LINGUISTIC AND OTHER CHALLENGES IN RESEARCHING TRANSCENDENT PHENOMENA: CONSIDERATIONS FROM WITTGENSTEIN AND BUDDHIST PRACTICE

John W. Osborne, Ph.D.
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

**ABSTRACT:** The Buddhist practice of avoiding conceptual descriptions of experiences of enlightenment was compared to Wittgenstein’s declaration in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” Wittgenstein’s later idea of language games, expressed in *Philosophical Investigations*, was examined in terms of its potential use in the exploration of transcendent experiences, with a focus upon the availability and variability of such language games. Methodological issues involving the contextual nature of transcendence and its manifestations were also discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, Wittgenstein, language games, sources of transcendence.

**WHO KNOWS SIGNS OF ENLIGHTENMENT?**

How do I know whether someone, such as a teacher or guru, truly knows the nature of a transcendent experience and whether this can be communicated to me? Within the Zen tradition the Roshi (master) presumably understands the nature of Kensho (enlightenment) and can recognize its presence in another person. The Roshi “knows” when the aspirant “knows.” Within the Zen tradition, after discussion, the Roshi seems to “know” where the aspirant is on the path to Satori (self-realization). The terms Kensho and Satori are sometimes used synonymously. Nonetheless, Kensho seems to be associated with the earlier stages of self-realization, while Satori is often considered to be a deeper awakening (Suzuki, 1961). However, the ultimate inadequacy of conceptual explanations of Kensho and Satori has been acknowledged (Enomya-Lassalle, 1968) and will be revisited later in this article. For present purposes the term “Kensho” will be used.

The ox herding pictures are often referred to as a kind of map that a Roshi can use in giving aspirants a hint of their progress towards Kensho. These pictures can be seen online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bN126j4FH7g. There are also numerous discussions of the ox herding pictures on the internet.

Zen also identifies stages on the path to Kensho. Kapleau refers to eight levels of Kensho:
Evidence of Kensho, evidence of great enlightenment, evidence of deepened enlightenment, evidence of direct experience of the great way of Buddhism, evidence of attaining the non-regressing mind of Fugen (an historical Bodhisattva or enlightened one), evidence of the joy and peace of being at one with the Dharma [historical teachings], further evidence of the joy and peace of being at one with the Dharma, and presentiment of death. (Kapleau, 1965, pp. 276–289)

I presume that these are suggestive rather than definitive categories of experience and that they resemble the continuous blooming of a flower rather than discrete stages. After the initial Kensho subsequent levels appear to be a deepening of initial experience. These types of Kensho may not occur in sequence necessarily. Sometimes a person may appear to miss one or more of these stages or compound them. Although there are various stages on the path to enlightenment aspirants are often warned about the dubious validity of conceptual descriptions of the path(s) to enlightenment: for example, “Enlightenment is the activation of a spiritual power which is normally found in everyone but has hitherto been hidden and therefore unused” (Enomiya-Lassalle, 1968, p. 36). This description is a generalized abstraction that tells little about the actuality of the experiences of enlightened individuals. However, personal accounts of Kensho are often poetic and not based upon natural science.

One night while I was immersed in meditation, I suddenly found myself in a very strange condition. There was no before and no after. Everything was though suspended. The object of my own meditation and my own self had disappeared. The only thing I felt was that my own innermost self was completely united and filled with everything above and below and all around. An unlimited light was shining within me. After some time, I came back to myself like one risen from the dead. My seeing and hearing, my thoughts and emotions were quite different from what they had been until then. When gropingly, I tried to think of the truths of the world and to grasp the meaning of the incomprehensible, I understood everything. Everything seemed to me quite clear and real. Spontaneously, I threw up my arms in an excess of joy and danced. And all of a sudden I exclaimed, ‘A million sutras are only a candle in front of the sun. Marvelous, really marvelous.’ (Enomiya-Lassalle, 1968, p. 27)

Nonetheless, words are used in an attempt to communicate the actuality of human experience despite Wittgenstein’s assertion in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Tractatus), published in English in 1922, that mystical and transcendent experiences are not well served by language. However, the migration of Buddhism from Asia to western countries has resulted in the limited use of language as a compensation for the lack of an historical tradition of practice.

FROM TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS TO PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Throughout his life, following a Catholic background, Wittgenstein was favorably predisposed towards mysticism (i.e., “A doctrine or discipline
maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational conceptual thought,” Audi, 1999, p. 925). His later interest in the aesthetics of music and other arts (Hagberg, 1995) confirmed the difficulties he had anticipated in the *Tractatus* concerning the inability of language to illuminate transcendent experience whether it is mystical, ethical or aesthetic experience.

