

# Wittgenstein and the Language of Zen

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Due to the insurgence of Zen literature in Western countries and the works translated into Western languages, a good deal of new philosophy of Zen has been written that places it into a context more easily understood in the Western philosophical tradition. The monumental task of explaining a school of philosophy with analogues to another is not entirely hopeless, but it certainly is rife with traps and pitfalls. We must, as with all of our philosophy, take great care in ensuring that all the terms and concepts we use are well-defined or at least well-placed within the body of the greater teachings. This is the primary reason why Wittgenstein, when writing the *Philosophical Investigations*, argued so strongly for using normal language, since he believed that the majority of deep, philosophical issues were entirely caused by improper use of language. Unfortunately, this is something that is especially problematic in the teachings of and about Zen.

Historically speaking, there are many common difficulties that the Western mind faces when attempting to understand or practice Zen. These difficulties do not go unnoticed in the teachings of Zen specialized for Western peoples, but they seem to do an inadequate job at addressing the problem. Perhaps by elucidating both the problem and the causes of this problem, we can hope to gain a greater understanding of how to move around the problem, or even a better way to frame Zen in a Western perspective, much as authors like Thich Thien-An and D.T. Suzuki have worked hard to accomplish.

The best way to approach this issue is from the perspective of the underlying medium of Zen, and that is language. Since a large amount of Zen teaching is attempting to define and explain terms using the Western philosophical discourses we are accustomed to, the quality of the gleaned knowledge is entirely dependent on the fitness of these analogies. Also, there is much to be inferred from the language and structure of the teachings of Zen that require an analysis outside of Zen<sup>1</sup>, and perhaps this can further aid in our understanding.

## The Structure of Zen Language

There is, of course, a logic to the types of statements that Zen makes, which is especially apparent in the seemingly limited (at least in practice) set of patterns that these phrases follow. It is vitally important to note that logic is not necessarily to be conflated as a type of positivism, or that it implies a referential system of language. What we really mean by logic in an internal consistency with some set of rules; choosing that set of rules is, however, a matter of choice of the system itself. In this way, the language of Zen

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<sup>1</sup> I would assume that conducting such an analysis from a text that purports to be a teaching of Zen would engender a bit of skepticism on the part of the reader as to the true intentions of the author. As with most teachings, it is important to practice what you preach, and true teachings must be careful to walk the line between using Western philosophy as a metaphor and explaining Zen *within* Western philosophy.

certainly seems to have a few types of consistency, the first of which we can perhaps oversimplify for a minute as “denying the obvious”.

Language, in its simplest and most pragmatic usage, is a tool by which we share our knowledge of the physical world with others (for the sake of this argument, we will entirely avoid any metaphysically descriptive abilities of language). In this way, we describe the location (time and space) and characteristics of objects and actions. This limited piece of language is of great importance to the normal functioning of life, and for the sake of simplicity, I will label this as our ability to articulate the “obvious”, or that which is visually apparent or conventionally observable. Also, this sense of the “physical” is meant without the desire to argue for or against the obvious philosophical underpinnings that Zen would take opposition with, simply because such arguments are out of place here. Again, in the pragmatic sense, whether or not objects actually exist in some predefined metaphysical manner is unimportant to the simple act of communicating our most basic understandings of physical proximities.

In its simplest, then, the language of Zen is often syntactically manifest as the negation of such statements of the obvious. One must take great care, however, not to place the semantic value of this type of Zen language in the same context as one would take the sentences they are denying. In some sense, this is hurdle that the teachings of Zen place particularly in the path of learning, and I doubt this is unwittingly so (although I cannot imagine the reason why). Moreover, in adding to this confusion, these sentences are syntactical doppelgängers of exact sentences that could appear in either system (Zen or obvious language); sentences such as “In my hand I hold no spade” could appear either way with vastly different meaning.

