

Zen and Zen Philosophy of Language: A Soteriological Approach

Jin Y. Park*

Scholars' views on the role of language in the Zen Buddhist tradition have recently diverged in two opposite directions. One is the traditional claim that Zen is at odds with language and Zen enlightenment is an experience of a linguistically pure state; the other is the relatively newer claim that language has played a pivotal role in the development of Zen tradition and Zen enlightenment is nothing more than a mastery of a particular monastic language game. These two seemingly contradictory claims about the role of language in Zen Buddhism as either a search for a non-linguistic state or a mastery of a specific linguistic system do not have to be mutually exclusive as they seem to be at first glance. Within Zen literature and the school's historical development, one finds the unmistakable coexistence of contradictory claims about language and written texts. For example, even though Zen Buddhism has declared from the very inception of the school that Zen enlightenment is characterized by a separation from language, each time such a claim was made, Zen neutralized its position on language with counterbalancing statements which discharge language from the accusation of being an obstacle to enlightenment.

Also, despite the claim that Zen is a special transmission outside Buddhist scriptures and written texts, Zen Buddhism has produced a tradition fully decorated with sophisticated Zen literature throughout its history. What this suggests to me is that there might be a different realm in the Zen

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religion, American University. Email: jypark@american.edu.

Buddhist account of language that cannot be neatly summed up as a desire for either a linguistic or anti-linguistic game, though both of them can be utilized in the process of our understanding of Zen language. The phenomenon further suggests that in order to understand Zen language fully, we might need a paradigm whose focus is not a judgment of the linguistic or non-linguistic nature of Zen enlightenment. As an attempt to create such a paradigm, I propose in this article what I would call a soteriological approach to Zen language. Both the linguistic and anti-linguistic approaches I mentioned earlier can be understood as soteriological approaches in a broad sense, for they also concern how language functions in the Zen doctrine of enlightenment. However, the soteriological understanding of Zen language I propose here distinguishes itself from the two at least in the following three aspects: first, its primary concern lies with the practitioner instead of with enlightenment *per se*; second, it focuses on the process of enlightenment rather than on enlightenment as a goal; finally, it emphasizes the language of participation as opposed to that of prescription.

The first section of this article surveys linguistic and non-linguistic approaches to Zen language. The second section discusses the issue within the context of *huatou* 話頭 meditation as described in Pojo Chinul's 普照知訥 (1158-1210) *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Kanhua Meditation* 《看話決疑論》 (1215). By analyzing *huatou* language in *Kanhua* Zen 看話禪 in the case of Pojo Chinul's Zen Buddhism, this essay aims to fill the gap in our interpretation of Zen language with the help of the stereological perspective.¹

1. Linguistic and Non-linguistic Approaches to Zen Language

The most prevalent understanding of the Zen attitude toward language asserts a flat rejection of the linguistic system. From that perspective, Zen sees distortion as inevitable in our use of words and theorization, and sees enlightenment as an experience of human reality that takes place beyond the realm of linguistic communication. This vision of linguistically pure Zen explains the school as searching for a "pure experience" of the "primordially given" original nature of human beings, when the practitioner frees herself or himself from the linguistically constructed reality of this world. Hence, Zen is understood as an effort to reach the realm when language

¹ With regard to the romanization of Chinese characters, in order to avoid confusion, I will use "Zen" to refer to both the Chinese (which should be called Chan) and the Korean (which should be called Sŏn) traditions. For other Chinese characters, I will use Chinese pronunciations for both Chinese and Korean traditions, unless noted otherwise.

“halts” as Roland Barthes writes: “All of Zen...appears as an enormous praxis destined to halt language... perhaps what Zen calls *satori*... is no more than a panic suspension of language, the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes, the breach of that internal recitation which constitutes our person” (Barthes: 74-75). When this idea of Zen rejection of language is pushed to the extreme, Zen was blamed for its “monopoly of inarticulation” (Koestler: 58)² and further accused as an Oriental equivalent of the “debasement of writing” which Jacques Derrida employs in his deconstruction of Western metaphysics (see Faure 1991: 26-31; 1993: 195-242; Park 1998: 201-213).

The idea that Zen Buddhist enlightenment reflects an aspiration for a linguistically pure realm in human experience encounters opposition when postmodern and post-structuralist theories of language come into play. When Zen enlightenment is viewed as a non-linguistic pure state, language is understood mainly through its representational function. Language represents truth, but as such it is not a constituent factor in the construction of truth. Understanding of language as a medium, or a carrier, of truth not only prevents language from participating in the message of truth itself, but makes it a liability for one’s understanding of truth. In the space between the truth and its receiver stands language. This being the space in which the distortion of the original message of the truth takes place, the only way to overcome this unwanted play of the intermediary power, one would argue, is to completely remove that stage.

