CHAPTER 9

Te-shan Carrying His Bowls

Does hitting the floor with the Zen master's stick reveal the first word? If you say that it does, then rock and bamboo also reveal the first word.

Does hitting the floor with the Zen master's stick reveal the last word? If you say it does, then you understand one but have not yet grasped two. Be careful, or you will get caught in the cave of emptiness.

The first word and the last word, are these one or two? If you say one, you have missed it by a mile. If you say two, the Zen stick will hit you.

What can you do?

Haahh!!

My job is writing this. Just now, your job is reading.

This is a well-known kong-an connected with the phrase "the last word." It is case 13 in the collection called *Wu-men-kuan* (*Mumonkan; Mu Mun Kwan*), and it also appears in *Book of Serenity*.

One day Te-shan came into the dharma room carrying his bowls. The house master, Hsueh-feng, said, "Old Master, the bell has not yet been rung and the drum has not yet been struck. Where are you going, carrying your bowls?" Te-shan returned to the Master's room. Hsueh-feng told the head monk, Yen-t'ou.

Yen-t'ou said, "Great master Te-shan does not understand the last word."

Te-shan heard this and sent for Yen-t'ou. "Do you not approve of me?" he demanded. Then Yen-t'ou whispered in the master's ear. Te-shan was relieved.

Next day, on the rostrum, making his dharma speech, Te-shan was really different than before. Yen-t'ou went to the front of the dharma room, laughed loudly, clapped his hands and said, "Great joy! The old master has understood the last word! From now on, no one can check him."[1]

After the case, Zen Master Wu-men (Mumon; Mu Mun) has a short poem:

> Understand first word,
> Then understand last word.
> Last word and first word
> Are not one word.[2]

Wu-men also has a commentary after the case. In his usual style, the commentary appears to be critical and caustic. But if you understand the style of Chinese humor he is using, it is actually a compliment. Wu-men says:

> As for the last word, neither Yen-t'ou nor Te-shan have ever heard it, even in a dream. When I examine this point, I find they are like puppets on a shelf.[3]

Some people say the phrase "they are like puppets on a shelf" means that the two of them put on a big show for everybody. But I think what he actually means here is that the puppet is something that is neither vital nor alive in itself; it is animated by someone pulling a string or sticking a hand in it. On first glance, you may think Wu-men is saying Yen-t'ou and Te-shan are not alive, vital, or

free; they are like puppets. But as always, his humor is backwards. He is actually affirming their action as vital, alive, and to the point.

Zen Master Seung Sahn, who also includes this story in his book of kong-ans *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, makes a comment that is even more terse: “Three dogs chase each other’s tails in a circle, following the smell, looking for food.”[4]

Before going on, let us take a look at the protagonists. Te-shan (Tokusan; Duk Sahn) was a famous Zen master who lived in China from the late seven hundreds to the middle eight hundreds. We already met him in chapter 6, “Te-shan Carrying His Bundle.” At the time of this story, he is an old man in his early eighties. He passed away a few years later. Te-shan was famous for the use of his stick; he was known for saying, “I give you thirty blows with my stick!” One day Te-shan came to the dharma room and said, “If you open your mouth, thirty blows. If you keep your mouth closed, still you get thirty blows.” Not surprisingly, Te-shan became known all over China as the Zen master of the thirty blows.

Yen-t’ou (Ganto; Am Du), the head monk in the story, and Hsueh-feng (Seppo; Seol Bong), the head of the kitchen (the rice cook or housemaster) were considerably younger than Te-shan. At the time of this story, Yen-t’ou was about thirty-five years old, and Hseuh-feng was about forty-five. They had known each other for quite a while and were close friends. They had already been monks for fifteen or twenty years, had traveled around to most of the major Zen temples in China, and had spent time with various Zen masters. By the time of this story, Yen-t’ou was confident of his experience and attainment and did not defer to anyone. Hsueh-feng, although he had had a number of experiences along the way, was not yet secure and confident of himself. But both held responsible positions in this monastery. If the Zen master is the captain, the head monk is the first lieutenant, who always presides over the meditation hall. The kitchen master must prepare meals that respond to everybody’s needs. In the traditional Buddhist monastery, food is viewed as medicine, and the kitchen master’s job is seen as service to the community as well as an opportunity to practice meditation in action.

