BLUE CLIFF RECORD CASE 96:
ZHAOZhou’S THREE TURNING WORDS


Zhaozhou brought forth three turning words for his community:

A wooden Buddha won’t pass through fire.
A mud Buddha won’t pass through water.
A metal Buddha won’t pass through a furnace.

Ah, Zhaozhou, the old Buddha. We are in good hands.

This case will be familiar to many of you. It is included in a slightly different form in our introductory koan collection and taken up relatively early in koan study. Most people don’t have a lot of trouble making fitting presentations for this koan, but I would say very, very, few appreciate its boundless subtle workings, particularly at that early stage of practice. I certainly didn’t. Looking at it again today I am struck by how, using very ordinary words and statements, Zhaozhou opens up a way into the lively and intimate activity at the core of who we are, and how we are.
First I want to say a little about the term "turning word" or "turning phrase." The term appears often in Zen writings. It's a bit like the "turning point" mentioned in yesterday's teishō. In regard to the lively interchange of Changqing and Baofu, Yuyanwu commented,

"People nowadays do not go to the Ancients' turning point to look. The Ancients were like stone struck sparks, like flashing lightning. Unfortunately people nowadays go to the words and get lost. The turning point appears where the mind road is cut off, when the discriminating mind is quiet. Here, with a sound or sight attention "turns" and confirms our self-nature that is no-nature at all. As Dōgen Zenji so kindly told us:

Practice that confirms things by taking the self to them is delusion; that things come forth to practice and confirm the self is real-ization."

Today's case is a rather unusual one — it seems so straight forward we have to wonder: "A wooden Buddha won't pass through fire" — well yeah, okay. "A mud Buddha won't pass through water" — anybody knows that, so what?

Xuedou collected the three turning phrases of Zhaozhou's from Zhaozhou's record. The full passage as it appears in Zhaozhou's record is as follows:

The master entered the hall and instructed the assembly saying, "a metal Buddha can't pass through a furnace, a wood Buddha can't pass through fire, a mud Buddha can't pass through water. The true Buddha is sitting in the house. Enlightenment, nirvana, suchness, and Buddha-nature, are just clothes placed upon the body, and as such, are to be called suffering and delusion. If you do not raise them, they cease to exist. "What, then, is the point of realization? When the mind does not arise, the ten thousand dharmas are not transgressed. Just sit and examine this matter for twenty or thirty years. If you do not attain realization, then you may cut off my head."

That's what the old Buddha Zhaozhou said. You can rely on Zhaozhou.

In his commentary on the case master Yuanwu says: "Xuedou disliked the indulgence of that final phrase [The true Buddha is sitting in the house] so he omitted it." Thank you Xuedou. Indulgent indeed.

As the saying goes, "When speaking say one-third of it; don't give the whole thing at once." The weeds will immediately grow ten feet high if you talk in such a way.

Departing from his usual way of one verse per case, Xuedou made three separate verses for this case — one for each turning phrase. Each verse in turn references a particularly salient story from the Zen tradition.

We'll examine Zhaozhou's three turning phrases in the light of Xuedou's verses and the stories they allude to.

Xuedou's first verse goes like this:

"A mud Buddha won't pass through water:
Spiritual Light illumines heaven and earth;
If standing in the snow were not stopped,
Who wouldn't carve out an imitation?"

"A mud Buddha won't pass through water." We may think of this as a limitation, but a mud buddha is a mud buddha, where is there any limitation? A mud buddha won't pass through water... exactly! Right! Voilà! If it did it would dissolve. YES! That is the virtue of a mud buddha, not a limitation.

When the mud buddha is just as it is, you are just as you are. That is the turning point. Just as you are. When MU is MU, then you are you. So Xuedou says:

"A mud Buddha won't pass through water:
Spiritual light illumines heaven and earth.”

These first two lines capture and elucidate Zhaozhou’s first turning phrase completely. Spiritual light is 神光 Shenguang in Chinese. Shenguang was the name of the second Chinese Zen ancestor, Bodhidharma’s successor in the traditional Zen lineage. The last two lines of the verse allude to the famous encounter Shenguang had with Bodhidharma after traveling to the South to seek him out. The story goes like this:

Shenguang found Bodhidharma behind Shaolin temple facing a wall doing zazen. He implored Bodhidharma instruct him but Bodhidharma sat motionless facing the wall and said nothing.

