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Reviewing the Path of Zen
The Ten Oxherding Pictures

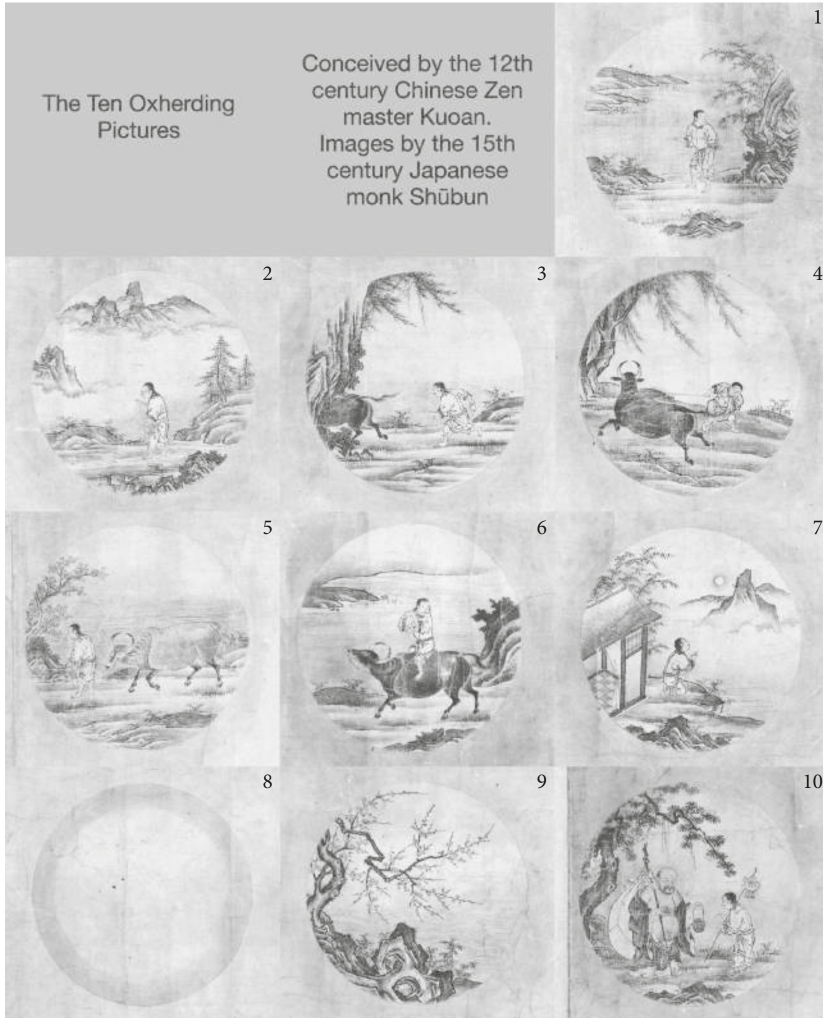

Figure 24.1 The Ten Oxherding Pictures of Zen

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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197573686.003.0024

In order to reflect on the path of Zen as a whole, in this concluding chapter I will comment on a classic and beloved text of the tradition: *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*.[1] The text consists of a set of ten pictures together with a title, a preface, and a poem appended to each one. The pictures are shown here in the order of left to right, with rows proceeding from top to bottom. Here are the titles and a brief description of each picture:

1. *Searching for the Ox*: A young man is walking in search of the ox, unsure of where to look.
2. *Seeing Its Traces*: The man has now found and is following the footprints of the ox.
3. *Seeing the Ox*: The man sees the ox, or at least part of it.
4. *Catching the Ox*: The man has tethered the ox and is struggling to control it.
5. *Taming the Ox*: The ox has become docile and is being gently led by the man.
6. *Returning Home Riding the Ox*: The man is riding atop the ox, leisurely playing a flute.
7. *Ox Forgotten, Person Abides*: The ox has disappeared and the man sits outside a mountain hut.
8. *Person and Ox Both Forgotten*: An empty circle.
9. *Returning to the Root, Back to the Source*: A tree in bloom by a stream.
10. *Entering the Town with Outstretched Hands*: A joyful old sage, with a large belly and a large sack slung over his shoulder, reaches out offering something in a gourd to a younger man. (In some renditions, only the older sage appears.)

The original pictures and poems were composed by the twelfth-century Chinese Zen master Kuoan Shiyuan. The general introduction and the prefaces to each picture were written by Kuoan's successor, Ziyuan. Kuoan and Ziyuan belonged to the Linji School, which became the Rinzai School in Japan.

Kuoan's original pictures no longer exist, but over the centuries many artists have recreated them. The most famous rendition is that of the fifteenth-century Japanese artist Tenshō Shūbun, who established the Japanese tradition of ink wash painting. Shūbun was a monk at Shōkokuji, the monastery where I practice in Kyoto. His rendition was the favorite of my teacher, Ueda Shizuteru, who is renowned for his philosophical interpretations of *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*.[2]

Curiously, Kuoan's *Ten Oxherding Pictures* did not become popular in China. Instead, another, slightly earlier version of oxherding pictures by Puming, who was probably a Caodong (Jp. Sōtō) Zen master, became the most popular version in China and also in Korea.[3] Later I'll discuss some of the major

differences between these two versions. In fact, a number of different versions of oxherding pictures were created by Chinese Zen masters starting in the eleventh century.[4]

