

CASE 12

**Jizō Plants the Rice Field**



By Yamada Kōun

*Instruction:*

The scholar tills with the pen, the skilled orator tills with the tongue. We patchrobed monks are lazy in watching the white ox on bare ground and do not pay attention to rootless grasses. How should one pass the day?

*Case:*

Jizō asked Shuzanshu, "Where have you come from?" Shuzanshu said, "From the South." Jizō said, "How is Buddhism faring in the South these days?" Shuzanshu said, "It is widely discussed." Jizō said, "Planting my rice field and growing rice is better than that."

Shuzanshu said, "How can you save the beings of the three worlds in that way?"

Jizō said, "What do you call the three worlds?"

*Verse:*

The various ways of explaining the source are all unnatural.

If it flows from the ear to the mouth, it will fall apart.

To plant rice fields and roll rice balls is an ordinary household affair.

This cannot be known by one who has not searched to satisfaction.

When we have searched to the full we clearly realize that there is nothing to search for.

In the end, Shibō did not make anything of a fiefdom.

Forgetting all activity and returning home is the same as birds and fish.

Washing his feet in the Sōrō River in autumn with the murky waters.

***On the Instruction:***

The scholar tills with the pen, the skilled orator tills with the tongue. This is quite an interesting koan. In olden times in China there were no disciplines like physics or mathematics.

Instead, intellectuals of old wrote poems and essays. In the civil service examinations held in ancient China, applicants were mainly tested on their ability to write poems and compose occasional pieces. We can assume that “scholar” here refers to persons with such literary talents. To “till with the pen” means to devote oneself to writing, much as a farmer devotes himself to tilling his fields. Nowadays it would refer to how novelists and essayists work steadily, filling their pages with ink, which is quite a task. This is their way of earning their daily bread. The text refers to how persons with literary talents make their living with their pens.

“The skilled orator tills with the tongue.”

In the old days of the silent films in Japan, there used to be persons employed by the movie theaters who would provide a spoken commentary to the action on the screen. They were also referred to as “benshi,” the same word that is used here in referring to orators. These are persons who earn their daily bread through their verbal eloquence. The politicians of old were all outstanding speakers. An orator tills with the tongue, in the sense of earning his living through his fine oratory. The outstanding statesmen of old were able to save their countries and bring peace to the world through the power of their oratory skills. On the other hand, public speaking skills could also act as the seed of dissension and disturbance. Adolf Hitler, for example, was an extremely skilled speaker who was able to sway the masses through the power of his oratory. Winston Churchill was another outstanding orator. Nowadays, however, such statespersons have become rare. Today’s politicians are more outstanding for their business abilities. Things have certainly changed compared to former times!

We patchrobed monks are lazy in watching the white ox on bare ground and do not pay attention to rootless grasses. Having spoken about writers and orators, the author turns his attention now to Zen monks and wants to know about their case. “What about Zen monks?” he seems to ask. What would be the Zen monk’s version of tilling with the pen or tilling with the tongue? In reply, he says that the ideal image of the Zen monk is lazily watching the white ox on bare ground. The “white ox on bare ground” can be understood as meaning our original self or true self. In the book entitled *The Prose & Verse of the Lotus Sutra* (C. Fa-Hua Wen-Chu, J. Hokke Mongu) there is the following passage: “Though your deluded views have been eliminated, deluded thoughts cannot be called bare ground.” Deluded views means delusions that arise from perception, in short, intellectual thoughts and feelings. All the thoughts in your head are, from the Buddhist perspective, deluded views. Although such deluded views have been eliminated, the deluded thoughts still remain, all the sufferings that come from emotions such as like and dislike, regret or envy. These are all deluded thoughts. And as long as they are there, it cannot yet be understood as the true bare ground. Both deluded views and deluded emotions must disappear. And then, what appears? Your true self—with nothing sticking to it. This refers to the state in which all discriminating thoughts have been completely wiped away. This is the white ox on the bare ground. If you devote yourself to Zen practice, you reach that place. But then the Instruction says that true Zen monks are too lazy to look at such things. If they are true Zen monks, they will not be caught up in ideas of enlightenment. If there is still a consciousness of having wiped away all delusions, that feeling still remains. That, too, must be forgotten. That is the attitude of a true Zen monk. And then what happens? This is explained in the ensuing lines:

They do not pay attention to rootless grasses. “Rootless grasses” means the same thing as the white ox on bare ground and refers to your true self. To say it is “rootless” means that its content is empty. There is neither delusion nor satori. The grass that emerges out of nowhere has neither form nor shadow. To repeat, this is a reference to our true self. In Zen it is also referred to as “your original face before your parents were born.” It is also no good to have such ideas of a true self in your mind, since they will remain as concepts. So true Zen monks pay no attention to such things, and this is how things should be.

