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**Vanessa Sasson:** In the last years of me engaging with these stories, I've come to realize everything is in them. And so sometimes what is so complicated to understand philosophically, it's really clear when you tell a story. We engage with stories in really easy ways, and they get imprinted on our psyche and we go back to them and we tell them again and we tell them again. And there's something magical about the transformative power of a beautiful story when it gives us the mess. So you can have all this philosophy about renunciation, ordination, but when you tell a story about renunciation, you feel the complexity of it without somebody having to spell it out to you in complicated jargon.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Vanessa Sasson. Vanessa is a professor of Religious Studies at Marianopolis College. Her new novel, *The Gathering: A Story of the First Buddhist Women*, is an imaginative retelling of the first Buddhist women's request for ordination. Building on years of research, the novel follows a group of women as they travel through the forest together seeking full access to the Buddha's teachings. In my conversation with Vanessa, we talk about what we can learn from the first Buddhist women's resilience, how contemporary women monastics understand this story, why she first started writing fiction, and the role of mythology in the Buddhist world. So here's my conversation with Vanessa Sasson.

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**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'm here with scholar Vanessa Sasson. Hi, Vanessa. It's great to be with you.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Hi, it's so nice to be with you as well. Thank you for having me.



**James Shaheen:** And very good to meet you finally. So, Vanessa, we're here to talk about your new novel, *The Gathering: A Story of the First Buddhist Women*. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it? And in particular, what inspired you to write it as a novel?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Yeah, so there's a lot to that question. The story itself, I think it might help if I tell a little bit of what the story is about because not everybody is as familiar with it as some of us in the field are. The story is the first women who want to ask the Buddha for permission to join the order. And so we know that there are Buddhist nuns today, and we almost could take it for granted that there are Buddhist nuns all over the world. But their story of how they became nuns is actually a really complicated story, and in some ways rather painful. So if you look at the literature, the story of the Buddha is that he's a prince in a palace. I think most of your listeners are going to know this. One day he has this vision of suffering and realizes that he wants to leave the palace and go and find the answer to suffering that he's not able to find at home. And so he makes this great valiant departure and he walks away from the worldly life and he kind of charges into the forest where he lets go of everything and begins to practice and to try to figure out what is this answer that he's looking for in his mind.

It's very evasive in the literature what he's looking for, but he's looking for something profound, something that is going to free him. And the tradition tells us that for years he floats around the forest trying to figure out what this answer is and tries all kinds of techniques until one day something magical like this reflection of inner vastness happens to him that we don't quite understand what it is. And so a lot of Buddhism is probably trying to capture what that moment was, but the story just tells us that it happens. And whatever this magical thing is that happens, he achieves it and he becomes completely and totally free.

And the idea is that this is a cosmic event. This is a social event. The whole universe is excited about his achievement. And so everyone notices that something really profound has happened.



And people hear about it, and so the tradition is that—this is years after he left the palace, but rumors begin that he's achieved something spectacular.

And so slowly the men from the palace that he left behind start wandering into the forest one at a time, one here, one there, individuals just going into the forest saying, “Whatever it is that you figured out, can I practice with you?” And so this becomes this quest to request ordination, to sit beside this man, this Buddha, this supreme being of the tradition's imagination, and try to learn this evasive thing that he found.

And every time someone makes that request, and there's all kinds of men that make this request, right? And you even have somebody like Angulimala, who's one of the most famous characters of the Buddhist imagination, who's a serial killer. Every time someone approaches him, in almost all cases, he'll say something very, very simple to the effect of just “Come,” and so there's this open invitation, this welcoming of just “Come sit with me and I will show you what I've done.”

And so this is how the early tradition imagines the building up of the first sangha, the first community. And so these men sit with the Buddha one after another and they create this kind of community that he will slowly build rules around and he'll orchestrate and he'll discipline and he'll create a sangha. And so slowly we have this organic process of building a community.

The trick in the literature is that one day the women want to do the same. And so *Tricycle* actually, you guys did an excerpt of the book a while back and you came up with the best title. And I wish that that was the title that I thought we called it “When Women Showed Up,” and I was like, “Oh, that's the title.” It was such a smart title, but it was that moment where the women want to try for the same thing. And so the story is that the women who are left behind, who are living in the palace, they one day wake up and they say, “Well, why don't we try it too?” And this is headed by the very famous kind of leader of the women, the queen of the kingdom,



Mahapajapati Gotami. And so she's the one to make the call. And so she decides, “I'm going to go and ask him if I can do this too.”

And then we have this bizarre thing that happens in the literature where the text tells us that all these women showed up to stand with her. And we don't know how that happened, so in my head I'm imagining this kind of gossip thread that has kind of spilled through the palace and everyone finds out, and so she leaves the palace. And there are 500 other women who have just kind of woken up and heard the news. And so there's this very excited energy that I can imagine as they say, “Well, she's going, so I think I'll go too.” And so these women depart together, which is really an amazing thing and is very different from how the men's community is formed. The men's community is formed with individuals kind of showing up one at a time. But the women's community arrives already formed in some ways, and the women's community, if you look at the details of the sources, are from all walks of life.

