

CASE 86

Rinzai's Great Enlightenment



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

A bronze head, an iron forehead,
The heavenly eyes, a dragon's pupils,
An eagle's beak, a shark's jowls,
A bear's heart, a leopard's liver:
[Still,] under the diamond sword no reflection is allowed;
One cannot plan anything at all.
Why is it like this?

Case:

Rinzai asked Ôbaku, "What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?" Ôbaku hit him. This happened three times. Rinzai then took his leave and went to see Daigu. Daigu asked, "Where have you come from?" Rinzai said, "From Ôbaku." Daigu said, "What did Ôbaku have to say?" Rinzai said, "I asked him three times, 'What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?' and I got his stick three times. I don't know if I was in error or not." Daigu said, "Ôbaku was overly gentle like an old grandmother; he completely exhausted himself for your sake. Yet you come here and ask if you were in error or not!" With these words, Rinzai came to great enlightenment.

Verse:

A chick of the Phoenix with nine-fold virtues;
A colt that runs a thousand miles.
The true wind goes through the pipes,
The wondrous activity turns the pivot.
When one comes suddenly, the lightning flies;
When the cloud of delusion is dispersed, the sun is all alone.
He "strokes the tiger's whiskers" - do you see it or not?
This is certainly a brave man of great caliber.

On the Instruction:

A bronze head, an iron forehead,
The heavenly eyes, a dragon's pupils,
An eagle's beak, a shark's jowls,
A bear's heart, a leopard's liver:

[Still,] under the diamond sword no reflection is allowed. The Instruction is praising Rinzai for his outstanding capacity as a Zen master. A person with “a bronze head” and an “iron forehead” is not your ordinary person. A person with “heavenly eyes” and a “dragon’s pupils” is also quite extraordinary, like someone with demon’s eyes. These other lines about the eagle’s beak and shark’s jowls are also referring to his great talent and capacity as a Zen master. The same holds for the expressions “bear’s heart” or “leopard’s liver.” This final line quoted here about no reflection being allowed under the diamond sword expresses how even a person with outstanding ability, holding the sword that kills or gives life, is no match for the diamond sword of a person whose eye is truly clear. There is no space for reflection or consideration to enter.

One cannot plan anything at all.

Why is it like this? These final lines summon up the Main Case and draw our attention to it. They could be referring to Ôbaku or Daigu, who are holding the diamond sword in this case.

On the Case:

Rinzai asked Ôbaku, “What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?” Rinzai started out studying Buddhist philosophy and doctrine. He was a very earnest individual, steeped in intellectual study of doctrine, and doing everything his master told him to do. Although he had already been practicing under master Ôbaku for three years, he had not been a single time to dokusan. Chin Sonshuku, the head monk at that time, was himself quite an individual. Chin (Chinese pronunciation: Chan) was his family name. He is better known to us under the name Bokushû, because he later lived in the geographical location bearing that name. The title “Sonshuku” is a title of respect for a monk. Chin asked Rinzai why he had never been to dokusan. In reply, Rinzai said that he would be happy to go to dokusan, but didn’t know what to ask. At this time he didn’t know anything about such exchanges in dokusan, evidently. Chin Sonshuku told him to ask the question that appears in the first line of today’s case: What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?

So Rinzai went to his first dokusan with Ôbaku and posed this question, upon which he was struck by the master. He had no idea why he had been struck. When he returned to Bokushû, the other monk wanted to know how things went. “I simply asked the question you told me to,” he said, “but the master just hit me.” Hearing this, Bokushû told Rinzai to go another time to dokusan. So Rinzai went again to dokusan and asked the same question, and was hit by the master in the same way. Why did the master hit him? This is a checking point when you work on this koan in dokusan, so I will not talk further about that here. Rinzai reflected deeply. It seemed to him that this was perhaps not the best place for him to practice. He was thinking of changing teachers. He then went to confer with the head monk. “Every time I go to dokusan, I end up being hit. I’m not a bit wiser as a result. What should I do? I’m thinking of going to practice under another teacher.”

Hearing this, Chin Sonshuku told Rinzai that, if he was planning to leave, he should by all means take his leave of his present teacher. Chin Sonshuku himself went to Ôbaku and told him he felt strongly that Rinzai was quite a promising monk but, feeling he was not making progress, he wished to go to another teacher. “Won’t you please recommend that he go to Daigu?” he asked Ôbaku. Daigu was a cousin in the dharma of Ôbaku, you could say. The disciples of Baso Dôitsu Zenji included Hyakujô Ekai Zenji, whose student was Ôbaku. But another disciple of that same Baso Dôitsu Zenji was Seido Chizô Zenji, who was also quite an outstanding master. His student was Daigu. We know very little about Daigu even today, including when and where he passed away. Kisu Chijô Zenji was a very deeply realized monk who was every bit a match for Hyakujô. Ôbaku, as mentioned, was Hyakujô’s disciple. As mentioned, because Daigu inherited Kisu’s dharma, he and Ôbaku were cousins in the dharma. This was the reason that Ôbaku ended up telling Rinzai to go to Daigu. As mentioned, we have almost no historical records about Daigu. Nevertheless, depending on how you

consider the matter, especially in the world of Zen, it is often the persons who did not gain fame who are even more outstanding than the famous ones. The ones who go around proclaiming their fame are hardly worth their salt. To tell the truth, this is true in all walks of life. There are no doubt many outstanding individuals who have never attempted to blow their own horn or advertise themselves. I can't help feeling the same holds for Daigu.

