Zen Buddhist language ideologies, identities, and community in a text-based, English-language online forum

Eunsook Sul
Benjamin Bailey

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/benjamin_bailey/80/
Negotiating Zen Buddhist and Western language ideologies and identities in a text-based, English-language online forum

Eunsook Sul and Benjamin Bailey*

Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

(Received 10 June 2013; accepted 30 August 2013)

This article explores how members of an English-language, online Zen Buddhist forum communicate their Buddhist identities and constitute a community through online postings. In the absence of the typical, constitutive elements of Zen Buddhist communities – a physical temple, monks, and copresent, silent meditation – ways of using language are the central means to performing Zen Buddhist identities. An analysis of segments of four threads on this forum shows forum members negotiating two competing linguistic ideologies: (1) an everyday Western language ideology that privileges logical, linear, and referential use of language, and (2) a Zen Buddhist language ideology that approaches everyday rational language as an impediment to achieving enlightenment and that privileges nonlogical, paradoxical language as a means to overcoming the limitations of ordinary, everyday thinking. Theoretically, this illustrates the power of language to enact ideologies and constitute community in an online space that is not tied to a particular cultural or linguistic place; it highlights the fact that everyday Western communication beliefs and practices – often treated as natural in the Western, English-speaking world – are cultural and ideological, and it shows that Westerners can adopt communication practices and ideology associated with Asia, thus paying symbolic homage to them.

Keywords: Zen Buddhist communication; language ideologies; intercultural communication

Introduction

This article explores how members of an online, English-language Zen Buddhist forum communicate their Buddhist identities and constitute a community through online postings. While online communities focusing on a shared interest have been a commonplace since the 1990s, expressing and negotiating a Zen Buddhist identity online poses challenges that are distinct from those faced by members of other online groups. First, Zen Buddhist identities and community have traditionally been constituted through copresent meditation in the setting of a temple or Zen center. Meditation in a temple is a multisensory experience, with the smell of burning candles and incense, the sounds of chanting and bells ringing, the feeling of the (often) hard floor on which one sits, the sight of Buddha statues or paintings and robed monks, and the silent bowing of bodies as they encounter each other upon entering the muted lighting of the temple. Placement of bodies in this culturally organized space and visual and auditory phenomena, such as a master’s Buddhist robes and striking of palm with bamboo to commence or end meditation,
constitute roles and activities in the community. This intense, multisensory, embodied copresence is impossible in a text-based forum.

A second distinctive challenge, and the focus of this article, is Western members’ negotiation of Zen Buddhist communication perspectives and practices, which include, for example, a relative preference for silence in many situations. This preference for silence and silent meditation — which practitioners understand as signifying connection when done together in a temple — can be antithetical to posting in an online forum. Take, for example, the following posts from a thread on the Zen Buddhist online forum that will be examined in this article. After a period of 10 days during which there had been only two posts, a member posted:

Is there anybody out there?

This post drew the following response from another member:

Yes, we are all here, reading and lurking with very little to say. This could be seen as a definite positive, being those with the most confusion and inner turmoil seem to often have the most to say.

This poster sees having ‘very little to say’ as a positive marker of Buddhist identity and having ‘the most to say’ as a sign of confusion or turmoil. In contrast to other online forums, in which frequent text postings are an indication of the vibrancy and success of the forum, ‘having a lot to say’ in this Zen forum can be seen as a sign of lack of Buddhist knowledge and fulfillment of Buddhist ideals. Paradoxically, this forum exists to share and promote Buddhist knowledge and practice — an introductory email promises ‘This group will be able to help you on your path’ — but it can express an ambivalent attitude toward the very postings through which the forum is constituted. The introductory email cautions, for example: ‘This is a very quiet group, so if you don’t say anything, no one will speak. (That is ok too.)’

This preference for situational silence is consistent with the central practice of Zen Buddhism: silent meditation. This preference for silence — and criticism of those who ‘talk’ too much — is also a direct reflection of Zen Buddhist linguistic ideologies, the cultural conceptions of ‘the nature, form and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order’ (Gal & Woolard 1995, 130). Zen Buddhists believe that everyday language creates illusion and cannot lead to enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhist practice (Cheng 1973; Park 2002; Wang 2003).

Despite this situational preference for silence, however, not all text-based posts are treated as problematic in this online community. Another, longer response to the posted question (‘Is there anybody out there?’) partly echoes the first response, in suggesting that things that are said may be worthless. It also, however, takes a poetic, stanza-like form and poses relatively enigmatic questions in the last three lines that might appear to some readers to be unrelated to the initial post to which it responds:

I am here…
But I am thinking what to say,
instead of saying something worthless,
so I haven’t said anything.
Perhaps I will say something soon.
but it is a hard thing to determine, 
what can be said….Is it not?  
Do you know what is important, but not wrong?

Despite the relative verbosity of this post, members treated this post— and other posts that shared certain characteristics with it— as valuable contributions to the forum.

Understanding why some posts are treated as problematic contributions to the forum, while others are lauded and treated as contributing to constitution of a Zen Buddhist community requires a *cultural* approach to communication. As described by Basso (1970, 215):

> to communicate appropriately with the members of an unfamiliar society it is not enough that he or she learn to formulate messages intelligibly. Something else is needed: a knowledge of what kinds of codes, channels, and expressions to use in what kinds of situations and to what kinds of people…

Understanding the various ‘codes, channels, and expressions’— that is, message forms (Hymes 1964) — that are used in this forum can explain why the first post, earlier, was criticized by other members for saying too much while the second, longer post was positively received. More generally, understanding the details of these message forms sheds light on the ways in which Zen Buddhist identities and the community that are normally constituted through silent, copresent meditation in a temple can also be constituted through a text-based online forum. At a theoretical level, the encounters show the power of language to constitute identities in a contextually impoverished, text-based communication situation, and they show ways that differences in linguistic ideologies can manifest themselves and be negotiated in actual encounters.

