"That Is Why The Buddha Laughs": Apophasis, Buddhist Practice, and the Paradox of Language

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Abstract

This essay arose from a collaborative project exploring the meaning of apophatic discourse in different religious traditions. I focus on the paradox of language as both liberating and ensnaring that resonates across the great diversity and heterogeneity of Buddhist traditions. Apophatic discourse is a widespread response to this paradox, as it is motivated by a recognition of the limits of words and concepts even as it seeks to point to that which is beyond these limits. The questions of whether there is a nonconceptual reality beyond the limits of words and concepts, and if so, what it might be, and why, precisely, language and reason are incapable of articulating nonconceptual reality, and what the role of language might be in leading beyond itself, are all sources of considerable debate among Buddhist thinkers. What is shared by figures with different responses to these questions is an understanding of apophasis as a form of Buddhist practice. The aim of Buddhist apophatic practice is to disrupt our natural linguistic attitude, in which we are beguiled by language, presupposing that our words and concepts somehow correspond with the ultimate nature of reality. How is apophatic discourse—enacting an awareness of the limits of language—meaningful if it cannot actually describe that which it is about? Buddhist apophatic discourses, such as ontological doctrines of ineffability, negations, and silence, are not simply pointing to ultimate reality, but are meaningful as transformative practices in the context of an interpretive community with shared soteriological goals and doctrines. Thus, even as apophatic discourse is ever transcending positive claims, it depends on kataphatic discourse to have any specific meaning.

Keywords Buddhism · Language · Apophasis · Practice · Paradox · Buddhist philosophy

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"The *dharma*-s are un-born, un-destroyed, absolutely empty, unsayable, unnamable, inexpressible; and yet they must be named and be identified with phenomena when we address beings whom we want to lead to deliverance: this creates an enormous difficulty…That is why the Buddha laughs; it is because of all these kinds of difficulties that the Buddha laughs with all his might."
Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra, attributed to Nāgārjuna
(Lamotte 1949, 442)[1]

The Paradox of Language as Liberating and Ensnaring

Early in the eighth century Chinese Buddhist text, *The Platform Sūtra*, the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch (Hui-neng) describes when, as an illiterate woodcutter, he overheard a recitation of the *Diamond Sūtra* in the marketplace. "As soon as I heard the words of the sūtra," he says, "my mind opened forth in enlightenment." Upon asking the man where he received the scripture, Hui-neng learns of the Fifth Patriarch, who declared that through the *Diamond Sūtra* "one can see the [self]-nature by oneself and achieve buddhahood directly and completely" (McRae 2000, 348a). Later, Hui-neng's awakening is famously verified by a poem he dictates at night (McRae 2000, 349a). And when he himself begins to teach, "At these words," we read of one of his students, "Hui-ming [experienced] a great enlightenment" (McRae 2000, 348b). According to *The Platform Sūtra*, then, the Dharma—insight into the nature of mind and reality that characterizes awakening—can be effectively transmitted or produced through spoken and written words.

That reading a text or listening to a teaching can lead to awakening is representative of a widespread Buddhist commitment to the transformative power of words. Sūtras, such as the *Diamond Sūtra* or the *Platform Sūtra*—texts that are understood to transmit *Buddhavacana*, the word of an awakened being—are only one type of transformative sacred word in Buddhist religious practice. Brief excerpts from scripture, or titles of sūtras, or even sounds that may not mean anything in a natural language, are sometimes regarded as condensed versions of the Dharma, and thus embodiments of buddhas and their power and wisdom. As such, according to some traditions, they are thought to offer protection from harm, or to be suitable objects of meditation on the path. The repetition of sacred syllables is sometimes said to call forth the awakened awareness of a Buddha, as the sounds of the syllables allow mental obscurations to fall away. In many instances, Buddhist communities regarded the very materiality of the book, sanctified by its words, as embodying the perfection of wisdom. According to Luis O. Gómez, "scripture, as the 'embodiment' of the Buddha as Dharma, becomes a living relic of the Buddha, so that every place where the text is made known becomes a sacred location, a reliquary, as it were" (Gómez 1987, 5309). Thus, the very words of a sūtra transform their environment. There are some Buddhist authors, for example Kūkai, who argue that every word is an expression of the Dharma. With its vast canons of sacred texts and commentaries, and its many verbal practices, "Buddhism is, in short," as Ryūichi Abé notes, "a mass producer of sacred words" (Abé 2005, 292).

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[1] Quoted in Droit 1995, 105.

