

## On ‘The Four Horses’

(*Shime*)

**Translator’s introduction:** This discourse is based on a widely quoted description of four kinds of trainees when they encounter the Buddhist Teaching on impermanence. The training of the four kinds is likened to the training of four types of horses.

One day a non-Buddhist came to where the Buddha was in order to pay the World-honored One a visit. He said to the Buddha, “I do not ask You whether You have words for It, nor do I ask You whether there are no words for It.”

The World-honored One sat in silence for some good while.

Thereupon, the non-Buddhist humbly bowed and, in praise, said, “How fine, O World-honored One! Your great benevolence and great compassion have parted the clouds of my delusion and made it possible for me to enter the Truth.” He then made a prostration and departed.

After the non-Buddhist had departed, Ananda then asked the Buddha, “What did the non-Buddhist realize that led him to say that he had entered the Truth and then, after praising You, depart?”

The World-honored One replied, “He was like a good horse who just goes forth upon seeing but the shadow of a riding crop.”

Since the time when our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma came from the West up to the present, there have been many good Masters who have taken up this account and given it to those training under them. Among the trainees, there were those who took years and others who took months or even just days before they clarified the Matter\* and came to trust in the Buddha’s Dharma. We call this the account of the non-Buddhist who asked for the Buddha’s explanation of the Matter. You need to realize that the World-honored One had two sorts of explanation: by spiritual silence and by spiritual explanation. Those who are able to enter the Truth via this narrative are all like a good horse who sees the shadow of the riding crop and

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\* See *Glossary*.

gallops forth. Those who are able to enter the Truth via a way of explaining the Matter that goes beyond spiritual silence and spiritual explanation are also like this.



Our Ancestral Teacher Nāgārjuna once said the following, “When I explain some phrase from a Scripture for the benefit of someone, it is as if that person were a swift horse who has seen the shadow of a riding crop and takes to the appropriate path.” On any occasion whatsoever, whether when listening to Teaching on that which arises and That which does not arise, or listening to Teaching on the Three Vehicles\* and the One Vehicle, there are often those who gallop off on a false path, but just as often there are those who can see the shadow of the riding crop and thereby take to the genuine Path. If you encounter such a person in your pursuit of a Master, there will be no place where he or she does not express some Scriptural phrase for your benefit, nor will there be any time when you can say that the shadow of the riding crop is not to be seen. Those who see the shadow of the riding crop immediately upon sitting in meditation, those who see the shadow of the riding crop after three immeasurably long eons, and those who see the shadow of the riding crop after innumerable eons of eons are all capable of entering the genuine Path.



In one of the *Āgama Scriptures*, there is the following passage:

The Buddha once told his monks that there were four kinds of horses. The first, upon seeing the shadow of the riding crop, is startled and forthwith follows the wish of its rider. The second, startled when the crop touches its hair, forthwith follows the wish of its rider. The third is startled after the crop touches its flesh. The fourth is awakened only after the touch of the riding crop is felt in its bones.

The first horse is like the person who hears about the death of someone in a distant monastic community and forthwith feels aversion for things of the world. The next horse is like the person who hears of the death of someone within their own monastic community and then feels aversion for things of the world. The third horse is like the person who hears of the death of someone near and dear to them and then feels aversion for things of the world. The fourth horse is like the person whose own body experiences sickness and suffering, and only then feels aversion for things of the world.

This is the metaphor of the four horses in the *Āgama Scriptures*. When you are exploring through your training what the Buddha's Dharma is, this is certainly a good place to study. Those among ordinary people or those in lofty stations who emerge as spiritually good friends and guides, later, as emissaries of the Buddha, become Ancestral Masters. All of them have invariably explored this Teaching through their practice and pass it on for the benefit of their disciples. Those who do not know it are not spiritually good friends and guides for ordinary people or for those more lofty. Those human disciples who have grown good, thick roots and are intimate with the Buddha's words and ways have invariably been able to hear this Teaching. Those who are ever so far from the Buddha's words and ways have not heard it, nor do they know it. Hence, those who would be master teachers should consider presenting it without delay, and disciples should pray that they may hear of it without delay.

The meaning of 'feeling aversion for things of the world' has been given in the *Vimalakirti Scripture*, as follows:

When the Buddha gives voice to a single utterance of Dharma, sentient beings are able to free themselves from suffering in accord with their type. Some will experience fear, some will feel joy, some will give rise to aversion for things of the world, some will cut through their doubts.



The *Great Scripture on the Buddha's Parinirvana* quotes the Buddha as saying the following:

Next, my good disciples, it is like training horses. Generally speaking, there are four kinds of horses. With the first, contact is made through their hair. With the second, contact is made through their skin. With the third, contact is made through their flesh. With the fourth, contact is made through their bones. They obey the trainer's wish, depending on which part is contacted.

