

Chinese Ch'an Buddhism and Mental Culture: Implications of the Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra on Counseling and Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

Chinese Ch'an Buddhism has penetrated into Chinese culture for centuries and cast a multifaceted influence on Chinese intellectual development, lifestyle, literature and arts. During the T'ang and Sung dynasties, Ch'an Buddhism surpassed the other Buddhist schools and became the dominant Buddhist order. All Buddhist monastics were called Ch'an monastics, and Buddhist temples were recognized as Ch'an temples. This influence has extended until modern, post-imperial times. The teachings of this influential Buddhist school also have profound implications on psychological well-being and psychotherapeutic techniques.

Since the 1930s, Zen, a Japanese adaptation of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, has been introduced to the Western world. Many Western psychologists have been attracted to the study of Zen Buddhism and have compared Zen with various psychological theories and practices. The wisdom of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism and its potential applications to counseling and psychotherapy, however, has not been widely investigated. This paper will explore possibilities of applying Ch'an Buddhist teachings to counseling and psychotherapeutic practices. The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch will be used as the base for this exploratory study.

Introduction

The terms of Ch'an and Zen both refer to a form of Buddhism, with the former a translation preferred by the Chinese Buddhist community and the latter commonly used by Japanese Buddhists and recognized by people in the West. Although the two terms refer to a form of Buddhism with the same historical origin and shared aspects of core teachings, Chinese Ch'an has its special features deviant from Indian Zen or Zen as widely understood by Westerners through the efforts of D. T. Suzuki and many other Japanese Zen scholars and practitioners. The differences between the two and their implications on counseling and psychotherapy will be discussed in this paper. For the purpose of clarity, this paper will therefore use the term Ch'an to refer to Chinese Ch'an Buddhism and Zen to everything else related to this specific form of Buddhism.

Ch'an (and Zen) Buddhism is generally believed to be rooted in Yoga. The core characteristics of Yoga, including the consciousness of a cosmic unity, the body-soul totality of the human person, the primacy of meditation, and the experience of liberation, can all be found in Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism.¹ Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, as generally believed by Buddhist scholars and historians, was founded in the sixth century by Bodhidharma, a Brahman from southern India. By the eighth century during the T'ang dynasty, Ch'an emerged as the primary school of Chinese Buddhism. In the Northern and Southern Sung dynasties (960-1126, 1127-1279), Ch'an Buddhism reached the heights of its influence on Chinese culture. Ch'an monasteries were built throughout the land to house large communities of monks and attract visitors and lay

followers. The influence of Ch'an Buddhism spanned widely, penetrating into Chinese intellectual development, scholars' lifestyle, literary content and expression in poetry and other writings, as well as aesthetic creativity shown in paintings, sculpture, landscaping design and architecture. The teachings of Ch'an masters and their social interactions with the Sung scholars influenced the thoughts of Neo-Confucians and the establishment of Neo-Confucianism.¹⁻⁵

It should especially be noted that the development of Ch'an Buddhism in China deviates from Indian Zen in both teachings and practices. Ch'an, after being introduced to China, first adopted the philosophy of Taoism which was at the time very popular among intellectual scholars and the ruling classes in the imperial court. Ch'an is therefore believed to be a product of Indian Zen and Chinese Taoist philosophy.^{1,5} This sinicization of Ch'an was further advanced through the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, and the fierce promotion by Hui-neng's disciple, Shen-hui, of Hui-neng's teachings. The vigorous effort of Shen-hui resulted in the establishment and popularity of the Southern school of Ch'an based on Hui-neng's emphasis on sudden enlightenment. By emphasizing an instantaneous awareness of one's perfect original nature and a teaching approach with no reliance on verbal or literal transmission, Ch'an deviated further from its Indian origin, which believed in a gradual process to enlightenment and emphasized the practice of meditation.²⁻⁴ This so-called Southern school of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism led by Hui-neng is also distinct from its opposite, the Northern school led by another Ch'an Master, Shen-hsiu, which followed the Indian Zen emphasis on gradualness.

