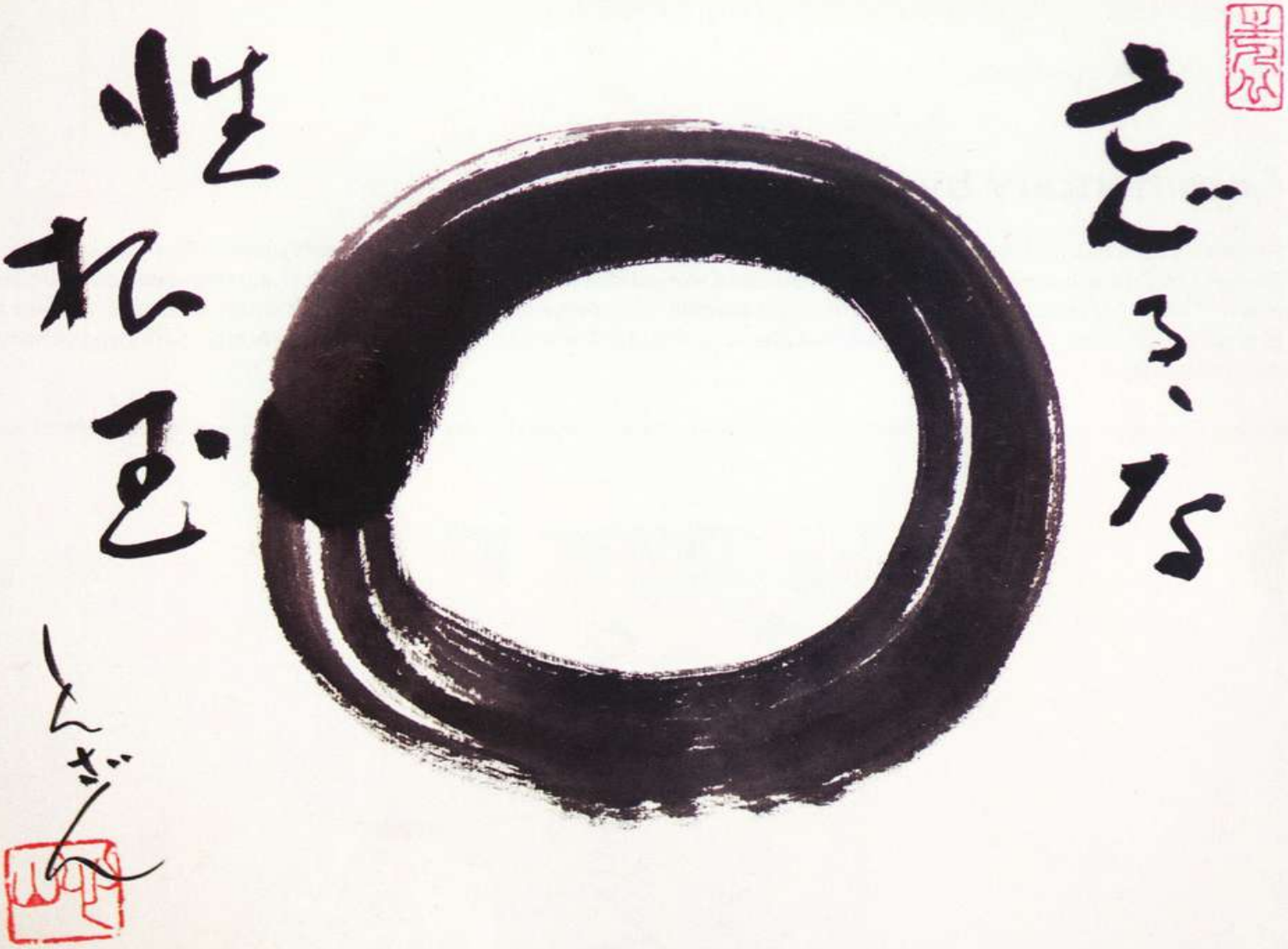
PRACTICAL ZEN

MEDITATION AND BEYOND



Julian Daizan Skinner

Foreword by Shinzan Miyamae

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SINGING
DRAGON
LONDON AND PHILADELPHIA

CHAPTER 10

ROADMAPS FOR YOUR JOURNEY

If you decide to use these practices to set out on a spiritual path, the details of your journey will be unique to you. In many ways it is a road of adventure – perhaps the last great adventure available to us on this earth!

No one can take this journey for you, and sometimes the going can get tough. It is possible to meander along the way and waste time dithering or going off on tangents. Conversely, there are no short cuts.

While walking the way is down to you, a competent teacher will save you time. In addition, you can save time by having the guidance of a roadmap. These roadmaps of the journey of spiritual insight occur in most spiritual traditions. If you look beneath the varying imagery, you'll find they have much in common.

If you have connections with a particular religion, you may find it helpful to explore its particular roadmap. Christians, for example, may find it helpful to look into the works of Saint John of the Cross, particularly *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Alternatively there is an anonymous 14th-century English text called *The Cloud of Unknowing* that is practical, clear and written by someone who clearly knew the ground he describes. In the Muslim tradition there is Ibn Arabi's *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*. There are other works of this kind.

In Zen there is a tradition of using sequences of pictures to depict the stages along the path. Of these, the ox or bull-herding pictures are well known, and here we will examine a version of them from a Zen master called Kakuan from the 12th century.[1] For those coming from other spiritual traditions, or no tradition at all, the ox-herding pictures are approachable, as they are light on overtly religious imagery. What does the ox represent? You could say the forces of life itself.

