

CASE 17

**Hōgen's Tiny Bit**



By Yamada Kōun

*Instruction:*

A pair of wild geese almost touches the ground and then flies high in the sky. A pair of mandarin ducks stands alone on the bank of the pond. Leaving aside for the moment the matter of two arrow tips mutually meeting, how about when returning the pointer on the scale to zero?

*Case:*

Hōgen asked Shuzanshu, "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth.' How do you understand that?"

Shuzanshu said, "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth."

Hōgen said, "If your understanding is like that, you have not realized it yet."

Shuzanshu said, "My view is just that. How about Your Reverence?"

Hōgen said, "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth."

Shuzanshu made a bow.

*Verse:*

Should a fly sit on the tip of the scale needle, it will be off the mark.  
The scale weight of ten thousand generations reveals the error.

Even if you clearly discern the different weights marked,  
In the end you must return, no match for the star on my scale.

**On the Instruction:**

This koan concerns the Zen master Hōgen Bun'eki Zenji. It might seem strange to say that I have a special liking for Hōgen, but I much admire his penetrating clarity. As you know, there were originally five schools of Zen, each with its own special characteristics. How could we describe the special character of the Hōgen School of Zen? It leaves no traces of hesitation in its path. Hōgen is perhaps not a master of words like Unmon Zenji. And he was not one to make generous use of his stick in urging students on. Although he appears very simple and plain, he hides a prodigious depth. If you ask me, I feel he is closer in spirit to the Soto School of Zen. Two outstanding descendants of the Sixth Patriarch Enō Zenji were Nangaku Ejō Zenji and Seigen Gyōshi Zenji. If we make a broad distinction we can say that the Soto School finds its origins in Seigen and the Rinzai School in Nangaku. The Hōgen School also originates with the spirit of Seigen Zenji. In that sense, it could be called closer to the Soto School than the Rinzai School. When I read the writings of Dōgen Zenji, I find a sense of harmony and closeness with Hōgen Zenji. The koan collection entitled *Blue Cliff Record* could be considered the work of the Rinzai tradition. That may be one reason why only one koan concerning Hōgen appears in that collection: Case 7, *Echō Asks About Buddha*. In contrast, Hōgen appears quite frequently in the cases of the *Book of Serenity*, five in all. Today's koan is one of those cases. The others are Case 27 (Hōgen Points to the Blinds, which also appears in the *Gateless Gate*), Case 51 (Hōgen's Boat or Land), Case 64 (Shishō's Succession) and Case 74 (Hōgen's Substance and Name). There are a total of about five persons appearing in those cases, with Hōgen among them. At any rate, let me state again that I feel him to be very close in spirit to the Soto School.

Dōgen Zenji's *Bendōwa* (On the Endeavor of the Way) Chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* includes the famous story about the fire child seeking the flame, which also concerns Hōgen Zenji. Let us turn now to the Instruction.

A pair of wild geese almost touches the ground and then flies high in the sky. A pair of mandarin ducks stands alone on the bank of the pond. A pair of wild geese is flying high and low. They are probably male and female. The same holds for the pair of mandarin ducks, a species in which the male and female remain together for life and are always seen with each other. Here they are standing on the edge of the pond. What are these two lines talking about? In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi says it is talking about the matter of "one is two and two is one." Upon reading the lines, we can certainly sense that feeling. Although there are two birds in each line, they almost touch the ground in flying low,

