

CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE: the sphere of immediacy

And the matter of language is a trifle, not worth your thought.
Dorje Chuncheh to John Blofeld¹

There arises the possibility that we undergo an experience with language, that we enter into something which bowls us over, that is, transmutes our relation to language.

Martin Heidegger²

Whenever language becomes an explicit theme in the Huang Po texts, the verdict appears to be negative. Since the true matter of Zen “cannot be grasped by way of language,”³ the Zen master’s practice must take an alternative course: “The Way resides in Mind awakening. How can it be spoken in language?”⁴ This attitude toward language is not a unique feature of the Huang Po texts; it pervades the Zen literature of the era. Lin-chi, who called the sacred texts of his own tradition “worthless dust,” belittles students of Zen who “seize upon words,” taking language to constitute “the true way.”⁵ Thus, it was for good reason that Ma-tsu, the founder of this Hung-chou tradition of Zen, was given the posthumous title: “Zen master of Great Silence.”⁶ What more could be said?

Plenty. The texts do much more than simply proclaim the “wordless *dharma*,” they debate it, they exalt it, and they trace its sacred lineage. The “Great Silence” does not begin with Ma-tsu. It can be traced back through sacred history all the way to the Buddha himself. Here is how Huang Po delineates its origins: “In the end we are not able to clarify the ‘one mind *dharma*.’ Therefore, the Buddha called Kasyapa to join him

¹ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 42.

² Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 107.

³ T. 48, p. 381a. ⁴ T. 48, p. 384a.

⁵ T. 47, p. 499b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 19.

⁶ T. 51, p. 245; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 152.

on the *dharma* seat, and separately transmitted the one mind to him. Without words, he spoke the *dharma*.⁷ Elsewhere, we learn how to fill in the details of this narrative. Zen texts tell how, without speaking a word but holding a flower, the Buddha awakened his disciple, Kasyapa. In response, Kasyapa just smiled, and had nothing further to say. This, along with the story of Vimalakirti's "thunderous silence," set the stage for the understanding of language in the Zen tradition. Huang Po frequently calls upon Bodhidharma to represent this understanding. Bodhidharma's "wordless *dharma*"⁸ had initiated Zen in China and, from the legends of Bodhidharma, later Zen Buddhists had received Zen's basic formula:

A special transmission outside the sutras, not dependent on language and texts, pointing directly to mind, one sees the true nature of things and becomes the Buddha.

"Direct pointing" circumvents language and cuts immediately to the heart of the matter, a form of moment-to-moment "presence" in which nothing needs to be said. Therefore,

Ascending the lecture platform in the Dharma Hall, Huang Po said: "The search for numerous kinds of knowledge cannot compare with a life of 'no seeking.' This is certainly the most exalted. A person of the Way is a person 'without concerns' (*wu-shih*). Surely there are not numerous kinds of mind, nor principles of the Way (*tao-li*) that can be spoken. Since we are 'without concerns,' you are dismissed!"⁹

Having come to hear the *dharma*, however, the monks should not have been disappointed. What they heard spoken, in powerfully condensed Zen rhetoric, was Huang Po's best *dharma*. In this case, the *dharma* consists precisely in startling disclaimers of *dharma*. Language is made to bend back upon itself, empowering itself through the act of self-denial. To say, as Huang Po did, that there are no "principles of the Way that can be spoken" is to enunciate a fundamental principle of the Way of Zen. The monks of Huang Po monastery and the authors of our text were clearly aware of this. They did not lack the reflexivity to see what kind of *dharma* they spoke. Therefore, in superb reflexivity, *The Essentials of Mind Transmission* has Huang Po pronounce the principle that "saying that there is no *dharma* that can be spoken is called speaking the *dharma*."¹⁰ Nor was this paradox a matter of embarrassment to the

⁷ T. 48, p. 382b. ⁸ T. 48, p. 381b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 44. ⁹ T. 48, p. 383b.

¹⁰ T. 48, p. 382a. Iriya traces this sentence of Huang Po to the *Diamond Sutra* in *Denshin Hoyō*, p. 54.

tradition. It seemed in fact to indicate something of profundity, and was therefore repeated on important occasions. Bodhidharma “only spoke of one mind, only transmitted one *dharma* . . . This *dharma* is the *dharma* that cannot be spoken.”¹¹

Not all interpreters have been content to let this paradox stand, however, without calling upon some theory of language to explain it. Most of them, like John Blofeld, have found the instrumentalist view of language most suitable for this purpose. According to this understanding, language is an instrument or tool available for our use in achieving certain specific communicative goals. Language is a means to some other end. The success of this theory, as we will see, turns on the capacity to maintain strict separation between goals and means. Consequently, Blofeld frequently makes a clear distinction between the content of Zen awakening and the particular linguistic form in which it happens to be “clothed” for description. On this theory, although the enlightened mind has transcended language unconditionally, nevertheless, language remains necessary and useful. Its role is instrumental, at elementary levels, in order to help others transcend language. Thus, Blofeld writes that, once enlightenment has been achieved, Buddhists “may employ words to point the way to others.”¹² Although language can never “describe” awakening – “something lying infinitely beyond the highest point ever reached by the human intellect”¹³ – to the uninitiated, it may still be a useful tool, “as words of some sort must be used in order to set disciples on to the right path.”¹⁴ Regrettably, therefore, Blofeld acknowledges that “until intuition arises in your mind, words will have to do.”¹⁵

