

CASE 76

Shuzan's Three Verses



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Instruction:

One phrase makes three phrases clear;
Three phrases make one phrase clear.
Three and one have no relation with each other.
Very clear is the way of the highest realization.
Tell me, what phrase exists first?

Case:

Shuzan instructed his assembly and said, "If you get it all at the first verse, you will be the teacher of buddhas and ancestors. If you get it all at the second verse, you will be the teacher of heaven and humankind. If you get it all at the third verse, you cannot save even yourself."

A monk asked, "At which verse did Your Reverence get it all?' Shuzan said, "The moon is set at midnight; one walks alone through the market place."

Verse:

The skulls of the buddhas and ancestors are penetrated with one single skewer;
The water clock in the palace moves quietly its arrow in the deep night.
The wonderful activities for heaven and humankind [are like] shooting ten catapults;
The troupes of clouds are brightly shining, emitting sudden lightning.
The person who is in here – do observe the change:
Meeting the base, one is noble; meeting the noble, one is base.
Finding the pearl through a blind man, the supreme way knows no end;
The [thin] knife plays freely over the deceased ox – there is nothing but the true heart.

On the Instruction:

Today's koan concerns the very famous *Three Verses of Shuzan*, which I believe are

also found in the *Miscellaneous Koans*.

One phrase makes three phrases clear;

Three phrases make one phrase clear. To say that “one phrase makes three phrases clear” means you are looking at the same thing from three different angles. In order to come to clarity on one phrase, you look at it from three different perspectives. The first phrase in the Main Case contains the word *sentoku*, which means to get it or understand it. This is what these first lines of the Introduction are talking about. To say “three phrases make one phrase clear” means that, although it might seem that there are three phrases, in the end they are there to make one phrase clear. You can say that one is three or three is one, but three and one are definitely not the same.

Three and one have no relation with each other. Although each phrase of the three is separate, in the final analysis they are one. There is the example of the Three Virtues of Dharma Body, Prajna Wisdom and Liberation. There is also the example of the *Three Bodies of the Buddha* or *Trikaya* (*dharmakaya* or dharma body, *nirmanakaya* or created body, and *sambogakaya* or reward body). Although there are three, they are essentially one.

Very clear is the way of the highest realization. The “way of highest realization” (*kōjō no ro*) means the Supreme Way. When Hyakujō spoke about the “three phrases mutually interpenetrating,” he attached the word “good” to beginning, middle and final and spoke about the “beginning, middle and final good.” What is the “beginning good”? In terms of my fraction it means everything in the phenomenal world, it is the numerator. It could be this stick here (Roshi holds up his stick). This is the “beginning good.” The “middle good” negates this stick and says, “this stick is not a stick.” The beginning good speaks about the phenomenal stick. But viewing things from the essential standpoint you say, “this stick is not a stick. The final good is saying, “thus it is called a stick.” To repeat, the beginning good is the stick as the numerator of the fraction. When you say, “this stick is not a stick,” it is the middle good with attention directed to the world of the denominator. Finally there is the whole, the fraction itself, which is known as the final good. Then you say, “this is a mountain.” I believe the “final good” of Hyakujō is the name itself. This matter is described in the section known as the syllogism in the *Diamond Sutra*. For example: Sentient beings are not sentient beings, therefore they are called sentient beings. Buddha is not Buddha, therefore it is called Buddha. A stick is not a stick, therefore it is called a stick. The *Diamond Sutra* consists of such statements. But the *Diamond Sutra* is not simply describing stages in the development of thought. It is describing the world of our true nature or true aspect.

To say “three and one have no relation with each other” is as follows. You say, “this is a stick.” You say, “this is not a stick,” and in that instant the world of emptiness appears. Thus, it has no relation to the initial stick. When you are seeing things in terms of the entire fraction, it is not the numerator and it is not the denominator. Thus:

Three and one have no relation with each other.

Very clear is the way of the highest realization. It is very clear. Harada Roshi

uses the words *zenbetsu* (completely different) and *zendō* (completely the same) in referring to this fact. I'm not sure if these expressions were used by anyone before him. For example there is the emotion of happiness or sadness. There is no doubting that they are both workings of your own mind. There is no doubting that both happiness and sadness are the manifestation of your true self. This is the aspect of *zendō* (complete sameness). Unless you clearly realize emptiness, you cannot clearly see that they are completely the same. As long as you see things only in terms of the world of phenomena, they seem to be separate and disparate, so you cannot speak in terms of the world of oneness. You have to realize that each single one is zero, that they appear on the basis of zero. Although they appear to be disparate on the surface, the root is one. This is what you realize in realization. They are only completely the same on the basis of being empty. When we feel sad there is only sad, without a trace of happy. When you feel happy, there is only happy without a trace of sad. But this line is saying that "three and one have no relation with each other" is an expression of the world of complete difference (*zenbetsu*).

