

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ZEN BUDDHISM:
POSSIBILITIES FOR WESTERN PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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Introduction

Riding the trains in Japan, something I have been doing frequently for about five years now, the genius of the human mind never fails to impress me. Its variety and adaptability is quite astounding. While looking around myself on the train the people I see are very different from the people who were around me while I lived in America. For example, where I grew up many people were proud of their independent self-reliance in a particular way that I have yet to find in Japan. Yet, when I look at my fellow passengers on the train, I see people, although different in many respects, who are generally psychologically healthy and happy. The breadth of ways in which the human psyche can healthily function is truly impressive.

As a psychotherapist I have been curious about how well psychology appreciates this diversity and adaptability of the human psyche. After being in Japan it seems clear to me that in many ways most psychological theories reflect Western understandings of what a person is. Zen Buddhism, long a part of the culture of Japan, has an understanding implicit in its writings of what a person is that is different in many ways from the Western understanding. As such, when Zen is examined from a psychological perspective, it offers some alternatives to Western psychological theory. This essay will focus on what some of those alternatives are.

I. The Ego from a Zen Perspective

A good place to start a discussion of Zen psychology is with a consideration of the ego. Ego is a Western term and must be used carefully when discussing the psychology of Zen. Generally in Zen the ego is a term that is used to refer only to negative possibilities of the psyche, most commonly as a delusion of a self that endures over time. This ego, this delusion of self as an entity, is posited to be the fundamental source of psychological suffering. However, there is within Zen thought, when it is examined according to Western psychological thought, a positive function of the ego, although it is talked about using different terms than ego. This points to the challenge of cross-cultural psychology.

In the West the meaning of the psychological term ego has its roots in Freudian theory. In Freudian theory the ego is understood to be the mediator between the unconscious instinctual forces of mind, the id, and a person's ideals or values, the superego. The ego attempts to manage the tension between these two. The ego as the mediator is understood to be the part of a person that functions as an executor, discriminating and making choices. In this function the ego is not an independent entity, but rather during early psychological development arises out of the id and always receives its energy for its function from the id. Thus, the id is fundamental and the ego, while trying to manage the id, is dependent on the id.

Freud used a metaphor of a rider on a horse to describe the ego:

the ego 'in its relation to the id is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces.' (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, as quoted in Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 73)

In Zen it could be said that this relationship between the instinctual forces of mind and the functions of mind that are referred to as the ego in

Western psychology is reversed. In Zen it is this so-called ego function that is fundamental and all of the other parts of mind, conscious and unconscious, appear through and receive their energy through this ego function. This ego function is considered to be the root of mind. All the rest of mind is considered to be a transformation of this root of mind.

Despite this difference with Freudian theory, Zen thinking also posits an ego function as the conscious executor function of mind. However, for Zen, due to the ego function being the root of mind, there are important meanings for this executor function. Particularly important is that the executor is the subjective sense of a person and it is within this subjective sense that a person's identity and executive function of discrimination and choosing arises. Subjectivity in Zen is understood to be that with which a person is most intimate. It is the experience of a person from which they cannot separate. There is no getting outside one's subjectivity. It is only experienced and lived, and can never be seen objectively.

Another way of describing subjectivity is that it is a person's identity. It is that which a person experiences as "I" or "me" and from which a person has no separation. Identity is the function of "I am ...," that with which there is no separation from "I." As a person's subjectivity and identity the ego in the Zen sense functions as the common denominator for all mental operations. It is the principal operator and the referential terminus for the psyche.

In psychological work from a Zen perspective this ego function must be included in any consideration for there to be the possibility of psychological health. Part of what is referred to in Western psychology as the ego is a natural function of mind according to Zen thinking. Thus, in Zen, contrary to what some believe, everyone has an ego. However, Zen thinking emphasizes that this natural function

of mind is one that is easily misunderstood or mislived. People commonly misapprehend their subjectivity as being separate or distinct from what they perceive as objective or outside their subjectivity. They feel their subjectivity as being different from all objective factors. They identify with their ego in an exclusive way. They falsely believe that their ego is an entity that endures over time and that they must protect this perceived separate entity.

