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ARTICLE

Teaching Zen's Ten Oxherding Pictures through Leonard Cohen's "Ballad of the Absent Mare"

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This paper describes how to teach Zen's famous Ten Oxherding Pictures through Leonard Cohen's song "Ballad of the Absent Mare." It also explains how instructors can contextualize these pictures within the history of Buddhist visual culture and thereby frame Cohen's adoption of them as a cowboy ballad motif. The essay begins by describing the metaphor of the ox. It then reviews three theories about the origin of the pictures, contextualizing them within the history of Buddhist visual culture. Finally, it provides a PowerPoint presentation that connects each of the Ten Oxherding Pictures to verses of Cohen's song and offers comments for instructors' use in class.

Keywords: Zen; Ten Oxherding Pictures; Leonard Cohen; Buddhist iconography

Sight and sound are two elements employed as Zen skill-in-means, methods for awakening. This paper describes how to teach Zen's famous Ten Oxherding Pictures through the Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) song "Ballad of the Absent Mare." It also explains how instructors can contextualize these pictures within the history of Buddhist visual culture and thereby frame Cohen's adoption of the pictures into a cowboy ballad motif.

The Ten Oxherding Pictures (十牛圖) were conceived and circulated in China during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Eventually carried to Korea and Japan, numerous versions of the pictures have come to exist, and many masters have commented on the work. It is thought that Chinese Chan master Kuoan Shiyuan, known as Kakuan in Japan, drew the first set of ten pictures in the twelfth century,

using images of a monk and an ox to depict stages of awakening according to Zen (Chinese: Chan). A modern version by Japanese woodblock artist Tomikichirō Tokuriki (1902–2000) became known to English readers through the wide-selling book compiled in the 1930s by Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Reps's book allowed these visual images and their interpretations, which had been so influential in East Asia, to reach English-speaking artists and Zen practitioners, who in turn disseminated them in their own countries.

In *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Reps suggests that the ox in the pictures signifies “the eternal principle of life, truth in action” (Reps 161, 134). My own paper begins by describing the metaphor of the ox. It then reviews three theories about the origin of the pictures and contextualizes them within the history of Buddhist visual culture. Finally, it provides a PowerPoint presentation that connects each of the Ten Oxherding Pictures to verses of Cohen's song and offers comments for instructors' use in class.

What is the ox metaphor?

There have been a number of suggestions about what the ox indicates in the pictures. Three of the most prominent are: 1) Buddha Nature, 2) the Mind-Ground (Chinese: *xindi*, Japanese: *shinji*, 心地, Sanskrit: *citta-bhūmi*), and 3) the Great Ultimate (Chinese: *taiji*, 太極) of the *Yijing* and Daoism. I would like to suggest that the true answer is both all of these and none of them. It is useful to explain the three theories to students, if only briefly.

1. Buddha Nature

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, Buddha Nature is the innate awakened state that we all possess but most have yet to discover. Accordingly, Buddhism is the way to find it. The idea of Buddha Nature became especially popular in parts of East Asia where Daoism had already been spreading its message that people are good and happy by nature. Indian Buddhism, on the other hand, via the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, holds that the basic activity of the human mind is either to desire to obtain something or to desire to get rid of something, and that this innate posture of discontent is the root of our suffering. Generally, East Asian Buddhism, including Zen, says that the most basic element of

humanity is Buddha Mind, our natural state of enlightenment. For this reason, in Zen, knowing the Four Noble Truths is much less important than one's experience of Buddha Nature.

2. The Mind-Ground

Even so, East Asian Buddhism teaches that our minds become filled with problems due to ignorance, and that beneath this defilement is the innately pure Buddha Mind that is the ground for all perceptions. This Mind-Ground is like the whole earth; it contains north, south, east, and west, which, after all, come out of the mind, as do all sounds and smells, pain and happiness, etc. Like the earth's ground, the Mind-Ground sustains all beings and does not discriminate. A Bodhisattva who realizes the Mind-Ground perceives reality accordingly, that is, indiscriminately. She or he does not judge experiences to be good or bad, and views both praise and ridicule with equanimity. The Mind-Ground is an old concept in Buddhism, used by Sarvāstivāda and other early schools. In Zen, it is typically referred to as simply 'the mind.' Zen is a tradition of Buddhism that is considered to have been transmitted through experience, outside of the doctrinal traditions, mind to mind. Famously, Zen is said to be the method of pointing directly to the mind.

