

CASE 61

Kempō's "One Line"



By Yamada Kōun

Instruction:

A roundabout preaching is easy to understand: it imparts to one hand;
A direct preaching is hard to understand: it opens up in all directions.
I beseech you, do not intend to speak clearly.
If you can speak clearly, it is harder to get out [of the cage].
If you don't believe it, I will try to raise the case, look!

Case:

A monk asked Master Kempō in all earnestness, "In a certain sutra it says, 'Ten-direction Bhagavats, one Way to the gate of nirvana.' I wonder where the Way is." Kempō lifted up his stick, drew a line and said, "Here it is."

The monk told Unmon about this and asked him. Unmon said, "This fan jumps up to the heaven of the thirty-three devas and adheres to the nose of the deva Taishaku. When a carp in the eastern sea is struck with a stick, it rains torrents as though a tray of water is overturned."

Verse:

The hand [of a master veterinarian] cures even a dead horse.
The soul-reviving incense will make you rise from the peril.
If you once sweat with your entire body,
You will believe that he has never spared the eyebrows¹.

On the Instruction:

This koan also appears as the final case of the *Gateless Gate*. The Introduction and Verse to the koan as it appears in the *Book of Equanimity* provide Wanshi Zenji's way of viewing the koan.

A roundabout preaching is easy to understand: it imparts to one hand;
A direct preaching is hard to understand: it opens up in all directions. A

¹ A saying goes that, if a Zen master imparts a wrong teaching, that teacher will lose his or her eyebrows.

“roundabout preaching” is a preaching that goes into exquisite detail intellectually in providing an explanation. It might be easy enough to understand such a detailed, intellectual explanation, but it “imparts to one hand.” That means it gives only a one-sided view of things and misses the big picture. Even the best intellectual explanation can only present half of the reality at best. But a “direct preaching is hard to understand.” It is “direct” in the sense of not relying on concepts or ideas. Such a preaching is difficult to understand. In terms of today’s koan, for example, it might be easy enough to intellectually understand Kempo’s drawing a line. But when it comes to his statement, “here it is,” unless we have an actual experience of that world, we will not really know what he is talking about. However, although it is difficult to understand “it opens up in all directions.” In other words, when matters that can be only half understood intellectually are shown experientially, you understand immediately. This means completely revealed with nothing hidden.

I beseech you, do not intend to speak clearly. But don’t run on trying to explain it in easy terms.

If you can speak clearly, it is harder to get out [of the cage]. In other words, even if you are most eloquent in your intellectual descriptions, you will find it difficult to extricate yourself from a cage of intellectualizing.

If you don’t believe it, I will try to raise the case, look! If you don’t believe what I am saying, I offer the following case for your perusal.

On the Case:

A monk asked Master Kempô in all earnestness, “In a certain sutra it says, ‘Ten-direction Bhagavats, one Way to the gate of nirvana.’ Kempô Oshô of ESSHÛ was originally a disciple of Tôzan Ryôkai Daishi, honored as the founder of the Soto School of Zen. Among Tôzan’s outstanding descendants was Sôzan Honjaku. Together they are revered as the originators of the Soto School. Some commentators find it strange that the name of Sôzan, actually a disciple of Tôzan, should come first in the official name of the school. Others believe the Sô in the name might originate in Mt. Sôkei, which was where the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (Japanese: Enô) resided. But no one knows for sure. At any rate, Kempô was an older dharma brother of Sôzan and had a very clear dharma eye, as you can surmise by looking at this koan.

The statement ‘Ten-direction Bhagavats, one Way to the gate of nirvana’ originally appears as a gatha or poem in the 5th chapter of the sutra known as the *Surangama Sutra*. The monk doesn’t recite the entire gatha. At any rate, the “ten-direction Bhagavats” can be understood as Buddhas or as Shakyamuni Buddha. Buddha has ten names, which include Buddha, Tathagatha, World-Honored One, etc. The name “Ten Directions” is one of those names, and actually means Buddhas in ten directions. There are many Buddhas, and the last of them is Shakyamuni Buddha. Above him are the so-called “Seven Buddhas.” And beyond that there are almost countless Buddhas, known as several thousand or several ten-thousands. This is what is referred to here in the statement “ten-direction Bhagavats.” As you will