The negation of these sentences is not a literal negation in the “obvious” sense, but a criticism of imagining that this “obvious” language holds deeper philosophical value. This, of course, broadens the original definition of “obvious” language that I give here, which is absolutely not an error on the part of the philosophy of Zen. It seems almost natural, at least in the context of Western philosophical thought, to understand referential language in more than these simple contexts; often times, especially in the more structuralist epistemological pursuits, linguistic constructs within natural language are *judged* on how well the reference can be measured/tested against the actual referent. In this sense, referents are classified along both a physical and metaphysical scale, and thus the existence (or Existence, if you will) of the objects being referred to are reified by their linguistic manifestation. As I will visit later, this is incommensurable with the larger teachings of Zen; for now, we will simply state that this type of sentence is a direct argument against the type of sentence into which it syntactically fits so seemingly well.

Another pattern that arises from this is the self-contradictory (perhaps oxymoronic) sentence, which takes the form, “A is true, but A is not true”, or, “A and  $\neg A$ ”. An example of this, taken from the “Illogical Zen” chapter of the Suzuki,

*Empty-handed I go, and behold the spade is in my hands.  
I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding. (33)*

Eventually, we glean the same conclusion as the previous pattern, but this time we learn a bit more about Zen's conception of logic as it pertains to linguistics. Normally, when we approach a sentence, we consider it atomic in the context to which it applies. Oftentimes,

this is why a single sentence is considered sufficient context to understand any individual piece of that sentence, and thus even why the common quotations of Zen teachings are a single or small number of sentences. However, when we attempt to apply the same approach to this type of self-contradictory sentence, we arrive back at the explicit, “Zen is not logical, nor is it illogical; Zen is *alogical*.” This, of course, depends entirely on the system of logic you are applying to the language.

On first glance, it appears that such sentences are entirely illogical, as the assertion that something is both true and false, simultaneously, cannot be true (as in the second of Schopenhauer's Four Laws). Zen teaching even goes so far as to state that applying the term “illogical” is itself a category mistake, as the characteristics of logic necessarily do not apply to the language of Zen. However, if we are to weaken the restriction that an entire sentence be judged within a single context, we are left with a much more expressive (albeit ambiguous) system within which to understand or judge the semantic value of phrases within sentences. So, with the example of holding the spade, if we realize that the first part of the sentence is to be taken in the “obvious” context, whereas the second is to be taken in the more general context of Zen (to be discussed in the final portion of the paper), we are left with a sentence of the form, “A is true, and B is false”, which is not inherently false or true. So, despite Zen's explicit message otherwise, such a sentence can easily be construed as both logical and true (or, at least, consistent with the teachings of Zen, which seems to be the closest and most acceptable measure of truth value within Zen).

## Zen Teachings on Language

The teachings of Zen are not silent on the subject of language itself. When reading the explicit message in regards to language, we are left with a few glaring messages. First, we are told that language is entirely insufficient to describe Zen and the path to *satori*. This fits easily with the messages of other visible/popular Eastern traditions and religions/philosophies which disparage the ability of language to so capture the more abstract concepts that the teaching addresses. Luckily, this philosophical line of thought has its Western analogue in the likes of Wittgenstein, especially applicable to the Eastern abundance of the universal concept, such as Zen, Buddha nature, the Tao, and many others.

As Wittgenstein teaches, in order to understand a thing, be it physical or metaphysical, “real” or abstract, we must know the limits of that thing. For physical objects, we can think of this in a simple, practical sense: we know what a chair is because we know the edges of the chair, the limits of the chair. Also, we can classify a things *chair*-ness by which objects do not have that quality. This is perhaps reminiscent of the epistemological notion that it is much easier to falsify or negate than to prove true, especially by way of example or other empirically meaningful information.

It is only logical, then, to conclude that *any* universal concept is unknowable or not understandable, since the act of knowing it would mean that it is not universal. This contradiction leads us directly to something reminiscent the teachings of Zen, albeit from a different angle and stated in a slightly different manner. After all, as with the concepts of Zen and Taoism, these things are not examples of universal concepts but *the* universe. A key difference, however, is that the Zen teaching would take only the language-specific

portion of the argument, that this limitation is not on our understanding, but on our ability to capture or describe. Again, as with the implicit messages of Zen, it seems that the theory being attacked is simply that of representationalism. So, Zen finds itself on the same side of the battle as Wittgenstein, although taking a different view on the relationship between language and human thought.

