

CASE 54

**Ungan's "Great Mercy"**

By Yamada Kôun



*Instruction:*

Transparent on eight sides, totally open in ten directions;  
Emitting light and shaking the earth in all places,  
Exercising supernatural deeds and subtle functions at all times:  
Tell me, how could this be manifested?

*Case:*

Ungan asked Dôgo, "What does the Bodhisattva of the Great Mercy use so many hands and eyes for?" Dôgo answered, "It is like a person in the middle of the night reaching with his hand behind his head groping for his pillow." Ungan said, "I understood." Dôgo said, "How did you understand it?" Ungan said, "The whole body is hands and eyes." Dôgo said, "You said it very well. But you expressed only eight-tenths of it." Ungan said, "How would you say it, Elder Brother?" Dôgo said, "The entire body is hands and eyes."

*Verse:*

One hole, void and open;  
Transparent on all sides.  
Without form, without "I", spring takes its shape;  
Unobstructed and unhindered, the moon travels through the empty sky.  
Pure treasure eyes, arms of virtue;  
"The whole body" and "the entire body" – how do they compare with each other?  
The present hands and eyes manifest the entire activities:  
The great functions, vertical and horizontal – how could they detest anything at all?

*On the Instruction:*

This is also a very famous koan. Ungan and Dôgo were dharma brothers, fellow disciples who inherited the dharma of their master Yakusan Igen Zenji. Dôgo was the older of

the two. In his *Soliloquy on the Book of Serenity* (Shôyoroku Dokugo), Yasutani Roshi mentions how Ungan was a person of great accomplishment, but that it took forty years for him to come to enlightenment. His was a case of a great talent maturing late. It would be wonderful if all I am saying here today could be translated simultaneously for the foreign members here, but I apologize that there is not the time for that today. I hope that it will be possible at a later date to translate my teishos on the *Book of Serenity* into English, but I hope you will bear up and simply listen today. Some people come quickly to kensho while others take time. An early kensho is of little use if it remains superficial, merely skimming the surface. This is not the fault of the practitioner, but rather the responsibility of the master. Even though it might take time to come to a kensho experience, if the experience is deep, that is to be preferred over an early, shallow experience. On the other hand, one shouldn't become proud of oneself for having taken so long! Nevertheless, as I just said, there are cases where later kensho experiences are deeper. I often tell the story of the later **Zenji Tani**, who took 18 years to come to kensho. He was proud of having taken so long and even wrote a book about his journey entitled "Searching for Mu for Eighteen Years." When I went to Hawaii to lead a sesshin there I confirmed the experience of a professor from Stanford University who had been practicing with Mu for 20 years. When I returned back from Hawaii, I related this to Mr. Tani. "You're boasting about having taken 18 years," I told him, "but here's somebody who took 20 years!" And in the case of Ungan in today's koan, it evidently took him 40 years. I happened upon this fact when reading Yasutani Roshi's book last night. I was filled with admiration on reading this. It's all the more a different category altogether from the usual kensho experience. One difference between the Soto School and Rinzaï School is that the Soto School does not try to forcibly bring about a kensho experience. As I'm always saying, the Soto School has more a tendency that could be characterized as waiting on the ground for the persimmon to ripen on the tree and fall of its own volition to the ground. That means the true natural flavor emerges. The Rinzaï School could be characterized as picking the fruit when it's still green and then pickling it in *shôchû* liqueur or steaming it to bring out the sweetness with artificial means. It might be sweet, but actually it takes time for the real flavor to come out. Recently I've been musing about where the difference lies. If a true, ripened flavor emerges, the result is the same. In the case of the Rinzaï School, there is almost always a dividing line between the state before kensho and following kensho. Even though we might speak in terms of attaining kensho, as long as this dividing line remains, it is still not the genuine article. It's a matter of this true ripening, and I can't help feeling that such cases can be found more frequently in the Soto School in the koans. It's truly natural. For example, if I hold up this stick here and there is some idea of this stick being no other than the universe, it's still not enough. There are still those dregs of satori remaining and they must be thrown away. In terms of the *Five Ranks*, it's a matter of *kenchûtô*, just the thing itself. If there's still some idea of "just sitting is the true fact," it's still not enough. There is just sitting, just standing, just drinking, just eating. You must be able to come completely to peace in just that thing. To be sure, without a kensho experience, such peace cannot emerge. Even

facing death to gain the great freedom can only happen if you have obtained this peace. This is not possible without the experience of kensho, but as long as there is the slightest idea remaining of kensho, that is not the natural sweet taste, so to speak. When you sit, there is just sitting. When you sit, there is just standing. Gantō refers to this as “the last word.” He says, “If you want to know the last word, it is just this (tada kore kore).” He is saying that must be clear. Then when you sit there is only sitting, and nothing at all. As I just said, I have the feeling that such cases are more numerous in the Soto School, although this is my personal opinion. Let us look now at the Introduction.

