

CASE 37

Banzan's "Not One  
Thing in the Three Realms"



By Yamada Kôun

*Instruction:*

It is futile to brood over the swiftest action that could catch the lightning; when the roaring thunder assails from the sky, you hardly have time to cover your ears. The scarlet banner flutters over the head; the twin swords are whirling behind the ears. If you are not equipped with an able eye and swift hands, how could you match that person? Some people lower their heads and keep pondering, trying to figure it out with their delusive thinking. They scarcely know that they are seeing countless ghosts around the skull. Now, tell me, if someone does not fall into delusive thinking, or get caught up in gain or loss, having a very clear understanding of the matter, how will you face such a person? I will try to show you an example, look!

*Case:*

Banzan, giving instruction, said, "In the three Realms, there is not one thing. Where should we seek the mind?"

*Verse:*

In the three Realms, there is not one thing.  
Where should we seek the mind?  
The white clouds make a covering,  
The flowing spring turns into a lute.  
One tune, two tunes – there is no one who understands.  
The rain has passed, and the autumn waters are deep in the evening moat.

There is very little time left now until the end of this sesshin. In his commentary on Case 41 (Jôshû's Great Death) of the *Hekiganroku*, Haku'un Roshi says the following:

*"The most important part of the sesshin is toward the end. Those who have determined to come to resolution here and now, exert your efforts till the very last! But don't stiffen up – either your spirit or your body!"* Very often your body gets stiff. You are told not to apply physical strength, but if you get really serious, you tend to concentrate your strength on the hands and so the shoulders get stiff. However, this shouldn't happen. Sit in a

composed manner – yet with a mind fully alert. If you feel you are sitting in a composed way, but if your upper torso is slumping forward, it is no good. Keep your spine perfectly straight, with no physical strength concentrated in any part of your body.

*"Some say, 'When I do my Mu seriously, Mu gradually disappears ...' Stupid! Forget that kind of nonsense, don't let anything come into your head, just keep your Muuuuuu!"* Often you get concerned with how you are doing: Am I breathing out correctly? Is my posture really proper? – Well, in this last phase, in the thick of the battle, so to speak, such concerns shouldn't matter at all. It's like sword-fighting [*kendō*]: while you are in the *dōjō* waving a bamboo sword, you can be concerned with the form, bodily position, and the like, but once in a real battle where the fighting is at its thickest, concerns about form, etc. drop off entirely; you just go on swinging and swinging like a mad person. This stage of the *sesshin* is a comparable situation. You don't need to worry about bodily form and so forth at all. Go, wield your sword like a lunatic!

*"If you are dead serious, how could you say, 'I'm tired'? At this point there should be no such thing as 'I'm tired.' If you are so absorbed that you don't know whether it is morning or evening, that's the way to go."* Truly, if you are really in your practice, you come to forget what time it is or what day it is today.

*"Imagine how you are when doing something you are really fond of, when you are utterly absorbed in doing it. Then you can guess what I mean,"* says Haku'un Roshi.

So we come to our Case "Not One Thing in the three Realms" with Master Hōshaku Banzan.

### ***On the Instruction:***

**It is futile to brood over the swiftest action that could catch the lightning; when the roaring thunder assails from the sky, you hardly have time to cover your ears.** This refers to a Zen master's extremely agile action, especially in view of Master Banzan. "The swiftest action that could catch the lightning" implies an extraordinarily speedy action that could even get hold of the lightning. "It is futile to brood over" means that if you try to use your intellect, you'll never be able to grasp it. It's a useless enterprise to use your head and try to comprehend an action as swift as lightning, simply because it defies all imagination. An utterance like "In the Three Worlds, there is not one thing" as in today's koan springs suddenly out of nowhere. This "springing out" – Zap! – is "an action that could grasp the lightning." Just like an image appearing in a mirror, there is hardly any lapse of time. If you activate your reasoning, you need time, but a mirror wouldn't need any time at all to form the image – like in a flash. When Master Banzan makes an utterance, you should think of it as a mirror making an utterance. Because he has such a clear grasp of the essential World, whatever he says comes out just like that – zap! – , so there's no way you could get hold of it. Trying to understand it with your intellect is nothing but "much pain with no gain" – "it is futile to brood over it."

"When the roaring thunder assails from the sky, you hardly have time to cover your ears." This sentence means that, when the thunder is really booming all over the sky, you have no time to plug your ears. This is another allusion to the swiftness of the action – once

again, in reference to Master Banzan.