How should one pass the day? In that case, how should we live each day? An example will be given of this, and we should examine it carefully.

**On the Case:**

Jizō asked Shuzanshu, “Where have you come from?” Shuzanshu said, “From the South.” Jizō said, “How is Buddhism faring in the South these days?” Shuzanshu said, “It is widely discussed.” Jizō is Jizō Kenshin Zenji, who also appears in the *Blue Cliff Record* and elsewhere. Among the disciples of Seppō Gison Zenji was Gensha Shibi Daishi. Jizō was a disciple of Gensha and thus a grandchild in the dharma to Seppō. Shuzanshu came to Jizō one day to engage in dharma combat (jap, hossen) although I am not sure whether or not this was their first encounter. Shuzanshu eventually became one of the dharma successors of Jizō. Another outstanding dharma successor was Hōgen Bun’eki Zenji, the founder of the Hōgen School of Zen. That would make Shuzanshu and Hōgen brothers in the dharma. As you probably know, there were originally five schools of Zen, each having its own founder. They are the Rinzai School, Unmon School, Igyō School, Hōgen School and Sôtō School, each with its own characteristics. All of the founders were outstanding persons, but I feel an especially close affinity to Hōgen Zenji. Iida Tōin Roshi, an outstanding master of Japan’s Meiji Period, singles out the Hōgen School for special praise, referring to it as foremost among the five schools of Zen. Hōgen is certainly outstanding in that there is no trace of logic-chopping in his presentations. He cuts through all obstructions and illusions. Two famous examples are the story about the *Fire Child Seeking the Flame* and *Two Monks Roll Up The Blinds* as appears in the *Gateless Gate*. You can only marvel at Hōgen’s ability to cut through all logical reasoning and get right to the point. At any rate, Shuzanshu, a brother in the dharma to Hōgen, came once to Jizō to engage in dharma combat.

“Where have you come from?” Jizō asks him. That’s a checking question. While certainly asking in geographical terms of where he has come from, at the same time this is an allusion to the essential world of the original self where there is no coming and going. He wants to check if he has realized clearly that he has not come from anywhere. His question is in the way of a probe to fathom the other man’s Zen understanding. In reply, Shuzanshu says, “From the south.” Here in Japan you might say, “I’ve come from Kyoto.” Then Jizō asks another question: “How is Buddhism faring in the South these days?” In reply Shuzanshu says, “It is widely discussed.” The original Sino-Japanese is *shōryō*, which also has the meaning of engaging in Zen exchanges. The word originally comes from the business world and has the meaning of haggling about the price. In Zen circles it refers to Zen exchanges (jap,

mondo). At any rate, Shuzanshu says that such exchanges are much in vogue where he has come from. He says there are many zazenkai where teisho are delivered and people are practicing zazen.

In reply to this, Jizō says something very important, thus revealing the true province of the Zen monk:

Jizō said, "Planting my rice field and growing rice is better than that." He says in effect: Planting my rice field and harvesting rice, cooking the rice and rolling rice balls for dinner is much better than that. Every day you get up, sit down, weep, laugh, eat, drink, sleep and wake. What is there other than that? If you have truly grasped your true self, there is nothing to be disturbed about. But if you have yet to grasp your true self and have left things half done, you will have various sufferings and troubles, wondering what the meaning of your life is. If you have not yet grasped your true self, your unrest finds no end. Shuzanshu expresses these doubts with his next question: "How can you save the beings of the three worlds in that way?"

You say you are just growing rice and eating it, but all sentient beings are suffering in delusion. What should be done? The "three worlds" are the world of form, the world of desire and the world of no form. These are the worlds of delusion. In that world of delusion, you yourself are suffering and others are suffering. The *Lotus Sutra* includes the expression "the burning house of the three worlds." It is as if you were burning in your own house, so great is the suffering. You want to escape from it, but no matter where you go it is the burning house of the three worlds. There is no escape. Others are suffering and you yourself are suffering. Shuzanshu is asking Jizō, "What about saving others from their suffering in the three worlds of delusion?" In reply, Jizō says, "What do you call the three worlds?"

