

Zen's Four Mottos and the Poetic Language

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Abstract

This paper attempts to delve into the heart of Zen Buddhism by discussing the four Zen mottos, which provide the philosophical and spiritual pillars of Zen. The four Zen mottos, “special transmission outside doctrine,” “not to establish language,” “direct point to the mind,” and “seeing into one’s nature and attaining the Buddhahood,” address the fundamental questions about language in its role of the expression and transmission of the spirituality. The mottos indicate that enlightenment is nothing but breakthroughs in an individual’s searching for meanings and a new level of consciousness in their life practice. The experiences of enlightenment as new horizons of consciousness cannot be fixed in conceptual language and reduced to doctrinal principles. Enlightenment, as concrete experiences in the “flux” of the mind, can be most directly expressed and effectively transmitted in poetic language. Poetry can metaphorically capture, articulate, and evoke the spiritual experiences that are often viewed as mystical or ineffable in an abstract paradigm. Poetry can capture the living experiences of life without making judgments and fixation based on doctrines and conceptual frameworks; therefore it is “a special transmission outside the doctrine.” Poetry can deliver spiritual messages without directly asserting and delimiting them; therefore, it “does not establish language.” Poetry can “directly point to the mind” by freeing the speaker from any fixed positions, frameworks, and logical rules, so it can directly appeal to people’s minds and respond to concrete situations. The poetics of Zen renders a contrast to the traditional approach to Buddhism that seeks the abstract representation of enlightenment based on exegeses and interpretations of the established words given by the founders and predecessors.

Keywords: Asian religions, philosophy, Buddhism, Zen, language, poetry, Chinese poetics

Enlightenment is the objective of Zen practice, but when the question “what is enlightenment” is asked, the Zen tradition offers no systematic or even straightforward answer from Zen tradition. Throughout classical Zen literature, whenever disciples ask about the definition of enlightenment, masters always give inexplicable answers such as “clouds hang in the sky and water sits in the jar,” or “a cypress tree in the garden.” This intriguing tradition can be traced back to the historical Buddha, who remained silent and presented a flower when the assembly expected him to give a sermon. Mahakasyapa, the head disciple, smiled at the moment of silence, and the historical Buddha announced that he had completed the transmission. What was transmitted in the Buddha’s silence, and why did the Buddha not speak a word while he was supposed to preach the doctrine of enlightenment? Was it difficult to say, or did he just prefer not to say it? What might be the problem of saying it? These questions have intrigued practitioners and philosophers for generations. To answer those questions we need to understand the notion of enlightenment, which, in turn, will lead to a critique of language, which provides the expression of enlightenment. Some scholars think that the experiences of enlightenment are irrational, mystical and beyond the reach of language. However, if the experiences of enlightenment are ineffable, how can such experience be expressed and taught, and how can we evaluate the wealth of literature produced in the Zen tradition? These questions demand a deeper exploration of the role of language in the experience of enlightenment, which seems to indicate a paradox. On one hand, enlightenment is at the center of the discourse of Zen; on the other, it is against the spirit of Zen to define or establish an intellectual scheme of enlightenment. A natural point to start the inquiry is the well-known four Zen mottos, which have been recognized by all schools as its gist:

A special transmission outside the doctrines,

Not to establish language,

Direct pointing to the mind,
Seeing into one's nature and attain the Buddhahood.

The four Zen mottos have historically marked the formation of Zen, as they provide the philosophical and spiritual pillars of Zen (Welter, pp.79-91, 2000). We will see how those Zen mottos collectively characterize Zen's unique view about doctrine, language, spiritual transmission, and expression. The four Zen mottos indicate that enlightenment lies in the mind of individuals, and the experiences of enlightenment cannot be fixed in language and reduced to doctrine. It can be transmitted only directly from mind to mind. These ideas pave Zen's poetic path to enlightenment.

1. A Special Transmission outside the Doctrines

Scholars generally agree that the very first Zen motto indicates Zen's departure from traditional Buddhism, which consists of an enormous amount of scriptures. The traditional approach to Buddhism assumes that the doctrines taught by the historical Buddha contain all the truth. To be a Buddhist is then to interpret, transmit, and practice what is written in the doctrines. "Special transmission outside doctrine" indicates that Zen's ideas and spirituality cannot be based on doctrines, and cannot be reduced to what has been said in scriptures. Zen masters seem not to take the Buddhist scriptures seriously, as they sometimes openly ridicule or even burn them publicly. However, "outside the doctrine" does not mean anti-doctrine, which can be considered a form of doctrine. As a matter of fact, most Zen masters, ancient and contemporary, have diligently studied and extensively understood the classical scriptures, although they regard those scriptures as pieces of literature rather than canonical documents. Zen wants to be founded on the living practice of life rather than abstract doctrines. In other words, Zen wants to open itself to the living experiences that go beyond what can be established and represented in scriptures. Dogen's poetic reflection on this Zen motto provides some insight in this regard:

The Dharma, like an oyster,
washed atop a high cliff,
Even waves crashing against,
the reefy coast, like words,
may reach but cannot wash it away. (Heine, p. 63, 1997)

Heine properly interprets the poem:

The Dharma is not a remote entity above the waves but finds its place beyond the water precisely because of the perpetual motion of the waves . . . Thus the oyster has been cast out of the universal background by the movement of a particular wave but must return to its source for sustenance.

