



Gnawing Through Qiánfēng's Three Illnesses and Two Lights

Raising the main case

Qiánfēng presented to the assembly, saying: "The dharma body has three kinds of illnesses and two kinds of light. One-by-one, you must directly pass through them. Further, bear in mind that there is a single opening going beyond."

Yúnmén came forward and said, "It's like a person inside a thatched hut - why don't they know the matter outside the thatched hut?"

Fēng chuckled and then belly laughed. Mén said, "Yet this student of Way is in a place of doubt."

Fēng said, "Where is your mind going?"

Mén said, "I want the venerable to get it with me."

Fēng said, "Truly one must be this way to begin sitting in peace."

Mén said, "Yes! Yes!"

Commentary

First, a bit about the two great teachers that appear in this case. Qiánfēng (9th Century) was a successor of Dòngshān Liángjiè, founder of what became the Sōtō lineage.¹ Qiánfēng is best known for the kōan “Qiánfēng’s One Road”² and for this one, “Qiánfēng’s Three Illnesses and Two Lights”. In contemporary Zen discourse, when Qiánfēng shows up, it is almost always with his one-time student, Yúnmén (-863 – 949).³

Yúnmén is widely revered as one of the brightest lights of the luminous Zen tradition - a reverence I share. His first awakening came with Mùzhōu, a successor of Huángbò, who is reputed to have broken Yúnmén’s leg by slamming it in a door. This precipitated that first awakening. Yúnmén then hobbled along and became a successor of Xuěfēng in one of the lines of the Shítóu succession.

After Xuěfēng’s death, Yúnmén traveled widely, training with several successors of Dòngshān, including Cáoshān, Shūshān, and Qiánfēng. Although Xuěfēng, Yúnmén’s transmission teacher, had received transmission from Dēshān, he had gone to see Dòngshān nine times. It appears that Yúnmén continued this between-lineage investigation (within the Shítóu succession) that Xuěfēng had initiated. And like Xuěfēng, Yúnmén served as the tenzo in at least some of the monasteries he visited. We learn from other kōans, for example, that Yúnmén served as tenzo at Qiánfēng’s place. So having awakened and received dharma transmission, we see Yúnmén serving others as tenzo before taking up the teaching cangue and continuing to serve in that capacity.

Second, a bit about the koan. “Qiánfēng’s Three Illnesses and Two Lights” can be found in Wànsōng’s commentary to *Record of Going Easy* (J. *Shōyōroku*), “Case 11 Yúnmén’s Two Illnesses” where it is the prequel for the main case. It also occurs in *Entangling Vines* (J. *Shūmon kattōshū*), “Case 17,” and with comments by Hakuin in *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin*, “Chapter 2: The Poisonous Leavings of Past Masters.” Hakuin mentions “Qiánfēng’s Three Sickness and Two Lights” frequently and includes it on his list of nanto (i.e., difficult to pass through) kōans. Further, “Qiánfēng’s Three Illnesses and Two

¹ Qiánfēng, aka, “Gānfēng,” and in Cleary translations as “Jianfeng;” Wades-Giles, Ch’ien-feng, J. Kenpō.

² See *No Gate Barrier*, 48: “A monk asked Qiánfēng, “The Bhagavats of the ten directions have but one road, the gate of nirvana.” I wonder, where is the starting place of that road?” Fēng grasped his staff, slashed one stroke and said, “It’s here.” Later, a monk asked Yúnmén to add to this. Mén lifted his fan and said, “This fan skips over one million comets, bounces over the Heaven of the Thirty-three, hits Indra’s nose, strikes an East Sea carp once, and rain pours down in torrents.”

³ See, for example, the delightful *The Record of Going Easy*, Case 40: “Yúnmén, Bái, and Hēi.” And *Entangling Vines*, Case 211: Qiánfēng’s “Take Up the One.”

Lights” is included in some kōan shitsunai in contemporary Inzan Rinzai lineages (but not in the standard Harada-Yasutani curriculum).

