

The Blue Cliff Record, Case 24

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Isan and Iron Grindstone Lu

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Master Engo's Pointer Stand on the summit of the highest peak and demons and outsiders cannot know you. Walk on the bottom of the deepest sea and even the Buddha's eye cannot catch sight of you. Even if your eyes are like shooting stars and your intellect is like flashing lightning, still you won't avoid being like the spirit tortoise dragging his tail leaving traces. At this point, what is proper? To test I site this old case. Listen.

The Main Case Iron Grindstone Lu arrived at Isan's, Isan said, "Old cow, so you've come." The Grindstone said, "Tomorrow there's a great communal feast on Taizan, are you going to go teacher?" Isan relaxed his body and lay down. The Grindstone immediately left.

Master Setcho's Verse Once riding an iron horse she entered the fortress. The edict comes down reporting that the six nations are cleared. Still holding the golden whip she questions the returning traveler. In the depths of the night, who will go along to walk the royal road?

In yesterday's koan, we made reference to Iron Grindstone Lu doing dharma combat with Shiko. Today I picked one of the koans from the Blue Cliff Record that has to do specifically with Iron Grindstone Lu. Her name in Japanese is pronounced Ryu Ketsuma. Ryu was her family name, in Chinese that's pronounced Lu. So we translate Iron Grindstone and left the Chinese name Lu, Iron Grindstone Lu. Ketsu means iron, and ma means mill. So it's a mill that grinds iron instead of grinding wheat or rice. She earned this nickname because of her ability in dharma combat. She was known throughout that part of China during that period of time as being a terrible opponent in dharma combat, that would just grind up any of the monks that came to challenge her. She was a successor of Master Isan, and Isan was part of the lineage of Yakujo. Yakujo received the transmission from Baso. So Yakujo was one of the 84 enlightened disciples of Baso, and Yakujo transmitted to several people. He also transmitted to Obaku, who became the teacher of Rinzai and the beginning of the Rinzai line. He also transmitted to Isan who along with his dharma successor Kyogen, began another line that continued for many generations. They were both part of what we call the five houses of Zen in China at that period of time. Another one of those houses was the Tozan school, or the Soto school. Both the Rinzai and Soto lineages are part of our monastery here. Those are the only two that continued through time and are still alive and well to this day.

Isan was also probably, one of the best known teachers of that period of time, he had some fifty four people that he transmitted to. It was a period of time that Zen was in it's golden age. I've often wondered why. Other times in the history of Zen if a teacher could find only one sucesor would feel very fortunate. Down to the present day usually teachers have only two or three successors at the most. Some of them, but it's very

unusual may have as many as six or seven. But during that time, fifty or a hundred were not unusual. Isan had fifteen hundred monks living at his monastery. The monastery that he had was on Isan mountain, that's how most of these masters got their names, they took the name of the mountain that they lived on. The year was 848, so it was the ninth century, and by imperial decree Buddhism was reestablished after eight years of fierce prosecution. That used to go on a lot. The years that Buddhism was in China. It's even happened just recently, I think I mentioned it just recently, so one period of time if the emperor happened to be a Buddhist, then Buddhism was in and everyone was a Buddhist. Buddhism flourished, and the emperor would build monasteries and some Zen master would become the National Teacher and have the ear of the emperor, and train the emperor's children and that's about as close they got to right action, being able to influence the Emperor's decisions. And then that emperor would leave and a new emperor would come in who was a Taoist, and all of the Buddhist monasteries would be destroyed and all the Buddhist monks chased out back into lay practice or beheaded in some cases and the Taoist's would be back in, back and forth it would go. But somehow that continuity remained. And the reason it remained was that what was transmitted was not what's in the text. So you can burn monasteries, you can burn the sutras, you can burn the records of the masters. What's transmitted is alive and goes from mind to mind so you can't see it. It goes from generation to generation, from person to person. In fact everything else is it's context, a matrix that's created so that the mind to mind transmission can happen. Every teacher has a teacher, and although we realize it ourselves, there's nothing that the teacher can give you, it's already there that which is to be realized, still in the Zen lineage, the approval of the teacher is a requirement so that you determine the authenticity of a lineage by tracing it back. And it's all documented. It's not that it's not documented, it is documented after the fact, after the mind to mind transmission, when transmission has already occurred, when the documents verifying it have already been passed on. That's what's kept it alive, that's what's kept it very vital. Each generation each teacher has the burden of responsibility to manifest the dharma according to the circumstances they encounter. So the dharma always fills the vessel that contains it. It's not like trying to take something that was written 2000 years ago and getting it to fit in the 20th century. It fits because it was transmitted to a 20th century person.

