

**CASE 23**

***Roso Faces the Wall***



By *Yamada Kōun*

*Instruction:*

Bodhidharma's nine years – it is called “the one disciple or even a half. If he continues that way, he will go on even until the year of the donkey<sup>1</sup>.”

*Case:*

Whenever Roso saw a monk coming, he immediately sat facing the wall.

Hearing of this, Nansen said, “I usually tell my people to realize what has existed before the kalpa of emptiness, or to understand what has been before Buddhas appeared in the world. Still, I haven't acknowledged one disciple or even a half. If he continues that way, he will go on even until the year of the donkey.”

*Verse:*

Flavor in plainness –

It wonderfully transcends thought and speech.

Seemingly continuing endlessly, yet it is beyond all phenomena.

Rugged, as if an idiot, yet his way is lofty.

A gem loses its integrity when patterns are carved;

A pearl in a gulf remains attractive by itself.

A fresh air, thoroughly pure, quenches the heat of autumn;

A piece of leisurely cloud afar separates sky from water.

*On the Verse:*

Bodhidharma's nine years – it is called “the gazing wall.” The koan itself is relatively straightforward, as is this Instruction. At the beginning of his comments on this koan in his *Soliloquy on the Book of Equanimity* (*Shōyōroku Dokugo*),

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Yasutani Hakuun Roshi has written something very good, and I would like to start off by quoting from that commentary.

*Roso was a dharma successor to Baso and a brother in the dharma to Nansen. You should clearly realize the spirit of zazen by means of Roso's facing the wall.*

Yasutani Roshi recorded most of the teisho of his master Harada ]Roshi and used them as the basis for his own *Dokugo* (Soliloquy) books, which means these are originally the words of Harada Roshi, although Yasutani Roshi was writing in the same spirit. And it is in this spirit that he admonishes us to clearly realize what this “facing the wall” really means. He continues:

*Zazen here does not refer to so-called bonpu Zen (“ordinary Zen”, i.e., Zen practiced for health and well-being) or gedō Zen (non-Buddhist Zen) or so-called hōben Zen (literally, Zen as a means) as practiced in Hinayana Buddhism. All those sorts of Zen involve “leaking samadhi” (jap, urojō), and only concern “samadhi power” (jōriki). They're only concerned with power coming from concentration of mind or with mental concentration. If you apply yourself to these types of Zen you can make unending progress, but if you slacken your efforts you will be back where you started from as that power of concentration “leaks” away. The so-called Zen of no thought (munen-musō) is also such a Zen. You should be duly aware that all these involve collecting samadhi power of concentration that will leak away if you slacken your efforts.*

I imagine most of you here are familiar with this, but we should take it clearly to heart. If we clearly realize enlightenment, it will definitely not leak away or disappear.

*The zazen referred to here is the authentic Zen transmitted by Buddhas and patriarchs. It is the highest and wondrous ability that does not leak away. It is only transmitted from Buddha to Buddha; it is the samadhi that can freely be received and does not allow the slightest room for intrusion of false paths. You should clearly realize the true aspect of this “non-leaking Samadhi,” which is different from the “leaking samadhi” of ordinary Zen. Although this dharma is copiously found in every person, it will not appear if we have not practiced, and cannot be obtained without our realizing it. This is the type of zazen spoken of here. I would especially like all persons of the Soto School to burn into their memories this single line of it's not being able to be attained without realizing it. Needless to mention, these are the words of Dōgen Zenji. Although the Buddha way is completely and intrinsically in every single person, unless you realize it, you will never be able to take hold of it. Words of this same spirit are found in profusion in all the chapters of the Shōbōgenzō and in the Gakudō Yōjinshū. Since the times of the Meiji Period, almost all the monks of the Soto School have fallen into the error of claiming that it is a mistake to seek enlightenment. But that itself is a major error. In order to save people belonging to this stream of mere intellectual understanding of these works, we make a division into three of the objectives or goals of*

