

CASE 47

Joshū's "Oak Tree in the Garden"

By Yamada Kōun



Instruction:

The oak tree there in the garden, the flag on the pole blown in the wind –
It is like one flower preaching the boundless spring,
Like one drop of water revealing the waters of the great ocean.

The ancient Buddha, born once in 500 years, goes way beyond the ordinary currents.

Not falling into words and thoughts, how could you understand the speech?

Case:

A monk asked Jōshū, "What is the meaning of the patriarch's coming from the West?" Jōshū said, "The oak tree there in the garden."

Verse:

The banks [are his] eyebrows

Holding snow;

The river [is his] eyes

Containing autumn;

The ocean [is his] mouth

Drumming the waves;

The ship [is his] tongue

Beaming with the streams.

The hand that sweeps out disorders,

The staff that brings peace.

Old Jōshū, old Jōshū!

Monasteries are disturbed, never coming to rest;

In vain you expend devices, making carts and fitting them to the grooves;

Without art it intrinsically covers the valleys and fills the trenches.

On the Instruction:

The oak tree there in the garden, the flag on the pole blown in the wind – I believe that quite a few of you have already practiced with this koan, which is also found in the *Gateless Gate*. Among the many koans there are some that sparkle with a special light, and this is one of them. Another would be Gutei's Finger. Although such koans are very concise, they are very clear and to the point, as is the case here. Only a person of considerable Zen power can say such a thing. Jōshū's everyday sayings very naturally became koans. Let us look now at the Instruction.

The Zen records tell of a sermon that Jōshū delivered one day:

The master addressed the assembly saying, "This fact is clear and obvious. Even a person of limitless power cannot go beyond it."

What is meant by a "person of limitless power"? This is a reference to our own true reality, our true self. And it is "clear and obvious" at any moment at any place. A "person of limitless power" means a person who is impossible to fathom, so great is she or he. Examples would be Shakyamuni or Bodhidharma. To say that such a person cannot "go beyond it" means they cannot take a step away from it. Jōshū's address continues:

When I went to Isan's place a monk asked him, "What is the mind that the Patriarch brought from the West?" Isan said, "Bring me my chair."

The word translated here as chair can also have the meaning of a mat spread out to practice zazen or the sitting cushion itself. Jōshū continues:

If he would be a master of our sect, he must begin to teach men by means of the fact of his own nature.

In saying, "bring me my chair," he directly presents the true fact. Jōshū says that a true Zen person cannot meet others with logic. He or she must always confront the student with the true fact. When dealing with students, you should not handle them with logic, but always confront them with the true fact, with the essential matter. Then the monk poses a question:

"What is the meaning of the patriarch's coming from the West?"

Jōshū said, "The oak tree there in the garden."

With his saying, "the oak tree there in the garden," it has already been completely exhausted. He presents us with essential nature itself.

The second part about "the flag on the pole blown in the wind" is a reference to Case 29 of the *Gateless Gate*, which concerns the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng. He had inherited the dharma of the Fifth Patriarch Kōnin Zeji, but remained in hiding after that, cultivating the dharma. One day two monks happened to see a flag flapping in the wind in front of the temple. One of them said that the wind was moving. The other monk said that it was the flag that was moving. Happening to be on the scene and hearing this, the Sixth Patriarch told them that it was neither the wind nor the flag, but the minds of the monks that were moving! Word got around about this queer pronouncement, and it eventually became public knowledge that

Hui-neng was the dharma successor to Kônin Zenji. In his commentary to this case, Mumon Ekai says: “It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves.” That’s actually the true fact. Yasutani Roshi also says in his teisho on this koan that the koan just cited from the *Gateless Gate* is also a wonderful koan that is a match for the present koan, and that is the reason it is presented here in the Instruction.

It is like one flower preaching the boundless spring, When a single flower blooms, we know that spring has come. The “boundless spring” means the spring that fills the entire universe. After all, when it’s spring there is only spring and no room for autumn. A single flower seems to be preaching that boundless spring in its blooming. There is also the famous Japanese saying, “When a single leaf falls, we know that autumn is here” (*ichiyô ochite tenka no aki wo shiru*).

Like one drop of water revealing the waters of the great ocean. A single drop of water reveals the entire great ocean. “One is all, all is one.” That is the world of our true reality. The Instruction is praising this answer of Jôshû in the koan, saying it is a wonderful koan, of course in way of simile.

The ancient Buddha, born once in 500 years, goes way beyond the ordinary currents. The words “ancient Buddha” or “old Buddha” (*kobutsu*) are used when referring to an outstanding Zen master. Dôgen Zenji was very severe in his judgment of Zen masters of the past but referred to Jôshû as “old Buddha.” If you look at his writings in the *Shôbôgenzô*, you see that he refers to masters such as Gensha Shibi Daishi or Tôzan Gohon Daishi as “old Buddha.” In ancient times in China it was believed that a truly outstanding sage only appeared every 500 years in the world. It is said that Jôshû was such a person. The same words of praise have been reserved for Hakuin Zenji in Japan.