Why didn’t the Buddha just remain silent after enlightenment? Why speak at all? The traditional Buddhist answer matches Blofeld’s: the Buddha spoke out of compassion, and skillful means. The suffering needed assistance, and the *dharma* was the tool most suited to overcoming their pain. The Huang Po texts have no less an authority than Bodhidharma make this historical point: “The Buddha spoke the *dharma* in order to eradicate all traces of mind.”¹⁶ Linguistic formulation of the *dharma* has a purpose in spite of the fact that the best Zen intuitions are inclined toward silence.

The story of Huang Po’s first meeting with his teacher, Pai-chang, follows this same line. When Huang Po asked to hear Pai-chang’s interpretation of how the enlightened masters of Zen had taught, Pai-chang

¹¹ T. 48, p. 381b. ¹² Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 17. ¹³ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 18. ¹⁵ Blofeld, *Beyond the Gods*, p. 25. ¹⁶ T. 48, p. 381a.

just remained silent. Huang Po's response calls Pai-chang to task, and to responsibility for the lineage of Zen. "You cannot let the original Zen teachings be lost in the hands of later followers,"¹⁷ he reasoned. Pai-chang has something that needs to be passed on to subsequent generations. How else can this be done except through language? Silent withdrawal will not do. Language, therefore, makes its appearance as an inadequate, regrettable, but nevertheless essential tool of the Zen tradition. It is an instrument, a means to a worthy end. Consider this crucial passage from *The Essentials of Mind Transmission*:

This Way of heavenly truth originally lacked a name or word. Because people of the world did not understand and were confused, Buddhas became manifest in the world to teach a remedy to this situation. Concerned that people would still not comprehend, they expediently established the name "Way." But one cannot come to realization by focussing on this name. Therefore it is said: "Having obtained the fish, forget the fishtrap." When body and mind are spontaneous, the Way is penetrated, the mind understood.¹⁸

This passage is most easily interpreted as sustaining an instrumentalist view of language in Zen. Let us transcribe it as follows: the "Way" is fundamentally pre-linguistic; it existed on its own prior to language. But when people, in their ignorance, failed to make contact with "the Way," the language of Buddhism was constructed. Words like "the Way" were employed to instruct them. If, however, in the midst of using language, people become too fixated on the medium, they will miss the pre-linguistic point of it all. Drawing on the traditional Taoist text, the *Chuang-tzu*, we see an encapsulated version of the relationship between language as temporary means and enlightenment as goal. Although the trap (language) is there in order to catch the fish (enlightenment), once you've got the fish, the trap is no longer useful and can be forgotten.

On the basis of this understanding of language, the Huang Po texts can reflect back on their own Buddhist language and say: "These teachings are merely expedients to entice people to enter the way. Originally there were not these teachings. Letting go of them, this is the *dharma*."¹⁹ Although linguistic and textual training may have had a preliminary function, once the goal had been obtained, these could be released.

In contemporary contexts of thought, however, several realizations place this understanding of language in doubt, and inspire an effort to ask ourselves how we might conceive of the role of language in Huang Po's Zen in terms other than this. Once this doubt is raised, the Zen

¹⁷ T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 103. ¹⁸ T. 48, p. 382c. ¹⁹ T. 48, p. 381a.

tradition begins to take on a somewhat altered form, and we begin to notice the centrality of language in Zen. We notice, for example, that fascination with language, as well as discursive experimentation, reach their climax in the Zen tradition. We begin to realize in rereading these classic Zen texts that no tradition in any time or place was more aware of its language than Zen.

To initiate ourselves into these new ways of looking at language in Zen, we might begin by taking a closer look at the modern western view of language that has shaped our view of Zen so far. The instrumental theory of language was so deeply ensconced in Blofeld's romantic heritage that he saw no alternative to it. So natural did this theory seem to him that he did not hesitate in presenting it as the key to understanding Huang Po. In his introduction to *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, Blofeld articulates his theories of language and religious experience:

Those who have actually achieved this tremendous experience, whether as Christians, Buddhists or members of other faiths, are agreed as to the impossibility of communicating it in words. They may employ words to point the way to others, but, until the latter have achieved the experience for themselves, they can have but the merest glimmer of the truth – a poor intellectual concept of something lying infinitely beyond the highest point ever reached by the human intellect . . . Usually, it is the utter impossibility of describing the Supreme Experience which explains the paradoxical nature of their speech. To affirm or deny is to limit; to limit is to shut out the light of truth; but, as words of some sort must be used in order to set disciples on to the right path, there naturally arises a series of paradoxes.²⁰

We will want to take notice of several assumptions that make this theory possible, as well as some consequences that would seem to follow from it.

