

CASE 2

Jôshû's Supreme Way



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

Heaven and earth are narrow; the sun, moon, and stars are suddenly dark. Were blows of the staff to fall like raindrops and shouts to peal like thunder, still you would not touch the point of the supreme teaching. Even the Buddhas of the three worlds can know it only by themselves; even the patriarchs of the successive generations cannot present it fully. Neither can the great treasury of all the sutras expound it adequately. Even the clearly enlightened monk is helpless. When you are at this stage, what other instruction could you expect? To say the word "Buddha" is to pour muddy water over yourself; to say the word "Zen" is to shame your face. For advanced students who have been practicing for a long time, it is unnecessary to say anything more. Recent beginners should investigate and apprehend it right away.

Case:

Jôshû, instructing the assembly, said, "The supreme way is not difficult: it simply dislikes choosing. If even a word is uttered, it is already an action of choosing or of clarity. This old monk does not dwell in clarity. Do you monks want to keep a firm hold on it or not?"

At that time there was a monk attending who asked, "You say that you do not dwell in clarity. If so, what is there to keep a firm hold on?" Jôshû said, "I do not know, either." The monk said, "If you say you do not know, why do you say that you do not dwell in clarity?" Jôshû said, "You have already asked fully. Bow and withdraw."

Verse:

The supreme way is not difficult.
A little speech – that's it; a little word – that's it.
In one there are many kinds;
In two there are not two.
On the horizon the sun rises and the moon sets;
Beyond the balcony the mountains are deep, the waters cold.

Where the skull's consciousness comes to an end, how could joy come up?

The withered tree is giving a dragon's groan:

Though dead, it is still not dried up.

Difficult, difficult!

Choosing or clarity? See for yourself!

On the Instruction:

There are not very many patriarchs in Zen history to whom Master Dôgen bowed with utmost sincerity. Jôshû, whom Master Dôgen extolled as "an old Buddha," was among the few, along with the Sixth Patriarch Master Enô, Great Master Tôsan Gohon, Great Master Gensha Shibi and others.

Jôshû attained great enlightenment at the age of 18, an experience known as *haka santaku* [The house is torn down, the residence is smashed], under Master Nansen Fugan. After that he remained as attendant to Master Nansen for forty years, until his master's death. Then, at the age of 61, he finally started his pilgrimage [*angya*], visiting the great Zen masters of his time (for example, Great Master Rinzai). This lasted 20 years. And around the age of 80 he settled down for the first time in a small temple named Kannon'in in a place called Jôshû (hence his name). There he continued his unstinted efforts to save all living beings for 40 years, until he passed away at the age of 120.

Bodhidharma, we are told, died at the age of 150. Recently it is not rare to hear about a person who is more than 100 years old. How long can a human being live? One theory says that any animal is potentially able to live eight times as long as the number of years needed to mature. This means that, if a human being comes to mental and physical maturity at the age of 25 (though we celebrate our "Coming of Age" Day at 20), he or she should be able to live up to 200. This might make an age of 120 not so astonishing. In reality our ordinary life is, alas, much shorter. What is the best way to make this short life longer? To do zazen. You know that many Zen masters have lived more than 90 years, even up to 100. Haku'un Roshi passed away around 90; Harada Roshi about 94. Ashikaga Shisan Roshi was 104 years old. If you wish to live long, therefore, do zazen!

Now back to Jôshû. When he started his *angya* around 60, he made a vow: "If I meet a child of seven years who is superior to me, I am ready to learn from him. If I encounter a man of 100 years who is inferior to me, I will give him instruction." Jôshû's world was so mature that he did not shout out loud ("Kaatz!") or strike with a stick. He simply murmured a few words, which, however, are said to have cast a sparkling light. This is why tradition speaks about Jôshû's "mouth-and-lip Zen," of which the present case is an example. In fact, hitting with a staff or shouting "Kaatz!" may not reveal such a deep dimension. The best way to judge the depth of a Zen master might be a comparison with Shakyamuni. We do not hear that Shakyamuni hit somebody with a stick or cried out "Kaatz!" Most probably he did not do such

things. Although the masters famous for such actions are great, we must know that greatness is always comparative. I may receive severe criticism from the Rinzai sect, but I assume that the dimension of Jōshū's self-realization excelled by far that of Rinzai's or Tokusan's.

Now the Instruction, which anticipates the Main Case: **Heaven and earth are narrow.** "Heaven and earth" means the whole universe. Usually we consider the universe as endlessly vast (although the conceptualization as "universe" suggests finitude). However, this universe is called too "narrow" – compared to our essential nature, our true self, our true fact. This true fact of ours appears in this Case as "The supreme way" or "The supreme way is not difficult." The supreme way is nothing but our essential nature. Compared to this, even the vast universe is laughably narrow.

