

PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

---

*Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Editor*

TITLES IN THE SERIES

---

*Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Religions of India in Practice*

*Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Buddhism in Practice*

# B U D D H I S M

  

# I N P R A C T I C E

*Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Editor*



PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

fetters formed by notions. And when the fetters formed by notion are cast aside, there remains this measureless knowledge of the Tathāgata, the support and sustenance of the whole world.

## 9

### Gotamī's Story

Jonathan S. Walters

The *Gotamī-apadāna* is the story of Buddha's maternal aunt and foster-mother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. "Gotamī's Story" is part of a collection of moral biographies called *Apadāna*, which is contained in the canon's "Miscellaneous Division" (*Khud-daka-nikāya*). The *Apadāna* was composed in India during about the last two centuries B.C.E. Most of it consists of autobiographies ascribed to about forty early Buddhist nuns (*Therī-apadāna*) and about five hundred and fifty early Buddhist monks (*Therāpadāna*).

The *Apadāna* stories are extensions of two earlier collections of Pāli verses (*gāthā*), which some scholars date to the time of Buddha himself, called "The Monks' Verses" (*Theragāthā*) and "The Nuns' Verses" (*Therīgāthā*). These are also included in the "Miscellaneous Division" of the Pāli canon, and are supposed to have been uttered by the Buddha's most famous disciples after they had become saints (*arhats*). The *Apadāna* takes these pithy ancient verses and weaves them into elaborated stories about the monks and nuns who are believed to have uttered them.

The *Apadāna* was produced in a period of great change and expansion in Buddhist history. Imperial unification of the Indian subcontinent by Aśoka Maurya in the third century B.C.E., and the privileged place held by Buddhists in the Mauryan and some subsequent Indian empires, left Buddhism in the post-Aśokan period, the period of the *Apadāna*, considerably different from what it had been during the pre-Aśokan period, the period to which the "The Monks' Verses" and "The Nuns' Verses" belong. What had been primarily a renunciate religion, focused upon monks and nuns devoting their lives to imminent achievement of *nirvāṇa*, became after the Aśokan impetus an international, universal, religion.

The early paradigms—saints who renounce the world and attain *nirvāṇa*—were not immediately appropriate for the bulk of society newly included within Buddhism's post-Aśokan universal embrace, who would not renounce the world in the present life but would instead continue to produce karma and, consequently, future existence. The early paradigms seemed relevant only to those near the end

of the path, who were already putting an end to karma and rebirth; how did they apply to common people who remain in the world of attachments, unwilling to leave it? The answer demonstrates a remarkable logic: if the biographies of the Buddha and his monks and nuns in this life provide models of and for the end of the path, then biographies of their previous lives, the stories of what they did when they too were commoners, should provide models of and for a person at the beginning of the path. This insight of the second and first centuries B.C.E. stimulated the composition of the *Apadāna* stories, which focus upon the previous lives of the monks and nuns in light of their present achievements.

All the moral biographies in the *Apadāna* share a basic structure: the monk or nun in question states: "In a previous life I met such-and-such buddha, performed such-and-such pious deed, experienced such-and-such happiness in heaven and on earth, and finally was born in the time of Gotama [Sanskrit Gautama] Buddha to experience the true happiness of nirvāṇa." The catalogue of all these previous lives of all those saints produced a virtual blueprint for the new universal society, representing every major city and kingdom in the "India" Aśoka first established, every occupation and station in life, every age, every caste, every type of being (male and female, animals and deities, as well as humans). In every situation there was, and is, an opportunity for piety whose rewards include heavenly bliss and nirvāṇa in the time of the coming buddha, Maitreya ("Love").

In the *Apadāna* we can see more than soteriology at work; different biographies incorporate and inscribe new calculations of time, new geographies and cosmologies, new forms of political activity. The moral biographies of the nuns, including "Gotamī's Story," address, further, certain problems that had emerged concerning the role of women in Buddhist practice. On the one hand, the nuns provided paradigmatic counterparts to the monks; without them one-half of universal society, the female half, would have been excluded from the new revelation of universal soteriology. On the other hand, the nuns' stories, which were most likely composed by women, unmistakably combat misogynist attitudes that continued among Indian Buddhists despite the Buddha's own apparent egalitarianism.

Later Buddhist authors would find even more relevance in these biographies for the societies in which they lived. These stories generated such wide-ranging discourses as political philosophy, law, and personal and social ethics. Some of the insights from texts like the *Apadāna* were repeated and enlarged; some were discarded. Likewise, some retellings of the stories were in prose rather than verse, meant for study rather than recitation. But through their many incarnations these stories have remained alive in the hearts and imaginations of Theravāda Buddhists to this day.

"Gotamī's Story" is a good example of the *Apadāna* genre. One of the most elaborate individual texts in that collection, it exemplifies many characteristic themes and styles: elaborate frame stories; alliteration, rhyme, and word-play; previous buddhas and times ancient enough to boggle the minds even of modern geologists; highly developed epithets for the Buddha; good deeds bearing fruit in nirvāṇa; elaborate biographical detail; supernormal powers and the performance

of miracles; the divine pantheon (in subservience to the Buddha and Buddhists); devotion to the Buddha; articulation of his teachings; and, as one of the nuns' biographies, vindication of woman's religiosity.

