

CASE 99

Unmon's "Bowl and Pail"



By Yamada Kōun

Instruction:

There is a special wisdom for chess, a special stomach for alcohol.
The sly rabbit makes three holes, the clever monkey has luck a myriad times.

There is [yet] an obstinate fellow – just tell me, who is he?

Case:

A monk asked Unmon, "What is the only-dust samadhi?" Unmon said, "Rice in the bowl, water in the pail."

Verse:

"Rice in the bowl, water in the pail" –
He opens his mouth and shows his guts,
Seeking for someone who can really understand him.
If you try to think, you fall into the second or the third level of activities;
If you face it, you are a thousand and ten thousand miles away.
Master Shōyō hits the spot a little bit:
Who would be equal with him in the "metal-cutting" sharpness?
The heart and mind, more solid than a rock, stands alone without parallel.

On the Instruction:

There is a special wisdom for chess, a special stomach for alcohol. Chess" can also mean the game of Go. You need a special kind of wisdom to play the game of Go. There are many cases of persons who, unskilled in other areas of life, are extremely skilled in the game of Go. Often they didn't have particularly good marks in school, but when it comes to Go they're a match for anyone. There is an old *senryū* (satirical haiku verse) which runs: *Ano baka ga honinbou ni nimoku oki* ("that fool is more than a match for the title-holder <in Go>"). This is what is meant here by "special wisdom," in the sense that such a person has a special skill in Go but in no other areas of life. Although I'm not inferring that today's Go masters are all like that!

And in like manner: A special stomach for alcohol. There are persons who, although small of stature, can really hold their liquor! You wonder where all that sake finds a place in their small bodies, and you think they must have a special stomach just for the alcohol.

The sly rabbit makes three holes, the clever monkey has luck a myriad times. The sly rabbit digs three holes, knowing that if there are only two, he is bound to be caught by the fox, for example. If he digs three holes, he can escape freely. The same goes for the clever monkey. To say he has luck many times means that he finds luck even in failure.

There is [yet] an obstinate fellow – just tell me, who is he? The word translated here as “obstinate” also has the meaning of babbling away without apparent connection. This is said in reference to the “only-dust Samadhi” found in the Main Case. There are all sorts of fellows existing here and there in our society. This is what this is referring to. “Who is such a fellow?” the Instruction asks us. Who is such a fellow who speaks so glibly? This, too, is said in reference to the words “only-dust Samadhi.”

On the Case:

A monk asked Unmon, “What is the only-dust samadhi?” Unmon said, “Rice in the bowl, water in the pail.” The phrase “only-dust Samadhi” (jinjin zammai) evidently appears originally in the *Avataṅsaka Sūtra* (Japanese: Kegonkyō, English: *Flower Ornament Scripture*). Many scholars have commented on these words, but don’t seem to really understand, writing things that remain unclear. “Only-dust” (jinjin) is a reference to the individual phenomena of the phenomenal world, here referred to as “dust.” Whatever you point to or look at, each of them is dust (jinjin). “Samadhi” is oneness. The word Samadhi (Japanese: zammai) originally comes from the Sanskrit. The original meaning is “correctly receiving.” In our case we sit in zazen and practice Mu, forgetting ourselves in the process. When you practice Mu with all that’s in you, forgetting yourself in the process, we can speak of “Samadhi, great Samadhi.” To tell the truth, however, I would like to use the word *kū* or emptiness for its meaning. Although no one else refers to it in this way among the commentaries I have read, if you ask me why I would like to use the word emptiness, it’s because, when you speak of “oneness,” it’s still the phenomenal world. It means one of the dusts of the phenomenal world. When you speak in terms of “correctly receiving,” it’s as if one is using the things of the phenomenal world to attempt an explanation. I have examined various commentaries on this koan in different books. Although they chop all sorts of logic in attempting an explanation, they are attempting to intellectually attach some sort of logic to it in order to convince the reader. Nowhere can you find a description that is based on actual Zen experience. It is just intellectual logic-chopping. I take this as proof that the authors have not actually grasped their true self, the true fact, so to speak. One author says that the words “only-dust Samadhi” mean that the individual phenomena of the phenomenal world are one with the universe. But this is using the phenomena to describe the phenomenal world; there is no mention of satori realization. The words “correctly receiving” I would like to see as referring to emptiness. Otherwise, you cannot really appreciate the interest of this koan. As I mentioned, the words in the koan originally appear in the *Avataṅsaka Sūtra*. Here is the original passage in that sutra:

Entering true Samadhi on a single hair’s tip.

If we understand this, as is the custom, as meaning “one with the universe,” that is the case. A single hair’s tip is one with the universe.

The text in the sutra continues as follows:

Entering true Samadhi from a single dust.

Coming out of Samadhi from all dusts.

