

CASE 33

Sanshō's Golden Scales

By Yamada Kōun



Instruction:

Meeting the strong, be weak; meeting the soft, be hard.
If both are robust and smite each other, there will surely be a wound.
Tell me, how do you meet your foe without collision?

Case:

Sanshō asked Seppō, "When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?" Seppō said, "I will tell you when you have passed through the net." Sanshō said, "A great Zen master with 1500 disciples doesn't know how to speak." Seppō said, "The old monk is just too busy with temple affairs."

Verse:

When the carp first ascends the three tiers of waterfalls, the heavens send
clouds and thunder to accompany him;
Bravely leaping and vigorously jumping, he shows his great function.
With his tail burnt up [and turning into a dragon], he clearly surmounts the Gates
of Yu;
The magnificent fish will never be thrown into a vinegar pot.
An old matured man does not startle other people;
Accustomed to meeting great foes he has no fear from the beginning.
Fluttering like a pinwheel of five ounces,
As a massive mountain, far more than a thousand tons.
Famed over the four oceans—who could be his peer?
He stands alone, never to be moved by the eight winds blowing.

On the Instruction:

This same koan also appears as Case 49 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. Since the way of appreciating and treating the koan is slightly different in the two versions, it would be helpful

to compare them. This is a mondo (Zen exchange) between Sanshō and Seppō. Let's look at the Instruction.

Meeting the strong, be weak; meeting the soft, be hard. A truly accomplished Zen person, that is, a person who has truly plumbed the depths of the way, a person of a ripened state of consciousness, will meet a strong attack with weakness. On the other hand, if the other person comes on softly, you respond with strength. The true Zen person must be able to do this with perfect freedom. Most people, if faced with a strong opponent, will tend to also come out strongly.

If both are robust and smite each other, there will surely be a wound. In other words, if the two opponents both come on strongly, someone is bound to get hurt, perhaps even both of them. But a truly accomplished person will be able to receive a strong attack with mildness and softness, like the wind blowing through the willow. However, I'm not saying that only soft is OK. If the other party comes on softly, you must have the ability to respond with strength. That's the whole principle of judo or aikido. In karate, for example (which evidently came originally from Okinawa) you meet force with force. In judo, however, you have the "soft way" (the actual meaning of the word "jūdō"), and when the opponent comes on strongly you use the strength of the opponent to do a turnabout and then throw him. If the opponent attacks you with force you use that force so that the other person falls down as the result of his own force. This is the essence of judo. The same holds for kendo or swordsmanship in the Japanese tradition. When you meet each other head on and the opponent takes a step forward, you take a step backwards. If you move forward, the other person withdraws. That's the kind of spirit and concentration you find in a standoff between two masters. If both were to come on strong in an attack, both would end up getting hurt probably. If you want to cause your opponent to fall without getting hurt yourself, you have to respond with softness when the opponent comes on strong and with strength if the other person comes on softly. This type of fighting spirit and concentration is essential, although not easy to attain.

To respond with softness toward strength is very hard to do. If iron strikes against iron, sparks are sure to fly. But if iron meets with tofu bean curd, what will happen? No sparks will fly. There's an interesting story in this connection concerning the Shinto saint Kurozumi Munetada the founder of the so-called *Kurozumi Teaching* (Kurozumi-kyō, a branch of Shintoism). He was a truly outstanding person. If you have a chance you should read the book he authored.¹ He is a person who clearly saw through the world of Mu, although in his language he refers to it as Ameterasu Ookami. Nevertheless, he clearly realized the satori of Zen. One day he was engaged in a discussion with a samurai which concerned the following question: If a bell is hit by tofu bean curd, is there a sound or not? Kurozumi said that if a bell

¹ English books on the subject include: *The Living Way: Stories of Kurozumi Munetada, a Shinto Founder* (Alta Mira Press, U.S. (June 2000).

and tofu hit each other, there's probably no sound. The samurai disagreed, and a discussion ensued. At some point the samurai prodded Kurozumi with the question, "Do you really think it doesn't make a sound?" and this time Kurozumi said, "No, it makes a sound." It takes a real master to be able to react like this. If each is simply trying to have his way, someone ends up getting hurt.