The Zen understanding of all phenomena, including the ego, is that of change over time and dependently co-existing in relationship spatially. There is no essence or substantiality to any phenomena. However, there is existence in each moment in relationship. This is not a dissociated or detached way of thinking. Thus, phenomena are both non-being and being inextricably interwoven together. The Zen word for this is *mu* 無. *Mu* is not a Japanese word, but a transliteration of the Chinese word *wu*. *Mu* does not mean just emptiness as many interpret it. It means both emptiness and substantiality together; or, in other words, *mu* 無 cannot be specifically designated as either only emptiness or only substantiality.

The ego function, as is true of all other phenomena, is always engaged with other functions and its environment. It is the root of mind, but it is not an independent entity or some kind of soul. The ego in Zen only occurs as part of mind. It is interrelated with and dependent on the psyche as a whole to exist. In this way the ego in Zen has similarities to Western psychological object relations theory.

Zen describes two basic activities that support the misapprehension of the ego: (1) attachment to one's ego as an entity, and (2) the illusion that one's ego is a self that endures over time. Attachment is more the affective function, illusion more the

cognitive function. As the ego is the root of mind, this misapprehension occurs prior to both the conscious and unconscious. Therefore, all other functions of mind are affected by this misapprehension. And conversely, because of the interrelatedness of mind, the ego also can be affected by other functions of mind. This allows for the possibility of healing.

The ego understood in this Zen way is the fundamental determining factor of the nature of mind. It is the crucial factor in mental health. Upon the ego rest both the possibility of mental health and mental pathology. One of the Japanese Zen masters that I have talked with said that it is through the ego that a person is bonded, or suffers, but it is also through the ego that a person becomes enlightened, or free of their suffering.

II. The Self as Situated

The Zen view is that as well as there being a natural ego, there is also a natural functioning of mind and a natural self. I refer to this as an inherent self. It occurs psychologically without a person having to construct it. This is possible because of the natural interrelatedness of mind and environment. Rather than trying to construct it, the focus of a person should be on trying to find and realize it.

One of the common criticisms of Zen and also of the Eastern traditions in general is that they lack a psychology of development. However, such a psychology is only important from the point of view of Western psychologies. The Western approach is that the self needs to be developed, that it needs to be made. The Western approach also is based on the understanding that psychological stability occurs through continuity over time. This is not the point of view of Zen. Zen believes that rather than developing the self, when the ego is correctly apprehended,

the self that is already present appears in one's experience. Functions of mind that need to be developed do so naturally when the ego is aligned with the inherent self. Zen thought also asserts that continuity of self, psychological stability, occurs not over time, from the past to the future, but from continuing in relationship to one's situation, in the present, from continuing through space rather than time. Zen thought posits that a time-based self is a fragile self because time is always changing. From this perspective it can be said that space is what the self is, time is what the self is not. This is not to say that developmental psychology does not have value. Rather, it is to say for Western psychology that there is unappreciated value in the present inherent self.

Given the importance of the role of the ego in the state of the functioning of the psyche, it is natural that Zen training works directly with the ego. Principally as the ego is understood to be subjective, that from which one cannot be separate or objective, this work is done as what I call inside work. This is work within one's subjectivity, within that from which one cannot separate.

The focus in Zen is not to free oneself from negative outside influences, but to change oneself on the inside. The fundamental activity that creates suffering occurs within one's basic sense of self, within one's most intimate part. It is one's own activity, not the result of being oppressed or suppressed by outside forces. This is an activity that cannot be separated from (See Mumonkan, case 2).

This inside approach applies to life as a whole. In Zen a person is understood to be an activity in relationship. Therefore, from an inside perspective, a person is always within their situation in life. This is a situated understanding of a person. This understanding has parallels to various Western psychological theories, such as object relations, family systems, and feminist.