That night there was a great snow storm. The Second Ancestor stood by Bodhidharma through the night. By dawn the snow had piled up past his knees. Bodhidharma finally said to him, “You, standing in the snow there; what are you looking for?” The Second Ancestor sighed sadly and said, “I only beg your compassion, to open up the gate of ambrosia and deliver the message that liberates sentient beings.”

Bodhidharma said, “The supreme, unequalled, spiritual Way of the buddhas is accessible only after vast eons of practicing what is difficult to practice, and enduring what is difficult to endure. How could a person of small virtue, little wisdom, slight interest, and slow mind attain the True Vehicle? Striving for it would be vain effort.”

Hearing this admonition Shenguang became even more determined. He took out a sharp knife, cut off his left forearm, and placed it before Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma knew he was a vessel of Dharma, so he asked him, “You stand in the snow and cut off your arm; what for?” Shenguang said, “My mind is not yet at peace. Please, Master, put it to rest.” Bodhidharma said, “Bring forth your mind, and I will put it to rest for you.” Shenguang said, “I have searched and searched for my mind, but I cannot find it.” Bodhidharma said, “I have completely put it to rest for you.”

And for all of us. Realization is a matter of stopping completely.

Xuedou writes:

If standing in the snow were not stopped,
Who would not carve an imitation?

I’ve searched and searched for my mind and cannot find it. This is not said lightly. It is years and years of ardent practice. Most people stop before they ever get started. They think they know something, they think they understand. But it doesn’t work like that. As you and I know, it’s not that easy. We have to really live our aspiration — put our heart and guts into it and go all the way.

The story of Bodhidharma and Shenguang is a legend, a folk story, a mixture of fact and fiction—created by the Zen tradition to present the Zen path and what it is about. As the scholar John Macrae said of these stories, “It didn’t happen, therefore it’s even more important.” These are not historical facts; they are expressions of a timeless Way, your own timeless Way. Only those who have struggled, often for many, many years, just to gain a glimpse, can fully appreciate what is being said. The sleepless nights, the river of tears—each of us struggles in our own way, but we can’t avoid the limits of our own sincerity and resolve being tested to the max.

At the very same time, if we don’t stop trying to get somewhere, we will never, ever arrive. That is where we put our effort, that is how we use our aspiration — only Mu; if you’re counting your breath: only one..., two... Full stop, each time—cutting off the mind road, right where we are. If we don’t stop, if we don’t cut off the mind road, then we just go on and on creating imitations of ourselves, of others, of Buddha, of emptiness. It never ends.

As Zhaozhou said,

“Enlightenment, nirvana, suchness, and Bud-
dha-nature, are just clothes placed upon the body, and as such, are to be called suffering and delusion. If you do not raise them, they cease to exist. What, then, is the point of realization? "Stop!

A mud Buddha does not pass through water.

Zhaozhou’s second turning phrase and Xuedou’s verse for it are as follows:

A metal Buddha does not pass through a furnace;
Someone comes calling on Zihu;
On the sign, several words
Where is there no pure wind?

To elucidate the matter of a metal buddha not passing through a furnace, Xuedou calls on master Zihu. Zihu was a dharma successor of the great Nanquan, and so a dharma brother of Zhaozhou. Zihu was famous for having a particularly exuberant watch dog. He posted a warning sign on his outer gate which read:

Beware of the dog!
Above, she grabs people’s heads;
in the middle, she grabs people’s loins;
below, she grabs people’s legs.
If you hesitate, you lose your body and life!

Whenever Zihu saw a newcomer arrive, he would immediately shout, "Watch out for the dog!" As soon as the monk turned his head, Zihu would immediately return to the abbot’s room. … Another one chewed to bits, right on the spot!

It is significant that before mentioning Zihu’s sign warning about the dog, Xuedou says,

A metal Buddha does not pass through a furnace;
someone comes calling on Zihu.

These two lines present the living fact itself. It’s teeth are even sharper than those of Zihu’s dog. A metal buddha melts in a furnace. A mud buddha dissolves in water. A wooden buddha burns in a fire. Just like that!

