

The Oxherding Pictures

Kyol Che 2021, Blue Heron Zen Community

Introduction

The calf, bull or ox is one of the earliest similes for meditation practice going back to the middle length discourses of the Buddha in the Pali cannon, the Majjhima Nikaya. (contributors n.d.)

Zen Master Ji Bong wrote that “The ten ox-herding pictures originated in twelfth century China as an allegorical illustration of man’s quest for enlightenment. Over the centuries Zen artists and teachers have produced many variations of these pictures and the accompanying commentary.” (Bong 2016)

“The people of old times used these paintings to represent the path of practice, and they wrote wonderful things about them. But when we look at these painting with our Buddha eye, we can see that what they describe, this linear progression through five or ten stages, is not entirely correct. Why is that? The path of meditation is not a stepwise progression where you go from here to there, and then you reach attainment. The direct enlightenment school of the Zen tradition teaches that right in this very moment you can touch nirvana, your true nature, your Buddhahood. You don’t need time and space to go through stages so you can attain something. Right in the here and the now, with the bright eye, you will see. [Tinh p. 55]

Searching for the Ox means searching for one’s true self. The Ox represents our mind and enlightenment.

Why Practice?

We all have Buddha Nature, so why practice?

In the introduction of John Daido Looi’s *Riding the Ox Home* are “The path of enlightenment is a spiritual journey of discovering our true nature. But the fact is that from the very beginning there is nothing to acquire. From the beginning, we are perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (Looi 2002)

Before his enlightenment, Dogen had a great sense of doubt about Buddha nature. He had a “...fundamental spiritual conundrum regarding the relationship between original enlightenment and the need for everyday practice...” It was resolved when he realized the immediacy of a unified practice-realization. (Heine 2020, pp. 68-71)

“Two fundamental components of Dogen’s discourse underlying his approach to writing are crucial for understanding various thematic elements expressed in his teachings. One key component is a strong emphasis on realizing the oneness of practice-realization at all stages of spiritual development and level of monastic experience.” (Heine 2020, pp. 93-94)

Believing that there is a “my practice” that is separate from you is a mistake. You and your practice is something you can be completely intimate with...and realize that there is no separation at all.

“The master asked Nan-ch’uan, ‘What is the Way?’

Nan-ch’uan said, ‘Ordinary mind is the Way.’

The master said, ‘Then may I direct myself towards it or not?’

Nan-ch’uan said, ‘To seek [it] is to deviate [from it].’

The master said, ‘If I do not seek, how can I know about the Way?’

Nan-ch’uan said, ‘The Way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. To know is to have a concept; to not know is to be ignorant. If you truly realize the Way of no doubt, it is just like the sky: wide open vast emptiness. How can you say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to it?’

At these words the master had sudden enlightenment. His mind became like the clear moon.”

[The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu, p. 11]

The 10 Oxherding Pictures and Verse

*Thus Samsara is transcended!
Blue mountains cross the waters
Like a sail before the wind.
Flowers bloom on a white rock;
It is spring outside the universe.* (Sunim 2009)

Painting 1: Going Out in Search of the Oz

*High mountains, deep waters, and a dense jungle of grass—
However much you try, the way to proceed remains unclear!
To alleviate this sense of frustration, listen to the chirping of cicadas.* (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

Dukka. Dissatisfaction. A question arises. What is this? Our quest begins.

“The first stage of a spiritual journey has to do with becoming aware of the possibility that a spiritual search can be a directive force in our lives. It is the time when we focus on the doubts plaguing us and clarify the intent of our lives. What is it that we must accomplish during this lifetime? What is most important to us?” (Loori 2002, p. 2)

Painting 2: Seeing the Footprints

A tangle of thorny brushes; the faint murmur of running water.

But here and there are footprints—is this the right path?

