

RHETORIC: the instrument of mediation

“Huang Po is such a grandmother that he utterly exhausted himself with your troubles!” said Ta-yu. “And now you come here asking whether you were at fault or not!” At these words, Lin-chi attained great enlightenment. “Ah,” he cried, “there isn’t so much to Huang Po’s Buddha-dharma!”

*The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*¹

Ts’ui-feng asked: “What words does Huang Po use to instruct people?” “Huang Po has no words,” said Lin-chi.

*The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*²

Language plays a far greater role in the mind of a Zen master like Huang Po than that of an “instrument,” a tool intentionally applied to the carrying out of particular purposes. Nevertheless, when language does function as an instrument in Zen, it is a tool of considerable power and precision. Indeed, in its “golden age” and today, Zen has been best known for its unique instrumental rhetoric, its own counterclaims notwithstanding. The “discourse of awakening” in Zen produces a kind of rhetoric very much unlike anything ever heard or read in East Asia or elsewhere, a way of speaking/writing that is distinctively “Zen.” In this chapter we consider both the character of this rhetoric and the role it plays in the quest for “awakening.”

The first extract at the head of this chapter acknowledges the possibility of a rhetorical impetus to awakening: “Lin-chi attained great enlightenment,” “[a]t these words.” Given the principle of “no dependence on language” and the ubiquity of language critique in Zen, who would have thought that enlightenment might “originate dependent” upon “words,” or that “words” might be the primary element structuring its

¹ Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 51; T. 47, p. 504c.

² Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 59; T. 47, p. 506b.

occasion? Were Zen Buddhists unaware of this function of language in Zen? Not in the least! Self-consciousness of language use and of its strategic role in the processes of awakening are among the most distinctive features of Zen. Reading Zen, we see it everywhere. Classic Zen texts give ample evidence that advanced practitioners, at least, looked at nothing with more focus and intensity than the rhetoric of Zen. The rationale for their intense focus was simply that nothing was thought to have greater potential to awaken the mind than the rhetorical excursions of the great Zen masters. It would appear, in fact, that, as the tradition developed, what developed most explicitly were rhetorical practices – the abilities to speak, hear, write, and read Zen discourse.

“Awakening” is not always elicited by language. Meditation, or an encounter or perception in the natural world, were also scenes where on occasion enlightenment might occur. But if you read through classical Zen literature where the enlightenment stories of the most famous Zen masters are recounted, you will find that these are surprisingly few. Overwhelmingly, language and rhetoric stand at the threshold of “awakening.” The phrase “at these words, so and so was awakened” is among the most common in the classical Zen *Transmission of the Lamp* literature. In one of his recorded lectures, Huang Po narrates his version of one of the most famous of these awakenings, the story of the reception of the “patriarchal robe,” a symbol of “mind transmission,” by Hui-neng, the renowned Sixth Patriarch of the Zen tradition. In an atmosphere of jealousy and intrigue, Hui-neng has secretly left the monastery with the patriarchal robe, and is being pursued by hostile forces, a Zen monk named Ming. When Ming finally catches up to him on the mountain top, Hui-neng leaps into offensive posture and puts a *koan* to him: “Just at this moment, return to what you were before your father and mother were born!”³ Then, “even as the words were spoken, Ming arrived at a sudden tacit understanding. Accordingly he bowed to the ground and said. . .”⁴

What he said on that occasion need not concern us. That he said something at the moment of awakening, and that the words of the *koan* are what evoked that breakthrough, are, instead, the objects of our reflection. Not only is Huang Po’s Zen rhetoric the medium of the narrative, rhetoric is its content as well. “Words” seem to be everywhere. Words give rise to the experience and then issue from it immediately and spontaneously. “Awakening” has not occurred in the absence of language, but fully

³ T. 48, p. 383c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 65.

⁴ T. 48, p. 383c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 65.

in its presence. And when it does occur, the natural response is not silence but more words.

Classic Zen texts present the moment of awakening as a rhetorical occasion, an occasion where readers or hearers can expect language to be at its very best. There are other such occasions, however. Perhaps the two most important are initial conversion experiences, often presented in the texts as preliminary moments of awakening, and “death verses,” the last “words” of the great masters of Zen.⁵ Just before dying, each Zen master would present the “words” that would be held by the subsequent tradition as the epitome of his Zen mind. Controlling this moment, and staging it with refined contextual sensitivity, were absolutely essential for any monk who would come to be valorized in the later tradition. With the proper audience carefully gathered at the proper time, the master releases himself into this final rhetorical occasion. His “discourse record,” then, narrating the event as if through the eyes and ears of a reporter on the spot, gives one or another slight variant of the following: “Having spoken these words, sitting erect, the Master revealed his Nirvana.”⁶

“Words” in the Zen tradition were far from inconsequential. Indeed, they hold a place of startling centrality, a realization which will lead us closer to the question: what is “awakened mind?” To get there, we focus on the character of enlightened language. What kinds of rhetoric were thought to be characteristic of enlightenment, and what kinds of rhetoric were commonly thought to evoke that state of mind? Lin-chi’s section in *The Transmission of the Lamp* shows intense focus on every occasion of speech. In one of its reflections on liberating language, the text says: “Each word we say should possess the three mystic entrances, and each mystic entrance must possess the three essentials, manifested in temporary appearance and action.”⁷ Words establish an “entrance,” a “doorway” providing passage into the open space of awakening. “Each word” should contain this potential for breakthrough; each word should possess its own power. Indeed, according to the account given in the Ma-tsu “discourse record,” the point is even broader: every word *does* possess this power, whether we know it or not, whether we experience it or not. “The very words I now speak are nothing else but a function of the Way.”⁸ While language may lead to alienation, thus preventing

⁵ For an analysis and description of these, see Bernard Faure, “The Ritualization of Death,” in *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*.

⁶ T. 47, p. 506c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 62. True to form, Lin-chi’s final two words were: “Blind ass!” ⁷ T. 51, p. 290; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 122.

⁸ Pas, *The Recorded Sayings of Ma-tsu*, p. 40.

awakening, it may also be experienced *as* the obverse of alienation, *as* the functioning of the Way itself.

