

CASE 15

***Kyōzan Thrusts His Hoe in the
Ground***

By Yamada Kōun



Instruction:

To know before it is said is known as silent discussion. To have it appear although it is not clarified is known as dark activity. To press the palms together before the main gate and perform kinhin under the eaves has a meaning. But what about doing a dance in the garden and nodding your head under the back gate?

Case:

Isan asked Kyōzan, "Where have you been?"

Kyōzan said, "In the rice field?"

Isan said, "How many people are there in the rice field?"

Kyōzan thrust his hoe in the ground and stood with his hands clasped on his chest.

Isan said, "Today, many people are cutting reeds on the South Mountain."

Kyōzan placed his hoe on his shoulder and immediately left.

Verse:

The old enlightened one's feelings are many, as he worries about his descendants.

Now he feels shame and raises up the family gate.

This requires remembering the story of the South Mountain.

Carving it in the bones and impressing it on the skin to mutually repay the debt of gratitude.

On the Instruction:

To know before it is said is known as silent discussion. As I am always saying, the basis or central focus of Buddhism is the enlightenment experience of Shakyamuni Buddha. There are now many Buddhist schools and, with the exception of Zen, almost all of them have writings known as the sutras (jap, okyō) on which they rely. The sutras are the recorded sayings of Buddha Shakyamuni. The Tendai School and the Nichiren School, for example, have the Lotus Sutra as the text on which they place their beliefs. The Jōdo or Pure Land School of Buddhism finds its basis in the Amida Sutra and two other texts for a total of three central texts. The Shingon School relies on the Dainichi Sutra.

All these texts can be understood as descriptions of the satori experience of the Buddha. As I repeatedly say, they are like clothes placed over the experience of satori. When the clothes are removed one by one, what remains is the enlightenment experience of Shakyamuni Buddha. In the Zen school there are no such clothes that can be understood as concepts. In Zen, all concepts are removed, so that just the experience itself is the object of concentration. This is zazen. And if we ask what that pure experience is, although expressed in various words, the basic expression is “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” The word *henshō* (literally, phenomenal-essential) from Tōzan’s *Five Ranks* expresses how the essential world is no other than the world of phenomena, that they are one. This is actually the entirety of Buddhism. The fact of clearly grasping this essential world in authentic experience is what distinguishes Zen from other religions. This essential world is not an idea or some sort of philosophical concept, and can never be grasped as such. The only way is to sit and experience it yourself. The koans are all talking about that essential world, and that is the case with today’s koan as well.

Please recall my oft-cited example of the ruler. On the front side are inches or millimeters clearly marked. This can be understood as the world of phenomena, the world that can be grasped by the five senses. Most people are only aware of that aspect. They believe there is no world other than the one you can see, hear and touch. Philosophy expounds on various ideas but has no substance. This is referred to in Zen as “imaginary flowers in the air” (*kūge*), like the motes of dust on your eyeballs that seem like flowers floating in the air. They have no real substance. Dōgen Zenji, as you probably know, was the author of the *Shōbōgenzō* (The Eye Treasury of the True Dharma), a major work with multiple chapters. For a philosopher, the book appears to be a kind of philosophy. If you ask how it differs from normal philosophy, it is in the fact that Dōgen actually experienced the truth and then wrote the work as an explanation of what he had experienced. This is something altogether different from the “imaginary flowers” resulting when you simply think something up without actually experiencing it. You must also view today’s koan with the same eyes. It’s important to have a clear experience of both the essential world and the world of phenomena. **It must be possible to act freely with them. They must be able to operate clearly and freely.** The *Five Ranks of Hen and Shō* by Great Master Tōzan explain how *hen* is the phenomenal world and *shō* is the essential world. They are then changed and revealed in five different combinations. We could say that a unique characteristic of Buddhism is the statement that *hen* and *shō* (phenomenal and essential) are one. In today’s koan we see Isan and Kyōzan handling this matter in various ways. Isan and Kyōzan were the cofounders of the so-called Igyō School of Zen. In most cases, the Zen schools have a single founder, and this is the only school having two founders. In the Soto School there were the two persons Sōzan Daishi and Tōzan Daishi. But in that case, Sōzan was the disciple of Tōzan. You could say it’s strange that the name of the disciple appears first in the name of that particular school of Zen. **The Sixth Patriarch Enō Zenji is also known as Sōei (where Sō is the same Sō as in Soto) because he lived on the mountain of that name.** You might protest and say that it is strange that the name of the founder comes after the name of his disciple in the name Soto, but if we remember that the real value of something often comes afterward, there is nothing strange about Tōzan’s name coming second. Let us return now to the Instruction

To know before it is said is known as silent discussion. Needless to add, the words of the Instruction are said while concentrating on the exchange between Isan and Kyōzan in the Main Case. This means that, before the other person says a single word you know his state of consciousness. Another expression used in modern Japanese to express the same thing is *kantan aiterasu*—literally, “livers and galls mutually illuminate”—in the sense that they mutually know their inmost feelings, like Damon and Pythias of Greek mythology¹.

