

CASE 6

**Master Ba's White and Black**

By Yamada Kôun



*Instruction:*

**When you cannot open your mouth, the person without a tongue can speak. When you cannot lift up your legs, the person with no feet can walk. If you fall into their bowshot and die at a phrase, how will you have freedom? When the four mountains close in on all sides, how will you escape?**

*Case:*

**A monk asked Great Master Ba, "Leaving the four phrases and cutting off the hundred negations, I ask Your Reverence to directly indicate to me the meaning of the coming from the West." Great Master Ba said, "I'm tired today, I cannot preach it for you. Go and ask Chizô. " The monk asked Chizô. Chizô said, "Why didn't you ask the Master?" The monk said, "The Master told me to come and ask you." Chizô said, "I have a headache today. I cannot preach it for you. Go and ask Brother Kai." The monk asked Brother Kai. Brother Kai said, "When it comes to that, I don't know." The monk told Great Master Ba what had happened. Great Master Ba said, "Chizô's head is white, Kai's head is black."**

*Verse:*

**The medicine becomes the sickness,  
The example is found among the former saints.  
The sickness becomes the medicine.  
Who will it definitely be?  
White head, black head.  
Children who cause the family to flourish.  
A phrase, no phrase: the activity to cut off the stream.  
Boldly sitting and cutting off the road on the tip of the tongue.  
Most laughable, the ancient awl of Vaisali.**

*On the Instruction:*

In today's koan we meet three patriarchs and a nameless monk. The first patriarch is Great Master Ba, followed by his disciples Chizô and Hyakuujô Ekai. Then there is the monk who asks the questions. The same case appears as Case 73 in the *Blue Cliff Record*. It would be interesting to compare the Instruction and Verse in the *Book of Serenity* with their

counterparts in Case 73 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. The world of Zen is always speaking about the same matter. Although we speak in terms of the phenomenal world and the essential world as if they were two separate entities, this is simply for the sake of explanation. In actual fact, however, they are one. It is a matter of clearly grasping that fact. There is no Zen other than this. It involves clearly grasping the fact and making it part of our everyday lives. Most people are only aware of the world of phenomena and do not know anything about the essential world. Even in religious circles most people know next to nothing about this essential world. They are attempting to save people only in the phenomenal world of form, but there is a basic error involved here. The people who are aware of this basic error are very few. I would like people from abroad to have an understanding of this matter. Sad to say, however, this appears to be impossible nowadays. The world of phenomena and the world of the essential are one. From the standpoint of phenomena, the objective world clearly exists. But from the standpoint of the essential world there is not a single thing. We should have a clear grasp of this fact in examining the present case. Let us turn now to the Instruction.

**When you cannot open your mouth, the person without a tongue can speak.** If you cannot open your mouth, how can you say anything? In our tradition, just after someone experiences kensho they examine the so-called Three Turning Words of Master Shôgen. Among them is the following koan:

“How is it that the person of great strength cannot lift his legs?”

Compare that to the next line of the Instruction for today’s case:

**When you cannot lift up your legs, the person with no feet can walk.**

Then there is the next of the Three Turning Words of Shôgen:

“It is not with the tongue that we speak.”

This is a koan of a similar category. When you examine it as a koan, however, it invites you to try to say something without moving your lips or tongue.

In today’s Instruction we have a certain condition: “When you cannot open your mouth, how will you speak?” The Instruction says that it is enough for the tongue to disappear. If you are tongueless person, you do not have to use your tongue. What is this saying? When we speak in the world of phenomena we move our tongue and mouth. From the standpoint of the essential, however, nothing moves at all. A person who has clearly grasped the essential world is known as “a person without a tongue.” If you clearly realize that there is no tongue, you can easily speak without moving lips and tongue.

**When you cannot lift up your legs, the person with no feet can walk.** This is actually a challenge to walk without moving your legs. Here is another difficult problem. How can you walk without lifting your legs? Isn’t it enough for the legs to disappear? If the legs disappear, there are no legs to be lifted. This is speaking about the same thing. In the world of phenomena, you have legs. From the standpoint of our essential nature, however, there are no legs. There is nothing at all. This is what is meant here.

**If you fall into their bowshot and die at a phrase, how will you have freedom?** The bowshot is the range of an arrow of a bowman. Here it means falling into the ruse of the other person and losing your freedom. You can be hit at any time by their arrows, so it is actually falling into their trap.

“Die at a phrase” means to be caught up in the concepts and thoughts found in words and to lose your freedom as a result.

