

Tenku Ruff

*Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women*

Week Three: "Being Who We Are: Ryu Tetsuma, the Iron Grinder"

October 20, 2019



Welcome back to the third week of "Reclaiming Our Stories: Four Remarkable Zen Women." This week I'm going to talk about a historical Zen figure named Ryu Tetsuma and her modern contemporary. I'm going to use their story to talk to you about just being who we are and authenticity.

Ryu Tetsuma was a woman who practiced in China in the 1100s. She appears in some of the Zen *koans*. A koan is a kind of story about one of the ancient Zen masters that's sort of like a riddle, but a riddle that we can't answer with our conceptual mind. It's meant to help us unlock our thinking mind and really learn from the experience.

Ryu Tetsuma appears in a Zen koan. Koans are intended to share stories with us about the Zen masters, to inspire us. Through this inspiration we can model our practice on theirs. Most of these Zen stories are about men, so then the stories teach us what's really a male ideal. This koan stood out for me because it's about a woman, something I experience very rarely, and her name was Ryu Tetsuma. We assume that all of the ancestors were male, but from their names, we don't know if they were male or female. Why do we make that assumption?

Ryu Tetsuma-san was from the 1100s. Her teacher was Isan. She was known for her strength, her playfulness, her determination, and practice. She lived near one of the Zen monasteries. We don't know exactly why she lived there. Did she happen to live in the neighborhood anyway? Maybe she would have been a nun if she was able, or maybe she lived there on purpose so that she could be near the monastery. We can decide on an outcome, or we can stay open to the possibilities. The koans don't state her age, but she's always called the Old Buffalo Woman. I don't know why. The footnotes say it's a term of affection. We don't know if she was old. We can make that assumption, or we can stay open to the possibilities. Her name, Ryu Tetsuma, means "the iron grinder," like for sharpening tools. A lot of the commentators say it's because she liked to grind up men with her wit in her dharma combat. We do know that Ryu Tetsuma was quite strong, and there might be some truth to that, or perhaps it's just a name. It does seem to fit with her personality, though.

I'd like to share with you one of the koans that Ryu Tetsuma appears in. It's called "Ryu Tetsuma: The Old Female Buffalo," and it's from *The Blue Cliff Record*, Case Number 24. It goes like this:



Ryu Tetsuma came to Isan, and Isan said, "Old Buffalo Woman, you've come!"

Tetsuma said, "Tomorrow there's going to be a great feast at Taishan Mountain. Are you going to go?"

Isan lay down, stretched himself out.

Tetsuma turned and left.

The end. That's the koan. You see it doesn't make much sense, but the crux here is that Taishan Mountain was six hundred miles away, so in 12th century China, it might have been a challenge for Isan to go there the next day. So, this is a koan teaching us about time and space. We can get a good sense of her character from it, her playfulness and wit.

When I was working on this koan, my teacher told me that Kanehira-san, the caretaker for Kannonji, our temple in the north of Japan, was named this. Her teacher, Tetsugyu Ban, gave her the name Ryu Tetsuma when she took lay precepts. When I heard this I was deeply touched. Kanehira-san is in her nineties now. She's the caretaker for Kannonji, the temple in the north. She was a disciple of Ban Roshi, my teacher's teacher, and she took on this care of the temple out of devotion to him. She gets up every morning, rings the wake-up bell, goes to morning zazen meditation, goes to morning service, cleans the temple, makes the breakfast. She takes care of the temple. She lives like a nun. She once showed me her foot, and the outside of her ankle is all shiny and calloused from sitting in the lotus position so much. Kanehira-san never ordained but continued her devoted practice as a layperson in the temple. So, you can see the similarities between her and the historical figure.

When I first met Kanehira-san over 20 years ago, it was during *sesshin*, then we reconnected just before my ordination years later. My teacher decided to drive up to Kannonji from his other temple and I went with him. As we approached the temple he turned and he said to me, "By the way, I didn't tell her we're coming." I was like, "What? What are you talking about?" and he said, "Well, the thing is, she's a tiger," by which he meant her Chinese zodiac year, by which he meant that she's strong. And she is. Kanehira-san has a fierce wit. She doesn't suffer fools. She's a very dedicated practitioner. From this, I learned that my teacher's kind of scared of her. She respects him greatly, but she doesn't indulge him, and in many ways she's kind of like his mom, which I find touching.



Kanehira-san's a lot of fun but you have to stay on her good side, which you can do by giving her sweets and by being authentic, because she hates nothing more than people who are fake. In other words, Kanehira-san's pretty similar to the description of Ryu Tetsuma that we get from the koan. This is why I was so touched that her teacher gave her this name. He really saw her for who she is. He wasn't asking her to be something else, but just recognized her as a strong, straight-speaking Japanese woman. He appreciated and even celebrated her as such by naming her that way. I can hardly think of it without tearing up. Most women practitioners get names like Gentle Heart or Pure Truth or Compassionate Wisdom. Not her. She's the Iron Grinder, a tiger.

