A Higher Perspective

on the

Ten Ox-Herding Pictures
Introduction

The ten ox-herding pictures are a beautiful representation of the Zen vision of the awakening process. They hold a personal significance for me in that I first contemplated them as a teenager, when they served as a source of inspiration for me and a way through which I could deepen my understanding of the inner path. In fact, my first book, which was never published, was based on a commentary upon this elegant depiction of self-realization.

The Zen understanding of the process of self-realization is very deep and goes considerably beyond most other non-dual traditions. Zen can be seen as the meeting of Buddhism and Taoism. The original Buddhism was very abstract and conditioned by Indian intellectualism. The spirit of Taoism, as well as the practical nature of the ancient Chinese mind, brought this Indian energy down to earth while retaining many of the profound insights of Hindu philosophy. This meeting point was the beginning of Zen.

Zen, or ‘Chan,’ has been developing for many centuries and has created many schools. The birth of Zen is commonly associated with Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who came to China and fought against the intellectualization of Buddhism. He was the one who said that Zen was to be the “direct transmission from mind-to-mind beyond the scriptures.” However, the Zen that we know was in fact created in the sixth century by the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng, a prominent figure who stood at the head of the northern school of Zen in China. He was the main advocate of the sudden approach to enlightenment, which sees it as a result of the direct recognition of our true nature as opposed to a result of gradual practice and progression. After his death, Hui Neng’s main disciples brought Zen to its peak, and the 200 years of Zen that followed has been called its ‘golden age’.

The Zen understanding of the subtle nature of reality and awakening is very deep, but that does not mean it is complete. The main problems in Zen are the overuse of male energy (the power of will) and the fact that the evolution of the heart is bypassed, thereby neglecting the feminine side of the soul. Even though the idea of compassion was propagated in Zen through the concept of ‘saving all sentient beings’, in practice, the strict discipline of Zen practices are not orientated towards the awakening of the heart. Developing compassion and having an awakened heart are two very different things; in fact, they may have nothing in common. To awaken the heart, one has to, first of all, feel compassion for oneself and create a positive relationship with one’s own pain. In contrast, because the Buddhist path is primarily concerned with transcending suffering, it generally represses human emotions and views them as part of human ignorance.

Another flaw of Zen is that it has become over-intellectualized. In fact, this is a paradox inherent to Zen, as it was initially born out of the desire to go beyond the scriptures and the mind, but this was then attempted through an over-emphasis on the very power of the mind and understanding. An example of this is the koan system, in which the adepts meditate on riddles whose solutions are supposed to yield insights into reality. In truth, however, such practices lead us to become even more stuck in the mind. In Zen, to give a clever answer to a koan is often seen as proof of spiritual attainment, while all that it really shows is a certain mastery over Zen’s esoteric language. This over-intellectualization is one of the indications of the imbalances that are inherent...
to Zen. The Zen hierarchy has tended to promote those with clever and quick minds, while those who may in fact have been more deeply realized but were less astute remained near the bottom.

Not all schools of Zen employ the koan system. The Soto school, for instance, bases its practice on shikantaza, ‘just sitting’. This practice is founded on the concept that we sit zazen not to reach enlightenment but rather to express our enlightened nature. The philosophy behind the concept of shikantaza is quite beautiful. But unless one has a truly qualified guide, it is easy to fall into what is called ‘dead shikantaza’ – just sitting without access to our pure nature – which is meaningless. Furthermore, the concept of shikantaza does not discriminate between different levels of awakening or account for the various dimensions and depths of the state of just being. Even though it is very valuable, in itself, it is insufficient to describe the correct perception of the path and the awakened condition.

The Zen path is not orientated towards holistic enlightenment for several reasons. First, the overuse of the power of will is in existential conflict with the principle of surrender. One obviously has to develop the power of concentration in order to go beyond the mind, but only in moderation. Excessive concentration can have damaging consequences and must be balanced through the energy of letting go. Through following the Zen technology of evolution, one is moving towards the realization of consciousness and the absolute state. However, those who do not reach the complete and proper awakening of these states, which is common, will end up abiding in a lower condition: a combination of awareness (or even just a crystallized observer) and deep being. In addition, and in either case, the absence of an awakened heart will prevent any level of integration between the state of consciousness and the state of being.

