

CASE 85

***The National Teacher's
Gravestone***



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

Only when you have the hammer to destroy the empty firmament
And the means to split Mt. Ka open,
You can reach where there are no seams or openings, where there are
no flaws or scars.
Just tell me, who is such a person?

Case:

Emperor Shukusô asked Chû, the national teacher, "What would you wish me to do after a hundred years?" The national teacher said, "Make a seamless gravestone for this old monk." The emperor said, "I should like to ask you, master, for a design." The national teacher remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "Did you understand?" The emperor said, "I didn't understand anything." The national teacher said, "I have a Dharma successor, my disciple Tangen, who is well versed with this matter."

Afterwards the emperor called Tangen and asked him about the meaning of this. Tangen responded:

"The south of the river, north of the lake:
In between there's gold, which fills the whole land.
Under the shadowless tree all people are in one boat;
In the crystal palace there is no knowledge."

Verse:

Only one – wide and endless;
Completely round – full and perfect.
Where the eyes can see no more, it stands high and lofty.
The moon is set, the lake is void, the color of the night so dark and weighty;
The clouds are gone, the mountain is lean; the autumn is rich in atmosphere.
The position of the eight trigrams is correct;
The spirits of the five elements are harmonious.
The [whole] body is right in it – do you see it?
The father and the son of Nan'yô seem to know that it exists;
The Buddha and Patriarchs of India can do nothing about it.

On the Instruction:

This is a very famous koan, which also appears as Case 18 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. The main case is the same, but the instruction and verse are different in the two collections. It would be interesting to compare the two versions, but due to time limitations, I will concentrate solely on this version in the *Book of Equanimity*.

Only when you have the hammer to destroy the empty firmament

And the means to split Mt. Ka open, The “empty firmament” means emptiness, the world of emptiness. The hammer here is the same hammer that a blacksmith uses when fashioning a sword.

Mt. Ka is one of the *Five Peaks* of China. To speak of the “means to split Mt. Ka open” means breaking down the world of emptiness that appeared in the first line. The world of emptiness is the world of enlightenment. Although we must one time experience that world of enlightenment, it will not do to become enamored of that world and wish to remain there indefinitely. You have to break open that shell, so to speak. In this case, emptiness means all ideas of emptiness. As I am always saying, you have to break down any ideas of emptiness. You have to break down that huge mountain of Mt. Ka. It is only when you have the ability to do so that the following is possible:

You can reach where there are no seams or openings, where there are no flaws or scars. This talk of “no seams or opening” is a reference to our own true self, which lacks any such seams or openings. It is saying that you can reach your true self, which is like a pure gem lacking the slightest scratch. In order to reach that true self, you must have the ability to break down emptiness, you must have the power to break Mt. Ka in half so that the waters of the river can flow through. It is only when you have such powers that you will be able to reach your true self. This true self, as just said, lacks any seams or cracks. The Instruction says that we will be able to reach our true self, which is lacking in any scratches.

Just tell me, who is such a person? This directs our attention to the Main Case where an actual example of such a person will be given. We are urged to look carefully. This seems to be hinting that both National Teacher Chû and Tangen are such persons.

On the Case:

Emperor Shukusô asked Chû, the national teacher, “What would you wish me to do after a hundred years?” Because I have mentioned it several times already on other occasions, many of you will know that National Teacher Chû was a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng (Japanese: Enô). In terms of Zen lineages, he was a brother monk of Seigen Gyôshi Zenji and Nangaku Ejô Zenji. After coming to enlightenment, he became a hermit, living in the mountains for forty years and continuing solitary practice. Although he did nothing to advertise his presence, his fame gradually spread so that even the reigning emperor heard of him. The title National Teacher refers to the teacher of the Emperor, although he still was not referred to at that time with that title. The emperor wanted by all means that he would come to his court and preach the dharma to him., and sent messengers several times to inform him of this But he would refuse time after time, saying he was not ripe enough in his own practice. This evidently happened several times, until he finally decided to go to the court, feeling he could not simply refuse the imperial decree. The Emperor Shukuso, when he went to meet Chû, perhaps because the monk was travelling in a wagon, alighted from his own wagon and pulled the wagon of the National Teacher, so great was his respect for him. During the time when Chû was still practicing as a hermit in the mountains, there was another monk practicing with him. Hearing that Chû had decided to leave for the imperial court at the repeated behest of the emperor, that other monk was beside himself with anger. He broke off all ties with his brother monk, saying Chû was lacking in the true spirit of a monk. It was not that the other monk was loath to go back into the world; he simply felt that his practice was not ripe enough. But National Teacher Chû felt he could not repeatedly deny the request of the emperor, and finally followed his will. At the time of this koan, National