The language of Zen in Huang Po's time and place was in a certain sense the language of ordinary discourse, heightened and intensified. The language that was being rejected was the formal language of scholarly Buddhist practice. The masters of Hung-chou Zen, following Ma-tsu, placed heavy emphasis on the transformation of everyday rhetoric so that it might become the "instrument" of Zen. To do this, ordinary words had to be used and understood in extraordinary ways. To hear Ma-tsu's words, not just *as* the words of Ma-tsu but also *as* the function of the Way, would take considerable reorientation, first in Ma-tsu's rhetorical practice and then in the practice of hearers. Once this transformation occurred, however, it was thought possible to hear the Way everywhere in language and in all things *as* signs of the Way. Any word was thought to bear this power. Any word or phrase was potentially a "turning word," a word or phrase capable of turning the mind so decisively that awakening would result.

To function in this way, however, words would need to be taken in unusual ways. And since "usual" words tend not to be taken in "unusual" ways, it was thought that the rhetoric with the greatest potential for breakthrough would be language that was itself unusual, so unusual that it would force itself upon the mind in strange and disruptive ways. These words would simply resist the appropriative tactics of "everyday mind." "Strangeness" and "disruptiveness" would come to be characteristics of distinctively Zen rhetoric. Because the "usual" order of language is located in spoken discourse, masters of Zen rhetoric would develop alternative "signs" of awakening. Huang Po came to be well known for his ability to "speak" without really speaking, through acts of "direct pointing" and through signals of silence. In order to characterize Zen rhetoric, therefore, we divide it into four distinct rhetorical styles: the rhetoric of strangeness, the rhetoric of "direct pointing," the rhetoric of silence, and the rhetoric of disruption.

THE RHETORIC OF STRANGENESS

One day during the group work, Lin-chi was going along behind the others. Huang Po looked around, and, seeing that Lin-chi was empty-handed, asked: "Where is your mattock?" "Somebody took it away from me," said Lin-chi. "Come here," said Huang Po. "I want to talk the matter over with you." Lin-chi stepped forward. Huang Po lifted up his mattock and said: "Just *this* people

on the earth cannot hold up.” Lin-chi snatched the mattock from Huang Po’s grasp and held it high. “Then why is this in my hand now?” he asked. “Today there’s a man who really is working,” said Huang Po, and returned to the temple.⁹

No doubt, uninitiated bystanders, like us, would be hard pressed to say how the foregoing constitutes “talking the matter over.” It is not even clear what the “matter” is, much less what Huang Po and Lin-chi have to say about it. Nevertheless, the intriguing character of this conversation – its strangeness – impressed itself so firmly in the mind of some monk that it eventually found its way into the classic texts of Zen. And there it has stood, for the contemplation of generations of Zen readers. Although this particular narrative never reached the status of *koan*, it did rate subsequent commentary by two of the great Zen masters of another generation. The story goes on to include equally “strange” comments and evaluations from Zen masters Kuei-shan and Yang-shan. No one seems to be concerned about “making sense,” at least not “sense” in the usual meaning of that word. Indeed, the rhetoric of strangeness in Zen is a sustained effort to call the entire realm of “ordinary sense” up into conscious awareness where, otherwise, it is rarely to be found.

It may be that the most readily identifiable feature of Zen discourse is its unconventional, unusual character. Zen rhetoric is indeed “strange” when read or heard in alien contexts like ours. But in addition to that, and more importantly, Zen rhetoric is eminently strange in relation to its own cultural context. Moreover, this unconventionality is intentionally cultivated and texts refer to it frequently. The central importance of the rhetoric of strangeness can be seen in the way that it is taken to be the primary sign of “awakening.” One Zen text that explicitly displays this link between strangeness of talk and awakening has the monk Shen-tsan returning to the monastery of his former teacher. The old teacher immediately sees that this is not the same Shen-tsan who left to go out on pilgrimage, so he says: “Who did you visit while out on pilgrimage? I notice you’ve been speaking in unusual ways.” Shen-tsan replies: “I was awakened by the Zen master Pai-chang.”¹⁰ The teacher can see that Shen-tsan has undergone a significant transformation, and the evidence is to be found precisely in what he says and how he says it. Presupposed in the story, and in numerous other stories, is that ordinary discourse issues from an ordinary mind. Out of the ordinary, unusual discourse flows from, and implies, an extra-ordinary state of mind.

⁹ T. 47, p. 505b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 54. ¹⁰ T. 51, p. 268a.

“Awakening” and unconventional rhetoric are closely linked. The latter is minimally a sign of the former.

Rhetorical strangeness was thought to be both a natural consequence of awakening – as we see in the Shen-tsan story – and an enabling power for others in that it functioned to open the minds of hearers or readers by breaking the hold that ordinary discourse has on them. One can imagine the effect that the following story of an encounter between Huang Po and Chao-chou had on anyone who may have witnessed it: “One time Chao-chou went to visit Master Huang Po, who closed the door of his chamber when he saw him coming. Whereupon Chao-chou lit a torch in the Dharma Hall and cried out for help. Huang Po immediately opened the door and grabbed him, demanding, ‘Speak! Speak!’ Chao-chou answered, ‘After the thief is gone, you draw your bow!’”¹¹ Encountering the unusual discourse of a Zen master like Huang Po was considered to be essential to authentic Zen practice, and thus to the possibility of awakening. It was thought to work on the one who encountered it, transforming the perspective from which language and world are experienced. This change was far from subtle. From the perspective of ordinary discursive custom, one might even question its sanity. Thus the *Transmission of the Lamp* says of Zen master P’u-hua that, after being enlightened by his teacher’s “parting words,” “he appeared to be mad and spoke without conventional restraint.”¹² Discourse that strays from social norms reflects an abnormal state of mind, which in some cases, by some interpreters at least, made it difficult to distinguish the “awakened” from the “insane,” since both are defined by freedom from norms and by unusual talk.

