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THE NO-SELF PSYCHOLOGY OF ZEN BUDDHISM:
CAUSALITY, ATTACHMENT, AND
THE MANIFESTATION OF FUNDAMENTAL ALIVENESS

ABSTRACT

This is a study of the psychological significance of three ideas that are important parts of the teaching of Zen Buddhism: causality, attachment, and no-self. The study qualitatively analyzed the reports of six Japanese Zen Buddhist masters of their experience and understanding of these three ideas. The six Zen masters interviewed were all at the interview times the head priest of a Japanese Zen temple and had been involved in Zen practice for many years. The focus of this study was to understand how mind functioned according to the three ideas being investigated. Particular attention was given to the understanding of what is a person, what is pathology, and what is healing.

The study employed a phenomenological-hermeneutical methodology. The general guiding question was what was the mind of a Japanese Zen master in a Japanese context. The goal was to understand more fully what is a Zen psychology from the point of view of Japanese practitioners of Zen. Each Zen master was interviewed at least two times. Descriptions of the Zen masters' lived experience of the focal three ideas were elicited.

The study found that the three Zen ideas investigated expressed a situated psychology with many similarities to relational psychologies in the West. Major differences found were: a psychology of a spatial or relational self in which the time or historical self is given little significance; what Zen refers to as the absence of the ego-self, or no-self; and that the situatedness of mind psychologically could disappear. In Zen being and non-being are inextricably interwoven together through the functioning of causality. It is the articulation of mind according to causality that the study concludes is the important contribution of Zen for psychology. It was found that the psychology of Zen tends to be misinterpreted in the West as a psychology of quietism and literal emptiness. The traditional inaccessibility of the masters of Zen practice and their unfamiliar methods has resulted in many misunderstandings by people outside the practice of Zen. It was concluded that these two aspects have been the main liabilities regarding the usefulness of the psychology of Zen.