

TEACHER FEATURE

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures

Allegories for Our Practice

By Bob Moore, JDPSN

The Ten Ox-herding pictures, sometimes called the Ten Bulls, 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.

Recently one of my students gave me a new version of the Ten Ox-herding pictures. These are ten metaphors for how we might evaluate our progress in practice. After some seasoning maybe we will perceive that they are just pictures, but I think that they can be meaningful teaching for most of us as we travel the Zen path.

I. Looking for the Ox



The first picture is called "looking for the ox" and it shows a young man preparing to enter the woods to search for the ox. Our first job is to find the woods; that's where the action is. But many of us are so preoccupied with our personal problems that we don't realize that we are actually already in the middle

of the woods and that it's possible to begin our search for the ox.

I have a son who turned three years old recently. When he was two he wasn't talking very much, and my wife and I were concerned that he learn to speak more clearly. But he would only respond most of the time to my nine-year-old daughter, who is his hero. When she gets angry at someone she calls them a "dodo," and when she sees things that appear gross to her she calls them "ocky." Well, of course, my son had no problem acquiring these two words and everyone became a dodo . . . Mama was a dodo, Papa was a dodo, guests visiting our house were dodos.

One night we were having dinner and he was standing in his high chair and conducting the activities of the meal. We kept saying to him, "Devin, sit down. You're going to fall and hurt yourself." But like a typical two-year-old, he didn't pay much attention. Eventually he slipped and the chair went out from under him. His chin hit the table, and he bit through his lower lip. Later he was sitting on the couch with a big swollen lip like a boxer, but he hadn't said anything since the fall. So I said to him, "Devin, are you okay now?" And he looked at me very earnestly and said, "Me dodo ocky."

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He was just 27 months old, and already he had attained complete self-recrimination! So our first job is just to get in touch with ourselves and realize that we're all in the woods together.

I teach music at the University of Southern California. One of my favorite composers is Charles Ives, who wrote a song called "The Cage." In the text of this song, a leopard is walking back and forth in his cage. A boy comes along and watches this leopard, and then he begins to wonder: is life anything like that, back and forth inside our own cages?

In our school we teach that the four walls that lock us in our cages are wanting mind, attaching mind, checking mind, and holding mind. So we all have a self-made cage. In Zen the name for our cage is karma and it is the primary hindrance to finding a free and compassionate mind. The first ox-herding picture is teaching us that without regular practice we are largely controlled by our karma.

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II. Finding the Footprints



In the second picture the young man realizes that he is in the woods, looks down, and actually sees the tracks of the ox. Seeing the tracks means that we can begin to believe in our direction, and we can start to formulate the questions that are at the core of meditative practice. This is called “think-

ing I.” In Zen teaching one often hears it said that we should put down our thinking because it is an illusion and a hindrance to actual attainment. But this kind of thinking is already pretty high class. Most of us are strongly controlled by our karma, so when we begin to evaluate the direction of our life or question seriously the meaning of life we are starting to prepare the groundwork for waking up. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, “Don’t throw out the manure of thinking, plow it under and use it to make beautiful flowers.” One key to practicing effectively is that we must learn to accept and possess our conceptual “shit,” whatever it is. Recognize it, accept it, breathe with it, become one with it. Therefore the first two pictures are concerned with the worlds of karma and thinking and represent in our school “opposites like this.”

III. Catching a Glimpse of the Ox



In the third picture the young man sees the tail of the ox come out from behind a tree. This means he has attained an actual taste of the essence of Zen. Probably everyone in this room has had some fleeting insight of this kind into your true nature — that is why most of us are here. It happens to some people

during meditation practice, but it's more likely to occur when we are completely involved in some daily activity — playing sports, making love, doing art or music — any action in which our small I disappears for a few moments and we find ourselves just doing the activity with one hundred percent intention and clarity. Often students come to formal Zen practice to cultivate and deepen these experiences.

IV. Catching the Ox



In the fourth picture the young man walks into a meadow, finds the ox and ropes him around the neck. Everyone wants to capture the ox and attain kensho. But Zen Master Seung Sahn teaches that if we rope the ox too soon there is a danger that the ox might over-

power us. As we do hard training our energy grows and our centers get much stronger. However, our karmic demons are also quietly growing more powerful during the process. Therefore it is important to watch our intentions and desires very carefully. But nearly all Zen students think a lot about enlightenment and have a powerful desire to capture their ox. In this fourth picture the man pulls one direction; the ox pulls another. He has some insight, but his karma and thinking mind are still present.

