

# Book Review

## *Stars at Dawn: Forgotten Stories of Women in the Buddha's Life*

By Wendy Garling

Shambhala Publications, 2016

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

We know the women in the Buddha's life, right? There's his mother Queen Maya, who died 10 days after giving birth. There's her sister, Mahaprajapati, who in the time-honored tradition of marry-your-dead-wife's-sister became his stepmother, the only mother he actually knew. There was his wife, the beautiful Yasodhara, whom he left in the middle of the night to pursue awakening. There was the milkmaid who gave him milk or rice gruel (depending on who you're talking to) when he was near death from excessive self-denial. And then, much later, after Mahaprajapati convinced him to create a women's order, there were the women disciples. And that's it, right?

Well, not exactly. Wendy Garling presents, as the subtitle says, forgotten stories of *women* in the Buddha's life. More to the point, both remembered and forgotten women in the Buddha's life. And also not just forgotten but deliberately unremembered aspects of the Buddha's life. Her sources are various sutras (Mahayana) and suttas (Theravada), few of which people read nowadays—*Pathamasambodhi*, *Abhinishkramanasutra*, *Malamkaravathu*, *Lalitavistara*, and so on. You might say that she read them so you don't have to.

Garling is a serious longtime student of Tibetan Buddhism—she took refuge with the Karmapa in 1976—with an MA in Sanskrit languages and literature from Berkeley. Someone should grant her a PhD for this book, which expertly pulls together vastly disparate and largely obscure sources, but of course that won't happen.

Garling has two main theses in this book and two basic techniques.

The first thesis is that female figures—both human and superhuman—are important, are powerful, and cannot be ignored. Goddesses associated with Shakyamuni's birth are discussed. At least some of the women in Buddha's life—especially Maya, Mahaprajapati, and Yasodhara—have supra-human aspects. The deep strain of sexism and misogyny that runs through many of these stories is acknowledged, but the record is corrected by giving powerful female figures, both divine and human, the foreground.

The second thesis is that palace life back then was very different from palace life now. Shakyamuni had a large harem, many of whose members later followed Mahaprajapati into monastic life—84,000 women according to one source, and if you believe that I've got a bridge across the Kansas River to sell you. The harem was not a brothel, but rather it was a complex society of women and children; as the son of a king, Shakyamuni would have grown up in one. Yasodhara was the chief wife but far from the only one. It's not even clear what wife would mean in such a household. Being a wife or consort of Shakyamuni was a great honor, and there are charming stories of how he met this or that wife or

consort and convinced her to become part of his household (or convinced her father to let her). In at least one case, Kisa Gotami—no, not the woman of the same name whose baby died and was sent looking for a mustard seed—the wife/consort chooses him and confirms this by boldly walking up to him and putting a wreath around his neck. In such a large harem, relationships can get complicated—for example, Garling presents evidence that Ananda was not Shakyamuni's cousin, but actually his son by this very same Kisa Gotami.

Those are the theses. Now for the techniques.

The first technique is to carefully examine the cultural references and complexity of various aspects of the Buddha's story—for example, what's with the elephant piercing Maya's side? Auspicious, yes, everyone knows that, but Garling traces down exact references. Did the elephant actually impregnate Maya or was it King Suddhodhana? In some versions the elephant, in some versions Suddhodhana, in some versions both. Was Maya supposed to be a virgin? Definitely not—virginity was not in itself a virtue; chastity in the context of monastic life was the virtue.

The second technique is an extraordinary sympathy with the humanity of the people in the Buddha's life, as well as Shakyamuni himself. Garling takes the semi-formulaic words of the texts she cites, and points to the deep humanity they express: the sorrow and anxiety and fear aroused by the thought of Shakyamuni possibly leaving the palace; the tensions and fears among women and children in a large polygamous household; Suddhodhana's concerns for his son and kingdom; Shakyamuni's own worries; and so on. This in itself is a wonderful contribution.

If I have a quibble about this book, it is Garling's attempt to settle things. For example, why try to prove that Ananda was Shakyamuni's son and not (the version we're used to) his cousin? It is a great service to present the variants. But to decide among them is not possible. The sources are not historical records, they are legends (remember the 84,000 consorts?), and they were created far away in space and time from what actually happened. There are many places in the text where Garling tries to establish fact where no fact can be established, dissipating the considerable energy of the book into an argumentative tone.

That said, Garling brings us the lives of the women in Shakyamuni's life, points to the power of both normal and supranormal women even in those misogynistic times, enlarges our sense of the society in which Shakyamuni lived, and provides liberating options to the standard tales we are used to telling. *Stars at Dawn* is a welcome addition to contemporary scholarship, with the added virtue that it is easily accessible to any reader. ♦

