

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2023, Term II.3

### Gutei Raises a Finger

#### KOAN

Master Gutei, whenever he was questioned, just stuck up one finger. At one time he had a young attendant, whom a visitor asked, ““What is the Zen your Master is teaching?”” The boy also stuck up one finger. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off the boy’s finger with a knife. As the boy ran out screaming with pain, Gutei called to him. When the boy turned his head, Gutei stuck up his finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened.

When Gutei was about to die, he said to the assembled monks, “I attained Tenryu’s Zen of One Finger. I used it all through my life, but could not exhaust it.” When he had finished saying this, he died.

#### MUMON’S COMMENTARY

The satori of Gutei and of the boy attendant are not in the finger. If you really see through this, Tenryu, Gutei, the boy, and you yourself are all run through with one skewer.

#### MUMON’S POEM

Gutei made a fool of old Tenryu,  
With a sharp knife he chastised the boy.  
Korei raised his hand with no effort,  
And lo! the great ridge of Mount Ka was split in two!

#### TEISHO ON THE KOAN

This koan has three parts. The first part is the first sentence: “Master Gutei, ev whenever he was questioned, just stuck up one finger.” The second paragraph, starting with “At one time he had a young attendant” and ending with “The boy was suddenly enlightened,” makes the second part, which tells us how Gutei’s young attendant was enlightened. The last paragraph, from “When Gutei was about to die” to the end is the third part of the koan.

The most important, however, is the first part. The essence of this koan is in the first sentence. The second part gives a remarkable example of Gutei’s Zen ability, and the third tells of the infinite and limitless working of the “Zen of One Finger.”

“Master Gutei, whenever he was questioned, just stuck up one finger.” Gutei was certainly an unusual Zen Master. He just stuck up his finger, whenever and whatever he was asked by anybody at all. For instance, someone might ask: “What is the essence of Buddhism?” and he stuck up one finger. “What is Joshu’s ‘Mu’?” he might be asked, and he stuck up one finger. “Bring out your mind and show it to me,” he was asked, and he stuck up one finger. In reply to “When your body is all decomposed,

where do you go?" he stuck up one finger. Throughout his life he gave no talks. What a hearty Master he was! The fact was, he could never put it in words even if he wished to do so. Or I might say he expressed it fully.

One is all. There is nothing to add. True it may be, but tell me, "What is the finger?" Is there anybody who does not have a finger? Or Truth, or the Buddha Nature, or whatever you may call it? Pitiful indeed are those who are not aware of the foolishness of seeking after water while they are in the midst of it. Yet if you stick to the finger, you are thousands of miles away from the Truth.

Mumon also simply says to his disciples, "Whenever he was questioned, Gutei just stuck up one finger," and adds no further comment. "I stick up my finger." True teisho is complete with this act. Those who know, should know it by this, and those who cannot understand it will just have to strive further until they become able to get it. There are no other means or devices to get the Truth of Zen.

However, perhaps I should not end my teisho by sticking up my finger. So I will come down a step and add some words, though from a less absolute standpoint.

Gutei was a Zen Master in China in the ninth century. According to his biography, when he was young Gutei lived alone on a mountain doing zazen. One day a nun happened to come by. According to the custom in China, when two people meet they take off their hats and exchange greetings. This nun, however, did not follow the proper etiquette. She was impolite enough to walk around Gutei three times without taking off her head-covering, stood right in front of him, and said, "If you can tell me the word that satisfies me, I will take off my head-covering." Gutei, whose spiritual eye was unfortunately not yet open, could say nothing in reply. The nun immediately turned to leave. Gutei called out, "It is getting dark. Why don't you stay here overnight and start your trip tomorrow morning?" The nun turned back and demanded again, "I will stay if you can give me the word." Once again Gutei was unable to say anything, and the nun simply left him.

Let me ask you: if you were to talk to the nun in place of Gutei, how would you answer?"

Gutei was now greatly ashamed of himself for having been unable to give an answer to the nun. He made up his mind to leave his mountain hut to visit various great Zen Masters and have further training to open his Zen eye. According to the legend, that night he had a dream in which a foreigner told him that a great Master who would be his teacher would soon come to the hut. In accordance with the dream, Gutei decided to remain on the mountain. Sure enough, ten days later an old monk came by. He was Master Tenryu, the successor to Master Taibai Hojo. Gutei was convinced that this must be the Master the dream had foretold, and he welcomed him with reverence. He told Tenryu of his encounter with the nun and asked him what the "fundamental word of Zen" could be. Tenryu, without saying anything, just stuck up his finger. At this Gutei was enlightened. The darkness in his mind was all dispersed, and his spiritual eye was opened to a new vista.

