

UNITED WISDOM

Zen: The Roles of Text, Teacher, and Direct Pointing

Traditions and Worldviews

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“The Way is originally complete and all-encompassing.”*

Dōgen, *Fukan Zazengi*, opening sentence. Editorial English translation of our Russian rendering of the Sōtō English version, not a verified published English quotation. Individual translators are not named on the page; the collective version is not attributed to one person.

About this article

“I read that Zen does not depend on words. Does that mean I can close the books?” This hypothetical question contains an understandable wish: to stop explaining life and finally encounter it. But there is an oddity. The person learned that words are unnecessary from words. What are they being invited to leave behind—reading, or the habit of mistaking a description for the thing itself?

Zen is often portrayed as sudden wisdom free of books, rules, and prolonged training. Its historical tradition is more complex: it developed extensive literature, forms of guidance, monastic orders, and practices. Text can guide, a teacher can test and demonstrate, and direct pointing can expose the limits of a ready-made explanation. These roles involve tension without becoming a simple war between reason and experience. We will examine why transmission outside scriptures does not mean abandoning written culture, how a kōan differs from an entertaining riddle, and why trust in a teacher retains ethical boundaries. We then offer a separate contemporary application: moving from explanation to attentive action without claiming to have realized Zen.

I. Zen belongs to Buddhist history

Zen is the Japanese name of a tradition transmitted through Chinese Chan; the term itself is connected with Sanskrit dhyāna, meditation. It is not a neutral attention technique that Buddhists happened to practice. Its religious horizon involves awakening, wisdom, and compassion. The academic overview of Japanese Zen emphasizes practice and distinguishes principal forms of training.

Naming that horizon helps us understand what a photograph of an empty room cannot show. Simplicity of outward form does not mean absence of content. A white wall can belong to a

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

complex religious world, just as an elaborate image can participate in carefully organized practice.

We should also avoid using “Zen” to describe a pleasant mood. Someone may be calm because they rested, heard good news, or have not yet faced a difficult conversation. That is insufficient grounds for speaking of awakening. Conversely, absence of a pleasant state does not let an outside observer assess the depth of another person’s religious life.

For a reader exploring out of curiosity, precision leaves room for freedom. We can decline to become followers or accept metaphysical premises and still investigate the question. We need neither dress differently nor declare every cup of tea a sacred experience.

Difficulty begins when we want another tradition’s authority while retaining complete arbitrariness in our interpretation. Every appealing observation then becomes “Zen,” while inconvenient context becomes a superfluous traditional shell. A more honest conversation distinguishes historical teaching, contemporary adaptation, and personal association.

II. Transmission outside scriptures does not mean life without texts

Formulas about transmission outside scriptures and independence from words emphasize that description does not exhaust realized understanding. They cannot be read as orders to destroy a library. Look at the official list of Sōtō texts for services and practice: it includes sutras, commemorative texts, vows, and instructions.

This is not an accidental departure from “pure Zen.” Written language preserves memory, establishes forms, and transmits teaching across distance and time. Even a call to move beyond a ready-made concept must be intelligible to someone in a particular language. Denying this dependence would be an overly convenient way of avoiding its examination.

In our hypothetical example, someone reads a detailed description of swimming. They understand the sequence of movements but do not yet know how their body stays afloat. Instructions are not therefore useless. They can prevent an error, explain an exercise, and help a beginner notice an unfamiliar distinction. But reading cannot replace action itself.

The analogy is limited: Zen is not equivalent to an athletic skill. It simply clarifies the relation between guidance and realization. Despising guidance because it is not action confuses functions. Treating acquired terminology as completed action confuses them again.

This tension exists in any serious work. Someone can know everything about an honest conversation and avoid it for years, or explain attentiveness without hearing an interlocutor. The problem is not necessarily too many books. Perhaps a book has become somewhere to remain safely knowledgeable without encountering what understanding should change.

III. What a text can do to a reader

A text can convey information, but also change the way a question is posed. Sometimes its usefulness lies in making a habitual answer cease to fit. The reader wanted a definition and encounters a demand to investigate why that particular definition is so urgently needed.

