

CASE 84

Gutei's One Finger



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

One hearing, a thousand realizations; one understanding, a thousand follow suit.

The people with the highest spirit capture all when one has been decided;

The people with the middle and lower spirits hear much, but do not believe much.

I will try to bring up the clear and the simple matter, look!

Case:

Whatever he was asked, Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger.

Verse:

Old Gutei – Zen on the fingertip:

He has used it for thirty years, yet it hasn't drained out at all.

Truly a man of the Way, he knows an art beyond all categories;

In the end he sees no profane things before his eyes.

What he got is extremely simple; his devices all the more broad.

The ocean of great-thousand worlds is engulfed in a hair-tip.

The dragons know no limit; whose hands would they fall into?

How splendid that Mr. Nin¹ takes a fishing rod with a hook!

The master² too puts up a finger and says, "Look!"

On the Instruction:

One hearing, a thousand realizations; one understanding, a thousand follow suit.

The people with the highest spirit capture all when one has been decided. "One hearing, a thousand realizations" means an extremely bright person who realizes a thousand on hearing one. There is the old Japanese saying "hearing one and knowing ten" (ichi wo kiite jû wo shiru), but here we have a case of hearing one and realizing a thousand. "Thousand" can be seen here as meaning "all." Thus, such a person hears one and realizes all.

"One understanding, a thousand follow suit" means that upon understanding one, he understands all. Please see it in this way. In this case, "thousand" means everything. He only

¹ Famous for having fished a big fish.

² Master Wanshi himself.

has to hear one and he understands all. This is not the usual case of hearing one and knowing ten, it is talking about the world of satori. To hear one and realize a thousand is the same as “one is all.” The second part of the first line means to understand everything upon knowing one. There is also the Zen saying “pass one and you pass a thousand, ten-thousand.” That is what satori or enlightenment is like. In ordinary terms of intellectual understanding, we would say that a person who knows ten on hearing one is a very quick-witted person. But here in the Instruction, rather than talking about an intellectually bright person, it is talking about a clearly realized person. We know the expression “one is all, all is one.”

“The people with the highest spirit capture all when one has been decided.”

These words are originally found in the *Shôdôka* (Song on Realizing the Way). The “people with highest spirit” means people with a superior spirit of seeking the Way. There is traditionally a division into superior, middling and inferior spirit. Although it might not be part of his intrinsic essential nature, due to various causes and effects from the past, our spirit of seeking the way is different, and there has traditionally been this division into three levels. So people with the highest spirit capture all when one has been decided. No problems are left over. True Zen satori must be like this. The other categories of middling and inferior spirit are said in the next line of the *Shôdôka*, which appears here as the next line of the Instruction:

The people with the middle and lower spirits hear much, but do not believe much³. They might have done a lot of intellectual study and have a good intellectual knowledge, but lack unshaking faith. They can point to this or that passage in the sutras or in the Bible with their abundant knowledge, but if you ask if they are really unshaken in their faith, it is not the case. There are still many worries and feelings of unrest.

I will try to bring up the clear and the simple matter, look! The original text also includes the meaning of cutting down to the basics and very severe. It means pressing out the absolute essence. This “clear and simple matter” is what is being said when it talks about “capture all when one has been decided.” He says he will now produce that extremely clear and simple matter after squeezing out the essence. We are told to look carefully.

On the Case:

Whatever he was asked, Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger. We know that Master Gutei lived in the Tang Dynasty, but not many details of his life are known to us. Since he was not a person to make a show of his realization or wish to become famous, we don't even know clearly where he was born or what his original name was. It is said that he was born in ancient Wuzhou, which is in modern-day Zhejiang Province. He lived in the locality known as Kinkazan (Jinhua-shan) or Gold Flower Mountain, but that is about all we know. He was a very earnest Zen practitioner, but perhaps not so bright intellectually. He would recite the sutra known as the *Gutei Butsumo Dharani* all day long. That is how he received his name Gutei. He originally had a little hermitage on Mt. Tientai where he sat in meditation. One day, a nun name Jissai came to visit him. Not standing on ceremony, she shook her staff and stood there bolt upright. The staff had rings attached to the end for going on pilgrimage and to scare the insects from the path to prevent them being crushed when one went by. She shook such a staff and circumambulated Gutei three times as he sat there in zazen. This is a kind of ceremony. Then she stood before him bolt upright and stuck her staff in the ground, as if she were making a fool of him, since she did not greet him. Gutei reproached her for her lack of courtesy in just coming in without any greeting and asked her to at least take off her sedge hat. Then the nun said, “If you can say a word, I will take off my hat and greet you.”

³ These lines from the *Shôdôka* appear as follows in the translation by Robert Aitken:
The best student goes directly to the ultimate,
The others are very learned but their faith is uncertain.

