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The Mental Spaces of Zen Koans - An Investigation into Its Logic

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Purpose

1. Relevance theory and mental spaces can be applied to Zen discourse.
2. To show Zen can be analysed besides conventional discourse and should not be ignored in communication research.

Background

Theory

Relevance Theory

- ❖ “... an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions.” (Wilson and Sperber, p249)

Communication and 'meaning'

To mean something by x , S must intend

- ❖ (a) S 's utterance of x to produce a certain response r in a certain audience, A ;
- ❖ (b) A to recognise S 's intention (a);
- ❖ (c) A 's recognition of S 's intention (a) to function as at least part of A 's reason for A 's response r .

Manifestness and cognitive environment

- ❖ (1) A fact is *manifest* to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at the time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true.
- ❖ (2) A *cognitive environment* of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him.

Ostensive-inferential communication

1. *Informative intention*: to inform the audience of something;
2. *Communicative intention*: to inform the audience of one's informative intention.

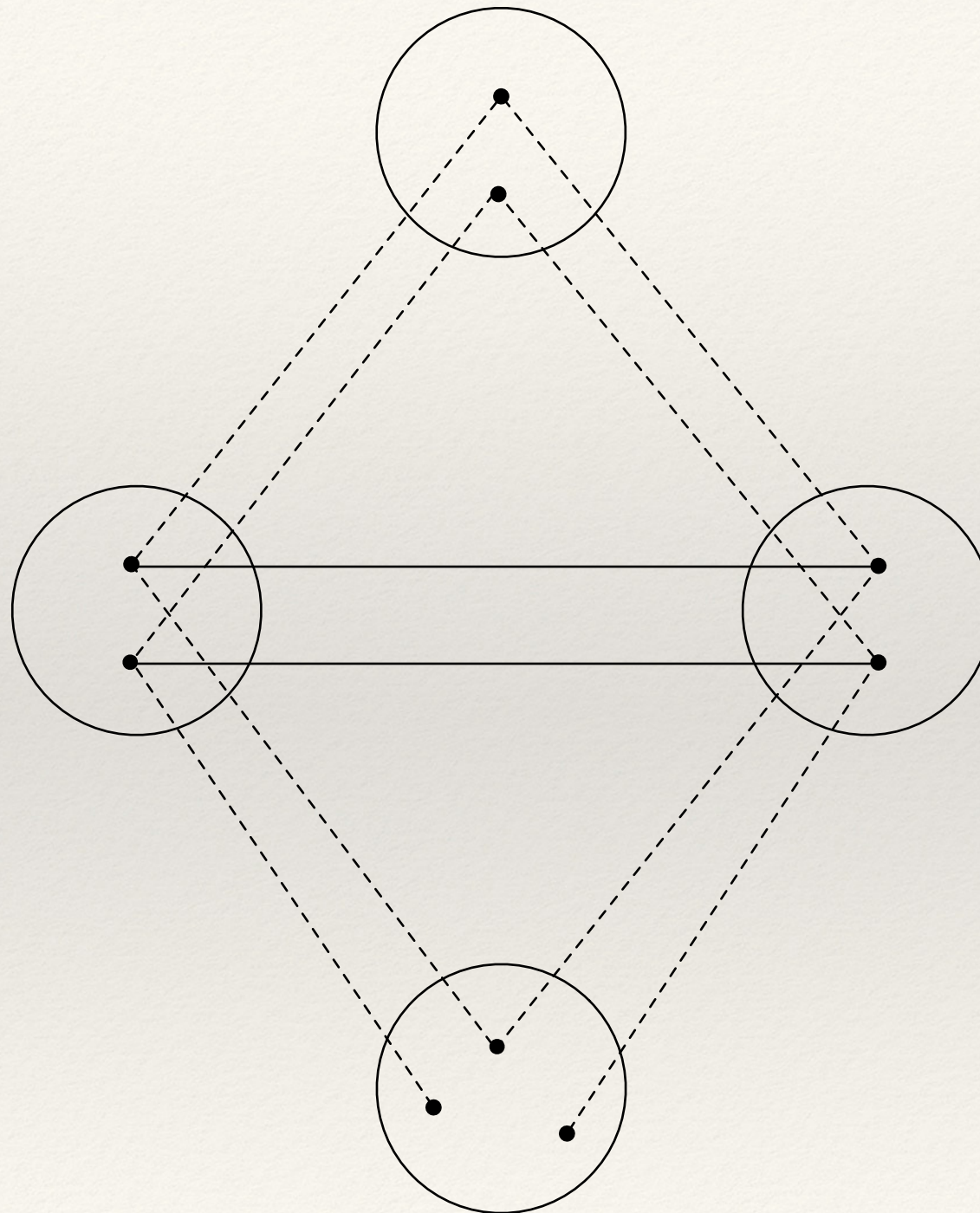
Ostensive-inferential communication

- ❖ the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions I.

