

Justice Evans

Professor Freeman

05/8/2023

Philosophy of Zen

Kuòān Shīyuǎn's: The Ten Bulls

As translated by: Senzaki Nyogen 千崎如幻 and Paul Reps.

Paintings attributed to: Tenshō Shūbun 天章周文

I: In Search of the Ox



*In the pasture of the world,
I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the Ox.*

*Following unnamed rivers, lost upon the interpenetrating
paths of distant mountains,
My strength failing and my vitality exhausted,
I cannot find the Ox.*

Depicted in painting I: *In Search of the Ox*, an oxherder lost and growing weary continues searching for the unknown and distant Ox. Pursuing many external paths, the young oxherder remains blind to that which he seeks. Yet, why is he seeking the Ox and what does the Ox symbolically represent? In Zen philosophy, it is traditionally believed that the Ox metaphorically represents our true nature, our Buddha nature. Our nature empty of independent existence. And the oxherder, embarking on this journey of self realization, represents the *seeking self*, longing to awaken to its *true self*. The path of Zen begins with awakening awareness of the core problem of self-alienation and the fact that we do not truly know ourselves. We have lost sight of our true nature and have grown so blind and unconscious, that as we aimlessly wander through life we have yet to realize we are lost. We have forgotten our true self and the waters of our fundamental nature have become murky so that we can not see within the depths of our original pure enlightened mind. Awakening to our own ignorance and delusion is the critical first step and it is this first step that the *Ten Oxherding Paintings and Prose* begins. In the first painting, “The oxherder realizes that he has lost the ox; the deluded self realizes that he is deluded, realizes that he has alienated himself from his own true self. He is still lost, but since he knows that he is lost, he has become a seeker” (Davis, 2022). The oxherder, now aware of his delusion, has become a seeker; yet, as you see in the painting through the contortion of his body, the young oxherder does not know where to begin searching. The *seeking mind* of the oxherder

now asks himself, where does one begin the search for true nature and what is it that one must be searching for?

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.

Depicted in painting II: *Discovering the Footprints*, the oxherder, aware of his delusions, begins to see traces left behind by the Ox as he continues seeking. The *footprints* in this prose represent sacred teachings and texts. These doctrines are not the Ox itself but act as guides leading one in direction of the Ox. Just as the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. On this journey of self realization, one must refrain from becoming attached to sacred doctrine, dharma, teachers and moments of enlightenment. For they are all guides upon the path, leading one to truth, but none are truth itself. These footprints tell us something about the nature of the Ox and thus lead you in the *right* direction of discovering our *true nature*. The direction being intrinsic. What the Oxherder seeks, he already possesses. Thus, he must refrain from wandering without and investigate his own nature within. Through following these footprints left behind by the Ox, “You come to understand that, despite all the differences among the myriad things we experience, there is a pervading oneness to reality, and that pervading oneness is your true self”. (Davis, 2022). As the oxherder follows the footprints he begins to intellectually understand this notion that his *true self*, is the silence between noise, the space between thought, the continuous swinging from inhale and exhale of the breath, the pervading life force that flows through all things. Yet, in the mind of the young oxherder this remains simply an abstract intellectual understanding. He has received this wisdom and grasped it intellectually, but it has yet to become an embodied experiential wisdom and a moment of awakening. Awakening is a holistic understanding, one that uses the mind to see through the mind. It transcends intellectual intelligence and is understood beyond the word and mind.

III: Perceiving the Ox



I hear the song of the nightingale.

The sun is warm, the wind is mild,

willows are green along the shore -

here no Ox can hide!

What artist can draw that massive head,

Those majestic horns?

Depicted in painting III: *Perceiving the Ox*, the oxherder experiences his first moment of *Kensho* - initial awakening. He perceives the Ox and sees into the *true nature* of the *self*.

Overjoyed, the young oxherder has caught his first glimpse but not yet realized his full Buddha - nature. *Kensho* or moments of brief and sudden insight occur in extraordinary experiences of the

most ordinary things. “In any case, such experiences are not a matter of seeing something outside the self; they are a matter of seeing the self in everything and everything in the self” (*Davis, 2022*). Such as Shakyamuni Buddha’s breakthrough beneath the bodhi tree upon observing the morning star rise. “At that enlightening moment, according to Yamada Mumon Roshi, Shakyamuni must have thought, “I am shining!” (*Davis, 2022*). The fool believes in the sacred. Believing in the sacred implies the existence of the non-sacred. Yet, everything is inherently sacred. Opening our heart-mind to the world, every inhabitant and experience of the world, the heavens and beyond; we cease to believe and experience ourselves as independent beings separate from the rest of reality and begin to empathetically identify with everything.