First, although “the Supreme Experience” is no doubt far from ordinary, there is nothing about it that is specific to any particular culture or language. The extraordinary person in any culture, speaking any language, has equal access to it because the experience is not linguistically and culturally mediated. Except for its differences from “ordinary mind,” “the experience of Zen” has no special “otherness” about it. We (Christians, Jews, secular modernists, and romantics) know “the experience” as well as “they” do, provided that we too have passed beyond cultural/linguistic categories to the bottom of things in pure unmediated experience. Romanticism, as a dominant form of modern liberalism, can thus take a charitable view of others – their “highest” experience is

²⁰ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, pp. 17–18.

every bit as “high” as ours. The hidden, and less charitable, side of this is that, since we already have direct access in our own culture to the highest and best in “their” culture, we don’t really have anything to learn from them. People are essentially the same. The otherness of the text, in this view, is only the otherness of depth to the shallowness of ordinary awareness. We may “express” or “describe” “the Supreme Experience” differently after we have it, but in the experience itself, we transcend those differences. The instrumental, secondary status of language makes this “universalist” theory of religious experience natural and obvious. If, however, experience and language “co-arise” in any sense, and are thus not so easily separable, then references to “the Supreme Experience” are problematized, and we begin to be concerned that we have not attended carefully enough to the distinctiveness of Zen.

Secondly, therefore, when Blofeld writes about “employing” and “using” language, we want to ask whether language is in fact best conceived as an instrument. From Blofeld’s point of view, language is a tool separate from the reality on which it may be used. We use it when we must say what we already know pre-linguistically. Blofeld does acknowledge that those of us who are not enlightened and who have not had “the Supreme Experience” may indeed be conditioned by language at the level of experience. Language, in this case, acts as a “filter” or a “veil” obstructing the purity of experience. According to Blofeld, when this occurs, we tend to enter into “disputes over words rather than what they signify.”²¹ We ignorantly take the particular words spoken as a dimension of the way things really are. The value of “Zen,” for Blofeld, and for western interpretation generally, is that through its “means” we come to direct experience and see things for ourselves, without regard to anyone’s language about them.

Notice, however, how language is continually hidden from Blofeld’s view, even when he is talking about it. When, for instance, Blofeld criticizes those who “have tried to clothe the Ultimate in words,”²² “the Ultimate” – Blofeld’s own “clothing” – is not noticed as language. “The Ultimate” here is simply what he is talking about, the referent itself. While “clothing” it as “God” or “Nirvana” may obscure it, the status and implications of the pronoun “it” do not come into view. The insight that “all thinking about language is already once again drawn back into language”²³ leads toward the further realization that language may be

²¹ Blofeld, *Tantric Mysticism*, p. 52. ²² Blofeld, *Hui Hai*, p. 39.

²³ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 62.

more than a tool available for “employment.” More fundamental than a tool at our disposal, language may be an element within which we reside as humans, in such a way that all of our “employments” always presuppose it.

The adequacy of Blofeld’s “clothing” metaphor is a good test case for the instrumental theory of language that is based upon it. In this context its adequacy will depend on whether experience and language are related in the same way as are people and their clothing. We understand the distinction between people and their clothing through the fact that they change clothing; they decide what to wear on any given occasion. Clothing both covers the person and presents the person in particular guises and forms. On occasions when all clothing comes off, the person will see him- or herself directly, rather than through one of the selected guises. If language and experience are analogously related, then we would have independent access to our own unclothed experience. Studying the various ways in which experience might be clothed in language, we would select one such outfit for conveyance to others.

This metaphor, and this account of language and experience, are no longer persuasive in our intellectual context. In the alternative that will be proposed in this chapter, experience always comes fully clothed, and the few occasions where that doesn’t seem to be so are more matters of limited wardrobe selection than of sheer nakedness. Where do we find language in everyday experience? Not primarily in abstraction as a system available when we must communicate. Instead, we find it in association with things and situations. We find it already in the world. Language constitutes a dimension of any experience. Although on occasion there are linguistic, rhetorical choices to be made, the overwhelming share of the time we don’t decide how to “put” things, we just say how they “are.” The words adequate to the experience are already there in association with the experience itself. We make decisions about how to put things only when they are not already in place themselves, that is, when ambiguity is a fundamental part of the experience itself. In these interesting cases, we don’t examine the experience on its own terms and then try various linguistic guises on to check their fit. Instead, we experience what is there through the juxtaposition of its multiple language forms. We experience “it,” therefore, *in* each of the language forms and *in* the relation between them, but never on “its” own.

