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The Zen Theory of Language

Linji Yixuan's Teaching of "Three Statements, Three Mysteries, and Three Essentials" (*sanju sanxuan sanyao* 三句三玄三要)

Seong-Uk Kim

In medieval China, Zen created its own image that would alienate itself from language. The following famous formula of Zen reflects this self-image: Zen is a special transmission that enables one to see the nature and attain enlightenment not by positing words and letters but by pointing directly to mind. In reality, however, Zen left a huge corpus of texts, even producing new Buddhist literary genres such as *gongan*, *yulu*, and *denglu*. This apparent irony underlies the unique Zen view of language. This article discusses the Zen view or theory of language by examining Linji Yixuan's teaching of "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials."

Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 867), a representative figure of the unconventional and iconoclastic style of Zen, is reputed to have taught the so-called "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials" (*sanju sanxuan sanyao* 三句三玄三要) or simply "three mysteries and three essentials."¹ Despite the retrospectively drawn image of Linji, this teaching appears rather theoretical though al-

¹ There are several Buddhist texts that record Linji's acts and words: the *Zongjing lu* 98 (compiled in 961) T48.943c08–24, the *Song gaoseng chuan* 12 (988) T50.779a26–b05, the *Chuanfa zhengzongji* 7 (1061) T51.753c27–754a29, the *Jianzhong jingguo xudenglu* 1 (1101) X78.646a13–a16, the *Rentian yanmu* 1 (1188) T48.300a25–306c05, the *Liandeng huiyao* 9 (1189) X79.81a05–90a22, the *Wudeng huiyuan* 11 (1252) X80.220c08–223b04, the *Wujia zhengzong zan* 2 (1254) X78.584c06–585b03, the *Fozu lidai tognzai* 17 (1333) T49.643b04–c21, the *Chanzong zhengmai* 6 (1489) X85.461a07–463a15, the *Zhiyue lu* 14 (1602) X83.549b21–563b01, the *Wudeng yantong* 11 (1653) X80.24c08–27b04, the *Wudeng quanshu* 21 (1693) X81.599c18–602b23.

most as incomprehensible as his other instructions, typified by such an unconventional and non-linguistic style as shouting and beating.² Since its first appearance in the *Jingde Chuandeng lu* in 1009, this teaching has become well-known within the Zen community, having been recorded in various texts. Despite its ambiguity, a few Sino-Korean Zen masters have deployed this teaching to develop a Zen principle of language. This article focuses on the interpretations of Linji's teaching of "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials," made by such Chinese and Korean Zen monks as Fenyang Shanzhao 汾陽善昭 (947–1024), Jianfu Chenggu 薦福承古 (970–1045), and Chinjōng Ch'ōnch'aek 眞靜天頊 (fl. 13th century), especially regarding the relationship between language and reality or language and enlightenment.

1 Linji's Teaching of "Three Statements, Three Mysteries, and Three Essentials"

Linji's teaching of "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials" is related to his two dharma hall sermons:

I

The master [Linji] took the high seat in the hall. A monk asked, "What about the first statement?" The master said, "The seal of the three essentials being lifted, the vermilion impression is sharp; with no room for speculation, host and guest are clear and distinct."

"What about the second statement?" The master said, "How could Miaojie permit Wuzhuo's questioning? How could expedient means go against the activity that cuts through the stream?"

"What about the third statement?" The master said, "Look at the wooden puppets performing on the stage! Their jumps and jerks all depend upon the person behind."

² According to Powell, Linji is not the most radical advocate of the unconventional Zen. Linji emphasized traditional Buddhist doctrines more than, for example, Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (807–869); Linji also favored a lecture setting for educating students over such unconventional settings as a work place favored by Dongshan. For details, see Powell 1982: 114–148.

The master further said, “Each statement must comprise the gates of the three mysteries, and the gate of each mystery must comprise the three essentials. There are expedients and there is functioning. How do all of you understand this?” The master then stepped down from his seat.³

上堂 僧問 如何是第一句 師云 三要印開朱點側 未容擬議主賓分
問如何是第二句 師云 妙解豈容無著問 漚和爭負截流機
問如何是第三句 師云 看取棚頭弄傀儡 抽牽都來裏有人 師又云
一句語須具三玄門 一玄門須具三要 有權有用 汝等諸人作麼生會 下座。

II

Someone asked, “What about the true Buddha, the true dharma, and the true Way? We beg of you to disclose this for us.”