This koan takes place about five years before Isan's death at age 83, so he was in his late seventies at the time of this encounter. He had built a temple on Isan mountain with his own hands. He was part of what was known as Denhai monks, monks who cultivated the fields and raised cattle. That was a tremendous departure from the original teachings in India. In India, the Vinaya for monks, which is still maintained in the Hinayana tradition, was that a monk doesn't work. It's very much the same in Hasidism where the devout Hasidic Jew studies the scriptures, and devote themselves completely to them, it's almost a form of monasticism, and doesn't work. So it was in Buddhism, and to this day Theravadan monks don't work. The lay practitioners do the work and gain merit by doing the work for them. So they're not allowed to grow their own food, they beg for their food, so to be a mendicant is an important part of the process. In Hinayana Buddhism that remains true, but in Mahayana Buddhism, particularly when it went to China. At first the Mahayana Buddhists also did the same thing, they didn't work, so long as there was a way to support them. But as the monasteries started to be located in the very far reaching regions of China in the mountain ranges, there were no villages to go to to beg. The winters were very very severe so in order to survive, they needed to grow their own food, they needed to cultivate and work in the fields, and that began with Yakujo, Isan's teacher. Yakujo's

very famous for saying, "A day of no work, a day of no food." That was the basic rule of his temple. If you didn't work, you didn't eat, because these monks didn't want to work. You know that was breaking the rules of the Vinaya. But of course the Vinaya was also transmitted mind to mind. In each generation the teacher needs to be able to respond to that Vinaya in a way that's appropriate to the circumstances. There's a lot more to the Vinaya than the surface that appears as the rules, the same with the precepts. People looking at the precepts, reading the sixteen precepts think that what you read is what they are, but it goes much beyond that. And in fact how far beyond that is not even possible to understand until one's training is virtually completed, it's at the end of formal training, after, fifteen or twenty years of training, that we take up the precepts as koans. One hundred and twenty koans to test one's understanding of the precepts. The precepts are also transmitted as well as given in the ceremony. Given as an act of faith in the beginning of one's training. They're actually transmitted as part of the transmission of the dharma at the end of training. So Yakujo made that rule, and in fact when he became too old to work, his monks felt sorry for him because he was such an old man, they didn't want him to work. They begged him to stop working. He said, "No, the rule is, a day of no work, a day of no food." So they took his tools and they hid them, and he stopped eating. So finally they had to give him the tools back, and he kept working until the day he died.

And Isan being a part of that lineage went off and started a temple on Isan Mountain, and they cultivated the fields and also raised cattle. I guess the cattle were raised for food, for milk, for food, whatever, as well as the cultivation of the fields. So all of their sustenance came from the mountain, whatever they could get from working with that.

Now Isan, because I guess cattle were very dominant; if you went to his monastery you probably stepped over tons of buffalo dung to get to the main gate, there were grazing cattle all over the place. Buffalo were very much up front in his way of teaching, I'm sure it came up again and again, just like when we had a gourmet deli, that would always come up in dharma talks here. It was always being related to the circumstances the students find themselves in. So one of his favorite koans that he would say to his monks was that in many years from now, in two hundred years, at the front gate of this monastery I will be reborn as a buffalo. And on the side of the buffalo will be written, 'This is monk Isan.' If you call it a buffalo, it's monk Isan. If you call it monk Isan, it's a buffalo. What will you call it. It's one of the two hundred koans that students need to work with here at Doshinji. Now obviously, old Iron Grindstone Lu, who was his successor must have passed through that old koan of the buffalo, and I think that's why he personally called her 'old buffalo cow.' In some of the translations they say 'old female buffalo.' For obvious reasons in English, calling someone an old cow is derogatory. Calling someone an old bull is not, so some of the translations say 'old female buffalo.' But you should understand the point of it, in Chinese that wouldn't be a derogatory statement. And that's what the word means in Chinese, it means cow. It's a different character for cow than it is for the male buffalo.

