

# The ten ox-herding pictures of Shuhbun

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I will speak in my capacity as a Jungian psychotherapist and therefore deal primarily with the symbolic meaning of this picture series.

I intend a careful study of all the ten images. / Originally, these images had the form of simple woodcuts. They illustrate the way of Zen Buddhist awakening, complemented with sayings of the ancient Chinese Zen Master Yu and with poems of praise of Master Kuan, and also with Japanese hymns. / They show the basic ideas of Zen Buddhism in a very simple and effective way. / The original text has been elaborated in its original form about 800 years ago in China and it is also valued since long time in Japanese Zen monasteries. / The most beautiful pictures are very well preserved illustrations that had been painted in the 15th century in Japan and are now kept in the Shokokuji Temple in Kyoto. / I am going to focus on these pictures. They are the unique works of the late 1454 Zen painter Shuhbun. /

## **The search for the Ox (I) /**

We see the shepherd alone in the center of the image. He looks lost without inner connection to the surrounding landscape. / There is obviously no correlation between shepherd and nature, or between shepherd and ox. He is in a state of being outside of himself, in a state of self-alienation. /

The lack of harmony is evident not only in the relation of the shepherd to the environment, but also in his own posture: he looks with his head in one direction, with the body in another. / Head, body, right hand and feet are not coordinated in an organic movement. This could mean that the head as the center of thinking does not coincide with the hand as the organ of action and with the feet as symbol of actual experience. / The different ways of orientation and practice do not work together, but each acts for its own sake. Thinking and doing, theory and practice diverge. /

Also the individual elements of the landscape are not connected among themselves. / This seems to indicate that the external cohesion among the things in the world is lacking as well as the internal coherence in the field of consciousness of the individual and also the connection between the individual and the world. /

This first image expresses thus in symbolic language a situation of existential insecurity and psychological lack of authenticity. / It shows an individual who has lost touch with its own center and with the cosmos and who therefore becomes a victim of the dynamism of the object world and of the inner drives. It is delivered to the being in its finiteness. /

In this situation, which is determined by a lack of wholeness and of experienced meaning, a longing for the ox arises: the ox standing for the "personal and original nature of the self." /

### **Finding the bullock track (II) /**

This "personal and original nature of the self", represented by the symbol of the ox, is not yet found here as itself, but it is only guessed at in an indirect way, as 'trace' of the Ox. / The original self in its own truth is not yet experienced directly in the man himself and from himself, but only just guessed. / There are only traces, i.e. some hints and thoughts that familiarize the person with the central experience that all things are connected in the unity of his Self and founded therein. / The person knows something about it, he has heard of it but no direct internal evidence has yet emerged. /

In comparison with the previous picture we could say that the shepherd now finds himself in a landscape that has become more clearly a coherent stage for his work. / He is on a path that passes horizontally between rock formations. The environment has now the meaning of an ego related space where the ego is experiencing and acting. / Landscape and Shepherd are in a functional relationship: the landscape offers itself to the shepherd as a path to be used and the shepherd uses the landscape as a horizon for his personal walking experience. / In this mutual mediation of Self and objective reality dawns the Zen experience of the nondifference of the nature of things and of one's own being. /

### **Finding the Ox (III) /**

The ox is an image of the manifestation of the true and original Self. / By alluding to an animal the Self is characterized as a living creature, i.e. as an autonomous being. / As an ox it is characterized in particular as a reality bound sensual and spiritual dynamics: / with a *body* that refers to the sensory aspect, / with *horns* that symbolize the spiritual dimension / and with a *movement* that stands for the dynamic aspect. / If we put these aspects together, we might say that the Self as symbolized by the ox, can be characterized as the experience of a self manifesting, living and moving greater being that acts in the reality. /

The young pastor is about to catch a glimpse of this living Self. He is aiming at it. The focus onto the living reality of the Self releases energies in him. / Unlike the situation at the beginning of his process (Fig. 1) his aiming at a greater reality makes all his forces, thinking and acting, head and body act together. / This corresponds to a consciousness that has found its way out from its initial self-blocking, where it had been stuck in a narrow Ego=Egoattitude and which opens now up to something larger and liberating. /

