

English Translation of:  
“禅仏教とトランスパーソナル心理学”  
(Transpersonal Psychology and Zen Buddhism)  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Today I am going to talk about a part of transpersonal psychology that has become very popular and even “hip” among psychologists in America. This is the psychology of Zen Buddhism. As I am an American I will be speaking about Zen from an American perspective, which may be quite different than that of a Japanese. My understanding of Japanese culture is limited and, as you can hear, my Japanese is not so good. I apologize for my misunderstandings of Japanese culture and for my low language ability. My name is Pawle and I think that rather than speaking Japanese, I speak “Pawle-語.” I hope you can understand my “Pawle-語.”

I will begin this talk by giving a brief description of the interest of Americans in the psychology of Zen Buddhism. I will then discuss how the unconscious and the ego are understood in the psychology of Zen. Next I will briefly discuss Zen and transpersonal psychology. Finally, drawing on my clinical experience, I will discuss the use of one technique from Zen methodology in clinical work with non-Japanese clients.

## II. ZEN IN AMERICA

One of the important beginnings of the history of Zen Buddhism in America was the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, at which Shaku Soen Roshi, with the aid of his translator D.T. Suzuki, introduced Zen to a very skeptical Christian audience. Following that conference, although interest in Zen remained very much in a

small fringe group of people for many years, seeds were laid, particularly through the writings of Suzuki in English, for an explosion of interest in the 1960s. This explosion of interest in Zen was initially in parts of the popular culture, particularly those parts that were seeking alternatives to various Western traditions. This may seem strange to Japanese people because Zen in Japan is very much a part of the established culture and is commonly identified with tradition. However, the perspective of Americans has always been different. Zen in America has always been a part of what has been called the “counterculture,” the part of culture that seeks different ways of doing things than those of the prevailing and larger general culture.

Initially popularity of Zen was mostly among counterculture groups such as hippies and spiritual seekers, people who valued quality of life over quantity of material possessions. However, gradually interest in Zen began to expand into more establishment parts of American society, such as academics and psychologists. In psychology those initially interested were generally within the humanistic and transpersonal psychological movements. This interest has expanded and today in addition to continued interest within these two branches of psychology there is also interest within psychoanalytic psychology in Buddhist psychology. I am continually impressed by the number and variety of books being published in America on the subject of Zen and psychology. I believe that Buddhist psychology, which includes Zen as well as Tibetan and Vipassana, is one of the fastest growing movements in psychology in America.

To understand why the psychology of Zen has generated this kind of interest in America it is helpful to consider several factors. One factor is that Zen is viewed by Americans as being a religion in which the implicit psychology is easily accessible and

understood. All religions, as do all parts of culture, have a psychology that is implicit within them, an understanding of what a person is upon which they are based. Each religion in its own way answers the same burning questions about the human mind about which modern psychology has tried to discover the truth. As such, all religions can be examined as to what is the psychology that is within their teachings and practices. Writers such as William James (1902/1961b), Carl Jung (1912/1952/1967), and Han de Wit (1991) have investigated what is the implicit psychology of various religions.

When examining the implicit psychology of Zen, one should be careful not to confuse the differences between religion and psychology. As a religion Zen does not address many aspects of mind that psychology addresses. Zen is a religion that, I believe, revolves around an ignorance-enlightenment dynamic. It does not address in much detail parts of mind that are not relevant to this dynamic, some of which are addressed in great detail by Western psychology, notably development, severe pathologies, and mind structure. While traditionally within Zen there has not been a “Zen psychology,” from the perspective of implicit psychology it is possible to speak of a “psychology of Zen.”

There are various explanations for the perceived accessibility of the psychology of Zen to Americans. One consideration is the foreign factor. Sometimes it is easier to recognize an implicit psychology when one is not burdened by all of the cultural associations a native person has with a religion. For example, many Japanese see Buddhism as a religion of death. However, this was something I only learned upon coming to Japan. In America Buddhism is never viewed this way. While in Japan you commonly see graveyards together with Buddhist temples, in America I have never seen this once.

