

Herd of Creativity

Reading the traditional Zen Ox Herding Pictures
as a map of the creative process

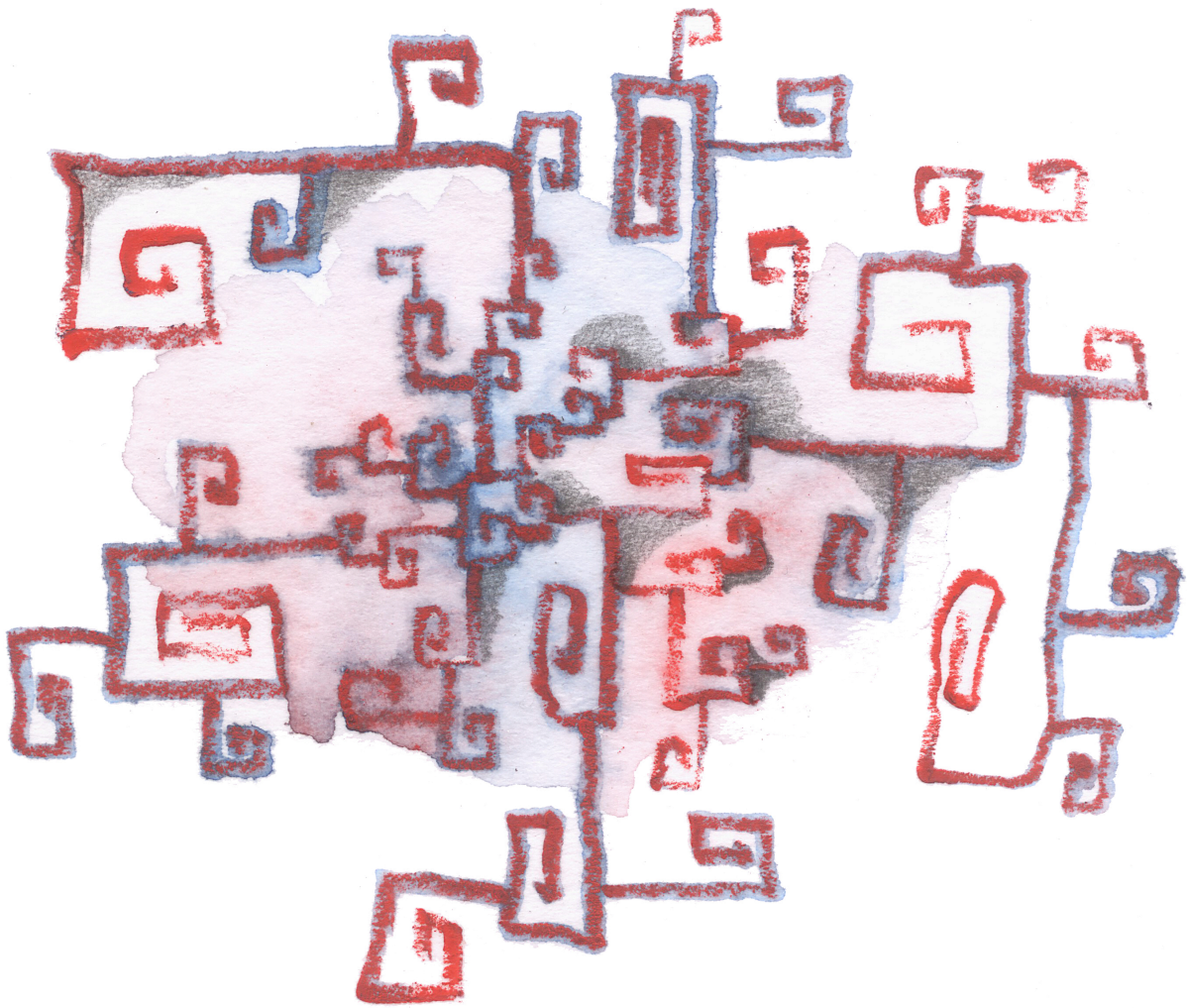
John F. Simon, Jr. • DrawingYourOwnPath.com

