

# A Woman of Zen

Melissa Myozen Blacker recounts how she, as a practitioner and a teacher, has navigated a male-dominated tradition.

*“Dragon Head Kannon” (2008) by Mayumi Oda.  
Case 24, Blue Cliff Record*

Iron Grindstone Liu went to Guishan.

*Might as well gather together, touching the difficult. Playing her part, this experienced old woman does not play by the rules.*

Shan said, “Old cow, you’ve come!”

*Point—search the grass shadows with a probing pole. It’s hard to say who you meet when turning in that place.*

Grindstone said, “There’s going to be a great assembly at Mount Tai, will you go too?”

*The arrow did not miss the target. In Tang Dynasty, beat a drum; in Korea, dance. The release was most rapid; coming to acceptance was the slowest.*

Guishan lay down.

*Strike—yes! Who turns thus to face Guishan, knows to distance herself, dissipating the mist, having other fine considerations.*

Grindstone went out.

*Celebration—yes! Meeting the pivot and acting.*

Iron Grindstone Liu!

*Nun—yes!*

-Translation from the Chinese by Dosho Port and friends

From my early days in Zen, this koan from *The Blue Cliff Record* (it also appears as Case 60 in *The Book of Serenity*) has been an important story for me. As a woman studying Zen with a male teacher, I was delighted to find someone like Iron Grindstone Liu, a woman who appears to have had such a deep and playful relationship with her male teacher, Guishan.

The cases in *The Blue Cliff Record* were collected by the eleventh-century Chinese master Xuedou Chongxian. Each one has a line-by-line commentary by the twelfth-century master Yuanwu Keqin. These comments provide reflections that are sometimes quite mysterious. And this is as it should be. Koans show us a way to engage directly with the seemingly irreconcilable worlds of consensus (binary) reality and absolute (empty) reality. In

consensus reality, everything is the way it is and can be compared with other things that are the way they are: snow and rain, sun and moon, left and right, man and woman. In the realm of the absolute, however, these distinctions disappear. The discursive human mind of a Zen practitioner moves back and forth between these two views. Koans are one of the many tools available for a Zen teacher to help her student find a way to live in both worlds simultaneously.

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As a woman studying Zen, I had heard Buddhist teachings that females were less able than males to practice the dharma and recognize their awakened nature. This belief was not surprising. Having grown up in the U.S. in the 1950s, the assumed inferiority of women was the air I breathed. And though the feminism that emerged in the 1960s helped me see through these assumptions, I continued to struggle with them. It was hard for me to challenge the patriarchal culture that surrounded me; in some part of my deep unconscious mind, I carried the idea that I was less than a man. Still, I was determined to practice feminism and live a life of equality between men and women.

At one point early in my Zen studies, I witnessed a public conversation between a female student and her male Asian teacher that startled and challenged many of the assumptions I had been carrying. The student asked, "Can a woman attain awakening?" The teacher said, "No." After the gasps subsided, he said, "And a man can't either. No man, no woman, no attaining." As I continued my journey into the heart of Zen practice, I held this story close. Wanting to be a good Zen student, I did my best to ignore the differences in gender that were so obvious and strong in my life. I worked hard to view gender as empty, but as time went on, I had to admit this view was limited and not really useful in helping me solve the koan of being a woman in

How do I understand my gender within the context of Zen teachings? Am I a woman? Am I not a woman? Could there be some way to embrace my gender without it getting in the way of my Zen practice? I've found myself

circumambulating these questions for the last thirty-five years of my Zen training and teaching.

Being a woman in Zen was problematic from the start. My first teacher found me physically attractive and seemed unable to keep himself from letting me know this—a betrayal of trust that came on gradually and eventually ended with my leaving him. I was a slow learner in this area, confused by his insistence on our potential sexual connection. Not only were both of us married but my husband was also one of his students! I found myself flattered by his attention, but I knew deep in my bones that the sort of relationship he wanted was not about the dharma. My sangha brothers and gay sisters were free to be themselves with this teacher, but I felt trapped in my woman's body, limited to being an object of desire rather than a whole person.

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Of course, this particular issue is not unique to Zen. And it's not new. We see this old story of the objectification of women by the male patriarchy everywhere in history and in modern Western culture. I was enacting a stereotype: the vulnerable young female student of a powerful older male teacher. I felt betrayed, confused, angry, and sad for many years.

