

CASE 60

Unmon's Staff



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

The myriad Buddhas and sentient beings are intrinsically not different. How could there be any difference between mountains-and-rivers and myself? Why is it, then, that everything goes and forms two? Even if you can skillfully unwrap the koan and thereby block up the main harbor, if you leave it as is, that will not do. If you do not leave it as is, it will be nothing at all to pick up the entire universe between your fingers. Where is the place where you can do this unwrapping? To test, I'm citing this case. Look!

Case:

Unmon held up his staff, showed it to the assembly and said, "The staff has changed into a dragon which completely swallows up the universe. Where do mountains, rivers and the great earth come from?"

Verse:

A staff swallows up the universe.
In vain he tries to tell about peach blossoms whirling on the waves.
As for those who have their tails burned off,
it's not a matter of grasping clouds and taking hold of mist.
How is it that those with sun-baked gills
must lose their guts and lack inner spunk?
I have finished grasping it.
Are you listening or not?
You must be smooth and flowing.
Moreover, you must stop scrupling over details.
The seventy-two blows I will make light of.
But it would be difficult to spare you one-hundred and fifty.
The master (Setchô) suddenly picks up his staff and descends from the rostrum.
The multitudes scatter at once.

On the instruction:

Unmon Daishi was founder of the Unmon Sect, one of the five original Zen sects which also include the Soto, Rinzai, Unmon, Hôgen and Igyô sects. The Rinzai Sect divided further into the Ôryû and Yôgi factions. This seven-fold division, then, is traditionally known as the Five Families and Seven Sects [Goke Nanashû]. Among these, only the Rinzai and Soto Sects made their way to Japan. The Unmon who appears in today's case is actually closer in lineage to the Soto sect than to Rinzai.

Unmon Daishi was extremely skillful with words, a kind of poet of the Zen experience. Setchô Zenji, compiler of the *Blue Cliff Record*, was from the Unmon lineage and a great admirer of Unmon. He, too, had a superb gift for the apt word or phrase. As I have mentioned before, the sect spirit of the Unmon Sect has been traditionally characterized by the expression: "Red Flag, Bright and Vivid". For, like a bright red flag fluttering brilliantly on a distant mountain peak, it can be seen very clearly, although actually reaching that flag is extremely difficult. The case before us today is not the best example of Unmon's succinctness with language but it is filled nonetheless with the biting directness which is so typical of this great teacher.

The myriad Buddhas and sentient beings are intrinsically not different. How could there be any difference between mountains-and-rivers and I myself? Why is it, then, that everything goes and forms two? As I tell you constantly, the world of the true fact is the world where "one is all and all is one." As we will see later in the main case, to lift up the staff [Roshi lifts up his kotsu] is to present the entire universe. To say that this stick is the entire universe may be difficult to understand. I often use the example of a fraction to make this understandable, at least intellectually. The numerator is the phenomenal world with all its myriad differences. All of you assembled here are different from each other. Each of you has a totally unique face different from all other faces in the world. But in the denominator, that is, in the world of the essential, everything is of one color; everything is exactly the same.

From the standpoint of this essential world, distinctions such as Buddha, sentient being, enlightened and unenlightened, etc. do not exist. They exist only on the surface. Imagine, for example, a great balloon which is as large as the universe itself. On the surface of the balloon appear and disappear the myriad phenomena of the universe. Most people are only aware of this single aspect. However, these are just the phenomena on the surface of the balloon. Inside the balloon is vast emptiness. The entry into the interior of the balloon, to that vast emptiness, is our everyday mind. Having penetrated to the interior of the balloon we discover a world of total emptiness. To discover this world of total emptiness is the so-called kensho experience.

Thus, so long as we see only the phenomenal world, Buddhas and sentient beings are naturally separate and different. Viewing things, however, from the interior of the balloon, to continue using our example, they are completely the same. They are "intrinsically not different," as the instruction tells us. The same thing can be said about the entire universe. So, we can say: "How is there any difference between mountains-and-rivers and I myself?"

