

Why Some Marriages Fail

The stories of Isi,dāsī, and of Uttarā and Sirimā

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I

ISI,DĀSĪ

(ThīA 260-271)

1 Failed marriages

Isi,dāsī (Skt R̥ṣi,dāsī) was the beautiful daughter of a good and wealthy merchant of Ujjenī (Skt Ujjayinī), the capital of Avantī (modern-day Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh). She was given in marriage to the son of a merchant of Sāketa in Kosala (modern-day Sujankot on the Sail river, Unao district, Uttar Pradesh). For a month, she served him lovingly and conscientiously.

By myself I cooked the rice,
By myself I washed the dishes.
As a mother looks after her only son,
So did I serve my husband.

I showed him devotion unsurpassed,
I served him with a humble mind,
I rose early, diligent, virtuous was I—
And yet my husband hated me. (Thī 412 f)

When Isidāsī related her predicament to her parents-in-law, they praised her virtues and asked their bewildered son what was wrong. He could not give a good answer and replied that he simply could not stand the sight of her, even though she was an ideal wife, having done nothing wrong.

I have done nothing wrong,
I have done him no harm,
I have not spoken rudely to him.
What have I done that my husband hates me? (Thī 418)

He simply tired of her for no apparent reason at all. In the end when her husband could not be brought to love her, they had no choice but to send Isidāsī back to her parents' house. Returning to her house as a rejected wife, everyone (except the husband) was devastated:

Rejected, overcome by suffering,
They led me back to my father's house.
“While appeasing our son,” they exclaimed,
“We have lost the beautiful goddess of fortune!” (Thī 419)

She was back in her father's protection, and he looked for a new husband for her, this time even asking for only half the usual dowry. When she finally found a new husband, again she served him with love and diligence but the same pattern repeated itself. Now both she and her father were totally at a loss.

Shortly thereafter, an ascetic visited them in quest of alms. It occurred to Isidāsī's father to offer her to this ascetic. When the ascetic was offered the hand of the beautiful Isidāsī and the comfort of her mansion, he readily accepted. But after only two weeks, he begged the father to return his robe and bowl. The ascetic would rather starve as the poorest of beggars than spend one more day in Isidāsī's company.

Despite the pleas and offers from the family, the ascetic said that he simply could not live in the same house as Isidāsī, and with those words he left. (Thī 422-425)

2 Recalling her past lives

Isidāsī was now miserable and on the verge of suicide rather than continue to bear such suffering. Now on that same day, the nun **Jina,dattā** came to her house for alms. Seeing the nun's peaceful countenance, Isidāsī decided that she should be a nun herself. At first, her father refused to release her, but relented in the end after considering her pleas, exhorting her to gain awakening (Thī 432).

After seven days of spiritual striving, she gained the three knowledges (*te,vijjā*) (of the recollection of her past lives, of other's karma, and of the destruction of defilements). Looking into her past, she realized that eight lives ago, she was a man: *a handsome and rich goldsmith*, who intoxicated with his youth, seduced the wives of others, treating them as objects to be won, used and discarded.

For his evil deeds, the goldsmith was reborn in **a hell** where he was cut on all sides by razor-sharp blades as he ran towards the form of a beautiful woman before him. After that, he was reborn as **a monkey**. When he was only seven days old, the troop leader castrated him. After dying, he was reborn as **a sheep**, the offspring of a one-eyed ewe, and was made a gelding, unable to satisfy his sexual urges. His third animal birth was as **an ox**, castrated and forced to pull the plough and cart with hardly any rest (Thī 440 f), which was especially painful for him because he had always avoided hard work when he was a goldsmith. In fact, as an ox, he had to work so hard that he lost his eyesight.

After three more births as animals, he was reborn as a human being, as **a hermaphrodite**, with the sex organs of both male and female—because he was obsessed with them! After 30 unhappy years he died and was reborn as the object of his desire: **a woman**. This is how desire turns a man into the object of his own desire.¹ The newborn girl was born into the lowest caste, the daughter of a very poor carter who failed in everything he did and ended up owing money to a lot of people.

In order to discharge his debts, the poor carter had no choice but to give his sixteen-year-old daughter away as a slave to his creditor, a wealthy merchant. In due course, the merchant's son, **Giri,dāsa**, fell in love with her and took her as a minor wife. The first wife suffered as a result of this new intrusion. The slave girl secured her newly won position by sowing discord between Giridāsa and his first wife so that they broke up in the end. (Thī 443-446)

After her death this time, she was reborn as **Isidāsī**, whom, despite her love and industry, three successive husbands could not love. Since she did not react with anger or aggression, but endeavoured at all times to be a model wife, she cultivated a store of merit for herself. Finally, Isidāsī cleared the mystery of her strange fate, and was finally free.

