
 “Will one day in the future, be a Buddha.”

4

The hermit made flower-offerings to Dīpankara,  
 Unwavering, single-minded, fully convinced.  
 He paid his respects with both hands flower-filled,  
 It was at Rambegam the prophecy was made.

5

From twenty-four Buddhas he received similar declarations.  
 He lived each life span to its full completion.  
 As Vessantara<sup>6</sup> he led a life of renunciation  
 His Acts of Generosity<sup>7</sup> then, were beyond comprehension.

6

The last of his many lives was spent in heaven,  
 He realized then he was very near his goal.  
 Gods enjoying bliss in the Brahma world,  
 Gathered in hundreds and thousands, to point the way.

---

3. This reference is to three specific Acts of Generosity related in the *Jātaka Tales*, a compendium of stories of the lives of the Bōdhisattva in his previous rebirths.

4. Buddhists believe that there were many Buddhas who lived and preached the Doctrine in different eons across *samsāric* time. Buddha Dīpankara preceded the present Buddha Gautama.

5. Sumedha, the ascetic, lay across a marshy rivulet so that the Buddha Dīpankara could walk over him and not muddy his feet.

6. Vessantara was known for his boundless generosity. He refused no request. He gave away his kingdom, wealth, and even his wife and children.

7. I use the phrase for the word *dāna*, which refers to meritorious acts of generous giving.

7

“Sir, the time has come for you to be a Buddha,  
Give up this life of bliss. Set forth, my lord,  
Think of past pieties performed and be reborn.”<sup>8</sup>  
It was for this the Bōsat<sup>9</sup> had waited so long.

8

He looked for the place where he was to be born, the land, the clan,  
With patience sought who his parents were to be.  
Who will I marry? What beauty is meant for me?  
His All-seeing Eye saw Dambadiva<sup>10</sup> was the land.

9

Saw the womb of his mother, Māyā, wife of King Sudhōvan,<sup>11</sup>  
Saw five hundred lovely women wet nurses,  
Saw that his chief consort would be born at the same time.<sup>12</sup>  
“I will now go to Dambadiva,” he declared.

10

As Queen Māyā was sleeping on her golden bed,  
All night long the full moon shone on her.  
The gold-limbed queen then to her husband said,  
“Through three watches of the night, my lord, the moon shone on my  
bed.”

11

On a heavenly bed knee-deep in flowers  
Sleeping alone, the queen saw in a dream  
A precious gem drop deep into her womb.  
“I do not know what is happening, my lord.”

---

8. Buddhists believe that to become a Buddha one has to be born in the human world. Here the gods in heaven encourage the Bōdhisattva to return to earth and so complete his quest.

9. *Bōsat* is the Sinhala word for Bōdhisattva.

10. Jumbudvīpa or Dambadiva is the name for India in Buddhist texts.

11. This is the Sinhala form of Sudhōdhana.

12. Yasodharā in her many incarnations had been his chief consort.

12

As the Queen lay sleeping on her flower-strewn bed  
 She saw a silver rock from the sky descend.  
 A thousand queens stood guard around her bed.  
 She told the king about the dream she had.

13

“By the white sands of the Neranjanā river  
 I was bathed and my hair was washed,  
 Around me there arose a pleasing fragrance,  
 Dreams of childbirth followed one another.

14

“Hosts of maidens gathered flowers for me  
 In the Anotatta-lake<sup>13</sup> they made a bed for me.  
 A pair of virgin maidens then bathed me—  
 The Anotatta-lake appeared in a dream to me.

15

“A conch-white baby elephant stood before me  
 Who with his baby trunk caressed my belly.  
 Will some auspicious thing happen to me?  
 O handsome King, what do these strange dreams mean?”

16

That day the king invited holy Brahmins,  
 Fed them milk rice, and asked about the dream.  
 “That dream bodes ill to no one, O my king,  
 A Bōsat will be born to the world, O king.

17

“King Suddhōdana, since you ask, we say,  
 Bad dreams don’t come to those who do good deeds.  
 A child will be born, that’s what those dreams mean—  
 One of great Merit, over Three Worlds he’ll hold sway.”<sup>14</sup>

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13. In Hindu Buddhist cosmology, this is a mythical lake at the foot of the mountain called Mēru at the center of the universe.