The idea that language or linguistic communication not only participates in one’s experience of truth but is its indispensable element introduces a linguistic approach to Zen language. In this context, mainly two interpretations have been suggested: the first is to understand Zen language as a rhetorical discourse and the second is to interpret it as a specific language game. Mark Lawrence McPhail’s discussion of Zen language in connection with postmodern narrative takes the stance of the first. According to McPhail, Zen language is to be understood with its “rhetorical aspect,” rhetoric here indicating its being positioned on the other side of argumentative and critical language based on the identity principle of dualistic think-

² Arthur Koestler writes: “Painters paint, dancers dance, musicians make music, instead of explaining that they are practicing no-thought in their no-mind. Inarticulateness is not a monopoly of Zen; but it is the only school which made a monopoly out of it” (Koestler: 58). Whether Zen has monopolized inarticulation or not is very much a debatable issue. However, it is misleading to say that Zen inarticulation, if such phenomenon does exist, has been drawn from the rationale similar to painters’, dancers’, or musicians’ use of communicative methods other than language. Is language completely missing in their expressions? The issue here is whether our use of language can be limited to verbal expressions.

ing. Reading the tradition of encounter-dialogue in Zen Buddhism from a rhetorical perspective, McPhail evaluates Zen as a “radically emancipatory understanding of language and life” (McPhail: 6; see also McPhail: 113-129; Olson). What McPhail suggests is that language in Zen tradition is, instead of something that needs to be removed for the experience of Zen enlightenment, fully operating in Zen discourse.

Dale S. Wright pushes the idea of the rhetorical function of Zen language further and claims that Zen tradition, rather than denying the use of language, developed its own language game that Wright calls a “monastic language game.” Wright brings our attention to the fact that language is not an optional element in one’s life nor is the pre-linguistic state, if such exists at all, accessible to human beings. At the very beginning of his article, “Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience,” Wright states: “The object of this essay is to present an alternative to what I take to be a fundamental component of Western-language interpretations of Zen experience—the idea that Zen enlightenment is an undistorted ‘pure experience’ of ‘things as they are’ beyond the shaping power of language” (Wright 1992: 113-138; see also Wright 2000: 200-212). As an alternative to the purely non-linguistic approach to Zen language, Wright proposes that “awakening would consist, among other things, in an awakening to rather than from language.... Zen monastic training would be understood to require a fundamental reorientation of one’s sense of language” (Wright 1992: 123). Wright’s interpretation not only secures an essential role for language in Zen enlightenment, but also creates a special position for it: “Language is taken to be the power to form that commonality and to shape and sustain the monks’ shared concern for the possibility of ‘awakening’” (*ibid.*).³

In the examples I have provided so far, one finds a spectrum, which ranges from a complete denial of language to a full acceptance of it. It is true that the linguistic and nonlinguistic approaches deal with Zen language at different stages in Zen practice. In other words, the non-linguistic approach is mainly concerned about the role of language in the state of enlightenment, while the linguistic approach focuses on the role of language in the process of attaining enlightenment. This distinction, however, should not pose a serious obstacle to our line of argument because if language in the ultimate stage of Zen practice is to be forgotten, language in the process to reach that goal cannot have any major role either. Also, if language is

³ Bernard Faure also finds the combination of Zen language and power (in this case, the emphasis is on social rather than monastic power) an attractive alternative to the naïve argument for alinguistic pure experience in Zen Buddhism: “The question [in Zen discourse] is never that of language in abstracto, but always that of legitimate language and of the power from which it derives and to which it gives access” (Faure 1993: 196; see also 195-216).

understood as essential in Zen practice and a pre-condition for it, the goal reached through that practice cannot be free from linguistic power. Our focus lies not in such distinction between the two approaches but in the fact that these seemingly contradictory understandings regarding the role of language in Zen Buddhism are not as mutually exclusive as they seem but coexist like two sides of a coin in various Zen discourses.

Actually, the confusion about the Zen attitude toward language and contradictory interpretations of it is not exclusively a modern phenomenon but one that scholar repeatedly encounter in traditional Zen Buddhist literature. In the well-known passages attributed to Bodhidharma (6th c ca), Zen Buddhism identifies its goal as follows:

A special transmission outside the scripture,
Not dependent on words and letters,
Directly pointing at the essence of human mind,
Seeing into one's nature and becoming a Buddha.⁴

These passages have been used, too frequently and too easily, as a proof of Zen school's rejection of a linguistic system. The history of Zen Buddhism provides ample examples of such expressions supporting the negative evaluation of language in Zen tradition. However, at least two issues are frequently forgotten when one accepts this negative tone of Zen rhetoric toward language. The first is the fact that the rejection of linguistic systems in Zen literature more often than not accompanies a complete acceptance of the system. The second is the question of why language is considered unreliable in Zen tradition. I will come back to the second issue later in this essay and here will take up the first case.

