

CASE 41

Rakuho On His Deathbed



By Yamada Kôun

Instruction:

Sometimes one is sincere and faithful, distressing oneself;

One's suffering and pain is beyond words.

Sometimes misfortune arises, people being devoid of comprehension.

At the deathbed one condescends and retails cheaply: at the very end one is most polite.

Tears welling out of painful guts, it is impossible to hide any more.

Now, is there anyone who has cold eyes?

Case:

When he was about to die, Rakuho addressed his assembly and said, "I have one matter to ask you about. If you say, 'IT's this,' you are putting another head on your own. If you say, 'IT isn't this,' you are looking for life by cutting off your head." The head monk said, "The green mountain always lifts up its legs; you don't need to carry a lantern in the daylight."¹ Rakuho said, "What occasion is this to utter such a saying?" A senior monk named Genjô stepped forward and said, "Apart from these two ways, I beg you, Master, not to ask." Rakuho said, "That's not enough. Say some more." Genjô said, "I cannot say it fully." Rakuho said, "I don't care whether or not you can say it fully." Genjô said, "I feel just like an attendant who has nothing to respond to his master."²

That evening, Rakuho called Genjô to him and said, "Your response today had something quite reasonable. You have to realize what our late master³ said, 'There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes. IT is not the Dharma before the eyes; IT cannot be reached by eyes and ears.' Which phrase is the guest? Which phrase is the host? If you can sort them out, I will transmit the bowl and robe to you." Genjô said, "I don't understand." Rakuho said, "You must understand." Genjô said, "I really don't understand." Rakuho

¹ Most probably a saying formed by Rakuho himself.

² Apparently an idiomatic expression meaning, "I can't describe it in words."

³ Rinzaï or Kassan.

shouted and said, “Miserable, miserable!”

[Another] monk asked, “What would you like to say, Master?” Rakuho said, “The boat of compassion is not rowed over pure waves. It's been wasted labor releasing wooden geese down the precipitous strait⁴.”

Verse:

With the clouds as bait, with the moon as a hook, one fishes in the pure water;
Old with age, solitary-hearted, one hasn't caught a fish yet.
After returning [to the ordinary world, finishing] the poem “Forsaking the Clamor”⁵,
[Lo,] the only sober one upon the Bekira River⁶.

On the Instruction:

Rakuho also appears in Case 35 of the *Book of Equanimity*. That case is entitled Rakuho's Obeisance and recounts how he met his match with Kassan and became his student. Actually, however, the records tell us that Rakuho was Rinzai's attendant for 20 years and was known as “Rinzai's single eye.” He was also known as the “sharp point of the arrow” of the Rinzai school. But it was only after he started to practice under Kassan that he “pushed out the bottom of the bucket,” so to speak, realizing full enlightenment. Although he had practiced under Rinzai for twenty years, he had yet to really fully realize. That only happened after he went to Kassan. Rakuho then returned his certificate of enlightenment (inka shōmei) to Rinzai and became Kassan's disciple. That's the kind of fellow he was. In today's case, however, we encounter Rakuho shortly before his death. There is the passage in the *Analects of Confucius*: “When a bird is about to die its song touches the heart. When a man is about to die, his words are of note.”⁷

There was the belief that the words of a dying man were especially good. It is said that although Rakuho exerted himself for a lifetime, he was unable to produce a single successor. There are some records that say the senior monk Genjō who appears in this koan was actually his successor, but there is no mention anywhere of what kind of person he was, where he came from and where or how he passed away. I have no way of knowing whether he actually was a dharma successor, but the Genjō who takes the stage in this koan appears to have not yet realized enlightenment. As for Rakuho, his full name was Rakuho Genan Zenji, a dharma successor of Kassan Zen'e Zenji. I already mentioned their exchange appearing in Case 35 of this collection, but I can say here that Kassan was more or less of the Soto lineage. There were the two masters Seigen Gyōshi Zenji and Nangaku Ejō Zenji. It was from Nangaku that the Rinzai stream flowed, and from Seigen that the Soto stream flowed. In that sense, Kassan and

⁴ It was a custom that the boat rushing down the stream through a gorge released pieces of wood ahead as a warning so that a possible crash with the boat coming upstream could be avoided. These wooden chips were called “wooden geese.”