*Zen in explaining things . Of course, this does not mean that there are three separately existing goals; we simply make a division in order that people can better understand what is being said. The first goal is developing concentration of mind. This is the only aspect that is common to all forms of Zen. The second goal is realizing our true nature. Unless there is this aspect, it is not the authentically transmitted Zen. “The proof is in the pudding,” as they say. Beginning with Shakyamuni Buddha and continuing on down the lineage of patriarchs in India, China and Japan, there has not been one of these many Zen masters who has not realized their true nature. It is only when the kensho experience is confirmed by a master who has inka shōmei and how has had an experience of kensho that one can be permitted to become a master of Zen. Even when we look at Dōgen Zenji’s Gakudō Yōjinshū, it is most clear that this is an iron rule of the Buddha Way. Even the Lotus Sutra contains the line: The main reason for the myriad Buddhas appearing in the world was only to have sentient beings open and realize Buddha knowledge and views. Buddha knowledge and views is the wisdom of satori, the prajna wisdom. However, there seem to be professors at Buddhist universities teaching that, since Shakyamuni Buddha came to enlightenment for us, there is no need for us to come to enlightenment, a truly deplorable state of affairs. Professor Kōdō Kurebayashi, a doctor of letters, is actually saying that it is enough to believe (in the Buddha’s enlightenment). He says that because Shakyamuni Buddha came to that experience and proclaimed it as free of error, any attempts to come to enlightenment oneself are the actions of a band of unbelievers who do not believe the words of Shakyamuni Buddha. If that’s the case, it was a great error for the patriarchs throughout the generations to come to enlightenment and most unseemly. And these are evidently the teachings of a professor at a Buddhist university. One can only shake one’s head in dismay.*

*That’s like saying that, since our ancestors ate their rice, their descendants can exist without eating rice.*

*The third goal is personalization of the Supreme Way. If body and mind are in accordance with the authentically transmitted zazen, that zazen itself is the full manifestation of the Supreme Way, whether we have realized it or not. In other words, it is a matter of truly revealing and truly practicing what has been realized. This is expressed by the words “practice and realization are not two” (shushō-funi). Viewing zazen from an unenlightened standpoint, it is known as the “realization within the practice” (shuchū no shō) <although the ensuing words are also just one way of expressing it>, and from the standpoint of one who has already realized, it is “practice on top of realization” (shōjō no shu).*

*Well, then, what does it mean to say that “body and mind are both in accordance with the authentically transmitted Zen?” As for the body, if we practice as expounded in the “manuals of Zen practice” (zazengi), that is all right. But do they*

*know what to do as far as the mind (or heart) is concerned? There are the words of Dōgen Zenji in the Fukanzazengi: “Think not-thinking” (fushiryōtei wo shiryō suru). But even though we can say such words, if it is not clear what they mean, it won’t be possible to put them into practice. Don’t go confusing things by saying this is talking about reaching a state of no-thought (munen-musō). Such an approach is Hinayana-Zen (shōjō-zen), it is “leaking Zen,” in the sense of samadhi power that leaks away when one fails to practice. It should be evident from what Dōgen exhorts us to do, that just reaching a state of no-thought will not do. But what do Dōgen’s words “not-thinking” (hishiryō) actually mean? In his footnote explaining the word, the scholar says that the Chinese characters for “not” (hi or fu) are not a matter of eliminating something but the “true aspect of thinking” (shiryō no shinjittai), which only proves that they don’t understand what it means. And one can only shake one’s head in dismay in hearing them talk about “practice and enlightenment as not two.” How can you know what is meant by “practice and enlightenment as one” just nodding off like that?*

Yasutani Roshi has only words of abuse for such practices. But what is actually meant by “not-thinking” (*hishiryō*) in Dōgen Zenji’s text? It is just MU; that is “not thinking.” It’s enough to devote yourself to the practice of MU. Not-thinking is not thinking. Then what should we do? This is actually something that should be discussed in the dokusan room, but if I were to attempt an explanation now, I would say that it is enough to sit wholeheartedly with MU. It is enough to sit single-mindedly with the koan. The Roshi continues:

*Well, then, it wouldn’t be much trouble to write about the essence of “not thinking,” but I’ll refrain from that here since there are people who will just parrot what I say. It’s not that I would balk at saying it. It’s just because I value the dharma and would dislike falsehoods from emerging. If you want to know, then come to me in dokusan and ask in all earnestness. But for those who don’t have the right attitude for receiving the teaching, it would be a waste of time and do more harm than good. Let me make a comparison of the Zen spirit of the Soto School and that of the Rinzai School. Both of them have strong and weak points. The Soto tradition puts the emphasis on the third goal of personalizing the supreme way, and has a spirit by which the second goal of realization is found within that third goal. This is the attitude of Dōgen Zenji.*

