

CASE 68

***Kassan Brandishes the Sword***

By *Yamada Kōun*



*Instruction:*

The emperor's decree inside the land of his direct control;  
The general's command outside the walled regions.  
Sometimes one gets power at the gate;  
Sometimes one is sublime in the room.  
Just tell me, who is this?

*Case:*

A monk asked Kassan, "What if one sweeps away the dust and sees Buddha?" Kassan said, "You must brandish your sword. If you do not brandish your sword, the fisherman dwells in a nest of reeds<sup>1</sup>."

The monk mentioned this to Sekisō and asked him, "What if one sweeps away the dust and sees Buddha?" Sekisō said, "He has no land<sup>2</sup> [to dwell in]. Where could one meet him?"

The monk reported this to Kassan. Kassan ascended the rostrum and said, "As for the facilities at the gate<sup>3</sup>, the old monk<sup>4</sup> is superior to Sekisō, but for deep discourse expounding the true principle he is one hundred steps ahead of me."

*Verse:*

The *kō* of the sword that banishes the Altair,  
The power that washes [and invigorates] the army:  
To whom belongs the merit of pacifying disorders?  
Weird dust, once raised, clears over the four oceans;

***On the Instruction:***

Today's koan concerns Kassan and Sekisō. When you examine this koan, one has the feeling that Kassan has abilities more associated with the Rinzai School, although he was

<sup>1</sup> That is, unable to catch a single fish.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., "country, realm."

<sup>3</sup> Concrete teaching means and devices in Zen.

<sup>4</sup> I.e., "I."

<sup>5</sup> A word that rejects proper translation; it means something like: spirit, sharp spiritual energy, etc.

actually of the Soto lineage. Sekisô was also of the Soto tradition. The two persons had a rather close relationship to each other. This matter of dharma succession is treated in greater detail in Yasutani Roshi's *Soliloquy on the Book of Equanimity* (Shôyôroku Dokugo), which includes a lineage chart at the end of the book. As is always the case, the Introduction (Japanese: shiju) has its sights set on the Main Case in presenting the ultimate of Buddhism. It preaches the ultimate matter of Buddhism while keeping its sights set on the Main Case. Let us look now at the first lines of the Instruction.

The emperor's decree inside the land of his direct control;

The general's command outside the walled regions. These words appear often in Zen texts. The "land of his direct control" would be familiar to the Japanese as the Kinki region, which originally meant the region that was near the imperial palace. The characters "kanchû" are used in the Introduction to indicate that region. The word Kinki in Japanese was indicated formerly as "Gokinai" or the five regions under imperial jurisdiction. The present-day Kinki region includes a number of modern prefectures. These were originally the areas that were under the direct control of the Emperor. To say "the emperor's decree inside the land of his direct control" means in the case of our koan a place that is governed by itself without your having to do anything.

As for the second line, "outside the walled regions" means outside the castle, in other words, the regions not under the jurisdiction of the emperor. In ancient times, rulers relied on military force to keep order. Peace was maintained by the general's command. If you ask what connection this has with Zen, you can see the land under the emperor's direct control as your true self. It is the essential world, the true fact. This is the world where "not a speck of cloud obscures the view." It comes to peace of its own accord without doing anything. Even though you do not do a thing, not a single wave is raised to disturb the peace. There is no need to rely on the military might of the general. This is talking about the world of our true nature. In terms of a koan, or in terms of counting the breaths, it is known as Mu or the "sitting place of the self." It comes to peace on its own.

Meanwhile, the area "outside the walled regions" means the phenomenal world, which does not come to peace on its own. Rather than the world of satori, you could see it as the world of samadhi power (jôriki). Although it might seem that the land of direct control and the region outside the walls are two different things, we are simply making a division into two for the sake of explanation. Actually, however, they are one. The world of the true self and the phenomenal world, the world of emptiness and the world of form. The *Heart Sutra* says: Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is no other than form."

It says that there is a truly outstanding Zen master.

