

Tenku Ruff

*Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women*

Week Four: “Maura’s Story: Enlightenment in Female Form”

October 27, 2019



Welcome back to the fourth week of the series “Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women.” My name is Tenku Ruff, and today I’m going to be talking about Maura Soshin O’Halloran, a young Irish-American woman who went to Japan, became ordained, practiced like her head was on fire, and was enlightened.

Maura, or Shoshin, was my teacher’s dharma sister. I’ve heard many stories about her over the years. She was also my first teacher’s dharma sister, meaning that they had the same teacher and they were practicing together as novices in the monastery. Maura went to Tokyo when she was in her twenties and made her way to Tetsugyu Ban Roshi’s temple. Ban Roshi was known for being a fierce, strong Zen master. He was a very small person with a huge personality. Maura made her way there, entered the temple, and, as she arrived and met Ban Roshi, he said to her, “Are you willing to shave your head and ordain?” She said, “Sure.” And he said, “You will be enlightened.” She went in and started her practice.

After a bit of time she was ordained. She became a priest. She threw herself into the practice with complete whole-heartedness and determination, and also with joy. When I hear stories about Maura, what people share her compassion and her fierce determination, of course, but also the light-heartedness and joy that she brought to everything that she did. For example, she would be working in the kitchen and just start singing the Zen chants that we do. But, to her, that sounded beautiful. She just would break into a full song of a chant.

After some time in the temple in Tokyo, Ban Roshi sent her up to Kannonji, his monastery in the north of Japan. Kannonji is a larger temple and we often have silent retreats for many people there, sometimes up to one hundred monks and laypeople. Maura was sent to Kannonji and she threw herself into the practice there as well. She would find things that she needed to work on and challenge herself. For example, she hated to wake up early. So, she thought, “Okay, I hate to wake up early. So, I’m going to get up an hour earlier.” And she would. When the monks entered the zendo, there she was already sitting in the darkness of the morning. Morioka is a really cold place. It snows a lot there, and the temple is not heated. She had that to practice with. He would get up in the winters before everyone else awoke and go shovel the path so that people arriving from outside could make their way into the zendo, and then go and sit with everybody else. This is the spirit that Maura brought to her practice. It was this complete, whole-hearted nature that

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inspired all the people that she met. Maura exemplified the teaching to “practice like your head is on fire.” She had this kind of urgency that wasn’t hard but was quite buoyant and joyous.

I want to share a story about Maura with you. Maura created a beautiful garden in the temple, it’s still there now. One day, one of the laywomen came over to help her plant some vegetables. That day, something was on Maura’s mind, and she was feeling a little irritable. So, she was just kind of shoving the plants into the ground. The woman turned to her and looked at her and said, “Maura, they’re alive.” And she said, “Huh.” And something opened for her. Later, when she was remembering it this is what she said: “Suddenly, I understood that we must take care of things just because they exist. We are of no greater and no lesser value. We must take care of things just because they exist. We are no greater and no lesser value.”

Maura brought this care into everything that she did, and people felt it. What I notice when I speak to people who knew her well—the people who knew her in Morioka, the other monks from the temple—is kind of a mirror effect, that they become more buoyant, more spacious, full of compassion, and determination. It’s as if her example inspires people from the inside out and helps us to feel our potential. This is something that she offered to everybody that she met. It’s something that people still feel all of these many years later: the sense of care, reverence, and potential. This is the sense that people bring when they speak about her today.

In our lineage tradition, we have what’s called *sesshin*, which is a one week silent, intensive retreat, that usually happens in the first week of every month. When Maura was at Kannonji she was helping to put on these sesshin at the same time as she was participating in them.

Sometimes, many times, she was also the cook. She would find herself moving between the kitchen, cooking for up to one hundred people, and then to the zendo to practice meditation, and then to the teacher’s room to do a practice interview. It was a very busy life with little sleep. We don’t sleep a lot during sesshin, and we keep this very dedicated energy going so that it builds over time and it gives us more energy for our practice.

It was during one of these sesshin that Maura was moving between the kitchen and the practice discussion line and she was awakened. She was enlightened! They took her in to see the teacher, and he asked her a series of questions. Then, this very stern, very small Zen master burst into laughter. He said to Maura, “You did it! You’re enlightened!” And the next thing he said to her was, “You have to help me. We have to help the others.” From that moment on, that’s what they

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did. They started to go all over Japan, helping others, hosting meditation retreats, giving teachings, throwing themselves into this need to save all beings. This is the other thing that Maura brings to us, is her enlightenment. Not just enlightenment, but enlightenment in female form, which is not something we get to see often in the stories. Often, the image we get of enlightenment comes through a male lens, which creates a sort of filter that blocks us from the actual experience. Maura offers us what it can be like in a non-male body. This was such a gift that she gave to all of us, and also part of the reason she inspires us so much.

