The problem of communicating one's understanding of Zen: A microanalysis of teacher-student interviews in a North American Zen monastery

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Sometimes the dialogue which you read in koans or the dialogue that takes place in the interview room doesn’t make sense, it’s not intended to make sense because it’s not a rational, linear sequential thing, this Bodhidharma, whatever you think it is it’s not. It’s not an idea, it’s not a concept, it’s alive and it’s working. How to see that, how to express that is what the dynamics of interview, of Dharma talk are about.

1. Introduction

This explanation from a Zen teacher to his students embodies the well-known precept that Zen knowledge cannot be conveyed rationally or verbally. Language use is not everywhere valued as a vehicle for expressing knowledge. This point is depicted in recent studies of Athabaskan native peoples (Scollon and Scollon, 1981), Quakers (Bauman, 1983), Trappist monks (Jaksa and Stech, 1978), and North American, Zen Buddhists (Preston, 1988). In Zen, silent meditation, or zazen, is a central practice for training the body/mind for enlightenment. However, Zen practitioners are not continually silent. Talk occurs during teacher-student interviews, though we will see that this talk is of a very distinctive variety. During these interviews, the teacher often calls upon the students to express their understanding of Zen. This “call” creates conflicting demands on the student; on the one hand, speech is proscribed as a way of knowledge, but on the other hand, the teacher requests the student to convey understanding. The ability to communicate one’s understanding of Zen is a basic problem for practitioners, especially for the newer students.
Our project here is to examine Zen teacher-student interviews as a communication event. We focus on two of the most distinctive ways of communicating in these interviews, koan (ko-an) practice and the “demonstration” of understanding. Zen beliefs about the epistemology of language create an interesting problem for participants; students are called upon to communicate their understanding of Zen, but verbal explanations and discursive talk are not valued as modes of expression. How do practitioners interactionally “solve” this problematic? In short, how do practitioners communicate their Zen understanding? We approach these questions by analyzing the discourse of teacher-student interviews, in particular, the teacher’s use of the koan as a challenge, and how these answers are interactionally achieved, negotiated, and evaluated.

2. Dharma combat as communication event

There are two kinds of teacher-student interviews, one done privately, called dokusan, and the other performed in front of the entire community, called Dharma combat or shosan. We will examine the latter kind of interview. The talk between teacher and student during Dharma combat reveals unique ways of speaking due to the radically distinctive epistemology of Zen. Instead of the Western emphasis on analysis of an object domain and its representation through language (or other symbol systems) as a way to knowing, the Zen tradition rejects analysis, and representation through language. However, “Zen does not shun or despise language. It only requires that language be used in a very peculiar way … The Master constantly urges the student to open the mouth and say something … Asking the student to say something constitutes an integral part of the educational process of Zen. For the moment he opens the mouth and ‘brings a decisive phrase’, the student discloses to the eyes of the Master the exact degree of his spiritual maturity” (Izutsu, 1982: 97–98). While it is impossible to explain Zen, a commentator has described the communication of Zen understanding as a “pre-reflective” form of expression: “(S)tatement in (teacher-student interviews) are authentic or inauthentic not in reference to the proposition spoken but in reference to the speaker’s state of mind. What is judged is the quality of the state of without-thinking, the source of the utterance, not the truth of the proposition or the content of the statement” (Kasulis, 1981: 119–120). So to appreciate the ways of communicating in the Zen speech community, we need to look to the distinctive uses of language they employ to accomplish their social practices.

There is an extensive philosophical, historical, and experiential literature on Zen Buddhism, but to our knowledge, there are no empirical studies of
language use and social interaction. Dharma combat offers an interesting communication event for analysis because it involves distinctive ways of speaking. Two of the most unique features of Dharma combat will be examined: the uses of the koan and the showing of one’s understanding.

2.1 Koan practice

Koan study is unique to the practice of Zen. No other religion uses a device parallel to the koan. The koan, however, does not directly contain religious instruction; it is indirect, often at first sight intractable. It is presented by the teacher as a problem to be solved, yet it is no ordinary sort of problem. A solution to a koan depends upon the teacher, the student, and the student’s stage of development.

As to the unique method of study that is used to realize a koan, it is not based upon “study” as we usually use that word. The aim is to “become one with the koan,” to embed the koan in one’s mind, not as an idea but as an object of focus. During meditation, the student repeats the koan, or a phrase from the koan, slowly over and over. The meaning of the words fall away with constant repetition and the identity of words is blurred by the very slowness of the repetition. The inward voicing features syllables rather than thoughts. “One must not be looking for an answer but looking at the koan” (Grimstone, 1977: 17). When an answer comes, as if of its own accord, then the student takes the answer to the teacher for validation.

The koan is used by the teacher during Dharma combat as a “confrontation” or “a challenge demanding a response” (DeMartino, 1983: 16) in order “to judge the student’s understanding” (Rosemont, 1970: 114). Koans have been characterized as a verbal paradox or puzzle or problem (Kubose, 1973; Miura and Sasaki, 1966; Suzuki, 1962). The koan is used to “shock” the student out of ordinary consciousness (Izutsu, 1982) and take the student “beyond logic to where there is no ‘why’ and no ‘because’” (Shimano, 1988: 73). “Part of koan study is to try to sharpen the student’s ability to communicate in a lively way what the meaning of Zen is all about” (Glassman, 1983: 11).