Chinese Ch'an Buddhism has not only perpetually influenced Chinese culture but also the cultures of its neighboring countries, especially Korea and Japan, and, through the Japanese Buddhists, the Western world. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), a follower of the Japanese Rinzai Buddhist school, is often credited with introducing Zen Buddhism to the West. Through the effort of Alan Watts (1915-1973), the ideas of D. T. Suzuki became popular in America. It was, however, the effort of the followers of another Japanese Buddhist school, Soto Zen, who introduced various methods of Zen practice and made Zen widely spread in the Western world. These Soto Zen masters, such as Shunryu Suzuki and Dainin Katagiri in America and Taisen Deshimaru in Europe, are recognized by some scholars as the true introducers of Zen in the West.⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, Western psychologists and psychoanalysts began to integrate the Zen teachings and practices into traditional psychotherapy. These teachings and practices, although transmitted from Chinese Ch'an, follow more the traditions of the Northern Gradualness School than the Southern Suddenness School.⁴

This paper is therefore aimed at using the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch as the base to discuss the implications of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism on counseling and psychotherapy. The paper will first give a brief review of the influence of Zen on Western psychology and psychotherapy, followed by a discussion of the major teachings and practice methods taught by the Sixth Patriarch as recorded in the Platform Sutra and their implications in the field of psychotherapy. The paper will conclude by addressing the issue of an integration of Eastern and Western wisdom as a means to provide a better mental health service.

It should be noted that this paper does not intend to focus on the verification of Chinese Ch'an history nor the validity of the Platform Sutra since both are quite controversial due to a lack of sufficient historical documents and, in some cases, falsified documents. The paper is generally based on the materials and beliefs that seem commonly recognized by the scholars in the field.

Influence of Zen on Western Psychology and Psychotherapy

The field of formal psychotherapy began in the late nineteenth century when Sigmund Freud developed the psychoanalytic approach to treat psychologically disordered patients.⁷ By 1950, different schools of psychotherapy had come to be established, each with its own unique therapeutic approach and theoretical basis. Zen Buddhism, after being introduced to the West, has been recognized by many psychologists and psychotherapists for its therapeutic value in mental culture. A few psychotherapists have actually attempted to integrate Zen concepts and practices into their own therapeutic approach.

Zen Buddhism has made its greatest impact in Western therapy through its influence on such theorists and clinicians as psychoanalysts Carl Jung, Karen Horney and Harold Kelman, the psychological theorist Alan Watts, the humanistic, existential psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, the existential psychiatrist Medard Boss, the Italian psychosynthesist Roberto Assagioli, the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, and the transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber.⁸ Since a detailed review of Zen influence on Western psychotherapy is not the focus of this paper, only a few representatives of this impact will be briefly discussed below.

The concern of Carl Jung (1875-1961) with Eastern religion and philosophy was evident in his theoretical work, including the foreword he wrote on D.T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*.⁹ In the foreword he praised Zen as "one of the most wonderful blossoms of the Chinese spirit – a spirit fertilized by the immense world of Buddhist thought." (p. 141) He also recognized the difference of Zen from all other exercises in meditation in its total lack of presuppositions, including Buddha himself. Man, according to Jung, with all his unconscious presuppositions is unable to rid himself of those. In Zen, as described by Jung, the energy which maintains the kinetics of consciousness may be saved and redirected over to the unconscious to reinforce its natural charge to bursting point. The readiness of the unconscious contents to break through into consciousness is therefore increased. But Jung also acknowledged that a special training of indefinite duration is needed in order to make it happen "since the emptying and shutting down of consciousness is no easy matter." (p. 151) Jung, in the meantime, warned of the dangers for a Westerner to be involved in Eastern traditions as Eastern practices, such as yoga and Zen, were considered by Jung unsuited to the Western mind.

Karen Horney (1885-1952) became increasingly interested in ultimate and spiritual questions and investigated Zen Buddhism toward the end of her life. She discussed Zen writings, especially those by D.T. Suzuki, on sincerity and wholeheartedness and believed the goal of therapy was "wholeheartedness: to be without pretense, to be emotionally sincere, to be able to put the whole of oneself into one's feelings, one's work, one's beliefs."¹⁰ (p. 242) For Horney, Buddhism has a

much deeper feeling for and can better train what she termed “wholehearted attentiveness,” a rare attainment but basic prerequisite for doing sound analytic work.¹¹

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) had a long-standing history of contact with Eastern teachers. He co-authored with D.T. Suzuki and Richard DeMartino the book *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*.¹² In the book, Fromm discussed how psychoanalysis can be useful to spiritual practitioners and how meditation can lead beyond the limits of therapy. He believed that psychoanalysts can help meditators avoid “the danger of a false enlightenment... based on psychotic or hysterical phenomena, or on a self-induced state of trance. Analytic clarification might help ... [meditators] to avoid illusions.” (pp. 140-141). Meditation practice, on the other hand, can help extend the psychoanalytic vision of optimal psychological well-being, which, according to Fromm, is a difficult achievement and may go beyond the aims of psychoanalysis.