Speaking about “Qiánfēng’s Three Sickness and Two Lights,” the old buddha Hakuin said, “I want you noble ones penetrating Zen’s hidden depths to know that these words of instruction Qiánfēng addresses to his monks are very difficult— *difficult in the extreme*. You should never think otherwise.... Just concentrate yourselves steadily and single mindedly on gnawing your way into Qiánfēng’s words. Suddenly, unexpectedly, your teeth will sink in. Your body will pour with cold sweat. At that instant it will all become clear. You will see the infinite compassion contained in Qiánfēng’s instructions. You will grasp the timeless sublimity of Yúnmén’s response.”⁴

Clearly, this is an enormously important and powerful kōan. So, third, let’s do an old-fashioned line-by-line deep dive from the beginning:

“Qiánfēng said, “The dharma body has three kinds of illness and two kinds of light.”

Qiánfēng slyly avoids laying out the three illnesses and two lights, but in Wànsōng’s commentary mentioned above, Wànsōng says that when he was wandering around China on pilgrimage, the monks in all the great monasteries were talking about them. He identifies the three illnesses as “not yet arriving;” “attached after arriving;” and “thoroughly dropping with no basis to rely on.” By way of metaphor, Wànsōng quotes Fóyǎn saying, “The first illness is riding a donkey, seeking a donkey. Another illness is riding a donkey, refusing to dismount.”⁵

These cover the first and second illnesses. Fóyǎn also said, “I tell you that you need not mount the donkey; you *are* the donkey! The whole world is the donkey; how can you mount it? If you mount it, you can be sure sickness will not leave! If you do not mount it, the whole universe is wide open!”

I’d say, if you don’t see that you’re already an ass, you’ll never get your ass off the ass.

Given that these are the three illnesses, what then are the two kinds of light? Penetrating-and-dropping off “attached after arriving,” and “thoroughly dropping with no basis to rely on” - the second and third illnesses. There is no difference. Notably, the first illness, “not yet arriving,” has no corresponding light.

⁴ Hakuin, *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin*. Modified by using Pinyin.

⁵ Fóyǎn Qīngyuǎn (DDB): 1067–1120. A monk of the Yangqi branch of the Linji school who studied *Vinaya* and the *Lotus Sutra* and practiced Chan. He received the complete precepts at the age of 14 and later inherited the Dharma of Wúzǔ Fāyǎn. Thomas Cleary translated some of Fóyǎn’s general lectures in *Instant Zen: Waking Up in the Present*, the source of the quote that follows. Thanks, Dieter, for sharing this text.

So now you know. But the heart of the matter is not a *description* of the three illnesses and two lights but knowing them through-and-through so you can be free at last, free at last (Spoiler alert: this too is illness). And the best way to test any provisional freedom (like, “Shit! I’m an ass looking for an ass!”) is within relationship, especially within a face-to-face encounter with a Zen teacher with old-school standards. Likewise, Qiánfēng says that “...one-by-one, you must directly pass through them.”

This is the dynamic function of the infinite compassion contained in Qiánfēng’s instructions that Hakuin pointed out above.

Remember, Qiánfēng was a successor of Dòngshān, who is regarded as the founder of what became the modern Sōtō lineage. This fact can be added to the already considerable mound of data for the well-established refutation of the [Post Meiji Sōtō Orthodoxy \(PMSO\)](#) nonsense that “just sitting” without kōan goes back to Dòngshān. Never mind that most of the contemporary Sōtō world still clings to PMSO belief system, much like a dead dog on a dead end street still clutches its jaws around a stinky old bone.

Some folks in PMSO circles, their eyes blinded by the hooey that their just sitting (so-called *shikantaza*) *as it is, is it*, deny having the first illness or even that such an illness is prevalent and pernicious. Just sitting, they say, is the cure itself. I would say to such folks, prove it! And don’t just sit there with a blank or silly look and mutter, “Just this is it.” Sadly, this is just not a particularly penetrating insight, nor does it leap through the double barrier. Indeed, it’s not medicine at all, but fool’s gold, pure and simple.

Whether you like kōan or not, the simple truth is that kōan are powerful medicines (when dispensed within the teacher-student relationship) for healing the first illness. Experience shows that kōan are much more effective than “just sitting.” Anyone interested in kenshō should know this. In my view, PMSO Zen teachers ought to post a disclaimer to this effect on their websites lest they deceive those looking for the real thing.

