

The Woman Who Raised the Buddha: The Extraordinary Life of Mahaprajapati

Wendy Garling

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Wendy Garling's *The Woman Who Raised the Buddha* fills a gap in historical accounts of the origins of Buddhism, which, like most major religions, has erased or devalued the contributions of women.

When her sister, Maya, died seven days after having given birth to Siddhartha, Mahaprajapati, queen of the Sakyas, took the infant Boddhisattva to her breast, adopted him as her son, and raised him until he left home at the age of twenty-nine to fulfill his life's purpose. Part of that purpose was to establish an egalitarian fourfold religious community of nuns and monks, laywomen and laymen.

But with patriarchy and misogyny rampant in the ancient world, Garling reveals, men among the monastics took control of the Buddha's legacy upon his death around 400 BCE. Women's contributions, as well as the Buddha's intent for equality in access to the dharma, were diminished or erased from Buddhism's narrative and practice. While Mahaprajapati's pivotal role in forming the order of Buddhist nuns is known, accounts of her life were fragmentary and rare.

Garling's book helps restore balance to the Buddhist narrative, relying on early women's stories translated from Buddhism's first written languages (Sanskrit and Pali), translations from writings of other Asian cultures, and a surprising cache of women's literature sequestered within the Pali canon. It illuminates the turbulent life and times of Mahaprajapati, a woman who not only loved and nurtured her adopted son as her own, but had the courage and spirit of adventure needed to confront entrenched men's dominance.

The Woman Who Raised the Buddha not only reveals how Buddhism, after more than 2,500 years, is still marked by patriarchy and misogyny, but brings to light the courage and human love that lie at its root.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2021)

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