only to disappear high up in the sky. They are so together in their actions that they appear to be one. The mandarin duck is the model of marital bliss among birds. The male and female are always together, living as one. Yasutani Roshi says that here we have true independence. The wife melts into the husband, disappearing in the process. The husband melts into the wife, disappearing in the process so that only the wife remains. This, he says, is an expression of how one is two and two is one. Although I naturally agree with him on that point, we must remember that this is how the lines are interpreted in any other collection of teisho on this koan collection. But what is the relationship between the Instruction and the Main Case? This doesn't appear to be clear in this explanation. I feel it's important to clarify the relationship with the Main Case. The statement that one is two and two is one can be found frequently in the Zen records. *The Blue Cliff Record*, for example, includes the statement that in one there are the many kinds and that in two there is not two. In order to truly clarify this matter, it's necessary to clearly realize the world of Mu. Otherwise it will remain unclear. To use once again the oft-cited example of my hands, I have two hands. But from the standpoint of the single life that lives in those two hands, they are one. The two hands are living that single life. In that sense you can say that one is two and two is one. That should help to clarify the matter. In like manner, unless we grasp the world of Mu, the matter of "one is two and two is one" will remain unclear. The *Shinjinmei* (Verses on the Faith Mind) says that one is all and all is one. There is no need to limit it to two. Unless you clearly realize the world of Mu, however, it will remain difficult to say this with conviction.

*A pair of wild geese almost touches the ground and then flies high in the sky. A pair of mandarin ducks stands alone on the bank of the pond.*

In examining these first two lines of the Instruction, we must ask what section of the Main Case they are focusing on. Although no commentators have touched on this issue, I myself feel it's a question of how we understand the words: "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth." Although there is one phrase uttered by both persons in the koan, the way in which Shuzanshu grasps it and the way in which Hōgen grasps it are different. Although they are two, they are actually one. This, I feel, is what these first two lines of the Instruction are talking about, and I feel we must understand it in that way. Wondering whether there were other persons who had the same opinion, I checked other books dealing with this koan, but found no others. We tend to forget that the Instruction is always focused on the Main Case. The Instruction is presenting the ultimate point of Buddhism. If it were only a matter of abstractly presenting the matter of one is two and two is one, I feel that it would not be on solid ground. Instead, it must be in perfect harmony and unity with the Main Case. That is my reason for believing that these lines are focusing on the

line in the Main Case uttered by both protagonists: *If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth.* Let us proceed to the next lines.

Leaving aside for the moment the matter of two arrow tips mutually meeting, how about when returning the counterweight on the scale to zero? These lines refer to how the arrows let loose by two master archers could mutually meet in midair. Writing about this in his teisho, Yasutani Roshi says this is a match between two masters of their trade. But the present koan is not a match between two equally able masters. There is quite a difference in the level of Zen understanding of Hōgen and Shuzanshu. So, the author of the Instruction says, we shall leave aside for the time being the matter of two masters on equal footing meeting each other and concentrate now on the present case. “Returning the pointer on the scale to zero.” In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi interprets these lines as “cutting with the saw” in the sense of cutting off the delusions of the student. “Returning the counterweight on the scale to zero” means checking the clarity and depth of the student’s understanding. In the present case, Hōgen cuts off Shuzanshu’s concepts with his reply, thus “returning the counterweight to zero.”

This simile of two arrow points meeting has its origin in a Chinese tale found in the Taoist book *Lieh-tzu*. In ancient times there lived an expert archer named Kishō (Chi-chang). His own teacher, who was named Hi-ei (Fei-wei), was also an archer of the highest rank who outdid his student. Kishō aspired to surpass his own teacher in skill and become the greatest archer in the world. One day he happened to encounter Hi-ei in an open field. Not wanting to miss his chance, he pulled out his trusty bow and let an arrow fly. Hi-ei also did not hesitate an instant in releasing an arrow from his bow. And, lo and behold, the two arrows met head on in mid-air and fell to the ground! The same thing happened when they attempted a second and a third time. The two archers ended up praising each other and lost any desire to eliminate the other. They joined hands in a close father-son relationship.

The author of today’s Instruction tells us that he is not interested in such matters as arrow points mutually meeting in mid-air. Instead, we have here an example of how the master cuts off the concepts and illusions of his student with a single deft stroke, and we are urged to examine that case.

