

SESSHIN TEISHO  
John Tarrant Roshi

February 7, 1993  
Camp Cazadero, California

BLUE CLIFF RECORD, CASE NO. 2

Today I'm going to read an old story, a case, from the Blue Cliff Record. This is Case No. 2. The case comes with an Introduction and before it by a teacher called Wang-wu (????).

Introduction

Heaven and earth are narrow. Sun, moon and stars all at once go dark. Even if blows of the staff fall like rain and shouts roll like thunder, you still haven't lived up to the task of the fundamental vehicle of transcendence. Even the buddhas of all ages can only know it for themselves. The successive generations of ancestors have not been able to bring it up in its entirety. The treasury of teachings of the whole age cannot explain it thoroughly. Clear-eyed students cannot save themselves completely. When you get here, how will you ask for more instruction? To say the word, 'Buddha,' is trailing mud and dripping water; to say the word, 'zen,' is a face full of shame. Superior people who have studied it for a long time do not wait for it to be said. The incoming (????) beginners simply must investigate it and understand it.

The Case

Chao-chou teaching the assembly said: The Great Way is not difficult. Just avoid picking and choosing. As soon as words are spoken, this is picking and choosing. This is clarity. This old fellow does not abide within clarity. Do you still hang onto anything, or not?

At that time a certain student asked: Since you don't abide within clarity, what do you hang onto?

Chao-chou replied: I don't know either.

The student said: Since you don't know, teacher, why do you, nevertheless, say that you do not abide within clarity?

Chao-chou said: It's enough to ask about the matter. Bow and withdraw.

Please sit comfortably.

I've chosen this koan, today, because it is not one of the more spectacular and brilliant koans. It's subtle rather than flashy and yet it shows the great old master at work and a fairly sincere student pressing him hard in an earnest inquiry into the way.

'The Great Way is not difficult. It just avoids picking and choosing.' This is from the beginning of a poem called "Faith in the Heart," "Trust in the Heart-Mind," by the Third Great

Ancestor, third in line from Bodhidharma, Bodhidharma being number one, that starts off

The Great Way is not difficult.  
It just avoids picking and choosing.  
Just don't love or hate  
And everything will be clear.

So you can tell the point that the poem is making here, which becomes very clear in meditation. As you're sitting on your cushion if you grab onto anything, if you push anything away, suddenly everything you touch sticks to you. It's like Brer Rabbit and the the tarbaby. If you start hanging onto your thoughts, you can't let go of them. If you try to push them away, you can't let go of them. So there you are stuck holding onto the tarbaby. We see, too, the emptiness of the things that we're attached to. How a thousand things fill the mind, but none of them is substantial or real. A thousand passions arise, but if we don't act on them, they fall away, too. Amazing that something that seemed so important suddenly is not so important. Our weariness that seems as if it will overwhelm us suddenly is gone and we are full of energy.

'The Great way is not difficult. It just avoids picking and choosing.' There is a Taoist flavor to this saying. The sense of following the water path through life. The water if it runs into a stone, it just makes its way around. The water is clear and has no attachments which is why we have a little bowl of water on the altar.

Chao-chou has brought up this saying which he was very fond of and he often liked to bring it up. And then he said that as soon as we speak, that is picking and choosing. If we are clear, we hang onto the clarity. This old student doesn't even hang onto that. Do you still hang onto anything, or not? So we could say that the greatest method of meditation is that whatever comes up, just don't cling to it. Whatever comes up, let it go. If you can do this, you'll find the way home very quickly. But it's hard. Things stick to you.

So, there was a student in the audience who said, "Since you don't abide within clarity, since you don't hang onto or cling to clarity, do you still hang onto anything, or not?" "What is it that you hang onto?" So he's pushing the question straight back at the teacher. In a way not much point. There is a slightly philosophical quality to this question, which somehow makes it lose its force, but it still is good to ask. You can see that this student has a certain strength and wants to come out, and wants to engage with life. It's better to ask and be a fool than not to ask and be a fool. Because if we get something going, who knows, we may learn something.

Since you do not abide within, live within, clarity, what do you hang onto?

Chao-chou replied: I don't know either.