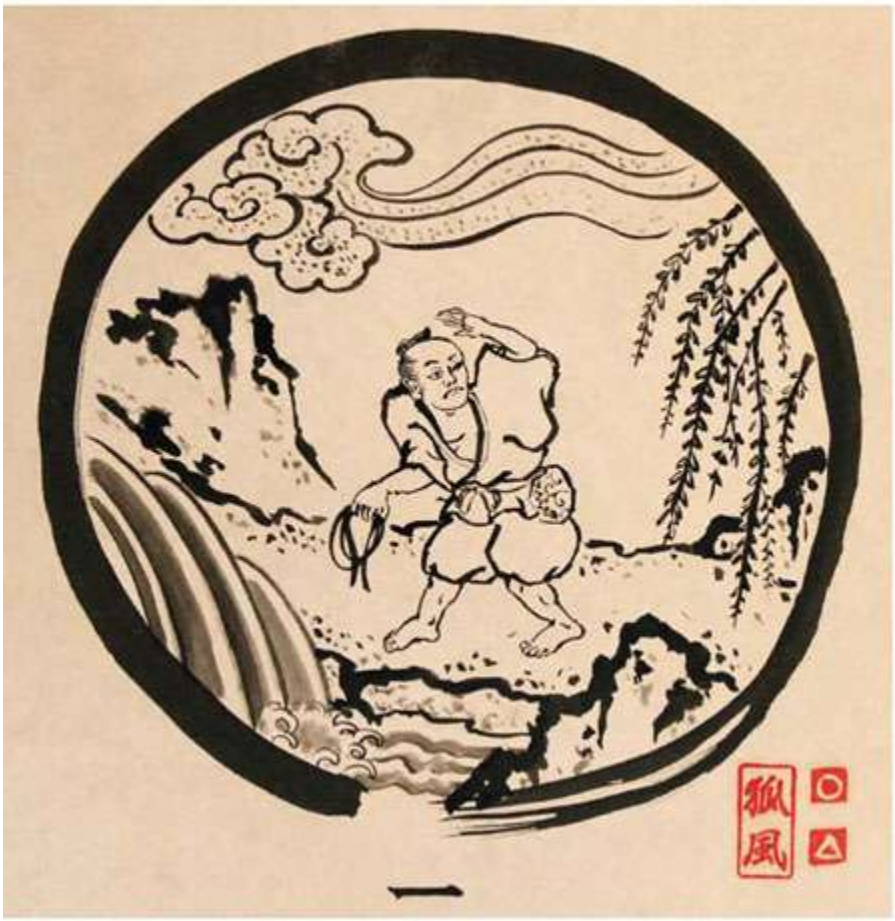
We'll also refer to the classical Buddhist text, the *Vishuddhimagga* or *The Path of Purification*, for the detailing of some of the stages. Among other writers you'll find many differing interpretations of the ox-herding stages. There is little consensus. The one I detail below corresponds most closely with my own experience, and that of both my teacher and my students.

In the following the ox-herding drawings are by one of my students, Alex Kofuu Reinke.

1. THE SEARCH FOR THE OX

This is the genuine start of practice. At some point in life you become very aware that something is missing. Students come to Zen from all walks of life and for all sorts of reasons, but in my experience there are three main triggers or catalysts that set people off on the path.

The first is suffering. People who have experienced deep pain in their lives may urgently need to find some kind of resolution. Shinzan Rōshi himself came to Zen after a whole series of personal disasters and a failed suicide attempt.



Second, some students have experienced another kind of disillusionment. Very often they've come from a successful background, with many of the trappings and symbols that our society associates with success. These things may be enjoyed and there may be a sense of gratitude, but these people are still consumed by a nagging sense that there must be more to life.

And finally, there are those who, perhaps completely unbidden, have had some kind of spiritual awakening or experience that spurs them on to develop further.

Of course, it may be that none of these apply to you and other reasons have brought you to Zen. Regardless of your initial motivation, when you are at this first stage, you have already gone further than just dipping a toe in the water. By now you have made a definite engagement or commitment to your spiritual quest, and there can be a great sense of potential at this stage. The Zen master

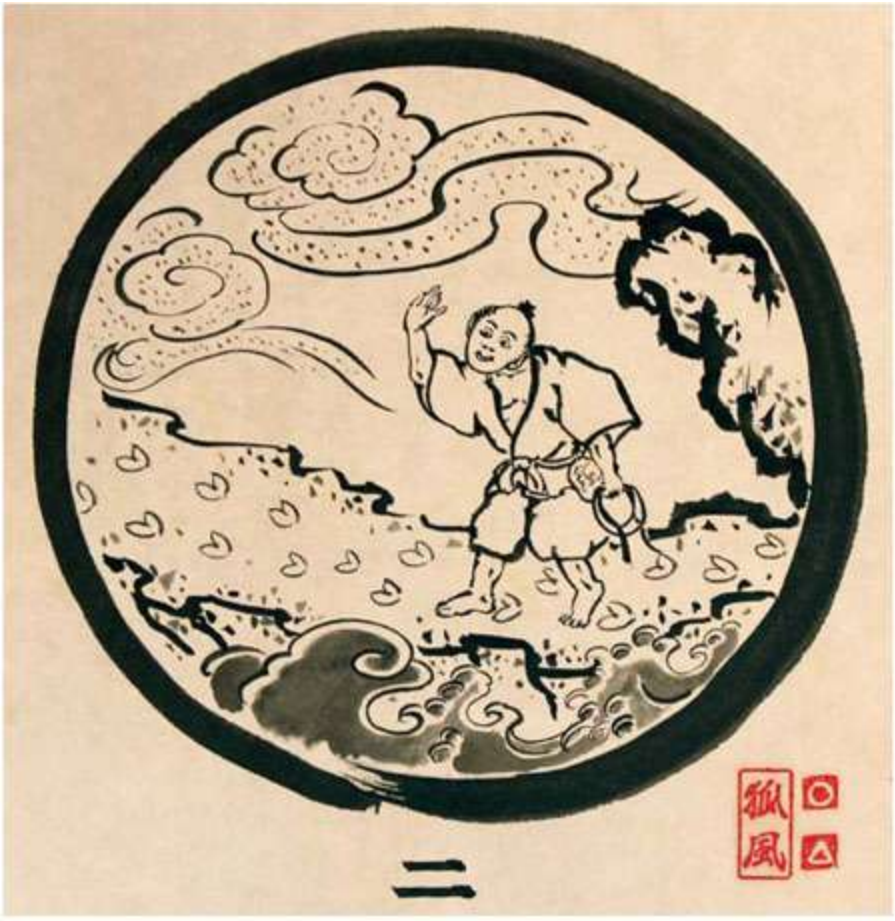
Shunryu Suzuki talked about having a ‘beginner’s mind’[2] – the state of open, untrammelled awareness. Sometimes there is considerable joy present and a feeling of being, at last, on the path.

