

CASE 52

Sôzan's "Dharma-body"



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Instruction:

Those who have intelligence can understand through metaphors.
If you reach a point where no comparisons or analogies work,
How do you explain to other people?

Case:

Sôzan asked Elder Toku, "The true Dharma-body of Buddha is like the empty sky. It manifests its form corresponding to things – just like the moon on the water."¹ How do you explain the principle of this corresponding?" Toku said, "It is like a donkey looking into a well." Sôzan said, "You put it in a nice way, but you were able to say only eighty percent." Toku said, "How about you, Master?" Sôzan said, "It is like a well looking at a donkey."

Verse:

The donkey looks into the well, the well looks at the donkey.
Wisdom embraces all, without anything outside it;
Purity prevails, with excessive abundance.
Who can discern the seal behind the elbow?
No books are stocked in the entire house.
With no thread in the loom the shuttle does the work,
Beautiful patterns, vertical and horizontal,
With exquisite designs, appearing of themselves.

On the Instruction:

Those who have intelligence can understand through metaphors. This koan is not that long as koans go, but it is still full of savor and meaning. The Soto School of Zen gets its names from the two masters Sôzan and Tôzan. Actually it would be better to refer to it as

¹ A quotation from a sutra.

the Tōsō School, since Tōzan was the master of Sōzan, but he takes second place in the school's name. Nevertheless it's often been said over the centuries that the name Sōtō is something of a misnomer. And there are still others who say that the Sō in the name is not a reference to Sōzan but rather to Sōkei, that is, the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng (Japanese: Enō). I don't really know why Sōzan comes before Tōzan in the school's name. At any rate, this koan deals with the Sōzan who was the dharma successor of Tōzan, in other words Sōzan Honjaku Daishi. He became a monk at age 19 and received the precepts at age 25. He then went to practice under Tōzan Gohon Daishi with whom he had various exchanges. Tōzan readily saw that the young man was quite promising and saw to it that he practiced under his tutelage. One day, Sōzan suddenly appeared at the door to Tōzan's hut and asked permission to leave the temple. Tōzan asked him, "Where are you going?" In reply, Sōzan said, "I am going to the place that never changes." Tōzan parried with, "If the place is unchanging, how can you go?" He is saying that coming and going are strange words for a place that never changes. In reply, Sōzan said, "Going itself is unchanging." It was then that Tōzan approved his realization. As some of you might know, the place that does not change is your own true self; it is the essential world. This essential self is unchanging. The reason is because it is empty. Most people have not realized this emptiness and have some concept of emptiness when you speak about it. Yasutani Roshi often used the expression "the acrobatics of emptiness" (*kokū no karuwaza*) to refer to it. You might then assume that there is something like "emptiness" as a separate entity engaged in acrobatics. Another person spoke in terms of "Mr. Emptiness" (Karappo-san), but here too, you might have some concept of a separate entity of emptiness, which would be far from the truth. Just this sitting, just this standing is simultaneously empty. It has no content. Unless you clearly grasp this fact you cannot be said to have truly realized this world. Nevertheless, we humans always have all sorts of ideas and concepts. We're like animals that have concepts as our food. But the real fact cannot be reached by any concept. Although comparison won't lead to true understanding, if we make a comparison we could use Yasutani Roshi's oft-cited example of drinking tea. There is no way you can communicate the taste of the tea just drunk to another person. The taste of the tea is a fact; it is not a concept. No matter how many thousands of words you use, there is no way you can communicate the taste of the tea you have just drunk to another person. It exhausts and transcends all concepts. Realizing your true self is realizing it directly and not as a concept. It's just like the tea. You have to drink it yourself to know the taste. No matter how you might try to bring people to drink the tea, they have to drink it on their own. Zen is also a matter of trying somehow to bring people to a grasp of their true self, taking all sorts of means to achieve that goal. Today's koan is a good example. It transcends and exhausts all concepts. It wants to bring this fact home to you somehow, taking all sorts of pains and making all sorts of efforts to achieve that. There is the saying, "knowing oneself that the water is warm or cold," which refers to this fact. Nevertheless, self-approved experiences won't do. That's just a kind of false pride. I'm sure that even Shakyamuni Buddha never became proud of his own experience. All the more so was that the case for people of later ages,