Thirdly, when Blofeld assails “a poor intellectual concept of something lying infinitely beyond the highest point ever reached by the

human intellect,”²⁴ he draws upon two more forms of dichotomy familiar to romantic metaphysics, between thought and feeling and between what lies within the bounds of language and what lies beyond them. These are distinctions embedded in modern English common sense, and contemporary thought has problematized each of them. When, in modern Europe, science and philosophy denied the cognitive and conceptual legitimacy of religion, poetry, and myth, the romantic counterclaim was that religion, poetry, and myth were not matters of thought anyway. Religion and all other forms of “depth” experience were taken to be experiences of “feeling” as opposed to “thought.” This thought/feeling dichotomy still pervades our ways of talking about religion, art, poetry, and music. Religious and poetic language are understood to be always inadequate outer “expressions” of something that makes an inner and nonlinguistic impact on one’s feelings.

Post-romantic thinking denies that “feeling” is an autonomous domain of experience, and that it is wholly innocent of the structuring imprint of language. On this account, feelings and thoughts “co-arise” and interpenetrate. They depend on each other. Moreover, both are shaped by language. The parameters of what we can “feel” or “think” are dependent on possibilities inherent in linguistic and historical contexts.

Closely related to the separation of thought and feeling is the distinction between what lies within the limits of knowledge or description and what lies beyond them. This is a question about the limits of language, a distinction essential to modernist and romantic understandings of religious experience. An alternative account of the experience of the inadequacy of language might be sketched out as follows. When we speak of experience that is beyond description, we have already described it. Its distinguishing feature or characteristic is this negative dimension, its being “beyond.” This feature is nevertheless constituted and structured by language. Like features of other experiences, it is the one that we put into our linguistic description. If the only thing that can be said about “it” is that it cannot be described, then that language is the stark shape of its form. Rather than being a limit that can be seen from the other side in “experience,” language establishes this limit and holds the limit within it.

From this point of view, the only sense in which experience goes beyond language is the extent to which they are not the same – there is more to experience than language. The point here, however, is they are never sufficiently separable that, from the side of experience, we could

²⁴ Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, p. 17.

see how language has run up against its limits, without language already being there in the construction of those limits. No matter how quickly we manage to maneuver, language will have arrived at the same time. One reason that this problem has been so recalcitrant to modern thinking is that language has come to be conceived in too limited a domain. Modern thought has located language in the derivative and subsequent roles of description and expression; post-modern thought locates it more primordially, in experience itself. Even before we get around to describing experience, language is already there as the form or forms that the experience has taken.

The model of language that I propose as an alternative to Blofeld's modern, instrumental version hinges on the idea that language is already embedded in the content of our experience. It does not concede a clear demarcation between primary experience and a subsequent interpretation that we piece together out of language and then place upon the raw data of experience. Language is present even in the "direct" perception of an object. Language and perception "co-arise." Although theoretically separable, they are indistinguishable in experience itself. How so? In accordance with the way in which "understanding" was articulated in the last chapter, we always understand what we perceive immediately *as* whatever it appears to be. Awareness of what it is that we perceive is linguistically structured, and comes to us directly in the perception itself. We perceive "this" directly *as* what it is – a book, a sound, a strange situation. These linguistically constituted images arise in the perception itself rather than subsequently. We can test this in our own experience. Try to find a perception that is not already associated with some language in the initial encounter. It is true that we do perceive some things incorrectly, and that subsequently we alter the language through which that perception is understood. What we initially perceive *as* a meditation bell is later understood to have been an ice-cream vendor. But both "perceptions," both "correct" and "incorrect," come to us in the form of language. Language doesn't guarantee accuracy; it just guarantees that all of our perceptions will be understood within the given context of language.

It is also true that we sometimes perceive some things in uncertainty, in sheer perplexity. We don't know how to understand them initially even though we have definitely perceived them. Yet language is already there, setting even this perception in context. We have perceived this state of affairs *as* perplexing, *as* uncertain, *as* mysterious, even if that is all that we initially perceive in it. To the extent that anything more than this has

been perceived, language will show its shape, whatever it is – colorless, awesome, multidimensional, beyond description, or *mysterium tremendum*.

Anything not experienced *as* something in particular is simply not experienced. Because this hermeneutical “*as*” is linguistically shaped, language is always implicated in our experience. Language, and its entire history of involvement in thought and practice, functions to set up a context of significance within which perception occurs. By means of language, the world (the given) is focused and organized in advance of every encounter with entities, persons, or situations. Thus, when we see something, we have already interpreted it – immediately – *as* whatever it appears to be. Assigning it a linguistic form is not something we do after seeing it. It is the very shape that seeing has already taken. Although this language refers to something extralinguistic – something beyond language – that something appears to us *as* the reality that it is through language.