Words and concepts are understood to be particularly effective in Buddhist texts that make arguments intended to lead the reader from confusion to wisdom. It is ignorance (*avidyā*) or delusion (*moha*), according to many Buddhist traditions, that leads to the aversion or hatred (*dveṣa*) and attraction—craving (*rāga*) or thirst (*tṛṣṇā*)—that cause suffering (*duḥka*). And it is an insight into selflessness, dependent origination, and impermanence, these traditions claim, that constitutes the Buddha's awakening. Overcoming the confusion that is the root cause of suffering, then, requires a practice of reasoned and contemplative inquiry that results in understanding; this is what motivates Buddhist philosophy. We see the results of this inquiry when the Buddha presents his liberating insights in what tradition regards as his first sermon in the Deer Park (S v 420; Bodhi 2000, 1843–52). The insights are systematized as the four noble truths: the truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. The eightfold path that constitutes the fourth truth includes both right speech and right view. Understanding the world in the right way and using words appropriately are necessary practices on the path to awakening. In the millennia that followed the first sermon, Buddhist thought as it was practiced through writing, teaching, debate, and study has been understood as a liberating practice.

It would seem, then, that the efficacy of language is presupposed by a broad range of Buddhist practices—including chanting sūtras, meditating on mantras, invoking Buddhas, reciting devotional hymns, teaching, and pursuing rational inquiry. But what most—though not all—Buddhist philosophers in fact argue is that language and conceptual thought are insufficient for achieving awakening *and* ultimate reality is beyond the reach of language. Already in many early Buddhist texts, there is an acknowledgment of the difficulty of articulating the insights that led to the Buddha's awakening or characterizing the state of awakening itself because they are beyond the limits of language and conceptuality. We see this, for example, in the *Discourse on the Noble Quest* (*Ariyapariyesana Sutta*): after understanding that he had been liberated from the cycle of rebirth, the Buddha's first thought was that it did not make sense to teach anyone else the insight and practice that resulted in his awakening, for it is "unattainable by mere reasoning" (M i 160; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 260). A similar sentiment appears in numerous other texts. For example, in the life of the Buddha as told half a millennium later in the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, following his awakening the Buddha describes the Dharma as "neither speculative, nor an object of disputational reasoning…it is the abandonment of all the aggregates; it is unsensed, unfelt, and the cessation of all sensation. It is ultimate, foundationless, cool. Devoid of appropriation, it has no representations, nor can it be represented. It is unconditioned and beyond the six objects of the senses. It is without conceptions, nonconceptual, ineffable, soundless, wordless, without expression or demonstration. It is unobstructed and beyond all perceptual objects" (Dunne 1996, 526). It is understandable that the Buddha hesitates to teach the Dharma. For the Dharma "is neither speculative, nor an object of disputational reasoning"; that is, one cannot present an argument that somehow arrives conclusively at the Dharma. "It is without conceptions, nonconceptual, ineffable, soundless, wordless, without expression or demonstration." The Dharma cannot be conceived or perceived. It is ineffable and cannot be articulated linguistically. It is no wonder, then, that awakening is "unattainable by mere reasoning."

For many Buddhists, language is not merely inadequate as a vehicle to articulate the Dharma or achieve liberation; language is often thought to reify, necessarily, in ways

that lead to aversion and attachment, and words and concepts are thus regarded as obstacles on the path to awakening[2]. Thus, the awakened mind of a Buddha is not merely transcendent to the social conventions of language; some Buddhist thinkers understand awakening to be a nonconceptual awareness that is precisely a liberation *from* language and concepts. This suspicion of words and texts is expressed in the idea, found in numerous writings, that from the Buddha's first sermon following his awakening until his death by the river, through all his years of teaching he never uttered a word[3]. In the words of the *Hymn to the Incomparable One* (*Niraumpamyastava*), attributed to Nāgārjuna, "not a single syllable has been uttered" by the Buddha (Mitreski 2015, 376). This image of a silent Buddha implicitly suggests that words beguile us, as they refer to a world of substantially existing and enduring things, a world which does not actually exist. If speech necessarily expresses mundane awareness—as some Buddhists argue—and impedes progress on the path, how could a Buddha speak? Because the Dharma exceeds the limits of language, according to this account, like the Buddha, we must abandon words.

And yet, the passage quoted above from the *Lalitavistara Sūtra* does suggest that we can have some understanding of the Dharma through descriptions which situate it beyond the limits of language: it is liberating, empty, beyond perception, nonconceptual, peaceful, and calm. The negations—"nonconceptual, ineffable, soundless, wordless, without expression or demonstration"—are accompanied by positive claims. The most significant positive claim, if only implicit, is that the ultimate actually exists; this positive claim is presupposed by all the negations (Komarovski 2008, 3). And, the Buddha does go on to teach his former companions about that which is characterized as beyond language. According to tradition, this teaching leads to the awakening of one of them—Kondanna—thereby demonstrating that the Dharma that transcends words and concepts can indeed be taught. The Buddha then devotes the succeeding decades to teaching the path of awakening to an ultimate reality beyond language.