including the great Zen personages of the past. All of them maintained an attitude of “not yet, not yet,” goading themselves on to further practice. What did they mean by “not yet”? It means that there are still concepts and thoughts remaining. It means not seeing clearly enough the world of emptiness. When we speak of the world of emptiness there is truly not a single thing, but more in the sense that this world cannot be grasped by our senses. You can speak in terms of eyes, ears and nose, or in terms of taste and touch, all the sense organs and the objects of sensation. Or you can make judgments in terms of good and bad. This all has to do with the six senses. But the true fact cannot be grasped by the senses and is thus called “empty.” It cannot be caught in the net of our senses, and yet it contains limitless capabilities. This is your true self. In order to express this aspect of containing limitless capabilities I often use the example of our own mind. Our mind extends out in the entire universe. It can be called the true self or the true fact. You can think of your own mind as the entrance to that world for the time being at least. Actually, that mind extends out limitlessly. Because we consider the mind to be something contained in our body, you can think of that mind as the entrance to the actual world, the essential world. The true world is the world of emptiness, but although it is empty it has limitless capabilities. Because the ordinary mind is the entrance to that world of emptiness, it has the same characteristics. The mind is empty; it has no form and cannot be produced for inspection. When asked to produce something, I can only show my hand or my foot. I can produce anything to which I can attach the prefix “my.” But I cannot produce THAT ONE, which the word “my” implies. There is no method of doing it. The mind has no shape or shadow, but nevertheless has limitless abilities. It can think, it can imagine, it can do anything. It’s our task to grasp that mind directly. In most cases, however, we assume some intellectual idea to be true realization. That’s my reason for saying that true Buddhism is on the verge of dying out. Let us look now at the Instruction.

Those who have intelligence can understand through metaphors. Of people in our midst, many are those with enough intelligence to understand it in terms of a metaphor. The *Lotus Sutra*, for example, abounds in such metaphors and parables. For example, there is the parable of the burning house of the three worlds. Anyone with a bit of intelligence can understand such parables. Today’s case also contains a metaphor, comparing our true nature to something in the everyday world. I was just talking now about the true self and saying that the purpose of Zen is to realize directly what your true self is. As you know, that true self cannot be expressed in any metaphor, no matter how skilled it may be. The only way is to directly realize the fact on your own. It’s the same as the taste of the tea. Some commentaries see “those with intelligence” (*uchi*) as referring to bodhisattvas. But even without going so far in our interpretation, we can say that people with normal intelligence can understand a parable or metaphor. Nevertheless, it’s still a case of intellectual understanding and cannot be called understanding through experience.

If you reach a point where no comparisons or analogies work,
How do you explain to other people? Recall the lines from the *Jeweled Mirror*

Samadhi (Hôkyôzammai): *Taken as similar, they are not the same.*

In other words, you can't express it in terms of comparisons. The Instruction asks us what we should then do. How are you going to bring others to an understanding of that which cannot be explained in terms of words or comparisons? The Main Case is now presented for perusal and we are asked to examine it carefully. Today's koan contains such a metaphor, which is still within the range of understanding. But what about the place where even analogies are transcended? You can think of this as preparation for dealing with this koan in the dokusan room.

On the Case:

Sôzan asked Elder Toku, "The true Dharma-body of Buddha is like the empty sky. It manifests its form corresponding to things – just like the moon on the water." The word "elder" (shôza) is used in the sense of "senior monk" (jôza). One day Sôzan posed this question to Elder Toku. When he says "just like the moon on the water," he means that the moon is reflected perfectly in any water body, from the smallest puddle to the largest lake or ocean, and is reflected according to the size and shape of the water body. He compares our essential nature to the moon reflected on the water. But when you say it like that, it becomes two: the moon and the water. Actually, however, the true fact is one. As I said above, the goal of Zen is to grasp the true self. When you say "true self" (shin no jiko) it has a subjective ring, and when you say "true fact" (shin no jujitsu) it has an objective ring, but they are actually one and the same. So, it's a matter of grasping that world of oneness. Our true self and the world of oneness are just two names for the same reality. That does not mean that there is some special entity of "oneness" found within your body somewhere. In order for it to be one, the content has to be empty. Only then can it be one. As I'm always saying when I compare it to life, from the phenomenal standpoint I have two hands, a left and a right hand. But from the standpoint of my life, those two hands live the same single life. From the standpoint of life, there is neither left nor right. Life has neither form nor shape. Where is life? If you try to produce it, you might be able to produce "my foot" or "my hand." But how do you produce that one implied by the possessive "my"? If you truly grasp it, you realize it is one, this one life. The same goes for mind (kokoro). Here we view it in terms of the water and the moon. Just as the moon is reflected in the water, my dharma body appears in response to form. That might seem to be two different things, the true dharma body of the Buddha and things. If we consider it in terms of something manifesting the true dharma body, we have two things. But actually it is one. In showing it here (just this!), there is the true dharma body of the Buddha itself. You have to clearly grasp this. Gutei Oshô, whatever he was asked about Buddhism, would always stick up a finger. This completely exhausts the entire universe. It is not that the finger somehow "expresses" the true dharma body of the Buddha. That finger itself is the true dharma body. That's a major difference. So, when you speak in terms of something being "like" something, you end up with two. You only understand it intellectually and remain unable to savor the true

