

CASE 12

Tôzan's *Masagin*



By Yamada Kôun

*Instruction:*

**The sword that kills, the sword that gives life: This has been the standard rule since of old and is the pivotal point of today. If you talk about killing, you don't harm even a single hair; if you talk about giving life, you lose your body and life. Therefore it is said: The supreme one way can't be transmitted even by the thousand holy ones. Practitioners who labor for forms are like monkeys trying to grasp reflections. Just tell me, if it can't be transmitted, why are there so many entangling koans? Those who have an eye to see, let them see!**

*Case:*

**A monk asked Tôzan, "What is Buddha?" Tôzan said, "*Masagin!*"**

*Verse:*

**The Golden Raven is quick, the Jade Rabbit is swift.  
Is there any sloppiness in the marvelous response?  
If you see Tôzan as displaying something to meet his student,  
You are a lame and blind turtle falling into an open gorge.  
Blossoms are abundant, the foliage is colorful;  
Bamboos in the north, trees in the south.  
Therefore I think of Chôkei and Official Rikukô,  
Who could say, "Laugh! Don't cry!"  
Hah!**

*On the Instruction:*

**The sword that kills, the sword that gives life: this has been the standard rule since of old and is the pivotal point of today.** Zen can ultimately be reduced to this double sword: the sword to kill and the sword to give life – therefore, killing and giving life. This principle has been common knowledge since old times. "The sword that kills" sounds quite dangerous, but it refers to a master's action of "killing" all delusive thoughts, of depriving his or her students of all

delusions. Therefore, those working on Mu are told to "die to themselves" or "kill themselves" in their practice of Mu; that is, to annihilate their delusive thinking through this practice. Not only when working on Mu, but also when dealing with all other koans, you are supposed to cut away all delusive thoughts, namely, all intellectual and conceptual understanding. It's often said that human beings are animals with emotions; as a matter of fact, human beings are animals with concepts. The human mind is heavily embedded in concepts; it even feeds on such concepts, so to speak. But concepts are never real facts. Since Zen aims at grasping the real fact, you must exhaust all of your concepts. If you say, for example, "Sugar is sweet," that sentence is a concept. No matter how many times you repeat it or hear others say it, and no matter how well you believe you understand it, the proof of the sweetness is only in the tasting. Various thoughts you produce in your head are, after all, not real at all. They are simply "photographs" of the realities. That's why Zen calls those thoughts "delusions" or "conceptual products." Taking away those concepts from the students is called "killing" [*setsunin*]. It's vital for Zen teacher to use both "the sword that kills" and "the sword that gives life." These two aspects are also expressed in such word combinations as "killing–giving life" [*sekkatsu*], "giving–taking away" [*yodatsu*], "folding–letting go" [*shûdatsu*]. You've got to "give life" as well as to "kill"; "taking away" and "giving" are both indispensable. This has been the principle of Zen guidance since of old and remains the key point even now.

The most crucial point is to first "kill" totally, eradicate all concepts and thoughts; then "giving life" follows naturally. This is called "dying the great death–coming to great life" [*daishi-ichiban, daikatsu-genjô*]. When you become totally void of any concepts or thoughts, suddenly you come to life. Here lies the most important point in Zen; it's always been the same – in olden times as well as today.

Not only when guiding people in Zen, but also when bringing up or educating children, it's important to equip yourself with the faculties of both "taking away" and "giving." The former one means your ability to forbid something or say "no"; the latter one concerns your aptitude to praise children, saying, "You did a fine job!" You must be able to skillfully display these two functions. Haku'un Roshi used to complain that the teachers of our time can say only good things to their students, they aren't able to scold them or say "no" to them any more. Parents especially have become too weak to scold their children. Maybe it's because few mothers today are college graduates and so they have a sort of inferiority complex toward their own children, who, on their part, usually enjoy college education. When they face college students, ordinary grown-ups are afraid to say a strong "no," becoming mere "yes-men." But this isn't good for the children. Teachers and parents must have enough authority to say "no" when necessary. However, constant suppression may intimidate the child and warp his spirit, who then becomes like a poor piece of grass crushed under a rock, unable to grow freely. You need both: burning sun and graceful water, or "the sword that kills" and "the sword that gives life."

