



# The Female Householder Mallika

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## Editor's Introduction

There are quite a few notable women whose lives are recounted in the earliest texts. Some were most intimately connected to the Buddha's life story, such as Queen Maya, who gave birth to him; her sister, the Queen Mahapajapati, who nursed and cared for him and later pestered him for acceptance into his order; his wife Yasodhara, who loved him; and Sujata, who provided the nourishment that enabled him to press forward to his final realization of nirvana. There was also the merchant wife Vishakha (see Chapter 3), who was first and foremost among women patrons and builder of the Purva Vihara in Shravasti. And then there were the eminent *theris*, women arhats whose influential poetic, personal accounts of their lives have been preserved in the canonical *Therigatha* ("Verses of Female Saints").

This chapter's subject is a devout follower of the Buddha, and her unusual life moves from low-caste street vendor to becoming favorite queen of Pasenadi, the king of Kosala. As skillfully constructed here from scattered canonical references and commentaries, Mallika's actions and her destiny in past and future rebirths become subjects that elicit many important discourses by the Buddha. These incidents center on karma, the effects of merit and demerit, the reality of spouses being united repeatedly over lifetimes, and the ways that character traits, too, carry over to future lifetimes. One surprising peculiarity in the Buddhist reckoning of merit-making is that the holier the recipient (needy or not), the greater the quantity of merit earned. Knowing this helps to explain how Mallika's gift to the Buddha, the highest of all spiritual beings, could have led to such an extraordinary and rapid rags-to-riches transformation in her life.





What this biography also highlights is how much the tradition preserves, and highlights, the Buddha's preaching to kings and courtiers. He was a skillful and determined leader of a missionary movement built on moral foundations, and so it should not be surprising that his encounters with political leaders, and their wives, find a common place in the Buddhist canon. It might also surprise the student that such an exemplary person as Queen Mallika, immediately after her charmed and virtuous life, was reborn in a horrible Buddhist hell (if only for a short time), due to an incident with a dog. But such is the logic of karma and its ripening (*vikalpa*) in the world of *samsara*.



### Introduction: Mallika's Historical, Geographical, and Cultural Context

India, the birthplace of Buddhism, looked far different at the time of the Buddha from how it does today. It would have been much less populated, and 16 *mahajanapada* (independent republics and kingdoms) dotted the landscape.<sup>1</sup> It was a time of social change, upheaval even. At this time, as historian Romila Thapar has suggested, republics were "parting company with Vedic orthodoxy,"<sup>2</sup> which set the stage for new voices, such as those of women and non-Brahmins, to make an impact.<sup>3</sup> The Buddha was one of a number of itinerant teachers who sought refuge in the jungle forests but whose teaching was centered in cities. The early community surrounding the Buddha drew from various sectors of society, disrupting the traditional caste-based transmission of religiosity in favor of a different authority, that of the Tri Ratna: the Buddha as its teacher, the Dharma that was his teaching, and the sangha, his community of monks. This social shift may not seem radical to a reader today, but it was radical for the period under consideration, when women's roles and caste roles had been clearly defined and were rigid.

Supporting the Buddha and his sangha financially were his benefactors: merchants with their fortunes from trade and the kings who exchanged their patronage for dharma teaching. The Buddha frequently stayed in Sravasti, the capital of the *mahajanapada* Kosala. King Pasenadi (Skt. Prasenajit) was the king of Kosala, and the focus of our chapter here, Mallika, was one of Pasenadi's queens and herself a devout patron of the Buddha. The Tri Ratna were already established by the time Mallika convinced her husband to convert to Buddhism. Through various episodes

in Mallika's life, we can see how taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha would have been understood in quite a literal way; more than once during a time of crisis, Mallika would seek out the Buddha for support. While she may have been typical in her faith, Mallika was not at all typical for a laywoman of her time, as she had access to the Buddha himself. The name Mallika is embedded in a canonical list of the most notable female householders (*upasika*).<sup>4</sup> Mallika also appears in a list of seven people, "famous even to the gods," who performed extraordinary acts of devotion that bore fruit in their lifetimes.<sup>5</sup>