The situation is also like this for the Tathagata. By means of four methods, He restrains and subdues sentient beings. With the first, the Buddha explains for their benefit what 'being alive' means, whereby they accept what He says. They are like horses who follow the wish of their rider once he has made contact with their hair. With the second, the Buddha explains what 'being alive, along with aging' means, whereby they accept what He says. They are like horses who follow the wish of their rider once he has made contact with their hair

and skin. With the third, the Buddha explains what 'being alive, along with aging and sickening' means, whereby they accept what He says. They are like horses who follow the wish of their rider once he has made contact with their hair, skin, and flesh. With the fourth, He explains what 'being alive, along with aging, sickening, and dying' means, whereby they accept what the Buddha says. They are like horses who follow the wish of their rider once he has made contact with their hair, skin, flesh, and bones.

O my good disciples, there is nothing assured when it comes to a rider training a horse, but with the World-honored Tathagata's restraining and subduing sentient beings, His efforts are assured and never in vain. This is why the Buddha was given the epithet of Tamer and Subduer of Those Who Are Strong in Their Determination.

This is called "The Four Horses of the *Great Scripture on the Buddha's Parinirvana*". There are no trainees who have failed to learn of it and no Buddhas who have failed to teach it. We hear it when we follow the Buddha. Of necessity, we pay heed to it whenever we encounter and offer our service to a Buddha. Once we have had the Buddha Dharma Transmitted to us, we continually give expression to It for the sake of sentient beings. When we ultimately arrive at Buddhahood, we voice It for the sake of the great assembly of bodhisattvas\* and all others—worldly and celestial—who will listen, just as if it were the first time that our wish to realize the Truth had arisen. This is why the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha have continued on without interruption.

Because this is the way things are, what Buddhas teach is far from what bodhisattvas teach. You need to keep in mind that, generally speaking, there are these four methods of a trainer of horses, namely, making contact with the hair, making contact with the skin, making contact with the flesh, and making contact with the bones. It may not be apparent what the object is that makes contact with the hair, but in the opinion of virtuous bodhisattva-mahasattvas\* who Transmit the Dharma, it might be a whip.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, among the methods for training a horse, there are those who may employ a whip and those who do not employ a whip, since the training of horses may not invariably require a whip.

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1. The word *ben* translates both as 'riding crop' and 'whip'. In neither case is its use viewed as an instrument of punishment in Buddhist training. Rather, it may be considered as an instrument for getting someone's attention or pointing the way.

Horses that stand eight feet high are called dragon horses. There are few humans who are prepared to train such horses. There are also horses called thousand-league horses, since they can run a thousand leagues in one day. When running five hundred leagues, these horses are said to sweat blood, but after five hundred leagues, they speedily run on, refreshed. Those who ride these horses are few, as are those who know how to train them. There are no such horses in China, but there are some in other lands. It seems that one does not often need to apply a whip to these horses. Even so, an old worthy once said, "In training horses, one invariably applies a whip. Without a whip, a horse is not trained, for this is the method for training a horse."

Now, there are the four methods of contacting the hair, the skin, the flesh, and the bones. To contact the skin while leaving the hair untouched is not possible, nor can one contact the flesh and the bones without touching the hair and the skin. This is how we know that one needs to add the whip. That this has not been explained here is due to something lacking in the old worthy's statement.<sup>2</sup> There are many places like this in Scriptural writings.

The World-honored Tathagata, Tamer and Subduer of Those Who Are Strong in Their Determination, was also like such a horse trainer. He subdued and restrained all sentient beings by means of these four methods, assuredly and never in vain. That is to say, there were those who accepted His words when He explained for their benefit what 'being alive' means. And there were those who accepted His words when He explained what 'being alive and aging' means. And there were those who accepted His words when He explained what 'being alive, aging, and sickening' means. And there were those who accepted His words when He explained what 'being alive, aging, sickening, and dying' means. Those who learn of the last three cannot avoid the first one. It is just as in training horses in the world: there is no contacting skin, flesh, or bones apart from contacting hair. Explaining for the sake of others what 'being alive, aging, sickening, and dying' means that it was He, the World-honored Tathagata, who taught the meaning of 'being alive, aging, sickening, and dying'. He did not do so in order to help people to cut themselves off from being alive, aging, sickening, and dying. Nor did He teach that being alive, aging, sickening, and dying is what Truth is. Nor did He teach this in order to get people to understand that being alive, aging, sickening, and dying are what Truth is. He taught this 'being alive, aging, sickening, and dying' for the sake of others in order to put before all sentient beings the Truth of

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2. In the original Chinese text of what the old worthy said, the word 'whip' does not occur. Dōgen's Japanese paraphrase is unclear as to whether he is referring to a whip or a riding crop.

supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. Thus, the success of the World-honored Tathagata's efforts to restrain and subdue sentient beings are assured and never in vain. This is why He is called the Awakened One, Tamer and Subduer of Those Who Are Strong in Their Determination.

*On a day during the summer retreat in the seventh year of the Kenchō era (1255), I finished copying and proofing this from the Master's draft.*

*Ejō*