

The Gateless Gate (TGG)

As translated by R. H. Blyth

Drawings by Mark T. Morse (mtm)

<http://www.gatelessgatestudio.com/about/>

About

The Gateless Gate is a personal pictorial reflection on the compilation of Zen cases referred to as the Mumonkan or Gateless Gate. In 2010, a series of events instigated this idea of completing a drawing for each of the Mumonkan's 48 stories. It was a process that led me through everything from pen and ink, to paper mache figures and Daruma decorated wooden totem poles. With those initial experiments and drawings completed, it is my intention to revisit each one as a weekly post on this website, offering another opportunity to consider their meaning and continue what has evolved into a meaningful ongoing education in art making.

The Gateless Gate was compiled in early 13th century China by Mumon Ekai and the stories remain a central theme to Zen training to this present day. For the purposes of my own efforts, I am making use of the translation and commentary by R.H. Blyth, from his book *Zen and Zen Classics*, Volume Four, Mumonkan. Although there are several other English translations available in print and online.

The stories of the Mumonkan are largely a mystery to me, especially in regards to the role they play in meditative inquiry. My drawings are for the most part literal caricatures of the stories with further assistance provided from a range of commentaries. Although enlightenment alludes me, the drawing process has provided a wonderful sense of familiarity to the stories as I have been able to put faces to these Zen exploits. The Mumonkan is a book filled with the joy and agony of many wayward and enlightened characters. I have found them to be a wonderful collection of entanglements that has only grown richer through the time spent envisioning them on paper. Of all its stories, the example of Zuigan in case 12 provided a playful potential for my own creative efforts. For if it is possible to call upon your own master, might it be possible to draw your own?

Case 12: Zuigan's Calling the Master

Every day Zuigan used to call to him self, "True self!" and would answer "Yes?" "Awake! Awake!" he would cry, and "Yes! Yes!" he would answer. "From now onwards, do not be despised by others, do not let them make a fool of you!" "No, I will not!"

Mumon's Commentary:

The master, Zuigan, himself sells and himself buys. He has a lot of puppets of gods and devils that he plays with. For what reason? Look and see! A calling one, an answering one, one that says "Wake up!" and one that will not be looked down on. But you must not stick to these appearances for that is your former mistake. And imitating others (e.g. Zuigan) is only the mental disguise of a fox.

Thank you
Mark T. Morse

Case 1



Joshu's Dog

A monk once asked Joshu, "Has a dog the Buddha-nature?" Joshu answered, "Mu!" (Mu is the negative symbol in Chinese, meaning 'No-thing' or 'Nay'.)

The Commentary

For the practical study of Zen, you must pass the barriers set up by the masters of Zen. The attainment of this mysterious illumination means cutting off the workings of the ordinary mind completely. If you have not done this and passed the barrier, you are a phantom among the undergrowth and weeds. Now what is this barrier? It is simply "Mu", the Barrier of the gate of Zen and this is why it is called "The Gateless Barrier of the Zen sect."

Those who have passed the barrier are able not only to have an intimate understanding of Joshu, but also of the whole historic line of Zen masters, to walk hand in hand with them, and to enter into the closest relation with them. You see everything with the same eye that they saw with, hear everything with the same ear. Is not this a blessed condition? Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier? Then concentrate your whole body, with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints, and eighty four thousand hair-holes, into this question; day and night, without ceasing, hold it before you. But do not take it as nothingness, nor as the relative "not", of "is" and "is not." It must be like a red-hot iron ball which you have gulped down and which you try to vomit, but cannot.

All the useless knowledge, all the wrong things you have learned up to the present, –throw them away! After a certain period of time, this striving will come to fruition naturally, in a state of internal and external unity. As with a dumb man who has a dream, you will know it for yourself, and yourself only. Suddenly your whole activity is put into motion and you can astonish the heavens above and shake the earth beneath. You

are just as if you had got hold of the great sword of Kan-u. You meet a Buddha? You kill him! A master of Zen? You kill him!

Though you stand on the brink of life and death, you have the Great Freedom. In the four modes of the six rebirths you are in a state of peace and truth. Once more, how are you to concentrate on this Mu? Every ounce of energy you have must be expended on it; and if you do not give up on the way, another torch of the law will be lighted.

The Verse

The dog! The Buddha-Nature!

The perfect manifestation, the command of truth.

If, for a moment, you fall into relativity,

You are a dead man!

Case 2



Hyakujo's Fox

Whenever Hyakujo delivered a sermon, a certain old man was always there listening to it together with the monks; when they left the hall, he left also. One day, however he remained behind, and Hyakujo said to him, "Who may you be?" The old man replied, "Yes; I am not a human being. In the distant past, in the time of kasho Buddha, I was head monk here. On one occasion a certain monk asked me whether an enlightened man could fall again under the chain of cause and effect, and I answered that he could not. Thus I have been reborn a fox. I now beg you to release me from this rebirth by causing a change of mind through your words." Then he asked Hyakujo, "Can an enlightened man fall again under the chain of cause and effect or not?" Hyakujo answered, "No one can set aside the law of cause and effect." The old man immediately became enlightened, and making his bows, he said, "I am now released from rebirth as a fox and my body will be found on the other side of the mountain. I wish to make a request to you. Please bury me as a dead monk." Hyakujo had the Karmadana, or deacon beat the clapper and informed the monks that after the midday meal there would be a funeral service for a dead monk. The monks thought this was odd, as all were in good health, nobody was in the hospital, and they wondered what the reason could be for this order. After they had eaten, Hyakujo led them to the foot of a rock on the farther side of the mountain, and with his staff poked the dead body of a fox and had it cremated.

In the evening Hyakujo ascended the rostrum in the hall and told the monks the whole story. Obaku thereupon asked the following question: "This old man made a mistake in his answer, and suffered reincarnation as a fox five hundred times, you say. But suppose every time he had answered he had not made a mistake what would of happened then?" Hyakujo replied, "Just come here to me, and I'll tell you the answer!" Obaku then went up to Hyakujo—and boxed his ears. Hyakujo, clapping his hands and laughing, exclaimed, "I thought the barbarian had a red beard, but there is another one with a red beard!"

The Commentary

"Not falling into the law of cause and effect" –for what reason falling into a fox-life? "Not setting aside the law of cause and effect" –for what reason being released from a fox-life? If in regard to this you have the

one (Buddha) eye, then you understand the former Hyakujo's (=the old man's) dramatic five hundred reincarnations that he received.

The Verse

Not falling, not darkening; –two faces, but one die.

Not darkening, not falling, –wrong! All wrong!

Case 3



Gutei's Finger

Whatever he was asked (concerning Zen) Gutei simply stuck up one finger. At one time he had an acolyte, whom a visitor asked, “What is the essential point of your master’s teaching?” The boy just stuck up one finger. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off his finger with a knife. As the boy ran out of the room screaming in pain, Gutei called to him. When he turned round his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. The boy suddenly became enlightened.

