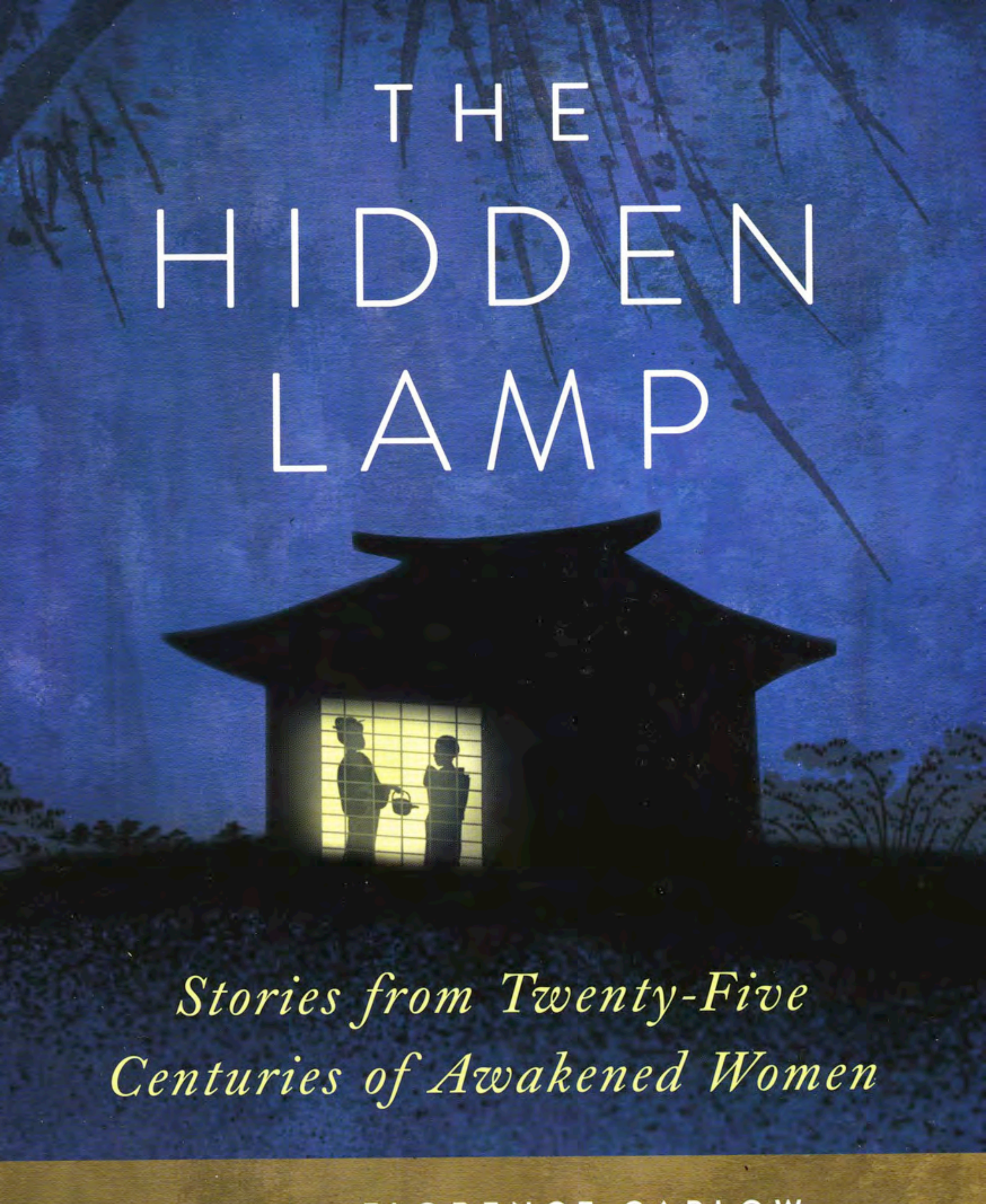

THE HIDDEN LAMP

Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women

EDITED BY **FLORENCE CAPLOW**
AND **SUSAN MOON**

FOREWORD BY **NORMAN FISCHER**

"An invaluable resource for seekers everywhere. These are treasures unearthed."
—SHARON SALZBERG, AUTHOR OF *REAL HAPPINESS*

Lingzhao's Helping

CHINA, EIGHTH CENTURY

One day, Layman Pang and his daughter, Lingzhao, were out selling bamboo baskets. Coming down off a bridge, the Layman stumbled and fell. When Lingzhao saw this, she ran to her father's side and threw herself to the ground.