**The scarlet banner flutters over the head; the twin swords are whirling behind the ears.** Here's another reference to a Zen master. "The scarlet banner flutters over the head" indicates the red flag hoisted above in order to announce the victory of the battle, whereas the loser, begging for peace, would unfurl a white one. This statement means that the Zen master has been showing the red flag as a sign of victory right from the start. "The twin swords are whirling behind the ears" means that the master is brandishing two swords behind his ears so that you can't approach him. Haku'un Roshi favors this interpretation, whereas another master understands the phrase to the effect that the sword holder is pressing the sword onto your neck, so that he could chop your neck off at any moment. In either case, such a formidable person is unapproachable for anyone.

Faced with such a person, **if you are not equipped with an able eye and swift hands, how could you match that person?** "An able eye" means that you are able to understand the Dharma with a clear eye and to stand up to the Master on equal terms. "Swift hands" means you are able to activate your power in no time at all. Let the master Zap! and you respond Wham! or if the master Whams!, Zap! is your immediate reply. If you are not equipped with the ability to respond to the situation instantaneously, "how could you match" him? In other words, face to face with a really great master, you ought to possess as clear a vision and as great a power as the master does; otherwise, you can't really deal with him, since your failure is inevitable.

However, on the practitioners' side: **Some people lower their heads and keep pondering, trying to figure it out with their delusive thinking. They scarcely know that they are seeing countless ghosts around the skull.** "Some people lower their heads and keep pondering." When you come to dokusan in this state of "lowering your head" and linger in thought, it is a problem, because time is simply wasted. When you come to dokusan, you must have something precise to say. If you have nothing to say, that's all right too, but say clearly, "I have nothing to say." At any rate, it's not good making your brains squirm with your head bent down. To "try to figure it out with their delusive thinking" means to think this way and that way, and endeavor to fabricate a conclusion. "They scarcely know..." means that practitioners themselves are not aware that they are doing it. Skulls have neither skin nor flesh and they look quite neat – for example, the skull of some animals in a museum. But looking straight into a skull you tend to feel as if the soul or something were coming out of it. There really is nothing there, but you get some eerie feeling that there could be something – so you fancy all sorts of things. This is nothing but delusive thinking. This is what is meant by "seeing countless ghosts around the skulls". The Zen practitioner is not aware of it, but she or he is bringing up a numberless host of delusive concepts within his or her head. This remark envisages anyone who is in the midst of Zen practice.

**Now, tell me, if someone does not fall into delusive thinking, or get caught up in gain or loss, having a very clear understanding of the matter, how will you face such a person? I will try to show you an example, look!** "If someone does not fall into delusive thinking" means that you cease to use your head to think about this or that. Not "to get caught up in gain or loss" means to go beyond the duality of yes-and-no or good-and-bad. To "have a very

clear understanding of the matter" means to be clearly enlightened. So, suppose someone has stopped using the head in thinking, has gone beyond any dualistic opposition, and has been equipped with an eye of clear realization that enables the person to say, "This is *it*"; if such a person should appear, how would you deal with him or her? In order to give a concrete example of such a case, Master Banzan is introduced

[Let me speak a little about the Dharma line of Banzan.] Master Banzan Hōshaku<sup>1</sup> is a Dharma successor of Master Baso Dōitsu. His sole Dharma successor is Master Fuke Chinshū<sup>2</sup> who appears frequently in the *Rinzairoku* [Collection of the Sayings of Rinzai]. When Master Banzan was nearing death, he gathered his disciples and said to them, "I will not live much longer. Is there anyone who can draw my likeness and bring it to me?" So, they tried to draw the picture of their master and handed in their attempts to him, but they were all scolded: "That's not what I meant!" Then Fuke came forth and said, "I have one." The master said, "If so, bring it out." At that, Fuke made a somersault and left the room. Seeing this, Master Banzan commented, "There's a crazy fellow for you. One day he will lead people making somersaults or standing on his head." Now, look very closely and see why making a somersault and leaving the room is the perfect likeness of Master Banzan.

This Master Fuke is a very interesting person and was even regarded by some as a real lunatic. Let me tell you a little about him from the *Rinzairoku*: "Fuke always went around the town ringing a bell and saying, 'If a clear-headed one comes, a clear-headed blow; if a dull-witted head comes, a dull-witted blow. If they come from all directions, I will give them blows like a whirlwind; if they come from nowhere, I will give them continuous blows' ...etc." He certainly was a strange fellow.

At another time the same Fuke bought a coffin and, wearing the monk's robe received from Master Rinzai, he carried the coffin and walked around the town, telling people, "I am going to the Eastern Gate of the town and I will die there." The people became curious and raced to follow him, whereupon he said, "No, I've changed my mind. Tomorrow I will go to the Western Gate instead to die there." And so, the next day people gathered to watch him, but again he said, "Not today. I have changed my mind. Tomorrow I'll go to the Northern Gate to die." But on the following day there were only a few people who came to watch him. In this way on the fourth day he went to the Southern Gate. This time there was no one who came. Then out of the gate he went, entered the coffin by himself, and asked a passerby to pound in the nails of its lid. This event soon became the talk of the town. Many people gathered around, but when they opened the lid there was no corpse there, only the sound of Fuke's bell ringing clearly in the air.