taste. What is the true dharma body of the Buddha? A bit of explanation may be necessary for a correct understanding. These words “the true Dharma-body of Buddha is like the empty sky” are originally found in the sutra known as the *Suvarāprabhāsa-sūtra* (Konkōmyōkyō, Golden Light Sutra). That sutra contains many gathas in which the four guardian deities praise the Buddha. In one of those gathas, it is said that the true dharma body of the Buddha is like the empty sky. People who are familiar with statements from my books will know that I often express it in terms of a fraction, in which the denominator is empty infinity. You can consider that denominator as the true dharma body. In Buddhism this is known as the three kinds of three treasures, which can be seen as the fundamental philosophy of Buddhism. The entire universe is explained in terms of the three kinds of three treasures. In order to describe Buddhism itself, the universe itself is described. The Three Treasures are Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And there are three kinds of Three Treasures: The Absolute Three Treasures, The Revealed Three Treasures, and the Maintaining Three Treasures. The Absolute Three Treasures are the Three Treasures of the world of oneness. These are the three treasures of the world of oneness, which transcends the world of duality. They are the three treasures of the absolute world. Because it would be too difficult to attempt to describe all three kinds of three treasures, I will limit the discussion to the absolute three treasures. Since there are three kinds of three treasures, there are a total of nine altogether. The most fundamental is the absolute three treasures: the Buddha of the Absolute Three Treasures, the Dharma of the Absolute Three Treasures, and the Sangha of the Absolute Three Treasures. The fundamental reality of the universe is explained in this way. To realize the Absolute Three Treasures and to reveal this in one’s own body is what is known as the Buddha of the Revealed Three Treasures. That is Shakyamuni Buddha. The Buddha of the Maintaining Three Treasures is the Buddha who guards and maintains that. There are many such Buddhas, being all those who have passed away. If you consider this world and the other world as one, you can say that those Buddhas truly exist, even though we cannot see them. The word “maintaining” (jūji) in Maintaining Three Treasures is said in the sense of maintaining and keeping them forever. In that sense, the wooden images or pictures of the Buddha are all the Buddha of the Maintaining Three Treasures. It would take a great deal of time to treat this subject in detail. Those who are examining koans with me in the dokusan room examine these Three Kinds of Three Treasures as the final stage of koan study. What we want to examine here, however, is what the Buddha of the Absolute Three Treasures is. This is emptiness that simultaneously contains unlimited capabilities. That is no other than the Buddha of the Absolute Three Treasures. And that is the true dharma body of the Buddha. You can take this as meaning that your mind extends out to fill the entire universe. There is nothing at all, in the sense that we cannot see it. And precisely there appear all things in the phenomenal world. The phenomenal world comes into existence as a result of the law of causation. This is the Dharma of the Absolute Three Treasures. What’s more, the Buddha of the Absolute Three Treasures and the Dharma of the Absolute Three Treasures are empty and completely one. Although we make a division into two for the sake of

explanation, they are actually one. The word “sangha” means an aggregate or sum. Recall the words of the koan: “The true Dharma-body of Buddha is like the empty sky. It manifests its form corresponding to things – just like the moon on the water.” Just as the moon is reflected in any water body—even the smallest puddle—so each thing manifests the true dharma body of the Buddha.

