Wittgenstein is a Buddha

A Comparison between Zen Buddhist and Wittgenstein’s Epistemology

By

Zhangsinong Liu

Senior Honors Thesis
Department of Philosophy
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

December 14, 2018

Approved:

John Roberts, Thesis Advisor

Thomas Hofweber, Reader

Alan Nelson. Reader
Introduction

Zen Buddhism has long been an elusive and overlooked subject in the realm of Western Philosophy. The main reason is that most original Zen texts are written in Ancient Chinese and Zen researchers in China are mostly not philosophy professionals who have gone through training in the system of Western Philosophy. So most of the texts explaining Zen Buddhism are not written in an analytical style. Also, there is a lack of Western epistemologists who are interested in Zen Buddhism. Most of the Western researchers in Zen are those who focus on the religious aspects.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide some initial thoughts on how to explain Zen Buddhist epistemology in the context of Western epistemology, especially Wittgenstein’s epistemology. I come to find that there are many similarities between Zen and Wittgenstein’s texts and Wittgenstein’s explanation can open a door for people who are trying to understand Zen Buddhism.

To begin, I am going to explain some terms that are unfamiliar in the system of Western Epistemology.

In the second part of the thesis, I am going to introduce a famous Zen Story about the three stages to get enlightenment, which is the final goal of most people practicing Zen. After having an explanation from a Chinese Zen researcher, I am going to look into two similar three-stage structure in Wittgenstein’s famous work: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. We are going to see that there are some astonishing similarities between the ideas they are trying to express: they both involve the idea that if you look closely into solipsism, in the end, you are going to find that you will become a realist. They also have the idea that the final enlightenment or the ultimate truth is not something that you can achieve by gathering more and more knowledge and
experience. It is something that is going to be achieved through a process that is unspeakable.

In the third part of the thesis, I am going to explain more about what Zen and Wittgenstein mean when they say about a process that is unspeakable, or in another word, epiphany. I will first quote *The Diamond Sutra* and its explanation of the epiphany process in Zen Buddhism. I will then introduce Wittgenstein’s idea about why understanding that cannot be expressed by thoughts is possible. Then I am going to try to answer two questions that might raise concerns from a Western epistemological view, which are “How do you know you achieved epiphany?” and “How do you know you got the truth from an epiphany process?”.

In the final section of the thesis, I will give a conclusion and summary of the result of the paper and propose some lines of inquiry of possible future research.
Term definition

Dao:

The ultimate truth that Zen is pursuing. It is a direct translation from the Chinese Character “道.” The Chinese Character has many meanings in different kinds of religion. However, in this thesis, we are going to discuss the idea of Dao in a Zen Buddhist sense. It is hard to explain what the Dao is. However, we are going to have a concrete idea about Dao after the second section of the thesis.

What is also worth mentioning is that getting the Dao or achieving Enlightenment is explaining the same thing since in Chinese they are written the same: “悟道.” The first character means suddenly getting some knowledge or just enlightenment and the second character is just Dao. It is said that getting the Dao is the ultimate goal of people practicing Zen and people reaching that stage will be rid of worry and sorrow and achieved Nirvana.

Zen:

Or Ch’an. The Ch’an is an indigenous form of Chinese Buddhism and Ch’an is directly translated from Chinese “禅.” Ch’an later spread to Japan and became “Zen.”

Epiphany:

Epiphany is a process that enables one to achieve Dao. The word in Chinese can be understood as “Sudden Realization,” so it is supposed to be a process when one suddenly recognized the Dao by intuition, rather than logic and deduction.

The epiphany process serves as the primary way for realization in Zen Buddhism. The
idea was brought up by The Sixth Patriarch, who is one of the most famous Chinese Buddha masters and is often considered as one of the early founders of Zen Buddhism. Then the idea became so renowned that Zen Buddhism and the epiphany process became the central Chinese Buddhism. Zen Buddhism is then brought to Japan and later, America.

Epiphany in Japanese is translated as Satori.ii

Koan:

“Enigmatic and often shocking spiritual expressions based on dialogical encounters between masters and disciples that were used as pedagogical tools for religious training in the Zen Buddhist tradition.”iii

Koans generally have the form that Zen masters are trying to help their students get enlightenment by telling a story, making a metaphor or just performing a weird act.

Dualism:

Dualism has many meanings in western philosophy. However, in this paper, I am going to use “dualism” to refer to some separation or contradiction between two things.