It seems that at this point in the development of the Zen tradition, there was felt a need to reflect on the entire path of Zen practice. Of course, discussions and depictions of stages of the path (Sk. *marga*) had already long been a part of the Buddhist tradition in India and elsewhere in Asia. In Tibet, there is a series of pictures that uses an elephant rather than an ox.[5] It starts with a monk chasing after an elephant that is being led by a monkey, and later a rabbit appears on its back. The elephant represents the mind, the monkey represents restlessness, and the rabbit represents lethargy. Eventually, the elephant is tamed and the monkey and rabbit disappear. As happens with the ox in Puming's version of the oxherding pictures, the color of the elephant gradually changes from black to white, representing a progressive purification of the mind. This is also the case in the version of oxherding pictures by Qingjiu, a version that Ziyuan ambivalently critiques in his introduction to Kuoan's version.[6]

In Zen, the mind is thought to be *originally* pure, and the point of practice is to *suddenly awaken* to this original purity underneath the coverings of deluding afflictions, rather than to *gradually purify* the mind of them. Doctrinally speaking, Zen has distinguished itself from other Buddhist schools that teach a path of gradual enlightenment by insisting on this sudden nature of enlightenment. Actually, in the eighth and ninth centuries there was heated debate within Zen between the Northern School's doctrine of gradual enlightenment and the Southern School's doctrine of sudden enlightenment.[7] In the end, the Southern School won out and the Northern School died out. Some eminent Zen masters—most notably the ninth-century Chinese Huayan and Zen master Zongmi and the twelfth-century founder of Korean Zen, Chinul—developed a synthetic doctrine of "sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation."[8] Yet, ever since sudden enlightenment became the orthodox teaching of Zen, many Zen masters have been somewhat hesitant to speak of stages on the path of Zen.

However, the best Zen masters past and present—including those who composed the various versions of the oxherding pictures—have realized that it is important not to fall into the trap of positing an overly simplistic dichotomy between a gradual path and sudden enlightening experiences. On the one hand, a momentary flash of insight can become nothing more than a fading memory if it is not deepened and developed through post-enlightenment practice. And, on the other hand, a gradual path can, after all, lead to sudden—often unexpected and unforeseeable—breakthroughs.

In the case of Kuoan's pictures, the biggest breakthrough comes in picture 8, when everything suddenly disappears, leaving only an empty circle. Before that,

in picture 7, the ox suddenly disappears. Since the ox did not come on the scene until picture 3, which depicts the first breakthrough moment, this means that the ox is actually pictured in only four of Kuoan's *Ten Oxherding Pictures*. This contrasts with Puming's ten pictures, in which the ox appears in all but the last, the empty circle. Also, whereas in Puming's version the color of the ox gradually changes from black to white, and whereas in yet another version by a master named Fuyin the ox turns—or, as he says, "returns"—from white to black,[9] the ox is always black in Kuoan's version.

What Does the Ox Represent?

"Hold on," you might be thinking. "Why are we talking about an ox and oxherding in the first place? I thought this book was about Zen, not tending livestock!" Actually, you are more likely thinking: "I know that the ox must be a metaphor for something, but for what?"

The standard answer is that the ox represents our true self, our Buddha-nature. We'll have to complicate this answer later on, but we can begin with the understanding that the quest the oxherder embarks on in picture 1 is a search for the true self; it is a journey of self-realization. The oxherder is *the seeking self*, while the ox is *the self that is sought*. In other words, the *deluded self* wants to awaken to its *true self*, and so sets out in search of it.

The oxherder finds footprints of the ox in picture 2, and then first catches a glimpse of it in picture 3. In the next three pictures, he catches the ox, tames it, and rides it home. We'll discuss the really strange stuff that happens after that later. To begin with, let's think about why the true self is pictured as an ox. Perhaps, as some commentators have suggested, the fact that cows are sacred animals in Hindu India is relevant. Yet, more directly relevant is surely the fact that taming an unruly ox is used as a simile for the practice of meditation in a number of early Buddhist sutras as well as in earlier Zen texts.[10]

Ueda points out that the calmness and confidently plodding nature of the ox makes it a good metaphor for the meditative mind. Moreover, an ox's great strength can become dangerous if one upsets and loses control of it, just as the untamed mind is unwieldy and destructive.[11] We should also bear in mind the vital role that oxen played in the agricultural life of China at the time. A farmer's ox was his prized possession. To lose one's ox, after all, would be tantamount to losing one's livelihood. And so, *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* begins with the oxherder realizing that he has lost his most important belonging; he has lost sight of the very source that sustains his life.

Pictures 1 and 2: Starting to Search, Finding Traces

As we discussed in Chapter 2, the spiritual path in general, and the path of Zen in particular, begins with waking up to the problem of self-alienation, to the fact that we do not truly know ourselves. In his preface to the first picture, Ziyuan tells us that we have turned our backs on our own true self; we have covered over our own originally enlightened mind. Awakening to the fact of our delusion is the crucial first step, and it is with that step that *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* begins. In the first picture, 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 now he knows that he is lost, he has become a seeker.

In a later Japanese version of oxherding pictures, the seventeenth-century Sōtō monk Geppa added two more pictures at the beginning, entitling them "Arousing Aspiration" and "Leaving Home."[12] These preliminary pictures dramatize and stress the importance of first waking up to the problem of self-alienation and setting out in search of the true self.

Although in the first of Kuoan's pictures the oxherder has already set out in search of the ox, he does not yet know where to search. He does not know which path to take, or even in which direction to proceed. This is why, in picture 1, the oxherder's body is facing one direction, yet he is looking over his shoulder in the other direction. When we set out on the spiritual journey, we might be highly motivated to find our true self, but we are probably not sure how to go about searching for it, or even exactly what it is that we are searching for.

