

CASE 69

Nansen's "Cats and Oxen"

By Yamada Kôun



Instruction:

Becoming a Buddha, becoming a patriarch:
This is nothing but wearing dirty names and is therefore to be abhorred;
Carrying horns, wearing fur:
It is recommended that [these beings] take superior seats.
Therefore, the true light does not radiate, great wisdom is like stupidity.
Moreover, there is someone who thinks it is convenient to be deaf,
And pretends not to know any arts.
Do you know who this is?

Case:

Nansen instructed the assembly and said, "All the Buddhas of the three worlds¹ do not know that there is. Only the cats and oxen know that there is."

Verse:

Limping with paralyzed hands,
Ragged with dirty hair;
Good for nothing, not capable of even one thing.
In silence he knows that his own state of mind is nothing but peace.
Composed, free from care – who says that in his guts he is an idiot?
The entire universe, all phenomenal worlds – they have turned to be food for him.
With his big nose loosely hanging, he seems perfectly satisfied, with no need for anything else.

On the Instruction:

Becoming a buddha, becoming a patriarch:
This is nothing but wearing dirty names and is therefore to be abhorred; If you ask

¹ The past, present and future.

whom this is referring to, it means the person known in the *Shôdôka* as the “leisurely person of the Tao, who has exhausted study and is without doing.” This is the state of consciousness of a person who has exhausted all practice and reached a state of perfect peace of mind. To speak in terms of becoming a Buddha or becoming a patriarch is just to use dirty names. Why is the name Buddha dirty? Why is the name patriarch dirty? Because words like Buddha or patriarch are all concepts. It is not there is actually anything like Buddha. It is just when there are no more concepts in your head that we give it the name Buddha. It’s the same as me receiving the name Kyôzô Yamada. And there is really a person who hates the word Buddha. His name is Shidô Bunan Zenji. As you might know, he was the teacher of Shôju Rôjin, who was the master of Hakuin Zenji. I consider Shidô Bunan Zenji to be a truly outstanding person. I have written about him in the *Opening Comments* of the latest issue of our magazine *Kyôshô*, so please have a look at it. Shidô Bunan Zenji was originally the innkeeper of a watering place along the Tokaido Road at that time. He became a student of the Zen master Gudô Oshô. This Gudô Oshô traveled back and forth several times between Kyoto and Edo (present-day Tokyo) along this highway and evidently stayed at this inn a number of times. As a result, Shidô Bunan began to receive the instruction of Gudô Oshô and eventually devoted himself to authentic practice. He decided to become a monk. Up to then he had devoted himself to carousing, to the extent that the family became quite disgusted with him. When I ask myself why he was carousing so much, I can surmise that he wanted everyone to think that he was no longer required at the inn, so that he would then be free to become a monk. Once when Gudô Zenji was traveling from Kyoto to Tokyo, he stayed overnight at the inn. The two men talked until deep in the night. The next morning Gudô Zenji continued on his way. Shortly after that, the master of the inn left home, never to return again. He went to Tokyo and practiced in a little hut-like dwelling. This was probably his continued practice after realizing enlightenment. As time went on, word got around that a very special person was living in the vicinity. Shôju Rôjin wanted to meet a true Zen master and traveled to Tokyo with that intention. I’m not sure if Shidô Bunan already called his hermitage *Shidôan* starting around that time, but at any rate Shôju Rôjin visited him in his dwelling. When he paid a visit, he found Shidô Bunan Zenji sitting in a ramshackle dwelling on worn-out tatami matting. But one look was enough for him to confirm that he had met his true teacher. This really speaks well for Shôju Rôjin. Shidô Bunan Zenji was definitely not a learned man, but he nevertheless wrote truly outstanding *waka*² poems. Also outstanding are his *dôka* or “songs of the way.” You would all do well to give them a perusal, if you have a chance. I have been looking over just the ones consisting of four lines. Many of them warn us against being duped by the concept of Buddha (*hotoke-sama*). Here is an example: “Even if you fall head first into Avici hell, don’t ever think of becoming a Buddha” (*sakashima ni abijigoku e otsurutomo hotoke ni naru to sara ni omouna*). The Avici hell is the most

² **Waka** (literally “Japanese poem”) or **Yamato uta** is a genre of classical Japanese verse and one of the major genres of Japanese literature. The term was coined during the Heian period, and was used to distinguish Japanese-language poetry from *kanshi* (poetry written in Chinese by Japanese poets), and later from *renga*.

gruesome of the traditional “eight hells” of Buddhism. This is truly outstanding. Shidô Bunan Zenji doesn't mince words. I believe such penetrating individuals are rare in the Rinzai School. I personally believe he is a match for Dôgen Zenji when it comes to his profound state of consciousness. Here is another verse of his: “No matter what, no different from an ordinary person, Buddhas and patriarchs are great devils” (*nanigoto mo bonjin ni kawaru koto nashi busso to iu mo daima nari keru*).

