

CASE 82

**Unmon's "Sound" and "Color"**



By Yamada Kôun

*Instruction:*

If one does not cut off sounds and colors, one fails wherever one is;

If one seeks by sounds and sees by colors, one cannot see the Tathagata<sup>1</sup>.

Is there anyone who is on the way to return home or not?

*Case:*

Unmon instructed the assembly and said, "Hearing a sound – realizing the way; seeing color – clarifying the mind<sup>2</sup> – Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara comes with some small change and buys [poor] sesame rice cakes<sup>3</sup>. If he throws [it] away, he will get [nice] *manjû* cakes<sup>4</sup>."

*Verse:*

One goes outside the gate, lets the horse gallop and sweeps away the comets.

The smoke and dust of all countries are pacified of themselves.

"The twelve sense-fields"<sup>5</sup>, void of unreal shadows and echoes,

Emit pure lights in three thousand worlds.

***On the Instruction:***

If one does not cut off sounds and colors, one fails wherever one is. It's hard to know by just reading the text what the author is talking about. We begin with the Instruction by Wanshi Zenji. What could this first line be referring to? "Sound and colors" is a reference to the objective world. They are mentioned here as representative of that world. You believe that there is an objective world outside of you, although in reality you and the objective world are one. Nevertheless, you persist in thinking they are two; you believe the objective world is outside of you. To "cut off sounds and colors" means you must cleanly cut off that external world; otherwise you will be trampling on the true fact wherever you go. To say that "one fails wherever one is" means it is a continuum of errors, with no real freedom. You believe that you are the prisoner of the objective world. As mentioned, sounds and colors are brought up here as representatives of the objective world, and you believe they are outside of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Case 20e of the Miscellaneous Koans.

<sup>2</sup> An idiomatic expression. A typical example of the former case is the great satori experience of Master Kyôgen as he heard the sound of a pebble hitting a bamboo; a famous example of the latter case is the episode of Master Reiun, who came to a deep realization after glimpsing peach blossoms afar.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Case 78.

<sup>4</sup> Steamed cakes made of fine wheat, with minced meat in it; in Japan sweat beans are used inside.

<sup>5</sup> The "six roots" (the six sense-organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind) and the "six objects" (corresponding to the above six organs: color and shape, sound, odor, taste, tangible objects, objects of the mind) put together.

you or separate from you. This, however, is an illusion. Unless you cut off that external world, that is, the objective world, you will always be in error. Recall the lines from the *Heart Sutra*: *Clearly saw the emptiness of the five skandhas and passed beyond all suffering.* This means to realize that all colors and sounds of the objective world are empty. Unless you clearly realize that they are empty, you will be trampling everywhere on the true fact and will lose sight of it.

If one seeks by sounds and sees by colors, one cannot see the Tathagata. These are famous words originally found in the *Diamond Sutra*. This is how the text appears in the *Miscellaneous Koans* that we examine in the dokusan room:

*Then the World-honored One uttered this gatha: "If any one by form sees me, By voice seeks me, This one walks the false path, And cannot see the Tathagata."*

To say "one walks the false path" means that, as long as it is still two (dualistic), it will not be possible to see the Tathagata. Tathagata means Buddha, but what is the actual essence of Buddha? To state it right out, it is the world of emptiness. It would be a major error to think that the world of emptiness is simply a concept. To the contrary, it is an undeniable reality. To clearly realize this world of emptiness is known as kensho. The "form" mentioned in the *Diamond Sutra* can be seen as the world of form and color. To pursue yourself by means of form or color and attempt to see yourself, or to pursue yourself through sounds and attempt to find yourself via sounds: This is a false path, the sutra tells us. You believe you are here and the sounds and colors are outside of you. You believe you are here and the music is outside of you. If you go on that way, you cannot encounter the Tathagata. The koan asks us how, then, we are to see the Tathagata. It is enough to become one with the Tathagata.

Is there anyone who is on the way to return home or not? The "home" mentioned here is one's own homeland; it is your true self. Most people are not aware of their true self. We speak in terms of "I" or "me" or "mine." But if we are asked to produce that "I", we cannot do it. You might say, "here I am." But that is simply your body. You might point at your face and say, "here I am." But that is just your face. But what face do you yourself have? How are you able to produce you yourself? You are able to produce all those things to which you can attach the possessive pronoun "my." But how can you produce that to which no "my" can be attached? That is a koan for you. You must examine whether there is a way to return to that original self to which no "my" can be attached. This is what the last line of the Introduction is asking. And then it says there is such a way and points our direction to the Main Case.

### ***On the Case:***

Unmon instructed the assembly and said, "Hearing a sound – realizing the way; seeing color – clarifying the mind "Hearing a sound and realizing the way" means hearing sounds and coming to enlightenment. A very famous example of this is Kyôgen and Hitting the Bamboo Stalk. Kyôgen was a very intelligent fellow who is said to have memorized just about all of the sutras and commentaries. However, his Zen master Isan realized that he could not leave his student with just an intellectual understanding of things. It would not do for Kyôgen to believe that he really understood Buddhism simply with intellectual knowledge. Isan decided to grill him, so to speak, and presented him with a question: What is your own original face before your parents were born? This is a koan. In other words: You are sitting there now, but what sort of face did you have before your mother and father were even born? This is a very famous koan. Among the koans that are given to persons who wish to realize their true nature, there is the koan Mu or this koan about the original face.

