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Shoyoroku - 9 - NANQUAN KILLS A CAT

INTRODUCTION

Kick over the ocean and dust flies on the earth; scatter the clouds with shouts, and empty space shatters. Strictly executing the true imperative is still half the issue; as for the complete manifestation of the great function, how do you carry it out?

CASE

One day at Nanquan's the eastern and western halls were arguing over a cat. When Nanquan saw this, he took and held it up and said, "If you can speak I won't cut it."

The group had no reply; Nanquan then cut the cat in two. Nanquan also brought up the foregoing incident to Zhaozhou and asked him: Zhaozhou immediately took off his sandals, put them on his head, and left. Nanquan said, "If you had been here you could have saved the cat."

COMMENTARY

Chan Master Yuantong Xiu of Fayun saw two monks standing together talking; he took his staff, went up to them and hit the ground several times with the staff and said, "A piece of karmic ground." How much the more so in the case of the leaders of the groups in the two halls, who got into an argument over a cat; Nanquan didn't offer them forgiveness or encouragement, nor did he give them admonition and punishment— a genuine man of the Way, he used the fundamental matter to help people; holding up the cat, he said, "If you can say a word I won't cut it." At that moment all sentient and inanimate beings in the whole universe are alike in Nanquan's hands begging for their lives. At that point, if there had been someone who came forward and either extended open hands or else grabbed him by the chest and held him tight and said, "After all, we sympathize with the Master's spiritual work," even if Nanquan had specially carried out the true imperative, I dare say (that person) would have been able to save the cat. But this den of dead rats had no energy at all; once Nanquan held forth, he wouldn't withdraw, and acted out the order to the full.

Eminent Xin of the Liao dynasty wrote the Mirror Mind Collection, in which he criticizes Nanquan's group for killing a living being, committing wrongdoing. Head Monk Wen wrote Discerning Errors in the 'Inexhaustible Lamp' in which he helped (Nanquan) out, saying, "An ancient text has it that he just made the gesture of cutting—how could he have simply cut it in two with one stroke, sending fresh blood gushing?" In these two critiques of the ancient, Mr. Wen's fault is the graver, whereas Mr. Xin's fault is the lesser.

As ever, Nanquan was shaking his head and wagging his tail in a herd of water buffalo. Haven't you read how as Chan Master Fori was having tea with his group he saw a cat coming and tossed a dove from his sleeve, giving it to the cat, which took it and went away. Fori said, "Excellent!" This too cannot be false contrivance of empty action. Nanquan thought to himself that 'where the tune is lofty, few join in'—reciting the preceding story to Zhaozhou, he questioned him about it, whereupon Zhaozhou took off his sandals, put them on his head, and went out. After all, drumming and singing go together; clapping the interval was accomplished perfectly—Nanquan said, "If you had been here you could have saved the cat." Although this little bit of activity is difficult to understand, yet it is easy to see—just see through it in lifting the spoon and picking up chopsticks, and you will see that the cutting of the cat and the wearing of the sandals on the head are not any different. Otherwise, look again; what tricks has Tiantong specially created?

VERSE

*The monks of both halls were all arguing;
Old Teacher Nanquan was able to show up true and false.
Cutting through with a sharp knife, all oblivious of formalities,
For a thousand ages he makes people admire an adept.
This path has not perished—
A connoisseur is to be lauded.
In tunneling through mountains to let the sea pass through,
only Great Yu is honored:
In smelting rock and mending the sky, only Guonu is considered best.
Old Zhaozhou had a life:
Wearing sandals on his head, he attains a bit.
Coming in differences, still clearly mirroring;
Only this real gold is not mixed with sand.*

COMMENTARY

"All the monks of both halls were arguing"—up till now they have never settled their controversy. If not for Tiantong understanding how Nan-quan's example evinces the whole from a clue, time and again the mistaken and the correct would not be distinguished. When the false and the true are distinct, how do you judge them? Then you should cut them off with a sharp sword and bury them in one pit. This will not only put an end to a whole lifetime's unfinished business, it will also cause the breeze to be pure throughout the land for a thousand ages.