Lundquist (1999) suggested:

It’s fine to give linguistic meaning to things and to draw parallels – this is the intellectualization that is accepted by our society and it is our way of quantifying experience. As long as we understand that this way of doing things is not necessarily authentic - there is something underlying aesthetics that is indefinable, incomprehensible and impossible to conceptualize through the mind. It must be passed over in silence. (p. 4)

Wittgenstein’s (1961) final line in the *Tractatus* (“what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”) had already been a major part of Buddhist practice for centuries. However, the acceptance of some limited value associated with linguistic explanation of mystical, ethical and aesthetic experiences, has been suggested by scholars such as Janik and Toulmin, (1973) and Lundquist, (1999). The inability of language, as a means of apprehending the meaning of transcendent experiences, has been implied by Buddhist practice over centuries. Buddhism and Wittgenstein (in the *Tractatus*), emphasize the non-conceptual understanding of the actuality of mystical experience and other transcendent phenomena. Buddhism allows some word based pointing with the caveat that enlightenment lies beyond conceptual thinking.

The *Tractatus*, as a whole, created the initial impression that what can be said are only propositions of natural science. But, Wittgenstein was not responding from a positivist point of view as some philosophers may have thought. His point was that there are realms of human experience, such as mysticism, ethics and aesthetics which sometimes are beyond language. Despite Wittgenstein’s early view, expressed in the *Tractatus*, words continue to be routinely used in the attempt to understand transcendent experiences. Janik and Toulmin (1973) suggest that, to some extent, language can facilitate at least an approach to transcendent experience, despite its shortcomings, by helping us to “see” that we need to understand beyond words.

The impact of the distinction between saying and showing, acknowledged by Wittgenstein, led to increased awareness, among philosophers, that aspects of human experience are beyond propositional language. Wittgenstein’s apparent mystical references have been compared to the Zen practice of “acting with an empty mind” (Glock, 1996).

The following excerpts from the *Tractatus* are considered to be evidence of Wittgenstein’s interest in, and sympathy with mysticism: (a) “feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical” (T6.45, p. 73)\(^1\), (b) “We feel that
even when all possible scientific questions have been answered the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself, is the answer” (T6.52, p. 73), (c) “So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions express nothing that is higher” (T6.42, p. 71), (d) “If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present” (T6.4311, p. 72).

The following two quotations present a picture of some of Wittgenstein’s early views, contained in the Tractatus, regarding language use:

Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it. It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is. Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes. (T 4.002, p. 19)

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (T5.6, p. 56). Hodges (1990, p. 82) suggests that “Such limits are not psychological, personal or individual. In fact the limits of my language are precisely the limits it has, not in virtue of being mine, but in virtue of being language at all–in virtue of being a mode of representation.”

Hodges identifies Wittgenstein’s shifting involvement with the mysticism of the Tractatus:

It is this “mystical” breaking free that the author of the Tractatus thought he had accomplished. However, the author [i.e., Wittgenstein] of the Philosophical Investigations (PI) cannot accept that. It is not that he rejects the mystical, but rather that he rejects the mystical as the ultimate ground for the intelligibility of language. (p. 196)

After almost a decade, following the publication of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein announced a new approach to what he called “ordinary language.” However, PI was not published until 1953 following Wittgenstein’s death in 1951. His approach to language is expressed in this answer to a question:

So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. This is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 88)

A Theory of Language

Prior to the writing of PI Wittgenstein’s picture theory was compatible with propositional logic. A person could read off the structure of reality from the
structure of language used to express it. This was similar to the way in which a picture can work. Within the PI he introduced the tool metaphor as a replacement for the picture theory of reality. Meaning is the sum total of the uses of a word as a tool rather than one essential meaning. However, all these uses, and therefore meanings, of a language game have a “family resemblance.”

Words, seen as tools, are used differently in various contexts. For example, some occupations and professions will use words in ways that are a function of their specialty. The functionality of word usage is what determines the nature of language games. There are relatively few words that have invariant meaning (e.g., specialist technical uses). Mostly, there is no essence of word meaning. The meaning of a word depends upon the job that it does. Wittgenstein used the analogy of language as a game to illustrate his idea of how language worked.

The concept of a language game seems to be appropriate if we consider the similarities (e.g., games have rules). The rules may have some ambiguity but can be modified if required. There can also be a certain amount of variability within game rules (e.g., how high one can tee up a golf ball, or whether one can toe or side foot a soccer ball in play). Nonetheless, language games do have rules or conventions that are relative to particular circumstances and applications.

