

Ox-Herding: Stages of Zen Practice

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Introduction

The ten ox-herding pictures and commentaries presented here depict the stages of practice leading to the enlightenment at which Zen (Chan) Buddhism aims. They dramatize the fact that enlightenment reveals the true self, showing it to be the ordinary self doing ordinary things in the most extraordinary way.

The story of the ox and oxherd, separate at first, but united in the realization of the inner unity of all existence, is an old Taoist story, updated and modified by a twelfth century Chinese Buddhist master to explain the path to enlightenment. The ox symbolizes the ultimate, undivided reality, the Buddha-nature, which is the ground of all existence. The oxherd symbolizes the self, who initially identifies with the individuated ego, separate from the ox, but who, with progressive enlightenment, comes to realize the fundamental identity with the ultimate reality which transcends all distinctions. When this happens, the oxherd realizes the ultimacy of all existence; there is nothing that is not the Buddha-nature. He now understands the preciousness and profundity of the most ordinary things of life, illuminating ordinary living with his enlightenment.

The twelfth century monk Guo-an Shi-yuan (also known as Kuo-an Shih-yuan or Kakuan Shien) revised and expanded upon the traditional Taoist story of the ox and the oxherd by creating a series of ten images and accompanying verses to simultaneously depict and narrate this well-known tale. Guo-an's version subsequently became one of the most popular and enduring versions of the parable. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of Guo-an's paintings, other Zen Buddhists and artists have repeatedly repainted and

retranslated Guo-an's immortal verses throughout the following centuries. While the illustrations of the tale vary, the verses tend to be either direct or indirect translations of Guo-an's original verses, and their message stands unchanged.

Courses and Audience

These images can be used to teach about Zen meditation and practice, the stages of spiritual realization, Buddhist meditation, and the practices of Asian religion in a wide variety of courses including, but not limited to:

- Asian religions
- Asian philosophies
- Buddhism
- Asian spirituality
- Chinese or Japanese meditation
- East Asian Civilization

The Images

The images presented here are by Master Gyokusei Jikihara, who painted them while in residence at New York's Zen Mountain Monastery in 1982. The images are reprinted here with permission of the Monastery and are also available on the Zen Mountain Monastery website: <http://www.mro.org/zmm/zenarts/oxherdinggallery.html>

Other artistic representations of the oxherding tale available online are:

www.sacred-texts.com/bud/mzb/oxherd.htm

From the *Manual of Zen Buddhism* by D.T. Suzuki

http://www.cs.sfu.ca/people/ResearchStaff/jamie/personal/10_Bulls/Title_Page.html

Reprinted from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, a collection of Zen and pre-Zen writings collected by Paul Reps and translated by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki

<http://www.buddhanet.net/oxherd1.htm>

From the Buddha Dharma Education Association; the text accompanying these images is not from Guo-an's verses.

I. The Search for the Bull



*In the pasture of the world,
I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the bull.
Following unnamed rivers,
lost upon the interpenetrating
paths of distant mountains,
My strength failing and my vitality
exhausted, I cannot find the bull.
I only hear the locusts chirping
through the forest at night.*

The first picture shows the oxherd desperately looking everywhere for his lost ox. He is dissatisfied with his life, unable to find the true happiness that he seeks. His efforts to secure wealth, friends, fame, and pleasure have not brought him the fulfillment he is seeking. Like many of us, he is seeking something, though he is not sure exactly what it is, that will make life meaningful and bring him lasting happiness.

II. Discovering the Footprints



*Along the riverbank under the trees,
I discover footprints.
Even under the fragrant grass,
I see his prints.
Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces can no more be hidden
than one's nose, looking heavenward.*

The second picture shows that the oxherd has now caught sight of the tracks of the ox, bringing hope that his ox is not lost forever. This could be interpreted to mean that he has recognized his distress and has begun to seek for a solution in the teachings of Buddhism or in other teachings. But he is still at the stage of thinking and talking about his problems and various possible solutions. He has not yet found a path to follow and has not yet started to practice.

III. Perceiving the Bull



*I hear the song of the nightingale.
The sun is warm, the wind is mild,
willows are green along the shore –
Here no bull can hide!
What artist can draw that massive head,
those majestic horns?*

In the third picture, the oxherd actually catches sight of the ox. Now, having started to practice, he glimpses the hidden powers to heal his suffering. But he does not yet understand the source of these powers and how to apply them in his search for peace and contentment. The verse, in saying that “I hear the song of the nightingale./The sun is warm, the wind is mild, the willows are green along the shore.” suggests that the reality the oxherd glimpses is not something separate from the ordinary things that he experiences, even though he does not yet know this.

