

Transcript of the teisho given on 19th March 2005 (4th day of Spring Sesshin, 2005)

Today's Teisho is Case 31 in the Blue Rock Collection.

Mayoku comes to Shokei

ENGO'S INTRODUCTION: With subconscious stirring, images appear; with awareness, ice forms. Even if there is no stirring and no awareness, you have not yet escaped from the confinement of the fox's hole. If you truly penetrate your practice and become master of it, you will experience not a trace of obstruction. You will be like a dragon supported by deep waters, like a tiger that commands its mountain retreat. Then, if you let go, even tiles and pebbles become illuminating; if you hold fast, even pure gold loses its luster. And the koans of the old masters will become tedious. Tell me, what am I talking about? See the following.

MAIN SUBJECT: Mayoku came to Shokei carrying his bell staff with him, walked around Shokei's seat three times, shook his staff, ringing the bells, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight. Shokei said, "Good." Mayoku then came to Nansen, walked around Nansen's seat three times, shook his staff, ringing the bells, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight. Nansen said, "That's not the answer." Mayoku said, "But Shokei said, 'Good'; why do you say, 'That's not the answer'?" Nansen said, "Shokei is 'good', but you don't have the answer. You are blown about the wind."

SETCHO'S VERSE:

*This mistake, that mistake,
Never take them away!
In the four seas, the waves subside;
A hundred rivers flow quietly to the sea.*

*The twelve bells of the staff tinkled up high;
Empty and silent is the road to the gate.
No, not empty and silent;
The enlightened man must take medicine
For the illness of "having no illness."*

(Bell rings three times)

This is a koan that begins with an encounter between two dharma brothers, Mayoku and Shokei, who are roughly contemporaries. In fact Mayoku, Shokei and Nansen --they were all dharma brothers, all students of the great master Ma Tzu ("Old Horse,"). Ma Tzu was a great Zen teacher and produced many deeply awakened students and these are three of them. So this little story involves people who practiced together for many years and had deep ties of affection.

Main subject: Mayoku came to Shokei carrying his bell staff with him.

Now, in China people who went on a pilgrimage sometimes carried a staff. This tradition has probably disappeared in China, but in Japan even today, when people go on pilgrimages, I'm told they sometimes carry such a staff. Often this staff has a ring at the top, which looks a little like a halo, and three pair of rings hang off it. In the Chinese version, there were apparently little bells instead of rings. This pilgrim's staff actually goes back to ancient India where people would often carry a staff with three prongs--a trident, which was an ancient symbol of perfection in Europe as well as India and East Asia.

So Mayoku comes to Shokei's temple carrying his pilgrim's staff after traveling some distance. He walks around Shokei's seat three times and shakes the staff so that the bells jingle, and strikes the ground with the staff's wooden base. Shokei is sitting on his cushion and doing zazen.

Why is Mayoku traveling, and what is he trying to show to Shokei? He is, as Setcho tells us in his closing verse, an "enlightened man." Mayoku has just recently had Dai Kensho, the Great Awakening experience, and he has come to share his happiness with Shokei, his elder dharma brother, who had also experienced Dai Kensho years before.

Mayoku has experienced Buddha nature with every atom of his being. Deep, pure Dai Kensho! He has just gone through this experience and it can be very powerful. You can laugh for days or you can cry for days. For a long time after your Dai Kensho, it is like being in arctic summer where the sun never sets. Unbelievable, wonderful experience! Mayoku is in the arctic summer where the sun never sets and he is walking on the top of the world. So naturally he sets off to see his dharma brothers, Shokei and Nansen. First he takes his pilgrim's staff and he heads off to Shokei's Temple, where Shokei is sitting in the Ch'an Hall, the zendo, deep in samadhi. Mayoku comes up with his staff, walks around Shokei's cushion three times, strikes the ground and stands up straight. Shokei looks at him and says "Good! Good!" Mayoku says, "Well, see you later, brother!"

Then Mayoku goes to the temple of Nansen. He walks into the temple complex where Nansen is doing zazen. Mayoku circles Nansen. His staff goes jingle jingle, jingle, and the handle goes "boom!" on the floorboards. Nansen looks up and says, "That's not the answer. I'm sorry, but you still don't have 'It'."

Mayoku is incredulous. He says, "But ...but ... Shokei said it was a good answer. Why do you say that's not the answer?" Nansen replies, "It's Shokei's nature to say 'Good' to everything. But you still don't have the answer. You still don't have 'It.'" This is such an important koan.

