

(Suggestion on using this download: Sit in a circle and pass the first 5 pages from person to person, to be read aloud. In a smaller group, each person can read several paragraphs. In a larger circle, each person can read one or two paragraphs. A facilitator can use the questions at the end to initiate a discussion about Mahapajapati Theri.)

Bhikkhuni Mahapajapati Theri: My Story

My name is Pajapati. I was born into the Koliyan tribe, a republican clan indigenous to the area later known as the Indian subcontinent. We were one of many Naga tribes in the region. The Koliyans shared the River Rohini with a neighboring tribe, the Sakyans. The Sakyans prided themselves on their Aryan language and origins. Though of different clans, we were under the same sovereign, King Pasenadi.

When I was born, soothsayers predicted I would be at the vanguard, hence my name which means leader of an assembly of people. It was not until I was much older that I came to understand what kind of leader I would become and what trailblazing work awaited me. As a young girl, I could not have imagined the upheavals ahead for me and my family nor could I have guessed my role in history. On more than one occasion I felt overwhelmed and not equal to the challenges I faced, but that part comes later.

Long before circumstances mandated that I advocate for women and their spiritual potential, when life was still simple and carefree, I enjoyed my youth which included spending time with my older sister Maya. When she married, I was delighted for her. I admired her and wanted nothing more for her than to be a happy wife and mother.

Even before she married, I began anticipating becoming an aunt to many nieces and nephews, but that is not what happened. The pressure on my sister to give birth to a son was enormous and continued to mount. Year after year, though, no child was born to my dear sister. It was agonizing watching her and feeling so powerless to alleviate her distress. After twenty-five years of marriage, at the age of forty, my sister, my poor dear sister had not conceived a child. A barren woman was seen as a failure, as worthless and useless. She carried shame as did her family.

Later generations would mistakenly think that my sister's husband Suddhodana was a great king. Such is the stuff of legends. Actually, in the Sakyan clan, the position of chief was open to any man, a position elected by rotation. Perhaps it was the only way people could later understand their desperate desire for a son. The future of the Sakyans did not depend on whether my sister had a son. At the time, there were many talented, brave, and illustrious men from good families who could assume the role of chief. No, Suddhodana and Maya loved each other and simply longed to be parents the way all happy couples do. Also, children were essential in preserving and protecting families, and caring for aging parents.

When no child was born to Maya, I married my sister's husband Suddhodana. Miraculously, my sister and I became pregnant at the same time. Maya gave birth first. It happened while she was en route to our parents' home. The future Buddha was born in a beautiful park on a full moon

eve. He was given the name Siddhartha, he who accomplishes his aim. Joy quickly gave way to sorrow. Within a week, my dear sister died.

We were bereft. The grief which overcame all of us, including the chieftain Suddhodana, was never reported. Historians never assembled the pieces of the puzzle, revealing why we all made such rapid progress toward enlightenment. We had intimate knowledge of the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering. We found great happiness when Siddhartha was born and then it was shattered with the passing away of his mother. Impermanence. The Buddha was born into a family drenched in loss, sadness, and death. It had to have left an indelible mark on him as well.

Many generations later it would be discovered that newborn infants can identify their mother's voice within hours of birth. Maya and Siddhartha had a precious week together and then she was gone! Did he feel a rupture when Maya died, when his mother was lost to him? I think he did. Somehow I cannot help but believe that the love my sister had for him from the moment of conception was known to him and he grieved along with us.

As Siddhartha grew up, I often wondered if it had been a burden for him to know his life was won at the cost of another. Such a kind child, right from the start, it had to haunt him on some level for he was not like other children. Only days old, my sister was the future Buddha's first teacher on aging, illness, and death.

I gave birth to my son Nanda shortly after Siddhartha was born, an event that should have filled me with utter happiness became tinged with sadness. I gave my son to a wet nurse and nursed Siddhartha. I later gave birth to my daughter, Sundari Nanda. As a child, Siddhartha was curious about Maya. I would recount stories about my sister so that she would remain alive and real in his heart. It came as no surprise to me that upon his enlightenment, he was quick to share his knowledge with his mother, journeying to the Tusita Heaven to repay her for her kindness to him.

Siddhartha was exceptionally talented in many things. We all expected him to make his mark. Following his birth, astrologers predicted that Siddhartha would become either a great ruler or else an exceptional spiritual leader. Hardworking, conscientious, and empathetic, we never thought he would shirk his obligations to his family and tribe. When he and Yasodhara had their son Rahula, any worries that Siddhartha would leave to pursue a spiritual quest faded.

