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Yasodharā in *Jātaka*s

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This paper discusses the role of the Buddha's wife, Yasodharā/Rāhulamātā, in Pāli *Jātaka*s. Noting her continued popularity in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, it considers her path to liberation seen as a composite whole, through many lifetimes, and considers some of the literary implications of this multiple depiction. The intention of this paper is to initiate more discussion about this figure as a sympathetic and central presence in Southern Buddhist text and practice.

Introduction

The Buddha's wife is a mysterious figure, mentioned only occasionally in the canon.[1] She is, however, an active presence in the Pāli *Jātaka*s, where all kinds of psychological, dramatic and sometimes fantastic situations are explored for the Bodhisatta and his principal followers, impossible in their final lives, where they have specific, even typological, roles to fulfil (Shaw 2010). Yasodharā, or in *Jātaka*s, 'Rāhulamātā', the mother of Rāhula, or Bimbā/Bimbādevī, features in many stories, always married to the Bodhisatta (TGBSB, 8). Here she seems to enact different approaches, or perhaps explorations, of marriage itself: one longstanding union is as if refracted through a glass, producing many narrative outcomes and multiple possibilities. We cannot assign a single authorial intent to the richly varied manifestations of this figure, but we can infer some animating principles, that colour and inform these different Yasodharās, configured for specific stations and types of lives as she accompanies the Bodhisatta on his path to an awakening, which, in the end, she finds too.

Her existences are diverse, though with parameters and scope that are not as wide as those of the Bodhisatta. Recent research and commentary on her identities in her Pāli past lives, particularly as Maddī in the *Vessantara-jātaka*, is starting to address past curious scholarly neglect of her role; a complex and highly

1. See Appendix to this paper.

eloquent companion to the Bodhisatta in his struggles is being revealed. John Strong argues that all the Bodhisatta's family undergo what he calls a 'family path', which in an ancient Indian context would not be considered inferior, but a collective journey, undertaken by all participants freely yet in conjunction with one another (Strong, 1997). Richard Gombrich gives some analysis of her in his introduction to the *Vessantara-jātaka* (Ja 547) (Cone and Gombrich 1977, xviii ff.). Steven Collins, discussing various 'felicities' described in early Buddhist texts that echo, anticipate or aid the path to *nibbāna*, demonstrates that heavenly existences of many kinds, enacted in the practices of single ascetics, forest-dwelling chaste marriages and conventional unions, are perceived as contributing and reflecting in different ways the nature of liberation itself (Collins 1998). As Jonathan Walters says, discussing her and other female presences in the *Apadāna*, 'marriage can even be a positive soteriological force' (Walters 2013, 191). So Yasodharā's earlier self, Maddī, performs an essential, active function in the fulfilment of the Bodhisatta's perfection of giving, not as a cipher, but as his main support, encourager and helper in their forest life. Justin Meiland's dissertation on renunciation in *Jātaka*s shows complex play on motifs, symbolism and character revealing Maddī's centrality in enabling the Bodhisatta to achieve his goal (Meiland 2004). Comparing her portrayal to that of Sītā, he notes Maddī and her other rebirths in other *Jātaka*s, show Yasodharā as an embodiment of the various possibilities of the female lay and ascetic life. As Maddī, she is seen as goddess-like in rural Thailand (Tiyavanich 2003). Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw consider her powerful presence in the various tales in the last ten *Jātaka*s, in many of which she appears, significantly, as a key player (TGBSB, 18–21; Shaw 2006, 223–224, 160–161). Ranjini Obeyesekere, explaining Yasodharā's role in the life of the Buddha, has beautifully translated Sinhala laments and post-canonical literature (Obeyesekere 2009, 2014). I have found no study, however, that considers this woman's character and path as a whole, both as a wife and mother, and as a spiritual practitioner over many existences in the Pāli *Jātaka* literature. Defined as her life and lives are by her relationships with others, it seems interesting to investigate her as a single participant within this larger narrative. What role does she play in the larger Pāli Buddhist story?

Yasodharā's presence in thirty-two stories

Klaus Klostermeier notes regarding various Sanskrit treatments of the figure: 'The frequency with which Yaśodharā is mentioned, and the very positive role which she plays in the successive births of the Bodhisattva, indicates a loving relationship' (Klostermeier 1999, 26). But the few accounts of her occurrence in *Jātaka*s have omissions; no study treats them all. So, this paper simply lists them in a table, and describes some features that, as far as I know, have not been noted or analysed elsewhere. *Jātaka*s have a fourfold structure: the story from the present; the commentarial prose story in the past, which must contain earlier elements, as the verse parts, usually considered canonical, do not cohere on their own; largely canonical verses; and the *samodhana*, the final assignation of connections, usually prose. One story usually omitted from the list is the *Maha-ummaga/Mahosadha-jātaka* (546). This

Table 1. Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā's thirty-two *Jātaka* lives + one.