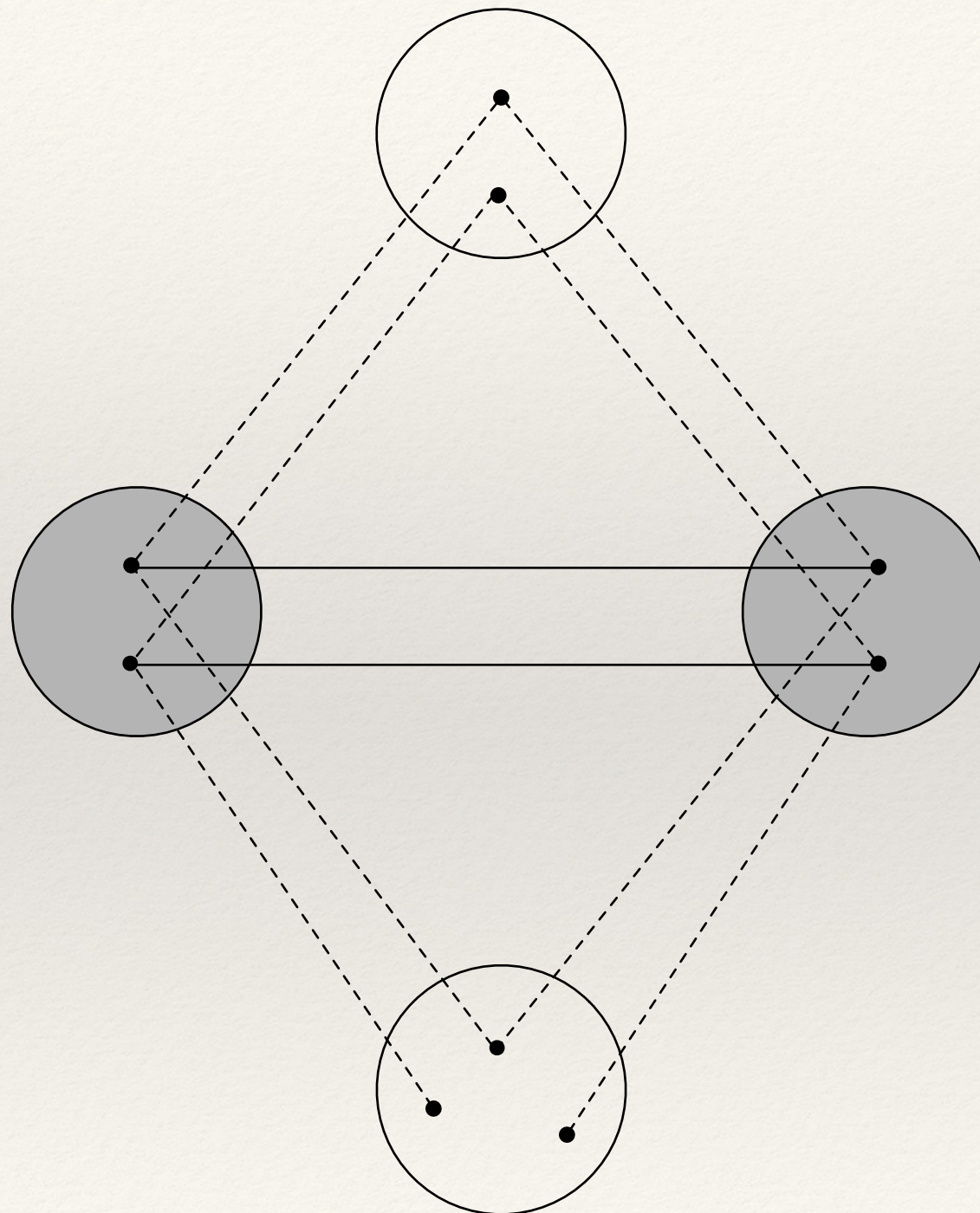
Ostensive-inferential communication

“... inferential communication and ostension are one and the same process, but seen from two different points of view: that of the communicator who is involved in ostension and that of the audience who is involved in inference.” (Sperber and Wilson, p54)

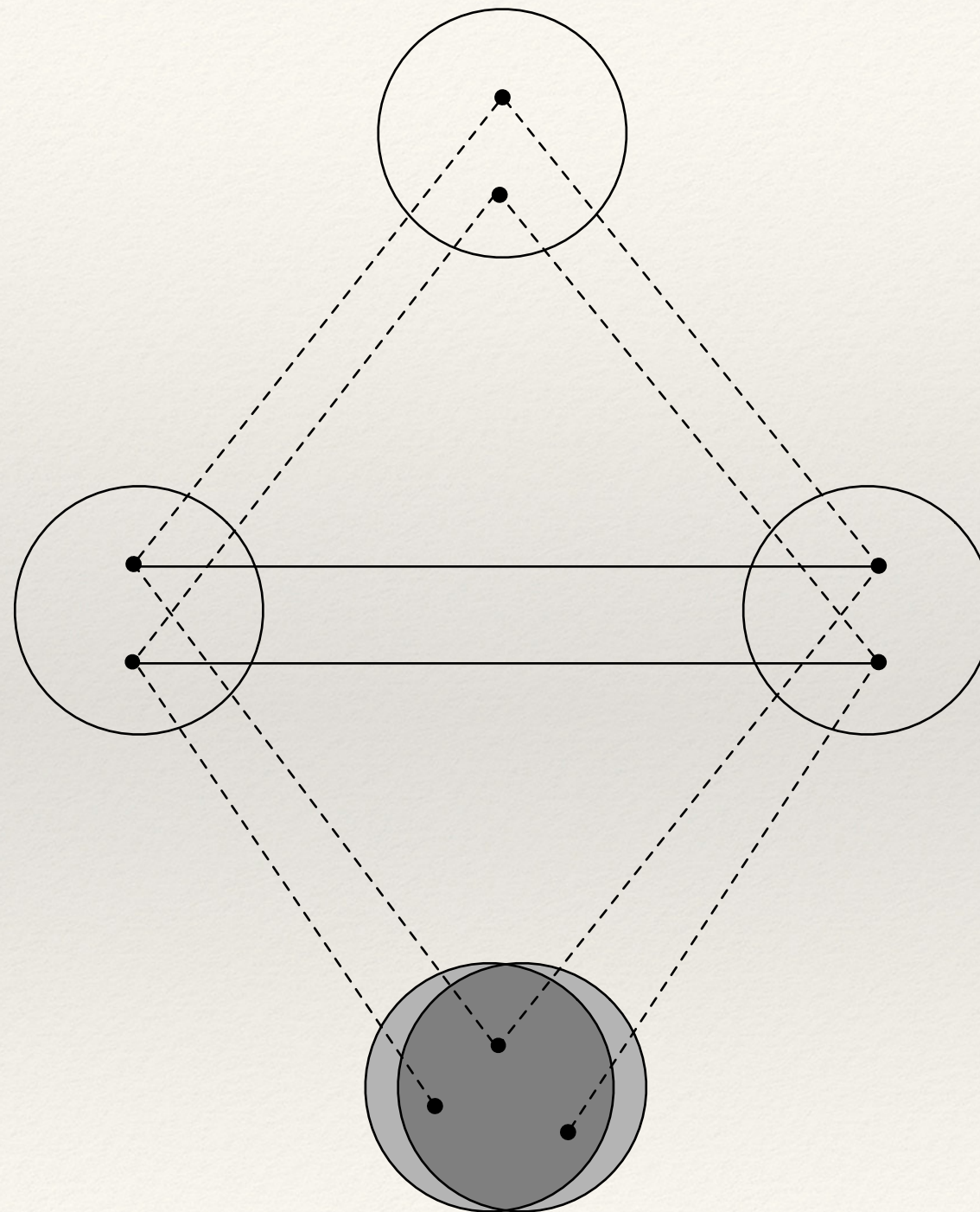
Blending Theory



Essential and Phenomenal Aspects



Mutual cognitive environment



Koan

Koan (definition)

