

Two Essays on the Oxherding Series

I: To Complete the Incomplete

I met the painter Max Gimblett in the early 1990s when we were both in residence at an art and study center in Italy. Soon thereafter Max began inviting me to work with him in his studio on the Bowery in New York City. Usually when I would arrive I'd find he had covered the flat surfaces of the studio with large sheets of drawing paper and laid out pots of *sumi* ink mixed in varying degrees of black and gray. Max would place a brush in my hand, and he and I would proceed to fill the paper with words and images.

At some point in this process Max suggested that we try to make new versions of a set of medieval Chinese poems and drawings known as the *Oxherding Series*. *Oxherding* presents a parable about the conduct of Buddhist practice. In the most common version there are ten drawings, the first of which shows a young herder who has lost the ox he is supposed to be tending. In subsequent images he finds the ox's tracks, sees the beast itself, tames it, and rides it home. In the seventh drawing the ox disappears: It "served a temporary purpose," the accompanying poem says; it was a metaphor for something, not to be mistaken for the thing itself. The herder too disappears in the next drawing; the image simply shows a circle (Japanese, *enso*), a common symbol for enlightenment. The ninth drawing implies that the person who has achieved enlightenment does not then retreat from the world; called "Returning to the Roots, Going Back to the Source," it usually shows a scene from nature. The final drawing shows a chubby fellow with a sack "entering the village with gift-giving hands."

The *Oxherding Series* has appeared in a number of versions over the centuries. What I've just described is the one attributed to the twelfth-century Chinese Rinzai Zen master Kuo-an Shih-yuan. Master Kuo-an composed a four-line poem to accompany each of his *Oxherding* drawings, and at some later date one of his students,

Ciyuan, added poetic “prefaces” or “harmonizing verses” to each of these. The poems have survived; Kuo-an’s original drawings have been lost, but many copies exist, including a set from Japan dated 1278.

The idea that Max and I might try our hand at twenty-first-century American versions of *Oxherding* took concrete form in the spring of 2002 when we were invited to spend several weeks together at an arts center in Colorado. That short period of intense work gave the project a good foundation, but it was just the beginning of what turned out to be six years of periodic engagement. Over and over again Max came at the drawings, finding his way into the spirit of the series. I did the same with the translations.

On my first approach to putting the *Oxherding* poems into English what I did was to gather all the existing translations I could find and try to intuit what lay behind them. In this way (I call it “translating from English to English”) I made my own first drafts. I then decided I needed to go deeper and therefore sought out a tutor, Jascha Smilack, at the time a doctoral candidate in Chinese literature at Harvard. Jascha and I worked one whole summer, moving character by character through the Chinese originals until I had a fairly sure sense of how the poems were constructed and what they had to say.

One of the pleasures of translation lies in the play of choices that must be made. Take the first line of Neruda’s “Walking Around,” which in Spanish runs “*Sucede que me canso de ser hombre.*” In the first translation of the poem I came across, Angel Flores’s of 1946, the line read, “It happens that I’m tired of being a man.” Here are four later versions, by Ben Belitt, Robert Bly, Donald Walsh, and Mark Eisner:

It so happens I’m tired of just being a man.

It so happens I am sick of being a man.

I happen to be tired of being a man.

Comes a time I’m tired of being a man.

Belitt adds a few words for emphasis; Bly replaces “tired of” with the more vernacular “sick of”; Walsh plays with the subject; Eisner gives the line an idiomatic turn. Any Spanish sentence can be brought into English in many ways. I think of the process of making choices (what’s best for that verb, “*cansarse*”—to get tired? to weary? to get fed up?) as adjusting the colors of the sentence, shifting the lighting. Some things stay the same, but the reds deepen, or a touch of iridescent blue gets added. A shadow here, a bright spot there. A great aesthetic pleasure comes when one finally gets the sentence properly lit in English so that it seems both true to the original and well fitted to its new tongue. Never, of course, is it *the* sentence. There can always be another translation.