Furthermore, this is not to say that because language resides in all experience, all experience is therefore theoretical. The simple, perceptual seeing something *as* what it is in the midst of our activity in the world does not require our thinking about it. No reflective mediation is required. The point, however, is that the results of past reflection and language use – the formation of concepts – get passed along to all participants in a culture through its language. You don’t have to reflect on the concept of a “door,” or define it, in order to experience that shape *as* a door and to use it in accordance with its appropriate “sense.” Language, therefore, is not to be located only at the level of concept and predication. It is also present at the level of perception in such a way that perception, language, and thinking are all interdependent.

Without this linguistically shaped sense that informs our direct awareness of things, the daily life of a Zen master like Huang Po would be problematic at best. His functioning in the world, like ours, requires that things are seen for what they are, in most cases, immediately, without standing around to ponder which linguistic clothing is most suitable to them. Inability to perceive this sound *as* a question, that sound *as* a meditation bell, or any sound *as* a sound would render basic life functions impossible. Inability to experience a monastery fire “immediately” *as* a fire, *as* a threat, *as* a demand for action, *as* requiring the evacuation of others, *as* extinguishable by water, and so on, would render the Zen master helpless and incapable of spontaneous, Zen-like response. No Zen text disputes this; in fact they all assume it. They assume the everyday function of linguistic distinctions by means of which things are experienced *as* what they are, fully laden with linguistically structured

meaning and significance. It is only on the basis of this background of language that distinctively Zen actions can be performed.

The instrumental theory of language that we have criticized here is not wrong in asserting that language functions as an instrument or tool that we use for our own purposes. We do, in fact, use language. But this theory is inadequate insofar as it sees this as the only location of language, and insofar as it understands human beings to have an independent and controlling relation to language. Every act of use or control, whether discursive or not, is already structured for us by the linguistically shaped contours of our cultural inheritance. Moreover, transcending these contours, getting back behind them, is no more desirable than it is possible. Not only are we mistaken when we understand the Zen master to have achieved this state, we also render him incapable of the worldly “function” for which he is famous.

It is interesting that language is almost never noticeable to us in this role. When we experience something or even talk about it, we focus exclusively on the thing and not on the language that mediates it to us. Language seems to disappear behind whatever dominates our experience. Ironically, this is even true when we are talking about language, as we are now. We don’t notice the medium of our talk as we focus on its object. When Huang Po criticizes language, he typically does not notice that it is language that is currently making the criticism possible. And when he does notice, we get reflexive paradox, the kinds of language that have made Zen texts famous. Language is a universal and inescapable element in all of our experience, and any account of language or of Zen must now come to terms with this realization. Even – or especially – the “great matter” of Huang Po is experienced as a “matter” at all within the language of Zen. Understanding it will require penetration into this language, not a leap out of it.

It was in the language of Zen that the community on Mount Huang Po had come together around their shared concerns. The language of Zen is a condition without which neither the practice of Zen nor the point of Zen would exist. If this is true, then we would not be well advised to accept Huang Po’s account of how Buddhist symbols, like “the Way,” came into existence. Recall that this passage explained how “the Way” existed prior to its name, but because people failed to experience it, the Buddhas “expediently” named it “the Way” in order to attract people to the possibility of living in accord with it.²⁵ On this

²⁵ T. 48, p. 382c.

account, language is a tool that doesn't really fit its referent. Let us construct another version. Consider reversing the story so that, rather than existing on its own eternally, only to be named later, "the Way" came into existence with its name. Gradually, perhaps imperceptibly, the word for dirt paths through fields and forest (an earlier or "literal" meaning of the word, *tao*) came to suggest something more than that, although related. The word itself began to suggest to some "users" that there are "paths" or "ways" through other affairs as well, even life itself. Beyond that, this symbol suggested, there may be a single unifying "Way" structuring all of reality.

Metaphors like "the Way" are the well-springs of new meaning. Words used in new contexts suggest more than their prior literal sense; they give rise to ideas not previously existent. In Paul Ricoeur's words: "the symbol gives rise to thought," and thought extends the possibilities inherent in symbols like "the Way." Rather than assuming the independent and prior origin of entities which come to be "named" later, it is worth considering how name and referent may "co-arise" through the symbolic, metaphoric initiative of language. When "the symbol gives rise to thought," language speaks suggestively to us, both in our own speaking and in the words of others spoken to us, and we listen.

At the end of Huang Po's meditation on the origin of the language of Zen, the text seems to summarize all of this in Chuang-tzu's fish-trap slogan – literally translated, "obtain fish, discard trap."²⁶ Rich in suggestiveness, the slogan can be understood in several ways. One Zen reading was clearly "once you have obtained the goal of Zen training – awakening – then you have no further need of the means – Zen Buddhism." Similarly, shifting metaphors, the "raft" of Buddhism is simply a vehicle to "the other shore." "Having arrived, why lug the raft along? You don't need it!" This understanding, however, has three significant problems entailed in it.

