

CASE 63

**Jôshû Asks About "Death"**

By Yamada Kôun



*Instruction:*

Sanshō and Seppō are orchids in the spring, chrysanthemums in the autumn;

Jôshû and Tôsu are the gem of Benka, the gold of the land of En.

On a balance without scales, both weights are even;

In a boat without the bottom, they go across in one place.

When the two meet, what happens then?

*Case:*

Jôshû asked Tôsu, "What if a man who has died a great Death comes back to life?" Tôsu said, "I don't allow walking about in the night. You should come in the daylight."

*Verse:*

The castle of poppy seeds, the rock of the kalpa – they subtly exhaust the beginning;

The living eye in the ring illumines vast emptiness.

Not allowing walking about in the night, [having] come in the dawn's light:

The news of the family [needs] not be entrusted to the giant goose or the fish.

***On the Instruction:***

Today's koan is a *mondo* (question and answer) between Jôshû and Tôsu.

Sanshō and Seppō are orchids in the spring, chrysanthemums in the autumn; That means they are complete equals, neither better than nor inferior to the other. You would be stumped to say which is more beautiful, orchids in spring or chrysanthemums in autumn. The same is true for Sanshō and Seppō; they are equal in their ability. There is the expression "difficult older brother, difficult younger brother" (kei tari kataku tei tari gatashi) to express this equality of strength and ability. Sanshō and Seppō originally appear in Case 33 of the *Book of Equanimity*. As you might know, Sanshō was the sole dharma descendant of Rinzai.

After realizing great enlightenment, he embarked on pilgrimages to engage in Zen exchanges with the Zen worthies of his time. This Sanshō Enen Zenji appeared before Seppō. Seppō Gizon Senji was a disciple of Tokusan. His older brother in dharma was Gantō. We have heard many times already of Gantō's great efforts to turn Seppō into an outstanding Zen master. As we now know, Seppō was a person who went to great pains to realize the essence of Zen. It is said that he went three times to Tōsu and also bowed nine times to Tōzan. This shows how earnest and painstaking he was in his practice. There is the saying, "with indefatigable industry, the light will definitely be great." That means in this case that outstanding students will result. Let us review that former case:

Sanshō asked Seppō, "When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?" Seppō said, "I will tell you when you have passed through the net." Sanshō said, "A great Zen master with 1500 disciples doesn't know how to speak." Seppō said, "The old monk is just too busy with temple affairs." A "fish with golden scales" was a fish that had bitten through the net. To "pass through the net" means to have eliminated all concepts and thoughts. Sanshō is referring to himself here. He is saying in so many words: "I, Sanshō Enen, have eliminated all illusions and come to you now. What will you give me now for food?" Seppō says, "I will tell you when you pass through the net." Sanshō comes on as if he has already broken through the net, but Seppō does not approve. "I'll let you know when you've passed through that net," he says. These two are truly equal in their ability. Sanshō says, "I've heard that you're such a great master with 1500 disciples, but here I find you ignorant of how to engage in a Zen exchange (mondo)!" In reply Seppō neatly retires by saying, "I'm so busy with temple business that I have no time for you now." It's important to savor well the ability of these two persons. These two appear briefly on the stage to then make way for Jōshū and Tōsu in the Main Case. As the Introduction says, Sanshō and Seppō are like the orchids in spring and the chrysanthemums in fall. That means they are complete equals in their ability.

Jōshū and Tōsu are the gem of Benka, the gold of the land of En. The *Book of Equanimity* is filled with references to old Chinese stories.

Benka lived in the Han Dynasty. One day he discovered a stone, which he believed to be a rare jewel. He presented it to the reigning Emperor, telling him that polishing the stone would produce a fabulous jewel. But the Emperor paid no attention to his request, nor did the courtiers. They thought Benka was talking nonsense, and he was punished by having the tendon of his right leg cut. When the next Emperor ascended the throne, Benka once again went to him to show the stone. Once again he was considered a liar and was punished again, this time by having the tendon of his left leg cut, making him a cripple. However, the next Emperor was evidently a very wise person. He heard about a man name Benka standing on the banks of the river and weeping. Upon inviting him to the palace and asking why he was crying, he was told that Benka was not crying because he had been made a cripple, but because no one understood what a wonderful jewel he really had. Astounded, the Emperor had the stone

polished and, sure enough, the most wondrous jewel resulted, equal in worth to seven palaces.

The “gold of the land of En” refers to a tale in which a man creates a table of gold, lays out all his gold on it and invites all the lords to visit him. These stories are cited here once again to emphasize how Jōshū and Tōsu are complete equals in Zen understanding and ability.

