

Pamela Weiss

Awakening the Fierce Feminine

Week 3: “Embracing the Unknown with Prajnaparamita”

November 21, 2020



Hi, everyone. Welcome back to week three of Awakening the Fierce Feminine. My name is Pamela Weiss and this week we're going to be taking a look at the archetypal figure Prajnaparamita. Last week I told the story about the Buddha's mother, Maya, who died shortly after he was born. Prajnaparamita is often referred to as the mother of all Buddhas. Prajnaparamita literally means “wisdom beyond wisdom.” It points us toward what we might call our source or the place where everything arises to which everything returns. Those two are beautifully and painfully described in both the birth and death of the Buddha, and the birth of the Buddha and the death of his mother: that birth and death are quite intertwined in our lives. The teachings of Prajnaparamita, of wisdom beyond wisdom, are often referred to in the whole canon of teachings, the Prajnaparamita literature that focuses on what are called the teachings on emptiness.

The Buddhist use of emptiness doesn't mean some big empty void; these are not teachings of nihilism. They're the teachings that show this intimate dance, this dynamic movement. Just as we explored that dynamism between these qualities of masculine and feminine the first week, here we're talking about the qualities of form—of everything that we see and smell and taste and touch and know—and emptiness, that from where everything comes and to which everything returns. Prajnaparamita represents that “lifeing,” that birth and death process.

In our meditation practice we are often pointed to pay attention to various objects of our awareness: to the breath, or feelings, or thoughts, or sounds. But here we're not talking so much about the content of what we're aware of as the mysterious nature of awareness itself. This places us squarely in the realm of Prajnaparamita. This places us in the realm of wisdom beyond wisdom, beyond what can be known by our cognitive, rational mind. It's inviting us into a realm of darkness, of source, and of mystery. It's inviting us to step into the unknown, to surrender ourselves to something beyond what our usual thinking minds can come up with.

Many of us don't lean into qualities of mystery, of not knowing, of darkness, as I spoke about in the first week. Many of us meet darkness with fear and mystery with aversion. But there's something built right into the essence of the teaching that's inviting us to step closer, inviting us to surrender.

So to take this step requires, again, a kind of fierce compassion, courage, and kindness to move past our fear into the potential for a sense of wonder, for a sense of discovering new things, discovering something we hadn't seen, we hadn't known, to allow ourselves to be surprised.

A Zen story says that all of us are walking around as if we were looking at the sky through a straw. Is that the sky we see? Well, sure it is. But is it the whole sky? No. And so what does it

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take to allow us to open up that straw so that we could see a bigger sky? This is the example that I used for the title of my book, *A Bigger Sky*. That's what that story comes from. And when we find this capacity to open ourselves beyond what we've known, to stop grasping after light and allow ourselves to fall back into darkness and mystery, then we allow ourselves to have the potential to be surprised and to be filled with a kind of wonder.

There's a beautiful quote that I love from Dogen Zenji, the founder of Soto Zen. He says, “When you sail out in a boat to the middle of the ocean, where no land is in sight, and you view the four directions the ocean looks circular and does not look any other way.” It's like us with our straw. But, he says, “The ocean is neither round nor square. Its features are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It only looks circular as far as your eye of wisdom can see at that time.” And he says, “All things are like this.” So when we open our straw, when we're willing to see a bigger sky, we have this possibility of being surprised and of discovering something fresh, something new.

I'll share a poem with you. This is again from this collection of the songs of awakening of the early Buddhist nuns, from this new translation, *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns* translated by Matt Weingast. And this poem is Dhammadinna's song of awakening; like Mahapajapati, Dhammadinna was one of the main leaders and founders of the nuns' community. Her name was described as “she who has given herself to the Dharma.” There's a spirit of letting go and of surrender. She describes her path this way. She says:

For so long,
I thought only
of the river's end.

Then one morning,
I set my paddle down
to watch the sun rise
over the eastern hills—

only to find
myself floating
Somehow
gently upstream.

I promise.
It was not what I expected.

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So it's a beautiful feminine expression of the path in my understanding of it—that we put our paddle down, that we let go of this striving and achieving and trying. There's a place for that, but at some point, it's so important that we put our paddle down, that we lean back into this great, dark, shimmering mystery and we allow ourselves to be surprised. We allow ourselves to discover something more than or beyond what we might have expected.

So I'm going to close with a second poem from the same collection. This is from a nun whose name was Punna, which means full. For me, this poem is pointing to this quality of darkness, of the unknown, of the mysterious, not as something frightening but as something that we can become intimate with in a beautiful and a wonderful way. She has a short poem, it goes like this:

Punna ~ Full

Fill yourself
With
the Dharma.

When you
are as
Full
as the
full
moon—
burst open.

Make the dark night shine.

So often, we imagine that the illumination, that the enlightenment is somehow bringing us light to take us out of the darkness. But you can see that in this reading of the poem, we might shift our orientation and our understanding that actually what is illuminated is darkness. What is illuminated is that we begin to see the beauty, mystery, wonder, and surprise of the world itself. And we can come to understand how it is then that awakening itself isn't, you know, a flash of lightning and now we're done but is this mysterious unfolding process in which there's always more to learn, to be understood, to be known.

So this week, as you reflect on these teachings, I want to invite you to try out a practice that I've used a lot myself and some of you may be familiar with called stream of consciousness writing. I'll give you some questions to ask yourself and the idea is that you just write as fast as you can,

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for say, five minutes, and that you write long enough that you get past your habitual known answers and you allow something to bubble up that surprises you. So here are some questions you might try on. The first is, “What do I know?” So you would write the question at the top, and then just write for five minutes as fast as you can. Ask ‘What do I know?’ and write anything that comes. And then the second question you could try is, “What don't I know?” See what comes. And a third question, if you're up for it, is “What do I love about the unknown?” So you could pick any one or two or three of those questions, and just to play with them, you could have conversations with people. But you might also try on this practice of this kind of writing as fast as you can to see if you can get past what you already know, if you can allow something to come, some new information that might surprise you.

So I hope that you find that helpful and I look forward to seeing you again next week for our final week of our series. Thank you.