

A Study on Zen Dialogue

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I.

The theme of this symposium, 《Language and Thought》, points to the difficult problem of Japanese Zen Buddhism for philosophy. Overall, the attitude of Zen Buddhism to language has been negative. In a sense this view is correct; but in another sense it is also incorrect. There is some misunderstanding by those who take it for granted that Zen is so. In order to remove these misunderstandings and clarify the problem of Zen's Language, I will begin my presentation by posing the question "What am I?" And I also hope to express my interpretation on Zen Dialogue.

Dogen 道元, the famous Zen master of Japanese Soto school 曹洞宗, said, "Learning the way of Buddha is equal to learning one's own self." (*Shobo-genzo* 正法眼藏) He said, "All of human minds are destined to desire to understand their own self", too. (id.) We can't help having the desire to understand ourselves and to grasp ourselves. We can't stop such desires of the mind. Hakuin 白隠, the reviver of Japanese *Rinzai* school 臨濟宗, said, "If you want to find the root of the power of the mind, you need to *Kensho* 見性 firstly", but "If you want to *Kensho*, you must study your mind." (*Kanzan-shi-sendai-kibun* 寒山詩闡提記聞) *Kensho* means awakening one's own nature, enlightenment. Ultimately one needs to look one's mind in the face, because one's power of the mind causes oneself to desire to understand his own self. If one has the question what am I, one studies one's power of the mind which has such a question, and one should *Kensho*. These three matters are equal to each other. "What am I?" equals "Where my power of the mind comes from?", so one's true self stands under the question. We must tackle the problem of the power of the mind, with the proviso that it is not 'the mind' but 'the power of the mind'.

Then, how can we relate the problem to the theme 《Language and Thought》? The above sentences give us a hint in the right direction; we are thinking the question by language, in a word, everything is thought by language. One asks questions by his language, and he wants to get answers by it, too. It is difficult to escape language as long as he wants to understand the phenomenal world by using his language. Buddhism explains that the whole world consists of two layers. The world has two aspects of truth; one is the mundane world which is regarded as relative and feasible to be explained by language, another is the world of the absolute truth (Dharma 法) which transcends the linguistic

world. The latter aspect of truth is called *Shogi-tai* 勝義諦, and the former *Sezoku-tai* 世俗諦. The world of Dharma is often expressed in 'the silence of Buddha'. Of course, it is the important expression for *Kensho* of Zen, but Zen monks seem to be chatterboxes sometimes. How can we make a connection between the silence of Buddha and ordinary verbalizations?

II.

Zen holds up slogans such as '*Ishin-denshin* 以心伝心' (which means transmission from mind to mind), '*Kyoge-betsuden* 教外別伝' (which means direct transmission of doctrines without dependence upon sutra or other writings), and so on. Those slogans are used for the purpose of Zen education, and a trainee monk may pay attention to a word of 'transmission' which is not a substantial object. It is important that he turns his attention to the power of transmission itself. Zen monks had discussions on Buddha in order to learn the way to Buddhahood, and such dialogues have come down to us with many records of their biographical literatures.

Those dialogues are called *koan* 公案. *Koan* originally means a public notice issued by the government, and now it refers to the statements which include answers made by Zen masters. Now, I quote a case from the text of *koan* collections of *Mumon-kan* 無門關.

A monk asked Unmon 雲門, "What is Buddha?"

Unmon answered, "A dry piece of shit."

-Unmon's "Dry Piece of Shit", *Mumon-kan* 21,
Main Case

This monk asked about the essence of Buddhism, but his teacher answered him with a nonsensical phrase. Everyone must be astonished by Unmon's answer. However, the answer awakens him from his illusion of a 'beautiful' 'pure' Buddha.

The following *koan* is known as *Zusabutsu* 図作仏. Baso 馬祖 studied under Nangaku 南嶽 and from him secretly received the Mind Seal (which means the seal of transmission of the dharma). One day, Baso practiced seated meditation alone, and Nangaku went to him and asked, "Worthy monk, why do you sit in meditation?" Baso replied, "I wish to become a Buddha." Thereupon Nangaku picked up a tile and started to rub it against a stone in front of

Baso's hermitage. Baso asked him what he was doing. Nangaku replied, "Polishing it, so that it will become a mirror." "How can a tile become a mirror through polishing?" asked Baso. "How can you become a Buddha through sitting meditation?" responded Nangaku. We are astonished by this dialogue, too. Baso thought that one could be a Buddha someday by way of meditation. But Buddha is not a substantial form that one transforms oneself into it. Nangaku's answer crushed Baso's illusion and attachment.

