

# No Bull: Zen Oxherding Pictures For The Modern World

With A Catholic Contemplative's Commentary

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with Bernadette Roberts

In the Zen tradition, oxherding pictures illustrate the process of religious discipline and awakening. The pictures presented here, along with narrative verse, depict this process in ten discrete steps or stages, outlining major transitions and warning of dangers along the way.

Comparisons have been made with Tibetan Buddhist depictions of the nine stages of elephant training. In popular legend, when Gotama Buddha was conceived, his mother dreamed a sacred white elephant entered her womb. Also, Gotama Buddha's taming of a wild elephant, which had been sent by Devadatta to kill Gotama, is a common subject of Buddhist art. According to early Pali Buddhist commentaries:

Just as a man would tie to a post  
A calf that should be tamed,  
Even so here should one tie one's own mind  
Tight to the object of mindfulness.

The metaphor is an ancient one. In China and in much of Southeast Asia

the farmer's ox was a fitting choice of subject since it was necessary for his livelihood. When the ox is gone, what is most essential has been lost. Like a mother unable to find her baby, or an American businessman who can't find where he parked his car (with laptop and wallet inside), there is not a moment's rest until it is found.

The ten paintings reproduced here are attributed to the Japanese Zen monk Shûbun, a fifteenth-century abbot of the Shôkokuji Rinzai monastery complex in Kyoto and one of the greatest painters of his age. Each picture is accompanied by two short verses attributed to Kuo-an Shih-yuan [Jp.: Kakuan Shion], a Chinese Zen monk of the Sung Dynasty. These verses have become a standard text in the Zen tradition, and are included in the classic *Four Texts of the Zen School* [*Zenshû Shiburoku*], and in the two-volume *Poison-Painted Drum* [*Zudokko*], the handbook for Rinzai monastic practice.

The verses for each picture are written in classical Chinese. First there is a sort of prose poem, which sets the basic tone for each picture. (Sometimes these have been attributed to Kuo-an's disciple Tzu-yuan [Jion], who wrote an introduction to the ten oxherding pictures.) These prose poems are written in eight lines of verse, with the following number of Chinese characters for each line: 4, 4, 6, 6, 4, 4, 4, 4. Following each prose poem is a four-line poem of seven characters each, evoking the basic sentiment and fleshing it out, often with concrete sights and sounds.

The line scheme is maintained in the translation here – each line of Chinese is rendered as one line in English. However, I have made no attempt to follow the rhyme scheme, let alone the parallelism, antithesis, tones and so on used in such verse. This is a retreat, not a conference or

seminar; my focus throughout is to expose the marrow, which is often only suggested, so that you can *see through your self*.

Don't worry about keeping track of the stages; just take in each one as a whole. Don't worry about where you are in the pictures either - the first one will do if you're really there.

Finally, the verse is terse and sometimes leaves unstated such basic components of syntax as subject, object and verb. I trust the reason for my clumsy attempt to do this in English will become clear as the lectures progress in this, the year of the ox.

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## *1. Seeking Ox*

*Never gone astray –*

*What need to search?*

*By turning away from awakening, the split occurs:*

*Covered in dust, finally all is lost.*

*Hills of home ever more distant,*

*Diverging paths proliferate:*

*Flames of gain-loss,*

*Blades of right-wrong.*

*Wading through thick weeds, searching, searching.*

*Rivers swell, mountains tower, paths unending.*

*Exhausted, in despair, without a clue.*

*Only the drone of cicadas in autumn leaves.*

The first two lines throw us right into the maelstrom: If it's never gone astray, why search? If it ain't broke, why fix it? Commentaries even today endlessly repeat that the young oxherder is you, the person seeking the Way, and the ox is your true self, Buddha nature, the ultimate. But this is of little help. Who, after all, is the one seeking – and what, in the end, has been lost? If you knew that, you really wouldn't need to seek.

Yet here you are, seeking. Until you've really struggled with this and come to the end, to glibly say "It's never gone astray, so I don't need to search" is at best a half-truth, at worst a self-serving lie, isn't it?

Looking at the picture, it's all eloquently expressed in the bearing of the farm boy-acolyte monk: Feet are carrying him off in one direction, while head turns the other way. Split, within and without; doesn't know whether he's coming or going. Desperately searching – but no idea where to look.

The first two lines have already revealed that originally – when and where is that? – there is no you here, no ox there. Then the third line states why, if you're honest with yourself, you must seek, you cannot help but search: because reality has turned away from (literally: "due to turning back on") its source. *Coming to my self*, I divert, pervert, what originally is. Thus the world of discrimination arises: self-other, enlightenment-illusion, birth-death, right-wrong, and so on.

No reason is given for this original turning away. It is simply stated as a fact – a fact that each of us confirms in our experience of self.

Do you see a connection with the Fall in the Book of Genesis, with Adam

and Eve (i.e., all of us) turning away from God's command, thus opening their eyes and knowing they were naked? In his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich explains it this way:

The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself. ...Man as he exists is not what he essentially is and ought to be. He is estranged from his true being.

Tillich describes unbelief or "un-faith" this way:

...man in the totality of his being turns away from God. In his existential self-realization he turns toward himself and his world and loses his essential unity with the ground of his being and his world. ...Man, in actualizing himself, turns to himself and away from God in knowledge, will, and emotion.

The rest of the text for the first picture details this split into within and without: Covered in the defiling dust of sense-attachments (the five senses and mind), *the all is lost*. The further I seek, the more paths proliferate, with no sign of the desired object anywhere. At the same time, my home recedes further and further from view. Anxiety over gain and loss burns in my heart, dilemmas over what is right and wrong pierce my very soul.

The four-line poem continues the imagery: stuck in the mud and weeds of delusive attachment, rivers overflow their banks, vast peaks threaten from above. All my energy spent, stuck between a rock and a hard place, an oppressive, monotonous drone is all that the senses pick up.