⁵ A poem which Kutsugen (cf. Verse to Case 12) composed after he was dismissed from his royal office.

⁶ The river where Kutsugen committed suicide.

⁷ Waley, Arthur, *The Analects of Confucius*.

Rakuho were both of the Soto lineage. It was Sekitō Kisen Zenji who inherited the dharma of Seigen Gyōshi Zenji, and Seigen was followed by Yakusan Igen Zenji, whose successor was Katei Tokusei Zenji. This was a time in which Buddhism was persecution, so that Katei became a boatman, living on a boat on a river. For this reason he is also commonly known as Sensu Oshō, where the words Sensu also have the meaning of boatman. And it was Kassan who went to Sensu and inherited his dharma. There are a number of interesting stories about him, but I will omit them here for lack of time. As mentioned, it was Rakuho who then inherited Kassan's dharma. This case, as mentioned, deals with the time shortly before Rakuho's death. As usual, the Instruction has its sights set on the Main Case in making its statements.

Sometimes one is sincere and faithful, distressing oneself;

One's suffering and pain is beyond words. The word translated here as "sincere and faithful" (jap, chūsei) is something Japanese will surely be familiar with. We talk about pledging loyalty to the Emperor or swearing allegiance (makoto wo tsukusu). It's a matter of forgetting about yourself and not caring about life and limb in doing your duty. In this case, Rakuho does not care for life and limb for the sake of the dharma, doing his absolute best. This is what the first line means. He undergoes a lot of suffering, spurring himself on and acting out of total compassion for the others. Such "suffering and pain is beyond words" for the sake of his students. That's certainly true. He is making every possible effort, suffering greatly in the process, for the sake of the dharma. Please recall in this connection the Verse to Case 17 of the *Gateless Gate* (The National Teacher's Three Calls):

We must carry an iron yoke with no hole.

It is certainly no trifling matter to guard true Buddhism. It is equal to the sufferings of wearing a heavy iron yoke through your life. Then comes the next line:

It is not a slight matter; the curse is passed on to our descendants.

This is not referring to blood relatives. Instead, the poet is saying that the sufferings of maintaining the dharma shall be passed on to our descendants in the dharma, which is indeed no slight matter.

If you want to support the gate and sustain the house,

You must climb a mountain of swords with bare feet.

If you want to support the gate and the house of Buddhism, you must bear up under pains that are like climbing a mountain of sharp swords in your bare feet. This is similar to the spirit of today's Instruction, where it says we have to bear up under unspeakable sufferings.

Sometimes misfortune arises, people being devoid of comprehension. The "misfortune" (wazawai) means the sufferings of people coming to practice zazen, met with a cry of "kaatz!" or with a blow of the master's stick. But even then, they are devoid of comprehension; they fail to get the point. They think you are talking gibberish and don't understand.

At the deathbed one condescends and retails cheaply. As you make ready to depart for the next world, although you might have maintained a stern and severe attitude up

to then, when it comes time to die, you cast aside your usual strictness, dashing it into twos and threes. I would like you to savor the section of the Main Case that this Instruction is talking about here. The master wants somehow to bring at least one person to a true realization of the essential matter and thus leave a successor. Desiring to somehow to open their eyes, he's ready to sell it at a cheap price at the last. It may not be a case of the "banana sale approach"⁸, but he is certainly giving the dharma away at a bargain price. But even in such a case, there are hardly any students who come to an enlightenment experience.

Then comes the second part of the line:

At the very end one is most polite. The "very end" means just before dying, at death's door. The poet says one is "most polite" at such a time. When things are like this, it is said, one cannot expect any real students to result. It's said that the best Zen masters are those who are still young in their 40's and 50's, because they are still capable of taking a stern and authoritative attitude toward their students. When you get older you're no longer able to do that! You start telling your students things that are not to their benefit, desiring that they somehow understand. This is a most troublesome illness. The same thing will happen to us. This is the feeling evoked in the words "at the very end one is most polite." I don't know how long it was before his death, but when Nagasawa Sogen Roshi passed away, he reportedly told his students shortly beforehand that this would be his last teisho and the last time he would receive students in dokusan. Evidently he was aware intuitively that his days were numbered. At any rate, the words, "at the deathbed one condescends and retails cheaply" evoke how the master, who has sternly maintained authority of the dharma up to then, is ready to sell it for a throwaway price at this point. You might say he is going out of his way to be especially polite.