But its very complexity renders "Gotamī's Story" unique among the moral biographies. The set pattern of these tales—the good deed in the time of a previous Buddha, details of the heavenly and earthly delights enjoyed as a result of that deed, and its ultimate blossoming in the attainment of nirvāṇa—concludes with a three-verse chorus that categorizes the various achievements common to all Buddhist saints (*arhats*). In "Gotamī's Story" this chorus appears not once but twice, and in the body of the text rather than at the end of it (verses 76–78, 125–27). These choruses indicate that the text includes within itself two "mini-*apadānas*" (verses 68–78, 95–127). Unlike most of the other texts in the *Apadāna*, Gotamī is not the only subject of her own autobiography. Instead, she transmigrates with five hundred other nuns who, in addition to various monks, the Buddha, laywomen, and deities—and a pervasive narrative overvoice—join her as speakers in "Gotamī's Story," which in effect becomes a full-fledged drama. Odder still, the focus of this biography is not life but death. All the other moral biographies end with these saints very much alive and singing about their own achievements. Gotamī and the five hundred nuns, on the other hand, die, leaving the Buddha to boast their achievements for them (verses 179–89).

Although "Gotamī's Story" flashes back to events in Gotamī's youth and numerous previous lives, all the action in the text occurs on the day of Gotamī's death. In brief, she decides on that very day (as do the five hundred nuns) to pass out of existence, which causes an earthquake. After consoling her followers she proceeds to the monastery where the Buddha is staying in order to inform him of her decision and secure his permission, which he grants in a pithy verse (verse 48). She next announces her decision to Nanda ("Delight," her son), Rāhula ("Fetter," the Buddha's son) and Ānanda ("Joy," the Buddha's personal secretary). The first two, already arhats fully detached from worldly ties, are unmoved, but Ānanda, still in training, weeps at the news. Consoling him, Gotamī tells the first "mini-*apadāna*," which recapitulates the story thus far. Then the Buddha, who is still present, asks Gotamī to put on a show of her miraculous powers as a lesson to those who doubt that women can achieve the highest states of spiritual perfection (verse 79), and she complies with great finesse (verses 80–92). She proceeds to tell the second mini-*apadāna* in order to inform the assembled folk, astonished by her miracles, how she had achieved this great power (verses 95–127). She takes final leave of the Buddha, returns to her own convent, and passes out of existence with the nuns (verses 145–52). The text concludes with a colorful description of Gotamī's funeral and the homage paid to her by the entire universe (verses 155–89).

Aspects of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's biography as known from other Pāli sources, too, are woven into the narrative structure of "Gotamī's Story." She was born in Devadaha ("Divine Lake"), the daughter of a Śākya nobleman and his wife (verse 115). Her family went to the Śākya capital Kapilavastu ("Red's Field") where her

father's kinsman Suddhodhana ("Clean Gruel"), the future father of the Buddha, was king (verse 115). Gotamī's elder sister, Māyā ("Illusion"); married Suddhodhana and became the Buddha's mother (verse 2), but she died when the Buddha (Prince Siddhārtha) was an infant. Gotamī subsequently took her sister's place as the Buddha's wet-nurse and, as the fecund imagery of "Gotamī's Story" reveals, she was thus de facto the Buddha's actual mother (verses 31–36, 60, 117, 158–60, 170–71, 181). After Prince Siddhārtha became the Buddha, Gotamī hounded him until he consented to establish an order of nuns parallel to the monks' order (verse 45), of which she became the preeminent leader (verses 46, 105). She died in Vesali, at the age of 120.

Gotamī's death was her ultimate achievement, for, as "Gotamī's Story" makes clear, it was no ordinary death. She had achieved the goal of nirvāṇa, so death for her was final release from the tedium of future birth and death in saṃsāra. This religious death, the attainment of nirvāṇa, is clearly the central theme in "Gotamī's Story." The text is rich with plays on the verbal forms of the Pāli word for nirvāṇa (*nibbāna*, lit. "blown out"), which I have reproduced in the translation by consistently rendering them with forms of the English verb "to go" (especially "go out," which preserves the literal meaning of *nibbāna*). Gotamī's death is not called "death" but "the great going out" (*parinirvāṇa*; Pāli *parinibbāna*). The text develops rich metaphors for this religious death: it is the journey to a great city (verse 11) where one who has gone cannot be seen (verses 67, 159), comparable to a fire that has gone out leaving no trace of where it went (verses 148, 152, 181, 182, 187).

In addition to nirvāṇa itself, "Gotamī's Story" explains, exemplifies, and mentions numerous other Buddhist themes: the central doctrine of the impermanence and essencelessness of all things (verses 56–57, 59–60, 138, 144, 151, 153, 179–80), the four noble truths (verse 21), the nature and powers of arhats (verses 76–78, 124–30, 183–88), the contrast of "form-body" and "dharma-body" (verses 31–33), meditative states of consciousness (verses 145–47), the auspicious marks of a buddha (verses 39, 41, 42, 52) and various cosmological perspectives. This somewhat indirect, but simple, means of teaching abstract concepts serves the obvious intention of the author(s) to encourage listeners to become more Buddhist by following Gotamī's example: to understand what she understood, and to act with her biography as their inspiration (verses 27–29, 188–89).

