

THE INTANGIBLES: MEANING IN LANGUAGE

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The history of thoughts is an old story, one we all have been following for a long time. Thoughts go on forever and are more than just their content and meaning. They share a common nature, and that nature can be seen and looked at in itself. Our thoughts often end up in sentences and words. What makes sentences work is that words have gaps between them, an ocean of emptiness in which words float.

The arrangement of letters in single words is fixed, but the arrangement of words in a sentence is not. The placement of words, one up against another, creates meaning. Arranging words carefully alters meaning and involves the clash and friction of consonants, and the smooth ease of vowels. This is why spoken poetry is so powerful. A simple rearrangement of words on the page changes the meaning.

It is the juggling of words that creates meaning, the friction of words rubbing together to create fire in the mind – light and clarity. Thoughts are the windows through which we can learn to gaze at the nature of the mind. This is what mind training is all about.

As mentioned, words are concretized or frozen thoughts that can be arranged in sentences for effect. Words can be set against one another to dam the flow of thought and retain meaning until we get it.

Sentences rich in meaning slow the mind until experience dawns. "Experience" is the key word here. Meaning has a kindling point where it sparks the mind and creates light. With light, seeing is possible and then clarity.

Meaning of any kind (no matter how subtle) is always only a reference and not anything in itself, a simple pointer that refers us to have an experience for ourselves, to live! And please think this through:

Remember that the meaning of a sentence is only as good as the "sense" it makes, which is to say meaning is at heart sensual, literally: to make sense. It is all about making sense. Sentences that don't refer us to experience and action are sterile, fit only for pundits.

In dharma practice the action we are referred to is that of experiencing the true nature of our own mind, the clarity of that. And clarity is its own reward, not clarity 'about'

something, but just clarity of the mind -- seeing "seeing" itself seeing. As the last sentence shows, words cannot hold the experience, but only refer or point to it. We have to follow the reference pointers (the meaning) and actually go there ourselves (where it points to) and experience it. That is the whole point of the dharma. Enlightenment is a do-it-yourself proposition and that by definition.

Words, frozen thoughts on a page, can be rearranged to create meaning. The arrangement of words prevents them from being meaningless. Working words until they catch fire creates light, and with the clarity of light we can learn to see the true nature of the mind, where there is not anything to be seen but the seeing itself.

In summary, all thoughts depend on their meaning, and all meaning depends on the sense it makes. Sense is a physical experience involving the five senses, thus the word "sense." The algebra of "meaning" is abstract, consisting only of pointers, references that are not anything intrinsically, but point beyond themselves to an experience to be had, a call to action. This is what Hamlet's soliloquy by Shakespeare is all about – stunning!

We read, read, read, read books, but as my first dharma teacher used to tell me over and over: "Someday you must become the book." It is significant that the Buddha, if he were here now, could not just walk over to us, touch our forehead, and we would become enlightened. The extent of his power was to point out to us how we can enlighten ourselves. This is what is called the "dharma," the pointing out of a method. It is then up to each of us to enlighten ourselves, just as the historical Buddha did for himself.

It is beyond significant that language itself, like a school of fish all pointing in the same direction, endlessly points to the sea of experience that awaits us. At best thoughts are a window through which we can gaze at the true nature of the mind itself. Someday we must each take the plunge.