This text is an edited excerpt from Chapter 6 of *Drawing Your Own Path*

Discovering the Ox

The ox herding pictures are beautiful, historical teachings about the path to enlightenment presented as a sequence of drawings and short poems. These lessons first appear in the eleventh or twelfth century. You can find many books, dharma talks, and videos presenting these poems and drawings. [<https://terebeess.hu/english/oxindex.html>] I'm grateful for the bounty of materials available and have benefitted from reading and listening to them. The ox drawings are a living map, continually being interpreted and updated by scholars and artists. 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 resonates with my artistic sensibility and I 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 map of the path to enlightenment, but it could also be read as a detailed description of the creative process. The two paths resonate.

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 his interpretations to guide me. The ox herding pictures are so helpful to clarifying my understanding 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 of the creative process, 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 your own improvisational drawings while considering each step.



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.

Once curious, the next step is to investigate.



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.

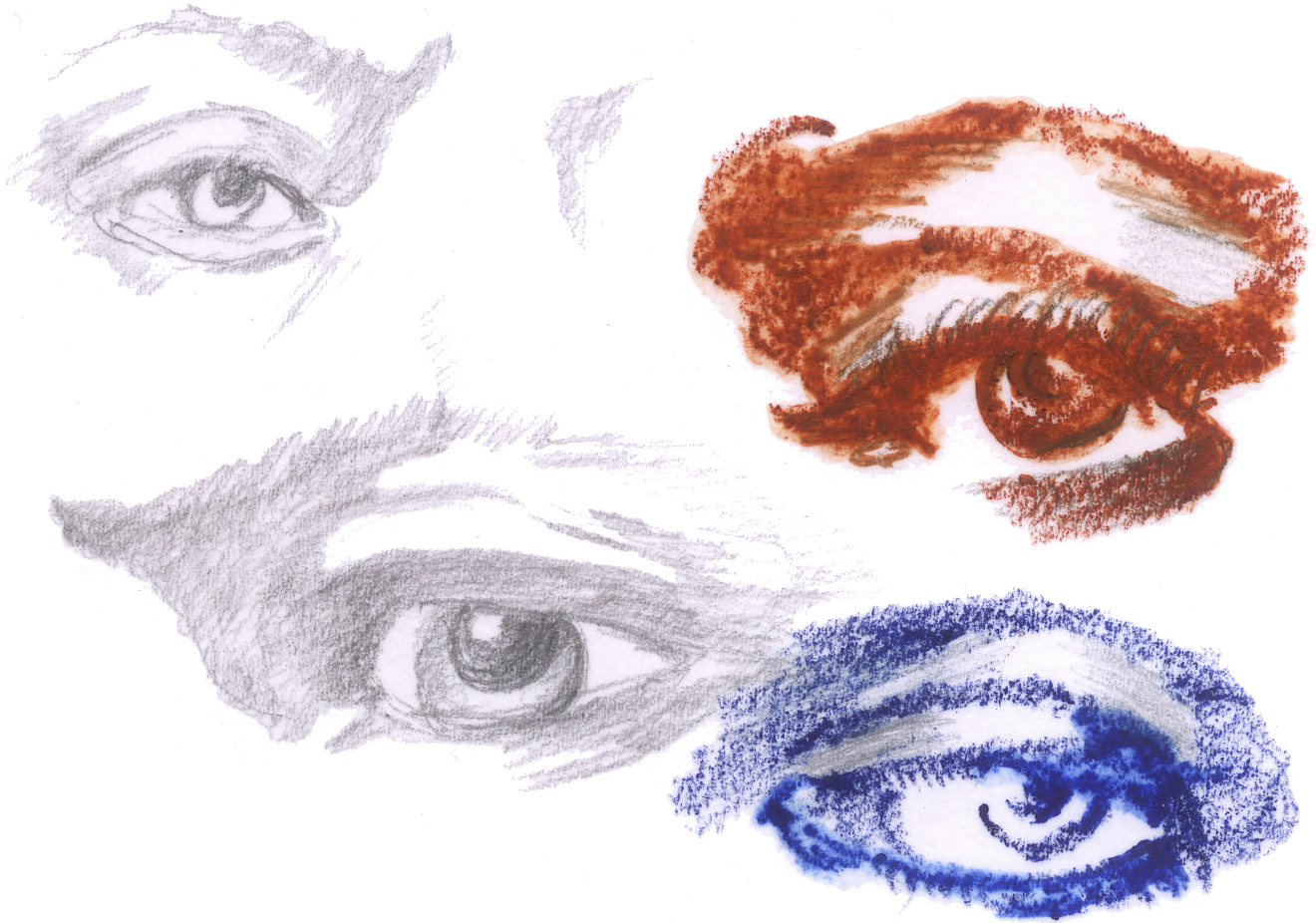
Life is peaceful before we become creatively inspired. Once the energy for a creative work arises our worldview shifts and we risk losing ourselves in the process. We need to find training and a medium that we can manage while avoiding self-criticisms that dampen the creative spirit. At this stage the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