The master said, “Buddha is the mind’s purity; Dharma is the mind’s radiance; the Way is the pure light pervading everywhere without hindrance. The three are one, yet all are empty names and have no real existence. With the true man of the Way, moment after moment his mind is not interrupted. From the time the great teacher Bodhidharma came from the Western Land, he just sought a person who would not accept the deluded views of others. Later, he met the second patriarch, who, having understood [Bodhidharma’s] one word, for the first time realized that hitherto he had been futilely engaged in striving. As for my understanding today, it’s no different from that of the patriarch-buddhas. He who attains at the first statement becomes a teacher *along with the patriarch-buddhas*; he who attains at the second statement becomes the teacher of men and gods; he who attains at the third statement cannot save even himself.”⁴

³ *Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao chanshi yulu* (hereafter, *Linji yulu*): T47.497a15–21. The translation comes from Sasaki 2009: 144–148. A few Zen works in the 10th–12th centuries record the *Linji lu* texts with small variations, which became sources of later versions: (a) the *Zutang ji* of 952; (b) the *Jingde Chuandeng lu* of 1009; (c) The *Tiansheng Guangdeng lu* of 1029; (d) the *Sijia yulu* of 1085; and (e) the *Linji yulu* of 1120. This sermon is recorded only in the *Linji lu* versions within the *Chuandeng lu* and the *Linji yulu*, while never mentioned in either the *Zutang ji* or the *Sijia yulu* versions. The *Guangdeng lu* records the sermon not in the section for *Linji*, but in the section for Fengxue Yanzhao 風穴延沼 (896–973).

⁴ *Linji yulu* T47.501c28–502a07. The translation, with small changes (in italics), comes from Sasaki 2009: 264. This sermon is included in the *Linji*

問如何是真佛真法真道 乞垂開示 師云 佛者心清淨是 法者心光明是 道者處處無礙淨光是 三即一皆是空名 而無毫有 如真正學道人 念心不間斷 自達磨大師從西土來 祇是覓箇不受人惑底人 後遇二祖 一言便了 始知從前虛用功夫 山僧今日見處與祖佛不別 若第一句中得 與祖佛為師 若第二句中得 與人天為師 若第三句中得 自救不了。

Without commentary, it is difficult to construe the meaning of Linji's teaching of "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials." The ambiguity of Linji's original teaching inevitably led to a few different interpretations.

2 Discussion of Linji's Teaching

2.1 Fenyang Shanzhao

The fourth-generation Linji master Fenyang Shanzhao 汾陽善昭 (947–1024) was the first in Zen history to deal with Linji's teaching of "three statements, three mysteries, and three essentials." Fenyang, well-known for his *Songgu daibie* 頌古代別, the first *gon-gan* collection, made poetic comments on the teaching, reflecting the spirit of "literary-Zen" that prevailed in the Song Chinese Zen community. In his comments, recorded in the *Fenyang wude chanshi yulu* and the *Rentian yanmu* without significant variations, he showed that Linji's teaching relates to the Zen view of language. The two texts provide Fenyang's comments on each of the mysteries and the essentials, though they offer no explanation for his omission of the three statements. Below are Fenyang's comments from the *Rentian yanmu*, the six-fascicle text compiled by Huian Zhizhao 晦庵智昭 (fl. 12th century) in 1188:

Later, the master Fenyang raised the old case, asking, "What are the phrases of three mysteries and three essentials?"

lu versions from the *Guangdeng lu*, the *Linji yulu*, and the *Sijia yulu* with few variations. The *Linji yulu*, compiled in 1085, is the earliest text to contain both sermons on the teaching of "three statements, three mysteries and three essentials." Both sermons cited here were probably well known within the Zen community around the compilation of the *Guangdeng lu* in 1039.

A monk asked, “What is the first mystery?” The master answered, “[The Buddha] directly entrusted [his dharma] to Drinker of Light [i.e. Kāśyapa].” ...

A monk asked, “What is the second mystery?” The master answered, “-Severing characteristics and departing from words and sentences.” ...

A monk asked, “What is the third mystery?” The master answered, “A bright mirror illuminates impartially.”

後來汾陽昭和尚因舉前話乃云那箇是三玄三要底句僧問如何是第一玄汾陽云親囑飲光前...如何是第二玄汾云絕相離言詮...如何是第三玄汾云明鏡照無偏。

(*Rentian yanmu* 1, T48.302a03–09)

[A monk asked,] “What is the first essential?” The master answered, “There is no fabrication in words.” ...

[A monk asked,] “What is the second essential?” The master answered, “A thousand sages enter into the mysterious and profound.” ...