I would like to dedicate this talk to HOLY, SACRED FAILURE. Let us praise failure, please, and let us understand that failure is the holiest and the most wonderful thing in the world, and let us not have any misconceptions about this.

I went through many sesshins failing to appreciate this. I was working on the Mu koan for a long time, and I dreamed of the day when I would answer it. I went to sesshin after

sesshin, and for many years it was all so strenuous. Day One: legs would be ok, and I would think, “Maybe this is the turning point! The days of pain are finally behind me!” Day Two: legs began to hurt. “Damn! Pain again!” I always used to get sick at sesshin. I would get cold sores, big fever blisters on my lips. This happened so often that after a while, I used to keep cold sore medicine in my shaving kit. I would get totally wiped out by Day Two of sesshin. Day Three: I’d be hanging on by a thread, very tired. Day Four: no answer! Day Five: no answer!

This went on for years, and then one day I answered the Mu koan. Well, it’s really not possible to answer the Mu koan; I had a deep encounter with Mu and it was totally unself-conscious. I had gone to so many sesshins, and I had almost given up on the idea of answering the koan. I didn’t even know why I was sitting. I was just sitting. I think I stayed in the group because . . . I don’t know why. My friends were there, my dharma brothers and sisters. We were all training together at the Center, but the idea of answering the koan had become so remote. Sometimes, before I would go to see Genki Roshi in dokusan, I would hear people calling, “Muuuuuu” “Muuuuuu,” “Muuuuuu.” Then I would go into the dokusan room, but I couldn’t even open my mouth. My spirit was crushed, and I remember one sesshin when Genki Roshi tried to coax me to say something: “Come on. Come on. Just give it a try.” But I just couldn’t do anything. I was paralyzed.

For many years, I would come to the sesshin, unpack my stuff and I’d think, “This might be the time! The time when I will get enlightenment.” But as the years went by, I set my sights a little lower: “Maybe I’ll just manage to answer my koan.” As more years and sesshins went by, I didn’t even care about answering the koan. I would go to sesshins and unpack, sit for five or six days, and then at the end, I’d pack up my stuff and say, “Good bye! Good bye!” to everyone. This went on for years. For me, Mu was a journey into confusion. I started Zen knowing what I wanted to do. I wanted to achieve enlightenment. But the more I went on, the more clueless I became. The strange thing is that when I had almost totally given up, I had a deep encounter with Mu.

This event took place when we were building our temple, Tokugan-ji, up in the mountains. I was staying that summer on the temple site for a number of weeks, as I recall. I had volunteered to stay there to help build the temple, and we had a sesshin at the end of the month of work. One day, during the sesshin, I just got up from my cushion and went in to see the teacher and presented my Mu. It was a totally unself-conscious act, and the consequences didn’t matter at all. Totally unselfconscious! It surprised me. What came out from my mouth wasn’t from me. That was a shock. After my encounter with Mu, I felt rather strange for a while. “Dazed” wouldn’t be the right word for my condition then. I was really in a new state of mind, and I still don’t have a word for it. Then I went home, and I reflected on it all. I thought, “I have actually answered the Mu koan. Wow! That’s fantastic!”

After “passing” the Mu koan, I thought zen practice would be easy from then on. In the Mumonkan, it says that after you have answered the Mu koan, your eyebrows will be interwoven with the eyebrows of the Buddhas and Patriarchs. Actually, that is true!

When you enter Mu-shin, you see with Buddha's eyes. You have a Buddha's-eye-view of the world. When the Big Mind enters your body, you become one with Buddhas and the Patriarchs. Although I didn't fully appreciate what had happened to me, I was just very glad to have answered the koan after years of work. I just thought, "It's all going to be easy from here on in."

Everybody knows that the Mu koan is difficult, and I thought that passing it would be the end of all my troubles. So I received a new, post-Mu koan, but the strange thing was that the answer didn't come. It was like a bad dream! I couldn't believe this was happening again! It actually made me mad! I thought, "This zen is a big rip-off. What a scam!"

Meanwhile, everybody else in our sangha was going into the dokusan room--they would sometimes be in there for what seemed like an hour--and it was obvious that they were answering their koans. I couldn't believe I was so unlucky.

I was stuck, but as I see now, getting stuck is a wonderful thing. There was something I just hadn't noticed, something I just wasn't seeing yet. As I said yesterday, when your Big Mind has come through the wall of nothingness and possessed your body for the first time, you are indeed seeing with Buddha's eyes, but you don't yet know how to use Buddha's eyes. It is as though you have been blind all your life and now you have eyes, but you still don't know how to see.