"What?!! Where are there any three worlds?" Here is a wonderful reply that is fitting of the teacher of Hōgen. Where are there any three worlds? Where are there any worlds of delusion? Show them to me if they exist! The worlds of delusion are just concepts inside your own head. If you believe there is a world of delusion, you are mistaken. In Buddhism it is said that if you believe that there is even one ordinary unenlightened being, you have already vilified Buddha's teaching. This is basically saying the same thing. If you think that there is a world of delusion, it is already an error. This is of course speaking from the essential standpoint. There are many Christians practicing here at this zendo. In Buddhism, we speak in terms of various worlds, including hell, hungry spirits and beasts. In Christianity one speaks about heaven and hell. There are many different painful and pleasurable worlds. Speaking from the highest standpoint, however, there is *only* the Kingdom of God. You must clearly realize that fact. Do you understand? You must realize and believe that there is *only* the Kingdom of God and nothing else. To speak in terms of there being hell is to speak from the aspect of practice along the way from a Buddhist standpoint. As long as you remain stuck in the world of phenomena, you cannot be saved. Actually, however, there is nothing that can be in dualistic opposition with the world of oneness. I would like you to realize and grasp that fact clearly.

"What do you call the three worlds?" Where is there any hell? There is the following anecdote.

Long ago a certain samurai came to a Zen monk and engaged in a heated discussion on whether there was really a hell or not. In the heat of the argument, the samurai became angry,

whereupon the monk heaped abuse on him. Beside himself with rage, the samurai pursued the monk while brandishing his sword. The fleeing monk suddenly turned around and said, “That is hell!” Taken aback, the samurai said, “So you’ve only been joking!” and suddenly started laughing himself. Then the monk said, “And that’s heaven!”

But if you think that there is a hell somewhere, you are mistaken. That is just a concept. Please savor this story well.

**On the Verse:**

The various ways of explaining the source are all unnatural. “Explaining the source,” means being acquainted with the truth or understanding well the basis of Buddhism. The word translated here as “explaining” means the ability to speak freely about something, including non-Buddhist subjects. Here the line means understanding well the basis of truth. One method is to polish your intellectual or philosophical understanding to come to understanding. The other method is to actually experience it. At any rate, it refers to a basic grasp of the truth and then being able to describe and explain it freely. The poet says that is all well and good, but in the end it is unnatural.

If it flows from the ear to the mouth, it will fall apart. That which enters through the ear is discharged from the mouth. The Japanese language includes the expression *mimigakumon* (lit, “ear learning”), which means knowledge acquired by listening to others. It just passes through your head without any reflection. You just repeat what you have heard without giving it a second thought. That will never do. In China there is evidently the expression “mouth and ear study,” which is considered to be the study of the inferior person. You just blithely repeat what you have heard. There are three or four inches at most between your mouth and your ears. But the study of a true gentleman (jap, *kunshi*) enters from the ear and settles in the heart and mind before taking on a worthwhile form. In other words, true study is a matter of personality development or perfection of character. Then you can speak unflinchingly when it is time to speak, in a composed and natural manner. And your actions will become softer. That is the learning of the gentleman. But the learning of the inferior person comes in through the ears and departs immediately through the mouth. If Buddhism is taught in such a way, it will soon fall apart and be destroyed, the Verse says.

To plant rice fields and roll rice balls is an ordinary household affair. Planting and harvesting rice and then using the rice to roll rice balls for dinner. The poet says that this is an everyday affair. But then he continues:

This cannot be known by one who has not searched to satisfaction. But only if you have searched and searched for the truth and realized that there is nothing further to search for can you truly appreciate this statement. I would like you all to become like that. This is speaking of the ideal of a Zen monk. In this case, it is pointing to Jizō in the Main Case. The next line of the poem is one of my favorites:

When we have searched to the full we clearly realize that there is nothing to search for. We search for the truth until we are sick of searching, searching and searching, until we

clearly realize that there has never been anything to search for. We have searched for heaven or the Kingdom of God and, having searched to exhaustion, we realize that, right where we are standing now is the Kingdom of God. It is realizing that you have been standing right in the middle of the Kingdom of God from the very start. You must clearly realize this point. Only when you reach this point does your search end.

