

HEKIGANROKU
(BLUE CLIFF RECORD)



CASE 96

**Jōshū's
Three Turning Words**

By YAMADA Kōun

Case:

Jōshū spoke three turning words to the assembly.

Verse:

A Buddha of mud does not pass through water.
A Divine Light illumines the heavens and earth.
If he had given up standing in the snow,
How many people would not have carved an imitation?

Verse:

A Buddha of metal does not pass through the furnace.
People came calling on Shiko.
The many characters on the sign.
Where does the clear wind not blow?

Verse:

A Buddha of wood does not pass through the fire.
I always think of Hasoda.
The staff hit suddenly.
I realize now that I have turned my back on my self.

On the Case and Verses:

This koan differs considerably in form from the other koans in this collection. To start with, there is no Instruction, which is in itself not so unusual as there are many other koans in this collection lacking an Instruction. However, the Main Case consists of a single line: **Jōshū spoke three turning words to the assembly.** This is certainly a departure from standard procedure. This line is followed by three different verses instead of the usual one. The first line of each verse is one of the “three turning words” mentioned in the Case:

A Buddha of mud does not pass through water.
A Buddha of metal does not pass through the furnace.
A Buddha of wood does not pass through the fire.

The *Miscellaneous Koans* covered immediately after kensho also include these three “turning words”, although they appear in somewhat altered form (a “turning word” is a word or phrase which has the power to “turn” our illusions into enlightenment).

*The Buddha made of wood won't pass through fire;
If he does, he will surely be burnt.
The Buddha made of mud won't pass through water;*

*If he does, he will surely be drowned.
The Buddha made of metal won't pass through a furnace;
If he does, he will surely be melted.
The true Buddha is sitting in the house.*

This is not the original form of the three turning words. It was created at a later date, perhaps even by Harada Roshi.

A Buddha made of mud will not pass through water. If he does, he will surely drown, says the *Miscellaneous Koans*. However, if he does not pass through water he remains a mud Buddha. The same goes for the Buddha of metal and the Buddha of wood.

As I always tell you, when viewing koans you must keep in mind that each and every thing in the phenomenal world is itself essential nature. This should also be kept in mind when reading today's koan.

I should also mention here that when Jôshû first spoke these words to the assembly he did not refer to them as his three turning words. If we want to know what Jôshû really said we should look to *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Jôshû* (Jôshû-Roku):

The master entered the hall and instructed the assembly saying, "Metal Buddhas can't pass through a furnace, wood Buddhas can't pass through fire, mud Buddhas can't pass through water. The true Buddha sits within you."

This last line differs from the way it appears in the *Miscellaneous Koans*: "The true Buddha is sitting in the recesses of the house." The account continues:

"Bodhi, Nirvana, suchness, and Buddha-nature, are just clothes stuck to the body."

This is a very interesting statement. In other words, none of these is the real Buddha, all of them are rather clothes covering the truth.

"And, as such, are to be called compulsive passions. If you do not ask about them, they are not compulsive passions."

How typical of Jôshû to be so direct in his presentation. He tells us that all words are delusion and that if we do not think about this or that in our head there are no delusions.

"Where can the True Realm of Reality be found?"

"If you do not give birth to the mind, the ten thousand dharmas are not transgressed. Just sit and go into [this matter] for twenty or thirty years. If you do not come to an understanding, you can cut off my head."¹

Bold words indeed. I would like to be able to say the same thing myself, to be able to tell everyone to sit in *shikantaza* for thirty years, although I would probably be dead by that time.

Yes, the truth is covered in the clothes of our concepts and thoughts. All our queries about Buddha and the like are nothing but ideas painted in our heads, they are the clothes of intellection. They are delusion. How does the Sixth Patriarch put it? "From the beginning not one thing. Where is there any place for dust to stick?" It is the purpose of

¹ *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu*, trans. by James Green, Shambhala, Boston, 1998, p. 77

Zen practice to realize clearly this fact of absolute emptiness. Let us return now to the koan.

A Buddha of mud does not pass through water. A Divine Light illumines the heavens and earth. If he had given up standing in the snow, how many people would not have carved an imitation? If a Buddha of mud were to pass through water it would disintegrate into paste. However, if it does not pass through water it remains that Buddha of mud. And when it does, a divine light lights up the heavens and earth. It might sound strange to be talking about a Buddha of mud. But that Buddha of mud is itself the true self, the true fact. It is the great universe itself. That is why we can say that a divine light illumines the heavens and the earth.