The great Zen master Dogen wrote, ‘To study Buddhism is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self.’ In this first stage we are studying the self, both mind and body. We begin to realise that ultimately we are not our mind and our body. Sometimes reality can be experienced as very alive and vivid during this stage as perceptions become particularly open and clear. Occasionally a student might think that this aliveness is the goal and that they’ve already made it. But of course the road continues.

This quality of investigation or exploration can flower into what many Zen masters call ‘the great doubt’ (*daigidan in Japanese*). In this state, the enquiry takes on an energy or life of its own, even a physicality. Hakuin often refers to forming the great doubt into a ball and placing it in the belly. He writes, ‘At the bottom of great doubt lies great awakening.’[3]

2. DISCOVERING THE FOOTPRINTS

Sooner or later the exhilaration of setting out on our quest gives way to the reality of life on the road. In the image characterising this stage, the footprints of the ox represent traces left behind from the past. Teachings from past practitioners can guide you, but more directly, your body and mind is a living record of the effects of your previous actions and choices. These footprints manifest at many levels of being and experience. Some of these may be of positive emotions such as happiness, but many of us will also experience the negative manifestations.



As the study of the self deepens, the relationship between physical and mental phenomena is perceived directly. We realise in a very clear way that everything – objects, people, emotions – continually changes. Everything has a degree of instability and so can never fully or permanently satisfy us.

> The blue sky is not blue, the white clouds are not white. (Daito, 1282–1336)[4]

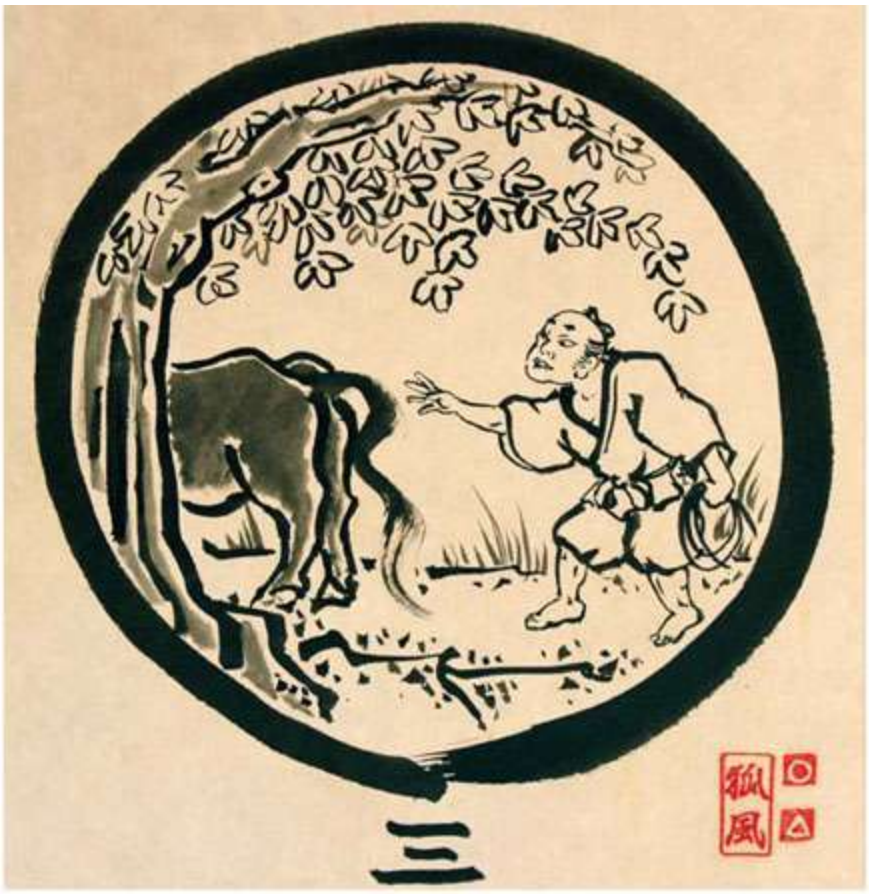
The footsteps of the ox are discovered in a physical way too. All kinds of tensions and misalignments caused by the stresses and strains resulting from our past choices can come up into conscious awareness. When I first went through this stage I found my whole body to be a mass of tensions, with particular tightness in my neck and shoulders, my belly and my throat.

This stage can be thought of as a purification or spiritual detox. The Zen term for this is *sange* (pronounced san-gay). If you are willing and open, unskilful things you have done will be perceived, and from this you can learn how to create a better future for yourself and others. As you do this there is a sense of lightening the load.

Over the years I have found many Zen students are shocked to discover how much the past is affecting them. Rather than face up to this uncomfortable reality, some people are tempted to simply give up and allow unawareness to take over again. This is a shame because, if we just trust the process and allow whatever needs to arise to do so without holding on or pushing away, things can start to really turn a corner.

3. PERCEIVING THE OX

If we don't give up, the view eventually begins to clear. Our meditation begins to take on a life of its own. Reality might be seen as a network of very fine vibrations, and strong feelings of bliss and a renewed sense of focus can arise. Sometimes there are beautiful experiences of light and visions. And as a lot of energy can be released in the body, students can feel more vigorous and younger.



It is possible to again feel that you have made it to the end of the journey, with these visions of the grandeur and fundamental beauty of reality. But you have only caught sight of the ox, and there is much further yet to go.