¹ The story of Damon & Pythias is about two young men whose loyalty to each other symbolized true friendship. When Pythias was condemned to death by Dionysius the Elder, he was released to make arrangements for his wife and children, in preparation for his death, only because

Another expression in common use is *ishin-denshin* which means communicating from heart to heart. When they face each other, without speaking a single word, they know each other's state of mind. This first line of the Instruction is talking about the relationship between Isan and Kyōzan. It says this is known as "silent discussion" (jap, *mokuron*), but more in the sense of a conversation held in silence. There are many examples of this, one of the most famous being the koan *Buddha Holds Up A Flower* in the *Gateless Gate*. The Buddha Shakyamuni held a flower in his hand, which he had received from a young maiden. He showed the flower to the assembled multitude with twinkling eyes. Only Mahakasyapa broke into a smile. No words were necessary in this case. Here is another case of "to know before it is said," of knowing exactly what the intention of the other person is, without he or she saying anything. The part about the Buddha's eyes twinkling is found only in the version of the koan in the *Book of Equanimity* and not in the *Gateless Gate*. Some quite illustrious authorities in the world of Zen maintain that this part about twinkling eyes is very important to the whole, even stating that it is the main point of the koan and expressing regret that it is missing in the version in the *Gateless Gate*. I can't necessarily agree. That same case says, "the tail has already appeared." In other words, in that smiling it is said completely. Here is a fine example of silent discussion. In Japanese we say "the eyes say as much as the mouth." That's another case of silent discussion.

To have it appear although it is not clarified is known as dark activity. This means that, although you do not say anything about what's on your mind, it naturally appears of itself. This is not a case of conversation. In the former case, there was another party to the conversation, but in this case you are alone. Although you don't say anything it is written all over your face. Even if the person says nothing, you know what he feels just looking at his face. Speaking from the first principle, we can say this about all phenomena. Although nothing is said, it naturally appears. What appears? The essential world. Although nothing is said, the essential world appears of itself, whether it be a pole or a door lintel, a flower or a blade of grass, a stone, a piece of brick, or whatever. Each of them is the complete expression of the essential. You could say that this is what is meant by "dark activity." The Chinese character in the original text translated here as "activity" means an innate force that does not appear on the surface. In the art of archery, the instant right before releasing the bowstring after notching the arrow and pulling the string is known as *ki*. It's that sort of activity. The activity is there, although there is no movement in that instant. The "dark activity" could be understood here as the essence, and the "silent discussion" could be seen as the activity. An example of such activity will now be presented in the Main Case.

To press the palms together before the main gate and perform kinhin under the eaves has a meaning. These words might seem to be in a relationship of cause-and-effect with each other, but that is not the case. *Just* pressing your palms together in gassho before the main temple gate! *Just* performing kinhin or walking mediation on both verandas of the temple! They are both practices in the Zen tradition. And although they appear to be two separate things, what they aim for is the same; they have the same single intention. They are completely consistent and in agreement with each other. When you have one, you have the other. In the koan about Buddha holding up the flower, you can consider it as being Mahakasyapa's smile in response to that twirling of the flower.

The Chinese characters used to write "main gate" are *sanmon*, which mean "three" and "gate." The same word is more commonly written with the characters for "mountain" and "gate" and also pronounced *sanmon*. The reason it is written here with the character for "three" is because there are traditionally three gates composing the main gate of the temple. The first of them is known as *gakūmon* or *ninkūmon* (both meaning "empty subject gate"). The second is known as *hokkūmon* ("empty object gate"), meaning that all phenomena are empty. The third is known as *gukūmon* ("both empty gate"), indicating how both subject and object

Damon stayed in his place ready to die if Pythias never returned. Some time later, Pythias did return, and amazed by this act of loyalty, Dionysius the Elder freed them both.

