

The Way and the Word: Speech and Silence in Daoism and the Zen Kōan

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ABSTRACT

According to D. C. Lau's translation of the *Daodejing*, chapter fifty-six asserts that "One who knows does not speak; [and] one who speaks does not know." At face value, the meaning of this sentence is clear: silence is the only recourse to one who has true knowledge of the Dao. Upon closer inspection, however, several questions can be raised that lead beyond a simple imperative of apophatia: *What is meant by "knowledge" here? What does "does not" signify—"should not," "does not need to," "cannot," or something else? How is this knowledge that precludes speech first acquired, and how is it passed on?* These and similar questions may also be applied to the Sino-Japanese Zen Buddhist traditions, particularly with respect to the *kōan* technique. Many writings about Daoism and Zen often begin with a disclaimer, to the effect that, while the author knows that she is involved in a paradoxical quest—to speak of what cannot possibly be spoken of—she will plow ahead in any case, rather than remain silent. This paper will attempt to go one step further, and speak of the speech about that which cannot be spoken of. It is my contention that it is mistaken to assume that words and even dualistic thinking have no place within ("philosophical") Daoism and Zen Buddhism.

Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything?
– *Zhuangzi* 2: 23

According to D. C. Lau's translation of the *Daodejing*, chapter fifty-six asserts that "One who knows does not speak; [and] one who speaks does not know."¹ At face value, the meaning of this sentence is clear: silence is the only recourse to one who has true knowledge of the Dao. Upon further inspection, however, several questions can be raised that lead beyond a simple imperative of apophatia: *What is meant by "knowledge" here? What does "does not" signify—"should not," "does not need to," "cannot," or something else? How is this knowledge that precludes speech first acquired, and how is it passed on?* These and similar questions may also be applied to the Sino-Japanese Zen Buddhist traditions, particularly with respect to the *kōan* technique. Many writings about Daoism and Zen often begin with a disclaimer, to the effect that, while the author knows that she is involved in a paradoxical quest—to speak of what cannot possibly be spoken of—she will plow ahead in any case, rather than remain silent.² This paper will attempt to go one step further, and speak of the speech about that which cannot be spoken of. It is my contention that it is mistaken to assume that words and even dualistic thinking have no place within ("philosophical") Daoism and Zen Buddhism.³

Obviously, the invocation of knowledge in the above Daoist verse is knowledge in a positive sense, presumably knowledge "of"—or perhaps more accurately "with"—the Dao. Yet at the same time it is not what we normally call knowledge, but takes on a new meaning or meanings. In typical Daoist fashion, new content is allowed for old words and terms. In fact, this new knowledge (which is, according to the DDJ, a primal knowledge, and therefore anything but "new") can only arise when standard, or conventional forms of thinking are abandoned. We shall return to this further with regard to Zen and the *kōan*. That Daoism invokes a different sort of knowledge is therefore clear, though the more specific implications of its apophatic claims remain somewhat

problematic. Chapter fifty-six of the DDJ, coupled with the famous opening lines ("The Way [Dao] that can be spoken of is not the constant Way [Dao]"), seems to draw the author of the work (whom we will call "Laozi") into a logical quandary Western thinkers generally term "the Liar's Paradox," where self-referential negation engenders and endless loop of uncertainty. If one who knows does not speak, then it would seem that whatever is spoken is not knowledge, and therefore the spoken sentence that proclaims this may itself be summarily dismissed as not knowledge, i.e., false. However, if we de-absolutize speech, i.e., consider it merely as the conventional or pragmatic use of words to gain certain affects, the problem becomes less acute. For any new knowledge must involve new ways of speaking as well as new ways of thinking.