This is one of the famous 'I don't knows' of zen. Yamada Roshi, actually he was passing this down from Yasutani Roshi and I don't know who he was passing it down from, there are many kinds of not knowing. There's plain old ignorant not knowing. "Show me the way to San Francisco." "Oh, I don't know." The ignorant not knowing. Then there's the kind of wise not knowing. Yamada Roshi used to call it true blindness when you are blind to the things that delude you. You are blind to the attachments and the

brambles of the world and Chao-chou is illustrating this kind of not knowing. The same as famous Bodhidharma when the emperor asked him, "Who is this standing before me?" and Bodhidharma said, "I do not know."

In your meditation if you ask yourself, 'who am I?' 'where have I come from and where do I go after I die?' and you do not know the answer, that is fine. That is better than thinking you know. We then stay with and become absorbed in that not knowing. Then we allow the question to come out in the midst of our absorption. It is like a single tree on a great plain. The question arises and we confront it.

So the student went on. He was a persevering student.

He said: Since you don't know teacher, why do nevertheless say that you don't dwell within clarity?

Chao-chou said: It's enough to ask about the matter. Make your bows and withdraw.

Again, I think there's nothing really wrong with this student's question, but the whole thing was beginning to fall into the weeds, the whole conversation was beginning to get lost. Chao-chou decided that there was nothing to do except put an end to it, put a limit on it.

He was a very old man at this time. I'm not sure how old, but we know that he taught for forty years from the time he was about eighty. So he was older than anybody in this room. Some of his contemporaries were famous for their loud shouts and using the stick, things like that, extravagant behavior, dancing in response to a question. Chao-chou was too old and feeble to do any of this, but at the same time he was greatly admired for his ability in meeting people. He always found a way to meet people even though he was so old and his voice so soft and he had hobble around.

He was a very resolute sort of person. He used to give teisho in a chair, which was traditional in China, and one day the leg of his chair broke through age and maltreatment and neglect. He had somebody tie a branch of firewood to it to hold it up. He wouldn't let anybody spend the time away from meditating to carve him a new chair leg. He spent years with this chair tied up with a piece of firewood giving teisho. So he had a unique spirit that you can see in this koan. He was not very much attached to circumstances himself. He didn't mind if his chair leg broke. He just immediately reacted and responded. So when you meet an obstacle, it is good to remember the Great Way is not difficult, it just avoids picking and choosing.

One of the great important discoveries for me was that I had to love the path itself. That when I did not know and I would go to my teacher not knowing. For a long time I really wanted so badly to know that I wasn't really even in the room with the teacher. I just passed through with the wind. In fact, he didn't let me stay very long. I remember going to see Yamada Roshi. I thought it was very special to get to see Yamada Roshi so perhaps I would get enlightened when I had dokusan with him. So I meditated very hard before hand. Then I went into see Yamada Roshi and kneeling began to ask him about Mu. And he looked at me, and he took a deep breath, and said, "Sit down." He sat me down and gave me a long talk about, "You must become one with Mu. In every moment

of the day, each breath must become Mu." Which was exactly what the Tanto was saying all the time in sesshin. I didn't get enlightened in my interview with him after all, but I always remember his kindness. I began to understand, too, that for him it was fine that I was working on Mu, and so it had to be fine for me, too. He could even enjoy that I was working on Mu, that I really didn't have a clue which way was up.

Chao-chou has very much that quality, doesn't he? The Great Way is not difficult. It just avoids picking and choosing. Right now is where we avoid picking and choosing. We have been meditating so well and then our meditation goes all to hell. (A little rhyme.) And the pilot wants to say, "But I'm meditating so well." Yes, and who knows that when your meditation disintegrates and falls apart, that might be a very important time for your practice. Be patient with yourself. You just patiently gather and it falls apart; and we gather and it falls apart. It is not for us to choose and decide about this. All we need is our inner sincerity of the heart, the sincerity of the horror, the whole being is thrown into the zazen. And that is enough. Gradually, then, we become one with zazen. We have to become one even with the obstacles. We can't try to push the obstacles away and say, "No, I will become one with the joyful and serene paths." We have to love the whole process. When we can do that with our whole hearts, then we're very near to the gate. We will find that we're not even in a hurry anymore and the world starts to appear before us. When we do kinhin, we realize that the whole world is coming toward us and all we have to do is accept it and meet it.

Please continue in this way. Trust your own sincerity. You have begun to gather some attention in your zazen. Do not be too concerned about what comes to meet you. Just love your walking and love the path and become one with it over and over again. That will be enough. Please keep it up.

# # #