

CASE 35

**Rakuho's Obeisance**

By Yamada Kōun



*Instruction:*

Speedy action and swift speech shatter the assault of non-Buddhists as well as of heavenly devils. A master of surpassing caliber, transcending even the principle of his own school, condescends to help a student of excellent aspiration and of the sharpest wisdom.

What if you meet a fellow who never turns his head even if he gets hit with a stick?

*Case:*

Rakuho came to Kassan and without bowing stood facing him.

Kassan said, "A chicken dwells in the phoenix nest. It's not of the same class. Go away." Rakuho said, "I have come from far away, hearing much about you. Please, Master, I beg you to guide me." Kassan said, "Before my eyes there is no you, and here there is no old monk<sup>1</sup>." Rakuho shouted, "Kaatz!" Kassan said, "Stop it, stop it. Don't be so careless and hasty. Clouds and the moon are the same; valleys and mountains are different from each other. It is not difficult to cut off the tongues of the people under heaven. But how can you make a tongueless person speak?" Rakuho said nothing. Kassan hit him. With this, Rakuho started to obey Kassan.

*Verse:*

The red-tailed carp shakes its head and wags its tail;  
Totally independent, he knows how to act in complete agility.  
Even if he possesses the art to cut off tongues,  
He is pulled by the nose and led to real freedom.  
Outside the window screen, in the luminous night, wind and moon are like day;  
In front of the withered tree, blossoms and grass are in eternal spring.  
O, a tongueless person, tongueless person!

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., "I."

How fitting is the one phrase – a full manifestation of the absolute command.  
As he walks alone in his sovereign realm, all is perfectly clear.  
Well then, – let people under heaven be merry and enjoy themselves!

***On the Instruction:***

Today's koan is a very interesting one from a specialist standpoint. It might be an exaggeration to speak in terms of a specialist standpoint, but I will talk about those matters in succession later in this teisho. At any rate, I feel the differences in the spirit of the Rinzai School and Soto School are very well expressed in this case. Let's look now at the first words of the Instruction.

Speedy action and swift speech shatter the assault of non-Buddhists as well as of heavenly devils. "Speedy action" means very quick activity, like a flash of lightning. The "non-Buddhists" (*gedō*) means persons who follow a path other than Buddhism. But this is not said in a disparaging way. Buddhism itself is known as the "inner way" (*naidō*) while other paths are known as the "outer way." At that time in India there were very many non-Buddhist paths. Some say there were ninety-six sects, according to Buddhist dictionaries. There are others saying that there were three outer paths, or four paths, or six or thirteen or sixteen, eventually adding up to the above mentioned ninety-six paths. All of the people in these other paths of practice were outstanding in terms of philosophy and intelligence. The "heavenly devils" refers to how there are many different heavenly worlds in Buddhism, amounting to thirty-three altogether. All the dwelling places of the deceased are known as "heaven" (*ten*). Of course, there are some people who go to hell. And even in that case they go to that high place. To be sure, it is higher than the world of people, but still not the world of true satori. The creatures living in these worlds are more outstanding than the humans living in the world of human beings. A true Zen master is such a person of speedy action and swift speech. There is not the slightest delay in his or her action. And his or her speech is a veritable flood of eloquence. He or she is able with his fast activity and eloquence to defeat the most intelligent non-Buddhist or heavenly devil. The original Chinese text includes the word *totsu*, which has the meaning of two sword points meeting head on. The true Zen master has the ability to defeat non-Buddhist and heavenly devils with his eloquence and activity.

A master of surpassing caliber, transcending even the principle of his own school, condescends to help a student of excellent aspiration and of the sharpest wisdom. "Transcending the principle of his own school" means he transcends all results and regulations, he goes beyond mere common sense. A true Zen master must be like that. In fact, Kassan, who appears in the Main Case, is just such a person. The author of the Instruction has his sights set on Kassan in saying what he does. But even such a person "condescends to help a student of excellent aspiration and of the sharpest wisdom." Such persons of excellent aspiration do not give up, no matter what the difficulties. And for such

persons he condescends to reveal the true fact.