In much of the Zen literature, the master presents the koan to the student, or visiting monk, who then offers an answer which shows (or fails to show) enlightenment. These accounts of the exchange over the koans represent case studies or idealized moments in Zen history. Many koans are records of the conversations between teachers and students of the past. Some relate moments when a master or student achieved enlightenment.

But the use of koans during Dharma combat as a living, contemporary practice, needs to be seen as accomplished in and through Zen practitioners’
social interaction (Garfinkel, 1967). That is, the *koan* as a linguistic document has no intrinsic significance which can be specified independently of its use (Wittgenstein, 1953). The *koan* becomes re-created as a challenge only because of how it is used and oriented to within Zen practice. Clearly, *koans* could be used as part of other practices, such as a historical study of Zen, a literary form, or even as part of a joke. So we will examine how the *koan* is *used in the contemporary practice of Dharma combat*: how it is interactionally oriented to, formulated, responded to, and used to evaluate. These various uses of the *koan* constitute some of the ways that *Dharma* combat works as a "confrontation" or test of understanding.

2.2 Demonstration of understanding

To become communicatively competent at *Dharma* combat, practitioners need to know how to present their understanding of Zen in culturally appropriate ways. Knowing how to communicate one’s understanding is of central importance for practitioners of *Dharma* combat. We will see that "showing" or "demonstrating" one’s understanding of the *koan* are more valued forms of expression than discursively talking about it. Zen knowledge cannot be verbally explained; it cannot be propositionally formulated. However, errors or mistakes in expression are readily identified by the teacher. The most frequent error of expression is to take an intellectual or rationalistic approach. We will see that demonstrating one’s understanding on the one hand, and intellectualizing about it on the other, are contrastive modes of knowing and of expression.

3. Methodology

This study attempts to extend the ethnographic work of Preston (1988) on North American Zen practice. Preston’s research concentrated on the central role of meditation in training the body/mind and on associated Zen rituals. *Dharma* combat fits into Zen training as a way to test the understanding gained from meditation. Our focus is more circumscribed in scope than Preston’s work in that we limit our analysis to the communication event of *Dharma* combat. Our approach draws from both the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974) and ethnomethodological/conversation analytic perspectives (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984: Ch. 8). By doing an intensive analysis of language use and social interaction we hope to describe some of the distinctive ways of communicating and knowing in this community.
This study is ethnographic in that Dharma combat is seen as a “communication event” to describe the distinctive forms of speech and expression in this community. Our principal interest is in the two most distinctive practices that comprise Dharma combat, the uses of the koan and the demonstration of understanding. Mastering these practices constitute two of the central ways of displaying communication competence in Zen community. As already mentioned, Dharma combat provides a testing function for Zen practitioners. This testing function also serves as a way to rank members within the Zen community. Thirdly, Dharma combat provides an educational function by allowing the newer students to observe the interview between the teacher and senior students.

In addition to our ethnographic description, we adopt some of the microanalytic tools from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Moerman, 1988; Sigman, 1987). An audiotape recording of a Dharma combat is used to draw up transcripts of the interviews to do a more fine-grained analysis of the social interaction. From an ethnomethodological/conversation analytic perspective, the practices of the koan and demonstration of understanding are interactionally achieved between student and teacher. We attempt to identify the “moves” made through language use, or non-verbal means, and how such moves are oriented to and responded to by participants as displayed in and through their talk. One of the authors has been a Zen student for over ten years which provides a member’s knowledge for understanding these practices.

Analytically we begin by focusing on the teacher’s responses to the student’s answer to the koan. The teacher’s responses initially occur in the “third turn” of the interactional sequence of the interview following the teacher’s presentation of the koan (or question) and the student’s answer. The exchange is not terminated with the teacher’s third turn, but regularly unfolds over several more turns. The point of beginning with this third turn is that it can be seen as an analytical resource to ascertain the teacher’s recognition and evaluation of the student’s prior answer, and as the teacher’s projection of further activities for the student. In brief, this third turn allows us to analytically look backwards and forwards in the interaction.

A caveat: we make no pretense to capture the deep, intuitive levels of Zen meaning and experience in our analyses. We are limited to the level of analytical descriptions of participants’ language use and social interaction, and the practices that are accomplished in and through these. In the ethnographic tradition, we want to know how the community’s distinctive communicative forms and patterns are used, displayed, and oriented to by the practitioners.

The following research questions will be addressed: (1) How is the koan
used, oriented to, and responded to by participants? In particular, how does the teacher display an evaluation of the students’ answers to the koan? (2) How do practitioners express their understandings of Zen given the constraints in ways of communicating? How are students and teacher alike called upon to demonstrate their understanding?

3.1 Materials

The Dharma combat that is examined here occurred at a Zen Buddhist monastery in the Northeastern United States. An audiotape recording of a Dharma combat is used for analysis. This Zen center routinely taperecords its Dharma lectures and Dharma combats for its library. All of the participants are native English-language speakers. The recordings were transcribed using a modified version of conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix).

