

CASE 45

Jôshû's Cloth Robe



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

If he wishes to say it, he says it; and there's no one in the world who's his match. When he has to act, he acts; and his total activity gives way to no one. Like sparks struck from flint, like flashes of lightning. Darting flames ride on the wind. A raging torrent crosses knife edges. Should even a supremely enlightened master appear, he will not escape having the tip of his sword cut off and his tongue tied fast. I open a narrow passageway as I test by citing this case. Look!

Case:

A monk asked Jôshû, "The myriad phenomena return to one. Where does the one return to?" Jôshû said, "When I was in Seishû I made a cloth robe. It weighed seven pounds."

Verse:

Knitting everything together and cornering the old and ancient awl.
How many know its weight, the seven pound robe?
Right now I throw it into West Lake.
This fresh breeze after releasing the load—Whom can I give it to?

Today we examine the koan known as "Jôshû's Cloth Robe." Since most of you are already somewhat familiar with Jôshû I will skip the details here, but I wish to emphasize that Jôshû was a Zen master who had totally rid himself of any trace of satori. This is also true, of course, about unenlightened persons who know nothing whatsoever about the world of satori. It is only when we practice steadfastly and assiduously that we finally realize. And what do we realize? Our true self. We realize that the content of our true self is totally empty and that we are one with the entire universe. As the *Shinjinmei* ("Poem on Believing in Mind") says, "One is all, one is one."

Here is the scenery of the real world, never encountered in the everyday world of common sense and logic. This is the world we realize in enlightenment. We then go on to practice and wipe away all traces of the enlightenment. At first the traces of that experience are glittering brilliantly. So long as this is so, we are still suffering from the sickness of

enlightenment; we have yet to become totally ordinary. When this "satori sickness" gradually fades away and we become ordinary persons we can then be said to be true Zen men and women. To give a graphic example¹ when we begin our practice, the stick is horizontal, as shown here. The process of practicing Mu with all our spiritual energy is the process whereby the stick is moved gradually to a vertical position. When the stick is completely vertical, it is the stage where all ego-consciousness is gone and we have died to our delusive self. Many masters will mistakenly approve this as a kensho experience. But we must go one further step². It is only when we have taken this extra step that we finally experience satori. After this, the student is usually told to practice shikantaza or to continue practicing Mu. This sitting after realization is extremely important.

At the San'un Zendo, once the person has reached this stage³, he or she is given one koan after another to work on. This process corresponds to the stick gradually moving back down towards a horizontal position again. In former times, when a person finished koan study, this was considered to be great enlightenment. But nowadays, even though a person may have finished koan study this is still not considered to be great enlightenment, and it is customary at this point for the person to continue with shikantaza practice. In this way our stick gradually returns to a totally horizontal position, and it looks no different from the way it looked at the start. At this point there are no traces of satori remaining. What difference is there, then, before and after satori? From the essential standpoint there is no difference at all. But from the standpoint of the individual consciousness it is quite different. In some inexplicable way things are totally different. The biggest difference is that the individual is no longer a slave to external influences.

Usually we are constantly at the mercy of our environment. For example, if we find that someone working in the same office as us has been talking ill about us, it immediately affects us adversely. If someone in the same office receives wages 50 cents higher than us, our spirits are restless. In this way we are ceaselessly under the influence of our environment.

But when we arrive here⁴ we are no longer under the control of our external environment and that's a big difference. When we are sad we cry like anyone else. Even a person who has reached the state represented by the horizontal stick cries just like anyone else. But there's still something different. What is it? Deep down inside that person is essentially at peace. Some might mistakenly suppose that by doing zazen we no longer have any emotions, that we no longer laugh or cry; but this is a great error. The purpose of zazen is not to become a strange or unusual person. If you give up halfway you might end up being out of the ordinary, but that is a "Zen sickness." At any rate, when the stick is once again completely horizontal, that is, when, by ardent practice, we have wiped away all traces of satori, we are ordinary persons and not strange in any way. When it's like this⁵ we're still strange or unusual.

¹ Roshi lifts up his "kotsu" or stick.

² Roshi moves the stick somewhat beyond the vertical position so that it is descending again toward a horizontal position.

³ Roshi shows the stick again in a position where it has moved slightly passed a vertical position.