The Sun, moon, and stars are suddenly dark. The sun, moon, and stars are all shining objects. Among these the sun is the greatest, shining brightly and endowing us with the necessary daylight. Nevertheless: however bright the sun may be, it is dark compared to our true self, the true fact, the supreme way. If, for instance, we put a blind over the window, even the brightest light cannot penetrate inside. Our essential nature is different: no matter how black the darkness is around us, the very action of our perception – "Hey, it's dark in here" – never gets darkened. Therefore, even the sun, moon, and stars, compared to the faculty of our essential nature, become pitch black at once.

Were blows of the staff to fall like raindrops and shouts to peal like thunder, still you would not hit the point of the supreme teaching. "Blows of the staff" imply the way of teaching applied, for example, by the famous Zen Master Tokusan: when a student comes, the master cries, "30 blows if you can say it, 30 blows if you can't say it!" and hits him immediately regardless of the answer. These blows fall "like raindrops," which means that they assault you as repeatedly and constantly as raindrops. "Shouts" mean the famous "Kaatz!", a trade mark of Master Rinzai; it "peals" as horribly as "thunder." Yet even such surpassing masters "would not hit the point of the supreme teaching." "The point of the supreme teaching" is nothing but the world of satori. This phrase might give the impression that it is referring to a gradual process of attaining enlightenment¹, but that is not the case. It signifies our true fact. That is, even for such great masters it is utterly impossible to reach our true fact.

Even the Buddhas of the three worlds can know it only by themselves. In the three worlds of the past, present, and future, there have been (and there will be) many Buddhas, such as Shakyamuni or Amida. However, in regard to the true fact, even these Buddhas can do nothing except just nod to it, for they cannot explain it to anybody.

Even the patriarchs of the successive generations cannot present it fully. There have been a number of prominent personalities, beginning with Mahakashyapa. But even such great people cannot manifest it to the full. No matter how great the Zen understanding is, no person can demonstrate our true fact, our true self in a convincing way.

¹ *Shushōhen*: "standpoint of practice."

Neither can the great treasury of all sutras expound it adequately. Sutras are commentaries, explanations of the true fact. Even the enormous collection of all the sutras cannot explain it sufficiently. How many sutras do you imagine there are? It is said there are 4,580 different works! Somebody even counted the number of (Chinese) characters used in all these books: 4,500,021,818! Isn't that incredible? But even all these sutras with all these characters cannot comment upon the true fact sufficiently.

Even the clearly enlightened monk is helpless. Even a monk who has attained the great enlightenment [*daigo-tettei*] can find no help in this regard. Being "helpless" means that he has not yet found the real solution even for himself. To show it to others is all the more out of the question. No matter how clear his eye is supposed to be, concerning this problem, he is still no more than halfway.

When you are at this stage, how could you expect more instruction? That is, when you face the problem of the true self, how on earth could you ask for more instruction?

To say the word "Buddha" is to be poured with muddy water. Even if you use the word "Buddha" and try to explain what "Buddha nature" is, you are simply pouring the muddy water of concepts and ideas all over your body. The real fact can never be presented in such words. Making compound nouns with "Buddha," like "Buddha-body" or "Buddha-nature," can only fill you up with dirt and filth.

To say the word "Zen" is shame all over your face. Even if you try to explain using the word "Zen," you will end up with your face blushing crimson for shame.

For advanced students who have been practicing for a long time, it is unnecessary to say anything more. If you have practiced sitting long enough, you should know what I mean right away. To these people, no further remarks are necessary. But **recent beginners should investigate and apprehend it right away.** Those who started zazen only recently, however, should take a close look at the example which now follows. Thus the main Case is introduced.

On the Case:

Jôshû, instructing the assembly, said, "The supreme way is not difficult: it simply dislikes choosing." The words Jôshû is quoting are actually those of the Third Patriarch, the famous Great Master Sôsan, who wrote the *Shinjinmei*. Let me relate an anecdote about him. Being severely ill he went one day to see the Second Patriarch, Great Master Eka. "Your disciple is suffering from wind anxiety," he said. "Wind anxiety" is believed to mean what we today call leprosy. In old times this disease was considered to be the result of heavy sins. So Sôsan told the master that he had this illness because of his deep sins and asked the master to cleanse him of his sins and make him whole. Then Great Master Eka said, "I feel sorry for you, surely I will make you clean. To start with, bring me your sins so that I may cleanse you of them." Now Sôsan, with all his effort, tried to take out his sins, but he could not. So he reported to the master, "I have tried very hard to take hold of my sins and to take them out, but

I could not." Then the master answered, "I have finished cleaning your sins."² What he meant was: If you have understood that sins are intrinsically empty, then you are purified of all your sins. It is said that Sōsan was cured of his disease then. (The believers of the "Seichō no ie"³ religion say that if you attain satori, you will be freed from all illness. This is not untrue or impossible. There have been many instances of this since times of old.)