Jackson Browne's classic rock anthem "Running on Empty" was recorded

in 1977, a year after the suicide of his first wife:

*Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels*

*Looking back at the years gone by like so many summer fields*

*In sixty-five I was seventeen and running up one-o-one*

*I don't know where I'm running now, I'm just running on*

*Running on - running on empty*

*Running on - running blind*

*Running on - running into the sun*

*But I'm running behind*

*...In sixty-nine I was twenty-one and I called the road my own*

*I don't know when that road turned onto the road I'm on*

*...Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels*

*I don't know how to tell you just how crazy this life feels*

*I look around for the friends that I used to turn to to pull me through*

*Looking into their eyes I see them running too*

*...You know I don't even know what I'm hoping to find*

*Running into the sun but I'm running behind*

Sound familiar? This is where the journey begins. For an important discovery has already been made: I realize I have lost it. And in my restless seeking, I have become utterly lost. This is the point of the first

picture, "Seeking Ox."

No longer feigning contentment with my discontent, I sincerely begin. I don't pretend that the bull is in the barn; don't divert my eye from the horns of the dilemma that I am. I no longer delude myself with wishy-washy, half-baked notions of delusion being enlightenment. I recognize how greedily seeking some enlightenment experience that's supposed to solve all my problems is, indeed, *a big problem*. Instead of "Seeking Ox," this first stage could be called "No More Bull."

In the 1946 film *Song of the South*, Brer Rabbit, wandering happily on a country trail, gets in a tussle with a tar baby – a couple of sticks covered in hot tar that resembles a human. Trying to get unstuck, Brer Rabbit ends up getting "so stuck he can hardly move his eyeballs!"

Profound and pervasive dissatisfaction is common at this point; whatever we encounter, *that's not it*. As Paul Tillich succinctly put it: "Everything is tried and nothing satisfies." Every path breaks into ever more trails, without a clue or track to follow. Each path taken seems endless – yet ends up a dead end. The harder we try to find our way, the more lost we get. The first two noble truths of Buddhism manifest: blind craving inevitably results in *dis-ease*. Pursued in all sincerity, great doubt arises, for self *is* this split, this separation. The religious quest is not in vain; at this point in the journey, however, it sure as hell can seem like it.

The line "Flames of gain-loss" harks back to one of Gotama's first and foremost teachings, known as the Fire Sermon. (T. S. Eliot, in a note to "The Fire Sermon" section of his 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, goes so far as to state that this sermon "corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount.") Delivered to a group of fire-worshipping ascetics, Gotama turns



up the heat by stating that all is burning, all is ablaze with blind desire, self-centered delusion, *dis-ease*. Later we will return to this sermon and see what Gotama's got cooking.

During the extremely hot and dry August of 1949, a fire started in the mountains around Mann Gulch in central Montana. A group of firefighters led by Wagner Dodge is parachuted into the area. Rugged mountains rise on both sides of the valley. The fire is above them. In an emergency they can safely retreat to the Missouri River at the bottom of the valley. The winds whip up debris, however, and a fire now starts *below* them, blocking the way to the river. Due to freak weather conditions, this fire quickly grows into an enormous roaring wall of flame racing toward them much faster than they can run. Virtually impenetrable mountain slopes on both sides, fire raging above and below. Leader Dodge realizes they have not more than a minute or two before the inferno hits them.

What does he do? What do you do when things get too hot? We will return to Wagner Dodge later. Now I will let you stew in your own juices, to confirm for yourself the first oxherding picture. Then it will be time for us to take up the second picture.



## 2. Seeing Traces

*Through sutras, the meaning is understood,  
Looking into the teachings, traces are found.  
It's clear: various vessels are all one metal,  
All things are one self.  
But unable to tell right from wrong,  
How to discern the true from the false?  
Not yet having entered the gate,  
At least the traces have been seen.*

*Tracks scattered all over the riverbank, under trees.  
Thick in sweet grass – Ah! What's that?*

*However deep in the mountain depths,  
Snout reaching heaven, nothing can conceal it.*

Look at the picture: head is screwed on straight now, body and mind unified, hand firm on the rope of discipline.

What has happened? Tracks have been found! In the first picture there was not a trace. Now the tracks are all around. The first two lines credit the sutras and teachings, and such is often the case. Many first find their feet through a sutra, a book on Buddhism, or by encountering someone who has already made the trek.

Buddhist writings and Dharma encounters are indeed precious, as are encounters with other religions. But where in fact are the true teachings found? Keep heart and eye open.

Coming into contact with the Dharma (*living truth*) is not just a matter of reading books, or listening to lectures – or even sitting in meditation. Dharma is not simply something you *do*. It must be what you *are*.

Giving your self completely to proper and sustained practice, a thread is found; fashioning it into a rope, diligently follow. The third and fourth lines reveal that one thread runs through all, that “all things are one self” – what is that?

Like the tracks themselves, the experience of this tends to remain a discrete event. So you're not yet able to discern the wheat from the chaff, the true from the false, as the fifth and sixth lines demonstrate. To sum up the second picture: the discrete tracks have clearly been seen, but the gate has not yet been entered.

The four-line poem tells that traces abound. The entangling weeds and

mud have now transformed into sweet grass. Suddenly something stirs. Where is it? – Within? Without? Nowhere? Everywhere? We cannot lose sight of it again. Nothing can conceal what has been revealed. Whatever happens now, we remain hot on the trail:

*I have often walked down this street before;*

*But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before.*

*All at once am I several stories high.*

*Knowing I'm on the street where you live.*

[“On the Street Where You Live” lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner, *My Fair Lady*, 1964]

In the Fire Sermon, Gotama described all as burning with desire, delusion, and *dis-ease*. In following the Way, the sermon continues, I become disenchanted and then dispassionate of *the all*. (Do you see? This is not merely self, seeking an experience that will solve all its problems.) Then there can be full release. With full release there is direct knowledge of release, and one discerns that this is the end of birth (and death), that the task has been done, that there is nothing further for this world. The Fire Sermon is a quintessential early Buddhist teaching of Nibbana [Skt.: Nirvana]: the flame of self extinguished.