Some artworks have appeared in my mind fully formed, ready to be made, and others only emerge after hours of improvising with materials. There is no singular way to create, it is only from a deep connection with intuition that I 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, the feedback giving rise to more curiosity. In this stage we pick a point to begin work and set it all in motion.

In this stage inspiration becomes action, next is the first try.



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 zen 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. At the drawing table lines accumulate fast. There is no more need to theorize or worry.

Making the first mark on a page is a big step, now try moving forward without judging. :)



4 Catching a Likeness

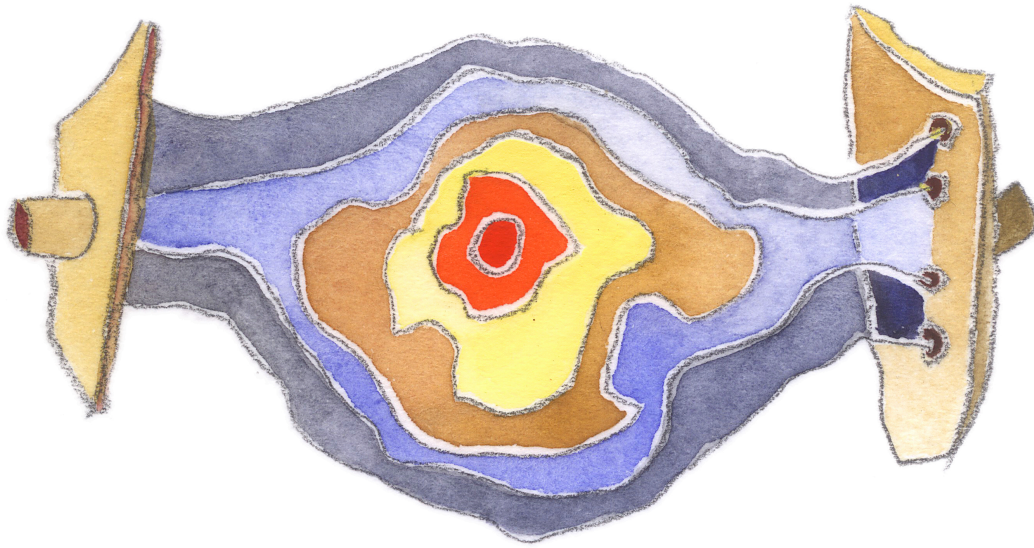
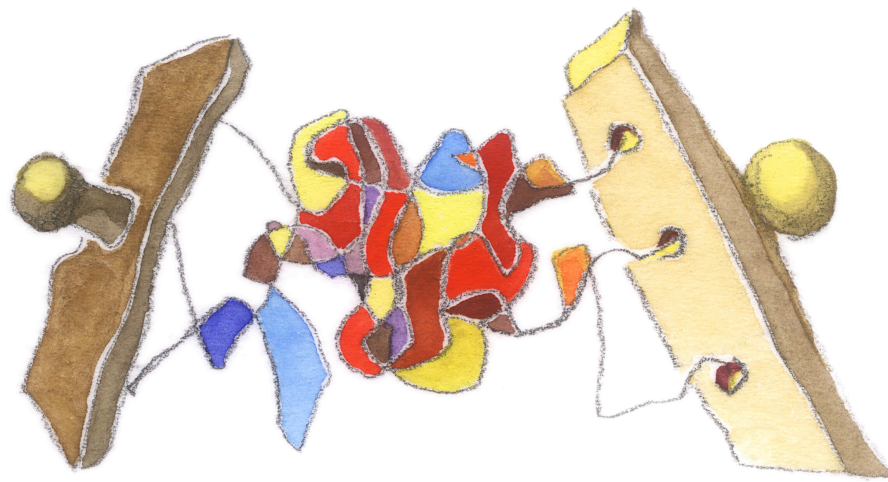
Seeing the thing that looks like the thing
that looks like nothing I've ever seen.
To get something working in the drawing
I move outside the ordinary.

