ZEN LANGUAGE IN OUR TIME: THE CASE OF POJO CHINUL'S *HUATOU* MEDITATION

Jin Y. Park
Department of Philosophy and Religion, American University

This essay discusses the role of language in *huatou* meditation in the Zen Buddhist tradition.[1] The first part of the essay explores Zen philosophy of language by considering the meaning of language in Zen in the context of the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda,* Chin. *yuanqi* 緣起) and emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*). The discussion will focus on the *huatou* 話頭 method, as expounded in the *Kanhwa kyŏrŭiron* 看話決疑論 (Treatise on resolving doubts about *hwadu* meditation; henceforth "*Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation*") (1215) by Pojo Chinul 普照知訥 (1158–1210), in recognition of the unique importance of the *huatou* system in Zen language and Korean Buddhism.[2] What follows is an interpretation of *huatou* meditation in accordance with Western philosophical discourses, especially in connection with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concepts of interrogation and visibility, Julia Kristeva's outline of the semiotic and the symbolic, and Søren Kierkegaard's idea of anxiety. The essay concludes with a discussion on the meaning of the Zen Buddhist spirit in our time.

Language and Experience in Zen Buddhism

Pojo Chinul's posthumous work *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation* has been considered the first major text on *kanhua* meditation (Kor. Kanhwa Sŏn 看話禪) in Korean Buddhism. In this text, not only does Chinul introduce the *kanhua* method, he advocates its superiority over Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism and confirms that this approach is a shortcut to enlightenment. The burden Chinul had to bear in order to advocate *kanhua* meditation must have been significant, given the fact that *huatou* meditation was not Chinul's main concern in his early works[3] and that the strong influence of Li Tongxuan 李通玄 (635–730) led Chinul in his pre-*kanhua* period to view Huayan Buddhism as the most perfect teaching.

    Kanhua meditation has played a vital role in Korean Zen Buddhism for several reasons. Both in Korean Buddhism and in the Zen tradition in general, the concept of *kanhua* has had a close connection with the self-identity of the Zen school. Zen Buddhism established itself in contradiction to the scholastic approach of other schools with its promise of sudden Enlightenment. The suddenness of Enlightenment in the Zen school encompasses both a thematic structure and a conceptual content. The basic tenet of Zen is that everybody is already a buddha. The "suddenness" of enlightenment in this case emphasizes that the seeming gap between the Buddha and sentient beings is in fact illusory. Since there is no ontological gap between the Buddha and sentient beings, enlightenment is sudden, that is, immediate and

unmediated.[4] Enlightenment being none other than the realization of this intrinsic identity, the sudden, vis-à-vis the gradual, paradigm constitutes the essence of Zen identity. From the practitioner's point of view, however, the gap between the Buddha and sentient beings is still palpable, and the necessity of providing a means to close the gap becomes urgent. A claim can be made that this gap, at least in the pre-enlightenment period, widens because of the Zen Buddhist rejection of language and theorization.

The rejection of theorization could be understood as a gesture emphasizing the experiential dimension of enlightenment. Claiming that the experiential dimension is an "extra" step beyond the kind of theorization constructed through linguistic expression is to assert a lineal movement from what is rendered in words to what is experienced and thus to affirm the gradualism of Zen soteriology. In this case, the underlying assumption is that language is located outside experience, a representation of experience, whereas experience is pure, authentic, and unmediated. A natural end result is the rejection of language. What needs to be considered here is whether the Zen Buddhist tradition can be understood through a simple binary postulation as to the relationship between language and experience.

Chinul's *kanhua* meditation provides a challenging case in this regard for two reasons. First, *huatou* in the *kanhua* method employs the nature of language as a tool for the awakening to one's buddha-nature. Second, the main concern of Chinul in his pre-*kanhua* period was to clarify the relation between the theoretical rendering of the Buddha's teaching, especially in Huayan Buddhism, and the Zen emphasis on "Mind is Buddha."

Huayan versus Zen

According to the Huayan theory of the fourfold *dharmadhātu,* the ultimate goal of enlightenment is the realization of the unobstructed interpenetration of phenomena (Chin. *shishi wu'ai* 事事無碍), also known as the conditioned origination of *dharmadhātu* (Chin. *fajie yuanqi* 法界緣起). The phenomenal world consists of diverse particularities. Each element, in its individuality, seems to exist independently, sometimes coming into conflict with others. Based on the fundamental tenet of dependent co-arising, which claims the interconnectedness of all beings, Huayan Buddhism posits the ultimate stage of buddhahood as the realization that the variety of existence in the phenomenal world is originally interrelated, and, in the ultimate sense, devoid of conflict. Thus, the doctrinal classification proposed by Fazang 法藏 (643–712) in his *Wujiaozhang* 五教章 (Treatise on the five teachings) places Huayan Buddhism (or the complete teaching; Chin. *yuanjiao* 圓教) at the top of a five-stage development of Buddhist doctrine (Fazang n.d., p. 481b). On the other hand, Zen Buddhism claims that the mind is Buddha. From the Huayan perspective, however, Zen falls short of the Huayan teaching in its emphasis on the identity of buddhahood and the sentient being. Huayan claims that when one practices Zen meditation, one tries to achieve enlightenment in the realm of the noumenal by retreating into the realm of one's mind, which Huayan interprets as a self-closure

within Zen training. Huayan considers itself superior to Zen because while the Zen school teaches that "Mind is Buddha" the Huayan school emphasizes "the contemplation of the unimpeded interpenetration of all phenomena."