However, even though kōan is more effective at healing the first illness, sincere students doing breath practice and/or just-sitting still do kenshō from time-to-time. I first wrote, “sincere and fortunate students,” but such folks may not be fortunate for long. To discover that you’re already riding a donkey, but then to be told by your teacher, “Of course you are, dear – just don’t attach to it” (too late!) is like discovering a cure for the most pernicious and pervasive illness in the whole world, just to be told by the medical professionals to ignore it and it’ll go away. What a disconnect! Such students would be wise to get a second opinion – and the sooner the better! The longer such students wait after their kenshō, the second illness will likely metastasize and could prove fatal.

The remedy lies in the peculiar power of kōan, when properly applied, which only comes into full bloom when used to address the second and third illnesses. "...Bear in mind," Qiánfēng says, clearly pointing to the course of practice to be pursued, "that there is a single opening going beyond."

What is the single opening going beyond?

Fortunately, Yúnmén came forward and said, "It's like a person inside a thatched hut - why don't they know the matter outside the thatched hut?"

Don't just slide by this one! The key to the living truth of each of the three illnesses and two lights lies here. This saying hides the timeless sublimity that Hakuin mentioned above. Yúnmén's thatched hut is a round peg for the round hole called the "singular opening going beyond." If you gnaw into it, you find that within it lies a truth waiting for you to discover. If you do diligent practice here, the day will come when you call out, "Yes! Yes!"

But if you're not yet calling out, then, I would ask you, "Who is the person inside?" "And what is outside the thatched hut?" And "Why does the person inside not know the matter outside?" Are you chuckling and belly laughing along with Fēng? Or, like Mén, are you in a place of doubt?

Although it isn't essential for the discovery process, I'll offer a translation note at this point. Most translations have "cottage" or "hermitage" for "thatched hut," and that's fair enough. However, if you are a context nerd like me, you might like to know the following: thatched hut, 庵, in Japanese is pronounced "an." In usage within the context of the buddhadharma, an "an" originally referred to a place for intense, solitary zazen practice. It was often used to designate a place for retirement from the world, and sometimes also for a small temple, especially a nunnery. In Keizan's *Record of the Transmission of Illumination*, Bodiford notes that "thatched hermitage (also 草庵 or sōan) "... is a poetic term that ... also came to mean a place where the resident monk could do what they wanted, free from pressure or interference by other members of the sangha. Thus, some Zen masters who did not live alone, but gathered disciples and built monasteries that were neither thatched nor especially humble called their domain a 'thatched hut' or 'thatched hermitage.'"

Just like that person inside!

But hold the tofu and don't be too fast to judge old master Yúnmén. A practitioner might wonder, "What kind of doubt is Yúnmén's doubt?" Explore this closely through the body

and you might just find he's calling out like Qīngshuì to Cáoshān, "Qīngshuì is alone and poor. I beg you, master, please help."⁶

Qiánfēng then explores Yúnmén's doubt, inquiring, "Where is your mind going?"

And Yúnmén confesses his sweet innermost request for subtle intimacy, "I want the venerable to get it with me."

Notably, what I render as "I want the venerable to get it with me" is translated by Waddell as "That's for you to clarify," and similarly by Cleary as "I want the teacher to comprehend thoroughly." They both seem to miss 相, xiāng, "mutual" or "together." I'm inclined to "get it with me" rather than a version that has the much younger student, Yúnmén, telling his venerable teacher, Qiánfēng, that the teacher doesn't yet get it. That just doesn't seem to fit the context. "I want the venerable to get it with me" is also in accord with Qiánfēng's next line: "Truly one must be this way to begin sitting in peace."

Which way is "this way?" One must be this way in two ways. One must be *in* this way, meaning having one-by-one correctly passed through the three illnesses and two lights. One must also "get it with" Yúnmén's timeless sublimity that is buried in "It's like a person inside a thatched hut - why don't they know the matter outside the thatched hut?"

Mén said, "Yes! Yes!"

Later, he would add his own twists with Yúnmén's "Two Illnesses," these were gathered up and versified a few hundred years later by Hóngzhì as Case 11 in what seventy-five years later became Wànsōng's *Record of Going Easy*.

I've shared my seven-hundred-and-fifty-years later translation of this [here](#).

⁶ *No Gate Barrier*, Case 10: "Qingshui Alone and Poor."