What if you meet a fellow who never turns his head even if he gets hit with a stick? Such a person doesn't even budge when hit from behind with a stick. This is referred to as "a head of bronze and a forehead of iron" (dôtô-tetsugaku). If your head is of iron, you won't budge even when struck. The author is asking us what we would do if we were suddenly confronted with a person of outstanding ability and spirit. How would we handle such a person? Rakuho, who appears in the koan, is such a person who does not turn his head even when struck with a stick. This koan concerns a confrontation between Kassan and Rakuho. Kassan lived in the Tang Dynasty at the time of the Emperor Weisong (Isô). In the 11<sup>th</sup> year of Kantsû, Zen practitioners gathered (Kassan is actually the name of a mountain) and invited Zen master Zen'e Zenji to open up a training center. This was the about the time of Emperor Seiwa in Japan (870 AD), about 1,000 years ago. The 11<sup>th</sup> year of Kantsû would be about the time of the Frankish Empire in Europe, which was divided into the three kingdoms of West Francia, Middle Francia and East Francia. East Francia is modern-day Germany, while West Francia is modern France. It was at this time in history that Kassan lived and taught. He was more of the Soto School than anything else. It was Sekitô Kisen Zenji of the Soto School who inherited the dharma of Seigen Gyohi Zenji. His successor Yakusan Igen Zenji was an outstanding master and according to the account in the *Transmission of Light* (Denkôroku), there were several persons who were his dharma successors, of whom Ungan Donjô Zenji was especially prominent. He was the teacher of Tôzan Gohon Zenji, known today as the founder of the Soto School. Among his dharma brothers was Sensu Tokujô Zenji, and it was this Kassan Zen'e Zenji who inherited his dharma. That means he was something like a nephew in the dharma to Tôzan Gohon Daishi. Sensu Tokujô Zenji, Tôgo Enchi Zenji and Ungan Donjô Zenji were all disciples of Yakusan Igen Zenji. That means that Tôzan Gohon Daishi and Kassan Zen'e Zenji were both of the Soto tradition. Kassan was a truly outstanding Zen personage and his own master Sensu Tokujô Zenji seems also to have been quite a fellow. He was originally a boatman who plied a ferry between the river banks. This was at the time of the Emperor Wu in the Tang Dynasty. It was a time when Buddhism was greatly persecuted by the Emperor, who ordered temples to be destroyed while forcing monks and nuns to return to lay life. It was at this time that Sensu Tokujô Zenji lived, hiding out in this way by posing as a ferryman. There is an interesting story in this connection. Before Kassan met up with Sensu, although it is not recorded that he had inherited the dharma of any master, he evidently already had a considerable Zen understanding. It also seems that he had a Zen assemblage under his direction. At one time, Kassan was preaching at the temple Chikurinji in the Chinjiang-fu region of Jiangsu Province when a monk asked him, "What is the dharma body?" Kassan said, "The dharma body has no form." The monk then asked, "What is the dharma eye?" Kassan said, "The Dharma eye is without flaw." These might be considered very fine answers, but someone in the assembly started snickering. Kassan wanted to know what was wrong with his sermon

that prompted the monk's laughter. The monk said, "I will not give an answer here. Instead, how about inquiring the Way with Sensu Oshô who lives in Yangzheng prefecture?" The person who laughed turned out to be Dôgo, who was a dharma successor of Yakusan Igen Zenji and thus a brother in dharma to Sensu Tokujô. So Kassan went to pay a visit on Sensu. Sensu asked Kassan what temple he had come from. Kassan said that if he lived in a temple, it would go against his original nature. Sensu wanted to know with what aspect of his essence it would be against. That's a really penetrating question. Kassan said, "It is not the Dharma before your eyes." This is how it appears in the koan. Sensu then wanted to know where Kassan had studied. Kassan said it was not a place we can grasp with our senses. A similar exchange appears in Case 41 of the *Book of Serenity* known as *Rakuho on His Deathbed*: *'There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes. IT is not the Dharma before the eyes; IT cannot be reached by eyes and ears.'*

Sensu felt there were still concepts remaining in Kassan's answers. We might think that what he said was perfectly fine, but from Sensu's point of view there were still concepts. There is still that concept of "dharmas before your eyes." And then Kassan was batted into the water with the oar that Sensu was using to ply the boat. What rough teaching! And it was then that Kassan finally experienced the true taste of Zen. There is more to the exchange in that account, but I will dispense with that here. When he climbed back into the boat, Kassan had something to say: "Words are endowed with inscrutability, without a path; the tongue converses, but says nothing."