**When the four mountains close in on all sides, how will you escape?** In our everyday lives we meet up with all sorts of difficulties. These are known in Buddhism as “the four mountains.” They are conventionally divided into the four categories of birth, old age, sickness and death. According to Yasutani Rôshi’s teisho on this koan, the *Agon Sutra* speaks of the following four mountains: Old Age Mountain, Sickness Mountain, Death Mountain and Decay Mountain. When these four mountains have closed in upon us, how can we pass through them? We are invited to look at the Main Case for an example. In other words, it is enough to realize that there is no body. If you realize that there is no body, there is no being

born and no dying, there is no aging and there is no sickness. There is nothing at all. There is no problem whatsoever. It is because we believe that there is a body that we cling to that body and are unable to move freely. We turn now to the Main Case.

**On the Main Case:**

The modern Rinzai School finds its origin in Great Master Ba (jap, Ba Daishi). The four main personages connected with the origin of that school of Zen are Great Master Ba, Hyakujô, Ôbaku, and Rinzai. The Sixth Patriarch Enô (Hui-neng) had two outstanding disciples. One of them was Nangaku Ejô Zenji. His own disciple was Great Master Ba. The other outstanding disciple of the Sixth Patriarch was Seigen Gyôshi Zenji, whose disciple was Sekitô Kisen Zenji. The Soto School has its origin with Seigen Gyôshi Zenji. Great Master Ba seems to have been an irascible type who had a face like a horse. This accounts perhaps for his name of Ba (chinese, Ma), which means horse. He was by nature a sturdy type who did not waste time on trifles. His eyes glinted like those of a tiger and he walked steadily like an ox. We can consider him to have been a stolid, heavy-looking person. People with a razor-sharp intellect are nothing to speak of. Such an intellect may be good for some things but, surprisingly enough, not very much use for other things. Baso seems to have been more of the slow and laborious type. When he looked at you it was with the eyes of a tiger, and when he walked it was with the gait of an ox. Interestingly enough, when he stuck out his tongue, it is said that it could reach higher than his nose! Baso Zenji first studied under Nangaku Ejô Zenji when he was probably still young. He was sitting in zazen at a temple all of the time. Nangaku Ejô Zenji was on pilgrimage in that area and happened to hear about the strange monk who spent all of his time sitting in zazen. He went over to Baso and asked him, "What are you doing?"

"I am sitting in zazen."

"Why are you sitting in zazen?"

"To become a Buddha."

Then Nangaku Ejô Zenji took a piece of roof tile and began polishing it on a stone.

Very surprised, Baso asked Nangaku what he was doing.

"I am polishing a roof tile to produce gold."

Baso said, "No matter how much you polish a roof tile, it will not become gold."

Nangaku said, "One who is not a Buddha can never become a Buddha, no matter how much he practices zazen."

It was his way of saying that all beings are by nature Buddha.

We do not know whether Baso came to great enlightenment on hearing these words or not. But this is an interesting example of how Nangaku taught others.

It is said that more than eighty persons received the seal of transmission (inka shômei) who were disciples of Baso Zenji. Among them were two outstanding persons: Hyakujô Ekai Zenji and Nansen Fugen Zenji. One of the koans in the *Blue Cliff Record* recounts how Hyakujô received a stern teaching when he was practicing with Great Master Ba. It was when Hyakujô was accompanying Baso on a walk. As they were walking, a duck suddenly flew out of the undergrowth. Baso immediately asked, "What's that?"

Hyakujô said, "It's a wild duck."

Baso asked, "Where did it go?"

Hyakujô said, "It flew away."

Baso then twisted Hyakujô's nose and said, "Where did it ever fly away?"

This was his severe way of teaching his disciple.

According to Inoue Shûten, a renowned Buddhist scholar, at the time of the present koan, Master Ba was about 80 years old, Hyakujô was about 60 years old, and Chizô was about 50 years old. A monk poses the question we have seen already in the Main Case.

**A monk asked Great Master Ba, "Leaving the four phrases and cutting off the hundred negations, I ask Your Reverence to directly indicate to me the meaning of the coming from the West." We could naturally talk at length about the**