But Master Gutei was unable to say a word. So the nun was about to take her leave. Seeing this, Gutei told her that it was already almost dark and kindly invited her to stay for the night. The nun spoke again, "If you can say a word, I will stay." But once again, Gutei was speechless. So the nun simply left. After she left, Gutei thought things over. "I have the form of a man," he said, "but I was unable to say a word to the women's question. I am truly worthless." He was angry at himself for his lack of gumption. He decided that it would not do to remain in the hermitage and determined to leave on pilgrimage to seek out outstanding Zen adepts of his day. But then the local mountain deity appeared in a dream and told him to delay his plans of descending from the mountain and going on pilgrimage. The deity said that a very outstanding living bodhisattva would be coming who would preach the dharma to him, and that it would not do to leave at this time. Awaking from his dream, Gutei decided to remain. And sure enough, before ten days had gone by, Master Tenryû arrived. Tenryû Oshô was a very famous master, a disciple of Baso Dôitsu Zenji and the dharma heir of Daibai Hôjô Zenji. Gutei was overjoyed to see Tenryû and told him about the visit of the nun Jissai and how he was unable to say a word in response to her question. Listening in silence, Tenryû Oshô suddenly stuck up a single finger. In that instant, Gutei came to great enlightenment. How happy he must have been! After that, whatever he was asked about Zen, he would simply stick up a finger. This is "one is all, all is one." And when he was about to die, he said, "I inherited this one-finger Zen from Master Tenryu. All my life I have used it, but have not used it up," whereupon he passed away. This is a famous story. Only a person who has clearly realized his true self can really appreciate this story. But then there is a person like the late Professor Totsudo Katoh, a layman and an outstanding expert on Zen. He has written a series of teisho on the cases of the *Book of Serenity*. He sometimes writes mistaken ideas, but sometimes he writes things that are useful, so I read his teishos. He is quite the scholar and has also given teishos on the *Blue Cliff Record*. Here is what he says about this case. "All phenomena in the universe are essential nature and a part of that essential nature." He says that all phenomena are a part of essential nature. This is what is problematical about his statement. This is obviously something he thought up and not the result of true experience. He died of sickness, but if he had gone on in this way, he might have committed suicide. When we say, "one is all, all is one," it means that the phenomenal world and the essential world are one and the same. Any thing in the phenomenal world is itself the essential world. It is not simply a part of the essential world. Even people who have studied Zen seriously in an intellectual manner say such mistaken things, so you have to be very careful.

Let me talk about another matter, which I imagine some of you have read about in the newspaper. An abbot of a temple in Kyoto belonging to Nanzenji recently committed suicide. The Nanzenji lineage amounts to our ancestors in the dharma. Harada Sôgaku Roshi inherited the dharma of Toyoda Dokutan Roshi, the former abbot of the Nanzenji lineage, which means the blood of that lineage is flowing through our own tradition. And now we read that the present abbot has committed suicide. Although many explanations have been offered for his behavior, it is said that he was seriously ill. He evidently entered a hospital in Matsue on September 5th, as he was originally from Shimane Prefecture. After spending some time there, he reportedly returned to the temple. It was not so long after he returned to Kyoto that he killed himself. According to one explanation, he evidently had liver cancer. But many people die of liver cancer. Why was it necessary for him to commit suicide? This is a major question. There are evidently more than four hundred temples in Japan having a connection with Nanzenji. The newspaper accounts say that this event has shaken the Japanese regarding their basic concept of life and death. He was evidently an intellectual who graduated from the Literature Department of the University of Tokyo before being drafted. After his return from the army he graduated from that university's graduate school. Shibayama Zenkei Roshi also died of cancer and evidently suffered much in his later years. It was this abbot who looked after him during that time. If you ask me why he committed suicide, I would clearly say it was because his Zen enlightenment experience was lacking. It was because he had no true experience. I wonder if he was completely lacking an eye. I can't help

feeling that way. True satori is experiencing body and mind fallen away. If you have experienced body and mind fallen away, you would never hang yourself in despair like this person did. There was the famous lay practitioner Yamaoka Tesshû. He was a master of swordsmanship and an outstanding Zen practitioner. He, too, died of cancer. He was evidently quite fond of sake and died of stomach cancer. He told others that, when it was time for him to die, he would wear a white kimono and asked that such a garment be made for him. One morning, after he had taken his bath, he called to his wife and told her to bring that kimono. Surprised at these words, his wife brought the white kimono to him. He put it on, sat down in zazen and passed away. What a truly noble way to die. Although not all Zen monks may be able to die this way, I still have to ask what this could possibly mean for a Zen abbot to hang himself. The reports on this occurrence in the weekly magazines like the *Shukan Asahi* and *Shukan Shincho* refer to him as an intellectual “august monk” (kôshô). Let’s stop kidding ourselves! I want to say. It is precisely because he was not “an august monk” that he displayed such an ungraceful way of dying. In recent years true Zen has been dying out in Japan. What is left are various intellectual lectures on Zen and the publishing of many books. But such books lack the power to really convince us. The authors know nothing about true Zen. If just reading such books were enough, there would be no need to suffer through the pain in your legs from earnest sitting. I feel sorry for the poor monk who died in such a way. I feel he was the victim of intellectual Zen, the Zen of mere appearance. That is my reason for feeling that we have to return to the origin point of Zen. Perhaps it is only in this zendo that the origin point of Zen is being guarded and protected. Although I might seem to be talking big, I feel that many people are suffering because they lack someone to guide them in practice. The Soto School has declined, I feel sorry to say. Please read what I have written in the latest Opening Comments. I have received a request from a magazine publisher to write on the subject of where we come from and where we go when we die. Although it is not a very successful publishing company, I have written a piece with that title. That piece also treats this problem of death. I also talked before a group of doctors recently on the subject of “what is the human being?” That also treats the topic of the true essence of the human being. I hope there will be a chance for all of you to read those pieces. These are the basic problems of humanity. It is truly a sad and shameful thing when a person who has devoted his life to Zen feels he has to hang himself when he comes down with cancer. Although I do not like to criticize others in this, I just couldn’t stomach it.

