

Kokoro – Sensei and I – Parts 28 to 36

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

28

“I realize it’s not my business, but if your family has wealth then I suggest you settle things soon. Best to receive your due while your father is still of sound mind. When something unforeseen happens, division of assets often sows discord.”

“I see.”

I didn’t give much mind to Sensei’s words. I wasn’t worried for myself, nor for my father or mother. No one in my family, I believed, warranted such concern. Further, it was unlike Sensei to expound on a practical matter, and it caught me off guard. Deference to Sensei as my elder, however, compelled me to listen without reproach.

“Forgive me if talk of your father’s death is uncomfortable, but all men must eventually die. Even a man in the best of health may go at any time.”

Sensei’s tone was unusually somber.

“Such talk doesn’t bother me in the least.” I cleared the way for Sensei to continue.

“How many brothers and sisters did you say you have?” Sensei asked.

Sensei asked, in turn, about all the members of my immediate family. He also asked about my aunts and uncles and their circumstances. Finally he asked, “Are they all good people?”

“None strike me as dishonest. They’re country folk, for the most part.”

“What makes you so sure that country folk are honest?”

I struggled with this question. Sensei, for his part, did not wait on my answer.

“Country folk, it often turns out, are no less dishonest than city folk. Also, you told me just now that none among your relatives struck you as dishonest. Do you imagine, then, that humans are of two distinct types, upright and dishonest? There’s no common mold from which scoundrels are cast. All men are virtuous most of the time. Or if they’re not virtuous, they’re at least ordinary. Then the moment of truth arrives, and the villain appears out of nowhere. It’s a frightening world - you have to watch yourself.”

Sensei was not finished, and I too had thoughts to share in response. We were interrupted, however, by the sudden barking of a dog behind us. We both turned round in surprise.

Cedar saplings had been planted near the rear of the platform, and next to them was a plot in which thick bamboo grass covered the ground. Only the head and back of the barking dog were visible within this grass.

A boy of about ten ran up and scolded the dog severely. Then he turned and greeted Sensei, his black insignia cap still on his head.

“Tell me sir, when you came in was there no one in the house?” he asked.

“No one was there.”

“But they were. Mother and sister were in the kitchen.”

“Were they?”

“You should have called hello on your way by.”

Sensei managed a smile. He took his coin purse from his pocket and placed a five-sen piece in the boy’s hand. “Give them my best regards, and allow us to rest here a while.”

A smile beamed in the boy’s sharp eyes as he nodded his agreement. “I’m the scout today.”

With that, he ran downhill past the azaleas. The dog ran after, its tail raised high in the air. A short while later, several more boys of the same age appeared. They too then followed down the hill on the same trail as the scout.

29

Due to the dog and the children, Sensei had not concluded his thoughts, and I was left hanging. Assets and the like, over which Sensei seemed so concerned, were of little interest to me at that time. Because of my nature, and perhaps too because of my circumstances, the concept of vying for gain was far from my mind. I was not on my own yet and had not been exposed to such matters. At any rate, my youthful self was utterly oblivious to issues of wealth.

There was one thing, though, on which I wanted to question Sensei further. He had said that when the moment of truth arrives, any man may emerge as a villain. I wanted to know what he meant. On the surface, or course, I understood his words well enough. There was certainly more to it, though, and I wanted to know the rest.

After the dog and the children had gone their way, the orchard fell back into silence. We sat motionless for a while, two men locked in silence. The exquisite colors of the sky began to slowly deepen. The trees around us were mostly maples. The light green of their new leaves, glistening on the branches as the breeze stirred them, seemed to grow gradually darker. The rumble of a cart sounded from a distant street. I imagined a fellow from the village had loaded it with shrubs or other such wares and was headed for a fair. Sensei rose abruptly at the sound of the cart, like a man called back from distant reveries.

“Shall we be going? The days are getting longer, but we’ve whiled this one away. The sun will set before we know it.”

Sensei's backside betrayed his earlier nap on the platform. I brushed it clean with both hands.

"Thank you. Did I pick up any resin?"

"No, everything's gone."