When Gutei was about to die, he said to the assembled monks, “I received this one-finger-Zen from Tenryu. I used it all my life, but did not exhaust it.” When he finished saying this, he entered into his eternal rest.

The Commentary

The origin of the enlightenment of Gutei and the boy is not in the finger itself. If you understand this, Tenryu Gutei, the boy, and you yourself are all run through with one skewer.

The Verse

Gutei made a fool of old Tenryu (or, Gutei and Tenryu made a fool of everybody).
The sharp blade has damaged the boy.
The Mountain-Spirit raised his hand and lo, without effort,
The thousand, myriad-piled mountain are split into two, Kasan (and Shuyo).

Case 4



Wakuan's No Beard

Wakuan's said, "Why has the Western Barbarian no beard?"

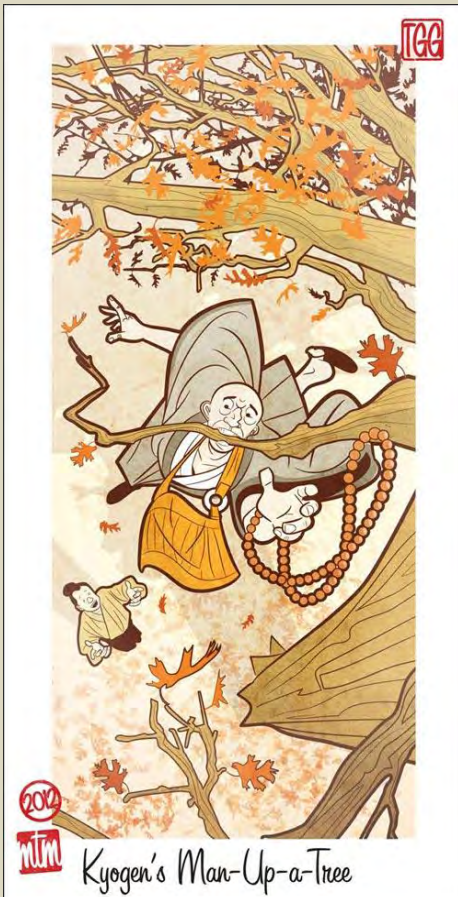
The Commentary

If you study Zen, you must really study it. If you become enlightened it must be the real enlightenment. If you once see the barbarian's real face intimately, then you have at last got "it". But when you explain what you saw, you have already fallen into relativity.

The Verse

Before a fool,
Do not expound your dream.
The beardless barbarian, —
It is adding obscurity to clarity!

Case 5



Kyogen's Man-Up-a-Tree

Kyogen said, "It's like a man (a monk) up in a tree, hanging from a branch with his mouth; his hands can't grasp a bough, his feet won't reach one. Under the tree there is another man, who asks him the meaning of Daruma's coming from the west. If he doesn't answer, he evades his duty. If he answers, he will lose his life. What should he do?"

The Commentary

Though your eloquence flows like a river, it is all of no avail. Even if you can explain the whole body of the Buddhist sutras, that is also useless. If you can answer the problem properly, you can kill the living, bring the dead back to life. But if you can't answer, you must ask Maitreya when he comes.

The Verse

Kyogen really has bad taste,
And spreads poison limitlessly.
He stops up the monks mouth,
And frantically they squeeze tears out from there dead eyes.

Case 6



The Buddha's Flower

Once when the World-Honoured One, in ancient times, was upon Mount Grdhrakuta, he held up a flower before the congregation of monks. At this time all were silent, but the Venerable Kasyapa only smiled. The World-Honoured One said, "I have the Eye of the True Law, the secret Essence of Nirvana, the Formless Form, the Mysterious Law-Gate. Without relying upon words and letters, beyond all teaching as a special transmission, I pass all this on to Mahakasyapa."

The Commentary

Golden-faced Kudon impudently forced the good people into depravity. Advertising sheep's heads, he sells dog-flesh, - but with some genius. However, supposing that at the time all the monks had laughed, how would the "all-including eye of the absolute truth" have been handed on? Or if Kasyapa had not smiled, how would it have been handed? If you say, it can (anyway) be handed on, that's the Golden-faced Old Huckster with his loud voice swindling at the town-gate. If you say it can't, why did Buddha say he had handed it on to Kasyapa?

The Verse

Holding up a flower,
The snake shows his tail.
Kasyapa smiles,
The monks don't know what to do.

Case 7



Joshu's Washing the Bowl

A monk said to Joshu, "I have entered this monastery. I beg you to teach me" Joshu asked. "Have you eaten your rice-gruel." "I have," replied the monk."Then", said Joshu, "go and wash your bowl(s)." The monk was enlightened.

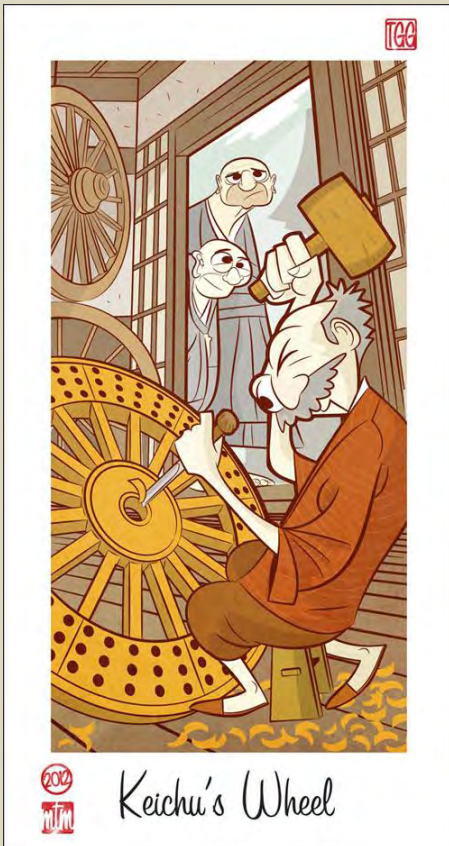
The Commentary

Joshu opened his mouth and showed his gallbladder, his heart, and his liver. If the monk didn't really grasp the truth, he mistook the bell for a pot.

The Verse

He made it all so clear,
It takes a long time to catch the point.
If you realize that it's foolish to look for fire with a fire
The meal won't take long to cook.

Case 8



Keichu's Wheel

Gettan said to a monk, “Keichu made a hundred carts. If we took off the wheels and removed the axle, what would then be obvious?”

The Commentary

To clarify this, one's eye will be like a shooting start, his response like a flash of lightning.

The Verse

Where the wheel of the mind-activity turns
Even a master doesn't know what to do about it.
It moves in all directions in heaven and earth,
And south and north and east and west.

Case 9



Daitso Chisho

A monk asked Seijo of Koyo and said, “Daitso Chisho Buddha did zazen for ten kaplas in a Meditation Hall, and could neither manifest the truth, nor enter the Buddha-Way. Why was this?” Seijo said, “Your question is a very appropriate one.” The monk persisted, “Why did he not attain Buddhahood by doing zazen in the Meditation Hall?” Seijo replied, “Because he didn’t.”