At Nanquan's the teacher was excellent, the apprentice strong; seeing the group had nothing to say, he recounted it to Zhaozhou, to show that there was a man in the crowd. Zhaozhou took off his sandals, put them on his head and walked out—after all "this path has not perished—a connoisseur is to be lauded." Confucius said, "Heaven is not about to destroy this culture." Observe how the paths of teacher and apprentice merged, singing and clapping following along with each other; nothing can compare.

In the method for making illustrative posthumous names it says that the flowing through of the fountainhead of the spring is called Yu. Also being the beneficiary of abdication and accomplishing good works is called Yu. In the classic geography *The Contributions of King Yu*, it says, "He led the river from Rock Mass Mountain to Dragon Gate Gorge." According to the book of Huainan, "The army of the Gonggong clan was strong and violent, and they contended with king Yao; when their strength was exhausted they ran up against the Buzhou Mountains and died. Because of this the pillar of heaven broke; the goddess Guonu smelted five-color stones to repair the sky." Liezi says, "When the positive and negative principles lose balance, that is called 'lack'—smelting the essence of the five constants is called repairing."

Master Ben of Yungai brought up the story of Dongshan taking away the fruit tray from the head monk Tai and said, "Though Dongshan has the mallet to shatter the void, still he doesn't have the needle and thread to mend it."

Nanquan is like great Yu, who dug through the mountains to let the sea pass through, manifesting extraordinary actions: Zhaozhou is like Guonu smelting stones to repair the sky; he finished the story.

I say, Zhaozhou was able to break up the home and scatter the family eighteen times; I don't know how many lives he had. Wearing sandals on his head amounts to something—tsk! tsk! there's nowhere to go, acting this way.

Baofu Corigzhan said, "Even though he's right, it's just worn-out sandals; Nanquan leveled the high and spoke to the low—"If you had been here, you could have saved the cat."

Cuiyan Zhi said, "Even the great Zhaozhou could only save himself." He passed up the first move.

Tiantong said, "Coming in differences, still clearly mirroring; only this real gold is not mixed with sand." He only can push the boat along with the stream; he doesn't know how to steer against the wind.

And now this bunch of you are here, and we have no cat; what dog shall we argue over?

(Wansong chased them out with his staff.)

ADDED SAYINGS: CASE

The eastern and western halls were arguing over a cat—People on an even level don't speak, water on an even level doesn't flow.

"If you can speak, I won't cut it."—Who dares stand up to his blade?

The group had no reply—Wait till rain douses your head.

Nanquan cut the cat in two—Once drawn, the sword is not sheathed.

Nanquan brought this up to Zhaozhou and asked him—a second try isn't worth half a cent.

Zhaozhou put his sandals on his head and left—Should cut in two with one sword for him.

"You could have saved the cat."—When the heart is crooked you don't realize the mouth is bent.

ADDED SAYINGS: VERSE

The monks of both halls were all arguing—If you have a reason, it's not a sayings: matter of shouting.

Nanquan was able to show up true and false—The clear mirror on its stand, when things come they're reflected in it.

Cutting through with a sharp knife, all oblivious of formalities—How much wind of the Dragon King does it take?

For a thousand ages he makes people admire an adept—There is one who doesn't agree.

This path has not perished—What use can the head of a dead cat be put to?

A connoisseur is to be lauded—I don't say there are none, just that they're few.

In tunneling through mountains to let the sea through, only great Yu is honored —The effort is not misspent.

In smelting rock to mend the sky, only Guonu is considered best—It won't do to lack one.

Old Zhaozhou had a life—Picking up whatever comes to hand, there's nothing that's not it.

Wearing sandals on his head, he attains a bit—For the moment I believe a half.

Coming in differences, still clearly mirroring—A wearer of the patch robe is hard to fool.

Only this real gold is not mixed with sand—This is truly impossible to destroy.

Nansen Kills a Cat

KOAN

Once the monks of the Eastern Hall and the Western Hall were disputing about a cat. Nansen, holding up the cat, said, "Monks, if you can say a word of Zen, I will spare the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it!" No monk could answer. Nansen finally killed the cat. In the evening, when Joshu came back, Nansen told him of the incident. Joshu took off his sandal, put it on his head, and walked off. Nansen said, "If you had been there, I could have saved the cat!"*

MUMON'S COMMENTARY

You tell me, what is the real meaning of Joshu's putting his sandal on his head? If you can give the turning words on this point, you will see that Nansen's action was not in vain. If you cannot, beware!