The paradox of language as liberating and ensnaring is at the heart of much Buddhist thought and practice. The questions of whether there is a nonconceptual reality beyond the limits of words and concepts, and if so, what it might be, and why, precisely, language and reason are incapable of articulating nonconceptual reality, and what the role of language might be in leading beyond itself, are all sources of considerable debate among Buddhist thinkers. And, of course, Buddhist traditions are so heterogeneous, spanning more than two millennia and very different cultures and social contexts across much of Asia—and today, much of the world—that we ought to be wary of making any claims that would attempt to cover Buddhism in its totality. Nevertheless, acknowledging the endless differences, one can still point to a tension that appears in numerous historically significant Buddhist text and practice traditions in South and East Asia between language as an obstacle and language as the vehicle to a nonconceptual awakening beyond the realm of words. Indeed, as Luis O. Gómez writes, "what is characteristic of Buddhism is its concern with a critique of language." But, he continues, "this concern is often found mixed, paradoxically, with a strong sense of the importance of the invariant word, the

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[2] As Luis O. Gómez points out, one can draw a distinction between the claim that the goal—or the experience of the goal—of the Buddhist path is beyond the grasp of words, and the claim that words are an obstacle on the path. In Gómez' view, most Buddhists affirm the first claim, but there is great variety with regard to the second claim, and how the two claims relate to each other (Gómez 1976, 138).
[3] This remarkable claim appears in a number of Mahāyāna texts. See D'Amato 2009.

holy manifested in utterance, silence embodied in words" (Gómez 1987, 5309). This tension between two aspects of language is not merely an interesting side-note. Transforming our relation to language—and thereby transforming our relation to the world—is, for many traditions, central to the Buddhist path.

Responding to the Paradox of Language: Apophatic Discourse

A common Buddhist response to the paradox of language as both liberating and beguiling is to employ apophatic discourse, a discourse that subverts itself even as it gestures beyond its own limits. "Apophatic" is a relatively recent English word, first applied in the nineteenth century to distinctive approaches to Christian theology. These approaches are rooted in Plato and the Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus, who informed Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians. "Apophatic" is derived from the Greek *apophasis*, meaning "negation" or "denial"; this is what it means in the texts of Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek authors. "Apophatic" contrasts with "kataphatic," which is derived from the Greek word *kataphatikos*, meaning "affirmation." More literally, *apo* means "other," and *phania* means to speak. Hence, one might translate "apophatic" as speaking otherwise, or speaking against. A kataphatic theology is one that is confident that first, God has a determinant nature, and second, this nature can be articulated and understood through words and concepts. While apophatic theologies may or may not believe that God has a particular nature, they insist that the Divine always exceeds our words and concepts, that God is necessarily beyond our capacities of understanding and representation. God is beyond the reach of any possible name or characteristics. Thus, as Philo, who integrated Jewish and Greek thought, writes, "God, as to his essence, is utterly incomprehensible to any being" (Franke 2007, 117). And Clement of Alexandria emphasizes the "impossibility of expressing God, and indicating that what is divine is unutterable by human power" (Franke 2007, 137). While kataphatic theology in making affirmations says directly what it means, apophatic thinkers are challenged to use words in the project of overcoming and pointing to something that is beyond language.

According to Denys Turner, "the apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language" (Turner 1995, 34). We can think of apophatic discourses as linguistic strategies of unsaying, employed to point beyond the actual words that are used to what is beyond or outside of language. Sometimes this is performed through affirming or non-affirming negation. Sometimes it is a strategy, or rhetoric, of silence. In their introduction to *Apophatic Bodies*, for example, Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel emphasize the linguistic dimension of apophasis, and characterize it as an unsaying that leads to silence: "the modifier 'apophatic'—that which 'unsays' or 'says away'—presses toward the pause and the silence within language" (Boesel and Keller 2010, 1). Some scholars, such as Michael Sells, understand apophatic discourse as a performance of a referential openness, an erasure of grammatical distinctions between subject and object that somehow describes mystical experience beyond language (Sells 1994). Commenting on the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, an Indian Mahāyāna text from around the fourth century CE, Mario D'Amato understands an "apophatic discourse or doctrine as one which makes…a self-abrogating move through employing the 'dialectics of self-erasure'" (D'Amato 2008,

18). According to D'Amato, apophatic discourse is oriented toward transforming the subject's relation to language; "in short, the goal of apophasis is to 'unspeak' itself, to place the doctrinal discourse under 'self-erasure'" (D'Amato 2008, 28).[4]

With its widespread view that ultimate reality is beyond the limits of language, all of these forms of apophatic discourse—doctrines of ineffability, implicative and non-implicative negation, silence, and rhetorics of unsaying—permeate Buddhist text and practice traditions.