The drawing moves past sketchy marks. In a single line we catch a likeness. Recognizing resemblances, I devote time to pursuing what I see and try to enhance the likeness. Desire catches fire and the battle is joined. This stage is the beginning of the struggle, I've seen enough to commit to the drawing 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.

Here is where the drawing begins, next we strive for consistency.



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 into comfortable patterns to get a satisfying result, our work is only getting established and we must continue to improvise with materials and techniques until we see style adapting to what each drawing needs. At this level, the tightrope walkers hone their balance. The drawings are allowed to arise 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.

Fun but focused work, perfect practice follows.



6 Riding the creative flow

Taking ideas to their limits

dancing the dance

in a Rococo rodeo

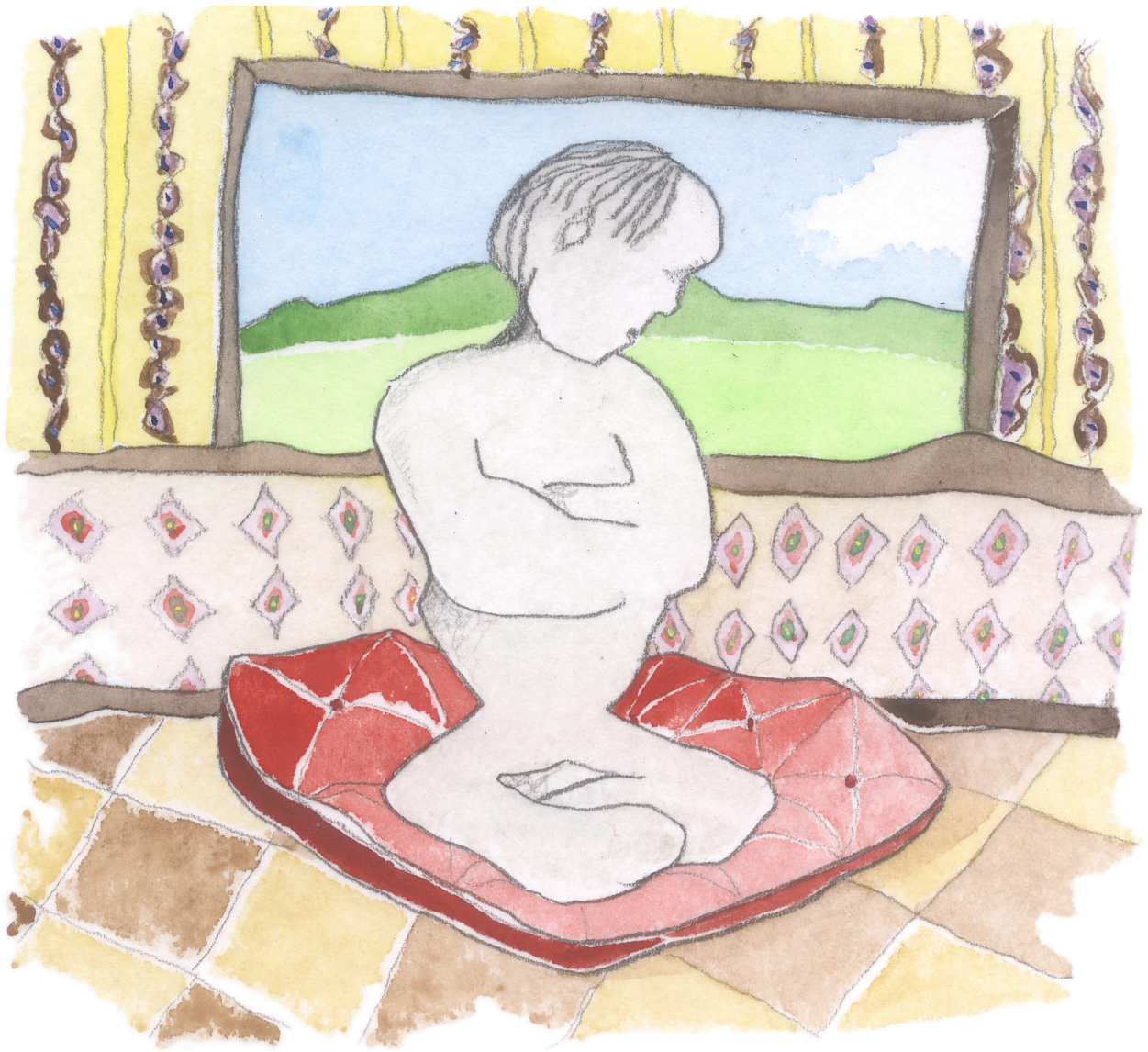
ba-dop ba-dop ba-dop ba-da whoo

These are timeless moments of ‘just drawing’. Art happens all by itself. Guided intuitively by experience and the excitement of realization, we are no longer blocking our own way. Each confident line and balanced color field adds energy to the growing image. Success and failure don’t come into play when we are experimenting at this level. Immediate judgement gives way to trust and watching what appears.

The Zen image of the sixth stage depicts a boy playing a flute riding comfortably astride a tamed ox. By this stage, 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 we are gaining from the practice outweighs the effort and doubt.

It is interesting to note the close crossover in this stage of the creative and contemplative paths. 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 is employed as a metaphor for deep connection to the source. Mindful creativity is the goal. 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.

This feels like the goal, why would I give this up? Next you get to keep all this and...



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? 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, pay attention to the disappearance of one particular sensation. Start by looking at the drawing you are making and see if you want to change anything. Does some small part still need fixing up or finishing? Continue to work on the drawing until you note that the feeling of needing to change it is gone. We should try to distinguish this sense of a completed drawing from other inner dialogs that may tell us the work is done because we are tired, or done because we so strongly desire completion that anything is good enough, or done because we fear continuing may 'ruin' it.

The drawing will not end all at once. Notice that the length of time you spend making marks starts to give way to longer amounts of time spent looking at the work. The drawing may look done when we are sitting but not when we stand up or return to the room. Sometimes I see a drawing sitting on the table for weeks and suddenly know how to finish it.

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 things ending. Being comfortable with 'gone', we gain the skills to observe the ending of one stage of the ox drawings and the beginning of 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, we feel familiar with just being. Maybe we never left home?