Understanding the posts in this online forum requires not only identifying culturally distinctive practices and perspectives but also approaching language itself as fundamentally cultural, heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981), and ‘reality-constitutive’ (Shi-xu 2005). From the perspective of heteroglossia, language is not just a neutral, abstract system of reference for ‘talking about’ topics, but a medium through which one participates in a historical flow of social relationships and meanings (Bailey 2012). Styles of communicating accrue social associations from their use by individuals and communities in particular contexts. By ‘style’ we mean constellations of linguistic choices across various communicative channels and dimensions (Ervin-Tripp 1972). One’s word choices, degree of directness or indirectness, length of turns, use of genres or silence, and selection from among myriad other linguistic features result in one’s ‘style,’ or what Hymes (1974) calls simply ‘way of speaking.’ Style is thus much more than an individual, idiosyncratic use at the moment of speaking. Uses of particular styles can invoke or index (Peirce 1955) the original contexts and perspectives with which they are associated. Thus, words and styles of speaking in an online forum are not just ways of neutrally denoting objects or ideas but are also vehicles that carry social associations from their prior uses and represent ongoing negotiation of a social world of power imbalances (Shi-xu 2005, 204). In this case, using words in an online forum in ways similar to the ones that historical Zen masters have used helps Westerners to constitute Zen Buddhist perspectives and context and connect them to historical Zen traditions and communities.

This article attempts to bridge Zen Buddhist and Western discourses at several levels. For the first author Sul, a lifelong practicing Buddhist raised in South Korea, Zen Buddhist texts and styles of communication are immediately and self-evidently valued
and meaningful. We try to highlight such emic perspectives in this piece in ways that make sense to Western-raised scholars such as the second-author Bailey. Illustrating the logic of Buddhist language ideologies helps show that common Western communication beliefs and practices are cultural and ideological rather than natural. This can help undermine assumptions of the superiority of everyday Western ways of communicating. Such assumptions are common given the history of Western power and imperialism over the last several centuries.

It is not just the differing heritages and perspectives of the two authors of this piece, however, that illuminate different cultural discourses. The contributors to the online forum themselves confront and negotiate different cultural and communicative worlds. In the world of this online forum, Zen Buddhist ways of communicating are more prestigious than the logical, referential ways of communicating – often associated with the West – that are highly valued in academia and many other settings. Forum members’ negotiations show that Westerners (1) can understand communication ideologies that are very different from their own and (2) can pay symbolic homage to communication ideologies that are associated with parts of the world that were once colonized by the West.

In this article, we first analyze Zen Buddhist linguistic ideology, which embraces two, seemingly contradictory positions (Park 2002). On the one hand, there is a distrust of everyday language and a concomitant, situational preference – especially in meditation – for silence. On the other hand, certain nonlogical, poetic uses of language, particularly koan (brief paradoxical statements, questions, or exchanges of dialog) are highly valued and form a central part of training in some Zen Buddhist traditions.

We then examine the portions of four threads in a Zen Buddhism online forum to explore the empirical workings of this linguistic ideology. The first two threads illustrate the widely ranging degrees of adherence to Zen Buddhist linguistic ideologies. These online postings illustrate the difficulties of constituting a Zen Buddhist community online because of the contradiction between the demands of text-based, online communication – disembodied, low-context, and temporally asynchronous, which favors highly explicit language – and the demands of Buddhist context, which devalue every day, explicit, referential language. These postings also illustrate, however, how distinctively Zen Buddhist ways of using words can create identity and community online, partly overcoming the limitations of a text-based forum. Specifically, more advanced members of the forum perform a Buddhist identity through use of poetic, nonlogical postings that evoke Zen Buddhist perspectives and allude to historical Buddhist texts. Forum members who perform this poetic style consistently are treated as embodying a desirable Buddhist perspective, and other members treat their posts as a form of instruction or socialization even though this seemingly illogical, nonrational style of speaking is stigmatized in many Western contexts outside of this forum. Aspects of the teacher–disciple relationship that is normally constituted through physical copresence in a Zen center or temple can thus be reproduced in a text-based forum online. Finally, we analyze the exchanges from two further threads between more advanced Buddhists. These performative posts index, both in style and content, specific texts from the historical Zen Buddhist canon. These forum participants never explicitly claim Zen Buddhist expertise, but rather display it indirectly through an interactive style and forms that are richly symbolic to Zen Buddhists, thus constituting Zen Buddhist identities and community.
Zen Buddhism and language ideology

Zen Buddhist language ideologies are intertwined with the specific history, practices, and belief systems of Buddhism. Buddhism originated from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in the north of India around 500 BC. Gautama sought the meaning of life and eventually achieved enlightenment, becoming Buddha (an enlightened one). Unlike followers of Western monotheistic religions, Zen Buddhists do not worship a god. Instead, Zen Buddhism encourages people to explore their ultimate selves, which can lead to the ultimate goal of Buddhism: enlightenment. This enlightenment involves ‘seeing through to your own essential nature’ and, at the same time, ‘seeing through to the essential nature of the cosmos and of all things’ (Scott & Doubleday 1992, 2). At a more practical level, it encourages the practitioners to rid themselves of attachment to impermanent, ever-changing circumstances, including a false notion of ‘I’ through learning and practicing the main points of Buddha’s teaching (Ho 1995).

Zen Buddhism developed as a branch of Mahayana Buddhism in China in the sixth century CE. The English term ‘Zen’ can be traced back, via Japanese and Middle Chinese Chan, to the Sanskrit term dhyana, which refers to a ‘meditative state.’ Congruent with the origins of its name, the central practice of Zen Buddhism is zazen ‘seated, silent meditation.’ In Zen temples and centers, Zen Buddhist identity and community are constituted through the shared practice of zazen.

