

**A DISCUSSION OF MODEL SUBJECT NO. 51  
FROM THE *BLUE CLIFF RECORD (HEKIGANROKU)*  
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NOT VERBATIM

***SEPPŌ'S "WHAT IS IT?"***

Seppō was a good example of a well-trained Zen Master. "Three times a visitor to Tōsu and nine times an attendant to Tōzan" became one of the catchwords of Zen practice signifying Seppō's hard discipline.

He was born in 822 and died in 908 near the end of the Tang Dynasty. The Emperor was killed by Shuzenchu in 904. The next and last Emperor of the Tang Dynasty, supported by this traitor, lasted for only four years. A dark restless period followed the Tang Dynasty. A severe persecution occurred when Seppō was twenty years old (845). Metalware throughout the land was turned into coin, including temple bells and images of Buddha. 4,600 temples were destroyed, 26,500 priests and nuns were cast out of the order along with 2,000 priests of other religions except Taoist.

The other principal character of this model subject, Gantō (828-887), was killed by a mob. He was a good friend of Seppō, and they had both been born in the province of Fukien. Both went on long, hard pilgrimages from northeast to southeast China, visiting many famous masters. As stated, they are said to have visited Tosu Daido three times and Tōzan Ryokai (Sōtō School) nine times. You may imagine how hard they practiced.

Later they were handed down Tokusan Senkan's transmission. When Seppō was 44 and Gantō 38, they left Tokusan and started pilgrimages again. At Gosanchin they were caught in a heavy snowstorm. Seppō was sitting all the while Gantō was sleeping. Gantō said to him, "This village is like a fortified town, why don't you sleep?" Seppō, rubbing his breast said, "I do not feel easy in my heart." Gantō answered, "Please tell me one by one what you have acquired."

Seppō told Gantō what he had experienced under Tōzan and Tokusan, but Gantō did not agree and said, "The treasures that come from outside are not your family treasures." Seppō was enlightened by this statement. He was 44 years old.

The following year they left with Kinzan Bunsui, their best friend who had become Tōzan's disciple, for further study at Rinzai's temple. On the way they heard that Rinzai had died. Gantō went on to Ryuzan near Lake Dotei, Kinzan went back to his temple, and Seppō returned

to the south.

When Seppō was 47 he secluded himself at a stone cave which had been the first residence of his old master Reikun. When he was 54 he had his own temple beautifully built on the top of a mountain. At the age of 60 he had 1050 students, one of whom was Ummon, founder of the Ummon School. A purple robe was presented to him by Emperor Kiso. His posthumous name is Shinkaku-daishi (Great Master Shinkaku).

### ***Introductory Word by Engo***

Engo, introducing the subject, said, "If you are caught by the slightest idea of good and bad, your mind (true mind, essence of mind) will be lost in the realm of disorder. If you do not have an idea of the order of stages, there will be no purpose in your practice. Now which do you think is better, to pursue the relative way or to resume to the absolute?"

[Note:<sup>1</sup> The relative form and color that you see now are the conditioned attributes of the unconditioned—constant—absolute. The absolute is the eternal unconditionally that gives rise to the conditioned, relative ways of practice. What you see now is the eternal unconditionality of the absolute and the momentous conditioned relative. Actually the positive or relative way is not different from the negative or absolute way. Even though you follow the order of the stages in your actual practice, if each relative stage—even the first stage—is brought out in full relief against the darkness of the absolute, and if there is no fumbling and groping in your practice under the right teacher, then your practice is already in the realm of Reality. Each relative stage bears the full meaning of the absolute, and the absolute reveals its actual meaning in the relative practice. If you wish to understand this secret, you must study under the right teacher not only by words but also by actual conduct on each moment under particular circumstances.]

To continue with Engo's introduction, he said, "If you become attached to some particular way of expressing Zen, captivated by something told in words or verse, attached to some method of instruction (scolding voice, slapping face, seizing by the collar and casting off, drawing a circle, lifting up one finger, etc.) you are nothing better than the parasitic weeds wrapped around dead trees. Even if a man thinks that he is living in the land of the Tathāgata itself, when he is possessed by the idea of this land or that land, he is said to be watching the moon of his old home which is now ten thousand miles away. Well, have you understood what I am saying? If not, here is an actual kōan for you to ponder."