This is exactly what a Huayan lecturer tried to teach Chinul, as described in the "Preface" to the *Hwaŏmnon chŏryo* 華嚴論節要 (Excerpts from the exposition of the *Huayanjing*) (1207), a biographical portrayal of the moment of his awakening. At the beginning of this "Preface," Chinul reflects on the advice delivered by the Huayan lecturer, who told him: "If you contemplate only your own mind and do not contemplate the unimpeded interfusion of all phenomena, you won't be able to enter the perfect virtue of the Buddha's enlightenment" (Chinul 1207, p. 173).

To Chinul, however, the Huayan emphasis on the unobstructed interpenetration of phenomena contains defects of its own in the sense that it is a theoretical rendering and does not explain how an individual enters into this stage. The problem Chinul addresses here is not so much the conflict between theory and practice as represented by the two schools but is the relationship between the two. Chinul's resolution is articulated later in the "Preface," at which point he arrives at the following realization:

> What the World Honored One said with his mouth constitutes the teachings of the scholastic school. What the patriarchs transmitted with their minds is Zen. What the Buddha said and what the patriarchs transmitted can certainly not be contradictory. Why do [students of both the scholastic and Zen schools] not explore what is at the core [of these teachings], but instead, complacent in their own training, vainly involve themselves with debates and waste their time? (Chinul 1207, pp. 173–174)

Chinul is not articulating the essential sameness of the linguistic rendering of the Buddha's teaching and the experiential dimension emphasized in the Zen adage of the mind-to-mind transmission. In this passage, Chinul expresses his realization of the identity of the difference and, at the same time, the difference of the identity. This constitutes the typical Zen framing of language, the theoretical background of which lies in the Buddhist idea of emptiness. What does it mean to say that language and experience stand in relation to the identity of the difference in the Zen tradition?

Turn the Lotus, Turn Your Language

The Sixth Patriarch Huineng in his *Platform Sūtra* explains one's relation to language by employing thirty-six parallels. Huineng writes:

> [Things] arise and cease, and thus leave two extremes. When explaining any *dharma,* do not stay away from the nature and characteristics [of things]. If someone asks you about *dharma,* use language so that the two extremes are completely explored [and exhausted]. All explanation should be given using parallels to show that things originate from each other, and eventually the two extremes [dualism] will be exhausted [explored to its end], and find no place to set themselves up. (Huineng n.d., p. 343b)

The thirty-six sets of parallels Huineng postulates are examples of individual entities that convention views as opposites. To name things is to give them an indi-

vidual identity through opposition and contrast, and this process constitutes a major function of language. By claiming the independence of each being and giving it a separate identity, language functions against the idea of dependent co-arising. This world of provisional appearances, however, eventually reveals itself as only half of the truth, for when a name is used it brings with it the other side of itself, that is, invisible aspects within the visible reality, which is the rupture of the other within the self. As Huineng states: "Darkness is not darkness by itself; because there is light there is darkness. Darkness is not darkness by itself; with light darkness changes, and with darkness light is revealed. Each mutually causes the other" (Huineng n.d., p. 343c).

The name, darkness, is understood by virtue of its relation to its other, that is, light. A problem arises *only when* one represses the invisible other within the name, when the name, darkness, claims an independent identity, refusing to admit its relation to light. Zen both confirms and rejects the linguistic function of naming by employing language to reveal the interrelatedness of each pair of oppositions. Huineng thus warns:

> When you speak, outwardly, while remaining within form, free yourself from form; and inwardly, while remaining within emptiness, free yourself from emptiness. If you cling to emptiness, you will only be increasing your ignorance. If you cling to form, you will slander *dharma* with your false views. Without hesitation, you will say that one should not use written words. Once you say one should not use written words, then people should not speak, because speech itself is written words. (Huineng n.d., p. 343c)

The relationship between language and one's mode of thinking in the way Zen Buddhism understands it is well articulated in the *Platform Sūtra* through an episode about a priest named Fada 法達. After seven years' study of the *Lotus Sūtra,* Fada was still unable to realize the true *dharma* that the Buddhist *sūtra* must convey to him. Reasoning that his failure was caused by a problem with the *Lotus Sūtra* and not in his capacity to decipher the text, Fada asked Huineng to resolve his doubts about the validity of the text. Huineng responded:

> If you practice with the mind, you turn the *Lotus;* if you do not practice with the mind, you are turned by the *Lotus.* If your mind is correct you will turn the *Lotus;* if your mind is incorrect you will be turned by the *Lotus.* If you open [your] buddha-view, you turn the *Lotus;* if you open the sentient-being's view, you are turned by the same *Lotus.* Practicing by relying on *dharma,* you will turn the *Lotus.* Fada, upon hearing one word, you will be greatly awakened. (Huineng n.d., p. 343a)

What Huineng tried to teach Fada is still meaningful in our time in understanding the role and function of language in Zen Buddhism. Language, like any entity in the world, is first of all a "form," and is in itself neither positive nor negative. As one's own tangible existence as a form is at the same time empty and is subject to the logic of dependent co-arising, so is language. If one rejects language because of its function of naming, which provides a tentative identity for each entity named, then one is also rejecting one's own physical existence in favor of emptiness, against which Buddhist discourse strenuously warns. The problem of language that Zen

Buddhism takes pains to teach has less to do with the function of language as such than one's inability to read the identity of difference between form and emptiness.