Recent archaeological discoveries in China have unearthed ancient versions of the DDJ, and there appears to be some discrepancy in particular over the wording of the chapter fifty-six we have been discussing. In Robert Henricks's translation of the *ma-wang-tui* texts, this chapter reads: "Those who know don't talk about *it*; those who talk don't know *it*."³ As we see, there is a slight but significant difference in the negative used here *vis-à-vis* the standard text, from "not/don't" (*Ch. pu*) to "not-it/don't-it" (*Ch. fu*). This alternative (though not necessarily more authentic) version brings up a new question—what is this "it"? If the "it," as it may be safe to assume, is the Dao, then what is the Dao? The Chinese glyph *dao* is usually translated into English as the "Way," but it is a word with multiple connotations, encompassing not only the Greek *hodos* (way) but also the Greek *logos* (word).⁴ As such, the first chapter of the *Daodejing* involves a play on words: "the *Dao* that can be articulated (*Dao-ed*) is not the constant *Dao*." Thus the concept of *dao* seems to invoke its own double negation: at once the Way and the Word, it cannot be grasped by the way of words.

In fact, it is precisely because of the indivisibility of the *dao* that it cannot be named or articulated; the *dao* is the "nameless" that is the "beginning of the ten thousand things," and is also the "named" that is "the mother of the ten thousand things," but it *is* not any one of the ten thousand things, since

it is not a “thing” at all. The Daoist fear or distrust of words is at heart a wariness of reification—of ideas and concepts becoming, or taking over what they are originally only meant to refer to or signify. Words objectify things, and “subjectify” their users. The Way in particular cannot be spoken of because to speak of it is, in some sense, to lessen or deny its power; the Dao is the source behind/in that which appears (i.e., the ten thousand things), but it *is not* that which appears.⁵ Thus to speak of the Way, as if by doing so the Way is captured by knowledge and concepts, is to speak “unknowingly.”

Yet what of speaking “on” rather than “about” the Way? Is not forced silence merely a step into the other side of the dualistic conception of speech and silence? And what of those multitudes who are not yet attuned to the Way, can they speak or be spoken to? As the *Wenzi* proclaims: “Real people... do not let things disturb their harmony, they do not let desires derange their feelings... [c]oncealing their names, they hide when the Way is in effect and *appear when it is not*.⁶ Furthermore, “[t]hose who *serve life* adapt to changes as they act... [c]hanges arise from the times; those who know the times do not behave in fixed ways.”⁷ Silence can be as much a stultifying fixity as words can be, and can be a hindrance to anyone attempting to “serve life.” Some Daoists may pine for a time of blissful undifferentiated Being, but the world in which we dwell daily is one of differentiation, and communication must somehow involve this fact. It is the trap of words, their tendency to fixity and reification that word-users must be wary of, not words in themselves.

As soon as we start to establish a system, we have names.
And as soon as there are names,
Then you must *also* know that it’s time to stop.
By knowing to stop—in this way you’ll come to no harm.
– *Daodejing*, 32

Thus, it is a disbelief in the possibility of approaching the Dao through sense perception (empirical “knowledge”) or logical argumentation (rational “knowledge”) that is at the heart of the Daoist injunction against words and speech. For those who truly “know” are not “widely learned”⁸: the type of calculative/objective knowledge is neither the means to attain Dao nor the goal of the search.⁹ With discursive logic and empirical experience rendered suspect, the “intuitive” approach to reality may give us the only sort of knowledge we can aspire to. Humans will only deal properly with things when the connection between people and things is understood—once things are no longer “things,” but what they are in their self-being—a connection that does not rely upon the mediator of language. By “attuning [the] mind with the undetermined, universal, and perennial mode of *tao*...[one] will thus dissociate [one]self from all particulars, while being however in perfect agreement with them all.”¹⁰ This “naïve” receptivity to the Dao precludes knowledge as information, but allows for a deeper knowledge, a meditative knowledge that is more direct, but less inquisitive. Inquiry may continue (according to the *Zhuangzi* [24:14] *must* continue), but only if it disavows all pretensions to identification and the acquisition of knowledge with any sense of finality. “The attainability of perfect understanding does by no means imply the possibility of *acquiring* the actual knowledge of either *tao* or its operative mode.”¹¹ In a sense, one could say that in Taoism epistemology collapses into ontology, so that ways of knowing

become inseparable from ways of being: in *being* with the Dao, one *knows* the Dao.