4. The place of Dharma combat in Zen practice

Before turning to the interaction in Dharma combat, it may be useful to begin by situating Dharma combat within the context of a scheduled pattern of activities practiced in this Zen monastery. The last week of each month is set aside for sesshin, or retreat, during which all other activities are suspended for full-time practice. Sesshin usually involves 15 to 20 practitioners. Students begin the day with dawn zazen or silent meditation. The students sit in rows in the zendo, or meditation room, so they can give each other support and so that their practice can be easily monitored. Zazen is the principle practice of sesshin, accounting for eight to ten hours of the day. Morning zazen is followed by a brief liturgical service and oriyoki, an elaborate meal ritual. Throughout the day during zazen and other forms of practice, the concentration on the suspension of inner monologues is to be maintained.

During sesshin students go to interview with the teacher. Two or three interviews a day is normal at this monastery. During interview there are no formal constraints on communication – the student may say anything to the teacher. The teacher guides and encourages the student’s practice. When the practice of zazen is sufficient, the student is given a koan. The koan is usually the transcript of an earlier Zen dialogue. The purpose of the koan study is to experience the realization in the original, historical case study and to demonstrate that experiential understanding in some direct way.
When the student successfully demonstrates mastery of the first *koan*, then the teacher approves and presents a second *koan* for study. There are some 700 *koans* to be realized in this program of study. If the student is unable to demonstrate mastery of the *koan*, then the teacher will offer guidance and support, or answer questions. After interview the student returns to the *zendo* to resume *zazen*.

*Koan* study is further assisted by daily formal lectures, or *Dharma* talks, which usually provide the historical background in which the original dialogue or incident took place, characterizations of the actors involved, alternative translations to the translation with which the students are working, or point out how the particular *koan* in question can be misleading.

*Dharma* combat is much like an interview except that it is a public event and all participants are confronted with the same *koan*, which usually has been posted the night before. At the monastery studied, *Dharma* combat is offered once a year at the conclusion of the Spring training season. During *Dharma* combat the teacher interviews with community members in an open forum. After a short talk in which the *koan* is offered as a challenge, the student approaches the teacher and offers a response. This is a community event of great importance; it is highly valued for its tradition, pedagogical merit, and drama. Decisive directions in the historical development of *Zen* pivot upon such moments of *Dharma* combat between equal adversaries, such high moments of combat are called *mondos*.

The purpose of *koan* practice and *zazen* create pressures which structure *Dharma* combat. As students become more practiced the results show in *Dharma* combat. Novices at *Dharma* combat can be recognized by extraneous talking. The speech of the more advanced student will be heavily packed but sparse: gesture is highly valued as it is less abstract than discursive dialogue. Advanced students will be moved by the teacher from discussion about the *koan* to a direct demonstration of their realization of the *koan*. This becomes the art of *Dharma* combat – to be the *koan*.

**5. The use of the *Koan* as a test of understanding**

One of the most distinctive features of *Dharma* combat as a communication event is the use of the *koan* as an organizing device for the teacher-student exchange. We examine how the *koan* is used by the *Zen* teacher in the practice of *Dharma* combat. What interactional functions does the *koan* serve, that is, how is the *koan* presented, oriented to and responded to by participants?
5.1 Presentation of the koan

The teacher presents the koan to the Zen community during his opening talk.

[1] ZEN TEACHER’S OPENING TALK
01. The question that I’d like to put forward today is from Master Mumon presents us: (2.3) with what he calls the
02. Zen warnings::(4.5) what he says is: (1.0) to observe the
03. regulations: (0.5) and keep to the rules: (1.8) is tying
04. oneself without a rope (2.6) to act freely and unrestrainedly
05. just as one wishes: (1.3) is to do what heretics and demons would
06. do (3.1) to recognize the mind and purify it (2.2) is the false
07. zen of silent sitting (2.8) to give reign to oneself and ignore
08. the interrelating conditions: (1.4) is to fall into the abyss:
09. (3.0) to be alert (1.4) and never ambiguous: is to wear chains
10. and an iron yoke, (2.2) to think of good and evil (0.9)
11. belongs to heaven and hell (2.2) to have a buddha view (1.0) and
12. a Dharma view (1.4) is to be confined in two iron mountains:
13. (4.8) they who realize it as soon as the thought arises::
14. (1.4) is one who exhausts: energy (2.4) to sit blankly
15. in quietism is the practice of the dead (2.3) if one
16. proceeds (0.4) that is goes forward (2.2) they will go
17. astray from the principle (1.8) if one retreats: (1.8) they
18. go against the truth, (1.4) if one neither progresses nor
19. retreats: (2.6) they are a dead person (*) breathing* (2.0)
20. now tell me (1.6) what will you do (6.5)
21. he says that the rules: to follow them (1.0) is tying oneself
22. without a rope (2.1) to act free (1.0) without restraint
23. (2.1) is what heretics and demons would do (1.6) what will
24. you do? (3.2) to purify the mind (0.9) to bring it peace
25. (1.6) quiet (2.2) is the false Zen of silent sitting (3.3) to
26. ignore cause and effect? is like falling into a great abyss:
27. (2.9) good and evil belong to heaven and hell (3.5) if you go
28. forward (*) you miss it (1.9) if you go backward (1.1) you
29. miss it (1.2) if you go neither forward or backward (.) you
30. miss it (2.8) *what will you do?* (1.6) how will you practice:
31. your Zen? (2.5) what have you realized? (1.9) how will you
32. practice your life? (5.4) you see in our practice there’s no
33. guru (1.4) no guide no teaching no teachers: (3.0) we don’t
34. have the priest or the rabbi or a holy one to intercede (1.7)
35. each one of us has to do itself (3.3) there’s nothing
36. to transcend and there’s no one to transcend (2.3) *then how
37. will you practice?* (2.5) how do you live the Zen life (0.9)
38. of boundlessness (2.2) without speech without silence without
39. action or non-action how do you manifest (1.1) the Bodhidharma
40. in your life (2.4) speak (2.4) come up (2.0) say

