

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 94*

# The Rebirth of Katsugoro

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As reported by  
*Lafcadio Hearn*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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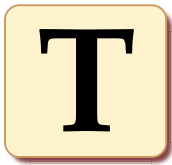
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# The Rebirth of Katsugoro

## I



he following is not a story—at least it is not one of my stories. It is only the translation of an old Japanese document—or rather a series of documents—very much signed and sealed, and dating back to the early part of the present (i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup>) century. Various authors appear to have made use of these documents, especially the compiler of the curious collection of Buddhist stories entitled *Bukkyo-hiyakkwazensho*, to whom they furnished the material of the twenty-sixth narrative in that work. The present translation, however, was made from a manuscript copy discovered in a private library in Tokyo. I am responsible for nothing beyond a few notes appended to the text.

Although the beginning will probably prove dry reading, I presume to advise the perusal of the whole translation from first to last, because it suggests many things besides the possibility of remembering former

births. It will be found to reflect something of the feudal Japan that has passed away, and something of the old-time faith—not the higher Buddhism, but what is incomparably more difficult for any Occidental to obtain a glimpse of: the common ideas of the people concerning pre-existence and rebirth. And in view of this fact, the exactness of the official investigations, and the credibility of the evidence accepted, necessarily become questions of minor importance.

## II

### 1. Copy of the Report of Tamon Dempachiro

*The case of Katsugoro, nine years old, second son of Genii, a farmer on my estate, dwelling in the Village called Nakano-mura in the District called Tamagori in the Province of Musashi.*

Sometime during the autumn of last year, the above-mentioned Katsugoro, the son of Genzo, told to his elder sister the story of his previous existence and of his rebirth. But as it seemed to be only the fancy of a child, she gave little heed to it. Afterwards, however, when Katsugoro had told her the same story over and

over again, she began to think that it was a strange thing, and she told her parents about it.

During the twelfth month of the past year, Genzo himself questioned Katsugoro about the matter, whereupon Katsugoro declared:

That he had been in his former existence the son of a certain Kyūbei, a farmer of Hodokubos-mura, which is a village within the jurisdiction of the Lord Komiya, in the district called Tamagori, in the province of Musashi;

That he, Katsugoro the son of Kyūbei, had died of smallpox at the age of six years, and that he had been reborn thereafter into the family of the Genzo before-mentioned.

Though this seemed unbelievable, the boy repeated all the circumstances of his story with so much exactness and apparent certainty, that the headman and the elders of the village made a formal investigation of the case. As the news of this event soon spread, it was heard by the family of a certain Hanshiro, living in the village called Hodokubo-mura; and Hanshiro then came to the house of the Genzo aforesaid, a farmer belonging to my estate, and found that everything was true which the boy had said about the personal appearance and the facial characteristics of his former parents, and about the aspect of the

house which had been his home in his previous birth. Katsugoro was then taken to the house of Hanshiro in Hodokubo-mura; and the people there said that he looked very much like their Tozo, who had died a number of years before, at the age of six. Since then, the two families have been visiting each other at intervals. The people of other neighbouring villages seem to have heard of the matter, and now persons come daily from various places to see Katsugoro.

A deposition regarding the above facts having been made before me by persons dwelling on my estate, I summoned the man Genzo to my house, and there examined him. His answers to my questions did not contradict the statements before-mentioned made by other parties.

Occasionally in the world some rumour of such a matter as this spreads among the people. Indeed, it is hard to believe such things. But I beg to make report of the present case, hoping the same will reach your august ear—so that I may not be charged with negligence.

[Signed] Tamon Dempachiro-5  
The Fourth Month and the Sixth Year of Bunsei  
[1823]

## **2. Copy of letter written by Kazunawo**

## **to Teikin, Priest of Sengakuji**

I have been favoured with the accompanying copy of the report of Tamon Dempachiro by Shiga Hyoemon Sama, who brought it to me, and I take great pleasure in sending it to you. I think that it might be well for you to preserve it, together with the writing from Kwanzan Sama, which you kindly showed me the other day.

[Signed] Kazunawo

The twenty-first day of the Sixth Month

[No other date]

## **3. Copy of the letter of Matsudaira Kwanzan [Daimyo] to the Priest Teikin of the Temple called Sengakuji**

I herewith enclose and send you the account of the rebirth of Katsugoro. I have written it in the popular style, thinking that it might have a good effect in helping to silence those who do not believe in the doctrines of the Buddha. As a literary work it is, of course, a wretched thing. I send it to you supposing that it could only amuse you from that point of view. But as for the relation itself, it is without mistake; for I myself heard it from the grandmother of Katsugoro. When you have read it, please return it to me.

