

CASE 44

Kôyô's "Suparnin"

By Yamada Kôun



Instruction:

A lion strikes an elephant, Suparnin¹ knocks down a dragon.

Even flying creatures and running animals distinguish between lord and subject;

Patch-robed monks should learn to tell between guest and host.

But how could you judge a person who dares to defy the heavenly authority?

Case:

A monk asked Master Hô of Kôyô, "The great dragon has emerged from the ocean, calming heaven and earth. How will you treat him when he suddenly appears before you?" Master Hô said, "Suparnin, the king of birds, absorbs the entire universe. Who can stick his head within him?" The monk said, "But how about when he does appear?" Hô said, "It is like a falcon catching a pigeon. If you don't realize it, you will learn the truth through the 'inspection before the balcony.'²" The monk said, "If so, then I'll fold my hands on my chest³ and retreat three steps." Hô said, "You black tortoise under the Sumeru altar.⁴ Don't wait to be struck on the forehead again and get hurt."

Verse:

The imperial edict comes down, the command is released:

¹ A giant bird that eats even dragons.

² A reference to a story in which Heigenkun Chôshô, the brother of the king of Chô and a wealthy landlord with 3,000 dependents, built a grand palace with a balcony that overlooked the main road. One day a crippled person was passing by and one of the concubines saw him and laughed. The crippled person was angered and demanded Heigenkun her head. Heigenkun presented the head of an executed convict as the head of the concubine. His dependents knew of his deception, lost faith in their master and gradually all left him. His fortunes declined, so at last he cut off the head of the concubine and presented it for the crippled person to inspect. After that the dependents returned and his fortunes were restored. -- The story is an allusion to the fact that you can never hide away the real truth.

³ The position of the hands during the *kinhin*.

⁴ A reference to one of the four carved figures, representing black tortoises, underneath the Sumeru altar (with the Buddha statue). It is used here as a symbol of someone who has lost the freedom of movement.

The heartland is for the emperor, the border lands are for the generals.
He does not wait for the roaring thunder to wake up the dormant insects;
How could one know that the wind stops the streaming clouds?
Continuously looming and weaving: golden lines and jasper stripes naturally follow.
Before [anything is] stamped, it's vast and empty;
Intrinsically there are no letters and characters at all.

I will be turning 74 soon. I don't think there are many people who are as blessed as I am when it comes to caring for one's health. My wife sees to it in various ways that I remain in good health, giving me health preparations to drink every day, although I'm not always sure what I'm drinking. At the Kenbi-Kyoin Clinic that I direct, we have the latest equipment and instruments for healthcare and about sixty specialists in different medical fields, including internal medicine, cardiology, radiology and the like, in addition to many physicians coming from outside with office hours at our clinic. I can be examined by these various physicians at any time, and I doubt if there are many people blessed like I am with such opportunities to watch after one's health. In addition, I am blessed by the practice of zazen, which is extremely important. The other day in the newspaper I read that Mr. Toshio Doko, Chairman of the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), is evidently reciting sutras of the Nichiren Sect of Buddhism every day before the Buddhist altar in his home. If he's doing that every morning that no doubt gives him a lot of strength for his life. Yasutani Haku'un Roshi passed away at the age of 89 shortly before his 90th birthday. He evidently had a large cavity in his lung in his younger days. When he was planning to travel to the U.S. for Zen activities, he underwent a medical examination and failed to pass. Due to that problem with the lung, he didn't qualify to leave the country, even though he said it was just a remnant of a problem from the past. He then came to our Kenbi-Kyoin Clinic and was able to get the go-sign for his trip. I would like somehow to live as long as Yasutani Roshi did, if possible. Let us look now at the Instruction for today's case.

On the Instruction:

A lion strikes an elephant, Suparnin knocks down a dragon. The lion is the king of beasts, and even an elephant is no match for him. In reference to the Main Case, it means that the monk was no match for Master Hō of Kōyō. The monk appearing in today's koan can't be considered one with as much power as a Zen adept.