The Commentary

You may know the Old Indian, but you are not to analyse him psychologically. An ordinary man who really knows him is a sage, but a sage who has merely discursive knowledge of him is only an ordinary man.

The Verse

Rather than putting the body to rest, rest of heart!
If the mind is at peace, the body knows no grief.
But if both the mind and body are pacified, thoroughly, as one,
This is the life of perfect sainthood, where praise is meaningless.

Case 10



Sozan and Poor Seizei

A monk, named Seizei by name, said to Sozan, “I am a poor destitute monk. I beg you to bestow upon me the alms of salvation.” Sozan said, “*Acarya Seizei!” “Yes, Sir?” replied Seizei. Sozan said, “Someone has drunk three bowls of the wine of Haku of Seigen, but asserts that he has not yet moistened his lips.”

*Acarya means teacher, master, and is here a term of respect.

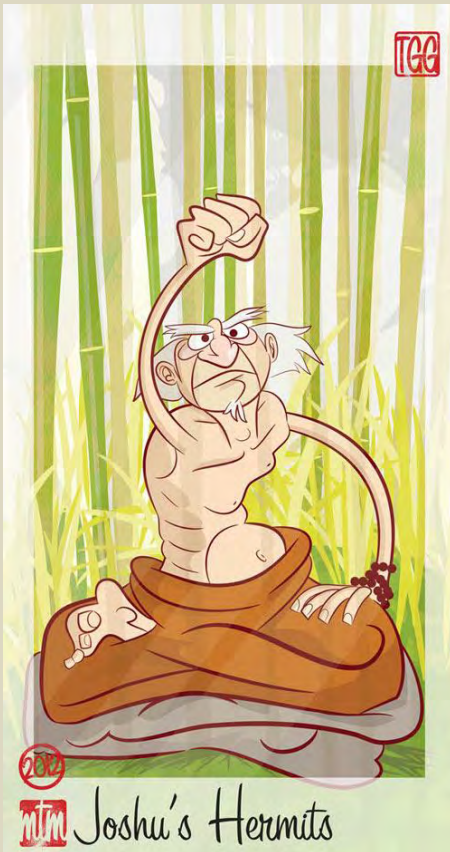
The Commentary

Seizei is obsequious, but what is his real state of mind? Sozan, with his Buddha-eye, sees into the recesses of it, and understands the visitor’s meaning. But however this may be so, just tell me, where and why does Acarya Seizei drink this wine?

The Verse

His poverty is like Hanzen’s;
His spirit like that of Kou.
Though he has no commercial system,
They are quarreling about riches.

Case 11



Joshu's Hermits

Joshu went to a hermit's and said, "Anything here? Anything here?" The hermit lifted up his fist. Joshu said, "The water is too shallow to anchor here," and went away. He went to another hermit's, and said "Anything here? Anything here?" The hermit lifted up his fist. Joshu said, "Freely you give, freely you take away. Freely you bestow life, freely you destroy," and made a profound bow.

The Commentary

Both stuck up there fist; why is one accepted, and the other rejected? Just say, where is the source of the confusion between the two? If, in regard to this you can speak a word of understanding, then you realize that Joshu's tongue has no bone in it. Now he raises up, now he dashes down, in perfect freedom. But though this is so, remember that the two hermits also saw through Joshu. Further, if you imagine that there was a comparison of superiority and inferiority to be made in regard to the two hermits, you have not an open eye. Neither have you an open eye if you suppose there is no deference of superiority and inferiority between the two hermits.

The Verse

His eye is a shooting star;
The movements of his soul are like lightning.
He is a death dealer,
A life-giving sword.

Case 12



Zuigan's Calling the Master

Every day Zuigan (Shi)gen used to call to himself, “True Self!” and would answer “Yes?” “Awake! Awake!” he would cry, and “Yes! Yes!” he would answer. “From now onwards, do not be despised by others, do not let them make a fool of you!” “No, I will not!”

The Commentary

The master, Zuigan, himself sells and himself buys. He has a lot of puppets of gods and devils that he plays with. For what reason? Look and see! A calling one, an answering one, one that says, “Wake up!” and one that will not be looked down. But you must not stick to [these appearances] for that is your former mistake. And imitating others [e.g. Zuigan] is only the mental disguise of a fox.

The Verse

Those in search of the Way do not realize the existence and true nature of the self;

This is because they recognize only the relative mind,

Which is the origin of our eternal transmigration;

Foolish people take it for the true original self.

Case 13



Tokusan's Bowl

One day Tokusan came towards the refectory from the Meditation Hall, carrying his bowls. Seppo called out to him, "Where are you off to with your bowls, when the bell has not rung and the drum has not been struck." Tokusan went at once back to his room. Seppo told this occurrence to Ganto, who remarked, "Tokusan though he is, he has no penetrated into the deepest truth, the last word of Zen." Hearing of this, Tokusan sent an acolyte to ask Ganto to come, and said to him, "Have you any criticism to make of me?" Ganto whispered his meaning to him. Saying nothing Tokusan took leave of him. The next day ascending the rostrum, Tokusan was different then before. Ganto, going towards the front of the Hall, clapping his hands and laughing, said, "What a happy thing! The old man has got the last word of Zen. From now onwards nobody will be able to take a rise out of him!"

The Commentary

As for what is called "The Last Word of Zen", neither Ganto nor Tokusan ever heard of such a thing. When you look into the matter, they're only a set of puppets.

The Verse

If you understand the first word of Zen
You understand the last;
But these two words
Are not one word.

Case 14



Nansen's Cat-Killing

Once, when the monks of the Western and Eastern Halls were quarrelling about a cat, Nansen, holding up the cat, said, "You monks! if any of you can speak a word of Zen I will spare the cat, otherwise I will kill it!" No one could answer, so Nansen killed it. In the evening, Joshu came back from somewhere, and Nansen told him what had happened. Joshu thereupon took off his shoe, put it on his head, and walked off. Nansen said, "If only you had been there, I could have saved the cat!"

The Commentary

Just say, what is the meaning of Joshu putting his shoe on his head? If you can express the meaning of his words and actions, they were not in vain, but if not, you are in danger.

The Verse

If Joshu had been there,
Everything would have been done the other way round.
He would have snatched away the Knife,
And Nansen would have begged for his life.

Case 15



Tozan's Stripes

Tozan came to learn from Ummon, and was asked by him “Where have you come from?” “From Sato,” he replied. “Where were you during the summer?” “I was at Hoji Temple in Konan Province.” “When did you leave there?” “On the twenty fifth of August.” Ummon burst out, “A beating is what you want!” The next day Tozan came and knelt before Ummon, and said, “Yesterday I was to be beaten by you. I did and said nothing I shouldn’t. What did I do wrong?” Ummon said, “You dirty big belly bag! What did you come from Kozei and Konan for?” Suddenly Tozan came to a realization.