By claiming that linguistic expression is not a "re-presentation" of experience, and experience is not an "extra" step beyond theory, Zen Buddhism gives language the same ontological status as other beings, instead of locating it within the hierarchical structure of subject-object dualism. The Zen concept of language, in this sense, asserts the ontology of language against both the employment of language as a subject's tool and the inflation of language into something that controls the speaking subject. This should become clear with the example of *huatou* meditation.

Kanhua *Zen and Nonduality*

The originality of the *huatou* method lies in its employment of language for the understanding of one's ontological ground. Language itself is a good example of emptiness. Being an arbitrary sign system, no signifier in a linguistic system can claim anything about the nature of the signified. Language functions based on a tentative agreement on the relationship between the signifier and the signified. That this agreement is tentative, however, is frequently forgotten, and in the naming process the identification of the signifier with the essence of the signified, and the further reification of this essence, paves the way to create a fixed Truth, which in turn assumes a central role in one's understanding of the world and of being.

That the arbitrariness of linguistic systems became apparent only recently in the Western metaphysical tradition helps elucidate a series of Western misunderstandings of the Zen concept of language. The misunderstanding of the *huatou* system in particular, and Zen tradition in general, arises out of a closed frame of thought in which logos and Truth are identified as given and the Word is understood as a manifestation of this Truth.

In his *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation,* Chinul provides his own doctrinal classification system, in criticism of Fazang's five-level taxonomy of Buddhist schools (see table 1). At least four issues need our investigation in order for us to understand the role of language in Chinul's *huatou* meditation: the first is the inclusion of the final stage of Huayan Buddhist practice within Zen Buddhism, which Chinul calls Huayan Zen; the second is the distinction between dead and live words; the third is Chinul's distinction between direct involvement with words and involvement with meaning; and the fourth is his application of the Three Mysterious Gates to the practitioner's level of maturity. An investigation of the use of these four elements is vital to the understanding of Chinul's Buddhist thought during his late phase and, more specifically, to the role of *kanhua* Zen within Chinul's soteriology and the function of language in that system.

I will begin with the second and the third issues. In the concluding section of the *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation,* quoting Dahui 大慧 (1088–1163), Chinul advises practitioners that they must "involve themselves with live words" (Chin. *huoju,* Kor. *hwalgu* 活句), but not "get involved with dead words" (Chin. *siju,* Kor. *sagu* 死句).

Table 1   Outline of Chinul's *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation*

Chinul's classification			Dead/Live words	Meanings/ Words	Three mysterious gates
Scholastic schools	Scholastic schools other than Huayan			Masters of language	
	Huayan				
Zen	Huayan Zen	Unimpeded interpenetration among phenomena	Dead Words		Mystery in the Essence
	Huatou Zen	Healer of diseases		Direct involvement with meaning	Mystery in Words
		Complete presentation of truth			
			Live Words	Direct involvement with words	Mystery in the Mystery

He further states: "If one obtains enlightenment by a direct confrontation with live words, one won't ever forget it; if one works with dead words, one won't even be able to save oneself [not to speak of being unable to provide help for others to become awakened]" (Chinul 1215, p. 102; Dahui n.d., p. 870b). Later in the same text, Chinul also makes a distinction between "an involvement with meaning" (Chin. *canyi,* Kor. *ch'amŭi* 參意) and "an involvement with words" (Chin. *canju,* Kor. *ch'amgu* 參句). As he laments: "Practitioners in our time, in their attempt to resolve doubts, work vainly on the former and have yet to practice the latter" (Chinul 1215, p. 102).

Reasoning from what is presented above, it seems clear that Chinul's major thesis lies in urging practitioners of his time to practice with live, not dead, words, and to become directly involved with words, not with meaning. What is not clear, however, is what Chinul means by these claims. What does it mean to say that one should practice with live words instead of dead ones, and get involved with words and not meaning? The situation becomes further complicated with the inclusion of the Three Mysterious Gates within this dual structure of live versus dead words and words versus meaning.

The Three Mysterious Gates (Chin. *Sanxuanmen,* Kor. *Samhyŏnmun* 三玄門), a Zen theory of buddha-dharma expostulated by Linji 臨濟 (?–867), contains a threefold mystery: the first, Mystery in the Essence (Chin. *tizhongxuan,* Kor. *ch'ejunghyŏn* 體中玄); the second, Mystery in Words (Chin. *juzhongxuan,* Kor. *kujunghyŏn* 句中玄); and the third, Mystery in the Mystery (Chin. *xuanzhongxuan,* Kor. *hyŏnjunghyŏn* 玄中玄).

