

CASE 31

Unmon's "Pillar"

By *Yamada Kōun*



Instruction:

The highest activity – a crane soars into the firmament;
The road facing the sun – a falcon flying over Silla¹.
Even if your eyes are like comets, you cannot help keeping your mouth
shut.

Just tell me, what sort of principle is this?

Case:

Unmon, instructing the assembly, said, "The old buddha and a pillar intersect each other. What number of activity is that?" The assembly was silent. He said on their behalf, "Clouds gather over the South Mountain; rain falls on the North Mountain."

Verse:

The single way of godly light has never been concealed from the very beginning.
It transcends ordinary views: it is "yes" and there is no "yes";
It goes beyond ordinary emotions: it fits, and there is no fitting.
With the pollen of the flowers upon a cliff, the bees produce honey in their
chambers;
With the rich wild grass, the musk deer make fragrance.
Each according to the kind: either three feet or sixteen feet.
It is all clear: wherever you touch, it is superbly manifest.

On the Instruction:

The highest activity – a crane soars into the firmament; This is the first zazenkai of this year. Since there are some of you whom I am seeing for the first time this year I take this opportunity to wish you a Happy New Year. When you read the newspapers you have the feeling that this year will be a difficult one. Since the Soviet Union has sent troops into Afghanistan, one has the feeling that the world situation will be getting more difficult.

¹ Ancient kingdom on the Korean peninsula.

You're probably worried about the situation, I can imagine. But it is precisely at such times that you should sit with all that's in you. If we sit fervently, we will escape danger. This is not my statement; it's the teaching of all the Buddhist patriarchs. Even though we're all in the same boat, if the boat sinks some will be saved and some won't as a result of cause and effect. If you accumulate good causes, your environment will be improved. As I am always saying, if you ask what good causes are, practicing zazen is, in the end, the best of all. There is no better cause than this. In our difficult world, the leaders of the different nations are no doubt racking their brains to find a way to somehow get over this crisis. We have no choice but to sit with all our might. Dōgen Zenji, speaking in his *Bendōwa*, explains this matter in a most clear and concise manner:

Even if all the buddhas that exist everywhere, more numerous than the number of particles in the Universe, were to use all of their wisdom and power to measure the merit of the Zazen of a single person, they would be unable to even come near to doing so.

In other words, through the zazen of a single person, the entire universe is purified. And small wonder, since the universe is one. If we sit and our hearts become purified, then the entire universe is purified. This is what is meant by the passage in Dōgen Zenji. There is proof of this. It might take a thousand or two-thousand years for true peace to arrive on this planet. But, as I am always saying, history is the process by which the essential world is revealed and extends out in the world of phenomena. Buddhism takes a very long-term view of things.

There is the Buddhist expression “appearing-remaining-destroying-emptiness” (jō-jū-e-kū) which expresses the great flow of the universe. From that perspective, one-hundred or two-hundred years in this world may be nothing more than an instant. At any rate, the day will definitely come when the essential world appears in this world of phenomena, although I don't believe this will happen during my lifetime. That being said, no matter what the present conditions are, when you are sitting, there is the self that fills the entire universe. In that sense, too, I would like you all to sit with all your might. We turn now to today's koan.

The highest activity – a crane soars into the firmament; The words translated here as “highest” (kōjō) and its counterpart (kōge) appear very often in Zen texts, so that many of you are probably almost sick of hearing them! “Highest” (kōjō) means “striving upward” and is a reference to the world of emptiness. There are expressions such as *kōjō-ippen* (the highest single aspect) or *kōjō-issikihen* (the highest aspect of a single color), which also refer to the world of emptiness, also known as the world of equality. The expression *kōge* (lit. “downward”) is the world of phenomena, the world of difference. It is the world that appears before your eyes quite clearly and distinctly. But please don't assume that these are two different things. They are one but two, they are two but one. There is actually no difference between them. This is actually the whole of Buddhism: “Upward” (kōjō: essential) and “downward” (kōge: phenomenal) as one. The Instruction is speaking about the aspect of kōjō (highest). It says that this highest activity is just like a crane soaring into the sky. The crane is considered to be the epitome of purity. Picture a stately crane soaring up into the sky and disappearing from view.

This is symbolic of the highest activity, the world of emptiness. When we sit fully absorbed in Mu, forgetting ourselves in the process, there is nothing at all. It is compared here to soaring up endlessly into the sky.

