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THE FINGER POINTING TOWARD THE MOON:  
A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHINESE  
BUDDHIST THOUGHT OF REFERENCE

I. PROLOGUE

Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us that a pain-sensation word like “pain” functions as a replacement for our primitive, natural pain-behavior such as crying, moaning, etc., that the sentence “I am in pain” does not *describe* the speaker’s inner pain-sensation, but rather *expresses* it in the way pain-behavior like crying does.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a demonstrative word like “this” and “that” may be considered a substitute for people’s primitive gestures of pointing to something with a finger, such that the word points to the object intended by the speaker in the way a pointing finger does.<sup>2</sup> A demonstrative may not correctly pinpoint its perceptibly present referent, and the latter may turn out to be an illusion. Yet the point for us is that the hearer of the word must be aware that the word points to something beyond itself and the thing can only be known in light of the concrete situation context related to the speaker and the hearer.

The same, indeed, can be said with regard to indexicals like “now,” “here,” and “I” and even to such general words as “snow,” “coffee,” and so forth. Just as consciousness is generally intentional, so the use of language is typically signficative, with the signifier *pointing*, in a concrete context, *to* the signified. Incidentally, the Chinese language itself encodes the kinship between the pointing finger and the signficative character of language. A number of its terms for expressing the referential function of language, such as “*zhiwei* (指謂) (denotation),” “*zhishe* (指涉) (reference),” “*zhishi* (指示) (indication)” and “*yizhi* (意指) (signification),” all involve the use of the word “*zhi* (指) (finger).”

One can use words to signify or point to speakable things, whereas some thinkers have attempted to use words to refer to things ineffable. But can we meaningfully refer to an ineffable thing by a word like “unsayable”?<sup>3</sup> By using the word “unsayable” for the thing we, it

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seems, inevitably make it sayable: The unsayable thing is sayable by the word “unsayable.” To escape this predicament, should the knower of the ineffable reality just remain in silence? But then, others would not know anything about the reality. If X is unspeakable, what real difference is there between saying “X is undifferentiated and yet complete” and saying “X is chocolaty, with a floral scent”? After all, the two sentences seem equally inappropriate with respect to the ineffable X.<sup>4</sup> Even if the knower manages to say something about the ineffable, the hearer’s understanding may turn out to be misunderstanding, as she may take the ineffable just as what is dictated by the words. In case the hearer could not follow, would the knower not speak in vain?

In Mahayana Buddhist texts, the transcendental truth or reality and the mystical experience intuiting it are often said to be ineffable as well as unthinkable, well beyond the reach of human concepts and words. If so, how should we treat the teaching in the Buddhist sutras? Here some Buddhist texts resort to the famous simile of a moon-pointing finger (*zhiyue zhiyu*) (指月之喻) for figuratively explaining the nature of the teaching and the related misunderstanding:

The teaching in the sutras is like a moon-pointing finger; on seeing the moon, one knows that what is marked as such (by the finger) is after all not the moon. The various speeches by all Tathagatas for instructing the Bodhisattvas are to be taken likewise.<sup>5</sup>

The Buddha told Ananda, “You still listen to the Dharma with a conditioned mind; as the Dharma then becomes conditioned too, you do not attain the Dharma-nature. It is like when a person points with his finger toward the moon to show it to another, the latter should follow the finger to see the moon. If the second person looks on the finger as the moon, he misses not only the moon but the finger also. Why? Because he mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.”<sup>6</sup>

For example, a child does not know what the moon is, so an adult points with her finger toward the moon to mark it. Yet, the child looks on the finger as the moon and fails to catch the purport of the adult’s gesture. This simile has “the moon” for the ineffable transcendental truth of Buddhism, “a moon-pointing finger” (*biaoyue zhizhi*) (標月之指) for the language used to express the truth, while one’s taking the language as capable of dictating the truth is likened to the mistake of taking the finger for the moon. The simile of a moon-pointing finger received much attention in Chinese Buddhism and is virtually the root simile in Chinese Buddhist discourses on the referential function of scriptural language.

This essay is an attempt to shed light on how the Chinese Buddhist understands the way language refers to an ineffable reality. For this purpose, I shall inquire into the linguistic thoughts of Sengzhao

(僧肇) (374–414 CE) and Jizang (吉藏) (549–623 CE), the two leading Chinese Madhyamaka thinkers, and discuss the implications of the simile for an in-depth philosophical analysis of the Buddhist thought of linguistic reference.<sup>7</sup> Since space is limited, I shall not attend to any thought of reference specific to other Chinese Buddhist schools like Tiantai (天台), Huayan (華嚴), and Chan Buddhism (禪宗). With our discussion centering on references of the “moon-pointing” type, the sole expressive mode concerning us here is one that is termed “indication.” The expressive mode of indication can broadly cover such linguistic modes as affirmation, negation, and figurative expression (simile and metaphor), insofar as their use implies the indicative function to be explained below. And the therapeutic function of language, highly valued in Buddhism, will then be bypassed. Though there is in Chinese Buddhism no systematic doctrine of linguistic reference, it is hoped that our interpretive analysis will disclose a clear picture of the Chinese Buddhist—especially the Chinese Madhyamaka—thought of reference.