From what kinds of norm has the discourse of the Zen master been set free? Primarily, it seems, from the requirement that when we speak, we make conventional assertions about how things are in the world. A movement toward nonrepresentational discourse can be traced through the textual history of the Zen tradition. At a crucial point in the history of Zen (in the late ninth or tenth century perhaps), the genre of explanatory textual commentary begins to be replaced by other textual forms; the transcription of didactic sermon is replaced by a concern to record unusual sayings and actions. Commentary as such is not eliminated, however, just a certain style of it. When narrators or characters in Zen texts such as Kuei-shan and Yang-shan comment on a rhetorical segment from one of the great Zen masters before them, their comments

¹¹ T. 51, p. 276; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 165. ¹² T. 51, p. 280b.

display their own distinct style. As the new forms of commentary mature, they increasingly flaunt their nonrepresentational character, their otherness and strangeness. Comments no longer seek to explain. Arguments are not set forth to persuade the reader. Given this reversal of discursive function, propositional statements cease to be the primary mode of discourse.

Although fully intent on awakening the mind, it can easily be seen that, the later the Zen text, the less it will be inclined to formulate propositions about such matters as “enlightenment” and “emptiness.” *The Essentials of Mind Transmission*, among the much larger body of literature about Huang Po, is thought to be the earliest extant text of this Hung-chou style of Zen. The most readily available criteria for sorting out which parts of the Huang Po literature are early and which later is the extent to which they engage in traditional explanatory commentary, and the extent to which, adopting colloquial language, they cease to make graspable assertions at all. For example, early segments of the Huang Po literature take a theory of “mind” as the primary matter of discussion. Later segments, composed perhaps decades and centuries after the life of Huang Po Hsi-yun, never discuss “mind.” They narrate stories about the strange and wonderful rhetoric of Huang Po. Although no less concerned about the “awakening of mind,” editors and writers cease to imagine Huang Po as having ever proposed true statements about the “matter of Zen.” “Reference” becomes more and more oblique, hinting, teasing, denying, challenging, but rarely explaining or stating the facts. Increasingly, the language of these texts embodies the “ungraspability” of the matters about which they speak.

Two basic features place this discursive practice in contrast to other well-developed rhetorical traditions. The early Chinese Buddhist tradition, and the Confucian tradition, were primarily oriented toward persuasion. In the European tradition, in fact, rhetoric itself is defined and constituted as the “art of persuasive communication.”¹³ By contrast, we have seen that the particular way in which Buddhist principles come to be manifest in medieval Zen practice renders persuasion, by rational or emotive means, irrelevant to their concerns.¹⁴ If “belief” as such has

¹³ Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric*, pp. 1, 318.

¹⁴ It is important to recognize that this lack of emphasis on persuasion would not be true of early Zen texts, which express a very different position within Chinese culture. These texts are ardently “apologetic,” and argue hard for the legitimacy of the lineage they represent. Texts of the Sung period, by contrast, presuppose an established and prestigious position in Chinese culture, the work of persuasion having been accomplished already.

been decentered, or placed in the background as a presupposition, then so has persuasive discourse.¹⁵ This first point of contrast leads to a second. Where persuasion is the goal, discourse will seek to conform to the conventions of the addressee. Hence, the western tradition of rhetoric had maintained that “the . . . cardinal sin’ of oratory is to depart from the language of everyday life, and the usage approved by the sense of community.”¹⁶ Eloquence, it seems, must be deeply grounded in common sense and conventional discourse. The contrast here, of course, is that eloquence in Zen was defined precisely by just such a departure from the conventions of both natural and scholarly discourse. Without its unconventionality, discourse would not be recognizably “Zen” in character. Recognizably “Zen” or not, we can see from the context of these texts that the strangeness of Zen rhetoric was no less puzzling even when expected. Thus, like us, the Governor Lu Hsuan, an ardent Buddhist, was nonetheless baffled by Nan-ch’uan’s “explanation” of Seng-chao’s “strangeness”:

Governor Lu Hsuan spoke to the Master Nan-Ch’uan, saying, “Seng-chao is very strange indeed. He maintains that all things share the same root and that right and wrong are mutually identified.” The Master pointed to the peony blossoms in the courtyard and said, “Governor! When people of the present day see these blossoms, it is as if they saw them in a dream.” The Governor could not understand what he was saying.¹⁷

The fact that the “Governor could not understand” is an important part of the story. Had he understood, the depth of Nan-ch’uan’s awakening might have been placed in doubt. Lacking strangeness and adhering to the conventions of common sense, how could it be enlightened discourse? How could it display an order of awareness beyond the ordinary?

This rejection of the ordinary, however, does not place Zen discourse in the realm of the exalted or sublime. No “heights” are sought or

¹⁵ Although persuasive discourse is not featured in this Zen literature, it could not have been altogether absent from the monastic setting from which those texts derived. The everyday business of Zen monasteries would have required “normal” representational and persuasive discourse. Disagreement about such daily matters as, for example, how much rice to store or whether to postpone a festival due to unusual circumstances would, no doubt, have called for persuasive arguments. Anyone making an assertion on such matters would have been expected to produce good reasons. What was extraordinary about this monastic context, however, was that, given the overarching monastic focus on “awakening,” the rhetoric of strangeness could break out at any time, even in the midst of everyday business as we saw when Huang Po and Lin-chi were out on the labor detail. Classic texts narrate numerous occasions on which normal and strange discourse appear together in juxtaposition. Without the added dimension of unusual rhetoric, however, these episodes would have never made their way into Zen literature.

¹⁶ Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric*, p. 21. ¹⁷ T. 51, p. 257; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 160.

reached. Instead, words are to penetrate directly into the “marrow” of the ordinary, to borrow Bodhidharma’s Zen metaphor. In describing Huang Po, for example, P’ei-hsiu and his monastic editors make a point of conjoining metaphors of plainness and simplicity with others that connote “otherness” and difference. Describing the bearing of Huang Po, the text says: “His words were plain, his pattern direct; his way was precipitous, his practice, solitary.”¹⁸ To write that his words were simple means, in this context, that the master Huang Po had set aside the formal and complex diction of Buddhist philosophical prose in preference for the language of everyday life.¹⁹ Zen masters characteristically rejected an “otherworldly” understanding of their practice, preferring instead to experience the “Way” in the midst of everyday life. But by setting academic prose aside and adopting the vocabulary of contemporary slang, they still did not speak “normally.” Instead, they twisted the slang of the time out of its particular representational hold. They spoke the common language of the moment in uncommon ways in order to undermine the norms and grounds embodied in it.