And so, we read a lot of books and listen to a lot of teachers. Finally, we come across some texts and teachings that ring true. Reading these texts and listening to these teachings, we sense that they are speaking to something inside us; they begin to stir awake a slumbering self-awareness deep within. We are, in fact, always able to *appreciate* more than we are yet able to really *understand*. Just as we can appreciate good food, art, and music without being much of a chef, artist, or musician ourselves, we can appreciate good spiritual teachings without being a spiritual teacher ourselves. When reading or listening to authentic spiritual teachings, we may have the distinct feeling that they are illuminating a path that we should follow in order to better understand ourselves. Such texts and teachings are represented by the *footprints* of the ox, which in picture 2 the oxherder has now found and is eagerly following. These texts and teachings are not the ox itself, but they are evidence that the ox exists, they tell us something about its nature, and they lead us in the right direction to find it ourselves.

In Ziyuan's preface to picture 2, we read: "Relying on the sutras, you understand the principles; by studying the teachings, you come to know the traces left

behind." Traces of what? Traces left behind by those who have awakened to the true self. These traces are tracks that you can follow, tracks that tell you which way to go on the path toward self-awakening. Ziyuan tells us quite specifically what these traces, the texts, teach: "It is now clear that the many vessels are composed of a single metal, and that the body of the ten thousand things is your self." In other words, through reading texts and listening to teachings, 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.

In Chapter 8, we saw how the ancient Hindu sage Uddalaka made a similar point using the simile of many pots made of the same clay, or different nuggets made of the same gold, or different tools made out of the same iron.[13] Later, in China, the Huayan Buddhist philosopher Fazang uses the analogy of a statue of a golden lion. The shapes that make up the figure of the lion are like the myriad forms of reality, whereas the pervasive gold is like the formless emptiness they all share in common.[14] A modern physicist might say that the pervasive "clay" or "gold" of reality is the quantum field of fluctuations of interchangeable mass and energy. In any case, as Ziyuan makes clear, it is crucial that one realizes that we are not just talking about a unifying field of *external* or *objective* reality. In other words, it is crucial to realize that "the body of the ten thousand things is your self." Here Ziyuan is paraphrasing a famous saying of the seminal Chinese Buddhist philosopher Sengzhao: "Heaven and Earth and I share the same root. The myriad things and I are of the same body."[15]

This is what the oxherder has come to understand at the stage of picture 2. And yet, this remains for him an abstract intellectual understanding. Recall the three levels of wisdom we discussed in Chapter 3: received wisdom, intellectual wisdom, and experiential wisdom. Although it may make sense to you that all things are made up of the same one reality—that there is a unity to the universe and that you too are part and parcel of this unity—this may still be an intellectual idea in your head, not a holistic and thus transformational awakening experience.

In his preface to picture 2, Ziyuan says that at this stage the oxherder is still not able to "distinguish right from wrong" or to "differentiate true and false." This suggests that an intellectual understanding of the unity of the universe all too easily falls into a one-sided grasp of oneness, an abstract conception of a One reality that is opposed to the Many things of the world, a uniform sameness that obliterates rather than makes room for differences—including differences that call on us, in various concrete contexts, to distinguish right from wrong and true from false. In Chapter 8, we saw Nanquan point to a flower in order to wake a scholar up from his dream-like infatuation with an abstract idea of oneness. That scholar was perhaps like the young man in picture 2.

The ultimate experiential awakening to a true understanding of oneness is depicted in picture 8, the empty circle, together with pictures 9 and 10. The oneness of the circle is an openness that makes way for, makes room for, the myriad things and people of the world, which indeed reappear within the open circle in the last two pictures.

Picture 3: Glimpsing the True Self

We have gotten way ahead of ourselves. As we will see, ultimate awakening is depicted in the trilogy of the last three pictures. Yet initial awakening—one's first experience of *kenshō* or seeing into the true nature of the self—takes place in picture 3, which shows the young man catching a glimpse of the ox. When the oxherder first lays eyes on his lost ox, he is overjoyed. This experience can be quite dramatic. As the text suggests, it often occurs in an extraordinary experience of the most ordinary of things, like hearing a pebble strike a stalk of bamboo, or seeing a peach blossom, to mention two famous examples. 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. The most famous example is Shakyamuni's breakthrough upon seeing the morning star. At that enlightening moment, according to Yamada Mumon Rōshi, Shakyamuni must have thought, "I am shining!"[16]

In his preface to picture 3, Ziyuan uses the metaphor we discussed in Chapter 8: it is like tasting salt dissolved in water. The salt cannot be seen from the outside, but if we dive in and open our mouths, we taste it clearly and we taste it everywhere. If we open our hearts and minds to everything around us, we cease to experience ourselves as separate from the rest of reality and empathetically identify with everything.

Yet, at this stage we have merely glimpsed the true self. We have not yet erased the dualistically deluded ego and overcome self-alienation, which means that, despite the dramatic nature of this unusual experience—indeed, because it remains an unusual experience—we easily slip back into viewing ourselves as separate from everything else. The journey home has just begun. Having found the ox, the oxherder must now catch and tame it.

Pictures 4–6: Catching and Taming the Ox-Mind

The oxherder catches the ox in picture 4, but now there is a struggle taking place. In Kuoan's appended verse we read: "With your last bit of spiritual strength you take hold of the ox; yet its mind is headstrong, its body powerful, and it won't

quickly or easily be broken." Ziyuan's preface to this picture states: "More stubborn than ever and still wild, if you wish to tame it you must use your whip."

