

CASE 56

***Misshi and the White Rabbit***



By Yamada Kôun

*Instruction:*

Even if you sank forever in hell, you would not look for the liberation of the saints;

Devadatta enjoyed the bliss of the third dhyana heaven.  
amid uninterrupted hell.

Uddaka-Ramaputta fell from the zenith of heaven  
down into the body of an otter.

Just tell me, where is the gain or loss?

*Case:*

When Uncle Misshi<sup>1</sup> and Tôzan were walking together, they saw a white rabbit run by in front of them. Misshi said, "How swift!" Tôzan said, "In what way?" Misshi said, "It is just like a person in white clothes<sup>2</sup> being venerated as a prime minister." Tôzan said, "You are such an elderly and respectable man, and still you say something like that?" Misshi said, "Then how about you?" Tôzan said, "A noble of an ancient house is temporarily fallen into poverty."

*Verse:*

Matching strength with snow and frost;  
Walking smoothly upon elevated clouds.  
Xiahui left his country;  
Xiangru passed the bridge.  
Xiao and Cao's strategy established the Han Dynasty;  
The body and mind of Chao and Xu wanted to evade Emperor Yao.  
People are disturbed by favor and disgrace – find deep faith in yourself.  
The traces of the true heart get mingled and mixed with those of fishermen and woodcutters.

<sup>1</sup> Sômitsu Zenji, uncle to Tôzan Zenji. "Misshi" literally means "Master Mitsui."

<sup>2</sup> I.e., a commoner, or a person without any social status.

***On the Instruction:***

Even if you sank forever in hell, you would not look for the liberation of the saints;

Devadatta enjoyed the bliss of the three-Dhyana-Heaven

amid uninterrupted hell. These are bold words indeed! They were written by Sekitō Kisen Zenji, author of the *Shinjinmei*. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi refers to that as the “golden phrase and golden word” (zengen-zenku) of Sekitō Musai Daishi (Sekitō’s posthumous name). “Golden word” originally means the words from the lips of Shakyamuni Buddha.

The “saints” (shosei) means the Buddhas of the three worlds, which mean countless Buddhas. The “liberation of the saints” means deliverance from all suffering. To “sink forever into hell” means that, even if I were to fall into hell forever, it’s all right with me. I would never seek liberation of the Buddhas or attempt to become liberated or free. Some of you here today are Christians. In Christian terms it would mean you don’t care a whit about getting into heaven. “Heaven? That’s not for me! I prefer to remain forever in this world filled with suffering and pain.” It’s a truly religious person who can say such a thing! This is no other than saying that your true nature is Buddha itself. Unless you clearly realize this reality you will not be able to speak these words of the Introduction. In Christian terms you could say that, unless you clearly realize that everywhere is heaven, you will not be able to say this. As long as you are clinging to Buddha and seeking salvation you still do not know your true self. That’s because you’re sticking to concepts. You think that Buddha is something august and special outside of you. But when you truly realize, you realize that you are smack in the middle of paradise wherever you are. What is there to seek otherwise? These words in today’s koan are teaching us this fact. In that sense they are precious and wise words indeed. It is only when you clearly realize that everywhere is heaven that you become able to say this. In that sense, these words have a very deep significance. There is the Japanese expression *bonshō* (ordinary and holy). This would lead us to believe there is a clear separation between saints and ordinary people, or to think that heaven exists separate from this world. I am not that familiar with Christianity, but if you assume that there is a hell, a world of demons in opposition to heaven, you are greatly in error. If that were the case, we could no longer speak in terms of an all-knowing and all-powerful God. Where is the Kingdom of God? It is right in the middle of hell. Are you truly able to respond like this? If not, then you are no Christian in my opinion. Since I’m not a professional on this matter, I might be speaking out of turn.

Devadatta enjoyed the bliss of the three-Dhyana-Heaven amid uninterrupted hell. This puts the matter into even more concrete terms. Devadatta was the Buddha’s cousin. Whatever he did, he was no match for the Buddha, so that he was extremely jealous of the Buddha. Whether they wrestled with each other or engaged in swordsmanship, he was no match for the Buddha. In his teisho on this case, Yasutani Roshi says that Devadatta

and Shakyamuni had always been bitter enemies. At least that's how things looked on the surface. When they wrestled with each other, he lost to Shakyamuni. He also lost out to him in finding a wife. He became a disciple of the Buddha with plans to destroy the sangha from the inside, but those plans were shattered. He then decided to kill Shakyamuni and ended up shedding the blood of the Buddha.