He uses the word “devils” to indicate concepts. Here is yet another verse: “What is Buddha? Fools have started saying it, and people are deluded by something without a name” (*hotoke to wa nani baka na yatsu ga iisomete na mo naki mono ni mayoi koso sure*). Who is it that started saying Buddha? What fools they are! The real thing is nothing at all. It is because they attach a name like Buddha to it that they are all deluded. He has clearly realized his true self. Here is yet another verse: “When I hear someone asking what Buddha is, I feel like my ears have been dirtied” (*hotoke wa to tazunuru koe wo kiku toki wa mimi no kegagaruru kokochi koso sure*). Here is a Japanese who can compose such poems. This is the time to take a second look at Shidô Bunan Zenji. He is of a different sort than Hakuin Zenji, we might say. He is different in character. Hakuin Zenji was a genius, especially when it came to literary gifts to compose texts and poems. Shidô Bunan Zenji could be said to have been completely lacking in such breeding and culture. There are almost no difficult statements in his writings. For example, with him there is no taint or trace of having read such works as the *Blue Cliff Record*, *Gateless Gate* or *Book of Equanimity*. When it comes to Shôju Rôjin, we can clearly detect the traces of his having read the *Blue Cliff Record*. A copy of that work could be found in the hermitage *Shôjuan* where he resided. As for Hakuin Zenji, there were many literary remains in the form of his voluminous writings. In that sense he was an inimitable genius. Nevertheless, I believe he needs to undergo further inspection when it comes to his enlightened dharma eye. This is not the time or occasion for me to speak in detail about this matter, and I feel that I that I must delve myself more deeply into the matter. Let me just say here that I hold Shidô Bunan Zenji in great esteem. His spirit is expressed well in these first words of today's Introduction: Becoming a buddha, becoming a patriarch: This is nothing but wearing dirty names and is therefore to be abhorred.

This is how it is when you have reached the true fact. It won't do to become attached to ideas or names.

Carrying horns, wearing fur:

It is recommended that [these beings] take superior seats. “Carrying horns and wearing fur” is a reference to animals, such as bulls and horses. The Instruction says that this is superior to all talk about Buddhas and patriarchs.

Therefore, the true light does not radiate, great wisdom is like stupidity. The true light is not glittery or shiny. All that glitters is not the real thing; it is like chrome. The true light is not at all glittery. You may not realize that each one of you is shining with a wonderful light, but actually you are that light itself. The true light is empty. Each person transcends any

talk of enlightened or not enlightened. That is your true self.

And “great wisdom is like stupidity.” The truly wise person seems to be a fool. The one who looks very smart is actually not very smart. This is a little frightening, since you don’t know when you are going to meet up with a truly outstanding person. Who knows! Among persons who look like country grandpas, there might be truly outstanding individuals. Among the ones wearing gorgeous robes you’re unlikely to find anyone worthwhile. It’s the custom for me to wear this robe when I deliver a teisho like this, but, as the Introduction says, the truly wise person is like a fool. I think I might have told you that I had been planning to visit Ryūtakuji Temple and was longing forward to visiting Nakagawa Soen Roshi. When he was still a young monk, Soen Roshi practiced under Yamamoto Gempō Roshi, who is considered one of the most outstanding monks of modern times. One day shortly after the end of the Pacific War, the young Soen and Gempō Roshi were in a very crowded train. At that time Soen was acting as *jisha* or attendant to Gempō Roshi. They were finally able to find empty seats and sit down. Despite the very crowded circumstances, Soen sat motionless in zazen. Meanwhile, Gempō Roshi scrunched himself in a corner of the seat so as not to take up space and pretended to be napping. When they returned to the temple, Gempō Roshi took Soen severely to task. “What kind of attitude was that on the train today? When it’s so crowded like that you have to make yourself as small as possible so that you’re not a bother to others. If you’re truly practicing such an attitude should rise of its own accord. What do you mean putting on such airs!?” Someone who happened to be present at the time of this grilling wrote about it later. The account says that Soen Roshi listened with rapt attention without saying a word. What a beautiful scene of master and disciple. Here is truly a case of the true light not radiating. Soen Roshi may still have been “radiating” a bit at that time. Gempō Roshi, great master that he was, did not “radiate” at all.

“Great wisdom is like stupidity.” Though your words flow like a flood of eloquence in expounding Buddhism, it’s of little worth.

