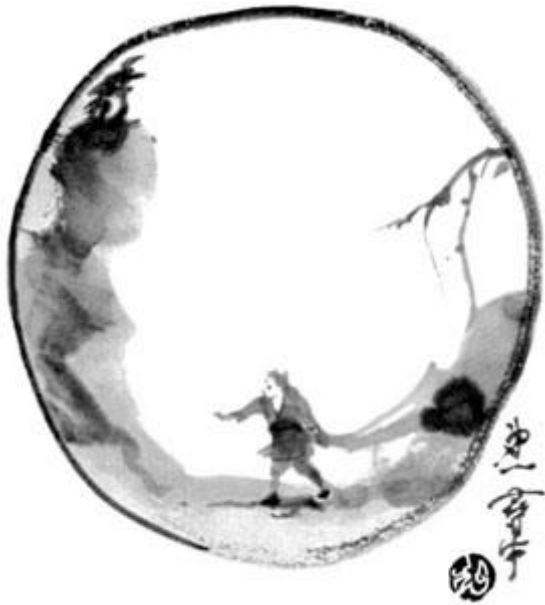


## STAGE 1: Seeking the Ox



### Introduction

Because the Ox has intrinsically never been lost, what need is there to go in pursuit?

Since the herd boy has turned his back on his true-nature, he is far away from it; with the dust before his eyes, he loses sight of the Ox.

Having left his ancestral home far behind, he gradually becomes lost on crisscrossing paths.

Thoughts of loss and gain rise up like flames, ideas of right and wrong spring up like sword points.

### Verse

*Incessantly you brush aside thick grasses in pursuit;  
The waters are wide, the mountains far, and the path leads on without end.  
Sapped of strength, exhausted in spirits, knowing no longer where to search,  
You only hear the sound of the evening cicadas chirping in the maple trees.*

The first of the Ten Ox-herding Pictures is "Seeking the Ox." It is the stage when the desire has arisen to seek the essential self, the original self (the ox). It is known as the "first stirring of the heart" [sho-hosshin] and is indeed a precious and beautiful movement. Although there are billions of people living on this earth, there are only very few who know that the essential self is completely perfect and absolutely limitless. Nor is it an exaggeration to say that there are hardly any who have realized this in fact and made it a part of themselves. How fortunate that we have encountered the authentic and traditional Buddha Way and taken the first step in its practice! How beautiful and precious indeed!

On this earth of ours the first to have realized that our essence is completely perfect and absolutely limitless was Shakyamuni Buddha. So, once you realize it, the completely perfect self (ox) does not go anywhere. Shakyamuni proclaimed that since we are endowed with it from the start there was no need to seek it out. The saying that "all living beings are originally Buddhas" is an expression of this reality.

But how is it with us really? No one has any idea of what way we are completely perfect or how we are absolutely limitless. No matter what, we can only see ourselves as imperfect and insufficient, as relative beings that exist for the limited span of 50 or 80 years. This is because we turn our backs on pursuing the crucial question "What is the true self?" to open

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### Ten Ox-herding Pictures

Verses Composed by KAKUAN Zenji | Teisho by KUBOTA Ji'un

our eyes to our real essence, but, instead, go after only the objective world outside us, thus becoming more and more estranged from our true self.

Once we turn to this dust of delusive differentiation, we go from one thing to another pursuing delusions and becoming hopelessly lost in that infinite dust, until finally we have completely lost sight of our true self. A common mistake into which those doing zazen fall is surely this. Therefore, no matter what is seen, no matter what is heard, no matter what comes to mind, not to pay attention to any of it but only become "Mu" itself [cf. Koan "Jôshu's Dog" in Mumonkan Case 1]. But rather, thinking Mu is outside of themselves, people try to grasp it conceptually and go after whatever comes to mind, from one thing to the next, without knowing how to stop. Then, Mu (their true self), which is what they should be seeking, goes off somewhere. As a result, no matter how many years pass, they cannot grasp Mu.

And so the familiar mountains and houses of your native place (true self) become distant, and you can no longer know the road over which you originally came. Even if you want to return, you no longer know the way to go back; rather, you go off on a side road which leads in a direction farther and farther away from the true self. What is that side road, you may ask? It is the endlessly critical mind which arises like a sharp dagger, judging some things good and others bad from the criterion of your own profit-gain.

Not being satisfied with the material world and attempting to achieve a solid spiritual base, you have reached the level of "seeking the ox." But if you make a mistake in the method of Zen, immediately you go down a side road with the result that it would have been better not to do zazen at all. Therefore, at the point of beginning zazen it is extremely important to choose an authentic master; at the same time you must never forget to always have a strict spirit of self-reflection when practicing the Way.

Now let's look at the verse of Master Kakuan:

Incessantly you brush aside thick grasses in pursuit.

You make the practice of Mu trying with all your might to overtake the ox by sweeping away the grass of delusive discrimination appearing continually. The legs become painful and the knees ache. In the afternoon you become drowsy. At "kinhin" [i.e., walking meditation between zazen sessions] you loosen the legs, wash the face and take away the drowsiness. You revive your spirit and once again challenge Mu.

The waters are wide, the mountains far,  
and the path leads on without end.

No matter how far you go, the channel of the river keeps widening, and the mountain ranges continue far in the distance; you never reach a place where you can say, "Now it is enough." Day after day, there is only sitting facing the wall. Can a person really solve the problems of life by just doing this? Thoughts get confused by the thousands and you go off on an unclear road.

Sapped of strength, exhausted in spirits,  
knowing no longer where to search.

Bodily strength is gone as well as mental energy. You don't know what to do. "What can I do? How can I do it?" Only those who have really practiced in a down-to-earth way can understand what it means to reach this point. However, here, at the lowest point, the point of the Great Death, you have reached the very important state that is called "being close to the treasure place."

You only hear the sound of the evening cicadas chirping in the maple trees.

It is now evening. The cicadas in the maple trees are singing "miiiiin, miiiiin" in a frenzy. When you hear their cry you want to cry also. "Oh, today also is finishing in vain." Unless you have experienced this kind of thought a number of times, you cannot find your true self.