[Signed] Kwanzan  
Twentieth day [No date]

#### **4. Relation of the Rebirth of Katsugoro: Introductory Note by the Priest Teikin**

This is the account of a true fact; for it has been written by Matsudaira Kwanzan Sama, who himself went [to Nakano-mura] on the twenty-second day of the third month of this year for the special purpose of inquiring about the matter. After having obtained a glimpse of Katsugoro, he questioned the boy's grandmother as to every particular; and he wrote down her answers exactly as they were given.

Afterwards, the said Kwanzan Sama condescended to honour this temple with a visit on the fourteenth day of this fourth month, and with his own august lips told me about his visit to the family of the aforesaid Katsugoro. Furthermore, he vouchsafed me the favour of permitting me to read the before-mentioned writing, on the twentieth day of this same month. And, availing myself of the privilege, I immediately made a copy of the writing.

[Signed] Teikin So [facsimile of the priest's  
kakinan, or private sign]



Sengaku-ji manual, made with the brush  
The twenty-first day of the Fourth Month of the  
Sixth Year of Bunsei [1823]

## **5. Names of the Members of the Two Families Concerned**

### **Family of Genzo**

Katsugoro—Born the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the twelfth year of Bunkwa [1815]. Nine years old this sixth year of Bunsei [1823]. [1] Second son of Genzo, a farmer living in Tanit-suiri in Nakano-mura, district of Tamagori, province of Musashi—Estate of Tamon Dempachiro, whose yashiki is in the street called Shichikencho, Nedzu, Yedo—Jurisdiction of Yusouki.

Genzo—Father of Katsugoro. Family name, Koyada. Forty-nine years old this sixth year of Bunsei. Being poor, he occupies himself with the making of baskets, which he sells in Yedo. The name of the inn at which he lodges while in Yedo is Sagamiya, kept by one Kihel, in Bakuro-cho.

Sei—Wife of Genzo and mother of Katsugoro. Thirty-nine years old this sixth year of Bunsei. Daughter of Murata Kichitaro, samurai—once an archer in the service of the Lord of Owari. When Sei was twelve years old she was a maid-servant, it is

said, to the house of Honda Dainoshin Dono. When she was thirteen years old, her father, Kichitaro was dismissed forever for a certain cause from the service of the Lord of Owari, and he became a ronin. [2] He died at the age of seventy-five, on the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month of the fourth year of Bunkwa [1807]. His grave is in the cemetery of the temple called Eirin-ji, of the Zen sect, in the village of Shimo-Yusuki.

Tsuya—Grandmother of Katsugoro. Seventy-two years old this sixth year of Bunsei. When young she served as maid in the household of Matsudaira Okino-Kami Dono [Daimyo].

Fusa—Elder sister of Katsugoro. Fifteen years old this year.

Otojiro—Elder brother of Katsugoro. Fourteen years old this year.

Tsune—Younger sister of Katsugoro. Four years old this year.

## **Family of Hanshiro**

Tozo—Died at the age of six in Hodokube-mura, in the district called Tamagori in the province of Musashi. Estate of Nakane Uye-mon, whose yashiki is in the street Atarashi-bashi-dori, Shitaya, Yedo. Jurisdiction of Komlya. [Tozo] was born in the second

year of Bunkwa [1805], and died at about the fourth hour of the day [IV o'clock in the morning] on the fourth day of the second month of the seventh year of Bunkwa [1810]. The sickness of which he died was smallpox. Buried in the graveyard on the hill above the village before-mentioned—Hodokubo-mura—parochial temple: Iwoji in Misawa-mura. Sect: Zen-shū. Last year, the fifth year of Bunkwa [1822], the jiū-san kwaiki [3] was said for Tozo.

Hanshiro—Stepfather of Tozo. Family name, Suzaki. Fifty years old this sixth year of Bunsei.

Shidzu—Mother of Tozo. Forty-nine years old this sixth year of Bunsei.