[A monk asked,] “What is the third essential?” The master answered, “Outside the tetralemma and a hundred negations, one fully treads the path of Hanshan.”⁵

如何是第一要 汾云言中無作造...如何是第二要 汾云千聖入玄奧...如何是第三要 汾云四句百非外盡踏寒山道。

(*Rentian yanmu* 1, T48.302a11–16)

Fenyang treated Linji’s teaching as one of the *gongan* cases: he raised the old case of Linji’s teaching to test his students. Then, without any proper response from the students, he presented his verse-comments probably in order to demonstrate his spiritual authority and show his understanding of the teaching, an understanding regarded as equivalent to Linji’s. As such, Fenyang’s comments on the three mysteries and the three essentials are as cryptic as Linji’s original teaching. We can hardly understand what his comments really mean. Even though we might guess the meaning of

⁵ The exact meaning of “Hanshan” (寒山) is uncertain. It could refer to the legendary Zen poet Hanshan (fl. mid-8th century) during the Tang dynasty; it might also generically refer to cold mountains.

some of the verses, our speculations raise more questions than answers. For example, Fenyang's comment on the first mystery, "the Buddha directly entrusted [his dharma] to Drinker of Light," could be interpreted as describing the fact that the truth is ineffable and thus can be attained and transmitted only through direct insight beyond the purview of language. However, it is difficult to determine whether such an interpretation is correct or why such a comment is applied to the first mystery rather than any other mystery or essential. Furthermore, Fenyang's two other comments seem to carry a similar implication: to the second mystery, "severing characteristics and departing from words and statements," and to the third essential, "Outside the tetralemma and a hundred negations, one fully treads the path of Hanshan." We cannot know for sure whether Fenyang's three comments mean that the first mystery, the second mystery, and the third essential all refer to the inadequacy of language; neither can we know how they might be different if they have different meanings. This uncertainty might be intentional. Fenyang might have composed his verse-comments to Linji's teaching not only to show his understanding but also to deny a theoretical and conceptual approach to the teaching.

However, despite the lack of any conceptual account, Fenyang's comments reveal that Linji's teaching is connected to the Zen view of language. As mentioned above, some, if not all, of Fenyang's comments indicate the inadequacy of language to describe reality as it is. Another of his verse-comments, more famous later within Zen circles, even addresses a more complex Zen view of language, beyond simple negation:

The matters of the three mysteries and the three essentials are difficult to discern;

One who is able to get the meaning and forget the words is easily intimate with the *Way*;

One statement brightly illuminates all the myriad forms;

On the ninth day of Chongyang [festival] the chrysanthemums' blossoms are new.⁶

⁶ This verse-comment is also recorded in the *Linji zongzhi* (X63.168a4–5).

三玄三要事難分 得意忘言道易親 一句明明該萬象 重陽九日菊花新。

(*Rentian yanmu* 1, T48.302b01–02)

Fenyang suggested that Linji's teaching embodies Zen recognition of the two opposite aspects of language. Citing the *Zhuangzi* in the second line, he expressed the fundamental inadequacy of language as a medium for expressing reality as suchness.⁷ He announced that language is inadequate or insufficient for attaining the Way. However, immediately afterward, in the third line, Fenyang turned to the affirmation of language, claiming that language can fully manifest the reality of the phenomenal realm.

Even though his comments do not provide much to help in understanding Linji's teaching, Fenyang showed that the teaching relates to the Zen recognition of the dual nature of language, which conceals and discloses reality simultaneously.

2.2 *Jianfu Chenggu*

The second-generation Yunmen master Jianfu Chenggu 薦福承古 (970–1045) took a more conceptual approach to Linji's teaching, focusing particularly on the three mysteries through the lens of the hierarchical relationship among different rhetorical styles. Chenggu supposed three different levels in the linguistic and non-linguistic expressions used within Zen circles. Each level of expressions corresponds to a specific rhetorical style. He correlated these three levels of expressions to the three mysteries, which he designated for the first time in Zen history as the “mystery in the essence” (*tizhongxuan* 體中玄), the “mystery in the word” (*juzhongxuan* 句中玄), and the “mystery in the mystery” (*xuanzhongxuan* 玄中玄). According to him, these three mysteries constitute the three sequential soteriological stages from the first through the second to the third mystery.

The translation is quoted from Keyworth 2001: 172–173 with small changes (in italics).

⁷ The phrase “one who is able to get the meaning and forget the words” (*deyi wangyan* 得意忘言) is from the *Zhuangzi* 26.

Chenggu claimed that the “mystery in the essence” refers to the expressions based on such doctrinal theories as mind-only (*weixin* 唯心), consciousness-only (*weishi* 唯識), and *tathāgata-garbha*. In particular, the expressions that are reminiscent of the Huayan teaching of “non-obstructed interpenetration of myriad phenomena” (*shishi wuai* 事事無礙) characterize this first mystery. Chenggu gave the following examples:

(1) Shuiliao, after being kicked and knocked down by Mazu, stood up and said, “On the tip of a hair, I’ve understood the source of myriad forms and hundreds of thousands of wondrous meanings.”

