

**Women in the Buddha's Life: resources for discovery, practice, and reflection**  
[Barre Center for Buddhist Studies; <https://www.buddhisticquiry.org/>]

## **Women in the Buddha's Life: resources for discovery, practice, and reflection**



Prince Siddhartha (the future Buddha) and his wife, Gopa  
Image from Candi Borobudur, Java, Indonesia

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## ***Introduction: What you will find here***

The Buddha is remembered as suggesting that a life well-lived stands on two legs: “focused attention” (*manasikāra*) and “the voice of another” (*paratoghosa*). The latter points to anything, including texts, that can engender a change in one’s way of seeing and engaging the world, indeed engender a change in how one lives.

On this website, you will find stories about women who were part of the Buddha’s life: his birth mother, his adoptive mother, his wife, as well as others. Their stories are gathered here as instances of “the voice of another,” and we hope they will serve as resources to help you change how you see and engage the world. Some of the stories found on this website are familiar, others are little known. They are from a variety of Buddhist traditions, although most of them come from South Asia.

Why gather these stories here? Why read them? Why reflect on them? Women’s voices are rarely given prominence in Buddhist literature, but they are part of the Buddha’s heritage, and they illuminate for us new or overlooked facets of the Buddha’s teachings. All Buddhist traditions agree that what the Buddha taught is not only true, it is also useful. Stories about women who were part of the Buddha’s life have these qualities too: they are true and they are useful. Answers to questions about why bring these stories together and why read them at all become easier, perhaps even self-evident, when we discover their truth and their usefulness for ourselves. In them and through them, we can discover new sources of inspiration for how to think and for what to do.

The literary scholar Robert Scholes astutely observed that reading remains “incomplete unless and until it is absorbed and transformed in the thoughts and deeds of readers.” (Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], x.) This insight is especially apt for reading the stories of women in the Buddha’s life. When what we read in stories about *them* is absorbed and transformed in *our* thoughts and deeds, we discover the stories’ usefulness as well as their truth in *our* lives.

The other leg that a life well lived stands on, “focused attention”—the activity of sustained reflection—is key if whatever we read is actually to become absorbed and transformed in our thoughts and deeds. Considering how we read can help to prepare the mental ground that can encourage and enable this to happen.

To this end, in addition to stories of women in the Buddha’s life, you will find on this website a variety of resources and exercises with each story. These are offered to encourage you to think about how you read and to practice different ways of engaging the stories. For example, there are audio-files for each story that will allow you to hear the story being read aloud. You might try listening to the story being read aloud to see how this changes how you engage and absorb the story.

Some of the resources are practices that can be engaged alone, while others can be engaged together with others. Some are labeled as aids for “reflection,” while others are labeled as “group practices.” These labels, however, are not rigid and they certainly should not constrain your own use of them. That is to say, you might try doing the group practices individually and the

individual reflections with others in a group. Of course, you may create helpful reading practices of your own, and if you do, we hope you will share them with us and with others.

The repertoire of reading practices and resources for reflection found here can be used with other texts too whenever one is reading to explore the truth and usefulness of a text in one's own life.

There are other aids provided for each story as "Reading Resources." These include glossaries on names and terms; contextual background to the story; and bibliographic information about other relevant translations.

### ***Reflecting on Pronouns***

One reading practice, however, can be done with all of the stories gathered here.

As we just said, drawing on the insight of Robert Scholes, the activity of sustained reflection is key if whatever we read is actually to become absorbed and transformed in our thoughts and deeds. There may be no better place to begin sustained reflection than by noting how gender appears in pronoun usage in the stories.

The choice of pronouns in the translations follows that in the original languages, but the process of absorbing and transforming in our thoughts what we read may be aided by experimenting, for example, with substituting gender-neutral pronouns, such as *zie* or the singular *they*, whenever "she" or "he" occurs in a translation; a "she" or a "he" is always accompanied in English by the tacit dichotomy of "he and she."

The practice of pronoun substitution can create room for other gender identities, both for the characters in the stories (whom we can imagine are frustrated themselves that the languages in which their stories are told do not have a gender-neutral or third-gender pronoun available, just as English historically did not, and thus misidentifies them) as well as for us readers of the stories (whatever gender we choose to use to self-ascribe ourselves). Experimenting with pronoun substitution when reading the stories can enlarge and enrich what we see in them, and it can nourish sustained reflection on their lessons. Indeed, this practice can enable the stories to say more to us than they actually say, and this is part of how what we read becomes absorbed and transformed in our thoughts and deeds.

A useful resource for reflecting on pronoun usage and why it matters can be found at:

<https://www.mypronouns.org/>

### ***A Note on Transliteration***

Transliteration in the translations of words from the original languages generally follow prevailing scholarly standards, such as the Pinyin system for Chinese and those that are employed in the *The Murty Classical Library of India* for languages of South Asia, but without the use of diacritics. In the case of proper names, including the names of persons, places, doctrines, and the like, common quasi-phonetic forms are used.

