

Zensho W. Kopp

The ZEN Ox-herding Pictures

The path to Enlightenment

A Zen classic
from the 12th century
with annotations by Zen Master
Zensho W. Kopp



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Preface

This fundamental work of Zen Buddhism is the collective, inspired work of two great Zen masters of the twelfth and twenty-first centuries and of one of the most famous Japanese Zen painters of our times.

The Zen poems and annotations of the Chinese Zen Master Kakuan Shien form the fundamental work, which, without the illuminating commentaries of an equally enlightened Zen master of the present, would be hard to understand. The reason here lies in the extremely profound, symbol-rich language of Kakuan's wonderful poetic verses and likewise of his annotations.

Over time, here in the west, the ten ox-pictures of Zen have appeared in many books. Yet none of them has been able to grasp the deep meaning of the work and bring it to its full expression. The main reason for this lacking lies in the fact that an unenlightened consciousness is never able to expound the Zen way to Enlightenment without first having achieved Enlightenment itself.

Therefore, we the editors consider ourselves fortunate that Zen Master Zensho has now created a new transcription of this very important handbook, to which he has added extensive annotations. Zensho's annotations are an expression of his enlightened consciousness. They are often of provoking, instant directness; they are, very clear, easy to understand and true-to-life.

Zensho's annotations provide the reader with a clear path to a deep understanding of the mysterious truth of the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen.

Without these extremely valuable explanations by one of the Zen masters of our present times, who draws from the same realised dimension of consciousness as Zen Master Kakuan from the twelfth century, the deeper meaning of this exceptional work of Zen literature would remain concealed from us.

Zensho's annotations, in which the old Chinese masters have their say too, are very practical and a unique orientation aid and an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

The reader will make best use of this book when he repeatedly pauses and allows what he has read to take effect. The profundity of the sayings in this book thus becomes increasingly clear through repeated reading and all the more so when put into practice. May this book help all those who read it to realise their immortal, true self.

The Editors

Zen Center Tao Chan

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Acknowledgments

The ox-herding paintings in this book, created in tusche by the Japanese painter Gyokusei Jikihara Sensei are impressive examples of Nanga brush painting in the traditional Chinese style. The editors and Zen Master Zensho would like to thank the staff at the Zen Mountain Monastery, Mount Tremper, New York for their kind permission to print these images, which through this book, are now available to a wider public.



禪



Zen

Introduction

This modern handbook of Zen is a classic of Zen literature and belongs to the fundamental, essential texts of Zen Buddhism. It is an extremely valuable guide on the path to Enlightenment and a limitless source of the mystical wisdom of Zen.

Of all representations of the various levels of spiritual realisation on the path of Zen, none is as profound and at the same time as fascinating as the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen. The Japanese Zen Master Zenkei Shibayama (twentieth century) says:

Since the beginning of Zen Buddhism there has been a whole series of writings to explain the practice methods and teachings of Zen.

Yet there has been no book which has portrayed them so clearly and distinctly as the “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures of Zen”. They explain it completely and unveil the profound truth of Zen.

The symbolic representation of the Zen path to Enlightenment by means of the pictorial story of a herder, searching for his lost ox – his true self, originates from the golden age of ancient China. The original version of the picture-cycle, which was firstly made up of six and later eight pictures, was painted by Buddhist teachers of Soto-Zen, who held the view that Enlightenment is a gradual on-going process.

All these representations had tried in the same manner to depict the on-going process of Zen training using a black ox

which became increasing white from picture to picture. Here, the colour black portrayed the tainted mind, tarnished by spiritual blindness.

However, in the twelfth century, the Chinese Zen Master Kakuan Shien produced a version with ten ox paintings and added an annotation to each one. Kakuan lived and taught at the Liang-shan Zen temple in Tingdschou, China. He was the spiritual heir to Zen Master Tai-sui Yüan-ching from the Lin-chi line of tradition and belonged to the twelfth generation following Lin-chi.

As opposed to earlier representations, Kakuan's ox-herding pictures show an ox that does not become progressively white – his ox remains unchangingly black throughout the pictures. In this way, he clearly expresses that, in truth, the original mind was never tarnished since it is eternally pure and unchanging. Through this, Kakuan rises above the old, limited viewpoint of earlier ox-book authors and proclaims:

The radiating light of the One Mind has been shining since timeless eternity and nothing can obscure it.

This is the essential core idea which interweaves Kakuan's brilliant work "The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures of Zen" like a golden thread.

