

CASE 77

**Kyôzan: As His Profession
Requires**



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

It is like a person depicting the empty sky:
The moment one starts to use the brush, one is in the wrong.
How could you bear creating a model and making a pattern?
How could you bear trying to make something?
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Bansho¹ has already exposed means of fixation.
If there are rules, make avail of them;
If there are no rules, use the [following] example.

Case:

A monk asked Kyôzan, "Your Reverence, do you know letters or not?" Kyôzan said, "According to my capacity." The monk immediately turned around once clockwise and said, "What letter is this?" Kyôzan drew the ideograph for "10" [十] in the earth. The monk turned himself around once counter-clockwise and said, "What letter is that?" Kyôzan modified the sign "十" into a swastika [卍]². The monk drew a circle in the air and lifted his two palms like Asura³ vigorously holding the sun and moon and said, "What letter is that?" Kyôzan immediately drew a circle enclosing the swastika. The monk at once represented the vigor of a Rucika⁴. Kyôzan said, "Good, good. Keep it with care."

Verse:

The emptiness of the circle of the Way will not be filled;
The letters of the stamps of emptiness have not yet revealed.

¹ It is Bansho Zenji, who composed the Instructions; therefore, the name "Bansho" here stands for "I."

² *Manji* in Japanese; a symbol of Buddhism.

³ Originally a Hindu deity, here one of the eight supernatural protectors of Buddhist Way.

⁴ The buddha Rucika wailed at his fate at first because he was the last of the thousand buddhas in this cosmic period. But then he made up his mind to be the energetic protector of the Dharma for all other buddhas. Two powerful figures of this buddha are seen at the entrance gate of many temples in Japan (named *Niô*).

Wonderfully governing the orbits of heaven und the axis of the earth;
Precisely applying the warp for the military use, the weft for literary use.
Letting go, gathering together;
Absolutely independent, freely going anywhere.
The activities turn subtle pivots; in the blue sky the thunder roars violently;
The eyes emit violet lights; one sees the stars in broad daylight.

On the Instruction:

It is like a person depicting the empty sky:
The moment one starts to use the brush, one is in the wrong.
How could you bear creating a model and making a pattern?
How could you bear trying to make something?

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These first lines are followed by the circle shown here. Banshō Rōjin, the author of the poem, drew a circle at this point. The final line is translated here as “how could you bear trying to make something?” But there are actually many possible interpretations. One possibility would be: “What circle (o) could you bear to make?” That might be easier to understand. In other words, you don’t even know what good a circle is. Or to put it in even simpler terms, you can’t even draw a circle. In other words, even if I draw this circle here, it’s beside the point.

Bansho has already exposed means of fixation.

If there are rules, make avail of them;

If there are no rules, use the [following] example. As I often say, the Instruction has its sights set on the Main Case. Unless you know about the Main Case, you won’t really understand the Instruction. If you ask what the main gist of this koan is, it is: “empty while simultaneously capable of great activity.” Or putting in the reverse, it is great activity, which is at the same time empty. The *Heart Sutra* says that “form emptiness and emptiness is form.” “Form” can be understood as the entire phenomenal world of color and shape. “Emptiness” means the world of not a single thing. This is saying that the phenomenal world of color and form is actually empty. Nevertheless, the phenomena appear like this most clearly. This is actually the fundamental essence of Buddhism. It was Shakyamuni Buddha who discovered this world for the first time. It is in realizing or grasping this world of emptiness that you attain fundamental peace of mind. This is the goal of Buddhism. The joy upon realizing this world of emptiness is beyond description. The words “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” can be seen as static expressions that express the essential world. In this koan, however, we have an example of the great activity of emptiness. Yasutani Roshi often used the expression “acrobatics of emptiness” (*kokû no karuwaza*) in referring to this. We stand up, sit down, cry and laugh. These are all the “acrobatics of emptiness.” This is what is being referred to here: “It is like a person depicting the empty sky.” This is what this koan is like.

Most translations of this line, such as the translation by Katoh Setsudō, translate this line as “it is like a person painting *onto* the empty sky.” Nevertheless, I agree with Yasutani Roshi in feeling that the translation “like a person depicting the empty sky” is more to the point and clearer. Even Katoh Setsudō, although he translates it as “like a person painting *onto* the empty sky,” still speaks in terms of “painting the empty sky” in his teisho on this koan. Thus, I feel that would be the best way to understand it. To say that it is “like a person painting the empty sky” means that, whatever you paint or depict will be wrong, because it is not true emptiness.

How could you bear creating a model and making a pattern?

How could you bear trying to make something? In the first line, the two characters *moyō*, which are used even in modern Japanese to indicate a “pattern,” are divided up into “*mō*” and “*yō*” to indicate a model and a pattern, as translated here. It means that, if you try to draw emptiness, you cannot help making simply a pattern or model of emptiness and not real emptiness. As I mentioned above, one possible translation of the second line in connection with the circle would be: “You can’t even draw a circle.” A circle might seem to be an expression of “zero” or “emptiness” but even drawing a circle is wide of the mark. If I were asked to produce emptiness, I might draw a circle to produce zero, but I already I cannot express it.

Bansho has already exposed means of fixation.