Before we go into the case, be aware that certain kong-ans may be interpreted in several different ways. Teachers and teaching lineages may make different points using the same kong-an, to emphasize particular aspects of practice or realization. That does not mean one teacher is correct and another is not; it does mean that embellishment may be heaped on to make a teaching point.

The main core of Zen teaching, however, is the bare bones of what is there. In a certain sense then, embellishing a story takes away from the central teaching: Don’t embellish anything, just be with it as it is.

This story, of course, is open to a lot of embellishment and a lot of different views, because its language is vague. First, look at the phrase “the last word.” What is the last word of Zen? Next, the incident where the head monk whispers something in the master’s ear, and the master is relieved. What was it that he whispered? Then, when the Zen master mounts the rostrum the next day, he gives a dharma talk considerably different than usual. It does not say what kind of dharma speech he gives, just that it was different. This allows a wide array of speculation.

Let’s go back and look at the story. The first paragraph says that Zen Master Te-shan came into the dharma room carrying his bowls. Then the housemaster said, “Old Master, the bell has not been rung, and the drum has not been struck. Where are you going, carrying your bowls?” He was basically saying, Why are you here? You’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. At that, Te-shan, without saying anything, turned around and returned to his room.

This seems a little strange. The Zen master has made a mistake. He is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people conclude that returning to his room in silence is his way of teaching something. Others, however, say that is his second mistake: First, he is in the wrong place at the wrong time; then he does not handle the situation well: two strikes.

At the end of the *Wu-men-kuan,* Zen Master Wu-men offers some cautions. One says: “To be alert and never unclear is to wear chains and an iron yoke.”[5]

That sounds rather curious. Usually we think of the formalities of Zen practice—sitting, chanting, and walking meditation—as exercises in being alert and becoming clear. But here it says that to be alert and never unclear is to bind yourself with chains and an iron yoke. The meaning is that even alertness and clarity, if they become a pursuit—something you aim at for gaining a sense of mastery—will turn into bindings and traps.

Someone told me a story about Zen Master Seung Sahn that may help explain this idea. Once he was at the Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles and was supposed to go up to the Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley. But at the airport he somehow got on the wrong plane and wound up in Albuquerque. With a lot of finessing, he was rerouted to Berkeley. When he finally got off the plane there, he said to the person who met him, “Today was stupid practicing day.” Sometimes practice is stupid practicing day, sometimes alert practicing day; sometimes practice is clear practicing day, sometimes unclear practicing day. But every day is practicing day.

In the kong-an, Te-shan is in a similar position to Seung Sahn’s position that day, not particularly clear and sharp. But it does not seem to be bothering him much. After all, he is already eighty years old. Then Hsueh-feng, the kitchen master, tells Yen-t’ou, the

head monk, about the Zen master's curious behavior: The Zen master came down at the wrong time, carrying his bowls, and then just turned around and returned to his room without saying anything. Yen-t'ou's response could be rephrased to say, Great though he is, old Te-shan still doesn't understand the last word. This phrase, "the last word," is the core of the kong-an. It was a teaching phrase Yen-t'ou used many times throughout his life. But what is the last word? What does it mean?

The first meaning is that Te-shan is not following his situation. He is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and because he does not follow his situation, his functioning is not clear. In that sense, the last word means to function clearly according to the situation and according to the particular relationship of the moment. Looked at a little more broadly, however, we may see another meaning: The last word of Zen is not some final attainment, some absolute end point. Instead, the last word of Zen refers to the ongoing practice of moment Zen— activity that is not being colored by ideas of the past or memory that is leaking into the present moment. If you practice and attain moment Zen, then you perceive clearly the situation of this very moment, your correct relationship to this situation, and the correct functioning that spontaneously emerges out of that perception of the situation and relationship. The last word is primarily about action.

