KOAN AS A MEDIATED TOOL FOR THE INEFFABLE EXPERIENCE: THE MIDDLE POSITION IN APPROACHING CHINESE CHAN TEACHING

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Rather than arguing for the role of language in transmitting the ineffable experience, the article reframes the debate by discussing Chan (Zen) experience as mediated via expedient means. Chinese Chan teaching is not out of the "spell of languages." Nevertheless, the article discusses that neither clinging to language nor entirely disregarding its role in Chan teaching is the ideal approach to understanding the ineffable Chan experience.

More precisely, the article attempts to approach the unspeakable Chan experience based on the theory of "twofold truth": truth relating to the conventional and truth in terms of the ultimate. Therefore, one plausible route in response to the paradoxical relationship between Chan experience and various ways of mediation in Chan teaching is to seek an answer in Nāgārjuna's exposition of "the middle position."

First, the author presents a linguistic interpretation of Chan experience and explicates the connection between the koan teaching and Chan enlightenment. Although there is a well-known Chan statement of "teaching beyond words and letters" (不立文字), it is important to note that Chan koan is a form of writing via words and letters. The linguistic nature of koans serves to provoke "great doubt" (疑情) in Chan students under specific circumstances. However, if we consider the significance of koan solely in terms of its language, we will fail to capture the essence of the koan tradition.

Second, the research critically examines the study of Chinese Chan koans, spanning from a pragmatic dimension to a contextual one. The author argues that it might be misleading to close the gap between linguistic context and experiential one. Sufficient examples in Chinese Chan Buddhist teachings demonstrate that disciples' enlightenment can be triggered not only by linguistic expressions but also by external stimuli. Then, it is important to make reference to other overriding mediated tools in Chan practice, such as somatic intentions, "discipleship," and semiotic tools. Since Chan experience is mediated, whether transmitted with words or not, a teaching with other skillful means (*upaya*) should be explored.

Lastly, the author concludes the paper by contending that a middle-way perspective may help us better understand Chan experience without falling into the extremes of linguistic determinism or mysticism. This middle–way approach essentially resonates with Dōgen's "oneness of practice and realization," which highlights the reconciliation of the doctrine of Buddha-nature with the imperative of practice.

Key words: Chinese Chan teaching, Chan experience, koans, the middle position, linguistic understanding.

КОАН ЯК ЗАСІБ ДЛЯ ВИРАЖЕННЯ НЕВИСЛОВЛЮВАНОГО ДОСВІДУ: СЕРЕДИННА ПОЗИЦІЯ У ПІДХОДІ ДО ВЧЕННЯ КИТАЙСЬКОГО ЧАНЬ-БУДДИЗМУ

У Амяо

Замість того щоб обговорювати роль мови у передачі невисловлюваного досвіду, стаття пропонує новий погляд на цю дискусію, розглядаючи досвід чань (дзен) як опосередкований за допомогою доцільних методів. Учення китайського чань не виходить за рамки "мовного впливу". Проте у статті обговорюється, що ні прискіпування за мову, ні повне ігнорування її ролі у вченні чань не є ідеальним підходом до розуміння невисловлюваного досвіду чань.

Точніше, стаття намагається підійти до розуміння невисловлюваного досвіду чань, спираючись на теорію "двох істин": істини, що стосується умовного, та істини, що стосується абсолютного. Отже, одним із можливих шляхів вирішення парадоксальних взаємин між чаньським досвідом та різними способами опосередкування в навчанні чань є пошук відповіді у трактуванні Нагарджуною "середньої позиції".

По-перше, автор пропонує лінгвістичне тлумачення досвіду чань та пояснює зв'язок між ученням коана та чаньським просвітленням. Хоча існує відоме чаньське твердження про "навчання поза словами і літерами" (不立文字), важливо зазначити, що чань-коан – це форма письма за допомогою слів і літер. Лінгвістична природа коанів служить для того, щоб викликати "великі сумніви" (疑情) у учнів чань за певних обставин. Проте якщо розглядати значення коана лише з погляду його мови, ми не зможемо повністю зрозуміти суті традиції коана.

По-друге, це дослідження критично оцінює вивчення чаньських коанів Китаю, починаючи з прагматичного виміру і закінчуючи контекстним. Автор стверджує, що спроба ігнорування розриву між мовним та емпіричним контентами може бути оманливою. Достатньо прикладів у китайському буддійському вченні чань свідчать про те, що просвітлення учнів може бути спричинене не лише мовними виразами, а й зовнішніми стимулами. Також важливо посилатися на інші важливі опосередковані інструменти в практиці чань, такі як соматичні наміри, "учнівство" та семіотичні засоби. Оскільки чаньський досвід опосередкований, незалежно від того, передається він словами чи ні, слід досліджувати вчення з використанням інших сприятливих методів (упайя).

