

# Goals and Methods in Zen Buddhism and Wittgenstein

By  
Henry Olree

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Honors Requirements  
for the Department of Religion  
Dickinson College

Dr. Daniel Cozort, Supervisor

Carlisle, Pennsylvania  
May 16, 2021

In academic circles, the extent to which ideas of Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951) are comparable to Zen Buddhist thought has been explored since at least 1958 with the publication of Paul Wienpahl's article "Zen and the Work of Wittgenstein." Articles written on the subject tend to focus on two aspects of Wittgenstein and Zen. One is the *goals*, namely the aim of Zen Buddhist practice compared with what Wittgenstein believes should be the aim of all philosophy. The other is the *methods*, namely traditional pedagogies used in Zen Buddhism to achieve Zen's aim compared with how Wittgenstein believes philosophy can achieve its only legitimate aim. This amounts to comparing primarily the Zen ideas of *satori*, *mushin*, and *kōans* with the Wittgensteinian ideas of "complete clarity," "just playing the game," and "the only strictly correct method," respectively.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that the accuracy of the comparisons made in scholarly works is lackluster until significant improvements begin around 1977. While analyses by Wienpahl (writing in 1958) and John Canfield (writing in 1975) leave much to be desired, analyses beginning with D. Z. Phillips and Dick Garner (both writing in 1977) more accurately represent the similarities and differences between Wittgensteinian and Zen thought. This paper leaves the reason for this phenomenon open to questioning, but invites the possibility that the improvements reflect increased exposure to authentic Zen thought by Western scholarship.

## **I. Introduction to Zen Buddhism**

The term "Zen Buddhism" denotes a tradition, allegedly started in our cosmic age by the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama (Shakyamuni), of masters "transmitting" their experience

---

<sup>1</sup> I say "Wittgensteinian" instead of "Wittgenstein's" because Wittgenstein's work, especially his *Philosophical Investigations*, is famously unclear about what exactly the author intends to convey (McGinn 1). Accordingly, I permit well-established interpretations of Wittgenstein's thought to influence my presentation of Wittgenstein, rather than vainly refusing interpretations in order to uncover what Wittgenstein really meant.

of enlightenment to disciples, who then transmit it to their disciples (Bodiford, O'Brien). Zen traditionally began viewing itself as a distinct kind of Buddhism in the fifth century CE, when the latest recipient of the awakening, Bodhidharma, introduced it to China as “true Buddhism” (Bodiford). But Zen as a distinct Buddhist tradition does not appear in the historical record until the beginning of China’s Zhou dynasty (690–705 CE), when empress Wuhou made Zen teachers her court priests (Bodiford).

What sets Zen apart from other Buddhist traditions is primarily its emphasis on transmitting the experience of enlightenment, rather than merely teaching how to attain it. Specifically, this entails the contention that reading Buddhist scriptures, studying the teachings, is not necessary for achieving enlightenment; whether the scriptures are useful or not depends on the student (Bodiford, Looi 111–113). Zen claims this is so because one’s ability to experience enlightenment does not depend on digesting scriptural teachings. Bodhidharma allegedly said, “Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures, with no dependence upon words and letters, a direct pointing to the human mind, and the realization of Buddhahood” (Looi 111).

So, if one need not understand written teachings to attain enlightenment, what *does* need to be understood? Put another way, what is being communicated in Zen transmission? Zen claims successful transmission occurs when the student sustains *satori* (“awakening”), a liberation from ontological illusions or “seeing into one’s nature” (*kensho*) that inspires compassion and spontaneous wisdom (Nagatomo, Herschok). *Satori* traditionally requires the student to experientially realize that the alleged distinction between his “ego-consciousness” or mind (the “I think” in “I think therefore I am”) and objects in the world is illusory. Specifically, he realizes that the internal world of the mind and external world of objects are so fundamentally interdependent that objects cannot be said exist independently of mental perceptions, and mental

perceptions cannot be said to exist independently of objects. Rather, the notions of “mind,” “perceptions,” “concepts,” and “objects” are practical abstractions superimposed on the pure relationality constituting reality (Hershock, Nagatomo).

So, if one were to say the material world is fundamentally made of atoms, for example, Zen would argue it is not that atoms are the building blocks of reality and whatever emerges to plain sight from atoms (e.g., molecules, visible objects) is practical abstraction. Rather, Zen would claim that the atoms, along with all “things,” are practical abstractions, and the all-pervasive interdependence from which thing-abstractions arise within us is itself reality. Yet dwelling on the interdependence of mind and objects can mislead one into claiming that the internal and the external are one whole “thing” constituting reality. This also obscures purely interdependent reality because it implies that a thing can have an existence of its own. So understanding reality requires a “positionless position” in which one believes in the self-essence neither of things like desks and chairs nor of a monistic (everything-is-one) universe (Nagatomo).

This implies that understanding reality cannot be achieved through analytical reasoning (in the literal sense of dividing complexities into simple parts) because to analyze is to engage in abstraction, the illustration of things. Instead, seeing “how things they really are” requires orienting oneself towards direct experience, and doing so without “clinging” to phenomena by insisting they are things with basis in reality. This approach is called *mushin* (“no-mind”), a mode of being free from such clinging to concepts (including desires), a fully open-minded disposition empty of intellectual attachments but not mindless (Nagatomo, Suzuki 1–2).

Whatever comes to view for this empty mind is the “suchness” of reality, a “seeing” in which

pure interdependence is experienced. This thoroughly non-dualistic experience is that of *satori*, which the student is to cultivate over time to receive the transmission.

