

CASE 39

Unmon's Flowering Hedge



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

One who can act freely on the road is like a tiger that has climbed to the mountains; one who flows along with worldly logic is like a monkey in a cage. If you wish to know the truth of Buddha nature you must take notice of times and causes. If you wish to forge pure gold that has been refined a hundred times it must be done with the furnace and bellows of a true master. But tell me, when the great function is revealed, what can be taken to test it?

Case:

A monk asked Unmon, "What is the pure and clear Dharma-body?" Unmon said, "Kayakuran [flowering hedge]!" The monk said, "How is it when one goes on that way?" Unmon said, "A golden-haired lion."

Verse:

**Flowering hedge. Don't look so stupid!
The pointer is on the scale arm, not on the measuring pan.
"... When one goes on that way..." – what a foolish thing to say!
A golden-haired lion. Everybody look!**

Today we look at "Unmon's Flowering Hedge," a very famous koan. Unmon Daishi, master of words that he was, always spoke with subtle appropriateness. It is said that each phrase from his mouth contained the function of three, so great was his skill with words in teaching. Nor was he a mere poet; he had trained himself to a towering level of Zen understanding. The expression "red flag flashing brightly" has been used traditionally in referring to the Unmon School. We clearly see the red flag fluttering brightly on the distant mountain but it is another matter entirely to actually reach that flag.

Setchô Zenji, compiler of the 100 cases found in the Blue Cliff Record and author of the Verses appended to each Case, was a descendant of the Unmon School and no mean hand with words himself. At any rate, the present case is a superb example of Unmon's ability to come to the point.

On the Instruction:

One who can act freely on the road is like a tiger that has climbed to the mountains; one who flows along with worldly logic is like a caged monkey. To "act freely on the road" is a phrase taken from one of the sermons of Rinzai Zenji which reads as follows:

He entered the hall and said, "There is a person who speaks of kalpas and who, although on the road, does not leave home. There is a person who has left home but is not on the road. Which person should receive the offerings of heaven?" So saying, he descended the rostrum.

"Home," here, means the essential self or essential nature. "On the road" does not mean on the way home; rather, that having already reached home, having clearly realized the essential world, we now emerge to perform the religious work of saving all beings. "On the road," therefore, is a reference to appearing in the phenomenal world to save all beings. I recall reading one book in which the author said that "on the road" means "the process or practice towards realization of the essential world," but this is not so. We have already clearly realized that world. To contrast "at home" and "on the road": "at home" is always the essential world, the "home country" of the essential, whereas "on the road" means emerging in the phenomenal to save all beings after having clearly realized the essential. Such a person acts with absolute authority and therefore resembles a "tiger" roaming free in the mountains. If a tiger is locked up in a cage, he's not much to speak of. But imagine a tiger that has been let loose to roam freely and which now crouches for attack with the mountains behind him. Such an image is filled with power and authority.

What about the person who "flows along with worldly logic"? This is the world of the ordinary unenlightened person who knows nothing about the essential world. Such a person is just like a monkey in a cage. She or he is tied up with coil upon coil of fetters, lacking any real freedom. But those who have reached their true home know how to be free even though the fetters of duty and responsibility might still be there. As members of society, we are not given license simply to ignore the everyday mores of that society. We have to go along with the crowd to a certain extent in the process of carrying on our lives. Nonetheless, we are free. Can you remain totally free even while bound by the fetters of social responsibility and the like? If you can't, then you cannot be said to really know your essential home. So long as we dwell in the world of everyday common sense, we're just like monkeys pent up in a cage. You must know how to be totally free even while in that cage.

How do we make our own that essential home? The Instruction continues: **If you wish to know the truth of Buddha nature, you must take notice of the times and the causes.** These very famous words are found originally in the Nirvana Sutra. If you want to know the living, non-conceptual fact of essential nature — (the word "know" might sound like understanding in an intellectual sense, but this is not the meaning here. It is to actually experience) — you must see that there is a proper time when causes ripen into results.

