

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORDS AND MEANING IN WORK “REVELATION OF THE DECISIVE SECRET FOR STUDENTS” OF ZEN MASTER VIEN CHIEU

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**Abstract:** *the koans and poems of Zen Master Vien Chieu play a distinctive part in Vietnamese Buddhist literature of the Ly-Tran dynasties, especially in terms of the Zen Sect's philosophy of language. They contribute significantly to Zen Buddhism's literary and artistic treasures, so studying them is indispensable. Many Vietnamese researchers such as Nguyen Dang Thuc, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dinh Gia Khanh, Thich Thanh Tu, Le Manh That, Nguyen Cong Ly, and Nguyen Pham Hung have referred to the Zen Master Vien Chieu's Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students. However, they mainly translate, explain, and remark on the meaning without focusing on the Zen Sect's views on the link between language and meaning, a part of the philosophy of language shown in work. Obviously, a philosophical perspective on language can help us deeply understand the characteristics and value of the koans in this work.*

**Keywords:** *zen Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism, Zen Master, Buddhist literature, Buddhism, Zen study.*

## ВЗАИМОСВЯЗЬ СЛОВА И ЗНАЧЕНИЯ В РАБОТЕ «ОТКРОВЕНИЕ РЕШАЮЩЕГО СЕКРЕТА ДЛЯ УЧЕНИКОВ» ДЗЕН-МАСТЕРА ВЬЕН ЧИЕУ

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**Аннотация:** *коаны и стихи мастера дзен Вьен Чиеу играют особую роль во вьетнамской буддийской литературе династий Ли-Тран, особенно с точки зрения философии языка секты дзен. Они вносят значительный вклад в литературные и художественные сокровища дзен-буддизма, поэтому их изучение просто необходимо. Многие вьетнамские исследователи, такие как Нгуен Данг Тхук, Тич Нхат Хан, Динь Гуа Кхань, Тич Тхань Ту, Ле Ман Тхат, Нгуен Конг Ли и Нгуен Фам Хунг, ссылались на «Откровение решающего секрета для студентов» дзен-мастером Виен Чиеу. Однако в основном они переводят, объясняют и делают замечания, не фокусируясь на взглядах секты Дзен на связь между языком и значением, являющуюся частью философии языка, показанной в работе. Очевидно, что философский взгляд на язык может помочь нам глубоко понять характеристики и ценность коанов в этой работе.*

**Ключевые слова:** *дзен-буддизм, вьетнамский буддизм, дзен-мастер, буддийская литература, буддизм, дзен-учение.*

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Zen Master Vien Chieu (999-1090), who specialized in chanting the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, wrote the work “Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students” to present ideas about dogma and deliverance (“Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students”: 參徒顯決: Explain clearly the secret to enlightenment to learners about Zen).

“Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students” consists of 59 questions and answers. The questioner states the problem logically, and the respondent uses two verses. There are 118 lines of poetry in total. It can be stated that the question-and-answer method is used commonly in the discourses of Buddha, not only in Buddhism but also in most other religions. However, giving the answers in this work has its characteristics, making it difficult for many readers to understand. Scholar Hoang Xuan Han wrote the following things to show concern at these kinds of responses: “When the monks talk about morality together, they recite verses with vague meanings. As a result, we don't know the exact meaning. For example, when a monk asks Zen Master Vien Chieu about the meaning of Buddhas and Confucian Sages, Zen Master answers in verse as follows:

“Yellow Chrysanthemums bloom brightly under the hedge.

The Oriolus sing loudly on branches in spring.”

The monk doesn't get it and asks him to explain. He says:

“In the daytime, the brilliant sun shines.

Then comes the night, bathed in bright moonlight.”

After that, the monk said that he understood the true meaning that Zen Master had given. “To be honest, I don’t know what that means. Are Buddhas and Confucian Sages all phenomena appearing on earth?” [3, p. 411 – 412].