3. The Great Ultimate

The Great Ultimate in Daoism is undivided absolute reality (Koller 2016). One reason for believing that the ox in these pictures represents the Great Ultimate is that Daoism has used ox drawings and ox stories to represent the Great Ultimate since before the Ten Oxherding Pictures were drawn and even before Buddhism was introduced to China. As with the adaptation of Buddhism in East Asia as Zen, and the adaptation of the Oxherding Pictures in America as the "Ballad of the Absent Mare," the Ten Oxherding Pictures, according to this theory, use the Daoist ox metaphor to stand for the Great Ultimate, combining it with Buddhism and tailoring it to represent Buddha Nature and the Mind-Ground. Like the Great Ultimate, Buddha Nature is said to be without birth and without annihilation. It is unchanging and logically incomprehensible. Buddha Nature is not a dualistic realm. You cannot speak of it as existing or

not existing, as great or small, good or bad. It is without any opposites. It is not dual and cannot be separated into parts. Buddha Nature is the foundation from which all things come. You and I are also the Buddha regardless of whether we flatter or slander. This is Buddha Nature.

Because the Great Ultimate, Buddha Nature, and the Mind-Ground are concepts for non-conceptual experience, according to all three interpretations the ox is ultimately not any of these but a metaphor for the non-conceptual, non-dual. As we see in the Ten Oxherding Pictures and in the "Ballad of the Absent Mare," the understanding eventually arises that the ox and mare are not different from the monk and cowboy. Likewise, because Zen is interested in pointing directly to the mind and operates outside of doctrinal traditions, pictures and songs appear to be more experientially useful than sūtras and commentaries.

What are the origin of the ox as metaphor for attainment?

The origins of the metaphor are uncertain, but again there are three main suggestions. These include: 1) the appropriation of the ox from Daoism, 2) Indian origins of the ox metaphor, and 3) The Eleven-Elephant Picture of Tibet. While scholars have suggested a combination of any two of these, once more the most complete answer could encompass all three.

1. Appropriation of the ox from Daoism

Laozi himself is often depicted riding an ox, an image representing that he has come to understand nature and absolute reality and exists in harmony with these. One of the most famous stories from Daoism that uses ox images in this way is Zhuangzi's "The Dexterous Butcher." In the story, a butcher develops perfect coordination with his subject, an ox. The butcher explains, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. . . . Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants" (Watson 1968, 50–51). This description closely resembles the progress depicted in the Ten Oxherding Pictures. In Zhuangzi's story, the ox can be seen as representing one's own nature. By forgetting himself or his ego-self, the butcher is able to

act spontaneously by taking no deliberate action (i.e., by *wuwei*). Thereby, he comes into harmony with nature, which, like an ox, is usually seen as wild. In the same way, the Ten Oxherding Pictures depict a monk's difficulties when trying to pull the ox by force (in picture 4), and ultimate success when both self and ox are forgotten (in picture 8).

2. Indian origins of the ox metaphor

According to this interpretation, the ox in the Ten Oxherding Pictures is taken directly from the famous "Parable of the Burning House" found in the third chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In this story, a father calls to his children to quickly come out of a burning house. The children, however, are playing and do not listen to him. To lure them out he offers each one his or her favorite toy: a sheep cart, a deer cart, and an ox cart. In this way the father gets each child to come out of the burning house. However, instead of giving the individuals the carts he promised, the father gives his children a large cart led by a white ox. The ox stands on the bare ground outside, untouched by the fire. This gift proves to be an even greater delight than those promised. In this metaphor, the children can be seen as ordinary people while the father is the Buddha. Ordinary people live in the three planes of existence (Sanskrit: *trailokya*), caught up in their desires and comfortably oblivious, even playing, during the time of our impending doom, represented by the fire. In the metaphor, the sheep cart, deer cart, and ox cart are the three vehicles of Buddhism. In Chinese Buddhism, there have been two interpretations of the *ekayana*, or one vehicle of the white ox cart: either it is seen as identical to the three carts, or as a fourth vehicle. Faxiang (the Chinese version of Yogācāra) and Sanlun (Japanese: Sanron) view the *ekayana* as identical to the three carts. Huayan and Tiantai are of the opinion that it is a fourth cart. In all cases, the bare ground outside of the burning house is a realm free from defilement, where the mind is cut off from the affliction of desire.

From this description we can see how the Ten Oxherding Pictures could have been adopted from the *Lotus Sūtra* without need of Daoist imagery, particularly if we consider its further use in Chan *gong'an* (Japanese: *kōan*).

There are numerous such Chan stories that begin with the following question but end with different responses. "A monk asked the master [Deshan Xuanjian], 'What is the white ox on the bare ground?' The master said, 'Moo, moo!' 'What sort of food does he live on?' asked the monk. 'Eat!' said the master" (Kirchner 2009, 303). From these stories it is clear that the subject was popular in Chan thought. There are also various metaphorical references that combine the white ox on bare ground with a herdboyc from the Tang Dynasty. For example, Changqing Da'an (793–883) writes:

All I did was to look after an ox. If he got off the road, I dragged him back; if he trampled the flowering grain in others' fields, I trained him by flogging him with a whip. For a long time how pitiful he was, at the mercy of men's words! Now he has changed into the white ox on the bare ground, and always stays in front of my face. All day long he clearly reveals himself. Even though I chase him, he doesn't go away (Chu 2010, 202).

