

Book Review

Storied Companions: Cancer, Trauma, and Discovering Guides for Living in Buddhist Narratives

By Karen Derris. Wisdom Publications, 2021. ISBN 9781614295754, paperback, 216 pages, \$18.95; ISBN 9781614295990, ebook, \$12.99.

Reviewed by Vanessa R. Sasson
Marianopolis College, Quebec

Karen Derris was diagnosed with brain cancer long before I met her. She had what she calls “a lazy tumor” in her brain occupying a small shelf in the back of her mind. But in 2014, Derris learned that her tumor had become active, and her experience with suffering, with mortality, and with impermanence, took center stage. Her tumor was no longer living on a shelf somewhere far away. It had taken its seat, front and center. Impermanence, as she says, was no longer something she considered from afar. It was now “crashing right into” her (4).

Storied Companions could have been a memoir about living with cancer, about the different layers of suffering Derris has been forced to face over the years, and the Buddhist teachings that have inspired her. And in some ways, it is in fact that. It is a love letter to her family and her friends about her experience.

But *Storied Companions* is also a study of Buddhist stories. As a scholar, Derris enters into the stories she has been studying all her academic life, using them as a venue for thinking through the moment she is faced with now, as her cancer progresses and her mortality looms. Derris reads Buddhist stories with the experience of a dying body, and she invites us to join along her journey. Each chapter is a reflection on a particular theme, combined with Buddhist stories she relates to that theme, to help her explore it.

One of the most impactful readings she provides emerges from her opening chapter, “Reading Anew,” where she challenges us to think of how we might read Buddhist stories differently. Her focus here is the story of the Bodhisatta’s Four Sights. As someone who specializes in the Buddha’s hagiography, I have engaged this narrative—in its many incarnations—repeatedly throughout my academic career. I thought I had seen it from every vantage point, and yet Derris provided me with something so surprising, I had to take a step back, close the book, and really think about what she was telling me from the page.

When I read the story of the Four Sights, I focus on the Bodhisatta's experience of seeing. That is, after all, the point of the narrative. The future Buddha sees Old Age, Illness, and Death, and his perspective is profoundly altered as a result. He can no longer sustain the illusions he was until then holding onto. And yet, when Derris looks at this story, her attention turns away from the Bodhisatta's perspective and toward these embodiments. She sees Old Age, Illness, and Death as people, whereas I only saw them as props. She sees characters standing on the side of the road who are suffering, and she wonders about them, about who they are and what their experience of suffering might have been like.

Even more so, she sees herself in these embodiments of suffering. She imagines herself as Ill Body and she imagines King Suddhodana trying to usher her out of the way, to ensure the prince does not encounter illness in his journey. But the Ill Body must be made visible in the narrative. Without it, the story would simply not make sense. Derris sees an "existential tug of war" (13) here. Suddhodana can try as much as he wants to remove Old Age, Illness, and Death from the Bodhisatta's line of vision, but they will not be eliminated. *She* will not be eliminated. She sees herself in the story, which is what good stories expect us to do.

Derris also pays attention to passages that I have never stopped to think about before. For example, she pulls a passage from the *Mahāvastu* that I have read many times, but that I never considered quite as she does. It has to do with a monk suffering from dysentery who soils himself, and has been abandoned with no one to take care of him. The Buddha learns of the situation and, together with Ananda, they themselves care for the monk. The Buddha washes the soiled monk with his own hands, and provides him with a teaching at the same time. Derris sees in this story a scene—one that is painfully familiar today—of sick bodies that are left abandoned in heartless hospital hallways. She wonders whether she, too, will one day meet such a fate: "what if my illness becomes so disgusting or I become such a burden that I will no longer receive care?" (103) she asks.

I must admit that I never asked myself such questions. Previously, when I read this passage in the *Mahāvastu*, my focus was on the Buddha, not on the vulnerable monk. Now Derris has me turning the story around, considering other characters and their experiences, making me sensitive to realities that I think I have largely avoided or just looked past.

