

CHAN—ENTERING THE GATEWAY OF INFINITE WONDERS: BEHAVIORAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERSPECTIVAL REORIENTATION AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL DECONSTRUCTION

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The secret of seeing things as they are is to take off our colored spectacles. That being-as-it-is, with nothing extraordinary about it, nothing wonderful, is the great wonder. The ability to see things normally is no small thing; to be really normal is unusual. In that normality begins to bubble up inspiration.¹

These from Master Sessan reveal the distinctive perspective characteristic of awakening that sets the realized practitioner apart from others. Normality thereby undergoes a profound redefinition, for it is in fact unusual to be normal when abnormality reigns. This radical reorientation in how the world is encountered or “seen” also affects how one acts in, on, and of the world. Hence bizarre behavior came to be closely associated with Zen Masters and practitioners. While their rantings and occasional ravings are often dismissed as *upāyically* motivated, that is, representing the most effective means to the end of stimulating realization in the student, it is well to consider underlying psychological and philosophical factors that contribute to the normality of their actions. To paraphrase Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.43), “The world of the enlightened is a different one from that of the unenlightened.” Having negotiated the passage between the two worlds, and endeavoring to meet the challenge to communicate on some level with the unenlightened, the enlightened must resort to unorthodox means, inclusive of illogical linguistic formulations, body language, and even appropriately timed silences.

PSYCHOSIS AND AWAKENING: SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

The psychiatric community only recently has recognized officially that religious experience is not invariably a sign of a psychological disorder. This admission is made in their professional “Bible,” the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV), issued in May of 1994. The compilers thereby seem to be reversing an anti-religious bias in the discipline of psychiatry that can be traced to Sigmund Freud. This bias is perhaps most clearly elaborated in Freud’s volume on religion provocatively entitled *The Future of an Illusion*, wherein religion is denounced as a “universal neurosis” that substitutes for a personal one.

¹ Master Sessan, in Irmgard Schloegl trans., *The Wisdom of the Zen Masters* (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 56.

Freud goes on to describe religion as an “obsessional neurosis” predicated on wish-fulfillment, a series of “symbolic disguisings of the truth.”² In pursuit of “our appointed problem of reconciling men to civilization,” Freud strongly urges an end to “such symbolic disguisings of the truth” tailored to a childlike mentality we have now outgrown.³

What, then, would Freud or his colleagues make of the Chinese poet Su Shi/Su Shih (1037-1101), who resorts to poetry in attempting to communicate insights realized through Buddhist practice? Is Su Shih simply engaging in poetic hyperbole when he writes:

The sounds of ripply creeks are all long wide tongues;
The mountains are the pure bodies of the Buddhas.
Late at night, when contemplating the eighty-four thousand verses,
How is one to explain to others what one has realized?⁴

If the poet insists that his description is more than symbolic, more than the product of an overactive creative imagination, how are we to respond? Are his images symptomatic of a mental malfunction; ravings induced by the “narcotic” of religious zeal? Or has he, in fact, been roused from a *Samsāric* dream of life in which others, Freud included, are obliviously steeped?

To decide on the correct diagnosis, it will be necessary to distinguish between the mentally disturbed and the enlightened, despite superficial similarities. While it may be true, as William Shakespeare avers, that “The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact,” there must be some point of demarcation among these three. The serendipitous enlightenment of the lover and the poet cannot be compared to an enlightenment grounded in cultivation and practice, just as a vision afforded through a crack in the rice paper cannot be compared to the full scope of the scene on the other side.

Clinical definitions Let us begin with the parameters for psychosis that have been established by contemporary practitioners of the psychological discipline. Definitions given by two sources are quite close in outlining the symptomatology:

² Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, W. D. Robson-Scott trans. (London: Hogarth Press, 1934), pp. 76-78.

³ Freud, p. 78.

⁴ Su Shih, quoted in Hsing Yun, *Lectures on Three Buddhist Sutras* (Tashu, Taiwan: Fo Kuang Publisher, 1987), pp. 22-23.

Psychotic Disorders

A general cover term for a number of severe mental disorders of organic or emotional origin. In contemporary psychiatric nosology, the defining feature of these disorders is gross impairment in reality testing. That is, the person makes incorrect inferences concerning external reality, makes improper evaluations of the accuracy of his or her thoughts and perceptions and continues to make these errors in the face of contrary evidence. Classic symptoms include delusions, hallucinations, severe regressive behaviors, dramatically inappropriate mood and markedly incoherent speech.⁵

The organic reaction type [of psychosis] in general manifests the following signs:

- 1) In the intellectual sphere there is impairment of comprehension, interference with elaboration of impressions, defects in orientation and retention, difficulty in activation of memories and marked fluctuation of the level of attention.
- 2) Affective disorder in the form of emotional instability, the patient laughing or weeping without sufficient cause, and often in an explosive way.
- 3) Character-change in the form of conduct foreign to the patient's natural disposition, e.g., indecent behavior in a hitherto self-respecting individual.⁶

Anyone who has any acquaintance with the literature of the Chan sect will immediately be able to identify the above signs of psychosis with the behavior of various Masters, many of whom were infamous if not notorious in their own times. Examples can readily be drawn from the chronicles set down by their disciples.

