

Article

## Human Actions Illustrated in Zen's Ox-Herding Pictures

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Received: 3 September 2012; in revised form: 10 October 2012 / Accepted: 11 October 2012 /

Published: 17 October 2012

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**Abstract:** The enlightenment from Zen's perspective is the experiences of action that reveal a horizon of new consciousness. This event of enlightenment is the process of action rather than the outcome of action. Therefore, actions are not just the means to enlightenment but the very core of it. The actions of enlightenment from Zen's perspective cannot be adequately described and explained in logical terms. Unlike most other Buddhist schools, Zen does not engage in extensive philosophical discourses; its classical literatures are mostly artistic in nature, consisting of collections of *koans*, poetry, and paintings, etc. The ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism are recognized as the classical illustration of Zen's spiritual journey, as it vividly depicts the practice of Zen in a poetic and metaphorical way. They present a visual parable of the path to enlightenment in a narrative sequence of a boy's searching, seeing, wrestling, riding, and transcending of the ox.

**Keywords:** philosophy; religions, Buddhism; Zen, enlightenment; poetics; theory of action; literary criticism

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### 1. Introduction

Zen Buddhism favors action over contemplation, and enlightenment is mainly considered the experience of action. The enlightenment from Zen's perspective is the events of action that delivers people from the habitually or conventionally established mindset to new levels of consciousness [1]. The traditional Zen practitioners in China spent most of their life time working in farms. For example, when master Bai-zhang became old, his disciples tried to release him from the labor, but he refused, so they hid his farm tools; the master then stopped eating, saying that nobody could replace him doing his own labor, and that he would not eat on any day he did not work ([2], p. 57). The emphasis on action is

not only due to the fact that historically Zen communities had to support themselves, but also because enlightenment essentially lies in the meaning of daily actions. As the following *koan* indicates:

A monk said to Zhao-zhou, "I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me how to attain enlightenment." "Have you eaten your rice porridge?" asked Zhao-zhou. "Yes, I have," replied the monk." "Then go and wash your bowl," said Zhao-zhou. The monk gained an insight ([3], p. 44).

This monk, as a beginner, believes that first task is to learn the path, after which he can follow it to attain enlightenment, which promises the extraordinary power and wisdom for him to act well. The master's answer "go and wash your bowl" reflects a Zen's basic teaching: the path, the goal, and the daily actions are the same thing. Enlightenment, as the act of disclosing, is a breakthrough in the overall consciousness rather than in contemplative thinking. As matter of fact, most events of enlightenment recorded in Zen literature have occurred in real life actions, such as working in farms. The following Zen poem provides such an example:

Seedlings are in my hand,  
One by one, I weave them into the rice field.  
Bending over to the mud, I see the blue sky in the water,  
And realize that the simplicity is the way,  
Stepping backward is going forward ([4], p. 73).

The poem depicts a typical scene of rice planting, in which the farmer must bend over to the field and step backward while laying the rice seedlings to soil. It is in this ordinary working situation, one sees the sky in the earth, which helps one to realize that enlightenment is attained in daily life practice.

By associating the event of enlightenment with daily actions, Zen cancels the traditionally project of *Nirvana* as the ultimate salvation, but seeks the spiritual meaning and wisdom of daily actions. Actions simply become the path of enlightenment rather than the path to enlightenment; enlightenment is not just the outcome of action, but also the process of it. Action is not just the means to enlightenment; it is the event of enlightenment.

According to Zen, the movements of enlightenment in actions cannot be adequately described and explained in logical terms. Unlike most other Buddhist schools, Zen does not engage in extensive philosophical discourses; its classical literatures are mostly artistic in nature, consisting of collections of koans, poetry, and paintings, etc. The ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism are recognized as the classical illustration of Zen's spiritual journey, as it vividly depicts the practice of Zen in a poetic and metaphorical way. They present a visual parable of the path to enlightenment in a narrative sequence of a boy's searching, seeing, wrestling, riding, and transcending of the ox. Each picture is supplemented by a poem and a paragraph of poetic remarks. From Zen's perspective, poetry is not only an art of expression, but also a way of life. Blyth puts it this way:

Zen is poetry and poetry is Zen. The word poetry, or poetical, may be used in three ways: verse, as opposed to prose; deep meaning in verse, that is Zen in words or regular rhythm; deep meaning, that is Zen, in verse or prose or sound or acts or states of the mind ([5], p. 76).