The Commentary

If Ummon at that time, by giving him the fodder of the sect, had shown him that One Way of Living Activity, it would not of become extinct. All night long Tozan wallowed in the waves of the sea of Yes and No until he could get nowhere, and, when long-awaited dawn broke, again went to Ummon, and had his eyes opened by him, and was suddenly enlightened, but he was not a seasoned man yet. Now I ask all of you: Was Tozan’s being beaten right or wrong? If it was right, then everything in the universe should be beaten; if it was wrong, then Ummon was a swindler. If you understand this clearly, then you and Tozan breathe the same air.

The Verse

The lion has a round-about-way of teaching her cubs.
Intending to urge them on she kicks them away.
And they soon redress themselves and charge back.
Heedlessly he came back to Ummon but was checkmated;
The first arrow was only a scratch, but the second one went deep.

Case 16

Ummon's Seven Fold Robe

Ummon said, "The world is vast and wide; for what is it you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?"

The Commentary

In general, learning the way and grasping Zen means avoidance of attachments to sound and forms. Though through hearing a sound there may be realisation, or from seeing the form of an object the mind may be enlightened, nevertheless this is the ordinary way of things. Especially you Zen monks do not understand how to guide sound, use form, see clearly the value of each thing, each activity of the mind. But though this is so, just tell me! Does the sound come to the ear, or does the ear go to the sound? But when sound and silence are forgotten, are both forgotten, what can you say of this state? If you listen with your ear, it is hard to hear truly. But if you listen with your eye, then you begin to hear properly.

The Verse

If you are enlightened, all things are as though of one great family.

But if not, everything is separate and disconnected.

If you are not enlightened [it makes no difference anyway because] all things are as of one great family.

And if you are enlightened [this also makes no difference to reality, in which] every single thing is different from every other things.

Case 17



Echu's Three Calls

The National Teacher called the attendant three times, and three times he answered. The National Teacher said, "I thought I had transgressed against you, but it seems that you have transgressed against me."

The Commentary

The National teacher called three times. His tongue fell to the ground [from talking too much]. The attendant answered three times, sending out a corresponding glory. The National Teacher, getting old and lonely, pushed the cows head down to the grass. The attendant would have none of it; delicious food is not suitable for a man who is satiated. Just say, in what did the transgression consist? When the country is prosperous, rich children are too proud [to eat plain food].

The Verse

He must carry the hole-less iron cangue,
And his descendants too can have no peace or rest.
If you wish to support your religion and cause it to flourish
You must climb a mountain of swords with your bare feet.

Case 18



Tozan's Flax

A monk asked Tozan, “What is the Buddha?” He replied, “Three pounds of flax.”

The Commentary

Old Tozan's Zen is rather like a clam; when it just opens the two halves of the shell, you can see the liver and the intestines. But though this may be so, just say, where can we see Tozan?

The Verse

“Three pounds of flax,” -artlessly, spontaneously it comes out.
The words and the meaning are intimate, indivisibly so.
He who explains this and that, yes and no, the relative,
Is himself [only] a relative man.

Case 19



Nansen's Ordinary Mind

Joshu asked Nansen, "What is the way?" Nansen answered, "Your ordinary mind,-that is the way." Joshu said, "Does it go in any particular direction?" Nansen replied, "The more you seek after it, the more it runs away." Joshu: "Then how can you now it is the way?" Nansen: "The way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is illusion. Not knowing is lack of discrimination. When you get to this perplexed way, it is like the vastness of space, an unfathomable void, so how can it be this or that, yes or no?" Upon this Joshu came to a sudden realisation.

The Commentary

Joshu suddenly brought up the question to Nansen, who explained it, but the tile disintegrated, the ice dissolving, the drain is blocked up. Even though Joshu came to a realisation, he must delve into it another thirty years before he can understand it fully.

The Verse

The spring flowers, the moon in autumn,
The cool wind of summer, winters snow,
If your mind is not clouded by unnecessary things,
This is the happy day in human life.

Case 20



Shogen's Strong Man

Shogen said, “Why is it that a man of great strength cannot lift up his own leg?” [Or, “Why does an enlightened man not stand up for Zen?”] And again, “It is not with our tongue that we speak.”

The Commentary

It must be said that Shogen shows us his whole soul, but there is no one to receive it. If there should be anyone who can actually do so, let him come to me, Mumon, and be beaten with many blows. Why these blows? If it is wished to know true gold, see it in the midst of fire.

The Verse

Raising my foot to kick up the Scented Ocean,
Lowering my head I look down on the four Dhyana Heavens.
My body is so big there's nowhere to put it;
Please finish this verse yourself!

Case 21



Ummon's Shit-Stick

A monk asked Ummon, “What is the Buddha?” “It is a shit-wiping stick,” replied Ummon.

The Commentary

We must say that Ummon can't appreciate plain food. He's so busy he can't even scribble properly. He is disposed to support the sect with a shit-stick. Look at the outcome!

The Verse

Sudden flashes of lightning!
Sparks from iron striking flint!
A blink of the mind's eye,
And the legs are already walking in different directions.

Case 22



Kasho's Flag Pole

Anan asked Kasho, "The World-Honored One transmitted to you the surplice of golden cloth; did he transmit anything else to you? Kasho called him and said, "Anan!" "Yes?" said Anan. "Knock down the flag pole at the gate" said Kasho.

The Commentary

If you can give a "turning-word" in regard to all this, you will see the meeting at Mount Grdhrakuta still in session. If not, then however much you "struggle against the light" from the age of Vispasyin, you cannot even now gain the Essence.

The Verse

The question, how dull! The answer, how intimate!
How many people there are with a film over their eyes!
The elder brother calling, the younger brother answering, the family skeleton!
This is a spring that does not belong to Yin and Yang.

Case 23



Eno's Good & Evil

The 6th Patriarch was pursued by Monk Myo up to Daiyurei. The Patriarch, seeing Myo coming, laid the robe and the bowl on a rock, and said to him: "This robe represents the faith; is it to be fought for? I allow you to take them away." Myo tried to lift them up, but they were as heavy as a mountain; they would not budge. Hesitating and trembling, he said, "I came for the Doctrine, not for the robe. I beg you to teach your servant!" The Patriarch said, "Do not think, 'This is good!, This is bad!, At such a moment, what is the Original Self of Monk Myo?'" At this, Myo was all at once greatly enlightened; his whole body was covered with sweat. With tears flowing he made obeisance, and asked, "Beside the secret words and the secret meaning is there anything else, deeper still?" The Patriarch answered, "You have realised your True Self, and anything deeper belongs to you alone," Myo said, "When I was at Obai together with the other monks, I never realised what my true self was. Now I have received from you instruction. It is like a man drinking water himself, and knowing whether it is cold or warm. You are my master!" The Patriarch said, "We both have Obai for our teacher. Hold fast to what you have learned from him!"

The Commentary

The Sixth Patriarch should say that this is a state of emergency, needing grandmotherly kindness. It is like peeling a fresh lichi, removing the pips, and then putting it in your mouth for you. All you have to do is just to gulp it down.