This master, Sōsan, composed the *Shinjinmei*. It is an excellent poem on *kokoro* (heart-mind) and the oldest of the famous classical Zen poems such as the *Sandōkai*, *Hōkyōzanmai* etc. And at the very beginning of this poem appears the line "The supreme way is not difficult: it simply dislikes choosing." The supreme way means the highest truth. Seen from the Buddhist point of view, it is nothing but our essential nature. This is said to be "not difficult, it simply dislikes choosing." So, you should not be particular and selective, insisting that you like this or you don't like that. If you stay as you are, you are the perfect presentation of the supreme way itself. But if you start thinking in your head and get fastidious about your liking and disliking, then you spoil the supreme way. At least this is the outside meaning of the text; the inner significance will be made clear later.

By the way, the Old Shōju, the teacher of Master Hakuin, had a master whose name was Master Shidō Bunan. "Shidō Bunan" means no other than "The supreme way is not difficult"!

"If even a word is uttered, it is already an action of choosing or of clarity." "Clarity" means the world of satori, the world of equality or of essence. "An action of choosing" represents the world of discrimination, the world of phenomena. So if you utter one tiny word, you are already in one of these two worlds – either in the phenomenal world or in the essential world, either in delusion or in satori. You may think that the world of satori is by far the better one.

But **"this old monk does not dwell in clarity."** Although he is evidently a man of satori, he does not dwell in the world of equality, in satori.

"Do you monks want to keep a firm hold on it or not?" Although I am not in the world of equality, in the realm of satori, I wonder if you, the disciples around me, want to hold onto satori as something extremely important. – In this way, Jōshū is checking his disciples.

At that time there was a monk attending who asked, "You say that you do not dwell in clarity. If so, what is there to keep a firm hold on?" Jōshū said, "I do not know either." Now a monk appeared before Jōshū – or maybe he shouted his question from afar – saying, "You say that you don't live in the world of satori, but if you don't dwell in satori, what in the world could you hold onto? There's nothing to hold onto, is there?" He is starting an argument, mixing up the two statements of Jōshū, that his disciples might be keeping a firm hold on satori and that Jōshū himself is not staying in the world of satori. Then, Jōshū answers, "I do not

² Cf. Case 30 of the *Denkōroku*.

³ A new religion in modern Japan.

⁴ Jōshū himself.

know either." How interesting! You see that the monk is using logic to trap him, but with this "I don't know either," Jôshû, a truly perfected master, can sneak through any trap. Yet, the monk, obstinate and cunning as he is, doesn't want to give up.

"If you say you do not know, why do you say that you do not dwell in clarity?" You say that you don't know. But just now you said that you didn't live in the world of satori. How could a man who knows nothing say such a thing? You said a minute ago that you were not in satori, because you knew it! You know that you are not in the world of satori. Why on earth do you maintain that you don't know? – Ordinary people would be driven into an impasse by this rigorous logic, not knowing how to find an appropriate answer. But Jôshû remains superb. He says, "You have already asked amply. Bow and withdraw." Is that all you have to ask? Then you are through with your questions. Make a bow and go back to your seat. – Against such a surpassing master like Jôshû, no trap works.

Here we must observe two things: First, we have to see through the evident fact of "The supreme way is not difficult" [*shidô bunan*]. At the same time, we should savor Jôshû's wonderful skill in handling his disciples. A truly enlightened person, a man of *daigo-tettei*, will never be stalemated. Never.

Zen master Kaisen Shôki⁵ was killed in a fire when Erinji, the temple where he was abbot, was burned down by Oda Nobunaga⁶. You may think that Kaisen must have been at his wit's end at that moment, but by no means:

Zen of great peace does not necessarily require mountains and rivers;

When the activities of the heart are eliminated, even fire is cool.

Kaisen thus died a peaceful death. If your zazen practice reaches this level of perfection, you will be able to act freely at any time, and will never fall into an impasse. The most common pitfall for ordinary people is the moment of death. They don't know what to do when they are facing death. But a truly outstanding person will never be troubled at that time; he or she can even "play" with death. Such a person is able to face death with perfect composure. There have been quite a few examples of this in the history of Zen. You must be like these people.

