

CASE 29

**Fuketsu's Iron Ox**

By Yamada Kōun



*Instruction:*

A poor chess player, going all too slowly, rots the handle of the axe;  
Your eyes swirling, your head going astray, you are robbed of the dipper  
handle.

Falling into a devil's cave and keeping hold of a dead snake's head, are  
you [still] capable of radically transforming yourself like a leopard?

*Case:*

When he was staying at the government office of the Province Ei, Fuketsu entered the hall [to preach] and said, "The heart seal [stamp] 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 ruined. 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 else, Elder?" Rohi was perplexed. Fuketsu hit him with his whisk and said, "Do you remember what you said? Say something, and 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:*

The activities of the iron ox:

The seal remains – the seal is ruined;

Going beyond the head of Vairocana,  
Becoming a Nirmanakaya buddha to sit [freely] on the tongue.  
Fuketsu possesses the scale, and Rohi is defeated.  
On the stick, at the shouting – a flash of lightning, a spark of flint.  
All is clear, the pearl is on the table.  
If you raise your eyebrows, it's already gone.

This is also a famous koan and, as you probably know, it also appears as Case 38 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, although the Instruction and Verse are different. The Instruction and Verse for this version of the case were written by Wanshi Zenji, while the Verses and Instructions in the *Blue Cliff Record* are the work of Engo Zenji. That means their respective ways of viewing the koan are a little different. As far as this case is concerned, at least, I feel that the version found here in the *Book of Equanimity* is better.

**On the Instruction:**

A poor chess player, going all too slowly, rots the handle of the axe. This entire Instruction concerns the Oriental version of chess known in Japan as the game of Go. Perhaps the author, Wanshi Zenji, was himself a chess player. The recently deceased abbot of Engakuji Temple in Kamakura, Asahina Sōgen Roshi, was also fond of playing Go. There is the Japanese saying “poor ideas are like resting” (i.e. equal to no ideas at all: *heta na kangae yasumu ni nitari*). The first line of the instruction is talking about a slow move in chess. When it comes to true masters of the game, they can very quickly size things up and make the right move. I once asked someone how many moves they can predict in advance and was told that the former *Honninbō* master in Japan could evidently judge about 1,000 moves in advance! When the question was posed to Yoshio Ishida, a former Go master, he evidently also said about 1,000 moves. When they place a stone on an intersection, they can judge all the moves that are possible after that and in the process of doing so eventually become able to predict 1,000 moves in advance. In a single glance they can see 50 moves for a single position. It's not so much a matter of thinking and judging but rather a matter of the moves appearing right before their mental eye, so to speak. Of course, we're talking about true masters of the game. The Instruction is talking about someone who's a poor and slow player of the game and who takes a long time to make a move. They might seem to be considering the best move, but actually they're not thinking much of anything. Poor players are just staring at the board and not much else. The proof is that they don't know what the next move is going to be. They have no idea what the opponent is going to do if they make a certain move, and so they end up losing roundly. This is what this line in the Instruction is talking about: slow, poor playing that takes a small infinity.

And what happens then? It “rots the handle of the axe.” There is a story behind this, too. The “handle of the axe” is evidently another name for the game of Go. The story goes that, in the Qin Dynasty (which was prior to the Han Dynasty), there was a woodcutter named Ôshitsu (Wang-shih) living in a locality known as Riku-an (Luan) Prefecture (I don’t know if such a place still exists). One day when he was felling trees in the mountains, he found a cave. Entering the cave he found four children playing Go. Because he himself knew a bit about the game he watched them playing. Then one of the children gave him jujubes, saying that if he ate them he would never feel hungry again. He ate some and felt fine, and then continued watching the children playing Go. After a while, one of the children told him that his axe handle was rotting. Looking at it, Ôshitsu saw that the child was right, for the axle handle was in a sorry state. Amazed, he returned back home only to find (like Urashima Taro in the Japanese fairy tale), that fifty or sixty years had passed and that not one of his acquaintances was still alive in the village. It appears that the children in the cave were mountain spirits of some sort for whom there was no time. It was like the Dragon Palace in the tale of Urashima Taro. But for the woodcutter there was time. Although it appeared as if time had stopped, the axe handle rotted away as decades went by. These two characters for “rotting axe handle” have become another name for forgetting oneself in a game of Go. When poor players are playing Go it takes forever for the game to come to a conclusion, so that the handle of the axe rots away in the meantime. This is actually a reference to the Elder Rohi who appears in today’s koan. As you see in the Main Case, he never really gets the point, no matter how much time passes. He is always considering and wondering. This is another example of “going too slowly and rotting the handle of the axe.”

