

Pamela Weiss

*Awakening the Fierce Feminine*

Week 1: “Restoring A Balance of Masculine and Feminine”

November 7, 2020



Hi, I'm Pamela Weiss. I am a Buddhist teacher in both the Soto Zen and Theravada Insight meditation traditions and the author of a recently released book called *A Bigger Sky: Awakening a Fierce Feminine Buddhism*. Over these next weeks, I will be pulling themes from my book to offer the stories, voices, and experiences of the women surrounding the life of the Buddha whose words and perspectives were often left out. My hope in doing that is to offer a framework in which we can create a more balanced path of practice and offer perspectives that may be useful for addressing some of the difficulties we're facing in our world.

You may be aware that the teachings were passed on in an oral tradition for several hundred years, which means that nothing he spoke was written down for a long time after the Buddha died. When the Buddha's teachings were eventually written down they were primarily recorded by male monastic scribes who did their own editing. They included some parts but there were lots of parts they left out.

So there's very little actually known about the Buddha as a human being, as a person. There's a lot recorded about his teachings. The human side of the person Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, is less known or understood. It's also the case that there are very few references to women in the early teachings of the canon and yet we know that the Buddha declared his intention to create what he called the fourfold sangha: the sangha of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. And so we can take by inference, in a way, the assumption that there were lots of stories and voices that weren't necessarily included in those early documents that we have as recordings of the teachings.

In this first week's session I want to look at what it might be to bring those voices back in, to balance what I feel is a very imbalanced world that we're living in now, to balance the masculine and feminine energies. A word we use to talk about that is that we are immersed in a system of patriarchy. Patriarchy just means that power, privilege, and the teachings themselves were passed down through a male lineage.

I'll open with a story that gives a personal flavor to this. For many years as a young Zen student I engaged in a beautiful practice that is done in Zen temples around the world, bowing and chanting to the names of the ancestors. In my early years of practice [at San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Monastery], every morning we would chant the names of ancestors from the Buddha through all of the ancestors in India, through China and Japan, all the way through Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who founded San Francisco Zen Center. It was a beautiful practice of paying respect, paying homage, and appreciating the hard work of the many, many people who brought us these teachings going back and back and back. I loved the practice itself. I really loved learning the stories about these ancestors.

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Some years after I left being in residence at Zen center I returned for a visit. Something surprising happened. When I went to this early morning meditation followed by the bowing and chanting, a new chant was announced, a chant announcing the names of the women ancestors. This had never happened in all the years that I had been there. I remember sitting in the cool dark morning in the meditation hall and listening to the names of the women ancestors as they were being chanted by the community, names I had never heard or known of. When the chanting ended I burst into tears.

This is how it is sometimes for us, we get so accustomed to living in a system that privileges and emphasizes certain qualities, certain capacities, and certain people, that we don't even know what we're missing until it's right in front of our face. Right? I didn't know how much I missed these women until their names were literally ringing in my ears.

The story of the Buddha, and particularly the story of the Buddha's awakening, is often described as a kind of heroic journey, one of striving, of dedication, of singular accomplishment. But if we look more closely we can begin to see that that's not really what happened at all. In the Buddha's life there were qualities of what we might call the feminine. I want to be clear here that what I mean when I'm describing masculine and feminine is not about gender. I'm talking about qualities that exist in all genders, that exist in all of us. When these energies fall out of balance within us we get sick, as is described in the system of traditional Chinese medicine. For example, we have masculine qualities of energy, activity, engagement, and moving forward. And we have more feminine qualities of stillness, quiet, and rest.

Our culture prefers hard over soft, light over dark, and speed over slowness. We're all immersed in a culture like that. So we can go into tilt and fall into illness both at an individual level and at a wider cultural level. We can see how our culture itself is on a bit of a tilt, that we are swimming in a sea of often unspoken or unnamed preferences. We may not even know how hungry we are for these other qualities, the qualities that I'm describing as the feminine.

