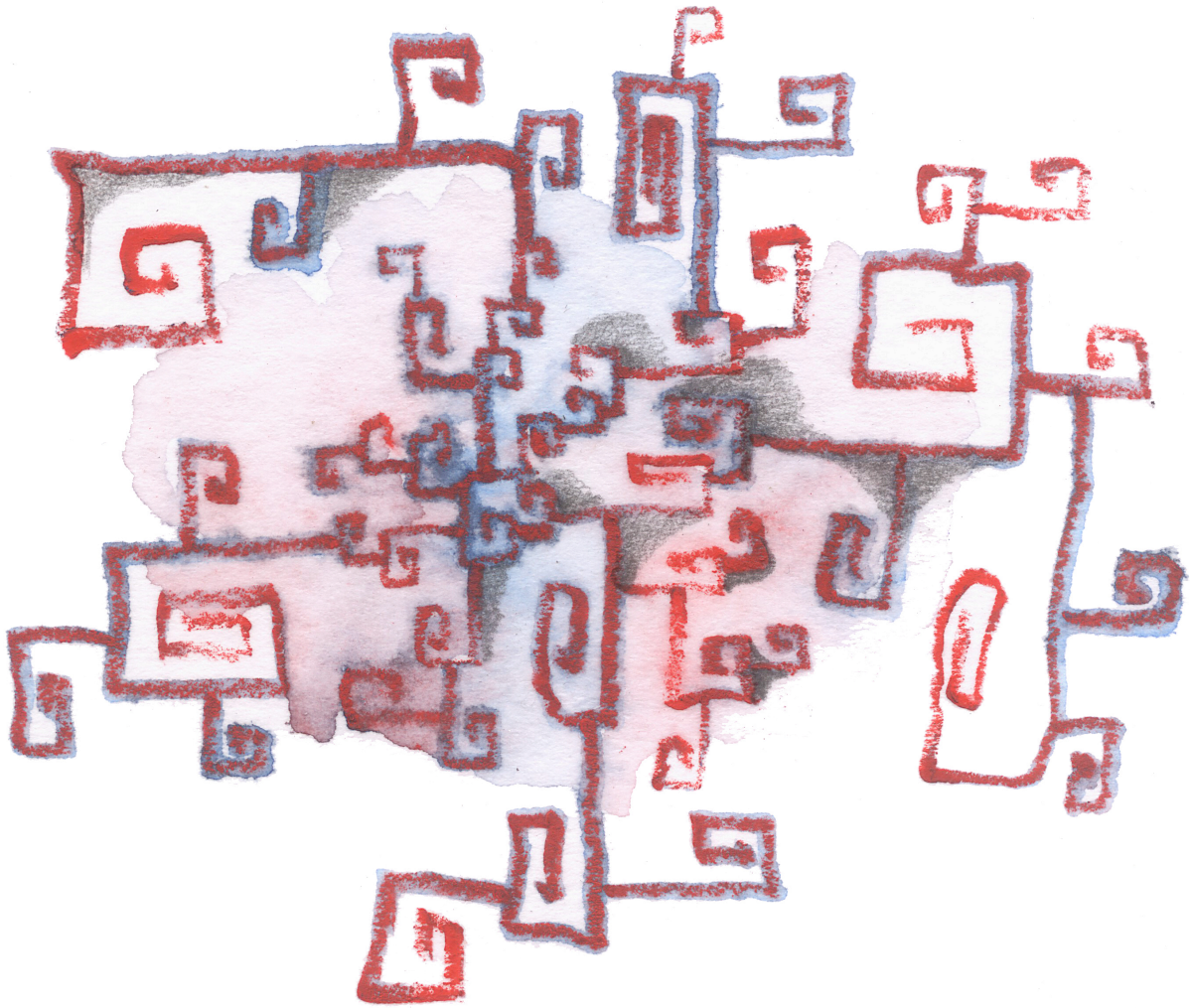


## Discovering the Ox

The Ox Herding Pictures are lessons about enlightenment presented as a series of drawings and short accompanying poems, first appearing in different versions in the eleventh or twelfth century. There are many readings, dharma talks, and personal variations of these poems and drawings available online and in books. [ <https://terebess.hu/english/oxindex.html> ] I'm grateful for the bounty of materials available and have benefitted greatly from reading and listening to them. This living map is continually being interpreted and updated. Composer and visual artist John Cage, known to use Buddhist ideas in his work, published a portfolio of his

own ox herding pictures, showing how the accidental and intentional qualities of the dharma take form in art and poetry. Because this map is visual, it immediately resonated with my artistic sensibility and I determined to study it as a spiritual guide. Imagine my surprise when, after memorizing, embodying and practicing all the stages, I realized that it was not only a historical map of the path to enlightenment, but also a detailed description of the creative process, the two paths resonating.

