

THE SERPENT OF AWAKENING

By Kerri Ryan MA

My unforeseen meeting with a two metre carpet python whilst out walking recently aroused thoughts of the symbolism surrounding this most mystical of creatures. Love them or loathe them, I knew this beauty quietly gliding through the grass was a symbolic message for me and my subconscious and I decided to search for the meaning behind my encounter.

I was already aware of the powerfully transformative aspects associated with the skin shedding practice of the snake. The process of death and renewal is evidenced in the casting off of the old self, while the newer version emerges as one regenerated and reborn, often creating with it total change. Yes, I knew this transformative process was taking place within myself, but I wanted more information. After all, spirit led me to investigate something I saw down on the creek bank, only to turn and almost step on this gorgeously patterned 2m specimen, totally unperturbed by my presence, leaving me gasping in awe. As I stood and observed her (or so I told myself) I knew this was an auspicious moment.

But what does it all mean? My encounter stayed with me as I began to search and soon I was looking up Snake Totem on Google to see what they had to say. "Creative forces are awakening, protector and guardian, wisdom expressed through healing, transition, new opportunities and changes" so said several sites. There was much stress on the transition and transformation, but this just served to whet the appetite and so I began to dig deeper.

The snake has existed throughout history and has been used by all cultures and eras with vast diversity as a symbol for both good and evil. People are not ambivalent about the snake; they either love or hate their venomous and slithering nature, and coming into physical contact with one is sure to arouse strong emotions. And so it was with me. What I discovered as I embarked on my research, was the vast array of information dealing with the symbology of the snake as it has touched humanity down through the ages. Here are just a small number of references, but you can see both the positive and negative role in which the serpent has been cast throughout history.

The snake has been variously adored as a regenerative power, as a god of evil, as a god of good, as Christ (by the Gnostics), as a phallic deity, as a solar deity, and as a god of death. It has also served as the symbol of Satan and many deities, including Apollo and the Egyptian god Ra. In Greek religion the snake was frequently considered divine. Among the Greek Dionysian cults it signified wisdom and was a symbol of fertility.

When we reference fortune telling, there is no more famous allegiance than that between the serpent and the Oracle of Delphi, known as the Pythia. The mystical python lived in a hidden cave and was the great incarnated she-serpent Gaia, communicating her wisdoms to the priestess who would enter into frenzied states of trance, inhaling the vapours that rose from the fissures deep within the earth. The god Apollo came to slay the giant she-serpent, replacing the Gaian oracle with prophesy of his own. The Pythia as oracle became one of the best-documented religious institutions of the classical Greek world, existing from circa 1000 BCE to 400 CE.

The negative connotation of the snake though has much to do with its venomous bite and the dangers associated with coming into physical contact. The Russell's Viper is one of the world's most deadly snakes, and it does most of its killing in India. At least 20,000 victims a year, mostly agricultural workers, suffer the fatal consequences of its bite - pain, vomiting

and dizziness, followed by kidney failure. It's not a nice way to die. As far as Indian snakes are concerned, a variety of poisonous snakes kill 50,000 Indians a year. In fact as many people die of snakebites in India as the rest of the world put together. In Australia for example, a country with more venomous snakes, there was only one death in the same period.

For many ancient civilizations the snake symbolised the underworld and the realm of the dead, due to the nature of snakes and their tendency to hide in burrows below the surface of the earth. Dreams of snakes seem to occur to those who are dying or who have recently lost a loved one, highlighting the transition from this life to the next. Recurring dreams of snakes also indicate a fear or an unresolved issue which must be faced. If a snake bites you in a dream, it can be an important sign that you are undergoing a kind of initiation, a psychological or spiritual trial that has the potential to change your life for the better.

Carl Yung speaks of the transcendent nature of the snake as he sees these creatures as figuratively coming from the depths of the ancient earth Mother, being denizens of the collective unconscious bringing a special chthonic (underworld) message.

The mediation between earth and heaven is also referenced by Yung as he describes the snake representing the therapeutic symbol of the Roman God of medicine Asclepius. Whereas the staff of Asclepius bore one snake, the rod of Hermes, or the better known Caduceus, bears two entwined serpents topped by a pair of wings, coming to represent the medical profession as we know it today. Hermes, as the winged messenger, was the god of the cross-roads who led the souls to and from the underworld.

The theme of death and rebirth is continued in the symbology of the World Snake, called the Ouroboros in Greek, where the snake is featured trying to swallow its own tail. It was said to be both male and female, self impregnating, self-feeding, immortal and complete. It represents eternity and the continuous cycle of life and death.

On the positive side the snake is associated with healing and reincarnation. In ancient Egypt, the snake Uraeus (the bellicose cobra) stood for the crown, spitting venom at the enemies of the Pharaoh and coiled around the solar disc of various other gods and goddesses such as Ra, Sekhmet and Isis.

In Eastern philosophy, the kundalini snake lays coiled around the base of the spine, symbolizing the vital energy that can be awakened through meditation practices. Kundalini refers to awakening and spiritual maturation leading to transcendent states of consciousness. Joseph Campbell recognized the symbology of the snake coiled around a staff where the staff represents the spinal column and the uncoiling serpents, the channels which cross as they rise through the chakras emerging out through the crown.

Now when the snake appears in the Garden of Eden to tempt Eve with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we are told it is Satan made manifest in its form. Here it seems the snake achieves pure evil proportions in its guise as the devil, but what it tempts Eve with is knowledge and wisdom, saying *"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* (Genesis 3:3) What woman could resist? The Christian take on this event foretold the fall of mankind at the hands of an evil serpent. In reality it foretold the fall of womankind and the demise of the goddess. A more modern theology could perhaps interpret the event as the transformative gift of knowledge and wisdom delivered at the hands of a chthonic messenger to a goddess who birthed a new era of consciousness.

The Aboriginal Dreamtime mythology speaks of the rainbow serpent who as mother creatrix pushed her way from the deep underworld, through the earth's crust to a world where all was sleeping. She travelled far and wide, leaving the imprint of her winding tracks upon the earth and then called to awaken all the plants and animals. The serpent here is another symbol of the creative force which emerges from the underworld to bring forth new life.

But what of this serpentine symbology and its significance for me personally? What positive or negative message have I discerned from my meeting? Some three months have now passed since I first espied her beauty and the transformation continues as I investigate the deepest meaning of my encounter. For me, the serpent represents kundalini shakti, the divine feminine awakening in my life. As I dance, the energy rises through me, breathing new life into my body, reminding me of my sacred purpose. I get to become that which I teach, no longer a spectator, the dance of life is enacted within, spiraling and rising, a white light ascending, bringing with it great transformation. Throughout history the snake has presaged new life, knowledge and wisdom and once again it is awakening in all women. Her message to me is the same for every women, the creative, sensual and sacred feminine life force lives inside us all. Let us invite her back to her rightful place, in our bodies, in our relationships and in the world.

May you engage in the divine dance with the serpent in your own life.

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