Teacher Chû was advanced in years and had given up his teaching duties. The emperor came to pay a sick visit on him. The emperor posed the question, "What would you wish me to do after a hundred years?" "After a hundred years" is a nice way of saying "after you have passed away." Most people don't live to be more than 100. Since he was already well on in years at the time of this interview, the question is asking about the time after he has passed away. The emperor wants to know if National Teacher Chû has any special request for the time after his passing.

The national teacher said, "Make a seamless gravestone for this old monk." Usually gravestones are square in shape. But the graves of Buddhist monks are often oval in shape. Maybe such a grave is what is referred to with the words "seamless gravestone," in the sense of having no corners. At any rate, this was the request of National Teacher Chû.

The emperor said, "I should like to ask you, master, for a design." The national teacher remained silent for a long time. In response to the emperor's question, the National Teacher just sits still.

Then he said, "Did you understand?" The emperor said, "I didn't understand anything." When the National Teacher sits still, his own essential nature is completely revealed. But the emperor cannot understand it.

The national teacher said, "I have a Dharma successor, my disciple Tangen, who is well versed with this matter." The version of this line is a little different in the *Blue Cliff Record*:

"I have a Dharma successor, my disciple Tangen, who is well versed with this matter. Let him come to you and ask him about it."

The original text includes the word *kaette*, which seems to say that he is more well-versed than the National Teacher himself. At any rate, the national teacher tells the emperor that, after he has passed away, he should call on Tangen and ask him about this matter of what the seamless tomb should look like. The next part of the koan is Tangen's design for that seamless tomb.

Afterwards the emperor called Tangen and asked him about the meaning of this. Tangen responded:

"The south of the river, north of the lake:

In between there's gold, which fills the whole land.

Under the shadowless tree all people are in one boat;

In the crystal palace there is no knowledge." Tangen is presenting the world of the true fact, you could say.

"South of the river, north of the lake," means all the way from south to north, but it also means all the way from east to west, although that is not mentioned here. The critical comments of Wanshi Zenji to these lines speak about different matters, as does the Verse to this koan. This first line is expressing "in all directions everywhere," it is talking about the entire universe. This is one design for the seamless tomb.

To say that there is gold in it that fills the whole land is something that has to be examined in the dokusan room as a point of the koan, as is true for the other lines here. I won't talk about that in detail but just present the literal meaning of the worlds. You can see this as referring to gold filling up endless space. This too must be examined individually in the dokusan room.

What does "shadowless" mean in the next line? "Under the shadowless tree the people are in one boat." It means that it is One. If there are two, then a shadow appears, in the sense of subject and object in dualistic opposition to each other. If I am the subject, then there is an objective world in opposition to that, in the sense of a shadow. But actually there is no such dualistic opposition; it is "shadowless." As I imagine you know, this is referring to the essential world. There is also the phrase, "not a speck of cloud blocking the view." All the "people in one boat" means the phenomenal world. This is how I see this line. Actually, however, you have to

come to dokusan repeatedly and examine this with me in the dokusan room.

The next line, “in the crystal palace there is no knowledge,” means a palace that is completely transparent. Where is there such a palace, you might ask. Actually, it is right here. The word translated here as “knowledge” (chishiki) also means an outstanding monk, although it can also refer to what we normally call wisdom. Shakyamuni or the patriarchs are also known as “chishiki.” In this fully transparent palace, however, there are no wise persons. This is referring to the essential world, the world of “intrinsically not one thing.” This concludes Tangen’s reply to the emperor. As just mentioned, it’s necessary to examine at each individual line with the teacher in the dokusan room, and I imagine there are several of you who have already done that with me. Please take the time to savor these lines.