As a way of life, poetry is a state of the mind and a mode of action. This paper will discuss the notion of poetic leap as an existential movement in action. Human action is one of the central subjects

in philosophy, science, and spirituality. Scientists, such as behavior psychologists, seek to explain it, while spiritual and religious practitioners search for ways to transform human action. In this pursuit, the fundamental questions are from where an action arises and how to act wisely and responsibly. An examination of action theories and existential philosophy will set the stage for exploring Zen's perspective on this matter. This will take the whole discussion to a more general level, since speaking is a type of action.

A study of the series of the pictures will render an extensive view about the existential leaps in the journey of enlightenment. The series can be divided into four sets of pictures, representing the progressive stages of actions as the path to enlightenment. It starts with the stages of intellectual meditation represented by the first three pictures of the boy's wandering, searching, and seeing the ox. The pictures point to the poetic leaps in the cognitive activities, such as intention, reasoning and the effort of concentration, which are associated with but prior to the full-blown action. The second set of three pictures represents the poetic leaps in the full engagement of the action, in which the boy wrestles, tames, and rides the ox home, indicating his spiritual advance from a novice to a master of the action in his journey of enlightenment.

## 2. Seeking the Path of Action

Enlightenment, as the event of disclosing, unfolds in the process of action, which, as we have discussed, is rendered in poetic leaps. Since this process cannot be described in analytical terms, Zen seeks to depict such process in poetry and pictures to provide the spiritual inspiration and practical guidance. *The ten ox-herding pictures* of Zen Buddhism are recognized as the classical illustration of Zen's spiritual journey. It presents a visual parable of the path to enlightenment in a narrative sequence of a boy's searching, seeing, wrestling, riding, and transcending of the ox. Each picture is supplemented by a poetic remark and a prosaic commentary. Reflecting the first Zen motto, "special transmission outside the doctrine" [6], this series of pictures goes beyond a religious document exclusive to the practice of Zen. It can be viewed as a masterpiece presenting general wisdom of life. Therefore, people from various traditions and disciplines can interpret and appropriate those pictures to their own interest. For example, Ingram, in his *Wrestling with the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience*, views the series of pictures as a general map of religious experiences [7]. Those pictures apparently reflect the human endeavor to seek new levels of consciousness. The question is what people do and how they do it to attain such higher consciousness. In his *Riding the Ox Home*, Johnson interprets the pictures as the sequence of the psychological maturity attained in the practice of meditation. This view is not broad enough to accommodate the Zen idea that enlightenment can take place in all events of life, rather than exclusively in special exercise such as meditation. I will interpret those pictures as the journey of action, which, according to Zen, is the journey of enlightenment. For instance, the series of pictures can be a reflection of a musician's path to perfect the art. This is actually suggested in the sixth picture where the boy is playing his flute while riding the ox home. From this perspective, the boy in the pictures represents the agent who seeks enlightenment in the process of actions. Correlative to that, the ox symbolizes the object the agent seeks and interacts with on the path of enlightenment. The object of action can be anything in the world, internal or external, mental or physical. For example, Johnson thinks that the ox represents the image of self that is

alienated from the person ([8], p. 22). The journey starts with the stages of mental preparations of action represented by the first three pictures of the body's wandering, searching, and seeing the ox.

### 3. Wandering in Wilderness: the First Ox-herding Picture

The first picture is titled "The Search for Ox," (Figure 1) which depicts a boy wandering in the wilderness.

**Figure 1.** The Search for Ox.



The supplementary poem of the picture reads:

In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall grasses in search of the bull.  
Following unnamed rivers, lost upon the interpenetrating paths of distant mountains.  
My strength failing and my vitality exhausted, and I cannot find the bull.  
I only hear the locusts chirring through the forest at night ([9], p. 136).