Concept:

I will use the word “concepts” to mean Fregean’s senses. A sense of a subsentential expression is a concept. Concepts are not mental objects, according to Fregean, but instead abstract objects. The reason that they are not mental objects is that more than one mind can grasp the same concept, or think the same thought.iv
**Solipsism:**

I am using “Solipsism” as the idea that “existence’ means for me my existence and that of my mental states. Existence is everything that I experience -- physical objects, other people, events and processes -- anything that would commonly be regarded as a constituent of the space and time in which I coexist with others and is necessarily construed by me as part of the content of my consciousness.”

**Realism:**

I am using “Realism” as the idea that the existence of objects and their properties are independent of anyone’s beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes and so on.
Section one: On Zen and Wittgenstein’s three stages to achieve the ultimate truth

Thirty years ago, before I practiced Ch’an, I saw that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. However, after having achieved intimate knowledge and having gotten a way in, I saw that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have found rest, as before I see mountains are mountains and rivers are just rivers. \(^{vii}\)

The aphorism occurs in many variants in Ch’an or Zen literature but is first attributed to Master Qingyuan in the Compendium of the Five Lamps. The Zen Master is indicating that having the epiphany, achieving Dao, or getting enlightenment (which are all the same thing in Chinese as mentioned in the term definition part of the paper) has three stages:

- Mountains are mountains.
- Mountains are not mountains.
- Mountains are just mountains.

However, like other Zen texts, it is still quite hard to understand. What is happening between the three stages? What is the difference between the first stage and the third stage? People studying Zen Buddhism gives an explanation of the three stages, which I am going into the detail in the next section. What I want to mention here is that I found that there are some shocking similarities about the three stages in Wittgenstein’s writing, mainly in the Tractatus
Logico-Philosophicus and Blue and Brown Books. I will make some analysis in Wittgenstein’s three stages and make a comparison between Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhist texts.

A Zen explanation:

This explanation is given in a paper published in 1991 called “Same or different?” and the truth about Zen written by Qiu Shi. The original text is written in Chinese, and I am going to summarize and translate the text down below:

“The first stage is “mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.” The reason that mountains are mountains in the first stage is that there exists the separation of the mountain and I. There is some dualism in place, which is the separation of me and the physical world. I, as an observer, am experiencing the world, and thus mountains are mountains: they are physically there to me. What I mean by separation here is that there exist two separate things: the mountain and me, or the mountain and the river. Buddhism usually see this stage as the puzzling stage, which is also where most of the people are in. In the mountain, river and I situation, I am distorted or bothered by the separation. The case can also be extended to true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, smart and dumb, life and death, etc. We can always see the conflict in the world, and because of the separation between the world and me, I and the world is also in conflict and thus brings us concerns and fear.

Then how can we go from the first stage to the second stage? We need to “get a way in.” But where is the way? Qiu Shi thinks that the way is to understand that there is no me. If there is no me, then there doesn’t exist the observer, and later the mountain and the river will cease to exist and also the conflict will cease to exist. The reason he thinks this is the
case is that Buddhism thinks that everything is changeable. There is a cause, and then there come the phenomena. Everything in the universe exists in cause and connections, and there doesn’t exist a physically object that is standing without other objects. Qiu Shi thinks that Qingyuan is acknowledging the non-existence of the physical world. However, Qiu Shi also mentioned that although there is no me, “Zi Xin” still exists, and it is the true essence of the world. What “Zi Xin” means in Chinese is “own-heart” or “own-thought.” So in the second stage, there is no me, no mountain, no river, just own-thought, and thus mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers.

So what is happening between the second stage and the third stage? Qiu Shi thinks the third stage is to eliminate the difference between me and no me. After we realized that there is no difference between the mountain and the river, the mountain and me, there still exists a difference between the statement that there is a separation, and there doesn't exist a separation. We are going to do something like anti-no-separation or anti-no-difference since the second stage is about no separation and no difference and the third stage is to anti that. The ultimate outcome is achieved by eliminating the difference between the statement that there is a difference, and there is no difference. And this time, we can see mountains are still mountains, and rivers are just rivers. However, the mountains do not exist because of me as the observer see it exists, I am right now acknowledging the true existence of the mountain and the river. The difference from the first stage is that this time I am seeing the true entity of the mountain, not the mountain I see as the observer.”

The first stage is pretty easy to understand in Qiu Shi’s explanation, which is the state of
a normal person. A person sees the world through the eyes and can see mountains are just mountains and think they are physically there because they think they see it.

For the second stage, because Qiu Shi thinks that Buddhism says that everything is empty, which means that everything is an illusion and not physically there. So he believes that Qingyuan thinks that mountains are no longer mountains because they are just an illusion and not there. However, what is unique about this explanation is that not only the mountains and the rivers are illusions, but also the idea of I as the observer is also an illusion because there is no me. What is also distinctive is that although there is no me, there is still the idea of “own-heart” or “own-thought” exists, which is quite hard to understand. My understanding is that he is talking about an idea that: as long as I am thinking, there must exist my thoughts. However, the thought doesn't require a thinker, so I am still an illusion, but my thoughts are real.