In particular, "Gotamī's Story" addresses itself to Buddhist women, from nuns striving for nirvāṇa here and now to laywomen (verses 20–29, 142–44) and goddesses (verses 13–17) for whom the goal remains more remote. She is explicit that they should follow her in following the Buddha's path (verses 28–29), affirms that even as children females have attained the most exalted states (verses 65–66), and puts on her show of miracles to demonstrate how much a woman can achieve (verse 79). She parodies some typical views of women even as she undermines them with her great achievements (verses 43–47), and suggests that the liberation of nirvāṇa transcends normal filial duties (verses 34–38).

This special focus on woman's religiosity is apparent in many of the nuns' biographies found in the *Apadāna*. The paradigmatic examples provided by the

famous nuns in their varied previous lives defined woman's place within the new universal soteriology. "Gotamī's Story" alone documents the soteriological efficacy of deeds performed by herself in a former birth as a slave woman, a rich man's daughter, and a powerful goddess. But a problem remained for Buddhist women which is addressed only by "Gotamī's Story," and which constitutes its real uniqueness. In the karmically black and white world of the *Apadāna*, males and females tread parallel yet distinct paths. Men were always male in previous lives; women always female. This is the reason that the monks' biographies were not suitable paradigms for that half of universal society which is not male.

But what woman could stand in apposition to the Buddha himself? The Buddha did not merely attain nirvāṇa, he attained parinirvāṇa, that "great going out" which, attained by few, points out the goal to many. The Buddha's "great going out" opened the door to arhatship, guaranteeing the finality of the monks' nirvāṇa. What of the nuns' path? Whose "great going out" guarantees that the nirvāṇa of nuns, too, is final?

The answer of course is Gotamī, for as we have seen already, in "Gotamī's Story" she does not attain merely nirvāṇa but parinirvāṇa (verses 38, 74, 75, 173, 179–80). She is the female counterpart of the Buddha, the founder and leader of the nuns' order who parallels (though does not supersede) Gotama, the founder and leader of the monks' order. Gotamī is represented as the Buddha for women. This helps make sense of some of the oddities in "Gotamī's Story." For example, her biography is collective because her own achievement, like a buddha's, is realized only by assuring the salvation of others, as well. Another oddity is that she is always called "Gotamī," which is merely her clan name; her given name, Mahāpajāpatī, is never used in the body of the text. Yet in all other Theravādin writings, both before and after "Gotamī's Story," she is consistently referred to as "Mahāpajāpatī" or "Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī." But the name took on special significance for the *Apadāna* author(s), concerned with portraying Gotamī as a female Buddha: "Gotamī" is, grammatically speaking, the exact feminine equivalent of the name Buddha was known by, "Gotama."

This apposition of Gotama and Gotamī, the Buddha and the Buddhī, is apparent in various situations within "Gotamī's Story" itself. It is even clearer when the text is compared with the canonical telling of the Buddha's own "great going out," "The Book of the Great Decease" (*Mahāparinibbānasutta*). This famous narrative, which some scholars consider the very heart of ancient Buddhism, is mimed step by step in "Gotamī's Story," explicitly illustrating that what Gotama was for men, Gotamī was for women. In the "Gotamī's Story" description of Gotamī's funeral, which is designated "better" than the Buddha's own (verse 173), she appears to be the very center of the universe. From the perspective of the author(s) of "Gotamī's Story," for religious women this is not far from the truth.

This translation is made from Mary E. Lilley, ed., *The Apadāna of the Khuddakavagga*, vol. 2 (London: Pāli Text Society, 1927), pp. 529–43. The names of the speakers have been added by the translator.

## Further Reading

The following translation of "Gotamī's Story" represents the only *Apadāna* biography of a monk or nun ever published in a Western language. For a more detailed analysis of *Gotamī-apadāna* and its intertextual location see my article "A Voice from the Silence: the Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* 33 (May 1994), 358–79. My "Stupa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in Juliane Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and South-east Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming) reviews scholarship on the *Apadāna* and related texts and provides further detail about their socio-historical location. But the "Monks' Verses" and "Nuns' Verses," translated into English verse as well as literal English prose, have been published by the Pāli Text Society and can be found in major libraries. A good introduction to the study of Buddhist women is Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), in which she surveys the condition of women under early Buddhism and explicates a Mahāyāna Buddhist attempt at creating a female Buddha that parallels (though differs from) the Theravādin attempt represented by "Gotamī's Story." A more detailed account of women in Theravāda Buddhist literature is I. B. Horner's *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930).

## Gotamī's Story

Narrator: One day the world's bright lamp,  
the charioteer of men,  
dwelt in Mahāvana Hall  
among Vesali's gabled huts. (1)

The victor's mother's sister then,  
the nun Great Gotamī,  
dwelt in that white and lovely city  
with saintly nuns five hundred. (2)

Gone off alone, she reasoned thus:

Gotamī: I cannot bear to look upon  
the Buddha's final passing,  
nor that of his two chief disciples,  
nor Rāhula ["Fetter"], Ānanda ["Joy"], and Nanda ["Delight"]. (3)

Ending life's constituents  
and letting go, I shall go out:

## GOTAMĪ'S STORY

permitted by the greatest sage,  
by he who is the whole world's lord. (4)

Narrator: The five hundred nuns there,  
Khemā ["Peace"] and the rest,  
reasoned that very thing out:  
that same thing they too reasoned out. (5)

And then there was an earthquake;  
the gods' thunder roared.  
Weighed down by grief the goddesses  
who dwelt there wailed and wept. (6)