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), in his book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*,¹² posited a vision of healthiness that resembles the ideal types of Zen meditators. Although he did not cite any specific Zen Buddhist writings, Buddhist concepts were sprinkled throughout his discussion.

Alan Watts, in his comparison of the modes of liberation or psychotherapeutic change developed by the East and the West, found that both Western psychotherapy and Eastern ways of life focus on altering people’s feelings about themselves and their relations to others and to nature.¹³ The two, however, differ in the target clients, according to Watts, where Western psychotherapy tends to deal with neurotic or disturbed individuals while the Eastern approach addresses normal or socially adjusted people.

In addition to the impact on Western psychotherapists and their therapeutic philosophies, Zen Buddhism also casts its influence on the Western psychotherapeutic treatment. Westerners not only practice Zen experiential exercises, such as sitting meditation and mindfulness training, but adopt several Zen systems of treatment such as Morita therapy, Naikan introspective therapy,¹⁴⁻¹⁵ and Zen meditation either as an independent therapy or as an adjunct to other forms of psychotherapy.¹⁶ An application of mindfulness to therapy and the use of mindfulness meditation for stress reduction have also been developed.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ We are likely to see an increasing impact of Zen Buddhism on Western psychotherapy in the future.⁶

The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

The Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Ch’an Buddhism, Hui-neng, after his disciple, Shen-hui’s successful propagation of the Southern school and severe accusations against the Northern school, has since been considered as the legitimate successor of the Dharma seal and robe from the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen (602-675). Hui-neng is also recognized as the principal unifying factor behind the Chinese Ch’an history out of the conflict between the Northern and Southern schools and the distinction of the so-called “Five Houses and Seven Schools.”^{1,19} As written by Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819) in an epitaph for the Sixth Patriarch (815), “When you say Ch’an, everything rests on Ts’ao-chi (where Hui-neng spent most of his life in teaching).”¹ (p. 155) All the followers of Ch’an tried to associate themselves with Hui-neng or his disciples.

The Southern school replaced the once esteemed Northern school to become the normative authority of the Ch'an transmission. The Sixth Patriarch is credited as the key person in the revolutionary movement in the history of Chinese Buddhism and the initiation of the development of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung and Ming dynasties.²⁰

The First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, according to Shen-hui in his daring and courageous speech at the Great Dharma Assembly of Hua-t'ai (734), had brought the Ch'an of the Tathagata to China and claimed that Ch'an is "not relying on words or letters; an independent transmission apart from the scriptural doctrine or any teaching; directly pointing to the human Mind; and awakening to one's Original Nature, thereby actualizing one's own Buddhahood."²¹ (p. 3) The Sixth Patriarch, as a successor of Bodhidharma's teachings, did not leave any writings behind. His way of teaching to his followers is considered simple and straightforward, which is also believed to be one of the reasons for the wide spread of his teachings.^{2-3,19} The Platform Sutra is generally believed to have been recorded by one of the Sixth Patriarch's disciples, Fa-hai, based on the teachings that the Sixth Patriarch gave to his disciples and the general public at the Ta-fan Temple in Shao-chou. An autobiography of the Sixth Patriarch was also included in the sutra. The original text of the sutra, however, can no longer be found. An early hand-written edition of the work was discovered in a cave during excavations at Tun-huang in Kansu Province. The Tun-huang manuscript was slightly improved by D.T. Suzuki and his colleague by dividing the originally undivided text into fifty-seven sections. Most translators and commentators have since followed their convention.^{1,22}

