

**“THE MOTHER OF ALL BUDDHAS”– MAHAPRAJAPATI GOTAMI  
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Buddhist stories have been passed down from century to century. Early accounts were communicated in the great oral tradition of India, but eventually were written and carried over mountains and seas from land to land. Though variations and inconsistencies exist, they may be ascribed in part to individual tellers — those scholars and monks without whom we might never know the story of Mahaprajapati.

Just as in the science of archaeology, where one may have nothing but a few bones or pottery shards to reconstruct history, the accounts of Prajapati Gotami (the honorific *maha* meaning “great,” was added later) — one of the great disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha — has been pieced together from fragments of her life and achievements.

It is said that when Siddhartha of the Shakya tribe was born to King Shuddhodana and Queen Maya, the special nature of the infant was divined from the beginning. Queen Maya experienced significant dreams prior to his birth. The fact that she was weakened by childbirth and would die soon must have grieved her greatly, as she feared she would not see him grow to manhood. Perhaps near the end of her life, Maya took her sister’s hands in hers and asked through her tears to protect and care for her son and husband. Sister to sister, Prajapati’s tender promise to do so would have eased the queen’s passage into death. After her death, the king took Prajapati as his wife and entrusted her with the child’s care.

Life at Shuddhodana’s court and palaces has been described as luxurious; no effort was spared to make the young prince happy and to surround him with beauty and delightful distractions. What pride Prajapati must have taken in him, and how seriously she undertook her duty.

The closeness between mother and child is intimate in the early years. Indeed, Prajapati would have witnessed childhood signs of Prince Siddhartha’s sensitive and insightful character. How many of us, as parents, have recognized in our own children our greatest teachers? In the world of ancient India, death, life and subsequent rebirth were deeply accepted facts. Prajapati no doubt had recognized her own karmic relationship to her stepson early on.

As all children eventually do, Siddhartha, or Shakyamuni as he came to be known, left his mother and father to follow his own way — to seek his own understanding of the true nature of suffering and of life. His eventual awakening or enlightenment and subsequent teachings must have sparked a desire for liberation and true happiness within Prajapati. The seeker in her might have yearned to follow him, even though her role as a woman and a queen was laid out before her as solid as the stance of a mountain.

As time passed, many male members of Shakyamuni’s family left secular life to join him as *bhikkus*, male religious mendicants who followed in his footsteps on the path to enlightenment. One by one, they departed to the hillsides and forests of India — even the Buddha’s son, Rahula, expressed the desire to leave the palace. Imagine Prajapati and the women of her household left more and more to themselves, gazing out the windows, pondering their lives.

Theirs was a privileged life, but it was severely bound by social convention. In the world of the common people, after they had finished bearing children, women were considered little better than slaves. In Prajapati’s society, men were allowed to assume a religious life after living as husbands and fathers but women had no such tradition. Women throughout the ages have chafed at such social bonds that held them in restriction. No matter how refined and wealthy a woman might have been she was still a woman and her spiritual needs would not have mattered much.

SGI President Ikeda offers his perspective in *The Living Buddha*: “We know from Indian literature in general that women were looked upon as lustful and quarrelsome by nature, and the low status forced upon them by society no doubt helped to bring out the less admirable traits in their characters. ... The point to be noted about the Buddhist view of women, I believe, is not that it regarded them as by nature less suited for the religious life than men, which was a truism of the time, but that it held out the possibility that they could overcome this handicap” (pp. 120–21).

The aging King Shuddhodana fell ill, and when it became obvious that he would soon die, Shakyamuni traveled from his winter quarters at Vaishali to Kapilavastu to attend his father’s passing. By some accounts, he traveled there to console his stepmother after his father’s death. At any rate, he would have had private time with Prajapati there, and it was said she expressed a desire to follow him as a *bhikkuni*, “asking if it were appropriate for women to go forth from home to homelessness under the guidance of the Blessed One” (*The Way of Siddhartha, A Life of the Buddha*, p. 155).