Zen Buddhist perspectives on speech and silence are also expressed in the principle of ‘Right Speech,’ which is one of the eight elements in the Noble Eightfold Path, which summarizes the principle teachings of Buddha. Right Speech proscribes lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter. ‘Idle chatter’ can include any talk that is unrelated to achieving enlightenment. Thus, the logical, referential forms of discourse that are often highly valued in Western academia, for example, could be considered ‘idle chatter.’ Such talk can be not only idle but also a hindrance to enlightenment, according to the Buddha: ‘The ultimate truth is beyond words … The Way is originally wordless. Linguistic expressions are illusions. They are no different from things that appear in your dreams at night’ (Park 2002, 213). From a Zen Buddhist perspective, both rational understanding and referential language are irrelevant to achieving enlightenment and may actually hinder the process of awakening (Cheng 1973, 77).

While silent meditation is the central, constitutive practice of Zen Buddhism and there is a distrust of everyday language and logic, Zen Buddhism has also produced a large body of texts, including sutras (Buddhist scriptures and teachings of Buddha) and their exegeses, Zen poetry, and koans (Cheng 1973; Wang 2003). A koan is a brief, paradoxical statement, question, or segment of dialog intended to facilitate Zen insight. Koans do not explain or describe Zen Buddhist awakening but rather are tools to facilitate a student’s letting go of everyday conceptual thinking and experience. Koans sound paradoxical and obscure to those who are used to logical and referential language use, as in the following, famous example: ‘Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?’ The goal of koans is to ‘break down and to dislodge assumptions that …[are] essential to ordinary, worldly discourse and experience. They …[do] violence to common sense’ (Wright 1992, 133). Hearing and responding to a koan thus requires one to let go of ordinary, everyday ways of thinking and experiencing, making one more open to awakening and enlightenment. According to Wang (2003, 179–180), a koan ‘functions and plays at the boundaries or limits of ordinary human thinking. By playing at these boundaries or limits, the Chan paradoxical expression works toward
something that ordinary logical thinking cannot arrive at, namely, overcoming the latter’s limitations.

The term *koan* comes, via Japanese, from the Chinese *gong’an* (‘public case’), and many *koans* represent brief segments of (public) dialog between historical Zen masters and disciples. The following two examples are well-known *koan* in this dialog form:

1. A monk asked Zhaozhou [9th century Chinese Chan master]: ‘Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?’
   
   Zhaozhou said: ‘Wu’ [‘no’, ‘not’, ‘nonbeing’, ‘without’].

2. Daibai asked Baso [8th century Chinese Chan master]: ‘What is Buddha?’
   
   Baso said: ‘This mind is Buddha.’

In each of these examples, there is a disjuncture between the question asked by the disciple and the answer given by the master. This disjuncture can serve to trigger uncertainty, or even anxiety, in the student and help him or her to see through and beyond ordinary experience and awaken (Park 2002, 215). This style of interaction is at odds with the style preferred in many academic, educational settings, in which a teacher is expected to produce logical, clear, explicit explanations to lead a student to a new understanding. Butny and Isbell (1991), for example, show that ‘good’ responses to koan questions are those that bypass logical, rational reflection.

According to Zen Buddhist language ideology, everyday language use can hinder, but not aid, the achievement of enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism. Situational silence, as during *zazen*, is valued and one should refrain, more generally, from ‘idle chatter.’ At the same time, forms of poetic, paradoxical language, especially *koans*, are valued as they can encourage practitioners to let go of everyday, common sense ways of experiencing the world, a requisite for awakening and enlightenment. In the remainder of this article, we illustrate how this Zen Buddhist communicative ideology shapes and makes comprehensible, postings in an online forum that juxtaposes Zen Buddhist ways of communicating with more logical, linear ways of communicating.

**Data and method**

Data for this article come from a Yahoo online forum started in 1999 that calls itself *The Zen Buddhism Sangha Group* ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Zenbuddhism](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Zenbuddhism)). According to the homepage of the group, the group is ‘A Sangha (‘Buddhist community’) for those on the Zen Buddhist path.’ When these data were collected in 2008, the group had just over 100 members. It is a moderated forum, in English, and averaged about 20 postings per month between 1999 and 2008, with considerable variation in participation from month to month. There were certain core members who participated for a long time, posting on a regular basis, and peripheral members who posted rarely. Most posters used screen names. Postings address both general topics, for example, ‘depression,’ ‘drugs,’ and ‘science,’ and topics that are specific to Zen Buddhism, for example, *Zazen* (sitting meditation), *Mu* (emptiness), and *Dogen* (a famous Japanese Zen monk). Information in an online thread entitled ‘Introduction’ suggests that the majority of the members are from the USA and a few from European countries. This is consistent with Ostrowski’s (2006) survey data indicating that many participants in English-language Buddhism
websites are Americans who are not members of temples or members of historically Buddhist immigrant groups.

First author Sul, a lifelong practicing Buddhist raised and educated primarily in South Korea, was a non-posting reader of the forum for over two years, reading most of the threaded posts dating to the beginning of the forum in 1999. The portions of the four threads from 1999 and 2000 that we analyze were selected because (1) they occurred immediately in the corpus, (2) they highlight distinctions between Zen Buddhist and Western language ideologies and the ways forum members negotiate these (the first two threads analyzed), and (3) they highlight ways in which more advanced Zen Buddhist practitioners can use relatively indirect, symbolic, and metaphorical language and demonstrate familiarity with Zen Buddhist communicative genres and the historical canon of texts (the final two threads analyzed). Although posts across the nine years address many topics, the contrasting styles illustrated in these four posts and the ways in which others respond to them are consistent with styles of posting and responding observed in over 2100 posts from the 1999–2008 period.

