

TRANSMISSION CEREMONY TEISHO GIVEN BY ALLAN MARETT
The Blue Cliff Record, Case 27: Yunmen's Golden Wind¹

Allan Marett

The Case²

A monk asked Yunmen, “When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what is that?”
Yunmen replied, “Golden wind is manifesting itself.”

Xuedou's verse³

The question already contains the essence,
The answer is also likewise.
The three phrases should be made clear,
A single arrow flies through the void.
Over the great plain—chilling windblasts howling, wailing;
In the eternal sky—intermittent misty rain.
Don't you see the long-sitting traveler of Shaolin who will never return?
Quietly he lies on the grasses of Bear Ear Mountain.

Declaration

Before I begin my talk, I wish to pay my respects to the traditional owners of this country, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and to acknowledge that the place where we now sit is Gadigal Land. At Sydney University, where I spent most of my professional life, graduation ceremonies are usually preceded by an acknowledgement that the university sits on a place of ancient learning that goes back millennia. In that spirit I would like to acknowledge that the land upon which our Buddhist institutions sit has for millennia been a seat of Wisdom. Zen Buddhism, like Indigenous Law, is a Wisdom tradition. I hope that my talk today will bring out some resonances between them.

I'm going to begin by discussing Case 27 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, Yunmen's Golden Wind, which takes us to Sung China, sometime in the first half of the tenth century. I'll then introduce some Indigenous perspectives that derive from two *wangga* songs: *Karra mana tjerri* (which addresses the Sea Breeze Dreaming) and *Karra-ve kanya vever* (“The wind is blowing on my back”). For many years now I have sung *wangga* songs such as these—songs that are simultaneously both ancient and contemporary—in both Zen and Indigenous contexts. I've been

¹ This talk was first given at my Transmission Ceremony, which was held at the Buddhist Library, Sydney, on 29 July 2018.

² With regard to sources, unless otherwise stated, I have used the translation of *The Blue Cliff Record* made by Yamada Kôun and Robert Aitken. I have also referred to Yamada Roshi's teishôs on *The Blue Cliff Record*, which have been published on the *Sanbo Kyôdan* website <http://www.sanbo-zen.org>, and to the following translations of the text and commentaries: Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, Shambala 1977; Thomas Cleary, *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record: Zen Comments by Hakuin and Tenkei*, Shambala 2002.

³ Apart from lines 5 and 6, the translation of the verse is from Yamada Roshi teishô. Lines 5 and 6 are taken from Cleary 1977.

fortunate to study these songs over a period of more than three decades with masters of the *wangga* tradition and have been authorized to sing them by senior elders from the Daly region, including Dr Payi Linda Ford, who is with us today.

My teachers are too numerous for me to name them all, but I would like especially acknowledge the late Frank Dumoo, the boss of *wangga* business in the Daly region, whom I called “Dad,” as well as Alan Maralung (my first teacher), Bobby Lambudju Lane (from whom I learned *Karra-ve kanya verver*), Tommy and Kenny Burrenjuk, Maurice Ngulkur (from whom I learned *Karra mana tjerri*) and Colin Worumbu Ferguson, who continues to be my friend and mentor. I offer you all a deep bow of gratitude, and especially to you, Payi, for your support and guidance.

Teishô

Case 27 of *The Blue Cliff Record* begins with an unnamed monk coming before the great Zen Master, Yunmen Wenyan and asking: “when the tree withers and the leaves fall, what is that?”

How should we regard the monk and what do we think of his question? Is he a dullard, merely parroting some key phrase about the dharma? Or does he have a genuine question, about impermanence perhaps? Or is he presenting a deeper insight to his master?

My old teacher, Yamada Koun Roshi, observed that we’re not given much information about this monk, so it’s not easy for us to discern exactly what he was asking. My initial sense is that the images of a withered tree and falling leaves indicate autumn—the season when the vitality of summer begins to yield to the cold starkness of winter—so perhaps the monk was using these images to frame a question about impermanence—about how it is when everything passes away.

In classical Buddhism, Impermanence (*anicca*) is—along with Unsatisfactoriness or Suffering (*dukkha*) and No Abiding Self (*anataa*)—one of the “three universal marks of existence” that affect all beings. According to this classical view, it is impermanence that leads us to find the world unsatisfactory, which in turn leads us to try to grasp onto things, or reject them, which in turn leads to suffering. It would certainly not have been out of character for an earnest Buddhist monk to ask a question of this type. “What about the falling away of things and the suffering this causes?”

