

Vanessa Sasson Backgrounder

Vanessa Sasson doesn't let academic life or cultural ideologies define her. How could she when most of her life she's been caught between worlds? Born and raised in Montreal in an Egyptian and Jewish household, Vanessa's Arabic-Jewish upbringing often left her feeling like an outsider. During the week she went to a Jewish school and hung out with her Jewish friends, but on the weekends, she lived her Egyptian heritage, wrapped up in its nostalgia and rosewater scented desserts. Today, she is a Professor of Religious Studies at Marianopolis College, a position she's held since 1999, a Buddhist scholar, author of four published academic works, numerous articles, and the novel, *Yasodhara and the Buddha*. She's also a fierce boxer, holds a black belt in martial arts, and won't hesitate to tell you she loves to fight.

The road to academia and a scholarly life wasn't a straightforward path for Vanessa. It took quite a while for her to find her calling. While many scholars have an interest in learning from an early age, that wasn't Vanessa's experience. She sailed through her higher education years disengaged from the learning process and unmotivated to study, doing just enough to get by in school. In college, she skipped classes and only showed up to take exams, hoping her independent study and knowledge were enough to earn her a passing grade. It wasn't until she was in her twenties that she had the opportunity to spread her wings and discover a passion for religion that would change the course of her education.

In the mid-90s, Vanessa received a job offer in Japan. A job that would have pleased her family who wasn't shy about telling her she should go into business, but the job held no excitement for Vanessa. On her way to Japan, she stopped in Nepal to see the Himalayas and never showed up for the job waiting for her in Japan. For months, she continued to renew her visa, staying in Nepali villages, excited by all the new experiences that engaged her spirituality. The sights, sounds, colors, and magic of the Nepalese communities spoke to her. She became fascinated by religion being alive and having movement and meaning. She'd never known religion could be so vibrant. If it had been up to Vanessa, she would have probably stayed in Nepal forever teaching English and speaking broken, peasant Nepalese. After renewing her visa every three months, and even leaving Nepal temporarily to travel to India so she could reenter on a new visa when her other renewal options had run out, the country she'd grown to love so much told her it was time to leave. With no other choice, she left and traveled back home to Montreal where she enrolled in McGill University and went on to earn her Ph.D. in Religious Studies.

As a Buddhist scholar, Vanessa tried settling into her role as a professor of Religious Studies at Marianopolis College, but she felt unbalanced. She had settled into her intellect yet couldn't settle into her body. Stagnant energy built up and she found an interesting outlet to release it. A coach at a boxing gym she worked at had suggested she try boxing. Then, living the Buddhist lifestyle of non-violence, boxing seemed like an odd choice for releasing energy. But the coach urged her to give it a try, which led her down a new road toward sparing. It's odd to hear a religious scholar say she loves to fight, but Vanessa isn't shy about embracing her passions even when it goes against cultural and religious norms.

Vanessa's desire to speak her truth and embrace the imperfect human experience doesn't begin and end in a boxing ring or at a martial arts event. It has bled over into her academic life and has inspired her newest novel, *Yasodhara and the Buddha*, a work of creative fiction. Always pushing past boundaries, Vanessa's novel is an alternate telling of the classical story of the Buddha. In writing *Yasodhara and the Buddha*, she's climbed over the fence and has brought to life a part of the story that many scholars and Western practitioners have overlooked. Vanessa's imaginative retelling focuses on the sad and romantic story of Yasodhara's who lost everything when her husband began his existential quest to understand suffering. While the Buddha's story is about gaining, Yasodhara's story is about loss. Vanessa chose to tell Yasodhara's story because she wants people to engage with Buddhism in a complete way, not a sanitized, elitist understanding of the religion, but for scholars to feel and empathize with the human side of Buddhism.

Ask Vanessa Sasson what she hopes to achieve with her writing and teaching and the answer is surprising. After living her life constantly straddling both sides of the fence, she has come to terms with her conflicting religious identities and wants others to do the same. Through her teachings and creative works, she wants people to engage with the messiness of Buddhism and embrace the flawed and imperfect experience of being human.

Boiler Plate Info (taken from her website)

Vanessa Sasson is a professor of Religious Studies at Marianopolis College. She is a Research Fellow at the University of the Free State in South Africa and a Research Member of CERIAS at UQAM. Sasson is the author and editor of several academic books, most notably a collection entitled *Little Buddhas: Children and Childhood in Buddhist Texts and Traditions* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Her most recent academic book, scheduled to appear in the Fall of 2021, is an edited volume entitled *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary* (University of Hawaii Press).