While being deeply appreciative of the Zen path, we must also see its limitations and possible dangers. It is not a path that can be considered balanced. It has always attracted seekers who have a tendency towards overly developing their male energies. No wonder it became associated with samurai and martial arts adepts in China and Japan, as seen in the caricature of Zen in Shaolin. However, it does offer very efficient tools of practice and spiritual discipline. In addition, its simplicity, directness, and aesthetics can appeal to those locked in the overly-mental western culture.

So, overall, we can see Zen as a very valid approach to the path, but not as a complete path in itself. Given this, it is interesting to return now to the main subject of this article, the ten ox-herding pictures, and to consider them from the higher perspective of a holistic and complete path. It is surprising how few seekers are aware of these pictures, which is in itself sad and indicates a low level of intelligence and a high level ignorance. How can one understand the nature of physics without making an effort to study Newton or Einstein? Similarly, a seeker should be actively engaged in studying and contemplating the science of enlightenment, using these discoveries to deepen his or her own realization. In the following section, we will look at each picture in turn and reinterpret its essence according to our own vision of the path.*

Before we do so, it is important to understand that the ten ox-herding pictures only depict the process of the awakening of consciousness. Even though terms like ‘emptiness’ or ‘the source’ are being used to describe them, these words represent the Zen interpretation of the realization of consciousness alone. As we have touched on, the Zen path does include evolution into the absolute, the unmanifested, but that dimension of evolution is not included in these pictures. While it is true that one can realize emptiness on the level of consciousness (the content-free and objectless nature of the mind), true emptiness goes beyond consciousness and represents the state of transcendence, in which one enters the unmanifested dimension of absence, the state prior to creation.

* The poems are translations from originals by 12th century poet, Zen master Kuo An
1. Seeking the Ox

Brushing aside thick grasses I pursue him,

In wide rivers, distant mountains, and paths without end.

Exhausted, unable to find him anywhere,

I only hear evening cicadas in the maple trees

The search for the ox represents awakening to the path. Here, a seeker is getting in touch with his spiritual longing and yet is still unable to identify its nature. He begins to seek, but he does not know what he is looking for. The beginning of the path can be the most deceptive, and as such can lead us in the wrong direction. If we are not in touch with the true intuition of the soul and if our spiritual intelligence is undeveloped, we can easily get lost or misdirected. Instead of entering the true path, we can become identified with limited teachings, engage in unproductive or imbalanced practices, enter illusory paths of devotion through giving away our power to bogus
gurus, or get stuck in pursuing an incomplete vision of awakening. This is the time to grow in maturity, through which we can discover the footprints leading to the self.

So, are you seeking the ox or are you seeking an extension of your dream? Those who seek the true ox are rare. In fact, the real challenge is not so much to discover our pure nature but to discover a real seeker, a true man of the path. Mediocrity, stupidity, and indolence are qualities which seem to dominate the vast majority of those who live in the pretention of seeking spiritual illumination. It is the beginning of the path that is the most important because its beginning will determine its end. If the beginning is steeped in ignorance, so will the end. It is at the beginning of the path that the secret of our existence reveals its true purpose. To truly enter the path is already to be touched by the hand of the divine, for one has entered the noble river of awakening.

2. Following the Tracks

*Scores of footprints in the forests and by the streams,*

*Do you see them scattered amid the fragrant grass?*

*Even deep in the remote mountains,*

*How can he conceal his enormous snout?*

Before we can find the ox, we must intuit where it hides; otherwise we will be walking in circles or even in the opposite direction. Following the tracks signifies coming to the threshold of awakening. This is the stage of evolution where we recognize that the spiritual path points in the direction of pure subjectivity, and that the secret of the teaching is awaiting its revelation in the cave of our own inner self. One is no longer just seeking – one is seeking the pure nature of I am. Here, conscious me begins to engage in the search by activating its deepest faculty, which is pure attention.