We find yet more overlap between Wittgenstein and Zen in regards to common language and, in Zen, the implications of this pragmatist philosophy as more than just a prescription on how to conduct matters of discourse. In the “practice” portion of Zen, we are taught that the true act of living Zen is applying oneself wholly to the everyday practices of life. Understood in this way, Zen is no more than living life, but being there every step of the way. The portion of this philosophy that applies to language within Zen would balk at the very label I apply here, as “philosophy” is understood in much the same regard as “logic”, which is to say a caricature of the real thing. Zen teaches that philosophy is akin to thinking about and overcomplicating a problem. Here, we find Wittgenstein singing the similar tune of “normal language”, that the breadth and depth of philosophical problems stem primarily from our inability to understand the language we are using.<sup>2</sup>

## The Implicit Message on Language

Perhaps the most important second-order philosophy of Zen on language is that language is not a corollary of thought, rather a mechanism that is built on top of our ability to think and experience. By stating that our inability to describe Zen has no real implication on our ability to experience, comprehend, or live Zen (as through the attainment of enlightenment), the teachings are essentially stating that there is some deeper mechanism through which we can understand these things. In fact, you could likely even see this as an understanding of Zen through language being either one of or *the* primary barrier between *samsara* and *nirvana*. Once we break free to this new understanding where we do not rely on our ability to describe Zen, we have found a new way to live the world, direct and unadulterated. This outlook seems certainly in direct opposition to Wittgenstein, who went so far as to state, in the *Tractatus-logico-philosophicus*:

*5.6 The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

*5.62 [...] We cannot think what we cannot think, so what we cannot think we cannot say either. (68)*

However, since the only way to test one’s enlightenment is through discourse with another enlightened being, the vestiges of enlightenment must at least make it through the language barrier. And, since Wittgenstein himself posited that the meaning of language was dictated by its *use* and not by its ability to represent, these two theories are not entirely incompatible. The key is that in the Zen, language is simply the public mechanism by which we share knowledge, and certainly not a private mechanism by which we understand knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a somewhat limited interpretation of the Philosophical Investigations, as argued by Richard Rorty to be a gross oversimplification (he takes the opposite view, that the portion of Wittgenstein that applies to discarding philosophy is to be ignored). Either way, the “Wittgensteinian therapist” viewpoint seems an important portion of Wittgenstein to at least mention.

A constant fight between Zen and at least its translations into English is that Zen continually reminds us that the subject-object distinction is a falsehood, and yet our very system of framing discourse requires us to take such a subject-object perspective. In attempting to teach such concepts as dependent co-origination, the sentences you use invariably end up with subjects taking action on objects, unless you attempt to write with no other verb except the copula. Since Zen relies so strongly on allegory and short stories, however, this perspective is inescapable.

We can further coalesce the teachings of Wittgenstein and Zen by realizing that both are alike in ways in which the arguments are presented in their “teachings”. A key aspect to works such as the Philosophical Investigations and most modern pragmatists is the use of “normal” language to explain philosophies. This includes linguistic devices such as allegory, prose, metaphor, and humor, common practices that put the reader at ease and open the world of philosophy to those who do not have previous knowledge with the more specialized languages that inhabit many areas of analytic philosophy.

Zen also follows along this path, finding that the most potent way of describing *satori* and the experience of attaining *satori* is to tell stories of enlightenments. To explain concepts, or often times to explain what Zen would consider category mistakes, Zen uses metaphor that attempts to uncomplicate what the authors would assume a Western perspective would overcomplicate. Also, Zen presents no deductive argument for whether or not it is “true”, no epistemological system from which to comprehend the concepts of Zen, and no categories<sup>3</sup> to be used to classify Zen.

## Application – Answers to “Who is the Buddha”?

A key criticism in Zen teachings of the Zen student, especially the learned Western student, is that the student takes too shallowly and suddenly the meaning of Zen – when an answer to “What is Buddha” is along the lines of “Three pounds of flax”, (Suzuki 48-9), Suzuki admonishes the man who reads this as pantheism, as if the Buddha is somehow contained in the three pounds of flax. Numerous times he points out that this is the “logical” conclusion, and this simple-minded interpretation could not be more than wrong. Ironically enough, Suzuki is committing the very same mistake that he is (perhaps correctly) reproaching the Western reader of, and that is of grossly mistaking the common philosophy of another culture (this time, Western philosophy) within the context of his own philosophy.