This unconventional element so essential to Zen rhetoric can be overstressed, however. Language solidifies even critical communities into new sets of norms; it re-establishes new paradigms on the ruins of the overthrown. We get a glimpse of the development of Zen rhetorical conventions in the off-hand remarks of a monk who, in response to the Zen master’s refusal to give explanations, says in exasperation: “All Zen masters speak like this.”²⁰ Even the minimal characterization of “freedom from norms” can constitute a norm and a repeated pattern. One can only be free from linguistic norms in some particular way and with some characteristic style. Gradually, the distinction could be made between specific styles of rhetorical “freedom,” all under the overarching “Zen” rubric. These somewhat distinct styles of speaking and teaching came to be described in terms of Chinese lineage or genealogy as “family styles” (*chia fu*). The “children” or monastic novices raised and trained to speak the language of Zen each bore the imprint of their particular family tree. Freedom is not chaos; it must have its own order and form to be recognizable as freedom. Far from undoing the Zen claim to freedom from convention, however, the institutionalization of the “unusual” makes this

¹⁸ T. 51, p. 379c.

¹⁹ Yanagida Seizan develops this theme of the simplicity and concreteness of Huang Po’s Zen in his comprehensive essay on the *Ch’uan-hsin Fa-yao*, in Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*, p. 169.

²⁰ T. 51, pp. 246c – 247a.

particular form of freedom broadly possible, and, for that reason, all the more interesting.

THE RHETORIC OF DIRECT POINTING

One day Pai-chang asked Huang Po, "Where have you been?" The answer was that he had been at the foot of the Ta-hsiung Mountain picking mushrooms. Pai-chang continued, "Have you seen any tigers?" Huang Po immediately roared like a tiger. Pai-chang picked up an ax as if to chop the tiger. Huang Po suddenly slapped Pai-chang's face. Pai-chang laughed heartily, and then returned to his temple and said to the assembly, "At the foot of the mountain there is a tiger. You people should watch out. I have already been bitten today."²¹

Although this conversation appears to be about something quite other than what it manifestly says, Huang Po enters the dialogue with two acts of "direct pointing:" a tiger's roar and a slap to the face of his teacher, Pai-chang. These and other nonlinguistic signs became a hallmark of the "rhetoric" of Huang Po. Even though it never replaced the language of spoken discourse in the teaching of Huang Po, the alternative rhetoric of "direct pointing" (*chih-chih*)²² did, in fact, become an important element of his teaching method as represented in later texts. Fluency in the use of these non-verbal signs, from ritual comportment to "shouting and hitting," was essential to participation in the monastic community. They amounted to a separate language of gesture which ranged from the relatively simple – ritual being the first area of socialization for novices – to complex spontaneous signs decipherable only by the most "awakened." Consider the following example from *The Transmission of the Lamp*:

The master Hsiang-yen asked a traveling monk where he had come from. He replied that he had come from the monastery on Mount Kuei. The master asked: What sorts of things has the master Kuei-shan been saying lately? The monk replied that someone had asked him what it meant that the patriarch of Zen had come from the West, in response to which the master Kuei-shan had simply held up his *fu-tzu* (a whisk symbolic of the station of Zen master or abbot). Hsiang-yen then asked what Kuei-shan's disciples had understood by this gesture. He said it meant that mind is awakened through the concrete; reality is revealed within situations. Hsiang-yen said: Not bad in some sense but why are they so intent on theory? The monk asked him how he would have explained the gesture. The master held up his *fu-tzu*.²³

²¹ T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 103.

²² Earlier traces of this practice can be found in the pedagogical technique of "pointing at things and asking the meaning." See McRae, *The Northern School*, p. 93.

²³ T. 51, p. 284bc; adapted from Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 223.

The language of this narrative points, at its climax, not to the words of the master but rather, to his gesture, which, in turn, is meant to point “directly” to the “great matter” of Zen. As with other signs, this act of “direct pointing” is necessary because that to which it points is not manifest otherwise, in this case not even available within the boundaries of conventional experience. The master’s act of “direct pointing” duplicates Kuei-shan’s initial effort to direct the monk to a kind of experience that can only be experienced in “awakening.” In this story the act of holding up the *fu-tzu* is taken to “speak” more directly toward this referent than any conventional speaking could – it is meant to evoke that to which it refers.

Several more examples of non-verbal answers to the same “*koan-style*” question help show the character of the rhetoric of “direct pointing”: “A monk asked: ‘What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?’ The master came down from his elevated lecture seat and stood beside it. The monk asked: ‘Is that your answer?’”²⁴ On the spot it might have been hard to know, but, in asking, the monk at least takes this as a possibility. Once the story becomes a written text, however, the problem is solved. If the coming down is recorded in response to the question, it must have been significant – a sign. To the question, “Is that your answer?” the master replies “I haven’t said a word.” But he has made a sign. The monk’s onerous task, and ours as readers, is to determine – a sign of what? What kind of sign? The unnerving realization in this case, however, is that if we have asked the question we can be assured that we have already irredeemably missed the “point” of the act. “Direct pointing” is a rhetorical act that either communicates immediately or “directly” without reflection, or not at all, leaving the recipient dumbfounded and out of place: “A monk asked: ‘Setting aside what the sutras say, what is the message of the patriarch who came from the West?’ The master stood up with his stick, turned his body around one time, lifted one leg up, and then demanded an understanding-laden response. [The narrator then reports that] the monk could not reply, in response to which, the master hit him.”²⁵ The monk knew these contorted gestures meant something, but what? No doubt some pointing is so direct that the point is missed altogether. What might go unnoticed in this story, however, is that, having missed the first sign, the monk gets a second chance. The act of hitting is not simply a form of punishment or chastisement for the dim-witted. It too

²⁴ T. 51, p. 277c; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 170. ²⁵ T. 51, p. 253c.

can be a direct act of signification, concluding, as many stories indicate, in an event of awakening, not just to the specific point of the narrative, but to the point of existence itself – awakening.

