

Zoom Zazen - Saturday 22 April 2023

Master Wanshi tells us that by wearing the *kesa*, by following the Valley Mind and the Wind Master, monks overcome all obstacles and free themselves. They abandon the dependence imposed by conditioning or all kinds of attachments, even the most subtle. Nothing can overshadow the light of the awakening mind of these monks.

This is also what [Master Wanshi] wishes for us and for all beings who follow the Buddha-Way:

"Be fulfilled and wander without intention to the empty field. You will be completely safe in this welcoming field and you can relax there at leisure, for this is the field of the ox - white from head to toe, docile and assured. And even if you want to chase him away from this place, he won't budge."

To wander to the empty field and to relax is nothing other than *Shikantaza!* Stop looking for your own nature. It has never left you; neither will it ever go away. Simply sit and watch. If you remain totally conscious in pure Presence you don't see anything, you *are there!* Pure Presence *is* the empty field.

The welcoming field of the white ox is the empty field where we can forget everything and see the *real*. There is no more a thinking-self to obscure the landscape!

Master Wanshi refers here to the very old theme of the ten paintings or poems of the taming of the buffalo or ox. It is thought that this teaching was expounded by the Buddha himself, since it already appears in the Pali canon - which gathers together the entire set of texts of the Theravada, the oldest form of Buddhism. This teaching then appears in the Buddhist literature of the 4th century, translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva, as well as in several sutras, including the Lotus sutra. Later, this theme was also transmitted in the Chan school from the 8th century onwards, and then in Japan - where it is still highly valued today. In Sapporo, Japan, in Chuo-ji temple where I went to do a three-month *ango* in 2015, there are two screens painted some years ago by Donin Minamizawa, the current *Zenji* of Eihei-ji.

These paintings show how a young herder goes to catch a wild ox that he¹ has spotted in the countryside and then goes on to subdue and tame it. This herdsman symbolises the practitioner who wants to tame the ox of his ego, and his mind - which is prey to the play of thoughts and passions - with the underlying desire to put himself at the service of all beings, like the monks who wear the *kesa*.

Each of the ten pictures has a title and is accompanied by a commentary in the form of a poem. It's actually about the religious practice that will lead the practitioner to liberation and awakening to his true nature. To succeed in taming the *self*, the practitioner has to develop the same qualities that a good herdsman uses to tame an ox.

In the first picture, the ox of the ego is totally black. Bit by bit it will become white, until it's white from head to toe when it's been completely tamed - that is, when the individual *self* has been completely studied, seen in its illusory appearance, and - in the end - forgotten.

You can readily find an abundance of literature on the taming of the ox in bookstores, along with many commentaries and details on the internet.

A disciple asked Master Hyakujō:

"I want to be taught about Buddhism. Can you tell me what it is?"

Hyakujō replied:

"It's like looking for an ox when you are mounted on its back."

"What should I do in order to understand this?"

"Go home on his back."

"How should I take care of him so that I am always in harmony with the Dharma?"

Master Hyakujō then said to him, *"You must behave like a shepherd who carries a stick to make sure that his beasts don't wander into someone else's rice field."*

Don't seek to eradicate the *self* as many try to do. See it and embrace it, then tame it. This is what it is to study the *self* and to free others.

To tame the ox, then, is to make our ego a friend, who will meekly lead us back to the empty field, the pasture of wisdom and kindness in which we are finally at home.

¹ i.e. his or her, throughout the *kusen*