In reducing logic to anti-Zen, it becomes a tautology to state that certain reactions are illogical. Just as simplifying Zen to a sort of semi-Nihilistic approach to universality, simplifying logic to positivism is a dangerous affair.

A better way to think of a good answer to this question is on the level not of the context of the question, as in “What are the characteristics of the Buddha?”, or “Where can I find the Buddha?”, but to instead think of the Zen answer applying to the *form* of the question. The answer, “three pounds of flax”, is of the form of the “denying the obvious”, in which the answer is in fact criticizing the question for making such a category mistake. In this way, *any* answer that does not answer the question on the level is a good answer, and thus

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<sup>3</sup> This excludes, of course, simple and practical categories of classification, such as allows the reader to determine sources of material

the real question being asked (from the point of the koan) is “Does the question ‘what is Buddha’ make sense?” This pattern repeats itself in other koan, such as “What was my original face before I was born?”

## Application – “Who am I?”

When we ask the question, “Who am I?”, we must be careful and apply a bit of Wittgensteinian skepticism at the meanings of these terms. The question is read by most as “What defines ‘me’?”, and thus seems on the level of this skepticism, but there is a slight and barely perceptible difference between the question “What defines ‘me’” and the truly skeptic approach.

For one, “What defines the term ‘me’” is really no different than “Who am I” in the sense that it assumes that there is something to find. There is an implied disquotationalism to the first phrase, of the form “‘I am something’ if I am something”, which again implies that the concepts of ‘I’ or ‘me’ are actual, concrete things. It seems that understanding of the question then requires a few levels of layering to be removed.

First, as in the stories of Yasutani-Roshi’s private encounters, answers come in the form of either physical relationships (“I am skin and bones”) or metaphysical relationships (“I am the sum of my thoughts and emotions”). These are rejected out-of-hand as missing the point of the question – my body is made up of skin and bones, but “I” am not, and my memory is made up of thoughts and emotions, but I am not. We have just asked the question again, which is “What is this thing that has a body, and memory, and everything else?”

The next set of answers are the ones along the line of “I don’t know”, which expose that that nobody can truly “know” themselves, especially in any simple epistemological sense<sup>4</sup>. This is a better answer than before, but still does not expose the true depth of the question.

In short, the question itself is unanswerable. Perhaps a more concise way of asking the question would be along the lines of, “Does the concept of ‘I’ even exist?”, to which a Zen student would answer, “No”. When stated in this way, however, you end up with an unavoidable complication, which is that your answer, *within your language*, depends on the subject-object distinction; that is, you would like to answer in the form, “I do not exist”, but that answer requires you to be stating ‘I’. This leads to just more infinite regress, as you cannot state even this without becoming the subject. The only possible answer, then, is to not answer at all, for you cannot state anything through the use of language without becoming a subject.

## Implications

Hopefully, with the idea of approaching Zen from a study of its language, there are new techniques that we can use to comprehend Zen in a way that is more easily understood

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<sup>4</sup> There are epistemological theories that take into account knowing or proving the truth of things that we normally disassociate with these concepts, such as aesthetics or ethics. Since these appear to be beyond the scope of the more popular and accepted epistemological theories of the lay Westerner, and because this perspective is most likely the one of the Western student of Zen, we can ignore these other epistemological approaches for now.

within our philosophical traditions; even if the content of Zen teachings is incommensurable with a given philosophical belief, at least the reader can hope to be arguing apples and apples.

In addition, these conclusions can tell us much about our own predilections towards language. The most common (and perhaps accepted) response to Zen in the West is to reject it on the grounds that it is not an accurate representation of the world, and this should come as little surprise. Our society prides itself on the elevation of scientific and technological pursuits, and good science requires a philosophy of specialized languages that we can hypothesize and test. Falsification is a necessity that then carries over into our world in other ways, as we analyze and give value to discourse that contains “factual” information. This pervades our outlook on what is meaningful in a more general sense – what pursuits should be prized above others. In a sense, the lay Western theory of language *is* our theory of epistemology. Perhaps, with a keen awareness of our own philosophical limitations, we can better appreciate both the content of the Zen teachings that have been made available to us, and even better understand our own assumption as they apply to both Zen (in particular) and Eastern philosophy (in general).

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