

Tenku Ruff

*Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women*

Week One: “Joshin’s Story: Finding Courage Through Compassion”

October 6, 2019



My name is Tenku Ruff. I’m a Soto Zen Buddhist priest trained in monasteries in both North American and Japan. My teacher is Tessai Yamamoto Roshi of Kannoji temple in the north of Japan in Morioka, and I received dharma transmission in the same lineage. I hold a Master of Divinity degree from Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon, a Tibetan Buddhist college. I’m also a Board Certified Chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains. I usually work in end-of-life care, grief counseling, and oncology in my work as a chaplain. I’m the current president of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.

In the next four weeks, I will be giving a series of talks called “Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women.” Zen Buddhism revolves around stories of the ancient masters. These stories are meant to inspire us, and to create an ideal that we can emulate. Because most of these stories are about men, that ideal has become male. But the ideal practitioner is supposed to be neither male nor female, but androgynous, which can be seen in a lot of our Buddhist iconography. We are meant to aspire to a figure that is neither male nor female.

Over time, as the monasteries and the stories have been more focused on men, what’s considered neutral is also more male. What about the women’s stories? I know so many women who are quite remarkable, Zen women who do great things, and I would like to tell their stories to find more of a balance. It’s time to return the feminine to our sacred stories.

In these four talks, I’ll offer stories of four dedicated female practitioners: stories that teach us about courage through compassion, about equanimity in leadership, about being who we are and authenticity, and about enlightenment. How can we, as women, find our own unique expression of the dharma? How can men learn from hearing stories about women as well as men? What unique qualities do female practitioners bring to the world, and how can we offer those in ways that benefit all sentient beings? We’ll explore some of these themes during the next four weeks.

The first story is about finding courage through compassion. This story is about Joshin, an elderly nun I met a few years ago in Hiroshima. Joshin was only 18 years old and very newly ordained when the United States dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. Her temple was located behind a mountain, so it wasn’t harmed. But soon after the bombing, people started to show up at her temple: people who had their skin burned off, people who were thirsty, people who had lost everything and didn’t have anywhere else to go.

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Joshin put them in the Buddha Hall, laid them down on the straw tatami mats in there, and took care of them. She brought them what food she had. She tried to offer them water, although they found it very difficult to drink. She ripped up her bed sheets so that she could bandage their wounds. Supported by her vow to live and to serve for the benefit of all sentient beings, Joshin completely threw herself into caring for these people, and she did all that she could.

Was she afraid? I’m sure she was afraid, and yet she jumped in, because really, she had no choice. Some of us think, “How could she do that? I couldn’t do that.” But she didn’t have a choice. She just did it. She cared for the people who needed it, and they kept coming. Over the next few days, a steady stream of people showed up. When Joshin told me the story, she said the blood soaked through the tatami mats and down into the wooden floors underneath.

Joshin also performed funeral services for the people who died. I’m sure she was scared, shocked, even traumatized, but nevertheless, she persisted. She continued to work. Some of us may think, “I could never do that. It feels impossible.” When we feel afraid, we start to shut down. We close. We hide. Compassion can help us open and be available to the needs around us. When we face a challenge, we can become fixated on ourselves. Compassion helps us to shift our focus from protecting ourselves, from “How will this affect me?” to “How can I be of benefit to others?” Compassion can help us to change our focus in order to connect. We sometimes think that what we’re most afraid of is connecting and being available, but it is disconnecting we should be afraid of.

Every morning in the Zen monastery, we chant the “Universal Gateway” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. This is the chapter on Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and this chapter teaches us all the ways that we can face our fears through compassion. For example, if surrounded by vicious bandits with swords drawn to strike, by mindfully invoking Avalokiteshvara’s power at once, their hearts will turn to compassion. Other examples include dragons, dreadful beasts with sharp claws, curses or poisonous herbs, sickness, death, old age, thunder and lightning, etc. Avalokiteshvara’s compassion teaches us how to show up. Avalokiteshvara can subdue the wind and fire of woes. Compassion assembles a boundless ocean of happiness.

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How can we shift our orientation towards compassion? What if we created more intention around facing our fears, allowing ourselves to show up when needed for the benefit of all sentient beings? We can start with our zazen meditation practice. As we sit in stillness and in silence, following the breath, watching our thoughts arise and fall away, then returning to the breath, we start to cultivate stillness. We cultivate the ability to return over and over to the present moment. We learn to rest in the present moment and to allow it to be our teacher. From that stillness, compassion naturally arises. From that stillness, when we let go of our ideas about what might happen, or our fears about what’s going to be, then we can start to respond to what’s actually here in front of us in this moment.

We’re all familiar with that moment when we feel our hearts will break wide open with compassion when we see something and feel not just a desire, but a *need* to help. When we see an elderly person struggling with their groceries and about to fall, we want to go help. When we see a little kid fall down and skin their knee, or when we see a kitten getting a little bit too close to the road, we want to help. We can start to cultivate compassion through this openness and desire to help, and through facing our fears. So rather than thinking, “Oh, no, that elderly person, she’s going to get mad at me if I try to help. She’s not going to like it,” and then freezing and shutting off, we can reorient ourselves. How can I be present to her in a way that allows her to accept my help and retains her dignity? When we see that little kid fall down, rather than thinking, “Aw, I’m not going to go over there. I’m just going to make him cry more. I’m sure his mom’s around somewhere,” we can shift our focus to, “How can I be present in a way that doesn’t make him more scared? How can I attend?”

