



## Taming Patriarchy

The Emergence of the Black Goddess

An interview with **Marion Woodman**

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introduction



Marion Woodman

"She couldn't be more perfect!" my colleague had exclaimed, scanning the pages of one of renowned Jungian analyst Marion Woodman's books on the emergence of "the feminine." "Even reading this stuff is like stepping into another dimension." From the beginning of our research on gender and spirituality for this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*, we had known we wanted to speak with someone who could articulate the delicate balancing of masculine and feminine energies so central to Jung's conception of the spiritual path. In Woodman, it seemed, we had hit the mark.

Internationally acclaimed for her work as a "bridge builder between the male and female worlds," the former high school English and drama teacher has, in the twenty-five years since she enrolled in Zurich's C.G. Jung Institute, earned a name as a renegade analyst with a rare understanding of the role of the feminine in bringing about personal and cultural transformation. Perhaps best known for her videotaped workshop with men's movement pioneer Robert Bly, *Bly and Woodman on Men and Women*, she is also the best-selling author of six books, including *Addiction to Perfection* and *Leaving My Father's House*. Her most recent work, coauthored with psychologist Elinor Dickson, is *Dancing in the Flames: The Black Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*. At the age of seventy, having *analyzed* more dreams than most of us have probably *had*, Woodman, we thought, would surely be able to bring the often enigmatic world of Jungian archetypal psychology to light.

Having spoken over the years with some of the foremost voices in today's increasingly popular dialogue between psychology and spirituality, one thing we have learned is that whenever *What Is Enlightenment?* approaches a thinker firmly rooted in the ego-dominated world of the psychological, there is always a certain amount of tension in the air. For although renowned transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber has written eloquently about the necessity of marrying Freud and the Buddha in order to achieve a truly

integrated view of human development, it has been our ongoing experience that when the psychological view meets the enlightenment view, a collision of worlds is almost inevitable. Little did we know, however, when we approached Marion Woodman for an interview that, in this case, the clash would not only be one of views, but of the very forces that drive the human psyche. Nothing in our past experience could have led us to predict the ironic outcome of the interviewer's month-long immersion in Woodman's writings on the complex shadow world of the unconscious. As if a man possessed, our colleague became so consumed by Woodman's emphasis on healing the ancient wounds of the ego that almost overnight he chose to completely abandon his life's aspiration to *let go* of his personal history in pursuit of enlightenment—suddenly finding the temptation to identify with the demons of his past too overwhelming to resist.

We were originally drawn to this master analyst for her explanation of the difference between masculine and feminine energies in the Jungian worldview—and particularly for what she sees as **the essential role of the feminine in bringing men, women and even our troubled world to wholeness. Could the mysterious black goddess that she claims is emerging in the dreams of men and women around the globe really be, as she suggests, the harbinger of a new paradigm of inclusiveness, here at last to tame the patriarchal lust for power and control that has brought us "to the brink of extinction"?** We wondered.

But, as we became familiar with her view, what began to capture our interest even more than her teachings on the all-embracing nature of the archetypal feminine were the **ultimate philosophical implications of her assertion that wholeness can be found only when we go beyond absolute, either/or thinking to embrace the "dance of opposites."** What, we wanted to know, is the relationship between the balancing of poles she describes and the transcendence of all duality spoken of in the great enlightenment teachings? Could the wholeness discovered through embracing and balancing the opposing masculine and feminine energies really be the same as the wholeness attained through the transcendence of *all* pairs of opposites, through enlightenment?

In the end, our encounter with Woodman proved to be an illuminating experience, as she showed both the genuine warmth and sensitivity one would expect from an analyst of more than two decades and the unusual elasticity of thought that has won her a reputation as one of today's truly wise women.

interview

**WIE:** *In your books, you've written quite extensively about the relationship between "the feminine" and "the masculine." What do these words mean to you, and how does the relationship between them express itself in our lives?*

**MARION WOODMAN:** As I understand it from my work with dreams, **there are two energies in our bodies, just as there are two energies controlling nature. There's a very active, analytical, logical energy symbolized by the sun and a synthesizing, relating energy symbolized by the moon. In our bodies, as in nature, we are**

