

*Commentary on Blue Cliff Records Case Number Eighteen by Suzuki-roshi,  
February 13, 1963, and February 8, 1971*

*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.

*Commentary, February 13, 1963*

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.

*Commentary, February 8, 1971*

One student may say it will cover the whole state, and another may say it will cover the whole earth, but I would rather say, as Nanyo Echu said, "Any stone will be good enough." Even a small stone can be good enough for me. You know, which do you like—the whole world or a small stone? I rather prefer a small stone which we can carry or move. The small stone is you yourself which covers everything. If you think the whole big universe is yourself, you will be lost. It does not make any sense. You need one small room for yourself. That is very true. When you find yourself really in the small room, as one of your rooms, then there is you yourself and the whole universe is there. The whole universe makes sense to you. Without your room, the whole universe does not make any sense.

So what you need now is the small room, and what you will need after your death is a small stone maybe. This is very true. This is actual reality which is always true with everyone. So do not talk about the whole universe or some mysterious experience, but just find yourself in the small room or in the rigid practice of Zen. "You should not go that way, you should go this way. You should cross your legs this way." Under this kind of limitation, you will find yourself. Real self is here you know. But because you discuss whether this room is good or bad, big or small, you lose your real self. Before you discuss, before you are caught by discriminating and thinking mind, you own your room.

To find true joy under some limitation is the only way to realize the whole universe. There is no other way for us to approach the whole universe. When

you exist right here, the whole universe makes sense to you. Before you think about it. You must give up your foolish discrimination, your foolish idea of freedom. In this way we should practice our way. If the rules are provided on a big scale, you may feel very good, but you will find it very difficult to follow that kind of complicated big-scale rule. The simpler the better, and the stricter the better. Actually it is so. But we must be careful not to make the rules too strict or you will rely on them, or find them too easy and just goof off. It is easy to follow strict rules. But if you do exactly what your teacher says, it works. That is all.

Our rules were formed by Hyakujo Zenji. He made them not too big and not too small. He and many others have thought about the various rules that patriarchs and Zen Masters have followed. That is how Zen rules originated and since then we try to improve our rules according to the circumstances under which we practice. You can trust our rules because they are the improvement of many Zen Masters. Of course I think we should improve our rules, or have more appropriate rules for us, but not from a scientific attitude or by generalization. The point is, the spirit is, to follow or understand why we must follow our way, why we must have some rules in our practice.

We should come to the point where we can give up superficial self or universal self, a self that you can replace for someone else's self. We enjoy some universal medicine which is good for everyone, but if so it will not actually help you much. Do you trust some medicine which is for everyone? Medicine should be just for you, prescribed for our practice and for each circumstance. Not medicine we can sell to many people. This is real medicine. It is better to stick to one thing rather than to try to understand many things. It is better to appreciate things one by one, rather than to try to put everything into your pocket where you will not see it. We put emphasis on validity, on direct effect on each one of us.

Why you practice zazen is to be filled with the spirit of the Bodhisattva and the real feeling of your being. Being which transcends our thinking mind and emotional activity. As long as you do not give up your thinking mind, it is not possible to make your, to have your enlightenment happen to you. That experience may happen to you in various ways. You say big enlightenment, small enlightenment, but actually there is no small enlightenment or big enlightenment. After you are dead do you need a big stone or a small stone? It doesn't make much sense. Anyway you need something. Any stone will do. That's all. You need something. And better to have smaller one, you know. Better to have very narrow rigid practice. It is easier for you to follow.

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