Kyūbei (afterwards Togoro)—Real father of Tozo. Original name, Kyūbei, afterwards changed to Togoro. Died at the age of forty-eight, in the sixth year of Bunkwa [1809], when Tozo was five years old. To replace him, Hanshiro became an iri-muko. [4]

Children—two boys and two girls. These are Hanshiro's children by the mother of Tozo.

## **6. Copy of the Account written in Popular Style by Matsudaira Kwanzan Dono, Daimyo.**

Sometime in the eleventh month of the past year, when Katsugoro was playing in the rice-field with his elder sister, Fusa, he asked her—"Elder Sister, where did you come from before you were born into our household?"

Fusa answered him: "How can I know what happened to me before I was born?"

Katsugoro looked surprised and exclaimed: "Then you cannot remember anything that happened before you were born?"

"Do you remember?" asked Fusa.

"Indeed I do," replied Katsugoro. "I used to be the son of Kyūbei San of Hodokubo, and my name was then Tozo—do you not know all that?"

"Ah!" said Fusa, "I shall tell father and mother about it."

But Katsugoro at once began to cry, and said: "Please do not tell! It would not be good to tell father and mother."

Fusa made answer, after a little while: "Well, this time I shall not tell. But the next time that you do anything naughty, then I will tell."

After that day, whenever a dispute arose between the two, the sister would threaten the brother, saying,

“Very well, then—I shall tell that thing to father and mother.” At these words the boy would always yield to his sister. This happened many times; and the parents one day overheard Fusa making her threat. Thinking Katsugoro must have been doing something wrong, they desired to know what the matter was, and Fusa, being questioned, told them the truth. Then Genzo and his wife, and Tsuya, the grandmother of Katsugoro, thought it a very strange thing. They called Katsugoro, therefore and tried, first by coaxing, and then by threatening, to make him tell what he had meant by those words.

After hesitation, Katsugoro said: “I will tell you everything. I used to be the son of Kyūbei San of Hodokubo, and the name of my mother then was O-Shidzu San. When I was five years old, Kyūbei San died; and there came in his place a man called Hanshiro San, who loved me very much. But in the following year, when I was six years old, I died of smallpox. In the third year after that I entered mother’s honourable womb, and was born again.”

The parents and the grandmother of the boy wondered greatly at hearing this; and they decided to make all possible inquiry as to the man called Hanshiro of Hodokubo. But as they all had to work very hard every day to earn a living, and so could spare but little time for any other matter, they could

not at once carry out their intention.

Now Sei, the mother of Katsugoro, had nightly to suckle her little daughter Tsune, who was four years old, [5] and Katsugoro therefore slept with his grandmother, Tsuya. Sometimes he used to talk to her in bed; and one night when he was in a very confiding mood, she persuaded him to tell her what happened at the time when he had died. Then he said: "Until I was four years old I used to remember everything; but since then I have become more and more forgetful; and now I forget many, many things. But I still remember that I died of smallpox; I remember that I was put into a jar; [6] I remember that I was buried on a hill. There was a hole made in the ground; and the people let the jar drop into that hole. It fell pon!—I remember that sound well. Then somehow I returned to the house, and I stopped on my own pillow there. [7] In a short time some old man—looking like a grandfather—came and took me away. I do not know who or what he was. As I walked I went through empty air as if flying. I remember it was neither night nor day as we went: it was always like sunset-time. I did not feel either warm or cold or hungry. We went very far, I think; but still I could hear always, faintly, the voices of people talking at home; and the sound of the Nembutsu [8] being said for me. I remember also that when the people at home set offerings of hot

botamochi [9] before the household shrine [*butsudan*], I inhaled the vapour of the offerings ... Grandmother, never forget to offer warm food to the honourable dead [Hotoke Sama], and do not forget to give to priests—I am sure it is very good to do these things [10] ... After that, I only remember that the old man led me by some roundabout way to this place—I remember we passed the road beyond the village. Then we came here, and he pointed to this house, and said to me: “Now you must be reborn—for it is three years since you died. You are to be reborn in that house. The person who will become your grandmother is very kind; so it will be well for you to be conceived and born there.” After saying this, the old man went away. I remained a little time under the kaki-tree before the entrance of this house. Then I was going to enter when I heard talking inside; someone said that because father was now earning so little, mother would have to go to service in Yedo. I thought, “I will not go into that house,” and I stopped three days in the garden. On the third day it was decided that, after all, mother would not have to go to Yedo. The same night I passed into the house through a knot-hole in the sliding-shutters; and after that I stayed for three days beside the *kāmado*. [11] Then I entered mother’s honourable womb. [12] ... I remember that I was born without any pain at all.

