

CASE 88

**"Non-Seeing" in the Ryōgon
Sutra**



By Yamada Kōun

Instruction:

If there is a seeing or there is a no-seeing, it is lighting a lantern in the middle of the day;

If there is neither seeing nor no-seeing, it is pouring ink in the middle of the night.

If you believe that seeings and hearings are like illusory pictures,
You will know that voices and colors are like empty flowers.

Tell me, is there a [worthy] story for patch-robed monks in the teaching?

Case:

The Ryōgon Sutra says, "When I don't see, why don't you see that I don't see? If you say that you 'see' that I don't see, that is naturally not the way how I don't see. If you don't see what I don't see, it is naturally not a[n objective] thing. Why isn't it your [own] self?"

Verse:

The great ocean is dried up, empty space filled up.

The patch-robed monks' nostrils are long,
the old Buddhas' tongues are short.

The string of the pearls goes through nine bent holes;

The beautiful loom is slightly turned once.

Meeting him right on the spot, who knows him?

You [now] believe for the first time that it's impossible to accompany this person.

On the Instruction:

If there is a seeing or there is a no-seeing, it is lighting a lantern in the middle of the day; "Seeing" can be understood here as seeing the things in the phenomenal world; it does not mean seeing the essential world.

"No-seeing" is a reference to the world of emptiness, where there is not a single thing. In the essential world of not a single thing there is no seeing, This is the essential world. This is said to be like lighting a lantern in the middle of the day. Things are very clear, and nothing needs to be said. But if you say things or think things, that is like lighting a lamp at noon. It is completely unnecessary. To repeat, "seeing" is the world of phenomena, "no-seeing" is the essential world.

If there is neither seeing nor no-seeing, it is pouring ink in the middle of the night. In the essential world there is no-seeing, and there is no no-seeing. The essential

world of our true nature is a world of pitch-black darkness where nothing can be seen. If the phenomenal world is the world of high noon, the essential world is the world of deep night. If the phenomenal world is bright, the essential world is dark.

If you believe that seeings and hearings are like illusory pictures,

You will know that voices and colors are like empty flowers. All that we see and hear is empty and without content or substance. If we realize that, we also realize that all sounds and colors are like “empty flowers,” which means they are without true substance. They might seem to be there, but actually they aren’t.

Tell me, is there a [worthy] story for patch-robed monks in the teaching?

The “teaching” can be understood as the teachings in the sutras or in the preaching of monks. He asks if there is there is preaching about the essential world. He says that there is.

On the Case:

The Ryōgon Sutra says, “When I don’t see, why don’t you see that I don’t see? If you say that you ‘see’ that I don’t see, that is naturally not the way how I don’t see.” These are the words of Shakyamuni Buddha to Ananda. No matter how you try to see it, you cannot see anything. Why is that? Even if you say you have seen what is not seeing, the form of that not-seeing cannot be seen by people. If you say you have seen not-seeing, it is not the real thing.

If you don’t see what I don’t see, it is naturally not a[n objective] thing. If you don’t see the actual essence of not-seeing, that is naturally not some thing. For it it were a thing, you could see it. Not-seeing cannot be seen.

“Why isn’t it your [own] self?” In other words, that not-seeing is you yourself.

The seer and the seen have become one. Usually we assume there is a division between seer and seen, between subject and object. But actually the one speaking and the one being spoken to are one. You could say that the one speaking is completely absorbed in the one being spoken to. You yourself disappear. Then it is one.

In the *Miscellaneous Koans* at the start of koan study we examine the following passage from the *Diamond Sutra*.

*“If you try to see me through colors
And to seek me through voices and sound
You are on a false path;
You will not be able to see the Tathagata.”
How can you see the Tathagata?*

You can understand as Tathagata as meaning your true self. If you become with each single sound you hear them. The essential world is empty.

On the Verse:

The great ocean is dried up, empty space filled up. To say the “great ocean is dried up” can mean that that all concepts, worries, delusions and distinctions have disappeared or dried up. What remains? The world of our essential nature, where there is not a single thing. All water of delusions has been dried up. This is the season of the great death. The “empty space is filled up.” What is filling it? Your true self. You might know the expression “true emptiness, wondrous being” (shinkū-myōu). To speak of “true emptiness” means that it can never be grasped by our five senses. But right there it possesses endless capabilities. That is the aspect of “wondrous being. There is the other saying “where there is not a single thing, the inexhaustible storehouse.” Precisely where there is not a single thing there are limitless capabilities. What is it that fills that emptiness? It is the essence of your own true self. Even if we are told to produce the mind, we know that it is there, but we cannot produce it. For us, then, mind is completely empty. And yet it can think and talk like this now. If you ask who is doing it, you would have to say emptiness. But it is the emptiness that simultaneously possesses limitless capabilities. Recall the first lines of the *Heart Sutra*:

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, practicing deep Prajna Paramita, clearly saw that all five skandhas are empty, transforming anguish and distress. Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form; form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form;

“Emptiness” means the essential world; “form” means the world of phenomena. Precisely in emptiness are simultaneously limitless capabilities.

The patch-robed monks’ nostrils are long, To say that the monks’ nostrils are long means that they put on a proud look.

The old Buddhas’ tongues are short. The old Buddhas’ tongues are too short to preach the dharma.

The string of the pearls goes through nine bent holes;

The beautiful loom is slightly turned once. This line about the string of pearls has a story behind it, which took place when Confucius was living in the kingdom of Chin. He received the difficult task of threading a string of pearls going through nine bent holes. He attached the thread to the body of an ant and inserted the ant in the first of the holes after putting honey on the other hole. The ant was attracted by the honey and travel to the other exit.

The “beautiful loom” means the workings of our mind. To “turn once” means to “die the great death” by forgetting yourself in practice and realizing your true nature. And when you realize, you realize that it was you from the start.

Meeting him right on the spot, who knows him?

You [now] believe for the first time that it’s impossible to accompany this person. Having met “him,” that is, your true self, you know that it’s impossible to accompany him in entering. Because it is one, there is no way one could line up with another. There is only one in the universe. You exhaust the entire universe.