

**CASE 18**

The National Teacher's  
Tombstone

By Yamada Kôun

*Case:*

Emperor Shukusô asked Echû, the national teacher, "What would you wish me to do in a hundred years?" The national teacher said, "Make a seamless tomb for this old monk." The emperor said, "I should like to ask you, Master, for its design." The national teacher remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "Did you understand?" The emperor said, "I didn't understand anything." The national teacher said, "I have a dharma successor, my disciple Tangen, who knows well about this matter. Let him come to you and ask him about it."

After the national teacher passed away, the emperor called Tangen and asked him about the meaning of this. Tangen responded:

"South of the River, north of the Lake:

(Setchô commented, "The single hand does not sound without reason.")

In between there's gold, filling the whole land.

(Setchô commented, "A staff, freshly hewn from the mountain forest.")

Under the shadowless tree all people are in one boat;

(Setchô added, "The sea is peaceful, the river clear.")

In the crystal palace there is no one who knows.

(Setchô commented, "The speech is finished.")"

*Verse:*

The seamless tomb – it is difficult to see it;

A clear pond does not allow the blue dragon to coil up in it.

Layer upon layer – shadows round and round;

For a thousand, ten-thousand years hence it will be shown to people.

*On the Case:*

The name of the emperor mentioned in this Case is Shukusô, but, to be historically accurate, it should be Daisô. By the time National Teacher Echû died, Emperor Shukusô had

already been dead about thirteen years. Therefore, the incident in this Case took place when Shukusô's son, Daisô, was emperor.

Shukusô, on his part, was the son of the famous Emperor Gensô of the Tang Dynasty. The story of Emperor Gensô, who loved his beautiful queen Yôkihi and was assassinated on a mountain called Anroku, is very famous. Gensô, Shukusô, and Daisô were all emperors devoted to Zen but were not especially praiseworthy as emperors. Iida Tôin Roshi said that for emperors there is emperor's Zen; there is no point in an emperor trying to act like a priest. That is certainly true, for there's nothing more ridiculous than an emperor badly imitating a Buddhist priest. In the first Case of the *Blue Cliff Record*, we have Emperor Bu of Ryô who questioned Bodhidharma. He, too, was a person who deeply respected Buddhism, wearing monk's robes and giving sermons. Yet, his last years as emperor were not very successful, and he was finally killed by one of his vassals. In Japan, as well, there have been many members of the imperial family over the centuries who have been devoted to Zen: the emperors Hanazono and Godaigo, for example. Although it's very important to have faith in Buddhism and practice it, it is better that a person in the highest position not try to imitate the life of a priest. Rather, such a one should have a great priest near by as a consultant. And this is what National Teacher Echû was for Emperor Daisô.

National Teacher Echû was a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch Enô and a Dharma brother of Nangaku Ejô and Seigen Gyôshi. After experiencing deep enlightenment, he went to Mt. Hakugai in Nan'yô and stayed in a valley called Tôshi for forty years without leaving. Nan'yô was also called Tôshû or Tô Province. The modern Japanese master Nantenbô<sup>1</sup> was also known as Nakahara Tôshû, after the place where Echû remained for forty years, and he gave Iida Roshi the name Tôin, which means to hide in Tôshi Valley, because they both emulated National Teacher Echû.

Although Echû remained in Tôshi Valley practicing in secret, it became known one way or another that there was a great person there. He was invited by Emperor Shukusô to come and preach the dharma and teach the way, but he did not go. After the third invitation, however, he felt it would be improper to disregard the emperor's wishes, and so he finally left the valley. He became the emperor's teacher and received the title "National Teacher." Whenever he went to the palace and preached, afterwards the emperor himself would see him off, pushing his cart down the road. Such behavior on the part of an emperor is rare, and it gives us some idea of the respect he had for National Teacher Echû.

In the present Case, it seems that Emperor Daisô, Shukusô's son, comes to see Echû on his deathbed. **Emperor Shukusô asked Echû, the national teacher, "What would you wish me to do in a hundred years?"** "In a hundred years" means "after you have died." From ancient times there has been a saying, "A person's life span is fifty (or sometimes: seventy) years." It certainly was rare for a person to live to be a hundred then. Thus, "a hundred years from now"

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<sup>1</sup> Zen master of Iida Tôin Roshi.

means "No doubt you will live to an advanced age, but after..." – a skillful way to avoid saying, "After you're dead." So the emperor was asking Echû to tell him if there was anything he would like to have done after he passed away.

