

CASE 19

**Unmon's "Mt. Sumeru"**



By Yamada Kōun

*Instruction:*

"I cherish the activities of Shōyō and Shinjō:  
All through their lives they pulled out nails and wedges from the people."  
Why did they sometimes open the door and present a bowl of glue,  
Or dig a pitfall on the road?  
Try to examine and see!

*Case:*

A monk asked Unmon. "Not a single thought arises: is there any fault or not?" Unmon said, "Mt. Sumeru."

*Verse:*

Not-a-single-thought-arising – Mt. Sumeru:  
The way Shōyō presents the Dharma is not stingy at all.  
If you can accept it, he gives it to you with both hands;  
If you have a doubt, it's so steep you can never climb it.  
The blue ocean is wide, the white clouds are calm;  
Do not put even a single hair in there.  
A fake cock crow can hardly deceive me;  
I will never let you cheat around and pass through the gate.

**On the Instruction:**

Unmon first practiced under Bokushū and then later under Seppō, under whose tutelage he "broke the bottom out of the bucket," attaining great enlightenment. We look now at the Instruction:

"I cherish the activities of Shōyō and Shinjō:

All through their lives they pulled out nails and wedges from the people."

Old Man Banshō, one of the co-authors of the *Book of Equanimity*, has taken this line from Engo's commentary to Case 6 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. Shōyō, which is located in Guangdong Prefecture, is the name of the place where Unmon Daishi lived. Thus, Unmon himself is known as Shōyō or Master Shōyō. Shinjō, located in Zhejiang Province, is the name of the place where Bokushū lived. Thus, Bokushū is known as Shinjō, the name of the place where he lived. The author of this line is saying that he really appreciates the brisk and light activity of Unmon and Bokushū. To say that they "pulled out nails and wedges from the people" means they deprived us of our concepts and thoughts. This means all the intellectual ideas that emerge from the illusion of dualistic opposition. Although it is intrinsically one, we cannot

bring ourselves to think so. When we are newborns, there is no separation into self and other, but as we grow up, there emerges such a distinction. Although this is an error, that is how we human beings are composed and there is nothing we can do about it. But these two masters pull out those nails and wedges. That is the work of Unmon, but not only Unmon. All Zen masters are engaged throughout their lives in this task of pulling out nails and wedges. They exert themselves to the utmost on our behalf.

Why did they sometimes open the door and present a bowl of glue,  
Or dig a pitfall on the road? Why would they want to open the door and present a bowl of glue? After all, you could get your hands stuck in it and not be able to free yourself. Why did they dig a pitfall in the road for unwary travellers to fall into? Actually they were trying in that way to save others. Unless they used such severe methods, they would not be able to pull out the nails and wedges of our delusive thoughts. It was out of their great compassion and kindness that they used all manner of methods to free us.

Try to examine and see! An example of such activity will now be given and we are exhorted to look carefully.

**On the Case:**

A monk asked Unmon. "Not a single thought arises: is there any fault or not?" Unmon said, "Mt. Sumeru." A monk came to Unmon and asked, "When not a single thought arises, is there anything wrong with that or not?" He seems to be talking about a state of not a single thought. In Hinayana Buddhism there is evidently a practice of meditating to reach a state of no-consciousness. If you are in such a state, you experience no suffering, thus allowing you to escape from suffering for a time. It is said that Shakyamuni Buddha taught such a technique.

However, I do not believe myself that this is what is meant by the monk's question. After all, the monk was in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. In Mahayana Buddhism, this would be referring to the true self or essential nature. When we see the phenomenal world from that standpoint, although there are phenomena they are all empty. We use the expression "*aru ga mama no aritsubure*" (precisely in its being it is destroyed) to refer to that. I have the feeling that this is what the monk is contemplating when he asks his question. He is asking, if you are in such a state, is there still something wrong? This is how his words should be understood.

Viewing things from the essential world one has realized, you can say, that no matter what you say and no matter what you think, the content is totally empty and not two. I feel the monk has thoroughly realized this world in asking his question. At any rate, because he was a monk in the Mahayana tradition, he would not be speaking about an unconscious state. Those of you who are practicing with the koan Mu continue that practice. You are told by the teacher to forget yourself in that practice. You forget yourself in giving your undivided attention to Mu. This could be seen as "not a single thought arises." Dōgen Zenji uses the expression *hishiryō* (not thinking) in referring to this. I feel it is about such matters that the monk is asking about.

You become the reality of *hishiryō* itself. He asks if there is anything wrong with that. If you are still thinking in terms of "not a single thought arises" or asking whether there is anything wrong with that, it is no longer truly "not a single thought arises." If you have completely forgotten yourself in the practice of Mu, you would have no time to think of such matters, no space for thinking would be left.

I feel this koan has two main points. The first point is how to view these words "not a single thought arises." The second is the statement "Mt. Sumeru," which is the name of a mountain that often appears in Zen texts. Mt. Sumeru is the name of a huge mountain in the middle of the universe, according to ancient Indian cosmology. Surrounding the mountain are

the earth ring (or metal ring), water ring and wind ring in that order. Around it the nine mountains and eight seas are interwoven with each other. Located on the outermost sea are four islands, with human beings living on the southern island, which is known as Jambudvīpa. If you gather one thousand of such universes you get the “small thousand universes.” And if you multiply that by one thousand, you obtain “middle thousand universes.” And if you then multiply that by one thousand you obtain “great thousand universes.”

