

Enlightenment and the Ten Zen Ox Herding Pictures ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 The Chan or Zen school sometimes calls itself the school of consciousness. In other words,
00:00:28 it teaches the nature of consciousness. There is a famous set of drawings that show one paradigm,
00:00:48 or one possible model, for the path of coming to understand the nature of your consciousness.
00:01:00 And it's called the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, Shi Niu Tu in Mandarin pronunciation,
00:01:08 Jyu Gyu Zu in the Sino-Japanese. Niu means an ox, and the ox symbolizes the nature of consciousness.
00:01:23 So they call it the Shin Niu, the ox of consciousness, or the Sam Ngao. Do I have it right?
00:01:32 How close? How do you say it? Pretty good, pretty close. That was a guess on the Cantonese, Sam Ngao.
00:01:41 So the consciousness symbolized by the ox. But to understand consciousness, in other words,
00:01:54 the way that humans experience our senses, is also enlightenment. So the Ten Ox Herding Pictures
00:02:03 can be interpreted in two different ways. One is they show you stages on the path to enlightenment.
00:02:10 The other is they show you the process of understanding or truly grasping what consciousness
00:02:22 is. But of course, those are exactly the same thing. I don't know if you can all see this,
00:02:29 but this is the first picture. And this is called Searching for the Ox. Notice that there is no ox
00:02:40 to be found. The Chinese verse that goes with this says, the ox herding boy is completely lost.
00:02:51 There's no trace of the ox. There's only the cicadas chirping. Do you understand who the ox
00:03:04 herding boy is and what the cicadas chirping? This is the situation of most people on this
00:03:15 planet at this time, unfortunately. They know they want something, but what they think they want is
00:03:22 not what they really want. Everyone's searching, like that song goes, everybody's looking for
00:03:31 something. But what people think they want is happiness dependent on conditions. But what they
00:03:43 really want is happiness independent of conditions, symbolized by the enlightenment ox or the
00:03:55 consciousness, the nature of consciousness ox. But there's no ox at all, not even any trace of the
00:04:02 ox. He's just wandering around, searching for something, looking for something, and just hearing
00:04:10 the twittering of the cicadas, which is unfortunately the situation for most people. Some people
00:04:25 though, in their wanderings, get fortunate. They see the tracks of something. They haven't seen the
00:04:41 nature of consciousness, they haven't seen the ox, they haven't experienced enlightenment. But
00:04:50 something gives them an indication that there is this possibility. Maybe they heard a dharma talk,
00:05:00 maybe they had some experience when they were little that they never forgot, or when they were
00:05:09 grown up. Maybe they had a friend that came to a retreat, etc. They get some indication that
00:05:20 there's another possibility beyond the transient fulfillment of the twittering world. So this is
00:05:36 called seeing the footprints. Every one of you has seen the footprints, or you wouldn't be here.
00:05:45 You might guess what the next step is. He sees the tail on the ox, the tush, and a few hairs of the
00:06:05 tail. He hasn't really seen the whole ox yet, but can you see there's the tush and the tail, and it's
00:06:18 like, oh my god, it really exists. I haven't seen it all, but I have seen a little piece of it. Most
00:06:27 of you are in this category. You haven't maybe, or at least in this category, you've gone beyond
00:06:36 just seeing the footprints. You've actually gotten a little visage of who you really are,
00:06:44 or you wouldn't have survived two weeks in silence. So you've seen the ox, but that's not

00:06:58 catching the ox. You see he's got the whole ox, and he's got a hold of it. Now we could say that
00:07:18 this would be perhaps one's first glimpse of no-self, stream entry, or Kensho type experience.
00:07:33 You've actually seen the whole ox, the nature of consciousness, which is no-thingness, and you've
00:07:45 got a handle on it, but it's still running wild. At least you've captured the ox, and it's in your
00:07:58 ken. You can see it anytime you want, but that's a far cry from taming the ox. In other words,
00:08:22 you internalize the enlightenment to the point where it can't slip away from you, and doesn't
00:08:37 run wild. It follows you, and as wonderful as that is, that cannot be compared to getting on the ox,
00:08:59 actually riding it. This is awesome. People are really afraid of this. It's one thing to see the
00:09:12 ox, even to catch it, even to sort of get it to be manageable. This is the ox of consciousness.
