THE OX-HERDING PICTURES OF ZEN BUDDHISM

Ten Ox-Herding Pictures
With musical accompaniment

Presented with the traditional foreward, prefaces and poems
with a new introduction
by the composer
Sonny Saul

includes audio CD of the original music

INTRODUCTION

The Ox-Herding Pictures of Zen Buddhism

Affectionately regarded in the legend and lore of Buddhism, the popularity of the ox-herding pictures has derived, in part, from their usefulness. Anyone interested in Zen is likely familiar with this series of ink and brush pictures which, providing a symbolic model, depict the story of a herdsman taming an unruly ox. It is significant that this superb simile of the dynamics of meditation practice —where the ox stands for the mind and the herdsman for the person engaged in meditation—goes back to very ancient and "pre-Zen" times.

The earliest known use of the ox and ox-herder in Buddhist teachings is the following poem which may be traceable to the third century B.C. It expresses clearly and concisely the analogy of the taming of the calf to the taming of the mind.

"Just as man would tie to a post
a calf that should be tamed
Even so here one should tie one's own mind
tight to the object of mindfulness."

Ever since, practitioners and commentators have enlarged and elaborated with more details and explanations, and artists eventually came to depict this same idea; the similarity of the gradual training, of the mind to the taming of a wild ox. It is worth noting this represents a common thread and simile in

both Theravada and Mahayana tradition as well as in Zen.

The first ox-herding pictures are from China. Now lost, these pictures are attributed to a Zen teacher, Seiko, from the period of the Sung Dynasty (11th and 12th centuries.) Seiko illustrated the stages of spiritual progress by a series of pictures which showed the gradual whitening of an ox until it disappeared—depicted by a circle.

That this disappearance, which seemed to imply that a oneness, or unity of sorts resulting from effacement of both Self and Other, was an ultimate goal or eventual result of Zen training, was challenged pictorially by another 12th century Chinese monk: Kakuan of the Rinzai school, who added two more pictures beyond the circle to clearly illustrate that the person of most complete spiritual development continues to live in the same reality as everyone else and moves there with the utmost freedom amongst ordinary men, whom he inspires with his compassion and radiance.

Kakuan's revision and improvement of the ox-herding series—because of both its aesthetic appeal and its thorough and consistent symbolic expression, and hence its usefulness in practice to this day—has become most widely known and influential.

The original pictures drawn by Kakuan unfortunately have not survived. What we have today are copies made by a 15th century Japanese artist/monk, Shubun, which are preserved in a monastery in Kyoto where Shubun practiced.

Whenever they are presented, the ox-herding pictures are always accompanied by a general foreword to the series, individual prefaces and a set of poems for each picture. The original foreword and individual prefaces were written by Chi-yuan, a monk in the direct line of Kakuan. The first of the set of poems (the only one reproduced here) is attributed to Kakuan himself.

The translation of the prefaces and poems into English presents a great challenge and a

comparison of the various attempts is edifying. Of particular interest is the confusion about the nature of the animal itself. Though the animal shown in the illustrations is horned, D.T. Suzuki's 1949 translation (the first into English) is titled "The Ten Cow-Herding Pictures." Paul Reps' translation, which has greatly popularized the series, always used the word "bull."

This version will use Suzuki's translations of Chi-yuan's foreword, but for overall consistency substitutes the word "ox." The prefaces and commentaries presented here are a fresh attempt and interpretation, likewise the original set of musical pieces I have composed in contemplation of the series; one for each image.

Finally, I want to call attention to the troubling contradiction between the highly specific step-by-step program represented by the pictures, poems, prefaces and now music, in the ox-herding series and what are usually considered the primary teachings of Zen Buddhism: that the attainment of Enlightenment or Buddha-hood is the result of a characteristic experience called "satori" which is always unexpected, always sudden and abrupt, always outside of scriptures; further, that it is impossible to obtain satori by mere study; and further, that any and all teachings are so many unnecessary obstructions and impediments. Startling, and koan-like, this contradiction deserves our consideration.

This is the first time that the ox-herding pictures have been presented with accompanying music. These short, abstract pieces are offered as homage, programmatic commentary, and as meditative aids.

Sonny Saul
Woodstock, Vermont

FOREWORD

Chi-yuan wrote this foreword to Master Kakuan's Ten Ox-Herding Pictures

The real source of all the Buddhas is the original nature of sentient beings. Through delusion we fall into the Three Worlds, through awakening we suddenly leap free of the Four Modes of Being. Therefore there is something for the Buddhas to do and something for people to carry out. In compassion the old sage set up various ways to teach his disciples sometimes the complete and sometimes the partial truth, leading them suddenly or gradually from the shallow to the profound, from the coarse to the subtle. Finally one of his disciples responded with a smile. He was foremost in the practice of letting go, with eyes like blue lotus. Since then the treasure of the true Dharma Eye has spread everywhere, and has reached even our country.

One who has attained to the core of this truth soars without trace like a bird above all laws and norms. But one attached to the manifold things is caught in speech and misled by words; he is like the clever turtle that tried to wipe out its footprints with its tail, thus making them more conspicuous.