“... literally, ‘public notice’; the Chinese kung-an originally meant a legal case constituting a precedent. In Zen a koan is a phrase from a sutra or teaching on Zen realisation, an episode from the life of an ancient master; a mondo or a hossen ... whatever the source, **each points to the nature of ultimate reality.**” (Deiner, 1986, 1991)

“... when used properly, koans are credited with helping students break down the barriers to enlightenment that the rational habits of the mind erect, and with **instilling a profound understanding of Buddhism** and its goals at a direct, experiential level. ... breakthrough to a new level of understanding.” (Keown, 2003)

Koan (definition)

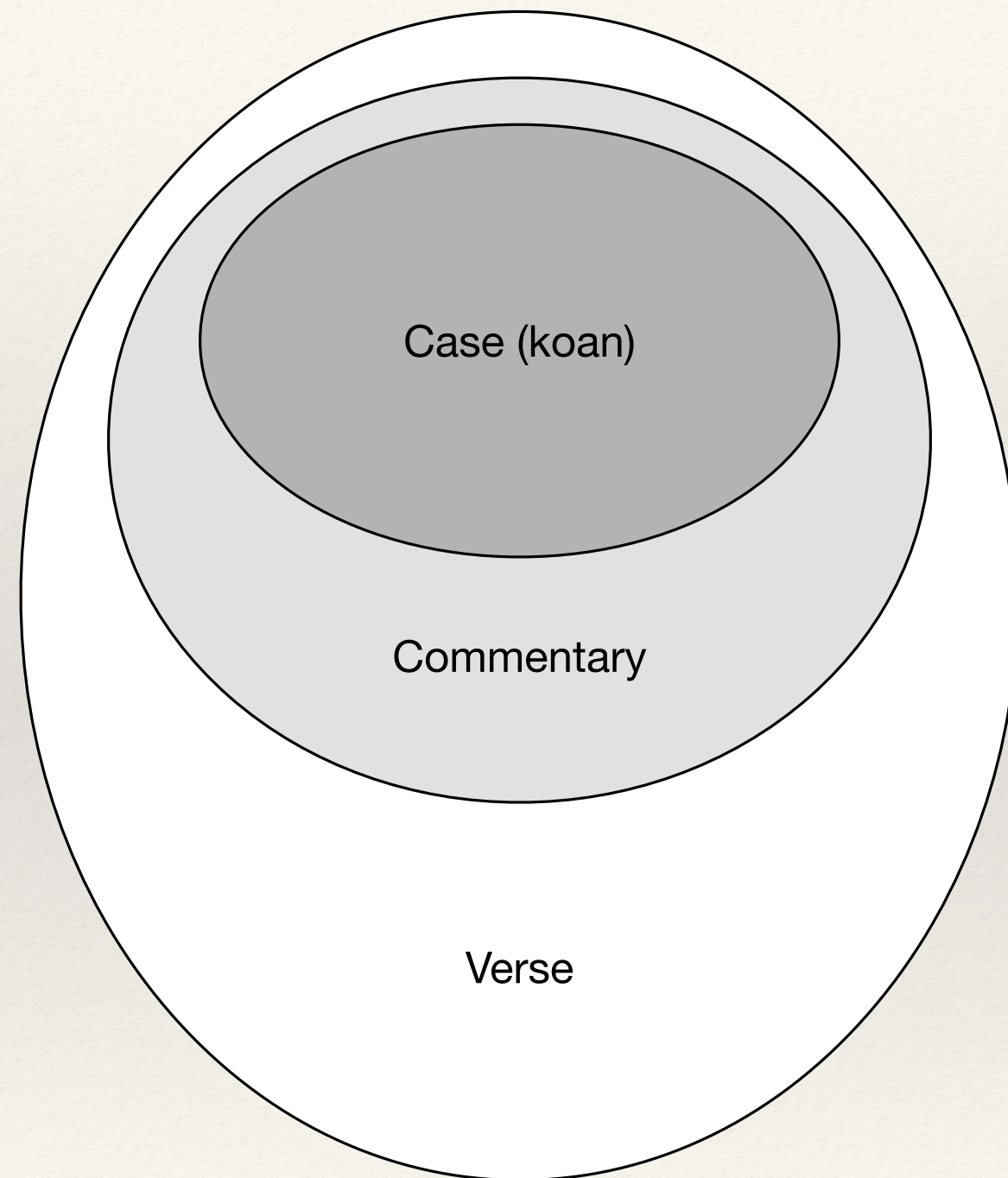
“The entrance into Zen is the grasping of one’s essential nature. It is absolutely impossible, however, to come to a clear understanding of our essential nature by any intellectual or philosophical method. It is accomplished only by the experience of self-realisation through zazen (meditation) And the koans used in Zen can be seen through only when looked at from the essential point of view. Therefore **to the person whose enlightened eye has not been opened, Zen koans seem impractical, illogical, and against common sense.** Once the enlightened eye has opened, however, all koans express natural matters and relate the most obvious of realities.” (Yamada, 1979, xxiii)

Mumonkan

Mumonkan

- ❖ A collection of 48 kōans compiled in 1228 or 1229 by Mumon Ekai (Wu-men Hui-k'ai (無門 慧開), 1183-1260).
- ❖ Each **case** (kōan) has Mumon's commentary and verse.
- ❖ The **commentary** is a clue to the case.
- ❖ The **verse** is another clue.
- ❖ All kōans point to the essential nature.

Mumonkan - Organisation



Mutually manifestness

- ❖ “... When the communicator lacks ... authority, but still wants to establish a mutual cognitive environment with her audience, all she has to do is adapt her informative intentions to her credibility. For example, in writing this book we merely intend to make mutually manifest that we have developed certain hypotheses and have done so on certain grounds. That is, we take it as mutually manifest that you will accept our authority on what we actually think. The mutual cognitive environment thus created is enough for us to go on to communicate further thoughts which we would otherwise have been unable to communicate. ...”

The “Intentions” of Mumonkan

- ❖ Consciously collected. (authoritative)
- ❖ Stated as tools to trigger enlightenment.