Not too long after this, Maura decided to return to Ireland. She wanted to bring Zen back there. She wanted to keep moving, to do the next thing, to help as many people as possible in her own home. So, she left Japan. She had her farewell ceremony, and before she returned to Ireland she was going to travel in Thailand with her brother. She got to Thailand and took a bus from the middle up to the north of Thailand. As that night bus was going north, the driver fell asleep. The bus crashed and she died.

When my teacher told me this story he said none of the monks wanted to believe that it was true when they heard it. He said, “You know, for one thing, they didn’t find any of her belongings.” Her passport, her luggage, none of that was with her. They had trouble identifying the body. Eventually, they were able to identify her by one bus ticket they found in her sleeve. With this time delay and with the lack of identification, they thought, “Maybe that wasn’t Maura. That was somebody else.” And he said another thing they thought was, “Maybe she’s getting too much attention and she needs to take some time. So, she just went off somewhere to practice in a cave for a while to deepen her practice.” They would make up these different stories. But, unfortunately, it was true. She died at twenty-seven years old.

Her death also gave us a gift: her diary, which is how we know her story today. After she died, her mom was going through her things and found her diaries from this time. She eventually made those into a book, which was published under the title, *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind*. It’s through this book that we know Maura’s story. Through the book, we know the story of who she was to herself, not who she was presenting as a polished, completed figure. We get to see the process. We get to see her struggles, the things she finds hard, and what she does about it. This is what makes her so inspiring! In seeing that unfiltered version of her just as she is, we can feel a strong sense of potential in ourselves. We can think, “Okay, she did that. That is so amazing. I

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can do that, too.” Certainly, that was the case for me. Maura’s book was first published around the time I started practicing in Japan. I didn’t read it for a couple of years, but when I did, I was just blown away. I wondered, who is this person who’s so amazing and, yet, brings out in me these same qualities that are so amazing?

People from all over the world have read Maura’s story now and they show up at her temple, Kannonji, which is my temple as well, where I was ordained and where my teacher is now the abbot. People from Ireland, of course, but also other people from all over the world. They show up not even quite knowing, I think, why they’re there. It’s not exactly on the beaten path, but they come and they visit the statue that Ban Roshi, Maura’s teacher, put up in her honor. She has a statue of Kannon bodhisattva, the bodhisattva of compassion. Visitors see the zendo where she sat and she practiced. They all want to see the closet where she slept. Yes, she slept in a closet. They bring this tenderness, these feelings of reverence and hope. They bring this feeling for Maura, a young woman in her 20s who completely blew apart all the ideas to become enlightened: a foreigner, a woman, in female form. This is so inspiring.

Many years ago when I was on a pilgrimage in Tibet I went to the holy Mount Kailash, which is a Tibetan mountain considered sacred. I circumambulated the mountain, as you do. It takes three days. It’s very, very challenging. It’s at a high altitude, with harsh conditions. For three days I walked, hiked, followed the pilgrimage route, and completed it. At my completion, I met an old man next to the lake. He asked me, “Did you just complete the circumambulation?” I said, “Yes, I did.” And he said, “That’s so great. In your next lifetime, you’ll be able to come back as a man.” I said, “I guess I better go do it backwards then.”

Not long before Maura died she wrote this in her diary:

I’m 26 and I feel like I’ve lived my life. Strange sensation, almost as if I’m close to death. Any desires, ambitions, hopes I may have had, have either been fulfilled or have completely dissipated. I’m totally content. Of course, I want to get deeper, to go further, but even if I could only have this paltry, shallow awakening I’d be quite satisfied.

Facing into the long, cold winter, I know not only will I be fine, but I’ll enjoy it.

Everything seems wonderful, even undesirable, painful conditions. So, in a sense, I feel

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as if I’ve died for there’s nothing more to strive for. Nothing else to make my life worthwhile or to justify it. At 26, a living corpse. And what a life!

I’d be embarrassed to tell anyone, it sounds so wishy-washy. But now maybe I have another 50 or 60 years—who knows—of time. I want to live it for other people. What else is there to do with it? Not that I expect to change the world or even a blade of grass, but it’s as if to give myself all that I can do, as the flowers have no choice but to blossom.

At this moment, the best that I can see to do is to give people this freedom, this bliss. And how better than through zazen? So, I must go deeper and work hard, no longer for me, but for everyone I meet. No longer for me, but for everyone I can help and still I can’t save anyone. They must work for themselves. And not everyone will. Thus, I should work politically, work to make people’s surroundings that much more tolerable. Work for a society that fosters more spiritual, more human values, a society for people, not for profits. What better way to instill the bodhisattva spirit in people?

Today’s talk was about Maura Soshin O’Halloran and the quality of enlightenment. It’s about authenticity, determination, great joy, great spirit, and the desire to save all sentient beings. What more could we ask for?