



This is part two of our oxherding journey, and last time we spoke, we last, our oxherder is looking for the ox, looking for love, if you will, in all the wrong places. A good question to ask is, "What starts us off on the spiritual journey in the first place?" Not everybody gets the itch. We might ask, "What is life about? Who am I?" Sometimes these questions can be triggered by an event in our life, such as the loss of a relationship, the death of someone close to us, or getting fired from an internship. These events might disrupt the sense that we are in charge and in control of our lives. It disrupts the sense that we are in the driver's seat and that we know where we are going. Something might occur which makes us feel that where we are going no longer makes any sense. We might feel disoriented and confused, suddenly aware that there is a shifting beneath our feet. We don't have all the answers. We may not even know what the questions are in the first place.



Later, we might encounter a book, or person, or a teaching that makes an impact. Suddenly the light turns on. For the first time, we might see the furniture in our room, whereas before we didn't even know we were in a room. This is what picture two is about in the oxherding. It is called, "discovering the traces," or "discovering the tracks of the ox." We see clearly that the young man is looking at hoof prints in the sand. The verse says, "Determination deep in the mountains. Your efforts bear fruit." It is gratifying to see the sign of tracks.

For me, this meant coming upon the phrase "Life is suffering." It was a personal truth that made an impression on me. I realized that life *itself* causes suffering. I thought



the problem was me, but the teaching of the first noble truth explains how life has a capacity to constantly leave us with a sense of loss. This is because of impermanence. Things change. Things do not always turn out the way we want them to.

Life does its own thing, which can be painful. As they say in New Age terms, pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. The expression "life is suffering" is otherwise known as "life is *dukkha*." Life leaves us thirsty, with a sense of wanting. We have an idea that if we do things the right way, we can avoid pain and disappointment. There is an inner quest to navigate and manipulate life so that we can guarantee ourselves plain sailing. When we sit down to meditate for the first time, it can be very sobering, if not disturbing, to see the extent to which our minds are frantically trying to control things. We can watch our endless commentary as we regurgitate and plan and plot and go over what was said, what was done, and what could have been done differently.

In the meantime, our life is happening in this moment. To the extent that we can, the practice is to drop our thoughts and come into our body. The practice is to be present with what is here. In the beginning, of course, we use our breath to help ground us in the now. We can see what a challenge it is at the beginning to do this, because everything in us wants to go toward the next thing. There is a forward momentum, which consists of the thought, "I have so many things I need to do and accomplish!" Seeing where these thoughts begin can move us in such a way that we stop in our tracks. We get the sense that there is another way to be. Picture three is called "Seeing the Ox." It gives us a taste of another dimension that exists beyond the choppiness of our questing and automatic ways of being.





By sitting still and being with ourselves, we feel how much we are being driven by something that runs us ragged trying to meet its demands. The more we can sink into the silence beneath the chatter of our minds, the more we can taste something that is restorative, precisely because it doesn't demand anything of us. It is unconditionally accepting of what is. Our very existence is enough because there is joy in this existence. For the first time, we become aware of an openness and spaciousness. There is freedom that is available to us and allows us to, maybe for the first time, hear sounds that we were oblivious to before. We pick up all the various textures of sounds that are in our environment and it becomes music. We see colors; we can taste flavors. There is an immediacy to our experience without the usual overlay of commentary and mental static.

At this point, we are beginning to get a sense of the habits of the body, mind, and heart that keep us locked up. Some of the habits are our thoughts and ideas about how things should be, our judgments, and our agendas. They give us a tunnel vision that cuts us off from being available to the planet and the abundance that is here. This returns us to the one of the basic teachings of Buddhism: that our suffering is born of our fixations and our need to control our lives so that we only have pleasant experiences. Our misery comes down to a constant and automatic need to pick and choose, to privilege what we like over what we don't like, and to categorize things in such a way so that we are always magnetizing to ourselves what we believe will be favorable. This is why it is so helpful to sit with others, because you commit to sitting for a certain amount of time. You are not going to get up because your pride won't allow you to (because you don't want to look bad in front of others). By committing to sit for a longer period of time than you might like to do on your own, we discover and encounter all kinds of feelings of discomfort that challenge us.

By committing to being still, we are committing to being with whatever comes up, such as the need to scratch or change positions. If I notice that just by being with the discomfort, the discomfort itself shifts and changes. Right there, I've learned that I have a greater capacity to tolerate discomfort. My mind will tell me all kinds of things. It will tell me that my leg is going to fall off, or that I am going to damage my hips for life, or



that I won't be able to stand this sensation. Time and time again, we can prove the mind's promptings and warnings wrong.

Just by sitting on this little mat, we discover the genesis of our actual freedom. It is not what happens to us, per se, it is how we respond, interpret, and react. Often times, we see how knee jerk our reactions are, simply because of our minds say: *danger, danger, unpleasant, unpleasant, move away, move away*. This is simply our biology speaking, and we can be dictated by logical imperatives. The promise here is the capacity to meet a situation that may be challenging, and maintain a sense of equanimity in the face of it.



The fourth picture is called "Catching the Ox." The young herder is using a rope. He actually lassos this enormously strong beast. The verse says, "With your last ounce of strength you take it, that stubborn and strong, it won't be broken. Now it suddenly climbs to high ground. Then it descends to vanish deep into mist." This describes where the oxherder is now. He is in the middle of the struggle of dealing with these patterns that carry so much energy. They require discipline and consciousness to work with them. This part of the journey is the completion of that first stage: being completely separated from one's self and from one's true nature. Whereas before we were unconscious, now we see what is causing our estrangement. We have caught glimpses of another way to be, but it feels inconsistent: *We have it, we have it, now we don't have it*. We know this from meditation. We might struggle with our thoughts and say, "Oh, that was a terrible meditation session." Why do we say this? Because we didn't have one moment of not-thinking. By simply sitting with and cultivating this capacity to be a witness, by being

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aware of what our minds are doing, we can make a difference in how we are pulled along by the mind.

It can be hard realizing we are not the drivers of our minds. We might have thought we could sit down and command our thoughts to do our bidding. It can be humbling to see our emotional habits of mind and the patterns that continue endlessly, no matter how much we try to work with them. We call them our own, but we don't even know if they are ours. They may have been handed down from our parents, our grandparents, or our ancestors. Now they are in our lap to work with. The really great thing is when we begin to see and notice them. It can be very hard initially to capture those programs that run us, thoughts such as, "Oh, I'll never amount to anything," or, "I'm not good enough," or "Everybody else can do it. I can't. Other people are smarter. Other people are better. I'm not. I don't have what it takes." It takes a while before we actually see how these conditioned thoughts run us. They contribute to a sense of identity which we believe is necessarily defective and lacking.

The outer shell that we take ourselves to be is, in fact, what keeps us feeling small and imprisoned.