



Ariya Martin, *Teeny Tower #1*, archival pigment print, 34x22", 2010

## **On Zen Master Dogen's "Gabyo" – "Painting of a Rice Cake" A Talk by Rafe Martin with photographic art by Ariya Martin**

*If you say a painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real. Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person. - Zen Master Dogen, "Painting of a Rice Cake," (Trans., Gary Snyder, Mountains and Rivers Without End.)*

*When [the Dharma] ...is internalized it is most naturally taught in the form of folk stories: the jataka tales in classical Buddhism, the koans in Zen. - Robert Aitken Roshi.*

Painted rice cakes, it's said, can't satisfy hunger. How could they? It would be like reading a menu and expecting *that* to nourish us – this is how one traditional Zen view puts it. To be satisfied, we're told, we have to sit down and eat. To satisfy our real existential hunger, we have to sit down and actually *practice*. We've got to eat a real meal, bite into, chew and swallow a real rice cake. But Dogen brilliantly states, "There is no remedy for satisfying our hunger other than a painted rice cake."

No remedy for satisfying our deep hunger other than a painted rice cake? A painting of a rice cake is going to do the job – is actually the only thing that can?

Hmmm. So, is it that without illusion, imagination, dreams we can't be whole, can't fulfill the potential of our realization of this very moment? Without stories of previous exertions, without temples, teachers, thangkas, painted and carved Buddhas, altars, Centers, Shakespeare, zendos, Beethoven, Blake, Gandhi, Dogen, Mary Oliver, Gary Snyder, Martin Luther King, Tarzan, Ryokan, Rembrandt, Rothko, Hakuin, Hamlet, Gandalf, Frodo, mothers, fathers – who would we be? How would we proceed?

Dogen goes on to say in "Gabyo" that the idea of ourselves as either unenlightened or enlightened is itself a painting built of the five skandhas.

Likewise the rooted idea of self and other is such a painting. Buddhas themselves are paintings created with clay shrines, a blade of grass, limitless aspiration, the thirty-two marks, and countless kalpas of assiduous practice effort.

If this is so, then what kind of truth would we seek, what kind of truth could we actualize that is *not* a painting?

How would we become whole, that is, be satisfied, without a painting of a rice cake?

For it is out of the imagination that we create our real lives. Athletes know this better than scholars. If you want to swim better, visualize yourself in the pool, the water flowing smoothly past, the chiming, churning sound of that flow, the kick of your legs, the perfect effortless stroke. What happens in the imagination affects us, even makes us who we are. As Yeats says, "In dreams begin responsibilities." Stories, paintings, art itself is a tool that our ancestors worldwide passed down to us, an impressive technology, if you will, to refine the inner life, to improve our dreaming. To paint a picture.

This goes against the grain of a certain contemporary view that Buddhism, especially Zen, is not about dreams and imaginings, but rather about "reality" and "truth." The salvation Buddhist practice offers is, in this view, freedom from all such old-timey "fluff." I have even encountered some Zen practitioners who hold that imagination is the furthest thing from Buddhism, and, indeed, useless to its practice.

But we could just as well assert the opposite — that Buddhism, Zen included, is a great engine of wish and dream. In fact, the Bodhisattva ideal, the core of Mahayana Buddhism of which Zen is one aspect, might be said to depend almost entirely upon the power of Imagination itself. To vow to save all beings one must not simply imagine, but one must imagine bravely, totally, immensely, and deeply. Why commit oneself to a small dream, tediously emptying a vast ocean by the teaspoonful, when a great dream can encompass everything, even Truth itself, and swallow up the entire universe in a single gulp?

Of course, "imagination," like "myth," can for us, today, summon quite opposing connotations. The popular meaning of myth, like imagination, is that it is something "false." But myth can also mean something so true it cannot be put into one final linguistic or imagistic form. It underlies all forms. It is a story truer than words can say.