There are no rules about how one must achieve *satori*, but two pedagogical methods dominate Zen tradition. One, typically used by Zen's Soto school, is called *shikan taza* ("just sitting") and does not concern us here. The other method, typically used by Zen's Rinzai school, is called the *kōan* method and is noteworthy for our purposes. A *kōan* is a riddle designed to be unsolvable by analytical reasoning, and solvable only by renouncing the attachment to essences (things or properties of things considered real-in-themselves) that analytical reasoning presupposes (Nagatomo). For example, consider a humorous *kōan* borrowed by Carl Hooper in an article we will examine later: "A monk asked Ummon, 'What is Buddha?' Ummon replied, 'A dried shit-stick!'"

From the perspective of our everyday attachment to essences, Ummon's response is nonsensical. How could Buddha, whether referring to Siddhartha Gautama or a philosophical concept, possibly be the same as a dried shit-stick? But the *kōan* forces us to abandon essence-attachment in order to solve it. For if we do, we become more puzzled by the monk's question than by Ummon's answer. If reality lacks essences, what kind of question is "What is Buddha?" How could Buddha be anything in particular? Ummon's answer intends to reveal this absurdity, which is the point of the *kōan*. In this way *kōans* encourage the adoption of *mushin* and traditionally aid students in their achievement of *satori*.

## II. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is among the most revered philosophers of the twentieth century and was a key figure in the "analytic" philosophical tradition that arose during

his lifetime (Monk). His philosophical debut took the form of kudos from his mentor Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) for his assistance in developing ideas laid out in Russell’s article series “Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (Stroll and Donnellan). But it was Wittgenstein’s own spin on “logical atomism,” displayed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (“Logical-Philosophical Treatise,” 1922), that first earned him renown. The *Tractatus* is best understood by beginning with Wittgenstein’s meta-philosophical claim that philosophical problems/debates arise from “the misunderstanding of the logic of our language” (*Tractatus* 23). Wittgenstein seems to have been perplexed by why so many philosophical debates rage on with no resolution in sight, and became convinced that the debates make no progress because philosophers are not united in using language in the singular way that enables it to be meaningful.

To take a trivial example, suppose you were to tell me, “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red and not red.” I would understand the meanings of the words in that sentence, but it seems that I would not understand the meaning of the sentence as a whole. In fact, the sentence seems to have no meaning at all. Wittgenstein would say this is because the extent to which any sentence is meaningful, as in “I get what you’re saying,” depends on the extent to which the sentence and its components (words, syntax) correspond with a specific fact or facts in the world (*Tractatus* 8). In Russell’s words, “the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts,” and since “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red and not red” does neither of those things, it is a meaningless sentence.

To make this theory compelling, Wittgenstein needs to explain how exactly propositions and their components can “correspond with” real facts in the world. How exactly does the proposition “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red” necessarily correspond with the alleged fact of Clifford the Big Red Dog being red? Wittgenstein answers that propositions are symbols we give

facts, symbols which operate as claims that the logical relationship between the parts of symbol A, B, etc. resembles the logical relationship between the parts of fact A, B, etc. enough to be considered a “logical picture” of it, something which unambiguously represents it like a painting of Paris unambiguously represents Paris (*Tractatus* 9, 28, 39). That a correspondence of this kind is possible at all implies Wittgenstein’s central assumption: that the logical structure underlying propositions is literally the same logical structure underlying reality (Monk, cf. *Tractatus* 8). Put another way, the logic which makes the proposition “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red” comprehensible *is* the logic of reality.

Considering that all philosophy consists of propositions, it is notable that propositions are merely logical pictures of reality. For Wittgenstein, this has two implications. First, if the goal of philosophy is to describe what reality *is*, then all philosophy fails. This is because propositions cannot describe the logical structure that makes them intelligible, meaning they cannot describe the logical structure of reality; the best propositions can do is display it. In other words, philosophy consists of saying things, but what philosophy tries to describe, the logic of reality, “can only be shown” (*Tractatus* 10). Second, if there is still something for philosophy to do, that something must be the only thing it is capable of doing: clarifying thoughts through elucidating language.

Specifically, philosophy is the ongoing project of forming “ideal language,” logically analyzing every proposition to reveal its unambiguous, logically undeniable meaning (*Tractatus* 10). This seems simple enough with propositions like “The leaf is green.” This is what Wittgenstein would call an “atomic proposition,” because it means, without a doubt, exactly what it means (*Tractatus* 11). But consider propositions employed in philosophical debates, like “The Good is The Beautiful.” Suddenly, what is meant is not clear. And it is the job of

philosophers, Wittgenstein contends, to logically analyze this proposition, e.g., to determine what “The Good” and “The Beautiful” mean, until it is deemed as nonsensical as “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red and not red” or as sensical as “Clifford the Big Red Dog is red.” Questions of truth come afterwards, and Wittgenstein thinks philosophical contentions never reach this stage because they are ultimately nonsense, “bad grammar” (10). This is because philosophy attempts to communicate that which is beyond the power of propositions to communicate, for which there is nothing to say (10). Hence Wittgenstein’s own summary of his position: “What can said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (*Tractatus* 23).

