

## 24. Punnika and the Brahman's Purification

INDIA, SIXTH CENTURY BCE .....

**T**HE SLAVE PUNNIKA was a follower of the Buddha and attained the first stage of awakening while carrying water from the river to her master's house. Sometime later she was again bringing water from the river when she saw the Brahman Udakasuddhika taking a ritual bath. She said to him, "I must come down to the river even on cold days like today because I am a water carrier and a slave. But why do you come to the river, even when it makes you shiver with the cold? What are you afraid of?"

"You know the laws of karma," he said. "I am washing away my past evil acts."

"Who told you that would work?" she asked. "If this were true, frogs, turtles, and water snakes would all go to heaven. And evildoers like pork butchers, thieves, and executioners could all be cleansed with a bath. Besides, doesn't water wash away your merit too? It would be better to avoid doing evil in the first place. So spare yourself from this freezing water and go home."

The Brahman saw the truth of her words and tried to give her his robe in gratitude, but she refused. Instead she suggested that he should take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and train in the precepts. He took refuge, and said to her, "Your words have washed me clean."

### DIANA WINSTON'S REFLECTION

Let's imagine it's 500 BCE, and not only are you a woman but you're a slave. So you probably are about as low as it gets in a highly stratified

culture where rules of caste, gender, and class are everything. And then let's imagine that you have the incredible good fortune of hearing a discourse of the Buddha, and in a nanosecond, like most people back in Buddha's time, you get enlightened. Okay, maybe not full-on, final-stage, zipped-bam-boom to nirvana, but a fairly do-able, in-this-lifetime awakening. One that's so profound it transforms you to the core.

So let's say then that you're still you. In spite of your transformation, you have to now go back to being a slave (although, thankfully, years later Punnika was freed from slavery). And let's stop here for a moment to notice that no matter what your spiritual awakening is, no matter how profound, you're still you and you still have to go back to your day job (unless you become a guru or something).

I used to spend a lot of time in long meditation retreats, and when you spend a lot of time meditating, something wakes up. I sat and sat and saw deeply into my own mind and body and experienced all sorts of letting-go's, from the mundane to the profound. But no matter what happened in all those years on cushions and in and out of monasteries, I now spend a good deal of time washing dishes, responding to email, and thanklessly wiping my two-year-old's (soon to be potty-trained, I hope) bottom. But that's just how life is—how mine is, anyway—and if I think my deep spiritual practice makes me special, I'm asking for trouble.

That's half of what I love about Punnika's koan. She's just herself, fetching water in chilly weather, evidently, and hardly special. Except she's pretty special.

Now imagine that you're a slave fetching water and you notice a Brahman—a member of the highest caste in India—doing his purification rites, which to you seem utterly inane, based on your own waked-up knowledge. So you see the Brahman shivering and you take pity on him and decide to break all barriers of caste and class and profession and gender, just about everything that could be broken, in order to tell him that he's a moron. When he hears your words, well, he gets transformed and tries to turn you into a guru, but you just pass the buck to the real guru—the triple gem.

What ovaries! What chutzpah! Talking to a Brahman, contradicting him, telling him he's got it wrong. Wow. But she does it from a place of very little self. "Yes, I know a truth, but it's the Dharma that holds me. Go check it out."

Punnika has no fear of singing her song of liberation. She has no fear of breaking rank and shouting with a loud and clear voice her truth of awakening.

It is way easier to hem and haw and say *yeah, I know a little something and I did a lot of practice, um*, but it's not easy to loudly proclaim, like Punnika, and to speak from our deepest knowledge of liberation, without fear. Many times I have spoken in public, sharing the Dharma in hundreds of contexts and hoping I embody it, but I've been vague about my own experience. Is this courageous?

Punnika was a revolutionary. For us she's a model. There have always been so many pressures, especially for women, to hide our truth, to not be as big as we know we can be, or as we secretly dream of being. We hide our light and our deepest realizations, and the world isn't better because of it. Nobody benefits by our hiddenness.

And we don't need to crow our realizations in arrogance or to be somebody special or to get gurusified or adored. We do it with humility and no-self-ness. We speak our Dharma from the place of Dharma. But we don't shy away.

And I say all this to you and I say this to me because the time is now to speak out, loudly, with a clear true voice—just like Punnika—that liberation is possible, and that we've done it, and countless women have done it throughout time, and of course there's more to go, but please, please don't hide your awakening.



As an ordinary person, do you have a responsibility to help someone who seems more confused than you are?