Joan Halifax

The Old Woman's Rice Cakes

Deshan Xuanjian was a great scholar of the Diamond Sutra, but he was not a Chan practitioner. He was traveling south in search of the dharma, carrying his commentaries on the Diamond Sutra with him. In the course of his travels he came across an old woman on the roadside selling tea and rice cakes. He asked her, "Who are you?"

She responded, "I am an old woman selling rice cakes." When he asked if he could buy some refreshments from her, she inquired, "Venerable priest, what are you carrying in your bag?"

He said, "I am a scholar of the Diamond Sutra, and here I have all my notes and commentaries."

Hearing this, the old woman said, "I have heard that, according to the Diamond Sutra, past mind is ungraspable, present mind is ungraspable, and future mind is ungraspable. So where is the mind that you wish to refresh with rice cakes, oh scholar? If you can answer this, you may buy a rice cake from me. If not, you'll have to go elsewhere for refreshment."

Deshan was unable to reply. The old woman then directed him to a Chan master nearby. Deshan burned all his notes and commentaries the next day.

What a wonderful koan! An old nameless woman on the road helps the smarty Deshan [the press has requested that we use pinyin]get free from his load of conceptual detritus. She is the Diamond Sutra itself, signless and aimless. She is nobody we know, and at the same time, she is an intimate manifestation of some kind of wild and cranky freedom. Through her, there is no abiding, no attachment.

Deshan was from northern China. As a youth, he studied the classical precepts. He also thoroughly soaked himself in the Diamond Sutra. Deshan heard that the Southern School of Buddhism was robust, and he spoke against it. Finally, he piled the Qinglong Commentaries on his back and made his way south to confront so-called sudden enlightenment of the Southern School.

So here is Deshan hauling around his ideas about the sutra, among other interesting burdens of opinion. He encounters the old woman, who cuts him free from the conceptual mind with the diamond of her mind. "Thus I have heard" are the first words in the Diamond Sutra. Thus Deshan heard the old woman, for sure. His mind for a ricecake. And he was a stale ricecake, as he could not reveal his own mind when confronted with her fierce clarity.

This old nameless crone becaume Deshan's catalyst to awakening, challenging his ego-based confidence, shattering his idea structure, introducing him to an ungraspable moment, a moment of absolute freedom from glosses, commentaries, and secondary consciousness.

Who are these old women who now and again appear in koans? They are who we really are, that wild old grandmother's heart of wisdom that does not engage in idiot compassion but cuts to the quick of the moment. She offers rice cakes and the refreshment of awakening tea. This staff of

life, rice, common food for all. Tea, common drink for all. And Deshan got the special transmission outside the sutras, the Supreme Meal!

"Zen is poetry," said the scholar R.H. Blyth. What did he mean by poetry? Certainly he did not use the word "poetry" in the sense of what we commonly call "verse." Rather, he meant that the essence of Zen, like the world of poetry, comes from the spontaneous, natural, unfabricated energy of meeting reality directly. It is the kind of unfiltered immediacy manifested by the old lady, nameless and by the roadside, selling ricecakes to any passerby. This quality of immediacy embodied by the old woman is in our everyday practice, and is also reflected in the so-called literary body that we call koans.

The mystery of koans and their poetic veracity comes about because they are non-discursive, based in life, full of allusions, and nonlinear. They are NOT commentaries on the sutras. Rather they invite us not to use the thinking mind but to allow the thinking mind to drop away by being absorbed completely into the koan body so that a genuine experience of intimacy can present itself.

The old woman selling rice cakes is that intimacy itself. She barks at the heady scholar: "I have heard that, according to the Diamond Sutra, past mind is ungraspable, present mind is ungraspable, and future mind is ungraspable. So where is the mind that you wish to refresh with rice cakes, oh scholar? If you can answer this, you may buy a rice cake from me. If not, you'll have to go elsewhere for refreshment."

Practicing with a koan is like strengthening a muscle that gathers us up and releases us into the present. Like the old woman, a koan reduces us to who we really are. One strike, like a diamond hitting glass, and we are free of secondary reflections.

The experience of absorption into this poem-like case is similar and dissimilar to what we experience in meditation practice, of being with the present moment as it is, being the sutras, not commenting on the sutras.

Usually this "as it isness" is free of a medium, like a ricecake, like shikantaza, or this present moment However, in the case of koan practice, the koan is dropped into the midst of this "as it isness", and lets the truth of things as they are shine through the matrix of its body. Using a jewel-like koan, a bright fragment of a past reality, as an inspiration and a guide in the immediacy of our very practice can enable us to be engulfed by truth; we become a kind of hook-line-and-sinker that is swallowed by the whole fish of life. Deshan got hooked and served up by one powerful, old and nameless woman. He was fortunate to have the hunger to require some refreshments!