Wittgenstein believed that in order to understand the meaning of language we need to look at it in practice and its relation to what he calls “form of life” – the result of the interconnection of culture, world view and language. The term “language-game” is meant to highlight the view that “the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 11). According to Wittgenstein there is no point of view outside language. We cannot get out of language to use it just as we cannot get outside ourselves in order to see into ourselves. No thought or experience is free of language. We use language in discussing the use of language.

Wittgenstein’s preference for ordinary language and the jobs that words do parallels the linguistic austerity of Buddhist approaches to transcendence. As Sontag (1995, p. 3) suggests: “He seeks to simplify expression and action, as the Zen monk does, because both know that complex language obscures vision by focusing attention on tortuous thought forms.”

Although he was well aware of the difficulty, or even impossibility, of using language to explain all human experience, he continued to struggle with this issue like many philosophers before him (Sontag, 1995). Wittgenstein made several remarks regarding the difficulties of logic in trying to explain aspects of human experience such as mysticism: “What cannot be expressed we do not express, – And how try to ask whether THAT can be expressed which cannot be EXPRESSED” (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 52). He also said that “the moment we try to apply exact concepts of measurement to immediate experience, we come up against a particular vagueness in this experience” (Wittgenstein, 1975,
In addition, he drew attention to the limits of language: “Time and again the attempt is made to use language to limit the world and set it in relief - but it can’t be done. The self-evidence of the world expresses itself in the very fact that language can and does only refer to it” (Wittgenstein, 1975, p. 80).

**LANGUAGE GAMES**

Wittgenstein’s choice of ‘game’ is based upon the analogy of language as a game. Because of the diversity and sheer number of games a satisfactory definition is difficult because the diversity of games covers physical, spoken, intellectual, safe and dangerous games and more. We cannot find “what is common to all these activities and what makes them language or parts of language” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 31). The analogy of word games suggests that language is primarily based upon usage in many varieties of contexts that give rise to a variety of uses. However, Wittgenstein (1980) noted that what distinguishes language from a game in this sense is its application to reality. This application is not shown in grammar, the application of the signs is outside the signs, the picture does not contain its own application, but that connection cannot be made by language, explained by language. (p. 10)

Wittgenstein persisted in hoping that language could ultimately illuminate human experience of the world as expressed in this comment: “At this point I am trying to express something that cannot be expressed” (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 31). “What is mirrored in language I cannot use language to express” (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 42). He also agrees that “how words are understood is not told by words alone” (Wittgenstein, 1970, p. 26). The use of language in everyday life is different to the use of language and grammar in situations where formal logic prevails. Sometimes our concerns lay outside the limitations of language. Wittgenstein (1974, p. 19) also said: “the task of philosophy is not to create an ideal language, but to clarify the use of existing language.” Language is not always logical and we do not necessarily behave logically.

No matter how we try to understand what enlightenment and other transcendent experiences mean, we often want to interpret them in words, even though we have been informed that there may not be appropriate language for descriptions of transcendence. In trying to grasp something beyond words we still fall back on working with words. However, a person’s experience of difficulty in describing a prior experience may be an indication of the potential validity of that experience because it confounds linguistic explanation (Janik & Toulmin, 1973).

**METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

I present some hypothetical examples of possible problems in researching transcendence within a group of Buddhist practitioners. The purpose is to
uncover potential problems, particularly the problem of how to approach research of a phenomenon, when one’s fore-understanding may be based upon conceptual descriptions of possible transcendent experiences. How can we frame a valid study given the problem of accessing a phenomenon that is resistant to linguistic description? Transcendence has been defined as “broadly the property of rising out of or above other things (virtually always understood figuratively); in philosophy, the property of being, in some way, of a higher order of being” (Audi, 1999, p. 925). It is also important to understand that transcendence is only one of various phenomena that comprise the corpus of Transpersonal Psychology (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). A problem with any attempt to research experiences of transcendence is the identification of the level of apparent transcendence reported prior to and during participation in a study. The above definition could refer to a relatively small advance or a much more significant advance such as might be reflected in the ox herding pictures (Kapleau, 1965, pp. 302–311). So levels of transcendence can vary but there is no linear progression or scale. A change in apprehension of transcendence can be a subtle move or a leap. In Zen practice it is the Roshi who is qualified to acknowledge the presence of transcendence.

As one might expect, there may be individual members of an esoteric practice who attempt to research the nature of possible transcendent phenomena experienced during their own “spiritual” practice. A group member may decide upon a research study and a subsequent interview of other members of the group, to which she belongs, as a potential data source. The intention underlying such a study would be the illumination of the experiences of practices that are considered to be a means of progressing towards the attainment of a mystical phenomenon such as Kensho.