MUMON'S POEM

Had Joshu only been there,
He would have taken action.
Had he snatched the sword away,
Nansen would have begged for his life.

TEISHO ON THE KOAN

This is a very famous koan in Zen circles, one that has been included in many Zen books because of the unusual story, which denies all rational or intellectual approaches. It is therefore extremely difficult for scholars, except those who themselves have gone through Zen training, to

understand the koan correctly. In most cases they interpret it from the standpoint of ethics alone, or from a common-sense point of view, since they do not have the authentic Zen eye and experience to grasp the essence.

Once more I should like to point out that koan are Zen Masters' sayings and doings in which they have freely and directly expressed their Zen experiences. We have to realize that they are fundamentally different from instructions in ethics and common sense. If we are not aware that koan belong to quite another dimension than the ethical or the prudential and practical activities of men, we shall forever be unable even to glimpse their real significance.

Some may criticize this statement by saying it implies that Zen ignores ethics and common sense. This is an extreme misunderstanding. Zen, on the contrary, frees us from our suffering and restraints caused by ethics and common sense. This does not mean to ignore or defy ethics and common sense, but to be the master of them and to make free and lively use of them. Unless this point is clearly understood, Zen sayings and doings can never be correctly appreciated.

The main figures in this koan are Nansen Fugan and his disciple Joshu Junen, two great Zen Masters who played active leading roles toward the end of the T'ang dynasty when Zen flourished most notably. In Hekigan-roku the same koan appears as two koan: "Nansen Kills a Cat," and "Joshu Puts a Sandal on His Head." In the Mumonkan it is introduced as a single koan.

"Once the monks of the Eastern Hall and the Western Hall were disputing about a cat. Nansen, holding up the cat, said, 'Monks, if you can say a word of Zen, I will spare the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it!' No monk could answer. Nansen finally killed the cat."

The first half of the koan quite simply states the incident. It is recorded that at the monastery where Master Nansen was the abbot, there were always hundreds of monks who had come to study under him. One day the monks staying at the Eastern Hall and the Western Hall were having a dispute about a cat. The koan does not tell us what the real issue of the dispute was, and there is no way for us to know it today. From the context it may be inferred that they were engaging in some speculative religious arguments referring to a cat.

Master Nansen happened to come across this dispute. His irresistible compassion as their teacher burst forth to smash up their vain theoretical arguments and open their spiritual eye to the Truth of Zen. He seized the cat in one hand, a big knife in the other, and cried out, "You monks, if you can speak a word of Zen, I will spare the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it right away!" He challenged the monks to the decisive fight.

Setting aside the monks at the Nansen Monastery, I ask you, "What is the word to save the cat in response to Nansen's demand?" The koan is asking for your answer which would stop Nansen from killing the cat. This is the key point in the first half of the koan. In actual training, the Master will press the monk: "How do you save the cat right now?" And if you hesitate even for a moment, the Master, in place of Nansen, will at once take decisive action.

Commenting on the koan, an old Buddhist said, "Even Nansen's knife can never kill the Fundamental Wisdom. It is ever alive even at this very moment." Even though this statement is undoubtedly true, it still smells of religious philosophy, for the term "Fundamental Wisdom" is an extremely philosophical expression which means "the Fundamental Truth that transcends all dualism." Master Nansen is actually holding up a cat in front of you. He is not inviting you to philosophical discussion or religious argument. If you refer to the Fundamental Wisdom, he will

demand, "Show me that cat of the Fundamental Wisdom right here!" He insists on seeing your Zen presentation.

Be no-self; be thoroughly no-self. When you are really no-self, is there a distinction between you and the world? You and the cat? You and Nansen? Is there a distinction between the cat killed and Nansen the killer? At any cost, first you have to be actually no-self; this is the first and the absolute requisite in Zen. The word to save the cat will then naturally come out of you like lightning. Actual training and experience are definitely needed in Zen.

