

CASE 57

Jōshū's Bumpkin



By Yamada Kōun

Instruction:

Before passing through, it's all like silver mountains and iron walls. After passing through, the self is intrinsically iron walls and silver mountains. Should there be someone who asks how it is, I would turn to him and say, "If, right here, you can reveal an activity, see a circumstance, sit and cut off the main crossing, thereby preventing passage to ordinary and holy, this is not yet beyond your inherent capability." If, however, it is not like this, observe the form of the ancients.

Case:

A monk asked Jōshū, "The Supreme Way is not difficult; it just dislikes picking and choosing. What is not picking and choosing?" Jōshū said, "Above and below heaven I alone am honored." The monk said, "Isn't that, however, picking and choosing?" Jōshū said, "You bumpkin! Where is there any picking and choosing?" The monk was speechless.

Verse:

It's as deep as the ocean; it's as hard as a mountain.
Mosquitoes and gnats play against a fierce wind in the sky.
Ants and termites try to shake an iron pillar.
Picking and choosing, a cloth drum hanging under the eaves.

"The Supreme Way is not difficult; it just dislikes picking and choosing." -- These words, which appear any number of times in the pages of the *Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Equanimity* [Shōyōroku], are the first lines of the *Shinjinmei* (Poem on Believing in Mind) by the Third Patriarch Sōsan. Here are the first two lines of that poem:

The Supreme Way is not difficult; it just dislikes picking and choosing.

If there can only be no hate and love, it is totally clear.

Jōshū was evidently very fond of these words and would utter them on every possible occasion. A total of four koans in the *Blue Cliff Record* (Cases 2, 57, 58 and 59) deal directly with

instances when Jōshū uttered these lines. The Supreme Way [Jpn.: *Shidō*] is the English equivalent of the Sanskrit term *Anuttara Samyak Sambhodhi* which, in more simple terms, is our essential nature.

On the Instruction:

The instructions for each of the koans in this collection are the work of Engo Zenji who presents us with the essence of Buddhism while keeping his eyes trained on the Main Case.

Before passing through, it's like silver mountains and iron walls. After passing through, the self is intrinsically iron walls and silver mountains. No matter how diligently you practice Mu, it is as if silver mountains and iron walls reared up in front of you, preventing passage. Many people come to me in dokusan, saying they have reached an impasse and can't make any further headway. This is a time which everyone who practices Mu is familiar with. The silver mountains and iron walls seem to resist our finest efforts to break through. What should we do then? You can only continue to practice Mu single-mindedly. When you have truly become one with Mu you will "pass through" without your being aware of it and, before you know it, the silver mountains and iron walls have disappeared. They were never there to begin with; they just seemed to be there. Thus, to pass through means to attain satori. But before you attain realization it can't help but seem that you are running up against silver mountains and iron walls. Having passed through, that is, having attained realization, you realize that you yourself were the silver mountains and iron walls. When you happen upon your true self you see that the silver mountains and iron walls are totally empty. Thus, even if you should try to break them down they will not fall, and even should you try to pass through, you cannot. After all, you can't fight with emptiness! That's what your true self is all about.

Should there be someone who asks how it is, I would turn to him and say, "If, right here, you can reveal an activity, see a circumstance, sit and cut off the main crossing, thereby preventing passage to ordinary and holy, this is not yet beyond your inherent capability." Engo Zenji questions: How about if someone should come and ask, "What is it like when you yourself have attained enlightenment, become silver mountains and iron walls and become one with the entire universe?" "Right here" means having reached that enlightened state of consciousness, which might sound very psychological, but it's rather a matter of grasping the true fact.

"An activity" means each of our activities: standing, sitting, laughing, crying, etc. To "reveal" means to realize clearly that each and every one of our activities (standing, sitting, etc.) is one with the entire universe. When you stand up, there is just standing up and nothing else in the whole universe. When you sit down there is just sitting down, and so on. But to clearly realize this is not so easy.

"Circumstance" means our external environment, in other words, the objective world. To "see a circumstance" means to realize that each and every phenomenon in the objective world is in itself the universe in its entirety. "Pillar!" There is nothing else in the entire universe. "Post!" Nothing else in the universe. This stick [Roshi holds up his *kotsu*] is the universe. To see a circumstance means to clearly realize this fact. Gutei Oshō, whenever he

was asked anything about Zen, would simply stick up a finger. But you must clearly realize that this single finger is the universe itself. Many koans deal with this. For example, there is the koan, "The Buddha Holds Up a Flower." As Shakyamuni Buddha was about to ascend the preaching rostrum, a woman standing nearby presented him with a flower. The Buddha took the flower and twirled it in his hands, not saying a word. This is a "single circumstance" and you must clearly realize that this totally exhausts the entire universe. But among the crowd gathered that day, only Mahakasyapa understood and broke into a smile. He was no doubt thinking, "Ah, the master is giving wonderful teaching today!" This is "seeing a single circumstance." When you truly attain satori you realize this. One after another (a finger, a flower) each phenomenon is the entire universe.