Tell me, how do you meet your foe without collision? How do you bring order to things without a standoff and collision? An example will now be given and we should look carefully.

On the Case:

Sanshō asked Seppō, "When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?" Sanshō, as you might know, was the sole dharma heir of Rinzai Daishi. Just prior to Rinzai's passing, Sanshō was at his side. Rinzai said, "After my death, do not destroy our essence of true Dharma."

Sanshō said, "Who would dare to destroy the essence of the true Dharma of Your Reverence?"

Rinzai said, "If someone asks you about it, how will you respond?" (This was a final checking question).

Sanshō instantly shouted, "Katsu!"

Rinzai was no doubt very happy on hearing this.

Rinzai said, "Who knows that my essence of true Dharma has been destroyed by this blind donkey?"

It might be a bit difficult at first blush to know what's going on here. As long as there is anything like an "essence of a true Dharma", it is not the genuine article. From the standpoint of the first principle, of course, even if it's a concept it's OK. But with his shout of "Kaaatsu!" Sanshō blows everything away and no concepts remain. Rinzai realized this and knew that this was truly inheriting his dharma. In the world of Buddhism concepts abound, all the product of intellectual thinking. Unless you sweep those concepts away, you will remain unable to grasp the real thing. Recall Mumon's words in Case 1 of the *Gateless Gate*: "If you meet a Buddha, you will kill him; if you meet an ancient Zen Master, you will kill him." He's telling us that we have to cut away all concepts of Buddha. Sanshō, with his great cry of "kaatsu!," also sweeps away all concepts of "the essence of the true Dharma." He had a very clear Zen understanding. Following Rinzai's passing, Sanshō went on pilgrimages to meet outstanding masters and engaged in Zen exchanges with them to polish his own state of consciousness. This koan relates an exchange he had with Seppō upon visiting the latter's temple. Seppō appears in any number of koans and was no doubt quite advanced in years at the time of this exchange. He was probably more than 80 years old. As for Sanshō, as far as I can surmise by perusing this koan, he was probably in his 30's or already pushing 40 at the time of the encounter. There is no doubting that he was quite clear in his Zen realization. The ancients were truly great! When

Dōgen Zenji returned to Japan from China upon inheriting the dharma of Nyojō Zenji, he was only 29. There is his famous saying upon returning: “I return home with empty hands.” Immediately after his return he authored the *Fukanzazengi* (Universal Recommendation of Zazen). When we read that text, we are amazed that a mere youth of 29 years could pen such a work. As mentioned, Sanshō was no doubt in his thirties at the time of this exchange, although this is merely my conjecture and by no means proven historically. At any rate, Sanshō came to visit Seppō and spoke as follows: “When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?”

A “net” is used to catch fish. We are dealing here with a fish that has bitten through that net and obtained its freedom. A “fish with golden scales” means a truly large and splendid fish. What is the net? It is our concepts and ideas. Sanshō means someone who has eliminated all concepts, including ideas of Buddha or Dharma and Buddhism. He asks Seppō how he will deal with him in asking how it will be fed. Needless to mention, Sanshō is referring to himself. Such a question is known in Zen as *kenjumon* (“question testing the host”). The question is posed with the intention of seeing how the other person will respond. Although he does not say it outright, Sanshō says in effect: “I have eliminated all concepts, how will you deal with me?” In terms of kendo or swordsmanship this is the stance in which one holds one’s sword over one’s head, poised for attack. How does Seppō respond?

Seppō said, “I will tell you when you have passed through the net.” Sanshō’s first statement assumes that he has already passed through the net, but Seppō does him one better in telling him that he’ll discuss the matter when he passes through the net! This, too, is holding your sword high over your head (jap, *daijōdan*). This could go on, with each outdoing the other, ever upward. Here is Sanshō’s reply:

Sanshō said, “A great Zen master with 1500 disciples doesn't know how to speak.” He says in effect: “Master Seppō, I have heard that you are a great master with 1,500 disciples and for this reason I came to visit you. But on meeting you I find that you do not even know how to conduct a Zen exchange.” Being still young, Sanshō immediately attempts to go beyond Seppō with his reply. How does Seppō respond?