Your eyes swirling, your head going astray, you are robbed of the dipper handle. This, too, is a reference to the game of Go. It depicts a person looking here and there on the Go board, but not knowing what to do. That is what is meant by the head going astray. The part about being “robbed of the dipper handle” can be considered the main focus. Your moves are all outguessed by your opponent in the game.

Falling into a devil's cave and keeping hold of a dead snake's head, are you [still] capable of radically transforming yourself like a leopard? This, too, is a reference to the game of Go. When you finally get two eyes, that group becomes alive. As many of you probably know who are familiar with Go, unless there are two eyes, the stone can die. In this case, two eyes have been established, but it is surrounded by the opponent’s stones, so that no movement is possible. This is known as being in a devil’s cave. You seem to enjoy being there. This probably originated from the world of Go. Nowadays, it has become a standard expression in Zen circles. For example, there is the expression “making your livelihood in a devil’s cave,” which means moving around in a very narrow environment. Even though you might have realized kensho, the experience remains very narrow and limited. But you seem to become complacent there. This is what is meant by this Zen expression.

“Keeping hold of a dead snake’s head” is another expression from the game of Go. It refers to when there is no eye and the position has already “died.” This is not known as a dead stone but they beat around the bush and call it a “dead snake’s head.” It refers to how you cling to that and can’t give in. This, too, is a reference to Elder Rohi in the koan.

Are you [still] capable of radically transforming yourself like a leopard? As long as you remain in that very narrow world, you will not be capable of great activity; you will not gain “the great life” (*daikatsu genjō*). The real thing calls for dying the great death, dying completely to your delusive self, upon which the world of great enlightenment reveals itself. And great activity should issue from this. But the Instruction speaks about a case where this has not happened, where one is stuck in a narrow world, and asks us if there is any method of changing the situation. There is the common Japanese expression “the wise adapt themselves to changed circumstances” (*kunshi hyohen suru*) which originally appears in the *Book of Changes* (I-Ching). The Instruction asks if there is not a method or means to deal with sudden changes in fortune. In former times, as books from that time attest to, people thought that a badger would change into a leopard and a leopard would then change into a tiger. This is also what is referred to here. The expression “keeping hold of a dead snake's head” also has its origin in the game of Go. It refers to a stone on the Go board that has no “eye” and is thus already dead and of no use in the game. And when you don’t realize that and try all sorts of ploys to escape, this is a case of keeping hold of a dead snake’s head. It means clinging to that and not being able to admit defeat. This is all referring to the Elder Rohi in the Main Case who does not realize that he has lost. He is still stuck in his little world and incapable of coming to the great life. When you die the great death completely, the great world of satori appears, and you should be capable of great activity. But he is not capable of that, since he is still stuck in his narrow world of concepts. The Instruction asks if there isn’t something to suddenly and decisively change the situation.

***On the Case:***

When he was staying at the government office of the Province Ei, Fuketsu entered the hall [to preach] and said, “The heart seal [stamp] 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 ruined. If it neither goes away nor stays, would it be right to give a seal [of approval] or not?” Fuketsu (Fengxue) was the name of a mountain, but is also the name of Fuketsu Ensho (Fengxue Yan-zhao) Zenji, who lived there in Ko’e Zen Temple. Mt. Fuketsu is evidently located in Joshū located in Konan (Henan) Province. Fuketsu was active in the period from the late Tang to the early Song dynasty. Intellectually gifted from an early age, he nevertheless failed the civil service examinations of his time and was unable to obtain a governmental post. In his disappointment he eventually became a monk. After many trials and tribulations he became a