He had clearly realized that there is not a single thing. Words are subtle and there is no way of knowing where they come from. He had clearly realized that, even when we are speaking, there is no speaking at all. This is what he was presenting with his statement. In response, Sensu said, "Fishing all over the river waves, one first encounters golden scales." "Golden scales" can be understood here as a truly outstanding fish. This was his way of bestowing Inka on Kassan.

Kassan stood up and was about to leave. But, as he if were reluctant to leave, he kept looking back as he continued on his way. Sensu then called out, "Your reverence! Never think that there is you or that there is me!" With that he turned the boat over and disappeared, never to return again. That's the kind of person he was. The ancients' method of teaching was certainly different from ours! Nowadays, if you come for the first time to a Zen meeting, you're more likely to be received with open arms and get the red carpet treatment. That's certainly a big difference from the methods of old. That was Kassan.

The real question is whether you have truly realized the world of emptiness or not. Unless there is this experience, it cannot be called true Zen. Up to now we have been talking about Kassan. Now we turn our attention to Rakuho.

Rakuho originally was attendant to Rinzai Zenji and served him for twenty years in that capacity. He was the apple of his master's eye. Rinzai praised him, saying, "Here is an

arrow of the Linji school. Who dares to withstand its point?" But one day, Rakuho took his leave. Rinzai asked him where he was going. "I'm going south," said Rakuho. Rinzai took his staff and drew a circle in the air. He said, "Pass through this, and then go." Rakuho shouted "Kaatz!" Rinzai hit him. Rakuho bowed and then left. This was the type of person he was and it was this Rakuho who then came to Kassan. This initial meeting is the subject of today's koan.

***On the Case:***

Rakuho came to Kassan and without bowing stood facing him. Even when you visit someone in ordinary circumstances, you would be expected to at least greet the other person. But Rakuho makes no formal greeting. It seems to be the height of rudeness. On the other hand, it is an expression of his confidence and self-esteem. He's not about to kowtow to every Tom, Dick and Harry. He just stands there facing Kassan. This is a very Rinzai approach.

But then Kassan reproves him. You have the feeling that he's taking him down a peg.

Kassan said, "A chicken dwells in the phoenix nest. It's not of the same class. Go away."

Kassan says that Rakuho is not of the real phoenix class, but more like a chicken, and tells him to go away. Rakuho was duly nonplussed at being scolded in this way by Kassan. But then Rakuho wouldn't have been Rakuho if he hadn't reacted as he then did. He immediately takes another tack.

Rakuho said, "I have come from far away, hearing much about you. Please, Master, I beg you to guide me."

How does Kassan respond?

Kassan said, "Before my eyes there is no you, and here there is no old monk."

Rakuho shouted, "Kaatz!"

The word translated as "you" in this statement is "Ajari," a term of respect used for example in the Shingon School of Buddhism for illustrious monks. Here it probably means "you." In making his statement, Kassan is viewing the essential world, the world of not a single thing. Although I'm tempted to ask Kassan, "Then who is it speaking now?" I get the feeling from this exchange that Rakuho was still not completely clear on this matter. I refer you back to the passage from Case 41 that I mentioned above: "*There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes.*"

In other words, before my eyes there is not a single thing. This is the essential word, the world of our essential nature. Kassan is saying the same thing here with his statement. Not a speck of cloud obscuring the view. There is no me and no you.

In reply Rakuho lets out a great shout of "Kaatz!" How very fitting for the prize student of Rinzai! You have the impression that he sweeps everything away with his shout, including the words of Kassan. Most people would hold their peace at this point, but Kassan

would not be Kassan if he were to give in to a shout.

Kassan said, "Stop it, stop it. Don't be so careless and hasty. "Cut it out with all that shouting!" he seems to say. It's often said that haste makes waste, and Kassan is reproving Rakuho for his hastiness. He then continues:

"Clouds and the moon are the same; valleys and mountains are different from each other." This section is also treated as a koan in the dokusan room, with students presenting their understanding. "Clouds and the moon are the same" means that they are alike in the same world of satori. "Valleys and mountains are different from each other" means that, although the experience is the same, there are differences in depth, clarity and immediacy. "Although we both speak of satori, your dwelling place and my dwelling place are different." How are they different?

"It is not difficult to cut off the tongues of the people under heaven. But how can you make a tongueless person speak?" "Cutting off the tongues of the people under heaven" means depriving them of their concepts, cutting off all concepts and thoughts. For example, his shout of "Kaatz!" sweeps away all concepts. That's not so unusual and not so difficult, Kassan says. But how about making those tongueless persons speak? You have to be able to do that too, otherwise it's not enough!