Long ago, master Seiko, aware of the different abilities of sentient beings, adjusted his teachings to the capacities of his disciples and prescribed remedies according to their respective illnesses. To this purpose he drew pictures of taming an ox. In these, with the ox becoming gradually white, he shows first the growing development of the disciple, and then, at the stage of the spotless purity of the bull, how the ability of the trainee has ripened. Finally, with both man and bull vanished, he illustrates the forgetting of heart and surroundings.

Though at this stage, insight has already pierced through to the root, within the surrounding circumstances, something remains that is not yet clear. Here those of shallow root ability tend to fall into erroneous doubt, while students whose understanding is as yet only small or medium, become bewildered and wonder whether they have fallen into empty emptiness, or conversely, whether they have been snared by the view of seeming eternalism.

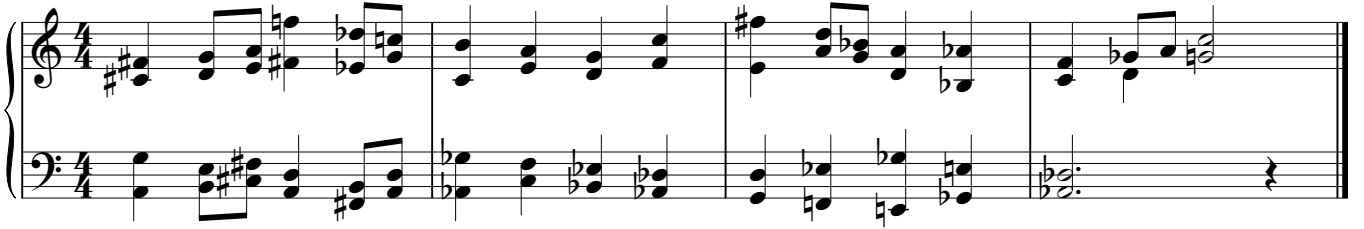
Kakuan also composed a poem for each picture. Like master Seiko before him, he put his whole heart into the execution of these drawings. The ten beautiful poems both shine into an are reflected by each other.

Kakuan's Ox-Herding pictures start with the missing ox and lead to the return into the origin. These poems fit the differing abilities and needs of those in training like food and drink appease hunger and thirst. With them as guides, I, Chi-yuan, have probed into the profound meaning and extracted hidden subtlties—like a jelly fish lends his eye to the little shrimps that shelter beneath it.

From "Searching for the Ox" to "Entering the City," like attempting to draw a square circle, my prefaces try to describe the indescribable, thus needlessly disturbing the peace of men. There is no heart to look for, less even less so an ox! How strange the one who enters the market place! Unless the heart of the ancient masters has been matched in its very depth, the resulting wrong will spread to the successors. Truly my own Foreword has come from the depth of my heart.

I — LOOKING FOR THE OX

What's the search about? The ox has never been missing. It's the man. He's been led astray... and become separated from his own inmost nature. That's what is lost. The road and its paths have become obscured. Home seems ever remote. All around, desires for gain; fears of loss flare up like a fire. Ideas of right and wrong line up like opposing sides in battle.



Alone, alongside a swelling river, lost in a wilderness of unending mountain paths,

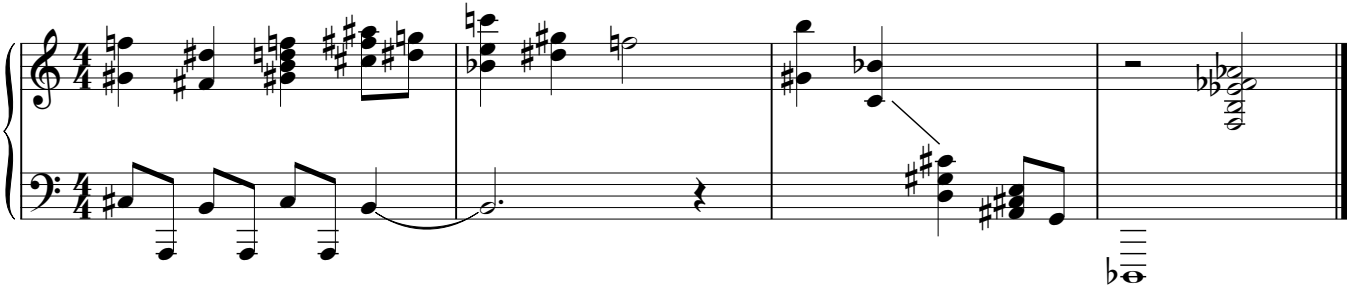
He is searching for an ox.

Exhausted and in despair, as evening darkens, he finds no clue.

He only hears the crickets in the maple woods.

II — SEEING THE TRACES OF THE OX

By reading the SUTRAS and listening to the teachers he has come to understand something. He knows now that things, however multitudinous, are of one substance; that the world around him and his own nature are reflections of one another. Yet, he is unable to distinguish what is genuine from what is fake. His mind is still confused as to truth and falsehood. As he has not yet entered the gate, he is provisionally said to have 'noticed the traces.'



By the water, under the trees, scattered are the traces of the ox.

But there it is—amidst the thick and fragrant woods; the trail.

However remote, over the hills and up to the mountains, the ox may wander,

With its nose reaching up to the sky, it cannot conceal itself any longer.