The first is that few Buddhists, and few Zen Buddhists, understood the moment of "arrival" or "awakening" to be so unequivocal and final. Although today's catch may be very satisfying now, tomorrow you may wish you had kept the fish trap. Even the most productive fishermen may get hungry again. If, like everything else, "awakening" is "empty," that is, relative to contexts, impermanent, and open to both deepening and further refinement, then abandoning all means may be either premature or foolish.

²⁶ T. 48, p. 382c.

A second difficulty with a literal reading of Huang Po's slogan is that the Mahayana Bodhisattva has taken a vow not to abandon others even if, or especially if, he or she has arrived at the goal. Although you may have all the fish you want, your vow is to teach all others how to use the trap. If Buddhism is a "means" to the "goal" of enlightenment, then the career of a Buddhist *as a Buddhist* is never over; it is just transformed. Dissemination of the means becomes the goal. Not only should you keep the trap, you might want to consider fixing it up, or experimenting with new and more effective versions.

Finally, this point leads us to suspect that the relation between "means" and "ends" is not as transparent as this powerful slogan would suggest. "Means" and "ends" are "empty." They arise together and stand continually in relation to one another. Alterations in one give rise to alterations in the other. Moreover, the adoption of any particular set of "means" by a practitioner has an ongoing and irrevocable effect on the one who shapes his or her life in accordance with them. What and how you practice influences who and what you become. Having chosen "these" Buddhist "means," you become "this" kind of person. If there is "no self" existing permanently and independent of the forces of "dependent origination," then who you are is a function of both the means and the goals you have adopted in practice. Once "awakened" you may opt to cease performing "these" Zen practices, but you will never throw them away. They constitute your very being. By then, fisherman and fish trap have already "co-arisen." Having been a real fisherman and a real Buddhist, how could you seriously maintain that your "true self" retains its "own-being" independent of those practices?

So, what remains of the Taoist wisdom that Huang Po has appropriated? This: that a great deal rides on how you relate to your fish trap and to your Buddhism. The rhetoric of "discarding," of "overturning," of "breaking through," is essential to the particular "means" of Zen. It is also fundamental to the entirety of the Buddhist tradition. Non-attachment, releasement, letting go, and emptying are all fundamental Buddhist practices, and, at the most advanced levels, these acts of distancing are aimed not at things in the world so much as at Buddhism itself. Having "discarded" or loosened other attachments, only the Buddhist "means" of loosening are now held firmly in hand. "Letting go," however, is a two-sided and "dialectical" motion, as the Taoist Chuang-tzu knew too. We must "discard" while "retaining," "let go" while "holding on." Enlightenment is not a proclamation of nihilism, as Huang Po makes clear in correcting overzealous and literal readings of

“emptiness.” “Emptiness” can only be valorized to the extent that it can be seen in “form.”

The “form” most readily used for the dissemination of “emptiness” was language, and this has been true throughout the history of Zen. The language of Zen gives rise to the “thought of enlightenment.” The thought of enlightenment gives rise to the practice of Zen, and the practice of Zen, including its linguistic practices, gives rise to the realization of enlightenment. Nor does the circle stop here. New means, new conceptions of goals, and new ways of speaking the language of Zen “arise” out of numerous “realizations.” None of these remain the same; each penetrates to the heart of the other – pure “emptiness.”

John Blofeld’s modern and romantic reading of Zen gave considerably less room for such entanglements. Modern mentality stresses the importance of separation, of individuality, and of clear distinction. Means are clearly distinct from ends, and ends from means. Tools are separate from the products of their labor. Language and the communal contexts of linguistic training have little to do with Zen awakening. On these bases Blofeld would write:

for I am convinced that any man who searches deeply into the inmost recesses of his own spirit will come upon the same eternal Wisdom proceeding from the indivisible unity of our real minds (or spirit) with the real Mind (or Spirit) which fills the universe, other than which nothing has more than a transient, dream-like reality. A tiny child left upon a desert island to grow up without a single human companion would, if he searched deeply and constantly into his own mind, come upon truths identical with those taught by the Buddha, Jesus, Lao-tse and all the other enlightened sages. If he could communicate those truths in some way, they would be purer than any communication the world has received, for such a child would not attempt to clothe Universal truth in the special terms employed by the followers of some particular religion.²⁷

The two “ifs” in this passage are crucial. By focusing our reading on them we can see how the line of thinking represented here turns on the extent to which Blofeld’s instrumental view of language will hold. The first “if” says: “if” this child, isolated from, and therefore, unperverted by, human society, “searched deeply and constantly into his own mind.” But would he? Could he? Lacking the concept “mind,” being without the metaphors “search,” “depth,” and “constancy,” what kind of constant in-depth mental searching would we expect to take place? Without a nuanced language of subjectivity, what kind of experience of self do

²⁷ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 228.

we imagine? On Blofeld's view, language and culture are "particularities" which do not touch upon the deep, and therefore, "universal," "recesses of the spirit." The untrammelled island of romantic imagination is the place where particulars, like religious ideas and practices, won't stand in the way of the Universal Truth hidden securely behind them. If Huang Po's Mahayana tradition is right, however, then the "universal" – "emptiness" – only makes its appearance, and only exists, within the particularities of "form."