So one of the texts that really inspired me for this is a text called the *Therigatha*. And it's this beautiful book of really, really old Buddhist poetry. It's about 2,000 years old. And we think it was actually produced by women, because the voices sound like women's voices. And each poem in there tells us a different story about women's lives.

And so you hear about women who joined what I call the Gathering, these women who showed up one after another. Some of them are queens and princesses and women of nobility, and some of them are homeless widows by the side of the road and some of them are courtesans and some of them are prostitutes. And so we get all these different kinds of women that kind of gather behind Mahapajapati Gotami and say, “Let's go.”

And this is really quite radical because in a world like ancient India where everything is stratified and there's so much hierarchy and there's so many divisions, these women broke that so that you



have homeless widows walking with queens and prostitutes and courtesans, and they came from different kingdoms. Some of those kingdoms were at war with Kapilavastu.

And so all these different women from all these different backgrounds decide to walk together and to go ask the Buddha the same question that the Buddha has been asked hundreds of times, hoping, I imagine, that he will say yes. But the devastating reality of the narrative that we have received from the tradition is that they go to see him, and he says something really evasive that none of us really knows what to do with where he basically says, “Maybe don't ask the question.” And so it was this story of women being so eager and excited and being so radical in their collective vision of how they were going to organize themselves that really wanted me to imagine the story.

I had to imagine it. I had to tell the story. But it's not a story with a super happy ending, so it was a complicated book to write, but it was a story I really wanted to write, which is why I wrote it.

**James Shaheen:** Well, that was so nicely put. That's an excellent description of the book you've written. One question that forms the core of the book is how the Buddha could have said no the first time he is asked. So how have you come to understand this question?

**Vanessa Sasson:** It's a really hard question. I wrestled with that question for a long time because these women, they arrive and they've left home. And this is really important for the narrative is that there's an understanding in ancient Indian traditions that when you take the path of renunciation, you leave home, you make this decision to leave home, to leave your world behind, you can't just suddenly the moment it doesn't go well go, “Oh, this was too hard. I'm going to go home now.” That's not the idea. It's supposed to be hard.

And so these women have done something really, really hard and very courageous. And they've left home and they've made this request. So they're kind of in a limbo, like a bardo of some kind



because they don't belong anywhere anymore. They've left. And he must know this. And so they've arrived at his doorstep, basically, and they're asking him, “Can we enter your world? Will you welcome us to practice with you?” So they have, even though they're choosing a life of what we call religious homelessness in the literature, they're still asking for some kind of home, a place that is going to welcome them so that they have a place to go to practice, to learn, to have teachings. This is what they're looking for.

And he gives this really evasive question, and he does it in all the literature because we have multiple vinayas and in every vinaya there's something really evasive about his response where he doesn't quite say no, but he definitely does not say yes. He kind of skirts the issue. And this leaves the women nowhere. And that's really, really hard about the story. So I've struggled with that question for a long time. Why did he do that?

**James Shaheen:** You know, amazingly but perhaps not surprisingly, the question of women's ordination is very much still alive in communities of women monastics around the world.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Absolutely.

**James Shaheen:** So what did you learn from talking with women monastics about the story of the first Buddhist women?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, I mean there's more to the story than this moment. We can go back to how it keeps evolving because it doesn't stop there. So he's evasive about his answer. He doesn't give them a yes or a no, and what's quite remarkable about these women is he gives them this evasive answer and he walks away and then they do something completely out of character, I think, in some ways with what the literature would have normally presented, but they just follow him and ask again.



They didn't take no for an answer, which is really quite amazing. And he said this evasive no three times, and three is usually that lucky charm, and once you're at three, it's really I'm not welcoming you into the community. And then they just follow him and they ask again, and he finally says yes, but with strings attached.

So, I think the details of that story, the fact that he doesn't say yes, he kind of says no, and they follow him to the next round and ask again shows me something about them being just courageous and smart and determined and refusing to accept the boundaries that they are being met with and that Buddhist women around the world are met with in monastic communities.

It's different in every monastic community, so it's not a one-size-fits-all answer to this. But the question of ordination for women is really complicated in a number of contexts. In some parts of the Buddhist world, ordination has never been given. So that's the Himalayan traditions generally, just until last year. We just saw the first ordination of Himalayan women in human history happen last year. So that was a really exciting transformation of the story. In other parts of the Buddhist world, women have had access to ordination and lost it. And then in other parts of the world, women have ordination, but they're bound by these regulations and these extra rules that really put them at a disadvantage.

So there's a lot of difficulty at living a monastic life as a woman. And my experience has been, with this story and with the monastic women I've had the opportunity to spend time with over the years, that this story really resonates because it's so familiar. Not just resonates like “This is our heritage story.” That too. But it resonates like, “Yeah, it was like that then. And it's still like that.” The story hasn't really changed in some ways. And so it feels very much like familiar territory for a lot of people who engage with the story.