“When I read anyone else’s translation I keep altering and transposing the words in my brain, and the result is something light, ethereal, like lacework,” Chekhov once wrote to a friend. When we read something in its original language we are not normally drawn to think about how it might be changed; reading in translation, however, can spur us to get involved, to freshly imagine. (I’m quoting Chekhov in Constance Garnett’s translation. Is “brain” the right word or would “mind” be better? “Light” or “weightless”? “Lacework” or “lace”?) A simple way to prompt this kind of participatory engagement is to come at a foreign text through multiple English versions, as I first did with *Oxherding*. Compare these two approaches to Genesis 1:3, the first from the King James Bible and the second from Robert Young’s “Literal Translation” of 1862:

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saith, ‘Let light be’; and light is.

Or compare a piece of Alexander Pope’s 1715 *Iliad* (concerning Paris and Helen)—

The enamour’d Phrygian boy
Rush’d to the bed, impatient for the joy.
Him Helen follow’d slow with bashful charms,
And clasp’d the blooming hero in her arms.

—with Robert Fagles’s 1990 version:

He led the way to bed. His wife went with him.

“That isn’t what I meant to say,” we sometimes say, and then restate the thing we had in mind, using different words. All sentences are “translations” of something we once had in mind and are the fruit of many small, usually unconscious choices. When it comes to written texts, where a foreign original is available in multiple translations, the choices are made more evident and the reader can more readily enter, more easily become co-creator of the new articulation.

As for *Oxherding*, when it came to putting the Chinese poems into English I found that my interest in multiple versions was intensified and complicated by both the nature of the original poems and the Buddhist teaching they convey. The syntax of classical Chinese turns out to be much looser than anything available to us in English. By “syntax” we most simply mean the rules by which the words in a sentence are arranged, these rules in turn reflecting our many assumptions about how the world itself is arranged—how events unfold in time, for example, or how human perception operates, or how we distinguish between subjective and objective knowledge. In the introduction to his masterful anthology *Chinese Poetry*, Wai-lim Yip points out that while English demands “rigid syntactical cooperation between and among parts of speech,” in Chinese the “syntactical demands are sparse, if not absent.” English verbs always have tenses, for example, but “the classical Chinese language is tenseless.” English often moves from subject to verb to object, each linked to the next in a clear causal order; Chinese, on the other hand, may be parasyntactic, meaning that things are simply placed in a line, their connection being left to the reader’s intuition. Chinese is silent about gender and number, too. The character for “person” could mean “he” or “she” or “people.” In all these ways and more, Yip writes, the “user of the classical Chinese language” has a “degree of syntactical freedom” not available to English-speakers, or, to put it the other way around, translation into English often involves adding explanations to what was originally quite spare.

Take, for example, the texts that accompany the first *Oxherding* drawing. The fourteen characters of the opening two lines of the poem signify, more or less:

without bounds stirring grasses leaving tracking down
waters broad mountains distant road more obscure

The Chinese is not wholly without syntax; in this case there are verbal units within each line so that certain sets of characters are understood to hang together:

[without bounds] [stirring grasses] [leaving tracking down]
[waters broad] [mountains distant] [road more obscure]

Still, much is left unsaid. There's no indication of who the actor is (if there is one), nor are the verbs conjugated in regard to person or time. Admittedly, there is a title, "Search Ox," so it makes sense to say that the lines describe a herdsman (or boy) tracking down a lost ox—but none of that is stated in the poem.

The preface doesn't fill in the picture any better. The first three lines might be put into English, character-by-character, as:

[From start not lost] [what use search for]
[Because abandoned awakening] [so become scarce]
[Living near dust] [and therefore loss]

Again, no actor is named, no oxherd. In *Oxherding* as a whole, in fact, the character for "person" (*rén*) does not appear until the last line of Poem 5 (the ox "willingly follows the person"), and in Poem 7 we are told that this person should be forgotten, that he is "empty." A returned human presence is implied in the last two drawings (someone sees the green mountains; someone comes to the village with gift-giving hands) but once again no actor is named.