**On the Case:**

Hōgen asked Shuzanshu, “‘If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth.’ How do you understand that?” These lines are found in the above-cited *Shinjinmei* (Verses on the Faith Mind), the work of The Third Patriarch Sōsan Daishi. The word translated here as “bit” in “bit of difference” is *gōri*. I have

read up on the meaning of this word and would like to present that information here. The smallest element of matter according to the ancient Chinese was written with the character *bō*. This is the same character as found in the word *bōzen*, which means “vacantly” or “blankly.” When ten *bō* are added together we have one *myō*. And when ten *myō* are added together we have one *jin*, which literally means dust. When ten *jin* are gathered together we have one *bi* which is found in modern Japanese words such as *bisai*, meaning extremely small or fine. And when ten *bi* are added together we have one *kotsu*, which is also used as a unit of weight measure. When ten of these *kotsu* are added together we have one *shi*. And when ten *shi* are added together we have one *gō*, which is the same *gō* as in *gōri*. When ten *gō* are added together we have one *ri*. And when ten *ri* are added together we have one *fun*, which is the same character that was used in counting money in ancient China. When ten *fun* are added together we have one *sen*, which is also a unit of money. We see that a zero is always added to one unit to obtain the next unit. Thus, a *gō* or a *ri* is several-hundredths of a single *sen*. At any rate, we are talking here about extremely small measurements. The line from the *Shinjinmei* tells us that if there is even the slightest intellectual thought, it’s already false. This line from the *Shinjinmei* is also examined in the dokusan room as one of the so-called *Miscellaneous Koans* that are scrutinized after a kensho experience. Even though we might have come to a kensho experience, there are still many concepts and thoughts remaining mixed in with that experience. Though we may have grasped Mu to some extent in that practice of Mu, the cases are rare, if any, of coming to a complete experience. If we really had grasped Mu in its totality, there would be no need for the other koans. But since that is almost never the case, in order to rid ourselves of the many concepts and ideas still remaining, we examine one koan after another in the dokusan room. This is a matter of cleaning up the remaining dirt of concepts in our heads. But it’s important that there be at least some small opening in the beginning, otherwise we will run into problems. For if there is no initial experience to build on, even if the student simply examines koans, he or she will become skilled in figuring out the “logic” of the koans. If it’s to be a true experience, it must not simply be a scratch on the surface but a real hole in the glass, so to speak. If there has been no real opening, and we simply examine koans intellectually, we will never come to a grasp of the real thing, no matter how many koans we look at. This is a very fearful state of affairs. If we ask what is different when it’s a true experience of grasping Mu, it’s the matter of coming to true peace in our hearts. That is the decisive matter. In this world of ours, even those who have finished formal koan study in the room, if there is still unrest in our hearts, we have to keep sitting ardently, whether we want to or not. I remember Nakagawa Soen Roshi once telling me that, even among those who have finished formal koan study, there are still many persons who have no true Zen understanding. This is a fearful state of affairs. When I see how students are instructed nowadays in the

Rinzai School of Zen, I feel that such a thing is quite possible. Although I don't like to speak ill of my own departed teacher, I think back to Kōno Sōkan Roshi, under whom I first began Zen practice. He gave me the koan Mu to practice with and I did my best. After having practiced for some time, I learned that the presentation I made to the Roshi in dokusan is considered in the Rinzai School as having passed the koan. Then the Master tells the student to put aside practicing Mu and continue on to other koans. That is not my way of doing things. In koan study with Harada Roshi, in order to pass the first barrier of Mu, no matter how long it takes, one is not advanced to other koans until there is at least a little opening. In carefully checking the content of kensho, it would be nice if there were a method of examining it in mathematical terms, but unfortunately there is no such method. In science you can use a litmus paper to test for a chemical reaction, but in Zen there is no such method. That means you can overlook something important if you are not careful. That is not the fault of the student, but the fault of the person in the position of Zen teacher. This is a most serious matter. The words in today's koan "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth," are usually interpreted in that way. If there is even a little bit of thinking mixed in, it's already not a true kensho, and the difference between that and a real experience is like the difference between heaven and earth. In this koan, Hōgen quotes this line and asks Shuzanshu how he understands them. Shuzanshu later became one of the dharma heirs of Nansen Fugen Zenji. At the time of this encounter, however, it appears that his dharma eye was not yet clear, and underwent checking by Hōgen.

