

CASE 59

Seirin's "Deadly Snake"

By Yamada Kōun



Instruction:

If it goes, it is retained;
If it stays, it is expelled.
Not going, not staying – *it* has no land.
Where will you meet *it*?
At every spot, at every place.
Just tell me, what is this thing that is so strange and so wonderful?

Case:

A monk asked Seirin, "How is it when a practitioner goes along a narrow path?" Seirin said, "You will meet a deadly snake on the great road. I advise you, do not run into it." The monk said, "What if I do run into it?" Seirin said, "You will lose your life." The monk said, "What if I don't run into it?" Seirin said, "You have no place to escape from it." The monk said, "Precisely at such a time, what then?" Seirin said, "It is lost." The monk said, "I wonder where it is gone." Seirin said, "The grass is so deep, there is no place to look for it." The monk said, "You too, Master, must be watchful in order to get it." Seirin clapped his hands and said, "This fellow is equally poisonous."

Verse:

The helmsman moves the rudder in the dark;
The lone boat turns its bow in the night.
The flowers of the reed, snow upon both banks;
The cloud over the water – 'tis autumn on the river.
Wind helps the sailboat, no need to row forward;
With the sound of the flute calling the moon,
The boat descends toward the enchanted land.

On the Instruction:

If it goes, it is retained;

If it stays, it is expelled. Among the koans concerning Fuketsu Oshô is the koan entitled “Fuketsu’s Iron Ox,” which is Case 29 of the *Book of Equanimity*. In the *Blue Cliff Record* the same koan appears with the title “Fuketsu’s Mind Seal.” That koan includes the statement: “When it goes away, the [impression of the] seal remains; when it stays there, the [impression of the] seal is brought to naught.” When I peruse the usual teisho collections examining this case, they see the words “goes away” and “remains” or “stays” as meaning “holding on” and “letting go” (Japanese: hajû-hôjû). “Go away” (Japanese: saru) means leaving the place. Meanwhile, “remain” (Japanese: injû) means staying at that place. The Zen expression holding on and letting go just mentioned is the same as “killing and giving life” (sekkatsu). There is also the expression “giving and taking away” (yodatsu). To reveal the essential world is stealing everything away, which is referred to as “going away” (saru). This would be the case of **leaving and taking away (hogyô)**.

“Retained” (ryûjû) means remaining in the phenomenal world. This is retaining (hajû), which means taking everything away. The aspect of hogyô is leaving things just as they are. The aspect of retaining (hajû) means clearing everything away and revealing the world of not one thing. Thus, there is “retaining” and “letting go.” Zen consists of these two aspects. This is how these first lines of the Introduction are conventionally viewed. In other words, the Zen master must sometimes display the aspect of retaining toward the Zen student and sometimes the aspect of letting go in guiding that student. These are the skills of an accomplished Zen master. They are his or her skills and strengths in guiding disciples. These are known as retaining or letting go, killing and giving life, giving and taking away. This, at any rate, is how these lines are usually viewed. But I feel such a view is uninteresting and do not take such a tack. In my case, “goes” means going from one place to another. But even in going, it remains. Even though there is movement, there is no movement at all. The *Blue Cliff Record* includes Case 53 about Baso and Hyakujo.

When Great Master Ba was walking with Hyakujo, he saw wild ducks flying by.

The Great Master said, "What is that?"

Hyakujo said, "Wild ducks."

The Great Master said, "Where did it go?"

Hyakujo said, "They flew away."

The Great Master twisted Hyakujo's nose tip. Hyakujo cried out in pain.

The Great Master said, "Why flew away?"

In other words: “Isn’t it right here?!” This is a case of “it is retained.” This is how I would like to see these words, not in terms of the skills of the Zen teacher, but in terms of our essential nature or the essential world. It is revealing the world of our true fact. That is how I would like to see the words in the Instruction.

If it stays, it is expelled. You square your shoulders and remain right where you are. “Expelled” is said in the sense of no content. You may think you are here, but the content is

empty. This line is expressing these two aspects. Of course, you could see it as meaning “holding and releasing” in the sense that a Zen master sometimes retains or releases in teaching, but I find it uninteresting to restrict the meaning simply to teaching ability. These lines are expressing our true fact, our true nature. Thus, Yamamoto Gempō Roshi often expressed it as “neither being born nor dying, it is always right here.” This is the truth from the standpoint of the essential world. In the phenomenal world, we are being born and dying, but from the essential standpoint there is neither being born nor dying. You are always right here. Yamamoto Gempō Roshi was fond of saying this, especially when he was officiating at a funeral where you offer final words (Japanese: *indō*). He would say, “do not come asking, I will say nothing.” This is how it really is and this is how I would like to see these lines in the Introduction.

