

Pamela Weiss

Awakening the Fierce Feminine

Week 2: “Mahapajapati’s Fierce Compassion”

November 14, 2020



Hi everybody, welcome back to week two of *Awakening the Fierce Feminine*. I'm Pamela Weiss and in this second week we'll be building on the themes introduced in week one. We will take a deep dive into the story of Mahapajapati, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother. For me, Mahapajapati represents this quality of the fierce feminine. She embodies the combination of deep compassion, a kind of maternal nurturing kindness, but also the qualities of perseverance, of grit, of tenacity, of courage. So you'll see more as we go.

I'll start by saying what we know about her story. We know is that both Mahapajapati and her sister Maya, who was the Buddha's mother, were married to the same king or clan head, Suddhodana. As far as we know Maya died very soon after Prince Siddhartha's birth, probably from complications of childbirth, and Mahapajapati took him in and raised him side by side with her own son.

I always imagine what that must have taken for Mahapajapati to have these twin events of the loss of one's beloved sister and the need to engage with her grief, at the same time, the responsibility for raising her son. So Mahapajapati is often understood and seen as this great nurturing force, sometimes what's called in the Zen tradition *robai-shin*, or grandmotherly mind, this deep caring, kindness, and compassion.

But she's not only known for that. Mahapajapati is also known as the founder of the bhikkhuni order or the nuns' sangha. The story goes that Mahapajapati traveled to ask the Buddha to ordain women three times. It's important to say that this story is probably more myth than history. But I think it's useful to understand that both history and myth have their own kind of truth. History tells us facts about what happened to who and when, but myth represents a kind of universal truth. A myth is something that may not have been factually true but is a story that's been passed on and repeated over and over and over, and which points us toward a universal archetypal sense of what is possible for us, our potential as human beings. I think that whether the story of Mahapajapati founding the nun's sangha is historically factual or not, it still represents something deeply important for us as practitioners and as human beings.

So the story goes that Mahapajapati travels to the Buddha three times. In mythic language, three can be understood as simply “many.” So she traveled from her home to the Buddha and his sangha many times or multiple times to ask him—to beg him really—to be allowed to join the holy life. It said that the Buddha says no three times. The language of this is beautiful; he says, “Do not set your heart on this, Pajapati,” but her heart is set.” This beautiful choice of words points us towards what's meant by fierce compassion. Compassion isn't just soft and fluffy. There is something strong in comparison; there is a kind of grit and tenacity in the compassionate heart. “Do not set your heart on this, Pajapati,” but her heart is set.”

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It's described that in the third time, or perhaps after many attempts, she brings a group of other women with her. Again, I think this is a really important piece in debunking this idea of walking the path as being a self-reliant solo endeavor. She comes this third time with a whole group of other women and she once again asked the Buddha, "Please, we'd like to join the sangha," he said, "No." She returned outside the gates to all of these women outside the gates—exhausted, with bloodied feet and dusty robes who've been walking for days, weeks, months, perhaps—and they begin crying and wailing.

Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and trusty attendant, hears their cries and asks, "What's happening?" Mahapajapati tells him, "We want to join the holy life, we want to become part of the sangha." Ananda is so moved by their plight he goes and takes a stand. He pleads their case to the Buddha. Apparently the Buddha again says, "No, it's not going to happen." But Ananda pins him in a corner and forces him to change his mind. He says, "Isn't it true that women can attain awakening just as easily as men?" And the Buddha says, "Yes." And he asks, "Isn't it true that Pajapati fed you at her own breast?" And the Buddha says, "Yes." Ananda says, "Then how can you not allow them in?" And so ultimately, the Buddha allows Mahapajapati and the women in.

This story is such an important piece of understanding the history of the Buddhist community. This story has been discounted and downplayed in so many ways. There are also many ways women have been sort of relegated to a lesser role at the bottom of the community's hierarchy from that time through to the present. One of the things that the Buddha is reputed to have said before he died was something like, "I will not pass away until I am confident in the creation and founding of the fourfold sangha [of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen]." So we know that this fourfold sangha was part of his vision, it was part of what he deeply wished to establish.

I want to highlight two things in this story. The first is the dual capacity Mahapajapati possesses to be both kindly, nurturing, caring, and to also have the qualities of courage, perseverance, of not being deterred when she's turned away. This feels like such an important aspect of how we understand what is needed on the path: it is an ongoing process in which we have to be patient and not give up, to keep going even in the face of difficulty. So this story, in many ways, represents what I was speaking about last week, that these qualities of masculine and feminine are not gender based. That they exist in figures of all genders.

What do we see in Ananda's role in this story? Ananda is often represented as a tremendously gentle, kind-hearted figure who both deeply cares for the Buddha, but also is the attendant; he runs interface between the Buddha and his disciples. So he's really also there to care for the community. But in this case, with his big heart, Ananda hears the cries of the women outside the

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gates and he doesn't turn away. He doesn't shut the gates. He allows his heart to be touched and not only does he turn toward their suffering, he inquires. He's interested, he asks what's happening here, he wants to know. Then he receives the women's story and based on that, he takes a stand. In taking the issue up with the Buddha he does something quite difficult, like going to your boss and complaining, right? He is the Buddha's attendant yet he goes and stands up to him. He becomes an advocate and an ally for the women outside the gates. So these are the themes that I invite you to explore in this next week: the heart that is open and receptive, but it's also strong.

I want to close with a poem that comes from what's called the *Therigatha*, the poems of the early awakened nuns. And it's how we know for sure that there was a community of women who practiced alongside the Buddha whether this story is historical or mythical. So I'll read Mahapajapati's poem and then offer you a few reflections for the coming week. So this poem is called *Mahapajapati, Protector of Children*. This is her song of awakening, written when she's a much older woman. She says,

I know you all.
I have been your mother,
your son,
your father,
your daughter.

You see me now in my final role—kindly grandmother.

It's a fine part to go out on.
You might have heard
how it all began—
when my sister died
and I took her newborn son
to raise as my own.

People still ask,

Did you know then, what he would become?

What can I say?
What mother doesn't see a Buddha in her child?
He was such a quiet boy.

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The first time he reached for me.
The first time I held him while he slept.
How could I not know?

To care for all children
without exception
as though each
will someday
be the one
to show
us all
The
Way
home.

This is the Path.

This is a beautiful new translation of Mahapajapati's awakening poem from a wonderful book called *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns* translated by Matty Weingast.

So as you move forward into this week, I want to invite you to explore two things. First, pulling from this beautiful poem, consider what it would be like to see with these eyes of compassion, to consider each person who you meet as a potential future buddha. How might that change the way we engage in the world? And the second is to take a look in your own life and to consider calling on the example of Ananda. How is it that we too might turn and listen to cries of those who are less fortunate, who are unseen, who are unprotected? And how might we not just hear the cries, but turn toward and be interested; to inquire, to ask, to discover. As we do that, what might it look like for you or me or any of us, in whatever situations we are in which we sit in a position of greater privilege than those around us, what would it mean to become an advocate and ally, as Ananda does to support this kind of inclusivity and fullness of the path?

I hope that those two reflections will feed you, nourish you, inspire you over the next week, and I look forward to seeing you during week three. Thank you.