Conventional human being is deficient, says Daoism. Further, its deficiency is in some sense a result or correlation of its deficient ways of knowing, and its use of words more specifically. Despite their differences, the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Wenzi* all share one basic insight: that “while other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, man has separated himself from the Way by reflection, posing alternatives, and formulating principles of action.”¹² The *Zhuangzi*, in particular, emphasizes the dangers of words, but even the highly skeptical author conveys an aptitude, a mode of being that must be reached before words lose their use. To point the direction to the life in which the Way may be realized, words, in the form of stories, verses, and maxims, are useful. It may be in fact through a *particular* use of words that the clinging to words and discursive knowledge may be overcome.

The bait is the means to get the fish where you want it,
catch the fish and you forget the bait... Words are the
means to get the idea where you want it, catch on to the
idea and you forget about the words.
– *Zhuangzi* 26:48

The author himself sees the paradox here, but casts it off with a humorous finish: “Where can I find a man who forgets about words,” he says, “and have a word with him?”¹³ “Zhuangzi” would like to speak with one who has transcended, not the *use* of words, but the *need* for words. In chapter twenty-seven, the author speaks of three modes of discourse available to those “no longer victims to the illusion of logical demonstration.”¹⁴ The most important and effective of these is what he calls “spillover saying”: “Use it to go by and let the stream find its own channels.” This is the speech proper to the intelligent spontaneity of the Daoist: “a fluid language which keeps its equilibrium through changing meaning and viewpoints.”¹⁵ It involves a recognition that words do not and cannot be fixed to things, i.e., cannot reach the essence of what they are speaking, but that they can be used to invoke, provoke, or perform, when they are freed from the trappings of representation. Thus the dictum “In saying say nothing” (*Zhuangzi* 27:5) need not mean “be silent,” but rather “say” in a way that “means” nothing in conventional terms, but may have great “meaning” in (provocative, affective) Daoist terms. For the author of *Zhuangzi* words offer themselves to our usage when we realize that they do not order themselves according to any rules of argumentation; when we have attained the unsayable knack, we can perhaps say without having to speak.

Wen-tzu asked: Can people speak of the subtle (the *tao*)?
Lao-tzu said: Why not? But only if you know what
words mean.
– *Wen-tzu* 99

Zen Words, Zen Knowledge

Thus Daoism may be more adequately deemed “cataphatic” than “apophatic”—allowing, that is, for the possibility that, while words can divert our attention away from the ultimate reality that is the Dao, words may be used, differently, to point the way to the Way. Turning from Daoism to Sino-Japanese

Buddhism—and particularly the Chan/Zen traditions—may help to clear up these points somewhat. Zen shares many features with philosophical Daoism, most significantly its promulgation of ineffability, especially paradoxical when the Zen (especially Rinzai sect) reliance upon the *kōan* is taken into account. Zen is often mistakenly thought by outsiders to be merely silent meditation or quietism, but as a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen rejects the ideal of the more traditional *arhat* in favor of the *bodhisattva*—a being who, having reached Awakening, returns to help all sentient beings still trapped in the world of suffering. The Bodhisattva “would never be a *pratyekabuddha*, a silent Buddha, one who ha[s] no message for fellow beings, but an Awakened Buddha who [speaks] up and actively assist[s] humankind in need.”¹⁶

What does Zen speaking entail? Zen claims to be a way of reaching Awakening *without* the ladder of words and scriptures. Like Daoism, Zen rejects “reliance upon letters” and the dualistic use of words upon which conventional knowledge is based. This is our grave mistake—the confounding of the experiential “fact” with its expression in letters and words, which are nothing more than “conceptual shadows.”¹⁷ Yet Zen is also associated with a unique technique towards Awakening called the *kōan*, which serves as a test of a Zen student’s understanding through the seemingly illogical and often paradoxical use of words. *Kōans* generally take the form of a riddle presented in discourse between an old Zen master and a questioning novice; a riddle that appears to be unanswerable, and is unanswerable in the terms of conventional logic.