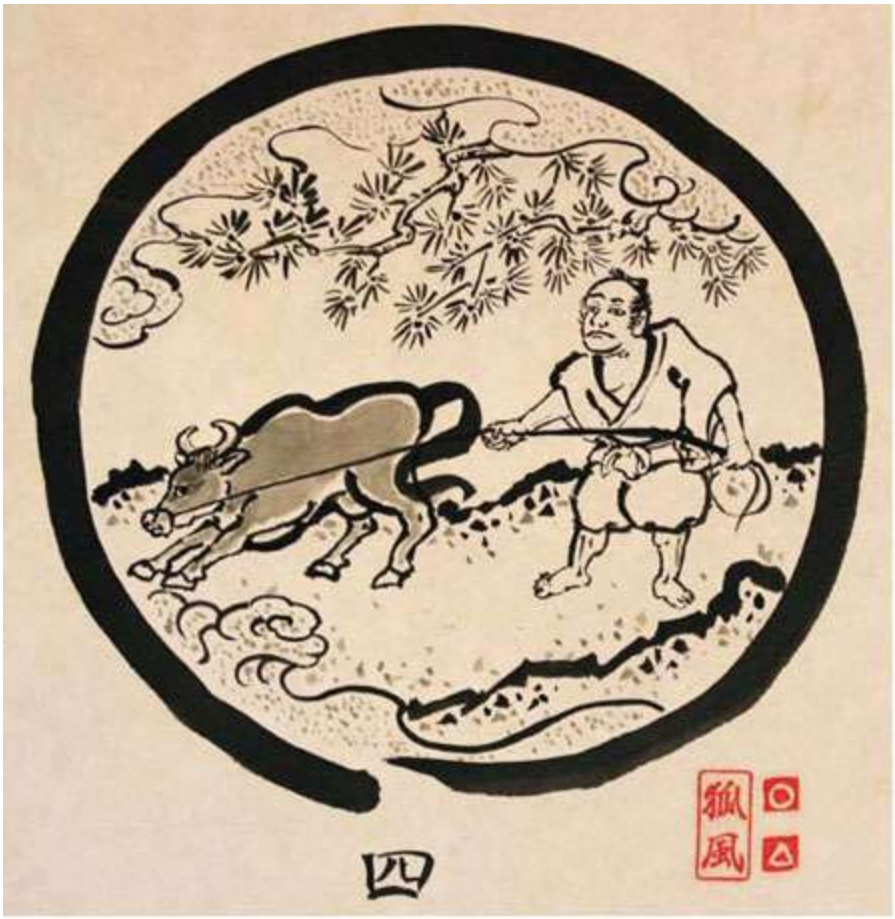
Some people can get really stuck at this level. The *Lotus Sutra* likens this to an image of an unreal city. If we think of ourselves as on a long and arduous journey, this stage is a mirage-like city where we can rest and gather strength. But the quest is by no means over and, just as the magical city appeared, it can also vanish.

The classical way to cause this vanishing is to try to grasp on to the experience itself. The whole path is about opening your hands and letting go. It is utterly natural to get stuck by trying to hold on to experiences. Eventually, however, we get to the point where we realise that all experiences arise and pass – that is their nature. However exalted it seems, no experience is exempt from this iron law.

If we keep practising earnestly, however, the next stage can begin to open up.

4. CATCHING THE OX

Here we are back on the road of purification. Compared to the second stage where the footprints of the ox were seen, this stage, where we actually lay hands on the ox, may feel a lot rougher. Here you come face-to-face directly with the suffering from your past. Most people find this part of the journey hardest to deal with, so I'm going to write more about this stage than any of the others.



As mentioned before, everyone has their unique journey and burden from their history. So some will pass through this stage quite easily, whereas for others it can be very tough.

Either way, it is important to keep going with the practice once you've reached this level. By this point there have been glimpses of some of the truth of reality, both the suffering and the bliss, and even if the practice is stopped, the suffering is likely to continue. This suffering can take on an existential quality that affects our worldview, so we may feel more intensely than before that we are strangers in a strange land, homeless and lost in the universe. Zen master Mumon referred to this state when he wrote, 'Those who have not passed the barrier and have not cast away the discriminating mind are all phantoms haunting trees and plants.'[5]

It can be hard to come face-to-face with this suffering. No wonder many turn aside. As you go through this stage of catching the ox, profound physical, emotional and mental discomfort, and dis-ease, can arise. It is important not to get involved in the storylines your mind may generate during this stage of the journey. The mind can be extraordinarily ingenious in fabricating reasons why we should turn back and give up on our quest. As T.S. Eliot put it, 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.'[6]

We can find ourselves worrying about becoming mad or losing our place in society. On my first time through this I found myself terrified that I would lose all usefulness as a person. But perhaps the deepest fear for many is that if the curtain is pulled aside, we will discover we are fundamentally inadequate. Even the Buddha himself faced this sense of unworthiness.

There is only one way through this, and that is to doggedly continue to practise. I've found several things can help. First, it's useful to appreciate that this is only a phase. Like the second stage, here the process is one of deep spiritual detoxification. If you have experienced a physical detox, you'll know it can feel pretty rough as the toxins are washed away, but afterwards you feel absolutely wonderful for months. This process we are considering has many parallels but goes much deeper than the second stage. Just do your best to keep what's happening in context. Second, having contact with a teacher or peers who understand what you're dealing with can be incredibly helpful. And third, broadening your perspective can

make a difference. You may well be doing this for yourself, and that's fine. But if you extend your motivation to practise for the benefit of a loved one, for your family, or even for all beings, the whole process can seem more worthwhile.

When considering what helps, it's useful to remember that the Buddha taught that the happiness of *nirvana* or liberation can be found through:

- mindfulness of the body
- mindfulness of sensations
- mindfulness of the mind
- mindfulness of mind objects.

You can see how these objects of mindfulness break down into two groups: mindfulness of the body and what is going on in the body, and mindfulness of the mind and what is going on in the mind.

Now, the Buddha taught that if we practise mindfulness of any one of these four we can find liberation. In other words, deal with any one and suffering on all four levels is resolved.