The road facing the sun – a falcon flying over Silla. The original Chinese also has the meaning of a road “facing south,” and expresses how things are very clear and distinct. The first line included the character for “activity.” It is the activity that emerges from perfect satori awakening, the activity that comes from the world of our essential nature. That was compared in the first line to a crane soaring up endlessly higher in the heavens. This second line is about the aspect of *kōge* (downward: phenomenal world). It is the single road of the phenomenal world, very clear and distinct. The character translated here as “falcon” means a bird of prey bred in falconry to catch game. The phenomenal world is compared here to a swift falcon that flies in an instant over the kingdom of Silla before you know it. Here is speed that’s quicker than the eyes can follow. But every single phenomenon is like this. The most direct example is the movement of subatomic particles. They appear and disappear within a millionth of a second. And we are all composed of such particles! Although people of old of course knew nothing about modern physics they could say things like this line of the verse: “The road facing the sun – a falcon flying over Silla.” Before you know it, it has flown away without a trace. This is looking at the phenomenal world.

Even if your eyes are like comets, you cannot help keeping your mouth shut. According to Yasutani Roshi’s teisho on this koan, this is an example of a writing style known as *Yōryaku-goken*. To explain it in simple terms, their eyes are like a comet with their extremely quick activity. But nevertheless they are unable to see this. That half of the statement is not produced here. It is “hidden” so to speak. The part about the mouth actually begins with the section saying that “even if our mouth has the eloquence of a great river,” it still cannot speak about that matter. As the verse says, “you cannot help keeping your mouth shut.” The original Chinese has the meaning of “you cannot prevent having your mouth being bent downward like a pole (for carrying things), i.e. not being able to speak. The true fact cannot be seen even if your eyes are as fast as comets, and cannot be expressed, even if your have eloquence flowing like a river.

Just tell me, what sort of principle is this? As I always say, the Instruction of a koan is always speaking with its sights set on the Main Case, which today involves Unmon. To repeat, the true reality cannot be seen no matter how you try and cannot be said, no matter how much you speak.

On the Case:

Unmon, instructing the assembly, said, “The old buddha and a pillar intersect each other. As Unmon has appeared any number of times already in previous koans, there is little left to say about him. He was the founder of the Unmon School of Zen. He is the one who experienced enlightenment under Bokushū when his leg was broken. Bokushū

was a member of the assembly of Ôbaku Zenj (Huangpo). When Rinzai practiced under Ôbaku, Bokushû also instructed Rinzai, acting as a senior monk. Although he is not generally as well-known as Rinzai or Unmon, he was a very severe master known for his unapproachableness. If you went to dokusan with Bokushû, the door would open and he would shout out, “what is this!?” If Unmon dithered even a moment, Bokushû would slam the door shut again and refuse entry. Unmon was sent back in this way several times. The last time this happened, Unmon managed to sneak in before the door was slammed, but unfortunately one leg of his was still in the entry and was broken by the door slamming. “Ouch!” he screamed in pain. And in that moment, “the bottom of the bucket broke out,” so to speak, and he realized great enlightenment. What had happened? If you explain it in words, you could say there was only that “Ouch!” in the entire universe. There was nothing at all, and Unmon realized his true self. Having come to realization in this way, he possessed penetrating insight. That means it’s difficult to really approach his world of Zen understanding. There is the expression “a red flag fluttering in the distance [on top of a far mountain]” to express the spirit of the Unmon School. You can clearly see the flag, but to actually reach it is no easy task. Unmon was a master of language. So was Jôshû, but in his case, the words just came out unexpectedly and very naturally. In Unmon’s case, although they were of course natural, he nevertheless possessed a special ability regarding words. Truly a master of language, he was able to express the matter in most cases with a single word such as *ro* (fool) or *kan* (barrier). About 70 years after Unmon’s death a man named Genshō had a dream of Unmon. I read once what the dream was about but can’t recall it at the moment. At any rate, Genshō reported the dream to the Emperor and was granted permission to open Unmon’s grave. Although 70 years had passed, it is said that his body was still in perfect condition without a trace of decomposition. At least that is how the story goes. The Emperor was very moved by this story and gave Unmon the posthumous name Daiji-Unkyō Shinkōmyō Daishi. The first characters Daiji mean “great compassion” and the character “ji” for compassion is the same as in the Zen name of Kubota Jiun Roshi in our lineage. The next character “kyō” is the same character as in my first name Kyōzō. The other characters in this name mean something like the “brightness of the true light.” It was this Unmon who one day ascended the rostrum to preach: “The old Buddha and a pillar intersect each other. What number of activity is that?”