Kanehira-san's pretty private, so I won't share all of her story here, but we do know enough from her story to know that there were probably some unpleasant parts of it. She has a son, and her husband left pretty soon after the son was born. She worked for many years in the post office, and she came to practice in her forties through Ban Tetsugyu, her teacher. She practiced diligently with him and continued on, staying on as the caretaker of the temple after he died and when my teacher took over. Kanehira-san has no temple ranking. She's not in the temple hierarchy in any way, but she has a lot of strength and she's the one who keeps the place going. She also has a lot of humility.

What I want to say here is that we are who we are, and that's all. All we can do is to let our buddhanature shine as we are, as women. Not catering to a male ideal of who we are as women, but just as who we are: in her case, this very strong woman, in other cases maybe a very quiet woman or even a very feminine woman. The only choice that we have is to be who we are. My teacher says the ideal practitioner should be neither male nor female, and he cites the bodhisattva Kannon as an example. Kannon is the bodhisattva of compassion, and when you look at the figures of Kannon, you see neither male nor female. Male practitioners often interpret androgynous as male, and this is because we're out of balance.

When we're out of balance, things are skewed one way. For example, in the monastery, when you have mostly men, what becomes seen as normal, as the center, is actually male. The more male is seen as normal the less normal female seems. Then, in turn, the less welcome feminine energy is, and actual women are. In Japan, the monastic lifestyle can be very male. During the times when I practiced together with men, it was sometimes suffocating. I've even had a man say



to me that only men can be enlightened, and he believed it. As long as we think practice is about becoming somebody else, we'll never be able to allow our buddhanature to shine. We'll never be able to be who we really are as women, as men, as anyone. Practice is about taking the backward step and shining the light within.

When we practice with koans, we read the stories of these practitioners and we're expected to try to become them. But in the case of Ryu Tetsuma, I have never read a commentary on her that I think really gets who she is as a woman. We get a male perception of this woman, this Old Buffalo Woman. We don't get a female perception from the inside out, and I think this is a failing. This is what happens when we're out of balance. We can start to restore the balance by bringing in women's stories. If these men had a chance to practice with women or to have a woman teacher, as many men in the West have the chance to practice with, they would have noticed they were out of balance. If they didn't notice it, then their teacher would have pointed it out to them. This is the benefit of having women in practice. This body that we're born with is what we have to work with in this lifetime. So it's not about becoming somebody else in order to reach perfection, it's about finding perfection in what we already have.

Likewise, we have to accept others exactly as they are in their place. My first Zen teacher used to say to us when we would complain about something that somebody was doing, "It's okay. That's just their place. Give them some space. Let them be in their place." In this lifetime, in this body, my place is female.

This is what I want you to understand: we don't need external validation to be who we are. We can let our genuine buddhanature shine even in situations where we don't have balance, where we're not equal. Nobody gets to tell us who we have to be. We have to find that for ourselves. Sometimes in those situations, we can even fly under the radar because we're not noticed so much, and have a little bit more freedom to figure out who we are.

I once practiced in a Zen temple where the teacher just couldn't accept me for who I am as I am. This teacher would tell me things like, "If you could only do this, then you would be happy." Usually the "this" was "be more like me." And I ingested that. I tried really hard. I thought, "Maybe if I do this, then I'll be doing it the right way." But there was no possibility of me ever doing it the right way because I was trying to be like her, and that wasn't me. When this happens, it can become a pattern, and it can start to consume us. It becomes like a cancer that eats us from

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the inside out. It's insatiable. It has no end, and it's a trap because we can never become anything other than who we are.

The Zen master Uchiyama Roshi used to tell a story about a violet and a rose. His teacher was very strong, and he compared him to a rose, vibrant and heavy. He was weaker in body and more intellectually inclined, and he thought of himself as more like a violet. He would say, "A rose can only become a rose, and a violet can only become a violet. For a violet, there's absolutely no need to produce rose blossoms. A violet is beautiful, whole, and complete just as it is as a violet. And a rose is beautiful, whole, and complete just as it is as a rose." We can only become our best selves, intricately connected with every other being in the universe, loving and caring for each other.

If Kanehira-san had tried to become a feminine, girly Japanese woman, she might have succeeded, but at what cost? She would have been an imitation of somebody else, not who she was. She would have been miserable. But she found her way to her teacher, who recognized and celebrated her for who she truly is: a tiger in a sea of monks, strong, playful, vibrant, the Iron Grinder. This is what I want for all of you: to allow your buddhanature to shine forth, to use your practice as a support, to let go of the extra, and to let your genuine nature be what it is. This is the way.

This week, we talked about Ryu Tetsuma and Kanehira-san, and the quality of being genuine and being who we truly are. Next week we're going to talk 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.