‘meaning’

- ❖ “Communication is successful not when hearers recognise the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when [the hearer] infer the speaker’s ‘meaning’ from it.”
(Sperber and Wilson, p23)

Two models

- ❖ **Code model** - ... encoding and decoding messages.
- ❖ **Inferential model** - ... communicator gives evidence of intention, and audience inferring the intentions from the evidence.

Strawson's reformulation of Grice's 'meaning'

- ❖ (a) S 's utterance of x to produce a certain response r in a certain audience A .
- ❖ (b) A to recognise S 's intention (a)
- ❖ (c) A 's recognition of S 's intention (a) to function as at least part of A 's reason for A 's response r .

Examples

- ❖ Implicature
- ❖ Uncoded communication
- ❖ Contradiction / illogical Communication
- ❖ Failed communication

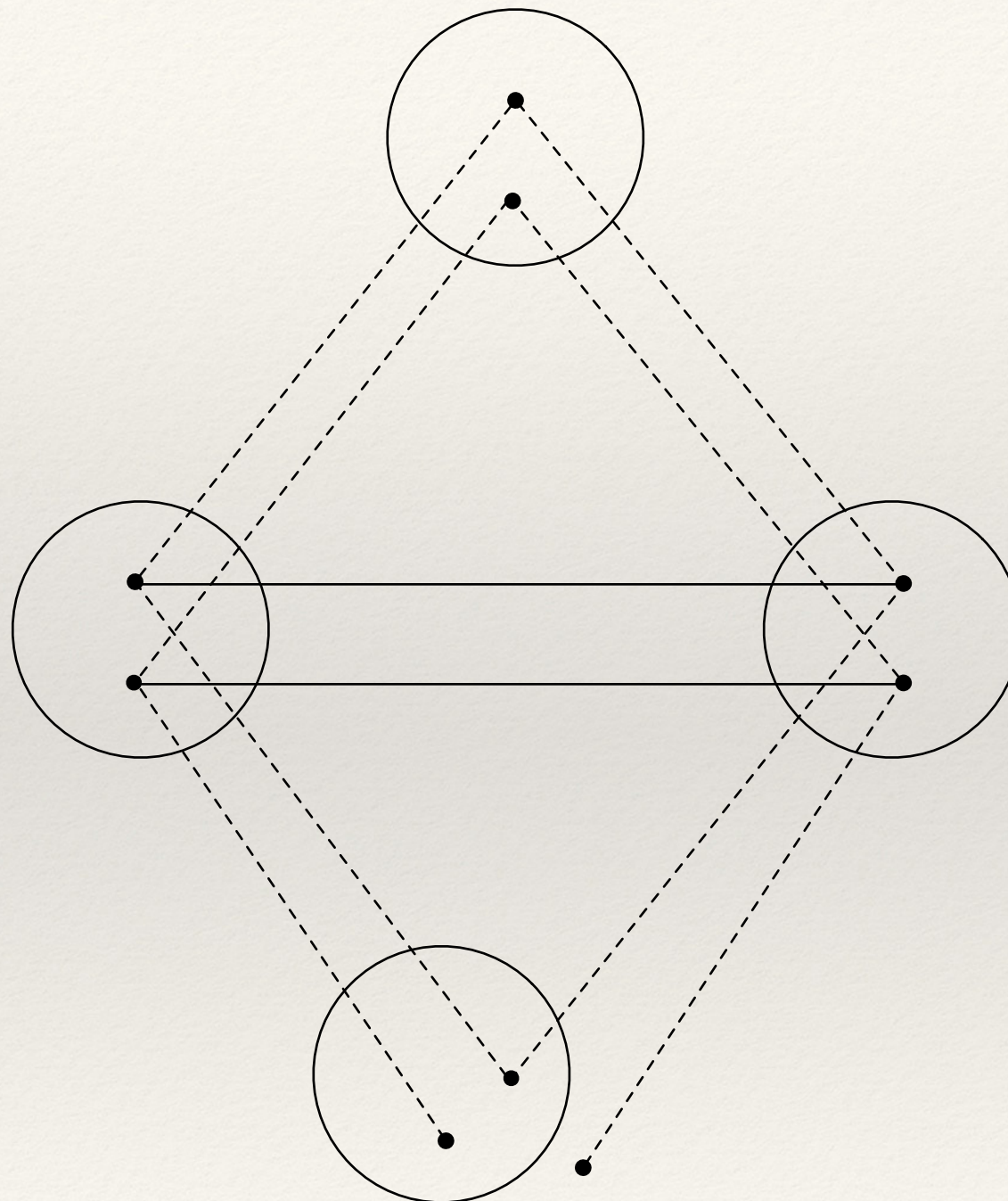
Implicature

1. Peter: What do you intend to do today?
2. Mary: I have a terrible headache. (implicit)
3. A monk asked Joshū in all earnestness, “What is the meaning of the patriarch’s coming from the West?”
4. Joshū said, “The oak tree in the garden.” (implicit)

The oak tree in the garden

- ❖ What is the teaching of the ultimate reality that Bodhidharma brought to China?
- ❖ It is this! (everything has a single essential and phenomenal aspect!)

Profound!