Tell me, what phrase exists first? Which is the phrase that comes before any division into three or talk about three clarifying one or vice versa? It is asking what the true fact is. This is presenting the problem, and now a concrete example will be given in the Main Case.

On the Case:

Shuzan instructed his assembly and said, "If you get it all at the first verse, you will be the teacher of buddhas and ancestors." The word translated here as "get it all" (*sentoku*) means obtaining the banker's fee in gambling. The first character "sen" in the expression "sentoku" means matting and means making a clean-up in a gambling game. What does it mean, then, to "get it all at the first verse"? You can understand it as meaning to realize fully at the first verse. Shuzan says that, if you realize completely on hearing the first verse, you can become the teacher of Buddhas and patriarchs. He then continues:

"If you get it all at the second verse, you will be the teacher of heaven and humankind. If you get it all at the third verse, you cannot save even yourself." If you get it on the second phrase, you can still be the teacher of humans and heavenly beings. But if you only get it on the third phrase, you cannot even save yourself.

What is the first phrase? You have to give your answer in *dokusan*. You have to be able to produce a phrase by which you become teacher of Buddhas and patriarchs. And for the second phrase one by which you become teachers of humans and heavenly beings. This is also challenging and a question to be raised in *dokusan*. You might think that the third phrase is the most boring, since you cannot even save yourself if you don't realize it. What sort of phrase is that? And is there even such a division into first, second and third phrase? You have to be able to see that. Why? Because if "three phrases make one phrase clear," you have to ask if there are three phrases or not. To give a hint, although there are certainly three phrases, they are one. Although they are one, we make a division into three. This sort of thing is often

explained this way in Buddhism.

A monk asked, "At which verse did Your Reverence get it all?" Shuzan said, "The moon is set at midnight; one walks alone through the market place." Is this the first phrase, the second phrase or the third phrase? What do Shuzan's words mean? "Oh, it's gotten quite dark, let's go home!" And you make your way along the road back home. What a wonderful phrase! It is neither the first nor the second nor the third phrase.

On the Verse:

The skulls of the buddhas and ancestors are penetrated with one single skewer; These lines are understood as referring to the first phrase, in the gaining of which you become teacher of Buddhas and patriarchs. As I mentioned before, the first phrase would be this stick. When I say "this stick," it is neither numerator nor denominator. You could think of it as the entire fraction surrounded by a circle.

The second phrase is "there is no mountain," which means the denominator. To call it a mountain according to conventional thinking would be the third phrase. That would be surrounding the entire fraction with the circle, but I believe this verse takes things in reverse order. To say "the skulls of the buddhas and ancestors are penetrated with one single skewer" is to express how all concepts have fallen away. So only the "skulls" are remaining, with no flesh or sinews. There is not even the "B" of Buddha remaining. If you ask me, this Verse takes the reverse order. In the former part it was the third phrase, and now it is the first phrase in which the outside of the fraction is surrounded by a circle. It is the thing itself, before there is a division into numerator and denominator. This is what is being described in the first line. That means it's slightly different from before. If you attain this first phrase, "The skulls of the buddhas and ancestors are penetrated with one single skewer." The section in the *Diamond Sutra* "a mountain is not a mountain, therefore it is called a mountain," said in connection with the phrase in the Instruction "one phrase makes three phrases clear," is a case of bringing the first phrase last. In this case, however, it is brought first. It is the world of not a single thought or concept. When there is not a single intellectual distinction, all thoughts are extinguished.

You might be familiar with the phrase: "Already the single character 'Buddha' dirties the mind field." That's because the word Buddha is a concept. As long as there is any idea of "Buddha," it has already soiled the field of our mind-heart. This is said from this standpoint. This is the first phrase. It is only from this standpoint that you can become the teacher of Buddhas and patriarchs. Only when you have clearly realized the world of emptiness can you become such a teacher.

The water clock in the palace moves quietly its arrow in the deep night. The water clock operates by allowing the water to fall down drop by drop. The palace is always very quiet, but in that dead silence you hear the sound of the drops of water. It evidently has a mechanism by which the dropping of the water causes an arrow to move on a clock face to show the time. The arrow rotates around the clock face. It means that, even though it is very silent,

there is still a little movement as the arrow moves along the clock face. What does this mean? Because this is the first phrase, it is the circle surrounding both the numerator and denominator of the fraction. It is the fraction itself. It is the world that comprises both numerator and denominator. It might seem as if there is nothing at all, but there is some movement. It is not a vacuum or simply zero. You know the phrase, “in the midst of not a single thing there is the limitless storehouse.” I feel this is what this line of the verse is talking about.