This is a standard beginning of a spiritual life, as almost all the spiritual antecedents from various traditions have experienced such bewilderment when their present view of the world and the sense of existence become problematic. The typical example is the historical Buddha, who left his royal home for a spiritual journey after he was disillusioned at the unbridgeable chasm between seemingly perfect life and the inescapable doom of sickness, old age, and death. Life is broken as the old image and conception of the world collapses, and there is a need for seeking a new meaning of existence. In terms of action, people at this stage are disoriented about what they should and can do, because they have lost the sense of purpose of doing what they used to do. The boy finds himself "lost upon the interpenetrating paths of distant mountains." It is a leap of consciousness for the boy to take off from the world in which he used to dwell and cast himself to the wildness. It will take another leap for the boy to find his way. The answer to the spiritual search is suggested in the attached commentary of the picture, which reads:

The bull never has been lost. What need is there to search? Only because of separation from my true nature, I fail to find him ([9], p. 136).

This passage indicates that path is not far from the mind of the seeker. The prospect of a new spiritual leap is embedded in this condition of bewilderment and thirst.

#### 4. Discover the Path: the Second Ox-herding Picture

The path is immediately manifested when the practitioner realizes that the journey of enlightenment is the venture of his own mind. The boy discovers this path in the second picture titled “Discovering the track” (Figure 2), which depicts the boy, with a bridle in his hand, discovering the track of the ox.

**Figure 2.** Discovering the track.



The poem after the picture reads:

Along the riverbank under the trees, I discover footprints!

Even under the fragrant grass I see his prints.

Deep in remote mountains they are found.

These traces no more can be hidden than one's nose, looking heavenward ([9], p. 138).

The track of the ox in this picture symbolizes the way to enlightenment. In order to reach enlightenment as the dreamland of Buddhism, one must find his way; otherwise he will keep wandering and get nowhere. When a person is thrown to the world, he may find many paths prepared for him by others, such as patriarchs and masters. He will either choose from all available paths, or make his own. From Zen's perspective, the journey of enlightenment cannot be fulfilled on the path provided by anyone else. Following the footprints of the antecedents is only a preliminary excursion. There is no handy path for the seeker to get out of wildness, so he has to find his own path, and he will not be able to find it unless he is walking. The boy set out to seek enlightenment as the ultimate emancipation, but a leap occurs in which he realizes that the ultimate is right here with him just like his nose that is right under the eyes, which, however, tends to “look heavenward.” Enlightenment is not a disclosure of a transcendent world like a heaven, but illuminations from this world. Enlightenment of Zen inspires and motivates people to do what they need to in their daily lives. Therefore, the commentary of the picture says that enlightenment must be like the metal that can make many utensils, and in this process, the authentic self is formed in conjunction with myriad things ([9], p. 138). The second picture reveals the intrinsic affinity between the meaning of existential emancipation and the

purpose of daily actions in individual lives. To seek the ox is to find something meaningful to do and the action is the path to enlightenment. Understanding this, the boy find his path of life; he is now pursuing the track of the ox with a bridle in his hand, indicating that he has his mind set on the ox.

However, the boy at this stage has not yet entered the gate of enlightenment, as the commentary of the picture says:

Understanding the teaching, I see the footprints of the bull... Unless I discriminate, how will I perceive the true from the untrue? Not yet having entered the gate, nevertheless I have discerned the path ([9], p. 138).

Seeing the track of the ox indicates that the seeker has found his path to enlightenment on a theoretical level, which is characterized as the discriminating “the true from untrue,” indicated in the poem. To understand and find the way of life is still an intellectual experience of life. After seeing the way, one must embark on the journey and walk the way. The general path of life must be embodied in particular actions, and the broad vision of spirituality needs to be focused to concrete matters of life. The discovery of the way of life will certainly motivate people and provide them with the intentions, which is necessary but not sufficient for actions to take place. Intention centralizes consciousness and provides the overall orientation of an action. A conscious action is impossible without an intention to act. However, an intention does not suffice to make action happen. Intentions cannot materialize into actions until the agent concentrates on a specific project and focuses on the relevant object of action.