The imagery of the oyster and waves presents an analogy symbolizing the relationship between the Dharma, or the truth, and its relative manifestations traditionally exemplified by the vicissitude of waves. The doctrines, the established sayings of antecedents, come to reside on a lofty peak, like the oyster, and become separated from the wave of everyday life. This causes a chasm between the two, which struggle to join together again. The "special transmission outside the doctrines" is to place the spirituality of Buddhism back in the concrete life, making it the living base for any discourse.

Zen is a synthesis of Buddhism and Chinese indigenous religions, which are generally viewed as secularly oriented. Zen shares the primary concern of native Chinese religions and philosophies, that is, how to live better in this world; as Suzuki puts it:

Briefly, Zen is one of the products of the Chinese mind after its contact with Indian thought . . . Compared with Indians, the Chinese people are not so very philosophically-minded. They are rather practical and devoted to wordily affairs; . . . While the Chinese mind was profoundly stimulated by the Indian way of thinking, it never lost its touch with plurality of things, it never neglected the practical side of our daily life. This national or racial psychological idiosyncrasy brought about the transformation of Indian Buddhism into Zen Buddhism. (Suzuki, p. 3, 1973)

Traditional Buddhism already has a practical dimension as clearly indicated by the idea of *upaya*, meaning skillful means of tackling problems to deliver people from their pitfalls. The historical Buddha gives two classical illustrations of this idea. One is the story in the *Lotus Sutra* about saving the children caught in a burning house. The children who are playing inside the burning house do not recognize the danger and refuse to escape. In order to get them out, an elder man lures them out with toys, an example of *upaya*. The historical Buddha gives another parable about rescuing a person who was shot by a poisonous arrow. He states that the

most important and urgent thing about saving that person is to pull out the poisonous arrow immediately, rather than to spend time learning where the arrow came from and who shot it (Rahula, pp14, 1974). The concept of *upaya* entails that the truthfulness of the transmission lies in its expedience and effectiveness rather than in a conformity with doctrine or extant truth. The Buddhist notion of truth can be illustrated by the metaphor of truth as a raft that helps people across the river; when the river is crossed, the raft can be left behind. A truth is meaningful only when it can deliver people from suffering and help them achieve enlightenment. Scholars have observed that, as the result of the integration with Chinese culture and indigenous religions, this practical orientation of Buddhism is emphasized and further developed in Zen; as Suzuki notes in *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism* examining the first Zen motto:

At the time of the introduction of Zen into China, most of the Buddhists were addicted to the discussion of highly metaphysical question, contented with merely observing the ethical precepts laid down by the Buddha and leading a lethargic life entirely absorbed in the contemplation of the evanescence of things. They missed apprehending the great fact of life itself, which flows altogether outside of these vain exercises of the intellect . . . For this reason Zen never explains but indicates, it does not appeal to circumlocution nor generalization. It always deals with facts, concrete and tangible. (Suzuki, p. 332, 1962)

According to Suzuki, the first Zen motto, “special transmission outside the doctrine” indicates a shift of emphasis from an abstract and intellectual discourse to practical wisdom about life. Enlightenment in Zen is brought down to earth in its most concrete and immediate sense. Scholars have agreed that Zen has been through three major developments. The first shift, established in the Northern school, is from the theoretical discourse to practical cultivation of the mind to realize its emptiness. The second shift, represented by the Southern school, is based on the conviction that the mind is originally empty by its own nature, or *zhi xing*; therefore, enlightenment can be achieved in a “sudden awakening” to this nature without going through a “gradual process.” The third shift, taking place in the blossoming period of Zen, is characterized by the realization that the empty mind is not apart from the “ordinary mind.” Therefore, enlightenment is realized in daily actions, as illustrated by the Zen saying, “Before enlightenment, carry water and chop wood, after enlightenment, carry water and chop wood” (Sun, p. 43, 1993). Enlightenment, as a transformation of the mind, enhances the daily experience of life, rather than transcending it. The following *koan* reflects this idea:

A monk came to ask the master Da-zhu, “what is the way of Zen?” The master answered, “When I am hungry, I eat, and when I am sleepy, I go to bed.” The monk said, “Anyone can do that; is there any difference between you and average person?” “Of course there is a difference,” the master answered. “Many people don’t feel like eating when it is time to eat, and they cannot sleep when it is time to sleep because their minds cannot settle down with the thousands of concerns floating in there (Dao-yuan, p. 108, 1965).

Zen aims to tackle the concrete problems of life by transforming people’s minds. Instead of creating a separate spiritual or religious life regulated by doctrines, the spirituality of Zen is dedicated to enhancing the daily lives of individuals. From this regard, the first Zen motto “special transmission outside the doctrines” does not mean to throw out doctrines all together, but intends to found Zen in living situations. Zen aims at the “special transmission” that is practical and well placed in the concrete life practice rather than a dogmatic world. This will lead to the gate of poetry as the spiritual transmission of enlightenment.