It is probable that experiential data obtained in interviews will express individual experiences of progress, or the lack thereof, rather than the attainment of enlightenment. However, can the researcher who is also an aspirant, tell how near or far each participant is from the ultimate goal and the extent of their apprehension of the kind of advice found in the Dharma and their own practice of meditation? The credibility of the researcher, to make such judgments, is in question.

What does the researcher know about transcendence? What level of understanding of enlightenment has been obtained previously by the researcher? She may identify common and unique themes in interview transcripts but can the researcher relate these accounts to the possibility of the ox herding pictures or Kensho? Also, where is the researcher in terms of personal experience in relation to various stages of the path to Kensho? The ox herding pictures are an attempt to show the path to enlightenment in symbolic and metaphorical terms. The twelve pictures depict the search for the ox and its eventual pacification. The twelve stages outlined by Kapleau (1965, pp. 302–311) are: Seeking the ox, finding the tracks, first glimpse of the ox (often associated with a first experience of Kensho), catching the ox, taming the ox, riding the ox home, ox forgotten self alone, both ox and self forgotten, returning to the source and entering the market place with helping hands.
These pictures are not a kind of “one size fits all” checklist of the stages of enlightenment but a metaphorical representation of experiences of progressive transcendence. Perhaps one could describe the process as the pacification of the mind through the practice of meditation and shift from duality to a body-mind unity. Buddhist teachers deny that word based descriptions can explain the process adequately. However, the ox herding pictures can be helpful for some people but can lead to getting stuck in conceptualization. Nonetheless, this approach has been used for centuries.

The researcher is not neutral. Her interpretation of the data from interviews with group members and how they are to be interpreted will be influenced by whatever knowledge and understanding she may have of the history of group members’ practice. A researcher, who is a member of a Sangha (Buddhist community) may interview other members of that community in an attempt to record their experiences of the teachings of their respective traditions. Being a member of the Sangha and its teachings and traditions may have already initiated the Buddhist language game that is a byproduct of the community. Perhaps the researcher should try to familiarize herself with any word games that exist within the community before the research begins. However, if the word games are conceptual in nature they could misdirect an approach to transcendence.

Conformity across members of the group, reflected in their language, may reveal signs of word games or what some may call “Buddhist speak.” The willing conformity of a group is likely a conditioning effect within any Sangha simply as the result of a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Dharma. The group leader, monk or lay person, can lead the group in ways that are traditionally appropriate as specified by their founders. Whatever ideas or opinions the researcher and the group hold, as participants in the research, they are likely to manifest in terms of demand characteristics of the group and the researcher. Such influences become critical in terms of deciding what comprises the data and to what extent conditioning and prior experience may have contributed to dialogue, observation and later analysis.

Sources of variability brought to a research study are the conscious and unconscious history of a researcher’s values and world view. The relationship of a researcher to the participants in the research is discussed below by several authors, as moving closer to the level of circumspection usually associated with counseling and psychotherapy. Rather than maintaining unrealistic “objectivity” these authors have addressed variability that has been overlooked by the attempt to edify natural science traditions. A more open relationship between researcher and participants, where the illusion of complete objectivity turns into greater openness and self-awareness, is what some researchers try to bring to their research. A researcher’s fore-understanding of the phenomenon in question needs a much deeper level of self-reflection. The following are some examples of this approach to research and its particular relevance to research directed at the exploration of transcendence.

Tambornino (2002) criticizes the absence of the role of the body in philosophical and political research. He decries the continued influence of
the mind-body dualism despite Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) work on “body-consciousness.” Tambornino adopts a “corporeal turn” and uses the provocative term of the “corporeality of thought” as means of drawing attention to what is often neglected. Sheets-Johnstone (2009) also promotes the need for a unified body-consciousness as she works with movements of the body as a primordial form of thinking. She recognizes that, like Wittgenstein, experience precedes language. The body is often able to show what cannot be spoken. Dancer Pina Bausch and her company (Wenders, 2011) provide outstanding examples of how the body can show rather than tell.

Romanyshyn (2007) presents a research method of continual self-reflection which he calls “metaphoric.” This label captures the somewhat equivocal nature of what is and is not to be found in a metaphor. Zwicky (2003, p. 10) states the situation succinctly: “The implied ‘is not’ in a metaphor points to a gap in language through which we glimpse the world. That which we glimpse is what the ‘is’ in a metaphor points to.” There is fluidity and uncertainty that the researcher needs to recognize. Of particular importance is the issue of transference for both researcher and participant. This metaphorical ambiguity is also reflected in language and is compatible with Wittgenstein’s reservations about the inability of language to fully represent experience. Romanyshyn also claims that metaphoric uncertainty can help avoid “methodolatry.”

