

Koan Commentaries

Whenever Master Hyakujo Ekai gave his informal preaching, there was an old man who would always listen to the preaching along with the rest of the assembly. When the assembly retired, the old man would also retire. However, one day he did not leave. Eventually, the Master asked him: *Who is this person that stands before me?*

The old man answered: *I am not a person. Long ago, in the time of Kasyapa Buddha, I was master of this temple. One day, a Buddhist student asked me whether even a great Buddhist practitioner falls into cause and effect. In reply, I said to him, "He does not fall into cause and effect." Since then I have fallen into the body of a wild fox for five hundred lives. So I beg you, Master, to say some words that will change me. I would like to get rid of the wild fox's body.*

Then he asked:

Does someone of great Buddhist practice also fall into cause and effect, or not?

The Master said: *Do not be unclear about cause and effect.*

At these words the old man realised the truth, and after prostrating himself, he said: *I am already free of the body of a wild fox. Now I would like to remain on the mountain behind this*

Shinji Shobogenzo Book 2, Case 2.

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temple. Dare I ask you, Master, to perform the funeral ceremony of a Buddhist monk for me?

The Master ordered the Supervising Monk to strike the wooden block to summon the monks. Then he told them: *After the meal, we will hold the funeral ceremony for a deceased monk.*

All the monks discussed this among themselves, saying: *The monks are all in good health and no-one is sick in the infirmary. What is the reason for this funeral ceremony?*

After their meal, the Master led the monks to the foot of a big rock behind the temple, and pick out a dead fox with stick. Then they cremated it following the formal method. In the evening, the Master gave his formal preaching in the Lecture Hall, in which he told the above story.

Then Master Obaku asked: *The words with which the man in the past taught the student were a wrong answer, and so he fell into the body of a wild fox for five hundred lives. If he had gone on without mistakes, what would have become of him?*

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Master Hyakujo said: *Step up here. I will tell you.*

Master Obaku went up, and gave the Master a slap. Master Hyakujo clapped his hands, laughed, and said: *Your attitude is like the fact that a foreigner's beard is red, but there is also the viewpoint that a man with a red beard must be a foreigner.*

Commentary by Nishijima

A monk asked the old Master if a person who is in the state of great Buddhist practice is subject to the laws of cause and effect or not. The Master replied that such a person does not fall into cause and effect. For this mistake the Master was reborn for hundreds of years as a fox. Everyone and everything is subject to cause and effect. Even the Buddha was subject to cause and effect.

Is there then no freedom? Is our whole life completely determined? If we look back on the past, it seems that our whole life is bound by cause and effect. However, our human freedom does exist – it exists in the present moment. It exists in our real action here and now. Buddhist Masters – indeed all who practice Zazen – can avoid getting lost in memories of past or dreams of future, so we are able to use our freedom.

When we consider time in the usual way, looking at the past or ahead to the future, then we must say that the Buddhist Masters are also bound by cause and effect. When we act in the present moment we can find our freedom. Thus a person of great Buddhist practice is both bound by cause and effect and free of cause and effect.

In the second part of the koan, Master Obaku asked what would have become of the old Master

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if he had never made such a mistake. He then answered his own question by giving Master Ekai a slap. This slap was not an abstraction, it was a concrete fact. The Master laughed and said: “*Your attitude is like the fact that a foreigner’s beard is red.*” This was a Chinese expression about inductive reasoning, i.e., going from concrete fact to general principals. (A is a foreigner with red beard. B is a foreigner with red beard. Therefore, all foreigners have red beards.)

The Master then said there is also the fact that the red beard indicates a foreigner. This expression represents deductive reasoning – going from general principals to more specific conclusions. (Foreigners have red beards. A has a red beard. Therefore A is a foreigner.) The Master agreed that Obaku understood concrete fact but warned him that other perspectives and viewpoints also existed.

Although this story mentions the idea of “five hundred lives” we should not think of it as suggesting that Buddhism holds the view of reincarnation. This koan illustrates one aspect of the fundamental Buddhist view of cause and effect – it is not a description of historical fact. Master Dogen discusses cause and effect in detail in *Shobogenzo Sanji-no-go (Karma in Three Times)* and *Shinjin-inga (Deep Belief in Cause and Effect)*.

Commentary by John Fraser

This story doesn’t make much sense unless you are aware that in East Asian folklore the fox is a shapeshifter, capable of many guises, including a human being.

Is an enlightened person free of karma, or not? Several errors are quietly embedded in this question. First, there is a dualistic assumption that there is an ‘I’ separate from ‘karma’, separate from ‘the world’. Second, there is the notion that karma is an unchanging burden, like taking up a bag of black stones, which can only be added to, or removed. But your karma is exactly your feeling state at this moment and is completely dynamic; the momentary expression of all conceivable causes. If we can simply feel what we feel, then our karma is liberated from us, and stones become worlds.

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