**James Shaheen:** Right, even when they do ordain, there's often blowback. It's still not an easy thing to do. You know, at one point in the novel, the narrator reflects, “We did not become as free



as we hoped we might be, or as free as I thought we should be.” So there are many layers of freedom at play here. Can you say more about how these women negotiate the tensions between social freedom and ultimate liberation?

**Vanessa Sasson:** That's a really important question. In some ways, my answer is samsara. I've been going back to that word a lot in the process of writing this book. If we go back to the story, what happens to the women in the early texts is they go back and they ask again for ordination, which, as I said, I think is a really courageous and kind of rule-defying move on their part.

And they do something even more courageous in that moment. In the Vinaya, which is the monastic rules where we get this story in part, there's this wonderful detail that I really latched onto. And that is that when they go ask the first time and the Buddha is very evasive, the text doesn't tell us that Mahapajapati Gotami is wearing robes and it doesn't tell us that she has a shaved head. It just says that she goes and she asks. When she leads the women after he's said no three times and they wander through the forest and they get to him again to the next place where he's gone and they stand and they wait for the Buddha to notice them, which is, that alone, to me is a really powerful moment, this moment of the women's silence and of their waiting. There's something really powerful about them standing there and just waiting, like they're going to wait until someone sees them properly. And so they're standing at the edge of wherever the Buddha is in Vesali, and they're waiting quietly.

And finally it's not the Buddha but it's Ananda who notices them. And Ananda goes to see Mahapajapati Gotami, and the text says he sees that she's wearing robes that are dust-stained, that her face has tears on it, and that her head is shaved. And it didn't say that before. And so there's a real question of when did she choose to shave her head? When did that happen? And so maybe she had her head shaved before, but the text doesn't tell us that. We know that it's shaved now. And so there's room in there, I think, for us to imagine the possibility that they were even





more radical than I'm imagining, that maybe they thought, “Well, he didn't say no, even if he didn't say yes.”

And so they were going to take on renunciation even if they don't get received by a community. And so they really are breaking these boundaries and saying, “We need this for ourselves,” but it's such a difficult journey for them. So they have to just break one wall after another. And they don't know if the wall they're going to break is going to break them and what will happen to them socially if they take matters into their own hands. They're ostensibly defying the Buddha, which is a really difficult story to tell in certain Buddhist circles. But they seem to do that. And then they present themselves again. And then when they ask, he finally says, “OK, I will see you.” But again, it's such a fraught road to get to that final destination of ordination. It's just not going to come easy.

**James Shaheen:** Likewise, a lot of women have to challenge their teachers. I remember Rita Gross was told to stop complaining. And she said, “I can deal with samsara, old age, sickness, and death, but I can't deal with the challenges that you're presenting.” You know, that was a pretty clever way for her to navigate that particular exchange. But you also explore the many different types of freedom that the women are seeking and making the journey to ordain: freedom from hierarchy, from familial bonds, that's a big one, from guilt, from shame. Some join the gathering as an escape from a life full of suffering while others join for companionship or even for food. Can you say more about these different motivations?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, this is what's so beautiful about the literature, and I think all of this is reflected like a mirror into the present moment because you see the same thing today is that the literature tells us about these women. They don't all have these kinds of pure spiritual motivations. They get idealized by the tradition as time goes on. There's no question about that. And they all become these perfected characters of the Buddhist imagination. But when you look at the *Therigatha* and its commentaries, you see so many of these women join what I call the



Gathering, join this idea of entering the Buddhist sangha, not necessarily because they want spiritual freedom. Some do. Like Mahapajapati Gotami, I think she's the embodiment of that spiritual ideal. But then you have the homeless widow by the side of the road.

So this one character in the *Therigatha*, her name is Chanda, and I've thought about her quite a lot. She's just this homeless widow by the side of the road, and she sees the women and Patachara walking past her. And she says, “If I go with you, will you feed me?” And the women say yes, and she says, “OK, I'm coming.” And so it's not always the loftiest of ideals. Some women are escaping brothels, and some women are escaping courtesan houses and bad husbands, and there's one character in the *Therigatha* who puts a noose around her neck, and just as she's about to pull it, she hears the Buddhist teaching and she thinks, “Oh, maybe I won't do this.”

And so you have these women who are coming out of all kinds of situations and backgrounds and realities, and they're not always doing this for some pure intention. They're doing it because they need a way out. And monastic community can offer that in certain cases. And I think we see that today as well. I don't know that everyone who becomes a monk or a nun today is always doing it for the highest ideal. Sometimes it's to get out of their parents' home or to get out of marriage or to get out of poverty or to get an education. So there's a lot of things that feel like the story is still the same. It's still hard. Life has not been cleaned up. We haven't figured everything out. Monastic life is also still complicated, and we hit walls all the time. Rita Gross's walls that she was facing are not that different from the walls that we see in the *Therigatha* that the women are banging up against and trying to figure out how to free themselves from.

