

CASE 30

Jôshû's "Giant Radishes"



By Yamada Kôun

Case:

A monk asked Jôshû, "I've heard that you personally met Nansen. Is that true or not?" Jôshû said, "The province of Chin produces giant radishes."

Verse:

**The province of Chin produces giant radishes.
The monks under heaven take this as a model.
All too clearly they know the past and the present;
Yet how could they discern that the swan is white and the crow is black?
Thief! Thief!
He wrung the nose of the monk.**

Since ancient times this has been a famous koan. There is no Instruction to it, either. However, in his *Soliloquy on the Blue Cliff Record*, Yasutani Haku'un Roshi provides us with something like an Instruction, which he may have written during a sesshin. So let's look at it first. His comments fit nicely with what I myself want to say.

"In this sesshin, one or two precious chickens are just about to be hatched. I pray that they will be born and grow in the best of health. What's necessary for this is only to get rid of enough of the shell. What should you do? Only stick to your tantei." Tantei means practicing single-mindedly Mu.....! This will do away with the "shell," and all your concepts will fall off.

"If you move your head, you are fail. There's no need of your head at all, using your head is the worst obstacle." To "move your head" doesn't mean to shake physically your head right and left or back and forth. If you deliberate at all with your intellect, you have already failed. You've got to cut off your "head." However, it certainly is a difficult task not to use your head.

"A thought with a certain beginning inevitably has an end where the thought loses its validity. That can't be the self-nature, or 'a phrase out of the time before your parents were

born'." Something that has a beginning and an end isn't the essential nature, for the Essential has no beginning, no end. That's the true "self-nature." If something has a starting point as well as a finishing point, it can't be the manifestation of the "one phrase before the birth of your parents." Here the roshi uses an expression deriving from a koan: "Bring me a phrase out of the time before your parents were born."

"It's not enough to commit your books to the flames in the literal sense. You've got to burn up all 'books' in your head." You have heard that Master Daie Sôkô, a disciple of Master Engo, thought that a koan collection like the *Hekiganroku* could only be an impediment to real practice, since something written on paper necessarily invites conceptual speculation, which is a source of grave sin. So he assembled all copies of the work and burned them up. This episode is being alluded to here. Just burning up the books in the physical sense isn't enough, you must throw away all books in your head. How could you burn down not only the "books" in the literary sense, but also the "books" in your head? There is only one method: Mu..... This will consume them all, nothing will be left behind.

"Look at Kyôgen." It refers to Master Kyôgen Chikan, who came to a great enlightenment when he heard the sound of a pebble striking a bamboo tree. Kyôgen first practiced under Isan, but since he was a great scholar of Buddhist philosophy, the learning from the books he had read blocked the way of true understanding. One day Isan gave Kyôgen a koan: What is your intrinsic face before your parents were born? Kyôgen was supposed to show that "face" to the master – what a difficult question! Of course, Kyôgen couldn't give any instantaneous answer; in fact, he couldn't make head or tail out of the question. What face did you have before your parents were born? – this is a question you would never be able to solve with the ordinary intellect. Kyôgen retired to his room and checked all his books and notes, looking for the answer to the koan. But he couldn't find anything that he felt like taking to Isan. At his wit's end he went to Isan and confessed, "I, Chikan, am ignorant. Master, please say a phrase for me." But Isan refused, saying, "It's easy for me to tell it to you. But if I did so now, you would resent me later on. So I'm not going to tell it to you." So Kyôgen gave up all hope, and went into the mountains, saying, "It's totally impossible for me to come to enlightenment in this world. What I can do is to serve other people." "Serving other people" doesn't mean, however, becoming a cook or a meal server in monks' dormitories. He built a small hut at the place where the National Teacher Echû¹ had once established his hermitage. He retired into the hut and, living a perfectly solitary life like that of a woodsman, he hoped to serve passers-by by humbly offering them tea. But being such a thorough-going person, he seems to have been aware of the koan at all times. One day, as he was cleaning the garden, a pebble was swept into a bamboo grove. It struck a bamboo and made a cracking sound. At that instant he suddenly was enlightened. It is said that all the confusing and delusive ideas in his head vanished away, which is supported by the famous phrase he composed: "With a

1 Cf. Case 18 of the *Hekiganroku*: "National Teacher and the Gravestone."

single stroke – all my knowledge was forgotten." At the sound of "Crack!" all thoughts and experiences that he had cherished in his head were completely exhausted.