14. The three worlds in Buddhist cosmology are heaven or the formless world (*arūpa*), the human world or the world of form (*rūpa*) and the spirit world, hell, or the world of lust (*kāma*).

18

As the Queen was sleeping on her golden bed,  
 A golden garland lay upon her bed.  
 Gods slipped the golden garland over her head.  
 “This is what I dreamed at early dawn,” she said.

19

“With parasols and flags a crowd surrounded me,  
 A golden star fell to earth beside me,  
 I picked it up quickly as if it were full of nectar,  
 Then deep into my womb sank that star.”

20

As on her flower-filled bed Queen Māyā slept,  
 She dreamt she was seated on Mount Mēru’s peak,  
 Saw a nearby village bathed in the full moon’s beams.  
 “O king, what is the meaning of these dreams?”

21

As the queen slept on a bed made all of silver  
 Her dome-like breasts began to fill with milk.  
 A silver baby cobra coiled within her—  
 Such dreams of childbirth constantly assailed her.

22

Brahmins came to the palace vestibule  
 And explained in full the meaning of the dreams;  
 “A noble Bōdhisattva will be born, O Queen;  
 All Three Worlds he will rule, like the full moon.”

23

Thousands of celestial maidens he left behind,  
 Abandoned a hundred thousand kinds of bliss,  
 Saw his noble mother Māyā, the infinitely good;  
 Then he descended from the sky, like a full moon.

24

Queen Māyā now has a pregnancy craving.<sup>15</sup>  
 Full of compassion, she gathers together the needy,

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15. It is culturally accepted that a woman has special cravings during pregnancy. The nature of the cravings can indicate the personality of the fetus in the womb. In this case, they suggest a child of generosity and great compassion.

Commands that homes be built for all the poor,  
And alms be also distributed there.

25

Queen Māyā has a second pregnancy craving,  
The city gates now open and close continuously  
As do the palace gates, opened for generous giving.  
In this way Queen Māyā satisfies her craving.

26

Queen Māyā has yet another craving,  
She wants the city to resemble one in heaven,  
Orders a beautiful structure to be built,  
Walks round the city and then enters it.

27

“I have a craving to take a walk in the *sāla*<sup>16</sup> grove.”  
The park is all decorated in silver and gold,  
Four Guardian Gods come to keep careful watch,  
They joyfully escort her round the grove.

28

The queen enters the *sāla* grove full of delight,  
Flowers bloom, the sound of bees is all around.  
The *sal* tree bends for the queen, lowers itself to the ground,  
Aware the ten-month pregnancy<sup>17</sup> is complete.

29

The mother can now see the Prince within her—  
A pure gold image enclosed in a jeweled case,  
Decked in many wondrous ornaments;  
At that moment all the gods appear.

30

She places her blessed hand on the trunk of the tree,  
The flowering branch bends low as if to adorn her,  
She grasps the lovely branch to ease her labor.  
They draw rich and beautiful curtains around her.

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16. The *sal* is a flowering tree famous in North India.

17. Pregnancies were believed to be ten or a little over ten month duration—perhaps calculated on a lunar calendar.

31

She had felt her pregnancy only after ten and a half months,  
 Her womb had hardly felt a cotton-wisp of weight.  
 The cool breath of flower-laden breezes wafted around;  
 In the *sāla* grove the baby prince was born.

32

Gods came through the sky and stood around her  
 Thousands of heavenly maidens surrounded her  
 The prince was born quickly, effortlessly.  
 Great Brahma held a golden net to receive the baby.

33

Like a moon the prince rests on the net of gold,  
 The lovely baby looks over the Three Worlds,  
 Aware there is none greater than he in all Three Worlds  
 The prince gives out a joyous lion roar.<sup>18</sup>

34

Seven lotus blossoms bloom for the baby Prince;  
 He stands on them and looks in four directions.  
 For Prince Siddharta who gave that noble roar  
 Gold-milk<sup>19</sup> is served to him without delay.