Нарешті, автор робить висновок, стверджуючи, що серединний підхід може допомогти краще зрозуміти чаньський досвід, не впадаючи в крайнощі лінгвістичного детермінізму чи містицизму. Цей поміркований підхід, по суті, перегукується з догенівською "єдністю практики та усвідомлення", що підкреслює узгодження вчення про природу Будди з імперативом практики.

Ключові слова: китайське вчення чань, чаньський досвід, коани, серединна позиція, лінгвістичне розуміння.

Introduction

On the one hand, scholars claim, "There is no pure experiences, no unmediated experience, regardless of whether experiences are ordinary or mystical" [Katz 1992, *26*]. On the other hand, the camp popularized by D. T. Suzuki, Japanese Chan (Zen) Buddhist scholar, insists that Chan practice is based on the pure, unmediated experience of *satori* (sudden awakening). Suzuki assumes that the "utterances of satori" are marked by "uncouthness and incomprehensibility" [Suzuki 1953, *25-46*]. Thus, a Chan monk speaks of Chan practice, "As soon as there are words and speech, this is picking and choosing." This is because in the state of enlightenment,

there is no affirmation or negation, nor is there anything extraordinary or mysterious [Cleary 1977, *365*]. It shows that Chan experience eludes mediation, particularly through language. Furthermore, the "self-narrative" of the Chan lineage is described as an unmediated, unbroken line of transmission passed from master to disciple through the use of koans [Heine and Wright 2000, *5*]. All these chimes with Chan Buddhist maxims: teaching without relying on words and letters, directly pointing to one's mind.

Nevertheless, Huineng (638-713), the sixth patriarch of the Chinese Chan Buddhism, claims that even the motto "not to establish written words" also suggests the use of words [Yampolsky 1978, *83*]. We might then ask: how about those classical collections of koans and *yulu* emerging from the vast corpus of Chan literature? "At these sentences, so and so was awakened," for example, occurs often in Chan texts that are rife with strange modes of transmission especially in paradoxical and strange forms. In this regard, claiming that enlightenment experience is unmediated or "pure" is pointless. The koan tradition is a practical mediation that enables disciples to access the enlightening experience. Therefore, Chan texts presented in the form of koan discourse are liberating rather than restrictive in guiding Chan practitioners.

Moreover, Chan adepts' peculiar use of language has attracted a growing amount of attention from pragmatics and contextualism. To get a sense of what scholars have been thinking about these two viewpoints, it is necessary to reflect critically on the "performative" dimension of Chan koans. For koan discourse, traditional deduction based on speech actions or Cooperative Principles (CP) does not entirely work. Koan is employed to elicit intuition rather than implicature; it necessitates performance, but the performer in a koan text is not always the utterer.

Hence, Chan masters' intention cannot be interpreted by the "implicature theory." For our daily speech, the indirect speech acts of speakers are too dependent on intention, and those of sentences too dependent on convention [Davis 1998, *167*]. On the contrary, in Chan community the enlightened being usually determines what counts as a performative. While some scholars have applied speech acts theory and Gricean concepts to koan research, a pragmatic study of "living words" (活句) in Chan practice has received little attention.

Second, if we follow Katz's initial definition of "context" as experiential and empirical in nature, we need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between koan and its contextual meaning. Although Chan performance takes place in everyday context, it refers to more specific circumstances that are not bound by conventions and norms of conversational contexts. Contexts in koan practice also serve as one part of deconstructive force to "stop intellectualizing," rather than a constructive one embedded in illocutionary acts.

We should re-exam the contextual scope of koan practice. When words are downplayed in Chan teaching, other skillful means (*upaya*) may function as alternatives to permeate through Chan experience. Any external objects that monks can access become part of the contextual implications for Chan teaching, extending beyond language alone.

In the following, we wish to make a further note on the paradoxical relationship between skillful means (koan in particular) and ineffable Chan experience. The study aims to present a middle-way perspective on the linguistic understanding of Chan experience. "Middleness" does not mean moderation or a compromise

between the two extremes of linguistic determinism and mysticism. As defined by the Buddha himself, it means, "not entering either of the two extremes." Because *upaya* (expedient means) is not a "cause" for attaining Buddhahood, but rather an "expression" of Buddha-nature. It is hoped that the investigation might illuminate a fuller implication of the ongoing Chan Buddhist tradition.

A linguistic understanding of Chan practice

In *Mysticism and Language*, Katz's linguistic interpretations of mystical experience widen our horizon for the central issue of ineffability in religion, and also make us understand the assumption that language is integral to mystical practice. Linguistic elements are inherent in spirituality. However, when it comes to transcending words, how should we approach Chinese Chan teaching, considering that literary Chan is expressed through written words and letters?

Katz maintains, "Linguistic forms embodied in sacred texts are not subject to the same restrictions imposed by the utilization of conventional semiotic systems" [Katz 1992, *16*]. It seems that he strives to justify the uniqueness of religious language, as to prove that linguistic research is not to demystify its role in explaining mystical reports, but to enhance its "scientific value." Besides, allowing contextualists to account for reality's effect on mystical experience is critical at a time when perennialists' views dominate mysticism.

