



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Yasodhara:

The Forgotten Story of the Buddha's Wife

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

1 August 2021

frederickuu.org

Growing up in a theologically conservative congregation in South Carolina, I was taught that there was only one right way to be religious, and conveniently, it was ours. All other paths—including many other Christian paths—were said to be dangerous and heretical. But the more I learned about the world, the more evident it became that **there are multiple spiritual paths that can lead to compassionate, wise, and generous ways of being in the world.**

If we stopped here with just that insight into the value of pluralism, that would already be significant. But there's at least one more important twist on this journey. As I dove deeply into the world's religions, it also became evident that **all religious and spiritual traditions include problematic parts.** No tradition is perfect. As you have heard me quote, "We are saved from perfection!" There is no one universal "way" that works for all people in all times and places. I've also come to value the importance of being transparent about both the good and the bad parts of various religious and spiritual traditions—the inspirational as well as the discredited.

Such recognitions can empower us to retain what remains valuable today (so that we aren't throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater), even as we let go of anything obsolete and no longer helpful in the twenty-first century globalized pluralistic postmodern world in which we find ourselves.

Perhaps all that is obvious to many of you, but I will confess that there have been times that I have found myself learning about some branch of a spiritual path that I didn't previously know much about, only to find myself thinking, "Maybe this is the one!" Maybe this path has all the virtues and none of the vices, all the benefits and none of the pitfalls. Well, at this point, having spent the last two-and-a-half decades exploring the world's religions as my full-time profession, I have found that all faiths eventually disappoint on some level. *We are saved from perfection!*

Now, don't get me wrong, there remains tremendous value in the world's religions, especially when balanced with the insights of modern science. But I have also come to appreciate the importance of being honest about the shadow sides of the various traditions.

The specific example that I would like to invite us to wrestle with today comes from the Buddhist tradition. There are so many aspects of Buddhism that I love, and practicing meditation has been incredibly helpful and transformative in my life. As I have shared with you previously, I am about six months into a two-year formal Meditation Teacher Training through an organization called Buddhist Geeks. But one of the things that I heard about in passing that always bothered me—but that I didn't know much about previously—was the relationship between the historical Buddha and his wife. So I did what I often do: I scheduled this sermon to force myself to learn more about that relationship, and to invite you to come with me on that journey.

Parts of the origin story of Buddhism are understandably often told in ways that glorify the historical Buddha, whose name was Siddhartha Gautama. For example, "the Buddha" is an honorific title, meaning "Awakened One," in much the same way that Jesus's last name isn't Christ—but rather, a title meaning "Anointed One."

Prior to going on a quest to become awakened (or enlightened), Siddhartha Gautama was said to have been a "prince." His family lived somewhere in what is known today as northern India, or perhaps southern Nepal, sometime around the 5th century BCE, give or take a hundred years (Sasson 4).

Siddhartha's story can be quite inspirational. He was heir to considerable wealth and power, with access to all manner of worldly pleasures, the best food, clothes, sexual partners, and more. (Keep in mind that this is the same time period in India in

which the *Kama Sutra* was written) (Garling 92). But Siddhartha turned his back on sensual pleasures to explore the most extreme ascetic spiritual practices of his time, before eventually realizing the profound insights into the nature of reality and the wisdom of the Middle Way which later became the basis for Buddhism.

On the one hand, I'm incredibly grateful for the spiritual insights that Siddhartha Gautama shared with the world, insights that have benefited me and so many others. On the other hand, if we zoom out, the story quickly becomes more complicated. As is often the case, it is important to recognize that *multiple things can be true*. Which brings us to a part of the historical Buddha's legend that is often left out or glossed over: the impact of his choices upon his family.

Do you know the saying that, "If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu?" Well, the Buddhist tradition has often been told in a way that privileges the perspectives of male monastics (10). And that tradition can begin to look quite different if you begin to acknowledge other perspectives.

