The Disappearing Ox

A Modern Version of a Classic Buddhist Tale

Lewis Hyde and Max Gimblett

with commentary by Lewis Hyde and Joseph A. Adler

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Chan/Zen, the Oxherding Pictures, and the World-Affirming Turn in Chinese Buddhism

Joseph A. Adler
Kenyon College

The ten oxherding pictures and accompanying poems of Kuo'an Shiyuan, who lived in China in the twelfth century, are an iconic representation of the bodhisattva path in Chan (in Japan, Zen) Buddhism. They also mark a turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism, a moment when Chan was becoming what it is today.

Buddhism began in northern India in the fifth century BCE with the enlightenment experience of Siddhārtha Gautama, commonly known as Shākyamuni Buddha ("enlightened sage of the Shakya clan") or just the Buddha. By the first century CE, Buddhism had entered China, brought by monks traveling with merchants on the dangerous branch of the Silk Road that crossed the Himalayas. Over several hundred years Buddhist teachings and practices were learned, absorbed, and modified by increasing numbers of Chinese of all social classes. In the seventh and eighth centuries new Chinese schools of Buddhism developed. These new schools reflected indigenous Chinese attitudes and values, which differed in some respects from those in Buddhism's homeland, India. During the Song dynasty (tenth to thirteenth century), Chan Buddhism evolved into roughly its current form. Brought to Japan in the thirteenth century, it became known there as Zen.

Of the four major schools of Chinese Buddhism, three focused on particular sutras, sermons of the Buddha. The Tiantai school regarded the Lotus Sutra as the Buddha's most complete and profound teaching. The Huayan school took its name from its preferred Huayan (Flower Garland) Sutra. The Pure Land (Jingtu) school was inspired by the Pure Land trio of sutras. All of these foundational sutras were originally written in India and had been translated from Sanskrit during the several hundred years of Chinese Buddhism's gestation.

The Chan school one-upped the other three by claiming to be based on a *wordless* teaching of the Buddha—an ineffable teaching beyond words or concepts. The idea of ineffable truth was not new in Buddhism, nor was it unique to Buddhism. Classical Daoism, in such early texts as the Laozi (the Dao de jing, fourth century BCE) and the Zhuangzi (third century BCE), had likewise claimed that the true *dao* or Way was inexpressible in words or concepts. Similarly, the Indian

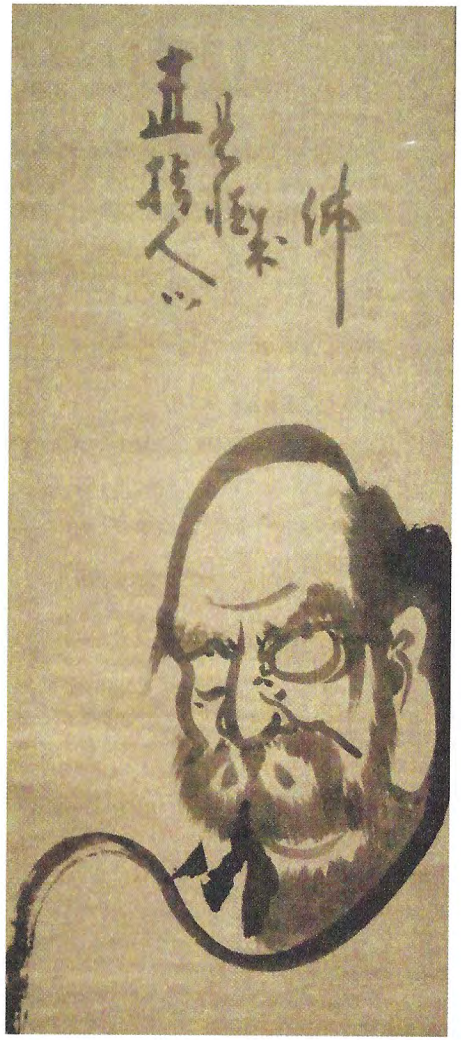
Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (first century CE) posited two levels of truth: conventional, relative truth that can be conveyed in words and absolute truth that cannot.

