

Tenku Ruff

*Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women*

Week Two: "Aoyama Roshi and the Dignity of Equanimity"

October 13, 2019



Welcome back to the second week of "Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women."

This week, we're going to talk about Shundo Aoyama Roshi, the abbess of the Aichi Semmon Nissodo, the women's training monastery in Nagoya, Japan. We'll talk about how Aoyama Roshi exemplifies the quality of equanimity.

Shundo Aoyama Roshi is the highest-ranking Zen nun in the history of Soto Zen in Japan. She ordained at age 5, and she's now 85 years old. Throughout her long life, Aoyama Roshi has seen war, peace, times of prosperity, and times of lack; times when she was supported, even greatly admired, and times when nobody at all liked her; times when she was an academic and times when she was a simple novice. Through it all, she offers her practice and its result to the nuns in her temple today.

I met Aoyama Roshi when I was in training at her monastery in Japan. Aoyama Roshi exemplifies a quality of dignity, of grace, presence and strength. Sometimes she just laughs, throwing her head back and laughing from her whole body, from her belly. At other times, she could be quite strict. I grew to greatly admire and want to emulate Aoyama Roshi.

When I used to see her walking, a phrase would pop into my head. I would think, "Dignified Conduct of a Practiced Buddha." This is from Dogen Zenji's writing. Dogen Zenji was the founder of Soto Zen Buddhism. In "Dignified Conduct of a Practiced Buddha," he wrote, "A practiced Buddha's dignified conduct flows out through its speech through all time, through all directions, all Buddhas and all practice." Aoyama Roshi's transformative functions flow out through her speech throughout all time, all directions, all Buddhas, all practice. This is what she offers to the world.

When Aoyama Roshi was offered the position to become the abbess of the women's monastery, she had many detractors, mostly women. They fought quite hard against her taking this position. I know this because she shared it with me. But even though she shared this story with me, I've never heard her speak ill of them. She talks about them in a way that's true: she names what happened, and she doesn't try to hide it. But she never speaks ill of the people who treated her in this way. In fact, she only speaks of them with kindness. And she told me that I should do the same. That when I speak of others, I should speak with kindness, even about those who work against me.

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It must've been quite hard for her, especially having other women fighting so hard against her. I've experienced this at times myself as a leader, having women be my strongest detractors. It's quite painful. And yet, she stayed present to that in a way that was real. She didn't try to hide it, but she also wasn't mean. I admired that greatly.

Somehow, Aoyama Roshi managed to walk through the worldly winds upright and with dignity. The worldly winds in Buddhism are praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure, and fame and disrepute. I'll say them again for you: praise and blame, success, failure, pleasure and pain, and fame and disrepute. We have to learn to walk through these winds steadily and with a dignified practice of a practiced Buddha.

It feels nice when we receive praise. It can feel like, "Yeah, I deserve that. I worked hard for it." But praise can change quickly into blame, as I think we've all experienced. Nothing stays the same, which is why we call these the winds: they're always changing. So when we receive praise, there's nothing wrong with that. We can accept it, say thank you and move on. "Great job, Tenku!" "Thanks." Finished.

The danger is when we start to get attached to praise and even feel like we deserve it or we need it to go on. When we start to feel like we need it and then it's not there, then we get stuck. And then we get disappointed and it pulls us out of where we really are.

The same is true of blame. Blame is something we tend to not like and want to push away, but what if we could stay present when it comes up? Even in times where we get feedback that's not so nice, even if 95 percent of what we hear is not helpful or isn't even true, what about the other five percent? What if we took that five percent and said, "Thank you?" "Terrible job, Tenku!" "All right. I hear you. Thank you." Leave it and move on.

This is how we can move between the winds of pleasure and pain without getting stuck. This is what I watched Aoyama Roshi do constantly. She came back over and over to that steadiness. Likewise, she has pain in her knees. I know this because when I saw her move after she'd been sitting in meditation posture, she would wince and move very slowly. But I never heard her complain. She stayed present to the pain, steady, upright, and with the dignified conduct of a practiced Buddha.