All this said, it is almost universally the case that translators treat what the Chinese leaves unstated as if it were a blank space that

must be filled in. In his *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki renders the lines just cited from Preface 1 as follows:

The beast has never gone astray, and what is the use of searching for him? The reason why the oxherd is not on intimate terms with him is because the oxherd himself has violated his own inmost nature.

Philip Kapleau's version in *Three Pillars of Zen* is similar:

The Ox has never really gone astray, so why search for it? Having turned his back on his True-nature, the man cannot see it.

Note that both translators have not only filled in the subject, they have provided an object as well, the ox, even though it too doesn't appear in the original. In the *Oxherding* texts, the character for "ox" (*niu*) does not show up until Poem 6, where we find the oxherd riding on the beast's back. Not only is the sequence more than half over before readers get the name of the thing being sought but it's taken away as soon as it's given. Preface 7 names the ox again only to say that, as with the person, we should forget about it. It was just a device, a metaphor, a fish-trap not to be confused with the fish it was meant to catch.

It will here be useful to pause and reflect on the meaning of this metaphorical ox. Even admitting that "ox" is a device used in teaching and not the thing itself, a symbol and not the actual object of the search, how are we to understand it? What does the metaphor represent?

There are two traditional answers. In some readings, the ox is taken to be the self of appetites and delusions that must be confronted, tamed, and disciplined. It represents the mind (or body) that wanders from correct practice and proper attention, the restless self that the oxherd-meditator must attend to, patiently pulling it back to the path of proper attention. More often, however, the ox is taken to represent the opposite: the "True Self," the "Original Face,"

“Buddha-Nature.” Understood this second way, Preface 1 points out that there isn’t really any need to search because the True Self is already present, the oxherd’s problem being not so much to find something he has lost as to wake from ignorance and see things as they are.

One modern teacher, Master Sheng-yen, kindly points out that we needn’t resolve these conflicting readings of the image. “Both views are admissible...; the ox is...ambiguous.” All metaphors allow for a range of readings, so why not let the ox stand simultaneously for the mind of vexation and the mind of enlightenment? After all, “affliction and enlightenment define one another”; as we face the one we actualize the other. (In some versions of the *Oxherding* drawings, the ox turns slowly from black to white—a simple way to represent and resolve this ambiguity.)

To come back to my earlier train of thought, the point here is that whatever meaning we give to it, the ox as a named object of the search scarcely appears in the poems. As with the actor who does the searching, it is a presence only lightly asserted.

The consequent spareness is typical of all classical Chinese poems, not just of those with overtly Buddhist themes. Yip illustrates the point with a five-character line from the eighth-century poet Meng Hao-jan:

move boat moor smoke shore

Brought over into English, this might read “I move my boat, mooring on the smoky riverbank”—a plausible rendering, but still it is the reader (or translator) who has provided a subject, chosen a tense for the verb, and then linked the other elements in a presumed commonsensical manner. Most translations of classical Chinese “explain” the original in this manner, as if the Chinese were a compact code in need of being unpacked.

There is much to be said about the general puzzle of how the syntactic looseness of Chinese might be represented in English, but for now the point is that the spareness of *Oxherding* is not unique. It is, however, especially well fitted to the teaching offered by the series.

In *The Book of Tea*, Kakuzo Okakura has this to say about the “conception of perfection” for both Buddhists and Taoists:

The dynamic nature of their philosophy laid more stress upon the process through which perfection was sought than upon perfection itself. True beauty could be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete.

If the observer is called upon to complete the scene, both an aesthetics and a pedagogy follow: An artist or a teacher should resist presenting a perfected picture because doing so will only produce a passive student. To rephrase Okakura in the context of *Oxherding*: The true *dharma* can only be discovered by one whose practice completes the incomplete.