Tears welling out of painful guts, it is impossible to hide any more. It is as if his tears are welling up out of his very entrails, from the depth of his painful soul. What tears are these? They are the tears of the parent for his child, of the master for his students. I feel these are referring to the tears of the Zen master out of his concerns for the dharma. He wants somehow to pass on his dharma in some way. But if there are no disciples to whom he can pass his dharma on to, this is a very sad state of affairs. This is what this line of the Verse is talking about. He is no longer able to hide his tears of sadness at this turn of events. This is of course referring to Rakuho in the Main Case. And then he considers:

Now, is there anyone who has cold eyes? In other words, is there any one present here who, upon seeing me weep bitter tears, can remain dry-eyed and tell me with assurance that there's nothing to worry about since he's here? After all, what good is it going to do to babble about this or that when he's on his deathbed? Yasutani Roshi always used to say that when you die, you should do so silently. Rakuho seems to be chastising his students: What are you speaking so effusively about? Isn't there anyone who can stand tall and say, "Don't worry, I'm here"?

⁸ *Banana no tatakiuri*, referring to how fruit sellers in Japan used to ask outrageous prices for bananas but then dramatically lower the price if there were protests.

On the Case:

When he was about to die, Rakuho addressed his assembly and said, "I have one matter to ask you about." We don't know for sure just by reading the text whether Rakuho was on his deathbed or whether he was giving his last teisho shortly before his death. In the old days in the temples, if someone was breathing his last, they would put him on a stretcher and bring him into the zendo under certain circumstances. I remember Kôno Sôkan Roshi telling us that there was such a practice at Shôgenji Temple in Ibuka, Gifu Prefecture. They would evidently bring the Roshi on a stretcher to the preaching hall. And once you were brought there, you weren't long for this world. So, in today's koan, either we have a case where all the monks have assembled shortly before Rakuho's death, or perhaps he is delivering his final teisho. We don't really know if he has appeared to preach in the Zen hall despite illness. At any rate, he speaks to the assembled monks as follows: "I have one matter to ask you about." His words continue:

If you say, 'IT's this,' you are putting another head on your own. Remember, these are Rakuho's final words. What is "IT"? It's our true self, our essential nature. But if you refer to it like that, it's like putting another head on your own head, because you descend into dualisms. It's like having two heads. Then there is subject and object. There is the one who sees and the one seen. But these are actually one. Many of you are practicing with the koan Mu to become one with Mu. But it's not a matter of making the "two heads" one through your practice. It's one from the very start. It's just that you mistakenly believe they are two. Mu is one from the very beginning, and that is you yourself. This is actually what it all gets down to, although just saying it like that doesn't really help. You can consider it as follows: To think that there are two different things is a form of illness, the illness by which something that is intrinsically one is seen as dualistic. I assign you the practice of MU in order that you can break out of that dream and realize the world of oneness. So if you think in terms of THIS or THAT, it's already two: the one seeing and the thing seen. But what about the other case?

If you say, 'IT isn't this,' you are looking for life by cutting off your head." If you try now to put it negatively (IT isn't this), it's like cutting off your own head. And then you look frantically for life, in other words, you seek desperately for another head. If you say IT's not that, then you have to look for something else. At any rate, it won't do to try to stamp out the world of oneness. Then one of the monks spoke up:

The head monk said, "'The green mountain always lifts up its legs; you don't need to carry a lantern in the daylight.'" What is the "green mountain"? The green mountain does not move, but here he says that the green mountain always lifts up its legs, is always walking. This is pointing to our own essential nature. Although the content is empty, it is always walking. You might think this is a strange world, but it's simply referring to you yourselves. Even Dôgen Zenji says the same thing: Green mountain is always walking. The empty guy is walking. Although he continues to walk from morning to night, there is a world in

which he does not take a single step. This is what is being referred to here.

You don't need to carry a lantern in the daylight. The true fact is completely clear, just like in broad daylight. There's certainly no need to light a lantern and go looking for it. Don't you see how clear it is? But actually Rakuho said something a little different, as is mentioned in Old Man Banshō's comments on the case. His words were evidently as follows: "The green mountain is always moving its feet; the bright sun doesn't shift its orb."

