

Book Review

The Hidden Lamp

Edited by Florence Caplow and Susan Moon

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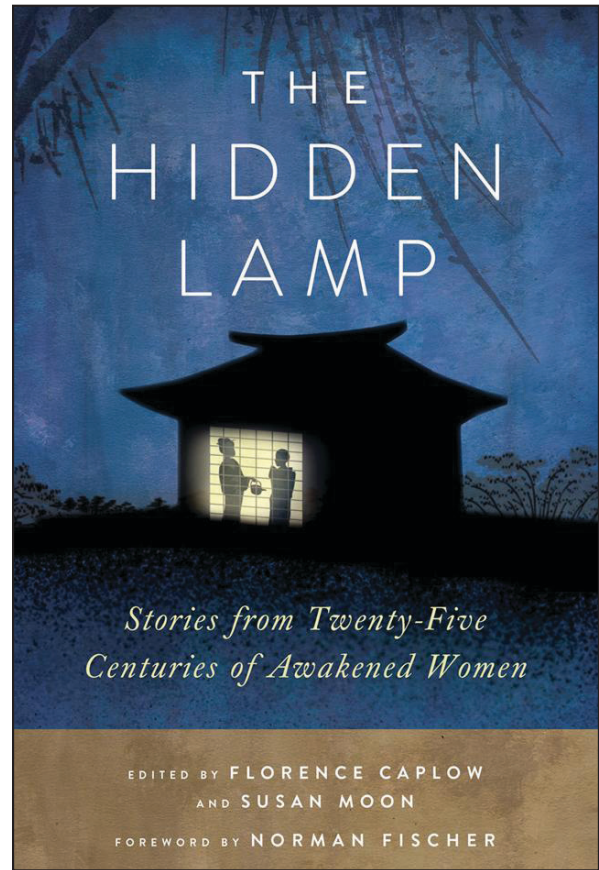
Imagine a favorite lamp. It sits next to a comfortable chair and provides light for reading and conversation. Perhaps it also creates a sense of home. And, if you've had the lamp for a while, it might also evoke feelings of continuity and heritage.

Zen Buddhism, from its earliest days, has provided lamps to guide practitioners. These were known lamp records (*teng-lu*) and originated about 550 CE in the development of lists of eminent monks. Then, in the mid-900s, the teachings of famous masters such as Linji and Joju were collected into "recording sayings" (*yu-lu*) so that practitioners could study their teachings. A few decades later, the first formal lamp records appeared. These works, known as "transmission of the lamp" collections (*ch'uan teng-lu*), gathered together selected sayings of respected masters. Both ancient and modern kong-an collections depend on these lamp records.

As Zen developed in the centuries after the T'ang Dynasty (618–907), the lamp records served several important functions. First, they distinguished "legitimate" Zen masters from various pretenders. Second, they offered criteria for recognizing a master. And, finally, they illuminated—and continue to illuminate—the intimate heart of Zen.

But the historical lamp records shone light only on the lineage of male masters and practitioners. Women were almost completely absent. As Zen literature developed in the later Song period (960–1279), the lineage charts and lamp records became more fragmented. And, coincident with this fragmentation, stories of strong female practitioners began to receive more attention. Odd, that.

I first became aware of the limited attention given to women's stories in 1992 when the Kwan Um School's kong-an collection, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, was published. As I read through the cases, I realized that only a handful involved women; to be precise, nine of the 365 kong-ans include a woman as one of the actors. Later, as I looked into the Chinese lamp records (translated into English), I realized that *The Whole World Is a Single Flower* actually was generous in its inclusion of cases involving women—such cases were exceedingly rare in the Chinese collections. In fact, I found only about fifty such cases from the T'ang Dynasty—the period of Zen's Chinese flowering.



Of course, women practiced Zen in the old days. Of course, some were equals of the great male teachers. But for the most part these women and their stories were marginalized in the most prominent Chinese lineage charts and lamp records. These omissions have left women in the dark. It has denied them a place within the tradition, excluded them from authority, and has suggested—not very subtly—that illumination was not for them: women could not serve as bearers of the lamp.

Of course, our shared experience as modern Zen practitioners tells us otherwise. We practice with, and are guided by, women who manifest considerable wisdom, compassion and generosity. These women are neither rare nor isolated—they are the norm in virtually all Western Zen sanghas. So we might ask: Where is the lamp record that accurately reflects the role of women in Zen? With the publication of *The Hidden Lamp*, that collection has arrived.