However, the ox appears here only with the rear part, and it seems to disappear behind the rocks on the left side. What could this mean symbolically? / It could mean that the Self is not yet seen here in its own nature and not yet fully recognized and experienced. / It is only partly seen in its reverse, concrete aspect, almost reified and objectified. / It is targeted as an object of consciousness and understood as an objectively existing reality. /

One may also say that in this aiming at the Self - as it is also expressed in the active running of the shepherd - there is still much Ego intention at work, / and that the Self therefore cannot

yet manifest itself according to its own nature. / Analogously to the Ego-ness of the intentional attitude of the shepherd the Self manifests itself in objective concreteness and in an exteriorized form. /

In psychological language we would call it a projection, a displacement of the Self onto people, events, things that represent the Self. The shepherd seems to aim at those things. / In this move towards the Self as an exterior entity the truth of its foundation in one's own and original being has not yet been recognized. / To put it in psychological terms: It would correspond to the situation of a person who trusts in the wisdom of another human being, of a spiritual leader or master and who ignores the knowledge manifesting itself from within. / Thus, a certain degree of self-alienation still exists. /

#### **Catching the Ox (IV) /**

This beautiful image shows the capture or taming of the ox, after having found and - in principle - perceived it in its full size and hence in its real nature. / The shepherd, however, must really appropriate the Self. / It's about an exercise of appropriating and internalizing of a greater reality that easily escapes from the Ego. /

The gesture of catching the ox means two things: it implies an *understanding* and a *realization* of the ox-being. / The shepherd „com-prehends“ the ox: he establishes a connection between the two, a direct tie, he com-prehends the ox. / In European languages the words for "grasping", "understanding" etc. are always connected with the idea of "taking hold" of, in French: com-prendre, in English: to comprehend etc. / In this sense it can also be said about this image that it shows the shepherd in a situation where he comprehends the "original nature" that is symbolized in the ox and the "Buddha nature". / At the same time this kind of understanding and comprehending is in no way a simple intellectual reasoning, but a dedicated, existential doing. / This obviously requires the dedication of the whole person (hence the determined attitude of the shepherd) / and it involves the very heart of man (hence the connection between the ox and the body center of the shepherd through the leash). /

On the other hand, the shepherd has the task to implement into concrete reality what has been discovered and understood. / The shepherd does not leave the ox simply go around, but binds it to the concrete realities of everyday life. / This means that the insight into the living unity of Self and reality (being symbolically expressed in the ox) must prove itself and develop in the context of everyday life. /

#### **The taming of the ox (V) /**

This picture shows the shepherd and the ox moving along in a quiet common rhythm. There is no more fighting taking place between the two. The ox follows the shepherd, as if it were a docile domestic animal. / The image thus depicts a situation of balance between different beings, which appear each in its own distinct value and which work together at the same time. /

The shepherd leads the ox, without forcing it into his own direction. / The ox is completely dedicated to the shepherd. The way it looks at the Master and is following him willingly manifests, so to speak, the animal's willingness to completely submit to the leadership and

needs of the shepherd. / And the shepherd leads the ox loose leash. The leash is not pulled tight, but hangs through and does therefore not serve to pull the ox into a desired direction. /

Between the shepherd and the ox there exists, thus, a harmonious interaction. / The Ox has become a domestic animal, where both sides need each other. / A domestic animal needs guidance by the shepherd, and the shepherd needs the natural strength of the animal. / This could, in symbolic language, stand for a form of cooperation between the Ego and the Self and between the individual and the original reality of one's being. / The limited Ego of the shepherd cooperates with the larger reality of the ox and this greater Self of the ox accompanies and supports the shepherd's Ego. /

This 'cooperation with the larger reality of the ox' could consist in the fact that the Ego transcends its limited thinking and links with a larger and more comprehensive view corresponding to the ox. / Such a broader view would be a symbolic view for instance, where one looks at things not only in their mere actuality, but where one understands them in their deeper nature. / It would be a symbolic understanding, which captures the deeper meaning of things and recognize them in their mutual connection and in their unity. /

To be 'accompanied and supported by the greater Self of the ox' could mean, conversely, that the Ego disposes of the richer and broader knowledge of the Self. /