**James Shaheen:** You know, while the novel weaves together the stories of many women in the *Therigatha*, it centers on Vimala, a prostitute who joins the gathering of women to escape her life at a brothel. How did you decide on Vimala as the central narrator of the book?



**Vanessa Sasson:** I sat with the *Therigatha* for a long time. I kept leafing through it, going back to it, and returning to it. It sat next to my bed for a few years while I was preparing this book. And so I kept looking at the different characters and trying to think, who's going to be my narrator? Who's going to do this for me? And whose voice can I imagine? Vimala was really interesting because she has so little information about her, which is part of what I really needed to be able to do this. I realized that I needed to have a background character. So this was a bit of a literary move more than it is some Buddhist academic move, but I was thinking from a literary perspective, I needed someone whose voice was not prominent in the tradition so that there weren't a lot of expectations. about her because I kept thinking of Mahapajapati Gotami. She was an obvious one to tell the story. She's at the forefront of the story, but she's such an important character in so many women's experiences and so many Buddhist minds. I couldn't imagine taking on her voice. It felt like I was trespassing.

So then I thought about Patachara. And again, she's such a big person for so many people's imagination that I thought again I'm trespassing into someone's life, and I don't know if I can do that. And Patachara's experience of suffering is so pronounced, I didn't know if I could understand it, if I could imagine or if I had the courage to imagine the kind of suffering she was forced to endure.

So I had to find somebody whose suffering was not so elaborate that I couldn't touch it and yet whose story was not so anchored in the tradition that it was going to bother a lot of readers because they have a different experience of who they think that character is. That was a lot of the literary decision making that went into it.

And then when I came across her, I found her so audacious. She's standing at the door with all of her beauty, summoning men in with. She's basically naked, just going, “Do you dare come to



me?” And there was something about her that I thought was just fabulous but also broken, and I thought, “I can understand that.” So I thought, “OK, let’s do this together.”

**James Shaheen:** Vimala’s story also demonstrates the familiarity of suffering. It can be difficult to imagine an alternative when we’re so stuck in our own habits and stories. So how did the women help each other to imagine and actually enact different possible futures?

**Vanessa Sasson:** That’s a beautiful question. I think the great thing about this story is that the women did it together. That’s what I find so beautiful is that these women, they couldn’t have done it on their own. I mean, society wouldn’t have allowed it, first of all. The husbands and the temple priests and the brothel owners would have pulled them back. And so the only way they were going to have strength to pull this off was as a community. And I think that’s true so often. When you march, like if you go to a women’s march today, and I think this is like the first women’s march, it’s so exciting to be surrounded and to think, “OK, we will do this.” The “I will do this” is very isolating and you’re risking so much, and it’s very hard to ask an individual to risk so much. But if you’re standing with a group and you do it together, a lot more is possible. And I think that’s what this story tells us. When the men go, they go as individuals, one at a time. Sometimes two people will go together, like two friends, like Sariputta and Mahamoggallana. They go together, and they have an agreement to do it together.

But most of the men are going by themselves. The women go as a group. And I think that’s what helps them imagine because their world is not giving them much imagination for this. The world of ancient India, there were the Jains and they actually had a monastic women’s community before the Buddhists, but I don’t know how prominent they were, and I don’t know if it was something that visibly you would see every day as you’re walking down the street. And so for most people, I don’t think that imagination would have been there that we can really be free. We can really do something different and radical with our lives.



That's hard to imagine even today for many of us. We just kind of follow the world that's kind of under our feet. And yet when you're with a group of women who are imagining something together, you lean on their shoulders and you do it as a group, I think it's so much more possible then. So I think that's how they did it.

**James Shaheen:** Well, this question may also have some contemporary resonance. As the group of women travel through different towns, they're met with mixed reception. What do you think was so threatening or dangerous about a community of women trying to get free?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, you're risking social disturbance. You're risking roles having to shift, power structures having to change, hierarchies having to reorganize themselves. I think you change a lot that way. It's a disruption, and disruption is difficult. So I can imagine that in some places, it would be exciting to see a group of people saying they're doing something different and they're going to try for something else. That could be really exciting to see, but it could also be really threatening and really scary to have a group of people saying, “We're going to change the system. We're going to try to do something else with our lives.” How do you respond to something like that? I can imagine this being very hard for a lot of people.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I mean, in some of the cases like with Vimala, certainly she was considered somebody else's property, so it was considered a kind of theft to even leave. So you write, “To leave the home was to disrupt the way things had always been, to threaten cosmic harmony, to destroy the social bonds that kept everyone else afloat. These women broke all those promises and challenged every expectation the moment they walked out the door.”

**Vanessa Sasson:** Yeah, I think that's what it is. You're changing something, and change is hard. It's inescapable, but it's hard.



