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## *A painting of a rice cake*

WHEN ZEN MASTER KYOGEN became a monk, his teacher asked him to say something about himself before his parents were born. He couldn't answer this question.

It is said he contemplated this question day after day for years, until, finally, he found the answer. He said, "Painting a rice cake doesn't satisfy hunger."

This saying is usually misunderstood, or it is understood only in a very narrow sense. So Dogen Zenji wrote about it to help us understand what it really means.

If you want to make a rice cake, you have to use rice, fire, firewood—many things. The same is true of nature. If you want to paint a rice cake, you have to use paint, a brush, and a canvas. Again, it takes many things. The same applies to becoming a buddha. A buddha is nothing but a painting of a rice cake, because a buddha is produced by the arousal of Bodhi Mind, practice, Enlightenment, and Nirvana. According to tradition, there are many kinds of buddhas, but they all paint their lives by arousing the Bodhi Mind, practice, Enlightenment, and Nirvana.

The same applies to human life. Human beings are produced by the five aggregates of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness—the five skandhas. But when we

start to paint, many different kinds of pictures are produced—using our heredity, memories, emotions, and so on. So there are many kinds of human beings, but we all use the five aggregates to paint our lives.

But the real question is, How do we, as the painters of our lives, use our colors? Which colors do we choose? If we use the color called “this present moment,” we can paint our life with it, but it’s very narrow. If we use the colors of past and future, we can paint a broader picture of our life, which is a little better than just painting our life in the present only.

But still, if we paint just our life on the canvas, there is no warmth or compassion. We have disregarded others. So, naturally, the life we have painted for ourselves never settles down into peace and harmony. It’s not really alive. It’s cold and dead. It’s not the fluidity of human life spoken of by the bodhisattvas.

So, how should we use the colors of our lives—the five skandhas as well as our past, present, and future? They must be intimately connected with each other. This is what the Buddha did—he painted the past, present, and future as a circle, not as something linear or as something composed of separate things.

The Buddha painted his life by using the colors of Bodhi Mind, practice, Enlightenment, and Nirvana. We must use these colors in harmony, not as separate things. In fact, they can’t actually exist as separate things. Past, present, and future are never separate either. Within Bodhi Mind there is Nirvana; within Nirvana, Bodhi Mind can be found. This is the way the Buddha painted his life.

In this way, human life is nothing but the painting of a rice cake. And what is Buddhism? It, too, is nothing but the painting of a rice cake. The truth of human life is nothing but the painting of a rice cake, and Buddha’s teachings are nothing but the painting of human life.

Any time we try to explain life, it’s nothing but a painting. It’s just thought. Concepts. Utter abstractions. These things

will never satisfy our hunger. This is why human beings are always hungry. This hunger is pretty deep. It’s not the usual hunger that we experience through our senses. This hunger is very profound—it’s there before we’re conscious of it. This is what the buddhas paint; this is what they try to draw to our attention. Whether we want this hunger or not, we are already hungry. Beyond any sense of good or bad, we are always hungry.

This hunger is what the Buddha called *dukkha*—suffering that comes from the depths of human life. Even before we are conscious of it, beyond our likes and dislikes, suffering is always there. It is very quiet, yet very dynamic. Whether we meet with success or failure, we can never be rid of it.

To produce a masterpiece, a painter can never find satisfaction. No matter what the painter accomplishes, there is still a deep hunger that encourages him to continue to paint. He can never stop. Though people appreciate his accomplishments, which benefit many, he is never satisfied. He just continues to paint.

But, in living his life, he can discover the flow of his effort. What makes it possible for him to continue? His hunger—his very deep suffering. But though it is suffering, it is also great encouragement. It nurtures his sensitivity to colors and the rhythms of nature. So, in a sense, it is not really suffering, because within it there is the very strong encouragement to live, to understand, to see, and to hear.

We can’t escape hunger; we can’t escape suffering. It is a truth of human life. But if we can understand this hunger, if we can see how deep our suffering is, then we can discover total freedom. Total freedom is found in realizing that there is nothing to satisfy. And this realization is found in the flow of life itself.