Some say that when the path is found, the seeker is gone. But while this statement is correct within the higher context, to give this kind of advice to those who have not yet entered the realm
of I am is utterly foolish. At this stage, if the seeker would disappear, only ignorance would remain. In order to awaken, he must first objectify his pure nature in order to create the inner space of consciousness through which he can actualize his pure nature. It is in this mysterious sphere of opening between me (the seeker) and I am that the magic of awakening happens. Initially, I am is an object of attention for me, while being at the same time its higher subjectivity. It is the subtle, profound, and exceedingly rich relationship between me and I am that constitutes the nature of the path. Indeed, to know that relationship is to know the path.

3. Finding the Ox

* A golden oriole trills on the branch,
* The sun is warm, the wind mild, and the lakeside willow green.
* Now there is nowhere for the ox to escape!
* Yet what artist can paint his majestic head and horns?

Finding the ox depicts the first awakening. However, in this case, the herder is shown to glimpse only the back of the ox, which represents that he has only a partial insight into I am. To seek is one thing, but to find is another. In addition, while in Advaita the idea is simply to discover who one is, in Zen, understanding the revelation of our pure nature has to enter from the beyond; the ox is outside of the herder, so to speak. The ox has to enter the landscape of our perception in order to be identified – it has to show itself to the seeker. This revelation is a function of grace, initiation, or transmission. A seeker cannot simply stumble upon the ox because it must agree to be seen: it descends from another dimension that cannot be bridged either through practice or self-enquiry.

Seeing the back of the ox is that first opening to I am. It is only the back because it is incomplete and the duality between me and I am is still very gross. One is both looking at and seeking one’s
pure nature; one can perceive it, see it, but one cannot become it. Indeed even this seeing lacks continuity, as the ox is wild and keeps getting lost in the forest of forgetfulness.

The question is: Who is seeing, and what is being seen? One must avoid falling into the pitfall of accepting easy and clichéd answers, and, above all, one must respect the nature of that divine duality, for that duality is the very way.

4. Taming the Ox

*With extraordinary effort I catch the ox,*

*Strong of body and spirit, he is not easily subdued.*

*At times, he scales the lofty plains,*

*Then hides deep within the cloud-like mist.*

Catching the ox signifies the practice of self-remembrance. Taming the ox represents the process of stabilizing consciousness, developing the continuity of recognition, and establishing a constant energy state. Here, the identity of conscious me is developing through the solidification of the flow of pure attention towards I am.

Taming the ox is the first stage of practice. Before that, there was not a practice but a seeking for that elusive object, or, rather, subject, which constitutes the heart of the path – the light of pure subjectivity. As they say in Zen, practice begins with awakening, and awakening itself is never a result of practice. Practice points to developing the correct relationship with the awakened state, and as that relationship matures, the state itself naturally becomes complete. A state of awakening can never be complete when it is initially awakened because awakening is not a state but a meeting of two dimensions of subjectivity, me and I am.
While some seekers dislike or feel daunted by the concept of practice, others see it as the hard work through which they hope to achieve their dream of enlightenment. However, the true meaning of practice eludes most seekers. We must be grateful for the fact that we can practice and express our highest cooperation with our spiritual realization. Practice is a gift that is given to us when we have access to our pure nature – the gift of being in a relationship with our true self.

There are many awakenings, but what they all have in common is that they transport us into the deeper dimensions of the light of pure subjectivity. The first awakening, described in the third picture, opens the door to universal consciousness. But the fact that it is open does not guarantee that it will remain so. It might close at any moment. And when it does, we fall back into the second picture. Here, because we have already glimpsed the ox, we have a very good idea what it is that we are seeking. However, this knowledge will not necessarily bring the ox back.

Opening to I am is often just a moment of grace, but we must learn how to keep this door ever open through our correct cooperation. This is the role of practice. The question is: Who is practicing? Unfortunately, throughout the history of spirituality, there have been many seekers and masters who have felt contented with the answer that it is ‘nobody’. To think that nobody is practicing is a direct representation of being no one, meaning not having met oneself, which in spiritual vernacular means to be a fool. In Zen, it is described as ‘having one eye’. One eye sees but the other is blind; one is living in the dimension of half-truths.