You may be familiar with stories about people who were born blind, or have lost their sight at an early age, and have been surgically rescued. When they look around after the operation, they don't at first understand what their eyes are seeing; in particular, they don't know how to perceive depth—objects in three dimensions. They have been given the capacity to see, but they still haven't learned how to see. This distinction was a big point of confusion for me. I thought, "If my eyebrows are interwoven with the eyebrows of the Buddhas and Patriarchs, as Master Mumon promises in the Mumonkan, then why can't I answer this damned koan?" Nobody explained the distinction to me, and explanations were not part of the tradition. Genki Roshi never explained anything in this way. That wasn't his approach. In classical zen style, he wanted students to struggle with uncertainty, and that's admirable, but a little help is not a bad idea. When I studied with Webb Roshi, he explained things more, and I found this helpful.

At any rate, my point is this is: even after you experience Mu in a dramatic way, and even after a kensho experience, you will still come to many sesshins where you have some trouble answering your koans. And that is a great opportunity to live a bigger life! There is no timetable. Some people develop quickly; some develop slowly. The schedule is not under your control, and it doesn't matter ultimately.

One of the greatest Zen teachers of the twentieth century was the Chinese monk Hsu-yun ("Empty Cloud"). As I mentioned the other day, Hsu-yun was the son of a minor military officer and administrator in China. His father did not want him to become a practitioner of ch'an, zen. So the father married him off when he was still a child to two young ladies. Hsu Yun and his two brides were rather unusual people, however, because they

began to practice ch'an together. As soon as Hsu-yun's father died, they all left their home and went to various temples in China, and they all achieved Dai Kensho. They were quite unusual dharma brothers and sisters! They never lived as husband and wives, but they carried on a correspondence for many years. My point here is that Hsu-yun started practicing when he was about 18, after his father died. He did sesshins, many sesshins, year after year. In Japan, by the way, trainees attend 6 or 7 sesshins a year. In China, that may have been the case too, before the Communist Revolution. In his many wanderings, Hsu-yun would do solitary practice, but he always came out of the mountains to do sesshins at various temples in China. He did maybe 5 or 6 or maybe 7 sesshins every year for many years, and he was in his 50s when he had his Dai Kensho.

Apparently Hsu-yun was tremendously inspiring. People who met him said that he reminded them of the great Zen masters of the olden times—Ma Tzu, Nansen, Joshu, and Rinzai. Once in every 500 years, a person is born who can practice as Hsu-yun practiced and have insight so penetrating. But Hsu-yun required 40 years to mature. When he did mature, it was really something. It's very important to recognize that the clock is not running. Practice is between you and the universe. It just depends on whether you can find within yourself the patience and humility to walk this path and not worry about success or failure.

For me, this humility was hard to achieve. When I started doing Zen, I was so impatient for breakthroughs. I wanted to have "mystical" experiences. I was just determined to encounter something unusual. But the mystical experiences didn't come! I sat on the cushion and tried, fruitlessly, to come up with some insight that would impress my teacher. As I said earlier, sesshin after sesshin, year after year, I was unable even to answer the breath perception koan. I could not concentrate wholeheartedly and openheartedly on a thing as simple as my breath. Eventually, however, I was appointed Tenzo or Head Cook of our sangha.

Our sangha was a little bit bigger than this one; maybe 35 or 40 people would attend sesshin. Our system was that one person, each half year, would be selected by the roshi to cook for two sesshins and, as a result, that person would have very little time to practice at the sesshin itself. This person would devote himself or herself single-mindedly to preparing the food. This was not a job I wanted to have. I wanted to be enlightened, and I thought, "I am not going to get enlightened in the kitchen." Cooking was too humble and unexciting for me. I was quite disappointed to be appointed Tenzo.

By the way, in those days I had gotten to be very good sitter. I could sit in the full lotus posture for sit after sit. I could sit till the cows came home. But the truth was that I wasn't answering my koan. I was determined to break through somehow, and then Genki Roshi said, "I would like you to be Head Cook." When he called me into the dokusan, I had the fantasy that he would say, "I'd like you to found a new temple. You are really enlightened already and you just don't know it." Of course, I knew that wasn't true. But I was still disappointed when he gave me the new assignment.