The nuns all came to Gotamī  
and bowed their heads upon her feet  
while questioning her thus: (7)

Nuns: In solitude, sister, we were dampened with tears;  
the solid earth trembled, the gods' thunder roared.  
There it's as though someone's crying is heard:  
What does this mean, Gotamī? (8)

Narrator: Then she said to all of them  
just what she'd reasoned out,  
and all of them then also said,  
that's what they thought, too. (9)

Nuns: If this is what you want, sister—  
the unsurpassed pure going out—  
then, pious one, with his assent,  
we all will go out too. (10)

Along with us you left your home  
and also left the world.  
Again together all of us  
to great nirvāna city go! (11)

Narrator: She said, "what is there to be said  
to women who are going out?"  
Then, with all of them, quit the ashram. (12)

Gotamī: Forgive me, goddesses dwelling here:  
I take my last glance at the ashram. (13)  
I'll go to unconditionedness  
where death and decay are both absent,  
and one doesn't meet the unpleasant,  
nor get cut off from pleasant things. (14)

- Narrator: The Buddhist goddesses, not free of passion,  
wailed in grief when they heard that speech.
- Goddesses: Alas! Meritless women are we, (15)  
this ashram has become empty:  
the victor's heirs, no longer seen,  
are like the stars at daybreak. (16)
- Gotamī goes to nirvāṇa,  
so do her five hundred;  
she's like the Ganges flowing toward  
the sea, with all her tributaries. (17)
- Narrator: The faithful laywomen came outside  
at seeing them go down the road  
and bent down at their feet to say: (18)
- Laywomen: Your good fortune, does it please you?  
To go and leave us destitute  
is something that you should not do.
- Narrator: Thus lamented the ladies, distressed, (19)  
so Gotamī spoke this sweet song,  
attempting to dispel their grief:
- Gotamī: Enough with all your crying, children:  
today's a day to laugh! (20)
- Suffering is understood;  
the cause of suffering allayed.  
I've experienced cessation;  
I've cultivated the path. (21)
- I have worshiped the teacher,  
and done what the Buddha taught;  
laid down the heavy load,  
and loosed the ties to life. (22)
- The reason for which I went forth  
from home to homelessness  
is finally attained by me:  
destroying all the fetters. (23)
- The Buddha and his splendid truth  
are still around, complete.  
So now's the time I should go out:  
do not grieve for me, children! (24)

- Kondañña, Ānanda, Nanda, and more,  
Rāhula and the victor remain.  
The monks are now all cheerful and close;  
the conceit of the heretics slain. (25)
- The famed one in Okkāka's clan  
has crushed Māra ["Death"], the god of death.  
Now children, isn't this the time  
for me to reach nirvāṇa? (26)
- My wish I've had for very long  
today will be fulfilled.  
This is the time for drums of joy!  
Why are you crying, children? (27)
- If you all have love for me,  
and if you all appreciate  
the dharma's great stability  
then strong and fervent you should be. (28)
- The great Buddha made women nuns  
only at my beseeching.  
So if you love me, be like me,  
and follow after him. (29)
- Narrator: Preaching thus to those women,  
preceded by the nuns,  
she proceeded to the Buddha's place  
then worshiped him and said: (30)
- Gotamī: Well-gone-one, I am your mother;  
you're my father, O wise one.  
Lord, you give the truth's pure pleasure!  
Gotama, I'm born from you! (31)
- It was I, O well-gone one,  
who reared you, flesh and bones.  
But by your nurturing was reared  
my flawless dharma-body. (32)
- I suckled you with mother's milk  
which quenched thirst for a moment.  
From you I drank the dharma-milk,  
perpetually tranquil. (33)
- You do not owe a debt to me  
because I brought you up.

Great sage, to get a son like you  
sates all desire for sons. (34)

Mothers of kings, like Mandhātā,  
are sunk into existence sea.  
Across this ocean of becoming  
is how far, son, you have helped me. (35)

Women can obtain with ease  
the names "Chief Queen," "King's Mother."  
The hardest name of all to get  
is "Mother of the Buddha." (36)

O hero, I attained that name!  
My only aspiration's this:  
be they minute or massive ones,  
to fulfill all duties to you. (37)

I wish to go out totally,  
abandoning this body;  
grant me permission, hero, guide,  
O ender of dis-ease. (38)

Stretch forth your feet, like lilies soft,  
marked with the wheel, goad, and flag;  
I will bend to worship them,  
my son, with all my love. (39)

Show your body to me;  
it's like a heap of gold.  
A good look at your body,  
then off I go to peace, O guide. (40)

Narrator: The victor bared his lovely body  
marked with the auspicious marks.  
It was as though a pale sun  
emerged from a dark evening cloud. (41)

She put her head down on his feet  
which looked like lotuses in bloom,  
upon his soles, where wheels were marked  
like young suns' shining rays. (42)

Gotamī: I'm bowing to the sun for men,  
the banner of the solar clan.  
After this, my final death,  
I'll not see you again. (43)

It is thought, chief of the world,  
that women are all flawed.  
If there should be some flaw in me,  
compassion-mine, forgive it. (44)

I begged you, over and again,  
for women's ordination.  
If that is somehow fault in me  
forgive it, bull of men. (45)

Having gotten your permission  
I taught and I instructed nuns.  
If I have given bad advice  
forgive it, lord forgiveness. (46)