It is ‘me’ who is practicing, but most humans, including spiritual seekers, are not in touch with their me. Therefore, this statement does not really mean anything to them. We often hear from those who follow our teaching from afar that they ‘like’ that we speak positively of me and resonate with the idea that becoming an individual is an indivisible part of spiritual awakening. However, sadly, most of these people do not really experience that very me. As such, because they are not receiving direct personal guidance, their appreciation of this teaching is illusory. One cannot ‘like’ this teaching if one is not in touch with one’s me, because that me is its very essence. To get in touch with who is practicing, our very me, is itself an expression of our spiritual maturity and, indeed, our awakening. However, me cannot really grasp itself unless it is experienced in the context of I am; hence the first awakening is an opening to the dimension of universal consciousness.

Me is practicing, cultivating I am, and keeping the state. But how can me ‘keep’ I am if I am is universal? In fact, me is not keeping I am, per se, but rather the opening to it. To practice self-remembrance (which is the lower self remembering the higher self) is to maintain the continuity of universal energy within the personal.

Taming the bull represents maintaining the continuity of the opening into universal consciousness. However, in order for this opening to become constant, many elements need to fall into the right place, all of which ultimately point to the unification of me and I am. What are the aspects of this unification? They are recognition, surrender, and samadhi. The fourth picture is mainly concerned with recognition. The continuity of recognition is the first step in unification, which is then followed by the energetic stabilization of the state.
5. Leading the Ox

I must never let go of the whip and rein,
Lest he strides down the dusty trail.
Having been well trained, the ox is docile;
He freely follows the master without the leash.

Leading the ox points to the stabilization of I am. The state has become constant both on the energy level and on the level of recognition. Energetic stabilization means that the access to universal consciousness is open at all times. Stabilization of recognition means that pure attention has been fully unified with I am.

The difference between the fifth and sixth pictures is small, as it points more to the level of integration than any actual achievement. Obviously, in the fifth picture, there is more duality between me and I am. Me is still controlling the opening to I am too much. In this picture, me is leading I am. In the next one, I am is leading me.
6. Riding the Ox

Mounting the ox I meander home;

The sound of my flute rides with the evening clouds.

Each beat and tune holds meaning profound;

No need for words if you understand this song.

Riding the ox means that one has arrived at the higher condition of unity with I am, meaning that me and I am are fully integrated. There is still a subtle duality, but it does not create a sense of separation from our pure nature. The ox-herder is playing the flute because he can finally be fully spontaneous and natural, joyful in the knowledge that his true self can never be lost.

In this stage, me and I am are unified but not merged. Because they are not merged, me is overly conscious of itself and of the beyond as the space of its abidance. Due to this excessive duality, me is still not free and the essence of true peace has not been reached.

The stage of riding the bull can be seen either as a high achievement or as a pitfall. Me and I am have been unified at last, but their relationship has not reached its final depth. Me still does not fully know who it is, and yet it may be content with the relative peace of having mastered the ox. However, because me has not met itself fully, it cannot surrender fully. Not knowing itself to its final depth, it may not recognize the suffering of still being separated from the beloved.
7. Arriving Home

Astride the ox I reach my native hill,

The ox has vanished, and I am free.

I dream until the sun is high;

The rein and whip lie idle in the barn.

Arriving home depicts the awakening of pure me. To arrive home means that our me enters the original abode of the self and, based on its surrender into I am, illuminates itself as the true essence of awakening. The path is no longer about reaching the ultimate as a transcendental reality, but about becoming oneself. In some translations of the ox herding pictures, this stage is called ‘the ox is forgotten’, because me, in its perfect unity with the universal I am, finally directs the light of recognition to its own identity, which has so far been neglected. The soul finally meets her pure nature of individual consciousness.

The duality between me and the universal self is transcended, but me is still overly conscious of itself; hence the ox-herder is in the center of the picture. In this stage, the only duality that remains is within the consciousness of me itself. In order to reach a higher condition of freedom, me has to become more deeply reabsorbed in the universal I am, which is the true samadhi beyond relative unity. In unity, me and I am are experienced within the dimension of presence. In samadhi, me crosses the threshold of absence and disappears in the beyond, while realizing its pure transcendental nature.

An interesting question would be how this picture relates to what in Hindu mysticism is described as ‘I am That’. The phrase ‘I am That’ represents a sort of conflict of identity because one aspires to fully identify with the absolute reality, but as a result becomes overly conscious of oneself as being the subject to its realization. The seventh picture actually depicts a deeper realization than ‘I am That’ because the ox (That) is forgotten, which means that the gross level of polarity between the individual and universal has been transcended. The question that follows is: Why
does ‘That’ need to be forgotten first? Why can ‘self’ not be forgotten already so that we can move directly to the eighth picture?

