

## ***Bombu Buys a Car***

**by Dr. Gordon Bermant, former president of the Buddhist Churches of America**

"My existence is such that I am ignorant of what is good or what is evil;  
I cannot tell what is right or what is wrong.  
Although I do not have the least love or compassion,  
I like to behave like a teacher  
Because of [my greed for] fame and material gain."  
--Shinran Shonin, "A Passage On Naturalness" (Jinen-honi-sho)

"Getting rid of your ego  
is like trying to throw away a garbage can.  
No one believes you are serious,  
and the more you yell at the garbage men  
the better the neighbors remember your name."  
--Jay Leeming, "Ego," in "Dynamite on a China Plate" (2006).

I want to tell you a story about a license plate. Some of you know that I recently bought a car. Not just any car. A dream car. A car that a boy growing up in Southern California, the home of American car culture, dreams about. A car that is only four feet high, but six feet wide, with 400 horsepower. I am the second owner of this car. The first owner maintained it carefully and kept the mileage low. He loved this car. I love it now.

The night that I drove the car home I had a brilliant idea. I decided that I would get a special license plate. This license plate would sum up how I felt about buying this car. Better yet, it would be a Shin Buddhist statement of how I felt about buying the car. My license plate would say BOMBU.

Perhaps some of you are not familiar with this Japanese word "bombu." When I first encountered it, almost 20 years ago, I had a shock of immediate recognition. I knew that this word referred to me exactly. Bombu refers to a foolish being such as myself. Bombu is hopelessly caught in the trap of his own ego, ignorant and greedy -- in short, all too human. Bombu is not a sinner, just a terminal fool.

The very next day my wife and I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles to register the car and apply for the license plate. My wife is generally more alert to reality than I am, and this day was no exception. She had not concentrated on my choice of license plate until we were standing at the counter finishing up what had to be done. When I told the lady behind the counter that I wanted a personal license plate that was spelled b-o-m-b-u, the lady first checked the computer to see if that license had already been taken. It hadn't, so she said that it was ok. I was really happy about that. Just then my wife said quietly to me "You can't use that license plate!" "What do you mean?" I said impatiently. "Listen," she said. "It sounds like 'bomb you!' You don't want that message on your license plate, and they're not going to let you have it!" I really didn't want to hear that. I thought the bombu license plate on my beautiful Corvette was just too perfect a combination. So I ignored my wife's warning and happily paid for the license plate.

That evening we had company for dinner and we tested the situation on them. Our guests were not Buddhists and knew nothing about this word bombu. I spelled the word out on a piece of paper and asked them to pronounce it. Without hesitation they said "bomb you." I

told them I had chosen it for my new license plate. They looked at me like I had done something dumb. Oops.

That night I tossed and turned. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't escape two truths. The easier truth to accept was that the license plate had to go. I couldn't have a license plate that could be read as a violent threat, no matter how much I didn't mean it to be read that way. The second truth was harder to accept. My enthusiasm for that license plate was a nifty bit of hypocrisy and self-deception. On the one hand, I was proud to be driving my beautiful powerful car. On the other hand, my license plate would show that I was really aware of my foolishness in having such a car. The license plate was a self-mockery that would insulate me from taking myself seriously in this fancy little car.

So what was this license plate all about? It was about my saving my self-image as a modest person while driving around in a car that successfully calls attention to itself and its driver. So it was about saving my psychological cake while I drove around happily eating it. When I could finally admit this to myself, I saw that the license plate had to go for that reason too, and would have had to go even if "bomboo" didn't come out as "bomb you."

I returned to the DMV and asked to cancel the license plate. But the lady at the counter said that the application had been sent in, so I would have to wait to receive the plates, then bring them in to exchange them. So I began the wait. In the meantime, as if to make a clear picture even clearer, I got a ticket for speeding in my car.

A few weeks ago a set of license plates arrived in the mail: They are ordinary Virginia plates, three letters and three numbers, with no meaning at all. What a relief! Accompanying the plates was a letter from DMV. It said this: We cannot send you the plates you requested because it is our policy not to allow obscene or other offensive content to be displayed on these plates.

So this is the story of the license plate. I think, after all, that it is a Shin Buddhist story. My foolishness is inexhaustible, and the lessons just keep coming from the wise and gentle teacher who is available to all of us. Without the wise teacher these lessons would be bitter rather than deeply funny. Without the foolishness, there would be less to laugh about.

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