The classic Chinese poem invites its readers to inhabit its field of elements, images presented one after another without the kind of explanatory connections we expect in English. It gives us this (in Poem 3)—

luxurious dense head horn
painting difficult complete

—rather than this (in Suzuki’s version):

That splendid head decorated with stately horns—
what painter can reproduce him?

The reader, instead of being told how the poem’s elements are related, is left to imagine those relations. The images in a Chinese poem, writes Yip,

form an atmosphere or environment, an ambience,
in which the reader may move and be directly present,
poised for a moment before being imbued
with the atmosphere that evokes (*but does not state*)
an aura of feeling....

The reader is invited into a context that allows him (and here Yip echoes Okakura) to “participate in completing the aesthetic experience of an intense moment, the primary form of which the poet has arrested in concrete data.”

In the opening oxherding poem, for example, the “aura of feeling” is weary despair, and the assumption of the poem’s syntactic spareness is that a reader is more likely to feel her own hopeless fatigue rise as she reads if she finds no actor in the poem than if she finds herself asked to witness that lost boy. English versions that augment the Chinese by naming the actor are not exactly mistranslations, but they tend to preclude participatory reading. Consider, for example, Suzuki’s rendering of one phrase in Poem 1: “He knows not where to go.” The Chinese characters, as usual, name no subject (they mean simply “no / place / to-hunt”). Adding a subject makes a proper English sentence, of course, but doing so also suggests to the reader that this is a scene to be observed, not entered; as such, it is less likely to evoke an intimate response, one closer to “*I* know not where to go.”

Even that, of course, would posit a subject not present in the Chinese—but with an important distinction: The subject appears in the reader’s mind, not in the poem. To offer it in the poem would be to beg the very questions that *Oxherding* sets out to pose: What is this “self” that feels it has lost something? What exactly has it lost?

Leaving the poem silent in regard to both the searcher and the thing sought not only leaves such questions open, it suggests how they might be answered. For note that the mind that reads the poem can hardly help (like most translators) supplying an actor to operate in the field of elements. Be it “*he* knows not” or “*I* know not,” if the Self-That-Doesn’t-Know, the Self-of-Weary-Despair, appears as the poems are read, then before our eyes we see manifested one link in “the chain of dependent origination” (Sanskrit: *pratitya-samutpada*), the arising, that is to say, of a sense of self out of the conditions at hand. What I’ve been calling the poem’s “field of elements” includes these: a move toward dust, endless forking roads, preoccupation with “gain and loss,” etc. And the poem implies that once all these things are disposed in the field of consciousness, the Self-of-Weary-

Despair will come into being. It will arise, yes, but not as an independent and substantial thing; it exists in relationship to the conditions that surround it, and it will disappear (it can be forgotten, it will prove to be empty) as soon as they are altered or dispersed. By implication, there is a way of being that would not so readily create a self, a subject, out of any given field of elements, that would not so swiftly “translate” experience into selfhood. Preface 9 gives a sketch of that way:

See the thriving and withering of forms;
 Live in the still and quiet of non-action;
 Do not identify with illusion and change.
 How could anything be improved?
 The waters are blue, the mountains are green.

The spareness of Chinese syntax can do more than raise the kind of questions about identity that I’ve just outlined. Much else can be put in play. As I’ve said, an English sentence typically moves from subject to verb to object: “John hit the ball.” In a Chinese sentence, the elements are less determined. What about “The ball hit John”: Could that be an allowed reading? Consider Gen P. Sakamoto’s version of Preface 10. He casts the poem in the first person (“I enter the market; ...I return home,” etc.), then does something surprising with the closing lines. The Chinese characters in question mean, more or less:

[wine shop] [fish shop]
 [influence make] [become Buddhas]

Kapleau’s version gives the conventional reading: An unnamed “he” enters the market and at the close of the poem “He leads innkeepers and fishmongers in the Way of the Buddha.” Sakamoto, however, flips the subject and object: “Wine shop and fish market / Become Buddha / And enlighten me”!