In his presentation, the teacher reads the question to the audience (lines
3–31), and then formulates its gist in his own words (lines 22–33). He concludes the opening talk by a call to the students to come forward and express their understanding of Zen (lines 37–41). This “call to the students” underscores the importance for Zen practice.

Following the teacher’s presentation of the *koan*, some of the students self-select to give their answer. In the eleven teacher-student exchanges that comprise this *Dharma* combat, the student initiates by coming forward from the audience to sit before the teacher and speaking. The teacher, in turn, responds to the student’s initiation.

5.2 *The koan as a communication problem*

The confrontational character of *Dharma* combat creates what we may gloss as a *communication problem* for some of the students. *Koans* cannot be answered in a discursive manner, yet students are called upon to present their understanding of the *koan*. One way to ascertain the adequacy of the students’ understanding of the *koan* is to examine how their answers are responded to and evaluated by the teacher. That is, how does the teacher display a recognition and evaluation of the student’s answer in this response?

In the following exchange the student’s answer to the *koan* is challenged in various ways.

[2] EIGHTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

S: The thing is not to be ti::ed
(2.9)

S: Do I (0.9) follow the ru::les >or< (2.4) follow (1.9) my free spirit? do I retreat? or go ahea:d (1.4) I do all of those things
(2.1)

S: The thing is not to be ti:ed to either way
(2.5)

1→ T: How? ((clears throat)) *how to do that?*
(5.7)

S: Ther- there’s no choice? (1.2) it’s done
(2.1)

2→ T: Why do you practi::ce?
(14.8)

S: I practice
(9.9)

S: I know it I can’t say it

3→ T: How do you practice
(16.6)

S: I practice be:ing (0.9) I practice being here
(3.5)

4→ T: Hm that’s what he talks about when says being lost in
silent elimination (1.7) turning off the world focusing or:
absorbing oneself (1.7) is the false Zen (2.4) *silent
sitting* =\texttt{quietism}< (9.)

5→ T: *So how? (to do this)*
S: I practice everything (2.8) I practice the silence I practice the struggling the fighting
(6.3)
T: Hmm (. ) you’re on the right track? but it’s still (0.9) a kind of an intellectual (. ) thing that you’re saying you know it’s (like) (1.5) right out of a textbook (1.5) or a Dharma talk (2.4) so look at- look into (0.8) how: to present that ali:ve (. ) not with dead words but ali::ve (1.8) how to practice our lives (1.2) how we manifest the Bodhidharma
(3.8)
T: Thank you

What we have glossed as a “communication problem” is evident, not only from the inherent difficulty of the koan, but also by the student being unable to answer the teacher’s questions and by the teacher’s critical evaluations of the student’s answer. As a response to the student’s initial answer to the koan, the teacher asks the student a series of questions (arrows 1–3). The student is unable to offer a satisfactory reply, so the teacher formulates the student’s answer in terms of the problem of the koan – as reflecting “quietism” (arrows 4). Bringing the talk back to the koan allows the teacher to invoke the authority of the koan to achieve his assessment. In critically assessing the student’s answer in terms of the koan as “quietism,” the teacher turns this problem back to the student – to further challenge her with the question (arrow 5). So the koan is not only used to initiate the exchange, but also is used to evaluate and further challenge the student’s answer. In addition, the teacher’s challenge is designed to encourage students to further pursue their Zen practice by formulating their answer in terms of the koan and leaving them with other unanswered questions.

The teacher’s reinstating of the koan in response to the student’s answer is also seen in the following exchange.

[3] NINTH STUDENT-TEACHER ENCOUNTER

1→ S: Shosanshi I’m cold
(2.4)
T: Hmm so am I=
2→ S: =((laughter)) You’ve been through this already (1.3) uhmm
(1.4)
3→ S: I practice because I practice
(1.1)
4→ T: Hmm how? how do you practice:: how do you do: (1.2) if all
4→ these things that Mumon said are true (2.1) almost no matter
4→ what you do? (2.1) it’s the wrong thing (1.0) if you go forward
4→ you go astray if you go back (you miss it)

S: How do you go forward?

(1.4)

T: When he says go forward he means if you advance: (1.5) in your practice if you if you uh (. ) work to attain the way (. ) you miss it (2.8) if you move away? move back you miss it (0.9) if you neither move backwards or forwards you miss it...

The teacher returns to the koan in his turn at talk following the student’s second answer (arrows 4). The teacher formulates the student’s answer about “practice” in terms of the koan. Unlike the prior exchange [2], the teacher invokes the koan without a prior questioning of the student’s answer. The return to the koan immediately after the student’s second answer seems to display the teacher’s negative assessment of the answer.