(2) A monk asked Zhaozhou, “What is the self of a student of the Way?” Zhaozhou answered, “Mountains, streams, and the earth.”

水潦被馬祖一踏踏倒 起曰萬象森羅 百千妙義 只向一毫上 便識得根源
僧問趙州 如何是學人自己 州對曰 山河大地。

(*Chanlin sengbao chuan* 12, X79.516b16–18)

Chenggu called these descriptions “words that wrap up the gist [of the doctrines]” (*hetou yu* 合頭語). According to him, these descriptions are of only secondary importance in the Buddhist soteriological path: they might help sentient beings receive favorable rebirths in *samsāra* by removing evil behavior but fail to release them from the endless cycle of birth-and-death and thus not lead them to enlightenment.⁸ For, as Chenggu explained, people who only understand the mystery in the essence are trapped in a dualistic mode of thinking: such people retain their own sense of right and wrong so that they want each and every statement to correspond to the teachings of the three vehicles and properly carry the Huayan principle of interpenetration. If a statement does so, they regard it as perfect; if not, they dismiss it as partial.⁹ According to Chenggu, because the mystery in the essence is a description that binds one to words and letters, other types of words are necessary to overcome such tendency.

For Chenggu, the mystery in the word refers to words that help remove dualistic thinking. He referred to this second mystery as

⁸ *Chanlin sengbao chuan* 12, X79.516b19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, X79.517a09–13.

words with few doctrinal concepts and, thus, more direct expressions of the truth. The following are the few examples Chenggu presented for this second mystery:

(1) A monk asked Qingyuan Xingsi, “What is the ultimate meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?” Qingyuan answered, “How much is rice in Luling?”

(2) A monk asked Zhaozhou, “I have heard that you have personally seen Nanquan. Is this true or not?” [The master] answered, “Zhenzhou produces big radishes.”

(3) [A monk] asked Yunmen, “What is talk that goes beyond Buddhas and patriarchs?” [The master] answered, “A pancake.”

(4) [A monk] asked Dongshan again, “What is the Buddha?” [The master] answered, “Three catties of flax.”

僧問思和尚 如何是佛法大意 答曰 廬陵米作麼價 又僧問趙州 承聞和尚親見南泉來是否 答曰鎮州出大蘿蔔頭 又問雲門 如何是超佛越祖之談 答曰 餬餅又問洞山 如何是佛 答曰麻三斤。

(*Chanlin sengbao chuan* 12, X79.516c14–18)

Chenggu called these expressions “no-response words” (*buda hua* 不答話) because a Zen master gave no direct answer to his student’s question, intentionally replying with an irrelevant answer.¹⁰ Such words are intended to help a student escape from the cage of concepts just as one “removes nails and wedges so that [a bird] could escape from a cage” (*quding xietuo longtou* 去釘楔脫籠頭).¹¹ Chenggu asserted that this type of language still cannot lead to enlightenment because it does not remove all conceptual defilements, even though it is less reliant on concepts than the mystery in the essence. However, in Chenggu’s view, this second mystery might be more harmful than the first mystery, for the mystery in the word could threaten the very existence of Zen. He argued that the Zen way of teaching was withering at his time because this type of language was so wide-spread within Zen community, in particular, within the Linji and Yunmen schools.¹² Chenggu crit-

¹⁰ *Chanlin sengbao chuan* 12, X79.516c22–23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, X79.516c20.

¹² *Ibid.*, X79.516c23 and X79.517a13–a15.

icized the Zen masters of both schools as being satisfied with the mystery in the word and, thus, still entrapped by words. Chenggu's first two types of mysteries, therefore, do not overcome the harmful effects of language. According to Chenggu, one needs another type of expression to remove all traces of language in order to reach enlightenment.

The third and final type of mystery Chenggu called the mystery in the mystery. He considered this third mystery to be non-linguistic expressions, such as shouting, beating, and silence. Chenggu offered the following examples:

(1) A non-Buddhist asked the Buddha, "I do not ask about words, I do not ask about wordlessness." The World-Honored One remained silent. The non-Buddhist said, "The World-Honored One in his great compassion enabled me to gain entrance into [Enlightenment] by opening the clouds of my delusion."

(2) Linji asked Huangbo, "What is the great meaning of the Buddha-dharma?" [Linji] asked three times and was hit [by Huangbo] three times.

外道問佛 不問有言 不問無言 世尊良久 外道曰 世尊大慈大悲 開我迷雲 令我得入... 臨濟問黃檗 如何是佛法的的大意 三問三被打。

(*Chanlin sengbao chuan* 12, X79.517a01–03 and X79.517a06)

For Chenggu, the mystery in the mystery directly reveals the truth without the medium of language, overcomes all defilements originating from one's attachment to language, and thus leads to enlightenment.