**dependent upon this balance of energy between day and night in order to live.** In the caduceus, the "logo" of the medical profession, these two energies come forward as two snakes that start together from the bottom and climb up through the various arcs until, at the top, they are about to kiss. **Well, in our lives, these two energies are working all the time to *find* this balance.** The words that I would associate with the feminine energy are "presence"—being able to live right here, in the here and now; "paradox"—being able to accept what appears to be contradictory as two parts of the same thing; "process"—valuing process as opposed to putting all the value on the product; "receptivity" and "resonance" in the body—having a body that is like a musical instrument, open enough to be able to resonate, literally resonate with what is coming both from the inside and from the outside, so that one is able to surrender to powers greater than oneself. So, for example, a dancer may perfect the instrument as much as he possibly can, the muscles can be as strong as it is possible for them to be, and the whole body will be as highly sensitized as technical work can make it, but still, the greatness of the dancer lies in his ability to surrender to the power of the Divine as it is coming through in the music.

**WIE:** *And that would be an expression of the feminine?*

**MW:** Yes, exactly—the word "surrender." **The principle of the feminine is openness to life, death, rebirth and the unity of all things within that cycle. It's the world of nature, you see. And that's the world that's striving so hard now to be recognized.**

**WIE:** *What is the expression of the masculine, then?*

**MW:** The masculine—to contrast it with the feminine images that I've used—tends to leap ahead to the future, to some idealized future. It tends to make things into black or white; it tends to look at life as an either/or situation instead of being able to hold a paradox.

Now here I must point out that **I don't think "patriarchy" and "masculinity" are synonymous.** I think that the patriarchy has become identified with power, and that as such it kills the masculine just as much as it kills the feminine. So patriarchy exaggerates the either/or, exaggerates the black or white. But the masculine is simply analytic, and it simply *recognizes* the either/or. It's more focused than the feminine in that it can go for a goal; it can discriminate between what is essential to that goal and what is not essential. It can discern, can use the sword, can cut off what is not essential to the action at hand. And these are positive attributes as long as they are *in relationship* to the feminine. I see these two energies as being in both men and women, and the masculine will always be in relationship to the feminine, so that it will be protecting the feminine, honoring the feminine and recognizing the values of the feminine. The feminine is the "being" side, and the masculine takes that "beingness" out into the world. It can also be the meditative "connector" inside, meaning that it can connect the soul to the Divine. A woman who is writing, for example, needs the masculine to begin her process, to put the words on the paper in a logical, informed way. She needs those masculine discriminatory powers to open the way for the Divine to come in, take over her arm and let her writing happen, and she also needs the masculine courage and strength to allow herself to *be* taken over. In

that moment, she's trying to discriminate between the personal and the *transpersonal*. That can be very frightening, and that's where masculine courage and strength are required. It takes tremendous courage to surrender at that point. Now, this is as true in a male artist as it is in a female, so my point is simply that there's a divine marriage going on between the feminine and the masculine in every creative process.

**WIE:** *In a condition of balance, or wholeness, what is the relationship between the feminine and the masculine energies, not only in the individual but in society as a whole?*

**MW:** In the individual, as I said, it is a harmonic balance where the values of the feminine are defended and honored by the masculine. Now that is so far beyond where our society is that it's hard to imagine it at that level, but maybe the example of a relationship or marriage might help. Suppose a woman decides that her marriage is no longer a big enough container for the person she's becoming. She holds the value that she has to grow into her full maturity as a woman, but she is *related* enough so she doesn't want to hurt the soul of her husband. She may use a sword to get out of the marriage, but she learns to use it with love. Because if you get out of a relationship or a job that you've loved with hatred, you damage your own soul as much as you damage the other. It's this *relatedness* between the masculine and feminine that is so important, and that's a very hard balance to find when you're at a transition in life. There has to be the masculine courage to make a cut if it has to be made, but there also has to be the feminine love that respects the soul of the other. Now in our society the same thing applies, but so far, most people are depending on anger and violence to try to make these cuts, and so there's no balance at all between the masculine and the feminine.

**WIE:** *What would the relationship between the feminine and the masculine be like under ideal circumstances?*

**MW:** Well, think of a person like Gandhi, for example, where you have that magnificent femininity along with incredible masculine strength. Or take an example from the theater world: Garbo developed a strong masculine side and became all the more feminine, all the more attractive, as her own inner masculine brought out her own inner feminine. The more a woman develops her masculinity the more feminine she becomes, and the more a man develops his femininity the more masculine he becomes.

