

CASE 91

Nansen and the Peonies



By *Yamada Kōun*

Instruction:

Kyōzan understands a dream as reality,
Nansen points to an awakened state as unreality.

If one knows that awakening and dreaming are intrinsically non-existent,
For the first time one can believe that unreality and reality transcend
dualism.

Just tell me, what eye does this person possess?

Case:

Minister Rikukō said to Nansen, "Dharma-teacher Jō is wonderful. He truly knows what he is talking about: 'Heaven and earth [and I] have one and the same root; all things [and I] are one single body.'

Nansen pointed at the peonies in the garden and said, "Minister, people of our time see these flowers as in a dream."

Verse:

Seeing through the roots of the creation with "subject" and "object,"
Seeing the gates of 'ins and 'outs' in abundance;
Letting the godly spirit play outside the kalpas, what questions could one have?
With the eye set before oneself, the knowing exists in subtlety.
When the tiger roars, the ghostly wind blows over the rocks;
When the dragon moans, the dark clouds fill up the caves.
Nansen, shattering the dreams of the people of his time,
Wants everyone to acknowledge the honored One who becomes the next
Buddha.

On the Instruction:

Kyōzan understands a dream as reality,

Nansen points to an awakened state as unreality. This koan is a very famous one. It also appears as Case 40 of the *Blue Cliff Record* with the title *Nansen and the Flower*.

Because Kyōzan understands a dream as reality and Nansen points to an awakened state as unreality, it might seem like two different things, but actually it has nothing to do with either dream or reality.

If one knows that awakening and dreaming are intrinsically non-existent,
For the first time one can believe that unreality and reality transcend
dualism. In other words, when you truly realizes, then you know that, whether we speak

about emptiness or a daydream, it is not a relative answer, but rather an absolute answer.

The first line of this Instruction, referring to how Kyōzan understands a dream as a reality, is actually an allusion to the preceding Case 90 of this collection. As mentioned there, Kyōzan was the dharma successor of Isan and himself an outstanding Zen master. Together they are seen as the founders of the so-called Igyō School of Zen. That former koan relates how Kyōzan went to Maitreya's residence and was assigned to the second seat in the assembly. An illustrious monk told him that the person in the second seat was to speak that day. So Kyōzan stood up, and struck the gavel, saying, "The Dharma of Mahayana is beyond the four propositions and transcends the hundred negations. I beg to tell you this!"

This all took place in a dream. But in this Instruction to the present case, it says that although it was a dream, Kyōzan understood it as reality.

The second lines talks of Nansen, who appears in today's case, and says that "Nansen points to an awakened state as unreality." Although we see the peonies, we actually do not see them, as is expressed in Nansen's statement: "People of our time see these flowers as in a dream."

This seems to be the opposite of what is said in the first line about Kyōzan, who says that what happens in the dream is actually reality. Nansen, for his part, says that what we see in reality is a dream. However, if we clearly realize that both reality and dream are empty, that their content is empty, you will realize that both unreality and reality transcend any dualism. This is speaking of the world of oneness, the essential world. Although we make a point of speaking about a dream and about waking, or about unreality and reality, when we awaken, we will realize that though we speak of seeing the real world or seeing the dream world, they are both the dream is reality and reality is a dream, in the sense that they are both intrinsically empty. From the standpoint of the essential world, though you speak of a dream, it is still an event in the phenomenal world. That is, when we see it from the standpoint of the essential world. From that standpoint, dreaming and waking are both empty. Unreality and reality actually both exhaust any relative world, since they are the world of oneness. This is what the Instruction is talking about. In other words, you will realize for the first time that unreality and reality are not relative worlds in opposition to each other, but actually the same single world that transcends any dualistic position. The word "believe" can also be seen here as meaning to understand or to realize.

Just tell me, what eye does this person possess? What kind of eye does the person possess who has realized this? Needless to mention, this is referring to the eye of satori. This brings us to the Main Case.

