

31. Ryonen Scars Her Face

JAPAN, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



AS A YOUNG WOMAN, Ryonen Genso was an attendant to the empress and was known for her beauty and intelligence. When the empress died, she felt the impermanence of life, and she decided to become a nun.

Ryonen traveled to the city of Edo in search of a Zen teacher. The first teacher refused her because of her beauty. Then she asked Master Hakuo Dotai, who also refused her. He could see her sincere intention, but he too said that her womanly appearance would cause problems for the monks in his monastery.

Afterward, she saw some women pressing fabric, and she took up a hot iron and held it against her face, scarring herself. Then she wrote this poem on the back of a small mirror:

To serve my empress, I burned incense to perfume my
exquisite clothes.

Now as a homeless mendicant I burn my face to enter
a Zen temple.

The four seasons flow naturally like this,
who is this now in the midst of these changes?

She returned to Hakuo and gave him the poem. Hakuo immediately accepted her as a disciple. She became abbess of his temple when he died and later founded her own temple. Before her death she wrote the following poem:

This is the sixty-sixth autumn I have seen.
 The moon still lights my face.
 Don't ask me about the meaning of Zen teachings—
 just listen to what the pines and cedars say on a windless night.

WENDY EGYOKU NAKAO'S REFLECTION

When my sangha members pay homage to our Buddhist women ancestors during morning offerings, among the names we chant is that of "Ryonen Genso, who sacrificed her beauty." Whenever I hear her name, I feel the hot iron singe the skin in the early dawn.

Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

What is this that awakens so powerfully within that it compels you to act—as only you can—to know the truth of your unique life?

When I was in my mid-twenties, I experienced a profound stirring within. It came unexpectedly while I was attending my first Zen session on a dare that I could not be quiet and sit still for an entire week. Sometime during those days, there arose within me a powerful force seeking to know itself. In a short time, I had left my marriage, career, and home and instinctively followed the call to fulfill this longing that is blood in the veins.

What is it that slumbers and then stirs so powerfully within us that the "little me" that we so often identify with is rendered helpless and insignificant? What is it that awakens to and then heeds the call to return home? As Ryonen herself asked, "Who is this now in the midst of these changes?"

Ryonen sacrificed her beauty so that what was most important to her, her spiritual quest into the Great Matter of life and death, would be taken seriously in the male-dominated Zen world of her day. In the West today, a woman need not take the extreme measure of disfigurement in response to sexism. Ryonen's horrifying action expresses the depth of her commitment; she enters an endless lifegiving stream of women courageously claiming our rightful inheritance as buddhas. Each of us as women today has sacrificed in order to pursue this

call. What have you as a woman given up in order to practice? Perhaps you gave up having a child, or a special relationship, or time with your partner and children, or becoming financially secure in your old age. Perhaps your so-called sacrifice is not seen as sacrifice at all, or is at least mitigated by the wisdom that "the four seasons flow naturally like this."

Ryonen's act of burning and scarring, not unheard of in her time, also reverberates in the spiritual quest of women today, in questions like these: How do we find our voice in traditions that value silence and are bound by historical and cultural imperatives to ignore the voice of women? How do we women claim our sense of personal power and a healthy sense of self in traditions that confirm the truth of selflessness? How do we women affirm our bodies in traditions that emphasize abstaining from desire? How do we find freedom within the forms that were born out of male domination?

Today, the vibrant quest of women into the Great Matter is reshaping how Zen is practiced in the West. Women intuitively bring forth relational and horizontal forms, such as councils, circles, and shared stewarding, as skillful means that manifest the truth of inter-relatedness. These forms of cocreating do not depend on hierarchical domination and, at the same time, affirm the life of all without compromising its depth.

Zen Buddhism speaks to liberation, to fully realizing and freely living this journey wherever we are, however we are, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, including relationships, family life, and work. There is much laid out for us in the tradition on how to awaken and ripen in the depths of this transient life—as we are living it. Ryonen herself plumbed these depths and implores us to just listen to what the pines and cedars say on a windless night.

And there is no doubt that the deeper we plunge into this awakening, the more expansive is our awareness and our caring, and the more we are called to address the conditions in which awakening can arise. Ryonen had her own temple and built bridges and schools in service to her community. Today, the moon still lights our faces in

the here and now, and we all must work to be of service on behalf of the well-being of others. So how about for you? In what ways is your practice broadening the heart? Serving others? Helping to transform your home, your community and organizations, and the world?
Aiiiiiieeeeeeeee!



What would you be willing to sacrifice in order to awaken and find freedom? What would be too great a barrier?