

What is the relationship between language and practice?

“A picture of a rice cake does not satisfy hunger” was a common expression in the China of Dogen’s time, and was taken to mean that language was an impediment to realisation. Hence the tendency of the koan stories to frustrate the student, to push him towards silence.

Certainly, we can see how language can easily become a shell, covering the great ocean of being, hiding the depth, beauty and precariousness of our lives.

But language can break its shell, and liberate: itself, ourselves.

So for Dogen the expression [which, mindlessly repeated, is part of the shell] is a statement of the absolute value of everything: the rice cake exists absolutely. It is not there simply to assuage hunger. Further, because of this, ‘picture’ ‘satisfy’ and ‘hunger’ are like pillars, holding up the unfathomable present.

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