

CASE 38

**Rinzai's True Person of No Rank**

By Yamada Kōun



*Instruction:*

Taking a robber for your own child, taking a servant for the master:

Could a broken ladle of wood ever be your ancestor's skull?

The saddle bone for a donkey could never be your father's jawbone.

When bestowing land with a new branch temple, how would you discern the master?

*Case:*

Rinzai instructed his assembly and said, "There is one true person of no rank, always coming out and going in through the gates of your face<sup>1</sup>. Beginners who have not yet witnessed that, look! look!"

Then a monk came out and asked, "What is the one true person of no rank?" Rinzai descended from the rostrum and grabbed him. The monk hesitated. Rinzai pushed him away and said, "The true person of no rank – what a shit-stick you are!"

*Verse:*

Delusion and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin;

Transmission is subtle, and yet simple.

When the spring wind once breezes, hundreds of flowers open;

When the powerful person yanks once, nine bulls turn back.

It cannot be helped: mud and sand are removed, yet it does not open;

The eye of the fountain is evidently blocked.

If it suddenly burst open, the water would freely flow.

The master also says, "Watch out!"

*On the Instruction:*

Needless to mention, this dojo (Zen hall) is for practicing zazen. However, I put the

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., sense organs such as eyes, nose, ears, tongue, etc.

emphasis on realizing kensho, and you might call my approach “kensho-Zen.” Then there is the matter of what we should do in order to realize kensho. Those people who participate in sesshin are well-versed in this matter. In our Zen center there are three conditions for participation in sesshin: First, no looking around. Second, no unnecessary talking. Third, dispensing with everyday greetings and formalities. These are the most basic cautions. This is not limited just to sesshin. The same holds for zazen. The reason we stress these matters is as follows. I was watching everyone during kinhin (walking meditation) now and I know that the sliding shoji windows are opened during the kinhin period. I have asked this to be done. There may be times when we have the shoji open during zazen, but that depends on the season of the year. I would like those persons responsible for order in the zendo to indicate the degree to which the shoji windows should be open. But if people are acting on their own to open or close windows during kinhin, it’s proof that their mind is wandering and they are not concentrating on their practice. If you continue with that sort of spirit, you will never be able to realize kensho. This reminds me of a story I heard one time. Hanamoto Roshi, who took the time and trouble to be present the other day at festivities to celebrate publishing of my book, was originally a disciple of Ueda Shōzan Roshi. Ueda Roshi was rare among monks of the Soto School in that he went to practice at a Rinzaï temple. In that respect he is similar to Harada Roshi. He evidently practiced for a long time at Myōshinji Temple in Kyoto. After that he went to practice at the center of Kasan Rōkan located in Yawatahama in the region on the island of Shikoku formerly known as Iyonokuni. It was there that he received *inka shomei* (certificate of finishing practice) from that master, after which he returned to his own temple. It was Ueda Roshi who originally told this story about Kasan Rōkan. One day, all the monks were out begging in takuhatsu. Takuhatsu is when the monks of the temple walk Indian file reciting sutras and going from door to door in the town with their begging bowls to receive offerings. The people of the town will then insert rice or the like in the begging bowls or perhaps a money offering. The offerings they receive are taken back and that is how they are able to live. That was the practice in old times, but nowadays, because the temples have become quite wealthy, they evidently don’t have to go out in that way begging in the streets. Actually, however, living on what they receive from offerings was originally the basic principle of temple life. When they walk along with begging bowls in their hands, it’s the same as when we practice kinhin. One day at the temple in Yawatahama where Kasan Roshi was abbot, the monks formed a single line and went out begging in takuhatsu. They were walking up a hill when they happened to pass by a man who was trying with all his might to pull a cart filled with a heavy load up the hill. It was summer and the sweat was pouring down his face. One of the monks out begging saw him and helped by pushing the cart from behind. Normally such an action would be most commendable. However, when the monks returned to the temple, the Roshi had that monk called to his room. When the monk came to the Roshi, he was told by the master that he should leave the temple immediately, that there was no sense in having him stay as a monk. The monk was flabbergasted and didn’t know what he had done wrong. Then the Roshi had one of the senior