Consider the following statement by Bodhidharma on language:

The ultimate truth is beyond words. Doctrines [Theories or teachings] are only words. They are not the Way. The Way is originally wordless. Linguistic expressions are illusions. They are no different from things that appear in your dreams at night. (Pine: 31, translation modified)

In this typical Zen statement on language the non-linguistic approach unmistakably can find a ground for its argument. The truth is beyond linguistic expression, for language is as unreliable as things in one's dream. How-

⁴ These passages separately appear in the eleventh century Zen texts (see Foulk: 151 & end-note 16) and it is known to scholars that they probably were not composed until the time when Zen Buddhism had been established as an independent school (see Gregory & Getz: 4). This, however, does not disqualify these four stanzas' function in suggesting the Zen identity.

ever, Bodhidharma is also recorded as stating:

There is no language that is not Buddhist teachings.... The original nature of language is liberation. Language cannot cause attachment. Attachment originally cannot be caused by language. (Pine: 65; translation modified)

This seeming contradiction within Zen tradition regarding language appears in a more complicated and sophisticated form in the *Diamond Sūtra*, one of the major texts in Zen Buddhism. The narrative in the *Diamond Sūtra* is characterized by its use of paradox in explicating Buddhist teaching. The *Heart Sūtra*, a shorter version of prajñāpāramitā texts, also incorporates the logic of simultaneous acceptance of negation and affirmation in order to disturb the dualistic tendency imbedded in linguistic structure and one's way of thinking. In the *Diamond Sūtra*, the paradoxical play of negation and affirmation is further enforced. Consider, for example, how logic develops in the following passages from the *Diamond Sūtra*:

(1) What is called Buddhist *dharma* refers to what is not Buddhist *dharma*. (T 8.235.749b)

(2) I will lead all the sentient beings to *nirvāṇa*, though I said "I will lead all the sentient beings to *nirvāṇa*," there actually are no sentient beings. (T 8.235. 751a)

(3) Tathāgata means that all *dharma*s are as such. Some people might say that the Tathāgata has obtained unsurpassed, right, and equal enlightenment; however, Subhūti, there is no such *dharma* as unsurpassed, right, and equal enlightenment. In the unsurpassed, right, and equal enlightenment that the Tathāgata obtained, there is nothing real nor unreal, and that is why the Tathāgata says that all the *dharma*s are Buddhist *dharma*s, and again, Subhūti, what is called all the *dharma*s are not "all the *dharma*s"; their names are "all the *dharma*s." (T 8.235.751 a-b)

(4) Do not assume that there is *dharma* to be explained by the Tathāgata. Do not think like that... To talk about *dharma* (*dharma*-talk) means that there is nothing to talk about, that is why it is called *dharma*-talk. (T 8.235.751 c)

These quotations provide evidence of how the simultaneous usage of affirmation and negation, which I have described as a characteristic feature of the Zen attitude toward language, developed into Zen logic in a Zen text like the *Diamond Sūtra*. As Bodhidharma teaches language as illusion and at the same time liberation, the *Sūtra* in the first passage identifies *dharma* with no-*dharma*. In the second passage, the existence of sentient beings is affirmed and immediately negated. The third passage begins by negating the belief that the Tathāgata has attained enlightenment. This negation is immediately revoked by the admission that he did attain enlightenment. The final passage again identifies *dharma* with no-*dharma*.

The discourse obviously violates the logic of language, not to speak of the logic of logic. If “a” is identified with “not-a,” language cannot function; or language might still function in such a state but it loses its meaning; or language will function only if the user of the language learns it in a way that is different from linguistic convention. This might suggest that Zen training, as the linguistic approach claims, includes the capacity to decode the logic of the seeming illogic of Zen discourse as exemplified in the *Diamond Sūtra*; this in turn justifies the claim that mastery of a specific use of a language game is essential to Zen enlightenment and the power of Zen masters in Zen monasteries.

Such a conclusion brings us back to the beginning of our query to Zen language. The rejection of language in Zen discourse supports the nonlinguistic approach while the counterbalancing statement that accepts linguistic system and the logic of illogic in a Zen text like the *Diamond Sūtra* also provides a justification for the linguistic approach. Such a co-existence of negation and affirmation of language reaches its peak in what is known as “encounter-dialogue” (*gong'an* 公案) meditation, a unique way of employing language in Zen practice which has attracted many scholars in their efforts to understand the nature of Zen per se as much as Zen language.

2. Zen Language and Questioning Meditation

A “public case” (*gong'an* 公案) is an encounter dialogue between a Zen master and a student, which is usually marked by a gap between the question asked by the student and the answer given by the Zen master. One specific form developed in the course of the history of encounter dialogue method is called *huatou* 話頭 (or a “head of speech”) meditation. The major distinction between the encounter-dialogue method and the *huatou* (head of speech) meditation lies in that the former is based on the performative nature of “encounter” and “dialogue” while the latter focuses on one word, the “head of speech,” which comes out of a certain encounter dialogue.

To take the best known and frequently used example, *wu huatou* 無話頭, a student asks Zen master Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778-897): “Does a dog have the Buddha-nature?” Zhaozhou replies: “*Wu* 無,” which can be translated as “No” or “Nothing” (*Gateless Gates* [*Wumenguan* 無門關], Case 1, T 48.2005: 292c). This entire episode represents an encounter-dialogue; *wu* is a head of speech; and to meditate with this word, *wu*, is *kanhua* 看話 (“observing the *huatou*”). The core of this dialogue as an “encounter-dialogue” lies in the fact that the answer given by the Zen master does not quite fit the student’s question. In the case of *wu gong'an*, understanding Zhaozhou’s “no/nothing” as meaning “No” will contradict the Buddhist

claim that all beings have the Buddha nature. To interpret it as "Nothing" will make the answer nonsensical. The questioner tries to make a logical connection between the original question and the teacher's answer. The discrepancy between the question and the various possible answers, however, puts the questioner into a logically untenable position.