3. The Eleven-Elephant Picture of Tibet

Although the words of Changqing Da'an and similar references from the time provide strong evidence that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the origin of the Ten Oxherding Pictures, we should also consider that Tibet has its own version of the Eleven-Elephant Picture. Its eleven stages are described as follows:

- 1) A monk (the meditator), holding a rope (mindfulness) (Tib *denpa*, Skt *smṛti*, Pali *sati*) in his left hand and a goad (full awareness) in his right, runs after an elephant led by a monkey. Here the meditator has no control over his mind.
- 2) He almost catches up with the elephant.
- 3) The monk throws a noose around the elephant's neck and it looks back; the mind is beginning to be restrained by mindfulness. The rabbit on the elephant's back represents torpor, which has by then become subtle.

- 4) As the elephant (the mind) becomes more obedient, the rope (mindfulness) needs less pulling.
- 5) The elephant is being led by the rope and the hook, and the monkey follows behind. There is less restlessness now; mainly full awareness is used.
- 6) Both the animals follow behind and the monk does not have to look back (he focuses his attention continuously on his mind); the rabbit (subtle restlessness) has disappeared.
- 7) The elephant is left on its own, doing without the rope or hook; the monkey takes leave. Torpor and restlessness—both mild—occur only occasionally here.
- 8) The elephant, now completely white, follows behind the man; the mind is obedient and there is no torpor or restlessness, but some energy is still needed to concentrate.
- 9) The monk sits in meditation while the elephant sleeps at his feet; the mind is able to concentrate without effort for long periods of time and there is great joy and peace. The flying monk represents zest and lightness of the body.
- 10) The monk sits on the elephant; he now finds true calm (Tib *zhine*, Skt *śamatha*, Pali *samatha*) and needs less energy to concentrate.
- 11) In the last stage, the monk on the elephant's back holds a sword (the realization of emptiness) ([Skt] *śūnyatā*), and cuts off the two black lines representing the obstacle to full knowledge (*jney'āvaraṇa*) and the defiling obstacle (*kṣes'āvaraṇa*) (Tan 2004).

In his paper containing the above description, Piya Tan does not point to either Chan's Ten Oxherding Pictures or the Eleven-Elephant Picture of Tibetan Vajrayāna as the source for the other. Instead, he shows how various Indian sūtras use an ox, calf, or other animal as a metaphor for training the mind in stages. He suggests that the images could have been developed in Tibet and China separately, without necessarily

referring to each other, but rather according to cultural interpretations of Indian Buddhist teachings. Interestingly, he does not mention the *Lotus Sūtra* as a possible source but focuses on the *Mahā Gopālaka Sutta* and the *Mahā Saṭṭipathāna Sutta*.

Contextualizing within Buddhist visual culture

We can also contextualize the Ten Oxherding Pictures within the broader context of Buddhist visual culture. Visual Culture is an academic field which, since its inception in the 1970s, has been drawing on the theories and methods of Art History, Archeology, Performance Studies, and other disciplines to understand the place of visualization and imagery in various settings. In locating the Ten Oxherding Pictures in the history of Buddhist images, we might begin with the earliest, that is, Indian Buddhist art.

Indian Buddhist Art and the Ten Oxherding Pictures

For the first several hundred years after his time, the Buddha's presence was only suggested in representations in images such as spoked wheels, the lion capital atop Aśoka's pillars, and the Bodhi Tree flanked by the *nāga* snake-like being Mucilinda, who is said in legend to be a protector of the Buddha. That is to say, the Buddha and the Dharma were first represented in aniconic imagery. We can consider the next development to be iconic images of Buddha, such as the seated figures familiar to us. In these representations he is often depicted as having some or all of the famous thirty-two marks of a Buddha, including long earlobes indicating his characteristic of always listening to suffering. In the Ten Oxherding Pictures, the Chinese Laughing Buddha in the tenth picture also has some of these marks. Many iconic images of the Buddha also display mudras—hand gestures indicating some attribute of Buddhahood or a story associated with him. The Laughing Buddha in the Oxherding Pictures is shown with a modified version of the Buddha's Varada, or Gift Giving Mudra. The figure of the Laughing Buddha is thought to predate Buddhism in China, to have been an earlier patron saint of orphaned children who bestows gifts from a bag like Santa Claus. Some associate this figure with the future Buddha, Maitreya, who will once more bring the path of awakening to the world. Likewise, in the Ten Oxherding Pictures, the Bodhisattva returns to the ordinary world of the cities to bestow the gift

of his practice. In *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Paul Reps relates a story about the Laughing Buddha carrying his bag of gifts through the streets, "actualizing Zen." When someone asks him a question about the Dharma, he replies, "Give me one penny" (Reps 1961, 31–2). In the same way, the Laughing Buddha interacts with the herdboyc in the tenth of the Oxherding Pictures, on the streets of the city, actualizing Zen.