monks tell him the Roshi's true intention. "What do you mean noticing that cart while out on takuhatsu? If you are truly aiming for kensho, you must practice with single-minded attention, never losing your hold on Mu. Even though you might take pity on the man pulling the cart, how can you truly practice zazen if you are thinking about helping him? We cannot have such people staying at our temple." The monk apologized profusely and was finally given pardon. In the old days, persons who wanted to practice at a temple had to stay at the entrance for about a week before they were admitted. They first would come to the temple and respectfully ask to be admitted to the community of monks. Usually they were then told that there was no room for them and were asked to leave. The head monk (perhaps the attendant or the jikijitsu) would slam the temple door shut and refuse to have anything to do with the newcomer. If the monk then left, he was not worth much. It was here that the monk really had to hold out to prove his mettle. Nevertheless, even though they were not admitted, they were at least given something to eat at regular intervals. If the monk was still there after a week, he was considered as having sufficient spirit for practice and was then allowed to have an audience with the Roshi. That was how things were in former times. But under such circumstances, some people are likely to give up. What I want to emphasize here is that the people sitting here in this zendo, even though it is not a traditional temple, should not take it into their heads to worry about how much the windows are opened or closed during kinhin. What I want to ask is as follows: When the bell rings for kinhin, you should open the shoji window in front of your seat. And then when kinhin is finished, before you begin zazen again you should close the shoji window in front of your seat again. This is not when you're sitting, so it's not that much of a distraction. It shouldn't be necessary for the leaders in the zendo to see that each individual window is opened or closed. Nevertheless, I would like those leaders to provide instruction on how much the windows should be opened or closed on the particular day. And everyone should refrain from looking around during kinhin! This is an important point. Since you have taken time from your busy schedules to be here today and practice, I would like you to practice in all earnest. The rules and regulations for the zendo are not mere formalities; they have a purpose. So you have to consider their purpose. For example, we say there should be no unnecessary talking and no looking around. The reason we say so is because talking and looking around distract you from your practice. The same holds whether you are in sesshin or at a zazenkai. I might not be the same as Kasan Rōkan, but if I run up against cases of people failing to do what they're told no matter how many times I say it, I might have to forbid them from coming any more to this center. This is only in cases where you feel it's no use in trying with someone anymore. At any rate, please pay attention to these points. We turn now to the Instruction.

Taking a robber for your own child, taking a servant for the master: The Instruction is speaking about being able to distinguish the false from the true. If you grab something false and believe it to be the real thing, that's no good. The Instruction actually has its sights set on the section in the Main Case where Rinzai says, "The true person of no rank – what a shit-stick you are!"

You catch the robber and believe it to be your own child. You're mistaking the false for the true. There is the Japanese expression, "the thief caught turned out to be my own son" (*nusubito wo toraete mireba wagako nari*). In this case, we can consider the thief to be our thoughts and concepts, the many thoughts that issue without ceasing in our heads. We say that those thoughts and concepts are an obstruction and you practice Mu to somehow catch those "thieves." But once you have clearly opened the eye of satori and have a good look at those concepts and thoughts, you realize that they are no other than you yourself. After all, they all issue from you. Thus, the expression here has the meaning that those thoughts, which you consider to be the thief, are actually nothing but you yourself. Here the meaning is a little different. To catch a thief and think it is your own child means in this case to mistake something fake for the real article. The same holds for the second part of the line: "taking a servant for the master."

You catch the servant and believe him to be the master. There are even cases of this in everyday life aren't there? For example, you visit someone's home for the first time and when you call at the door, a woman comes out to greet you, whom you take to be the lady of the house. She might happen to be wearing an apron and you assume that she's been working in the kitchen. But then you find out that you've mistaken the family maid for the lady of the house.

Could a broken ladle of wood ever be your ancestor's skull? The Instruction is telling once again that we should not mistake something fake for the real thing, like mistaking a broken wooden ladle for the skull of your ancestor.

The saddle bone for a donkey could never be your father's jawbone. This might seem a bit far-fetched, but perhaps the saddle bone looks a little like a jawbone. Nevertheless, we should avoid mistaking something false for the true thing.