**The national teacher said, "Make a seamless tomb for this old monk."** National Teacher Echû's response was, "Make a seamless tomb for this old priest," that is, "for me." There are various styles of tombs, but those of Buddhist priests are usually egg-shaped. Such a round shape is what Echû refers to with the word "seamless." Nowadays, many of the "egg tombs" of Buddhist priests are pointed at the top. Yasutani Haku'un Roshi's tomb isn't a perfect egg shape, either. It's somehow pointed on the top. Perhaps Haku'un Roshi is a bit unhappy about it!

**The emperor said, "I should like to ask you, Master, for its design."** "What specifications should it have?" Daisô asked. **The national teacher remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "Did you understand?"** **The emperor said, "I didn't understand anything."** At this time it appears that Echû wasn't lying in bed, for he sat silently for a while and then said, "Did you understand?" Thus he showed the design for his tomb, but ordinary people wouldn't be able to make head or tail out of it. So the emperor replied, "No, I didn't." Engo seems to have liked this answer, for he comments, "Luckily I encountered this 'not-knowing'." It is the same answer we find in Case 1 of the *Hekiganroku*, in which Bodhidharma says, "I don't know." At that time the Emperor Bu also said, "I don't know." "Not-knowing is most intimate" is a famous saying. In any event, at this point Emperor Daisô did not understand what Echû really meant by sitting silently for a while. Echû meant this as his last teaching, since there was not much time remaining for him. But Daisô didn't get it. No matter how much you beat a broken drum, it won't make a sound!

**The national teacher said, "I have a dharma successor, my disciple Tangen, who knows well about this matter. Let him come to you and ask him about it." After the national teacher passed away, the emperor called Tangen and asked him about the meaning of this.**

Here, I'd like to add a few words about Echû, the national teacher. As I mentioned earlier, he practiced for forty years in Tôshikoku and only left that valley, finally, in response to repeated requests from the emperor. At that time, he had a close friend there. Whether they actually practiced together or only lived together is not clear, but, in any case, he had a friend on the way, Seizazan by name. When Echû told him of his decision to leave the valley for the capital, Seizazan became quite angry. "What do you hope to accomplish by leaving now?" he demanded. "This sort of business is not for you," he said and, telling Echû he no longer wanted anything to do with him, he broke off their association as friends.

Echû was not motivated by a desire for fame or profit when he decided to go to the capital. Still, it is possible that, from the viewpoint of a truly pure person, he appeared to have been seeking public esteem. Becoming the teacher of the emperor, he would probably be met with a carriage and assured of a secure life; whereas, in the mountains, there must have been days when they didn't know if they'd have enough to eat. It is said that the worst thing a

follower of the Buddha's way can do is to worry about money and/or honor. Even in the world of Zen, there seem to be people who try to get weekly magazines to print their photographs or articles about them. That very fact shows that they are not true practitioners of Zen. Actually, there's no need to worry about publicity and advertising. If you concentrate on enriching the content of your Zen practice, it will be appreciated for itself. But to think, "Well, what that master has is bound to be recognized, so I'll just keep him secret," is not quite pure, either. Does it make any difference whether one is recognized by others or not? If you really want to practice Zen, you must get rid of any thought of becoming rich and famous.

Let's appreciate Tangen's design for the tomb. **Tangen responded: "South of the River, north of the Lake."** The phrase "design for a seamless tomb" makes it sound difficult. To put it more simply, it is the design for our essential nature. Since this nature is the whole universe, it could also be called a design for the universe. Tangen expresses it more poetically with the words, "From the south of the River to the north of the Lake." From here as far north and south as one can go, everything from north to south. It means the whole universe.

**Setchô commented, "The single hand does not sound without reason."** From north to south – the entire universe – is called a 'single hand.' It is said that the koan, "The Sound of One Hand" comes from this statement. The one hand is the whole universe but it is just one, so it does not sound uselessly. The koan is to hear that sound and bring it to the dokusan room. Some clap their hands together like this [Clap!]. But isn't that two hands? Yes, it's two [Clap!] but, at the same time, one. It appears in the form of two [Clap!] but actually it is one [Clap!]. From the point of view of my life there is no two in my two hands; always only one. But if you try to do in the dokusan room what I just did, you won't pass the koan! "The single hand does not sound needlessly." It is always perfectly still. When it becomes two there is sound. Soon after kensho a practitioner is given the koan, "Stop the sound of the distant temple bell." It, too, does not ring without cause. When it is one, it does not ring.