Qiu Shi’s text that explains what is happening between the second stage and the third stage is tough to read since he didn't explain why certain things are happening. But there is something I do catch from the explanation of the third stage, which is the transition from the doctrine that everything is empty to realism. Qiu Shi thinks that in the end, the reason Qingyuan began to see the mountain as mountain is that he realized that the mountains are actually and physically there. However, one might argue that people in the first stage also think that mountains are there so what’s the difference. Qiu Shi’s answer to that is the reason people in the first stage believe that mountains are physically present there is because they are blinded and think that they see the actual mountain and river. However, they see the illusion of the mountain and the river and thought they see the truth.

However, after the second stage of considering the possibility that everything is an illusion, you sort of know that your eye and yourself are giving you fake things. So people
reaching the third stage can see the truth about this world, not a fake illusion anymore. We can relate this idea to Plato’s form. People reaching this stage is like people living in a world that has perfect forms. So they no longer see the imperfect imitation in the phenomenon world (in the Plato case) or an illusion and the changeable world (In Zen’s sense), instead, they see the ultimate truth of this world, and the ultimate truth is that the mountains are physically there.

Now here comes the critical question: Why that is the case and how do we reach that? However, Zen Buddhism doesn’t give us answer about why (they never offer a “why” to anything closely related to Dao, a topic I will touch on later), however, they do give us how: which is to eliminate the difference between that belief that there is a difference, and there is no difference. It seems Zen is describing an idea that you need to make a cognitive jump to reach that, since in the world that there is a difference between there is a difference and there is no difference is in the world that still has logic. However, when you reach that there is no difference stage, you are stepping out of the boundary of logic since that this not logical. So you need to get out of the border of this world and make a jump to another. The Zen Buddhist idea I have been talking about is very puzzling, and my discussion of it here does not make it very clear. However, later on, I will return to this topic, after discussing Wittgenstein, and that then it might be easier to figure out what is going on here.

**Wittgenstein’s three stages:**

At many places in his writing, Wittgenstein puts forward an idea that seems to involve a similar series of three-stages, and I am going to discuss two of them. The first one is a part of the *Tractatus*, and the second one is the structure of the *Tractatus* as a whole.
5.6 The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

5.61 Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.
So we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’
For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and
this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of
the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.
We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.

5.62 This remark provides the key to the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism.
For what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself
manifest.
The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that
language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world.

5.634 This is connected with the fact that no part of our experience is at the same time a
priori.
Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other
than it is. There is no a priori order of things.

5.64 Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly,
coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension,
and there remains the reality coordinated with It. \textsuperscript{ix}
In the text above, Wittgenstein depicted three stages from normal to solipsism and then to pure realism. Wittgenstein didn't mention the first stage since it is pretty self-evident: not all people believe in solipsism from the start.

People moving from the first stage to the second stage through learning solipsism and later believe in it. Wittgenstein thinks that solipsism is quite right is because the world is my world. The key is the sentence: “The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language mean the limits of my world.” Wittgenstein thinks that there is a limit to our language and our world is just the world made of the language that we can use. Thus the world we see is just a world I can use language to describe and therefore it is just my world. However, it seems to Wittgenstein that there doesn't exist the physical world, or he thinks that solipsism means that the world we can see is my world and whether there is a physical world is none of my business. I do believe that Wittgenstein meant the latter since he did not give us a reason why the physical world doesn't exist. We can have the world as we can describe it, but we can still have a physical world lying somewhere.

Then it comes to the third stage, which is after some further analysis, solipsism coincides with pure realism. I have to acknowledge that it is pretty hard for me to understand what does it mean by solipsism shrinks to a point and then becomes realism. I don’t have a solution to why Wittgenstein think that solipsism coincides with pure realism. However, we can see that Wittgenstein’s third stage mirrors Zen’s third stage since they all go from some strange metaphysically views, like solipsism to common sense, like realism.

Here is another three-stage process in the *Tractatus*. If we are going to look at *Tractatus* from the whole book, we can see that the book is written in a three stages structure.
The readers who begin to read the book are in the first stage. Then Wittgenstein takes his reader to be looking for a solution to specific problems: some philosophical problems. He talked about logic, morality, language, will, etc. Those facts can all move us to the second stage, and we should have some understanding of some philosophical issues. But at the end of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes:

6.521 *The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.*
(Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)

6.53 *The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.*

Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—this method would be the only strictly correct one.

