

CASE 7

Yakusan Ascends the Rostrum

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Instruction:

Eyes, ears, nose and tongue each have a single ability. The eyebrows are above. Warrior, farmer, craftsman and merchant each have a single occupation. This unskilled one is constantly without a thing to do. How does the fundamental teacher of the essential go about it?

Case:

Yakusan had not ascended the rostrum for a long time. The head monk said, “All monks have been anxious for instruction for a long time. Please, Your Reverence, won’t you give a sermon?” Yakusan ordered the bell to be rung and the drum to be struck. The assembly gathered. Yakusan ascended the rostrum, and after sitting there for a while, he descended and returned to his room.

The head monk followed him and asked, “You consented to give a sermon. Why didn’t you say anything?” Yakusan said, “For sutras there are sutra teachers, for sastras there are sastra teachers. Why do you find this old monk’s way strange?”

Verse:

**The naïve child frets about money given to stop his crying.
Even the outstanding steed Follow-The-Wind looks back at the whip’s shadow.**

**The clouds sweep the broad sky, the crane nests in the moon.
The cold clarity penetrates the bones, not allowing sleep.**

On the Instruction:

Yakusan Igen Zenji was the dharma successor of Sekitô Kisen Zenji. The line of succession started with Sekitô Kisen Zenji followed by Yakusan Igen Zenji, who was then followed by Tôzan Ryôkai Zenji. When I look at this dharma lineage I can’t help feeling that we have here the very source of the Soto Zen tradition. As mentioned, Yakusan inherited the dharma of Sekitô Kisen Zenji, a very outstanding Zen master. If we examine Case 36 of the *Denkôroku* (Transmission of Light) we find the circumstances by which the dharma was transmitted from Sekitô to Yakusan. It’s quite an interesting story. Yakusan Zenji was sitting every day in zazen. Sekitô Zenji said, “What are you doing there?” We find the same exchange between Baso Dôitsu Zenji and Nangaku Ejô Zenji. In the case of Baso, he replied, “I wish to become a Buddha.”

In reply to the same question, Yakusan said, “I am not doing anything at all.”

Baso was of the Rinzai lineage, while Sekitô and Yakusan were of the Soto lineage. The one person said, "I wish to become a Buddha" and the other one said, "I am not doing anything at all." The difference in the answers is quite interesting.

In reply to this, Sekitô said, "Then you're sitting idly." Yakusan said, "If I were sitting idly, that would be doing something."

Then Sekitô said, "You said you're not doing—what aren't you doing?" In reply, Yakusan said, "Even the former sages don't know." In other words, even Shakyamuni and Bodhidharma don't know. This is a very interesting exchange, and could be called very Soto, in my opinion. In response to this, Sekitô composed the following verse:

*Though we've been living in the same place,
I do not know his name;
We go along with the flow of nature,
Being just so.
Even the eminent sages of old don't know him—
How could the careless rabble understand!
(Cleary)*

Let us look at the individual lines:

*Though we've been living in the same place,
I do not know his name;*

There is also the saying "although we mutually meet, still I don't know him." This first line of Sekitô's poem is referring to our true self. We are living with our true self from morning to evening. Although it sounds as if there might be two persons, they are actually one.

*We go along with the flow of nature,
Being just so.*

This means to go where my toes lead me, you could say. There is just that going. When you walk, there is just that walking. When you sit, there is just that sitting.

Even the eminent sages of old don't know him—

The "eminent sages" means the Buddhist patriarchs. Even they know nothing of this world.

How could the careless rabble understand!

When I read these lines I can't help feeling that the Soto practice of *shikantaza* (just sitting) is shown here. This is certainly different from the approach in the Rinzai School of Zen. Among the disciples of Sekitô Zenji was the famous Rikô, who was the governor of the province Rôshû. One day he came to visit Yakusan Zenji. Although he had traveled from afar to visit Yakusan, the master did not even look up when he came in, but continued reading something. On the surface, this could be considered the height of rudeness. And because he was a high government official, it was all the more so. Then Layman Rikô said, "Seeing the face is not as good as hearing about him." Although I have heard that he is a very famous Zen master, when I meet him, things seem to be quite different. Layman Rikô seems to be somewhat disappointed. He says that hearing about Yakusan's reputation from afar is much better than actually meeting up with him. Then Yakusan called, "Taishu!", which was his title as governor. The layman said, "Yes!" Yakusan said, "Do you praise your ears and despise your eyes?" This is an interesting statement. Isn't it strange for you to honor your ears but to debase your eyes? That was one on Layman Rikô. In response to this Layman Rikô said, "What is the Way?" What is the true essence? What is the ultimate essence of Buddhism? In reply Yakusan Zenji pointed above with his finger and then lowered it to point to the ground. "Do you understand?" he asked. "No", I don't understand," said the other.