Is that the only approach though? What about the contemplative consumed in the flame of God’s love, or the Bodhisattva burning with compassion for all? Remember Wagner Dodge? With the flames fast approaching and nowhere to escape, what did he do?

First of all, he stopped running. That’s right, stopped in his tracks. Have you? That is how to approach. By no longer running toward – or away

from - *anything*, the tracks become clear. The way opens up underfoot. Strange as it sounds, if we don't stop, we can't truly proceed.

To stop is not merely to sit still. It is self, body-mind in its entirety, all the senses, coming to a full and complete stop. This is the beginning of true zazen.

Only when all running away - or toward - has ended, does it start to become clear. True religious practice is not an escape from our problems, psychological or otherwise. See for yourself: trying to *have it your way* - or get *a-way* - only gets *in* the way, creates more entanglements. In proper and sustained practice let it all go, once and for all. With this second picture, "Seeing Traces," the right direction has been found.

But the gate has not yet been entered. Be careful here. Consciousness can be clarified, purified, emptied to an incredible degree. This can be most helpful as a preliminary practice. But that is far from the end of the matter. Learning to coast and enjoy the ride for a while is not coming to a full and complete stop. A clarified, purified consciousness emptied of its ordinary content is still discriminating consciousness. Discrimination is not discernment. It is a discursive, bifurcating symptom of *dis-ease*. And discernment is not merely discrimination. It is seeing into, seeing through, the true nature of things. Buddhism warns against both "false discrimination" and "false sameness." I leave it to you to discern the value of the so-called Zen, Buddhist, and other spiritual teachings flooding the market nowadays. The poem for case twelve of *The Gateless Barrier* sums it up:

*Those who search for the Way do not realize the Truth,*

*They only know their old discriminating consciousness.*

*This is the cause of the endless cycle of birth and death,*

*Yet ignorant people take it for the Original Man.*

Many so-called teachers reduce the problem to dualistic thought or discriminating intellect, and then offer ways to get rid of it – a sure sign that discrimination remains. Discriminating intellect is not the problem; it is merely the tip of the iceberg. As Paul Tillich already made clear, estrangement concerns “knowledge, will, and emotion.” Whether thinking, willing, or feeling, self-as-consciousness is split. Do such teachers even recognize the real problem underfoot?

Don't mistake the footprint for the beast. Once you have stopped, *that which is sought in all sincerity shows the way*. The tracks unmistakably show the direction you must go.

In your practice, patiently gather all your energy into one. As you do, the activation of the senses (including mind) is not only clarified, purified, and emptied; it is suspended. The senses function during daily activities. In sustained zazen also, the senses are completely open – yet held in check, so to speak. As the technical Buddhist expression puts it, there is no “outflow” [Skt.: *āsrava*; Pali: *āsava*] – or inflow. Now we are ready for the third picture.



### 3. *Finding Ox*

*By listening, an entrance found;  
Seeing through, the source encountered.  
It is this way with all six senses,  
Every act crystal clear.  
Like salt in water,  
Or glue in paint.  
Open your eye:  
There's nothing else.*

*Nightingale singing, singing in the treetops.  
Warm sun, soft breeze, riverbank willows green.*

*Right here, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.*

*Majestic head and horns no artist could capture.*

The first line harks back to picture two and gaining a foothold through such things as hearing the teachings. In early Buddhism, hearing the *Dhamma* [Skt.: Dharma], considering it, and practicing it were called the three wise ways. In ancient times the Dharma was not written down but orally recited and memorized. Thus hearing it was the natural first step. In time, reading became more common, so we don't need to cling to the auditory sense. Actually, the entrance is everywhere, filling all our senses, if only we are in tune, in accord. The sustained effort of gathering all into one culminates in realizing all *is* one. Now, where does *that* come from?

Look at the picture: for the first time the ox has appeared. With the second line, we plunge right in. This is no longer catching sight of discrete tracks, or hearing something in the distance. Entering the source itself, it's "here" without a doubt. Not a sound, sight or insight, but the root-source of experience. This is not a discrete experience that self can have, however wondrous.

The third and fourth lines make clear that encountering the root-source transforms all the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind are now clear and unhindered in their functioning. The rest of the first verse reveals that all is now inseparable from the source itself: salt in water, the glue in paint suggests that the source is there "in" each and every thing, but inseparable. The source is not simply something else, something other.

Poet-layman Su Tung-po of eleventh century China expressed it as:



“Gurgling brook the gold, broad tongue; are mountain colors not the pure body?” Every sound, the eloquence of Buddha; every form, the body of awakening.

The four-line poem for picture three sings and portrays that which is beyond sound and sight. The source is apparent wherever we look, whatever we hear or think or feel: *“rocking in the treetops, all the day long,” “nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide.”*

The last line of the four-line poem suggests that although it is fully expressed in – *as* – each and every thing, the source is inexhaustible. That which you have sincerely sought and faithfully followed, draws you in and shows the way. The living source which cannot be objectified or separated out – *but which you now know you are inseparable from* – will not lead you astray. Only *you* can do that. Like gravity inevitably drawing you in: resist and you’re left sucked into the vacant center of your “self” instead of being drawn inevitably into the source of all.

After the Edo Period Zen master Hakuin Ekaku had his first sight of the ox, he was asked about “*Mu*” or emptiness. He replied “No place to lay hand or foot on that.” A natural response at this stage, though we will return to it later.

We left Wagner Dodge stopped in his tracks. As important as this stopping is, it is not enough. The flames still approach. There is one more thing Wagner Dodge did. It seemed so bizarre that most of the others in his crew thought he had gone crazy, so they continued running. As a result, they died. After he stopped, what did he do?