## II. SIMILE OF A MOON-POINTING FINGER

As is well known, Indian Mahayana Buddhism stresses the limited and even illusory nature of language. The related views somewhat shape the linguistic thought of Chinese Buddhism, while the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* (莊子) represents another key source of influence. Basically, given its notion of nonduality between *ti* (體) (substance) and *yong* (用) (function), mainstream Chinese philosophy tends toward viewing the transcendental (the universal principle-way) and the phenomenal (the particular thing-events) as subtly permeating each other to form a dynamic organic whole. As a result, though the limitation of language was still recognized, Chinese Buddhist thinkers did not so much emphasize the illusory character of language as highlight its value in leading one to realize the transcendental Real.<sup>8</sup>

We now direct our attention to Sengzhao’s and Jizang’s philosophy of language as well as the implications of the simile of a moon-pointing finger to bring out a significant aspect of the Chinese Buddhist thought regarding linguistic reference. The two earlier quotations about the simile come from the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra and the Suramgama Sutra, both presumably written in China. The Lankavatara Sutra, composed in India around the fourth and fifth centuries, has a verse that reads: “Just as a fool, on seeing a moon-pointing finger, looks at the finger but not the moon, so one who is attached to words does not see the Real.” In addition, both the Meditation Concentration Sutra and the Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra

contain similar similes and ideas,<sup>9</sup> although parts of the two texts might not have been written in India. The simile, on the whole, was not widely employed by Indian Buddhists. Nevertheless, in view of the relationship between the Chinese word “*zhi*” and linguistic reference,<sup>10</sup> it is not surprising to see the simile often cited in Chinese Buddhism.

In spite of its frequent occurrence in Chinese Buddhist texts, the simile of a moon-pointing finger is interpreted quite in the same way, though the authors may differ on what the “moon” stands for. There is then no need for extensive use of quotations. The following elucidation by Zongmi (宗密) (780–841 CE) should suffice to show the general Chinese Buddhist understanding of the simile:

[The Perfect Enlightenment Sutra says:] “The teaching in the sutras is like a moon-pointing finger; on seeing the moon, one knows that what is marked as such (by the finger) is after all not the moon.” Indeed, the use of words and images (*xiang*<sub>1</sub>) (象) is meant (for the hearer/reader) to get the intention. Lack of words and images makes for confusion, while attachment to them leads to delusive views of the truth. And so the Sutra resorts to “a moon-pointing finger” figuratively to express the teaching. It means to say: seeing the moon requires the point of a finger; realizing the mind-heart counts on the teaching of the Buddha. One sees the moon by dint of the finger and forgets the finger on seeing the moon; one expresses the mind-heart by dint of the teaching and forgets the teaching on realizing the mind-heart. One misses the true moon by fixing on the finger and misses the original mind-heart with attachment to the teaching. As the intention is to let one realize the Real and forget the words, the Sutra says “is after all not the moon.”<sup>11</sup>

In view of this quotation and other related comments, I set forth six theses to make explicit the linguistic-philosophic thinking pertinent to the simile:

- T1: Words in no way correspond with the ineffable Real and cannot say or properly express the Real.
- T2: Words can point *toward* the Real by means of the forms meant or properly expressed by them.
- T3: The forms are different from the Real and so are to be negated.
- T4: One who takes the forms for the Real not only misunderstands the Real but also is ignorant of the function of language.
- T5: The forgetting of words and their forms can dissolve the entanglement of language and thought and even lead to an intuitive experience of the Real.
- T6: The intuition of the Real depends upon extra-linguistic factors as well as language.

Meanwhile, we recall the conundrum noted in the beginning of this essay. Can we say of something that it is unsayable without

contradicting ourselves? By using the word “unsayable” for an unsayable thing, we seem to render it sayable such that the thing is both sayable and unsayable. Put differently, in order to set a limit to language, we would have to find both sides of the limit speakable and so the unspeakable would turn out to be speakable! Given the apparent self-contradiction involved, a number of modern scholars have questioned the reasonableness of raising an ineffability thesis. Graham Priest, in contrast, claims that although linguistic reference to things ineffable results in self-contradiction, the contradiction actually has its cause in the nature of reality, a nature that is in a certain sense contradictory.<sup>12</sup> Is there then no escape from the contradiction?

Before accounting for the six theses, let us first see how Sengzhao and Jizang comprehend the relationship between names/words and reality. Like Nagarjuna (ca. 150–250 CE), the founder of the Indian Madhyamaka School, before him, Sengzhao opposes the claim that a name must name a real entity and also rejects the view that names correspond with realities:

If one uses a thing(-name) to designate a thing, what is thus designated can be called a thing. If one uses a thing(-name) to designate a non-thing, the non-thing, though thus designated, is not a thing. Therefore, a thing does not become real by being given a name, and a name does not refer to a reality by designating a thing.<sup>13</sup>

If one looks for a thing through a name, the thing has no reality matching the name. If one looks for a name through a thing, the name has no efficacy to obtain the thing. A thing that has no reality matching a name is not a (real) thing. A name that has no efficacy to obtain a thing is not a (non-provisional) name. Thus, a name does not match a reality and a reality does not match a name; with no correspondence between names and realities, where do the myriad things exist?<sup>14</sup>

A rabbit has the name “rabbit” and is a conventionally real thing. By contrast, though a unicorn has the name “unicorn,” it does not thereby become conventionally real. On the whole, the first quotation stresses that a thing does not become real by having a name, and a name does not refer to a reality by naming a thing. Hence, the meaningfulness of a name in no way rests on its referring to some extra-linguistic actuality. This goes against what we may call the “no name without an entity named” claim. The second quotation points out that a thing conventionally referred to by a name has no reality to match the name, while the name has no efficacy to denote a real thing. Apart from regarding names and things as empty, this passage repudiates the view that names correspond with realities.

Sengzhao also appeals to the relativity and interdependence of words to show that things designated by names are empty and unreal.

