

CASE 83

Dōgo's Nursing the Ill



By Yamada Kōun

Instruction:

The whole body is ill: Vimalakirti can hardly be healed;
This grass can cure well: Manjusri employs it well.
What could be better than consulting a person of the highest realization
And obtaining the place of great peace?

Case:

Isan asked Dōgo, "Where have you come from?" Dōgo said, "I come from nursing the ill." Isan said, "How many people are ill?" Dōgo said, "There are people who are ill, and there are people who aren't ill." Isan said, "The one who is not ill – isn't that you, dear Chi¹?" Dōgo said, "Ill or not ill – it has nothing to do with 'that' matter. Say it quickly! Say it quickly!" Isan said, "Even if I may say it, there's no relation at all!"

Verse:

How could good medicine go through your mouth?
Even a genius doctor couldn't get hold of your hand.
Seemingly existent, that One isn't originally non-existent;
Totally empty, that One isn't originally existent.
Not perishing, it is born;
Not dying, it lives long.
Transcending the most ancient Buddha to come before him,
Walking alone after the "Kalpa of Emptiness²."
As for serenity, the firmament covers and the earth supports;
As for movement, the crow³ flies and the rabbit⁴ runs.

On the Instruction:

The whole body is ill: Vimalakirti can hardly be healed. Vimalakirti was a very rich man who lived at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha in India and about whom it is said that his dharma eye was in no way inferior to that of Shakyamuni. He is said to have

¹ Dōgo's full name was Dōgo Enchi. "Chi" is short for Enchi.

² According to the Buddhist cosmology, the universe repeats the four Kalpas: The Kalpa of Becoming, the Kalpa of Abiding, the Kalpa of Destruction and the Kalpa of Emptiness.

³ I.e., the sun.

⁴ I.e., the moon.

been a Buddha who appeared in the form of a layman in order to assist Shakyamuni in teaching the people. One day, Vimalakirti took ill. Shakyamuni said to the Bodhisattva Manjusri that he should go a pay a sick call on Vimalakirti. He had given the same order to a large number of his entourage prior to that, but all of them had refused, saying they lacked the qualifications to do so. When he asked why, they related how they had formerly disputed the dharma with Vimalakirti and were all defeated roundly. A great many thus said that it would be of no use for them to pay such a sick call on such a formidable contender. This discussion makes up part of the text known as the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. Finally Shakyamuni asked Manjusri to go. So Manjusri, accompanied by a large number of disciples, went to pay a sick call. Upon arriving, he asked Vimalakirti where he was ailing. In reply, Vimalakirti said, "Because all living beings are subject to illness, I am ill as well." This is different from ordinary illness. When it says in the Instruction that "the whole body is ill," it is not a question of where one is ill. It is saying that the entire body is illness. What can be done to cure such an illness? As Vimalakirti says, "When all living beings are no longer ill, my illness will come to an end." But what is their illness? Some might believe that they are not ill, and it's true enough that it's not an illness in the ordinary sense of something you could give a name to. From the standpoint of Shakyamuni and Vimalakirti, we are all ill. In other words, as I am always saying, the real world includes both the phenomenal world and the essential world, which are actually one and the same world. The truth of Buddhism is only that. I always use my hand to explain it. The back of my hand is the phenomenal world, the objective world that can be grasped with our senses. That is the back of the hand. But there is also a world of emptiness or nothingness. Let's consider that to be the palm of the hand. The world of ordinary common sense is only aware of the world of phenomena. They are not aware of this other world of emptiness, represented in this case by the palm of my hand. You can only realize this world by sitting in zazen and realizing enlightenment. As I am always saying, this world is you yourself. The same holds for all phenomena. The world of phenomena and the essential world are one. We are actually moving and working freely in this world. Most people are only familiar with the world of the back of the hand. The phenomenal world is the object of the natural sciences. The essential world of emptiness might be a theme in philosophy to think about. But philosophy is a conceptualization, because it is something we think about. To truly experience this world as a fact is only possible by sitting in zazen and realizing it in satori. Thus, the people who are only of the world of phenomena can all be said to be ill. Taking pity on the people suffering from this illness, Shakyamuni and Vimalakirti and Manjusri are wondering all the time what they can do to help them. There is nothing they can do but to bring people to an awareness of this world. They are always wondering how they can open the eyes of people to this reality. That is their only concern. The world of the Buddha and patriarchs is found here; it is their only job. To return to the first line of the Instruction:

The whole body is ill: Vimalakirti can hardly be healed; We all chant the Four Vows and say, "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them." Unless all sentient beings are saved, Vimalakirti will not be cured of his illness."

