

SESSHIN TEISHO  
John Tarrant Roshi  
Camp Cazadero, California  
February 10, 1993

BLUE CLIFF RECORD, CASE NO. 5

This is the fifth story in the Blue Cliff Record, "Hsueh-feng's Grain of Rice."

Introduction

Whoever would uphold the teaching of our school must be brave spirited with the ability to kill someone without blinking an eye. Only such a person can become a buddha right where they stand. Therefore, such a one's illumination and function are simultaneous. Locking up and opening out are equal. Principle and phenomena are not two and he or she practices both the provisional and the real. Letting go of the primary she sets up the gate of the secondary meaning. If she were to cut off all complications straight away, it would be impossible for late coming students of elementary capabilities to find a resting place. It was this way yesterday. The matter couldn't be avoided. It is this way today, too. Faults and errors fill the skies. Still, the point is as a clear-eyed person, she can't be fooled one bit. Without clear eyes lying in the mouth of a tiger one cannot avoid losing body and life. As a test I cite this. Look!

The Case

Hsueh-feng, teaching his community, said: Pick up the whole great earth in your fingers and its as big as a grain of rice. I throw it down before you. It's in a black lacquer bucket. You can't find it anywhere. Beat the drum. Call everyone to look for it.

The Poem

The ox head disappears; a horse head emerges.  
In the mirror of Hsao-chi (???) there's absolutely no dust.  
He beats the drum for you to come and look, but you don't see.  
When spring arrives, for whom do the hundred flowers bloom?

Please sit comfortably.

The person who wrote the Introduction was Hsuan-wu (???), whom everybody who does a koan lineage at all is descended from. He was one of the great late Chinese masters in our tradition, just before our tradition came to Japan. All of the entire Rinzai line is descended through him, the entire Rinzai line through Japan. He said, "Only if you can kill someone without blinking an eye, can you become a buddha right where you stand." This may be a little alarming for pacifist buddhists. What do you think he means?

There's a kind of inner resoluteness that is needed to really achieve anything, whether it's in work, or in love, or in the dharma. We have to throw everything away and just concentrate on

this one thing and let everything else die, everything else goes dark.

He also points out that if Hsueh-feng were to cut off all complications straight away, "It would be impossible for late coming students of elementary capabilities (he means us) to find a resting place." In other words he's saying, Hsueh-feng is bending down a little bit, but it's okay because he's gotten people like us who wouldn't understand him if he didn't. The truth is that every time we open our mouths we're wrong. We move from it. There's an old saying, that if you say the word 'buddha,' you should wash out your mouth with soap. Hsuan-wu's comment reflects this spirit. But still sometimes you have to say, 'buddha, buddha.' Another teacher was asked, "How do you avoid saying the word buddha?" He said, "Buddha, buddha, buddha."

Hsueh-feng said, "You pick up the whole great earth in your fingers and it's like a grain of rice in size." Beautiful, isn't it? There are many, many examples of this kind of insight in our tradition. The first transmission story is of Shakyamuni holding up a flower. The story is that everybody gathered at vulture peak in India for him to give a talk, a teisho. When the time came and the drum was beaten and everybody got ready, he didn't say anything. He just held up a flower and twirled it around. The zen story goes that Mahakasyapa was in the audience and he cracked a smile. Then Shakyamuni said, "Okay, I'll give you the transmission. You recognize me." That was the first zen story about transmission. Although the events took place in Buddha's time, the story came much later. Blake's famous lines, almost a cliché, really, come to mind:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And heaven in a wild flower.  
To hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

I think in sesshin we know that eternal hour. You walk outside meditating under the trees, the flowers and the rain and the leaves and the birds. All of them go on forever and the path goes on forever from before birth and after death. The whole world is here walking under the trees, sitting in the dojo this long afternoon.

Hsueh-feng's biography is worth recounting so I'll interrupt the case to recount a little of it. He wanted to go off and study zen at the age of nine, but his parents had doubts about the wisdom of this course at that age. At the age of twelve he went to a temple and met a teacher and refused to go home. So he stayed there. He studied for many years. He first studied the precepts with the precept master. Later on he studied zen. He was about twenty-four when buddhism was persecuted. He dressed in disguise. In old China people's orientation, you might say, was indicated by their dress. There was Taoist dress and buddhist dress and Confucian dress. He wore Confucian dress and went around visiting secret zen masters at that time. Then later on the persecution was lifted again. Some suspect this time always sounds like the twentieth century. I think the koan tradition sprang up in response to conditions rather like the ones we have regrettably experienced in our time.