⁴ He shows the stick in a horizontal position again after passing through a vertical position.

⁵ Roshi holds the stick slanted sideways.

Jôshû is an example of a person who had reached this stage⁶. He had wiped away all traces of satori. Few indeed are the people who reach this stage. Though there have been many outstanding Zen masters from ancient times, only a handful reached this stage. We could probably count them on the fingers of one hand. It is for this reason that Dôgen Zenji reserves the highest praise for Jôshû, referring to him as "Old Buddha."

Jôshû never acted in a rough manner. We are all familiar with Rinzai's shouts of "Katsu!" and how Tokusan wielded his stick. Rinzai Zenji often responded to the queries of his students with a great cry of "Katsu!" Tokusan, master of the stick, would immediately give the student a blow or two to touch off realization. But Jôshû was always a model of quiet reserve. I imagine if we were to meet him on the street today most of us would mistake him for an ordinary beggar monk. He was evidently quite poor materially as can be ascertained from some of the poems he wrote. In one verse he says that he hasn't laid eyes on a bean cake for over a year, and that just the thought of such a treat makes his mouth water. Such lines show us just how ordinary Jôshû had become through ardent practice. It is this Jôshû whom we meet again today in this koan.

On the Instruction:

If he wishes to say it, he says it; and there's no one in the world who's his match.

Quite often we hesitate to say what's on our mind, fearing that we will make fools of ourselves before others or that our statements will offend them. But a true spiritual person (in this case, Jôshû) will say what needs to be said. Recall Case 1 of the *Gateless Gate*: "Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?" "Mu!"

The Zen master who appears most frequently in the pages of the *Blue Cliff Record* is Unmon with a total of fifteen cases, followed by Jôshû who appears in twelve. Almost without exception Jôshû responds to his questioner very succinctly, almost in a low mumble. Case 19 of the *Gateless Gate* presents us with the particulars attending Jôshû's great enlightenment:

Jôshû earnestly asked Nansen, "What is the Way?" Nansen answered, "The ordinary mind is the way." Jôshû asked, "Should I direct myself toward it or not?" Nansen said, "If you try to turn toward it, you go against it."

Jôshû was seeking the final resolution from Nansen on the ultimate question. And at this point the last obstructions to enlightenment were eliminated. The Jôshû who appears in the *Blue Cliff Record* responds with short terse answers. A good example is the series of koans dealing with the following phrase from the *Shinjinmei*: "The Supreme Way is not difficult; it simply dislikes picking and choosing." It is for such reasons that the Instruction for today's koan says: "When he wishes to speak, he speaks."

And, as the verse continues, Jôshû's way of teaching has no equal in all the world: **When he must act, he acts, and his total activity gives way to no one. Like sparks struck from flint, like flashes of lightning. Darting flames ride on the wind. A raging torrent crosses knife edges.** When he wants to do something he does it on the spur of the moment

⁶ The stick is again horizontal after having passed through a vertical position.

without hesitation. "Total activity" means the working of his entire spirit, with his whole being. He may respond in a low mumble but in that moment his very soul dances forth and he is a match for anyone. His activity constantly fills the entire universe. The activity of his entire being comes forth: "Above the heavens and below the earth I alone am honored." This activity is as fast and fleeting as sparks struck from flint or a flash of lightning. If we blink for even a split second we are liable to miss it, it's so fast. It is like tongues of flame which, when the wind fans the fire, lick out in a split second, consuming anything in their path. It is faster than a raging torrent or a fleet-footed runner dashing across knife blades without sustaining a scratch. These are all metaphors for the incredible speed of Jôshû's Zen activity.

Should even a supremely enlightened master appear, he will not escape having the tip of his sword cut off and his tongue tied fast. I open a narrow passageway as I test by citing this case. Look! The original Chinese verse uses the simile of a blacksmith's hammer and tongs to characterize an outstanding Zen master, who, in the same way, draws from his students their best efforts and "forges" outstanding successors. Even if such an outstanding master were to appear before Jôshû, that person would be unable to say a word in response. Jôshû is so completely ordinary that even should such a Zen master wish to say something, he would not know where to start.

But the instruction says that he will open up the road just a crack to let us have peek inside and witness a living example of Jôshû's activity. But we must look very carefully if we are not to miss it.