6.54 *My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them.* (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.  

Wittgenstein thinks that when you learn the solutions to the philosophical problems, you won’t be able to say what the answers are, in a sentence; the solutions must be shown, rather than said. And when you come to understand Wittgenstein, he says, you will learn that the problems themselves disappear. So, in a way, you go back to something like the way you were before you became aware of the problems.

Also in both Wittgenstein and Zen, at the second stage, you come to believe something new which looks like a sophisticated philosophical theory, and then at the third stage, you recognize that that theory was somehow confused or meaningless. For Wittgenstein, all the sentences in the Tractatus up till the end are meaningless, and for Zen, it turns out that there was no difference between there being a separation and there being no separation, hence at the second stage you were really confused when you thought you had learned something new that you hadn’t known when you were at the first stage.

A comparison between Wittgenstein and Zen:

Studying Wittgenstein’s texts can help us understand Zen tremendously. Wittgenstein’s first three stages have astonishing similarity with Zen’s three stages: they both involve some solipsism idea and then return to realism. So we can use the Wittgenstein’s understanding of solipsism idea to learn what is happening to the second stage. So if in the second stage, what we are referring to as an illusion world or a fake world is just the world we see it. Then it does not mean that there doesn't exist a physical world. There can still exist a physical world, and just human being cannot perceive it. Wittgenstein also answers why we cannot see the real world,
which is the limits of language.

The last part of *Tractatus* can help us understand the significant jump from the second stage to the third stage. From the second stage to the third stage requires the knowledge that is beyond the limits of the second stage and the knowledge is something that cannot be said because language is in the second stage. And that is also why you cannot tell, or no one is explaining what is happening from the second stage to the third stage. People began to say things that only includes statements, stories or sometimes show you something rather than giving you a reason: It is not because they do not want to. It is because they just cannot.

Also, I noticed that all of the three processes from the second stage to the third stage involve the eliminating of the question itself. For the Zen explanation, the third stage needs us to eradicate the concept of difference and separation, which is the critical question we are going to solve in the second stage. For the solipsism to realism transition, in the end, we found out that solipsism and realism are the same things. For the last part of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein directly says that the solution of the problem is in the vanishing the problem. So I think this is the ultimate reason why the third stage returned to the first stage: after eliminating the problems that bother us in the second stage, we are left without the problems raised in the transition between the first stage and the second stage, and thus we look exactly like the first stage. However, we are different from the first stage, since we have already gone through the second stage and we are no longer bothered by the problems between the first and the second stage. To Buddhism, it is just because of those problems that make people sad, worried and now, after reaching the third stage, we can become a true Zen master and be free of all the worries and sadness.

I will end this section with a famous koan which later being transformed to different versions of the Zen stories. However, the essence remains:
A student once asked his teacher, "Master, what is enlightenment?"

The master replied, "When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep."\textsuperscript{xi}

In the next section of the thesis, we are going to focus more on the jump, and the thing that cannot be said.
Section two: On the process and legitimacy of epiphany

From the above section, we come to know that there is a cognitive jump happening between the second stage and the third stage. However, both Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhism texts from above cannot give us a detailed view about what is happening. So, in this section, we are going to research more on what is happening during the jump and why it is something that cannot be said.

We are going to start from an ancient Zen text: The Diamond Sutra, which is one of the most famous and important Zen Buddhist texts.

Now in the midst of the assembly was the Elder Subhuti. Forthwith, he arose from his seat, bared his right shoulder, knelt upon his right knee and with palms joined respectfully, addressed the Buddha thus.

“Most rare World-Honored One! The Tathagata is skillfully mindful, perfectly instructing and entrusting the Bodhisattvas. World-Honored One, when virtuous men and virtuous women initiate the mind of anuttara-samyaksambodhi, how should their minds dwell? How should their minds be pacified?”

The Buddha spoke, “Excellent, excellent Subhuti, it is as you say. The Tathagata is skillfully mindful, perfectly instructing and entrusting the Bodhisattvas. Now, listen well to what I say. Virtuous men and virtuous women who initiate the mind of anuttara-samyaksambodhi should thus dwell and pacify their minds.”

“I assure you, World-Honored One, we joyfully await your answer.”