"The clouds are in the sky and the water is in the jug."

In pointing upward and then downward, he completely reveals the true essence. Nothing more is required than this. Unless you are completely free in your Zen activity you will not be able to respond like this. Please take some time to savor this exchange.

Eyes, ears, nose and tongue each have a single ability. Each of the senses has a single ability. Eyes can see, ears can hear, the nose can smell, the tongue can taste. Each has its own ability.

The eyebrows are above. The eyebrows are above and not doing anything at all. But the one that does nothing at all and who has no ability is actually the highest one. It is above the nose and above the ears, and has no ability whatsoever.

Warrior, farmer, craftsman and merchant each have a single occupation.

This unskilled one is constantly without a thing to do. “This unskilled one” (jap, sessha) was used in times of old in referring to oneself. In this case, it is referring to Banshō Rōjin, author of the Instruction and the Verse. He says that he himself is completely at peace, without a single thing to do. There is nothing left that has to be done. This is known in Japanese as “kan.” The one without a tongue is the one without any ability whatsoever. This is a reference to the essential self, which is deaf, dumb and blind, and has no use whatsoever. It says that there is such a one.

How does the fundamental teacher of the essential go about it? What methods are used in instructing students of Zen? We are invited to look at the following koan as an example.

On the Case:

Yakusan had not ascended the rostrum for a long time. The head monk said, “All monks have been anxious for instruction for a long time. Please, Your Reverence, won’t you give a sermon?” Yakusan evidently had not given a teisho for quite some time. The head monk approached him timidly and asked him if he wouldn’t give a sermon, as the monks had all been waiting for a long time to hear his teisho.

Yakusan ordered the bell to be rung and the drum to be struck. The assembly gathered. Yakusan ascended the rostrum, and after sitting there for a while, he descended and returned to his room.

The head monk followed him and asked, “You consented to give a sermon. Why didn’t you say anything?” Yakusan said, “**For sutras there are sutra teachers, for sastras there are sastra teachers. Why do you find this old monk’s way strange?**” “Sastras” are treatises on the sutras. They include the *Daijō Kishinron* or the *Jōron*, to give two famous examples. In the *Tripitaka* are also found the sutras and the sastras. Yakusan says, “For sutras there are monks who give lectures on the sutras. For sastras (treatises) there are monks who give lectures on them. I am neither of those. What do you find wrong with my method?” In other words, you must clearly realize that in his ascending the rostrum, sitting still, and retiring to his room, he has completely revealed the essence. He is preaching perfectly in a loud voice. We encounter the same thing in the koan of Vimalakirti’s Entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. It means the way of the single dharma that is not two; it is the world of oneness. At the behest of Shakyamuni Buddha, Manjusri once paid a visit on Vimalakirti who was lying ill in his house. They talked about various matters. Finally, however, the question was posed: How does one enter the dharma gate of non-duality? In other words, how can you enter the world of oneness? Manjusri exhausted all his wisdom in expounding it. All those who had come with him also proposed their views. Finally, Vimalakirti was asked to deliver his own opinion. The question was posed again, “What is the dharma-gate of non-duality?” At that time, Vimalakirti simply remained silent. This is very similar to today’s case. We find the same thing regarding Shakyamuni Buddha in the first case of the *Book of Equanimity*:

One day, the World-Honored One ascended the rostrum. Manjusri struck the gavel and said, “Behold the Dharma-king’s Dharma. The Dharma-king’s Dharma is like this.” The World-Honored One descended the rostrum.

It’s a matter of grasping the world of oneness, the dharma gate of non-duality, the world of the true fact, the essential world. It will not do to simply come up with an idea of it in

your minds. You will never be able to grasp the true fact in that way. If you do, it will disappear without a trace. Let us turn now to the Verse.

On the Verse:

The naïve child frets about money given to stop his crying.

Even the outstanding steed Follow-The-Wind looks back at the whip's shadow.

There is a story behind these first lines of the Verse that is found in the *Nirvana*

Sutra.