With this notion in mind, we can understand what Wittgenstein means on the last page of his *Tractatus* by “the only strictly correct method” for conducting philosophy (*Tractatus* 90). “What can be said clearly,” Wittgenstein contends, are propositions concerning natural science, or what we might call the hard sciences (*Tractatus* 90). By contrast, metaphysical propositions, among which Wittgenstein implicitly includes all propositions supporting philosophical theories, cannot be said clearly (i.e., logically reduce to nonsense). So, the only correct way for philosophy to operate, Wittgenstein contends, is to simply demonstrate the nonsense of these metaphysical propositions through logical analysis. Wittgenstein recognizes that this does not seem like philosophy at all, but he does not think that makes the method less correct (*Tractatus* 90). Thus for Wittgenstein, philosophy should show that its own propositions are senseless, meaningless. Only then can the philosopher “surmount these propositions” and “see the world rightly” (*Tractatus* 90).



### III. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

Wittgenstein's second seminal work, an unfinished collection of ideas published after his death as *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), functions as a challenge to the *Tractatus* (Monk). It first attacks Wittgenstein's old "picture theory of meaning" (Monk), the idea that the meaning of a proposition is the specific fact with which it shares a unique logical structure or "picture." Wittgenstein describes that theory like this in the *Investigations*: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with a word. It is the object for which the word stands" (5e). To understand Wittgenstein's new objection to this central idea of the *Tractatus*, let us first recall what Wittgenstein means by the "meaning" of a proposition. Like in the "Clifford the Big Red Dog" example, Wittgenstein still equates one's capacity to understand a proposition with one's capacity to make sense of it or to recognize its meaning. The meaning of a proposition is what a proposition is understood to communicate, and the proposition must make some sort of sense for it to be capable of communicating anything at all.

That said, the "Later Wittgenstein" of the *Investigations* challenges the "Early Wittgenstein's" picture theory by way of example. Suppose a community of builders uses a language consisting of the words "block," "pillar," "slab," and "beam" that aids the community in performing the task of building. How do the community's children learn the language? Specifically, how do the children learn what the words, and consequently the possible propositions, mean? Picture theory argues that when the parents utter "block" as they point to the corresponding object (a block) in front of a child, the child understands that the object is called "block" through an "innate insight" that the word "block" is a symbol of the object which corresponds with it in logical structure (McGinn 45). The Later Wittgenstein noticed that this "innate insight" is left unexplained. Furthermore, it demands an explanation; how can a toddler

automatically understand that pointing to an object while uttering a sound constitutes naming the object when the toddler has not learned what it means to name things? (McGinn 45).

Wittgenstein proposes an explanation that departs entirely from picture theory. He reminds us that the community of builders, while teaching their children their language, are also teaching them the activity of building; the two “educations” are occurring simultaneously. From this, he proposes that perhaps these educations are inextricably intertwined, and consequently that language and the activity it is used in are inextricably intertwined in a sort of “language-game” (McGinn 47). Thus, perhaps a builder’s child understands the word “block” not through innately recognizing a logical symbol-object correspondence usable to construct propositions, but through learning the word’s role in propositions that denote patterns of activity, such as the proposition “Block!” denoting the action of handing someone a block (McGinn 47). In other words, in picture theory a word’s meaning is its correspondence with a fact, but in “language-game theory” a word’s meaning is its *use* in the activities which employ it (language-games) (43).

Like the picture theorist struggles to demonstrate the existence of innate insight, the language-game theorist struggles to explain how exactly one comes to know the right use of words in language-games. Put another way, how can one know how to play the game when the rules are incomprehensible without playing the game? Wittgenstein’s less-than-ideal answer is to just play the game. Wittgenstein writes about telling the proposition “Five apples” to a shopkeeper who grabs five apples for the customer: “But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word ‘red’ and what he is to do with the word ‘five’? – Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere” (*Investigations* 6e). For the

language-game theorist, “just playing the game” is the mysterious key to understanding language.

But language-game theory has a major edge over picture theory. Returning to the builder’s child, suppose that the child really does have innate insight. How does the child’s recognition of correspondence between the word “slab” and an object (a slab) constitute *understanding* the word, i.e., knowing the word’s meaning? Can the child know what “slab” means solely through the logical picture she forms connecting word to object? The Later Wittgenstein says no. In the context of this builder community, “our ordinary idea of what constitutes understanding” demands that understanding the word “slab” entails understanding the actions associated with it (McGinn 47). Wittgenstein asks in the *Investigations*, “Doesn’t someone [in the builder community] who acts on the call ‘Slab!’ in such-and-such a way,” regardless of the presence of a logical picture or recognition of symbol-object correspondence, “understand it?” (7e). Accordingly, the Later Wittgenstein thinks language-game theory better explains how we understand language than picture theory does.

Having claimed the superiority of language-game theory, Wittgenstein is forced to renounce his “only strictly correct method” from the *Tractatus* and postulate a new view on how to solve philosophical problems. According to his new view, all philosophical problems arise from a lack of “complete clarity,” but not clarity in the *Tractatus*’s sense of logical demonstration that all philosophical propositions amount to nonsense. Rather, “complete clarity” is achieved when one recognizes that if the meaning of any proposition is its use in a language-game, any proposition is meaningless outside of its language-game.

Wittgenstein asks us to consider the proposition “This is how things are” (*Investigations* 57e). Russell contended that this proposition (symbol), and perhaps this proposition alone,

undeniably corresponds to a fact in reality (object). If I'm sitting at a classroom desk and I claim "the desk exists," I can doubt whether this is true because I'm not sure whether I'm perceiving a real, physical object (I could be hallucinating). But if I make the claim "This is how things are" in reference to that which I'm perceiving, whatever it is, I cannot doubt the truth of that claim. This is because it is impossible to persuasively argue I am not perceiving something, i.e., stuff or "sense data," even if it is a hallucination. So, according to Russell, "This is how things are" undoubtedly reflects a fact I know is true "by acquaintance," i.e., through direct experience (cf. Stroll and Donnellan).