So to answer your question, I see this condition of balance in mature people who know what their own values are because they've worked very hard to discriminate between what belongs to their own soul and what does *not* belong to their own soul—mature people who value their dreams and who recognize that the soul has its own pattern and its own life to live, and who give it a chance to live that life. But in order to do that, they would have to be in touch, as I said, with their own inner imagery. And they'd have to be in touch with their own inner feelings, which is a frightening thing to say in a society where most people are cut off at the neck and honestly do not know what is going on at a feeling level in their gut or their kidneys or their heart or any of the other parts of their torso. And that's the tragedy, because then it erupts in rage. There's no discrimination. The masculine doesn't have a chance to come in with any kind of discriminatory action;

action becomes acting out. In a society where citizens are in balance, they have those emotions—that rage, for example—but it is contained until it can be put into cultural forms such as a play or a dance. That's what culture is. It's holding the passion at a vital point until it can be put into a civilized form. But in our culture, there's a tendency to not even attempt to hold the container, to give creative form to the tension between these opposites. Instead, let the bombs or the knives or the bullets fly, and act *out* the rage. And where are the values in that?

**WIE:** *Are you saying that the more civilized form of expression you're describing could potentially extend beyond personal creativity to animate the structure of society itself?*

**MW:** Of course, and that does happen periodically on the planet. I mean, there have been cultures, when they've reached their peak, where that balance was in place. But mind you, even that keeps changing. And now, I think we're moving toward *one planet*, and the transition is ferocious because we have to go through that terrible breaking up of these old patriarchal patterns in order to find the new ones.

**WIE:** *In your book Dancing in the Flames, you describe the figure of a black goddess or Madonna that has been appearing with increasing frequency in the dreams of many contemporary men and women, and you describe this as an indication that the feminine is "push[ing] through from the very depths of the collective unconscious like a universal force that speaks individually and culturally." What exactly is happening here, and what does it mean?*

**MW:** Well, as I see it, we've lost touch with the feminine, with our feelings in our bodies and with the planet itself. Now, collective dreams are presenting new challenges. For example, lust in the body now needs to be united with love in the soul. The Judeo-Christian tradition has split the body from the soul, and so now these dreams of the black goddess are bringing up the image of a very lusty, passionate woman who values life and is in love with life. For example, I'm looking out the window now, and all the buds are coming out and the flowers are all bursting forth in the garden, and there's that luscious, delicious sense of loving—loving and living—that is the recognition of the birthright of life itself, in which lust and that love are expressed *together*. And this is one of the most crucial problems of our culture: Too much feeling is repressed in our own "human earth"—which is to say, in our own bodies. For many people, "playing it cool" is the biggest, most important thing; one should not get heated up over anything. In other words, they cut out the passion: then life becomes boring until they explode in a fit of rage.

Now I'm not suggesting that the black goddess is an ultimate goal. The ultimate goal, in terms of the feminine, is to bring up that dark energy until it finds its civilized form, and to bring the *white* goddess off of her pedestal, her idealized pedestal that keeps women in an inhuman frame in the minds of most men. Idealization confines her to a heavenly state that must eventually flip into a demonized state because, in its incompleteness, it's simply inhuman. So the goal is to bring the white goddess down from her pedestal, to bring the black goddess up from repression, and to bring them together—lust and love together.

And again, that's for both men *and* women, because both men and women have this tragic split in their femininity—and in their masculinity.

**WIE:** *How do we know that the goddess is, as you're suggesting, an emergent, impersonal, feminine cosmic force that is revealing itself to an increasing number of human beings with the intention of revolutionizing human life and consciousness?*

**MW:** I don't. I don't *know* that. How could we possibly know? All I can say is that I believe that God—masculine spirit and feminine matter—is speaking to us directly through our dreams. Dreams, being *metaphorical*, being the *connection* between the spiritual and the physical, are the language of the soul. And I've seen messages from this black Madonna in hundreds of dreams, and they all seem to have a creative intent in the life of the person to whom they come. So I see the black goddess as representing a cumulative insight that will eventually have an impact on the planet. It's not just happening here, you know; it's happening all over. And this goddess is, by the way, beloved in India—Kali, the goddess of life and death, of creation and destruction, is the most revered Hindu goddess. But our country hasn't dealt with Kali at all because we don't like to think that death is part of life—even though we've just finished with winter! I mean, if we gave any thought to it at all, we'd know that death leads to new life. So I don't *know*, but I think we have to learn to accept mystery, to accept that the Divine is mysterious and that if we think we know everything, we are grossly deceived.