“How do you explain the principle of this corresponding?” Sōzan asks how this corresponding takes place. He wants to know what that means when we say that that true dharma body of the Buddha manifests its form corresponding to things.

Toku said, “It is like a donkey looking into a well.” A donkey lacks human powers of understanding or judgment. When it chances to look into the well, that no doubt makes an impression. But the well has no life. There is nothing living there. It’s just like the donkey looking into the well. You look and there it is. That’s the true dharma body of the Buddha. That’s how it manifests its form corresponding to things, he says. That’s an interesting way of expressing it.

Sōzan said, “You put it in a nice way, but you were able to say only eighty percent.” Zen masters never give a perfect score, and there are many examples of this in the koans. This is said in order to prompt further practice. Even though you might think you have realized it, it’s still not enough. But to be able to give such a reply as Toku is quite a feat. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi says that the two men are “even-steven,” so wonderful is this reply. But Sōzan does not approve completely.

Toku said, “How about you, Master?”

Sōzan said, “It is like a well looking at a donkey.” A donkey is a living creature. It may not have human powers of judgment, but it can see. A well is an inanimate thing. To say it is like a “well looking at a donkey” is a truly wonderful reply. As I mentioned before, you have to present the fact in the dokusan room. In his teisho to this koan, Yasutani Roshi says, “it is like the echo when you call out in the mountains.” If you were to use words to explain it, you could say that there is just seeing, with no seeing subject and no seen object. There is no hearing subject or heard object. Usually we assume that there is the one seeing and the thing seen, or the one hearing and the thing heard. Then there are two things. This is the world of everyday thinking, and not the real world. The interesting thing about this reply could perhaps be explained as follows. There is just the donkey seeing, with nothing seen. It is just seeing without a seen subject. This might help to understand it a bit more, at least intellectually. But what about “it is like a well looking at a donkey”? Here there is neither the one seeing nor the one seen. It is the place where neither subject or object exist. There is neither one who hears nor something that is heard. There is neither subject nor object. This might help to understand it a bit better. At any rate, there is a certain amount of difference between the two answers. Whether that difference amounts to 20 points or not is another matter. I myself, in response to Sōzan’s statement it is like a well looking at a donkey,” would like to say, “You were able to say only eighty percent.” I wonder what he would then say in reply.

On the Verse:

The donkey looks into the well, the well looks at the donkey. The Verse reproduces word-for-word the statements in the Main Case.

Wisdom embraces all, without anything outside it;

Purity prevails, with excessive abundance. The “wisdom” is the wisdom of our true self. It’s no mistake in calling it the wisdom of Buddha, an intrinsic wisdom and not post-priori wisdom. This wisdom “embraces all, without anything outside it.” It contains the entire universe, without anything lacking. There is nothing outside that wisdom. “Purity” means the “pure dharma body” without a single stain or blemish. The original text speaks in terms of dipping in water. The entire universe is dipped in water. The universe is vast indeed, but is nevertheless said to be limited, according to Albert Einstein. The same character in the original can mean either to “to steep or dip” or “to insert,” and the second meaning might be easier to understand. Even when all things are inserted, there is still left over. These two lines are saying basically the same thing. The reality of our true self is limitless.

Who can discern the seal behind the elbow? In other words, we are endowed with it from the very beginning: Buddha nature or the true self. It is the virtue with which we are intrinsically endowed. This is what is meant by the “seal behind the elbow.” “Seal” means the “seal of the Buddha mind,” it means the essential self of all persons. This true self embraces all but there is still abundance. Each one of us is intrinsically endowed with it.

