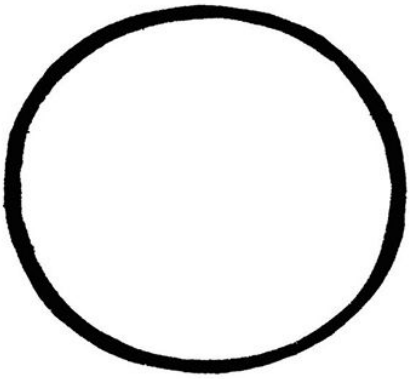
Barbara Joshin O'Hara
The Oxherder's Journey
Week Four: "The Enlightened Return"
July 24, 2017



Part four, the final part of the oxherder's journey, starts with picture eight, and it's a very dramatic image. It simply shows a black circle, nothing else, and it's entitled, "Forget Both Self and Ox."

As I mentioned before, Zen is not a path of self-improvement, but rather a path that wishes to solve the question of life and death. Zen says that when we are born, nothing is added to the world, and when we die, nothing is taken away.

This eighth picture, which used to be the final picture until two more were added, is the empty circle that reveals the insubstantial nature of the self. The verse goes, "Whip and line, and you and the ox are all gone to emptiness. Into a blue sky for words too vast. Can a snowflake survive the fire of a flame pit? Attain this, and truly be one with the masters of the past."

We might say that what separates us from our true nature is this desire to be a "somebody." It's not so much the self that grasps, but rather that grasping is what makes the self. It is to believe in the thoughts that we have about ourselves and simply create this character that we entrust with substance and belief.

The question, "Who would I be without this thought?" might be a let down for the character we take ourselves to be, or it might be a let down for our self-image, but that in itself is awakening.

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Being on a spiritual path, we're certainly not exempt from setting up all kinds of self-images, but in Zen we are always brought back to this core truth that is revealed in the exchange between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu.

The Emperor Wu asked Bodhidharma, "What is the highest and holiest truth?" He might have expected Bodhidharma to say generosity or virtue or goodness. Instead Bodhidharma's answer was, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy." This was a bit of a shock for our emperor because he had invested a lot of energy in building temples and working towards merit for his actions. Emperor Wu was not unlike many of us at the beginning of our practice, when we hope that in the end the practice will give us an upgrade or develop our assets in some way so that eventually things work out better for us.

The end, as in the beginning, is all one, and it's simply here—things as they are in this moment. "Vast emptiness, nothing holy" cuts through any thoughts of gain. In that way, Zen is hardcore because it goes for the jugular. It's the practice of things being taken away. The eighth picture is where we are left with absolutely nothing, and that nothingness is, of course, everything.

The emperor looked at Bodhidharma and he said, "Who are you to speak like this?"Bodhidharma's response was, "I don't know." The enormous openness of this "I don't know" is the openness to, again, this everything—he miraculous abundance of all that this moment provides if we can simply be present for it, as opposed to my own separate agenda. We see that the self is not something that can be pinned down, reduced to an image or a profession or a resume or a catalog of attributes. That is not what we are.

We chant in the evening at our temple an evening *gatha* [prayer] that says, "Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken." It's a plea for us to make use of the time to practice letting go in each moment. Letting go of our ideas, of our agenda, so that we can be available to experience true nature in the only way that we can, which is in this moment, how it is manifesting in me, through me.

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The next picture after this empty circle is picture nine, and it's called "Return to the Origin, Back to the Source." It simply shows a picture where nature has returned, things as they are. We've seen the emptiness, the fact that phenomena are constantly dynamic, ever changing, and that the world is manifesting in each moment in you. The verse says, "You returned to the origin, you went back to the source, saw the emptiness of the self and of all things, such wasted effort. How much better to be blind and deaf. From inside your hut, you don't see outside your hut. Let the streams just flow on, the flowers just bloom red."

In a way, it's saying you've gone through all of this work and struggle and many hours sitting in practice simply to be back with life as it is. Why bother? It's like this other saying that says, "In the beginning of practice, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. Then when I had an awakening, I saw that mountains weren't mountains, rivers weren't rivers. After 30 years, I saw that mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers." We're back in the world *just as it is*, with the difference being that we have seen something. How much better to be blind and deaf!

It's like saying when we are deprived of our senses we're in a state of innocence, we're not caught up in things as things, we're closer to the source. It reminds me of a scene in the movie, *Into Great Silence*, where these Cistercian monks lived in silence, and there was a blind monk who

was interviewed while sitting in his cell, which had virtually nothing there—no arm chairs, no computers or radios or TV. He was saying that every day he gives thanks to God for depriving him of his sight. Imagine, he gives thanks to God for depriving him of his sight—why? He said it brought him closer to God, and continued to say that was the whole purpose of our life because that is what makes us happy.

Our heart can only be filled when it is truly at home. When the heart knows where home is, the search is over. The whole universe is none other than you in each moment. Whatsoever is occurring right now in this world, it's as *you*. Let the streams flow red, let the flowers bloom: if you are feeling heartbroken, that is *what is here right now*. That is the world, the whole world is heartbroken, and we make space for that to be.

The final picture, picture ten, is called "Entering the Marketplace with Extended Hands." It shows us this hearty, jaunty figure entering the marketplace carrying a wine jar. The verse goes, "With bare chest and feet, you come to the market. Under dirt and ash, your face breaks into a laugh. With not display of magic powers, you make withered trees burst into flowers."

This figure with his bare chest is modeled on the figurative Hotei, a 10th-century itinerant Chinese monk who had a reputation for eccentricity as well as for being enlightened. He was

unconventional in his behavior, to say the least, in that he showed complete freedom to be himself, unconstrained by notions of what other people might expect. He wandered around with a big bag and a straw hat, and whenever he felt like it, he would lie down and take a nap. If people gave him things, he would put them into a bag, and then when he met some kids, he would take them out of this bag and give them away. Talking and laughing, he mingled with the common folk.

When it came time for him to pass, he seated himself in zazen on a great rock, and he composed the following poem and passed away. The poem said, "Maitreya, the true Maitreya embodied in myriad selves, time and again reveals himself, yet no one at the time knows."

This figure who has ended his journey is bare-chested, signaling his openness, his trust, his generosity, his sense of abundance. He can receive give freely as the occasion demands. Even though life is hard—his face is covered in dust—he's able to laugh and be joyful. Because he is so present and so completely available in the moment, his own sense of aliveness brings the world around him into life.

With no display of magic powers, Hotei can bring forth life in things that are lifeless. Why? Because he is alive. When we are alive, when we are filled with the sense of what it is to be alive, then everything around us is filled with significance and becomes precious.

On that note, the journey never ends—we know that it is endless. But in this journey, we can look forward to deepening our sense of awe for being on it.