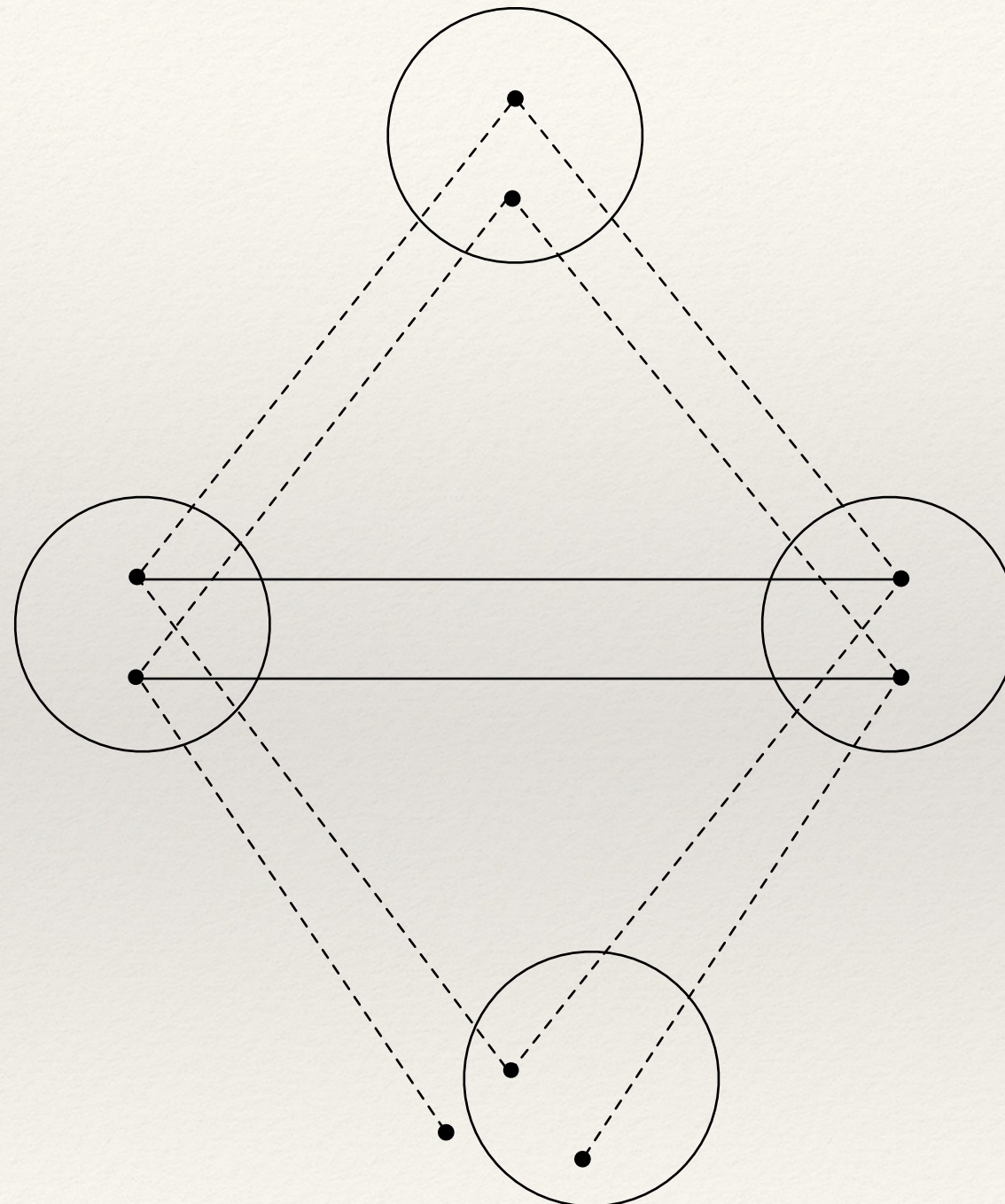
Uncoded communication

1. “How are you feeling today?”
2. Mary responds by pulling a bottle of aspirin out of her bag and showing it to him.
3. Whatever he was asked about Zen, Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger.
4. He had a boy attendant whom a visitor asked, “What kind of teaching does your master give?” The boy held up one finger too. Hearing this, Gutei cut off the boy’s finger with a knife. As the boy ran away, screaming with pain, Gutei called to him. When the boy turned his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened.

Gutei's one finger

- ❖ “What kind of teaching does your master give?”
- ❖ It is this! (everything has a single essential and phenomenal aspect! The phenomenal aspect might be different but the essential aspect is the same!)

Thinking you are right!