"I just got this haori. The wife will be cross if I go and soil it already."

On our way back down the gently sloping hill, we approached the house again. Out on the veranda, which had been deserted on our way in, was the lady of the house with her daughter, a girl of fifteen or sixteen, who was helping her spool thread. From beside the gold fish basin we called out our thanks for their hospitality. The lady called back that we needn't mention it, and she thanked us as well for the nickel coin given to the boy.

When we'd made our way out the gate and walked for a while, I turned to Sensei and spoke. "Tell me, when you said earlier that any man, in the moment of truth, may emerge as a villain, what did you mean by it?"

"There's nothing profound there. -- It's simply a fact. It's not a product of theory or reason."

"Granted it may be a fact, what I want to know is what you meant by moment of truth. To what sort of moment were you referring?"

Sensei laughed. It seemed that now, when the passion had left him, he had little interest in expounding. "I was referring to money. At the sight of money, the noblest of gentlemen unmask his inner villain."

Sensei's answer left me dissatisfied. I sensed he was brushing me off, and I felt diminished. Feigning indifference, I set off walking at a quick pace. Sensei, in due course, began to fall behind. He called to me to wait.

"Look at that now."

"At what?"

"Your demeanor. Did I not just affect it with a single response?" I had stopped and turned to wait for him. He looked at my face as he said this.

30

Deep down, in that moment, I hated Sensei. Even as we walked together again, shoulders side by side, I refrained from giving voice to the questions in my mind. Sensei, for his part, whether he noticed or not, showed not the slightest concern. As he ambled on with his easy gait and signature reticence, I grew more and more spiteful. I wanted to somehow get under his skin.

"Sensei."

“Yes?”

“You were a little worked up back there in the gardens. I’ve seldom ever seen you like that. Were you showing another side of yourself?”

Sensei made no immediate reply. I thought maybe I’d gotten to him. I also feared that maybe I’d missed the mark. At any rate, I decided to leave it at that. Sensei suddenly stepped to the side of the road, tucked up his shirttails, and relieved himself at the base of a neatly-trimmed hedge. I stood by idly as he finished his business.

“Pardon the delay.”

With that he started walking again. I gave up at this point on arguing him into a corner. The road we were walking gradually came to life. The hills and valleys, with their wide cultivated fields, disappeared from view as houses closed in on both sides. Even still, the neighborhoods were quiet, and in some of the yards we saw peas climbing bamboo trelliswork, or chickens penned in by wire screen. A succession of cart horses, returning from the city center, approached and passed us by. Such sights were wont to grab my attention, and the questions that had occupied my thoughts were soon forgotten. When Sensei suddenly resurfaced our earlier exchange, it hit me as out of the blue.

“Did I really seem worked up back there?”

“Yes, a bit I suppose, but ...”

“No, that’s fine if I did. I was worked up. Discussions on wealth most easily set me off. You may not know it, but I’m terribly vindictive. I never forget a disgrace suffered or an injustice perpetrated. Ten years may pass, or even twenty, yet it all stays with me.”

Sensei spoke with even more passion than before. What surprised me most, though, was not the passion in his words, but the meaning of what he said. I had certainly never expected to hear such revelations from him first hand, and I had never imagined him to harbor such tenacity. I’d believed him a meek spirit. His meekness and decency were what endeared him to me. In a fit of anger I’d challenged him, and now his words appalled me. He continued on.

“I was deceived. What’s worse, I was deceived by my those of my own blood. I’ll never forget it. While my father was alive, they had all seemed models of decency. However, the moment he died they began to reveal themselves - a pack of despicable rogues. The disgrace and injustice, all that I suffered at their hands, I’ve carried with me from my youth to this day. I expect I’ll carry it forever. Only death can erase it from my mind. Nevertheless, I’ve yet to take my vengeance. Or then again, maybe it’s no longer personal. I’ve already taken it further. I’ve come to despise the whole of humanity, of which those rogues are a part. I suppose that’s enough.”

I had no words of consolation to offer.

Our conversation that day progressed no further. Unsettled by Sensei's demeanor, I was happy to let matters lie.