Again, we have reached an impasse: the *kōan* exercise seems to belie the Zen injunction against the use of words as a means to Enlightenment. But the Zen *kōan* is (like the verses of the *Daodejing*) quite unlike, say, the parables of Jesus or the dialogues of Plato, in that the *kōan* often appears not simply obscure but ridiculous, nonsensical, and utterly illogical. This is because the Zen *kōan* works in some way as what Austen might call “performative” speech: the words are always also an *act* in themselves, an instigatory act which is meant to induce sudden awareness (if not full Awakening) in the hearer. The way the words are used cannot be fully delineated from the content, the (referential) meaning of the words themselves. According to D. T. Suzuki: “The idea is to unfold the Zen psychology in the mind of the initiated, and to reproduce the state of consciousness of which these statements are the expression.”¹⁸ Again we see the epistemological-ontological conflation: the *kōan* is intended to produce a change in which is revealed the proper Zen state of being, and it is only with this change that “knowledge” comes, as the students comes to share the state of being from which the *kōan* itself arose.

As such, the *kōan* seems to eschew logic and instructive rhetoric (representative speech) for the sake of the shock of form (performative expression). But to deny the words of the *kōan* any “meaning,” however symbolic, allegorical or affective, is to miss another level at which the Zen *kōan* works. To reject the use of logic and dualism *in toto* is to create a new dualism of dualistic and non-dualistic modes of thinking. The only possible escape from this quandary must be to somehow sublimate dualism without either affirming or denying its use. It is to refrain from the reification of non-dualism, utilizing dualism while recognizing its limits, in order to precipitate an awareness of the dangers of *any* type of

reification. This may be what is meant by Dōgen’s famous statement that, for the person without any Zen training, mountains are mountains, for one partially instructed in Zen, mountains are not mountains, and for one who has attained Awakening, mountains are once again mountains.

In the history of *kōan* Zen, there arose an inevitable (and “disastrous,” according to D. T. Suzuki) intellectualization of *kōans*. As hundreds of *kōans* were recorded in writing, they began to be approached, *qua* written texts, with something less than the immediacy of the Zen student faced with the master’s riddle; i.e., the student was no longer *involved* in the *kōan*, and had available leisure to study its words and meaning, without the commitment of direct, experiential involvement. The tendency to handle *kōans* intellectually is lamented by D. T. Suzuki and Ruth Sasaki, both of whom claim that this remains a grave problem in *kōan* study today. But as this change took place in history, with the growing written record of *kōans* there began a conscious development of new *kōans* that used the words of the old masters as pointers to engage the intellect, only to show its limits, and at the same time to effect, directly, the receiving consciousness in order to precipitate a sudden “breakthrough” into a state of *satori*.

In this way it could be posited that the Zen *kōan* does not rely solely upon its “shock value” but *also* upon the words it uses, in logical (symbolic, allegorical) or illogical (affective, performative) ways. The intellect has its uses, however limited these may be—though a stumbling block in the early stages of Zen training, once again it is primarily the hubris of ostensibly objective, calculative knowledge that is to be overcome. Perhaps the traditional weapons of language and knowledge can be used against their old masters. As in the martial arts, the force of one’s foe is not resisted directly but rather channeled in a different and productive way. Despite Suzuki’s comment that “there is no room in the *koan* to insert an intellectual interpretation,”¹⁹ this does not mean that there can be no that or logic to the *koan*: one need not abjure the possibility of a *different kind of logic* in Zen that is neither dualistic nor non-dualistic but perhaps both/and. While words may not grasp the “unsayable” Dao or the Awakening of Zen, words can be “a vehicle on which the truth is carried.”²⁰ Once Awakening is reached, of course, words can be forgotten. Until that time, however, their use as pointers can hardly be denied. Isshu Miura quotes an old master who said, “In our sect there are no words and phrases.” Miura’s response is that, “for [this] very reason... words and phrases are the more wonderful.”²¹

Conclusions

The buddhas and patriarchs have been greatly sorrowed to see that sentient beings bind themselves to the realm of birth-and-death and sensual delusion... [and t]herefore they have displayed words in the midst of wordlessness and handed down forms in the midst of formlessness.