Eventually, there arose the Fuke Sect as a branch of the Rinzai Sect. Their distinct trait is saving people through music. The monks of this sect are the so-called *komusō* [literally: "monks of nothingness"] and they play the bamboo flute [*shakuhachi*] as they wander along. Anyway, Master Fuke is the only Dharma successor of Master Banzan, and there is no record of any other disciple having inherited his Dharma.

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<sup>1</sup> Dates of birth/death unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Dates of birth/death also unknown.

*On the Case:*

**Banzan, giving instruction, said, "In the three Realms, there is not one thing. Where should we seek the mind?"** This is what Banzan said one day, as he went to the Zen hall and preached to the assembly. The "three Realms" refers to the Realm of desire [*yokkai*], that of form [*shiki-kai*], and that of no-form [*mushiki-kai*]. The Realm of desire is this common world we now live in. It's named this way because our world is made up of a bundle of desires, with people who covet anything and everything. The Realms of form and of no-form are invisible worlds. Yes, there *are* realms that are invisible to our eyes. The Realm of form cannot be seen, but it's probably made up of very minute, fine material elements. Often people talk about "psychic phenomena," and the Realm of form refers to a world of a similar dimension. Anyway, it is a world with a certain boundary. If this "boundary" disappears, there is only spirit, then we are in the Realm of no-form. However, all three of these Realms are worlds of delusions.

Surveying these three Realms, Master Banzan said, "There is not one thing."

The original term for "thing" here is *dharma*. This term can mean "thing" or "phenomenon" too because a thing/phenomenon is governed by the Law of cause and effect and comes about as such. If you encounter in Buddhist literature (or Zen literature) the word "dharma," you must remember that it has the twofold meaning of "true Law" as well as "thing/phenomenon." And this "dharma" can be further specified either as "form-dharma" [*shiki-hō*] or as "mind-dharma" [*shin-hō*]. "Form-dharma" means some thing/phenomenon that has a form. Even in the "Realm of form" – although not this-worldly thing, but nevertheless – some "thing," some "material" is there. The "mind-dharma," on the other hand, refers to our mind or "heart-mind" [*kokoro*]. Although our *kokoro* has no particular shape, it changes constantly [as a phenomenon]; for example, it becomes sad or it becomes glad.

Now, what's maintained here is that there is neither "form-dharma" nor "mind-dharma." There's nothing at all to perceive. "In the three Realms, there is not one thing [*sangai-muhō*]" refers to the world of Mu, that world where there is "not a speck of cloud to obstruct the eyes [*manakoni sayuru kumonoha mo nashi*]".

And in that world, "where shall we seek the mind?" Banzan says, "In the three Realms, there is not one thing" – yet there is this *someone* who says, "In the three Realms, there is not one thing"! When you ask who that could be, that is what we call our *mind*. But where on earth is that "mind"? –Master Banzan thrusts out this question.

Now you have to look very carefully at this phrase: "In the three Realms there is not one thing." In the Sutra *Hannya-shingyō*, it is said, "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness nothing but form." Therefore, "form" *is* "emptiness." So, when you are told to show the world of emptiness, you bring out the world of form. It's extremely difficult to grasp clearly that the world of form is the world of emptiness *itself*. You must pound it into your head very well.

"In the three Realms, not one thing" – can you show it to me? Bring out that thing you call "mind"! How would you do it? This is a question to be handled in the dokusan room.

Putting it straightforwardly, if you think that mind and dharma, mind and form are

distinct and separate from each other, you are mistaken. Master Banzan asks that question in order to ensnare you. Thing and mind are originally one, but we cannot help thinking of them as being two separate and distinct entities. If someone says, "Bring out the mind," you would normally answer, "I can't, because the mind has no form, no shape." However, that mind, that which *is* nothing, is form itself. If you have grasped clearly that emptiness as such is form, then when you are asked, "Bring out the mind," you can immediately answer, "This!"<sup>3</sup>. In this case, there seems to be the "mind" inside this [belly], so it may seem to be easy to "bring it out." But: "Bring out the mind" – "Cherry tree!" Can you respond like this immediately? They are all one. But if you think about the "one"-ness and try to bring out that "one," you'll fail. That's not "an action that could catch the lightning," like an image that reflects immediately upon the mirror. Even if it's something thought out in a computer-like mind and comes out in a split second – which may seem quick enough – that won't do either because it still takes a bit of time. You can't compare this at all with the image reflected in the mirror that comes out with the speed of light. Only when it comes out like this – Zap! – is it the action grasping the lightning bolt. So, if you are told to bring out "In the three Realms, there's not one thing," you must view that command from this perspective.