Buddhist Apophasis: Ineffability, Negation, Unsaying, and Silence

In debate with others and in very different intellectual cultures, Buddhist thinkers developed numerous and varied accounts of ultimate reality, the subject who directly realizes ultimate reality, and the role of words and concepts in realizing ultimate reality[5]. According to Nāgārjuna, one of the most influential Buddhist philosophers, anything that is dependent on something else cannot be an autonomous substance. Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) systematically shows that the objects that populate our world, but also motion, time, dependent origination, suffering, the Buddha, nirvāṇa, and any other possible concept, are all empty of the substantial nature we conventionally attribute to them. Nāgārjuna's negation of this substantial nature constitutes what Indian logicians characterize as a non-implicative, or non-affirming, negation (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*). Non-implicative negations are contrasted with implicative, or affirming, negations (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*), which implicate something other than what is negated. For example, if I claim that the wind instrument I play is not a saxophone, I imply that I play another wind instrument. In contrast, if I claim that I do not play the saxophone I am not implying that I play any other instrument. To say that Nāgārjuna's negation of conventional substances is non-implicative, then, means that it does not imply that there is another ultimate ground that is beyond convention.

Nāgārjuna declared that his project was to abandon all views; while language and concepts are necessary for the realization of ultimate reality, eventually they must be abandoned.[6] Some thinkers who affirmed Nāgārjuna's account as the highest teaching

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[4] D'Amato's distinction between apophasis and ineffability is informed by the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. D'Amato argues that "a doctrine of ineffability should be understood to primarily address the relation between sign and object: an ineffability claim is a claim that some object x is unable to be expressed, a claim that the sign cannot properly refer to the object." He defines a particular kind of apophasis, in contrast to doctrines of ineffability, marked as "apophasis[(B)]": "An apophatic[(B)] doctrine…should be understood to primarily address the relation between sign and interpretant: an apophatic[(B)] doctrine indicates that the proper understanding of the doctrine—the interpretant or meaning of the doctrine, the doctrine's 'proper significate outcome'—entails a realization that the doctrine must ultimately 'unspeak' itself, that the doctrine does not function as a description of the 'way things really are,' but rather is only an instrument or means to some further end: the end of 'discarding all notions and determinations'" (D'Amato 2008, 28).

[5] For typologies of accounts of ultimate reality and the subject who perceives it, see Komarovski 2008, 2011, and 2015.

[6] At the very end of the *Fundamental Verses*, Nāgārjuna writes: "I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion, taught the true Dharma for the abandonment of all views" (Siderits and Katsura 2013, XXVII.30). And he begins his *Refutation of Objections* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*) by having his opponent voice the not unreasonable critique that if everything lacks inherent existence, then Nāgārjuna's very claim must also lack inherent existence, and therefore not have the power to refute the inherent nature of phenomena. In response, in verse 29, he insists, "I have no thesis"; thus, his position is not susceptible to the opponent's critique (Westerhoff 2009).

interpreted him as arguing that having no view did not mean that he actually "had no view" on numerous important topics, just that he maintained no thesis about ultimate reality that was itself inherently justified (Cabezón 2009). Ontological doctrines that became widespread after Nāgārjuna, such as the Buddha nature of sentient beings (*tathāgatagarbha*), the fundamental consciousness that underlies awareness (*ālayavijñāna*), and the pure luminosity of the mind (*cittaprabhāsa*)[7], motivated positive accounts of ultimate reality and were integrated into tantras that impacted Buddhist thought and practice in India and permeated Buddhism in Tibet and East Asia (Kapstein 2011). There was also a concern that while Nāgārjuna's radical antifoundationalism may be liberating from attachment to opinions, it also nihilistically undermined the very basis of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice: moral discipline, the generation of compassionate mind, and going for refuge[8]. But even those thinkers who defend a robust role for logic and conceptual thought in Buddhist practice generally argue that ultimate reality is beyond the scope of reason and conceptuality. Ultimately, conceptual knowledge is to be surpassed by an intuitive awareness cultivated through yogic practices. Despite the many differences, then, in their accounts of ultimate reality, awakened awareness, and the path to awakening, many Buddhist philosophers, especially Mahāyānists, share a view that the goal to be achieved and the fundamental nature of reality, however they describe it—*bodhi, Dharmadhātu, tathāgata, tathāgatagarbha, nirvāṇa*, Buddha-nature, true mind, emptiness[9]—is beyond language and concepts. As Yaroslav Komarovski notes, "virtually all Mahāyāna thinkers from different ages and cultures are in consensus that the highest ultimate reality is ineffable and transcends words and concepts" (Komarovski 2008, 2). Hence, these thinkers articulate apophatic ontological and epistemological doctrines and employ linguistic strategies, especially negations, to point beyond language.