I once heard of a monk who, when he was about to die, summoned his disciples and discussed the procedures of his funeral, giving detailed instructions: The funeral banquet should not be too ostentatious, that point might as well be altered like this, that other point should be done this way ... (You would have thought he was talking about someone else's funeral!) Another example is Yamamoto Gempô Roshi, master to Nakagawa Sôen Roshi. Gempô Roshi seems to have thought one day: Now that I have chosen my successor, living any longer would be nothing but a nuisance to everyone; it's time for me to make my exit. So he started to eat less and less. Now if he had gone on in that way, his funeral would have fallen sometime in March, the busiest month of the year for the temple. So the doctors and the chief disciples consulted with each other and ventured to approach the roshi. Reverend Master, the

⁵ ? – 1582.

⁶ A famous warrior lord in Japan.

timing isn't very nice. Could you please make it a little later? "Oh, is that so?" said the roshi, and started to eat normally again. So he lived a little longer than scheduled ... How composed he was in the face of death! He almost fooled with death. This is a fine example how a man of perfected practice can manage any problem in life, without being stalemated at all.

On the Verse:

The supreme way is not difficult. Why isn't it difficult? Because if you are hungry, you just eat; if you have some business to do, you get up and do it. It would be difficult if you insisted on sitting when you have some urgent business to do. But standing up to do something – there is nothing difficult about that. When your business is over, you may sit down again. If you are tired, you simply lie down. But usually people think that the "supreme way" is something more than that. They think the truth comes out of their brainwork. However, what comes out of their brain is not truth, but simply an *idea*, a *concept* of the truth. The real "supreme way" means standing up, lying down, talking, listening, eating, sleeping; outside of our concrete actions in our daily life, there is no "supreme way." Philosophy makes a grave mistake in assuming that the truth is always something extremely difficult, something incomprehensible for ordinary people. Thus, no philosopher can grasp the real truth. Philosophers are simply circling around the truth; they may come closer and closer to it, but they can't grasp it directly.

You may have heard of the famous Japanese philosopher, Prof. Nishida Kitarô⁷. He lived in Kamakura following his retirement from Kyoto University. Nishida wrote a series of articles called "Kamakura Zakki" [Kamakura Jottings] for a magazine. I read them shortly after my graduation from the university. There he wrote: "Seeing the phrase 'Everyday is a good day' of Master Unmon, I felt as if my whole life had been driven to the wall." "Every day is a good day" is a famous koan⁸. "Being driven to the wall" means that the fighting is up; you are at the mercy of your opponent. Observe well how Prof. Nishida, a man with a great aptitude for logical thinking (a rare talent among Japanese!), found himself, at the end of a life-long difficult process of philosophical thinking, driven to a dead end by that single phrase of Master Unmon: "Every day is a good day." I at that time was reading philosophical books intensively at that time. But I had to realize very clearly how powerless, useless philosophy is. Even Prof. Nishida, in his late years following his retirement, had to make such a miserable confession, revealing the total powerlessness of philosophy!

Once again: "The supreme way" doesn't exist in our brain; it's our everyday actions. There's nothing difficult about it.

A little speech – that's it; a little word – that's it. The phrase "It (the supreme way) dislikes choosing" is usually understood as a warning: "Don't be particular and selective." In

⁷ 1870-1945.

⁸ Cf. Case 6 of the *Hekiganroku*.

fact, if we say, "Here comes a man I don't like," or "What terrible weather!", this seems to be an action of "choosing," at least in the ordinary sense of the word. At that moment, we evidently dislike someone or something. However, in the very utterance "What terrible weather," there isn't a bit of choosing. When you feel "terrible," where is any room for choosing? The opposite case would be that you find someone or something "nice." "How nice!" – this is a fact. In the fact of this utterance there isn't a trace of choosing. "A little speech," "a little word" – that's the presentation of our true nature, the manifestation of the fact "The supreme way is not difficult." Whether we love it or hate it, the phrase itself – "I love ..." or "I hate ..." – is in itself the "supreme way" which is "not difficult," namely the perfect expression of our essence.

The next line develops the theme of our essential nature: **In one there are many kinds; in two there not two.** Very interesting words. In short, they mean: "Form⁹ is emptiness itself, emptiness is form itself (although you may not see the identity right away). It's nothing but our essential nature that stands up, sits down, cries or laughs. If you observe these individual phenomena (standing up, sitting down, crying, laughing), "there are many kinds." But the essential nature is always one, as defined in the *Hannya-shingyô*: "Form is emptiness itself." In other words, equality is the same as discrimination. "In two there are not two." The first "two" can be "three" or "five"; this simply represents the variety of the phenomenal world. In this "two," "there are not two," that is, there's always just "one." Although many things appear in the phenomenal world, intrinsically they are all one and the same. It expresses the world of our essence, the world of the true fact.

