



So now we come to part three of the oxherding journey. We're looking at the fifth picture, which is called "Taming the Ox." This is a lovely image that shows a docile ox following the young man. You'll remember in the last part, we saw the struggle that the young man had to catch the ox. Here, it shows that the relationship between the young man and the ox is a lot easier. The poem says, "Once one little thought arises, another follows. Adhere to awakening, and all becomes truth. Reside in ignorance and all is unreal. This happens not because of the world, but only because of your mind. Keep a firm grip on the rope and do not waver."

"Once one little thought arises, another follows." That's just what the mind does. Practice [helps us] let go of our thoughts. Our thoughts are constructs, fabrications. They are not real. They are not simply our experience in the moment. "Adhere to awakening, and all becomes truth."

Awakening would be seeing the thought as the thought, and just that. To buy into our thoughts, or to be pulled along by our thoughts as if they were facts, is delusion or ignorance. "Reside in ignorance and all is unreal." So, we might notice though as our practice continues that for a time, things seem to look brighter and we might even feel that we are becoming kinder, gentler, happier people. Then after a while, these improvements seem to fade and we start thinking, "I'm not improving; I'm getting worse." We see our moodiness, our tendency to anger and impatience perhaps, and all the ugly thoughts that fill us with shame, our meanness, our smallness, our

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pettiness, our ambition, our need to prove ourselves better than others. Now it seems that all our practice does is magnify all of our faults and failings.

This can be depressing. For a while, it can seem positively hopeless. We feel, "Oh, we're not made of the stuff we thought we were made of." Really, all that's happening is that our capacity for paying attention has grown. We are able to witness the movements of our mind. We're able to show up a lot more for our experience than before. We see that not all of it is edifying. Chögyam Trungpa described meditation as one insult after another. We see, too, that the point of this journey is that we're not on a journey of self-improvement. We are on a journey of realizing what the self is, which is very different. The difference is that we are able to expand our capacity to simply be with what is so that ultimately, we see that we are everything—nothing excluded.

Sitting, being able to watch the movements of our mind and our heart, causes the dissolution of the imprisoned, reactive, smaller self. It is what allows us to be present to the eons of conditioning, the eons of hurt, the eons of all of our experiences. We don't know the experiences of our ancestors, our parents, but being able to show up and simply bare witness is a supreme act of compassion. It allows aspects of our being to come into awareness, and, in that awareness, they are liberated.



In picture six, we see that the oxherder is actually sitting happily on the ox. He can trust the ox to

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lead the direction home and he's playing a flute. This is called "Riding Home on the Ox." The verse goes, "Shields and spears are gone. Winning and losing are nothing again. You sing woodsman's village songs and play children's country tunes. Stretched out on the back of your ox, you gaze at the sky. We call you, but you won't turn around. Catch at you, but you won't be tied down."

This represents coming into a place of ease. Finally, the struggle has been fought and has resulted in a confidence that allows us to simply be and to trust in the unfolding of reality. There's a return to simplicity, to innocence. All of our energy, you see, is no longer being taken up with this struggle to assert ourselves or defend ourselves. We're no longer at war with ourselves because we have been able to let all of our selves be. There's a sense of freedom and spaciousness. We can accept things as they come, knowing that they will change. We don't need to fight them. There's a greater sense of ease. Dogen said, "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget one's self is to perceive one's self as all things. To realize this is to cast off body and mind of self, and others." When you reach this stage, you will be detached even from enlightenment, but will practice it without thinking.

When we reach this stage, we know what the self is. We're not a bounded creature who is simply the son or daughter of our parents who had such-and-such a thing happen to us when we were five years old, and who never want it to happen again. Certainly, our conditioning is not eliminated, but we're no longer quite run by it or suckered into it. We have a capacity to look at what comes up, the reactivity, and, at the best of times, have a moment of awareness that can help us resist being pulled into it.



Picture seven is called "The Ox Forgotten, The Self Remains." This shows a picture of the ox herder sitting quietly outside his hut. The ox is no longer there. The sun is high in the sky, and the herder's not doing anything. He's relaxing. The verse says, "Astride your ox, you've reached the hills of home. With ox put away, you too are at ease. The sun's risen three poles high, yet you're still dreaming. Your whip and line hang idle under the thatched eaves." Here, the search is called off. The struggle has ended and there's a sense of peacefulness and relaxation. We know who we are, and no longer have to seek. The more we can savor the silence beneath the chatter, the more we realize that we're always home just where we are and that nothing more is asked of us. Our existence is enough.

This is a feeling that many of us can actually taste, particularly at the end of a silent retreat. This oxherding journey could take years, decades, or one could go through these stages in a moment. Certainly in any retreat that you might go on, be it a week-long retreat, a ten-day, three weeks, a month, three months—we can see some of the same developments. You see the sense of alienation at the beginning, the struggle, wanting things to be different, the complaining about how things are. That sense of fretfulness and agitation that just feels like our nerves are on edge and everything is rubbing us the wrong way. Then simply by sitting quietly, following our breath day after day, something settles down. One feels increasingly in harmony. What has happened is

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that one is now realizing that sense of separateness is dissolving, and one is becoming part of the one fabric that manifests in the myriad forms around us. It emanates from the one seamless source, which is the self.

Huang-po said, "All the buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the one mind beside which nothing exists. The one mind alone is Buddha, and there is no distinction between Buddha and sentient beings. To awaken suddenly to the fact that our own mind is the Buddha, that there is nothing to be attained or a single action to be performed, this is the supreme way." It's already here. It already has been, and always will be. It is not going anywhere, but it is occluded from us because of our own sense of separateness.