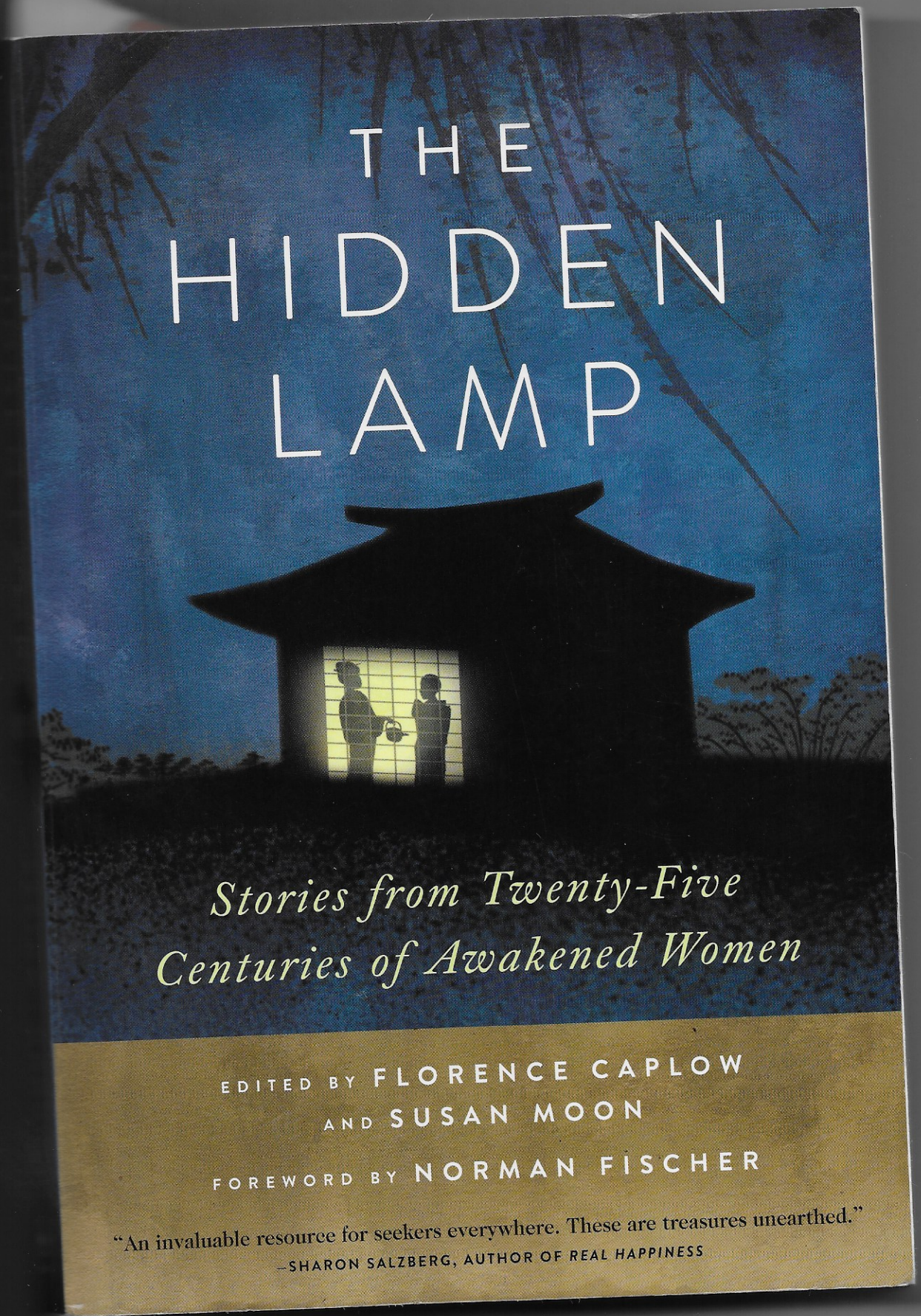

THE
HIDDEN
LAMP
Stories from Twenty-Five
Centuries of Awakened Women
EDITED BY FLORENCE CAPLOW
AND SUSAN MOON
FOREWORD BY NORMAN FISCHER
"An invaluable resource for seekers everywhere. These are treasures unearthed."
—SHARON SALZBERG, AUTHOR OF REAL HAPPINESS

Contributors and Reflections

In the classical koan collections, like the *Blue Cliff Record*, each koan has a commentary written by the compiler. In this book, each story has a short reflection by a different woman teacher.

Because there are many more than a hundred contemporary women teachers, we established general criteria to help us choose whom to invite. Generally, we invited women who have been teaching the Dharma—or in a few cases writing about the Dharma—for a long time, though we invited both prominent and less well-known teachers. Some of the women we invited were unable to contribute, but most accepted our invitation with generous enthusiasm. Because of the richness of women's practice at this time, there were many powerful women teachers whom we were not able to invite or who were not available. We wish we could have included them all.

Our intention from the beginning has been to bring a diversity of voices and perspectives to the book. We invited women who teach in a wide range of Buddhist traditions, including Zen (from Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese traditions), Pure Land, Vipassana, and Vajrayana. We invited women of diverse ethnicities, racial backgrounds, and sexual preferences. We invited both nuns and laywomen. We invited women from all over the world.

Due to our own limitations as translators, we were unable to invite women who don't write in English. This limits the range of the book to some extent, but ultimately our commentators represent all major Buddhist traditions and come from thirteen different countries in Asia, Africa, North America, Central America, Australia / New Zealand, and Europe.

