



SO WHAT?

Ryuge Kodon, who lived in China from 835 to 923, left home at fourteen, was ordained, and then traveled all over, studying with various teachers, including Tokusan Senkan. One day Ryuge said to Tokusan, “Before coming here I had heard about Tokusan’s one-phrase Buddha-Dharma, but all this time I haven’t heard the master say a single phrase about Buddha-Dharma.”

Tokusan said, “So what?”

Ryuge didn’t get it, and went to study under Tozan Ryokai, where he told him the same thing. Tozan asked, “Are you accusing me of something?”

Ryuge then recounted what Tokusan had said. As he repeated the words “So what?” he suddenly came to an awakening.

So what! Ryuge realized all aspects at once. So what, if I didn’t say a single phrase? You were expecting something from me? You’re disappointed you didn’t get what you came for? And, what’s there to say? How could a single phrase about Buddha-Dharma be said? There is nothing to be said *about* Buddha-Dharma: no concept, no description, no hint, no formula. And, *this* is being said at every moment of every day, in every word, in every way. One-phrase Buddha-Dharma is manifesting right here, right now. And, most importantly, so what! Here it is! This is the whole of it, the one-phrase Buddha-Dharma itself. And it is so *what*, it is so completely *what*, it is what-ness itself--and you missed it.

Ryuge continued training with Tozan, becoming his Dharma successor. After some years he again went on pilgrimage, deepening his understanding with renowned teachers, including Rinzai Gigen. Eventually he became the abbot of a temple on Mt. Ryuge. He often quoted Tozan’s saying: “Only when you regard the teachings of the buddhas and patriarchs as you would a newly made enemy are you qualified to be a student of Zen.”

Nothing from someone else will do you any good. You want me to give you my one-phrase Buddha-Dharma? I have nothing to give you. So what! Find out for yourself; awaken on your own.

In *The Iron Flute*, Case 28, a monk asks Ryuge, “What did the old masters attain when they entered the ultimate stage?”

We have so many stories about ancestral teachers awakening to their true nature—but what did they attain? Some of you might be too sophisticated to ask that question, but a student with beginner’s mind may wonder, what’s it like to awaken, to experience supreme enlightenment? What do you get? How do you get it? In *The Diamond Sutra* we are told, “There is no formula for Supreme Enlightenment,” but still, we may yearn for instructions, directions, the game plan.

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Ryuge answered the monk, "They were like burglars sneaking into a vacant house." The old masters snuck into an empty house: into shunyata.

Most of us are dwelling in a very full house. You may know the poker expression, "a full house." It means that you are holding cards that are three of a kind and a pair. What's a full house in life signify? Being in the game, convinced that everything's about gain and loss, right and wrong, and that we just have to figure it all out, find the strategies that will help us win.

We hope desperately that we'll get something to ameliorate our anxiety about having been dealt a bad hand, that if we stay in the game, the dealer will give us the right cards.

But our game is more like tarot than poker. What are the cards we get? The Fool. The Juggler. Judgment. The Hanged Man...and my favorite, Death. They remind us that we have to get rid of everything we think will make us better, everything we seek from others because we don't feel good enough, because of our inner sense of lack, because we're always hungry for more. As Bob Dylan put it: "I've got a hole where my stomach disappeared." Believing in our own narratives of clinging and aversion, ignoring the truth of impermanence, we construct a self that we think can control every aspect of our circumstances. However, each circumstance appears and disappears according to causality and conditions. You like it? So what! You don't? So what!

Ultimate truth has no concept, no construct to grasp. So it's up to us to realize the boundlessness devoid of any characteristics. There is nothing to attain, nothing that can be held, no one to live up to or report to. When we realize the ultimate vacancy of our own house, so *what*, as-it-is-ness, continually manifests.

Dogen wrote a verse that evokes this:

*Unmoored
In midnight water
No waves, no wind
The empty boat
Is flooded with moonlight*

When he was a young monk, Rinzai asked Obaku, "What is the quintessence of Buddha-Dharma?" Three times he asked, and three times he got struck. Finally he went to Daigu's place, told him about it, and said, "I don't know whether or not I'm at fault."

Daigu said, "Obaku is indeed such a grandma. He completely exhausted himself for your sake. Yet you come here saying, 'I don't know whether or not I'm at fault!'" Upon hearing these words, Rinzai was greatly awakened and cried, "Aha! Obaku's Buddha-Dharma is nothing special!"

So what? It's nothing special, yet we keep sniffing around for something extraordinary we can call our own, some projection of a dream of awakening, which is so different from waking up to our own nature. And when we do, it's just as Nansen told Joshu: ordinary mind is the Way. The extraordinary ordinary mind: no name can be given to it; nothing *about* it can be known. No one else can give it to us.

Nyogen Senzaki, in his comment on this case of *The Iron Flute*, said: "This monk [who asked Ryuge] probably thought masters have something others do not have; however, they have nothing others have."

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They have nothing others have: nothing. This is true liberation. These masters, burglars in an empty house, steal even the emptiness. They steal the shunyata of shunyata. They are not stuck in Mu, but are vitally alive. Returning to ordinary activity, realizing this “nothing special,” they are actualizing the freedom of nonduality in the world of loss and gain.

Senzaki noted, “The monk was impatient to get the answers.” How often, in our impatience to attain something, have we missed the endlessly subtle and continually manifesting ultimate truth, which has come from emptiness and will return to emptiness, just as we have and will.

At the end of his comment, Senzaki said, “A man was once asked, ‘What do you have within you that makes you appear so calm and contented?’ In turn, he asked the questioner, ‘What do you have within you that makes you look so uneasy and disheartened?’ When you have nothing within yourself, you are always happy, but when you cling to your many desires, you can never get out of your misery.”

Undoubtedly, the man who was once asked that question was Senzaki himself, who indeed had “nothing others have.” When we feel uneasy and disheartened, it’s a good indication that we’re clinging—not only to material goods and seemingly harmless distractions, but to our strategies for spiritual progress and attainment. How to relax the hand that grasps, that has become a rigid claw? Exhale. Open the palm to nothing.