In a similar vein, I myself have wondered if the usual reading of Image 4 might not be turned around. This is the moment when the oxherd has caught the ox and we see man and beast pulling in oppo-

site directions, the herder's rope stretched taut between them. If the ox is a metaphor, this is the one place where it seems most clearly to stand for the restless, unruly self, the flesh full of desire or the constantly wandering mind. After all, if the ox were a metaphor for the "True Self," "Buddha Mind," etc., why would the herder need these tools of discipline, the whip and the rope?

But perhaps we are reading the image backwards. Perhaps it is the ox who is disciplining the oxherd and the title "Catch Ox" doesn't mean "the oxherd catches the ox" but rather "the ox catches the oxherd." After all, sometimes we submit ourselves to discipline once we have a clear sense that it will yield results. The oxherd sees the ox in Image 3; in Image 4, the ox, the True Self, demands practice of the oxherd. He may think he's caught an ox, but it is the ox that's caught him!

This is an idiosyncratic reading, I realize, but the looseness of the Chinese syntax allows it. From the field of offered images, this meaning may arise. Who's to say which way the energy runs along that herder's rope? As for the fish shop at the end of Preface 10, there lie the fish on beds of ice, their eyes open: Who's to say they cannot be the near cause of someone's awakening? Who's to say how any one seeker is to complete the incomplete?

As we've seen, translators of *Oxherding* respond variously to the incongruities between Chinese and English. Many simply fill in the blanks, providing subject and object, choosing tenses for the verbs, a gender for the actor, and so forth. Most *Oxherding* translations imagine a male, third-person actor, such that the first line of the first poem—

[without bounds] [stirring grasses] [leaving, tracking down]

—becomes, in one translator's version:

Alone in the wilderness, lost in the jungle, the boy is searching,
searching!

Other translators cast the scene in the first- or second-person, as in these two examples:

In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the Bull.

Vigorously cutting a path through the brambles, you search
for the ox.

Sakamoto, whose inventive ending to Preface 10 I've just cited, combines all of these, varying the pronouns as he moves from poem to poem, as in these samples:

Poem 1: **One** aimlessly pushes the grasses aside in search.

Poem 2: Did **you** see the ox?

Poem 4: **I** seize the ox.

Poem 7: Riding on the ox, **he** has come home.

Sakamoto at least struggles overtly with the puzzle of how to nominate what might be called “the Oxherding Self,” rather than silently pretending that no metaphysical or spiritual questions lie behind a translator’s choices. Yip poses one such question this way:

How can an epistemological world view developed from the Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, which emphasize the ego in search of knowledge of the non-ego..., turn around and endorse a medium that belies the function and process of epistemological elaboration?

Put another way, how can English syntax convey a world-view that calls its very notion of knowledge into question? Yip’s answer is that it can’t. To get the Chinese into English, English itself would have to change, loosen up, become less demonstrative.

Yip has written a book about Ezra Pound, and not surprisingly he finds in modernism and the poetic styles it spawned attempts to modify English so as to make it more hospitable to non-Western modes of perception. As is well known, Pound’s encounter with Chinese through Ernest Fenollosa’s work was the starting point. Absent Fenollosa, we might never have had lines like the ones Yip cites from Canto XLIX:

Rain; empty river, a voyage....
Autumn moon; hills rise above lakes....
Broad water; geese line out with the autumn.

As Yip shows, the line of syntactical experimentation that Pound began was continued by poets as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, e.e. cummings, and Gary Snyder.