Other examples of the encounter dialogue include: "What is the Buddha?" "What is the Way?" and "What is the meaning of the First Patriarch's coming from the West?" The answers are respectively: "Three pounds of flax," "A dried shit-stick," and "The tree in front of the garden."⁵ In these three examples, the absurdity of the question-and-answer practice is obvious. It becomes clear that neither the question itself nor the answer given to the question is the major issue involved in the *huatou* method. How does language function in these dialogues and what does Zen Buddhism aim to earn from this practice? The rest of the essay is an attempt to answer this question, employing the case of Pojo Chinul's Zen Buddhism.

Chinul's thought on *huatou* meditation is clearly articulated in his writing, *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Kanhua Meditation*. In this text, Chinul makes an effort to help his contemporaries remove their suspicions of the *huatou* method and to convince them of its efficacy. Thematically speaking, Chinul's argument in the *Treatise* evolves around one major thesis: *huatou* meditation is the quickest and most effective way to achieve enlightenment and is different from any other forms of Buddhist teachings whether they be scholastic schools like Flower Garland (*Huayan* 華嚴) or Sudden School (*Dunjiao* 頓教). At first glance, one finds Chinul's argument charged with the contradictory claim of supporting both the linguistic and non-linguistic nature of Zen enlightenment; however, his work turns out to provide a new perspective on language in Zen practice.

In presenting the superiority of *huatou* meditation in Zen practice, Chinul claims that a denial of the linguistic system is neither the goal of Zen Buddhism nor a Zen-specific phenomenon. Instead, according to him, the idea of freeing individuals from linguistic traps can be found in many different Buddhist teachings. Chinul states,

⁵ Encounter dialogues are collected in two books, *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyanlu* 碧岩錄) and *Gateless Gates* (*Wumenguan* 無門關). For English translations of both, see Sekida. For the translation of *The Blue Cliff Record*, see Cleary & Cleary; for the *Gateless Gates* see Aitken, and Cleary 1997. For a general introduction to the *huatou* method, see Wönyung. For a socio-historical context of the emergence and popularity of the *huatou* exercise, see Miura & Sasaki. For the most recent scholarship on "encounter-dialogue," see Heine & Wright. For a brief but interesting observation of the effect of the encounter-dialogue on Western literature, see Dumoulin. A deconstructive reading of the tradition can be found in Faure 1993: 211-216. For the encounter-dialogue tradition in Korea, see Buswell 1986: 217-218 and Buswell 1987.

The idea of leaving language behind and eliminating speculation is found in all five teachings. Each teaching has something to say about freeing practitioners from linguistic constraints and that is to teach the practitioner to overcome linguistic description and grasp the seminal message. (733b; in Park 1998: 383)

The Flower Garland School's theory of Five Teachings proposed by Fazang 法藏 (643-712) places Zen on the fourth level of the five tier classification of Buddhist teaching under the rubric of the Sudden Teaching.⁶ Chinul strongly denies the identification of Zen with Sudden Teaching, one reason being that the goal of Sudden Teaching, according to Chinul, is just to block the linguistic and thinking faculty of the practitioner. The implication is that Zen practice, especially *huatou* meditation, is more than a simple rejection of a linguistic system. Here, Chinul obviously denies the non-linguistic model of Zen enlightenment. How then does Zen practice, especially *huatou* meditation, differ from other Buddhist teachings with regards to its treatment of language?

In order to clarify the characteristics of *huatou* meditation, Chinul provides two distinctions he considers essential to *huatou* practice. The first is the distinction between "live words" (*huoju* 活句) and "dead words" (*sjju* 死句), and the second is that between "involvement with meaning" (*canyi* 參意) and the "involvement with words" (*canju* 參句). Borrowing from Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1088-1163), Chinul teaches the first distinction as follows:

The practitioner of *huatou* must involve himself with "live words"; do not get

⁶ Fazang's doctrinal classification divides the Buddha's teaching into five stages: Hīnayāna Teaching (*xiaoshengjiao* 小乘教), Mahāyāna Inception Teaching (*dasheng shijiao* 大乘始教), Mahāyāna Final Teaching (*dasheng zhongjiao* 大乘終教), Sudden Teaching (*dunjiao* 頓教), and Complete Teaching (*yuanjiao* 圓教). Fully developed and articulated in Fazang's *Treatise on the Five Teachings* (*Wujiao zhang* 《五教章》) the doctrine of the Five Teachings is already traceable in the writings of Dushan 杜順 (557-640), the first patriarch of the school. See Dushan, "Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of the Hua-yen" (《華嚴五教止觀》). For an English translation of Dushan's work, see Clearly 1983/1994: 43-68. For an English translation of Fazang's *Treatise on the Five Teachings*, see Cook. For the Flower Garland school's doctrinal classification, see Gregory 1991: 93-135; Lie 1981: 10-47. The relationship between the Flower Garland School and Zen Buddhism had a significant meaning to Chinul, who was a devoted Flower Garland scholar before he changed the direction of his Buddhism toward *huatou* meditation in his later years. The fact that Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780-841) was one of the most influential figures throughout Chinul's life tells something about Chinul's stance on this relationship. In *The Complete and Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood* (《圓頓成佛論》) written during the period of Chinul's Flower Garland Buddhism, Chinul provides a strong advocacy of the Flower Garland teaching, while in the *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Kanhua Meditation*, he places *huatou* meditation as the most efficient and quickest way to enlightenment. This transformation in Chinul has been a topic for many scholarly researches. For the relation between the Flower Garland and Zen schools in Chinul, see Park 1998: 220-258; Buswell 1986 and Buswell 1983: 1-95; Shim.