35

Wet nurses on either side surround him,  
 The ceaseless clamor of thousands is around him.  
 Then like a full moon shining very brightly,  
 He is taken to the palace with pomp and pageantry.

36

Thousands of guards are stationed to protect him,  
 Hundreds of thousands of heavenly flowers adorn him.

---

18. These events are all part of the Buddha story. The 'lion roar' he gives at birth indicates he will be a Supreme Buddha. He then takes seven steps on lotuses that magically appear.

19. It is a paste made of breast milk, a touch of gold, and other auspicious ingredients that is rubbed on a newborn's tongue for health, wealth, and rhetorical skills—a custom still performed in Sri Lanka.

Like a moon coming into fullness,  
The Prince now comes into his sixteenth year.<sup>20</sup>

37

Our Bōsat acquires skills with bow and arrow  
Yasodharā becomes his chief queen as before.  
For twenty-nine years he lives the life of a layman,  
Then gladly abandons all pleasures, leaves his queen.

38

Sick of *samsāra*, he turns to the ascetic path.  
The king sends several queens to hold him back.  
Disillusioned, he turns away from that pleasure-park.  
“Whatever happens I will leave today.”

39

The Bōsat rises quickly from his bed.  
“I’ll abandon pleasures, become an ascetic” he says.  
“Who is that standing at the door?” he asks.  
“It is I, Canna,<sup>21</sup>” lord, who’s by your door.”

40

“Virtues practiced over long years in *samsāra*  
Are now complete, the heralded prince<sup>22</sup> has come.  
I will become an ascetic when I’ve seen my son;  
The fortunate Prince Rāhula has been born.

41

“My friend, our friendship stretches back through time.  
Today will be my final royal journey.  
Give me my rich and precious ornaments,  
Prepare my horse, friend, deck him in his finery.”

---

20. Sixteen years was considered the age of adulthood.

21. Canna was his minister and friend, throughout *samsāra*. The name is pronounced with a soft “ch” sound.

22. It was predicted that the day Siddharta’s son was born he would leave the palace in his quest for Enlightenment. Now when he hears that his son is born he knows the time for his departure has come.

42

The minister weeps, tears stream down his face.  
 “I will now see my son and will come back,” Siddhartha says.  
 He goes to the royal palace where his wife resides,  
 And sees her in her bed, fast asleep.

43

He rests his blessed hand on the golden lintel  
 Places his blessed foot on the gold door-sill,  
 Sees her sleeping like a moon on her pure bed,  
 Withdraws his foot, turns away his head.

44

She sleeps on a bed heaped with lots of flowers  
 Milk flows from her swan-breasts for the baby prince  
 Yasodharā, full of Virtue, who has never done wrong,  
 Except perhaps, unwittingly, being a threat to Buddhahood.

45

Her hair falls loose, long, blue-black  
 Curls frame her face, like twirling tops.  
 The baby in her arms suckles content.  
 How can he leave once he’s seen those golden breasts?

46

“From long ago I fulfilled all the Virtues  
 I practiced ‘giving’ to be a Buddha, to save all beings.  
 She is lovely, moon-like, preeminent among women —  
 Shall I just say one word to my dear queen?”

47

“My lovely queen sleeps on her golden bed.  
 Shall I draw near, look at my baby by her side?  
 Her arm cradling him is a golden vine.  
 My eyes are drawn to my lovely, sleeping queen.”

48

“The baby sucks his milk from that jeweled dome.<sup>23</sup>  
 What more is there to see, it is no use.”

---

23. The Sinhala word is *mānik karandu* (jewelled relic casket). I use the word “dome” as a relic casket is dome-shaped like a *stūpa*. The English word “casket” has another shape and other connotations.

You have never failed me, not in thought or deed.”  
His mind holds firm, his eyes fill with tears.

49

“You’ve wept more tears for me than the seas hold water,  
Does this wide world hold a woman as good as you?  
Today I leave you in order to become a Buddha  
I must destroy desire, be firm in my resolve.

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<sup>24</sup> my queen.  
No more will we walk together the *samsāric* round.  
I will come back as a Buddha. Wait for me.”

