

*Commentary on Blue Cliff Records Case Number Eighteen by Suzuki-roshi,
February 13, 1963*

Commentary

Nanyo Echu Kokushi was a famous disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, a very good Zen Master, and quite a scholar of Buddhism in general. It is unfortunate for us that he did not have many good descendants, because as a result we do not know him so well. But he himself was a great Zen Master. After receiving transmission from the Sixth Patriarch, he practiced for forty years on Mount Hakugai without ever leaving the mountain.

Main Subject

Attention! The Emperor Shukuso asked Nanyo Echu Kokushi, who was sick, "A hundred years from now what kind of memorial do you want?" Nanyo replied, "For this old monk an untiered seamless mound will do." The Emperor asked, "Master, please tell me what design you would like?" Nanyo was silent for a while, and then he said, "Do you understand?" The Emperor replied, "No, I do not understand." Nanyo answered, "This poor monk has an attendant (jisha) who will be my publicly appointed successor, please ask him after I am gone."

After Nanyo Echu died the Emperor summoned Oshin, Nanyo's successor, and asked about the earlier conversation with Nanyo. Oshin did not say anything for a bit, and then said, "Do you understand?" "No, I do not," replied the Emperor. Then Oshin replied with the following verse. (Setcho, the compiler of the Blue Cliff Records, has added his own comments, in parentheses.)

South of Sho and north of Tan
(One hand does not make a sound.)
The land is filled with gold.
(A mountain-shaped pilgrim's staff.)
Under the shadowless tree, a ferry-boat,
(The sea is calm and the river clear.)
No one notices in the emerald palace.
(The summarizing is over.)

Appreciatory Words

An untiered mound is difficult to see.
In the deep water are dragons and snakes.
Unaffected and openhearted,
The simple mound grows tier by tier.
Tens of thousands of generations will see it.

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A traditional Buddhist memorial is a tower like a pagoda or stupa, divided up into five tiers representing (starting from the bottom): earth, water, fire, air, and Buddha Nature or emptiness. But the memorial stone for a Zen Master should be a simple untiered mound.

Sho and Tan are the names of the two rivers in China which were the boundaries of the main area in which Zen was flourishing. Between Sho and Tan may be the four elements, or everything that is, and gold may be Buddha Nature or emptiness. I think you know Hakuin Zenji's koan of one hand clapping—one hand usually does not make any sound by itself. "Mountain-shaped" and the "pilgrim's staff" of plain wood or the branch of a tree, mean many things—Dharmakaya, emptiness, compassion, or a tombstone, something that covers everything. And the same is true of the tree without form or shadow under which people happily pass their lives.

You may say the emperor should have understood when Nanyo remained silent. Buddha did not answer the Brahman who asked what the unstated teaching was. And Bodhidharma, as you know, said, "I don't know," when asked who he was. Buddhism should be understood within us, and the emperor is the disciple and he should understand what Nanyo meant. This understanding is OK, but it is too much concerned with remaining silent. To say Buddhism is this or that is like building a big monument. It is to create waves on calm water. This is not calm. To see the untiered mound is indeed difficult—means that you want to see it. But because you want to see it, you cannot see it. In pure clear water there are no dragons. In dead clear water dragons do not live. They live in rivers and oceans where there are things to eat. To say that I am a Zen Master may rock the boat filled with various kinds of people—wise and foolish. This is the way to lose the boat. If the emerald palace has no understanding, there is no trouble. The summary is over and Nanyo is quite happy under his tombstone. The shadow of the mound is round and everyone can see it.