We boarded a train on the outskirts of the city, and once on board we hardly spoke. Shortly after disembarking, it was time to head our separate ways. As we parted, Sensei's mood seemed again to have changed. He said to me, in a tone much brighter than usual, "You're carefree from now until June. It's possible such days will never come again. Enjoy this time to the fullest."

I smiled in return and removed my cap. In doing so I looked at Sensei. Could such a man really, in the depths of his heart, harbor contempt for all humankind? His countenance betrayed not the slightest hint of such thoughts.

I must admit that I benefited greatly from my frequent discourse with Sensei. I should also say, though, that there were times when it left me hollow. I was left, on occasion, hanging in the dark. Our discussion that day in the country was one such example that sticks in my mind.

Not one to hold things back, I once divulged this to Sensei. Sensei laughed. I explained myself. "I wouldn't mind if I thought you incapable of elucidating. What bothers me is when you know the full story yet refuse to bring me along."

"I don't keep things from you."

"You do."

"I believe you're confusing my thoughts and ideas with my past experience. I may be a poor thinker, but what thoughts I have I freely share. There's no reason not to. Revealing my life to you in full detail, however, is an entirely different matter."

"It's not a different matter. Your thoughts are the products of your experience, which is why I hold them so dear. There's no value in one without the other. What can I gain from talk from an empty shell?"

Sensei, seemingly exasperated, looked me in the eye. The hand that held his cigarette trembled slightly. "You don't mince words."

"I'm simply sincere. I sincerely wish to know about life."

"Even if it means unearthing my past?"

The word "unearth" suddenly rang ominous in my ears. The man sitting before me, it seemed, was no longer Sensei, whom I'd come to respect, but an unknown malefactor. Sensei's face had gone pale.

"Are you truly sincere?" he pressed me again. "My past has left me distrustful of all, including even you. You're the one person, however, whom I don't want to doubt. Your innocence doesn't warrant distrust. I'd

like to confide in someone, just one person is fine, before I die. Can you be that person? Will you be that for me? Are you sincere to the core of your being?"

"As my life is sincere, so too are my words." My voice quavered.

"Very well then," Sensei continued, "I'll tell you. I'll relate my past with no omission. If I do so ... no, that doesn't matter. Bear in mind, though, that my story may not serve you. In the end, you may wish you hadn't sought it. Also -- understand that I can't do this now. I'll relate it all in good time, but not until then."

Even after I returned to my lodgings, Sensei's words continued to weigh on me.

32

My professors, it seemed, did not share my enthusiasm for my thesis. Nevertheless, I did receive passing marks. On graduation day, I pulled my musty old winter clothes from the trunk and put them on. As we lined up in the hall, all the faces showed signs of swelter. My body, sealed tight under thick wool, roasted intolerably. After a short while standing there, the handkerchief in my hand was sopped.

As soon as the ceremony ended, I returned to my room and stripped down. I opened the second floor window and surveyed the world through my diploma, which was rolled up tight like a spyglass. Then I tossed it onto my desk and sprawled myself out in the middle of the room. Lying there, I thought about my past. Then I imagined my future. That diploma, which stood like a sentinel between past and future, struck me as an odd piece of paper, in some ways profound and in some ways meaningless.

Sensei had invited me to dinner that night. We'd had a long-standing agreement that I would dine with him on the day of my graduation.

As promised, a table had been laid out in the parlor, near the veranda. A thick, embroidered tablecloth, stiffly starched, beautifully reflected the light of electric lamps. Whenever one dined at Sensei's, the dishes and utensils were set over white linen, the kind one finds in a Western-style restaurant. The linen was always freshly laundered, spotless, and pure white.

"Just like collars and cuffs. If you can't keep them clean, then don't choose white in the first place. White must be white."

This reminded me how fastidious Sensei was. His study, too, was always neatly arranged. As a careless man myself, I was often struck by the sharp contrast between us.

I'd once remarked to Sensei's wife how meticulous he was. She'd pointed out that he was not so meticulous when it came to his attire.

Sensei, who was listening nearby, had added with a grin, "To tell the truth, I'm psychologically meticulous. That's why I always suffer so. It really is an absurd condition."