<sup>1</sup> This note was probably added by Richard Baker.

## **Main Subject**

When Seppō was in his hermitage on Mount Seppō, two unnamed monks visited him and bowed to him (what is the bow). Seppō saw them coming, pushed open his gate, jumped out, and said, "What is it?" (An indicative question<sup>2</sup>, a question and yet an answer, do you understand the real Seppō? Tell me what it is. "He is an iron flute with no holes," Engo said.) The two monks said, "What is it?" (The two monks did not fail to respond, but Engo says, "They are old sounding-boards covered by velvet." They were chalk and not cheese.) Seppō made a bow to them and went back to his room. (Engo said, "This is not a dragon because it has no legs, but it is certainly not a snake because it has no horns." I say, "What is it?")

The two monks later extended their travels to visit Gantō in Gantō Mountain. Gantō said, "Where did you come from?" (Gantō has already caught them.) The monks said, "We are from Reinan." (Be quick and give him a right answer.) Gantō said, "Then you must have met Seppō, haven't you?" (It is very kind of him to wait for their right answer.) The monks said, "Yes we have." (He was not asking them yes or no, but whether they had understood the actual Seppō.) Gantō said, "What did he say?" They told him all about what had happened when they visited Seppō. Gantō said, "What did he say after all?" thus requesting their final answer. But they said, "He did not say anything." He bowed and went back to his room. Thereupon Gantō said, "Oh, what have I done? When I was at Tokusan with him, I should have let him know the verse of my dying bed. If only I had told him that, he would not have been thrown into such confusion." (Although Gantō mentioned Seppō's name, he actually meant to give the monks his own last word. Then, what is his last word?)

The two monks were allowed to spend the summer at Gantō's monastery. At the end of the session, the two monks asked Gantō's instruction about the meaning of Seppō's unusual behavior and what Gantō had meant by: "How I wish I had told him my last word." Gantō said, "Why did you not ask me before?" They said, "Because we thought your last word too valuable to ask about." Thereupon Gantō said, "Seppō is a fellow countryman of mine. He and I always went on pilgrimages together, yet we will not die together. If you want to know my last word for Seppō and you, I will tell you what it was. It is nothing but: 'This is it.'"

Wherever Seppō and Gantō might be, however long they might live as the best friend of each other, what Seppō did is actual Seppō, and

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<sup>2</sup> Indicative: (gram.) stating a thing as a fact, not as conception, wish, etc., of speaker; suggestive, giving indications [*Oxford English Dictionary*]. [Note attributed to Richard Baker.]

what Gantō did is actual Gantō. "This is it" should always be the last word for oneself and for others.

Dōgen-zenji said, "Breathing in or breathing out, after all, what is it?" No one can tell what it is.

Now, you may not be calm or patient enough to wait for the right answer, but let us ask ourselves if our activity is either subjective or objective. Let me point to this: What do we mean by "it"? Do you mean breathing itself or the idea of breathing? If you mean the idea of breathing, it will be another matter. If you mean breathing itself each moment, you have solved the problem already when you breathe in and out on each moment in calmness with Big Mind. Now, you will understand that the right answer to "What is it?" should always be "This is it."

Gantō was killed soon after leaving his last word to his friend Seppō.

This translation and commentary are my poor offering to these two great masters.

### ***Appreciatory Word by Setchō***

Referring to Gantō's last words to Seppō,  
I will ask you, Enlightened Mind,  
Is daytime different from nighttime or the same?  
Even though they lived fully acquainted with each other  
In complete companionship,  
They were to die in different places. Yes.  
They should die in different ways.

Buddha should have curled hair,  
Bodhidharma should be blue-eyed.  
From East, West, South, and North let us  
Come back to our old home,  
In a midnight sky to see  
A plain white  
Mountain covered with snow.

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This transcript is a retyping of the existing City Center transcript (thought to have been based on notes by Baker-rōshi), with minor editorial changes. It is not verbatim. No tape is available. The City Center transcript was entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. This lecture was published in *Wind Bell*, June 1964, Vol. III (No. 5), pp. 4–6. It was last reformatted by Bill Redican on 3/13/01.