**If you talk about killing, you don't harm even a single hair; if you talk about giving life,**

**you lose your body and life.** As for "killing," even if you "kill" yourself, not even a single hair perishes. Your Zen master says to you, "Die to yourself! Kill yourself!" How do you "kill" yourself? By simply doing your Muuuuuuuuu. But don't worry, even if you practice Mu, you'll never die physically. I've never heard of a single case that a person actually died out from practicing Mu. Not even a finger, not even a single hair will be damaged. On the other hand, "coming to life" means nothing but "losing your body and life"; that is, it's the same as dying. What is "coming to life" after all? It means that there is nothing within yourself; truly, there is not one thing. If you completely kill yourself (that is, if you "die the great death"), you inevitably come back to life (you "come to great life"). When you revive, you see that the "substance" of yourself is completely zero... If there's still something left, it's not a real "coming-to-life." If you die "the great death" and observe your true self closely, you must admit that "you've lost your body and life," for there's nothing there. Therefore, "dying" and "coming to life" are two aspects of one and the same thing. You may have been unable to see your true self because of your delusions which have existed for kalpas; then we'd like you to "die" once and for all in order to encounter your true self. If you once die and vanish completely, you return to life all at once.

**The supreme one way can't be transmitted even by the thousand holy ones.** The "supreme one way" means the highest realm of the real fact. This can never be communicated even by the thousand holy ones. There are a countless number of buddhas, as the title of one sutra – "Three Thousand Buddha Names" – indicates. But no matter how many buddhas have gathered together, they haven't been able to transmit this "one way." The taste of tea must be appreciated personally; the same is true with these facts concerning dying and living. The dharma is nothing you can convey to other people.

However, some of you may wonder why then there is such a phrase as "the transmission of mind through mind" [*ishin-denshin*]. What that describes is often compared to "pouring water out of one vessel into another." For instance, I drink tea and then invite Mr. Koike, "Please have some tea." He drinks it. Then I say, "Now you know how this tea tastes." He answers, "Yes, now I know it." This process is simply called "transmission of mind through mind."

But – as sometimes happens – if the tea doesn't have an authentic quality, I drink the unauthentic tea and my guest must taste it as well. In that case there is a danger that something false is transmitted as something authentic. Anyhow, as this comparison may show, you can't transmit the ultimate truth of the real fact to anyone; you can't learn it from anyone either. The only way to know it is to experience it by yourself.

But often it happens that **practitioners who labor for forms are like monkeys trying to grasp reflections.** Many people who want to learn Zen have a hard time chasing after the forms – not the experience of mind, but concepts produced by the human brain – but they are like monkeys which want to catch the reflection of the moon on the water. Running after concepts without substance will never lead you to the real fact.

**Just tell me, if it can't be transmitted, why are there so many entangling koans?**

**Those who have an eye to see, let them see!** Why are there so many koans, if the true reality is intransmissible? So the Instruction asks whether or not the true reality could be transmitted through koans at all. But, as I have already mentioned, the koans "transmit" nothing. Koans are there for you to appreciate. They are means for you to personally taste the "tea" with. Now here is one koan; if your spiritual eye is open, look well into it!

*On the Case:*

**A monk asked Tôzan, "What is Buddha?" Tôzan said, "Masagin!"** This is a very famous koan and appears also as Case 18 of the *Mumonkan*. Master Tôzan here is not Master Tôzan Ryôkai, the founder of the Soto School, but Master Tôzan Shusho, a dharma successor of Great Master Unmon.

Now a monk asked, "I hear so many times about Buddha. But what's that anyway?" Well, what is Buddha? Someone gave a very sly answer: Buddha is Buddha [*hotoke* in Japanese] because, with him, what is tied up is "loosened" [*hodokete-iru*]. So this definition says that Buddha is someone who is entirely free, like a rope whose knot is now completely loosened, or hard ice which has now melted back into water and changes freely into any shape – but this is no more than a clever piece of logic!

The monk in the Case has read about the Buddha in sutras, so he asks a question, "What is the true Buddha?" At that time Master Tôzan was weighing *ma* in the kitchen, which means either flax or sesame; it hardly matters which of the two it actually was. Tôzan's answer was "*Masagin!*" – "three *kin* of *ma*!" (*Kin* is a unit of weight; the entire phrase is traditionally pronounced "*Masagin*" and not "*Ma-san-gin*," which grammatically would be more correct). Some people say that since each object is Buddha, Tôzan answered that three *kin* of sesame/flax is also Buddha. This is absolutely off the mark. Why? Because it's only the fact of *Masagin!* Tôzan simply threw out his *Masagin!* The "Verse" to Case 18 of the *Mumonkan* ("Tôzan's '*Masagin*'") says, "*Masagin* juts forth!" This is the point you must truly appreciate.