It was unclear to me what he meant by “psychologically meticulous.” Did he just mean that he was fussy in the common sense of the word, or did he mean that he was morally unrelenting? His wife, too, seemed unsure of his meaning.

That evening, I sat opposite Sensei with the signature white tablecloth before us. Sensei’s wife sat between us, one on either side, with a direct view of the garden.

“Congratulations.” Sensei raise his saké cup in my honor. I felt little sense of joy at this gesture. One reason, of course, was that there was scant joy in my heart for this word to unleash. At the same time, Sensei’s manner of speaking instilled none either. There was nothing in his voice that lifted my spirits. He smiled as he raised his cup, and while there was no trace of ill temper or irony in his smile, there was also no sign of sincere happiness. His smile merely conveyed the fact that in this situation, this is what people are wont to do.

“It’s splendid,” Sensei’s wife said to me, “your mother and father must be quite proud.”

I suddenly thought of my father and his illness. I thought that I should go to him soon and present my diploma.

“Where does Sensei keep his diploma?” I asked.

“Where did we put it? -- Do we still have it somewhere?” Sensei asked his wife.

“Yes, I believe we’ve saved it somewhere.”

Neither seemed to know where it was.

33

When it was time to eat, Sensei’s wife sent the maidservant, who’d been seated at her side, off to the next room and proceeded to serve us herself. This, it seemed, was standard practice at Sensei’s house with casual guests. I’d been uncomfortable with it at first, but now, after a number of occasions, I’d grown fully accustomed to being served in such manner.

“More tea? More rice? You’re quite an eater.” Sensei’s wife had never been shy in commenting on my eating habits.

This day, however, on account of the heat, my appetite failed to impress.

“Done already? You’ve become such a light eater lately.”

“I haven’t become a light eater. It’s just this hot weather.”

After calling back the maidservant to clear the table, she next had ice cream and desert fruits served.

“We prepared this ourselves.”

Sensei’s wife, who was not so busy with household chores, had the time to make ice cream for her guests. I asked for seconds.

“Now that you’ve graduated, what do you plan to do next?” Sensei asked. Sensei had shifted his seat halfway onto the veranda and was leaning his back against the open shōji.

I’d been focused on graduation and given no thought as to what was next. Seeing my hesitation, Sensei’s wife asked if I might take a teaching position. When I still didn’t answer, she suggested the civil service. Sensei and I both laughed.

“To tell the truth, I have no idea. I’ve hardly given a thought to taking an occupation. I’m not sure how one chooses. With no experience to draw on, it’s hard to know what best to do.”

“That may be true. However, it’s your family’s wealth that affords you such leisure. Look at those who are pinched. I would doubt they’re as unconcerned as yourself.”

Some of my friends had secured middle school teaching positions well in advance of graduation. Deep down, I knew that Sensei’s wife was right. However, I replied with, “A bit of Sensei must have rubbed off on me.”

“Well, don’t let it be more than a bit.”

Sensei forced a smile. “No harm if it does rub off, just remember what I told you the other day. While your father’s still with you, arrange for your share of his wealth. Until you’ve done so, you mustn’t rest easy.”

I recalled that day in early May, when Sensei and I had ventured out of the city and into the vast gardens of the nursery, where azaleas were in bloom. On our way home, Sensei had become quite worked up. I replayed in my mind the forceful words he’d directed my way. They had, on second thought, rang more dire than forceful. At the same time, however, I did not know what was behind them, and they’d failed to move me.

“Tell me, how much money do you and Sensei have?”

“Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Because Sensei refuses to tell me.”

She smiled and looked at Sensei. “Probably because there’s nothing worth telling.”

“But I’d like to know what it takes to live like Sensei. Do tell me, so when I speak with my father I can know what I’m after.”

Sensei had turned toward the garden and was smoking with an air of detachment. My only recourse was to continue with his wife.

“It’s not enough to even make mention of. We find a way to get by as we are. -- At any rate, you really must apply yourself to something. Just idling about like Sensei is out of the question ...”

