The Influence of Chan Buddhism on Zhou Dunyi

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Abstract: As a foundation of Chinese Neo-Confucianism, Zhou Dunyi had exerted a tremendous, profound and far-reaching influence upon the history of Chinese Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties, particularly since the growth of Neo-Confucianism through the efforts of Zhu Xi (1130-1200). Zhou Dunyi’s Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate had been popularized in the Neo-Confucianism. This paper is an integrated study of the influence of Chan Buddhism on Zhou Dunyi, investigating the formation of Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy as influence of Chan Buddhism. The study will be carried out from these main aspects: (1) the Chan Buddhism’s influence on the life of Zhou Dunyi, (2) the relationship between Chan Buddhism and Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy of the Book of Changes.

Introduction

As one of the major schools of Chinese Buddhism, Chan Buddhism had exerted a tremendous and far-reaching influence in the history of Chinese culture. In particular, since the injection of fresh vitality into Chan Buddhism by the Southern School that was established by Huineng (638-713) in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Chan Buddhism had been popularized in the Buddhist community and hence popularized in China. It has become an inseparable part of Chinese culture, and it has exerted a deep influence upon the mentality of the entire Chinese population, among them is included Zhou Dunyi’s (1017-1073) ideology of the “Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate.”

The Practice of Chan Buddhism

The fact that Zou Dunyi practiced Chan Buddhism is found in a great deal of literature, which includes Confucian literature, historical literature and Buddhist literature. Evidence of this is in Passing Down the Light to Laity (Jushi fendeng lu) which reads as follows:

Zhou Dunyi had said: “This marvelous mind of mine, was edified by Venerable Huanglong, and was enlightened by Venerable Foyin. In addition, without Dong Lin’s help and training, I would not have been able to completely understand the Book of Changes.”[1]

“Huang Long” was Chan Master “Huanglong Huinan” (1002-1069) a founder of the Huang Long Chan Buddhist School which is one school of the Linji Chan Buddhist Schools. The most important of Huang Long’s teachings is “Huang Long Three Steps,” namely “the arising of dukkha,” “human body and Buddha body,” human life and animal life. When people asked him Dharma, Huang Long tested them with the above three issues.

“Foyin” was “Foyin Liaoyuan” (1019-1098) who was a Chan Master of the Yunmen School during the Song Dynasty. He learned the Analects of Confucius (Lunyu) when he was only two years old. Later he became a Buddhist monk at Baoji Monastery, and then went to Kaixian Monastery, which is located at Lu Shan Mountain in Zhangxi Province when he was nineteen. He lived at Cheng Tian Monastery since he was twenty-eight. Master Fo Yin was good at poetry and Chinese calligraphy, so Song Dynasty personages such as Su Shi (1037-1101), Huang Shangu etc. all had a profound friendship with him. In order to show him his respect, Shen Zong (1048-1085) who was an emperor of the Song Dynasty presented him with the name “Fo Yin” which means Buddha Seal [2].
“Dong Lin” was “Dong Lin Chang Cong Ming” (1025-1091) who was a disciple of Huang Long, and lived at Donglin Monastery in Lu Shan Mountain. A Precious Biography of Chan Monastic Sangha (Chanlin sengbao zhuan) mentions that when he was teaching Chan Buddhism at Donglin Monastery, scholars from all over the world attended his lectures to follow him.

In this quoted passage, Zhou Dunyi himself admitted that he was influenced by Chan Buddhism. In fact, in the Song Dynasty, Chan Buddhism had become a “common teaching” for the various Buddhist schools. Chan Buddhism had also integrated with the indigenous culture of China, and it had exerted direct or indirect influence upon Chinese politics, culture, art, science and technology, architecture and even the mentality of the entire Chinese population. It had become an inseparable part of the indigenous culture of China. Hence, as a famous scholar of the Song Dynasty, it is impossible that Chan Buddhism did not affect Zhou Dunyi. But how far did Chan Buddhism influence Zhou Dunyi? Another program in Passing Down the Light to Laity (Jushi fendeng lu) as well as in Buddhist Literature (Shishi zijian) reads,

Venerable Foyin Liaoyuan was living in Luanxi, Zhou Dunyi paid his respects to him and asked: “Fate is called ‘intrinsic nature;’ to act according to conscience is called the Way (dao). Why does Chan Buddhism call ‘without mind’ the Way? Liao Yuan replied, “If you are in doubt, don’t practice it.” Zhou Dunyi said, “When I practice Chan, I am not ‘without mind’. What is the Way after all?” Liao Yuan answered: “You can see the green mountains all around you when you want.” Zhou Dunyi suddenly attained enlightenment.