The first time I dealt with this koan in dokusan was at Engaku-ji in Kamakura under Asahina Sôgen Roshi, more than two decades ago. It would be interesting to look over the notes I took of that dokusan, but going into them wouldn't benefit you at all, so I'll skip it. It would amount to what I've just explained anyway: mind and material are not two separate and distinct entities. If you say, "There is surely the fact of 'nothingness,' but I cannot bring it out, no matter how hard I try," that's because you have realized the matter only halfway.

*On the Verse:*

**In the three Realms, there is not one thing. Where should we seek the mind?** Here Setchô cites directly from Banzan's words: "Bring out that 'In the three Realms, not one thing' for me." – "Where shall we seek the mind?" In fact, "In the three Realms, not one thing" [*sangai-muhô*] is nothing but the "mind." It has no shape, no form. This is the world of Mu. Setchô versifies it in the following lines:

**The white clouds make a covering, the flowing spring turns into a lute. One tune, two tunes – there is no one who understands.** The white clouds are an umbrella, a hat; the rivers flowing with a gushing sound form the sound of a lute. These lines are depicting the entire universe, so the poet is talking on quite a grand scale.

Some commentators say that the "three Realms" refer to the Realms of desire, form, and no-form, but here they can be interpreted as referring to the entire universe. Haku'un Yasutani Roshi, on the other hand, takes "the three Realms" to imply the "three poisons" of greed, anger and folly. ("Greed" is a bundle of desires, "anger" is irritation and wrath, and "folly" is an attachment to something – as when you cling to money, for example – and is deeper-rooted than just greed.) In short, there are commentators who take the "three Realms" to mean the entire universe and others who take it to mean the "three poisons." In Setchô's verse it is the former meaning that is taken.

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<sup>3</sup> Striking his belly.

So, "White clouds form a covering, the flowing waters make a lute" – it certainly is a grandiose vision.

From times of old there have been those who wrote verses from a grand point of view. For example:

"Sleeping with Mt. Fuji as a pillow,  
My feet extend to the end of the Plain of Musashino<sup>4</sup>."

or:

"Balling up heaven and earth into one lump of cake  
And gulping it in one breath –  
Quite an easy task for my throat indeed."

Or, on an even larger scale:

"The fellow who balls up heaven and earth into one lump of cake  
And gulps it in one breath,  
I blew away with the tip of a hair in my nostrils."

It seems to go on without limit!

Next: "One tune, two tunes – there is no one who understands." There is no one at all who is able to appreciate the sound of the "lute" composed of the rustling waters. What is this tune that's being played here? In fact, each and every thing is *it*, but there's no one who understands it.

**The rain has passed, and the autumn waters are deep in the evening moat.** I believe Setchô himself is bringing out one such tune for us to hear. When the rain has fallen in the darkness of night, the waters of a moat or a pond have richly increased. The word "moat" [*tô*] means a pond, but not a round one, but a square one, like a moat around a Japanese castle. At any rate: At the end of the rainy spell, the waters of a moat are full and deep... I can't explain it any further in words. And that's doubtless one "tune."

There's a koan by Master Tôzan Gohon, "Non-sentient Beings Preach the Dharma." Anyone who can hear the non-sentient beings preach the Dharma can also hear this "one tune, two tunes." But, if you have many bundles of dirt or garbage in your head you cannot hear this music. When everything disappears, then every thing, each and every individual thing, can be heard playing the tune of "Non-sentient beings preach the Dharma." And, as I said above, one of these tunes is "The rain has passed, and the autumn waters are deep in the evening moat." I urge everyone here to make up his or her own "one tune, two tunes."

This "tune" doesn't necessarily have to be sound; every single thing in this entire universe is playing the music of "one tune, two tunes." Even right here it is playing this "one tune," but if I speak too much, your practice in the dokusan room will be hindered. But you usually forget very soon what you've heard, or else you don't notice what is being said. Someone came to me and said, "Roshi, is it all right to say practically everything that way?"

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<sup>4</sup> The large plateau east of the Tokyo area.

Those who can understand my speech tend to worry about what I say. But when it comes to dokusan, all that has been said is of no practical help at all. It's a strange thing, isn't it?

"Last night's rain knocked off so many ginkgo leaves, didn't it?" "The persimmons are turning a nice color now...." Everything is "one tune, two tunes." To speak more radically, "The pillar is vertical!" or "The pillar!" – each of these is "one tune, two tunes."

"One tune, two tunes – there is no one who understands."