Sometimes one gets power at the gate;

Sometimes one is sublime in the room. The "gate" means the area outside the walled regions. If we consider this in terms of the castle, it means taking a step into the world of phenomena. To gain power means to quell all concepts in the mind through the power of

samadhi. To say “one is sublime in the room” means sitting in total peace in the world of one’s own essence. It is the world of satori, the world of “Above and below heaven I alone am honored” (tenjô-tenge yuiga dokusan). The verse says it is very hard to come by a person who has both of these aspects. This is indicating the Main Case. The two lines of the Introduction are talking about the same single person. If we look at this in connection with the Main Case, it would seem that the line about “getting power at the gate” is referring more to Kassan, while the second line about “sublime in the room” is referring perhaps more to Sekisô. If you make such a division into two, there is some sense in seeing it that way, but when we simply examine the Introduction by itself, it seems to say that there is a single outstanding Zen master who possesses both those powers.

Just tell me, who is this? Who possesses such wonderful powers? The Main Case is not about one persons, but two, one being Kassan and the other being Sekisô.

### ***On the Case:***

A monk asked Kassan, “What if one sweeps away the dust and sees Buddha?” “Dust” can be understood as meaning all concepts and discriminating thoughts. One sweeps away all such “dust” and sees Buddha for the first time. “How is it then?” the monk asks. As long as your head is filled with all sorts of thoughts, you cannot meet up with your true self. It is only when you clear away all such delusive thoughts that you meet your true self for the first time. This is known as kensho or satori.

Kassan said, “You must brandish your sword. If you do not brandish your sword, the fisherman dwells in a nest of reeds.” What a bold statement! He is saying, in effect, you must cut that Buddha in two with a single stroke of your sword. “What? You have met Buddha? Cut that Buddha in two!” Why does Kassan say such a thing? “Buddha” is also a concept. He says that if you do not brandish your sword, “the fisherman dwells in a nest of reeds.” The fisherman plies his boat into an area of reeds, hoping to catch fish there, and his boat gets caught in the reeds. In this case, too, you must cut away those reeds. In other words, unless you immediately cut off that idea of Buddha, it will become an impediment to you, and you will lose your true freedom. Even though you may be able to expound Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist philosophy, you cannot be saved by it. Nowadays the word “setsuzen” (literally, “explaining Zen”) is making the rounds, as people deliver all sorts of lectures about Zen. But such people know nothing of true Zen. People who have not experienced the pain in their legs that comes from sitting in Zen practice cannot be said to know anything about Zen. Although it’s not good to speak ill of others, there is the great Zen scholar Daisetsu Suzuki. I have several books of his in my library that were published by Iwanami Publishers as small paperbacks. Although he writes about all sorts of difficult matters, I do not know of a single person who came to enlightenment as a result of reading Suzuki-sensei’s books. I think I can state that unashamedly. If someone feels they have, I ask them to show me that experience. That’s how strongly I feel about this. No matter how much you might study in intellectual knowledge, that

will never lead to satori.

I myself formerly believed I could find the truth by reading books about Zen. But what you have in books is merely the shadow of the truth, a shadow of the real thing. In the days following the Pacific War, a time when I had little money, I would roam the used bookstores looking for books on Zen, believing there was something to find in those books. When I brought these books back home, I would be scolded by my wife. “What are you doing buying old books, when we hardly have enough to live on?!” she would say. In the process I got to know just about every used bookstore in Tokyo! It took quite a number of years for me to realize that you can’t find the truth in books. No satori will result from simply reading a book about Zen. It was then that I felt keenly the necessity of practicing zazen. But then it took several years more before I finally could practice under a true teacher. Nevertheless, all those books I bought back then were not worthless. When your eye of satori has opened and you have finished koan study and are faced with the task of leading others in Zen practice, those books can be of great benefit. Even though people may realize the same truth of Zen, it makes a big difference if you have learning or not when you are leading others in practice. This is a very clear difference. When you are guiding others in practice, you also need the power of learning. Such depth of learning is important and is what will attract others to you. In that sense, it is by no means a waste of time to devote yourself to study. Nevertheless, study alone is not true Zen. It’s important to have a good understanding of this state of affairs. Nowadays there are many people giving lectures or writing books on Zen, but most of the persons writing such interpretations have not experienced the pain in the legs that comes from earnestly practicing zazen. Persons who have not experienced the pain in their legs from earnest sitting are hardly in a position to understand true Zen. In that sense, when it comes to given interpretations of the concept of “Buddha,” there are all manner of things you can say. But the true Buddha cannot be known. The monk then goes to Sekisō and relates what transpired during his encounter with Kassan.

