Literary Buddhas Across Ages and Borders

Selwyn College, University of Cambridge
July 15–16th 2022

A symposium funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council

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Abstracts for Friday July 15th

July 15th, 9.00–10.00am

Joanna Gruszewska
Assistant Professor, Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations, Jagiellonian University in Krakow

The Buddha in the *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā*, which forms a part of the Khuddhaka Nikāya of The Pāli Canon, is a collection of poems traditionally ascribed to elder Buddhist nuns (*therī*s) and is considered one of the oldest texts attributed to female authorship. The poems of the *Therīgāthā* have the form of autobiographical accounts of individual nuns, mostly written in the first person and composed in verse, which concentrate on the issue of achieving liberation. According to the Buddhist tradition the *Therīgāthā* contains poems traditionally regarded as monologues uttered by nuns at the very moment of their enlightenment. Even though the nuns' verses are not words of the Buddha, the Buddha appears in them several times. The proposed paper would like to elaborate on the insights of Kathryn R. Blackstone, who observed the Buddha in the *Therīgāthā* mainly as an object of reverence (Blackstone 2000: 50). The presence of the Buddha is varied: some of the verses are attributed to the Buddha and are regarded as soliloquies (Shaw 2016), in some the Buddha appears as a literary character – the Buddha is either the teacher whose words are repeated at the time of enlightenment, the commentator who praises the accomplishments of the given nun, or, rarely, a conversational partner of the nun who authors the verses. I would like to analyse the presence of the Buddha in the nun's verses and compare it to his depictions and interactions with monks in the *Theragāthā*, taking into account the cultural context of ancient India and the problem of gender relations in ancient Indian Buddhist monasticism. Lastly, I would like to reflect on whether any of the *therī*s can be considered a female equivalent of the Buddha.

July 15th, 10.00–11.00am

Sue Roach
Postdoctoral Research Associate, SOAS London

Cousins in Conflict: The Buddha as Proponent of Asceticism in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*

The *Vinaya*, or monastic law code, is the division of the Buddhist canon which regulates the conduct of monks and nuns, both collectively and individually. However, the *vinaya*s of the various early schools are also a valuable source for the biography of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Scholars and laypeople in the West tend to be most familiar with the Pāli texts of the Theravādins. According to this tradition, one of the points of conflict between Śākyamuni Buddha and his cousin Devadatta was the espousal (however disingenuous) by Devadatta of certain rigorous ascetic practices (Pāli: *dhutaṅga*; Sanskrit: *dhūtaguṇa*) which the Buddha refused to make mandatory for the *saṅgha*. This is the account we find in many authoritative reference works.

In 2018, Jens Wilhelm Borgland published an article based on a close reading of portions of the *Saṅghabhedavastu* in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* (the *MSV*) in which he demonstrated that the *MSV* version of Devadatta's plot differs significantly from what we find in the Pāli and other Mainstream *vinaya*s. The *MSV* Devadatta specifically criticises the Buddha for his (the Buddha's) praise of various *dhūtaguṇa*s. The *MSV* Devadatta declares five new rules for his own followers, only one of which is a *dhūtaguṇa*.

My research shows that the *MSV* portrayal of the Buddha as the proponent (rather than opponent) of *dhūtaguṇa*s is not limited to these details in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*. The *MSV*'s version of the 4th Forfeiture offence contains a long account of the Buddha's return to Kapilavastu. Here too we see the Mūlasarvāstivādin Buddha at doctrinal odds with e.g. the Pāli Buddha. He eulogises and lists all the *dhūtaguṇa*s as part of a skilful plan to wean his newly ordained Śākyan kinsmen off their preoccupation with their material possessions. He also uses the *jātaka* of Mūkapaṅgu to achieve this aim.

Evidence from many other parts of the *MSV* suggests that the compilers of this code actively endorsed some of the *dhūtaguṇa*s as a legitimate Buddhist path. I analyse how exactly they envisaged this path and conclude that it constituted a form of voluntary simplicity rather than harsh asceticism; it was nevertheless far removed from the luxurious lifestyle of some Mūlasarvāstivādin monastics as depicted in the *vinaya* and elsewhere.

As well as establishing the *MSV* Buddha's distinctive stance on the central issue of ascetic practices, I will examine the literary skill with which the compilers embed the *jātaka* in the 4th Forfeiture offence.

