

The Feminine, Poetry and The Sacred



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This “I,” am a true “I” but also the eye which sees. . . leaves, stem, lotus, a rose, a peony unfolding. . . .  
Wide and bright like a radiant seed,. . . a sapling of no-thing. You are invited to a recital and response in  
vigil like style to pay homage to the sacred writings of women from various traditions and times. In this  
community circle and class, we will explore the person and place of the feminine in spiritual practice. The  
feminine archetype is not specific to a single gender; therefore, men and other gender expressions are most  
welcome. A poetry ‘chant’ type book will be provided. Suggestions and short exercises will be offered to  
stimulate conversation and contribute to your own writing experience.

Koji Shin’ei Alison Brown

Class limited to a small group. Meets in the Jizo Hall (I would like to end up with eight)

Five weeks – Monday - October 23<sup>rd</sup> to November 20<sup>th</sup> , 2023

Evenings with time for Zazen 6:30pm – 8:30pm

I have used multiple sources - but there is an anthology which people can purchase. *Women in Praise  
of the Sacred, 43 Centuries of Spiritual poetry by Women.* Edited by Jane Hirshfield.

## *The Feminine, Poetry and the Sacred*

This “I” am, a true “I” but also, an eye that sees, the leaves, a stem, a lotus, a rose, a peony unfolding.  
Wide and bright like a radiant seed, a sapling of no- thing. . . . To go our own way paradoxically, is to  
begin a genuine conversation together. To ask in simple and direct manner, what do I know, what do I feel  
as myself in myself, myself as unique, myself, in a universal way, nothing less than the expression of all  
things.



This talk is written to introduce a class I am doing, by the same name - Monday evening, late October, five weeks through November. The class is full, but I have opened two more places, to deal with the inevitable flux of beginnings. If you have signed up for the class and have decided that this is not something you can or want to do, it is fine. Please let me or the office know so we can remove your name. I will be doing this kind of format again, with varied subject matter. a lovely invention of Buddha Eye to work with difficult material in a personal, hopefully enjoyable, and more accessible way,

In this talk, I have brought together the stories of a few of the poets we will be working with in the class, I give you a short excerpt about their lives, time, and place, who they were and their contributions, an example of their writings, mostly poetry. These poets are drawn from many traditions, India, Medieval Europe, Asia, and America. I give some relation to Buddhist practice, as I experience this. We are not studying the life of the poet, rather the poet stands as a third thing from which you can relate and draw forth your own life and practice. If you are not a poet well then don't be. One of the distinguishing qualities of women writers through the centuries was the deep need to write many ordinary folks who wrote to clarify and understand their life. These are powerful women who stood their ground in untenable circumstance, many lost their lives. Words such as devotion, esp. devotion to him, God, love etc. It is fine to disagree, but I encourage you to listen and notice. There are many aspects of the feminine archetype. Here I cover the archetype as I have worked with it, and feel it is in need of reevaluation and renewal.

## *The Radiant Seed*

Not about her but  
through her is the eye of the needle,  
The thread of worlds move. When  
demons are no longer demons. They  
become our true angels.

She . . . who plants a garden within my belly,  
where I bask in her green. This  
ultimate and simplicity.  
This “I,” am a true “I”  
but also, an eye that sees,  
the leaves, a stem, a lotus, a rose, a peony unfolding.  
Wide and bright like a radiant seed, a  
sapling of no- thing.

To become oneself, out of oneself,  
oneself is all things, is  
to bless our world, and  
to be blessed. To step firmly upon  
the ground of unknowing. Immersed,  
absorbed in its abundance, shedding  
its excess to bring forth ease, this “I”  
rests deep in the marrow of her native rhythm.