When bestowing land with a new branch temple, how would you discern the master? The original Chinese talks in terms of "breaking up the soil" and "dividing up the thatch." Soil and thatch are figurative terms for land and a house. This is the case of a branch temple. Nevertheless, you have to be able to clearly discern the master, that is, the person who can take care of that temple. The same expression is also used in Zen circles. In beekeeping there is the practice of "hiving off," in which a single hive is divided into several hives. In this case, too, it's important to first clearly determine that everything is OK before making a division. But how do we make such a distinction? An example will be given now and we are asked to examine it carefully.

***On the Case:***

Rinzai instructed his assembly and said, "There is one true person of no rank, always coming out and going in through the gates of your face. This saying of Rinzai is very famous. What does he mean by the "true person of no rank"? In Buddhism we speak in terms of the six ordinary worlds and the four holy worlds. The six ordinary worlds are

hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, angry spirits (*shura*), human beings and heavenly beings. The four holy worlds are Pratyekas, Shravakas, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. Among the Bodhisattvas there are 52 ranks, and it's a matter of continuing practice and advancing up rank by rank. From the standpoint of practice and enlightenment (*shushōhen*), there are many steps along the way. But for the true person, the true self, there are no such ranks or steps. We speak in terms of our true self or our essential nature. In our true self there are no ranks or steps. We speak in terms of practicing zazen and grasping our true self, the true self of no rank. As just mentioned, the aspect of practice step by step in Zen practice is the element of practice toward enlightenment (*shushōhen*). To clearly grasp our true nature is known in Japanese as *honbunjō* (the essential world). The standpoint for our practice of zazen is to clearly grasp our true and essential self, free of ranks or steps. This is what is meant by Rinzai's expression. You could think of it as your original face without any rank. It is the true self, which transcends any distinctions of ordinary and holy, sinner and saint or Buddha. Rinzai says there is such a true person of no rank. Where is he or she? Actually, each and every one of you is that true person of no rank, all of you sitting here in zazen. Seen from that standpoint, each of you is Buddha. To even think that there is a single ordinary person is already to vilify the true dharma wheel of the Tathagatha, it has been said since of old. There is not a single ordinary, unenlightened person. All of you are the true person of no rank. And Rinzai says that this true person of no rank is "coming out and going in through the gates of your face." Someone provided an interesting explanation for this statement. He said that this is referring to how the air comes in and out of our nostrils. This is a respected Zen person who is saying such a thing! Some people say really stupid things! But you might think of it as something like air, because it has no form. But you shouldn't assume that it's just coming in and out of your nostrils. It's coming in and out of your eyes, your ears, your mouth, every pore of your body. But we have to clearly grasp that true person of no rank. When Rinzai says that it is "coming out and going in through the gates of your face," he means that person of no rank is sitting in stately dignity in you, and acting freely.

"Beginners who have not yet witnessed that, look! look!" He means that we should have a good look at the person of no rank. Then a monk happened to be present:

Then a monk came out and asked, "What is the one true person of no rank?" This might seem like a natural question to ask. To tell the truth, however, that very person who is asking in that way is no other than the true person of no rank! It's just that he hasn't realized it yet. What happens then?

Rinzai descended from the rostrum and grabbed him. Rinzai descended from the high rostrum he was sitting on and grabbed that monk by his lapels.

The monk hesitated. Rinzai pushed him away and said, "The true person of no rank – what a shit-stick you are!" Actually this part of the koan has to be investigated individually in the dokusan room. You have to be able to express the essence of what is happening here. In effect, he is saying, "You yourself are the true man of no rank! You

lousy monk!” A “shit-stick” (Japanese, *kanshiketsu*) was what people used in olden times instead of toilet paper when they went to the toilet. It consisted of a spoon-like instrument made of bamboo which was used for cleaning yourself after going to the toilet. The stick was dried and used again, although I imagine it still smelled!

This is Rinzai’s way of saying, “you no-good monk!” Is there a difference between the true person of no rank and “you lousy monk”? You might think it’s a matter of distinguishing the fake from the real, but actually they are one. I would like you all to clearly see this fact.

