from The Hidden Lamp,
Ed. F. Caplow & S. Moon

The Old Woman and the Fire Poker

JAPAN, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Master Hakuin Ekaku used to tell his students about an old woman who had a teashop nearby, praising her understanding of Zen. The students didn't believe that such a person could have much wisdom, and so they would go to the teashop to find out for themselves.

Whenever the woman saw them coming she could tell at once whether they had come for tea or to look into her grasp of Zen. In the former case, she served them graciously. In the latter, she beckoned them to come behind the screen to the back of the teashop. The instant they obeyed, she struck them with a fire poker.

Nine out of ten of them did not escape her beating.

Jane Hirshfield's Reflection

"There are mountains hidden in mountains, there is hiddenness hidden in hiddenness," wrote Eihei Dogen. Hiddenness steepens also this story of the unrecognized teacher outside the gate, who keeps her abbot's stick, a handy fire poker, tucked behind a rice paper screen.

Preconception hides the actual behind a screen. One preconception here is surely gender—these monks are skeptical of the practice of a woman. Status can blind as well. The monks are home-leavers, wandering clouds. The old woman lives in the world of commerce and thirst, of road dust and fatigue. How could her understanding compare to their vows, long effort, and strict meditation?

Another story punctures similar issues. Two monks find themselves

on the bank of a fast-flowing river alongside an old woman who also needs to cross. One lifts her onto his shoulders. Many miles later, the other turns and asks how he could defile himself so, breaking the precepts by touching a woman. The first monk replies, "I put that grandmother down hours ago; why are you carrying her still?"

Who, then, lives in the relative and in preconception: the woman who simply serves tea and then wipes the counter with a clean rag, or the robed monks who question her practice's heart? This koan unravels both fabrics. Come into the shop with anything extra—competitiveness, self-importance, comparative ego—and the fire poker waits. For those who enter with wholehearted thirst, who taste with their own tongues, fragrant green leaves will appear.

This koan offers a path without extra. Its affection for us is a flavor poured without category, beyond definition. Lay practice is acknowledged in Zen, at least in theory. Vimalakirti, Layman Pang and his family, the oxherding pictures: each shows a thorough practice not separate from others. But this old woman goes even further; she just makes tea. Nameless, almost invisible, a person of no rank expressing wisdom as naturally as she might reach back in the night for a pillow—throughout Zen, we find realization described in such images, a mountain whose grasses any donkey can browse. "What is Buddha?" one student asks. "Have you eaten your breakfast?" the teacher replies. "Yes." "Then wash your bowl." The sixth Zen ancestor—whose practice had been in the kitchen, sorting rice—he too is in this old woman's family tree.

When I left my years of formal training in Zen—years I still feel as the gyroscope and diamond at my life's center—and began to make my way as a poet, I didn't hide my Zen background, but I didn't announce it. I didn't want my poems hung on a Buddhist coat peg or read with any preexisting expectation. As a young student, I'd learned of the four traditional paths of practice—priest, monk, layperson, teahouse lady. As I moved back toward poetry, the old woman's wholehearted yet invisible practice simply felt right: to live and write with an unlabeled and unlabeling awareness. Then, in 1999, Bill Moyers interviewed me

for a poetry documentary on public television, and surprised me by asking, "I've heard that in your Zen you do something called 'teahouse practice.' What does that mean?" I could say only, "It means we've just burned down the teahouse." Then I told the story of the old woman's practice of boiling water and hidden, fragrant leaves, how people liked to stop at her teahouse without knowing why.

The woman of this story has a Western sister—a barmaid in the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*. The hero, wild with death-grief, searching for an herb that will make him immortal, asks for directions from the barmaid. She counsels him to accept death, return home, love his wife, raise his children, enjoy the warmth of sun and the coolness of rain. Gilgamesh ignores her, finds and then loses the herb, and goes home to build an immense wall around his city. This image, to me, is no symbol of civilization's beginning, nor even of a necessary individuation. Rather, Gilgamesh makes a choice toward ego and self-separation, born of death's denial and acceptance's failure. We call *Gilgamesh* the first epic. Might it not equally be our earliest tale of the tragic? The barmaid and the old lady of the teahouse meanwhile keep offering this moment's generous, fragrant cup, washing it clean again when it's been emptied.

Walk into the old woman's teashop today, you'd still get either tea or a thrashing. But her koan? This book? She'd burn them right up, stirring the ashes gladly with her plain iron poker.

If you try to prove that someone else is a fool, you're bound to be made a fool of. But how do you investigate the wisdom of another? Would you go to that old woman for tea or for her Zen beating? What did her tea taste like?

Let's Become Enlightened Together

KOREA, TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Australian nun Chi Kwang Sunim had the opportunity to meet a 102-year-old Korean nun, Kye Jeon Sunim, who had meditated for years. When Chi Kwang came into her presence, the old nun was sitting upright, with a rosary of black beads and a rosary of white beads twirling together in her left hand, silently repeating her mantra and gazing into space in front of her. The old nun grabbed Chi Kwang's hand and pulled her close.

When Chi Kwang yelled in the hard-of-hearing nun's ear, "I'm a foreigner!" the old nun held up the mingled black and white beads and said, "Let's practice together."

When Chi Kwang asked the old nun about her past, she replied, "What past?" Then the old nun smiled and said, "Let's become enlightened together."

Alexandra Porter's Reflection

This koan is from the Korean tradition. When I was young, I traveled to Korea, and there I met a lot of wonderful and powerful Korean nuns. Some of them ran their own temples, taking care of anyone who came to explore the Buddha's path. During my first visit, one of those nuns inspired me to practice meditation, not by trying to teach me anything or by asking questions, but just by being helpful and human. She was just there, providing what I needed. Her example made a strong impression on me and now I have been practicing within the Korean tradition and running a temple myself for more than twenty years.