## *The Feminine, Poetry and the Sacred*

I have wanted to do this talk, to string together the lives and work of a few exemplary women: great mystics, spiritual practitioners, and poets. Exemplary and few in the sense that they point us toward our own potential. Not occupying the top of the charts, they ask to be sought out. Their voices echo the centuries, challenging us . . . to cultivate a practice with deepening regard for our own truth. I think we miss aspects of femininity, underestimating her strength and richness and need to learn better ways of listening to her and looking. To look and listen from the heart of her world. I am not certain we see strength in her receptivity, and devotion, the complexity of her yin element, her specific kind of confidence, integrity, and courage, her relationship to her sometimes-uneasy masculine traits. There are many ways of the feminine, the deities throughout the different cultures that point us towards her varied excellence. Here I would like to emphasize the necessity of the feminine archetype in spiritual practice, ways that have been forgotten or lost, in need of renewal. In the Greek pantheon I see the deities as qualities. Quality which confers uniqueness, distinction and difference, encouraging a transparency in word and deed, opening us to myriad ways to see and experience the world and yet, more than merely this and that. Hestia of the hearth, darkness, death, the depths of Persephone, Hekate and the lady of the labyrinths, Ariadne. In Buddhism, the love, bliss, and eroticism of the dakinis, the compassion of Kuan yin and wisdom of Prajnaparamita. I especially want to give some favor to the Indian poets such as Mirabai, and one of my favorites Lalla, the Sufi poet Rabia, the recluse Emily Dickinson and the Christian Mystics.

In my own life, I never made the decision to fight for equality as a woman equal to men, as this was never my direction. Instead, I cultivated an internal heritage. I have approached life through imagination. I chose to be an artist, an artist drawn towards an essential expression of the feminine archetype. I use the term archetype as a manifestation of immediate and living energy. If permitted to be seen and take her rightful place in tradition and culture, can unlock greater intimacy and range of human experience. For so many years it seemed I had not yet mentally emerged onto the surface of the world, therefore, I did not feel the overt effect of prohibitions toward women, from obvious customs or rules. I experienced an attitude of feminine inferiority, as well as the loss of a more rounded masculine value and purpose: underground, underworld, hidden in cultural or family dynamics in ways difficult to name. I look back to re-discover seed origins, years gathered as seeds of other and earlier origins. Years ago, I find intimations of somewhat complete insights. Somehow it happens a tiny darkness, a slight disturbance opens into light and vastness and yet, there is need to give body through years of unraveling, living this life within conditions. It is about our difference and the pain of that difference, also the beauty and quality of that difference. If the feminine meaning and value is seemingly implied and hidden it is because her life and writings can be profoundly personal and particular, therefore controversial in subtle and difficult ways. What empowers

us to hear and stay close to this inner pulse, to move in our own particular direction, and who is it? . . . who provides us with the strength to follow the call? And because the soul is shy.

Throughout these writings, I find the expression of surprise and originality, of truths formed in her language of color, of flowers, her dreaming. . . of insects and of wolves, she . . . like water, like the mountains, we enter, walking with the mountains, the trees, the earth, and new seeds of relationship, nurture, and community, and the intimate and universal dialectic of love.

(Julie, story) The artist communicates a vital need for genuine creative expression, the arts as central to the discovery of one's true self. This life of our true person, in periods of crisis and great impact and in smaller transitions as well.

*Margarite Porete*: French medieval poet, mystic, and beguine. Beguines, a "Holy Woman," mediaeval women gathering to practice the virtues, to share and speak of their love for the divine and perform acts of charity. Like the clergy, Beguines made vows of poverty, although they could retain ownership and they could return to a life with a husband. Most beguines served as nurses to care for the sick and poor, they worked as teachers, or they made cloth and lace. Many of these women were unattached, unwanted daughters, therefore suffering some socioeconomic disadvantage. Many wanted to become nuns yet not being of noble birth, were denied entrance into established catholic religious orders. Numbering as many as fifty or seventy women training in community most were diligent and true in their practice, yet they prayed without the sanction of the church. Most of the great medieval female mystics came from bougienages. They ask in a simple and direct manner: what do I feel, what do I know, as myself, in myself? This life as my promise to the beloved, this expression of my absolute love. They lived and wrote from the depth of their hearts beyond social convention, and outside the conventions of the church.