At this point we have to repeat the question: what does the ox represent? We started by saying that it represents our true self, our Buddha-nature. Indeed, this is what almost all traditional and modern commentaries say. And yet, we have just seen the text of picture 4 refer to the ox as "more stubborn than ever and still wild," such that it needs to be "broken" and "tamed." Does it make sense to say such things about the true self or Buddha-nature?

Ueda says no. He says that, although the text attributes stubbornness and wildness to the ox, really these are characteristics of the oxherder at this stage. In fact, Ueda says, if you look closely at Shūbun's rendition of picture 4, it is unclear who is trying to flee from whom, and who is pulling whom. Is it perhaps the ox that is pulling the still resistant oxherder onto the homeward-bound path of awakening?[17]

If we stick with the standard interpretation of the ox as representing the true self, this does seem to be the best way to view what is going on here. However, there is another compelling interpretation given by the modern Chinese Zen master Sheng-yen. He suggests that "the ox represents the mind and its activities." As a matter of fact, the ox is referred to in many commentaries as the "ox-mind," and it is not a stretch to understand this to mean the mind in all its *unenlightened* as well as *enlightened* activities.

If we understand the ox to represent the mind in *all* its activities, writes Sheng-yen, "on the one hand, the ox may be seen as the great white ox of enlightened Buddha-nature. Seeking, discovering, taming, and riding the ox home would then signify the process of awakening to and actualizing one's true nature to the point where it is fully integrated with all aspects of life." "On the other hand," he goes on to say, "the ox is characterized as wild and unruly, and must be forcibly restrained from wandering off into the weeds of desire and deluded thinking. This image seems more suggestive of the mind of vexation than the mind of enlightenment."[18] We need not choose between these views of the ox, says Sheng-yen, since it is the same mind that can be either deluded about or enlightened to its own true nature.

This interpretation has the merit of retrieving an instructive aspect of Puming's and other versions of oxherding pictures that show the color of the ox changing from black to white over the course of the training. It is the same ox, the same mind, but its underlying purity is uncovered as the deluding afflictions are removed. A later version of the oxherding pictures portrays the ox as white from start to finish.[19] This was evidently a critique of the apparent *gradualness* of versions such as Puming's and a reminder that the Buddha-nature is pure from the beginning; one just needs to *suddenly* wake up to its purity. Fair enough, but a merit of the oxherding pictures, in all their versions, is arguably that they

reconcile the sudden and gradual approaches to enlightenment. As Ōtsu Rekidō Rōshi, a modern Rinzai Zen master and former abbot of Shōkokuji monastery, puts it: "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."[20]

To be sure, there are dramatic breakthroughs, experiences of *kenshō*, which fundamentally change one's life and one's understanding of one's self. In Kuoan's version, as we have noted, such *kenshō* experiences occur first in picture 3, next in picture 7, and ultimately in picture 8, which opens the door to and includes, as we will see, pictures 9 and 10. And yet, it is also undeniable that there is a *path* to be practiced and stages to be gone through. After all, one should not just wait, but should do all that one can to prepare for enlightening breakthroughs to happen. When they do happen, they will certainly surprise you. They may appear like bolts of lightning that suddenly come out of nowhere, rather than like raindrops patiently collected in a pail. Some paintings of picture 3 portray this well when they have the ox suddenly appear to one side of or even behind the oxherder on his path of practice. Shakyamuni Buddha was always clear that Nirvana is "unproduced," and so it is not the product or result of the path. The path leads one to discover Nirvana—and to realize that it was always already there.[21]

I like to compare the relation between methodical practice and sudden breakthroughs to walking out onto the thin ice of a frozen lake and then suddenly falling through the ice. Aiming for the center of the frozen lake, we methodically take one step after another. Aiming for enlightenment, we regularly engage in meditation and other forms of practice. Yet, when the moment comes and the ice breaks, we suddenly realize that the water of the Buddha-nature was always right underfoot. Although the ice may be the thinnest at the center of the lake, the real goal is not to reach the center, but rather to break through the ice and plunge into the water. This can potentially happen anywhere at any time. However, a methodical practice of walking toward the center of the lake is the best way to cultivate the conditions for a sudden breakthrough to occur.

And so, we need to diligently practice; we need to patiently train the mind, tend the ox. Four centuries before the various versions of oxherding pictures were composed, the eighth-century Chinese Zen master Mazu is said to have asked a monk tending the fires in the kitchen what he was doing. The monk replied, "Tending the ox." "How does one do that?" asked Mazu. "When he strays into the grass, I pull his nose back onto the path," the monk answered. "You really do know how to tend the ox!" Mazu replied.[22] This precursor dialogue would seem to support versions of the oxherding pictures that portray a gradual whitening of the ox. However, as we saw in Chapter 11, Mazu is also known for being instructed by his teacher, Nanyue, that one can no more become a Buddha by methodically sitting in meditation than one can make a mirror by polishing a tile.

Kuoan's version of the oxherding pictures has the great merit of clearly depicting both the gradual and sudden aspects of training and awakening. Accordingly, the ambiguity of the symbolism of the ox in Kuoan's pictures may well have been intentional. This ambiguity is especially at play in the middle stages of the path—the stages depicted in pictures 4, 5, and 6—where it appears that the practitioner is both taming and being tamed by the ox. In picture 4, we witness an intensely ambivalent struggle. In picture 5, the oxherder is leading the now docile ox. Yet, in picture 6, he is leisurely riding on the back of the ox, playing a tune and letting the ox take him wherever he wishes, for wherever that is will be home. Effort is giving way to effortlessness as practice becomes a way of life.

