

CASE 10

An Old Woman Near Taizan



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

There is gathering in, there is letting go ability to kill, the ability to give life.

The weight and bar (of the scale) are in his hands.

Delusive passions, demons and non-Buddhists—all can be handled easily.

The great earth, mountains and rivers—all become toys. Just say. What state of consciousness is this?

Case:

Whenever anyone would ask the way to Taizan, an old woman would say, “Straight ahead.” If the monk walked even a little, the woman would say, “This fine monk also goes on like this.” A monk told Jôshû about it. Jôshû said, “Wait, and I will see through (the old woman) for you.” Jôshû asked as the others had done. The next day, he came into the hall and said, “I have seen through the old woman for you.”

Verse:

In old age he becomes a spirit.

It has not been mistakenly transmitted.

Jôshû, the old Buddha, inherited Nansen’s dharma.

That the old tortoise loses its life is due to the pattern.

The outstanding steed Follow-The-Wind is bothered by the harness.

He saw through the Zen of the old woman.

If you speak about it before others, it isn’t worth a cent.

On the Instruction:

This same case appears as Case 31 in the *Gateless Gate* and is known there as “Jôshû Sees Through the Old Woman.” However, the way of handling the case by Mumon is somewhat different than the method of Old Man Banshō in the *Book of Serenity*. Let us look now at the Instruction.

There is gathering in, there is letting go. You can understand these words as referring to Jôshû. Jôshû’s seeing through the old woman means being able to discern what level of Zen understanding she has. Thus we can see the Instruction as referring to Jôshû. A true Zen master, the Instruction tells us, is completely free in his or her Zen activity. It is like gathering up a rope or depriving the other of his freedom. This is also known as grasping and releasing. It is also known as trapping. Another expression is killing and giving life. It means taking the life of the other. These are all examples of gathering in. But just when you think it is gathering in, it is releasing. It is also known as giving. That means giving freedom, or giving life. In contrast to tapping, there is the aspect of releasing or allowing the other to be free. Zen teachers, in guiding their students, must know where the student is in his or her practice. He must use one of these two methods with complete freedom. Sometimes he must gather in. To speak more concretely, gathering in is the aspect of taking away life. This is the aspect of teaching from the standpoint of the essential world, the world of not a single thing. The aspect of releasing is the aspect of revealing the world of phenomena. The world of phenomena extends out before you. As I am always saying, form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Although it is one, it has the aspect of emptiness and the aspect of form. But they are not separate entities. They are one and the same. The act of concentrating on the aspect of emptiness in guiding students is what is known here as gathering in. When the master has the aspect of phenomena to the fore in guiding, it is known as letting go or releasing. Although we speak in terms of having the aspect of phenomena on the outside, to the back is always the essential world. This is a prerequisite. Otherwise, it is not real Zen. Thus we have both gathering in and releasing. Sometimes the master will gather in, another time he will release.

The staff follows the body.

There have been various theories about what kind of staff is involved here. Some say it’s like a magic wand used by a magician because all different things can come from that staff. That staff is always with him and can be used in complete freedom. Sometimes he gathers in and another time he releases.

The ability to kill, the ability to give life. Sometimes he acts to kill, in the sense of depriving the student of all concepts and thoughts. There are all sorts of thoughts in their

heads: evil thoughts and evil feelings, delusive thoughts. He has the power to deprive students of all such thoughts. The ability to give life means he has the power to give the new life of realization after depriving them of all delusions.

The weight and bar (of the scale) are in his hands. With a traditional scale with a counterweight and a bar, you put things on the scale to see how much they weigh. It means being able to gauge the Zen understanding of the other person. He has that power at all times and can use it with complete freedom. Here is another phrase for your perusal that has the same meaning:

“If you steal it, true gold loses its color.”

Gold may be glittering, but from the standpoint of the essential world, it has no color. That’s certainly the case, since there’s nothing at all. Since the content of the essential world is completely empty, there is no color whatsoever.

“If you release it, then even stones will give off light.”

What light is it? The light of your Buddha nature, the light of your essence. There are always these two aspects of killing and giving life. If the master believes it is right to “kill” the person, in the sense of depriving him or her of delusions, he acts freely to do so. If he thinks it is the time to give life, he does so. And he can do so in complete freedom. The same holds for raising children. Sometimes you have to scold them and sometimes you have to praise them. That would be the aspect of giving life. To scold them when they misbehave is the aspect of killing. It’s a matter of achieving the right balance between the two if the children are to grow up right. There are ever fewer parents who can scold their children with authority. This has nothing to do with whether the parents themselves have had a good education or not. Not infrequently the mother hasn’t had such a high education. She might have only finished primary school. But if the daughter graduates from university, the mother might end up meekly submitting to whatever the daughter says. But that is not real childraising. To give a rather unusual example, former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka’s mother didn’t graduate from a women’s university or anything. Kakuei Tanaka might seem like a person who could take on any contender, but it’s said that he’s meekly submissive before his mother. It’s certainly strange. You have to have the ability to scold the children when they’re doing wrong. Otherwise they won’t grow up right. Of course, there are also cases where being strict is overdone and has a negative effect.