	Jātaka	Rebirth	Name if given and other significant features
1	*Lakkhaṇa* (11)	Deer: RM mother, BS father of wise & foolish sons.	–
2	*Mahāsudassana* (95)	Human: chief queen of universal monarch	Subhaddā (Great Fortune)
3	*Maṇicora* (194)	Human	Sujātā (Well Born)
4	*Bandhanagara* (201)	Human	–
5	*Kurudhamma* (276)	Human: chief queen	–
6	*Abbhantara* (281)	Human: queen; BS an ascetic	Story from the present refers to RM as Bimbādevī
7	*Supatta* (292)	Crow: wife of crow	Suphassa (Softie). Story from the present refers to RM as Bimbādevī
8	*Anusociya* (328)	Deer: wife of deer	Samillabhāsinī
9	*Visayha* (340)	Human: merchant's wife	
10	*Sūci* (387)	Human: smith's wife	Canonical marriage proposal from the BS
11	*Kumbhakāra* (408)	Human: potter's wife	
12	*Susīma* (411)	Human: chief queen	Speaks canonical verse
13	*Kummāsapinda* (415)	Human: chief queen	–
14	*Gaṅgamāla* (421)	Human: chief queen	–
15	Āditta (424)	Human: queen	Samuddavijayā (Conqueror of the Ocean); 'wise and accomplished'
16	*Cakkavāka* (434)	Brahmani duck	
17	*Cullabodhi* (443)		
18	*Cakkavāka* (451)	Brahmani duck	
19	*Udaya* (458)	Human: princess	Udayabhaddā (Auspicious)
20	*Pānīya* (459)	Human: queen	
21	*Dasaratha* (461)	Human; queen	Sītā (Cool One)
22	*Candakinnara* (485)	Kinnara	Candā (Moon)
23	*Campeyya* (506)	Nāga: queen	Sumanā (Beautiful)
24	*Jayaddisa* (513)	Human: chief queen	
25	*Cullasutasoma* (525)	Human: queen	Candā (Moon)
26	*Kusa* (531)	Human: wife of prince/king	Pabhāvatī (Radiant)
27	*Mahājanaka* (539)	Human: queen consort	Sīvalī; 'wise and accomplished'
28	*Khaṇḍahāla* (542)	Human: queen consort	Candā (Moon)
29	*Bhūridatta* (543)	Nāga: queen consort	
30	*Vidhura* (545)	Human: queen	
31	*Mahosadha/Ummagga* (546)	Human: minister's wife	Amarā (Deathless). Canonical *Abhisammbuddhagāthā* sees her as past rebirth of Bimbāsundarī (Beautiful Bimbā).
32	*Vessantara* (547)	Human: wife of prince/king	Maddī (Crushed? Intoxicating?)
33	Buddha's final life (*Jātaka Nidāna*)	Human: wife of prince/king	Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā. She becomes a nun and attains awakening

Key: RM = Rāhulamātā; BS = Bodhisatta. In all cases, her husband/consort is BS.

is crucial however, for, unusually, the assignments of characters in the present to their earlier counterparts are not in prose, but in verse, a rare *abhisambuddhagāthā* — an ancient verse made by Gotama 'in the present' (Geiger 1943, 31). Here the Buddha describes his earlier wife as a counterpart to Bimbāsundarī, using what appears to be an older name (Ja VI 478). This probably canonical verse, referring to the Bodhisatta's 'present' and a past-life wife, has been completely neglected in all discussions about Yasodharā/Rāhulamātā, and, incidentally, offers realistic support to the presence of a validated wife as a genuine historical figure.

Our heroine is reborn in many realms and species. She is usually strikingly beautiful, even as a goose, where her golden colour matches the Bodhisatta's handsome appearance (434, 451). She is often described as wise and accomplished (539, 424). She is occasionally tempestuous, when opposing asceticism (411, 525, 539), for instance, but in most lives is noble and respects the precepts. Unlike the Bodhisatta, she is never reborn in a 'low' rebirth such as a mouse or hare. Her attitude to renunciation varies. Where she does not renounce with him, she sometimes tries to seduce her husband away from asceticism (539, 459). Despite this, one does not find the elaborate descriptions of her as the classic abandoned wife that inform, for instance, the depiction of Sundarī in Aśvaghoṣa's *Saundarānanda* (Covill 2005). In practice the Bodhisatta rarely abandons her to renounce: only four stories see her not accompanying him when he pursues asceticism.[2] In the *Mahājanaka-jātaka* (539) she also becomes a solitary ascetic: this tale is distinguished by her attainment of *jhāna* on a *kasiṇa* after the Bodhisatta has left the palace. Although, in the *Cullabodhi-jātaka* (443), she has descended from a *brahmā* heaven, where beings are reborn through the practice of *jhāna*, no other story describes her attaining *jhāna*.[3] There are three tales where they live as ascetics together. In the *Kumbhakāra-jātaka* (408), she takes renunciation first. In this tale, the Bodhisatta, a potter, extols the superiority of the holy life. His wife rises, pretends to fetch water, but escapes out of the back door so she can become an ascetic first; he cares for the children until they are independent and he can become an ascetic (408). There are some stories where they co-habit chastely, usually in accordance with both their wishes. In twenty-four stories, however, they live as a 'married' couple, whether as brahmani ducks (434, 451), deer (328), *nāga*s (506) or in various human spheres, usually regal. In the *Mahāsudassana-jātaka* (95), at her husband's instigation, as his chief queen, she encourages him, before his death, to renounce his palaces and riches. In these environments she characteristically acts in accordance with her then species and station in life.

The still highly popular *Kusa-jātaka* (531) is curious as the Bodhisatta is, unusually, ugly. Yasodharā, as Pabhāvatī, deeply repulsed by his looks, runs away. Their

2. *Jātaka*s where they remain together, or we can assume they did in the absence of other evidence: 11, 95, 194, 276, 281, 292 (328 stay together as ascetics), 340, 381, 397, (in 408 she goes to be an ascetic before him), 415, 421, 424, 434, (in 443 both are married against their will and become ascetics), 451, 458 (but chaste), 461, 485, 506, 513, 531, 542, 545, 546 and 547. He leaves to become an ascetic without her: in 411, 459, 525, he goes off to be an ascetic and the rest of the village follow. In the *Mahājanaka* (539) she follows his ascetic path.