That Chan Buddhism is based on a wordless teaching was expressed through two "mythical moments" in the story of Chan's origins. The first, the Flower Sermon, appeared in writing during the Song dynasty. It describes the mythical beginning of the wordless teaching:

> When Shakyamuni Buddha was at Vulture Peak, he held out a flower to his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Kashyapa broke into a broad smile. The Buddha said, "I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate, independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine [*jiao* 教]. This I have entrusted to Kashyapa."[1]

The second mythical moment is a poem attributed to Bodhidharma, considered the monk who brought the wordless teaching from India to China in the sixth century; he is known as the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch and the first Chinese patriarch of Chan Buddhism. The poem, which also first appeared in writing during the Song dynasty, encapsulates Chan. In fact, the first two lines directly quote "independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine" from the Flower Sermon, but with the clauses reversed:

> A special transmission outside the teachings,
> Not based on the written word;
> Directly pointing to the human mind,
> Achieving Buddhahood by seeing one's nature.[2]



Daruma [Bodhidharma], Hakuin Ekaku (Japan, 1685–1768). Indianapolis Museum of Art / Wikimedia Commons. The calligraphy is the last two lines of the poem.

Chan's story continues with Bodhidharma's student Huike (487–593), who received the wordless teaching and passed it down to his student, Sengcan (d. 606?), and thence to Daoxin (580–651) and Hongren (601–674), the fifth patriarch. The Platform Sutra adds Huineng (638–713) as a sixth patriarch, although contemporary scholars view the whole story of the transmission from Hongren to Huineng as myth. Nevertheless, all subsequent Chan/Zen masters trace their lineages to the sixth patriarch, and through him to Bodhidharma and the Buddha himself.[3]

This origin story of Chan Buddhism—part history, part legend—depicts a direct line of teachers and students beginning with the Buddha through Bodhidharma to a series of Chinese teachers in fairly recent historical time. Thus the source of truth—the Buddha Dharma—was accessible to Chinese monastic and lay followers of the Buddha, including those who could not read or could not afford an education, because the truth was embodied in actual, living teachers—the monastic abbots certified in the lineages that evolved after the sixth patriarch. These abbots taught monks, nuns, and laypersons affiliated with their temples.

Chan Buddhism thus understood and presented itself as unique among the Chinese schools of Buddhism, offering what Nagarjuna had called the most perfect truth (*paramārtha satya*), one that transcends words and concepts. Chan emphasized the personal encounter between teacher and student as well as meditation to prepare the mind for that truth. In fact, the word Chan derives from *dhyāna,* the Sanskrit word for the meditative state of mind, transliterated into the Chinese *channa* 禪那 and shortened to *chan* 禪. The other Chinese schools also incorporated meditation but placed greater emphasis on teachings or doctrine (*jiao* 教, as mentioned in the two mythical moments above).

The oxherding pictures became part of the rhetoric of Chan uniqueness, portraying the bodhisattva path in pictures and poems, nondiscursive forms of communication. Poems, after all, convey their meanings through metaphor and other imagery that potentially stimulate the intuitive and subtle understanding Buddhist enlightenment entails.

Path, Pictures, Poems

The path trope in Buddhism goes back to the original teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths. The fourth Noble Truth is in fact the Eightfold Path, which covers morality, meditation, and wisdom. The bodhisattva (literally "enlightened being") in early Indian Buddhism referred to the Buddha in his previous lifetimes—a "Buddha-to-be." The forms of Buddhism that spread into China, though, came mostly from a newer branch of Buddhism, Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle"). In Mahayana, the bodhisattva path—the process of realizing one's inherent Buddha-nature of wisdom and compassion—was portrayed in ten stages in the Daśabhūmikā Sutra (later incorporated into the Huayan Sutra), an obvious precursor to the ten oxherding pictures. ("Path" in Chinese, incidentally, is *dao* 道, usually translated "way.")

In Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva was reconceived as an enlightened being who chooses to remain in this cycle of rebirth (samsara) instead of achieving nirvana, or the extinction of rebirth. The bodhisattva vow is to remain in this world to help others achieve enlightenment and release from suffering. Bodhisattvas are characterized by wisdom and compassion. Their compassion for others is based on their intuitive understanding that all beings are fundamentally interdependent; thus any suffering is the suffering of all. Interdependence is the real meaning of "emptiness" in Mahayana Buddhism: things are empty in the sense that they lack *independent* natures. Mahayana bodhisattvas are something like saviors who can take mundane forms, sometimes unrecognizable to ordinary people.

