

“American Oxherding”

Lewis Hyde and Max Gimblett are in the process of making a modern American version of the Sung Dynasty Chinese *Oxherding Series*, a set of drawings and poems that are a parable about Buddhist practice. Hyde is translating the Chinese texts and Gimblett is making new sumi ink versions of the drawings.

When it comes to the translations, the plan is to have each Oxherding text appear in three different English versions: a “one word ox” which sticks slavishly to the Chinese (one word per character), a “spare sense ox,” which puts each Chinese syntactic unit into a simple English sentence, and an “American ox” (or “fat American ox”) which takes considerable liberties while trying to be faithful to my intuitions about the meaning of the series.

What follows here are Hyde’s “American Oxherding” versions.

I Searching for the Ox

The Ox is never really lost, so why hunt for it? No oxherd can see what he has turned his back on. Five kinds of hunger have led him this way and that. What was home a moment ago is now a confusion of crossroads and dirt paths. Desire for gain and fear of loss circle like tongues of fire. An obsession with right or wrong marks everything, like a blade sharpened on both edges.

Alone in the deep woods, despairing in the jungle,
searching for nothing!

Flood-swollen rivers, mountains beyond mountains,
the trail endless and unchanging.

Bone-tired, heart-weary, the whole thing seems
hopeless.

No sound but the evening cicadas singing in a
grove of maple trees.

II Seeing the Traces

He can sense its traces while reading the sutras, hearing the teachings. No gold vessel is like any other, but all are made of gold. He and the world, they are made of the same stuff. Still, he wonders, shouldn't good and evil be set apart? Trying to separate out the truth he ends in confusion. If there is a gate, he has not gone through it. Were those really the traces of something, or is this a joke?

In the woods, along the riverbank, strange marks
all around.

What has bent the sweet grass down just there?
The deepest canyons, the highest peaks—nothing
can hide that constellation, The Nose of the Ox.

III A Glimpse of the Ox

If he would only listen to everyday sounds he would get it in a second. As for the senses: it was the cicada that made the ear! The thing itself is there no matter what we do. It is like the salt in water and the binder in paint. Rightly opened, the eye sees no difference between the water and the well.

The meadowlark sings, sitting on a branch.
Warm sun, light breeze, green willows by the river.
The Ox stands right there; where could he hide?
That splendid head, those stately horns,
what artist could draw their likeness?

IV Catching the Ox

Today the oxherd laid his hands on the Ox. That beast, free since birth in high and uncut meadows, would rather go its own way. No ring has ever pierced its nose; the memory of sweet-smelling grass muscles its back. If the oxherd hopes to ride this Ox he will have to use his whip.

He must hold the rope with all his might
for the Ox is two-thousand pounds of old habit.
One moment it runs to the high meadows,
the next it is lost in a fog-bound riverbottom.

VI Riding Home

The struggle is over. As for gain and loss, he can't remember what the problem was. Lying on the Ox's back, he hums a forest tune; he plays flute songs learned in childhood. The sky seems larger than the earth. None of the five hungers can turn his head. Call to him, offer him anything—he will not hear you.

He is riding home but seems to be in no hurry.

Evening mist absorbs the flute tones. Their

harmony

carries his heart to the horizon line.

Talk about grass is not what keeps this Ox alive.

VII Ox Forgotten

What was that all about? Alone now, the oxherd feels quite at home. On this path, one thing is not two things. When the rabbit is caught, the snare may be abandoned. When the fish is caught, why stand there holding the net? See: like gold drawn from dross, like the moon risen from clouds, this world has always given off a single light.

He could not have gotten home without that animal,
but oh, the Ox has disappeared and the man sits by himself, content.

His reverie does not bear the red mark of solar time.

The rope and whip lie idle under the cabin thatch.

VIII Self and Ox Forgotten

This serenity scatters no light. No holiness appears. If he thinks he is a Buddha, it passes quickly. Proud that he is not a Buddha, that goes too. Five hundred fully-enlightened ancient ones cannot see anything special in the man. If a hundred flower-bestowing birds circled his room, he would feel the deepest shame.

Empty whip, empty rope, empty Ox, empty human being.

“The vast blue sky” is not at all the vast blue sky. Think of snow falling on a blazing fire. Just there the spirit of the ancient masters is fully present.

IX Going Back to the Beginning

The dust never had any dust. Bodies grow and decay, delusions form and dissolve, identities come and go.... Live in the still place between; it needs no improvement. The waters are blue. The mountains are green. Change without end: sit and watch.

Seeking the Source, the One True Origin: why all this seeking?

Better to stay at home as if ears and eyes had never opened.

He sits in the cabin. There is nothing to hunt for beyond the gate.

The streams flow and flowers open, vividly red.

X Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands

He has closed the cabin gate behind him.
Not even the wise notice him as he walks
by. He has left all the apparatus of
spiritual life behind. He follows the path
before him, not trying to match the
footsteps of ancient teachers. He carries a
gourd into the market and comes home
leaning on an old stick. Drinkers in
taverns and butchers in meat shops see
him and they wake up.

Barefoot, bare-chested, he enters the market.
Dusty, spattered with mud, how broadly he grins!
He has no need of magic powers. Near him
the withered trees spring into bloom.