Wittgenstein challenges Russell's conclusion through noticing that "This is how things are" appears to have the quality of corresponding with present experience "only because it has the construction of an English sentence." If we instead chose to say "p" to denote present experience, a symbol would still be used to denote the same experience, i.e., the same symbol-object correspondence would occur. But no one could even begin to assess whether the proposition "p" is true, because the alleged symbol-object correspondence between "p" and reality does nothing to make "p" meaningful or understandable. Thus, Wittgenstein contends that "This is how things are" operates as the proposition described above "only because it is itself what one calls an English sentence," only because it plays a role in an already established game (*Investigations* 57e). And if the meaning of the proposition is dependent on its role in an already established game, "To say that it agrees (or does not agree) with reality would be obvious nonsense" (57e).

Accordingly, "complete clarity" in the *Investigations* amounts to recognizing that all philosophy, because it consists entirely of language, is a game. There is no objective nonsense to be uncovered in philosophical statements, only the realization that all statements have nothing to

do with reality and thus I can “break off philosophizing when I want to” (57e). Wittgenstein thinks this realization does not require a specific method, meaning philosophy need not adopt a specific method like was advocated in the *Tractatus*. Instead, philosophical methods are to be treated like “therapies” whose utility is determined by their ability to produce “complete clarity” (57e).

#### **IV. Paul Wienpahl’s “Zen and the Work of Wittgenstein” (1958)**

Wienpahl structures his article around three claims. First, that the goal of philosophy in both the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* resembles *satori* in Zen. Second, that the style of the *Investigations* resembles *kōan* pedagogy. Third, that the “therapeutic” approach to philosophy advocated by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* resembles Zen’s general lack of reliance on a particular method to achieve transmission.

Arguing for his first claim, that the goal of philosophy in both the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* resembles *satori* in Zen, Wienpahl notes that Wittgenstein’s comments on philosophical method towards the end of the *Tractatus* “may be taken to indicate” that Wittgenstein himself had dissolved his philosophical concerns by detaching himself from the proposition-born philosophical ideas he considered illusory (68). Wienpahl cites quotations including, “The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem,” and “At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena” (68). Wienpahl equates the dissolving of these concerns with a realization that all “differences between things” are illusory, which leads him to claim that Wittgenstein had “attained a state of mind resembling [...] *satori*,” which Wienpahl

characterizes as a disposition in which “one is not bothered by questions about ‘the meaning of it all’” (69).

Regarding the second claim, that the style of the *Investigations* resembles *kōan* pedagogy, Wienpahl continues that Wittgenstein’s goal in writing the *Investigations* was to develop a method for achieving the concept-detachment he supposedly advocated at the end of the *Tractatus*. Wienpahl cites Wittgenstein’s “imagine a yellow patch” counterexample to picture theory. If I tell you to bring me a yellow flower, you likely think you conceive of that scenario as a sort of mental picture in order to understand what I mean. But what if I tell you to imagine a yellow patch? Surely a mental picture does not arise, for you cannot imagine (in the sense of mentally “seeing” or envisioning) the literal process of imagining something. The best you can do is analogize it to other things you can imagine (e.g., a light bulb going off, yourself in a thinking pose). Yet you understand the command anyways, which Wittgenstein thinks indicates that your ability to understand the command has nothing to do with mental pictures (69).

Wienpahl thinks such examples from the *Investigations* resemble *kōans* insofar as they entail “constructing or calling attention to examples of linguistic behavior in such a way as to shock the mind into noticing something which had not been noticed and thereby to free it from [...] the bind of conceptions” (69).

Finally, in relation to the last claim, that the “therapeutic” approach to philosophy advocated by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* resembles Zen’s general lack of reliance on a particular method to achieve transmission, Wienpahl contends that Wittgenstein’s position that methods for achieving “complete clarity” are legitimized solely by their results (“like different therapies”) resembles the Buddha’s pedagogy as described in the *Diamond Sutra*, a valued text in Zen tradition (69, 71–72). In the sutra, the Buddha’s teachings are compared to “a raft that is

of use only to cross a river,” suggesting that the teachings are evaluated solely by their ability to lead to *nirvana* or *satori* in their listeners (Wienpahl 71–72). Accordingly, Wienpahl infers that Wittgenstein and Zen masters would agree that the value of methods is solely therapeutic. That is, good methods are evaluated not by logical coherence or dialectical resilience, but by their ability to free listeners from concept-attachment.

I think that only Wienpahl’s third claim carries substantial weight. Regarding the first claim, it is misleading to characterize both Wittgenstein’s mindset in the *Tractatus* and *satori* in Zen as concept-detachment. The Early Wittgenstein views the goal of philosophy as revealing the nonsense of its own propositions through logical analysis, meaning the goal is not to detach from them as if they are some otherwise inescapable illusion. Rather, as Wittgenstein says, the problem “vanishes” when the nonsense of the propositions is clearly shown. It just becomes abundantly clear that philosophy attempts to say things which cannot be said, and concepts like picture theory are required to attain this clarity (even if such clarity entails abandoning picture theory afterwards).