If we were to forget our individual identity too soon, we would fall into a negative emptiness because the personal would not be properly integrated with the universal. Absence would dissolve our presence too soon, thereby preventing us from realizing our higher divine subjectivity. The evolutionary dance of the personal with the transcendental is very deep and intricate, and any error in its development can have disastrous consequences. The premature dissolution of our individual identity – that is before it is fully developed – is one of the major pitfalls of false enlightenment through which one can fall off the great way. While to make mistakes on the path is natural and an indivisible part of the process of learning and growing, what we call a ‘pitfall’ is an excessive error, an evolutionary trap that has to be avoided at any cost. For a seeker who lacks the proper guidance and maturity, it is usually exceedingly difficult to dig himself out of those deceptive holes.

However, while it is not yet forgotten at this stage (meaning it is still excessively self-conscious), our individuality has been significantly transformed. Therefore, if we were to repaint this picture, we would try to put more emphasis on that fact. The figure is no longer an ox-herder because there is no longer an ox – it has already been found. Perhaps the figure could be painted in a transparent way to more closely reflect the quality of his inner experience, the translucent and pure nature of the most intimate dimension of his me. His me has not disappeared but is new, awakened. He has realized that he has not been seeking the ox for the ox’s sake but for his own – to become his true self.

So, what has happened to the ox? Was it only there to assist our awakening and then disappear? The ox cannot simply be gone, because without it the herder would not be able to experience his pure nature. So although you cannot see the ox in the picture, that does not mean it is not there. It is there, but it is fully integrated and all-pervasive; it is the very background of the whole picture. The seeker feels like he has arrived home, freed from the need to pursue the ox, but his adventure with the ox has not ended. After sitting there in the freedom of being his own true self, he will sooner or later realize that the next step has to be taken: to plunge deeper into the dimension of the invisible ox – to disappear in the beyond.

To forget the ox is an extremely significant step in our spiritual journey, for it turns our quest for home around: from seeking to disappear in the transcendental reality, to discovering who we really are. There is a point in evolution when in order to realize his true self, the seeker has to forget the universal I am and be totally alone – isolating the knowledge of his own self both from universal objectivity and universal subjectivity. In that isolation, he can finally become his own man and awaken the pure nature of his soul. Based on that awakening, he comes to the point of maturity which constitutes the total renewal of his relationship with existence.
8. Non-duality

Whip, rein, person, and ox merge into emptiness,

No words can reach across this vast blue sky.

How can snow accrue on a burning stove?

Here finally, I walk with the Patriarchs.

The empty circle represents the state beyond self-consciousness. In other versions of the pictures, this stage is called ‘the self is forgotten’ or ‘both ox and self are forgotten’. This ultimately means that not only the duality between me and I am is transcended, but that the duality inherent to me itself, the mechanism of self-reference, is also dissolved. Me forgets itself through realizing its universal essence as the true consciousness of the soul. Me is merged into the state of absence. Pure consciousness is conscious, and yet it is beyond knowing itself as being conscious; it forgets itself in itself, which in fact means that its personal aspect forgets itself in its universal dimension. There is no more me or I am, nor is there both or neither – pure reality alone remains.

This is the stage of arriving at complete samadhi in the universal consciousness. I am is forgotten and me is forgotten; both are forgotten and only the indescribable remains – the essence of formlessness is realized. However, in Zen language, to remain at this stage of evolution represents an attachment to emptiness and lack of integration with both the form and function of creation. It is typical in Indian mysticism to interpret this level of realization as the ultimate, due to the escapist tendencies inherent to the Indian path. Even though in theory some Advaita teachings do speak positively of creation or say that the outer world is Brahman, in practice the true evolution towards oneness and integration with both form and function is more or less absent. This is perhaps one of the biggest gifts of Zen to the tradition of Buddhism (which can be considered as the further development of Hinduism). It took our evolution one step further – to step out from emptiness into the real world.