His biography just tells us, "Tenryu stuck up one finger. At this Gutei had satori." No detailed account is given of his inner struggle before getting satori. Yet those who themselves have gone through hard training and searching will appreciate behind this short sentence the painful searching and striving Gutei must have gone through before this moment of breakthrough was given to him.

What is important here is not the lifted finger, but the intensity of the inner struggle Gutei went through. In Zen training one has to strive with soul and body to transcend his dualistic discriminating consciousness. One has to come to the ultimate extremity where any slightest touch may effect a great change in his personality, so fundamental as to be described by saying that "the earth splits and the mountains collapse." He has to plunge into the abyss of "sheer darkness altogether," as an old Master expressed it.

When Master Tenryu stuck up his finger, Gutei must have been at his ultimate extremity. He had spent years on the mountain doing zazen, but somehow his discipline could not go beyond the dualistic

limitations. The incident of his encounter with the nun made him ashamed of his training and intensified his spiritual quest to somehow break through the barrier. He was finally driven to the abyss of his ultimate extremity. He was in a spiritual state that made him ready to explode at the slightest touch. Tenryu's finger was an arrow shot at the right moment. It served to effect the breakthrough. The intensification of Gutei's searching and the presentation by Tenryu were like a chicken ready to break open the eggshell and its mother hen pecking at it to help the chicken out. Gutei's satori was a happy result of both of them hitting the right moment. If one starts asking what this one finger might mean and tries to find some significance in sticking up the finger, apart from the actual inner struggle Gutei went through, he is a complete stranger to Zen. If one's spiritual quest—or Great Doubt—is intensified to the ultimate extremity and his striving has come to the breaking point, a bird's singing, the sound of a stone hitting bamboo, the Master's slapping, his holding up one finger, or anything will do.

Tenryu's finger effected this breaking through the barrier—the fact of having actually, personally, transcended the dualism of yes and no, having really cast away the dichotomy of subject and object, is here. If I dare to explain it philosophically, one finger held up here is not a finger any longer; it is Gutei himself, I-myself, the universe itself—but if one clings to such an explanation, Zen is no longer there.

On my recent trip to the United States, an artist in Kyoto asked me to bring to an American friend of his a painting of a plum branch, and also asked me to write an aphorism on his painting. Often a painter in Japan will ask a Zen Master to write a Zen saying on his painting so that people will recognize the Zen spirit in his work. On this painting of a plum branch I wrote, "Three thousand worlds [the whole universe] are fragrant." I wanted this one plum branch to symbolize Gutei's finger, or Zen itself. A single tiny plum branch is fragrant throughout the whole universe; that is, the plum branch is the Absolute and embraces the whole universe, transcending all forms of dualistic opposites. The whole universe is a plum branch; a plum branch is the whole universe. The Zen of One Finger is inexhaustible indeed.

"At one time he had a young attendant, of whom a visitor asked, 'What is the Zen your Master is teaching?' The boy also stuck up one finger. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off the boy's finger with a knife. As the boy ran out screaming with pain, Gutei called to him. When the boy turned his head, Gutei stuck up his finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened."

Mumon is kind enough to introduce another story related to Zen of One Finger in the hope of presenting Gutei's Zen even more clearly to us. Gutei had a young lay disciple attending him, a youth who stayed in the monastery to study sutras and receive training but had not yet been ordained as a monk. The boy got the habit of imitating his teacher by sticking up one finger, and when visitors would ask him, "What kind of teaching does Gutei give?" he would stick up his finger without a word. Hearing of this, Gutei one day took drastic measures and cut off the boy's finger; that is, he cut off the boy's finger of imitation, which is no better than a corpse.

Gutei called out to him as he ran away screaming with pain. When the boy involuntarily turned his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. At this, fortunately the boy was awakened to the True One Finger. In the extreme pain penetrating the universe, he grasped the Truth of One Finger. The boy, losing his finger, attained the true finger and eternal life. This Zen of One Finger is nothing but the Truth pervading the whole universe. It can never be found in the boy's imitating finger, which is like a corpse. The marvelous capability of Gutei in cutting it off should certainly be admired.