In *Fukan Zazengi*, Dōgen joins the question of the Way's completeness with an insistent call to practice. In the official Sōtō translation, criticism of pursuing words is followed by concrete directions concerning place, sitting, and returning to ordinary action. Such a text does not merely deny explanation: it moves the reader into another mode of work.

Immediacy here is not arbitrariness. Practice has a form. We need not turn that form into a universal rule for everyone, but cannot erase it and retain only the attractive idea of "living naturally." "Naturally" can conceal either attentiveness or habitual avoidance; that remains to be distinguished.

Contemporary readers should not treat each sentence of instruction as an independent aphorism. A call not to judge during a particular practice does not mean abandoning the distinction between honesty and dishonesty in life. The absence of a plan to "become a Buddha" in an instruction does not make every effort and obligation meaningless.

In a hypothetical situation, someone reads about nonattachment and stops taking responsibility for shared work. They say they no longer cling to results. Other participants, however, face a broken promise. We should return the phrase to its context and assess the action separately. A religious term cannot do the work of justification on the person's behalf.

IV. Dōgen: why practice is not merely a means

For Dōgen, teaching and realization have a more difficult relationship than the familiar "first learn, then do." We usually picture work as producing a result: today's exercise should bring a new quality tomorrow. But in Zen's understanding of this relationship, setting a goal can itself become part of the difficulty. Practitioners constantly compare their present selves with an image of a future awakened person, placing that image between themselves and action again.

Seijun Ishii's explanation of shushō ittō concerns the unity of practice and realization. He turns to the eighth question of Dōgen's *Bendōwa*: practice is not situated entirely outside awakening as a preliminary stage. Yet this does not authorize abandoning practice because everything is already fine. Ishii emphasizes Dōgen's reverse movement: original Buddha-nature must be realized in practice. This is an account of a Sōtō religious position, not a measurement of every seated person's condition.

A tension appears that popular advice loses. Sitting exclusively for a future special experience turns present action into waiting. Declaring that no action is needed because one already has everything removes realization. Both extremes preserve a convenient image: future victor or already accomplished sage. Dōgen's question prevents settling into either.

Shikantaza is usually rendered "just sitting." But Kenshu Sugawara's scholarly Sōtō explanation shows that simplicity does not mean casually sitting down or switching attention off. It involves full commitment to zazen and refusal to treat it solely as an instrument for an external goal. Dōgen himself also wrote about reading sutras. Sitting's priority within this teaching does not make written culture an error.

An outside reader can find a useful distinction here without calling it mastery of shikantaza. We can act while continually checking whether the action brings us closer to a desired self-image. Or we can notice that comparison itself has taken the place of work. A hypothetical musician practices a phrase but asks after every attempt whether they now look like a real performer. A learning task becomes an examination of identity. Returning to the audible phrase is different from confirming or disproving status once again.

This analogy does not prove Dōgen's teaching: musical exercises have measurable future results. It only helps show that a goal can sustain action or obscure it. Zen's religious formulation goes much deeper than ordinary advice to worry less about achievement. We should retain both the example's recognizable side and its difference from the tradition.

Dōgen also does not reduce self-knowledge to collecting a more detailed biography. In *Genjō Kōan*, §§4–8, he connects studying the Way with studying oneself, forgetting oneself, and realization through myriad phenomena. The language deliberately disrupts the familiar picture: a separate "I" no longer appears the sole master of what must be understood. This is not an instruction to lose memory, stop caring for oneself, or abandon ethical responsibility.

In Kodo Takeuchi's interpretation, genjō kōan concerns reality being realized, not only an old case selected for training. The same word "kōan" can therefore take part in different questions. For Dōgen, it need not mean a puzzle to solve and leave behind. Its content unfolds in text and practice, not in one especially convenient English equivalent.

When reading such a passage, we should resist making it a slogan: "Give up the ego." A slogan tells us in advance what to condemn; the text makes us investigate how understanding works. Sometimes precise reading obstructs a premature "direct" conclusion. Text and immediacy then prove more closely connected than the popular picture of wordless Zen promised.