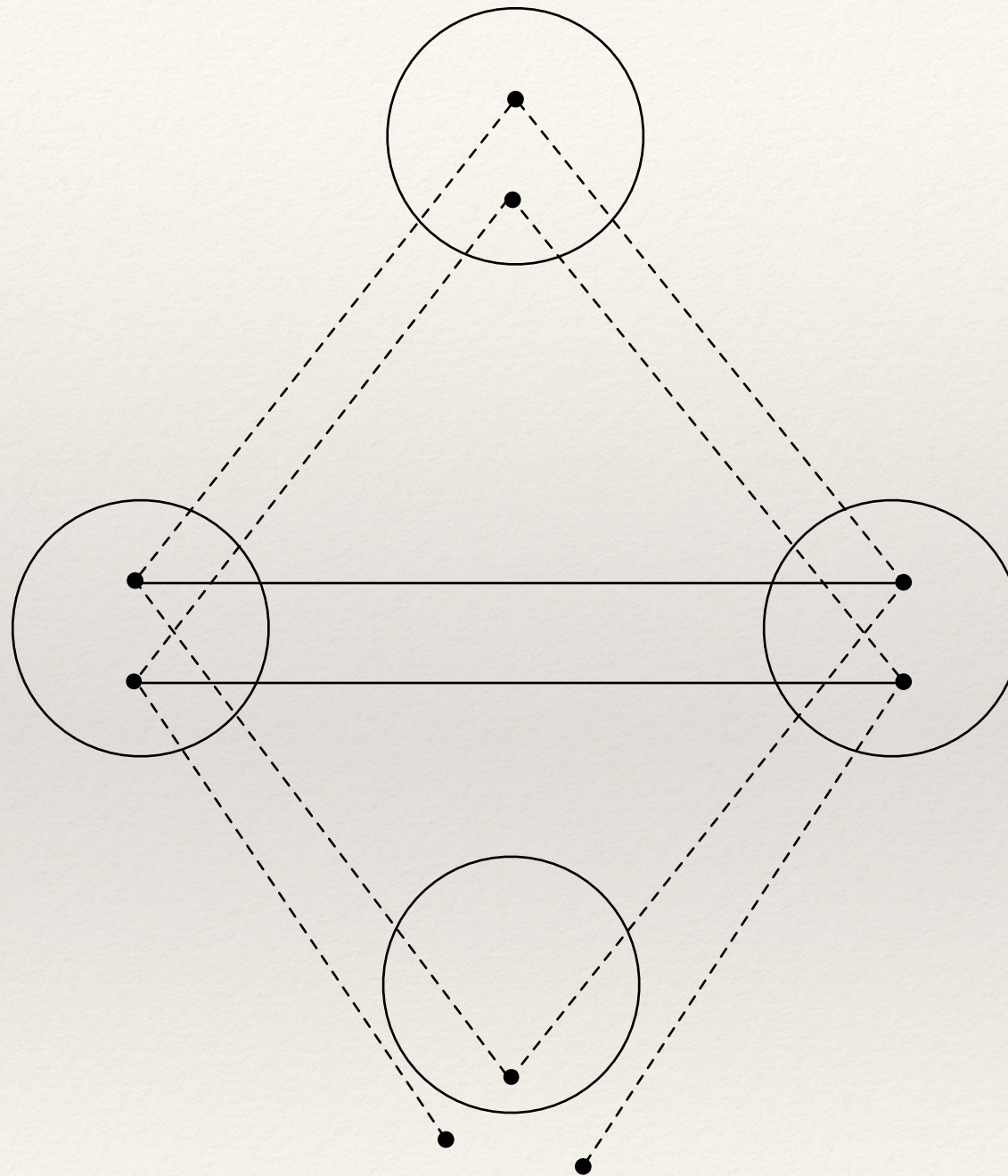
Contradiction or illogic

1. Are you angry?
2. No, I'm not angry. I not angry, whatsoever.
3. A monk asked in all earnestness, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?"
4. Joshū said, "mu!"

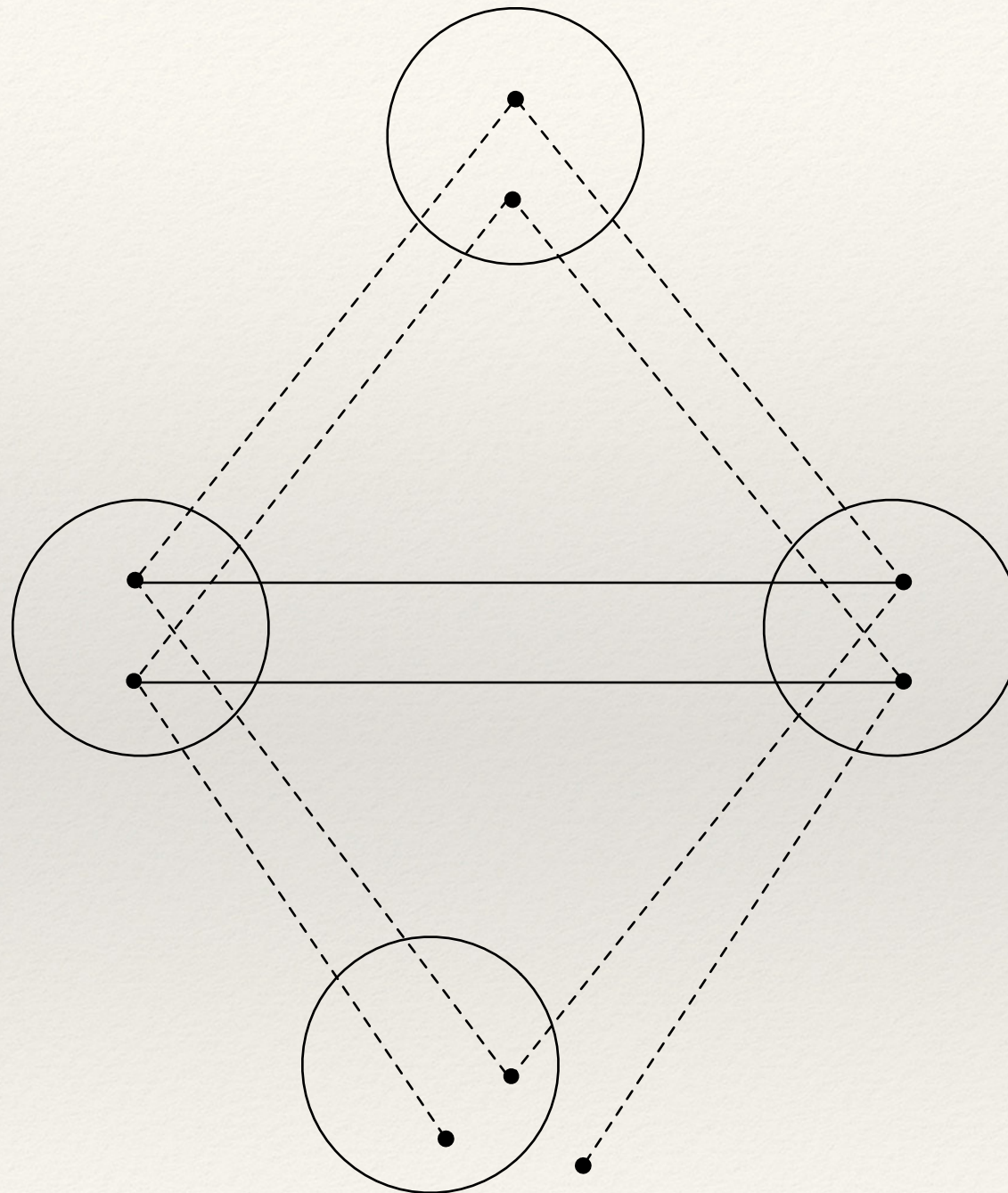
Mu

- ❖ Does all reality have an essential aspect?
- ❖ Yes! Even if the phenomenal aspect changes, it stays the same! The essential aspect is also empty!

Response falls outside



Mu is not a contradiction!



Failed Communication

1. Suppose, for instance, that Mary wants Peter to mend her broken hair-drier, but does not want to ask him openly. What she does is begin to take her hair-drier to pieces and leave the pieces lying around as if she were in the process of mending it. [...] She does expect him to be clever enough to work out that this is a staging intended to inform him of the fact that she needs some help with her hair-drier. [...]