*Satori* differs from both concept-detachment and the Early Wittgenstein’s “only strictly correct method.” *Satori* indeed arises in part from noticing that distinctions between things are illusory, but Wienpahl’s equation of this realization with concept-detachment is flawed. The *mushin* (“no-mind”) conducive to *satori* is not a deliberate shunning of all concepts; it is not “mindless.” Rather, *mushin* is having no concepts or ideas *in particular*, none to which one is clinging, in order to approach reality with a truly open mind and gain insight into its character (Nagatomo, Suzuki 1–2). Regarding Zen versus the “only strictly correct method,” Zen firmly upholds the pure relationality/interdependence of reality, while the Early Wittgenstein thinks any observations about reality-as-it-is are nonsensical propositions. Zen claims one cannot use

propositions to express this truth, but nonetheless believes insight into this reality, *satori*, is possible, which the *Tractatus* would deny.

Wienpahl's second claim is also questionable. Examples like "imagine a yellow patch" from the *Investigations* indeed make one notice things about linguistic behavior they had not realized before, but it does not follow that such examples encourage the reader to abandon all concepts. For the Later Wittgenstein, language-game theory, and by extension any concept, is sometimes useful and sometimes not. The goal is to stop philosophizing *when I want to*, on command, not to stop philosophizing entirely. Plus, concept-abandonment is not even the goal of *kōans*. *Kōans* aim to eliminate clinging to essences, to eliminate subject-predicate thinking in which any "thing" has real particular properties. The goal, as stated before about *mushin*, is to have no distinctions or concepts *in particular*, none to which one is clinging. A life in which one forces himself to lack all concepts is alien to Zen practice.

But Wienpahl's third claim is fair enough. The Later Wittgenstein approves of any method or methods which achieve "complete clarity," and Zen approves of whatever aids a student in achieving *satori*. Neither require a set method, for both are therapeutic in the sense of being oriented towards solving a sort of unease.

## **V. John Canfield's "Wittgenstein and Zen" (1975)**

John Canfield's article "Wittgenstein and Zen" (1975) essentially claims that the Later Wittgenstein's "just playing the game" is the same as Zen's *mushin*. Starting with Wittgenstein's "imagine a yellow patch" example, Canfield summarizes language-game theory fairly accurately (cf. Canfield 389–401). He builds on this to claim resemblance between the *Investigations* and Zen thought. He thinks Wittgenstein's insistence that we "just play" language games (even as



we're unsure how we know how to play them) in order to understand reality closely resembles the Zen practice of *mushin* (which Canfield calls "just doing") in order to achieve the understanding of reality revealed by *satori* (383). But here Canfield makes a major error. Namely, he claims language-game theory contends that "understanding," as in understanding reality in distinction from understanding language, "do[es] not require thought" (383). This assumes incorrectly that language-game theory has anything to say about how reality is understood as distinct from how language is understood, which pervasively undermines Canfield's argument.

Specifically, the Later Wittgenstein's idea of "just playing the game" is useful solely for understanding language. One of his central ideas in the *Investigations* is that philosophy, the discipline concerned with questions of reality-as-it-is, cannot possibly have anything to say about reality, since its meaning exists entirely within the boundaries of language-games. So, "just playing" a language-game does not help one understand reality. Rather, the Later Wittgenstein aims at "complete clarity," which is not an understanding of reality but merely a realization that philosophical problems are no more substantial than games. "Complete clarity" leaves reality a mystery.

On the other hand, Canfield is right that *satori* is about understanding reality-as-it-is. But his characterization of the *mushin* achieving *satori* is not entirely on-target. Canfield argues that because "those practicing Zen Buddhism are admonished to carry on their daily activities [...] in a state that is free of all thoughts" but nevertheless "understand information presented to [them]," Zen thought "postulates the possibility of understanding existing in the absence of thought" (385). The "state that is free of all thoughts" seems to be Canfield's definition for *mushin* (which elsewhere he calls "just doing"), and such a definition is misleading. Like Wienpahl, Canfield

mistakenly equates *mushin* with a persistently concept-less state in which all ideas and concepts are permanently abandoned. Canfield accordingly claims that *mushin* enables one to understand reality through “the absence of thought.” But *mushin* is not the absence of thought; it is the absence of any clinging to particular thoughts. It is understanding without *basis in* thoughts.

Canfield thinks that the *Diamond Sutra*’s claim that no “notion” or concept can arise in a “Bodhi-being” or enlightened being, as well as the Zen-approved *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sutra*’s claim that “clean wisdom” arises if “the mind is kept from all mental conditions,” can be completely understood in light of language-game theory, without any traditional Zen teaching required (385–386, 391). But in light of my criticisms, it should be clear that this is not the case. It is indeed true that no concept can arise within a Bodhi-being, but this does not exclude concepts from *happening to* a Bodhi-being. “Arising within” suggests clinging to one’s authorship of the concept; “happening to” does not, and the latter would be excluded from Canfield’s understanding of *mushin*. Similarly, to have a mental “condition” implies having a state of mind weighing on the subject, something that does more than merely pass through. The *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sutra* is not saying the mind should force itself to drop concepts; it is saying the mind should free itself from being chained to them.