We tend usually to think of ourselves as completely separate existences with the

phenomenal world revealing itself outside of us in the form of mountains, rivers, trees and the like. Seen from the surface, that is exactly right. But viewed from the interior, in this case, the vast empty interior of our balloon, everything is one because it is totally empty. You can't get any more one than that! Thus, the verse can say, "How is there any difference between mountains-and-rivers and I myself?" Dôgen Zenji said the same thing: "I have clearly realized that Mind is mountains, rivers, the great earth, the sun, the moon and the stars."

So long as we think that there is a distinct self with the so-called objective world outside of the self, this is, to speak frankly, the world of illusion. The true state of things is: Both seer and seen are one and the same. Both the one that hears and that which is heard are one and the same. This is the total revelation of the Buddha; this is the Tathagatha itself, and it is this that you must realize. If you can once realize this fact, everything written here will be totally acceptable. You yourself will be able to say, "How is there any difference between mountains-and-rivers and I myself?" This is the world of oneness.

But why is it that, although all things are one, they appear as two? As the Instruction says: "Why is it, then, that everything goes and forms two?" Actually, it's no problem at all. While it is one, it is also two; while it is two, it is also one. This is the true reality. From the aspect of the phenomenal, all distinctions are completely clear. From the aspect of the essential, there is nothing at all and thus it is completely one. Seen from the inside it is one. Seen from the outside, the aspect of distinction is completely clear and in evidence. This is traditionally known as *ichisoku-issai/issai-sokuichi* ("All is one and one is all"). In the *Hannyashingyô* Sutra this is expressed as, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." It is this that you must realize.

The question in the instruction might seem to be requiring some sort of intellectual answer, but that is not so. The instruction uses this as a way of urging us to take hold of the true fact. Here, it is inviting us to see and realize the true nature of reality, in other words, that two is one and one is two.

Even if you can skillfully unwrap the koan and block off the main harbor, if you leave it as is, that will not do. If you do not leave it as it is, it will be nothing at all to pick up the entire universe between your fingers. Where is the place where you can do this unwrapping? To test, I'm citing this case. Look! A koan may appear difficult and resistant to all efforts to open up its secrets. But just as you might open up a cloth bundle with a deft movement of your hand, you can "unwrap" that koan and reveal it to the daylight. In other words, you can clearly understand the content of that koan. "Main harbor" is a simile for that which is most essential and important. In other words, by totally understanding the koan you can block off the main artery of Buddhas and Patriarchs. You will have those Buddhas and Patriarchs at your beck-and-call, and they will not be able to utter a peep in protest. This is all figurative language for Zen understanding. But, as the instruction continues, just to be able to have Buddhas and Patriarchs under your thumb is not the true appearance of a Zen person. You must become completely ordinary. Thus, "if you leave it as it is, that will not do."

If you have an initial kensho experience and leave things at that without bothering to continue with practice, rust will soon form on that experience and it will eventually become no

more than a memory. It is most important that we continue to sit steadfastly after kensho and go to dokusan as often as possible.

You could compare the kensho experience to cutting a freshly toasted piece of glutinous mochi rice in two. If you leave the two pieces next to each other, they will congeal back together again before you know it. The process of working on koan after koan in the dokusan room is the process of opening little-by-little the space between those pieces of rice to the point where they will not stick together again.

To make truly clear the true fact of our essential self and to completely personalize and reveal this in our everyday lives is no easy thing. Just having the initial kensho experience is the beginning. The number of people in the history of Zen who came to complete clarity with an initial experience are few indeed. Hui-Neng [jpn.: Enô], the Sixth Patriarch of Zen in China, was evidently such a rare individual, but he would have to be called a great Zen genius.

In almost all cases, there are still concepts mixed in and the experience is thus what is traditionally called "Sôji Zen," in other words, Zen which looks to all appearances like the real thing but is still a little different. We are seeing the true reality but it is still as if we were looking through a thin film. To continue koan practice and eventually get to the point where we see with total clarity with nothing in the way is great enlightenment, but this is very hard to come by. Harada Roshi often said, "Many are those who abuse 'Sôji Zen' but how many people today have gone even this far in their practice?" Thus we can see the importance of coming to that initial experience, no matter how slight it may seem.

