

CASE 40

**Unmon's "White and Black"**

By Yamada Kōun



*Instruction:*

Where the wheel of activities turns, even the wise eye is bewildered;  
When the treasure mirror opens, no speck of dust ever passes.  
The fist opens, [yet] nothing falls to the ground;  
He knows well the time, according to the subject.  
When the two sword blades meet, how do they penetrate each other?

*Case:*

Unmon asked Kempō, "May I ask for your answer<sup>1</sup>?" Kempō said, "Have you ever reached this old monk or not?" Unmon said, "If so, I must say I was too late." Kempō said, "Is that so, is that so!" Unmon said, "I thought I was Marquis White, but I find that here is Marquis Black<sup>2</sup>."

*Verse:*

One pulls the bowstring with the arrow-notch;  
Pearls in the net reflect one another infinitely.  
A hundred arrows shot, no arrows are wasted;  
Various forms are accommodated, all lights shine without impediment.  
Each utterance comprising all, one dwells in the samadhi of leisureliness.  
Moving freely therein in particularity and equality:  
Nothing but complete freedom in all directions.

*On the Instruction:*

Where the wheel of activities turns, even the wise eye is bewildered. Today's koan is known as "Unmon's White and Black." Because this koan presents a very deep state of Zen understanding, giving a teisho on this case is difficult, and I can imagine it will be

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<sup>1</sup> A literal translation. It is possible to understand the word simply as "instruction" and to translate the whole sentence as "May I ask for your instruction?"

<sup>2</sup> Marquis White and Marquis Black are noted thieves in Chinese folklore. Marquis Black, a female thief, seems to have been the cleverer of the two.

difficult to understand for the non-Japanese practitioners present here today. However, there may be an opportunity in the future to translate my teisho into English, and I hope that those people will then have a chance to appreciate it at that time.

Today's case is not so grave that it would be referred to as a verbal joust between Kempō Oshō and Unmon Daishi, but it could be seen as a meeting between two outstanding Zen adepts, both of whom display a very outstanding state of consciousness and Zen understanding. Kempō was by far the elder in terms of years. Kempō was a dharma successor to Tōzan Gohon Daishi. As you might know, Seigen Gyōshi of the Soto School and Nangaku Ejō of the Rinzai School were both students of the Sixth Patriarch. One of Seigen's successors was Sekitō Kisen Zenji, himself a very outstanding Zen master. Among the dharma successors of Sekitō was Yakusan Igen Zenji. Also succeeding to Sekitō's dharma at about the same time was Tennō Do Zenji, a situation that led to two streams from the same master. Yakusan's successor was Ungan Donjō Zenji, who was followed by Tōzan Ryōkai (Gohon) Zenji, who in turn was succeeded by Kempō, who appears in today's koan. As for Tennō Dōgo, his dharma was succeeded by the illustrious Ryūtan Sūshin, the teacher of Tokusan. And as for Seppō, one successor was Unmon, who could thus be seen as in the fifth generation following Sekitō. Because Seppō corresponds to Kempō, he could be seen as uncle in dharma of Unmon and, as just mentioned, was actually considerably his elder in terms of age. At the time of the koan, Unmon must have been still quite young, perhaps in his late 30's or early 40's. These are our two protagonists in today's koan and, as I said, they were both extremely ripe in their Zen understanding and state of consciousness, with a subtle and delicate approach to the dharma, although very deep at the same time. It's a matter of savoring this deep Zen understanding in today's koan. Let us look now at the Instruction.

Where the wheel of activities turns, even the wise eye is bewildered; As usual, the Instruction has its sights set on the Main Case, specifically the two protagonists Kempō and Unmon who appear in the koan. The "wheel of activities" means Zen practitioners, in particular the most outstanding Zen masters. Wheel of activities refers to the free and unfettered Zen activity of such masters. It's the activity that appears in the process of guiding others in Zen practice. In today's koan we have an example of such Zen activity meeting its equal in another Zen adept. It is as if they were mutually illuminating each other. This is all implied in the expression "wheel of activities" (kirin). In Zen, it's a matter of promptly producing the actual fact, the real thing. And when such Zen adepts present us so unhesitatingly with the essence of Zen, we're likely to miss it if we don't look quickly. You have to understand on the spot. No dithering allowed. It appears as things from the phenomenal world. But precisely there appears in quick succession the essential world itself. This, too, is implied in the expression "wheel of activities," which means a very quick and nimble activity. And even wise persons are apt to start wondering and thinking, whereupon it vanishes. What is the Instruction trying to say? It means that even wise persons are likely to mistakenly believe the essence is other than where it actually is. Even great wise persons and scholars will

lose sight of it because it's so subtle. This is expressed in this first line of the Instruction. An example of such quickness will be presented in the Main Case, and we are urged here to look carefully at that case and appreciate it.