On the Case:

A monk asked Jôshû, "The myriad phenomena return to one. Where does the one return to?" Here we are presented with "all is one." It is all the various phenomena in the phenomenal world. They are numerous indeed but when gathered together they are one. Only when we have experienced the world of oneness can we say this, but once we have experienced it we immediately understand. But this monk wants to know where the one returns to.

In the book *Hekiganroku-Jirinshô* by Master Fûge reads: "When the great kalpa fire is enflamed, the Thousand Great Worlds will be destroyed. (In other words, the entire universe is entirely consumed in a great conflagration, leaving nothing but ashes. It's as if tens of thousands of atomic bombs were to be set off in the same instant.) Nothing but ashes would remain. Where would the ashes go?" This is also the myriad phenomena returning to one! But where would this "one" now go? Anybody still thinking with his head would give up at this point: "Hmm, just where does the one return to?"

The monk is closing in upon Jôshû with logical arguments. He seeks to corner Jôshû like a king in a chess game and call "checkmate!" He seems to have left Jôshû without any place to flee. How would you answer at such a time? It would not be totally impossible to give an intellectual answer of some sort. "The myriad phenomena return to one. Where does the one return to?" Well, let's see, since all is one and one is all you could say something like,

"the one returns to the myriad phenomena." But this is logic-chopping. It is only thinking about the matter in logical terms. Jôshû doesn't answer with such logic-chopping.

Jôshû said, "When I was in Seishû I made a cloth robe. It weighed seven pounds."

This is truly bold and imposing. Nevertheless, he no doubt said it in a low murmur as if it were nothing at all. He has presented us with the fact itself; we have "the one" right in front of us. Or it might be better to say we have the world where both the myriad phenomena and the one have completely disappeared. All glittering traces of satori have been done away with and we are here⁷. He has, without fanfare, presented us with the world where we are once again totally ordinary. But most people would get caught up at this point when asked a question like the monk's. They would immediately recall Buddhist teachings or what they had read in this or that Zen book. But Jôshû isn't tripped up in the least. Listen to him answering: "You know, when I was in Seishû I made myself a Zen robe. It weighed seven pounds. That robe was really heavy!" Those with eyes look now. Those with ears hear now. Here is the true world of Zen. "You know, last year I had a robe made in Kyoto. They charged me 35 thousand yen for it!"

What is this? Is this satori or isn't it? Is it just passing the time of day? It is neither. When I practiced under Asahina Sôgen Roshi, during one of his teisho the Roshi said something like: "The ancients were truly great. Nothing but enlightenment from morning to night." I might be scolded for saying so, but when I recall this statement now, I feel it betrays the extent of the Roshi's own understanding at that time. A truly outstanding Zen person is by no means glinting of satori from morning to night. Not until the satori is completely wiped away can that person be considered to be truly outstanding. The kind of person whom Asahina Roshi praised as "outstanding" is actually stuck in the world of practice and enlightenment (*shushôhen*). In other words, such a person is still stuck in the world of satori from morning to night. Is this greatness? On the contrary, it is the height of non-freedom. If there is nothing but satori in your head when you eat or walk down the street what could be more bothersome? All of that excess baggage must be done away with. Only then can you finally become a truly free person. It is because that person is truly free that "when he needs to say something he says it, and when he needs to act, he acts." Truly free. The purpose of Zen is to produce such truly free people. We are all actually free to begin with, but various circumstances and karmic causes have filled our heads with all sorts of things which deprive us of this freedom. The purpose of Zen is to rid us of all this excess mental baggage and make us truly free.

I sincerely hope that every one of you who has taken up the practice of Zen will lose your hideboundness and become truly free. Recall the words in Hakuin Zenji's *Song of Zazen*: "Like ice and water, without water there is no ice, without living beings, no Buddha." We are all intrinsically free-flowing water, water which flows pure and free and doesn't stagnate. But, sad to say, we're all like hardened ice. We've become stiff and hard. The task here is to melt that ice and let the water flow free once again. Then, whatever vessel it is poured into, be it square, round or oblong, it will conform to that shape with total freedom. We could say that melting ice into water is the purpose of zazen. Jôshû is really free-flowing water. For, like

⁷ Roshi moves his stick gradually from a vertical position back to a horizontal position.

water, he is completely free while lacking any self-consciousness of his freedom. What is the difference, after all, between ice and water? Ice is hard and water is flowing, but they're both the same H₂O, make no mistake. Without ice there is no water, without us living beings there is no Buddha.