Grandmother, you may tell this to father and mother, but please never tell it to anybody else."

The grandmother told Genzo and his wife what Katsugoro had related to her; and after that the boy was not afraid to speak freely with his parents on the subject of his former existence, and would often say to them: "I want to go to Hodokubo. Please let me make a visit to the tomb of Kyūbei San." Genzo thought that Katsugoro, being a strange child, would probably die before long, and that it might therefore be better to make inquiry at once as to whether there really was a man in Hodokubo called Hanshiro. But he did not wish to make the inquiry himself, because for a man to do so [under such circumstances!] would seem inconsiderate or forward. Therefore, instead of going himself to Hodokubo, he asked his mother Tsuya, on the twentieth day of the first month of this year, to take her grandson there.

Tsuya went with Katsugoro to Hodokubo; and when they entered the village she pointed to the nearer dwellings, and asked the boy, "Which house is it? Is it this house or that one?" "No," answered Katsugoro, "it is further on—much further," and he hurried before her. Reaching a certain dwelling at last, he cried, "This is the house!" and ran in, without waiting for his grandmother. Tsuya followed him in, and asked the people there what was the name of the



owner of the house. "Hanshiro," one of them answered. She asked the name of Hanshiro's wife. "Shidzu," was the reply. Then she asked whether there had ever been a son called Tozo born in that house. "Yes," was the answer; "but that boy died thirteen years ago, when he was six years old."

Then for the first time Tsuya was convinced that Katsugoro had spoken the truth, and she could not help shedding tears. She related to the people of the house all that Katsugoro had told her about his remembrance of his former birth. Then Hanshiro and his wife wondered greatly. They caressed Katsugoro and wept; and they remarked that he was much handsomer now than he had been as Tozo before dying at the age of six. In the meantime, Katsugoro was looking all about; and seeing the roof of a tobacco shop opposite to the house of Hanshiro he pointed to it, and said, "That used not to be there." And he also said, "The tree yonder used not to be there." All this was true. So from the minds of Hanshiro and his wife every doubt departed [ga wo orishi].

On the same day Tsuya and Katsugoro returned to Tanit-suiri, Nakano-mura. Afterwards Genzo sent his son seven times to Hanshiro's house, and allowed him to visit the tomb of Kyūbei, his real father in his previous existence.

Sometimes Katsugoro says: "I am a Nono-Sama: [13] therefore please be kind to me." Sometimes he also says to his grandmother: "I think I shall die when I am sixteen; but, as Ontake Sama [14] has taught us, dying is not a matter to be afraid of." When his parents ask him, "Would you not like to become a priest?" he answers, "I would rather not be a priest."

The village people do not call him Katsugoro anymore; they have nicknamed him "Hodokubo-Kozo" (the Acolyte of Hodokubo). [15] When anyone visits the house to see him, he becomes shy at once, and runs to hide himself in the inner apartments. So it is not possible to have any direct conversation with him. I have written down this account exactly as his grandmother gave it to me.

I asked whether Genzo, his wife or Tsuya could remember having done any virtuous deeds. Genzo and his wife said that they had never done anything especially virtuous, but that Tsuya, the grandmother, had always been in the habit of repeating the Nembutsu every morning and evening, and that she never failed to give two mon [16] to any priest or pilgrim who came to the door. But excepting these small matters, she never had done anything which could be called a particularly virtuous act.

This is the End of the Relation of the Rebirth of

## Note by the Translator

The foregoing is taken from a manuscript entitled *Chin Setsu Shu Ki* or “Manuscript-Collection of Uncommon Stories,” made between the fourth month of the sixth year of Bunsei and the tenth month of the sixth year of Tempo [1823–1835]. At the end of the manuscript is written—“From the years of Bunsei to the years of Tempo—Minamisempa, Owner. Kurumacho, Shiba, Yedo.” Under this, again, is the following note: “Bought from Yamatoya Sakujiro Nishinokubo: twenty-first day [?], Second Year of Meiji [1869].” From this it would appear that the manuscript had been written by Minamisempa, who collected stories told to him, or copied them from manuscripts obtained by him, during the thirteen years from 1823 to 1835, inclusive.