When the treasure mirror opens, no speck of dust ever passes. The "treasure mirror" is a reference to the thoroughly polished state of consciousness of Zen adepts. It is so clear that not single speck of dust blocks the view. This is all a reference to the perfectly clear state of consciousness of an outstanding Zen adept. It's actually saying that the form or aspect of the other person is perfectly reflected, like in a crystal clear mirror.

The fist opens, [yet] nothing falls to the ground; In other words, when you open your fist, there is nothing there. If there were something in the fist it would fall to the ground, but in this case there's nothing at all. You might think this is something quite difficult, but actually the content is empty. There is evidently a source for this statement in the Instruction. Once a monk asked Shôgen of Fukien: "What is the jewel in the robe?" The master said, "When you open your fist, there is not a single thing." Although there is not a single thing, anything appears according to the necessity. It's almost like a sleight of hand magic show. When you open your hand, there's nothing there. But when you need something, it's right there at your disposal. Although there is intrinsically not a single thing, nevertheless:

He knows well the time, according to the subject. The response must come instantly and completely in accordance with the other party, in this case, the Zen practitioner, while being aware of the extent to which the other's practice has ripened. He knows at a glance what treatment is best for the person in question. He knows how much causes have ripened and can respond with complete appropriateness according to the time and situation. It's certainly no use trying to deliver a university lecture to primary school kids. To "know well the time" means to know the level of ripeness of the other party, and thus be able to provide the most appropriate instruction. That's the mark of a true master.

When the two sword blades meet, how do they penetrate each other? This is referring to the dharma combat in the Main Case between Kempô and Unmon. When such outstanding Zen adepts confront each other, what will the outcome be? To "penetrate each other" (jap, *egô*) means that they merge with each other and become one. Here we have a case of two outstanding masters maneuvering free and unfettered. And just like a swordfight in a movie, the swordsman might appear to have been killed, but actually he can't die! This is all implied in the expression "penetrate each other." An example of such freedom in dealing with each other will now be given and we should look carefully at the Main Case.

***On the Case:***

Unmon asked Kempô, "May I ask for your answer?" Kempô said, "Have you ever reached this old monk or not?" Unmon was Kempô's disciple and reportedly served as his attendant for nine years. Their relation here is that between master and disciple, with Unmon the younger of the two. Unmon starts out with the statement: "May I ask for your

answer?” That’s an interesting beginning. After all, it’s rather strange to ask for an answer without having posed a question. In the essential world there is no asking or answering. There is nothing to ask, and nothing to answer. Of course, both of them are aware of this from the very start. If you were to say, “may I ask a question?” it is already like a scratch. To pose a question when there is nothing to ask from the very beginning is like a scratch on a perfect surface, so he doesn’t say anything. Instead he says, “May I ask for your answer?” But if the other party were now to answer, that too would be a scratch. Kempô, however, great Zen master that he is, says, “Have you reached this old monk or not?” The word “old monk” has two meanings. First of all, Kempô is referring to himself. He seems to be musing to himself and saying, “Have you ever been to meet me before?” It could have such a meaning. But that is just the surface meaning. Actually “this old monk” means the true self. It is pointing to the essential world. “I wonder if you’ve met that old monk or not,” he seems to say. It’s a probing thrust. Instead of answering, he sends out his own question. But in questioning, he’s at the same time providing an answer. The answer is right in the question. It’s his answer to the initial thrust of Unmon.

If Unmon were now to say, “I have reached the old monk” in the sense of having realized his true self, it would mean he said he realized kensho. But is there such a thing as kensho from an essential point of view? After all, it’s simply seeing what was there from the very start. There’s certainly nothing in particular to talk about. Although both of them have deeply realized the true fact, they have both completely forgotten it and become their completely natural, original selves. To repeat, if Unmon were to say something like, “I have seen the old monk,” it would be like a scratch on a perfect surface. So instead he says:

“If so, I must say I was too late.” He seems to be saying, “Well in that case, I guess I’m a little late with my greetings.” You have to be able to savor and appreciate what’s going on here when Unmon speaks like he does. Well, now, how does Kempô respond?

