

## “One-Word Oxherding”

Lewis Hyde and Max Gimblett are in the process of making a modern American version of the Sung Dynasty Chinese *Oxherding Series*, a set of drawings and poems that are a parable about Buddhist practice. Hyde is retranslating the Chinese Oxherding texts and Gimblett is making new sumi ink versions of the drawings. When it comes to the translations, the plan is to have each Oxherding text appear in three different English versions: a “one word ox” which sticks slavishly to the Chinese (one word per character), a “spare sense ox,” which puts each Chinese syntactic unit into a simple English sentence, and an “American ox” (or “fat American ox”) which takes considerable liberties while trying to be faithful to my intuitions about the meaning of the series.

What follows here are Hyde’s “One-Word Oxherding” translations, for which a word of explanation is in order. The Chinese texts of the oxherding series consist of a preface and poem for each image. The characters for each of these fall into syntactic units, typically as follows:

Preface --

X X	Title -- 2 to 4 characters
X X X X X X X X	8 characters
X X X X X X	6 characters
X X X X X X	6 characters
X X X X	4 characters
X X X X	4 characters
X X X X	4 characters
X X X X	4 characters

Poem --

X X X X X X X	7 characters
X X X X X X X	7 characters
X X X X X X X	7 characters
X X X X X X X	7 characters

The poems are always 4 lines, 7 characters each. The prefaces vary a little, the second and third lines sometimes having 7 characters rather than 6, for example. In general, however, they are very regular.

There are syntactic units within the lines as well. The poems, for example, read X X, X X, X X X -- the first two characters are a unit, the second two a unit, and the last three a unit (as, for example, “red moon, white sun, round sky disks”). The 8-character lines that begin each preface can be broken down: X X, X X / X X, X X (as, for example: “red moon, white sun / now rising, now setting”).

On the pages that follow, the prefaces and poems are reproduced with a single English word for each Chinese character, sticking to the order of the characters even when the sense is a little hard to follow.

Notice that the Chinese in general does not indicate who the actor is in a sentence, nor conjugate the verb, nor differentiate between singular and plural, nor indicate gender. In the first preface, for example, the lines “from start not lost / no need track down” could come over into English as “the oxherd has never lost anything, so why hunt for it?”, but it could also be translated as “you have lost nothing, so why hunt?” or “it was not lost so there was not need to track it,” or “she didn’t lose it at the start, and she need not track it down now.” Similarly, the end of the first poem could describe a cicada in a tree, or many cicadas in a grove of trees.

1 Search Ox Preface

From start not lost  
 what use search for

Because abandoned awakening  
 so become scarce

Living near dust  
 and therefore loss

Home mountain gradually distant

Branched roads suddenly strange

Gain loss blazing up

Right wrong blade rising

[Search Ox Poem]

Without bounds  
 stirring grasses  
 leaving, tracking down

Waters broad  
 mountains distant  
 road more obscure

Strength exhausted  
 spirit weary  
 no place to-hunt

But hearing  
 sweetgum trees  
 evening cicada song

II See Tracks Preface

[See Tracks Poem]

Following sutras understanding meaning  
 reading teachings perceiving footprints

clear  
 multiple vessels are one gold

understand  
 all things are one's self

right / wrong unable to-distinguish

true / false how to-separate

not-yet enter this gate

merely achieve "see tracks"

River beside  
 trees under  
 tracks unexpected

many

Fragrant grasses  
 scattered about  
 doesn't he see?

Although in  
 deep mountains  
 even deeper places

Distant heavens  
 that nose  
 how conceal it?

III See Ox Preface

[See Ox Poem]

Follow sound able to-enter  
 See place encounter source  
 “Six Roots”<sup>1</sup> gate  
 all perceptions without error  
 Within all actions  
 all sources become apparent  
 Water in salt flavor  
 Paint within binder blue  
 Low / high eye discerns  
 is not separate thing

Yellow oriole  
 branch on  
 one call call  
 Sun warm  
 wind gentle  
 shore willow green  
 Just this  
 more not  
 avoid meeting place  
 Full-grown full-grown  
 head horns  
 painting difficult to-  
 complete

---

<sup>1</sup> I.e., the origins of the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind).