#### **VI. D. Z. Phillips’s “On Wanting to Compare Wittgenstein and Zen” (1977)**

D. Z. Phillips’s article “On Wanting to Compare Wittgenstein and Zen” (1977) criticizes Canfield in a similar way. He agrees with Canfield that language-game theory can help remove “initial intellectual prejudice” from explorers of Buddhism by presenting a persuasive argument against the necessity of concepts/thought in understanding (Phillips 338–339). But he disagrees that the idea of understanding arising from “just playing the game” can be equated with the Zen

idea of understanding arising from “just doing” or *mushin* (339). He contends Canfield misses that language-game theory sets up a dichotomy missing in Zen thought, namely that you are either engaged in a sort of “harmful reflection” if you are “acting with thought” (having any mental pictures) or you are achieving “complete clarity” if you are “acting without thought” (“just playing the game”) (339–340).

Phillips turns one of Canfield’s own examples against him to demonstrate how “just doing” (*mushin*) in Zen could be said to at least sometimes operate in a middle ground in which acting with thought lacks harmful reflection (340). The example is from renowned Zen teacher Philip Kapleau (d. 2004); it recounts a “Japanese-style fencing champion” whose “preoccupation with tactics” during his matches caused him to lose against three different, less skilled opponents. Consequently, for his fourth match he tried setting aside those tactical thoughts and “simply giving himself to the task in hand.” He became so immersed in doing so that he did not know whether he had won or not until someone told him later, and this immersion, he claimed, was “the naked expression of enlightenment” (Phillips 339). Phillips thinks the example creates a problem for Canfield because although the fencer clearly acted without thought during his fourth round, the story claims his “splendid victory” was “full of foresight.” So, before his match, the fencer imagined mental pictures of what he might encounter in the match, meaning before his match he acted with thought without engaging in harmful reflection (340).

In essence, Phillips is responding to Canfield’s equation of Later Wittgensteinian “just playing the game” with *mushin* by noting that the Zen ideal does not prohibit forethought. To Phillips, it seems that the fencing champion need not “strip away” *all* of his thoughts to achieve *satori* because one would be hard-pressed to claim he won his fourth round without exercising forethought prior to the round, and he allegedly achieved *satori* anyways. By contrast, the Later

Wittgenstein would contend that any “acting with thought” obstructs the goal of “complete clarity” (Phillips 341). Accordingly, Phillips contends, one cannot equate Wittgenstein’s concept-detachment for “complete clarity” with Zen’s *mushin* for *satori*, even if they are similar. I agree with Phillips, because his contention highlights that Zen, unlike Later Wittgenstein, does not recommend a complete, enforced absence of thoughts.

Phillips additionally objects to equating “acting without thought” and *mushin* on the grounds that many instances of Wittgensteinian “just playing the game” would not be considered instances of *mushin* by Zen practitioners. Phillips again uses one of Canfield’s own examples to make this point, this time a passage by the Taoist thinker Chuang Tzu (d. 286 BCE) that both Canfield and Phillips think has “obvious affinities” with Zen thought (Phillips 342). The passage implies that behaviors like anger and cursing cannot arise from “emptiness” (which Canfield identifies with the Zen emptiness of thought: *mushin*), but Phillips notes that “just being angry” or “just cursing” are perfectly acceptable examples of “just playing the game” (342). “Cursing” is among the language-games Wittgenstein lists in the *Investigations*, and “being angry” seems to lack any qualities that would exclude it from such a list (Phillips 342). Thus, it seems that the scope of legitimate examples of *mushin* is smaller than that of legitimate examples of “practice,” meaning *mushin* and “just playing the game” cannot be equated.

Regardless of the legitimacy of citing Chuang Tzu as Zen Buddhist thought, Phillips’s objection here highlights the differing ethical characters of *satori* (achieved through *mushin*) and “complete clarity” (achieved through “just playing the game”). Zen tradition claims that the experience of *satori*, insight into reality, evinces compassion and spontaneous wisdom in the experiencer as if such qualities flow forth from reality itself. By contrast, “complete clarity” is described as a recognition that compassion and selfishness, mercy and anger, all good and bad

activities using language, are comprehensible only within their own games, and are consequently unrelated to what is really true.

## **VII. Dick Garner's "Skepticism, Ordinary Language and Zen Buddhism" (1977)**

Whereas D. Z. Phillips criticized Canfield's equation of Wittgensteinian "just playing the game" with *mushin*, Dick Garner's article "Skepticism, Ordinary Language and Zen Buddhism" (1977) continues the question of *satori* versus "complete clarity." Garner thinks that while an "ordinary-language philosopher" like Wittgenstein "aims at [...] freedom from philosophical worry," Zen practice is "entirely nonconceptual [...] with no conscious intentions" and its appeal derives from the practitioner's ability to "spontaneously attain deliverance" (Garner 175–176).

After providing a brief overview of "complete clarity," Garner makes clear the deliberate nature of striving for such clarity by noting that the Later Wittgenstein's ideas arise from "a particular way of looking at the world, an alert and self-conscious awareness of [one's] own linguistic behavior" (173). He notes also that "complete clarity" seems to manifest specifically as losing the "inclination to make (or even take seriously)" philosophical ideas, whether they are "dogmatic" or "skeptical" (173). Consequently, unlike even the Hellenistic Pyrrhonist skeptics like Sextus Empiricus (d. 210), Wittgenstein's "complete clarity" does not offer a holistic solution to life's problems (Sextus thought Pyrrhonism created an "untroubled condition of the soul"); it offers merely "cessation of bother from philosophical questions" (Garner 174). Sometimes, Wittgenstein's "complete clarity" might even obstruct "quality of life" (Garner 174), such as perhaps in its permissiveness towards being angry (cf. Phillips 342).

