

## STAGE 4: Seizing the Ox



### Introduction

For a long time he has been living in obscurity in the countryside; today you have met him.

Because he enjoys his former situation so much, it is difficult to drive him out.

He cannot stop loving the fragrant grasses; his stubborn will is still strong and a wild spirit remains.

If you wish to make him pure and obedient, you must apply the whip.

### Verse

*You have exhausted all your faculties to take hold of him.  
Because his spirit is strong and his strength abundant, it is difficult to rid him of his habits.  
Sometimes he goes to the top of the high plain.  
Other times he resides in clouds and smoke.*

The stage of "seizing the ox" is that at which you have firmly laid hold of the ox, which is our essential nature. The essence of the ox has become clear. At the stage of "catching sight of the ox," you have only seen the ox. If you slacken your effort, thinking that this is already the highest attainment, the ox soon disappears from sight again. The resulting state is one in which all that remains is the memory of having seen the ox (having reached enlightenment). Thus, if you have reached enlightenment, it is vitally important to continue your practice more and more vigorously to make that world which has been glimpsed become even clearer.

However, this ox in our heart for a long time has been set deeply in the outlying fields and in the midst of mountains, which is to say, it has been mired in the phenomenal world of dualism. And because it cannot forget the taste of that world, it has been very difficult to pull it away from it. As the result of long years of practice, for a brief moment today, you have been able to grasp the ox. This is the stage of "seizing the ox."

Well, exactly what does it mean to have seized the ox (real self), you may ask. It means to see clearly, without the mediation of concepts, that the essence of your self is completely

empty, and that because the essential self is empty it has the unlimited ability to become anything. The expression in the Prajna-Paramita Sutra, "Form is emptiness," refers to this reality; it is neither a thought nor a concept. When you reach this point, there is no fear of losing the "ox" anymore.

However, the world of dualism that you have become accustomed to so long is a very comfortable world in which to live. The true ox that is completely empty of substance, before you are able to come to know it, separates off and becomes the slave of its surroundings. It becomes buried and is unable to free itself. That part of us which is attached to the old world of dualism is not only very stubborn but also has the tendency to soon get out of control. So, in one way or another you cannot help but thinking there is an objective world outside of yourself. If you understand that from the beginning the essence of your self is empty [shinku], you should also be able to see that the objective world is also empty [hokku]. But in reality, things do not go so easily. In order to further make the world of hokku(world as empty) clear you must work and practice harder and harder. Once you have taken hold of ninku (self as empty) and hokku (world as empty), then for the first time the world of truly "seizing the ox" becomes apparent: the whole universes is only one person, so that "above and under heaven there is only I, alone and sublime."

Now we can appreciate the verse of Master Kakuan:

You have exhausted all your faculties to take hold of him.

Because you found the true ox ("seeing the ox"), you were overjoyed and encouraged a hundredfold. Then, you were further inspired to try to actually grasp the ox with your hands. As a result of this long and persistent pursuit, you were finally able to seize the nostrils of the ox.

Because his spirit is strong and his strength abundant, it is difficult to rid him of his habits.

But once you grasp this true ox, you find that its habit of seeking the discrimination of dualism remains strong. You put yourself forward everywhere, see the other as other, and are taken up in that world of discrimination. There is danger that those very reins holding the ox, by which you have gone to the trouble to make clear the world of emptiness, will be severed. The bad habit of opposing self and other, because it has perjured over such a long period, does not easily change even though you have understood emptiness. Therefore you must more and more throw yourself into the practice of Zazen.

Sometimes he goes to the top of the high plain.

Let me elucidate that state of not being able to change. At some time, even though it is just for a moment, standing at the pinnacle of "seizing the ox," you linger in the world of emptiness and become attached to the world where - as a famous phrase goes - "there are no living beings to be saved, even if you should want to save them." You boast that "no one has had as deep an enlightenment as I." When your heart is seized by this state, the freedom of mind and action no longer exists. Surely, it is few that have actually experienced such a thorough emptiness, and certainly the joy of having experienced that world is without comparison. But to become attached to that world leads to self-complacency; a

person afflicted with Zen sickness like this is nothing but a white elephant that is completely useless for saving other living beings.

Other times he resides in clouds and smoke.

Another facet which is difficult to eradicate is the tendency to return quickly to the world of dualism - the makyô [delusive fantasy] which spreads so easily like a smoke screen. From there it is very hard to escape again. Because the self-consciousness that "I have attained an enlightenment which others couldn't" has become so strong, such a person is, on the contrary, more stubborn than those who have not attained enlightenment. Such people put themselves forward more strongly, and reach a state which is beyond help. Undoubtedly there were some cases like this in the past because there is an ancient term "arrogant Zen-devil" [zen-tenma] to warn against just such a state. To avoid that pitfall, you must, after reaching enlightenment, become more and more humble and put yourself more into Zen practice.