2. Not to Establish Language

The next Zen motto “not to establish language” reveals the problem of language in the transmission of Zen, since the attachment to doctrines is embedded in the establishment of language. This statement was often interpreted as “do not depend on language,” as if language can be dispensable in the transmission of Zen. According to this understanding, human language, as a cultural phenomenon, is inadequate in transmitting Dharma, the transcendental truth of Buddhism. For example, Suzuki thinks that truth is “seeing things as such,” before it is filtrated by language:

The ultimate truth is a state of inner experience by means of intuitive wisdom, and as it is beyond the realm of words and discriminations it cannot be adequately expressed by them . . . The ultimate truth is Mind itself that is free from all forms, inner and outer. No words can therefore describe Mind; no discriminations can reveal it (Suzuki, 1962).

Suzuki thinks that “not to establish language” indicated Zen’s seeking for “direct experience of reality” before one’s senses are tainted by any linguistic mediation or conceptualizations. Fromm, concurring with Suzuki, believes that language might function as a filter or a veil placed upon reality and thus hides its true face (98-101).

Suzuki, as a leading scholar and practitioner of Zen, represents a prevalent conviction that language, due to its mediating, conditioning effects, could neither render the path nor serve as representation of enlightenment understood as an immediate, intuitive grasp of reality. This perspective indicates that although linguistic mediation is necessary in everyday communication, it can and ought to be transcended in order to grasp the “naked” reality seen from the enlightened eyes. This critique of language reflects a well-known Zen slogan, “whatever you say about enlightenment is irrelevant.” It seems that there is no predicate proper for the notion of enlightenment. That is why Zen masters never provide a definitive answer to questions such as “What is enlightenment,” as any such answer would leave some misleading trace for people to cling to, therefore defeating its spirit of non-attachment.

Suzuki provides the most extensive understanding about the problem of language in the spiritual transmission of Zen, but his solution that discredits the role of language altogether, is problematic. A practical question is how the transmission is possible without resorting to language. One tactic that seems to provide an alternative to the use of language is the silence, initially exemplified by the historical Buddha who kept his silence with a flower in his hand during a sermon. The following koan story addresses this issue.

In a summer conference, the master did not give any speech. One monk was grumbling, “I just wish to hear a few words from him.” An elder monk overheard him, and said, “There is no single word with regard to enlightenment.” Then, immediately, he clattered his teeth and said, “Damn, why should I say that stupid thing!” The master heard that and laughed at him, “you just spoiled the whole thing” (Qu, p. 124, 1992).

The elder monk regrets saying, “there is no single word . . .” because he realized that he has broken the silence by the very utterance of silence. However, the real mistake of the elder monk is not by the fact that he has opened his mouth, but by his tendency to be fixated with silence, which would be as mistaken as an attachment to anything else. Silence is nothing but a particular sign or event that attains its meaning in the context of other signs or activities. In other words, silence is a special mode of speaking and acting whose significance does not really transcend the linguistic world. Silence is never meant to be the designated path to, or the representation of, enlightenment. It is not even an ideal way of the spiritual transmission. Zen wants to explore various modes of speaking and open itself to all possible ways of transmission, and that is why Zen has produced the largest body of literature comparing to all Buddhist traditions. A koan story about De-shan, a well-known master for his hitting, (Note 1) provides a further illustration.

One night, the master announced to all disciples that tonight would be a silent session, whoever spoke would be hit thirty times. A disciple stepped out and gave a silent bow. “Now what?” the master raised his stick. The disciple kept his mouth shut, but De-shan hit him anyway. The disciple argued, “I did not say a word, why did you hit me this time?” “Where are you from?” the master asked. “I am from Xing-luo.” “That is right, you owe me thirty whacks when you were on your way here.” (Dao-yuan, p. 280, 1965).

The master has announced that it is to be a silent session of practice. A disciple obviously takes it literally, but he was hit. The master does not even explain what is wrong with the disciple who indeed has followed his instruction and does not utter a word. Apparently, the master does not simply mean keeping the mouth shut, when he speaks of the silence. Instead, silence here means a state of the mind that transcends the logical duality: either speaking or non-speaking. Although the disciple does not say anything, he has broken the silence in his mind when he takes silence as the designated path to enlightenment. De-shan, the same master, reveals the problem of silence in the following koan.

One day a monk came to visit De-shan. The master suddenly grabbed the monk and asked him about the meaning of enlightenment. Before the monk spoke, the master warned, “If you could say it, you will receive thirty blows, but if you could not say it, I will also give you thirty blows. Now what can you do?” (Qu, p. 270, 1992).

The real problem about language in the speaking of enlightenment is the dilemma that on one hand, enlightenment cannot be represented by anything that has been spoken and on the other hand, one has to say it anyhow. In other words, one has to speak the unspeakable. This dilemma is most dramatically presented by a famous Zen koan given by the Zen master Xiang-yan.

A man was up in a tree hanging from a branch with his teeth. His clenching on the twig was the only support for his body. The tree was on a cliff, under which was a bottomless hollow. Now somebody asked him what was the meaning of enlightenment. If he did not say anything, he would fail to provide an answer, and thus stuck on the tree forever. But if he tried to say something, he would fall to the bottomless valley (Dao-yuan, pp196, 1965).