One day, Shakyamuni Buddha was passing by the foot of a mountain, a fact known to Devadatta. Devadatta was waiting on the top of the mountain and caused a huge boulder to thunder down the mountainside. Fortunately, Shakyamuni was only slightly injured on his foot by the boulder passing by. Being a person of great virtue, perhaps he was thus able to avoid any real calamity. At any rate, there had been no threat to his life. When someone of Shakyamuni Buddha's outstanding virtue is injured to the point of bloodshed, it is known as "shedding the blood of the Buddha," a most serious offense. As punishment, Devadatta fell into Avīci hell, the hell without respite. People were sentenced to fall into this hell if they committed any of the Five Great Offenses. As I will mention later, it is different from other hells in that there is no end, no respite to the suffering. For example, you might take a cigarette break after working your hardest. But in Avīci hell there is no such a break from your suffering. This is the hell that Devadatta fell into. But Shakyamuni took pity on him and asked Ananda to go visit him there in hell to ask how he was doing. In reply, Devadatta scolded Ananda, saying, "I have no need of your pity! Being here is the subtle rapture of the third dhyana heaven." In Buddhism there are many heavens, including the "third dhyana heaven" (Japanese: sanzenten) mentioned here. It is common to speak in terms of transmigration through the three worlds. The three worlds are the heavens of the three worlds. The first of the three worlds is the world of desire; it is the world we live in. That world includes hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, angry beings, humans and heavenly beings. Heaven in the world of desire is different from heaven in the Christian tradition, being just one of the worlds belonging to the world of desire. The next of the three worlds is the world of color, the world of those who have left this world, and where there is only color and nothing else. This is the world in which you can obtain Zen samadhi power, the power of spiritual concentration, spiritual joy. This world of color includes four heavens: initial dhyana heaven, second dhyana heaven, third dhyana heaven and fourth dhyana heaven. The third dhyana heaven is the world referred to here. When Devadatta says that being in hell is like enjoying the pleasures of the third dhyana heaven he is saying basically the same thing as in this line of the Introduction: "Even if you sank forever in hell, you would not look for the liberation of the saints."

To enjoy life in the midst of greatest poverty: In this respect there was Yan-hui, the disciple of Confucius. It is said that he only had a cup of water and a bowl of rice, but still enjoyed the Way in perfect peace. Even Confucius was beside himself with admiration and said:

*Incomparable indeed was Hui!*

*A handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink,  
living in a mean street-*

*others would have found it unendurably depressing,  
but to Hui's cheerfulness it made no difference at all.  
Incomparable indeed was Hui!* (translation by Arthur Waley)

But sad to say, Yen Hui died early, and Confucius was beside himself with grief. Yen Hui was such a person. It all depends on your state of mind.

Uddaka-Ramaputta fell from the zenith of heaven

down into the body of an otter. Uddaka-Ramaputta had great spiritual powers that allowed him to make himself invisible and steal into the palace to do what he pleased. But he happened to touch the hand of one of the princesses, upon which he lost his powers, became visible and was taken captive. In that sense he was rather slipshod! Although he was caught, he was pardoned and regained his powers, after which he was born in the zenith of heaven (Bhava-agra). The Japanese version of the word, *uchōten*, is used in everyday language to express a state of ecstasy. In addition to the world of desire and world of color I mentioned above there is a third world known as the world of no-color. The lowest heaven in that world is the “void nature heaven.” Then comes the “form nature heaven” and the “no nature heaven.” The highest is the “zenith heaven” mentioned here. This is the heaven in which beings are happiest. It was in this heaven that Uddaka-Ramaputta was reborn. But it requires certain causes that result in one’s being born in that heaven. If you perform good deeds, you gradually climb up into ever happier heavens. But when that virtue is exhausted, you fall down into your original state. It is like shooting an arrow up into the air. At first it rises up in the heaven, but when its force is exhausted it falls again to the ground. Yōka Daishi speaks about this matter in his *Song on Realizing the Way* (Shōdōka). Thus, in order to be born in the zenith heaven there must be enough accumulated good causes. But then he fell and became an otter. He had fallen from the highest heaven to the level of beasts. This was reportedly because he had formerly wanted to catch fish. At any rate in Buddhism we say that good causes result in good effects, while bad causes result in bad effects. If you accumulate good causes, you will definitely become happy. Even Dōgen Zenji says, “those who do good inevitably ascend [into heaven].” If you do good you will definitely become happy; if you do evil you will inevitably fall. It’s rather frightening in its inevitability. But, to repeat, if you do good you will become increasingly happier. It’s like saving money. If you are frugal the money will naturally increase. But if you don’t save it up and simply spend it, you will become poorer and poorer, returning to your original state of pennilessness. If you look at the accounts statements of companies, you see that principle at work, even if it’s only money in that case. The results of causes are there in perfect clarity. It’s rather interesting to contemplate. The circumstances you are presently living in are like the statement of accounts for what you did in the past. The daily profits and losses of a company appear as a summary of past business operations. Just when you think you’ve reached the top, you fall to the bottom, or vice versa. The important thing to realize that, no matter what the circumstances, it is completely empty.