Let's look briefly at the "Comments" by Master Engo on this Case, relating how Master Tôzan first met Great Master Unmon (the same story is found in Case 15 "Tôzan's Sixty Blows" of the *Mumonkan*). First Unmon asks, "Where have you come from?" Tôzan answers, "From Sado." Unmon: "Where did you spend your summer?" (which means: where did you pass the summer training period?) Tôzan: "At Hôzuji Temple in Konan [south of the lake]." Unmon: "When did you leave there?" Tôzan: "The 25th of August." When the dialogue came to this point, Unmon told Tôzan very harshly, "I spare you sixty blows." This means: "Although you should be hit sixty times, I will spare you the blows, because that would be an insult to my stick. You aren't even worthy of being hit." That is, although Tôzan has answered correctly, it has been shown that he has no eye of enlightenment; he's simply been chit-chatting. His severe criticism came because of this. But Tôzan couldn't understand why he had been scolded; it

troubled him so much that he was unable to sleep that night. Next day he begged for a dokusan and asked the master, "Yesterday you harshly scolded me that I wasn't even worth sixty blows. What was wrong with me?" Then Unmon said, "You rice bag! Have you been wandering about like that, now west of the river, now south of the lake?" ("East of the river and south of the lake" designates the areas where numerous Zen masters resided from of old.) You are nothing but a shit bag, devouring rice all the time! You are simply goofing around over there and over here, shame on you! (This second scolding was apparently much sharper than that of the day before.) Hearing this, however, Tōzan came to a great enlightenment. We can simply say that Tōzan's "time" was ripe enough then for this breakthrough. Even if we say or hear the same words, we can never say that the same thing would surely happen to us. But Tōzan could say, "I got it!" Upon realizing he said something truly great, "One day I'll go to a no-man's place and make a hermitage there. I'll store no rice corns nor will I plant any vegetables (I won't worry about food). But I'll receive many outstanding monks who'll come to meet me, and guide each of them to enlightenment. I'll eradicate all their delusive thoughts and concepts and bring their minds back to their original nakedness. I'll reduce them to their true state of total nothing-ness (that's it!), making 'persons of no matter' [*buji no hito*] out of them." This bold talk surprised Unmon, who remarked, "You're as small as a coconut, but you surely are something of a braggart!"

Such is the anecdote revealing the great caliber of Master Tōzan Shuso. That's why he could respond to the question "What is Buddha?" with his "*Masagin!*"

Such an answer would be impossible without a truly great enlightenment. "*Masagin!*" has no meaning. It doesn't say that three *kin* of flax or sesame are Buddha. Only: "*Masagin!*" What's the difference between this and "Muuuu!" How is it different from WHACK!<sup>1</sup> or "Kaatz!" If you think even a bit in your head, you are ruined. Your response should be, "Yeah, so it was!" Savor well this "*Masagin!*"

### *On the Verse:*

**The Golden Raven is quick, the Jade Rabbit is swift.** "The Golden Raven" means the sun, since the Chinese thought that a three-legged golden crow lived in the sun; "the Jade Rabbit" refers to the moon, as a rabbit was believed to be making rice cakes [*mochi*] on the moon. To be "quick" and "swift" means that they run rapidly. This is normally understood as indicating how instantaneously the answer "*Masagin!*" followed the question "What is Buddha?" – as fast as lightning. In his *Soliloquy on the Blue Cliff Record* Yasutani Haku'un Roshi also says, "Time flies like an arrow; a flash of lightning – a sparking flint!" Surely the sun and the moon fly quickly. But "quickness" isn't always what we visually associate with the sun and the moon. Modern astronomy maintains that they are moving at extremely high speeds, but as we

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<sup>1</sup> The Roshi strikes the lectern.

observe them with our own eyes, they seem to be circling around us rather slowly; it doesn't much seem to be "a flash of lightning – a sparking flint!" In my view, the "sun" and the "moon" are enough to represent "*Masagin*." That they are "quick" and "swift" is nothing more than a figure of speech. This view is certainly not a very common one, but at least lida Tōin Rōshi interprets the verse as I do. Among Master Dōgen's phrases we read: "Every morning the sun rises in the east, every night the moon sets in the west." I believe that "the Gold Raven is quick, the Jade Rabbit is swift" could well be replaced by this sentence. This surely represents a real "*Masagin*," the true fact. Master Engo also pays little attention to "rapid" and "swift" when he comments on the verse: "It is said at the beginning, 'The Golden Raven is quick, the Jade Rabbit is swift.' It's not all different from Tōzan's answering with his '*Masagin*!' The sun rises and the moon sets. Day after day it is like this..."