Indeed, Buddhists have always assumed that this goal will only be achieved through certain forms – certain subtle, reflexive, and imaginative forms that can only be the products of great cultural achievement. If "enlightenment" is a consequence of simply being left alone, then temples, monasteries, Zen masters, and other institutions would not only be beside the point, they would be counterproductive. Given the problems that accompany human institutions and culture, this was indeed what Blofeld was led to wonder. Institutions inevitably foster greed and perversion. Perhaps their absence would be an improvement. When looking in this direction, what Blofeld could not see is that the concepts of "greed," "perversion," "improvement," and "awakening" are only available within linguistically constructed cultural institutions. Lacking these, we could not see what needed improving, nor that improvement was one among the many possibilities. Blofeld still imagines the child a romantic, striving for deep inner attainment, without the perversions. Romantic ideology, his own, was invisible to him. Its language and doctrines were, for him, the structure of reality itself. Since his own doctrines were transparent *as* doctrines, Blofeld could relegate "doctrine" to the realm of the derivative, of "particularity." Therefore, "doctrine" came to mean, essentially, "false doctrine." But from our perspective, the deserted child would be in a more serious situation with respect to religious and cultural matters. Not only would he grow up without the "false" doctrines that "particular religion[s]" tend to promulgate, he would miss out on the "true" ones too, and the effect of this would be no romanticism, no "search," and no "spirit." In the absence of the culture of Zen, we cannot imagine the abandoned child becoming a Zen master.

According to the alternative view of language being sketched in this chapter, outside a particular linguistic context, "spirit" will not even exist as a possible goal of this child's quest. Far from being the "particular" which inappropriately "clothes" the "Universal," language is as "universal" as anything will ever get. It is only in language, and in the form

of understanding that resides in a particular language, that any kind of religious possibility comes forth. We learn about such possibilities as “Spirit” and “Universal Truth” only in the process of learning those languages which have set them forth in word and image as realities. It is not the case, in this view, that learning to speak a language is simply learning how to “use” certain words to describe or point to a reality that we already know and understand in itself. On the contrary, reality becomes the reality that it is for us in language. As H.G. Gadamer puts it: “It is in language games . . . that the child becomes acquainted with the world. Indeed, everything we learn takes place in language games . . . The words we find there capture our intending.”²⁸ Blofeld’s second “if” follows similar lines: “If he could communicate those truths in some way, they would be purer than any communication the world has received, for such a child would not attempt to clothe Universal truth in the special terms employed by the followers of some particular religion.”²⁹ On the contrary, without a particular language, these “truths” could not be experienced or known, much less communicated. Without the particular, no universal. From this point of view, Blofeld’s interest in the “unclothed universal” was itself neither “universal” nor “unclothed.” Interest in such an experience can be located with some exactitude in a particular era of a particular culture, the era in which romanticism established the norms for religious thinking in European culture. The vast vocabulary for the “universal” and its quest were opened up as real possibilities in many of the great nineteenth-century romantic texts. Indeed, it is there that we find in great abundance Blofeld’s “clothing” metaphor. These texts had “capture[d]” Blofeld’s “intending.” Blofeld had listened deeply to what the religious language of his time and place had to say to him. This listening, and the learning that accompanied it, shaped the way in which the Buddhist texts he would read came to have meaning for him. Indeed, it made possible his having any interest in them at all. And as we think these thoughts in English, we must realize that the same applies to us. These same romantic texts, now once or twice removed, perhaps even as unknown to us as our great-grandparents, stand in the lineage of our openness to Huang Po and invisibly shape our reading Zen.

What implications would all of this have for our understanding of Zen? It would mean, for one thing, that the language of Zen (or more precisely, the T’ang dynasty language of this text or the Sung dynasty

²⁸ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 56. ²⁹ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 228.

language of that) embodies a particular understanding of reality, and that this background is what has enabled the kind of religious practice and realization associated with it. It also means that we would want to qualify the extent of the universality that we would imagine to be available in Huang Po's Zen. Each time and place, by virtue of its participation in a somewhat different language, would be characterized by the particular kind of experience that was made possible by its language and other dimensions of cultural background. It would therefore not be a mere accident that Zen practices and experiences were born in the Sinitic languages of certain historical periods, rather than elsewhere or at other times. To this way of thinking, "Zen" interests us not because "they" have the "Universal Experience" too, but because they experience something "we" don't, and because their language has opened up a set of possibilities for them that, by our contemporary standards, is extremely impressive. In it we see something perhaps well worth appropriating for our own cultural use. Aside from this difference opened up in the uniqueness of their language and culture, there are no pressing reasons for studying Zen.

The richer and more diverse the language, the greater the reservoir of possibilities it holds open to those who speak and listen to it. Language, as the medium of these possibilities, is, among our many inheritances, the most fundamental.

