

CASE 53

*Ōbaku's "Drinkers"*

By Yamada Kōun



*Instruction:*

When one meets the student, one does not see Buddha;

For great enlightenment there is no teacher.

The sword that fixes heaven and earth knows no sympathy;

The activity to capture tigers and rhinoceroses forgets holy understanding.

Now tell me, whose strategy is this?

*Case:*

Ōbaku instructed the assembly and said, "You are all drinkers of lees. If you continue to go on your Way like this, where will the 'Today'<sup>1</sup> be? Do you know that in this great empire of Tang there is no Zen master?"

Now a monk came forward and said, "What would you say to the fact that in various places there are people who accept students and direct their assemblies?" Ōbaku said, "I don't say that there is no Zen; I only say that there is no master."

*Verse:*

The Way is divided, the threads are dyed: too much labor.

Binding the leaves, tying the flowers: it mars the ancestors.

One takes skillfully the active handle of creation;

Vessels designed with waters and clouds are on the lathe.

Clearing the tangles, smashing the tile chips, shaving off the fluff;

The balance, the mirror, the scale and the scissors:

Old Ōbaku perceives even an autumn hair;

Cutting off the spring wind through sitting, he never allows haughtiness.

*On the Instruction:*

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<sup>1</sup> The world of nirvana.

As you might know, this same koan appears as Case 11 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. Although the Main Case is the same, the Introduction and the Verse are very different, especially the Verse. The texts before and after the koan in the *Blue Cliff Record* are extremely simple and clear, presenting things as they are. The texts in the *Book of Serenity*, however, tend to be a quite ornate in style. Wanshi Zenji, the compiler of the *Book of Serenity*, was a man of extensive learning, so that old stories and legends often appear in his texts and verses. Let us look at the first lines of the Introduction.

When one meets the student, one does not see Buddha.

For great enlightenment there is no teacher. Ôbaku Zenji was a disciple of Hyakujô Zenji, who had many disciples. Of those many disciples, Ôbaku Kiun Zenji and Isan Reiyu Zenji (known as the founder of the so-called Igyô School of Zen) were referred to as “dragon and tiger.” They were evidently quite outstanding.

Ôbaku was born in Fuzhou Prefecture. Already as a youth, he received tonsure on Mt. Ôbaku and became a monk. Later he became a disciple of Hyakujô. But it was actually not on Mt. Ôbaku that he was active as a Zen master, leading successors. That happened later when the illustrious government official Haikyû built a temple on the west bank of the Yangtze River and invited Ôbaku to live and teach there. Nevertheless, Ôbaku was immensely fond of the temple Manpukuji (Wanfushi) in his native Fuzhou Prefecture, and gave the new temple the name Mt. Ôbaku Manpukuji. There is a temple of the same name in the city of Uji in Japan. Ingen Zenji came originally from China and gave that name to the temple that was built there since he had trained himself in the original temple of that name in China.

Ôbaku Zenji had the looks and bearing of a hero, possessing Zen-like attributes from birth, you could say. He was of imposing stature, measuring almost seven feet. It is said that there was a round protuberance on his forehead, which had developed there due to his habit of prostrating himself constantly. At any rate, he was a true hero of Zen and the teacher of Rinzai. You might have heard how Rinzai first came to Ôbaku and asked about the “essential meaning of Buddhism.”

One has the feeling that Rinzai was of nervous disposition, although that is only my surmise. Although he was residing at the temple of Ôbaku, he did not go to dokusan. Evidently one was not required to go to dokusan, as is the case today. Seeing how Rinzai did not go to dokusan, his fellow monk Bokushû urged him to do so. Rinzai wanted to know what he should ask in dokusan. Bokushû told Rinzai, “Why not ask him, ‘What is the essential meaning of Buddhism?’” Rinzai did as he was told. Without saying a word, Ôbaku struck Rinzai with his stick. Rinzai went back with a heavy heart and was immediately confronted by Bokushû, who wanted to know what had happened. Rinzai told him that he had posed the question as he was told, and had been hit by the master. Bokushû told Rinzai to go once more to Ôbaku with the same question. Rinzai went to the master, posed the same question and was struck again like the first time. Bokushû told him to try one more time. And sure enough, when Rinzai asked the same question a third time, he was struck again! But he remained at a loss as to why he had

been struck and what was wrong with his question. Hearing this, Bokushū went to Ōbaku and told him that Rinzai was actually quite a promising fellow. He asked Ōbaku to tell Rinzai to go to Daigu if he came another time to dokusan. So when Rinzai appeared again in the dokusan room he asked for permission to go on pilgrimage, feeling that things were not going well in his dealings with Ōbaku. Ōbaku told him to go to Daigu and that is what Rinzai did. He was then asked by Daigu where he had come from. “I have come from Ōbaku,” he said.