The Verse

You describe it in vain, you picture it unavailingly;
Praising it is useless; stop trying to apperceive it!
There is nowhere to hide your true self;
When the universe is annihilated, this remains, indestructible.

Case 24



Fuketsu's Speech & Silence

A monk asked Fuketsu, "Both speech and silence transgress; how can we not do so?" Fuketsu said, "I often think of Konan in march; The partridge chirps among the scented flowers."

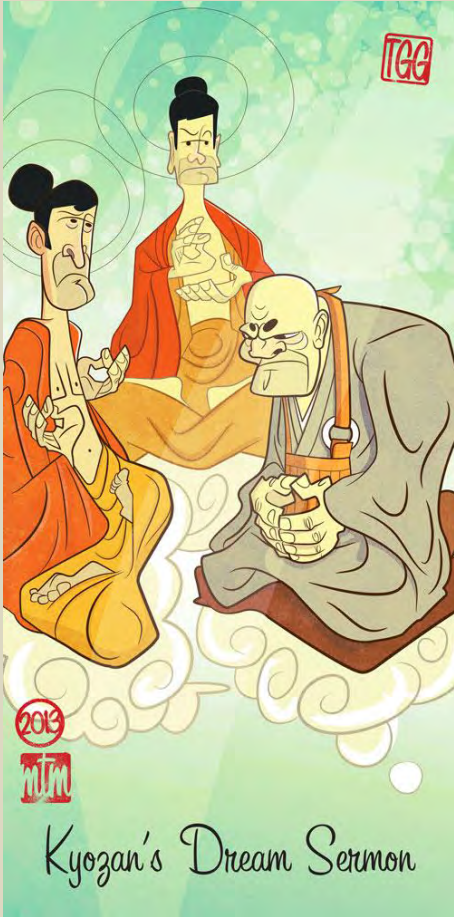
The Commentary

Fuketsu's activity of mind is like lightning. He has his road, and walks along it. But why does he not avoid relying upon the tongues of the ancients? If you are kind enough to express your view of the matter, there is a way out; leave all words and phrases behind, and say something!

The Verse

Fuketsu did not make his own fine sentence,
But though he did not explain, the answer is there.
If Fuketsu had gone on talking and chattering,
The monk would not have known what to do.

Case 25



Kyozan's Dream Sermon

Kyozan dreamed a dream. He thought he went to Maitreya's place, and sat down in the 3rd seat. A monk there struck with a gavel and said, "To- day, the sermon is to be given by the one in the 3rd seat" Kyozan stood up, struck with the gavel and said, "The truth of Makaen is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations. Hear the Truth!"

The Commentary

Now tell me, did Kyozan preach, or did he not? If he opens his mouth, he is lost; if he shuts it he is lost. If he neither opens it nor shuts it, he is a hundred and eight thousand miles away from reality.

The Verse

In broad daylight,
He expounds a dream, while yet a-dream.
Bogie of bogies,
He is just upsetting the whole congregation.

Case 26



Two Monks Blind-Rolling

Hogen of Seiryō went to the hall to speak to the monks before the midday meal. He pointed at the bamboo blinds. At this moment, two monks went and rolled them up. Hogen said, “One has it, the other hasn’t.”

The Commentary

Tell me, which one profited, which made a loss? If your eye is single, you will realise that Teacher Seiryō failed. Nevertheless, I am not making the mistake of dealing with profit and loss.

The Verse

When they are rolled up, the great sky is bright and clear,
But the great sky has no affinity with Zen.
To have nothing to do with the sky is better,
And never let the wind through.

Case 27



Nansen's No Mind, No Buddha

Nansen's No Mind, No Buddha

A monk asked Nansen. "Is there a truth which no one has taught?" Nansen replied, "There is." "What is this truth," said the monk, "which no one has so far taught?" Nansen answered, "It is not mind; it is not Buddha; it is not things."

The Commentary

Nansen was just asked a question, and,— at once used up all his treasure, decrepit old chap!

The Verse

Too kind, Nansen lost his value;
What an effect no-words has!
The blue ocean may change,
But Nansen has simply made everything more incomprehensible.

Case 28



Ryutan's Candle

Tokusan went one night to Ryutan to ask for his teaching. At last Ryutan said, "It is late; you had better go back." Tokusan made his bows, lifted the blind and went out. Seeing how dark it was outside, he came back in, and said, "It's dark out there" Ryutan lit a lantern and handed it to him. Tokusan was about to take it, when Ryutan blew it out. At this Tokusan was enlightened. He made obeisance. "What have you realised?" asked Ryutan. Tokusan replied, "From now on I will not doubt what you have said." The next day Ryutan ascended the rostrum and declared, "Among you there is a chap whose fangs are like the sword-tree! his mouth a blood-bowl. Strike him with a stick, he won't turn his head to look at you. Some day or other he will climb the highest of all peaks and establish my Way there." Tokusan then made a bonfire of his commentaries on the sutras in front of the Hall, and declared, "All the most profound teachings are like a single hair in vast space. The farthest extreme of human wisdom is a drop of water thrown into a deep ravine." Having burnt up all his notes he took his departure.

The Commentary

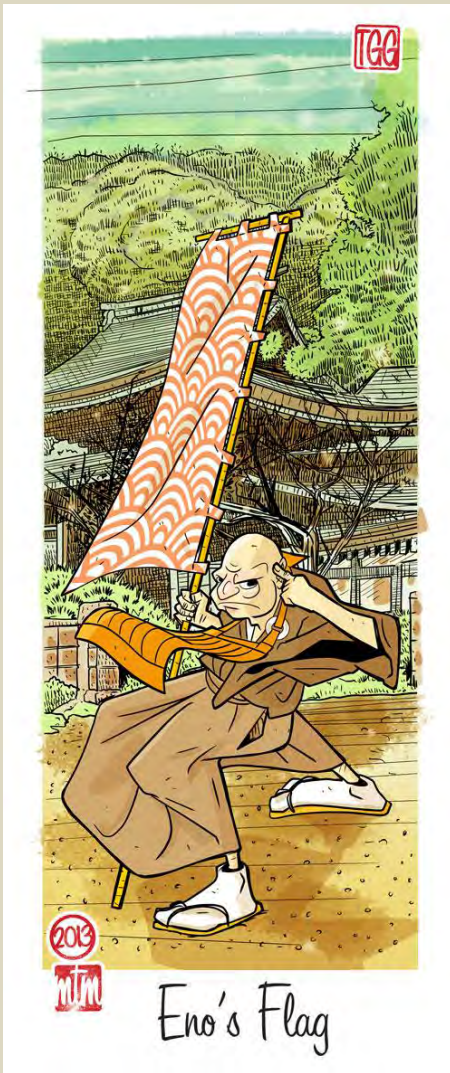
Before Tokusan passed the barrier [of his native place] his mind was eager, his mouth was anxious, with a purpose in his mind, he went south, to confute the doctrine of "A special transmission outside the sutras." When he got on the road to Reishu he asked an old woman to let him have something to "point his mind." The old woman said, "Your worship, what's all that writing you are carrying?" Tokusan said, "That's the manuscript of my notes and commentary on the Diamond Sutra!" The old woman said! "In that sutra it says, 'Dispositions of mind, or modes of thought, whether relating to the past, the present, or the future, are alike unreal and illusory. Which of these minds is your worship intending to point?'" That question was a poser for

Tokusan. Nevertheless, not giving up in despair to the old woman's words, he asked her! "Is there a Zen master near here?" "About five li away lives Ryutan" she replied. He arrived at Ryutan's quite deflated. It must be said that the former words and the latter words were inconsistent. Ryutan took pity on him quite shamelessly. Seeing that Tokusan had some fire of knowledge, Ryutan should have violently thrown muddy water over his head. Looking at the whole affair impartially, it was all just a farce.