In the twelfth century, Zen Master Kuoan Shiyuan composed his version of the ten poems. Those poems were translated and interpreted by John Daido Looi in the book *Riding the Ox Home: Stages on the Path of Enlightenment*. I relied on this text to guide me as I composed my own versions. The ox herding pictures were so helpful to clarifying my understanding of the transformations along the creative path that I take the meanings to heart. Below I offer an alternative reading of the ox herding pictures, my reinterpretation of the poems and images to reflect the stages on the creative path, pointing out the parallels to the spiritual path. The accompanying improvisational drawings were made while meditating on each stage. I invite you to do the same as an inquiry practice, make an improvisational drawing when considering each stage.



## 1 Curiosity

Creatively seeking,

Mind awakening,

Curiosity energizes

The desire to make

Curiosity is an initiating force, present the moment we enter the world. The human instinct to survive requires us to discover and know things about our environment. We need to sort out what is and isn't our body. Who is holding us? Where is food? As we peer out of newborn eyes we think to ourselves, "What is this?" Our curiosity drives us into the world.

The first stage of the creative journey is about awakening, spontaneously or deliberately, to the myriad possibilities of the world, knowing that the ten thousand things aren't exactly as they seem, and that reality can be manipulated. Creativity is more than continual discovery. Curiosity on the creative path connects us to the world.

We guide our 'normal' lives with stories we tell ourselves about how the world works. The habitual patterns of our life are established and comfortable. One day we experience something out of the ordinary, a curiosity, a strange or unusual thing, such as a spectacular sunset or a senseless act of violence, and this disruption is followed by urgent feelings with accompanying thoughts such as, "I can't let this experience disappear, I must remember it" or "This arrangement not right, it must be changed!" Disruption calls up our creative energy and like the irritation to an oyster, we may renormalize our lives by making a pearl.



## 2 Taking Initiative

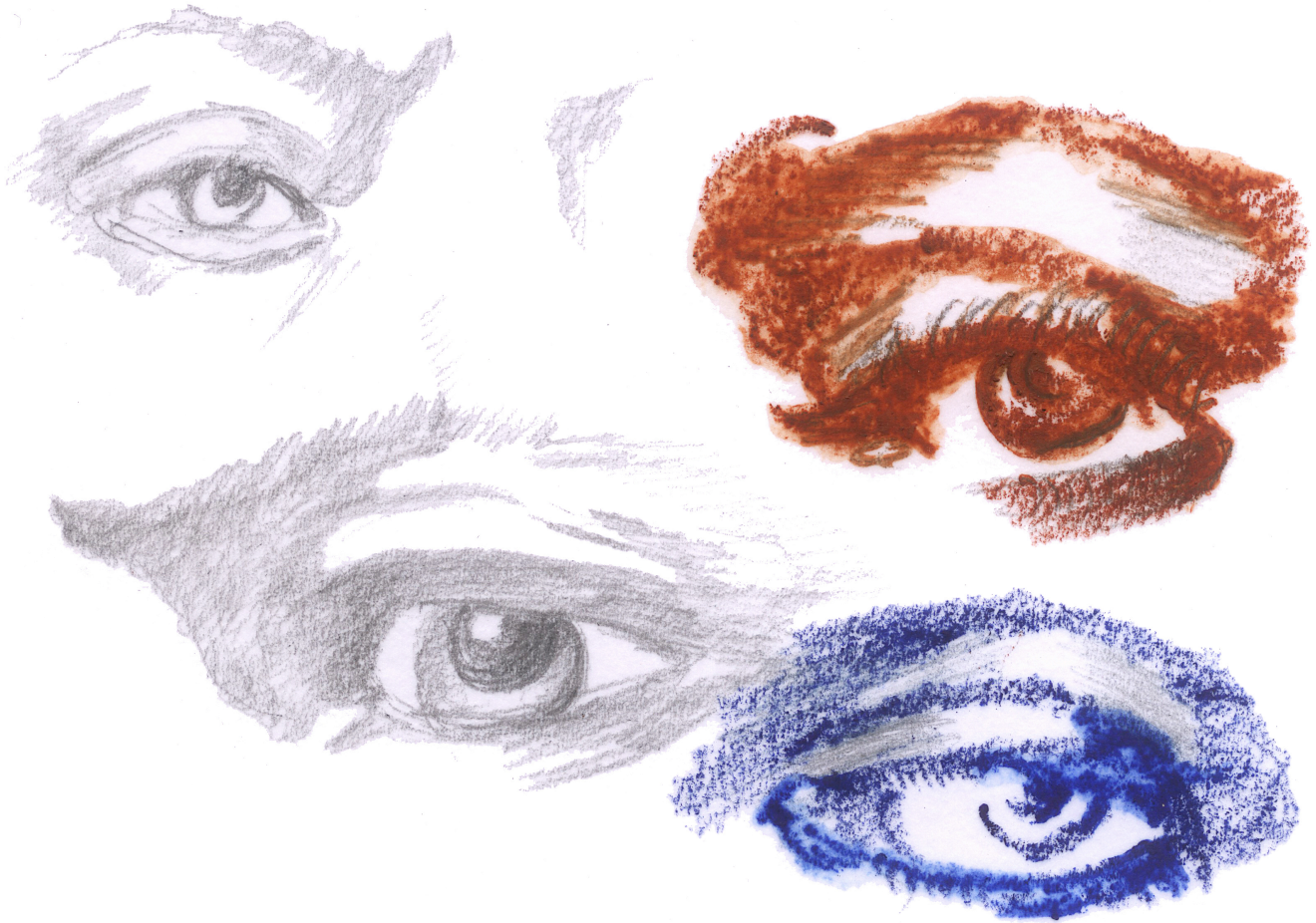
Creative energy will not dissipate,  
Turning over and over in my mind,  
Suddenly I see the media and methods,  
I resolve to undertake this work.

