

On ‘A Picture of a Rice Cake’

(Gabyō)

Translator’s Introduction: In this discourse, Dōgen begins by exploring, from a literal perspective, the saying by Meditation Master Kyōgen Chikan that “A picture of a rice cake cannot satisfy one’s hunger.” In other words, a mental construct is no substitute for the direct experience of That Which Is. Also, knowing that suffering exists does not allay suffering. He then subtly turns this perspective around and shows how what we call a direct experience is shaped by how our mind depicts things.

Because all Buddhas are enlightened, all worldly beings are enlightened. Even so, Buddhas and worldly beings are not of one and the same nature or of one and the same frame of mind. Nevertheless, at the time when both manifest their enlightenment, the enlightenment of one does not inhibit the enlightenment of others. At the time when both manifest their enlightenment, they will manifest it without the two coming in contact with each other’s manifesting it. This is the forthright Teaching that is characteristic of our Ancestors. So do not hold up some measure of sameness or difference as the gauge of someone’s capacity to train. This is why it is said, “When we just barely comprehend what a single thing is, we comprehend what myriad things are.” What is spoken of here as ‘comprehending what a single thing is’ does not mean that we deny the appearance that some thing previously had, nor does it mean that we make one thing stand against another, nor does it mean that we treat some thing as absolute and unique. Treating some thing as absolute and unique is synonymous with treating it as an obstruction and then being obstructed by it. When our comprehension is freed from the obstruction of ‘I comprehend’, one instance of comprehension is equivalent to myriad instances of comprehension. One instance of comprehension is equivalent to a single thought or thing, and the comprehension of one thought or thing is synonymous with the comprehension of myriad thoughts and things.



A Buddha of old once said, “A picture of a rice cake never satisfies hunger.” Patch-robed novices who are seeking for a Master with whom to explore this

saying, as well as bodhisattvas* and shravakas* who have come hither from all directions, are not all uniform in reputation and rank. And this includes those having the head of a celestial being or the face of a demon, all of whom come hither from all directions, their hides thick or thin. Although they may say that they are studying what Buddhas of the past and present have said, they are actually spending their lives living under some tree or in a hermit's thatched hut. As a consequence, when they are at the point of passing on the traditions of our monastic family, some may refer to this statement about a rice cake by saying, "He said what He did because engaging in the study of the Scriptures and commentaries will not instill true wisdom." And there are others who may say, "He spoke this way because He was trying to say that studying the Scriptural texts on the three provisional vehicles* and the one True Vehicle* is, moreover, not the path to enlightenment." In both instances, this is their engaging in judgmental thinking.

Speaking more broadly, those who assert that provisional Teachings are completely useless are greatly mistaken. They have not had the meritorious behavior of Ancestors in our tradition genuinely Transmitted to them, so they are in the dark about the sayings of Buddhas and Ancestors. Since they have not clarified what this one saying is about, who could affirm that they had thoroughly explored the sayings of other Buddhas?

For instance, the saying "A picture of a rice cake never satisfies hunger" is like the saying from the *Āgama Scripture*, "Refrain from all evil whatsoever, and uphold and practice all that is good."¹ And it is like Daikan Enō's query, "What is It that has come about like this?" And it is like Tōzan Ryōkai's statement, "I am always eager here in this place." For the time being, you need to explore these statements in a similar manner through your training.

Folks who have encountered the expression 'a picture of a rice cake' are few, and none of them have fully delved into what it means. How do I know this? In my testing one or two smelly skin bags* in the past, they had reached neither the level of certainty nor even the level of uncertainty: they simply seemed indifferent, as if they were refusing to lend an ear to some neighbor's chitchat. You need to realize that what is called 'a picture of a rice cake' includes the appearance of what is born of "father" and "mother", as well as the appearance of what has not yet been born

* See *Glossary*.