The interesting thing was that I started as Head Cook with some resentment, but I discovered that cooking is a wonderful thing because you can give people pleasure and help them. I didn't realize how much I loved the people I practiced with until I had the opportunity to cook for them. I didn't think this through, however, in the way I have just summed it up. I didn't become consciously aware. But I began to get interested in cooking for some reason, and I began to enjoy the looks on the faces of my dharma brothers and sisters when they ate the food I made. I actually became a super-cook. I wasn't trying to outdo anyone, but I just got interested in cooking good food. I had worked in a couple of restaurants when I was growing up, and I used that knowledge in my cooking at the sesshins. I made different foods and I made special sauces. I even made béarnaise sauce! Sauces like béarnaise are not very good for you, and they are not vegan—in fact, they're loaded with milk and butter! I don't make them anymore for that reason, but without even thinking about it, I really started to enjoy helping my dharma brothers and sisters by cooking good food

One of the things I used to do was make breads. Remember, I was just cooking and not sitting too much during these sesshins. So I would make some rolls from scratch! Everybody would come out of the zendo in the evening at 10:30, and there would be a plate of rolls for them. A plate of fresh rolls and a jar of honey! It was so pleasing to see everybody eat. I would come back later to see if there were any rolls left, and if there were, I would be disappointed and think that maybe I hadn't done a good enough job."

At the end of my period as Head Cook, Genki Roshi called me into the dokusan room and said, "You haven't answered the breath koan but I will pass you anyway because you have finally done something which is a little less selfish." I was very moved by that. He was not scolding me. The truth of it was so obvious!

The point I'm trying to make is that the experience of failure was very good for me. Fortunately, I've had a lot of failures, and that's good! On a certain level, we all know this.

I'm told that when archaeologists were digging up the ruins of the Nalanda University about a century ago, they found a statue of the Buddha. The British, who have Oxford and Cambridge, don't tell anyone about this, but the first international university in the world was built in India. It was Nalanda University. It admitted women as well as men. There were women's dorms and men's dorms—that's a matter of historical fact. People came from all over the world, from Indonesia and China. People even came from Europe to study at Nalanda. It was eventually destroyed by an invading army. In the ruins, however, archaeologists found a little statue of the Buddha which had an inscription under it, in Pali or maybe in Sanskrit, saying, "Seeing emptiness, he feels compassion." When we sit in the presence of Mu-shin—when we face the wall of emptiness—what arises spontaneously in our hearts is compassion. Boundless compassion! It's amazing. It's the heart of Buddhism! We could change the inscription a little to make it say, "Seeing failure, he feels compassion." The message would be the same.

The experience of failure is the most wonderful gift in the world. We can hate it. We can get angry and upset with ourselves, and we can beat ourselves up, but at some point, we

end up loving the world more deeply. This is an amazing fact. “Seeing failure, he feels love.”

In case of Mayoku, he has just had Dai Kensho. He has not simply solved the Mu koan. This is the big deal. “This is it,” Mayoku thinks. “I am Buddha Nature now!” Naturally, he wants to share this with his friends, with whom he has practiced for many years. He goes to see Shokei, and Shokei says, “Man, that’s wonderful.” But Shokei says, “Man, that’s wonderful” to everything. That’s Shokei’s heart. He has experienced enough failure to always be compassionate. Then Mayoku goes to Nansen, the teacher of Joshu; Nansen is young at this time but still older than both Mayoku and Shokei. Nansen sees Mayoku do his little dance and says, “Wait a minute! You don’t understand. Dai Kensho doesn’t mean you have nothing left to learn. Your only chance of growing is in continuing to fail.”

After you have Dai Kensho, there are still many things to learn. In fact, learning goes on forever because the possibility of failing goes on forever. This is such a wonderful thing. After Dai Kensho, you still have personal habits which are not fully compassionate and enlightened. You still might be impatient and you still might be irritable. So, you have to spend the rest of your life cleaning up these aspects of your personality, and you have to work on them continuously. Truly great people don’t sit in the temple enjoying their enlightenment. If they do that, their enlightenment begins to decay, believe it or not! Their light begins to grow dim. You need to encounter the universe again and again in all its painful difficulty, and sometimes that means helping people who haven’t had this wonderful experience of waking up. So Nansen is doing a favor for Mayoku when he says, “Wait a minute! You have forgotten how you got here –it was failure that you brought here, and it is failure that will take you farther down the road.”