3. Pāli *Jātaka*s impress the happiness and contentment of the couple, usually without meditation.

marriage is from the outset characterized by a curious separation, at first engineered by him because of his ugliness, when he makes only night-time visits, and then by her, through her subsequent repulsion on seeing his physical unattractiveness. The kammic explanation of the curious circumstances of this oddly modern theme of relationship failure and its resolution, is important in this context, in part for their indication of the operation of will within the multi-life *Jātaka* narrative. The story says that in an earlier life his subsequent spouse had been married to a man who mistreated her. She, in the presence of the Bodhisatta, had vowed never to be reborn married to this man again; the Bodhisatta also made an aspiration to marry her, but did so after stealing a cake from a *paccekabuddha*, thus ensuring an ugly appearance in a later life, explained as a kammic consequence of tainted aspiration (Ja V 289). The theme is so compelling, and has ensured the story's continued appeal perhaps, because it suggests dynamics found in perennially popular tropes familiar in other traditions. It is reminiscent of the Eros/Psyche story of classical myth, the princess and the frog stories, and beauty and the beast, of Western folktale and, in the modern world, of the story of Cyrano de Bergerac, who hid his love through messages sent by an intermediary because of his great ugliness. In the *Kusa-jātaka* Pabhāvatī is not at first heroic, though she symbolically possesses a great radiance which threatens to reveal the Bodhisatta's face, even in deep darkness (Ja V 286). The trials of the couple appear like an alchemical journey, of great intensity and passion, as the Bodhisatta woos and works to transform his wife's perceptions of him through various tests and vicissitudes. For she does finally return to her husband, when the ugliness of the Bodhisatta's face casts terror around the king who wishes to put her to death (Ja V 306–07). At this point she undergoes a complete turnaround, and speaks in his favour for the first time in that narrative: she can state after her trials, at last truthfully, the virtues of her husband. She also, in her final recognition of her husband's calibre, starts to see beneath appearances and surface features to the goodness and strength she only then recognizes. It is perhaps one of the few *Jātaka*s where marriage and sexuality are explored extensively, symbolic of the need to separate 'appearance' and 'reality', 'beauty' and 'ugliness'. The trajectory of their marriage is seen through a passionate, if initially darkly troubled, meeting of minds, as well as a physical union based on her part, like a Jacobean tragic figure, on deep disgust, then completely transformed.[4] Here, truthfulness heals their union and produces heroism in him, as she finally acknowledges the truth of his nobility of character and status while he is working in disguise, as a lowly cook.

Imagery of gold accompanies their relationship; she is frequently decked in gold and jewels. In this story, as in two others, (328, 458), the Bodhisatta first finds her by having an image made of his perfect woman, crafted in gold, which is taken around the countryside to find its living counterpart. The statue that matches Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā, a Galateia more beautiful than the image, indicates too a perfect loveliness in the physical world, the sense-sphere. The Bodhisatta suffers many trials,

4. The theme is reversely comparable to Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's, *The Changeling* (1622; Lake 1975), for instance, where Beatrice-Joanna's repulsion for the villainous De Flores changes to obsessive passion.

before he can find an actively protective corresponding beauty beneath her outward form. The story works through this powerful metaphor to explore many levels of appearance and reality: finding 'truthfulness' is part of the way that the Bodhisatta has to find a path separating him from this worldly beauty, but which brings him to it again. With the return of a wife who now recognizes him, and who amidst his, and her own, sufferings, he finds his courage too, and returns to his princely status.

Other tales also appear to draw upon a mythic and allegorical level in their depiction of the transformatory and sometimes redemptive power of love within marriage, and the relationship between male and female. As Sumanā, the *nāga*, an underwater creature, in the *Campeyya-jātaka*, true to all her species, Rāhulamātā acts with abandon and throws herself at the Bodhisatta in this underwater rebirth, so that he forgets, despite having the *nāga* ability to recollect past lives, all his time as a human before (506; Shaw 2006, 158–178). In accordance with her behaviour in every other tale, however, she is faithful, and exemplifies the heroic *sīla* her husband is developing in that lifetime. When her husband is captured in snake-form above ground, she transforms herself into a goddess and intercedes, in the manner of a Shakespearean heroine such as Portia, to argue with the snake-charmer who has enslaved him and made him dance in public. Such is her eloquence and dazzling beauty the *nāga* is freed, and both, after changing shape and standing for a moment together as humans, return reluctantly to the realm of their *nāga* rebirth, where skilfulness is less possible than as a human. Here, as in other tales, she employs all the resources available to her in a particular rebirth: in this case the ability to 'shape-shift' at will.

In other stations of life she also behaves appropriately to her role: in the *Visayha-jātaka* (340), as a merchant's wife, she shares her husband's generosity, practically hunting around the house to find presents for him to give.[5] In the *Āditta-jātaka* (424), she inspires the Bodhisatta to generosity: when he is dissatisfied with the unworthiness of the recipients for his gifts, she suggests he offers flowers and invites *paccekabuddha*s instead.

Eloquence and quickness of thought are recurrent features: she speaks in canonical verses in the *Susīma* (411), when she is the older queen of the young Bodhisatta, to try, unsuccessfully, to dissuade her husband from the renunciate life when he is alarmed by a grey hair — which she has just claimed is his, though it is really hers. When she sees the effect, she is alarmed:

> But it is mine, not yours, this grey, my lord!
> From the top of my head,
> For your good I did this, and spoke a lie.
> Please forgive this one fault, great king.