According to Chinul, Mystery in the Essence is a stage in which one realizes buddha-dharma on the level of noumena, which is more or less equated with the unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena in Huayan. The theoretical basis of this understanding obtained in the first stage becomes the object of criticism in the second stage, whose aim is to put into question acquired knowledge learned via linguistic expression. Practicing *huatou*s like "A dog does not have buddha-nature," or "A dried shit stick," or "Three pounds of flax," the practitioner obtains awakening via words that are used against words, hence Mystery in Words. This, however, is not sufficient for final enlightenment. The idea that one is free from the fetters of fixed ideas will place obstacles in one's path to complete freedom. Thus, one must go through one more step, Mystery in the Mystery, in which the practitioner shakes off the idea that s/he has dismantled all the limitations imposed on her/himself. Chinul reads the three stages as a step-by-step entrances to awakening, which he explores in the later part of his *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation.* The "dead words"– "involvement with meaning"–"mystery in the essence" / "mystery in words" groups are juxtaposed with the "live words"–"involvement with words"–"mystery in the mystery" group. One can speculate that Chinul's obsession with Huayan Buddhism, his painful efforts to identify the final stage of Huayan Buddhism with Zen, and his half-abortive attempt to produce Huayan Zen might have something to do with these distinctions.

Moving back to the question of the meaning of each section in Chinul's classification, let me resort to the examples Chinul provides for each instance, that is, dead words–mystery in the essence; an involvement with meaning–mystery in words; and live words–involvement with words–mystery in the mystery:

(1) The entire world is one mind. (Chinul 1215, p. 101)

(2) "The oak tree in the garden." (Wumen n.d., Case #37, p. 297c)

(3) Master Shuilao 水潦 asked Mazu 馬祖, while they were out gathering rattan: "What does it mean that Patriarch Bodhidharma came from the West?"

"Come close, I'll let you know," Mazu replied.

As soon as Shuilao approached him, Mazu kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Shuilao picked himself up without being aware of it, and burst into a big laugh, clapping his hands.

"What did you learn that makes you laugh like that?" Mazu asked.

"A hundred thousand teachings on dharma, countless mysterious meanings, all are understood to the core at the tip of one hair," Shuilao said. Mazu suddenly didn't care about him. (Chinul 1215, pp. 97–98)

How do we identify each stage and what are the categories distinguishing one from another? The first quotation provides a "theoretical" rendering of Buddhist doctrine, especially of the unimpeded interpenetration of Huayan Buddhism. Exploring the final stage of enlightenment, Huayan doctrine negates the distinction between self and others and the temporal scheme of past, present, and future. Compared to the first quotation, the second passage, which consists of a well-known *gong'an,*

Table 2 *Kanhua* Meditation and Narrative Technique

	Huayan Zen	**_Kanhua_ Zen**	
Levels in practice	dead words	\ live dead \ words words \	live words
	((involvement with meaning))	involvement with meaning	involvement with words
	mystery in the essence	mystery in words	mystery in the mystery
Relation between the subject and language	theoretical rendering/declarative	interrogation–	→ performance
Dominant narrative style	prosaic (philosophical discourse)	conversational– (epigrams)	→ poetizing (literary/poetic imagination)

uses terse language and opaque logic: "What is the meaning of the First Patriarch's coming from the West?" "The oak tree in the garden," Zhaozhou replies.

What is the relation between Bodhidharma's establishment of Zen Buddhism and the oak tree in the garden? Is there any relation at all? The student in the third passage asks: "What does it mean that Patriarch Bodhidharma came from the West?" This time the answer Shuilao receives from Mazu is neither a logical explanation nor a mysterious response. He is kicked by Shuilao, and the story presents it as a moment of enlightenment. Gestures like shouting, silencing, and striking are given as examples of the mystery in the mystery. Having presented the Mazu episode, Chinul observes:

> How is it possible that Shuilao understands a hundred thousand teachings on *dharma* and countless mysterious meanings to the core by being kicked by Mazu? The episode clearly expresses that, for those with the ability to encompass the Zen approach, entering into awakening has nothing to do with the Sudden school's method, which insists on cutting off language to create the state of leaving thought behind. (Chinul 1215, p. 98)

Chinul emphasizes this fact in several places in the text with Fazang's classification in mind, making a distinction between the *huatou* method and the Sudden teaching. The implication here is that "at the final stage of enlightenment one does not need many words"—not that one should not use language at all (Chinul 1215, p. 99). In respect to the function of language, in the transformation from the first to the third stage of nonlinguistic gesture, two aspects are noteworthy. The first is a movement from a theoretical rendering (a neutral expression) to performance (which is wholly context bounded); the second is a movement from prosaic expression to poetization (see table 2).

The rubric "relation between the subject and language [the text]" in table 2 shows how the subject/object relation changes as the practice develops. In "theoret-

ical renderings" such as "one phrase is so clear that it encompasses all the phenomena in the world" (Chinul 1215, p. 92), the gap between (a) the subject and object and (b) the reader and linguistic expression is clear. Speaking in terms of religious practice, the phrase provides the goal (or the enlightened state) at which the practitioner is aiming to arrive. The goal, however, is described without any concern for the practitioner's current status. Nor does the phrase provide any means for the practitioner to achieve this goal. This is why Chinul emphasizes several times in his *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation* that Buddhist teachings other than *kanhua* meditation express the goal to be achieved and describe it from the perspective of those who have already obtained enlightenment. What is unclear for practitioners, however, is how to reach that point. The relation between the Buddhist teaching/text and the practitioner/reader, in this case, takes a form similar to what Chinul identifies as doctrinal faith (Chin. *jiaoxin,* Kor. *kyosin* 教信), the belief in the principle that "I can *become* a buddha," as opposed to the patriarchal faith (Chin. *zuxin,* Kor. *chosin* 祖信) that "I *am* a buddha."