One refers to a near thing by the word “this” and refers to a distant thing by the word “that”; on the contrary, a person at a distance refers to “this” thing by “that” and “that” thing by “this.” In reality, things do not have fixed names and the items one grasps through names are not real either. Things only appear to be real on account of the use of their names, whereas their true state is neither existence nor nonexistence.<sup>15</sup> Such not-existent, not-nonexistent things can still be designated by words like “existence” and “nonexistence,” though one must know that these words are solely provisional. To say the word “existence” is to make explicit not-nonexistence by a provisional use of “existence”; to say the word “nonexistence” is to make explicit not-existence by a provisional use of “nonexistence.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the emptiness of names also implies an interpenetration between names such that the use of the word “existence” for a thing does not preclude the thing’s being named by the word “nonexistence,” and vice versa. Jizang goes one step further, claiming that to say the word “existence” is to make explicit not-existence by a provisional use of “existence,” and to say the word “nonexistence” is to make explicit not-nonexistence by a provisional use of “nonexistence.”<sup>17</sup> The overall purpose is to undercut a substantialist viewpoint of meaning and reference that tends to posit distinctive, word-correlated, but actually unreal entities. Such a move is advisable if we are not to be ensnared by language into futile construction and attachment.

Indeed, names as provisional words are neither real nor in correspondence with reality, and one cannot use them to describe the Real.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in Sengzhao’s view, the Real is subtle, obscure, profound, without shape and form (*xiang*<sub>2</sub>) (相), yet, “speech arises from names, a name arises by means of a form, while a form arises owing to its apprehension (by the intellect); lack of a form means lack of a name, and without names there is no speech.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, the formless Real is inaccessible to language. Here the notion of form virtually serves as the basis for the application of a word. The Real, being formless, has no apprehensible form and ultimately cannot be denoted by a name,<sup>20</sup> nor spoken of in language. Similarly, Jizang’s nondual principle (*li*) (理) of the middle-way is formless, nameless, conceptually unfixable, and beyond the limitation of words, which means that the principle cannot properly be expressed by words. This is the aforesaid thesis T1.

In an essay tackling the topic of ineffability, it is important to clarify to what extent words mean, semantically represent, or properly express their objects. However, neither Sengzhao nor Jizang explicitly elaborate on this issue. Instead, the following passage from the *Zhuangzi* may be relevant and worth our attention:

Before we can speak of coarse or fine, however, there must be some form. If a thing has no form, then numbers cannot express its dimensions, and if it cannot be encompassed, then numbers cannot express its size. We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness.<sup>21</sup>

This passage distinguishes between the coarse and fine aspects of a sensible thing, which is always “formed.” The aspect that can be meant or properly expressed by words, or that one can use words to talk about, is the coarse aspect of a thing. This aspect roughly accounts for our cognition of resemblance among things of the same class and is apprehended by common people’s nonabstract, vague thought in daily life. On the other hand, the fine aspect is basically the particular or “fine-grained” aspect of a thing. Properly speaking, this aspect cannot be described by words. Still it may be *reached* by the mind through visualization. For example, if someone tells me what the blooming hydrangea in her yard looks like, her words may arouse in my mind a vivid image of the plant. Here I can use my past sense experience of a blooming hydrangea to *visualize* the fine aspect of the plant in a way another person cannot if he has never seen it before. Thus, the fine aspect of a thing may broadly be reached not by the semantic operation of words themselves but by the mind, by virtue of word-aroused nonsemantic factors such as vivid remembrance of past sense experience.

Strictly speaking, words only mean or properly express the coarse aspect of a thing. This aspect alone can in a strict sense be reached by the semantic operation of words themselves: It is the semantic correlate, the *meant as such*, of words. However, in a loose sense the fine aspect may also be considered speakable; some would even claim that this aspect can be properly expressed by a demonstrative word like “this” or “that.” Though this distinction between the coarse and fine aspects is based on the *Zhuangzi*, it seems pertinent to our present subject as it helps to delimit the reach of language. Now, when Sengzhao and Jizang speak of the formlessness of the Real, by “form” (*xiang*<sub>2</sub>) they generally mean the intellectually apprehensible and broadly speakable appearance of a thing, and so we can take such a form to cover both the coarse and the fine aspects.

Just like Zhuangzi’s formless Dao, Sengzhao’s supreme truth, being formless and nameless, is beyond the reach of language. Nevertheless, he is well aware of the significance of using words to *point toward* the unspeakable:

The nameless Dharma cannot be spoken of in language. But, though beyond the reach of words, it cannot be transmitted without the use

of words, and so the sages (*shengren*) (聖人) speak all day without ever having spoken.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, according to Jizang, although the Dharma is intrinsically formless and nameless, the sages resort to provisional teachings of forms and names to enable sentient beings to realize the formless and nameless. He contends that the supreme truth (*zhendi*) (真諦) and the mundane truth (*sudi*) (俗諦) in Nagarjuna's doctrine of twofold truth are not two ontologically distinct truths, but rather two kinds of expedient teaching intended to reveal the nondual principle of the middle-way, which is neither supreme nor mundane:

The reason for taking the middle-way to be the substance (*ti*) of the two truths is that the two truths are meant to make explicit the non-dual principle. As when one points toward the moon with a finger, his intention is not of the finger, but to let others see the moon, so also with the teaching of the twofold truth. The two truths are meant to make explicit the non-dual; the intention is not of duality, but to let others get at the non-dual. This is why we take the non-dual (principle) to be the substance of the two truths.<sup>23</sup>

Jizang deepens the Mahayana Buddhist middle-way insight of non-abidingness and nonacquisitiveness. On the one hand, the Real transcends all relative forms and names, residing in the word-forgetting and thought-ceasing (*yanwang lüjue*) (言忘慮絕) state. On the other hand, speech and nonspeech being nondual, the Real can still be intimated through names and speech. Even if language cannot *point at* or *describe* the ineffable Real, it can yet *point toward* or *indicate* it. This is the basic import of thesis T2, though its contents need to be elucidated with respect to our simile.