There are seldom truly capable men, either in the past or today. Many disciples were there with Nansen, but none of them could speak out to meet their teacher's request. "No monk could answer," the koan says. Keeping back his tears, probably, Nansen "finally killed the cat." We can read from the word "finally"* with what a bleeding heart he killed it.

Be that as it may, "Nansen finally killed the cat" is a precipitous barrier in this koan which has to be broken through in actual training and discipline. The Zen Master will certainly grill the student, "What is the real meaning of Nansen's killing the cat?" If you are unable to give a concrete and satisfactory answer to him, your Zen eye is not opened. Only those who grasp the real meaning of killing the cat are the ones who can save the cat.

Master Toin said, "What Nansen killed was not only the cat concerned, but cats called Buddhas, cats called Patriarchs, are all cut away. Even the arayashiki, which is their abode, is completely cut away, and a refreshing wind is blowing throughout." Though rightly stated, it still sounds very much like an argumentative pretext not based on actual training and experience.

Master Seccho of Hekigan-roku commented on Nansen's killing the cat quite severely, "Fortunately Nansen took a correct action. A sword straightway cuts it in two! Criticize it as you like." However, referring to the comment, "A sword straightway cuts it in two!" Dogen said, "A sword straightway cuts it—no-cut!" and pointed out a quite different standpoint. In other words, he is asking us to see "it," which no sword can ever cut, in Nansen's work of Zen.

In my training days I took sanzen with my teacher who suddenly asked, "Setting aside Nansen's killing the cat, where is the dead cat cut by Nansen right now?" A moment's hesitation in replying to his severe demand would immediately result in thirty blows of his stick, for it would clearly show that neither Nansen's killing the cat nor Dogen's "A sword straightway cuts it—no-cut!" is really understood. Sanzen in Zen training is not so easy as outsiders may generally think.

A Zen man should be able freely to express and live his Zen in his killing, if he kills the cat. If the cat is killed, the whole universe is killed, and his Zen is at work in the dead cat. Otherwise he has not got even a glimpse of the real significance of this koan. Traditionally, he can never study Zen apart from his actual self—here, now. Intellectual and common-sense interpretations of koan may be possible, but they are all by-products.

The scene of the koan changes here. In the evening Joshu, well known as an outstanding monk under Nansen, came back to the monastery. Nansen told him what had happened while he was away. Hearing it, Joshu took off his sandal, put it on his head, and walked out of the room without a word. Nansen, seeing this, praised Joshu, saying, "If you had been with us there on that occasion, I could have saved the cat!" "The father well understands his child, and the child his father." They are in complete accord in silence.

Now, what is the real meaning of Joshu's putting a sandal on his head? Further, how can it save the cat? This is the vital point in the latter half of the koan. Here again, unfortunately, there are

hardly any books that show an authentic Zen point of view on what Joshu did, because these authors themselves have not actually broken through the barrier of Nansen's killing the cat.

Master Dogen very aptly said, "Death: just death all through—complete manifestation!" When you die, just die. When you just die thoroughly and completely, you will have transcended life and death. Then, for the first time, free and creative Zen life and work will be developed. There, cats and dogs, mountains and rivers, sandals and hats, will all transcend their old names and forms and be given new birth in the new world. This is the wonder of revival.

In this new world the old provisional names all lose their significance. Listen to an old Master who says,

A man passes over the bridge.

Lo! The bridge is flowing and the waters are unmoving.

It is said that Jesus Christ rose from death after his crucifixion. As I am not a Christian, I do not know the orthodox interpretation of the resurrection in Christianity. I myself believe, however, that Jesus' resurrection means to die in human flesh, and to revive as the Son of God transcending life and death. His resurrection means the advent of the Kingdom of God. It is the mysterious work of God to create the new and true world. There everybody, everything, lives in God, and all the provisional names and defilements of this earth are never found in the least.

Joshu availed himself of Nansen's killing the cat (i.e., the Great Death) as the opportunity for resurrection. Do not be deluded by old fixed names such as sandal or hat, a mountain or a river. A name is a temporary label given to Reality at one time at one place. Only when your attachments to such provisional given names are cast away will the Reality, the Truth, shine out. Joshu directly presented the Reality that can never be cut by anything. In this new world everything is revived with new significance. Why on earth do you have to cling to old provisional names? Joshu's action is the direct presentation of his Zen, which Master Nansen highly praised, saying, "If you had been there, I could have saved the cat!"

