

CASE 71

Suigan's "Eyebrows"

By Yamada Kōun



Instruction:

If you hold blood in the mouth and spit it at others, you defile your own mouth;

If you love sake cups, you will end up paying for the debts of others all your life.

You have been selling paper for three years,
And yet you even lack "paper money for the demons" [needed to enter the realm of the dead].

I, Banshō, preach to you all,
But does that strike a fair balance or not?

Case:

Towards the end of summer¹, Suigan instructed the assembly, saying, "All summer I've preached to you, my brothers. Look here, are Suigan's eyebrows still there?²"

Hofuku said, "The robber's heart is terrified!"

Chōkei said, "They are well grown!"

Unmon said, "Barrier [*Kan*³]!"

Verse:

The heart to become a robber, the guts to transcend others:

Clear and free, horizontally and vertically;

Prompt and just, according to the situation.

Hofuku and Unmon – their superb noses cover their lips;

Suigan and Chōkei – their long eyebrows reflect in their eyes.

Immature Zen disciples, when would you stop your stupid deeds?

¹ Summer-sesshin for 3 months.

² According to popular belief, a great criminal loses his eyebrows as a portent of his future punishment in hell.

³ Literally: "barrier" (cf. *Mumonkan*). In those days this Chinese word also meant in colloquial terms, "Watch out!" or "There!"

I dare say, spirit and expression are both cut off at once,
You bury your [true] self, swallowing your own spirit and gulping your own voice;
You ruin your ancestors' [fame], [ignorantly] facing a wall, [one-sidedly] carrying
a board.

Before I begin my teisho on today's koan I would like to speak briefly about a certain matter. When we enter this zendo for a zazenkai or sesshin, we must do so very quietly. The most important matter in practicing zazen is to bring the mind to silence. That means our movements must also be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible. I just noticed that people sitting in the inner row on each side place their zafu sitting cushions on the wooden walkway in the middle of the zendo when we practice kinhin or walking meditation. Some people have been tossing their zafus onto that central wooden area as if throwing an object from a distance. Such an attitude will not do. It's not going to make any great difference in terms of time whether you take the zafu and place it carefully on the floor or simply toss it onto the middle floor section. I would like you all to carefully and quietly place your zafus on the middle section prior to starting kinhin. During the tea ceremony in Japan the tea room is very quiet, with the participants making each movement of the hands and feet very quietly and carefully. The gestures and practices of the tea ceremony have their origin in Zen and one practices tea ceremony with the Zen spirit. You could say the tea ceremony was originally the "samadhi of innocent play" (yûge-zammai) of enlightened persons. That means people are very careful to make no sound when walking, when serving tea or when drinking the tea. Lately certain rough practices have made their way into Zen, but this is not the true spirit. This means that such persons have not yet achieved the state of mind required for true Zen practice. I would like you all to be careful about this matter. In the Soto School of Zen there is the saying that "rules of behavior are the fundamental matter" (sahô kore shûshi). One should maintain a dignified and quiet manner in one's every action. There is a passage which appears in the *Zayû No Mei* (literally: Text to Be Kept to the Right of One's Seat) by the Zen master Chuhô Oshô: "Do all things in quiet dignity and never act recklessly."

Next I would like to talk about Shôju Rôjin who lived at the hermitage Shôjuan in Iiyama. There was a monk who wanted to pay him a visit. The monk evidently came from Shôkôji Temple, which is located in my own hometown of Nihonmatsu. When the monk arrived at the hermitage he was told that the master had gone out for a walk. It was Shôju Rôjin's mother who greeted the monk. The monk wanted to know where the Roshi had gone. In reply the woman said, "Don't you know that he's taking a walk in your stomach?" She must have been quite a lady! Since the monk had come quite a long way to see the Roshi he decided to wait for him outside so that he could see him prior to returning. It was evidently quite an incline up to the hermitage and the monk decided to wait at the bottom of the hill for the Roshi. But then he happened to see Shôju Rôjin from the back as the Roshi carefully took one step at a time on his way up the hill to the hermitage. The monk was so impressed by this sight, that he felt

unworthy to meet the Roshi and left without greeting him. The Roshi evidently seemed so noble and unapproachable in the way he ascended the stairs with quiet dignity. This is what is meant by the words “with dignity and quietly” (*igi-jakujō*) as they appear in other Zen writings. It might be too much to expect such dignity from everyone, but we should all try.