Chenggu set up the sequential stages of a spiritual path along which one approaches genuine spiritual realization of the truth by advancing from the mystery in the essence through the mystery in the word to the mystery in the mystery. In this schema, Chenggu displayed a negative view of language by arguing that non-linguistic expressions alone could lead to the experience of enlightenment.

2.3 *Ch'önch'aek's* Sönmun kangyo chip

The thirteenth-century Korean Zen master Chinjöng Ch'önch'aek 眞靜天頊 (fl. 13th century) presented the most comprehensive and

clear account of Linji's teaching in his *Sōnmun kangyo chip*.¹³ The discussion on the teaching in this text follows a question-answer format among Zen students and three imaginary figures named Howöl (Bright Moon 皓月), Ch'ōngp'ung (Clean Wind 清風), and Pyōg'am (Blue Cliff 碧巖).¹⁴ Through the mouths of these figures, Ch'ōnch'aek provided his own analysis of the teaching. Rather than focusing simply on the three mysteries, he looked at Linji's teaching as a whole and developed it into an integrated theory of language regarding the human experience of reality.

1. Three Statements: Three Different Levels of Realization

Ch'ōnch'aek regarded the three statements as three different modes of experience or three different levels of realization: fully enlightened, partially enlightened or delusory, and entirely delusory, each of which is characterized by three essentials, three mysteries, and three phrases. For Ch'ōnch'aek, these three statements are not limited to linguistic expressions, as the term "statement" might suggest. In the middle of the *Sōnmun kangyo chip*, he provided a definition of the term for a student who was confused about its meaning:

¹³ The earliest known woodblock of the *Sōnmun kangyo chip* dates back to 1531. The authorship of the *Sōnmun kangyo chip* is controversial because there is no indication within the text. The text is attached to the end of the *Sōnmun pojang nok*, which records the great Zen master Chinjōng Ch'ōnch'aek (眞靜大禪師天頊) as its author. The *Mandōksa chi* and the *Tongsa yōlchōn*, both of which were compiled in the nineteenth century, identify this Zen master with the thirteenth-century Ch'ōnt'ae scholarly monk of the same name. However, such modern Korean scholars as Ko Ik-chin argue that the two monks were different persons, questioning the credibility of the two nineteenth century texts as accurate historical records. Ko even attributes the authorship of the *Sōnmun kangyo chip* to an unknown Zen master (Ko 1979: 159–165). Here, I assume that the Zen master Chinjōng Ch'ōnch'aek, not the Ch'ōnt'ae monk, is the author of the *Sōnmun kangyo chip* until further evidence on the authorship is found.

¹⁴ Their names appear only in such Korean Zen texts as the *Sōnmun Ojong kangyo*, the *Sōnmun sugyōng*, and the *Sōnmun sabyōn man'ō*, compiled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even in these texts, they always appear in quotations from the *Sōnmun kangyo chip*.

From all the forms of the mundane world, large and small, existent and nonexistent, to the long speeches and short words, acting and silence, and beating and shouting of the Buddhas and patriarchs, they are all statements.

世間一切形 大小相有無 乃至佛祖長言短語 作用默然 一棒一喝 皆各一句也。

(*Sōnmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 854.b6–10)

For Ch'ōnch'aek, all types of verbal and non-verbal, linguistic and non-linguistic, and secular and Buddhist expressions are statements. All of these statements, according to him, are classified into one of the three groups depending on the extent of realization they represent: first, second, or third statement.

2. First Statement

According to Ch'ōnch'aek, the first statement describes the enlightened state of mind. It represents the experience of reality as suchness without any trace of defilements, the experience that is featured by the three essentials. Ch'ōnch'aek explained the three essentials in terms of two interchangeable paradigms, “illumination-function” (*choyong* 照用) and “capacity-function” (*kiyong* 機用):¹⁵

The first essential elucidates illumination. It means that the great capacity responds perfectly; ... the second essential unveils function. It means that the great function is fully manifested; ... the third essential unveils the simultaneity of illumination and function. It means that capacity and function are given equally.

