

From the book
Sutra
The Way to Zen
SH 12/64



1. The Old Woman of Mount Wutai

CHINA, NINTH CENTURY



AN OLD WOMAN lived on the road to Mount Wutai. A monk on pilgrimage asked her, "Which is the way to Mount Wutai?" The old woman said, "Right straight ahead."

The monk took a few steps, and she said, "He's a good monk, but off he goes, just like the others." Monks came one after another; they'd ask the same question and receive the same answer.

Later, a monk told Master Zhaozhou Congshen what had happened and Zhaozhou said, "I'll go and investigate that old woman myself."

Next day Zhaozhou went to the old woman and asked, "Which is the way to Mount Wutai?"

"Right straight ahead," she replied.

Zhaozhou took a few steps.

The old woman said, "He's a good monk, but off he goes, just like the others."

Zhaozhou returned to the monastery and told the monks, "I have checked out the old woman of Mount Wutai for you."

She's the only one who knows where it is.

NANCY BROWN HEDGPETH'S REFLECTION

Years ago, before practicing Zen, I read an article about Dorothy Day, the Christian activist. She had recently died, and the article included one of her favorite poems, written by Rabindranath Tagore:

Living
discovery

Living
discovery
Living
discovery

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.
 I awoke and found that life was duty.
 I acted, and behold, duty was joy.

I cut those lines out of the magazine, tucked them in my wallet, and carried them around for years. They captured a longing I had for a life that was all of a whole—what I called at the time “being fully human.” In this koan about the old woman of Mount Wutai, I recognize my own seeking in that of the pilgrims: looking for some way of living that would seem complete, compassionate, and wise.

When I read this koan, I imagine an old woman who lived most of her life near a crossroads on the way to Mount Wutai. As a younger woman perhaps she raised children, cared for her husband and parents, cleaned, cooked, tended animals, and raised food for her family. Maybe, over her long life, she had witnessed many pilgrims who were seeking the mountain, seeking the Buddha’s wisdom, seeking some special experience that might change their lives so they could embody that wisdom themselves. Many had asked her, “Which is the way to Mount Wutai?” (Or: “Please help me; I’m suffering.”) How did she answer when she was a younger woman? Perhaps literally: “Go left” or “Go right”; after all, she knew which way led to the mountain. Over the years of her life, a stream of sincere seekers passed by.

We live our daily, ordinary lives right alongside of our seeking: “There must be more to this living; everything I care about changes, dies away; everything I wish were different doesn’t change enough or not in the right way.” We see—for ourselves—that getting things or money or influence doesn’t ease the longing; even being loved doesn’t ease the longing. And there is more: “Not only do those I love change and die but so do I.” And “What is this ‘I’?” knowing

Over time, perhaps the woman who lived on the way to Mount Wutai matured and ripened into the very compassion and wisdom that the pilgrims were seeking. Instead of pointing the exact way she offered an experience that stopped their minds and raised a question: What does she mean by “Right straight ahead,” when the way is not straight, and why does she say it to everyone?

One of the attractions of this koan for me is that the language of the old woman is so much that of my late teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn. The teaching with which he ended every retreat and every letter was, "Only go straight, don't know; try, try, try for ten thousand years nonstop; soon get enlightenment and save all beings from suffering." This has everything we need: question, courage, faith, direction, compassion, and vow. The old woman of Wutai, from her experience, boiled it down to "Right straight ahead."

How do we go "straight ahead, don't know"? This question—any sincere question in the moment of asking it—returns us to a mind that is before thinking. In this moment of asking we and this universe are not split apart. How is it just now? What is the job of this moment? What a simple and portable practice!

I live on a farm, and we plant many vegetable seeds. Those tiny seeds contain an unbelievable force that brings together earth, nutrients, microbes, tilth, water, heat, gases, sunlight. When the seeds germinate, their tender forms move earth and rocks and go in whatever direction is needed to grow. As the plants mature and flower they offer us the oxygen and nourishment we need to live, as well as color, variety, medicine, and many other benefits. Finally, the plants make new seeds before they wither, decompose, and give back to the earth what is left. In fertile ground and with proper conditions their seeds will start the cycle over again.

I imagine this phrase "Right straight ahead" as a wonderful seed that the old woman of Wutai planted in the fertile ground of the pilgrims—the ground of not knowing, of being willing to ask. Her seed is still being planted and cultivated in us as we open to it. What an inspiration! May each of us create fertile soil and plant seeds beneficial to all.



What is the point of spiritual seeking, and what do you hope to find there? Have you ever overlooked the wise person right in front of you, clothed in a seemingly ordinary form?