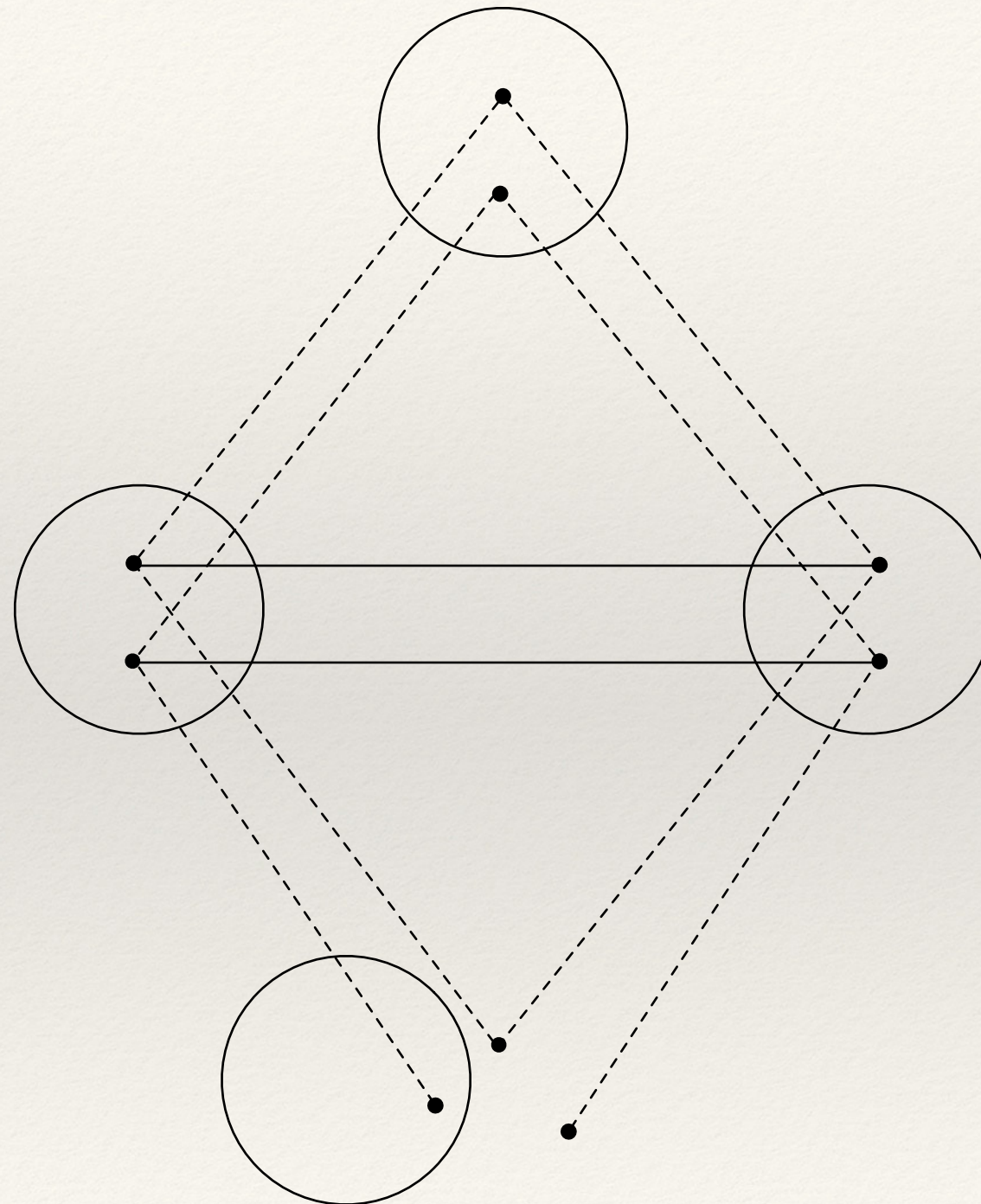
Failed Communication

2. When Tōzan came to Unmon for instruction, Unmon asked, “Where have you come from?” Tōzan said, “From Sado.” Unmon said, “Where were you during the summer retreat?” Tōzan, “At Hōzu Monastery, south of the lake.” Unmon said, “When did you leave?” Tōzan said, “On the twenty-fifth of August.” Unmon said, “I spare you sixty blows.”