Anderson and Broad (2011), like Romanyshyn, focus upon personal attributes and values that researchers may bring to their research and the possibilities for their own transformation in terms of increased self-awareness, and especially transpersonal elements. However, the inadequacy of linguistic representations of experience are well recognized among transpersonal researchers such as those discussed here. Awareness of the limitations of linguistically transmitted reports of human experience is not without value. To some extent, the validity of the communication of human experience can be strengthened by increasing the amount of research on transcendence and the examination of the variable contexts and linguistic reports. If we learn more about the thematic structure and presentation of descriptions of transcendence we may be able to identify pervasive components and what they seem to be saying. Perhaps Wittgenstein saw the value of a wider field of research encapsulated within his language games.

Observation of behavior in the form of gestures and movements can sometimes show what cannot be told. What the body shows is a source of data that can be cross referenced with peoples’ descriptions of their experience. The combination of what is said and what is shown may offer a degree of cross validation. Wittgenstein highly valued the arts as being able to communicate what cannot be said (Hagberg, 1995). Emphasis upon behavior of the whole body by Tambornino and Sheets-Johnstone allows the body to show what may not be possible to describe in words.

There may be ample discussion of progressive experiences within a particular spiritual tradition such as Buddhism. However, there is a sense in which the devotion to the Dharma may require a paradoxical degree of conformity in
order to promote more personal freedom from automaticity and programming. Experiences of individual seekers may appear to have some common stages (e.g., the ox herding pictures of Zen where several people may be catching a glimpse of the ox’s tracks). This circumstance might also be a manifestation of a word game.

There are no, one-size-fits-all descriptions of transcendent experience. However, there are written accounts from those who have had such experiences. It is from these accounts that attempts are made to capture the phenomenon in words. But, these descriptions are often accompanied by warnings such as “enlightenment is essentially an inward experience which defies expression in unequivocal concepts or words” (Enomiya-Lassalle, p. 11, 1968). Nevertheless, attempts are made to give seekers some broad indication of the journey that awaits them. The ox herding pictures are a kind of pictorial map of the path but Zen also stresses that enlightenment cannot be obtained through intellectual efforts. It is a sort of intuition, according to Enomiya-Lassalle, that can open a door to progress. Advice offered, such as not necessarily trying to capture the experience of transcendence in words, could also impact word games.

In the Zen tradition paradoxical answers are often given by a Roshi to questions regarding this topic, usually in periodic interviews (Dokusan). The aspirant cannot understand the experience until it happens and then both, the Roshi and the aspirant recognize that something unusual has happened. Most aspirants would not find much satisfaction from the types of conceptualizations given to those who want information about enlightenment because conceptual descriptions take an abstract form. The need to know about future enlightenment can actually interfere with the meditative process.

The use of the words used by interviewees to describe their experiences, almost certainly, will overlook Wittgenstein’s call for silence, expressed in the *Tractatus*, as well as advice regarding the inadequacy of conceptual language. The researcher may have no knowledge of where the participants are on the path to transcendence. Nonetheless, they may have experienced some early signs (e.g., signs of the ox’s track) without knowing it. Participants in the study might struggle for appropriate words to describe their experiences and thereby obtain an insight into the problems of language that preoccupied Wittgenstein throughout his life.

Another likely influence upon participants’ reports of their experiences has been shaped by Heidegger’s notion of human “thrownness.” To some extent “thrownness” can be viewed as a form of conditioning that is shaped by genetic and environmental factors such as the influence of “the they” (society at large). Heidegger also believed that language is prior to human speech. When one is thrown into the world a form of pre-comprehension of the world is developed as a platform for the development of language (Heidegger, 1962). His notion of “thrownness” expresses the fact that humanity’s entry into the world is beyond control. We do not choose our parents, their culture and language, their economic circumstances or the genes we inherit from them. The community
into which we are born exerts pressure to conform to prevailing values, customs and particularly our language culture. If, however, as Heidegger claims, there is an early pre-comprehension of the world that is ultimately displaced by language, there may still be a residue of such pre-comprehension that enables an apprehension of human experience that is language free.

A natural science approach to understanding an experience of transcendence is likely to produce invalid data that is characterized by a failure to understand the superimposition of language upon the actuality of experience. Overlooking the fact that language follows experience may result in a literal interpretation of language that does not accurately reflect a person’s experience. Many people have had pre-linguistic thoughts which they have difficulty expressing in language. When people use similar language to explain their experience of a phenomenon, one cannot conclude that their experiences are identical. The words used to describe such experiences may give some indication of the experience but be subject to a prevailing language culture that has the potential to distort the actuality of the experience. Some language games will manifest misapprehension of meaning, particularly if the meaning of the experience of interest is subtle, as is the case with transcendence.