Mallika was just a wife and layperson, albeit a queen and devoted supporter of the Buddha. According to canonical and commentarial accounts, her life story was interwoven with the Buddha's, and such proximity to the central biography of Buddhism warrants our attention. She was a queen, but not a singular one – she was one of a few queens of Pasenadi, although she was low born. She had sex with a dog (and enjoyed it). She argued with her husband, taunted him, and upstaged him. She was not, ostensibly, a Buddhist moral exemplar, and yet the most often pronounced expression of the Buddhist version of the Golden Rule comes embedded in her story. Unfortunately, Mallika's biography is not present in a coherent, chronologically sound, narratively coherent way. Instead, Mallika's story is revealed in bits and pieces, each a fragment with edges to explore, each a new surface to reflect some light on the morally didactic material conveyed within.

### Mallika's Biography

Over a half-century ago, with an eye toward discerning social history, the scholar I.B. Horner



(whose biography is included in this textbook; see Chapter 7) called for a careful examination of laywomen's lives as represented in the earliest Buddhist texts. She cast about and discovered a trove of information, albeit in scraps scattered throughout the canonical materials:

Then, too, there was Queen Mallikā, chief consort of King Pasenadi of Kosala, with whom the Buddha converses now and again; and Nakulamātā, the pious and devoted wife of Nakulapita. And this is typical: such records exist but they are scattered through the Vinaya and the Nikāyas. These, then, have to be searched and carefully sifted in order to build up any reliable picture of the position held by lay-women at the time and the place to which this literature purports to refer.<sup>6</sup>

To find Mallika, let alone cobble together her biography, requires the "sifting" I.B. Horner called for, and some text-to-text jumping – premodern Buddhist "biographies" jump genres and become attached to, and assumed into, new works. Mallika is a character caught in the Buddha's own community, a karmic net that is cast and recast with characters shuffling between roles and recurrently related in birth after birth. Sometimes Mallika's present-day experiences are explained through a story of a past life of the Buddha, and sometimes they are explained by the Buddha, peering into her past lives. References to Mallika weave in and out of early stories, and that is how Mallika's story begins: she makes an appearance in the frame story of the *Kummasapinda Jataka* (415), where the Buddha himself provides details of her previous life.

Mallika was the beautiful and good daughter of the chief garland maker in Savatthi. As a 16-year-old, she once made her way to a garden with some of her friends. She carried three portions of gruel in her basket, a biographical element that connects this story with others.<sup>7</sup> Leaving town, she passed the Buddha on his way into town; he caught her eye, and she was motivated to offer him her gruel, which he accepted. This pleased Mallika, who then dropped at his feet to pay respect, "rapt in joy" (*pitim gahetva*). This act prompted a smile from the Buddha; asked about this marked reaction, he explained, "Ananda, the fruit from this offering of gruel will be that this girl will on this very day become the

chief queen of the King of Kosala." Later that day, when the King Pasenadi of Kosala was riding by, exhausted after a battle with rival king Ajatasattu of Magadha, he was diverted by the singing of a charming young woman.

Remarkably, her rapidly ripened merit was such that, rather than run away, Mallika approached the king and held his attention by physically holding his horse's nose steady. They had a brief courtship; the king ascertained that she was unmarried and paused to rest while she held his head on her lap. He unhesitatingly brought her in a procession with his army back to her home in Savatthi, but it didn't end there. That evening, a chariot was sent for her, and Mallika was brought to the palace, presented with jewels, anointed, and made the chief queen. "From that day forward she was the dear, pleasing, and dutiful wife of the King ... and beloved of the Buddhas." Her good fortune became the talk of the town, and even sparked conversation within the early sangha about the "virtue of the Buddhas" that made her meteoric social rise possible.

What catches our own notice about Mallika, the person imagined in the literature, is that she caught the Buddha's attention, then the king's attention, and then the people's (and sangha's) attention. At first glance, the fetching story of a low-born woman rising when she attracts the king appears to be typical, a commonly employed narrative hook. But her allure is not ultimately attributable to her singing, good looks, or charming personality; what is decisive is the force of merit that is earned by a donation to the Buddha. Fittingly, the *jataka* tale that is introduced by this frame story reveals that gifts of basic (even unsalted) gruel to earlier Buddhas also resulted in better births for the givers. The other effect of this story is to introduce the queen as having a special place in the Buddha's own circle of devotees. Her privileged position, even as a laywoman, is an effect of the Buddha's own position, and this bond sets up more didactic encounters where her righteousness and loyalty to the Buddha are highlighted. To *upasikas* like Mallika, the profound, important truths are revealed about how future destiny in *samsara* is connected to an individual's action in the here and now.