Can we therefore say that koans, like other sacred texts, assist the mystical adepts in achieving a spiritual progress? The use of koans is an entirely new form of Buddhist practice in China for guiding the disciple for "sudden awakening." In other words, it is a new "art of speaking" that is distinct from conventional languages, yet a koan is primarily a discourse on Chan practice and a discursive practice in itself [Katz 1992, *158*]. Although this discourse is often regarded as subtle, peculiar, and spontaneous, it is nevertheless subject to specific epistemological, cultural, and sociopolitical constraints. However, in the course of koan development, not all Chan masters endorse the employment of koan system to practice Chan.

For example, Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) incinerated the wooden print of *Blue Cliff Record* (a classic koan collection) at the dawn of the Southern Song dynasty to free disciples from their obsession with words. His radical actions were regarded as a fierce critique of literary Chan (文字禪). Deshan Xuanjian (782-865), another towering Chan figure, was originally a scholar interested in practicing Chan by engaging doctrinal treaties (especially *Diamond Sutra*), loathing the sudden teaching proposed by the Southern Chan school. However, Deshan became awakened when his teacher Longtan suddenly blew out the candle on the pitch-dark mountain road for sending him home. Deshan then burned down all his commentaries of scriptures in the teaching hall, declaring: "to exhaust the essential human knowledge of the world is like a single drop of water cast into a great abyss" [Yuanwu 2018, *29*]. He later became famous for his extraordinary "caning" method in guiding Chan practitioners.

It seems that these Chan adepts threw suspicion on written words for attaining Chan experience. However, some scholars believe that mystical experience is never "pure" but always shaped by pre-experiential expectations, beliefs, and concepts [Katz 1978, *5*]. Some assume that only after the ultimate reality is realized can "the raft for crossing the water" be discarded. As a result, two camps emerged in Chinese Chan community in terms of linguistic means, sowing the seeds of a long-term

polarity. According to the well-known gradual/sudden paradigm, koan is widely applied in the special domain of Linji circle for the active pursuit of sudden awakening, but it remains passive in the Caodong tradition, which proposes a mediate (gradual) approach. These accounts constitute a type of historical writing of Chan koan as "self-narrative", giving rise to a dialectical tension between "gradual" and "sudden" that functions as the matrix of Chan tradition.

However, according to Chinese Chan scholar Jia Jinhua, there is no rigid polemic between the two schools concerning the means of Chan transmission. A full understanding of Koan Introspection Chan/Silent Illumination should be achieved in light of each other and within the context of the political and social environment in which they developed [Jia 2010, *168*]. Instead of allowing the "two poles" to solely shape the historical narrative, it is important to uncover hidden layers of koan tradition and its role in history. This is also what Heine and Wright have strived for a reexamination of presumed "self-narrative" of the koan tradition [Heine and Wright 2000, *5*]. To understand how koan relates to mystical experience, we must first define mystical experience. However, the investigation into "mysticism" has been undertaken by various disciplines, with little consensus about how to clarify it. A key word for its classification is its ineffability.

I would like to say what really matters here is not the delineation of mysticism, or how linguistic understanding demystifies Chan practice. What matters is how we think about the role of linguistic mediation in conveying Chan experience. At least for Buddhism, the idea of no-self (Anatta) is fundamental to understanding the nature of reality. If there is no inherent "self", let alone a language that a person speaks, nor a mysticism that the language tries to speak of. By positing the existence of such mysticism, we fall into another loop as perennialists. We may first of all develop a philosophical understanding of Buddhist language itself.

According to Y. Karunadasa, Buddhism does not attribute holiness to any language. The Dhamma as well as the language through which it is presented are a means to an end and not the end itself [Karunadasa 2014, *15*]. In this regard, there is no need to overvalue the power of language or to undermine its importance. Linguistic means are not to demystify religious experience but rather to assist Buddhist teachings. Instances like Huineng, who was illiterate but awakened spontaneously upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra* without formal Chan training, are rare. Huineng also acknowledges that in the Dharma, there is no sudden or gradual, but among people some are keen, and others dull [Yampolsky 1978, *139*]. Given the quandary of speaking or not, as well as learners' various intelligence levels, Chan masters should create "skillful means" (*upaya*) to do instruction, so *songgu* (頌古), koans, *yulu* (語錄), *huatou* (話頭), and Chan poems start to bloom during the Tang and Song dynasties.