The simile of a moon-pointing finger uses “the moon” to represent the ineffable Real, while “the moon-pointing finger” stands for the scriptural words used to express the Real, and the moon-pointing function of the finger would be the expressive function of the words. The finger bears no resemblance to the moon and by no means tells the tale of the moon. It just tells the direction for seeing the moon. Now, by following the direction thus told, one knows the rough location (as marked by the finger) of the moon as well as how to see it,<sup>24</sup> though, surely, it is through the eyes, not the finger, that one sees the moon. In a free interpretation of the simile, *the direction* amounts to the form that Sengzhao and Jizang ascribe to sensible things but not to the Real, and *the rough location of the moon* would be the imposition of the form on the Real. In the case of words expressing sensible things, the form would cover the coarse and fine aspects of the things. But in the case of words used to express the Real, it is just an unreal conceptual or imaginative construct. The words used to refer to the Real only tell their correlated forms, not the Real. However, when the



forms are superimposed onto the Real, the words thereby indirectly make known the Real. We may, using the word “indicate” as a technical term, say: The words *say* or *tell* the forms and so, with the forms being imposed onto the Real, *indicate* the Real such that one comprehends that the Real is such and such as meant by the words. The concerned relations may be illustrated as in Figure 1:

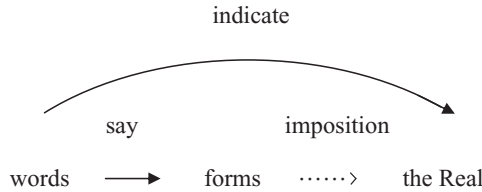


Figure 1

An indication is an indirect expression. It does not really say or reach its intended referent.<sup>25</sup> It contains two distinguishable phases within its expressive operation: the “say” phase and the “imposition” phase. Words as *denoters* only tell—as the operation of the first phase—the forms as *denotees*; but they are also *indicators* capable of indicating the ineffable Real as the *indicatee*. This is done through the imposition of the forms onto the Real, which constitutes the operation of the second phase. Whatever expression—a word, a phrase, a sentence—that functions in this way is an expression with the indicative function and will be called an indication in this essay.

As mentioned before, in the simile one’s mistaking scriptural language as capable of dictating the Real is likened to the mistake of taking the finger for the moon. The forms and their impositions are imaginative constructs correlated with the words concerned and so can be subsumed under the broader category of language. The mistake of looking on the language as the Real, then, consists in taking the Real to be what we normally understand by the words or in taking the forms and impositions to be what the Real actually is.

A simile, to be sure, is just a simile and the above analysis may not fully reflect the views of the Buddhist thinkers employing it. But our main concern here is about the possibility of using words to refer to an unsayable reality. Can we noncontradictorily express the ineffable Real? The way out of the alleged impasse lies in the *imposition-cum-negation* method involved in the operation of indication construed here. In the operation the forms are superimposed onto the Real so as to *present* it as such and such as meant by the words. Thus, the hearer knows the Real to be, say, ineffable, emptiness, neither supreme nor mundane, and so on. Without the imposition what is said by the words

would be totally irrelevant to the Real and nothing about the Real could be known. On the other hand, the forms so imposed onto the Real are unreal impositions. So this act of imposition as well as the imposed forms must at the same time be negated. Without the negation the Real would erroneously be taken as bearing the imposed forms and would consequently become sayable. Indeed, the imposition and its negation must go hand in hand: They are but two sides of the same coin. Through the imposition and its negation the hearer comes to have a dim, residual apprehension of the Real. As a result, even if we cannot noncontradictorily *speak* the unspeakable, we can still noncontradictorily *indicate* it.<sup>26</sup>

Now, if an “X is ineffable” sentence is indicative in nature, there would be no real contradiction, as Graham Priest and others have tried to show, except perhaps this apparent but unreal contradiction:

- S<sub>1</sub>: One cannot descriptively express the ineffable.
- S<sub>2</sub>: One can indicatively express the ineffable.
- ∴ The ineffable is both expressible and inexpressible.

Though indescribable, the ineffable can be indicated and an indication does not directly refer to the ineffable. As descriptions, the sentences “X is undifferentiated and yet complete” and “X is chocolaty, with a floral scent” are indistinguishable in relation to the ineffable X. As indications, however, if X is Laozi’s ineffable Dao, “X is undifferentiated and yet complete” would be a good fit, whereas “X is chocolaty, with a floral scent” can be the right choice if X is Wittgenstein’s aroma of coffee, although the latter is not wholly indescribable.<sup>27</sup>

Since the Real is not accessible by language and thought, the forms meant by words, being distinct from but imposed onto the Real, need to be negated. This is stated in thesis T3. For Sengzhao, one must not take words at their face value to determine their significance. This can mean whatever form one imposes onto the Real must be negated. If “the Real is emptiness” is uttered, one must know that the Real does not bear the emptiness-form matching the word “emptiness.” If “the Real is not existence, not nonexistence” is uttered, one must know that the Real bears neither the not-existence form nor the not-nonexistence form corresponding respectively to the phrases “not existence” and “not nonexistence.”<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Jizang frequently notes that his speech in terms of names and forms with regard to the nameless and formless is provisional or even forced; this suggests the presence of imposition and its negation. His Dao-revealing interpretation of word meaning may be said to imply the notion of the negation of superimposition.<sup>29</sup>

The imposition-cum-negation method here involved, meanwhile, is only implied, not explicitly stated. An explicitly stated imposition-

cum-negation would be a self-erasing kind of speech known as *suishuo suisao* (隨說隨掃), which consists of first stating a literal or figurative attribution and then explicitly denying the attribution. For example, one first says “X is P, Q, R” and then says “X is not P, Q, R” or “X is not speakable.” The Buddha preached the Dharma for forty-nine years but did not utter a word; his disciple Subuti spoke about the supreme wisdom all day and said he had spoken about nothing. The speech pointing toward the ineffable always stands negated, implicitly or explicitly.