are essentially empty. There is also another explanation, in which the three gates are correlated with emptiness, non-form, and non-action. I feel the first explanation hits the nail on the head. Beyond the main gate is the so-called *hattō* or dharma hall, the hall where the dharma is preached. There is no central image of the Buddha in that hall. Instead, there is just the central altar known as the *shumidan* (lit. Mt. Sumeru platform), which expresses “true emptiness as nirvana itself” (jap, *shinkū-nehān*). As I mentioned, there is no image in that hall. Beyond the dharma hall is the *butsuden* or Buddha hall. This is known as “true emptiness as wondrous form” (*shinkū-myōshiki*), meaning the wisdom of wondrous form. That hall contains the main image of the Buddha. When I read this explanation, I feel it makes good sense and admire the monks of old for their ingeniousness. To repeat, there is first the sanmon or main gate, which is followed by the dharma hall (*hattō*) with no image in it, and then the Buddha hall (*butsuden*) where the main image of the Buddha on the altar expresses the world of wondrous being (*myō-u*). The world of the Absolute Three Treasures is found in the dharma hall, which is empty. It is only when it is revealed that we have the world of wondrous being taking on the form of the Buddha. These are the Three Treasures. On the right side are the monks’ quarters. On the left is the hall where the monks sit. On the right is the image of Kanzeon Bosatsu (also known as the Bodhisattva Kuan-Yin or Avalokitesvara, to use the Sanskrit name). This is the embodiment of compassion. On the left is an image of Manjusri, the embodiment of enlightened wisdom. This makes up the general plan of a temple. Although this might not be of central importance, I thought it might be of interest to you. Let us proceed to the next line of the Instruction:

But what about doing a dance in the garden and nodding your head under the back gate? This is speaking about the same matter as the first lines regarding “to know before it is said.” When someone does a dance in the garden, the person standing under the back gate somewhat removed from him nods his head in approval. Here is a case of two persons in complete harmony with each other, two persons who understand each other’s intention without saying a word. The Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura includes a dance platform where ceremonial Shinto dances are performed. Imagine someone performing a ceremonial dance on the platform and the people below the dance stage watching and smiling. That’s the kind of feeling you have in this part of the Instruction. Isan and Kyōzan were completely intimate with each other’s world. The Instruction asks if there is an example of such intimacy in thus turning our attention to the Main Case. The Igyō School of Zen has often been characterized by the words “father and son singing in perfect harmony.” This is a unique characteristic of that school. But if we were to mention a possible drawback, although Isan was certainly a great Zen personage he tended to give his approval all too readily. Kyōzan himself may not have been like that, but students in this school tended to be treated too nicely. Childrearing today shows similarities, lacking the stern reproof that is needed at times as parents fail to discipline their children. In stark contrast to the Igyō School is the Rinzai School of Zen. Rinzai would give a great shout of “*katsu!*” no matter what was presented to him. This seems to be more effective in bringing up good children. That’s not to say that just scolding is the best way, but if you simply praise your children no matter what they do, you can’t expect good adults to result. Children in Japan today go to university or college for the most part after graduating from high school. Going to university is all the rage and has become a matter of course. Many of the mothers of these children haven’t even finished high school, so that their sons and daughters can’t help appearing to be on a higher level. Since the children have clever tongues, they end up putting down their own parents. The parents lack the authority to act as parents. The same is true for both fathers and mothers. Whether in school or at home, parents and teachers must have the authority and power to reprimand students and children when necessary. In this connection, I can’t help feeling that Isan was a little too soft on his own students.

On the Case:

Isan asked Kyōzan, “Where have you been?”

Kyōzan said, "In the rice field?"

Isan said, "How many people are there in the rice field?"

Kyōzan thrust his hoe in the ground and stood with his hands clasped on his chest. Kyōzan, as the outstanding student of Isan, was one of the two pillars supporting the Igyō School of Zen. Isan was also the name of the mountain where the temple of Isan was located. Kyōzan was acting as *shissui* or managing monk at the temple. The position of *shissui* is one of the so-called *rokuchiji* or six positions, which also include those of *tenzō* or kitchen monk and *inō*, the officiator at services. These monks wear *samu'e*, the clothes worn during *samu* or working meditation. The temples of old were all self-sufficient, raising their own food. That means *samu* or working meditation in the fields or elsewhere was extremely important for their upkeep. The monk in the position of *shissui* was responsible for supervising that work, and this koan concerns an exchange while Kyōzan was acting in that capacity. He had just returned from the fields when Kyōzan suddenly asked, "Where have you been?"

"In the rice field", was the reply.

Isan countered with, "How many people are there in the rice field?"