Dissolving, melting, burning… breaking, decaying, being devoured, and simply just falling apart — we don’t need to wait until we are dying to investigate this fascinating and inescapable matter of our lives. Better we look closely now while our basic faculties are more or less intact. When the falling apart really gets going, it will be too late. Have a look right now. Dissolving, melting, burning, decaying, being devoured: what is it? What decays? What falls apart? It’s really okay to look very closely and attentively at this life. And I don’t mean thinking about it — just mulling it over in your thoughts, trying to construct some sort of conceptual model that you then call understanding — that’s useless. Just look directly at your own life. One breath. One moment. The whole thing is right there. What is it? Is it passing away? What is passing away? See for yourself. Only when we are willing to step forth out of our familiar nest of cherished feelings and ideas — and to do this again and again, only then does realization have a chance. Otherwise, it’s just your smartphone, and the refrigerator, and the TV, forever.

But someone comes calling, we get tired of that — when we show up and pay attention to this immediate matter of our lives, Zihu’s dog will do her job. You can count on it:

Above, she grabs people’s heads;
in the middle, she grabs people’s loins;
below, she grabs people’s legs.

At this Xuedou asks, "Where is there no pure wind?” Ahhhhhhh! Burning, dissolving, falling apart — isn’t that the fresh pure wind hitting you in the face right now? Like "spiritual light illuminating heaven and earth" — there is nowhere it does not reach.

Speaking of master Zihu, one time he went out into

Continued on page 7
### Honolulu Diamond Sangha Calendar

#### APRIL 2016

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#### MAY 2016

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the outhouse late at night and shouted, "Catch the thief! Catch the thief!" In the dark he ran into a monk, grabbed him by the chest, and held him, saying, "Caught him! Caught him!" The monk said, "Master, master, it's not me." Zihu said, "It's been you all along, but you just won't own up to it."

That pure wind has been blowing for all beings since the beginningless beginning. When are you going to own up to it?

Zhaozhou’s third turning phrase and Xuedou’s verse for it are as follows:

A wood Buddha does not pass through fire;
I always think of the Oven Breaker—
The staff suddenly strikes,
Just then realizing the self turned away from.

This time Xuedou calls on the Oven Breaker monk to help him lay bare glistening ashes of Zhaozhou’s third turning phrase. The story of the Oven Breaker monk goes like this:

The "Oven Breaker Monk" was not known by any surname; his speech and behavior were unfathomable. He dwelt in seclusion on Mount Song. One day he journeyed to a mountain village with a group of followers. This village had a shrine that was most sacred to the villagers. In its hall was placed only an oven. People from far and near came and sacrificed to it unceasingly; they had immolated an unimaginable number of living creatures there. The Master entered the shrine and tapped the oven three times with his staff. He said, "What humbug! You were originally made of brick and mud mixed together. Where does the spirit come from, whence does the sanctity originate, that you burn living creatures to death like this?" And again he hit it three times. The oven then toppled over and collapsed of itself.

Momentarily there was a man in a blue robe and tall hat suddenly standing in front of the Master; bowing, he said, "I am the god of the oven. For a long time I have been subject to retribution for actions, but today, hearing the Master explain the truth of non-origination, I am already freed from this place, and living in heaven. I have come especially to offer my gratitude." The Master said, "It is your fundamentally own inherent nature, not my act of saying so." The god again bowed, and disappeared.

The oven-breaker monk—what a marvelous story. The sacred oven! What a marvelous metaphor. That "place" where we cook up all those schemes and plans, where we’ve long been roasting ourselves and others in the heat of karma and retribution. And not just we ourselves, but all the families and the whole village have been paying homage and offering life and limb for as long as anyone can remember. There seems to be lots of agreement that this is what needs to happen. In ancient days the immolation was done out in the open—now we tend to cook indoors, so to speak, immolating ourselves and others in ovens and utensils that have fancy psychological names... but not so much has changed.

"What humbug this oven! <tap, tap, tap> A jumbled heap of thoughts and sensations — where do you get the authority or sanctity to sacrifice any being?"

Look! LOOK! <tap, tap, tap> "Broken! .... Collapsed!" With every call of the neighborhood children, with every bell, it completely collapses and falls apart.

You don’t have to build it up again.

A wood Buddha won’t pass through fire. A wood Buddha burns up in a fire. Hooray!
Our delusions won’t pass through the fire of our attention either. No further analysis needed. Just keep your attention right on the combustion point: this breath Mu, this walking, opening the door, answering the phone, the cry of the gecko, yellow bananas!

As oven breaker told the liberated oven spirit: “Liberation is your fundamentally inherent nature, <rap, rap, rap> not the act of speaking about it.”