Unforgivable? Forgive!  
Why should I praise my virtue now?  
What more is there to say to you  
when I am going to nirvāna? (47)

The Buddha: Those in my order, pure and faultless,  
made ready to escape the world  
are like the crescent moon at dawn  
which, fading, sees destruction. (48)

Narrator: The other nuns among them worshiped  
The Buddha and fell at his feet  
then sat there, gazing at his face  
like stars and moon around Mount Meru. (49)

Gotamī: My eyes and ears weren't satisfied  
to see you or to hear you speak.  
But now that I've become perfect  
my mind is quenched by dharma-taste. (50)

O bull of men, when you roar forth,  
debunking the assembled sophists,  
those there who get to see your face  
are fortunate to do so. (51)

O battle-ender, fortunate  
are they who worship your fine feet  
which have broad heels, extended toes  
and golden nails upon them. (52)

Fortunate indeed are they,  
O best of all the men,

who hear your anger-slaying words,  
so cheerful, friendly, sweet. (53)

I am fortunate, great hero,  
intently I worship your feet.  
The existential desert's crossed;  
the dharma makes me shine. (54)

Narrator: She told the monks of her intention,  
those who were devout,  
and worshiped Rāhula, Ānanda, Nanda.  
She spoke like this to them: (55)

Gotamī: I've had it with this body,  
needing others, and hard to control;  
this sick house like a serpent's lair  
is pastured for old age and death,  
and covered with suffering's slime.  
Therefore I want to go out now;  
give me permission, children. (56-57)

Narrator: Nanda and the auspicious Rāhula,  
free of grief and defilement,  
wise, unimovingly steadfast,  
reflected on the way things are: (58)

Rāhula and Nanda:  
Greed for real things, all conditioned,  
is worthless as banana wood.  
It is impermanent and fleeting,  
only an unreal mirage. (59)

Conditioned things? Impermanent!  
Gotamī, the victor's aunt,  
the one who nursed the Buddha goes,  
leaving behind no trace. (60)

Narrator: Ānanda was still in training.  
He loved the Buddha, but he was sad.  
Standing there and shedding tears,  
he piteously wailed: (61)

Ānanda: Gotamī is going, smiling;  
soon the Buddha too will go  
to nonexistence, called nirvāṇa,  
like a fire without fuel. (62)

Narrator: Gotamī spoke to Ānanda,  
who was weeping in this way:

Gotamī: My son, intent on serving the Buddha,  
your wisdom's deep, as is the sea.  
And so you really shouldn't mourn  
when the time to laugh has come!  
With your assistance, son, I reached  
the goal toward which I strived: nirvāṇa.  
At your request, son, he ordained us;  
do not be distressed, my child:  
your toil is bearing fruit. (63-65)

That state which is not seen by elders  
nor by non-Buddhist teachers  
is witnessed by some Buddhist girls  
when they are only seven. (66)

Take your final look at me,  
preserver of the Buddha's word.  
My son, I'm going to that place  
where one who's gone cannot be seen. (67)

Once, when he was preaching dharma,  
the chief guide of the people sneezed.  
And then, compassionate, I spoke  
these words of blessing to him: (68)

"Enjoy long life, great hero!  
Remain an eon, sage!  
For the sake of all the world  
don't dare grow old or die." (69)

The Buddha then replied to me,  
who'd spoken to him thus:  
"A buddha never should be blessed  
as you would bless me, Gotamī." (70)

"How then," I asked, "O all-knower,  
should thus-gone ones be blessed?  
And how should buddhas not be blessed?  
Tell all of that to me." (71)

He said, "Look close at my disciples,  
in harmony, and vigorous,  
energetic, resolute,  
that's how to bless a buddha." (72)



Then I returned to our ashram  
and thought it out alone:  
"The lord who ended re-becoming  
is pleased by monks and nuns at peace. (73)

"Well then, I'll go out utterly;  
don't let me see a hindrance!"  
Thinking thus, and having seen  
the seventh of the sages, (74)

I announced to that instructor,  
"It's time for my great going out"  
and then he granted me permission:  
"Know that it's the time!" (75)

Defilements gone, I've abolished existence;  
I am now like an elephant cow  
who, breaking every single fetter,  
dwells without constraint. (76)

Being in the Buddha's midst  
was pure profit for me:  
I attained the three special knowledges:  
The Buddha's teaching is achieved! (77)

The four analytical knowledges,  
the eight deliverances,  
the six higher knowledges experienced:  
The Buddha's teaching is achieved! (78)

The Buddha: Yet still there are these fools who doubt  
that women too can grasp the truth.  
Gotamī, show miracles,  
that they might give up their false views. (79)

Narrator: Gotamī bowed to the lord  
then leaped into the sky.  
Permitted by the Buddha, she  
displayed her special powers. (80)

She was alone, then she was cloned;  
cloned, and then alone.  
She would appear, then disappear;  
she walked through walls and through the sky. (81)

She went about unstuck on earth  
and also sank down in it;

she walked on water as on land,  
without breaking the surface. (82)

Cross-legged, she flew like a bird  
across the surface of the sky.  
With her body she controlled  
the space right up to God's own home. (83)

She made the earth a canopy;  
Mount Meru was its handle.  
And, twirling her new parasol,  
she walked around the sky. (84)

It was as though six suns arose:  
she made the world fume.  
As though it was the end of time,  
she garlanded the earth in flames. (85)