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Once, when I was at her monastery, someone sent us a box of apples from her home region of Japan, Nagano. Apples are her favorite food, and she was so excited. Even though we were in the middle of *sesshin* [silent retreat], she had the cooks cut the apples so we could all share them. In this way we all shared in the pleasure: that crisp taste and sweetness of new apples coming in. We enjoyed the apples, we experienced pleasure, and we went straight back to the zendo, finished, continuing on the dignified conduct of a practiced Buddha.

Equanimity is not indifference, nor is it aversion, pushing things away. Equanimity is about accepting things as they are, and staying present. Some people think of a leader as someone who's distant or cool, but equanimity is also about being warm. It allows us to bring that warmth into our encounters with others. What Aoyama Roshi really exuded was caring and warmth for all of us in her temple. I don't think I could ever in a million years imagine receiving a hug from her, and yet I felt completely embraced by her warmth and her presence. Aoyama Roshi's mind is calm, and she is present. We have the benefit of her 80 years of practice to help us learn to stay present and to demonstrate to us what equanimity looks like in a human being. We can also cultivate equanimity ourselves, and we can start with our practice.

As we sit in zazen meditation, allowing our breath to fall into our lower belly, following the breath, watching our thoughts arise and fall, continuously returning to the breath, we cultivate stillness. We cultivate stability. We cultivate the ability to be present to what's in front of us. In this way, we can use the stability of our practice to work on equanimity ourselves. The stability of our practice gives us the awareness that things are always changing.

Change is one thing we can be sure of. Things are never going to stay exactly the same, but we can be present when it happens. The more we fight against change, the more we suffer. Aoyama Roshi knows this clearly. At 85 years old, she knows that the person we hated when we were 20 can become our best friend when we're 60. That food we loved as a child can be disgusting to us in our 20s. Or maybe that person who broke our heart when we were in our 30s is completely forgotten in the shadow of the full love we find in our 40s. Things are constantly changing, and this in and of itself brings a kind of comfort. Knowing and accepting that things change brings peace and stability to our life.

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When I was at Aoyama Roshi's monastery, I admired her greatly, and I wanted to be like her. I was impressed. And I was reading Dogen Zenji's fascicle on this, and I thought, "Dignified conduct of a practiced Buddha. I'm going to do that." I wanted to walk with that dignified conduct as well. I thought I was doing really well with it until another Zen woman teacher took me aside. She was the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center, and her name was Zenkei Blanche Hartman. Blanche said, "Hey, Tenku, I want to talk to you." And I said, "Yeah, what's up, Blanche?" She said, "You know, you don't have to try to be so perfect." I asked, "What are you talking about?" Blanche said to me, "Do this practice for nobody's eyes. Not even your own. Practiced Buddha requires the complete dropping off of self and other."

Blanche shared this story with me, which I'll share with you now. When Blanche was a young monk, she went to see her teacher. He said, "Blanche, I want you to take up this practice. Do nothing for the eyes of the beholder." She said, "Okay, yes. I'll do that." She left the teacher's room. She walked down the hall to go back to the zendo. And as she walked, she kind of looked over her shoulder, and she realized she was still walking with the feeling that others were watching her. She thought, "Oh, I have to work on this. He's pointed out something about me that I didn't know about myself. I've got to fix this." Then she thought, "Oh no, if I do that, then I'm going to be doing this for his eyes, and that's still somebody's eyes." So then she thought, "Wait a minute, what am I doing? I don't know what to do about this." She ran up to her room, got into her bed, and pulled the covers over her head.

We just have to do the practice, not thinking about it or conceptualizing it, but just trying. Doing it, making mistakes, trying again, coming back over and over. This is how we learn to walk steady through the winds—praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute—by continually trying. My teacher says there are three things most important to us in our practice. Number one is to continue. Number two, continue. Number three, continue.

This week, we talked about Aoyama Shundo Roshi and the practice of equanimity. Next week, we're going to talk about a historical woman figure named Ryu Tetsuma and her modern contemporary, and what they teach us about being who we are.