However, this does not mean that there is no development process of spiritual maturing in Kakuan's Ten Ox-herding Pictures. For his Zen is the southern, dynamic Lin-chi Zen of immediate perception by becoming aware of the mind – right up to complete awakening in the realisation of sudden Enlightenment.

This version of Zen Master Kakuan's Ten Ox-herding Pictures of Zen found its farthest widespread adoption in Japan following the Ashikaga-period as a never-ending source of profound wisdom of Zen and a steadfast spiritual

guide. It was considered an essential Zen text of unique value and renowned as the most important ox-herding book.

Although Kakuan's ox-herding pictures, which once set an example for many painters, have become lost over time, his wonderful poems of highest expressive force fortunately remain for us, as well as his accompanying comments. These texts, together with the inspired ink paintings by the Japanese Zen painter Gyokusei Jikihara Sensei (1904-2005), form the basis of this book.

Jikihara Sensei was a highly esteemed contemporary painter in Japan and practised Zen under Zen Master Zenkei Shibayama. His ox-herding paintings in this book, painted in tusche, are unique examples of Nanga brush painting in the traditional Chinese style. The paintings, which breathe the spirit of Zen, are an expression of his expert mastery of tusche painting and stand out by the uniqueness of his brushwork.

Yet what prompted Zen Master Kakuan to add two new pictures to the eight which existed in the original version of the twelfth century and thus create a version of ten pictures? The ox-herding picture series of earlier authors, which existed up to that time, ended with the eighth picture, the empty circle "Enso" - in Zen the symbol of Enlightenment - as if, with this, the Zen path would thus be at an end.

However, Kakuan, as a true, fully realised Zen Master goes beyond this limited notion of Enlightenment with the two, extremely meaningful pictures he includes. His version is pure, living Zen and goes much further and deeper than previous depictions which ended with the eighth picture. Thus we see on his ninth picture a wonderful nature idyll as a pointer to the fact that the enlightened one, in his realisation of the non-discriminating clarity of the mind, lives in the all-embracing wholeness of being. In the words of Kakuan:

He has returned to the origin.
He beholds the alternating coming and going of all
life in the world and abides in serene non-action.

By awakening from the dream of birth and death he has risen above all duality, and thus the whole world transforms itself for him into the great revelation of transcendental wisdom. Without exception, he now experiences all that exists as the timeless reality of the One Mind, and when he acts, everything he does is the wonderful act of Buddha.

In the tenth, final ox-herding picture we see how the enlightened one enters the marketplace in the world with a broad laugh covering his entire face. In his utter realisation of Enlightenment he moves among the crowd in great compassion and total freedom in order to liberate them from the ignorance which causes them suffering, so that they awaken to their true self. Kakuan says:

He shows bar-keepers and fishmongers the way of
awakening to their true self.

Zen is the way of “sudden Enlightenment”. It is the essential feature of the Zen of the old, great Chinese masters like Hui-neng, Ma-tsu or Lin-chi when compared to all the other teachings in Buddhism. However, we should make it clear to ourselves that sudden Enlightenment does not just happen by chance, unexpectedly and just like that, without any spiritual preparation.

Instead, the term “sudden Enlightenment” means that the true, direct Zen way to liberation is not made up of predefined, dogmatic fixed steps, unlike most Buddhist schools. For clinging to predefined steps suppresses and even prevents the creative ability for an intuitive, direct understanding and limits the free mind.

Consequently, we should also not make the mistake of interpreting the systematic order of Kakuan’s ox-herding

pictures as a way by steps to Enlightenment. For this would not be in keeping with the true, free mind of Zen and is indeed diametrically opposed to it. However, we are not in conflict with the principle of Zen of sudden Enlightenment when we speak of an ongoing spiritual process of maturing.

Thus, the Zen way of awakening to our true self in terms of the ten ox-herding pictures features different levels of spiritual realisation, even when Enlightenment itself happens very suddenly, in an instant, following a long process of spiritual maturing.

In an instant, in a single, blessed moment, the mind expands into boundlessness and a new perspective opens to us which transforms our whole essence.

Thus Kakuan's ten ox-herding pictures of Zen in this book show us the "Zen way of sudden Enlightenment through spiritual realisation".

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Zensho W. Kopp



禪

道



Zen Path

*The mind-ox is our original, innermost
essence. Its bright gleam of clear light has
been shining since time immemorial.*

Zen Master Kakuan Shien

I.

Seeking the Ox