Although it might seem as if they are just passing the time of day in ordinary talk, this is actually a checking question. The world of "how many?" is the world of phenomena. In response to this question Isan takes his hoe, sticks it in the ground in front of him and stands there with his hands folded on his chest. What does this action mean? Remember that Isan, with his question of "how many?" was speaking from the aspect of the phenomenal world of "many and few." In response, Kyōzan presents the essential world, where there is only him in the entire universe (jap, *kankon-daini-nashi*). This is the same as "in heaven and on the earth, I alone am honored." As I mentioned just now, this koan concerns an exchange regarding the so-called phenomenal world and the essential world. We can say that this sums up the entirety of Buddhism. How does Isan respond to this action of Kyōzan?

Isan said, "Today, many people are cutting reeds on the South Mountain."

Kyōzan placed his hoe on his shoulder and immediately left. The words "South Mountain" can be interpreted in various ways, but I prefer to take them literally here, although other commentators might have a slightly different view. The author Tokudō Katoh, for example, says this refers to Mt. Shūnan (literally south of Shū), which means a mountain in the south of the Shū or Chou Dynasty in ancient China. It is also known as Shinrei or Shin Peak. This would bring thoughts of the reigning emperor to mind. The words translated here as "many people" could also be translated as "a great person" who is living on the South Mountain, says Katoh. At any rate, "cutting reeds" is said in response to Kyōzan's action of sticking his hoe in the ground and standing there with his hands folded on his chest. It would be a thrust home, an admonition, in reply to that expression of the essential, warning him not to remain in that world of empty-oneness. "What do you mean staying in that world of emptiness?" he seems to be saying with his reply. "Don't get caught up in views of emptiness and forget the phenomenal world in the process!" At any rate, if we take Tokudō Katoh's interpretation as accurate, then even the Emperor on South Mountain is engaged in fieldwork such as cutting reeds. "Field work" is the world of phenomena.

I prefer to see South Mountain as referring to the southern mountain in their vicinity and understand the line as saying that there are many people there engaged in cutting reeds. In connection with this question of interpretation, there is a similar instance found in Case 22 of the *Blue Cliff Record* (Seppō's Snake), which includes the following statement by Chōkei:

"Today in the Zen hall there are many monks who have lost their body and life."

The idea is that there are many monks in the hall who have been bitten by a "poisonous snake" and are about to die, in the sense of losing their delusive self. This is how I understand the line and Yasutani Roshi saw it in the same way. But Iida Tōin Roshi, that illustrious master of the late 19th and early 20th century, maintains the word *ooi-ni* in the original, which we have translated as "many," can also mean a "great person." In that sense, it

would mean that Chōkei is talking about himself. Iida Roshi used this argument as grounds for interpreting the statement in today's koan in the same way, i.e., an outstanding person on South Mountain is cutting reeds. The reeds were used as thatch for the temple roofs in times of old. Nevertheless, I prefer my own interpretation, which appears as the koan text at beginning of this teisho: "Today, many people are cutting reeds on the South Mountain."

With his reply, Isan has presented the world of phenomena and seems to say, "You have presented the world of oneness, but be sure not to forget the phenomenal world!" Kyōzan's response shows his true worth:

Kyōzan placed his hoe on his shoulder and immediately left. Here is a fine example of father and son immediately understanding each other's intentions. Kyōzan picks up his hoe and departs without saying a word. He understands immediately. He receives a slight hint about the phenomenal world in Isan's statement and knows without a moment's hesitation what to do. I don't know if one could understand this as "silent discussion" or "dark activity," but both are a possibility here. Master and disciple are in perfect harmony and intimacy with each other. Please take the time to savor this exchange.

On the Verse:

The old enlightened one's feelings are many, as he worries about his descendants. When you get older you tend to get a bit cranky, worrying about how your children and grandchildren are faring, or whether they will get into the right school or not, etc. This is said in reference to Isan.

Now he feels shame and raises up the family gate. This is talking about Kyōzan. Upon hearing Isan's words he suddenly comes to his senses and feels compunction. While remaining in the world of "not a single thing," he received a hint from Isan not to forget the phenomenal world and came to his senses. He then "raises up the family gate." This means that he uplifts the Igyō School of Zen.

This requires remembering the story of the South Mountain. In other words, don't forget what Isan said: "Today, many people are cutting reeds on the South Mountain." That means: Don't remain stuck in views of emptiness. This is an important point, and we shouldn't forget it, the verse tells us.

Carving it in the bones and impressing it on the skin to mutually repay the debt of gratitude. This final line of the verse says we should impress this on our hearts and take it to heart in order to repay our debt of gratitude to the Buddha. For Kyōzan it means not forgetting his debt of gratitude to his own master Isan. At any rate, please take the time to savor and appreciate this intimacy between master and student, between Isan and Kyōzan, an intimacy that does not allow a single drop of water to seep through.