But Dōgen Zenji actually criticizes this statement of Rinzai in his writing. He says that Rinzai knows about the true person of no rank, but does not know about the true person of rank! That’s quite a good statement! Do you understand what Dōgen Zenji is saying? When you speak about the true person of no rank, you are talking about the true self, without form or shadow. Up to now you have not seen it, so you practice with all your might to realize it. This is what the practice of Mu is about. As I always say, the world of emptiness and the phenomenal world are one. In the phenomenal world there are ranks and steps. When we speak in terms of the true person of no rank, it only emphasizes the world of emptiness, which is an error. So, when Dōgen Zenji says that Rinzai knows about the true man of no rank but does not know about the true person of rank, he is pointing to the true fact, in which the phenomenal and essential are one. The content of that true essence is empty, but all phenomena appear from there. This is Dōgen Zenji’s way of offering his criticism of Rinzai.

***On the Verse:***

Delusion and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin;

Transmission is subtle, and yet simple. Delusion and enlightenment are like the back and palm of your hand. Where does delusion come from? As Zen master Bassui Zenji says, if you trace delusion to its ultimate source, you find nothing. If you trace enlightenment to its source, you find nothing at all. Rinzai is attempting to convey the world of satori to a deluded person. It is not just limited to Rinzai. This has been the case for all patriarchs from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. And here it says, “transmission is subtle, and yet simple.” It is transmitted wonderfully, and with complete simplicity and clarity.

When the spring wind once breezes, hundreds of flowers open;

This time the expression is reversed. When the spring wind blows, it causes hundreds of flowers to bloom. This time the result comes first. This is a type of expression that often appears in Chinese poetry. When the wind blows in spring, many different flowers bloom in profusion. What is this referring to? I feel it refers to the initial words of Rinzai: “There is one true person of no rank, always coming out and going in through the gates of your face. Beginners who have not yet witnessed that, look! look!”

When the powerful person yanks once, nine bulls turn back. This is the same as the preceding line. The person in question is so strong that he can pull nine bulls at the same time. What is this referring to? I feel this is pointing to the next section of the koan:

Rinzai descended from the rostrum and grabbed him. The monk hesitated. Rinzai pushed him away and said, “The true person of no rank – what a shit-stick you are!” The original Chinese reverses the order and has the section about “nine bulls turn back” coming first in the line. But the monk fails to become enlightened. This is expressed in the ensuing lines of the verse:

It cannot be helped: mud and sand are removed, yet it does not open; This is referring to digging a well. When you dig deep enough a hole is created from which water issues. When the hole is dug, pure water flows forth and the well is created. But: It cannot be helped: mud and sand are removed, yet it does not open. In other words, Rinzai has done all in his power to bring the monk to realization, but the monk doesn't even know so much as the “k” of kensho! Although the master does his utmost, there doesn't seem to be a glimmer on the side of the monk. “It cannot be helped,” comments the verse. There's nothing to be done for this monk!

The eye of the fountain is evidently blocked. The “eye of the fountain” means the eye of satori. The fountain is blocked with mud and sand, so that the “sweet spring” of enlightenment cannot well forth. The eye of enlightenment is blocked. The eye of the fountain also means the hole of the well when digging a well. This also has a story behind it. The illustrious monk Hôgen Oshô was digging a well. But no matter how deep he dug, mud and sand fell into it and the sweet spring was blocked. The eye of the spring was blocked. Seeing this, a monk said, “It is because the sand is blocking it, that the spring cannot pass.” The reason why the water can't pass through is because sand falls into the well and blocks the passage. It is his way of saying that there is some sort of blockage and that is the reason why the eye of satori does not open. Although it is the sand that is the problem when digging a well, the monk wants to know the reason why he cannot come to realization. In reply, Hôgen says, “The spring's eye doesn't penetrate the sand blocking it; when the eye of the Way doesn't penetrate, what is it hindered by?” The monk couldn't say anything. So Hôgen answered in his place: “It is hindered by the eye.” This is what is being referred to here in the Verse:

If it suddenly burst open, the water would freely flow. The monk at that time could not come to enlightenment. But if were to suddenly to burst open (i.e., if he were suddenly to realize), the water would flow freely in any direction. Then comes the last line:

The master also says, “Watch out!” You don't know what he's going to do next, so watch out! That's a very Rinzai-like statement. The Rinzai School of Zen is known as “Rinzai the General.” This koan is very concise and clear. It leaves you with a good feeling.