Just tell me, where is the gain or loss? As this shows, some people fall into the

hell of no respite while others climb up to the highest heaven only to fall again. Is it better to become happy or to become unhappy? Where is the gain or loss? We are then asked to look at the Main Case for an example of what this is talking about.

***On the Case:***

When Uncle Misshi and Tôzan were walking together, they saw a white rabbit run by in front of them. Tôzan, as you know, is Tôzan Gohon Daishi, the first patriarch of the Soto School. Uncle Misshi was so called because he was Tôzan's "uncle" in the dharma, which of course means that he was older in years than Tôzan. Once, when they were walking together, a white rabbit happened to flash by them.

Misshi said, "How swift!" Tôzan said, "In what way?" The ancients were always ready to begin a Zen exchange, a *mondo*.

Misshi said, "It is just like a person in white clothes<sup>3</sup> being venerated as a prime minister." "White clothes" is said here in terms of a commoner. He is saying in effect, "It's just like a commoner suddenly becoming prime minister." This statement is examined from various angles in the dokusan room. If I speak about it here, many will tell me I shouldn't speak so much about it in a teisho, but I can't help wanting to tell people. The rabbit is very fast, like a divine power. It's no mere human feat, more like a rabbit feat.

Tôzan said, "You are such an elderly and respectable man, and still you say something like that?" "Are you still talking in such terms" he seems to say, "as if an ordinary rabbit had become something that transcends a rabbit?" This would be like "looking for the liberation of the saints" as in the Introduction. An unenlightened person attains enlightenment and becomes a Buddha. Tôzan seems to be berating Uncle Misshi, asking why he's still talking such drivel at his age.

Misshi said, "Then how about you?" Tôzan said, "A noble of an ancient house is temporarily fallen into poverty." In reply to Uncle Misshi's statement, in which he praises the rabbit for "divine powers" far exceeding a rabbit, Tôzan says there is just the rabbit. I don't want to reveal too much here, as it might cause problems later in dokusan. Nevertheless, it's quite difficult to realize this koan. One way to say it is: I'm fine just as I am. All beings are intrinsically Buddha, and already possess the limitless and absolute from the very beginning. You temporarily fall into poverty, but that impoverished state is perfectly fine. If you stick to the belief that you need money or social status to become peaceful, it's not the real thing. You have to realize that you are alone honored under heaven, even if you fall and lose everything. This is what Tôzan is saying.

Nevertheless, I feel this case is talking mainly about everyday affairs, as is true for the Verse. To tell the truth, I don't find this koan particularly interesting. If it's going to be real koan for me, it has to express the ultimate truth. I would like such an exchange between Uncle Misshi and Tôzan to be expressing the true fact, the true aspect. I have no sympathy for koans

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., a commoner, or a person without any social status.

that simply talk in terms of everyday social life or like a book of ethics.

***On the Verse:***

Matching strength with snow and frost;

Walking smoothly upon elevated clouds. “Comparing the strength with snow and frost” is the aspect of falling. The poor must bear up with hardship and lack in making greatest efforts. That is the same as the life force in order to bear up under snow and frost. You must have the strength of a great tree to bear up. Even if you are poor, you bear up under it and overcome it. Just like a pine or oak overcomes the frost and snow, we must have the same strength. All of you are bearing up somehow in life. Even in difficult straits we have to bear up under hardship. That is our ordinary world on the one hand. On the other hand, there is the aspect of “walking smoothly upon elevated clouds.” This is the aspect of the “person in white clothes being venerated as a prime minister.” It is like walking at the zenith of satori. It is the world of “not a speck of cloud to obscure the view” as said in terms of a commoner becoming prime minister. There are these two aspects. In the world of phenomena we have to bear up under hardship, using all our strength. From the other aspect, it is completely empty. It was the Buddha and the saints who realized this empty nature. This verse is talking about these two aspects.

Xiahui left his country;

Xiangru passed the bridge. Xiahui lived in the kingdom of Chou at the time of Confucius. This very virtuous man had a willow tree growing next to his house and he obtained the name Liu Xiahui or “Willow Xiahui.” He was a public servant who heard petitions, something like a modern-day judge. Although he had done nothing wrong, he was expelled from this position three times due to false charges. One of his friends, unable to stand by and watch any longer, asked Xiahui why he remained in that kingdom although he had been driven from his post three times for no reason. He wanted to know why he didn’t seek a post in another country. But Xiahui, virtuous man that he was, said, “If you go the honest way in doing your work, you can expect to be fired three times.” Perhaps he has a point. He’s saying that if you simply do your work honestly without trying to curry favor with your superiors, it’s almost to be expected that you will not be liked by them and might lose your job three times. If it’s a matter of going somewhere else and not acting honestly, there’s no need to leave the country of my parents, he says. This is presented here in the Verse as an example of unfavorable circumstances, the world of failure.