involved with “dead words.” If one obtains enlightenment by a direct confrontation with “live words,” one won’t forget it ever; if one works with “dead words,” one won’t even be able to save oneself [let alone being unable to help others to get awakened]. (737a; in Park 1998: 424)

And regarding the second distinction, Chinul states:

Huatou meditation contains two kinds: one is an “involvement with meaning” and the other, an “involvement with words.” Practitioners in our time, in their attempt to resolve doubts, work vainly on the former and have yet to practice the latter. (737a; in Park 1998: 427)

Both “live/dead words” and the “involvement with words/meaning” are not Chinul’s own devices but concepts he learned from Dahui, who in turn learned them from his teacher Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (1063-1135).⁷ In Chinul’s teaching of *huatou*, as much as in Yuanwu’s and Dahui’s, the two distinctions are critical in practicing *huatou* meditation. Throughout the text, however, Chinul provides neither a definition nor an explanation of exactly how these distinctions function. If we borrow a comment by Great Master Hujōng 休靜 (1520-1604) who has been credited as “a direct spiritual descendant of Chinul” (Mu Soeng: 142), the “involvement with words” means the “live words” in which “no mental route or verbal route is laid out,” while the “involvement with meaning” refers to the “dead words” which is characterized by the fact that “a logical route and a verbal route are laid out, [so that] one hears explanation and thinks about ideas” (Hujōng: 7.636b). Based on these interpretations, we can safely assume that one’s degree of

⁷ When both distinctions were first used by Yuanwu, one of his major concerns was to warn both literati and practitioners against the conceptual understanding of “encounter-dialogue.” As encounter-dialogues began to be compiled during the Sung dynasty, the encounter-dialogue with old cases complemented with explanatory verses and commentaries produced a highly sophisticated literary culture. The old method of shouting and kicking have been extremely overused, creating a performance without awakening, while old cases turned Zen into a culture of literary study. That the Zen tradition did not completely stay away from such a trend, but instead tried a revolution within the seemingly literary culture, seems to me an indication that the Zen concept of language is far from being a simple rejection of the linguistic system. Yuanwu tried to change the trend of Zen practice in his time from the literary Zen to practical Zen by emphasizing the “live words” as opposed to the reading of encounter-dialogues which he defined as “dead words” and by urging people to directly involve themselves with “words,” instead of analyzing the “meaning” of each case. Although this was Yuanwu’s intention in composing the *Blue Cliff Records*, it is not clear, from the way he introduces them, how one gets involved with “live words” and gets involved with “words” and not “meaning.” Yuanwu’s efforts had not produced much change in the way encounter-dialogues were understood in his time and eventually led his student Dahui to launch a revolution of his own by burning his teacher’s book and introducing a new way of practicing encounter-dialogue. For discussions on Yuanwu’s Kanhua meditation see Hsieh 1994: 66-95 and 1993; Yü; Buswell 1987.

reliance on language is a key criterion of these distinctions that are crucial in *huatou*. This understanding of *huatou* language, however, contradicts the claim Chinul makes in the *Treatise*. As mentioned earlier, in the *Treatise*, Chinul clearly declares that the idea of dismissing language is not a Zen-specific phenomenon but one that can be found in many Buddhist teachings in history. Yet here Chinul is asserting the 'wayless' way in which neither mental nor verbal routes are provided as the only and best way to practice Zen.

After a repeated denial of the identification of the Zen practice with the teaching of "leaving thought and language behind," Chinul explains how Zen functions as follows:

Those who practice the shortcut approach of the Zen school do not rely on acquired understanding and feelings at all and directly enter into enlightenment only guided by the flavorless *huatou*. They are not subject to the temporal scheme imposed by language, or to meaning, mind, consciousness, and speculation as well as acquired understanding and interpretation. All of a sudden the *huatou* will explode, shaking the ground when... the *dharmadhātu* of One Mind illuminates itself. (Chinul: 4.736b; in Park 1998: 417-8)