52

Sandalwood scent wafts over her flower-filled bed  
That sweet fragrance for many leagues extends.  
“Most beautiful are you, my Yasodharā,  
I’ll return when I become a Supreme Buddha.

53

“I leave my pure and gold-limbed queen behind,  
I withdraw my foot without a backward glance.  
I make this sacrifice to become a Buddha.”  
He steps back, walks away, a radiant sun.

54

“Canna, long have we two walked this path together.  
We gave our word to each other, many lives ago”  
The minister falls at the Bōsat’s blessed feet  
Asks, “Lord, where is it you now intend to go?”

---

24. Bimbā was another name for Yasodharā.

55

“If you leave us our land will be deserted.  
 Don silken shawls, take a golden sword instead.”  
 “Friend, do not impede my path to Buddhahood.  
 Deck out my horse and bring him to me now.”

56

One does not argue with a Bōdhisattva.  
 Canna sobs, walks to the horse Kantaka.  
 Weeping hot tears he decks him in full finery,  
 Lifts his hand and strokes the animal gently.

57

The prince is dressed and now is ready to go  
 He presses his blessed feet on the threshold.  
 With his gold sword-tip he opens the golden door,  
 And thinks of his beloved son and of his Queen.

58

He leaves to become an ascetic to help all men.  
 She cuddles the sleeping child decked in ornaments.  
 Her blue-black hair hangs loose about the bed  
 Coils upwards and curls around her face.

59

On a bed strewn over with *saman* jasmine<sup>25</sup> flowers  
 The queen rests relaxed nestling her infant child.  
 Like a garland made of golden *kinihiri*<sup>26</sup> flowers  
 Her blessed arm cradles her baby child.

60

With his mind firmly set on becoming a Buddha  
 He forsakes past happiness for an ascetic life,  
 Forsakes the ties of love that bind to *samsāra*,  
 And those loose coils of blue-black, curling hair.

---

25. The flower is a Sri Lankan jasmine of great fragrance.

26. Spectacular golden flowers used in poetry as an image of softness and beauty.

61

Her gentle face that comforts with cool kisses  
 The lovely child held closely in her arms  
 Is like a golden star beside a full moon.  
 He leaves now, like the moon, thinking of his son.

62

Like the full moon the Bōsat steps outside.  
 “I go now to the forest, leave my gold-limbed child.”  
 Gold-limbed he walks towards the river bank.  
 “I’ll see my wife and child when I come back.”

63

He’s seen the ills of *samsāra* and is sickened.  
 He jumps astride his good horse Kantaka,  
 Crosses thirty leagues of woods and desert  
 Stops when he reaches the banks of the river.

64

Hoooves beat down heavily, the horse leaps across the sand.  
 The animal opens his mouth and neighs aloud.  
 He flares his ears then turns his head around  
 And lovingly he licks the prince’s feet.

65

It was the full moon night in the month of *Āsala*.<sup>27</sup>  
 He crossed the river, came to a sandy bank,  
 Took off his ornaments, gave them all to Canna,  
 Told him to re-cross the river and go back.

66

“How can I go back, my noble lord and master?  
 You leave us with an endless burning grief,  
 We are lost. Our sun has sunk behind the mountain.  
 How can I go back to that city, to wait for whom?”

---

27. *Āsala* is the eighth month (August) on a lunar calendar.

67

The Bōsat takes his gold sword in his hand  
 Cuts off his hair and throws it into the sky  
 Sahampati, god of heaven, takes the relic,  
 Makes the first offering of a monk's requisites.<sup>28</sup>

68

The weeping minister falls upon the earth.  
 The Bōsat lifts his hand to stroke his horse.  
 "Let us all three, break our bonds, go on to *nirvāṇa*."  
 The weeping horse falls dead and is born in heaven.<sup>29</sup>

69

Grieving the loss of both the Bōsat and the horse,  
 "Do you send me home empty-handed?" Canna asks  
 "I must tell the king your father all that has happened.  
 Lord, give me leave to go, for that is now my task."

