

Women of the Way
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
July 16, 2009

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

I'm at present writing a review of a new book that will be out in a couple of months, *Zen Women* by Grace Schireson. I commend it to your attention. I want to say a few words about what I'm finding in writing this review. She does a great job of surveying, pretty quickly, because it's not that thick a book, the history of women in Chan (which is the Chinese pronunciation of Zen), and Son (which is the Korean pronunciation of Zen), and Zen (which is the Japanese pronunciation of Zen). She does a pretty good job of giving a different sense of the kinds of lives women lived in Chan / Son / Zen over the centuries. One of the things I like about it is that she speaks not only chronologically (this happened and this developed like this, etc.), but she also ties things together in themes. She'll talk about how different women in different countries and across centuries dealt with the problems of being denied entry, for example, into the institutions of Buddhism. Or how they juggled our favorite question : the householder / monastic duality. Or what kind of relationship women had with sexuality within and without the monasteries. She keeps bringing things back to contemporary concerns — how these questions are questions that in many cases are still alive and unresolved for us. That's really helpful, too.

For those who have felt a yawning gap in that we don't know much of this history, this is a great start in filling that gap in. A lot has been available, but in esoteric scholarly journals, not that accessible to many of us. So this is a great book for anybody to pick up and read.

I want to begin by touching briefly on a couple of reasons why this is important for everybody. The first is that, when we don't have this material (98% of which we haven't), we lose something. We don't have a full and complete picture of Chan / Son / Zen. We have had it edited for us. Somebody has decided, recently or a thousand years ago, what is wholesome and good for us to know about our tradition. I don't know about all of you, but I resent being told what is wholesome and good for me. I'd rather figure that out for myself. I trust that, for most of you, you'd rather figure that out for yourselves as well.

So we're not getting the full picture, and we've lost a great deal in terms of imagery, metaphor, and story. In the second part of my talk I'll delve into some of that to give you a flavor for what I'm talking about. Why not have more ways of talking about practice? About the experience of awakening? About the struggle to come to the experience of awakening? About how we live lives in the world with and without awakening? Why not have more images, metaphors, and stories? How could that be a bad thing?

The second reason it's important is that our idea of what Zen is can get incredibly narrow. Mostly, I would wager that in the Americas, what we think of as Zen is actually what young Japanese men of the late 19th century did in urban temples. That's not Zen. That's what young Japanese men of the late 19th century did in urban temples. Which is a good and wonderful thing, but to say that's Zen is to leave out a whole lot. One of the things we do in *this* Way is to bust open those unconscious constrictions of what we think of as Zen. And we've certainly done that by making it a practice of here and now, of our lives, of the images and metaphors, songs and poetry of *this* place, landscape, and ecology. We've also gone back to the Chinese origins of the koan tradition, this koan way, and have tried to revive that spirit to see how that expands our sense of what Zen is.

Just a quick, graphic example of that : In Japanese practice, which we think is Zen practice, somebody every once in a while goes around the hall during a retreat and whacks people with sticks to wake them up. We think that's Zen. But I still remember the moment I learned that in the Chinese temples, they went around and served green tea to everybody to wake them up. In that instant, my idea of what Zen is changed. Whacking people with sticks is not Zen. It's Japanese. And serving people green tea is not Zen. It's Chinese. But the thing that seems to be constant is the desire for people to be awake in the meditation hall. So how do we do that? What's our expression of that? What we do with that is serve tea at the beginning of every meditation and then the head of practice goes around a few times and gives everybody a vigorous neck and shoulder massage. That's our expression of what seems like the truth about the true thing — which is not whacking or tea — but is being awake in the hall. So anything that breaks us out of those narrow boxes and our ideas about what it is seems important, given that buddha nature pervades the universe and Zen is everywhere.

Then two specific things that have to do with our own time and circumstances are : we live in a world where a great deal of the problems among human beings are caused by the ideas we

have about each other — the generally incomplete, incorrect, not so helpful ideas that we as individuals have about other individuals, and we as groups have about other groups. Buddhism in general and in particular has this incredible jewel, which is a long-developed, sophisticated, refined practice of inquiry and deconstruction aimed at showing you the emptiness of ideas. We're endlessly turning those practices of inquiry and deconstruction on our senses of ourselves. For those who have been doing it for awhile, it really works. You begin to see the emptiness of most of your ideas and most of the things that have been solid and real about yourself. We could use those same methods and practices and turn them on ideas about race, gender, sexual and affectional preferences, religions, political beliefs — name your topic. We could deconstruct them as well using these tools of Buddhism, and see the emptiness of most of our ideas about other people and other groups. We haven't done that. Buddhism hasn't yet made that offering, which I think could be a potentially important one to the world. One of the things we can do is deconstruct our ideas about gender as much as we can our ideas about self.

