

The story of Dame Ragnell begins with an ambush. King Arthur is traveling alone through a forest when he is surprised by a dark knight. The knight unhorses Arthur, which technically makes the king his prisoner. Instead of holding him for ransom, however, the knight makes a bargain. He will give Arthur a riddle and one week to come up with an answer to it. If the king fails, the whole kingdom will be forfeited to the knight.

The knight's question is this: "What does a woman really want?" Like other men throughout the ages, Arthur hasn't a due. As he rides away, however, he is accosted by an aged hag who hangs on to his bridle and insists that he stop to listen to her. The crone is shudderingly ugly—hunchbacked, covered in warts, and bald except for a few pathetic gray strands sticking straight up out of the crown of her head. She walks like a duck, and her voice is somewhere between a cackle and a screech. "I am Dame Ragnell," she croaks. "I can give you the answer to the knight's riddle—if you agree to my price."

"There would be a price," sighs Arthur: "Still, anything is better than handing over my kingdom to that wretched knight."

"Then promise me the hand of Sir Gawain in marriage," cackles the hag.

Arthur hesitates for a moment, weighing the fate of the kingdom against the prospect of blighting his friend Gawain's life, and then chooses the kingdom.

"If you can solve the riddle," he says, "Gawain is yours."

"Such a simple riddle," Dame Ragnell tells him. "Really, it should be obvious. What a woman wants is to have her own way."

Sure enough, this turns out to be, the right answer: The kingdom is saved. And Gawain, being a loyal subject of his liege, agrees to go through with the marriage.

On the appointed day, he meets Dame Ragnell in the palace chapel. In her bridal gown, she looks like a dressed-up skeleton. The ladies of the court break into tears when they see the woman this noble knight is to wed. Gawain, being the model of courtesy, gives no sign of distress. But after the ceremony, he escorts his bride to her chamber, bids her goodnight, and turns to leave.

"Not so fast," cackles the crone. "You've married me this day and, by God, you shall bed me this night."

Gawain is appalled. Still, his good manners do not fail him. Taking a deep breath, he clasps the old woman in his arms and kisses her. As his Lips touch hers, a miracle happens. Dame Ragnell's warty, hunchbacked shape falls away, and she is revealed as a stunning blue-eyed blonde, the very incarnation of a medieval knight's feminine ideal.

"You have saved me," she tells Gawain, looking up at him through low, curling lashes. "I was under a curse that could only be lifted when a gentle knight kissed my lips. Now I am free to be my true self—but only for half the day. Husband, which would you prefer? Would you rather have me beautiful by day or beautiful by night?"

Gawain is in a quandary. If she remains beautiful at night, he will have to look at Dame Ragnell all day. But if she is beautiful only during the day, he will have Dame Ragnell in his marriage bed. "I don't know what to do," he says. "You choose."

"Ah," says his wife, "now you've lifted my curse completely. Because you gave me the choke, you've freed me to be my beautiful self all the twenty four hours!"

This is what *we* do for the mind when we recognize the beautiful Goddess Chiti beneath her skin of thoughts. We free her to reveal the beauty and power that lie behind those thoughts. It was Gawain's willingness to treat his ugly wife with courtesy that made the difference. In the same way, our respect for the goddess within the mind allows her to reveal her sweetness and glory.

EXERCISE: SEEING THE MIND AS THE GODDESS

Sit in a comfortable posture and close your eyes. Allow your attention to center itself on the breath. As you do, say to yourself, "My breath is a manifestation of the Goddess, the divine energy of creation." Each time a thought arises, say to yourself: "I honor this thought as an aspect of the Goddess, Consciousness. I honor this thought as *Shakti*: divine, conscious energy."

Continue this for at least ten minutes and notice how it affects the flow of thoughts in the mind.