– Zhongfeng Mingben (1263-1362)

The Dao cannot be spoken of because the Dao cannot “be” anything, even the word *dao* is not its “name” (DDJ, 25). Whatever we say of the Dao will not *be* the Dao because the Dao cannot be exhausted by words. Human minds, in reifying the flux that is the Dao, in conceptualizing “things,” and

confining existence (“being”) to a mere linguistic copula (i.e., “is”), have lost sight of the Dao, which is reality itself. Yet even within the classic Daoist texts we see a clear ambivalence towards words, and are left with the possibility that to be wary of speaking “of” or “about” the Dao does not necessarily render human beings to silence and passivity.

If the “does not” in Laozi’s “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know” connotes “does not need to” rather than the exclusive (and dualistic) imperative “cannot,” then what we are faced with is a warning against reification, not an abolition of words and speech. The true opposite of discursive speech is not silence, but what Foucault would call “counter-discursivity”—a type or technique of speech that uses words to subvert reliance upon conventional knowledge and communication. Zen too is wary of concepts and conceptual thinking, but life can be grasped, and truth illuminated, by *not trying* to grasp it via dualistic or non-dualistic means. The Buddhist ideal of non-attachment and the Daoist *wu-wei* mean walking onwards *past* the need for attachment rather than absconding from the scene of trouble by running away from attachment and into a new attachment to silence and passivity.

The Zen *kōan* usually presents a choice between two alternatives, both of which are equally impossible, just as in life any dichotomous choice will be imperfect, whether it be between logic and illogic, dualism and non-dualism, words and silence, affirmation and negation, action and non-action. The problem in both Daoism and Zen is to pass *beyond* the two alternatives, ultimately reaching Awakening or confluence with the Dao—a mode of being where mountains are once again mountains, but are never exhausted by the word “mountains.”

A monk asked Fuketsu: “Without speaking, without silence, how can you express the truth?”

Fuketsu observed: “I always remember springtime in southern China. The birds sing among innumerable kinds of fragrant flowers.”

Mumon’s comment: Fuketsu used to have lightning Zen. Whenever he had the opportunity, he flashed it. But this time he failed to do so and only borrowed from an old Chinese poem. Never mind Fuketsu’s Zen. If you want to express the truth, throw out your words, throw out your silence, and tell me about your own Zen.

Notes

1. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, 56.
2. Even the author of the *Daodejing* makes clear that in calling what he is concerned with the Way, or the Dao, he is merely “styling” it as such, “not know[ing] its name.” Despite this, critics from East and West have long questioned Laozi’s intent in even writing the book. In a poem called “The Philosophers,” Tang poet Bai Juyi (772-846) writes:

“Those who speak know nothing;
Those who know are silent.”

These words, I am told,
Were spoken by Lao-tzu.

If we are to believe that Lao-tzu

Was himself one who knew,
How comes it that he wrote a book
of five thousand words?

– Waley, *Chinese Poems*, 190

In this paper, I hope to provide evidence that will show that Bai Juyi errs by making the second line of Laozi’s “Those who speak...” into an imperative of silence, rather than an injunction against a certain type or way of speaking.

3. Henricks, *Te-Tao Ching*, 26, my emphasis.
4. Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 88.
5. Finazzo, *Notion of Tao*, 32.
6. Cleary, *Further Teachings*, 7, my emphasis.
7. Cleary, *Further Teachings*, 10, my emphasis.
8. Henricks, *Te-Tao Ching*, 38.
9. Finazzo, *Notion of Tao*, 15.
10. Finazzo, *Notion of Tao*, 121.
11. Finazzo, *Notion of Tao*, 122.
12. Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 173.
13. Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 198.
14. Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 200.
15. Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 201.
16. Eliade, *Guide*, 32.
17. Shibayama, *A Flower*, 25.
18. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, 135.
19. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, 137.
20. Tongshan, quoted in Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, 138.
21. Miura, “Koan Study,” 52. Miura cites the importance of *gonsen* (“the study and investigation of words”) *kōans*: “we must devote our efforts to penetrating into the innermost meaning of words and phrases,” he says, “if because you desire the emancipation of your own body, you don’t pass through the *gonsen koans*, how are you going to save sentient beings?” (Miura, “Koan Study,” 53)

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