Let me tell you another story in this connection. This one concerns Yamamoto Gempo Roshi of Ryūtakuji Temple in Mishima, who was the master of Nakagawa Soen Roshi. Among his students was Masuda Kōzō, who was the foremost player of *shōgi* at that time. One day when he was visiting the temple, he was invited to visit the Roshi in his room. He happened to see Gempō Roshi ascending the stairs in quiet dignity as he followed him. Upon seeing the Roshi from behind, Masuda Kōzō, who was himself known as “*meijin*” or “master of *shōgi*,” said to himself, “Now there goes a true *meijin*!” He considered Gempō Roshi to be a true “*meijin*” or “master” in terms of his outstanding character. After this incident, whenever Masuda visited the temple he would inquire after the Roshi by saying, “Is *meijin* here?” This type of character comes from quieting our minds. I have gone at some length about this matter, but I would like everyone to take special pains to remain silent in the *zendo*. We now turn to today’s koan.

On the Instruction:

If you hold blood in the mouth and spit it at others, you defile your own mouth. This entire Introduction speaks about how the Zen master, in fervently guiding others in practice (whether it be providing explanations, delivering *teisho* like this or receiving people in *dokusan*), actually defiles himself. Here it is compared to holding blood in one’s mouth and spitting it at others, whereupon we become defiled with the blood. This is indicating how the truth or the true fact cannot be conveyed by words and explanations. You must descend two or three steps; you must lower your sights somewhat and try somehow to have your students have at least an intellectual understanding of what you are talking about. In the end, the only thing remaining is to have the other person encounter the true fact in personal experience. You cannot convey with words the taste of the tea you have just drunk, no matter how hard you try. The more you try to explain, the farther you stray from the truth. The only way is to have the other person drink that tea. That means having the other person take the cup of tea in his hands, showing him how to bring it to his lips and having him drink it. It won’t do for you to drink the tea. As the Introduction says, if you descend two or three levels and try to explain it with words, you only end up scratching and harming the true fact. In trying to be kind to others you only end up dirtying yourself.

If you love sake cups, you will end up paying for the debts of others all your life. Now the example of drinking sake is used to say the same thing. You are like a person who loves sake and ends up paying the tab for others all his life in his eagerness to have them also drink. I don’t imagine even the most enthusiastic quaffer would go this far, but this is used here as an example. A true Zen master is one who wishes above all else to share with other persons the joy he or she has experienced. This attitude is compared here to the drinker who wants

others to join in the fun and ends up paying the tabs of others throughout his life. It is a poetic expression of the person who does all in his power to bring others to a realization of the same world that he has realized to become truly happy. The next lines are similar in spirit.

You have been selling paper for three years,

And yet you even lack “paper money for the demons” [needed to enter the realm of the dead]. It is like the person who makes a living selling paper and should bring paper money with him when he dies. This is known in the Orient as “shisen” (“death money”). The worth is written on the paper and the paper is placed in the coffin with the deceased. The deceased then pays the money to the boatman who takes you across the River Sanzu (Japanese version of Acheron) to the world of the deceased. You also pay money upon being judged for what bad deed you committed in this world. This reminds one of the Japanese saying *Jigoku No Sata Mo Kane Shidai*. Literally this means that even your situation in hell depends on how much money you have, but the saying is used to mean that money is the key that opens all doors. Thus, according to ancient belief, it’s necessary to make sure that even the dead take money along with them. These lines depict a situation where you have sold all your paper and have no paper left to make “dead money” when you die. This would also include decorating with paper money to carry out services for devils. That is why such money is written with the characters for “devil money” in the Chinese original. But here we have a situation where you have sold all the paper and have none left for yourself to make “dead money.” This, too, is said in reference to the Zen master who does everything possible for his or her students.

I, Banshō, preach to you all, But does that strike a fair balance or not?