*The Rinzai School puts the emphasis on the second goal of realization and has a spirit by which the third goal of personalization is found within that second goal. For this reason, Rinzai Zen puts the emphasis on koans and neglects the practice of just sitting (shikantaza), while Soto Zen puts emphasis on just sitting and neglects koan study. Starting with Dōgen Zenji and continuing with Keizan Zenji and the Zen worthies over the generations, they used koans freely when the occasion demanded it, as the historical annals attest to. There has never been a tradition in the Soto School*

*saying that it is erroneous to resort to koans. This is something that Zen teachers lacking an enlightened eye have started to say starting in the Meiji Period. Present-day Soto Zen speaks nominally in terms of just sitting (shikantaza), but the true content of shikantaza is lacking. What it is, is Hinayana Zen (shōjōzen) of no thought, or it has descended to the level of mere bonpu-zen that simply involves developing concentration of mind. But people who even practice this time of Zen are as few as the stars at dawn. The present state of things is such that the majority of monks of the Soto School cannot even sit in the full lotus position. I am not saying that I do not like the Soto School, but evidently you are considered a “strange fellow” in the Soto School if you practice zazen. What a terrible state of affairs. It can’t be helped if laypersons like us are called strange because we practice zazen, but when even monks are considered strange for practicing zazen, it’s a total disaster. And on top of that here are university professors saying that there is no need to practice zazen, that it is enough to have an intellectual understanding of Zen teachings. They’re really causing things to fester and rot! And this is actually the reason that the conclusions of Buddhist doctrine are not correctly understood.*

*From olden times, the Rinzai School has placed emphasis on Zen involving a stepwise process, while the Soto School has emphasized the Zen of no steps. This tendency has been evident in the Soto School since the time of Engo Zenji and Wanshi Zenji. Actually, however, the authentically transmitted Zen can be expressed as follows: steps are no other than no steps, no steps are no other than steps. This is known as the “dharma gate of oneness of cause and effect” (inga ichinyo no hōmon). “Cause and effect” is the Zen of stepwise practice. “Oneness” (ichinyo) is the Zen of no steps. There is no real Buddhism unless both are present. It will not do to imagine that emphasizing one side is half of the truth. If there is only one aspect, then the whole is false. Whether it’s a matter of satori or no-satori, steps or no-steps, whether you fall into having or not having they are both false. They are untruth.*

This is what Yasutani Roshi says in his commentary. Please take time to appreciate these words.

Bodhidharma's nine years – it is called “the gazing wall.” As you know, Bodhidharma came from India to China, where he first had an audience with the Emperor Wu of Liang (jap, Ryō no Butei). The exchange they had on that occasion is the content of Case 1 of the *Blue Cliff Record* (Hekiganroku). Because the Emperor could not understand Bodhidharma, the patriarch considered it fruitless to remain, so he crossed the Yangtze River and settled down at Shaolin Temple (jap, Shōrinji) where he sat nine years facing the wall in zazen. People in the neighborhood evidently referred to him as the “wall-staring Brahmin.” India always had the religious tradition of Brahmanism, which resembled Buddhism although it was different. The Brahmins also sat facing the wall in meditation, a fact known to people in China at that time, and

accounting for Bodhidharma's nickname among the local populace. But when we examine the matter closely, we realize that just that sitting still is the complete manifestation of the essential world. And Bodhidharma sat facing the wall for nine years.