Rakuho said nothing. Rakuho was silent. He evidently didn't know what to say.

Kassan hit him. With this, Rakuho started to obey Kassan. The author of the commentary to this case in the *Book of Equanimity* comments saying, "Unexpectedly, Kassan acts like Rinzai." To deal a blow with your stick is, after all, very Rinzai-like. It was only then that Rakuho acquiesced and became Kassan's student. As Yasutani Roshi writes in his commentary to Case 41 in this collection, Rakuho returned the *inka-shōmei* certification that he had received from Rinzai and became Kassan's disciple, eventually inheriting his dharma. But what is actually the difference between cutting off the tongues of people under heaven and making tongueless persons speak? If I make bold to express my own opinion, that shout of "Kaatz!" is "subject and object both robbed away" (ninkyō-gudatsu). This is how it is said in the Rinzai School. The Rinzai standpoint begins with this standoff between subject and object. I can't help feeling that this shout of "Kaatz!" completely eliminates any opposition between subject and object in the phenomenal world. Take the example of kendo swordsmanship. When you advance with your sword and cry "men!" while making a long slashing stroke that falls on the centre-line of the head, both subject and object are stolen away. But this is still something belonging to the world of phenomena. There are many examples in everyday life of completely forgetting yourself in the matter at hand. Other examples might be playing the piano or executing ballet steps, where you completely forget yourself in what you're doing. At that moment there is no piano and no self. That's another case of subject and object stolen away. There is definitely such a thing. But true enlightenment does not emerge simply from such concentration. The second part about "making tongueless persons speak" means clearly

realizing that, although you speak, there is no speaking at all. In the *Five Ranks* of the Soto School, instead of talking about a separation of subject and object, one speaks about a standoff between the phenomenal and the essential worlds. That's the difference. In the Rinzai School there are many people who have truly realized the essential matter. But then there is the case of Bukkō Kokushi, the founder of Kenchōji Temple in Kamakura. He said, "I am so happy to realize that subject and object are both empty." There are many other such cases in the Rinzai School. Here we have the aspect of "subject and object both stolen" as presented in that cry of "Kaatsu!" You deprive others of any thoughts or anything to say. But I still can't help feeling that this remains an event in the phenomenal world. This is the point that Kassan is nudging Rakuho about. "That's not enough!" he says. You have still not realized the world of "not a thing obstructing the view." I have the feeling that this is what he is saying with his statement. This is the world of *shō-chū-rai* (the relative within the absolute) in the *Five Ranks*. It is not a revelation of only the essential world. I have the feeling he is saying, "Even in your wildest dreams you have not realized the world of *shō-chū-rai*. The reason I say so is found also in the fact that Dōgen Zenji, in his younger years, practiced nine years under the Rinzai masters Eisai Zenji and Myōzen Oshō. But he was still not satisfied. He traveled to China and had the experience of "body and mind fallen away" before returning. On his return he said, "There is not a speck of Buddhism." To say that "body and mind fall away" means that he clearly realized that both body and mind are empty. For a while after his return to Japan, he praised Rinzai Daishi in the highest terms, saying there was no one who could compare with him. But suddenly his opinion changed, as one can ascertain from statements in the *Shōbōgenzō* such as "there are few children of Rinzai's Buddha-Dharma" (*rinzai no buppō tasu nashi*). This is his way of saying that Rinzai has still not gone far enough. The first scholar to take up this matter, I believe, was Professor Fumio Masutani in his book "Rinzai and Dōgen." After reading this book, I paid a visit on Professor Masutani. I was actually going to ask his permission to quote from his book in my own book, which was about to be published, prior to releasing my own book. He gracefully gave his permission. In our conversation at that time, he said that he had written about how Dōgen Zenji's estimation of Rinzai Zenji suddenly changed and that since the release of that work he had been besieged with letters protesting those claims. In his book, Professor Masutani attributes the change in Dōgen's attitude to an inner development. He does not write about what sort of development that could have been or what circumstances could have led to that development. Thinking about the matter now, I believe that Dōgen Zenji felt the same sense of dissatisfaction toward Rinzai that Kassan feels toward Rakuho in this koan, that a cry of "Kaatz!" erasing everything is all well and good (subject and object both stolen away), but still not enough. As I mentioned at the outset of this teisho, this koan is interesting from such a professional or "expert" point of view as shown in Professor Masutani's statements. This might not be of particular interest to most of you know, but perhaps you can store it away somewhere in your memory for future reference!