Socializing novices into Zen Buddhist language and perspectives

In this section, we examine the portions of two threads that illustrate how forum members negotiate aspects of the language ideology described earlier. Styles of communicating are explicitly addressed and implicitly evaluated in these two threads, and the degree of adherence to a Zen Buddhist style is treated as marking a poster’s degree of sophistication in Zen Buddhist practice. Both of these threads were initiated by posts that subsequent posts treated as problematic in (1) the ways they used language and (2) the perspective suggested by such language use.

More experienced members, through their posts, guide and coach novice members in cultivation of a Zen perspective and Zen communicative style. This instruction is not direct or explicit but is achieved through performative example. A post that is seen as illustrating a lack of Zen Buddhist perspective, for example, may receive a reply that asks a paradoxical question or otherwise appears only remotely related to the initial post. This online forum lacks the institutional hierarchy of a temple and the visual cues (e.g. a monk’s robes or a Zen master’s seated position facing lay Buddhists) that differentiate between teacher and disciple. Different styles of posting, however, differentiate among individuals in terms of their degree of Buddhist insight and perspective.

We identify three distinct ways in which posts express a relationship and adherence to Zen Buddhist linguistic ideologies. The first style is an explicit, referential style that resembles everyday talk and shows little awareness of Buddhist perspectives on language use. This is the style that is often treated as problematic by other members. In a second style, members’ posts directly address, through the referential mode, Buddhist perspectives and knowledge. Such posts illustrate an intellectual understanding of some aspect of Buddhist perspectives on communication and sometimes make an explicit reference to historical Buddhist texts. From a Zen Buddhist perspective, these represent the performance of novice identities, regardless of the degree of intellectual knowledge of Buddhism displayed. In a third style, members perform (but do not explicitly claim) a Buddhist identity through use of a poetic, seemingly obscure style that emulates koans. These posts openly violate Gricean (Grice 1975) cooperative principles of relation (‘be relevant’) and manner (‘avoid obscurity and ambiguity’), which many Westerners take to be universal constraints on communication. These sequential posts also regularly defy the sequential patterns of turns identified by conversation analysts as preferred or unmarked
(Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008), patterns that are also treated by Western conversation analysts as universal. Thus, posts that consist of a question are not necessarily responded to with answers and offers are not necessarily met with acceptance or rejection.

‘Is there anybody out there?’

The first thread (‘Is there anybody out there’), mentioned at the beginning of this article, includes four postings, by four different members, and illustrates the three communicative styles and their relationship to Zen Buddhist ideology described earlier. This thread was initiated by Michael’s post, later. It appeared after 10 days during which there were only two posts to the forum:

anyone here?

Wed Jun 30, 1999

Is there anybody out there?

--Michael

Michael posted this question with quotation marks, as if it might not be his words or it might have a special meaning, but he does not specify here. Subsequent posters, however, treat it as an explicit, direct question or request for more online posting. As described earlier, this explicit, referential style is seen in Zen Buddhism as an evidence of a practice that is distracting from the pursuit of enlightenment. The first response to this post came a day later:

Re: anyone here?

Thu Jul 1, 1999

>‘Is there anybody out there?’

>--Michael

a Zen master might respond, does it matter? or the computer screen is in

front of you.

but you are right been very quiet lately.

hp

Poster ‘hp’ uses two different styles, or voices, in this post: (1) a style that illustrates an intellectual understanding of distinctive features of Zen Buddhist communicative style – when citing a hypothetical Zen master – and (2) an everyday, interactional style. The content of the first part of the post (‘a Zen master might respond, does it matter? or the computer screen is in front of you’) suggests an intellectual understanding of differences between a Buddhist perspective and an everyday life Western one. From a Zen perspective, whether other beings exist or not has nothing to do with one’s own pursuit of enlightenment. Unlike religions such as Christianity or Islam, Buddhists do not believe in a God outside of oneself. One is enlightened through practice, following the example of Buddha. One’s own effort rather than reliance on others (even Buddha or Bodhisattvas) is what matters. Thus, from a Zen perspective, the question ‘is anybody out there’ does not matter. Poster ‘hp’ also
suggests, that a Zen master might respond, more obscurely, ‘the computer screen is in front of you.’ Zen masters frequently remind their students that awakening or enlightenment is not something to be found far away but is already present in or near the student.

These relatively noncooperative utterances are not given by ‘hp’ as a response, however, but are treated as the hypothetical responses a Zen master might give. As such, ‘hp’ illustrates the knowledge of a Zen perspective but does not interactionally perform it himself. In the final part of the post, ‘hp’ reverts to an everyday, non-Zen frame for interaction. This part of the post (‘but you are right been very quiet lately’), responds to Michael’s implied evaluation of the forum as relatively quiet (‘Is there anybody out there?’), agreeing with it.

Like hp’s post, L’s post two weeks later in response to ‘Is anybody out there?’ displays an intellectual understanding of Buddhist perspective, but does not embody or perform a Buddhist perspective:

Re: Is anyone out there?

Wed Jul 14, 1999

Hello,

Just joined the list. The following caught my eye:

> Subject: anyone here?
> ‘Is there anybody out there?’
> --Michael

It’s a trick question. Right?

Bodhidharma’s response: ‘no knowing.’

L

After greeting the forum and noting that he just joined the group, L cites Michael’s ‘Is there anybody out there?’ and then questions the intended meaning, or illocutionary force (Austin 1962), of the post. Rather than treating it as a literal question or an implied evaluation of the forum – and responding accordingly – he asks if it is a ‘trick question.’ This suggests that he is aware that language use, including questions, in Zen contexts often diverges from the relatively literal, linear ways that it is used in everyday life. He asks for confirmation (‘Right?’) of his interpretation that the question should not be interpreted in terms of an everyday communication frame.