Sometimes this means staying in the background and just watching and noticing, being available in case something is needed. Sometimes compassion requires us to just be present without doing anything, but that’s different than not doing anything out of fear. When entering a crowded room, rather than seeing all of those people in there and thinking, “Nobody’s going to like me. I don’t think I can do this,” we can shift our focus to, “How can I be kind to this person or to that person?” In other words, we can shift our focus from “What’s going to happen to me?” to, “How can I help others?” There are definitely other people in that room who are also nervous and don’t know what to do. So by facing our fears, by staying open to them and bringing in compassion, we can start to be of benefit to everybody around us. We have to act. We have to do something. Not doing something is not an option. And we can start with small things.

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Of course, we cultivate the ability to show up through our meditation practice, but we can also cultivate compassion in our day-to-day interactions. We can be kind to the supermarket clerk when we’re checking out. Just by saying hi and having a few words with them, smiling, maybe even offering a compliment, we can shift the focus of somebody’s entire day. We know that ourselves having received that kindness before. And then it starts to ripple out from there. Maybe the next person in line is having a bad day themselves, and that clerk is then nice to them and shifts their day, and then they go home to their kids and are nicer to them and shift their day. And then their kids meet their friends, and this way, compassion starts to ripple out over the entire universe.

Please don’t ever underestimate the power of compassion. We can practice it in our daily life, whether we’re driving on the road, at work with our colleagues, or just going about our day with our families, with our pets. This is the marvelous power of Avalokiteshvara, the marvelous power of compassion. Our practice must be for the benefit of all sentient beings. We don’t do this practice for ourselves. We don’t do this practice for our health. Those might be benefits that we see as a result of our practice, but that cannot be our intention. Our intention has to be to practice for the benefit of every single sentient being. In this way, we can start to think bigger than ourselves. In this way, we can start to show up, to be fully present for whatever is needed from us, whatever that looks like in our days.

This is what Joshin did as she met those people coming to her one by one, the people with burns, the people who had lost everything. She just showed up. When I met Joshin, she was near the end of her life, about 60 years after the bombing. What I saw in front of me was an elderly nun, very stable, no hard edges, kind, full of heart, and secure in herself. This is what I saw at the end of her life. I have no idea what she was like on that day she was 18 years old and the bomb was dropped, but I do know this one thing. I do know that throughout her life, she continued her practice. She continued to show up. She continued to stretch herself and to develop compassion, and I know this because of what I saw in front of me. This elderly nun exuded that beautiful quality of compassion. This is available to all of us.

I have a friend whose story is similar to Joshin’s. I’m going to call her Myosho, but that’s not her real name. Myosho was a young nun who had just finished her novice training when the tsunami and earthquake hit in northern Japan. Her home temple was in that region, and the waves came

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up almost to the front door of the temple, but not quite. Immediately afterward, people started to show up there. It was very cold. They were freezing. They were wet. They had lost absolutely everything, their homes, their families. Everything around them was gone, so they went to the temple. And as they showed up, Myosho took care of them. She and the others at the temple gave them everything they had as far as food. They gave them a place to sleep, a warm bath, dry clothing, and cared for them. And as people died, she also officiated their funerals, sometimes as many as six in one day.

After a few months, when the initial intensity started to die down, other things came up. Myosho found that she knew how to officiate a funeral, but she didn’t know much about grief counseling. She didn’t know how to care for the people who were acting out their grief with anger. She didn’t know what to do in the face of that, and she was afraid. She also found that she didn’t know how to care for herself very well. What Myosho did in the face of that is why I admire her so much. She stayed present, and she leaned in. She sought help when needed. She reached out to older nuns to talk to. She leaned in to her Buddhist practice, returning to the basics, real fundamentals of Buddhist practice, and started attending retreats when she could. She never missed zazen in the morning or evening. She looked into getting training in grief counseling, and what she found was that she wasn’t quite ready to do that, which I also admire, because she didn’t push herself beyond what she could do. She said, “I’m not ready to do that.” She stopped, but she saved the materials for later when she was ready to do it, and I admire this so much.

Myosho took a very difficult situation and continued her practice through it, and continues to grow and to learn. When I told my teacher about Myosho when the tsunami first came, what he was to me was, “She’s going to become an excellent nun.” I think this is true. Myosho went from being really lighthearted, always laughing and joking, to being more of a serious nun. The jokes are still there, she’s still funny, but she also has a very grounded quality. And when I saw her many years later, what she most wanted to do was talk about practice, talk about growth, to sit zazen together.

This is what we can do. When we’re faced with a challenge, we find the resources available to help us through our practice, through support, through reaching out, through stretching when we can, pausing when we need to. And in this way, we continue our practice. In this way, through facing our fears, through showing up, not shutting down, we can move from being like Myosho,

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the young nun where the tsunami came, to being like Joshin, the elderly nun who met me with stability and kindness.

This week, we learned about Joshin and Myosho, two Zen nuns facing their fears through compassion. Next week, we’ll be talking about Shundo Aoyama Roshi, the abbess of the Aichi Semmon Nissodo Women’s Monastery in Japan, and how she brings the practice of equanimity to her life.