

Let your hair down¹

THE RAPUNZEL FAIRY-TALE. On an adult level, the fairy-tale of Rapunzel² is very significant psychologically.³ In “**Rapunzel**” (as in “Rumpelstiltskin” and “Beauty and the Beast”), an adult exchanges his or her child with a power-figure to secure personal welfare or safety. This uneven exchange, unquestioned and unchallenged in these tales, suggests desperation. A woodsman (a king, in the Grimms’ version) steals rapunzel, a kind of lettuce, from a witch’s garden, but is caught, and threatened with terrible punishment.

Desperate for his life and for the love of his wife, he agrees to give the coming child to the witch. Having received the child, named Rapunzel, the witch in due course keeps her atop a tall tower with neither stairs nor exit, with only a very high window. As Rapunzel matures, her hair grows extremely long and beautiful.

One day, a prince passing by, hears her singing. He calls out to her and she lets down her hair. In due course, she is pregnant. The witch, discovering this, lays a trap for the prince. Having caught him, she strikes him blind and exiles him in the wilderness. Rapunzel gives birth to twins and is herself exiled. She finds her blind prince and heals him with her tears. Love triumphs in the end, and they live happily ever after.

THE RAPUNZEL SYNDROME. Psychologically, we can see “Rapunzel” as a “liberation” story, in the sense of a struggle of personal growth, in the face of hindrances and trials, and a unification of dualities. Rapunzel’s father, in trying to gratify his pregnant wife’s desire for rapunzel, has to pay for his transgression (stealing). Our punishments or losses are often bigger than our actual transgression, which further bring upon us other sufferings.

Rapunzel is the child in us, who is yet to know the ways of the world. The witch is some kind of authority figure in our family or religion, who wants to cast us in its own image. So we are imprisoned in a tower of over-protectiveness, which ironically cannot prevent our inner maturation, at least to some extent. Rapunzel’s long growing hair represents our inner goodness, which not only attracts the goodness in others, but is also the way out of the society’s ignorance and sufferings.

Rapunzel’s singing represents a natural feeling of inner joy, which strikes a chord in another figure of goodness, the prince. We might have to face great odds as we struggle to know ourselves, but if we are willing to rely upon ourselves (her long hair, the singing), we will somehow discover what seems lacking in our lives (the prince). The union between Rapunzel and the prince produces twin happiness.

This is like the letter and the spirit of the Dharma: our self-understanding begins with knowing the word and the way, and then its value and purpose. These are the fruits of a happy meeting of minds, harmonizing of calm and insight, like samadhi and wisdom in meditation. The experience is both profoundly blissful and liberating.

For a moment, we appear “blind” to the world: it does not make sense to us. The reality is that it is the world that is unable to see how we have grown spiritually. So we are cast out all alone to complete our quest for self-fulfillment. We should not fear this aloneness, just as the Buddha goes on with his lone quest for awakening under the bodhi tree despite being deserted by the five monks. In our most vital moments in life, we are, we must, be alone: for, it is a self-discovery.

¹ From “Emotional independence” = SD 40a.8 (5.3.2).

² See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Rapunzel” [Berlin: Real schulbuchhandlung, 1812], in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. Berlin: Dieterich, 1857. See Maria Tatar (ed), *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*, NY & London: W W Norton, 2002:103-114.

³ On the nature and value of fairy-tales, see **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1.

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While we struggle, it seems as if an important part of us is missing, lost in some wilderness of the heart. If we are loving and faithful to ourselves and move on, we will surely unite with the missing pieces of our lives. From our sufferings (Rapunzel's tears), we will learn how to heal ourselves, and so live well fulfilled and liberated lives.⁴

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⁴ Further see Piya Tan, "To have or to be?" (R166) *Simple Joys* 101208.