If you want to pierce its nose and tie it up, do not rely on someone else's strength! (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

It is very interesting that the Oxherding paintings and verse don't have a teacher, just the seeker: "Do not rely on someone else's strength!" says the verse. This is something that we have to see for ourselves. Our teachers can't see it for us. Our teachers can't give it to us. We already have it, although saying it is an it is also mistaken. [see Tinh pp. 40-42]

"As a result of attending to our questions, of letting go of the distractions, concentrating on what is most important to us, we notice the path. When we turn our attention towards it, the path is as clear as daylight. It is nothing other than our lives." (Loori 2002, p, 12)

Painting 3: Seeing the Ox

*Among willow branches swaying in the spring breeze an oriole is singing.
How can the sparrow experience his joy in calling to his mate?
Isn't the moonlight glimmering in the forest my home?* (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

Thich Phuoc Tinh writes: “In the third painting, seeing the first trace of the buffalo, we are not yet skillful at directing our mind. Our mind goes very fast. We see a fleeting moment of a thought or just a trace of a feeling, and then it is gone. We are not in control yet. But as we practice mindfulness and become more skillful, we will recognize that the state of Buddhahood is right in our body ...” (Tinh 2011)

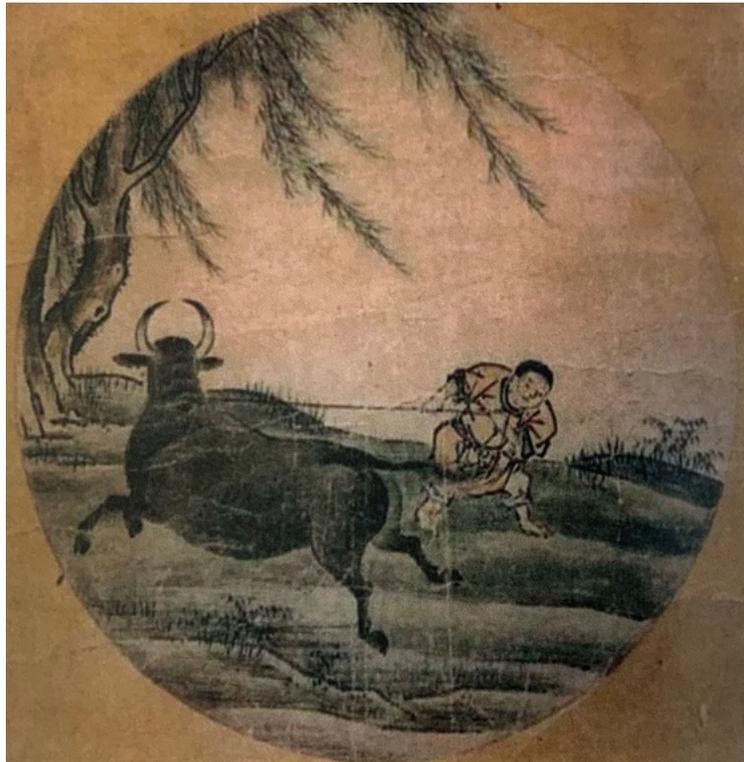
John Daido Looi writes: “The third stage of the spiritual journey pivots on getting the first glimpse of the true nature of the self. It is about becoming completely awake and seeing clearly for just a moment.” (Looi 2002, p. 22)

Painting 4: Catching the Ox

Advancing with difficulty; the ox's nose is pierced.

But this fiery nature is hard to control.

Dragged here and there, you stray through cloud-covered forests. (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

Our mind has been likened to an ocean and our thoughts waves. As we meditate, we calm our minds, and the waves die down. It can be a struggle, especially at first. The Dhammapada has this graphic visualization: “Just as a fish hooked and left on the sand thrashes about in agony, the mind being trained in meditation trembles all over.” (Connelly 2014, p. 71)

Even seasoned practitioners have bad days. An old Zen Master once told me that when his mind is especially unsettled, he stops trying to just sit with spacious awareness and goes back to counting his breaths. Without judgement.