Problems with the interpretation of language in research are usually embedded within individual accounts of other peoples’ linguistic accounts of human experiences in either spoken or written form. This situation is probably impossible to avoid. However, it certainly needs to be borne in mind during data analysis of accounts of human experience. Wittgenstein (1969, p. 42) stated that “what is mirrored in language I cannot use language to express.” There may be aspects of language that can show something beyond linguistic dimensions of language such as unfamiliar modes of speech. Wittgenstein (1970, p. 26) cautions that “how words are understood is not told by words alone.”

Kensho, as previously stated, can occur in several stages or as a totality. In the hypothetical study discussed in this paper some of the experiential descriptions arising from meditative experience may contain hints of a process that could lead to progress towards a first glimpse of Kensho. Such an experience is not uncommon in Zen meditation. However, there is no guarantee of further progress. At this stage of meditative experience word based descriptions of experience may have partial validity. However, the actuality of a higher level of Kensho may reach a stage where words become inadequate. Experience precedes attempted explanations. If words are deployed they may take the form of linguistic gestures or exaltations that have little to do with their literal meanings.

Early signs, such as seeing the tracks of the ox, may or may not be present in the experiences of participants in a research study. In view of such unknowns a researcher might be well advised to frame the aims of a study in terms of gathering accounts of meditative experience without looking through any pre-conceived lens for signs of Kensho. Unless a researcher has read some of the literature on transcendence she may not be familiar with “word games” that
cover transcendent experience and thereby be at a significant disadvantage when she analyses experiential descriptions from members of a Buddhist or other group devoted to self-knowledge.

How does a researcher recognize whether transcendent experiences are present in peoples’ accounts of their experiences? This begs the question of the possible existence of a language game for transcendent experience. Wittgenstein’s view was that language games are rarely composed of an essence. Examination of the diversity and commonality of language games about transcendence might establish what can be said. One can summon up long lists of mystics on line. However, even a cursory look provokes some doubt as to what constitutes a mystic. Even authors who have written novels containing quasi mystical characters seem sufficiently qualified to be on such a list. An uncritical acceptance of mystics without looking at their language games, in order to understand the extent of variability and commonality they contain could result in misdirected acceptance of an attempted understanding of transcendence. If a wide array of relevant extant language games existed as a source of transcendent experiences, they might provide some helpful criteria for the recognition of other transcendent experiences. In other words: What are some of the characteristic markers of a disjunctive concept of transcendent experience? Is there a sufficient spectrum of word games that can provide a map of the extent of relevant word games related to transcendence and the extent of their cohesion and variability? Is Wittgenstein’s notion of word games a workable solution to the problem of describing and being able to recognize transcendence?

Is the task of extracting meaning from literal and metaphorical descriptions viable? At best this linguistic predicament casts doubt upon the validity of text or spoken experiential accounts as a valid source for the attempt to explain the nature of transcendence. This has been clearly recognized in Buddhist tradition expressed in the Dharma. However, in countries lacking a Buddhist heritage of Zen, teachers can face the dilemma of providing some descriptive information about the nature of experiences of transcendence even though it is discouraged by Buddhist tradition.

Words used in a study to describe apparent commonalities of experience may have intended meanings that differ from common uses of the same word(s) or perhaps be a function of an esoteric language culture (e.g., an altered state vocabulary associated with drug usage) that may appear to be counter intuitive in regard to the experience in question. Consequently, a high degree of commonality of particular word usage may imply possible reliability but not validity. What are the possible linguistic indicators of valid descriptions of transcendence? How can these indicators be recognized by those who have not experienced transcendence to a level of enlightenment but are perhaps looking for a glimpse of the “tracks of the ox”? This may be one reason why Buddhism has the practice of Dokusan as a way of monitoring the experience of an aspirant and providing guidance.

How can a researcher identify the nature of a valid experience if she has not experienced the phenomenon herself? She cannot, but she may be able to glean
some hints that point to where a participant appears to be in terms of the tracks of the ox if she has experiential wisdom. The challenge for the researcher and the participant is to find shared word games. But even if they appear to succeed in doing so the degree of “family resemblance” among chosen words could be distant.