As mentioned, Samadhi can be seen as oneness. Coming out of Samadhi and entering Samadhi are one. In emerging, we emerge from a single dust. Passages of this sort are found throughout the *Avataṅsaka Sūtra*. There are also expressions such as “all dharmas are without ego” (shohō muga), or “no abiding nature” (muteisei) or “no self-nature” (mujishō). They all attempt to describe the matter of emptiness. The expression “all dharmas without ego” means that each thing in the phenomenal world is without ego. This is the same as saying “no self-nature.” Thus, a description of emptiness (*kū*) can be understood in this way. For example, the flow of the water in a river means that there is never for an instant the same water in the same place in the river, because the water is constantly flowing. Thus, people say, it has no ego and no self-nature. People will then talk of the “principle of no abiding nature” (muteisei genri). They say that phenomena are constantly in motion and say that the expression “all actions are inconstant” (shogyō mujō) comes from this, as things are constantly changing and

in motion. There is no fixed entity. This is the way they attempt to explain this matter. Recall once again the words from the *Heart Sutra*: form is no other than emptiness. “Form” means the phenomenal world. The line says that all things in the phenomenal world are empty. That emptiness has no self-nature and is constantly changing. Modern physicists have come to the point of saying this. In pursuing studies of the world of matter, they have discovered that so-called subatomic particles are constantly in motion and have no fixed nature or solid entity. Comparing this to the flow of the river, when we see the river from a distance it might seem like the river is a solid entity. Actually, however, the water is moving constantly and without stopping. Scholars will point to this and say that this is inconstancy (mujō). But I think otherwise. When we speak of emptiness, it is referring to this world where there is not a single thing. This is not just an imaginary world, but a truly existing world that is experienced in Zen enlightenment, a world that can be directly experienced in that way. But if you simply try to describe that world intellectually without having actually grasped it, true Buddhism is lost. Let me read a passage from Yasutani Roshi’s teisho on Case 100 of the *Book of Equanimity* where he refers to the Instruction of that case.

“One word can make a nation rise, one word can make a nation fall;”

This medicine can kill people and can give people life.”

“These words are found originally in the *Analects* (Lunyu) of Confucius.

The single words and phrase of the master can cause the nation to arise or can cause Buddhism to perish. Nowadays there are a great many questionable masters around and, as we can see, they have made a real mess of Buddhism. That’s because they tell bunk and blab nonsense.”

Yasutani Roshi minces no words in telling this. It’s just as he says. If people come to dokusan in a Zen setting and tell you they don’t know how to put it in words when you ask if they understand, that’s proof that they don’t really understand. If they truly understood, they would be able to say it forthright. Let me diverge from my topic a little. The other day, I saw Mr. Nakasone¹ giving a speech on television. I understood very well his convictions and how he expressed them. I could understand him very clearly. It seems that most people felt the same way. The reason is he has a clear grasp on the problems; he knows what he’s talking about. If he had started talking about some philosophy of economics or the like, it would be proof that he doesn’t really understand. If you truly understand, you will definitely be able to talk about it. If people don’t understand what you’re saying, it means the speaker does not clearly understand what he’s talking about. A person who has clearly grasped what he is talking about, even if he is not a skilled speaker, will be understood by his listeners for the most part. If you don’t understand collections of teishos on Zen, in many cases it’s because the person who wrote the book does not really understand. But this does not definitely mean that Zen books written to be easily understood are worthwhile books. Even though newcomers easily understand them, if important matters are missing, those books are of little worth. If the main gist is missing, no matter how easy they may be to read, they cannot be called true Zen books. Nevertheless, if a person says he understands but does not know how to express it, it’s proof that he doesn’t really understand. You can’t cover up your ignorance in such a case. I feel Yasutani Roshi has really hit the nail on the head with his statements. A true book on Zen can never be fully understood without a true “eye of enlightenment.” Although expressing things in simple terms might be effective in explaining intellectual matters, the heart of Zen can never be expressed in words. What would you do if you were asked to describe the taste of tea? Even though you use words like “bitter” or “sweet,” in the end you can only taste it yourself and have others taste it. You could say that what we are involved with here is having people coming to a direct taste of that tea. Even if you use thousands of words, you will never be able to convey the taste of tea to others. The same holds for enlightenment. That is my reason for wanting to see the word samadhi as referring to emptiness. Thus you could say

¹ Yasuhiro Nakasone is a Japanese politician who served as Prime Minister of Japan from 1982 to 1987.

