

CASE 11

**Ôbaku's
"Gobblers of Lees"**



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

The great activities of the buddhas and patriarchs are entirely within your grasp. The life of every human or heavenly being is completely at your command. Every casual phrase of yours perturbs the crowds and astounds the multitudes. Every internal movement, every external action of yours shatters the chains and smashes the fetters. You deal with people of supreme aspiration, you handle the matters of highest truth. Just tell me, is there anyone who was ever like that? Do you know the destination of such a person? I will give you an example, look!

Case:

Ôbaku instructed the assembly saying, "You are all gobblers of lees! If you keep going on your way like that, when will you be able to have your 'today'? Do you know that in this great empire of Tang there is not a single Zen teacher?" Then a monk came forward and said, "What would you say to those who direct their assemblies and lead their followers in various places?" Ôbaku said, "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no teacher."

Verse:

**Awesome and solitary, void of any pride;
Seated in the vast ocean, he distinguished dragons and snakes.
The Emperor of Daichû once touched him lightly,
To fall thrice into his claws and fangs.**

Master Ôbaku Kiun, the teacher of Master Rinzai, was a dharma successor of Master Hyakujô Ekai. It seems that he originally wanted to be a disciple of Master Baso Dôitsu, one of whose disciples was Hyakujô himself. When Ôbaku came to Hyakujô to greet him, Hyakujô said, "What are you here for?" Ôbaku said, "I came here only for one thing." Hyakujô saw immediately that this man already possessed deep understanding. The next day Ôbaku came to Hyakujô to bid him farewell. Hyakujô asked, "Where are you heading?" Ôbaku said, "I am

going to Kōsei to meet and venerate Great Master Ba [Master Baso Dōitsu]." Hyakujō said, "Great Master Ba is already dead." Ōbaku said, "I am very sorry to hear that. However, I heard that your Reverence is a disciple of Great Master Ba. I would like to know what dialogues your Reverence had with him." So Hyakujō told him how he had come to a great enlightenment under Great Master Ba. At last Ōbaku became Hyakujō's disciple. Hyakujō, on his part, seems to have greatly appreciated Ōbaku as a man of special caliber.

Ōbaku was, in fact, a man of exceeding stature, as the above Verse says. Even physically he was a giant of more than 7 feet. He had a distinguishing protrusion in the middle of his forehead – traditionally referred to as the "round pearl" – since, so they say, he always struck his forehead on the floor when he performed his daily services.

Among his disciples there was a distinguished man named Haikyū, prime minister of the Tang Dynasty. He is the one who collected the teachings of Ōbaku and compiled them into a book called *Denshin-hōyō* [On the Transmission of Mind as Essence of Dharma], a work preserved even to this day. I've appreciated this book since my youth and read it many times. It is written in a very clear language. Ōbaku is extremely transparent, quite different from Rinzai in the *Rinzai-roku* who often says rather complicated things. This fact may be another sign of his great quality. Great Master Yōka says in his *Shōdōka* [Song on the Realization of the Way]:

A great elephant does not play in the small alleys of rabbits;

Greatly enlightened people do not care about tiny things.

That's exactly how Ōbaku was.

On the Instruction:

This Instruction praises Ōbaku's dharma style or character in view of the following koan. Since ancient times it has enjoyed the reputation of being an extremely fitting "instruction."

The great activities of the buddhas and patriarchs are entirely within your grasp. When your kensho becomes perfected, great activities spring out. You can act freely "to kill a buddha when you meet him, to kill a patriarch when you meet him." Ōbaku is in perfect command of such great activities ascribed to the buddhas and patriarchs.

The life of every human or heavenly being is completely at your command. With his fingertips, with his lips, Ōbaku can freely control the life of countless living beings in the human world as well as in heaven. Such great activities are under his command.

Every casual phrase of yours perturbs the crowds and astounds the multitudes. A "casual phrase" is a saying uttered freely, without any conscious preparation or considered intention. Such phrases astonish and influence masses of people. Originally all words of the buddhas and patriarchs are like that. Most koans are composed of "casual phrases" of the buddhas and patriarchs. Those phrases were not intended to be koans; they simply came out

as free utterances without any forethought. Why is this possible? Because the buddhas and patriarchs are in the true world. If you utter a phrase from the sphere of the true world, every pronouncement becomes a koan. For example, the Catholic Fathers cite very often the words of Christ, and these words are full of koans.