To say that he “goes beyond the ordinary currents” means that he transcends everyday logic and thinking.

Not falling into words and thoughts, how could you understand the speech? “The oak tree there in the garden” is something that does not fall into words and thoughts. It is not just chopping logic, it is directly grasping the true fact. That being the case, “how could you understand the speech?” The “speech” means the koan itself. The Instruction asks us, “How will you understand this koan about the oak tree in the garden?” It is asking how we can directly apprehend it, without resorting to logic. And now we turn to the Main Case.

On the Case:

A monk asked Jôshû, “What is the meaning of the patriarch’s coming from the West?” Jôshû said, “The oak tree there in the garden.” These words “the meaning of the patriarch’s coming from the West” (*soshi seirai i*) often appear in Zen texts. What was Bodhidharma’s true intention in coming from the West (India) to China? What was the true content of Bodhidharma’s enlightenment, his state of consciousness? This is what the monk is asking. What is the ultimate meaning of Buddhism? In response, Jôshû says, “The oak tree

there in the garden.” This is a very famous koan. When I look at the records I made of my own Zen training, I see that I first practiced with this koan in 1947, which would be 32 years ago. It was in 1946 that I arrived with my family back from Manchuria, where I had been living. We first lived in the older house that had been standing on this property, and which originally belonged to my younger brother. We borrowed the house and during that time I practiced Zen under Asahina Sôgen Roshi, seeing him in dokusan in the morning before work and in the evening on the way home. As I said, it was in 1947 that I was given this koan to work on. Asahina Roshi was different from Yasutani Roshi, in that he did not do the koans in a specific order. Instead, he simply assigned koans that occurred to him on the spur of the moment. That included koans from the *Gateless Gate* or some from the *Blue Cliff Record*. Most of them can be found in the collection known as the *Collection of Entanglements* (Kattôshû). I took out those old koan notes in preparing for this teisho. Looking at them, I see that he would ask questions to which I would supply answers, after which he would give his approval. In the *Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Jôshû* (Jôshû-Roku), the exchange continues as follows:

The monk said, “Don’t instruct by means of objectivity.”

The word translated here as “objectivity” (kyô) means the objective world outside of you.

The master said, “I don’t instruct by means of objectivity.”

This is another point that must be appropriately shown in the dokusan room. In my case, I gave some sort of logical answer, “The monk asking the question is seeing the oak tree as something in the external world, while Jôshû is expressing it as the absolute.” It’s probably not that bad as a logical answer. But the Roshi said, “That’s fine as logic, but you have to express it directly. I want to hear your own view.” I then gave some sort of presentation. The Roshi said, “It has to be a little more like this.” And then he showed me how to present the koan. But then there is a further checking question to this koan. At a later date, Kakutetsu-shi, a student of Jôshû’s, went to Master Hôgen. Evidently this saying of Jôshû’s was already famous by that time. Hôgen Zenji was a truly outstanding Zen master for whom I have great esteem. Hôgen Zenji asked Kakutetsu-shi, “I heard your late master had a koan about an oak tree. Is that true?”

Kakutetsu-shi replied, “My late master did not have any such koan. You should not abuse him.” In his teisho to this koan, Yasutani Roshi says, “Do you think that this concerns anything so picayune as an oak tree?” There are no words about an oak tree. You have to be able to see this. It’s not that there is some talk about an oak tree. Upon hearing Kakutetsu-shi’s answer, Hôgen said, “The true lion cub roars like a lion.” My notes say that I went with this koan to dokusan on the morning of June 4, 1947. I hadn’t yet realized kensho at that time. Nevertheless, I had worked on about forty or fifty koans from the so-called *Miscellaneous Koans* (Zassoku), and had some glimmer of their meaning, although I had not really experienced kensho. Perhaps Asahina Sôgen Roshi thought that I had. When I attended sesshin with him, I was passed on quite a number of koans, and the monks would congratulate

me, although I myself felt there were no grounds for congratulation whatsoever! Given this background, Yasutani Roshi asked me to entitle my kensho report “Great Joy on a Second Kensho Experience” for printing in the *Kyōshō* magazine. But that was no second kensho experience; it was the first genuine experience. When I think of things now, I have the feeling that my way of understanding the koan does not differ all that much from my present way of understanding it. I can say in connection with this koan that the monks at that time made a great fuss about this “oak tree in the garden.” Kanzan Kokushi, the abbot of Myōshinji Temple, did not leave any writings behind, but a specialist on Zen came from China and wanted to know if the late master had left any writings behind. Upon searching, the monks found a manuscript in the corner of the storage shed, which was entitled “The Story of the Oak Tree in the Garden Has a Robber’s Spirit.” I happened to see this where it was posted at the bell where we waited for dokusan. It told about how a certain Chinese scholar came and was very surprised to find such a writing at the temple. What is Kanzan Kokushi looking at when he speaks of a “robber’s spirit”? This is also a koan that was assigned to me at that time and to which I gave an answer to Asahina Roshi. Please try to come up with your own answer.