For me, retreating into the emptiness of gender was strongly appealing. In my life, this view became a lifeline I could use to help free me from the attention of my teacher's sexual predation. Sadly, other women in our sangha were not so lucky. And, as I came to understand later, seeing into the emptiness of everything is only half of the path of awakening.

While trying to work out these issues, I continued my life as a straight woman in modern America. I married and had a child. I worked as a therapist and as a mindfulness teacher and trainer, helping people live fully in the midst of grief and despair. While striving in my Zen life to be simply a neutral person of the way, in my everyday life, I was definitely a woman.

As I became a senior student, I struggled to own my power. Often, when I acted strongly and clearly, I was criticized for not being feminine enough. I was told to be softer, to not be so sure of things. This advice was never directed toward my male sangha brothers. I encountered the same dilemma in my professional life.

This struggle began to resolve when I met my second Zen teacher, James Ford. He combined dharma clarity with tenderness and kindness and also demonstrated a scrupulous respect for boundaries, managing to keep his desires from inappropriately overshadowing his teaching. And even though, by the time I met him, I had made a habit of hiding my own strength, he quickly recognized similar leadership qualities in me. His no-nonsense unwillingness to buy into my lack of self-confidence helped me develop my capacity to become a teacher, eventually enabling me to receive transmission from him. Even then, it has taken years for me to integrate my gender, my personality, and my dharma understanding.

I have been inspired by the examples of other women Zen teachers, and I have learned a great deal from many of them about how to be a woman of the way. But the help I received from these wise and compassionate women was always tempered by the fact that many of them were dealing with similar issues, such as being disrespected for their strength and power or recovering from (or denying) their own histories of abuse by their male teachers. Other women sangha members have also been helpful. Through candid conversations with sangha sisters and female teachers, experiences that once seemed personal have been revealed as all too common.

And so I looked to the koan stories that have inspired my heart since I first began practicing Zen. When I first engaged in koan practice as a young student, there were very few examples of women teachers in the traditional collections. More recently, some helpful guides in this area have been published, including Grace Schireson's *Zen Women*, which offers stories about the scattering of women whose stories were recorded in Zen histories. Many of these women are merely unnamed background characters, "old grannies," as one male teacher describes them, or women who sell tea by the side of the road. Often, they seem to exist solely in relationship to men, valued for their capacity to challenge male teachers. *The Hidden Lamp*, a collection of stories edited by Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, gathers many more examples of women teachers from the last two and half millennia, with commentaries by contemporary women teachers.

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Iron Grindstone Liu was the first named Zen woman I came across in my studies, decades before these two books were published. I found her fascinating right from the start. Born in 871, her full name was Liu Tiemo, and she was a student of Guishan, the other character in this koan. It appears she had her own temple and was considered an equal to the male teachers she met. In one encounter, Zen master Zihu asks, “I have heard of Iron Grindstone Liu. They say you’re not easy to contend with. Is that so?” And she replies, “Where do you hear that?” He continues, “It’s conveyed from the left and right.” She replies, “Don’t fall down, Master.” The dialogue ends with Zihu driving her out of the room, beating her with a stick.

Here is a little hint of Liu’s capacity to blend the relative world (not easy to contend with, and heard about from left and right) with the absolute, as she tells Zihu not to fall down among these sorts of unhelpful comparisons and judgments.

I so much wanted to be like her—an Iron Woman, as Grace Schireson describes her, tough and more like a man than a woman. She was so far from who I—a young, small, and timid woman—could ever dream of being. In studying koans, though, it’s important to look beneath appearances. Perhaps Liu had found a way to solve the koan of being a woman in Zen.

Liu’s teacher was Guishan, who was a student of Baizhang. In one of my favorite Zen stories, which takes place when Guishan was still a student, his teacher asked him to see if there was any fire left in the stove. Guishan searched the ashes and was unable to find anything, at which point Baizhang himself poked in the ashes and found an ember. Showing it to Guishan, he said, “You said you didn’t see anything—but what about this?” As students, we lose faith in the teachings on a regular basis. A true teacher helps the student find the glowing ember of the awakened heart, alive in the ashes of whatever is presently acting as an obstruction.

After this, Guishan became the cook at Baizhang’s monastery. In another famous koan, Baizhang was looking for someone to be the teacher at a new monastery on Mount Gui. He put a water bottle on the floor and asked his

gathered students, “You can’t call this a water bottle—what do you call it?” The head monk answered, “You can’t call it a wooden sandal!” Guishan, however, simply kicked the bottle over and walked away. Baizhang named Guishan head of the new monastery. On Mount Gui, Guishan built himself a hut and continued his practice. After about eight years, students began to gather around him. Their number eventually reached fifteen hundred. Guishan, notable for his calmness, patience, and skill at teaching, produced forty-one successors, including Liu Tiemo.