In the many years it generally takes a Zen practitioner to go from stage 4 to stage 6, the great effort of practicing-to-become-enlightened transforms into the effortlessly efficacious practice-of-enlightenment. This enlightened effortlessness is wonderfully depicted in the popularly painted picture 6. Needless to say, this is not a matter of lazily zoning out, but rather a matter of living fully engaged in the Zone of Zen.

Picture 7: Forget About the Ox, Remember Your Self

A major—though still not complete—breakthrough happens in picture 7, which is entitled "Ox Forgotten, Person Abides." In this picture, the ox has disappeared, and the oxherder sits alone outside a mountain hut, at peace with himself and the world. Ziyuan's preface to this picture begins with these words: "The Truth is not two; the ox was just posited as a provisional topic." The Truth, the Dharma, is the ultimate truth about reality that Buddhist teachings are meant to express. For Zen, this is the true self, the self that understands itself to exist as a part of—rather than to subsist apart from—the worldwide web of reality.

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, as the title of picture 9 announces. At that stage, we have really gotten over ourselves; we have gotten our egos totally out of the way so that the myriad things of the world can shine forth in all their splendor.

But at the stage of picture 7, we have not yet gotten that far. At this stage, we have forgotten the ox, but not yet the self. Nevertheless, this picture represents an important breakthrough: the realization that the ox was, after all, just a finger pointing at the moon. Once we know what it was pointing at, we can put the finger down, and indeed we should put the finger down so that it does not block our view of the moon. In Shūbun's depiction of picture 7, a man on a mountaintop is directly beholding the moon, a traditional symbol of enlightenment.

Ziyuan uses another traditional metaphor to make the point: it is like the fisherman realizing that what he is really after is the fish, not the fancy new fishing net he recently acquired. We often get so wrapped up in our collection of spiritual paraphernalia that we forget the spiritual practice it is meant to facilitate. Like a camper more interested in browsing the latest camping gear inside a store than in actually going out into the great outdoors, we spend a lot of time and money shopping online for imported incense and exquisite images. Such paraphernalia can, of course, inspire and facilitate a lot of real practice—but only if we do not mistake the net for the fish.

In picture 7, the 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 one object alongside others. One must, as the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen 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.[23]

The ninth-century Chinese Zen master Linji admonishes his students for objectifying the mind and looking for it outside themselves: "Turn your own light inward upon yourselves! A man of old said: 'Yajñadatta [thought he had] lost his head, but when his seeking mind came to rest, he was at ease.' "[24] Linji is referring here to a story that appears in the *Shurangama Sutra*, which tells of a man who fell in love with the image of his face in a mirror, but then became distraught when he found that, without the mirror, he could see the rest of his body but not his head; and so he went madly about seeking his "lost head."[25]

The lesson is that we paradoxically find ourselves only when we realize that the mind that seeks is not some*thing* that can be found. That is like using a torch to look for fire, or like using a flashlight to look for a flashlight. I've never done those silly things, but I have looked all over for my glasses before realizing that I was wearing them. The eighth-century Chinese Zen master Baizhang "compared the search for enlightenment to searching for an ox while riding on its back."[26] And the thirteenth-century Chinese Zen master Wuxue Zuyuan exclaims: "It's you who are the Buddha, but you just won't see— / Why go riding on an ox to search for an ox?!"[27]

Ueda points out that although in the first six pictures the ox represents the true self, it nevertheless represents the true self *from the standpoint of the deluded, self-alienated self*.[28] The struggle between the oxherder and the ox is a struggle with and within ourselves.[29] As we progress from picture 4 to picture 6, the dualism between the oxherder and the ox is gradually overcome. But it is only in picture 7 that the oxherder is able to dispense with the image of the ox altogether and just be himself. No longer needing to be an oxherder—a seeker or a tamer—he sits alone at peace with himself and the world.

Pictures 8–10: The Tricycle Trilogy of the True Self

One can imagine the story ending with picture 7. Indeed, some spiritual paths do end with a sage at peace with himself on a mountaintop. Such solitary sages leave the world behind or, at least, leave it as it is. For Zen, this is to have climbed to the top of a hundred-foot pole and yet to be unable or unwilling to leap off—to leap, that is, back into the world filled with dust as well as flowers.[30]

It is worth noting here that the ultimate temptation Siddhartha experienced came *after* his enlightenment, after, that is, he sat at the base of the Bodhi Tree for seven days "experiencing the happiness of liberation." Mara—the personification of temptation—said to him, "If you have discovered the path, / The secure way leading to the Deathless, / Be off and walk that path alone; / What's the point of instructing others?"[31] Compounding this temptation to travel a solo path and stay on the mountaintop of Nirvana alone, the newly awakened Buddha thought: "If I were to teach the Dhamma [Sk. Dharma], others would not understand me, and that would be troublesome for me. . . . Those dyed in lust, wrapped in darkness will never discern this abstruse Dhamma which goes against the worldly stream, subtle, deep, and difficult to see." Yet at that point the god Brahma—here symbolizing the compassion that accompanies wisdom—pleaded with the Buddha, saying: "There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are wasting through not hearing the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma." Listening to this plea and "out of compassion for beings," the Buddha rose and began his forty-five-year teaching career.[32] These texts from the Pali Canon foreshadow the development of the Mahayana Bodhisattva ideal and its critique of the so-called Hinayana ideal of the Arhat who seeks his own salvation and leaves the world behind. As Karen Armstrong puts it, "The Dhamma demanded that [the Buddha] return to the marketplace and involve himself in the affairs of a sorrowing world."[33]