As we said, this picture is often called ‘self is forgotten’. But does that mean it is absent? Pure me is still there, but it is fully infused into universal consciousness. It is not merely gone, for it
remains conscious of itself. However, it is conscious of itself in a transcendental way, free from the shackles of self-consciousness. It is both conscious of itself and conscious of I am as its eternal abode and as the fathomless beyond. Although this picture may appear to represent a static condition, it is not so; the naked eye simply cannot see what is happening there. And what is happening is an exquisite unity of the natural samadhi of me in the realm of absence and its constant surrender, which is the very prerequisite of arriving at the state of perfect equilibrium between the dimensions of presence and absence.

9. Returning to the Source

Returning to one’s root has taken much effort,

Better to have acted blind and deaf from the start!

Dwelling in my hut, I see nothing without,

Rivers flow, flowers are red.

After the stage of emptiness in which all is dissolved – when, as they say in Zen, ‘the mountain is no longer a mountain and the river is no longer a river’ – the mountain re-emerges to be just a mountain and the river to be just a river. All is thus. All is as it has always been, and yet it is absolutely different because the perceiver has moved beyond the mind and can finally see reality from his pure, unmodified nature. This picture shows the integration of pure consciousness with perceptual reality. It is easy to get stuck in emptiness and mistake it for the ultimate freedom. However, true freedom must include the realization of all that is as one self, including the world of perception and the senses. It is interesting that returning to the source does not signify the realization of the absolute or emptiness here; rather it signifies the state of seeing things as they are from the place of our pure nature. In Buddhism, this is also referred to as the ‘mirror-like consciousness’ or ‘thusness’. All is just as it is – pure and real. Paradoxically, to return to the source is to come back to that very world that once was thought to be external to self.
In our teaching, that which allows one to realize the state of suchness, or thusness, is what we call the ‘natural me’. Natural me is the transparent and ordinary condition of conscious me (and on a higher level, primordial me) that is experienced and experiences itself from the place of unity with pure consciousness. It is ultimately conscious me that allows us to realize the state of unity with existence, for it is conscious me that links consciousness with the mind and with the world of perception. Hence, the transformation of conscious me, its true illumination, is the final step in arriving at the condition of oneness. While initially conscious me is too surrendered and too identified with I am to behold the world as it is, it gradually reaches the ultimate balance between being rooted in pure consciousness and serving as the total and clear channel to the apperception of the cosmos.

In this picture, there is neither a herder nor an ox. So, who sees the tree and the river? It is the same me that was there at the beginning, but now it has merged with the fundamental consciousness of reality to such an extent that it no longer interferes with the perception of the world: it cannot be seen in the seen. It is not in the picture. It is that which allows it to be seen at all.

In our teaching, we speak about levels of perception because perception is never entirely static. Perception is also a form of participation in and creation of the reality of the seen. In Zen, they speak about two main levels of reality: substance and function. Substance is the nature of pure subjectivity, the passive principle of all that is. Function is our natural expression in the phenomenal existence. However, there is also a level of perception which is in-between substance and function. The more passive perception is, the closer it is to substance; the more active it is, the closer it is to function. What has been described as mirror-like consciousness is the mode of being that is rooted in substance but has already begun to pass the threshold of function.

In mirror-like consciousness, our me is passive and transparent. It is a combination of primordial me and the transparent or pure observer. In reality, it is the observer that is responsible for the faculty of seeing, while conscious me is its identity in consciousness. The next level of perception creates additional layers of willing participation and co-creation. The mirror-like consciousness is still present, but it is no longer alone because we begin to actively attend to that which we perceive. In our language here, we speak about the faculty of the ‘focused transparent observer’ as the one who zooms through the many lenses of mirror-like consciousness in order to reflect the more complex layers of reality with its infinite details. This is not the same as the old me standing in-between our pure nature and the world and superimposing various modes of mind upon the external reality. Here, our me is transparent, an open window into creation, but within this transparency there is both focus and purpose, for we begin to experience the world as our natural extension, where each act of perception can no longer be separated from an act of creation.
10. Returning to the World

Barefoot and bare-chested, I mingle with the world;
Though covered with dirt, I beam with joy.
Without the need for secret miraculous powers,
I make flowers bloom from withered wood.

