

CASE 65

Shuzan's "Bride"

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Instruction:

Tut, tut! Whoop, whoop!
Crump, crump! Grumble, grumble!
Puff, puff! Zing, zing!
Vast and vague,
Impossible to chew, difficult to come near.
Tell me, what is this all about?

Case:

A monk asked Shuzan, "What is Buddha?" Shuzan said, "When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle."¹

Verse:

When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle:
The appearance is graceful and truly natural.
How laughable! The girl in the neighborhood imitates a frowning face:
She simply adds to her ugliness for other people, it never makes her attractive.

On the Instruction:

Shuzan was of the Rinzai School and fifth in the line of succession starting with Rinzai Gigen Zenji. Rinzai's successor was Kôke Zenji, who was followed by Hô'ô Zenji of Nan'in. His successor was Fuketsu Enshô Zenji, who was followed by Shuzan Shônen Zenji. One of the last cases in the *Gateless Gate* concerns Shuzan's Shippei. Those of you who have worked on the koans in that other collection are no doubt familiar to some extent with Shuzan. I personally feel he was unusual among the teachers in the Rinzai lineage. He has a free-and-easy, uncomplicated air to him that reminds one more of a Soto master. If we were to characterize the Rinzai School, on the other hand, we might point to this feeling of the sheen of satori glittering brightly. But that sheen of satori must fade away like oxidized silver loses its sheen,

¹ This is how the mother-in-law introduces the bride to the village people.

so that you do not know in the end if there is satori there or not. When we examine this koan with Shuzan, it definitely exudes a Soto flavor. We turn now to the Introduction.

Tut, tut! Whoop, whoop!

Crump, crump! Grumble, grumble!

Puff, puff! Zing, zing!

Vast and vague,

Impossible to chew, difficult to come near. We experience all sorts of sounds in these first lines. The words tut, tut (Japanese: ta ta) are supposedly muttered when you are angry to scold the others.

Whoop, whoop! (Japanese: sa sa) are words uttered like a horse whinnying, evidently in a very hoarse voice.

Crump, crump! (haku haku) are sounds like knocking on a door or the sound of footsteps.

Grumble, grumble! (raku raku) imitates the voice of a hero, like great general, a sonorous, self-important voice.

Puff, puff! (chō chō) imitates the sound of the dying wind faintly sighing.

Zing, zing! (ketsu ketsu) imitates brisk and vigorous movement.

The words vast and vague (man man, kan kan) do not express so much a specific meaning but more a feeling at a certain time. You might consider all these words lined up here as exclamations uttered in various moods. Why are they written here? Because each utterance “returns to the first principle,” they completely express our true self. Whether it’s “Ah!” or “Oh!”, each completely manifests the essence. When you say “impossible to chew, difficult to come near,” it means you cannot find any intellectual meaning there. Because they have no meaning, no matter how much you chew, you will not get any taste. The same holds for the koan Mu, for example. No matter how much you chew on it, you cannot find any meaning. If there were a meaning, it would be easy enough to approach, but because the content is empty, you cannot grasp it.

Tell me, what is this all about?

What is this all about, lining up these different words next to each other? If you still don’t understand, then look at the following case. If you look at the Introduction and then at the Verse, you notice that they are different in their savor. The Introduction is composed mainly of sounds. So if you look at the Introduction and then at the koan, you notice that certain koans can be seen in the same way, such as kanshiketsu or masagin. But if you then look at the Verse following this case, that’s not true. Actually you can use either the Introduction or the Verse as reference to the Case, although in most cases it’s the Verse.

On the Case:

A monk asked Shuzan, “What is Buddha?” Shuzan said, “When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle.” This koan deals with

Shuzan Shônén Zenji. One day a monk asked him, “What is Buddha?” In reply, Shuzan said, “When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle.”

This has its origins in the countryside in old China. The new bride in the village is paying visits on relatives and rides on a donkey from house to house. The mother-in-law takes the rope and leads the donkey along the road. This story was used in ancient China to indicate a situation where everything is topsy-turvy. Usually it would be the mother-in-law who would ride the donkey and the new bride would take the rope and lead the donkey along. But here we have the exact opposite. As mentioned, it’s a saying used to express a situation where everything is turned upside down. And here is Shuzan saying that this is Buddha. What does this mean? It’s just THAT, just the fact itself, with no thoughts about good or bad, correct or topsy-turvy. If you start chopping logic about how things being turned upside down or the like, Buddha is lost. Even things that appear to be wrong are just as they are. It’s just like a picture. The true world is completely revealed. This is what this koan is about. However, from the standpoint of the Introduction, it’s just tut, tut!, whoop, whoop! No logic, no meaning! There are just those words: “*When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle.*” (*shinpu ro ni noreba ako hiku*). That’s what it really must be about. Recall the following lines:

“How does our pure, original nature instantly give birth to mountains, streams and the great earth?” (Japanese: *shôjô-honnen-unga-kosshô-sanga-daichi*). From the autonomous viewpoint, considerations such as “topsy-turvy” or “opposite” have absolutely no connection. But that’s not how things are looked at in the Verse. It simply presents this picture of the bride on the donkey with the mother-in-law pulling the tether.

On the Verse:

When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle:

The appearance is graceful and truly natural. First the Verse simply presents the fact. Then it says it is “graceful and truly natural.” There is no logic or anything sticking to it. I wonder if there is a word in other languages comparable to the word *fûryû* in Chinese and Japanese which appears in this second line of the verse and means something like elegant and graceful, a taste for the poetical and non-prosaic side of life. It’s written with the characters for “wind” and “flowing.” But just to translate it as “elegant” or “graceful” doesn’t convey it’s full meaning. It expresses a psychological state where there are no concepts clouding the mind. As soon as logic appears, *fûryû* disappears. There is nothing at all. There is just the bride on the donkey and the mother-in-law holding the tether. Clip-clop, clip-clop. That’s it. That’s truly elegant or refined, in the sense of nothing sticking to it. It’s completely natural with no guile or additional intent. In the long poem *Shôdôka* (Song on Realizing the Way) by Yôka Daishi there are the lines: The source of our self-nature is the Buddha of innocent truth (Japanese: *hongen-jishô-tenshinbutsu*). When we examine these first lines of the Verse, we can well understand how Shuzan could answer as he did in reply to the question, “What is Buddha?”

But as soon as some sort of intent or concept enters in, what then?

How laughable! The girl in the neighborhood imitates a frowning face:

She simply adds to her ugliness for other people, it never makes her attractive. This is evidently based on an old Chinese saying. In Japan, too, there is the saying *hisomi ni narau*, which also means imitating a frown and indicates blindly following someone's bad example. In ancient times in China there was the famous imperial concubine Xi Shi, who was a great beauty. It is said that when she was feeling ill wrinkles in the form of the Chinese character for eight (八) formed on her forehead. But precisely when she frowned she was considered most beautiful. A true beauty remains beautiful, whether she's smiling or frowning. Hearing of her beauty, another concubine who was not so beautiful tried to imitate her frown, but it didn't help her looks one bit! On the contrary, it made her look even uglier. This is what is being alluded to in these final lines of the Verse. "You're a sight to be seen!" as they say.

What are these lines talking about? In other words, just as it is, it is the "Buddha of innocent truth" (*tenshin-butsumi*). But as soon as a concept enters, it is destroyed. If it appears just as it is, it's perfect. Add ideas like "that's Buddha" or the like, and it's lost.

"When a bride rides the donkey, her mother-in-law leads it by the bridle." Just like it is, it's perfect. But if I start talking about it and say it's the "Buddha of innocent truth" or the like, it becomes "ugly." I'm talking like this about it so you will understand, but on the whole it's not the least bit difficult. Nevertheless, it's really difficult to be completely natural. As I am always saying, we Zen practitioners have to pass through the gate of satori. And having done so, we must then gradually remove any smell of satori. What is satori? In a word, it is realizing that you are one with the universe, that there is neither subject nor object. There is no self and no other. It is one. I often say empty oneness to express it. To clearly realize this is what we call satori. Once you have realized it, that special sheen of satori must disappear as you become an ordinary person. But this is still different from someone who has never passed through that gate of satori. How is it different? The person who has realized experiences peace of mind. There is a difference in terms of the level of peace of mind compared to another person. Then you must work on one koan after another and, even when you finish koan study, that is still not enough. You could say that is only the departure point for further practice. Up to then you had been holding the hand of your master to aid you in walking, much like a child in kindergarten. But now you walk on your own for the first time. This is when your practice really starts. That's what I mean when I say it is very difficult to become truly natural, to become your completely natural ordinary self (*moto no mokuami*). That won't happen overnight. It might not be all that difficult to finish koan study. It might take time, but if you work hard you can do it. But if you ask whether you have true peace of mind upon finishing koan study, it's not so easy. The real practice starts just then. Please take time to consider this matter carefully.