**Is there any sloppiness in the marvelous response?** The wonderful response "Masagin!" Tōzan spontaneously gave to the question "What is Buddha?" is by no means a haphazard answer; it sprang out of his profound Zen experience.

**If you see Tōzan as demonstrating something to meet his student, you are a lame and blind turtle falling into an open gorge.** In the Verse to the Case "The Oak Tree in the Garden" [Case 37] of the *Mumonkan* it is said, "Words do not express the fact, speech doesn't match the student." They say Mumon borrowed this line from our Master Tōzan Shuso. It breathes the same spirit: Words and concepts are not the real fact. Zen masters don't vary their teaching method, applying this technique for student A, that technique for student B. They are constantly manifesting the real thing to their students, even if their "speech does not match the student." It's not the same as ordinary school education where we ought to treat grade school kids as grade school kids, college students as college students, thus "matching" the respective student by applying each time a different pedagogic principle.

If you conceptually observe Tōzan's "*Masagin*," you are totally in the wrong. In other words, if you understand "Masagin" as if the word were expressing some truth, or as if it were a word specially given to a man of high aspiration with a pedagogic aim, you would completely miss the point. Just like a "lame and blind turtle" falling into a deep gorge, and being unable to climb back, you lose all freedom of movement if you understand "Masagin" with your concepts and thoughts.

**Blossom are abundant, the foliage is colorful; bamboo in the south, trees in the north.** These lines have a historical background. Once a monk asked Master Chimon Kōso<sup>2</sup> about our present koan, saying, "What is the meaning of Master Tōzan's answering '*Masagin*'?" Then Master Chimon answered, "Blossoms are abundant, the foliage is colorful." Spring blossoms are blooming in abundance, the autumn leaves are bright all over. Also in our zendo, "blossoms are abundant, the foliage is full of color," you know. Do you understand? If you think, "Oh, you mean the beautiful flowers in front of the Buddha altar!", you are wrong. Master Chimon

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<sup>2</sup> Master Setchō's teacher.

meant to say, "'Blossoms' are all over, 'Masagin' is all over, do you see that?" But the monk said, "No, I don't understand." Then Chimon said, "Bamboo in the south, trees in the north." After all, they all mean the same thing. It's meaningless to think conceptually that the region to the south of the River Yangtze was famous for bamboo, while the area north of the river was full of trees.

**Therefore I think of Chôkei and Official Rikukô, who could say, "Laugh! Don't cry!"**

**Ha!** This also has a historical background, which could be summarized as follows: Official Rikukô, a high government official ("inspector") in Sen Province, was a lay practitioner of Zen. He was a disciple of Master Nansen and a outstanding Zen personage, appearing also in Case 40 of the *Hekiganroku* ("Nansen and a Bunch of Flowers"). When Master Nansen passed away, Official Rikukô laughed loudly at the funeral, "Ha, ha, ha, ha!" in front of the altar. A temple priest heard it and said to him, "What insolence! This is the funeral of your own master. You are supposed to mourn and cry; how inappropriate it is to laugh! Why in the world did you laugh?" Then Official Rikukô said to the priest, "Say something. If what you say pleases me, I'll cry." But the priest couldn't say anything. Then Rikukô cried bitterly, "Alas, alas! My master is gone, gone at last to a distant place! Ah! ah!" Why did he laugh, at first? When he laughed the whole universe was the laughing; when he wailed, the whole universe was the wailing. The universe full of laughter was the best prayer for the deceased master. When I die, I want you too to laugh loudly to bid me farewell .... Later Chôkei heard the story and said, "That priest's eye is blind. On such an occasion you should laugh instead of cry." It is to this remark that our present line in the Verse alludes. Chôkei said something nice, "You should laugh instead of cry." There are many ways to observe this sentence, but the gist of it is that if you truly understand "Masagin," you'll clearly understand "Blossom are abundant, the foliage is colorful; bamboo in the north, trees in the south." You'll also clearly see "the sun" and "the moon." Then why not laugh loudly? There isn't any reason to cry. Laugh, laugh, fill the whole universe with laughter!