

Rahula, the Lucky: Original Monologue from the Point of View of the Buddha's Son

by Alessandro D. F. Gagliardi

For a recording of the monologue (not including the reading) delivered on April 8, 2018, (the Buddha's Birthday) at the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, [click here](#).

Reading

Buddha-carita, or Life of Buddha - Book V [Flight]: 26-38, 83-84

Then the prince, having a longing aroused for something imperishable, went into his palace. He went towards the king; prostrating himself, he said, 'O king, – I wish to become a wandering mendicant to seek liberation.'

Having heard his words, the king shook like a tree struck by an elephant; in a voice choked with tears, he said: 'Refrain, dear one, from this. It is not yet time for you to give yourself up to *dharma*. They say the practice of *dharma* is full of dangers in the first period of life when the mind is still fickle. It is high time for me to practice *dharma*, leaving my royal glory to you who are well worthy to be distinguished by it; but your *dharma*, is to be accomplished by heroism. It would be irreligion if you were to leave your own father. Therefore, give up this resolve. Devote yourself for the present to the duties of a householder.'

Having heard these words, he made his reply: 'I will refrain, O king, if you can assure me against four contingencies: My life is not to be subject to death. Disease is not to injure my health. Old age is not to impair my youth. Disaster is not to take away this my worldly fortune.'

The king of the Śākya replied: 'Abandon this idea bent upon departure; extravagant desires are only ridiculous.'

Then he addressed his father: ‘I will not be stopped; it is not right to hold back one who wishes to escape from a house that is on fire.’

Firm in his resolve and leaving behind without hesitation his father who was devoted to him, his young son, his affectionate people and his unequalled magnificence, he then went forth out of his father’s city. Then, looking back on the city, he roared, ‘Till I have seen the further shore of birth and death I will never again enter the city called after Kapila.’

Monologue

(N.B. This monologue was delivered extemporaneously.

What follows is one version, and is not the same as what is in the recording.)

My father... my father.... my teacher... my master... my father... why did you leave me? Why did you abandon us? Your son, your only son, your wife, your family, your country. The whole Shakya nation counted on you, depended on you. But you left. To seek enlightenment, they say. It was your destiny, they say. But why really? Because you were afraid. You were afraid of death. And you were afraid of life. You had seen death for the first time; suffering, sickness, for the first time. But also life. I was just born. And what is it you said when you heard of my birth? “A *rahu* is born, a fetter is born,” and so they called me Rahula, fetter. That’s what I was to you. You had already made up your mind to leave by the time your wife gave birth. You went to the king and he told you, “now is not the time, you have a family to attend to.” But you left anyway. They say that you came to look in on us one last time before you left. They say we were fast asleep, my mother’s arm was covering my face. I wonder if that made it easier or harder for you to leave. And leave you did. And you may never have come back. You left hoping to overcome death. And then you almost died! You were the most extreme *sadhu*, the most extreme ascetic, starving yourself, torturing your body. You nearly starved yourself to death,

would have, if not for that young boy who gave you some goat's milk. I imagine he wasn't much older than me at the time. You almost died. What if you had died? What if you had never come back? But you did come back. I wonder if you thought of me then. I wonder if you thought of me as you lay dying. Perhaps you thought it was me who was bringing you that milk? No, I think not. I think you had forgotten all about me at that point. Did you think of me when you were sitting under that old fig tree? Did Mara try to tempt you with memories of me and your wife? No, I doubt that too. I think you had forgotten that we'd even existed. When you walked into town, when you came back, you made no effort to seek us out. It was only because my mother recognized you, she told me to go up to you, to demand my inheritance. She said you possessed "four great mines of wealth." I imagine she thought those were mines of silver, gold, gems, that sort of thing; the kind of wealth our family was used to. So, I walked up to you—age seven—and demanded my inheritance. Of course, you had no worldly wealth. Your wealth was your teachings. So, you offered me the only inheritance you knew. You said: "Śāriputra, ordain him." Śāriputra. You couldn't even do it yourself. Nothing against Śāriputra. He is a great monk. But he wasn't you. You couldn't even ordain your own son. Did it even occur to you that it might not be right to expect a seven-year-old to take vows? Of course not. You were so high off your new-found enlightenment, you wanted to share it with whoever would listen. It wasn't until the king demanded that you not ordain a child without the consent of his guardians that you realized anything was wrong. But by then it was done. Grandfather had lost you, and now he had lost me too, and his daughter-in-law shortly after. I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like if you had never come back. Would my mother have ever told me the truth? That my father had gone into the woods to conquer death, never to return? At some point, I'm sure I would have had to have figured out that my grandfather was not my father. I wonder what kind of ruler I

would have made. Not a good one, I don't think. How could I be? Just like he did with you, he tried to prevent me from ever seeing death or disease. Of course, once I was your student, that was one of the first things you showed me. You took me to the charnel grounds, pointed to the burning bodies, and told me that I would be like that one day. What a strange education for a child. It wasn't cruel. In fact, I think maybe I accepted it better than many of your other students. They say I've learned quickly. Perhaps because you've spent so much time with me. They call me "Rahula, the lucky," because you spend so much time with me. Perhaps you feel guilty for the time we lost. But always as a teacher. Only as a teacher. Never as a father. Grandfather was like a father to me. Overprotective, perhaps. Spoiling me, certainly. Just like you, I was brought up with no notion of suffering or want. I wonder what will become of him. They say he has become quite ill. I wonder how you feel about that. It's hard to tell by looking at you. Nothing seems to phase you. I hear some people call you a stone buddha. Not like cousin Ananda. You chastise him for feeling too much. I see that. Do you even care that your father is dying? I don't know. I wonder about returning to him, taking my place as heir to the Shakya throne. If not me, then who? He has no other heirs. I think the kingdom cannot last long after he dies. I wonder if I would make a good king now? In truth, I don't want that anymore. There was a time, after I took my vows and joined you, I missed the pleasures of the castle. But you taught me the true nature of such things. You taught me to overcome all kinds of desires, even as they first arose within me. There was just one thing you couldn't teach me how to overcome: my desire for my own father. So, there you are: *my* fetter. My fetter and my liberator, both. It's the one weapon Mara still has on me. He's shown me the future. He's tried to tempt me with the pleasures of the castle should I leave you and return to that life. He's shown me that I will never be a great monk, not like Śāriputra or Ananda, that I will die before you, that I will not even get to be *your* heir, that

hardly anyone will even remember me. But that's alright. In spite of my dual fortune of being both a prince and the son of the enlightened one, I am no different than any of your other students.