1. That is, the Precepts (refraining from evil, etc.) will alleviate suffering (hunger), but only so long as one is living by them and not just mouthing them.

of “father” and “mother”.² At the very moment when a rice cake is actually made by using rice or wheat flour, without doubt, it is the moment when the reality of it manifests and the term for it is fulfilled. Do not explore through your training that a picture of a rice cake is something as trifling as our perception of the comings and goings of things. The ‘colors’ we use in ‘painting a rice cake’ will find their equivalents in the colors we use in painting a landscape. That is, in painting a landscape we use cerulean blue and earthen red pigments, and in painting a picture of a rice cake we use rice and wheat flour. Since, in both cases, the projects and the planning are equivalent, the materials we are using are also equivalent.

As a consequence, ‘a picture of a rice cake’ may refer to such things as a rice dumpling, a bean cake, a cake of tofu, a baked wheat cake, a fried rice cake—all of which arise from a picture we have drawn in our minds. You need to recognize that there are such things as pictures, cakes, and thoughts and things. Therefore, the cakes that are appearing in the here and now are all together ‘pictures of rice cakes’. Should we seek for ‘a picture of a rice cake’ apart from this, ultimately we will never encounter it, for such a thing has never been thought up. Although a picture of a rice cake manifests at some one time, it does not manifest at some other time. Nevertheless, it lacks the characteristics of being old or young, and it leaves no traces of its coming and going. At the same time, nations and lands as ‘pictured cakes’ come forth and materialize here and now.

In the phrase ‘will never satisfy hunger’, ‘hunger’ does not refer to something that is under the sway of the twenty-four hours of a day. And, at the same time, when one encounters a picture of a rice cake, it is not some convenient thing, for even were we to sample a picture of a rice cake, ultimately it would fail to satisfy our hunger. There is no rice cake that depends on our being hungry. And because there is no rice cake that depends on there being rice cakes, the vigorous way of living fails to be transmitted, and the traditional ways of training are not passed on. Hunger is a monk’s traveling staff.* Whether borne horizontally or vertically, it undergoes thousands of changes and myriad transformations. A rice cake is also one manifestation of body and mind, be it blue, yellow, red, or white, or long, short, square, or round.

Now, when we paint a picture of a landscape, we use cerulean blue, verdant green, and earthen red colors to depict awesome cliffs and strangely shaped rocks,

2. Not yet born of “father” and “mother” refers to the time before duality arises, whereas what is born of “father” and “mother” refers to the arising of dualistic thinking.

as well as making use of the seven treasures and the four treasures.³ Managing the painting of a rice cake is also like this. When painting a human, we make use of the four elements* and the five skandhas;* when painting the Buddha, we not only make use of a clod of earth or mud, we also make use of His thirty-three auspicious characteristics, of a blade of grass, and of innumerable kalpas* of training and practice. Because depicting the Buddha in a scroll painting has always been like this, all Buddhas are depicted Buddhas and all depicted Buddhas are Buddhas. We need to investigate what a painted Buddha is and what a painted rice cake is. We need to explore in detail and with the utmost effort what a black turtle of stone is and what a monk's traveling staff of iron is, what a physical thing is and what a mental thing is. When we make such an effort, life and death, as well as coming and going, are simply drawings of a picture, as is, in a word, supreme enlightenment. In sum, neither the Dharma realms nor empty space are other than painted images.



A Buddha of old once said in verse:

*When I finally realized the Way,
The white snow, which had blanketed all in a
thousand layers, departed
And, in my making a picture of this,
Blue-tinged mountains emerged on scroll after scroll.*

This is talk about the great realization. It is His way of expressing that His having done His utmost to practice the Way had come to full fruition. As a consequence, at the very moment of His having realized the Way, He has created a picture, wherein He calls blue-tinged mountains and white snow 'scroll upon scroll'. Notwithstanding that, there is not a movement or a moment of stillness that is not part of His making a picture. Our own efforts to do our utmost at the present time are simply obtained from our own pictures. The ten epithets of the Buddha and the