The above text depicted a question-answer situation in The Diamond Sutra. To fully
understand this, we have to get the full story here, which is explained by Master Nan Huai-Chin:

*The Buddha said, when virtuous men and virtuous women decide to seek the supreme Dao, it’s like THIS that their minds should dwell, like THIS that they should pacify their minds. After finishing this sentence, the World-Honored One then once again closed his eyes. Subhuti probably waited for ages and then raised his head to look. He said, “I assures you, World-Honored One, we joyfully await your answer.” In other words, I’m on the edge of my seat listening, waiting to hear! Subhuti was just poised there, but the Buddha did not continue. Why? Because he had already answered, but Subhuti did not understand.*

I believe that we all share Subhuti’s confusion. How is repeating the question an answer? Nan Huai-Chin also gave us an answer for that, “He (Buddha) was telling Subhuti to listen carefully. Listen very carefully, and I’ll tell you. When you have the mind, when all of your mind is just one thought that seeks the Dao, just like this should it rest. Just like this has the untamed mind been placated. That’s all—just like that.”

According to Nan Huai-Chin, the reason that the Buddha answered the question in this way is that he wanted Subhuti to achieve epiphany by showing him that what he was doing right now is the answer to his question. The key here is to show, not to tell. Zen masters have the idea that the best way to teach Dao is to show it in some form and the student will realize it by the action, not the words.

And we can also find a similar idea in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which we have analyzed in the above section:
6.53 The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—this method would be the only strictly correct one.

7 What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

From the above text, we can see clearly that for Wittgenstein, there is something that can be said and something that cannot be said. The “sayable” things are propositions of natural science, the “unsayable” things are the things that are outside of natural science, and the role of philosophy is telling people that the thing that they are seeking is “unsayable.”

We can soon find the connections by directly comparing Zen Buddhism text with *Tractatus*: it seems that Wittgenstein is depicting philosophers as Zen masters: someone who tells people to realize the truth, not through words and someone who pass over the truth in silence.

**A further breakdown of the third stage:**

For Zen masters, the purpose of epiphany is mainly to achieve Dao or to achieve the third
stage. Like we discussed before, Zen didn't give a reason why practicing Zen can enable you to get the epiphany. However, we can find some text about the characteristics of the epiphany process. Nan Huai-Chin puts it this way:

True form is the essential substance of Dao, or dharmakaya, and is exactly the true essence of enlightenment. It is the Dao to which one awakens. And just what is this Dao? Is it found in emptiness or in phenomena? That which is called true form is just the dharmakaya, the original source of being... The idea is to find the original source of being and diligently pursue the fountainhead of the universe, the original form of the dharmakaya. Enlightenment is awakening to the dharmakaya. In Buddhist terminology, enlightenment is awakening to the empty nature of the dharmakaya. This is what’s called true form prajna. It is wisdom as opposed to mere intelligence, which is conceptual in nature. Intelligence is limited to previous knowledge, experience, feelings or images; whereas, the true dharmakaya is inconceivable.

Those who study the sutras will often encounter the expression inconceivable, and through the literati, this expression has been brought into common usage... Its original meaning was exclusively used to describe a method of realizing the dharmakaya. We can’t reach it through common knowledge or ideas, or through thinking about it, discussing it or researching it; therefore, it is termed inconceivable. But take notice! This is not to say that it cannot be thought about.

This “cannot” means that one cannot use the conceptual mind. If one uses ordinary knowledge or thinking to force a logical idea of the Dao, this is completely wrong. If the Dharmakaya can be attained through conceptualizing, this still falls within the
boundaries of false thinking. Therefore, it is said that it cannot be reached through thought, but that is not to say that one can’t think about it. It must be attested to through realization and not merely through thinking about it.xvi

The above text is exciting yet confusing. Mainly there are three points: Dao cannot be achieved by logical thinking and experience gathering, and it can only be achieved through realization. The seeking of Dao doesn't involve conceptualizing, which, in Western epistemology, is an essential step to truth. Thoughts cannot reach Dao, but people can still think about it.

Since achieving Dao is the result when you reach the third stage, we know that this activity requires a cognitive jump, as we discussed in the previous section. Logical thinking and experience are still things and techniques in the second stage, so you cannot use logic and experience to break the limits of the second stage. So going to the third stage requires a particular type of technique that is different from those from the second stage: epiphany.

Since logical thinking is not a thing in the process, there is also no place for conceptualizing. If we use the word “Concept” in a Fregean sense, which we discussed in the term definition section, the way to achieve Dao cannot be achieved using logic and abstract objects. Conceptualizing is still a technique we use to analyze problems in the second stage. When we first encounter philosophical problems, the first thing we do is to give an abstract definition about the subject we are discussing the then use logic to solve the problem. This traditional Western Epistemology technique will have no use in achieving Dao.