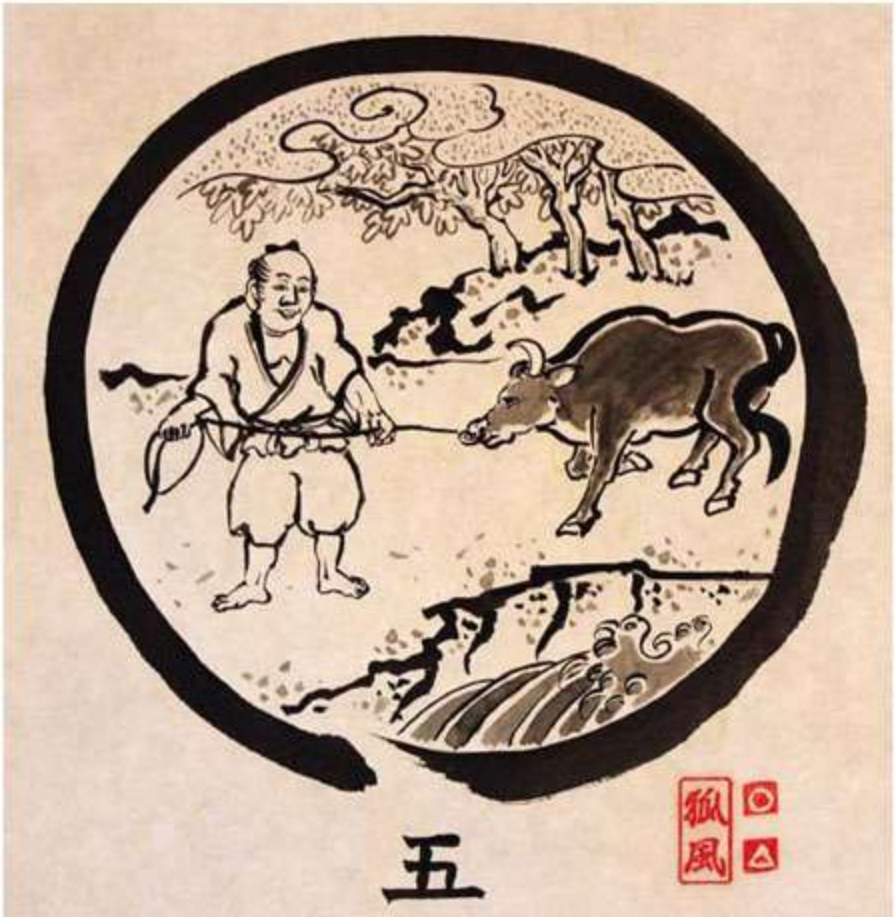
For myself, at this stage of catching the ox, I found it helpful to switch my attention towards the physical phenomena arising within me rather than the mental storylines, and I usually recommend this to my students.

There are specific obstacles that can appear at this stage. They vary from person to person, and, as mentioned, having a teacher who has gone through this journey before is a great help. It is normal for fear, anger and confusion to come up, and in the Buddhist analysis, these are seen as the three basic obstacles. Simply try to be as present as possible with the actual embodied experience of the feelings, and allow them to arise and pass.

Some people reach a point in which nothing is happening and there seems only a vast wasteland. If this is the case for you, it is still very important to just keep on with the practice.

5. TAMING THE OX

Essentially the process at this stage is one of de-identifying. Up to this point in life we have been unconsciously identified with our thoughts, feelings, body and experiences. Through this de-identification we can begin to realign with who we really are.



> The snow melts and the bones of the mountain appear. (Daito, 1282–1336)[7]

This experience of catching and taming the ox can vary a lot. Some people have a very gentle ox to deal with, but for others it is wild, and the whole experience can be as intense as a rodeo. With my students I recommend a steady discipline at a measured pace so that the process is manageable. Going through this period, some of my students have benefited from psychotherapy in parallel with their Zen practice.

This is a stage when many, or perhaps even most, people give up. Some maintain the appearance and routine of practice, but the quest is abandoned and this really is a shame. Even if you have a wild ox to catch, all that abundant vitality will be available for positive uses if only you can keep going. Be reassured that what you're experiencing is simply a stage and will surely come to an end.

When it does, we reach a stage of equanimity. The ox is tamed. There is sufficient de-identification from all the emotional, physical and mental 'stuff' that it can arise and pass away quite freely.

There is no longer a struggle and absolutely no doubt that the only way is to stay with the practice. With this realisation comes a quality of relief. It may be that some of the suffering still continues to arise, but the crucial shift is that we don't identify with it so much – we don't take it personally. The ox comes to realise that our intentions truly are for the best: our intention is not to kill the ox. With this realisation we become able to lead the ox; we're friends.

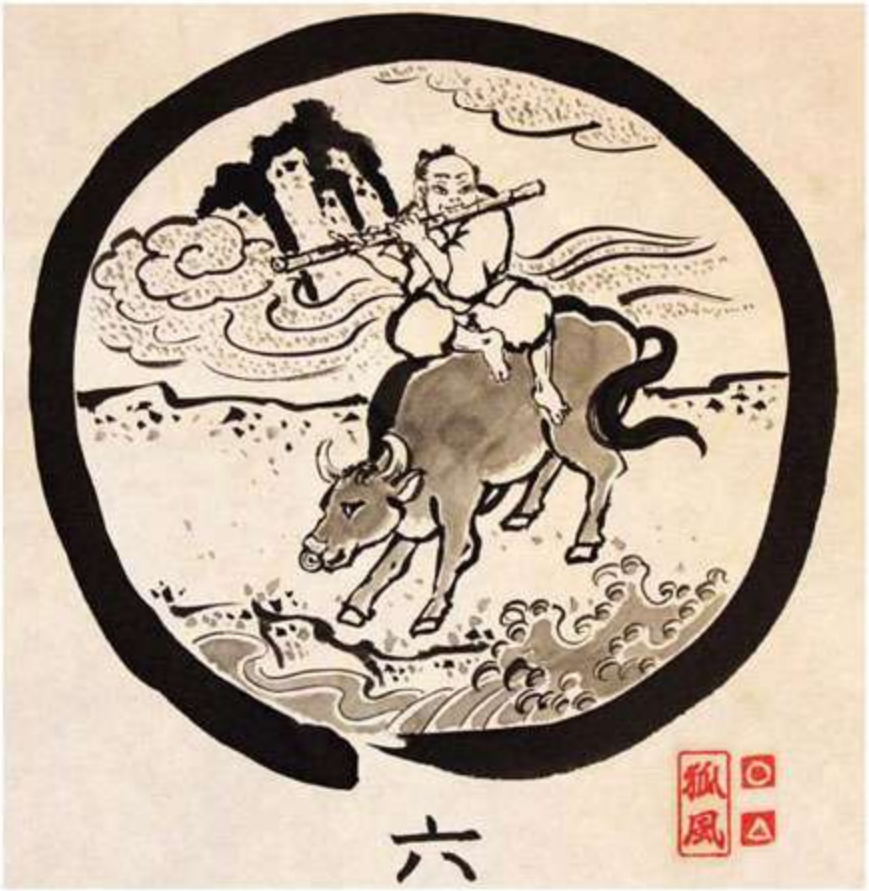
> I watch the birds fly off at dawn and return home at dusk.[8]

6. RIDING THE OX HOME

The boy and the ox are together. Not quite one, but almost. The experience of this stage can be pleasant. Our view has shifted, and it may be possible to perceive and ride the vibrating, dynamic, ungraspable reality of things without any particular effort. We can feel like we are sustained by the energy of the universe.