Every internal movement, every external action of yours shatters the chains and smashes the fetters. An "internal movement" [*ki*] is an activity of mind appearing momentarily in the head without developing into a concrete action. If it comes out and takes a concrete form like wielding the stick, etc., it is called an "external action" [*kyô*]. A quick blinking of the eyes, for example, could be either *ki* or *kyô*. At any rate, the tiny activity of a truly great person can cut the chains which confine the human mind. Speaking of chains, note that there are "golden chains" too. Especially those people who have seen the world of nothing-ness for the first time have the tendency to be preoccupied with that experience; they are said to be in "golden chains." These chains may be "golden," since they look precious in the eyes of those who haven't had kensho yet. But they are surely another kind of chain – a chain named "enlightenment." Before enlightenment you are bound with the chains of delusions, after enlightenment you are tied with the golden chains of *satori!* The word "chains" here refers not only to such "golden chains," but to all sorts of chains including those of sheer delusions. "Fetters" are instruments to bind up hands or legs. They also can be cut asunder by a tiny activity of mind. Such great spiritual power is in Ôbaku's hand.

You deal with the persons of supreme aspiration, you handle the matters of highest truth. "A person of supreme aspiration" [*kôjô no ki*] means a practitioner with the strongest determination, a person of "the highest quality" [*jôkon*]. *Ki* [literally: activity] means here a person who practices zazen "activating" the mind to attain kensho and buddhahood at any cost. This doesn't mean that people with mediocre determination are altogether excluded, but Ôbaku deals mainly with people having the highest aspiration, who are the most firmly determined to climb to the very top of the way with continuous and strenuous efforts. And in his teaching he "handles the matters of highest truth" [*kôjô no ji*], that is, he doesn't apply second-class methods but always resorts bluntly to the first-class realities. The buddhas and patriarchs, when they teach, present nothing but the naked "highest" facts. They give you, so to speak, the purest and strongest *sake* to drink; they don't give you sake-and-water, thinking that this may be enough for the time being, since you wouldn't be able to swallow such and such statements.

Just tell me, is there anyone who was ever like that? Do you know the destination of such a person? I will give you an example, look! I've explained enough. Is there a real example for that? Can you say what becomes of him or her in the very end? If you can't answer, I'll give you an example, so look closely!

On the Case:

Ôbaku instructed the assembly saying, "You are all gobblers of lees! If you keep

going on your way like that, when will you be able to have your 'today'?" Once Ôbaku stepped up on the rostrum and taught the assembly saying, "You all are simply devouring lees! You stick to the words other people have said, you are preoccupied with what this one or that one has said about Zen. You do nothing but ape around, and that's exactly what gobblers of lees are!" Things don't seem to be so different even today.

There are always people who are pilgrimaging around, attending this zazenkai over here, that sesshin over there, and visiting this and that master one after another. But if you are loafing around like that in your practice, when and where will you experience your "today," that is, the day you can say, "Yes, now I've got it!" When will you encounter that day, like Tokusan who said upon his realization, "I will never doubt any more what the old master has said to me." What you are doing is simply gobbling lees! Shame on you!

"Do you know that in this great empire of Tang there is not a single Zen teacher?"

In that period there were many great masters such as Nansen, Jôshû, etc. But Ôbaku says there is no Zen teacher in the entire land. (You might feel like asking him, "What are you then?")

So a monk, who happened to be with him, displays his fine intelligence: **Then a monk came forward and said, "What would you say to those who direct their assemblies and lead their followers in various places?" Ôbaku said, "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no teacher."** "Zen" here doesn't refer to the practice of Zen we are doing now, but it's another name for what's normally called "essential nature," "Buddha-nature," or "essential world." Then it's quite correct to name anything "Zen" – mountains, rivers, trees, grass, you name it.