At any rate, Rinzai went to Daigu, having taken his leave of Ôbaku. Daigu wanted to know where he had come from.

Daigu asked, "Where have you come from?" Rinzai said, "From Ôbaku." Daigu said, "What did Ôbaku have to say?" Rinzai said, "I asked him three times, 'What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?' and I got his stick three times. I don't know if I was in error or not." Rinzai still did not know where he was in error.

Daigu said, "Ôbaku was overly gentle like an old grandmother; he completely exhausted himself for your sake. Yet you come here and ask if you were in error or not!" With these words, Rinzai came to great enlightenment. These lines related how Rinzai came to great enlightenment on hearing these words of Daigu. This is all that is related here. But actually the exchange continues.

Upon realizing enlightenment, Rinzai said, "There is not much to Ôbaku's Buddha dharma." He seems to be saying that, although it is the dharma of the great Ôbaku and he hit me three times, it was not really such a big thing.

Hearing this, Daigu immediately grabbed Rinzai and said, "You bed-wetting devil! Before you were asking where your error is and now you say that there is not much to Ôbaku's dharma!" Then Rinzai hit Daigu in his side three times. This is a famous story. Daigu realized that Rinzai had really come to enlightenment.

What does it mean so say that, "on hearing those words he came to great enlightenment?" What did he realize and in what way. I would like to examine this point carefully. To come to enlightenment means to realize the world of emptiness. Rinzai had clearly realized that world. He realized that there is not a single thing. That is why he could say that there is not much to Ôbaku's dharma. This could be called a turning point for Rinzai and showed that he had realized very clearly and outstandingly.

When Dôgen Zenji went to China, evidently only the Rinzai School of Zen was known far and wide. Interestingly enough, however, Dôgen Zenji, although he started out paying highest praise to Rinzai, asking how Tokusan could ever compare to him, suddenly changed his opinion at a certain point, saying things like "How could Rinzai ever know of such things?" What brought about this change? Such changes of opinion and expression can be found in the *Shôbôgenzô*. Professor Fumio Masutani, a Buddhist scholar, writes about these matters in his book "Rinzai and Dogen." I once visited Professor Masutani at his home because I wanted to obtain his permission to quote a section from his book in my own book *Zen No Shômon* (The Right Gate of Zen). When I asked why he thought Dôgen had changed his opinion, he said he felt it was the result of an "interior development" in Dôgen. Although Dôgen had been considering Rinzai in the highest terms, he suddenly changed his opinion, saying that Rinzai was no match for Ôbaku. You can find such passages in the *Shôbôgenzô* where he refers to Ôbaku as "great and august master." I would like at some other opportunity to give my own view on why this change in Dôgen's estimation of Rinzai occurred, since I have my own personal opinion. At any rate, in the present koan, Rinzai suddenly realized on hearing these words of Daigu. He must have been very happy. As mentioned, Rinzai nudged Daigu in the side three times, whereupon Daigu realized that Rinzai had come to an authentic enlightenment.

On the Verse:

A chick of the Phoenix with nine-fold virtues;
A colt that runs a thousand miles.

The true wind goes through the pipes,

The wondrous activity turns the pivot. The “chick of the Phoenix” is a reference to Rinzai. The same holds for the “colt that runs a thousand miles.”

The “pipes” in the next line can also be considered like a blacksmith’s bellows used to coax the fire when making a sword. Here the wind is passing through those pipes. Because there are pipes there are holes, which is a reference to emptiness. The wind passes through freely without the slightest hindrance. This can also be seen as referring to Rinzai’s enlightenment experience. It says that he clearly passed through the world of not a single thing. The “true wind” is the wind of true emptiness.

The “wondrous” in “wondrous activity” is said in way of praise of Rinzai. The “pivot” is the most important point, the pivotal point. It is like the pivot pin on the wheel of a cart, without which the cart cannot move. This, too, is praising the wondrous activity that turns the pivot. Upon realizing that “there is not much to Ôbaku’s dharma,” Rinzai set this wondrous activity spinning. This is how I would like you to understand these words.

When one comes suddenly, the lightning flies;

When the cloud of delusion is dispersed, the sun is all alone. To come suddenly means to come from right up front. That activity is truly wonderful and quick, like a flash of lightning.

I would like to see these lines as referring to the Zen activity of Rinzai Daishi. Although this does not appear in the Main Case today, I can see these lines as also referring to how Rinzai, upon attaining enlightenment, says that “there is not much to Ôbaku’s dharma,” thus clearly indicating the world of emptiness. To say that the “cloud of delusion is dispersed,” means that all concepts and illusions have disappeared and true realization has become his own. Then all clouds disappear, and only the sun is shining brightly in the cloudless sky. And it is moreover one with all things. That is what is meant by “the sun is all alone.” This could also be applied to the statement that “there is not much to Ôbaku’s dharma.” It is the world of great enlightenment.

He “strokes the tiger’s whiskers” – do you see it or not? This line, too, is referring to Rinzai. The poem has no clear order of before and after enlightenment in singing his praises. To say in this line that he strokes the tiger’s whiskers refers to how Rinzai goes to Ôbaku and asks what the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma is. It can also be seen as referring to when he first went to Daigu and asked about the dharma. The poet asks us if we have realized Rinzai’s true essence or not, whether we have realized Rinzai’s true value or true mettle.

This is certainly a brave man of great caliber. You must realize that all persons are persons of great caliber. I have the feeling that this part of the Verse is not clear and to the point. But please take the time to appreciate it anyway.