The Verse

Rather than hearing the name, seeing the face is better;
Rather than seeing the face, hearing the name is better.
But however much you help the nostrils,—
Look what you've done to the eyes!

Case 29



Eno's Flag

The wind was flapping a temple flag, and two monks were having an argument about it. One said the flag was moving, the other that the wind was moving; and they could come to no agreement on the matter, however they argued back and forth. The Patriarch said, “It is not that the wind is moving; it is not that the flag is moving; it is that your honourable minds are moving” The two monks were struck with awe.

The Commentary

It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves, it is not the mind that moves. How shall we understand the Patriarch? If you have a close grasp of the meaning, you will see how the two monks, intending to buy iron, got gold. The Patriarch could not repress his compassion, and so we have this disgraceful scene.

The Verse

The wind moves, the flag moves, the mind moves,
All confirmed as guilty of error.
We know we open our mouths,
But we don't know we go all wrong.

Case 30



Baso's Very Mind

Daibai asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?" Baso answered, "The mind is the Buddha."

The Commentary

If you have grasped Baso's meaning, you are wearing Buddha's clothes, eating Buddha's food, speaking Buddha's words, doing Buddha's deeds, that is to say, you are Buddha himself. But though this may be so, Daibai has misled not a few people into mistaking the mark on the balance for the weight itself. He doesn't realise that if we explain the word "Buddha" we must rinse out our mouths for three days afterwards. If he had been a man of understanding, when he heard Baso say, "The mind is the Buddha!" he would have covered his ears and rushed away.

The Verse

It is broad daylight, a fine day;
It is silly to rummage around,
And asking about the Buddha
Is like declaring oneself innocent while holding on to the stolen goods.

Case 31



Joshu's Old Women

A monk of Joshu's asked an old woman the way to Taizan. She said! "Go straight on." After the monk had taken three or five steps, she said, "This monk also goes off like that." Afterwards, another monk told Joshu about this, and Joshu said, "Wait a bit; I'll go and investigate this old lady for you." The next day off he went, and asked the same question and got the same reply. On returning, Joshu said to the congregation of monks, "I've investigated the old lady of Taizan for you."

The Commentary

The old woman just sat still in her tent and planned the campaign; she didn't know that there was a famous bandit who knew how to take the enemy commander prisoner. Old Joshu was clever enough to steal into her camp and menace her fortress, but he wasn't a real general. Pondering over the matter, we must say that they both had their faults. Tell me now, what was Joshu's insight into the old woman?

The Verse

The question is the same.
The answer is the same.
Sand in the rice,
Thorns in the mud.

Case 32



Buddha & the Non-Buddhist

A Non-Buddhist said to the Buddha, “I do not ask for words; I do not ask for silence.” Buddha just sat quietly. The Non-Buddhist said admiringly, “The compassion of the World-Honoured One has opened the clouds of my illusion, and has enabled me to enter on the Way” Making his salutations, he departed. Ananda then asked Buddha, “What was it this Non-Buddhist realised, that he so praised you” The World-Honoured One replied, “A high-class horse moves at even the shadow of the whip.”

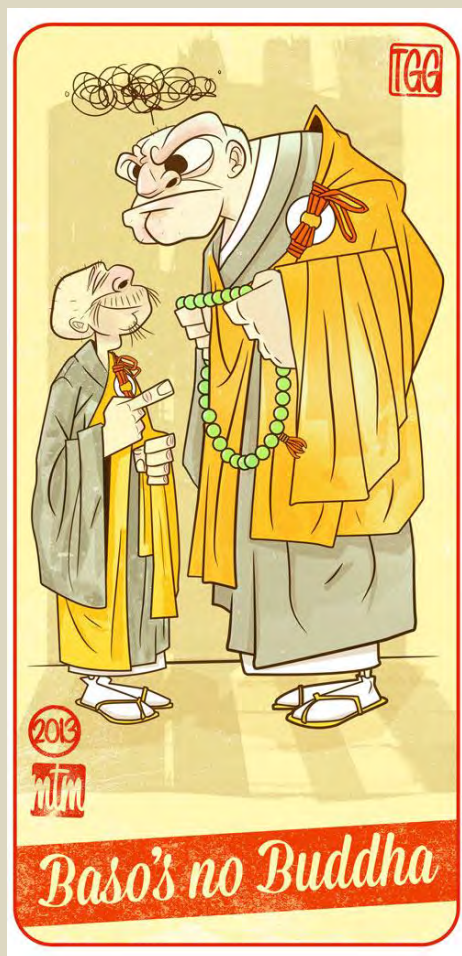
The Commentary

Ananda was the Buddha’s disciple, but his understanding was nothing like that of the Non- Buddhist. Just tell me, what is the distance between disciples and non-disciples?

The Verse

Walking along the edge of a sword;
Running over jagged ice;
Not using a ladder;
Climbing precipices handleless.

Case 33



Baso's no Buddha

A monk asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?" Baso answered, "Not mind, not Buddha."

The Commentary

If you understand what Baso said, your study of Zen is at an end.

The Verse

If you meet a master-swordsman in the street, give him a sword.

If you meet an unpoetical man, don't offer him a poem.

When you meet someone, tell him three quarters,

Don't on any account let him have the other part.

Case 34



Nansen's No Way

Nansen said, "The mind is not the Buddha; knowledge is not the Way."

The Commentary

Nansen, growing old, was lost to shame. Just opening his stinking mouth, he told others about the disgrace of his own house. However, we must say that few are grateful for it.

The Verse

The weather is fine, and the sun appears;
Rain falls, and the earth becomes wet.
With exceeding kindness he explains everything,
But how few have faith in his words!

Case 35



Goso and Sei's Soul

Goso asked a monk, “Sei’s being separated from her soul, which was the real person?”

The Commentary

If you are enlightened concerning what real things are! you will know that we pass from one husk to another like travellers in a night’s lodging-house. But if you are not enlightened, don’t rush about wildly. Suddenly earth, water, fire, and air are separated, and! like a crab with its seven arms and eight legs in boiling water [you struggle!]. Don’t say I didn’t warn you!

