

The Psychology of Zen: Could an Eastern View Enhance the Science of Mind and Behavior? *Kyoto Journal*, no. 59 (February, 2005), pp. 8-13.

## **The Psychology of Zen:**

Could an Eastern view enhance the science of mind and behavior?

Reggie Pawle, Ph.D.

As a psychotherapist I have long been curious about how well psychology appreciates the diversity and adaptability of the human psyche. Having lived in Japan for several years, it now seems clear to me that, in many aspects, most psychological theories reflect Western understandings of what a person is. Zen Buddhism, long a part of the culture of Japan, has an implicit understanding of the human being which is different in many ways. When Zen is examined from a psychological perspective, it offers alternatives to Western psychological theory. What are some of these alternatives?

### **The Unconscious and the Ego**

A good place to start is with the relationship of the unconscious and the ego. Both 'unconscious' and 'ego' are originally Western psychological terms and each must be carefully considered when used in a discussion of Zen. The unconscious in Zen *does* have some similarities to Western theories. Both heritages consider that there are strong mental activities outside of a person's awareness that have major influences on their psychological experience. Both see these out-of-awareness activities as being generally not understood, yet integral to a person. One crucial difference, however, is the nature of these activities. Zen's particular focus is on a person's mental illusions and emotional attachments. In Zen thought, these are psychological activities that support a false or unreal sense of how people experience themselves.

Zen has its own particular ways of working with what it identifies as unconscious activities of mind. For one, it always does so with the conscious mind being fully awake and engaged. Zen does not encourage going off into trances or putting the conscious mind

to sleep in some way. Nor does Zen encourage the development of extraordinary powers of mind, such as those developed through yoga. Whenever I have told a Zen teacher about some of my energy experiences during yoga practice they listen curiously, grunt (Zen masters grunt well), and don't say much. Their attitude is, So what?

This is not to say that unusual and intense experiences do not happen during Zen practice. Inevitably the contents of the unconscious appear in some way if a person participates long enough. One word for what can appear is *makyo* (Jap. 魔境), which means literally "a world of devils." Makyo in Zen consists of the delusions that can arise while a person is doing Zen practice. Once, during a meditation retreat on the East coast of America, I fell deeply in love with a woman sitting opposite me, a woman with whom I had never even spoken a single word. She left the retreat before it was over, so afterwards I searched out her phone number and called her up, fully expecting her to embrace me immediately; I was rudely shocked when she didn't know what on earth I was talking about. In American Zen communities this is spoken of as a "meditation romance." The Zen way of working with such a hallucination is just to let it go and return to present awareness, which is what I did.

But that's not all. Ten years later, I was in a bar on the West Coast of America talking with a Zen friend and I told him this story, relating it as one of my big learnings in Zen practice. He seemed very surprised and asked me the woman's name. I couldn't remember, so I described her. "That sounds like my ex," he said, and named her correctly. "I was at that retreat too, and the same thing happened with me towards her, so I called her up afterwards too, and we proceeded to have a three-year relationship. She was really putting out relationship energy that week." In this way I came to understand that what I had thought was entirely a hallucination had some grounding in reality, but my friend's approach to this woman had somehow been less delusional than mine.

Zen considers experiences such as makyo and yoga energies as being beside the point. In Zen, the point is the ego. Zen does not argue with the idea that reality can be mixed in with hallucinations; neither does it deny the reality of such things as energy experiences, but it emphasizes that such phenomena can all too easily become subject to some ego interest. An example would be my first yoga teacher, who could through

merely touching another person, create within them various energy experiences. This is called *shaktipat*, and since it is not a common ability it was easy for this man to use his talent to impress women, even seduce them, which he reportedly often did. Because of this he was eventually kicked out of the yoga organization.