In reply, Shuzanshu says the same words: "If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth." But Hōgen does not seem pleased:

Hōgen said, "If your understanding is like that, you have not realized it yet." We ourselves cannot know simply seeing the words here. Only when you receive the person in dokusan, see his facial expression or hear his tone of voice can you have an idea if the person has realized it or not. Just seeing the statement on paper is not enough to really know. At any rate, I have the feeling that Hōgen must have recognized the dregs of concepts in the way that Shuzanshu understood this phrase. He must have felt that there were still some concepts remaining, even though it might not all have been concepts. That was the reason for his statement. He seems to be saying, "you cannot come to true peace in those words with that understanding."

In his response, Shuzanshu admits that he is no match for Hōgen.

Shuzanshu said, "My view is just that. How about Your Reverence?" He admits defeat and asks for instruction. How does Hōgen respond?

Hōgen said, “If there is a bit of difference, it is the remote distance between heaven and earth.”

Shuzanshu made a bow. Hōgen says the same thing, and Shuzanshu makes a bow in response. He has understood. We must examine this section carefully. Please consider the matter carefully. Where is the difference when they say the same thing? Although they say the same thing, it’s different, and although they are different they are the same words.

Hōgen Zenji had carefully researched the *Kegon* (Hua-yen = Flower Ornament ) *Sutra*. One book says that he embodied in Zen the “all-encompassing principle” (jap, *enri*) of the *Kegon Sutra*. The word translated here as “all-encompassing” literally means “round.” In order to truly understand that word, we would have to examine the *Five Ranks of Hen and Shō* of Tōzan Zenji. I imagine many of you are not familiar with those matters, but for those who have examined the *Five Ranks* in the dokusan room, I offer these comments. As you might know, Tōzan Zenji makes a division into *Hen* (phenomenal) and *Shō* (essential). He then obtains Five Ranks by combining these in various ways. They are: *hENCHŪSHŌ* (universal in the particular), *shōchūhen* (particular in the universal), *shōchūrai* (emerging from the universal), *hENCHŪSHI* (arriving from the particular), and *kenchūtō* (unity attained). Although *kenchūtō* is the final rank, it’s also the beginning. It’s the fact of the full revelation of the true fact. As long as there is even a drop remaining of *shō* (universal) or *hen* (particular), it’s not the real thing. This is what is expressed by *kenchūtō*. When I read about how Hōgen Zenji embodied in Zen the “all-encompassing principle” (jap, *enri*) of the *Kegon Sutra*, it occurred to me that Hōgen Zenji always speaks from the standpoint of *kenchūtō*. Let me take this opportunity to also speak of the matter of “the fire god is here to look for fire” which is cited in the *Bendōwa* (On the Endeavor of the Way) Chapter of Dōgen Zenji’s *Shōbōgenzō*. It concerns the monk known as Director Xuanze, who had the position of organizer at the temple, something like a general director in a modern company. Director Xuanze had been in the assembly of Hōgen Zenji for three years already, but had not gone to dokusan even once. One day, Hōgen Zenji asked him, “How long have you been in my community?”

“Three years,” was the reply.

“You haven’t come even once to dokusan. Why not?”

Director Xuanze said, “To tell the truth, although I haven’t mentioned it up to now, before coming here I spent quite a long time in the assembly of Kyūhō Zenji and benefited from his teaching. When I asked Kyūhō, What is the self of a Zen student?, he said, “The fire god is here to look for fire.”

(He was asking about his own essential nature, his own true self.

“As a result of that answer, I cleared up my problem.”

It's like those practicing with Mu. If asked what Mu is, they might reply, "I am Mu." If that were enough, the practice of Mu would not be that difficult. But that will not do. That is just brushing Mu, but there still remains a concept of Mu. The student must go on to break through that concept. This is true about the present exchange as well. It's true enough that the self is looking for the self. Director Xuanze says that he realized that the self is looking for the self, and that his problem was solved, and that he felt no need to go to dokusan.