**James Shaheen:** You also say of the community of women, “They were a community of female renunciants who had renounced before they even knew if they were allowed.” How have you come to understand renunciation in the process of writing this book, and what is it that the women are renouncing?

**Vanessa Sasson:** I think renunciation is actually really profound, and I think it's something that I'm learning over time. I don't think it's something that I learned just once. I think when I was younger, I would have thought that renunciation is this very clear setup of either householder or renunciant, kind of like how certain binaries are created in Buddhist literature where you're either a monk or you're a householder. And that's really simplistic, and it's really a kind of black and white narrative. But the more I spend time thinking about renunciation, the more I think there is something much more nuanced about what the question of renunciation is.

So I think socially, there is a request, I think, in a lot of communities that the renunciation is to be welcomed. So these women are hoping that the Buddha will give them a spiritual home, even if they've renounced an actual home. I think that paradox is important, and I don't think it's a contradiction. To renounce but to be left in the middle of nowhere in the wild, very few people are going to have the capacity to meet that. I don't know that renunciation is supposed to be so radically individual that you're just supposed to hang in the middle of nowhere with no one supporting you. I think the reason there's monastic sanghas is because you can renounce some things, but you need to be held still.

And so I don't think of renunciation as as radical as I think I understood it in my 20s when I was first engaging with this literature where I thought it's this kind of radical departure and you need no one. I'm completely on my own, I'm independent and individual. It's very young, and it's understandable and it's idealistic, but I don't think it's true. I think even in renunciation, there's a question of community and there's a question of companionship and friendship and love and support that I don't know that we've always had the language for in Buddhist studies or in



Buddhist communities, but I think it's really important. These communities were not individuals standing alone. They were together. And they were trying to renounce something else. They weren't necessarily trying to renounce people.

**James Shaheen:** Right, I think of this and I think this notion when we're young that we're going to go off on our own just affirms our worst tendencies, our hyper-individualistic bent, rather than actually the challenges in community. But a central component of renunciation is the tension between family obligations and the path to awakening. Can you tell us a bit about how this plays out in the story of the Buddha's wife, Yasodhara? How does she navigate this balance seeking ordination?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, so this is where I think Buddhism is actually extremely skilled and sophisticated is the story of Yasodhara and of all of these women who are leaving home, it's complicated for them to leave home. Their renunciation and the Buddha's renunciation, and there's so many stories like this all through Buddhist literature, renunciation is a complicated ideal. Because when you do it socially, when you leave your home and your family obligations, you are disrupting everything. And so when somebody chooses a monastic life, there is a lot of loss for the family. They're losing a worker. They're losing someone who will take care of their parents in their old age. They're losing potential grandchildren. There's a lot of loss that happens with this. And even if you're excited and proud of your child for having such a dedicated life, I'm sure that for most families, it's still complicated to watch your child walk away and join a different family and a different community life.

So I think renunciation creates a disturbance in society that you're constantly having to renegotiate. And you see it in the Buddha's life story where he leaves home and he disturbs everybody. And this is the genius of Buddhist storytelling is they tell you that he's disturbed



everyone. They don't give you this story where he thinks, Oh, I'm going to leave home and go live in the forest. And everybody goes, “Wonderful, we're so proud of you.” That's not the story.

**James Shaheen:** He's supposed to be the king, the next king.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Right, he's hurt everybody. And so he's upset his father who expected him to take the throne, so now his father is stuck without somebody to take care of the throne. The royal subjects, the citizens, they've just lost their prince. Mahapajapati has lost her son. Yasodhara loses her husband. Rahula, who is just born, has lost his father. Kantaka, who's this horse, this fabulous white majestic horse who loves the future Buddha, who loves the prince, he loses the prince too and he dies of heartbreak. So you have just this fantastic storytelling that happens in the literature where they tell you of one heartbreak after another. They don't tell you everybody's happy he becomes the Buddha. They tell you how sad everyone is to lose the prince. And to me, this is sophisticated, this is intelligent, this is telling you that yes, renunciation is a very profound, tricky thing to accomplish, and it means different things at different times in your life. It is going to upset everything around you, and it's not going to be easy, and you're going to cause suffering in the midst of you seeking your freedom for suffering. And that, to me, is the genius of these stories.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, you know it always makes me think of *The Pilgrim's Progress* because I believe if I remember correctly he tears himself away from the family, and it's a terrible scene, and it reminds me of that, although this is a little more elegant, frankly, in the telling, although the emotion of the scene is very real.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Oh, the emotion is terrible. There's a scene in a Sanskrit text in the *Mahavastu* where Mahapajapati has cried so much that her eyes are covered with scales from all her tears. I mean, they really don't pull their punches. They really let you feel the loss of this person that they all loved and that they all expected things from and who had responsibilities that he owed.