In the past decades, philosophers have debated on the relationship between language and experience, and some of them have come to agree that language is always implicated in experience and even the immediate perception is already mediated by language. Wright summarized this debate and concluded:

Language is both actively manifest and presupposed in the constitution of this experience. We have found, first, that language is involved in the linguistic stage-setting and shaping of enlightened experience, and, second, that the effects of enlightenment are most clearly manifest in their linguistic form.

Suzuki's idea of "direct experience of reality" has been questioned by contemporary philosophers based on the conviction that no "reality" or "direct experience" is devoid of linguistic mediation. (Note 2) Even the very dichotomy between reality and its representations is a conception conceived in language. Buddhism essentially coincides with the contemporary philosopher's position that there is no human access to reality before interpretation through language. The Buddhist idea of sunyata negates any kind of reality of self-nature or independent substance. All experiences, including enlightenment, are constructed through "interdependent arising," which necessarily involves language. It is theoretically problematic and practically impossible to circumvent language in the path to enlightenment. Zen has produced more literature than any other Buddhist schools, and this fact indicates that Zen does not dismiss or depreciate language. Zen masters are extraordinary with words in their koan exchanges. If language is indispensable in Zen's endeavor to attain enlightenment, we need to find a new perspective to interpret the Zen motto, "not to establish language." We need to address two questions raised by this statement. First, what is the Zen's critique of language? Second, how does this critique lead to Zen's approach to language, which embraces poetic elements?

Since language involves meanings, the statement "not to establish language" naturally leads to the question about whether Zen establishes meanings. Particularly, does the term enlightenment represent something definitive, such as the "absolute truth" or "ultimate experience?" Traditional Buddhism admits such term as "absolute truth" although it is not considered transmittable through words. The notion of enlightenment is developed from the idea of Nirvana regarded by traditional Buddhists as the ultimate goal of their practice. Attempting to answer the question "what is Nirvana," Rahula writes:

The only reasonable reply to give to the question is that it can never be answered completely and satisfactorily in words, because human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality that is Nirvana. Language is created and used by masses of human beings to express things and ideas experienced by their sense organs and their mind. A supramundane experience like that of the Absolute Truth is not of such a category.

Although this passage reflects the thought of the Theravada School of Buddhism, it still reveals that Nirvana transcends the established system of meanings and therefore cannot be defined by words. According to the Four Noble Truths (Note 3), Nirvana means the cessation of all cravings and emancipation from various bondages. However, this definition does not render Nirvana a definitive meaning that can be sought as the ultimate goal. The term Nirvana, as the complete cessation, is devoid of any describable contents, and it can only be understood as negation or nothingness. Moreover, if the term Nirvana signifies something definitive, it would create a new attachment in mind, and thus defeat its initial meaning which is the ultimate liberation from all attachment. Nagarjuna, in his Madhyamaka philosophy, indicates the impossibility to establish any theoretical meaning about Nirvana (Williams, p. 68, 1989). Based on that, Mahayana Buddhist tradition holds that, in a sense, Nirvana is Samsara. From this perspective, Nirvana does not represent a particular condition of the mind or a specific kind of experience. Instead, it indicates a general course of practice which is embodied in the Eightfold Path namely, right perception, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The historical Buddha did not define the "rightness" the Eightfold Path, neither did he indicate what exactly can be attained by pursuing those paths. Nirvana, which is devoid of all substance, cannot be deemed as any ontological or experiential reality which can be pursued and attained as the ultimate goal. From Zen's point of view, nirvana is what one starts with in the journey rather than something one can attain or reach at the end of the journey. Nirvana is the path rather than the objective of the path. In other words, the Eightfold Path is not the way to Nirvana, but the way of Nirvana.

Zen master Dogen thinks that to define and seek enlightenment as something ultimate and separable from the practice would be misleading since it will reduce the practice of Zen to a means of some predetermined end. He believed that the meaning of enlightenment lies in the process of practice. As he puts it:

The view that practice and enlightenment are not one is mistaken. In the Buddha-Dharma they are one. Inasmuch as practice is based on enlightenment, the practice of beginner is entirely that of original enlightenment. Therefore, in giving the instruction for practice, a Zen teacher advises his/her disciples not to seek enlightenment

beyond practice, for practice itself is original enlightenment. Because it is already enlightenment of practice, there is no end to enlightenment; because it is already practice of enlightenment, there is no beginning to practice (Kim, p. 61, 1987).

According to Dogen, separating the goal from the path indicates the dualistic approach to enlightenment, which will undermine the process of practice by reducing it to merely a means to the goal. Dogen's thought represents the consistent conviction of Zen that enlightenment does not point to a definitive state as the ultimate objective that all people should strive for at all times. Enlightenment is a journey or project rather than an essence. It lies in the never-ending process of practice and people can continuously experience it in their lifetime. Different individuals will have different experiences of enlightenment, and each moment of enlightenment is different from others. Therefore, the statement, "Not to establish language," indicates not to establish the meaning of enlightenment as a definitive state of the mind. This is to say that enlightenment does not have any ultimate meaning that one can define and achieve once for all. The meaning of enlightenment cannot be separated from the process of action and neither can it be brought to a closure.