IV. Catching the Bull

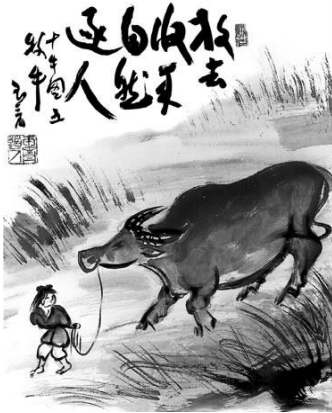


*I seize him with a terrific struggle.
His great will and power
are inexhaustible.
He charges to the high plateau
far above the cloud-mists,
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.*

I have abandoned the whip and ropes

The fourth picture shows that the oxherd has now caught hold of the ox, using the bridle of discipline to control it. This symbolizes the rigorous discipline required of the Zen practitioner. Although he now realizes that the power to transform his life lies within himself, in his Buddha-nature, all of his previous conditionings are pulling and pushing him in different directions. Holding the rope tightly means that he must work hard to overcome his bad habits of the past that developed through the ignorance, hatred and craving that gave rise to all of his afflictions.

V. Taming the Bull



*The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down
some dusty road.
Being well-trained, he becomes
naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.*

The fifth picture shows that disciplined practice can overcome the bad habits of previous conditioning and bring one into accord with the true nature of reality. Although discipline is still needed because the old habits of mind still have power, living in greater awareness of the true reality gives one the energy and direction to live a wholesome life. Now the ox willingly follows the oxherd home, meaning that the separation between oneself and true reality is being overcome.

VI. Riding the Bull Home



*Mounting the bull, slowly
I return homeward.
The voice of my flute intones
through the evening.
Measuring with hand-beats
the pulsating harmony,
I direct the endless rhythm.
Whoever hears this melody
will join me.*

The sixth picture suggests the tranquility and joy that reunion with the source of existence brings; now the oxherd rides on the back of the ox, joyously playing his flute. The verse suggests that he has been freed from old fears and anxieties and that so freed, he can now express his creative energies in celebration of life.

VII. The Bull Transcended



*Astride the bull, I reach home.
I am serene. The bull too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

In the seventh picture the oxherd has realized his identity with the ox; the ox can be forgotten, for it is none other than the experience of everyday things. This can be interpreted to mean that the separation of practice and realization has been overcome, as has the separation of ordinary reality and the ultimate reality. Until now he has been practicing meditation as a means of achieving enlightenment. But with realization of the non-duality of existence comes awareness of the identity of means and ends; practice itself is realization.

VIII. Both Bull and Self Transcended



*Whip, rope, person, and bull –
all merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast,
no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist
in a raging fire.
Here are the footprints of
the Ancestors.*

I have abandoned the whip and ropes

The eighth picture tells us that when the duality of self and reality has been overcome not only is reality (the ox) forgotten, but so is the self (the oxherd); the circle symbolizes the all-encompassing emptiness that constitutes the ground of all things. Now, in the awareness of unceasing transformation and total interconnectedness in every experience one is freed from all craving and hatred for the other. In this freedom there is a sense of the wholeness and perfection of ordinary things.

IX. Reaching the Source



*Too many steps have been taken
returning to the root and the source.
Better to have been blind and deaf
from the beginning!
Dwelling in one's true abode,
unconcerned with and without –
The river flows tranquilly on
and the flowers are red.*

I have abandoned the whip and ropes

As the ninth picture shows, when self and reality (as constructs) are left behind, then things are revealed to be just what they are in themselves; streams meander on of themselves and red flowers naturally bloom red. In the ordinary events of life are found the most profound truths. Only by seeking the ox as a separate ultimate reality could the oxherd discover that there is no separate reality; that the ultimate is to be found in the ordinary.

X. In the World



*Barefooted and naked of breast,
I mingle with the people
of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden,
and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees
become alive.*

I have abandoned the whip and ropes

Finally, the tenth picture shows the enlightened oxherd entering the town marketplace, doing all of the ordinary things that everyone else does. But because of his deep awareness everything he does is quite extraordinary. He does not retreat from the world, but shares his enlightened existence with everyone around him. Not only does he lead fishmongers and innkeepers in the way of the Buddha but, because of his creative energy and the radiance of his life, even withered trees bloom.

Further Reading

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<http://www.mro.org/zmm/zmmhome/index.html>