Buddhist apophatic discourse seems oriented toward disrupting our natural linguistic attitude, in which we are surrounded by language in such a way that we are unaware of how it beguiles us. Buddhist apophatic discourse seems oriented not just toward destabilizing linguistic claims, but also toward a different relation to language. We see this relation to language already in the *Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake*

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[7] Doctrines of luminous mind already appear in Early Buddhism and are found, for example, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and the Abdhidhamma. However, they were employed in more ontologically positive accounts of ultimate reality in later Mahāyāna traditions.

[8] In addition, there are very different views about the resources and dangers of inferential reasoning, and the role and function of conceptuality in Buddhist practice. And many Mahāyāna philosophers stepped back from what appears to be Nāgārjuna's radical apophasis. "Indeed," Robert Gimello writes, "much of the subsequent history of Mahāyāna thought may be read as a cumulative qualification of the Śūnyavāda that one finds in the Perfection of Insight literature and in Nāgārjuna" (Gimello 1976, 117). According to Gimello, what unites the many challenges to the early Madhyamaka "is a profound dissatisfaction with the seemingly relentless apophasis of Nāgārjuna and, to a lesser extent, of his sources. All are able to acknowledge Nāgārjuna's caution—that uncritical use of the constructive language of philosophical views is a species of intellectual bondage—but they acknowledge it only as a caution, a corrective to false views. They insist, however, that the way of denial and negation, the unremitting distrust of positive language, is necessary but not sufficient unto enlightenment." Gimello argues that for many Mahayanists this view undermined the significance of compassion and the moral life. These later figures, he writes, "took it upon themselves to reassert the salvific value of kataphasis, the spiritual utility of positive and affirmative language. They chose, in short, eloquence over silence" (Gimello 1976, 119). For an account of the positive ethical role that apophatic discourse can play, see Edelglass 2007.

[9] These terms are taken from Chinul's list of characterizations of "true mind" in "Straight Talk on the True Mind" (Buswell 1983, 163–164).

(*Alagaddūpama Sutta*), in which the Buddha famously compares his teachings to a raft. According to the parable, the *dhamma* is like a raft that a traveler might build to cross from a shore that is dangerous and frightening to the other side of a river that is safe and secure. Once on the other side, the traveler would not pick up the raft and carry it along; it would be abandoned at the shore. "The Dhamma is similar to a raft," the Buddha says, "for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping" (M i 130; Harvey 2009, 183). This early image appears in numerous Buddhist texts, across vastly different traditions and historical periods. Various Buddhist traditions have interpreted the metaphor of the raft as suggesting that language is useful, indeed necessary, for crossing to the far shore of awakening. However, awakening means having a light touch and not clinging to any teaching (Cabezón 1994, 47–52). This is what is meant when the dharma is described with the image of one illusory king defeating another. The teachings are not somehow linguistic or conceptual articulations of ultimate truth. Rather, ultimately, they themselves are illusory, but they are still effective at freeing us from the illusions that trap us in saṃsāra.

In addition to doctrines of ineffability, negation, and strategies of self-erasure, in which even one's own doctrines are abandoned, the practice of silence is an apophatic strategy that appears frequently in Buddhist traditions. Silence is explicitly recommended in some early Buddhist texts[10]. For example, according to the *Māgandiyasutta*, "Of him who has gone to cessation there is no measure, there is nothing in terms of which they could speak about him. When all the Dharmas have been uprooted, all the ways of speech have also been uprooted" (Gómez 1976, 145–146). As Gómez characterizes the orientation presented in such passages of the Pāli Canon, "the way to the goal is a way of silence, the goal is beyond words, and the man of the goal is himself beyond all talk and speculation" (Gómez 1976, 146). According to Gómez, what is being proposed here is neither an alternative view to any other view, or even the rejection of all views. Rather, it is a practice of letting go of the cognitive and affective tendency to fixate on hierarchical ideas that divide the world up in various ways; it is, ultimately, a practice of silence.

