

CASE 19

Gutei's One Finger



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

When a particle of dust is raised, it comprises the great earth. When a flower blooms, the world springs forth. But when dust is not yet raised and a flower has not yet bloomed, how can it be seen? Therefore, I say, it is like cutting a skein of thread: with one hack, it is all cut; or like dyeing a skein of thread: with one dyeing, all is dyed. Now, if you cut off all complications and bring forth your family treasure, then you comply everywhere with high and low, and there is no difference between front and back, each one will be fully manifest. If you are not yet so, look at the lines below.

Case:

Whenever he was asked [about Buddhism], Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger.

Verse:

For the way he responds I deeply cherish old Gutei;
Throughout the universe, is there another like him?
He cast a log adrift on the sea,
In the night of turbulence, together he attends to blind turtles.

On the Instruction:

When a particle of dust is raised, it comprises the great earth. When a flower blooms, the world springs forth. What do these sentences mean? They depict the "scenery" of the true self, the true fact. In one speck of dust are comprised not only the entire earth, but also heaven and earth, the whole universe. When a flower comes to bloom, the entirety of the phenomenal world is manifested. In philosophical terms, it's expressed as: "One is all, all is one," as the Third Patriarch, Great Master Sôsan, says in the final part of his *Shinjinmei*. It's a very famous line, so you may already have heard it before. It's the logic of the absolute world. In the relative world, which is the world of phenomena, this logic is nonsense. There, each item is singled out, standing by itself.

However, when such terms as "relative" and "absolute" are used, we are apt to take them conceptually. As a matter of fact, it's a deep-rooted illness of all human beings to try to understand them philosophically. But we should know that the "absolute" world is not a concept or thought, but real, solid fact. This fact is utterly unattainable through conceptual discourse. It can only be grasped experientially. That's what is called satori, enlightenment.

Quite briefly, satori means to see that the substance of you yourself as well as that of the outer world, which seemingly is opposed to yourself, are totally empty. "To see" of course doesn't mean that you see something with your physical eyes. You must realize something within yourself. This is called "inner self-realization" [*jinaishō*].

If you have realized that both the subject and the object are empty, then you can grasp the world of oneness. There is no other way to really get to know the world of oneness than this way. This emptiness, however, can never be grasped through our five senses. To be "empty" means, after all, it cannot be perceived by those senses. Yet, at the same time, this "emptiness" can do anything. It's equipped with infinite capabilities. It can see, hear, think, imagine. It stands up, sits down, cries, laughs – all these are works of the "emptiness." Therefore, satori means to grasp clearly through your actual experience that you yourself as well as the entire universe are empty, and at the same time that this fact possesses mysterious, infinite capabilities. A speck of dust in the phenomenal world is the entire universe itself, a flower in the phenomenal world is identical with the "the triple-thousand great one-thousand worlds"¹. That's because they are both empty.

But when dust is not yet raised and a flower has not yet bloomed, how can it be seen? Some people interpret this line as referring to the state before enlightenment, before the moment of the realization of Mu. But I'd like to regard it as an expression of the state before the separation between self and others, before the creation of the universe, or before "time" was ever set into motion. This is also called "before your parents are born" [*bumo mishōzen*] or "a time before any signs [of phenomena] are ever stirred up" [*chinchō mibun*]. In short, before your consciousness is born. If you talk about "a speck of dust," then there is already the consciousness of "object" (although, if you have clearly grasped the world of true fact, you can see that that speck of dust comprises the universe). If, however, someone were to ask you, "What about the time before any such consciousness is ever born?", you are in an impasse. Neither Shakyamuni nor Bodhidharma can utter anything reasonable. What would you do if that someone insisted you say something? Vimalakirti, a great lay Zen personage, is reported to have remained perfectly silent. If I were to say a phrase, it's simply "just this." When you stand up, you stand up. When you sit down, you sit down – but even such expressions are dirty blemishes on the real fact.

Therefore, I say, it is like cutting a skein of thread: with one hack, it is all cut. If you chop "a skein of thread," that is, a bunch of thread, into two, everything is cut at once. This is a

¹ *Sanzen-daisen-sekai* = the whole universe. Cf. Case 29.

metaphor to instruct those who haven't come to satori yet.

Or like dyeing a skein of thread: with one dyeing, all is dyed. In the traditional way of dyeing, before synthetic dyes, a skein would be dipped into a pot of indigo and the whole thing would be dyed at once.

Now, if you cut off all complications and bring forth your family treasure ... What are the complications you should cut off with the koan of "Gutei's One Finger"? All your delusive thoughts and feelings. Then, the treasure that is intrinsically within you – your Buddha-nature – will come forth and you will be perfectly free. Everything will be all right.

Complying everywhere with high and low, there being no difference between front and back. The high are high, the low are low: [From the essential viewpoint] they're okay as they are. The rich are rich, and that's all right. The poor are poor, and that's all right, too. No matter what condition you find yourself in, you will live in perfect ease. Also, "front" and "back" are the same. In other words, whether you are a president of the company, or its messenger boy, it makes no difference. You'll always be at peace. When you grasp your true self, you will be like this.