This was the fruit of that past deed,
That although I served them like a slave,
They rejected me and went their way:
Of that, too, I had made an end. (Thī 447)

3 Evaluation

Mrs CAF Rhys Davids is of the opinion that **the Isi,dāsī Therī,gāthā** (the above story) has a late style and suggests late literary creation. The scene is Pāṭalīputta, and not any of the usual towns mentioned in the Canon. According to her, the name of Isidāsī's sponsoring nun—Jinadattā—suggests traces of Jain influence here. (Thī:R xxii f)

The Isi,dāsī story could easily be misread to affirm that it is our bad karma to be born as a woman or a hermaphrodite. The story however confirms that our habitual thought and actions will follow us in one

¹ Nyanaponika & Hecker 1997:315. It should be noted here that, although the story seems to stress on Isi,dāsī's past karma, her sufferings are not all due to her past karma, but her present conditions of each birth are important factors, too, esp her last birth, when she meets the nun Jina,dattā, and becomes an arhat in due course. On the point that not everything that happens to us are due to past karma, see eg **Titth'āyatana S** (A 3.61/1:173-177) = SD 6.8.

form or another. As we think, so we act; as we thus act, so we reap the fruits. The point is very clear: we should take care what we desire for because ultimately we become what we desire, virtually or really.

II

SIRIMĀ & UTTARĀ

(DhA 17.3/3:308-313)

4 Uttarā

Sirimā (Skt Śirimā) was a courtesan of Rājagaha (Skt Rājagṛha), daughter of Sāla, vaṭī (Skt Śālavatī) and younger sister to Jīvaka the doctor. Her story is closely intertwined with that of **Uttarā Nanda, mātā**, the foremost of lay-women disciples who waited on the Buddha (B 36.20). Uttarā was married into a non-Buddhist family so that her husband, Sumana, forbade her from observing the fast (*uposatha*).

Knowing her husband well enough, Uttarā then came up with an idea. She hired the services of the courtesan Sirimā at the cost of 15,000 pieces of money (*kaḥāpaṇa*, Skt *kārṣāpaṇa*)² to look after her husband for a fortnight. When her husband saw the beauty of Sirimā, he immediately agreed to the arrangement.

On the last day of the fast, Uttarā was busy preparing alms for the Buddha. Her husband, who was walking nearby with Sirimā, saw Uttarā hard at work, smiled thinking what a fool she was not to enjoy her wealth. Uttarā smiled in return, thinking how foolish he was for not making proper use of his wealth. Sirimā, thinking that both husband and wife were smiling at each other to slight her, flew into a fury.

Seizing a pot of boiling oil, Sirimā threw it at Uttarā's head. Uttarā, at that moment, was full of lovingkindness for Sirimā. The oil, therefore, did not hurt her at all. Sirimā, realizing her grievous error, begged for forgiveness from Uttarā.

Uttarā then said: "My father is still living. If he forgives you, so will I."

"I shall go to your father, the rich guildmaster, and ask him for forgiveness."

"Puṇṇa (Skt Purṇa) is the father who brought me into the round of suffering. If the father bringing me out of the round forgives you, then so will I."

"But who is this father who is bringing you out of the round of suffering?"

"The Buddha, the Perfect Self-awakened One."

"But I don't know him. What shall I do?"

"The Teacher will be coming here tomorrow, together with his monks. Come yourself, bringing whatever offering you can, and ask his forgiveness."

The following day, after the meal-offering was over, Sirimā went up to the Buddha and begged for forgiveness. "What for?" asked the Buddha. Sirimā then related the whole story. The Buddha then asked Uttarā to confirm the story.

Uttarā said: "I suffused her with lovingkindness, and thought to myself: My friend Sirimā has done me a great service..."

"Excellent, Uttarā, excellent!" said the Buddha, "That is the right way to overcome anger." And he added this verse:

Overcome anger with non-anger,
Conquer evil with goodness,
Conquer the miserly with generosity,
And the liar with truth.

(Dh 223)

Then the Buddha delivered a discourse, at the end of which Uttarā won the fruit of non-return. Her erstwhile unbelieving husband and parents-in-law all became streamwinners, as did Sirimā.

² On the *kaḥāpaṇa/kārṣāpaṇa*, see **Money and Monastics** = SD 4.19 Intro (1).

5 Sirimā's body

Ever since the eye of truth (here meaning streamwinning) arose in her, Sirimā gave up her life as a courtesan and devoted herself to looking after the order. Through meal-tickets, she invited the Order to send eight monks daily to her house for a meal-offering. One day, one of the eight monks returned to his monastery and when asked about the meal, he replied that the food was indescribably good, but Sirimā's looks was even better.