dharma successor in the Rinzai lineage. He is a great-grandson of Rinzai in that succession. The provincial governor at that time was evidently a disciple of Fuketsu and became a monk himself. He then was transferred to the prefecture of Ei, whereupon he asked Fuketsu to accompany him. Fuketsu lived in the government facilities of the locality during the summer training period, occasionally delivering teisho or receiving students in dokusan. The events in today's koan occurred during that period, it seems. One day Fuketsu ascended the rostrum to deliver a teisho. He said, "The heart seal [stamp] of the patriarch resembles the activity of the iron ox." In ancient times, in order to prevent the Yellow River (Huang-ho) from overflowing its banks, a large object in the shape of an iron ox was constructed and placed on the bottom of the river to regulate the water's flow. But there is also the story that an ox shrine was constructed that had an iron ox figure as its central figure of devotion. When the Yellow River threatened to overflow, prayers were offered to appease the gods and cause the river to settle down. Yasutani Roshi felt that both stories were acceptable for our purposes, but I myself prefer the second version. In a book in my library about Chinese tradition there is a section mentioning that there was an iron ox castle in this prefecture of Ei, and that a shrine to an iron ox was constructed on the borderline between the south and north of the Yellow River. I personally feel this is the better version. The main point is that it is an iron ox, and thus does not move at all. Although it is completely still, it nevertheless performs a great work or activity. In the case of the iron ox, it performs the great activity of controlling the waters of the Yellow River. Fuketsu says that the heart activity of the Zen patriarchs is similar to that activity of the ox. Although it is completely still, it nevertheless performs a great activity. What about the next line?

When it goes away, the [impression of the] seal remains; when it stays there, the [impression of the] seal is ruined. This is actually the main focus of this koan. What does this mean about the seal or stamp? When you affix a seal to paper, the red impression remains on the paper. That is what is meant here. But if you simply let the seal remain on the paper, the impression will not be revealed. What does the seal mean here? It means the world of phenomena. Fuketsu's explanation about the seal being removed and the impression remaining, or having the seal stay, whereupon the seal is "ruined" is no other than form is emptiness, emptiness is form in the *Heart Sutra*. To say the seal "goes away" means that the seal is removed, but also means clearly realizing the world of "intrinsically not one thing" (honrai muichimotsu). To say that the seal remains means that the world of phenomena mostly clearly exists. Although the seal remains, in the sense that there is the phenomenal world, the seal is ruined, which means that the content of the phenomenal world is completely empty. So Fuketsu Oshō is explaining the nature of things in terms of a stamp, which can be seen as the aspect of "having" and "not having" or phenomenal and essential. The seal remaining is the world of "having" (phenomena) while the seal ruined is the world of "not having" (essential). You can think of it as our true essence or true reality. It's not limited to the patriarchs, it's true for all of us. Then comes the next part:

If it neither goes away nor stays, would it be right to give a seal [of approval] or not?" That is to say, leaving things as they are, both in terms of the essential and the phenomenal. It is the world of "just this" (*tada kore kore*). The seal here is used in the sense of giving a seal of approval, what is known in Zen as *inka shōmei*. He is asking, in effect, if it is all right to give the seal of approval (*inka shōmei*) for a person who is neither clinging to the world of phenomena nor to the world of the essential.

A person named Elder Rohi happened to be present at that time. The term "Elder" (*chōrō*) means he is not just an ordinary monk. He is a monk who has realized great enlightenment and received *inka shōmei*, and who is now acting as the head monk of a temple. Dōgen Zenji was also sometimes referred to as the "Elder of Eihei" (*Eihei Chōrō*). Here it means someone who has realized great enlightenment (*daigo tettei*). This Elder Rohi is no run-of-the-mill monk; he is someone who has practiced very fervently. He does not appear in other Zen records, only in this particular koan. Evidently he was not all that well-known. At any rate, he happened to be on hand that day and came forward:

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." In Yasutani Roshi's *teisho* on this koan he says the Elder Roshi is saying in effect, "I have the activity of the iron ox, but I don't need your seal of approval for anything in the world." How does Fuketsu respond?