Xuedou too appreciates not the words but the working of the staff. He wrote:

The staff suddenly strikes,
Just then realizing the self turned away from.

At that very point where the staff arrives <WHACK> the intimate face that we have turned away from for so long, breaks out at the core of our life.

As Hakuin Zenji once lamented:

Its mysterious activity outside the words is inconceivable. All the marvelous functions of non-doing are present therein. But this path has been thrown away like dirt by people of modern times.

Maybe so, but not any longer — not today!

We sat in a circle, ten of us. We came to share ideas, thoughts, and experiences on dealing with difficult people. As I drove across the island to Palolo Zen Center on this sunny, Saturday afternoon I thought about the difficult people I have contended with recently and in the past. I thought of the high school students I teach and my own sons. It wasn’t more than ten miles of H1 travel before I realized that the most difficult person I contend with is me.

It was me that tensed inside, blood pressure rising and mind going blank when a Tita entered class fifteen minutes late, making a disruptive display of her entrance and illicit apparel and calling across the room to a friend who responded with laughter and a loud “Hey, where you been girl?”

“If you have to come late, fine, but can’t you just enter without a big disruption?” I uttered with obvious irritation.

And of course I knew instantly that this was not a skillful way to deal with a difficult person. Why was it so hard to just breathe a breath or two, wait for the class to settle and go on with the lesson and talk to the girl later? Why did I make it so difficult? Why am I so difficult?

Lisa was the last to arrive to the Sangha circle. She came silently, gliding in like a graceful bird, comfortably settling into a spot on the couch between Clark and Susan. I noticed a healthy sheen on her youthful skin suggesting a thin coat of perspiration and a glow on her face that radiated heat, yet she was cool with composure. It wasn’t long before she uttered what seemed like a profound question, “How do we deal with our animal nature? After all, we are animals!” And she went on to share with animation her morning African dance class, such that we could feel the drums pounding and the energy pulsing through the arteries and muscles of our animal bodies.
“Doesn’t our animal nature play a role in how we deal with difficult people? What can we do about it, or how can we use it?”

Kathy commented on fear and how sometimes difficult people are threatening to us and how cornering a wild animal can lead to vicious attacks. How do we skillfully keep ourselves from feeling cornered and lashing out or attacking, and how do we keep ourselves from cornering others?

Clark offered a useful acronym from his quick iPhone research on how to deal with difficult people; STOP. Stop whatever you are doing. Take three deep breaths. Observe how your body feels and proceed with kindness and compassion. I can’t imagine a scared feral cat cornered in my garage stopping to take three breaths while observing how its body feels and proceeding with kindness and compassion to walk calmly by as it exits. Can a wild animal be kind and compassionate? I’ve seen what looks like kindness and compassion in domesticated dogs. So maybe that’s the difference, although we are animals, maybe we aren’t “wild.”

Another member shared the disturbing observation that our society promotes and supports unhealthy, unkind and difficult personal interactions. Some have experienced it in their workplace where one is often expected to participate in office gossip or become ostracized, and it’s rampant in social media with cyber bullying among high school students and adults. Susan B. also pointed out that we see it in our leaders such as Justice Scalia, described as being nasty, brutish, caustic, demeaning and bullying in his professional writing; still a leader of high esteem.

We talked about our schools, and I wondered, “What are we teaching our children—competition, over valued grades for getting into college, how to outwit and overpower your opponent?” Yet kindness and compassion are rarely promoted.

How do we deal with difficult people?

Our sangha circle ended. The question still remained and new ones were generated. I came seeking a remedy for how to deal with the difficulty of being me and it seemed I was about to leave empty handed. Yet I felt grateful, and others expressed a similar feeling—grateful for the opportunity to get together in a space of kindness and compassion to discuss a common practice problem with our sangha.

Were others seeking answers, and did they find them? I don’t know, but I walked out recounting Michael’s answer to a question in Wednesday night’s Question and Response about what to do with strong emotions. “Feel it.”

Perhaps that is all that is needed, or all that we can do. Feel the frustration, the fear, the anger of dealing with difficult people, even our self. Feel the joy of sharing with sangha members in a Sangha Circle. Feel the muscles and heat of your animal body.

Feel it!

Special Thank You
The Garden Committee would like to thank Barbara Alexander for her professional consultation on PZC’s gardening design issues. Barbara is a garden designer and Master Gardener. She helped us identify and visualize new plantings for the front of the property, particularly along the road.

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