If the speech of the ineffable does not necessarily imply self-contradiction, would the contradiction lie in the imposition-cum-negation method? The contradiction here, if any, is also apparent, not a strict “P and not P.” The method implies that the imposition placed onto the ineffable is only an imposition, not a real attribution. Thus, the negation concerned negates any attempt to turn the imposition into a real attribution. It rather makes known the true character of the imposition. Analogously, the succeeding negative expression in a self-erasing speech denies the reality-matching character of the preceding attributive expression, while manifesting its indicative character. An imposition is both revealing and occluding, and its negation serves to reduce the extent of the occlusion.

Now, regarding the puzzle of setting a limit to language, the borderline between the speakable and the unspeakable may be likened to the horizon: This side of the “horizon” consists of things within the reach of language, whereas the other side constitutes the realm of the unspeakable. We can only *point toward* (indicate) the far side of our semantic horizon, though we can *point out* (speak) things within the horizon. Obviously, the cognition of this horizon does not demand our *pointing out* both sides of the limit, so there is no error in speaking the unspeakable. Just as we can point toward the far side of our visible horizon, so we should be able to gesture toward the unspeakable, of which we may have only slight knowledge.

In interpreting the simile of a moon-pointing finger, one may claim that the scriptural language tells absolutely nothing about the Real, that the function of the language simply consists noncognitively in guiding religious discipline, in curing illness and untying knots, or even in evoking some “awakening” experience. The therapeutic function of language is highly valued in Chinese Buddhism. Scriptural sayings are said to be timely medicines for curing intellectual illness, rather than to describe reality or transmit knowledge about it. And it is ponderous to speak of truth and falsity in application to therapeutic sentences.

Jizang also has something noteworthy to say about the therapeutic function of language. However, we must not neglect the indicative

function of language. Chinese Buddhist thinkers generally affirm a metaphysical truth/reality interwoven with sensible things and use expressions like “suchness,” “Dao,” “the nameless and formless Dharma” to refer to it. We then thus understand the simile: Just as a moon-pointing finger does not by itself tell us the look of the moon, so scriptural language does not reach the Real itself. Just as the finger tells us the rough location of the moon, so there is a farfetched semblance between the imposition and the Real, somewhat like that between a scene vividly seen and a watercolor of the scene. Because an indication can transmit knowledge about the Real, it is not ponderous to speak of truth and falsity in application to it—just as if the moon is in the western sky, the gesture of pointing westward could be correct, while others would be erroneous.

Language is endowed with the descriptive cognitive function of matching or representing realities. It is also used noncognitively to guide behavior, to arouse the hearer’s feelings, to give an order, to make a request, and so forth. Yet, indication differs from both of them. It is not noncognitive, for it is meant to transmit knowledge about reality. It is not narrowly cognitive, because it has a specific nonrepresentational function. If someone mistakes the imposed forms for the Real, holding only a representational view of (cognitive) language, he, as said in thesis T4, not only misunderstands the Real, but is also ignorant of the (indicative) function of language. Of course, if one lumps indication together with noncognitive linguistic uses, one is likewise ignorant of the function. Incidentally, if the hearer knows the functioning of the indicative expression used by the speaker, she is unlikely to take the ineffable just as what is dictated by the words, and the speaker would not speak in vain.

The negation of superimposition occurs on a conceptual plane. The negation is a conceptual negation. Now, if we merely negate conceptual impositions by means of words and concepts, we are still stuck within the confines of words and concepts, and may even foster attachment to the negation. To escape from the bondage of language and thought, then, we must *practically* forget the words used and their correlated forms/impositions. Only thus could the linguistic and conceptual knots be untied. The above quotation from Zongmi includes the phrase “forgets the finger on seeing the moon.” The Buddhist notion of forgetting the finger on seeing the moon probably originates from Zhuangzi’s fish-trap allegory:

The fish-trap exists because of the fish; on getting the fish one forgets the trap. The rabbit-snare exists because of the rabbit; on getting the rabbit one forgets the snare. Words exist because of the intention; on getting the intention one forgets the words (*wangyan*) (忘言). How can I find a word-forgetting person to have words with him?<sup>30</sup>

We must note that forgetting words greatly differs from forsaking words. For, (i) one needs to use words before forgetting them; (ii) after forgetting words one can still recall and continue to use them; (iii) one can have words with a word-forgetting person, but not a word-forsaking one. The forgetting of words does not mean to abandon words, but to dissolve the linguistic and conceptual entanglement resulting from the use of words. It forms the basis of Zhuangzi's paradoxical notion of speaking nonspeech (*yan wuyan*) (言無言). If the ineffable Real exists beyond our semantic horizon, the forgetting can help to untie the linguistic knots and even lead one beyond the horizon to intuit the Real in itself. This is roughly the meaning of thesis T5.