The last reason this material is important is that most of us in the Americas are not monastics. Most of us are householders doing some kind of practice. In Asian countries, for the last almost couple thousand years, women were often denied the opportunity to practice as monastics, denied admission into the institutions. They had to figure out other ways of practice. They had to figure out ways of practice within households, within the domestic situations they lived in. That could be incredibly valuable information for us. They worked on this for hundreds of years under much more difficult circumstances than we find ourselves in. Wouldn't it be great to have access to what they figured out? Wouldn't it be great to know what conclusions they came to in their practices and ways of being people of Zen?

I always think, in regard to this, of a group of Chinese women in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in China who were called Daoren — people of the Dao, people of the Way. They were somewhere in between monastics and lay people. They didn't go into convents or monasteries, but they often did live in communal situations together. They didn't live householder's lives, but they were living in the world.

They were an interesting hybrid that appeals to us, perhaps, today. In the words of the Sufi poet Rabi'a, they were eating the bread of this world while doing the work of that world. I think a lot of us relate to that. We feel a connection with that way of living; we don't want to

live what we may think of as an unthinking, consumerist householder's life, and yet we also don't want to go into a monastery, so we're looking for a way to be committed to the Way while living in the world. And here are these women who figured this out hundreds of years ago. How great it would be to know what they did.

That's my speech for why this matters.

Now I want to turn to one of many examples from the book and give the kind of dharma talk that I can give only because we have this material. I couldn't have given this talk last month. It's about a 17th-century Chinese woman named Xinggang, who against great odds and obstacles ended up practicing and becoming a renowned teacher in the Linji or Rinzai lineage — the koan lineage that is our own ancestry. I want to read a bunch of her words because it's so glorious to have the words themselves, and then make some comments on some of the things she said.

This is a journal she kept when she was doing her training. At that time in China it was very common for people to go off somewhere to do years-long secluded trainings. That tradition survives more in Tibetan Buddhism than anywhere else, where one-year, three-year, or nine-year retreats are not uncommon. She went off to do a year-long retreat. She doesn't say why she did this, but I'm interested in why she built herself a meditation hut in the cemetery where her parents were buried so she could take care of their graves. There's something about that that feels like an immediate statement : *I'm going to do this most intense practice of going off on my own, but I'm going to take care of my parents' graves while I do it.* She's trying to bridge that gap between ordinary householder's life and religious life. She says of this time,

I lived in deep seclusion with few comforts but determined to persevere. My body seated upright with grave dignity, I made no distinctions between inner and outer.

Those of you who have braved your way through the *Xinxinming*, the *Trust in Mind* that we were looking at earlier this year, immediately see that emphasis on the breaking down of dualities : no distinctions between inner and outer.

I pushed against emptiness [Isn't that a great phrase?], cutting off entanglements. Once the distinction between inner and outer was gone [In other words, once the dualities had dropped away and I was no longer spending all my time sorting, judging, and classifying everything], then all entanglements were dissolved.

So it was the dropping away of dualities that allowed this sense of being entangled in things to also drop away. Not having relationships with things, but feeling entangled in things.

When there is neither shape nor form, one sees oneself face to face, and can gather up a great kalpa [a kalpa is a vast length of time] in a single point and spread a speck of dust over the ten directions. [The ways we usually think of things — big / small, long / short, all of that — completely disappears.] Then you experience no restrictions, no restraints, and you're free to go where you please.

This is by a woman who's living in a hut for a year, but feeling completely free to go wherever she pleases in the sense of her own heart-mind.

Sometime after this she was made a dharma heir of her teacher and became a teacher in the Linji or Rinzai lineage. At that time, you were given a staff to symbolize your teaching authority, which was called the wish-fulfiller. This is a poem she wrote about receiving Dharma transmission.

Fingers fold around the wish-fulfiller, the lineage continues;
[I love that she claims it. *I put my hands around the wish-fulfiller and the lineage continues with me.* What a great encouragement that is for all of us, because the lineage also continues with us.]
As both past and present disappear in a dazzling emptiness.
When you understand the nature of the true wish-fulfiller,
Then the unchanging Absolute will rest in the palm of your hand.

Here's a question to take away with you tonight : What is the true nature of the wish-fulfiller? What is the true wish-fulfiller for you? For all of us? And how, if we know that, does the Absolute come to rest in the palm of our own hand, just as the staff rested in the palm of her hand?