He then demonstrates his knowledge of Buddhist history by suggesting how Bodhidharma, a fifth/sixth-century monk who brought Buddhism to China in 520 AD might respond to such a question. In the Blue Cliff Record (Yuanwu, Cleary, & Cleary 1977), a collection of Chan Buddhist koans, Bodhidharma engages in a dialog with Emperor Wu of Liang. When the Emperor addresses Bodhidharma, ‘Who is this standing before me?’ Bodhidharma replies, ‘No knowing.’ L thus demonstrates knowledge of an important historical Buddhist text as well as knowledge of some of the nonlinear conventions of Zen Buddhist interactional style. Like hp, above, however, who quotes a hypothetical Zen master, L describes what an historical Zen master might say, rather than performing the perspective himself.
Eleven days after the initial post, Eric responds more directly than other posters (‘Yes, we are all here’) and even provides an account for his and others’ relative silence:

Re: anyone here?
July 11, 1999

Yes, we are all here, reading and lurking with very little to say.
This could be seen as a definite positive,
being those with the most confusion and inner turmoil
seem to often have the most to say:->
If anyone has any favorite Zen and or buddhist web
sites to share, feel free--------

Onward to Utopia,
Eric

While Eric’s response answers Michael’s question and even addresses the implied criticism of an underactive forum, it also criticizes the communicative ideology implied in Michael’s post. For Eric, the relative quiet of the forum ‘could be seen as a definite positive’ since ‘those with the most confusion and inner turmoil seem to have the most to say.’ Eric’s post suggests a central communicative paradox for this Zen forum: if one has a higher level of Zen insight, one probably will not say much in the forum, and if one has nothing of value to say, one is likely to post more often. Unlike other topical, online forums, where active posting is seen as a sign of the success or vibrancy of the community, a relative lack of posting to this forum could be a sign of the success of this Zen Buddhist community. As in the previous two posts, Eric displays his knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist linguistic ideology through direct reference. He explicitly explains why some people might not post much and criticizes those who might post a lot. He finishes his post in an everyday, directly informational style with a request to others to share Buddhist websites.

The post from Pakpaw, later, is different from the posts earlier in its use of nonlinear, poetic forms that end in seemingly cryptic, paradoxical questions:

Re; anyone here?
July 6, 1999

> ‘Is there anybody out there?’
> --Michael

I am here…
But I am thinking what to say,
instead of saying something worthless,
so I haven’t said anything.

Perhaps I will say something soon.
but it is a hard thing to determine,
what can be said….Is it not?
Do you know what is important, but not wrong?

Pakpaw

The first line of Pakpaw’s post (‘I am here’) responds to Michael’s posting literally and cooperatively and begins to give an account (‘But I am thinking....’) of why he has not posted more. He does not cite reasons such as ‘I have been busy’ or ‘I was traveling,’ which are everyday accounts for why one has not been in contact with others but instead suggests that it can be difficult to say something that is not worthless. This suggests his attention to the Zen Buddhist principle of Right Speech, according to which one should abstain from idle chatter that lacks purpose or depth.

The rest of his post is seemingly more enigmatic. He writes, ‘Perhaps I will say something soon’ as if he were not saying something in the writing of the post and as if he had no direct control over whether he would say something. He suggests that it can be difficult to know ‘what can be said,’ perhaps because from a Zen perspective, words must be used with care and only when something of depth needs to be communicated. He poses a seemingly paradoxical question: ‘Do you know what is important, but not wrong?’ This question implies that many things that might be considered ‘important’ are ‘wrong,’ which does not fit with everyday conceptions of ‘important’ and ‘wrong.’ This question forces the audience to think in new ways about ‘importance’ and ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ Finally, the entire post is written in two stanzas of four lines each. Three of the lines contain eight syllables, while another five range from 7 to 11 syllables. The shortest lines – of three and seven syllables – contain ellipses (‘...’), which lengthen the lines, making them more comparable to the longer lines. This form of the post gives it a distinctly poetic feeling.

Pakpaw’s post is similar to a koan in its poetic form and a seemingly paradoxical question, thus embodying a Zen linguistic ideology. It teaches not through explicit instruction – enlightenment cannot be achieved that way – but through contradiction and paradox that can encourage the interlocutor to break free of everyday ways of thinking that can hold the individual back from progressing toward enlightenment. Although this is an egalitarian community with no institutional hierarchy, Pakpaw guides a relative novice by performing a Zen Buddhist perspective, just as a monk or Zen master might guide a disciple in a temple.

*How often do you sit in zazen?*

Like the thread analyzed earlier, the thread below (1) illustrates several competing styles of language use, each suggesting a different relationship to Zen linguistic ideologies, and (2) was initiated by a post that violates Zen Buddhist assumptions about language and Zen practice. The initial post in the thread was by the then-forum-moderator, who did not otherwise post frequently. The post invites members to respond to an online survey about the frequency with which they engaged in sitting meditation, or zazen. This posting came after a 27-day period during which there were no posts to the forum. The posting is subsequently treated by several members as displaying an orientation that is at odds with a Zen Buddhist perspective:

New Survey

Wed Oct 13, 1999
Hello,

Here is a new survey so we have at least something
to do now when the list is so calm. It would be nice
if we could have more answers this time.

How often do you sit in zaZen?
Possible answers are:

○ The whole day, I live at a monastery.
○ Every morning and evening.
○ Every day.
○ A few times a week.
○ Once a week.
○ Rare.
○ Never.

To vote, please visit the following web page: http://www.onelist.com/surveys/Zenbuddhism

Note: Please do not reply to this message. Survey votes are not collected
via email. To vote, you must go to the ONElist website.

Thanks!