There are several people here who, despite earnest efforts, have yet to attain realization. Some of them have been practicing for five years, ten years or more. This is all due to causation and to there being a definite point in time when causes ripen and produce

results. When I plant in the spring, the flowers bloom in the summer and the fruit appears in the fall. Until the right season comes there won't be any fruit no matter how much fertilizer I throw on the ground. This is something we have to realize. This principle of causes and the right time is a very mysterious one; we never know how or when we will realize. It also has something to do with the extent of our Dharma-affinity.

Mumon Oshô worked on the koan Mu for six years. There is also the example of Reiun Oshô. Reiun is usually mentioned together with Kyôgen who came to realization when he heard the sound of a pebble striking a stalk of bamboo. Reiun Oshô came to great enlightenment when he happened to spy some peach blossoms in the distance. It took thirty years of arduous practice for this to happen. The verse he composed at the time of his enlightenment begins as follows:

Thirty-six years of seeking the swordsman.

The line has also been translated as, "the man who searched for the sword." Read in the first fashion, the line suggests that Reiun practiced arduously as he continued his search for an outstanding Zen master. If we translate in the second way, the line zeros in on the Reiun who spent thirty years in search of the sword of his true self. I myself prefer this latter interpretation. Here is the next line:

How many times did I confront the falling leaves;

How many times the broken branches?

Year in and year out the spring and fall came and went. Each autumn the leaves fell and the dead branches broke away. Reiun witnessed this thirty times in succession before breaking through. In the instant that he happened to see peach flowers blossoming in the distance, he suddenly came to great enlightenment: "Ah, now I know!" The poem continues:

After one look at peach flowers,

I have come directly to the here and now;

No doubts remain.

Reiun had rid himself of any remaining doubts concerning his essential nature when he encountered it directly. "Essential nature" is a password for a reality that is essentially un-nameable. The same holds for expressions like "Buddha nature." Once you have seen for yourself there's no mistaking it but, as long as it remains mere hearsay—a picture painted in your mind, you'll never be done with doubting and questioning.

Reiun Oshô took thirty years to come to enlightenment, able student of Isan that he was. Listen to Isan's words upon reading his student's enlightenment poem:

"Those who come to realization as the result of external affinities will not soon lose hold [of that experience]."

To paraphrase: "Because you attained realization through the affinity with the flowers, you will never lose that realization." Isan's readiness to praise is a contrast to Rinzai who would let loose a blow or a shout and never give direct praise, no matter what you brought to him by way of understanding. Gensha Shibi Daishi, hearing about Reiun, commented saying,

"If you ask me, I agree it was only to be expected; but, if I may say so, there is still a way to go."

Perhaps he's right. To come to realization upon noticing the peach blossoms is still only

entering the gate.

If one were to ask why it took Reiun so long to come to enlightenment we could answer that it was because causes had yet to ripen. There is very definitely this aspect to Zen practice: if causes have not yet ripened, despite all our efforts we cannot break through to enlightenment. Some hearing this may find false comfort in this and say, "Well, since my time hasn't yet come it's only natural that I can't come to enlightenment." This is a mistake. Dôgen Zenji sternly reproves such an attitude in the "Busshô ("Buddha Nature") Chapter of the *Shôbôgenzô*: "The time is already here," says he, "It is only you who have failed to realize it."

Let me elaborate this matter of causation a little. The Japanese term for "cause" consists of two Chinese characters *in* and *en*. "In" refers to causes within oneself while "en" refers to external aids. "In," for example is like the life contained within a single grain of wheat — the potential to become an entire stalk of wheat. But just lying there, it'll never sprout. Only when I plant it in the ground and give it sunlight and the right amount of water will it do so. "En" is this indirect help from the water and sun.

Our Buddha nature is known sometimes as San-in Busshô, "Buddha Nature of the Three Causes." A wheat grain contains life within it: Shôin Busshô, "Buddha Nature of the Direct Cause," the first of the three causes. The potential to realize that life on one's own, also contained within, is known as Ryôin Busshô "Buddha Nature of the Completed Cause," while the externally acting indirect power—that power which attracts causes—is known as En-in Busshô "Buddha Nature of the External and Internal Cause." This is within us too. This being so, there's no reason why we cannot realize our essential nature. Yet there are those who cannot bring themselves to accept this. Everyone of us is endowed with Buddha Nature of the Three Causes. Dôgen Zenji tells us that the causes have already ripened: if we choose to see it, it is right before our eyes; choose to grasp it, we can do so right now. The peach blossoms were right there for Reiun to see. It could have been some red flowers, a blade of grass, a pillar—anything at all. Since it's right there, all we have to do is to see and realize.