A noticeable feature of this exchange is that the student offers an answer (arrow 1), then withdraws it based on the teacher’s response, and then offers another answer (arrow 3). The student’s initial answer about being “cold” was offered by a different student in an earlier exchange. Given the Zen precept “to make understanding your own” (see [1] lines 33–36), this answer is marked as repeated or copied. This problematic is recognizably displayed by the student’s laughter and self-deprecatory comment (arrow 2). The student, then, attempts a different answer.

Throughout this Dharma combat, the koan is generally oriented to as a “barrier” or problem for the students, but in one case, the authority of the koan is itself questioned by a student.

[4] SEVENTH STUDENT-TEACHER ENCOUNTER

S: I thought that Mumon was ah (1.3) supposed to clarify our minds so why does he (. ) hh- come up with all that bullshit hhh

T: It’s not bullshit it’s uhm they’re real questions:

S: I know but when ya concen- whey ya try to figure it out? (. ) it’s lost

(1.8)

S: *So*=

1→ T: =So what is it that he’s trying to show us::

(2.1)

S: To dro:p it hh in my opinion .h (0.7) and just go on with washing the dishes or *whatever*

T: When ya go on you (. ) move away from it he says

(5.2)

2→ T: If you retreat? (1.8) you miss it (1.4) and if you don’t

2→ move =if you neither go forward or retreat (2.3) you’re a

2→ dead man (2.6) *so how do we practi:ce*

T: That’s a really important question...

The teacher defends the koan as “real questions.” Instead of invoking the
koan to evaluate an answer, the teacher here must show the koan as a “real” or genuine question worth confronting. To accomplish this, the teacher again formulates the problem of the koan (arrows 2). Initially he questions the student about the koan (arrow 1), but then moves to formulate the problem of the koan and justify it himself (arrows 2).

By way of summary, it is clear that Dharma combat involves more than simply the two-part exchange of the presentation of the koan and the student’s answer as has been portrayed in some historical writings on Zen. In the transcripts examined so far, the teacher responds to the student’s answer by further questioning, formulating the student’s answer in terms of the koan, and evaluative comments. As analysts, we can use these responses as a resource to see the teacher’s assessment of the student’s understanding. These responses constitute some of the ways the teacher uses the koan to challenge and enliven the student’s understanding. At the same time, the teacher’s responses attempt to move the student toward a Zen form of expression.

6. The demonstration of one’s understanding

In the teacher’s concluding talk of this Dharma combat, he draws a contrast between intellectualizing about one’s understanding and Zen expression: “It’s not an idea, it’s not a concept, it’s alive and it’s working. How to see that, how to express that is what the dynamics of ... Dharma talk are” (epigram). This is a common theme in the Zen literature – a Zen understanding cannot be rationally or intellectually conveyed. So the student faces the communication problem of putting into words that which cannot be said. Along with the koan, what we here gloss as “the demonstration of understanding,” are the most distinctive forms of Zen expression in Dharma combat.

This contrast between ideas and Zen expression is evident in the following exchange.

[5] TENTH TEACHER-STUDENT EXCHANGE
T: … we really need to see what it is that we’re doing
   (3.5)
T: We really need to see (…) it’s true, nothing to attain
   (2.5)
T: everything’s: perfect and complete as it is:
   (2.5)
T: until we realize it (…) it’s just an idea
T: doing what you’re doing while you’re doing it (…) is an idea
   (3.2)
→ T: How do we make that alive (2.1) how do we manifest
that in our very existence

(6.2)
S: *I don’t know*
T: Well find out...

In this fragment the teacher critically evaluates the student’s answer by
calling it “an idea.” Also, in transcript [2], the student’s answer was
criticized as “intellectual.” The mistrust of “words and ideas” as a way to
understanding constitutes a central proscription for Zen ways of speaking.

In critically evaluating the students’ answers, the teacher also exhorts or
directs them toward a Zen mode of expression. For instance, in transcript
[2] after his negative evaluation, the teacher calls upon the student “to
present that ali:ve (.) not with dead words but ali::ve.” This contrast
between words and Zen expression is used to evaluate and exhort the
student in [5] (see arrows).

These critical evaluations and calls for Zen expression constitute what
we have called “the student’s communication problem” – students need to
know how to express their understanding so “it’s alive and working.”
“Demonstration” is our gloss for what the teacher calls expression that is
“alive” (see transcripts [2], [5], and the epigram). The demonstration of
understanding and the proscription against intellectualizing, each spring
from the same root – the impossibility of putting Zen understanding into
ordinary language.

The call for demonstration of understanding seems to be the most
difficult challenge in Dharma combat. The teacher does not command a
demonstration from every one of the students who come up to give answers.
In the eleven encounters, the teacher calls for a demonstration four times.
To call for a demonstration seems to mark these students as more advanced
in their practice.

ELEVENTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

S: Mumon is a fool (1.8) why does he separate himself (1.2)
    does not he see: the moon? in the sky? (0.8) doesn’t he see the grass
growing from the earth
    (5.2)
T: That’s a good capping phrase as ah hhh Roshi would say
    (1.2)
T: That’s a good (_) way of capping it (1.3) but how do you see it
    (1.8)
S: I see it
    (1.2)
1→ T: Show me (0.7) what you see
T: Is this the Bodhidharma that you practi:ce
    (1.2)
S: Yes=
2→ T: =Why do you point outside yourself
2→ S: That is not outside myself
2→ T: It is
2→ S: It isn’t
   (1.2)
   ((mild audience laughter)) Hhhhhhhhhhh
   [        ]
T: Thank you for your answer

The teacher favorably evaluates the student’s initial answer, and then challenges the student further by commanding a demonstration of her understanding (arrow 1).