The word "Divine Light" [jpn: *Shinkō*] was the name given to the Second Patriarch of Chinese Zen, Eka Daishi, about whom it is said that a mysterious light filled the room when he was born. In the Verse, the mention of divine light calls to mind the Second Patriarch and the discussion turns to him.

The next line about standing in the snow refers to the circumstances, which eventually led him to his realization. Eka Daishi first started out by studying Taoism and then moved on to research into Buddhism. Still unable to find true peace of mind with all of his studies, he happened to hear of Bodhidharma who had come from India preaching the doctrine of "no dependence on words or phrases" and "a special transmission outside sutras." Eka resolved to go to Bodhidharma and find the solution to his own mental anguish. With this in mind he set out for Shōrinji (Shao-lin Temple) where Bodhidharma was residing.

Upon arriving there, Eka discovered Bodhidharma sitting constantly in zazen and unwilling to receive him. I might mention here that in the Rinzai Sect – maybe in the spirit of Bodhidharma – there is the custom known as *tankazume* where a candidate for monkhood is not admitted to the temple grounds for a week in order to test his resolve. Instead, the person must wait outside the gate where he receives simple meals but nothing else. If, at the end of a week, it seems that the young candidate shows promise, he might be told that there is no room for him, in a further test of his resolve. If the person shows true spirit he will be admitted to see the Rōshi in the *Shōken* ceremony.

In recent times, however, when someone comes asking to practice, the tendency is more to welcome him with open arms and bring out tea and sweets. Obviously you're not going to find such good material for students if you react in such a way.

Returning now to Eka Daishi, one night as he continued to wait outside for Bodhidharma to admit him, it began to snow heavily and the snow eventually reached his waist. Nevertheless, Bodhidharma still refused to see him. Eka Daishi considered the matter. "If I continue to wait like this I will never be admitted. I must show that I am willing to stake my life." With that, he took the short sword he had with him and cut off his own arm at the elbow to show his absolute determination, that he was willing to risk death for this matter.

Upon seeing this display of absolute resolve, Bodhidharma finally admitted Eka. "You stood in the snow and cut off your elbow. What do you want?" In reply, Eka said, "My

mind is not at peace. I ask the Master to put my mind to rest." "Is that so?" said Bodhidharma. "Well, in that case, please bring me your mind, I will put it to rest for you." This statement is an important koan².

Eka could not find his mind no matter how hard he searched. He came back to Bodhidharma and said, "I have searched for my mind but have not been able to obtain it." The record has Eka Daishi answering Bodhidharma's question immediately. More likely he spent several days trying to locate his mind before finally reporting to Bodhidharma. Upon hearing this, Bodhidharma said, "I have put your mind to rest for you." That you have realized that there is no mind to put to rest--that itself is putting the mind to rest.

Eka Daishi went on to succeed to Bodhidharma's dharma as the Second Patriarch. What I have just recounted is actually the single surviving record concerning him. In comparison, the Third Patriarch, Sôsan Daishi is very famous as the author of the *Hôkyôzammai* ("Jewel-Mirror Samadhi"). I feel this very lack of any desire to make himself known is one of the outstanding traits of the Second Patriarch. Even today there are many so-called religious people who can't wait to have their names appear in the newspaper. Eka Daishi had completely rid himself of such desires. We do not know what temple he resided at, or the year of his death. Of course, the fact that Buddhism was being persecuted by the emperor of that time might have had something to do with this.

To return to our Verse, if Eka Daishi (he is referred to as Divine Light) had been unable to attain true peace of mind as he did by standing in the snow and eventually cutting off his own arm in a show of resolve, "how many people would not have carved an imitation?" In other words, most people after that would have been satisfied with just imitating peace of mind and not settling for the real thing. There would have been nothing but dead Buddhism.

What about the second verse? **A Buddha of gold does not pass through the furnace. People came calling on Shikô. The many characters on the placard. Where does the clear wind not blow?** In the Miscellaneous Koans we read, "The Buddha made of metal won't pass through a furnace; If he does, he will surely be melted." Here, however, the Buddha of metal does not pass through the fire, so it remains the metal Buddha. Once again, we are presented with the actual fact itself. The essential appears in the form of a metal Buddha. The same goes for the final verse about the Buddha of wood. It is only that the way of speaking is somewhat indirect and thus difficult to understand. Many teisho have been delivered on this koan but almost none of them meet with my satisfaction; they all miss the point. If there were suitable teisho it would be enough to read them. Since there aren't any, I am forced to give my own interpretation.

The Shikô who appears in this second verse was the outstanding monk Rishô Zenji who lived on Shikô Crag in the Kushô region of China. He was a student of Nansen. It is said that Shikô hung a sign outside his hut with the following inscription on it.