I myself have a similar story of my own training days, which of course is not comparable with that of the boy attendant. I had already spent three years at the monastery and was in the abyss of darkness. I did not know how to proceed, where to go, or what to do. There is an occasion in the sesshin (the intensive week-long training period at a monastery) when every monk has to go to the Master's

room for sanzen, which is the occasion for a monk to show his Zen ability to his teacher in private. (It is totally different from logical or philosophical discussions, or questions and answers.) I struck the bell of sanzen and stepped into the Master's room feeling like a lamb dragged to a slaughter house, for I did not have anything to say. In a fix, I instantly raised my hand and exclaimed, "The Truth pervading the whole universe!" The Master, with piercing eyes, stood up and drove me out of the room of sanzen, saying, "You good-for-nothing monk! You had better return to college!" I shall never forget the pain I had at this Master's rebuke.

Philosophically speaking, my statement that "the Absolute Truth pervades the whole universe" is certainly correct as far as content goes. But it was just an idea, a thought—that is, a carcass that merely looked alive on the surface—it was not a fact I had personally experienced. Gutei's finger and his young attendant's finger are the same finger. Still, there is a fundamental difference. While Gutei's finger was Zen itself, the universe itself, the attendant's finger was just an imitation without the fact of his own experience. It was a fake with no life, and should be cut off.

The Zen of One Finger is in the finger and yet transcends the finger. If one fails to grasp correctly the Truth of One Finger here, he is altogether out of Zen.

"When Gutei was about to die, he said to the assembled monks, 'I attained Tenryu's Zen of One Finger. I have used it all through my life, but could not exhaust it.' When he had finished saying this, he died."

Mumon generously adds this last remark to complete this koan of Zen of One Finger. Although the physical body of Gutei, a historical person called Gutei, did die, his Zen is alive here now, in my finger and your finger, transcending space and time. The whole universe is a finger; a finger is the whole universe. It should then be ever new and alive, and its creative work can never be exhausted; it exists forever together with the universe itself.

#### TEISHO ON MUMON'S COMMENTARY

"The satori of Gutei and of the boy attendant are not in the finger. If you really see through this, Tenryu, Gutei, the boy, and you yourself are all run through with one skewer."

Mumon first comments that the satori of Gutei and of the boy are not in the finger. Where is the satori then? We should not be misled by the word *finger*. What is it that is in front of you? What is it that is behind you? Cast yourself away, die in yourself, and be the seen when you see, be the heard when you hear. If you truly die in yourself, whether you may be standing or sitting, going or coming, it is nothing but the finger; it is nothing but Zen. Heaven and earth, Gutei and the boy, I and you, are all run through with one finger; all is in one finger. Mumon tries his best to uphold the Zen of One Finger.

It is recorded that long ago Master Gensha said, "In the past, had I witnessed Gutei sticking up one finger, I should certainly have wrenched it away!" Does this comment of Gensha praise the Zen of One Finger or abuse it?

#### TEISHO ON MUMON'S POEM

Gutei made a fool of old Tenryu,  
 With a sharp knife he chastised the boy.  
 Korei raised his hand with no effort,  
 And lo! the great ridge of Mount Ka was split in two!

Mumon made a poem to complete this koan and also to illustrate its point clearly. Originally, the Truth of Zen is clear and manifest. It is lucidly revealed everywhere. Nothing is lacking anywhere. Why is it necessary then to stick up one finger, or to cut it off? From the absolute standpoint, both Tenryu and Gutei are making fools of everybody. Furthermore, to make the boy attain satori by cutting off his finger—how absurd! Even to hear it pollutes the ear. Thus with much zeal Mumon comments on the koan.

Lastly, Mumon refers to a Chinese myth and says, “Korei raised his hand with no effort, and lo! the great ridge of Mount Ka was split in two!” Once upon a time there was a god named Korei who had supernatural mysterious powers. He split the Great Mountain Ka into two parts and let the great river run through the range of mountains. Even the supernatural powers of Korei are no match for the Zen of One Finger. In the phrase “with no effort,” Mumon implies how dynamically and extraordinarily One Finger works.

When one wants to go, he goes; when he wants to sit, he sits; this is how a Zen man lives. Where does he get this Truth in Zen? We must clearly see this supernatural power, so creative and mysterious.