July 15th, 11.30am–12.30pm

Naomi Appleton
Senior Lecturer in Asian Religions, University of Edinburgh

Devotion and the Literary Buddha of the *Avadānaśataka*

The starting point for this paper is the reflection that translating the *Avadānaśataka* made me love the Buddha, even though I don't identify as a Buddhist. The Buddha of the *Avadānaśataka*, a (Mūla-)Sārvāstivāda narrative collection in Sanskrit from sometime in the first half of the first millennium, is painted as an extraordinary character. First of all, he is able to see the past and the future, not only of himself but also of others, and to explain how the karmic deeds that sit at the heart of the text's stories come to fruition. He is physically magnificent, such that his very presence evokes awe in those he encounters. He also works miracles, and his magnificent light-emitting smile pervades the entire cosmos, saving beings in its wake. Yet he also has his human side, and can relate to his followers in ways that sometimes surprise us. He is clearly the object of devotion for many characters within the text, and this paper asks how that might also model and affect responses outside the text. Using examples of literary strategies in the *Avadānaśataka*, I will argue that this particular literary Buddha is aimed primarily at eliciting an emotional response in the audience, by inspiring awe, devotion and even love.

July 15th, 1.30–2.30pm

Janine Nicol
Research Associate, SOAS London

The Buddha as "Royal Ascetic" and "Sage-King": an investigation into the nature of kingship in the *Liudu ji jing* 六度集經 (*The Compendium Sūtra on the Six Pāramitās*).

The *Liudu ji jing* 六度集經 ('LDJJ') is an early jātaka collection, traditionally regarded as a translation by Kang Senghui 康僧會 (? – 280). Recent scholarship reveals a complex textual history; it is a composite, containing stories in differing formats, by different translators. The 85+ stories provide many small windows into how the Buddha, both as Śākyamuni, and in his many guises as a bodhisattva in previous lifetimes, was described and perceived in the earliest centuries of Buddhism in China. The concept of a liberated being, who has accumulated merit over innumerable lifetimes, was new to a Chinese audience and needed explanation. There being no comparable figure in the Chinese pantheon, how then, to describe the Buddha? Which traits did he exhibit and which actions did he pursue? As expected for a work which classifies the jātaka stories under the headings of the six *pāramitās,* related traits figure highly. But Indic concepts may not have immediately resonated with the neophyte Chinese audience. The *Wei lüe* (ca. 265 CE) records the earliest audience for Buddhism in China was the Han court where, in c. 2 BCE, a Da Yuezhi envoy orally transmitted Buddhist scriptures to someone at the Imperial Academy. As Antonello Palumbo argued in his 2012 paper, 'Models of Buddhist Kingship in Early Medieval China', "the princely status of the Buddha appears to have been played up ever since this initial encounter": the LDJJ provides ample evidence for this. In his final incarnation Śākyamuni relinquished his royal status to pursue liberation, but in nearly half the jātakas in the LDJJ the Bodhisattva is portrayed as royalty: a human ruler (19 times), an animal ruler (14), a Crown Prince (4), and a Cakravartin king (3). These stories usually begin declaring 'in former times the Bodhisattva' was a particular character and ends with Śākyamuni identifying that character as himself. Chinese audiences could be forgiven for conflating the traits exhibited by the Bodhisattva with those of Śākyamuni. Palumbo suggests Buddhism entered China, "speaking directly in the ears of the ruler" and "its first model of kingship [was] is the Buddha himself – the Buddha as the royal ascetic bringing to perfection the old Taoist ideal of the trance-driven cosmocrat." This paper will examine whether this ethical paradigm holds good in the two centuries following the end of the Han in south China, and whether, in the LDJJ, a hybrid Buddho-Confucian template for rulership emerges with models of kingship found in Confucian sources also utilised to promote Buddhism to Chinese rulers.

July 15th, 2.30–3.30pm – presenting remotely, 8.30–9.30am for the presenter

Adam Miller
Doctoral Student, University of Chicago; Adjunct Instructor, Central Methodist University

'That would make for a very good biography': The Life and Times of Śākyamuni in the *Precious Banner Sūtra*

"The Transcendent One's biography stems equally from the three baskets, but it seems necessary to make a distinction between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna. The *Extended Performance* [Skt. *Lalitavistara*], for example, details his life from dwelling in Tuṣita Heaven until the turning of the first wheel of dharma. If one wanted to flesh out the period after the first sermon according to mode common to Mahāyāna texts, the story of the model pair as told in the *Precious Banner Sūtra* [Skt. *Ratnaketuparivarta*] could be added. That would make for a very good biography."[1] So writes Tāranātha (1575–1638) in the postscript to his biography of Śākyamuni, titled *Sun of Faith*. The basic account of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana's conversion is well known. What makes the *Precious Banner*'s telling unique is the inclusion of Māra, who kicks up a lot of dirt in an effort to dissuade the "model pair" from taking refuge in the Buddha. This story is recounted relatively quickly in the *Precious Banner*, however, and it is unclear where Tāranātha would have us stop reading. Following Tāranātha's suggestion, then, this paper reads the *Precious Banner*—and not just its telling of the model pair's conversion—as a source for the Buddha Śākyamuni's literary life.

