

STAGE 9: Returning to the Source



Introduction

It is originally pure and clean without a speck of dust clinging.

He observes the flourishing and dying of form while remaining in the silence of no-action.

This is not the same as illusion; what need is there for striving or planning?

The water is blue and the mountains green; he sits and watches phenomena take form and decay.

Verse

Having come back to the origin and returned to the source, you see that you have expended efforts in vain.

What could be superior to becoming blind and deaf in this very moment?

Inside the hermitage, you do not see what is in front of the hermitage.

The water flows of itself and the flowers are naturally red.

How much time and pain it took to come to the eighth stage of "Person and Ox Both Forgotten"! Now you have reached at last the stage where you realize the fact of "Person is empty, so is the dharma," that is, the subject (person) and the object (dharma) are both totally empty. Since this is the fruit of extremely long and hard labor, you tend to stick to this stage and to cherish it endlessly - the last residue of enlightenment. If you succeed in washing it away by constant and persistent sitting, you come to a state of realization that the fact of "Person is empty, so is the dharma" is the essential state of human beings, signifying nothing special at all. Through this realization you return to your original starting point. This is the stage of "Returning to the source," where not a trace of such things as "Buddhism" or "Tathagata" is found anywhere. It is true that "the state after enlightenment is exactly the same as that of before enlightenment." It is the state of mind of "a leisurely person of the Way, who, having finished learning, has nothing more to do."

At this stage you can observe that all the highs and lows and vacillations of this world are, as they are, void of substance and are manifestations of the world of perfect stillness and non-being. Expressed in these terms it sounds as if there were two things - being and non-being. But in fact, being is non-being; the aspect of being is, as it is, non-being itself. There is no distinction between the two at all.

Ten Ox-herding Pictures

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

This proposition "Being is non-being" is a crude fact, not a temporary illusion or a dream. At this point you can realize and affirm that it has been entirely unnecessary to be consciously engaged in practicing the way or trying to attain enlightenment. This is a very important point: you start with the first stage of "Searching the Ox," and, spending many years in practice, you come at last to the ninth level of "Returning to the Source," and as a result of this entire process you can say that practice and enlightenment were unnecessary. It is totally wrong to maintain from the very beginning that practice and enlightenment are of no use. Such an attitude is called "inactive zen" [buji-zen] . Today, almost all Zen schools in Japan have degenerated to this "inactive zen." They maintain that just sitting is enough, not appreciating the experience of enlightenment or even ignoring it. On the other hand, you must bear in mind: No matter how strongly you argue that enlightenment is important, if it's nothing more than just propagating a conceptual zen or if you take pride in your experience (if it was an authentic experience), you are only mid-way. There is no other way than to sit and sit and sit, until you can very clearly say that practice and enlightenment were intrinsically unnecessary.

Let's now appreciate the verse by Master Kakuan:

Having come back to the origin and returned to the source,
you see that you have expended efforts in vain.

You are now back to your starting point. How much effort you needed for that! Occasionally you encouraged yourself washing your face with the ice-chilly basin water, or you sank into desperation listening to frogs croaking in the dusk outside, or you kept sitting in defiance of the pains in the legs or of unbearable fatigue. Many times you have felt, "Now, this time I've come to a true experience!" but soon that experience is covered with anxiety and discontent. How many times you have determined to stop doing zazen altogether!.

What could be superior to becoming blind and deaf
in this very moment?

Come to think of it now, why didn't I become like a blind and deaf person right away? "Blind and deaf" here means a state of mind where there is nothing to see and nothing to hear. When you see, there's only the seeing, and the subject that sees doesn't exist. When you hear, there's only the hearing, and the subject that hears doesn't exist. The objects which are seen or heard are, just as they are, without substance. But understanding the logic of this will not do. When this is realized as a fact, you become like a "blind and deaf" person.

Inside the hermitage,
you do not see what is in front of the hermitage.

The late YAMADA Kôun Roshi comments that this line comes from a dialogue between Unmon [864-949] and Master Kempô [dates unknown]: Unmon visited Master Kempô and asked, "Why doesn't a person inside the hermitage know anything outside the hermitage?" To this, Kempô burst out into laughter. The point is why the person inside the hermitage (subject) cannot see the things "in front of the hermitage" (object). That's because there isn't anything in front of the hermitage. You may say that there is only the subject, there being no object at all. Yet, in actual truth, that "subject" doesn't exist either.

The water flows of itself and the flowers are naturally red.

The water runs smoothly, the flowers are colored scarlet. This line seems to imply that there are only the objects and there's no subject at all. However, as a matter of fact, those objects do not exist at all. It's simply that the water is running smoothly, and flowers are scarlet. Everything is just as it is [tada korekore], and everything is void as it is now [arugamama no aritsubure]. The fact that there is no distinction between self and others simply continues without end - "The water flows of itself and the flowers are naturally red."