Language consists of both meaning as the signified, and words as the signifiers. (Note 4) The statement "not to establish language," indicates that Zen's idea of non-fixation not only apply to the signified meaning, but also to the words, the signifier. Zen is against traditional Buddhism which has the tendency to sanctifies the words of the historical Buddha and treat them as the ultimate source and foundation of the religion. This traditional approach considers the Buddhist discourse an endeavor of exegesis which only allows certain flexibility and novelty in the course of interpretation. Zen sets itself free from not only the fixation of meanings but also any establishment of words, or signifiers provided by any authority. Both the meaning and the expression of enlightenment are open to the endless exploration and creativity. A koan story depicts an interaction between a Zen master and one of his disciples who tends to affix a signifier of Zen:

When people asked Ju-di about the essence of Zen, the Zen master did not say anything, but stuck out his index finger. One of his disciples saw this, and whenever someone asked him about Zen, he imitated the master showing his index finger. One day the master asked the disciple what, in a nutshell, is the way of Zen, the disciple, again, presented the index finger. The master took a knife and chopped that finger off and asked him again what is the way of Zen. The disciple, looking at the absence of the finger, was suddenly enlightened (Qu, p. 237, 1992).

Disciples often believe that there is a definitive essence of Zen and they expect Zen masters to define such essence in words or other established forms. Zen masters always avoid the direct answer to such question and instead innovate ways, often artistic and improvised, to meet people's mind according to the situation and disposition of the individual. By showing the one finger, the master may mean the idea of one-mind, or he simply want to point to the mind of the inquirer, indicating that everything of Zen is in the mind of individual. Whatever it might mean, it is intended to be an upaya, a skillful means that can solve the practical problem of the individual in certain situation without necessarily resorting to any established words. Cutting off the finger in the above koan story illustrate in a vivid way the idea "not to establish language." A religion can develop and renew its meanings in the course of exegesis and interpretation within an established linguistic framework, as many religious traditions do with their fundamental scriptures. Zen, however, attempts to free itself from any scriptural foundations and sets out to explore meanings without any fixed linguistic framework as its boundary. In other words, Zen demands a constant refreshing of both the signified and the signifiers, and to do so it needs to go beyond the course of interpretation and constantly break the established linguistic shells. However, as reflected in the disciple who imitated his master in the above koan story, people tend to establish and cling to both meanings and the signifiers of meanings. To overcome such inclination is one of the major aspects of Zen practice noted throughout Zen literature. The following is another well-known example:

The master Lin-ji once was talking to disciples, "Behold, there is a true person who is without a position but he constantly comes in and out of your body. Pay more attention if you have not yet seen him." A monk came forward and asked: "What does such a person without a position look like?" Lin-ji grabbed the monk and exclaimed, "you tell me." The disciples were all dumbfounded while the master suddenly said, "who cares a shit about this true person without position?" and then he went straight back to his room (Dao-yuan, p. 212, 1965).

Disciples have the tendency to seek the model or authority which can often be found in the religious founder or antecedents. Lin-ji initially intends to say that the holiness did not have any fixed position, and he uses the idea of person-without-position to teach his disciples not to cling to any fixed positions. Obviously, Lin-ji notices that this very idea of person-without-position could be the object of attachment, as the disciples tended to dogmatize about whatever the master speaks. Realizing that words, both the signified and the signifier, can become the

source and objects of attachment, Lin-ji and other Zen Buddhist schools adopted special non-verbal devices, such as abrupt shouting and hitting, to stop the practitioner's tendency of attachment. However, the extraordinary use of language remains the major means to deliver the message of non-attachment. The most vivid example is Lin-ji's provocative saying about killing the Buddha:

Fellows who seeks the way, don't be deceived by others, and you have to kill all the internal and external (fixation). Kill the Buddha if you happen to meet him. Kill a patriarch or an arhat if you come across him. Kill your parents and relatives if they are in your way. Only then can you be free from any bondage and set your mind at ease (Dao-yuan, p. 212, 1965).

In traditional Buddhism, the Buddha, as the religious founder, represents the ultimate truth and vision of Buddhism. To kill Buddha would mean to give up Buddhism on the whole. Zen does not take Buddhism as any established system of meanings fixed by a set of words given by a historical founder. Zen asks similar questions that traditional Buddhism asked, such as the meaning of enlightenment, but Zen want to locate its effort in the ceaseless and open-ended exploration rather than a set of final answers. People tend to seek the ultimate answers from the authoritative words, and that is exactly the approach that Zen opposes. Without being committed to the authoritative words, including the historical Buddha's original teachings, the development of Zen will not be based on the exegesis and interpretations of scriptures. Zen has to find a way to overcome the contradiction between the idea not to establish language and the necessity to use language. This opens various new directions and styles of spiritual expressions, among which we find poetry.

We have seen that Zen does not shun language; instead, it offers a non-conventional way to approach language. According to Zen, language is not only an established protocol for communication and representation of what has already been disclosed. Language is also an act of exploration, and thus plays significant role in forming and expressing the experiences of enlightenment which, from this perspective, are not ineffable. However, this does not mean that language can establish the experiences of enlightenment as an objective and universal reality, since Zen does not recognize such reality. Moreover, according to Zen, not only the meaning of enlightenment cannot be fixed, but the linguistic expression of enlightenment should not be fixed either. Language can express the experiences of enlightenment, but this does not entail that it can establish enlightenment in a definitive and objective way. Zen uses language in different way from the scientists and philosophers who seek a universal paradigm to describe and explain things in objective and accurate way. Human mind is not a "thing" that can be understood and coped with a universal paradigm.