The first two points are all discussed in the comparison of the three stages. However, the last point, which is that Dao cannot be reached by thoughts, is new. We do touch a little bit on the topic of unsayable things, but right now we are going to look at the problem further. What
does it mean to say that something that cannot be reached by thought, but we can still think about it, and how is this idea connected to something that cannot be said?

**A Wittgensteinian answer:**

Luckily and also surprisingly, Wittgenstein, the man who had never encountered a Zen master, gave a logical possibility for something that can be thought about but cannot be expressed in words in the *Blue Book*, and I will explain the idea below:

*If I give someone the order "fetch me a red flower from that meadow", how is he to know what sort of flower to bring, as I have only given him a word?*

Wittgenstein is trying to show us an idea of how words can serve to convey an instruction. The example might not seem to relate to anything Dao is pursuing, but later the example will open up the idea about what word cannot do for us when it comes to communication. The discussion goes on:

*Now the answer one might suggest first is that he went to look for a red flower carrying a red image in his mind, and comparing it with the flowers to see which of them had the color of the image. Now there is such a way of searching, and it is not at all essential that the image we use should be a mental one. In fact the process may be this: I carry a chart coordinating names and colored squares. When I hear the order "fetch me etc." I draw my finger across the chart from the word "red" to a certain square, and I go and look for*
a flower which has the same color as the square. But this is not the only way of searching
and it isn't the usual way. We go, look about us, walk up to a flower and pick it, without
comparing it to anything. To see that the process of obeying the order can be of this kind,
consider the order "imagine a red patch". You are not tempted in this case to think that
before obeying you must have imagined a red patch to serve you as a pattern for the red
patch which you were ordered to imagine.

Wittgenstein then brought up an idea about how we commonly answer the question
above. When we are trying to understand the meaning of a word, we have some kind of mental
image or mental representation of the thing, and then we link the word to that thing. In this
example, to understand the meaning of “red,” we have a mental image of a “red” square, and we
link the square to the color “red.”

However, Wittgenstein pointed out the problem of the argument. If the idea is right, then
we need to image a red patch before we imaged a red patch. To find the red patch to imagine, we
need first to call up the red patch. And that process seems ridiculous since you cannot imagine
something before you are supposed to image it.

Now you might ask: do we interpret the words before we obey the order? And in some
cases you will find that you do something which might be called interpreting before
obeying, in some cases not.

It seems that there are certain definite mental processes bound up with the working of
language, processes through which alone language can function. I mean the processes of
understanding and meaning. The signs of our language seem dead without these mental
processes; and it might seem that the only function of the signs is to induce such processes, and that these are the things we ought really to be interested in. Thus, if you are asked what is the relation between a name and the thing it names, you will be inclined to answer that the relation is a psychological one, and perhaps when you say this you think in particular of the mechanism of association. —We are tempted to think that the action of language consists of two parts; an inorganic part, the handling of signs, and an organic part, which we may call understanding these signs, meaning them, interpreting them, thinking. These latter activities seem to take place in a queer kind of medium, the mind; and the mechanism of the mind, the nature of which, it seems, we don't quite understand, can bring about effects which no material mechanism could. Thus e.g. a thought (which is such a mental process) can agree or disagree with reality; I am able to think of a man who isn't present; I am able to imagine him, 'mean him' in a remark which I make about him, even if he is thousands of miles away or dead. "What a queer mechanism," one might say, "the mechanism of wishing must be if I can wish that which will never happen."xvii

Then Wittgenstein goes on to discuss that there seem to be some mental processes other than the language or word that are used by us to interpret the meaning of words and to act on it. If we try to put into words everything we know when we say we understand the meaning of the word, we cannot do that since there are some other mental processes other than language existed and “bounded up with the working of language.”

We are tempted to think that if we know a thing, then we should be able to articulate it using concepts, explain it using languages. But even in very simple cases, including knowing the
meanings of the color words, there is no way to put all of our understanding into words in a way that leaves no room for possible misinterpretations. This serves as an excellent argument that the same kind of thing Zen is talking about must be possible because we have examples of understanding-not-in-words that are indubitably real.

**The problems:**

The above analysis isn't enough for us to say that the epiphany process is valid. Merely thinking that there is something that is beyond thoughts doesn’t prove the truth value of epiphany. There are much more to consider.

The first question is that if having an epiphany is supposed to be a way of acquiring knowledge, then what do you come to know? What is your justification for believing it? What reason do you have to think you have a “real” epiphany, and not just an illusion of an epiphany?

The second question is that after you achieved the epiphany, how can you tell that you got the truth? A better question is that if two people who have reached epiphany want to test on the same person to see if he or she has achieved epiphany, will they arrive at the same conclusion? Is there any good reason to believe that different people who have epiphanies are becoming aware of the same thing? How can someone (for example a Zen master) test someone else (for example, one of their students) to see whether they have had an epiphany?

