

39. REFLECTIONS ON RANDOM THEMES

HOMAGE TO YASHODHARA



*Ehret die Frauen! Sie flechten und weben
Himmlische Rosen in's irdische Leben.
Honor women! They braid and weave
Heavenly roses in our earthly life.*

F. Schiller (Würde der Frauen)

In most religious traditions Gods and angels reveal themselves more often to men than to women. Yet in some religions there have been/are goddesses as well as gods: Isis and Athena, Minerva and Sarasvati, Brigantia and Frigg, for example.

Days on the calendar are consecrated to celebrate their presence in faith-systems of the world. In this way religions memorialize Esther in the Judaic tradition, Radha in the Hindu, Mary in the Christian, Aisha in the Islamic, and Yashodhara in the Buddhist.

Buddha's father had a sister named Pamitá. She was married to King Suppabuddha. Yashodhara was this couple's daughter. Her name means *One who bears Glory*.

Prince Siddhartha (who became Buddha: the Enlightened One) was born on exactly the same day as Yashodhara. The two grew up in royal luxury. At 16 they were married. At 29, Yashodhara gave birth to a son. The child was named Ráhula.

On the day of the child's birth Siddhartha quietly left his wife, son, and palace in his quest for higher truths. He wanted to find the ultimate cause of pain and anguish. In another rendition of this event, when Siddhartha wore a monk's attire and was about to leave on his mission, crowds came to pay respect to him.

According to another tradition the young prince went to take leave of her. Yashodhara was overwhelmed with joy and sadness. She fell at his feet and sobbed. Siddhartha's toes were drenched with her tears. But the young sage left her calmly, saying she had always been loyal to him, even in a previous birth.

After she understood the purpose and significance of Siddhartha's spiritual quest she decided to follow the ascetic path herself. She cast away jewels and silken robes, changed to ordinary raiment, and began to live on sparse food.

Gabriel Constans wrote a historical fiction on Yashodhara: *Buddha's Wife* (2009). His re-telling of the story is respectful of Buddhist lore, but it also raises questions on the significance of spiritual life. More importantly, it makes us think about some of the injustices

done towards women. In this account of the scene Yashodhara says: “Shakya walked out of the door the day I delivered Rahula. Dazed after the strenuous labor, all I wanted to do was sleep. But I was woken out of my reverie by cries of ladies in waiting. Gathering my strength I walked out to witness the *happening*. Tears flowed effortlessly. I saw Prince Siddhartha devoid of his status, clad in mere robe moving away from the palace without a knowing gait. I quickly clad myself and ran out of the palace doors. I ran knowing I could lose everything if it happened. I ran amidst the wailing crowd begging Siddhartha to change his mind. I ran to protect my child who had just opened his eyes to this world. By the time I caught up with my Prince, he had transformed to the point of no recognition. He simply looked at me and walked on. I ceased running and fell to the ground hoping that he would look at me. He kept walking. I passed out over the fading footprints of Shakya on the palace grounds.”

It has been said that many people came to give Yashodhara moral support. In one version of the event, some princes came forward to marry her and take care of the child. But she would have nothing of that. She persisted in her ascetic life and followed five hundred other women to become nuns of the order. Later, son Ráhula also became a monk in the monastic order established by his father. Yashodhara became an enlightened soul (arahant).

There are books on Buddhism that barely mention Yashodhara, for what matters to the authors, as for the religion, is the wisdom from the Master: not the pain and wailing of an abandoned woman. The saga of Yashodhara is symbolic of the story of women all through history who have endured neglect and abandonment, sometimes even abuse and persecution, while their husbands go on the search for well-paying jobs, higher truths, lofty ideals, and God. While many men were absorbed in scientific research, artistic creation, spiritual quest, business affairs, politics or whatever, the devoted wives were working hard at domestic chores, in the kitchen and the laundry, often attending to children’s needs and the husband’s meals. This too was sexual harassment and exploitation, albeit of a very different kind. This was so, and still sadly is the case, in most cultures of the human family.

Great men have labored for the welfare of humankind, crossed the seas, explored the world, and advanced human knowledge. But one shouldn’t forget that countless women have silently and selflessly sacrificed their personal comforts and potential for achievements just to enable their male consorts to achieve their various goals.

The world has changed for the better in many ways, but not yet sufficiently. Many males still haven’t recognized fully how much they owe to the, rightly called, *better halves* of the species. They need to reflect a little more on their roles and responsibilities in daily chores.

So, even as we recall and rejoice in the messages of Buddha and Rama, Moses and Jesus, let us also remember with respect Yashodhara and Sita, Zipporah and Mary.

V. V. Raman: 16 May 2020