A moon-pointing finger only tells the approximate location of the moon, the hearer has to turn and raise her head to see the moon with her own eyes. Similarly, the intuition of the Real requires the presence of extra-linguistic factors. As mentioned before, the fine aspect of a thing may be reached by virtue of word-aroused nonsemantic factors. For a direct experience of the Real, apart from the indirect knowing by words, the hearer needs to *forget* the words to realize the Real with a *deep, quiescent mind-heart*. This, to be sure, depends upon the hearer's level. Such is the meaning of thesis T6. In the phrase "not existence, not nonexistence," for instance, one should not only conceptually negate the not-existence and not-nonexistence forms, but should practically forget the phrase and the forms to realize the principle that is neither existence nor nonexistence.<sup>31</sup> The forgetting of words by no means ensures the realization of the Real. But the forgetting that brings on the realization is basically concomitant with the act of realization.

Word-forgetting is not an integral part of the indicative use of language, but can be seen to supplement it. A word-forgetting person time and again forgets the words used, negatively to dissolve the linguistic and conceptual knots and positively to realize the ineffable Real. Here we see the difference between word-forgetting and silence: Unlike silence, word-forgetting is generally right adjacent to the use of words. The forgetting that brings on the realization of the Real only arises due to the use of words, and so a sage "does not take the finger as the moon but also does not get rid of the finger to see the moon."<sup>32</sup> The notion of word-forgetting shows language to be an important *direct* factor assisting the intuition of the Real. Significantly, this and the relevant notion of speaking nonspeech may have influenced the Chinese Buddhist thinkers to have a more positive attitude toward language than their Indian predecessors, who would tend to value silence over speech.

Given his philosophy of the middle way and the notion of word-forgetting, Jizang can then state both that "the nondual is speechless" and that "speech is just the nondual":

*Question:* . . . the nondual principle is speechless, whereas the teaching responding to things is a speech; that is, the speechless principle admits no speech, while the verbal teaching excludes speechlessness. Then, as the principle is right opposite to the teaching, how can it get the name “nondual”? *Answer:* You only know that the nondual is speechless, but do not realize that speech is just the nondual. . . . So, speaking while being speechless, though one speaks, one really has no speech; imaging while being imageless, though one images, one really forms no image. As there is concordance, whence comes the alleged opposition?<sup>33</sup>

Of course, this view is anticipated by the paradoxical passage from the *Zhuangzi*: “If one speaks nonspeech, one speaks all one’s life long without having spoken, and one does not speak all one’s life long without having not spoken.”<sup>34</sup> Here “speaking nonspeech” roughly corresponds to “speaking while being speechless, though one speaks, one really has no speech.”

In the Buddhist context this can mean: (i) One responds to whatever comes with a quiescent mind-heart and speaks just as the occasion arises; (ii) one’s speech turns out to be self-emptying indication; (iii) a Buddhist sage forgets his speech, having no attachment to it, while a layman may try to forget his speech in order to realize the nondual. All this perhaps accounts for the claim that “speech is just the nondual.” The nondual principle, truly, is correlated with silence, but it is not the same as silence. Although sacred silence *sounds like thunder*, silently showing the profound, indivisible nature of the Real, it is after all a way of expression with its own limitations. Moreover, if one overvalues silence, separating silence and speech, one is rather in danger of fostering attachment to silence.

### III. EPILOGUE

Many scholars of Chinese philosophy of language have averred that the chief function of Chinese philosophic language lies in practically guiding behavior or dissolving attachment, not in representing or describing the external world. In Chinese Buddhism, too, language’s pragmatic function of curing intellectual illness is more emphasized than its cognitive function of describing the world. Nevertheless, the indicative function of language examined in this essay is neither cognitively representational nor noncognitive, nonreferential. When Sengzhao says, “The Dao of nirvana, indeed, goes beyond the realms of existence and nonexistence and evades the paths of words and images,”<sup>35</sup> his main intention is not to guide religious discipline or cure intellectual illness, nor to describe the Real. One needs to transcend

the duality between semantic representation and pragmatic linguistic usage to attend to the *middle way* indication.

As we are here mainly concerned with the difference between indication and representational expression, let us illustrate the difference with the two figures:

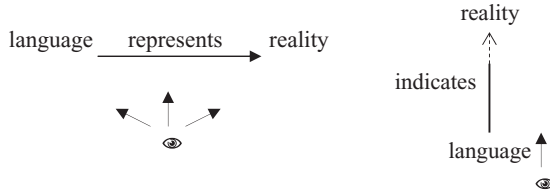


Figure 2

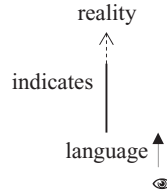


Figure 3

In Figure 2 language directly represents reality. Besides, our mind's "eye" can simultaneously look at language, the representing function and reality. This may strengthen the belief in the correspondence between language and reality.

By contrast, we can explain Figure 3 as follows:

1. Language as an indicator can, like a moon-pointing finger, point toward some ineffable reality as the indicatee.
2. The indicator bears no correspondence to the indicatee, and one cannot simultaneously look at the indicator, the indicating function and the indicatee.
3. An understanding of the language requires one to integrate words, meanings, images, and related contextual factors to attend to the reality.<sup>36</sup>
4. Whatever forms the hearer or reader imposes on the reality present the latter as such and such a reality.
5. On grounds of the ineffability of the reality, the impositions have to be negated and even forgotten.

Apart from the supreme reality, the fine aspects of things and events, the sage's intentions, one's deep-lying feelings, all these are in varied degrees ineffable. So, the notion of indication has a wide range of fields of application.

