

CASE 38

Fuketsu's "Mind Seal"



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

If you talk about the gradual, it goes against the normal yet conforms to the Way. Amid the busiest city, seven vertical and eight horizontal. If you talk about the sudden, it leaves no tracks. Even a thousand sages cannot seek it out. If you raise neither the gradual nor the sudden, how will it be? For the swift person, a single word; for the alert steed, one flick of the whip. At such a time, who is the able Zen personage? I will give you an example, look!

Case:

When he was staying at the government office of the Province Ei, Fuketsu entered the hall [to preach] and said, "The mind seal of the patriarch resembles the activity of the iron ox. When it goes away, the [impression of the] seal remains; when it stays there, the [impression of the] seal is brought to naught. If it neither goes away nor stays, would it be right to give a seal [of approval] or not?"

Then Elder Rohi came up and said, "I have the activities of the iron ox. [However,] I ask you, Master, not to give me the seal." Fuketsu said, "I am accustomed to leveling the great ocean through fishing whales. But, alas, now I find instead a frog wriggling about in the mud." Rohi stood there considering. Fuketsu shouted "Kaatz!" and said, "Why don't you say anything, Elder?" Rohi was perplexed. Fuketsu hit him with his whisk and said, "Do you remember what you said? Say something, I'll check it for you." Rohi tried to say something. Fuketsu hit him again with his whisk.

The Magistrate said, "Buddha's law and the King's law are of the same nature." Fuketsu said, "What principle do you see in them?" The Magistrate said, "If you do not make a decision where a decision should be made, you are inviting disorder."

Fuketsu descended from the rostrum.

Verse:

He snares Rohi and makes him mount the iron ox;
The spear and armor of the Three Profundities do not treat him lightly.
All waters heading for the castle of the So king –
At a single shout he reverses their course.

Today's case seems easy to understand at first glance, but proves in reality to be rather difficult. This is a koan that brings us to an appreciation of the keen-witted activity displayed by Fuketsu in dealing with his students.

In his *Soliloquy on the Blue Cliff Record* [*Hekiganshu Dokugo*] Yasutani Roshi also speaks about this koan. (Yasutani Roshi's statements in this book are mainly representation of the thought of his teacher, Harada Roshi. Yasutani Roshi himself recalls that, while writing this work, he made the notes he had taken during his master's teisho the groundwork for his book and expanded them. Words with biting sharpness appear often in those pages, and at such times we feel more the spirit of Harada Roshi at work than of Yasutani Roshi, his successor.)

[Here are excerpts from Yasutani Roshi's *Soliloquy* on the present case:] *"Even if you don't understand the teisho at all, it shouldn't interfere with your zazen in the least. You can still attain satori."* People coming from outside Japan may not understand a word when I present a teisho in Japanese. But this doesn't matter at all. Proof is the fact that many people from abroad have already attained kensho. On the other hand there are [Japanese] people who seem to understand what I am saying but can't make any real progress in their practice!

"If you at least practice zazen, you will also gradually come to understand the teisho. If you understand it, it is all the better. But even if you don't, it doesn't matter a bit." Even if you don't understand the words, you will begin to understand little by little as you keep listening, just as if strips of thin paper were falling away one by one. *"But if you ask me whether you don't need to listen to the teisho at all, I still think it is better to listen... Recall and savor the tale of 'Ennyatara Losing Her Head and Running Around.' It is just like her friends finally having to tie the mad woman to a pillar and tell her repeatedly that her head was right on her shoulders. By all rights, you should be able to realize your true self just by hearing about it, but because of the deep dream of the delusive self" – that is, since it is extremely difficult to do away with our ego-sense – "you cannot accept this. However, this simply means that you can't accept the matter with your surface consciousness; your root-consciousness or sub-consciousness has already accepted this totally, saying, 'Yeah, yeah, that's right.' Thus, if we keep listening we will gradually understand.*

If I deprive people of all things and speak" – that is, if I speak from a very strict point of view – "the 'leaking samadhi' [urojō]" – zazen of us ordinary people – "is nothing more than just 'egotistic opinion' [gaken]" – i.e., the consciousness of your self is always present – "or simply your emotion. It can't be otherwise when you sit without the 'eye of true wisdom.'" Even when you say you have attained kensho, it is still like looking through a pane of glass. It is only after you have achieved thorough enlightenment that you see directly, not through the pane of glass. If you sit in this condition, then the true and authentic world is seen with perfect clarity. This is what is called "sitting with the eye of true wisdom."