Nguyen Dang Thuc explains the general features of thinking in Zen studies: “This is characteristic of the poetic spirit of Zen studies. The Zen Masters respond according to the three-sentence logic of general intellectuals rather than answer the question directly. These verses are like the key to open enlightenment. Therefore, people who have not undergone spiritual experience and have not found the harmony between two souls cannot understand. It is a way of “mind to mind transmission” or “special transmission outside the teachings” of Philosophie Du Non that is anti-rational, anti-linguistic, purely experimental, and completely implemented as Zen Buddhism. It doesn’t allow people to understand objectively. On the other hand, it requires them to perceive clearly, to attain enlightenment or intuition like sleeping and suddenly waking up or being awake and suddenly entering a dream” [12, p. 224]. From the general theory, the researcher explained a few verses of Zen Master Vien Chieu. “The question is: “What is the meaning of Buddhas and Confucian Sages?” In Eastern and Vietnamese thought, the word “Buddhas” refers to those who come out of the world to seek the truth, and the word “Confucian Sages” refers to people who entered the world. “Buddha” is Shakyamuni after attaining the omniscience of a Buddha. And “Confucian Sages” is Confucius who acts freely “according to the mind without breaking the rules.” The two ways of realizing the universe, essence, and existence, are compared to the following verse:

“Yellow Chrysanthemums bloom brightly under the hedge.

The Oriolus sing loudly on branches in spring.”

These are two beautiful, reasonable scenes that are similar to the two natural scenes below:

“In the daytime, the brilliant sun shines.

Then comes the night, bathed in bright moonlight” [12, p. 224 - 225].

Thus, the images of nature are metaphorical images for Buddhas and Confucian Sages. Both of them are meaningful, valuable, and vital in life. Nguyen Dang Thuc’s approach shows that to read and understand *Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*, it’s needful to possess knowledge of the Zen Master’s “direct question and answer” and way of thinking when discussing his verses.

Since then, Vietnamese researchers began to apply their understanding of the Zen Sect and its views on language to understand and evaluate the contributions of *Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students* to literary language. They had to learn about the philosophy of language of the Zen Sect to compare with modern linguistic theory.

Language is undeniably a vital instrument for people’s thinking and communication. Semiotics, a formal subject focused on studying language, was developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

In the book *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure used the two concepts: “signifier” and “signified” to analyze language as a sign system. The “signifier” is a thing that we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste and represents a concrete object or an abstract thought. It is not the same as the “signified.” Moreover, the relation between them is irrational and dogmatic.

Because language is a tool to expose thoughts, thinkers (including Zen Masters) always use language to reveal their ideas. Unfortunately, the number of verbal concepts is often limited, and the things and phenomena that need to be defined are infinite. Therefore, language has inevitable limitations. In other words, words are synoptical and cannot convey the individuality of things. There is a gap between language and thoughts. Furthermore, it’s too difficult to express the abstract ideas of philosophical and religious doctrines in language. To show the powerlessness of language, Chuang Tzu (369 BC-286 BC) told the following story:

“One day, when King Te Hoan Cong was reading a book in his house, a wagon-builder who was shaping a wheel in the yard named Bien approached and asked: “What are you reading?”

The King replied: “Reading the teachings of the Confucian Sages.”

Bien asked: “Are those Sages alive?”

The King replied: “They are all dead.”

Bien said: “So you’re reading their dregs.”

The King replied: “I am reading a book. How dare a wagon-builder to discuss. If your explanation makes sense, I will forgive you. Otherwise, I will execute you.”

Bien said: “I would like to take my work as an example. If I shape a wheel slowly, my hands will be flexible, but the work is inefficient. In contrast, if I shape the wheel quickly, I will be tired and cannot complete it as planned. Thus, I must work at a normal speed, suitable for my hands and heart. Since I cannot describe the magical things in this process, I cannot teach my descendants. They can’t learn anything from me either. Therefore, even though I’m seventy years old, I still have to work myself. The ancients and the lessons they left have no longer existed, so the book you’re reading is their dregs.”

The art of shaping the wheel to gain perfection is an abstract thing. Using language to teach others, making them reach a teacher's level is too challenging. In the Wei dynasty and Jin dynasty (222-589), Occultism had the concept: "words cannot express all thoughts." It is like feeling the heat or the cold when drinking water. They are personal feelings. (*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*).