Master Shido Bunan illustrated the mystery of Zen working in his poem:

Die while alive, and be completely dead,

Then do whatever you will, all is good.

The first line, "Die while alive, and be completely dead," well describes Nansen's Zen at work, and the second line, "Then do whatever you will, all is good," refers to the working Zen of Joshu. Nansen's and Joshu's Zen are two yet one, one yet two. Master Mumon used this koan so that his disciples would grasp this mystery of Zen. Master Daito made the following poems on the koan. First, on "Nansen Kills a Cat":

Nansen seizes the cat: lo! one, two, three!

He kills it: behold, just solid iron!

Here all has been thoroughly cast away. The whole universe is just one finger. All has returned to One. Then, on "Joshu Puts a Sandal on His Head" Master Daito wrote:

Joshu goes with a sandal on his head: lo! three, two, one!

Heaven is earth; earth is heaven!

Where Absolute Subjectivity works, the old fixed ideas are of no avail. This is the world of Reality, or Truth, which transcends provisional names and labels, where everything is born anew with creative freedom.

TEISHO ON MUMON'S COMMENTARY

"You tell me, what is the real meaning of Joshu's putting his sandal on his head? If you can give the turning words on this point, you will see that Nansen's action was not in vain. If you cannot, beware!"

Master Mumon asks his disciples, "What is the real meaning of Joshu's putting his sandal on his head?" Master Daito, as I have quoted, admired the free working of Joshu in his poem, saying, "Heaven is earth; earth is heaven!" Where in the world is the source of this creative freedom? Cut, cut, cut! Cut everything away! When not only the cat, but Buddhist views and Dharma concepts are all cut away, leaving no trace behind, this creative freedom is yours. However, without actual hard searching and discipline you cannot expect to attain it. Mumon's address to his disciples is always from the standpoint of actual training. It is from this standpoint that he asks you to see the real significance of Nansen's action of Truth in Joshu's free presentation of Zen. In other words, he tells us to appreciate the wonder of resurrection in the fact of the Great Death. Then the killed cat will bloom in red as a flower; flow in blue as a stream. It is ever alive, not only with Master Joshu, but with you in your hand and in your foot today.

There is an old haiku poem in Japan:

A frog leaps into the water;
With that strength
It now floats.

It is interesting to read the poem in connection with this koan.

In the end Mumon admonishes his monks, "If you cannot, beware!" If you fail to grasp Nansen's and Joshu's Zen alive, and keep on chopping logic, you are in danger. You had better be killed once and for all by Nansen's sword.

TEISHO ON MUMON'S POEM

Had Joshu only been there, He would have taken action. Had he snatched the sword away, Nansen would have begged for his life.

Mumon says that if Joshu had been there when Master Nansen demanded, holding up the cat, "If you cannot say a word of Zen, I will kill the cat right away," it would have been Joshu who took the action of Truth of "One cut, all is cut!" Is it because they are both birds of the same feather? Only he who is capable of giving life is able to kill. Joshu was utterly free either to revive or to kill, to give or to take away. Such was the preeminent Zen ability of Joshu.

Placing wholehearted confidence in Joshu's Zen ability, Mumon says that if he had snatched the sword from Nansen even the great Master Nansen would have been unable to hold up his head before Joshu. Do not jump to the conclusion, however, that Joshu's work is good and Nansen's is not. When a Zen man wins, he just wins; that's all. When he loses, he just loses; that's all. No trace is left behind.

Master Mumon says, "If he had snatched the sword away." Let me ask you, "What kind of sword is this?" If it is the sword of the Fundamental Wisdom, not only Nansen but the cat, monks, mountains, and rivers all have to ask for their lives. Perhaps I have spoken too much.

sixty-third case of the Blue Cliff Record - Nan Ch'uan Kills a Cat

POINTER

Where the road of ideation cannot reach, that is just right to bring to attention; where verbal explanation cannot reach, you must set your eyes on it quickly. If your thunder rolls and comets fly, then you can overturn lakes and topple mountains. Is there anyone in the crowd who can manage this? To test, I cite this to see.