This point is made directly for those of us of “mediocre” understanding in the following story of Huang Po: “A monk asked, ‘What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?’ The Master immediately struck him.” Then, for those of us who might miss the significance of this, the narrator adds: “The teachings of Huang Po embodied the highest vision, so those who were mediocre failed to understand him.”²⁶ The story of Lin-chi’s enlightenment shows that he misunderstood the sense of these signs from Huang Po too, at least initially. Only when another Zen master interprets Huang Po’s “blows” does Lin-chi come to “awakening.”²⁷ Huang Po is represented in later texts as having taken enormous risks in his effort to enlighten Emperor T’ai Chung by slapping him. The Emperor’s remarks in response question the directness of Huang Po’s pointing. Valorizing this blunt and startling rhetoric, however, the text leaves the Zen master undeterred, even at the risk of appearing to undermine political authority.²⁸

By calling this practice a rhetoric of “direct pointing,” we draw upon a Zen phrase which intends to show how actions, like spoken words, can become events of signification. But surely gestured signals differ from verbal signs. How? One could characterize the difference by means of a simple example. If you ask “Where is the door?” I can respond by saying: “To your left near the fireplace,” or, saying nothing, by directing a pointed finger in the appropriate direction. In the first instance, you must decipher the verbal message and follow its directions. In the second, little or no “deciphering” is required (if you have a history of acquaintance with this particular sign). The sign directs you immediately and does not seem to call for interpretation or reflection. Obviously, however, the simplicity of this example hides the complexity of “direct pointing” in Zen, where the referent of the sign, the “great matter,” is neither visible nor readily available to ordinary experience. If, like some Buddhists, we conceive of this referent as “emptiness,” or the open space of awakening, then no ordinary act of pointing will bring us into its presence. Like other forms of Zen rhetoric, direct pointing will inevitably be strange, as unconventional as its referent, which is not an object at all. It was in fact just because of the “depth” and invisibility of its referent that

²⁶ T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, pp. 105–106.

²⁷ T. 47, p. 504c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, pp. 50–52.

²⁸ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, pp. 95–96.

the use of non-verbal signs was considered to be an effective “device.” Nevertheless, it is worth noting that all signs, even non-verbal ones, function as mediators. “Pointing” is, by definition, indirection. It may be more direct than other signs, but as long as the referent comes to experience by way of the pointing, mediation has occurred. This is true even when, as in Zen, what is mediated is the experience of “immediacy.”

THE RHETORIC OF SILENCE

The practice of silence had a longstanding and distinguished role to play in Buddhism, especially in the Zen tradition for which meditative practices were important. Stories about the practice of silence among the great paradigmatic figures of the Zen tradition – the Buddha, Mahakasyapa, Vimalakirti, Bodhidharma – were extremely influential. So important was the absence of discourse in Zen that silence soon became a sign or “saying” on its own. It began to signify something important. Many Zen stories of “encounter dialogue” describe how a particular meeting between two Zen masters reaches its climax in an expression of silence. Other narratives explicitly figure silence as an understandable response or answer to a question. Huang Po’s disciples knew very well that when the master chose to be silent rather than lecture, that *was* his teaching. We can see how widely this was understood in the Zen tradition by noting its occurrences and the interpretations given to them. Zen master Hsueh-feng’s biography, for example, ends an episode by saying: “He answered merely by sitting silently in his seat.”²⁹ Indeed, nothing could be more essential to the depth of awakening than to have understood and appropriated the sense of silence.

In many narratives, silence is explicitly conjoined with speech as parallel forms of signification. Huang Po takes this point so far in, fact, that he surprises a monk who has asked about Vimalakirti’s silence by saying that “Speech and silence are one. There is no distinction between them!”³⁰ Silence in these texts is more than the absence of discourse. It fits into communicative interaction by continuing the dialogue and, very often, bringing it to fruition in awakened disclosure. As the complementary “other” to speech, its message is taken to complete the direction and intent of other rhetorical practices in Zen. Not all silence has significance, however. The master remarked: “Unless you understand profoundly, it is no use thinking that you can just keep quiet!”³¹ In this

²⁹ T. 51, p. 327c; see Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 280. ³⁰ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 121.

³¹ T. 51, p. 277b; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 169.

instance, silence has significance only insofar as it displays the monk's confusion. Only certain kinds or qualities of silence are profound enough to join in a conversation that satisfies the requirements of Zen rhetoric. Given the interpretive "strangeness" of Zen dialogue, and the opaque character of silence, it isn't always easy to tell when silence is a sign of wisdom and when it is a sign of failure. In one episode, Huang Po's silence is left hanging, far too ambiguous for the editors not to intervene. So they bring in two later Zen masters to pass judgment: "At this, our Master remained silent. Later, Wei Shan mentioned the incident to Yang Shan, enquiring if our Master's silence betokened defeat. 'Oh no!' answered Yang. 'Surely you know that Huang Po has a tiger's cunning.' 'Indeed, there is no limit to your profundity,' exclaimed the other."³² Huang Po gets the benefit of the doubt here, because he is Huang Po and, after all, this is his text. It is clear, however, that silence, like any other sign, is open to variant interpretation. To different interpreters, it may "betoken" quite different meanings.