He lit a match. Burning the grass around him, he then lay down in the burned patch and escaped unscathed.

We are not fire fighters. But we, also, stop running. And instead enter the flames.

In religious practice, what remains, what survives, after all has been consumed? Put the other way around: when one has become disenchanted and dispassionate with all, who realizes release, for whom does the flame become extinguished? Only after all has been consumed can this really be known. It is now time to turn to picture four.



#### 4. *Catching Ox*

*Long hidden in wilderness,  
Today finally found.  
Yet hard to keep up with it wandering off:  
Longing for meadows of sweet grass,  
Refusing to be broken,  
Wild as ever.  
To bring into complete accord,  
Lay on the whip!*

*Putting all energy into it, grab the beast.  
Yet so strong and stubborn, won't be broken.*

*Now taking the high ground.*

*Now descending into misty depths.*

If the ox is our so-called true self, the absolute, Buddha nature, why must it be broken and tamed?

At any rate, *you* need to be firm here. Don't ease up. As it's said: "The further you go, the deeper it gets; the more you realize, the harder you must strive." With your whole being, grab the bull by the horns and don't let go!

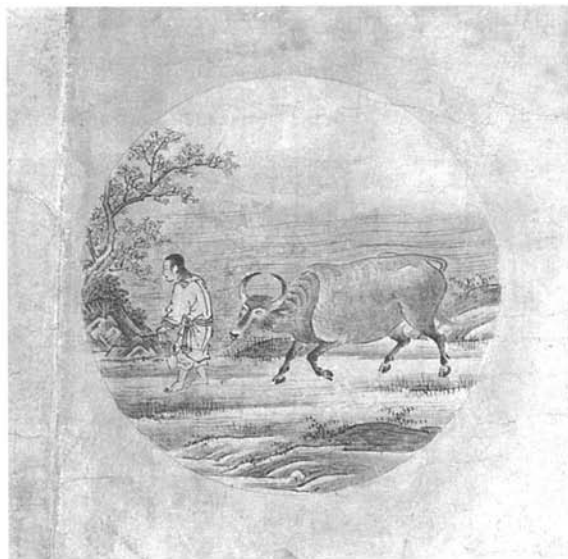
As the picture shows, the two are not yet completely one. But they *are* inseparable now. Be careful when discord arises; do not fall back into old ways. As the last two lines of the second verse suggest, one moment you will be taken to the very summit, the next plunged into the very depths.

Constant practice of right effort, with great trust, is required here. To really grab the bull by the horns with your whole being, you must let go of all your hopes and expectations, all your experiences, knowledge and insight. Such things prevent complete accord. You can't have this on *your own terms*. Simply continue on, without desire or complaint.

Remember Hakuin? Asked by the master about "*Mu*," he proudly responded: "No place to lay hand or foot on that." A fine answer, clearly displaying the young Hakuin's spiritual prowess and freedom. The master, however, exposed the place where Hakuin was still bound to his freedom by promptly squeezing Hakuin's nose and declaring, "Got a pretty good hand on it here." Then with a hearty laugh, the master spat out: "You poor hole-dwelling devil!"

Indeed. If any such place remains in you, don't wait for me to smash

it. Don't get attached to it, don't dwell or abide in it. Don't turn it into an experience you have attained: "...man must be so poor that he is not and has no place wherein God could act. Where man still preserves some place in himself, he preserves distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God..." Meister Eckhart. Don't get caught by the bull of your experience, however subtle or profound.



## 5. *Taming Ox*

*Once a thought arises,*

*Another surely follows.*

*Wake up and all becomes truth,*

*Abide in ignorance and all is false.*

*This is not due to external conditions,*

*It arises from mind.*

*Hold tight the rope,*

*Do not waver.*

*Don't let go the whip and tether even a moment,*

*Or alas, the beast may wander into worldly dust.*

*Properly tend till tame and gentle,  
Without entangling bridle, following of its own accord.*

As the picture shows, they now move as one. There is little resistance anymore. The going is smooth.

However, the text warns of remaining dangers. Having come this far, you might wonder how could there still be obstructions? To the question: "But after kenshō [i.e., the initial experience of seeing the true nature] is attained and you have entered the path of enlightenment, surely there's no evil to obstruct you then?" Hakuin answers: "Indeed there is! It exists if you create it. If you don't create it, it doesn't exist. But such distinctions can wait until after you've attained the Way. You can pose such questions to yourself then – it won't be too late."

A stubborn illness requires bitter medicine. So the text for picture four stated: "To bring into complete accord, lay on the whip!" Here the tone is a bit different: "Hold tight the rope, do not waver." The text here concludes: by proper tending, follows of its own accord, with no more need for implements or prodding.

Here it is confirmed that this "practice" is not something you *do* at times, for example, on the *zazen* cushion. It is constant; it is what you *are*. Still, you must take great care not to sully or defile it.

We are now halfway through the journey. You have gotten a sense of the "process," skillfully but artificially broken up here to help us on the Way. I trust you now see there are not really ten discrete steps or stages. Zen is not preoccupied with process or even transformation. Don't get hung up with this portrayal of the stages, or the accompanying narrative.

Everyone must *go through themselves*; no two paths will be the same. These depictions and descriptions can be helpful signposts and warn us of traps along the Way. The point, however, is to actually complete the journey.

While each one must make the journey themselves, as a group practicing together, let us all continue on the Way, supporting each other and being supported by each other. Determined but patient. Through day and night, pleasant and unpleasant, bearable and unbearable, illusion and enlightenment. Don't stop halfway.