I should mention here that there were actually two Tōsu’s. According to the scholar Katoh Setsudō, the Tōsu appearing in today’s koan is Tōsu Daidō. The Tōsu we are more familiar with is Tōsu Gisei, who was the dharma heir of Taiyō Keigen Oshō. There is also discussion about whether the name in Japanese should be pronounced Tōsu or Tōshi. Professor Katoh goes as far as saying that the one appearing in today’s koan is pronounced Tōsu, while the person we usually refer to as Tōsu Gisei is actually Tōshi Gisei. This is not of absolute importance, I believe. At any rate, the person appearing in today’s koan is Tōsu Daidō Zenji, who was roughly a contemporary of Jōshū, while Tōsu Gisei Zenji lived much later.

As you might recall, the Sixth Patriarch Enō Zenji had two outstanding disciples: Nangaku Ejō Zenji and Seigen Gyōshi Zenji. Seigen Gyōshi’s dharma heirs included Sekitō Kisen Zenji, whose own disciples included Tanka Tennen Zenji. Tanka’s heirs included Suibi Mugaku Zenji, who also appears often in koans. The Tōsu Daidō Zenji appearing in this case was the dharma successor of Suibi Mugaku Zenji.

Tōsu Gisei Zenji, on the other hand, was in the lineage represented by Sekitō, Yakusan, Ungan and Tōzan Gohon Daishi. This was followed by several generations, and Tōsu Gisei Zenji’s immediate predecessor was Taiyō Kyōgen Zenji.

Jōshū was a successor in the lineage of Nangaku, Baso and Nansen. This koan occurred when Jōshū paid a visit on Tōsu. When you examine the two men, you find them to be equal in their ability. That is expressed in the next line of the Instruction:

On a balance without scales, both weights are even; Scales in olden times had stars as markings on them. Nowadays, there are very handy scales that immediately tell you the weight. Back then, however, they used scales with balances. This line is saying that there is no scale that could measure the ability of the two protagonists in the koan. Neither is “heavier” or “lighter” than the other. They are even. If you ask me, you can say that they are both empty. That’s why “both weights are even.”

In a boat without the bottom, they go across in one place. This, too, is referring to how they are equal in strength. A “boat without a bottom” might seem likely to sink, but this boat doesn’t. Both of them are riding in that boat.

When the two meet, what happens then? In other words, when two such outstanding protagonists encounter each other, what will result in way of a Zen mondo? This directs our attention to the Main Case.

***On the Case:***

Jōshū asked Tōsu, “What if a man who has died a great Death comes back to life?” Jōshū was probably over sixty at the time of this koan. He had practiced under

Nansen for forty years, which means he was close to sixty when Nansen died. After his master passed away, he first embarked on pilgrimages (*angya*) to visit the outstanding Zen worthies of that time and engage in Zen exchanges (*mondo-shôryô*). It is said that he lived to be 120 years old. It was only when he was eighty years old that he settled down in a temple known as Kannôn-in in the town of Jôshû and lived there. At any rate, when Jôshû was on pilgrimage at an earlier time, he came to the temple of Tôsu Daidô Zenji and asked the following question: “What if a man who has died a great Death comes back to life?”

A “man who has died a great Death” means a person who has completely cut off any delusions and concepts. When that happens, a new life suddenly appears. Jôshû seems to be referring to himself. He says in effect: “I have died the great death and come again to life. How will you treat me?”

As you know, when all concepts die away, the new life of your true self appears. It is only then that the activity of a religious person emerges. Actually, however, there is no living and dying. Precisely where there is no living and dying, he fabricates living and dying in coming this way to Tôsu. Thus, precisely in the great death there is the great life. There is a division into two. You could say that Jôshû is revealing the essential world with his words. As you know, even if I raise this stick, this is the complete manifestation of the essential. When I consider it, the essential world is the world of not a single thing. It is the world of the fraction I often cite, whose numerator is alpha and whose denominator is a circle containing the figure eight on its side symbolizing emptiness and infinity. I had the feeling that, in raising a staff, I was showing that world. Actually, however, when we speak of the essential self, we make a temporary division into the numerator and denominator. But the essential self is the entire fraction itself. When I show this *kotsu* (Roshi shows his stick), the essential world and the phenomenal world are completely one in being shown here. I tend to say the world of emptiness or oneness. That may seem to be showing the world of the denominator. But actually it's the fraction itself; it is the fact itself that is shown. Although I am showing both the phenomenal and the essential, it is actually revealing the fraction itself. That is how I would like to view this statement of Jôshû. What does Tôsu say in reply?

Tôsu said, “I don't allow walking about in the night. You should come in the daylight.” When he says he does not allow prowling around in the night, he is saying that, as long as there is a division into great death and great life, it is not the real thing. It is like walking around in the dark. Come to me in broad daylight, he says. That means the fraction itself. He is asking Jôshû to show the fact itself.