For instance, prior to researching this sermon, I was vaguely aware that Prince Siddhartha Gautama was married and had a son, and that he left them at home when he embarked on his years-long spiritual quest. He later returned home only long enough to take his son with him, again leaving his wife behind.

Those details bothered me, and the more I learned, the worse I felt about the many disheartening possibilities behind those hard details. It bothers me that I have spent many years in and around the Buddhist tradition, but prior to researching this sermon, I could not have told you that the Buddha's wife even had a name. Often in the early Buddhist writings, she is left out altogether, or called either "the Buddha's wife" or "the mother of Rahula" which is the name of their son (Sasson 1). As it turns out, we do know her name: Yasodhara. And I want to invite us to spend a few moments this morning considering how the origin story of Buddhism changes when we reflect on it from her perspective.

If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, one good starting point is a book titled [Yasodhara and the Buddha](#) by the religion scholar Vanessa Sasson. At the risk of stating the problem bluntly, I'll follow the lead of Wendy Doniger, a religion professor at the University of Chicago, and one of the world's more renowned experts

in Indian religions. In considering Siddhartha's story from the perspective of Yasodhara, Doniger has said, **"her husband abandoned her, and even took away their child"** (ix). I remember the first time I heard it phrased that way, I had to stop and let those harsh words sink in. That's heavy stuff. It's such a painful and all-too-human story that has played out across so many families over time.

And this is one of those points in which we are invited to consider whether we can allow multiple differing "truths" to co-exist. Can we allow for the messy, complicated possibility that the historical Buddha was both a spiritual genius and an uninvolved, disappointing, even really problematic husband (Garling 83)? Can we be honest that the Buddha has helped *alleviate suffering* for countless people through the spiritual practices he helped pioneer, and may have also *caused significant suffering* for his family in the process (Sasson 3)?

Let me add a few more details to Siddhartha's story, then I would like to invite us to consider some takeaways for how it can inform our approach to meditation and to exploring the Buddhistic tradition from a twenty-first century perspective.

As best as scholars can discern, Siddhartha and Yasodhara were the same age; some traditions hold that they were born on the same day. And they were both sixteen years old on their wedding night. They were married for twelve years before Yasodhara became pregnant, at age twenty-eight, with their first child, a son. So there may have been some struggle around fertility.

Typically, there is joy around the birth of one's firstborn son, particularly after trying without success to have a child for more than a decade (269). Instead, tradition holds that, of all nights, Siddhartha chose to leave home the day after his son was born —without meeting his son nor saying goodbye to his wife. Some early Buddhist records suggest that: "His abandonment was dramatic and the outcome devastating. Yasodhara woke up the next morning to the news of his departure...she challenges the Chariot Driver for taking her beloved away. She demands explanation, she shakes in fury, she collapses with pain." (2-3).

When Siddhartha returned six or more years later around the age of thirty-five, many people in the palace rushed out to greet him. In contrast, there is a powerful line

in some of the early Buddhist records that Yasodhara alone refused to go out to greet him. After so many years, she said that he could come to her (281).

According to the stories, he did come back to her, but only briefly and primarily to take his son with him back into the forest, again leaving her behind, which further hurt Yasodhara. Importantly, there were again other possible options he could have chosen. For instance, there are also ancient Indian traditions of “a king taking his wife with him if he departed for a contemplative forest life” (Garling 151). And given that Yasodhara eventually became a Buddhist nun, fully enlightened in her own right, an interesting question is what might they have discovered together if he had invited her to join him on his initial spiritual quest (260-1).

In the spirit of fairness, I will certainly concede that all this was playing out in a deeply patriarchal culture and time; and the historical Buddha did permit women to be taught meditation. Yet, women also remained second-class citizens in many Buddhist tradition. Most infamously, there is an early teaching of the Buddha that, “even the most senior [female] nun who has been ordained for one hundred years must bow down to and respect a junior [male] monk even if he has only been ordained for a single day” (Weiss 139).