"He became a real tabula rasa. ... A wonderful annihilation of ego!" But how could he come to enlightenment on hearing the sound "crack"? There's no philosophy here. It would be a nice thing if you could obtain enlightenment simply through hearing a stone striking a bamboo. But it's not that simple. Your practice must have reached the point of sufficient maturity beforehand. You really have to do your Mu with all-out intensity, and because of the "merit," so to speak, of your devotion you become truly and purely one with Mu. Then it smoothly opens up. Anyway, the episode of "Kyôgen striking a bamboo" is a very well-known story.

"Sure enough, with the harsh sound of the bamboo struck by the stone, all delusions from the beginningless past have disappeared. The dream of illusion was broken. Isn't that state perfect and complete as it is? So, when one layer has peeled off, keep on going, and more layers will peel away, one by one." It's just like peeling the layers of a shallot². You peel one layer, and underneath there is another one waiting to be peeled. If you take that layer off, there still is another one. You keep peeling and peeling, then, in the end, there is nothing at all. This is a fine comparison. These "layers" are our delusions. You peel these "delusions" one by one, and consequently, there remains nothing in the end. You come to realize, "Oh, there was nothing at all!" Usually we cherish a strong belief that our "ego" or "self" really exists, but in actual truth there is nothing whatsoever. It's fun to watch a monkey in this connection: Monkeys eat things after they peel off the outside shell or cover of just about everything, so if you give a shallot to a monkey, it peels and peels and peels, till it realizes that everything is gone. How infuriated it is then!

"When two or three layers have fallen away, do it harder. Iwasaki Yaeko is an excellent example of this." Since I talk about her from time to time, many of you may know about Miss Iwasaki Yaeko³. "Iwasaki" is the name of the family that started the business group Mitsubishi. Yaeko was the eldest daughter of Mr. Iwasaki Tetsuya, the head of a branch family and the founder of the present Asahi Glass Inc.; he was an outstanding lay practitioner of Zen as well. Yaeko also practiced Zen under the guidance of Harada Sogaku Roshi; she attained great enlightenment and passed away at the tender age of 24. She sat intensively while convalescing from her lung disease, in Kamakura. Harada Roshi visited her for personal guidance whenever he had a chance to make a trip to Tokyo. However, as he usually resided in Obama⁴ in Fukui Prefecture, it wasn't easy for him to come up to Tokyo frequently. So Yasutani Roshi went to her in Harada Roshi's stead and guided her personally. Then, suddenly – in fact, as a manifestation of the merit of her zazen – she came to a clear kensho experience. And after that her experience kept deepening radically, and in the short

² Rakkyô in Japanese; a tiny onion-type plant used to make pickles.

³ Cf. also the teisho on Case 28, p. .

⁴ A small town near the Japan Sea coast.

period of one week she progressed to a deep level of realization that we, ordinary practitioners of zazen, could hardly attain even if we practice an entire lifetime. We may practice for thirty or forty years after our initial kensho, but it would still be quite rare to go that deep; she did it in one week, almost at a single stroke. Harada Roshi confirmed her experience to be a "great and thorough enlightenment" [*daigo-tettei*]. After her kensho she wrote every day to her Roshi. Seven or eight letters of hers remain, attesting very clearly to the great leaps of her Zen understanding taken from one letter to the next. In her last letter on the seventh or eighth day she writes that she has to bid farewell to the Roshi, indicating her imminent death.

I was a student in the pre-war high school system when I first encountered the story of Iwasaki Yaeko. The abbot of the temple in my home town showed me a copy of the magazine *Shōyū*⁵ issued by Harada Roshi, and said, "This is a truly wonderful story, worthy of special mention in the entire history of modern Zen." In the magazine were printed all the letters of Yaeko addressed to Harada Roshi, together with short comments by the Roshi. (Nowadays we can read them in a book⁶ in which her posthumous writings are also collected.) I was astounded. "Could anything like this really happen in this world?" I had heard a bit about Zen, but to know that this kind of thing could actually take place was a profound shock to me. This was the first thing that sparked my interest in zazen.

My roommate in the high school dormitory, Nakagawa Sōen Roshi, became seriously interested in Zen after he graduated from university. Of course, he had some interest in Zen even at university, but it was after graduation that he decided to personally practice zazen. At first he was more interested in *Namu-amidabutsu*⁷. He used to go to a series of lectures on the *Tan'ni-shō*⁸ delivered by a monk called Jōkan Chikazumi in the Buddhist Hall near Tokyo Imperial University. One day he took me there to listen to Master Jōkan's lecture, but I didn't go there again after that. Honestly, it was boring to me. Sōen Roshi frequented the lectures for a year or two, and then he didn't go any more. I asked him why he had stopped going there. Then he answered, "Because it was boring." You know, it gave me valuable food for thought: even if you come sooner or later to the same conclusion that it's "boring," it is a great difference whether you feel that way after just visiting there once, or after checking out the whole thing thoroughly for one or two years....