[1] de bzhin gshegs pa'i rnam par thar pa sde snod gsum las byung mnyam yin yang | theg pa che chung gi dbye ba phyed dgos par snang ste | 'phags pa rgya che rol pa las | ston pa dga' ldan du bzhugs pa nas | chos 'khor thog mar bskor ba'i bar rgyas par 'byung ba lta bu | theg chen gyi lugs yin pas de'i rjes 'thud par 'dod na | 'dus pa rin po che tog las 'byung ba'i mchog zung gi lo rgyus dang | . . . kha bskang na shin tu legs par 'gyur la | (Tāranātha, *Bcom ldan 'das thub pa'i dbang po'i mdzad pa mdo tsam brjod pa mthong bas don ldan rab tu dga' ba dang bcas pas dad pa'i nyin byed phyogs brgyar 'char ba*, in *Tā ra nā tha'i gsung 'bum*, [TBRC W22277], 17 vols. [Leh: C. Namgyal and Tsewang Taru, 1982–87], 12:1–12:166 [cataloguer's pagination, 12:1–12:331], at 12:165a.5—12:165a.7 [cataloguer's pagination: 12:329.5–12:329.7)]).

July 15th, 4.00–5.00pm

Bai Yu & Athanaric Huard
Doctoral Students, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris

The Cosmological Buddha as a Narrative Motive

In this presentation, we will introduce the theme of the "cosmological Buddha" as a narrative motive. This term was used until now by art historians to describe images where the whole world system is depicted on the body of a Buddha. This type of representations is attested in Central Asia (Kizil grottoes and Balawaste in Khotan) and in China since the fifth century. For now, no Indian model is known. The depicted Buddha is traditionally identified as Vairocana as he is described in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra.* But other scholars argue that he should be identified as Śākyamuni and can be interpreted in a broader perspective. The lack of textual parallels makes it difficult to understand the purpose and the meaning of these images.

We will study several instances of description of "cosmological symbols" appearing on the Buddha's body in Buddhist narrative texts, to name only the most important ones: a *Buddhacarita* composed by a follower of Aśvaghosa, which isn't preserved in Sanskrit but was translated to Chinese as the *Fo benxing jing* 佛本行經 (T 193); a putative Chinese "apocryphon" the *Dacheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經 (T 159); the Tocharian A version of the *Bṛhaddyuti-jātaka*, and the *Maitreyasamitināṭaka*, a Tocharian A drama about the life of Maitreya. In all these texts, these descriptions appear as a distinct narrative motif, added at crucial points of *avadāna*s, biographies of Śākyamuni or of Maitreya. It is always depicted from the perspective of a character or a crowd looking at the Buddha, which brings it close to *darśana*, and it precedes conversion or *praṇidhi* scenes.

With the new textual materials, we would like to show that this motive is not originated from Mahāyāna conceptions. Previous literature assumed that it was somehow connected to the *viśvarūpa* theophany, but the exact relationship remained obscure. The narrative instances we provide make it clear that, by resorting to this motive, Buddhists consciously challenge Hindu gods and the brahmanical myth of creation in order to display the superiority of the Buddha. In Tocharian narratives, this motive is part of *praṇidhi* scenes, and in addition to cosmological symbols, all Buddhas of the past appear on the body of the Buddha. This suggests that it was also used as a symbol for the continuity of the Dharma, but it may also reflect speculations on the oneness of the Buddha nature.

July 15th, 5.00–6.00pm

Chris Jones
Research Associate, Faculty of Divinity & Bye-Fellow, Selwyn College, University of Cambridge

Śākyamuni among other Buddhas in the Indian Mahāyāna

Indian Buddhology of the early Common Era appears to have moved in a number of bold directions. For one thing, the cosmographical picture of a world with gods, humans and animals, into which there might be born an awakened teacher, expanded to acknowledge the existence of other worlds or "world-systems" that could in theory accommodate other buddhas: what come to be called "buddha-fields" (*buddhakṣetra*s). "Our" Buddha, Śākyamuni, becomes not only the awakened teacher of our age, but also of our world-system, and in especially (but not exclusively) Mahāyānist literature is numbered among other buddhas who are understood to have taught not simply through time, but across the vastness of space.