Life is peaceful before we become creatively inspired. Once the energy for a creative work arises our worldview shifts and we risk losing ourselves in the process. We need to find training and a medium that we can manage while avoiding self-criticisms that dampen the creative spirit. At this stage the energy is all that is supporting the work and, as in the hero's journey, some effort is now required to cross the threshold from idea to practice.

Some artworks appear in my mind fully formed and others have emerged while improvising with materials. There is no singular way to create, it is only from a deep connection with intuition that you begin to see what each creation calls for.

In the contemplative tradition this stage is called 'discovering the footprints', referring to the first time we experience something real on the spiritual path. For creative work, this is an inspired moment, or sometimes a moment of desperation, that leads us to take up materials with the desire of discovery. The feeling is so strong in this moment that we can't not make art.

When we say a creation will be 'realized' we often assume that 'real' means the art will be made of physical materials but realization can also take place in the mind. For me the strongest realizations have come from the interaction of the mind and the world, through feedback. The creative spirit is reduced from a flowing sensation in the mind into physical materials, then viewed, studied, and reinterpreted, giving rise to more curiosity. In this stage we pick a point to begin work and set it all in motion.



### 3 First glimpse

Now the page is no longer blank,  
Tentative marks, sketchy lines,  
Overcoming my hesitation and shyness,  
The goal is far but the journey is underway

In the spiritual tradition, the third stage, ‘seeing the ox’, marks the first glimpse of the true self. It can be a practitioner’s first time experiencing the value of the Buddha’s teachings, trying out meditation, or turning thoughts inward; doing just enough practice to return a reward.

On the creative path, this stage happens during mark making and warmup exercises when the artist settles their mind into drawing and starts to see the first gestures, now doing it ‘for real’. I get a physical sensation in my abdomen, joyous butterflies, a lift that comes when I have broken the symmetry and started a drawing, the graphite line, charcoal smear, or flash of colored paint now in my sight for the first time, mine to work with. I know what the material feels like. I’m underway! The drawing is an object I am working with but also a reflection, not separate from ourselves—the universe glimpsing itself from a new angle.

I feel my attention being pulled into the page, my focus narrowing and I start to ‘see’ what this new world holds. Even small gestures inform the growing idea—lines made at the start can direct the entire evolution of a drawing. When working with the infinite, even a single mark is enough. In this stage we transition away from our intellectual ideas and expectations for practice because of our immediate situational demands. Sitting in meditation we focus on each breath and at the drawing table lines are accumulating fast. There is no more need to theorize or worry.