## 6. *Returning Home Riding Ox*

*The struggle is over;  
Loss-gain vanished.  
Humming rustic tunes,  
Playing a child's ditty.  
Astride the ox,  
Gazing at boundless sky.  
Even if called, won't turn round,  
Though enticed, will not stop.*

*Astride ox, leisurely wending the way home.  
The tune dissolves evening glow.*

*Sentiment unbound in each beat and verse.*

*In tune with each other – need it be said?*

With this sixth picture the struggle has ended. The *dis-eased* subject is no more. Boundless child playing boundless tunes astride boundless ox gazing at boundless sky. This is perhaps the most famous of the oxherding pictures, similar to Taoist depictions of Lao Tzu riding off into the mountains astride an ox.

Picture and verse express a profound *samadhi*-at-play, or joyful *samadhi*, free of self-other. No need for complex philosophies, a simple song says it all:

*Mr. Bluebird's on my shoulder;*

*It's the truth, it's actual –*

*Everything is satis-factual!"*

["Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" lyrics by Ray Gilbert, *Song of the South*, 1946]

Not a worry in the world. Who needs outside confirmation, lineage or transmission?

Constant practice of right effort reaches fruition in effortlessness. *Tao Te Ching* (chapter 48) and *Chuang Tzu* (chapter 22) speak of "Doing nothing – yet nothing is left undone." Nothing is easy. This is really *running on empty*. In the beginning, each path led to a dead end; now, every road leads home.

Who is in tune with whom? As the end of the text for picture six suggests, to those who are truly intimate, what words are necessary, what

praise possible? The Tang Dynasty monk Lin-chi [Jp.: Rinzai], the father of Rinzai Zen, demands "Speak, speak!" He is not asking for words.

"Returning Home Riding Ox" is a marvelous moment on the Way. But there is still a ways to go.



### *7. Ox Forgotten, Man Remains*

*There are not two Dharmas,  
And the ox is symbolic.  
The trap is left when the rabbit is snared,  
The net abandoned once fish are caught.  
Like gold from dross,  
Or moon emerging from clouds:  
The single beam shines  
Prior to the world arising.*

*Astride the ox, the hills of home at last.  
Ox vanished, you're at ease.*

*Sun already high in the sky, yet dream on.*

*Rope and whip idly lie under thatched roof.*

The ox is gone – *again!* But unlike the first (and second) pictures, now there is no need to search for it. It will not reappear; even its troublesome tracks have vanished. *No bull* – another marvelous moment on the Way.

The person remains – yet he is not the child that began the journey. This “*one*” is inseparable from all. The picture shows him spontaneously bowing and putting hands together in grateful prayer. To whom or what, you might ask. But once we get here, the question answers itself; such bowing *is* the answer. Still, there is value in sincerely asking.

As the text reveals, here there are not dual Dharmas: no conflicting truths, nor levels of reality. There’s not really *one* either.

Separating gold from dross, moon emerging from clouds, suggests that what we desperately sought has always been here – but must be realized. The ox never *has* gone astray – once we actually stand here, that truth is manifest. And so the ox, having done its work, is gone.

The single beam that is shining refers not only to the moon’s enlightening glow; if it did, how is it prior to the world arising?

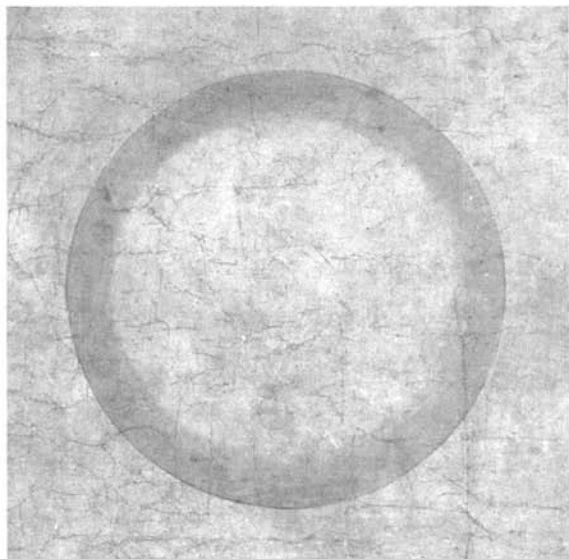
Sun already high in the sky, yet dreaming on: the peaceful slumber of awakening. Consider: “*Samsara* [birth-death] as well as Nirvana – like last night’s dream.” Or the Taoist expression “Sleep without dream and wake without care.” Can you even remember the first picture, where you couldn’t find a moment’s rest?

The implements you had used to tame and train are now idle, as trap and net are left once the creature is caught. The ways and means must

be mastered – then abandoned. Don't let ways get in the way, don't turn the practice into the service of the self: "Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden." Meister Eckhart. Amen.

What remains here? This alone, without object – or subject. Without *re-presentation*, without being turned into something, anything, within or without: "Ox vanished, you're at ease."

But there are three more pictures – why isn't this the last one? Let us continue on and see.



### ***8. Man and Ox Both Forgotten***

*Worldly sentiment shed,  
Empty even of holy intent.  
Not hanging round where Buddha resides,  
Quickly passing where no Buddha is.  
Without abiding in either,  
Not even the thousand eyes can penetrate here.  
A hundred birds offering flowers –  
What a shame.*

*Whip and rope, man and ox – all gone.  
Vast azure heavens beyond reckoning.*

*Snowflakes can't survive flaming furnace.*

*Here truly one with the masters of old.*

No worldly sentiment or delusion here; yet neither is there a trace of transcendent holiness, no stench of *satori*, not a whiff of enlightenment. That too must fall away. Even the falling away must fall away. How could it be any other way? Like snow falling on a hot stove, whatever flakes appear just as soon dissolve.

Thousand eyes refer to all-seeing compassionate vision. The Bodhisattva of Compassion is often represented with innumerable eyes to see and arms to aid all beings. Yet even this great being cannot *see* here. Do you see?

Although in the beginning they were spoken of separately, can you now see that the flame of self extinguished (Nirvana) and burning with compassion for others are really not two different approaches? Still wrapped up in self – or no-self – how can you really see and hear the other, let alone lend a helping hand? The immaturity of Hakuin's initial experience ("No place to lay hand or foot on that") is clear.