Not going, not staying – it has no land. It is *just this* (*tada kore kore*). That is the true world. If you ask who these lines are talking about, you can say it is like this for all of us from the standpoint of the essential world or our essential self. From the standpoint of our true nature, there is no going or staying, it is always right here. Saying “it has no land” is referring to our true self. You could also call it *tako* (other self) in the sense that there is no distinction between subject and object. It has no land because it is completely empty and there is no place to live.

Where will you meet it? The word “it” is not referring to something like Buddha. This is said about each one of us. We have no land. From the phenomenal standpoint, we all have a country or an address. But when we see things from the other aspect, where can we meet it?

At every spot, at every place. It is always right here, but if you search for it you will never find it. It is always right here in every moment, right now.

Just tell me, what is this thing that is so strange and so wonderful? Who can do such a strange and wondrous thing? Everyone can do it. It is only that we do not realize it. Everyone can do it, but a particularly wonderful example will be given now and we are asked to look carefully.

On the Case:

A monk asked Seirin, “How is it when a practitioner goes along a narrow path?” Seirin was a dharma successor of Tōzan Gohon Daishi. He started out practicing under Kassan and he appears quite frequently in the Zen records. Later, he became famous as a dharma heir of Tōzan in the third generation. He is also known as Shiken Zenji and thus in the Soto lineage. At that time the Soto School still had a lot of sharpness and astuteness. The modern Soto School is lacking any “claws and teeth,” so to speak. Everything is very peaceful, but the necessary astuteness is lacking. Such sharpness and astuteness emerges from the world of satori, cutting incisively through any logic-chopping. When you look at the printed teishos of various Zen roshis, you notice that the teishos of persons with a sharp dharma eye

sparkle with a special light. It's no good if you look in vain for that special sparkle in a person's teisho. Then it's lacking in any teeth and claws, which means it's not real Zen. Among the verses composed by Ôbaku Kiun Zenji is the following:

Three times he personally felt those claws and fangs at work. This is referring to an incident involving the Emperor at that time. Once he practiced with Ôbaku in order to escape danger, and three times he was defeated by Ôbaku. I find the expression "claws and fangs" to be very fitting in appraising Ôbaku. Let us look now at the monk's question:

"How is it when a practitioner goes along a narrow path?" The "practitioner" is referring to the monk himself. He says in effect, "I have come like this along a narrow path." In olden times, Zen masters lived in the mountains and you had to travel over narrow mountain paths to reach them. The monk is going to the Zen master to meet him for the first time. Yasutani Roshi, in his teisho to this koan, says the monk is deliberately talking about "coming and going" although there is essentially no coming and going, thus opening up a "dharma combat." The monk challenges the master with his question of "coming" along a narrow path, as if asking whether the master has anything to warn him about. "How will you treat me?" he seems to ask.

Seirin said, "You will meet a deadly snake on the great road. I advise you, do not run into it." "There's a fearful poisonous snake lying in ambush on the road. Be careful not to run into it!" I feel Yasutani Roshi's opinion about this statement is quite good. When Seirin talks about a deadly snake, he is referring to himself. There's a "deadly snake" named Seirin lying in wait. Be careful you don't bump into him! It is a "deadly snake" in the sense that you lose your life if you meet up with it. Later in the koan he is referring to it in the sense of the essential world. He quickly changes his tack according to the monk's words. But if you see his first reference to a "deadly snake" as referring to the essential world, it doesn't have much force; it's too weak. That "killing" aspect doesn't work. I too feel that Seirin is referring to himself in talking about a deadly snake. He is saying in effect, "There's this very dangerous snake named Seirin here. Don't bump into him!"

The monk said, "What if I do run into it?" This monk is quite a fellow!

Seirin said, "You will lose your life." It is here that Seirin moves quite naturally to talking in terms of the essential self. As I believe will be comprehensible to those who have experienced kensho, it is a matter of losing your life in the sense of body and mind disappearing. It is "body and mind fallen away" (*shinjin-datsuraku*). You lose your life in the sense of disappearing.

The monk said, "What if I don't run into it?" This snake fills the entire universe. This is expressing the essential world.

Seirin said, "You have no place to escape from it." You are right in the middle of it at all times and can never escape it.

