

STAGE 5: Taming the Ox



Introduction

Once thoughts rise up even slightly, they are followed by other thoughts.

Through enlightenment, they become true; in delusion, they become false.

It is not due to our surroundings that they are there; they are only produced by our mind.

We must pull the Ox firmly by his tether and not allow any doubts to enter.

Verse

*Whipping does not depart from the body at any moment.
Lest he follow his own whim, entering the dust and dirt.
If you devotedly tame him, he will be pure and gentle.
Without bridle and chains, he will follow you of his own accord.*

Once you have reached the point of "seizing" the ox, which is the true self, you must not rest on your laurels but continue to practice with all your strength and go on to the next stage. It is the stage of taming the ox, a very important process by which you make your own that which has been realized. As I mentioned previously, seizing the ox is grasping clearly the fact that the essence of your self is completely empty [ninku] and at the same time all beings in the universe are also completely empty [hokku]. But to have attained such an enlightenment does not mean that our concepts and delusions automatically all disappear. With the re-appearance of just a minor conceptualization, the delusive concepts come back again one after another without end. In fact, it is the case that the clearer your experience of seizing the ox, the harder it is to escape the delusion of having understood this whole world and to avoid the proud thoughts which ensue one after another. You boast of the experience, talk proudly of Zen, and fall prey to the reckless desire to want to direct and lead others.

Of course, if you should ask what is the essence of these delusive and discriminatory thoughts that arise continually, know that they are in themselves empty and without reality. If you can really rest assured in that fact, each of them, one by one, becomes the true self as it is. But we humans, unfortunately, always cling to what we have experienced and have the habit of not letting go. This is especially true in the case of the seizing of the ox, a feat that most people have a difficult time achieving. Once we have made it, we boast that no

Ten Ox-herding Pictures

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one has had such a wonderful experience. We cling to the delusive and proud thoughts that arise one after another, such as, "Perhaps even Shakyamuni Buddha himself did not have such an experience as I." And these thoughts themselves become a new reason for delusion.

We always can see only the oppositional world of dualism, subject and object, but the concept that the objective world "is" appears not because the objective world is really there. Only because in our hearts we recognize "The objective world is," it is. This means that this "is-ness" is, in reality, only in our mind. Therefore, there arises in the mind the idea of "I" which has experienced seizing the ox, so the world corresponding to that "I" also appears, with the result that the objective world is conjured up by the proud "I". In the true world of seizing the ox, the objective world as well as the subjective world is totally empty; there is no room for being and non-being to appear at all. To be always at rest securely in such a world, it is necessary by all means to put the halter through the nose of the ox and pull it firmly. If the ox starts to eat the grass of discriminatory delusion, tell him "No, no!", never neglecting the due training, and continue in hard practice to the end. The practical means to that end is that single sharp spear, MU. This is the practice for post-enlightenment, and you must say that, in a sense, it is endlessly more difficult than the pre-enlightenment practice.

Let's now look at the verse of Master Kakuan:

Occasional whipping does not depart from the body.

The stage of taming the ox is one in which you must make the utmost effort to bring under control as far as possible the ox you have seized. For that purpose you must never let the whip or the halter get away from your self.

Lest he follow his own whim, entering the dust and dirt.

If you don't take such precautions, without fail the ox will go off on its own and will enter that world of discrimination full of dust and dirt. It goes without saying that this applies to the secular world in which it was so much at home before, but it also wants to go into that world of enlightenment (seizing the ox), and it is not easy for it to come out from there again.

If you devotedly tame him, he will be pure and gentle.

To "devotedly tame him" means that if you really become serious and keep taming the ox, your heart gradually softens and becomes pure. This is a very important process. Having your experience approved, and coming to the stage of seizing the ox, an experience which most people have a hard time achieving, you come, by and by, to think greatly of yourself, and without noticing, you become proud of yourself. It is only through strenuous sitting and continual training that the heart gradually becomes gentle, and the physiognomy becomes mellow, and the former harsh way of speaking drops away. If this does not happen, it is not the true effect of Zen.

Without bridle and chains, he will follow you of his own accord.

Once the ox has become tamed, even if you do not attach the bridle or chains, the ox naturally starts to follow. Therefore, standing, sitting, crying, laughing, the true ox always remains.

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