In the middle of the first millennium Mahāyāna Buddhist commentators developed systematic accounts of what a buddha is and how he relates to the world (what we might tentatively call "systematic Buddhologies"). Earlier Mahāyāna Buddhist literature exhibits a more complex picture, in which one might explore not only "what" Śākyamuni is (sometimes in terms of his "bodies" [*kāya*], or modes of being), but also "who" he is as an awakened teacher relative to others before him, after him, and also those buddhas teaching concurrently in other, distant worlds. This paper looks at how Śākyamuni is imagined as one among many buddhas in some well-known as well as less well-known Mahāyānist discourses (*sūtra*s), in which his character is explored not in a systematic manner but rather through narratives and dialogical forms. I shall address how the composers of Mahāyāna discourses wrestled with the Buddhological question of the one and the many: how far named buddhas, who are supposed to be of the same underlying nature, are both discrete teachers but also perhaps expressions of a single awakened personage/reality. This will culminate in some reflections on Śākyamuni under the guise of Vairocana, and some new reflections on how the notion of a "cosmic buddha" seems to have evolved from sources such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, and is known to us earliest in the rich and colourful content of *sūtra* literature.

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Abstracts for Saturday July 16th

July 16th, 9.00–10.00am – if presenting remotely, 1.30–2.30pm for the presenter

Kavita Pai
Doctoral Student, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT, Delhi; Adjunct Assistant Professor, Institute of Dharma Studies, Somaiya Vidyavihar University

The Essence of Buddhism: Dharmanand Kosambi's Imaginative Re-tellings of the Buddha's Life

While Ambedkar's 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' is widely acknowledged as an instance of the radical re-imagination of Buddhism in the modern era, the works of some of his equally important predecessors who wrote not in English but in the 'vernacular' remain in near obscurity in the English-speaking world. This paper will discuss the works of one such individual, Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1947), who told and re-told the story of the Buddha over his entire life, in different forms such as the essay, the anthology, the long biography, and in drama. The paper will delineate the path he took in order to arrive at the 'essence' of Buddhism in a world at once ravaged and galvanized by the forces of colonialism, science, and modernity, his interlocuters on the journey being, on the one hand, Burnouf, Edwin Arnold, Olcott, Rhys Davids and others, and on the other, Parshvanath, Tukaram, Phule, Marx, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Savarkar, among others. Finally, the paper will attempt to understand some of Kosambi's narrative choices through a close reading of his own biographies and autobiographies.

July 16th, 10.00–11.00am

Margarita Delgado Creamer
Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Pittsburgh

Jorge Luis Borges on the Buddha's Life Story

In a packed theatre in Argentina in the 1970s, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), one of the greatest twentieth century writers, gave a memorable lecture on Buddhism, a subject with which few Latin Americans were familiar. Although the title of his lecture was "Buddhism", it was the Buddha's life that had pride of place. His presentation gave one of the several versions of the Buddha's life story that Borges had told since 1950. Despite the extensive scholarship on Borges and his writings, not much research has been done on this aspect of his opus, and his relationship with Buddhism in general.

In the hope of contributing to the comparative discussion on this topic, this paper will analyse a selection of writings in which Borges narrates and discusses the Buddha's life story, as well as his own related critical commentaries in various interviews. The focus, however, will be on a piece entitled "Forms of a Legend", in which Borges reflects on the transformations of the story itself, and, based on these transformations, he ponders the relationship of reality and unreality, legend and history, and the fantastic character that the Buddha and the universe end by acquiring in some of these legends.

This paper argues that far from turning these reflections into detached philosophical discussions, Borges turns them into an arena for wrestling with his own worldview, ethics and poetics, thus making the life stories of the Buddha part of the Borgesian universe. In the process of doing so, he remains faithful to traditional Buddhist sources, but transforms discussions of them into an existential introspective exercise.

July 16th, 11.30am–12.30pm

Micah Auerback
Associate Professor, Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Michigan

The Light of the Three Ages: How a Nun of Early Modern Japan Illuminated the Life of the Buddha

Long a mainstay of didactic sermons and religious art, tales of the life of the Buddha started to reach Japanese audiences through new routes in the sixteenth century. Transformed in commercial publication and performance to suit new audiences, these works boasted scenes of unearthly fantasy; gory dismemberment in battle; jealousy leading to attempted sororicide; and melodramatic family renunion. Working outside Buddhist institutions, their creators evidently did not regard the existing biographical literature as sacred canon. Rather, they seem to have found in it a rich repository of material ready to be rearranged, embellished, or overlooked as needed. Conspicuously weak, and not always at the centre of the story, the Buddha-to-be of their works sometimes does not even defeat Māra's minions.