Series of pictures portrayed the life of the Buddha early in Buddhism's Indian history. In China, picture series memorialized the life of Confucius. Other Buddhist stories were also portrayed

visually. The story of Sudhana, for instance—in which the young man meets fifty-three teachers, including various bodhisattvas, in his quest for enlightenment—appears in carved relief panels in the ninth-century Borobudur temple in Java and in eleventh-century Nepalese paintings. Picture series in China also illustrated particular virtues, such as a famous series called *Twenty-Four Cases of Filiality.*

Poems also have a long history in Buddhism. The early literature included verses (*gathas*) in praise of the Buddha. Poetry figures into the eighth-century Platform Sutra mentioned earlier; the fifth patriarch (Hongren) chooses the sixth patriarch (Huineng) by means of a poetry contest. Up to the present day, Chan masters have used poetry to represent their enlightenment, even writing death poems near the ends of their lives.[4]

Turning Point

Several versions of the oxherding series appeared in China beginning in the eleventh century, the period in which Chan/Zen Buddhism developed many of its enduring characteristics. These include the role of charismatic, often iconoclastic teachers; the reliance on nondiscursive expression; the use of art, especially in spare and spontaneously produced forms; the focus on meditation; the use of humor; and the use of often enigmatic stories and sayings from legendary Tang-dynasty (seventh to tenth century) masters. Kuo'an Shiyuan's oxherding series from the twelfth century—the version retold in this book—reflects these characteristics. It also marks an important turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism: a changed attitude toward the mundane world of ordinary life.

Early Buddhism evinced a negative view of mundane existence—the realm of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara, the cycle of existence). This world—and everything in it—is the occasion for *duhkha,* which is usually translated "suffering" but really means something like *unsatisfactoriness* or *frustration.* The frustration is caused by our human tendency to grasp for permanence in a constantly changing, impermanent world; even life itself, we know, will come to an end. This unsatisfactoriness is the starting point and raison d'être of Buddhism, and the first of the Four Noble Truths: All life is *duhkha.* The second truth is that *duhkha* is caused by the craving for permanence, and the third is that *duhkha* can be eliminated by eliminating craving. The fourth Noble Truth shows the way to eliminate craving: the Eightfold Path.

In early Buddhism the meditative part of the Eightfold Path is known as the Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga* in Pāli, the language of the early sutras), the purification of the mind through the progressive dropping-away of all mental states. This is necessary because the everyday life of the mind fetters us to the eternal cycle of rebirth, which also means continual death and dying. The ordinary experience that keeps us in the realm of samsara includes family life, which is full of craving and attachment—the causes of suffering. Hence it is necessary—either in this life or a future one—to give up family for a monastic life, where temptations are minimal. The goal of transcendence includes transcendence (to the extent possible) of the body.

Early techniques, therefore, included meditation on the distasteful elements of the body and on rotting corpses as lessons in the body's impermanence. The *Satipatthāna Sutta* (Sutra on Establishing Mindfulness) includes this "meditation on mindfulness of the body":

> A monk considers his body per se, from the soles of his feet upward and from the top of his head downward, wrapped as it is in skin and filled with all sorts of impurities. He reflects, "In this body, there is hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, colon, intestines, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus,

blood, sweat, fat, tears, lymph, saliva, snot, synovia, and urine."

. . . And also, if a monk should see a corpse abandoned in a cemetery, dead one day or two or three, swollen, turning blue, and beginning to fester, he should concentrate on his own body and think "This body of mine is just like that one; it has the same nature, and it will not escape this fate."[5]

After the Indian forms of Buddhism were fully understood and digested by the Chinese we begin to see innovations reflecting that the traditional Chinese worldview was in general more affirmative of ordinary life and mind. In Confucianism, ordinary life is the arena for human *fulfillment* in family, community, and state. The highest calling for an educated man was to be a scholar-official in government; for a woman it was to be a wife and mother. The ultimate goal for both genders was to become a sage, one who embodies the perfection of human relationships and has a morally transformative effect on those around him and on society at large. Sagehood was based on the innate goodness of human nature, as conceived by Mencius (Mengzi) in the fourth century BCE.

In Classical Daoism—the intellectual tradition based primarily on the Laozi and Zhuangzi—the ultimate truth, the *dao* or Way, was to be found in a natural world characterized by change and transformation. The goal was a long and healthy life in harmony with nature. In the Daoist religion, which began in the second century CE, the human body was understood as a microcosm of the *dao* and the locus of spiritual perfection. The ultimate goal shifted from longevity to immortality.[6]

This affirmative view of ordinary experience and the human body can be seen in the Chinese schools of Buddhism, and most clearly in Chan. The goal was no longer to purify the mind of its defilements (the negative psychological states causing attachment and suffering), but to discover one's inherent Buddha-nature of wisdom and compassion—a goal influenced by the Confucian idea of the innate moral nature. Chan also drew upon earlier themes in Indian Mahayana Buddhism, including Nagarjuna's theory that the true nature of samsara is in fact nirvana. The result was a consistent and persistent theme in Chan Buddhism: enlightenment is to be found in the realm of everyday life. As the eighth-century Chan master Mazu put it, "Ordinary mind is the Way (*dao*)." In other words, wisdom is realized and manifested by compassionate action in the world—not transcendence of it. Other Chan and Zen masters said that Buddhahood is to be found in insects, dung, and inanimate roof tiles. Here we approach some of the enigmatic sayings that Chan and Zen are known for, but they are all based on well-reasoned philosophical claims.