In *Chinsim chiksŏl* 真心直說 (Straight talk on the true mind) (1205), Chinul explains the difference between faith in the doctrinal school and faith in the patriarchal school as follows:

> [Faith] in the doctrinal school is a belief in cause and effect.... If you wish to obtain the result of being a buddha, have faith in [practicing] the six *pāramitās* for three kalpas as a cause, then you'll earn as its result *bodhi* and *nirvāṇa.* Right faith in the patriarchal school is not the same as this.... It [patriarchal faith] only stresses that one is originally buddha; the impeccable self-nature (Chin. *zixing,* Kor. *chasŏng* 自性) is innate in everybody, and the marvelous essence of *nirvāṇa* is perfect and complete in each individual. There is no need to search for it outside, for from the very beginning, it has been within. (Chinul 1205, pp. 48–49)[5]

The patriarchal faith, "I am already a buddha," provides the theoretical foundation of the identity of Zen Buddhism and is the ground for its claim of sudden enlightenment. The two modes of thinking—"I am already a buddha" and "I can become a buddha"—are distinguished by their stance on the relationship between the subject and object. In understanding the two forms of faith, we need to be aware of the different meaning of "being" and "becoming" in this context compared to the continental philosophical tradition. "Becoming" in the doctrinal faith is not a process, but a reification of self as a separate entity. By negating the identity of sentient beings and the Buddha in the ultimate sense, the practitioner sees her/himself in separation from the status of the Buddha. The recognition that "I am already a buddha" is not a declaration of a logocentric quality of the Buddha that is identified with self, or an egocentric hypostasis of it; it recognizes the fact that all beings are already within the net of dependent co-arising of constant movements and interconnectedness. The realization that "I am already a buddha" is equivalent to declaring that my existence is already within the net of conditioned genesis.

The importance of the patriarchal faith, "I am already a buddha," as opposed to the belief that "I can become a buddha," lies in the fact that it manifests the core of

kanhua meditation by problematizing the subject-object dualism. The nondualistic vision of *kanhua* meditation is performed in Zen practice through the art of interrogation as practitioners pursue their practice with *huatou* meditation.

Huatou *Meditation and the Art of Interrogation*

Gong'an 公案 practice is characterized by the gap between the question asked by the students and the answer given by Zen masters. The undecipherable answer of Zen masters to the inquiry of their students on the nature of Buddhism and Zen practice has made readers in our time wonder why they were so unwilling to share their knowledge with their students. Consider Zhaozhou's 趙州 *wu huatou* 無話頭, one of the best-known *gong'an* cases. *"Wu"* ("no") as the answer to the question regarding whether a dog has the buddha-nature provides, in logical interpretations, only a limited number of possibilities: (1) No, the dog does not have buddha-nature; (2) no, I do not know; (3) no, it is none of your concern. As one goes through possible answers that can be drawn from the master's response, *"wu,"* the practitioner eventually arrives at a dead end, the point where possible answers are exhausted. What does this exhaustibility of answers mean?

When a question is answered, the question ceases to be a question and turns into a statement. When a question "What is 'A'?" is posed, "A" is in an open state. The moment this "A" is answered, "A" is no longer "A" but *the* "A" as defined by the subject. To ask "what is . . . ?" is to ask about essence. The question demands definition, distinction, and naming. By asking about what is asked and expecting a logical answer, the person who asks the question tries to determine what is being asked about. This determination, or meaning-giving act, by its own nature, limits what is determined and inevitably leaves some part out. This process of self-delimiting of linguistic practice does not limit itself to linguistic practice but creates a boundary of one's mode of thinking that develops into a subject-object dualism. By creating a gap between questions and answers, and thus producing a state in which no definite answer resolves the tension between the question, the answer, and the questioning subject's desire to control the relationship between the two, *huatou* practice challenges the dualistic mode of thinking that pervades one's understanding of the world and being. Until the questioning mode inquiring "what is it?" is challenged and broken down, until the subjugation of the other by the questioning subject via one's rational speculation is itself put into question until what is asked about exposes itself, instead of being defined by the questioning subject, the discrepancy between the question and the answer in *huatou* remains wide open.

Is this what Chinul tries to tell his disciples by saying that one should involve oneself with the word itself instead of with its meaning? The involvement with the word itself, as opposed to its meaning, suspends the subject's meaning-giving act. In Zhaozhou's *wu gong'an, wu* itself remains an element in an arbitrary sign system, not a presentation of meaning, and is, thus, in an ultimate sense, empty.

As possibilities for answers to questions become exhausted, the separation between the subject who asks the questions and answers that are conventionally

controlled by the speaking subject begins to narrow. Heinrich Dumoulin suggests that in order to solve the seeming riddle involved in the *gong'an* meditation, the practitioner should "become one with the *koan [gong'an]*," so that s/he "will so completely appropriate it that it no longer stands as a separate object" (Dumoulin 1990/1992, p. 126). To identify the *gong'an* with oneself is to direct questions to one's own existence instead of the object. This transformation of a linguistic question into an ontological one is defined as the art of interrogation.