3. Direct Point to the Mind

Doctrines and linguistic frameworks provide the guidelines for the religious practice and communication. Without resorting to doctrines, how does Zen provide directions and answers to problems in life practice? The third Zen motto, "directly point to the mind" provides a clue for the answer of this question. The first two Zen mottos, "special transmission outside doctrines," and "not to establish language," are negational statements which tell what Zen speaking should not be like. The third motto, "direct point to the mind," is the affirmative statement indicating what Zen transmission should be like. This statement is a natural extension of the first and second Zen motto, indicating that Zen speaking should not be based on what has been said by the founders, nor should it be attached to or centered on any fixed position, nor confined by any logical framework. After liberating from authority of doctrine and founders, Zen discourse becomes immediate expressions of the minds, whose horizons collide and merge to create "fusional horizons." Recourse to doctrines and authorities is considered an "indirect" approach. The motto suggests that a spiritual discourse be like a living drama of the direct interaction between individual minds, which directly responds to concrete situations. The drama is often poetic in contrast to the theoretical approach, which seeks the abstract representation of enlightenment. The following koan story exemplifies this Zen motto.

A troubled nun came to seek help from master Wu-shan, asking him how a nun could attain enlightenment. The master told her to come back at midnight. When the nun came back at midnight, she saw the master dressing in woman's clothing and wearing heavy make-up. She was stunned and suddenly enlightened (Liao, p. 274, 1996).

The master discerns that what prevents the nun from making progress was her fixation about the disadvantage of being a nun comparing being a monk. Instead of theoretically deconstructing the gender difference, the master sets up a show that helps to reveal the illusory nature of the gender differences from the spiritual perspective. A philosophical discourse can help to identify the problem in an abstract level, but there is still a distance between the theoretical understanding and the actual realization. From Zen's perspective, human mind are concrete and individualistic rather than a universal. A direct approach to the mind in a setting of concrete encounter is often

more meaningfully and effectively than resorting to abstract teachings which is considered the “indirect” approach. The Zen master chose to show the problem rather than to analyze it theoretically. Instead of indoctrinating the disciples, the master preferred to present it to achieve direct impact on the mind. This approach can immediately shatter the problem that has entangled a practitioner’s mind for a length of time, and enable him to find the answer on his own, and attain a “sudden awakening.” The effectiveness of this approach can be illustrated in the following Japanese Zen story.

A soldier came to ask Hakuin “Is there really a paradise and a hell?” “Who are you? Your face looks like that of a beggar?” As the soldier became angry and began to draw his sword, the master remarked: “Here opens the gate of hell!” At these words the soldier, perceiving the master’s tact, sheathed his sword and bowed. Here opens the gate of paradise,” said Hakuin (Ross, p. 80, 1960).

The soldier apparently knows little about Zen which does not place its spirituality in heaven or hell. However, the master does not correct his misconception, nor does he try to teach the soldier about Zen. He does not even directly answer the question raised by the soldier. Instead, the master manages to elicit the immediate experience from the heart of the soldier, letting him realize for himself that heaven and hell, from Zen’s perspective, lie in the very mind the person.

The most important aspect of Zen, and Buddhism in general, is about taking right action expeditiously. The classical period of Buddhism left a large volume of scriptures. Among them the narrative sutras represent the deeds of the historical Buddha, and provide example of good behavior. The philosophical sutras provide the Buddhist worldview, and help to understand the right way to act. The legal sutras present the Buddhist system of precepts and disciplines for the practitioners to regulate their conduct. The traditional Buddhist schools require extensive studies of the classical literature to achieve right understanding and concentration which were presumed to precede the right action. This approach to action is considered indirect because it aims at the way of thinking which is only a preparation for good actions. Zen seeks more direct way to actions, because, according to Zen, action is not necessarily the result of thinking; it precedes thinking. Therefore, Zen language emphasizes stimulating actions rather than rendering representations of meanings. This approach to language coincides with the western speech-act theory according to which speeches primarily perform actions that aim to evoke other actions rather than to represent ideas.

“Direct point to the mind,” indicates that Zen’s language aims to prompt people’s immediate action. In a koan story, a newly arrived disciple asks about the path to enlightenment; the master does not answer the question, but asks: “have you eaten your breakfast yet?” “Yes” the disciple replied. “Then go and wash your bowl” (Qu, p. 203, 1992). Instead of analyzing the problem based on a theoretical system and telling people how to act accordingly, Zen masters usually seek to appeal to people’s immediate impulse to action, and see it takes place. Action, according to Zen, will expedite the transformation without necessarily going through the traditional intellectual path.

“Direct point to the mind” calls for an extraordinary art of language, which, as we will see in later chapters, constitutes the poetic dimension of Zen. Poetry can narrate events, present images, express feelings, and illustrate ideas, but in Zen poetics, those are only derivative functions of poetry. The poetry is not just the means of representations but more importantly the way of action that seeks to directly impact the mind. Koan exchange is a major practice of “directly pointing to the mind,” because the authority of doctrine and the fixation of language can only be transcended in this poetic mode of speaking.

