

Sogen's One Drop of Water

By Shodo Harada Roshi

When the monk who would become the National Teacher Fukusho joined the monastery of the founder of the Hogen Line, Hogen Buneki Zenji (885-958), he had already been with Master Sozan for many years. Because he thought he had already realized enlightenment, Fukusho just lived at the monastery, without even doing sanzen.

One day a monk asked Master Hogen, "What is the one drop of water of Sogen?" The monk was asking: the great Dharma, the truth, the Zen that was transmitted from the Sixth Patriarch, what is it? He was asking about the essence of the teaching of the Dharma that flowed from the temple, Sogen, of the Sixth Patriarch. "The one drop of water of Sogen" was how he was referring to this great truth.

When he asked, "What is the one drop of water of Sogen," Hogen answered without a pause, "THIS is the one drop of water of Sogen." This is how Hogen answered, saying, "That which is asking is that one drop of water of Sogen!" But the monk who had begun this koan exchange did not understand the meaning of the answer he received. He prostrated and left.

When Fukusho, who was standing behind the monk, heard that exchange he was suddenly deeply enlightened. Although he had thought he was already enlightened at the monastery of Sozan Roshi, he now knew that there had been still further for him to realize. He had not yet fully understood. But now his state of mind was thoroughly ripened, and at that one expression by Hogen he was completely and totally awakened.

The words "Sogen's one drop of water" are about the flow of one drop of water—of the essence of the dharma—from the mountain of Sokeizan, the mountain where the Sixth Patriarch's temple stood. This is the ultimate point of Zen where words and phrases cannot reach. It is the truest place of Zen, the Sixth Patriarch's pulse of truth.

In Okayama, Japan, there was a master named Gisan Zenrai Zenji who made excellent use of these words. A monk training with him at Sogenji was deeply enlightened upon hearing these same words and even took the name of Tekisui Zenji, or One Drop of Water Zenji. This episode is passed along at Sogenji.

In the year 1837, when his teacher Taigen Shigen Zenji died, Gisan Zenrai Zenji became the abbot of Sogenji and raised disciples there. Many monks gathered at Sogenji to train, often more than one hundred at a time. Among them was one named Giboku Zenji. One day Giboku Zenji's job was to prepare the bath for Master Gisan; he was nineteen, old enough to believe he understood how to do things well. Giboku Zenji had first gone to Kyoto to train, but he could not find a good teacher there and had come to Okayama when he heard that Master Gisan was an excellent teacher. In those days there was no spending money for a poor monk, and while he had a great huge vow, he came to Okayama impoverished and walking in broken sandals. He did sanzen with the Roshi, but instead of being able to offer a gift of incense to the Roshi for the incense used in sanzen, he made do with a brush holder that someone had bought for him.

Giboku had been at Sogenji for only a short time when it became his turn to make the bath for the Roshi. The bathwater was a little too hot, so he brought buckets of water from the well and cooled the bath down. When it was sufficiently cool he set down the last bucket, in which a few drops of unused water remained. Then, before going to bring more water, he dumped those last few drops out onto the ground. Since he was going to get more water, he probably thought those last few drops weren't necessary.

Gisan Zenrai Zenji saw that and said to him, "What did you just do?"

"I went to draw some water."

"Before you drew the water, what did you do?"

"I threw away some old water," Giboku answered simply.

"If you do training with a mind like that, no matter how much training you do or how long you train, you will not awaken. That bit of remaining water, if you dump it out there—how can it be used? If you take it outside and put it on some plants, then the plants will be given life, and the water will also be given life. If you give it to the cucumbers in the garden, the cucumbers will be helped and the water will be satisfied too!"

It is the work of one who is ordained to give life to everything, but that cannot be done with such a lack of mindfulness. Giboku was reprimanded in that way. Since he was nineteen he had thought he understood already. When he was reprimanded he realized how little he actually understood and that something as simple as one drop of water, a single drop of water, had taught him that he had to start over again in his training. This he did, later becoming a great Zen Master.

Of course, today water is generally available, although there are still times and places where it is scarce. We often carelessly and thoughtlessly use water unnecessarily. As the raindrops fall from the sky, one after the next, they land on the leaves of the tree, or the trunk of the tree, or the stone wall, and only when all these drops come together can a small stream be born on the earth. These small streams meet and join, and with this gathering a river is born. When the waters of many rivers all join together, an ocean becomes possible. To put it another way, the source of the ocean is the drop of rain that falls from the sky. One drop of water. Each and every one of these drops has its own functioning. A small amount of water has its functioning, and a large amount of water has its functioning. To be able to use the potential of any amount of water, be it large or small—this is our deep wisdom. To be able to make the best use of the potential of the amount of water we have is humans' wisdom. Zen is the cultivation of the clear and deeply seeing eye that can know and appropriately act in each and every situation that comes along.

This is not a wisdom having to do with trivial and minute bits of information but instead one that can see all the way through to the essence of things. It allows us to make use of each thing, no matter what it might be, and give it life. This depth of Mind is Zen. In this way Gisan Zenrai Zenji was constantly enlightening his disciples. Tekisui Giboku Zenji, who received his teaching, used that wisdom and gave it further life.

Just before his death, Tekisui Zenji said,

The one drop of water of Sogen,
For seventy-four years
It was used, never exhausted,
Throughout the heavens and the earth.

Saying these words he died. For seventy-four years Tekisui used the splendid teaching he had received at Sogenji about the preciousness of water. He used it and thoroughly gave it life, but it was impossible to use it up.

If we use money, it gets used up. If we use things for a long time, they get worn out, but when teaching is used it becomes more and more radiant. For his entire life Tekisui gave this teaching the functioning that extended through the heavens and the earth. Thanks to this teaching that functioning was possible. Using water as a metaphor, he taught about Buddha Nature. This truth, this awakening of the true eye, is what he was teaching about.

In fact, from the line of Gisan Zenrai Zenji also came the head abbot of Engakuji in Kamakura, Imakita Kosen. Imakita Kosen's Dharma line was carried on by Shaku Soen, who, at the World Congress of Religions more than one hundred years ago, gave the first Buddhist teaching in America. Shaku Soen's disciple was D. T. Suzuki, who is one of today's foremost translators of

Buddhist teachings into English. That one drop of water, one drop of teaching, that Dharma, is being given life all over the world today.

In Kyoto, Myoshinji monastery was opened by Gisan Zenrai's disciple Ekkei Shuken, and the monastery of Tenryuji was opened under Tekisui Zenji. In Osaka, in Sakae, Nanshujji monastery was opened. Gisan Zenrai also raised Shokokuji's Daisetsu Joen and Ogino Dokuen. When we look closely at this, we can see that more than one hundred years ago, that main stream of Zen came forth from the overflowing wisdom of that drop from Sogenji, and from Japan it has flowed into countries all over the world.

The Sixth Patriarch's teaching, with water as the metaphor for Buddha Nature, was given great respect by Gisan Zenji. He actualized it in his teaching of disciples. From that time and continuing through today as well, that teaching is being given great life.