Transparent on eight sides, totally open in ten directions; What is this referring to? On reading commentaries by the scholar Katoh Setsudō, I see that he refers to this as the activity of the Dharma-Body Buddha or Vairocana Buddha. But that’s nothing more than lecture Buddhism. Make no mistake, it is those things too; but unless you realize that Vairocana Buddha is you yourself, it is not living Buddhism. This lie is thus referring to your own true nature, your own true self. I would like you to become clear on this matter. To say it is “transparent on eight sides” means that it is clear and shining like a jewel. The character used here (rei) actually means a lattice in a window. The same holds for the accompanying character (rō), which means a large window, or the framework attached to a window. In this zendo we have shoji paper windows. You can take this line as referring to the framework that remains when the paper has been removed. The expression “eight sides” means in all directions, combining north, south, east and west. He is saying that there are windows in all directions, which means “completely open” with the wind blowing through from all directions. You can enter from any side. This is referring to our true self. Among the koans dealing with Jōshū there is the following:

A monk asked Jōshū, "What is Jōshū?" Jōshū said, "East gate, west gate, south gate, north gate." (*Blue Cliff Record, Case 9*)

It is open on all sides and you can enter from any side. This should help you understand the expression, “Transparent on eight sides, totally open in ten directions.”

“Ten directions” is what results when you add the dimensions up and down to the eight sides. Why is it “totally open in ten directions”? This is an important point. Actually, no window frames are necessary. In all directions it is completely empty. This is referring to your true self. Then come the next lines:

Emitting light and shaking the earth in all places,

Exercising supernatural deeds and subtle functions at all times: What does this mean? It might seem mysterious and wondrous, but this is always and everywhere. It is no doubt important to ask in the dokusan room what is meant by emitting light and shaking the earth. But how is the light emitted and how is the earth shook? Happy, sad, hateful, loveable...in that way the light is emitted. That is understandable enough, but at the same time: the pillar, the post...in that way the light is emitted. You must become quite clear on this matter. This is your own light. Normally we assume that the pillar and the post are something

outside ourselves, completely separate from ourselves. But that's not the case. These are all your own light. If you clearly realize the world of oneness, you realize that these lines of the Introduction are referring to your own true self. You realize it in the highness of the mountain, the stretching out of the river, the green of the leaves, the red of the flowers. In precisely that way the light is emitted. That is your own light.

And how is the earth shaken in all places? Sitting, standing, walking, rolling over, weeping, laughing...in that way the earth is shaken. I would like you all to clearly grasp this fact. What does it mean to speak about "exercising supernatural deeds and subtle functions at all times"? "Supernatural" is said in the sense of displaying a completely free and wondrous activity. What activity is that? When you're hungry you eat. When you have an affair to dispose of, you speak. When it's finished, you stop speaking. This is truly "supernatural" and "subtle." Iida Tōin Roshi often said that the things we take for granted are actually most wondrous. "When you're hungry, you cook the rice and eat it. This itself is wondrous deed and subtle function." I couldn't agree more. Then come the final lines of the Introduction:

Tell me, how could this be manifested? In other words, is there an example of how supernatural deeds and subtle functions are manifested? Yes, there is. Our attention is directed now to the Main Case that follows.

***On the Case:***

Ungan asked Dōgo, "What does the Bodhisattva of the Great Mercy use so many hands and eyes for?" The Bodhisattva of the Great Mercy is the Bodhisattva Kannon (Kanzeon Bosatsu). In the *Heart Sutra* she is referred to as Kanjizai Bosatsu, the expression used by the monk Xuanzang (jap, Genjō) in his Chinese translation of that sutra. The expression "Kanjizai Bosatsu" means the Bodhisattva whose seeing is completely free. "Seeing" (kan) is not said simply in terms of seeing with the eyes. Hearing with your ears is also seeing. There is the Japanese expression "naikan," which implies an "inner seeing" but not by seeing with the physical eyes or hearing with the physical ears. It is also possible to "see" with the tongue. It is only later, after the fact, that we speak in terms of seeing with the eyes. The Bodhisattva of the Great Mercy is often depicted as Kannon with a Thousand Arms or Kannon with Eleven Faces, as a figure possessing countless eyes and countless hands. According to Professor Katoh Setsudō (also cited above), thousand originally was forty, although it basically amounts to the same thing. Ungan wants to know what the Bodhisattva does with so many hands and eyes. What does Dōgo say in reply?

Dōgo answered, "It is like a person in the middle of the night reaching with his hand behind his head groping for his pillow." He says it is like a person in the middle of the night, half asleep and half awake, who gropes for his pillow with his hands. This is how he describes the activity of the Bodhisattva of Great Mercy.