Daigu said, “What did Ōbaku say?”

Rinzai said, “Three times I asked him about the essential doctrine and three times I got hit. I don’t know if I made some error or not.”

Daigu said, “Ōbaku has old grandmotherly affection and endures all this difficulty for your sake—and here you are asking whether you’ve made some error or not!”

Upon hearing these words Rinzai came to great enlightenment. The story then recounts how Daigu leaned forward, upon which Rinzai pinned him down on the floor and jabbed him in the side with his finger three times. Daigu then felt that Rinzai had now realized the great matter. Although Rinzai realized great enlightenment at Daigu’s temple, he was still the disciple of Ōbaku.

Interestingly enough, Dōgen Zenji originally spoke and wrote very highly of Rinzai, calling him “outstanding among the outstanding.” But beginning at a certain point, his estimation of Rinzai changed completely. Although it would require more research to determine what had happened, a certain Professor Fumio Masutani has brought up this matter in a book entitled *Rinzai and Dōgen* (Rinzai To Dōgen). Dōgen takes a quite critical stance toward Rinzai, but is lavish in his praise of Ōbaku. I can’t remember the exact passage in the *Shōbōgenzō* where he writes that, although Ōbaku was the dharma successor of Hyakujō, he was superior to Hyakujō, and although he was the dharma grandson of Baso, he was superior to Baso. He goes on to say that in three to four generations of Zen ancestors, there is no one who can compare with Ōbaku.

Though tall of stature, Ōbaku was also a person of high caliber who did not waste time with trifles, always presenting the essence in a few terse words. We should keep this in mind in now examining the Introduction, since that is also dealing with Ōbaku.

When one meets the student, one does not see Buddha. The word translated here as “student” also means the activity of mind. When the activity of mind operates, there is not the slightest idea of Buddha in that mind. There are absolutely no ideas of illusion/enlightenment, ordinary/holy or views of dharma or Buddha. This can be seen as the great activity and refers to how the mighty Zen activity of Ōbaku Zenji is revealed. In that case, there is no concept of Buddha.

For great enlightenment there is no teacher. Great enlightenment is a matter of realizing that you are alone in the entire universe. But it would be a major error to assume that there is a separation between you and the universe. That being the case, there is not the slightest crack for a teacher to enter. There is also the saying “in the entire universe there are

not two persons.” You are one with the universe, and there is not the slightest room for a teacher to enter. You must truly realize that world. That is the greatest respect you can pay to your teacher. If such a student were to appear, how happy the teacher would be!

The sword that fixes heaven and earth knows no sympathy. A “sword that fixes heaven” means a sword that brings everything under heaven to peace, eliminating even the slightest concept. Unless all such concepts are cut off, no true peace can emerge. And at such a time, one cannot adhere to social niceties. One cannot, for example, refrain from opposition in deference to one’s teacher or assume that opposing one’s superiors is not allowed. There is the Japanese saying *taigi shin wo messu* (personal affections must be sacrificed at the altar of justice). This is particularly true in the case of Zen. When it comes to the matter of enlightenment, all such personal feelings must be put aside. These lines of the Introduction are said in reference to Ōbaku Zenji.

The activity to capture tigers and rhinoceroses forgets holy understanding.

Now tell me, whose strategy is this? “Tigers” can be understood here as meaning very bright students and monks, students who are likely to “lunge at” their masters in a spirited show of Zen activity. But the master must be able to handle such rough students and guide them along the Way, bringing out their potential. In such cases, no logic-chopping is allowed. There should be no ideas of Buddha’s teaching at such a time. This is no time to be referring to such and such passage in a sutra to try to explain things. What is there, then? Just the fact itself. The teacher must only present students with the fact itself. The Introduction asks if there is such a person capable of that, prompting us to look at the example of Ōbaku Zenji in the Main Case.

***On the Case:***

Ōbaku instructed the assembly and said, “You are all drinkers of lees. This story is originally related in earlier texts, in the text known as the *Egen*, for example. That original version contains some prefatory remarks, referring to how Ōbaku addresses the monks seated in front of him: “You are all sitting there in rows before me, but I have nothing to teach you. Go away!!” He then flails his stick at them to make them leave, but nobody leaves. It is then that the words in the koan come. The expressions “drinkers of lees” seems to have been a popular phrase at that time to criticize others. Ōbaku accuses the monks of only drinking the dregs remaining after the wine if made. The “dregs” are our concepts and thoughts. He says they delight in gobbling up phrases and entanglements. The true and pure Buddha dharma is in you. That is the intrinsically revealed Buddha nature (*hongu busshō*). That is what we should be drinking. But instead we content ourselves with eating the dregs, delighting in concepts and ideas. My speaking here like this today is also a form of “lees” or “dregs.” But it is up to you whether you wish to eat those dregs or not! Legend has it that there was a region known as *Esshū* in olden times where people liked to eat such dregs and the expression

“drinkers of lees” was used to criticize others. It was evidently quite a strong expression.