As all this shows, if you think that everything is going to be rosy once you have kensho, you will be in for a disappointment. As soon as you are given a new koan to work on, you find that you can't make any headway. The koan is a very mysterious thing. That which is to be understood in the koan is the same for everyone but, perhaps due to differences in personality, the place where someone gets hung up will depend very much on the individual. Once you understand it will be very clear and simple. But then you go on to the next koan and once again you are stuck. In many cases it will be the same aspect that you are stuck on. Through a process of repeatedly running up against this in koan study, you gradually polish your understanding. There is the saying, "Having passed one barrier you pass a thousand barriers in an instant." But if this were really true for everyone, in other words, if you truly realized completely with one koan, the other koans would offer little or no resistance to your understanding. Even granted difficulties in understanding due to the unfamiliar language the koans are written in, this would offer no real problem once the meaning was explained to you. It would then be possible to breeze through the koans. But actually it is hardly ever so easy. That is why it's so necessary to work on koan after koan in the dokusan room and gradually polish your understanding to true clarity.

Thus, if you are really going to see through the koans to the point where Buddhas and Patriarchs cannot say a word, you cannot give up midway in that koan practice. If you don't give up but continue on faithfully, the koans will eventually become clear to you. Then, it will be nothing at all to take up the entire universe in a pinch. How could it be otherwise? The entire universe is within you. And now, to give an example of just what is involved in truly seeing through a koan, the following case is offered. Look very carefully.

On the Case:

Unmon held up his staff, showed it to the assembly saying, "The staff has changed into a dragon which completely swallows up the universe. Where do mountains, rivers and the great earth come from?" The staff here is the walking staff which monks of old had with them when they went on Angya or Zen pilgrimage. Recall, for example, the koan from the *Gateless Gate* "Bashô's Shujô" where Mumon's commentary reads as follows:

"Having it support us, we wade across a river that has no bridge. Having it accompany us, we return to the village on a moonless night. But if you call it a shujô, you will go to hell as swiftly as an arrow."

One day Unmon took his staff and thrust it before the assembly saying, "The staff has changed into a dragon which completely swallows up the universe. Where do mountains, rivers and the great earth come from?"

As I mentioned, it's not a matter of where the mountains and rivers come from; you must clearly see that just where there is nothing at all there are mountains, rivers and the great earth. This [he holds up his kotsu again] has become a dragon and swallowed up the entire universe. "One is all and all is one" has totally consumed the entire universe. The staff is the numerator of our fraction. As long as you see only the numerator it will be just the stick. But from the aspect of the numerator (to explain it in intellectual terms) the stick consumes the entire universe. When you see with enlightened eyes, it needn't be a stick; it can be anything at all. Gutei Oshô always lifted up a finger. If you only see the finger and have not awakened to the world of emptiness, this will seem like nonsense. You must grasp the universe which that single finger consumes.

All koans, when approached with the logical mind, remain senseless riddles. But once we realize experientially it will be easy to see that the finger is the totality and that the entire universe is exhausted in a single finger. There is actually no need to say "this staff has turned into a dragon." Just holding up the staff is quite enough.

Koans always sound as if they are going against common sense. Harada Roshi was fond of asking, "Which is taller, Mt. Fuji or Atagoyama (a hill in Tokyo where Tokyo Tower is located)?" Speaking in terms of common sense, Mt. Fuji is of course higher, but such an answer will be of no use in a Zen setting. There is in essence no dividing line at the foot of Mt. Fuji which delineates it from the rest of the terrain. The foot of Mt. Fuji extends outward to cover the whole of Japan and then down to the bottom of the ocean, eventually including the entire earth. And since our earth is nothing but a speck in the universe we can furthermore say that underlying Mt. Fuji is the entire solar system and eventually the entire universe. The little hill in the middle of Tokyo can be seen in exactly the same way. From a Zen point of view you must realize that Mt. Fuji and the hill in Tokyo are exactly the same altitude.