The core philosophy of the Sixth Patriarch as revealed in the Platform Sutra consists of two key elements of Mahayana thought. One is the doctrine of the Buddha nature central to the *Lankavatara Sutra* which, legend says, was chosen by Bodhidharma as the main sutra for transmitting his teachings. The other is the prajna wisdom taught in the *Diamond Sutra* which was added to the Ch'an teachings since the Fourth Patriarch, Tao-hsin. These two core thoughts form the foundations for the Sixth Patriarch's doctrine of sudden enlightenment.^{1-2,20} He, following the Bodhidharma's teachings, emphasized that awakening to one's original nature will actualize one's own Buddhahood. This Original Nature used by the Sixth Patriarch in the Platform Sutra is the Buddha nature generally referred by Buddhists as it entails the possibility of becoming a Buddha. The prajna wisdom that sees through emptiness – the doctrine of dependent existence of the phenomenal world, of all qualities and forms – is, according to the Sixth Patriarch, "the most honored, the supreme, the foremost... and practice according to it, you will certainly become Buddha."²² (p, 148) The Sixth Patriarch described the application of the prajna wisdom in daily life in a form of "no-thought, non-form and non-abiding."²² (p, 148) He stressed this teaching by saying that "in this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis."²² (p. 137-138) This teaching of no-thought, non-form, and non-abiding is believed to shed light on Ch'an practice.²

Implications of the Platform Sutra on Counseling and Psychotherapy

As mentioned above, many therapeutic approaches claiming to follow the Zen teachings have been adopted by the West and their value has been documented. These

approaches, however, do not follow the essence of the Sudden Enlightenment teachings of the Sixth Patriarch. They reveal only the teachings of the Gradualness school. Take sitting meditation, the method most popularly used by Westerners, as an example. The Sixth Patriarch in the Platform Sutra clearly criticized sitting meditation by saying “The deluded man clings to the characteristics of things, adheres to the Samadhi of ones, [thinks] that straightforward mind is sitting without moving and casting aside delusions without letting things arise in the mind... This kind of practice is the same as insentientcy and the cause of an obstruction to the Tao.”²² (p. 136) He further instructed the true meaning of “sitting in meditation” by pointing out that “In this teaching ‘sitting’ means without any obstruction anywhere, outwardly and under all circumstances, not to activate thoughts. ‘Meditation’ is internally to see the original nature and not become confused.”²² (p. 140)

Another popular practice adopted by Westerners, the mindfulness practice, commonly used as a way of meditation in which “one is simply attentive to the ongoing flow of the mindstream without concern about particular contents of experience that arise,”²³ (pp. 109-110) also contradicts the Sixth Patriarch’s teachings on no-thought and not viewing of the mind. He warned that one should not “rest in objective things and the subjective mind,”²² (p. 138) and stated that “If someone speaks of ‘viewing the mind,’ [then I would say] that the ‘mind’ is of itself delusion... Since this delusion has no place to exist, then you know that whatever you see is nothing but delusion.”²² (p. 139)

Morita therapy, consisting of isolated bedrest to force patients to come in touch with themselves, follows a similar training philosophy and practice as that of mindfulness meditation. Therefore, it does not follow the Sixth Patriarch’s teaching either. By emphasizing the development of a sense of responsibility and obligation in the patient, Naikan introspective therapy corresponds with the Sixth Patriarch’s teaching about layman practice, but it is not his core teaching.²⁴

In sum, all the therapeutic methods adopted by Western therapists require setting aside a special time for treatment or practice, and patients are guided by therapists. The Sixth Patriarch’s teachings, however, emphasize practicing in daily life during every moment (“The samadhi of oneness is straightforward mind at all times, walking, staying, sitting, and lying.”²²) (p. 136) and self-directed enlightenment of one’s own pure nature (“Good friends, see for yourselves the purity of your own natures, practice and accomplish for yourselves.”²²) (p. 141) The psychotherapeutic methods claimed by practitioners to follow Zen thought by Westerners are therefore not directly rooted in the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch.

What, then, are the “rightful” methods of psychotherapy according to the Sixth Patriarch’s teachings in the Platform Sutra? The Sixth Patriarch, however, did not lay out in the Platform Sutra clear teaching methods nor concrete phenomena attending the paths to enlightenment, but all the essential elements regarding practice and enlightenment are there.^{1,3} A few suggestions provided below seem to be implied in his core teachings, which consist of, as mentioned above, the assurance of the Buddha nature in all beings, sudden enlightenment as seeing into one’s Original Nature, and prajna wisdom expressed in no-thought, non-form, and non-abiding.

