

STAGE 3: Catching Sight of the Ox



Introduction

If you attain by way of sounds, you will encounter the source of all seeing.

The six sense organs are each no different from this; in all actions, the head is revealed.

It is like the salty taste of the water, the binder in the paint.

Raise your eyebrows, and this is nothing other than THAT itself.

Verse

*The bush warbler sings on the branch.
The sun is warm, the breeze gentle, and the willows on the riverbank are green.
There is no place you can escape from him.
That majestic head and horns could never be painted in a picture.*

"Catching sight of the ox" is the stage of having seen clearly the real self. What does it mean to see clearly the real self? Up to that time you have been accustomed to think that there was a "substance" (the ego) which was called the self. But to see the real self clearly is to experience the fact that actually the self is completely devoid of substance and that the so-called ego was never even there!

For many this experience is initiated through some kind of resonating sound. Master Mumon [1183-1260, author of the Mumonkan] attained a great enlightenment as soon as he heard the "boom" of a big drum. Master Kyôgen [? -898] was raking in the garden very earnestly when a stone lodged in his broom flew off and struck a bamboo tree with great force. At the sound of the "whack" the delusion that had enveloped him up to that time was blown away at once and he attained the true self. And so there are many examples of such achievements following upon sounds of various kinds.

In this way when you realize the true self, you reach the source, namely, "whatever you see or hear, each individual thing is, just as it is, the true self." Of course, it is important that this be a true experience. If even a little conceptual thought creeps in, it is not a true experience of "catching sight of the ox."

Ten Ox-herding Pictures

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

Let's look at this phenomenon more closely. There are said to be six "roots" [kon] of perception, that is, six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, (tactile) body, and mind. Corresponding to these organs there are six "objects"[kyô] of perception: color and shape, sound, smell, taste, tangible objects, and mental objects. And there are six "consciousnesses" [shiki] which occur when the six sense organs correspond to the six objects of perception: visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness, tactile consciousness, mental consciousness. True enlightenment is understanding that each one of these is true reality, devoid of any substance, the true self; among them there exists absolutely no difference.

And it is not only the six sense organs, six objects of perception, and the six consciousnesses which are meant here. Standing, sitting, crying, laughing, eating, drinking, slipping, spilling - all such movements are the true self, the true fact, that is, the ox as a whole really appearing in total openness.

The condition of the true ox as devoid of all content is just like the saltiness in sea water or the glue in the pigment, which cannot be detected from outside. Ordinary people know only the superficial forms like the sea water or pigment. But after enlightenment you realize that there is saltiness in sea water and glue in pigment, and that, in actuality, these elements have been doing their natural work. When you know clearly saltiness which makes sea water what it actually is and glue which makes out pigment, with confidence you can say that this is the ox (the true self). The result is that the entire way of looking at things you have used up to now changes completely.

Let's now take a look at the verse of Kakuan Zenji:

The bush warbler sings on the branch.

The term "bush warbler" means nightingale. The nightingale sits on a branch and warbles in a loud voice. "Catching sight of the ox" (enlightenment) must be a clear experience like this. It is the "boom" of Master Mumon and the "whack" of Master Kyôgen. Insofar as you bring to dokusan some abstraction like, "Each thing in heaven and on earth is itself an expression of Mu," it is not the real thing. Abstractions, concepts, thoughts are play models of Zen and not Zen itself. Both teachers and students of Zen must take this to heart. Accordingly checking this out is very important.

The sun is warm, the breeze gentle,
and the willows on the riverbank are green.

When you have experienced really "catching sight of the ox" (enlightenment), you for the first time escape from the fetters of the ego and see reality just as it is. It is like when you have put down the pack from your shoulders just as the spring sunlight comes through and a gentle breeze flows; the weeping willows on both banks are putting out green leaves and the branches are swaying gently.

There is no place you can escape from him.

The true ox being expressed in the softness of this spring scene is not just the world which is seen by the eyes or heard by the ear [ninku]. All the environment surrounding us is the

true ox itself [hokku]; all the universe is the ox itself. Thus, if this is true, even should you want to escape from the ox there would be no way to escape. And:

That majestic head and horns could never be painted in a picture.

No one can express or diagram or foretell when and in what way the ox will appear, for the movements of the real ox are very lively in the midst of the forest.

But what we must keep in mind here is that, when you have an experience like this, you feel just like you have gotten hold of the neck of the devil, and before you know it, you are boasting of the experience, neglecting your practice, disregarding the master, such that it would have been better never to have done Zen in the first place. "Catching sight of the ox" is still only the third stage. Know that you must walk a road of continual striving for improvement.