And he broke the social contract. And the tradition stays with that story. They don't say, “Oh, it didn't matter.” They stay with the story, and all the beautiful early storytellers, they spend time telling you about the loss as it's experienced by all of these different characters. Yasodhara's loss is devastating and angry and accusatory, and she goes to see the chariot driver and she says, “How could you let him leave? Didn't you tell him about me?” This is such a poignant moment in the biography of her to say, “How could you let this happen? I'm here. He's not supposed to go. He has responsibilities to me.”

So when the tradition creates stories like this, it's telling you this is a hard decision and it's going to break a lot of things. There's no way to be in samsara. That's why I started this by saying that has been my word for the last few years. At the end of the day, samsara is always a little bit broken and not quite right. And I don't know that we *can* get it right. I think the literature tells us it's going to be a mess. And it is a mess.

**James Shaheen:** We can't quite fix it.

**Vanessa Sasson:** No, and so when these women leave, they're having this aspiration and then they're met with a new mess because samsara is ever present. That's my only way of understanding this literature is that we were always in a space of things being not quite right because our greed and our hatred and our desire are fueling 90 percent of what we do, and so we hurt each other all the time. And so they want to create a sangha, and then that sangha is not quite what they had hoped for.

**James Shaheen:** Right, you mentioned the messiness, so can you say a bit more about the messiness of community?

**Vanessa Sasson:** If we pick up the thread of the story, when they go to see the Buddha and he finally sees them, Ananda notices that their heads are shaved and they're crying. They don't tell



us why the women are crying. Are they crying because they're so happy they finally reach the Buddha again? Or are they crying because they're frightened that he might say no again? They don't tell us. But there's a well of emotion in these women. This matters to them for whatever reason, and for each one probably a different reason, but there's emotion in this moment. This matters. They're not just saying, “I want to do this because I want to get out of something.” They've come to a point now where the request is heavy.

And so finally, the Buddha—and in the text, it's terrible. I had to actually soften the Buddha's behavior and change it a little bit because I couldn't live with how harsh some of this literature is because in the literature, he does not even go to meet the women. He does not even talk to Mahapajapati, his stepmother, directly. And I thought that I can't recreate that myself. So I adjusted some of the story for my own kind of temperament. But the women are told in the Vinaya that they will get ordination, but they get conditions and these eight conditions or these eight heavy rules as they're often translated, the *garudhammas*, have been a really difficult part of Buddhist history ever since.

And people have been discussing and debating them for 2,500 years, more or less, depending on where you want to place where the story begins. The eight rules are basically no matter what your situation, no matter how senior you are, you must always be inferior to a monk. And so the first of the eight rules is if a monk has been ordained one day and a woman has been ordained a hundred years, she must bow to him. And the seven subsequent rules are more of the same but in different technical color. And so you have these eight rules that basically determine that, OK, women can be ordained. They've finally made it into this community and they'll have a spot. They won't be alone in the forest by themselves, but they have to always accept that the monks are going to be above them.

And that's a tough message to get out of an ancient text. I mean, every religious tradition has this kind of a narrative somewhere in its history and in its current reality. But it's still very hard to



digest this kind of unapologetic demand: if you want to be part of the community, you have to understand where your place is, and your place is not beside the monks, it's behind them.

And monastic communities have been negotiating this story ever since. Do we have to still abide by this? Do we agree? Do we not agree? Do we want to? Do we not want to? This has been a big question for monastic communities ever since that was established whenever we want to decide that story was established.

**James Shaheen:** Right. So, what have you learned from talking with contemporary monastics about these eight rules? How do women monastics negotiate these today?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, it's different in every community, and I think it's different for every monastic. I spent a summer years ago in Sri Lanka asking that very question. I did a whole research project on trying to understand what women's relationship was to these rules and to the question of higher ordination. Every woman I spoke to had a different answer for me. For some women, of course, the Buddha would say this and this is the right thing and he said it, therefore I accept it. A lot more women were much more nuanced in their answers and said, “Well, we have the rules, so we have to follow them, but maybe one day it will change or there's aspiration for it to be complicated or different one day.” Other women rejected it completely and said we were going to have full ordination and we're not going to abide by these rules, and that's the end of it, and it's just a question of time before everybody figures it out. So you have a real spectrum of responses. There's no one-size-fits-all on the answer to this question.

But what is consistent is that women have to think about this question—monastics generally and male monastics as well. They have to decide as communities, not just as individuals, how are they going to engage with nuns when they meet them? Will they require this rule or will they not require this rule? And what you will find in contemporary communities often is that there's a lot of nuance in mini gestures or microgestures that most of us wouldn't notice but that are forms of



communication, a kind of nonverbal body language. So I've been told by many monastics that if they're not in a formal setting, a monk will say that if they're not in a formal setting and they meet a nun that they really admire or that they know of or they know is older than them in ordination, they will bow to them first.