Mallika was inspired to take refuge after she directly asked the Buddha about the cause of differences she perceived in those around her:



how can one woman have it all, being beautiful, wealthy, and skillful, while another can be beautiful but poor and not skillful, and another unattractive, wealthy, and skillful, and another unattractive, poor, and not skillful? The Buddha explained that traits perceived in this life are the result of actions in past lives; physical attributes are reflections of one's moral cultivation through time. Beauty, wealth, and skillfulness are caused by lack of anger, generosity, and lack of envy in past lives, whereas unattractiveness, poverty, and unskillfulness are the result of past experiences of anger, stinginess, and envy. Mallika then determined she would strive to be good to her subjects; generous to the sangha, Brahmins, and poor; and not envious of others.<sup>8</sup> She showed her great generosity not only by giving regular alms but also by building a large, ebony-lined hall for the sangha, which was used for religious discussions.

Although she may have strived for excellent behavior, there were a few instances when her behavior was less than exemplary. A story of an unintentional indiscretion, followed by a lie to cover it up from the scrutiny of the king, adds texture to her biography while it stands out as one of the strangest incidents in early Buddhist literature. The setting is the Queen in her bath, then:

[a dog] ... saw the queen bend down and [it] started to perform an indecent act with her. Though she took no active part, it was not a fitting thing. However, since there are none who reject such gratification, the queen endured the pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

When the king confronted her about this "indecent act," she actively denied it. Even when the king pushed her to confess, after her misbehavior with her body and then in her speaking, she refused and instead concocted a story about how images double themselves in the bath house and deceive the viewer. She reported that the king himself had appeared in a compromising position when she looked upon him from the same vantage point, and convinced him he had simply seen something that didn't occur. Privately, of course, she knew she had lied, and through offerings to the Buddha she hoped to mitigate the consequences of her vile actions. The story concludes with her thoughts on her indecent act and her

lies, which will cause her rebirth in the Avici hell, among the worst in the Buddhist cosmos.

Her attempt to assuage her husband aside, Mallika was not always a complacent wife. At least three heated arguments with her husband provided opportunities for the Buddha to teach. In each, the Buddha intervenes as an effective peacemaker. The frame story for the *Sujata Jataka* explains that, once, King Pasenadi was extraordinarily angry with Mallika, and completely ignored her. The Buddha came to know of it, and went to the palace on his alms rounds. Instead of accepting the alms from the king, he covered his bowl and asked after Mallika. The king complained that she was spoiled by the new privileges she enjoyed. The Buddha simply reminded him that it had been the king himself who had raised her to such a position, and that he should put up with the offense. He advised that they live in peace together. When the sangha asked about it, the Buddha explained that this was not the first time he had interceded in their marital disputes – in a past life, when the future Mallika had been a fruit-seller's daughter and had caught that king's eye, the king had similarly raised her up as chief queen. One day back then she upset this king because she didn't recognize the fruit in his bowl as being the type she had hawked before becoming queen. That king – who would become Pasenadi in a future birth – also took offense at how prideful she had become and ordered her away from him. The then future Buddha had intervened at that point, too, explaining the king's complicity in her change of status, thus enabling the king to forgive her haughtiness as he had a hand in its creation.<sup>10</sup>

Another time, the king was angry with Mallika; again he blamed her overweening pride, but this time the root of the argument was said to be in an offense of "conjugal rights," where she felt ignored. The frame story is much like that in the *Sujata Jataka*: Mallika does not appear for the almsgiving, the king complains about her, and the Buddha tells him to get over it, explaining through a previous life story. In this case, in their past lives, the Buddha had been king Bhalatiya, who had come upon two heavenly spirits called *kinnaras* (the future Pasenadi and Mallika) embracing emotionally. The *kinnaras* explained that, 697 years before, a storm-flooded river had separated them for just one miserable night, and





that remembering that night brought forth such emotion. By reminding the king and Mallika of their love in the current life, and as it carried over from a shared past life, the Buddha acted again as an effective peacemaker.<sup>11</sup>

