

## STAGE 2: Finding the Tracks



### Introduction

He has understood the meaning of the sutras and knows about the tracks through the teachings.

It is clear to him that all vessels are made of gold, and he knows that the myriad things are himself.

But if he cannot distinguish between right and wrong, how can he separate the true from the false?

As he has not yet entered this gate, he can be said to have merely seen the tracks.

### Verse

*At the waters edge, under the trees - hoofmarks are numerous.  
Balmy grasses grow abundantly - can you see them or not?  
Even if you go deeper and deeper into the mountains,  
How could his nostrils, well compassing the heavens, hide him at all?*

The stage of "finding the tracks" is the stage of having discovered the hoofmarks of the ox. In general, the "hoofmarks" signify the stage in which you read and understand the sutras, or study the various teachings of Shakyamuni and of the patriarchs, and come to a conceptual understanding of the content of their experience. That is to say, it is the stage in which you have understood "cerebrally" the existence of the ox.

However, in actual practice, when you do the practice of Mu with all your might, at first what were two separate entities - yourself and Mu - gradually become one through your efforts and a deepening of Mu practice. And the conviction is born: "if I continue at this rate, I too can certainly make kensho." And then your strength is put into Mu even more. This stage is called that of "finding the tracks."

What does it mean to say that you understand conceptually that the ox exists? It means to have understood the principle that all beings in heaven and earth are empty ("Form is emptiness" - [a famous quote from the Prajna-Paramita Sutra or Hannyā Shingyō Sutra]). Once you understand the nature of this emptiness you also understand the principle that all things in heaven and on earth are the self. As Monk Jō [who lived in the 4th century China] says: "Heaven and earth and I are of the same root; all things and I are the same body." Now there is an "I" which understands this principle. Yet, insofar as this "I" remains, you do

not really understand the true emptiness or the inner state expressed as "Heaven and earth and I are one body."

Thus it is necessary to personally experience the fact of "Form is emptiness." And to do that there is only one way: to give your whole self to Mu, to forget the self so that just Mu remains. If you continue this practice, you will eventually at some opportunity or another take hold of the "fact" that you are completely empty and do not exist anywhere and the "fact" that because you are empty everything is yourself. Insofar as you do not actually do this practice nor have this experience, be assured that your Zen is simply conceptual and theoretical Zen.

Those who are captives to this kind of conceptual and theoretical Zen are also spoken of as a whole as those in the position of "finding the tracks." Those who do scholarly research in Zen, no matter how fine and detailed the research is, from the standpoint of the practice of Zen are taken together as being in the stage of "finding the tracks."

Let's now try to appreciate the verse of Master Kakuan:

At the waters edge, under the trees - hoofmarks are numerous.

Along the water's edge and in the depths of the forest, in every place the hoofmarks of the ox can be seen. Theoretically, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form; heaven and earth and I are of the same root; all things and I are you body." But from the aspect of practice, each and every Mu is every and all the hoofmarks of the ox.

Balmy grasses grow abundantly - can you see them or not?

There are sweet smelling grasses spreading out abundantly and swayed by the wind. The poet challenges us, Can you see them? All things in heaven and on earth, each one by one, are the open and clear and identical expression of this true fact. Do we understand this or not? The verse seems to insinuate that we might comprehend a little with the head, but that we aren't able to truly understand the real thing.

Even if you go deeper and deeper into the mountains.

The more you pursues the original ox with your "Muuuuu," the farther it goes into the recesses of the mountains. If you look at Mu from the outside and try to pursue it, it just keeps going farther and farther away. This is a very important point: your practice must not be one of pursuing and looking at Mu from the outside. It must be one of just completely becoming Mu itself.

How could his nostrils, well compassing the heavens, hide him at all?

But wait a moment. With each Mu are we not grasping the muzzle of the ox, and is it not the ox (the real self) itself? Is it not a reality that cannot be hidden anywhere? This is a sincere warning for us.

If you are really faithfully practicing, at first you don't know what is what, but gradually the way of folding the legs, holding the hands, and keeping the position become clear; the way

of controlling the breath and the practice of Mu itself becomes understood. If you continue for a few months or half a year or a year, gradually the heart becomes calm and the way of doing Zazen itself begins to deepen. And the conviction arises that if you continue this effort, you will without fail attain enlightenment. You begin to sit with greater and greater enthusiasm. Even conceptually you become certain and your conviction of Zen does not waver even with the slightest thing. You have not yet grasped the ox experientially, but you have fully gotten into gear with the practice of Zen. This is the stage of the position of "finding the tracks."

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### **Ten Ox-herding Pictures**

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