The innocent child is crying. His parents tell him that if he stops crying they will give him money. They take some golden leaves from a cyprus tree and give it to him, telling him it is money to make him stop crying. Of course, it is not really money. The monks in Yakusan's assembly are like the foolish child, thinking there must be something and making a great fuss. They attend this sesshin or that zazenkai. Because they are fussing, the parents are worried. Who are the parents in this case? I believe it is natural to see this as referring to the head monk. Because the monks are making a fuss, he is worried and asks Yakusan to give a sermon. Then Yakusan comes out, ascends the rostrum, sits there a while and retires to his room. This is like the leaves given to the crying child in place of real money. But none of them understand. It appears that no one thought that it was real money. This brings us to the next line of the verse.

Even the outstanding steed Follow-The-Wind looks back at the whip's shadow.

The words translated here as "outstanding steed" also have the meaning of a four-horse carriage, and are used as an example of something very fast. "Follow-the-Wind" is the name of a horse that was the fastest of the seven outstanding steeds of the first Emperor of the Shin Dynasty. This line of the poem also has its origin in a legend found in the *Samyuktagama-Sutra* (jap, *Agon Sutra*) about four types of horses. The most outstanding horse starts galloping as soon as it sees the shadow of the whip. The next best horse starts galloping as soon as the whip touches its hair. The third best variety of horse starts running when the whip hits its skin. The fourth and worst horse only starts running when it feels the whip in its bones. I think we can add one other variety of horse that could be seen as the worst of all: the one that does not move no matter how much it is struck! The outstanding steed Follow-the-Wind in the verse is a reference to the head monk. Although he might be considered quite outstanding among the monks, even when he sees the shadow of the whip he does not start running. Instead, he looks back at the whip, which is to say he hesitates and starts thinking. Although Yakusan Zenji has presented him with the essence of Zen, he is unable to respond. He is like the horse that looks back at the whip instead of starting to run on seeing the whip's shadow. Instead of reacting immediately to the outstanding sermon of Yakusan, he pauses to think and poses his question. He should realize that Yakusan, with his actions, is proclaiming the dharma in a loud voice. To say that he looks back at the whip means he gives off an air of looking back and not seeing the fact before him.

The clouds sweep the broad sky, the crane nests in the moon. This sings the praises of the state of consciousness of Yakusan Igen Zenji. We have a scene from nature to depict that state of consciousness. You can think of it as follows. To say that the clouds sweep the broad sky means that the clouds seem to sweep the sky clean and then disappear, leaving not a speck of dust. This is often referred to in Zen circles as "not a speck of cloud obscuring the view." And in that perfectly cloudless sky the full moon is shining brightly. Then there is a single pine tree measuring a thousand feet. When you look at it from this vantage point, it is as if the moon were sitting in the branches of a huge pine tree. And at the very tip of the pine tree, a crane has built its nest. It is a world of absolute purity where there is not a speck of dust, a world that has completely transcended the mundane world. This is the state of consciousness of Yakusan Zenji. It might seem as if a crane has built its nest on the moon, but that is not so. Since the pine tree is very tall, it seems as if it is holding up the full moon. On the topmost branches of the tree, a crane has built its nest. Case 28 of the *Book of Equanimity* is the koan *Gokoku's Three Shames*, which contains three questions. The first is as follows:

A monk asked Gokoku, "How about when a crane perches on a withered pine tree?"

He is asking about the ultimate stage of enlightenment where there is not a single thing, no form or color. In response to this, Gokoku says, "It is a shame when seen from the ground." It is certainly splendid when the crane stands on one leg at the very tip of the pine tree, a picture of purity. But when seen from the ground, it is a shame. What does this mean? As long as we remain in the world of satori, the religious spirit of wanting to save all beings cannot well up. That experience is not worth a cent. It is as if you yourself alone were content with it. This will never do. After coming to the very top, you must return to the world of people. For unless you do so, there will be no power to save others. That means you must completely realize the world of the true fact, and then return to the world of human beings and work in the world of discriminating thought. Otherwise, there can be no saving of sentient beings. It is as if you were completely alone on a desert island with no one else around. You must return to the world of people. It seems that the verse in today's koan compares Yakusan Zenji with the crane.

The cold clarity penetrates the bones, not allowing sleep. This is the state where all heat is gone, and the clear cold penetrates to the very marrow, so that no sleep is possible. It means becoming the person who never sleeps. The eyes give off a cold light. This means becoming the person who never sleeps. It is the state where all delusive thoughts have disappeared and all traces of satori have also vanished. How should this line be viewed as a koan? Koans are not to be pondered in your head. It's a matter of presenting the fact. Try coming up with something on your own.