(1) In every moment, at every place in one's daily life, observe one's mind to be sure that it remains as a:

- **Non-Distinguishing Mind:** Do not have dualistic thoughts in mind by applying a judgmental stance to discriminate good from bad, pretty from ugly, young from old, etc. Perceive objects clearly as they are in the moment without going through a process of self-interpretation, intellectual reasoning, value judgment, and emotional provocation. This is the so-called ordinary mind in the core teachings of Ch'an (Zen). This mind is also described in the Platform Sutra as a mind that "separates from the dualism that produces the passions," and cited in the Platform Sutra from the *Vimalakirti Sutra* as one that can "while externally distinguishing well all the forms of the various dharmas, internally stand firm within the First Principle."²² (p. 139) With a non-distinguishing mind, it is then possible to experience the true reality.
- **Non-Attached Mind:** Do not dwell your mind on anything that is not the focus of the very moment. This does not mean preventing any single thought from arising in your mind. The one that practices in that way is, according to the Sixth Patriarch, bound in the Dharma and the practice is based on a biased view.²² (p. 153) A mind without attachment to the past or future brings full attention, or a mindful state, to the present. By focusing on the present, we will live totally in the experience of the moment and attain oneness with our Original Nature.²⁵
- **Purified Mind:** This is what the Sixth Patriarch called the straightforward mind that has no illusory thoughts. One who maintains a purified mind "does not see the faults of people everywhere."²² (p. 140) As the Sixth Patriarch advised against the practice of "viewing mind" or "viewing purity"²² (p. 140) practiced in sitting meditation, maintaining a purified mind should be considered as an ordinary way of living carried out in every moment of our existence.

(2) Awaken to our Buddha nature: Through the close self scrutiny described above, one will understand one's original mind which is in its nature pure, permanent, perfect, non-moved, and capable of arousing all Dharmas.²⁴ This understanding of the original mind brings instantaneous awakening to one's own original nature, the Buddha nature.²² However, this understanding may not be quickly realized for people who do not have a keen mind. It is important to stress in therapy that this supreme quality exists within each of us and to use this emphasis to reach the following therapeutic goals:

- **To foster self confidence and assurance:** Believing in one's nature as being as supreme as the Buddha's should empower the weak to gain self confidence and assurance. But, one has to be careful not

to be directed to an illusory image of an exaggerated self or inferior self.

- To behave appropriately: For every thought and every movement, this supreme quality can be used as a yardstick for determining appropriateness or rightfulness of conduct.
- To develop a rightful life goal: Making the awakening to one's Buddha nature as a life goal will bring a rightful focus to life, according to the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch and other Buddhist masters, and prevent the wasting of precious time in the human realm.

It should be stressed that the methods suggested above need to be applied in every moment and at every place in our daily lives. They are not meant to be practiced separately from our daily routine and in an isolated place. All of these methods follow the principle of the Ch'an teachings on directly pointing to one's mind to awaken one's Original Nature. They are also believed to be based more directly on the teachings of Sudden Enlightenment by the Sixth Patriarch than the other methods well-known to the West as Zen therapeutic methods. The key differences are hence threefold: (1) The former emphasizes a practice in every moment and at any place, whereas the latter has to be practiced away from other daily tasks; (2) The former does not follow any specially designed format but observing one's mind, whereas the latter is usually carried out through a specially tailored program, position or set of rules; and (3) The former focuses on the goal of awakening to one's original mind, whereas the latter focuses on controlling or correcting our mind.

Although those Zen methods popular in the West tend to provide means for a gradual progress toward the final fruition, they still have their value in psychotherapy. As the majority of human beings are believed to need time to practice for a full enlightenment,³⁻⁴ these methods may, as studies shown, be useful for many individuals. Perhaps the methods suggested in this paper following the Sixth Patriarch's Ch'an teachings may be applied to psychotherapy as primary, leading approaches, whereas the other Zen methods may be used as secondary, supportive approaches.

Conclusion

Since the introduction of Zen Buddhism to the West in the twentieth century, Eastern thought and practice have been followed or studied by Western practitioners and scholars. Mental health professionals and spiritual practitioners are, however, still searching for a way to integrate the two traditions to a full utilization of both. Some efforts in bringing the two together tend to make one subordinated to the other.⁸ A genuine insight of each tradition that goes beyond Eurocentrism (the view that "European standards and ideals are the center of the universe"⁸ (p. 5) and Orientocentrism is necessary for a synergistic integration. Such integration also needs to be based on fully mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. This paper is written with the hope to increase or clarify some understanding of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism and its implications on counseling and psychotherapy so that a better mental health service may be provided to all.

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