But it's not an easy state to reach in daily life. "High and low" don't go together so easily. It's quite common for anyone to be upset because someone else has gotten a hundred yen² more at bonus time. Or, when your rival's monthly salary has been set a thousand yen higher than yours, you feel as if your whole life were discredited and your entire future fatally damaged. Yet, once you realize your true self, you remain completely unperturbed.

This doesn't mean you can slacken your efforts or become idle; rather, with a peaceful heart you try your best to do what you can. For what purpose? In the final analysis, it is for others. To do something for yourself is a trifling matter but, should you set your mind on serving others, no matter how much time you have, it won't be enough. It's the same with money. The amount of money you need for yourself is rather little. Ordinary food doesn't cost much either. But should you want to help others, the money you have to spend for them – no matter how much money you have – won't be enough.

We human beings must always resolve to live for others. To do that, you must be at peace within yourself. You won't be able to help others solve their problems unless you have solved your own. Once your own problems are solved, you'll be mobile enough to save others. That's the state I would like you to be in – "complying everywhere with high and low." If your position is exalted, that's fine; if humble, that's fine, too. It doesn't make any difference whether you are walking up front or trailing in the rear. You are complete in yourself.

Each one will be fully manifest. If you are high, you are complete as you are; if lowly, still you are complete as you are. "To be fully manifest" means that the whole universe is present, your whole true self is right there. You can also say that the Buddha-nature is revealed, is completely manifested. No matter whether you are a president or a messenger boy,

² A little less than a US dollar.

you yourself are a complete existence which perfectly manifests itself. To realize this, you have to see into your true nature.

If you are not yet so, look at the lines below. If you have not yet penetrated it, see the following koan.

On the Case:

Whenever he was asked [about Buddhism], Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger.

The exact dates of Gutei's birth and death are unknown, but we know he lived during the reign of Emperor Busô in the Tang Dynasty, around 845 AD. Busô was a very violent man and persecuted Buddhism (the so-called *Eshô-sata*³, destroying 40,000 temples and secularizing 265,000 priests and nuns. This was the era in which Gutei lived. He is usually known as Master Gutei of Mt. Kinka in Bu Province. Kinka was a prefecture of Bu Province, the present Sekkô Province. However, Mr. Ino'ue Shûen says that in Fukken Province, beyond Mampuku Temple on Mt. Ôbaku, there is another temple named Gutei Temple, on a mountain called Mt. Reiseki. In this temple there is a wooden statue of Gutei holding up one finger, which leads Mr. Ino'ue to conjecture that Master Gutei passed away there.

Gutei was a very sincere and earnest person. Even when he was still without an enlightened eye, he would daily chant a three-line mantra from a sutra called *Gutei Butsumoshin Dharani*, for which he came to be named.

One evening, perhaps when he was fervently chanting this mantra, a nun named Jissai who was traveling around on a pilgrimage [*angya*] stopped at his temple. In conformity with Buddhist etiquette, she walked around the seated Gutei three times as a greeting and then, standing in front of him and still wearing her bamboo hat, said, "If you can say something, I will take off my bamboo hat." Gutei, devout though he was, may not have been very agile mentally, for he couldn't come up with a single word and just sat there in silence. The nun repeated her statement three times, but, getting no response, she must have thought there was no point in challenging such a person and started to leave. All of a sudden he called to her, "It's getting quite late, why don't you stay here tonight?" The nun responded, "If you can say something, I'll stay." But again, he was unable to utter a word. In fact, his very statement, "It's getting quite late, why don't you stay here tonight?" was enough as an answer, but he couldn't realize it. So, once again, he was at a loss. "If you can say something, I'll stay," the nun repeated three times, and, without getting any answer, she finally left.

Gutei felt terribly ashamed and angry at himself. "I am a man with no backbone," he growled to himself. "I couldn't even say one word in response to that nun's challenge. How miserable!" Whereupon he made up his mind to leave the temple and set out on a pilgrimage, thereby really beginning Buddhist practice in earnest. After making preparations to leave in

³ The persecution in the Eshô-era.

the morning, he went to bed. Then he had a dream. Sanjin⁴, the guardian deity of the region, appeared to him and said, "Tomorrow a living Tathagata will come here. So, give up your plans to leave this temple."