The sun moves from east to west. But Rakuho says, "It doesn't shift its orb," it doesn't move at all. I, too, feel this statement of Rakuho in the commentary to be more to the point than the saying of the monk in the koan. Nevertheless, we must keep with the statement in the koan as it appears in the Main Case. As just mentioned, it is as clear as day, and there's no need to light a lamp and look for it.

Rakuho said, "What occasion is this to utter such a saying?" "What time is this to be talking about such things?!", Rakuho says. "Here I am about to depart for the next world. This is no time to be repeating such hollow phrases and insolent words!" Words like "green mountain is always walking" might be all well and good, but it's no help if it's just some concept. "What time do you think this is to be talking about such things?" Rakuho chides the monk. What's gotten into your head to jabber about such matters when I'm about to depart for the next world?

A senior monk named Genjō stepped forward and said, "Apart from these two ways, I beg you, Master, not to ask." The head monk failed the test, so to speak, so now the senior monk Genjō steps forward. What are the "two ways"? You can see them as "yes" and "no." If you say it's this, that's wrong. If you say it's not this, that's also wrong. "But is there anything else that you can say?" the monk wants to know. Is there any need to search farther than that? This is what he is asking with his question. But Rakuho does not accept this.

Rakuho said, "That's not enough. Say some more." He pushes the senior monk to say more.

Genjō said, "I cannot say it fully." "I cannot say anything more than this."

Rakuho said, "I don't care whether or not you can say it fully." "Whether you can say it fully or not is not my problem, it's yours." He rejects the monk's statement.

Genjō said, "I feel just like an attendant who has nothing to respond to his master." He seems to say that he is no longer worthy to act as his attendant. He means that, although he would like to say it, he finds it difficult to do. Such a phrase is used to express a situation in which you might know it, but cannot find the words to express it. This ends this particular scene.

That evening, Rakuho called Genjō to him and said, "Your response today had something quite reasonable. You have to realize what our late master said, 'There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes. IT is not the Dharma before the eyes; IT cannot be reached by eyes and ears.' Which phrase is the guest? Which phrase is the host? If you can sort them out, I

will transmit the bowl and robe to you.” When Rakuho tells the senior monk that his response had something quite reasonable, this is what I meant by “selling it at a bargain.” He seems to feel that the monk has grasped something, but is unable to express it. He then tells Genjō that he must realize what the late master (i.e., Kassan) said. The words that follow are all the words of Kassan:

‘There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes. IT is not the Dharma before the eyes; IT cannot be reached by eyes and ears.’ These statements have to be examined together with the Zen master in the dokusan room. “Dharmas” (hō) means all things in the phenomenal world. “Consciousness” (i) means the mind (kokoro). This is quite an interesting expression. He is talking about there not being a single thing before your eyes. It’s a matter of presenting this in the dokusan room. And then he says, “the consciousness is before the eyes.” In other words, there are no things before the eyes; there is mind (kokoro) before the eyes. “IT” means “that thing,” a reference to your true self. He says that IT is not things before the eyes. IT is not something that can be reached by eyes and ears. The essential world cannot be grasped with our senses, it cannot be seen or heard.

Which phrase is the guest? Which phrase is the host? The guest is the objective world; the host is the subjective world. Remember, these are the words of Kassan. There is the following story about Kassan.

Kassan set out to meet Sensu Oshō, the master whose dharma he inherited. Sensu asked him, “In what temple do you live?” Kassan said, “I do not live in a temple. If I lived in it, it is not like IT.” “What is it not like?” Sensu wanted to know. What is not similar to? He’s talking about essential nature. There is no stopping and dwelling. Because it is empty. But you talk in terms of living in a temple; it is not like your essential nature. But Sensu wants to know what it is not like. Words like “essential nature” can lead to concepts, and are not used in such an exchange. It is then that Kassan says the words that are found in today’s koan:

‘There are no dharmas before the eyes; the consciousness is before the eyes. IT is not the Dharma before the eyes.’” But Sensu was not satisfied and pressed him further: “Where did you learn those words?” It is then that Kassan says the following words:

“IT cannot be reached by eyes and ears.” It appears that Kassan was saying this all the time, and that’s probably the reason Rakuho produces these words here. Then he asks: “Which phrase is the guest? Which phrase is the host? If you can sort them out, I will transmit the bowl and robe to you.”