V. A kōan does not live apart from training

A kōan is a case or saying used in particular forms of Zen training. It may look paradoxical, but is not merely a riddle with a clever answer. In Rinzai practice, kōans involve the student's work and meetings with a teacher; Sōtō places a different emphasis on sitting. These differences should not become an absolute wall between all members of the schools.

Remove a kōan from training and place it in "ten sages' riddles," and its function changes. A reader may enjoy it, feel puzzled, or invent an interpretation. These are actual events of reading. They do not yet show that the task assigned to that case in a particular lineage was accomplished.

We can investigate the change through our own example. An instructor asks a student a question to test their approach to a problem. The student finds the answer online. The answer matches, but the method under examination remains unknown. A correct phrase is therefore not always a sufficient educational result.

Conversely, we should not conclude that every incomprehensible teacher's answer is profound. Difficulty may arise from a method of training, a poor explanation, a language barrier, or absence of content. Puzzlement alone does not establish its cause. Readers retain the right to ask about context, purpose, and the form of an encounter.

A rare combination is needed: neither demanding that everything significant immediately become familiar nor assuming that everything unfamiliar is significant. The first extreme closes learning; the second opens a way to manipulation. Between them lie patience, clarification, and the possibility of ending participation if relationships become unacceptable.

VI. A teacher shows more than they report

A teacher may notice the difference between what students say about practice and how they act. This is one reason teaching cannot always be replaced by a book. A living person can respond to a particular difficulty, change an explanation, and recognize a familiar error where students see only their own persuasive story.

"May" does not mean "always does so correctly." Guidance requires relationship, knowledge, and trust; it does not make every judgment about finances, family, or health true. We can trust someone within a particular field without granting control over our whole lives.

In our hypothetical example, a beginner learns an instrument. The instructor notices a tense hand and proposes another approach. That knowledge is tested in the work. But if the instructor claims the right to choose the student's life partner, another domain has been entered. Musical competence does not establish that authority.

Religious guidance has a meaning the analogy does not exhaust. Yet the boundary of authority remains humanly intelligible. In what capacity is the person speaking now? What grounds support the advice? Have corresponding commitments been accepted? Can students ask questions? What happens when they disagree?

Consider another hypothetical case of our own, showing how advice becomes shared work. A reader asks: if ready-made explanation must be left behind, should thinking stop altogether? An interlocutor proposes precisely describing one recent conversation first. The reader notices remembering mainly their own answer, while replacing the other person's request with a guess. The initial question changes: it concerns a particular substitution for what was heard, not elimination of thought. This is our contemporary learning situation, not an account of a Zen ceremony or historical master–student encounter.

Text, advice, and action test different aspects of the difficulty here. Text prevents an isolated phrase from being taken as a ban on all reasoning. The interlocutor returns the question to a case that can be examined. The reader compares their version with what was actually said. Finding a discrepancy does not prove the guide's spiritual depth; finding none does not show all teaching is useless. A small task has appeared that can be clarified and checked again. In the next conversation, the reader can ask whether they conveyed the request correctly rather than silently imposing a familiar meaning. The other participant's reply may correct both the initial guess and an adviser's overconfident explanation. Help therefore retains value without demanding that someone receive the last word on every circumstance of one's life.

These questions do not destroy trust. Sometimes they make it definite for the first time. Without them, "trust" may mean everything at once: respect for experience, hope of support, fear of losing a community, and willingness to obey. Distinguishing these grounds helps a person understand which relationship they actually chose.

VII. Direct pointing and the temptation of absolute authority

Direct pointing can be understood as addressing what another abstract definition cannot replace. But its immediacy does not create automatic moral infallibility in the speaker. There is no necessary connection between an unusual teaching method and permission to harm.

This particularly matters in popular stories about old masters' sharp replies, shouts, and actions. A historical narrative has a genre, circumstances, and transmission of its own. Contemporary people acquire no authority to reproduce every recorded action merely by calling themselves teachers. Reading a story and consenting to participate are different events.