Beloved what do you want of me?

I contain all that was, and that is, and that shall be.

I am filled with the all.

Take of me all you please. -

if you want all of myself, I shall not say no

Tell me, beloved, what you want of me-

I am Love who am filled with the all;

what you want,  
we want, beloved-  
tell us your desires nakedly.

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in 1310 for her refusal to retract her writings, unwilling to utter a single word of apology or explanation to her inquisitors. The non-willing, non-having, non-thinking, non-knowing, teaching us to trust the interior abyss, and teaching us to trust ourselves. For Marguerite Porete it is the inquisition, her eighteen-month discernment period prior to her death, strengthening her resolve, fleshing out her experience of the one. The challenge, the vehemence, of the enemy and of our own, once withdrawn, gives us potency to recognize, feel/see, the one: emptiness and phenomena. We build strength to acknowledge and say no to extraneous thought and fear, to see that it has no permanent substance. *“This soul said Love, does not take account of shame or honor, of poverty or riches, ease or unease, love or hate, hell or paradise. . . If anyone were to ask such free souls. . . if they would wish to be in paradise, they would say no. Besides, with what would they wish it? They have no will at all, (like the Buddhist- wu wei) and if they were to wish for something, that would mean severing themselves from Love.”* To acknowledge the ultimate simplifies the heart, to Marguerite an act of pure love. Bottomless, infinite, empty, and yet our true home, these women wrote in response to their lives, which in Buddhist practice is essentially empathy: the one in the many, and the many in the one. In its sameness and difference, it is.

**Lalla**- poet and mystic from Kashir, in Northern India, lived during the fourteenth century. She was married at twelve and ill-treated in her marriage. Her husband ignored her, her mother-in law deprived her of dignity and sustenance and was cruel. Throughout this time, she remained patient, faithful and uncomplaining. She left in her early twenties to study with a master of the Shaivite Order (Shiva). Shiva is part of the trio of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Shiva dancing his dance of death and rebirth, to absorb within himself the dark invisible round of interconnectedness. Upon completion of her training, she wanders naked or semi-naked dancing, singing her verses throughout Kashmir. She is a beloved poet, who speaks to the people and encourages the people to sing. And. . . so, they listened, and sang. Her poems express a psychological clarity and severity combined with depth and devotion. She is a favorite poet of mine, unconventional, in custom and expression. Original, one’s original mind resonating through . . . one’s natural rhythm, stay, do not run, feet step firmly upon the ground. Of . . . an inner and personal integrity, solitary and yet not alone. Person, with a capital P speaks to her rich, black, alizarin, marrow, . . . of blood, and bone. Her rich, black, red marrow, . . . of root and heart. *“Passionate with longing in my eyes, searching wide and seeking the night, the day, light. Lo! I behold the truthful one. In mine own house fills my gaze.”*



## F

Playfully, you hid from me.

All day I looked.

Then I discovered

I was you.

And the celebration of

That began.

*Mira bai* : mystic and poet, born in Rajasthan in Northern India in 1498. . . . Without the energy that lifts mountains, how am I to live? Many early poets' become legends, through their poetry and their unconventional lives, but also because of the lack and attention to accurate historical information. I think the legend is quite nice. Mira bai created poetry dedicated to Krishna, the dark one, for whom, she waited, prayed, danced, and sang. Encouraged by her example the people wrote poetry, and they danced, and sang. She was revered and raised to be a saint. She found her life through her devotion to Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, a god of love and mercy. Mira bai the daughter of nobility, married off to a prince, into a family of position and of great wealth, and power. Yet her husband, father and father-in-law all died within a period of three years. The city of Rajasthan being fragmented, suffering from continuous infighting between small princes and principalities. Mira questioned a world which seemingly cared little for justice, peace, or for one another, instead fostering a concern for oneself and one's ambition. Her devotion to Krishna deepened. She spent most of her days receiving spiritual teachings or performing acts of devotion and prayer. Her family was displeased, attempting to poison, torment, and keep her life

restrained. Eventually she left the palace and renounced her worldly wealth, and status. *My friend, I went to the market and bought the . . . Dark One. You claim by night, I claim by day. Actually, I was beating a drum all the time I was. . . buying him. You say I gave too much; I say too little.*