“You are all drinkers of lees. If you continue to go on your Way like this, where will the 'Today' be?” If you continue wandering around, visiting this sesshin or that zazenkai, this Roshi or that Zen teacher, when will the day come when you slough away all dregs and realize great enlightenment? It won't do to continue on as you have so far. This phrase “where will the 'Today' be?” is the heart of the koan. Where is that “today”?

“Do you know that in this great empire of Tang there is no Zen master?” You continue wandering around, visiting this Zen master or that Zen teacher, but do you know even one Zen teacher worthy of the name in all of China? There is not even one person who can be called a Zen master. I would like to ask Ōbaku, “in that case, what are you?” When examining this phrase as a koan, this is one of the checking points.

You might assume upon reading this that Ōbaku is blowing his own horn, saying he is the only Zen master worthy of the name in all of China: Under heaven and on the earth, I alone am honored. If we interpret it in this way, it would seem as if he is saying that he alone is great and all the others are no good. But that is not the case. The words “under heaven and on the earth, I alone am honored” (*tenjō tenge yuiga dokusan*) were proclaimed by Shakyamuni Buddha upon his great enlightenment. Another similar expression is “alone in the entire universe” (*kenkon tada ichinin*). As I just said, depending on the interpretation, these words of Ōbaku could be seen as a case of blowing one's own horn, saying he is alone is great. But that is not so. Well then, what is his meaning?

Now a monk came forward and said, “What would you say to the fact that in various places there are people who accept students and direct their assemblies?” A monk stepped forward and pointed to how various teachers lead students and practice. “Aren't they Zen teachers?” he wanted to know.

Ōbaku said, “I don't say that there is no Zen; I only say that there is no master.” “I'm not saying there's no Zen, I'm just saying there are no masters to teach Zen.” He is saying that Zen is not something that you can simply teach people about for their intellectual understanding. It's a matter of “realizing yourself whether the water is cold or hot,” as the saying goes. No matter how many lectures you deliver on satori, people won't understand. You have to realize it and taste it yourself; otherwise no amount of talking will help. As Yasutani Roshi used to say, there is no way I can convey to you the taste of the tea I have just drunk. You have to drink the tea yourself. This is what experience is all about. This is not inferring that Zen is simply a matter of practicing zazen. It's a matter of Zen experience. And no one can teach you that. Even though I am sitting here talking like this, the only thing I can tell you is how to adjust your posture and sit. It's the same thing that Miyazaki Roshi is telling you all the time. It means matters like how to breathe or how to count your breaths or how to practice with Mu. We can only tell you how to do it. That said, however, it's true that I refer back to my own experience in practicing Zen to teach you in a way that you will reach the goal as soon as possible without dallying on the way. It remains a methodology. But when it comes to the

essence of Zen, there is no resort but to experience it yourself. In that sense, this final statement of Ōbaku can also be seen as a checking point of this koan. Many of you here are working on various koans. Please take the time to savor this particular koan.

***On the Verse:***

The Way is divided, the threads are dyed: too much labor. In older times in China, some people were chasing after sheep along a road when the road forked, so that they were unable to catch the sheep. This old story is mentioned here to emphasize that true Zen is one, although various schools of Zen have arisen. And when the way divides into several paths, there is the danger of missing the main road. The reference to “the threads are dyed” is also found in an old story. Although the thread was originally pure white, it was dyed various colors, so that the original whiteness was lost. The multicolored threads may be beautiful to behold, but the original purity is lost. Saying all sorts of things might help your understanding, but the purity of the true fact, the original whiteness is lost as the “color” of thoughts and concepts becomes attached. Then the true fact becomes lost. This is a case of “too much labor,” too much wasted effort, so that concepts appear and “color” the original whiteness. That is most troublesome. Reading between the lines we glean that the dharma of Ōbaku is the original pure white.

Binding the leaves, tying the flowers: it mars the ancestors. When Bodhidharma originally came to China he said:

*I originally came to this land*

*To explain the true and rescue beings from delusion.*

*One flower opens with five petals,*

*Producing a fruit which matures on its own.*

Some people see this poem as predicting the emergence of the several schools of Zen. There was originally a division into five schools, after which the leaves proliferated and the flowers bloomed. Nevertheless, as the Verse to today’s case says, that became an adversary, marring the sign that had been transmitted from one Buddhist ancestor to another. This is also saying, like the former line, that when the branches proliferate, the main track is lost.