Partially owing to the influence of the Chinese language as an ideograph, ancient Chinese thinkers generally declined to set language apart from, and over against, reality. This expresses itself in two attitudes toward language: (i) The thinkers rather unanimously dismissed the "no name without an entity named" claim; (ii) they generally did not favor forsaking language to rest in sheer silence. The early Wittgenstein asks his readers to throw away his ladder of propo-

sitions and pass over the ineffable in silence.<sup>37</sup> Indian Mahayana Buddhism denies language from the standpoint of wisdom and reaffirms it under the attitude of compassion,<sup>38</sup> yet wisdom and compassion are here mutually different. Chinese Buddhism, on the contrary, tends to transcend and affirm language on the same ground, the ground of nonduality of *ti* and *yong*. If we in our worldly life cannot escape from the omnipresence of language, then the best thing to do would be to use language without being *used* by language. In this connection, the simile of a moon-pointing finger as construed above may just have pointed out the right way.

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#### ENDNOTES

A Chinese draft of this essay was read at the conference “Chinese Philosophy in Analytical Perspectives,” the Department of Philosophy, National Chengchi University, Taipei, July 2005, while its English draft was presented at the conference “Themes in Buddhist Literature,” the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, April 2006. I should like to thank the following scholars for their suggestions: Professors Robert Gimello, Chen-kuo Lin, Koichi Shinohara, Drs. Kuo-ching Huang, Ulrich Timme Kragh, and Yuan-tse Lin. I am also grateful to the reviewers of *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* for their critical comments.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 75–76.
2. Here the substitution is not complete: while using the word “this” or “that” for an object, one may still perform the gesture of pointing to the object with a finger. However, the use of the word “pain” may also be accompanied by such pain-behavior as moaning, sob, and frown.
3. I shall use the words “ineffable,” “unsayable,” and “unspeakable” interchangeably.
4. Keith E. Yandell has claimed that if a given mystical experience is really ineffable, it would absurdly follow that any description is equidistant from the experience with any other. See his “Some Varieties of Ineffability,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (1975): 167–79.
5. *Dafangguang Yuanjue Xiuduoluo Liaoyi Jing* 《大方廣圓覺修多羅義經》 (The Perfect Enlightenment Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 17:917a27–29.
6. *Da Foding Rulai Miyin Xiuzheng Liaoyi Zhupusa Wanxing Shoulengyan Jing* 《大佛頂如來密因修證了義諸菩薩萬行首楞嚴經》 (The Suramgama Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 19:111a8–11. Both this *Sutra* and the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra, it is widely believed, were originally written in China, but this would not affect the main line of our argumentation.
7. Thus, this essay approaches our main issue concerning the Chinese Buddhist thought of reference in two directions: a discussion of the Chinese Madhyamaka views of language and an analysis of the simile of a moon-pointing finger. The two, so to speak, respectively constitute the horizontal and vertical axes of this essay. The connection between the two directions would become clearer as we move on.
8. Throughout this essay, I use “the Real” as a handy term for the ineffable truth, principle, way, or reality intended by the concerned Buddhist thinker(s).



9. *Dasheng Ru Lengqie Jing* 《大乘入楞伽經》 (The Lankavatara Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 16:620a15–16; *Zuochan Sanmei Jing* 《坐禪三昧經》 (The Meditation Concentration Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 15:284a8–13; *Dazhidu Lun* 《大智度論》 (The Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 25:726a1–4.
10. In pre-Buddhist Chinese texts, the word “zhi” already meant designation, signification, or the like, for instance, “the knower . . . sets up names to designate (zhi) the reals” (*Xunzi*), in Li Di-Sheng (李滌生), *Xunzi Jishi* 《荀子集釋》 (Taipei: Student Book, 1984), chap. 22, 512.
11. Zongmi, *Dafangguang Yuanjue Xiuduoluo Liaoyi Jing Lüeshu* 《大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經略疏》 (A Concise Commentary on the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 39:555c10–16. Incidentally, as the notion of image is rather complicated, I shall refrain from discussing it here and leave it for future investigation.
12. Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 233, 294–95. His reason for upholding the contradictoriness of reality is that there are certain contradictory statements about limits, that are true, and that reality is such renders those statements true.
13. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun* 《肇論》 (The Treatise of Sengzhao), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:152a24–26.
14. *Ibid.*, 152c20–23. The phrase “a name has no efficacy to obtain a thing, and a thing has no reality matching a name” is found in Jizang’s *Dasheng Xuanlun* 《大乘玄論》 (A Treatise on the Profound Teaching of the Mahayana), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:16c27–28.
15. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 152c24–28. Sengzhao then reaches the Madhyamaka conclusion: “Thus we know that things are not real; they have long been provisional names.” Sengzhao’s argument here is rather problematic, though he has other more Madhyamaka ways for showing the unreality of things. In any case, we are concerned here with his linguistic thought, not with the soundness of his arguments.
16. *Ibid.*, 152c12–14.
17. See his *Erdi Yi* 《二諦義》 (The Meaning of the Two Truths), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:112b27–28: “Though (the *dharmas* are) not existence, they are, for the sake of sentient beings, tentatively expressed by the word ‘existence’ in order to show not-existence. . . .” Among Jizang’s four types of interpretation of word meaning, this type of interpretation is called a Dao-revealing interpretation (*xiandao shi*) (顯道釋).
18. If a word semantically represents or corresponds to its referential object, then, let us say, the word says, denotes, or properly expresses the object. The word expresses the object as it truly is. If words forming a sentence semantically represent its referential object or state of affairs, then we take the words to say, tell, describe, or properly express the latter.
19. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 159b20–21.
20. *Ibid.*, 154a16–17: “The intellect apprehends a form by knowing the knowable object and so is termed ‘knowing.’ The supreme truth is intrinsically formless, how can the true intellect know it?” See also, Sengzhao’s *Zhu Weimojie Jing* 《注維摩詰經》 (A Commentary on the Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 38:411a17–18: “The arising of the intellect occurs within the confines of forms; as the *dharmakaya* is formless, it is not to be reached (*suo ji*) (所及) by the intellect.”
21. Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 178; cf. Guo Qing-Fan (郭慶藩), ed., *Zhuangzi*