So in the Buddha's story, he sets out on his journey and begins a very intense practice of striving and extreme asceticism. It's a kind of denial or maybe even hatred of the body. He takes himself to the brink of death, eating some stories say one sesame seed a day to keep himself alive. The stories describe how he becomes weakened, emaciated, very close to dying. As he takes himself to that edge of death, he has a question that bubbles up, and the question is something like, "Might there be another way?"

I love this question myself as a place of reflection when I find myself stuck in something that I'm trying very hard to find a way through. "Might there be another way?" This is a reflection, a



question. And as the Buddha asks himself that question he doesn't come up with a plan for how to go forward. A memory comes to him. It's a memory of a time when he was a child sitting under the shade of the rose apple tree and he spontaneously fell into a state of concentration, ease, and bliss. He realizes there is another way because of that memory. He recognizes that he doesn't have to be so harsh with his body. He sees that pleasure itself is not the enemy, that it's okay to enjoy what's happening. This memory causes him to decide to nourish himself—to take food—to change his charted course of practice.

Then he receives what is described as a bowl of rice pudding from a young farm girl named Sujata. And this is a beautiful description of the path and of his turning to find balance within himself; a balance between this striving energy and this need for rest, and for nourishment, and for receptivity as he receives this food from her. For me, this is again an example of how we too need to discover what are the things that genuinely nourish us. Where can we find sources of nourishment as we walk the path? Sometimes we might have a bowl of rice pudding, but often those sources of nourishment come from things like being in nature, or finding sources of beauty, or communion with other people. So we have this reflection, this relying on a sense of memory, and a kind of bubbling up of intuition rather than logical thinking. And we have this important piece of recognizing the need for nourishment as we walk the path.

And finally, once the Buddha's more robust, he sits down under the Bodhi tree and declares "I'm not getting up until I understand suffering and the causes of suffering." And he sits resolutely. And while he sits, he—like perhaps some of us—has some difficulty. Internal and external difficulty. He's besieged by what is described as the armies of Mara. One of the voices that Mara comes forth with is the voice of doubt. Mara comes and whispers in his ear, “Who do you think you are?” You might have felt this yourself sometimes as you've been sitting, meditating, and walking the path. The description here of the Buddha's response is beautiful. He doesn't say something like, “I'm the Buddha.” In fact, he's not the Buddha yet! He's a solo guy who has been ostracized by his friends because he took nourishment. He's no longer a prince. He's not yet the Buddha. He's in this kind of limbo. And when Mara pushes on him to say, “Who do you think you are?” he makes this beautiful gesture of reaching down and touching the earth. In some descriptions, it says “the earth shakes in acknowledgment of his intention to awaken.” And for me, this is a key piece of understanding that not only is it not a solo heroic journey, but that we need others, we need support, we need nourishment. We need these qualities of supporting ourselves, not just striving. The path itself is less about transcending up and out and more about sinking down into an earthy embodiment, finding our place, and allowing ourselves to be right where we are here on the earth.

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So I invite you to take up some questions in reflection of these stories over the next week as you move through your life. The first is to take a look where in your life and perhaps in your practice do you feel out of balance? Where are these energies of masculine and feminine—of activity and rest, of action and receptivity, of nurturance and striving, all of that—where is it that you feel those out of balance in yourself? And how might you begin to turn the corner and find a greater sense of balance?

The second question I invite you to take up is just this one: might there be another way? This is especially good when you find yourself really stuck someplace, or you just have no idea where to go from here. Don't take up the question trying to find an answer. But to ask the question in a kind of big, open, receptive, hanging out with waiting to see what might bubble up. Just ask “Might there be another way?” and see what comes, as in the story of the life of the Buddha and his awakening, this memory arose for him.

And finally, I invite you to consider for yourself, what would it mean for you to reach down and touch the earth? What might that mean, not just as an actual activity, but as a metaphor? What would it look like for you? So I hope that you will take up these questions and reflections and see how they permeate through your practice over the course of the next week. I will look forward to seeing you again soon. Thank you.