4. Seeing into one’s Nature and Attain the Buddhahood

Buddhahood is the realization of enlightenment. The last Zen motto points out that enlightenment lies in “seeing into one’s nature.” The fourth Zen motto naturally follows the previous ones which indicate that the meanings of Zen cannot be contained in doctrines and established in words. Enlightenment as the objective of Zen lies in the realization of the Buddhahood which is deeply embedded in the mind of all individuals. The question is how it is possible to attain something deep in the mind and the meaning of which cannot be defined in its teachings.

According to mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha nature is endowed to all individuals. The idea that only some people can attain enlightenment is rejected as the hinayana, “the small vehicle,” while the former regards itself as “the big vehicle.” One pillar stone of mahayana Buddhism is the idea that “All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature,” a statement from Mahapari-Nirvana sutra. Here the term “Buddha-nature” means the potentiality to become a Buddha or to attain enlightenment. Although this idea renders the possibility for all to attain the Buddhahood, it still presumes a gap between the potentiality of enlightenment, and the actuality of enlightenment, since a practitioner needs to take a process to achieve enlightenment, and then become Buddha.

In other words, an ordinary person is not Buddha until he realizes his Buddha-nature. Since the term “Buddha-nature” does not have any definable element, it becomes a transcendental concept indicating some mystical potentiality in the context of traditional Buddhism. Zen revolutionized the idea of Buddha-nature as Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, stated in *The Platform Sutra*:

An ordinary person is Buddha. Their troubled mind is the Buddhahood. A foolish thought makes one an ordinary man, but when he pass through it, he becomes Buddha. The first thought bring him to a delusion when his mind is attached to a scene, but he immediately attained his enlightenment when, with his second thought, he frees himself from that attachment. The learned seeker, the exalted wisdom is not to stay where you are, but not to be attached to where you come from and where you head for (Fa-hai, p. 18, 1982).

According to Hui-neng and all Zen schools after him, an ordinary individual is already a Buddha. There is no transcendental Buddha-nature looming above for people to attain, since every individual mind already possesses Buddha-nature although it may be shadowed. Enlightenment lies in the moment when a person comes out of his own shadow. Therefore, there is no universal vision of enlightenment for which all individuals should strive. The abstract idea of Buddha-nature, which retains a metaphysical remnant, is embodied by Zen as “One’s own existential nature” or *zhi xing* in Chinese. As the final Zen motto states, to achieve enlightenment is to see one’s own nature, rather than seeking a universal ideal. The famous Japanese Zen master Dogen also discussed this issue, and he concluded that Buddha-nature is nothing but the existence of all individuals (Kim, p. 120, 1987). Since Zen and Buddhism in general do not recognize any self-nature, the term “one’s own existential nature” does not imply anything intrinsic or fixed in human mind. Suzuki’s statement reflects general thought of Zen in this regard:

(To see our nature) is to see directly into the mystery of our own being, which, according to Zen, is Reality itself. Zen thus advises us not to follow the verbal or written teaching of Buddha, not to believe in higher being other than oneself, not to practice formulas of ascetic training, but to gain an inner experience which is to take place in the deepest recesses of one’s being (Suzuki, p. 218, 1973).

One’s existential nature is nothing but one’s mind, which, according to Buddhism is essentially empty in the sense that it is not predetermined by anything, and therefore, limited by nothing. This ensures the unlimited possibility for each individual to form his unique mind in life practice. To see into “one’s own nature” is to experience the movement of one’s own mind, which is essentially bound by nothing. The mind inevitably encounters difficulties and obstacles in its journey and when a person walks out from his own pitfall, he experiences the moment of enlightenment, the moment of liberation of the mind. Therefore, everyone has his moments of Buddhahood which need to be renewed throughout the lifetime. That is why Hui-neng said:

When not enlightened, Buddha turns into an ordinary man. When enlightened, an ordinary turns into Buddha. All the differences are played out by your mind. Therefore, see into your mind and immediately discover the Buddhahood (Fa-hai, p. 21, 1982).

Obviously, each moment of enlightenment is always concrete and unique to the individual at the time when he attains such an experience; therefore, it cannot be fully expressed in an abstract level. Enlightenment is generally viewed as a higher consciousness. However, there is no universal basis to measure which type consciousness is higher or lower. The meaning and the path to such consciousness vary from person to person depending on the individual existence at certain stage of life. This view bears certain resemblance with standpoints of the existentialist tradition. For example, Kierkegaard thought that truth lies in subjectivity; it is an antithesis to objectivity, rather than conformity of that, as he put it:

Here is such a definition of truth: An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person (Luper, p. 85, 2000).

The objectivity is expressed through reason in a conceptual framework, but truth, from the existentialist view, must be a leap from that. Truth is essentially the reality constructed and experienced by the mind of individuals, and their experiences are the reality rather than the reflection of it. While Kierkegaard’s leap leads to the faith in god, Zen’s leap end in enlightenment which is realized in life practice. However, Zen’s idea that the truth of enlightenment lies in individuality is still different from Kierkegaard’s idea about subjectivity. The individuality in Zen is a contrast to the universal and the abstract, while the subjectivity in Kierkegaard is a contrast to objectivity.

