

CASE 40

Nansen's "Flower Bush"



By Yamada Kôun

*Instruction:*

Withdraw and cease, withdraw and give up. Flowers bloom from the iron tree. Is there? Is there? The clever man suffers a failure. Even though he is seven in length and eight in width [completely free] he cannot avoid having his nose pierced by another. Try to say where the error is. As a test I quote this. Look!

*Case:*

High Official Rikukô, while talking with Nansen, said, "Jô Hosshi says, 'Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one.' How wonderful this is!" Nansen called Rikukô and, pointing at a flower in the garden in front, said, "People of these days see the flower of this bush as in a dream."

*Verse:*

Seeing, hearing, being aware, knowing—these are not one by one.  
Mountains and rivers are as in a mirror, they are not seen.  
Frosty sky, the moon has set, almost midnight.  
With whom can this be tasted?  
On the clear pool reflections are shed.  
It is cold.

According to Hakuin Zenji, this is one of the eight most difficult koans. It is Nansen's state of mind that makes it so formidable. The logical thread is not so problematic but, since Nansen is talking from his state of mind, penetrating it and putting forth an opinion is a difficult thing.

*On the Instruction:*

Withdraw and cease, withdraw and give up. Flowers bloom from the iron tree. Is there? Is there? Cease! Give up! In the 96th Case of the *Book of Equanimity* [Shôyôroku],

"Kyûhō Does Not Acknowledge", the phrase "withdraw and cease, withdraw and give up," appears. It is one of seven "withdraw"s uttered by Kyûhō in quoting his late master, Sekisō: "Withdraw and cease, withdraw and give up, withdraw to a cold and sad place, withdraw to ten thousand years spent on one thought, withdraw to cold ashes of old trees, withdraw to a wisp of white incense, withdraw to the incense burner in the old hermitage." In the *Shōyōroku*, excluding the two sentences "withdraw to a cold and sad place" and "withdraw to the incense burner in the old hermitage", there are five phrases and the first two are, "withdraw and cease, withdraw and give up". This means to throw away all delusive ideas and become really nothing. In other words, throw away delusive ideas and attain realization. And then abandon realization.

If one can do this, "flowers bloom from the iron tree". The iron tree is the true self and even should you cut it, it cannot be cut. "Flowers bloom from the iron tree" is the image of Great Life Becoming Reality. Through practice we can attain realization. And after realization, with one koan after the other, we go on deepening our state of mind. One can understand for oneself better than others can whether or not the actual state reached is good enough. If you think, "This is enough," you have come to a dead end. You must always think, "It's not enough, it's not enough!" After all's said and done, I think that the power of self-examination pushes our practice ever on.

Master Kyûhō also said, "Looking at the words of the buddhas and patriarchs, at all times one should make repentance." Looking at the koans, looking at the words of the buddhas and patriarchs and comparing these with your own present state of mind, you can see clearly that it's not perfect yet. Similarly, Master Dōgen taught, "Compare your heart with the teachings of the past"--reminding us to compare our hearts, our state of mind, with the teachings of the buddhas and patriarchs as did Master Bassui who said, "If you have an experience and think 'This is it!' look at one koan." For example: "A monk asked Jōshū, 'What is the meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the west?' Jōshū answered, 'The oak tree in the garden.'" To look at this koan is to compare our hearts with the teachings of the past. If there be even the slightest doubt, it's not yet the real thing and we must go back once again. In this way, comparing our hearts with the teachings of the past and attaining realization on our still imperfect points one by one, we go forward. And as far as we go we can never say, "This is enough!"

The seven "withdraw"s mentioned above are the image of one's gradually deepening state of mind divided into seven stages. The level of the last injunction, "withdraw to the incense burner in the old hermitage", cannot be understood unless one goes there oneself. For us who are still immature this is a world beyond imagination.

Anyway, with delusive ideas given up, realization given up, for the first time flowers bloom on the true self—on the iron tree, flowers bloom.

"Is there? Is there?" Is there really such a person, someone who can say, "I am that"?