⁵ Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 598.

⁶ Leland E. Hinsie and Robert Jean Campbell, *Psychiatric Dictionary*, third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 609.

If abstracted from their context, and reported to a modern therapist, there might be serious cause for concern about each of the individuals involved in the Chan “case histories.”⁷ Their words and behaviors legitimately may cause us to question their sanity or grasp of reality. However, if we dismiss these remarks as merely metaphorical, then we would have missed the trans-rational message and method of Chan. If we were to confront a Chan Master with those rationalizations, thirty blows might well follow, for betraying the authenticity of the moment encapsulated in each vignette!

But precisely how do they differ from the psychotic individual? To begin, both the psychotic and the awakened are placed in a therapeutic encounter. However, in a Chan context, it would seem that the lunatics are running the asylum—the more bizarre the words and behavior, the more enlightened the individual! It is the struggling, unawakened student who is most likely to offer rational pronouncements, only to be rebuffed verbally and/or physically by the Master. Both the psychotic and the awakened challenge the accepted divisions and interpretations of “reality,” presenting alternative visions disruptive of the existing order in varying degrees. For the psychotic, their disease is defined in terms of their deviation from accepted norms, while the awakened defines the disease as those norms themselves, the sleeper’s distorted dreamlike version of reality. The psychotic’s is a personal malady that sets him or her apart from the norm; the awakened, also set apart from the “norm,” is a rare voice of *Nirvānic* insight amidst the surging sea of *Samsāric* delusion.

The psychotic individual may have wandered through the Gateway to Infinite Wonders, the Gateless Gate, but did so involuntarily. This can be compared to the drug-induced attempts to achieve enlightenment, which often become “bad trips” due to the lack of preparation or practice on the part of the individual. The sine qua non of cultivation, even if it is sudden cultivation, has thus been severed from realization. In contrast, for the

⁷ Recall that Plato acknowledges a similar fate awaits philosophers who return to the “cave” of lower level reality, after having experienced the transcendental reality outside: “Coming suddenly out of the sunlight, his eyes would be filled with darkness. He might be required once more to deliver his opinion on those shadows, in competition with the prisoners who had never been released, while his eyesight was still dim and unsteady; and it might take some time to become used to the darkness. They would laugh at him and say that he had gone up only to come back with his sight ruined; it was worth no one’s while even to attempt the ascent. If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him”; *Republic*, chapter xxv, Francis MacDonald Cornford trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 230-31.

enlightened practitioner the Gateway takes on the function of a revolving door. The mystery is that there is no mystery—“being-as-it-is, with nothing extraordinary about it, nothing wonderful, is the great wonder” as Master Sessan states. Or, mystery itself is deconstructed, revealed to be a product of the unawakened mind. Going in and out of the Gate, back and forth between *Nirvāna* and *Samsāra*, is all the same thing, because *Samsāra* is (and always was) *Nirvāna*, and *Nirvāna Samsāra*.

DECONSTRUCTED SEEING

If self-initiation is indeed the characteristic that distinguishes the awakened from the psychotic, then it is crucial to examine precisely how awakening is arrived at. What process is undergone by the enlightened that is lacking in those who spontaneously wander across the boundary? The most recent discussions have concluded that the process of seeing is complex beyond our ability to explain or understand it fully.⁸ As physicist and Nobel Laureate Francis Crick describes it, “seeing is a constructive process, meaning that the brain does not passively record the incoming visual information. It actively seeks to interpret it. . . . What you see is not what is really there; it is what your brain believes is there.”⁹

The survival value of such interpretive constructions has been recognized as early as 1739 by Scottish philosopher **David Hume** in his groundbreaking critique of metaphysics and epistemology, *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Hume’s analysis casts doubt not only on the efficacy of reason, but also on the materialist basis of modern science.

We suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions. . . . We never can conceive any thing but perceptions, and therefore must make every thing resemble them. . . . ‘Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and ‘tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses.

Hume ultimately takes refuge in imagination and the natural force of “Custom” (roughly equivalent to instinct), declaiming, “Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy.” Note the sharp contrast with the

⁸ See Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), chapter 3, “Seeing,” pp. 23-33.

⁹ Crick, pp. 30-31.