The Hidden Lamp gathers together one hundred stories of awakened women spanning the history of Buddhism. An essay by a modern female teacher accompanies

each case, conclusively demonstrating the legitimacy of women's place in modern Buddhism. And, as with the old lamp collections, the cases and commentaries illuminate the way for all practitioners.

The commentators in *The Hidden Lamp* come primarily from the various Zen traditions (including some from the Kwan Um School of Zen), but several teach in other Buddhist traditions. This diversity broadens the significance of the primary cases, giving them a resonance that may surprise many readers. Although each commentator offers her own perspective, the commentaries as a whole are personal and intimate, clear-eyed and honest, and point directly at the great matter of Zen.

For example, one case features Charlotte Joko Beck (1917–2011), a dharma heir of Maezumi Roshi:

Joko Beck had finished a talk and asked if there were any questions. A young man raised his hand and bluntly asked, "Are you enlightened?" Her response was immediate. Laughing, she said, "I hope I should never have such a thought!"

Peg Syverson, who studied with Joko Beck, offers a commentary in which she notes, "He [the young man] was no doubt wondering: 'Can this teacher really help me? Can I trust her?'" Syverson then reveals something deeply intimate about her own work with Joko Beck. Early on, Beck asked what had brought her to Zen. After reflection, Syverson said, "I just want to be a better mother for my son." Beck then "tartly replied, 'Well, that's a story!'" Syverson describes how she then lost her bearings, as though Beck "had suddenly tossed a pitcher of ice water in my face." A good lamp shines light onto unseen places.

Furyu Nancy Schroeder reflects on a well-known case involving the great Chinese master, Zhaozhou (Jōju):

One day Master Zhaozhou Congshen was outside the monastery and an old woman came along carrying a basket. He asked her, "Where are you going?" The old woman said, "I'm going to steal Zhaozhou's bamboo shoots." Zhaozhou asked, "What will you do if you run into Zhaozhou?" The old woman walked up to Zhaozhou and slapped him.

Schroeder's commentary delves into the complexity of this relationship

Does Zhaozhou meet the old woman freshly and openly? . . . not just this woman, this meeting, this moment—all meetings, all moments, all women. They've known each other, loved each other, slapped each other before . . .

Schroeder then goes to the heart of the matter:

We don't see the word "love" used so often in the Dharma. In fact, there seems to be a fear of it. In particular, the body of it: the lovely body,

at every age, of the child, of the woman, and of the man. But if what's happening in this story isn't love, including, dare I say, "sex," then I'm a monkey's uncle.

I once corresponded with James Green, translator of *The Recorded Sayings of Joshu*, to see if this case's original Chinese contained any suggestion of sexuality. Green said that the Chinese text did not, nor did it seem to him even to point in that direction. I believe Schroeder's commentary comes closer to the mark. A good lamp accurately illuminates history.

Several of the cases come from the Korean Zen tradition, including this one:

One day a nun asked Manseong Sunim, "How do I cultivate the Way of the Buddha?" "No cultivation," answered Manseong. The nun persevered, "How, then, can I obtain release from birth and death?" "Who chains you to birth and death?" Manseong asked in return.

In her commentary on this exchange, Barbara Rhodes explores the student-teacher relationship. She asks, "What if she [the nun] hadn't had a teacher? Then what would she do? What did the Buddha do?" From this, Rhodes explores the importance of looking into the great questions of life and death with unstoppable effort. For Rhodes, doubts and questions were "my ticket home." She goes on to write:

The koan says at one point, "the nun persevered." That is exactly what we need to do . . . When student and teacher sit down together, the student speaks, the teacher listens; the teacher speaks, the student listens . . . The Way has already appeared.

Who chains you to birth and death? Look in the mirror, then go have a cup of tea. Only you know if it's hot or cold.

A good lamp always reveals the essential matter.

Many of the classical kong-an collections, such as *The Blue Cliff Record* and *The Wu-Men Kuan*, expand upon the kong-ans themselves with introductory instructions, commentaries and verses. In this spirit, the editors of *The Hidden Lamp* have followed each of the commentaries with their own "pointers"—questions designed to stimulate a deeper investigation of the cases. For me, these questions distracted from the heartfelt commentaries, but other practitioners may find value in them.

Despite its claim to a transmission "outside the scriptures," Zen teaching has always depended on literary sources and texts, especially the lamp records. Now, with the publication of *The Hidden Lamp*, women join as full partners in the transmission of the lamp. May this light shine brightly on all beings. ♦