

"MU CHOU'S THIEVING PHONEY"
Blue Cliff Record, Case #10

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July 2, 1993
St. Dorothy's Rest
Camp Meeker, California

This is Case #10 of the Blue Cliff Record, "Mu Chou's Thieving Phoney."

Introduction

So; so. Not so; not so.

In battle everyone occupies a pivotal position. So it is said that if you turn upwards, even Shakyamuni, Maitreya, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, and all the myriad sages together with all the masters in the world suck in their breaths and swallow their voices. If you turn downwards, worms and maggots and everything that crawls, all sentient beings each and everyone emits great shining light. Each and everyone towers like a wall miles high. If on the other hand, you neither face upwards or downwards, how will you deal with it? If there is a principle, go by the principle. If there is no principle, go by the example.

To test I cite this. Look!

Mu Chou asked a student: Where have you just come from?

The student immediately shouted: Kaatz!

Mu Chou said: That's a `Kaatz' on me.

Again the student shouted: Kaatz!

Mu Chou said: Three `Kaatz', four `Kaatz', what then?

The student had nothing to say.

Mu Chou hit him and said: You thieving phoney.

Suei-to's verse:

Two shouts and a third shout.
Good zen students recognize the opportune moment for change.
If you call that riding the tiger's head, the two of them
would both turn out to be blind.
Who after all is really blind?
I bring it out for everyone to see.

Mu Chou always behaved like this in the stories about him. He was the person who, as an old, old man when Yun-men came to him, often wouldn't open his door. But when he did, Yun-men jumped in the door for an interview with him. He said, "What is it?" to Yun-men. Yun-men hesitated and he threw him out and slammed the door and broke Yun-men's leg. Yun-men at that moment screamed with pain and gained enlightenment. Distress is buddha; buddha is distress as Chao-chou said. He was always like this.

He trained in the same temple with Lin-chi under Huang-po and you can feel some of that same very strong flavor in his work. He was the kind of teacher who, no matter what you brought to him, he'd take it away. It really didn't matter how clever or skillful you were, you eventually had it all stolen from you so that something else had to happen.

This is what I think is the great virtue of koan work. This is why, in spite of its extreme obnoxiousness, I stayed with koan work. I think it's a great way. No matter what you bring forth, your delusion gets stolen.

This student maybe had a little bit of understanding. He understood that you can bring out anything and if you really understand, that's it. The bird call, the cushion, pain, sorrow, laughter, all are in the sacred land. He knew that if he said, "Oh, I come from Los Angeles," that Mu Chou would hit him, so he said, "Kaatz!" He tried to offer some zen. Mu Chou just waited until the student wilted and said, "That's a `kaatz' on me." The student needed to do something else, but was stuck in the groove and yelled again. It's hard to intimidate Mu Chou. "Three `kaatz', four `kaatz', what then?" The student had a sort of honesty he couldn't say anything. He couldn't try to imitate any more. So Mu Chou hit him and then said, "You thieving phoney." Again, holding up a barrier for the student. Just saying it like it is.

I took on zen myself without a teacher. I'm not sure if that helped me or not, or if it was bad for me. I read about zen and had done some training in other traditions. I was attracted to the koan work so I decided I would try it. So day and night going about my rather chaotic life and far from any teacher, I held the koan. First I started with the `One Hand', but it stuck in my head too much so I went onto `Mu'. For some years I walked around with mu everywhere--answering the telephone, eating dinner, working. Actually, I was working as a very, very lowly assistant out of House in Australia some of the time. Holding public meetings about aboriginal land rights in bars and trying to meditate when I'd drunk too much in the bar. There was something good about just holding the koan with no guidance at all. Just trying to find a way. One of the things that I think I learned that is really good is to do something and watch what happens and to feel your way. And that it's really good to have a very high barrier. The low barrier doesn't really do it in the long run. We can give you very precise meditation instructions and say, "Do this, do this," and that will get you through about two hours of sesshin. Then you come to the limit of that, and then maybe you can ask me and I'll say, "Well, do that, do that." That will get you through another few hours, and then I'll say, "Don't do this, don't do this," and so on. It gets a bit tedious for you, I think. So, there is some way in which we have to find our way and the barrier, like Mu Chou hitting the student, holding up the barrier, is really what helps us and holds us and is the blessing for us.

We know that life is full of suffering. This is why it got our attention in the first place. Otherwise, the mule would have kept plodding along. We know that all our usual means have not resolved this issue. This becomes evident quite early in life. Children know this. Children then forget it, usually about the time they become teenagers.

I was talking with some senior zen people about how they came to zen and a friend had an enlightenment experience when he was about four or five. His parents used to have these terrible knock down, drag out fights. It was one of those drunken, chaotic families. The pressure of this was his barrier. He used to go away and sit by himself and think about it. He realized that the world was very beautiful and they couldn't see it. He spent years trying to find how to make them see it. He said that when he became a teenager, he forgot. He started riding around on this big motorcycle and things. But then later he came to zen again.

The world really is a great fire and we are burning in it. And everything, our clothes, our feet, our hair is on fire. Eventually that fire drives us to zazen. So when you are in zazen, if you can find a great barrier, be thankful because this is the fire of the world and you have found it in a form in which you can greet it. You must let that barrier penetrate you and you must penetrate it. You must be open enough to let it in, let that fire in. Vigorous, tough and fierce enough to go out after it. We need to be both, don't we? We need to be open and we need to be fierce as well. If you have really done that, then you are really taking on the core of being human, the core of suffering in the world. And the core delight of being human. Why we would want to do this absurd thing like walk around in these bodies anyway. The wonder and beauty and power of it and how it, too, is a great gift.