3. In a mundane sense, 'the seven treasures' refers to various precious and semi-precious stones, as well to the seven treasures of a universal monarch, whereas 'the four treasures' refers to the four basic tools of a painter, namely, brush, ink, inkstone, and paper. On a spiritual level, 'the seven treasures' refers to the seven types of jewel trees that are to be found in the Pure Land, whereas 'the four treasures' refers to four divisions of the Scriptures: the Buddha's Teachings for all (the *Sutras*), His instructions for monastics (the *Vinaya*), the commentaries on the Buddha's Teachings (the *Shastras*), and the prayer-like invocations (the *Dharanis*).

three insights are 'scroll paintings'.⁴ The five spiritual agents, the five spiritual powers, the seven characteristics of enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path comprise 'scroll paintings'.⁵ Were you to say that such pictures are not real, then all thoughts and things are also unreal. If thoughts and things are not real, then the Buddha Dharma is unreal. If the Buddha Dharma is real, then it follows that a picture of a rice cake must be real as well.



Ummon Bun'en was once asked by a monk, "What would you call talk that goes beyond 'Buddha' and transcends 'Ancestor?'"

The Master replied, "A rice dumpling."⁶

We need to take our time to investigate this saying of his. Once a 'rice dumpling' has been brought into existence, there will be an ancestral Master who will speak out about "talk that goes beyond 'Buddha' and transcends 'Ancestor.'" And there are the 'trainees of iron will' who may not listen to him.⁷ And there are novices who will listen because the Master has brought forth an expression of Dharma.

Now, Ummon's displaying the Matter* and hitting the bull's-eye by saying "a rice dumpling" are, to be sure, a couple of slices of a painted rice cake. And they

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4. The ten epithets of the Buddha are 'The One Who Comes Thus', 'The One Worthy of Respect', 'The Self-enlightened One', 'The One of Perfect Conduct', 'The One Who is Well-gone', 'The Knower of the World', 'The Unsurpassed One', 'The Supreme Trainer of Those Who Can be Trained', 'The Teacher of Gods and Humans', and 'The Awakened One Who is the Refuge of the World'. The three insights are the recognition of impermanence, the recognition of no fixed, unchanging self, and the recognition of suffering.
 5. The five spiritual agents are trust, zeal, reflection, contemplation, and wise discernment. The five spiritual powers destroy doubt by trust, negligence by zeal, falsity by reflection, confused or wandering thoughts by contemplation, and all illusions and delusions by wise discernment. The seven characteristics of enlightenment are being able to distinguish the true from the false, being undeflected from one's training and practice, being joyful, being rid of heaviness of mind, being at ease, being able to keep the mind focused, and not being thrown off by whatever arises.
 6. The term 'a rice dumpling' is being used in Dōgen's discussion as a metaphor for a question that the intellect 'cooks up' to chat about.
 7. Here, 'trainees of iron will' refers to those senior monks who hear the Dharma being voiced by a Master but have ceased to listen.

contain talk about going beyond 'Buddha' and transcending 'Ancestor', and they contain a pathway for entering Buddhahood or for entering demonhood.⁸



My former Master once said, "Tall bamboo and plantain enter into the making of a picture."⁹ This expression is one by which those who have gone beyond long and short have explored 'making a picture' through their training.

'Tall bamboo' is the Chinese name for what we in Japan call 'long-stemmed bamboo'. Although people say that bamboo is the result of an interplay of yin and yang, it is we who are setting 'yin and yang' in motion. Even so, there is the time of a tall bamboo, but that time cannot be measured in terms of yin and yang.¹⁰ Even though great saintly ones may catch a glimpse of yin and yang, they cannot fathom what yin and yang really are. Because yin and yang together constitute the impartiality of thoughts and things, the impartiality of weights and measures, and the impartiality of words and ways, it is something beyond the yin and yang that the minds and eyes of non-Buddhists and those of the two Lesser Courses* depend on. It is the yin and yang of tall bamboo; it is the reckoning of the stages in the life of a tall bamboo; it is the world of tall bamboos. The Buddhas in all ten directions exist as the household of tall bamboos. You need to realize that the cosmos with its heavens and earths is the roots, stems, branches, and leaves of a tall bamboo. Therefore, it causes the cosmos with its heavens and earths to endure, and it causes Mount Sumeru within the Great Ocean, along with the whole universe in all ten directions, to have substantiality, and it causes a Master's traveling staff and lacquered bamboo bow to be both complete and not complete.¹¹