#### 4      Catching a Likeness

Seeing the thing that looks like the thing  
that looks like nothing I've ever seen.

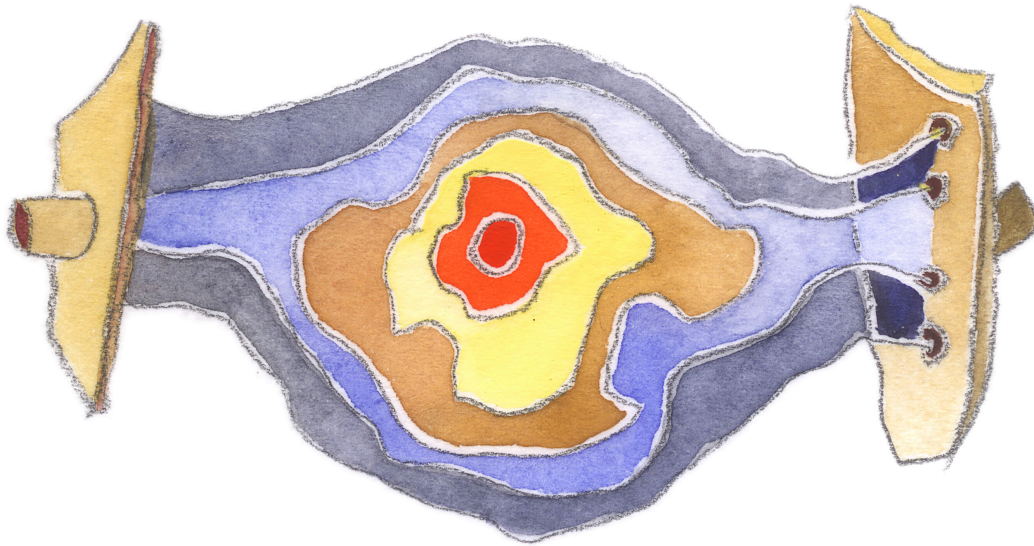
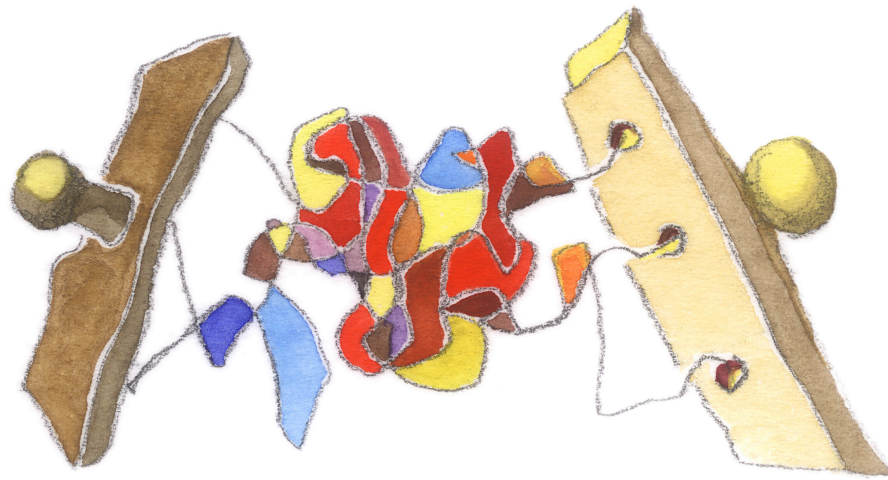
To get something working in the drawing

I move outside the ordinary.

The drawing moves past sketchy marks. In a single line we catch a likeness. Seeing there is something working we automatically decide to devote time to pursuing the form and bringing it under control. Desire catches fire and the hero's battle is joined. This stage is the beginning of the struggle, we've seen enough to commit but haven't gotten to the depth of the project.

It is just as easy to ruin a promising sketch with too many lines as it is to stop short of an excellent drawing by being afraid to go too far. This is the stage where we start gaining judgment from experience. We make lots of quick studies, some full of overworked contours, some with tantalizing potential, and a few drawings that deliver. The work begins to pile up on the table, asking us to work quicker, larger, and with more vision. It takes effort to capture the spirit in our materials and even more to perfect it. If the first three stages were preparation, this is where the real work begins. This stage calls for us to be clever in tackling new territory, to experiment and invent techniques that let us see in a new way.