A hypothetical student feels humiliated and the teacher says: "That is your ego resisting." The reaction may have different explanations, but this phrase tests none. It makes every objection

additional evidence of the teacher's power in advance. Within such a closed framework, helpful difficulty can no longer be distinguished from arbitrary conduct.

Our ethical conclusion is clear: claiming profound spiritual meaning does not cancel questions of consent, consequences, and the possibility of stopping. This is a contemporary assessment of relationships, not a claim that every historical Zen lineage follows the same modern rules. The distinction is needed precisely because the tradition is historically diverse.

Nor should this boundary become suspicion of every difficult training. New knowledge sometimes requires patience, repetition, and acknowledgment of error. The distinction is not whether discomfort exists, but whether its meaning can be investigated, limits named, and a participant's dignity retained. Discomfort alone proves neither growth nor harm.

VIII. Everyday life does not make the task simple

Zen is often connected with returning to ordinary life. Sōtō's self-description connects zazen with everyday practice. Yet a familiar action may be difficult precisely because attention disappeared from it long ago: someone already knows what everything is called and therefore stopped looking.

In a hypothetical conversation, a person listens to a loved one while preparing a reply. The words are audible, but their content passes through a ready-made defense. "Pay closer attention" seems banal until it becomes clear that one must temporarily abandon the role of someone who understands everything. Simplicity of wording does not mean ease of performance.

A new role is easily created: someone who is "always present." Every action is again assessed through a self-image. They wash a cup and consider how correctly they wash it as a practitioner. They have moved from an image of a busy person to an immediate one, but still chiefly monitor the image.

Our contemporary distinction is modest: attention to action and displaying attentiveness are different activities. Someone may quietly complete promised work without a special experience, or speak beautifully about presence while leaving work to others. Usefulness cannot therefore be assessed solely by a moment's inner solemnity.

Everyday life also includes conflict, fatigue, and uncertainty. If "ordinary life" appears only as tea, a garden, and a clean room, many circumstances of most people's lives have vanished. Substantive application must withstand discussion of responsibility and boundaries, not merely create an aesthetic impression.

IX. The limits of words: a meeting point where traditions diverge

Insufficiency of formulation is a question shared by several traditions, but their answers differ. A Zen text makes this particularly clear: although a record does not replace realization, it can still guide it. To understand text and living instruction, compare Dōgen with authors for whom the problem takes another form.

In Plato's Phaedrus, 275d–276a, written discourse is compared with living knowledgeable speech: a record cannot itself answer every new question. This resembles our difficulty with a student who has the correct answer but has not acquired the ability to understand a case. The similarity is criticism of substituting knowledge's visible trace for knowledge. Platonic teaching, however, develops dialectical work and knowledge of its object; needing a teacher does not turn it into zazen.

Epictetus emphasizes something else. In the Enchiridion, §51, discussion of proofs of an ethical rule is compared with applying it. Someone can explain why lying is wrong and continue lying. We recognize the gap that occurs when reading protects the image of understanding instead of changing behavior. But Stoic exercise and Dōgen's unity of practice and realization have different foundations. Similar criticism of bookish confidence does not eliminate this difference.

For al-Ghazālī, experiential knowledge of God differs from discursive description and requires religious work, as IEP, §4c explains. Here too, information does not equal realization. But knowledge's theistic orientation cannot silently become Buddhist awakening. Nor should any intense experience be declared sufficient for both traditions: each has its own language, training, and ethical discipline.

This comparison clarifies the original book we wanted to close. We can stop reading to act, or keep reading to correct understanding. Error lies neither in one gesture nor the other, but in a mistaken measure of results: a heard phrase becomes a mastered path, meeting a teacher an absolute guarantee, an experience authority to judge others. Text and immediacy become opponents only after receiving the same function. Distinguishing their functions restores the possibility of learning.