Another consideration is the function of mind that is emphasized in Zen practice, which is attention. Through attention a person discovers the self that is already present. A person attends to what is, as-it-is (そのまま) or suchness (眞如 *shinnyo*) in Buddhist terminology, and awakes from what one previously mistakenly believed to what is actually their true self. The Zen methodology is to attend first, receive experience, and then after experiencing something fully digesting it intellectually. Experience first, think second is the Zen way.

The significance of this for Americans is that this is a very different use of the mind than that which is emphasized in American education. Americans are educated to learn how to think critically. In theory during a traditional liberal arts education a person learns how to make choices intelligently. The basis of this is being able to use fully the discriminative faculties of mind. One result of this educational approach is that such a trained person always asks questions first, thinks first, and then experiences something if their questions are answered in ways that make sense to the person. Think first, experience second is the American way.

It is not hard to see how such a different use of the mind is appealing to Americans. Zen in de-emphasizing the discriminative mind opens up possibilities that are not accessible to a person as long as they stay in the discriminative mind. Americans are very attracted by what are to them new possibilities of consciousness, represented in Zen by *satori* (悟) and *kensho* (見性). The appeal is also shown in the different psychological characteristics that are developed by the different educational philosophies of America and Japan. An emphasis on thinking produces people who are individualistic, independent, make their own choices, and tend to doubt before they

accept. An emphasis on attention produces people who are sensitive, function well within groups, pay attention to their environment, and tend to accept before they doubt.

The Zen methodology, thus, has the effect of eliciting psychological parts of Americans that have been malnourished or underdeveloped by their own culture. Americans in emphasizing individualism and choosing for oneself have become too loud, too used to their own way, too selfish. And naturally American psychology emphasizes the same aspects of a person that its culture emphasizes. This I believe is important to recognize. It focuses on separation-individuation, fosters the ability to make choices, improves people's self-esteem, and encourages people to develop their uniqueness. These are the strengths of American psychology and this emphasis can particularly be seen in humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The weakness of American psychology is that it is unable to treat the negative aspects of this focus, one of which according to the critique of psychoanalyst Mark Epstein (1995) is narcissism. With its emphasis on self-esteem, which is a kind of healthy self-love, American psychology has great difficulty working with unhealthy self-love, narcissism. The psychology of Zen offers to Western psychology ways of working with narcissism that Western psychology lacks in its own methodology and theory.

### III. THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE EGO

Next I want to consider one of the fundamentals of the psychology of Zen. The psychology of Zen expresses a comprehensive view of what is a person, what is pathology, and what is healing. Today I will consider just one aspect of this, a consideration of the ego and the unconscious. How the unconscious and the ego are understood in Zen is at the heart of the approach of the psychology of Zen to narcissism.

Both of these terms, unconscious and ego, are originally Western psychological terms and must be considered carefully when used in a discussion of Zen. The “un” part of unconscious does not mean “no” or “none” in Western psychology.

Unconscious is not no-conscious and therefore is not equivalent to the Zen understanding of no-mind (無心) or no-self (無我). Rather, unconscious refers to a part of consciousness of which a person is unaware. The unconscious is a part of mind that interacts with the part of mind of which a person is aware. No-mind and no-self in Zen refer to something that is outside of or beyond the conscious and unconscious human mind. From this perspective it is natural that transpersonal psychology would have great interest in no-mind and no-self.

Within Zen there is very little that directly addresses this Western understanding of the unconscious. However, implicit within Zen teachings and literature there is a Zen version of this unconscious. Rather than instinctual drives in the Freudian understanding or archetypes in the Jungian understanding, the unconscious in the psychology of Zen is the mental illusions and emotional attachments of a person. In Zen terms these are psychological activities that support a false or unreal sense of how people experience themselves.

Zen has its own particular way of working with it identifies as unconscious activities of mind. One is that 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 developing extraordinary powers of mind, such as those developed through yoga. This viewpoint is well expressed in the story of Obaku Zenji and Rinzai who, while walking together, came to a flooded stream that blocked the way. Rinzai then proceeded to cross the

torrent by floating across in his straw rain-hat, whereupon Obaku Zenji sighed and said, “I have allowed such a fellow to accompany me! I ought to have slain him with a blow of my staff!” (P’ei Hsiu, 1958, p.94)

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* (魔境), which means literally “a world of devils.” *Makyo* in Zen is the delusions that can arise while a person is doing Zen practice.