> Measuring with hand-beats the pulsating harmony, I direct the endless rhythm. (Kakuan, 12th century)[9]

The mind is now well trained. When working with a *koan* or other object of meditation, it can be held more or less continuously, but there is still the subtlest sense of distinction between you and your object of meditation – the subtlest sense of you and your ox.

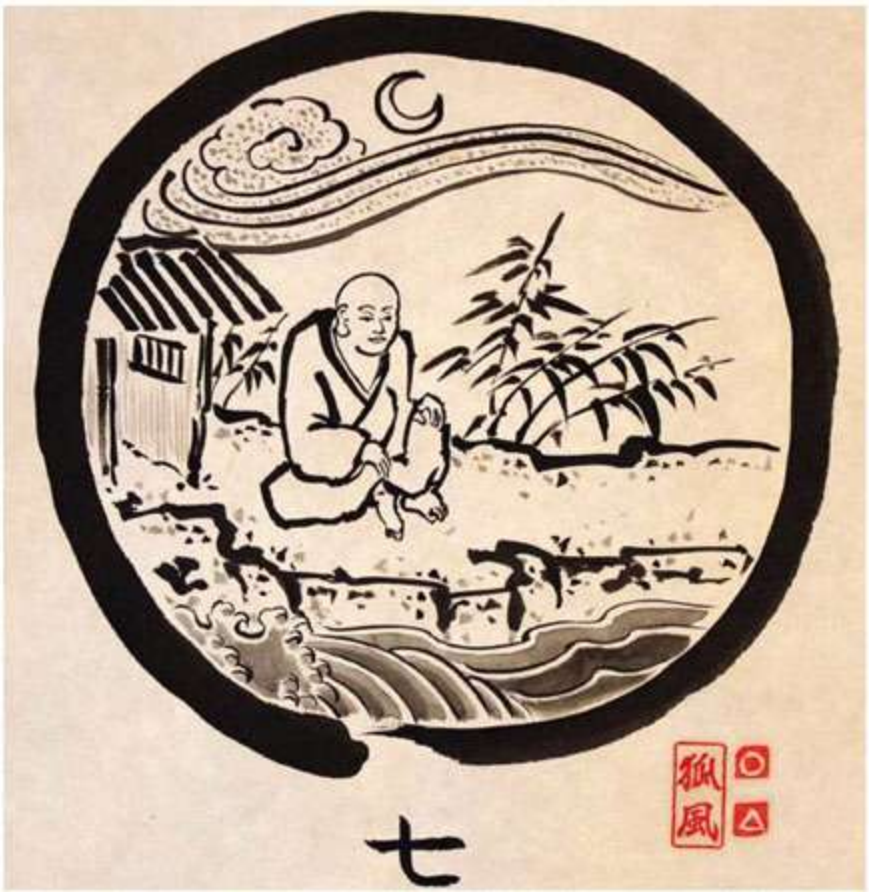


It is possible to ignore this gap and decide the work is done, but with an honest and clear eye, it is obvious there is further to go. The trouble may be that it is not entirely clear how to proceed. You may feel your state is now aligned with the way, but it is nevertheless not quite the way. Being so close means we lose perspective. We can't quite see what to do, and this loss of perspective can be disorientating.

Some students experience this stage as rather like travelling on a train track that is parallel to the track they wish to be on. There seems to be no convergence, and the question is: how can this final gap be crossed?

7. THE OX TRANSCENDED

As always, the way forward is to let go. At a certain point the ox just disappears. This is because you have become one with it. Although this oneness may be a pleasant experience for some, it can also feel like a desert. It can feel as though you are identified with nothing.



> Above, no supports for climbing; below, self is extinguished. (Daito, 1282–1336)[10]

The famous Zen text, the *Mumonkan* (*The Gateless Gate*), says: ‘All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has a dream.’

This stage can have a quality of potential about it, a sort of spiritual pregnancy. This is the end of the line, and you now know what mystics of the past have called ‘spiritual poverty’.

> No road to advance on; no gate to retreat through. (Daito, 1282–1336)[11]

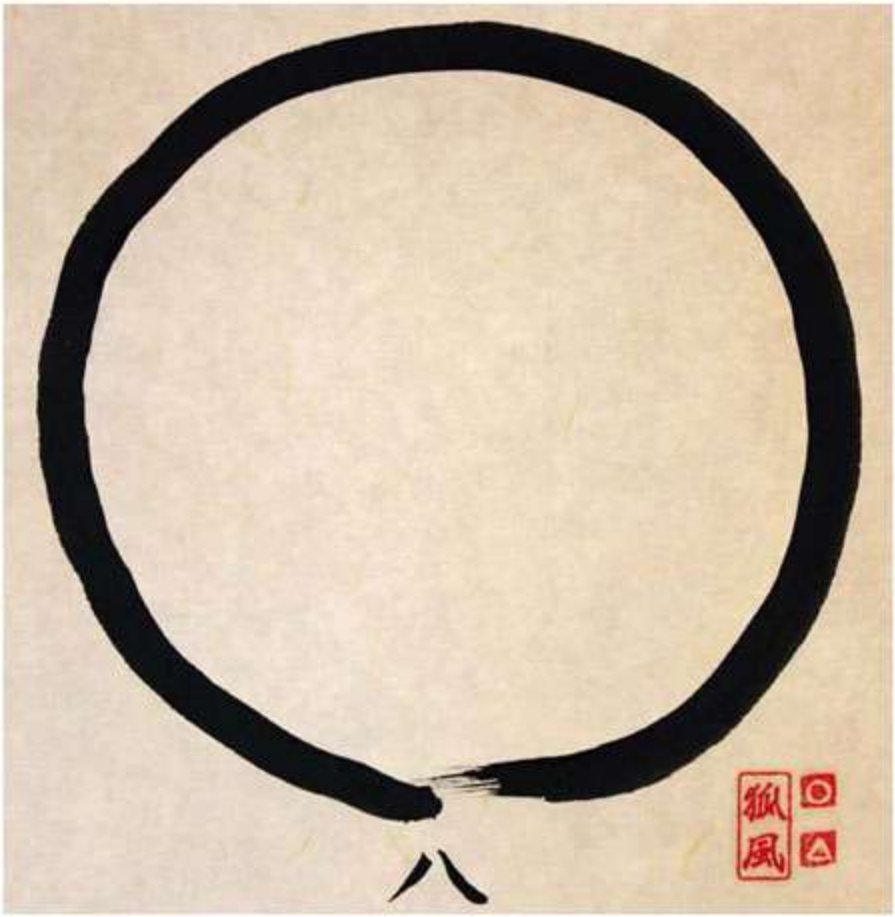
The 14th-century meditation manual, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, puts it beautifully:

> Let go this everything and something, in preference for this nowhere and this nothing. Do not worry if your senses have no knowledge of this nothing; I love it much the better for this.[12]

But even this nothing is not an end.

