

**MODEL SUBJECT NO. 52  
FROM THE HEKIGAN ROKU  
(BLUE CLIFF RECORDS)**

**NOT VERBATIM**

**JOSHU'S "DONKEYS CROSS, HORSES CROSS."**

**With an Introduction and Commentary by Reverend Suzuki,  
Master of Zen Center**

**April 1964**

**Introduction by Reverend Suzuki:**

Jo-shu (Personal name: Sramanera) of this subject was a native of Northern China. When he was ordained (at quite a young age), he visited Nan-sen with his master. "Do you know the name of this monastery?" asked Nan-sen, who had been taking a nap in his room. The boy said, "Sacred Elephant Monastery." "Then did you see a sacred elephant?" asked Nan-sen. The boy replied, "I did not see any sacred elephants, but I saw a reclining bodhisattva." Nan-sen raised himself up and said, "Have you your own master now?" "yes, I have," said the boy. "Who is he?" asked Nan-sen. To this the boy Sramanera made a formal obeisance which should be given only to his own master, saying, "Spring cold is still here. Please take good care of yourself." Nan-sen called up Ino-osho (who took care of the monastery) and gave him a seat.

One day Nan-sen allowed Jo-shu to meet him in his room. Jo-shu asked Nan-sen, "What is the true Way?" "Ordinary mind is the true Way," said Nan-sen. "Is it something to be attained or not to be attained?" asked Jo-shu. "To try to attain it is to avert from it." said Nan-sen. "When you do not try to attain it, how do you know the true Way?" asked Jo-shu. To this question, Nan-sen's answer was very polite. "The true way is not a matter to be known or not to be known. To know is to have a limited idea of it, and not to know is just psychological unawareness. If you want to achieve the absolute, where there is no doubt, you should be clear enough and vast enough to be like empty space." Hereby Jo-shu acquired full understanding of the true way of Zen.

When Jo-shu was sixty-one years of age, he heard that his former master in his hometown was not well, and he went all the way back from South China to take care of him. His parents heard about his coming back from the South and wanted to have him home. But as soon as Jo-shu learned of his parents' wishes, he left his old master before they came.

He used to say, "I must ask my way from a child of seven, if he is good enough. But I shall be a teacher of any old man of a hundred years." At the age of eighty he resided at Jo-shu (North China). He

appreciated the bare life of ancient patriarchs and used only a broken-legged chair, repaired by a piece of firewood. Throughout the forty years during which he lived the simplest form of life in Jo-shu monastery, he never wrote a single page of a letter, begging for his support.

## **Main Subject**

A monk said to Jo-shu, "The famous stone bridge, I have just seen it; but it was nothing but a simple stepping-stone bridge," and requested his answer. Jo-shu said, "you did see a simple stepping-stone bridge, but did not see the actual bridge." The monk then asked, "What is the stone bridge you mean?" Jo-shu said, "It is that which donkeys cross and horses cross."

## **Commentary by Reverend Suzuki**

This monk came to Jo-shu ignoring the great master's prestige, and said "I did not see anything but a common stepping-stone bridge," and requested his answer. Jo-shu in return gave him an interesting gift problem, saying, "You did not see the real stone bridge, but only a stepping-stone bridge," Now the monk was caught in Jo-shu's gift-box of duality (intellectual problem: right or wrong, this or that, phenomena or noumena, interplay of the subjective and the objective) and asked, "What is the real stone bridge?" Now Jo-shu, wishing to free the monk from the idea of some special stone bridge, answered "Donkeys cross and horses cross."

This usual manner of instruction is not like Toku-san or Rin-zai, who answer by means of sticks or scolding voice, Jo-shu just answered with simple common words. This 'kōan' looks quite common, but it does not allow you to become accustomed to it.

Once Jo-shu asked a head monk of the zendō (Zen practice hall) who it was who had built the stone bridge. The head monk said "Riyo built it." Jo-shu asked again, "When he was building it, on what did he work? (i.e., did he work on subjective bridge or objective bridge or what?)" The head monk could not answer. Jo-shu said, "people talk about this stone bridge, but when asked this kind of simple question, they cannot answer."

One day when Jo-shu was cleaning the main hall a monk came and asked him, "Why is there dust in the hall to clean?" Jo-shu said, "because dust comes in from the outside." The monk said, "I cannot recognize pure clean hall to have dust in it." Jo-shu said, "I see one more piece of dust here." Those were the old Zen master Jo-shu's way.

The Zen master is supposed to be tough enough to remain faithful to the way, but all the better to be not so tough and follow the way.

**Appreciatory Word by Set Cho:**

Without setting himself up as an isolated peak,  
Old Jo-shu's Zen is insurmountably high.  
Who knows he is catching giant turtles,  
In the vast ocean of Buddhism?  
That old scholar Kan-Kei may be compared to Jo-shu  
Only to make us all laugh.  
Suddenly breaking the arrows was quite futile.

**NOTE:**

Kan-Kei (895) was a disciple of Rin-zai, and contemporary with Jo-shu. He was asked a question similar to the one Jo-shu asked in the Main Subject. Kan-Kei's question and answer was as follows: A young monk: "I have just come from the famous Kan-Kei Valley, but I saw nothing but a small lake."

Kan-Kei: "But didn't you see the real Kan-Kei Valley?"

The young monk: "What is the Kan-Kei Valley you mean?"

Kan-Kei: "Breaking the arrow suddenly."

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This transcript is a retyping of the existing City Center transcript (thought to be based on notes by Baker-rōshi). It is not verbatim. No tape is available. The City Center transcript was entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. It was reformatted by Bill Redican (10/27/01).