#### **The return on the back of the ox (VI) /**

For the fourth time the shepherd appears together with the ox. The relationship between the two is here the most intimate. / When first he ran after him, then captured him and finally preceded him like a tamed domestic animal, he now rides on his back. The ox turns into the shepherd's ground and foundation, it becomes a riding-horse. /

The ox is now carrying the shepherd. The one, who leads it, sits on its back. / The ox has thus the leading element of the Ego in its own center. Itself guides it with loose leash from the intersection point between Ego and Self. / It looks like an experienced rider pair, where horse and rider understand each other nearly blindly. The shepherd must not hold the leash with his own hand. The ox seems to sense instinctively where the journey will lead to, and the shepherd surrenders trustfully to the ox's instinct. /

The ox seems in fact to sense intuitively: similar to a horse, it lifts its head and sniffs the air. / It finds its way home on the tracks of the odor that brings back familiar memories from the past. /

The shepherd sits in a serene attitude on the back of the ox. The tedious day's work seems to lie behind him. / He has the leisure to indulge in a sublime, creative activity. / His eyes are not focussed on earthly goals and tasks that would lie before him. With an internalized look he is rather attentive to the melody that rises from within. /

How could we interpret these observations symbolically? / We see here a situation described within the process where the conscious Ego, the shepherd, lets himself be totally carried by the ox, i.d. by a greater, elementary founding power. It seems as if awareness has developed that something greater is at the basis of one's own doing. /

Such an awareness makes us think e.g. of the experience of a creative person, who experiences himself in his creation to be guided by a powerful inner dynamic where the ratio of leader and follower is reversed. / The Ego experiences itself standing in the service of a creative reality different from it that tries to implement its intentions through its formation, action and thought. / The Ego experiences itself as a flute-playing artist and interpreter, as a co-author, as an executor of a play, whose production lies in other hands. /

Such being determined by an autonomous active force is also typical for spiritual experiences: there something else, also, is acting that gives the Ego the feeling of being carried on the back of an ox that is 'returning' and leading back home into one's own depth. /

### **The ox is forgotten, the shepherd remains (VII) /**

This picture breaks with the usual course of the picture series: suddenly the ox disappears as an object, and the viewing angle shifts for the first time into the vertical. / The shepherd is on a higher point, a hill; and his gaze is directed upwards in the direction of the moon appearing on the sky; rising in the background there is a steep hill, and finally we look in a bird's-eye view high from above. / The whole scene is thus composed in a vertical layout. We find ourselves in a situation that transcends earthly horizontality in favour of an otherworldly dimension. /

At a more careful look we realise that the shepherd is on a rocky salient between heaven and earth. / Under him the dense massif with sharp pieces of stone: an image of limited earthly reality and above him the rising moon he is longing for: an image of an infinite and undivided reality. / The shepherd stands in this existential tension between this world and the hereafter, or understood in a Zen Buddhist way: in the tension between "Presence" and "Original Being". Or in psychological terms: between the phenomenal and archetypal reality. /

Behind the shepherd's back we look into an empty house. It could be an image for a form of existence, which finds its home in the void. / As a house it represents a place of protection and security, but it is empty. / This means: there are no concrete things that the shepherd's ego could cling to, yet this "space of emptiness" offers protection and home: / i.e. we could see in it the place where an *immanent transcendence* can be experienced. /

"The ox is forgotten, the shepherd remains": Forgetting the ox signifies a positive step towards internalization of the ox within the shepherd himself. / The initial and true self, encountered so far in the ox is now integrated in the experiencing ego itself. / That means a state of awakening, in which "all that is present returns into its own self. Error and awakening, profit and loss, justice and injustice, good and evil are then brought into its initial state of non-difference. Only here emerges a happy, self-enjoying self. " / (The Ox and its Shepherd, R. Daizohkutsu Ohtsu, p. 101, Neske, 1985).

In psychological language this corresponds to a religious experience of unity where the opposite qualities of human existence, both positive and negative, are experienced in their original unity. / In this experience of enlightenment, the normal human point of view is transcended. / It is no coincidence that the shepherd kneels on a raised platform, thus, that he is no longer on an ordinary level of experience, and that he directs his gaze with an expression of astonishment or rapture, and in a kneeling posture of prayer towards the

height. The picture expresses here a vision totally filled by the Self. /

### **The complete oblivion of ox and shepherd (VIII) /**

We come here to a central image in the entire sequence of images. It is characterized by the fact that we have here no more objects in front of us: the ox and the shepherd are completely forgotten, and every kind of landscape is repealed.