Of all the *Oxherding* translations I've found, the only one that seems to me to reflect this tradition is that of Stanley Lombardo, a Zen master and professor of Classics at the University of Kansas. In Lombardo's *Oxherding*, an imperative mood sometimes implies an actor ("hold onto the rope"), but in fact no actor is ever named, most of the poems being rendered with image-phrases laid down parasyntactically, one after another: "Weary, exhausted, no place left to hunt: / Maples rustle, evening, the cicada's song." This is a post-Pound *Oxherding*.

The *Oxherding* Series is not, of course, a teaching about linguistic problems or translation in the literal sense; it is a parable of Buddhist practice, the poems and drawings suggesting a Way toward apprehension of the True Self. For this reason, it requires Westerners to reckon not just with matters of syntax but more broadly with the question of how a medieval Chán-Buddhist teaching can be carried over into twenty-first-century American speech. More broadly still, how is any spiritual insight passed from one person to another? How is the *dharma* transmitted? How, in this case, can the language of poetry convey an understanding that claims to lie outside language ("The vast blue sky' is not at all the vast blue sky. / Think of snow falling on a blazing fire.")?

My own response to such questions has been to try to keep them in play, not by making a translation of *Oxherding* but by making *three* translations. My "One Word Ox" replaces each Chinese character with a single English word, my "Spare Sense Ox" casts each poem in simple English sentences, and my "Fat American Ox" shamelessly expands on each of these. Not that these three versions should be read as a series progressing from rough to finished draft. Rather, each should be read with the other two calling it into question, readers being invited by this lack of finish, by my stuttering as it were, to seek for themselves the Ox of Right Speech. The true *dharma* can only be discovered by one whose practice completes the incomplete.

II: Cicada at the Gate

“I hear faintly the cawing of a crow far, far away, echoing from some unseen wood-side.... What a delicious sound! It is not merely crow calling to crow, for it speaks to me too. I am part of one great creature with him; if he has voice, I have ears.” —Thoreau

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” —Blake

The senses play an important role in Buddhist practice, or so the *Oxherding* poems seem to say. The first hint comes in Poem 1, in which we find the oxherd lost and confused. In my “One Word” version, the poem ends with these lines:

Strength	exhausted			
	spirit	weariness		
		no	place	to-hunt
But	hearing			
	sweetgum	trees		
		evening	cicada	song

The oxherd is completely dispirited; then he hears the cicadas singing in the sweetgum grove.

I have rendered the first word of the last line (*dàn*) as “But”; it could also be translated as “Only” or “Merely,” which would give the line a slightly different sense. “But” implies a turn in the story, a change, whereas “Merely” might mean that the insects’ song is yet another sign of the oxherd’s confusion and fatigue. One teacher reads the line that way, in fact: The cicada is up in the tree “meaninglessly shrilling away,” crying “Mee, mee.”

That seems plausible; in my own reading, however, this line contains a hint of things to come. It might even describe a moment of insight, though the oxherd is not yet ready to know that, nor to consolidate such moments into a more durable awareness.

To see how the line might be read in this positive light, consider a second passage, the opening of Preface 3:

Follow	sound	able	to-enter
See	place	encounter	source
“Six	Roots”	gate	
all	perceptions	without	error

In my “Spare Sense” version, I have these lines as “Follow the sound and the way opens; see the place and come to the source. / At the root of each sense is a gate: perception there is not muddled.”

In the Buddhist model of consciousness, the “roots” are the six human sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, skin, and mind), from which arise the six senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and cognition). The roots are also gates through which the world enters us in such a way that we can know it.

More elaborate descriptions of human sensory psychology follow: Each sense has an object (eyes perceive forms, ears perceive sounds, etc.), each object gives rise to a form of conscious awareness (eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc.), and so on. For now, however, we need focus only on the senses as roots and the roots as gates, asking what role these play in Buddhist practice. The oxherd hears the cicada: then what? Or—to take some of the many other moments of sensation in the poems—the oxherd sees the green willows and red flowers, he hears the oriole calling from a branch, he and the ox both smell the sweet-grass: then what?