**In between there's gold, filling the whole land.** From south of the River to north of the Lake, that is to say, the whole universe, this world of oneness, is nothing but gold, pure gold. In what way? This is a koan. In the dokusan room, you must present various examples of gold filling up the universe. "In between there's gold, filling the whole land." Look well.

**Setchô commented, "A staff, freshly hewn from the mountain forest."** Setchô adds a fine comment: "A staff, freshly hewn from the mountain forest." This *kotzu*<sup>2</sup> that I have here is not "hewn freshly from the mountain forest," since it has been worked upon and lacquered by human hands. But what does "a staff, hewn freshly from the mountain" mean? It's another expression for the gold that fills the universe – it's as it is. If you think about it and try to attach theoretical meaning to it, it ceases to be "freshly from the mountain forest." For example, the act of standing up. You just stand up, without any theory or concept. If it is not just standing-up, it's not "freshly from the mountain forest." When you have something to do,

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<sup>2</sup> A short stick a Zen master carries as a sign of office.

you just stand up. That's it. And when you are finished, you sit down. Everything you do quite naturally: eating food, drinking water, washing your face – each one of these is "the staff, hewn freshly from the mountain forest." That's another name Setchô gives to the pure "gold" filling up the entire universe.

**Under the shadowless tree all people are in one boat.** When the sun shines upon a tree, its shadow is also there. So what does "the shadowless tree" mean? There are various interpretations of this phrase. According to one, when the sun is directly above the tree, it throws no shadow. Others say that the shadowless tree that is mentioned in the Nirvana Sutra is a tree at night. On a pitch-black night a tree has no shadow. This interpretation seems preferable. Under a tree on a dark night there is no shadow. The "shadow" here stands for "differentiation" or "discrimination," so, "shadowless"-ness symbolizes the world of non-differentiation. "One boat" is the entire universe. In this ferry boat there are all kinds of people: men and women, teachers and students, priests and nuns, husbands and wives; old people and children. However, from the Zen point of view, they are not just riding on the same ferry; each of them exhausts the universe. "Above and below the heavens, none exists but I alone" – this applies to everyone there. Each and everyone is intrinsically Buddha, and they are riding together on this ferry. This expresses our essential world, where there is no discrimination at all. Men and women, and so forth, are all of the same nature. Earlier, it was called "the shadowless tree." The "one boat" under this shadowless tree is also a "design" for our essential world. Once you get on this boat, there is no trouble, for everyone is Buddha without any differentiation. It's only when we draw distinctions that we have problems. At this time of year<sup>3</sup>, people are receiving their year-end bonuses. It's fine if you look only at your own. But if you start looking around at what others got you are apt to become dissatisfied, because you see the differences. Salaried workers are a miserable lot because they tend to get angry if their colleagues are getting even a hundred yen more than they are. However, when you clearly perceive the world in which there is absolutely no differentiation, then, **the sea is peaceful, the river clear.** The sea is calm and peaceful, ideal for the voyage – that's the ambiance expressed in Setchô's comment. In order to have a truly calm and peaceful mind, you must be able to see the world of absolute equality, the world of no discrimination whatsoever.

There is one more design: **In the crystal palace there is no one who knows.** The expression "crystal palace" originally meant a beautiful palace such as Emperors Shukusô and Daisô must have lived in. But in Zen it means a completely transparent palace – as one made of crystal or fine glass – symbolizing our essential world. In what way is it transparent? Well, you can see through it. And it's the same with our world too. How? Everything is what you see, what you hear. Red is red. Our world is the crystal palace where there is nothing other than just as you see, just as you hear. And in it there is "no one who knows." There's no one who could be classified as buddha, bodhisattva or ordinary person. One might wonder what

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<sup>3</sup> In December.

great persons live in such a splendid crystal palace – Shakyamuni Buddha? or Bodhidharma? or Manjusri? Yet, when you look closely you find there is no one at all. That's the world of enlightenment: there is nobody, not even a mouse stirring.

