

## STAGE 6: Riding the Ox Home



### Introduction

The battle is already over, gain and loss are also empty.

He sings a woodcutter's rustic song and whistles a child's tune.

Straddled on the Ox's back, he gazes at the clouds.

Though you call him he will not return; though you try to catch and hold him, he will not stay.

### Verse

*You mount the ox and want to make your way slowly home.  
A barbarian plays the flute in the red glow of sunset.  
Each measure, each tune is filled with ineffable tones.  
Among true intimates, what need is there for words?*

As the title says, this is the stage in which you get on the ox and ride it home. It is the fruit of the previous stage of taming the ox, and it is that stage in which at last the ox follows what it is told.

In the stage of seizing the ox, you were able to grasp your true self. However, as is often said, if thoughts occur even a little, other thoughts are soon to follow; you are then bothered by thoughts which occur one after another. Especially the thought that you have achieved a great enlightenment rarely attained by others, gradually without your noticing it, becomes a source of pride which is difficult to dispel. Therefore, you try to tame this ox by fighting strongly against such a thought, saying to yourself: "This is not enough, this is not enough." Now this effort at taming the ox has brought results, and the struggle is over at last. By that I mean that you have recognized that the substance of unenlightened/enlightened, ordinary/holy, good/bad, gain/loss is empty and that accordingly the wall between unenlightened/enlightened, ordinary/holy, good/bad, gain/loss has disappeared.

And so just as the lumberjack hums a country melody or children innocently play their children's tunes on their flutes, so too does such a person enter a state of true freedom without any blocks. From the standpoint of the ordinary person it is indeed an enviable

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### Ten Ox-herding Pictures

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

state. This state in which the ox (your true self) does exactly what it is told, is like being able to lie down leisurely and watch the clouds in the sky move gently here and there.

Even if you try to call the ox back, it does not look back. Even if you try to grab it and to lock it up, it would not stop. Letting things run their course, day by day, hour by hour, doing what should be done, you go along without any hindrances.

This is truly a wonderful state. However, there is here a big trap. That is because there is an ox which is walking along smoothly on its own and a self which is looking at that ox. And that self is happy, gazing at the ox (the true self) and thinking how gentle it has become. Your state has become so comfortable. You proclaim that you have reached a wonderful state. And those who hear that admire it as something worthy. But they also think that such a person must be special, and they feel no urge to try zazen. The result is a completely useless Zen, certified by only your self. But once you have come this far, you must urge yourself on further by the motto, "Practice another 30 years," and sit and sit and polish the self.

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

You mount the ox and want to make your way slowly home.

The word for "slowly" [iri] in the original text refers to something connected and stretching for some distance. Here you have mounted the ox, which is your true self, and is slowly proceeding to return to your native village with no end yet in sight. "Wanting to make your way" means that you are trying to return, but it also implies that you are not being able to do that. What keeps you from coming back? It is because there is a self, which is looking at the ox.

A barbarian plays the flute in the red glow of sunset.

"A barbarian" [kyô] refers to a foreign tribe living in the northwest of China. The sound of a flute played by someone in this tribe salutes the sunset note by note. It can be heard so clearly. But that flute, like the sound of a foreigner playing in a strange land, brings a tinge of melancholy.

Each measure, each tune is filled with ineffable tones.

That is true, but, in each song and each note, there is an infinite savoring. That is so because in every clap of the hands, or every footstep, or in each blade of grass, the true self is at work. You are able to experience directly these things without logical thinking and manipulation of concepts.

Among true intimates, what need is there for words?

But what really is that like, you may ask. In ancient China there were two friends, Hakuga and Chôshiki. Hakuga was a master of the Chinese lute. When Hakuga played the lute, Chôshiki would discern the state of his mind and his disposition by listening carefully to the sound and the tone. So it is not always necessary to verbalize what is within. There is a way of understanding perfectly while being silent.

It is not easy to reach this state. However, this close friend, that is to say, the ox, which without saying or proclaiming anything, is always still there. Because this state is pleasant and happy, the sickness of clinging by all means to this experience appears. This is the innate weakness of human nature. And little by little, unawares, you fall into this way of thinking. This stage is only the sixth stage, and you should know that you are still "on the way."