Yunmen, the great master, responds by saying, “Golden wind is manifesting itself.” This response resonates perfectly with the autumnal tone of the question, since in Chinese poetics gold is the colour that is associated with autumn. We might interpret Yunmen’s response as saying: “this is precisely how autumn manifests; the trees wither and the leaves fall. Things come forth just as they are.”

In the autumn of our lives, as we enter the years when our bodies begin to fail and death begins to seem more imminent, this very state can, in maturity, be experienced as a *blessed* Golden Wind. In many ways, this is where we hope to end up in a mature practice, or a mature life: with an ability to be at one with whatever occurs. The word “dharma,” which is usually understood as the body of the Buddhist Doctrine, also carries the meaning: “things as they truly are.” “The person of great freedom,” writes Shibayama Roshi, the former abbot of Nanzenji, “would be the one who lives in peace in whatever circumstances ... whether the

situation is favourable or adverse. For such a person... everything is blessed as it is. The eternal peace is established here. This is the indescribable spiritual happiness a Zen [person] enjoys.”⁴

Some commentators however—including the compiler of *The Blue Cliff Record*, Xuedou Zhijian—would not have been satisfied with the interpretation that I’ve just given you. For Xuedou, both the monk’s question and Yunmen’s reply are as much about revealing their Essential Nature as being about decay and impermanence. This is made clear in Xuedou’s verse on this case: “The question already contains the essence/The answer is also likewise.”

The character that Xuedou uses for “essence,” 宗 (pronounced *zong* in Chinese and *shû* in Japanese) also means “ancestral source,” and accordingly Cleary translates the first line of the verse as “the question has the source.” The couplet thus simultaneously points both to the essential truth of the Buddha-dharma and to the lineage of the master, Yunmen. These two are not, however, in conflict: they are simply dimensions of the one truth. Each of these two dimensions—the essential and the ancestral—are taken up and elaborated in later couplets of the verse.

For example, the final couplet, “Don’t you see the long-sitting traveler of Shaolin who will never return? Quietly he lies on the grasses of Bear Ear Mountain,” points in the direction of the ancestral source. The “long-sitting traveler of Shaolin who will never return,” is, of course, Bodhidharma, the Indian (or possibly Central Asian) monk who brought Zen Buddhism to China in the fifth century CE, and who sat unmoving in meditation for nine years at Shaolin Temple on Bear Ear mountain. Prior to this, Bodhidharma had a famous encounter with Emperor Wu of Liang. The Emperor could not recognize Bodhidharma as the great sage that he was, but after Bodhidharma has left and crossed the Yangtze River, and once the Emperor had been alerted to who he really was, the Emperor asked his advisor to call him back. The advisor famously responded. “Even if everyone in the country went after him, he would never return.” This is why Xuedou calls Bodhidharma the one “who will never return.”

The eighteenth century Japanese Master Tenkei Denson wrote in reference to these lines of “the eternal, unchanging, living Bodhidharma, who neither comes nor goes.”⁵ That which is “eternal and unchanging,” and “which neither comes nor goes” is precisely what we call in Zen “our Essential Nature” or “our Buddha Nature.” Xuedou’s phrase, “a single arrow flying through the void,” expresses this eternal and unmoving Bodhidharma mind. Here it is, right now, flying through the void, going precisely nowhere.

Tenkei’s contemporary, Hakuin Zenji, skilfully points to the identity of question and answer: “The very substance of the Zen ancestor sitting at Shaolin

⁴ Shibayama Zenkei, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*. Shambala 2000, p.34.

⁵ Thomas Cleary, *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record: Zen Comments by Hakuin and Tenkei*. Shambala 2002, p.85.

[Yunmen's response] is itself the time and the state of *the tree withering and the leaves falling* [the monk's question]."⁶

In Zen poetics, images such as the withered tree and the fallen leaves point directly to the boundless empty field that has been there from the beginning, to use the words of Master Tiantong Hongzhi. Images of this type abound in Xuedou's verse: "Over the great plain—chilling, windblasts howling, wailing/In the eternal sky—intermittent misty rain." Here "the great plains" and "the eternal sky" represent the boundlessness of our Essential Nature. Keizan Jokin, one of the early Japanese Zen masters and one of our great poets, used similar images to point to Emptiness: "The wisteria has withered; trees have fallen down;/Mountains have crumbled level with the plains."⁷

For Xuedou and other later commentators, the monk's utterance is not so much a question, as a *presentation* of his awakened mind, where everything has completely fallen away. Yunmen's response, "Golden wind is manifesting itself" perfectly balances the monk's presentation with a vision of fullness and abundance.