Chinul further clarifies his position on the superiority of *huatou* meditation by emphasizing that *huatou* is a "special transmission outside the doctrine" which is significantly different from the teaching of the scholastic schools and which can be mastered only by those who have achieved a high mental state. As we follow Chinul's line of argument to support the *huatou* meditation, a question arises: If the *huatou* is a special transmission outside texts and the best description Chinul can provide of the functioning of *huatou* in practice is an eruption of the mystical moment of enlightenment, how is it compatible with Chinul's claim that the denial of linguistic description has nothing to do with Zen enlightenment? Would it be a confirmation that, despite Chinul's repeated denial of identifying Zen experience with the rejection of language, Zen enlightenment is after all a search for a "pure experience" beyond the linguistic realm that suddenly arises when practitioners "overcome linguistic description and grasp the seminal message?" If this is the case, are the distinctions between "live words" and "dead words" and that between the "involvement with word" and the "involvement with meaning" none other than Chinul's (and Dahui's) way of expressing the difference between approaching Zen meditation with ("dead words"/ "involvement with meaning") and without ("live words"/ "involvement with words") relying on the linguistic system?

In order to answer these questions and to clarify the relation between the two sets of distinctions, let us examine the following three quotes that Chinul provides as examples of each case. The first quote is an example of

the “dead words”; the second, the “involvement with meaning”; and the third, the “live words” and the “involvement with word”:

(1) In this endless world, between me and others, there is no gap even as infinitesimal as the thinness of a hair. The entirety of the past and present of the whole world is not separated from one thought at this moment. (Chinul: 4.733a)

(2) (a) (“What is the Buddha?”)

“The oak tree in the garden.” (*Gateless Gate*, case 37, T 48, 2005. 297 c)

(b) (“What is the meaning of the first Patriarch’s coming from the West?”)

“Three pounds of flax.” (*Gateless Gate*, case 18, T 48. 2005.295c; *Blue Cliff Record*, case 12, T 48.2003.193a)

(3) Master Shuilao 水潦 asked Mazu 馬祖, while they were out gathering rattan:

“What does it mean that Patriarch Bodhidharma came from the west?”

“Come close, I’ll let you know,” Mazu replied.

As soon as Shuilao approached him, Mazu kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Shuilao picked himself up without being aware of it, and burst into a big laugh, clapping his hands.

“What did you learn that makes you laugh like that?” Mazu asked.

“A hundred thousand teachings on *dharma*, countless mysterious meanings, all [in every aspect] are understood in their essence at the tip of one hair,” Shuilao said.

Mazu suddenly didn’t concern himself about Shuilao. (Chinul 4.735b; in Park 1998: 409-410)

The example of the “dead words” in the first quote provides a “logical” rendering of the Buddhist doctrine known as the “unobstructed interpenetration of all beings,” the ultimate stage on the teachings of the Flower-Garland School. Compared to the full description in the first quote, the second example, which consists of two well-known encounter-dialogues, uses terse language and opaque logic. The third example does not concern itself with linguistic expressions in its attempts to render enlightenment. The answer Shuilao received from Mazu was neither a logical explanation nor a puzzling response: rather he received a big kick, and the episode records this as a moment of awakening. Such gestures as shouting, silencing, and striking have been given as examples of the third stage.

Superficially, the movement from the first stage of “dead words” to the third stage of the “live words” appears to be a gradual removal of the linguistic system. It is characterized by a shift from a full-sentence statement via a fragmentary conversation to a communication carried out through non-linguistic means in the third stage. During the process, the logic of daily life becomes diluted to the point that a kick causes an awakening. This, however, does not fully explain the distinction among the three

citations.

Consider that even in the stage of the “dead words” in the first quote, the alleged logic is not very logical. Also, in the third quote, enlightenment may be attained by a non-verbal action, such as being kicked, but the presentation of that moment is fully articulated. The practitioners/readers need to bring together their literary, religious, and philosophical imaginations in order to grasp the meaning of this discourse.

What exactly did happen in the alleged “mind-to-mind” communication between Mazu and Shuïlao? Theoretically speaking, if Chinul warns against the “dead words” of investigating meaning because of its nature of proliferation of meaning and logic which is understood as not being helpful to the practitioner, it is tempting to identify this mind-to-mind communication as a state when language stops functioning in our thought-process as the nonlinguistic model suggests. However, what then is the role of language in this fully verbalized description of the moment of enlightenment? If enlightenment is the experience of a linguistically pure state, can this verbal description stand by itself? How does Zen find the justification for the authenticity of the verbal recording of a non-linguistic experience? Does this then suggest that Zen enlightenment is taking place by actualizing a specific rhetoric/language game exclusive to a Zen practitioner and that practicing the “live words” is nothing other than learning to decode Zen language, while the “dead words” are saturated with the common sense logic and communication of our daily language? I will leave the question unanswered for a moment and move to the soteriological model in hopes of clarifying the seeming contradiction innate in Chinul’s rendering of *hua-tou* language.