The explanation for this in terms of psychological theory is that there is a fundamental difference between the Western psychological and Zen approaches to the relationship of the unconscious and the ego. Western psychological approaches that focus on the unconscious generally consider it to be *basic* to mind, and view all other functions subordinate to the unconscious. However, in Zen this relationship is reversed. The ego is believed to be basic, and the unconscious is subordinate to this ego. According to Zen, the ego is the fundamental determining factor of the nature of mind. It is the key, the crucial factor in mental health. Upon the ego rest both the possibility of mental health and mental pathology. One of the Zen masters I have talked with said that it is through the ego that a person is “bonded”, or suffers, but also through the ego that a person becomes enlightened, or free of their suffering.

As a term, ego has its roots in Freudian theory and it has been imported into Zen talks conducted in English. Generally in Zen ego is a term that is used only in negative ways, being used similarly to common American expressions such as someone being egotistical or being on an “ego trip.” In the West, when someone has a “big ego,” we mean they have an inflated sense of self and are narcissistic. The Zen use of ego has this same meaning, with the additional nuance that such egotistical tendencies happen in subtle ways in people all day long. From the Zen perspective it is not just the rich or beautiful, but also ordinary people who can be living egotistically. Zen thought asserts that the psychic life of people revolves around their ego. For example, in Zen, emotions are seen as having three qualities, depending on the ego’s evaluation of experience. Emotions can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If the ego likes something, then the emotion felt is a pleasant one, and so on. According to Zen, cognition and perception as well as all other psychic faculties function the same way.

Another important aspect of the ego as commonly understood in Western psychology is that it is the part of the psyche which serves as its coordinator or executor.

This refers to functions such as being able to carry out decisions. For example, if a wall stands before me, various functions of mind are involved in my interaction with this wall. I see the wall, have the desire to pass through it, discriminate that there is a door, have the bodily ability to walk, and understand that I can go through the door. It is the ego that coordinates all this information, desire, and the bodily movements that actually take me through the door. This is a way of describing a psychological activity that all people have. And this is a function that is *assumed* in Zen, but not focused on or talked about in terms of the ego. When I have asked Zen masters if they can actualize their choices, they've looked at me like I've suddenly had a bout of temporary insanity, and said, "Yes, of course!" From this perspective there is a natural ego present in all enlightened Zen masters.

One of the characteristics of this coordinating function of mind is subjectivity. Here again is an activity of the psyche that all people have: the subjective ego. It is our most intimate part, that part of ourselves from which we can never separate, never get outside of. Once during meditation I tried to see my subjectivity, but only succeeded in giving myself a headache!

While Zen implicitly agrees with Western psychology that everyone has a subjective coordinating ego, what is different about Zen is its assertion that subjectivity and all ego functions are commonly mislived or misunderstood. The ego as subjective coordinator according to Zen is an activity, a function, that always interacts with and changes according to conditions, and nothing more. In fact, the ego is dependent on the rest of mind even to exist. However, people tend to regard ego functions as if they had a material existence. Hence they commonly misapprehend their subjectivity as being separate, different, or distinct from what they perceive as objective or outside their subjectivity. They identify with this subjective ego in an exclusive way, and believe their ego is an entity that must be nourished and protected; which must, at all costs, endure over time. This, Zen asserts, is a delusion that is the fundamental source of psychological suffering.

What is radical about Zen is that it affirms that the ego can be *clarified*, that it can function naturally, without the illusory sense of a separate self that must be protected

and/or nourished. In other words, a person can have a subjective sense that is not narcissistic.

This understanding of the function of the ego reflects how Zen understands a person is to live psychologically in a healthy way. Zen and Buddhism in general have often been misinterpreted as advocating emptiness and/or withdrawal from life. However, Zen focuses on mind being natural and in harmony with the world within which it finds itself. Mind, to function, *needs* discernment and affinity. From this point of view it is natural to have attachments, feelings and desires. Zen does not try to eliminate these, but rather focuses on how these functions of mind are lived. A Zen master once said to me, “Desire is not the problem, it is the one who is desiring who is the problem.” In other words, desire is a natural function of mind, but it is through the ego that problems with desire can arise. When the ego is clarified, desire functions naturally in a healthy way.

### **A Person as Form**

The Zen view is that as well as there being a natural ego, there is also a natural functioning of mind and a natural, inherent self which occurs psychologically, without a person having to construct it. Rather than trying to *construct* a self, the focus of a person should be on trying to find and *realize* their self.