第一要明照即大機圓應...第二要明用即大用全彰...第三要明照用同時即機用齊施。

(*Sōnmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 853.c11–15)

Ch'ōnch'aek used the analogy of an instrument to explain the capacity-function paradigm, which can be summarized as follows:

¹⁵ The illumination-function pair first appears in Fenyang's section of the *Jingde Chuandeng lu* in relation to the Linji's teaching with no further explanation; the capacity-function pair is never mentioned prior to Ch'ōnch'aek, who first employed the two pairs to explain the three essentials.

when an instrument is touched, all of its parts operate altogether; when untouched and unplayed, it is called the great capacity; when touched and played, it is called function.¹⁶ This explanation is reminiscent of a well-known paradigm with a long pedigree tracing back to the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (C. *Dasheng qixin lun*, K. *Taesŭng kisillon* 大乘起信論). The treatise explains reality in terms of two opposite yet inseparable aspects: “mind as suchness” (C. *xin zhenru*, K. *sim chinyŏ* 心眞如) and “mind as birth-and-death” (C. *xin shengmie*, K. *sim saengmyŏl* 心生滅). The former refers to the immutable aspect of reality; the latter to the conditional aspect. These seemingly opposite aspects are in fact non-dual because they are based on the same reality. “Mind as suchness” and “mind as birth-and-death,” the non-dual set of the *Awakening of Faith*, could correspond to capacity and function, Ch’ŏnch’aek’s paradigm for three essentials, respectively. Therefore, the three essentials also represent the immutable and conditional aspects of reality as well as the non-duality of the two aspects. By linking the three essentials to Linji’s first statement, Ch’ŏnch’aek defined the first statement as expressing full and perfect enlightenment to the three essential aspects of reality. According to him, because realization on this level means attainment of both the Buddhas’ dharma and the patriarchs’ mind, one who does so deserves to “be a master along with the patriarch-buddhas.” The first statement is given the highest position in Ch’ŏnch’aek’s interpretation of the three statements.

3. Second Statement

Ch’ŏnch’aek regarded the second statement as representing the middle level of realization. On this level, one attains a certain degree of enlightenment to suchness but still has delusion. According to him, this state of partial enlightenment and partial delusion is characterized by the three mysteries.

Ch’ŏnch’aek apparently did not agree with Chenggu’s account of the three mysteries though he accepted Chenggu’s nomencla-

¹⁶ *Sŏnmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 851.b23–c3.

ture: the “mystery in the essence,” the “mystery in the word,” and the “mystery in the mystery.” Rather than assigning specific Zen expressions to each of the mysteries, Ch’önc’h’aek defined the three mysteries in terms of capacity and function, as he did for the three essentials:

Question: What is the first mystery?

Answer: The whole capacity responds by illuminating ...

Question: What is the second mystery?

Answer: The wondrous function is everywhere ...

Question: What is the third mystery?

Answer: The capacity and function are conferred equally.

問如何是第一玄 答全機照應...問第二玄 答妙用縱橫...問第三玄 答機用齊施.

(*Sönmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 851a15–21)

Ch’önc’h’aek explained the three mysteries in almost the same way he did the three essentials; the three mysteries could refer to the immutable and conditional aspects of reality as well as the non-duality of these two aspects. In order to clarify the differences between the mysteries and the essentials and, by extension, between the first and second statements, Ch’önc’h’aek, then, employed the analogy of an object and the shadow it casts: the “essentials” can be compared to real objects while the “mysteries” correspond to shadows created by the objects. He further explained that a shadow merges into (C. *ji*, K. *chük* 卽) an object in the first statement while an object merges into a shadow in the second statement.¹⁷ Ch’önc’h’aek probably meant by this analogy that the essentials represent full and perfect enlightenment to reality, while the mysteries refer to partial and imperfect enlightenment, and that the first and second statements express these two different degrees of enlightenment, respectively. According to Ch’önc’h’aek, the realization in the second statement leads one to “become a master of the human and heavenly beings,” not equivalent to the Buddhas and patriarchs.

¹⁷ For more details of this analogy, see *Sönmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 855b8–19.

4. Language and Reality

Before moving on to the third statement, it is useful to discuss the issue raised by Ch'ōnch'aek's explanation for the first and second statements. His respective accounts of the perfect and imperfect manifestation of reality in the first and second statements inevitably raise an issue about the relationship between language and reality. Ch'ōnch'aek himself brought up this issue, asking the following question through the mouth of a student, who supposedly had not mastered the Zen use of language:

Question: if [you] say that the second and third statements are linguistic statements, one who hears it would acknowledge. However, how can [you] say that the first statement is a linguistic statement?

問若曰第二第三句 是言句之句 則或聞命矣 第一句 則奚可以言句詮哉。

(*Sōnmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 852c13–15)

This question derives from a specific view of language, a view based on the fundamental suspicion of language. According to this view, language does not represent reality as such. It rather conceals or distorts the truth of reality and is therefore incapable of fully manifesting that truth or the experience of it. This negative view of language seems to be justified by the Zen tradition itself. Many Zen masters of medieval China defined Zen as not relying on language. Zen, according to their definition, is a tradition that transmits the ineffable mind-dharma (C. *xinfa*, K. *simpŏp* 心法) along the unbroken lineage from the Buddha himself, as shown in the Zen description of its very first transmission: the Buddha Śākyamuni passed this dharma to his disciple Mahākāśyapa by holding up a flower, not uttering a word. Even Linji appeared to share such a negative view of language when he expressed his reluctance to preach about the mind-dharma at the request of a local magistrate: “If I were to demonstrate the great matter in strict keeping with the teaching of the ancestral school, I simply couldn't open my mouth” (若約祖宗門下 稱揚大事 直是開口不得).¹⁸

¹⁸ *Linji yulu* T47.496b16: the translation is quoted from Sasaki 2009: 117.