The Suparnin is a mythical bird as huge as the universe, and it's said even the dragon, king of the oceans, doesn't stand a chance against him. Indeed, Suparnin is said to feast on dragons as his favorite dish.

Even flying creatures and running animals distinguish between lord and subject. In his teisho on this koan, Yasutani Roshi says that, even in the world of animals,

there are rules distinguishing lord and subject, weak and strong. Even more so is it the case in the world of practicing monks that etiquette between master and student clearly exists.

Patch-robed monks should learn to tell between guest and host.

But how could you judge a person who dares to defy the heavenly authority? “Heavenly authority” means absolute authority. I understand this as meaning the world of our true nature, the essential world. If someone should vilify that heavenly authority, how should that be judged, the author asks. An example will now be given in the Main Case.

On the Case:

A monk asked Master Hô of Kôyô, “The great dragon has emerged from the ocean, calming heaven and earth. How will you treat him when he suddenly appears before you?” Master Hô of Kôyô was also known as Seihô. He received his name from Mt. Kôyô in Reishû and was also known as Kôyô Seihô. He was in discipleship to the Zen master Keigen Zenji of Mt. Taiyô in Reishû. Master Hô of Kôyô evidently did not have a dojo or Zen practice center to lead his students. Although he was no doubt a man of considerable ability, he was not known as Zen master, but instead used names such as Hô Oshô or Hô Jisha. The word jisha means attendant, and perhaps he also served as an attendant to a master at some point. Taiyô Keigen Zenji was in the sixth generation in the lineage of Tôzan Daishi. He had fifteen dharma successors, all of whom died young. It was Usan Enkan Zenji who took care of the robe and bowl symbolizing succession. Usan Enkan Zenji was of the Rinzai stream, but was evidently in close harmony with Taiyô Keigen Zeji. Because all the dharma successors had died young, leaving no dharma successor, he had been asked to transmit the dharma if a worthwhile person appeared. The dharma was later passed on to Tôsu Gisei Zenji. In the present case, a monk came to Master Hô of Kôyô and posed the following question: “The great dragon has emerged from the ocean, calming heaven and earth. How will you treat him when he suddenly appears before you?”

As long as the great dragon is in the ocean, the sea is troubled, but when he emerges, everything becomes calm. This is referring to cutting off all delusive thoughts and feelings. The monk had evidently had something of a kensho experience, although shallow. “Appears before you” means when he confronts you face to face. How does the master respond?

Master Hô said, “Suparnin, the king of birds, absorbs the entire universe. Who can stick his head within him?” This can be seen as doing the monk one better: You speak about a dragon, but here’s the giant bird that eats dragons as his favorite food. He is looking at the world of the essential. As I am always saying, the essential world is empty and one. I would like to see this answer as referring to the essential world. He is presenting his own state of consciousness. He says that even Buddha and Bodhidharma cannot lock horns with him. You must clearly see through the state of consciousness of Master Hô. But the monk is unaware of this and replies glibly.

The monk said, “But how about when he does appear?”

In reply to this, Master Hô says,

"It is like a falcon catching a pigeon. If you don't realize it, you will learn the truth through the 'inspection before the balcony.'" In other words, it's an easy catch with the likes of you. If you haven't realized it by now, you will have to undergo the "inspection before the balcony." That means you have to realize the true fact. There is a story behind this expression "before the balcony." The Lord of Ping Yuan was probably something like a modern day yakuza boss who had some three thousand persons sponging off of him. Where he lived there was a large building like a tower. A woman acting as his handmaid happened to see a lame man passing by as she looked down from the tower, and started to laugh at the man. The man was enraged and shouted out that the woman who had laughed should be beheaded; otherwise he would not give way. In a fix, the Lord of Ping Yuan had a convict beheaded and gave the head to the man, saying it was the head of the woman. Seeing this, the house guests sponging off of him left one by one, so that no one was left. Even more in a fix, the Lord of Ping Yuan now had the woman beheaded and gave her head to the lame man. Hearing this, the retainers gradually returned to his home. Master Hô cites this story to indicate that the monk must have his experience checked to determine whether it is authentic or not. It also means that the monk must realize his true self and then be able to distinguish between true and false. It is his way of saying that the monk has yet to realize.