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has a valuable view on the art of interrogation. According to Merleau-Ponty, interrogation does not define the interrogated. It opens up a space in which the questioner and the questioned get closer. Interrogation makes it possible for what is asked about to speak and announce itself, so that it can make itself known. Merleau-Ponty envisions interrogation as a process of "inhabiting the world," the process through which my body draws the thing entirely to itself, incorporates it, and communicates with the things. In the process of interrogation there exists only difference without distinction to the point that there is no divergence between the within and the without. To interrogate the visible world of things, Merleau-Ponty tells us, is not to speak about space and light but rather "[to make] the space and light which are there speak" (Merleau-Ponty 1961, p. 178). The speaking subject's dominance of the spoken object loses its functioning ground, for the demarcation between the subject and object has already been blurred in this act of interrogation. Chinul thus writes: "Those who learn the teaching and follow the principle of nondiscrimination, which does not hold on to a specific form, earn the understanding that there is neither a speaking subject nor a spoken object, and that there is neither a thinking subject nor a thought object" (Chinul 1215, p. 95).

This is a chiasmic operation, which one finds in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relationship between subject and object. Merleau-Ponty further explains the impossibility of making a clear distinction between subject and object through the example of visibility. A conventional understanding of visibility is to see it as the action of the subject (the seer) upon an object (the seen). "I see a table," for example, presents a structure that the subject is seeing the object. Visibility, to Merleau-Ponty, however, is a result of chiasmic operation—the intertwining of seeing and the seen. Here again we can see a parallel in the relationship between seeing and the seen in Merleau-Ponty and between a Zen practitioner and his/her *gong'an* in *huatou* practice. Seeing is not the result of the behavior of the seer. The enigma of seeing is that "my body simultaneously sees and is seen" (Merleau-Ponty 1961, p. 163). That is, "It sees itself seeing." Because one is both seeing and being seen, he "who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is* of *it*" (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968/1980, p. 134). This intertwining of one's vision and the visible is what Merleau-Ponty calls "visibility." In visibility, one's vision touches the thing and the world, while at the same time is touched by the visible.

Visibility is brought to light by the participation of both the seer and the seen, and the visibility of our experience of the visible world is doubled in a secret visibility, as in a painting that "gives visible existence to that which profane vision

believed to be invisible" (Merleau-Ponty 1961, p. 166). This secret visibility is one's relation to other beings in the world as they disclose themselves in the chiasm of visibility. The chiasm of visibility is the space in which the practitioner of *gong'an* becomes one with the *gong'an* itself. This is the moment when the visibility of one's own existence is revealed to the practitioner, as the practitioner frees her/himself from the subject's confinement and opens her/himself up to the world of dependent co-arising as the groundless ground of one's existence. And this is the point when truth emerges as disclosure *(aletheia)* instead of as *veritas,* as in Heidegger's ontology. This is the moment of mystery in the mystery, when the experience of being kicked by one's teacher is transformed into a moment of awakening.

Poetizing Language, Poetizing the World

Speaking in terms of language, what does it mean to say that space and light announce themselves instead of being defined by the speaking subject? What language does this chiasmic vision speak? And how do we find a link with Chinul's "involvement with word," as opposed to the "involvement with meaning," which I have interpreted as a movement from the prosaic, declarative mode to poetization? What needs clarification, at this point, is the term "poetization" and the mode of thinking involved in this tendency. To speak of poetization is another way of speaking about the chiasm of visibility. The chiasmic relation of the subject and object—self and others—that Merleau-Ponty explores in terms of visibility is well sketched out in terms of its function within a linguistic system in Julia Kristeva's layout of the semiotic and the symbolic in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974/1984).

Poetic language, or poetization, is revolutionary, Kristeva claims, in the sense that in poetry, the process of saturation of the semiotic in a normative or prosaic discourse runs in the opposite direction, toward the "semiotization of the symbolic." The symbolic refers to "the syntactic and linguistic categories of a signifying process," arising out of linguistic systems, social constraints, biological determination, and historical situations. The symbolic asserts a normative meaning, is a definite, authoritative, order-giving mode like law. It works through the paternal authority of Lacan's "no/name of the father" *(le non / nom du père).* The symbolic works through the dream of transparent, scientific language, in which the relation between the signifier and signified is rigidly set. On the other hand, the semiotic, explained in terms of *chora,* is a "nonverbal signifying system," as well as energy charges, Freudian unconscious drives, and the maternal womb. In contrast to the symbolic, which arises out of a linguistic framework and which defines things by carving spaces for them as separate entities out of the undistinguished stream of thought, the semiotic *chora* is mobile and provisional. These characteristics of *chora,* however, are only postulated and projected because *chora* is neither a sign nor a signifier; it exists before the differentiation of the linguistic system. Poetry, or poetization, is an explicit confrontation between socio-symbolic regulation and the semiotic flow, and the semiotic rupture, as the title of Kristeva's book suggests, becomes most visible in the use of language in poetry.