### 5. Focus on the Object: the Third Ox-herding Picture

The third picture, titled “Perceiving the Ox” (Figure 3) shows that the boy has physically seen the ox.

**Figure 3.** Perceiving the Ox.



The picture is remarked by the attached poem:

I hear the song of the nightingale.  
 The sun is warm, the wind is mild,  
 willows are green along the shore.  
 Here no bull can hide!  
 What artist can draw that massive head,  
 those majestic horns? ([9], p. 140).

This clearly indicates an experiential contact with the thing the boy will engage as the object of action. The supplementary comment of the picture points out that, “as soon as the six senses merge, the gate is entered” ([9], p. 140). Another leap occurs, which consists of the movement from the discovering of the way to actually seeing the object of action. Compared with intellectual understanding, this experiential recognition of things is more comprehensive and concrete with the involvement of “six senses.” The emergence of the vivid image of the ox indicates that the boy has found and focused on the object of action. The image is the result of focus of the six senses. Nothing appears in consciousness if attention is scattered. Concentration is one of the basic disciplines of Buddhism, as it is listed in the eightfold path as one of the Buddha’s foremost teachings. Zen particularly emphasizes the discipline of concentration because it is a gate to action which, according to Zen, is the event of enlightenment. To concentrate is to gather and align attention, effort, and energy on certain objects in the direction of intention. Through focus, the object of action is manifest in consciousness. To focus on an object is to bring the attention all the way down to the object so that the agent not only thinks about what he is dealing with, but also physically sees, hears, touches, and grasps it. An action is more likely to happen when the agent finds and engages the object, bringing it from the distance to nearness, from blur to focus and from darkness to light.

Because an action demands the collaboration of the mind and the body, understanding, intention, and focus, as mental events, does not yet amount to an action in a complete sense. For example, people who enjoy music are not necessarily capable of playing a good music.

## 6. The Stages of Interactions between Subject and Object

The second set of three pictures represents the leaps into the full engagement of the action, in which the boy wrestles, tames, and rides the ox home while playing music, indicating his advance from a beginner to a master of action.

### 6.1. Engage the Object: The Fourth Ox-herding Picture (Figure 4)

Considering the transition from the third to the fourth picture, the boy makes a great leap from seeing the ox to physically engaging the ox, shown in the fourth picture depicting the boy’s wrestling with the ox.

**Figure 4.** Wrestling with the ox.



The attached poem reads:

I seize him with a terrific struggle.  
His great will and power are inexhaustible.  
He Charges to the high plateau far above the cloud-mists,  
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands ([9], p. 142).

After the agent acquired the intellectual understanding and perception of the object in the previous stages, he engages it. Action always happens between subject and object. Subject is the agent who initiates an action, while object is the thing that responds to the action when it is acted upon. In other words, action is essentially interaction between the subject and the object. An action happens when the subject captures the object and continues to engage it. As the subject makes a move, the object responds, by changing its presence and sending feedback to the subject, which again makes its response and renders another move, so on and so forth. At this initial stage of action, the subject, represented by the boy, has to struggle with the object. The comment of the picture says:

Infatuation for scenery interferes with his direction. Longing for sweeter grass, he wanders away. His mind still is stubborn and unbridled. If I wish him to submit, I must raise my whip ([9], p. 142).

From the picture, we see that the boy is after the ox. This indicates that the object plays the leading role at this stage of action, although the subject is trying to gain the control. The ox, which represents the object, obviously does not respond cooperatively to the boy at this stage. The subject has to struggle to keep up with the object. The relationship between the subject and object at this stage of action is not secure. The fact that ox is trying to “wander away,” indicates that the mind of the boy is still subject to distractions, which may cause him to lose his object. An action cannot continue unless a congenial relationship is maintained between the subject and object. If the subject loses touch with the object, or the object stops responding, the action will be terminated. It is in the subsequent stage of action that this relationship is secured.

## 6.2. Control the Object: The Fifth Ox-herding Picture

This picture is titled “taming the ox” (Figure 5) in which the herdsman has reined the ox.

**Figure 5.** Taming the ox



The poem reads:

The whip and rope are necessary,  
 Else he might stray off down some dusty road.  
 Being well trained, he becomes naturally gentle.  
 Then, unfettered, he obeys his master ([9], p. 144).