X. Conclusion: a signpost does not replace an encounter

Text, teacher, and direct pointing need not compete. Text preserves and differentiates. A teacher helps work with a particular difficulty. Pointing may return attention to what explanation has already concealed. Each role has usefulness and limits.

Contemporary readers must especially avoid making the limits of words a reason to abandon precision. When agreements, knowledge, consent, or inflicted harm are involved, clear words

are necessary. Silence may be practice or evasion. A tradition’s name alone cannot distinguish them.

Immediate experience likewise need not become a personal certificate of truth. Someone experienced something important; that deserves attention. But describing the experience, drawing a conclusion about the world, and claiming power over others still require distinction. Depth does not remove this work.

The book in the opening question may be closed if it is time for practice, or reopened if misunderstanding remains. The gesture itself does not determine wisdom. What matters is whether it helped us encounter events more precisely and retain responsibility for what happens between people.

What this means in practice

The following proposal is a contemporary experiment in attention, not instruction in mastering Zen or a promise of awakening. Choose one familiar action that allows calm, direct checking: reading a letter, tidying a workspace, or listening to a short message. You need not change breathing, assume a special posture, or seek an unusual state.

First name what is to be done. Then do it, noticing when a ready-made explanation replaces perception. While reading, distinguish written words from the story already forming about the author’s intentions. While listening, notice when rehearsing your own reply begins.

Afterward, do not rate yourself “mindful” or “unmindful.” Ask what became more specific. Did you discover a missed deadline, hear a request previously taken as an accusation, or realize you cannot concentrate and need a pause? These are checkable distinctions. An attractive feeling of presence may accompany them but need not.

A hypothetical person reread three books about communication before an important conversation. Now they can choose one action: restate the other person’s request and check whether they understood it. This is a small meeting of text and experience. The book offered a distinction; conversation tested it; the reply changed the picture.

If you want to encounter Zen practice itself, a contemporary exercise is insufficient. Learn which lineage a community belongs to, how training is organized, what beginners are expected to do, and what commitments arise. You need not accept everything beforehand. A first visit can remain an introduction.

Notice your expectations too. If you seek a teacher who will finally remove the need to choose, no depth of tradition makes that expectation a safe foundation for trust. If you seek only confirmation of known answers, the encounter can become decorative. Between these extremes lies willingness to learn while retaining responsibility for participation.

Key quotation

> *“Practice and realization are inherently undefiled. Moving forward is, ultimately, an everyday matter.”*

Dōgen, *Fukan Zazengi*, paragraph on practice and realization; editorial English translation of our Russian rendering of the Sōtō version, not a verified published English quotation. This line does not cancel learning. It returns understanding to how ordinary action is lived.

Connections across traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. The table shows a common question and limits of similarity; matching formulations alone do not establish historical influence.

Positions	Similarity	Boundary
Dōgen, Fukan Zazengi ↔ Plato, Phaedrus	A verbal record does not exhaust realized understanding.	Dialectical knowledge and zazen do not have the same task.
Sōtō practice/realization ↔ Epictetus, §51	Knowledge is not assessed by the ability to explain alone.	Stoic application of norms is not shushō ittō.
Japanese Zen ↔ al-Ghazālī, §4c	Religious learning has an experiential dimension.	Knowledge of God is not renamed Buddhist awakening.
Shikantaza in Sugawara ↔ Aristotle, II.1	Participation in action matters for developing a capacity.	Just sitting is not reduced to training character for an external goal.
Dōgen’s Genjō Kōan ↔ Takeuchi’s explanation ↔ Rinzai in SEP	Kōan involves transforming understanding.	Realized reality and a training case cannot be translated without remainder as a riddle.

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Tags

Zen, Chan, dhyāna, Dōgen, Fukan Zazengi, Genjō Kōan, Bendōwa, Sōtō, Rinzai, zazen, shikantaza, shushō ittō, practice, realization, awakening, kōan, guidance, text, transmission, reading, immediacy, understanding, discipline, ethical boundary, everyday life, Plato, Phaedrus, Epictetus, al-Ghazālī, Aristotle, authority, responsibility

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.