The “old Buddha” refers to the Buddhas prior to Shakyamuni Buddha, which are known sometimes as the “past seven Buddhas,” although this might not be known in our traditional understanding of history. These seven Buddhas are believed to be the forerunners of Shakyamuni Buddha, or like former incarnations. Actually, there are countless Buddhas in addition to this, said to be “as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.” This is only natural, considering that time is endless and that, during that endless time, countless persons are continuing earnest practice to realize satori and to enter the consciousness of Buddhas. Given that our true life is limitless and that, having determined our goal, we continue endless practice, there must certainly be countless Buddhas existing. Some might conclude that you

have to go to that Buddha realm to really know, but actually it is not so easy to experience in ordinary circumstances, since the world in which they live and the world where we live are different. But you can be certain that, in a world unseen, countless Buddhas truly exist as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. This is what is referred to here with the word “old Buddha.” You can think of it as referring to the past seven Buddhas, the predecessors of Shakyamuni. That could be Amida Buddha or Vairocana Buddha or even Shakyamuni Buddha. Unmon says that those old Buddhas merge with a pillar. The original Chinese translated here as “pillar” actually means “exposed pillar” because the pillars in a temple are exposed to the elements and not closed in. You find them, for example, in the main hall of the temple. They are large round pillars exposed to the air. Unmon says that the old Buddhas and the pillar merge. It as if they are shaking hands with each other, have become one. He then asks what level of activity that is, a question that seems like a riddle. But no one in the assembly could say anything. I often tell students working on Mu to become one with Mu. When you practice Mu fervently and truly become one with Mu, your true self appears. This is saying the same thing. “Merge” here means to become one with something. The old Buddhas and the pillar have become one. He then asks what activity that is, but no one could answer. So he answered on their behalf: “Clouds gather over the South Mountain; rain falls on the North Mountain.” Dark clouds gather over the South Mountain and rain falls in torrents over the North Mountain. But what is he actually saying? If I may add a little explanation, you must first of all consider the old Buddha to be your own true self, which is eternal life without beginning and without end. The pillar is a pillar, to be sure, but is appearing here as the representative of the entire world of phenomena. You needn’t adhere to the word pillar, it can be a desk, a chair, a door, anything at all. As I mentioned, “merge” means that they become one. To tell the truth, they have always been one from time immemorial. To put it in other words, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Old Buddha is emptiness. It is our true self, which is completely empty. But, as Unmon says, that emptiness itself is no other than the world of phenomena. This is what is said in the *Heart Sutra*. You could also say that equality is no other than difference, difference no other than quality. Or if you use the explanation found in the *Five Ranks* of Tōzan you could say *shō-chū-hen* and *hen-chū-shō*. *Shō* is the world of emptiness. Tōzan says that precisely in emptiness are phenomena. This might lead you to believe there are two things, phenomena that are somehow in emptiness. But actually they are completely one and the same. This is expressed with the words *ken-chū-tō*. You can think of Buddhism or Zen as the process of discovering this truth yourself and somehow making this known to others. Zen is a matter of having people realize this fact themselves in actual experience. This is true for all phenomena. It’s no mistake to say that all phenomena are a matter of the old Buddha and the pillar merging. Unmon asks what level of activity that is, but no one can answer, so he answers himself.

He said on their behalf, “Clouds gather over the South Mountain; rain falls on the North Mountain.” Oh! Look at those black clouds! That’s the old Buddha and pillar merging.

Wow! What a downpour! This is also the old Buddha and pillar merging. Unmon says the clouds gather on South Mountain and the rain falls on North Mountain. You might think this strange in terms of cause and effect and shake your head if you consider things logically. But koans are always speaking about the essential world, where there is neither north nor south. To be sure, you could say clouds gather on South Mountain and rain falls on South Mountain, but that’s not very interesting, so Unmon expresses things more poetically. There’s a short critical comment here by Old Man Banshō, one of the authors of the *Book of Serenity*: “Old man Chang drinks wine; old man Lee gets drunk.” If you start to wonder how that’s possible, you get caught up in the words and lose your freedom. Koans are constructed to catch you up in your conceptual thinking. But if you realize that old man Chang and old man Lee are one, there’s no problem. It’s like saying “Yamada drinks wine, Kyōzō (Rōshi’s first name) gets drunk.” Once you clearly realize the world of oneness, this is no problem at all. It’s speaking of your own true self.

On the Verse:

The single way of godly light has never been concealed from the very beginning. “Godly light” means a mysterious light. That single way of mysterious light has never been hidden. It is always completely revealed. It won’t do just to have an abstract image in your mind of this. If I ask you to produce that single way of godly light right now, how do you react? Abstract concepts are of no use in Zen. What’s a possible answer? “Oh, listen to that rain come down!” If you clearly realize that single way of godly light, you can produce it anywhere. If you simply think in terms of abstractions and concepts and think you know, it’s not enough. That might be a nice poem, but it’s not real Zen. Even in the case of the present poem, if you just understand the intellectual meaning of the words and not what’s behind them, that might be a nice poem, but it’s not Zen.