And so there are these micro moments that happen that are really small that we might not see, but then in formal settings, they might feel like they cannot do that. So I think there's a really wide range. Buddhist women in different countries have very different circumstances. And so it's different everywhere, but the story is part of what it is to be a monastic. So the story is present; it's just the response to it is varied.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, people have said, I've heard them say, why don't they just strike it on their own? But then they lose the support of their community and the financial support of the sangha, and it's not easy, you know. Just doing that is maybe brave, but it's not easy.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Well, also, in a way, it's a very Western kind of response to things. I think we have a very disposable worldview. I think it's a very contemporary idea of just if you don't like something, throw it away. And I think that works in some people's idea of Buddhism. They think, “Oh, Buddhism is about renunciation. Just throw things away.” But I think things are actually more complicated than that. So renunciation is not about throwing things away. I think it's a transformation of a relationship. And that's what I meant that the idea that was once binary in my head has become something much more nuanced. It's not about me throwing my family away. You can't throw your family away, you're not supposed to dispose of each other. But is there a transformation of the relationship where you don't feel as bound? Can you care for people regardless of who they are in your life and not because of who they are in your life? That's something that doesn't necessarily show in your behavior in a way that is obvious to other people, but I do think it's an inner transformation and an inner reckoning with something more profound about renunciation. I do think you can renounce a lot without anyone seeing anything,



without it being a big show, but I don't think it's about disposing. And I think sometimes we think that, right? You can dispose of the Buddhist sangha if you don't like it. You can dispose of this. You can dispose. It's not about disposing.

**James Shaheen:** Right, yeah, how often do we hear people say, “I'm out of here”?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Exactly.

**James Shaheen:** So throughout the novel, you also explore the role of stories, myths, and legends in shaping how we interpret the world and what we imagine is possible. Can you say more about the power of myths within the Buddhist world and within the world of this particular story? How does hearing other stories help the women to process their own?

**Vanessa Sasson:** I am a fan of storytelling. I think stories are wonderful. So as a scholar of the tradition, when I came up into the field of academia, storytelling was not something that many people gave any credence to. This was something for old women by the fire. You didn't take stories and narrative that seriously. What is interesting for scholars is philology and textual critical analysis and philosophy. These are the things that are kind of the highbrow of academia. What we didn't do very much is give any time or attention to storytelling, because I think we thought it was like what you do for children.

But in the last years of me engaging with these stories, I've come to realize everything is in them. And so sometimes what is so complicated to understand philosophically, it's really clear when you tell a story that we engage with stories in really easy ways and that they get imprinted on our psyche and we go back to them and we tell them again and we tell them again. And there's something magical about the transformative power of a beautiful story when it gives us the mess. So you can have all this philosophy about renunciation, ordination, but when you tell a story



about renunciation, you feel the complexity of it without somebody having to spell it out to you in complicated jargon.

So I think having these stories, telling these stories, we're engaging with the tradition in really sophisticated ways sometimes. But we haven't allowed ourselves to recognize that. When you go to most Buddhist communities, people tell stories. People have always told stories. I see it with my students. If I'm giving them philosophical statements or theory, half of their eyes glaze over and I know they're thinking about what they did last night or wishing they could look at their phone. But the moment I start telling them a story, I see the change. I see that all of a sudden they look at me differently and they're listening and their heads are cocked to the side a little bit and they put the phone down and they stare at me and I see the wheels are starting to turn in ways that I lost them a moment before. And so I know this is true. I know that we respond as human beings to stories and that sometimes that's the best vehicle for us to get to the next stage of our lives.

**James Shaheen:** So how did you start writing fiction?

**Vanessa Sasson:** That was the first question you asked me, so now we're finally there. I've been writing as a scholar and I've been doing academia for 25 years now, more or less, and I've enjoyed it immensely. And I've had a great time in my field, truly. But I did get to a point where I felt like it was a repetitive act, and I felt like there was a kind of style to writing as an academic that's very formulaic. It's an important style, and you want to be able to master it so that you can convey things with precision. This is not to beat this down and say it's not a good system or methodology. I don't think that's the case. But it's repetitive. And there was a point at which I'd gotten to a point where I thought, “Is this all I know how to do? Is this the only way I know how to write or express myself or raise my questions?” And so there was certainly an existential personal question for me of just, What else can I do? How else can I express myself and engage



with this literature? And then there's other questions of Is this like the only way that this literature should be dealt with?

I knew that I loved stories and that I wanted to engage with stories, but as a scholar you're not supposed to be the storyteller. So the only time we're allowed to be storytellers is in the classroom. That's when it's allowed, and so we can all tell our stories in the classroom. But the moment the class ends, we have to get very serious in our writing.

But there's something so alive and evocative about being with the stories. And so I went through a lot of questions about whether it was time to open the door to try something new for all kinds of reasons: for my own personal transformation, for my engagement with the literature, to fall in love with the literature again.