Shinkō's three bows – it divulges the mysterious activities of heaven. Shinkō is the other name for Eka Daishi (Huike), the second patriarch of Zen in China. He obtained his name Shinkō (lit, divine light) because it is said that light filled the room at the moment of his birth and that it entered the newborn baby's mouth. The verse says that this Shinkō made three bows. There is a story behind this. Bodhidharma had a hard time after his arrival in China, but finally succeeded in raising up four outstanding disciples: Dōfuku (Daofu), Nisōji (the Nun Zongchi), Dōiku (Daoyu) and Eka (Huike). And because Bodhidharma had already raised up four outstanding disciples, he no longer considered it necessary to remain and was thinking of returning to China. He therefore asked the four disciples to present their present views on the dharma. Dōfuku, the first to speak, said, "My present view is that we should neither be attached to letters, nor be apart from letters, and to allow the Way to function freely." In response to this statement, Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my skin." The next to speak was the nun Nisōji, who said, "My view is that it is like the joy of seeing Akshobhya Buddha's land just once and not again." She is saying that she has seen paradise and has no need to see it again. She is presenting her own essential nature with this statement, and saying that she has thoroughly realized the truth and has no need to seek further. In response to this statement, Bodhidharma says, "You have attained my flesh." The flesh is somewhat deeper than just the skin. Then Bodhidharma asks Dōiku for his view, to which Dōiku replies, "The four great elements are originally empty and the five skandhas do not exist. Therefore, I see nothing to be attained." He is saying that there is "not a speck of cloud obstructing the view." He has clearly realized the world of emptiness. In response, Bodhidharma says, "You have attained my bones." Finally he asks Eka Daishi what his understanding is. Eka came forward, made a full bow, stood up, and returned to where he was.

This is the best of all. This is what the line from the verse is referring to when it says, "it divulges the mysterious activities of heaven." The mysteries of heaven means that which can never be revealed to humans, the best-kept secret. And with his action, Eka has "leaked out" that secret. You can understand it as our own true self, the true fact. It is the world of MU, the world of not a single thing. It is referred to here as the "mysterious activities of heaven."

It divulges the mysterious activities of heaven.

[Yet] how could you sweep away the traces and annihilate the tracks? Making a bow and standing is all well and good, but there are still traces remaining, in the sense that there is still the "stink" of satori, of concepts of

enlightenment sticking to it. After all, not everyone bows and folds their hands on their chest. It still has some “odor” of Zen sticking to it, and in that sense there are still traces. The verse is asking us how we can sweep away those traces. This also has a story behind it. It is said that the mother sea turtle lays her eggs on the beach and then uses her claws to erase her own traces on the sand so that the eggs will not be discovered. But even though she has erased her tracks, her tail leaves traces in the sand while she is doing that. The verse seems to be asking how even those traces of the tail can be erased. And in presenting this question, the author turns his attention to the Main Case.

**On the Case:**

Whenever Roso saw a monk coming, he immediately sat facing the wall. As I mentioned before, Roso was a disciple of Baso Dōitsu Zenji and thus a brother in dharma to Nansen Fugen Zenji. If anyone came to Roso asking about zazen or wanted to engage in a *mondo* (Zen exchange), Roso would immediately turn around and sit facing the wall in zazen. What is this all about, this turning around and facing the wall without a word when anyone came? It is the same in spirit and activity as Bodhidharma’s facing the wall for nine years. If you begin to speak in terms of concepts, it leaves traces. The best is just to sit in silence. But even then, traces remain; it still smells of Zen. That smell of Zen must also be removed, although it’s quite difficult to do. Roso had this way of showing the essence of Zen. To be sure, it is quite wonderful. But Nansen got word of how Roso would always turn and face the wall in zazen when people came to him:

Hearing of this, Nansen said, “I usually tell my people to realize what has existed before the kalpa of emptiness, or to understand what has been before Buddhas appeared in the world. Still, I haven’t acknowledged one disciple or even a half. If he continues that way, he will go on even until the year of the donkey.” This talk about “what has existed before the kalpa of emptiness”, etc. refers figuratively to a state where not a single concept or thought arises. It is the world of MU. Nansen is always telling his students to realize that world prior to the birth of concepts and thoughts, which is basically the same as “what has been before Buddhas appeared in the world.” It is the world where no thought of Buddha arises. It is the world prior to any discriminating consciousness, prior to any division into subject and object. There is the Zen phrase, “your face before your parents were born,” which is referring to the same thing. Nansen tells his students to grasp that fact, that world, to come face to face with it. He is prodding them to realize their own true self, where even the slightest thought of Buddha does not exist, the world where all concepts have been swept away. And although he teaches in that way, he says he cannot even get one disciple or even a half a disciple. The masters of old

considered it good if they could obtain even one or even a half of an outstanding student. But still it was difficult to obtain. This is what Nansen is saying in urging his students to realize the world prior to concepts, prior to any division into subject and object. The Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida also speaks in these terms of a state prior to a division into subject and object. Nansen says that although he speaks with grandmotherly kindness, chewing the food himself before inserting it in their mouths, he still cannot obtain even one or even one half of a disciple who has truly realized the great matter.