Sure enough, the following morning Master Tenryû appeared at the temple. Tenryû was a great master who was a successor of Master Daibai Hôjô⁵, himself a dharma successor to Great Master Ba. Delighted, Gutei gave him the seat of honor and, in the course of the ensuing conversation, told him what had transpired the preceding evening and said, "How ashamed I was, not to be able to reply anything to the nun! But just what should I have said?" At that, Tenryû simply raised one finger. In the same instant, "the bottom of his mind-barrel was crashed through," as the expression goes. Everything collapsed to pieces. When the time is ripe that is how it happens. How easy it would be if just simply raising the finger could open up everyone's mind like this! It's not that easy. As we know from science, crystals are formed by first dissolving sufficient material into a liquid to form a supersaturated solution. If left in that state, nothing happens. To have crystals form, the beaker with the solution in it must be tapped lightly, to jar the solution. Gutei's case was similar to this. Interiorly he was supersaturated and needed only to be jarred by the raising of a finger in order to come to realization. "How happy he must have been!" commented Nakagawa Sôen Roshi once, "It's vastly different from the enlightenment cases which occur today with the koans 'Mu' or 'The Sound of One Hand.'" At any rate, he broke open to clarity with scarcely a trace of delusion remaining. What did he see? The world where there is not one thing. He clearly understood that the single raised finger exhausted the entire universe, that by it the universe was annihilated. That was Gutei's providential karma [*innen*].

In the account of this koan in the *Mumonkan* there was a young male disciple at Gutei's temple who constantly observed Gutei thrusting up a finger in response to questions. And so, when people living near the temple asked him how the master was, he would hold up a finger too. People told Gutei about this boy's behavior, saying, "Your boy attendant is quite an impudent kid, he always sticks up a finger to any question!" Then Gutei grabbed the boy one day and cut off his finger with a knife. As the boy ran away screaming in pain, Gutei called after him. The boy looked back. Gutei quickly raised a finger. The boy wanted to raise his finger too, but it wasn't there. At that, it is recorded, the young boy had a great enlightenment. When Gutei lay dying, his last words were, "I received this one finger from Master Tenryû and used it all my life, but I never exhausted it."

The raising of the one finger manifests the entire universe. That is, Zen enlightenment is to see clearly the world of empty-oneness. This koan is a very good example of that. When the world of empty-oneness is clearly grasped in the raising of a finger, all delusions are cut off. "With one hack, it is all cut; with one dyeing, all is dyed." Setchô seems to have been delighted with Gutei, as we see in the following Verse that he composed.

⁴ Literally: "mountain deity."

⁵ Cf. the koan "Just Mind, Just Buddha," Case 30 of the *Mumonkan*.

On the Verse:

For the way he responds, I deeply cherish old Gutei. "The way he responds" refers to Gutei's method of treating those who came to question him. No matter who it was, he simply stuck up a finger. "It's indescribably wonderful!" says Setchô, "I like that so much in him."

Throughout the universe, is there another like him? You may search from one end of the world to the other, but you won't find anyone to compare with him. He is peerless. What great praise!

He cast a log adrift on the sea; in the night of turbulence, together he attends to blind turtles. This is from a story that appears in Section 27 of the Book of the *Myôshôgon'ô-honjimon* in the *Lotus Sutra* – as well as in the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutras*. There once was a turtle in the sea that had just one eye in the middle of its belly instead of two in its head. It wanted by all means to see the sky but, under the circumstances, certainly could not. One day, a log with a hole in the middle of it came floating by. By catching hold of the log from beneath and putting its one eye up against the hole, the turtle was finally able to see the sky. – Master Gutei throws a log with a hole into the ocean in an effort to save blind turtles. Anyone lucky enough to catch hold is able to see the world through it. The log is Gutei's upraised finger. With it he saves blind turtles, namely spiritually blind persons. The sea is rough and it is night, but he throws the log in, nonetheless, out of desire to save people. Here is the log⁶. Those who can come to realization through it will see the real world.

But this is such a rare occurrence – even as it is rare for a blind turtle clinging to a floating log to get to peep into the sky. This line says how rare it is to encounter the true Buddhist dharma. And how true that is! Unless the time is ripe, it's not easy for a person to be blessed with such happiness. Just the other evening I had a telephone call from a man who had read my book *The True Gate of Zen* [Zen no shômon]⁷, and wanted to put some questions to me. For eighteen years he had been practicing *shikantaza* by himself without a teacher. He wondered if it was really all right to continue that way. As a matter of fact, Master Dôgen wrote that in order to do zazen you must choose a true teacher. You should not study by yourself. No matter how many books you read, they will be of no use. Someone must take you by the hand and lead you. So, I told him he should not keep practicing all alone. He answered that he understood, but he didn't know where to go to ask for true instruction. He was at a loss where to go to find a "log with a hole in it." With so many temples in Japan there should be at least one in each prefecture where a person could go to get true direction. I don't mean to speak ill of Buddhist priests, but there are very few who can teach zazen with real authority. How pitiful! This man, although only thirty-five years of age, had been doing zazen since he was seventeen or eighteen. But when I told him that it was futile for him to practice alone, he

⁶ The Roshi sticks up a finger.

⁷ Published in Japanese (1980, ²1986).

sounded very dejected, as he replied, "Is that so?" This shows how rare it is to encounter the authentic Buddhist dharma. It's not an easy matter to receive the true teaching, just like the blind turtle upon the floating log.