"However, when your understanding of the koans becomes opaque" – that is, unclear – "then put aside koan study for a while and just sit as hard as you can. But when a person with low heart and poor spirit" – someone who still lacks true decision to search the Way – "sits in a

kind of imitation shikantaza, it can have the reverse effect. Not even one out of twenty people would succeed in such a way." Here Yasutani Roshi is pointing out the great difficulty of shikantaza practice. It is the authentic and pure Zen, and Dôgen Zenji came to enlightenment through this. But only a person with great spirit and determination could ever achieve this.

"How could Zen instruction be of any use if it consisted of nothing more than a moldy old text? Nowadays, the world is filled with people who can't follow along unless the most gradual method among the gradual is applied." The students can't keep up with you unless you drag them along step by step. If you begin to speak about the real fact nobody will follow along. You may be familiar with Case 23 of the *Shôyôroku* (Roso Sits Facing the Wall). Whenever anyone came to Roso to ask about the Dharma, he would say nothing and simply turn around and face the wall in zazen. So, most people couldn't follow him, because he didn't say anything at all. But if someone who is equipped with a real eye were to see him, he or she could understand it, "Ah-ha, it's the manifestation of the essential Nature itself!" "The most gradual method among the gradual" means that the master chews and softens the "food" by himself before he or she offers it to you, so that it becomes a lot easier for you to take it (, although it's you, after all, who has to move the mouth and swallow the food!). Yasutani Roshi says that nowadays people will not stay with you unless you make the food easy enough for them to digest.

"The Founder Eihei¹ wrote the Shôbôgenzô only for those who were the quickest of the quick" – that is, those people who can realize in a flash, like the Verse says, "quick-witted person or the bright steed" for whom one word or one flick of the whip are enough – "and yet there are people in these days who simply mimic the Founder's way of talking and brag that the Ladder Enlightenment² of Rinzai is mistaken. Such impudence! They don't even know a thing about this 'ladder.'" I have a feeling that these were originally the words of Harada Roshi, but I would like you to savor them just the same.

You must know that in Zen practice there are both gradual [*zen*] enlightenment and sudden [*ton*] enlightenment. Nowadays, there are almost no cases of sudden great enlightenment. Almost all examples are those of the gradual type. Moreover, [figuratively speaking,] it isn't the type of walking at a quick and vigorous speed, but just like walking slowly and a short distance in kinhin!

Let us now examine the Instruction.

On the Instruction:

If you talk about the gradual, it goes against the normal yet conforms to the Way. Amid the busiest city, seven vertical and eight horizontal. Here we speak about advancing step-by-step. The "normal" means the ordinary or orthodox way. The main road of Zen is the sudden enlightenment, so, the gradual seems to be going against the ordinary way of Zen. Still, it actually conforms to the Way. In other words, if there is no one coming along with you, nothing happens to start with. Making it possible for others to follow along is the act of conforming to the Buddha Way, for it is the activity of saving all living beings.

¹ Dogen Zenji.

² Gradual enlightenment.

"Amid the busiest city" refers to the ordinary human society. "Seven vertical and eight horizontal" is a reference to complete freedom of movement and activity. You enter into the common human world and act with complete freedom in the work of liberating all living beings. Otherwise, the most basic vow of saving all beings cannot be accomplished.

If you talk about the sudden, it leaves no tracks. Even a thousand sages cannot seek it out. If we speak about the main road in Zen practice, that is, about sudden enlightenment, there is not a speck of dust, not a trace to be found. When you come to think about it, it is already out of sight. Even if a thousand sages, that is, a thousand buddhas were to gather, they would not be able to find it. Since there are no traces of it, there is no way it can be tracked down.

If you raise neither the gradual nor the sudden, how will it be? For the swift person, a single word; for the alert steed, one flick of the whip. At such a time, who is the able Zen personage? I will give you an example, look! Up to this point the author has spoken about gradual and sudden as two distinctive methods. Now, what about the time where there is neither gradual nor sudden, where both have been transcended? One word is enough for the quick-witted person to understand; one flick of the whip is enough to send the quick and alert horse off and running. Both are references to Fuketsu's activity. The author is saying, "Well, I have spoken about swift people and alert steeds. Is there anyone here of that caliber? Are there any swift persons and alert horses? I will now give you one example and you must look at it very carefully."

The authentic way of Zen is not a matter of coming gradually to an intellectual understanding, but of coming to sudden experiential realization. But in actual fact, it doesn't always work out that way and it is more often than not a matter of being led by the master step-by-step along the way until you arrive at the same place where the master is. In the final analysis, whether it is a gradual or a sudden process, the final destination, satori, is the same. If you go gradually, it's simply going to take time. But the content of the experience is the same, so there's no need to worry.