Shikô has a dog which bites.

At the top, he takes off the heads of people.

² Cf. Case 41 of the Mumonkan.

In the middle, he takes off the waists of people.

At the bottom, he takes off the legs of people.

If you stop to ponder you will lose your body, you will lose your life.

What is this dog? If you look at Case 59 of the *Book of Serenity* you will see that our true self sometimes appears as a poisonous snake. In that koan, "Seirin's Deadly Snake," a monk seeking the true Dharma comes to Seirin saying that he has come along narrow mountain roads. In reply, Seirin says, "There is a poisonous snake here." Seirin is talking about himself.

In the present instance, essential nature takes the form of a vicious dog. If you get bitten in the head, you will lose your head. That is, your head will become empty of any thoughts and concepts. If you are bitten in the middle you will lose your waist. If you are bitten below you will lose your legs. You will become completely empty. This is truly losing body and life. It is the same as body and mind fallen away.

If we understand what is being said on Shikô's sign, the Verse tells us, "where does the clear wind not blow?" Since it is the essential world, there is nothing to be said. There is just that pure wind blowing by. This is said in the same spirit as the Divine Light illuminating heaven and earth.

And now on to the final verse. **A Buddha of wood does not pass through the fire. I always think of Hasôda. The staff hit suddenly. I truly realize that I have turned my back on my self.** Since the Buddha of wood does not pass through the fire it does not burn and remains the Buddha of wood. It is the essential world itself. The rest of the Verse is speaking about the same thing. As I mentioned earlier, Setchô Zenji is using Jôshû's Three Turning Words as the first lines for three verses of his own construction. Here he says that mention of the Buddha of wood always reminds him of the patriarch Hasôda whose name means "The Oven Breaker." We do not know his real name but do know that he was a disciple of Sûzan Keian (who in turn was a student of the Fifth Patriarch Kônin). There is an interesting tale concerning how he received his nickname of "Oven Breaker."

It seems that there was a shrine in a certain village where a guardian deity was enshrined. The god was represented in the form of an oven and the villagers were required to make live offerings of animals at regular intervals so as not to incur the wrath of the god enshrined therein. The villagers were in the habit, then, of killing a pig or a lamb during festivals and offering it to the oven. Hearing about this, a monk came to the village. He felt the whole matter to be very stupid and went straight to the shrine to determine whether there was a god there or not. There he hit the oven three times with his staff and said, "Oven, your origin is the dirt of the ground. Nevertheless, there is a spirit dwelling in you which is demanding live offerings and causing a lot of trouble for the people of this village. You must stop this immediately." He then hit the oven three times again with his staff, upon which the oven suddenly fell apart. From the inside emerged a man wearing green clothes and a crown, who bowed and said, "I have been in this oven all this time suffering for crimes I committed long ago. Thanks to your words I have been released for a while from my suffering. I am truly grateful to you. To tell the truth, I am actually in

heaven and have appeared in my heavenly form to you." It was as a result of these events that the monk received the name of Hasôda or "Oven Breaker."

The Verse continues: "The staff hit suddenly. I truly realize that I have turned my back on my self." When Hasôda Oshô hit the oven with his staff, he was crushing all concepts and thoughts. The talk about crimes from the past is said because there is still no realization of the true self. Harada Roshi says that "the logic of turning one's back upon oneself" means that when we fail to face our true self head-on and instead turn our back on it. In other words, by failing to coming out in the open and instead going in the shadows we do not know our true self. It was as a result of not realizing his true self that the man in the oven ended up the way he did. When the oven was broken, he could return to his true self. This is all speaking about the true self in poetic terms.

We are all carrying the heavy burden of our own concepts. If you ask Jôshû Oshô, we are all seeking after Bodhi Wisdom and Nirvana and the rest of it, but these are all concepts, nothing but clothes covering up the true naked self which is lacking the slightest dirt. We are born naked and free of concepts end up acquiring many. Unless we wash them all away we will be unable to meet up with our true self. Zazen is the process whereby we gradually peel away all those coverings to return to our true naked self. This is the only way we can really be saved, at least from the standpoint of Buddhism. Nevertheless, we are all very fond of those "clothes" and reluctant to remove them. We cling to them tenaciously.

This ends my teisho. I should mention here that much of what I have said agrees with comments by Asahina Sôgen Roshi in his edition of the *Blue Cliff Record* in the *Iwanami Bunko* paperback series. There are few people who take views similar to my own. I would appreciate it if you would view this case in this way.