**The clever man suffers a failure. Even though he is seven in length and eight in width [completely free] he cannot avoid having his nose pierced by another. Try to say where the error is. As a test I quote this. Look!** Clever people, though they be intelligent

and quick to understand, suffer failure. They fail in grasping the "real thing". We're given the impression here that High Official Rikukô is indicated by "the clever man". "Seven in length and eight in width" is the appearance of complete freedom of action wherein length and width have no end as in "If you meet the Buddha, kill him, if you meet the patriarchs, kill them!" This action cannot appear unless you really experience yourself to have become free. While you are bound (not by something having form—like a rope—but by your own conceptual thoughts) you cannot say of yourself that you are completely free. Even supposing that you have reached complete freedom, still Nansen holds your nose down.

To "pierce the nose" refers to someone opening a hole in an ox's nose, inserting a ring, passing a rope through it and then leading the ox around. In the same way, though we may think we have complete freedom, before a true master we're led around by the nose. The Instruction here seems to refer to Nansen and High Official Rikukô. "Try to say where the error is. As a test I quote this. Look!" Here the problem is posed; what is wrong—where is the error—that one is being led around by the nose? In short, Rikukô has not freed himself completely of conceptual thoughts and even though he seems completely free he's just being led around, it says here.

*On the Case:*

High Official Rikukô, while talking with Nansen, said, "Jô Hosshi says, 'Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one.' How wonderful this is!" At the time, Rikukô was a high official of the government, someone who might today be called "Chief Secretary". He had also been a disciple of Nansen for some time, had received certification (*inka*) from him and was said to have reached complete realization. Still, in this koan it seems that he's still having his nose held down by Nansen. He'd gone to see Nansen and was talking about various matters. Then, quoting from Jô Hosshi's book, *Hôzôron* [Essay on the Store of the Treasure], he said, "Jô Hosshi says, 'Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one.' How wonderful this is!" The word translated as "wonderful" literally means "strange"; therefore some people read it as "difficult to understand". But here it is a word of praise and may correspond to "wonderful".

In ancient times there was a very famous man named Rajû Sanzô (Kumarajiva), who brought many sutras from India and translated them into Chinese. Among his many disciples were four so excellent as to be called "The Four Wises". Jô Hosshi was the best of these. Excellent in poetry and essays, and admirable for his personality and insight, he was active around the year 410 AD. Fuken, the king of Shin, urged him to become his secretary but he refused thereby causing King Fuken to take offense and sentence him to death. Jô Hosshi asked for a week's stay of execution during which he wrote down his state of mind, and that is the work referred to above, *Essay on the Store of the Treasure*. After finishing it he went off to die with composure. His last verse, when he was about to have his neck cut off, is very famous. It says:

*The four elements in the origin are not existent,  
The five aggregates are essentially empty.*

About that time, people thought that the four elements (earth, water, fire, wind) were the elements that compose the material and objective world. But this material and objective world in its origin has no existence. Physical scientists of our time are getting deeper and deeper inside material substance, and it seems they are going to prove scientifically that "the four elements in the origin are not existent". In the *Hannya Shingyô* it is said, "Realizing that the five aggregates are empty makes all suffering and misfortune vanish." The five aggregates are matter, perception, ideas, volition and consciousness which, aggregating together, form everything. They include not only the material forms of the objective world but what is inside oneself as well—that is, our mind with its actions. These actions have no form, nevertheless, they are among the five aggregates. When those actions accumulate, it is called "karma". There's both good karma and bad karma and these too are among the five aggregates. And all of these are empty. Essentially they are nothing.

Listening to the explanation, one might understand the words, but one must really grasp it as experience. Coming to the fact of whether this world has been grasped or not, it's doubtful in most cases and thus it is said that true Zen is dead. In seeking to grasp this world, it is useless to pursue it by logic; it must be grasped by living experience. And once it is grasped, emptiness really is discovered to exist. It sounds strange to say that nothingness "exists" but this world of emptiness can be experienced. Referring to this, Haku'un Yasutani Roshi spoke of "the acrobatics of emptiness." And, really, it's so: standing, sitting, laughing, crying—we must understand that some "Mr or Ms Nothing" is performing all these "stunts".