Ariya Martin, *Teeny Tower # 2*, archival pigment print, 34x22", 2010

As for imagination, it need not mean fantasy, reflection, daydreams, thoughts, insights, or the stream of internal vision and thought, where we are isolated, withdrawn, and separated from whatever is right before us: *that* teacup; *this* bug. That damned leaky faucet. It can just as authentically mean *Imagination*, in the sense of infinite creative potential, the realm we might enter in meditation (zazen) when body and mind fall away; emptiness that is neither static nor dull, but free (empty) of all limitation; that is, a realm of infinitely creative potential, the realm out of which we dream/create our own unique daily, never-to-be-repeated, moment-by-moment, breath-by-breath, thought form-by-thought form, lives. It is where the highest we can imagine is the same as what IS, the state one might experience in watching the night dances at Zuni Pueblo where plants, birds, thoughts, galaxies, and stars enter the plaza as living, dancing beings. "There is a dream dreaming us," is a Bushmen saying pointing to this realm. It is the Empty realm of Reality. Blake says, "The imagination is not a State: it is the Human existence itself." And what is that? It is simply, "To see a world in a grain of sand,/ And a heaven in a wild flower, /Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,/ And eternity in an hour." (W. Blake, "Auguries of Innocence")

So, what we most usually term "reality" is, as it turns out, simply another dream, an *imagining* and a somewhat limited one at that. In the end, reality and imagination, Mind and stories cannot be separated. Painted cakes do feed our hunger. Not only are they not two, they are not even one: "In other words, myth is reality and reality myth. Dogen did not believe . . . in a dualism between reality and myth . . . rather his purport was to clarify, purify, and reinforce myth — that is, Buddha-nature — in order to see and touch reality as it was." (Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dogen: Mystical Realist*)

Again, to repeat Dogen himself:

If you say the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dharma is not real. Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person.

One of the central koans (literally "public record") in the venerable *Mumonkan* (*Gateless Gate* or *Gateless Barrier*) collection of koans and commentaries by the early thirteenth century Chinese Zen Master Mumon

(Wu-men) is its second case, that of "Hyakujo's (Pai-chang's) Fox." The case itself is essentially a folktale about karma and essential nature in which a head priest is reborn 500 lifetimes as a fox. Wu-men's pithy comment on the case ends, "If you have the eye to see through this you will appreciate how the former head of the monastery enjoyed his five hundred happy blessed lives as a fox."

Here Mumon might be making a sly reference to jataka tales – stories of the Buddha's former births, often in animal form. In the jataka tradition, the Buddha himself lives (essentially) five hundred past lives, before stepping forward and making his final, total effort to embody the Way, thereby becoming Shakyamuni, the Buddha of our own historic period. Mumon's reference touches an interesting and classic point – were any of those 500 previous lives any less "Buddha"? The Zen question here is – are any of our lives now?

The voice of a mythic, deeply imaginative Zen runs like quicksilver through the koans, turning back and forth on fundamental points of karma and essential nature. And behind that, lie pointers to the Buddha's past lives as brought to life through the Dharma folklore of the jatakas, little paintings, snapshots of moments on the Way, all part of the traditional context of Buddhist practice and aspiration. They show the Buddha painting his own picture of Buddha, an enso portrait, with the brush and ink of countless kalpas of sustained and dedicated practice.



Ariya Martin, *Teeny Tower # 3*, archival pigment print, 34x22", 2010

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In Ariya Martin's *Teeny Towers* one surface meets another in a clambering balancing act of daily aspirations. Containers at a modest bathroom sink - familiar to our hands in weight and shape and barcoded - summon grand triumphs in small daily actions. Intimate, domestic spaces are the scene of our own placing, where we often contemplate our actions in more administered spaces. Here, the symbolic imagination has been invited into the measured placement of one thing atop another in the midst of precarious life.

Ariya Martin is the daughter of Rafe Martin, a nice review of these photographs can be found at her website [here](#). Martin received her MFA in imaging arts-fine art photography from Rochester Institute of technology. She moved to New Orleans in 2006 to put her photography skills to use as instructor and co-director of The New Orleans Kid Camera Project (a project of One Bird), the non-profit organization she co-founded. For the past two years she has been teaching photography as adjunct faculty at University of New Orleans, where she currently is the [Artist in Residence](#).

Rafe Martin is an award winning, internationally known author and storyteller whose work has been featured in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *USA Today*. He has been a featured teller at the National Storytelling Festival, the International Storytelling Center, and the Joseph Campbell Festival of Myth and Story among many others, and is a recipient of the prestigious Empire State Award. He was Roshi Philip Kapleau's chosen editor for his own final books, and is also a fully ordained lay Zen practitioner, with many years of Zen practice and study. Among his many books are *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends, and Jataka Tales*. *The Banyan Deer: A Parable of Courage and Compassion*, and available on September 28th, [Endless Path: Awakening Within the Buddhist Imagination – Zen Practice, Daily Life, and the Jataka Tales](#).

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