

Zoom Zazen - Saturday 3 Dec 2022

After having told us about the resplendent light which is the very heart of zazen, Master Wanshi continues his remarks by specifying what we must master to remain in this clarity which cannot be stained by the least impurity:

"First and foremost, tug and pull back the ox's nostril.

"Of course its horns are imposing and it stomps around like a beast, yet it never damages people's crops or seeds."

This is a reminder of the story of the ten stages of training the ox¹, the famous Chan parable, or how to tame the discriminating mind and the dualistic self. It is an important teaching for us all: how to map out one's spiritual path and achieve enlightenment. A must read!

To tame the wild ox whose tracks he has spotted, the young herder first catches it, seizes it, and then fixes a ring in the animal's nose. He uses the rope and the whip. Every time the ox tries to move away from the chosen pasture, the boy pulls back on the ring, causing the ox a good deal of pain.

"The rope and whip are necessary to prevent the ox from getting lost on the dusty paths. Well trained, it is naturally docile and, without any restraint, it follows its master."

Without the ring of the precepts, without discipline, without perseverance in practice, we cannot tame our disordered and ignorant mind, or expose the possessive, manipulative self. Through unceasing, patient, respectful work on the precepts, the ox will gradually turn from black to white in the course of its taming, and acquire a great docility. The horns of the ox-ego are imposing and oppressive. Skillful means and effective strategies are needed to tame such an animal and make a friend of it. For the ox rebels against whoever tries to restrain it. It uses the forest of fears and beliefs to hide itself and graze wherever it pleases. Yet, despite this fierce attitude, the ox never damages anyone's plants or seeds, for however ignorant and heavy-handed it may be, it does not destroy what feeds it.

In our meditation, when we attain the silent light, the self is seen and the animal is soothed. It fades away, forgotten in luminous Presence. As we no longer linger anywhere, nor grasp anything, the eyes themselves can no longer see it. Everything is forgotten and it is realised, without even a shadow of a doubt, that everything preaches Dharma.

Controlling the ox demonstrates that forgetting of the self which we all desire. The ox doesn't disappear, but it has stopped doing as it pleases.

"The ox is subdued and I can rest. Whip, rope, ring, young herder and ox [all] are let go. Everything is emptiness. So vast is the sky that nothing can be said about it. It is like a snowflake that fades into the fire. This is the mark of the Patriarchs."

Then, on the subject of this freedom so virtuously acquired, Master Wanshi concludes:

"Walking freely, accept whatever comes to you, [whatever] happens. Accepting whatever comes to you, [whatever] happens, walk freely."

Each time forgetfulness of the self occurs, in pure Presence, in unconditional acceptance of *what is*, the ox is tamed. Having domesticated the ox, an animal renowned for its strength and violence, the young boy will finally be able to return home, in complete safety, to his true home, to his homeland.

"Riding the ox, I return home. The sound of my flute blends with the glow of the sunset. My hand taps out an infinite rhythm and whoever hears this music will join me."

¹ "Taming the Ox", see for example : <https://terebess.hu/english/oxherding.html>