We may consider esoteric or tantric images to be the next development in Buddhist visual culture. The most famous of these are maṇḍala paintings used for meditative visualization. The most widely used maṇḍala of East Asia are the dual maṇḍala, that is, the Garbhadhatu or Womb Realm maṇḍala, considered female, and the Vajradhatu or Diamond Realm maṇḍala, considered male. Together, these maṇḍala represent the union of all things provisionally considered polarities; female and male are wisdom and compassion, as well as the known and the knower, respectively. These maṇḍala have been used in Japan since the ninth century by practitioners of Shingon and Tendai Buddhism. In the Zen attainment represented in the Ten Oxherding Pictures, the realization of non-duality is also desired. In meditation, the tantric maṇḍala are navigated either from the outside towards a central Buddha, or from the motionless awaking of the central Buddha outwards toward the world of action around him. Likewise, there is progression through the Ten Oxherding Pictures—the circularity of the journey and the movement from action to inaction and back. Also as in the Oxherding Pictures, the figure depicted in the maṇḍala is not the historical Buddha but a representation of the ideal traits the tradition's practitioners aspire to embody. In the Womb Realm maṇḍala, the central Buddha is Mahāvairocana, the representation of the teachings of the Buddha and the realized unity and non-duality of all elements of the universe. Mahāvairocana sits in the center of an open lotus flower, a symbol of the Buddha's compassion. He is surrounded by four other representational Buddhas and four Bodhisattvas. Each of these figures is depicted as sitting on one of the eight petals of the lotus flower. Each represents an attribute of the all-encompassing Buddha in the center. For example, to the west, the Buddha Amitabha (Japanese: Amida) represents the central Buddha's compassion. A practitioner would meditate on compassion while visualizing Amitabha, repeating the mantra associated with that Buddha and assuming the same mudra. In this way, the meditator essentially

becomes Amitabha, and thereby is able to embody the compassion of the Buddha. After realizing this attainment, s/he moves in contemplation around the petals of the maṇḍala, for example to the figure representing the Buddha's wisdom, working similarly to gain that attribute of Buddhahood. Eventually, the practitioner navigates the entire lotus, gaining each of the attributes represented and becoming the fully achieved Buddha in the center. This movement from image to image, from achievement to achievement, is quite similar to that of traversing each of the Ten Oxherding Pictures. The movement from the central Buddha in the lotus to actions in the ordinary world represented as surrounding him in the Womb Realm maṇḍala is like traversing from the first Oxherding Picture to the tenth.

The assumption in tantric Buddhism is that body, mind, and speech have a mysterious power that allows us to become a Buddha. This emphasis on experience contrasts with doctrinal Buddhist traditions, such as those popular in the Nara period of Japanese history, before Shingon and Tendai were popularized there and before Zen was introduced to the country as a separate tradition. Zen is a tradition of Buddhism that likewise values direct experience and for the most part rejects doctrinal study.

Early Chinese Buddhist Art

From the time Buddhism entered China during the late Han Dynasty, around the first century CE,¹ and for the next for several hundred years, Buddhist artists relied on Indian art and art from the Afghan region to inform their style. Sculptures and carvings from the time were in the Graeco-Indian tradition, and this style influenced Chinese Buddhist painting. Some of the most famous Chinese masters of Buddhist art, including Chang Sengyu (c. 470–550) and Wu Daozi (680–760?), painted scenes on temples and caves with such realism that it was said when the eyes were painted on dragons "they flew away amid thunder and lightning" (Sullivan 1984, 107). Unlike anything done in China before, these paintings imported Indian techniques as seen in Ajantā caves, such as shading that gave the effect of roundness. The Oxherding Pictures contrast with this style.

¹ The date Buddhism entered China is unknown and currently disputed, but is generally thought to be late first century CE.

Chan Painting and the Ten Oxherding Pictures

Elaborate images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Jataka tales of the Buddha's past lives, and the ornate worlds of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the western paradise promised by Pure Land Buddhism impressed viewers and culminated in the visually stimulating maṇḍala paintings of tantric Buddhism as described above but produced in China during the Tang dynasty. However, it is in Chan painting that Buddhist artists began to embrace the spirit of spontaneity advocated by Daoism and to reject the highly wrought methods and style of their predecessors. Returning to their Chinese artistic roots, Chan artists preferred monochrome ink and a calligraphic style that is more obviously two dimensional. In contrast to the serene depictions found in other Chinese Buddhist art, theirs were more intense, showing a fierce concentration appropriate to Chan meditation and life. Five Dynasties artist Kuan Hsiu (832–912) painted monochromatic arhats in ugly caricatures that must have shocked viewers, much like Chan *gong'an* on the subject might do. Shi Ke (d. 975) applied the same style to more light-hearted themes, such as his *Two Minds in Harmony*, showing a sketchily drawn monk asleep on a cat. Shi Ke is credited with coining the term "yi" (意) to describe his style of painting, literally referring to the mind's "intent" or "feeling," in contrast with other Buddhist styles more confined by rules (Sullivan 1984, 149). Later Chan artists developed this idea as *xie yi* (寫意)—painting feelings—which was likewise spontaneous, monochrome, and sketchy. One of the best-known Chan painters in this style is Liang Kai (c. 1140–c. 1210) of the Song Dynasty. Among the themes Kai explores is that of the sixth patriarch of Chan, Huineng. Kai depicts Huineng cutting bamboo for firewood in one painting and tearing up sūtras in another, both favorite themes of the "sudden enlightenment" tradition of Chan. Liang Kai himself is said to have retired from court and taken up a life devoted to drinking and painting at a remote Chan monastery. Other Song Dynasty Chan painters, such as Mu Qi (13th century) with his famous *Six Persimmons*, also focused on simple subjects, letting the nonessential blur into the background as happens in Chan mediation (Sullivan 1984, 170). These same features are present in the Ten Oxherding Pictures, also first produced in the Song Dynasty. This tendency to reduce the complexity of earlier artistic systems and eliminate cleverness as a device is just what a Leonard Cohen folk song on guitar achieves.

