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ESTHER:

*Me, My Daughter, and Five Men*

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*Men, women, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters—  
Tell me, to whom belongs the Dharma?  
If you say that True Self is neither man nor woman,  
What will you do on your honeymoon night?*

**KOAN**

Esther and her daughter were two females living with five males: Esther's husband and four sons. Esther asked: *How can I hear my daughter's voice among five men?*

**REFLECTION**

Sometimes people write that gender has no place in Zen, that it's an artificial construct in a practice that urges us to realize our lack of an individual, separate self. If there is no such thing as a separate self, what is this thing called *man* and *woman*, *male* and *female*?

I am not a separate self, and at the same time I am different. So how do you honor the individual voice of each member of the family? How do you listen to the soft and the loud, the shy and the bold, the quiet and the noisy? How do you respect the different personalities of boys and girls without falling into stereotypes, without dictating preferences?

Don't we all have our personal preferences? Our society has preferences, too: for the prosperous over the poor, white people over those of color, the young over the aged, men over women. All are equal in their differences. Intuitively, we think that our equality lies in our oneness, but it actually lies in our differences, in the sense that no single "difference" is bigger, more important, or of higher value than any other difference—except according to someone's preference.

Is it easy to raise a daughter in our society? Is it easy to read that millions of female fetuses have been aborted in Asia and millions of girls everywhere left illiterate, uneducated, unfed, and uncared for because they're girls? My mother remembered that in her large, poor family in Eastern Europe, the girls helped their mother prepare the food and then watched as the boys came in and ate; they didn't eat until the boys finished, and then they only ate what was left. For many years, she disliked women, calling them weak and spineless, and she preferred the company of men. She wished to be one of the strong ones, the loud ones, the ones who could eat first.

How do you hear your daughter's voice without succumbing to stereotypes, without expecting her voice to be softer than her brothers', more tentative and submissive? Could she be as loud as they are, as rambunctious and assertive? How long will it take before someone—at home, in school, or a neighbor or friend—finally tells her that girls don't behave that way?

Freedom comes out of realizing that every single thing has its place and position, that each and every person and thing is the One Body—men, women, young, old, black, white, plants, animals, sentient and insentient beings. For this reason, isn't our practice to let go of all labels and return again and again to the question: Who am I? Answers come up right away: a woman, a teacher, a writer, the one making dinner, the one walking the dog, a daughter speaking to her mother by phone. But all these things can change, so who are you really?

The practice is to dwell in that question rather than in the label. Once you see that the One Body expresses itself equally in all the different forms of life, doesn't honoring one form over another miss the point? If that One Body includes everything without exception, how can you question the value of, or denigrate, any of its expressions?

Nevertheless, it has taken years to uncover the names of female Buddhist nuns and teachers who have taught this precious dharma since the time of Shakyamuni. The names of male teachers have been chanted from the beginning, but only recently have some of us added the names of female teachers as well. Most of the names of women teachers have disappeared into the dust of history, and for this reason, in dedicating our prayers and chants to them, we invoke *all Women Honored Ones whose names have been forgotten or left unsaid*.

Awareness of how others discriminate or look down on us due to our gender, color, or religion helps us respond appropriately. But getting resentful and self-righteous shows my attachment to the label. It will provide a temporary answer to the question of who I am, but it will not help me sit in the space of not-knowing.

THE BOOK OF HOUSEHOLDER KOANS

Does your true nature have anything to do with labels or descriptions?

My husband had a major stroke that paralyzed half his body. He was quite disabled even after two years of therapy and exercise, and a bout with cancer did not help. People called him a stroke victim, or a stroke survivor, but is that what he was?

Once we were being interviewed for a film on Zen and peace making. He stared straight at the interviewer with two patches on his nose and forehead from the cancer surgery and radiation, half his face swollen and black and blue from a bad fall he'd had the previous night, and stitches at his temple fastening a deep, painful cut. He was worn and tired that day, his eyes dimmer than before but still containing his old spark, and he spoke slowly, with effort.

"We had in our house a big glass vase. One day it broke into many pieces. Tell me, was it whole then, and is it now broken? It was whole when it was in one piece, and it's whole when it's in many pieces. In fact, each small fragment is the whole." He thought for a minute, then continued: "Two years ago I had a big stroke. Anyone seeing me before my stroke would have said that I was whole. Now, two years after the stroke, and with cancer, tell me, am I any less whole?"

Whole—and different. All of us are equal and different manifestations of this one great life. When I'm aware of this, can I "listen" to the butterfly as deeply as I listen to another human being? Can I bear witness to the sharp quills of porcupines, the slither of snakes, the large, smelly turd piles left by horses? Can I bear witness equally to boys and girls, women and men, honoring each for his and her difference, his and her uniqueness?

*Look carefully at anything: a pen, a tree, a bottle of water, your child. Describe it in your mind. Now look again and let go of the words and labels you came up with earlier. Tell me, what remains?*