*On the Verse:*

The red-tailed carp shakes its head and wags its tail. This singing the praises of Rakuho, who appears with great gusto, like a carp shaking its head and wagging its tail.

Totally independent, he knows how to act in complete agility. There is no “ego,” no “I” remaining and he can thus act in complete freedom. You see this in how he can suddenly change his tack and become very humble later in the exchange. At first he just stands there haughtily without even greeting Kassan. But when Kassan tells him to go away, he suddenly switches to a lowly stance in all freedom. This isn’t possible as long as there is still ego. How fitting of Rakuho to respond as he did! There is no ego before the dharma and he can switch freely.

Even if he possesses the art to cut off tongues... Rakuho cuts off the tongues of people with his great shout of “Kaatz!” depriving them of their concepts. That’s all very fine, but:

He is pulled by the nose and led to real freedom. He had his nose pulled by Kassan and finally was able to “make tongueless persons speak.” He finally becomes conversant with the subtle matter. Kassan causes him to become familiar with the subtle spirit. The word for spirit is “shin” which also means divine but means here our heart-mind (kokoro). You can think of it as meaning “subtle mind.” Kassan caused Rakuho to become familiar with that subtle mind. The verse says that Rakuho, although he had the great ability to deprive people of their tongues, still had his nose pulled around by Kassan, so that Kassan could bring him to familiarity with the subtle mind by which tongueless persons are caused to speak.

Outside the window screen, in the luminous night, wind and moon are like day; In ancient times a very gorgeous palace had a tower of gold, silver and jewels, and was hung with curtains inlaid with jewels which were known as “Night Brightness Curtains” because they were so bright they turned night into day. “Night” is the world of not a single thing, the essential world. This is the world of *shō* in the *Five Ranks*. “Day” is the world of phenomena. We must remember that the essential and phenomenal are one. Here they can be freely distinguished and used. This line of the verse is describing Kassan’s state of consciousness. Even in total darkness there is light. This is also describing the two aspects of “bright” and “dark” or *shō* and *hen*, phenomenal and essential. To repeat, although we make a division into “light” and “dark” or “phenomenal” and “essential,” they are truly one. There is complete freedom here.

In front of the withered tree, blossoms and grass are in eternal spring. This line, too, sings the praises of Kassan. What is the withered tree? You can think of it as the world of not a single thing, the essential world. All concepts and ideas have fallen away as we die the great death like a withered tree. But precisely there: “blossoms and grass are in eternal spring.” The flowers all bloom from that withered tree. It is the bloom from where there is not a



single thing. The withered tree can be seen as “where there is not a single thing” (mu-ichimotsu-chû). And the part about the flowers and eternal spring can be seen as the “there is the limitless storehouse” (mujinzô). The flowers and grass can be seen as the act of saving all beings. It is precisely from where there is not a single thing that the kindness of saving all beings comes, blooming like the flowers in spring. This, too, is speaking of Kassan.

O, a tongueless person, tongueless person!

How fitting is the one phrase – a full manifestation of the absolute command. The “absolute command” is Buddha’s authentic law. This is intimately revealed in the one phrase of the tongueless person. The tongueless person has “spilled out the entire guts” of the Buddha. “Fitting” means that it is completely appropriate and does not allow a drop of water to leak out. This calling of the tongueless person is referring to the world of not one thing. Unless you have realized this world, you cannot say that you really understand Buddhism. Zen enlightenment consists in realizing experientially this world of emptiness. Then you can cause tongueless persons to speak.

As he walks alone in his sovereign realm, all is perfectly clear.

Well then, – let people under heaven be merry and enjoy themselves! The “sovereign realm” can be understood here as the entire universe. You have to clearly grasp the true world to say this.

Today is Sunday and people will be traveling here and there, trying to get their bit of fun. The “well then” in this final line has the meaning of “be that as it may.” The poet says that if there are persons reveling after having only realized very shallowly and not truly realized the great matter, I will have nothing to do with them. This is the usual way of seeing this. But I feel it must not necessarily be limited to the world of Zen. All these people running around wildly with calluses on their feet trying to enjoy themselves. What can you consider them but strange?