As far as I can tell, Garner's assessment here is exactly right. "Complete clarity" is only a conclusion through deliberate philosophical reasoning that philosophical propositions have no

bearing on reality. It is merely a disposition resulting from understanding how language works, and claims to have no power to solve any problems in life besides questions about the nature of reality (i.e., philosophical questions).

For Garner, the Zen aim of *satori* differs from “complete clarity” in both its method and its promise. Somewhat paradoxically, properly aiming at *satori* entails not deliberately aiming at it at all. Garner thinks this idea is found in the teachings of Hui-hai (d. 814), who urged listeners to “keep [their] minds from dwelling on anything whatsoever” in order to “spontaneously achieve deliverance” (175). One can see why Garner draws the inference: if deliverance (presumably *satori*) is spontaneous, then one cannot aim for it like one can aim for “complete clarity.” Garner seems to connect this with Huang-po’s (d. 850) exhortation to “do away with all concepts,” since even having an idea of *satori* in mind will cause you to miss it (174).

Garner also emphasizes *satori*’s differing promise. To Garner, *satori* is not merely a cessation of asking philosophical questions; it is “deliverance” (175), a cessation of all concerns because it transcends the state of being concerned. As Garner puts it, one experiencing *satori* “cannot be disturbed” (175). Therefore, whereas Wittgensteinian “complete clarity” manifests as a deliberate aim at viewing language in such a way that philosophical problems cease to concern, Zen *satori* manifests as a spontaneous experience of lacking problems or worries (cf. *dukkha*) about anything.

Garner’s claim that *satori* does not result from a deliberate way of looking at things (unlike “complete clarity”) is correct, so long as we are discussing what *satori* results from (*mushin*) and not *satori* itself. The *satori* experience of losing essence-based, subject-predicate thinking and being immersed in wisdom and compassion is said to result from approaching experience with *mushin*, and *mushin* is the opposite of looking at things in a deliberate way.

*Satori* itself, on the other hand, seems to have generalizable qualities, such as the expression of wisdom and compassion and the internalization of non-dualistic understanding. But perhaps the latter notion is a question of philosophy rather than a question of how the Zen tradition sees itself, so it might be irrelevant here.

Garner's notion of *satori*'s promise is also fairly accurate, so long as the idea of "lacking disturbance" is understood as disturbances being resolved through insight rather than Wienpahl's "not being bothered by the meaning of it all." Through *satori*, disturbances dissolve as a product of seeing reality clearly; they are not shrugged off because reality is incomprehensible. And Garner rightly notes that this means *all* disturbances. The scope is wider than complete clarity's elimination of mere philosophical questions. Additionally, *satori* is indeed spontaneous in the sense that it typically happens to a person unpredictably. This does not mean immense disciplines oriented towards achieving it are always useless (e.g., "just sitting" or getting drilled with *kōans*). It just means that the conditions for experiencing *satori* are mostly if not entirely unpredictable.

### **VIII. Carl Hooper's "Koan Zen and Wittgenstein's Only Correct Method in Philosophy"** (2007)

Finally, let us visit Carl Hooper's article "Koan Zen and Wittgenstein's Only Correct Method in Philosophy", which argues that Wittgenstein's "only strictly correct method" resembles *kōan* pedagogy in Zen insofar as both "set limits to the reach of philosophical discourse" and "refuse to engage in metaphysical speculations or argue the merits of a metaphysical position" while also not being "anti-metaphysical" (283, 286).

According to Hooper, the Early Wittgenstein's "only strictly correct method" can be described as "policing the border between what can, and what cannot, be said" (284). This leaves open the question, "What determines what can or what cannot be said?" Hooper's answer arises from likening this only correct method with the Zen *dokusan* ("private interview"), presumably part of *kōan* pedagogy (defined as consisting of "meditating on, under the guidance of a master, the apparently nonsensical statements and stories known [...] as *koans*") (283). Hooper notes that in a *dokusan*, the master interviewing the student is "in effect policing the border between what can be said and what cannot be said" by discouraging "the disciple's confused and ignorant attempt to say the unsayable" and encouraging "the insightful recognition that all that is essential lies beyond the reach of language and thought" (285–286). So, Hooper thinks both Wittgenstein's only strictly correct method and *kōan* pedagogy try to ensure that no one wastes time attempting to articulate the ineffable foundations of existence.

We saw how both Wittgenstein's only strictly correct method and *kōan* pedagogy "set limits to the reach of philosophical discourse," but Hooper thinks they also take a similar, specific approach to metaphysics (i.e., the study of things as they really are). Both view serious debate of any metaphysical position as misguided. Some dispute whether Wittgenstein really felt that way, and Hooper sympathizes with them because "it is clear that [Wittgenstein] does not follow [his own] method in his *Tractatus*" (285). But Hooper adopts the position of Gordon Bearn, who reconciles Wittgenstein's method throughout the *Tractatus* and his claim that no one "who tries to say something metaphysical" is onto something by arguing that "the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* are designed to be the last metaphysics" in the sense that they are a metaphysics "designed to destroy the impulse" to speculate about metaphysics (285). *Kōan* pedagogy has no



need to form a “last metaphysics” but similarly thinks metaphysical speculation is useless.

Hooper uses the Ummon *kōan* mentioned earlier to demonstrate this point (286).