V. Taming the Ox



In the fifth picture, the man walks down the road, leading the ox behind him with a loose rein that is attached to the nostrils of the ox. Some teachers regard this as the quintessential ox-herding picture. The ox is now basically tame, but still requires diligent attention. This is like a famous anecdote about

Zen Master Joju and his teacher Master Nam Cheon.

One day Nam Cheon saw an apprentice monk pouring hot water into the tubs for baths and said to the monk, “Don’t forget to bathe the cow.” This really confused the monk: “Bathe the cow? I don’t understand.” So later that day when Joju returned to the temple the monk asked him, “I was pouring hot water into the tubs and Master Nam Cheon said to me, ‘Don’t forget to bathe the cow.’ I don’t understand. Has he gone crazy? What is he talking about?”

Joju said, “Don’t worry. I will check this out.” Joju went to Nam Cheon’s door. Bang, bang, bang.

“Come in.”

Joju said, “I understand that you’ve been talking about bathing a cow.”

Nam Cheon replied, “That’s right. What are you going to do about it?”

Joju went over, inserted two fingers into the Master’s nostrils and started leading him down the hall towards the baths.

Nam Cheon cried, “Not so rough! Not so rough!”

If our self-cultivation is natural and we remain awake and focused like Joju then the ox is already following us down the path.

VI. Riding the Ox Home



In the sixth picture the man is riding the ox back home while playing a flute. There is no longer any need to hold on to the rein. This means that the five sense organs are pure and the sixth consciousness is functioning without hindrances. We begin to perceive that our everyday experiences are, indeed, the content of an enlightened mind. However, the ox is still present. There is still some small idea of attainment present.

VII. Ox Lost, Man Remaining



In the seventh picture the man is sitting on a rock, but the ox is now gone. Perhaps the ox is off sleeping somewhere but it does not concern the man. This is quite different from the earlier pictures when he was searching for an undiscovered ox. In some versions of the pictures the man is a tiny figure in a panoramic landscape, but, however insignificant, he is still there.

Once there was a great Aiki-jujitsu master who after many years gave teaching transmission to his senior student. He said, "Now you will teach and I will remain in the office, and if you need me, sometimes I will come out and help you." The students of the dojo had a big celebration that night and drank a lot of rice wine.

Quite late in the evening the new head teacher led the other students back towards the dojo. They all had a little too much to drink so they weren't paying careful attention. The group walked around a corner and came up close behind a mule that was standing in the street. The mule kicked at the teacher. This new teacher did a spectacular roll, right over the rear end of the mule, and landed on his feet in a perfect fighting posture.

The students all shouted, "Oh, wonderful! We never saw our old teacher do anything this incredible." They could not wait to tell the master the next morning how correct he was to give transmission to his senior student. But the next day when the master heard the story he became very angry, stripped the transmission designation from the head teacher's uniform, and said to him, "You are not ready to be a master. You must become a student once again."

No one understood the Master's anger. Then he said, "Come with me, I will show you the correct action in this situation with a mule!" He led the students down the street until he found the mule. As the master got about four feet from the mule's rear end he walked around him in a big circle and continued quietly down the street. Then his students understood.

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This is very high class teaching — be fully present and don't make anything. If one is awake, then he should never get so close to the rear end of a mule that he is able to be kicked. So making anything is a big mistake. All ideas of attainment must melt away. The ox must disappear — that is the meaning of the seventh picture.

VIII. No Ox, No Man



The eighth picture is just an empty circle, the circle that has been the frame for the first seven pictures. Pictures three through seven all are concerned with the realm between "thinking I" and the attainment of the essence of this picture, which is sunyata or emptiness. In this picture there is no subject and no object, the

man and the ox have both disappeared. But there is also no idea of negating the existence of the man or the ox. All opposites dissolve into the ground of being. In our school we call this the attainment of first enlightenment. But as long as we have any conceptualizations about what enlightenment might be like, or notions about ourselves as unusual men or women its attainment remains a thousand miles away.