# Notes

1. The Western reader is requested to bear in mind that the year in which a Japanese child is born is counted always as one year in the reckoning of age. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Lit: “A wave-man,” a wandering samurai without a lord. The ronin were generally a desperate and very dangerous class, but there were some fine characters among them. [\[Back\]](#)
3. The Buddhist services for the dead are celebrated at regular intervals, increasing successively in length, until the time of one hundred years after death. The jū-san kwaiki is the service for the thirteenth year after death. By “thirteenth” in the context the reader must understand that the year in which the death took place is counted for one year. [\[Back\]](#)
4. The second husband, by adoption, of a daughter who lives with her own parents. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Children in Japan, among the poorer classes, are not weaned until an age much later than what is considered the proper age for weaning children in Western countries. But “four years old” in this text may mean considerably less than three by

Western reckoning. [\[Back\]](#)

6. From very ancient time in Japan it has been the custom to bury the dead in large jars, usually of red earthenware, called Kame. Such jars are still used, although a large proportion of the dead are buried in wooden coffins of a form unknown in the Occident. [\[Back\]](#)
7. The idea expressed is not that of lying down with the pillow under the head, but of hovering about the pillow, or resting upon it as an insect might do. The bodiless spirit is usually said to rest upon the roof of the home. The apparition of the aged man referred to in the next sentence seems a thought of Shinto rather than of Buddhism. [\[Back\]](#)
8. The repetition of the Buddhist invocation *Numu Amida Butsu* is thus named. The *nembutsu* is repeated by many Buddhist sects besides the sect of Amida proper, the Shinshu. [\[Back\]](#)
9. *Botamochi*, a kind of sugared rice-cake. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Such advice is a commonplace in Japanese Buddhist literature. By Hotoke Sama here the boy meant, not the Buddhas proper, but the spirits of the dead, hopefully termed Buddhas by those who loved them, much as in the West we sometimes speak of our dead as angels. [\[Back\]](#)

1. The cooking-place in a Japanese kitchen. Sometimes the word is translated “kitchen-range,” but the *kāmado* is something very different from a Western kitchen-range. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Here I think it better to omit a couple of sentences in the original rather too plain for Western taste, yet not without interest. The meaning of the omitted passages is only that even in the womb the child acted with consideration, and according to the rules of filial piety. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Nono-San (or Somali, the child-word for the spirits of the dead, for the Buddhas, and for the Shinto Gods, Kami.) Nono-San wo ogamu, “to pray to the Nono-San,” is the child-phrase for praying to the gods. According to Shinto thought, the spirits of the ancestors become Nono-San-Kami. [\[Back\]](#)
4. The reference here to Ontake Sama is of particular interest, but will need some considerable explanation. Ontake, or Mitake, is the name of a celebrated holy peak in the province of Shinano—a great resort for pilgrims. During the Tokugawa Shogunate, a priest called Isshin, of the Risshū Buddhists, made a pilgrimage to that mountain. Returning to his native place (Sakamoto-cho, Shitaya, Yedo), he began to preach certain new

doctrines and to make for himself a reputation as a miracle-worker, by virtue of powers said to have been gained during his pilgrimage to Ontake. The Shogunate considered him a dangerous person, and banished him to the island of Hachijo, where he remained for some years. Afterwards he was allowed to return to Yedo, and there to preach his new faith, to which he gave the name of Azuma-Kyo. It was Buddhist teaching in a Shinto disguise—the deities especially adored by its followers being Okuni-nushi and Sukunahikona as Buddhist avatars. In the prayer of the sect called Kaibyaku-Norito it is said: “The divine nature is immovable (fudo) yet it moves. It is formless, yet manifests itself in forms. This is the incomprehensible divine body. In heaven and earth it is called Kami: in all things it is called spirit, in man it is called mind. From this only reality came the heavens, the four oceans, the great whole of the three thousand universes; from the one mind emanate three thousands of great thousands of forms.” [\[Back\]](#)

15. Kozo is the name given to a Buddhist acolyte, or a youth studying for the priesthood. But it is also given to errand-boys and little boy-servants sometimes—perhaps because in former days the heads of little boys were shaved. I think that the

meaning in this text is “acolyte.” [\[Back\]](#)

6. In that time the name of the smallest of coins =  $1/10$  of 1 cent. It was about the same as that now called rin, a copper with a square hole in the middle and bearing Chinese characters [\[Back\]](#)



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