The Zen Sect's philosophy of language was established based on the objective rule of the link between language and thinking, the signifier and the signified, and was influenced by Lao Trang's and Occultism's ideology on language and the written word's limitations.

In the discourses of Buddha, the Lankavatara Sutra provides arguments for negating the teaching of the sutras in writing. Buddhism teaches about the Mind. "The Mind that Buddhism refers to is a purely internal experience. People can't use words to liberate or use written words to transmit. It is not an experimental mental activity without thinking and similar to the saying in Buddhist scriptures: "Beyond thought and words, beyond conception." "Experience is the act and the result of personalization, like an example in the Platform Sutra: "A person who drinks water, he knows whether it is hot or cold." In other words, language is a product of thought and can be formalized. The human experience, on the other hand, is infinite and cannot be formalized. Therefore, language isn't able to show the experimental aspect of humans. In addition, that Mind is purity. It is the highest realm that man seeks and is the kind of internal feeling rather than the real one. Therefore, the written words cannot be used to perceive it" [18, p. 11].

These reasons make the Zen Sect possess a policy of "not using language or the written words to preach." The book *Gotōegen* recorded a story. However, researchers supposed it was an anecdote about *The Flower Sermon*: "At Gr̥dhraakūṭa mountain, the Buddha did nothing but held up a flower in front of his disciples, and only his disciple Mahakasyapa smiled. The Buddha immediately announced to give the truth to Mahakasyapa, the ancestor of the Zen Sect." This story illustrated Zen Buddhism's concept of "no dependence upon words and letters"

*The Lankavatara Sutra* noted the Buddha's teachings to Mahamati: "Buddhas and Bodhisattvas neither speak nor respond. Why? Because the Dharma is not preserved in the letter." The Sixth Patriarch Hui-Neng in *The Platform Sutra* wrote: "The true teachings of the Buddhas have no relation to the letter." That was the Gates of the Dharma of "mind to mind transmission." The Diamond Sutra said: "If anyone says that the Tathagata's teaching of the Dharma a slander of the Buddha, that person doesn't understand my theory." The Lankavatara Sutra wrote: "Mahamati, the deluded people say that the meaning is like the saying. This indicates that they don't know that the language has birth and death, while the meaning doesn't." The Dharma was not preserved in the written words, so Zen Master Lam Te said: "The name isn't only a name! The reason is that you think that the sacredness of "that understanding from learning in daily life and the past through the intelligent" attaches to all names."

*The Vimalakirti Sutra* said that when Manjusri led Buddhist disciples to visit Vimalakirti, and discussed the "Non-Dual Dharma." However, Vimalakirti answered with silence. All languages cannot express the Absolute Truth because they're relative. Therefore, "Vimalakirti's silence" is a profound explanation for the Absolute Truth that cannot be displayed in words and cannot also be defined.

However, it should not be assumed that this is the only way to express the language of the Zen Sect. In the history of the Zen Sect, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Zen Masters exaggerated the practice rather than analyzing the scriptures and teaching the Dharma. Bodhidharma (~470-543) proclaimed to Luong Vu De: "not using words to preach." During the Tang Dynasty, a class of monks who thoroughly understood letters and arts appeared. Thanks to them, the trend of merging meditation and poetry, poets, and monks took place. Besides, the policy of "not using language or the written words to preach" was supplemented by "not separating from the written words." The Zen Sect that promoted "not separating from the written words" doubted that conceptual language couldn't tell about the Mind. During the Song Dynasty, Lin-Chi School and the Five Houses of Zen applied poetry and chants to preach Buddhism. Chu Du Hai wrote: "From the Five Dynasties (907 – 979) and Northern Song (960 – 1127), the sayings of Zen Masters began to circulate. After the Transmission of the Lamp had appeared, the language of the Zen Sect tended to be formalized. Although this kind of formalization was detrimental to the development of thought in the Zen Sect, it significantly promoted the formation of a unique artistic language in the Zen Sect. "The language of the Zen Sect," which was a specific form of language in the classics of meditation, suddenly became more robust. It absorbed various components of Mandarin, dialects, and written forms of Chinese based on the dialects of the Tang-Song dynasty. These components formed a language's labyrinth through the free and flexible combination, making us amazed [18, p. 213]. Zen Master Nguyen Lang (Thich Nhat Hanh) also commented: "Zen Masters often use specific images to lead practitioners to enlightenment. They don't want their students to immerse in abstract reasoning. When Nanquan asked Zhaozhou (Nanquan and Zhaozhou were two Chinese Zen Masters in the ninth century) about Bodhidharma's intention when passing through China, Zhaozhou pointed out into the courtyard and said: "Look at the pine in the yard. Zen study is similar to poetry because they focus on images rather than abstract concepts. Poetry without images is no longer poetry. Similarly, if we delve into metaphysical reasoning,

