

## “Body Exposed in the Golden Breeze”

Teisho, given by Rafe Martin, Endless Path Zendo, Fall 2020

Hekigan roku (Blue Cliff Record) Case # 27: Yun-men’s ‘Body Exposed to the Golden Breeze.’

A monk asked Yun Men (Ummon), “How is it when the trees wither and the leaves fall?”

Yun Men (Ummon) answered, “Body exposed in the golden breeze.”

That’s the whole case. A quote from Yunmen, a late T’ang era teacher, that Kapleau Roshi particularly loved were his words on the Birth of the Buddha. Legend says that the newborn infant Buddha took seven steps and declared, “Above the Heavens, below the Heavens. I alone, the Honored One.” Of this, Yunmen said, “If I’d been there, I’d have knocked him to the ground with my staff, cut him to pieces, and fed his body to dogs. This would be a small way of bringing some peace into the world.” This may give you some of the flavor of Yunmen’s Zen.

So some additional takes on the taste of Yunmen’s tea from his extensive appearance in our koan curriculum:

H-14 A monk asked Yun Men (Ummon), “What is the teaching that Shakyamuni preached throughout his life?”

Yun Men (Ummon) answered, “One teaching in response.”

H-39 A monk asked Yun Men (Ummon), “What is the pure body of reality?”

Yun Men (Ummon) said, “Flowering hedge.”

The monk then asked, “What is it like when one goes on in such a way?”

Yun Men (Ummon) said, “Golden-haired lion.”

H-50 A monk asked Yun Men (Ummon), “What is the Dust Particle Samadhi?”

Yun Men (Ummon) replied, “Rice in the bowl, water in the bucket.”

H-60 Yun Men (Ummon) held out his staff to the assembled monks and said, “This staff has transformed itself into a dragon and swallowed up the universe. Mountains, rivers, the great earth—where are they to be found?”

H-62 Yun Men (Ummon) said to the assembled monks. “Between heaven and earth, through space and time, there is one treasure hidden in the mountain of form. Pick up a lamp and go into the Buddha Hall. Take the temple gate and place it on the lamp.”

HR case #83— Yunmen— once said to his assembly, “The ancient Buddha and the pillar merge. What kind of spiritual activity is that?” No one answered, so he answered himself for them, “Clouds gather over the southern hills. Rain falls on the northern mountains.”

H-86 Yun Men (Ummon) said to the assembly, “Everyone has his own light, though when you try to see it you cannot—everything is darkness. What is everybody’s light?” He answered himself, saying, “The temple storeroom, the tower gateway.” He also said, “A precious thing isn’t as good as nothing.”

Yamada Roshi says that compared to Yunmen, even the words of Hakuin Zenji who was a brilliant and dynamic writer as well as a Zen master of monumental realization and ability appears a bit muddy. But read a statement of Yunmen’s, he says, and it is like looking at the clear blue sky without a single cloud in it. Transparent. Absolutely clear! Not a smidgen of self-awareness. Nothing at all— fully exposed, fully expressed. Ordinary and resplendent beyond all words. And yet not separate from them.

So, once a monk came to Yun Men and asked— “How is it when the trees wither and the leaves fall?” Yun Men immediately answered, “Body exposed in the golden breeze.”

What is the monk asking? What are his words pointing us to? Where’s he coming from with this question about withering trees and falling leaves? It could be direct, simple, and straightforward. Maybe it was the autumn, and he was responding to what it aroused in him. How do I deal with not just the withering and falling I see around me, but total loss— with impermanence itself and with the inevitability of death? Does the Dharma offer refuge? Is there a refuge? In short *my tree is withering, my leaves are falling. Help!*”

If so, if that’s what’s up, he’s coming with a real question. Impermanence is no longer theoretical for him, no longer a concept on a list of things a Zen Buddhist is supposed to believe. “Impermanence? Check, got that.” Rather it’s now, “Leaves are falling, all around me. A friend my own age died last week. My eyesight isn’t so good these days, same with hearing. My knees ache and bones creak after zazen, and spicy food is off the menu. How do I find peace in the midst of this?”

And, Yunmen’s answer?— “Body exposed in the golden breeze.”