This grass can cure well: Manjusri employs it well. This line says that, if this grass is used, it can cure Vimalakirti's illness. What does this mean? This also appears in the Commentary to Case 87 of the *Blue Cliff Record*.

One day, Manjusri ordered Sudhana to pick medicinal herbs. Sudhana (Japanese: Zensai Dôji) often appears in the sutras. This youth travelled to the south where he met fifty-three outstanding Zen adepts and practiced under them. The story originally appears in the *Huayen (Kegon) Sutra*. Sudhana was the son of a very rich man. He summoned up a strong will and departed on this journey to the south of India, where he met with various masters, but remained unable to break through to enlightenment. Finally he went to Manjusri. Manjusri had him search for medicine. It was evidently medicinal herbs. Sudhana said, "Upon searching the great earth, I can find nothing that one could say is not medicine." Since he had been ordered to do so by Manjusri, he went in search of medicinal plants. He realized that everything he saw or heard was medicine, that there was not a single thing that was not

medicine. What medicine is this? It is the medicine of the essential world one with the phenomenal world. If you realize this world of zero, your sickness will definitely be cured. Sudhana, upon viewing all things, realized that they were all medicine. He then returned to Manjusri and told him that everything he picked up was medicine. He wanted to know what he should do. This is not limited to just grasses. A stone will do, or a grain of sand. They are all the essential world itself. Each single thing in the phenomenal world is one with the essential world. Thus a stone or any object will do. But Manjusri had asked him to pick grasses. So Sudhana plucked a blade of grass and brought it to him. Manjusri held it up and showed it to everyone, saying, "This medicine can kill people and it can also bring people to life." It is free to kill or give life. It can become poison or medicine. So even if it is given to Vimalakirti, he will be cured. The Instruction says that Manjusri knows well how to use that medicine. What is the herbal medicine? It is the world of your essential nature, the world of zero. It is one with the world of phenomena. So no matter what you show in the essential world, it is one with THAT. Unless you clearly see that world, you cannot understand this koan. Although Manjusri knows well how to use that medicinal herb, he does not do such a troublesome thing.

What could be better than consulting a person of the highest realization

And obtaining the place of great peace? He says that it is not necessary to look for medicine. This has its sights set on the Main Case, which we will now examine.

On the Case:

Isan asked Dôgo, "Where have you come from?" Dôgo said, "I come from nursing the ill." As you know, Isan was Isan Reiyu Zenji. Isan is the name of a famous mountain located in Changsha in Hunan Province. Isan Reiyu built a temple there known as Dôkei Temple. Because he was living in Isan, he took the name of the mountain as his own Zen name.

Dôgo Enchi Zenji was of the Soto School of Zen and a dharma heir of Yakusan Igen Zenji. In this koan Isan is checking Dôgo when he asks him where he is coming from. In reply, Dôgo says that he has come from nursing the sick.

Isan said, "How many people are ill?" Dôgo said, "There are people who are ill, and there are people who aren't ill." Although it might seem at first glance that they are simply passing the time of day in a friendly chat, each question is a severe examination. What is this talk about "sickness" after all? In his reply Dôgo says there are people who are ill and those who aren't ill.

Isan said, "The one who is not ill – isn't that you, dear Chi?" Chi is Dôgo himself, as it is short for Enchi, his second Zen name. The original text includes the word *Zuda*, which is a term of respect for a monk. There is also the expression *zuda-bukuro* to refer to the bag that monks carry. Isan asks if the one who is not ill is Dôgo himself.