meditation is no longer meditation. Therefore, it's popular for Zen Masters loving poetry to express realizations in poetry and guide their students with poetic images" [8, p. 164 - 165].

The two policies of "not using language or the written words to preach" and "not separating from the written words" are not contradictory. "Non-reliance on written words" avoids using conceptual language with many limitations to discuss the principles. On the other hand, "not separating from the written words" use metaphors and symbols in poetics and koans to impact the minds and emotions of listeners and readers, helping them from experiencing themselves to self-perceiving the truth, that is, Dharma-element according to the discourses of Buddha. The above quote shows that Nguyen Lang uses the concept of "image." However, in general, Zen Masters use a teaching style that avoids abstract concepts in many ways. For instance, besides poetic images, they use gestures like *holding up a flower and smiling*, hitting, and shouting (movements and body language). Therefore, we suggest using the concept of signs and symbols. "The finger pointing to the moon, the moon on the water surface, and grinding a tile to turn it into a mirror" are not simple images but are vivid signs and symbols in life, contributing to teaching Buddhism.

Vietnamese Buddhist literature in the Ly-Tran dynasty had been formed in the developmental context of "not separating from the written words," and poetry and meditation merged since the Tang-Song dynasties. It was also strongly impacted by this trend. "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*" of Zen Master Vien Chieu showed the influence of the records passing on the lamp of Buddhist truth that began to be popular during the Song Dynasty in China. This type of book was literary and recorded about Zen Masters.

Saussure distinguished between a sign and a symbol. The sign was the signifier, having an arbitrary, illogical relationship with the signified. In contrast, the symbol had a logical, explicable relationship with the signified. He wrote: "A feature of the symbol is that it is never purely arbitrary. It is not empty because there is a fundamental principle of the natural relationship between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice is a pair of scales that cannot be replaced by another symbol, a chariot, for example" [17, p. 68].

The symbol was one thing that existed because of another. The signifier was sensible and perceptible, and the signified was a thing that was hidden and not perceptible. According to researcher Arthur Asa Berger: "Symbols can be classified into three groups: *conventional, random, and universal*. Conventional symbols are words that we already know what they mean. On the other hand, random symbols are often personal and related to each person's private life. For example, if a person has his/her first love in Paris, Paris can become a random symbol of his/her passion. Finally, there are universal symbols, in which the relationship between the symbol and the thing presented is internal and derived from all people's life experiences. Many of these symbols are associated with our bodies and natural processes" [16, p. 67].

Vien Chieu's exceptional contribution is manifested in poetic images taken from the real world. They are familiar to the recipients and are recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, records passing on the lamp of Buddhist truth, and other literary and historical books. Therefore, they will belong to conventional and universal symbols if we categorize them.