3. Zen Philosophy of Language: A Soteriological Approach

What is the relationship between language and thought, language and a speaking subject, and language and the subject’s experience? Contemporary Western philosophy has taken these issues as the core of its understanding of the world and being. Imported to the Western world in the milieu of such an environment, the study of Zen language in the West has keenly debated the issue of whether what Zen calls enlightenment is a linguistically bound or linguistically pure experience. However, Zen language involves, to a certain degree, both linguistic and nonlinguistic approaches, and even such a self-contradictory claim that Zen both denies and accepts a linguistic system does not fully explain the role of language in Zen. This fact urges us to consider the third possibility, which does not tangle with linguistic or nonlinguistic nature of experience but which allows a symbolic function of

Zen language. I call this alternative a soteriological approach. From this perspective, Zen language, when the scope is limited to the case of Chinul's *hwaeton* meditation, is characterized by the following three aspects, as mentioned earlier. First, its primary concern lies with the practitioner instead of enlightenment per se, which I explain as language of anxiety; second, it focuses on the process of enlightenment rather than on the goal to be achieved, which I call language of interrogation; finally, *hwaeton* embodies language of participation as opposed to that of prescription.

(1) *Hwaeton* and the Language of Anxiety: In its relation to the practitioner, *hwaeton* speaks the language of anxiety. *Sūtras* and Buddhist doctrines describe the goal to be achieved by the practitioner. The ultimate level of the Flower Garland school, for example, beautifully articulates the state of complete enlightenment when individual events take place in perfect harmony without interrupting one another. Beautiful and perfect as it may be, from the perspective of the practitioner, the reality of the ultimate realm is far beyond her or his reach. Most urgent is her or his reality and that is exactly what is missing in the *sūtras* and even in anthologies of encounter-dialogues. Implicit in *hwaeton* language, which Chinul calls the "live words" and the "involvement with words," is the recognition of the practitioner's struggle as an inevitable part of the path to enlightenment. It urges the practitioners that they need to be aware of their reality instead of the reality described in the *sūtras*.

Hwaeton meditation involves at least two types of anxiety. The first is ontological anxiety that arises out of the paradox of identity: "I am a Buddha, and at the same time I am a sentient being." The anxiety, which is caused by the irony inherent in the sentient being's existence, is the practitioner's burden that must be endured throughout his or her journey to enlightenment. The second is the lack of practical guidelines in pursuing the path to enlightenment, which produces a double anxiety to the practitioner in Zen tradition. The disturbance created inside the practitioner demands an action to relieve the individual from the burden of anxiety, which eventually makes possible a religious leap beyond the paradox of one's dual identity as a sentient being and a Buddha. This religious leap in the context of *hwaeton* meditation takes place through the transformation from the metaphysical inquiry of "what is...?" to the ontological question of "why...?" via the art of interrogation.

(2) *Hwaeton* and the Language of Interrogation: In *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment* (1983), Sung Bae Park proposes to interpret the *hwaeton* method as a "questioning meditation," utilizing an etymological analysis of two Korean words, "brokenness" (깨짐) and "enlightenment" (깨침) (see Park 1983: 123-125). "For the kung-an meditation," Park writes, "it is crucial to maintain a constant, unbroken questioning of wu. The key to the

kung-an is not the word wu, but the active process of questioning itself, i.e., Why? Why? Why?" (ibid.: 73).

"Wu *huatou*," which I introduced earlier, is the first *gongan* known as "Zhaozhou's Dog" in the *Gateless Gate*. Here a monk asks Master Zhaozhou whether a dog has Buddha nature. Zhaozhou answers "wu." "Wu? Mu? No? What does he mean?" The monk must have wondered. Hence Wumen 無門 (1183-1260), the compiler of the volume, comments on the *gongan* as follows:

In order to master Zen, one should pass the barrier of the patriarchs. To attain this subtle realization, you must completely cut off the way of thinking. If you do not pass the barrier, and do not cut off the way of thinking, then you will be like a ghost clinging to the bushes and weeds. (Sekida: 27)

How then does one cut off the way of thinking and get through the barrier? Wumen advises that one should hold on to a questioning mind of doubt as he states: "Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word 'wu'" (ibid.: 28).

Wumen's comments on the "Zhaozhou's dog" case in his *Gateless Gate* unmistakably reverberates with echoes of Dahui's teaching on *kanhua* 看話 meditation. In his efforts to change the trend of "literary Buddhism" during the mid-Song dynasty, to which texts on encounter-dialogues made not a small contribution, Dahui strongly emphasizes the importance of doubt. Criticizing the tendency of hyper-textualizing case stories of encounter-dialogues with the compilation of new interpretations one after another, Dahui teaches the practitioner to focus on a "*huatou*," the head of a speech, clearing up all the contextual resonance that constantly arouses conceptual chains.

What *huatou* meditation, or *Kanhua* Zen, aims to do through focusing on *huatou*, i.e. the core word in the encounter-dialogues, instead of employing the entire story of the dialogues, is to create one great existential doubt (see Park 1983: 66-77). As the practitioner's anxiety and frustration created by *huatou* develop into one great doubt, the mode of thinking in the practitioner changes from the declarative and judgmental tone of the normative to the questioning tone of the interrogative in which the subject's tendency for judgment is suspended.

