

# Revisiting Baizhang's Fox<sup>1</sup>

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It is no secret that I have a longstanding interest in the story of Baizhang's Fox, which has been an important life-koan for me. I've already given a number of dharma talks about it, and the koan also forms the basis of my Noh play, *Oppenheimer*, which I sometimes describe as 'a teisho, in the form of a Noh play, on Baizhang's Fox.'

What has prompted me to take up the story yet again? Well, some months ago I sent Nelson Foster—one of the senior teachers in the Diamond Sangha, and Resident Teacher at Ring of Bone Zendo—a copy of the DVD of *Oppenheimer*. Nelson responded by asking me some thought-provoking questions about the relationship of *Oppenheimer* to the story of Baizhang's Fox. Before I replied to his questions, however, I felt the need to come back to the case and look at it with fresh eyes—post-*Oppenheimer* as it were. In revisiting Baizhang's Fox, I'll focus on only the first part of the case; I intend to address the issues raised by Nelson in a later article.

Once when Baizhang gave a series of talks, a certain old man was always there listening together with the monks. When they left, he would leave too. One day, however, he remained behind. Baizhang asked him, "Who are you, standing here before me?" The old man replied, "I am not a human being. In the far distant past, in the time of Kasyapa Buddha, I was head priest at this mountain. One day a monk asked me, 'Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?' I replied, 'Such a person does not fall under the law of cause and effect.' With this I was reborn five hundred times as a fox. Please say a turning word for me and release me from the body of a fox."

He then asked Baizhang, "Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?" Baizhang said, "Such a person does not evade the law of cause and effect." Hearing this, the old man was immediately enlightened and was released from the body of a fox.<sup>2</sup>

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When a student encounters a koan for the first time – whether in dokusan, or in a dharma study workshop perhaps – I often ask, "what do you think is the main point of this case?" "What is it that most interests you about this story?" I find this is a good way of allowing students to establish their own relationship with the case and to find out where in their life and practice the koan resonates. It's also a question I sometimes ask myself when encountering a new koan, or re-encountering a familiar koan. So when I decided to revisit Baizhang's Fox, this was precisely the question that I asked myself.

What jumped out for me in response was the question, "Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?" This question is in fact asked twice and draws two different responses, each of which has different consequences.

When, in the distant past, a monk asked the old priest this question, his response was, "Such a person does not fall under the law of cause and effect." The consequence of this was that the old man was reborn five hundred times as a fox.

Eons later, after many fox-lives, the old man finally met Baizhang and in turn asked him the question. Baizhang's response was, "Such a person does not evade the law of cause and effect." The consequence, we learn, is that the old man was immediately enlightened and released from his fox-body.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of a teisho that I gave at the 2017 Rohatsu sesshin. A slightly truncated version of this talk can be heard at <http://szc.org.au/the-fox/>. It is intended as the first part of a two-part article that will reflect on the relationship of the story of Baizhang's Fox to my Noh play, *Oppenheimer*.

<sup>2</sup> Aitken, Robert, *The Gateless Barrier. The Wu-men kuan (Mumonkan)*. San Francisco: North Point Press, p.19. This portion of the case also appears as Case 8 in the *Book of Serenity*.

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### Budai under a pine tree



When, as students of Zen, we confront stories such as Baizhang's Fox, we need to do so with a clear dharma eye, with the eye of an awakened one. A common-sense reading of the story would suggest that the old man fell into 500 fox-lives as a result of making a mistake about cause and effect and that, when Baizhang corrected the mistake, he was released from his fox-body. But the problem with this line of thought is that it sets up a dichotomy of right and wrong—right answer versus wrong answer—and this immediately mires us in dualistic thinking.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that there is no wisdom in this common-sense reading—indeed, in his essay entitled 'Deep Belief in Cause and Effect,'<sup>3</sup> Dôgen Zenji is scathing about people who do not give due attention to this aspect of the case and its ethical ramifications—but nevertheless, thinking dualistically like this is inevitably only partial. We need to go deeper.

Shibayama Roshi in his teisho on this case also draws our attention to the limitations of such 'common-sense interpretations' of the koan and points beyond to a deeper understanding, where Zen is 'alive and active' ... and where we can freely deal with dichotomies such as falling under the law of cause and effect versus not falling under the law of cause and effect.