Fredrik

This post, both in its style and content, appears counter to Zen ideology and practice. While a linear, logico-referential style of communication is often used to seek or share information in this forum, this posting suggests using the social scientific instrument of a survey to investigate an empirical question. While zazen is the central practice of Zen Buddhism, questions of ‘how often’ or ‘how long’ one sits are not appropriate measures of Zen understanding or progress toward enlightenment. The amount of time spent and the frequency in zazen do not determine Zen understanding. Exerting more time and effort on a regular basis may be helpful but it does not guarantee progress. There are well-known examples in the Buddhist canon of monks spending their whole life in zazen but achieving nothing and examples of novices who reached enlightenment without exerting much time or effort in zazen. Those familiar with Zen do not use a Western positivistic mindset and quantitative measures of frequency to evaluate Zen. From a Zen perspective, such measures and orientations are seen as an illusion.

This initial, survey-style posting initiated a thread of eight replies over two weeks. The first response came two days after the initial post:

How often do I sit?

Oct 15

‘I’, does not sit often.

PS. You can sit without sitting,
and sit when you’re standing.
But only those who stand still,
can stand when they’re sitting.

Pakpaw

From an everyday communication perspective, Pakpaw’s response appears uncooperative. Pakpaw flouts the directions (‘do not reply to this message... To vote, you must go to the ONElist website.’), does not use any of the closed-ended responses listed in the survey, and answers in a style that suggests that the initial question was misguided. Pakpaw’s use of quotation marks around ‘I,’ his separation of the word ‘I’ from the verb with a comma, and his grammatical treatment of ‘I’ as third person (“‘T’, does not sit often.”) draw attention to the notion of ‘I.’ Pakpaw suggests nonattachment to his ego by treating it as if it were a third person, which he could observe from afar. His stylized response to the question of ‘How often do you sit?’ calls into question the assumptions underlying the initial posting about the survey and challenges the forum members to think in new ways about self and ego. This is consistent with the teachings of Zen masters, who approach the ‘I’ and ego as creating a false dualism between self and the outside world that can hinder awakening (Nhat Hanh 1995, 9–10; Scott & Doubleday 1992, 3; Sahn 1997, 17).

In the remainder of his post, he uses a koan to illustrate an understanding of sitting that is contrary to the one suggested in the initial survey-request post. His koan appears illogical and nonsensical in terms of referential truth values: ‘you can sit without sitting, and sit when you’re standing’ and people can ‘stand when they’re sitting.’ What this koan communicates to Zen Buddhists, however, is that the essence of Zen is not captured by formal categories such as ‘sitting’ or the visible, quantifiable period of time during which one is sitting. Zen masters commonly encourage disciples to concentrate on koans 24 hours per day, even when sleeping. Such masters emphasize that with the proper orientation every activity can include meditation and mindfulness, not just periods when one is physically sitting. Pakpaw’s koan suggests this in an indirect, seemingly contradictory form.

A day later, Frederik, who had posted the initial survey, responds to Pakpaw’s post, asking briefly ‘What is that “I” that don’t sit?’:

(no subject)

Sat Oct 16 1999

>‘I’, does not sit often.
>
>PS. You can sit without sitting,
>and sit when you’re standing.
>But only those who stand still,
>can stand when they’re sitting.
>
>Pakpaw

What is that ‘I’ that don’t sit?
While Fredrik’s initial post displayed no awareness of Zen linguistic ideology, his subsequent question (‘What is that “I” that don’t sit?’) shows an intellectual understanding that there is something problematic about the everyday notion of ‘I’ in Zen. His style of language also approaches the poetic, seemingly enigmatic style of Pakpaw. He does not use an explicit, analytical style (e.g. ‘Are you referring to a Western, egocentric concept of the self when you say “I”?’) but continues the interaction in a more poetic format.

Pakpaw responds six days later in a poetic form with a characterization of ‘I’ and an explicit exhortation:

(no subject)
Fri Oct 22 1999

> What is that ‘I’ that don’t sit?

The same one,  
that keep you from standing still.  
Give it up…that ‘I’

Pakpaw suggests that if one is controlled by one’s ego or ‘I,’ one can’t be standing ‘still’ looking inward, which is a goal of sitting meditation. In the last line of the post, Pakpaw switches to a relatively direct style of speech, but one with a seemingly paradoxical command to Frederik: ‘Give it up…that ‘I.’ From a Zen perspective, however, this command is not paradoxical. Many Zen masters describe the point of departure for Buddhism as ‘not-self’ (e.g. Nhat Hanh 1995, 39), a position from which one can overcome false dualisms between subject and object and more directly experience reality.

In this section, we have seen communicative ways in which members overcome limitations of a text-based online forum in constituting a Zen Buddhist community. The foundational activity of a Zen Buddhist community – silent, copresent meditation – is not possible in such a forum, but language-based exchanges are. Members discuss their shared topical interest and share information, much as they do in other topical Internet forums. Such activities, however, can be seen at odds with the proper performance of Zen Buddhist identity. According to Zen Buddhist linguistic ideology, everyday forms of language lead to illusion, not enlightenment. This paradox is ameliorated by some members of the forum through a performative style that embodies a Zen Buddhist perspective. Unlike in a temple, where a master, monks, and lay Buddhists occupy hierarchical positions that are marked visually through clothing and use of the culturally organized space, leaders in this forum establish their expertise only through the knowledge and the style that they display in their postings. One has the opportunity in this forum to learn about Zen Buddhism not only through logical, referential talk about it but also through engaging in Zen practice through interaction with more advanced practitioners.

**Constituting Zen identities and community through Zen communicative ideology and practices**

Both of the threads presented earlier were initiated by posts that (some) forum members found lacking in Zen insight or perspective. Forum members treated these posts as an opportunity to socialize novice members into a more Zen Buddhist perspective. The interactions earlier thus resemble, at one level, the Zen Buddhist dialogs between the
disciple and the master, in which the disciple’s speaking illustrate a relative lack of Zen Buddhist awakening and the master’s paradoxical words encourage the novice to let go of everyday ways of thinking and experiencing.