Back to Yasutani Roshi's instruction: That "Iwasaki Yaeko is an excellent example" means that you should keep sitting once you have peeled away one layer, so that countless layers will keep falling away. In the end nothing remains – this is called "emptiness of the subject" [*ninkū*].

"From the time that Bodhidharma transmitted Buddhism to the present day, those who have accomplished the dharma may amount to some thirty or forty thousand in China. Perhaps more. Master Jōshū is truly one of the two or three old buddhas." To "accomplish

5 Literally: "excellent friends."

6 cf. Three Pillars of Zen.

7 The evocatory formula of the Jōdo-shinshū Sect of Buddhism.

8 "Lamentation on the Heretics"; a famous work [late 13th century] of the Jōdo-shinshū Sect.

the dharma" means to have attained great enlightenment. "Old buddha" is an expression of the highest respect for a Zen personage. Master Dôgen, too, extolled Master Jôshû, saying, "Jôshû is an old buddha."

Jôshû is the same master that appears in the koan of Mu, "Jôshû's dog," with whom you are quite familiar. He truly was skillful in his use of language. If you observe the sayings of the old Zen masters, you'll notice there are two persons who can justly be called masters of words: Unmon and Jôshû.

The Zen streams of Unmon and Jôshû are both present in the *Hekiganroku*, which contains 18 koans about Unmon and 12 about Jôshû. This shows how highly the two masters were revered by Master Setchô. Iida Tôin Roshi comments, "The *Hekiganroku* is nothing but Unmon and Jôshû."

However, Unmon and Jôshû are slightly different in their styles. Jôshû's words are always very simple, they are quite commonplace words with no striking features at all. Unmon's speech is, on the other hand, quite polished and refined. So it's been often said that, "One phrase of Unmon contains three phrases." Jôshû mentions nothing that evokes "refined" mastery. He says perfectly natural things, and yet those utterances are, in reality, so excellent. This koan is no exception.

On the Case:

A monk asked Jôshû, "I've heard that you personally met Nansen. Is that true or not?" A monk once came to dokusan with Jôshû and asked him, "According to what I've heard, you have personally met with Nansen. Is this true?" The fact that Jôshû was Nansen's disciple was known to everyone. After attaining self-realization at the age of 18, Jôshû practiced 40 more years under Nansen – a fact very well known to all. The questioning monk was doubtless aware of it, and yet he asks. So his question was one that tries to test the master. Obviously he is not a commonplace fellow, but a monk of unusual caliber.

What does the question mean? Does it simply express what it literally means? That's the point.

Anyway, Jôshû's answer was: **The province of Chin produces giant radishes.** What an absurd reply indeed! What in the world is this trying to say?

Here in Japan, Sakurajima in Kyûshû is famous for growing enormous radishes. They look like giant turnips, some even reaching such an enormous size that, in order to properly carry them, they must be tied together and hung on both sides of a horse for balance. Closer to us, Nerima radishes produced in Nerima, Tokyo, are well known.

So the question was: You, Master, are said to have directly encountered Nansen, is it true? To this, the master answered: Great radishes come from Sakurajima.... What's the connection between the question and the answer? There are many ways of understanding this, but this is how I see it:

Since Jôshû was a disciple of Nansen, "You have once met Nansen" makes sense as it is. But it seems more natural to take the question to mean, "You seem to have inherited the dharma of Nansen." That is, the monk is actually asking: "What is the essence of Nansen's dharma?" or "What is the essence of Nansen himself?" If I can interpret the question this way, it's the same as asking about the fundamental meaning of Buddhism, the essential world: What is the ultimate essence of Buddhism, transmitted from one master to another?

To this: "The province of Chin produces giant radishes." If, hearing this, you try to think even a bit with your head, you've already failed. If you try to figure out what the phrase means – "The province of Chin produces giant radishes" – you are off the mark. Try to utter, "The province of Chin produces giant radishes." That's it! It flashes like lightning! At that very instant, you've got to see the essential world. If not, you can't meet Jôshû in person. To put it more directly: Here, Mu appears in the form of enormous radishes. "Giant radishes" are nothing but Mu. So: "What is the ultimate essence of Buddhism?" – "Mu...!" For those who are on the koan "the sound of one hand," it's the same as the "one hand." It's one and the same world. You must be able to naturally see that identical world. "That itself is IT"! Remember the saying, "If you stop and think, you deserve thirty blows." As Tôin Iida Roshi comments on this point, "If there is even the slightest meaning, you can't save yourself." That is, if you think even a tiny bit with your intellect, you fail. "The province of Chin produces giant radishes" – the moment you hear this utterance, you must spontaneously be able to witness the essential world; otherwise, you haven't passed the koan. In that sense, it could be seen as an unusually difficult koan. The Verse speaks about that "difficulty."