To postulate the semiotic *chora* as a stage before signification arises is not an attempt to present the semiotic as an antithesis to the symbolic. The semiotic marks itself only through the signifying practice that results from transgression by the symbolic. In other words, the readily applicable binary opposites, such as nonverbal versus verbal, mobility versus stasis, energy versus law, maternal wholeness versus paternal fragmentation and order, explain only part of the situation of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic defines, regulates, and asserts its rule. This distinction creates a gap between the distinguished, and naming cannot contain the whole of what is named. This limitation is imposed on the symbolic by its own structure, determinations, and motivations. On the other hand, only after the transgression of the order of the symbolic can the semiotic find an apparatus of expression. The semiotic then functions by affirming, and at the same time negating, itself within the symbolic meaning-producing procedure. The interruption and transgression by the linguistic system of the symbolic cannot totally repress the semiotic, nor is the symbolic totally independent from it. A signifying system cannot be "'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (Kristeva 1974, p. 29; 1984, p. 24). By exploring a signifying system as a mutual relationship between the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic, Kristeva brings our attention to the visible and invisible aspects in our use of language. The movement from "dead words" and "an involvement with meaning" to "live words" and "an involvement with words" does not suggest a simple change from a domain of linguistic communication to a pure state of nonlanguage, as is often misunderstood. Instead, the movement marks a revolution in one's mode of thinking in which the invisible aspects of our signifying system are fully acknowledged.

In his assessment of the contribution of the *huatou* method, Sung Bae Park provides a distinction between "letter culture" (Kor. *munja munhwa*) and "non-letter culture" (Kor. *mu munja munhwa*) through which he shows that Zen practice aims "to cure the attachment to the letter culture," not to remove language from our thinking (Sung Bae Park 1995, p. 15). Once the attachment, the reification of the symbolic, recognizes the semiotic, the basic energy of non-letter culture, one can free oneself from the hypostatization of the symbolic (letter culture). The letters themselves will come to expose the life of non-letter culture (ibid., pp. 15–16). In Chinul's text this transformation is described as a movement from prosaic narrative to poetization. It might not be a coincidence that the Zen tradition has produced a rich poetic tradition and that Zen poetry became a dominant literary form, especially after the popularization of *huatou* meditation.

Huatou *in Our Time*

Between human being and God, only adjustment is possible. Søren Kierkegaard calls this a religious leap, a movement that bridges the gap created by the inevitable paradox that is faith. The illogicality of the paradox, which Kierkegaard exemplifies by exploring the story of Abraham, is logically understandable in the context of Chris-

tianity because of the unbridgeable ontological gap between the creator and the created. In Abraham's story, God is inconsistent, contradictory, and paradoxical to the point where, having blessed Abraham with his son, Isaac, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the same God then demands that Abraham sacrifice his son. And Abraham has faith in the paradox that his God demands Isaac of him but that his God will also not demand Isaac of him. God appears paradoxical from the human being's perspective, for we cannot completely figure out the intention of a Being whose ontological ground is anchored in a different realm. Faith, for Kierkegaard, means this belief in the absurd. Kierkegaard's main concern in retelling Abraham's story, in *Fear and Trembling,* is not to claim that the God is paradoxical. Instead, his story tells us what one must deal with in order to have faith despite the paradox. The religious implication of Abraham's story is quite simple: Abraham has faith, and God's grace saves Isaac and returns him back to Abraham, so we praise God. But Kierkegaard writes: "what is omitted from Abraham's story is the anxiety" (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 28).

It is not that Abraham had to offer his *best thing;* he had to offer his *son.* The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac: "precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is" (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 30). Throughout his text, Kierkegaard's focus is neither on God nor on His grace, but on Abraham and his anxiety, not a trace of which we find in the Bible. The point for Kierkegaard is not that Abraham gets Isaac back and thus we praise God's mercy, but that to have faith as Abraham did is to believe in the absurd, the paradoxical; this faith requires the courage to deal with anxiety.

At this point we find a link that connects two very different traditions: Kierkegaard's existential philosophy and Chinul's *huatou* practice. The connection comes from the fact that the practitioners of Chinul's *huatou* meditation share the anxiety Abraham had to go through in order to maintain his faith. *Huatou,* after all, is a gesture to turn the direction of the practitioners' mind-set from a soteriology-oriented teaching to the reality in which Zen practitioners find themselves. Buddhist *sūtra*s tell the ultimate goal the practitioners will achieve, but the gap between the goal and the practitioners' reality brings anxiety to the practitioners concerning the realization of the paradox of identity represented by the statement "I am a buddha and at the same time I am a sentient being." This anxiety, the apex of which is called the Great Death in the process of *huatou* meditation, constitutes a vital factor in Zen practice.

The language of *huatou* meditation—which Chinul calls live words, involvement with words, or mystery in the mystery—shows its recognition of the anxiety of the Zen practitioner. Zen discourse is neither an order nor a language of "should." Zen language tells the practitioner that one cannot ignore one's problem by simply focusing on *nirvāṇa,* which is yet to be the state of the practitioner. Zen language wakes up the practitioner from sleep and stays with her/him during sleepless nights. The words of *huatou* initiated by the master tell the practitioner that the latter must

go through the stage of anxiety and come to realize that the gap between the practitioner and the Buddha is as real as the ultimate reality that sentient beings are buddhas. One should not hide oneself behind the well-written, seemingly understandable phrases of the *sūtra*s and the logical presentations of the Buddhist teachings, when one cannot embody them. Without embodying the teachings in the *sūtra*s, and making them one's own, all of the statements of "shoulds" are meaningless, for *huatou* enforces a language of live performance, not of duplication. Zen language is a warning and an alert. It is a kicking, shouting, or pinching, both physical and mental, from the practitioner's teacher, like what Mazu received from Shuilao. Anxiety is surely the practitioner's lot, but the anxiety makes possible the religious leap beyond the paradox of one's dual identity as a sentient being and a buddha.