Poetry becomes a primary mode of language that best speaks the unique and extraordinary moment of enlightenment experienced by individuals. If the logic mode of language does not suffice to speak the existential wisdom, poetry offers an alternative which speaks “the most passionate inwardness” of individuality, and demand leaps from the reason. If the existential truth cannot be spelled through propositional statements derived from certain philosophical positions, then it may be better depicted in poetry that captures the moments of flow and leap in life. Zen practitioners find poetry particularly relevant and powerful in expressing the moment of breakthrough in the practice of Zen which, according to Zen, is the practice of daily life. Consequently, both Zen monks and lay people write poetry to speak their unique experiences of enlightenment, producing a collection of poetry named the poetry of enlightenment, which becomes an important genre of Chinese and Japanese poetry. Some Zen poetry contain references of Buddhist teachings, such as the following poem by Gyokko, a fourteen century Japanese Zen monk:

Coming, I don't enter at the gate,
 Going, I don't leave by the door.
 This very body
 Is the land of tranquil light (Stryk & Ikemoto, p. 70, 1973).

This poem can be easily recognized as a Zen poem as it clearly illustrates the Buddhist idea that Buddhahood lies in the very existence of individuals, as Zen believes that one does not need to enter any gate to become a Buddhist. The higher class of Zen poetry does not contain any reference to Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist ideas, however, can be revealed through interpretation of the poems. The following is a well-known example that captures the moment of enlightenment:

On my straw sandals I chase the clouds
 treading on and over the mountains
 Seeking the spring but could not find it.
 Coming home, I pick up a petal of plum blossom,
 putting it under my nose, and suddenly
 I smell the spring all over the branches (Li, p. 98, 1992).

This poem presents an allegory that reflects a typical experience of seeking enlightenment, symbolized by the character's searching for the spring. The poet could not find her enlightenment because it does not exist in the external world. She then turned her attention to her own existence, as the character of the poem comes home after the search for spring. The character in the poem finally found the spring when she took the action to smell the petal of the flower, and the fragrance revealed the spring to her. This poem metaphorically shows that enlightenment cannot be found anywhere outside the individuals' existence, but it can only be realized in the life practice of individuals.

The most influential Zen poetry, however, do not contain any trace of Buddhist teachings, therefore, they do not assume any differences from other poetry in terms of their originality. Both Zen monks and lay people have contributed to this body of poetry which demonstrate that poetry is primarily the direct expressions of enlightenment as the existential breakthrough. The Zen poems in this category aim to capture the extraordinary moments of life, rather than serve as the means to illustrate Buddhist ideas. Ke-qing, (Note 5) one of the most prominent classical Zen writers, writes a poem in his first experienced of enlightenment:

Fragrance of perfume and warmth of fireplace
 permeated the embroidered curtain.
 The drunken lad was home,
 held up by his love.
 That long lost moment of the dissolute youth,
 only the sweetheart knew (Li, p. 142, 1992).

This is a typical Zen poem of enlightenment, as it is selected in almost all collections of Zen poetry. The poem does not give any reference to Buddhist doctrine. The poet was attempting to capture the moment of

enlightenment, and the extraordinary experience contains extensive visions, feelings and thoughts which is too personal and complicated to be described in any abstract terms. This poet finds a perfect parable to capture such unique experience: a flashback and reflection on a moment of a love affair in youth, which is still vivid and striking after time, and yet so indescribable that it can only be spoken in poetry. The scene of the dissolute youth is an excellent metaphor of life which is immersed in ignorance and temptation. Enlightenment is a breakthrough in life, and that usually takes people to a higher ground, from which they can see and reflect on the past from a new and often exalted perspective. The drunken past of the dissolute youth was converted and illuminated to a poetic scene through the enlightened eyes.

5. Conclusion

The four mottos of Zen indicate that language, in its conventional mode, can create the condition for people to be stuck in the established reality. However, language can also provide means for the spiritual transmission and expression. Particularly, language in its poetic mode can directly capture the experiences of enlightenment as the existential breakthrough achieved by individuals in their life practice. There is an impression among scholars and practitioners that poetry only provides some aesthetic decoration to the expression of enlightenment. People who hold this view also tend to believe that poetry only provides an instrument to illustrate and embellish the ideas of enlightenment, rather than the direct expressions of it. Poetry constitutes the basic existential movements of human speaking, and provides the direct expression of Zen's spirituality rather than the supplementary illustrations of it. Therefore, poetry is not only a way of expression of the spirituality of Zen, but the essence of it.

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Notes

Note 1. Hitting on head with a stick is a common practice between masters and disciples. Usually when disciples reveal any trace of attachment, masters will seize the opportunity to give them a blow to achieve the effect of sudden realization of that.

Note 2. See Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights : An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*

(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) 53-67

Note 3. Four Noble truths are the initial teachings of the historical Buddha about the cause and the path to be released from suffering.

Note 4. The signified and signifier are the terminologies developed by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

Note 5. He is the author of *Bi Yan Lu* (The Blue Cliff Record), the major classic koan collection with poetic commentary, which won him the title, “the perfect enlightened one.”