Tôsu might seem at first blush to be reproving Jôshû, but Tôsu himself is talking in terms of darkness and brightness, night and daylight. It is the fraction itself—and not the division into numerator and denominator—that is the real self. This is what is being presented here. This is how I see this koan now. I used to think formerly that it was just treating the world of the denominator (essential world). But upon working with these koans, I have come to notice this fact. If I say such a thing, I might be accused of constantly changing my opinion, but

I personally see it as a kind of progress along the way. In other words, Jôshû presents great death and great life, while at the time completely revealing the true self. In contrast, Tôsu presents daylight and nighttime, which are corresponded to each other, while he at the same time presents the true fact. In that sense, there is truly no “superior” or “inferior” in this koan. They are complete equals.

***On the Verse:***

The castle of poppy seeds, the rock of the kalpa – they subtly exhaust the beginning; This first line of the Verse is also referring to Jôshû and Tôsu. The “castle of poppy seeds” is a reference to eternity in Buddhism. Imagine a castle measuring 40 miles on each side and filled with poppy seeds. Every hundred years a bird comes and eats one poppy seed. It would take forever for the poppy seeds to disappear. It thus symbolizes an endlessly long time span.

The same holds for the “rock of the kalpa.” This time we have the image of a cubic rock measuring 40 meters on each side. Every hundred years an angel descends from heaven and brushes the rock with her feather cape. A kalpa is the time it would take for the entire rock to disappear! The ancients were certainly imaginative! These images are much more vivid than a bunch of zeros lined up, and easier to understand. These lines are saying that it is without beginning and without end. It is endless time. This is what is meant by the lines “they subtly exhaust the beginning.” This means that both Jôshû and Tôsu have clearly grasped that world. In what way did they grasp it?

Case 47 of the *Gateless Gate* is Tosotsu’s Three Barriers. In the Verse to that koan are the following lines:

*In one consciousness, we see the whole of eternity.*

In the single consciousness of “happy!” we realize endless kalpas. There is nothing other than that single consciousness. “Eternity” is just an idea you think up. Actually, however, there is nothing other than the present moment. That is expressed in the next line of the Verse:

*Eternity is nothing other than right now.*

In that sense, the first line of today’s Verse (The castle of poppy seeds, the rock of the kalpa – they subtly exhaust the beginning) is very interesting.

The living eye in the ring illumines vast emptiness. The “living eye” is the eye of satori. This line also refers to both Jôshû and Tôsu. The ring has a hole in the middle. The Instruction talked about the gem of Benka. Two words in the original are translated as “ring,” although they have a slightly different meaning in terms of the relative size of the hole and the surrounding ring.

The eye of satori is used to see the ring. That means seeing the surrounding ring. You can see the ring as the phenomenal world, and the hole as the world of emptiness. To illuminate vast emptiness means to see that emptiness with the eye of satori. That means clearly realizing

that the phenomenal world is empty. And although it is empty, it appears clearly like this.

Not allowing walking about in the night, [having] come in the dawn's light:

The news of the family [needs] not be entrusted to the giant goose or the fish. Since walking about in the night is not allowed, he is walking in broad daylight. When the light of dawn comes, the darkness disappears. This expresses how we clearly realize our true nature. The "news of the family" means news about our true home. The news of the essential world does not need to be entrusted to the goose or the fish. That news about our true home does not rely on anyone. Where is the essential world? Here it is (Roshi strikes rostrum with his stick). That being so, you need not rely on any one. About this matter of the goose and the fish, I'd like to share with you what I found in a book by the scholar Katoh Setsudô. The news from home is known as a great bird and the fish is a great fish. We don't want to depend on that fish. You cannot understand with words alone. There is a story behind this. In the Han Dynasty, there lived a retainer named Sobu who was sent to the north to the Xiongnu people in order to convince them to become allies, but they would not listen to him. He was thrown into prison, but he refused to apologize. He remained in prison for many years until one day he happened to catch a goose and attached a detailed letter to the goose's foot and let it go. The goose flew to the Han kingdom and landed in the garden of the Emperor's palace. The Emperor caught the goose and found the letter, whereupon he realized that Sobu was still alive and well.

The story about the fish is similar. In the Han Dynasty there lived a man name Saihakushi, whose beautiful daughter married. Her husband went to war and was captured by the enemy. The wife was also caught and became the concubine of the king. She wrote a letter, enclosed it in wax and attached it to the foot of the goose, which she released in the air. The goose stopped midway to drink water in a lake, whereupon the wax tied to its leg fell off and was eaten by a fish. A fisherman caught the fish only to find the wax in its stomach with the enclosed letter. These stories are cited here to emphasize that one does not need such outside means; they are unnecessary in our essential home.