There is one significant way that the reflections in this book differ from the commentaries in traditional koan collections (besides the obvious difference of being written by women!). Each contributor explores the question of how the story speaks to her in her own life and Dharma practice, and this encourages us, the readers, to do the same. It is, after all, in our very vulnerability as humans, subject to old

age, sickness, and death, that we find our freedom. And many of the stories affirm this. It's encouraging to know that when we feel lonely or afraid, this doesn't mean we are not strong enough to follow the Dharma path. Our teachers and ancestors have been there before us.

None of the reflections on the stories, no matter how esteemed their authors, are final answers in any sense—this is why they are called "reflections." Each is one woman's perspective, opening the curtains on a view from a particular window into the landscape of the koan.

Each reflection is followed by a series of questions that have arisen for us as we, the compilers of the book, have lived with the story. This echoes the traditional structure of the classical koan collections, where each koan is accompanied by a commentary and a "pointer."

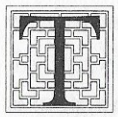
These stories are invitations extended to you across the centuries. An old woman at the side of the road has some tea and rice cakes for you. Asan's rooster crows for you. Ziyong borrows the voice of the mountains to speak to you. Dipa Ma reaches her hand across the aisle to you when the plane encounters turbulence. A Brahman wife tells you that you're not the only one who burned the family's curry dinner and that you too can wake up at the sound of the sizzling.

All these stories are pointing to spectacular, profound, and potentially life-changing teachings. We twenty-first-century Buddhist practitioners can take these stories and koans into our own practice; we can bring them to life in our bodies and hearts; they can put us in touch with our relatives, both known and long-lost, and wake us up to the truth that we are all connected, *all* of us, across time and space. Everyone is invited to the family reunion.

Zenshin Florence Caplow and Reigetsu Susan Moon
Shoalwater House, Tokeland, Washington

Soma Rebukes Mara

INDIA, SIXTH CENTURY BCE

 HE NUN Soma was a disciple of the Buddha. One day she was deep in meditation beneath a tree in a forest grove. Mara, the Lord of Delusion, approached her, cloaked in invisibility. He whispered in her ear, "Because a woman has a naturally limited consciousness, and the realm of wisdom is hard to reach, no woman has the ability to attain it."

Soma recognized Mara and rebuked him, saying, "How could a woman's consciousness be a hindrance when her heart is set on liberation? Am I a woman in these matters, or a man? This question has no power over me. Mara, begone!"

And he was gone.

Barbara Joshin O'Hara's Reflection

No one—and certainly not a woman—survives childhood without being imprinted with their culture's ideas of who one is and what one can or cannot do. Growing up in Ireland in the 1950s, I remember my father holding forth with eloquence and conviction on a wide range of topics. When my mother, eager to chip in with her own observations, voiced her opinion, he would inquire with a rhetorical flourish: "My dear, why do you always have to add?" The silence that followed made it clear that his opinion alone mattered.

It was a struggle to find my own voice. Convinced that no one was interested, not only did I not talk about my own experience, I discounted it. Integrating all aspects of my experience was a challenge,

as I disowned feelings of need and desire and prided myself on getting by with very little. When I found Zen, I seemed to take very naturally to sitting. I could face the wall without too much difficulty and even fancied that I had less ego to contend with than my peers. But after my mother died, I entered a Zen monastery for three years, and there I had frequent encounters with Mara.

Mara is the internalized voice of conditioning that keeps us in thrall to the familial and cultural messages that maintain the status quo. Mara isn't interested in liberation; it is interested in control. It will argue that its job is to protect us from pain, all the while binding us with reactive patterns of anger, avoidance, or addiction. By keeping us in the grip of our conditioned selves—for example, with a compulsive need to please in order to feel accepted—Mara has all the power, just like any jailer. But when we open to our own experience, whatever it is, and meet it with courage, we have an opportunity to rediscover our inherent wholeness and perfection, and then Mara is a goner.

Over and over, during those three years in the monastery, I had the chance to see how the inner template I brought to inchoate experience reproduced familiar dynamics. Feelings I'd originally turned away from because they were overwhelming—despair over not being heard, seen, or valued—were reawakened, and by dint of endless hours of sesshin during which there was no escape, I was visited by Mara time and again. He would assume different forms and shapes, but often enough he came in the guise of an inner protest at how unfair everything seemed. These reactive emotions of anger, I realized, were hiding deeper layers of older hurt. By bathing in the awareness of this rawness deep at the core, I discovered the salve of compassion.

When the Buddha was sitting with the firm intention to become enlightened, Mara tempted him with all kinds of distractions—power, lust, anger—questioning his capacity for liberation by asking, "What gives you the right to seek awakening?" Shakyamuni responded by pointing to the earth. He simply was, and this being, this presence, was enough, as earth was his witness.

Similarly, Soma's intention to liberate herself is the true measure

of her worth. When Mara suggests that she doesn't have what it takes because she's a woman, she asserts: "How can a woman's consciousness be a hindrance when her heart is set on liberation?" When one cultivates the capacity to be present and fully open to one's experience, such categories as "male" or "female," "good" or "bad," "sacred" or "profane" no longer apply, for one discovers in their place a dynamic fluidity of form, the dance of emptiness itself. Soma is telling us that when we meet whatever arises in the field of consciousness with awareness, and can acknowledge but not identify with the contents of our mind, we say "No" to Mara. This is how one is liberated from the constraints of a limited self.

Soma's spiritual genius shows the importance of questioning the imprints of our conditioning, of examining the automatic ways we perpetuate an identity that keeps us feeling inadequate. Soma shows us how a fearless resolve gives the courage to dislodge even the most prevalent beliefs.

My own sense is that Mara is never vanquished, once and for all, just as our human conditioning is never fully overcome. When our practice is strong enough, we can heed our own reactivity and, out of the stillness, reach for what is true in the moment, and from there, respond appropriately.

What do you say to the voice that tells you, "You aren't ready yet?"
What happens to delusion when it's recognized?