On the Case:

Minister Rikukō said to Nansen, "Dharma-teacher Jō is wonderful. He truly knows what he is talking about: 'Heaven and earth [and I] have one and the same root; all things [and I] are one single body.' Minister Rikukō was a very illustrious minister who served during the Tang Dynasty under the Emperor Genso. Perhaps he would be known today as a local inspector general. It was evidently quite a feat to obtain such a title as his (tayu).

Dharma-teacher Jō (Japanese: Jō Hōshi) was himself a very unusual and outstanding individual. Minister Rikukō was much taken with him and said about him that "he truly knows what he is talking about." It was Dharma-teacher Jō who first said, "Heaven and earth [and I] have one and the same root; all things [and I] are one single body." "All things" can be understood as meaning the entire phenomenal world. Minister Rikukō is beside himself in admiration for these words of Dharma-teacher Jō.

Minister Rikukō evidently visited Nansen from time to time to engage in dharma-exchanges and seems to be well along in his practice.

Let me speak a bit more about Dharma-teacher Jō. Among the four outstanding Chinese monks to go to India and bring back the sutras for translation, the first to do so was Kumārajīva. Kumārajīva's own disciples included ten outstanding disciples, of whom four

were particularly praiseworthy. These four disciples included Dharma-teacher Jō (Chinese: Sengzhao). He evidently came from humble circumstances in Chang-an. There are four writings of his that have been bequeathed to later generations: On Time (butsu-fuhen-ron), On Sunyata (fushinku-ron), On Prajna Not Cognizant (hannya-muchi-ron), Nirvana Is Unnameable (nehan-mumyo-ron). They are known collectively as the *Jōron* (Chao-lun). This is just an aside, but I was able to obtain a rare hand-written copy of this text somewhere that was written by a master calligrapher. It also includes the name of the copyist and his seal attached to it. Yasutani Roshi, upon seeing my example of the treatise, expressed his admiration for having obtained such an outstanding copy. These words quoted here are found in that text. Minister Rikukō, in quoting those words, is beside himself with admiration for Dharma-teacher Jō. Unless he had clearly realized the world of emptiness, Dharma-teacher Jō would not have been able to say what he did in these lines

Nansen, on hearing these words of admiration from Minister Rikukō, pointed to the peonies in the garden and said, “Minister, people of our time see these flowers as in a dream.”

Although Nansen says “people of our time,” he is actually talking about Minister Rikukō. He is saying in effect: “You Minister Rikukō, see these flowers as in a dream.” You do not really see these peonies. It is as if you were looking at them in a dream. You have not realized the true essence of those flowers. You do not realize that their true form is no form. It is as if you were dozing off in a dream. The Instruction contains the line: “Nansen points to an awakened state as unreality.” The “awakened state” can be seen as that which can be grasped with our five senses. This is actually quite a difficult koan, known as one of the *Eight Difficult Koans* of Hakuin Zenji. It is not so difficult to understand my intellectual explanation of the koan. But it’s a matter of producing that dream world of Nansen. You do this individually in the dokusan room.

Nansen is also famous as the one who killed the cat, which is a koan in the *Gateless Gate*. At that time he was very sharp and demanding as a master. It is often said that people in their forties or fifties make the best Zen teachers. When you get into your sixties or seventies, you are no longer able to raise your voice loudly in dokusan. The best situation would be to practice under a Zen teacher in his or her forties or fifties.

Recently a person came to me from Germany saying she wasn’t sure whether she had realized kensho or not. She had originally begun her practice with Father Lassalle and then practiced with Father Willigis. She wanted me to check whether she had actually realized or not. She spoke very quickly in English. That would be OK, perhaps, if she were American or British, but I had a great deal of trouble understanding her German-style English. Nevertheless, I could determine that she had seen the world of emptiness. Although she had seen it without a doubt, she was still sticking to that world of emptiness. I suddenly let out a great, ear-piercing shout. Everyone in the zendo was evidently very surprised to hear my shouting like that. I assumed that she would not be coming any more, but she did come. And she was actually very joyful and in tears. She told me that, as a result of that great shout, she could finally release her hold on emptiness. She is now working on the *Miscellaneous Koans*. Here is an example of me suddenly letting out a great shout. A person with true ability would not have to do such a thing in leading others, I reflected later to myself.