Looking at the famous dialogue between Guishan and Liu—“Old cow, you’ve come!”—the two of them appear to have had quite an unusual relationship for the times they lived in. Even for the present time, it’s refreshing to see two people as playful as they are in this case, both embracing and disregarding gender. Pat Enkyo O’Hara, in her commentary on this koan in *The Hidden Lamp*, calls the exchange “a perfect *pas de deux*...satisfyingly complete and heartbreakingly intimate.”

Yuanwu comments: “Might as well gather together, touching the difficult. Playing her part, this experienced old woman does not play by the rules.” Here is the first clue to Liu’s freedom, a woman who is not trapped by gender but is most certainly a woman. Guishan calls her “Old cow!” In English, calling a woman a cow is an insult, but in this relationship, it functions as a recognition of sameness and differentiation. Guishan himself identified with being a water buffalo, saying that was the form in which he would be reborn. Here, the male buffalo and the female cow meet, ready to engage.

Yuanwu compares the encounter to searching for something in the shadows of the grass with a pole. It can’t yet be seen, but it can be touched, remotely at first. It’s an invitation. Guishan is asking, “What will you do, my old friend, with this moment?”

Liu invites him to a feast—a simple and direct response from the world of consensus reality. There is nothing complicated. Yuanwu comments on this directness, comparing Liu’s words to an arrow that doesn’t miss its target: “In Tang Dynasty, beat a drum; in Korea, dance.” Be appropriate to the place and the situation you’re in. She is like the arrow, suddenly releasing itself into the air with no hesitation.

And now the story takes a turn. Guishan doesn’t answer from the binary, dualistic world. He simply lies down. Yuanwu approves. As he comments,

Guishan has made an accurate hit himself. Two arrows have met in midair. The mist is dissipated—any confusion is set aside.

Liu responds by leaving. There's nothing more to say. Yuanwu approves of this, too, and calls it a celebration. The line “meeting the pivot and acting” refers to the capacity to quickly transform from oneness to differentiation at the moment the situation pivots. Everything balances on a fine point, ready to change in a heartbeat. If we have learned to live in both the worlds of oneness and form, we can perform this dance together.

The last two lines of this new translation—“Iron Grindstone Liu! / *Nun—yes!*” are not usually found in modern koan collections; Dosho Port told me he discovered them in the Chinese characters. He and I were mutually delighted with them. For me, they are the affirmation of a strong woman who can play in the fields of emptiness and form, as required.

There is a practice in Zen of saying yes to everything we encounter. When something happens that is hurtful, when something is joyful, we just say yes. After all, saying no is a form of objecting to reality. We can certainly spend our lives doing this, but ultimately we have to bow to what is real. (And sometimes this includes saying yes to the mind that rejects.)

Here, Xuedou and Yuanwu say yes to Iron Grindstone Liu. As I reflect on what I have learned in my life as a woman in Zen, I can remember so many times when I said no to who I am, letting myself be defined by what others thought I should be. Now I see my work in the world as being fully myself. I am a woman. And I am not a woman. Ultimately, I am both a woman and not a woman. When I get up in the morning at a sesshin, I put on my women's underwear, comb my hair, and don my priest's robes. On other days, I put on my women's underwear, comb my hair, and don jewelry. All of these clothes and markers of form are made of emptiness.

In the current political climate, it's harder to ignore the misogyny behind blatant criticisms of strong women and the denial of our value as full human beings. We encounter sexism every day—sometimes like a shadow and sometimes unavoidably in the news, in relationships, in our families. Is it possible, without falling into overreaction or ignoring, to meet each instance directly? There is an emotional cost to being present in this way. Sometimes we feel the pain and injustice of objectification more strongly, sometimes less. But either way, through the practice of widening our view of reality, of

bringing together the worlds of sameness and differentiation, we can learn to feel them fully. Our duty, as practitioners of any gender, is to say yes to whatever arises and then to act from the balanced place of response rather than reactivity.

My intention is to be like Iron Grindstone Liu—to find a way to be direct and playful in my encounters with what has so often been confusing and frustrating. Woman! No woman! Woman Zen teacher—yes!