It depends. On the one hand, the practitioner might take her perceptions personally, so to speak, saying, “I hate that whining” or “I love the cicada song.” The syntax of such statements is itself the beginning of confusion. First it sets up a subject and an object, so a duality arises; then it attributes to the subject an attitude toward the object, thus giving the subject a particular identity (hater, lover). Finally, with identity will come dissatisfaction or suffering. Everything changes. Cicada haters will suffer in springtime; cicada lovers will be disappointed in winter.

In the “Fire Sermon” the Buddha addressed the kind of sensory self-making I have just described:

All things, O priests, are on fire.... The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire.

And with what are these on fire?

With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.

The ear is on fire...; the nose is on fire...; the tongue is on fire...; the body is on fire...; the mind is on fire....

What fuels the flames is not sensory perception but rather the lust, hatred, and delusion that are added to it (otherwise described as attachment, aversion, and ignorance). There are sensory impressions and then there are the relationships we bring to them, the things that we do to make them “me” or “not-me.” When we say “I love the cicada song,” an “I” arises that stands in relation to the sound, and so the world is divided into self and other, a duality that we take to be real. At that point (as Preface 1 says), the paths begin to fork, “‘Gain’ and ‘Loss’ catch fire; / ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’ sharpen swords.”

What would happen, though, if we were able to hear a sound or see a sight with utter detachment? The *Oxherding* text itself seems to promise that possibility in a line cited earlier: “At the root of each sense is a gate; perception there is not muddled.” Moreover, there are in the Buddhist tradition many stories of practitioners whose awakening was triggered by a simple sense impression. The Buddha, after all, was enlightened when his eye fell upon the morning star after a night of meditation. Basho’s frog poem may describe a similar moment:

Old pond—
Frog jumps—
plop!

A drum struck in the dining hall, a broken tile tossed—*clink!*—into the bamboo grove, a temple bell at dawn, a *sake* bottle breaking: Long is the list of sounds that have occasioned awakening.

Rinzai Gigen, Chinese founder of Rinzai Zen, said to his students, “Upon the lump of red flesh there is a True Man of no Status who ceaselessly goes out and in through the gates of your face.” This Person Without Rank, as other translations put it, is that man or woman who has no social position (almost unthinkable in Rinzai’s ninth-century China) or who, more figuratively, cannot be described in terms of any differentiating characteristics (male/female, beautiful/ugly, wise/stupid, rich/poor, old/young, lover/hater, etc.) He or she would be like the fellow who comes into town at the end of *Oxherding*, giving gifts. He seems to be enlightened, but so fully so that nobody notices him! He has not even taken on the identity of Enlightened Person. “He has hidden from view the beauty of himself. / He leaves the beaten path of the old worthies.”

Be that as it may, the implication is that this “True Person” knows the world sensually but does not thereby acquire identity. There is an old saying in Zen: “Before enlightenment, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; after enlightenment, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.” The difference is that in the first instance sense perceptions give rise to identity; later they do not. In the first *Oxherding* poem there are mountains and rivers but they seem “wide” and “distant” (and the oxherd is weary, exhausted); by the ninth poem, when the oxherd has “Returned to the Roots,” these things are simply present: “The waters are blue, the mountains are green.”

It should be said that even such simple statements depart from any original unity. As indicated in passing above, we need not bring attachment and aversion to bear to give rise to dualism. Note that in the “Fire Sermon” the Buddha doesn’t sort sensation only into the pleasant and unpleasant but adds a third category, the indifferent. In

order to make even such flat assertions as “the mountains are green” or “the cicadas sing,” there has to be a split between the perceiver and the perceived. “Person and Ox Forgotten” would be better.

Dogen Zenji, thirteenth-century founder of Soto Zen, wrote:

Mustering our bodies and minds we see things,
and mustering our bodies and minds we hear
sounds, thereby we understand them intimately.
However, it is not like a reflection dwelling in the
mirror, nor is it like the moon and the water. As
one side is illuminated, the other is darkened.