On the Verse:

Knitting everything together and cornering the old and ancient awl. How many know its weight, the seven pound robe? "Knitting" and "cornering" are words used to describe a particular type of question in Zen exchanges. It was Bun'yô Zenshō Zenji⁸ who first devised a classification of eighteen categories for the various ways in which a practitioner can question the master. This particular classification of "knitting and cornering" [*henpeki-mon*] is one of them. There is also, for example, the classification known as "checking-the-host question" [*kenju-mon*] in which the question attempts to determine the opponent's level of understanding. Yet another classification is known as a "thing-borrowing question" [*shakuji-mon*] in which a certain matter is "borrowed," so to speak, to express the essential matter. For example: "Heat and cold come, how can we avoid them?" Here, the matters of heat and cold are used to express our sufferings and anguish. In other words, when we are beset with suffering and anguish what do we do?

"Knitting" here means knitting or compiling everything together and then closing in on one's opponent. In today's koan, the monk "knits together" the two matters of "the myriad phenomena return to one" and "where does the one return to" to form a single question with which he attempts to corner Jōshū. Here he uses such a question as his first words in order to check Jōshū.

"The old and ancient awl" is Jōshū himself. Awl is an expression used to refer to Zen practitioners who "bore" into the problem of their own existence with the awl of Mu, for example. The poet thus pays his respects to Jōshū, calling him an "old and ancient awl." To this great and aged Jōshū came a monk with a knitting-cornering question seeking to corner the old monk.

In response, Jōshū said, "When I was in Seishū I made a cloth robe. It weighed seven pounds." But how many people, the poet is asking, really know the weight of that robe? In other words, just how many are there who know Jōshū's inner world, his state of consciousness?

Right now I throw it into West Lake. This fresh breeze after releasing the load—whom can I give it to? These two final lines are singing of the poet Setchō's own state of consciousness. West Lake [Chin.: *Xihu*] is an area west of the city of Kōshū [*Hangzhou*] in Sekkō [*Sekiang*] Province known for its scenic beauty. Setchō, who himself lived in the vicinity of West Lake, tells us that he has even thrown the cloth robe into West Lake. In the koan Setchō is saying, "I have no need for such things!" So, there is nothing left at all. This could also be said about Jōshū. Nevertheless, Setchō says that he has thrown even the cloth

⁸ 947-1024.

robe into the lake so there's really nothing left at all.

This fresh breeze after releasing the load—whom can I give it to?" In ancient China boatmen sailed up and down the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers with their merchandise. The southeast wind which blew as they went upstream was known in Sino-Japanese as *jôsai* [literally: "cargo loaded"]. When they reached their port of call and unloaded their cargo, the hold of the boat was now completely empty. The northwest wind which blew the boats downstream again was called *asai* [lit.: "cargo unloaded"]. How wonderfully free and easy it must have felt to sail downstream in those empty, buoyant boats. Setchô, the poet, is asking us: "To whom can I convey the exquisite feeling of lightness and freedom at such a time?" I ask you to truly realize your own true self and you will see that you are completely empty and free like those boats dancing on the river. We are all carrying the heavy cargo of our own concepts and ideas. But if we can unload all that cargo on the shore, if, like the boatmen of old, we can unload our heavy cargo of concepts and thoughts, we will be totally light and easy. Dôgen Zenji refers to this as *shinjin daturaku* [body and mind fallen away]. To whom can I convey the absolute freedom and lightness which I experience at that moment? This is what Setchô is trying to tell us. Unless you experience this for yourself you cannot know it, but this state is what Dôgen Zenji calls *daturaku shinjin* [the fallen away body and mind]. When you have rid yourself of all the collected garbage in your head, the feeling of joy at that time is beyond description. There is no way to experience this other than to sit your very hardest and, once you realize that your essential nature is empty, you will understand naturally what Setchô is attempting to convey. I sincerely hope you will go on to taste for yourself this wind of true freedom.