The rhetoric of silence was particularly embraced by some East Asian Buddhist traditions. For example, according to the Korean scholar monk, Chinul (1158–1210), "the Buddhas and patriarchs did not let people get snared in words and letters; they only wanted them to put deluded thought to rest and see the original mind. This is why," Chinul continues, in "Straight Talk on the True Mind," "when people entered Te-shan's room he struck them with his staff…We have all groped too long for our heads; why should we set up more words and language?" According to Chinul, gesture and silence address ultimate reality more directly than language ever could. Thus, he writes, "At

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[10] Some of the most oft-commented on examples of silence in Buddhist traditions are in the Pāli Nikāyas, when the Buddha famously remains silent in response to a recurring list of ten—or sometimes fourteen—so-called "unanswered questions." T.R.V. Murti interprets the Buddha's silence as an apophatic move, suggesting that refraining from answering the questions points to the beyond of language (Murti 1960, 36–54). But the Buddha's silence has also been interpreted according to an empiricist framework: David Kalupahana argues that the Buddha refrains from responding because he lacks the direct, empirical experience necessary for any knowledge claim (Kalupahana 1976, 155–160). Richard Hayes argues that the Buddha maintains silence because "all possible answers to these questions presuppose the existence of an enduring self" (Hayes 1994, 361). For a more recent interpretation of the unanswered questions as a schematization that ought to be understood in the context of formal debate and that is really about navigating a middle way between eternalism and annihilationism, see Nicholson 2012.

the summit of Mount Sumeru ratiocination has been forbidden for ages; but at the top of the second peak all the patriarchs have tolerated verbal understanding" (Buswell 1983, 161). Speech is appropriate, but awakening is an abandoning of speech in silence. This is why, Chinul says, "When the World Honored One was momentarily silent at Vulture Peak, when Subhūti forgot all worlds below the cliff, when Bodhidharma sat in a small cell in wall contemplation, when Vimalakīrti kept silent in Vaiśālī—all displayed the mind's sublime essence" (Buswell 1983, 166). For Chinul, it is in silence that awakening is most clearly manifest.

Perhaps the most famous Buddhist example of wisdom manifesting in silence, cited here by Chinul, is the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* is celebrated for its account of nonduality as expressed in both philosophical dialog and dramatic presentation. In chapter IX, Vimalakīrti asks the assembled bodhisattvas to explain how a bodhisattva enters the Dharma gate of nonduality. Much of the chapter is composed of brief responses to the question from different bodhisattvas. Finally, Mañjuśrī—the bodhisattva of wisdom—says, "As I understand it, it is to be without words and without explanation with regard to all the Dharmas—without manifestation, without consciousness, and transcending all questions and answers. This is to enter the Dharma gate of nonduality." Thus, according to Mañjuśrī, while all the explanations presented about nonduality may be true, nevertheless, the actual entry into the Dharma gate of nonduality is beyond words; it is nonconceptual, and transcends any possible explanation. Mañjuśrī then turns to Vimalakīrti and asks for an explanation of the bodhisattva's entry into the Dharma gate of nonduality. But Vimalakīrti, famously, "was silent, saying nothing. Mañjuśrī exclaimed…'Not to even have words or speech is the true entrance into the Dharma gate of nonduality'" (McRae 2004, VII.33/148/551c). Why is Vimalakīrti's silence recognized as "the true entrance into the Dharma gate of nonduality"? In the following section, I argue that it is because of a linguistic context that allows silence to function as a form of speech, for silence is meaningful only in the context of a particular language game.

Understanding Apophasis: Language Games and the Rhetoric of Silence

Silence might seem to be the most appropriate response to the ineffable, the most suitable way to articulate a truth beyond the reach of words and concepts. This is in part because of the various forms of apophasis, silence seems the most free of the limits of particular words and concepts. And, therefore, one might think that silence in fact does not have any *particular* meaning but only gestures beyond any possible meaning. However, apophatic silence resembles philosophical claims of ineffability, negation, and other strategies of unsaying because it is meaningful precisely because of its place in the language games of particular linguistic communities who share a common interpretive framework.

To begin, it is worth pointing out that silence in Buddhist texts can have different meanings. For example, we see in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* how silence can be an expression of ignorance. In an amusing episode earlier in the text, the rather stodgy elder Śāriputra, representing the *śrāvaka* position (or "Hīnayāna"), is surprised to learn there had been a goddess hiding in the house where much of the dialog takes place. The

