

CASE 79

**Chôsa and One Step**

By Yamada Kôun



*Instruction:*

"The wife of the son of the family Ba" on the golden sand-bank – indeed a special spirit [of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara]<sup>1</sup>.

Pounding to make chestnut rice cake in a jade pot – who would ever dare to turn it around?

If you don't go into the terrifying billows, you can hardly get a satisfactory fish.

What about one phrase manifesting leisurely, majestic strides?

*Case:*

Chôsa had a monk ask Master E, "How was it when you had not yet seen Nansen?" E remained silent. The monk asked, "What about after seeing him?" E said, "Nothing special."

The monk returned and told Chôsa about this. Chôsa said, "The man sits on the top of a hundred-foot pole. He has entered the way, but it is not yet genuine. He must take one step from the top of a hundred-foot pole. The worlds of the ten directions are your complete body." The monk said, "How should you take a step from the top of a hundred-foot pole?" Chôsa said, "Mountains of Ro; water of Rei<sup>2</sup>." The monk said, "I don't understand." Chôsa said, "Four seas and five lakes are all under the imperial reign."

*Verse:*

The pearl person's dream is destroyed – a cry of the rooster!

---

<sup>1</sup> Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is said to have appeared in the district of Sen'u in the ancient China in the form of an extremely beautiful girl and promised to marry a young man who would be able to read the sutras best. All young men started to learn to read the sutras, but the son of the Family Ba could read them better than anyone else, so he succeeded in marrying the girl, who, however, died right after the wedding. An old monk, who happened to come by, explained the real history behind the girl. After that, Buddhism spread all over the district, and the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was erected on the golden sandbank of the land; the statue was eventually called "Avalokitesvara, the wife of the son of the Family Ba."

<sup>2</sup> Ro and Rei are the names of Provinces in ancient China.

Looking around [one sees that] all phenomena in life are equal.  
Wind and thunder, bringing the news [of spring], drive out the dormant insects;  
Peach trees, silent as they are, naturally create footpaths [beneath].  
When the season is come, one labors in the paddies with a plowing ox;  
Who would ever fear the knee-deep mud of the ridges of the spring fields?

***On the Instruction:***

"The wife of the son of the family Ba" on the golden sand-bank – indeed a special spirit [of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara]. Let me speak briefly about Chôsa. He was a disciple of Nansen Fugen Zenji and a brother in dharma to Jôshû. Nansen, for his part, was a disciple of Baso. That produces the following lineage: Baso-Nansen-Chôsa. Although he is not as famous as Jôshû he was evidently a very sharp and stern master. To explain in all brevity, there was originally the so-called Igyô School of Zen founded by Isan and Kyôzan. Chôsa was engaged in a dharma combat (hossen) with Kyôzan, which ended up with him pushing Kyôzan down and stepping on his chest. Greatly amazed, Kyôzan cried out, "Whoa, just like a tiger!" This is the Chôsa who appears in today's case.

"The wife of the son of the family Ba" is actually a reference to Gyoran Kannon (Kannon Carrying a Fish Basket). I have a white figure of this particular Kannon in my study in Kamakura where I receive dokusan. The "golden sand bank" is an allusion to how, in former times, the Yellow River (Huang-ho) flowed from north to the east. On the south bank of the river was the city of Loyang (Japanese: Rakuyô). The people to the west of the river were sorely lacking in faith in Buddhism, so that it had almost died out. Gyoran Kannon then assumed the form of a beautiful woman, since Kannon can become anything. She then told the people that she would become the bride of anyone who could recite the sutras well. She was in this way attempting to open up a path for teaching the people about Buddhism. The first test involved being able to recite the *Heart Sutra* by memory. As it turned out, more than thirty men were able to recite it by heart after studying it overnight. Since it was impossible to become the bride of all those people, she then said that they would have to be able to recite the *Diamond Sutra* by heart, promising to become the bride of the man who could do so. This time a little more than ten men were able to pass the test. Kannon then said that she would marry the man who could memorize the extremely long *Lotus Sutra* in three days and recite it. This time, only one man named Ba was able to do so, whereupon she became his bride. The people held a wedding ceremony according to custom, but that night, the bride passed away, reportedly to bring home to the people the brevity of life and the transience of all things. It is said that she fell ill while they were making the traditional exchange of nuptial cups and died that night. A funeral was held and she was buried. Later an old monk came and used his stick to dig up the grave, whereupon he discovered that the bones had turned to gold. This is the origin of this first line of the Introduction. "Golden" is used here in praise of the sand, perhaps indicating sand on the riverbank of a lovely color. The word translated here as "sand-bank" also indicates rapids in a

