

Beginner's Course - 8

The Ten Ox Herding Pictures



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Lesson 8: The Ten Ox Herding Pictures

I. The Search for the Bull



*In the pasture of the world,
I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the bull.
Following unnamed rivers,
lost upon the interpenetrating
paths of distant mountains,
My strength failing and my vitality
exhausted, I cannot find the bull.
I only hear the locusts chirping
through the forest at night.*

The first picture shows the person desperately looking everywhere for his ox. He is dissatisfied with his life, unable to find the true happiness that he seeks. His efforts to secure wealth, friends, fame, and pleasure have not brought him the fulfillment he is seeking. Like many of us, he is seeking something, though he is not sure exactly what it is, that will make life meaningful and bring him lasting happiness.

II. Discovering the Footprints



*Along the riverbank under the trees,
I discover footprints.
Even under the fragrant grass,
I see his prints.
Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces can no more be hidden
than one's nose, looking heavenward.*

The second picture shows that the person has now caught sight of the tracks of the ox, bringing hope that his ox is not lost forever. This could be interpreted to mean that he has recognized his distress and has begun to seek for a solution in the teachings of Buddhism or in other teachings. But he is still at the stage of thinking and talking about his problems and various possible solutions. He has not yet found a path to follow and has not yet started to practice.

III. Perceiving the Bull



*I hear the song of the nightingale.
The sun is warm, the wind is mild,
willows are green along the shore –
Here no bull can hide!
What artist can draw that massive head,
those majestic horns?*

In the third picture, the person actually catches sight of the ox. Now, having started to practice, he glimpses the hidden powers to heal his suffering. But he does not yet understand the source of these powers and how to apply them in his search for peace and contentment. The verse, in saying that “I hear the song of the nightingale. The sun is warm, the wind is mild, the willows are green along the shore.” suggests that the reality the person glimpses is not something separate from the ordinary things that he experiences, even though he does not yet know this.

IV. Catching the Bull



*I seize him with a terrific struggle.
His great will and power
are inexhaustible.
He charges to the high plateau
far above the cloud-mists,
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

The fourth picture shows that the person has now caught hold of the ox, using the bridle of discipline to control it. This symbolizes the rigorous discipline required of the Zen practitioner. Although he now realizes that the power to transform his life lies within himself, in his Buddha-nature, all of his previous conditionings are pulling and pushing him in different directions. Holding the rope tightly means that he must work hard to overcome his bad habits of the past that developed through the ignorance, hatred and craving that gave rise to all of his afflictions.

V. Taming the Bull



*The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down
some dusty road.
Being well-trained, he becomes
naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.*

The fifth picture shows that disciplined practice can overcome the bad habits of previous conditioning and bring one into accord with the true nature of reality. Although discipline is still needed because the old habits of mind still have power, living in greater awareness of the true reality gives one the energy and direction to live a wholesome life.

Now the ox willingly follows the person home, meaning that the separation between oneself and true reality is being overcome.

VI. Riding the Bull Home



*Mounting the bull, slowly
I return homeward.
The voice of my flute intones
through the evening.
Measuring with hand-beats
the pulsating harmony,
I direct the endless rhythm.
Whoever hears this melody will join me.*

The sixth picture suggests the tranquility and joy that reunion with the source of existence brings; now the person rides on the back of the ox, joyously playing his flute. The verse suggests that he has been freed from old fears and anxieties and that so freed, he can now express his creative energies in celebration of life.

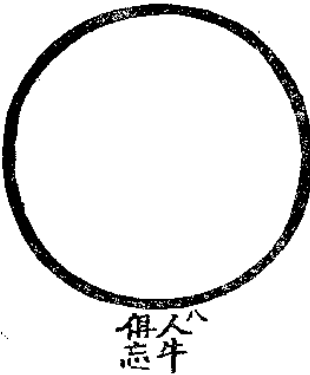
VII. The Bull Transcended



*Astride the bull, I reach home.
I am serene. The bull too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

In the seventh picture the person has realized his identity with the ox; the ox can be forgotten, for it is none other than the experience of everyday things. This can be interpreted to mean that the separation of practice and realization has been overcome, as has the separation of ordinary reality and the ultimate reality. Until now he has been practicing meditation as a means of achieving enlightenment. But with realization of the non-duality of existence comes awareness of the identity of means and ends; practice itself is realization.

VIII. Both Bull and Self Transcended



*Whip, rope, person, and bull –
all merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast,
no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist
in a raging fire.
Here are the footprints of
the Ancestors.
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

The eighth picture tells us that when the duality of self and reality has been overcome not only is reality (the ox) forgotten, but so is the self (the person); the circle symbolizes the all-encompassing emptiness that constitutes the ground of all things. Now, in the awareness of unceasing transformation and total interconnectedness in every experience one is freed from all craving and hatred for the other. In this freedom there is a sense of the wholeness and perfection of ordinary things.

IX. Reaching the Source



*Too many steps have been taken
returning to the root and the source.
Better to have been blind and deaf
from the beginning!
Dwelling in one's true abode,
unconcerned with and without –
The river flows tranquilly on
and the flowers are red.
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

As the ninth picture shows, when self and reality (as constructs) are left behind, then things are revealed to be just what they are in themselves; streams meander on of themselves and red flowers naturally bloom red. In the ordinary events of life are found the most profound truths. Only by seeking the ox as a separate ultimate reality could the person discover that there is no separate reality; that the ultimate is to be found in the ordinary.

X. In the World



*Barefooted and naked of breast,
I mingle with the people
of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden,
and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees
become alive.
I have abandoned the whip and ropes*

Finally, the tenth picture shows the enlightened person entering the town marketplace, doing all of the ordinary things that everyone else does. But because of his deep awareness everything he does is quite extraordinary. He does not retreat from the world, but shares his enlightened existence with everyone around him. Not only does he lead fishmongers and innkeepers in the way of the Buddha but, because of his creative energy and the radiance of his life, even withered trees bloom.