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When Is a Word Dead?

By Matthias Esho Birk

The 19th-century American poet [Emily Dickinson](#) once wrote:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

Reading these lines for the first time recently, I was immediately struck by Dickinson's verses. In Zen practice, just as in any other spiritual or religious practice, we say a lot of words. Most of those are pretty old, first uttered far away in space and time: we chant millennia-old sutras from India, meditate over thousand-year-old Chinese koans (snippets of encounters between ancient Chan masters and their students), and discuss many centuries-old practice instructions from Japan. Are these words dead, just as their original authors are? Far gone in space and time? Or do they just start to live the day we speak and hear them? Or might both be true, and if so, who gets to decide whether they are dead or alive?

Words: our mind generates a lot of them by itself. After all, our mind thinks to a large extent in words. It creates sentences and whole narratives with these words. And we tend to get so tangled up and identified with these word-based thoughts that we start to view the world through them. We think of ourselves as a largely consistent entity, separate from everything else around us. We think of time as a linear process, with past and future, and a present moment squeezed somewhere in between. We think of change as something happening to us, the change being separate from ourselves. The stories our mind creates out of words are often full of regret, aversion, righteousness, preferences, anger, greed, and even hatred. In short, the words our mind naturally generates can spin a web of delusion around us, reinforce our deeply held notions of separation between the self and the other, and all too often keep us in a hamster wheel of suffering. In some ways, we could say that the word is the ultimate duality tool, a knife that mercilessly cuts reality into little chunks until no reality is left—just labels and narratives. That is, of course, precisely why we can't think our way out of our fundamental dilemma, and why we need meditation to access a space not reached by words.

On my first visit to a Zen meditation center, at age 16, one of the texts we chanted was a short one by the 12th-century Japanese Zen monk Daio Kokushi called "[On Zen](#)." In that text, there is a line that goes, "*The Buddha has playfully let words escape his golden mouth. Heaven and earth are ever since filled with entangling briars.*" I was struck by this: Wasn't this a Buddhist place I was visiting? And hadn't we just spent time reciting his very words? Why would we, in the same breath, claim that the Buddha's words had filled the world with briars? But isn't it true? Aren't we always at risk of getting entangled in the meaning words carry? As if entangled in briars?

Let's take the example of a famous Zen koan: a monk asks Master Joshu, "*Does a dog have buddhanature?*" Joshu says, "*Mu!*" (in English, something like "not" or "nothingness"). We ask ourselves: What did Joshu mean? Why did he say "nothingness"? What happens when we try to figure out Joshu's motivations? Joshu becomes separate from us

in space and time, as does “mu.” We imagine the word uttered over a thousand years ago by an old man. We become like archaeologists, separate from the word and its meaning, trying to dissect and understand it. What did Jesus mean when he said, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself;*” or the Buddha when he said, “*I am awakened together with the whole of the great earth and all its beings*”? We move into interpretation, explanation. What was the original meaning of this? Whenever we try to understand these sentiments in this way, we are caught in subject-object separation. The meaning (object) is out there for us (the subject) to understand.

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In fact, the precondition to asking ourselves what Buddha meant by saying a certain word is to see us as the subject, and Buddha and the word as the object. In all those cases, the word is indeed dead when it is said because we treat it as separate from us. Uttered in a faraway space and time, it no longer lives in us, through us, as us. Most religions are entirely based on separation, relying on the interpretation of words. Words supposedly spoken by the religion’s founder, a relevant sage, or maybe even God almighty. Words we need to follow and hence understand. No doubt we need to understand and argue about the meaning of a word in that case: “*What did they really mean when they said it?*” This becomes incredibly important. And so literal wars have been fought about the sovereignty of defining what it is that certain words mean.

So why use words in the first place in spiritual practice? Why chant, read, or discuss stories and sutras? Why not discard them completely and just meditate? Because words have the power to guide the mind as well. A word can guide attention. “Bread.” Did you think of it? Of course you did. The word guided your mind to think of bread. In that sense, our mind is the word’s devoted servant. Say, hear, or think a word, and your mind will go there. We can make this natural tendency of the mind our ally in spiritual practice. We can use the word to guide our mind to question its dearly held beliefs, to guide the mind into the experienced reality of the moment. Into the now. To see. To look. To experience.

When Zen Buddhism’s seventh patriarch, Vasumitra, met Buddhanandi, who later went on to become the eighth patriarch, Buddhanandi said to him: “*I have come to discuss the truth with you.*” Vasumitra replied, “*Good sir, if you discuss it, it is not the truth.*” We cannot discuss the truth. And words cannot express it. They can only ever point us to the present moment experience of the now. But the present moment is constant change, so the moment we hang on to the meaning of a word, we are stuck—we have let the word and its potential to direct our mind die.

So what does it take to release those words from discussion and to truly let them live?

It means we have to give birth to them. It means letting go of our belief that meaning is outside us, something for us to grasp. It means realizing that Joshu, Buddha, and Jesus are none other than ourselves. Not, “*What did Joshu mean when he said ‘mu’*” but, “*What is Joshu, as a manifestation of myself, saying right now*”? What is the word mu pointing to, expressed in the now? Uttered in the now? Realized in the now? This is not special to the word mu, or koans. I can approach Jesus’ words with this same directive. Not what did Jesus mean when he said, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself;*” but what does Jesus mean as you right now?

When we approach any (seemingly ancient) word like this, the delusion of the separation between the self and the other immediately breaks down. You are Joshu, you are Buddha, you are Jesus. When we approach a word like this, letting it live in the now, not separate from us, we relinquish the notion that “we can figure it out,” we relinquish the notion of the word being separate from us. The word is us. We become so intimate with the word that no other is left. When approaching any word like this, we have to birth it through our body: we cannot understand it with our mind, we have to experience it, live it. Does a dog have buddhanature? Mu. Don’t try to think about it (then you are separate from it). Be it. Say “mu” now, for the first time. And then awaken to what arises in the moment, in the now.

We cannot discuss the truth. And words cannot express it. They can only ever point us to the present moment experience of the now.

Who gets to decide whether a word is dead when it is said or whether it just starts to live that day? We do, of course. With every word we hear or say, we can treat it as a dead entity, complete and finished, with fixed meaning, or receive it as still evolving, growing, never complete, always just moving. In order for words to be born, they also have to die in that same moment— that is, we need to let go of old meanings, attachments to views about them, or insights we had because of them. We need to die in the process, letting ourselves go and letting the words arise through us. Born and dead. In one single moment. That's practicing with words to become free.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 and died in 1886. Raised in a patriarchal world, with extremely limited opportunities for women, she had very few readers during her lifetime. Most of her poems appeared only in letters to close friends, and her first published collection of poetry came out only after her death. And although today she is considered one of the most important American poets, she never experienced fame. She knew, of course, of the fleeting nature of fame: "*Fame is a bee / It has a song / It has a sting / Ah, too, it has a wing,*" goes one of her poems. Now, I ask you: When you read her words, can you let them live? Allow them to fly? And then die?

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