What is that? How do we find peace when the chips are falling from our own hands? Where does it end? Will the grave— our final resting place on this earth— bring peace? Will good deeds get us into heaven where we then forever rest at ease? Emperor Wu thought that the merit of his good deeds would sustain him and expected confirmation of this from the newly arrived teacher, Bodhidharma, who offered instead only vast emptiness with nothing holy, nothing to cling to. Is body exposed in the golden breeze just like this only put in nicer, more poetic language? Is it reassuring? Challenging? Liberating? What's Yunmen saying?

But this is a Zen *monk* standing before Yunmen, not a so-called worldly person like an Emperor. A monk's task is full realization for the sake of all, anutarra samyak sambodhi— full, complete and perfect enlightenment. So as this is the questioner, maybe he is asking something more like, "Oh, teacher, when all is fallen away, when all personal entanglements, duality, self-centeredness, self-involvement, all concepts, ideas, gains, losses, in short, all our leaves drifted to earth what's it like? And what is revealed? Please give me an inkling, a taste of this. I want to more than believe; I want to know."

Pushing further this monk could be asking— "What is nirvana like?" Nirvana is the cooled down condition we arrive at when all the fires of the passions, all the self-involvement and self-centeredness we've become habituated to as our truest, most personal reality have been entirely blown-out, like a candle's flame on a birthday cake. It's gone! All of it. What is that like? What then? Will I fall into an empty void and lose my personality, or what?

And Yunmen responds with, "Body exposed in the golden breeze." Has he done his job as a teacher and answered this monk's sincere request for help? Has he fortified his faith, given him the strength to continue? Or has he added yet another barrier, a silver wall impossible to get a foothold on, so smooth it's simply impossible to climb? If so, why? Or might it be a pointer toward further practice, or something to figure out? What is Yunmen up to?

Of course, if the monk really wants to know, he would have to let *his* tree wither, and his concepts of who or what he and others are, fall away. To find out what's it like, he'd have to do it. He might have to practice this breath, this count, this Mu, this koan point himself. When the great fall opens upon him, his hefty stock of Buddhist beliefs will blow away, like so many dry leaves until no leaves remain on the tree. If we want to personally know truth, like the way we personally know exactly how hot or how cold water is when we put our own hands in it, we'll have to know it by experience. Hekigan roku case #-17:

A monk asked Hsiang Lin (Kyorin), "What is the meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the West?"

Hsiang Lin (Kyorin) said, "Sitting long and getting tired."

Someone else's words won't give us anything more than a concept about it. Even the Buddha can't do it for us. We each have to do it ourselves. Dokusan literally means, "going alone." We have to go alone, into the fire, into the withering. And though a teacher will not hold our hand in this, he or she will nonetheless certainly walk right into the flames with us.

Or, maybe the monk has done this, has seen past his dying tree and his falling leaves and touched bare empty ground, body fully exposed. Now he's come forward to challenge the teacher's understanding, match it against his own, or use the encounter to clarify an initial insight and go deeper. Or maybe he's filled with pride— in Zen pride comes after, not before a fall and he's here to show off. All are possible. "Hey teacher, show me your realization. I've died the great death, the tree withered, my leaves fallen. Can you match it, top it, or express it truly? Do you have it for real? What can you do with me? I've heard about you along the bamboo pipeline. Are you the real deal? If so, let's see."

Yunmen seemingly majestically unperturbed answers, "Body exposed in the golden breeze." Does it do the job? Does it liberate or clarify or deepen or put in the monk in his place. Or what?

Or maybe something more poignant is at work. Maybe this interchange came about when an earnest student ran to a trusted teacher for help. He's committed to his practice, stayed with it night and day and now simply by continuing on, he finds himself somehow totally lost, wandering in a desert without a blade of grass in sight. All life's green succulence is gone. What's he gotten himself into? Maybe he should never have left home? At least there might there an oasis ahead? Can the teacher, he wonders, guide me to it? "It's lonely out here and I'm dying of thirst."

Perhaps you've gotten stuck in such an empty barren place yourself once or twice. Aitken Roshi says that every religious tradition worth its salt knows about this "dark night of the soul." It is likely that all serious practitioners of any tradition eventually hit it. Then there seems to be no life, no sustenance anywhere. Practice is an empty a desert. There is *Nothing!* No support, no encouragement, no joy just endless burdensome work without meaning, value, or benefit. It's hard to continue, it's all empty, worthless. "Why," we may ask ourselves, "did I ever start this? I want to go home." Or maybe we think, "I just don't care anymore. I want relief not more burdens."

