



Don't Eat the Billboard!

I have been in the habit of saying that the word for something is not its true reality, for the word confines our understanding of the limitless nature of true being. For example, when I say "chair" most of us visualize an apparatus for holding a seated person. We may imagine wooden chairs, overstuffed chairs, folding chairs or wicker chairs, but our minds respond similarly to the word "chair." We do not, however, know what it is to experience the chair until we sit in it. We can talk about chairs for hours, but it is very difficult to talk about what it is to sit in a chair, to experience directly its reality.

It is this inability of

words to completely capture experience that lies behind the familiar Buddhist understanding that the fullness of reality is found before or beyond or outside of words. Our practice is pointed toward experiencing reality directly rather than inferring it by talking about it. In our Zen tradition it was Bodhidharma to whom we attribute the famous saying:

*Without relying on words and writings,
A special transmission outside the scriptures;
Pointing directly to the human mind,
See your own nature and become Buddha.*

Ah, but in thinking that the REAL reality lies outside of words, we can make the fatal mistake of discarding words altogether, suggesting that they have no place in our understanding. We say, "The map is not the road." True, but does the map have no relation to the road? Does the word "chair" have no relation to the experience of

sitting in a chair?

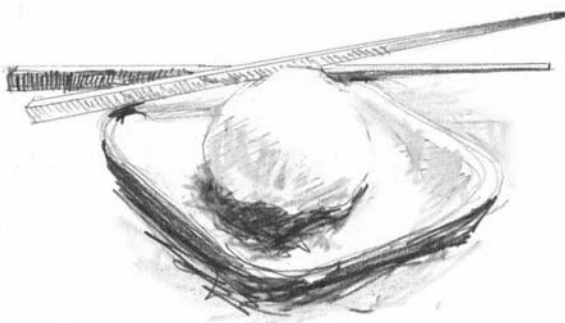
In his *Shôbôgenzô* fascicle *Gabyo*, Dôgen suggested a special relationship between the words that paint a picture of something and the experiential direct knowledge of that something. The title, *Gabyo*, translates as "A Picture of Rice Cake" and I was reminded of it recently while driving on an expressway in the Milwaukee area. Rearing up before me on the side of the road was an immense billboard on which was painted a larger than life and deliciously detailed picture of a huge and luscious chicken sandwich. The words scrolling above the sandwich were: "Don't Eat the Billboard!" and almost hidden in a lower corner were the golden arches and the word McDonald's.

It made me laugh, of course, but then I was reminded of the example Dôgen gives in *Gabyo* of Kyogen Chikan (Xiangyan Zhixian), a Chinese Zen master who died in 898. Chikan was brilliant and an ardent scholar, yet his

increasingly frantic search among sutras and writings seemed to bring him no nearer to realization. In intense frustration, he burned his books, exclaiming, "A picture of a rice cake can't satisfy hunger." He later was awakened when he heard the sound of a pebble striking bamboo.

For generations, this story was used to suggest that words and concepts served no useful purpose in our apprehension of reality. Words were spurned. Yet Dôgen, in *Gabyo*, says the following: "In general, those who understand that an expression like this exists to assert that abstract teaching is utterly useless, are making a great mistake. They have not received the authentic transmission of the ancestral founders' virtuous conduct, and they are blind to the Buddhist patriarchs' words."

And further, "The very moment of the present in which (picture-cake) is made into reality, using rice flour, is the moment in which the reality is



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realized and *the word is realized.*" (Emphasis mine.) Finally, "Truly, because the whole Universe and the whole of Dharma is the painting of a picture, human reality is realized from a picture, and Buddhist patriarchs are realized from a picture."

The process of realization is mutual. The painting represents a potential experience and lets us know what it looks like. It implies the experience in a way that helps us recognize it. The painting may not satisfy our hunger, but it indicates to us something that will. Dôgen is telling us how we make the Universe and the Dharma comprehensible by creating a mental view of it. Without a "painting" of a Buddha, how would we recognize one on the road?

Still, the painting may identify an experience,

but it is not the experience itself. The mistake we make with words and letters is that we can come to think that they alone are sufficient. If the Buddha we meet on the road is limited to the outline painted in our mind, he is an illusion. Rinzai rightly said, "If you meet a Buddha on the road, kill him!"

Dôgen adds something new to our understanding of the process when he asserts that the moment the cake is realized using rice flour is also the moment when the word is realized. The full realization of what we have pictured comes about when we bite into the cake. Paintings (the images and words in our minds) point to a reality to which they are essential as the means of recognition, but those words and letters themselves are fully realized only when the actual

thing, person or event is experienced.

So I have spoken in error when I have said that true reality lies outside of words. I should say, "full reality must include both words and experience." The description and the actuality fulfill and realize each other. The word points to and helps us recognize the thing and the experience of the thing illuminates the word. It is dangerous to depend solely upon one or the other, or to discard one in favor of the other. Book learning alone will not bring realization, but realization is understood through our ability to picture it. It was hearing a quote from The Diamond Sutra that sent Hui-neng, the

man who was to become the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, in search of the Dharma.

"Don't eat the billboard!" because "A picture of a rice cake can't satisfy hunger." But both the marketing director for McDonald's and Dôgen believe the image or word identify what we will bring to full realization when we eat the sandwich or taste the Dharma.

You can't eat the billboard, and merely reading the Diamond Sutra is not enough, but both billboard and sutra send us in search of the experience that completes the picture.

-Tonen O'Connor

Note: The quotes from Gabyo are from the Nishijima and Cross translation of Shôbôgenzô.



