

Journeys



Riding Through the Gateless Gate

By Rafe Martin

I'M HEADING NORTH on Interstate 390 to Rochester, New York, after a great October day of riding twisty rural back roads and hours of tales, tire kicking, good food, and motorcycles.

The rain starts, then comes down heavily enough to wash my bug-splattered windscreen nearly clean. I switch on the heated grips to keep my hands warm as rain soaks through my gloves.

It's peaceful riding a motorcycle in the rain at seventy-five miles an hour. *Shh shh shhh* is the sound the tires make. Up ahead are Neil and Judy on a classic mid-eighties Honda sportbike. Behind me rides Bob, also riding solo, like me, also on a BMW, but a cruiser, not a sport-tourer like mine. He's followed farther back by Joe and Carol on an RT that Joe's planning to sell so he can get a V-Strom. Bikes! We love 'em.

But we also recognize that they're only the physical foundation of the story, attention-gathering devices that carry us not just through space and time, but into the present moment itself. That's something that all bikers experience—which is what really puts us out there, in the wide-open cockpit on the other side of fear.

An ex-motorcycle racer once confided to me after leading a high-speed run on winding back roads, "It's not about the bike. It's a spiritual thing."

A glorious double rainbow appears—an immense violet, green, yellow, and orange arch spanning Interstate 390. It's

like a mythic portal looming over the beautifully sweeping curves of the highway. Sunlight streams down, pouring through mottled, rosy clouds. One after the other we ride beneath the gigantic rainbow arc, like passing through the entrance to another world. Or more deeply into this one.

How great to be alive! In the rain! On a motorcycle! Not without cares, but without *thoughts*. With *attention*, which is what happens when you ride. It has to. Your life depends on it. Everything extraneous to this present moment is pared away.


That's the secret—motorcycling can be a gateless gate to the most ancient Zen, the nameless Zen of "nothing at all." Hands on grips, butt in the saddle, feet on the pegs, rain, engine, and wind noise. And rainbows.

Who says mind is thoughts? Mind is walls and tiles and fence posts, says that old Zen worthy, Dogen. Mind is rainbows and engine noise, curved seats, gas tanks, tankbags, and handgrips.

Case thirty-seven in *The Hekigan Roku*, or *Blue Cliff Record*, goes like this: "Banzan gave words of instruction saying: 'In the three worlds there is no dharma, [or, depending on the translation, "there is nothing"]. Where then shall we find [or seek] mind?'"

How to know? One good place or way to start might be to let go of any ideas of mind, or of Zen. Then let go of any thoughts of letting them go. Then losing your grip on those thoughts of yourself letting go of letting go. Just let it *all* go. Everything. Gone.

Now where are you? I'm doing seventy-five in the rain on two wheels, grateful for this moment, for this human body-mind. And glad, so very glad, to be alive.

And you? 

RAFE MARTIN is an author, storyteller, and dharma teacher. His most recent book is *Endless Path: Awakening in the Buddhist Imagination*.