Seppō said, “The old monk is just too busy with temple affairs.” In other words, “I’m so busy these days with this and that that I don’t have the time to spend with you. I hope you’ll excuse me.” He seems to be retreating but such strength is hard to come by. You have to get older for such strength to appear. I’m not just saying so because I myself am growing old! Please recall the words of Yamamoto Gempō Roshi that I often cite. “Better than your 60’s is your 70’s, better than your 70’s is your 80’s, better than your 80’s is your 90’s, better than your 90’s is after you die.” It’s only when you grow old that you become truly free. There are samples of Gempō Roshi’s calligraphy among treasures on store at Ryūtakuji Temple in Mishima. It consists of a couplet written in large characters. I don’t know how old he was when he wrote it, but it’s a truly wonderful sample of his calligraphy. I often feel strongly that I would love to be able to write like that. The couplet consists of two lines from a poem by the

Chinese poet Wang Wei:

I walk to where the waters end/And sit and watch the clouds arise.

Yamamoto Gempō Roshi evidently told people when he was over ninety years old that he had the feeling he could finally write calligraphy more freely. It's not just a matter of calligraphy; the same holds for the human heart. You have to grow older to really experience this. All of you must do your best to reach an advanced age. Even though you have practiced Zen, unless you reach old age, such plain and unadorned savor cannot emerge. Among the students of Bassui Zenji in the Edo period was Takusui Zenji, who reportedly lived to be more than 120 years old. He was a great admirer of Bassui's teachings, following to the letter the preachings of Bassui as found in the book known as the *Enzan Kana Hōgo* (Dharma Talks of Enzan in the Kana Syllabary) and reaching great enlightenment. In his later years, no matter what he was asked he would reply with the words *jinjin-mimyō nari* ("it is deep and subtle") and state that he could say nothing about it. Sanshō's state of consciousness is, to be sure, very wonderful and penetrating, but compared to Seppō he is still young, I feel. To repeat, please try to live somehow to an old age. If you practice Zen you will lose your fear of death. That's all very fine, since most people are terrified of dying. Actually it is our fear of death that brings us to the practice of Zen in the first place. You carry on doggedly without stopping until you resolve this problem. One of my cousins is a former manager in a company. Recently he confided to me, "Kyōzō, these days I'm so scared of dying." I said to him, "Oh, is that so? You've come to a very good place if you can say that." But now he's close to ninety and it'll be quite a task, but if he practices zazen he'll lose his fear of dying. But I went on to tell him the following: "But actually that's still not enough. You have to be able to retain your inner peace no matter whatever the outer circumstances are like."

I recall in this connection the words of Dōgen Zenji.

"Because a Buddha is in birth and death, there is no birth and death. Because a Buddha is not in birth and death, a Buddha is not deluded by birth and death." The section about a Buddha in birth in death means clearly realizing your own essential world. There you will find no birth and death. But satori is still remaining. The section about "Buddha is not in birth and death" is the stage where even that satori disappears. If satori disappears, there is no more being deluded by birth and death. When you live there is just that living. When you die there is just that dying. There is no problem. I would like all of you to reach this stage. When I say it like this, you might assume that I have reached that stage, but it's surprisingly difficult to become like that. Nevertheless, that is what I would like to reach.

On the Verse:

When the carp first ascends the three tiers of waterfalls, the heavens send clouds and thunder to accompany him.

Bravely leaping and vigorously jumping, he shows his great function.

With his tail burnt up [and turning into a dragon], he clearly surmounts the

Gates of Yu. This story about the carp ascending the waterfall often appears in the koans. In ancient times in China there was an illustrious ruler name King Yu. The river in his kingdom overflowed its banks, causing great distress for the people. The king had a large mountain excavated to create a waterfall with three tiers and allowed the river water to flow through it. That mountain is known as Dragon Gate Mountain or Yu Gate. The waterfall has three tiers or stages. When spring comes and the peach blossoms bloom, the carp swim upstream and ascend this large three-tiered waterfall, upon which they become dragons, it is said. At that time, there are clouds and thunder to accompany that event. The tails of the fish are burnt away and they become dragons that fly up into the sky.