understand by imagining it, time is without limit. Before we were born, time existed without limit because it has no beginning. During that endless time, the beings who continued earnest practice over billions of years became the next world-honored ones. We cannot imagine this, perhaps, but when we realize satori, we continue practice to rid ourselves of any stain of satori. The original “dirt” or “dust” is our concepts and ideas. But no matter how hard we try to rid ourselves of it, some dirt remains. This is how Yasutani Roshi describes this state of affairs. There is endless dirt sticking. And thus, there is no limit to how clean we can make it in practice. This is our essential nature. The sutra says that there is a single way to nirvana. Nirvana can be seen as the way of true peace of mind. There is one way to that peace. Although there are many Buddhas, they pass through this way and enter nirvana. This is what the gatha in Chapter 5 of the *Surangama Sutra* is saying. This monk has heard that gatha and would like by all means to travel that same path to nirvana.

Kempō lifted up his stick, drew a line and said, “Here it is.” This is different from the modern-day Soto School. What we have here in this koan is the true tradition of the Soto School. There is no logic sticking to it. He says, “Here it is.” This is not “roundabout preaching,” it is a “direct preaching.” You have to realize it to truly understand it. I’m sorry to speak badly of the modern-day Soto School, but since our Sanbō-Kyōdan is in the Soto tradition, Yasutani Roshi said that we had separated from the Soto School and established a direct connection with Dōgen Zenji to create the Sanbō-Kyōdan. I believe that is only natural to say so. Few are those who would be able like Yasutani Roshi to say things so straightforwardly without mincing words. Harada Roshi also felt and thought the same way but still spent his entire life within the Soto School, and thus would not be in a position to freely speak critically of that school. I am always feeling, as I have said before many times, that if Dōgen Zenji were to be reborn and visit Eihei-ji, he would be driven away with abuse: “This is no place for you! Get out of here!” When I mentioned this to Brigitte D’Ortschy, she said the situation was no different in Christianity. She then gave me a passage to read from Dostoyevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov,” a great classic of world literature. I read it myself once in the past and felt that this was a work that probably no Japanese would be able to write. It delves deeply into the matter of religion. Among the three brothers, Ivan, the second oldest, is extremely intelligent. In the novel he writes a play. The youngest brother Aloysha is a very virtuous person who has also practiced in a monastery with the desire to become a monk. Ivan reads his drama to Aloysha. In that play Christ takes the stage, although he does not say a word. Even in the Japanese translation I read, the language is quite rough. The Grand Inquisitor says things like, “What did you come here for!?” “Why are you coming to bother us in our work?” If such persons were to see the real Christ, it might turn out like that in the book.

In like manner, if Dōgen Zenji were to suddenly show up in Eihei-ji Temple, the headquarters of the Soto School, the monks there might drive him out! This section from Dostoyevsky’s novel seems to agree in spirit with what I am thinking and saying. At any rate, this “direct preaching” of Kempō in today’s koan is nowhere to be found in the modern Soto

School.

When Kempō says, “here it is,” what does he mean? Needless to say, he is pointing to our essential nature, the essential world. It is the world where “not a speck of cloud obscures the view.” This is referred to as “here it is.” Kempō has his sights set directly on that world when he says “here it is.” If you understand this, you will understand where the Way is.

But the monk in the koan didn’t understand. So later on he went to Unmon and asked the same question.

The monk told Unmon about this and asked him. Unmon said, “This fan jumps up to the heaven of the thirty-three devas and adheres to the nose of the deva Taishaku. When a carp in the eastern sea is struck with a stick, it rains torrents as though a tray of water is overturned.” The monk told Unmon about his going to Kempō and asking his question and how Kempō responded. He wanted to know what this was all about and thus asked Unmon. In reply Unmon says what appears in the koan. As for the “heaven of the thirty-three devas,” there are many heavens in Buddhism as opposed to the single Christian heaven. There are worlds where the many people who have died in this world now reside. They are not all heaven, but the place where the most advanced persons reside is known as heaven, while the lowest place is hell. But even the highest level contains many variations. The heaven referred to here is the Tusita heaven where the most outstanding persons reside. Indra (Taishakuten) is something like the boss of that heaven. Unmon says that his fan jumps up to that heaven and hits the nose of Taishaku. What is he saying with such a statement? Then he speaks about the carp in the Eastern Sea. When you hit that carp with a stick it jumps around, and it rains torrents as if a tray of water were overturned. What relation do these statements have with Kempō’s “here it is”? This is the important point in the koan. It is sometimes referred to as the true self or Buddha nature or dharma nature. Or sometimes we say essential nature or essential world. Although it is completely empty, it is simultaneously the phenomenal world itself. There may be all sorts of movement or disturbances in the phenomenal world. So when Kempō says “here it is,” he is presenting that movement while at the same time revealing the essential nature. In Unmon’s case, he is presenting that element of movement from the aspect of the phenomenal world. However, in addition to being the phenomenal world it is the world of our true nature. In the phenomenal world, such things as a fan jumping up to heaven are impossible. But seeing things from the standpoint of the essential world, we can say such a thing. The same thing holds for the statement about the carp of the Eastern Sea. In terms of everyday logic, such statements cannot be understood. But our true self is presented to us directly in this way. Unmon Daishi was a master of the cogent statement, although he was closer in spirit to the Soto School. You can see both Kempō and Unmon as doing their utmost to bring us to a realization of the world of our true nature. In the version of this koan that appears in the *Gateless Gate*, Mumon Ekai, the author of that other collection, also presents his own commentary on the koan.

