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A DISCUSSION OF MODEL SUBJECT NO. 51
from The Blue Cliff Records (*Hekiganroku*)

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY REV. S. SUZUKI, ZEN MASTER, ZEN CENTER

SEPPO'S "WHAT IS IT?"

Seppo was a good example of a well-trained Zen Master. "Three times a visitor to Tosu and nine times an attendant to Tozai" became one of the catch-words of Zen practice signifying Seppo'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 Seppo 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, Ganto (828-887), was killed by a mob. He was a good friend of Seppo 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 Tozen Ryokai (Soto School) nine times. You may imagine how hard they practiced.

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

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

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

When Seppo 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 who was Unmon, founder of the Unmon 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: The relative form and color that you see now are the conditioned attributes of the unconditioned --constant--absolute. The absolute is the eternal unconditionality 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 Tathagata 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 Koan for you to ponder."

Main Subject

When Seppo was in his hermitage on Mount Seppo, two unnamed monks visited him and bowed to him (what is the bow). Seppo saw them coming, pushed open his gate, jumped out, and said, "What is it?" (An indicative question¹, a question and yet an answer, do you understand the real Seppo? 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.) Seppo 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 Ganto in Ganto Mountain. Ganto said, "Where did you come from?" (Ganto has already caught them.) The monks said, "We are from Reinan." (Be quick and give him a right answer.) Ganto said, "Then you must have met Seppo, 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 Seppo.) Ganto said, "What did he say?" They told him all about what had happened when they visited Seppo. Ganto 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 Ganto 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 Ganto mentioned Seppo'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 Ganto's monastery. At the end of the session, the two monks asked Ganto's instruction about the meaning of Seppo's unusual behavior and what Ganto had meant by: How I wish I had told him my last word. Ganto said, "Why did you not ask me that before?" They said, "Because we thought your last word too valuable to ask about." Thereupon Ganto said, "Seppo 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 Seppo and you, I will tell you what it was. It is nothing but: This is it."

Wherever Seppo and Ganto might be, however long they might live as the best friend of each

¹ Indicative: (gram.) stating a thing as a fact, not as conception, wish, etc., of speaker; suggestive, giving indications. --Oxford Dictionary.

other, what Seppo did is actual Seppo and what Ganto did is actual Ganto. "This is it" should always be the last word for oneself and for others.

Dogen Zengi 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 on 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.'

Ganto was killed soon after leaving his last word to his friend Seppo.

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

Appreciatory Word by Setcho

Referring to Ganto's last word to Seppo,
 I will ask you, Enlightened Mind,
 In 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 mid-night sky to see
 A plain white
 Mountain covered with snow.