His first teacher died and he travelled around quite a long time. He had a close friend called Yen-t'uo (Ganto) and they used to travel together a lot. They were both rather restless,

particularly Hsueh-feng, and he would go around everywhere. He had a rice tub and a spoon and he would be the rice steward in every temple. He would travel around from temple to temple and he'd stay a few years and then go back to another master. Then he'd decide maybe the first master was better and he'd go back to him. He went like this. He actually visited Tou-zu (sp???) three times and he visited the great Te-shan, perhaps the great teacher of his time, nine times. He eventually wound up with Te-shan, who was the great figure of the last case who studied the Diamond Sutra and came down to teach the barbarians that zen was wrong and stayed to perpetuate one of the great zen lines. He was over forty by the time he finally met Te-shan and is generally considered to be a successor of Te-shan. Te-shan was over eighty, quite old, quite long in the tooth. He stayed there for several years with his friend Yen-t'ou. Although they were friends, Yen-t'ou was younger. Yen-t'ou was already very deeply enlightened. Hsueh-feng would struggle along. He had had little experiences that would keep him going, but he couldn't really set his heart to rest. This was a matter of great concern to him. He was known as the sweating horse of zen. A man of effort. He started when he was twelve and here he has just met his true teacher when he was forty, twenty-eight years later. Think of this next time you complain about the time it is taking you to do koans. He's just meeting his teacher now. He stayed with that community for some time and there are a number of koan stories about him there. He doesn't really seem to have connected with his teacher immediately.

The story goes that he was traveling on pilgrimage between training periods with his friend Yen-t'ou. As they were crossing a mountain pass, they were snowed in a little place called Tortoise Mountain in a village that was in Hunan (???) in a little hut. There's nothing much you can do when you're snowed in except meditate and sleep. So Yen-t'ou slept and Hsueh-feng meditated. Every now and again Yen-t'ou would roll over and open his eyes and look at Hsueh-feng sitting there meditating and then he'd roll over and go back to sleep. Day and night Hsueh-feng meditated. This went on for several days. Yen-t'ou sat up and said, "What are you doing sitting there like a wooden buddha by the roadside?" Hsueh-feng said, "My heart is not yet at rest." Which is a very beautiful reply, I think. He had an awareness of who he was and where he stood. I think this sort of admission to ourselves is very important. To see who we really are is always the beginning of something good. Just like discovering our secret greed, or secret tendency to tell lies, or something in yourself. When you notice it, you begin to feel shame. The beginning of generosity and change in you is happening.

Then what happened was that Yen-t'ou said, "Bring out what you know and I'll test you." Hsueh-feng told his story. When he arrived at Te-shan, he said, "Does this student have any share in the matter handed down from antiquity as the fundamental vehicle?" It's a rather fancy way of putting it, but I think you can get what he's saying. Do I have the capacity to be enlightened in this life? Do I have any connection with all those old stories? If you tell stories about something that happened a thousand years ago, people say, 'well, that happened so long ago and doesn't apply to me.' If you tell stories about things that happened a generation ago, people say, 'that happened in the last generation and doesn't apply to me.' If you tell stories about things that happened last week, people say, 'it is not now.' Our potential is really always the same, but Hsueh-feng doubted. He knew that he did not know that in his bones. So he asked his teacher that. Te-shan, even though he was eighty

years old, managed to stagger up and strike him a blow and said, "What are you saying?" He had an insight at that time. He described this sort of thing to his friend Yen-t'ou. He said, "When Te-shan hit me, it was like a bottom falling out of a bucket." Yen-t'ou gave a great shout, "KAH!" (he was known for his shout) and said, "Haven't you heard it said that what comes in through the gate is not the family treasure. You must let it flow out from your own breath to cover heaven and earth, then you will have some small portion of realization." With this shout and these words Hsueh-feng was suddenly greatly enlightened. He bowed and said to Yen-t'ou, "Older brother, today, Tortoise Mountain has finally attained the path." That's often translated today 'In tortoise mountain I have attained the path,' but actually he says, 'Today, the whole village, the whole mountain, the whole world has attained the path.' It is a very beautiful way of putting it. So you can see that Tortoise Mountain is the whole world just like this grain of rice that we hold up.