- Jishi* 《莊子集釋》 (Taipei: Wanjuan Lou, 1993), 572. The word here translated as “form” is “*xing* (形),” not “*xiang*”; however, both words are alike in meaning the cognizable and broadly speakable appearance of a sensible thing. In the *Zhaolun* they are occasionally taken to be synonyms. Incidentally, I refer to the *Zhuangzi* several times because of its influence on the Chinese Buddhist thought of language.
22. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 153c24–26. This implies that the Dharma is unspeakable and yet linguistically transmittable.
  23. Jizang, *Erdi Yi*, 108b22–25. For Jizang’s other references to the simile of a moon-pointing finger, see *Erdi Yi*, 90a–b. As Jizang’s own doctrine of twofold truth is rather complicated, its details must be omitted here. For a lucid exposition of the doctrine, see Ming-wood Liu, *Madhyamaka Thought in China* (Leiden/New York/Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1994), 135–52.
  24. The Chan master Huiji (慧日) writes in the *Dahui Pujue Chanshi Yulu* 《大慧普覺禪師語錄》 (The Teaching Record of Chan Master Dahui Pujue), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 47:811a3–5: “The hand is initially irrelevant to the moon, yet by knowing what the hand points to, one knows the location of the moon.” For Dahui’s own interpretation of the simile, refer to the same text, p. 895b.
  25. In a number of Chinese Buddhist texts, the Real is said to be beyond the reach (*suojī*) of intellect, language, or words and images. This qualification is involved in many an ineffability thesis.
  26. For further discussions on this issue, including responses to some modern scholars’ criticisms of an ineffability thesis, refer to my article “Saying the Unsayable,” *Philosophy East and West* 56 (2006): 409–27. Incidentally, some scholars have attempted new, daring interpretations of the opening verse of the text *Laozi* (老子) to save Laozi the philosopher from the charge of self-contradiction; for instance, Bo Mou, “Ultimate Concern and Language Engagement: A Reexamination of the Opening Message of the *Dao-De-Jing*,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27 (2000): 429–39. Such an approach is not quite needed. For, there may be no real contradiction in the verse and Laozi is, alas, just one of a great many thinkers who offered an ineffability thesis and then faced the charge.
  27. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 134: “Describe the aroma of coffee—Why can’t it be done? Do we lack the words? And for what are words lacking?” In our view, the coarse aspect of the aroma is *describable* in the strict sense of the term, while in the same sense the fine aspect is indescribable.
  28. This suggests that a negative expression can function as an indication. Cf. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 156b25–29:
 

To say it is *not-existence* (*fei you*) (非有) is to say it is *not existence* (*fei shi you*) (非是有), but not that it is *non-existence* (*shi fei you*) (是非有). To say it is *not-nonexistence* is to say it is *not nonexistence*, but not that it is *non-nonexistence*. Not-existence is *not non-existence*, and not-nonexistence is *not non-nonexistence*. Hence, Subuti spoke about the supreme wisdom all day and said he had spoken nothing.

Here, “is not existence” resembles a sentence negation of the form “*x* is not *P*,” whereas “is nonexistence” expresses a predicate negation of the form “*x* is non-*P*.”
  29. According to this interpretation, to say the word “middle” is to make explicit not-middle, and the word “nonexistence” has as its meaning not-nonexistence. Refer to Jizang, *Sanlun Xuanyi* 《三論玄義》 (The Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:14b2–5, and *Erdi Yi*, 95bc. By the same token, to say “ineffable” is to make explicit not-ineffable and to have as its meaning the negation of the imposed ineffable-form. This interpretation has another dimension that I should leave out here.
  30. Guo, *Zhuangzi Jishi*, 944; cf. Watson, *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 302.
  31. Cf. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 159b7–9. Jizang also makes use of the term “word-forgetting” (*wangyan*); he even characterizes his nondual principle with the phrase “word-forgetting and thought-ceasing.”

32. Yongming Yanshou (永明延壽), *Zongjing Lu* 《宗鏡錄》 (The Record of the Mirror of Orthodoxy), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 48:428c2–3. This is not meant to play down religious discipline; after all, one who is meditatively well-practiced is in a better position than others to forget words and intuit the Real.
33. Jizang, *Jingming Xuanlun* 《淨名玄論》 (A Treatise on the Profound Teaching of Vimalakirti), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 38:856b22–c3. Cf. Sengzhao, *Zhu Weimojie Jing*, 347b7–9: “Nonspeech does not mean having no speech. It means emptying what is spoken. . . . By emptying what is spoken, one speaks all day without having spoken.”
34. Guo, *Zhuangzi Jishi*, 949; cf. Watson, *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 304.
35. Sengzhao, *Zhaolun*, 158c19–20.
36. For the notion of integration I have here in mind, refer to Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 40–42, 69–70.
37. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974), 74.
38. Cf. Gadjin Nagao, *Madhyamika and Yogacara*, ed. and trans. Leslie S. Kawamura (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 41–46.