"Main crossing" refers to a place where boats anchor, or a ferry crossing, at any rate a place of constant coming-and-going. Here it means the central place where thoughts and concepts make their way to and fro. To cut this off means to render a person speechless, unable to utter a single word. One commentator says in his teisho that this amounts to throttling Buddhas and Patriarchs so they can't utter a word. The main crossing can also be taken as meaning the vital point of the essential self. Everything comes from this essential self. Thus, to cut off the main crossing means to block that off, not allowing a single word. It can also be seen as meaning to block off the road where concepts and thoughts travel back and forth.

"Ordinary and holy" is a delusive division into a standoff between sacred and profane. How is it when such dualistic ideas of deluded-enlightened, holy-ordinary, etc. have ceased to appear in our heads? If we have succeeded in preventing their passage we have attained realization. However, even after having accomplished such outstanding feats, the Instruction continues, this is not something which is above our standing or capacity. Since it is precisely this which is the total revelation of the essential, it cannot ever be beyond our capacity.

If, however, it is not like this, observe the form of the ancients. For those who have yet to advance this far, in other words, for those who, even after hearing this, cannot see this as concerning themselves, look carefully now at the appearance of the ancients (that is, Jōshū).

On the Case:

A monk asked Jōshū, "The Supreme Way is not difficult; it just dislikes picking and choosing. What is not picking and choosing? Jōshū said, "Above and below heaven there is only I." Master, the monk says, you are very fond of the words, "The Supreme Way is not difficult; it just dislikes picking and choosing." But what is not picking and choosing?

Picking and choosing means liking this in preference to that. I like tea better than coffee. I like him but I don't like her. As long as this kind of choosing according to one's whim is present, our basic peace of mind will be disturbed, that peace of mind which is like the bottom of the ocean where not a ripple disturbs the profound calm. The Supreme Way (i.e., our essential nature) is exactly like this; there is not a wave of disturbance in the essential world. But if picking and choosing should make their appearance, waves have already

appeared on the surface of our consciousness and we lose our basic peace of mind. This monk is earnestly asking Jôshû what is meant by not-choosing.

Jôshû answers, "Above and below heaven there is only I." These were reportedly the words of the Buddha when he was born, and you can see images of the baby Buddha which show him pointing upward with one hand and downward with the other.

The monk said, "Isn't that, however, picking and choosing?" Jôshû said, "You bumpkin! Where is there any picking and choosing?" The monk was speechless. The monk did not understand. To say that you are the only one in the whole universe – isn't that itself the epitome of picking and choosing? No, it's not. But once you start to think about the meaning of Jôshû's words you're lost. That's choosing. Jôshû isn't dealing with concepts or meanings. It's just "Above and below heaven there is only I." No different from this [Roshi holds up a finger]. This is the essential world itself. The essential world is revealed totally in "Above and below heaven there is only I." There is no comparing between this and that. It is only when there is two that choosing appears. But with "Above and below heaven there is only I," there's just that fact, nothing to choose. This is Jôshû's world, but the monk doesn't understand. "Isn't that choosing, your Reverence?" "You bumpkin! Where is there any picking and choosing?"

"Above and below heaven there is only I." Where is there choosing of any kind? Once you start to affix meaning you are already choosing. But there is no meaning. "Above and below heaven there is only I." Whack! [Roshi hits the rostrum with his stick]. Where is there choosing!

Let me explain this in more detail. For example, when I say, "Ahh, that's nice!" it might seem like choosing, but actually in that moment there is just "Ahh!" (liking) in the whole universe and no room for dislike. Or, vice-versa, when I say, "Ugh, that's terrible?" there is just that "Ugh!" (dislike) and no room for liking. In addition to filling the entire universe, it is totally empty. "Ahh!" and "Ugh!" are totally void, they have no intrinsic substance. It is precisely because they are empty that they can become one with the entire universe. Dôgen Zenji says:

"Yet in attachment blossoms fall, and in aversion weeds spread."

The cherry blossoms which were so beautiful are now scattered to the winds. What a shame! Although I just finished weeding the garden I find new weeds popping up already. Darn it! To feel regretful upon seeing the flowers fall and vexed upon seeing the weeds proliferate might seem like picking and choosing. But actually, it's not. When you say, "What a shame!" there is only that in the entire universe. When you say "Darn it!" there is only that in entire universe. Please savor this fact deeply.