Zen considers experiences such as *makyo* and other non-ordinary experiences 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 and the reality of such things such as energy experiences, but rather emphasizes that such experiences can all too easily become subject to some ego interest. An example is my first yoga teacher, who could through touching another person create various energy experiences in that other person. In yoga practice this is referred to as the ability to transmit *shaktipat*. Such is certainly not a common ability. Thus, it was easy for him to use this talent to impress women, thereby helping him seduce them. Stories of his behavior were often heatedly discussed in that yoga community at that time.

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 the unconscious to be basic to mind and all other functions subordinate to the unconscious. However, in Zen this relationship is reversed. It is the ego that is believed to be basic and the unconscious that is

subordinate to this ego. According to Zen the ego is the fundamental determining factor of the nature of mind. Upon the ego rest both the possibility of mental health and mental pathology. It is this understanding of the ego that enables the psychology of Zen to directly work with narcissism.

Ego as a term has its roots in Freudian theory and has been imported into Zen talks done in English. Generally in Zen ego is a term that is used only in negative ways, being used in similar ways to common American expressions such as someone being egotistical or being on an ego trip. 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. 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 and all other psychic faculties function the same way.

Psychologically speaking from a Zen perspective one explanation for this is that the ego is one's subjectivity. In Western psychology subjectivity is one function of the ego. Subjectivity in Zen terms is a natural function of mind, but is just a function, an activity, that is always changing according to conditions. Everyone has subjectivity, so it can be said that everyone has a natural ego. However, people commonly misapprehend their subjectivity as being separate or distinct from what they perceive as objective or outside their subjectivity. They identify with this subjective ego in an exclusive way. They falsely believe that their ego is an entity that must, at all costs, endure over time. This is a delusion of self as entity that Zen asserts is both the fundamental source of psychological suffering and the source of the narcissistic ego.

The natural ego with its various functions that Western psychology describes such as subjectivity, directing attention, making choices, and being the coordinator of the psyche functions in all people. What is significant and radical about the psychology of Zen asserts that this ego can be clarified and can function as an activity without the illusion of being an entity or self that must be protected and/or nourished. It is this illusion of the ego as an entity self that Zen asserts leads to narcissism.

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 being in harmony with the world within which it finds itself. Mind needs functions like discrimination and attachment to function. From this point of view it is natural to have attachments, feelings, and desires. Zen does not try to eliminate these. Rather, Zen focuses on how these parts of mind are lived. One Zen master said to me once during a personal conversation about desire, “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 arise. Desire is okay when the ego is clarified and not trying to hold onto itself.

## VI. ZEN AND TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

I will next turn my attention to how some of the aspects of transpersonal psychology are understood by the psychology of Zen. Transpersonal in English literally means “above the person,” or, psychological terms, “above the self.” In the West traditionally that which transcends or surpasses the human is the spiritual, the religious aspects of a person. Transpersonal psychology has expanded this Western religious understanding of “trans” to include not only that that is above a person, but also to many

other different non-ordinary aspects of mind, aspects of mind that are outside, beyond, or greater than a person's normal consciousness. Briefly stated, it is the purpose of transpersonal psychology to integrate all these various "trans"personal aspects of mind into psychology.

The Zen approach to many of these "trans" aspects of mind is expressed in the story previously discussed of Obaku Zenji and Rinzai crossing the flooded stream. For Zen it is very dangerous to develop these abilities of mind without clarifying the ego. In Zen as discussed it is the ego that is fundamental and the clarification of the ego is the purpose of Zen practice. Development of non-ordinary abilities of mind is not important and can be very delusory.