On the Verse:

Old Gutei – Zen on the fingertip:

He has used it for thirty years, yet it hasn’t drained out at all. To say that “it hasn’t drained out at all” means that he has not used it up. For thirty years he has used the Zen he inherited from Tenryu but he has not used it up.

Truly a man of the Way, he knows an art beyond all categories. The “man of the Way” is Gutei. This is the same as the phrase in the *Shôdôka*: The leisurely person of the Way, beyond philosophy. Because he has solved all problems by simply lifting up a finger, it is known as “an art beyond all categories.” It means that it transcends the phenomenal world. Those things in the world of dualistic opposition are known as profane things. This is an “art” or skill that cannot be obtained in the world of duality.

In the end he sees no profane things before his eyes. Those who see profane things before the eyes are those who are only in the world of dualistic opposition. Their view for the truth is blocked and they do not see anything.

What he got is extremely simple; his devices all the more broad. It is so simple and nothing could be better, because it is everything. The “devices” are the skillful means (hoben) used in guiding others. It means that he has a truly broad and limitless Zen activity.

The ocean of great-thousand worlds is engulfed in a hair-tip. This means

that single hair tip drinks up the entire great ocean dry. That is certainly true, because it is one. It would certainly not be strange to say that the great ocean engulfs a hair tip. But to say that the great ocean is engulfed by a hair tip is not something we can imagine in the world of everyday thinking. In other words, it is saying that the phenomenal world and the essential world are completely one. It means that a single hair exhausts the entire universe.

The dragons know no limit; whose hands would they fall into? The poet seems to be asking whose hands could catch dragons to cook them. If your eye is clear any one of you can do it. The “whose” in the question “whose hands” is no other than you yourself. In his comment to this line, the author says, “The heavenly dragon (Tenryû) is still here.” Although this is not said in the book, this is referring to Wanshi Zenji himself. He does not have to bring Tenryû on the scene. If any person clearly grasps it, he falls into anyone’s hands.

How splendid that Mr. Nin takes a fishing rod with a hook! There is a story behind this line. Mr. Nin fashioned a large hook and a large fishing pole. He then put fifty oxen on the hook for bait. This story originally appears in *Zhuangzi*. The Chinese are fond of saying astounding things! If it’s going to hold fifty oxen, it must be quite a large fishing rod! He puts his line in the East Sea and waits for a fish. Even after waiting a year he doesn’t catch a single fish. But then after another year passes a huge fish grabs the bait. This is what is meant by “how splendid!” Mr. Nin was beside himself with joy, having caught a huge fish with his huge fishing pole. This is actually referring to Gutei Oshô. To say he is a “splendid” one means that he has experienced great enlightenment. Some of you are no doubt familiar with another koan where the monk asks, “What will you give the golden-scaled fish who has passed through the net to eat?” Sanshô’s great fish means having fished up someone who has experienced great enlightenment.

The master too puts up a finger and says, “Look!” The “master” is Wanshi Zenji, who tells us to “Look!”

Today’s koan is relatively clear and simple. I hope you can appreciate something of the taste of Zen through examining this koan. To repeat, the Zen of intellectualizing is of no use. No matter how august you might look, you cannot even save yourself with such intellectual Zen. This is known as “the one who has not yet saved himself” (jigu furyô). How much less are you in a position to save others! There is no way other than to come to a thoroughgoing realization of your true nature. You must grasp the genuine article.

Dôgen Zenji was not fond of the word kensho. This all depends on how the word kensho is understood. Dôgen preferred to use the word shô in referring to the experience. Shô is used also in the sense of proving or attesting to. But it actually means to realize. The same goes for the word shôgo. Bassui Zenji used the word kensho, no matter how deep or shallow the experience. If there were any problem, he would say that it was a case of “incomplete kensho” (kensho futtettei). You could say that unfortunate abbot at Nanzenji Temple was a case of incomplete kensho. There’s no doubting that. All of you must do your very best.