The *Book of Serenity* includes a capping phrase after his question: *A pitfall for a tiger*. That means you have to watch out! But Dôgo does not fall into that trap.

Dôgo said, "Ill or not ill – it has nothing to do with 'that' matter. Say it quickly! Say it quickly!" What is "that matter"? It is the essential world. Your essential nature has no form; it has nothing to do with sickness or no sickness. The central point of this koan is whether you clearly see that or not. Having been up to now the one who is checked, Dôgo suddenly turns things around and becomes the examiner with, "Say it quickly! Say it quickly!" How does Isan respond?

Isan said, "Even if I may say it, there's no relation at all!" Why is there "no relation at all"? Because if you say something, it will definitely become a concept. Such concepts have nothing to do with our true self. When you practice zazen, you should leave off thinking about something and devote yourself single-mindedly to the practice of Mu. This is to sweep away all concepts. As long as there are concepts, it is not the real thing. For example, the idea of "sweet" is just a concept. If you are thinking about sweetness, a concept will attach.

But no matter how often you say “sweet”, it doesn’t become sweeter. The real sweetness can only be tasted directly. Concepts are not the true fact. The purpose of Zen is to have people come to a direct experience of the true fact. This is what is involved here, too. No matter what you say, it has nothing to do with THAT. When Isan says, “Even if I may say it, there’s no relation at all!”, he is very clear about that, as one would expect from him.

On the Verse:

How could good medicine go through your mouth? What is “good medicine”? This, too, is referring to our essential nature. It is the world of the palm of the hand, to use my simile again. That good medicine is zero, it is void. That is why it can never go through your mouth and down your throat. Because there is nothing to go through. The capping phrase to this line of the Verse is as follows: It can’t be swallowed; it can’t be spit out.

Even a genius doctor couldn’t get hold of your hand. Even an outstanding physician, a very god of physicians, cannot cure this illness. Remember that this Verse is describing your own true self.

Seemingly existent, that One isn’t originally non-existent. This is saying basically the same thing. It might seem like there is something there, but “that One isn’t originally non-existent.” “Seemingly existent” is referring to the phenomenal world. “That One isn’t originally non-existent” is not referring to the essential world, but to the phenomenal world.

Totally empty, that One isn’t originally existent. This is now referring to the palm of the hand when it says, “that One isn’t originally existent.” This verse presents both the world of not having and of having. When it says, “seemingly existent,” it means that it seems as if there is something there. When it says, “that One isn’t originally existent,” it says that there is not something there.

Not perishing, it is born;

Not dying, it lives long. This is saying “intrinsically unborn.” Maybe that would be even better than the line of the verse. Intrinsically not born.

“Not dying, it lives long” is referring to our essential nature.

Transcending the most ancient Buddha to come before him,

Walking alone after the “Kalpa of Emptiness.” The “most ancient Buddha to come before him” (Japanese: *Ion*) means the oldest of the thirty-three Buddhas. And because it is even prior to that Buddha, it means before the universe appeared. No one knows when this world appeared. But even before that, our essential nature has existed.

“Walking alone after the kalpa of emptiness” This is referring to the limitless future. But we are walking alone even after that. This is referring again to our essential nature.

As for serenity, the firmament covers and the earth supports;

As for movement, the crow flies and the rabbit runs. From the standpoint of quietness and serenity, the blue sky is always covering the earth, and the earth supports everything. From the quiet aspect, where there is not a single problem, this happens most naturally. There is the expression *jinen-hôni*, which means most naturally.

And from the standpoint of movement, “the crow flies and the rabbit runs.” This is also an aspect of “peace under the heavens.” To repeat, this Verse is speaking about the statements in the Case: Ill or not ill – it has nothing to do with ‘that’ matter. Say it quickly! Say it quickly!”

“Even if I may say it, there’s no relation at all!”

This is singing our essential nature. Although today’s teisho is not that difficult, it’s a question of whether you can truly appreciate it nor not. In that sense, it might not be that easy. The only thing you can do in the end is realize and savor it yourself.