Kempô said, “Is that so, is that so!” What is he saying? At this point, you no longer know what is being asked and what is being said. He just says, “Is that so, is that so?”

Unmon said, “I thought I was Marquis White, but I find that here is Marquise Black.” There is a story behind this reply. But let me first explain what he’s getting at here. In so many words he is saying: Here I was thinking I was quite a fellow, but you did me one better! Marquis White and Marquise Black were both thieves in an old story. So Unmon is saying in effect: I thought I was quite a thief, but you’re a great thief and far superior to me. There is a source for this story of the two thieves, and information can be found in Yasutani Roshi’s *Soliloquy on the Book of Equanimity* (Shôyôroku Dokugo). Although they might not seem to be saying much, this is actually a very deep koan. It might not seem like much at first glance, but the more you delve into it, the more there is to savor and appreciate. The Verse is a poetic appreciation of the Main Case, but the Verse to this koan presents its own surprising difficulties.

***On the Verse:***

One pulls the bowstring with the arrow-notch;

Pearls in the net reflect one another infinitely. What does this mean about an arrow notch on the bowstring? There are many possible interpretations. In his *teisho* on this koan, Yasutani Roshi says the arrow notch and the bowstring refer to the perfectly matched Zen activity of Kempō and Unmon as shown in the dharma combat of this koan, which is just like a tautly pulled bowstring. The pulling of the bowstring with the arrow-notch is Unmon's initial thrust in his "May I ask for your answer?" This is how Old Man Banshō sees it in his commentary to the verse. It means that the bowstring and the end of the arrow are completely one. As Old Man Banshō says, "it cannot but be shot." Old Man Banshō's commentary on the Verse says that the lines of the Verse refer to the individual elements of the Main Case, with the first line referring to Unmon, etc. Of course, it's perfectly all right to see things in that way, but I can't help thinking that all the lines of the verse refer to both protagonists in the koan. But let me at any rate introduce Old Man Banshō's view of things here. In that case, the first line of the Verse would be referring to how Unmon says, "May I ask for your answer?" Commenting on this, Old Man Banshō says, "When the arrow is on the bowstring, it cannot but be shot." He says that this expresses the tense tautness in Unmon's initial thrust. The comes the next line of the Verse:

Pearls in the net reflect one another infinitely. This line is also challenging to interpret. The net is made up of pearls. This is a reference to Indra's Net, which is found in the palace of the Thirty-Three Heavens, and which is composed completely of pearls. Each of the individual pearls composing the net reflects all the other pearls in the net. This process of reflection extends out endlessly. What is this referring to? In Zen there is the expression, "one is all, all is one." This is what that expression is like if expressed in terms of an image. In this case, we can say that the pearl Kempō perfectly reflects the pearl Unmon, and vice-versa. They perfectly reflect each other. Thus, the state of consciousness expressed in Unmon's initial statement is perfectly reflected in the other person and his reply. Even though the words may be different, the state of consciousness is the same, with the Zen consciousness of this person reflected perfectly in the consciousness of the other person, although in the form of questions and answers. Old Man Banshō, however, whom I quoted already, says this line is referring to Kempō's answer, which in form is actually a question: "Have you ever reached this old monk or not?" Although the interpretation of the poem is a bit troublesome, you can say that the question and answer reflect each other. The question of the one person is reflected in the other, and the answer of the other person is reflected in this person here. What's more, the question is in the form of an answer. As Old Man Banshō says, "the question is in the answer, the answer is in the question." Unmon's question is reflected in Kempō's state of consciousness and becomes the answer. And the answer is developed in the form of a question. The mutual reflecting of the pearls, the mutual shining of the light, and furthermore the answer in the form of a question: this is one interpretation of this line of the Verse and helpful in

understanding.