So Iron Grindstone Lu who had now succeeded Isan and had built a hermitage on an adjoining peak of Isan Mountain came to visit him. Master Engo, in speaking of the nun, Iron Grindstone said that she was like, "Stone struck spark, like a lightning flash. Hesitate and you lose your body and your life. In the path of meditation if you get to the most essential place, where are there so many things? This meeting of adepts is

like seeing horns on the other side of the wall and knowing immediately that there's an ox. Or seeing smoke on the other side of the mountain and immediately knowing there's a fire. When pushed, they move. When pressed they turn about." That is they function freely, both of them. Both of them are adepts, that's the thing to see. That the complete merging of parent and child, child and parent had been complete with these two.

Iron Grindstone Lu had studied for a long time, her active edge was sharp and dangerous. She built a hut a few miles from Isan Mountain and one day went to call on Isan. When he saw her coming, he said, "Old cow, so you've come." The Grindstone said, "Tomorrow there's a great communal feast on Mount Tai. Are you going to go teacher?" Isan relaxed his body and lay down whereupon Grindstone left. Engo said, "All of you look! Throughout they seem to be conversing, but this is not Zen neither is it Taoism. Can it be understood by calling it unconcerned?" Is that what his reaction was. In one of the first translations of this koan, one that was produced many, many years ago, that's what the translator said, that he was unconcerned. That's not what the point of this koan is. There's a lot more to be seen.

Now Isan Mountain was over six hundred miles from Mount Tai. How then did Iron Grindstone Lu want Isan to go to the feast. They didn't have planes in those days. It's like one of the students from here coming to me and saying, "Daido, in a half hour there's going to be a party at ZCLA in Los Angeles, are you going to go?" So what was the meaning? Engo says, "This old lady understands Isan's conversation. Fibre coming, thread going. One letting go, one gathering in. They answer back to each other like two mirrors reflecting each other, without any reflecting image to be seen. Action to action they complement each other, phrase to phrase they accord." This is a perfect example, this dialog, of that completion between teacher and disciple. Two mirrors face to face, reflecting with no image in between. Why is there no image in between? Why is it that they can't be seen by the Buddha's and ancestors? Why is it that the eye cannot see itself? When you are the thing itself, there's no separation. You need to be outside of something in order to see it. You need to be separated in order to see it. In true intimacy, there's no knowing. There's no seeing. There's no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. These two are one reality, they function freely. The fibre coming, the thread going, in sewing. One letting go, rolling out, one gathering in. Letting go and gathering in. Letting go is where the teacher or the adept is positive, nourishing, giving, manifesting in the phenomenal world, in the relative. Holding back, they're not there, they take away. One rolls out, the other gathers in, the other rolls out, the other gathers in. It's in complete harmony. It's like a beautiful dance, a beautiful dharma dance. They complement each other. Phrase to phrase they accord. Then Engo says, "People these days can be poked three times and not turn their heads. But this old lady couldn't be fooled one little bit. No means is this an emotional view based on mundane truth. Like a bright mirror on a stand. Like a bright jewel in the palm of the hand. When a foreigner comes, the foreigners reflect it. When a native comes, the native reflects it. It's that she knows there's something transcendent, that's why she acts like this." That bright mirror on its stand is the mirror of samadhi. So whatever is there, it reflects it. Doesn't interpret it, analyze it, judge it, characterize it, understand it, file it, store it, manipulate it, love it or hate it. It reflects it perfectly. The perfect mirror of samadhi.

This kind of dharma combat constantly went on during China's golden age of Zen. There were these constant pilgrimages that monks would make, from monastery to monastery. Testing, sharpening their

understanding. Perfecting, going further. What's the limit? How far can you go? There's no edge, there's no boundary. Where's the edge of the universe? If you think there's an edge, then what is it that's just beyond the edge? You too are just like that.