Banshō is Banshō Rōjin (Old Banshō), the author of this koan collection *Book of Equanimity*. He is talking about himself here. He has written both the longer and shorter comments in the collection and preached in this way on behalf of all. The words about striking a fair balance refer to measuring with a scale. He asks if the bill is correct or not. He wants to know if it was a dead loss or if there was a slight profit. You could see it as a general statement of accounts. It is said here in an ironic way. Let me say right out that there is no profit whatsoever. Let’s take the example of building this zendo. There may be cases of receiving donations but also of building it with your own funds. If your own savings are insufficient, you might have to borrow money from the bank or you try to collect funds, doing all in your power. Then you hold zazen and sesshin. We might be receiving a certain amount from you, but this doesn’t settle the accounts completely. Lately, however, the monks have all become quite sharp and also quite rich. This is most unfortunate. Following the war, the land prices rose. The temples in the countryside owned land, but their monthly income was little, so that they were all quite poor. To practice in poverty is true practice. As soon as you have money you lose your will to practice, because you no longer have to deal with daily difficulties. But no matter how rich you are, you’ll eventually run up against the biggest problem of all, namely, your own death. Most people get very worried and flustered because here is one problem they can’t solve with money. To tell them at that time to practice Zen would already be too late. Although the

practice of zazen itself is very commendable, they cannot expect to leave all suffering behind or to have a great kensho experience. To repeat, most wealthy people lack the will to practice. Indeed it is said that in heaven the people do not practice. To be sure, it's quite a feat to make it into heaven. It's a matter of "planting good causes" (zenkon wo tsumu), which means doing good deeds and leading a good life. The best way is to act on behalf of others. The things you do simply for yourself are not good deeds in the broader sense. It's what you do for others that counts. Heaven must be a wonderful place, although I've never been there. On the other hand, if it's all too pleasant you lack the will to practice. If you do good deeds it's like saving up money, and the money will accumulate. But if you do nothing, your savings will steadily diminish and you will fall down from heaven, perhaps even falling into hell.

I sometimes think about people who have a lot of money and are living only for themselves without wanting to do anything for others. But when they grow older they don't know what to do with themselves. After all, they've attained all they wanted and now don't know how to spend their time. This could also be considered a kind of hell when you have so much time on your hands and don't know what to do with it. If you have the spirit of wanting to help others there is any number of things you could do. But people who have no such desire have effectually fallen into such a hell. They are truly to be pitied. Some of you might be in leadership positions later. Please never have ideas of wanting to make a lot of money or become famous. Even if you should become well known you yourself are unaware of it. That is the ideal. If you want to become famous or be praised by others, that's like falling into hell. The most harmful element is "ideas of wealth or fame" (myōri no nen). Dōgen Zenji also emphasizes this in his writings. Unless you throw away all desire for wealth or fame, you cannot have the true attitude for Zen practice.

On the Case:

Towards the end of summer, Suigan instructed the assembly, saying, "All summer I've preached to you, my brothers." The four persons who appear in this koan (Suigan, Hofuku, Chōkei, Unmon) are all Zen masters. All of them were disciples of Seppō Gison Zenji. All four of them appear frequently in the cases of the *Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Equanimity*. Suigan was the youngest of the four. He also held sesshin at his own zendo. The records say that he lived on Mt. Suigan in the locality of Ningbo in Zhejiang Province. Sesshin in those times were known as "U-Ango" or the training period during the rainy season. The characters "ango" translated as training period mean "living in repose." During this time, the monks did not work but instead devoted themselves fervently to Zen practice. This was a period extending from May to August when there was an especially large amount of rain. Because it was not a good time to go on pilgrimages, the monks gathered in one place and practiced together for a period of ninety days. In Japan there was the practice of "Setsu-Ango" or "snow training period" held during the winter from November to February. It was also

known as the “Gokoe” (literally: river and lake assembly) or the “Setchûsei (literally: discipline amid the snow). This is how things were in the past, but I imagine that nowadays there are only the names remaining and no actual sesshin practiced in this way. There is also the word “kessei” for sesshin, indicating how everyone gathers together and observes the rules of sesshin. The word “kaisei,” used in referring to the end of the period, indicates how the “restrictions are released,” and everyone takes their leave. The words “end of the summer” in the present koan refer to the day on which the summer angô comes to an end. Evidently Suigan was to hold the final dharma talk on that day.