In the frame story of the *Sambula Jataka*, the sangha discusses the hot topic of the day, how Mallika had risen in life as a result of her gift of gruel to the king and how she was an exemplary devoted and faithful wife. The Buddha explained that even in a past life she had been so devoted: she was once the chief consort of the crown prince Sothhisena, who was so affected by leprosy that he left the palace to hide in the wild. The dutiful Sambula followed him and ministered to his every need. When she was almost abducted by a demon, the deity Sakka intervened. When she returned to Sothhisena's side, Sothhisena tested her faithfulness and she swore she was true to him alone. She affirmed this in the ancient Indic ritual called "An Act of Truth," in which she proclaimed that, if she were telling the truth, Sothhisena's leprosy would be healed. Then it was. They returned so that Sothhisena could reign, but soon his head was turned by other women and Sambula was jilted. Sothhisena's father, the former king (who would be the Buddha in the future), thereupon reminded his son of Sambula's unswerving dedication in his time of need and thus brought the two back together.<sup>12</sup> Here again, loyalty and devotion are important traits for Buddhist householders.

The stories reveal a keen mind at work; Mallika is smart. Once when the Buddha's attendant Ananda is sent to the palace to explain the dharma to the queens, Mallika proves a quick study while Queen Vasabha is not at all.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, however, Mallika is too smart for her own good, but it is for a greater good that her intelligence causes trouble. In one story from a *Dhammapada* commentary, Mallika outshines, even humiliates, her husband: "Mallika called the king a simpleton for putting his faith in brahmins and took him to the Buddha, and while the king sat trembling, asked the questions for him and had them explained."<sup>14</sup> Here, Mallika is an agent for understanding and for the greater good of others. In the frame story of the *Mahasupina Jataka*, King Pasenadi seeks out Brahmins to interpret his 16 ominous dreams.<sup>15</sup> The Brahmins propose exorbitant sacrifices "everywhere four roads

meet," and as they make their preparations they find reasons to petition the king for even more. "Large sums of money, and large supplies of food of every kind will be ours,' thought the exultant brahmins."<sup>16</sup> In the story, Mallika at first just seems curious as to why the Brahmins keep petitioning the king (and why the king allows them to). Her suspicions ultimately prompt the king to seek out the advice of "the chief Brahmin of the world," the Buddha himself, who puts the king's mind at ease as he explains that his dreams point to the far future, that they have been dreamed by kings of the past, and that the unnecessary fears of the kings of the past gave the greedy Brahmins an excuse to prescribe costly sacrifices then as well.

The *Piyajatika Sutta*<sup>17</sup> opens with a householder overcome with grief over the death of his son; he finds the Buddha, who notes the householder's compromised faculties (*te indriyanam annathattan ti*). The householder exclaims that of course he is beside himself; he has just lost his son, which makes him unable to eat and draws him to the cemetery, where he cries out, "Where have you gone?" The Buddha counsels, "That's the way it is, householder. That's the way it is – for sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are born from one who is dear, come springing from one who is dear."<sup>18</sup> But this householder rejects the Buddha's position, and accepts an alternative consolation from some gamblers who assure him that it is happiness and joy that arise from the loss of a dear one. Word spreads of the conversation, and, when it reaches the king of Kosala himself, Pasenadi wonders what the Buddha's teaching really is. Naturally, he consults Queen Mallika about the statement that sorrow and so on arise from a dear one, and specifically attributes the statement to "your contemplative, Gotama." Mallika responds, "If that was said by the Blessed One, great king, then that's the way it is."<sup>19</sup> Her apparently flippant deference to the Buddha piques the king's ire, and he snipes:

No matter what Gotama the contemplative says, Mallikā endorses it: "If that was said by the Blessed One, great king, then that's the way it is." Just as, no matter what his teacher says, a pupil endorses it: "That's the way it is, teacher. That's the way it is." In the same way, no matter what Gotama the contemplative says, Mallikā endorses it: "If that was said by the Blessed One, great king,







then that's the way it is." Go away, Mallikā! Out of my sight!<sup>20</sup>

Though her faith in the Buddha's truthfulness is unswerving, Mallika nonetheless sends a trusted Brahmin to ask the Buddha directly if he had, in fact, said that. Having provoked the king's anger, yet not wanting to lose an argument, shrewd Mallika wants to be sure. The Brahmin's petition for confirmation provides the Buddha with an opportunity to elaborate. Citing examples drawn from many personal experiences, the Buddha reveals the underlying universal truth that attachment to the dead leads only to grief. Now armed for a further confrontation with her king, Mallika adapts the Buddha's universal lesson to her particular situation, exemplifying Buddhist practice. She convinces the king of the statement's veracity by applying it to his own life, and what might his feeling be should he lose his own beloved dependents, princess Vajiri, his other queen (Vasabha), and his son Vidudhaba, as well as herself ("Am I dear to you?" *Piya te ahan ti?*) and the king's subjects. The king is thus drawn more deeply toward the Buddha's teaching, as he sees its applicability within his own life experience.

In this long textual account, we see the power of story, both inside and outside the text, to disseminate the dharma. The story of Mallika's gruel-giving and the story of the Buddha's seemingly dispassionate words of advice are said to have spread rapidly among the people – it is a public airing of private relations. Many people have loved and lost, and this universal experience gives rise to the truism that loving excessively is a source of long-term sorrow. The repetition of the stories of the people catalyzes understanding. But what Mallika does is analogous to and illustrative of the power of biography: she adapts the common, universal narrative of love and loss to the very particular life experiences of the king himself. Of course he would feel an especial regard for his own progeny; of course his faculties would be diminished should harm come their way. Putting a human face on the abstract teaching makes the lesson stick in King Pasenadi's mind and sways him to the Buddha's doctrines. And the special salience of this biography applies to the reader of this story, who is brought inside the text.

A vignette located in several places in the Pali Canon, known as the *Mallika Sutta*, opens with

King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika together in an upper level of the palace:

"Tell me, Mallika, is there anyone dearer to you than the self?"<sup>21</sup>

"To me, Maharajah, there is no other dearer to myself than the self. But to you, Maharajah, is there anyone dearer than the self?"

"To me also, Mallika, there is no other dearer than the self."<sup>22</sup>

Clearly anticipating an exchange of affection, Pasenadi appears mystified that his beloved queen would not find him – the king, her love – more cherished than herself! He visits the Buddha, who listens to him recount the exchange with Mallika and uses it as an opportunity to share his wisdom in the form of an *udana*, or "inspired utterance":

Having traversed all directions within the mind,

No one is found more dear than oneself.

As everyone holds one's self the most dear,

One who loves himself should not harm another.<sup>23</sup>

This verse suggests a primary existential orientation based on the self as a moral agent. Ethical reckoning begins with self-conception and understanding. It appeals to common sense: don't be violent, because you understand what violence feels like in your own life; as you are your own most dear person, each other person understandably holds himself most dear. The Buddha himself looked to his extensive life, the stories of his past lives, and the moments that made sense of his present to reveal something pertinent to present situations.

Reciprocity often predominates in Buddhist stories: when Mallika met the king, "she did him a (good) turn" by letting him rest in her lap; the king's reciprocity is to install her as chief queen. So when, on the upper story of the palace, she replies to the king's query that there is no one more dear to her than herself, this direct and forthright answer surprises the king. Then she goes further by turning the question back to him, and his reflection is what drives further insight, beyond the romantic surface to existential depth. King Pasenadi is said to ponder:





I, who am king, ruler of the earth, indwell, after conquering it, this great circle of the earth as its owner. As far as I am concerned, it is fitting that I do not behold another dearer than the self. But this outcaste, being inferior from birth, (yet) who was installed by me in an exalted position, does not hold me, who am her lord, likewise dear. She says, face to face with me, that “The self alone is dearer.” “How hard, truly, is this one,” and, having lost his self-possession, reproved her, saying: “Surely for you the Three Jewels are dearer.”