CASE

At Nan Ch'uan's place one day the (monks of) the eastern and western halls were arguing about a cat.¹ When Nan Ch'uan saw this, he then held up the cat and said, "If you can speak, then I will not kill it."² No one in the community replied;³ Nan Ch'uan cut the cat into two pieces.⁴

NOTES

1. It's not just today that they're haggling together. This is a case of degeneracy.
2. When the true imperative goes into effect, the ten directions are subdued. This old fellow has the capability to distinguish dragons from snakes.
3. What a pity to let him go. A bunch of lacquer tubs—what are they worth? Phoney Ch'an followers are as plentiful as hemp and millet.
4. How quick! How quick! If he hadn't acted like this, they would all be fellows playing with a mud ball. He draws the bow after the thief has gone. Already this is secondary; he should have been hit before he even picked it up.

COMMENTARY

An accomplished master of our school: see his movement, stillness, his going out and entering in. Tell me, what was his inner meaning? This story about killing the cat is widely discussed in monasteries everywhere. Some say that the holding up is it; some say it lies in the cutting. But actually these bear no relation to it at all. If he had not held it up, then would you still spin out all sorts of rationalizations? You are far from knowing that this Ancient had the eye to judge heaven and earth, and he had the sword to settle heaven and earth.

Now you tell me, after all, who was it that killed the cat? Just when Nan Ch'uan held it up and said, "If you can speak, then I won't kill it," at that moment, if there were suddenly someone who could speak, tell me, would Nan Ch'uan have killed it or not? This is why I say, "When the true imperative goes into effect, the ten directions are subdued." Stick your head out beyond the heavens and look; who's there?

The fact is that at that time he really did not kill. This story does not lie in killing or not killing. This matter is clearly known; it is so distinctly clear. It is not to be found in emotions or opinions; if you go searching in emotions and opinions, then you turn against Nan Ch'uan. Just see it right on the edge of the knife. If it exists, all right; if it does not exist, all right; if it neither exists nor doesn't exist, that is all right too. That is why an Ancient said, "When at an impasse, change; when you change, then you can pass through." People nowadays do not know how to change and pass through; they only go running to the spoken words. When Nan Ch'uan held up (the cat) in this way, he could not have been telling people they should be able to say something; he just wanted people to attain on their own, each act on their own, and know for themselves. If

you do not understand it in this way, after all you will grope without finding it. Hsueh Tou versifies it directly:

VERSE

In both halls they are phoney Ch'an followers:

Familiar words come from a familiar mouth. With one phrase he has said it all. He settles the case according to the facts.

Stirring up smoke and dust, they are helpless.

Look; what settlement will you make? A completely obvious public case. Still there's something here.

Fortunately, there is Nan Ch'uan, who is able to uphold the command:

Raising my whisk, I say, "It's just like this." Old Master Wang (Nan Ch'uan) amounts to something. He uses the fine jewel-sword of the Diamond King to cut mud.

With one stroke of the knife he cuts into two pieces, letting them be lopsided as they may.

Shattered into a hundred fragments. If someone should suddenly hold his knife still, see what he would do. He can't be let go, so I strike!

COMMENTARY

"In both halls they are phoney Ch'an followers." Hsueh Tou does not die at the phrase, and he also does not acknowledge that which is ahead of a donkey but behind a horse. He has a place to turn, so he says, "Stirring up smoke and dust, they are helpless." Hsueh Tou and Nan Ch'uan walk hand in hand; in one phrase he has said it all. The leaders of the two halls have no place to rest their heads; everywhere they go, they just stir up smoke and dust, unable to accomplish anything. Fortunately there is Nan Ch'uan to settle this public case for them, and he wraps it up cleanly and thoroughly. But what can be done for them, who neither reached home nor got to the shop? That is why he said, "Fortunately there is Nan Ch'uan, who is able to uphold the command; with one stroke of the knife he cuts into two pieces, letting them be lopsided as they may." He directly cuts in two with one knife, without further concern as to whether they'll be unevenly lopsided. But tell me, what command is Nan Ch'uan enforcing?