meaning of the four phrases and the hundred negations, but the main point is that of leaving behind all concepts and thoughts. The four phrases and the hundred negations were a form of argument used in arguing with philosophers and teachers from schools other than Buddhism. Although there are many descriptions of these four phrases, the simplest one proposes being, nothingness, non-being and non-nothingness. Each of these four contains a further four, which gives us sixteen. And for each of these sixteen there are the three elements of past, present and future, which give us forty-eight. Then there are the two aspects of “already occurred” and “not yet occurred,” which doubles the figure of forty-eight to give a figure of ninety-six. And when the original four phrases are then added to this we obtain one hundred. The ancients certainly came up with interesting systems! Nevertheless, we’re still on the level of concepts and thoughts. The monk says, “I’m not interested in such conceptual systems. Please directly indicate to me the meaning of the coming from the West.” “The meaning of the coming from the West” means the meaning of Bodhidharma’s traveling from India to China. You are familiar with the phrase “directly pointing to the mind, realizing true nature and attaining Buddhahood.” The monk is asking about the ultimate truth of Buddhism. He is not interested in concepts, he wants the living fact. He wants to experience flesh-and-blood Buddhism, the ultimate meaning beyond concepts. He asks Master Ba to present the essence of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West, or you could say the ultimate truth of the Buddha’s enlightenment.

In reply, Great Master Ba says, “I’m tired today, I cannot preach it for you. Go and ask Chizô.”

What is this? You must realize that this is the ultimate truth that transcends the four phrases and cuts off the hundred negations. In order to do so you must come to an experience of kensho. You have come here because you want to grasp the world of essential nature, where there is truly not one thing. The truth is that all phenomena are themselves the essence. They are truly one and the same. If you realize the world of the essence, then anything you bring from the phenomenal world is right. In this case, it is the statement, “I’m tired today, I cannot preach it for you. Go and ask Chizô.”

Both Hyakujô and Chizô were disciples of Great Master Ba at this time and were practicing at the same temple.

**The monk asked Chizô. Chizô said, “Why didn’t you ask the Master?” The monk said, “The Master told me to come and ask you.” Chizô said, “I have a headache today. I cannot preach it for you. Go and ask Brother Kai.”** Brother Kai means Hyakujô Ekai Zenji.

**The monk asked Brother Kai. Brother Kai said, “When it comes to that, I don’t know.”** It is important to realize that each of these statements is the complete manifestation of the ultimate truth of Buddhism, the meaning of the coming from the West.

Then the monk eventually goes back to Great Master Ba.

**The monk told Great Master Ba what had happened. Great Master Ba said, “Chizô’s head is white, Kai’s head is black.”** What does this mean? This also is directly pointing to the meaning of the coming from the West. Anything you say is it. The pillar is vertical, the threshold is horizontal. The willow is green, the flower is crimson. Because the monk has just come from talking to Chizô and Hyakujô, it is natural for Master Ba to say what he does. It is just as it is. It’s important to accept it on the spot. And to do so you must clearly realize the essential world. In a single phrase you have the complete manifestation of the essential world. Some people might ask, “Aren’t the various conceptual thoughts and illusions also the full manifestation of the essential?” That is correct. But the problem is whether you have realized that essential world or not. It is to realize that the essence is empty. If you have not realized that there are no concepts and thoughts, you will remain their prisoner. Actually, anything you wish to bring is all right. “Catch a thief and realize it is your own son.” The one you thought was a thief turns out to be your own child. When you clearly realize the essence of concepts and illusion, you realize that these are no

other than yourself. Even if you think you have come to full enlightenment, it will still take time to truly realize this koan. Dôgen Zenji practiced fervently with Nyojô Zenji in China. It was not that his practice was finished. It was just that the stage of seeking instruction from a master had ended. The rest is up to you. The true fact is that eyes are horizontal and nose is vertical. The true fact is Chizô's head is white, Kai's head is black. Just as it is, it is perfect. But to truly realize this will take many years in most cases. It is said that Echû Kokushi took forty years before he truly understood that eyes are horizontal and nose is vertical, that Chizô's head is white, and Kai's head is black. And that was *after* he had realized great enlightenment. Some people believe that with a single experience of kensho everything will be all right. Then it is a matter of working on koans one after another and passing those koans. I often use the following example to explain kensho. Imagine that there is a thick wall of black glass separating the room you are in from the adjoining room. Most people believe there is only this world of phenomena. That means they are only aware of the pitch-black glass. They are not aware that there is another world on the other side. But upon reading the Zen records of the ancient worthies and hearing teishos, they come to understand that there is another world on the other side of the glass. In order to discover that world, they begin the fervent practice of Mu. It is just as if you were drilling through the glass. And then, one day, you manage to bore through to the other side and make a small hole. This corresponds to kensho. There are almost no examples of knocking the entire glass out. Among the ancient Zen patriarchs, perhaps only the Sixth Patriarch Enô was able to do so. Some might make a hole equal in size to the little finger, and some make a hole the width of a needle. But the fact that a hole has been made is the same. We then realize that there is truly another room on the other side. It is not just concepts, it is the result of actual experience. Then it is a matter of gradually enlarging the size of the hole. The only way to do so is to work on koans one after another. The final step is to eliminate the glass completely. This is known as great enlightenment (jap, daigo tettei). But since you have been in the one room for so long, even if you have removed the glass, you are still not completely clear. You have no recourse but to continue sitting until you become used to that world with no glass whatsoever. Even though you may have come to an experience of kensho, you still have the feeling that there must be something other than what you see and what you hear, although there is no such thing. There was no glass from the very start. To believe there is such glass is delusion. You could refer to it as an illness. For that reason, it is not necessarily good to come to a hasty kensho. The best way is to become completely settled in your practice. Let us look now at the Verse.