*All I was doing was breathing*

F

Something has reached out and taken in the beams of  
my eyes.

There is a longing, it is for his body, for every hair of  
his dark body.

All I was doing was being, and the Dancing Energy  
came by my house.

His face looks curiously like the moon, I saw it from  
the side smiling.

My family says : “Don’t ever see him again!” And they  
imply things in a low voice.

But my eyes have their own life; that laugh at rules,

and know whose they are.

I believe I can bear on my shoulders whatever you  
want to say of me.

Mira says: Without the energy that lifts mountains,  
how am I to live?

*A Dream of Marriage*

F

In my dreams the Great One married me,  
Four thousand people came to the wedding.  
My bridegroom was the Lord Brajanath, and in the  
dream all the doorways were made royal, and he  
held my hand.

In my dream he married me, and fortune came to me.  
Mirabai has found the Great Snake Giridhar; she  
must have done something good, in an earlier  
life.

Not to count on any - thing, through myriad acts of love and devotion. Devotion as the restorative deed. To follow the inner directive, the true self in the guise of the all-embracing lover. Mira bai, like . . . a wandering mendicant, wandering fields and forests without a home. Calling Krishna, the blue black. . . the dark one and singing. Like the wine drenched ecstatic god the duende, calling the women out into the night, with his flute, not saying what is expected to be said, calling the people into a subtle rapture. One, with their hearts full, one, with great generosity and forgiving for that is when the lover approaches. Opening the heart, as wide as the moon, translucent, illumined, yet intimate with shadow, and the wild. We say we like the wild, to touch the ultimate, endless azure, blue, green of oceans, and of skies, but to allow something or someone to be slightly out of sorts, things falling out of place. Do we appreciate this place of surprise, of a Buddha or a god's space, entering the deep beneath the feet, with quiet adventure, wild and beautiful.

How crazy these words, not one, not two. Not believing the negative, conditioned concepts, percepts, and feelings that attempt to ensnare us. There is nothing outside or separate, especially during meditation but throughout our day as well, much of our habituated expectations, thoughts

and emotions coming up in the mind are without basis. Yet they are not without reason, or without spiritual function. I personally appreciate the darkness, opening into a deepening resonance, keeping us fresh and on the alert. I appreciate difficult feelings as they contribute to an ability to stay with the world, rooted and grounded. We need our failures and mistakes; we need the many ways we are. It is not meaning that creates an issue but the fixed and single meanings we arbitrarily assign. Challenging circumstances and trying people encourage our trust. They are why it matters, our impetus to listen, and to learn love deeply and well. The should and should nots, not good enough, too good, not old enough, young enough, big enough, or smart enough: for whom, for what? Can we investigate, and relinquish this, one step at a time, feet firm upon the ground, to walk bravely.

**Sun Bu-er** : mystic and teacher, considered one of the seven Taoist immortals. Born in twelfth century China, her name means Clear, and Calm, a Free Human being. Her life and history absorbed into fable and folklore. In China today she is the subject of many novels and plays. Sun Bu-er was married and had three children. She did not begin a singular and focused practice in the Tao until she was well into her fifties. Her husband had begun his Taoist studies with master Wang Zhe. Upon having a dream in which the great master visited and carried them both away. Sun and her husband became Taoist adepts studying with Wang Zhe founder of the Pure Serenity School. The Pure Serenity sect approved of the practice of remaining immersed in daily life to complete one's obligations as a house holder before withdrawing from the world. Sun Bu-er expresses the movement of nature, her nature and transformative process in a series of fourteen poems.