5. Āryaśura's version of the tale, *Jātakamāla* 5, does not include a spouse. The tales that include a wife, and her depiction in them, shows a figure that could be construed as less favourable: for instance, *Jātakamāla* 4, the equivalent to *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 40, includes a wife who is too scared to cross the threshold to give alms to a *paccekabuddha*, as Māra has created a hell realm just over the threshold. The events of this tale, interesting for its metaphoric depiction of the misgivings that can accompany generosity, are not associated with Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā in the Pāli *Jātaka*s, where she is never fearful: in *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 40 a servant exhibits this timidity and there is no mention of a wife (Khoroche 1989; Meiland 2009, 2017).

You are young, and just so good-looking, O king!
Like the first shoots of a sprouting plant,
Govern your kingdom: look at me!
Do not chase after now what is right for old age. (Ja III 394)

She seems a female counterpart to her husbands' struggle, embodying qualities appropriate to the nature of the genre — one could say perfection in some instances — which the Bodhisatta is developing himself. Her regal births are frequent, and a certain hauteur and courage accompany this. As a princess she is majestic, sometimes imperiously disdainful to any threats to her position. As Sīvalī in the *Mahājanaka-jātaka* she inflicts terrible tests on all her suitors until the Bodhisatta outwits her (Ja VI 40–3); she also exhibits disgust for his eating of leftover food, a brahminic taboo (Ja VI 62–3). This tale is attributed by many traditions to show her vigour (*viriya*) (TGBSB, 5). Sīvalī's indefatigable and larger-than-life insistence first on following her husband, then making shrines to him, and then, finally, pursuing meditation, as he does, is magnificently heroic (Ja VI 67). As Amarā in the *Mahāummagga/Mahosadha-jātaka* (546), she is marked by a brilliant intelligence and wit reflecting the Bodhisatta's own, aptly in this story always assigned to the perfection of wisdom (*paññā*) (Ja VI 329; TGBSB, 5). She forestalls a plot to overthrow the Bodhisatta as minister to the king by cleverly writing down dates and people who are giving 'presents' of stolen property; she also gives short shrift in her punishments to them (Ja VI 369–370). This means he is not implicated when his enemies claim he has taken the items from the palace. When he is a suitor, she speaks to him with enigmatic gestures and riddles that match the style and tempo of this endlessly investigative story, where riddles, spying, intrigue and conspiracy constantly test the central players to use skill in means, the *upāya-kosalla* (Ja VI 363–368; see TGBSB, 198–201).

So what do these multiple variations suggest? Certain features emerge amongst the tales' apparently random distribution. Many different environments are described, as the characters assume roles in many different species and modes of existence. Over the last few decades we have become fascinated by multiple narratives, of different, often fractured perspectives on one field or series of events: we enjoy literary works with manifold narrative viewpoints, like heartbeats, or endlessly multiplying possibilities in parallel universes, as demonstrated in the films 'Sliding Doors' (Intermedia Films, 1998), or 'Groundhog Day' (Columbia Pictures, 1993). The undifferentiated time of *atīte*, 'times past', the framing device that links these stories also permits these multiple perspectives, a variety of relative fields for the Bodhisatta and Yasodharā/Rahulamātā, in which different kinds of marital relationships and interactions can be explored, outside what the tradition comes to consider the typological requirements of their final life together.

Her fidelity embodies the virtue that ensures that the resources of the natural world work for her. Because she lives in trust and alignment with other beings that inhabit the physical environment around her, she can, at times of crisis, assume a pro-active, initiatory role. So truth-telling, a frequent device in early Buddhist narrative, is often the primary means by which she overcomes obstacles: her trust in

the world around protects her when she invokes protective deities, or asks spirits identified with that locality to help her. In the *Candakinnara-jātaka* she saves the day by an act of truth (*sacca-kiriya*); King Sakka, stirred by her poetic evocation of the natural beauties of the environment, saves the Bodhisatta from 'death'. Sometimes she simply states her own virtue, and sometimes, as in this case, makes an appreciative declaration of the highly differentiated virtues within the immediate locality, such as the hills, mountains, lakes, skies, woods and streams.

> Oh, you are a bad man, you prince,
> Who has wounded my much-loved husband.
> You shot him, at the roots of a tree,
> And there he lies wounded, on the ground! (Ja IV 285)

She then invokes the beauties of the Himalayas — the flowers and hills, and the gold and white tips of the mountains — and finds her spouse revived, apparently because of her words. And the story finishes with her, characteristically, citing the environment around them as a background to what is suggested as an idyllic pastoral:

> Let's wander now to the mountain woodlands and rivers,
> Where streams flow, strewn with flowers,
> Dwelling places for all kinds of trees,
> And speeches of love to one another. (Ja IV 288)

According to the Abhidhamma, the beautiful (*sobhana*) or skilful (*kusala*) consciousness produces contact with beautiful forms (*kusala vipāka*) in the world around. So, the resonance within her to the auspicious properties of the physical world around seems to make their power available to her in times of need.

Her ability to invoke gods, natural reserves and local spirits within the endlessly rich *Jātaka* woodlands, marvellous landscapes, palaces and sometimes simple domestic spheres in which she is born, render her in some ways rather a modern figure: a kind of eco-heroine capable of survival and mobilization of the resources around her, skillfully deployed to support the Bodhisatta and other beings that share their environs. But it is not only deities she gets on her side; nor does her truthfulness necessarily involve citing virtues. In the *Khaṇḍahāla-jātaka* (542), as Candā, the princess wife, she has a genius for seizing the moment: rather than invoking supernatural aid, she realises that the king, about to fulfil his misconceived vow to kill his sons and daughters, will never respond to the arguments given by other members of the family, and herself. In what Appleton terms an 'impressive' way, she has even offered up her own children instead (TGBSB, 400). But she courageously and practically makes her formal declaration:

> By the truth 'foolish Khaṇḍahāla is doing an evil act' –
> By this spoken truth, may I have my lord. (Ja VI 155; TGBSB, 420)

She saves Canda, the prince/Bodhisatta, with one bluntly incontrovertible statement: that the king is being extremely stupid and cruel (Ja VI 154–155). This sensible measure ensures that the gods support her, for Sakka dispels the assembly and frightens the king with blazing iron, and, at the local level, the townsfolk rise up

against the king and instate the Bodhisatta as their true sovereign. She has already used deft appeals to popular opinion in the *Mahājanaka-jātaka* (539). There, as queen, she stirs up her people through false claims of fire in what proves this time, however, an unsuccessful attempt to turn the Bodhisatta from his determination to renounce: the will of a Bodhisatta, unlike that of kings, cannot be deflected. But it is an indication that her true alignment, when in a royal house, is with her people and the inhabitants of the kingdom, whose aid she knows she can call upon when in times of need.

Her resourcefulness is tested to the limit in the *Vessantara-jātaka*. I will not consider it in detail: it has already been discussed elsewhere (Gombrich 1977; Collins 1998; Meiland 2004; TGBSB, 523–528). A recent important collection of essays highlights various aspects of its omnipresence in Southeast Asian ritual and cultural life (Collins 2016), as does the work on banner art and its association with Thai vernacular versions by Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate (2012). The story should be mentioned, however, as in this, as Maddī, Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā becomes one of the most popular heroines in Southeast Asia. As is well known, it describes Vessantara finding the greatest extent of generosity, by giving up his auspicious white elephant, the symbol of his kingdom, kingdom, horse, children and wife, before having them all returned in a chiasmic reversal. The theme of the story is obviously a very tricky one for westerners — but its shock value was probably always there for Asians too. It involves an extraordinary test of a spouse's virtue that is echoed in many other literary and religious contexts: in the Indian Harischandra legend, in Chaucer's tale of Gertrude, whose fidelity is put to gruelling tests by the king, her husband, and even in the English novel, Thomas Hardy's tale of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.[6] In the *Vessantara*, by her acquiescence to being given away, to an ancient audience Maddī would be seen as finding the perfection of her auspiciousness too, a theme other events in the story support. Indeed, this applies to modern enactments: one Thai friend told me she saw Maddī as the embodiment of all women's struggle, a heroine on which all women can focus their losses, griefs and happiness. In modern festivals sometimes a strikingly beautiful actress takes the role, occupying centre stage while the monks in the background chant the story in its traditional form. Women present sometimes make offerings of flowers and fruits to the shrine so that in this one performance, at least, her sufferings can be alleviated and made less hard. For them the narrative is genuinely living: a drama going on whenever the story is chanted aloud. Maddī's behaviour throughout the story is perceived as an embodiment of what is possible for a woman in situations of terrible stress and misfortune. In the forest she is endlessly capable and practical, finding fruits, food and toys for the children wherever they go (Ja VI 520ff). Placing her trust in the forest when searching for food, she is not harmed by wild animals. She even continues willingly to live in the forest with her husband after he has given

6. In the Indian Harischandra legend, the hero sells his wife and child to a brahmin to pay debts: when the son dies, the boy is subsequently revived because of the parents' virtue, and the family is restored to good fortune. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) Henchard 'sells' his wife.

away their children. When Vessantara makes her his final gift, she acquiesces, with a simple statement of consent, so helping him in his struggle, in striking contrast to her sometimes stormy behaviour in other tales, such as the *Mahājanaka*, where she follows the Bodhisatta after he tries to renounce, attempting to trick him with lies and recriminations (539; Ja VI 54–57).

Jātaka stories are not arranged chronologically, but just as the last has been understood as the culmination of the spiritual path for Vessantara, so it seems to be intended to be for Yasodharā too. Unlike others in the story, she never breaks precepts, or puts her own wishes, however noble, before the needs and requirements that the beings in the immediate situation demand: she provides the true moral compass of the tale. It is interesting that the first gift of the Bodhisatta, in a scene that, as Gombrich points out, is considered one of the pivots of the tale, and one of the most popular in Southeast Asian depictions, is the auspicious rain-bringing elephant, involving a symbolic and profound relinquishment of the good fortune of his kingdom. The animal is called, curiously enough, *Paccaya*. This term, which means 'condition', is a technical description of each of the twenty-four *paṭṭhāna*, the links by which, in the Abhidhamma, all events that occur in any given moment of consciousness or situation are related to others, in manifold ways, both in space and time. Gombrich demonstrates that its use as a proper name is the result of a commentarial misreading.[7] It does, nonetheless, communicate the interconnectedness that unifies this story and which perhaps even historically influenced this reading. Maddī, like Vessantara, has to give up everything, but, unlike him, she never lets go of her sense of interconnectedness with other beings, whether her husband, her family, her environment, or, perhaps, her vow to accompany the Bodhisatta. She embraces interdependence, seeking at every juncture to act with mindful connectivity to others and the world around. In accordance with her invocation of the powers and beings of the natural environments of other *Jātaka*s, she addresses the wild animals of the forest as kindred beings. They, really divine beings, have been told by local spirits to obstruct her path so that she cannot meet danger by searching for her children. While it is getting dark, the trees do not give her fruits, and she is disorientated and lost: but her sense of kinship with other beings and the forest still persists, and she asks for their help not to block her path, and so lead her to her home (Ja VI 557).