**An answer:**
Wittgenstein offered us some ways to solve the problem. If we go back to the colored words example, it is pretty clear that we can directly test whether or not the person indeed goes through epiphany. You can ask the person to fetch a red flower and see if he or she finds the right one. However, this won’t be absolute proof since it might just be a lucky guess that the guy just randomly selects a flower and it is red. But still, tests of this kind will be a good indicator to determine whether or not the guy finds the solution.

Wittgenstein also gave us a similar example in his later work *Philosophical investigation*:

143. Let us now examine the following kind of language-game: when A gives an order B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule. The first of these series is meant to be that of the natural numbers in decimal notation. — How does he get to understand this notation? — First of all series of numbers will be written down for him and he will be required to copy them. (Do not balk at the expression "series of numbers"; it is not being used wrongly here.) And here already there is a normal and an abnormal learner's reaction. — At first perhaps we guide his hand in writing out the series 0 to 9; but then the possibility of getting him to understand will depend on his going on to write it down independently. — And here we can imagine, e.g., that he does copy the figures independently, but not in the right order: he writes sometimes one sometimes another at random. And then communication stops at that point. — Or again, he makes ‘mistakes’.

What we have to mention in order to explain the significance, I mean the importance, of a concept, are often extremely general facts of nature: such facts as are hardly ever mentioned because of their great generality. in the order. — The difference between this
and the first case will of course be one of frequency. — Or he makes a systematic mistake; for example, he copies every other number, or he copies the series 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, .... like this: 1, 0, 3, 2, 5, 4, .... Here we shall almost be tempted to say that he has understood wrong.

191. "It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash." ... xviii

In the passage, Wittgenstein gave us a similar example that seems to involve an epiphany process. A teacher is trying to teach a student to write a series of numbers and the way to show the student is to write the series down and let the student copy them. And then the way to test it is to ask the student to “write it down independently.” The way we get what the series of numbers to write down is not through the teacher’s teaching about why we should write in this way, but through we "grasping the idea in a flash.” So can the epiphany process in Zen be tested in the same way as the examples of Wittgenstein? Can the result after the epiphany process be tested in some actionable form?

The key here is to find a scenario that an already-enlightened person is judging whether other people achieved enlightenment or not. And luckily, we have found it. It is one of the most well-known Ch’an stories about how Hui Neng became the Sixth Patriarch:

*His Holiness Hui Neng, who became the great Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an was a poor illiterate peasant boy from Hsin Chou of Kwangtung. He later got a chance to meet the Fifth Zen Patriarch, Hung Jen, at the Tung Chian Monastery in the Huang Mei District of Chi Chou and Master Hung Jen accepted him as his disciple.*
One day the Fifth Patriarch told his monks to express their wisdom in a poem. Whoever had true realization of his original nature (Buddha Nature) would be ordained the Sixth Patriarch. The head monk, Shen Hsiu, was the most learned, and wrote the following:

The body is a Bodhi tree,
The mind like a bright mirror stand.
Time and again brush it clean,
And let no dust alight.

The poem was praised, but The Fifth Patriarch knew that Shen Hsiu had not yet found his original nature, on the other hand, Hui Neng couldn't even write, so someone had to write down his poem, which read:

Originally Bodhi has no tree,
The bright mirror has no stand.
Originally there is not a single thing:
Where can dust alight?

The master then found he was truly enlightened and gave him the insignia of his office, the Patriarch's robe and bowl.\textsuperscript{xix}

This is the perfect story for our analysis. The Fifth Patriarch was someone who has achieved the Dao (The original nature or the Buddha Nature is referring to Dao), and he was
finding his successor, another person who found the Dao. The way he was judging it was to make it a competition and made people write poems, so he knew that by reading the poem, he was able to tell if someone had achieved the Dao or not. In the end, he did make a decision and genuinely thought that Hui Neng was the one who achieved the Dao. So based on the above analysis, we know that the way to achieve Dao is something that cannot be said, or we can make it similar by saying that why the Dao I am expressing or telling you is the case is something cannot be said. So I can tell you that you can see mountains are just mountains after achieving the Dao or I can tell you that the ultimate truth is emptiness (Which is the main point in the Heart Sutra, another famous Zen Texts). But I cannot tell you why that is the case. I can give you a red flower and tell you that it is red, but I cannot really tell you why that is red and not something else. I can show you how addition works, but I cannot tell you why that is the case. (Further than that, there doesn't exist a proof for 1+1=2, it is just something that is regarded correct for math) But, I can still test you about it. I can ask you to find a red flower for me and based on my understanding of the red flower I can make the judgment about whether you find the right one or not. I can ask you to calculate what 8+2 is and I will compare the number to my result.