IV: Catching the Ox



I seize him with a terrific struggle.

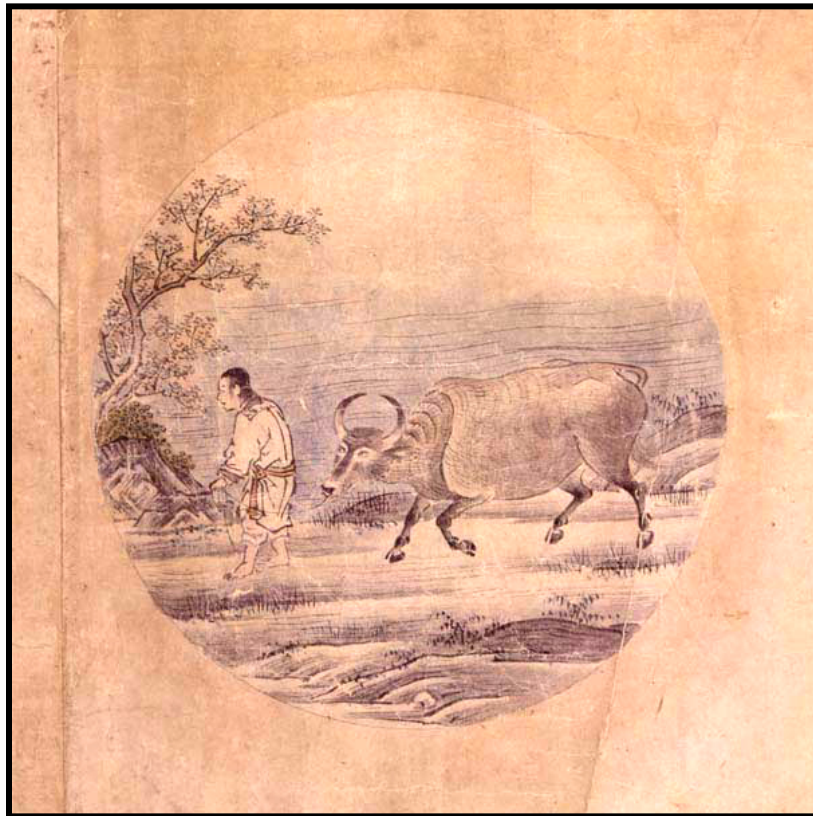
*His great will and power
are inexhaustible.*

*He charges to the high plateau
far above the cloud-mists,
or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.*

Depicted in painting IV: *Catching the Ox*, the young oxherder catches the Ox. But there is a great struggle occurring between Ox and the Oxherder. We must question at this stage who is

resisting who? Perhaps the Ox - our *true nature* is not resisting being caught by the oxherder but is pulling the still resistant egocentric oxherder, onto the homeward-bound path of awakening?

V: Taming the Ox



*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.*

Depicted in painting V: *Taming the Ox*, the oxherder must use his last bit of spiritual strength to take hold of the Ox; yet, its mind is headstrong, its body powerful and it will not be broken with ease or haste. Attributing qualities of being more stubborn than ever and still wild, needing to be broken and tamed by the necessity of the whip. Again, we must understand that these characteristics are not of the Ox but are of the oxherder at this stage in the development of his self realization. Although, perhaps from another interpretation posed by Chinese Zen master Sheng-yen, “The Ox represents the mind and its activities” (Davis, 2022). Understand this to mean the mind in all its enlightened and unenlightened activities, it is the same mind that can both be deluded or enlightened to its own true nature. “It is the same Ox, the same mind, but its underlying purity is uncovered as the deluding self afflictions are removed” (Davis, 2022). Our Buddha nature that we all possess and have always possessed is inherently pure and has been from the beginning; one must *suddenly* wake up to its purity. As in a moment of *Satori*, “The breakthrough must indeed be abrupt and sudden. But the practice after this breakthrough, in order to preserve that which has been gained, must be gradual” (Davis, 2022). In this instance, I believe we can understand that of which we *gained*, to be nothing, but inherently all that we've lost. To know thyself, you must forget thyself and open thyself.