It is interesting to note, however, that the dialogues which climax in silence never really end there. The language of silence always seems to require or to provoke explication – translation, interpretation, and then commentary always seem to follow it. Take, for example, the renowned story of Bodhidharma's final transmission to his best disciples.³³ Four students are asked to say what they had attained through Bodhidharma's Zen teachings. The first three tell him, albeit cryptically. The fourth, Hui-k'o, bows and remains silent, an act fraught with historical profundity. The narrative, however, doesn't just end there with the bow of silence. Although silence is the most enlightened response of the group, its point needs pointing out. Bodhidharma breaks the silence by interjecting his interpretation and judgment. Hui-k'o's silence is the winner, but only after verbal language intervenes, abolishing the silence, in order to announce its victory and, having already done so, to solicit the occasion for didactic purposes. The authors of Bodhidharma's text knew better than to be silent about silence. Silence is indeed profound, but only when brought to the foreground and supported by a discourse that articulates its profundity. Lacking that, silence isn't much of anything. No one attends to it. Zen rhetoric has shaped both the doctrine and the experience of silence, and has transformed them into a sign. Silence is clearly meaningful, but only when it stands in the midst of other forms of Zen rhetoric.

³² Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 98. ³³ T. 51, p. 219bc.

In contrast to most modern interpretations, silence in Zen texts is rarely figured as quietude or acquiescence. On the contrary, like other forms of Zen rhetoric, silence is often presented as disquieting and unnerving. Silence is considered to have the critical power to cut through all “form” and to disrupt all talk that derives from conventional awareness. Only the awakened, who have entered into the “emptiness” and “selflessness” of silence, can “hear” it without fear and loss of bearing.

THE RHETORIC OF DISRUPTION

Lin-chi went to Huang Po, the head of the temple, to ask about the cardinal principle of Buddhism. Before he had finished speaking Huang Po hit him . . . I don’t understand, said Lin-chi.³⁴

Lin-chi could not figure out what to make of Huang Po’s response to his important question. It interrupted, indeed disrupted, his inquiry “[b]efore he had finished speaking.” All he knew was that this Zen master was “dangerous” to be around. After having introduced the biography of Huang Po’s head monk, Mu-chou Tao-tsung, by saying how “unusual” he was, his discursive practice is described in words that had become standard in the text: “His rhetoric was precipitous and dangerous; it did not follow convention” (literally: “did not follow the rut”).³⁵ In what sense was the rhetoric of Mount Huang Po dangerous? Critically and powerfully, this rhetoric called into question, and thus “endangered,” the conventional state of mind implied and supported by normal, representational discourse. It is imagined as undercutting and disrupting their interlocutor’s ingrained posture as a grasping subject. These words are dangerous and unnerving in that they seem not to share the common vision of how things are set into place: “One day, Huang Po entered the Dharma Hall where all of the monks had humbly gathered. The Master said, ‘All of you! What are you seeking?’ Thereupon he took a staff and scattered them, and then said: ‘You are all idiots! Seeking the Truth through traveling as you do now will only make others ridicule you’”³⁶ Gathered there piously to receive the *dharma*, Huang Po gives them what they least expect – disruption of the *dharma*. The rhetoric of disruption cuts through ordinary experience, and thus also ordinary linguistic forms. It works toward evoking an experience of disorientation. In order to catch a glimpse of where you are, dislocation is

³⁴ T. 47, p. 504c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 50. ³⁵ T. 51, p. 291a.

³⁶ T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 104.

essential. When asked about Zen language, master Tzu-man said: “It disturbs heaven; it shakes the earth.”³⁷ Zen rhetoric is designed to disorient one’s relation to everything. “The master Yang-shan said: ‘Aren’t you able to understand that there isn’t a single doctrine that is adequate?’” The narrator then adds: “Later when this comment was reported to Kuei-shan, he remarked: ‘One word from Yang-shan throws everyone into doubt.’”³⁸ Here language functions not to answer questions and to settle things, but rather to unsettle and open them to alternate viewing. Here is a religious discourse that, at least in this one significant way, stimulates doubt rather than belief.

How does it do so? First, the renowned Zen master, whose “ethos” had captured the attention of the entire culture, speaks in ways that simply do not fit conventional patterns. This unusual discourse forces one to ask about, and perhaps to seek for, the different kind of placement in the world that might have given rise to this kind of rhetoric, an alternative position from which it might make sense to say such things. Having shifted discursive gears, the whole Zen community seems to be based on just such a re-placement, one that signals a fundamental shift in practice and comportment. Upon entering this discursive world, most unsettling is the realization that, not only does it not make sense, but it won’t make sense as long as I remain who I am, that is, a subject self supported by particular conventions of placement in the world. The language of Zen throws into question the self/world relation that supports the reader’s position as one who grasps and acts on the world. The text acts to evoke a disorientation, and then reorientation, of the reader’s subjectivity. This is clearly the “otherness” of Zen language and Zen experience. To be in accord with this language, one must allow it to transport the self out of the posture of subjectivity – out of the ordinary and into an open space where one’s prior socialization is rendered dysfunctional. Beyond disruption, this is truly frightening, and Huang Po does not hesitate to tell us so. His text says, in fact, that the experience is somewhat like being suspended over an infinite void, groundless, with nothing to hold on to.³⁹

In order to evoke this experience of dislocation and groundlessness, Zen discourse, including the rhetorics of strangeness, direct pointing, and silence, brought intense pressure to bear on conventional subjectivity. The demand for immediate, prereflective response under the glare of the Zen master was one form this pressure took. The basic pattern

³⁷ T. 51, p. 249b. ³⁸ T. 51, p. 283b; see Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 215. ³⁹ T. 48, p. 382a.

was to have the master pose an inescapable verbal quandary, and then demand response. When P'ei-hsiu requested an audience with Huang Po and began by setting the context for his question, "the master screamed, 'P'ei-hsiu!' 'Sir,' I answered respectfully. 'Where are you?' . . . no reply was possible to such a question."⁴⁰ Suddenly out of context, P'ei-hsiu was lost. Or, to take another example: "The master said: 'When you encounter someone who embodies the Way, you should respond neither in words nor in silence. Now, what will your response be?'"⁴¹ Unable to respond out of conventional speech and behavioral patterns, on the spot the practitioner must push through "ordinary mind" to someplace else, wherever that might be, with all the urgency and seriousness of his position in the monastic community. The monk knows all too well that an appropriate response will not emerge from an ordinary posture. The self who can respond is not the conventional subject, which has been forcefully thrown into question by all forms of Zen rhetoric.