Many threads on this form, however, do not illustrate such contrasts in Zen Buddhist knowledge or perspective but instead contain successive posts that embody a Zen perspective. Such posts rely on relatively indirect, symbolic, and metaphorical use of language and demonstrate familiarity with Zen Buddhist communicative genres and the historical canon of texts. By interacting in a performative style with allusions to this canon, members constitute themselves as members of the larger Zen Buddhist community.

The following example illustrates how a koan form can be used in both an initial post and a reply to that post. In this example, Pakpaw poses questions that are easily answerable in logical terms but are not treated as literal, logical questions by other forum participants:

Vegetarian
April 4, 2000

I am in a restaurant on vacation,
and my daughter does not finish,
her pasta with meat sauce.

should I let it go to waste,
or finish it for her, if I can?

Am I still a vegetarian if I eat it?

Why or why not?

Pakpaw

Like many koans, this post defies everyday ways of thinking, in which eating meat and being a vegetarian are incompatible. Wolfgang’s response avoids answering the posed questions in any direct way, which would require entering the world of syllogistic reasoning. Instead, he relates the story of a Buddhist monk – in some Zen versions of the story, it is Buddha himself – that may shed light on the dilemma suggested by Pakpaw:

Re: Vegetarian
April 5, 2000

There is an old story of one Buddha monk begging for food, and when a leper filled his bowl, one of his fingers fell off into it. The monk remembered the saying ‘eat what you get’, and emptied the bowl …

gassHo () Wolfgang

In responding to a koan with another koan, Wolfgang does not respond directly or logically to the question (itself illogical) posed by Pakpaw. Instead, his story of a monk
eating a leper’s finger serves two Zen Buddhist functions. On the one hand, the image startles the reader and provokes the reader to experience in a new way and possibly let go of everyday experience and concepts, a primary function of *koan* in Zen Buddhist training. A second function of this post is to link Wolfgang and his online interlocutors to a 2500-year history of Zen Buddhist stories and teachings. By referring to a text from the historical Buddhist canon, Wolfgang helps reconstitute that canon in the present and establish it as a relevant common framework for this community.

Wolfgang closes his post with the word *gassho* and the double-parentheses icon ‘()’. *Gassho* (from Japanese) is a term for putting palms of hands together in front of the chest with fingers pointing up as in prayer, often combined with a bow. The icon ‘()’ represents the two hands, palms together. This gesture indicates a humble attitude by lowering oneself (literally bending one’s body when doing *gassho*) and showing respect to others. Members often conclude posts with the icon ‘()’, with or without the word ‘*gassho*.’ In this post and response, Pakpaw and Wolfgang use a poetic and paradoxical style that both indexes and directly refers to Zen Buddhist texts. By appropriately interacting in this style, they validate Zen Buddhist identities and contribute to the constitution of a Zen Buddhist community online.

The final example illustrates an even more subtle form of Zen Buddhist interaction through written language. Unlike the prior thread, this thread makes no explicit reference to Buddhism. Both posts in this next thread appear in verse form, lack an explicit narrative of events, and refer to ‘the mirror,’ the referent of which is not stated:

(1) The Mirror

Sat Feb 5, 2000

However you look at life,
that is how life is.
Do you see the mirror now?
Silip (Full Moon)
P’ak (Penetrating through)
Paw (White Clouds)

(2) Re: The Mirror

Sat Feb 5, 2000

>However you look at life,
>that is how life is.
>Do you see the mirror now?
The mirror is large--
so big no edge is in sight.
Nose bumps glass everywhere.
Be still. Breathe on it. It clouds.

Once seen, nose need not be bruised.

:) Jesa

Although these posts make no explicit reference to Buddhism, students of Buddhism (1) know ‘mirror’ to be a common metaphor for mind in Buddhism and (2) recognize parallels between this exchange and a specific, canonical exchange of seventh-century Chinese Zen poems. Zen masters Songchol and Barry (2004, 34) describe the common ‘mirror as mind’ metaphor as follows:

A mirror in its natural state is perfectly clear. But it loses its ability to reflect as more and more dust gathers on it until finally it can no longer reflect a single thing properly. Our delusions are like dust on a mirror….

The fact that the two members of the forum can refer to ‘The Mirror’ without further explanation suggests that they share this metaphor as a common cultural reference point.

More subtly, the two posts echo a pair of seventh-century poems written by monks Hui Neng and Shen Hsiu while they were competing to become the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. The Fifth Patriarch had asked the monks to show their wisdom and said that whoever realized Buddha Nature would become the Sixth Patriarch. Shen Hsiu, the head monk, was considered the favorite and produced a koan comparing the mind to a mirror. The illiterate Hui Neng dictated a poem that played upon Shen Hsiu’s poem and revealed great Zen insight. For this performance, he was named Sixth Patriarch. These historical figures and their pair of mirror poems are described in many introductory books on Zen Buddhism and are widely known among students of Zen Buddhism.

In this forum, Bob posted with the title ‘The mirror’ and referred to ‘the mirror’ again in his post, as if it were a particular mirror being referred to, even though there was no prior mirror specified. Jesa responds to PakPaw Silip’s post with a poem that also referred to ‘the mirror,’ just as Hui Neng responded to Shen Hsiu’s mirror poem with a different mirror poem. This second mirror post suggests not only historical knowledge of Zen Buddhist figures and texts but also the ability to perform. Such performance displays a Zen perspective that would not be achieved through expressions of explicit knowledge and thus functions as a marker of authentic Zen Buddhist identity.

