

# Ten Ox-Herding

## Images



training the mind for enlightenment

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WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

# Ten Ox-Herding Images

by

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*Ten Ox-Herding Images*

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dedicated to my friend Jan



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Someone who seeks the Way doesn't look beyond himself.

He knows that the mind is the Way.

But when he finds the mind, he finds nothing.

And when he finds the Way, he finds nothing.

If you think you can use the mind  
to find the Way, you're deluded.

When you are deluded, Buddhahood exists.

When you're awake, it doesn't exist.

This is because awareness is Buddhahood.

Bodhidharma : *Wake-up Sermon*

# Preface

The Zen composition, known as *The Ten Ox-herding Images* (Jap. *Jūgyūzu*), was composed by Rinzai *Ch'an* priest Kakuan Shion Zenji (12<sup>th</sup> century) and published by Jion Oshō, his Dharma heir, shortly after the *Blue Cliff Records*. The *Jūgyūzu* is one of four texts of the *Zenshū Shiburoku* (*The Four Texts of the Zen Sect*).

It represents Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) as **an Ox**. To each of the pictures, Kakuan appended verse and commentary.

Earlier works by other *Ch'an* masters of the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279) also spring out. Ching-chu (Jap. *Seikyo* – 11<sup>th</sup> century) had a series of five images, with the Ox getting gradually whiter until it disappears (or '*mu-shin*,' 'no-thought'). Jitoku Zenji (1090 – 1159) worked with six pictures.

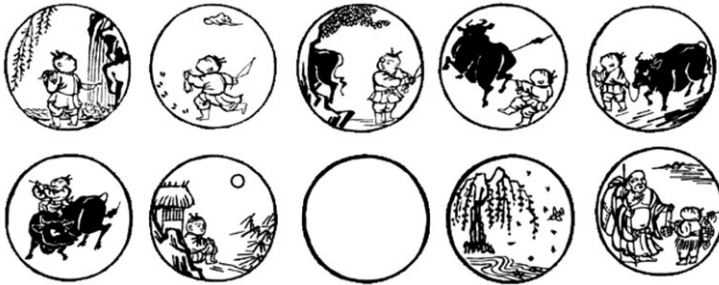
With these past teachers as models, Kakuan composed the best-known version and inspired Tenshō Shūbun (1414 – 1463) to draw the images found here (the originals are in the Museum of the Shokokuji Temple in Kyoto). The verses have been redone, but their original sense stands.

Part of (ladder) Zen, these images are about *awakening the mind* (arousing *Bodhi*-mind or '*hotsu bodaishin*'), a process shared by all schools of Buddhism. They depict ten stages as waymarks on the path to enlightenment, organizing *the science of awakening*.

The ox-herding metaphor sheds light on the mental processes leading to *true* peace (*nirvāṇa*). The oxen depict successive steps in the attainment of an open, awakened existence. To explain awakening with such images pays tribute to the excellence of *Ch'an*, always to the point, flowing and profound.

In the last stage, the awakened one *enters the world*. *Returning to Town with Helping Hands* features a Living Buddha, participating, and, having entirely vacated substance-obsession, solely led by altruism.





Ten Ox-Herding Images

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## Introduction

In the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the Buddha was dwelling at Kosambi in a *siṃsapā* grove. He took up a handful of leaves and asked the monks, which was the greater amount, the leaves in his hand or the grove overhead. They all responded, saying there were many more leaves on high. The difference is beyond comparison !

'... the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, *bhikkhus*, have I not taught those many things ? Because they are unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nirvāna*.' – *Samyutta-nikāya*, Saccaṣamyutta, 31.

The *Ten Ox-Herding Images*, a set of exquisite visual metaphors of the awakening process, the path leading to the wide recognition (Tib. *ngo shes-pa*) of the 'original face' (Jap. '*kenshō kobutsu*' or 'to see one's nature and realize Buddha'), are like this handful of leaves. They represent the mind-work needed to awaken. The story of the Ox and the oxherd, originally a Taoist tale about the inner unity of all of existence and the path (Chin. *Tao*) manifesting it was updated and modified by 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Ch'an* monks to explain the path to awakening to Buddhahood (Jap. *satori*). This spiritual journey is a return to our *original state*, the root of our mind. This innermost awareness or all-encompassing field of experience is present *in every moment*.