On the Verse:

Seeing through the roots of the creation with “subject” and “object,”

Seeing the gates of ‘ins and ‘outs’ in abundance. I feel one can understand the “roots of the creation” as the root source or origin of Mu. It means clearly seeing through to the root source of Mu. Although we speak here in terms of subject and object, you can also see it as meaning phenomenal and essential or as form and emptiness. The “creation” (zōge) can be seen as the changes and vicissitudes of the objective world. You have to see through the roots of those changes to the origin of Mu. It is in that sense that you see through the roots of the creation. There is a short critical comment to this verse line as appended by Wanshi Zenji: “Walking, I come to where the stream ends.” This could also be seen as inquiring into the

mind with the question “what is Mind?” (kokoro kore nanimono zo). You trace your own mind back to its source and come to the place where there is not a single drop of water. This is a very good line. The second line, which comes now, has the following capping phrase: “Sitting, I watch when the clouds rise.” Let me mention here in passing that Yamamoto Genpō Roshi of Ryūtakuji Temple wrote these lines in a piece of calligraphy. He evidently said that it was only when he reached the age of ninety that he felt he could really write freely. I often feel that I would like to be able to write calligraphy like his.

Seeing the gates of ‘ins and ‘outs’ in abundance. The gates of “ins and outs” mean the conceptual thoughts that arise without stopping in our heads. So this would mean watching as those thoughts arise and disappear. Recall the line from the *Diamond Sutra*: “Dwelling nowhere, the mind should come forth.” Where do the thoughts and feelings come from? They come from nowhere, they come out of nothingness: Feelings of happiness or sadness, of being hot or cold. We should examine those thoughts and realize they come from nothing. As mentioned, this line of the verse also has a capping phrase: Sitting, I watch when the clouds rise. These two capping phrases, when taken together, form a truly outstanding statement.

Walking, I come to where the stream ends.

Sitting, I watch when the clouds rise.

This is truly expressing how there is not a single thing to begin with.

Then comes the next line of the verse:

Letting the godly spirit play outside the kalpas, what questions could one have? This question “what question could one have?” is for me pointing to where there is not a single thing. You can see the “godly spirit” as meaning mind (kokoro). To let the godly spirit play outside the kalpas means to have it play outside phenomena. I interpret this line as asking where that place could be where there is not a single thing.

With the eye set before oneself, the knowing exists in subtlety. This can be seen as attaching your view to the phenomenal world. The “knowing existing in subtlety” (chimyō ni zonsu) means prajna wisdom. It is the wisdom of realizing that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. The line says that this exists wondrously. You look at the peonies over there. Although they are flowers in the phenomenal world, you realize that they are simultaneously empty. The Japanese are vaguely aware of this even without having had a kensho experience. The same holds for other peoples in Asia. This is difficult for people in Europe to understand. This knowledge is what is known as *prajna* wisdom.

When the tiger roars, the ghostly wind blows over the rocks. This roar of the tiger is Nansen’s statement: “People of our time see these flowers as in a dream.” The “ghostly wind blows over the rocks” means that, when the wind blows through the cracks in the rocks, a ghostly sound is emitted.

When the dragon moans, the dark clouds fill up the caves. In this line, Nansen is compared to a dragon in a cave.

Nansen, shattering the dreams of the people of his time,

Wants everyone to acknowledge the honored One who becomes the next Buddha. Nansen wants to wake everyone up from their dreams so they can realize the truth. “Becoming the next Buddha” means the next candidate for Buddhahood. Usually it is believed that, in keeping with a prophecy made by Shakyamuni, Maitreya will appear as the second Buddha when Buddhism is about to vanish from the face of the earth. At present, he is waiting in the Tusita Heaven for his appearance. But we should not assume that Maitreya is the only candidate for Buddhahood. Everyone is such a candidate. Nansen, with his preaching about the peonies, has awoken us from our dreams. We are all living Maitreyas. He wants to somehow wake us up from our dream and realize that we are the ones who take over for the Buddha. There is no way to understand this koan other than to savor its taste.