“If he continues that way, he will go on even until the year of the donkey.” “He” means Roso. Nansen says that if Roso continues that way to simply turn around and face the wall, no one will ever understand. The phrase “until year of the donkey” means never, because there is no year of the donkey in the zodiacal cycle of twelve years, each with an animal. Nansen seems to be speaking disparagingly of Roso in his interesting expression. We Zen teachers today tend to speak all sorts conceptual things, but I would love to be able to teach like Roso. You are familiar with the koan about Gutei Oshō, who held up a finger whenever he was asked anything about Zen. This finger is the universe itself. The same holds for turning around and facing the wall. Please take the time to thoroughly savor this world.

***On the Verse:***

Flavor in plainness –

It wonderfully transcends thought and speech. These lines are referring to Roso.

Chinese cuisine, with its myriad flavors, is certainly delicious, but real flavor is found in plain food, the poet says. Some people say that Japanese cuisine is more delicious than Chinese cuisine, although I myself don't necessarily agree. But it's true that a more delicate taste is preferable to heavily seasoned dishes in bringing out the true flavor of the food.

All this is referring to Roso's turning around and facing the wall in zazen without saying a word. Nothing could be plainer than this, but nevertheless it has a deep savor that defies description. And it transcends all concepts and thoughts.

Seemingly continuing endlessly, yet it is beyond all phenomena. This refers to us sitting. There is a self sitting, but the content is completely empty. It continues on endlessly. Although there seems to be something, there is nothing. Try it yourself. When you are just sitting there in zazen, there is nothing at all, although it somehow seems as if there were something. Nevertheless it is “beyond all phenomena.” This is pointing to the content of Roso's sitting before the wall. Although it seems to continue endlessly, and you want to say there is definitely something, but when you are asked to produce it, there is nothing at all. Nevertheless, you cannot say there is



nothing, since you are sitting there like that. Although there appears to be something, the content is empty. “There is not a speck of cloud obstructing the view.” This is singing the state of consciousness of Roso.

Rugged, as if an idiot, yet his way is lofty. “Rugged” is said here in the sense of his sitting there motionless in zazen, although it also evidently has the meaning of “no knowledge.” No movement at all, nothing at all in his head. There is nothing like wisdom there. Because he is just sitting there like that, you might consider him to be an idiot. There is the Zen saying, “like a fool, like an idiot” (*gu no gotoku ro no gotoshi*). Although he may seem at first glance to be a fool, “yet his way is lofty.”

A gem loses its integrity when patterns are carved; There is the practice of carving some pattern into a gem, as was the case in ancient China. But when that is done, the poet say, the true beauty of the gem is lost. It loses its natural purity. In terms of Zen we could say that, when you start jabbering about this and that, the true purity of Zen is lost. The best is not to say anything and to just sit there in perfect stillness. And so:

A pearl in a gulf remains attractive by itself. The pearl in a clamshell at the bottom of the gulf emits its own beauty without its having to be added to a string of pearls on a woman’s neck.

A fresh air, thoroughly pure, quenches the heat of autumn; This is also a reference to sitting there without anything added to it. It is referring to Roso’s sitting there before the wall. It is just like a cool autumn breeze dispelling the lingering heat of summer. That means all smell of enlightenment is wiped away. It is liked oxidized silver that has lost all glitter and sheen. There is just that sitting, like a fool, like an idiot, to quote the Zen phrase above. Please be aware that the man or woman sitting across from you on the train who seems to be slow on the draw might be a great personage. So you should be careful not to act disrespectfully toward him or her!

A piece of leisurely cloud afar separates sky from water. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi says this is referring to the world that Nansen indicates in the Main Case: To realize what has existed before the kalpa of emptiness, or to understand what has been before Buddhas appeared in the world. There are other commentators who share that view. For example, there are some who say that these final two lines of the verse are looking alternately at Roso and Nansen in bringing things to a close. I myself would like to focus only on Roso and believe that these lines are referring solely to Roso’s state of consciousness as expressed in the koan.