There is yet another danger lurking at the stage depicted by picture 7 of *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*—namely, the danger of mistaking an ironically inflated and spiritually self-satisfied ego for the true self.[34] We have all heard of, and some of us have met, holier-than-thou sages who have succumbed to the temptation to get stuck at this lofty stage, losing the luster of their limited enlightenment by metaphorically tying themselves up with—if not literally wearing around their necks—golden chains. Yet Zen spirituality truly begins with the overcoming of this state of being stuck in the clouds of spiritual transcendence. Real Zen is found only where the path up the mountain doubles as a path down the mountain. The path of Zen is, in truth, the ceaseless circulation of the upward and downward journey, the never-ending to and fro of ascending and descending. The enlightened and enlightening figure in picture 10 models this as he commutes between his rustic hut and the bustling city.

This path of the most profound spiritual circulation is portrayed in the last three pictures taken together. As Ueda explains, whereas pictures 1–7 tell the story of a linear progression to higher and higher levels of self-realization, the last three pictures are all on the same level. The true self is not simply portrayed in any single one of these last three pictures; the true self is the endless movement, the ceaseless circulation among them.[35]

It is possible to relate the last three pictures to a Zen interpretation of the doctrine of the Three Bodies of the Buddha discussed in Chapter 10.[36] The empty circle of picture 8 would indicate the formless Truth Body, understood as the originally pure mirror-mind that is capable of nondually embracing and illuminating all the forms of the world. The peaceful freedom and naturalness of the stream flowing and tree blooming "of their own accord" in picture 9 would present an utterly open-minded experience of these illuminated phenomena as a thoroughly this-worldly conception of the Enjoyment Body. And the compassionate activity depicted in picture 10 would present the Manifestation Body tirelessly and joyously working on behalf of liberating all sentient beings.

It is also possible to understand the last three pictures as each foregrounding one or two of the Four Immeasurable Mindsets of lovingkindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity (introduced in Chapter 5). The empty circle of picture 8 presents the absolute evenness of the mind of equanimity, the mirror-mind that sees the equality of everything and everyone such as they are without attachment or aversion, without bias or prejudice. A circle is indeed defined by the fact that every point on the circumference is equidistant from the center. Yet in this case the center is everywhere and the non-egocentric heart-mind is the open circle's equanimous awareness. Such non-egocentric awareness enables an empathetically joyful experience of all the natural beauty and wondrous interconnections of the world, as depicted in picture 9. It also opens the no longer egocentric heart-mind to all the psychological and spiritual as well as physical sufferings of sentient beings, and thus the doorway to an engagement in the world motivated by lovingkindness and compassion, as illustrated in picture 10. It could also be said that all four of these Immeasurable Mindsets are gathered in picture 10, where the enlightened and enlightening figure, without attachment or aversion, compassionately liberates others from suffering and joyously celebrates with them the wonders of living a life of naturalness within human society, which is in turn situated within the wider community of the natural world and, ultimately, within the empty circle of the Buddha-nature, the formless source and abode—the Source-Field—of all forms.

Having indicated their interconnectedness, let us now focus on each of these last three pictures, highlighting in turn one wheel of the tricycle trilogy of the true self.

Picture 8: The Empty Circle: Infinite Possibility, Freedom, and Openness

"First, the Great Death; after cutting off completely, then coming back to life."[37] This classic Zen saying is portrayed in the last three pictures. Picture 8 is entitled "Person and Ox Both Forgotten." It is just an empty circle, not a picture of anything at all. It is a great negation, an absolute emptying, of all forms. Ōtsu Rōshi relates picture 8 to what the ninth-century Chinese Zen master Linji calls "taking away both person and surroundings," dropping off both subject and object—in this case, forgetting both the searching self and the searched-for Buddha-nature.[38]

It is said that there are at least a hundred ways to draw this circle, and countless ways to understand it.[39] While the ways to understand the circle may be infinite, one of those ways is to understand it as a symbol of infinity. Infinity here means infinite possibility, a formlessness pregnant with all possible forms. When I see the empty circle, I see freedom and creative potentiality, the absence of any boundaries and the open source of all innovation. I also see a formless symbol of the open mind of wisdom and the open heart of compassion.

As we discussed in Chapter 21, the Western tradition has tended to associate being with form and form with the good, and so has conditioned us to be horrified by what we see in picture 8 as a vacuum of nothingness, a white hole, as it were, of inert and vacant emptiness. In East Asia, by contrast, the empty circle—or, as it is usually called, "the single circle"—is seen as a sign of perfection, a well-rounded completeness without any jagged edges remaining.[40] In fact, one of the first Western philosophers, Parmenides, spoke of the one true reality as a homogeneous "well-rounded sphere."[41] Yet, in stark contrast to his conception of an unchanging and undifferentiated One, the empty circle of Zen dynamically makes room for the teeming multiplicity of forms.