The third patriarch’s poem *Trust in Mind* has a line that says “When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity your very effort fills you with activity.” Another translation of the same line: “Trying to still the mind inhibits the experience of oneness.” (Song 2004, 2015). You can’t force your mind to settle down, but you can *let* your mind settle down. If you are struggling take a deep breath and relax, and don’t think that your meditation is good or bad.

John Daido Looi writes: "In the fourth stage we begin to get a rudimentary understanding of the nature of the True Self. Yet, despite our increasing ability to appreciate reality directly and accurately, it is still difficult to get our insights to manifest in our lives. It is one thing to see the ox; it is quite another to take hold of it. ... Intimacy is real seeing; not the seeing of an object by a subject, but seeing when there is no separation between subject and object. It is the identity of subject and object. Intimacy is seeing with our whole body and mind." (Looi 2002, p.28)

I'm sure Kido Inoue would point out that there is no separation between body and mind. He repeatedly stressed the importance of seeing that.

Painting 5: Herding the Ox

*Fearing that it may fall into a steep and perilous path,
You hold it tight with whip and bridle,
and with the strength of both legs firmly hold your ground.
Once past this critical moment, the ox comes following you. (Sunim 2009)*



(Inoue 2010)

Loori writes: “Our training has advanced to where we have verified for ourselves the natural order of reality. We are pretty clear about how our mind works; how our habit patterns affect our lives, what the trigger points are that bring up anger, greed or fear...We begin to discern clearly but we still remain relatively powerless in uprooting our conditioned responses to the order of reality....We use our practice of awareness to open up the possibility of living more harmoniously. The whole practice is gradually beginning to come together and is less of a struggle. But there is still the nose ring, the need for discipline to actualize what is realized.” (Loori 2002, p. 36)

Painting 6: Riding the Ox Back Home

Sitting astride the ox, the noble person happily returns.

The sound of his flute mingles with the crimson sky; he has discovered the garden of joy. (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

Loori writes: “At this stage of the spiritual journey we start to navigate the complexities of our life with ease. A sense of unity with the myriad of phenomena and events in our life begins to appear.” (Loori 2002, p. 44)

Painting 7: Forgetting the Ox, the Person Rests Alone

Bright moon and cool wind; what a splendid home!

Sitting all alone, the ox has gone away.

Even if you doze until sunrise, what use would be a whip and bridle? (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

Loori again: “The struggle has ended. A sense of peacefulness and relaxation pervades. An ancient Chinese comment on this stage is , “All is one, not two. We only make the ox a temporary subject. It is as the relationship of a rabbit in a trap, a fish in a net, as gold in dross or the moon emerging from a cloud. One path of clear light travels throughout endless time.”

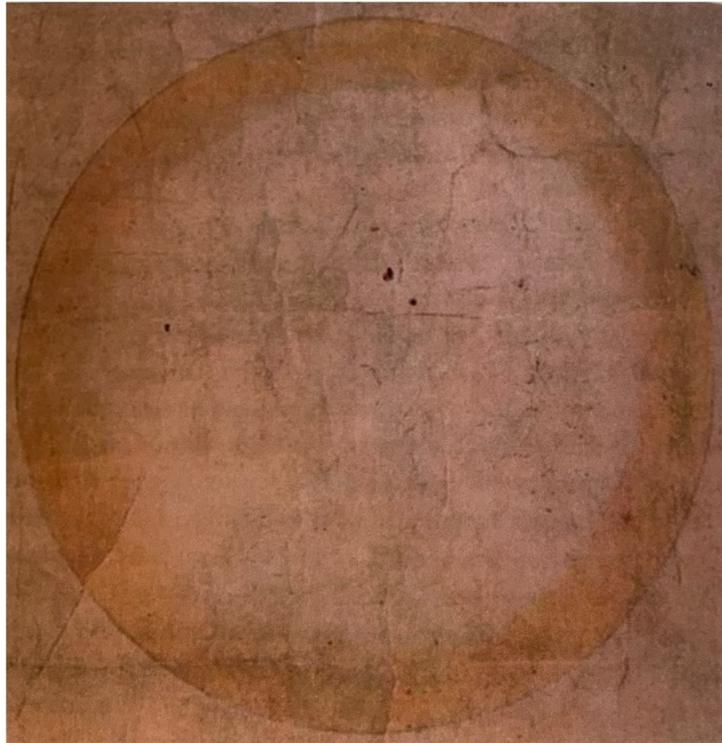
“Linji wrote “the true person of no rank. Within this lump of red flesh there is a True Person of no Rank that goes in and out of the senses.”