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8. That is, Ummon's reply is fine as far as it goes, but if the disciple remains attached to concepts like 'Buddha' or 'Ancestor' or 'transcendence', then he has entered the path to demonhood rather than the one to Buddhahood, where all such concepts are dropped off.
 9. Bamboo and plantain have long been used as subjects for both Chinese and Japanese paintings. Both have also been used as metaphors and carry various meanings. On the basis of the present quotation by Dōgen's Master, Tendō Nyojō, as well as Dōgen's discussion of it, bamboo is descriptive of the Master and plantain is descriptive of the trainee.
 10. That is, the life of a Master cannot be measured by applying mundane, dualistic measures such as yin and yang.
 11. The lacquered bamboo bow was entwined with a wisteria vine and was sometimes used by Zen Masters ceremonially in pointing to the Master-disciple relationship.

Plantain has earth, water, fire, wind, and space, as well as mind, will, consciousness, and wisdom. These are its roots, stems, branches, and leaves, along with the brightness of its flowers and fruit. So, when the winds of autumn envelop it and tear it, there is not a single mote of dust that remains on it. It can doubtless be described as pure and clean, for there is no sinew or bone within its core, nor any glue or other sticky substance upon its form. Liberation is its goal. Further, since it is not clinging to immediacy, it is beyond discussion of such measures of time as minutes and seconds. Through this endeavor, earth, water, fire, and wind are brought to life, and mind, intent, consciousness, and wisdom are made to experience the Great Death. Thus, in this lineage of ours, we have habitually received the Precepts, employing spring and fall, winter and summer, as Their tools.

The present activities of tall bamboo and plantain are making a picture. Accordingly, those who may awaken upon hearing the sound of bamboo being struck will make a picture, whether they be dragons or garter snakes,¹² for they will not harbor any doubts about the sentimental concerns of the mundane or the saintly.

*That cane can be long, this way,
And this cane can be short, this way,
This cane can be long, this way,
And that cane can be short, this way.¹³*

Because these are all images in a picture, they are, of necessity, in accord with each other. When there are long pictures, short pictures will not be lacking. Clearly, you need to thoroughly explore this principle. Because the whole universe and all thoughts within it are the act of drawing a picture, every human thought and thing emerges from a picture, and Buddhas and Ancestors come forth from pictures as well. Thus, beyond the image of a rice cake there is no medicine to satisfy our hungers, beyond the image of hunger there is no mutual encountering among humans, and beyond the image of fulfillment there is no capability.

12. Here, 'dragons' refers to monks of marked spiritual achievement combined with singular intellectual prowess, whereas 'garter snakes' refers to monks whose abilities are less pronounced. In either case, both are quite capable of distinguishing between the genuine and the mundane in spiritual matters.

13. To paraphrase what this poem is pointing to, those of mundane thinking may discriminate among Masters, particularly on the basis of how long such a one has been functioning as a Master, but from a spiritual perspective, someone who is a Master is so because he or she is 'this way', that is, 'such a person', one who has fully realized the Truth.

In sum, to be satisfied with being hungry, to be satisfied with not being hungry, not to satisfy one's hunger, and not to satisfy one's not being hungry—all these would be impossible and inexpressible were it not for an image of hunger. You need to explore through your training that the concrete here and now at this very moment is a picture of a rice cake. When you explore the fundamental point of this through your body and mind, you will begin to master the meritorious function of ever so slightly setting things in motion and of your being set in motion by things. Prior to this meritorious function manifesting itself before your very eyes, your ability to learn the Way has not yet manifested fully. When you make this meritorious function fully manifest, you will fully realize just what a picture is.

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