Researchers of what are claimed to be transcendent experiences may conclude that an understanding of enlightenment is beyond the reach of language even though there may be some value in terms of language pointing practitioners in the appropriate directions, according to historical practice. The Zen approach to understanding experiences that are preludes to transcendence, as well as its actuality, is based upon centuries of the history of Roshi-aspirant relationships. This accumulated wisdom is crucial in directing aspirants towards practices based upon guidance from those who “know.” Perhaps they do not intend the use of word games but they do use the ox herding pictures. These pictures obviously involve meanings that are transmitted through language as well as visually.

The methodological issues raised in this article, together with comments from various scholars, suggests that the attempt to research transcendent experiences will not be easy or perhaps not viable. The difficulties discussed here imply that methodological circumspection is appropriate. Issues of language and meaning are important for studies of personal experience because, much of the collected data from interviews of practitioners of various forms of transcendent spirituality involve the attempt to find words to describe what may be beyond description. Moreover, if—as Wittgenstein (1953) suggests—meaning should be derived from its use in a complexity of overlapping contexts that involve meanings determined by usage rather than a meaning that is invariant, satisfactory descriptions of transcendent experiences may be problematic.

Existence is being-with-others and subject to the persuasive influence of ‘the they.’ This situation implies the need for sharpened awareness of the problematic nature of language cultures in trying to understand the nature of transcendence. Culturally based languages can act as spectacles through which lived-experience is processed. For much of the time speakers are simply doing what is taken for granted. Language users are encapsulated within an existence that allows discussion of their “forms of life.” However, then comes the dilemma of using language to discuss problems of language. Wittgenstein persevered but did not achieve finality on the meaning and use of language. His many questions about the nature of language, however, and its effects upon our understanding of transcendent experiences, particularly mysticism, aesthetics and ethics, are a valuable legacy that has not lost its currency.

**CONCLUSION**

The difficulties of finding language games for transcendence are considerable. The job they are supposed to do relies upon the choice of which words qualify for language games. Language games can also be widely spread and different
even though they may have a family resemblance. The environment for looking at transcendence in this article is contextualized in terms of Buddhist practice. Transcendence is such a slippery concept. Whatever definition is the starting point should express some aspect of an elevated state. However, this is a very minimal description of an experience that can lead to Kensho. However, transcendence in the form of a breakthrough in understanding may be relatively simple while other experiences of transcendence may be elevated and beyond words. If we look for words that appear to have some frequency of use in being associated with transcendence how can we know whether these words were associated with “genuine” experiences of transcendence? The root of the problem lies in the validity of whatever extant information describes the experience. One person’s experience of “transcendence” may be more like a dream state evoked by the contemplation of nature on a sunny day rather than transcendence. How can we look for the appropriate word games when we have such limited and variable information on the nature of transcendence? The situation appears to be subject to circularity. Buddhist validation of transcendence seems to depend more on those Buddhists who have had transcendent experiences and realize the futility of attempts to use descriptive conceptual language in describing the experience. Poetic metaphorical language and emotive expressiveness seem to occur in many reported cases. The experience may create a sense of wonder and a change in world view. But these manifestations are not standardized. Are there word games that illuminate transcendence and where are they?

The later pages of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* seem to be more compatible with a sense of ineffability that is often referenced in discussions of advanced transcendence. Despite his focus upon ordinary language Wittgenstein acknowledged that “there are indeed things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical*” (T6.522, p. 73). The *Tractatus* as a whole was judged as ultimately leading to philosophical nonsense. Wittgenstein acknowledged this judgment in the text (T6.54, p. 74). However, the so called mystical part of the text has been well received, particularly by scholars of religion (e.g., Lundquist, 1999; Sontag, 1995).

Research that attempts to openly and directly explore the presence of transcendence can be difficult because the phenomenon is unusual. Buddhism, as discussed earlier in this article, discourages conceptually based accounts of transcendence. Definitions of transcendence appear to abstract what seems to characterize many alleged examples of transcendence. Perhaps this is why the definitions are limited and vague like the example cited earlier in this article [i.e., Audi, 1999]. The variability of the contexts in which the phenomenon may occur resembles the kind of diversity expressed in Wittgenstein’s language games. The situations could share a family resemblance in some respects as well as significant contextual diversity.

The ineffable nature of an individual’s transcendence is not well served by language alone. However, as suggested earlier, the body is a valuable source of expressing an experience or showing meaning via a particular art form.
Descriptions of transcendence seem somewhat limited to an elevation of consciousness within a positively perceived experience. Traditionally it appears, in part, to be associated with being an aspirant of a religious or “spiritual” way of life. The fact that transcendence appears to be a disjunctive concept means that it can be defined in many ways and in different settings. Lists of attributes or behaviors are not always constants. The context in which transcendence occurs may or may not be significant.