According to the explanation of Le Manh That in the *Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist literature*, Vol.3, it can be seen that "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*" has applied the symbolic, metaphorical words, as follows:

- They're taken from *Transmission of the Lamp Records* (23 times) and *Blue Rock Collection* (1 time).
- The sutras: *Wondrous Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra* (3 times), *The Sutra of complete enlightenment* (2 times), and *Short Lamrim* (2 times)
- Books such as *Yi-king* (1 time), *Analects* (1 time), *Chuang Chou* (1 time), *Han-Fei-Tzu* (1 time), *Lushi Chunqiu* (3 times), *History of the Warring States period* (1 time), *Shiji* (3 times), *Pūzi Shi* (1 time), *Jin Shu* (1 time), *Wei Shu* (1 time), *Xin Tang Shu* (1 time). It can be said that "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*" is composed by a Zen Master with academic education and knowledge covering all three teachings. Therefore, only when listeners have a similar education can they receive those erudite thoughts. The influence of the records passing on the lamp of Buddhist truth indicated that the consolidation of poetry and meditation in "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*" resulted from the development of the Zen Sect's written words that formed in the Tang Dynasty and flourished in the Song Dynasty.

In terms of genre, Nguyen Dang Thuc called it "direct question and answer." Nguyen Lang (Thich Nhat Hanh) considered it "the first word," and Le Manh That called it "opportunity of conversational language." However, we would call them conversations on problems that were interested in the Zen study. The dialogue was the form commonly used in the discourses of Buddha. (In Confucianism, the *Analects*, which recorded conversations between Confucius and his disciples, was also classified in this category.)

A fundamental feature of the dialogue between Master Vien Chieu and his followers is logical questions. The answer uses symbols rather than going directly to the concept that the questioner is waiting for. For example, the monk asked: "What is the meaning of Buddhas and Confucian Sages?"

Zen Master answered: "Yellow Chrysanthemums bloom brightly under the hedge on September 9.

The Oriolus sing loudly on branches in spring."

The monk didn't get it and asked him to explain. He said:

“In the daytime, the brilliant sun shines.

Then comes the night, bathed in bright moonlight.”

This is one of the most vivid and easy dialogues in the *“Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students.”* The question refers to the Buddhas (of Buddhism) and the Sages (of Confucianism). The answer consists of two sides with two pairs of symbols: the yellow Chrysanthemum blooming in autumn - the Oriolus singing in spring, and the sun - the moon. There isn’t any abstract concept of the doctrine. All of them are the concrete things that help each person possessing life experience realize the “true principle”: Buddhas and Confucian Sages are beautiful and crucial for life and human beings.

There are three types of signs and symbols used in the *“Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students”*:

**Firstly**, symbols related to nature are plants, heaven, earth, wind, moon, snow, bamboo, chrysanthemum, pine, spring, autumn, and animals. Natural images are used more than other types, for example, moon (11 times), sun (3 times), flowers (9 times), and wind (7 times), creating poetry for the abstract questions and answers.

Nature brought a great source of materials that created aesthetic, poetic beauty for poetry in general. Confucianists applied natural images such as pine, chrysanthemum, bamboo, and apricot to express the will of a gentleman entering the world. Heaven and earth had given the Confucian the quality of genius, so their contribution when entering the world was to reciprocate this favor. Nature that took the symbolic role had expressed the vast aspects of the Zen study.

The monk asked: “What does “beholding the Buddha-nature to reach the Buddhahood” mean?”

The Master replied: “A dry tree blooms when spring comes.

The wind carries the fragrance thousands of miles away.”

The question contains the abstract concept of “beholding the Buddha-nature to reach the Buddhahood,” and Vien Chieu uses the symbols of “a dry tree blooms (when spring comes) and fragrance (carried away by the wind). Thich Thanh Tu explained: “The dry tree is a metaphor for five skandhas (including form, feeling, ideation, reaction, and consciousness) that obscure human nature. However, if people practice, they will realize inherent intelligence called “beholding the Buddha-nature.” However, many wonderful applications cannot be measured, like a dry tree blooming and the wind carrying a fragrance thousands of miles away. Therefore, using the image of a dry tree blooming helps us realize the magic of “beholding the Buddha-nature” and be fascinated by the poetic beauty of its metaphor.”

The monk asked: “Mind and Dharma need to be forgotten. Character is truth, so what is truth?”

The Master replied: “The raindrops on the flower on the mountain are the tears of a Goddess.

The wind that stirs the bamboo branches in the yard is Ba Nha’s sound of guqin.”