In *Ch'an*, synthesizing Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and native Taoism, the Ox, represents the three levels of mind : coarse, subtle, and very subtle. At times, the Ox only refers to the original, ever-fresh, natural, empty jewel mind of mere luminosity and knowing ; clear and radiant, the Buddha Within (*tathāgatagarbha*), the matrix-of-One-Thus-Gone. We are born and die with it. Some recognize it, most

not. Very subtle, it cannot be given or taken away, percolating through all other minds, adventitious and concealing it.

Even subtle minds (the roots of the coarse mind) are like dark clouds hiding this Sun of Wisdom.

At the beginning of the path, the Ox seems nowhere. At the end of the path, it is everywhere and everything, then again forgotten. But the power to *ever transform oneself* is rooted in it.

A description of the path is *not* the path itself. Each person walks uniquely. But spiritual maturation can be spoken of in general terms, for beyond time and space, the characteristics of the stages are remarkably similar in most spiritual traditions (cf. Appendix).

Man suffers. As soon as he spots the pervasive nature of this, he feels something is amiss. Does he want this dissatisfaction underlying his existential human condition to end truly? The poisons of craving, hatred, and ignorance define the deluded man. But because great ignorance cannot eradicate the very subtle mind but only temporarily conceal it, even the suffering mind is at times blessed with a few moments of sunlight breaking through the clouds.

As a deluded spiritual seeker, one sets off. Is *irreversibly* ending suffering deemed possible and so actively sought? Question your situation, your reality, life, death, etc. Muster great determination and persevere *against all the odds*. If these conditions are not present, if this *eros* is absent, the Ox will be too, and woe will endure. It cannot be otherwise.

Once on the road, man and Ox start to interact. The very subtle mind enters consciousness, causing all previous conditionings of the man to work against him. He has to capitulate the 'I' and 'mine,' a task completed at the end of the stage represented by the Eight Image.

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The deceived man, turned into a spiritual seeker and ignorantly hallucinating a world 'out there' and 'in here,' wonders where the Ox is? He has been told the Ox exists and trusts this to be true. Perhaps he remembers briefly experiencing the Ox as a child?

But at first, the emotional afflictions and wrong views completely conceal the Ox. Then, when it finally appears, they make the Ox revolt. It shows how insidiously one was misled.

Awakening manifests in Ten Stages. Let me briefly discuss this.

The first three stages *prepare* the process of transformation. One is aware of one's sordid predicament and is willing to work on it. One studies, reflects and meditates; a short glimpse of the Ox is granted.

In the next two stages, the Ox is *trained*. Recognizing the root mind is made stable, and familiarity with its continuous presence is cultivated during ritual, meditation, and everyday life.

Training the mind in *recognizing* the Ox, *returning* to repeatedly pick out the limpid mind (Tib. *rigpa*), and finally *resting* in it are the steps of uncontrived, unfabricated spiritual practice. The first is pointing out the Ox by mindful and sharp introspection or aided by a teacher. The song of the clear mind amidst the noise of the subtle and coarse minds needs to be revealed. Once *identified*, returning to it becomes gradually more comfortable. The second is daily training, enacting meditative familiarity. Once the original mind is pinpointed, recognition is often lost. Concealed again, finding it anew is trained. Going after it, one breaks through (Tib. *trekchö*) resistance and *maintains* recognition. The third, settling, is *releasing* all minds into the base mind, like writing on water. Adventitious minds (Tib. *marigpa*) are *ornaments* of this *ur*-mind, its effulgence or vibrancy.

In the sixth and seventh stages, the man turned master exists in blissful harmony with the Ox. This dual-union gives rise to spontaneous joy and creativity. Spontaneous presence (Tib. *lhündrup*), the

continuous immersion in innermost awareness, is ongoing. Then, the master forgets bliss and mastership. In the last three stages, *Thus Gone*, one awakens to the natural, nondual clear mind. The Ox is nowhere, nor is there a reflective, self-referencing consciousness, only a vivid, awake primordial innermost clear awareness.