You kind of get a distance from the literature as a scholar sometimes because you're so used to looking at it as your object that you're in charge of studying, and there's some control issues with that and all kinds of bizarre emotions that emerge. But if you let yourself become a storyteller, all of that goes away and you're supposed to fall in love again, or you can't write it. And I wanted to fall in love again. I mean, this was the literature that I loved as a graduate student that made me start this journey in the first place. And I felt as though there was a little bit of losing my way with my relationship with these stories. So there was a lot of that that was happening. There was a call to enjoy and not just be a professional all the time, to have the privilege of saying “I've had all this wonderful time as a scholar, I can do this and what a shame if I don't.”

But then there were also political reasons for why I did what I did. The world of scholarship is very narrow. We talk to ourselves, we talk to each other, and I think that a lot of the time, what we work on doesn't always move beyond our boundaries. And so there was also a desire to truly engage with the question of What do I do with this privilege of an education that I have? Is there more that I can do with what I have? So the question that I've found myself thinking about was if



I had a responsibility to do something more in all seriousness. I was wondering if there was more that I do. I have all of this access to education, to literature. I've been thinking about this material for so long. Do I have a responsibility to do more with what I have? And so to reach outwards, which is a scary thing to do, because as a scholar, you get used to your small little network that becomes safe: I know how to do this, but maybe I should do a bit more. And all of those things were at play for me when I thought, “Let me try to do this.”

**James Shaheen:** Well, it's pretty amazing. It's a wonderful read. It really is. I so enjoyed having some of the women from the *Therigatha* or from the canon fleshed out and made real to me in ways that I really hadn't thought about. And it's amazing how similar some situations are today to how they were then. But I have one last question for you, Vanessa, if you don't mind. The story is replete with jewels, prophetic dreams, tree goddesses, and the supernatural, not to mention the Buddha's extraordinary perfumed chamber, which I really liked. This may come as a surprise to readers who think of Buddhism as an austere or even sterile tradition. So can you say more about the role of what you call the fabulous in the Buddhist world?

**Vanessa Sasson:** Yes. I love this question, and I'm so glad you asked it. I think we have appropriated or we have engaged with Buddhism in the West a little bit like what I was saying with scholarship, that we've put philosophy and philology on these kind of pedestals, that this is what real Buddhism is about, and that the renunciation is that binary renunciation and this almost like an extremely ascetic understanding of Buddhism. And it makes us almost feel bad all the time: all the things you have to let go of and all the ways you have to release yourself. And when I look at Buddhist literature, I don't see that. What I see is gods playing in the sky and dropping giant flowers from the heavens and conch shells blaring and jewels.

I mean, just one of the most amazing descriptions, if you ever get a chance to look at some of the literature about the Mahabodhi tree. This is the tree that the Buddha achieves awakening under, and there are so many stories of him walking slowly toward this tree, and the path is lighting up





like charms scintillating all around him. It's like you can imagine each step the world gets brighter as he walks towards this tree. This is in our earliest literature. And then the tree itself is exploding with jewels and beauty and treasures, and the gods are all floating above the tree singing with excitement, “He's coming. The moment is about to happen. He's about to become the Buddha.” And so you have this joy, this celestial joy and excitement. The whole universe is excited that he's going to become the Buddha.

And the literature is filled with this kind of imagery, and it's beautiful, and it's enthusiastic, and it's joyful. It's not dark. It's not austere and individualistic. Everything is communal in Buddhist literature. He's never alone wherever he goes. When he achieves awakening, all the gods are like watching in anticipation. The spirits and all kinds of things are waiting with bated breath. When's it going to happen? I mean, it's just these wonderful images of Buddhism that are festive and beautiful and shiny and fabulous. And I don't know how we allowed ourselves to skip past all those descriptions. It's like we read past them over and over again and yet they're on every page of every Buddhist text. There's this extraordinary abundance in a tradition that is actually speaking about renunciation. And that's again going back to that sophistication that I was saying I see in the stories of this capacity to hold renunciation and beautiful cosmic celestial abundance at the same time.

And what better way to understand that than to have a visual, to see this tree and to see everyone excited about him achieving awakening? It's not a dark, austere, difficult tradition in much of the literature. There are obviously exceptions to every rule, but I think we need to spend a little bit more time enjoying the beauty of these Buddhist stories and these Buddhist texts. And I don't know why we don't.

I mean, I remember coming across Yasodhara's story more seriously and realizing that it's so romantic. Why does no one talk about the Buddha's relationship with Yasodhara as a deeply romantic tragedy? They were married for lifetimes, and then he leaves her in his last life. I mean,

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it's made for an opera. And somehow we've bypassed it and just turned it into something really quite serious. And I understand why we've done that on some fronts, but I think we have robbed ourselves of some of the beauty that the tradition has to offer. And I tried to tap into a little bit of that in the book, and I feel like I didn't even come close to what most of the texts do. So I just kind of popped in a little bit of it, but I hope some of that comes through, because that's important to me.

**James Shaheen:** Well, it definitely does. Vanessa, thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Gathering*, available now. Thanks again, Vanessa.

**Vanessa Sasson:** Thank you so much.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Vanessa Sasson. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow Tricycle Talks wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!