Moreover, there is someone who thinks it is convenient to be deaf,

And pretends not to know any arts. This is saying that the most precious thing is to be deaf. It doesn’t mean truly deaf, but making believe one is deaf. The one who “pretends not to know any arts” is the one who plays the fool. Once again, the most precious thing is being able to pretend you’re deaf. The word translated here as “arts” is the character “*sai*” which is found in expressions such as “cutting a sorry figure” (*fū-sai ga agaranai*) “standing out” (*kō-sai wo hanatsu*). It has the meaning of a design or decoration. It means the pretty pattern on the surface. The opposite would be the expression “*fusai*,” which means lacking any decorative elements, like a fool. There is the expression in the text *Hōkyōzammai* (Jewel-Mirror Samadhi) “like a fool, like an idiot” (*gu no gotoku ro no gotoshi*). This means playing the fool. You might think he’s a fool, but actually he knows everything. There is one who, although he knows everything, makes believe he is a fool.

Do you know who this is? Who is that person? This is speaking in reference to Nansen.

Nansen Fugen Zenji often appears in the koans together with Jôshû Oshô. He was originally the disciple of Baso Dôitsu Zenji. There is more information about him in Banshô Rôjin's longer commentary to this case, so please read that text to get a better understanding. Nansen was quite a formidable opponent in Zen exchanges. As is stated in the Instruction, Nansen was "someone who thinks it is convenient to be deaf, and pretends not to know any arts." He eventually rid himself of all polished refinement, all glitter, and has the air of a country grandpa. When you read the *Record of Jôshû* (Jôshû-Roku) you find preachings and poems. When Jôshû first practiced with Nansen he was evidently very sharp and to the point in Zen exchanges.

One day Jôshû prepared a bath and invited Nansen to bathe. Nansen said, "Invite the water buffalo to bathe." Nansen evidently often said that he wanted to be a water buffalo when he died. It might have been around that time that this exchange occurred. One of his students asked Nansen, "After you die, where will you go?" Nansen replied, "I will become the water buffalo of the farm over there." To return to our story, Jôshû invited Nansen to take a bath, and Nansen gave the answer just cited. Jôshû then said, "I have brought the water buffalo into the bath." Nansen said, "Did you bring a rope?" Jôshû suddenly pulled Nansen's nose. As this shows, in his younger years Jôshû was very quick and sharp. As he aged, however, he became increasingly mellow and mature. That's the kind of person he was.

On the Case:

Nansen instructed the assembly and said, "All the buddhas of the three worlds do not know that there is. Only the cats and oxen know that there is." The "Buddhas of the three worlds" means the Buddhas of past, present and future. As for the words "there is" (Japanese: aru), there have been many opinions submitted since times of old. Hioki Mokusen Zenji, for example, in his teisho on this case, says that Nansen is saying in effect, "I do not know that there are the Buddhas of the three worlds." There are also many views regarding the expression "cats and oxen" (Japanese: rinu byakkô). One theory says "rinu" means cats, as Yasutani Roshi related in his teisho on this koan. And the word "byakko" means oxen. Again, according to Hioki Mokusen Roshi, Nansen is saying in effect: "I know that there are cats and oxen, but I don't know there are the Buddhas of the three worlds." This is somewhat different from the usual understanding of these words. The usual view is that the Buddhas of the three worlds do not know anything. If you look, for example, at the commentary written by the scholar Katoh Totsudô, he says that the expression "aru" in the original text is in the sense of "there is something." So, it would mean, "the Buddhas of the three worlds do not know that there is that." What is that? It means the essential world, or enlightenment or kensho or Buddhism. It could also mean Mu or the sound of one hand. The Buddhas of the three worlds know nothing of such things. The Buddhas of the three worlds know nothing at all about such great matters. I personally prefer this interpretation to Hioki Roshi's view. And this is the usual way of understanding these words. Let's say, for example, that you have experienced