Nonetheless, keep in mind the caveat in a sutra:

"The person who uses colors to see the self or sounds to find the self is practicing a heretical path.

Such a one will never be able to see the Tathagata."

Had Reiun, for example, just admired the flowers and concluded their color to be Buddha nature, he'd have been mistaken. There's no Buddha there. Similarly, one hearing music and exclaiming, "Oh, what lovely music! That's the music of Buddha," is equally mistaken. Such views are heretical and will never lead to a true experience of the Tathagata. So if Reiun's realization upon seeing the peach blossoms had been one of "color equals Buddha" he'd have been greatly in error. It's true enough that there is a time and season for everything, but never forget that that time is right now. The only reason you cannot realize is that your effort is lacking.

Dôgen Zenji himself needed several years of arduous practice before he could finally declare, "The study of a lifetime comes to an end here." From the standpoint of causes ripening in time, it was necessary for Dôgen Zenji, even after many years of practice in Japan, to travel to China and practice under Tendô Nyojô Zenji — a process entailing several years

before finally bearing fruit. When we grasp the essential world, we understand that causes are already ripe in every second and in every place. But we'll not understand until we get there. Until then, we can only trust in the words of those who have already reached the goal. It's like listening to Kubota-san¹ who spent a long time living in London talking about life there. If you haven't been there you might wonder if everything he says is true. Once you go and see for yourself, you know.

If you wish to forge pure gold that has been refined a hundred times, it must be done with the furnace and bellows of a true master. But tell me, when the great function is revealed, what can be taken to test it? Most of what we call gold is actually a mixture of gold and other metals and will be stamped accordingly as 14 or 18 karat gold. If you wish to obtain pure and unsullied gold, you must forge and smelt it with a blacksmith's bellows. The blacksmith here is an enlightened Zen master. If we practice zazen and wish to attain a true Zen experience, free of any impurities, we must discipline ourselves in Zen practice under a qualified Zen master.

We want to test whether or not the results of such a process are "pure gold." Thus the Instruction says, "When the great function is revealed, what will be taken to test it?" The focus is on Unmon who appears in the main Case. "When the great function is revealed..." When we truly realize, a wonderful and free activity comes forth from that realization. Though the basic content of the experience is the same, there are different degrees of realization. There are even cases where, in spite of realization, no significant change or particularly great activity appears at all. This is proof that the experience is not yet complete. The person has yet to break through the bottom of the bucket. Imagine a bucket with sand and grit remaining at the bottom. Though all the water seems to be gone still this residue remains. When we break through to complete enlightenment, a great freedom of activity becomes evident. Recall, for example, Case 31 of the Gateless Gate, "Jôshû Sees Through the Old Woman." What Jôshû saw was that the old woman, having, perhaps, realized to some degree, had yet to attain to the level where the "great function is completely revealed."

The main Case of today's koan is, in effect, a litmus test to determine if what we have is pure gold. The problem is whether we can see this or not.

On the Case:

A monk asked Unmon, "What is the pure and clear Dharma-body?" Speaking in intellectual terms, the "pure and clear Dharma-body" is the Absolute Three Treasures. The personification of the pure and clear Dharma-body is Dainichi Nyorai or Vairocana Buddha. Kensho is seeing unmistakably the pure and clear body of reality wherein there is nothing at all—not a speck of cloud before the eyes. The Buddha of the Absolute Three Treasures is this aspect of "nothing at all." The Dharma of the Absolute Three Treasures is phenomena revealing themselves in myriad forms and appearances (but human beings have yet to show their faces). The Sangha of the Absolute Three Treasures is the reality wherein the Buddha and Dharma of the Absolute Three Treasures are one and the same. These three aspects of

¹ The 3rd Abbot of the Sanbôkyôdan, Kubota Ji'un Roshi.

Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are known as the Absolute Three Treasures. The pure and clear Dharma-body, therefore, is the absolute essence of Buddhism where not a speck of dust remains. This is what the monk is talking about when he asks, "What is the pure and clear Dharma-body?" A very important question.

Unmon answered, "Kayakuran [flowering hedge]!" When I went to dokusan with this koan under Hanamoto Roshi at Muga Sôzan, he told me that the flowering hedge is a hedge with flowers blooming here and there. When Unmon gave his answer there was probably such a hedge right before his eyes. "Flowering hedge!" That's the pure and clear Dharma-body. But, recall the line from the sutra quoted above: "A person who takes colors to see the self or sounds to find the self is practicing a heretical way. That person will never be able to see the Tathagata." If I were to say "Flowering hedge!", the first thing you'd do is look at the hedge. But when you look for the fact outside of yourself you are already far from it. "The Oak Tree in the Garden!" is the same thing. Turn to look at the oak tree and you're already mistaken for you've taken what is outside of you to express it. If you look toward the hedge when I say "Flowering hedge!" it has already gotten away from you. Vairocana Buddha, pure and clear, has already hidden himself away somewhere.

Unmon said, "Kayakuran!" This is what the Zen ancients are talking about when they say, "The spark of a flint, the flash of lightning." We must instantaneously realize upon that shout of "Kayakuran!" Whack!!² It's exactly the same. The flowering hedge has jumped forth upon that shout of "Kayakuran!"

The monk said, "How is it when one goes on that way?" Having become completely one with the flowering hedge and having completely accepted this as the truth, how is it then? This is what the monk is asking. Here is no ordinary monk; he already has quite an eye. Only a person with a considerable degree of understanding could respond like this. Of course, he might well be asking this in order to test Unmon. At any rate, he has already descended to the second level of truth.

In response, **Unmon said, "A golden-haired lion."** This phrase was evidently used in conversation when one wanted to show approval and praise of the other person. "That's right, well done!" In this instance, too, it appears at first blush that Unmon is giving the seal of his approval to the monk's understanding by saying, "a golden-haired lion." But in his commentary on this Case, Engo Zenji says that we are not sure whether Unmon is praising, or censuring. Yasutani Roshi says in his teisho on this koan that Unmon appears to be praising the monk but is actually secretly sticking out his tongue at him! Zen often uses praise to squelch someone but insult to praise. In the Case before us, there's quite possibly a mocking tone to Unmon's words of praise—rather like praising a child by saying, "Oh what a good little boy!"

Without doubt, this is one way of looking at the koan. However, I feel that when Unmon says, "A golden-haired lion," it's simply "flowering hedge" appearing now as a golden-haired lion. Once again, if you have a picture in your head of a lion with golden hair you are already wrong. "Flowering hedge!" "A golden-haired lion." Essential nature has jumped forth as a golden-haired lion. But one has to realize right on the spot. What? Your

² The Roshi strikes lectern.

true self, of course.

On the Verse:

Flowering hedge. Don't look so stupid. Don't stand there with your mouth open and a blank stare on your face when you hear, "flowering hedge."

The pointer is on the scale arm, not on the measuring pan. The poet uses the image of a scale to make his point. The scales of old contained graduation marks on the balance arm and a pointer that moved along it as the weight in the pans changed. To know how much something weighed one had to look at where the indicator was pointing. It didn't help to look at the pans! When Unmon says, "Flowering hedge!" it doesn't help a bit to have an image of a flowering hedge in your head. You'll never find the real thing there. It certainly won't be found in any concept of an actual flowering hedge. The Verse is warning us not to go wide of the mark.

"...When one goes on that way..." – what a foolish thing to say! Remember how the monk asked in the main Case, "How is it when one goes on that way?" The Verse tells us that this was a senseless thing to say.

A golden-haired lion. Everybody look! A golden-haired lion. Look for yourself. You have to take a living grasp on your true self.

In his critical comments on the main Case, in reference to Unmon's answer to "a golden-haired lion," Engo Zenji said that it and "flowering hedge" are just two faces of one die. When you throw the die, sometimes you get a one, sometimes a six. Sometimes a flowering hedge, sometimes a golden-haired one. This is probably how Engo Zenji saw the koan. You can endlessly savor this beautiful koan.