**WIE:** *The radical feminist theologian Mary Daly has written that "'God' represents the necrophilia of patriarchy, whereas 'Goddess' affirms the life-loving being of women and nature." Do you agree with the assertion that patriarchy is inherently destructive, whereas matriarchy is inherently beneficent?*

**MW:** Again, **I think patriarchy has *become* destructive. I think that when it started out in ancient Greece, there was an attempt to bring the nation to consciousness. That was a very important step in the evolution of humankind. But now it is connected to power—power over nature, power over other people, power over our own bodies—and people identify themselves in terms of power if they're in patriarchal thinking. So patriarchy has lost its sense of relatedness and its sense of love; it's on a wild rampage now.** But I cannot agree that matriarchy, in itself, is the solution. I think that unconscious matriarchy can be just as vicious as patriarchy. If a person is taken over by the negative mother archetype, the voice inside continues to snarl, "Who are you? Who do you think you are? You can't really achieve anything. You are nobody." That voice is a broken record that goes on and on and on inside the brain, and it can come from the feminine just as much as it can come from the masculine. So I simply cannot accept Daly's statement. It seems to me that we've *all* got to strive toward consciousness. And it's not any longer about being subject to father/patriarchy or mother/matriarchy. **It's about finding ourselves and taking responsibility for ourselves as mature, grown-up human beings. That's what I think this big transition is about. We're moving out of being children and adolescents, and we're being forced into the responsibility of making mature decisions—or we're not going to survive as a planet.**

**WIE:** *In this issue's interview with Sam Keen, the author of Fire in the Belly, we presented him with your view that within each of us, male or female, there are both masculine and feminine energies that need to be brought into balance if we're to become whole. Keen responded: "There are two kinds of people. Those who divide the world up into two columns and those who don't. Why start with two columns? Why start with making your basic concepts about the human psyche goose-step along? I think that's a kind of intellectual tyranny. It's totally unhelpful for me to say, 'Now I've got to get my yin balanced with my yang. Am I too yang or too yin?' If all I can think of is 'I've got to do this or that,' if all I can think of is masculine or feminine, it's a shotgun to my head. That's why I don't like Jungianism and why I detest the idea of archetypes." What is your response to Keen's criticism?*

**MW:** I've learned to accept the fact that there are energies in all human beings that can wipe out the personality, and personally, I think it's *wise* to have some idea of what those energies are. That would be my comment on the archetypes. I mean, what is the point of living if there is nothing but a bread-and-butter, walk-on-the-ground flat world? And as for having to divide everything up into *yin* and *yang*, I didn't do any dividing up into *yin* and *yang*. We're living in a world that *is* divided into *yin* and *yang*. There is masculinity, there is femininity; there is night, there is day. And energy functions like a magnet: opposite poles attract and like poles repel. So I think that if you want real passion in your life, you need to recognize that the so-called opposites are passionately attracted to each other. Without that differentiation, you lack the "fire in the belly"—and life isn't worth living without that fire.

**WIE:** *Yet with regard to opposites, you've also written: "Let us . . . try to avoid the patriarchal either/or and move into the feminine both/and. In that paradox, the mystery of being human lies." Could you explain why, in your view, the feminine is "both/and" and the masculine is "either/or"?*

**MW:** As I explained earlier, **it's the patriarchal either/or that splits things in two, that is continually setting up differences, whereas if you were to look at nature as an expression of the feminine principle, you'd find that in one little patch of ground there are a hundred different living organisms working together to bring the planet to life in spring. The whole world of nature has this incredible both/and ecosystem, so that you don't have to get rid of *these* things in order to have *those* things. It's not either/or. You accept the black, the white, the red, the pink; you accept it all as one. And the true masculine, as I understand it, honors that.**

**WIE:** *You've also stated that "The opposites are complementary, not contradictory. They are partners in the dance of life—partners, that is, in the ongoing interplay between the observer and the observed. This dance, this interplay cannot take place in a world of absolutes, for such a world has no room for differing modes of perception—only for a patriarchal God who is himself the observer and the observed." Why is it that absolutes leave no room for differences?*