Koan system is a unique Chan teaching method based on transcriptions of encounter dialogues between masters and disciples. However, it strikes us as odd and peculiar because koan is marked by dialectic negations, living words, contradictory claims, symbols and bizarre performance. It is futile to seek a logical interpretation of the ultimate truth from it. For example, when emperor Wu asks Bodhidharma, "What is the first principle of the holy teachings?" "Emptiness, no holiness," Bodhidharma replies. The emperor then questions him, asking, "Who is this standing before me?" "No knowing" [Yuanwu 2018, *19*]. This negation could

be considered as uncooperative in a conventional conversation, but the negation in this koan shows a gesture that is neither saying nor disaffirming. In many koan cases, even patriarchs' words are flawed and disputed, lest someone cling to them as the ultimate truth. It is also a way to exercise non-abiding, or even not to abide by negation per se.

Such an idea should be best illustrated with Nāgārjuna's (ca.150−250 CE) method of *tetralemma* in terms of the conventional and the ultimate in a fourfold negation, whose structure appears to be as follows: "A", "not-A", "A and not-A", "neither A nor not-A". This progression accordingly indicates that the ultimate truth cannot be put into words and concepts through a fourfold negation [Zhang 2018a]. We then have the question: If the ultimate truth transcends discursive thoughts and words, will it lead to ineffable mysticism or nihilism? According to Murti, terms such as "mind", "consciousness", "ideas" and "understanding" are after all empty (*sunya*) because they are dependent on thought and concepts. As such, they belong to the "conventional truth" [Murti 1955, *140*]. The following is how Nāgārjuna expounds the relationship between the conventional truth and the ultimate one:

"The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddha is based upon twofold truth: truth relating to the conventional and truth in terms of the ultimate. Those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths do not understand the profound truth emphasized in the Buddha's message. Without relying upon the conventional, the ultimate is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate, freedom is not attained" [Garfield 1995, *8-10*].

This is "the middle position" for understanding the role of language in approaching Buddhist mysticism. It is undoubtedly relevant to the koan system as a skillful means for attaining realization. But koan, as it is mysterious and enigmatic to many, has elicited a chorus of positive and disputed reactions from the East and West. A good many of scholars raise specific questions concerning its role in Chan Buddhism. Is it a poetic means to express ineffable Chan experience? Is it performative in advancing the principles of Chan iconoclasm? "Middleness" does not mean moderation or a compromise between two extremes, instead, it implies "not falling into one of the two extremes," as the Buddha put it [Yampolsky 1978, *29*]. However, koan teaching extends far beyond its linguistic scope. If we merely consider its significance in terms of its language, we will fail to capture the essence of koan tradition. In what follows, we will take a critical look at how pragmatics approach the role of koan in doing Chan.

A critical reflection on "performative" dimension of koans

Wittgenstein in his early works claims that "no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value" (LE 44) because such a description "does not and never will touch the essence of the matter" (VC 69) [McManus 2006, *175*]. His mysterious outlook is very similar to the oriental concept of *Dao* or the ultimate truth. For him, absolute truth cannot be expressed by the modern logic or scientific language in analytic philosophy. He later, in his most well-known work *Philosophical Investigations*, takes a pioneering step in challenging traditional philosophy. He steers his attention toward ordinary language from the realm of logic, investigating the meaning of a word in its use. He also goes to great lengths to prove that even for the inexpressible realm, it will be effective to explain the transcendental by applying his concepts like "family resemblance," and "language games."

Wittgenstein's recognition of the importance of context led to the development of a new branch of linguistics known as pragmatics. Following him, J. L. Austin believes that words do things, and a performative perspective encompasses both ordinary and extraordinary linguistic phenomena. Innumerable studies have appeared in recent decades about every performative aspect of Chan koans. Scholars bring us a step closer to understand what koans are actually saying and how to act with words. However, pragmatics overemphasizes the power of words in doing things, and also leaves some unique aspects of koans unexplored. In the following, rather than providing an exhaustive account of their theories, I will critically reflect on this pragmatic tendency in the study of koans.

Henry Rosemont provides a performative analysis of koans, suggesting that they are not descriptive but performative in nature. He exemplifies this by taking questions like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" and argues that koan sentences have no truth value but instead have a great shock value for students. A koan performs its task to "stop intellectualizing," and the performative analysis can account for the seeming madness and its hidden method [Rosemont 1970, *118*]. Performative analysis of koan usually focuses on its use of verbs. Actions such as shouting, beating, slapping, halving a cat in two, or kicking down a bottle are often accounted as performances. However, we need to be careful when relating Chan "performance" to Austin's concept of "performative acts."

According to Austin, "speech act" (illocutionary act) refers to an utterance that have performative function in language and communication, which means the performative force is normally signified by a verb. An explicit verb indicates a speech act for exercising influence on the hearer in a normal conversational setting [Austin 1962, *59*]. For example, *peel me a pear*, uses the verb *peel* to emphasize the fact that I'm requesting. We feel the same illocutionary force in the sentence "you had better wash your bowl" spoken by Zhaozhou master in front of a monk in order to issue a request. As said by Austin, we achieve the performative by using the operative words for demands, questions, assertions, and promises. The idea of a performative utterance is that it is the performance of an action. The utterer must be the performer [Austin 1962, *60*]. However, some koans, but not all, meet these requirements.