His friend Yen-t'ou, who was known for his shout, died and sort of disappears from history. He returns later because Hakuin was fascinated with him and how such a wise teacher could die so young. He died in his sixties, his late sixties. He was run through by bandits, guerillas. Just the usual casual mayhem at the time of civil war. He had sent his students away and he sat meditating in his temple. They rode into the temple and speared him. And he had said, "When I go, I will go with a great shout." For miles around villagers heard this great, 'Aaahhh' lion's roar and they knew that Yen-t'ou had gone. Years later Hakuin meditated on this and met Yen-t'ou, actually.

But Hsueh-feng became a very humorous and great teacher with maybe 1500 hundred students himself. A sample of his humor is, "Everyone. The whole great earth is the eye of a monk." You see it's that same enlightenment experience, isn't it? Tortoise Mountain is the universe. Tortoise Mountain gets enlightened. A grain of earth is the whole world. A very great enlightenment experience at work here. He says, "Everyone, the whole great earth is the eye of the monk. Where will you go to take a shit?" So here he is. His humor is at work again. He says, "The whole great earth, though it is just a grain of rice in size, I throw it down. It's in a black lacquer bucket. You can't find it anywhere." Then he says, "Daniel, beat the drum. Call everyone. We'll look for it." Imagine everyone going out to look for that grain of rice. Where do you think that grain of rice is? Is it still here? Someone asked another teacher, Yung-feng (???), about this, and he held up his staff and he said, "Do you see Hsueh-feng?" Hsueh-feng's humor seems to have passed down through the generations.

The verse goes, 'An ox head disappears; a horse head emerges.' Very interesting. Something disappears; something appears. When we really realize and we really see that grain of rice, you will understand what he means. Something disappears and a horse head emerges.

'In the mirror of Hsao-chi there is absolutely no dust.' The mirror of Hsao-chi refers to the Great Sixth Ancestor who is considered to have written a sutra. The only sutra written in relatively recent times. The long story is that he was a semi-literate rice pounder; a workman working around the meditation hall. It was the time when the Fifth Great Family (???) Teacher asked everybody to compose a verse expressing his understanding. A great tradition, actually. There was a person of great

learning and accomplishment in meditation, who was the most senior student who was Hsuen-sueh (???), who wrote:

The body is the enlightenment tree.  
The mind is like a bright mirror stand.  
Polish it again and again diligently,  
and there will be no dust at all.  
Do not let there be any dust.

People were reading this aloud and admiring it as an expression of the depth of meditation and Hui-neng asked somebody to write down on the wall for him his own verse:

Enlightenment is basically not a tree.  
The mind mirror is not a stand.  
Originally there is not a single thing.  
Where is there any dust?

The story is that Hui-neng actually was the first person to succeed the Fifth Great Ancestor, but that's another story.

Okay, so, 'In the mirror of Hsao-chi there is absolutely no dust.' You know what that is like when you are deep in meditation. Everything is crystalline and clear. Hsuan-wu's (???) comments on this are, "Smash the mirror and I'll meet you. First you must smash it."

The poem goes on, 'He beats the drum for you to look, but you don't see./When spring arrives, for whom do the hundred flowers bloom?' Kind of a good question to ask yourself. For whom do the flowers bloom? For whom do the mushrooms push up out of the earth covered with pine needles? For whom do the birds sing if not for you? Who is that one?

So now, here we are in the depths of sesshin, in the depths of samadhi. It is important at this time to raise up your effort. It is easy now to just enjoy sailing down the river as if you were on Cleopatra's barge, but when you come to shore everything will be taken away from you again. If you want something that can't be taken away from you, you must really penetrate right now. Please look into your heart and ask yourself the question, what is it? You will find that the question itself is a marvelous palace that you can walk into. Even that is not enough. You must keep asking yourself, what is it? what is it? going deeper and deeper. You can never really cross that barrier between the question and complete unity, but suddenly it will be crossed. It is beyond your will and your intention, but the universe will do it for you if you are sincere. All we have to do is over and over again approach the gate until suddenly we are flung through it without the use of our own hands.

Please, it's very important to persevere at this time. Let's do it!

# # #