Therefore, "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no teacher." Zen is nothing you can "teach" someone; neither can anyone "teach" you what Zen is. It's completely off the mark to expect someone to teach you Zen. You must "taste" it by yourself. That's why "there is no teacher." In fact, all a Zen instructor can do is simply push you from behind; you must stand and walk on your own feet.

In the ordinary world, we see that instructors of English, German, tea ceremony, flower arrangement and so forth actually "teach," and the students imitate what the teachers do. But that's not the way it is with Zen. We can teach you how to walk: for example, how to practice Mu, how to breathe, and the like. That is, we can show you how to practice in a general way. Actually practicing is your job. Your master can't be like a mother who does everything for her baby holding, feeding... There is a phrase: "Whether it's cold or warm you can only tell from your own experience." For instance, we can say to you, "This tea is nice, please try it." But it's you yourself who actually taste the tea and appreciate it. "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no teacher."

This koan offers two angles of observation. On the one hand it is possible to appreciate the grandiose statement, "Do you know that in this great empire of Tang there is not a single Zen teacher?" On the other hand, another rather modest statement also draws our attention, "I

do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no teacher." The latter statement is usually understood the way I explained to you just now. But Master Engo comments that "With a bang it started out, dismally it petered out." The first sentence was a great and powerful bang, but it all fizzled out with the next one. He also comments, "It fell to pieces like tiles and melted away like ice." That is, Ôbaku's remark, "Do you know that in the great empire of Tang there is not a single Zen teacher?" sounds powerful enough. But when a monk asked further, he could only mutter, "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no Zen teacher," thus collapsing miserably like crumbling tiles and melting ice. This type of interpretation is favored more by the Rinzai School. In either case, the foremost point to bear in mind is that other people can never transmit to you the real taste of Zen; you yourself must personally experience it. Other ways of appreciating this koan should be the subject of further deliberation in the dokusan room when you eventually come to face the koan.

On the Verse:

Awesome and solitary, void of any pride. This single line seems to sufficiently describe Ôbaku's being. The "awesome" atmosphere baffles description. Something similar is expressed when Master Setchô praises Unmon in his Verse to the Case "Unmon Extends His Hands"¹: "Awe-compelling and majestic, commanding four hundred provinces." The next word "solitary" is quite significant too. "Void of any pride" means lack of any self-consciousness. He stands all alone in his awe-inspiring majesty. Imagine, for example, a master of sword-fighting, who quietly appears with his sword in the arena, stands still and lifts the sword slowly with its tip pointed ahead. You can imagine how awe-inspiring the solemn air around him would be. And yet, the master himself isn't conscious of it at all. The atmosphere around Ôbaku was just like that.

Remember how Master Setchô praises Master Jôshû in his Verse to the Case "Jôshû and the Stone Bridge"²: "Unaware of his unapproachable solitude, yet his way being extremely high." He is all alone, his reality is unapproachable and steep like a tall cliff. But he himself is unaware of it, his way being exceedingly lofty. This describes the same reality as "awesome and solitary, void of any pride." Personally I like the word "solitary/solitude."

In this connection I would like to mention Shôju Rôjin³. He was the master of Master Hakuin⁴, succeeding to the dharma of Master Shidô Bunan. He spent most of his life in his Shôju Hermitage in Mt. Iiyama⁵, where he eventually died. Although Ôbaku must have been of much greater caliber than Shôju Rôjin, the atmosphere "awesome and solitary" also fits Shôju perfectly.

¹ Case 54 of the *Hekiganroku*.

² Case 52 of the *Hekiganroku*.

³ "Shôju Rôjin" literally means "Old One Shôju." His real name was Dôkyô Etan.

⁴ A great renovator of the Rinzai School in the 18th century in Japan.

⁵ Located in the northern part of the present Nagano Prefecture.