On the Verse:

The province of Chin produces giant radishes. Setchô is not borrowing Jôshû's words but he's presenting the fact as it is. He's not merely imitating them. "The province of Chin produces giant radishes," says Jôshû, and Setchô says the same thing, but he is uttering it with his own inner force. That is why Master Engo also comments, "There is newness with every utterance." Jôshû's speech, "The province of Chin produces giant radishes," has been heard before, but now Setchô utters "The province of Chin produces giant radishes," and that brings out a new flavor. What a wonderful statement! No matter how many times you hear this, there's no getting tired of it.

The monks under heaven take this as a model. This koan is praised by all monks as an exemplary koan, as an outstanding model koan, one unsurpassed by others. Other koans with the same excellence are "Jôshû's Mu"⁹ and "Jôshû's cloth robe."¹⁰ Here we see examples of speech that is superbly free, traditionally expressed in the phrase "Jôshû's tongue knows no bones." It's a manifestation of the essential world, the world of oneness. They surely are

⁹ Case 1 of the Mumonkan.

¹⁰ Case 45 of the Hekiganroku.

exemplary koans; in fact, any speech Jôshû utters is an excellent model koan.

All too clearly they know the past and the present; yet how could they discern that the swan is white and the crow is black? They know clearly the difference between the past and the present. But how could they discern – that is, they can't discern – that the swan is white and the crow is black? You may think that it's a crooked statement. It means that both are clear: the past and the present on one hand, and the white swan and the black crow on the other. In one Verse in the *Mumonkan*¹¹, a line reads: "Just because it is so clear, it takes us longer to realize it." Because it is all so very clear and evident, it is all the more difficult to figure out what it's about. Those words could be applied to this Verse. It's all so clear; the past is past, the present is now; the swan is white, the crow is black. Why can't you understand this clear fact? "All too clearly they know the past and the present" may correspond to "Just because it is so clear," while "yet how could they discern that the swan is white and the crow is black?" corresponds to "it takes us longer to realize it." That is: It's all so clear, why can't they understand it? For example, take the phrase from our present koan, "The province of Chin produces giant radishes." The language is so clear and evident. But you can't grasp the real essence of the matter. Everyone knows that there are big radishes in Nerima, but no one knows the essence of it. Master Engo comments here: Everyone knew in the past and everyone knows at present that the koan "Jôshû's giant radishes" is an exemplary koan, but they never knew that there's nothing extraordinary at all in it.

Zen is always like that. In the very fact that there is nothing special – there's indeed no secret at all – there's everything. Another example: In the koan "Jôshû's 'Wash your bowls',"¹² a monk asks Jôshû, "I have just entered this monastery. I beg you, Master, please give me instructions." Then Jôshû asks, "Have you eaten your rice gruel yet?" The monk says, "Yes." Then says Jôshû, "Wash your bowls." The language is quite clear, isn't it? But what is the relevance of washing your bowls after breakfast? So very clear, yet so difficult to understand. This is a typical Zen atmosphere. There is really nothing to it, yet everything is in it. In washing your bowls there's everything, in standing up there's everything, in sitting down there's everything. But you can't understand it. Our line in the Verse refers to this situation.

Thief! Thief! Sometimes the word "thief" [*zoku*] could be replaced with "pickpocket" [*byaku-nen-zoku*]. It's an expression of praise to Jôshû. It certainly is a strange way of extolling Jôshû to call him a thief. Why "thief"? Because he robs people of their delusions. Great Zen masters are all great "thieves," for they take away all the delusions people cling to and regard as precious. We wish we could become Great Thieves, but this is no easy thing. Petty sneak-thieves are just about the best we can ever become. "What a great thief!" – it's the highest homage to Master Jôshû.

He wrung the nose of the monk. With the koan, "The province of Chin produces giant

11 Cf. Case 7 (Jôshû's "Wash Your Bowls") of the *Mumonkan*.

12 *ibid*.

radishes," he wrings the noses of Zen practitioners. "Ouch!" Did you get it? When you cry out "Ouch!", there is only "OUCH!" – could you get that? Therefore: "He wrung the nose of the monk."