There are some people who hear or read accounts of the great enlightenment experiences of the ancient people and consider that, unless their experience is also of the same sort, it amounts to nothing. This is not true. If you gradually make your way and finally reach the goal, the substance does not differ and you arrive at the same place. For this, there is nothing you can do but put your trust in the teaching of your master and follow his or her guidance. Some people are disappointed because their experience seems more like a burning candle, or even the faint glow at the tip of an incense stick. It's simply a matter of making that initial glow ever brighter and greater. The central question is always whether you truly come to realization or not. After the initial and authentic realization, if you continue to practice, that initial glow will become more and more radiant, until it eventually rivals the brilliance of the midday sun.

On the Case:

When he was staying at the government office of the Province Ei, Fuketsu entered the hall to preach and said, "The mind seal of the patriarchs resembles the activity of the iron

ox. Master Fuketsu³ was born in the final years of China's Tang Dynasty and died in the first years of the following Sung Dynasty. His life encompasses the 60-odd years covering the last days of the Tang and the start of the Sung Dynasties, a time of great internal strife known generally as "the Five Reigns." He was Rinzai's great-grandson in the Dharma and his full name was Fuketsu Enshô Zenji. He went through many tribulations along the way to becoming a great Zen master. In his commentary to this koan, Engo gives a detailed description of the process whereby Fuketsu sought the Way.

Ei is the name of a province in old China, just as one of our prefectures like Kanagawa-ken here in Japan. The governor of the Province Ei at that time was holding Fuketsu in great esteem and had invited the master one day to the government office in order to ask him for Dharma talks. One of these talks forms the famous text of today's koan.

The "mind seal of the patriarchs" is a reference to their enlightenment or their Buddha-mind. It is customary to call Shakyamuni "the Buddha" and to use the word "patriarchs" in referring to all others in that line of succession which begins with Mahakashyapa. The first patriarch of Zen in China was Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma's dialogue with the Emperor Bu appears as Case 1 of the *Hekiganroku*. The Emperor could not bring himself to understand what Bodhidharma was speaking about. This must have been a disappointment for Bodhidharma, who then left that place – as if to say, "There's nothing I can do here" – and crossed the Yangtze River, heading northward. After Bodhidharma left, Shikô, a monk in attendance on the Emperor, asked his ruler, "Does your Reverence know who that man was?" The Emperor said, "I don't know." Shikô told him, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokitesvara who transmits the seal of the Buddha-mind." This is the same as the "mind seal" in this koan: the form of Bodhidharma's heart-mind. This mind actually has no form, but the word "mind seal" is used metaphorically.

Fuketsu says, "The mind seal of the patriarchs resembles the activity of the iron ox." In ancient times a great iron ox was placed in the river bed at the stretch of the Yellow River running through Sensei Province. The head of the ox was on the south side of the river and its tail on the north side. Since the Yellow River often overflowed its banks, the people created a shrine dedicated to this iron ox, the Iron Ox Shrine, and prayed that floods might be prevented. Since the great ox was made of iron it would not budge even if the river should overflow, and to the people it worked wonders to protect the river from causing a disaster. In other words, although the "ox" could not be seen, it still had the function of protecting and stabilizing the river.

I am straying a bit from my topic, but there is a Zen master called Ban Tetsugyû Roshi of Tôshôji in Tokyo's Shinagawa district. His name Tetsugyû literally means "Iron Ox" and is derived from this koan.

At any rate, Fuketsu says that the form of the mind of the patriarchs is exactly the same as that iron ox; it does not move at all but nonetheless displays truly outstanding activities.

"When it goes away, the [impression of the] seal remains; when it stays there, the [impression of the] seal is brought to naught." These two lines are a reference to the activities

³ 896-973.

of the mind seal, and there have been many interpretations for them. A stamp is pressed on paper and when you remove it, its seal remains as impression. But I think this "seal" has two meanings here: first, "seal" as impression; secondly, "seal" [*in* in Japanese] of *in-ka shōmei* (which means "witnessing guarantee" [*shōmei*] of the true presence of the seal of the Buddha-mind). At the same time, "seal" [*in*] can refer both to the *instrument*, stamp, used to make the impression on paper and to the *impression* itself. Since the same word can mean all these things, confusion arises in understanding the meaning of the text.