VI: Riding the Ox Home



*Mounting the Ox, 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.*

Depicted in painting VI: *Riding the Ox Home*, the young oxherder is depicted leisurely riding on the back of the once stubborn and wild Ox. Playing a heavenly tune and allowing the Ox to take him wherever he wishes. For, from this point forward, this shall ever be his home. “Effort is giving way to effortlessness as practice becomes a way of life” (Davis, 2022). This notion of effortless enlightenment is not one of lazily zoning out but rather a matter of living fully engaged in the Zone of Zen. At this stage everything becomes a means and opportunity of practice.

VII: The Ox Transcended



Astride the Ox, I reach home.

I am serene. The Ox too can rest.

The dawn has come. In blissful

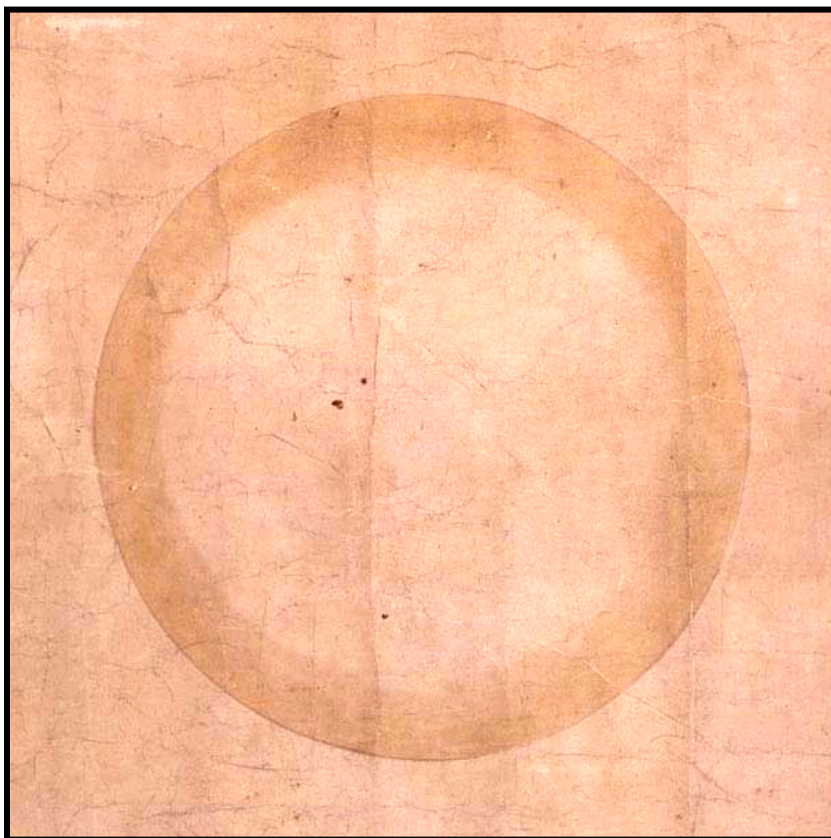
Repose, within my thatched dwelling

*I have abandoned the whip and
Ropes.*

Depicted in painting VII: *The Ox Transcended*, alone outside his mountain hut, the young oxherder sits at peace with himself and the world as the Ox has disappeared. Truth is not two and as for Zen, this notion of truth is our true nature. This *true self*, is “The self that understands itself to exist as a part of - rather than to subsist apart from - the worldwide web of reality” (Davis, 2023). At this stage in the development of the young oxherders self realization, the Ox as a separate entity from the *self* has been forgotten but the self still remains. For in this instance, the Ox was simply a finger pointing at the moon and not the moon itself. The moon represents the symbol of Nirvana or enlightenment. The young oxherder now clearly sees that at which the ox was pointing at, and thus, must now put down the finger so that it does not continue to block our view of the moon itself. Within this painting and prose, the young oxherder, “Has a crucial realization - namely, the insight that in order to find oneself, one has to stop looking outside the self, as if the self were an object alongside others. One must, as the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen says, “Learn to take the backward step that turns the light [of the mind around] and shines it inward” illuminating, as it were, the illuminating mind itself” (Davis, 2022). This is the paradox of the mind seeking that which cannot be found for it is seeking the mind. Do not search for the Buddha outside of your own mind, for the mind is the Buddha. If you see the Buddha on the road, kill the Buddha! What you seek, you've always possessed, remember! No longer a seeker, nor tamer, the delusion of duality between Ox and oxherder has now faded. Yet, the oxherder now aware of his true nature faces the temptation of spiritual seclusion or the true test of reentering the world. This is the dilemma of the *Bodhisattva* ideal