Now the boy has gained the control. He leads the ox and appears to be its master. This indicates that in this stage of action the subject has overpowered the object. The roles in the previous picture have been switched, as the subject now assumes the leading position in action. However, the ox, after being tamed, still looks alien to the boy, and the boy has to “hold the nose-ring tight.” This indicates that although the struggle between the subject and the object has ceased, considerable effort and caution are still needed from the part of the subject to control the object to ensure the proceeding of action. The spirituality at this level is discipline, which indicates the masculine power directed from a subject onto an object. Although discipline is an important part of Zen training, it is still a beginning stage of spirituality, since Zen does not attribute its spirituality to subjectivity. The overemphasis of the power of self is one of the major problems in life and action from Zen’s point of view. Therefore, the commentary of the picture points out, “Delusion is not caused by objectivity; it is the result of subjectivity” ([9], p. 144). The discipline and the power of self is only an initial stage of the spirituality. In the journey of enlightenment, the self will be softened and the tension between the subject and object will be alleviated in a harmonious relationship, which will unfold in the subsequent stages.

### 6.3. *The Harmonious Interplay Between Subject and Object: the Sixth Ox-herding Picture (Figure 6)*

Another poetic leap occurs in the sixth picture that depicts the boy leisurely and gracefully playing his flute while riding the ox home. The leash is no longer needed, as ox is let loose, indicating a harmonious relationship between the subject and the object in this stage of action.

**Figure 6.** Riding the ox home.



After the boy has found, focused, captured, and secured the ox, now he is in a new relationship with the ox. In previous stages, the subject, as the active agent, seeks to be the master of the object which has been regarded as a passive thing. In this stage, however, the master-slave relationship between the

subject and object disappears. The agent no longer assumes his master position over the object, but rests in a harmonious relationship with it. The boy can just let the ox go without exerting any control, indicating that the action becomes effortless, as the agent can yield himself to a smooth flow generated in the congenial interaction between the subject and the object. This scenario is certainly not exclusive to Zen's training, but an example of any skillful or artistic performance.

One added image in this picture is the boy's playing of a flute, suggesting that action at this stage become artistic and creative. This music performance is remarked in both the poem and the comment of the picture. The poem reads:

Mounting the bull, slowly I return homeward.  
 The voice of my flute intones through the evening.  
 Measuring with hand-beats the pulsating harmony,  
 I direct the endless rhythm  
 Whoever hears this melody will join me ([9], p. 146).

The poem is followed by the following comment:

This struggle is over; gain and loss are assimilated. I sing the song of the village woodsman, and play the tunes of the children. Astride the bull, I observe the clouds above. Onward I go, no matter who may wish to call me back ([9], p. 146).

The picture, the poem, and the commentary reveal a carefree spirit in the boy's performance of music. The allusion of learning music is implied throughout poetry that goes with the series of pictures. The performance of music provides a perfect analogy to the journey of enlightenment. The music symbolizes the insight of enlightenment. According to Zen, all people have their inner music, and the Zen's journey is to discover, attune, and perfect it.

The previous stages of action can be conceived as the preparation for such artistry of action. The boy's wandering in the first picture indicates the search for his inner music. Pursuing the footprints of the ox in the second picture is equivalent to a theoretical study of music. The third picture, "seeing the ox," implies that the boy at this stage has the direct experience of music, as the poem attached to the picture indicates, "hearing the song of the nightingale". The fourth picture, "taming the ox" is analogous to the hands-on training process that a music student must go through to acquire the skill after the intellectual and experiential comprehension is attained from previous stages. After that stage, the student can express himself through music, indicated in the fifth picture showing that the boy has a solid control of the ox. At this stage, however, the student is not yet a true artist since he has to exert substantial efforts to manipulate his instrument. The real artistry emerges in the sixth picture where the boy "sings the song of the village woodsman, and play the tunes of the children . . . The voice of my flute intones through the evening" ([9], p. 146). At this culminating stage, the musician has found the natural flow of music as he performs it spontaneously and effortlessly in the seamless interaction between him and the instrument.