Shakyamuni refused to grant her request and returned to his quarters at Vaishali, saying: “It is not possible. In Rajagaha, there are also a number of women who want to be ordained but I do not believe it is the right time yet. Conditions are not yet ripe to accept women into the *sangha*” (*Old Path White Clouds, Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, p. 291).

He knew the negative traits of men as well, and although he had not originally encouraged followers, he eventually assented to the formation of the *sangha* or community of male believers or monks and was beginning to see the fruits of his teaching in them. He was reluctant to include women for many reasons. Foremost among them was a concern for their protection from the dangers of the homeless life of mendicancy and the shocking effect that it would have upon society in his time.

Prajapati, however, would not be denied. It is generally accepted that she and fifty-one female members of her household shaved their heads and cast off their costly garments for rags, leaving to follow the Buddha to Vaishali, a distance of several hundred miles. Upon their arrival at Vaishali, their feet were badly swollen and cut from walking barefoot. They waited near the Buddha’s quarters where they might have a word with him. Ananda, one of Shakyamuni’s chief disciples, saw them there, quietly weeping. Recognizing Prajapati, he inquired why they were there.

When Ananda learned why they had walked all the way from Kapilavastu, braving the dangers that must have accompanied women traveling alone, he took it upon himself to speak with Shakyamuni on their behalf. He asked Shakyamuni if it were true that women had the same capacity as men for the attainment of enlightenment. The Buddha replied that, without a doubt, women could attain enlightenment. The tender-hearted Ananda then pressed his case, saying that Prajapati had been like a mother to Shakyamuni all these years and had loved him as her own son. After all, she had renounced all her possessions. Would the Buddha show compassion for her and the other women who had traveled so far and admit them to the *sangha* as *bhikkunis*?

Thinking on this, the Buddha must have seen the problems this would cause among the numbers of male followers who had begun to tame their desires and observe his rule of chastity. He discussed it with others and, eventually, he assented, with caution and a code of eight rules for the nun’s order. Prajapati has been quoted as saying: “Just as a young girl accepts a garland of lotus flowers or roses to adorn her hair after washing it with perfumed water, I happily accept the Eight Rules. I will follow them all of my life if I am granted permission to be ordained” (*Old Path White Clouds, Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, p. 295). That day,

by some accounts, Mahaprajapati was ordained as the first Buddhist nun along with as many as 500 other women.

She took her position humbly and with a great sense of responsibility, and her efforts resulted in the compassionate application of the code and the best instruction possible for women followers. Buddhist documents record that Prajapati eventually attained enlightenment. It was in her persistence and determination that Shakyamuni saw the great potential of women's inherent enlightenment.

According to Indian studies specialist Dr. Hajime Nakamura: "The appearance (in Buddhism) of an order of nuns was an astonishing development in world religious history. No such female religious order existed in Europe, North Africa, West Asia or East Asia at the time. Buddhism was the first tradition to produce one" (*World Tribune*, "The Enlightenment of Women," May 26, 2000, p. 4).

Repeatedly in his letters to women followers, Nichiren Daishonin encouraged them, comparing them to bodhisattvas and to Mahaprajapati. In "Reply to the Lay Nun Myoho," he states: "The Buddha at Eagle Peak surely perceives that you surpass the nun [Mahaprajapati] as greatly as clouds do mud. The name of that nun, the Buddha Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, is no unrelated matter; it is now the name of the lay nun Myoho" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1106). What great resolve this must have kindled within the nun Myoho and others in thirteenth-century Japan!

When Mahaprajapati died, her body was carried to the funeral pyre for cremation by the Buddha's disciples, while Shakyamuni walked alongside holding her hand. What little we know of her comes down through the ages as a poignant portrait of a mother's love and a profound karmic relationship. What we owe Mahaprajapati is difficult to fathom. We can never know how long it would have been before women's equal capacity for the indestructible happiness of enlightenment would have been recognized or encouraged. In this light, she has been called "The Mother of All Buddhas."

## References

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