Ch'önch'aek answered this question regarding the inadequacy of language as follows:

How can [you] know that each and every linguistic statement made by patriarchs, Buddhas, and good friends is indeed incomprehensible just like the sound of a wooden person singing and clapping and a flake of snow that falls on a burning brazier? If you say that such a statement is nonexistent, you are mistaken as well. If you say that it exists, you are also mistaken. If you say that it is neither existent nor nonexistent, or neither non-existent nor non-nonexistent, you are still mistaken. Also, you are not permitted not to say that it is existent or nonexistent, neither non-existent nor non-nonexistent, etc.

夫豈知祖佛善知識 所發言句 一一如木人唱拍 烘爐點雪 實不可擬議
謂之無語 亦不得 謂之有語 亦不得 非有語非無語 非非有語非非無語
摠不得 又不可不謂之有語無語 乃至非非有語 非非無語.

(*Sönmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 853a5–10)

Rather than discussing language in general, Ch'önch'aek addressed the uniqueness of language as used by the enlightened. Such enlightened beings as Buddhas and Zen patriarchs fully and perfectly realize the truth of reality: that everything, including language, is empty. Even though they use language, therefore, they leave no trace of attachment in their mind, just as a flake of snow completely disappears as soon as it falls on a burning brazier. By using a tetralemmic description, Ch'önch'aek asserted that conceptual and intellectual speculation should not be applied to the language of the enlightened. For Ch'önch'aek, the first statement is possible as language used by people who attain enlightenment.

5. Third Statement

In Ch'önch'aek's analysis of Linji's teaching, the third statement is placed on the lowest level: the statement represents various aspects of delusion. On this level of realization, one becomes attached to words and forms and develops dualistic modes of thinking: the distinctions between subject and object, enlightenment and un-enlightenment, Buddha and sentient beings, etc.¹⁹ According to

¹⁹ *Sönmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 855.b3–4.

Ch'önch'aek, all of the characteristics of delusion are represented by the “three phrases” (*sanju* 三句).²⁰

Ch'önch'aek is probably not the first monk in the history of Zen to employ the expression “three phrases” to describe the deluded state of mind. For example, the expression appears several times in the *Baizhang lu* 百丈錄, where its meaning is similar to the one found in the *Sōnmun kangyo chip*. For example, Baizhang said,

When [one] penetrates through the *three phrases* only by ceasing all intellectual views of existence and nonexistence as well as all desire, it is said that [he] cleans up the shit. Likewise, when [one] seeks the Buddhas, wisdom, and all the dharmas of existence and nonexistence, it is said that [he] brings in the shit. It is not said that [he] throws it out. Likewise, creating the Buddhas' view and understanding and merely clinging to what is seen, what is sought, and what is done are all called “the shit of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañca*).

但息一切有無知見 但息一切貪求 箇箇透過三句外 是名除糞 如今求佛求菩提求一切有無等法 是名運糞入 不名運糞出 如今作佛見作佛解 但有所見所求所著盡 名戲論之糞。

(Yanagida, 1983: 22b05–09)

Whether Ch'önch'aek was aware of this previous usage of the three phrases, he placed the third statement on the lowest level of expression, linking the statement to the three phrases. For him, on the level of the third statement, one becomes like “a wooden puppet on stage” rather than a master who operates it because of his delusion. Hence, Ch'önch'aek asserted that such a person “could not even save himself.”

6. Relationship between the Three Statements

Ch'önch'aek did not assign any specific expression exclusively to any of the three statements, implying that a certain expression or statement would not remain fixed as any of the three. In fact, Ch'önch'aek argued that a statement could be defined as any of the

²⁰ Here, I translate the Chinese character “ju 句” as “phrase” in order to distinguish its meaning from that of “*sanju sanxuan sanyao* 三句三玄三要,” which I translate as “statement.”

three statements because every statement has the potential to represent the three essentials, the three mysteries, or the three phrases.²¹ According to him, a statement is defined or re-defined as one of the three statements not by the statement itself but by its usage. To illustrate this idea, Ch'ŏnch'aek employed the analogy of the three seals: he compared the first, second, and third statements to the seal of the three essentials stamped, respectively, on air, on water, and on clay. Ch'ŏnch'aek then cited the Song Linji master Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) to explain this analogy:

Dahui said, “That a student of high capability listens to the Way is like stamping the seal on air; that a student of middle capability listens to the Way is like stamping the seal on water, and that a student of low capability listens to the Way is like stamping the seal on clay.”