“I don’t just idle about.” Sensei turned his head to challenge his wife’s words.

34

It was after ten when I left Sensei’s place. In several days I would return to the country, so before getting up from the table I offered parting words.

“I won’t see you again for some time.”

“Will you be back in September?” Sensei’s wife asked.

Now that I’d graduated, there was no particular need for me to return in September. I was sure, though, that I was not going to spend the dog days of August in Tōkyō. Nor was I compelled to come back early to seek a position.

“I suppose around September.”

“Well, take care then. We may do some traveling this summer ourselves. It looks to be hot here this year. If we do go, we’ll send you a postcard.”

“Where did you have in mind?”

Sensei was grinning as he listened to this exchange. “We don’t even know yet that we’re going.”

Sensei suddenly stopped me as I prepared to rise from my seat. “By the way, how is your father’s health?” he asked.

There’d been no updates on my father’s health. No news, I’d figured, was good news.

“It’s a serious condition. Renal failure is the end of the road.”

I’d never heard the term “renal failure,” and I had no idea what it meant. Back home during winter break, when we’d talked with the doctor, he hadn’t voiced any such term.

“Do take good care of him,” Sensei’s wife added, “Once the poison reaches his brain, you’ve lost him. It really is serious.”

I had no experience in such things, and I floated an awkward grin to mask my disquietude. “His disease, they tell us, is incurable, so we’ll just have to take things as they come.”

“As long as you’re resigned to what’s coming.”

Sensei's wife, perhaps thinking back on her own mother's death from the same disease, spoke in a subdued tone and then shifted her gaze downward. I felt truly sorry for my father and the fate that awaited him.

At this point, Sensei turned to his wife and asked, "Shizu, do you think you'll die before I do?"

"Why?"

"I was just wondering. Or do you think I'll go first? That's usually the case. The husband goes first and the wife is left behind."

"Not necessarily. It's just because husbands tend to be older."

"That's why the husband goes first then. Which means I'm bound to depart this world before you do."

"You're the exception."

"You think so?"

"You're fit as a fiddle. When have you ever been truly ill? I'm quite sure I'll go first."

"Really?"

"Yes, I believe so."

Sensei looked at me. I smiled in return.

"Suppose I do go first. What will you do?"

"What will I ..."

Her speech faltered. The idea of Sensei's death, and the thought of her own sorrow, seemed to upset her. When she raised her eyes again, however, she'd regained her composure.

"After all, what can I do? Through thick and thin one rolls with the punches."

She shot me a knowing look as she answered him tongue-in-cheek.

35

I'd been preparing to take my leave but instead made myself comfortable again. I didn't want to disrupt the conversation.

"What do you think?" Sensei asked me.

I had never, of course, given any thought to who would die first, Sensei or his wife. All I could do was laugh. "Don't look to me to tell you the number of your days."

“It really is about numbered days, isn’t it? Each of us is born with a given amount, no more and no less. Sensei’s mother and father, for example, departed this world nearly together.”

“They both died on the same day?”

“Not the same day, but close to it. One after the other.”

This was news to me. I was intrigued.

“How did they manage that?”

Sensei interrupted his wife before she could answer. “Let’s not get into that. It’s of no relevance.”

Sensei held a fan in his hand, and he made a point of stirring the air with it. Then he turned back to his wife, “Shizu, after I’m gone this house will be yours.”

She smiled. “How about the land it’s on too?”

“I’m afraid the land’s not mine to give, but all my possessions will be yours.”

“That’s fine, but what do I do with all those foreign books?”

“Sell them to a dealer.”

“How much are they worth?”

Sensei didn’t answer her question. However, he remained fixated on the distant subject of his own death. He seemed convinced that his own death would precede his wife’s. His wife, initially, made her best effort to take the discussion in stride. As it went on, though, the subject began to weigh on her feminine sensibilities.

“After I’m gone ... After I’m gone... How many times have you said that? For Heaven’s sake, please stop already. You’re only inviting misfortune. If such time should come, you can rest assured that all will be handled according to your wishes. Isn’t that enough?”