Leonard Cohen and the "Ballad of the Absent Mare"

Leonard Cohen was a Canadian folksinger and an icon in his own right. Among his many famous songs are "Hallelujah" (1984), "Suzanne" (1967), and "Bird on the Wire" (1969). When students in an undergraduate class are asked if they know who Leonard Cohen is, at least one typically sings the word "Hallelujah" in answer. Cohen has said in several interviews that in terms of religion, he can only classify himself as Jewish, having received what he considers a good Jewish education free of fanaticism.² He is also known to be a longtime Zen meditation practitioner, but he does not view Zen as religion. The French documentary *Leonard Cohen: Spring 96* (Armelle Brusq) provides background and insight into Cohen's Zen monasticism and lifestyle on California's Mount Baldy during the 1990s. Teachers might consider showing this documentary to their students, in part or whole, to illustrate Zen Buddhist training in America, as it documents some of Cohen's time as an ordained Rinzai Zen monk. Cohen took the Dharma name *Jikan*, meaning "silence," an interesting choice for a folk singer.

In his song "Ballad of the Absent Mare," Cohen interprets the Ten Oxherding Pictures through the eyes of a western cowboy balladeer. In each country and during each time period in which Zen and Buddhism more broadly has spread, it has incorporated elements of the new cultures it encountered. In China, elements of Daoism can be found in Zen's Buddha Nature concept, and Confucianism in its lineage system. Likewise, in America, Jack Kerouac made his Dharma Bums freight train hopping hobos, while J.D. Salinger created a modern Bodhisattva from New York City in the image of Holden Caulfield. Poet Gary Snyder wrote the "Smokey the Bear Sūtra," equating a furry firefighter with Vairocana, the Great Sun Buddha, and singer-songwriter Cat Stevens made reference to the Ten Oxherding Pictures in the title of his album *Catch a Bull at Four*, before converting to Islam and changing his name to Yusuf Islam.

² See for example "The Leonard Cohen Experience," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDisjwYEgso> (accessed 11/12/16).

The PowerPoint Presentation

To teach students the content of the Ten Oxherding Pictures and how Americans have contextualized Zen, I suggest matching the stanzas of Cohen's song one by one to the Ten Pictures and presenting the results in a PowerPoint presentation, video, or other program. This is easily set up via reference to the illustrations and commentary by Kakuan in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, which is widely available on the internet.³ Such a presentation is provided with this article. I suggest breaking up the recorded song (using the free program Audacity,⁴ for example) and grouping the relevant stanza with its corresponding Oxherding picture, as I have done in the attached presentation. Alternatively, numerous different versions of the Ten Oxherding Pictures and interpretations by other masters are also available on the internet.⁵

PowerPoint Presentation

Slide 1 shows the first of the Ten Oxherding Pictures and says the following, taken from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*:

1. Searching for the Bull



³ For example, <http://www.dharmamet.org/oxherding.swf> (accessed 11/12/16).

⁴ Available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> (accessed 11/12/16).

⁵ See <http://www.buddhanet.net/oxherd1.htm> (accessed 11/12/16), for another tried and true classroom use.

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

Following unnamed rivers, lost upon the interpenetrating paths of distant mountains,

My strength failing and my vitality exhausted, I cannot find the bull. I only hear the locusts chirring through the forest at night.

Comment: The bull never has been lost. What need is there to search? Only because of separation from my true nature, I fail to find him. In the confusion of the senses I lose even his tracks. Far from home, I see many crossroads, but which way is the right one I know not. Greed and fear, good and bad, entangle me.