Painting 8: The Ox and the Person Are Both Forgotten

Since even space has collapsed, how can obstacles remain?

Could a snowflake survive inside a burning flame?

You cheerfully come and go; how could you not always laugh? (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

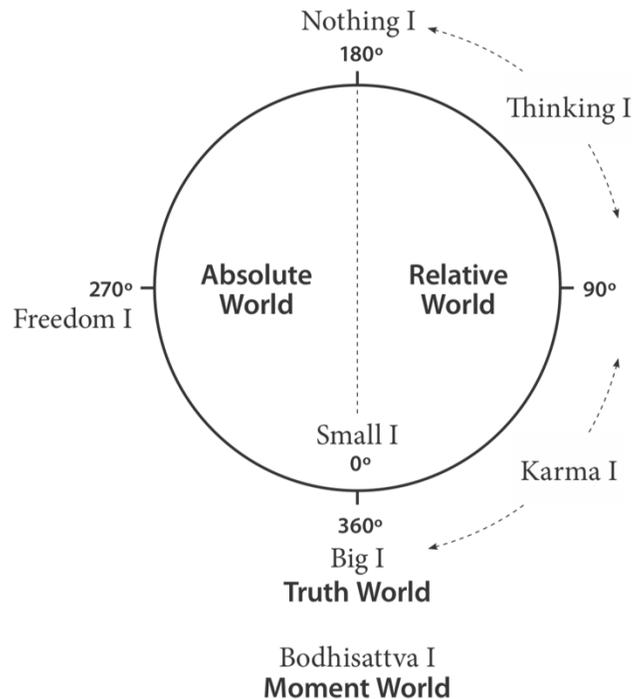
We've come to the last three paintings. The last three paintings represent very important stages in our spiritual journey.

Our root teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn taught that there are different levels of enlightenment. There are three of them, one for each of the last three paintings. There is first enlightenment, which is attaining true emptiness; original enlightenment, which is attaining truth world; and final enlightenment, which attaining moment world. We also say these are attaining Substance, Truth, and function, respectively.

“The Buddha understood that all the problems come from *jiga/gaken* [troubled/troublesome self, i.e., the small I], that appear when body and mind are separated, and he proved that it vanishes when body and mind become one again. (Inoue 2010, p. 24)

Kido Inoue wrote “By making both the man and the ox disappear, he emphasizes the falling out of body and mind. Though it does explain the most important thing, it is not the quintessence of the of the teaching.” One more step is necessary. (Inoue 2010, pp. 25-26)

The 8th painting represents attaining first enlightenment. The Ox and the person are both forgotten. This is 180° on the Zen Circle, the first enlightenment, attaining sunyata or emptiness. Don't know mind. The dropping away of body and mind.



You can see that when your mind shifts from discriminative thought to non-thinking/don't know, that really no shift occurred, i.e., it is the same mind. There is no separation from one to the other. They are both right there. The shift is instantaneous and without effort. The top of the zen circle is that pivot from delusion to realization.

Attaining 180° is not attaining something that you don't already have. You can directly observe this in your meditation practice. One moment you are counting your breath, and the next moment you are thinking about something somewhere else. Then you notice that you drifted off and come right back to counting your breath. There is no separation between the two. It is the same ordinary mind for both. Same with shikantaza, just sitting with spacious awareness. One moment spacious awareness, the next moment thinking about some drama or some other discursive thought. Same ordinary Mind. Effortless to go from one to the other. Close your eyes, then open them. That effortlessness; the same ordinary mind from one to the other.