One takes skillfully the active handle of creation;

Vessels designed with waters and clouds are on the lathe. I would like to see these lines as referring to the unalloyed purity of Ōbaku’s dharma. The words translated here as “creation” also include the characters for “pointing south” (shinan), which traditionally mean guiding or directing others. When the famous Yellow Emperor battled with the man named Chiyou, Chiyou created a major fog to confuse the directions so that the enemy could not be located. Then the Emperor pointed with his finger to the south and when the army advanced in that direction, they were able to completely defeat the army of Chiyou. This is evidently the origin of this expression. But Yasutani Roshi does not accept that view. According to his teisho on this case, there is an ancient Chinese work referring to how the south wind

blows, causing the leaves to sprout on the trees and the flowers to bloom. When spring comes, the wind blows from the south. Thus, the “south” is not only beneficial to plants and animals, but also refers to raising up and guiding others. It is the southerly direction that carries out that role. I feel this interpretation is more appropriate here. The gods of creation freely bring about the seasons, so that the changes from spring to summer and then to fall and winter occur. These are all the splendid and mysterious workings of creation. The “active handle” can also be seen as the king’s scepter. It is used here to refer to this free creative spirit and refers more specifically to Ōbaku. He exhibits free ability to guide his students.

Vessels designed with waters and clouds are on the lathe. This is referring to how the monks (who are traditionally referred to as “clouds and water” <unsui>) are fashioned on Ōbaku’s lathe through his outstanding guidance. He has the power and skill to freely guide them and bring them to realization.

Clearing the tangles, smashing the tile chips, shaving off the fluff. This refers to eliminating all concepts and ideas. This is referring again to Ōbaku. “Shaving off the fluff” means the downy feathers of a bird. This means eliminating even the tiniest remaining concepts of dharma. Summing up, we can say that this means eliminating all concepts, and even the most subtle and tiny views of Buddha or dharma.

The balance, the mirror, the scale and the scissors: These words refer to how the other person is reflected free of distortion like in a mirror polished to perfection. This again is referring to how Ōbaku guides his students. He can “measure them up” perfectly like a perfect scale or balance, reflect them perfectly like a mirror, and then “cut off” their concepts like the sharpest scissors. In other words, he has the ability to “kill and give life.”

Old Ōbaku perceives even an autumn hair; He can instantly perceive the present state of consciousness of the student, knowing immediately whether the student has truly realized or not. If you have that ability, you could be said to be an outstanding Zen master. You can only use your own experience as the basis for judging the experience of others, to know whether they have truly realized or not. So, unless your own experience is solid, you won’t be able to judge whether someone has truly realized it or not. But Ōbaku perceives even an autumn hair. Autumn is the time when animals shed their summer fur and get their winter fur. The character for the fine hairs of the animals in autumn is also used traditionally in Zen to refer to very slight concepts. Ōbaku has the ability to perceive such concepts and cut them off.

Cutting off the spring wind through sitting, he never allows haughtiness. Although this final line is also referring to Ōbaku, Yasutani Roshi sees the “spring wind” as referring to satori. Among the recorded sayings of National Teacher Bukkō are the following words: “Cutting off the spring wind in a flash of lightning.” At any rate, I would like to see this as referring to the act of cutting off the concepts of the practitioner. Those concepts have no substance and are thus referred to as the “spring wind.” Thus, I don’t necessarily see the words “spring wind” as referring here exclusively to satori.

To say “he never allows haughtiness” is said in reference to how Ōbaku had a very lofty

state of consciousness, but was not a person to act in a proud or haughty manner because of that. Because he had such a lofty state of consciousness he was somewhat unapproachable for others. That is why he would prostrate himself countless times before the Buddha every day, to the point where a protrusion developed on his forehead. This shows how stern and unflinching he was with himself. In everyday language we would say he would allow no arrogance or hubris in his own behavior, although it is not limited to arrogance in the usual sense. He furthermore would not allow himself to take on a proud or haughty bearing, refusing to give off the slightest odor or sheen of enlightenment. People tend to want put themselves in a favorable light and make themselves look good. That's a sign that egoistic feelings have yet to be eliminated. Ōbaku Zenji had no such feelings, but he was also aware of how he was somewhat forbidding to others because of his lofty state of mind and it was for that reason that he would prostrate himself before the Buddha whenever he had a spare moment. I was urged once by Yasutani Roshi to perform prostrations before the Buddha every morning. I don't know if he recommended that practice because he thought I was a bit cheeky. I was more portly at that time than now, so perhaps he thought it would be good exercise for me. I would sometimes travel with Yasutani Roshi to zazenkais at different locations and sometimes we would be in the bath together, and I would wash his back. One time he looked at me and said, "You're too fat. You have to take steps to lose weight." I must have weighed about 80 kilograms at the time, so I'm assuming he was urging me to carry out prostrations for that reason!