70

He gives him leave, and all his ornaments.  
 "Cross *samsāra*'s ocean waters, do not falter;  
 Tell the king my father to care for my young son;  
 Tell my queen Yasodharā to be comforted."

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 lord, my beloved?  
 Go bring him to me now. I must see him, I will."

---

28. It is a tradition that when a monk first joins the Buddhist order, he is presented by a member of the laity with a set of eight basic requisites for a monastic life. They include two sets of robes, an undergarment, a begging bowl, a belt or carrying sash, a razor, needle and thread, and a cloth for filtering water. Here Sahampati, king of the Brahma heaven, makes the first ever such gift to the Bōdhisattva.

29. Heaven is a place where the gods live and to which those who do good go. But it is distinct from *nirvāṇa*.

72

Her combed hair falls like loosened strands of gold  
 Her full breasts like two domes made of pure gold.  
 Her lord gone to become a Buddha, to seek *nirvāṇa*,  
 Yasodharā falls on her bed and breaks into sobs.

73

“You left resolved, your mind set on being 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?”

74

“We were first born in the animal world as deer,  
 Since that life we two have never been apart.  
 In every *samsāric* birth I was always your consort.  
 Why then in this life did you go, leaving me alone?”

75

“Once we went as ascetics together to the forest,  
 We happily carried our two children in our arms,  
 We lived in two dwellings, separate, but in the same forest.  
 Why have you left me alone now, what have I done?”

76

“With full awareness, I too made every effort.  
 By the power of our resolves we were always together,  
 With our joined hands we made all our gifts together.  
 Why then did you leave me, my lord, without one word?”

77

“My eyes are full, my garments wet, tears fall,  
 As my husband, nectar-like, I recall.  
 Abandoning our son, I know he has now left.  
 Is there another woman in this world so bereft?”

78

“Once in a former birth we were born as squirrels,  
 And our young one into the ocean’s waters fell,  
 I know how hard you strove to save him then,  
 My husband, lord, why did you leave him now?”

79

“Did I do wrong to bear you a handsome son?  
 Did I fall short in beauty, goodness, strength?  
 Was a disrespectful act unwittingly done?  
 Or did you dream of being a Buddha, conquering death?”

80

“You must know, my lord, how the Kirala<sup>30</sup> hatches its eggs  
 Straining with its feet turned to the sky.  
 Flames of my grief rise up, they burn and scorch.  
 I beat my breast in grief and openly cry.”

81

“In the shadows of the forests you now walk,  
 There is no resting-place for you in that dark.  
 Unceasing burns the fire that sears my heart,  
 O golden one, I beat my breast and weep.”

82

“My moon-like lord who partook of fragrant food  
 That I, with special flavors, made for you,  
 May sweet fruits grow in the forest for you,  
 And fragrant flowers bloom for my lord of gold.”

83

“Our flower-decked bed where we lay as our hearts desired,  
 I cannot look on it now—it burns my breast.  
 Striving to be a Buddha, unhindered, you went;  
 A searing sun now is the bed on which you slept.”

84

“As Vessantara do you recall how you went to the forest?  
 Did I not look after you then, comb the forest for fruit?  
 A care never crossed your mind then, was that not the truth?  
 My moon-like-lord did I not constantly protect?”

---

30. The *kirala* is the local name for a bird that has an unusual way of hatching its eggs.

85

“Like the marks on the moon was I not with you always?  
 Who told you then to abandon me today?  
 When I was asked to stay in Sandamaha city<sup>31</sup>  
 Did I not weeping, follow you that day?

86

“I did not protest when you gave away our children  
 Was I not then a Vessantara<sup>32</sup> that day?  
 Did I not bear you the lovely prince Rāhula?  
 Why then did you leave me and walk away?

87

“I never kept a secret from you ever,  
 I never let you be troubled, not me, Yasodharā,  
 I, once so blessed, now weep inconsolably,  
 Woman of a thousand virtues, I’m your Yasodharā.

88

“Your cause was Buddhahood—I sensed the signs  
 Yet I came with you as your wife, every time.  
 Now let meditation never leave my mind.  
 Ah! the palace is dark today, oh husband mine!