The advanced understanding of this student is displayed, not only by her ability to perform a demonstration, but also by her defense against the teacher’s further challenge (arrows 2). This moment of successful defense against the teacher’s challenge is also seen by the audience’s appreciative response cries and laughter. She is the only student who is able to defend her understanding against the teacher’s challenge throughout the encounter. The fact that she is the final participant to engage in Dharma combat may reflect her advanced status.

In another case, the teacher directs attention away from the student’s verbal answer to call for demonstration.

[7] SECOND TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER
S: … I’m gonna realize heaven and hell (0.7) good and evil
   (2.3)
S: I’m gonna cherish: those two iron mountains
   (14.2)
S: A dead man breathing
   (3.2)
1→ S: What do you think he’s going to do?
   (1.4)
T: What I want to know is? without falling into speech or
2→ silence (0.8) how do you do this?
   (5.5)
S: Shosanshi
3→ T: *( ) show me now*
   (8.0)
S: *Thank you*
   (16.0)
T: Thank you for your answer

The student initiates the exchange by offering an extended answer to the question (only a portion of it is presented here). The student tags a question onto the end of his answer (arrow 1), but the teacher does not respond to this question, instead he asks the student “how do you do this” (arrow 2). In other words, how to “manifest” the answer or make it “alive,” what we have
glossed as demonstration. The teacher commands the student to “show me now” (arrow 3). The student, then, gestures as a way to demonstrate his understanding. The call for demonstration is used as a way to challenge the student and also to aid the student in their progression of Zen practice. In the following fragment, the teacher attempts to move the student towards a more valued form of expression.

[8] FIFTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

T: … when we’re completely enmeshed in delusion: (. ) and pai:n (2.8) >um<

*how do we realize ourselves*

(3.8)

S: Ya just die right there with it all?

(1.4)

T: *Hm* how do you die

(5.3)

S: Heh heh heh heh (. ) You just (. ) wait until that stuff burns: you right up

1→ T: *Hm* without words:

(11.3)

2→ T: Without using an object

3→ S: Heh heh heh (. ) that’s where you stuck me last time

((audience heh heh heh heh))

(2.5)

T: Hm without using an object

(6.7)

T: Do you understand

(5.9)

S: Nope

T: Now work on that=

S: =Heh heh heh heh

T: Thank you

S: Thank you

The teacher calls for a demonstration rather than the verbal presentation of the student’s understanding (arrow 1). The teacher further challenges the student to demonstrate “without using an object” (arrow 2). The student explicitly displays his inability to demonstrate in response to the subsequent challenge, “that’s where you stuck me last time” (arrow 3).

While the call for demonstration marks students as more advanced in their practice, students are not always able to give an appropriate demonstration. In the following exchange, the student is unable to offer any demonstration at all.

[9] NINTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

T: … so how- how to do it

(0.9)

S: In everything in everything
S: If you’re one with:
(7.2)
T: What is that (.) to be one with that moment
(6.3)
T: When you’re re:ally: be the thing itself what is that?
(4.6)
T: That’s emptiness: (1.3) sunyata (0.8) body and mind fall away
(1.5)
1→ T: *So show me emptiness:* (1.0) right now
2→ (5.0)
3→ T: You’re working on the right koan to find out=
S: =HA Ha ha
T: Keep going
S: .Hh Thank you

In this transcript the teacher calls upon the student to demonstrate or “show … emptiness” (arrow 1). But the student is unable to do the demonstration as marked by the five second pause (arrow 2) and the teacher’s exhortation to keep “working” at it (arrow 3).

The student’s failure to demonstrate in [8] and [9] displays what we have glossed as the “communication problem” for students of how to “show” their understanding so “it’s alive and working.”

6.1 Questions prior to the call for demonstration

The teacher precedes the “call to demonstrate” by some preparatory work to ascertain the student’s understanding. As we have seen, the teacher does not call for a demonstration from each of the students. In the four previous transcripts [6–9], the teacher’s call for demonstration is preceded by a “how question(s)” in his prior turn or turns (see arrows).

[6] ELEVENTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER
→ T: … but how do you see it
(1.8)
S: I see it
(1.2)
T: Show me (0.7) what you see

[7] SECOND TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER
→ T: … how do you do this?
(5.5)
S: Shosanshi
T: *( ) show me now*
FIFTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

→ T: *how do we realize ourselves*
   S: Ya just die right there with it all?
   (1.4)

→ T: *Hm* how do you die
   (5.3)
   S: Heh heh heh heh (.) You just (.) wait until that stuff burns: you right up
T: *Hm* without words:
   (11.3)
T: Without using an object

NINTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER

→ T: ... so how- how to do it
   (0.9)
   S: In everything in everything (1.0) if >you’re if you’re one< with
   (7.2)
   S: if you’re one with that moment
   T: What is that ... that’s emptiness: (1.3) sunyata (0.8) body and mind fall away
   (1.5)
T: *So show me emptiness:* (1.0) right now

The call for demonstration of understanding occurs in a sequential environment of “how-questions.” How-questions may be used for preparatory work by eliciting a process-like reply from the student – how to do understanding, rather than verbally describing understanding. Of course, not all how-questions lead to a call for demonstration (see: transcript [5], arrow; transcript [3], arrow 4; transcript [2], arrows 1 and 3). But all calls for demonstration are preceded by how-questions.