If you are going to practice the moment Zen of the last word, you have to be clear about your condition, so you can enter into the situation and join with the relationship of the moment. Essentially the last word means you and the world are not two. The world is in you, and you are in the world. That means cut off the idea of duality.

Philosophical Buddhism has a teaching scheme called the four wisdoms. These represent different aspects of practice and of clear mind. The first wisdom is called universal nature wisdom. If you attain the mind before thinking, you attain universal nature wisdom.

The second wisdom is called great mirror wisdom, meaning that if your mind is empty, then it clearly reflects the whole panorama of your experience. Thus great mirror wisdom means completely empty, completely full: completely empty of any idea or conception, especially of a substantial, separate, self-sufficient self; completely empty of any idea of self-sufficiency; and completely full of your connection with the many possibilities of this universe.

The third is called observing wisdom, meaning that you begin to discern the distinctness and specificity of each and every thing, rather than just perceiving a panorama. At that point, you perceive that black is black, and white is white, that sky is high, and ground is wide.

The last one is called perfecting of action wisdom. Here, if you attain the previous three, you can begin to perfect action and commit to helping others.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, there are many concrete images that represent this last word, or perfecting of action wisdom. Among them is a series of ten pictures called the ox-herding pictures. The ox represents mind.

The first picture, "Seeing the Footprints of the Ox," represents the moment when you catch a glimpse of what original mind is like. Others are titled "Finding the Ox" and "Reining In the Ox." Then there is a picture of "Riding the Ox," which has a little person sitting on top of the ox. After that is "Leading the Ox Back Home." Further along is one called "Both Ox and Person Forgotten," which is just an empty circle. The very last picture in the series shows a chubby little guy with a round belly and a wine gourd slung across his chest. His hands are open in a gesture of giving and receiving. This picture is titled "Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands." Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the great Tibetan teacher, commenting on this last picture in the series says, "You destroy whatever needs to be destroyed, you subdue what needs to be subdued, and you care for whatever needs your care."[6] That is perfecting of action wisdom, the expression of wisdom and compassion completely interfused.

The spirit of universal compassion is sometimes represented as a female form with a thousand hands surrounding her in a big circle. In each hand is an eye. This is called the Thousand Hands and Eyes Bodhisattva of Compassion. Once, two monks were discussing this image. One said to the other, "What does the Bodhisattva of Compassion do with so many hands and eyes?" The other monk replied, "It's something like, in the middle of the night, reaching back and straightening your pillow." When you are asleep in the middle of the night and your pillow is out of place, you do not think about it, you just spontaneously reach back and adjust it. At that point, the other monk said, "Oh, now I understand." The first monk then asked, "Well, what is it that you understand?" The other monk replied, "All over the body are hands and eyes." The first monk said, "You've said a lot there, but you've only said eighty percent." "Oh, and how would you say it, brother?" demanded the other. "Throughout the body are hands and eyes," answered the first monk.

"Throughout the body are hands and eyes" represents the complete embodiment of compassion and skillful activity. *Eyes* means clear seeing of the current situation and relationship. *Hands* means doing something governed by the wisdom of your perception. "Throughout the body are hands and eyes" means completely manifesting the one with that spirit of compassionate activity in the world. In one sense, you could say that each of us is one of these hands and eyes. But at the same time, we are also the complete totality of all the hands and eyes. That is the essence of what the phrase "the last word" points to.

Let's continue with the kong-an. After the head monk, Yen-t'ou, has made his pronouncement that the old master does not understand the last word, Zen Master Te-shan sends for him. He has heard about this comment. Probably everybody in the

monastery is now buzzing that the head monk said the Zen master doesn't understand the last word. But when Yen-t'ou comes to his room and whispers something in the master's ear, Te-shan is relieved.