This is an impressive way of teaching the truth (or the true principle.) Thich Thanh Tu said: “When it rains, there is rainwater on the flower. When the wind blows, the bamboo clumps in front of the yard collide and sound. That’s true. However, the author imagines that rainwater on flowers is like the tears of a Goddess, and the sound of bamboo rubbing against each other is like Ba Nha’s sound of guqin. This imagination causes things to lose their realness, which is a delusion. Stopping imagining and letting things be themselves are the truth.” This is an ingenious interpretation of the concept of “truth” that is abstract by using familiar objects around us.

The monk asked: “Four great elements have existed for many eons.

Please tell me how to escape samsara.”

The Master replied: “Rhinos are precious animals, but they eat thorns and sleep in the mud.”

The sentence implies that rhinos are rare animals (because their horns are used as medicine), but they only eat thorns and sleep in the mud. Vien Chieu taught that if we would like to escape from worldliness, we had to escape from this world, not anywhere else. Similarly, rhinos live in a dirty environment, but their horns are precious. The metaphor is unique because the author has carefully observed the surrounding world to choose the most suitable thing to express the thought that needs to be conveyed to those who enter meditation.

The monk asked: What does “cutting out the verbal expression” mean?

The Master replied: “The sound of the horn following the wind goes through the bamboo forest.

The moon passes through the mountains to reach the house wall.”

The question is an abbreviated version of the proposition “cutting out the verbal expression and eliminating the conceptual thinking.” Thich Thanh Tu commented: “How good two verses are! The wind and the sound of the horn have no thought. They thread through the bamboo clumps to reach the listeners. They don’t have ideas and language but still move to the listener’s ears. Things move, although mind and language don’t exist.”

The selected and applied natural images are alive, close to people, and easy to feel, helping Vien Chieu explain vividly, effectively and avoid the dryness and boredom of the teachings and ideas of the Zen Sect.

**Secondly**, the symbols related to the world are people, houses, castles, ships, swords, roads, walls, experiences, way of life, and daily work.

They are often used to explain Buddhist students’ necessary actions and life philosophy.

The monk asked: “What is the occult cause?”

The answer was: “Carrying the basin of water, what happens if you accidentally stumble?”

Thich Thanh Tu explained: "Occult cause is a great mystery." The questioner would like to know how to remain after enlightenment. The meaning of the answer was that: "Be careful when you carry the basin of water. If you slip and fall, the water will spill out." To point out Vien Chieu's creativity, Thich Thanh Tu compared this expression with another for the same problem of preserving the enlightened mind that was the teachings of Buddha in Agama Sutra through a parable: "A dead man is absolved if he carries a plate full of oil from the beginning to the end of the road without dropping any drop of oil. If a drop of oil falls out, the executioner following him will cut off his head. The condemned man attentively carries the plate of oil, and he isn't distracted when he passes by beautiful girls, restaurants, and theaters, so the oil doesn't spill, and he survives." He used the metaphor of carrying a plate of oil to talk about bringing a water basin. Both of them aimed at caution and attention.

To provide more details for the questioner, Vien Chieu said:

"Don't wash your hands in a river with big waves. If you fall into the water, you'll drown." It means that we need to be cautious, careful, and not reckless in wading the river to wash, which can make us be swept away by the current. This example is close and easy to awaken the mind of the meditator.

One more question: "Green bamboo is the suchness," so what is the meaning of "suchness"?

The answer was: "Giving you who have gone a thousand miles.

A smile and a teapot."

Le Thi Thanh Tam explained: "The answer has several images: people, miles of roads, and teapots. This image cluster is connected by verbs such as "give" and "smile." If the verse doesn't mention the meaning of "suchness," it is naturally beautiful. However, it evokes the poetic image of a lonely person on a journey of thousands of miles. He leaves or is searching for something and receives a good cup of tea in a moment. Will a sip of tea help him feel warmer, more meaningful, or solace for a long life-or-death journey? The answer surpasses the logical requirement to answer the question: "What is the meaning of "suchness"? It develops in a different direction from the point of view of absolute nature but is true to the nature of the great concerns about deliverance." (10, 132)

The learner asked: "All the living are Buddhas. I don't understand this statement. Please explain it."