“All summer I've preached to you, my brothers.” In other words, for the past ninety days of this summer angô I have been preaching the dharma for you. What sort of talks were those? They were no doubt about the way of Zen and the Buddha-Dharma. They were probably about the content of satori, how it is when one realizes satori, methods of practice leading up to satori, various warnings and points to remember in practice. Nevertheless, they cannot really hit the nail on the head, so to speak. As I mentioned above, you cannot express the true reality with words. There is evidently a passage in the sutras stating that, if you preach false dharma, your eyebrows will fall out. When Suigan poses his question at the end of the summer angô, I do not necessarily think that he was lacking confidence and thought that what he had said was wrong. I think he is asking the others to look carefully whether his eyebrows have fallen out or not. He is also showing everyone those eyebrows while asking. “I have preached the whole summer for you. You should look carefully and see whether my eyebrows have fallen out or not.” In his *Soliloquy on the Book of Equanimity* (Shôyôroku Dokugo), Yasutani Roshi says, “In the Hekigan Roku (Blue Cliff Record) this case is considered a difficult one to pass <nantô>.” The expression “nantô” originated with Hakuin Zenji, I believe. The reason that such koans are known as “difficult” is as follows. All koans are viewing things from the viewpoint of the essential world or essential nature, the aspect of the dharma body (hosshin). As I am always saying, there are the two aspects of phenomenal and essential. The aspect of Dharma body is the world of Buddha nature. The ordinary phenomenal world is the one we are living in every day and we are aware of it. But we remain unaware of the essential world. Concretely speaking, there is no way of grasping this world prior to realizing satori. No matter how much philosophers wrack their brains they cannot understand it. It is a matter of directly grasping this world. It is from the standpoint of this world that the koan is viewed. The problem is that things from the phenomenal world appear in the koan, and the usual koan involves seeing things in the world of the numerator (world of phenomena) from the world of the denominator. Yasutani Roshi says such nantô koans are difficult because they are trying to bring us to see things in a way that cannot be done simply with the eye of the dharma body aspect. The reason it cannot be seen solely in terms of the dharma body aspect is because the true fact is neither the numerator nor the denominator; it is the fraction itself that is the true fact. To take the example of my hand, the hand that appears on the surface is what I call numerator of the fraction. To the back of that is the essential world of the denominator. For the sake of

explanation, we make a division into two, where the back of the hand and the palm of the hand are the denominator and the numerator. But the actual hand is not simply the palm of the hand and is not solely the back of the hand. For they are truly one. That is the truth. Even if we see things solely in terms of the palm of the hand representing the essential world, that is only seeing half of the picture. The true fact is that phenomenal and essential are one. Yasutani Roshi says such a koan is difficult because it wants to bring us to a kind of seeing that is not possible solely with the eye of the dharma body aspect. The ability to see the essential world is known as the “wisdom of equal nature” (Japanese: byōdōshōchi). All things are equal in that they are zero. Seen from this aspect of emptiness, all things are equal. The eye that can clearly see this fact is known as the “wisdom of equal nature.” But at the same time that we realize this equality, we realize that there are many differences in the world of phenomena. Our dharma eye must be able to see things with this precision and delicacy. This is known as the “wisdom of subtle perception” (myōkansatsuchi). For example, you come to me in dokusan. From one standpoint, you can say about all of you that sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha. This can be said from the standpoint of the “wisdom of equal nature,” for you are all equal and the same. But from the standpoint of the phenomenal world, you are all different. What you are thinking is different, what you are suffering from is different, everything is different. And unless the teacher is aware of those differences, he is unable to give appropriate instruction. This is the aspect of the “wisdom of subtle perception.” When we look at a koan, we are usually observing it from the standpoint of the “wisdom of equal nature.” When Yasutani Roshi speaks about this koan being “difficult” (nantō), he means that actually we must be able to view the koan from the aspect of the “wisdom of equal nature” and the “wisdom of subtle perception.” To repeat, it wants to bring us to see the aspect that cannot be seen with the eye of the dharma-body aspect alone. When we view today’s koan in that light, this statement of Yasutani Roshi makes perfect sense. However, when I examine views of this koan from the past, there are many cases where they do not really understand even that world of the denominator, which would be the “wisdom of equal nature.” It would seem in many cases that they are simply viewing the koan from the aspect of the phenomenal world. At least this is how I feel about it. For example, examine his statement again: “All summer I’ve preached to you, my brothers. Look here, are Suigan’s eyebrows still there?” In saying this, he sticks his face out for them to see. This is the main crux. At the same time that he is sticking his face out and asking if the eyebrows are there or not, he is completely revealing the essential nature of Suigan, which is totally empty. You have to realize this clearly.