Koan discourse entails performance, but the performer is not always the one uttering the words. The koan story is more descriptive than performative in the context of textual representation because it is basically a transcription of encounter dialogues narrated by an obscure author. We see how Chan masters perform, but they do not necessarily assume the role of utterer. For example, a monk asked Baizhang, "What is the most wonderful thing?" Baizhang said, "I sit alone on this Great Sublime Peak." The monk then made a bow and Baizhang struck him. The last two sentences of this koan depict a "Dharma battle" involving two figures with peculiar gestures–bowing and striking.

Although Austin admits that the utterances of the words may be accompanied by non-verbal actions, sometimes even without the utterance of any word [Austin 1962, *76*], he categorizes them as "explicit performatives." However, the performances of Chan masters cannot be classified as explicit performatives because they are not the ones uttering the performance. Instead, they engage in pure performance, using it as a means of Dharma battle. This is not consistent with Austin's idea that "there

is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering" [Austin 1962, *60*]. Many koans demonstrate how Chan practitioners influence students by their actual physical performance instead of using words. It is their way of enacting their maxim of "not establishing words and letters" in practicing Chan.

Moreover, with respect to the problem of using conversational implicature, I would make a short note on how Chan practice "performs" in light of principles of cooperative behaviors. H. P. Grice posits the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its four maxims–relation, quantity, quality, and manner, as a framework for explaining the conversational implicature. Following the CP is to make your conversational contribution as required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged [Grice 1975, *45*]. "Implicature" in Grice's definition implies that unstated information is conveyed to an audience who can work out what is being said by the reference to cultural/ linguistic maxims that are being flagrantly flouted [Robinson 2002, *182*]. Almost none of conversations in koan show the compliance with the CP maxims, because koans usually minimize the dialogue cooperation. The following are often-cited examples:

1. A monk asked Dongshan, "What is Buddha?" Dongshan said, "*Masanjin*!" (Three pounds of flax, 麻三斤). (*Blue Cliff Record*, case 12).

2. A monk asked Yunmen, "What is Buddha?" Yunmen replied, "*Ganshijue*" (A lump of dried shit 幹屎橛." (*Gateless Gate*, case 21)

3. A monk asked Zhaozhou "What is the point of the First Patriarch's coming from the West?" Zhaozhou said, "The cypress tree in the courtyard." (*Gateless Gate*, case 37)

As evident from the example above, there is a deliberate violation of cooperative principles. Chan masters seem to willfully flout the maxim of relation, even the maxim of quality. Whenever a monk inquires about Buddha or the ultimate truth, the reply may appear obscure and irrelevant. Thus, the listener will infer the hidden meaning behind phrases like "three pounds of flax" or "dried shit" due to implicature naturally arising from the violation of the maxims. The lack of sufficient information necessitates reliance on implied intention in the dialogue.

For Grice, a particular conversational implicature can be inferred through the engagement in reasoning with various elements such as the conventional meaning of the words, CP, the context of the utterance. But Chan master's intention cannot be interpreted by the concept of "implicature" based on Gricean theory. The indirect speech acts of speakers are so dependent on their intentions and daily conventions. But in a koan you cannot deduce a speaker's intention from sentences that are dependent on conventions. For example, the word "hungry" is conventionally associated with "food", but the word "Buddha" does not conventionally connect to "the cypress tree" or "a lump of dried shit." Understanding a koan requires more than just filling in missing information. As Davis points out, "Grice's principle assumes that people cooperate in the process of communication in order to reduce misunderstanding" (Davis 1998, *8*). Implicature theories involve the conventional use of a sentence with its literal meaning for saying something and perform an act through its implied meaning.

In this vein, Gricean theory may not provide us with a comprehensive understanding of koans. Why should a master always perform striking with a stick

on many occasions to different disciples? Conventional deduction either based on speech acts or CP does not work for koan discourse. The purpose of a koan is not to convey an implicature, but rather to evoke intuitive understanding. The intuition in Chan Buddhism refers to a transcendental experience that defies a rational conceptualization, rather than simply maintaining or dealing with relationship with others through verbal performance. Chan master's performative speech acts serve both epistemological and soteriological objectives.

There are also other conditions sufficient for implying something, and it is possible and common to mean something by completely nonlinguistic actions [Davis 1998, *31*]. This is why Grice's CP is widely criticized for its ambiguity in applying to other languages and cultures. Chan practice is a much more complicated "performance" involving paradox, paralanguages, questions, and silence. It is insightful to apply Gricean theory to Chan study, but there appears to be a mismatch between Gricean term for "cooperation" and Chan way for "interaction." If Grice encounter koans, he might quickly find himself overwhelmed by the unpredictable variety and illogicality of human behavior, the very mess that constative linguistics attempt to tidy up [Robinson 2003, *26*].