The queen’s response reveals that even good intentions in fact have roots in reflecting on the only spiritual story that really matters in the long journey *samsara*, that of the self’s destiny. Mallika explains that, while she holds the Three Jewels dear, she does so in order to secure for herself the benefits of better rebirth as she proceeds with the cumulative self-cultivation that she hopes will result in “the bliss of freedom.”<sup>24</sup> The story of one’s life is central to the ultimate reckoning of what is most valued.

Within the narrative strands of her life, Mallika exemplifies ideal householder characteristics such as loyalty, devotion, and generosity. She is also held up as the ideal wife in five traits: always rising before her husband; always going to bed after him; always obeying his commands; always being polite; and using only kind words. Through her we see that, if a person can align his or her life toward the Three Refuges, the process can be transformative. While early in her stories she lies to and argues with her husband, the later Mallika is praised as a model of feminine virtue, someone who plumbs the profundity of the dharma, especially the nature of suffering, in her honest declaration that she holds herself most dear. Clinging excessively to that which is dear is the cause of suffering, as is explored in the *Piyajatika Sutta*, and it is this theme that returns in the *Raja* or *Kosala Sutta*,<sup>25</sup> where the king himself is immersed in grief over Mallika’s death.

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Stories from her life, especially that of her death, become templates to explore the details of how karma works, with intentions and in actions, and the characteristics that develop through time to build a good person.

Pasenadi was visiting the Buddha when a messenger brought the distressing news of Queen Mallika’s sudden death. His response was visceral: “He sat there miserable, sick at heart, his shoulders drooping, his face down, brooding, at a loss for words.”<sup>26</sup> The story of her death, whispered to the king, provides the grounds within the narrative for the Buddha to explain that all the sorrow the king feels ultimately is for no good. The Buddha also anticipates Pasenadi’s likely question about her rebirth location; unwilling to cause the king more pain by revealing her inevitable if short-term rebirth in the Avici hell, the Buddha repeatedly causes him to forget to ask. Only after Mallika had then been reborn in the Tusita heaven on the eighth day did the Buddha reveal her location, and he used her story to reflect on death and decay.

## Reflections on How This Individual’s Life Relates to the Buddhist Community

Reconstructing a life from Mallika’s narrative scraps underscores the utility of biography in helping to construct Buddhists outside the text, even in the current day. Just as the Buddha’s past-lives narratives literally construct his Buddha body (by narrating his cultivation of perfections), so the narratives of the past, narrative present, and future lives of Mallika construct her body as a subject for teaching the dharma. Her character, as is the case for everyone in the Buddhist understanding of karma, develops through time and through life experiences. And her character still continues to teach core values and about the workings of karma.

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## Notes

- 1 See Thapar 1966: 50.
- 2 Thapar 1966: 51.
- 3 Thapar continues, “this trend is also apparent from at least one brahman source, which describes certain republican tribes as degenerate *kshatriyas* and even *shudras*, because they have ceased to honour the brahmins and to observe Vedic ritual” (1966: 51).
- 4 Hardy 1899: 197.
- 5 *Milindapanha* 115: 291, [www.tipitaka.org/romn](http://www.tipitaka.org/romn) (accessed January 16, 2013).
- 6 Horner 1982.
- 7 See the third story in *Jatakamala*, or *Kathasarit-sagara* xxvii.
- 8 Hardy 1999: 197.
- 9 Obeyesekere 2001: 162.
- 10 Francis and Neil 1897: 13–15.
- 11 Rouse 1901: 271–5.
- 12 Francis 1905: 48–53.
- 13 Malalasekera 1974: 455.
- 14 Malalasekera 1974: 455.
- 15 Chalmers 1895: 187–94.
- 16 Chalmers 1895: 187.
- 17 Bhikkhu 2011.
- 18 Bhikkhu 2011.
- 19 Bhikkhu 2011.
- 20 Bhikkhu 2011.
- 21 “Atthi nu kho te Mallike koc’ añño attanā piyataro?” (Steinthal 1982: 47). *Attana* means “yourself.”
- 22 Woodward 1987: 56.
- 23 Masefield 1994–5: 729–30.
- 24 Masefield 1994–5: 730.
- 25 Bhikkhu 2012.
- 26 Bhikkhu 2012.