The corresponding audio from Leonard Cohen is the beginning of the song, which says:

Say a prayer for the cowboy, his mare's run away
And he'll walk til he finds her, his darling, his stray
but the river's in flood and the roads are awash
and the bridges break up,
in the panic of loss.
And there's nothing to follow, there's nowhere to go
She's gone like the summer, gone like the snow.
And the crickets are breaking, his heart with their song
as the day caves in
and the night is all wrong

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen1.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: In addition to the correlation Cohen draws between the horse and the ox, we might also speculate that he is hinting at the loss of a woman he hopes to regain; his love songs have been known to refer to separation and longing

for reunion. Regardless of our interpretation of this part of the metaphor, certainly there is an element of the cowboy's love for the mare in the song. The opening phrase, "Say a prayer," sets a religious tone.

It is also important to note that according to Zen, and to Buddha Nature theory in Mahāyāna Buddhism, awakening is not a matter of training ourselves to become greater and thereby attain something we did not previously have. Instead, as in Daoism, it is innate and must be rediscovered like the ox and mare that have run away. In this stage, the aspirant becomes aware that there is awakening.

Slide 2 is as follows.

2. Discovering the Footprints



Along the riverbank under the trees, I discover footprints!
Even under the fragrant grass I see his prints.
Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces no more can be hidden than one's nose, looking heavenward.

Comment: Understanding the teaching, I see the footprints of the bull. Then I learn that, just as many utensils are made from one metal, so too are myriad

entities made of the fabric of self. Unless I discriminate, how will I perceive the true from the untrue? Not yet having entered the gate, nevertheless I have discerned the path.

The corresponding Cohen audio says:

Did he dream, was it she who went galloping past
and bent down the fern, broke open the grass
and printed the mud with the iron and the gold
that he nailed to her feet,
when he was the lord

And although she goes grazing a minute away
he tracks her all night he tracks her all day
Oh blind to her presence except to compare
his injury here
with her punishment there

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen2.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: In this picture the ox still has not been seen, but now there is phenomenal evidence that it exists and an apparent path to discovering it. In his comment, Kakuan assumes the voice of one at this level of attainment. He says, "Unless I discriminate, how will I perceive the true from the untrue?" Like the phenomena of the ox and mare's hoof prints, the aspirant mistakenly believes that discrimination and dualistic thinking are necessary for perceiving the true nature of reality. Cohen likens this perception to a dream, which is a common Buddhist simile. Kakuan says this perception takes place in deep mountains, a typical Daoist motif. Later in his song, Cohen also alludes to a mountain setting, referring to the high plateaus of the American western plains.

Slide 3 is as follows.

3. Perceiving the Bull



I hear the song of the nightingale.

The sun is warm, the wind is mild, willows are green along the shore,

Here no bull can hide!

What artist can draw that massive head, those majestic horns?

Comment: When one hears the voice, one can sense its source. As soon as the six senses merge, the gate is entered. Wherever one enters one sees the head of the bull! This unity is like salt in water, like color in dyestuff. The slightest thing is not apart from self.

The corresponding part of the song says:

Then at home on a branch in the highest tree

a songbird sings out so suddenly

Ah the sun is warm and the soft winds ride

on the willow trees

by the river side

Oh the world is sweet the world is wide
and she's there where the light and the darkness divide
and the steam's coming off her she's huge and she's shy
and she steps on the moon
when she paws at the sky

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen3.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: Those who saw the well-known Korean movie *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* will remember not only the central role of the ox in allusions to the Ten Oxherding Pictures but also that a bird watches over the human characters like a karmic judge. Kakuan's awareness of the song of the nightingale matches Cohen's recognition that a songbird sings. In all of these cases multiple interactions in nature facilitate the process of realizing one's Buddha Nature, making us aware of that process by breaking the silence. Perhaps Cohen himself acts as this kind of songbird as well.

Slide 4:

4. Catching the Bull



I seize him with a terrific struggle.
His great will and power are inexhaustible.
He charges to the high plateau far above the cloud-mists,
On in an impenetrable ravine he stands.

Comment: He dwelt in the forest a long time, but I caught him today!
Infatuation for scenery interferes with his direction. Longing for sweeter grass,
he wanders away. His mind still is stubborn and unbridled. If I wish him to
submit, I must raise my whip.

The corresponding section of "Ballad of the Absent Mare" says:

And she comes to his hand but she's not really tame
She longs to be lost he longs for the same
and she'll bolt and she'll plunge through the first open pass
to roll and to feed
in the sweet mountain grass

Or she'll make a break for the high plateau
where there's nothing above and there's nothing below
and it's time for the burden it's time for the whip
Will she walk through the flame
Can he shoot from the hip

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen4.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: The title of this Picture, "Catching the Bull," was given by Kakuan and appears in the Chinese below the drawing. This is also the source for the title of Cat Stevens's 1972 album, *Catch a Bull at Four*. "Catching the Bull" refers to finally getting some kind of grasp on the elusive Mind-Ground and Great Ultimate. But indeed, as Kakuan and Cohen point out, the Bull puts up a great struggle and is not really tame. Kakuan says it is "inexhaustible," a description often used by Daoists to characterize the Way. Cohen echoes Kakuan in reference to sweet grass and the necessity of the whip.

