

69. Kongshi's Bathhouse

CHINA, TWELFTH CENTURY

WHEN SHE was quite elderly, but before she became a nun, Kongshi Daoren opened a public bathhouse. On the door to the bath she posted these words:

Nothing exists, not even dirt, so why are you bathing?

Even a speck of dust—where would it come from?

Say something true and then you can enter the bath.

If the ancient spirits can only scrub your back,

how could I, the founder, bring purity to your mind?

If you want to be free from dirt

you should first make such an effort that your whole body sweats.

It is said that water can wash off dust,

yet how can people realize that the water itself is also dust?

Even though you suddenly wipe away the distinction between water and dirt,

you must still wash it all off when you come to this bathhouse.

SALLIE JIKO TISDALE'S REFLECTION

Kongshi Daoren's life is so familiar to me; she is my neighbor, my mother, my friend. Duty to others is a part of life; we are enmeshed in each other's lives, each other's needs. Like so many women, Kongshi found that she could not fulfill her dearest wish—to become a nun—because other people wanted her to do otherwise. I have felt

this in my own life, the piercing sorrow of being unable to do what I wanted to do—not because I could not, but because I chose the needs of others over my own.

In Kongshi's time, women needed permission from the male head of the family to ordain. Kongshi's father refused to allow her to become a nun; instead she entered a politically expedient marriage. In time, her husband allowed her to leave the marriage, and she had no place to go but back to her father's home. When he died, her brother became her guardian. She asked for permission again, and again she was refused.

When we suffer, our impulse is to blame. We can look at Kongshi's story as a tragedy—the familiar tale of a woman thwarted by men and society, constrained by someone else's rules. But there is more to her story—and to mine, and yours—than what she was not allowed to do. At that time, all of China was built on the harsh constraints of class; every person's life was defined by the society. Men, too, sometimes could not ordain, because of political and family duties. Many such people led lay lives of study and meditation and were known as *daoren*, "people of the Way." Kongshi lived simply, studying alone.

Kongshi was thwarted by men, but what touches me about her story is how inconsequential that was, in the end. Like all of us, she was mainly thwarted by her own desire. We live in hope and fear, lost in the past and racing to the future, imagining the self we want to be instead of who we are. Kongshi thought she needed ordination robes to be happy; she couldn't have them, so she was unhappy for a long time.

In the end, thwarting was her liberation. Kongshi was deeply moved by a few lines from the *Contemplation of the Dharmadhātu*: "One includes all and enters all. All includes one and enters one; one includes one and enters one; all includes all and enters all. They interpenetrate one another without any obstruction." She must have felt resentment—I certainly have. But she saw how the world braids together, intricate beyond measure, that nothing is really obstructed, and she rose above resentment. She rose above her own point of view: with a small shift in perspective, ordination robes are just clothes. What a great gift she received in not being able to do what she wanted

to do! Could she have seen into the nature of interpenetration if she had been given what she wanted?

Like Kongshi, I thought I needed ordination robes. I thought I needed a certain life—but as happens to many of us, my fantasy life was blocked by my real one. And I came to see that only by finding ourselves blocked can we seek a doorway. After her brother died, Kongshi went to study with a gifted teacher. There were no more obstacles; she could do what she wanted. She could ordain if she wanted—and she didn't. Meeting her teacher face to face, she said to him, "I make the universe. I unmake the universe." Knowing that, how could it matter what she wore?

Finally, she left her teacher and built a bathhouse outside another monastery. On the door, she wrote the poem. Her days were spent filling tubs, scrubbing backs, washing out dirty towels and hanging them to dry and folding them up carefully the next morning: a woman's work. But she also wrote poems on the walls and engaged her customers in Dharma combat. Dirt? Water? Self? Other? Show me the difference.

Finally, she moved to a convent and taught anyone who came to see her. Almost as an afterthought, she ordained. There had never been any real obstacles at all. I like to think of her washing and drying her robes and folding them as carefully as she had learned to fold a bath towel, because— isn't it obvious?—they were the same.



In what ways do we think, when we practice, that we are somehow cleaning up our act? Are we cleaning up our act? Does taking a bath or a shower help us clean up our act?

Handwritten notes:
"religions
traditions
confirmation"
"or
need"
"be a
monk"
"or
nun"
"I
make
the
universe"
"I
unmake
the
universe"