who vows to return again and again in order to assist all beings in reaching Nirvana for eternity. And the critique of the *Arhat* who seeks and attains his own salvation, leaving the world behind. Another danger at this stage of the young oxherders self realization development is, “The danger of mistaking an ironically inflated and spiritually self-satisfied ego for the true self” (Davis, 2022). And yet what makes Zen most beautiful is that it truly begins when one overcomes this state of being lost in the clouds of egoic spiritual transcendence. “Real Zen is found only where the path up the mountain doubles as a path down the mountain” (Davis, 2022). Thus, the path of Zen is the ceaseless circulation of the upward and downward journey such as the endless cyclical phases of the new moon to full moon. This path is never ending and the path itself is enlightenment. But you must ask yourself, how am I walking? Do I walk present in the moment with generosity, compassion and wisdom? Or in haste with no awareness, full of ignorance, greed and aggression? So far at this stage of the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* it can be thought of as a linear development. But from this stage on, the final three paintings are interconnected and occur at the same level and are in constant cyclical relation. The *true self* is the endless movement and the ceaseless circulation of the final three stages.

VIII: Both Ox and Oxhereder Forgotten



Whip, rope, person, and Ox-

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.

Depicted in painting VIII: *Both Ox and Oxherder Forgotten*, The famous Enso symbol represents, “First the Great Death; after cutting off completely, then coming back to life” (Davis, 2022). Attachment to the searching self and the searched for Buddha- nature have both been let go of and forgotten. In this symbol we come to understand that form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form. It is the symbol of infinite possibility, freedom, creative potential and the absence of boundaries. It is the symbol of an open mind of wisdom and an open heart of compassion. “Complete nothingness is the originary place from which all thoughts and every kind of knowledge originates” (Davis, 2022).

IX: Returning to the Origin



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.*

Depicted in Painting IX: *Returning to the Origin*: we can truly see the emptiness of form and the form of emptiness. Nature, the ultimate depiction of enlightenment. At this stage things exist just as they are, there is no more inner and no more outer. As from the beginning, the Enso of emptiness as our true nature, the ox being one of an infinite appearance existing in this all embracing expanse. We are empty, empty of independent existence. This notion is the seed of enlightenment. “The root delusion - the cause of our cravings and attachments and the suffering they perpetuate-is our karmic habit of experiencing ourselves as separate from others and the rest of the world. To awaken to the true self is thus to “return to the root and source” of reality” (Davis, 2022). One is then enlightened by all things and sees things as they truly are, free from delusion, preconceived notions and subconscious karmic habits.

X: Entering the Marketplace



*Barefooted and naked of breast,
I mingle with 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.*

Depicted in painting X: *Entering the Marketplace*, Bodhisattva retreats down the mountain and returns from his sacred seclusion into the sacred public sphere of the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. The Bodhisattva now sacrifices his seclusion in order to offer solace to others. He

enters the marketplace with the offering of passing the torch of enlightenment onto the next oxherders to emerge. “Going to bars and fish markets, he turns all into Buddhas,” Ziyuan tells us. “He does not use any secret sagely powers to do this,” Kuoan says, but merely by entering the marketplace bare-chested and barefooted, covered in dirt and ash- and smiling from ear to ear. His contagious laughter creates an atmosphere of infectious peace and joy that surrounds him wherever he goes” (*Davis, 2022*). This Buddha, Budai, meaning “cloth sack” has come to realize that he owns nothing, unlike the majority of us who have yet to realize this. Believing that things are given to us in order to pay it forward and give them onward to others. Budai does not celebrate nor boast of his Bodhisattva hood or of his spiritual realizations, rather he “hides his light”, concealing his holiness under the dirt of his services. He has let go of worldly feelings, sensations and emotions such as thoughts of holiness. Thus, he does not remain where the Buddha is, and rather he continues on past where the Buddha is not. “Insight into emptiness is awakening to interconnectedness, and thus the loving heart is opened along with the awakened mind” (*Davis, 2022*).

Work Cited:

- Batchelor, Martine. “The Ten Oxherding Pictures.” *Tricycle*, 30 July 2020, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/ten-oxherding-pictures/>.
- Davis, Bret W. *Zen Pathways an Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of Zen Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 2022.
- “Ten Bulls.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 24 Apr. 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Bulls.