The Verse

The moon among the clouds is ever the same;
Valleys and mountains are in constant change.
What a happy thing it all is!
This is one! that is two.

Case 36



Goso's no Word no Silence

Goso said “When you meet a man of the Way on the way, do not greet him with words; do not greet him with silence; tell me, how will you greet him?”

The Commentary

If you can answer Goso intimately, you are to be congratulated on your genius; but if you can't, you must endeavour to look at everything you come across.

The Verse

Meeting a master on the way,
Do not use words, do not be wordless!
Give him an uppercut,
And as for understanding, he'll understand at once!

Case 37



Joshu's Oak Tree

A monk asked Joshu, “What did Daruma come to China for?” Joshu answered, “The oak tree in the temple front garden.”

The Commentary

If you grasp Joshu's answer clearly and strongly, there is for you no former Sakyamuni Buddha, or Maitreya Buddha to come.

The Verse

Words do not express things;
Phrases do not show the mind-movement.
He who receives (only) words is lost;
To stagnate with sentences is to be deluded.

Case 38



Goso's Cow

A reddish-yellow cow passes by a window. The head and horns and the four legs go past. Why doesn't the tail too?

The Commentary

If in regard to this, you are able, even when in a hurry, to fix your one eye on it, and say a turning-word, you will be able to repay the Four Obligations and help the Three Bhava. If you are still unable to do this, reflect again on the tail, and you can do it.

The Verse

If the cow goes through, it will fall into a ditch;
If it goes back it will be destroyed.
This little bit of a tail,—
What a marvellous thing it is!

Case 39



Ummon And Trap Into Words

As soon as a monk stated, “The radiance of the Buddha quietly and restlessly illuminates the whole universe”, Ummon asked him, “Are these you are reciting not the words of Chosetzu Shusai?” The monk replied, “Yes, they are.” Ummon said, “You are trapped in words!” Afterwards Shishin brought up the matter once more and said, “Tell me, how was the monk trapped in words?”

The Commentary

If you are able to grasp Ummon’s unapproachable accomplishments and follow through the monk’s corruption (of being trapped into words), you will be the leader of humans and Devas. If not, you cannot even save yourself.

The Verse

A fish meets the fishhook in a rapid stream,
Being too greedy for the bait, the fish wants to bite.
Once his mouth widely opens,
His life is already lost.

Case 40



Isan's Bottle

When Isan was with Hyakujo he was the tenzo. Hyakujo wanted to choose a master for Mount Daii, so he called the head monk and the rest of them, and told them that an exceptional person should go there. Then he took a water-bottle, stood it on the floor, and asked a question. “Don’t call this a water-bottle, but tell me what it is!” The head monk said, “It can’t be called a stump.” Hyakujo asked Isan his opinion. Isan pushed the water bottle over with his foot. Hyakujo laughed, and said! “The head monk has lost.” Isan was ordered to start the temple.

The Commentary

Isan was a valiant man of the time,⁵ but he could not spring out of Hyakujo trap. Comparatively speaking, Isan leaned towards the difficult, and away from the easy. Why do I say this? Because he removed the towel from his head and put on an iron cangue.

The Verse

Tossing away the bamboo utensils, and the wooden ladle,
Isan immediately cuts off obstructions.
The barrier Hyakujo set up for Isan did not stop him;
With his feet he overturns the Buddha like flax.
The tips of his feet radiate the Buddha like flax.

Case 41



Daruma's Mind-Pacifying

Daruma sat facing the wall. The Second Patriarch, having cut off his arm, stood there in the snow. He said, "Your disciple's mind has no peace as yet. I beg the Teacher to give it rest." Daruma replied, "Bring your mind here and I will give it rest." The Patriarch said, "I have searched for that mind, and have not found it." Daruma said, "Then I have put it to rest"

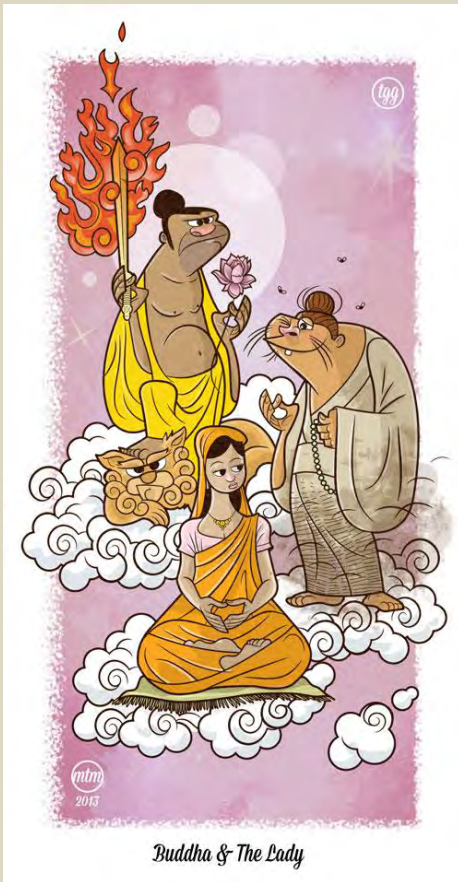
The Commentary

The broken-toothed old foreigner crossed the sea importantly from a hundred thousand miles away. This was raising waves when there is no wind. Daruma had only one disciple, and even he was a cripple. Well, well!

The Verse

Coming from the West, and direct pointing,—
All the trouble comes from this!
The jungle of monks being all at sixes and sevens
Comes from these two chaps.

Case 42



The Buddha & The Lady

Once, in ancient times, Manjusri went into the presence of the World-Honoured-One where all the Buddhas assembled, but they had all departed to their original dwelling-places. A single woman was there, close to Buddha's throne, in the deepest meditation. Manjusri said to the Buddha "How is it that this woman is so close to your throne, and I cannot be?" The Buddha spoke to Manjusri and said, "You may awaken this woman from her deep meditation, and ask her yourself how this can be." Manjusri walked round her three times, snapped his fingers once, (and could not wake her, so he) took her up to the Brahman Heaven, and practiced all his magic art upon her, but could not bring her out of her deep meditation. The World-Honoured-One said, "Even a hundred thousand Manjusri's could not get her out of her concentrated condition. But down below, past twelve hundred million countries, as innumerable as the sands of the Ganges, there is a Bodhisattva named Momyo. He will be able to awaken this woman from her profound meditation" Thereupon Momyo emerged out of the earth, and bowed to the World-Honoured-One, who told him what he wanted him to do. Momyo went before the woman, snapped his fingers once, and at this she came out of her meditation.

The Commentary

The drama Old Sakya puts on the stage is a great hotchpotch. Just tell me now, Manjusri is the teacher of the Seven Buddhas; why couldn't he get the woman out of her samadhi, when Momyo, a beginner, could? If you can understand the reason for this without discrimination, while living a busy life of worldly affairs, you will ever be in the Dragon Samadhi.