On the horizon the sun rises and the moon sets. When day dawns, the moon fades away behind the far mountains. This is it: the perfect presentation of the "supreme way," of the true fact. There is no "liking" or "disliking" here. The sun simply comes up, and the moon simply goes down.

Beyond the balcony the mountains are deep, the waters cold. The author is probably deep in the mountains. Standing on the balcony he sees water below. Perhaps it is a river or an artificially dug pond. From autumn through winter, the water becomes clear and transparent. And how chilly it looks! – What is this all about? Once again, the perfect manifestation of the "supreme way," of the true fact. It is also called *genjô kôan*. The "kôan" in this phrase means – different from the ordinary meaning – the world of equality, the world of essence, whereas "genjô" refers to the world of phenomena. "On the horizon the sun rises and the moon sets; beyond the balcony the mountains are deep, the waters cold" – all this is a description of the landscape in front of your eyes. Nevertheless, it is at the same time the presentation of the "kôan," of the essential world.

Where the skull's consciousness comes to an end, how could joy come up? This phrase is problematic. The "skull" is of course dead, has no consciousness. So there are no such feelings as joy or sadness in it. At least, that is the literal meaning of the sentence.

⁹ The original word *shiki* means that which has form and color, namely all phenomena.

Quite a few people interpret this as the expression of the "great death" [*daishi-ichiban*]: You go on practicing until there is no movement of consciousness whatsoever. It is a state of mind akin to death. (By the way, this is the stage you must reach before attaining kensho: You keep Mu-ing until you lose any consciousness of yourself and become perfectly one with Mu. This is the "moment of the great death," which, however, is not satori itself. To attain true satori, you must come right back to this side – the process called the "great revival" [*daikatsu-genjô*]¹⁰). However, this is not my interpretation of the sentence; that will be presented later on.

The withered tree is giving a dragon's groan. When the winter wind blows through a withered tree, the tree pipes. It gives a living sound. The dead still speaks in a living voice.

Though extinguished, it is still not dried up. Even when it is completely dead, life still flows, the blood is not yet dried up. Completely withered, and yet there is still some moisture left. Some life is still there.

Now this line ("The withered tree is . . .") is usually understood as an expression of the "great revival" [*daikatsu-genjô*, cf. above] after the "great death" [*daishi-ichiban*], which is supposed to be expressed in the previous line ("Where the skull's consciousness comes to an end . . ."). However, my view is somewhat different from this. I would like to see the sentence "Where the skull's consciousness comes to an end" solely from the viewpoint of the essential world: It is the same as the origin of Mu, the origin of our true existence. Nothing stirs there, therefore, "the skull's consciousness has come to an end." There exists no trace of either joy or sadness. There is no "I hate" or "I'm happy." There are absolutely no feelings at all. If you are still having your feelings, such as "I hate it" or "I don't like him," you are not at the most authentic level. "It simply dislikes choosing" – well said, but in reality it is not possible to choose at all. There is namely no choosing! Only the fact exists. Uttering a word, becoming glad or sad, hating or loving – though all these are, seen from an ordinary viewpoint, actions of "choosing," yet the very fact of uttering a word or becoming glad or hating someone transcends all your feelings. Therefore: "How could joy come up?" As for the next line ("The withered tree is giving a dragon's groan; though extinguished, it is still not dried up."), someone commented that it is the same as "Light in darkness, darkness in light" [*meian sôsô no jisetsu*], and I completely agree. "The withered tree" should be interpreted as the withered world of essence, the world of black darkness. Nevertheless, when the wind blows, the withered tree gives a sound, a sound of life. Seen from one side, there is nothing, since it is all withered out. Seen from the other side, there is still life, giving voices and sounds. Observed from the essential world, it is nothing but a withered tree. Yet it is actually living in the phenomenal world. Therefore, it is "light in darkness, darkness in light." In other words, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."

Difficult, difficult! It is easy to say "The supreme way is not difficult," but to actually

¹⁰ Literally: great living, immediate fulfillment.

reach this point is not at all an easy task. Difficult, difficult!

Choosing or clarity? See for yourself! There is no use preaching on and on. The essential world can only be savored personally. So please savor it by yourself. This puts an end to my own preaching. "Choosing or clarity? See for yourself!"