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." With his reply, Fuketsu has disposed of the Elder Rohi with a single blow. What an interesting reply.

Rohi stood there considering.

Rohi stood there in a dither, not knowing what to say.

Fuketsu shouted "Kaatz!" and said, "Why don't you say anything else, Elder?" More likely he simply shouted out angrily what he said. He leaves Elder Rohi not the least room, firing back with his question.

Rohi was perplexed. Once again, the Elder Roshi just stood there, not knowing how to reply.

Fuketsu hit him with his whisk and said, "Do you remember what you said? Say something, and I'll check it for you." Do you remember what you just said about having the activity of the iron ox? Do you remember the koan I set forth about the mind seal? Try showing me your understanding and I will check it.

Rohi tried to say something. Fuketsu hit him again with his whisk. Once again, he tried to say something, but without waiting an instant Fuketsu hit him again with his whisk. This Fuketsu is really something! He knew that, even if he were to say something, it wouldn't amount to anything. He has still not cut off concepts and ideas. Because he has not yet

truly grasped the true matter, as soon as he is challenged in this way he immediately begins to dither.

The Magistrate said, "Buddha's law and the King's law are of the same nature." The Magistrate feels that there is a definite similarity between the Buddha dharma and the world of governing.

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 then asks the Magistrate, "What do you see there that you make such a statement?" The Magistrate says that unless you really cut things off at the root, problems will appear later. There's evidently the saying, "if you're going to kill, you'd better see blood." You have to cut off the head of the snake to kill it, so to speak. In Zen terms this is referring to cutting off concepts and ideas. Unless you cut off those concepts at the root, they're liable to come back again. The Magistrate sees a similarity here with government. If you want to quell unrest, you have to find the source and get rid of it; otherwise it will rise up again.

As you probably know, this is a classically Rinzai approach to teaching Zen, in the sense of summarily eliminating and cutting off all concepts. The Rinzai School is known as "Rinzai, the General." That's certainly true in the case of this koan. Please take time to relish and appreciate it.

***On the Verse:***

The activities of the iron ox:

The seal remains – the seal is ruined; In the dokusan room the student is asked to produce the activity of the iron ox. All of you should try to come up with an answer. The activity of the iron ox is surging right up at you. To tell the truth, each and every one of you has the activity of the iron ox. It's just that you don't realize it. Standing up, sitting down, crying, laughing...all are the activity of the iron ox.

As I mentioned, the statement "when it goes away, the [impression of the] seal remains; when it stays there, the [impression of the] seal is ruined" means "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." "The seal remains" is the world of phenomena. "The seal is ruined" is the essential world, the world of not a single thing. In terms of Tōzan's Five Ranks, they are respectively Hen and Shō. Actually that is the whole of Buddhism. It's up to us all to clearly realize what is expressed here as Hen and Shō. Everyone knows about the world of Hen (phenomena) but few have realized the world of Shō (essence). In kensho you realize the aspect of Shō in realizing that there is not a single thing.

Going beyond the head of Vairocana, Vairocana is the name of the most fundamental Buddha. And that is no other than you yourself. Each of you is Vairocana Buddha. It is the world of not one thing. Here it receives the name Vairocana. But, as the verse says, you must go beyond the head of Vairocana. You must go beyond that world of emptiness. There is

no final station in your practice. Even though you have practiced fervently, there is still dust clinging to that experience. You have to practice further to remove all concepts. As long as there are still ideas of “emptiness” in your head that is dust and dirt. That is the reason for saying that even Shakyamuni Buddha is still practicing, as I mentioned in yesterday’s teisho as well. That means that even Shakyamuni Buddha is still “green.” You know the saying “even the blue sky must receive a blow.” This is saying the same thing. Even though you have realized emptiness in satori, you must deepen that experience in further ardent practice and rid yourself of all concepts of emptiness as well.

