

CASE 64

Joshu's Sandals



By Yamada Kôun

Case:

Nansen again brought up this story and asked Jôshû. Jôshû took off his sandals, put them on his head and walked out. Nansen said, "If you had been there I could have saved the cat."

Verse:

The koan reaches completion upon his asking Jôshû.
Within the city of Chang-an,
One is free to wander at leisure.
Putting the sandals on his head...no one understands.
Returning he reaches the ancestral hills and then rests.

On the Case:

This case is a continuation of the story found in Case 63. The two appear together as a single koan in Case 14 of the *Gateless Gate* and Case 9 of the *Book of Serenity*. Although this case is also lacking an instruction, the instruction for Case 63 would be more than fitting. Please refer to that former case before reading this one. And although Jôshû was Nansen's student, it appears that he was actually the older of the two. There are some who say that Jôshû was also Nansen's senior in terms of his Zen understanding. Dôgen Zenji, a hard taskmaster when it came to appraising Zen masters from the past, was hesitant to bow his head to anyone but the very best. Even in speaking of Rinzai or Tokusan, he was apt to say things like "this is beyond the knowing of either Rinzai or Tokusan." For Jôshû, however, he reserved the highest praise, calling him "Jôshû, the old Buddha." Jôshû was one of three or four masters from the past, including Tôzan Gohon Daishi and Gensha Suibi Daishi¹, whom Dôgen Zenji singled out for special praise.

As a man who had truly rid himself of all traces of enlightenment, Jôshû was totally ordinary. All of us start in a state of delusion, our heads full of discriminating concepts. Jôshû went through great sufferings before truly "dying the great death" and attaining great life in perfect enlightenment. He followed this with a lifetime of assiduous practice to rid himself of all traces of enlightenment, to the point where he forgot satori itself and even the act

¹ Originally a fisherman, Gensha had a profound experience of life's impermanence when his father drowned before his eyes as they were out fishing one day.

of forgetting. This is the truly ordinary man, the Zen person spoken of in all Zen writings. We sense strongly that spirit of the totally ordinary in today's koan. Our task today is to come to intimate terms with Jôshû's completely natural revelation of his state of consciousness.

It appears that Jôshû was away somewhere when Nansen killed the cat. When he returned that evening, Nansen told him what had happened during his absence. Nansen must have asked Jôshû what he would have done in response to the question about killing the cat. In reply, Jôshû took off his straw sandals, put them on his head and walked out. What could this mean?

At any rate, Nansen was overjoyed when he saw this and said, "If you had been there at the time, the cat could have been saved. What a shame that you were away!" But why did Jôshû do what he did? This is one of the checking points in this koan.

In his teisho on this koan as it appears in Case 9 of the *Book of Serenity*, Yasutani Roshi has the following to say: "Jôshû has forgotten everything, even forgetting about forgetting, and has attained great peace." Yasutani Roshi says in his teisho that what is expressed here is how Jôshû has come to enlightenment, but then forgotten about that experience and its content, so that even Buddhism and the Buddha-Dharma do not remain. He has become a completely ordinary person who is completely at peace, and this action expresses that state of consciousness. What we must be aware of here is Jôshû's way of replying to Nansen's question of what he would have done if he had been there. In reply to the question, Jôshû presents his state of consciousness.

It is then up to us to appreciate just how wonderful a response this is. With his action, Jôshû was perfectly revealing the state of consciousness spoken of by Yasutani Roshi in the passage quoted above: he has completely forgotten and become a totally ordinary person. Just what does Jôshû's action mean? If you ask me, it has no meaning at all. In fact, if there were even the slightest meaning attached to it, it would already be "the difference between heaven and earth." If you think that Jôshû was attempting to show with his action how he had forgotten satori and become ordinary, you would be mistaken. If there were the slightest trace of intention or trying in his action he would already have "lost his life." It is JUST THIS. Just that action and nothing else.

I had always thought that this is the way one should understand this action. When we are taking a walk down a country road, for example, we will sometimes, with no particular thought as to what we are doing, pluck up a blade of grass or pull down a leaf from an overhanging tree branch. It occurred to me that this is exactly what we have in today's koan. When we pluck a blade of grass or a tree leaf, is there any meaning in our action? None at all. There is just that plucking. Then, as I was looking over the koan again last night, I came upon the following short critical comment by Engo Zenji which is appended to the second line of the verse: "He allows his hand to pluck at the grasses." Upon seeing this, I realized that Engo and I are of the same opinion and felt very happy.

Engo also has the following comment on this section of the main case. "He does not avoid trailing mud and dripping water." (Cleary) This means that a true Zen master, in leading students, trails mud (i.e., does things that shouldn't really be necessary). Put in more modern terms, Jôshû's action is truly wonderful and his ability truly praiseworthy.

Nevertheless, it would be better if he hadn't done that!

There is also the expression found in other koans: "The spirit turtle drags its tail." A sea turtle will come up on the beach to lay its eggs in the sand, bury them and return to the ocean. In order to prevent the eggs from being found, the mother turtle uses her tail to brush away her footprints in the sand. The turtle is very clever, but the traces of her tail remain on the sand. This is what is meant by this expression which is often found in Zen writings to characterize an action which is superfluous. Jōshū's action was truly wonderful but he too, after all, is a "spirit turtle dragging its tail."

On the Verse:

The koan reaches completion upon his asking Jōshū. Within the city of Chang-an, one is free to wander at leisure. Putting the sandals on his head...no one understands. Returning he reaches the ancestral hills and then rests. Upon asking Jōshū what he would have done if he were there, Nansen receives Jōshū's wonderful response and the koan finally reaches completion. Nansen had already wielded the "sword that kills," i.e., he had deprived the monks of all their concepts. But it had yet to act as the "sword that gives life." Just cutting the cat in two is not enough to present the world of enlightenment. It is necessary to bring the cat back to life again. Upon dying the great death, dying to all our concepts of self and other, we must go on to attain the great life of true realization. Only then do the "sword that kills" and "sword that gives life" come together to bring the koan to completion. In the dokusan room the student is asked to present both the state of consciousness expressed in Nansen's killing the cat and that expressed in Jōshū's action.

Within the city of Chang-an, one is free to wander at leisure. Chang-an was the capital of the Chinese empire in the Tang dynasty. These lines are an attempt to express the leisurely and totally natural response displayed by Jōshū. Engo adds the following critical comment to this line of the verse: "In this way he has attained cheerfulness, in this way he has gained freedom." "Cheerfulness" here is used in the sense of not having a care in the world, not the slightest cloud of doubt crossing one's mind. This is an expression of Jōshū's state of consciousness as he puts his slippers on his head and walks out.

Putting the sandals on his head...no one understands.
There's nothing to understand. It had absolutely no meaning.

Returning he reaches the ancestral hills and then rests. Upon reaching our true home we can finally rest at ease. Up to now we have been on pilgrimage, so to speak, undergoing various hardships. But now we have returned to our ancestral home and can finally rest. This is truly the peace that passes all understanding. We long for nothing, we are completely satisfied. This is referred to in Zen by the expression *kika-onza* [literally, "returning home and sitting in peace"]. We have returned to our original, totally natural self. Having gone out on the road which is our practice we attained satori but then went on to forget it totally and even to forget our having forgotten it! We can imagine here an old man tottering

up the path to the house where he can rest. Please appreciate this koan as an expression of Jôshû's own state of perfect peace.