Hofuku said, “The robber’s heart is terrified!” The Chinese character translated here as “terrified” has two possible readings, both of which are examined by Yasutani Roshi in his book. The first one, ozuru, means trembling in fear. The word “robber” expresses how a true Zen master is a master thief. The reason is that he takes everything away from you. The greater the Zen master, the greater the thief. Although Hofuku calls Suigan a robber, in his heart he is giving highest praise. He is compared to a robber who is trembling out of fear of

being caught. But it will not do to simply see that single aspect of trembling with fear. You must at the same time clearly grasp the essential Suigan, who does not tremble in the least. That's the difficult part. Simply seeing the trembling Suigan is not real Zen. As long as the essential world does not appear, it is not Zen. It's simply idle banter. But what if we read the same character with its other reading (otsuwaru), which means to tell a lie? Why is he telling a lie? If we interpret it in this way, it is saying in effect, "Look, Suigan has eyebrows!" Suigan himself is clearly aware from the very beginning that there is nothing at all. Then Hofuku would be saying in effect, "You liar! Saying you have no eyebrows!" That is one way of looking at this statement, and I personally feel that this interpretation is more interesting. To repeat, Suigan is aware from the very beginning that, essentially speaking, there have never been any eyebrows. Thus, to pose questions about whether they are there or not is already lying. Please recall the koan from the *Gateless Gate*: "Why does Bodhidharma have no beard?" He is saying this while viewing the picture of the bearded Bodhidharma. You could say, just where there is no beard, there is a beard. Just where there is a beard, there is no beard. This is the entranceway to Zen. Most people only know the entranceway. Although there is not a single thing, but from another viewpoint, to say that there is also correct. To say that there is not is also correct. This is the barrier or gateway to the true way. In this koan Unmon says

"Barrier [Kan]!" But prior to that we have the pronouncement of Chôkei:

Chôkei said, "They are well grown!" Chôkei is Seiryô Zenji who resided at Chôkei-in Temple in Fuzhou (Fukushû). This would make him roughly a contemporary in Japan of Sugawara no Michizane, which is about 930 AD in the Western calendar. That means Chôkei lived some thousand or 1,200 years ago. Chôkei also appears in Cases 24 and 64 of the *Book of Serenity*. Hôgen Zenji first practiced under Chôkei but later went to study elsewhere. Chôkei was in the position of an elder dharma brother to Suigan. Here he says, "They are well grown!" in response to Suigan's question. The question is: What is well grown? When Yasutani Roshi says in his comments to this koan that it is a difficult koan because it wants us to see a place that cannot be seen with the eye of the dharma body alone, it is this section he is referring to, I believe. When I speak like this, I am criticized by my disciples, who say I am always giving away the answers to the koans in my teisho. With his "they are well grown!" Chôkei is saying that they have grown so thick and bushy, you could cut them with a sickle. In his comments to this section, Yasutani Roshi says: "Those eyebrows are growing profusely! But what are those great eyebrows of Suigan? That's the point you must see. You have to be able to see directly that the entire universe, the great earth is nothing but one single eyebrow. This is the matter of the dharma body aspect." You may realize that there are only those eyebrows in the entire universe. That is the aspect of the "wisdom of equal nature." But unless the other aspect of the "wisdom of subtle distinction" is also there, it will not be possible to see the subtle moments of the eyebrows.

Where are the eyebrows, after all?

"The robber's heart is terrified!"

Just that trembling is Suigan himself. This is neither simply the denominator nor simply the numerator. It is the fraction itself. This is how this koan has to be viewed.

Unmon said, "Barrier [Kan]!" This "barrier!" is quite difficult to pass through. The Zen master Daitō Kokushi said that he practiced with Unmon's "barrier!" for six years before he could pass it. He said that he practiced only with this "barrier" (kan!). Please come to me with this "barrier" in dokusan.

