

THE CODED LANGUAGE OF ZEN

BARBARA J GABRYS

Department of Materials

University of Oxford

Parks Road Oxford OX1 3PH

Corresponding Author's email: barbara.gabrys@materials.ox.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

To see the nature of Reality, Zen chooses an experiential path through silence.

The state of consciousness in which subject and object have resolved into the union of thinking, feeling, and willing is true reality. Independent, self-sufficient true reality manifests itself in the form of this union. We must realize the true state of this reality with our entire being rather than reflect on it, analyze it, or express it in words.

K. Nishida *An Inquiry into the Good*



Zen Calligraphy by Shinzan Miyamae Rōshi

Introduction

Zen roots are in Indian philosophy and Buddhist religion. However, over the centuries it has developed, and absorbed elements from other approaches to life, for example, pragmatic Confucianism, Daoism and Japanese reverence for Nature. This, in combination with the importance of personal experience of Reality, means that philosophical language plays only a little role in living Zen. That is a challenge as, especially in teaching and learning, some verbal instructions are necessary. Studying Zen with a master is more a case of an apprenticeship than a study in an academic sense. At the core of it is the practice of *zazen*, the sitting meditation.

Since the last century, there is great fascination with all things ‘Zen’. It is widely accepted that in order to understand any theoretical – physical, mathematical or philosophical – model of the Universe and Reality one has to possess relevant training. What about Zen training, then?

An additional difficulty arises with meaning which can be lost in translation. Taking sutras for guidance of our actions we have to remember that the original ones were written in Pali about 2000BCE, then translated into Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, then into other languages including English. A lot of modern Zen texts are in English, and are also read by non-native speakers - there are many layers between a word and its original meaning. Here Zen offers a great advantage by cutting directly to the heart of matter.

How is it done? The Zen theory has three *nen* which translate roughly as a unit of thought or an activity of mind (Sekida 1977). The first *nen* is the most important as it intuitively performs pure cognition of the object. The second *nen* follows immediately, and reflects on the first – hence one becomes conscious of one’s thoughts. This process integrates the preceding *nen* into a continuous stream of thought, forming a basis of self-consciousness and ego awareness. Synthesizing, introspection and reasoning are functions of the third *nen*. *Zazen* practice, and dynamic Zen activity, aims to cut off delusive thoughts, thus reaching the first *nen* directly. In this context, all philosophical,

physical and mathematical models of Reality and Universe are the fruit of the third
nen.



Zen practitioner, Gyōkuru-ji Temple, Gifu Prefecture, Japan

Case Study

One of the most important texts in our school of Zen is the Lin-chi lu, 'The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi' (Lin-chi 1999), in Japanese *Rinzai Roku*. I'll be referring to Linji Yixuan, the Chinese master who died in 867 CE, as Rinzai Gigen, since he's the father of the Zen school of Rinzai. His date of birth is unknown; it is generally accepted that his teaching career was rather short, maybe spanning a decade. He was a student and Dharma heir of Ōbaku (Huang-po), another famous Zen master. Ōbaku, a severe Zen master, knew Zen inside out. Rinzai's Dharma heir, Sanshō (Hui-juan), another outstanding Zen master, was the compiler of Rinzai's teachings. This record contains not only Rinzai's teachings, but also episodes from his Zen training and his teaching career. In his life, three phases can be distinguished: the training under a master, wandering about to test his insight, and his teaching career. In what follows I'd concentrate on his teaching methods, as these are perhaps the most misunderstood by Westerners.

Rinzai appears in several koans, in the collections *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku* (Sekida 1977), variously as a student or teacher but also as a third person or a subject of exchange. (See, for example, Case 20 of *Mumonkan*: Ryūge asks Suibi and Rinzai). He had a reputation of being iconoclastic and to the point in his teachings. While his knowledge of Buddhist scriptures shows in various quotations, he insists on direct insight into the meaning of scriptures, and living one's life accordingly. He is not fooled by lip service.

From the records the picture of Rinzai as an extremely fierce and direct person arises, rather like a general leading an army of disciplined monks. We must not forget the context of the *Teachings*: they are addressed to seasoned monks, and his shouts and lashings are meant to break any attachments to ideas that they may still have so that they can experience kensho.