8. BOTH OX AND SELF TRANSCENDED

One of my teachers once told me that it is impossible to stay in the previous state for very long without this succeeding stage appearing. But all of that is out of our hands. You don’t get to decide when your spiritual pregnancy comes to term.



Before the fullness of this stage arises, there may well be precursors. By no means does everybody experience them, but you may find yourself entering deep states of letting go. Either gradually or suddenly, you let go of your perception of things being a certain fixed way – you let go of your thoughts and feelings, and even your senses, and seem to go through a certain threshold.

Typically this letting-go state, *samadhi* as it's often called, is deeply restful and beautiful, even blissful. You emerge with your senses, your whole being, purified. This experience of deep letting go is powerful and transforming, but only temporarily so. There is an afterglow of clarity and presence, but it wears off.

The direction you are heading towards is an even further letting go. You, yourself, can't actually do it, but all the inner work you've done up to this point establishes a momentum. You simply keep

going, and at a certain point, often when you least expect it, it happens.

And when it happens there is absolutely nothing left, it's a complete discontinuity. Unlike previous *samadhi* experiences, which can last for extended periods, even several hours, this experience is momentary. We die and are reborn in a moment. It's like the lights blink off and then come on again.

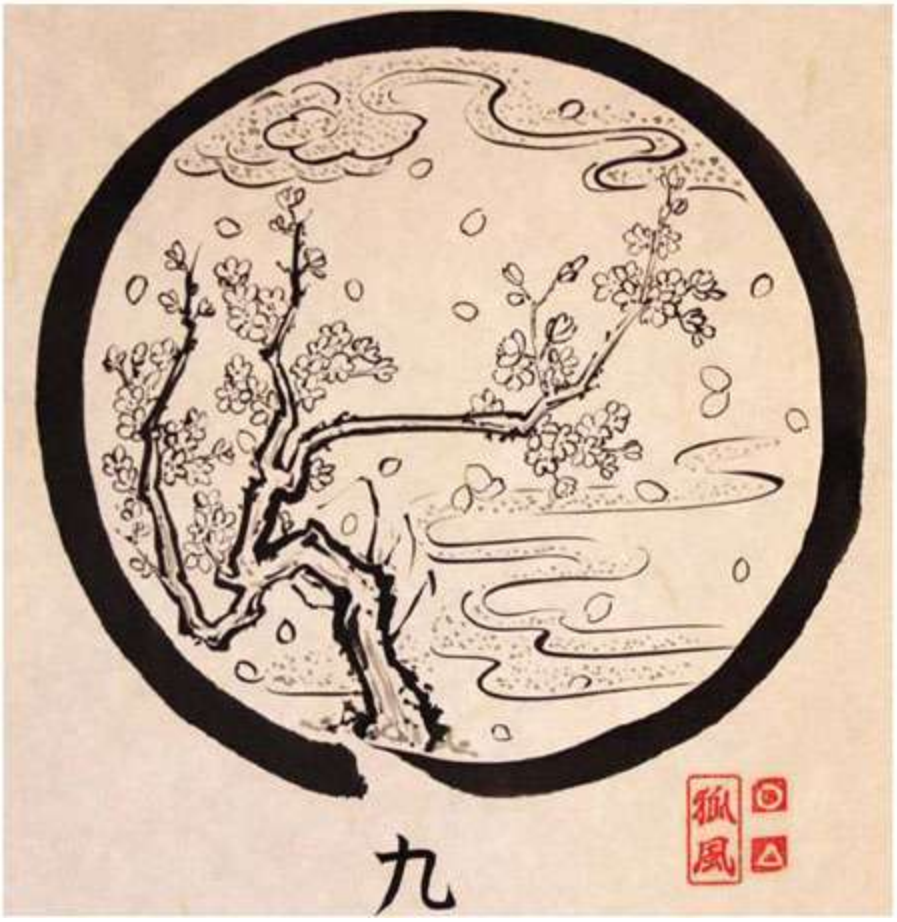
Almost any stimulus can bring this about. Zen master Hakuin heard an unexpected bell. Bankei smelt plum blossom. Whatever the immediate stimulus, we are suddenly plunged into what the Bible calls 'The valley of the shadow of death'.

The image of this stage is an *enso*, the famous Zen empty circle. Suddenly reality disappears and so do you. Zen calls it 'the great death'.

Everything is let go, and in this abandoning, there is no time, space or anything else. In discussing this nothing-and-nowhere place, the traditional commentary to the ox-herding picture states, 'Whip, rope, person and bull – all merge into a no-thing.'

9. REACHING THE SOURCE

This is a stage of rebirth. We become a new being in a new world. This rebirth isn't a one-time event; it's happening moment by moment. The idea of a fixed, permanent self is simply laughable.



This stage is often filled with bliss and relief. Sometimes tears of joy and gratitude are shed, and sometimes tears and laughter occur at the same time. We know we are home, and paradoxically we know we always were.

The commentary here states, ‘The river is green and the mountain is blue.’[13] Everything is as it is, and embodies a quality of perfection. As with all emotions, those released by this rebirth are passing and transient.