Oxherding

The earliest version of the oxherding series appeared probably in eleventh-century China and consisted of only five pictures now lost. In this series the ox, representing the mind, began as black and progressively paled, illustrating the stages of enlightenment. The series ended with an empty circle, symbolizing the mystical experience of unity in enlightenment, when the distinction between subject and object is gone. This is the culmination of the purification of the mind and the transcendence of ordinary thought and experience, as in early Buddhism. Later versions extended the series to six, eight, and ten pictures. The six-picture series, now also lost but attributed to Zede Hui (eleventh century), apparently ended differently than the one in five stages, because a poem that accompanied the last picture goes like this:

Even beyond the ultimate limits there extends a passageway,
Whereby he comes back among the six realms of existence;
Every worldly affair is a Buddhist work,



An early illustration based on Budai (Hotei), from the series traditionally attributed to Tenshō Shūbun (1414–63).

> And wherever he goes he finds his home air;
> Like a gem he stands out even in the mud,
> Like pure gold he shines even in the furnace;
> Along the endless road [of birth and death] he walks
> sufficient unto himself,
> In whatever associations he is found he moves leisurely
> unattached.[7]

The poem's opening lines clearly describe the bodhisattva who remains in this "dusty world" to spread wisdom and compassion. So here the goal of the path is not transcendence of worldly distinctions but affirmation of this world, where enlightenment is realized.

Kuo'an's version of the ten oxherding pictures likewise represents the turning point I have described. The ox remains black throughout and probably symbolizes the Buddha-nature, and the empty circle is not the last picture. Following it are two more: "Turning Back to First Nature," which is simply a landscape with no ox and no herder, and "Entering the Village with Gift-Giving Hands," which depicts a portly, jolly man carrying a large sack on a stick. The image is based on a real tenth-century Chinese monk nicknamed Budai ("Cloth Sack," Hotei in Japanese), who supposedly wandered around and gave gifts or treats to children. Later he was identified as Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, and today he is often referred to as the laughing Buddha. In Japan he was incorporated into the Seven Gods (*kami*) of Good Luck, a group primarily associated with Shinto. But in the oxherding pictures he clearly represents the bodhisattva, having returned to the world after his enlightenment and manifesting his Buddha-nature of wisdom and compassion.

The ninth picture, a landscape, also illustrates the turning in the value of this world from negative to positive. It resonates with a well-known saying by another Chan master from this period, Qingyuan Weixin:

> Before I had studied Chan for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that

> mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have achieved a place of rest, I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers.[8]

By "I saw that mountains are not mountains," Qingyuan means that he saw the true nature, Nagarjuna's perfect truth, of mountains—their emptiness of any independent nature. By "I see mountains once again as mountains," he means that emptiness, the interdependence of mountains with all other things, is precisely what mountains truly are. In Nagarjuna's terms, nirvana is nothing but samsara, correctly understood. Or as the singer Donovan Leitch put it in 1967, "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is."

Kuo'an's oxherding pictures therefore represent a fundamental transformation of worldview in Buddhism as it spread from South to East Asia. In it, *this world* is the arena in which fulfillment or salvation can be achieved. Enlightenment requires no extraworldly intervention, and its completion does not involve transcendence of the ordinary. This world is not something to be saved from; it is where ultimate meaning and value—sacredness—reside.

NOTES

1 Translated in Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan & Hekiganroku* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), 41. The original text is *Wumen guan* (Gateless Gate), by Wumen Huikai (1183–1260).

2 Translation by the author.

3 For the sake of brevity I have simplified the story a great deal. For the dates and an excellent discussion of the early history of Chan see Master Sheng-yen (with Dan Stevenson), *Hoofprint of the Ox: Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a more thorough discussion see John C. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

4 See, for example, Yoel Hoffman, comp., *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1986).

5 John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism,* 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), 119.

6 See my *Chinese Religious Traditions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), chapters 3–4.

7 Translated in D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (1934; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1960).

8 Translated in D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism,* First Series, modified (1949; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1961).