

Pamela Weiss
Awakening the Fierce Feminine
Week 4: “Yasodhara’s Journey”
November 28, 2020



Hi everybody, welcome back for the fourth and final week of our series, *Awakening the Fierce Feminine*. Over the past few weeks, we've taken a look at different aspects of the story of the Buddha and some of the women in his life: his aunt Mahapajapati and the archetypal or mythic figure of Prajnaparamita, the mother of all Buddhas. I've told these stories looking to see what happens as we begin to pull these threads and weave them back into the fabric of the teaching how it can provide us with a fuller and more whole understanding of our practice.

So this fourth week, we're going to be taking a look at the story of Yasodhara, who was the Buddha's wife. For me, Yasodhara's story is one of the most difficult parts of the Buddhist teachings and canon to make peace with because the simple story is that the Buddha abandoned his wife and young son soon after his son was born to go off on his quest. Sometimes the Buddha himself and his later monks were described as the ones who went forth, who left their homes to go out and seek their spiritual life. This raises the question of what happens to those who are left behind. There's a beautiful description of Yasodhara as “the one who stays” or “she who stays.” I think that her story can help us begin to illuminate what it might look like to have a fully integrated practice in the midst of our daily lives.

Little is known about Yasodhara. It is said that she was the daughter of a neighboring clansman. Maybe she and Siddhartha, the young prince, really fell in love; maybe it was more of an arranged marriage. We don't know many of those details. What we do know is that she gave birth to a son named Rahula. And we also know that she basically doesn't show up, at all, just about in the Buddhist teachings. In fact, in some places she's not even referred to by her own name, Yasodhara, she's only referred to as the mother of Rahula. So she's a figure that really has been very much written out. She kind of flits in the shadows, in the distance, of the heart of the story.

So what are we to make of that? Fortunately, there are some later versions of her story that I want to share with you. One version of the story—and again, this is a more mythic version, probably not historically true—but, you know, myths in history offer different kinds of truth, right? So in the mythic version, it's described that Siddhartha and Yasodhara make love the night before his departure and that she remains pregnant for eight years. While he's on his journey out there, she is carrying a journey in here. And again, it's unlikely that she actually stayed pregnant for eight years. But it's a beautiful metaphor. It's described that over the course of those eight years while Yasodhara was pregnant and the Buddha was out searching, that in the very moment of his awakening Yasodhara gives birth.

It's a beautiful way of understanding and perhaps framing what it means to awaken, that there's something fresh and new that comes forth and is born, and that that something new is deeply

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embedded in the body. So again, this is a bit of a more feminine understanding of what it might mean to awaken.

There's a second version of the story. In this version, when Siddhartha goes off into the world Yasodhara stays and she takes up her own practice, at home, caring for her child, tending the hearth, taking care of the garden, making food. And her practice is of equal value to Siddhartha's practice of extremists asceticism, and striving and awakening. And so it's an offering really of a very different quality of the path.

For me, Yasodhara's teachings feel like the lost teachings. These are the teachings that didn't get written down. These are the teachings that perhaps, like the early teachings of the Buddha, were passed on in an oral tradition, but maybe never were brought forth in the same way that teachings were recorded in the early Pali canon and beyond.

There's an example in the tradition of the teachings on emptiness that were brought forward by Nagarjuna, the important Buddhist philosopher. His name means “the king of the sea serpents,” and it's said he went down into the sea and retrieved texts, beautiful teachings on emptiness, and brought them forth into the world. And so in that same spirit, we might imagine that there are teachings that haven't yet been revealed, that perhaps this is our time to discover. How might we find teachings hidden in plain sight in the activities of our daily life? How might we find ways of awakening as we go about engaging in the apparently mundane tasks of our daily lives? What would it mean if there was an equal opportunity to awaken not just by leaving the world, but also by staying? By engaging fully with what's right in front of us?

As Buddhist teachings have traversed over many cultures and many countries, they have shapeshifted and pulled from the places that they arrive and offered fresh new flavors. And I know for myself, that there is a wish to bring in these flavors of the feminine that we have been discussing. Again, this is not just women, but for everyone who has been impacted by a patriarchal system of hierarchy and preferencing. I think it was bell hooks who said “Patriarchy has no gender.” The history of the Buddhist teachings that we have received has been limited or biased in a particular direction that has harmed all of us.

And so, as we bring this final week of teaching to a close, I want to really encourage us all to reflect over the last number of weeks and consider from the first week, what might a path of awakening look like that pulled in more these qualities of nourishment, of embodiment, of earthiness? And from the second week, how can we learn from both the deep compassion and the gritty persistence and courage of Mahapajapati?

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And from the third week, what would it look like to bring forth our understanding of darkness and mystery, not as things to be afraid of or which needs to be enlightened, but instead to understand that enlightenment itself is shining a light on the great mystery, bringing it forward so that we can continue in this ongoing path of waking up?

And finally, in this fourth week, pulling on the stories of Yasodhara, what might it look like if we were to consider this is our time to discover? What does it mean to engage fully and wholeheartedly in practice in the context of our daily lives? While of course it can be useful to go away to a monastery (as I did) or on retreat, or to have times in which we sit and settle and have quiet and peacefulness, but also whatever it is that we settle down into can also be expressed in the world, and through the world, in our daily activity. So I hope that bringing forward some of these lesser-known and often overlooked stories can help me and you and all of us enliven the teachings, bring them into a fuller balance, and a kind of greater sense of wholeness and inclusivity. In the title of my book, *A Bigger Sky*, there's an allusion to this understanding that there's so much for us to know and learn and wake up to. But no matter how much any one of us understands, it really takes all of us to see the whole sky.

And so that spirit we want to keep including more and more voices, more and more perspectives, more and more points of view, particularly those that are so often left out, in this case, voices of women; but also voices of others who have been traditionally underrepresented in our tradition and in our world. Awakening the fierce feminine is just an aspect of awakening the radical inclusivity that's needed for all of us to be whole. So I appreciate you joining for these last number of weeks And I hope that the teachings have been helpful. Thank you.