*On the Verse:*

***The medicine becomes the sickness,***

***The example is found among the former saints.***

We hear outstanding expositions of Buddhism or of Christianity. These words are the medicine that heals the sickness. However, if we cling to them, they will become poison instead. They will become entangling vines that deprive us of our freedom. This is also true concerning satori. To come to realization is the medicine. But if we then cling to that experience it will become a sickness. We have the example of this among the former sages. Even Shakyamuni Buddha, after coming to enlightenment, is said to have remained in that state of emptiness for a week, enjoying it.

All of us have our sufferings and trials. There is no way of describing the joy upon realizing that those sufferings are empty. Having realized that they are empty, we can't help liking that condition. It is like being alone on an island, enjoying your perfect peace. Having believed that I was subject to the criticism and spite of others, I suddenly realize that I am alone in the entire universe. Since there is no other person, it is as if I were in charge of the entire world. But if I remain in that state, I will remain unable to save others, since there are no sentient beings to save. And if we are unable to save others, for what reason have we come to kensho? It is necessary to deepen in our realization and bring others to the same place, otherwise it has no meaning. We have the example of Shakyamuni and the other ancient

worthies. It is thus necessary to urge ourselves on in our practice. Thus, the sickness is also the medicine, the sickness is also the doctor. Our sufferings are sickness, but if we had no sufferings, we would never have any will to practice. They are a sickness, but at the same time they are the doctor who heals us. There is what is known as a “natural healing power.” Within our body and mind is a power that can cure illness. That which heals us is we ourselves. It is our essential nature or true self. We can also understand this as meaning that we heal the sickness through the power of our essential nature. Usually, however, “the sickness becomes the doctor.” This is referring to the statement of Baso in the koan: “I’m tired today, I cannot preach it for you.” It is also the statement of Chizô: “I have a headache today. I cannot preach it for you.” We can say that this is the sickness that becomes the doctor turning illusion into enlightenment. That is how Yasutani Roshi views the koan, and it is the usual way of doing so. However, as I just mentioned, it is precisely because there is a sickness of the mind that there is a natural healing force to heal that sickness.

**Who will it definitely be?** Needless to mention, this is Hyakujô and Chizô and Baso, although it is not limited to these three. It must become the same for all of us. For all of us, it must be a case of the sickness becoming the doctor.

**White head, black head.** This is of course referring to Chizô and Hyakujô Ekai.

**Children who cause the family to flourish.** These are the worthy heirs who allow the family to flourish.

**A phrase, no phrase: the activity to cut off the stream.** I would like to see this line as referring to Great Master Ba. From his standpoint, whether there is a phrase or not, it has the power to cut off all illusion. “A phrase” means a phrase with meaning. “No phrase” means a phrase with no meaning. We can consider the words prior to satori as those having meaning. Upon coming to realization, we realize that the content of those phrases is completely empty. So they are all “no phrase.” A good example is Jôshû’s Mu. When we realize that it is empty, it is no phrase. Even if we assume for the moment that there is meaning in the saying of Great Master Ba in this koan, it has the power to cut off the words of the other person. At the same time, for Great Master Ba it is not a case of a phrase, but a case of no phrase. Whether it is a phrase or no phrase, there is no raising of letters; all words are the fact itself. From the standpoint of the essential, all phrases are no phrase. To say that there is no setting up letters is all letters. Precisely with this “no phrase” you can cut off all illusion.

**Boldly sitting and cutting off the road on the tip of the tongue.**

I consider this to be singing the praises of Great Master Ba. At the same time, the fact that this particular case is taken up in this way in the *Book of Serenity* aptly expresses the special characteristics of the Soto School. In contrast to this, the phrase of Ôbaku “sitting alone on Daiyu Peak” of the Rinzai School, aptly expresses the special characteristics of that school: commanding and awe-inspiring. The phrase in the verse of the present koan expresses the world where both a phrase and no phrase have been transcended and one has become a completely ordinary person. This is a matter of clearly grasping the essential world, clearly grasping our essential nature.