Delusive passions, demons and non-Buddhists—all can be handled easily.

This is also referring to Jōshū. Even in the case of devils or non-Buddhists, whatever the delusive thoughts, he can handle them with ease.

The great earth, mountains and rivers—all become toys. All of these are like playthings to him. This is certainly an outstanding ability. Is there a person with such an ability?

Just say. What state of consciousness is this? Has there ever been a person with the abilities just described? An example will be given now and we are invited to examine it closely. We proceed now to the Main Case.

On the Case:

Whenever anyone would ask the way to Taizan, an old woman would say, “Straight ahead.” Taizan (Chinese: Taishan) refers to the famous “five great mountains” (Japanese: Gotaizan), which in ancient times were said to be the Zen hall of the Bodhisattva Manjusri. I have no way of knowing how things are now, but in former times, those who wanted to really study Buddhism had to travel to this mountain at least once in their lives. At the foot of the mountain there was a teashop, or something like a snack shop that was run by an old woman and located at a fork in the road. The monks who were about to climb the mountain would drink tea in the shop and ask the way. Each time the old woman would say, “Straight ahead.”

If the monk walked even a little, the woman would say, “This fine monk also goes like this.” If the monk would then set out on his way after obtaining these directions, the woman would say: “Such a fine monk. But he goes on in that way too.” It must have sounded very ironical. If we examine the matter more closely, we can say that the road that the monk is asking is the road in the phenomenal world. But the answer of the old woman is actually not talking about the phenomenal way. It is talking about the essential world. There is such a koan in the Miscellaneous Koans:

“In order to meet the requirements of a Zen student I must walk straight along a narrow mountain road with 99 curves.”

Ninety-nine can be understood here as meaning a great many curves. If we examine the statement of the woman in this way, we understood what is going on. But the monk, although he was being presented with the fact, unfortunately did not understand. Then the woman would say what she always said: “This fine monk also goes like this.” She had gained a reputation as a mean-tempered old lady. One of the monks who met with this treatment told Jôshû about the old woman.

A monk told Jôshû about it. Jôshû said, "Wait, and I will see through (the old woman) for you." Jôshû asked as the others had done. The next day, he came into the hall and said, "I have seen through the old woman for you."

Jôshû set off and asked the same question to the woman. She gave the same answer. Without saying anything further, Jôshû returned. The next day he went to the hall and said, "I have seen through the old woman for you." He did not say anything about whether she was good or bad. This is the main point of the koan. How did he see through her? We have to remember that this is the great Jôshû. Recall the line in the Instruction:

The staff follows the body. Because he has the balance, he can tell at a glance.

What did Jôshû see to say what he did? You must come up with an answer in dokusan. I could say something here, but that would be like giving the answer on a school examination. In Mumon's commentary he does not say anything. But in the commentary in the *Book of Serenity*, Old Man Banshō has the following to say in his commentary:

"The woman on the road to Taishan used to follow Wuzhou out and in the temples (on the holy mountain Taishan) and had fully gotten into Manjusri's saying, "Before, three by three; behind, three by three."

Living on Taishan was the Zen master Mujaku (Wuzhou) Genkie Zenji. The woman had evidently been studying under that master. He is saying that the woman had a clear understanding of this famous saying of Manjusri. Whether that was true or not, I don't know. But that is what is stated here. At any rate, she was certainly a tough customer. There have been various commentaries and criticisms written about this from times of old. It is classified among the so-called "difficult koans". One person says that, in addition to Jôshû seeing through the old woman, he himself was seen through by the old woman. In the present koan the main focus is how Jôshû saw through the old woman. But we could also ask how the old woman saw through Jôshû. I would like you all to consider that point as well. How did the woman see through Jôshû? This is like two mirrors mutually reflecting each other. We know that Jôshû said that he had seen through the old woman when he returned. At the same time, however, since he is reflected in the mirror of the old woman, we have to ask how the old woman saw Jôshû. This is another point to examine. You could say that the presentation in the *Book of Serenity* is somewhat more complex than that in the *Gateless Gate*. As you can see, the matter is not that simple. Thus it has been asked: "I ask you. How did the old woman see through Jôshû?" We proceed now to the Verse.

On the Verse:

In old age he becomes a spirit. The verse says that, on becoming old, he becomes a spirit or a ghost. What does this mean? This is referring to Jôshû, who lived to be 120 years old. Let me review his biography here. In the commentary it says that Jôshû first started to study Zen at the age of sixty, but this is an error. He actually started to practice under Nansen at the age of eighteen. It is said that at that time he “broke the house and dispersed the dwelling,” which means that he had a very deep experience. Interestingly enough, his teacher Nansen also had a very deep experience at the age of eighteen. You could say that they were an equal match for each other in terms of Zen understanding. Jôshû then continued to practice under Nansen for about forty years. Please recall the famous koan about Nansen killing the cat. His master Nansen died when Jôshû was fifty-seven years old. He remained for a while at the temple and then set out on pilgrimage at the age of about sixty. He traveled throughout China to meet the illustrious masters of his day and to sharpen his Zen understanding in Dharma combat with them. This went on for about another twenty years. It was only when he was about eighty years old that he settled down in the small temple known as Kannon-In in the town of Jôshû, from which he got his name. He lived to be 120 years old. The line in the verse says that he was so old he looked like a ghost. But you could also say that, as a spirit, he had the ability to transform people. Oriental tradition has it that badgers become white when they grow older and have the ability to change people into something else.