The language, after all, is the repository of the kinds of meaning and relation that make a culture what it is. In it one can find the terms by which the natural world is classified and represented, those by which the social universe is constituted, and those terms of motive and value by which action is directed and judged. In a sense we literally are the language that we speak, for the particular culture that makes us a "we" – that defines and connects us, that differentiates us from others – is enacted and embedded in our language.³⁰

On this account of language, we would want to understand both the Zen monastery on Mount Huang Po and the texts that issued out of it as having, among their primary tasks, the articulation of a distinct language of Zen. The Zen language in which novices would train would gradually bring them to Zen experiences, showing the world to them in its light. Zen concerns and Zen practices would slowly take shape in the novices' minds, replacing or reshaping whatever concerns and practices were there before. The primary words and symbols of Zen do not just name objects and issues that were already there in the novices' minds

³⁰ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 20.

pre-linguistically. Instead, they slowly generate these new concerns, new ways of being in the world, that had no previous existence in the practitioner. Hearing new words and new sentences, and then learning to speak them, the novice is initiated into new forms of life. Thus the “experiences” of Zen would only be available through the language and culture of Zen.

Describing any tradition this way, however, raises a pernicious modern intellectual problem. We suspect the possibility of a vicious “relativism” in which we are thought to be captives of our language, closed off from the world and from people in other cultures. This suspicion, however, arises as much from our traditional reluctance to admit the finitude of human understanding as it does from this particular account of it. Understanding, knowledge, and practice are indeed relative to language. That conclusion is unavoidable in our time. Language plays a role in establishing the boundaries of human finitude. This does not mean, however, that we are captives of our language; it does not mean that we are predetermined in some ineluctable way. It also does not mean that we cannot understand what goes on in another culture or another language. Reading Zen well will give rise to understanding. To say that language establishes limits, or a certain range of possibilities, is not to say which of them will or will not be actualized, nor how, when, by whom, in what way, and to what end. It is rather to say that human freedom and understanding are finite, and that language is what, perhaps more than any other factor, shapes that finitude in the particular way that it is. That finite placement in a language is not closure or isolation is further demonstrated by our ability to learn another language. As we learn to speak we learn to understand, and, understanding, we are able to find our way around in a foreign culture.

It also modifies these limits to know that languages are always in the process of change. As old ways of speaking fade and are replaced by new ones, a transformed set of possibilities are opened up for our endeavor and experience. We never simply repeat the language of our ancestors. Language and culture stay alive by the constant process of reshaping and restructuring. As new situations arise, new ways of speaking are established to deal with them. These “new ways” are never totally new, of course. They are always hammered out on the anvil of the preceding discursive practice and mediated through the culture’s grasp of its new situation. But linguistic practices and the shape of the culture will nonetheless be transformed. We can see these changes in retrospect, for example, in the advent of “Zen” out of the resources of earlier Chinese

Buddhism, and in the differences between Blofeld's reading of Zen and ours.

It is no doubt due to this limiting dimension of language that several traditions of thought about language have rendered a negative judgment. Language is taken to be a barrier, restricting knowledge and freedom. If this restriction is understood to be severe, then the response may be to search for ways to transcend language altogether. This must be at least part of the motive behind Blofeld's concern to set aside the "clothing" of particular languages in order to get to the universal hidden behind them. And it has certainly been at least a good guess to say that some understanding like this may have been at stake in Zen as well. The critique of language is clearly fundamental to Zen discourse. What is important for our reading, however, is to see the other side of language in Zen. This "other side" can be most easily seen in the fact that, even in the midst of negative judgments, language is a matter of intense pre-occupation in Zen.

Having a "concept" of language, and a vocabulary in which to discuss it, is a sign of considerable cultural sophistication. Not all cultures nor all historical epochs have made language a thematic object of reflection. Thinking "language" requires a great deal of abstraction. Ordinarily we think right through language to its objects and concerns without noticing the medium in which we do our thinking. In Zen, however, this medium is the focal point of inordinate contemplation. The Huang Po texts – including layers from quite different historical periods – share this obsession. In *The Essentials of Mind Transmission* alone, there are no less than nineteen different words for or about language. Numerous passages in the text take language as an explicit theme; very few leave it out of the discussion altogether. Some Zen texts are explicitly reflexive: in addition to discussing language in general, they direct attention to the language that is being spoken, written, read, or thought *at this very moment*. *Koan* meditation may be the most condensed and self-conscious linguistic practice ever devised in any culture. The suggestion being made in all this is that in reading Zen, rather than bracing ourselves to transcend language at the opportune moment, we may be better off focusing meditatively on the language of transcendence itself. Paying attention to Zen rhetoric, we may come to appreciate and to understand that the instruments and devices of the Zen trade are not so far off after all. Therefore, having seen where language may be located behind the scenes of Zen, let us now turn to the discourse of awakening itself.