00:09:21 The samgau. When it comes to riding on the ox, that's scary. Some of you are facing this stage.
00:09:35 If you look carefully, you'll see the ox is going this way. You see the boy? He's playing a flute,
00:09:49 quite relaxed, but he's looking the other way. He's riding the ox backwards. Do you understand?
00:10:01 Okay. There's no informed consent to enlightenment. Enlightenment is better than you think it is,
00:10:12 and not nearly what it's cracked up to be. Which one of those did you want to hear? One, both,
00:10:21 or neither? Enlightenment is like continually falling off a cliff, and being completely
00:10:36 comfortable with that. A great and powerful beast carries you, and you have to give up your
00:10:50 investment with where it's going. It's the ultimate act of surrender, riding the ox backwards. The
00:11:00 flow of impermanence. It's like falling down, but you don't fall down. You fall up into existence
00:11:10 moment by moment, which is what pratityasamutpada means. It's a falling, but a falling up, without
00:11:18 any fixation, without needing to know what's going to happen next. You simply fall into what needs
00:11:31 to be done moment by moment. This might be called the act of true faith, as opposed to belief,
00:11:41 which is holding on to something. Faith is letting go of the need to be oriented, the need to have
00:11:56 answers. You simply let the flow of expansion. This is surrendering to the flow of expansion
00:12:03 and contraction. Riding, riding on the wave of the dynamic wave of nothing whatsoever,ness,
00:12:15 and letting it carry you. That's quite a profound act of faith. What comes next? The ox has now
00:12:45 carried you home. He's home. Okay? And he's completely at rest. He's found final repose
00:13:01 of the spirit in his home. The ox is gone. Only who he really was remains. Just the person,
00:13:17 that true, authentic human with no fixated position whatsoever. And no more need for a mind
00:13:34 as an object. He's home. He rode the ox home. Complete enlightenment. Nirvana. But there's
00:13:49 three more pictures. What could they possibly stand for? Well, if you read the books, they give
00:13:59 you various explanations. But I was privileged to discuss these pictures with a Japanese Zen
00:14:16 master many years ago, who told me that there's an oral tradition about these ten pictures that
00:14:28 has not been written down. According to this Roshi's oral tradition, the last three of these
00:14:37 ox herding pictures tell us the substance, the appearance, and the ultimate use of enlightenment.
00:14:52 So you can hardly wait, right? Substance is coming up first. What it's made out of? The matter. The
00:15:02 matter itself. And here is the substance of enlightenment. No substance whatsoever. Right?
00:15:20 When the Emperor asked Bodhidharma, what is the first principle of holiness? What did Bodhidharma
00:15:32 say? Wide open and nothing holy. What's the form of enlightenment? The mountains and the cherry
00:15:46 blossoms. The ordinary appearances of the world. Every single thing is the appearance of enlightenment.
00:15:54 And what's the use of enlightenment? Why do we do this? Why do we bust our buns? Well, actually,
00:16:08 it's not the use of enlightenment. It's the ultimate use of enlightenment. The final cause. In the end,
00:16:14 why do we do this? In the beginning, we might do it out of curiosity, out of desperation, out of

00:16:21 wanting to get high in some way. Who knows? Okay? Maybe relief of suffering. Maybe find out who we
00:16:29 really are. These all have their validity. So in the beginning, there could be many causes for us
00:16:39 to take on this practice. But the final cause, the arete, when you get right down to it, what is it
00:16:50 going to be about? This is my favorite and the last. Essentially, the Chinese version of Santa
00:17:02 Claus. Roly-poly guy with a bag full of goodies going into the marketplace, handing them out to
00:17:14 anyone who wants to take them. Very ordinary, okay? The kind of person you wouldn't hesitate
00:17:23 to talk to. The kind of person you might not think even was in any way special, unless you
00:17:34 knew what to look for. This is actually a historical character, someone that existed in
00:17:46 Chinese history. He was known as the cloth bag monk. That's essentially what he was, a bag man,
00:17:59 a street person. You know how some of you come from Santa Monica, okay? You know how there's
00:18:09 sort of like celebrity street people, okay? There's like certain ones that you know, you even
00:18:15 see them in cartoons and things. Well, in the capital of China, in the Tang Dynasty, Chang'an,
00:18:23 that was the capital. It's now known as Xi'an. Some of you have been there. It's in the far
00:18:29 western part of China. Anyway, in the capital of China, during the Tang Dynasty and Chang'an,
00:18:36 there was this well-known sort of street person that was a kind of Buddhist monk. All he did was
00:18:45 play with children all day and just hang out in the market place and schmooze with people.