A hundred birds offering flowers refers to Niu-tou Fa-jung [Gozu Hoyū], a seventh century Chinese monk who was so saintly and devoted in his practice that flocks of birds brought flowers in their beaks as offerings. When he met the Fourth Patriarch of Chinese Zen and penetrated here, they stopped the fuss.

Where is the teacher or master in all of this? Of course, you can say that you are constantly being guided, inspired, prodded and challenged. But note well that nowhere in these pictures does a teacher appear for the "poor" oxherder. Others who have made the journey already, and companions on



the way, can be of great help. But each one of us must make the journey. Again: *this, which we in all sincerity seek, shows the Way*. This is the only teacher necessary, as Gotama's own example reveals.

All the pictures are done inside a circle, a kind of *ensô* or Zen circle. This eighth picture is just the circle, lightly shaded for effect. Like an empty mirror. What does it reflect? Nothing? Everything? Is this so-called vast emptiness, or is all really present (though not *re-presented*) for the first time? Let us enter and see.



### ***9. Return to Origin, Back at Source***

*Originally pure and clean,  
Without a speck of dust.  
Seen through, the growth and decay of all forms.  
At ease in the unconditioned.  
Without illusory phantoms,  
What is there to embellish?  
Waters blue, mountains green.  
Sit and see through the change of things.*

*Return to origin, back at source – what wasted effort.  
Far better just to be blind and deaf.*

*Inside the hut, no sight of things outside.*

*Streams flow their own accord, roses naturally bloom red.*

Every day the sun rises and sets; each moment the whole world awakens – from where, for whom?

An earlier version of Zen Oxherding Pictures consists of only five pictures, with the ox gradually losing its dark color and ending with the empty circle. To avoid misunderstanding mere emptiness as the end and goal, eventually one more picture was added. This sixth one is similar to the tenth and final picture here. Two verses for that sixth and final picture begin (freely rendered):

*With the marvelous end one has finished dying,*

*yet even here there is a way through:*

*Back amidst the six realms [of samsaric existence:*

*gods, men, demigods, animals, hungry spirits, hell]...*

*The very root of life extinguished –*

*then springs to life again [literally: revived, resurrected]...*

This is the great death of Zen Buddhism culminating in the great awakening, or great rebirth. Now it's real: "Never gone astray – what need to search?" Return to the origin, back at the source? Bah, so much wasted effort! Inside the hut, no sight, no *re-presentation*, of things outside. What is outside – or inside – this? Do you see why this ninth picture is "further," "beyond" the eighth picture?

Better to be blind and deaf? Whoa, this isn't politically correct! Could it mean that reality - *this* - is only perceived when self is deprived of all six senses, bereft of all sense? Often expressed as seeing with the ears and hearing with the eyes. With this, the tenth and final picture can be discerned.



## 10. *Entering Market with Open Hands*

*Alone behind brushwood door,  
Not even the thousand saints know.  
Hiding his light,  
Not following the tracks of past sages.  
Carrying his gourd, he enters the market.  
Leaning on his staff, he returns home.  
Hanging round honky-tonks and fish stalls,  
All become Buddhas.*

*Entering market with bare chest and bare feet.  
Smearred with mud and ash, broad face beaming.*

*No display of magic powers.*

*Yet withered trees burst into bloom.*

Note that the oxherd is now a chubby Buddha aiding a young inquirer. The circle is complete – yet there is nothing remarkable here. Not a glimmer of inner experience. Covered in the mud and ash of serving others, with a look not unlike that of a fool. Not simply free *from* care, but free *to* care – no strings attached. No special powers or charisma – yet somehow all are saved. Verse for picture eight included being truly one with the masters of old; now there is no thought even to follow in such tracks.

Instead, we carry our gourd to market. We go about our daily work. Conventional commentaries mention that the gourd is a symbol of emptiness. Other commentaries mention that it was also used for carrying wine. The two complement each other well, for we continue to observe the precepts – without being intoxicated even by them.

Why enter such worldly and “corrupt” places? Certainly not the place for a self-respecting monastic. Not there to enjoy himself – but not there in order to save others either. Precisely because there is no such intent (secular or sacred), all are embraced and “become” Buddhas just as they are. Just like right here and now:

*Numberless beings – set free.*

*Endless delusion – let go.*

*Countless Dharma – see through.*

*Peerless Way – manifest!*

So goes our four great, or universal, vows.

As Kuo-an's disciple Tzu-yuan put it in his introduction: "Who is that devil at the end entering the market?"

The Zen Oxherding Pictures are now complete. Or are they? As my friend Bernadette Roberts mentions below, when she first saw these pictures years ago, she decided, without reading the verses or commentary, to view them in light of her own Catholic contemplative journey. What follows is her take on the Ten Oxherding Pictures.

Narrowly conceived, her Christian comments may seem quite wrong and out of place – they are certainly not the Zen Buddhist point of view. Clear differences will come to the fore; profound common ground will also appear. Both are precious gifts – no false discrimination or false sameness here.

I find her comments insightful, and especially appreciate her turning the traditional reading on its head. In Zen Buddhism, terms or phrases that can evoke sudden realization are called “turning words.” Thanks to Bernadette’s turning words (what Meister Eckhart might have called *break-through-words*), true to their original purpose, these oxherding pictures can once again leap free and wander in new pastures. I leave you with Bernadette’s vision as a further opportunity to see beyond self by seeing through these pictures in a new way.



## PREFACE

Years ago, wanting to know something about Buddhism, I picked up a book with a set of pictures. These pictures obviously depicted a spiritual journey. The idea of graphically depicting the journey struck me as unique and delightful. I decided, however, before reading the Buddhist interpretation, I'd look them over to see if (or how) they might be understood in terms of my own Christian journey. What follows is how I understood them.