Often people say that the old man had to be turned into a fox because 'not falling into causation' denies the fact of cause and effect and thus forms a one-sided, mistaken view of equality [i.e. non-differentiation] that is not real equality. He was released from the fox body because 'not ignoring [or evading] causation' acknowledges the reality of cause and effect and knows the acceptance of differentiation. But the essence of this can never be found in such a common-sense interpretation. Neither am I saying that Zen denies causality. What I want you to know is that Zen is alive and active in quite another sphere where it makes free use of both "not falling" and "not ignoring."<sup>4</sup>

Why did the old man make his error? Dôgen suggests that it is the result of 'emptiness run wild,'<sup>5</sup> or what we might call, 'one-sided clinging to emptiness.' You might think that falling into this sort of error is a somewhat unusual problem. Ordinarily, people see only the world of form, and do not see the empty side at all.

The previous koan in the Wumenguan, Zhaozhou's Dog, is designed to address precisely that problem, by encouraging us to break free from a blinkered view that binds us to the world of form—the world of phenomena, the relative world—and to give us a first glimpse of our essential nature, of the world of empty oneness. We call this *satori* or 'awakening.' But after experiencing *satori*, it is not uncommon for practitioners to make the mistake of clinging to emptiness and becoming careless about the world of form—the world of phenomena—and when that happens, look out! 500 fox lives are coming your way.

And why was the old man freed from his fox lives? We might think that the old man was freed from the fox's body because he finally realises both perspectives—that of form and that of emptiness, but we need to be clear that seeing both form and emptiness is never a matter of *balancing* the world of form with the world of emptiness, or even seeing things now from the perspective of form and now from the perspective of emptiness.

This simply will not do. If we cannot see that form and emptiness are absolutely one and the same, then we're not seeing fully with a clear dharma eye, and we'll miss the deeper significance of this koan. After all, the Heart Sutra tells us quite unequivocally that, 'form is no other than emptiness, emptiness not other than form; form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form,' and for Dôgen, the relationship between realisation and karma was similarly one of complete identity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nishijima Gudo Wafu and Chodo Cross (translated and edited), Dôgen Kigen, 'Deep Belief In Cause and Effect (*Shinjin-inga*)', *Shôbô Genzô. The True Dharma Eye Treasury*. Berkeley: Numata Centre for Buddhist Translation and Research 2008, vol 4, pp.251-261.

<sup>4</sup> Shibayama Zenkei, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*. Boston: Shambala, 2000, p.38.

<sup>5</sup> Nishijima and Cross 2008, p.252

<sup>6</sup> Nearman, Hubert (translation), *Daishugyô (The Great Practice), Shôbôgenzô, Eye of the True Teaching A Trainee's Translation of Great Master Dogen's Spiritual Masterpiece*, Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press 2007, p.825.

While talk of form and emptiness, or of karma and realisation, may be useful tools for teaching about, or discussing, the dharma, if there is one iota of separation between them, integrity will be lost. This is the deeper truth that lies at the heart of the story of Baizhang's Fox.

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### The fox



Here is a story about precisely this matter: a story that underscores the complete identity of form and emptiness.<sup>7</sup> Yunyan is sweeping the courtyard, and along comes his brother monk, Daowu. Daowu says, “you’re working hard,” to which Yunyan replies, “but you need to recognise that there is one who does not work.” That is: you see the form of the one sweeping the courtyard, but can you also see that there is also not one that is working; one that is completely empty and does not move at all? Here are two Zen worthies, testing each other’s dharma eye. Daowu’s “you’re working hard,” points to the everyday world of form, Yunyan’s “you need to know that there is one who is not working hard,” points in the direction of emptiness.

Daowu next response, “you mean there are two moons?” is a gentle admonishment of his brother monk for raising form and emptiness as if it was a matter of one or the other—the one who works hard as opposed to the one who doesn’t.

In response Yunyan thrusts out his rake and says, “How many moons is this?” Complete unity of form and emptiness, right there. Rake and nothing but rake in the whole universe.

Daowu responds by sitting still, without a word.

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Shibayama Roshi writes, “What I want you to know is that Zen is alive and active in quite another sphere [—from that of the common-sense understanding that he earlier outlined—] where it makes free use of both “not falling” and “not ignoring

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<sup>7</sup> *Book of Serenity*, Case 21.