I can never forget the moment I was told Siddhartha had left the palace. At first I could not believe it. I was in shock. It was as though time had stopped. The sobbing Yasodhara had to repeat herself over and over until I could accept that Siddhartha was serious about his leave taking. My son, my handsome, good hearted son was gone. I never thought of him as my stepson, or even nephew. He was my son. I nursed him. I mothered him. He was my boy. Sometimes his leaving made sense, other times it remained incomprehensible. It upset me that he was in turmoil yet could not confide in me. When did this breach between us happen? How did I fail to notice that Siddhartha was no longer a part of us? But, upon reflection, I began recalling

comments he had made and subtle ways he revealed a growing disenchantment with our way of life. In hindsight, I could point to moments that foretold his departure.

Everyone was so upset, Siddhartha's father, his wife, his brother and sister, cousins, and so many others. It fell to me comfort and reassure everyone. That had always been my job. We had shielded him too much, I explained. It was understandable that a young man would want to explore the world. Give him time, I said, he'll be back, but days rolled into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. I questioned whether I did something wrong. Had I failed in some way? Was it my fault? Occasional news about Siddhartha reached us. I was relieved to know he was alive although it stunned me to hear how he was living. Begging for food? Siddhartha came from a proud warrior class. This was beneath him. There were times I drew up plans to find him. I rehearsed my best arguments to bring him back but realized it was pointless. The pain of his departure felt like a burn that only hurt more as time passed.

When Siddhartha fled our home, not only did he abandon his family but he also deserted the women in his harem who were dependent on him—his mistresses, concubines, and servants. Some historians would prefer the term “ladies of the court” to describe these subservient, subjugated women. How noble were they if they were not free to safely leave the court and pursue the life they wished? Birds in a golden cage.

Compared to them, I was fortunate. I was married to a powerful man and had his protection. The patron, who gave these women a sense of identity and was supposed to shield them, had vanished. Vulnerable and frightened, they turned to me for guidance and protection. My role as mother expanded to include them as well. At first they sought my advice on practical problems. Years later, they asked me to explain the dhamma, our conversations shifting over time from issues of survival and personal problems to finding liberation, but I am getting ahead of myself.

News reached us that Siddhartha had achieved full enlightenment. My husband sent repeated delegations to the Buddha, inviting him to return home to share what he had discovered. These delegations failed. Instead of returning to Kapilavastu, they became renunciants and joined the growing Bhikkhu Sangha. I was frustrated but amazed at the same time. What a teacher Siddhartha had become! To meet him was to be transformed. He had much more influence over people than his regal, formidable father. I began to believe what the hermits and soothsayers had predicted following Siddhartha's birth. Finally, the tenth delegation, almost two years since the Buddha's awakening, succeeded in relaying the message and persuaded Siddhartha to return home.

I waited for months to see my son as he made his slow journey home, teaching the dhamma to those he met along the way. Finally he arrived home. He radiated a happiness and contentment he had not displayed in the months before he left us. My husband and I listened to his teaching and almost immediately became his students. We entered the stream. Some needed a miracle to accept that Siddhartha was the Buddha. Not me. I knew almost at once. All of my worry for him fell away. This was a time of rejoicing and celebrating. He honored his family and brought us the

best gift he could: directions on ending suffering. All that we had been through as a family seemed a small price to pay for the opportunity to practice and become enlightened.

And so it went very well for a number of years until my husband died about four years later. To add to the stress, more and more men were leaving their families at this time to become monks. Among them were my son Nanda and grandnephew Rahula, the Buddha's son. And then things turned very dark. A bitter dispute erupted between the Sakyans and the Koliyans over water rights to the Rohini River. I was a Koliyan by birth but Sakyan by marriage. My children were half Sakyan and half Koliyan. I cherished many people from both clans. As I feared, a battle ensued and a significant number of men died. Some of the women who lost their husbands came to me for help. Others went to the Buddha and asked him to intercede. I also implored him to do what he could. The Buddha, too, was half Sakyan and half Koliyan, and had as many Koliyan relatives as Sakyan family members.

The Buddha gave a sermon to these two warring tribes. The effect of his words caused the men to abandon fighting altogether. Most became monks. This only increased the number of women without a primary male relative to safeguard them. I was surrounded by a growing number of widows or women, who for all intents and purposes, were living as widows after their husbands left them to ordain. For these poor women, many of their sons had left as well. Also in this growing number of displaced women were consorts, dancers, and musicians. Lacking other family, these women turned to me as well as to each other for comfort and protection.