On the Verse:

The banks [are his] eyebrows

Holding snow;

The river [is his] eyes

Containing autumn. You can think of this as a portrait of Jōshū. His eyebrows are so white like the banks of a river covered with snow. His eyes are deep and clear as the waters of the river in autumn.

The ocean [is his] mouth

Drumming the waves. His mouth is compared to the waves dashing on the shore like the beating of a drum. In the sutras the word “sound of the ocean tide” (Japanese: *kaichōn*, Sanskrit: *jaladharagarjita*) is used to describe the voice of the Buddha when he preaches. For example, there is the following passage in the *Surangama Sutra* (Ryōgonkyō):

The Buddha's compassion arose and he took pity on Ananda and on all in the great assembly and he spoke to the great assembly in a voice that swept over them like the ocean-tide. (Translated from Chinese by *The Buddhist Text Translation Society*, USA).

The original says “ocean tide sound” and is the origin of this line in the Verse. There are scholars who have commented on this “ocean tide sound” as described in the *Surangama Sutra*, explaining that the Buddha does not preach because people ask him to. It is just that, out of pity and compassion for them, he raises his voice. But this must be a timely response, the commentator says. At any rate, the Verse compares Jōshū voice to the ocean tide.

The ship [is his] tongue

Beaming with the streams. Now Jōshū’s way of speaking is compared to the smooth course of a boat on a river.

The hand that sweeps out disorders,

The staff that brings peace. The “disorders” are those of the troubled heart, whose waves Jôshû can sweep away. This is said in praise of his great ability as a Zen master.

The staff that brings peace. The “peace” means peace of mind, peace of spirit.

Old Jôshû, old Jôshû! This is uttered in awe of Jôshû’s great power and virtue.

Monasteries are disturbed, never coming to rest. Due to that “oak tree in the garden” the monasteries never come to rest, never ceasing to speak about that oak tree. My speaking here before you today is a good example!

In vain you expend devices, making carts and fitting them to the grooves. This is talking about us practitioners of Zen. “Expending devices” refers to how we wrack out brains about the oak tree in the garden. As for “making carts and fitting them to the grooves,” the grooves in the road mean the “meaning of the patriarch’s coming from the West.” We make carts of our own delusive thoughts, trying to fit them to those grooves. Between the lines we can read the exhortation to dispense with such useless efforts.

Without art it intrinsically covers the valleys and fills the trenches. “Without art” is seen by Hakuin Roshi as meaning “thanks to samadhi power” (jôriki). “Without art” refers to Jôshû’s effortlessly teaching the dharma. Without art he “covers the valleys and fills the trenches.” “The oak tree in the garden” exhausts the entire universe. As long as you are relying on some special skill or power, it is still not the real thing. Actually, such power must also disappear. In Zen, unless such special matters completely disappear, it is still not real Zen. In the text known as the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, there is the following story.

Wo Lun has the talent

To stop the hundred thoughts:

Facing situations his mind won't move:

Bodhi grows day by day.

There are many people who believe Zen consists in cutting off our thoughts. When he says “facing situations his mind won’t move,” it means no thoughts arise in his mind, no matter what the situation. “Bodhi grows days by day” means that his Buddha nature or Buddha wisdom increases daily.

When the Master heard it he said, "This verse shows no understanding of the mind-ground, and to cultivate according to it will increase one's bondage." Then he spoke this verse:

Hui Neng has no talent

To stop the hundred thoughts.

Facing situations his mind often moves;

How can Bodhi grow?

Of course, in terms of practice, we must go through the stage described in the first poem. But, as the Sixth Patriarch describes in his poem, the real world, the real fact is a different matter. He says that he has no special power or talent. He makes no effort to stop the various thoughts arising. And depending on the situation, he has various feelings, including

thoughts like “Oh, how vexing” or “oh, how troublesome!” In the last line he asks us how Buddha nature can ever grow. To repeat, in Zen practice, we must go through the process described by Wo-lun before we can reach the state of mind described in the poem of the Sixth Patriarch. But the really realized person is not one who is trying to cut off his thoughts. He realizes: It is fine as it is. Whatever arises, it is like clouds in the sky, with no content. That’s why he can say, “facing situations his mind often moves.”

Recall in this connection the words of Dôgen Zenji, “Yet, thought it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.” When the weeds spring up again, we say “darn it!” And when the cherry blossoms fall and scatter in the wind, we say, “oh, what a shame!” Whatever feelings arise, it is no problem.