This form of questioning may be identified as a “call for demonstration sequence”:

Teacher: How-question
Student: Discursive answer
Teacher: Call for demonstration

Such questioning strategies show the teacher’s attempt to move the student towards a more advanced form of expression. This sequence seems to indicate the student’s reluctance or unwillingness to initiate a demonstration without an explicit call from the teacher.

6.2 Teacher’s demonstration of understanding

Dharma combat as an activity is a confrontation for both student and teacher. While we have thus far concentrated on the teacher’s challenge to the student, at certain points the teacher is called upon by the student to demonstrate understanding.
In the following transcript, the teacher tells a narrative about the value of "not-knowing" (only a portion of which is reproduced). Upon the completion of the narrative, the student calls upon the teacher to "show" his understanding (arrow 1).

[10] SIXTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER
T: ... Bodhidarma said I don't know *but ah* fortunately (.) Emperor Wu didn't get it (1.6) Bodhidharma in disgust turned (1.7) left (0.6) sat for nine years: in a cave facing a wall (2.9)
T: ((whispered)) I don't know (3.6)
1→ S: Shosanshi show me this don't know mind (3.5)
2→ T: Huh sun rises: (1.1) in the east sets in the west (5.0)
3→ S: When your head scratch- when your head itches you just scratch it
T: Sometimes they don't (audience laughter)=
T: =Sitting in the zendo you scratch your head you get yelled at...

In response to the student’s request and challenge (arrow 1), the teacher does not discursively explain the “don’t know mind,” instead he offers, from a Western perspective, what appears to be an irrelevant answer (arrow 2). From a Zen perspective, this answer need not adhere to conversational maxims (Grice, 1975) or make sense logically or discursively. This utterance may be glossed as the teacher’s “showing” of the “don’t know mind.”

The student’s attempt to match or imitate the teacher’s answer in form (arrow 3) displays the student’s recognition of the teacher’s utterance as a demonstration of understanding. To put this another way, as analysts we can use the student’s response (arrow 3) as his interpretation of the teacher’s prior utterance. The student would not attempt to provide a structurally similar type of idiomatic answer, unless the student saw the teacher as presenting a demonstration.

The following transcript is the shortest exchange we have from this Dharma combat.

S: If the buddha (1.0) banged on the door (1.1) or on the floor (1.5) or on the wall: during the service (2.0) would ya turn him away?: (0.9) if he refused to observe the rule of silence? (1.0) or would ya hit him over the head with the rule book (1.6) or what (1.3)
T: ((slaps floor four times loudly))  
S: ((leaves))

The student here initiates the encounter by asking a puzzle-like question. The teacher does not respond verbally to this puzzle, but rather slaps the floor four times. The student then leaves the encounter. The student’s action of leaving may be seen as a response indicating his recognition of the teacher’s demonstration and its completion.

In the following fragment, the teacher demonstrates an answer in response to a student’s question.

[12] FIFTH TEACHER-STUDENT ENCOUNTER  
S: How’s your pract- ((clears throat)) how’s your practice progressing Dido  
(1.3)  
→ T: Ahh:: URGH:: MMMM::nn:: HAAaa::  
(2.8)  
S: Can’t seem to get anywhere?  
(4.9)  
T: *Do you understand?*  
(1.5)  
S: *No*  
(4.5)  
T: How does your practice go …

The teacher provides a demonstration of understanding (arrow) in response to the student’s question. The student takes the teacher’s apparent “groaning” conventionally as indicating difficulty as displayed by the student’s follow-up question. But the teacher breaks out of this discursive talk by asking the student if he understands the significance of his answer.

In above encounters, the teacher’s demonstration is in response to a request [10] or a question [12] from the student, but the teacher’s demonstration simultaneously works as a challenge to the student. In each case, the student’s response to the teacher’s demonstration is negatively assessed. Demonstration is the valued form of expression, but it is apparently difficult for students to respond – to know what to do next. Students need to know how to produce a demonstration of understanding. As such, the teacher’s demonstration of understanding furthers the communication problem for the student.

7. Discussion

The program of the ethnography of communication calls for a comparison of ways of speaking across contexts. Other religions also use tests of understanding, such as Talmudic disputation and Taoist verbal confronta-
tion. For instance, the Taoists at the Settled Heart commune in Colorado used various forms of verbal confrontation, “ranging from softly spoken insults to full-fledged, face-to-face yelling matches replete with obscenities” (Crawford, 1986: 68). While this is clearly more vociferous than Zen, there is a parallel to the use of the koan in that each form is a confrontation designed to “shock” the student out of ordinary consciousness.