IV Get Ox Preface

[Get Ox Poem]

Long hidden distant places  
 this day encounter it

Because there superior  
 so difficult to-pursue

Loves sweet greenery  
 so without discipline

Stubborn mind still strong

Wild nature still lively

Want to-get pure tameness?

Must add whip hitting

Exhaust entire  
 vital energy  
 get ahold it

Heart-mind strong  
 strength vigorous  
 finally difficult to-subdue

Some times  
 just arrives  
 high land summit

Also enters  
 hazy clouds  
 deep regions to-dwell

V Herd Ox Preface

[Herd Ox Poem]

First thought just rising  
 next thought close behind

Because awakened  
 There-fore  
 Become truth

In confusion  
 There-fore  
 Become false

Not from circumstances had  
 Only from heart-mind born

Nose rope firmly pull

Not allow other impulse

Whip rope  
 all times  
 not distant self

afraid it  
 leap away  
 enter dust dirt

join together  
 herding achieve  
 pure warm harmony

halters bindings  
 without constraints  
 willingly follows person

VI Ride Ox Return Home Preface

[Ride Ox Return Home Poem]

Shield        spear        already    ceasing  
 gain        loss        return-to    emptiness

Sing        rustic        song  
 of        wood-        cutter

Play        unrefined    tune  
 of        - - - - -    children

Body        across        ox        back  
 eyes        look        clouds    heaven

called        back:        not        turn

lured        surrounded:    not        stop

Riding        ox  
                  meander        along  
                                  soon        return    home

Bamboo        flute  
                  sound        sound  
                                  accompany    sunset    clouds

Each        beat  
                  each        song  
                                  un-        limited    meaning

Knowing        harmony  
                  what        need  
                                  flap        lips        teeth<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I.e., chatter.

VII Forget Ox Remain Person Preface

[Forget Ox Remain Person Poem]

Dharma without second dharmas:  
 ox temporarily was purpose

Analogy: snare / rabbit  
 have different names

Clarify: fish-trap / fish  
 have different qualities

Like gold emerging ore

like moon leaving clouds --

one whole cold light

mighty sound beyond time

Riding ox  
 already obtains  
 arriving home mountain

As-for ox,  
 empty  
 -----  
 as-for person, idle

Red sun  
 late afternoon  
 still day- dreaming

Whip rope  
 idle stopped  
 thatch room within

**VIII** Person Ox Alike Forget Preface [Person Ox Alike Forget Poem]

Worldly	desires	drop	away	Whip	rope			
Holy	intentions	all	empty		person	ox		
						all	belong	emptiness
Having-	Buddha	place:						
no	need	seek	out	Blue	sky			
					wide	deep		
Without-	Buddha	place:				words	cannot	penetrate
urgent	must	pass	by					
				Red	stove			
Either	side	not	touch		flame	above		
						how	survive	snow?
Thousand	eyes	difficult	peering					
				Arriving	here			
Hundred	birds	offering	flowers,		only	then		
						join	ancient	teachers
one	scene	shamed	heart					

**IX** Return Roots Go-Back Source Preface [Return Roots Go-Back Source Poem]

Since	origin	pure	clean		Return	root			
not	receive	one	dust			go-back	source		
							already	cost	effort
Observe	formed	things							
their	thriving	withering			How	equal			
						directly	down		
Dwell	non-	interference					as-if	blind	deaf?
its	still	quiet							
					Hut	inside			
Not	identify	illusory	change			not	see		
							hut	outside	things
How	require	more	improvement?						
					Rivers	naturally			
Water	green	mountain	blue			without	bounds		
							flowers	naturally	red
Sit	watch	success	defeat						

X Enter Market Hanging Hands Preface [Enter Market Hanging Hands Poem ]

Scrapwood	gate	just	shut	Reveal	chest			
thousand	sages	not	know		bare	feet		
						enter	market	arrive
Bury	the	scenery		Apply	soil			
of	one's	self			smear	ashes		
Leave	road	ruts				smile	fill	cheeks
of	old	worthies		Needing	not			
Carry	gourd	enter	market		immortal	ones		
						deep	secrets	riddles
Walk	cane	return	home					
				Just	teach			
Wine	shop	fish	shop		withered	tree		
						release	flowers	open
Influence	make	become	Buddhas					