## F

The relic from before birth  
Enters one's heart one day.  
Be as careful as if you were holding a full vessel,  
Be as gentle as if you were caressing an infant.  
The gate of earth shut tight,  
The portals of heaven first opened.  
Wash the yellow sprouts clean,  
And atop a mountain is thunder shaking the  
earth.

F

The beginning of the sustenance of life  
Is all in yin and yang.  
The limitless can open up  
The light of the great limit.  
Diligently polished the mirror mind.  
Is bright as the moon.  
The universe in a grain  
May rise or it may hide.

Merging with the great limit, the state of unity before word, feeling, and or form. Nothing other than a tiny darkness opening into awareness: The great happiness. Free. . . to be with our life, with other lives, to meet whatever is happening with natural grace. Finding our capacity to recognize the noumenon, to sit in a posture of stillness and composure, yet vibrant and alive. There is no conflict between letting things be and a self that functions. What I like about possibility in the artist in ourselves is that he/she points us wholly toward the elixir of word, color, gesture and image and yet behind to something more. The stuff of the shadow, dream and our world: this is word and image, as our whole life, transparent and beyond the limited self. As the expression of no-thing in silence and interconnection, in oneself, and as it is in things. That we are originally one, felt as a profound change, a whole life dropping off body and mind. Faith is the act of permission. A recognition of one's natural mind, this something more. In truth there is nothing to know and yet we do know as we experience this each moment, now. . . this vast leaping over, stepping back, and then stepping forward as our original vow.

**Emily Dickinson:** Poet and Recluse. . . . her letter to the world. Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. She spent most of her adult years living with her family in the house her grandfather built. As she grew older, she rarely left the house, except for intermittent written correspondence and had few visitors or true friends. Yet living and writing in her own way, she is fiercely independent, and profoundly connected. *A Vastness as a Neighbor came, . . . a Wisdom, without Face, or Name. . . A peace, as Hemispheres at Home. . . And so the Night became.* Her father was a prominent lawyer with a distant and puritan disposition. She remained close to her brother Austin, who was married and practiced law. Both she and her younger sister Lavinia lived in the house together, both remained unmarried. Lavinia was more outspoken, less scholarly in inclination and very protective of her sister. Emily spoke of her mother as colorless and living in the shadow of her husband.



F

The Infinite a sudden Guest  
Has been assumed to be  
But how can that stupendous come  
Which never went away?

F

Wild Nights- Wild Nights  
Wild Nights should be  
Our luxury!

Futile-the Winds-  
To a Heart in port-  
Done with the compass-  
Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden-  
Ah! The Sea!  
Might I but moor -Tonight-  
In Thee!

The myriad ways we say for whom are we, for what, or where? Our presence as Buddha, all presence as Buddha, which does not mean things go as we would like. What did the Buddha mean by earth as witness, to meet experiences silently marked by grace, our lives influenced by other lives and yet not comparable. The poems of Emily Dickinson are expressive of a conversion experience, by her own admission brought on by crisis, possibly an erotic crisis and stimulating the work of oneself. “My Business”, stated Emily Dickinson in one of her letters, “is Circumference,” and “Twas the old road-through pain- That unfrequented - One.”

The ultimate . . . things as it is, light and peace which liberates and gives life. Hidden within the potential of our own death, moment by moment or, as the great transition, is . . . a wisdom fundamentally that we are one and . . . that Nothing dies. To face the fact of our own death and loss without fear ( or whatever is your poison) is to dissolve a self, caught up in the illusion of separateness. Through practice we experience this oneness, as actual, not hypothetical. When we truly recognize this, as our body, the body of the world, this Buddha body, we have so to speak arrived. For would it not be that our voice among the trees, mountains, the rivers, and clouds would somehow bring true grace?