

The 10 bulls of Zen

A collection of zen paintings that depict the journey of a man towards self-realisation

■ By Karen Sivan

A curious monk asked the master, "What is the Way?"
"It is right before your eyes," said the master.
"Why do I not see it for myself?"
"Because you are thinking of yourself."

How? What? Why? Most people want answers and solutions to be given for their problems. Can you help me? What is Zen? Can Zen help me? Why this

Kakuan, painted 10 pictures, illustrating the search for an Ox, which represents the search of our true nature. The pictures and comments on them, usually in prose, have been redone by Zen Masters throughout the centuries, to convey their own personal vision of Zen. Interestingly, out of the ten pictures, only four include the Ox. This could mean that maybe we are not as important as

open hands of compassion. It is difficult, for to do this, we need to let go of our stories and personal dramas and clearly see our fantasies and desires for what they are—illusions and delusions. We need to comprehend that we are not the main character in this 'life play', that we cannot control circumstances and that we are not individuals—separated, isolated and lonely—but a vital part of the whole. Our essential nature [Ox] lies in not being who we think we are!

Can we still find some relevance in a set of pictures from the 12th century? Yes! Only if we grasp the essence and accept that to find something, we have to lose it. When we find it, we see that it was there all along. In our exploration, we have to throw away the things hiding

within us and there it is—we find traces of the Ox.

Pictures 3 – 5. Mindfulness will lead us to find the Ox and, with discipline and self control, will help to catch the Ox. We get the inspiration to make changes and perhaps are satisfied with this progress, but wait... there is the long process of taming the Ox [picture 5]. Can we become masters of our mind and not slaves to every whim and desire that arises? This could be a long and arduous process for many. Why go too far, you're probably already a slave to your computer and mobile phone and they rule your life. Think about it.

Picture 6. Here our seeker friend is found proudly riding the Ox back home; the object of his goal apparently achieved, he is one with the Ox. He is happy and



1 Searching



2 Finding Traces



3 Discovering



4 Catching



5 Taming



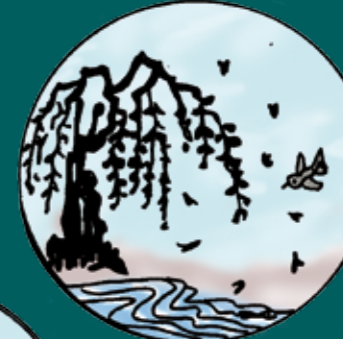
6 Coming Home



7 Ox forgotten



8 All is forgotten



9 Returning to the Source



10 Entering the Marketplace

way? Why not that way? Questions, questions, always questions!

Zen is reluctant to answer questions and usually throws our questions back at us. The only advice would be to simply live in the now, and live a compassionate life. Service and love are at the essence of all true teachings and traditions.

Yet, students are always keen to measure their practice, be told how they are progressing, or at least have signposts along the way marking out their journey.

Well, luckily, Zen has a street map and offers signposts! The Ox herding pictures illustrate the Way, using metaphor to guide us. It is not that we hear different words or get 'better' answers but the meaning of the words changes for us and this enables our stories, pictures and outlook to be different.

In the 12th century, a Chinese Ch'an [Zen] master,

we like to believe we are.

You search when you have lost something or are in want, distress or suffering. But you will not search unless there is hope of finding.

The search can be long and one needs to possess three main requirements for the journey: great faith, great doubt and great determination. This is true for any spiritual growth to mature. Without them, we will flounder. The final picture is our destination where we must arrive with open hands of compassion. The journey in pictures clearly shows us the process, and is helpful for examining our own practice.

We see that the goal of Zen is not to be able to sit for hours on end, as in the *Soto* tradition or answer *koans* as in the *Rinzai* tradition or to be able to quote famous sayings and debate every book. It is, in fact, something far more difficult: to come back to the market place and live with

it from our view. Yet, we also have to live in the world, support ourselves and families, maintain relationships, work, shop, cook, clean, eat and sleep. No wonder, we need great faith and great determination as our companions! Now let's look at the pictures.

Picture 1. To begin, a young farming boy is seen in picture one, most probably asking the question; 'Who am I really?' That could mean re-assessing our lives. Am I happy? Is there joy in my life? Am I fulfilled as a human being? Is there more to my life than spending all my day engrossed in projects and workload. Such questions and similar ones mark the beginning of our search for the ox.

Picture 2. In search of our Ox, we look for books, teachers, videos, gurus. Perhaps we find an interesting course to attend and, listening to the teacher, we feel as if they are speaking to us personally. The words resonate

believes his journey has ended. He is satisfied with the progress made and is enjoying the success. This is comparable perhaps with the sought-after promotions or our delight on receiving recognition. It is hard to be honest with ourselves, but try stepping back to see if your attitude is one of self-satisfaction.

Picture 7. That's how, in picture seven, the Ox disappears; it is forgotten and the seeker is alone. Maybe you are content and no longer seeking, or more likely, feeling isolated and lonely. Fundamentally, the picture reminds us that we are self-absorbed. No one else matters. We live totally in our own minds. But good company [*satsang*] is vital in spiritual life. Join with or form a *sangha*—a group of like-minded friends with whom you can share your practice and experiences.

Picture 8. Faith and trust carry us on and reaching the next stage, Man and Ox both forgotten, we find an

empty circle. Zero! No person, no Ox, nothing! Nothing to see but emptiness. However, the circle is enclosed; it is full of space. So, do you view the circle as empty or full? When you attain your true self, the mind is empty yet limitless.

Picture 9. Returning to the Source may be the answer. Appreciating nature, marvelling at the miracles all around us, things over which we have no control and where we have no say in the matter. A tree blooms, the stream flows. There are birds and fish, and there is no person shown. The options and interpretations are limitless.

Picture 10. Finally, entering the marketplace with open hands. Most often referred to as 'returning'. Coming back to the marketplace from which we wanted to escape, coming back with empty hands of compassion. Returning with a will to serve and with the ability to love without expecting anything in return. So much so that you can't stop yourself from doing it. Allowing compassion to flow freely, first toward your own circumstances and then extending it to others.

This is the aim of Zen practice.

At the end, in the last picture, an old man is seen with a young boy. Returning to ordinary life with a different perspective; empty hands; not holding on to anything; life continues but the search has ended. Having gone



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through the processes described within the pictures, our young boy ages and becomes ageless.

We are not who we thought we were. We are insignificant yet greater than we imagined. We are not alone; we are all in this life together; old and young, rich and poor. Are we really any different from one another? Can we put the insignificant part of us aside and allow the greater part to come forward and be of help to others?

In the start of this article, I gave you only half of the story '*What is the Way*'. I end by giving you the final lines: "What about you: do you see it?", the monk asked. "So long as you see double, saying I don't and you do, and so on, your eyes are clouded," said the master, to which the monk asked, "When there is neither 'I' nor 'You', can one see it?" The master replied, "When there is neither 'I' nor 'You', who is the one that wants to see it?"



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