Ungan said, "I understood." Dōgo said, "How did you understand it?" Ungan said, "The whole body is hands and eyes." In other words, the thousand hands

and thousand eyes are the activity of the true self. I often express this in terms of a fraction in which the numerator is the Greek letter alpha and the denominator is a circle containing the figure eight lying on its side to express empty infinity. It is empty but possesses limitless capabilities. The aspect of emptiness is expressed in the first lines of the Introduction (Transparent on eight sides, totally open in ten directions). If you understand this, this koan can easily be solved. To say “the whole body is hands and eyes” is pointing to the activity of our true self. In his commentary to this koan, Old Master Banshō, the compiler of this koan collection, says the following: “When reaching for a pillow at night, there’s an eye in the hand; when eating there’s an eye on the tongue, when recognizing people on hearing them speak there’s an eye in the ears.”

We usually speak in terms of having five separate senses, but if one of them is missing, the others stand in for it. For example, a blind man uses a stick to walk along the street. In that case, there is an eye on the stick. Although we make a division into five senses, they are intrinsically one. The Verse we examine later speaks in terms of “one hole, void and open.” The “hole” is divided into five: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin. But the one using them is a single person. In speaking about the fact of emptiness containing limitless capabilities, Iida Tôin Rōshi often used the formula: “When there is no ‘I’, there is nothing that is not ‘I’” (*onore naki toki onore narazaru wa nashi*). If you are completely empty, the entire universe is you yourself. Usually we see things in terms of a separation into subject and object. But when that separation disappears, you realize that you are the entire universe. Enlightenment means to realize that you are empty. But after that, even emptiness is gone. That means throwing away satori. As long as there is some idea in your head of “emptiness,” a “shell” of satori is still remaining. It is only when that disappears that you become truly free. A truly realized person is not bound by anything. Earlier in this teisho I compared the Soto School with the Rinzai School. I can’t help feeling in both cases that the Zen of Dôgen Zenji is the authentically transmitted Zen. The Zen authentically transmitted by Buddhas and Patriarchs is what is expressed in the *Five Ranks* as *kenchûto*, where the separation between form and emptiness has completely disappeared. Unless you have come to this point, you cannot really understand the state of consciousness of Dôgen Zenji when he says, “I have returned to my homeland with empty hands.” I have the feeling that it is precisely regarding this point that Dôgen Zenji later became critical of Rinzai Zenji at a certain point in time. The “kensho” we are always talking about is something like entry to middle school. Because you have to pass the test in order to advance further in your studies, we have people practice fervently to “pass the test.” Then it’s a matter of passing the test and advancing on to graduation. But you cannot say you understand everything even after having graduated. After that, the path continues, as we can see in the master’s courses and doctoral programs existing today. But even after having obtained your doctorate, so to speak, it still doesn’t mean that you now understand everything. Unless you rid yourself of all traces of satori, you are not a truly free person. So even when we speak in terms of kensho, there still remains the aspect of practice and realization, no matter how long you’ve

studied. Of course, that aspect is very important. It is very important to spur yourself on in your practice, realizing that it is still not enough. Nevertheless, as long as there is some consciousness of having attained kensho and that is seen as something separating you from your prior understanding, it is still not the genuine thing. That too must completely disappear. I feel that the authentic Zen transmitted by the Buddhas and Patriarchs is found here.

To return to today's koan, Ungan said, "The whole body is hands and eyes." What does Dôgo say in reply?

Dôgo said, "You said it very well. But you expressed only eight-tenths of it." "That's a very fine answer," he says in praise. "But you only get 80% for it."

Ungan said, "How would you say it, Elder Brother?" Dôgo said, "The entire body is hands and eyes." Instead of "whole body," he speaks in terms of "the entire body." The original Chinese for "whole body" is *henshin*, while the word for "entire body" is *tsûshin*. In his commentary on this koan, the scholar Katoh Setsudô asks why Ungan didn't face his brother monk Dôgo and ask him why it is only eight-tenths. Katoh says that it is precisely because he did not ask in that way that makes Ungan outstanding. But the real problem is the question: Is there a difference or not between "the whole body is hands and eyes" and "the entire body is hands and eyes"? If we simply look at the words on the surface, you might assume that the first statement receives 100 points while the second statement only receives 80 points. And there are even some commentators who see the statements in that way. A certain professor wrote a book about "Tea and Zen" in which he treats this koan and states that the second statement is somehow deeper than the first. Upon reading this I felt that the author had never practiced with koans in the dokusan room. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi uses the expression *nanpin-nantei* (literally, "difficult older brother, difficult younger brother", but here in the sense of both being outstanding) to view it. He sees the two protagonists as having the same state of consciousness. They are viewing the same world in saying what they do, but still you only get "eight-tenths" and never one-hundred percent. No matter how well you state it, you still only get 80%. So you make your best efforts to obtain a perfect score. But if you're actually given 100 points, you're liable to take things easy and think you're OK as you are. There is the view that even Shakyamuni Buddha has only received eight-tenths. This is how this statement has to be viewed in today's koan.