The return to the world shows the stage of integrating the realization of pure consciousness with our human nature. It is about coming out from both the state of emptiness and from the state of suchness in order to correctly express our human existence. In this last picture, the monk returns to the marketplace, carrying a bottle of wine, deeply ordinary and unassuming – and yet he brings true illumination to the world of men. After completing the circle of evolution, the seeker has to return to the natural place of being his ordinary self. He has no message, no mission, no teaching, and yet all that he touches becomes truth.

While the 9th picture represents the integration of consciousness with the world of perception, the 10th depicts the integration with the world of function. Function is a natural extension of perception, as perception is a natural extension of being. As we have explained, perception is in fact the beginning of function; it contains the element of function in its more passive mode. However, in Zen, function is understood more as our active expression in the external world. Any function performed from our pure nature is a direct manifestation of our enlightenment. However, as long as we are self-conscious about being enlightened, we are still caught in the world of polarities, thereby missing the chance to become truly free. There are many nets in the dimension of illusion in which a fish can be caught, and any adept of the path is being continuously tested.

Zen contains the important Taoist idea of concealing one’s illumination. This is not about being humble and inconspicuous or about trying to blend with humanity. One is actually concealing one’s illumination from oneself, going beyond the polarity of enlightenment and ignorance, and hence becoming truly ordinary and innocent. Of course, a self-realized being is not a fool; he
naturally knows that he is self-realized. However, he does not abide upon this idea. In his natural state, he has no self-image and lives in the emptiness of non-differentiation.

A free man lives beyond the mind in the state of non-conceptualization, but our ability to use concepts is indivisible from our functioning and naturally needs to be integrated into our natural world. In Buddhism, this is depicted by the archetype of Manjushri, a Buddha of wisdom. Wisdom requires discrimination, and discrimination requires duality – duality within the mind itself. Hence, Manjushri is usually shown with a sword, which serves to cut non-duality into polarities in order to create the space for intelligence to produce differentiation and wisdom. To be stuck in the mirror-like consciousness and the state of suchness is to fail to enter the world of function, and hence to fail to realize the very purpose of enlightenment, which is to experience the totality of life.

We could argue that the monk in the picture is still not fully free as he remains dressed in his monk’s robes, but this choice may have been purely circumstantial. Regardless, it is a choice that we come to respect considering the fact that the 10th picture is not the end of his evolution, but rather the true beginning of his entry into the realm of pure subjectivity. He may appear to have completed his path, but his path has just begun.

Conclusions

That there is a precise map of human evolution towards truth and self-realization is simply a fact. Those who deny it, whether in the name of non-duality or other artificial mind constructs, belong to the category of humans who refuse to use the highest gift of existence – our intelligence. Intelligence is our capacity to understand, to illuminate the unknown with clarity. Not to use this faculty is to go against our very humanity and against truth.

The map of human evolution is objective, for it reflects the grand design of the creator himself for the complex process of spiritual unfoldment. There are obviously variations, since we, as humans, are quite diverse, but the basic principles of that evolution are universally applicable. Just as we eat similar food, walk on two feet, and breathe the same air, so we have similar evolutionary capacities and requirements. Even if the majority of humanity remains considerably unevolved and spiritually unconscious, this does not stand in contradiction to the fact that their evolution in the direction of the horizon of truth remains their highest duty and responsibility.

The nature of truth is such that it awaits its own revelation – it awaits its meeting with the intelligence and sincerity of all those conscious beings who have been created for this very purpose. But truth demands sacrifices from those who follow its footsteps. It is not meant to be revealed easily; it shows its face only to those who have gone through the fire of pain and desperation and who have shown their readiness to die on the altar of spiritual transformation. Only those who are worthy can see reality as it is, and they become worthy by living to fulfill the higher purpose of finding the ultimate clarity – the kind of clarity that liberates us from the shackles of ignorance. Ignorance is our beginning, but it is not our end. Freedom and complete understanding is our true destiny. Waking up from the collective lethargy, from our spiritual stupor, rebelling against our basic ignorance, sloth, and insincerity, and gathering our total will to know the truth – that is to enter real life.
Blessings,

Anadi

For a full glossary of the terminology used in this article, you can visit our website:
www.anaditeaching.com/glossary