Dogen distinguishes direct or intimate perception from reflective perception. To think or say, “I hear the cicada” is not the same as hearing the cicada. As the thought arises, so arise “the forking roads,” beginning with the doubleness of thinker and thought. (“Ordinary consciousness is always consciousness of something. There must be a dualistic structure for conscious awareness to take place,” writes Master Sheng-yen.) Then the dualities propagate: If there is sound, so there is silence; if water reflects the moon, so it can fail to reflect; if the mirror has a bright side, so it has a dark. This may all be very interesting, but it is not intimate.

It would seem, then, that the true Person Without Rank who “goes out and in through the gates of your face” is not distinct from experiences that arise in the outer or inner worlds. He *is* these experiences, not the person who “has” them. Thus one modern teacher, Yamada Mumon Roshi, can write:

For all of us, [the Person Without Rank] is always
going out and coming in through our...senses. It
is truly amazing. Having gone out, he becomes the
objective world, the world of myriad phenomena.
He becomes mountains and rivers, rain and wind.
But entering within, he becomes the subject, feel-
ing hungry or sleepy, happy or sad. This is the true
source of all buddhas, the true person of no rank.

To be sleepy without the cognitive element (“I’m sleepy”) and without attitude (“I wish I weren’t sleepy”), and to perceive mountains and rivers without these as well, is to be the Person Without Rank, and to live as neither a subject nor an object. Such, it seems to me, is the state that the African-American writer and practicing Buddhist Charles Johnson tries to describe in his antebellum novel *Oxherding Tale* when he pauses to muse on “the manumission of the first-person viewpoint.” It is the state said to be found in some Buddhist-flavored poems. “Basho,” Robert Bly once claimed, “after a long struggle, probably lasting twenty or thirty years, arrived at a point where his poems were neither subjective nor objective....” As an example, Bly quotes this poem:

The temple bell stops
But the sound keeps coming
Out of the flowers.

Is the sound of the bell in the temple, in the person, or in the flowers? In sitting meditation, is the breath interior or exterior?

With all these things in mind, let’s go back to the place I started, to the question of how to read the last line of the first poem. My own reading is influenced by the few things I know about cicadas in fact and in myth. These insects have a famously long life cycle, the nymphs living underground for many years before they crawl to the surface and shed their skins to briefly fly and sing. This combination of long incubation and total metamorphosis has, not surprisingly, made the cicada a symbol of spiritual transformation and rebirth. Some of the most ancient Chinese jades (from the neolithic Hongshan culture) are cicada-shaped carvings that were placed on the tongues of the dead to assure their rebirth by sympathetic magic. In the last line of the first poem, then, an image of great antiquity appears, not just an insect singing in the trees but Old Cicada itself, four-thousand-year-old sign of a promised awakening:

Sweetgum grove—
Old Cicada—
that song.

That song, moreover, is not just any song. It is diffuse, pervasive, and penetrating. Old women sitting on a sunlit bench hear it. Lovers hear it in their hideaway. The fishermen hear it as they pull up their last nets. Everywhere present, cicada song is to the ear what moonlight is to the eye, and therefore, like moonlight, it makes a good symbol for Buddha-nature. On a moonlit night, wherever you go, there's that light; on a summer evening, wherever you go, there's that song. "As it is clear that multiple gold vessels are a single metal, / so understand that all things in the world comprise one's self."

At the start of *Oxherding* we have a person, six gates of perception, and singing cicadas. There seems to be a problem with "dust," but it does not arise from the "Six Roots." On the contrary, each root is a gate and "perception there is not muddled." *Oxherding* is a remarkably sensual set of poems, and the sensuality is not there by way of warning, or to be suppressed. Hearing, sight, smell, taste: The senses can awaken us to the thing we seek, the thing immediately present, should the doors of perception be cleansed.

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