These are the designs for the "seamless tomb" presented to the emperor. Setchô, who seems to have an inclination to interject interesting comments, now adds, **The speech is finished**, as if to say, it's all over, let's go home, like after a sesshin.

Here I would like to digress a little and tell you an interesting story involving Tangen, the national teacher's attendant. In Zen literature, when the master's attendant appears, he is usually remarkable. This is true even in ordinary companies of today. The secretary of the president is often remarkable for he or she is usually present when the president is making important judgments and decisions. This is a marvelous education, and if the secretary really works hard at the job, he or she might also become president some day. Well, to this Tangen (his real name was Ôshin, later he was the head of a temple called Tangen-ji, after which he was named) came the well-known Kyôzan, who founded the Igyô Sect with Isan. But at that time Kyôzan wasn't that far in his practice, so he could not get near Tangen. Apparently Tangen, the only successor of National Teacher Echû, was very awe-inspiring and unapproachable. There was nothing to be done, so Kyôzan left and went to practice under Master Shôkû. While he was there it happened that a monk came and asked Shôkû, "What is the meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the west?" In other words, what was Bodhidharma's real intention? what is the essence of the Buddhist way?

Shôkû said, "A man has fallen into a thousand foot well. If you can save him without using a rope, I'll tell you the meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the west." How to save a man in a deep well without using a rope? Shôkû told the monk that if he knew how, he'd tell him why Bodhidharma came from the west. But the monk didn't understand. Instead, he made an inane comment: "The other day I went to see Priest Chô who told me many things that were helpful." He obviously thought Shôkû was just making small talk. Shôkû became very angry and called Kyôzan, "Come and drag this dead corpse out of here," as if to say, "anyone who talks like this is as good as dead – he doesn't understand a thing." How stern the ancient masters were! But then, even Kyôzan could not understand how to save the man who had fallen into the well. In the Rinzai Sect this koan is sometimes given. Try to work on it and see how you would do it.

Later, Kyôzan went back to Tangen and told him this story. Tangen said, "You fool, who is in the well?" We create the problem of a man in the well in our heads and are completely bound by it. Who is in the well? You fool, you are the one who are in it! But Kyôzan still did not understand clearly.

After that he went to Isan and told him of the problem, saying, "I'm still struggling with it." Isan called Kyôzan's first name, "Ejaku!" "Yes?" he answered. "There, you are out of the well!" Ha, ha, ha! Zen dialogues are really interesting, aren't they?

*On the Verse:*

**The seamless tomb – it is difficult to see it.** It is very difficult to see the true reality of the universe. We can see the phenomenal, but how hard it is to perceive the essential world!

**A clear pond does not allow the blue dragon to coil up in it.** There are several ways of looking at this line. According to one interpretation, "a clear pond" refers to the consciousness of the National Teacher Echû. Then "the blue dragon" means various thoughts and concepts. That is, it's impossible for such dragons as thoughts and concepts to dwell in a truly clear pond. Another way of interpreting this, however, is that truly great Zen masters ("dragons") are not found in the transparent world of enlightenment. National Teacher Echû is not there either. In the transparent world there is no one at all. Even if you want to save other people, there isn't a single soul there. But National Teacher Echû isn't in such a world. It's never the world of pure enlightenment, where there is not even one thing, that really great Zen masters dwell in. They live in muddier water! If not, they cannot save anyone. In what kind of place are they? Maybe in a place like this zendo. It's pretty muddy here!

**Layer upon layer – shadows round and round.** "Layer upon layer" means the overlapping layers of the "seamless tombstone." But this is also the "design" of our universe: piled up in layers. That the phenomenal world is composed of layers is an interesting point of view. Modern science also tells us that the phenomenal world is made up of particles, atoms, molecules and so on – although Master Setchô isn't speaking about such things. Anyhow, the "seamless stone" has layer upon layer, just as the universe itself does. And the "shadows" of the tombstone, "round and round", fall on the ground. How? Mountains are high, rivers are long. Willows are green, flowers are red. The sun, the moon, the stars. "Shadows round and round" reflected in the world of phenomena.

**For a thousand and ten-thousand years hence, it will be shown to the people.** For many generations to come, the true world will be made known thanks to Tansen's design for a seamless tomb.

This is an excellent koan. Savor it well.