The monk mentioned this to Sekisō and asked him, “What if one sweeps away the dust and sees Buddha?” Sekisō said, “He has no land [to dwell in]. Where could one meet him?” To “sweep away the dust” means to sweep away all concepts and to mean Buddha face to face. This time Sekisō presents him with the real thing.

Sekisō said, “He has no land [to dwell in]” “What? Buddha?” he seems to say. “Where does Buddha live?” There is no place he lives in. Where can you ever meet him? Buddha is empty. Buddha is inside you. You might think this means that this is limited to your physical body, but if we state it outright we can say that Buddha’s land is the entire universe. But it’s important to realize that the content is empty. It cannot be grasped with our five senses. This is what is meant by the statement “He has no land [to dwell in].” So we can never meet up with Buddha no matter where we go. That is the true Buddha. As I am repeatedly saying, in Christianity, too, there is the saying “the Kingdom of God is within you.” But don’t assume that means simply inside this physical body. It pervades the entire universe. But it seems that many people hear this statement and assume that there is something like a God dwelling in our

individual bodies. In one sense, that's also not wrong. For example consider it in terms of life. My life is not something outside of me but definitely something within me. But what is it? Life is truly incomprehensible and wondrous. That which pervades the entire universe appears precisely here. The same holds for mountains, rivers, grasses and trees. But no one knows why there is something called life. I am not familiar with the actual situation for theology, but if people assume that they know all about God, they are gravely in error. There is a world that is completely unknowable.

I remember reading a story in a book written by Masaharu Taniguchi, the founder of the religious organization *Seicho-No-Ie*<sup>6</sup>. We live in a three dimensional world with the three dimensions of length, width and height. But imagine a world of only dimensions and lacking the dimension of height. Then there is only length and width. The story imagines such a world and writes about different things in such a world. For example, occasionally it becomes soaking wet in that world. For us persons living in a three dimensional world, we know that the rain falls from above and that the ground becomes wet. But if there is no height in your world, you have no way of knowing why it occasionally becomes wet. They have no explanations for this occurrence. So those people in that flat world wrack their brains trying to come up with an answer to this problem. That's our philosophers, who similarly think about this and that. But such thinking is just so much delusive thought, it is nothing but conceptual thinking. The people in that world actually don't know why it becomes wet from time to time. And some of them become completely neurotic or even go crazy trying to find an answer, since they're only thinking of such matters. Finally the people of that country promulgate a law saying that is forbidden to think of such matters. The situation is no different in our three dimensional world. Albert Einstein has also proclaimed that things are not limited to our three dimensional world. He says that that there is a world of endless dimensions which is unknowable to persons knowing only of the world of three dimensions. It is a matter of humbly accepting that which we cannot understand. Such a humble spirit is required. If we blithely assume that human knowledge can know everything, we are sadly mistaken.

There is the book entitled *Anonkurausu*? which I have received from someone. Even in Christianity people are aware that there is a world we cannot know. Especially when it comes to the matter of life, we cannot know. Why is there such a thing? We have no idea. This is what is meant by the statement: He has no land to dwell in. Just to say come out and say there is a place might be presumptuous. So he says, "Where could one meet him?" Where are you going to meet him, he asks the monk.