In many classical Zen narratives, disruption and disorientation are hastened through the use of negative language, which disrupts conventional practices and beliefs. Given continual overturning, practitioners of Zen, including readers, are hard pressed to know what to believe. Monks come to the monastery, and we to our texts, believing and knowing a great deal about Zen, not to mention who we are and what we are doing. But the rhetoric of Zen begins to subvert those beliefs and that knowledge from the first moment of exposure. Zen discourse is disruptive, of both itself and its reader, by overturning and undercutting any effort to hold on to it as correct vision or true belief. The *Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, for example, ruthlessly breaks out of the reader's grasp when it has the master say: "Followers of the Way, don't believe what I say. Why? Assertions have no foundations. They're just pictures temporarily drawn in the empty sky . . ."⁴² Or, "Followers of the Way, don't take the Buddha to be ultimate. As I see it, he is just like a privy hole."⁴³ If, having come to the great master Lin-chi for wisdom, you cannot believe what he says, nor, groping for something to hold on to, even that the Buddha is ultimate, then what can you believe?

By the time you have read your way through very much Zen literature, few options haven't been explicitly overturned: "Kuei-shan: 'Of the 40 scrolls in the *Nirvana Sutra*, how much is from the Buddha and how

⁴⁰ T. 48, p. 387b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, pp. 100–101.

⁴¹ T. 51, p. 327b; see Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 277.

⁴² T. 47, p. 502c; adapted from Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 37.

⁴³ T. 47, p. 502c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 37.

much is the discourse of devils?’ Yang-shan: ‘It’s all devil-talk.’ Kuei-shan replied: ‘From now on, there won’t be anyone who can correct your views.’”⁴⁴ When the subjectivity of “viewing” has itself been dislodged, what views remain to be corrected? To say with Huang Po that “there are no principles of the way that can be spoken”⁴⁵ is to enunciate a fundamental principle of the way of Zen – that only by being cast out of the security of knowledge and conventional belief will one awaken to the open space of illumination.

Moreover, this open or empty space is not to become a new object of knowledge. We will be unable to determine conceptually what it is since it becomes manifest precisely in the emptiness that opens up when the practitioner is dislodged from the position of the subject who “represents” and “determines.” The experience eludes objective representation by overturning the foundations from which representation proceeds. For this reason it seems that the rhetorical practice of dislodging and undercutting is aimed at evoking a corresponding response, that of “release” and “letting go.” It would be aimed at replacing one foundation or set of beliefs, not by another, but rather by an experience of groundlessness, emptiness, or openness. I take this to be the impact of the saying thought to have awakened Zen master Fa-yen: the posture of “‘not knowing’ most closely approaches the truth.”⁴⁶ This line makes it abundantly clear that “the truth” is not a matter of correct belief, but rather something that is manifest in the absence of grasping. “Knowing” is here figured as an inauthentic form of self-securing and grasping. It represents human “desire” and “craving” more than it does the “openness of things.” The rhetoric of disruption intends to overturn this “posture” in the experience of “awakening” from it.

THE DISCOURSE OF AWAKENING

The rationale for this strange and disruptive dimension of Zen rhetoric is the thought that language can enable an awakening from subjective grasping and craving. Although, drawing on Buddhist metaphor, language is at the heart of human “illness,” it is also the “cure.” Although language “lulled us to sleep” in the first place, it can also wake us up. It is true that some Buddhists, including Zen Buddhists, focusing on the ways in which language can block and obstruct human freedom and

⁴⁴ T. 51, p. 265a; see Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 205.

⁴⁵ T. 48, p. 383b; see Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*, p. 76, note 3, for a discussion of variant readings and similar passages. ⁴⁶ T. 51, p. 398b; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 239.

awakening, sought an alternative to it in pre-linguistic immediacy, the transcendence of language. Others, however, set off in the other direction. They sought instead some form of non-objectifying language through which the experience of immediacy might be mediated.⁴⁷ They sought a transformed rhetoric of “live words” and “turning words” through which awakening might be evoked. This understanding of Zen rhetoric best accounts for the focus on language in Zen texts. It also best explains why enlightenment narratives in classic Zen texts overwhelmingly feature discursive, rhetorical backdrops to the experience of awakening. When, “at these words”, Lin-chi attained great enlightenment under Huang Po, what had changed most was his way of speaking. Once awakened, Lin-chi was anything but silent. His speech is represented in the texts as overpowering, penetrating, and always striking directly to the heart of the matter. So favorably impressed with Lin-chi’s rhetoric was Huang Po that he predicted Lin-chi would “sit upon the tongue of every person on earth.”⁴⁸ Lin-chi’s discursive practice is imagined as being so powerful in its critical thrust that virtually everyone “falters” (*i-i*) before it. Overwhelmed by the way in which Lin-chi cuts through convention, interlocutors are left disoriented, unable to respond with insight.⁴⁹ The *Lin-chi lu*, which gathers story after story exemplifying this feature of Lin-chi’s discourse, asserts very clearly that language and the power of awakening are deeply interfused.

There is an important connection between the image of the Zen master as unhesitating and unflinching and the central Buddhist realization of the emptiness or groundlessness of all things. The Zen master is the one who no longer seeks solid ground, who realizes that all things and situations are supported, not by firm ground and solid self-nature, but rather by shifting and contingent relations. Having passed through this experience of the void at the heart of everything, the master no longer fears change and relativity. The Zen master is undaunted by the negativity in every situation and every conversation. He no longer needs

⁴⁷ On the idea of language as the sphere of immediacy, I am influenced by Scharlemann, *Inscriptions and Reflections*.

⁴⁸ T. 47, p. 505c; adapted from Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 56.