To say “who can discern the seal behind the elbow” means that it is intrinsically not necessary to bring others to a realization of it and to thus transmit the seal of the Buddha mind. There is actually a story behind this line of the Verse. The *Book of Serenity* is full of such references to ancient legends and the like, making it difficult to understand at times. This story originally appears in the Chinese classic known as the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Chinese: Shi-ji). Zhao Jianzi said to his children, “On top of Mount Chang I have hidden a precious talisman for behind the elbow. The one who gets it first will be rewarded.” The expression “behind the elbow” is a reference to our true nature. There might be those without a hand, but basically everyone has an elbow. A “seal behind the elbow” means that the seal of the jewel has been hidden. Everyone hurried merrily up the mountain to look for the jewel, but they were unable to find it and returned home empty-handed. Only Wuxu (who was evidently Zhao Jianzi’s son) said that he had found that seal. Upon being asked what the seal was, Wuxu said that, when you climb to the top of Mount Chang, you can see entire territory of Daizhou in a single glance. Daizhou was probably the territory belonging to Zhao Jianzi. I would imagine it was about the size of three modern counties (gun). Zhao Jianzi thought the boy was clever indeed and transferred responsibility of the family to him. The “seal behind the elbow” is a reference to our true self, something we all possess. Everyone possesses the seal of the Buddha mind or Buddha-nature. There is no need to distribute it to anyone. This is what is meant by the query in the verse: Who can discern the seal behind the elbow?

No books are stocked in the entire house. These are reportedly the words of Tôzan Gohon Daishi. For the most part, anything written in a book is not the real fact. It is an aggregate of concepts. As I just mentioned, there is no reality in concepts. Thus, no matter how many books you read, you will not grasp the true fact as a result. This was what Tôzan was saying with his statement. People who have a lot of books tend to be half-baked in terms of their eye of satori, while people without books are in many cases outstanding Zen persons. When we look at the Zen records, we see those with outstanding literary gifts and those completely lacking such gifts. Because China was originally a land where writing was held in high esteem, there were several Zen patriarchs who were outstanding writers. Unmon Daishi, for example, was a man of great literary gifts. The *Record of Unmon* could be said to be filled with words and phrases that sparkle with a special light. Setchô Zenji, the compiler of the *Blue Cliff Record*, and Wanshi Zenji, the compiler of the *Book of Equanimity*, were similar in that respect. In more recent times there was Kyodô Zenji, the author of the Zen work known as the *Kyodôroku* (Record of the Empty Hall). In Japan, Hakuin Zenji and others excelled in writing poems and other texts. On the other hand, there were other great Zen personages who completely lacked such literary talents. An example is Jôshû Oshô. Then there was Hôgen Oshô, a person I greatly admire, but also lacking such a literary bent. Another Japanese master was Bassui Zenji, who forbade his students to have books of poetry or literature on their desks, finding them to have no relation to the pursuit of the Way. Dôgen Zenji was not, in my opinion, a great literary figure, although he was a great philosophical mind. He was rare among the Japanese in his outstanding ability to consider things philosophically. But we look in vain for outstanding poems from his pen. That's my reason for saying that he was not an exceptional literary talent. After all, it's Dôgen Zenji's outstanding philosophical and speculative powers that make him great. Persons of poetic or literary gifts must be warned not to cover up the fact with fine literary expressions. Hakuin Zenji's writings have great power, whether it be the *Yasenkanna* (A Chat on a Boat in the Evening) or the *Orategama* (The Embossed Tea Kettle). Although these works are written with great poetic power, unless the person reading them has a clear eye, he or she is likely to be tricked. That might seem like a hard judgment, but not infrequently one is dazzled by the sheer force of the literary language. When Tôzan Zenji confirmed inka (seal of approval) on Sôzan Zenji, he warned him that there were three things required in discerning whether a Zen person was genuine or not in this "age of decline."

The Master said, "In this Dharma-ending age people possess much idle knowledge. If you want to distinguish true from false, there are three types of defilement to be aware of. The first is defiled views. This is said to be not departing from a particular fixed view about the potential for enlightenment and thus falling into a sea of poison. The second is defiled emotions. This is said to be entrapment in preferences and repulsions, thus having one's perspective become one-sided and rigid. The third is defiled language. This is said to be mastering trivia and losing sight of the essential. The potential for enlightenment is thoroughly obscured. You

should understand clearly that a disciple whose understanding is muddled and is going round and round in circles has not done away with these three types of defilement.”

If one is all too gifted with words, one is likely to lose sight of the main matter and not know where things go. He warns us to not always take the words of a gifted speaker or writer at face value, because there is an inherent danger. In that respect, the writings of Bassui Zenji lack all decorative elements or special forms of expression. When you read the writings of Hakuin Zenji, you find them filled with felicitous forms of expression. Of course, they are also the writings of an outstanding Zen master. Nevertheless, you must keep in mind Tōzan’s warning about “defiled language” in reading those works. That is all I want to say today.