

“Spare Sense 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 translating the Chinese 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 “Spare Sense Oxherding” versions.

I Searching for the Ox

Preface

From the beginning nothing was lost.
There is no need to search.
Turning away from awareness,
that's how neglect arises.
Move toward dust:
loss will follow.
The family mountain grows more distant,
the forking roads are useless now.
“Gain” and “Loss” catch fire;
“Right” and “Wrong” sharpen swords.

Poem

Searching, pushing through endless underbrush.
Wide waters, distant mountains, darkening path.
Strength exhausted, spirit weary, no hint of where
to hunt.
Just hear the evening cicadas sing in the sweetgum
grove.

II Seeing the Tracks

Preface

By relying on the sutras and reading the teachings
understand the meaning and perceive the footprints.

As it is clear

that multiple gold vessels are a single metal,

so understand

that all things in the world comprise one's self.

If unable to distinguish true from false

how to tell the real from the fake?

This gate has not yet been entered.

One only gets this far: "Seeing the tracks."

Poem

By the waters, under the trees, many surprising
tracks.

Sweet-smelling grass scattered about--isn't it
obvious?

Even in dark mountains or hidden recesses,
how could that heavenly nose be concealed?

III Seeing the Ox

Preface

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.
Inside all actions
the source becomes clear.
Like the salt in seawater,
like the binder in blue paint,
the eyes distinguish high from low
and see that “it” is not a separate thing.

Poem

Yellow oriole on a branch--one call after call.
Warm sun, gentle wind, green willows on the
riverbank.
Just this and no more: the meeting is unavoidable.
Stately head and stately horns: hard to finish that
painting!

IV Getting the Ox

Preface

Today one comes upon it,
long hidden in distant places.
Because it rules these regions
it is not easy to chase after.
Its love for sweet foliage
has left it untamed.
Its stubborn mind is still strong,
its wild nature still lively.
If you want true domestication
you must really apply the whip.

Poem

All one's vital energy spent, one gets hold of it.
Its heart is strong, muscles vigorous: these are
ultimately hard to erase!
Sometimes it shows up in the high mountains,
Other times goes to live in deep valley clouds and
mist.

V Herding the Ox

Preface

First thought just rising, other thoughts follow
behind.

Being awakened, one comes to embody the truth.

Being confused, one embodies delusion.

Delusion does not arise from the outer world;

Only the mind can give it birth.

Pull the nose-rope firmly.

Do not let it wander at will.

Poem

Always keep the whip and rope close at hand
for fear it might leap into the dust and dirt.

In true herding they are joined in warm harmony.

Unfettered by halters and ropes, it follows the
person by itself.

VI Riding the Ox Back Home

Preface

When struggle ceases, gain and loss return to
emptiness.

Singing a woodcutter's rustic song,

Piping a simple children's tune,

Lying across the ox's back,

Looking into the cloudy sky:

If called back, he will not turn,

If lured or baited, he will not stop.

Poem

Wandering along, soon to return home riding the
ox.

The bamboo flute song echoes with the sunset
clouds.

Every beat and every tune unlimited in feeling.

Knowing this harmony, what need is there to talk?

VII The Ox Forgotten, the Person Remaining

Preface

The dharma doesn't have a second dharma:

The ox served a temporary purpose.

By analogy: the snare and the rabbit are two
different things.

To clarify: the fishtrap and the fish have different
qualities.

Like gold coming out of the ore,

Like the moon leaving the clouds,

One cool light already shone

Before time came into being.

Poem

Riding the ox he has already arrived at his
mountain home.

As for the ox, it is empty; as for the person, he is at
rest.

Late day's red sun, and still he is lost in dream.

The whip and the rope lie idle under the thatched
roof.

VIII The Person and the Ox Both Forgotten

Preface

All worldly emotions fall away;
all sacred sentiments are empty.
No need to linger in places where the Buddha is;
in places where there is no Buddha, quickly pass
by.
Neither side exists.
A thousand eyes would have difficulty detecting
[such a person].
A hundred flower-offering birds:
that scene would be one long farce.

Poem

Whip and rope, person and ox: all are empty.
Words cannot reproduce the vast blue sky.
How could snowflakes survive the flames of a
forge?
One can only join the ancestors by arriving at this
place.

IX Returning to the Roots, Going Back to the Source

Preface

It was originally pure and clean and has gathered
no dust.

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.

Sit and watch success and defeat.

Poem

Returning to the roots, going back to the source--
that already took effort.

Better to have been, right away, as if blind and
deaf.

Sitting in the hut, see nothing outside the hut.

The rivers overflow by themselves, the flowers
bloom red.

X Entering the Marketplace with Hanging Hands

Preface

His makeshift gate is shut tight; a thousand sages

wouldn't know him.

He has hidden from view the beauty of himself.

He leaves the beaten path of the old worthies.

He enters the marketplace carrying a gourd

and goes home with a walking stick.

In the wine shops and fish stands

people are transformed into Buddhas.

Poem

His chest uncovered, barefoot, he comes into the

marketplace.

Smeared with mud and ashes, he smiles broadly.

He does not need the coded secrets of the

immortals.

He just shows the withered trees how to release

their flowers.