

Barbara Joshin O'Hara  
*The Oxherder's Journey*  
Week One: "A Hero's Quest"  
July 3, 2017



My name is Barbara Joshin O'Hara, and I am a teacher at Village Zendo, as well as its cofounder with Enkyo Roshi O'Hara. The zendo is a temple of the Zen tradition that is located in downtown New York. I have been with Village Zendo for more than 30 years. During that time I have discovered that the oxherder's journey is one of my favorite artifacts of the Zen tradition. More formally, it is known as the "Ten Oxherding Pictures." This artifact is a graphic depiction of the stages of awakening or enlightenment. By graphic, I mean that it entails or comprises ten images that were originally done in wood carving, dating back to as early as 11th or 12th century China.

Ten of these scenes show the trajectory of an ordinary individual. This individual is an oxherder. In the beginning of his journey, he is searching for his ox. In the final scene, he returns to the marketplace many years later and looks very different.

This story follows a similar archetypal blueprint to the hero's journey. A hapless hero (who happens to be male, but could be any gender) sets out, leaves home, and faces a series of obstacles. An initiatory experience transforms him so deeply that when he returns home, he is able to contribute to his community in a deeper, more meaningful way.

We might ask, has the hero of this journey gained anything? In the Zen tradition, nothing is gained at all—there was no need to set out in the first place because everything that we seek is already here. That which we are seeking we have never lost. For some reason, it seems that we have to take a journey to determine this for ourselves. We are complete and perfect just as we are. Nothing needs to be added or sought out.

If anything changes for the hero, it is their perspective. This change makes all the difference between a life of suffering and a life full of appreciation and ease amidst pain and loss.

Why an oxherder? In our postmodern age, the ox has lost the resonance it had for the people of that time period. Then, it was not uncommon to see young ox calves tied to stakes so they could be domesticated and used to plow the fields. The ox was a powerful symbol of energy that could be harnessed for the good. Civilization took a leap forward when lands could be tilled. This coincided with an increase in literature and the arts; it



created more space and time for new ideas, concepts, and craft making. The ox made more wealth available. Additionally, the cow always been seen as a sacred animal in India.



The journey of this oxherder begins with a sense that something is missing. He goes on a quest. Our first picture is called "Searching for the Ox." It depicts a young man who seems disoriented. He is lost and looking for something. There is a frantic quality to his stance. The accompanied verse says, "Turning away from your own awakening, you became estranged from it. Then enclosed by dust, in the end you've lost it. The hills of home recede farther and farther away. You're lost as soon as the paths divide. Winning and losing consume you like flames. Right and wrong rise around you like blades."

Turning away from your own awakening, you became estranged from it. As the Buddha said, all beings are already awake. And yet, we turn away from our awakening. How do we do this? It begins early on. As soon as there is discomfort, we instinctually protest and look for relief. We seem to be hardwired to move away from discomfort and instead to go towards pleasure. When we are children, we rely on our parents and caregivers to comfort and soothe us when things are overwhelming. This is how we learn to tolerate uncomfortable sensations.

Inevitably, there are times in our lives when our caregiver fails us. We may be left alone with intolerable sensations. At that point our biological substrate alerts us of danger. We have an immediate response of fight, flight, or freeze. This is a basic survival skill that is instinctive. We use it when we feel that something is too much for us to bear.

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Our whole system primes us to run away from whatever is threatening us. If we can't run, it tells us to freeze, to shut down. In doing so we leave the ground of being, which is available to us only in our present experience. By available, I mean this is how it reveals itself to us is in each moment.

We become more skilled at navigating the terrain so that we are able to avoid discomfort. We pride ourselves on our capacities and skills to control our lives in the direction of more pleasurable experiences. Rinzai says, "Followers of the way, if you know that fundamentally there's nothing to seek, you've settled your affairs. But because you have little faith you run about agitatedly, seeking your head, which you think you've lost. You cannot stop yourselves."

We engage in forward momentum by looking for what we think will fill up a sense of increasing dissatisfaction. We believe that something is missing, which makes us externalize our attention. We think it could be out there in the form of success, fame, wealth, and relationships. As we achieve one goal after another, we still ask ourselves, "Is that all? Is that all there is?" This characterizes our posture before we find the teachings. We say to ourselves, "It is either my fault or other people's fault or my environment's fault. Something is the matter. I am not at ease with the way things are and I am divided within myself."

This is essentially the first realization that prompts us to ask the question, "Where do I find the answer?"