It is an image of absolute emptiness. There are no concrete things any more. / But this void is enclosed in a circle. In this sense, the void appears as a hollow form, from which something may originate. / The circle describes the emptiness as a containing vessel in which everything is canceled and conserved, according to Hegel's double use of the German word "aufheben": / everything is canceled in the sense of negation and at the same time conserved in the sense of storage. / Therefore, in this circular form everything is extinguished and at the same time can emerge out of its own origin. /

The emptiness makes disappear all determination. This suggests a perspective, which goes beyond all content and all perspectives. / It indicates a state of mind where the objective reality is perceived as such, in pure immediacy, in its authentic essence without any interfering viewpoints. / Everything that could impede or distort the immediate perception: the distinguishing or objectifying thinking, in short, all egobound perception is left behind. / It is a perspective-free absolute openness to what manifests itself out of itself. / It is what in the language of Hegel is the "absolute knowledge", or in a Buddhist approach the jumping into pure nothingness i.e. "to die in a great manner" or in the language of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, "To forget God or to let God". /

### **Returned into the ground and origin (IX) /**

With the picture of a cherry tree deeply rooted in the earth is represented here the idea of returning to the ground and origin. / After the last picture where we have met the situation of absolute negation and absolute nothingness, (but where due to the circular shape, paradoxically, the dimension of absolute possibility has always staid open) we encounter now the situation of absolute beginning and absolute affirmation. /

The cherry tree has its origin in a primitive rootstock. / This root bursting from the elementary rock describes a basic movement: it makes us think of a *primordial form of cell division*, of separation and distinction. / But the thought of an *endless movement* comes also to mind: a movement in the sense of the mathematical symbol for infinity, that is a lying eighth. /

In whatever way we look at this root formation, we are always referred to a dialectical origin from which the being emerges and acquires consciousness. / This is an image of the Self relating to itself through the dimension of nature. /

From this arises a flowering cherry tree. It is a spring-like incipient tree. It may symbolically represent an unmediated becoming. / The tree gives the impression of an amazing new beginning and breaking up. / The start has been founded in the dynamics of a rhizome form, like branches in the roots, but at the same time it is sudden, so sudden, as a becoming out of nothing, like a becoming out of dying, like a resurrection from death. /

We could thus say that this image describes, in symbolic language, the Self in its natural becoming from its own origin and in its sudden present existence. /

### **The Entering into the market with open hands (X) /**

With this final image, a third way is shown how the ego-transcending Self appears itself to the experiencing Ego. / The Self, after having manifested itself in the transcending nothingness (Fig. VIII) and then having concretized in the state of original nature (Fig. IX), reveals itself now in the form of an encounter between two persons: an old man and the young shepherd (Fig.X). /

The old man is carrying a large bag: this describes symbolically someone who has experienced a lot, who is rich in life experiences. / The bag is like a form of storage of all the experiences made on the road of life, like a treasure of life experiences. / The round shape of this bag continues the round outline of the body of the man, it completes his round spherical shape. Perhaps we could understand it symbolically along the following lines: the experience contained in the sack stems entirely from the personal, bodily experience of the old man. / It's life experience, existential experience, not just an intellectual heady knowledge. / What has been learned the hard way, is contained in this bag as experiential knowledge. /

The bag is attached to the walking stick or to the beggary. The stick serves as a supporting third axis in addition to the natural support, given by the two legs. / It may correspond to a hold, which the Ego progressing step by step in its life process finds in the teachings and words of former wise men, in the cultural heritage and the authority of those who have preceded, and whose insights provide support in the here and now. / It is the third leg of the tradition, which has an effect onto the ever present presence, which accompanies one's own way of experiencing and reflecting. /