goddess repeatedly bests Śāriputra in doctrinal debate, at one point illustrating nonduality by transforming his body into the form of a goddess and herself taking on Śāriputra's form. When the goddess asks, "How long has it been since your emancipation?" Śāriputra refrains from answering her question and is silent. The goddess then asks, "What is your great wisdom that you remain silent?" Śāriputra, hesitant to speak about liberation, responds with a view that many Buddhists might have: "Emancipation is not to be spoken of, and so I did not know what to say." But the goddess is not satisfied: "Speech and words," she replies, "are entirely the characteristics of emancipation. Why? Emancipation is neither internal, nor external, nor intermediate. Words are also neither internal, nor external, nor intermediate. Therefore, Śāriputra, the explanation of emancipation does not transcend words. Why? All *Dharma*s have the characteristic of emancipation" (McRae 2004, VII.9/127–128/548a). According to the text, then, Śāriputra's silence is a sign of ignorance; he misunderstands the fact that awakening is not radically different from everything else, and thus it is appropriate—as with the text of the sūtra itself—to use words to say something about awakening.

In contrast to Śāriputra's ignorant silence, Vimalakīrti's silence is profound and instructive, not because it is silence, but because of its linguistic context. It follows thirty-one verbal explanations of nonduality, culminating in Mañjuśrī's claim that entry into the Dharma gate of nonduality transcends language and thought. Thus, Vimalakīrti's silence enacts what has been verbally presented. As Jay L. Garfield observes, "Discourse may be limited, and silence may be necessary, but only when that silence is *articulate*—that is, when it is also discursive." Silence may have a meaning, then, but its meaning depends on the linguistic context. "Śāriputra's silence fails precisely because, absent the discursive context that gives it sense, it is senseless; but a silence that has the requisite sense—a sense that no speech can convey—has that sense only when it becomes a kind of speech" (Garfield 2015, 256). That is, silence on its own does not indicate wisdom; without speech marking it as profound, silence is meaningless.

The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* was particularly popular in East Asia, and silence played an especially significant role in East Asian Buddhist texts, especially in Ch'an. Silence appears often in Ch'an "encounter dialogs" as an appropriate response to a question, or in a meeting between two masters. In Ch'an Buddhism, there is, as Dale Wright argues, a "rhetoric of silence," in which silence has been shaped as a meaningful sign. But, Wright shows, discourse is necessary to make the silence meaningful, to reveal its profundity. Wright cites as an example the famous story of Bodhidharma who, when giving his final transmission of the Dharma to his most advanced students, asked them to share the fruit of the Ch'an teachings. After the first three give obscure answers, the fourth, Huike, bows and maintains silence, and is chosen as the Second Patriarch. As Wright points out, it is Bodhidharma declaring Huike's silent bow to exhibit the greatest wisdom that marks the silence as profoundly meaningful and not a sign of ignorance. That is, the silence is profound because of how it is described with words, precisely because of the way it is situated within a particular discourse (Wright 1993, 30–31).

Wright's account is in tension with popular views of Zen awakening as a pure experience beyond language. In response to these views, Wright emphasizes how important language is to every aspect of Zen. He argues that the goal of awakening is highly structured through communal practice and meaning making. Moreover, Zen traditions have employed very specific uses of language that require extensive training

to master. According to Wright, then, the difference between the enlightened and the unenlightened is a linguistic one; the enlightened have learned a different language game. This is why it makes sense that Ch'an and Zen teachers would determine whether or not a student had achieved awakening according to a poem the student wrote. This new language game is a way of speaking that is aware of one's own linguistic context. "If the experience of awakening is mediated through the symbols, texts, instructions, and linguistically shaped social practices of Zen, then perhaps the outcome of this educative process ought to be conceived as a transformation of how one dwells in the linguistically shaped cultural world that is the practitioner's inheritance. In this case, awakening would consist in, among other things, an awakening *to* rather than *from* language." Thus, Wright concludes, "far from being a transcendence of language, this process would consist in a fundamental reorientation within language" (Wright 1992, 133). This does not mean that awakening is not beyond language. It is, and, as Wright points out, East Asian poets influenced by Zen rhetoric make similar claims for a spectrum of human experiences. But, the recognition of the failure of language is the result of a highly sophisticated orientation to language. And this orientation requires belonging to a linguistic community with shared practices and a shared faith in a soteriological goal and the path to realize it (Carpenter 2012; Edelglass 2019).

Apophatic Discourse as Buddhist Practice

If apophatic discourse is meaningful—including silence, negation, unsaying, and pointing to what is inconceivable beyond words and concepts—does not this mean that apophasis, despite its self-presentation, is actually making positive claims? This question pushes us toward understanding apophatic discourse on the model of kataphatic discourse. It suggests that to understand apophatic discourse is to answer the question, *what does it say*? But, in the context of Buddhist literature, I would suggest, a more fruitful question to ask of apophatic discourse is *what does it do*? Or perhaps, *what are some of the things it does*? Or even, *what can one do with* apophatic discourse? Or, phrased in another way, as C.W. Huntington does, we can ask of perhaps the most influential Buddhist author of apophatic texts, "What sort of *effect* was Nāgārjuna interested in achieving?" (Huntington 2007, 129). Or, as Huntington also asks, "How does Nāgārjuna's apophatic language accomplish its philosophical/ religious work?" (Huntington 1995, 299).