This inherent self is possible because of the natural interrelatedness of mind and environment. In Zen a person is understood to be an *activity* that is always in relationship to the environment. Through being in relationship a person naturally develops and participates in life. Such a person is always within their situation in life. This is a view of person as form. There is no escaping being form. A person may change their situation, but they are still within themselves, their body, this world. A person may move to Japan, and their situation change, but they are still *situated*; it is just a new form of being situated.

As a person is a situated experience, Zen asserts that it is important for a person to be situated without holding back. Really be who you are. Be your form. Rather than a removed or dissociated approach toward life, Zen encourages full involvement. The more a person becomes their situated experience, the more their natural or inherent self appears.

Yet, since according to Zen who they are is changing from moment to moment, any kind of holding onto situated experience has pathological possibilities.

This kind of participatory approach to life is reflected in the Zen understanding of attachment, detachment, and non-attachment. Zen considers attachment to be fundamental to all phenomena. One Zen master said to me that it would not be a mistake to say that the world is made of conditions and attachment. Yet, if one becomes attached to attachment, and holds onto one's attachment over time, then natural attachment becomes a different, unhealthy kind of attachment. Conversely, if one detaches from attachment, then one is denying the kind of attachment that is fundamental to being a relational and situated person. Thus, Zen emphasizes non-attachment, which means being attached fully in the moment without trying to maintain the form of this attachment. In action, non-attachment means participating fully, but without attachment to the result of this participation.

### **A Person as Formless**

One more very important aspect of this “self as form” must be considered. That is the understanding that while a person is situated, in Zen thought a person is also *not* situated. A person is form, but not only such.

The Zen understanding of situated experience is that it necessarily involves a subject and an object. This is the sense of consciousness being intentional, always being object-directed. Yet Zen thought also asserts that consciousness can exist *without* this subject-object function. This is formless consciousness — consciousness as awareness only. This is a capacity of mind that Western psychology commonly does not account for. However, the Zen masters that I have talked with testify not only to its reality, but also to its necessity if one is to realize fully the human potential.

Mind that is situated always has psychological reference points. Psychologically, the Zen idea of emptiness is the disappearance, or letting go, of all these reference points, both the subject and its objects — resulting in a formless awareness that is empty of situated experience. These reference points include both the subject and its objects. Zen emptiness is both non-subjective and non-objective. It is crucial to understand that this emptiness is not realized through turning inward and becoming subjective at the expense

of being non-objective. Over-emphasis of subjectivity commonly leads to detachment, which is just another kind of ego illusion.

Emptiness is both an ability of mind and the nature of mind. Practically speaking it enables a person to let go of their personal situation and viewpoint, their false ego. The capacity for letting go of one's psychological reference points specifically addresses the sense of ego as entity. The result of this is that a person is much more open, has all of his or her psychological functions available, and is thus much more able to interact freely and healthily with their environment.

Care should be taken not to understand emptiness as a void. Several of the Zen masters with whom I have spoken have emphasized this. One master said specifically that it's not that emptiness is a void, but that it cannot be perceived by the ordinary subject-object mind.

This understanding of emptiness as the letting go of all psychological reference points can appear to have an affinity with the idea of "pure experience." This has been written about by both Americans (William James, 1904/1996) and Japanese (Kitaro Nishida, 1911/1970; D.T. Suzuki, 1933). This idea, in various non-academic forms, has also had great appeal in parts of popular culture in the West. "Pure experience" is the idea that the experience of formless awareness is basically the same for everyone. It is the belief that it is possible for people, despite their differences in background, to have in a moment the same experience.