Is this what the monk is talking about with his withered trees and fallen leaves? Does he mean there's not a green leaf or sip of water anywhere, just an empty desert of dry practice with no relief. If so, how does Yunmen help? Does he reach out a hand in support? Does he point out that green line of trees up ahead and say, "Keep going."

There's a green wet world ahead, with full leaved tress dripping with rainwater, surrounded by shimmering clear pools. It'll be ok. Just steady on."

What Yunmen does do, of course, is present the truth: "Body exposed in the golden breeze."

What's he saying now? Is he saying, "You're so close, don't you see?" Or is he saying, "That's it completely! That's it! Entirely clear!"? Is he pointing to what the monk can't yet see, or is he taking it all away to reveal . . . what?

And how does his response work *in each possible instance*? Is it the same or different each time? Does Yunmen have one point in mind? Does he get the true version of the monk's question right off the bat, knocking it out of the park? What *is* Yunmen's point? How is "body exposed in the golden breeze" not just perfect but elegantly, sublimely so?

And why that wind "golden"? Gold is the color of well— gold— of wealth and success. It is the color of leaves in fall, the time of harvest, of fulfillment. How does this speak to the monk's anguish, to his human dilemma, or to his challenge, to his own practice-realization, or his enquiry? Yunmen, who was known for his ability to get up on a question and ride it most skillfully, stealing the robber's own horse as it were, here rides the monk's metaphor perfectly, meeting the monk's arrow-point head-on with his own. Two arrows meeting in mid-air is how tradition puts it. There is no gap, no distance, or separation. Not because he's bridged the divide but because for Yunmen there is no divide and never was from the start. Yunmen is speaking from the original undivided realm. What is the tone, the flavor of his response? Positive? Negative? Ironic? Harsh? Gentle? Encouraging? Demanding? Scornful? Fulfilled? Magnanimous? None of these? All?

The great 20th century Irish poet William Butler Yeats as far as we know had never heard of Yunmen, yet he wrote something reminiscent of Yunmen, nonetheless.

Meru

Civilisation is hooped together, brought  
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace  
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,  
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease  
Ravening through century after century,  
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come  
Into the desolation of reality:  
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!  
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,  
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,  
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast

Beat down upon their naked bodies, know  
That day bring round the night, that before dawn  
His glory and his monuments are gone.

The key to the connection lies in that “Ravaging, raging, and uprooting that he may come/Into the desolation of reality”? The “desolation of reality.” What’s he getting at? What is its connection with Yunmen?

And that was Yeats, with his Celtic background and theosophical interests. But how will we show Yunmen’s point? Going alone in dokusan the challenge is our own. It is our own even if we never bring it to dokusan, or even if we never go. No one is left out of this and no one escapes— even if we hide, for right now leaves are indeed dropping leaving us exposed, with no cover; our tree is withering leaving us nothing to cling to. Our hands can’t reach a branch, and our feet can’t touch one, as Hsiang-yen says in koan case number five of the *Gateless Barrier*, “Up a Tree”.

Hsiang-yen said, "It's as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch by your teeth. Your hands can't grasp a branch and your feet can't touch one. Someone appears beneath the tree and asks, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' If you do not answer, you fail the questioner and evade your responsibility. If you do answer, you lose your life. What do you do?"

Nothing above, nothing below how will we respond to a request for help? We are all working on this realization of practice, this practice of realization in the midst of all sorts of things, indeed, with everything falling down. This is always at the core, whether we know it or not. “Body exposed in the golden breeze” is where Yunmen’s genius turns out to be our own. For, like London Bridge, in reality, all falls down, nothing remains, and even this “nothing remains” is already adding too much.