These questions suggest that we should be wary of primarily interpreting apophatic discourse according to a natural linguistic attitude, which presupposes that language corresponds to objective reality, that our conceptual distinctions correspond with the distinctions between natural kinds that are ultimates in the world. In "A Way of Reading," Huntington argues that the meaning of Nāgārjuna's work should be located "in its capacity for transforming one's perspective, for shifting one's existential hermeneutic" (Huntington 1995, 302). According to Huntington, to reconstruct apophatic discourse as an argument is to lose what apophatic discourse actually does. And part of what it does is cultivate a particular kind of wisdom, a wisdom that recognizes its doctrinal beliefs as not ultimately grounded, but "soteriologically efficacious" (Huntington 1995, 304). The goal of hearing, reading, studying, and contemplating apophatic discourse is to live lightly with our beliefs. The path to

liberation requires living with the paradox that even as the beliefs of the communities to which we belong structure our lives, determine our moral commitments, our bodily comportments, and ritual practices, to hold them too tightly is an obstacle on the path.

While Huntington and Garfield have disagreed on the role of rational argument in Nāgārjuna (Garfield 2008), Garfield also emphasizes the question of what Nāgārjuna's words *do*. Describing Nāgārjuna's approach to language, Garfield writes, "he sees the function of his words not as mirrors that reflect reality, but as *instruments*, as discursive tools by means of which he can cause his interlocutor to see things in a certain way. The words are not taken to express abstract entities, but simply to be effective means of intellectual and behavioral coordination, including this use to coordinate our thought so as to enable us to see that words do no more than coordinate our behavior. The deceptive character of language is its tendency to get us to think that it is more than this" (Garfield 2015, 253–54). Instead of trying to give us another mirror of reality, Garfield is arguing, Nāgārjuna uses words to effect a change in his readers, to allow us to see how we are entangled in language.

It would be premature, perhaps, to think that all Buddhist discourse about the limits of language is about provoking a transformation. Sometimes, it seems, claims about the limits of language are presented as if they were descriptions of awakened awareness, as if they were phenomenological accounts of first person experiences. And some Buddhist philosophical arguments for the inexpressibility of ultimate reality seem to be primarily concerned with justifying the path to realization of a nonconceptual awareness. But much Buddhist apophatic discourse can be interpreted not as trying to mirror reality but as aiming to provoke a liberating transformation that is meaningful in the context of the Buddhist path.

Buddhist thinkers have from the beginning understood rational inquiry as one of several elements of the path. This makes sense, I noted earlier, as many Buddhist traditions regard ignorance and confusion as the source of our dis-ease in the world. Compared with other philosophical approaches, however, apophatic discourse, which provides no positive content to which we can cling, is more interested in transformation than the truth of any particular claim. This is not to say that apophatic discourse has no concern for truth. Apophatic discourse, I believe, with its negation, unsaying, and critical analysis of kataphatic doctrines is committed to a better understanding. And apophatic negation, unsaying, and critical analysis can open spaces for new accounts. But in the end, as D'Amato notes, "apophasis[B] implies a conception of philosophy as *praxis* more than *theory*, as more concerned with the cultivation of spiritual realization rather than the statement of theoretical truths" (D'Amato 2008, 29).

Conclusion

I began this paper by emphasizing the pervasiveness of the paradox of language as both liberating and ensnaring in Buddhist traditions. I suggested that apophatic discourse is a common response to the paradox of language. To ask what apophatic discourse *says*, as if it were primarily in the business of making rational arguments, misses what apophasis is about. A better question is, what does apophasis *do*? Apophatic discourse, I argued, is a form of Buddhist practice. The aim of Buddhist apophatic practice is to transform our relationship with language, relinquishing the congealed entanglement with words and

concepts and thereby achieving freedom from conceptual proliferation. At the same time, I suggested apophatic discourses, such as doctrines of ineffability, unsaying, negation, and silence, are only meaningful in the context of an interpretive community with shared doctrines and goals. But apophasis also expresses a recognition that these doctrines are unable to access ultimate reality, and thus while necessary, if grasped too tightly, are an obstacle to awakening. Perhaps it was something like this that the Buddha had in mind when, recognizing the paradox of language as both necessary and misleading, in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, he laughed with all his might.

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