Hōgen Zenji was probably aware that something of the sort was going on in the monk's mind, and said:

"That is a good statement. But I'm afraid you did not understand it."

Hearing this, Director Xuanze was incensed, having believed that his understanding was correct. Thinking he had nothing more to learn in this temple he was about to take his leave, but then thought things over. He said to himself, "The master is a renowned teacher in this country, a great leader of five hundred monks. His criticism of my fault ought to have some point."

He then went back to Hōgen and requested dokusan. He apologized to him for being about to take his leave and then asked the original question:

"What is the self of a Zen student?"

Without pausing even an instant, Hōgen shot back with, "The fire god is here to look for fire." They are the exact same words, but there is a difference. Please examine this matter carefully.

We have the same thing in Case 7 of the *Blue Cliff Record* (Echō Inquires About Buddha). In response to the question, "What is Buddha?" Hōgen says, "You are Echō."

The same is true about the case "Two Monks Roll Up The Blinds" in the Gateless Gate. To repeat, Hōgen is always speaking from the standpoint of *kenchūtō*. This is the ultimate point in Zen practice, I feel. In that sense, I would like you all to appreciate how outstanding Hōgen Zenji is as a Zen master. If I speak further about such matters, it will simply become a source of confusion in dokusan. At any rate, I would like you all to understand and appreciate that in Hōgen's statement "If there is a bit of difference, it's the remote distance between heaven and earth," there is not the least bit of conceptual thinking. Let us proceed now to the Verse.

***On the Verse:***

Should a fly sit on the tip of the scale needle, it will be off the mark. What does the "fly" refer to? It's our concepts and thoughts. But there is really nothing at all. That is the scale, the world of perfect quality. If even the slightest concepts appear, it's already off balance.



The scale weight of ten thousand generations reveals the error. “The error” means that it’s not balanced, not level. And what will reveal that error? It’s “the scale weight of ten thousand generations.” This is the balance that can never be off. It’s the world of emptiness. There is only the true self. If it should move even a little bit, it’s off balance. This is speaking about the state of consciousness of Hōgen Zenji. It’s always directly on the mark. This is speaking from the standpoint of that state of consciousness. If there is even a little bit of conceptual thinking, he knows immediately. This is not so easy to do. If there is any concept in your mind, you will be unable to do so. You must clear away all concepts in fervent practice. Particularly if you are in the position of guiding others in practice, this is indispensable. If the person in the role of teacher is off balance, the scale will be of no use.

Even if you clearly discern the different weights marked,

In the end you must return, no match for the star on my scale. The characters translated here as “different weights” mean heavy weights and very light weights. It means that even if you clearly discern the slightest differences in weight, “you end up having to return to the star on my scale.” It’s just that severe. In other words, even if you are a person who is extremely sensitive to when there is some sort of weight, if there is still a concept of a self remaining, it’s not yet complete. That is what is meant by returning to the star, in other words, to zero point. Imagine a beam balance and a pan that is used to place things for weighing which is attached with a cord. Right next to the cord are the individual markings on the beam balance. If counterweights are brought over to the side with the markings, the side with the counterweights and the side with the object in the pan balance each other out. The “star” refers to the marker indicating zero point. In the case of the pan in which nothing has been placed, there is the cord. If weights are attached to the cord, the balance is obtained. The star is the zero point. No matter how sensitive you might be in detecting small differences in the weight, you are no match for zero, which is the star on the scale. The poem speaks in terms of “my,” and means that you are no match for my world of zero. It would seem that Wanshi Zenji, the author of this poem is referring to himself here with this statement. But the “my” is not absolutely necessary. With this statement he seems to be saying in so many words that he himself has grasped that world of zero. No matter how sensitive the person, if he is only relying on that for his strength and does not know the world of zero, it’s still the aspect of practice toward enlightenment. It’s not said from the standpoint of the essential. Instead, you must clearly discern with the eye of essential nature.

Although today’s koan might not seem that hard to understand, when you attempt to savor it more deeply, you find unexpected depth in it.