She held mounts Meru, Mandara,  
Daddara, and great Muccalind—  
all of them, in a single fist,  
like tiny mustard seeds. (86)

She concealed with finger's tip  
the makers of both day and night  
as if her necklace had as gems  
a thousand suns and moons. (87)

From her tiny palm that held  
the waters in the four great seas,  
she rained forth a torrential rain  
like an apocalyptic cloud. (88)

She made appear up in the sky  
a world-ruler with cortège.  
She showed [Viṣṇu as] the Lion and Bôar  
and Garuḍa, his eagle mount. (89)

Alone, creating magically  
a measureless chapter of nuns  
she made them disappear again,  
then said this to the sage: (90)

Gotamī: This one who's done the work, hero,  
your mother's younger sister,  
attained the goal, eyeful one,  
and now worships your feet. (91)

- Narrator: Her miracle display complete,  
that nun descended from the sky,  
paid homage to the world's lamp,  
then sat down at one side. (92)
- Gotamī: A century and score from birth:  
great sage, that is my age.  
That much is old enough, hero,  
O guide, I'll now go out! (93)
- Narrator: Astonished, with hands clasped in praise,  
folks then said this to Gotamī:
- Layfolk: Your prowess has been shown sister  
in supernormal miracles. (94)
- Narrator: Gotamī then told them all  
how she had come to be a saint.
- Gotamī: There was a seer of all things,  
the Buddha Padumuttara ["Best Lotus"].  
That guide was born into the world  
one hundred thousand eons ago. (95)
- I too existed at that time,  
born in a clan of ministers.  
We lived in Hamsavati ["Swan-filled"] town,  
quite rich, with many servants. (96)
- Once, when tagging on with father—  
surrounded by a group of slaves—  
along with a large retinue,  
I approached that bull of men. (97)
- The victor like autumnal sun,  
surrounded by aura ablaze,  
was raining forth, a dharma-cloud,  
like king of all the gods. (98)
- Seeing him, my mind was pleased  
and then I heard his lovely voice:  
that guide for men was making his  
aunt chief of all the nuns. (99)
- Hearing this, for one whole week,  
I sponsored lavish donations.  
I gave a lot of the requisites  
to the chief and his disciples. (100)

I fell down prostrate at his feet,  
aspiring to that rank,  
and then the greatly mindful one,  
the seventh sage, said this: (101)

The Buddha "Best Lotus":

This one who for a week has fed  
the world's guide and disciples:  
I shall relate the fate of her;  
listen to my words! (102)

In one hundred thousand eons,  
born into Okkāka's clan,  
the one whose name is Gotama  
will be the master in the land. (103)

Rightful heir to his great teachings,  
transformed by his truth,  
the woman Gotamī will be  
his female disciple. (104)

She will be his mother's sister,  
The Buddha's wet-nurse all his life.  
And she'll attain preeminence  
among the senior nuns. (105)

Gotamī: Hearing that, I felt true bliss,  
and then I spent my whole life  
serving the Buddha requisites.  
And when I died I was reborn (106)

among the highest gods who lived  
in Tāvatiṃsa ["Thirty-Three"] heaven.  
In all delights and riches I  
outshone the others in ten ways: (107)

with my shape and sound and smell,  
and with my taste and feel,  
in terms of lifespan and complexion  
and happiness and fame (108)

I shone, attaining supreme power.  
And then I was seen in the place  
of the most favored of the queens  
of him, the king of gods. (109)

Transmigrating now here, now there,  
I was blown on by karma-wind

and born into a slaves' village  
in the king of Kāśī's realm [Banaras]. (110)

Every day there were five hundred  
dwelling in that very place.  
There I became the wife of him  
who was the eldest of them all. (111)

Five hundred self-enlightened ones  
entered our village for alms.  
I was very glad to see them,  
as were all the women. (112)

We formed ourselves into a guild  
and served them for four months.  
We gave to them monastic robes;  
we women with our husbands then (113)

transmigrating, passed on from there  
and went to Tāvātimsa.  
And now, in this, my final life,  
I was born in Devadaha ["Divine Lake"]. (114)

My father was the Śākyan Añjana ["Jet Black"];  
my mother was Sulakkhana ["Well Marked"].  
We left there for Kapilavastu ["Red's Field"],  
staying with Suddhodana ["Clean Gruel"]. (115)

All the other Śākyan women  
also went there then.  
But of them all I was the best;  
I was the Victor's nurse. (116)

My son, once he had left the world  
became the Buddha, the instructor.  
Afterwards I too went forth  
with the five hundred women. (117)

I witnessed the joy of peace  
[attained] by the male Śākyan heroes.  
They were the men who formerly  
had been born as our husbands. (118)

They were the doers of good deeds  
and seized the crucial moment.  
Pitied by the well-gone one,  
they all became great saints. (119)

Narrator: The other nuns who were still there  
rose up into the air,  
and came together, just like stars,  
those great women then shone. (120)

They displayed some miracles,  
just as ornaments of every kind  
are shown by craftsmen who are skilled,  
especially by goldsmiths. (121)

Having shown these miracles,  
diverse and numerous,  
and having pleased the sage debater  
with his assembly at that time (122)

they all descended from the sky  
and worshiped him, the seventh sage;  
obtaining the chief man's consent,  
they sat down in that place. (123)

Nuns: Hey, hero, it was Gotamī  
who pitied all of us.  
Perfumed by your good karma  
we slew the imperfections. (124)

Defilements gone, we've abolished existence  
and now we are like elephant cows  
who, breaking every single fetter,  
dwell without constraint. (125)

Being in the Buddha's midst  
was pure profit for us:  
we attained the three special knowledges:  
The Buddha's teaching is achieved! (126)

The four analytical knowledges,  
the eight deliverances,  
the six higher knowledges experienced:  
The Buddha's teaching is achieved! (127)

We've mastered all the miracles,  
and the "divine-ear" faculty.  
Great sage, we're masters of the knowledge  
of what is stored in others' hearts. (128)

We know all of our former lives;  
"divine-eye" now is purified.