Like it or not, my destiny had me leading an assembly of women. I was not simply the natural head of such a group. I was one of them as well, having lost my husband to death and my sons to the Sangha. Here we women were, left to our own devices, left to fend for ourselves. We had the dhamma but no organized support or assistance. It fell to me to plead our case to the Buddha and be admitted to his Dispensation as female monks, bhikkhunis. In truth, we were already living as renunciants in so many ways. We simply wanted that acknowledged and gain the support our brothers in the dhamma had.

Understanding the First Noble truth as they did, all of these women could have given long, heartfelt, and insightful sermons on dukkha. For many of these women, their lives had been shattered in a blink of any eye. They were also experts on impermanence and knew there was nothing dependable they could cling to. All the norms and rules that had kept our world together blew apart. Their desires to renounce were sincere. As history would show, they also had what it took to become enlightened. Many of these women were truly remarkable.

Reflecting on my life, I could see how circumstances evolved in such a way to prepare me for my ultimate role. I witnessed my husband handle affairs involving our tribe. He settled disputes, advised people, and knew when to confront a problem and when to let things slide. Without intending to, I was in school, learning diplomacy, learning things that I would later use when I found myself heading the Bhikkhuni Sangha. No, I was not the first ordained woman. I was not the first female renunciant under the Buddha. There were already a sprinkling of nuns at Vulture's Peak and other places, but I was the only one with the needed skills and stature to lead

a diverse group of women at such a tumultuous time, and coalesce these female ascetics into an enduring community.

The many conversations I had with the Buddha about the Bhikkhuni Sangha have never been written down. Thousands of years following my death, people would never know what the Buddha actually said to me. Chroniclers would later write the most preposterous things, such as the Buddha was opposed to ordaining women or he believed ordained women would shorten the life of his Dispensation or that I had to repeatedly plead for ordination for myself and other women. All of this is absurd. The Buddha's actions speak louder than any words. Within five year of creating the Bhikkhu Sangha, the Bhikkhuni Sangha was established. How can anyone believe that someone as independent and resolute as the Buddha was talked into something he did not believe in or value? Shortly after his Awakening, he spoke of wanting to establish an order of nuns. In the Mahaparanibbana Sutta, the Buddha said his Dispensation would not be complete without female monks. And no one more eloquently spoke of the accomplishments and attainments of bhikkhunis than the Buddha.

Once ordained, I was able to focus on purifying my heart and mind, and made rapid progress. I saw my past lives and the ignorance that led to journeying from one lifetime to another. I attained nirodha, the state where everything stopped. The Buddha named me the outstanding disciple in having wide knowledge. When I was ill and close to death, I sent for my stepson, my teacher, the Buddha, and he came. We visited for the last time. At his urging, I performed miracles prior to my death as well as during my cremation. I did these feats, not for my glory, but at the Buddha's advice to dispel any doubts people might have about women's spiritual abilities. We women are capable of astounding attainments. Only marvels arising when the Buddha died equaled what I accomplished.

My death and release into Paraniibbana paralleled that of the Buddha and predated what he did. I systematically entered the eight jhanas and the attainment of cessation, and then descended backward from the eighth jhana to the first and up to the fourth when I passed away. No further samsara for me, no further wandering on. A massive earthquake shook the land at the exact moment of my death. Everyone knew an astounding and exceptional person, a fully enlightened woman, had died. My death inspired many to work hard to free themselves as well.

I tell the story of my life for one reason only, to encourage you to follow in my steps and enjoy the bliss of full liberation, enlightenment. Dear daughters, and sons, this is your inheritance. Come and claim it!

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(Material drawn from Ven. Analayo's chapter, "Women's Renunciation in Early Buddhism: The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns" from the book *Dignity and Discipline*, Susan Murcott's book *The First Buddhist Women*, and Jacqueline Kramer's article "If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami" from the *Winter 2011 Issue of Present*.)

Discussion questions:

1. Were there any parts of Pajapati's story that you didn't know? Anything which surprised you?
2. What things about her life impressed you?
3. She went through significant losses in her life—the death of her sister, her stepson leaving, her husband dying, her son leaving the family, family members dying in wars. Can you relate to such losses? If so, how have they shaped or transformed you?
4. In examining your own evolving life story, can you recognize how certain incidents or experiences which seemed challenging or even bad at the time, later proved beneficial, even essential in imparting insights and skills?
5. In reflecting on Mahapajapati's life, is there anything about her story which encourages and motivates you to act differently, to try new behaviors, or endeavors?
6. Do you see yourself as a leader? If so, why? If not, why not? What stops you from sharing your knowledge and skills for the good of others?

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