89

“You tied their hands and gave away our children  
 My golden breasts oozed milk for them, my young.  
 I fell at your feet and wept hot scorching tears.  
 To one who tried so hard, why do you cause such pain?

90

“Once both of us were born as *kindurās*<sup>33</sup>  
 We lived together on the dark moon rock.

---

31. The reference is to Yasodharā’s decision to leave the palace and follow her husband Vessantara to the forest.

32. Vessantara is now synonymous with one who performs acts of incredible generosity. Yasodharā here claims the same title for herself in that she even let him give away her children.

33. Yasodharā in her grief recounts events in various past rebirths. Here the reference is to the *Kīnduru Jātaka* when they were born as *kinduras*—mythical creatures, half human half bird—not unlike the mermaids in Western literature. A king out hunting saw them

Now beloved, in one night we are torn apart—  
My heart is split. I can do nothing but sob.

91

“Countless times we gave away our children,  
Countless tears I’ve wept because of you.  
Tell me, have I ever wronged you, even unwittingly?  
Why did you leave to become a monk, so secretly?”

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?”

93

She tore off her precious pearl and gemstone jewels,  
Took off her golden silks and the rings on her toes,  
Pulled off the golden ornaments in her ears,  
The queen sat lifeless as if turned to stone.

94

“I shall wait weeping and wailing, lamenting my woes,  
Boundless tears will flow as I sob unceasingly,  
Confused and troubled I now weep endlessly.  
Why did you do this to me, depart as never before?”

95

“When you were born as an elephant in the forest,  
Did not a *vādda*<sup>34</sup> hurl his arrow and make you fall?  
Did I not sit there beside you weeping and pleading?  
O my husband why have you now abandoned our son?”

---

and fell in love with the *kindura* woman. He killed the husband in an attempt to win her. She, however, refused to leave her dead husband. Hearing her laments and moved by her grief, the gods restored her husband to life.

34. *Vādda* is the term used to describe a group in Sri Lanka who were non-Buddhist and lived by hunting. They inhabited the forested areas of the island.

96

“When you were Mahausada<sup>35</sup> what didn’t I do for you?  
I rubbed a rice and curry paste on my head and limbs.  
All those ordeals, however hard, were sweet to me  
I was your Amarāvati then, now, your Yasodharā.

97

“I went with you on your countless ascetic journeys,  
Joined in many forms of worship and offering.  
I can’t remember a wrong done even unthinkingly.  
Why did you leave me so alone and solitary?

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?

99

“Whatever faults I may have had my lord,  
I cooked and fed you flavored food and drink.  
You who now wander far away in the forest,  
May the blessings of the gods be with my lord.

100

“May all the forest fruits turn sweet for you.  
May men surround you as do bees a flower.  
May the sun dim his scorching rays for you.  
May gods create shelters for you as you walk.

101

“My lord no longer hears my sad laments.  
I don’t see my gold-hued lord even in my dreams.  
Now I too vow to renounce all worldly pleasures,  
Though he has left me, I’ll abide by the moral rules.<sup>36</sup>

---

35. The reference is to yet another *Jātaka* story of a previous birth of the Bōdhisattva. Yasodharā, then his wife Amaravati, rubbed a paste of rice and curry on her body so her imprisoned husband could lick it off and relieve his hunger when she visited him in prison.

36. These are the moral precepts that laymen undertake to perform in order to enter the path to *nirvāṇa*.

102

“My heavy grief I’ll bear, however hard.  
 Like the air around me, I’ll think only of my lord.  
 To become an *arahat* unswervingly I’ll try  
 Till I set eyes on him again, I’ll tell my rosary.”<sup>37</sup>

\* \* \*<sup>38</sup>

103

For seven days the Bōsat stayed in a mango grove,  
 On the seventh day, to Rajagaha he went.  
 With his All-seeing Eye saw what former Buddhas had done,  
 Then begged for alms, sat by the river and ate.

104

Leaving Rajagaha he said to King Bimbisāra,  
 “I’ll preach a sermon to you when I return.”  
 The Bōsat then went to the Ūruvela region,  
 Remained there as an ascetic for six years.