The kindly old man carries in his left hand a basket (a "hollowed-out pumpkin"). Since he comes with "open hands onto the market" his gesture means that he is giving and offering something. / He shares his experience with others; he is ready for a natural movement of compassion. / The gesture of sharing and passing on comes from the horizon of his own wealth of experience as a natural process of self-exteriorisation. It is not dictated from any moral authority whatsoever from the outside, but is a natural outflow of his inner being. (This is very Buddhist ethics). /

It is worthwhile to consider this pumpkin basket closer. / It can be anticipated that this basket may be considered as a condensed symbolic representation of the whole process, as shown in the 10 ox pictures. / What the old man passes on and what he offers here could be understood as a vessel to achieve the experience of the Self in several steps. / This is the meaning of the 10 images we have discussed: they are like a circular tank in which the imageless inner experiences, the "understanding by the heart", the "insight into the original nature" can be produced. The pictures are like a womb, a matrix that produces personal experience in the sense of Zen. /

7 vertical strokes depict the bulging sphere of the pumpkin. / We can remember the pictures 1 - 7: they represent 7 aspects of ego-transcendence under the theme of the confrontation between shepherd and ox. / Through the 7 stations a progressive awareness of the round, extended Self has been awakened. A more global and receptive awareness has been created, as pictorially expressed in the symbol of a spherical vessel. / Linear Egoperspectiveness has always been transcended towards an integral Self-experience. This crossing over was done in 7 steps within the process, which simultaneously correspond to seven different dimensions of experience of the Self. /

Cutting across these seven segments we can distinguish three horizontal levels: the ring at the upper opening of the basket, the soil at the bottom of the basket and the handle fixed at two points. / In a almost model-like condensation these levels could describe the aspects of the self as they are experienced in the images 8 - 10: / the empty opening could describe the aspect of nothingness and emptiness as it was expressed in Figure 8 by the circular empty ring, / the floor plate at the base of the vessel could represent the aspect "cause and origin", expressed in figure 9 where the Self is made present in the elemental reality of nature; / and the handle corresponding to this current 10th image could express the situation of the relational bow, where the Self realizes itself within the relationship between two individuals. /

The basket represents the sum of the 10 ox pictures, so to speak. It is a picture of the whole process. / At the same time it shows what is the function and significance of these 10 pictures: they are a vessel and a structure in which the central experience of Zen can be practiced and appropriated with the help of pictures. / And they can convey a direct experience of the Self in its manifold and circular completeness. /

Now the figure of the old himself. It is a cheerful and kind-looking man, humane and wise. He does not radiate the distant austerity of a teacher or ascetic. Rather, he seems close to the ordinary people on the market, whose concerns and needs he knows well. He embodies the human, all too human. /

With this unconventional ordinariness he gives the impression of a "sacred fool", or of the "Fool" in the Tarot. / The fact that his dress is open, disclosing his chubby belly and body, shows that he is free from any convention. He expresses natural authenticity and freedom from alienating norms and social pressure. / At the same time he embodies in himself the Buddha. Like him, he has a big belly: the enlightened being has become alive again in him in his physical corporality. /