The parallel stage on the contemplative path is marked by the practitioner reaching a breakthrough, a moment of clarity that quickly vanishes because concentration is still weak. The danger here is mistaking a small success for mastery, a sketch for a finished drawing, an insight for enlightenment. We get that first hit of bliss when sitting or we quickly make that excellent figure study and we want to run and share it with the world. Catching takes effort but our prey is powerful and we must also have patience.



5 Taming the image

Just drawing, just drawing, just drawing,

My attention is on technique

Building intuition, exploring possibilities,

And improvising in the moment

Fundamentals practiced, focus growing, and likenesses common, we have built our tools for aesthetic discovery and can begin to add layers of meaning to the work. Daily discipline is still needed to get to the studio, select paper, pick up pencils, and to initiate marks until the practice returns more than it takes.

Let's be careful not to apply too harsh a whip, art is best tamed by enclosure not force, slowly bringing the practice to materials, allowing for play and mistakes. If drawing is fun then why complicate things? We only need to mindfully observe. On the contemplative path, discipline must also be applied in getting oneself to the cushion, making sure practice is regular but not so forcefully that we want to avoid sitting.

This is not the spot to fall back on comfortable patterns to get a satisfying result, our work is only getting established and we must continue to experiment with materials and techniques until we see that a real style is adapting our methods to what each drawing needs. At this level, the tightrope walkers hone their balance, trying just enough to get the work done and not too much that the drawings aren't allowed to arise, given space, or flow naturally. We are confident but try not to have too much pride at what we've done so far. Allowing 'what is' to arise, we join more closely with that which we initially sought, the work becomes more ours, and a more mature style develops. Facing the blank page every day is humbling but exciting and finally absolutely familiar.



6 Riding the creative flow

Taking ideas to their limits

dancing the dance

in a Rococo rodeo

ba-dop ba-dop ba-dop ba-da whoo

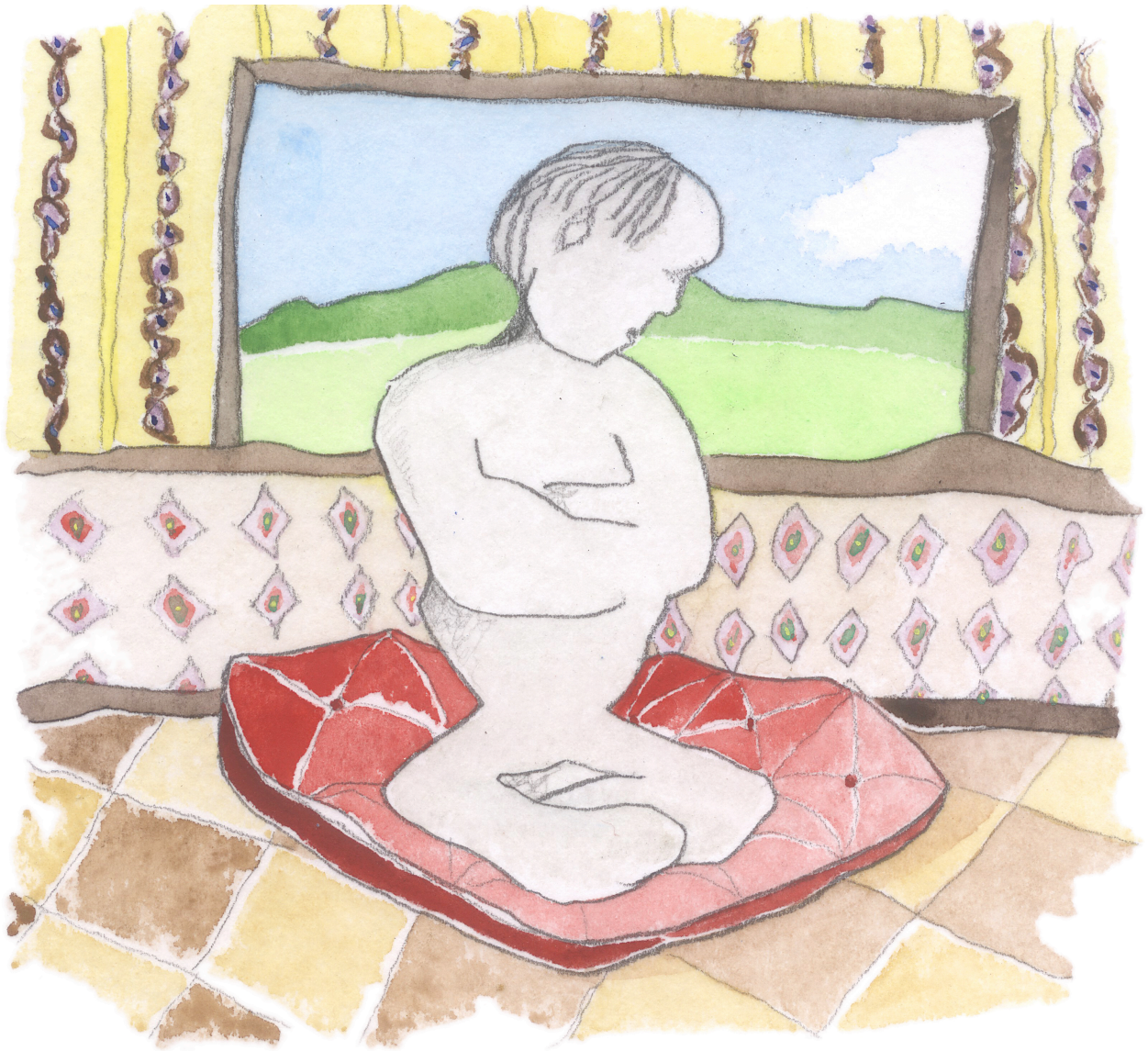
These are timeless moments of ‘just drawing’. Making art happens all by itself. Guided intuitively by experience and the excitement of realization, we are finally out of the way. Each confident line and each balanced color field that appears on the page adds energy to the growing image. Success or failure don’t matter when we are experimenting at this level. The feedback is self-sustaining. Reason and words fall away...