Contextual understanding of koans as "living words"

Although the study of Chan koans often revolves around speech acts theory and Gricean concepts, the discussion about "living words" has received little consideration. The author of the *Blue Cliff Record* suggests seeing koans as "living words" rather than "dead words" to transcend their literal meanings. Koans are irrational and not rule-governed, defying static conception and constative interpretation. But if we are entirely subject to koan ineffability, we will fall into the trap of mysticism. Interestingly, the distinction between the constative and the performative opens a door for dealing with such quandary. A turn toward performative approach allows us to explore koans as "living words." Ancient Chan adepts love to create living words for learners to engage in Chan practice, for they believe that everything is in motion and flux, and impermanence is the nature of things. For example, a koan sentence like "What is the meaning of the patriarch coming from the West?" appears frequently in Chan dialogues:

When Longya posed this question in front of Cuiwei master, Cuiwei said, "Pass me the meditation brace." Longya gave the meditation brace to Wei; Cuiwei took it and hit him. Longya said, "Since you hit me, I let you hit me. In essence, though, there is no meaning of the patriarch coming from the West." Longya then turned to Linji, and asked him, "What is the meaning of the patriarch coming from the West?" Linji said, "Pass me the cushion." Longya took the cushion and handed it to Linji; Linji took it and hit him. Longya said, "Since you hit me I let you hit me. In essence, though, there is no meaning of the patriarch coming from the West." (*Blue Cliff Record*, case 20)

There is no wonder that Longya seeks a constative understanding of the ultimate truth, because he assumes that the phrase "the patriarch coming from the West" has a "truth value." An answer to this question implies that an idealized explanation of the ultimate truth will be conceived. In Robinson's sense, the use of idealization is a way to construct an ideal language, or a clear sentence to decide its "truth value." If the "truth value" of a sentence is provided, its discursive value could be easily recognized as a certain hegemonic assumption [Robinson 2003, *9*].

As exemplified in the case above, Cuiwei's actions strongly imply the performative nature of Chan practice, as a gesture to transcend constative readings within the "null context." Therefore, once Longya inquired about the meaning of "the patriarch coming from the West", he was hit by his venerable teachers. It highlights the performative dimension of Chan practice, instead of mere linguistic analysis. Chan adepts often caution learners against focusing solely on the "dead words" and instead they must study the "living words" [Yuanwu 2018, *89*].

We should keep in mind that the Ancients did not utter a single word or phrase at random. As Yunawu holds, "If your words do not astonish the audience you will fall into the streams of the commonplace" (語不驚群，陷於流俗) [Yuanwu 2018, *82*]. Also, Chan masters deliberately avoid a stabilized conceptual understanding of the Way to prevent attempts to relegating a koan into a secondary importance. Instead, they employ living phrases as a powerful device to disenchant the constative function of statements. They are used by Chan masters to fight against the insistence on abstracting ideal forms from the apparently chaotic welter of actual language use and disregarding everything that exists beyond such idealization [Robinson 2003, *36*].

Besides, Robinson also claims, "Human beings perform language as an actor performs his or her role doing things with words in a complex social context" [Robinson 2003, *40*]. For him, the phenomenal world is a place of confusion, and conceptual impurity; he quotes Derrida's words "there is no idealization that keeps itself pure, safe from all contamination" [Robinson 2003, *232*]. Hence, the complex social context works as an automated mechanism for performative linguistics. His emphasis on context also corresponds to Chan Buddhist focus on "situations." As aptly noted in koan case 27, "Seeing the hare, he lets go the hawk; using the wind, he fans the fire (見兔放鷹，因風吹火)." This refers to Chan teachers' ability to adapt student to any situation. If one's mind happens to coincide with the situation, all the complications that beset him will suddenly disappear, and he will truly understand the Way.

However, Robinson's context is different from Chan "situations" in some sense. The context in his eyes is socially determined and effected by certain power and authority. He says, "The ancient performative power of words to effect real change is closely guarded, restricted to an elite few" [Robinson 2003, *32-35*]. On the contrary, koan context is not that socially complicated, because it is usually the one who has realized enlightenment has the "authority" to perform and to effect a change. "The openness and dynamic tension of a koan is due to the reversal in which the awakened person takes the master's position by demystifying the koan and the master's authority" [Nelson 2004, *284-288*]. As shown in the second koan case of *Gateless Gate*:

One evening Huangbo asked Baizhang master, "The old man gave the wrong answer and was doomed to be a fox for five hundred rebirths. Now, suppose he had given the right answer, what would have happened then?" The master said, "Come here in front of me, and I will tell you." Huangbo went up to Baizhang and slapped him on the face. Baizhang clapped his hands and laughed, "I was thinking that the barbarian had a red beard, but now I see before me the red-bearded barbarian himself." (*Gateless Gate*, case 2)

In this case, Huangbo's rudeness did not enrage his teacher Baizhang. Rather, Baizhang was pleased with his "uncouth success," because it demonstrated his

student's mastery of the true Dharma. This illustrates how the Chan tradition entrusts the enlightened one the "authority" to engage in performative teaching. Within the Chan community, enlightened beings "perform" their teachings based on the specific situations they encounter. As explained by Yuanwu, a good master will respond to disciples' problems according to circumstances, giving medicines and dispensing prescriptions.