"What are you doing?" cried the Layman.

"I saw you fall so I'm helping," replied Lingzhao.

"Luckily no one was looking," remarked the Layman.

Joan Sutherland's Reflection

The Pang family has been the embodiment of enlightened householder life in China since the eighth century: living modestly, deeply committed to the Way and each other, full of humor and insight, unabashedly eccentric. During their lifetimes, a revolution in Chan was underway, and awakening was now understood as something that happens in relationship, in encounters and conversations. The earliest koans are records of such encounters, and the ones involving the Pangs show that deep realization is just as possible in domesticity as in monastic life, for women as for men.

Layman Pang renounced his wealth to live simply, befriending some of the greatest Chan teachers of his day. Mrs. Pang seems to have been simultaneously no-nonsense and profoundly connected to the mysterious. About their son we know little except that he worked in the fields, growing the family's food. For many, the most luminous member of the family is the daughter, Lingzhao, whose name means "spirit shining."

Lingzhao and her father were inseparable, supporting the family by making and selling bamboo utensils; later she accompanied him on his pilgrimages. Once when the Layman tripped, Lingzhao threw herself to the ground next to him. She explained herself with the immortal words, "I saw you fall so I'm helping."

Lingzhao's action obliterates the idea that there is a helper and a helped. Compassion isn't a commodity we deliver but a commitment, according to Chan, to help liberate the intimacy already inherent in any situation. "What is most intimate?" the koans suggest that we ask. Usually the most intimate response to another's difficulty begins with the willingness not to flee. Fleeing can take the form of abandoning the situation, and it can also mean escaping into "helping," into a whole constellation of ideas about what ought to happen. Intimacy is being willing to stay and accompany and listen, to be vulnerable and surprised and flexible. It's a willingness to fall with someone else, and see what becomes possible when we do.

Layman Pang's final remark does not mean that he's worried about some third person judging the event; the one who fortunately isn't looking is ourselves—that is, our inner tendency to monitor and pass judgment, distancing us from our interactions even as they're happening. How free it is when we aren't keeping score, how potentially generous a life lived with no one looking!

At another level, Lingzhao's gesture suggests that we are all falling together, lifetime after lifetime, through the universe. Right now we are falling through this world, which holds out an invitation to us: come see what life is like here. We find that it's made of flame and water, wind and earth, sorrow and beauty, love and fear, light and dark, and everything in between. As we fall, if we pick and choose, instead of accepting all of life as it offers itself, we're in some way refusing the invitation. If we say to life in this world, "I'll take your sunsets but leave your diseases," we're being stingy in a way that hurts ourselves most of all. In "Lingzhao's Shining Grasses" (page 271 of this book), Lingzhao says that as we walk (or fall) the Way, the heart-mind of the ancestors—which is another way of saying the deepest reality—is in *every* blade of grass, and they all hold us up.

When Lingzhao throws herself down, her kindness is clear and unhesitating, completely without self-concern. It's also funny. Those are the qualities of her enlightenment. This is what it looks like when all the energy bound up in the small story we're constantly telling ourselves, in all our reactions and opinions and judgments, has been liberated into awakening. It's a free place, and Lingzhao lived there to the end. She, like others in the old stories, chose the time of her death: in the koan "Lingzhao Goes First" (page 185 of this book), she sat down, folded her hands, and disappeared. The Japanese poet Ryoan Keigo wrote that her basket had completely poured out its contents, and she shot out of life like an arrow.

Koans employ the language of art and myth to express the things that matter most in life. If you want to understand compassion, for instance, they offer no definitions. But they invite us to experience for ourselves what compassion feels like through completely absorbing and being absorbed by the koan. Over time the koans start falling down next to each other, illuminating each other, like Lingzhao, to help.

When someone you love is hurt, you want to help him or her. How do you find the appropriate response? How can anyone be helped? And is it possible to join another in suffering?