Interrogation is a mutual act. The interrogation, in the way it functions in the practitioner of *huatou*, does not and cannot define the interrogated; instead it opens up a space in which the questioner and the questioned get close to each other. The normative mode functions by maintaining a certain distance between the subject and linguistic expressions. The subject will eventually define the object as she or he declares her or his evaluation of

the object. The dualism innate in this narrative never breaks down. The interrogative mode, on the other hand, comes about when the doubt within the questioner begins to erode the certainty she or he has maintained of the questioned. In the interrogative mode, the subject's dominance over the object loses its ground and eventually the demarcation between the questioner and the questioned becomes blurred. The dismantling of the boundary will take place as a solution to the ontological paradox with which the practitioner has been struggling.

(3) *Huatou* and Language of Participation: Finally, *huatou* speaks the language of participation. Both the language of anxiety and the language of interrogation cannot take place without the involvement of the practitioner. I have just said, "language takes place" in *huatou*, but how does language "take place" or "occur?" This grammatical disruption provides a good example of the Zen attitude toward language, which Chinul clearly articulates in his teaching of *huatou*. In the *Treatise*, Chinul points out that in terms of theory, both the teachings of the Flower Garland School and the Sudden School cannot be wrong. However, *kanhua* is the most recommended practice. This is not because other schools employ language while the *kanhua* method teaches students not to rely on language; it is rather because in other schools, linguistic descriptions stand as they are, indifferent to the commitment of the practitioner, while *kanhua* functions only with the practitioner's participation. What this implies is that at the ultimate level, language per se cannot be the criterion for a judgment about the nature of Zen enlightenment; instead the main concern of Zen is whether or not language itself is activated by the practitioner.

If we consider once again the three examples I provided earlier, in a logical rendering of the "dead words" such as "one phrase is so clear that it encompasses all the phenomena in the world" (Chinul: 733a), the gap between the subject and the object, on the one hand, and the reader/practitioner and linguistic expression, on the other, is obvious. The phrase provides a goal for the practitioner to aim at, but it delineates the enlightened state without a concern for the practitioner's current status. It requires minimal involvement of the reader, for the level of the reader/practitioner does not change the contents of the phrase. In the second stage of the "involvement with meaning" of encounter dialogues, without the participation of the subject (i.e. the practitioner/the reader), the phrase remains nonsensical, for each case is heavily context-bound. When these stories are detached from the actual situation and written down in a text as encounter dialogues, the situationality of the story dissipates and the cases themselves turn into dead language that inspires a chain of interpretations. In the third stage of the "live words," if the parties involved in the story do not participate, the discourse itself cannot be constructed. Hence,

in his comments on *huatou* practice, Hujǒng advises that one should practice *huatou* with sincerity like “a hen brooding on her eggs, like a cat watching a mouse, like a hungry person thinking of food, like a thirsty person thinking of water, like a child longing for its mother” (Hujǒng: 636b-c; in Mu Seong: 152). The uninterrupted sincere concentration of the parties involved in these activities characterizes the key to the *huatou* practice.

4. Conclusion

Proposing a soteriological approach as one interpretation of *huatou* language in Zen Buddhism, I leave open the possibility of linguistic and nonlinguistic approaches to Zen enlightenment. One reason for this is to question the universalistic approach to Zen language. Throughout the development of the tradition, Zen Buddhism has been faithful to its initial promise that enlightenment is sudden and it should “take place” rather than be talked about. In this context, the definition of Zen Buddhism by Bodhidharma quoted earlier is to be understood as a soteriological promise of Zen Buddhism rather than as a declaration of Zen attitude toward language. One promise of Zen Buddhism is the suddenness of enlightenment. The suddenness of enlightenment in Zen school encompasses both a thematic structure and atemporality in its process. Since the basic tenet of Zen is that everybody is already Buddha, the “suddenness” of enlightenment emphasizes that the seeming gap between a Buddha and a sentient being is in fact illusory. Since there is no ontological gap between a Buddha and a sentient being, enlightenment is sudden, that is, immediate and unmediated.

In order to facilitate this “happening” of sudden enlightenment, different stages in the history of Zen schools have developed different methods to teach students. The paradoxical language in the inceptive period of the school had its own function that is distinguished from that of the performative language employed by Zen masters like Mazu or Zhaozhou. The language of disruption involved in the case stories of encounter-dialogues in the voluminous Zen literature compiled during the Song dynasty again functions differently from the language of *Kanhua* Zen, which I described here as the language of anxiety, interrogation, and participation. To dismiss such differences in the development of over a thousand years’ history of Zen Buddhism and to apply a universal theory of Zen language seems to me misleading.

The nature of ultimate enlightenment as such might not be changed in all these different methods. However, we are not dealing with enlightenment per se but with discourses on enlightenment. Regardless of the authenticity of enlightenment obtained by each Zen master, articulation on

the enlightenment is a secular business. Then, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of Zen language, we need a critical re-evaluation of the universalistic approach, both in terms of methodology and philosophy. Different schools as well as different time periods in Zen have employed language for different purposes, and the particularities of each case need be fully explored before we can reach any conclusion on the role of language in the Zen tradition.⁸

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⁸ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion under the title "Chan and Chan Philosophy of Language: the case of Chinul's Hwadu" (Nashville, TN, November 20, 2000).

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