In comparison to mainstream, middle-class, North American English conversation, the Dharma combat discourse reveals noticeably more silences, i.e., between-turn gaps and within-turn pauses. These silences are readily apparent from even a casual inspection of the transcripts presented above. These pauses and gaps display the importance or the carefulness the participants give to the activity. Such silences result from participants using their meditative states in answering and responding. These pauses and gaps function to minimize the possibility of overlaps and interruptions. This economy of speech to silence seems to provide a way for the participants to display orientation to the importance of the event and the respect they have for each other.

Our above description of Dharma combat can be compared to schoolroom discourse, teacher-student exchanges in the classroom. As in the Zen context, we have the social identities of teacher and student. Classroom talk and Dharma combat are more formal than ordinary conversation in that there are less speech overlaps and more silences — between-turn gaps and within-turn pauses (McHoul, 1978). In each context we see the discourse pattern of the teacher putting a question to the student, a student offering an answer, and then the teacher evaluating this answer. This characteristic pattern has been described by the three-part sequence: (a) teacher’s question, (b) student’s answer, and (c) teacher’s comment on answer (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Analysts have observed that part (c), or the third-turn, imbues such interaction with its pedagogic character (Heritage, 1984: 288–289). In this third turn the teacher may make various moves: assess the answer, question the student further, or challenge the student’s understanding. In both communication contexts the third turn, or responses to the student’s answer, can be used as a resource to ascertain the teacher’s understanding and evaluation of the answer.

The distinguishing feature of Zen discourse comes in the members’ understandings which are displayed in and through their communicative practices. In each context the characteristic three-part sequence is initiated by the teacher’s question, but the question or koan in Dharma combat is of a radically different nature. As we have seen, participants in Dharma combat face the problem of how to communicate an answer to a question, the koan, which cannot be suitably answered by discursive reasoning and
Western cannons of rationality. Given the impossibility of expressing such understandings in ordinary language, moves the Zen practitioner toward different modes of expression, away from discursive talk and toward a demonstration of understanding. Consequently, some student answers and teacher responses do not make sense within a discursive discourse mode.

When the more advanced practitioners are asked about their knowledge of Zen, they claim ignorance or not to know. Preston (1988) also observed this disavowal of knowledge; to paraphrase his observation, “Those who know, say they don’t know.” Such disavowals seemed to come primarily from the more advanced practitioners and from the teacher (see transcript [10]). At the same time, these advanced practitioners are more able to demonstrate their understanding. This verbal disavowal of knowledge by more advanced practitioners reflects the Zen preference for demonstrating one’s understanding over discursive answers.

Another point of comparison is to the description of Dharma combat as practiced in other cultures, such as Japan. Izutsu (1982) characterizes Dharma combat by its terse and succinct manner of confrontation. “The dialogue is ... mostly of extreme concision and brevity. It is a real verbal fight. And the fight is over almost instantaneously, just like a contrast fought with real swords by two masters of Japanese swordsmanship. There is no room for a dialektiké. The Zen dialogue does not last long like a Platonic dialogue ... Rather, the Zen dialogue aims at grasping the ultimate and eternal Truth in a momentary flash of words (Izutsu, 1982: 06). This description of a brief, terse exchange between teacher and student does not fit our North American case of Dharma combat. In only one or two instances could the above description be supported by the data (see transcript [6] and [11]).

We may speculate about the divergence of our case from Izutsu’s (1982) above description of the terseness of Zen dialogue. Two explanations seem plausible here. First of all, Izutsu’s description may be an idealized account, a case of noteworthy historical significance between advanced Zen practitioners. What gets written of in Zen texts is the exemplary rather than the ordinary instance. Secondly, as Zen has spread throughout the world from China to Japan and Korea and now to the West, it has gone through various transitions due to its cultural base (Kraft, 1988). North American Zen practitioners may be more voluble than their Japanese counterparts. Even though Western and Zen epistemologies are radically different, North Americans come to Zen with cultural ways of learning acquired through verbal explanations and reasoning (Kapleau, 1988). This seems to be especially true in the dialogue with the newer, less advanced students; their exchanges with the teacher are more lengthy, literal, and discursive than the more advanced students. The acquisition of communication competence at
Zen practice requires more succinct and demonstrative ways of communicating.

By way of summary, we have attempted to provide an account of two of the most distinctive features of the Zen practice of Dharma combat, the uses of the koan and the call for demonstration. Dharma combat is designed to “challenge” or “confront” participants with the problem of expressing one’s understanding within the Zen constraints about thinking and ordinary language. For the newer student, in particular, this call for expression combined with the Zen constraints pose a communication problem. The koan and call for demonstration are not merely exotic or baffling forms of expression, but are the very activeness through which the group’s ways of knowing are interactionally conveyed and displayed.

References


### Appendix

**Transcript notation**

- [ ] Marks the beginning of overlapping utterances.
- = Marks when there is no interval between adjacent utterances.
- (0.3) Intervals within and between utterances timed to tenths of a second.
- (.) A short untimed pause less than a second.
- : Marks the extension of the sound or syllable it follows.
- ? Marks a rising inflection.
- , Marks a continuing intonation.
- - Marks a halting, abrupt cutoff.
- **word** Emphasis is marked by underlining.
- **WORD** Capital letters mark that the passage is spoken louder than surrounding talk.
- **** Marks a passage that is quieter than surrounding talk.
- > < Marks an utterance delivered at a quicker pace than surrounding talk.
- **hhh** Audible exhalation or out-breath.
- ( ) Transcriptionist doubt.