“each dust is empty” (jinjin kore kû). It is precisely because it is empty that it becomes one with the universe. This cannot be explained in terms of philosophy, no matter how many words you use. Since each one of us is empty, you can become one with the universe. For example, can you say that the right hand is one with the left hand? No, you cannot. Right is right and left is left. No matter what intellectual explanation you use, you cannot say such a thing. However, from the standpoint of my life, which has neither form nor shadow, it is empty. That life is empty and both hands are living that same single life. Thus you realize that they are essentially one. Before you can understand oneness, you must have a realization of the world of emptiness as its foundation. It is only when there is this world of emptiness that the matter of oneness is there. For example, my family and I lived in Manchukuo (former puppet-state of Japan) for a period of ten years up to the end of the war. It was a period when the military exercised strong control over Japan. There was the slogan *Hakkō ichiu* (literally "eight crown cords, one roof" i.e. "all the world under one roof"). There is certainly nothing wrong with the idea itself of wanting all people of the world to unite in harmony. But this was not to be due to the power of satori, but rather with military force. Here lies a major problem, I feel. And I can't help feeling that it was this erroneous policy that led to Japan's defeat and calamity. If you are to truly realize the world of oneness, you must by all means realize the world of emptiness that is its basis. But this experience is lacking in many cases. I have the feeling nowadays that Buddhism is dying and has lost the power to save people. That is because people who are truly aware of the world of “zero” are becoming ever fewer. Even when the monks considered so illustrious were to gather together they lack the power to really save people, if you ask me. That means they lack the power that comes from authentic Zen experience. In Zen it is through this experience that you are saved. And that experience forms the basis for saving others. There is no other way. Let me talk briefly about Christianity. In Christianity God is all-loving and all-powerful and it is through Him that we are saved. Although I may be alone in thinking so, I have the feeling that the Christian St. Benedict may have had a Zen experience. I had the chance recently to travel to Wurzburg, Germany. Fr. Willigis Jaeger, who had practiced at Sanun-Zendo in Kamakura for many years, had received permission to use half of the monastery facilities to create a zendo. I was there to attend the opening ceremonies for that zendo and I was attending the ceremonies on the invitation of Fr. Willigis. At that time, a bishop in charge of a diocese that includes many parishes was on hand and I was able to speak with him about St. Benedict. Interestingly enough, Pope Gregory the First (also known as Gregory the Great), who actually lived long after St. Benedict, wrote Benedict's biography, which also includes an account of Benedict's satori experience. Upon reading that account, I have the feeling that, after all, he had grasped the world of emptiness. In Christianity one speaks of experiencing God, I have had been told before. I feel this experience is a religious experience. What Buddhists call seeing essential nature or Buddha-nature is known in Christianity as seeing God. I can't help feeling that they are alike in being an experience of nothingness or the world of emptiness. If religions try to understand each other from the standpoint of philosophy or ideology, they end up at an impasse. But in a world that transcends such distinctions there is a common plaza, I feel. Let me now return now to a discussion of the case.

A monk asked Unmon, “What is the only-dust samadhi?” Unmon said, “Rice in the bowl, water in the pail.”

As mentioned, the phrase “only-dust Samadhi” (jinjin zammai) also appears in the *Avataśsaka Sūtra*. The monk has read that passage and is asking Unmon about those words? In reply, Unmon says, “Rice in the bowl, water in the pail” (Japanese: hatsurihan tsurisui). I feel this reply of Unmon to be quite wonderful. Rather than having an image of rice in a bowl, which could lead to intellectualizing, it would be better just to say “bowl” or just “pail!” At any rate “rice in the bowl, water in the pail” is a very Zen way of presenting the fact. Although it might be difficult for you to understand, please take time to savor this reply. Each single thing is the whole. One is all, all is one. For us, it's a matter of grasping the world of emptiness acting as the basis for that oneness. Without that experience, it is not real oneness. We must

pursue it tirelessly until we realize it. It cannot be grasped in intellectualizing. There is no way other than grasping it experientially.

On the Verse:

“Rice in the bowl, water in the pail” – The first line of the verse reproduces Unmon’s reply. When you say “rice in the bowl,” that is the actual universe itself. It is the true form or true aspect (shinjissō). When you say “water in the pail,” that is the true universe in its entirety. It is not the phenomenal universe, but rather the true universe, which we could also call the essential world. Your true self is known as essential nature. If you take the back of your hand to be the world of phenomena, we could say that most people are only familiar with that world. But there is also the world of the palm of the hand, the world of emptiness. Moreover, the back of the hand and palm of the hand are the same single hand. When I move my hand like this, the back of my hand and palm of my hand move as one. This is just an example and cannot be said to be the fact itself. Nevertheless, for the sake of explanation it could be represented in this way. When say “rice in the pail,” you can see this single point as a spot. But this is at the same time the entire universe. When you first realize this world you experience boundless joy. And then you tend to cling to that world of oneness, the world of emptiness. That is an error. After all, the phenomenal world and the essential world are one. If you view the koan from that perspective, you will gradually understand and savor its flavor. The Verse is expressing the Main Case in poetic language and it’s a matter of appreciating that poetic scenery sung of in the verse. As mentioned, the first line of today’s first reproduces Unmon’s words. Let us go to the next line.