Zen emphasizes the fluid nature of this situatedness. Conditions change moment to moment. Therefore, what a person is also changes moment to moment. Zen asserts that this change occurs much more rapidly than can be perceived by the mind.

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. Rather than a removed or dissociated approach to life, Zen encourages full involvement and participation in life. The more a person becomes their situatedness, the more their natural or inherent self appears in their experience. Yet, as who they are is changing moment to moment, any kind of holding on to situated experience has pathological possibilities.

This kind of participatory approach to life is reflected in the Zen understanding of 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, holds on to one's attachment over time, then natural attachment becomes a kind of attachment that is unhealthy. However, if one detaches from attachment, then one is denying the attachment that is fundamental to being a relational and situated self. Thus, Zen emphasizes non-attachment, which means being attachment fully in the moment without trying to maintain the form of this attachment. In action non-attachment is participating fully without attachment to the result of this participation.

III. The Self as Non-situated

There is one more very important aspect of this situated self that must be considered, and this is where Zen parts company with the various Western theories previously mentioned. This is while a person is situated, in Zen thought a person is also not situated. This is the previously referred to idea of *mu* - being and non-being. A person is their situatedness, 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. Zen thought also asserts that consciousness can exist without this subject-object function. This is non-engaged consciousness, consciousness as awareness only. This can be realized consciously through the faculty of intuition. This is a capacity of mind that Western psychology commonly does not account for. However, the Zen masters that I have talked with testify to not only its reality, but also to its necessity in order to realize fully the human potential.

Mind that is situated always has psychological reference points. The Zen idea of emptiness psychologically is the letting go of all of these reference points, an awareness that is empty of situatedness. The ability to do this enables a person to let go of their personal situation, their personal viewpoint, their false ego. From the Zen perspective all psychological problems are caused by clinging to a false ego. The capacity for letting go of one's psychological reference points specifically addresses this false clinging. 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 emphasized this. One master said

specifically that it's not that emptiness is a void; it's just that it can't be perceived. Thus, emptiness is referring to something psychologically that is beyond or outside the capacity of mind to perceive.

That emptiness cannot be perceived means that it cannot be understood or experienced through the faculties of mind that separate or discriminate. It can only be understood from the "inside" perspective – through intuition and through experience. It cannot be understood in an objective way. It becomes possible to realize emptiness when the subject of mind drops or forgets its individual identity and all of its particular reference points. This is a mysterious nature of mind, that which cannot ever really be known (See Mumonkan, case 19).

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 is an idea that William James (1904/1996) wrote about in America and the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1911/1970) referred to as an explanation of the Zen experience. D.T. Suzuki (1933), who wrote many books about Zen in English, also made some references to it. 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 a person can have an experience that is free of all forms of situatedness. It is the belief that it is possible for people regardless of their differences in background to have in a moment of pure experience the same experience.

I have seen this idea have an enormous seductive influence on people. Many Westerners have come to Japan to practice Zen based on the appeal of this idea. From a certain cross-cultural perspective it is very attractive – that people regardless of their heritage can experience together the same purity. Unfortunately most of the Westerners who have come to Japan on this basis ran smack into the wall of cultural

differences and eventually left Japan in various states of psychological unease. An example of this is how correction of mistakes is handled by superiors to inferiors within a Japanese temple. Westerners often find the Japanese way problematic. Its purpose is to eliminate the attachment to self. However, for Westerners, when this practice is carried to extremes, they commonly find it an affront to their basic sense of dignity and human values and rather than loss of self-attachment the result is a lot of anger.