I have seen this idea have an enormously seductive influence on people. Many Westerners have come to Japan to practice Zen based on the appeal of this very belief. From a certain cross-cultural perspective it is hugely attractive — the notion that people, regardless of their heritage, can experience together the same purity. Unfortunately, most of the Westerners I know who have come to Japan on this basis run smack into the wall of cultural differences, and instead of pure experience they have an encounter with great psychological distress. An example of this cultural wall is the way that correction of mistakes is handled by superiors towards inferiors within a Japanese monastery. Westerners often find the Japanese way problematic. The purpose of their method is to eliminate the attachment to self. However, the superiors' conduct is founded in Confucian

hierarchical ethics, which in practice means that a superior can be extremely severe in correcting errors and the inferior is expected to be fully humble and bow deeply to the correction. Yet Westerners raised in a completely different ethic, that of equality and human rights, commonly find such stinging corrections an affront to their basic sense of dignity and human values, and rather than a loss of self-attachment the result is volumes of confusion and anger. I can vividly remember one such experience myself, when I showed up a day later than expected at the temple where I study. I recall the stunningly blunt way I was spoken to, very humiliating and also very scary, since I was threatened with permanent expulsion from the temple. This could have meant never seeing my Zen teacher again.

### **Healing: Zen as Clinical Work**

The methodology of Zen is comprehensive and there is much that can be very useful for clinical work with people from non-Japanese cultures. Here I will focus on just one technique — the use of *koans*.

Koans have earned quite a reputation in America. People have become fascinated with their seeming riddle-like aspect; they cannot, after all, be answered by using the intellectual mind. A good example of a koan often heard in America is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” (The answer, I realized a while ago, is “A Zen music store.” But I’m not being serious! Or maybe I am ...)

A koan is a question or a statement which a Zen teacher offers their student, and which the student uses as a subject for meditation. In Zen it is said that each koan expresses a law or universal principle. Another example of a koan is one which the Zen philosopher Hisamatsu Shin’ichi (1994) asserted was the fundamental koan, of which a literal translation of his Japanese could be: “None of that will do; now what?” Expressed in looser English, this could be, “Now that you’ve done everything that you can do, what will you do?” What a koan is pointing to psychologically is that in mental turmoil there are always opposing forces that seem irreconcilable. Psychologically, a dilemma always creates the sense that a person has done everything that they can, has “hit the wall” in American parlance, but the dilemma still continues.

One of the values of a koan psychologically is that it helps a person identify what

their own personal “wall” is. This wall may be in relation to a particular situation, or it can be in relation to a part of a person’s character that is an ongoing challenge for that person. In a therapy session, a client and I will together try to formulate, in a question or phrase, the essence of that with which they are struggling. The client can then explore the koan, observing how they tend to deal with it and what is associated with it. They can then stay with this question or phrase in life and bring it back to work on it further in future sessions. This technique allows people to really get into their struggles and work with them. People tend not to know how to do this. Koans are very practical in this way.

Zen does not stop at identifying the root of a person’s struggles. It further asserts that a koan can *always* be resolved, regardless of how impossible it may appear. This is the part of a koan most commonly missed or overlooked by people. From where the Zen student sits, there appears to be no resolution. The student may sit with a koan for years and years, may even die without answering their koan. At one Zen monastery I was shown the place in the graveyard for monks who had answered their final koan, i.e., became enlightened, and another place for monks who had died without doing so. Yet from where the Zen master sits, answers to koans are immediately apparent.

In Zen, answering a koan always occurs through the becoming one with what was previously in opposition. The answer appears and the dilemma disappears, or maybe it works vice versa! For psychology this means that if a person stays with their dilemma and does not try to handle it either by separating from it or over-identifying with it, eventually a resolution appears. Koans in this way access great faith within a person.

## CONCLUSION

These parts of the psychology of Zen that I have described are not just for monks sitting in monasteries — they are for ordinary people. I have found the psychology of Zen very useful in my clinical work in Japan, which has so far involved clients from about eighteen countries. Zen understands a person as being both situated and non-situated, form and formlessness, all at the same time. The key to both of these is the ego, the roots of which are beneath the unconscious. When the ego is clarified and functioning healthily, there is no separation between person as situation and person as non-situation. This Zen kind of

understanding opens up great resources within an individual, all of which are inherent and only need to be discovered. Techniques such as koans facilitate this. Incorporating such Zen approaches into psychological theory and clinical practice can serve to broaden psychology and help it to more effectively serve clients of diverse backgrounds.

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