00:18:53 Everybody knew him and he was just sort of this like friendly guy and easy to get along with.
00:19:01 You'd never really think there was anything all that special. He was always just sort of around
00:19:06 for people, particularly liked to give out gifts to children, things like that. At night, he used
00:19:16 to sleep in the snow. That should have been a giveaway right there that there was something a
00:19:23 little unusual about his physiology that may have been the result of something. He was known to the
00:19:33 citizens of Chang'an. They called him the Bu Dai He Shang. Bu means cloth, Dai means bag, and He
00:19:41 Shang means a monk, the cloth bag monk, because he carried around these gifts to give to people.
00:19:48 The Emperor of China at that time was a Buddhist and a meditator who had his own imperial preceptor,
00:20:02 his own sort of master, who would have been like the most authoritative monk in China of the time.
00:20:19 So one morning, they call that the Guo Shi, that's the teacher of the Emperor. So one morning,
00:20:31 the Guo Shi said, Your Majesty, I don't know if you're aware or not, but the most enlightened
00:20:47 subject in your kingdom died this morning. The Emperor said, Who? The imperial master said,
00:20:59 the cloth bag monk. The Emperor couldn't believe it, because it was like, that was the most
00:21:07 enlightened person in my kingdom? Because everybody just took him for granted. So this becomes a sort
00:21:20 of ideal for what an enlightened person should be like. Very ordinary, very easily approachable,
00:21:31 just they're there for you, nothing all that special. In the Indic formulation, an enlightened
00:21:42 being is a god, is an archetype. But in the Chinese formulation, the enlightened being is a sort of
00:21:56 pudgy, easily approached guy hanging out in the streets, available to people, but with these gifts
00:22:10 to give. So this is called, this last picture is called, Entering the Marketplace with Hand
00:22:21 Outstretched. We may start this path for various reasons, but if we stay on it, in the end,
00:22:32 this is where we end up. We end up with what's called the Dao Xin in Chinese, the Bodhicitta,
00:22:41 the intense call to be of service to our fellow beings in one way or another. It's an automatic
00:22:55 consequence of having understood the nature of consciousness, the nature of my mind, which is
00:23:07 the nature of nature, the nature of the source. It's an automatic consequence of knowing that your
00:23:19 source is everyone's source, but knowing that for real, not in a sort of feel-good belief kind of
00:23:28 way, but in a very tangible way, moment by moment, really inescapable in your moment-by-moment

00:23:37 perceptions of things. So we're coming now to the end of our retreat, just one more day actually,
00:23:49 we're going to be going into the marketplace when we leave here, metaphorically. And in various ways,
00:24:12 each of us in his or her own way, we have a bag full of goodies, and we can go with hand outstretched.
00:24:24 Not that we're going to lay any trips on anybody, but you have a gift to give, the gift of the
00:24:34 effects of your practice. You may never speak about it explicitly, but your pores will. The
00:24:45 pores of your skin, that's teaching, that's going into the marketplace, giving a gift to people.
00:24:51 If somebody asks you what you did, and you're capable of giving a reasonable, logical, coherent
00:25:00 description of this practice, you're giving a gift to someone. And some of you already, and many of
00:25:12 you eventually, will discover that you'll end up actually teaching, maybe one or two people, or
00:25:20 maybe more people. You may have heard the the cliché, when the student's ready, the teacher appears. Well,
00:25:32 I don't know about that, but I can definitely tell you that when the teacher is ready, the students
00:25:38 disappear. And you may notice that happening to you. Do not be alarmed. And understand that in
00:25:53 the end, this is the final goal of this practice. So I leave you with that.