### ONE: SEEKING OX

God is looking for us. He wants us. We may not know it, but we belong to Him and He even hunts us down to be sure we know it. Though we may hear His voice calling, even see Him from afar, we keep going our own way. Still, He follows relentlessly – and we know we are being tailed. He must want something from us, but what could that be? What can anyone possibly give God?

### TWO: SEEING TRACES

Seeing our footprints going in the wrong direction, God can no longer abide His own time. Like the Hound-of-Heaven He begins to chase us down. So what are our options now? Should we run faster, try to hide, or, as a true bull, daringly turn and face Him, boldly ask Him what He wants of us?

### THREE: FINDING OX

Since He is now too close to escape, there is no choice but to turn, look Him in the face, and bluntly put our question to Him. What we never

planned on, however, was the nature of this face to Face encounter. Just seeing God face to Face is all it takes to turn anyone's life around – forever! For a moment we even lose sight of our self. God, however, never loses sight of us. He alone knows what He has created, knows His plan for our eternal destiny, knows the Way and can bring us there. But what, we ask, could God possibly get out of all this? Now no man can fathom God's love for all He has created, yet all He asks is that we love Him back. That is all He wants, all He has ever asked of us. And what is our reply?

#### FOUR: CATCHING OX

Having seen God, we are so overjoyed at being caught that we rue all the time we wasted without God on our tail. Quickly we become friends with much exchange of affection and delightful treats. The only blip in this scenario is when God suddenly goes off, disappears on us, and we grow anxious, miss Him terribly. Now we must forage for ourselves and spend lonely nights. In time, however, we learn to patiently wait-out these absences, our trust is becoming unshakable, and too, we are learning to see Him on ever deeper levels – even, see Him in the dark! And with every sudden return, His light and love become ever more exalted – totally worth the wait!

But who can understand the demands of exchange in such a great love as this? Love, after all, demands equality – no happiness in an unequal exchange. To be given everything and return nothing is the anathema of love – better not to love at all. Yet all we can give God is what is ours, what we ourselves have made, which is a nothing compared to everything God has given us. All we have to give God is what He has

made - ourselves, our whole being. He can take it, exchange it, recreate or transform it even to the point of no return. It is this supernatural refashioning that becomes the make-or-break of the journey, this is the ordeal of becoming God-proven - if we can put it that way. This is the ordeal of ordeals.

### FIVE: TAMING OX

The Ox is no meek lamb, and the Herdsman, no good shepherd. Only a tough Herdsman can deal with a strong-willed bull. God knows just what will happen when He brands the bull with the seal of His Image, yet only this can seal the Ox to Him forever as His own possession. This Seal, of course, will burn the bull to the depths of his being, burn a Center right through him, and it will be painful. At the onset of this ordeal, however, a film-like veil is put over his mind, a veil through which, in time, God can be seen everywhere, a depth of vision that never leaves - though initially it all but blinds the Ox. Following this, the moment he looks inward to his familiar Center, instead of light, there is a bottomless black hole, the sight of which begins the painful burning through to the depths of his existence. Now there is a fire in the belly and the bull goes wild. First on his agenda is never to look "within" again - but how can this be avoided? Finally, screwing up his courage he decides to "face it," to deliberately look down into this dark pit even if it kills him - it might be better to be dead anyway. But lo and behold, looking down, there is God's Big Eye looking back at him! What a shock! But now he knows the direction: go down into the pit where, at bottom, God Is. So he makes this journey through a revolting self to his bottommost existence - a point where one can go no

further and where one eventually finds a peace that surpasses definition. This sacred space, the peace of God, becomes a refuge from a self still storming wildly about and above us. We hang on to this peace for dear life until, finally, the storm gradually subsides and the Center becomes bright, rises to the top and is ever available. Where we thought God was out to break our spirit, it turns out, God gives us His Spirit instead, this is the way it goes. Then comes the certifying revelation of an abiding, permanent oneness of the two, and with that, a whole new person (Ox) appears.

### SIX: RETURNING HOME RIDING OX

Who goes home is a “brand” new Ox – the old one is dead. And here begins a whole new life, a life “I” no longer live, but “We” live. The Ox can no more be aware of himself than he is of his other half – God. The two are one in knowing and willing. With a fearless freedom and a divine Center of imperturbable peace and joy, they set out and return to the marketplace whence they came. The marketplace, however, is but a testing ground, a challenge to the imperturbable Center into which everything that touches self (the Ox) ultimately disappears. Making their way through the marketplace the divine Center imperceptibly expands as every aspect of self that can arise disappears into It, never to be experienced again. Thus the divine Center expands in proportion as self (Ox) disappears – “He must increase, I must decrease,” as the saying goes. The Rider does not lead the Ox – no reins needed – because the Ox comes to know the Rider’s mind so well he can anticipate Its will and direction – usually the hardest. And so the two, the Ox and Herdsman, bull their way through the ups and downs of life, always landing on their feet. Then there comes a time when nothing

can touch the Ox at all, there being nothing left to touch – self has been lived through completely, there is nothing left to experience. Now this has all been a good and adventurous life, a great life that God intends everyone to live in oneness with Him. Here nothing is wanting, nothing left to be achieved, no further to go in this life. From here on we can only head for our eternal, heavenly home.

### **SEVEN: OX FORGOTTEN, MAN REMAINS**

In the silence of ecstasy self is gone, this time, forever. Initially we do not know this, but wait for its usual return (after ecstasy). When this does not happen, all we know is that “something” is missing. It takes awhile to realize self will never return, but with this certitude there is joy, a burden lifted, a lightness, now we can fly! But alas, the moment we try to look inward to the Rider, to our divine Center, oh no.....!