It is written in a document that a priest from the Shôkôji Temple in Nihommatsu, my hometown in northern Japan, once visited Shôju Rôjin. The name of the priest was Kaishuku, and he was the head monk under Master Daikaku, the abbot of the Shôkôji Temple. He was a priest of high repute, possessing considerable Zen understanding. But since the fame of Shôju Rôjin was so great, he came to the hermitage Shôju-an, apparently with the aim of checking Shôju. Shôju was not at home; only his mother, named Rin, was there. Priest Kaishuku asked her rather insolently, "Is the master of the hermitage not at home? Where is he?" Shôju's mother, a great person indeed answered, "The master of the hermitage, sir, is coming to and fro in your own belly..." Kaishuku was dumbfounded. There followed a few more questions and answers, but in the end he was defeated and expelled from the hermitage by Shôju's mother. However, Kaishuku hid himself behind the stone steps of the hermitage to wait for the returning master. In the evening, the old master came back. Kaishuku watched the old man from behind as he went up step by step in his wooden sandals. Struck deeply by a profound atmosphere – "awesome and solitary" – Kaishuku was unable to speak to the old master, and left the place. How wonderful to be "awesome and solitary" like this!

Mr. Masuda Kôzô, a master of Japanese chess [*shôgi*], practiced *zazen* under the late Yamamoto Gempô Roshi. When Gempô Roshi passed away, Mr. Masuda related a personal episode: Once he was watching Gempô Roshi going up the stairway: that atmosphere struck Mr. Masuda somehow and he thought to himself, "There's a true Zen monk!" A master knows a true master, you might say

At any rate, such was the air of Ôbaku, "awesome and solitary, void of any pride." It doesn't occur at all to him to think that he himself is a great one.

Seated in the vast ocean, he distinguished dragons and snakes. He sits immobile, filling up the "vast ocean" or the entire universe, and he distinguishes at first glance whether the practitioner appearing in front of him is a "dragon" or a "snake," that is, whether he or she is a great or hopeless one. A true Zen master can immediately see whether the student is highly advanced in practice or still at the beginners' level.

The Emperor of Daichû once touched him lightly, to fall thrice into his claws and fangs. "Daichû" is the name of the era of Emperor Sensô⁶ of the Tang Dynasty. "The Emperor of Daichû" is therefore Emperor Sensô himself. When he was still a little boy and his elder brother Bokusô was the emperor, Sensô was one day playing with his playmates. As the emperor had finished the official work of the day, the throne was vacant. Sensô climbed on it, and, playing that he was the emperor, made his fellow comrades bow the formal prostration to him. Among these playmates was Busô, one of Bokusô's three children who later succeeded to the throne (Keisô, Bunsô, and Busô). Busô obviously had a tendency to hold grudges, and even later he remembered quite well how his uncle once had humiliated him by making him do the prostration. So he eventually killed Sensô. But somehow Sensô was revived – one history

⁶ 846-859.

book says that when they threw filth upon his corpse, the dead came back to life – and then became a monk in order to avoid further troubles, going on pilgrimage around the country far and wide. Once he was a scribe as well as a practicing monk under the name Daichû in the temple of Master Enkan Saian. It happened that Ôbaku was the head monk of this temple, so Daichû and Ôbaku practiced together. Now Ôbaku constantly made deep formal bows in front of the altar so that he developed a protrusion on his forehead. Seeing Ôbaku bow Daichû asked him, "It is written, 'Do not adhere to the Buddha in seeking anything, do not adhere to the dharma in seeking anything, do not adhere to the sangha in seeking anything.' But what are you seeking, worshipping constantly like that?" Ôbaku answered, "I don't adhere to the Buddha in seeking anything, I don't adhere to the dharma in seeking anything, I don't adhere to the sangha in seeking anything. I just worship like this all the time!" and he hit Daichû hard. Daichû asked further, "You say you just worship. But what does that amount to?" Then Ôbaku hit him again. (Perhaps the blow wst neglecting the significance of worshipping.) Daichû cried, "What violence!" Then Ôbaku, "What? Where is 'violence' or 'politeness' in my hitting?", and he hit him once again. So Daichû was hit three times. (Later, Daichû was invited to become the emperor of the land as Emperor Seisô.) This anecdote is referred to in the lines, "The Emperor of Daichû once touched him lightly, to fall thrice into his claws and fangs. Daichû touched Ôbaku in a light but careless way, saying, "Do not adhere to the Buddha...", then he was attacked three times by Ôbaku's fierce claws and fangs.

All this shows that Ôbaku was a man of tremendous caliber. If you have time, please read the *Denshin-hôyô*. It has long been a source of inspiration to me.