Various occasions(episodes) are written as *koans*, to be sure, but we may observe the common essence in Zen dialogue. That is the event whereby a questioner was astonished, confused, and awakened in the face of a nonsensical answer of a teacher. It is unusual for the general people to experience such an event. Zen teachers use *koans* in order to produce the effect, and they guide their disciples to the world of the absolute truth. That is the way of practice called *Koan, Zen Dialogue*.

Dialogues, questions and answers, are being done every day. For example, when one asked the other to bring a near chair, so he may be sure that the other does it for him. We live on tacit understandings, and think that we understand our relation with each other in the world. But it is a problem concerning the way of understanding. 'Understanding the world' equals 'Telling the world apart'. (The latter is similar to 'Articulating and clarifying things in the world.) Everything distinguishes itself by its name. (If you think that is nominalism, you are mistaken.) Because the words of 'the chair' divide it from others, we believe the chair to be independent of all the rest. But it is our illusion.

In this case, the chair exists as opposed to other things. We give it meaning in order to divide it from others and recognize its existence. Or to be exact, we can't help seeking the meaning of the words. Because it seems that the meanings of words give themselves substantiality, so we desire to divide the world into meaningful and meaningless. *Koans* awaken us to such illusions by showing nonsense and meaningless phrases.

A monk once asked Joshu 趙州, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"

Joshu answered, "The juniper tree in the front garden."

The monk replied, "Master, don't teach me using external objects."

Joshu said, "I'm not teaching you using external objects."

The monk asked, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"

Joshu answered, "The juniper tree."

Joshu's "Juniper Tree", Mumon-kan 37, Main Case

The questioner should have been confused if he had received senseless answers such as Joshu's. And He might have thought, "What is the meaning?", again. He confused himself because of his desire for meaning. One desires to grasp all of the meanings in the world and 'I'. When he loses an object of his desire, he should feel pain and doubts and distress himself. The desire for meaning causes illusions, and he does *Go 業*(which means a deed which is produced by the action of the mind) eternally for the cause of desire and illusions.

The hardest desire is for that of 'I'. We give ourselves our self-identities by seeking various meanings. We recognize any questions to be meaningful before asking. The fact that we ask "what am I?" proves that we find some meaning in it. The acts of our mind happen before we ask any questions. However, the question 'what I am' is in fact a non-answered question. Those who face a problem of *koans* squarely, would experience the events which can't be explained. In spite of Dialogue, the questioner would learn the impossibility of the articulating functions of Language in the event. He would face the impossibility of his understanding about the answerer. It is a note worthy fact with regard to the relation between Dialogue and Language.

'I' and 'the other' exist in the world of their relationship. The questioner('I') asks the answerer('the other') without their tacit understandings or common rules. They ought to ask or answer each other. The questioner can't predict any answer. He only hopes to ask the other's forgiveness. — Because 'the other' is a mystery. And also is 'I'.

III.

Impossibilities of understanding, articulation, dividing, seeking meanings, and using language...all of these images give us a sign of infinity. We can't help having the desire to understand it and seek its meaning, in other words, the more one has the desire, the more the manifestation of infinity grows on his self. He gets a little chance for a glimpse of the manifestation in dialogue between 'I' and 'the other'. We can realize the Infinite only through dialogue.

However, these arguments seem to be contradictory to each other. One argues that a man desires to understand the meaning of the Infinite as is determined like an object, another argues that the Infinite should not be understood by using any words and determined by us. When we think that we understand or find the meaning of the Infinite, the Infinite is already not the Infinite. This is the problem between Faith and Intelligence. I might say, "I believe you", "I believe what I say", and "I believe the Infinite", but then I'm turning into faithlessness at the same time. To make matters worse, I would begin to doubt. 'I' should lose the

faith as long as 'I' try to understand the other like an object. Subjects understand Objects, but Subjects should not put faith onto Objects. We divide the whole world into the 'individual'. The whole world isn't the totality of substances but the Infinite. So those who live in the world continue to ask the other and answer the other to infinity, as long as their minds desire meaning.

Now, we, like objects, put faith into the hands of the Infinite. Buddhists probably call the fact *Tariki* 他力 which means the power of the other(i.e. Buddha), and I think it is *Shogi-tai* 勝義諦.

I approached Zen Dialogue from the ethical aspect in Section II. And in section III, I tried to talk about the religious aspect. Thank you for your kind attention.

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