The Ox is everywhere, and the world is seen as it is : a body of bliss ! Then the Buddha Within manifests. Walking down the mountain, every sentient being encountered awakens, completing the path of enlightened action as universal and unconditional altruism.

The *Ten Ox-Herding Images* are an example of 'ladder Zen,' approaching Buddhahood *gradually*. Zen, like all other Ati-Yoga practices (*Dzogchen*, *mahāmudrā*), is, however, known as a *suddenist* Dharma teaching, with awakening *coming of itself*.

Indeed, in the *Flower Sermon*, a beautiful story told by *Ch'an* Buddhists, the spirit of Zen is admirably summarized. In this sermon, *Mahākāśyapa*, one of the most revered of the early disciples and foremost in ascetic practices, is said to have been the first to receive direct (mind-to-mind) Dharma transmission from Buddha *Śākyamuni*. In statuary, *Mahākāśyapa* is often depicted together with *Ānanda*, foremost in *sūtra*, each standing to one side of the Buddha. The latter held up a lotus and just admired it in his hand. Nobody knew how to react, but *Mahākāśyapa* faintly smiled, and Buddha knew he truly understood and so worthy of being his successor. In the original Sino-Japanese, the story is called 'pick up flower, subtle smile.' Here, enlightenment happens through a gesture. The teaching is *a simple action introducing awakening* rather than words and complex gradual systems leading the disciples step-by-step.

When *Ch'an* became more popular and attracted more followers, the suddenist approach could not be applied to everyone. A more measured organization of teachings became necessary. The masters of the Song Dynasty accommodated this. While the images and adjacent poems cannot be called a comprehensive system, they do, by

way of art and poetry, bring order in the various events encountered. In this way, students could be compared. These signposts compromise, advancing progressive steps of rising awareness, leading closer and closer to the instant of full enlightenment (Jap. *satori*), the liberation (*mokṣa*) from cyclic existence.

As Bodhidharma says, *Buddhahood is awareness*. Awareness isn't hidden, but *only right now*.

To find the Way, don't hold on to anything. Such awareness is beyond description and directly penetrating. It is part of all movements of thought. Eventually, only a single and unique state of immediate awareness prevails (*mahā-samādhi*) ; the 'dance of awareness' of the *Vidyadharas* beyond cause and effect.

Although historically, the Ox-herding Images belong to *Ch'an* (to become part of Japanese Zen), this book understands the teachings they convey to reflect a training of the mind integrating a wide variety of yogas available to Buddhist practitioners. Sūtra, Tantra, and Ati-Yoga, representing the Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma, are part of the stages given by the ten images. Gradual and suddenist yogas, fabricated and non-fabricated approaches are available.

Because the core of the message is recognizing, maintaining recognition, and resting in the very subtle mind of Clear Light (Tib. *od gsal*), one may wonder whether *Ch'an* and *Dzogchen* are not akin. Remember, this mind is mentioned in the *Pāli Canon* as 'luminous' but defiled by adventitious defilements (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.10, 49/9). Later texts call it the 'brightly shining mind' (*prakṛti-prabhāsvāra-citta*) or 'radiant light' (*prabhāsvāra*).

For Tucci (1980), *Dzogchen*, a term coined in later times and meaning 'Great Completion,' is rooted in the Mahāsiddha tradition of India, practiced by wandering tantric yogis. *Ch'an* influenced it. Both are nongradual approaches, teaching sudden or instantaneous awakening. The latter is similar to the Japanese '*satori*' or the Chinese '*wu*,' translating the Sanskrit verb '*vibudhyati*,' 'to awaken.' Great

Tibetan scholars like Sakya Paṇḍita (1181 – 1251), rejecting suddenism, accused *Dzogchen* of being a 'Chinese doctrine' (Tib. *rgya nag gi chos*) deriving from *Ch'an*.

The *Ten Ox-herding Images*, presenting a gradual path, integrate the core message of the suddenists : identify the Ox, prolong this identification whatever happens and finally effortlessly rest in it. But it also suggests study (*sūtra*), transformative internalization (*tantra*), as well as self-release (*dzogchen*). Their framework allows the integration of the *Buddhayāna* as a whole.