Jô Hosshi's last verse goes on:

*When the head faces the sharp blade,  
It is nothing more cutting the spring wind.*

Stretching your neck before the well-sharpened blade and having your head cut off is the same as the spring wind being sliced, for there is nothing. It's not easy, but if you're really practicing zazen I would like you to experience this state of mind, even a little. This poem is probably the origin of the poetry of National Teacher Bukkô, founder of Engakuji. When he was in China and his temple was besieged by the soldiers of Yuan, he recited a verse when the sword was brandished over his head. Its last two lines run:

*The precious, three-foot long, great sword of Yuan,  
Cuts the spring wind from behind like a flash of lightning.*

This seems to be an imitation of Jô Hosshi's last verse.

Well, Jô Hosshi was a great man. "Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one"! The root of the universe and one's own root are one and the same because both come from one place. And everything and oneself are one. "This is really wonderful," says High Official Rikukô in admiration as he quotes these words. According to Engo's commentary, Master Sekitô Kisen attained great realization upon getting in touch with this statement and, the following day, composed the *Sandôkai*<sup>1</sup>. But, even when they are looking at the same thing, there's a difference between the person who grasps it by experience and the one who understands it conceptually. These words of Jô Hosshi, "Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one", are concepts, to put it frankly. The word "same" means "equal"

<sup>1</sup> Literally: "Merging of Difference and Sameness."

and is equivalent to the *soku* of "Shiki soku ze kû, kû soku ze shiki"<sup>2</sup> and this is a conceptual medium. Similarly, the "one" in "everything and I are one" (all things and oneself are one) is also a concept. When we really become "one" there is no "one" any more. As it is said in the Verse of the 13th Case of the *Gateless Gate*, "Tokusan Carries His Bowls",

*The last word and the first word,*

*These are not one word.*

"One" is a concept presupposing two. The real one is not even one. High Officer Rikukô seems to understand well Jô Hosshin's words conceptually and so he exclaims, "How wonderful this is!"

To go on: **Nansen called Rikukô and, pointing at a flower in the garden in front, said, "People of these days see the flower of this bush as in a dream."** At this point, Nansen wanted to teach by any means the fact of "Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one"--not the idea but the real thing. Pointing at a flower in the garden, probably a peony, he called, "High Official!" "Yes!" "People of these days see the flower of this bush as in a dream." He said "people of these days" but he really meant High Official Rikukô. "You truly do not understand this flower," he is saying. "Even seeing it, probably no one knows its real being. You probably don't either. Just seeing it dimly in the middle of a dream, you don't know the reality of this flower, do you?" It was a severe inspection. As long as you think, "I am here and the flower is there," you are only seeing the flower and its reality cannot be understood.

Among the koans after kensho there is "Put out that fire a thousand miles away." Without putting out the fire a thousand miles away, real fire—the reality of fire—cannot be understood. When the one who sees and the thing seen are separated, as in opposition, it's like seeing in a dream. I've given this explanation here, but it won't do when you are in the dokusan room!

The Case says "like in a dream" but it shows the statement, "Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one" as a living fact. In the same way, when you are in the dokusan room, you must show it as a living fact. The Verse of the 25th Case of the *Gateless Gate*, "The Sermon of the Third Seat" says,

*The broad daylight, the blue sky,*

*He speaks of a dream in a dream.*

*Suspicious! Suspicious!*

*He is trying to deceive the whole assembly.*

It says "dream" here, but it's not a dream. Even a fearful dream, for example, is nothing when one awakes though while dreaming it to be real it is an evident fact. Again, if you say "a dream", this phenomenal world is all a dream for what happened yesterday is no more. If you say "reality", even what is in a dream is all reality, every moment of a dream is reality itself; yet, one moment after the other fades away and disappears. Nansen said, "Just like in a dream, you don't understand the real thing, you don't see the real flower." Nonetheless, I am expecting all of you to grasp the reality of the flower!

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<sup>2</sup> From the *Hannya Shingyô*: "Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness, exactly form."