On the Verse:

The heart to become a robber, the guts to transcend others:

Clear and free, horizontally and vertically;

Prompt and just, according to the situation. The poem says that, to become a true robber, you have to have more than the usual amount of pluck and courage. Unless you've got real guts, you can't become a great robber. The second line about "clear and free, horizontally and vertically" sings the praises of a truly outstanding Zen person. A great robber means a great Zen personality. Unless you have guts and courage surpassing others, you won't be able to lead others in practice. These words express how a true Zen person acts very quickly without dilly-dallying. The words "prompt and just, according to the situation" mean that you have to respond accurately to how the other person comes at you.

Hofuku and Unmon – their superb noses cover their lips;

Suigan and Chōkei – their long eyebrows reflect in their eyes.

Immature Zen disciples, when would you stop your stupid deeds?

The first line expresses how truly outstanding persons look different from other people. The second line about the long eyebrows reflecting in their eyes is an echo of Chōkei's words: "They are well grown!" The eyebrows have grown so long that they are reflected in their eyes. This, too, is no ordinary face! In his commentary on this koan, Yasutani Roshi mentions that these first two lines of the verse use a technique known as *yōryaku-goken*, in which one part of what is being expressed in a line is omitted, but which appears in the other line. In this case, although the first of the two lines speaks about Hofuku and Unmon, it also refers to the other two persons. The same goes for the second of the two lines. To repeat, these two lines are talking about outstanding persons, and not ordinary persons.

The next line about "immature Zen disciples" means slipshod Zen students who are not careful and painstaking. Yasutani Roshi says this is referring to persons who still have ideas of satori in their innards. I would like to see this as meaning Zen monks whose eyes are not clear and who do not understand things clearly. To say "when would you stop their stupid deeds?" means that you find such slipshod students all around. How does this connect with the former lines? The first half presents truly outstanding Zen adepts. In the second half he talks about "monks of nowadays" and say they are all worthless. But there is no connection. Here it is only presenting the phenomenal aspect in which Hofuku, Unmon, Suigan and Chōkei all have

special faces. When you look at this, you see no sign of the essential world. It just seems to be talking about noses and eyebrows. But the people who only see that aspect are the good-for-nothings in the ensuing line just quoted. They are the ones who only see the aspect of phenomena and have no idea about the essential world. Such monks are good for nothing. In addition to seeing that their noses are long or their eyebrows are long, you have to see the essential nature of all four persons. Those who have not yet done so are good for nothing. They only see the aspect of “having” or “being,” so that the essential aspect has been neglected.

I dare say, spirit and expression are both cut off at once. The words of the four persons, as well as their meaning and movement of mind, have all come out on the surface. But now it is a matter of completely ridding oneself of such things, completely clearing it away. And if you dare to speak in that way, it is not really like that. This is Banshō Rōjin, the author of this text, who is speaking now. He says it in this way, because there is no other way to say it.

He says that, even though we speak about matters in the phenomenal world, it is crucial to simultaneously grasp the world of not a single thing. He says that people have failed to grasp that and kicked it all out. The one who just considers things intellectually with no real experience is an immature Zen disciple.

You bury your [true] self, swallowing your own spirit and gulping your own voice;

You ruin your ancestors' [fame], [ignorantly] facing a wall, [one-sidedly] carrying a board. They have buried their own true self and do not know their own great light. Yasutani Roshi interprets this line as meaning that they buried up the reality of how their own light covers heaven and earth. They have not yet really grasped their true self. To say they swallow up their own spirit and gulp their voice means that they have tied themselves up with ideas of what is wrong and have no freedom. This, too, is an immature Zen disciple. They cannot say a word and just mill around, not knowing what to do.

As for the final line, let me refer solely to Yasutani Roshi's commentary. Those immature Zen disciples go far as to make trouble for Buddhas and patriarchs, bringing Buddhism into total disorder. What's more, it's as if they were facing a wall or the like, not able to see anything in front of them. They can see either the essential world alone or the phenomenal world alone. They cannot see the entire fraction itself. To say that they are “one-sidedly carrying a board” means they can only see on one side. There is also the expression “tanpankan,” literally, a board-carrying fellow. Fools will carry a board through the town and say this is a one-sided town. They can only see one side and not the other.

Today's koan appears to have been difficult to give a teisho on. It might be good to try again to give another teisho.