Similarly, I can ask you to show your understanding of Dao and compare it to my knowledge of Dao. The fact that I cannot show you doesn't mean I do not know what it is. The reason that the Fifth Patriarch chose Hui Neng was that his understanding resembled the understanding of The Fifth Patriarch.

However, there was a possibility that Hui Neng just knew what the Dao was from The Fifth Patriarch (since you can tell what the Dao is) and made a similar poem. It is like you are asked to fetch a red flower with the experience that you have seen one and you find the one that
looks similar to the red flower you have seen. However, it is highly impossible in this case since making a poem has too many random variables and it is not something you can make by copying other people’s poem and make it seem original. Also, it is pretty hard to make a lucky guess and hit the jackpot since you are not selecting and the answers are infinite. So if I have already achieved the Dao, the way I am going to test others is to make them show me the Dao in an original “free response” approach: to tell a story, to make a poem, or do an act. It is similar to the scenario that a math teacher is trying to teach children how to calculate how many apples I have on both hands if I have one in left and one in the right after explaining the rules of additions. After he or she shows the student how to get the result two apples, the teacher can ask what if I have two in left and one in the right. The student, in this case, can still get the right answer even if he or she does not understand what is going on: he or she needs to do a similar thing by adding the number together, even though the student does not need to know why he or she should do so. However, if in this case, the teacher asks the student to calculate how many apples are on the chair and table when one on the table and one on the chair, then the student has to sort of know why he or she should add the number together to get the answer right.

But a problem remains: how can the Fifth Patriarch know that his Dao was right? The way the Fifth Patriarch was sure that Hui Neng got the Dao was to compare them to his understanding. What if his understanding has initially been flawed? That would imply that Hui Neng’s answer was also defective. And in this case, the red flower and addition cannot offer much help since you can say that for all practical purposes, every normal human will agree that this flower is red, and that one plus one equals two. You cannot say the same thing about Dao since it will make the whole discussion senseless: “Why do you think you get the Dao?” “Because it is just universally true.” It is just not helpful. It seems that the only way out of this is
by saying that the Fifth Patriarch got it from the Patriarch before him and the chain will go to the start of all this: the first Buddha himself. And this is what the story told us: Hui Neng got enlightened before by the Diamond Sutra, and the Fifth Patriarch started to teach him more about the Sutra after the appointment, and Hui Neng thought the text resembled his understanding. The Diamond Sutra is the teaching of the Buddha. Asking whether the Buddha got the Dao is like asking whether Plato’s understanding about forms was right about Plato’s understanding about forms. The Buddha was the one who created the whole thing and the idea of Dao in the first place. Whether the Dao is the truth, however, is a different discussion.
Conclusion

It seems that we have achieved a lot in this thesis. The primary purpose of it, as we stated in the introduction section, is to make an introduction to Zen Buddhist epistemology through a way that can be understood by Western epistemologist. We have shown what function does epiphany, which is the key of Zen epistemology, serves in the whole process of understanding the world. We have achieved that through the three stages and by comparing to Wittgenstein’s two three-stages structures, we can see that the process does have some truth in it since a well-known Western Philosopher also came up with the same idea.

We also looked into the details of the epiphany process. We first have the idea that there exists the similarity between Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhism that they both have the idea that something exists something that cannot be said and the thing is essential for some fundamental questions. We then use Wittgenstein’s texts to prove that there is the possibility that there exists some understanding that is beyond language. Then we look at an important question that is bothering Western epistemologists, which is if we achieve something that is beyond thought, then how can we be sure that we get something right? Later we solved the question by comparing Zen and Wittgenstein’s texts since they all involve the idea that although the result is achieved through unspeakable processes, we can still test on it, since the result of the test is speak-able or showable.

However, this thesis is also limited. We can see that when studying the three-stage process, Wittgenstein and Zen seems to all conclude that a solipsism idea will eventually become realism. However, I am unable to explain either of them. It seems to be a critical issue why solipsism will coincide with realism, and the topic might need another thesis to explain.
There is also some further research idea generating from this topic. For example, an examination of the scope of epiphany needs to be analyzed. For Zen and Wittgenstein, epiphany is mainly for Dao and the meaning of life. However, achieving those are not the end, and there is a possibility that we need to use that to solve some real-world questions. The question that can we derive some sayable thoughts from some unsayable understandings is essential and can be of great use if proven right.

---


viii Shi, Q. (n.d.). (“Same or different?” and the truth about Zen.)