大慧云 上士聞道如印印空 中士聞道如印印水 下士聞道如印印泥者.²²

Though Ch'ŏnch'aek provided no further explanation, the definition or re-definition of a statement might happen in the following way.

An enlightened master has the Buddhas' dharma-seal and the patriarchs' mind-seal. With his enlightened mind, the master makes a statement, which could be verbal or non-verbal, linguistic or non-linguistic, or secular or religious to test his students or help them attain enlightenment. The master's statement is always the first statement because it expresses the master's enlightened state of mind. However, the very same statement could also be the first, second, or third statement, depending on the capability of the student who listens to the master's statement. When a master makes a statement, a student with high spiritual capability will instantly attain enlightenment without falling into the trap created by the statement or leaving any trace of attachment, just as there is no trace of the seal stamped on air. In this case, the master's statement becomes the first statement to his student. A student with mid-level spiritual capability would attain some degree of enlightenment.

²¹ *Sŏnmun kangyo chip*, HPC 6, 853a10–13.

²² *Ibid.*, HPC 6, 852a22–24. Dahui's original remark is recorded in the *Dahui Pujue chanshi fayu* 20 with little variation from Ch'ŏnch'aek's citation (T47.894b17–18).

However, because the student's enlightenment would not be perfect, he would have some attachment to the statement just as there is the briefest trace of the seal stamped on the surface of water. The statement becomes the second in this case. A student with lesser spiritual capability would not attain enlightenment at all. He would merely become attached to the statement and produce all sorts of dualistic thought, just as there is a distinct trace of the seal stamped on clay. In this case, the statement becomes the third.

Ch'ōnch'aek's interpretation of Linji's teaching hinges on the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of language. Language, like any other thing in the world, is empty of its own nature. Just as a particular thing obtains its identity within a particular context or relationship because of its emptiness, language gains a particular meaning or function in the context of its utterance due to its empty nature. According to Ch'ōnch'aek, any word or any type of rhetoric possesses the potential to be the first, second, or third statement. Enlightened beings such as Buddhas and Zen patriarchs, as masters of emptiness, realize this feature of language.

3 Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Fenyang Shanzhao, Jianfu Chenggu, and Chinjōng Ch'ōnch'aek regarded Linji's teaching as implying a relationship between language and reality or language and enlightenment within Zen circles. Fenyang showed his recognition of the dual nature of language through his poetic comments on the teaching. According to him, language distorts and covers the truth of reality and thus obstructs the experience of that truth; at the same time, the same language carries that truth and arouses the experience of it. In fact, many Zen masters realized this feature of language, as demonstrated in the famous metaphor of the "dead word" (C. *siju*, K. *sagu* 死句) and the "live word" (C. *huoju*, K. *hwalgu* 活句). In Zen masters' usage of this metaphor, the former refers to the words that lead only to dualistic modes of thought, the latter to those words that bring an end to all dichotomies and bring about enlightenment. Usually, the plain and indicative rhetoric of the scriptures would be regarded as the dead word while the unconventional rhetoric

of terse and paradoxical Zen language would be regarded as the live word. However, many Zen masters warned that Zen rhetoric would become the dead word if it lost its spontaneity by being routinized and conceptualized, just as the words of the Buddha degenerated into the dead word (Buswell 1988: 246–248). Accordingly, Chenggu criticized some of the Linji and Yunmen masters of his time in his interpretation of Linji’s three mysteries. For Chenggu, these masters generated attachment to a specific Zen style of rhetoric and reified it, taking away its power to bring about the experience of enlightenment. Chenggu, therefore, rejected language as a whole. Another Song Zen master Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (1063–1135) even proclaimed that all expressions, including shouting and beating, were dead words (Hsieh 1993: 163). These two masters’ rejection of language probably served as “shock therapy” to emphasize that language itself, just as any other phenomena, is empty. This emptiness of language is fully revealed in Ch’ōnch’aek’s interpretation of Linji’s teaching. According to Ch’ōnch’aek, language itself does not possess the power to cover or uncover the truth of reality because of its empty nature. Depending on the context in which it is used, language attains such power and becomes the first, second, or third statement. Zen masters, who realized this truth of language, use language without attachment. Their use of language, therefore, is the expression of this realization as well as a skillful means of guiding their students toward enlightenment.

General Abbreviations

C	Chinese
HPC	<i>Han’guk Pulgyo Chōnsō</i>
K	Korean

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