As I said earlier, in Chinese Zen, gold was the colour associated with autumn, and autumn, in turn, was associated with abundance. This is true not just in Chinese Zen. Some of us might remember Keats's *Ode to Autumn*, which begins: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." Master Tiantong Hongzhi, wrote: "the place of silent and serene illumination is the heavenly dome in autumn,"⁸ and he goes on to urge us to be, "splendid and lustrous like the waters [of the dharma] moistening autumn."⁹

Yunmen's Golden Wind of Abundance is said to be "manifesting itself," that is, it is constantly coming forth, right here and now. Closer examination of the phrase "Golden Wind is manifesting itself" reveals, however, that Yunmen's words reference not only abundance, but also poverty. *Simultaneously* they present the coming forth of things and their falling away and in so doing, they point directly to the Great Matter that lies beyond birth and death. This is the genius of Yunmen's response.

In order to understand precisely how Yunmen points to that which lies beyond birth and death, we need to dig a little more into the language and the poetics or his utterance. While "manifesting itself" is the most common translation of the pair of Chinese characters 體露 (*dilu*), taken *literally* this character-pair mean "body exposed." This is why Thomas Cleary, in his translation of *The Blue Cliff Record*, renders Yunmen's response as: "Body exposed in the Autumn Wind."

Centuries later, in eighteenth-century Japan, Hakuin Zenji latched onto this more literal interpretation when he commented "[Yunmen] saw the whole world uniformly in terms of the realm where subject and object are transcended and your skin is shed."¹⁰ And again, he writes, "when the skin is completely shed,

⁶ Cleary 2002, p.84-85.

⁷ Yamada Kôun and Robert Aitken (trans), *Denkoroku*.

⁸ Leighton, Taigen Dan, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, Tokyo/Rutland, Vermont/Singapore: Tuttle, 2000, p.38.

⁹ Leighton 2000, p.42.

¹⁰ Cleary 2002, p.85.

there is only one reality.”¹¹ This one reality is “the body exposed in the Golden Wind.” When we awaken, the skin of an abiding self is indeed completely shed and the empty body of the dharma-kaya is fully exposed.

What is it that is exposed when everything is blown away in the golden wind that has been blowing since the beginning and which is blowing right here and how? What is it that transcends the abundant coming forth of things and their concomitant falling away? The Zen student must be able to point to this without hesitation.

Winds that expose the true body that lies beyond birth and death also make an appearance in the tradition of Aboriginal *wangga* songs. We Zen Buddhists draw heavily on the wisdom of Indian, Chinese and Japanese masters, but alas it is far more difficult for non-indigenous Australians to access the indigenous Wisdom traditions of this ancient land. You might like to reflect on why this is so.

I began this talk by formally reading a case and reciting a verse about the Golden Wind from one of our Buddhist compendia of wisdom, *The Blue Cliff Record*. I’d now like to sing something from an Aboriginal compendium of Wisdom—the *wangga* songs of North West Australia—and then explore their resonances with Yunmen. You can hear Maurice Ngulkur’s performance of this song if you go to <http://wangga.library.usyd.edu.au/repertories/ma-yawa-wangga/141> and you’ll also find a musical transcription of this song directly below.¹²

The image shows a musical score for a Wangga song. It is divided into several sections:

- VOCAL SECTION 1**: Labeled "Parlando", it features a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "ka-ma ma-ma ga-mi ka-ga-ga ka-ga-ga ka-ga-ga".
- INSTRUMENTAL INTRODUCTION**: A Didjeridu part in bass clef, marked with a tempo of $C = 112$.
- VOCAL SECTION 2**: A second vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "ka-ma ma-ma ga-mi ka-ga-ga ka-ga-ga".
- INSTRUMENTAL SECTION 1**: A Mandolin part in treble clef, marked with a tempo of $4 = 112$.
- Didjeridu**: A second Didjeridu part in bass clef, continuing the instrumental introduction.

¹¹ Cleary 2002, p.86

¹² Allan Marett, Linda Barwick and Lysbeth Ford, *For the Sake of a Song: Wangga Songmen and their Repertories*. Sydney University Press 2013, p.52.