In the two exchanges described in this section, members of the forum achieve common ground through the use of an indirect, poetic style that is richly indexical of Zen Buddhist discourse and that makes allusions, both referential and in terms of form, to well-known historical Buddhist texts. Posters constitute themselves as experts through such posts, and by cooperatively interacting in this style – posting from a Zen perspective and interpreting and replying to others’ posts from a Zen perspective – they constitute a Zen Buddhist community.

Conclusions

Zen Buddhists confront distinctive challenges to constituting identity and community in a text-based online forum. Zen Buddhist communities typically center on a temple or a Zen center where identities are constituted through silent, copresent meditation. Online forums do not allow for physical copresence or copresent silence. Text-based forums consist only
of words, which are not only unnecessary for achieving enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhist practice, but can hinder achieving it.

Despite these challenges, Zen Buddhist expertise can be displayed and identity can be constituted through online text-based interaction. The genre of *koan* and allusions to Buddhist texts and teachings can bring alive Zen Buddhist perspectives and connect far-flung participants in a cultural-religious community. Seasoned members’ use of richly indexical forms and genres allows them to display and share knowledge in a culturally preferred way. This indirect style of interaction reflects Zen Buddhist ideologies in which logical, referential description and instruction is not a means to enlightenment. Paradoxical, nonlogical language, in contrast, can be a useful tool to help dislodge individuals from their ordinary, everyday ways of thinking and experiencing. Individuals who use language consistent with Zen Buddhist ideologies are treated as leading by example in this forum, where other ways of constituting a teacher identity – for example, through monks’ robes and use of space in a temple – are not possible.

Forum members, who are primarily American and Western, confront and negotiate these two ways of thinking about communication and language use. These negotiations are of conceptual interest for several reasons: (1) they show the power of language to constitute community and culture online, even in a forum limited to written text exchanges; (2) they highlight the existence of competing cultural and ideological notions of communication among forum members; and (3) they show that Westerners can adopt ways of speaking associated with parts of the world once colonized by the West, thus paying homage to ways of speaking that have otherwise been considered less prestigious.

It has long been recognized that ways of using language are constitutive of particular social identities (e.g. Carbaugh 1996; Gumperz 1982) in face-to-face interaction. Because online forums hide many indicators of social identity – for example, physical appearance, clothing, social or regional accent, and geographic location – the successful constitution of identity and community in this online forum shows that even a few dimensions of language can be sufficient to constitute identity. In this particular case, genre and allusions to historical texts are shown to be keys to marking identity and community membership.

Through their negotiations of contrasting, sometimes conflicting, styles of discourse, participants in this forum are forced to attend to the cultural and ideological nature of language. In the context of striving for enlightenment, everyday talk can be seen as illusory and ‘idle chatter’ among Zen Buddhists and situational silent copresence can be highly valued. In many American contexts, in contrast, talk is a way to express an individual self who has choices and honestly shares his/her thoughts and feelings (Carbaugh 1988). The valuing of illogical, paradoxical styles of speech is also counter to popular American and Western attitudes toward communication, which see the efficient transfer of explicit, propositional information from one person to another, as in a ‘conduit metaphor’ as ‘good communication’ (Reddy 1979; cf. Carey 1975 on ‘transmission perspective’). As with other aspects of culture, it is easy to take one’s linguistic ideologies for granted and see them as nothing other than the nature of the world until confronted with communicative beliefs and practices that diverge from what one considers normal. Confronting the ideologies and practices documented in this article can help Westerners to see their everyday communication beliefs and practices as cultural and ideological rather than natural.

Finally, this article shows that Western ideologies of communication are not always privileged over those associated with parts of the world once colonized by the West. The economic, political, and military power of the West over the past five centuries has translated into symbolic prestige for Western patterns of communication. In this forum, in
contrast, Zen Buddhist ways of communicating are often treated by Westerners as superior to the logical, rational, and linear ways of speaking associated with everyday Western styles of talk and academic discourses. Power imbalance is typical of intercultural contact situations, at least at the global political-economic level, but that does not mean that mutual respect is impossible in individual encounters. Although we do not know if the practices and the perspectives apparent in this forum extend into the forum members’ lives, in the forum itself, at least, we see Western members treating a non-Western intellectual-cultural tradition as valuable and worthy of emulation.

Notes
1. Miller (2010) explores simultaneous, but not copresent meditation, using Internet technologies, and Connelly (2012) explores the use of avatars and computer images to emulate Buddhist rituals online. The present study, in contrast, addresses exchanges of text on a message board. The messages are posted serially, and there is no real-time interaction.
2. Many koans have become part of Zen Buddhist canon, with classical collections of koans from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries in China and Japan containing between 48 and 300 koans each. These two koans come from the thirteenth-century Chinese compilation ‘The Gateless Gate.’
3. Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, for example, described his sudden awakening, as follows: ‘I was selling firewood in the market one day, when one of my customers ordered some to be brought to his shop, outside of which I found a man reciting a sutra. As soon as I heard the text of this sutra my mind at once became enlightened’ (Huineng, Wong, & Price 1990, 67).
4. Shen Hsiu wrote (Scott & Doubleday 1992, 18):
   
   Our body is the Bodhi-tree
   And our mind a mirror bright.
   Carefully we clean them hour by hour
   And let no dust alight.

   Hui Neng then dictated:
   
   There is no Bodhi-tree
   Nor strand of a mirror bright.
   Since all is void
   When can the dust alight?

Notes on contributors
Eunsook Sul received an MA in communication from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and is currently working on her dissertation at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She is a lifelong practicing Buddhist. She grew up and received her undergraduate degree in Korea and lived and worked in Japan before coming to the USA.

Benjamin Bailey is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. His research focuses on language, culture, and social identities, particularly ethnicity and race. He is the author of various articles and chapters on race, code switching, bilingualism, immigration, and intercultural communication.
References