The monk said, "If so, then I'll fold my hands on my chest⁵ and retreat three steps." With his words, the monk seems to have assumed a chastened attitude, but deep down he has yet to truly realize. There is still an "ego" remaining. So what does Master Hô say?

Hô said, "You black tortoise under the Sumeru altar. Don't wait to be struck on the forehead again and get hurt." A black tortoise under the Sumeru altar means a stupid guy. Even though I said that Suparnin, the king of birds, absorbs the entire universe, you still didn't understand. Then I said that it's like a falcon catching a pigeon, effectively banging your forehead. Get lost! The Sumeru altar is found in the main hall of the temple and is the place from which the master preaches. Below the altar is a carving of a tortoise to support the altar. Here it indicates a situation where the person cannot move, according to the explanation in Yasutani Roshi's teisho on this case. It originally appears in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji) in the section known as *Biographies of Diviners*. A certain person while still a child caught a tortoise and used it as the pillar to hold up the floor. Because the person had died, the floor was moved, upon which others discovered the tortoise still alive, although 50 or 60 years had gone by! The tortoise had gone on living, without eating or drinking. The master in this koan used this story as an example to sternly rebuke the monk. The important thing here is that the monk has not truly realized the true fact. The master is doing all in his power to bring him to a realization of that fact, but he has still not realized.

⁵ The position of the hands during *kinhin*.

On the Verse:

The imperial edict comes down, the command is released: In other words, it is the complete revelation of the essential from the very start.

The heartland is for the emperor, the border lands are for the generals. The “heartland” can be understood as the land directly ruled by the emperor, and in this case means the essential world. In the border lands the various generals take command. Here it means the “commands” of the general to protect the essential world, such as koans, Buddhist doctrine, the sutras, etc. Order is maintained in well-organized associations, with no room for strange persons to intrude. There’s no room here for fake enlightenments.

He does not wait for the roaring thunder to wake up the dormant insects; In the month of February of the lunar calendar⁶ when the thunder rolls, the hibernating insects come out of the ground. This line of the Verse thus refers to how the monk in the koan comes at the wrong time, an inopportune moment. He has come with his question although he has yet to realize his own true nature.

How could one know that the wind stops the streaming clouds? The monk came out, but his actions were checked.

Continuously looming and weaving: golden lines and jasper stripes naturally follow. The “golden lines” and “jasper stripes” are the warp and woof of the woven fabric. Without good thread for the warp and woof, no really good woven object can result. In other words, to produce a really outstanding monk you need good thread. It’s all up to the skill and ability of the teacher.

Before [anything is] stamped, it's vast and empty;

Intrinsically there are no letters and characters at all. Before a stamp is applied, there’s nothing at all. The original Chinese speaks in terms of what results when birds peck or insects gnaw, which somehow resembles the shape of Chinese characters. This talk about prior to the stamp can be seen as meaning before the universe, or “before the empty kalpa,” as Yasutani Roshi points out. Precisely where there is nothing, there is the essential world. There are no concepts whatsoever. This is the world of *shō* in the *Five Ranks*. In other words, in order to produce outstanding monks, you need the skill and strength of an outstanding Zen master.

⁶ 3rd of 24 solar terms in the traditional East Asian calendars. It begins when the sun reaches the celestial longitude of 345° and ends when it reaches the longitude of 360°. It more often refers in particular to the day when the sun is exactly at the celestial longitude of 345°. In the Gregorian calendar, it usually begins around March 5 and ends around March 20.

The word *keichitsu* has the meaning of awakening of hibernating insects. The traditional Chinese farming culture said that during *keichitsu*, thunderstorms will wake up the hibernating insects, which also means the weather is getting warm.