The emphasis that Kido Inoue places on the separation we make of body and mind, that particular duality, is very interesting. It is the duality that we can be most intimate with, *our* body and *our* mind. Turning our thoughts inward, we can investigate this until "body and mind drop away."

Some teachers stop with the 8th painting. While you may have achieved personal liberation at this point, our school really stresses the importance of “one more step,” coming back into the world and saving all beings. Bodhisattva action.

Historically this was point of contention between Mahayana (the great vehicle) and Hinayana (the lesser vehicle). Calling that school Hinayana is rather rude and antagonistic. We should refer to the other school as Theravada, not Hinayana. There are many Theravadans that are filled with compassion.

Painting 9: Returning to the Original Place

*My very own treasure is recovered; all those efforts spent in vain!
It would have been better to have been blind, deaf, and dumb.
The mountains and water are just as they are!
So is the bird among the flowers. (Sunim 2009)*



(Inoue 2010)

There is a famous saying by Qingyuan Weixin that is about realizing substance and truth (Watts 1989, p. 126):

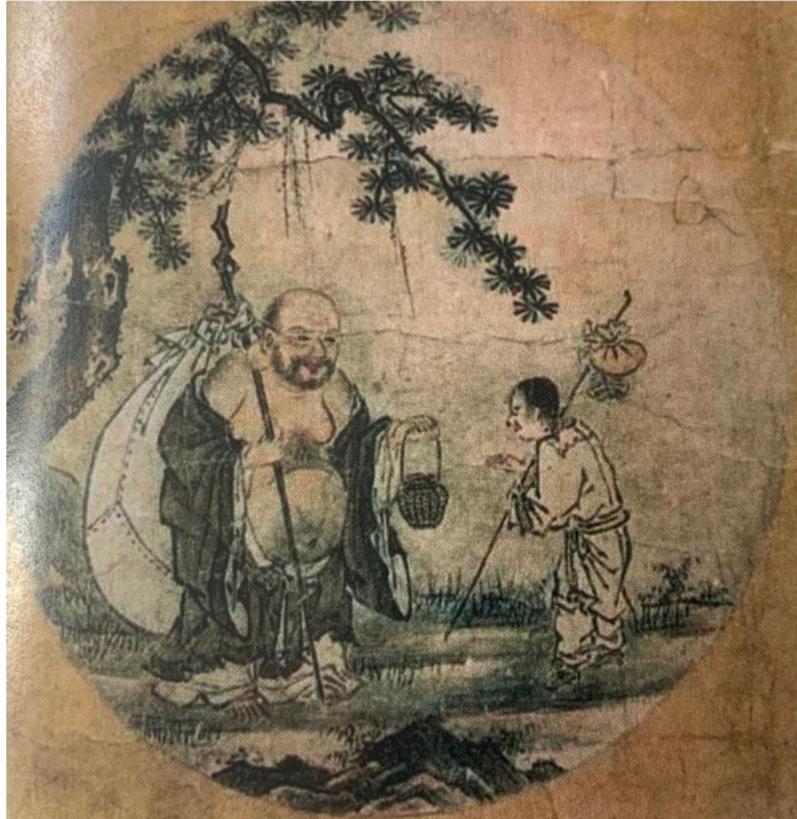
Before I studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains are once again mountains, and waters once again as waters.

Painting 10: Appearing in the Marketplace to Teach and Transform

Ragged and starving you approach the market and the streets.

Even covered in dust, why would the laughter cease?

The bees and butterflies are happy because flowers have bloomed on a withered tree. (Sunim 2009)



(Inoue 2010)

This painting represents the final enlightenment, attaining moment world. Going into the world with compassion and prajna wisdom. Perceive the situation and function accordingly.

What About After the Last Painting?

Dogan wrote “To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind, as well as the bodies and minds of others, drops away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

The 11th painting is missing...this no-trace continues endlessly. Or perhaps all the paintings should be tossed aside, so to speak?

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