As mentioned, Banshō Rōjin is the author of the Introduction. It is he who is saying that you can’t even draw a circle to express it. Thus he (i.e. Banshō) has “already exposed means of fixation.” The original Chinese characters translated here as “fixation” mean something like a nail driven in wood to hold it down. The other character of the two means a net, and is also used in the sense of fixing something so that it cannot move. You can understand these lines as follows, I believe: By drawing a circle, Banshō has provided a clue. Drawing a circle is, to be sure, wide of the mark, but it nevertheless provides a clue. And how is it then? This is speaking about our true self.

If there are rules, make avail of them;

If there are no rules, use the [following] example. If there are precedents from the patriarchs, we should make avail of them. Otherwise, we should follow the example given here in the Main Case. These words introduce the Main Case.

On the Case:

A monk asked Kyōzan, “Your Reverence, do you know letters or not?” Kyōzan said, “According to my capacity.” The words “according to my capacity” (*bun ni shitagau*) mean “to the extent that’s required.”

The monk immediately turned around once clockwise and said, “What letter is this?” Here is an example of “the acrobatics of emptiness.” The content is empty but there is totally free activity.

Kyōzan drew the ideograph for “10” [十] in the earth. In writing the ideograph for “10,” which is a cross whose axes can be extended out endlessly, he is expressing how our true nature fills the entire universe. This “10” [十] is the thing itself. You can also see it as expressing the activity of the phenomenal world.

The monk turned himself around once counter-clockwise and said, “What letter is that?” Kyōzan modified the sign “十” into a swastika [卍] This, too, expresses the activity of the universe.

The monk drew a circle in the air and lifted his two palms like Asura vigorously holding the sun and moon and said, “What letter is that?” An Asura in Buddhism is a deity that is subject to such passions as anger. When the monk draws a circle in the air, he is expressing the world of emptiness for the first time.

Kyōzan immediately drew a circle enclosing the swastika. This expresses phenomena within emptiness: it is great activity that fills the entire universe.

The monk at once represented the vigor of a Rucika. To say that he “represented the vigor of a Rucika” means that he took on the pose of one of the guardian deities (Niō) at the gate of the temple.

Kyōzan said, “Good, good. Keep it with care.” Kyōzan expresses his approval.

Let me now talk about certain aspects of the koan in more detail. This monk seems to have been quite a formidable opponent. In his comments on this case, Banshō Rōjin refers to him as a “great arhat of India.” An arhat is a person of the way who has realized great enlightenment. It was such a monk who came to test Kyōzan and see how great the master really was. It was as if he was coming to check the master. Banshō Rōjin also describes the exchange in detail in his comments. That commentary makes mention of another monk from India who paid a visit on Kyōzan and then said: “I came to China to pay respects to Manjusri, but instead met a little Shakyamuni.” Isan and Kyōzan, the founders of the Igyō School of Zen, were truly outstanding. To sum it up, each movement we make—lifting a leg, raising a hand—is essential nature itself. All koans are trying to somehow make us aware of this world of emptiness. But they have no resort but to bring up something from the phenomenal world. This present koan has several interesting examples of that.

On the Verse:

The emptiness of the circle of the Way will not be filled;

The letters of the stamps of emptiness have not yet revealed. The “circle” in the first line is the hub of a wheel, around which the wheel turns. The second of the two characters (“kan”) translated here as “circle” also means a kind of jewel in China that forms a circle with a hole in the middle. It is such a jewel when the diameter and circumference equal each other, according to the information in the dictionary. You could say it is precisely due to that emptiness that the wheel can turn. You can understand this as meaning that, because it is essentially empty, the activities of the phenomenal world go smoothly. The “emptiness of the

circle” means that it can never be plugged up or stopped up. This is what the first line of the Verse means.

The second line means that no matter how hard you try to write the letters of emptiness you cannot do it.

Wonderfully governing the orbits of heaven und the axis of the earth;

Precisely applying the warp for the military use, the weft for literary use. You must realize that this is empty. And for that reason it is “wonderfully governing the orbits of heaven and the axis of the earth.” The ancient Chinese evidently believed that the heaven rotated to the left and the earth rotated to the right. It is precisely because it is empty that it can rotate so easily. The final line makes a division into military and literary and compares it to the warp and weft of a loom. This is also expressing the unfettered and free activity of Kyôzan, who can respond very freely to the questions of the monk.

Letting go, gathering together;

Absolutely independent, freely going anywhere. “Letting go” and “gathering together” is also known as killing and given life, in the sense of guiding Zen students. Killing would be depriving them of their concepts. Giving life would be leaving everything as it is. Such an approach is also important in childrearing, with the correct balance of praise and scolding. The same goes for guiding Zen students. This line says that Kyôzan is very free in “killing and giving life,” in “letting go and gathering together.” The line “absolutely independent, freely going anywhere” means “below the heavens and on the earth, I alone am honored.” You are walking alone in the entire universe. These lines, too, are praising the activity of Kyôzan.

The activities turn subtle pivots; in the blue sky the thunder roars violently;

The eyes emit violet lights; one sees the stars in broad daylight. The “subtle pivots” refer to the wheel hub that is empty in the center, which I mentioned above. It is from there that activity appears. You could say that all activity appears out of nothing. It is like thunder suddenly rumbling in a perfectly clear sky, since it emerges out of nothing. The second line praises the Zen eye of Kyôzan which sparkles so brightly that he can see stars in broad daylight. He is able to see straight into the state of consciousness of the other person. It’s a little creepy how he can immediately discern how you are faring the moment you enter the dokusan room by just looking at your face. His eyes are shining brightly, as if he could see stars in the daytime.