In other words, if you can say clearly which phrase is the host and which the guest, I will transmit my dharma to you (as symbolized by the robe and bowl). But the senior monk Genjō does not know what to say. Even though Rakuho has lowered the price considerably to sell the dharma at a bargain, he still doesn’t know. Rakuho was no doubt very vexed at this.

Rakuho said, “You must understand.” “Don’t tell me you don’t understand. You must know the answer.”

Genjô said, "I really don't understand." Rakuho must have felt very sad.

Rakuho shouted and said, "Miserable, miserable!"

[Another] monk asked, "What would you like to say, Master?" Another monk (not Genjô) then spoke up and asked the Master what he was getting at with his statement.

Rakuho said, "The boat of compassion is not rowed over pure waves. It's been wasted labor releasing wooden geese down the precipitous strait." I will explain the individual lines afterward and present the basic meaning of what he wants to say here. He is saying in effect that he has now given up trying to teach the dharma or lead others. Although he made all sorts of efforts, it was all in vain.

The "boat of compassion" on the waves is said in the sense of going out on the lake in a boat to catch a wonderful fish. But if the boat is "not rowed," it means that he has given up trying to catch such a fish. Although he had plied the boat over the waters of the lake, clear like a mirror, he has now given up trying to go out in that boat. "Releasing wooden geese down the precipitous strait" means that a goose carved of wood is let out on the water when the boat is going through narrow straits with rapids. This is used to check whether a boat is coming from the other direction and prevent a collision. Although all these precautions and steps were taken, it availed him naught. Although on one hand he is bewailing the lack of a dharma successor, from the essential viewpoint, there is no such need. The fact that "all beings are intrinsically Buddha" lies to the background of his statement. This is how Yasutani Roshi views the koan. That's certainly a possibility.

However, I can't help feeling that these words of Rakuho express his despair here, at the end of his life, on failing to produce any dharma successors. Thus, the words in the Instruction ("tears welling out of painful guts") are very fitting to describe this scene.

On the Verse:

With the clouds as bait, with the moon as a hook, one fishes in the pure water. If we attempt to explain the meaning of this line intellectually, we can say the poet paints a picture of a person standing aloof from the ordinary world, living as he pleases in nature in the living samadhi of saving all beings in perfect freedom. In his commentary on the verse Old Man Banshō says:

An ancient used a rainbow as a pole, the new moon as a hook, a piece of cloud for bait; in the clear waters one can thus pole the boat of compassion; in the precipitous straits one must first release a wooden goose. (Cleary translation)

This could be referring to Rakuho or to Sensus. At any rate, we have an image of someone living in perfect freedom and ease in the midst of nature, sitting in the bright moonlight with a gentle breeze blowing. But we shouldn't assume he's become a hermit. He wants to somehow "land a great fish" in the sense of wanting to somehow save all beings, acting freely and without obstruction. But there's not even a nibble on his hook!

Old with age, solitary-hearted, one hasn't caught a fish yet. Old and solitary,

he would love to catch a fish, in the sense of having at least one dharma successor, but he's unable to do so. How sad!

After returning [to the ordinary world, finishing] the poem "Forsaking the Clamor",

[Lo,] the only sober one upon the Bekira River. The poem *Li-Sao*, translated here as "Forsaking the Clamor," is also translated as "Encountering Sorrow." The author was Qu Yuan, a high official in the Kingdom of Su. But due to the slanderous tongues of others at the court, he was banished to Changsha. Heartsick and despondent, Qu Yuan wrote the poem known as *Li Sao*, or *Forsaking the Clamor*. He happened to meet a fisherman on the banks of the river one day, who asked him what he was doing. In reply, Qu Yuan said, "All the world is drunk; I alone am sober. All the world is polluted; I alone am pure." Upon saying this, he plunged into the Bekira River and drowned. This is what these final lines of the Verse are referring to. Where is he "returning"? To the essential homeland, the world of emptiness. He is returning to the world of emptiness whence he came. The unfortunate Qu Yuan, who drowned in the river, was the only sober one among all the drunken ones. This is referring to Rakuho. He lets down his fishing line to fish up an outstanding fish, but is all one. Please take time to savor this koan and the Verse.