stream, which are difficult for boats to navigate. The first line says there is a special meaning or spirit in the fact that the Kannon with the Fish Basket appeared on that sandbank. This means that, when it comes to saving all beings, she will undertake anything. If there are people who cannot believe in Buddhism, she will go out of her way to save them.

Pounding to make chestnut rice cake in a jade pot – who would ever dare to turn it around? The word translated here as “jade” is the Japanese word *ruri* which was used in olden times to indicate glass, but can also mean a lapis-lazuli, a type of gem. “Chestnut rice cake” can also mean millet dough cake (awamochi). If you pound the rice cake in the pot too hard, it might break the pot, so you pound gently. You would not dare turn your hand during pounding for fear of breaking the pot. This line points out how, unless you are a truly outstanding Zen adept, you will not be able to act with firm clarity when the occasion demands. You will not be able to freely guide others. That is just like a person pounding rice in a jade bowl who fears to pound too hard for fear of breaking the bowl. It means a Zen teacher with no real power.

If you don't go into the terrifying billows, you can hardly get a satisfactory fish. In other words, unless you act swiftly and decisively when the occasion demands, you will be in funk, unable to really lead others in practice.

What about one phrase manifesting leisurely, majestic strides? What sort of phrase could that be, that manifests such leisurely and majestic strides? The sights are set on Chōsa, who appears in the Main Case.

***On the Case:***

Chōsa had a monk ask Master E, “How was it when you had not yet seen Nansen?” E remained silent. Master E was also a disciple of Nansen, although he evidently doesn't appear in the Zen records as do most of the other Zen worthies of that time. One day Chōsa had a monk ask Master E the question found in this case. In response Master E simply remained silent. Evidently he didn't know what to say or deliberately remained silent.

The monk asked, “What about after seeing him?” E said, “Nothing special.” The monk asks Master E about the time after meeting Nansen, if there was something worthy of special mention. He is asking what sort of instruction he received from Nansen. In reply, Master E says, “Nothing special.” It is here that we see that he still hasn't realized. You have to realize kensho, no matter how small the experience may be. But simply to say “nothing special” is not enough. Even though it might not have been an overwhelming experience where you are beside yourself with joy, you must have at least had some experience of suddenly realizing. If it were a matter of opening the gate, so to speak, entering and then forgetting everything, even satori, it would be another matter and an answer like “nothing special” might be appropriate. But that doesn't appear to be the case here. Master E has no real experience worth speaking of. This is evidently how Chōsa sized him up.