She never ceases to know and acknowledge the causal relations that link her family and the beings around her. She is respectful of the forest, the means by which her livelihood and those around her are supported and come into being. Here she embodies a necessary counterweight to the Bodhisatta's overwhelmingly powerful generosity, which is aimed, albeit for altruistic motives, at attempting to separate himself, ironically through *dāna*, from those to whom he is most attached. The story is not really the 'sexist' fable modern readers might infer. Both figures, and perhaps the ideals of both sexes, are in some ways absurdly shocking. Vessantara in his determination to give despite the misgivings of his heart, is impossibly and endlessly generous, as Steve Collins notes, thus fulfilling the demands set for a

7. Cone and Gombrich 1977, xxxiii-iv. See Ja VI 588–589; TGBSB, 518.

Bodhisatta to become a Buddha in his final life: 'I am not indifferent to my children, nor to the princess Maddī. But Omniscience is precious to me, and for that I gave away even those people who were precious' (Collins 1998; Ja VI 570). Maddī, in her heroic acquiescence to this, by freely and nobly allowing herself to be given, is equally reckless, thus fulfilling in the tale the demands of an extreme counterpart of heroic womanhood. Through her support the Bodhisatta can make his gifts as the fulfillment of the last prerequisite in the attainment of the perfections. The events of the *Vessantara* would not be possible without her collusion, and her agreement to them involves her trusting the larger narrative of the Bodhisatta vow. This requires a *saṅgha*, as well as a teaching, and the participation of many family members as supporters and followers of the Bodhisatta. As Strong observes, in his discussion of the Sanskrit trajectory of her final life-story, as the spouse of the Buddha in the *Sanghabhedavastu*, their paths are interconnected:

> he leaves a wife, she loses her husband; he gives birth to Bodhi, she gives birth to a son; he emphasizes Dharma, she emphasizes rūpa. But in the final analysis, the broad themes of her questing remain the same, for she too, along with her son, is on a path that involves the realization of the truth of suffering and the consequent attainment of *nīrvāṇa*. (Strong 1997, 124)

This story presents us with a complex interplay of the renunciate and the lay life, issues of kingship, the relationship of the ruler to his people, and the choice of the ascetic path. It enacts throughout the essential interdependence of all the beings in the narrative, as it does the nettedness of so many other factors too. Maddī, by taking refuge in her virtue, cannot be relinquished by the Bodhisatta, despite his best efforts. Because of her unimpeachable virtue King Sakka descends from his heaven to request her, thus protecting her from coming to any harm from any other recipient. Amongst the many underlying themes of this story, this one strand demonstrates that however much any locus of consciousness seeks to free itself from the relationships which confine it to a particular place, status and people, freedom is found through acknowledging and accepting interdependence, yet not being bound or confined by it. In the world of *saṃsāra*, how can a king be extricated from the kingdom that defines him, subject separated from object, the denoter of male separated from that of female? One verse, uttered interestingly by Maddī, distils this understanding:

> The banner is the signifier of the chariot, smoke the signifier of fire;
> The king is the signifier of the kingdom; a husband is the signifier of a woman.
> (TGBSB, 564; Ja VI 508).[8]

Donald Swearer notes the popularity of these images in Thai vernacular verse (Swearer 1995). Featuring in an impassioned and universal speech on the miserable status of women alone, without husbands, the imagery subtly demonstrates something rather different: the great interdependence of male and female, just as

8. *Dhajo rathassa paññāṇaṃ, dhūmo paññāṇaṃ aggino /rājāraṭṭhassa paññāṇaṃ, bhattā paññāṇam ithiyā.* The word *paññāṇaṃ* is associated with the word for wisdom (*paññā*) and can be synonymous, but here its secondary meaning is taken, as a mark, sign or token (see PED 390 and Ja V 195).

the paired images demonstrate their dependence on each other too. Which element in these pairs is actually the more important? If form needs name, can name really be effective without substance? Can *nāma*, in the end, function without *rūpa*?

The Bodhisatta gives everything, and finds it all again, but from the perspective of a larger spiritual path, there is a great Buddhist irony: how can any character actually be 'his'? Given the operation of the laws of *kamma*, beyond life and death, can they be 'owned'? According to Buddhist principle, all the characters have their own *kamma*; all have their solitary as well as collective path. Even the children, in an implausible but necessary feature for volition (*cetanā*) to be demonstrated, each, singly, agrees to the gift of themselves. Maddī reminds her husband, that 'children are the greatest gift' (Ja VI 568). As I discuss in the introduction to my translation of this story, this is a deeply multivalent statement, resonant on many levels (TGBSB, 524–525). It encapsulates the manifold symbolism of the way the community of the Buddha's followers inform and support the whole narrative of his test of generosity: for children, in the *Jātaka* world-view, cannot *belong* to anyone, whatever the parameters of the outward relationship. They are, from the parents' point of view, a gift when they arrive, and each has his or her own *kamma* to fulfil — perhaps, if undertaken skillfully, their true gift to parents. The framing device of a number of interweaving paths to liberation that accompany that of the Bodhisatta, will in the final lives of these characters, offer resolution to all problems associated with interconnectivity and solitude, for these people, linked by vows to the Bodhisatta, aspire to be members of his final *saṅgha,* whatever their familial relationship. Maddī is a heroine equal to Vessantara as hero: she supports her husband, follows her own path, and trusts to the environment, her vow and the *kamma* with which her virtue has become aligned. She symbolically relinquishes her children, and her status, for the sake of Buddhahood. Her auspiciousness enables the Bodhisatta to make his gifts, ensures that they are returned, and permits their future life together to be realized, when he will return to teach her after attaining his — and their — goal. A separate being, she is presented as the female counterpart to, and hence natural consort of, Vessantara. As Sakka says, they are as alike in colour as milk and a conch-shell (Ja VI 572).

Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā operates in many different worlds and species, and her dramatic search is to find a way to accord with their rules and limitations. Perhaps like many other literary heroines, from Śakuntalā and Sītā, to Portia, Rosalind and Miranda, to Eliza Bennett, the ability to work creatively and resourcefully within the rules that govern a role and part of life is what has rendered them historically so adventurous and appealing. Her spiritual development is tracked through her free participation in so many differing worlds: her *bhāvanā* arises from *sīla*, *dāna* and, in the *Janaka*, meditation too. Within these, it seems, it is her very interrelatedness, even as it is enacted rather skillfully through her most common name, Rāhulamātā, which is her greatest strength.

A female microcosm: Number symbolism of 31/32/33

A further point should also be made about the number of stories in which she appears: thirty-two, with the final life as an extra element, thirty-three. In Pāli

Buddhism, the number thirty-two denotes a whole organism or a complete world system. There are thirty-one parts of the body, which, with the thirty-second described by Buddhaghosa, the brain, makes thirty-two. There are thirty-one realms of existence, which, with *nibbāna*, also makes thirty-two. There are thirty-two miraculous marks (*lakkhaṇa*) which characterize the human whose destiny is to be a universal monarch or a Buddha. In all of these categories, another last element is in some way crucial, an encompassing or significant factor, denoting a self-sufficient system. In the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, King Sakka provides the final, thirty-third element of the realm associated in the Pāli canon with complex discussion, differentiation and a sense-sphere happiness, whose particular features also seem to be complexity, movement, and an underlying unification. The Great Man (*mahāpurisa*) is the thirty-third element in the thirty-two marks. The body as a whole includes its thirty-two different aspects. The cosmology of the entire Buddhist universe unifies all the different realms together. All of these lists describe entities with highly variegated features, movement and communication between the parts, unified by one, thirty-third, classificatory factor. These counterparts strongly suggest that the thirty-two links made to her in the *samodhana*s are the result of editorial deliberation. This possibility is supported by the fact that there are three stories where she is not mentioned in the tale itself, or her presence is quite unnecessary, except to provide this connection at the end (11, 411, 513). There are also one or two where she is clearly being *excluded* from the attribution, suggesting again some editorial doctoring to present her as an impeccable spouse for the aspirant Bodhisatta. Presumably her 'past lives', as well as her last, should be like that of Caesar's wife, beyond reproach. In the *Mataṅga-jātaka* (497), for instance, he falls in love with and marries a Brahmin woman. Even though the union is unconsummated, with offspring born after a visit to a heaven, this taint might reflect badly on Rāhulamātā, given the injunction of the *Dharmasūtra*s and *Manu* that high-caste women should not marry beneath them (Olivelle 2009a; Olivelle 2009b,18; *Dharmasūtra* 1.9.1): so no mention is made of her in the *samodhana*.

In the *Ummadantī-jātaka* (527) the married femme fatale with whom the Bodhisatta falls helplessly in love is attributed to Uppalavaṇṇā, not Yasodharā, as in the Āryaśura version (*Jātakamālā* 13). Indeed Uppalavaṇṇā, often depicted in *Jātaka*s as the daughter of the Bodhisatta and Yasodharā, provides a useful comparable, her dramatic and unusual 'past lives' supporting her presence as the nun pre-eminent in psychic powers. She is often a goddess, unlike Rāhulamātā, whose existences are usually earthbound, and, unlike Rāhulamātā, experiences more diverse rebirths, including a courtesan (276) and several that are divine, as the kindly goddesses in the *Mūgapakkha-jātaka* (538), *Mahājanaka-jātaka* (539) and *Sāma-jātaka* (540). She features as the Bodhisatta's daughter in the *Vessantara*, and, in her final life, becomes one of two of the Buddha's chief nuns.[9]

9. As with Moggallāna, also of 'dark' appearance, this highly coloured excellence seems reflected in past lives of notable variety, passion and adventure. Uppalavaṇṇā, like Moggallāna, experiences some turbulent results from earlier existences: as an enlightened nun she is raped, an event which Gotama publicly notes was not associated with any present defilement in her mind.

Such rebirths provide striking contrast to those of Rāhulamātā, for whom the editors clearly felt a regal, unimpeachable and 'humanly' respectable destiny should trace back aeons! The fact that there are thirty-two in which she is the Bodhisatta's spouse indicates that Rāhulamātā's path was perceived by the editors as a complex, highly elaborated and self-sufficient unity, completed by the thirty-third, her final life. The sense-sphere heaven of the Thirty-Three, where beings are reborn for *sīla*, generosity, faith, and investigation, offers a whole world of happiness. Her rebirths also appear to follow the pattern of other organisms or categories of complex inter-dependencies denoted by that number.

Her name

As these cosmological and bodily parallels indicate, Yasodharā/Rāhulamātā, the editors suggest, is being communicated as a heroine who lives through so many diverse and highly differentiated lives as part of a larger whole, her commitment to be the spouse of the Bodhisatta/Buddha. This paper has been preoccupied with her name (*nāma*), but it is through words associated with form (*rūpa*) that she is most described. Terms to do with appearance and form constantly surround her: her names mean glory (*yaso*); she is sometimes Kañcanā, golden (*kañcana*). Bimbā seems an ancient name for her: *bimba* can be a fruit; but in Sanskrit it is also an image, the disc of the sun or moon, a shape, a mirror, a representation such as a picture, or a round form (SED 731). This name is apt on several levels: the Bodhisatta's golden images of her; her 'mirroring' of his aspirations, and her counterpart path to him, enacting continued support to his long search. She adapts to different situations and different needs, even, as in the *Kusa* and the *Janaka*, where it is difficult and painful. But in each tale her destiny is treated as solitary as well as relational: her acquiescence to being made a gift by the Bodhisatta would be perceived as the final purification of many lives of their union together, in which she, like him, has chosen a particular path. Through the workings out of her individual and collective *kamma* over several lifetimes, and her willingness to participate in this larger narrative, she becomes a particularly Buddhist heroine.