Rather than developing extraordinary mental abilities what is focused on in Zen is finding the "trans" in ordinary circumstances, in everyday life. A good example of this in practice is case #19 in the *Mumonkan* (Huikai, 1228/1977), which is a dialogue between Zen master Nansen and his student Joshu. This dialogue begins by Joshu asking Nansen what is the Way of Buddha. Nansen replies that it is "everyday mind." Joshu is confused, so he asks what kind of practice would be good to do. Nansen replies, "If you seek for it, you'll only go in the wrong direction." Joshu is further confused, so he asks how he can ever understand the Way without practice. Nansen's answer is, "The Way is neither knowing nor not knowing. Knowing is illusion, not knowing is indifference.<sup>1</sup>"

There are several "trans" aspects of mind that are expressed in this wonderful story. One is that the Way cannot be spoken of in dualistic or discriminative categories. To realize the Way a person must transcend this kind of subject-object mind. Zen stories often speak of the limitations of the discriminative mind, which is something

Americans commonly don't hear in their own education. In Zen this transcendence is done not "trans" anything, but right where a person is, right in the present moment as-it-is (そのまま). From a psychological perspective what occurs is that the attachment to mind as solely discriminative activity disappears, emptiness arises, and then mind can be active as discrimination without a person being limited by or attached to this function of mind.

Subject-object mind is intentional and always has psychological reference points. The Zen idea of emptiness psychologically is the disappearing of or the letting go of all these reference points, a formless awareness that is empty of intentional mind. These reference points include both the subject and its objects. Emptiness is both non-subjective and non-objective. It is very important to understand that 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 illusion of the ego.

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 that which cannot be perceived by ordinary subject-object mind.

A related "trans" aspect of mind expressed in this story is the transegoic. What Nansen is expressing is the point of view of what I referred to earlier as the clarified ego. Such a natural ego is simply part of the functioning of "everyday mind," participating as part of the situation within which it is. This is the Zen sense of transegoic, not a going above or outside or beyond the ego, but rather changing radically the nature of the ego. The separative and narcissistic ego disappears and one's true self as no-ego (無我

*muga*) appears. Paradoxically transegoic in the psychology of Zen is simply the clarified functioning of ordinary mind.

## VII. ZEN AS CLINICAL WORK

In this last part I will briefly discuss the use of one Zen training method, *koans*, in clinical work as an example of how the psychology of Zen can be successfully applied with any nationality of the client. A *koan* is a question or a statement from a Zen teacher to their student, which the student uses as a subject for meditation. It is said in Zen that each *koan* expresses a law or universal principle. One example of a *koan* is what the Zen philosopher Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1994) asserted was the 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 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.

One of the values of a *koan* psychologically is that it helps a person identify what their own personal "wall" is. This personal wall can 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. A client and I together try to formulate in a question or phrase the essence of that with which they are struggling. The client can then explore the question or phrase, seeing 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. The technique allows people to really get into their struggles and work with it. 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* that is most commonly missed or not noticed by people. No matter how impossible it may appear, there is *always* a solution. From where the Zen student sits, there does not appear to be a resolution. The student may sit with a *koan* for years and years and may even die without answering their *koan*. At one Zen monastery I was shown in the graveyard the place for deceased monks who had answered their final *koan*, i.e., became enlightened, and another place for deceased monks who had died without answering their final *koan*. Yet, from where the Zen master sits, answers to the *koan* are immediately readily apparent. No matter how difficult a *koan* may appear to a student, there always already is an answer.

In Zen answering a *koan* always occurs through the becoming one of 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 by either separating from it or over-identifying with it, eventually a resolution appears. *Koans* in this way access great faith within a person.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The psychology of Zen Buddhism offers alternatives to Western psychological theories and methodologies. It also offers a particular kind of transpersonal psychology, one that emphasizes how to realize the "trans" aspects of mind right where a person is in ordinary life. I have found the psychology of Zen very useful in my clinical work, which has included clients from about eighteen countries so far. According to Zen the key for a person is the ego, the roots of which are beneath the unconscious. When the ego is clarified and functioning healthily, then a person can truly participate in life.

This Zen kind of understanding opens up great resources within a person, all of which are inherent in a person and a person only needs to discover. Techniques such *koans* facilitate this. Incorporating Zen approaches into psychological theory and clinical practice can serve to broaden psychology and help it be more effective in serving diverse backgrounds of clients.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The translation used here is by Daigaku Rumme, found in Sekkei Harada's *The Essence of Zen*, 1998, p. 165.

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