He opens his mouth and shows his guts,

Seeking for someone who can really understand him. Why did Unmon speak like he did? He was looking for “someone who can really understand him” (Japanese: chiki). The Japanese word “chiki” has the meaning of a truly intimate friend. He wants to somehow make what he has experienced known to others. He opens his mouth, and what does he say? Rice in the pail, water in the bucket. And that saying like he did is a complete revelation of the whole. He has not hidden anything. Rice in the pail, water in the bucket. That’s everything. To say he “shows his guts” means he doesn’t hide anything.

If you try to think, you fall into the second or the third level of activities. If you try to think intellectually about “rice in the pail, water in the bucket,” you fall into the second or third level. That means true oneness is lost as you think about this or that. It is not the pinnacle.

If you face it, you are a thousand and ten thousand miles away. To “face it” means to be viewing “rice in the bucket, water in the pail” from outside it in dualistic opposition, with you as the subject and that as the object of observation. The poet says the distance is like being a thousand or even ten thousand miles away. It is something altogether different. As I’m always saying, the true fact is always one. When you say “rice in the bucket, there is only that in the entire universe. Of course, that means it is completely one with you. But if you are examining that as something outside of you, you are far removed from it indeed, as if there were a distance of ten thousand miles between you and it.

Master Shōyō hits the spot a little bit: Master Shōyō means Unmon. To say that he “hits the spot a little bit,” means that he does not get a perfect score for his reply of “rice in the bucket, water in the pail.” In Zen one never receives a perfect score. The person who wrote this poem does not speak in terms of a perfect score. Instead, he says that Unmon hit the target fairly well.

Who would be equal with him in the “metal-cutting” sharpness? The phrase “metal-cutting sharpness” evidently appears in the *I-Ching* or *Book of Changes*, a classical work of Chinese antiquity.

In that book it also says that when true gentlemen (kunshi) congregate with each other, their hearts are one. The hardness of the friendship of true friends and knowers of the

Way is as hard as iron and resistant to cutting. This is what is meant by this line of the verse. In this case, it means seeing the true fact. It means experientially grasping your own true self. This is the world of “only-dust Samadhi” (jinjin zammai). Such a thing is very hard. If it were only a matter of believing in something you had not experienced yourself, that would not be enough. It is not enough just to believe what others have told you. You have to experience and see it for yourself. If you realize it yourself, then you will not be disturbed by what others might say. This is what this line of the verse means. It is asking us: Who has such a hard spirit? Unless it is someone who has realized that same world, one cannot speak in terms of the same degree of hardness. In the world of religion one might think that belief is the essence of all religion. For example, you believe in it because Christ said so or because it is written in the Bible. The Salvation Army in Japan exhorts people to “Just believe!” (tada shinzeyo!) while pounding on the drum. In true religion the need to believe must also disappear. To say the need to believe disappears means that if you have personally experienced it there is no longer any need to believe in it. It is because you yourself have not yet realized it that you feel a need to believe the words of illustrious persons. Then you say, “The Buddha said it, so I believe in it.” Or you say, “It’s written in the sutras, so I believe it.” It’s not a matter of believing because others have said it. It’s a matter of realizing it yourself and being able to say, “Buddhas and patriarchs have not deceived me.” This is true realization and truly knowing. You have to realize yourself that what the sutras say and what the Buddha said was true after all. Just believing because others have said so is still a low level. You have to practice and realize it with ever-greater clarity so that you can say for yourself that it’s the truth. And when you reach that stage, you won’t be perturbed in the least, even if Shakyamuni Buddha or Bodhidharma should appear and challenge your realization. Then you can say clearly, “No, it is not a false understanding.” Unless you get to this stage you cannot really speak of religion in the true sense. Thus, to repeat, this line of the verse, “Who would be equal with him in the “metal-cutting” sharpness?” is asking if there is anyone who has experience the true fact in the same way.

The heart and mind, more solid than a rock, stands alone without parallel. This line is based on a poem found in the *Classic of Poetry* (Shi-jing or Mao-shi), an ancient collection of Chinese poetry also known popularly in English as the *Book of Songs*. Here is the original passage in the poem:

My mind is not a stone ; --

It cannot be rolled about .

My mind is not a mat ; --

It cannot be rolled up .

A stone may be hard, but it still can be rolled about. My heart is not a stone, because it will never roll about. My heart is not a mat, because it can never be rolled up. This speaks of how hard that heart is in the sense of true and unshaking resolve. If you ask where such resolve comes from, we can say it comes from experiencing the true fact and resolving the basic matter. Then, no matter what others may say, you can stand firm in your realization of the truth and can say it frankly and forthrightly. I would like you all to become such persons.