One day, he saw the grass growing luxuriantly outside of his window, and said: “It is just like my thoughts.” He wrote Liao Yuan a poem, “I have never been unenlightened and have not attained enlightenment. My mind and environment meld into one. The grass is deep and the pine tree outside my window is the Way. It lets people never tire of looking at it.”[3]

From this program it would appear that Zhou Dunyi not only practiced Chan but also attained Enlightenment. Chan Buddhism places emphasis upon attaining Enlightenment and Buddhahood through spiritual practice based on one’s original pure mind. The most prominent example is Chan Buddhism’s advocacy of “one’s mind is the Buddha.” According to Chan Buddhism, whether sentient beings can attain Buddhahood or not depends upon their thoughts. Hui-neng said, “By being deluded in preceding thoughts, one is an ordinary, unenlightened person; by being enlightened in subsequent thoughts, one becomes a Buddha. The Buddha is in the mind, not outside the mind. What is important is to put effort into cultivating “one’s own mind.”[4] Hui-neng also said, “Buddhahood is attained within one’s nature; do not seek it outside oneself.”[5] It is thus clear that an important characteristic of Chan Buddhism is the interpretation of Buddha-nature as being in the mind. In the passage quoted above, the sentence, “You can see the green mountains all around you when you want.” which Chan Master Foyin Liaoyuan said in answer to Zhou Dunyi, means that Buddha is in the mind, not outside the mind, what is important is to make an effort to cultivate “Zhou Dunyi’s own mind.” What the enlightened Zhou Dunyi attained was recognition of Buddha-nature as his own, original mind. The subject of the poem he wrote to Liao Yuan Foyin describes the Buddha-nature in his mind. Because Zhou Dunyi has recognized Buddha-nature as being his mind, to him the pine tree which was in front of his window was the Dharma, as well as his mind, because all objects are harmonious.

For more information about Zhou Dunyi’s Chan Buddhist ideology we can look at Buddhist Literature (Shishi zijian) which reads:

Zhou Dunyi wrote a poem…, Master responded to him with a poem, “The essence of the great Dharma exists universally; it is not only in beasts, plants or beings which fly or dive. It can be seen walking or sitting. One who sees it by object or voice, is unenlightened.” Hence, (Zhou Dunyi) invited master to occupy the presidency of the Institute of the Green Pine Tree.[6]

Here, the “Master” is Foyin. This poem described the essence of the Dharma, which is self-nature. All human beings have self-nature, but it was hidden because of the arising of dukkha (Dukkhasamudaya-arippayasacca) which includes ignorance, thirst, desire, greed, craving etc. It is this dukkha which produces re-existence and re-becoming. What the subject of this poem is pointing at is Zhou Dunyi’s mind, and Foyin shows Zhou Dunyi the way that leads to the cessation of dukkha.
According to Chan Buddhism self-nature can be realized in this very life, so in his poem Master Foyin said that, “it can be seen by walking or sitting.” Self-nature is beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore beyond our conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence. Even the word “happiness” (sukha) which is used to describe self-nature has an entirely different sense here. Hence, in the end of the poem, Master Foyin said, “one who sees it by object or voice, is unenlightened.”

**Relationship between Chan Buddhism and Philosophy of the Book of Changes**

In Buddhist Literature (Shishi zijian), The Collection of Zhou Lianxi (Zhoulian xiji) and Records of Helin Temple (Helin sizhi), we also can find some passages, discussing a relationship between Chan Buddhism and Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy of the Book of Changes, which reads:

Zhou Dunyi always says, “The essence of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra is just the Confucian Quiet Hexagram (Gen Hexagram 艮卦). Oh! The essence of the sixty-four hexagrams (六十四卦) of the Book of Changes is The Quiet Hexagram. The Quiet Hexagram is mountains, one over the other, which denotes stopping.” [7]