To return to the monk’s question: “Not a single thought arises: is there any fault or not?” In reply, Unmon says, “Mt. Sumeru” (Japanese: *shumisen*). Why does he say that? According to one commentator he is saying: “Isn’t even asking like that a concept. Your fault is as large as Mt. Sumeru.” However, Unmon’s true feeling was not there. He was not talking in such logical terms. When he says “Mt. Sumeru” (*shumisen*) he is producing the essential world.

This monk is not seeing his true self. Instead, he is thinking all sorts of things when he asks his question. But Unmon’s reply is presenting the true fact itself directly. That is how you have to see this koan.

From the Mahayana Zen standpoint, it is “*aru ga mama no aritsubure*” (precisely in its being it is totally destroyed). Feeling happy. This is a thought or feeling, but its content is empty. It is changing moment by moment. The same holds for feeling sad. Its content is empty. It is a moment-by-moment continuum. That is how you have to see “not a thought arises.” When you say, “not a thought arises” (*fu ki ichi nen*), that is the complete revelation of the true fact. There is just that. When you say Mt. Sumeru (*shumisen*), how is it different? This is what the Verse is taking about, which was written by Wanshi Zenji.

### **On the Verse:**

Not-a-single-thought-arising – Mt. Sumeru: This actually concludes the teishō; the rest is just the reverberation.

The way Shōyō presents the Dharma is not stingy at all. Unmon says, “Mt. Sumeru!” It might appear that it is not enough to understand, that he is mincing words and being stingy. But far from being stingy, he has said it all.

If you can accept it, he gives it to you with both hands. Not only does he give it to you with both hands, he gives it with his entire mouth, with his eyes, with his feet.

If you have a doubt, it’s so steep you can never climb it.

If you start to think about it, you will never be able to climb the steep Mt. Sumeru. If you just think about Mt. Sumeru, not really realizing, it is like “silver mountains and iron walls,” to use a Zen expression. There is nothing you can hold onto.

*The blue ocean is wide, the white clouds are calm.* You can see this as producing the world of Mt. Sumeru (*shumisen*) or as the state of consciousness of a person who has realized that world. The blue sea stretches out endlessly, with white clouds floating in the sky. In addition to being the true aspect of the universe, you can see it as presenting the state of consciousness of the person who has realized that, especially the consciousness of Unmon.

Do not put even a single hair in there. Avoid putting even a single fine herein there. You have to realize it on the spot. If even the slightest thought appears, it is already gone.

A fake cock crow can hardly deceive me;

I will never let you cheat around and pass through the gate. Although the words might seem difficult to understand, in simple terms he is saying that he will never be fooled by anyone. Even if you appear before me with a knowing look on your face, I will not be fooled. I will not let you through my barrier.

The line about the “fake cock” has a story behind it. The *Book of History* (Shi-ji) tells the story of a man named Meng Changjun, an extremely bright statesman from the kingdom of Ji who served the government of the country of Chin. Because he was so outstanding he eventually became a minister, and had many retainers, including those with various skills and

abilities. One of them told the king of Chin that Meng Changjun, although a very outstanding man, was actually from the kingdom of Ji and could not help considering the interests of his native land. “You are about to make him minister,” they told the king, “but in time he will no doubt be considering more the fortune of Ji and not that of Chin.” Meng Changjun was caught and thrown into prison, and was about to be executed.

However, the king of Chin had a princess who had been close to Meng Changjun, and who secretly made a request to him. She had heard that he had a cloak made of white rabbit fur and wanted it. She told him that if he could give it to her, she would beg for his life before the king. However, that coat had already been presented to the king as a present. Nevertheless, among Meng’s retainers was a man who could imitate a dog in then stealing into rooms. He entered the king’s room, making believe he was a dog, and was able to steal the coat and give it to the princess, who arranged for Meng Changjun’s getaway.

With his retainers in tow, Meng Changjun escaped and came to a barrier in an enclosed valley. The gate to the barrier would only open when the cock crowed at dawn, since the crowing of the cock was understood as a signal to open the gate. However, among the retainers of Meng Changjun was a man who could imitate the crowing of a cock and who did so. All the roosters in the surrounding area began to crow, so that the gate was opened and Meng Changjun and his retainers were able to escape.

Sei Shōnagon, authoress of *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, wrote the following famous verse:

*The rooster's crowing  
In the middle of the night  
Deceived the hearers;  
But at Osaka's gateway  
The guards are never fooled.  
Yo o komete  
Tori no sorane wa  
Hakaru tomo  
Yo ni Osaka no  
Seki wa yurusaji*

This poem is evidently based on the Chinese story related above. To return to the final line of today’s Verse:

I will never let you cheat around and pass through the gate. In other words, I will never carelessly leave the gate open to let you pass through. You will not get past my gate! Let me hear the true crowing of the rooster!