The commentary is written with this view in mind. Mistakes are due to my ignorance, and I'm sure more can be derived when more people study, reflect, and meditate on these images. They clarify the path to Buddhahood and beyond and promote the integration of all 'Buddhisms' (Strong, 2015).

The ten images act as *waymarks* on the path. Accordingly, a map with reference points may be provided. It allows one also to understand Zen as gradual progress, permitting practitioners to compare their joyous effort.

### I) Phase of Struggle : Recognizing and Stabilizing

In the first five images, one struggles with the jewel mind. In the last, there is *endless bliss*, for its presence has become continuous.

#### 1) Recognizing the Ox :

##### *In Search of the Ox*

Always suffering, man feels an existential aching caused by this deep dissatisfaction with life. He trusts the Ox exists, but still looking behind, does not find it. Spiritual practice begins. The Ox does not appear at all. Finding it seems hopeless.

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### *Finding the Footprints*

Study and reflection do suggest the Ox exists. Everywhere its traces are found. The Ox is indirectly there yet cannot be immediately seen. Meditation is difficult. While the patient mind settles in practice, the Ox still does not appear. Where is it ?

### *A Glimpse of the Ox*

First bliss ! An extraordinary event. So unexpected. Is this the Ox ? By immediately grasping at what happens, the Ox is only partly seen and vanishes quickly. But the impact of the encounter lingers

on and has a powerful effect. The intent to secure oneself direct access to the Ox, whose existence is confirmed, is strong. By catching a glimpse of the Ox and experiencing the profound impression of bliss (*ānanda, sukha*) on the mind, one mobilizes the will to find the Ox and never let it escape vehemently. The presence of *an open window on the absolute* is not confirmed.

2) Stabilizing the recognition of the Ox :

### *Catching and Taming the Ox*

The Ox is present but wild and unruly, mirroring one's afflictions and delusions. Surely, catching and taming the clear mind is folly given the afflictions and obscurations necessary to consciously experience the suffering caused by craving, hatred, and ignorance. The Ox appears as a beast. The whip is our desperation with ourselves.

### *Herding the Ox*

Manipulating the Ox with tricks to secure oneself constant access to *bargained* bliss is not like bathing in the vast and warm sea of spontaneous uninterrupted delight. Here is a yogi of sorts, a conjuror at times, but without higher states of joy. Taming a wild Ox is terrible,



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but a humble beast even more so. The whip is still present. The man walks the Ox home.

II) Phase of Ease : Resting

3) Enjoying the visible and invisible Ox :

*Riding the Ox Home*

The struggle is over ! The very subtle mind is *continuously present* and *harmoniously* co-exists with the master. A dual-union between both is in place, making the master joyful, artistic, spontaneous, and the best of teachers. Ending his day of work, the Ox rides the master home. The whip is never used.

*No Ox, Only Man*

The Ox is internalized. Coming home to himself, the master no longer considers this blissful existence, for this would burden. Wisdom and compassion rise together. The master forgets the master. Awaiting the Great Death, he kneels to celebrate the Great Mystery.

4) Resting in recognition of the Ox :

*No Ox, no Man*

Self-consciousness and self-referencing stop. All moments of pure consciousness completely lack reification and reflection. The Mirror of Wisdom appears, but its surface does not reflect. It is dark because there is no reflection due to the lack of light. Lacking 'I,' 'mine,' or 'other,' negative *samādhi* abides. This Great Emptiness is *Bodhi*-mind, the awakened mind of the Buddha Within shared with all other Buddhas.

*Returning to the Source*

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Reflection is reactivated, and the world is again perceived. It is the same world but now experienced *as it is*, as the Great Fullness, from all sides interconnected and empty of substantial core.

In positive *samādhi*, mirror-like consciousness directly perceives suchness. The absolute exists conventionally as a property of every prehended object. All is sacred and filled with the sublime bliss of the Buddhas. It is the *reward* of the Buddha Within.

*In Town with Helping Hands*

See ! The barefooted, cheerful Walking Buddha is there ! *Thus gone*, he came back ! Everyone he looks upon awakens ! Existence is entirely spontaneous ; the *actual life* of the Buddha Within.

Thus, recognizing that it may all be nonsense,  
I present this commentary.

Jion Oshō