The monk returned and told Chōsa about this. Chōsa said, “The man sits

on the top of a hundred-foot pole. He has entered the way, but it is not yet genuine. He must take one step from the top of a hundred-foot pole. The worlds of the ten directions are your complete body." These words of Chōsa are also found in Case 46 of the *Gateless Gate*. "Sitting on the top of a hundred-foot pole" means a person for whom all concepts and thoughts have been wiped away. That itself is no easy task. It is the state expressed by the words "not a speck of cloud obscuring the view" (*manako ni sayuru kumo no ha mo nashi*). There is not a trace of concepts in your head. You feel very peaceful and enjoy that state of perfect peace. This would be the first step in "dying the great death" (*daishi ichiban*). Chōsa says this in reference to Master E. He says that Master E has come close to true satori, but it is not yet an authentic experience. "He has entered the way, but is not genuine." He has to take a step from the top of that pole. The "worlds of the ten directions" means the entire universe. It means realizing that you are one with the entire universe. Up to then you had been thinking that you were separate from the objective world. But when you open the eye of satori, you realize that you and the universe are completely one. You must plunge into that world of oneness. Usually we see things dualistically in terms of self and other or subject and object. This is the world of everyday common sense where conflicts never cease. If you attempt to solve problems in that dualistic world it will be very difficult to find any solution. If you take a step from a hundred foot pole, you die the great death and experience the great life as a new world opens up. You clearly realize that you are one with the universe. Unless you enter that world, everywhere you go will be a world of dualistic opposition.

The monk said, "How should you take a step from the top of a hundred-foot pole?" Chōsa said, "Mountains of Ro; water of Rei." Those who have worked on this koan will know the answer to the monk's question. The "mountains of Ro" were no doubt an area of great natural beauty, and the water or Rei was beautiful and clear. This is probably a river and not the seaside. This is not showing how to advance from the hundred-foot pole but rather presents the state of consciousness after doing so. For us it might be "Kamakurayama!" (a hilly region on the outskirts of the town of Kamakura). Each single thing is the whole, is the "entire body."

The monk said, "I don't understand." Sa said, "Four seas and five lakes are all under the imperial reign." The monk didn't understand what Chōsa was saying, so Chōsa said, "four seas and five lakes are all under the imperial reign." The "four seas and five lakes" can be understood as the entire universe. These words indicate complete peace under heaven thanks to the emperor. If you truly realize, you realize that nothing is missing. This is peace itself. This is the same as saying that the worlds in the ten directions are the entire body.

### ***On the Verse:***

The pearl person's dream is destroyed – a cry of the rooster! When the rooster crows at the break of dawn you awaken. Who is it that awakens? The ordinary person. There are different views on the interpretation of this line. For example, Yasutani Roshi sees it

as describing the state of Master E's satori. Although he has realized, it is not yet true realization. In that case, to say that the "pearl person's dream is destroyed" would mean that he has awakened, he has realized satori. And how are things then, we might ask.

Looking around [one sees that] all phenomena in life are equal. This would mean realizing that each single thing is "the whole body." This is describing the state of consciousness after realizing satori. But I think it would be going a bit too far to see all of this as applying to Master E. When I examine Shiroki Mokusen Zenji's book on the *Book of Equanimity*, I read that Master E came to realization under the guidance of Nansen Zenji, but that it was not yet a decisive experience. He seems to be taking a nap on the pinnacle of satori. This is the reason for Chōsa's statements in today's case.

Wind and thunder, bringing the news [of spring], drive out the dormant insects;

Peach trees, silent as they are, naturally create footpaths [beneath]. When spring arrives, there is often thunder. The insects that were hibernating in their holes come out of the ground. This would seem to be referring to Master E, who had some sort of experience. As for the peach trees, the peach blossoms do not say a word, but everyone passes underneath those trees to view the beautiful blossoms, so that a small path is naturally created. This expresses how people will naturally gather around a person who has truly realized and then ripened perfectly in character and virtue, just like a path naturally appears under the trees during the flower viewing season.

When the season is come, one labors in the paddies with a plowing ox. To say "when the season is come" means when the time after realization has come.

Prior to realization, you generally are guided by your master, taken by the hand, so to speak. But when you realize, you must walk on your own and become independent. This line expresses how the master tells the student he or she can now walk alone. And when that time comes, "one labors in the paddies with a plowing ox." You go out and work in the fields.

Who would ever fear the knee-deep mud of the ridges of the spring fields? You become muddy from walking through the fields. But precisely in those circumstances you have to do your very best. You sink knee-deep into the mud. The poet tells us that, no matter what the hardships, we mustn't lose our beginner's mind. I imagine you all know now what these lines are referring to.