Some people say that Yen-t'ou tells the Zen master not to worry—that his true intention in saying that Te-shan didn't know the last word was simply to get Hsueh-feng's attention. Now the Zen master and head monk can collude in some skillful fashion to help Hsueh-feng have an awakening. And maybe in fact that is what happened. It is a nice idea, one brother looking out for the other, an act of compassion. But you have to torture the text a little to arrive at that meaning. The bare bones of the story are just the head monk's statement. Many people might think that the head monk in a monastery would never say something like that about the Zen master, especially because this takes place in China, with all its formalities and hierarchical social protocols, like respect for the teacher and respect for your parents.

But the story says that the head monk did make the statement, the Zen master did get upset and did send for him, demanding, "Don't you approve of me?" And at that point there is a problem between them. Now the question becomes, how do you repair a strained relationship? We all have found ourselves in situations like that. It is important that the head monk and Zen master see things in accordance with one another, just like husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, two close friends, or two coworkers. How do you reestablish the harmony of your relationship? If you want someone to listen to something you have to say, what can you do in that situation to get them to listen? Reestablishing harmony and rapport is essential for all beings.

Other stories about Yen-t'ou offer a flavor of his style and temperament and help us see whether he was capable of blatantly saying, The old boy doesn't understand the last word. Especially pertinent are some of Yen-t'ou's interchanges with teachers when he was in his early to mid thirties and was traveling to various monasteries. One tells of the first time he called on Zen Master Yang-shan (Kyozan; An Sahn). As soon as he entered the dharma hall, Yen-t'ou held up his sitting mat and yelled out "Master!" Yang-shan immediately reached down and held up his whisk. (At that time, Zen masters had emblematic horsehair whisks.) When Yang-shan held up his whisk, it was as if he had said, Well, here is the sign of the Zen master. Yen-t'ou said, "An undeniable expert," turned and left.

Then, when Yen-t'ou first came to call on Te-shan, he entered the dharma room and stood in front of Te-shan, holding up his mat and looking up at Te-shan, who was sitting on the high seat. Te-shan said, "Well?" At that, Yen-t'ou just snorted, "Bah!" Te-shan then said, "Where is my fault?" To which Yen-t'ou replied, "A second offense is not permitted," turned around, and left the room. The next day he came again. This time he stood next to Te-shan, who said, "Aren't you that fellow who just arrived yesterday?" Yen-t'ou replied, "Yes, sir." Te-shan said, "Where did you learn that empty-headedness?" Now that sounds like an insult, but in fact it is a remark of recognition. If you are going to function clearly and perceive clearly, you have to have emptied out all of the stuff in your head. Yen-t'ou replied, "I never deceive myself." Then Te-shan said, "In the future you shouldn't turn your back on me." Some translations say that Te-shan said, "Some time in the future you will shit on my head."

It is an interesting interchange when Te-shan asks, "Where did you learn that empty-headedness?" and Yen-t'ou just says, "I never deceive myself." Most of us are repeatedly deceiving ourselves. All around us we may see people dying, yet we think that somehow we are going to live forever. There is always tomorrow to get something done. When the alarm clock rings in the morning, telling us to get up and sit meditation, we turn on the snooze alarm and doze for another fifteen minutes. We also repeatedly deceive ourselves with ideas like, I'm not worthy, I'm not deserving, I'm not very good. Usually we don't consider such thoughts as deception. More often we think of self-deception as inflating ourselves, thinking of ourselves as better, more talented than we actually are. But the fact is, the more primary deception is that we make ourselves feel, over and over, less than we actually are.

Recently someone told me a story. She said, "From childhood on, I always thought that I was stupid. Then I got married, had a couple of children, and I still thought I was stupid. Then I went back to college and did very well, but I still thought I was stupid—that somehow I must have been fooling the instructors, and that sooner or later I was going to take one course where they would see through me and see just how stupid I was." Many of us harbor a view like that, however subtle, but it goes on and on and on.

But when Yen-t'ou said, "I never deceive myself," he meant, "I don't get caught up in any ideas of better or worse, deserving or undeserving, good or bad. I never deceive myself with these thoughts about image. I just clearly perceive the essential."