It has not been mistakenly transmitted. It is not a lie, it tells us; it's really true. There has been this story from of old, and it is not a lie.

Jôshû, the old Buddha, inherited Nansen's dharma. Only really outstanding Zen personages are known as “old Buddha” (jap, kobutsu). Dôgen Zenji also refers to Jôshû as “old Buddha.” Dôgen Zenji himself was often referred to with this title of “old Buddha.”

That the old tortoise loses its life is due to the pattern. The reason that the old tortoise loses its life is because of the patterns on its shell. In old times, people used the patterns on a tortoise shell to tell the future. This included the patterns on the shell itself as well as the patterns produced by the cracks forming when the shell was heated by fire. To lose its life means that it is killed. There is an old story behind this. In olden times during the Sung Dynasty, a man named Genkun had a dream. An old man with flowing white hair appeared in the dream. The old man in the dream said there was a deep gorge in a location called Sairo and that he was there. There was also a river known as the West River, and Genkun was asked to make a petition to the river god. On his way to the river god, he was caught by Yoso, a master fisherman. After awaking from this dream, Genkun went to a fortuneteller to have the dream interpreted. He wanted to know what meaning it could have.

The man interpreting the dream said that the spirit of an old tortoise would certainly appear. Genkun searched far and wide and, sure enough, he met Yosa. He caught a tortoise that was five *shaku* in length. He realized that he had caught a huge tortoise. Genkun wanted to somehow save that tortoise but could not understand why the tortoise appeared in the dream. So he had the dream interpreted. The tortoise was killed and the tortoise shell was used to divine. But no pattern appeared on that tortoise shell. This story originally appears in the *Chuang-tzu*. The fact that the tortoise was killed is because it unfortunately has a pattern on its shell. What is this referring to? With her answer of “Go straight ahead,” the old woman seems to have some sign of enlightenment. She has some air of enlightenment in her answer. And for that very reason, she is stomped on by Jôshû.

The outstanding steed Follow-The-Wind is bothered by the harness.

Follow-The-Wind was an outstanding horse belonging to the first emperor of the Shin Dynasty. Even an outstandingly fast horse like Follow-The-Wind, if harnessed and tethered, will not be able to move at all. This is a reference to the old woman of Taizan. She’s quite an adept. But when tethers and harnesses are put on, she cannot move. This refers to how she was seen through by Jôshû. Jôshû said, “I have seen through the old woman for you.” This is also stated in the next line of the verse.

He saw through the Zen of the old woman. But then comes the next and final line:

If you speak about it before others, it isn’t worth a cent. If you talk big before others, it isn’t worth anything. Don’t say such things, the verse tells us. It would be foolish to talk about such things before others. This is putting Jôshû back in his place.

There is much more that could be said about this koan, but let’s leave things at that as far as the koan is concerned and concentrate on Jôshû as a person. What sort of person was he? I would like to speak a little about him in connection with the line from the verse: In old age he becomes a spirit.

Among the writings of Jôshû is the so-called *Song of the Twelve Hours of the Day* which is a poem in free-verse form. It includes the following passage:

*A broken-down temple in a deserted village – there’s nothing worth saying about it.
In the morning gruel there’s not a grain of rice,
Idly facing the open window and its dirty cracks.
Only the sparrows chattering, no one to be friends with,
Sitting alone, now and then hearing fallen leaves hurry by.
Who said that to leave home it to cut off likes and dislikes?
If I think about it, before I know it there are tears moistening my hanky.*

You could say these are the lines of a man who, growing old, has turned into a spirit. All glitter of satori has completely faded away and he has become a completely natural person. Please take the time to appreciate this state of consciousness. Here are some further lines:

Aimlessly working to kindle a fire and gazing at it from all sides.

Cakes and cookies ran out last year,

Thinking of them today and vacantly swallowing my saliva.

Seldom having things together, incessantly sighing,

Among the many people there are no good men.

Those who come here just ask to have a cup of tea,

Not getting any they go off spluttering in anger.

Shaving my head, who would have guessed it would happen like this?

Nothing in particular made me ask to be a country priest,

Outcast, hungry, and lonely, feeling like I could die.

Mr Chang and Mr Lee,

Never have they borne the slightest bit of respect for me.

A while ago you happened to arrive at my gate,

But only asked to borrow some tea and some paper.

The temple Kannon-In where Jôshû was master must have been a terribly poor place. But it is precisely this true Zen that remains for posterity. Monks dressed in finery will have no lasting influence. Having rid himself of all traces of illusion he returns to his original, ordinary self. He seems to be complaining and in illusion, but in his heart he is completely at peace and will not be disturbed by anything. I would like all of you to become like this.