Among the few Buddhist intellectuals to take issue with such popularizations was a nun of the esoteric Shingon denomination, Kōgetsu Sōgi (1756–1833). A minor aristocrat, Kōgetsu became a disciple of Jiun Onkō (1718–1805), the great scholar and reviver of precept practice. Kōgetsu co-founded and superintended a convent, where she extensively researched the Buddha's life through Chinese canonical works, such as the *Chapter on Schisms* of the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya*, and compilations by Chinese monks, such as the *Genealogy of the Śākyas* by Sengyou (445–518). She reworked such sources into her own vernacular biography of the Buddha, *The Light of the Three Ages* (J. *Miyo no hikari*). Put into print a few years after her death, it was republished by a group of prominent monks, who newly commissioned illustrations, in 1885.

The present research draws on the author's draft translation of The Light of the Three Ages, and upon archival research which the author conducted in 2019 at Kōgetsu's convent, Mitsujōzan Chōfukuji. This research shows how Kōgetsu marshalled 'orthodox' biographical sources to counter the 'distortions' in the popular lives of the Buddha of her day. Notably, she restored biographical episodes which had fallen out of favor in Japan: the petition to join the Buddha's order by his aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī, as well as the Buddha's ultimate inability to prevent the annihilation of his own clan by its estranged offspring, Virūḍhaka.

July 16th, 1.30–2.30pm – presenting remotely, 8.30–9.30am for the presenter

Rachel Pang
Associate Professor, Davidson College

Shabkar's (1781–1851) Re-telling of the Historical Buddha's Life Story in his Collected Works

The life of the historical Buddha is not a static tale, but rather, one that has been told and retold in various cultural contexts around the world. In Tibet in particular, the standard version of the Buddha's life story is in the form of the "Praise of the Buddha's Twelve Deeds" which Tibetan historians have traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna. This version of the Buddha's life story is widely chanted in monasteries to this day. There exist other renderings of his life story as well, such as in 125 episodes (Schaeffer 2015).

In this paper, I consider how a poet-saint from eastern Tibet, Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781-1851), retells the story of the Buddha's life in his Collected Works. On the one hand, Shabkar adheres to the standard version of the Buddha's life story by re-iterating the story in the form of the twelve deeds and incorporating episodes from the *Jātakamālā*. He does this in his *Wondrous Emanated Scripture* (*ngo mtshar sprul pa'i glegs bam*) and a newly composed "Praise of the Buddha's Twelve Deeds."

On the other hand, Shabkar also undercuts the standard version of the Buddha's biography. At the beginning of the second volume of his autobiography, he presents the claim that the story of the historical buddha is the provisional meaning of the *sūtras*. Instead, he argues that the ultimate life story of the Buddha can be found in the Dzogchen tantras, a system of thought and practice belonging to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Drawing from Dzogchen mythology, he argues that the first true Buddha was Samantabhadra, who continuously manifests throughout *saṃsāra* in various forms. Shabkar uses this as the basis of his argument that his audience should perceive their guru to be a manifestation of the buddhas and to view spiritual teachers from different sects and religions to be manifestations of buddhas as well.

Here is an instance where the Buddha's life story is retold for a particular objective. Shabkar's reasons are threefold. First, Shabkar retells the Buddha's story in order to give advice on how to practice the six *pāramitās* and guru yoga. Second, Shabkar "takes back" the story of the Buddha from more scholarly iterations such as that by Butön (1290-1364) to make it accessible to the masses through a clear and simple literary style. Finally, Shabkar recasts the Buddha's story using the myth of Samantabhadra in order to advocate for the practice of non-sectarianism. In doing so, he also makes an implicit argument that the Nyingma sect presents the most ultimate form of the Buddhist instructions – a claim that is common in many traditions of Buddhism across Asia. In Shabkar's retelling of the Buddha's life story, we see evidence of Julianne Schober's observation about the Buddha's life story's uncanny ability to "shift narrative foci and interpretive contexts" allowing for its perdurance as well as "continuation in specific, local contexts" (1997, 12).