*On the Verse:*

Seeing, hearing, being aware, knowing--these are not one by one. Since old times there have been discussions about the first phrase, "Seeing, hearing, being aware, knowing—these are not one by one." It is a difficult one. Seeing—"Ah! what a beautiful flower!" Hearing—"Kachin! Kachin!" [hitting the lectern] Being aware—awake. Knowing. In short, these are our consciousness. Seeing-hearing-realizing-knowing "are not one and one" says the Verse, and there is the problem. From one point of view they are not separated but one; from another, they are not one, but separated—just the opposite. For example, about "they are not one and one" Haku'un Roshi says, "They are not separated." But saying "one," if there is one it is not the real one. Hakuin Zenji, too, says, "They are one, not different ones." Seeing-hearing-realizing-knowing, they are all nothing but essential nature, and from this point of view, truly they are not separated.

Yet Tenkei Zenji has written, "They are not one and the same." Also, Inoue Shûten says that they are not one but separated. And in his commentary, Engo takes them as separated. But in the end, I think that both opinions can be taken. However, saying that they are one is easier to understand; saying they are different is more difficult to see. There's also the expression, "All the same. All different." "All the same" means that they are completely one; "all different", that they are completely separated. And then there's this saying, "Should they come to meet, ten thousand separations, one thousand differences." On the other hand, when one attains realization, it's "Should they come to meet, it is the same house." In trying to understand the words, "ten thousand separations, one thousand differences" remember that when we say "What a beautiful flower!" the whole universe is that flower. There is nothing else. "Ting!", the bell rings and we hear. This time there is only "Ting!". The flower and "Ting!" are completely separated. In each case, the whole universe is one and one, completely separated. For example, this person [sitting] on the side and I are, viewed from the essential nature aspect, the same. Since we come from the same place, the original source is the same, we are in the same house. But from the phenomenal point of view, I fill the whole universe with myself. "Upon heaven and under heaven I am the only one to be honored." And this person on the side [of me] fills the whole universe with himself—"Upon heaven and under heaven he is the only one to be honored." This is said to be complete separation.

After all, both opinions are good, but to make it easier to understand, following Haku'un Roshi's teisho, I will read: "Seeing-hearing-being aware-knowing, these are not one and one" as "They are not separated, they are one."

The following line, **Mountains and rivers are as in a mirror, they are not seen**, is the same as the koan we noted before: "Put out that fire a thousand miles away". In the mirror are reflected mountains and rivers. When they are reflected, subject and object are one, and there is not such a thing as seeing. Of the real one-world—the world beyond subject and object—the Verse says, "Mountains and rivers are as in a mirror, they are not seen." The same must be said when looking at a flower: there is neither the self who sees nor the flower that is seen. This is real seeing. The mirror is the subject; mountains and rivers are the

object. Seeing the flower is like mountains and rivers reflecting in a mirror. Conceptual operations prompt us to think that we are seeing the flower, but the truth is "only the flower". From the point of view of the flower, "only the flower"; from our point of view, "only oneself". Looking out from one's self, the whole universe is oneself; looking out from the object, one's self is absolutely nothing—there is only the objective world.

**Frosty sky, the moon has set, almost midnight. With whom can this be tasted? On the clear pool reflections are shed. It is cold.** A cold and frosty night, the moon has set and it's completely dark. It is around midnight. There is a pond, clear water without a single wave—only some reflections. This poetry seems to be a symbol of the true oneness of subject and object—entered into and completely one with the scene. Is there anyone who can feel this feeling or taste this taste? This is truly "Universe and I have the same root; everything and I are one." Saying "Universe and I have the same root, etc." sounds theoretical, but reading, "Frosty sky, the moon has set, almost midnight. With whom can this be tasted? On the clear pool reflections are shed. It is cold," is right away "Universe and I have the same root." I think that unless you have really grasped the world of emptiness as an experience, you will not understand real Zen.

I happened to read Iida Tōin Roshi's teisho on this koan, but it doesn't exactly suit. I feel he is taking the world of emptiness conceptually. Perhaps I am being conceited, but I did have a feeling of doubt about it. From now on, as "homework", I think that this has to be examined thoroughly.