[not evading].”” What is he saying here? Is he setting up a dichotomy between the world of form and the world of emptiness, or is he pointing to their complete identity? I think it is the latter, but in order to show why, I need to digress a little.

The ninth century Chan master Qingyuan Weixin had a saying that went something like this:

Thirty years ago, when I began studying Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. After I gained intimate knowledge of the truth of Zen, there were no mountains and no rivers. But now I have fully attained the way, I see that mountains are mountains, and rivers are rivers.

In the Genjô Koan, Dôgen makes a similar point:

As all things are buddha-dharma, there are delusion, realization, practice, birth and death, buddhas and sentient beings. [This is the realm of mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers, karma is karma.]

As myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death. [This is the realm of no mountains, no rivers, no karma.]

The buddha way, in essence, is leaping clear of abundance and lack; thus there are birth and death, delusion and realization, sentient beings and buddhas. [This is the realm of mountains, rivers and karma that are liberated to be themselves, leaping clear of form (abundance) or emptiness (lack). Completely natural!]<sup>8</sup>

Qingyuan and Dôgen both point us to the fact that that prior to realisation, before we experience emptiness, things are just things. All we see is form, perhaps with occasional intimations that this is not the full story. When we awaken, when we experience *satori*, we see for the first time that there is no thing at all. This is the territory of the koan Mu. And it is where the old man in our story is stuck. He has seen into the emptiness of things but he cannot yet fully embrace the truly natural way that lies beyond any separation of form and emptiness, where mountains are free to be mountains and rivers free to be rivers. This is what I think Shibayama Roshi is pointing to when he says that we can make free use of not falling into and not evading karma.

But the old man was not capable of this. Up until the point he experienced *satori*, he had known cause and effect only from the viewpoint of the world of form. After *satori*, cause and effect seemed to no longer function.

But that cannot possibly be the full story. No matter how enlightened you are, no matter how clear your dharma eye, if you drive your car off a thousand foot cliff you will surely die. The old man had yet to take that final step into the realm where mountains are free to be mountains, and where karma operates freely and without obstruction.

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The seriousness of this matter is powerfully expressed in the koan story: if you mislead an enquiring student about karma you will fall into 500 lives as a fox. Dôgen Zenji's Shôbôgenzô includes two teishos on Baizhang's Fox: 'Deep Belief in Cause and Effect' and 'The Great Practice.' As I've already mentioned, in the former, he makes it very clear that denial of cause and effect, as a result of what he calls 'emptiness run wild,'<sup>9</sup> leads to disaster: 'as a result of [the negation of cause and effect, the negator] falls into bad states.'<sup>10</sup> Bad states such as: '500 lives as a fox.'

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi (translated), Dôgen Kigen, 'Genjo Koan,' [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dôgen\\_Teachings/GenjoKoan8.htm](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dôgen_Teachings/GenjoKoan8.htm) (viewed 6 February 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Nishijima and Cross, *op.cit.*, p.255

<sup>10</sup> Nishijima and Cross, *op.cit.*, p. 252

Dôgen emphasizes that ‘in learning to practice the Buddha-Dharma, the first priority is to clarify cause and effect. If cause and effect perished and became void, buddhas could not appear in the world and the ancestral master could not come from the west. In sum, it would be impossible for living beings to meet Buddha and to hear the Dharma.’<sup>11</sup>

Personally, I feel very strongly about the dangers of being blinded by emptiness and denying cause and effect. In our present age, there have been many instances of highly respected Zen masters and other Buddhist teachers – people who are highly respected for their dharma eye – doing unconscionable things, including sexual abuse and misconduct, bullying and justifying killing.

My Noh play, *Oppenheimer*, also reflects the seriousness of my own concerns about this matter. In the play, Robert Oppenheimer’s obsession with the sub-atomic world is equated to the old man’s obsession with emptiness. What the two domains have in common is that in both the law of cause and effect appears to break down. The play rests on the dramatic conceit that, just as the old man in the story of Baizhang’s Fox was blinded by emptiness and became careless with regard to cause and effect, so too was Oppenheimer blinded by the beauty and fascination of the sub-atomic world and as a result lost sight of the effect that his actions would have in the world. The consequences of Oppenheimer’s carelessness around cause and effect – the almost total destruction of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki together with many thousands of their inhabitants, not to mention the nuclear shadow that continues to hang over us to this day – led him into what Dôgen would call ‘bad states’ – into a succession of fox-lives. Bound to the world of the living by his unresolved pain and regret Oppenheimer’s ghost returns obsessively to Hiroshima every year on the anniversary of the atomic bombing and suffers the agonies of those who perished there. Each time, he dies an agonizing death and is reborn to even greater pain upon his wheel of karma.