With every imperfection gone,  
we won't be born again. (129)

We understand meanings and doctrinal things,  
etymology and how to preach.  
Great hero, it was in your presence  
that our knowledge was produced. (130)

O guide, you are surrounded by  
us all with loving hearts.  
Great sage, now give us your consent  
to go and reach nirvāṇa. (131)

Right now we're going out!

Narrator: The Victor said, "What can I say  
to women who are going out?  
Know that it's the time!" (132)

Gotamī and all the nuns  
paid homage to the Victor.  
Then from their seats they all rose up  
and went away from there. (133)

With all the people the great man,  
the wise one, chief of all the world,  
followed after his own aunt  
until she reached the gate. (134)

Then Gotamī fell to the ground  
beneath the world's kinsman's feet,  
and with all of the other nuns  
she worshiped them once more. (135)

Gotamī: This is my last look  
at the lord of the world;  
your face, a fountain of ambrosia,  
won't be seen again. (136)

No more homage to your soft feet;  
I won't touch them again.  
O hero, chief of all the world,  
today I go to nonexistence! (137)

Who needs your face and body,  
with things such as they are?  
Everything conditioned changes;  
it provides no comfort. (138)

Narrator: She, having gone along with them  
back to her own "nuns' lair,"  
sat down with legs crossed on each other  
in her own auspicious seat. (139)

The laywomen residing there,  
adorers of the Buddha's word,  
heard her rustlings about,  
so those foot-worshipers approached, (141)

pounding fists hard on their chests  
and crying piteous tears.  
Grieving, they fell to the earth  
like creepers cut off at their roots. (142)

Laywomen: O lady, bestower of the refuge,  
please don't leave us for nirvāṇa.  
Bowing down our heads, we all  
are begging this of you. (142)

Gotamī: One of them was energetic,  
a laywoman faithful and wise.  
While gently stroking that one's head  
I spoke these words to her: (143)

"Enough, enough depression child;  
free yourself from Māra's snares!  
Everything existent changes;  
shaking, it's lost in the end." (144)

Narrator: Then having sent them all away,  
she entered the first altered state;  
the second, yes, and then the third,  
and then she reached the fourth of them. (145)

In order, moving higher still:  
the plane of space-infinity  
the plane in which perception's pure  
and that where nothingness is seen. (146)

Gotamī reversed the order,  
backward reaching all these states,  
the last one first, the first one last,  
and then back to the fourth. (147)

Rising up, she went out  
like a fuelless lamp's flame.

There was a great earthquake;  
lightening fell from the sky. (148)

The thunder rumbled loudly,  
the deities there wailed;  
a shower of flowers from the sky  
rained down upon the earth. (149)

Meru, king of mountains, shook  
just like a dancer on the stage;  
the great ocean was greatly grieved  
and he was weeping in distress. (150)

The gods, snake gods, and demons too,  
and even Brahmā [God], in awe,  
said, "This one now is all dissolved;  
in flux indeed is all that is." (151)

The other women who were there,  
who practiced the Buddha's teachings,  
they too went out just like the flames  
in lamps with no more fuel. (152)

"Alas! Attachments end up cut!  
Alas! Conditioned things all change!  
Alas! Life ends up in destruction!"  
Just like this the people wailed. (153)

Then Brahmā and the deities  
approached the seventh sage  
and acted as one ought to act  
in such a situation. (154)

And then the Buddha told Ānanda,  
whose knowledge was an ocean,

The Buddha: Go now, Ānanda, tell the monks  
my mother's reached nirvāṇa. (155)

Narrator: Ānanda, who had lost his joy,  
his eyes filled up with tears,  
announced, while choking on the words:

Ānanda: Now assemble, all you monks, (156)

who are out of east or in the south  
or in the west, or in the north;  
listen to my words, you monks  
who are the Buddha's heirs. (157)

This Gotamī who carefully  
reared up the sage's body,  
is gone to peace, no longer seen,  
just like the stars at sunrise. (158)

Her destination now is reached;  
her name alone remains.  
Even the Buddha, who has five eyes,  
cannot see where she went. (159)

Each who has faith in the Well-Gone One  
and each who is the sage's pupil  
ought to come, that Buddha's son,  
to honor Buddha's mother. (160)

Narrator: The wise monks living far away  
heard that, then they came with speed.  
Some came by the Buddha's majesty,  
some by their own great power. (161)

The folks there raised a funeral bier  
where Gotamī now lay,  
inside a shiny gabled hut  
of golden color, lovely. (162)

The four great gods lifted it up,  
each corner one supported,  
while their king and all the other  
gods stood in the gabled hut. (163)

The cosmic builder, Viśvakarma ["Universal Maker"]  
erected many gabled huts:  
five hundred of them, which were all  
the color of autumnal suns. (164)