"When it goes away" means "when you take away the stamp." "The seal remains," that is, the impression of the seal is clearly visible. "When it stays there" means "when you leave the stamp in place on the paper." Then, "the seal is brought to naught," which means: the impression of the seal is on the paper, but since you leave the stamp on the paper you cannot see the impression it has made. Nothing is visible.

Now, the question is, what does all this have to do with Zen? Here is Yasutani Roshi's interpretation:

"When it goes away, the seal remains" means: Even though you have rid yourselves of all discriminating thoughts, there is something which remains just as before. There is something which never goes away anywhere but "remains" exactly as before. That's the essential World. "When it stays there, the seal is brought to naught" means on the other hand: When you attain kensho and become smug about that experience, settling down into it, then "the seal is brought to naught," in other words, everything is destroyed.

This is certainly an acceptable way of interpretation; if you bear this in mind, you will not stray away from the essence of practice: When you rid yourselves of all delusions through Zen practice, the essential World reveals itself; gaining even a glimpse of this World is known as kensho. But, should you content yourselves with that experience, you are doing nothing except just sitting idly on top of your satori. –This interpretation is certainly true in its own right, but this is rather concentrating on *shushōhen*, the aspect of practice in the phenomenal world. But how is it when viewed from the standpoint of the essential [*honbunjō*]?

I myself see the matter as follows: If we make a distinction between the instrument (stamp) and the impression made by this instrument, we can see the instrument as the essential World (this is *shō-i* in Tōzan's Five Ranks, as opposed to *hen-i* the phenomenal). Were we to take away the instrument, the impression left by it would remain for us to see. If we remove *shō-i* [the essential], then *hen-i* [the phenomenal] appears. Buddhism's sole concern is this matter of phenomena and Essence, and I believe that this is what Fuketsu is preaching about.

"When it goes away, the seal remains": If you take away the essential aspect of *shō-i* (taking away the sealing instrument), then only the phenomenal aspect of *hen-i* (impression of the seal) remains. "When it stays there, the seal is brought to naught": If you do not take away the essential aspect of *shō-i* (the instrument stamp) but leave it in place, then *hen-i*, the phenomenal aspect (the impression underneath the stamp) will never appear and there will

only be the world of Essence.

This is also known as "gripping and releasing" [*hajû-hôgyô*]. "Gripping" represents entirely the aspect of only *shô-i*, the Essence, and phenomena cannot appear at all. There is also the phrase, "All the logical wisdom in the world cannot raise a speck of dust." In the essential World there is not a speck of dust. "When it stays there," [that is, if it is just the essential world], phenomena cannot even show their face. "When it goes away," that is, if the sealing stamp is removed, the phenomena appear and everything is revealed. This aspect is known as "not throwing away a single thing in the gate of Buddhism" [*Butsuji monchû ippô o sutezu*]; this is "releasing." I would, therefore, like to view this all as an explanation of the Zen activity of "gripping and releasing." There are several other Zen phrases related to this: for example, from the aspect of "gripping" or the essential world of not one thing, "Even true gold loses its color" [*shinkin iro o shissu*]. Or, to quote another phrase, "If you release it, then even the rubble will shed light," which refers to the phenomenal world spreading all over. It is for such reasons that I wish to view this discussion on the "seal" as referring to the Zen activity of gripping and releasing.

But really important is the next part: **"If it neither goes away nor stays, would it be right to give a seal or not?"** "Not going away" means the essential World; "not staying" means the same thing as "going away," so it signifies the phenomenal world. To put it differently: "Does the world where there is neither gripping nor releasing conform to the mind seal of the patriarchs? If it does, then I will confirm *inka*. But how is it in reality?"

Then Elder Rohi came up and said, "I have the activities of the iron ox. [However,] I ask you, Master, not to give me the seal." Fuketsu said, "I am accustomed to leveling the great ocean through fishing whales. But, alas, now I find instead a frog wriggling about in the mud." Rohi stood there considering. Fuketsu shouted "Kaatz!" and said, "Why don't you say anything, Elder?" Rohi was perplexed. Fuketsu hit him with his whisk and said, "Do you remember what you said? Say something, I'll check it for you." Rohi tried to say something. Fuketsu hit him again with his whisk. The Elder Rohi was a venerable monk and an old disciple of Rinzai. Probably because all the others in the assembly were silent, Rohi stepped forward and said, "I have the activity of the iron ox, but there is no need for you to confirm me with *inka*." He has certainly come forth boldly in stating that no *inka-shômei* was necessary for him.