A hundred arrows shot, no arrows are wasted; In other words, every arrow of one hundred arrows hits the bull's-eye without a single wasted arrow. This is the usual interpretation of this line. The Soto Zen master Hioki Mokusen Roshi (1837-1920) interprets the line as follows: "If an arrow is let loose, of hundred arrows, not one is in vain." I feel this interpretation is more to the point. In this case, too, Old Man Banshō sees this line as referring to Unmon's reply: "If so, I must say I was too late." Precisely in that reply he hits the bull's-eye straight on. He might seem to be in a daze, but that arrow was definitely not in vain. And then there is Kempō's reply, "Is that so, is that so!" Old Man Banshō sees the next line of the Verse as referring to this:

Various forms are accommodated, all lights shine without impediment. It's important to savor this line. As I mentioned above, the individual pearls reflect the entire universe in all its forms. The pearls mutually reflect each other. The light of one pearl reflects the light of the other, without any obstruction. It's free, unfettered and flexible. This is how he appreciates Kempō's reply, "Is that so, is that so!" Such a reply is only possible from a perfectly polished state of consciousness. Please recall in this connection Case 33 of the *Book of Equanimity*:

Sanshō asked Seppō, "When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?" Seppō said, "I will tell you when you have passed through the net." Sanshō said, "A great Zen master with 1500 disciples doesn't know how to speak." Seppō said, "The old monk is just too busy with temple affairs."

I feel Seppō's state of consciousness at the end of that other koan is similar to Kempō's in the present koan. With his reply of "Is that so, is that so?" Kempō seems to be acting stupid, but actually he completely exhausts everything in that reply. Precisely in that reply you can see the pearl shining. As I mentioned, Old Man Banshō examines each line of the verse and applies it to the individual statements in the koan. That's certainly not wrong. But I also feel that any line of the Verse could apply to both Kempō and to Unmon. Please take the time to savor the Verse on your own.

Each utterance comprising all, one dwells in the samadhi of leisureliness. This line also refers to a dharani, but in this case means that everything is found in each utterance of the exchange in the koan. "May I ask for your answer?" This contains everything. "Have you ever reached this old monk or not?" This too contains everything. "If so, I must say I was too late." This utterance too exhausts the entire universe. This is what this line of the Verse is getting at. According to Old Man Banshō, there are three kinds of dharani. One kind has many syllables. These totally contain all the teachings. Then there are those with just one syllable, such as "kaatsu!" or "niii!" or "bang!" A single syllable contains the whole. Then there is the case of Vimalakirti's silence. This too reveals the entirety. In the verse it refers to both Kempō and Unmon.

The "samadhi of leisureliness" means it is like playing. Yasutani Roshi sees samadhi as

referring to the absence of discriminating thoughts and concepts. Then as you see it or hear it is itself samadhi; there are no thoughts in your head. It is as you see it, as you hear it, as you stand, as you sit, with nothing else sticking to it. Examining this exchange between the two Zen masters, we feel as if they are playing a game of catch or shuttlecock with each other.

Moving freely therein in particularity and equality: The original Chinese has the feeling of something rolling freely. There is the Chinese saying *enten-kattatsu* which expresses this free, unfettered feeling. The words translated here as particularity and equality also mean slanted and round. The Verse expresses this freedom of movement between the essential and the phenomenal world. As soon as you conclude that it's about the essential world, it turns out to be the essential world, and vice-versa. And this occurs with total freedom. For example, when Kempō says, "Have you ever reached this old monk or not?" you might assume it's talking about the phenomenal world but, lo and behold, it turns to be the essential world. The same holds for Unmon's statement: "If so, I must say I was too late." And given the fact that Unmon came late to kensho, there is some flavor of that in his reply, although it is also completely revealing the essential world. You might think it's talking about the phenomenal world, but it's actually the total revelation of the essential world. It turns so quickly between phenomenal and essential, you can't keep up. If you read the *Shōbōgenzō* of Dōgen Zenji, for example, you encounter that same difficulty. It's the same situation in this case. You think he's talking about the aspect of practice and enlightenment (*shushōhen*), and suddenly he's expressing the essential world. Or conversely, you think he's talking about the essential world, and it turns out to be about the aspect of practice and enlightenment. It moves back and forth very quickly between one and the other, and unless your eye is quite clear, you won't be able to keep up. This is what is meant by the line: Moving freely therein in particularity and equality. It's rolling back and forth between the essential and phenomenal and back again, like a ball rolling around. The minute you think it's about the essential, it turns out to be the phenomenal, and vice-versa.

Nothing but complete freedom in all directions. Once you have reached this state of consciousness, it's quite free. The Chinese text uses the words vertical and horizontal to express all directions. Vertical could also be seen as meaning time. Completely free in past, present and future. And horizontal could be seen as space. Completely free in all directions. Throughout limitless time and space it is completely free. You will definitely become that way if you continue your practice. Please savor this koan, although it's a rather difficult one.