The wonderful activities for heaven and humankind [are like] shooting ten catapults;

The troupes of clouds are brightly shining, emitting sudden lightning. This corresponds to the second phrase, which upon understanding you become teacher of heavenly beings and human beings. The “wonderful activities” (yōki) means the activities that save people and heavenly beings. A catapult was an ancient weapon used to shoot huge shafts like giant arrows. You have to be able to release very heavy shafts to save humans and heavenly beings. What shafts are those? An example would be a great cry of “Kaatz!” like the masters of old. You might not have to resort to such drastic measures as the teacher of Buddhas and patriarchs, but when it comes to humans and heavenly beings, you have to be able to release such mighty shafts. This corresponds to the second phrase.

The troupes of clouds are brightly shining, emitting sudden lightning. It is as if there were soldiers lying in ambush in the clouds, but the clouds are brightly shining. That could be a reference to the flags fluttering brightly in the breeze, as if shining. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the clouds are completely silent. And out of that stillness lightning is suddenly sent forth, emitting thunder or a great flash of light. This would be getting the second phrase.

The person who is in here – do observe the change: The “person who is in here” means the person who gains the third phrase. This would usually be the ordinary unenlightened person (bonpu), but because three is one and one is three, this means that all beings are intrinsically Buddha. The change to observe here means to view carefully the free activity by which they change their body. This is not possible for the ordinary unenlightened person. This line of the verse says that “person who is in here” also gives off the flavor in the background of the Buddha, in the sense that all beings are intrinsically Buddha. It is not a completely unenlightened being. We who are in the position of guiding others in Zen practice use this or that method to lead others. This is what this line is referring to.

Meeting the base, one is noble; meeting the noble, one is base. This is referring to the freedom of activity of an outstanding Zen person. From one perspective you can also say: “Meeting the base, one is base; meeting the noble, one is noble.” If a child comes you take an attitude fitting to a child. If an older person comes, you take a stance fitting to an older person. You can do it with perfect freedom. This is referring back to the former line: The person who is in here—do observe the change. The Main Case speaks in terms of not being able to save yourself. This would be telling us to look carefully at the way of guiding those who cannot save

themselves.

Finding the pearl through a blind man, the supreme way knows no end; There is an old story behind this that originally appears in the Taoist work *Zhuangzi*.

Once Emperor Yellow, going on an outing to the north, lost his pearl. He had a wise man search for it, but he could not find it. Next, he sent a clairvoyant man, but he could not find it either. At last he sent a blind man, and he found the pearl.

It will not do to search for it intellectually. You have to empty your head. Just like the blind man was the one to find the pearl, it is only when you empty your mind that you can meet up with your true self. You practice Mu to empty your minds. As I always say, at first there is a division between you and Mu. Then you practice Mu with all that's in you, but all sorts of thoughts come into your head, making it impossible to grasp Mu. There are many people with this problem. They are doing their best but are still considering things intellectually. The thing they think about most is about themselves in a manner of self-reflection. It as if there were a third party in addition to you and Mu, who is standing on the periphery and observing things, a little like *The Third Man* in the famous film. You are constantly observing and judging your practice from the side, as it were, wondering if your way of practicing Mu or your way of breathing is all right. If you are concerned with such matters, you cannot truly forget yourself in the practice of Mu. The only thing the Zen teacher can do is to have those people devote themselves solely to Mu. That doesn't mean exerting physical force into the practice. If physical force were enough, sumo wrestlers would be attaining kensho every day, but that's not the right way. If you go on that way, you cannot truly forget yourself and cannot truly become empty. Zen satori is a matter of becoming empty. It cannot be called a true Zen satori experience if it is not an experience of emptiness. A lot of people think it is a matter of experiencing a feeling of oneness. That might be one sort of Zen, the Zen of samadhi power (jōriki). As I am always saying, if you are still concentrating on something with form, it is not enough. In the art of archery you have a target you shoot at. You concentrate on that target, which you can see, thereby gradually increasing your powers of concentration. But this will not lead to enlightenment. As soon as you stop practicing, those powers of concentration fade away and you are back where you started. Such powers of concentration are no doubt important in your life to achieve anything, but satori does not emerge from mere concentration of mind. When you are counting your breaths, it has no form or shadow. You have to devote your full attention to "one," "two" and so on. The same holds for the practice of Mu. If you concentrate in that way, you suddenly realize. I would like you all to be aware of this matter. It is when you practice Mu and become empty that you initially realize that you yourself are empty. Thus, there is this aspect by which only a blind person can find the pearl. They you can say, "the supreme way has no end."

The [thin] knife plays freely over the deceased ox – there is nothing but the true heart. This line is also based on an old legend. A master chef used his knife to serve up dishes. He was a true master of the kitchen knife. His knife seemed to dance over what he was cutting. The reason was because the knife was so sharp and thin. It could cut the meat with no resistance, as if it were dancing. As long as something is forced, it's no good, the master chef explained. This story is cited here to express this free activity. The words “there is nothing but the true heart” are pointing to Shuzan’s statement in the koan: “The moon is set at midnight; one walks alone through the market place.”

This is so free of guile, so free and natural. This verse is referring to this freedom in the lines here. Please take the time to savor this verse and the koan.