July 16th, 2.30–3.30pm – presenting remotely, 8.30–9.30am for the presenter

Roberto E. García
Associate Professor, Centre for Asian and African Studies, El Colegio de México

Śākyamuni Buddha in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: The Legend of the Buddha in Vasconcelos' *Hindustani Studies* (1920)

The intellectual encounter of the Spanish-speaking world with Buddhism has a relatively short history, dating back to the late nineteenth century. Although some theosophical works translated into Spanish during the last two decades of the nineteenth century presented interpretations of the Buddha's doctrine, the first written productions on Buddhism in Spanish-speaking countries focused almost exclusively on the legend of the Buddha. Thus, the reception of the figure of Buddha Śākyamuni in Latin American countries at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth had a mainly literary character. Within this incipient vein of Latin American orientalism, the figure of the Mexican José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), philosopher and poet, enlightened politician and educational ideologist, stands out. In his founding work *Hindustani Studies* [*Estudios indostánicos*] (1920), Vasconcelos constructs a multifaceted Buddha, at the same time a literary figure, a philosopher and a paradigm of holiness. Thus, Vasconcelos' Buddha retains his status as a literary construction, but is not limited to it; it also serves as a historical reference for authentic Buddhist doctrine, which, for Vasconcelos, as for his sources, is represented mainly by the Pali Canon of the Theravāda school.

In this presentation, an analysis will be made of some aspects of the figure of the Buddha in Vasconcelos' *Hindustani Studies*, framing his approach in the contexts of the reception of the figure of the Buddha among Latin American intellectuals at the turn of the century and of academic discourses on Buddhism that had developed in Western countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This will allow us to address more specifically some trends that characterized the exposition of the Buddhist tradition in this work from the early twentieth century, mainly with regard to the legend of the Buddha and the notions of authenticity, originality and decadence that Vasconcelos inherited from his Western academic sources. As we will see, the Mexican intellectual would use these elements to cement his own post-revolutionary educational and civilizing program.

July 16th, 4.00–5.00pm

Vanessa Sasson
Professor of Religious Studies, Marianopolis College

Writing from the Buddha Biography, Writing Yaśodharā

According to Charlie Hallisey, scholars of Buddhist Studies might benefit not just from listening *to* texts, but listening *from* them. Leaning on a passage from the Sanskrit grammarian Panini, Hallisey suggests that when we listen *from* a text, we allow ourselves to learn from it. As scholars, we tend to limit ourselves to context and analysis, even "at the expense of engaging what [the text] might say that transcends that context" (Hallisey 76). Hallisey encourages us to consider the transformative experience of reading – something that Sara McClintock calls "ethical autopoiesis." For McClintock, scholarship in the field of Buddhist Studies need not be limited to the historical and philological enterprise. We may also challenge ourselves with the question of how we ourselves might be transformed by the texts we read.

McClintock and Hallisey are providing scholars with an opportunity to broaden the field of Buddhist Studies. Scholars are trained to keep sources at a clinical distance. As historians, we mine them for clues about the past. As philologists, we piece the words apart. But the question McClintock and Hallisey challenge us with is whether we might also engage with texts as *readers*. What happens when we allow the texts to speak to us?

In this paper, I want to connect this question to the story of the Buddha's Great Departure and explore some of the ways reading the story has engaged and transformed my own understanding of the narrative. For most of my academic career, I have read the story of the Buddha's Great Departure following traditional academic methodologies. But when I allowed myself to read the story *as a reader*, when I approached the story with the aspiration of listening *from* it, what I read was something altogether different. No longer focused exclusively on the protagonist, all the characters (human, animal, celestial, plant) suddenly came alive. Interactions and relationships (many lifetimes in the making) filled the pages, a chorus of voices clamoring with things to say. The story of the Buddha's departure was no longer exclusively focused on the future Buddha. It was also focused on everyone he was leaving behind, along with all those who celebrated his imminent accomplishment. And everything and everyone else in between.

Taking the experience one step further, I experimented not only with listening from these stories, but tried writing from them as well – attempting to tell the story again, but for the first time, in my own voice (Sasson 2021). Are we allowed to write Buddhist stories as scholars or are we supposed to limit our activities to specific types of study? I set this question aside and forged ahead. And then I was watching vibrant scenes flicker before my eyes instead of textual fragments locked onto a fixed page. The story changed. In this paper, I will describe the experience of trying to write *from* the Buddha biography and lay out some of the questions I wrestled with as I tried to engage the story at such close range.

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Further Information

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For any questions regarding the event, please email literarybuddhas@gmail.com, or one of the convenors at their address below.

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