Addressing this question of non-situated experience versus situated experience is an important question for the psychology of Zen and for the interests of broadening psychology in general. My sense is that the resolution of this is in *mu* - that non-situated experience and situated experience exist together at the same time. Separating one from the other results in incompleteness and the reification of each. Experience is situated, but in the same moment, as all reference points can dissolve, it is not situated. Any non-situated experience can only occur within a situated context, most specifically that of the body. It is not freedom from, but rather freedom within, freedom to. This is freedom in one's circumstances and being free in one's response. Thus, rather than focusing on trying to be free from something, the Zen view is that it is a person's own activity is binding them to their suffering and they can focus on being free without having to change something outside their self.

IV. Healing: Zen as Clinical Work

How psychological healing occurs has been a matter of great debate throughout the history of Zen. Awakening or satori in Zen terminology can be understood psychologically as a healing of mind. In the history of Zen there has been a big debate as to whether this healing occurs suddenly or gradually.

Sudden awakening means that there is a sudden shift in mind and a person suddenly is able to do something that they couldn't in the previous moment. The common American expression that "the light suddenly turned on" refers to a person suddenly grasping something that they previously hadn't been able to understand.

Gradual awakening means that change and healing happen gradually as a result of the accumulation of causes. This is more the common way that healing is understood to occur. As a result of doing this and that a person gradually gets better.

I think that both of these ideas are very useful for clinical work. People generally and easily understand gradual awakening. However, sometimes mysterious events happen psychologically that a person doesn't understand. Sometimes these are due to sudden shifts of mind. Understanding this capacity of mind can be very helpful for people.

An example is a client who suddenly became very depressed and couldn't get out of her bed. She said that when she went to bed she was feeling okay. The next morning she couldn't get up. What happened? From a Zen perspective there were many causes that gradually led up to this event, but the event itself was a coalescing of these causes with the result being a sudden shift in her experience. Understanding both of these aspects, the causes that led up to the event, and the event itself, the sudden shift, were very important and helpful for this client.

Zen practices employ many different techniques to assist awakening or healing, all of which reflect the inside focus of Zen. These techniques are very valuable when integrated into clinical work. Values such as staying with experience, non-separateness, and non-judgmentalness are emphasized. The function of mind that is utilized is what I call attention-feeling: attend to experience simply without giving it meaning, feel it, and receive it. Thinking and the discriminative mind are

de-emphasized. These functions of mind utilize objective and separative factors. They are important for many activities in life, but are not helpful when a person is trying to work within their core sense of self. The Zen methodology is to attend to experience first and reflect on it later. Through attention-feeling one awakens to or finds one's inherent self.

Also very useful for clinical work is the *koan* 公案, for which Zen has earned quite a reputation. A koan is a statement and/or a question by a Zen master that their student uses as a subject for meditation. It is said that each *koan* expresses a law or universal principle.

Each *koan* contains some kind of duality, one that seems to have two things in opposition that are not resolvable. For example, the Zen philosopher Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1994) asserted that there was a fundamental *koan*, which was: none of that will do; now what? What a *koan* is pointing to psychologically is that in psychological turmoil there always are two opposing forces that seem irreconcilable. A dilemma psychologically always has the sense that a person has done everything that they can, has "hit the wall" in American parlance, but the dilemma still continues. Each person has their own personal "wall." One of the values of a *koan* psychologically is that it helps a person identify what their own personal "wall" is.

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. Inherent within the dilemma is a solution. In Zen this always occurs through the becoming one of what was previously dualistic. Psychologically this means that if a person stays with their dilemma and does not try to handle it by their usual strategies, eventually the resolution appears.

Koans are an example of a practical technique that I have found to have great value in work with clients. Zen theory and practices offer a broadening of Western psychological theory and practice. Zen is pointing to great resources within the human psyche, resources that can resolve seemingly irresolvable conflicts. The assertion that the human mind is only situated reifies it and puts unhealthy limits on the potential of human beings. This Zen kind of understanding that can be very useful for psychology. It allows for change and healing and reflects the adaptability of the psyche that impresses me whenever I ride the trains. Incorporating this into psychological theory and clinical practice can serve to broaden psychology and help it be more effective in serving diverse backgrounds of clients.

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