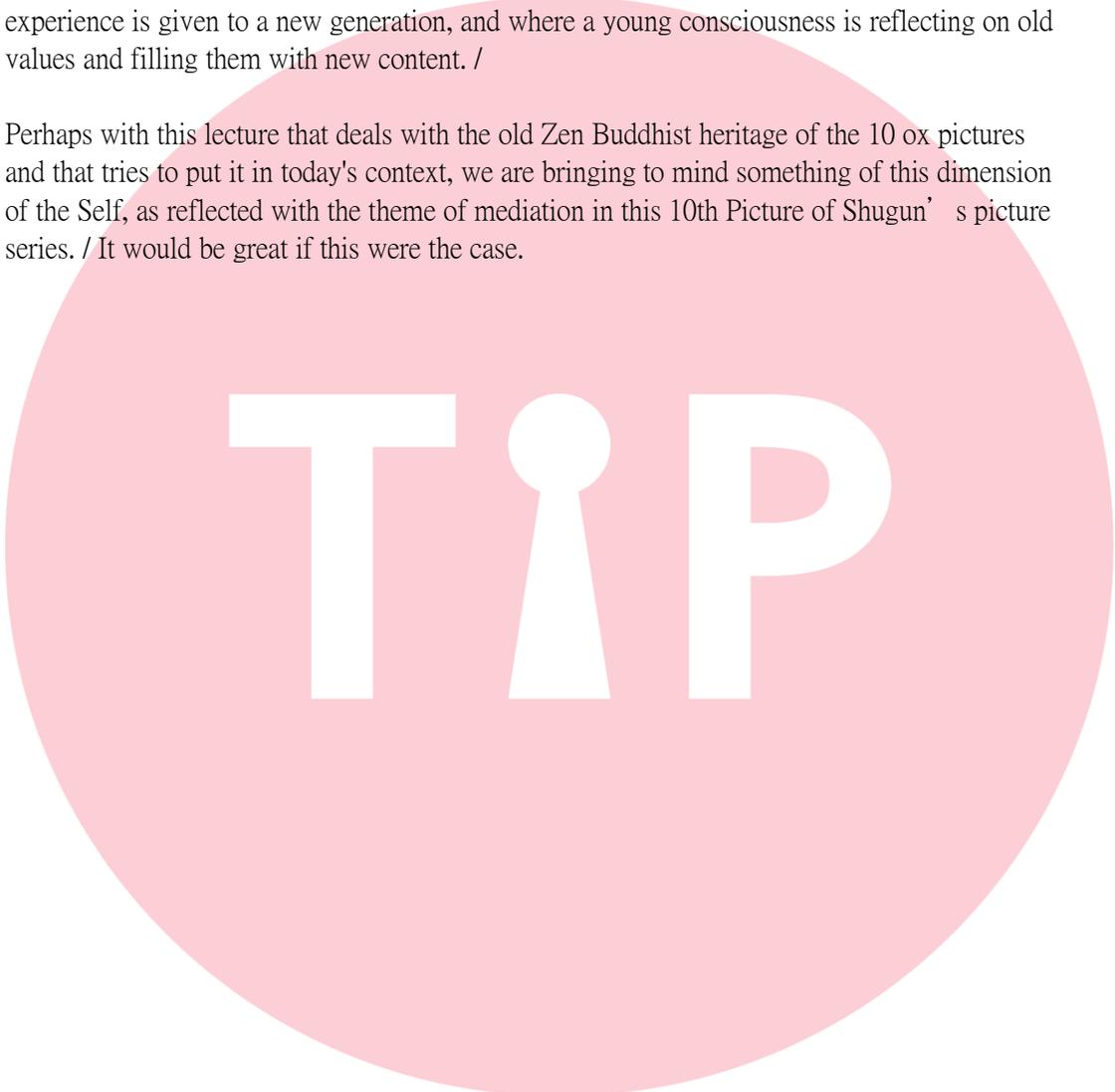
The picture shows an encounter between an old and experienced mind and of a young and learning mind, which manifests itself in the guise of the shepherd. / This young shepherd adopts a respectfully receptive attitude, which is expressed in his slightly stooped posture and in the receiving gesture of his hand. / The package of his own experience is still small, the stick of orienting knowledge drawn from tradition, yet little developed, but there is at the same time a willingness to learn. /

With the juxtaposition of these two figures, a polarity is expressed, which could symbolically stand for various types of relationship between two people: / the relationship between an old, *individuated* individual and a young, still searching ego, who confront each other as opposites; / the relationship between a *master and a pupil*, where the master passes his

knowledge on to a student, and where both are connected in the continuity of a learning tradition; / the relationship between a *father and son*, where the experience of a previous generation is left to a new generation as spiritual heritage, / and finally the relationship between *two eras*, where a task stemming from an earlier time has to be carried on by a new era in the sense of renewal. /

The path of experience described by these 10 pictures thus ends with this image of the Self as realized in an interpersonal relationship. / According to the above-mentioned relations between the two protagonists the Self is particularly experienced where an old consciousness opens itself towards a young consciousness, where a master takes care of a student, where previous experience is given to a new generation, and where a young consciousness is reflecting on old values and filling them with new content. /

Perhaps with this lecture that deals with the old Zen Buddhist heritage of the 10 ox pictures and that tries to put it in today's context, we are bringing to mind something of this dimension of the Self, as reflected with the theme of mediation in this 10th Picture of Shugun' s picture series. / It would be great if this were the case.



TIP