A researcher’s attempt to openly express the object of research as an investigation of transcendence within a group, or individually, is probably ill advised. Revealing what the researcher is looking for may become a demand characteristic of the research. However, a researcher’s interest in the experiences of those who are members of a group that is committed to a self-knowledge practice such as Buddhism, or even dangerous sports, may be less likely to interfere with the integrity of the expression of individual experiences. Without mentioning the phenomenon of transcendence a researcher can seek to explore experiences within various groups that might have elements of transcendence embedded within their practice of self-knowledge.

Transcendence can be associated with religion, personal growth, a higher level of consciousness, “being in the zone” in sports and in so called “spiritual” experiences not associated with familiar religions. Transcendence can also be involved in “going beyond” usual limits of pain and fatigue in athletic performance. Psychological investigations of the experiences of participants in dangerous sports have opened a new frontier in the study of transcendence (e.g., Parry, Nesti, & Watson, 2011; Selsi, 1992). These examples are merely some of the many contexts in which transcendence may occur. The nature of the transcendence varies to some extent in its response to the context in which it occurs. The variability of contexts and their associated aims may at least share the experience of going beyond their usual experience to a higher level of consciousness related to the purposes of the contextual group.

The study of transcendence in dangerous sports has opened a new ready-made source of transcendence that avoids the problem of looking for transcendence in various groups that pursue self-knowledge through established methods such as prayer and meditation but present a researcher with no guarantee of the presence of transcendence. From a researcher’s perspective already available accounts of transcendence avoid the problem of searching through reports of experiences in search of transcendence. Those persons who participate in dangerous sports may exhibit aspects of their experiences that are unique to their sport. Their experiences of transcendence may also contain qualities found in other different groups. Interviewing those who engage in dangerous sports and have freely reported transcendent experiences, when interviewed, can avoid demand characteristics because evidence of transcendence has already occurred spontaneously.

Despite the difficulties of researching transcendence a researcher can ask participants in a research project to describe their experiences of living within a
particular way of being such as found in a religion or systems of personal
growth. Some participants may report transcendent beginnings such as “tracks
of the ox” while others may be more advanced. The fundamental challenge is
that, as a researcher, one is looking for experiences of a phenomenon often
associated with the teachings of certain groups that focus upon self-knowledge
but whose membership is no guarantee of the experience of transcendence.

A problem for some researchers is being able to recognize and understand
transcendence if they have not experienced it themselves. Can they recognize
the difference between genuine transcendence and other psychological
phenomena such as fantasies, hallucinations, inflation and psychological
projections? These are called Makyo in Zen Buddhism.

Another possibility for a potential researcher who is interested in transcen-
dence is to investigate the published accounts of transcendence, such as those
of Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s *Pathways through to Space* and Evelyn Underhill’s
*Mysticism*. Transcendence is also to be found in the oeuvre of poets (e.g.,
Hopkins, Whitman, Dickinson). The nature of transcendence found in a
variety of sources may expand the extent of its commonality and singularity
across different contexts.

Regardless of the concerns expressed in this article, in reference to the use of
linguistic accounts of transcendence, the telling of human experience is likely
to continue. However, an understanding of the limitations of words in
communicating experiences of transcendence may be offset by reference to
other indicators of experience such as the expressions of the human body.
Individual expression through reference to dance and music may be workable
but not always so. Sontag (1995) concludes that:

‘Mysticism’ or the ‘mystical,’ means many things, of course. Plato pointed
out that all significant concepts have multiple and not single meanings. The
irony is that for both Wittgenstein and all of history’s ‘mystics’ that
experience lies outside normal confines and thus is outside of normal
language, it cannot be finally pinned down in its meaning within language.
(p. 155)

**NOTES**

1 “*Tractatus* employs a notoriously austere and succinct literary style. The work contains almost no arguments as
such, but rather, consists of declarative statements which are meant to be self-evident. These statements are
hierarchically numbered, with seven basic propositions at the primary level (numbered 1–7), with each sub-level
being a comment on or elaboration of the statement at the next higher level (e.g., 1, 1.1, 1.11, 1.12).” http://
en.wikipedia.org/wicki/Tractatus_Logico-Philosophicus

Although Wikipedia may often be considered a questionable source from a scholarly perspective, based on my
knowledge of the *Tractatus* this description is valid, succinct, and accessible in its explanation.
REFERENCES


The Author

*John W. Osborne* is Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta, Canada. In addition to an interest in the topic of this article he has recently published several papers on the transition to retirement. He currently lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He can be contacted at josborne@islandnet.com. His website is https://retirementpsychology.ca