The following exchange, section 5, illustrates the above points (Lin-chi 1999):

Part 1. Ascending the Hall

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The Master ascended the hall. A monk asked: “What is the basic meaning of Buddhism?”

The master held his fly whisk straight up.

The monk gave a shout.

The Master struck him.

Another monk asked: “What is the basic meaning of Buddhism?” Again the Master held his fly whisk straight up.

The monk gave a shout.

The Master also gave a shout.

The monk was about to say something, whereupon the Master hit him.

The Master said, “All of you – if it’s for the sake of the Dharma, don’t hesitate to sacrifice your bodies or give up your lives! Twenty years ago, when I was at Huang-po’s place, I asked three times what was clearly and obviously the real point of Buddhism, and three times he was good enough to hit me with his stick. It was as though he had brushed me with a sprig of mugwort. Thinking of it now, I wish I could get hit once more like that. Is there anyone who can give me such a blow?”

At that time a monk stepped forward from the group and said, “I’ll give you one!” The master picked up his stick and handed it to the monk. The monk was about to take it, whereupon the master struck him.

Commentary

The above section is like a small story developing. Let’s look on the above exchange in turn. In the first paragraph, the Master ascended the hall or took up the High Seat, from which Zen master delivers his teaching in a formal setting.

We have three main elements here:

- The fundamental question about the basic meaning (essence) of Buddhism
- The shout ('Katsu!' in Japanese) as a cut-off device for thinking
- Hitting and slapping: Eastern vs Western context

Question

'What is the essence of Buddhism' is a subject of many koans and clearly of central importance to monks and lay persons seeking the Way. One could argue that every sutra and, in general, the Buddhist theory contains the answer to that question, in one way or another. But the Truth cannot be explained in words.

In Zen the answer must come from the hara!

That's why every Zen Master will respond by a different action or a short sentence which seemingly makes no sense, like raising the fly whisk here. Actions demonstrate the understanding, not words – show, don't tell.

Shouting

Katsu shout is cutting off delusions; at the very moment of shout there are no thoughts. This is a moment of no-mind. Katsu is a very powerful teaching device.

Hitting In many koans and stories about Zen masters of old we have this situation: a master asks a question; a monk does not know how to answer – upon which the master hits him. This action is intended to stop the thinking process – and if it works, the student attains no-mind. So, the meaning is twofold:

- i. As a teaching device to stop the thinking process, and to attain sudden understanding
- ii. Sometimes hitting was used to physically shake somebody into *kensho*, to precipitate enlightenment if this person was 'ripe', just on the very verge of transformation. A famous example is of Zen master Hakuin hit with a broom by an irate woman and falling into the gutter, upon which he had

a great awakening. There is an analogy in science to such precipitation of enlightenment: if we have a supersaturated solution of salt in water then if we hit the glass salt crystallizes upon impact – change of phase. However, it can only work if the student is ready, as a delicately timed action.

What's going on here? In principle the monk responded with a shout to the master's shout, why then the hitting? The master acts on the chance of shocking the monk into no-mind state. Hence, we can view hitting monks as Zen master's kindness in 'inverted praise' fashion.

In the second paragraph, the scene is almost identical. Is it another monk enquiring about the same fundamental problem or the first one trying his luck – or the master's knowledge – again? This time after the monk's shout the master responds with a shout! Sometimes in such an exchange both become one mind. This is very effective device: should it work, it would be Zen, even for a tiny instant.

But this is as far as it goes, now the monk is lost for action and hesitates. This merits a blow from the master, giving the monk the last chance by forcing him into no-mind state. Does it work? Let's look at the closure as Rinzai delivers his teaching in the third paragraph.

The closing section refers to a particular period in Rinzai's life as a student of Ōbaku (section 48), and is closed by Rinzai's pedagogical comment. It links his development as a student to that of maturity of a Zen master in a smooth transition, and the link is being beaten without soliciting and to want to be beaten on purpose.

What is the meaning of the phrase 'Thinking of it now, I wish I could get hit once more like that. Is there anyone who can give me such a blow?'