Oppenheimer’s liberation from his ghostly existence and his cycle of agonies comes only when he, like the old man, sees into the true nature of karma – when he sees that he is not separate from the effects of his actions. Only then can he act to free himself, in the full understanding that the law of cause and effect can never be evaded.

After awakening there is much work to be done, as we learn to carry our realisation into the world. Teachers not only lead students to awakening, they also (with the help of the words and actions of the old masters enshrined in our koans) help them to integrate their realisation into their daily lives. Karma is one of the most difficult and confusing things to integrate, and this is why, perhaps, this koan is known as a *nanto* koan: because it deals with a particularly difficult matter.

Seeing into emptiness does not mean that you can evade the law of cause and effect. Dôgen is firm on this matter: ‘In learning in practice the Buddha-Dharma, the first priority is to clarify cause and effect.’<sup>12</sup>

Dôgen’s view of karma is both radical and subtle. It is in the other of his discourses on Baizhang’s Fox – “The Great Practice” chapter in the *Shôbôgenzô* – that he draws our attention to the fact that the clear dharma eye sees the relationship between The Great Practice (that is, Full Awakening) and Cause and Effect as one of *identity*.

When we search for and find the Great Practice, this will be the Great Practice of Cause and Effect. Because this Cause and Effect is invariably the full perfection of the cause and the complete fulfilment of the effect, there is nothing to debate concerning ‘being subject to [falling

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<sup>11</sup> Nishijima and Cross, *op.cit.*, p. 257

<sup>12</sup> Nishijima and Cross, *op.cit.* p.257

under the law of]’ or ‘not being subject to [not falling under the law of]’ and there is nothing to discuss concerning ‘being blind to [evading]’ or ‘not being blind to [not evading].’<sup>13</sup>

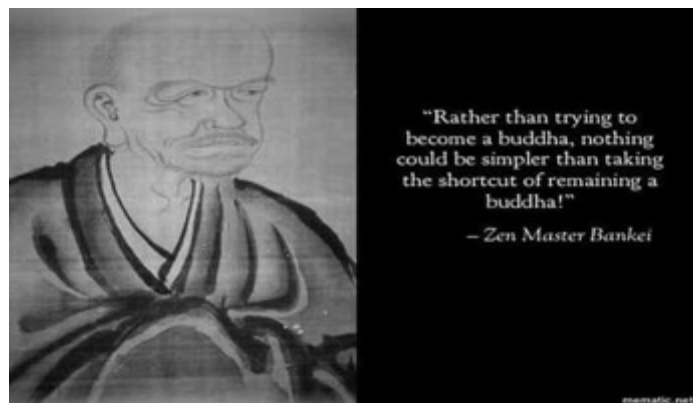
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Just as Yunyan’s thrust-out rake – how many moons is this? – presents the complete identity of emptiness and form, Dôgen’s words point us towards the absolute non-separation of awakening and karma. As in Qingyuan’s expression of full maturity, where there is no tension between the emptiness of mountains and rivers, and the form of mountains and rivers; everything, including the action of karma, is free to be itself.

For a more recent expression of this fundamental truth and its implications for how we lead our lives, I’d like to turn once again to Shibayama Roshi, and allow him the last word:

The fact of cause and effect is so clear and undeniable! In all ages and places there can be nothing on this earth that does not exist through the action of cause and effect. Every moment, every existence is causation itself . . . This being the case, the [person] of real freedom would be the one who lives in peace in whatever circumstances cause and effect bring about. Whether the situation is favourable or adverse, he [or she] lives it as the absolute situation with [the] whole being – *that is he [or she] is causation itself* (my emphasis). [Such a person] never dualistically discriminates different aspects of the situation; [the] heart is never disturbed by any outside elements. [Living] like this, [such a person] is the master of cause and effect and everything is blessed as it is. The eternal peace is established here. This is the indescribably spiritual happiness a Zen [person] enjoys.<sup>14</sup>

## Hotei



<sup>13</sup> Nearman, *op.cit.*, p.825

<sup>14</sup> Shibayama, *op.cit.*, p.34