**MW:** Well, absolutes bring forward their opposites, but the poles are so far apart that they can't even recognize that they're two sides of the same coin. So that if, to use an example we've already spoken about, you idealize women on one side, you're inevitably going to demonize them on the other. When a woman "betrays" you because she cannot live up to the ideal that has been projected on to her, there's a tendency for men to see her as a betrayer, a seducer, an evil witch who would suck out their insides—right? So, with absolutes, the poles are so far apart that it's always an either/or, black-or-white situation. You can't bring them together. Whereas from a nonabsolute perspective, the poles are not so far apart. Because from that *feminine* perspective there's a human dimension, and the human dimension is imperfect. And within that imperfect world, differences are not only possible but are in fact essential to make life interesting. If, on the other hand, you're in an absolute world where what you want is perfection—for example, the Nazi world that wanted the perfection of the human race—there's absolutely *no* room for the play of opposites and therefore no room for the dance. The dance goes on between differing values, and there is a *mystery* at the center of the dance. The still point at the center of the dance is that mystery, and it keeps changing. And that's what's so interesting about life—that even the still point keeps moving. As your perception evolves, the still point moves.

**WIE:** *Hitler's ideology is no doubt one of the most horrifying examples we've ever seen of the dangers that can result from adherence to an absolute view. But at the same time there have been other figures throughout history who are known to have espoused what could also be called an absolute view with the aim of achieving a decidedly different outcome. The Buddha, for example, to the best of our knowledge, aspired to a kind of perfection and encouraged his followers to do the same. Would his teaching of enlightenment have had the same kinds of implications that you've been speaking about?*

**MW:** I can't speak to that because I'm not steeped in Buddhism. But I do know that when, for example, Christ talks about being "perfect," that word means "wholeness." It's not about cutting off everything in yourself that's not acceptable; it's about bringing out everything in yourself that contributes to the wholeness of who you are. Instead of being perfect in a very tiny area of yourself, you'll be attempting to be a whole human being, and that does place a limit on the goal of perfection.

**WIE:** *But if, as you suggest, an ultimate or absolute view does inherently negate the rich interplay of opposites that make up the world we live in, at the same time couldn't it also be said that the feminine, as you've defined it, inherently negates an ultimate or absolute perspective that always transcends everything?*

**MW:** Yes, I would say so. Now bear in mind that I am speaking from my own point of view, and I don't pretend to be a philosopher or a theologian. But the word "transcend," as it's used by most people, means to come in from above, to see everything from above, and that's the use of the word that I'm responding to. For me, though, the word "transcend" can also mean seeing everything from *below*. Most addicts, for example, find their healing by going down into the trauma that caused their emptiness in the first place. As they learn to love themselves and honor themselves with their own imperfections, their hearts open. They can love themselves and other human beings. They transcend the



hell they could not endure, not by flying up and out of life but by moving down and into life. Then heaven and hell cease to be polarized opposites. Paradoxically, they are one. I also see the black Madonna as "transcending from below." In other words, the feminine energy of the planet itself, if you think of it as a volcano erupting from the very bowels of the earth, is transcending our normal life's existence. Think of the great waves that come smashing in. That power that is erupting from inside and below can be just as life-renewing as an angel touching down from above.

**WIE:** *On one hand, it seems completely understandable that, as you've said, a rigid adherence to absolute notions can easily lead to a dangerously disembodied, exclusive and alienated relationship to life. But on the other hand, couldn't it be said with equal validity that it's only when we're willing to transcend all notions of opposites—including those of "masculine" and "feminine"—that we can experience a perspective and a relationship to life that's truly all-inclusive?*

**MW:** Yes, that is right. But even so, I think I'd still stay with the metaphor of the dance. Energy moves because it is attracted to something. We are magnetized by otherness. Eventually, we realize opposites are not in opposition. They are in love. They attract, they unite, they create new life. The key is to hold the still point in constant movement. If you're really dancing with a partner, there is a still point between you that is always holding no matter how fast or how far you are moving on the floor. And if you're throwing a pot on a wheel, however fast it's moving, that still point has to hold or your pot blows up. And so the two energies, the centrifugal and the centripetal, the masculine and the feminine, have to be in balance. Balance is all.