It transcends ordinary views: it is “yes” and there is no “yes”; “Ordinary views” means the understanding of the ordinary, unenlightened person who has yet to realize the true fact, the idea that there is a viewing subject and a viewed object completely separate from each other. We tend to depict the world in terms of the viewer and the viewed, as subject and object. But you have to transcend that dimension to grasp your true self. The ordinary idea of subject-object or self-other, this idea of a separate self is established on our ordinary logical thinking and is thus “ordinary views.” If we transcend this, we realize the world of oneness. Then you can say “it is ‘yes’ and there is no ‘yes’.” In other words, in transcending the world of ordinary views we realize the world of emptiness, the world of oneness. As long as there is still something, it is not true oneness. When you realize the world of emptiness, then you can say: it is “yes” and there is no “yes.” In other words, from the aspect of “yes,” whatever you bring me as

an answer, it's right. But from the aspect of "no yes," whatever you bring me is wrong. In Zen we also use the terms *immo* (yes) and *fuimmo* (no) to express this. There is the aspect by which anything you bring me is OK. It can be this stick (Roshi shows his kotsu), this lectern, a pillar, a post, anything at all, they're all OK. Why? Because they're one. But then there is the other aspect by which anything you bring me is wrong. Seen from the world of emptiness nothing is right. Neither of them is perfect. The aspect of *immo* (yes) is the world of phenomena and anything you bring me is OK. Seen from the other side, nothing you bring me is good, a very stern position. These are also known as "the sword that kills" and "the sword that gives life." The sword that kills is the stance of refusing anything you bring to me. The sword that gives life is the aspect of receiving anything you bring me. This is what this line of the verse is talking about. There is the Zen saying: "Within the gate of Buddha affairs, not a single thing is thrown away" (*butsuji-monchū ippō wo sutezu*). This is the aspect of giving life, where not a single thing is denied. Everything is OK. But then there is the aspect of "not raising a single speck of dust" (*ichijin wo rissezu*). This is the aspect of the essential world, the world of not a single thing. Whatever you bring me is no good. These two aspects may seem to be two different things, but actually they are one.

It goes beyond ordinary emotions: it fits, and there is no fitting. This is the same as the ordinary views in the former line. They are the emotions that emerge from a dualistic view of things. Unless you transcend this aspect, you cannot realize the world of oneness. And what then? "It fits, and there is not fitting." That is the same as *it is "yes" and there is no "yes."* The rest of the verse describes the world of "the old Buddha and the pillar merging."

With the pollen of the flowers upon a cliff, the bees produce honey in their chambers;

With the rich wild grass, the musk deer make fragrance. The flowers on the cliff mean something that the ordinary person cannot easily reach. But the bees use the pollen of the flowers to produce honey. This is also a case of "the old Buddha and the pillar merging."

The second line about the rich wild grass means that the grass is rich in nutrients. And this is used to produce musk, which is a wonderful fragrance. This is also a case of the "old Buddha and the pillar merging."

Each according to the kind: either three feet or sixteen feet.

It is all clear: wherever you touch, it is superbly manifest. This time the verse is talking about people. When it comes to people, it can be a three-foot boy or a sixteen-foot Buddha. The Buddha is sometimes referred to as the sixteen-foot golden body. Sometimes it appears as a three-foot boy, another time as a sixteen-foot Buddha. Both are OK, and none can be called bad. There is the Zen conundrum: Which is higher, Mt. Fuji or Mt. Kamakura?² Actually Mt. Fuji is perfectly fine in being high, and Mt. Kamakura is perfectly fine in being

² Mt. Kamakura (Kamakurayama) an area of low hills on the outskirts of the city of Kamakura, Japan.

low. A tall person is fine as a tall person; a short person is fine as a short person. They are all OK (jap. *ichininmae*). This, too, is an expression of “the old Buddha merging with the pillar.” It is the world of phenomena. And what about them?

It is all clear: wherever you touch, it is superbly manifest. The world of “the old Buddha merging with the pillar” is clear at every step you take, clear wherever you look. It is clear as pillar, it is clear as grass, it is clear as flower, it is clear as mountain, it is clear as river, it is clear as Dick, it is clear as Jane. They are all completely clear and manifest.

I’m always feeling that true peace is not possible without realizing the world of oneness. As I said in yesterday’s teisho, I would like somehow to have the Russians learn to practice zazen. There are many people from abroad practicing in this zendo, but not a single person from Russia. Perhaps it will take a hundred years before people in Russia begin to practice zazen, says Father Willigis. But even if it takes that long, it’s still worth the effort. For unless you practice Zen, you can’t realize the world of oneness. When you realize the world of oneness, then true peace will come.