Eventually, in my own training. . . If you're making it up, well you make it up and you do these absurd things. I thought it would be good to sit outside in the cold, in the rain and so I would sit outside in the cold rain of the winter, in the sleet. Well, I don't know if that helped me or not. I would sit alone in the mountains. I would sit in the city where it was noisy. I got too tense, I think, because I started to throw up all the time. I'd sit and throw up; sit and throw up. But nevertheless the koan was working in me. Eventually, I was fortunate enough to find a teacher and managed to stagger there to find my teacher and sat more and more. Actually, I didn't get any better. I used to throw up more. I remember one of the big features of sesshin for me was that I'd develop a high fever and just race out during kinhin and throw up and race back in the dojo. The leaders would scream at you if you came late in those days after kinhin. That was okay; that was part of the barrier and I respected that. That wasn't hard in itself. What was hard was not understanding. Being sick isn't hard; dying isn't hard. What's hard is not understanding and not having a heart at rest.

When I went to Aitken Roshi, who is actually a very courtly and gentle person, he nevertheless seemed like a cliff to me. I had come all this way from Australia and I walked in and he said... He always used to ask you what you wanted out of zazen. There is this category of students' desires that Yasutani Roshi handed down, I don't know how old it is, that if you wanted this, you got this practice, and if you wanted enlightenment, you got a koan. They're still sort of good, those categories. I said, "I'm already working on the koan `Mu'." He said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "No." He rang his bell. That was my first dokusan. My relationship continued like that for quite some time. I would walk in and sometimes he'd ask me a question and I'd say, "I don't know," and he'd just ring his bell. I had to somehow detach from the idea that this was failure because I couldn't have borne it, I think. One of the things I liked about

koan study was that I put myself at risk with it in that way. That I had to face the fact that I didn't know to the very bottom of my toes. There wasn't anyway I could fake it and say, "Well, I know a lot about English literature." He'd ring his bell. He knew a lot, too. So that was very good.

I tried many things. I tried being desperate during sesshin. I did more sesshins than I care to remember in that fashion. They all sort of blur now when I look back. I tried sitting up every night after sesshin, then being just so sleepy on my cushion in the morning. So all those things I tried. I wasn't smart enough to talk to other people. I don't know whether this was good or not. I had to make it all up since I wasn't talking to my teacher either. I'd just go and say, "I don't know," but I went three times a day to dokusan. Just sat there. A long dokusan was about thirty seconds. I think that was good for me. I held myself against the wall, against my own sense of failing. I was really failing, thoroughly failing, utterly failing. I think it's good to do that. We hit something that's very basic and fundamental when we do that. Then we find that it begins to turn and that failure itself, suddenly it's not so failed. I realized I didn't know and sometimes I was so happy even. "Fortunately I know nothing about this matter." And he would ring his bell. This, too, was the great life. Just walking down the hall, coming in and doing my bows, leaving again and doing my bows. I think at that moment I began to become free when I understood that I was really willing to fail and that the failure itself was beyond gain and loss, beyond failure and success. So then it wasn't really necessary to pass koans and in due course, eventually, by some accident I did.

Yet I remember understanding that there was no other life that I really could have because everything else was on fire. My understanding of fire was poor so I felt very heated and burned by it. I was prepared to do this. I came thinking I'll check this out and maybe stay for three months and I stayed nine years before I left to come here to start our own temple. I realized that if I stayed fifty years that would be okay. That, too, is the Great Life and that if I didn't understand, well as Yamada Roshi used to say, "Oh, perhaps you will understand in the next life or the one after that." I love the integrity of that. What does it matter as long as you are walking the way, that is the great thing.

Then we see fire differently and we understand how it burns in everything. It burns in our sorrow and our joy. There is a great current underneath that is so alive and rich and bubbles and tingles all the time in the midst of the fiercest joy and the fiercest sorrow. It is always there. A kind of dragon that sleeps underneath breathing away.

This is what the old teachers are doing when they hit somebody or they shout. They are just holding up that barrier so that we can get beyond success and failure. This is what your knees are doing when they scream at you. They are holding up that barrier. This is what your heart is doing when old grief comes up in sesshin. It is also what your heart is doing when an inexplicable joy comes over you that you know you did nothing to deserve. "Fortunately I did nothing to deserve this." It is something beyond that narrow planning and succeeding. It is so much greater than that. This is the kind of blessing of our lives that happens. This very deep way in which all actions become sacred. Naturally we love life and naturally we are not

sentimental about it either. Even our dying is a form of this great love running through everything.

Then naturally a kind of vow comes. The bodhisattva vow is to save all beings to walk the way, to become enlightened and to help others to enlightenment. This is really a vow to live in the middle of the fire; that there is no other place that's as valuable and interesting. There is nothing more interesting and amazing to do with our lives. Nothing that quite so astonishes. It's not some sort of Victorian piety. It's seeing the nature of the world. It's seeing how the floor runs all the way to the wall, how the sun is bright and the night is dark. It's just like that, the compassion of zen.

Kuan-yin in iconography has a thousand arms and hands. One old teacher asked another, "Why does the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara have all those hands and eyes?" (Each hand has an eye in the palm.) The other teacher said, "It's like reaching behind you for a pillow in the night." We often dream voluptuously involuntarily. This is the great work that we do.

So please continue your dream. See what kind of waking you can come upon. At this stage in sesshin use any method that you can to deepen your practice. Do not be afraid to experiment. Do not be afraid to take risks with your practice. Do not be afraid to fail. You will find something that is beyond failure and success. Please, let's keep going.

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