The traditional views about action generally assume that the subject or the agent is the only active element of action, while the object is a passive thing to be acted upon [10]. In the *ten ox-herding pictures*, the object of action is represented by a living ox, vividly implying that not only the subject but also the object are alive, as it can actively attract, confront and interact with the subject. Based on

the relationship between the subject and the object, the series of pictures distinguish several levels of action, which can be traversed through the existential leaps.

The first set of three pictures depicts cognitive activities which render a flow of information between the subject and the object, but the two do not actually engage each other. In this stage, the subject distances itself from the object and obtains a detached perspective to observe or reflect on the object. This mode of activity prevails in academic studies. Action actually takes place when the subject engages the object, which is portrayed in the second set of three pictures. These three pictures suggest three modes of interactions between the subject and the object. The initial picture of the engagement (the fourth ox-herding picture) shows that the boy is running after the ox. The next picture shows that the boy gains the control and leads the ox. In the last picture of the set, the boy rides the ox home in complete harmony. These three pictures suggest three levels of actions. The first one is the object-oriented action, in which the subject mainly responds to, and tries to keep up with the object. This mode of action has been thoroughly studied by behaviorists whose major concern is how objects determine human behavior. The reversion of the relationship makes the second mode of action, in which subject seizes the control of object and forces it to respond. This mode of action is studied by action theorists, particularly the teleologists who are mainly interested in how human initiatives, such as intention and belief, motivate action [11]. Both modes of action are characterized by a master-slave relationship between subject and object. However, this relationship disappears in the next level of action as the subject finally achieves a harmonious relationship with the object after the process of seeking, understanding, and engagement. Action culminates in such a harmony in which both subject and object are progressively illuminated and transformed. The interplay of subject and object renders the manifestation of a creative experience symbolized by the music play of the boy. The idea represented by the sixth ox-herding picture indicates a spiritual ideal and fulfillment of Buddhism and Hinduism, a major source of Buddhism. The image of the boy playing the flute on the back of the ox is obvious reminiscent of Krishna, a Hindu deity who were particularly known in teaching the wisdom and spirituality of action in *The Bhagavad Gita*, a major Hindu scripture.

The ox-herding pictures clearly show that Zen takes a different approach from action theorists, such as behaviorists and teleologists, who believe that the process of action can be described as causal sequence and understood from either objectivity or subjectivity. The series of the ten ox-herding pictures, aided by the supplementary poems and commentaries, indicates that action unfolds in poetic leaps that cross over several stages. The leaps from one stage to another are driven by the ongoing interaction between subject and object, which is captured poetically rather than logically.

## 7. Conclusions

Zen's enlightenment lies in the daily practice of life, as expressed in its principal slogan: "the ordinary mind is the way." Enlightenment is not to take off from this world but to mingle with and rise from it. Familiar action theories describe action as a causal sequence, assuming that by analyzing the causes and effects of action, we can come up with a fundamental paradigm to describe and explain human action ([12], pp. 423–440). Subsequently, by locating and manipulating causes, we can confidently control effects and thus manage human activity. However, from Zen's perspective, an action does not arise from its presumed cause. To act is to perform the existential leap that delivers

people to a different world. Therefore, action is not derived from the past but is oriented toward a new horizon. The focus is on the process of action rather than the anticipated objective. Zen often uses the term “non-thought” to characterize this mental state of action. If one exerts too much thought and expectation about the purpose or the outcome of an action, the mind may be affixed on the thought, and one may fail to launch or carry out the action. In other words, when attention is attached to the anticipation of the result or value, the ability to act may be undermined. Therefore, one of the Zen discipline is to suspend the calculation of value and the anticipation of the result of an action, to cultivate the emptiness of the mind, from which the impulse to act springs. Zen generally believes that enlightenment lies in the process of the practice rather than anything that may come out of it. The process, rather than the expected outcome, should take up the mind of the agent during an action. From Zen’s perspective, an action is not primarily a pursuing of a known value, but a leap into the process, which gathers, unifies, and transforms things and consciousness; this process fulfills the primordial human need: the need for action itself.

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