Yet neither Wittgenstein’s only correct method nor *kōan* pedagogy is “anti-metaphysical” in the sense of actively repressing people’s metaphysical intuitions. Wittgenstein’s method merely informs the metaphysical speculator that he is not approaching some grand truth; it does not insist that he repress his intuitions. Similarly, the Zen master Mumon Ekai (d. 1260) used *kōans* to “warn [...] his disciples to not confuse their ‘own treasures’—their own realization of the metaphysical—with the ‘things coming through the gate,’ namely the speculations of others” (Hooper 286). Thus, it can be said that “the Zen master lets the metaphysical manifest itself in whatever [...] is [at] hand” (Hooper 286), which reinforces Hooper’s point that Wittgenstein’s only correct method and Zen *kōan* pedagogy share a highly similar attitude about metaphysics.

Hooper seems correct here. “Policing the border between what can and what cannot be said” is an accurate summary of Wittgenstein’s “What can said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.” Additionally, the Early Wittgenstein encourages philosophers to take the *dokusan* interviewer’s role in the sense of discouraging adoption of nonsensical propositions, a “confused and ignorant attempt to say the unsayable.”

Furthermore, what the Early Wittgenstein calls nonsensical propositions are precisely metaphysical ones, those propositions which form the foundation of philosophical theories, and Zen agrees that metaphysics in the sense of thinking about “things” leads one away from reality because it requires dualistic, subject-predicate thinking. And neither the *kōan* method nor the only strictly correct method aim to actively repress metaphysical intuitions (although for different reasons). The only strictly correct method is concerned only with that is actually correct; it has no opinion on people’s metaphysical impulses. Zen, and by extension the *kōan*

method, only discourage clinging to metaphysics or deliberately upholding a metaphysical position; metaphysics, like any thoughts, can pass through.

In these senses, Wittgenstein's "only strictly correct method" and the *kōan* method bear striking resemblance. But it should be noted that the methods have differing motivations. Whereas the "only strictly correct method" depends on the claim that some propositions tell us facts about objects in reality and philosophical propositions do not, the *kōan* method depends on the claim that thinking in terms of objects or essences is entirely misguided in a fundamentally interdependent reality.

## IX. Conclusion

Scholarship comparing the ideas of Zen and Wittgenstein suffered from numerous inaccuracies in its early phases. Wienpahl's analysis rests on insufficient understandings of *satori*, "the only strictly correct method," and "complete clarity." Canfield's analysis neglects that "just playing the game" is not about understanding reality, and mischaracterizes *mushin*. But beginning around 1977, it improved vastly. D. Z. Phillips rightly corrected Canfield about the extent to which "just playing the game" achieving "complete clarity" can be likened to *mushin* achieving *satori*. Garner accurately outlined the differences between "complete clarity" and *satori*. And Hooper rightly pointed out that both Early Wittgenstein's "only strictly correct method" and Zen's *kōan* pedagogy refuse to make metaphysical claims while also not forcing their students to reject whatever metaphysics comes to their minds. Based on this analysis, one might be inclined to think 1977 was a "golden year" for comparative philosophy regarding Wittgenstein and Zen. This paper does not dig into that claim, but it invites the possibility that this was the case. In this way, I hope this paper contributes to comparative philosophy by acting

as a premise for investigating the history of Western understandings of Zen, a history which perhaps reveals that Zen thought was not accurately understood in Western academia until the late 1970s.

## Bibliography

Bodiford, William M. "Zen." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Feb. 2021, [britannica.com/topic/Zen](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zen).

Accessed 20 April 2021.

Canfield, John V. "Wittgenstein and Zen." *Philosophy (London)*, vol. 50, no. 194, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 383–408, doi:10.1017/S0031819100025584.

Garner, Dick. "Skepticism, Ordinary Language and Zen Buddhism." *Philosophy East & West*, vol. 27, no. 2, University of Hawaii Press, 1977, pp. 165–81, doi:10.2307/1397614.

Hershock, Peter, "Chan Buddhism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/buddhism-chan](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/buddhism-chan).

Hooper, Carl. "Koan Zen and Wittgenstein's Only Correct Method in Philosophy." *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3, Routledge, 2007, pp. 283–92, doi:10.1080/09552360701708753.

Loori, John Daido. *The Eight Gates of Zen: A Program of Zen Training*. Shambhala Publications, 2002.

McGinn, Marie. *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, Routledge, 2013, doi:10.4324/9780203080955.

Monk, Ray. "Ludwig Wittgenstein." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Apr. 2020, [britannica.com/biography/Ludwig-Wittgenstein](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ludwig-Wittgenstein). Accessed 14 April 2021.

Nagatomo, Shigenori. "Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/japanese-zen](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/japanese-zen).

O'Brien, Barbara. "Shakyamuni Buddha." *Learn Religions*, 2018, [learnreligions.com/shakyamuni-buddha-449787](https://learnreligions.com/shakyamuni-buddha-449787).

Phillips, D. Z. "On Wanting to Compare Wittgenstein and Zen." *Philosophy (London)*, vol. 52, no. 201, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 338–43, doi:10.1017/S0031819100027170.

Stroll, Avrum and Donnellan, Keith S. "Analytic philosophy." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jun. 2017, [britannica.com/topic/analytic-philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/analytic-philosophy). Accessed 16 April 2021.

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Shambala Publications, 2011.

Wienpahl, Paul. "Zen and the Work of Wittgenstein." *Chicago Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, Chicago Review, 1958, pp. 67–72, doi:10.2307/25293461.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, trans. Hacker, Peter. *Philosophical Investigations*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., John Wiley & Sons, 2010, Google Ebook.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, trans. Ogden, C. K. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Project Gutenberg, 2010, Ebook.