The Zen image of the sixth stage depicts a boy playing a flute riding comfortably astride a tamed ox. By this time, we are no longer challenged when meditating, the movements of the mind are familiar, the road more easily navigated. There is no longer a question about what we are doing, either drawing or sitting, the value outweighs the effort and doubt.

The state can easily become mindless but let’s remain aware of changes including the eventual end of this phase. My first experiences in flow were so blissful that I became convinced the flow state was the goal I had been seeking and somehow believed it could be maintained indefinitely if I practiced hard enough. When I identified myself as a person who had achieved something or grasped onto a particular drawing style, the artistic growth ended.

The beauty of a graphic form is not in its geometry but in the degree to which it reflects the flow state of its creator. Many times I have made a ‘really good’ drawing and immediately attempted to make more copies in that style only to find them appear derivative, lacking the spontaneity that made the original so attractive. I duplicated the visual form but not the creative energy. It is only by following the process to its conclusion and returning naturally to curiosity, allowing anything to arise, that I can give life to new work.

It is interesting to note the close crossover of the creative and contemplative paths at this stage. The classic Zen ox drawing of stage six depicts a musician, an artist. This is the stage of the spiritual path where creativity is acknowledged, even celebrated, the openness of creative practice being employed as a metaphor for deep connection to the source. On the creative path, this stage is also where art making and spirit come closest. A common feeling in flow is that of being controlled by a supernatural force, the energy doing the drawing. The dancer is danced when we give ourselves up to the process.



7      Returning home—Noticing the sense of completion

Beauty resonates!

Not one line, one mark, one color,

one word, one note, one thought,

not one thing is out of place.



How do I decide when a drawing is finished? To learn to see when things end, let's make use of the powerful practice Shinzen Young calls 'noting gone'. He instructs, "Every time you are aware that something has vanished, note "gone." To find when the drawing is done, we pay attention to the disappearance of one particular sensation. Start by looking at your drawing and note when the need you feel to change the image is no longer present. Glance at the piece and then look away, look back again. Does any alteration or addition suggest itself? Does some part still need 'fixing up'? Has the energy to make this drawing been satisfied and disappear into a settled feeling? We should try to distinguish the feeling of wholeness we get from a completed drawing from any inner dialog that may tell us the work is done because we are tired of marking, finished because we so strongly desire completion that anything is good enough, or we fear continuing because we may ruin it.