Enko said, "Right now you're content to understand this is unconcern." This is Isan's lying down. Another master said, "Don't take having concerns as not having concerns. Time and time again, concern is born of unconcern. If you can immerse yourself into this and penetrate through, you'll see that Isan and Iron Grindstone Lu acting in this way is the same sort as ordinary people's conversation. People are often hindered by words, that's why they don't understand. Only an intimate acquaintance can understand them thoroughly." Intimate acquaintance means, realizing that Buddha mind. "Time and time again, concern is born of unconcern." A nice way of understanding compassion. We think of compassion as doing good, but that's not what compassion is. Doing good is doing good. Compassion is quite different. It functions freely with no sense of separation between the doer and the thing that the doer is doing. It happens like the way you grow your hair, it just happens. If someone falls, you pick them up. It's the same intimacy in which there is no knowing. There's no separation. It comes out of wisdom. Wisdom is the realization of no separation. Compassion is the activity that comes out of that realization. So it's very different from doing good. Tokusan's sixty blows was an act of grandmotherly compassion. Not a punishment. Rinzai's fist, an act of compassion. Desperately these teachers wanted their disciples to realize themselves, make themselves free. To realize the inherent freedom that's their very life just as it is. So can this be understood by calling it unconcerned? "When letting go they both let go. When rolling in they both roll in." We call this in Zen training the merging of perspectives.

In the footnote to this Main Case when Iron Grindstone said, "Tomorrow there's a great communal feast on Taizan, are you going to go teacher." The footnote says, "The arrow is sharp to no purpose. In China they beat the drum. In Korea they dance. The letting go was too fast, the gathering in was too slow." 'In China they beat the drum. In Korea they dance.' Daido drinks sake, Kyodo gets drunk. No separation.

Master Setcho's Verse

Once riding an iron horse she enters the fortress. The edict comes down reporting that the six nations are cleared. Still holding the golden whip she questions the returning traveler. In the depths of the night who will go along to walk the royal road.

This is a very very clear verse, some of them are difficult to follow. 'Once riding an iron horse she enters the fortress.' This is praising Iron Grindstone Lu, coming as she did to Isan. 'The edict comes down reporting that the six nations are cleared.' This is praising the way Isan questioned her. 'Still holding the golden whip she questions the returning traveler.' This is praising Grindstone saying "Tomorrow there's a great communal feast on Taizan, are you going to go teacher?" In the depths of the night, who will go along to walk the royal road?' This praises Isan relaxing his body and Iron Grindstone immediately turning and leaving.

Once Seppo commented on this case with verse. He said:

Standing on the summit of the highest peak, unknown to demons and outsiders.

Walking on the bottom of the deepest sea unseen even by the Buddha's eyes.

That's referring to one of the ranks of Master Tozan, the five ranks of Tozan. It refers to a very highly developed state of understanding. While on the mountain peak manifesting in the market place. While in the market place, alone on the mountain peak. The merging of absolute and relative.

A monk once asked Seppo, "When Isan said, 'Old cow, so you've come.' What was his inner meaning?" Seppo said, "In the depths of the white clouds the golden dragon leaps." The golden dragon of course is Iron Grindstone, an enlightened being. The dragon always functions in the clouds, flies with the clouds. The monk said, "When Iron Grindstone Lu said, 'Tomorrow there's a great communal feast on Taizan, are you going to go teacher?' What was her inner meaning?" Seppo said, "In the heart of the blue waves the jade rabbit bolts." The monk said, "When Isan immediately lay down, what was his inner meaning?" Seppo said, "Old and worn out, decrepit and lazy. Days without concern, lying idly deep in sleep facing the blue mountains." Is this unconcerned?

It's said that Iron Grindstone was fully equipped with the seven items of a warrior. The seven items of a warrior are also the seven items of a teacher. What those seven items are: One is great capacity and great function. The second is swiftness of wit and eloquent mind. The third is wonderful spirituality of speech and movement, that is being able to manifest live words not dead words. Fourth an active edge to kill or to give life. To kill is to have someone understand the absolute basis of reality. To give life is to show it, manifest it in the ten thousand things. Fifth, wide learning and broad experience. The sixth, clarity of mirroring awareness, that perfect great mirror of samadhi. And seven the freedom to appear or disappear. That is to let go or to hold fast. That is to give and nourish or to take away and disappear.