⁴⁹ It is interesting that, when these episodes become written text, faltering responses and the failure to respond at all are included in the text as a way to show the power of Zen rhetoric. For the reader, as for observers and participants in “encounter dialogue,” these moments of tension and failure are points of possibility where breakthrough could occur. In *The Northern School*, John McRae reflects on structural and historical connections between classical encounter dialogue narrative and the early Zen rhetorical practice of “pointing at things and asking the meaning” (*chih-shih wen-I*), in which only the master’s discourse is recorded and not the lesser interlocutor’s response (pp. 93–95).

to hold his ground in dialogue, and therefore does not falter when all grounds give way. What he says is not his own anyway; he has no pre-ordained intentions with respect to what ought to occur in the encounter. Indeed, on Buddhist terms, he has no self – his role in the dialogue is to reflect in a selfless way whatever is manifest or can become manifest in the moment.

Many of the passages that we have examined in this chapter are examples of what have come to be called “encounter dialogue” narratives, stories giving account of what transpires when two or more Zen masters encounter one another. These dialogues were linguistic events that took on such importance in the tradition that they became primary points of focus for Zen practice. Fluency in dialogical encounter was taken to be demonstrative of depth of enlightenment. Perhaps the most important characteristic of true encounter between masters was that the exchange would pass back and forth between the two without reflection and hesitation. Indeed, “immediacy” and “directness” are the highest forms of praise given to the discursive practice of a Zen master. The *Transmission of the Lamp* says of Zen master P’ang-yun, for example, that “he was noted for his eloquence and his quick responses.”⁵⁰ The text later claims that when he encountered other Zen Buddhists, “he responded to them direct and spontaneous, even as an echo, and his replies were beyond measurement and rules.”⁵¹

The “echo” metaphor is important. P’ang-yun’s response was as quick and as natural as an echo. Like an echo, P’ang-yun did not need to ponder what was said or done in order to respond. Response simply bounced back, prereflectively. Not being able to respond, what the texts call “faltering” (*i-i*), signals a failure of openness and insight. Faltering, one has been caught in the act of planning ahead, unable to remain in the present moment of discourse. Unfaltering, one follows what appears as it appears, which requires no pre-established intentions.

What gets said, then, in any true occurrence of “encounter dialogue,” is less dependent on the speakers than it is on the situation at hand, which is construed as including the speakers. Zen discourse in its ideal form is fully situational and occasional. What is said in any given situation corresponds to the unique and particular demands of that situation. Thus, Zen language is explicitly related to time, place, and circumstance. It fits into a context of interconnections and is not imposed upon it. This

⁵⁰ T. 51, p. 263b; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 175.

⁵¹ T. 51, p. 263c; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 176.

is simply to say that the spontaneity of Zen rhetoric is, ideally, a “responsiveness.” It “co-responds” with what is going on at the moment.

This is not to say, however, that rhetorical training was not important in Zen. On the contrary, to enter a Zen monastery meant submitting your mind to rigorous reshaping through the language of Zen. Having trained in this way, improvisation is possible – not before. One can speak the language of Zen freely only after having learned it by submitting oneself to its purposes. Training provides the background out of which free moves can be performed. On these bases, Huang Po and Lin-chi ridicule memorization and discursive pre-planning. When a monk has faltered in Zen dialogue, it is common for the master to apply more pressure, saying, for example, “This guy just memorizes words.”⁵² When one’s words emerge from the stockroom of memory, they are suspected of not being called for by the situation itself. In such cases, what enters discourse is more self than situation.

The “echo” metaphor for discourse carries this theme further. P’ang-yun’s responses were described as “direct and spontaneous, even as an echo.”⁵³ Following this image, one might say that P’ang is no more the source of his responses than the walls of the canyon or cave are the source of the echo’s sound. He doesn’t plan to say what he says. What he says is a function of contextual positioning, not of preordained intention.

This may be what Zen texts mean by the speaking of “non-dual words” (*pu-erh chih yen*),⁵⁴ words that bespeak the identity or congruence of self and situation. Dual or divided words derive from and point back to the prior intentions of the speaker. Although they may speak about the situation, they imply and implicate the desires of the self more than the shape of the larger context. To speak “non-dual words” requires one to surrender control, to allow the matter and the direction of discourse to go their own way, and to open oneself to the work of overturning and awakening.

The focal word or phrase that seemed to embody this transformative power in an “encounter dialogue” came to be called a “turning word” (*ch’uan-yu*),⁵⁵ the word upon which the point of the encounter “turns” and the word holding the power to turn the mind of participants, audience, or reader. “Turning words” were not simply a set of particularly powerful or efficacious symbols. No list of them could be produced. All

⁵² T. 51, p. 291b. ⁵³ T. 51, p. 263c; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 176.

⁵⁴ T. 51, p. 399b. ⁵⁵ T. 47, p. 503a; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 40.

words gained their power from the situation in which they were spoken, heard, or read. Words do not possess this power on their own; they are, according to Buddhist theory, “empty” of inherent significance. Instead, “turning words” are words that fit into a context in such a way that they open that context to view in some revealing way. They do so by virtue of their fit with the context and not on account of their own inherent power. The *Lin-chi lu* calls this “speaking a word apropos of the moment.”⁵⁶ The task of interlocutors is not so much to produce the turning word intentionally as it is to prepare for its appearance in the midst of dialogue. “Preparation” here is only a renunciation of subjective intention and an opening out from the self such that, when a “turning word” does appear, it will be able to do its work of awakening.

Words like these, which were particularly effective in the process of overturning and opening the mind, were called “live words” (*huo-chu*).⁵⁷ Explanatory, analytical words were thought to be “dead” (*ssu-chu*) in this respect: they evoked the need for more explanation but not insight, not an awakening from the deadening spell of everyday talk. Live words, like certain actions, could be “direct pointers.” Yet what they pointed to was less a meaning than an opening or fissure in the network of meanings. Discursive forms of meditation (including *koan* practice) required a practitioner to abide with a single word or phrase in so unnaturally focused a way that it would open up out of its common-sense relation with all words and meanings and into an awareness that was described as an awakening from the ordinary hold that language has on the mind. Thus released, one would see things in unusual ways and, at the same time, say “unusual things.”

⁵⁶ T. 47, p. 506b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ T. 51, p. 389; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 296. See also Buswell, “The ‘Short-cut’ Approach to *K’an-Hua* Meditation,” pp. 321–377.