From the standpoint of practice in the phenomenal world [*shushôhen*] we are prisoners of picking-and-choosing. But from the essential standpoint, the standpoint of the true fact, there is no choosing whatsoever. Seen in terms of my fraction, in which the denominator is zero-infinite and the numerator (alpha) is anything in the phenomenal world, if I substitute "Ahh!" this is most certainly choosing from the phenomenal standpoint of the numerator, but from the standpoint of the denominator (zero-infinite) it is nothing. This is not choosing. In other words, while choosing it is not choosing. From the standpoint of the essential world

(denominator) we are in the world where there is no choosing. But from the phenomenal standpoint (numerator) our entire lives are one choice after another.

On the Verse:

It's as deep as the ocean; it's as hard as a mountain. Mosquitoes and gnats plays against a fierce wind in the sky. Ants and termites try to shake an iron pillar. The first two lines of the verse focus on the world of Jôshû which is deep as an ocean where you don't know where the bottom is. No wonder, since there is nothing. It's as hard and impenetrable as silver mountains and iron walls. No matter how hard you pound they will not budge. What, however, is the hardest of all? It's emptiness. A diamond may be very hard, but it can be broken or reduced to carbon in a chemical reaction. But there's no way you can destroy emptiness. Thus the line from the verse: "It's as hard as a mountain."

The next line is speaking about the same thing. When the monk comes to Jôshû asking questions and seeking to trip him up, he's just like a mosquito or a gnat flitting around in a fierce wind. The Chinese characters for sky also mean emptiness, which provides this line with an echo of Jôshû's world of emptiness. The monk is just like an ant or a termite trying to move an iron pillar. No matter what he may do, Jôshû isn't perturbed in the least.

Picking and choosing, a cloth drum hanging under the eaves. A cloth drum won't make any sound no matter how you pound on it. This is Jôshû's essential nature, the essential nature of everyone of us. If I speak in terms of "Jôshû's state of consciousness" it sounds as if this belongs to Jôshû alone. But actually, it's the true fact; it's our essential nature, the world of zero and infinite. Whatever you pound, be it picking or choosing, it won't make a sound. Even if you, like the monk in the koan, say, "Isn't that, however, picking and choosing?" it won't make a sound. This is our true self, and no matter what you say it's not going to produce a sound. It is totally motionless, it's stillness itself. Please savor this fully.

This ends my talk on today's koan, but I would like to quote now from Yasutani Roshi's *Soliloquy on the Blue Cliff Record* (Hekiganshû Dokugo) since this particular passage – whether it derives from Yasutani Roshi himself or Harada Roshi, I don't know – gives us valuable advice on the matter of practice:

"Speaking from the standpoint of simplicity, kensho is no big feat. It's simply admitting to that which has been with you from the start."

In other words, it's not something outside of you; it's something which is within you which you are using constantly. Thus, seen in terms of easiness, kensho is not difficult.

"Nevertheless, from the beginningless past the karmic sickness [gôbyô] has built a nest in the field of the eighth consciousness and, since it's a matter of breaking through this, from the standpoint of difficulty, kensho is definitely not easy."

As with "the Supreme Way is not difficult," since it's a matter of breaking through the choosing which you have always done, it's not so easy.

"You can't afford to let up your guard. If you are neglectful for even a second you are as good as dead. No, you are worse than dead!"

In other words, even in your practice of Mu, you start wandering off in your mind and thinking about something else.

"Even Wanshi Zenji (compiler of the Book of Equanimity) received a scolding from Tennen of Tanka. But following this he did nothing but sit for the next 40 years, never neglectful for a moment up to his dying breath."

To be discouraged because you failed to attain kensho after one sesshin is absolute foolishness. Since, when all is said and done, it's a matter of just recognizing what's there from the beginning, there's absolutely no reason why you can't do it. But, for reasons beyond our understanding, none of us come into the world with this knowledge. We are all victims of "karmic sickness" and persist in seeing as two that which is intrinsically one. We all use the word "I." This "I" has two arms and two legs, two eyes and two ears, all separate phenomena. But in terms of the single reality of the life coursing through me, there is no left and no right. There is just that single life. Most people, however, fail to see this, contenting themselves with pursuing objects outside themselves. Nevertheless, life is always with you; it never goes away. And yet they continue to think of life as something outside.

Let us, for the time being, affix the name "Mu" to this life. When you are practicing Mu it is always with you, isn't it? But if I ask you, "Where is Mu?" I have people telling me, "It's somewhere in this area" as they point to their chests. This is what I mean by "karmic sickness." We must cut off this sickness at its source. Then things will finally appear to us as they really are. This is kensho.

When we attain kensho we are happy. Although it's simply a matter of seeing things as they are from the very start, nonetheless we're happy, because we realize that that which up to now could only appear as two is actually one. You must all cure yourselves of this karmic sickness. And the best medicine is "Muu!"