

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures

Paintings by Master Gyokusei Jikihara

Verses by Master K'uo-an

Obtained from <http://www.mro.org/zmm/artgallery/oxherd.html>

Introduction from <http://www.ijnet.or.jp/iriz/irizhtml/zenart/10ox.htm>

Introduction by Urs App

The protagonist of this poetic picture story, a boy herdsman, stands for none other than you, dear reader. It is the very “I” that reads these lines through a pair of eyes, the subject of your life, the protagonist of that unique story that is yours. It is what thinks your thoughts, makes your plans, has your desires, and signs your checks: it is what was born of your parents and will die on your deathbed.

This “I” is also the starting point of the Zen Buddhist quest. When a Chinese man called Huike, according to a Zen story, met Bodhidharma, the following conversation ensued:

Huike: “Please, Master, bring peace to my heart-mind!”

Bodhidharma: “Show it to me, and I will pacify it!”

Huike: “I have searched for it, but I could not find it.”

Bodhidharma: “If you could search for it, how could it be your very own heart-mind?”

In Zen Buddhism, the injunction “show me your self” has a particular ring, as the root-source of man’s basic dissatisfaction and the engine of his striving is none other than this “I”. The Japanese Zen master Bankei, for example, diagnosed the basic human problem as follows:

Your self-partiality is at the root of all your illusions. There aren’t any illusions when you don’t have this preference for yourself.

Rather than being the goal of man’s quest, Zen thus sees the “I” as the very problem. Thus the herdsman, who has an “I” just as all of us do, sets out in search of what he truly is. The object of this search, man’s true self, is represented by an ox or buffalo. The quest extends from the seeing of faint traces (picture 2) to the thorough overcoming of the problematic “I” with all of its objects (including the ox; picture 8) – and to the emergence of nature as it truly is (9).

In the Indian Upanishads, the highest spiritual goal is the realization that one’s own true self, one’s atman, is nothing other than the very essence of everything, i.e., brahman. “Tat tvam asi”, “That thou art,” is its expression. In terms of the present classic of Zen literature, the Ten Oxherding Pictures, that means: your true self, what you really are without realizing it, is nothing other than that ox & that flower, or your neighbor. Thus the true man in picture 10 is not aloof from the world but rather right here, in the bustle of the marketplace.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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?

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.