The monk reported this to Kassan. Kassan ascended the rostrum and said, "As for the facilities at the gate, the old monk is superior to Sekisō, but for deep

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<sup>6</sup> **Seicho-no-Ie** is a syncretic, nondenominational, monotheistic, New Thought religion, one of the Shinshūkyō (or new religious movements) in Japan that have spread since the end of World War II. It emphasizes gratitude for nature, the family, ancestors and, above all, religious faith in one universal God, inheriting its basic characteristics from Buddhism, Christianity and Shinto. Seicho-no-Ie is the world's largest New Thought group. The phrase means "The Home of Infinite Life, Wisdom and Abundance".

discourse expounding the true principle he is one hundred steps ahead of me.” The monk went back to Kassan and told him about this exchange with Sekisô. “Deep discourse expounding the true principle” means the true fact. The character “ri” can sometimes have the meaning of “logical” but in Zen texts it often means the true fact itself. So Kassan says he is no match for Sekisô when it comes to the true fact.

*On the Verse:*

The ki of the sword that banishes the Altair,  
The power that washes [and invigorates] the army.

To whom belongs the merit of pacifying disorders? There is a story behind these lines. Yasutani Roshi tells the story very skillfully in his teisho on this koan, so I will reproduce his version here.

The character for “ox” in the first line means the star Altair, which is known in Japanese as the “oxherd star.” Together with the North Star it is known as “Togyû.” Regarding the “sword that banishes the Altair” there is the following story, which reportedly appears in the historical work known as the Annals of the Jin Dynasty. In ancient times there lived the great astronomer Lei Huan. When observing the area around the Togyû star group, there was always an unusual “chi” or spirit penetrating heaven and hearth, which he considered strange. Around that same time, a man named Zhang Hua became aware of the same phenomenon and had Lei Huan come to study that strange “chi.” In explaining the reason for this phenomenon, Lei Huan said that the spirit of a jeweled sword had ascended into heaven. Zhang Hua then made Lei Huan the governor of the territory Yuzhang. A prison where that *chi* arose was being refurbished and the cornerstone was excavated, whereupon a stone box was unearthed, which when opened revealed a jeweled sword. From this outstanding sword arose a kind of spirit up into heaven. The reason why this story is cited here is to praise Kassan’s statement in the koan: “You must brandish your sword.”

The second part about “the power that washes [and invigorates] the army” also has its origin in an ancient story. When King Wu of Zhou was about to send a punitive expedition against King Zhou of Shang, the sky, which had been clear up to then, suddenly clouded and rain began to fall. San Xuansheng, a fortune-teller, said, “Isn’t this a portentous sign of calamity? We should cease battle.” But King Wu was stubborn and would hear nothing of quitting. He said, “No. Heaven is washing the troops.” Whereupon he urged his troops on and eventually defeated King Zhou’s armies. This is cited in reference to Kassan, who uses force to push forward. In Zen terms you could say that the Verse is referring to the samadhi power (*jôriki*) to push on with the practice of Mu. This tendency in some Zen circles to act with samadhi power is especially prevalent in the Rinzai School. The monks in the Rinzai school practice Mu with great force and sometimes let out a great cry of “Kaatz!” Nevertheless, it is surprisingly difficult to come to true realization with such forceful methods. Unless I explain why this is so, it might be quite difficult to understand, but since there is no time for that now, I