If making expands into seeing the things being made, then who is seeing them?



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

With our attention 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 suggest themselves and soon we are curious to hear what others think.

Knowing the drawing is done allows us to enjoy the making



9 Sitting at the source

Seeing the path in perspective,
Hearing echoes from the journey,
Sitting in an open landscape
Familiar surroundings are refreshed

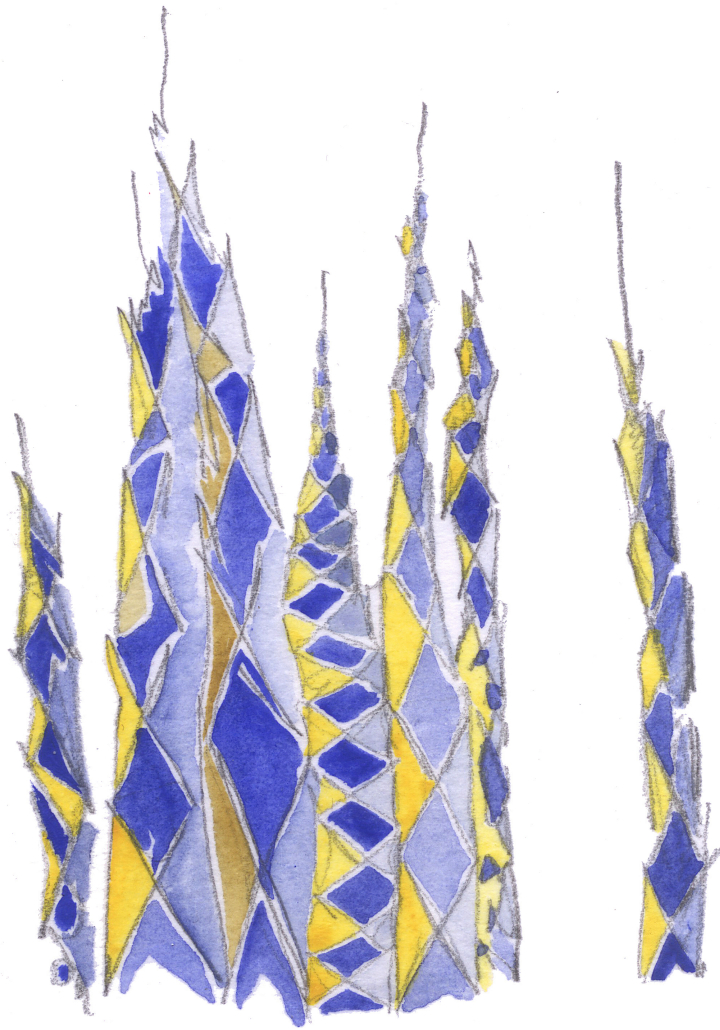
In one scene of Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, the actor Peter Falk, cast as himself, makes a speech to address the concerns of the angelic entity he senses nearby. Falk extolls the virtues of being present in the world, the pleasures of being physically equipped to sense the world.

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 something. 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 an 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."

The best part of creative contemplation is that after the meditation, you've got a drawing!



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 mark making and introspection, it is time to take our drawing and show it to the world. The last ox herding picture is an experienced monk entering a public market and offering wisdom. Artists may consider showing their work as the last step 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 and I was focused on the rewards - fame and fortune. After making thousands of artworks over many years, small sketches to big sculptures, the gallery and museum shows stopped feeling like the goals, seeking money and praise seemed less important. I had heard ‘the journey is the goal’ but it was never real until I had enough experience to look between the moments and see what persisted. My attention shifted to the images and ideas that emerged from the practice, the larger themes, the protected emotions that take time to open. Making, showing, letting go, and making again allow resonant layers of meaning to appear as I discovered myself.

I look at my drawings with more and more layers of understanding and compassion. I think about all the ways I can read them. 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.

The market cycles while the nature of things is endlessly explored.