Slide 5:

5. Taming the Bull



The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down some dusty road.
Being well trained, he becomes naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.

Comment: When one thought arises, another thought follows. When the first thought springs from enlightenment, all subsequent thoughts are true. Through delusion, one makes everything untrue. Delusion is not caused by objectivity; it is the result of subjectivity. Hold the nose-ring tight and do not allow even a doubt.

The corresponding part of the song is:

So he binds himself to the galloping mare
and she binds herself to the rider there
and there is no space, but there's left and right

and there is no time,
but there's day and night

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen5.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: In this stage, the practitioner has begun to calm the discriminative mind, either through mediation or other Zen practices. But it is still necessary to practice with care because, although some attainment has occurred, there is still discrimination. Cohen describes this partial attainment in a similar way: "There is no space, but there is left and right; and there is no time, but there's day and night."

Slide 6:

6. Riding the Bull, Returning Home



Mounting the bull, slowly I return homeward.

The voice of my flute intones through the evening.

Measuring with hand-beats the pulsating harmony, I direct the endless rhythm.

Whoever hears this melody will join me.

Comment: This struggle is over; gain and loss are assimilated. I sing the song of the village woodsman, and play the tunes of the children. Astride the bull, I observe the clouds above. Onward I go, no matter who may wish to call me back.

Instructor's comments: There does not seem to be an independent verse in the song that neatly corresponds to Oxherding picture number six. Instead, Cohen combines pictures six and seven into one verse, as shown below. We should also consider that he uses two verses each to describe pictures one through four, only one verse to describe picture five, and now only one verse for six and seven together. We might speculate that the changing number of corresponding verses indicates how the perception of time becomes more and more fine, until it comes to a complete stop in picture eight, below. In the sixth Oxherding picture, the aspirant's struggle to tame the unruliness of mind, those waves that obscure the Mind-Ground beneath, has become effortless.

Slide 7:

7. Bull Forgotten, Self remains



Astride the bull, I reach home.
I am serene. The bull too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling I have abandoned the whip and rope.

Comment: All is one law, not two. We only make the bull a temporary subject.
It is as the relation of rabbit and trap, of fish and net. It is as gold and dross, or
the moon emerging from a cloud. One path of clear light travels on throughout
endless time.

The corresponding part of the song is:

And he leans on her neck and he whispers low
"Whither thou goest, I will go"
And they turn as one and they head for the plain
No need for the whip
Ah, no need for the rein

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen6.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: In this stage of awaking to Buddha Nature, the aspirant gives up the attachment to meditative tools and their associated images, whether an ox or a Buddha. As Kakuan's comment says, "We only make the bull a temporary subject." This is like the vehicle of Buddhism that helps us cross the stream of *saṃsāra*. Once across, there is no attachment to the boat.

The first two lines of Cohen's stanza seem to refer to the previous Oxherding picture in that the cowboy rides the mare comfortably. In addition, Cohen adds, "Wither thou goest, I will go," a reference to Book of Ruth in the King's James Version of the Bible (Ruth 16–17), again tying the Zen message to the American and Jewish religious experiences and the mare to love for a woman. Cohen also wrote another song called "Wither Thou Goest." When I think of that line in the context of the Ten Oxherding Pictures, I am reminded of the scene near the beginning of *Narrow Road to the Deep Interior*, when Bashō describes letting a farmer's horse guide him to a

destination that man could not discern. This seems to be the point in Cohen's song as well—riding the mare but letting it lead, taming the mind so it can be experienced as untamed.

Slide 8:

8. Both Bull and Self Forgotten



Whip, rope, person, and bull – all merge in No-Thing.

This heaven is so vast no message can stain it.

How may a snowflake exist in a raging fire?

Here are the footprints of the patriarchs.

Comment: Mediocrity is gone. Mind is clear of limitation. I seek no state of enlightenment. Neither do I remain where no enlightenment exists. Since I linger in neither condition, eyes cannot see me. If hundreds of birds strew my path with flowers, such praise would be meaningless.

Instructor's comments: We should strongly suspect that the reason there is no corresponding verse in the song is because number eight is the empty circle. This empty circle—also seen in the famous Zen *enzo*, incomplete circle—is highly significant in terms of awakening to Buddha Nature. Here, the perceived duality between ox and monk, mare and cowboy, and mind and the perceiver of mind, are all shown

to have been misconceptions of the nature of reality, and vanish. Likewise, the verse is "empty" in that it is not provided.

We might also speculate that the idea behind this empty circle is the reason that the song is called "Ballad of the Absent Mare." Listeners assume that the mare is absent in the sense that she has run away. However, it becomes clear, particularly at the end of the song, that in reality the mare is absent by virtue of being merged in No-Thing, as Kakuan puts it. In the same way, there is no monk, cowboy, singer, or listener; all are concepts dependent on the perception of a "self" and "other." According to Buddhism, like all things, these are empty of self-existence. Basic Buddhist teachings say that all things consist of five elements (five *skandhas*) that constantly interact with one another, always coming into and going out of existence. That is to say, the person you are right now is not the person you were ten years ago, physically or mentally. The same is true from moment to moment. There is nothing that is not interacting with other elements; there is nothing that permanently exists. In this sense and in others, there are no individual separate beings and in fact no beings at all, since what we call a being has changed by the time we have named it. In this eighth stage of awakening the mind has stopped positing an ego-self that constantly judges experience as separate from itself. Thus the illusion of an ox and a monk disappears.