### ***On the Verse:***

One hole, void and open;

Transparent on all sides. The "hole" can be taken as meaning the "six holes" (Japanese: rokkyû) of our six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and will). I think this is what this is referring to here. For example a single eye is "one hole." Although there is a hole, it is void. And precisely because it is void it fills the entire universe. For example, you see a flower and say, "Oh, how beautiful!" That fills the entire universe, the content is empty. If I strike the rostrum with a stick (Roshi hits the rostrum with his stick), that fills the entire universe. This

is the same as the first line of the Introduction: Transparent on eight sides, totally open in ten directions.

Because it is void, it extends out everywhere.

Without form, without “I”, spring takes its shape. “Form” means all phenomena revealed in the light of the sun. The flowers bloom, the leaves sprout on the tree, the insects crawl out, all phenomena. But it is not spring itself. Actually, spring has no form or shape. There is no “I,” no ego trying to show off. To say “spring takes its shape” is a reference to Chinese music, in which the sounds of the flute were tuned to twelve tones. Nowadays we have piano tuners who do much the same thing on the piano. Piano tuners often use a pipe to produce tones to help in tuning the piano. Perhaps this is where this phrase originally comes from. In China they divided the sounds into twelve levels and divided those tones into two groups of six, which were known as the yin and yang tones. *Yang* is spring, and *yin* is winter, or you could say spring and summer is *yang*, while fall and winter is *yin*. To say that spring takes its shape means that spring is in the *yang* section. The word translated here as shape (*ritsu*) refers to the *yang* sounds, while the *yin* sounds are expressed with the character *ryo*. Thus, with the arrival of spring, the “*ritsu*” season begins. That means we enter the *yang* tone scale. Spring has no shape, it has no ego. But of itself it enters the season of *yang*. It becomes warm by itself. What is this referring to? It means our own true self.

Unobstructed and unhindered, the moon travels through the empty sky. The moon moves through the sky without stopping and without any hindrance. We might think we have something like an ego. But you just get hungry, whether you want to or not. There is no ego, but your stomach naturally becomes empty and you feel hungry. This becoming hungry, too, has no form or shape. But if you eat something warm, it becomes warm. The food we eat is gradually digested and becomes our flesh and blood. That is just like the moon traveling through the empty sky. There is no obstruction.

Pure treasure eyes, arms of virtue. The “pure treasure eyes” are said in reference to the many eyes of the Bodhisattva of the Great Mercy. If there is no ego, it is always pure and spotless. This is referred to here as “treasure eyes.” Without your wanting to, you just see what is before you. But if there is an idea of an “I”, it becomes egoistic. When there is no ego, it is beautiful. When we see things, there is no ego, there is just seeing: black, red, everything perfectly clear. To consider something red as white creates a stain. The “arms of virtue” are the thousand arms of the Bodhisattva of Great Mercy. Virtue results from the activity of the many hands. If you are kind to others, that will come back to you. These are the hands that produce virtue.

“The whole body” and “the entire body” – how do they compare with each other? Let us leave off for a while from interpreting this line. If you get caught up in them you lose the sense. In preparation for today’s teisho I was reading the *Surangama Sutra*, which I found to be quite argumentative in style, and filled with all manner of observations. Looking at my copy of the work, I found several sections underlined in red, which means I must have read

it at some time in the past, although I have no recollection of doing so! Buddhist doctrine really goes into hairsplitting detail and is quite a challenge to read. But there's also the danger of losing the main thread with so much detail. What main thread is lost? All sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha, as Hakuin Zenji writes.

The present hands and eyes manifest the entire activities:

The great functions, vertical and horizontal – how could they detest anything at all? Whether it is “the whole body” or “the entire body,” the hands are the working of the entire universe, and the same holds for eyes. Thus, this activity exhausts the entire universe. Here it is known as “the great functions” (taiyû). That activity is truly free. When the true self is revealed you might assume, in hearing that it is one with the universe, that there are two separate things that are somehow one with each other. The true self and the universe are one; the essential world and essential nature are one and the same. The expression “entire activities” (zenki) means the activity of the entire universe. You could refer to it as the activity of the “total self” (zenjiko). And that activity is truly free, with nothing sticking to it, nothing unpleasant. “How could they detest anything at all?” This koan has been included here in order that people can realize their true self. It's not a matter of getting caught up in the web of words; you have to go on and realize your true self.