Rinzai is testing his monks – which one is on par with him? Whose inner eye is ready to be open?

There is a brave soul to pick up the challenge; unfortunately, he falls short of expectation as he hesitates to pick up the stick. It is difficult to imagine the enormity of

this challenge for us – the master such as Rinzai must have had a forbidding presence – and on top of it the need to overcome the respect for the monastic hierarchy. Can we assume that Rinzai is glad that somebody is picking up the challenge? If so, his disappointment of not having a worthy opponent is reflected in that final blow.

We can locate this episode somewhere between 850 CE (death of Ōbaku) and 866 CE, his own death. As he has asked the fundamental question three times, and got the same answer – blows – three times, we do not know whether the third time round Ōbaku was satisfied with the exchange. But Rinzai was an outstanding student: he was fully in tune with his master's action. We know it from the line 'It was as though he had brushed me with a sprig of mugwort.' He took the beating as an encouragement to go on, as a sign of approval: well done, old chap!

Remark

Interestingly, Rinzai has developed a philosophy of shouts, and defines four types (Wu 2013):

Frequent as was his resort to the rod, Lin-chi had nevertheless been noted in later generations as the master of shouts, as is evident in the well-known saying: "Te-shan's beatings, Lin-chi's shouts". It is not without reason that he has been considered a specialist in shouting, seen that he developed a philosophy of shouting. He classified shouts into four main categories. As he once expounded to a monk, "Sometimes, a shout is like the sword of a vajra-king; sometimes, a shout is like a lion crouching on the ground; sometimes, a shout is like a sounding rod for testing the grasses; sometimes, a shout is not used as a shout." After stating these categories, he asked the monk, "How do you understand this?" As the monk was fumbling for an answer, the master shouted. I suppose that this shout belongs to the first category, because it was meant to cut off the monk's chain of thoughts which would lead nowhere.

Summary

Zen is down to earth, grounded in the present and it abhors metaphysical considerations. Zen tradition attributes this approach to the patriarch Bodhidharma, is summed up in his 'Everything you do is Zen', and carries on till the present day.

In my training, I've learned to communicate in Zen way through doing, assimilation, osmosis, guesswork, being an apprentice... It was only when I started teaching that a need for some classification or categorization arose. There is a vast difference in entering Zen monastery as a trainee, being born in the Japanese or Chinese cultural tradition, and being a Western lay truth seeker with help of a modern Zen master. In my own koan training it took me a while to internalize what it means 'show, don't tell', and why a Zen master can tell whether I have really grasped the essence of the koan. But as the training deepens, there are phrases that have to be offered as an answer. That's where an interesting part begins: there was my own answer and the standard answer – sometimes they overlap.

What does it mean, 'a standard answer'? It is the answer passed down from Zen masters to their successors in a lineage. While the collections of koans are in the public domain, the answers are not, or at least should not be. The main difficulty in hitting the standard answer is that it's heavily linked both to the Zen monastic tradition, and the language of classic Chinese and Japanese poetry. That's why a substitution of a familiar picture would be accepted as an answer. For example, let's assume that an answer invokes the image of plum blossom. For a Western practitioner the cherry or apple blossom would be close enough if offered with deep understanding. In addition, a Master may request that a student brings a 'capping phrase' from a vast collection of poems (Zen Sand 2003).

Expression of Reality in Zen art and poetry merits in-depth treatment, and goes beyond the subject of this paper.

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Mini-dictionary of terms

Dharma A Sanskrit term with a broad meaning. Moral and ethical laws, the order of the universe, the nature and proper functioning of things, the truth. Sometimes used as teaching of Buddhism.

Hara A Japanese term for lower belly. In the Zen context it is loosely translated as a seat of spiritual power from which actions spring.

Koan Teaching device in Zen training, an object of fascination for some people with interest in Zen. A koan cannot be solved intellectually; an answer to a problem posed is found beyond duality.

Kensho A sudden experience of Reality, sometimes compared to a feeling being struck by a thunderbolt.

Sutra In Buddhism, sutras are records of teachings given by a historical Buddha.