Also, Katz regards Chan koan as a typical example of how Chan Buddhism performs its mystical task in a linguistic context. He emphasizes that the linguistic device of the koan push the disciple toward the deeper, highly counterintuitive truth of no-self and emptiness [Katz 1992, 7]. This contextual approach to mystical experience of Chan Buddhism is intriguing and insightful. He contends that linguistic means like koans help one realize the exalted states of transcendental wisdom and experience. That's why we see the proliferation of *kanhua Chan* (看話禪) during the 11th century, which is a practice of meditation on the critical phrase of a koan story. In this sense, it functions in the same fashion as the meditation on Indian mantras. If we consider the significance of koans for the contextual approach solely in terms of its language, we will miss the essence of koan tradition. The contextual implication of koan goes far beyond its linguistic reach, but scholars place too much emphasis on the power of language. If we consider "context" to be experiential and empirical in nature, we need to deepen our understanding of the relationship of koan with its contextual meaning.

Chinese Chan Buddhism prefers to use daily context to stimulate students. Rather than relying on mystagogic instructions, Chan masters employ concrete and commonplace approaches. By going beyond linguistic reductionism, we can gain a better understanding of different contexts (including linguistic and experiential contexts) in relation to mystical Chan experience. Chan scholars believe that bizarre behaviors via external objects have a wide range of application in terms of its immediacy and intuitiveness. This aligns with Dongshan's words, if a monk cannot have *satori* with master's words, it is time to provoke "great doubt" in response to specific circumstances (context) to transcend the dualistic thinking.

Chan mediation beyond words and letters

Many mystics are often more complex than solely relying on "linguistic intentionality" as the mediation. Chan tradition demonstrates that linguistic mediation is just one facet of the overall Chan experience. It would be misleading to close the gap between linguistic context and experiential context. In Chan Buddhism, many stories show that external stimuli, rather than linguistic expressions trigger a disciple's enlightenment. Consider the typical occurrence of a disciple attaining a sudden awakening upon hearing a sound, just as master Xiangyan realized enlightenment when he heard a pebble striking bamboo. Koan cases constantly offer instruction by highlighting daily utensils, such as breakfast dishes, window blind, straw sandals, as well as religious implements like bells, robes, staffs, flags, and bowls.

These are external objects that monks can easily reach, and they become part of contextual implication for Chan teaching rather than words. Staffs and sticks are particularly adopted for nonverbal performance like shouting and beating. For example, when Shenghui asked Huineng, "When your reverence sits in meditation, does he see or not?" Huineng responded by striking him with a stick three times.

In addition, other overriding mediated tools are often employed in Chan practice. Chan adepts themselves even serve as "textbooks" and they use semiotic tools to create an experiential context.

The role of Chan patriarch within the Chan tradition is another way through which disciples get involved in Chan experience. It functions similarly as words or doctrines that inform the enlightenment experience. Chan texts provide many examples concerning the power of master-disciple "discipleship." While I will not expound on Chan lineage, it is necessary to show the discipleship in guiding Chan teaching, without which all words are powerless in the transmission of the dharma.

Chuanzi Decheng (820-858), an eminent Chan master, was known as "ferryman monk," who daily ferried travelers across the river with a small boat. His purpose behind this is to impart his teaching. When Decheng encountered Jiashan Shanhui (805-881), he threw Shanhui into the river, then hitting him with his paddle. Then, Shanhui became the first one able to respond to his fierce teaching method, Decheng thought he finally accomplished his transmission task, thereupon overturning his boat and disappeared into the river, never to be seen again. Such extraordinary Chan teaching style at the cost of master's own life is a typical example showing the importance of master's role in Chan teaching. Without the mediation of Chan adepts, all scriptures and linguistic expressions cannot go further.

Another example is Xiangyan Zhixian (?-898), who pleaded with his teacher Weishan to give a direct answer to his inquiries, but his request was flatly denied. Devastated, he burned all his books and abandoned his Buddhist studies, vowing to live as a rice-gruel monk for the rest of his life. He was unexpectedly enlightened one day while sweeping fallen leaves when he heard a cracking sound from a pebble striking a bamboo. He then said with deep gratitude to his teacher, "If you had elucidated the profound Dharma to me when I pleaded, I would not have reached where I stand today."

A good master works as a "situation" in a koan story. Rather than providing a complete understanding via words, the master guide disciples in a special way, letting them feel the extreme despair of their pursuits (Wu 2022). By letting go of intellectual understanding, and fully engaging in the experiential context, disciples may attain intuitive cognition. It is through these tactile strategies and living words of Chan adepts that the Dharma remains vibrant and alive. No matter how we perceive Chinese Chan teaching, we must pay attention to the role of Chan master as a mediator, as well as the unique framework of master-disciple interaction embodied in Chinese Chan texts. By doing so, we can enhance our understanding of the mediated nature of Chan experience.