105

Having vanquished Māra, the fearful god of death,  
 He partook of milk-rice offered by Sujāta.  
 The noble one’s face now waxed like a full moon.  
 He floated his golden bowl upstream on the river.<sup>39</sup>

106

Repeating a wish made far back in the beginning,  
 Sothiya the brahmin brought *kusa*<sup>40</sup> grass as offering,  
 The Bōsat happily accepted, walked to the Bōdhi tree<sup>41</sup>  
 Saw the twenty-one foot *Vajrāsana*<sup>42</sup> there.

---

37. Buddhists tell beads as in a rosary and recite the virtues of the Buddha. It is called the string of nine virtues.

38. The verses of lament end here and the Buddha narrative picks up again.

39. The bowl flowing against the current was a symbol that his Doctrine would be against the flow of normal desires.

40. It is a kind of grass that he can use to sit on.

41. The tree (*ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha achieved Enlightenment.

42. The *Vajrāsana* is the immovable seat of Sakra. Here the Bōdhisattva sits on the seat under the ficus tree with the determination that he will not rise until he has achieved full Enlightenment. It thus becomes an ‘immovable seat’ or *vajrāsana*.

107

The Bōsat sat contemplating virtues perfected.  
 For his protection, the gods all gathered round.  
 Māra's hosts came too they filled the area around—  
 But he's now a Supreme Buddha, all bonds destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

108

To enable his Doctrine to last five thousand years  
 The Buddha, full of Merit looked over the earth.  
 To destroy all bonds, to save creatures from *samsāra*,  
 The Noble One preached the Sermon of the Turning Wheel.<sup>44</sup>

109

The noble Buddha looked with his All-seeing Eye  
 And made three visits, in consecutive order,<sup>45</sup>  
 Aware his life would last another forty-five years,  
 He went to his father's city to preach to him.

110

The gracious city was decked like a heavenly abode.  
 Five hundred *arahat*<sup>46</sup> monks accompanied him.  
 He gathered his kin, preached the Doctrine to them,  
 The city became enveloped in his halo of gold.

111

Like a tree of pure silver the weeping queen now comes,  
 The light of the Buddha's halo envelops her heart.  
 Like a lovely vine, escorted by her maidens, she comes,  
 Falls at the Buddha's feet and breaks into sobs.

---

43. The ten Impediments (*dasa bimbara*) such as lust, sloth, pride, and so on are a hindrance to a religious life.

44. The *dhamma cakka pavattana sutta* (verses that set the Wheel of the Doctrine in motion) was the first sermon that outlined the theory of causation basic to the Buddha's teachings.

45. The three visits are to the Tusita heaven to preach to his mother and the gods there, to the world of the nagas, and to his former home, Kapilavastu, to preach to his father and kinsmen.

46. *Arahats* have reached the final stage of the path to *nirvāṇa*.

112

Prince Rāhula asks his father for his inheritance,  
 Circling him, like a golden star around a moon.  
 The Buddha preaches the Doctrine, the prince is fully convinced,  
 Prince Rāhula is ordained and becomes a monk.

113

The Buddha preaches to the King, his father,  
 Eases his grief, sets him on the path to *nirvāṇa*.  
 Yasodharā gives up past comforts, becomes a nun,  
 With purity and wisdom keeps her vows.

114

She lived in this way, thereafter thought,  
 “I’ll perform a miracle, rid men and gods of doubt.”  
 The blessed queen pursued the life of a nun  
 Sat long hours in meditative trance.

115

All who do good, can earn the same rewards,  
 Discard Defilements,<sup>47</sup> quickly gain relief.  
 The queen now sits cross-legged, up in the air.  
 Says, “I’ll get permission, follow the Discipline,

116

“And hereafter I’ll be known as ‘Rāhula Mātā.’<sup>48</sup>  
 Soon the queen sheds all Impurities,  
 Then dies, and wins *nirvāṇa*’s highest bliss.  
 Five hundred maidens achieve bliss with her.

117

Her relics were enshrined in a beautiful *stūpa*.<sup>49</sup>  
 All paid their respects with a rain of flowers.