Holy failure! If you practice Zen, you are going to fail and fail and fail and fail. Elsewhere in the Blue Rock Collection, Engo says something like this: “Everybody wants to talk about the winners of the Triple Crown; nobody wants to talk about the sweating horses of the past.” In other words, we all want to see the beautiful thoroughbreds come racing across the finish line—the Joshus and Rinzais--but nobody wants to think about the horses that draw wagons and pull plows. A lot of Zen is about being a sweaty horse: sitting on the cushion and sweating bullets. And we don’t like to think about it. All we want to think about is the moment when the teacher will say, “Now it’s yours! Enlightenment – here it is!” And then we will say, “Yes! Thank you. Thank you all!” Nobody wants to think about the moments when your legs are hurting and you are sending mental signals to the time-keeper: “Ring the bell! Please ring the bell so I can uncross my legs!” A friend of mine used to say, “One of the things you should learn, when start doing Zen, is to go to the bathroom before you sit down on the cushion.” This was said by one of my dharma friends from Seattle. We were at a party and somebody said, “Oh! You two are Zen trainees. Tell me about it.” Then my friend said, “You will never know what Zen is until you feel the pee going out drop by drop while you are waiting for the bell to ring.”

Let's understand the value of failure. After surgery, when they take the bandages off a person's eyes, the surgeon might say, "Now you can see." But for a long time, you can't. You have to learn how to see. To someone who has just had surgery, a picture of an apple and an actual apple look the same at first. They look identical. If you've just had surgery, you can sit there and look and look, and then you might say, "Damn it! I'm trying. But the two still look the same." Then, all of a sudden, there is going to be a shift and you will see it. One is a photo, one a real apple in three dimensions. Until then, there's no sense blaming yourself and getting mad. This failure is a wonderful opportunity to develop new eyes and a new experience of the universe. Don't ever allow yourself to be disappointed when you can't answer your koan. It's a great tragedy when somebody feels that way. "I went to sesshin and I didn't answer my koan"--how wonderful! People who really practice Zen are not the people who answer three koans in the first year and ten in the second year. That would be really regrettable. It is the experience of being stuck that forces us to grow and develop and change and enter Big Mind. You sit in front of the wall of emptiness and you just have to keep changing, shedding illusions, until wall opens up and Big Mind possesses you. That requires patience and humility. It also requires kindness to yourself.

We live in a culture where everyone is given tests from the first grade on. We have an examination culture. If you don't get an 'A,' it's failure—this attitude is especially true of people who go for advanced degrees and who are very good at passing tests. If you start failing in your Zen practice and the teacher says in dokusan, "That's not the answer, not yet," you can go home and think, "This sesshin has been a disaster." It is like you have written 400 pages but the teacher says that you have to write them again. Actually, as an undergraduate, I studied with a man named Benjamin Bennett, a professor German literature, and he wrote a dissertation on Goethe or something. At the end of the whole process, his committee was ready to pass the dissertation with flying colors, but he actually withdrew it and said it was junk. And then he wrote a completely new one. The interesting thing is that, in his field, he is the probably one of the most accomplished thinkers. He was willing to admit failure and go back to the square one and that is why he is one of the most accomplished people in German studies. If you practice Zen, there are going to be a lot of days when you don't answer your koan, and you will leave sesshin with pain in your legs and nothing to show for it. This "nothing to show for it" is the essence of growth – the essence of life. Please don't allow yourself to be disappointed and discouraged. Holy failure!

Engo says that if you don't care about success, even tiles and pebbles will become illuminating, but if you are afraid of failure, even gold becomes valueless and the koans of the old masters will become tedious--oppressive.

Setcho's Verse

*This mistake, that mistake,
Never take them away!*

Holy Failure!

*In the four seas, the waves subside;
A hundred rivers flow quietly to the sea.*

All rivers lead to Buddha. All rivers lead to the sea. You can't go wrong. Failure is also encountering Buddha.

*The twelve bells of the staff tinkled up high;
Empty and silent is the road to the gate.*

Ah! Empty and silent is the road to the gate. Now I understand. Now I've got "It." But wait. . . .

No, not empty and silent;

I've changed my mind. I was wrong. Now, I see another aspect.

*The enlightened man must take medicine
For the illness of "having no illness."*

If there is no chance of failure, you are lost. It's hopeless. Being sick is the best of health. This process never ends! There is always another dimension to reality. Zen practice is infinite practice. Every day I get up and sit on the cushion; it's wonderful! There is always something new. I swear to you, it's like that. There are always new questions – always new angles, always another horizon, and therefore always failure. How wonderful!!