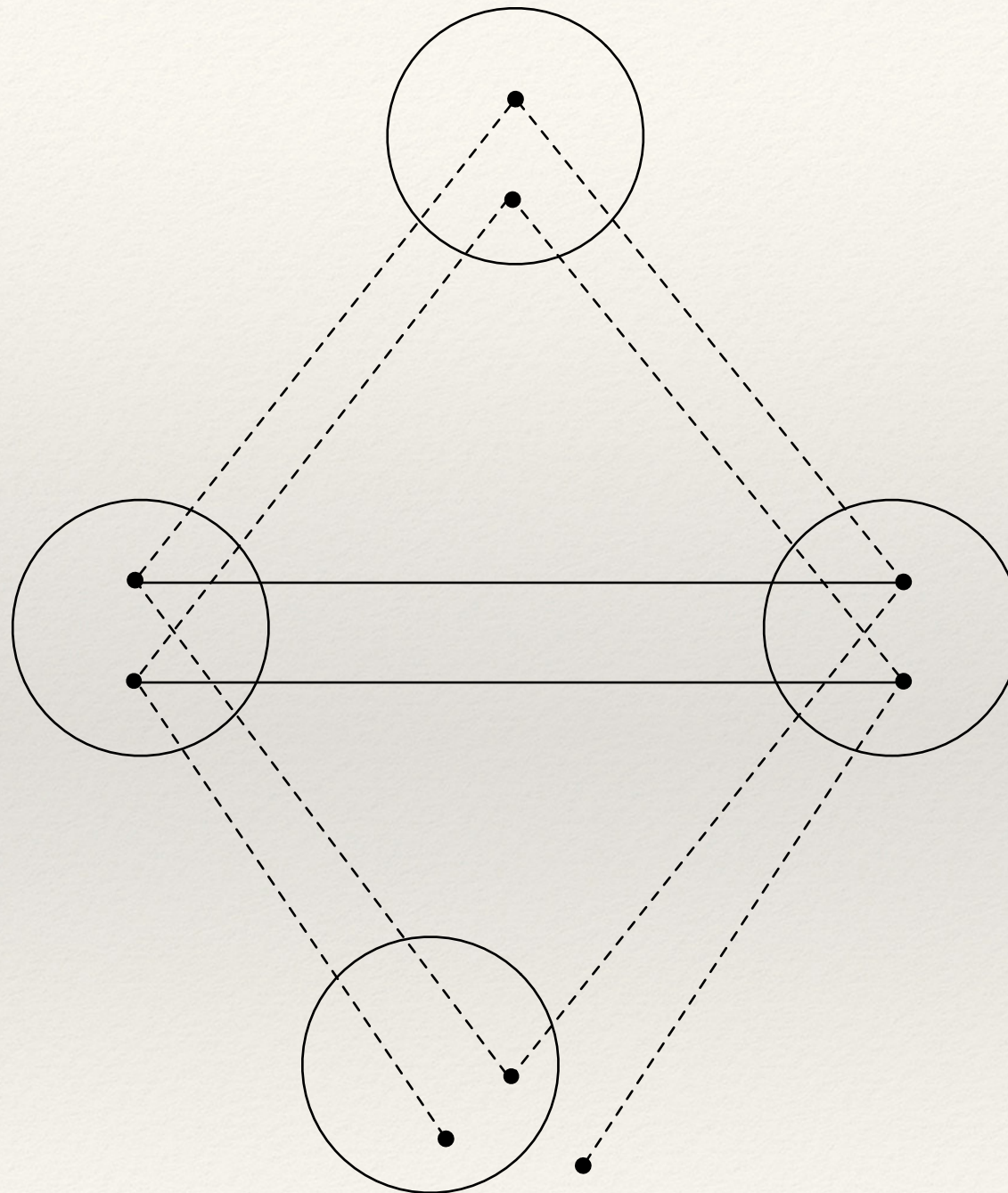
Failed Communication

1. Where have you come from?"
2. "From the essence."
3. "Where did you progress to?"
4. "The essence, of course!"
5. "When did you leave?"
6. "I now know I had never left!"

Prompt and response wrong



I spare you sixty blows!



Zen's intentions

1. Koans are designed to bring about enlightenment.
2. Enlightenment is the grasping of the ultimate reality.
3. The reality of everything has an *essential* and *phenomenal* aspect.

Zen ostensive-inferential communication

- ❖ the enlightened (E) produces a koan (K) which makes it mutually manifest to E and the unenlightened (U) that the E intends, by means of K, to make manifest or more manifest to U a set of assumptions (reality as an essential and phenomenal aspect, but they are one).

Prompt and Response

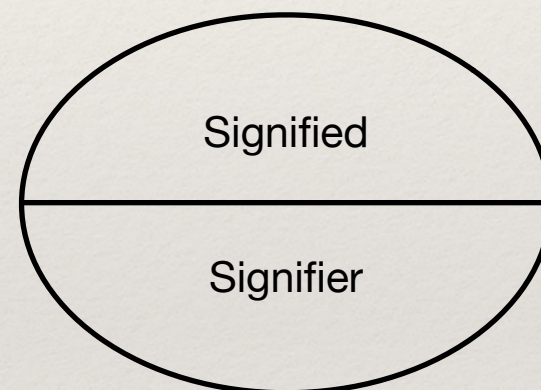
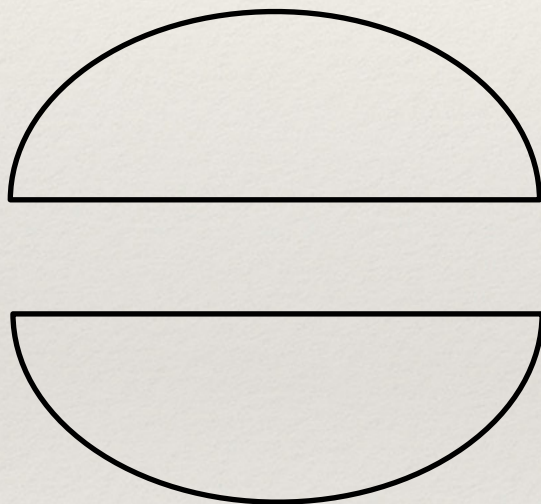
Prompt and Response

(Communicator)	Prompt (Communicator)	Response (Audience)	(Audience)
Question Only	Question		(Enlightenment)
Question and answer	Question	Answer	(Enlightenment)
No Question	Statement or Story		(Enlightenment)

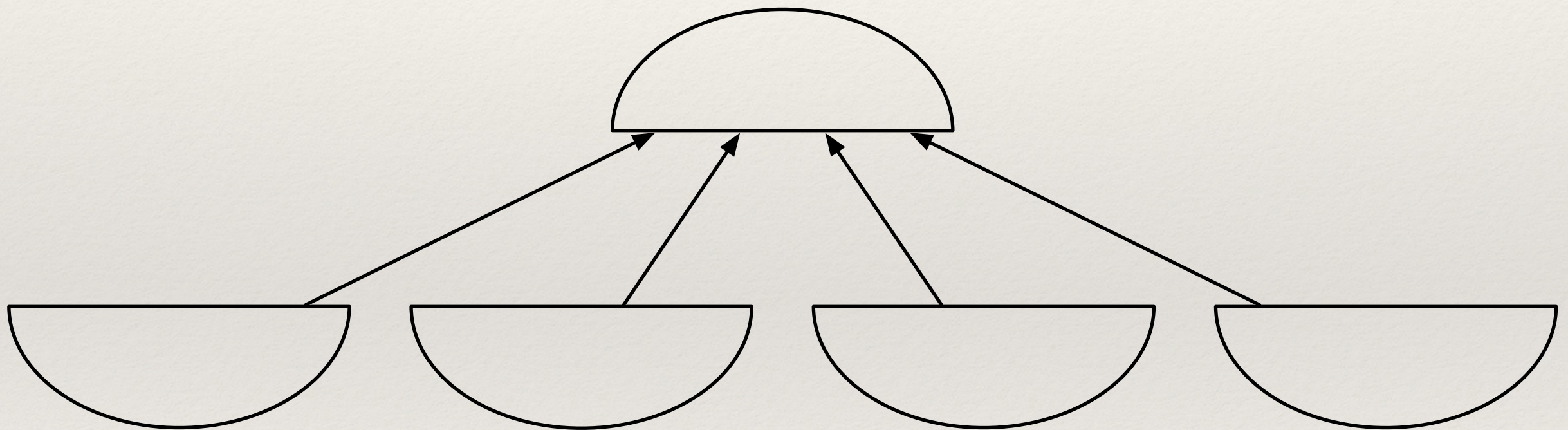
Discussion

- ❖ Not only can relevance theory be applied to koans, it is highly compatible.
- ❖ Koans (and Zen) in essence is highly structured and conventional. Its status as beyond standard understanding and analysis needs to be revised.
- ❖ mental spaces are a good visualisation tool for understanding and describing how koans function.

Sign?



Unlimited signifiers?



Limitation of this study

- ❖ Limited to the koans only; need to look at the commentary and verses.
- ❖ The method was applied only to a small closed set; expand.
- ❖ Need to expand to other zen works.

Thank you for listening.

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