The energy that drives the drawing may not go away all at once. We may notice an abrupt diminishing of the time we are spending using our hands to make lines and an sharp increase in time we spend just looking at the work. The feeling may be gone from one view, only to rise as you move around the work. Once we are sensitive to this change, we can watch the whole cycle on different scales played out over a work in progress. It is possible to note the energy ending completely for each mark and curiosity rising for the next. The linearity of the stages is beginning to dissolve.

As we get better and better at noting when the initiative to work on a drawing diminishes, we get better at noticing all kinds of changes. Being comfortable with 'gone', we gain the skills to observe movement from one stage of the ox drawings to the next. The seventh stage feels like a return to home because the most constant thing in the cycles are the transitions between the

stages, the arising and passing changes. When we gain the perspective to be able to note these phase transitions as they begin and end, we feel familiar with just being. Maybe we never left home?



8 Drawing and self forgotten

The image I dreamed of is here,  
before me and not here at all,  
the image and the imaginer  
entangled

While noting the changes of the cycle, the self and the drawing are forgotten. The foreground story of an artist making a drawing shifts to the background. The vision that brought the drawing into being and the excited artist who couldn't wait to make the marks both become part of a wider view of an ongoing process. No more searching for an image and no need to make.

Knowing the drawing is done we ask, "What is this? What does it mean? Have I grown from the process? Who made this?" The deep feelings that formed the image in the mind and the initiative in the body can now be touched, they have a persistent form in the world as graphite and paper. Were they ever separate? I reawaken in a world containing an object that feels like part of me.

The Zen image for this stage is the *enzo*, a symbol for wholeness. The drawing is done and we know it is done. We see the drawing in the world and ourselves in the drawing. Sitting at this stage, meditating, integrating our actions, we enjoy the beauty and originality of the piece, Stories to explain what we see begin to suggest themselves and soon we are curious to hear what others think.



9          Sitting at the source

Seeing the path in perspective,

Hearing echoes from the journey,

Sitting in an open landscape

Familiar surroundings are refreshed

This is the final stage of introspection, the drawing is completed and we've spent time looking at it and considering its meaning. What comes next is a pause, a context shift, and an appreciation for having been able to experience the drawing coming into being, each mark adding to the particular character of the moment.

In one scene of Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, the actor Peter Falk, cast as himself, makes a speech to address the concerns of the angelic entity he senses nearby. Falk extolls the virtues of being present in the world, the pleasures of being physically equipped to sense the world. Standing in front of a food truck in the early Berlin dawn, Falk speaks to an angel that only the film audience can see. "I wish I could see your face, just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch somethin'. Yea, it's cold. I feel good... Look... Here... To smoke, have coffee, and if you do it together... its fantastic. Or to draw: you know, you take a pencil and you make a dark line, then you make a light line and together its a good line, or when your hands are cold, you rub 'em together...that's good, you see that feels good. There are so many good things!"

When I began my journey to the source of creativity, I had no idea that the journey was one of opening my awareness to the present, but it made sense to me when I looked around at the world and realized, "What else could be the source but this?" Art is the expression of this, of what it is like to be present, and to sense it.

In the beginning we are curious about what is going on around us and inside us. We explore the world looking for explanations. We record our experiences as symbols on paper.

Finally, we see creativity in everything. To repurpose an old Zen saying, “Before I came to drawing, pencils were only pencils, paper only paper. After I began to draw, pencils were no longer pencils, paper no longer paper. But when my drawing was complete, pencils were just pencils again, and paper just paper.”



**10**      Return to the market

Who will buy this beautiful drawing,  
who will engage and be willing to share:  
the circular path of endless production  
and liberation through unselfish care?



After all the making and introspection, it's time take our drawing and show it to the world. In the Zen tradition, the image presented in stage ten is of an experienced practitioner entering a public place and offering wisdom. Artists will especially relate to the market as the last transition in the journey. The picture is done, now time to share the message and get rewarded for the effort.

Forget about awakening and enlightenment, when I started on the creative path my ego was in control. I was focused on the rewards at the end. After traipsing around the cycle thousands of times, each creative act counting as a turn, my attention came to rest on persistence, seeing what stayed the same yet different, and the resonant layers that appear here and now, not in some future or far away mystical disembodied land but here today in my body.

I look at my drawings with more and more layers of understanding and compassion. When I teach, I emphasize practice and technique, but only so the student builds enough experience to be able to point out to them the layered view. The acceptance the market gives (or doesn't give) my work only occupies one note in the process. The vibe creativity gives is the best reward, to live a grateful life in that creative spirit.