Xiangru passed the bridge. This is also based on an old story which concerns Sima Xiangru. Although he later succeeded in life, he came from very humble surroundings. His father died when he was still a child, after which he was hired to feed the pigs on a farm. It was only after quite a while that he decided to go to the capital and make his fortune, and then left his homeland. When he was leaving his homeland he had to cross a bridge. He made a vow to himself before he left his homeland that he would cross this bridge again in a four-horse

carriage. Then he went to the capital, studied hard and became a success. And sure enough, he did actually return triumphantly to his homeland in a four-horse carriage. What is this referring to? You practice and gradually make progress along the Way. This would be like the statement of Uncle Misshi: It is just like a person in white clothes being venerated as a prime minister.

Xiao and Cao's strategy established the Han Dynasty; Xiao and Cao are also examples of individuals who made outstanding efforts and finally succeeded. This would be the case of the commoner becoming the prime minister. Their full names were Xiao He and Cao Can. Both of them were vassals of the Emperor Gaozu of Han and both lived in the country of ?Hai?. When the Emperor Gaozu of Han founded his kingdom, Xiao He came with 3,000 troops to aid him, and Cao Can also participated in what we could now call a revolution. They defeated the enemy and founded the Han Dynasty. For their services they were awarded prizes. Xiao He was praised for obtaining first place in terms of achievements, but Cao Can was fifth place. After that, Xiao He passed away but left a last will. He gave directions on how to maintain peace in Han, and it was Cao Can who received that mandate and exerted himself to maintain peace in Han. These would also be examples of the commoner becoming the prime minister. As I mentioned above, these verse lines are all referring to matters of ordinary life and thus not that interesting in terms of Zen.

The body and mind of Chao and Xu wanted to evade Emperor Yao. This line is also based on a traditional story. The Emperor Yao of the ancient past was a man of great virtue. Emperor Yao told Chao Fu that, when he grew old, he would cede the position of emperor to him. But Chao Fu, great individual that he was, felt he had heard a "dirty story" in receiving such flattery from the emperor. He promptly washed his ears in the Wei River. Living there was Xu Yu, an oxherd. When he brought his oxen to the river to water them and saw Chao Fu there, he asked the other man what he was doing. Chao Fu told him that he was washing his ears after hearing the Emperor's talk about bequeathing his reign to him, considering that a "dirty" story. Hearing this, Xu Yu said, "Is that so? Then I don't want to water my oxen in the water in which you have washed your ears." And he promptly took his oxen further upstream to water them. This is an example of "falling into poverty," to quote Tôzan, the opposite of the commoner becoming prime minister. And as I mentioned above, even though you fall into poverty, it does to disturb you. For example, how many people would be able to speak in terms of "dirtying their ears" if they were told that someone was going to give them a million dollars?

People are disturbed by favor and disgrace – find deep faith in yourself. This line evidently first appeared in the *Tao-te-ching* of Laozi. Favor and disgrace are said here in the sense of succeeding or failing. In both cases, people are surprised, whether they gain or lose. Such an attitude won't do. Whether you succeed or fail, your heart should not be perturbed. You have to deeply believe in yourself. If you become a millionaire, it shouldn't disturb you. You can clearly realize this if you have a clear realization of your own self-nature.

The traces of the true heart get mingled and mixed with those of fishermen and woodcutters. You can consider “traces” as meaning the traces of “delusion/enlightenment” or “ordinary/holy.” The deluded person practices and experiences enlightenment. But it won’t do to become proud of that experience. It’s a matter of erasing all traces of deluded or enlightened, ordinary or holy. So you forget the difference between delusion and enlightenment, and mingle with fishermen and woodcutters, with ordinary people. It is only then that you can understand the true feelings of that person. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi writes, “It is only from where there is no odor that the true feeling flows forth.” When it comes to the true heart of the true person, as long as there is a smell of saintliness or an odor of satori remaining, the heart of the true person or the true self will not appear. That said, it also won’t do to have the smell of the ordinary person. You have to practice until all such distinctions fade away, throwing everything away, I would say. You then mingle with fishermen and hunters and it is then that you truly understand their true feelings. Buddhism is not a matter of studying about Buddha. It is a matter of studying the true nature of the human being. So all of you should become true human beings. The true nature of such a true person is known as Buddha nature. Buddha nature is human nature. You don’t have to become a Buddha; it’s enough to become a true human being.