Buddhist recommendation of “mindfulness” (*dhyāna*), the very essence of Chan!¹⁰

But what would it be like to forego the filtering interpretative process, penetrating to the very root of reality? Let us compare attempts by Western logicians on the one hand and a Chan Master on the other to invoke uninterpreted “seeing” versus “seeing as.” First the logicians, elaborating the epistemological bottom line or “ultimate evidence” of observation as linguistically communicated:

I may see the dean of the law school mail a birthday check to his daughter in Belgium. Saying so in these terms does not qualify as an observation sentence. If on the other hand I describe the same event by saying that I saw a stout man with a broad face, a gray moustache, rimless spectacles, a Homburg hat, and a walking stick putting a small white flat flimsy object into a slot of a mailbox, this is an observation sentence . . . any second witness would be bound to agree with me on all points then and there, granted merely an understanding of my language.¹¹

Despite all their efforts **Quine and Ullian** have failed to deconstruct a number of culturally-encoded elements in their allegedly pristine observation sentence. These include “spectacles,” “Homburg hat,” “walking stick,” and “mailbox,” each of which could be further reduced to fundamental sensory data the way the birthday check being mailed was reduced to “a small white flimsy object.” The authors also claim there is a limit to epistemological explorations: “when we get down to our own direct observation, there is nowhere deeper to look.”¹²

¹⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888, rpt. 1975), pp. 216-218. As has often been noted, Hume’s philosophical questionings led him to the same conclusion as had been reached by Buddhist philosophers more than two thousand years earlier regarding the constructive nature of the self. Ironically this view is only now being revived as a new and unprecedented “astonishing hypothesis” by thinkers such as Francis Crick, obviously oblivious of the long history of Buddhist thought along these same lines. It is also interesting to note that David Hume is not mentioned by Crick in his work on this topic.

¹¹ W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 23.

¹² Quine and Ullian, p. 21.

Chan epistemology, however, defies this limit, recognizing a profounder level to be accessed once the delusory possessiveness of “our own” observation is stripped away. The result is a radical empiricism, that is, a method of getting to the root of experience. Hence, instructing students in an exercise in “purifying the six senses,” **Master Sheng-yen** states:

The most basic training for a beginning practitioner is to try to purify the eye consciousness. Sometimes I ask people to look at things, or at people sitting across from them, I ask them to look attentively, but to refrain from identifying or categorizing the object. For example, in observing people, a practitioner tries not to perceive an individual as male or female, stranger or friend. To do this, one must refrain from using one’s memory, ideas, or any previous experience. Like a camera, one must look without discrimination. If one has been practicing well, it is possible to see things in this different way.¹³

Lacking categorizations, the observations gleaned by such practice would be reduced to the most basic form, perception without conceptualization, rare sensory input not processed by the intellect. Accordingly, linguistic expression as an observation would be difficult and misleading, inasmuch as language is based on particular patterns for ordering and conceptualizing data.

Master Sheng-yen reports the behavioral changes wrought in disciples who have applied his method of “pure gazing,” including a man who “became” the trees he was scrutinizing, a monk who saw people imposed upon gravestones, and a nun who tried to return fallen blossoms to their branches. While fully aware that such behavior would be judged bizarre by the uninitiated, Master Sheng-yen argues that appearances can be deceiving in such cases:

Because most of us make discriminations based on our preconceptions, our eye consciousness is static, dull and rigid. Our vision is selective, because of our memories, likes and dislikes. Since our minds are impure, our vision is also impure. If our minds were to become pure, then we could say that our vision would also be pure. What is seen

¹³ Sheng-yen, *The Sword of Wisdom: Lectures on the Song of Enlightenment* (Elmhurst, New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1991), pp. 67-68.

by pure eyes is quite different from what is seen by impure eyes.¹⁴

The oft-repeated mirror analogy is useful here. The pure mind, like the immaculate mirror, reflects a far different image from the mirror beclouded by distorting dust. Even if they are set before the identical scene each mirror will “see” something different. “Reality” is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. The “eye” that does the seeing is the key element: a pure eye renders a pure reality while a clouded eye’s reality is equally beclouded. Master Sheng-yen identifies five such “eyes”:

- (1) Physical eyes we are born with;
- (2) Heavenly eyes acquired through one’s practice . . .
- (3) Wisdom eyes, enabling us to end the cycle of birth and death;
- (4) Dharma eyes, to see Buddha-nature and the Dharma body) . . .
- (5) Buddha eyes, the perfection of the Dharma eyes.¹⁵

Quine and Ullian are restricted to merely the physical eyes (and perhaps the “inner eye” of reason/logic recognized in the Western philosophical tradition at least from the time of Heraclitus in the sixth century b.c.e.).

Given this different, and broader, range of tools available within Buddhism, the range of data acquired is correspondingly broader. As defined within the Buddhist system, these data are not the result of imagination (as in the case of the psychotic), but a stripping away of self-imposed barriers to a holistic vision of reality. To see the forest we must overcome our fixation on the individual trees—although that fixation may itself have “survival value” by narrowing our attention in response to an immediate need¹⁶.

¹⁴ Sheng-yen, p. 69.

¹⁵ Sheng-yen, p. 67.

¹⁶ Crick lists of the genetically-encoded “laws of perception,” pp. 37-39.