One day Prince Siddhartha Gautama walked out of his palace and ran straight into old age, sickness, and death. Cut to the quick— to that part of the nail that is alive and when you cut there, it hurts—suddenly, all he’d thought was rightfully and forever his, his lovely privileged life was chopped down. He was naked and exposed, without his familiar palace to run back into. None of his usual comforts survived the devastation. All was gone, gone, entirely gone!— as the Prajna Paramita says. Total devastation, and yet could he have also have caught a glimpse of the heart of perfect wisdom right there, right in that loss? Wisdom is not nihilism. That would turn our life into a shaggy dog story, a tale told by an idiot, as Shakespeare says, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Signifying nothing? Wait! What is this, “nothing”? It’s familiar isn’t it? Bodhidharma told Emperor Wu that the highest truth is, “Vast emptiness, nothing to be called holy.” And, Yunmen, a chip off the same old block answered a monk with, “Body exposed in the golden breeze.”

But this nothing for all the falling leaves coming down around us, is not time-factored. It is not what we get *to*, but what is here from the start, and fully here right now. This is Yunmen's land. And yet, this "desolation of reality," (desolate of what? Please be clear!), from one perspective is predictive for, in time, the ground *will* be littered with fallen leaves. It would an act of desperation, then, like someone taking arms against the sea, to try counter such overwhelming loss by pasting the dead leaves back again on the tree from where they'd fallen. Though we can try. Plastic surgery may smooth away our wrinkles for a while. But the end is inevitable. Can the inevitable itself be fulfillment? It's not a trick, not a palliative, not even an answer. All answers deconstruct, wither, dry up, and fail in the end. Answers have to be remembered, which is never intimate enough. A verse of Ikkyu's goes— "When I tried to remember I always forgot. But once I forgot, I never forget." This is genuine intimacy.

And what *body* is Yunmen talking about? *What* body is exposed in the golden breeze? Case 46 of the *Wu-men kuan* may offer a clue. It is, Shih-shuang's "Step Forward from the Top of the Pole." The case goes:

Master Shih-shuang said, "How do you step forward from the top of a hundred-foot pole?"

Another eminent master of former times said:

You who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole,  
Although you have entered the Way, it is not yet genuine.  
Take a step from the top of the pole  
And the worlds of the Ten Directions are your total body.

William Blake (whom Yeats deeply admired) wrote—

What is the price of Experience? Do men buy it for a song? Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price/ Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children/Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy/And in the wither'd field where the farmer ploughs for bread in vain."

The price of wisdom is all, says Blake; it is everything. With the prophetic voice of one crying in the wilderness he asks, "Who, knowing the cost, is willing to make such an effort?" Is this his version of, "Vast Emptiness, nothing to be called holy," his, "Body exposed in the golden breeze"? Dylan has a line in "Visions of Johanna," that goes—"Banker's nieces seek perfection, expecting all the gifts that wise men bring." He's pointing down the same road. Not to even mention, "Desolation Row."

Still, losing is not quite the right word. Letting go may be closer. To let all go means to release our own desperate *hold* on things. Like ghosts, we tend to cling to things, ideas, people, position, in an unconscious effort to make ourselves feel worthy, alive, solid and real. Yet, as Wumen warns in his teisho on Chao-chou's Mu, "If you do not pass the barrier of the ancients, you are like a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses." Aitken Roshi says that, "bushes and grasses" are "shorthand for the many fixations that provide the ghost with identity," fixations like philosophies, histories, possessions, jobs, bank accounts. Without such bushes and grasses *in our minds*, we feel terribly insecure. Having them is not the issue; clinging to them for all we're worth as if that is all we truly are, is. For such identifying can only give us a shadow existence, ghost lives, not substantial and real ones, not ones we can live out in the daylight. Ghosts only come out after dark. The barrier Wu-men is speaking of is Mu. But it could be, "Body exposed in the golden breeze," or any koan, or even the breath, this breath, this silent count of "one, two." Tradition says that the Buddha, sitting under the Bodhi tree was experiencing the breath—when all fell away. All. Gone. The tree withered, the leaves fell. Body exposed in the golden breeze.

A thousand years ago, Yunmen stepped up and knocked the clinging ghosts' socks clean off. With his one line response to the trials, issues, challenges of life and to the endless Path of ongoing practice-realization with its constant refrain of "not enough yet, not yet enough," he nails the truth: great loss, great beauty and, right there without a single gap—there it is: body exposed in the golden breeze.

Ah! Ah! At last. At last!