Before death, she delivers canonical *Apadāna* verses describing her multi-life autobiographical history (Mellick 1993; Walters 2014), elaborated in a later Pāli text, the *Bimbābhikkhunī-nibbāna* (Skilling 2007). These give a first-person account of her initial vow, at the time of the Buddha Dipaṅkara, to become the spouse of the Bodhisatta-to-be. At that time, she says, the earlier Buddha Dipaṅkara has made two prophecies about her: that she will be beloved and she will attain enlightenment 'like a lion breaking out of a cage' (*Yasodharā-therī* Ap 588). The first prophecy has certainly been fulfilled in her reputation in Southern Asia. The second is evoked by her final words, as Yasodharā:

> She then made herself into various forms: as an elephant, a horse, a mountain and an ocean, and then as the sun, the moon, Mount Meru and Sakka ...Then, having taken the form of a brahmā, she gave a teaching on emptiness. 'O great hero! I, Yasodharā, pay homage at your feet, the one with clear vision!' (Ap 578, 580)

Rāhulamātā, by her very name, is defined by interrelatedness, a principle that applies not just to her relationship with the Bodhisatta and her son but also to her embodiment of a connectivity that early Buddhists perceived as underlying all life, of every kind. This would not be underestimated. This doctrine permeates early Buddhist texts, from the teachingof dependent origination in the *Sutta*s, to enjoinders concerning members of the *bhikkhusaṅgha*'s interdependence with one another and their relationship with the laity in the *Vinaya*, to the fully developed philosophical teachings of the connectedness of events on a momentary basis in the *Paṭṭhāna*. All beings are related to one another by manifold conditions; all beings are caught in the network of existence by thousands of factors, operating within their own bodies, in their relationships to one another and their interactions. By her alignment to so many other beings and environments in the tales she is constantly adaptive, fulfilling the needs of her station and environment. To the ancient Buddhists, it seems, it is this sympathetic engagement, fulfillment and occasional active transcending of her duty in life, her *svadharma*, which is her virtue, and constitutes the basis of her spiritual path in her preparation for final awakening. She appears 'lion-like': in one rebirth she is a lioness, and in the *Candakinnara-jātaka* (485) invokes the gods with a 'lion's roar', again roaring 'like a lion' when she defends the Bodhisatta for giving her away (Ja VI 570). Gotama's job might be to know all worlds; her awakening is figured by her capacity to embody and become them. By her assumption of the forms of natural features of the earth and sky, animals, the lord of a sense-sphere heaven, and a god of the meditative heavens of *jhāna*, she enacts both her command of the realms of behaviour (*sīla*) and meditation. She nonetheless demonstrates her ability to dissolve and let go of all identities, speaking, the verse says, from emptiness, produced by wisdom. She embodies, rather than describes, the Buddhist path.

This evidence of her arahatship shows that for early Buddhists, she is the true spouse of the Buddha, and finds freedom for herself, revealing in her final words her mastery of and freedom from all forms and all realms of existence. As it is hoped this paper demonstrates, her *Apadāna,* the canonical *Jātaka* verses referring to a spouse for the Bodhisatta, and her active and comprehensive engagement in *Jātaka* narrative, mean that her strength, purpose and highly coloured participation in the Bodhisatta vow should not be overlooked as we consider the Southern Buddhist treatment and discussion of women.

This short survey is intended as a beginning: more research on the history of local contexts, rituals, narratives, vernacular traditions, poetry and drama would help us to understand the special place this figure seems to have held, and continues to assume, in Southern Buddhist practice and culture.

Appendix: Some Pāli sources for Rāhulamātā/Yasodharā

Canon:

Vin I 82
Ap II 584ff
Bv I 98

Pāli Commentaries, apart from *Jātaka*s listed above:

Ja I 54	Born same day as Gotama
Ja I 58	Married when sixteen and placed at head of forty thousand women
Ja I 62	Gotama leaves on the day of the birth of their son, Rāhula Gotama gives the *Candakinnara-jātaka* on his return
Mp I 198	She becomes a nun under Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī
Mp I 376	Explanation of the name Bhaddakaccānā that her body was the colour of burnished gold; Buddhaghosa identifies her with Bhaddakaccānā, mentioned in A I 25, as chief amongst nuns in psychic powers and knowledges (*mahābhiññappattānam*). Bhaddakaccānā is mentioned as the daughter of the Sākyan Suppabuddha and his wife Amitā (Mp I 205).

Abbreviations

A	*Aṅguttaranikāya*
Ap	*Apadāna*
Bv	*Buddhavaṃsa*
DPPN	Malalasekera, G. P. 1974. *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*. 2 vols. London: Pali Text Society. First published in Indian Texts Series 1937.
Ja	*Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*
Mp	*Aṅguttaranikāya* commentary
PED	Rhys Davids, T. W. and William Stede. 1921–1925. *Pāli-English Dictionary*. London: Pali Text Society.
SED	Monier-Williams, Monier. 1899. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
TGBSB	Appleton, Naomi and Shaw, Sarah. trans. 2015. *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha: The Mahānipāta of the Jātakakatthavaṇṇanā*. With a foreword by Peter Skilling. 2 vols. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Publications.
Vin	*Vinaya*

Pali Text Society editions used for Pāli texts.

Individual *jātaka*s in the Pāli collection are denoted by their number in brackets, and references to the Pāli text by Ja and volume and page number.

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