How Fuketsu responds to this is worthy of special attention. **"I am accustomed to leveling the great ocean through fishing whales. But, alas, now I find instead a frog wriggling about in the mud."** Please note Fuketsu's great spirit. **Rohi stood there considering.** Then the Elder paused to think, since he didn't expect such a reply from the master. **Fuketsu shouted "Kaatz!" and said, "Why don't you say anything, Elder?"** Fuketsu immediately hurls a great "Kaatz!" and asks, "Why don't you say anything?" **Rohi was perplexed.** The Elder hesitates again; he doesn't know what to say. **Fuketsu hit him with his whisk.** A saying goes, "When you kill, you need to see blood." That is, your "killing" should be thorough, it shouldn't stop halfway – that's what Fuketsu is demonstrating. He further asks, **"Do you remember what you said? Say something, I'll check it for you."** "Have you forgotten what you said just a minute ago? You bragged you had the activity of the

iron ox, didn't you? Say something, then! I will check you." He is attacking the routed enemy. **Rohi tried to say something. Fuketsu hit him again with his whisk.** Then, the moment Elder begins to open his mouth to utter something, Fuketsu hits him again. It would certainly be difficult to treat the student this way. The feeling of pity for the student wouldn't let me do it! But if you are a true Zen master, you must be able to act this way.

The Magistrate said, "Buddha's law and the King's law are of the same nature." Fuketsu said, "What principle do you see in them?" The Magistrate said, "If you do not make a decision where a decision should be made, you are inviting disorder." Fuketsu descended from the rostrum. Buddhism really does resemble ruling in some ways. If you do not cut off delusions with one decisive stroke, settling instead for a half-baked treatment, it can very well be a source of later trouble. While we're on the subject of politics, we have recently a good example of this coming from China. The so-called "Gang of Four" were summarily convicted and imprisoned with no waste of time. If the "Four" hadn't been totally condemned, there no doubt would have been much more trouble and confusion. When I consider and compare these matters, I can see myself the similarities between the Buddha-Way and the way of the ruler.

On the Verse:

He snares Rohi and makes him mount the iron ox; the spear and armor of the Three Profundities do not treat him lightly. The first half is a reference to the Elder Rohi stepping forward and saying, "I have the activity of the iron ox." The "Three Profundities" in the second half refers to the so-called "Three Profundities and Three Essentials of Rinzai," which are an expression of Rinzai's Dharma and Zen spirit. Tôzan Gohon Daishi is known for his Five Ranks [*goi*], while Rinzai Zenji summed up his own state of understanding in his "Three Profundities and Three Essentials." Therefore, the latter half of the verse means that Fuketsu, armed with Rinzai's Dharma, does not show any indulgence toward his opponent, does not let him go carelessly. (There have been several interpretations of the "Three Profound Matters" – usually divided into the three categories of *Taichûgen* [The Profound Within the Body], *Kuchûgen* [The Profound Within the Word] and *Genchûgen* [The Profound Within the Profound], or put into another set of three categories of *Ichigen* [Single Profundity], *Taigen* [Body Profundity] and *Yôgen* [Function Profundity] – , but I will skip further details.)

All waters heading for the castle of the So king – at a single shout he reverses their course. The Province of Ei had become, by that time, the site of the government office. But in former times King Bun of So had moved his capital from Han'yô to this area of Ei and built a castle there. Thus, the reference to "the castle of the So king."

"All waters heading for ..." is a translation of the Chinese characters in the verse which mean that all waters head for the great ocean. But they can also represent how all vassals bring tribute to the court. That is, the vassals assembling at the court of So are likened to many rivers emptying into the ocean.

Now Fuketsu reverses the flow of these myriad waters with one shout of "Kaatz!" The line says that Fuketsu showed wonderful Zen activities dealing so superbly with the Elder. It

is a high tribute to the sharpness and excellent vigor Fuketsu displayed.

However, when we appreciate the above Case as a koan, the really important matter is Fuketsu's statement: "When it goes away, the seal remains; when it stays there, the seal is brought to naught." The rest is simply for you to savor Fuketsu's lively Zen spirit.

Fuketsu was indeed a very sharp-minded person as is depicted in this koan, but, when he appears in Case 24 of the *Mumonkan* (Leaving Speech and Silence Behind), he is a wonderful example of aged mellowness:

A monk asked Fuketsu in all earnestness, "Both speech and silence are concerned with *ri* and *mi*. How can we transcend them?" Fuketsu said, "I constantly think of Kōnan in March where partridges are chirping among hundreds of sweet blossoms."

Please savor and appreciate this other side of Fuketsu's personality.

If I dealt with you all in the way that Fuketsu handled the Elder Rohi, I think you would all run away...