The empty circle is often drawn so as to leave it open, reminding us that it symbolizes a dynamic Way that never reaches a static completion (see image in Chapter 10). The empty circle can thus be understood and experienced as the creative source as well as the peacefully encompassing abode—the Source-Field—of all the multifarious things we experience. As Ōtsu Rōshi puts it, the "complete nothingness is the originary place from which all thoughts and every kind of knowledge originates," and "the unhindered life of Zen flows in the circulation between" the indivisible nondual essence indicated by picture 8 and the manifestation of the manifold diversity of phenomena portrayed in picture 9.[42]

As we saw in Chapter 8, Zen teaches that "all the universe is one bright pearl." Yet, if we misunderstand the one bright pearl as synonymous with the homogeneous monism of Parmenides's well-rounded sphere, then we are stuck "in the cave of demons on black mountain." Dōgen thus urges us to appreciate not just

the oneness of the one bright pearl of the universe but, at the same time, its "infinite colorations," for "each of the many facets of its radiant variegations contains the merit of the entire universe."[43]

Picture 9: Forms of Nature Within the Formless Circle

Puming's and Qingjiu's versions of the oxherding pictures understandably end with the empty circle. However, according to Kuoan and the Japanese Zen tradition that has cherished his version, those versions stop short of expressing the affirmation of a dynamic and pluralistic world of forms, not to mention the compassionate engagement to which the Zen path ultimately leads. Puming's version goes beyond the stage of forgetting the ox yet keeping the self, but it does not explicitly go beyond depicting the peak experience of letting go of all attachments to forms and enjoying the peace of Nirvana. Kuoan and the Japanese Zen tradition have thus insisted on adding two more pictures—two more steps, as it were, in the round dance of the true self that takes place in a ceaseless movement among pictures 8, 9, and 10.

In terms of the famous couplet of the *Heart Sutra*, picture 8 shows us that "form is emptiness," whereas picture 9 shows us the other side of the same coin, the converse and complementary truth that "emptiness is form." In Zen parlance, whereas picture 8 displays "true emptiness" (Jp. *shinkū*), picture 9 displays "wondrous being" (*myōu*). These two go together since it is precisely because things are empty of independent substantiality that they can be as they truly are in their dynamic interconnectedness. As for picture 10, the modern Rinzai Zen master Akizuki Ryōmin follows D. T. Suzuki in saying that it expresses the "wondrous activity" (*myōyū*) that issues from a realization of the nonduality of true emptiness and wondrous being.[44]

Ueda understands picture 8 in terms of what his predecessors in the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji, call the Place of Absolute Nothingness and the Field of Emptiness. We discussed these ideas in Chapter 21. Ueda himself uses a traditional Mahayana Buddhist expression to say that the circle represents the "Empty Space" (Jp. *kokū*) that allows all form-things to exist in their interrelations and that encompasses all our finitely meaningful worlds.[45] In his German writings Ueda translates this term as *die unendliche Offenheit* (the Infinite Openness) and as *die unendliche Weite* (the Infinite Expanse).[46]

The empty circle makes room for everything. It is always there as the formless background, even though we hardly ever notice it, since our intentional consciousness functions by foregrounding this or that set of forms. Ueda points out that in Kuoan's version of the oxherding pictures, the empty circle was in fact there from the beginning and remains there till the end. All the events before and after picture 8 take place within it, even though, before the inherently

indescribable experience indicated by picture 8, we did not realize this. "In fact," writes Ueda, "from the beginning the true self was portrayed not as the ox but rather, insofar as it was portrayed at all, as the circle." And every determinate thing that appears within this all-embracing empty expanse is, as it were, a "self-determination of the true world of this single circle."[47]

Enlightenment is a matter of waking up to what has always been there. In the first lines of his preface to picture 1, Ziyuan writes: "It has never been lost, why the need to search for it? It is because you have turned your back on your own awakening that you have become alienated from it." We have turned our back on ourselves. We have mistaken ourselves for isolated egos, and as a result have distorted our view of other persons and objects in the world. And so, we needed to turn away from our distorted view of the world and to search for our true self. It was helpful to have an image of the true self—in this case an ox—for a while, but then came the time when it was necessary to let go of this heuristic device.

In picture 7, the seeker found his higher, truer self. But, in picture 8, even that needed to be let go of. No more inner, no more outer, now he can finally just let things be as they are. Picture 9, which simply depicts a mountain stream flowing under a tree in bloom—without an objectified self in sight—shows how it is easiest to do this in nature. It is relatively easy to let beautiful flowers and meandering brooks show themselves in all their natural splendor without getting in their way. As the open heart-mind of the empty circle, the true self formally withdraws from the scene, getting completely out of the way so as to make room for the forms of nature to present themselves. Not only can meditation, the practice of clearing the heart-mind, enable us to appreciate the wonders of nature, but, conversely, as we saw in Chapter 18, appreciating the wonders of nature can enable us to clear the heart-mind and to awaken and cultivate such virtues as freedom and generosity.

Alas, it is much harder to be enlightened, and to enlighten others, amid the hustle and bustle of the human world. It is much easier to forget about one's troubles and to commune with nature on the spacious balcony of a beach house or mountain retreat center than it is to be at peace in—and to bring peace to—a subway car crammed full of stressed-out commuters. Nevertheless, a line from *The Blue Cliff Record* may inspire us to flow with the cool waters of the mountain stream down into the heat of the city: "Peaceful meditation does not require mountains and rivers: when you have extinguished the mind, fire itself is cool."[48]

Picture 10: The Bodhisattva Returns from the Mountaintop to the City Center

Picture 10 shows an old sage coming down from the mountain, returning to the marketplace and (in Shūbun's rendition) greeting a young man. It is a Zen

depiction of the Bodhisattva return to the world to work on behalf of liberating and enlightening others. The figure with outstretched hands who appears in this last picture is a traditional forerunner not only of the modern proponents of Engaged Buddhism, but indeed of all those persons, past and present, who bring the peace they have found to others; of all those who share the wisdom they have attained; of all those who have become vehicles of the great vow to enlighten and liberate all sentient beings. The long journey of the oxherder had reached a premature peak when he, no longer needing the provisional symbol of the ox, became a solitary sage on a mountaintop. In the end, however, his journey leads to a sacrifice of that solitude in order to bring solace to others.