One goes to the bottom of the deepest sea heaving sand and raising dust. The other

stands on the top of the highest mountain and causes white waves to billow up to the sky.

The part about going to the bottom of the deepest sea could be seen as referring to Kempô. At the bottom of the ocean there is not the slightest movement. This is referring to the world of our true nature. But what about “heaving sand and raising dust”? The one heaving sand and raising dust is Unmon.

This is a difficult koan, but please take the time to savor it.

On the Verse:

The hand [of a master veterinarian] cures even a dead horse. The original Chinese says “entering the hand” (te ni hairu). What enters the hand? “Here it is” enters the hand. And then he can even bring a dead horse back to life. This is a reference to an old Chinese legend. In olden times there lived a man name Chôshû who had a most outstanding horse, which unfortunately died. Chôshû was beside himself with grief. His friend Kakuboku told him he would bring the horse back to life for him. He brought an animal that looked like a monkey and had it breathe into the nostrils of the dead horse, perhaps in a process resembling mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. And sure enough, the horse revived. When the men looked around, the monkey was no longer anywhere to be found. This story is mentioned here to indicate how when “that” is put in the hand, it can revive even a dead horse.

The soul-reviving incense will make you rise from the peril. The “soul-reviving incense” had a very fine fragrance. There is also a story behind this line of the verse. Long ago, an epidemic ravaged the land, claiming many lives. But when this incense was lit and the fine fragrance wafted in the air, people who had died three days before returned to life. It was an ethereal fragrance with the power to revive people from the dead. If you truly realize what the fragrance stands for, your true life will be in your hands. But you must clearly realize Kempô’s “here it is” and Unmon’s talk about the fan jumping up into heaven. The “soul-reviving incense” will bring you back to life, in the sense of giving you your true life.

If you once sweat with your entire body,

You will believe that he has never spared the eyebrows. It’s often said that sweating will cure you of a fever. It is like sweating the fever out of your entire body. The word “he” in the final line is referring to Unmon. It means that he is willing to spare his eyebrows and look strange out of his great compassion to save all beings. Although he might look quite unsightly when observed from the side, he even forgets that and does not regret losing his eyebrows. It is said that if a Zen master preaches false dharma or gives a bad preaching, his eyebrows will fall out. Please recall in this connection Case 8 of the *Blue Cliff Record* (Suigan’s Eyebrows).

Towards the end of summer, Suigan instructed the assembly, saying, "All summer I've preached to you, my brothers. Look here, are Suigan's eyebrows still there?"

Hofuku said, "The robber's heart is terrified!"

Chôkei said, "They are well grown!"

Unmon said, "Kan!"

Today's Verse is saying that there are cases where the teacher does not regret even losing his eyebrows for bad preaching, so great is his compassion for his students. Thus, from the real standpoint we can say that Kempō's statement "here it is" is not the very best method of delivering a preaching. That's all the more the truth concerning Unmon. His method seems to be saying all sorts of strange things to confuse people so that, from one standpoint, it's true that it's not so admirable. Thus there have been short critical comments in koan collections that contain this koan, which say things to that effect. In other words, one can well understand that both masters are doing their very best, but it remains short of the genuine article. Such views are possible. Be that as it may, the masters are so filled with a desire to bring people to an awareness of this true fact, that they publicly embarrass themselves.