Jizos all dressed up at Hokyoji

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

August 2009

- 5 Introduction to Zen
- 8-15 Great Sky Sesshin at Hokyoji in Minnesota (MZC will remain open for practice)

September 2009

- 2 Introduction to Zen
- 5 Closed for Labor Day holiday

October 2009

- 7 Introduction to Zen
- 17 All-day sitting
- 18 All-day sitting

To see the 2009 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Happenings

Appreciation and thanks to Tojun Cobb, who kept the Zen Center open and alive during Tonen's absence, teaching Saturday classes and leading zazen. Also to **Jim Gother**, who made the trip down from Eagle River to care for the vegetable gardens that he'd helped plant in June. (Tonen has already enjoyed the kohlrabi.) And to **Luke Mueller**, who worked hard with Tonen to return the gardens to civilization after they had run wild during her absence in Japan and who installed some new Japanese style rock gardens in unexpected corners of our small property.

The Japan trip. June 8-18, Tonen, Tomon Marr, and Luke Mueller joined a group led by Taihaku Priest of Shao Shan in Vermont, for ten days of ango practice at Hokyoji Monastery in Fukui prefecture, Japan. Abbot Shinkai Tanaka Roshi and the resident monks were exceedingly kind and a rich practice included zazen, daily services, work practice, the *ryaku fusatsu* repentance and renewal ceremony, *takahatsu*

(begging rounds), a visit to the high rock on which Jakuen, Dôgen's disciple and founder of Hokyji, spent years in zazen, meals with *oryoki*, meetings with the abbot and a visit to Eiheiji. Tomon returned to Albuquerque and her medical practice at the UNM hospital immediately following the Hokyoji practice, but Tonen and Luke visited Kyoto for a few days, including a visit to Kensho Miyamae. This visit was highlighted by a trip to Mt. Hiei where the site of the 14-year-old Dogen's ordination can be found deep the forest.

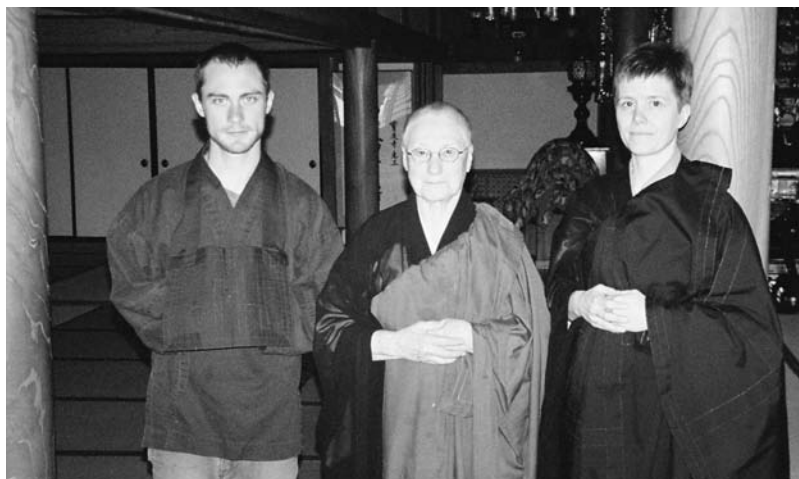
Tassajara, in the meantime, welcomed Lorraine McNamara-McGraw for a splendid six weeks of work practice that she found so fulfilling that she intends to return in August for more, followed by a 3-month monastic practice period.

On July 9, Tonen had the unexpected delight of joining a team including Mayor Barrett, a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi that opened the 25th anniversary international competition of ComedySportz in Milwaukee's Third Ward. It was enormous fun and the participants radiated a special kind of joy.

On July 19, Tonen was in Minneapolis as a guest teacher at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, delivering the Sunday morning dharma talk and conducting a three-hour afternoon workshop on Contemplating Compassion.

Jim Gother has joined Tomon and Tonen in the weekly long-distance study of the Zen Sourcebook, via email and conference call.

Robin Twohig, now residing in Oregon, was back to visit family and joined us for practice on several occasions. It was good to see her.



Luke, Tonen and Tomon at Hokyoji



Hokyoji temple

Milwaukee Zen Center

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Wed., Thurs., Fri.

6:15 am Zazen
(Zen sitting)
6:55 am Kinhin
(Zen walking)
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 end of practice

6:30 pm Zazen
7:10 pm Kinhin
7:20 pm Zazen

Saturday

6:15 am Zazen
6:55 am Kinhin
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 breakfast, oryoki
8:25 work period
9:15 break, coffee & tea
9:30 study class*
10:30 end of practice
*except on all-day sitting days

Introduction to Zen

An informal presentation on Buddhism and Zen, followed by instruction in zen sitting, tea and discussion.
6:30-8:30 p.m.—first Wednesday of each month.

Zen sitting instruction and private interview available by appointment. Call 963-0526.

MZC Contact Information

For messages: **Phone:** (414) 963-0526
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For information and
schedules: www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Useful Websites:

Soto Zen Buddhism: <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/>
Soto Zen in America: <http://www.szba.org>

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- Participating - any amount you can afford \$ _____

I would like to make a one-time contribution \$ _____

- Please add me to your mailing list
- Please remove me from your mailing list
- Please change my mailing address

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Long 10"		\$ 7.00	.39	\$
Shipping - \$3.00 first two boxes of incense and 50¢ per item thereafter.				\$

*Only Wis. residents need include applicable sales tax.

TOTAL \$ _____

Please make checks payable to Milwaukee Zen Center

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