It is only natural for people who have not experienced the world of oneness to see the koans as senseless riddles. But for people who have experienced that world of oneness, each koan makes perfect sense. This is the world of "one is all and all is one." Just where there is nothing at all there are mountains, rivers and the great earth. Just where there are mountains, rivers and the great earth there is actually nothing at all. It is completely empty. You must grasp this reality experientially.

On the Verse:

A staff swallows up the universe.

In vain he tries to tell about peach blossoms whirling on the waves.

As for those who have their tails burned off, it's not a matter of grasping clouds and taking hold of mist. Speaking so that everyone would understand, Unmon said that the staff had changed into a dragon which swallows up the whole universe. But the staff needn't change into a dragon; it's fine just as it is. Thus in his verse, Setchô says that a staff has swallowed up the universe. The next line about peach blossoms has its origin in ancient Chinese tradition.

Yu, one of the Sage Emperors from China's earliest antiquity and legendary founder of its first dynasty, once had a waterfall constructed to control the waters of the Yellow River. This waterfall consisted of three tiers, each a thousand feet in height which would have made the entire edifice three thousand feet high. The waterfall was known as "Yu Men" (literally, "Yu Gate") and it appears as a figurative expression in Zen writings as "Yu Gate Three Tier Waterfall."

When the peach blossoms began to fall it was also time for the carp to swim up the waterfall. It was said that any carp which could swim up all three tiers of the waterfall would change into a dragon and climb up into heaven. At this time the tails of the carp would be singed by heavenly fire after which they turned into dragons. Referring to this legend, Setchô says, "in vain he tries to tell about peach blossoms whirling on the waves." In other words, please stop this tiresome talk about carp climbing up the three tiers of the waterfall, having their tails burned and turning into dragons. There is no need for anything to turn into a dragon. The carp are fine just as they are. Dragons are supposed to grasp the clouds and the mist in climbing up into the skies. Thus, all talk about climbing up waterfalls and tails being burned off can't be about real dragons.

In terms of our Zen practice, we talk about practicing, attaining enlightenment and Buddhahood, but a Buddha which has to attain kensho and achieve Buddhahood can't be a real Buddha. What, then, is a real Buddha? It's your essential nature. We are practicing to clearly realize that essential nature and to make it apparent in our every action. You might have clearly realized your true nature but it's a far more difficult task to personalize that experience in your daily life. Dancing with joy upon attaining realization is just seeing what has always been there.

How is it that those with sun-baked gills must lose their guts and lack inner spunk? Among the carp which are climbing up the three-tiered waterfall, there are some which bang their heads on the rocks and are washed to the sandy banks of the river where they lie in the sun, half dead from exhaustion and gasping for air. To "lose their guts and lack inner spunk" means to despair and lose courage. But even if you fail in climbing up, it's not a cause for despair. Even if you have not attained kensho, isn't your essential nature right there from the beginning? Even if you have succeeded in climbing up the waterfall and becoming a dragon, this is not everything. For those who were tossed to the shore where they lie gasping on the sands, it doesn't mean that the essential nature has disappeared, so there's

no need to be discouraged. The real matter of importance is grasping that essential nature. The most important thing is realizing that all sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha.

I have finished grasping it.

In other words, my discussion ends here.

I have said everything that I want to say.

Are you listening or not?

You must be smooth and flowing.

Moreover, you must stop scrupling over details.

The seventy-two blows I will make light of.

But it would be difficult to spare you one-hundred and fifty.

The master (Setchô) suddenly picks up his staff and descends from the rostrum.

The multitudes scatter at once.

I have said everything I wish to say, but have you really understood? There must not be any dawdling. You should understand at once and achieve complete serenity of mind. As long as your head is filled with thoughts, concepts and lingering doubts, you still cannot be called "smooth and flowing." There must be nothing sticking. You must also stop wondering whether it is this or that. Any of you who are still debating over this and that in your heads will receive seventy-two blows with my stick even though you deserve a hundred and fifty!

Clutching his staff, Unmon descends from his preaching seat and takes his leave without giving a parting glance. With that, everyone assembled there scatters to the four winds. Maybe they're worried that if they linger around they might receive those hundred and fifty blows!