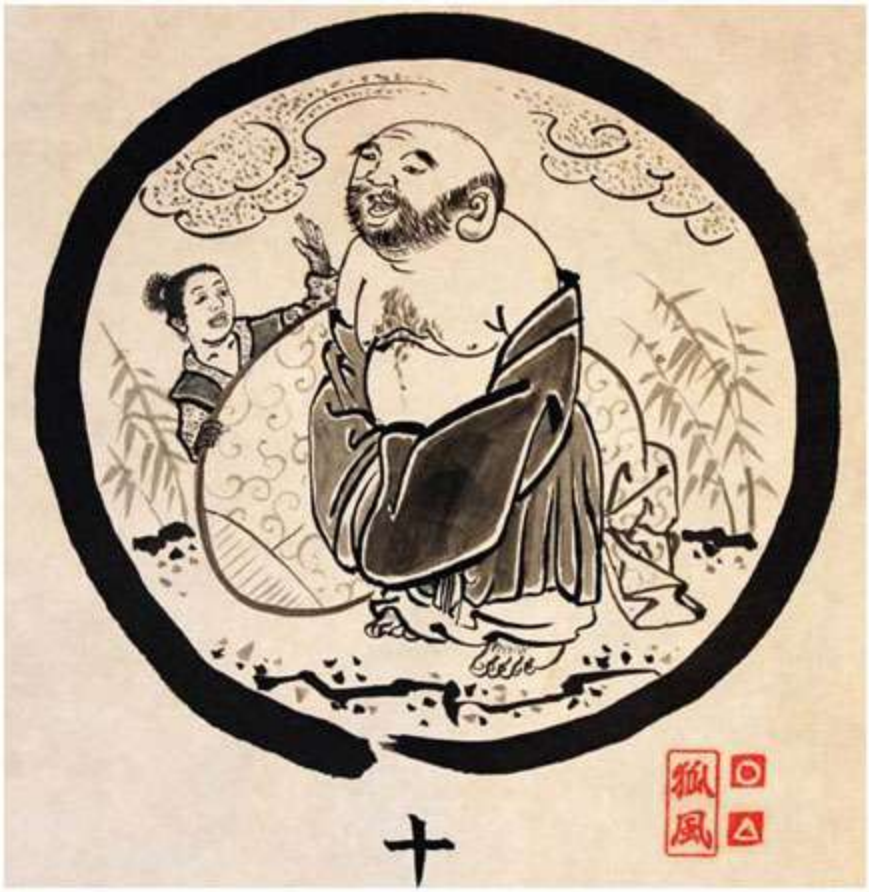
> The capital is a pleasant place, but it’s difficult to live there long. (Daito, 1282–1336)[14]

Although it’s common for there to be an emotional release at this stage, particularly the first few times we end up here, sometimes our arrival is very quiet. If we can understand that our destination isn’t an

experience so much as a shift in the way we relate to all experiences, we are less likely to be misled by a temporary elation.

However joyful the emotions released, it is always a mistake to try to hold on to them. Our journey continues.

10. RETURNING TO THE WORLD



It's over, the Buddhas and Patriarchs' disease
That once gripped my chest.
Now I am just an ordinary man
With a clean slate.

(Daito, 1282–1336)[15]

In the final picture of the series, the young seeker has become the fat, jolly, laughing Buddha. Here, he is passing on 'The Way' to the next young seeker.

The product of all this spiritual work is not just realisation. This understanding has to be lived and it is natural to want to help others. How life is lived becomes vastly important. The traditional commentary says, ‘I visit the wine shop and the market, and everyone I look upon becomes enlightened.’

At some point comes the important realisation that this long journey is actually a cycle and our understanding still isn’t complete. The conversation between the laughing Buddha and the aspirant seeker goes on internally, as well as in our interactions with others.

> Even the sharpest sword must always be re-sharpened. (Rinzai, 866 CE)[16]

There is further to go, and in time the cycle is begun again. Only now the landmarks are more familiar. Every single step of the way requires all our spiritual cards on the table. The work still requires courage and resolution, and it is always possible to stop moving on. But at least we have done it before; we know it in our blood and bones: ‘If we can discard a thing as small as our self, then we can experience a thing as large as the Universe.’[17]

Many times in the interview room I remember Shinzan Rōshi miming casting something behind himself and saying to me in English, ‘Get and throw, get and throw.’ Each understanding must be cast away or it becomes an obstacle to the next. We end up with nothing. Again, in the interview room, I remember him talking through the cost of Zen practice and summing it up in English: ‘In the end we become good man, everybody like.’

As our practice continues to deepen, more and more suffering is dealt with, and we become more able to live fearlessly and enjoy our lives. We find a happiness that does not depend on any circumstances. Our life becomes truly beneficial to others.

We have a Japanese term, *intoku*, meaning ‘unobtrusive or secret goodness’. This is a sign that practice is truly maturing. When ‘Thundering Settan’ (1801–1873) was master of my teacher’s training monastery, freshly washed and cut vegetables would mysteriously appear in the kitchen every morning. In seeking the

perpetrator, Settan Rōshi disguised himself as a monk meditating by night on the mountain. He followed a young *unsui* (training monk) called Tairyu down to the nearby river and watched him gather leaves discarded by local farmers. At that time, Settan Rōshi thought to himself, 'This monk will be my successor.' In the course of time, Tairyu became the next Zen master of Shogengji.

Perhaps this sounds a difficult path. Like all things, some have an affinity for it and an easier time, while others have more to deal with along the way. The truth of the matter is that learning to let go can be done little by little. You can set the pace. When you let go a little, you'll find life gets a little better. When you let go a lot, life gets a lot better!

And of those who have genuinely experienced this rebirth, I've never heard of a single dissatisfied customer.

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1 The Buddha himself had used ox-herding imagery centuries before in the *Maha-gopalaka Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Cowherd)*.
2 Shunryu, S. (1970) *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill.
3 Yampolsky, P.B. (editor and translator) (1971) *The Zen Master Hakuin.* Oretegama I. New York: Columbia University Press, p.144.
4 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.136.
5 Quoted in Shibayama, Z. (2011) *The Book of Mu*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, p.87.
6 Eliot, T.S. (1968) 'Burnt Norton.' In *Four Quartets*. New York: Mariner Books, 20 March.
7 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.116.
8 Hori, V.S. (2003) *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, p.580.
9 Senzaki, N. and Reps, P. (1957) *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*. North Clarendon, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Inc., p.143.
10 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.199.
11 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.202.
12 Unpublished manuscript translation, Daizan.

13 The Japanese tend to see rivers as green and mountains as blue. In the West we often think of the colours the other way round.
14 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.205.
15 Quoted in Kraft, K. (1992) *Eloquent Zen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p.191.
16 Kononenko, I. and Kononenko, I. (2010) *Teachers of Wisdom*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing, p.159.
17 Koho, K.C. (2000) *Soto Zen*. Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, p.17.