The process by which we practice zazen fervently and attain satori is compared to the process by which the carp becomes a dragon. As a result of our practice we realize great enlightenment, which is compared here to a carp climbing up a three-tiered waterfall, having its tail burned off and becoming a dragon. This is accompanied by clouds and the sound of thunder. This is all talking about Sanshō in the koan: “Bravely leaping and vigorously jumping, he shows his great function.” It is this wonderful activity. The original Chinese also has the meaning of the dragon showing his horns. This refers to the great activity of Sanshō in the koan with his bold question: “When a fish with golden scales has passed through the net, what should it get for food?” There’s a feeling of mettle and spirit from head to toe.

With his tail burnt up [and turning into a dragon], he clearly surmounts the Gates of Yu. This is also about Sanshō’s wonderful spirit and activity. Make no mistake, he’s definitely enlightened and it’s no fake. He is the man who has turned into a dragon having climbed the heights. But then comes the next line of the verse:

The magnificent fish will never be thrown into a vinegar pot. The vinegar pot is a large jar for pickling vegetables. The “magnificent fish” would be like a fine specimen of a sea bream (tai) in Japan. This line, too, is speaking about Sanshō. Such a magnificent fish like Sanshō would never be stuffed in a pickling jar. Sanshō came to Seppō, but he would never be stuffed into the “pickling jar” of Seppō. These lines up to now are praising Sanshō and his outstanding Zen activity. The ensuing lines speak in terms of “an older matured man” and refer to Seppō.

An old matured man does not startle other people. When you become mature and great, you don’t do strange things. While you’re still young you tend to do things out of the ordinary, wearing clothes that will attract people’s attention, for example. When you’re older, you have no desire to do such things; you become plainer and simpler. This is Seppō, who has become old and mature. You no longer do unexpected things to take people by surprise. You’re completely ordinary.

Accustomed to meeting great foes he has no fear from the beginning. He has experienced this sort of thing any number of times, such Zen exchanges with outstanding Zen personages, those outstanding and strong contenders who always appear on the scene. Since he’s already been faced with such persons any number of times, he’s not afraid at all, no

matter who comes. What's spoken of here is not easy to reach. In my case, for example, in former times when I was receiving people in dokusan I would often wonder what they would be bringing to me as a question and if I would be a match for them. Nowadays, however, I'm not surprised and not scared, whatever they come with. That being the case, I would like you all to become "great foes"!

Fluttering like a pinwheel of five ounces, The first line compares the Zen activity of Seppô to the lightness of a pinwheel rotating in the wind and weighing only five ounces. But then comes the next line:

As a massive mountain, far more than a thousand tons. This, too, expresses the state of consciousness of Seppô.

Famed over the four oceans—who could be his peer?

He stands alone, never to be moved by the eight winds blowing. Seppô's fame as a great Zen master has spread over the four oceans, which means throughout China. There is no one who is his match. The second line is similar to the expression "above and below the heavens, I alone am honored" (*tenjô tenge yuiga dokusan*). No matter what wind blows, he is not to be moved. The eight winds could be seen as meaning praise and censure. Specifically they are gain, loss, defamation, eulogy, praise, ridicule, sorrow and joy. The first element of the eight winds is the wind of profit (*ri*) or making money. If you get caught up in this, your mind is no longer at rest. The next is decline or decay (*sui*). For example, you were the manager of a company but are now in a state of decline. This, too, will cause unrest in your heart. Then there is censure (*ki*) or praise (*yo*), which is also known as flattery (*shô*). Then comes ridicule (*ki*). The next is sorrow (*ku*). When these various winds blow, your heart is moved like things in the wind. But the Verse says that a true Zen man is not perturbed no matter how many of the eight winds blow. This is similar to the Zen phrase, "though the eight winds blow it does not move...the moon in the sky." It is like the full moon shining in the middle of the firmament. No matter how strong the wind blows, the moon is not moved in the least. It continues to shine brilliantly. This is speaking of Seppô's state of consciousness. It is important that we all become like this.