"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.

The enlightened and enlightening figure in picture 10 is traditionally associated with Budai, a tenth-century Chinese Zen monk who was nicknamed the "Laughing Buddha." Known in the West also as the "Happy Buddha," in the East he came to be thought of as a prefiguration of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. As legend has it, Budai was a wandering monk who would give away anything that was given to him. Budai's name literally means "cloth sack," and the sack he carries on a staff slung over his shoulder serves as a kind of clearinghouse for donations. Like us, he owns nothing. Unlike us, he realizes this. He understands that things are given to us so that we may, in turn, give them onward to others.

The Budai-like figure in picture 10 does not make a show of his Bodhisattva blessings. We are told that he "hides his light," concealing his sageness under the dirt and ashes of his service. He has passed through the furnace of the empty circle of picture 8. In his preface to that imageless picture Ziyuan strikingly writes: "Letting go of worldly feelings and emptying out thoughts of holiness, he does not linger where the Buddha is, and he runs quickly past where the Buddha is not."[49] This means that he is neither a fundamentalistic Buddhist nor an iconoclastic nihilist. He has shed all attachment to—and all the trappings of—holiness, and yet he does not make a show of this shedding either. In other words, he has washed off "the stench of Zen" that at some point in our practice we all get and have to get rid of. Like a bird flying across a clear blue sky, he embodies pure Subtraction Zen with no lingering residues of the paraphernalia of parasitic Addition Zen. Yet, neither does he throw away whatever might be useful to others; he makes a show of iconoclasm no more than he clings to iconography.

It should be evident by now that the other side of the coin of Subtraction Zen is Vow-Vehicle Zen. By way of clearing our minds and emptying our hearts of all our attachments and acquisitiveness, we free ourselves up for becoming pure

vehicles of the great Bodhisattva vow to enlighten and liberate all sentient beings. Insight into emptiness is awakening to interconnectedness, and thus the loving heart is opened along with the awakened mind. Such is the nonduality of wisdom and compassion that is the core teaching of Zen Buddhism.

With the ego out of the way, the wise and compassionate Peaceful Wind of the Buddha Way can blow right through us to all those who are affected by our lives. While picture 8—the empty circle of egoless wisdom—presents the pure formless form of Subtraction Zen, picture 10—the circle full of interactivity—depicts the concomitant compassion of Vow-Vehicle Zen. The enlightened and enlightening true self continually commutes between these two sides of the same coin of wisdom/compassion. Absolute detachment opens the door to wholehearted engagement. Freedom from egocentric attachment to any form enables nondualistic interaction with all forms.

In Shūbun's famous rendition, the Budai-like figure in picture 10 is shown with outstretched hands, offering gifts to the young boy in the scene—including, of course, the greatest gift of pointing the boy down the pathway toward his own enlightening journey. He is, as it were, passing the enlightening torch to the next generation of oxherders. The Budai-like figure in picture 10 is a portrayal of the true self. At the same time, the true self is this entire scene. And he knows it. In a clearly self-aware yet utterly unselfconscious manner, he identifies himself not only with his finite form but also, indeed first and foremost, with the open field in which we are all interconnected.

Finding, Forgetting, and Opening the Self

Let us conclude our review of the path of Zen by relating *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* to the key passage from Dōgen's *Genjōkōan* that we discussed at the end of our preview of the path of Zen in Chapter 2:

> To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.
> To study the self is to forget the self.
> To forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things of the world.
> To be enlightened by the myriad things of the world is to let drop off the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others.[50]

The first line can be paired with pictures 1–7: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self." Buddhism is not really about learning doctrines and rituals; it is about coming to "know thyself."

The second line can be paired with picture 8: "To study the self is to forget the self." This is the experience of utterly "dropping off the body-mind," letting go of

all our attachments to the physical things and psychological thoughts we have possessively and egoistically identified ourselves with.

The third line can be paired with picture 9: "To forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things of the world." With the false fabrications of our isolated egos out of the way, the interconnected events of the world can naturally shine forth without egoistic distortion.

Finally, the fourth line can be paired with picture 10: "To be enlightened by the myriad things of the world is to let drop off the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others." No longer thinking of oneself as selfishly separated from others, one inspires others to set out on the path to the same realization. Like the humble sage in picture 10, one not only endlessly continues one's enlightening practice, one also, as Dōgen goes on to say, continually "lays to rest the traces of enlightenment," hiding one's sageness with the dirt and ashes of one's service.

The path of Zen, as depicted in *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*, is, to be sure, an extremely demanding one. It often seems almost as intimidating as it is inspiring. At every stage appears a still higher stage. Beyond every mountain range appears yet another mountain range. And, in the end, if we manage to get that far, the path leads down from the mountains right back to the valley where we started. Passing the torch of the beginner's mind to others, our journey does not end. Only now we realize that the journey itself is the true destination. Now, at last, we are at Home on the Way.