Case 99 of the *Blue Cliff Record* is entitled “Shukuso and the Buddha with the Ten Bodies”:

*Emperor Shukuso asked the National Teacher Echu, "What is the Buddha with the ten bodies who guides the living beings?"*

*The National Teacher said, "Sir! Go beyond the head of Vairocana [1]."*

*The emperor said, "I don't understand it."*

*The National Teacher said, "Never consider yourself to be even the pure Dharma-body."*

This koan is talking about the same thing as the verse. You must continue on and rid yourself of concepts of emptiness. At the same time:

Becoming a Nirmanakaya buddha to sit [freely] on the tongue. This is referring to the world of phenomena. You can understand “buddha” here as also meaning Shakyamuni Buddha. There is the tradition of the Three Bodies of Shakyamuni (Trikaya). The Dharmakaya Buddha is Vairocana Buddha as in the previous line of the verse. It is the most essential Buddha. It is emptiness, the essence of the universe. From that emerge all phenomena. Sambhogakāya Buddha is the Reward-Body Buddha. It is the Buddha who practices fervently to save all beings and, as a reward for that fervent practice, reveals the form of Buddha. It is said that *Amida Nyorai* Buddha is such a Buddha. Then comes *Nirmanakāya Buddha* or Response-Body Buddha. Let’s say we normally have a fervent wish to be saved. This is the Buddha that appears in response to that voice of supplication, the Buddha that appears in response to the pleas of sentient beings. As you can see, Buddha appears in different guises to save all beings. This Buddha is also known as *Keshinbutsu* or Body-Changing Buddha. It expresses how the Buddha takes different bodies or forms in the work of saving all beings. In other words, Shakyamuni Buddha preaches in response to those different aspirants. He preached for 49 years. The verse says that we must come and sit on the tongue of Shakyamuni Buddha who preached those sermons that way. This is a reference to the true fact. Although you think there is not a thing, it is on the tongue of Shakyamuni. You have to become that way to save all beings. The former line about going beyond the head of Vairocana means that we must continue our practice endlessly after experiencing satori. This line about sitting on the tongue of Shakyamuni means that we must return to the world of ordinary people. It is only



there that Shakyamuni can preach. This is a reference to the phenomenal world. But it is also in the world of satori. Our true self is from one standpoint completely empty, but from another standpoint precisely in the world of phenomena. This is what this line is talking about.

Fuketsu possesses the scale, and Rohi is defeated. The scale means the weight on a traditional scale. Fuketsu has that scale in the palm of his hand, which means he has absolute authority. It means he has grasped the most important and fundamental matter. He is grasping the fundamental of satori. But Elder Rohi has failed.

On the stick, at the shouting – a flash of lightning, a spark of flint. This is a reference to Fuketsu's spirited activity, as he jabs with his whisk and shouts "Kaatz!" As the verse says, it's like "a flash of lightning, a spark of flint." It's extremely quick and nimble. If you're still thinking, you will never achieve such activity. Lately I've been taking piano lessons from Ursula Okle. And I have to look very carefully at each note and consider what key to play. That's certainly not a case of "a flash of lightning, a spark of flint"! But the words are a very apt description of the outstanding pianists who sometimes appear on the television. I'm beside myself with amazement at their talent and prowess. These words describe Fuketsu's wonderful activity. When it comes to playing the piano, I'm more like Elder Rohi since I have to look carefully at each individual note and consider what key to play. My "teacher" tells me that if I keep practicing and repeating, I'll gradually get better and I have to believe her. But true masters of the instrument are really a case of "a flash of lightning, a spark of flint." I sometimes wonder what's going on inside their heads when they play so wonderfully.

All is clear, the pearl is on the table.

If you raise your eyebrows, it's already gone. This is another reference to Fuketsu's wonderful Zen activity. Each action is clear and vivid. This will not be possible unless your enlightened consciousness is truly clear. The pearl on the table means the pearl is rolling around freely on top of the table and does not leave any trace of hesitation. It's used here once again as symbolic for that wonderful freedom of activity. If you start to consider things, you'll end up like my piano playing. Then, "if you raise your eyebrows, it's already gone." To raise the eyebrows means to start thinking about it. As soon as you do that, the true fact is gone. You have to grasp it in an instant. Please take the time to appreciate Fuketsu's outstanding Zen activity.