

STAGE 8: Person and Ox Both Forgotten



Introduction

Ordinary feelings have fallen away,
thoughts of holiness are all empty.

We should not linger where there is Buddha;
we should pass quickly by where there is no
Buddha.

If we do not stick to either, it will be
difficult for a thousand eyes to perceive us.

For myriad birds to carry flowers is a shame
all around.

Verse

*Whip, tether, person and ox - all are empty.
The blue sky spreads out far and wide, it cannot be communicated.
On a red-hot oven, how can there be any place for snow?
Having come this far, you understand the intention of the patriarchs.*

At the eighth stage, "person and ox both forgotten"[jingyu gubô], we come to realize the fact that this "I" (person), which has been seeking, and the essential self (ox), which has been the object of our search, did not exist at all.

It is the same fact manifested in Dôgen Zenji's statement, "My body and mind have fallen away," which he presented to his own master, TENDÔ Nyojô Zenji [1162-1227], after he had come to great realization upon hearing the words of his master, "Practicing Zen is the falling away of body and mind." You have forgotten yourself, you have forgotten all others, you have forgotten everything; there is only one round circle without any substance whatsoever. This is what is meant by "person and ox both forgotten."

In order to reach this stage, it is of crucial importance that - as a saying goes - "you do not linger where there are buddhas, and you pass quickly through where there aren't any buddhas." To "linger where there are buddhas" means to idle your time away with such beloved concepts as "buddhas," "enlightenment," and so on. As long as you cherish in your mind even a little bit of such ideas as "kenshō," "great enlightenment" [daigo tettei], "Dharma transmission" [inka shōmei], and so forth, you are not yet a true one. "Where there aren't any buddhas" means, on the other hand, a level of mind where you can say

that such seemingly precious items concern you no more. But you must never foster this notion in your head or even take pride in this fact. You must "pass quickly through" it.

Explaining the seventh stage "Ox Forgotten, Person Remaining," I mentioned that there still remains self-consciousness. It was because the person was leisurely dwelling on the level of "no buddhas." When you have passed through this level, the world where there is utterly nobody and nothing becomes truly clear and evident.

If you have passed beyond both the world of buddhas and that of no buddhas, you are in a world which even Shakyamuni or Manjusri with their clairvoyance cannot perceive. It's because there is not even a thing there. The basis of Zen is to grasp this world of nothingness through experience. Zen without this experience is merely a conceptual Zen and amounts to nothing more than playing around with plastic models of Zen.

If someone has truly experienced the real fact, how would his life look? Let me show you an example. In ancient China there was a Zen master named GOZU Hôyu [594-657]. He was a man of high virtue, and people in his neighborhood respected him deeply. Even birds praised his virtues by fetching flowers and offering them to him. But later on, after he came to great enlightenment under the Fourth Patriarch DAII Dôshin Zenji [580-651], the birds stopped bringing flowers to him. As long as people extol you as a great person, a person of high virtue, etc., you are not real. A person of true enlightenment does not look great at all. The birds fail to spot Hôyu Zenji, because he turned invisible to them, as he became someone who is nowhere.

Let's now appreciate the verse composed by Kakuan Zenji:

Whip, tether, person and ox - all are empty.

You have diligently applied whips and tethers, searching with all your might for your essential self. Your goal once attained, you realize that the whips, tethers, you yourself and the ox - all is empty with no substance at all. It is a world where there is utterly nothing and no one.

The blue sky spreads out far and wide, it cannot be communicated.

The blue sky is wide and clear. It expresses the true fact of emptiness, the world of true self. Since it is empty, there is no means to communicate it. Yet, to tell you the truth, it was communicated from the very beginning as "empty."

On a red-hot oven, how can there be any place for snow?

The "red-hot oven" is a live blast furnace burning with scarlet flames. It melts away anything. It goes without saying that snow will be made to evaporate in an instant, leaving no trace whatsoever. It means that the true fact of emptiness is burning hot like the furnace. There is no room for any discriminatory thought ("snow") to enter.

Having come this far, you understand the intention of the patriarchs.

Only at this level, you match the spirit of buddhas and patriarchs. In other words, if you don't attain this level, there is no meaning in your Zen practice. Only with this experience can you solve your problem of life-and-death and attain true peace of mind. However, it is still the eighth stage of practice; you need to practice more to come up to even higher levels.

Ten Ox-herding Pictures

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