Slide 9:

9. Return to the Origin, back to the source



Too many steps have been taken returning to the root and the source.
 Better to have been blind and deaf from the beginning!
 Dwelling in one's true abode, unconcerned with that without –
 The river flows tranquilly on and the flowers are red.
 Comment: From the beginning, truth is clear. Poised in silence, I observe the
 forms of integration and disintegration. One who is not attached to "form"
 need not be "reformed." The water is emerald, the mountain is indigo, and I see
 that which is creating and that which is destroying.

The corresponding lines of the song are:

Now the clasp of this union, who fastens it tight?
 Who snaps it asunder the very next night?
 Some say the rider, some say the mare
 Or that love's like the smoke
 beyond all repair

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen9.mp3>]

Instructor's comments: Now that dualistic thinking is gone, and one realizes it was never separate since the beginning, we might wonder why it was necessary to go through all these steps. As Kakuan's verse says, "Better to have been blind and deaf from the beginning!" The idea of "returning to the origin" is also central to Daoism; we can see this throughout the *Daodejing*. For example, verse 16 of the *Daodejing* says, "All things alike become active. We then observe them return,"⁶ and verse 34 says, "All things return in this way and we do not know what governs this."⁷ The uncertainty expressed in the *Daodejing* is close to Cohen's own sentiment: "Now the clasp of this union, who fastens it tight? Who snaps it asunder the very next

⁶ 萬物並作，吾以觀復。 See <http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing> (accessed 11/12/16).

⁷ 萬物歸焉，而不為主。 See <http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing> (accessed 11/12/16).

night?" The ninth picture illustrates Zen's "first in last" concept and shows that Buddha Nature has always been present.

Slide 10:

10. Entering the Market place with Bliss-Bestowing Hands



Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden, and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees become alive.

Comment: Inside my gate, a thousand sages do not know me. The beauty of my garden is invisible. Why should one search for the footprints of the patriarchs? I go to the market place with my wine bottle and return home with my staff. I visit the wine shop and the market, and everyone I look upon becomes enlightened.

The end of the song:

But my darling says, "Leonard, just let it go by
That old silhouette on the great western sky"
So I pick out a tune and they move right along

and they're gone like the smoke
and they're gone like this song.

This stanza can be listened to here: [<http://ww2.coastal.edu/rgreen/Cohen10.mp3>]

Instructor's comment: The content of the tenth picture is important in showing that a Bodhisattva returns to the ordinary world to help sentient beings on their own paths to realization. Likewise, in the song, the singer returns to ordinary life. This part of the ballad appears at first to be the most enigmatic once the content of the Ten Oxherding Pictures has been unpacked from the previous verses. Here we are suddenly introduced to two more characters that are neither the cowboy nor the mare, except perhaps metaphorically: Leonard, who has been revealed to be the one experiencing the vision of the cowboy and absent mare, and his darling, to whom it appears he has been relating all this. The verse suggests that the cowboy and the horse were images the singer/Cohen had imagined in clouds or smoke in a western sky, which of course is fitting for the cowboy ballad and for bringing Zen into an American context. It might be understood that the silhouette in the sky is "old" in that it has been playing out over and over for millennia in various forms—such as the Ten Oxherding Pictures, the "Ballad of the Absent Mare," and ordinary lives across continents.

Cohen's imagery in this final verse is very fitting to Zen in two ways. First, there is the idea that we experience only provisional reality, that only Buddha Nature is ultimately real and unchanging. Many Buddhist writings, including the *Lotus Sūtra*, describe our experience of provisional reality as being like clouds, smoke, bubbles, a mirage, or as Cohen put it earlier in his song, a dream. The second way the last verse fits with Zen is that it expresses non-attachment in the phrase "just let it go by," an idea that is actualized in the next phrase, "they're gone like the smoke and they're gone like this song." Again, while "they" seems to refer to the cowboy and the mare, it also implies all duality and the struggle to realize non-duality.

It is worth noting that in reference to the cowboy, the second line of the song calls the mare "his darling, his stray," whereas the end refers to "my darling." This

change reinforces the notion that the mare is a metaphor for a woman. Most important in this regard, the one by analogy who is the "darling"—who in essence tells the monk to "let it go by"—is the Laughing Buddha in the tenth Oxherding Picture. This connection strongly implies that "my darling" in the last line of Cohen's song refers to Cohen's own Zen master, who is, after all, to be considered within the tradition as a living Buddha.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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