The text of the song is as follows:

<i>karra mana tjerri</i> <i>kagandja kinyi-ni kavulh</i>	Brother Sea Breeze! He is always manifesting himself right here and now, as he has from the very beginning
<i>purangang kin-pa-diyerr</i> <i>kavulh kagan-dja kisji</i>	The sea is always breaking at the creek, right here, like this

This text tells us that, like Yunmen’s Golden Wind, the Sea Breeze Dreaming is “manifesting itself/himself.” And just as we needed to interrogate the original Chinese in order to discover that what was translated as “manifesting” there literally means “body exposed,” so too we need to interrogate the original language of the Sea Breeze *wangga*—Marriammu—in order to understand how “manifesting himself” is actually expressed here.

What I’ve translated as “he is manifesting himself right here and now, as he has from the very beginning” is, in Marriammu: *kagandja kinyi-ni kavulh*. As is common in Aboriginal languages, the verb is agglutinative, that is, it consists of a verb-stem to which elements are added before and after to inflect for person, mood, tense and so on. The verb stem of *kinyi-ni* is *-nyi-* which means “to make or do.” Put *ki* in front—*ki-nyi*— and it means “he makes or does.” The suffix *-ni* makes the verb reflexive, *kinyi-ni*: “he makes himself.” Linguist friends tell me that these sorts of self-reflexive verb constructions tend to occur only within the poetics of song, and not in everyday discourse. That is, they are unique and special poetic expressions of deep truth.

Self-generation is an important quality of Dreamings, which require no agency beyond themselves for their existence. This quality of the Sea Breeze Dreaming is shared by Yunmen’s Golden Wind, which is also self-evidently present and dependent on nothing outside itself for its existence. This is what Tiantong Hongzhi was referring to when he said, “Birth and death originally have no root or stem; appearing and disappearing originally have no defining signs or traces.”¹³

When I was studying this *wangga* with the old songmen, we spent many hours mulling over possible translations of this phrase, *kinyi-ni*. Finally, growing impatient, one of the songmen, Ambrose Piarlum, picked up a goose wing fan, stepped up to me and waved it in my face. Going past words and categories he directly exposed the true body of the Sea Breeze Dreaming. Wind and nothing but wind. From a Zen point of view, this was a perfect presentation of the true fact.

The *eternal nature* of the Sea Breeze—in Zen terms, “that which neither comes nor goes; that which is beyond birth and death”—is expressed by the co-verb *kavulh*, which follows *kinyi-ni* and means literally ‘he lies’ or, as we would say in Zen, “he has lain there from the very beginning,” while the *here-and-now-ness* of the Dreaming is indicated by the word *kagandja*, which precedes *kinyi-ni* and means literally, “right here and now.”

When, in his verse, Xuedou write “Over the great pain—chilling windblast howling, wailing/In the eternal sky, intermittent misty rain,” the reference to

¹³ Leighton 2000, p.32.

“the great plain” and the “eternal sky” parallels *kavulh*, and makes clear that Yunmen’s Golden Wind is similarly boundless and *eternal*; while the references to “chilly blasts of wind” and “intermittent misty rain” parallel *kagandja* in expressing the *right-here-and-now-ness* of the Golden Wind.

So to summarise: *karra mana tjerri*—Brother Sea Breeze; *kagandja*—right here and now; *kinyi-ni*—he is manifesting himself; *kavulh*—as he has from the beginning. This manifestation of the eternal right here and now is what in Zen we call Our Original Face.

Personally I find these resonances deep moving, and wonder whether they might not represent a point of departure for a healing exchange of the type recently suggested by Noongar novelist, and twice winner of the Miles Franklin Award, Kim Scott. In a recent interview on the ABC Away program, he said:

I step toward a possible future via a transformation, because if it’s the case, as I believe, that things like our languages [and I would add, songs] are important—are major denominations in the currency of identity and belonging ... (and enlightened Australia is coming to see this)—then we require some sort of exchange. It can’t be just given over, so it’s the whole exchange, and the negotiation—the protracted negotiation—that I think I kind of enjoy. And I think the history of my people has shown they’re very skilful in that protracted negotiation and dancing around and stepping into the shoes of the other.¹⁴

I hope that in time, we non-Indigenous Australians are able to show ourselves to be equally “skilful in that protracted negotiation and dancing around and stepping into the shoes of the other.”

I’d like now to briefly return to the monk’s question to Yunmen: “When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what is that?” At first I took this to be a question about impermanence and decay, and the associated chain of causation that leads to suffering, but then, guided by Xuedou’s verse and Hakuin’s commentary, I came to see that he was not *just* an earnest monk asking a question about Buddhist doctrine, but also someone presenting his awakened mind to his master.