The Verse

One could awake her, the other couldn't;
Both have their own freedom.
There is a god-mask, and a devil-mask;
The failure was very interesting.

Case 43



Shuzan's Bamboo Spatula

Master Shuzan held out his bamboo spatula and asked, “If you call this a bamboo spatula, you give umbrage (to the principle of Zen). If you call this no bamboo spatula, you violate the law (of common-sense). What will all of you call this?”

The Commentary

Should you call this a bamboo spatula, you would give umbrage. Should you call this no bamboo spatula, you would betray the law. Both to speak out will not do, and no word will be of any use either. Quickly say, quickly say!

The Verse

Bringing out the bamboo spatula,
Shuzan demanded the order? of life or death.
Being put to either the umbrage, or the betrayal,
Even Buddha and Patriarchs would beg for their lives.

Case 44



Basho's Stick

Basho said to the assembled monks, "If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away from you."

The Commentary

It helps you when you wade across a river, when the bridge is broken down; it accompanies you when you return to the village on a moonless night. But if you call it a staff, you will go to Hell swifter than an arrow.

The Verse

The deep and the shallow everywhere
Are all within my grasp.
It holds up the sky and the earth;
In every place it spreads the True Doctrine.

Case 45



Hoen's Who Is He

Hoen of Tozan said, “Shaka, Miroku, are the servants of another. Tell me, who is this “Another”?”

The Commentary

If you get to know clearly who this Other is, it is like knocking into your pa at the cross-roads. Why should you ask someone else whether it is he or not?

The Verse

Do not draw Another's bow;
Do not ride Another's horse;
Do not speak ill of Another;
Do not enquire into Another's business.

Case 46



Sekiso's Hundred-Foot Pole

Sekiso said, “How can you go on further from the top of a hundred-foot pole?” Again, an ancient worthy said, “One sitting on the top of a hundred-foot pole Has entered the Ways but is not yet the real thing. He must go on further from the top of the hundred-foot pole, And reveal his true self in the ten directions.”

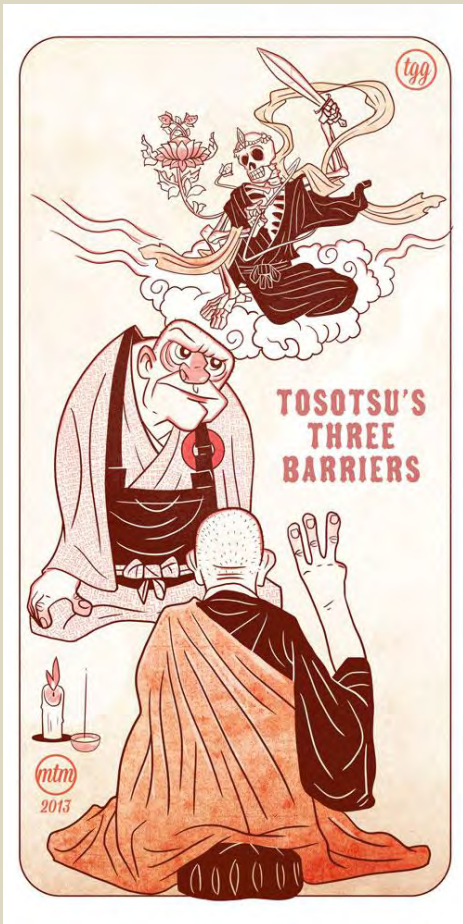
The Commentary

Going on beyond the top of the pole and turning his body about, what is there here to dislike or to praise? But even so, tell me, how we proceed onwards from the top of a hundred-foot pole? Aha!

The Verse

If the third eye in the forehead is darkened
And we mistake the star on the balance for the measurement,
We throw away our body and soul
And blindly lead other blind people.

Case 47



Tosotsu's Three Barriers

Tosotsu made three barriers, asking the monks: Getting rid of your illusions and penetrating into the truth is done by seeing into your nature. At this moment, where is your nature? When you realize what your nature is, you are free from life, free from death. When the light of your eyes is falling, how can you be free from them? If you have freed yourself from life and death, you know where you are going. When the Four Elements separate, where are you off to?"

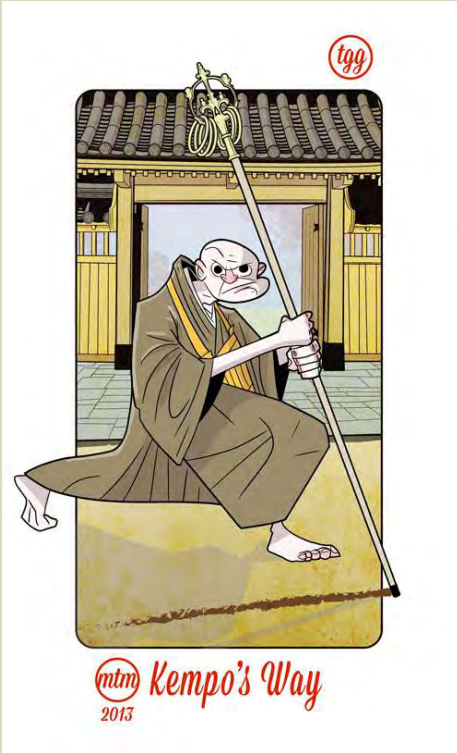
The Commentary

If you can say the three passwords, you are master wherever you may be. If you are not yet able to do so, coarse food we get tired of! and it is difficult to be hungry after well-digested food.

The Verse

One thought fills immensity;
To see eternity in an hour.
If we see through this thought,
We see through the thinker of it.

Case 48



Kempo's Way

A monk said to Kempo, “The Bhagavat of the ten directions have one road to Nirvana. Where, may I ask, does that road begin?” Kempo lifted up his stick, drew a line, and said, “Here”. Later, the monk asked Ummon’s help. Ummon held up his fan, and said’ “This fan has jumped up to the thirty third Heaven, and hit the nose of the Deity there. The Carp of the Eastern sea gives one stroke, and it rains cats and dogs.”

The Commentary

One goes the bottom of the deep sea, and, scratching in the dirt, raises dust. The other goes to the top of the highest mountain, and raises foaming waves that touch the sky. One grasping, the other releasing! with his one hand each sup ports the deep doctrine. They are just like two riders, neck and neck. In this world, such people who grasp truth directly are difficult to find. But if we look at these two great teachers with a true eye, neither of them really knows where the Nirvana road is.

The Verse

Without raising a foot, we are there already;
The tongue has not moved, but the explanation is finished.
Though each move takes the initiative,
We must know the final checkmate.

Mumon Ekai was a Zen master of 13th century Song period China. He is remembered for compiling the collection of 48 Zen koans known as the Gateless Gate. Approximately 780 years later I can thank him for providing a rocket ship worth of creative fuel. He's been an unexpected form of muse, too far away in time to have a real idea of who he was, so visually and mythologically I have some room to let him exist in my imagination.



Block print by Mark T. Morse (mtm)