Kyôgen was beside himself. He returned home and searched through the books he had read and his notes, but he could not find an answer. He completely lost any confidence. Although he had an incredible intellectual knowledge of Buddhism through reading books, he found himself at an impasse when faced with a single question from his master. He felt that he was beyond saving. In former times, the famous National Teacher Keichû had built a hut

and practiced there. Kyôgen went there and made a similar hut to pass his days in. Although he seemed outwardly to have given up all hope of realizing, no doubt an unceasing inner search continued in his heart. That is what Yasutani Roshi also says about him. One day, as he happened to be cleaning in the garden, a small pebble was caught up in his broom and flew through the air, hitting a nearby bamboo stalk. “Tock!” At that instant Kyôgen realized great enlightenment. He turned to his hut and lit incense and then prostrated himself in the direction of where Isan was living. He said that Isan’s mercy was greater than that of his own parents. When Kyôgen had been presented with the question by Isan and when he, unable to find answer, went to ask Isan, the master told him, “It would a simple thing to tell you the answer, but if I were to tell you the answer, I would be hated by you in the future.” He then sent Kyôgen on his way again. Recalling this, Kyôgen said, “If the master had told me the answer then, I would never have been able to experience the joy I have today.” He then prostrated himself in gratitude. In his case, the question was ripening in his spirit without ceasing. In chemical terms, this could be compared to inserting a substance in a solution so that it gradually dissolves and reaches what is known as the saturation point. If the solution receives some sort of stimulus at this time, such as gently tapping the flask or mixing the solution with a glass rod, it will suddenly become white and a crystal will form. This is similar to what happened with Kyôgen. When his inner search and questioning had reached a saturation point, the “Tock!” of the stone hitting the bamboo was enough to touch off enlightenment. This is an example of “hearing a sound and realizing the way.”

What about “seeing color and clarifying the mind”? “Clarifying the mind” is just another way of seeing realization or kensho. Here we can cite the example of the monk Reiun who searched for thirty years for an outstanding Zen master until one day he happened to see peach blossoms in the distance and “clarified the mind.” He then wrote a poem in which he said he would never forget that experience. This is an example of “seeing color and clarifying the mind.” We often use the word kensho to refer to Zen realization. Dôgen Zenji was not very fond of the world kensho, preferring to use the word “shô” instead. It’s a matter of realizing or confirming for yourself. Dôgen Zenji often mentions the example of Kyôgen and Reiun in the pages of the *Shôbôzenzô*, his magnum opus. What does Unmon say about this in today’s case?

Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara comes with some small change and buys [poor] sesame rice cakes. He says that kensho is like the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Kannon) scraping the last coins from the bottom of her purse to buy sesame rice cakes. Such cakes are certainly not the best. But the important thing is that she empties her wallet to buy them, leaving not a single coin behind. In Zen practice you can’t hold back at all. Unmon says that hearing sounds and attaining the Way or seeing colors and clarifying the mind are like the Bodhisattva Kannon emptying her wallet to buy sesame rice cakes of poor quality.

If he throws [it] away, he will get [nice] manjû cakes. To “throw it away” means to throw away all traces of satori or enlightenment. Then you will be able to eat outstanding cakes. Even though you may have realized enlightenment, it’s no good so long as you are sticking to that experience. It is only when you throw it all away that, for the first time, you can be “on the way to return home,” as it says in the Introduction. It’s no good if you’re still carrying around that satori experience with you. You have to throw it away and forget it. Then you have really good cakes. Unmon says this is the state of consciousness of the truly accomplished Zen person.

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

One goes outside the gate, lets the horse gallop and sweeps away the comets. In ancient times in China the appearance of a comet in the sky was considered to be a portent of calamity for the country. The “calamity” from a Zen standpoint is concepts and thoughts. For Zen practitioners the spear to drive away the comets is Mu. It is like charging into the midst of the enemy. What happens then?

The smoke and dust of all countries are pacified of themselves. Those

endless concepts and thoughts come to a complete stop and it becomes truly peaceful for the first time. All concepts and distinctions are cut off.

"The twelve sense-fields", void of unreal shadows and echoes,

Emit pure lights in three thousand worlds. The "twelve sense-fields" can be understood as meaning the objective world. These include the "six roots" and the "six domains." The "six roots" are eyes, ears, nose, tongue body and will. The "six domains" are the objects of sensation in the objective world: color, sound, odor, taste, touch and things. When these are combined, you obtain the twelve sense-fields. That is the objective world. This objective world is referred to here as "unreal" (kan), lacking roots or leaves. They are all "void" (bôzu). This is saying that all phenomena are fundamentally empty. All concepts fall away and pure light is emitted in the three thousand worlds. In other words, the "three thousand worlds" are no other than you yourself. If you think they are outside you, you are still seeing things dualistically and that light cannot be emitted. When you become completely one with the three thousand worlds, the pure light of your true self is emitted. One of the koans in the *Gateless Gate* is Case 39: Unmon and a Mistake in Speech.

*A monk once asked Unmon, "The radiance serenely illuminates the whole vast universe..."*

These words were originally written by Chôsetsu Shûsai. The title Shûsai was given to those in ancient China who passed the examination to become a high official. The examinations were not concerned with government or sociology. They tested how well you could read and write. That means all those who passed the examination and received the title Shûsai were outstanding literary stylists. Chôsetsu Shûsai, being skilled in poetry, expressed his own experience in a poem. The koan continues:

*Before he could finish the first line, Unmon suddenly interrupted, "Aren't those the words of Chôsetsu Shûsai?" The monk replied, "Yes, they are." Unmon said, "You have slipped up in the words."*

Do you understand? Where did he slip up in the words? If I tell you any more it will be an impediment to you in dokusan and so I won't say any more. Please work carefully and earnestly on this koan. To sum it up, the three thousand worlds and the self are one. And then it gives off a great light. But I won't say anything more!