This is the mind that Te Shan found when he travelled to south China to check out the Ch'an teachers. On the road he met an old woman who was selling rice cakes and she said to him, "I see that you are a student of the Diamond Sutra. If you can answer one question for me I'll give you free all of the rice cakes that you want, but if you cannot answer me then you are a fraud and must go away." He said to her, "I am the Master of the Diamond Sutra. Ask me anything that you like."

She asked him, "The Diamond Sutra says that past mind is not attainable, future mind is not attainable, and present mind is not attainable. If this is true then what kind of mind will you use to eat your rice cakes?" He was stuck and had no idea how to reply. Te Shan was a great scholar and thought that he was going to come south and expose the Ch'an masters as fakers. But instead some old woman had "hit" him. And he had no idea how to answer or what to do. We are told that he wandered aimlessly until he found the residence of Ch'an Master Lung Tan. They talked long into the night and we might imagine how Te Shan was trying to justify himself to the Master who listened patiently. Finally when Te Shan's mind was completely stuck and he was totally frustrated, Lung Tan said to him, "Why don't you take the hut at the end of the path and get some rest."

Te Shan went out into the night and discovered that it was pitch black. He went back into the Master's hut and said, "I can't see anything outside."

The Master said, "No problem. Wait here."

Lung Tan lit a candle and handed it to Te Shan. Just as Te Shan was about to take his first step into the darkness, Lung Tan

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blew out the candle.

PA! Everything became completely open and Te Shan attained this mind without subject, without object, not empty, not full — an experience of unbounded openness. In our school we call this “without like this.” Please note that pictures three through eight all are illustrative of the attainment of this first enlightenment experience, which the Heart Sutra calls Nirvana. For most of us, connecting in this way with the ground of our being requires a long seasoning process involving years of diligent practice.

But this is still only the eighth picture.

IX. Returning to the Source



In the ninth picture there is no man, but a beautiful landscape returns. White clouds pass in front of blue mountains; spring comes and the grass grows by itself; trees grow up and water flows down. This picture means that everything in this universe is already completely expressing its inherent

Buddha nature. And our sense organs are capable of revealing this truth to us moment by moment.

What we see, smell, hear, taste, and touch is the complete truth. The Heart Sutra names this state Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, perfect unexcelled truth. In our school we call this condition “only like this.” Buddha sat under the tree in a samadhi of unbounded openness, perceived the particularity of the morning star and attained this mind, which we call original enlightenment. That is the essence of the ninth picture.

X. In Town with Helping Hands




But one last step remains. Our school especially emphasizes the tenth picture throughout our entire training. In the last picture the man appears again, but now he is older, bald and a little heavy. He is in the middle of the city with children all around, and he is like Hotei, passing out Dharma presents to

these baby Bodhisattvas.

This is final enlightenment and it is not special in the way that most of us conceive when we begin our Zen journey. This picture teaches us that we are to return to the existential world. But we return with a simple, clear and unattached mind that focuses on perceiving our correct relationship and correct situation in each moment. If we practice unceasingly with that intention then our actions will become generous, spontaneous, creative, effortless and compassionate. This is the true meaning of Zen and it is the same as Nam Cheon’s everyday mind or Taoism’s wu wei (not doing). Our school calls this condition “just like this.”

I’ll conclude as I began, with another story about my son. Last year at Easter was the first time that he understood what a holiday was, and he had a grand old time. My wife is really into holiday celebrations, so she had presents for the kids and she hid eggs all around the yard and in the house. It was the first time that he had experienced anything like this, so his eyes were as big as saucers all morning. In the afternoon I noticed him in his room, playing with his new toys and singing to himself. As I listened closely I heard that he was singing to himself over and over, “Thank you, rabbit. Thank you, rabbit.” He had this completely open, generous kind of mind. And that is the meaning of the tenth picture and the essential meaning of Zen — “just like this” moment by moment for 10,000 years we must try, try, try to keep this clear, generous and open Bodhisattva spirit.

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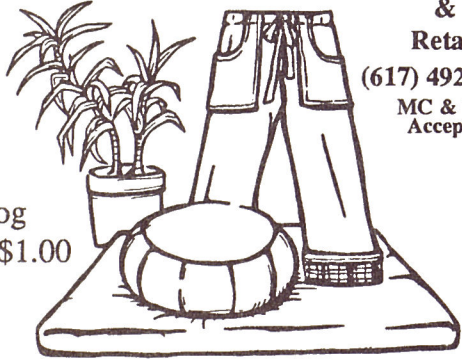


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