will do it at another opportunity. Simply using physical force when practicing Zen is definitely not enough. There must also be the aspect of quietly entering into the practice. This could be said to be more the hallmark of the Soto School. All sorts of thoughts and ideas appear in our heads. Then you might be tempted to use force to brush those thoughts away. This might be seen to be one possible method. This is expressed in the phrase “sweeping away the dust and seeing the Buddha.” One rids oneself of all concepts and realizes kensho. One sweeps away the dust to realize this. Because the dust disappears when you become one with the practice, when it comes to the practice of Mu, people attempt to become one with Mu. That might be the case in the Rinzai School, but in the Soto School rather than trying to brush away the dust, it is a matter of clearly realizing that the content of that dust is empty. In other words, it’s not a matter of eliminating thoughts and then meeting the Buddha. It’s more a matter of clearly realizing that those thoughts are empty. Dōgen Zenji’s experience of “body and mind fallen away” is such a case. There is a subtle difference between these two. The satori of Zen is to clearly realize that all things are zero and thus one. If you clearly realize that they are zero, you also realize that they are one. Even though you might have an understanding of oneness, this aspect of “zero” is hard to come by. This is a very subtle difference. In our zendo we do not emphasize putting force into the practice. Instead people are told to persevere in quiet practice and clearly realize emptiness.

Weird dust, once raised, clears over the four oceans; The verse speak of “weird dust” to describe our concepts and thoughts, which are strange and dubious spirit. The Japanese word *yōki* refers to something that is somehow spooky or creepy. For example, even in this same single room there are times when it has a happy and harmonious atmosphere. It is the hearts of the persons in the room that make it so. The very same place can sometimes have a truly peaceful atmosphere and a disturbed atmosphere. This is a matter of *ki* (Chinese: *chi*). A study of this *chi* force is one area of research in Eastern thought. For example, there is the martial arts form known as Aikido. The “*ki*” in Aikido is the same character meaning spirit. Here it is a matter of studying what this *chi* is. Traditional Western thought does not speak in terms of such a spiritual force or power. If you wish to understand Eastern thinking, you have to study this matter of *chi* or *ki*. Although I myself have not done any research on this matter, I have a friend who is engaged in such research. He is a great Aikido adept. In the midst of furious battle, delusive thoughts fill the atmosphere, so that a weird spirit rises. Although it was filled with the dust of concepts, everything has now come to perfect silence, so that the four seas are cleared and everything comes to peace. This peace can refer to Kassan cutting away all concepts, but also to Sekisō clearly seeing the world of emptiness. I feel these lines are referring to both persons. Although the dust raised by soldiers and horses is thick, the dust of delusive thoughts, so that a strange spirit or whirling dusts flies up, now the four seas are peaceful and clear. This is the condition where everything has come to peace and all delusive ideas have come to silence, so that there is nothing more to say.

With the robe hanging down, the emperor rules naturally, doing nothing.

This reference to “the robe hanging down” comes originally from words referring to the ancient sainted emperors: There were the three early rulers (huang) followed by five emperors (di), the last two of whom were Yao and Shun. Such sainted rulers would never have worn the armor of a warrior. They were always dressed in civilian dress. The general may don armor, but the sainted emperors Yao and Shun would never do such a thing. The words “with the robe hanging down” refer to this wearing of ordinary clothes and no armor. And such an emperor rules naturally, so that the world is governed. In the last analysis this is a matter of the power of virtue. The true ruler is one who does nothing, but the kingdom naturally comes to peace. In his teisho to this koan, Yasutani Roshi says that when the Yellow Emperors Yao and Shun let their robes hang down, the world naturally comes to peace. The original text uses the expression *mui* (Chinese: *wu-wei*) or “doing nothing” to express how the world naturally comes to peace without anyone having to do anything. It is not a matter of physical force but rather the power of virtue. I sometimes recall the Japanese Emperor. I personally feel that the Emperor is foremost in Japan in terms of personality or character. There is no one who is his equal. There is no sense of an egoistic self. That's why I consider him foremost among Japanese. In former times, however, he wore a military uniform and was known as Daigensui-Heika (Great Commanding Emperor). Yasutani Roshi writes, however, that it would have been better if the Emperor had never worn a military uniform. If the ruler wears civilian clothes, the world will naturally come to peace. Of course, it might be necessary to don a uniform and do the work of a general, but as the virtue of the ruler increases, the country will be governed naturally. If a person of outstanding virtue is present, the surrounding atmosphere will become peaceful and arguments will cease. Please take the time to savor these words of the koan.