kensho and realized your own essential nature. As long as there is something like “essential nature” in your head, it is still not the genuine article. If you have truly become one with it, you are not aware of it in the least. As long as there is an awareness of something like “essential nature” it is not yet the real thing. To be sure, you must realize some time the essential world. But then you must gradually sweep away all traces of it so that any traces of enlightenment disappear. It’s a matter of extinguishing the light. Any consciousness of enlightenment or something special must disappear. Yōka Daishi in his *Shōdōka* (Song of Realizing the Way) refers to this as the “leisurely person of the Way, who has exhausted learning and has nothing to do” (Japanese: *zetsugaku mui no kandōnin*). There is nothing more to learn. But when you have “nothing to do” (*mui*, Chinese: *wu-wei*), it doesn’t mean you just sit around idly. On the contrary, you devote yourself fully to the task of saving others. Just because you may have had an enlightenment experience, it certainly won’t do to take a smug attitude. To have completely forgotten that “there is such a thing” means that any consciousness of a separate ego disappears completely. So long as there is still egoistic consciousness (Japanese: *ga*), whatever you do it will still not be enough. If that egoistic consciousness disappears, whatever you do it will be without error. This is the position expressed in today’s koan. The Buddhas of the three worlds do not know anything. There is the Japanese expression *imo no nieta mo gozonji nai* which literally means “not knowing whether the yams have cooked or not,” but is used to designate someone “who doesn’t have a clue.” This originally appears in the so-called *Iroha-Garuta*³. In connection with today’s case, it means that the Buddhas do not realize at all that the yams are cooked and ready to eat. It’s surprisingly difficult to reach this state. There might be some people who steam the potatoes and are fussing about when they’re finally done. But the Buddha doesn’t know a thing about that. “Only the cats and oxen know that there is.” As I mentioned already in reference to the Instruction, the Sino-Japanese expressions “*rinu*” and “*byakko*” are translated here as “cats and oxen.” But Hioki Mokusen Zenji says that “*rinu*” means a raccoon dog (Japanese: *tanuki*), while “*byakko*” means a fox. It probably doesn’t make much difference how they’re translated, since it’s referring basically to animals. It’s the animals that know about such things, he says. What does this mean? It means people who stuff their heads with concepts such as Zen Buddhism and attempt to understand things intellectually. Such persons are referred to as “cats and oxen.” He is saying that such concerns are the domain of ordinary, unenlightened persons (*bonpu*), that it’s such persons who know about such matters. When Dōgen Zenji was still young, he happened upon the following passage in a sutra: “All beings in essence have true dharma nature, are originally a body of Buddha nature.” This is basically the same thing as saying, “All beings are intrinsically Buddha.” To say that all beings in essence have true dharma nature means that we are perfect and lacking nothing. Upon reading this passage from the sutra, Dōgen pondered: “All human

³ *Iroha Garuta* is a card game for children, similar to *Uta-garuta* and *Hyakuin Isshu*. Representing the 47 syllables of the *iroha* syllabary and adds *kyō* (“capital”) for the 48th (since the syllable “n” can never start any word or phrase). A set consists of 48 proverbs each starting with a different syllable and another set of cards expressing a proverb.

beings are intrinsically Buddha and lacking nothing. Nevertheless, all Buddhas and patriarchs from old have awakened the spirit of studying the Buddha way, practicing and attaining *bodhi* wisdom. They realized great enlightenment and entered the realm of nirvana. Why was that so?" This was a major problem for the young Dôgen. Why did beings, who are intrinsically Buddha, still have to practice and obtain enlightenment? He visited many persons with this question, but was unable to obtain a satisfactory answer from anyone. Finally he went to Eisai Zenji, the person who first brought Rinzai Zen from China to Japan and who wrote the text known as the *Kôzen Gokokuron* (Treatise on the Promotion of Zen for the Protection of the Country). He was a pioneer of Rinzai Zen in Japan. The young Dôgen went to pay a visit on him, presenting the above question. Eisai's answer at that time was the same as found in this koan: "All the buddhas of the three worlds do not know that there is. Only the cats and oxen know that there is." The Buddhas of the three worlds do not know anything at all about such matters as "All beings in essence have true dharma nature, are originally a body of Buddha nature." Those who know about such things are fakes. It is those who have stuffed their heads with intellectual Buddhism who know about such things. The Buddhas of the three worlds know nothing about such things as original dharma nature, Buddha-nature or the natural self-nature body. Upon hearing this, Dôgen was so surprised that he was covered with sweat. I imagine that he passed through the first barrier at this time. But he was still not satisfied and traveled to China where he practiced under Tendô Nyojô Zenji and had his decisive experience. These words are very famous.

On the Verse:

Limping with paralyzed hands,
Ragged with dirty hair;

Good for nothing, not capable of even one thing. These first lines would seem to indicate a person who is a pathetic sight. It expresses an ugly and strange appearance. If we were suddenly to see such a person, we would no doubt think it strange. And then the verse says this person is "good for nothing, not capable of even one thing." Such a person would never be hired by a company. A person who can do anything is rare indeed; equally rare, however, is a person who can't do a single thing! But if you think him a fool, it's not the case.

In silence he knows that his own state of mind is nothing but peace. Nevertheless, in his heart he is always at peace. All of us must reach this state. No matter what happens, knowing in our heart of hearts that all is OK.

Composed, free from care – who says that in his guts he is an idiot? He is living in complete ease. Who could say that, deep down inside, he is a fool? No one could say such a thing, because he is definitely not a fool.

The entire universe, all phenomenal worlds – they have turned to be food for him. Wherever he goes, all is food for him.

With his big nose loosely hanging, he seems perfectly satisfied, with no need for

anything else. If his nose is so big that it's hanging down to his mouth, he's no ordinary person. Nevertheless, "he seems perfectly satisfied." This is truly the "leisurely person of the Tao, who has exhausted study and is without doing" as it says in the *Shōdōka*. Please set your sights again on the previous line: "In silence he knows that his own state of mind is nothing but peace." I want to tell all of you: Please become such a person. But it's quite difficult to become like this.