The answer was: "I advise you to work hard on the farm. Don't sit by stump and wait for careless hare."

This answer combines observation of life and a literary incident. The story of working on the farm can be related to the saying "an emptied mind is a truth," which Nanquan answers Zhaozhou's question, "what is the truth?" The emptied mind is like a water surface without waves. It doesn't arouse thoughts. Keep your mind as empty as a farmer doing the work in the field. The emptied mind is the Buddha. Don't let your mind be affected like the man plowing on the field and trying to find a rabbit plunging its head into a tree. The next day, he thinks that another rabbit will dive its head into the tree again, so he sits by the stump and waits for it. He fantasizes about fantasy. Daily life is the Buddha in the heart. After hearing that, the learner thinks he gets it, so he asks the master for guidance without studying anyone else. The master then said:

"What a pity for the choking person.

Being hungry but not eating."

It can be said that choking is a common situation. The food is still in the neck and has not gone to the stomach, but people think they're full. They are hungry but stop eating. It is an interesting metaphor for complacent people.

**Lastly**, there are symbols related to historical figures such as Thach Sung, Tan Thuy Hoang, Kinh Kha, Quach Phac, Hua Ton Taoist, Ba Nha, and historical events related to the way of life and behavior of human beings.

A housing-related conversation case is pretty interesting. For instance, a meditator asked: "The house is empty, and the gate is closed.

Who knocks on the door to enter?"

The master replied: "Kim Coc (Thach Sung's villa) was lonely and full of flowers and herbs. Buffaloes and goats were free to go in and out. In the Tan Dynasty, Thach Sung was rich and had a luxurious villa. However, his family was assassinated. Since then, the house had been deserted. Buffaloes and goats freely entered the place to eat grass. It was no longer a luxury house."

This indicates that the pure, quiet inner will be chaotic if someone wants to enter. The Master borrowed the incident about Thach Sung, but the primary purpose was to lead the story of cultivating the heart, not giving a history lesson.

The story of Jing Ke, who assassinated Qin Shi Huang unsuccessfully, was also used in a dialogue. The question was: "What is to follow the water stream to attain the enlightenment?" (Following the water stream helps the raft across the river gain the enlightenment).

Vien Chieu replied: "Jing Ke left and did not return."

Jing Ke failed in assassinating Qin Shi Huang, and he was killed. Similarly, if a cultivator lets life take him away, he won't reach enlightenment. If you surrender to the flow of life, you have accepted to live according to the world. How can you attain enlightenment if immersing yourself in birth and death?

Le Thi Thanh Tam had a different opinion from Thich Thanh Tu. She wrote: “The questioner wanted to know “How shall the path to enlightenment follow the truth?” The respondent repeated the incident about Jing Ke, and the “enlightenment” was to remind the core of the incident: “leaving and not returning.” His disappearance implied many meanings. “Enlightenment” was like a trip to disappear, forever free from the bonds of false views in the afflictive life.” (10, 132-133). According to Vien Chieu, Jing Ke’s decision to assassinate Qin Shi Huang was like “attaining the enlightenment,” so people had to be brave like Jing Ke and dare to throw away wealth, power, and fame to become a Buddhist monk. The metaphorical image of Jing Ke reminded us of two verses that he read before leaving, recorded by Sima Qian in the Shiji:

“The wind is blowing, and the Dich River is cold.

The hero leaves and doesn’t come back.”

These verses describe the mettle and determination of a hero. Therefore, the character Jing Ke has brought high efficiency for teaching enlightenment.

In sum, the way of using the incident of Jing Ke in Zen Master’s preaching is different from that of historians. The Zen Master used various symbolic materials according to the nature of each question.

Thinking in Zen studies is a spiritually intuitive one. Therefore, the realization by spiritual intuition is vital because language is valid on the conceptual and symbolic levels. Meanwhile, the self-realization realm of the Zen Sect can be beyond the language. All interpretations must be removed, and the students are provided with dialogues with the challenge of spiritual intuition. They need to burn themselves, understand the koans, and become enlightened instantly. Moreover, koans often use the opposite form of language to create a path to enlightenment: “awakening the principles of Buddhism by absurd clauses” to urge learners to break out of the ordinary way of thinking.