As the monk described Sirimā's beauty, another monk, who was listening simply fell in love with her without even having seen her. It so happened that on the following day, Sirimā fell sick and could not serve the monks, including the lovesick monk. So, her servant served the monks. At the end of the meal, Sirima made an effort to get out to pay her respects to the monks. Even without her adornments and simply dressed, the lovesick monk thought that Sirimā looked extremely beautiful. "Imagine how beautiful she would look when she is well and wears her jewelry!" he thought.

That same evening, Sirimā died. Rajah Bimbisāra relayed the news to the Buddha, who then instructed that the body should not be cremated but left in the charnel ground and guarded against carrion crows and other animals. After three days, Sirimā's corpse was swollen and festering with worms, so that it looked like a pot of rice over a hot fire, bubbling over on the surface.

Bimbisāra then decreed, under pain of a fine of eight gold coins, that all adult residents of Rājagaha should file past the body, to see Sirimā in her present condition. As for the lovesick monk who had not eaten for four days, the food in his bowl, too, was by then crawling with maggots. His friends then told him that the Buddha was going to see Sirimā. At the word "Sirimā," the monk was galvanized. He emptied his bowl and rinsed it, and then joined the others to see Sirimā.

When the crowd had gathered, the Buddha instructed rajah Bimbisāra, "Let it be proclaimed with the beating of drums what whoever pays the sum of 1000 coins may have Sirima." But no man wanted her now, so the price was lowered; but no man wanted here even for free. Then the Buddha spoke to the monks:

Here, monks, you see a woman who was loved by the world. In this same city, in the past, men would gladly pay a thousand gold coins to enjoy her for just one night. Now, however, no one will have her, even for nothing. This is what the body comes to, perishable and fragile, made attractive only through ornaments, a heap of wounds with nine openings, held together with three hundred bones, a continuing burden. Only fools attach fancies and illusion to such an impermanent thing.

See this painted puppet,
A mass of wounds,
Diseased: an object of desires,
It has nothing stable or lasting. (Dh 147)

After the Buddha's discourse, the lovesick monk was cured and became a streamwinner.³ After the contemplation of the body, he developed insight and became an arhat.

As for Sirimā, she had been reborn in the heavens. Seeing the Buddha, the monks and the crowd around her corpse, she descended to earth in a glorious blaze accompanied by 500 celestial maidens in 500 chariots. Then she dismounted and saluted the Buddha. The venerable Vaṅgisa, the foremost poet in the order, asked from where she had come and what meritorious deeds she had done to obtain such glory, and Sirimā told her story (Vv no. 16 = 137-149).

6 The Vijaya Sutta

On this special occasion, the Buddha delivered the Vijaya Sutta, also known as **the Kāya, vicchan-danika Sutta** (The Discourse for Disillusionment Towards the Body, Sn 1.11):

³ DhA 3:104 f; VvA 74 ff.

- 193 When walking or standing still,
sitting or lying down,
one bends, one stretches—
this is the movement of the body.
- 194 Joined together with bones and sinews,
laid over with skin and flesh,
covered by the outer skin—
one does not see it as it really is.
- 195 Full of gut, filled with the belly,
the lobe of the liver, the bladder,
the heart, the lungs,
the kidneys and the spleen.
- 196 Nasal mucus, saliva,
sweat and lymph,
blood, fluid of the joints.
bile and fat.
- 197 And from the nine openings,
impurities ever flow:
eye secretion from the eyes;
wax from the ears,
- 198 And mucus from the nose;
through the mouth ever pukes
bile and phlegm;
from the body, sweat and dirt;
- 199 And the hollow of its head
is filled with the brain.
“It’s beautiful!” so thinks
the fool, led by ignorance.
- 200 But when it lies dead,
bloated and blue-black,
cast away in the cemetery,
relatives care not for it.
- 201 Dogs devour it, and
jackals, wolves and worms,
crows and vultures, too, devour it,
and what other living beings there be.
- 202 Having heard the Buddha Word,
the monk has insight here—
indeed, he thoroughly knows it.
For, he sees (the body) as it really is.
- 203 “As this [body] is, so was that;
as that [body] is, so will this be.”
(Knowing this,) let one discard desire for the body,
both within and without.

- 204 Having discarded desire and passion,
the monk who has insight here
reaches the deathless, the peace,
the eternal state of nirvana.
- 205 This two-legged (body) is impure,
foul-smelling, that we attend to:
full of various dead things,
trickling from here and there.
- 206 Whoever, such a body
would think to exalt
or should despise another—
what else is this but lack of insight. (Sn 193-206)

At the end of the discourse, the nun Janapada, kalyāṇī Nandā became an arhat, and Sirimā a non-returner.
(SnA 1:244 f, 253 f)

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