And all the nuns there in those huts  
had been laid out on biers,  
hoisted up on god-shoulders,  
lined up in proper order. (165)

A canopy up in the sky  
was stretched out over everything.  
The sun and moon and all the stars  
were drawn on it in gold. (166)

Flags of different sorts were raised,  
a floral carpet laid;

and incense rose into the sky  
like blossoms from the earth. (167)

The real sun and moon and stars  
were sparkling and seen by all,  
and even though it was high noon  
the sun cooled like the moon. (168)

The gods made offerings of garlands  
scented with divine perfume  
and worshiped Gotamī with song,  
with music, and with dance. (169)

The snake gods, demons, and Brahmā,  
according to their powers,  
made offerings as best they could  
for the Buddha's gone-out mother. (170)

All the Buddha's daughters there,  
gone out, were carried off.  
And after them came Gotamī  
the wet-nurse of the Buddha. (171)

Proceeding, worshiping the mother,  
came forth gods and men;  
the snake gods, demons, and Brahmā,  
then Buddha and disciples. (172)

The Buddha's great nirvāna, good,  
but not as good as this one:  
Gotamī's great going out  
was positively stellar. (173)

Ananda: O monks, we will not see the Buddha  
at his own great nirvāna;  
the Buddha's here at Gotamī's,  
and monks like Śāriputra ["River's Son"]. (174)

Narrator: Then they built the funeral pyres  
made out of fragrant wood,  
and sprinkled them with sweet perfume;  
being set afire, they burned. (175)

Each part of them had been consumed;  
only bones remained then.  
At that time Ānanda spoke  
words giving rise to deep emotion. (176)

Ānanda: Gotamī is gone, no life,  
and now her body's burnt.  
The indication is that soon  
the Buddha too will leave. (177)

Narrator: Ānanda put all her bones  
into her begging bowl,  
then, urged to do so by the lord,  
he gave them to the Buddha. (178)

Taking them up with his hands,  
the seventh sage then spoke:

The Buddha: Even the trunk of a huge timber tree,  
however massive it may be,  
will break to bits, eventually.  
Thus Gotamī, who was a nun,  
is now gone out completely. (179–80)

It is so marvelous a thing:  
my mother who has reached nirvāna  
leaving only bits of bone  
had neither grief nor tears. (181)

She crossed this ocean of existence,  
grieving not for others left;  
she now is cool, she's well gone out:  
her torment now is done. (182)

Know this, O monks, she was most wise,  
with wisdom vast and wide.  
She was a nun of great renown,  
a master of great powers.  
She cultivated "divine-ear"  
and knew what others thought.

In former births, before this one,  
she mastered "divine-eye."  
All imperfections were destroyed;  
she'll have no more rebirths. (183–85)

She had purified her knowledge  
of meaning and the doctrines,  
of etymology, and preaching;  
therefore she did not grieve. (186)

An iron rod aglow in fire  
cools off and leaves no ash.

Just like the flame once in the rod,  
it's not known where she went. (187)

Those who are emancipated  
cross the god of lust's delugé;  
those with solid happiness  
do not get born again. (188)

Therefore be lamps for yourselves;  
go graze in mindfulness.  
With wisdom's seven parts attained,  
you all should end your woe. (189)

# — 10 —

## The Great Bliss Queen

Anne C. Klein

Yeshey Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal) is identified as a queen of the eighth-century Tibetan king Tri-srong-day-tsen (Khri srong lde bstan). Tibetans regard her as a fully enlightened buddha who appeared as an ordinary Tibetan girl so that people of her country might easily form a relationship with her, visualize her, and attain enlightenment through conjoining this visualization with the Nyingma Great Completeness teachings that were preserved by her. The Nyingma tradition, which alone among the Tibetan orders adds the title Great Bliss Queen to her name, reveres her also as a manifestation of the Indian goddess of sound, the muse of learning and literature, Sarasvatī. She is also identified with the female bodhisattva Tārā, and with the Buddha's own mother. In addition, she is considered an emanation, or appearance in ordinary form, of a female buddha known as Vajravārahī, "the Adamantine Sow." In her resplendent form as Vajravārahī, however, she is not accessible to ordinary persons. Thus, her appearance in Tibet as a daughter of the Karchen family was "for the sake of those who, for the time being, do not see her Vajravārahī form as a fully perfected deity. Among the practices of the guru [Padmasambhava] especially intended for Tibetans there are many whose chief deity is [the Great Bliss Queen] Yeshey Tsogyal." (Do-drup-chen III, *Rig 'dzin yum ka*, 474.2ff.) From the hagiographical literature we can discern that she is venerated for two quite different reasons. On the one hand, she is the acknowledged preserver of the tradition that she embodies. On the other, she is an exemplary religious seeker who triumphs over the most difficult challenges in accomplishing her goal of demonstrating a path to enlightenment. In many ways, her story is like that of a hero—alone, overcoming obstacles—even though the principles her story puts forward undermine that model of highly individuated, oppositional accomplishment.

According to her hagiography, Yeshey Tsogyal was born under miraculous circumstances. The sound of a Sanskrit mantra echoed in the air, her mother gave birth painlessly (as had the Buddha's mother) and a nearby lake increased vastly in size—hence, perhaps, the name "Queen (gyal) of the Lake (tso) of Primordial