As I read Derris's interpretations I am reminded that, for an academic discipline to thrive, we need every reader to participate. I have benefited from a healthy body all my life. I have never known the kind of physical vulnerability that my friend, Karen Derris, is facing. I have therefore been reading these texts from a position of unusual bodily privilege. I look past sick bodies, scenes of soiled bedsheets, teachings that dig too deep into the fact of impermanence, and, instead, focus on the heroic adventures of the Buddha. But Derris urges me to *look* at the soiled bedsheets. She tells me that the Four Sights are real beings, not just props to help move a heroic narrative along. She teaches me that there are other interpretations to seek, if only I take the time to see.

Wrestling with mortality is a complicated journey. The more we prepare ourselves for the end of our story, the more we are inclined to reflect on how it all began. Derris therefore

shares not only some of her reflections on death, but also takes us through some of her childhood experiences, many of which include devastating moments of physical abuse. To be honest, some of the stories she shares were very painful for me to read—particularly as someone who cares about Derris. I considered bypassing that material for this review, but then I came across one of Derris' own observations and I forced myself to forge ahead. She reminds us that people will talk about anything other than the hard stuff, usually because we don't want to risk hurting the person further. But this just leads to more isolation: "People with sickness are abandoned routinely in all sorts of ways" (106).

Derris describes some of her early experiences with her mother's violence and turns to the story of Aṅgulimāla for symmetry. Once again, however, she does not look at the Buddha's magical powers, but looks directly at Aṅgulimāla the serial killer. She focuses on the one who is doing the hurting, and not the hero who makes everything better. She sees her mother in Aṅgulimāla, and she sees herself, and she wonders when she might put down her own anger and "stop," as Angulimala once learned to do. She also incorporates the story of Kisa Gotamī, who carried her dead baby in her arms. Derris sees herself in these challenging characters. She looks deeply at the experiences and likely perspectives of the characters that most of us look past so that we might marvel at the Buddha's skill. Derris has turned the stories around, showing us how to see them from a different angle.

But what Derris offers in this book goes beyond the interpretations she provides. Derris also models something that I hope to emulate. I have known Karen Derris for many years as a colleague and as a friend. I have watched her reality unfurl from a distance, seeing her mostly at academic conferences, and more recently, in Zoom gatherings with friends. And what has inspired me over the years, and what inspires me in the pages of this book, is that even with a terminal illness burrowing into her brain, the effects of which get harder to manage with every passing year, what Derris wants most is to keep evolving. She wants to feel inspired. She wants to love her family, and she wants to understand even more about life than she understands now. Derris is an exemplar; a scholar in the finest sense of the term. Her quest for knowledge—real knowledge—continues regardless of her circumstances. "Stay inspired, I tell myself now," is what she writes. "Sometimes, I find [staying inspired] impossible and the best I can do is repeat that to myself" (116). But on better days, she knows that this life is not limited to suffering. There is much beauty to behold, too.

Scholarship in Buddhist studies, for much of its short history, has been limited to a particularly conservative methodology. While other disciplines have allowed themselves to push against their own boundaries, Buddhist studies has kept its parameters largely intact. But more recently, scholars have begun to let themselves test the limits of the field. Scholar practitioners, for example, are more open about the lens they use to read the tradition. Others are trying to engage a wider audience through public scholarship, and still others are attempting creative avenues. Buddhist studies is changing.

A few years ago, *Storied Companions* might not have been included in the roster of new books in Buddhist studies. It would have been tagged as a memoir, which means most of us

would have missed it. But if we let ourselves think beyond traditional methodologies, what we are bound to realize is that this book is the product of a lifetime of scholarship. Derris' book belongs to our field. It also belongs in bookstores, and it belongs in dharma centers. It is a book that challenges categories, and that is what good books are supposed to do.