She messed about with koans, much like we do. Here's a poem she wrote to help one of the nuns she was working with through her koan practice (I'm going to start writing you all poems; you'll be sorry) :

Understand the ordinary mind, and realize one who is naturally complete.
[What have we been talking about in the koan salon? Ordinary mind is the Way. Who is naturally complete?]
Ask urgently who you were before your mother and father were born.
[Which, of course, is the Original Face koan : "Quickly, quickly, without thinking good or evil, before your parents were born, what is your original face?"]
When you see through the method that underlies them all,
[Another question : What is the method that underlies them all?]

The mountain blossoms and flowing streams will rejoice with you.

Just a few more examples of her words. I feel a different flavor than we're used to, especially from the Linji school. The Linji school was known for its abruptness, shouts, hits, and that kind of stuff. There's a beautiful bracing quality to that, and she shows this other side using exactly the same material, having Dharma transmission in that line. She says :

There is no greater suffering than to be caught up in the bustling of worldly affairs, there is no greater joy than cultivating the way with one-pointed mind. [That's not often said : 'There's no greater joy' ...] The Way is no other than the greatest joy in this world. Abandoning the Way to seek out pleasure is like throwing away food and seeking hunger!

There are a couple of expressions of sorrow. This is from one of her dharma heirs; listen to the tenderness in these poems she wrote when Xinggang died. There's no fear of emotion here, no fear of the human heart, no fear of having feelings. That seems like a tremendously important piece we're picking back up. These are two verses called "Mourning the Nun Who Was My Master."

I.

The moon sinks west as autumn comes to a close;
The fly-whisk, untouched, lies at the head of her seat.
Outside the window, the branches of a single tree weep;
A wind arises and rain drips mournfully in the meditation hall.

There's no drama, no indulgence in emotion, but there's no turning away from it, either. There's no thinking that the right thing to do is be stoic and talk about emptiness at such a time.

The second poem :

II.

For the past twenty years, she has been our teacher,
Truly unique and alone, her staff flashing up and down.
When did the smoke from her quarters dwindle away,
Leaving her children and grandchildren as they were before?

By children and grandchildren she means her students. There's something so poignant to me about 'When did the smoke from her quarters dwindle away?' They must have seen that on the grounds from her home.

Then again, this same dharma heir, Yigong, wrote another poem when her dear sister in the Way died a couple of years later. This is what she wrote about her dharma sister Yichuan :

Alas, there was no one like you, my dharma sister, the monk from Banruo. Your heart was like that of a naked child, your actions like those of the ancients ... You were clever while appearing awkward, wise while appearing stupid, eloquent while appearing inarticulate, iron-strong while appearing soft. You treated others as you would treat yourself, and fully exhausted the possibilities of both humans and heaven. You and I shared the same way of life, but you have abandoned me and entered the realm of the deathless.

Here's one of many anecdotes when Xinggang was still alive and teaching : She went back to her old training monastery, where she'd been the first woman to train in a monastery that had been only men up until that point. When she got there she saw that the monks were suffering badly from the cold winter. So she went back to her convent, and she and all her nuns spent several months sewing leggings for the monks, and they delivered them to them. No sense of *It's good for you to lose your toes to frostbite*. She just got everybody together and they started sewing, made leggings, and probably saved a toe or two. Again, a kind of different flavor.

I'll close with this. At one point she was talking about her own relationship to the lineage, to the Linji tradition with its sticks and shouts and blows and kicks. She said,

In the gates and halls of the elders, the work of the lineage flourishes.
Knowing my own lazy ignorance, I've hidden away in order to be still.
Esoteric methods, blows and shouts —
I'm giving them all a rest.

Again, her absolute confidence in the gates and halls of the elders, the gates and halls of this place where people have practiced for a long, long time. The work of the lineage flourishes, even though I'm giving esoteric methods, blows and shouts a rest for a while.

That's the kind of stuff that's available in [this book]. I'll stop there and welcome any questions or comments you might have.

Q1 : Did you say these words were in hiding?

JIS : Yes, they've been locked in the vaults of temples, the records of temples, and in libraries. Pretty inaccessible except for people who read the languages and are interested

in that kind of scholarship. One of the things the author does that I like, is to talk about what it was like for her to discover the records of this teacher, which are so extensive. She was just blown away that there was all this material. I had never heard any of this. This is all new to me. Barbara Ruche ended up founding an institute whose sole purpose is the propagation of this material, because she was so thrilled to find it. She also brings in what it's like for us to discover it now.

There was a scholar, I think it's John McRae, who talked about how *gongan*, which is the original pronunciation of koan and means public case, also referred to the table the case was lying on in a court of law. He actually thinks it's the table they were referring to, and so the koan becomes a kind of table in the middle of the room upon which we all lay our interpretations and understandings of the case, which I quite like as an interpretation.

Thank you all.