Sensei turned toward the garden with a grin. However, in deference to his wife he spoke no more on this subject. Not wanting to overstay my welcome, I immediately rose from my seat. Sensei and his wife saw me to the entry hall together.

“Take good care of your father,” Sensei’s wife told me.

“We’ll see you in September,” Sensei added.

I acknowledged their salutations and stepped out through the latticed door. Between the entryway and the gate stood a single fragrant olive tree. In the darkness, it seemed to be stretching its limbs to block my way. Taking several steps toward it, I surveyed its dark, densely foliated branch-ends, and I imagined the flowers and fragrances of the autumn to come. This olive tree and Sensei’s house, from my earliest memories of

them, were inseparable in my mind. As I stood before the tree, thinking ahead to someday in autumn when I'd next cross Sensei's threshold, the light that had spilled from the entry hall went out. Sensei and his wife, it seemed, had retired to their inner rooms. I went out alone onto the dark street.

I didn't return directly to my lodgings. I needed to buy things for my trip home, and my stomach needed a chance to settle, so I walked toward the lights of the town, where the evening was still young. In the mass of men and women milling about, I ran across a fellow graduate. He pulled me into a bar, determined that I drink with him. Once there, I was subjected to his bluster, which the froth on my beer easily exceeded in substance. I didn't get back to my lodgings till after twelve.

36

The following day I again braved the heat to go and buy what I needed. I'd received a letter listing requested items, and I'd thought little of it at the time, but it struck me now as a terrible imposition. As I mopped my brow on the train, I felt growing spite for the folks back home. Did they even appreciate their demands on my time and the effort involved?

I had no intention of merely whiling away the summer. I'd drafted up a work plan for my days back home, and in order to execute this plan there were books I had to buy. I committed myself to half a day on the second floor of Maruzen. I found the shelves that housed the books in my field of interest, and I examined each offering one by one.

In the course my shopping, what taxed me most was a decorative collar for a woman's kimono. The shop clerk was happy to show me an assortment of wares, but when came to deciding, I struggled. Furthermore, the pricing seemed arbitrary. I would ask about one that looked affordable, and find it was far too expensive. I'd avoid others that looked too refined, and they'd turn out to be modestly priced. When I compared several side by side, there was nothing to justify the difference in price. I was completely confounded. Inwardly, I kicked myself now for not having gone to Sensei's wife.

I bought a bag. It was, of course, an inferior piece of domestic make, but its shiny clasps would impress the folks back home. I bought it at my mother's behest. She had instructed me in her letter to buy myself a new bag when I graduated. I was then to fill it with her requested items. I'd laughed when I'd read this. I could understand her thinking, but somehow it all struck me as comical.

Just as I'd announced to Sensei and his wife in parting, I boarded a train three days hence to depart from Tōkyō and journey home. Since the prior winter, Sensei had offered considerable counsel on my father's illness. While I had every reason to feel concern, I found myself, in contrast, remarkably subdued. I was troubled most by thoughts of my mother alone after his death. In my mind, no doubt, I had already come to terms with my father's mortality. In a letter to my elder brother in Kyūshū, I had stated plainly that Father would never recover his health. I had also urged him to find time this summer, despite his duties, to visit home and look one last time into Father's eyes. In an appeal to his sentiment, I'd added that it would be unconscionable for us, as children, to leave our aged parents forsaken and forlorn in the country. These words, as I wrote them, were sincere and from the heart. Afterward, however, they seemed to ring hollow.

I reflected on this contradiction as I sat in the train. As I reflected, I came to see myself as fickle and superficial. I felt dissatisfied. I turned my thoughts to Sensei and his wife. In particular, I thought back on that conversation at their dinner table.

“Which of us do you suppose will die first?”

I silently repeated the question that Sensei and his wife had considered that evening. I knew full well that such a question could never be answered with any certainty. But what if it could? What if they did know who was to die first? What would Sensei do? What would Sensei’s wife do? I wondered what they could do, other than carry on just as they were. (Just as I, with the death of my father back home approaching, also carried on.) Human life, I saw, was something fleeting. Our drive to persevere, to carry on with a brave face, I also saw as hollow and fleeting.