Moreover, Chan tradition is also infused with symbolical mediations. Symbols, images, and ritual behaviors are usually considered as "skillful means" by which a master may test and awaken his disciples. It is important to avoid interpreting them symbolically, but rather to consider how these semiotic elements capture the essence of Chan experience beyond words. Take, for example, the image of "circle" in koan stories:

1. Chencao came to see Zifu. Zifu drew a *circle* in the air. Chencao said, "I have no object in coming here. Why do you bother to draw a circle?" … (*Blue Cliff Record*, case 33)

2. Nanquan drew a *circle* on the ground and said, "If you can say a word, I will go on with you." Guizong sat down in the middle of the *circle*… (*Blue Cliff Record*, case 69)

3. Shishuang drew a *circle* and wrote the character "ox" in it. Xuedou asked, "Why didn't you bring it out earlier?" Baofu said, "My master, you have grown old; employ someone else to attend you." (*Blue Cliff Record*, case 91)

Obviously, epistemology can account for the widespread use of words, chants, and symbols in evoking mystical experience. But drawing circles as a means of gaining insight does not imply an inability to express certain ideas semantically. Symbols in Chan practice tell a great deal about Chan experience. Symbols are not abstract, but existential-practical. If the disciple tries to encode the symbolic meaning of circles in above koans, he may not be unable to respond spontaneously to them. Therefore, attempting to designate a signifier-signified relationship for a sign such as "circle" in a koan is a mistake, which even leads to a delusion. So that is why when Chencao asked Zifu, "Why do you bother to draw a circle?" Zifu closed the door [Yuanwu 2018, *113*].

If Chan experience is unmediated, we may conclude that it transcends conventional linguistic expressions and dualistic thinking. Then, the language or other means employed to reach Chan experience would be regarded as mediated. Actually, we may approach this paradoxical issue from the perspective of *ti/yong* (體/用), *ti* (what it is) and *yong* (what it does) are mutually dependent. *Yong* can also define what *ti* is in that it changes and transforms *ti* via "various means" and as such is both "from itself" and "of itself" [Zhang 2018b, *196*]. Thus, we need to reiterate, Chan speaks of the concept of "a skillful means" (*upaya*) that implies the meaning of "gates toward the enlightenment" (*famen* 法門). Skillful means as both methodological and functional process of enlightenment also become expressions of enlightenment in itself.

A concluding remark

As we have analyzed, although performative and linguistic-based contextual analysis of koans provide important insights into the role of "skillful means" (*upaya*) in the realization of Chan enlightenment, we should be cautious about the statement that "there is no experience unless there is a language for it" [Katz 1992, *63*]. Experiential context is not merely linguistically oriented. According to a critique from Shigenori Nagatomo, the inquiry into mysticism cannot be complete just by analyzing the language and epistemology of mystical experiences. In other words, mystical experience cannot be adequately understood by relying simply on the speculative reason [Nagatomo 2002].

It is to this extent that Nāgārjuna's twofold truth comes into our focus: truth relating to the conventional and truth in terms of the ultimate. "Without relying upon the conventional, the ultimate is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate, freedom is not attained" [Garfield 1995, *8-10*]. This highlights how twofold truth remains as a "middle position" in relation to two perennial theories that polarize our understanding of the essence of Chan experience and "special transmission."

Nāgārjuna argues for an empirical and experience-based approach when studying human consciousness, mind, and language. Because the ultimate truth is not entirely "the other," he views "dependent arising" as more methodological than metaphysical. As a crucial answer to a dualism between language/concepts and the enlightenment

experience, "dependent arising" offers a middle way [Zhang 2018a]. As said by Nāgārjuna, the ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary practice [Siderits 2013, *273*], he endorses the experiential guiding strategies at the level of the conventional truth.

Koan teaching suggests that "skillful means" are more than just tools for enacting the "ultimate truth," instead, they are also immanent in enlightened awareness. It is important to note that a middle position is the transcendence of the binary opposition between the unspeakable Chan experience and various ways of "speaking." It resonates with Dōgen's understanding of the relationship between koan practice and enlightenment experience. Koan is not just an expedient method for guiding Chan students, but rather an all-encompassing effort that actualizes the sudden awakening.

Sudden awakening should not be regarded as a realm of pure consciousness, but rather as the active engagement of emptiness within the realm of conventional thought and language [Heine and Steven 2000, *11*]. In this sense, middle–way approach corresponds to Dōgen's "dynamic oneness of practice and realization" [Waddell and Abe 2002, *73*]. Therefore, koan teaching does not manifest something previously not manifested, but rather presents what is already there as they truly are in their suchness.

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