The monk said, "Precisely at such a time, what then?" That means, "precisely when it is just now, just this, how about then?" Precisely when you neither try to

avoid it nor try to bump into it, what then?

Seirin said, "It is lost." This is an interesting point in this koan. The snake has disappeared without a trace.

The monk said, "I wonder where it is gone."

Seirin said, "The grass is so deep, there is no place to look for it." The "grass" is our concepts. It means that concepts and thoughts well up like clouds so that the snake gets away without a trace. But actually the thoughts themselves are the snake. The snake has changed into concepts and thoughts and can no longer be seen. To repeat, the grass means our various ideas and thoughts: "Perhaps it's like this, or perhaps like this." etc. But in the last analysis what are those concepts and thoughts? They are no other than you yourself. They are the complete manifestation of the snake. The snake has turned into concepts and thoughts. You might think that there is something outside of your thoughts, thinking this and that. But that is not so. It is only one. Another way of expressing it is to say that the snake has changed into grass. So if you try looking for the snake outside the grass, you will never find it. This is what Seirin is saying. But this is no run-of-the-mill monk.

The monk said, "You too, Master, must be watchful in order to get it." You too, master, must watch out that you are not swallowed by that poisonous snake!

Seirin clapped his hands and said, "This fellow is equally poisonous." Seirin was very happy and clapped his hands in delight. "This fellow really knows what I'm talking about!" The teishos on this case say that the expression *dokki* (literally, poisonous spirit) in the original text means giving off poison. Seirin is saying, "I gave off poison, but so did you!" "I'm quite a poisonous snake, but so are you!" They are completely in harmony with each other in terms of Zen understanding. There is the expression "guest and host mutually exchanging" in the sense of freely switching between the role of guest and host. A true Zen exchange of *mondo* is like this, with the protagonists freely exchanging roles, sometimes on top and sometimes on the bottom, like two master swordsmen in combat. Yasutani Roshi often used the expression "double win" to refer to such an exchange. Here's a case of matched skill and ability.

On the Verse:

The helmsman moves the rudder in the dark; The "helmsman" is referring to Seirin. He is like a master helmsman maneuvering skillfully through valleys and narrows on the river. And this is a "lone boat":

The lone boat turns its bow in the night. This line is referring to the monk in the koan. The helmsman may be Seirin, but the monk turns the bow in engaging in a Zen exchange (*mondo*) with Seirin. These first two lines describe how the Seirin and the monk engage most skillfully in a Zen exchange, completely consistent and in harmony with each other. The lines seem to evoke a scene of viewing boats on a river.

The flowers of the reed, snow upon both banks; The flowers of the reed are

reportedly white, although I've never seen them. On both banks of the river those white flowers are blooming in profusion, looking for all the world like snow. The two banks could be understood as self and other in the sense of dualistic opposition, or they could be seen as representing the essential world and the phenomenal world. The verse says that both banks are completely white. That means there is no distinction between self and other. It would be better to simply appreciate the verse without too much explanation, just painting an image in your head. Too much explanation robs the verse of its poetic beauty and flavor.

The cloud over the water – 'tis autumn on the river. It's hard to know if this is talking about a cloud or more in the sense of haze or mist. There is the saying “water and sky indistinct in the single color of blue” meaning that you cannot distinguish between sea and sky on the blue horizon. This evokes autumn scenery. Picture a big river like the Yangtze River, where the water and the sky cannot be distinguished from each other in the distance. The verse describes how the state of consciousness of Seirin and the monk can no longer be distinguished from each other.

Wind helps the sailboat, no need to row forward; The wind pushes the boat and along, negating the need for human power. The boat moves along most naturally. You have thrown away all discriminating thoughts and are most free and natural, like a boat moving freely in the wind without human aid.

With the sound of the flute calling the moon,

The boat descends toward the enchanted land. The moon is shining brightly high in the sky. A single boat is moving along in the current. In the distance you can hear the sound of a flute. The poem is written in such a way that you feel that the moon has appeared in the sky at the sound of the flute. The “enchanted land” is evidently some idealistic world. This is probably a borrowing from Taoism. It is something like the Isle of Eternal Youth in the Taoist tradition, where it's always spring and pleasant, always peaceful and relaxed. Depending on the translation, this final line can mean that that boat “descends” toward the enchanted land or that it even “disdains” the enchanted line. The first reading is the most common, but the second possibility is also interesting. At any rate, take the time to savor this poem, particularly the final lines.