On the Verse:

Only one – wide and endless;

Completely round – full and perfect. These two lines could actually be a single line of six characters, but here they are divided up into two lines, and a critical comment (jakugo) is attached to each.

The words “only one” (Japanese: ko) mean the only one in the entire universe. “Wide and endless” extending out without limit.

The character translated here as “completely round” (en) is also used to indicate a circle. The character translated here as “full and perfect” (da) is originally a Sanskrit word meaning beautiful, full, etc. This second line basically means perfect and complete. It also means that it is one with the universe, extending out without limit. This is of course referring to our essential nature. Because the verse is written in reference to the “seamless gravestone” all the lines in it have some connection with that.

Where the eyes can see no more, it stands high and lofty. This, too, is a reference to our true self. It might be easier to understand if the order is reversed: It stands high and lofty, where the eyes can see no more.

The moon is set, the lake is void, the color of the night so dark and weighty. The moon has set behind the western mountains and disappeared. The lake is void, lacking any reflection of the moon. The color of the night is “so dark and weighty.” This, too, is a reference to the essential world. This seems to be a description of the world also expressed in the words, “under the shadowless tree all people are in one boat.”

The clouds are gone, the mountain is lean; the autumn is rich in atmosphere. Here we have a scene in autumn. It is a world in which the warmth of human passion has disappeared. Here is a world in which all discriminating thoughts and ideas have disappeared, where all the “junk” in your head is gone. This is the world of satori alone. Even ideas of Buddha or Dharma are gone. This is what is meant by the expression, “the mountain is lean,” I feel. And to say “the autumn is rich in atmosphere” is also an expression of the world of enlightenment, the very pinnacle of enlightenment.

The position of the eight trigrams is correct;

The spirits of the five elements are harmonious. These are the “eight trigrams” (hakke) originally found in the *I-Ching* or Book of Changes. You set up the eight trigrams to reach satisfaction. This is saying that, in the essential world, the position of the eight trigrams is from the start correct, without absolutely no room for improvement. It is complete and perfect. These eight trigrams allow eight different arrays, which also have a connection with yin and yang. If there is no gap, it is yang. With yin, there is a line in the middle. These are combined in various ways and express a sort of endless change and variation. To say the “position of the eight trigrams is correct” is to completely reveal the seamless gravestone itself. It is the world of the true fact, to which nothing need be added. Another expression of the same thing is *hachimén-reirô*, which expresses perfect serenity, for example the graceful dignity of Mt. Fuji. The same expression is used to refer to a serene and affable person.

The “five elements” (gogyô) mean the elements composing the objective world, usually considered to be earth, water, fire and wind. But they can also be seen as wood, fire, earth, metal and water. To say these five elements are “harmonious” means that the objective world is perfectly harmonized. It is not a matter of harmonizing something that is not in harmony; as the essential world it is from the very start in perfect harmony. These lines of the Verse express the full and complete aspect of the essential world, in perfect harmony. That perfectly harmonized world is expressed with those eight expressions.

The [whole] body is right in it – do you see it? I take this as meaning that the body is in the middle. He then asks if we see that body in the body. The content of the body is the world of emptiness. The content of that body is the world of not a single thing; it is the world of emptiness.

The father and the son of Nan’yô seem to know that it exists. The “father and the son” are National Teacher Chû and Tangen, who are teacher and disciple. It would appear that they both know that world exists.

The Buddha and Patriarchs of India can do nothing about it. This means that, when it comes to the essential world of not a single thing, not even Buddha, not even Bodhidharma can lay a hand on it. This, too, is the plan for the seamless gravestone. Tangen’s words in the Case are examining this world of our own true essence from various angles. Do you understand what I’m saying? Please come to me with this koan in dokusan. Otherwise, you will not be able to truly appreciate it.