So where do we go from here? What do we do with this imperfect, messy, and complex situation? Among many possible takeaways, I invite you to consider at least three in particular.

The first is that **no human being—including religious and spiritual leaders—ever has or ever will perfect**, whatever that would even mean. (Remember, we are saved from perfection because it is an impossible ideal to be all things to all people.) No one is perfect whether we’re talking about world-historical religious figures like the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Moses, and others, or whether we’re talking about various stripes of ordained clergy. This claim is likely not particularly controversial among most UUs, but let us also be honest that a lot of people—including many UUs—have ended up in a lot of abusive situations when religious leaders are put up on pedestals and when religious leaders fail to deal honestly with their flaws and limitations. So may the story of Yasodhara be a reminder that religious leaders can be inspirational and important leaders, while also always remaining fallible human beings.

A second potential takeaway is to **not limit ourselves to the understandings, standards and conventions of the past.** As we saw before, *multiple things can be true.* The historical Buddha was clearly a spiritual genius, even though some aspects of his teachings are limited by the sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other oppressions of his time. As with all understandings, we should give ourselves the freedom to update old teachings in light of today's evolving and more inclusive insights.

Finally, we should **question the ideal of the solo monastic male.** Don't get me wrong. If you feel called to meditate alone in a cave or in a forest, and you can do so in a way that doesn't unduly harm others, then that is indeed a time-tested way of pursuing spiritual growth. But the story of Yasodhara points us to another increasingly common way of pursuing spiritual growth: through meeting the challenges of everyday life.

The poet, environmental activist, and Buddhist practitioner Gary Snyder (1930 -) put it this way regarding practicing the dharma no matter one's situation in life:

All of us are apprentices to the same teacher that all masters have worked with—reality. Reality says: Master the twenty-four hours... It is as hard to get children herded into the car pool and down the road to the bus as it is to chant sutras in the Buddha Hall on a cold morning. One is not better than the other. Each can be quite boring. They both have the virtuous quality of repetition. Repetition and ritual and their good results come in many forms: changing the car filters, wiping noses, going to meetings, sitting in meditation, picking up around the house, washing dishes, checking the dipstick. Don't let yourself think that one or more of these distracts you from the serious pursuits. Such a round of chores is not a set of difficulties to escape so that we may do our practice that will put us on the path. *It is our path.* (Kornfield 72)

Our invitation is not only to “wake up,” it is also, as the saying goes, to “wake down”—to open ourselves fully—with mindfulness, heartfulness, bodyfulness—to the reality of the life we have.

Although I continue to value my occasional opportunities to go deeply into meditation states on long retreats, I am increasingly coming to experience the value

and power of practicing mindfulness, heartfulness, embodiment, awareness, concentration, and more at home, at work, at the grocery store, at the gym, while reading the news. May the story of Yasodhara be a challenge to consider the ways that we can wake up right here, right now in the midst of our daily life. Everyday life can truly be one of the most difficult and fruitful places to practice.

That insight connects back to my sermon a few weeks ago on Dr. Nicole LePera's Holistic Psychology. It can be one thing to think you are awakened or enlightened when you are out there alone in a cave; a much harder test is integrating your spiritual practice into your everyday life. Zen masters may be famous for being able to skillfully trigger us in the areas we still need to work on, but let me tell you: children are natural little Zen masters, often preternaturally able to push our buttons. As you've heard me say before, "Our families can push our buttons because our family sewed on our buttons." Along these lines, Ram Dass used to say, "**If you think you're enlightened, spend a week with your family.**" For most of us, doing so will quickly expose some places where we still get hooked, and where we still have work to do to become more fully liberated and free.

So, as we come to the end, I remain grateful for the tremendous legacy of spiritual wisdom and practice that Siddhartha Gautama helped discover. And I also remain curious about all that remains to be discovered—beyond what he was able to teach us— about living out the dharma in the present context of our daily lives.