Zen Master Vien Chieu applied the opposition in a language to open up his disciples’ intelligence and enlightenment. “The opposition in a language is rhetoric combining contradictory concepts or propositions. It portrays a paradox in life or perception to impress, develop expressive nuance, and elicit thought on the topics given from perspectives other than those commonly held” [13, p. 23]. Although these propositions are pretty absurd, they have profound meanings. Via the use of contradictions and illogicalities to evoke highly intellectual issues, the opposition in a language brings powerful “blows” to the minds of religious learners. Thanks to that, they’ll be from a state of realizing the absurd to focusing and using their senses and potentials to comprehend spiritual reality and quickly attain enlightenment.

Usually, dead trees cannot bloom even in spring, but Vien Chieu uses two verses to paint a wonderful and magnificent natural scene.

“The dry branches bloom full of flowers in spring.

The wind carries the fragrance thousands of miles away.”

The absurd is used to express things making sense - the wonderful application of Buddhism. This contradictory and illogical proposition makes learners brainstorm to find the true meaning. It’s also a way to make them discover the truth of the religion. “Beholding the Buddha-nature to reach the Buddhahood” is when a person is “like a dry branch” (a metaphor for the five aggregates) and is being confused but realizes his natural purity. The process of going from stupefaction to enlightenment is like a dry branch that blooms in spring, making the fragrance follow the wind to spread everywhere. Only when the mind is calm can we see the wonderful application of this path. If we see our nature and original heart, the Buddha-nature immediately manifests, that is, becoming a Buddha.

In addition, many other forms of opposition were used in the “*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*” to bring high efficiency in teaching Zen philosophy to learners. Talking about the futile effort, Zen Master Vien Chieu took some images such as:

“The blind turtle kept looking at the cliff  
Softshell turtle limped up a high mountain.”

Or:

“Building a nest on a burning curtain.  
Sideburns are as white as reed flowers.”

Or:

“The deaf listen to the harp.  
The blind watch the full moon.”

These sentences are structured in an opposition form to indicate useless actions. To talk about the wonderful application of the truth, the Zen Master wrote:

“In a dry pond  
Fish live forever.”

In fact, fish will die without water. However, in the water or on the shore, there is religion. If we understand that truth, we can live anywhere for ten thousand years. Or another illogical image:

“Oriolus sing in the autumn  
Peonies bloom under flying snow.”

The Oriolus sing only in spring, and peonies bloom in summer. However, the verse has changed the rules of all things.

Contradictory events bring new associations, prompting learners to reflect, go beyond conventional thinking, and reach higher-level interpretation. Thanks to that, they realize the hidden philosophy. It's also a unique and effective way for them to awaken to the right path of Zen.

With the knowledge of the samadhi language and expertise in Buddhist studies, Zen Master Vien Chieu has created good koans whose words significantly impact practitioners' minds. In the "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*," he used beautiful words, symbolic images, and unique rhetorical measures such as the opposition form in a language and incidents, increasing the connotative value of the meaning. The koans, which possess hundreds of verses and flexible images, effectively convey Zen principles and paint the world beautifully. It's a typical example of the talent "quoting poetry to explain Zen" and "introducing Zen to explain poetry" of Vien Chieu, a talented Zen Master and a poet of Buddhism in the Ly Dynasty.

The "*Revelation of the Decisive Secret for Students*" of Zen Master Vien Chieu made an outstanding contribution to the teaching method of merged poetry and meditation. Furthermore, he clarified the policy of "not using language or the written words to preach" and "not separating from the written words" of East Asian Zen Buddhism.

2. There are many different translations. Since this is a form of poetry that has 5 words per sentence, the translated lyrics are often unclear. We choose the translation by Nguyen Duy Hinh, *History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, pp. 204-217. The translation of the poem is referenced and edited from many sources.

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