The question; 'what did Isan mean when he said, "Old buffalo cow so you've come."' The footnote to that statement says, 'Check a probing pole, a reed shade, where should you look to see the obscurity.' Probing pole, what was Iron Grindstone's purpose in asking tfeh question, "There's a great communal feast on Taizan, are you going to go teacher?" The footnote said, 'In China they beat the drum, in Korea they dance.' "Isan relaxed his body and laid down." The footnote says, "The arrow got him. Where will you see Isan.' The Grindstone immediately left. The footnote says, 'She's gone. She saw the opportunity and acted. How will you understand this?'

We tend to look at our practice in a very abstract way. We tend to equate the practice with the monastery. Some kind of a sanctuary that's removed from the world. We come to the monastery, we're quiet, we're gentle. We bow to each other, we go back out into the world and we push and we shove. So on the left hand we have the monastery, and the left hand we have the world. We live in a period of time where self-centeredness is the key. Overwhelming self-centeredness. The "me" generation. I'm worth it. It's kind of interesting, there's an ad that appears on television now continually for the lottery, it shows people responding to the obvious question, "What would you do if you won, several million dollars, ten million dollars in a lottery?" And it's very interesting the responses. One person's going to buy the company they

work for and fire the boss. Somebody else is going to buy his and her's Maseratis. Somebody else is going to buy and island and on and on. It's kind of interesting, they're all self-centered answers. It's not so much that, this is not a sampling of the public. Because they're all actors that are responding, it's obvious. But the thing that's interesting to me is that these companies don't advertize things unless a lot of research is done. And what that research indicated, what people wanted to do with their lottery money is self-centered. Nobody talked about helping the poor, of housing the homeless, or donating some of it to AIDS research, or any of the ten thousand needs that exist out there. And the reason, they didn't talk about it is that that doesn't appeal to the public. The research indicated that if you want people to take a chance on the lottery, then you're going to have to give them very self-centered motivations in order to do it. It's just like all the other advertizing it's self-centered. And the reason the advertizing is self-centered, is it's a perfect mirror of what's going on. If you want to understand a country or a society, look at the advertizing. Having worked in that field for many years I know. A lot of research goes into it. They know their customers. And they know them well. What does it say about this time and place that we exist in? What does it say to us when we realize that seven people running for public office in New York City are under indictment, two of them convicted felons. They're about to take public office, about to be given public trust. What's wrong when we realize that in business there's incredible corruption, in politics incredible corruption, in religion incredible corruption. Where have we failed? And as I've mentioned before when you really look at it, what it's about is power. And the illusion that what power is, is money, the ability to manipulate and control people, things, and in a sense from a mundane point of view that's what power is. But real power, spiritual power, is the realization of the self, is the freedom that comes out of that realization. The freedom that was manifested with these two adepts, when you see the point of what this dialog was between the two of them. It's a period of time that the relationship's disintergrating, family is slowly becoming obsolete, compassion is almost non-existent. What can we do?

It's really important to keep asking, to keep questioning. But ask yourself, and answer yourself. That's what zazen is about. Be master of yourself. It's the same with this koan, where do you see the point of this koan? The answer is within the questions themselves. Don't separate yourself from Iron Grindstone or Isan. The answer is within yourself, in your life. Not some abstraction or some esoteric doctrine, but this very life itself.

Please use the remainder of this sesshin as if your life depended on it. Don't waste a moment of it, because your life does depend on it. To enter this incredible way is probably the most important thing that any one of us will ever do with our lives. It goes far beyond mundane power, position, authority, money. It has to do with very stuff that life itself is made of. So throw yourself into it, totally. Into your zazen, into the chanting, into the bowing, into the work, into sesshin and unify the mind. Don't hold back. Take a chance. Let go. Let go of whatever you're holding on to. That's the way you practice the edge. Life is a precious gift. It doesn't need to be consumed in pain and suffering. It's perfect and it's complete, lacking nothing, just as it is. And if you haven't realized that truth yet, this is the time to do it. Each one of us are fully equipped Buddhas. Fully equipped human beings. There's nothing that you need that you don't have there. You have it. It needs to be realized.