In the end, Shibō did not make anything of a fiefdom. This all happened long ago. Shibō is Chō-Shibō. The Founder of the Han Dynasty had three outstanding vassals. The first was Han Shin, famous for the story of his being forced in his youth to act as a mount for his master, and who is known for his outstanding ability to wage war. The next was Shōka, who was an outstanding politician. The last was Chō-Shibō. Instead of directly waging war, he was known for his tactical skills and his amazing foresight and his ability to plan tactics from his tent for battles taking place a thousand miles away. The Founder of the Han Dynasty had the assistance of these persons in gaining power. This line in the poem refers to granting fiefdoms as rewards for outstanding retainers. Although the Han Emperor was about to award Chō-Shibō with a kingdom of 30,000 persons, the vassal refused the gift. He said that he himself had no special merit and it just happened that he met up with the future Founder of the Han Dynasty in the little town of Ro. That being the case, he said, it was enough for him to receive that little plot of land. "I have no need for a large fiefdom of 30,000 persons," he said. Here is an example of desiring nothing. It is an allusion to the Zen person who has practiced and come to complete satisfaction.

Forgetting all activity and returning home is the same as birds and fish. This means forgetting all mental activity and returning to our true home, our essential self. What does it mean to say that this is the same as birds and fish? If you're tired you sleep and if you're hungry you eat something. After having searched and searched for the truth in fervent practice, you finally realize that there is nothing to search for. You have returned to your original, natural self. You live a very natural life. Some of you might think that you could never make your way in life in this busy, competitive world trying to live such a hermit's life. But actually there is no difference between the life of planting and eating rice and our daily life in the workaday world. The poet asks us what is actually lacking. There is absolutely no room for regret. This doesn't in any way mean resigning oneself to one's lot in life. If you say such things in a spirit of resignation, you have yet to truly realize what this is talking about. On the contrary, you must realize that you are completely revealing your true self in every moment. It is only when you engage in complete combustion of your self in each moment that you can appreciate what this is talking about. You have to clearly grasp this and take up residence there to gain true peace.

Washing his feet in the Sōrō River in autumn with the murky waters. This is a reference to Kutsugen (Qu Yuan). Although he succeeded in becoming a high official of the Kingdom of Chu, he was the victim of another's slanderous tongue. Deeds that he was not guilty of were reported to the Emperor and he was dismissed from his post. Although he attempted to give his advice to the Emperor regarding the welfare of the nation, his words were not heeded. Beside himself with grief, he tied rocks to his body, jumped into the river of Bekira and drowned. Kutsugen left behind many poems,

including the famous *Li Sao* (Encountering Sorrow). When Kutsugen, in his great sorrow and emaciated with care, was walking along the banks of the river, about to bid farewell to the world, a fisherman suddenly appeared on the scene. He asked Kutsugen, “You were a high government official. Why do you have such a sad face?” In reply, Kutsugen said, “The world is murky, I alone am pure.” It means that most people remain sleepily unaware of the truth and sleep through life, while I alone am awake. In reply, the fisherman said, “You say that the world is murky and you alone are pure. When the waters of the river are clear, I can wash the tassels on my hat. When the waters are muddy, I can wash my feet. What is there to feel so pessimistic about?” The water can be both murky and clear. If the water is murky, you can wash your feet in it. If it is pure, you can wash your tassels. You’re completely free. In the present verse, the Zen monk is washing his feet in the Sôrô River. The season is autumn, and it is as if water and sky have merged with each other in the single color blue. The hazy horizon renders indistinct the difference between water and sky. This is presenting the world of the true fact. When the water is murky you wash your feet. Put more simply, when you have something to do you stand up. When you’re finished you sit down again. Isn’t that fine just as it is? If you’re hungry you eat. What need is there to be sad? Whatever the situation and wherever you are, in Christian terms, you never take a step out of the Kingdom of God. Whenever and wherever you are, you never take a step out of the essential world. There is *only* the essential world. I would like you to savor this carefully. There is no need to worry about the murkiness of this workaday world. Even in the case of what happened recently in Southeast Asia, things are all right at the very bottom.