Yuanwu Keqing, who some sixty years after the death of Xuedou published *The Blue Cliff Record* together with his own commentaries, was also of this view. He thought that if we see the monk merely as someone enquiring into the matter of impermanence, we diminish him: “If you look at him in [such] ordinary terms, he just seems to be a monk involved in idle concerns.” Like Xuedou and Hakuin, Yuanwu saw the monk’s question as pointing in the direction of Essential Nature:

This monk posed a question that was indeed dangerous and lofty ... he undeniably has something marvellous about him. Yunmen did not stir a hair’s breadth, but just said to him, [“Golden wind is manifesting itself.”]. He answered most

¹⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/saturday-12-may-2018/9734542>.

wondrously, and without presuming to turn his back on the monk's question either. Since the monk's question had eyes, Yunmen's response was straight to the point.

By dismissing the possibility that the monk's question was an enquiry about impermanence and its associated suffering, however, Yuanwu may have missed something, namely that *there is no inherent contradiction* in seeing the monk's images of the withered tree and falling leaves as representing *both* Impermanence and Emptiness. Without a hair's breadth of difference!

Nor is there any conflict in seeing Yunmen's response as pointing *both* to being with things-just-as-they-are and to the totally fallen away, totally exposed, body and mind of our Essential Nature. Again, without a hairsbreadth of difference.

As followers of the bodhisattva path, Zen practitioners vow to liberate all beings from suffering. To me, Yunmen's Golden Wind not only expresses clarity, but also points to the alleviation of suffering. As we read in the opening lines of The Great Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra (which we will chant together later in the ceremony), "The bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin [or Avalokitiswara], through practicing the deep wisdom of the prajna parameter, clearly saw that all things are empty, thereby transforming all suffering." From the standpoint of emptiness, there is no tree to wither and no leaves to fall, and yet, and yet ... there is no ending to withering trees and falling leaves. This truth is clearly and unequivocally expressed later in the Heart Sutra, where it says: "no old age and death and also no ending of age and death." *Mu ro shi yaku mu ro shi jin.*

When correctly performed in ceremonies associated with death, *wangga* songs have the power, like Yunmen's Golden Wind, to cut through birth and death in order to liberate both the living and the dead. I know this through singing these songs in funerals and other mortuary ceremonies. But I have also learned, from the lived experience of being with the bereaved on such occasions, that they also ease the suffering of the living who have been left behind, by emphasising the closeness of the communities of the living and the dead, which song and dance cause to mingle on the ceremonial ground.

The deep spiritual understandings that *wangga* songs and their associated dances enact continue to sustain people today just as they have through the millennia. It is this understanding that led me to dedicate so much of my professional life to learning these songs, and to responding to people's distress at the loss of ceremonial songs by fostering projects that aimed to help keep these life-sustaining treasures alive.

So let me end my talk with another song, *Karra-ve kanya verver*. You can hear Bobby Lambudju Lane's beautiful performance of this song at <http://wangga.library.usyd.edu.au/reperitories/lambudju/71>. I have often performed this song not just in ceremonies for my Aboriginal families in the Northern Territory, but also within our sangha and within my immediate family, when family or dear friends have passed away, or when we are having to go our separate ways, or at times of significant transition, such as this very ceremony. And perhaps this is also a point at which I can also acknowledge that the *shakuhachi honkyoku San'an* that Alex played at the beginning of our ceremony

also has this function. Performed primarily to ensure safe delivery of a newborn—another point where non-existence and existence come so close that they almost touch—*San'an* can also be played to ease our passage through major transitions.

Karra-ve kanya verver rtedi kayanthi / Karra-ve kakkung bende badjalarr:
“The wind is blowing on my back, taking me to my ancestral home, Badjalarr.”
Sometimes, when I sing this song in English, I substitute ‘taking me to my own true home’ for “taking me to my ancestral home, Badjalarr”.

This song was first sung by a being that, viewed from one perspective, is already beyond life and death, and from another, is in the process of moving between the worlds of the living and the dead. The touch of the wind on the back exposes the exigencies of the present moment—the grief at loss that beats down upon the living— as well as the deep truth that from the very beginning everything is beyond birth and beyond death. In Zen terms we might express this as: from the very beginning, nothing to lose, and nobody to lose it. And yet ... And yet ...



*Allan at Temple 17, Sekkeiji, Shikoku, Japan.
Photos: Allan Marett*



Allan receiving Transmission from Subhana.