Traditionally, the patriarchal faith that one is already a buddha and that one's teacher is the living proof of one's own buddha-nature, based on one's belief in the reality of her/his enlightenment, has made the Zen tradition possible. Chinul makes the same point when he quotes Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780–841): "Buddhist teaching being what the ten thousand generations rely on, it should be presented in detail; the teaching of a Zen Master, on the other hand, aims at immediately getting [his student] enlightened; thus, meaning should penetrate [the student's mind] in quietude" (Chinul 1215, p. 101). Because Buddhist doctrine is meant to cover a variety of people, it should be laid out in detail so that each individual can find an appropriate method of study for her/himself. The Zen master, on the other hand, deals with individuals one by one. Different methods of teaching should be used in accordance with the student's capacity. This Zen pedagogy of one-to-one relationship, supported by patriarchal faith, is the legacy of Bodhidharma's declaration of Buddhist pedagogy as mind-to-mind transmission, and it has played a central role in the practitioner's solitary struggle with her/his anxiety. Patriarchal faith is a promise from one's mentor that s/he is not ignorant of the practitioner's anxiety and her/his sleepless nights. Reconsidering this tradition, one must ask: is *huatou* still feasible, framed as it is by the patriarchal faith and the Zen pedagogy of one-to-one relation, especially when we consider the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of our time?

There are three reasons why I have placed Chinul and the Zen tradition side by side with some elements of contemporary Western philosophy. The first reason was to show that the intellectual atmosphere of our time shares some aspects with the Buddhist way of thinking. The second reason was that the Buddhist discourse itself must become aware of the fact that it exists within the limits of both the sociohistorical and the intellectual contexts of the times.

Huatou, after all, is a method, not ultimate reality itself, and the *huatou* tradition was constructed out of sociohistorical necessity. The way *huatou* is practiced must therefore change in accordance with changing times, as long as new methods still impart the spirit of *huatou.* To say that the intellectual environment of our time is no longer favorable to patriarchal faith is *not* equivalent to saying either that the Zen tradition has become obsolete or that the driving force of *huatou* meditation is outmoded.

The changing meaning of patriarchal faith suggests the necessity of changing the Zen language. Zen Buddhism has been hibernating in a conservatism created out of its inability to cope with changing times while at the same time letting the radical liberalism inscribed in Buddhist doctrine and the revolutionary spirit of *huatou* meditation deteriorate with time. It has failed to provide an adequate defense against the prevalent misconception of Zen Buddhism both in academia and lay circles. Does the tradition consider that this is the way of being faithful to the founding fathers' adage that Zen is a mind-to-mind transmission, established outside the *sūtras*?

What was Chinul's intention in writing his *Treatise on* Huatou *Meditation*? Was it not an attempt to provide a theoretical ground for *huatou* meditation? And here arises the third reason for my comparative study. I wanted to show that a theoretical system for the *huatou* method is not only necessary but possible in our time. In closing, I suggest that, however absurd it might sound from the standpoint of the Zen concept of language (both in the right and wrong understanding of it), to make the Buddhist religious leap possible and keep *huatou* meditation alive in our time, it is essential that we attempt to make its philosophy accessible in a logical form. In this case, the logic will be the Zen logic of illogic.

Notes

1 – In order to avoid confusion, all romanization of Chinese characters in this essay will follow Chinese pronunciation with the following exceptions: "Zen" will be used instead of "Chan" and titles of Chinul's works will be romanized based on Korean pronunciation. The Korean pronunciation of some Chinese characters will be preceded by the abbreviation "Kor"; "Skt" and "Chin" will refer to Sanskrit and Chinese words, respectively.

2 – For discussions on Zen language, see Jin Y. Park 2002 and Wright 1992.

3 – The word *gong'an* appears in *Susim kyŏl* (Secrets of cultivating the mind) (Chinul 1203–1205, p. 133), in *Pojo chŏnsŏ* (*Pojo chŏnsŏ* 1989). A discussion of the *huatou* method as a shortcut approach to enlightenment is found at the end of *Pŏpchip pyŏrhaeng nok chŏryo pyŏngip sagi* (Chinul 1209). However, *Kanhwa kyŏrŭiron* is the first work to be devoted entirely to the *huatou* method and to endorse it fully as a shortcut approach to enlightenment. For an English translation of the complete works of Chinul see Buswell 1983.

4 – The ideology of the suddenness of enlightenment and its relation to the buddhaness of all sentient beings is well articulated in the legend of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 惠能, whose illiteracy together with his low social class symbolically demonstrates this fact. The episode on the poetry competition between Huineng and Shenxiu 神秀 also confirms this issue. See Huineng n.d.; English translation, Yampolsky 1967. For discussions on the sudden-gradual issues in the Chinese Zen Buddhist tradition, see Gregory 1987. On the same issue in Korean Buddhism, see Kang and Kim 1992.

5 – For a comparison of patriarchal and doctrinal faith, see Sung Bae Park 1983, pp. 19–24.

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