### **EIGHT: MAN AND OX BOTH FORGOTTEN**

In one fell swoop the Divine Center leaves the whole body! God is gone too! The one who dies is not self (it merely slipped away unnoticed, and who cares about it anyway?) Rather, it is God who dies. But who can believe such a thing? Unheard of! Considered rationally, of course, it all makes sense: since Ox and Rider were indissolubly One, there cannot be one without the Other. Just as they lived as one, so they die as one.

### **NINE: RETURN TO ORIGIN, BACK AT SOURCE**

Beyond this death there is only a Void of Voids – Meister Eckhart's “breakthrough” into the unknowable Essence of the Godhead, the Source,

which is God-as-He-is-in-Himself and no longer God-as-He-is-in-our-self. This is the Meister's "barren desert," "the wasteland," "abyss" of the Godhead. The essence of the Godhead, however, is not fit for a human being, in fact, there is nothing worse in human history than this Void of Voids.

Though sensory perception remains, the mind is Void, all form is Void – no God in nature, all creation is an absolute Void. With no experience of life or being, of body or soul, of mind or thought, the only question that can arise is: "What is the true nature of 'this' that remains?" Obviously, something remains, but the mind has not a single idea. The answer can only be revealed – and so, eventually, it is.

## TEN: ENTERING MARKET WITH OPEN HANDS

Lo and behold!

Who is this who has risen from the dead?

It is Universal Man, the sum of all creation – *CHRIST!*

Now Who, besides Almighty God, could have 'thunk' of such  
a thing, much less make it happen?

*"On account of His infinite love He became what we are,  
in order that He might make us what He Himself is."*

St. Irenaeus (125-202 AD)

## EPILOGUE

In the Christian tradition, returning to the marketplace only comes after the egoless Unitive Condition (ox and rider as one) but never after the No-self event – there being no one to return anywhere. It's all over for this world. As for Christ showing up, well, just remember, neither "I" nor any

human person is Christ. It would seem, however, the Oxherding Pictures were made just for Christ – after all, “I am with you always” is the truth!

Following the Unitive State, traditionally one is given some “Apostolic mission” to go out and do some work for the Lord – go to the missions, found an order, or whatever. What I discovered, however, is that what people need most in life is God’s interior grace, and I could not give it. Apart from praying this grace for others, the marketplace was a complete failure for me. The fact I could do nothing for God was the bane of my life. It is a hard lesson to learn, but in time I saw, knew, that for us, God does indeed give His Grace to others – I have seen miracles! In truth, no prayer is in vain.

What initially struck me about these pictures was the two-step depiction of loss-of-self – a fact most people miss. First, self (Ox) is gone; then shortly after, God (Herdsman) is gone. This is exactly how the-experience-of-no-self goes, and why I found these pictures so remarkable.

Thank you Jeff for inviting me to contribute my Christian take on these delightful pictures. I’ve often wished to do a similar set depicting the Christian journey, but alas, there is neither talent nor time. I greatly appreciate your openness to other traditions and hope your Zen friends will not be offended by any distortions I may have made to their traditional perspective. If your colleagues find it in anyway offensive, just scratch it.

## NOTES

Ten Oxherding Pictures reproduced courtesy of the Shōkokuji Rinzai Monastery Complex in Kyoto.

The Zen Oxherding transcript is based on retreat lectures given in 2009 in Japan, the United States, and throughout Europe.

I would like to thank participants in my seminar at Hanazono University for their comments on the verse translations: Zen master-scholar Sodō Yasunaga, Zen monk-scholar Takuma Senda, Zen laywoman Takami Yoshie, Helen Findley (Fulbright scholar, University of Chicago), and Casper Wits (Japanese Ministry of Education scholar, Kyoto University).

For elephant-training pictures in the Tibetan tradition, see Geshe Rabten, *Treasury of Dharma* (Tharpa Publications 1997) pp. 115ff.

“Just as a man would tie to a post” cited in Walpola Rahula, *Zen and the Taming of the Bull* (Gordon Fraser 1978) p.16.

First two Paul Tillich quotes from *Systematic Theology* (University of Chicago Press 1957) Volume 2, pp. 44-45, and 47; “Everything is tried and nothing satisfies” from *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press 1971) p. 48.

T. S. Eliot note for line 308 of “The Waste Land” in *Selected Poems* (Faber and Faber 1961) p. 72.

For the Fire Sermon, see the informative Wikipedia article, which also mentions the Eliot note.



Poem for case twelve of *The Gateless Barrier* quoted in Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (Harper & Row 1974) p. 91.

For “Gurgling brook” see Victor Sôgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kôan Practice* (University of Hawaii Press 2003) p. 512.

“The further you go, the deeper it gets” is a paraphrase of expressions often cited by Hakuin. See Norman Waddell, *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin* (Shambhala 1994) p. 17; Norman Waddell, *Hakuin’s Precious Mirror Cave* (Counterpoint 2009) pp. 33 & 204.

For Hakuin’s experience and the master’s response, see Philip Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (Columbia University Press 1971) pp. 118-119; Norman Waddell, *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin* (Shambhala 1999) pp. 30-32; Waddell, *Hakuin’s Precious Mirror Cave*, pp. 31 & 169.

Eckhart’s “...man must be so poor” quoted in Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy* (Lindisfarne Books 2001) p. 214.

“But after kenshō” quoted in Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, p. 38.

For Lin-chi’s “Speak, speak!” see Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Record of Linji [Lin-chi]* (University of Hawaii Press 2009) p. 5.

For “Samsara [birth-death] as well as Nirvana – like last night’s dream”

see Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin*, p. 39; Waddell, *Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave*, pp. 122 & 271.

For "Sleep without dream" see Thomas Cleary, *Wen-tzu: Understanding the Mysteries* (Shambhala 1992) p. 8.

"Whoever is seeking God by ways" quoted in Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (Continuum 2001) p. 11; also found in Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (Crossroad Publishing 2001) p. 115.

For Tzu-yuan (Jion)'s "Who is that devil" see Yamada Mumon, *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* (University of Hawaii Press 2004) p. 2.