---

47. See note on Impurities.

48. Once she became a nun she was known not as Yasodharā but as ‘Rāhula mātā’ (mother of Rāhula.)

49. A bubble shaped structure in which the ashes or other relics of the Buddha or arahats are preserved.

Siddharta, now a Buddha, rained Merit on her,  
With his Buddha-hand placed flowers on her bier.

\* \* \*50

118

She cast aside all worldly blessings and joined the order of the nuns.  
She broke all earthly bonds of grief, as an *arahat*, brought glory to the  
nuns.

She made offerings to men and gods, when in the order of the nuns,  
She obtained permission, attained *nirvāṇa*, the blessing that is beyond  
all blessings.

119

When the prophecy was made that in this eon he would be a Buddha,  
You came with him like his shadow never left him anywhere.  
From the time he became a Buddha, you lived apart, reached *nirvāṇa*  
first<sup>51</sup>

The many occult powers you gained, you exhibited everywhere.

120

Leaping over the seven oceans not permitting them to overflow,  
You appeared in the ocean depths swimming like a fish below.  
For the benefit of men and gods many miracles you did show,  
Yasodharā of great fame, to *nirvāṇa* you did go.

121

Exhibiting various occult powers as offerings to the great *Muni*,<sup>52</sup>  
Now rising up to the sky, in full sight of the great *Muni*,  
Destroying grief, great Yasodharā reached the ultimate *nirvāṇa*  
Can we not now recount your virtues together, in one voice?

---

50. I have marked a break to indicate a change in rhythm and style that occurs here. One of the palm leaf manuscripts conclude at verse 117. There is further internal evidence to support verse 117 as being the conclusion of the poem. Yasodharā's death, and cremation are described in this verse. What follows refer to events that took place before her death and seem a later addition.

51. As related in the *apadāna*, Yasodharā dies and reaches *nirvāṇa* before the Buddha.

52. Another term used for the Buddha.

122

She sits in the three planes of the sky in their successive order.  
 She takes on the guise of Lord Sakra, great Brahma, the *Nāgas* and the  
*Garuda*.<sup>53</sup>

She tells the crowds that gather round “I am Yasodharā.”  
 She sings the praises of Lord Buddha, on that day dies, attains  
*nirvāṇa*.

123

May all women bow your heads before the feet of Yasodharā.  
 Like a jeweled crown she adorns the heads of women everywhere.  
 Listen women, to this sermon decide to be born like her,  
 Plan to do every Act of Merit when this sermon you do hear.

\* \* \*54

124

You creatures who wish to gain *nirvāṇa*,  
 See life's pain, shed your love of *samsāra*,  
 Grasp not wealth that can only bring sorrow,  
 Do Acts of Merit, do not in suffering wallow.

125

Women, take this sermon well to heart,  
 Angry looks on your husbands do not cast.  
 Like gold and mercury, live loving and united.  
 Be born like Yasodharā and be greatly blessed.

126

Think always of your husband's well-being,  
 Don't demand he bring you this or that.  
 Don't say a single word that might cause hurt.  
 Love him and live happily together.

---

53. The Garuda were mythical snake-eating birds. These are some of the miracles referred to in the *Yasodharāpadana*.

54. I have marked a break here because there is again a distinct break in rhythm and style. See introduction p. 27.

127

When things get rough and there is not much to spend,  
 Be kinder to him than when things were good.  
 It is not wrong, O women, to care for a husband.  
 Can't you too, like Yasodharā, reach *nirvāṇa*?

128

Like Yasodharā be always true to your husband.  
 Come ill or well be unchanging, faithful ever.  
 O women, if you love and are true to one husband.  
 You will surely enjoy future heavenly pleasure.

129

Be obedient to your husbands, all you women,  
 Do not be sad, and care for him when sick.  
 Be like Yasodharā who never thought of another.  
 Accumulate Merit so you can reach *nirvāṇa*.

130

All you women, fill your hearts with goodness.  
 Focus your mind constantly on good deeds.  
 Love all creatures, protect them from life's pain,  
 Then the nectar of *nirvāṇa* you will surely gain.