

Yu Uses Her Full Strength

CHINA, TWELFTH CENTURY

THE LAYWOMAN Yu Daopo made doughnuts for a living. She also studied Chan—Chinese Zen—with Master Langye Huijue, who told her to contemplate Linji’s phrase, “the true person of no rank.” One day she and her husband were delivering doughnuts, and as they walked through the street, they met a beggar who was singing “Happiness in the Lotus Land.” Yu was suddenly enlightened and she threw the tray of doughnuts to the ground.

Her husband scolded her: “Have you gone crazy?”

Yu slapped him, saying, “This is not a realm you understand.” She then went to see Langye, who immediately verified her awakening.

One day after this, Langye asked the assembly, “Which one is ‘the true person of no rank’?”

Yu shouted out this verse:

There is a true person of no rank, who has six arms and
three heads.

When she uses her full strength to cut, Mount Hua is split
into two.

Her strength is like the ever-flowing water,
not caring about the coming of spring.

KOKYO MEG PORTER ALEXANDER’S REFLECTION

Thirty-five years ago, when I put on my black robe and headed to the mountain monastery of Tassajara, stories like this—though always of

men—were an entry to Zen practice for me; stories made enlightenment something personal and embodied and radical.

Most of us who came to Zen in the 1970s were young and sincere. We were desperate to be comfortable with ourselves and, at the same time, determined to make a difference in the world. We brought all forms of suffering with us to the cushion, to the embrace of Suzuki Roshi’s teaching. And with practice, through practice, something in us was transformed. The intensity of practice opened our senses, allowed us to hold our difficulties and cultivate our strength.

When I read the story of Yu, I imagine a woman I might have known or been, someone needing to break open, someone prepared for the effort this would take. A woman whose heart/mind responded deeply to a generous teacher, a teacher whose vision of sangha was wide and inclusive.

The turning phrase, or koan, that Yu contemplated has a timeless ring: “the true person of no rank.” The practice of Zen includes living with a phrase, returning to it over and over, not only during meditation but throughout the day’s activities. I drew my koan for those early years of practice from words of Tozan in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, and I rephrased them in the feminine: “The blue mountain is the mother of the white cloud. The white cloud is the daughter of the blue mountain. All day long they depend on each other, without being dependent on each other. The white cloud is always the white cloud. The blue mountain is always the blue mountain. Completely independent, completely dependent.” The blue mountain and white cloud moved me to tears.

These koans push us beyond our ideas of “self”—the complicated, emotional self that is faceted by roles and fractured with desire and grief. Fiercely explored, the world can shift and open into a pure and luminous reality right before our eyes. For Yu it happened in the marketplace in the middle of the workday. For me, it was in the pure presence of the Tassajara garden at night, illuminated by the moon, washed in the freshness of the mountain creek.

Yu’s teacher could see the “person of no rank” in her when she

couldn't see it for herself. And by her efforts, she became that person of "no rank," that person whose sense of herself was deeply rooted and radically expansive.

Our teachers wait for us. I imagine Master Langye, with the pride of a parent barely concealed, offering his respect to Yu by presenting the question to the assembly of monks and lay folks: "Which one is the person of no rank?" Perhaps he had done this before. Perhaps it was the tradition to acknowledge publicly these breakthrough encounters.

I imagine Yu, trepidatious but fully ready, fully attuned, shouting out in response. Shouting! Why not? Her words, full of strength, full of flowing, of arms and heads, a sword that penetrates with ease the solid, the deep, and the vast, like water springing from her own depths. Yu's imagery invokes the power of Manjushri's wisdom sword and Kuan Yin's elixir of compassion. She invokes the power of earth and water, feminine images of the deep and boundless source.

I met my husband at Tassajara. We had a daughter and eventually made our way back into the world as householders, carrying with us a combined practice life of twenty-five years at San Francisco Zen Center. When my daughter left home, I resumed a formal practice, rooted in lay life, and took priest ordination.

Now, as I enter my eighth decade, the story of Yu's enlightenment evokes something nuanced and personal. There is gratitude and tenderness for the ordinary, as well as the difficult and inspired. The Tassajara creek still sings in the background for me, though my life is more like the water I live by now—the Russian River, running wider, smoother, deeper, before emptying into the Pacific Ocean. Step by step by step—for each of us, the only way.

I keep in view these words I found in a hospital's simple meditation room while working as a chaplain:

These many beautiful days cannot be lived again.
But they are compounded in my own flesh and spirit,
and I take them in full measure toward whatever lives ahead.

—Daniel Berrigan



What happens when we deeply see something and are thereby taken beyond the cultural norms and expectations of others?
Where do we stand then?