On another occasion, Yen-t'ou came to Te-shan's room. Standing at the threshold, he asked, "Is it holy or is it ordinary?" Immediately Te-shan shouted, "Katz!" Yen-t'ou bowed to him. Later, when Zen Master Tung-shan (Tozan; Dong Sahn) heard about this interchange, he said, "Anybody but Yen-t'ou would have found it difficult to respond." When Yen-t'ou heard about Tung-shan's comment, he said, "The old master of Tung-shan doesn't understand good from bad. He didn't understand that at that time I was holding up the old boy with one hand and putting him down with the other."

In another story about Yen-t'ou, the housemaster Hsueh-feng asked Te-shan, "What doctrine is used to teach people in our sect?" Te-shan answered, "Our sect has no words. In reality there is no doctrine that can be given to people." When Yen-t'ou heard of this, he said, "The old man Te-shan has a spine as strong as iron. It can't be broken. Even so, when it comes to the way of expounding the teaching, he still lacks something." This was Yen-t'ou's style. He did not hesitate to open his mouth and speak his mind.

Now we come to the last part of the kong-an, when Yen-t'ou whispered whatever it was that he whispered in the master's ear and Te-shan was relieved. The next day, the story says, when Te-shan mounted the rostrum, his dharma speech was different than before. Yen-t'ou applauded and said, "Great joy!"—the old boy had finally got hold of the last word. "From now on, no one can check him." One question is, if his dharma speech was different than before, what kind did he usually give? Zen Master Yuan-Wu (Engo), the compiler of *The Blue Cliff Record*, once said that Te-shan "could scold the Buddhas and revile the Patriarchs, pummel the wind and beat the rain."[7] One of Te-shan's more typical dharma speeches reads:

> I see differently from our ancestors. Here there is neither patriarch nor Buddha. Bodhidharma is an old stinking barbarian. Shakyamuni is a dry toilet strip. Manjushri and Samantabhadra are dung-heap coolies. *Samyaksambodhi* and subtle perception are nothing but ordinary human nature freed of fetters. Bodhi and nirvana are but dead stumps to tie the donkeys to. The twelve divisions of the scriptures are only registers of ghosts, sheets of paper fit only for wiping the pus from your ulcers and tumors. All the "four fruitions" and "ten stages" are nothing but demons lingering in their decayed graves, who cannot even save themselves.[8]

This was Te-shan's usual style: "If you speak correctly, you get thirty blows. If you speak incorrectly, you also get thirty blows." When Zen Master Lin-chi (Rinzai) heard of this, he said to one of his monks, "Go there and ask him why the one who speaks correctly should get thirty blows. As soon as he begins to hit you, grab hold of his stick, push it against him, and see what he'll do." The monk did as Lin-chi had told him. Just as Te-shan went to hit him, the monk grabbed the stick and pushed it against Te-shan, who stood up and silently returned to his room. When the monk came back and told of the incident, Lin-chi said, "I always had my doubts about that old fellow. But putting that aside for a moment, did you see the real Te-shan?" As the monk fumbled for something to say, Lin-chi hit him.

Te-shan gave a speech that was different than usual, so his flexibility obviously was great, and he understood how to rise to the occasion quickly. There is one more point here. The beginning of the case says that the housemaster asked Te-shan, "Old Master, the bell has not yet been rung and the drum has not yet been struck. Where are you going carrying your bowls?" Te-shan silently returned to the master's room. Some people say that Te-shan was teaching through his silence, that he was teaching something like, Coming, going, mistake, no mistake, these are all of one seamless fabric. But even if this were so, the housemaster did not get it. Then all the complication and confusion emerged in the monastery.

The final question is, if you were Te-shan, what could you have said to the housemaster at that moment? How could you have used your mistake to give him some simple, clear Zen teaching? This is an important point. How can we use our mistakes rather than getting hung up on them? How can we be flexible and yielding, yet stand firm when it is necessary to stand firm? And how can we connect with the situation at hand and help this world in a thousand different ways, as the bodhisattva who has a thousand hands?