It is evident that Zhou Dunyi used the ideology of The Book of Changes to explain Buddhism. But what he used is Lianshan (Connecting Mountain 连山), which is the The Book of Changes of the Xia Dynasty (about 21st century BC to the 17th century BC). In Lianshan the first hexagram is The Quiet Hexagram which means one mountain over another mountain. The explanation of The Quiet Hexagram reads:

When one’s resting is like that of the back, and he loses all consciousness of self; when he walks in his courtyard, and does not see any of the persons in it, — there will be no error. [8]

This denotes resting (or stopping) when it is the time to rest, and acting when it is the time to act. When one’s movements and resting all take place at the proper time for them, his way of proceeding is brilliant and intelligent. The similarities between The Quiet Hexagram and the Lotus Sutra are striking. The fact that Zhou Dunyi used Lian Shan ideology to explain Buddhism, shows that Buddhism influenced Zhou Dunyi’s The Book of Changes ideology.

In addition, the inscription called “A Statement on the Causes and Conditions behind the Rise and Fall of Helin Temple” (Helin si xingfei yuanqi shuo) states:

“It was Master Shouya of the Song dynasty who skillfully transmitted the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate to Mr. Lianxi. This relationship originated at the Yinjian Pond. The Love of Lotus Pond was beside the temple and there was pavilion built in it called the Study Area…an inscription of this was carved on a stone tablet for future visitors to research.” [9]

This tablet still survives intact in Helin Temple today. Its inscriptions are 799 Chinese characters, which are still clear and capable of being read. This has been a hidden source ready for researchers to discover, investigate and examine. The end of this inscription which states, “An inscription of this was carved on a stone tablet for future visitors to research” was inscribed by Shi Chenxian. Although the exact date of the inscription is unknown, based on the description of the people and events, such as the names of the donors and what they donated to rebuild the temple, we can come to realize that the tablet was established during the Ming dynasty. In 2006, editors Bai Huawen and Zhang Zhi, collected the inscription for publication in the Records of Helin Temple. [10]

The inscription identifies an important event in the history of Chinese philosophy. It shows that Chan Master Shouya taught Lianxi at the “Study Area” (dushu chu), a pavilion in the Loving Lotus Pond beside the temple and that master Shouya actually did transmit the Supreme Ultimate to Lianxi (Zhou Dunyi) at this Yinjian Pond. Moreover, as evidence, this site has survived and still exists at Helin Temple today.

After studying the Supreme Ultimate and practicing Chan with Shouya, Lianxi incorporated Chan Buddhist philosophy into Confucianism to develop the Supreme Ultimate. Through the interaction of Chan Buddhism, Confucianism and The Book of Changes, he established his Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate (taiji tu), which indicates that “ultimateless” is also the Supreme Ultimate. It also indicates that the Supreme Ultimate, through movement, produces the yang and through
quiescence produces yin. The alternation of yin and yang is called the Way (dao). The yang principle is hard (gang); the yin principle is soft (rou). Heaven gives birth to all things by means of yang, and gives completion to all things by means of yin. The act of giving birth is one of love, and that of giving completion is one of righteousness. Therefore the sage, from his station on high, uses love to rear all things, and righteousness to remedy all people. Such work by Lianxi provided beneficial inspiration and experience for the development of Confucianism in the Song dynasty.

Lianxi’s concepts most certainly originated with both the Supreme Ultimate and Chan Buddhism as taught by Chan Master Shouya at Helin Temple. In order to memorialize this historical and cultural event, after Lianxi died, a memorial hall called Lianxi Shrine (lian xi ci) was built beside the Loving Lotus Pond where he used to study with Shouya and wrote his famous poem Verses on Love of Lotus (Ailian shuo) at Helin Temple. Xu Dayong of the Northern Song dynasty wrote a memorial inscription to record the events at Lianxi Shrine entitled, A Testimony of the Master Lianxi Shrine (lianxi xiansheng ciji). Wang Yinglin (1223-1296) wrote A Record of Rebuilding the Lianxi Shrine and Jitian Tablet (Chongjian lianxici bing jitianbei ji). Not only have both these two inscriptions survived in the Records of Helin Temple, but also Wang Yinglin’s tablet has survived at Helin Temple as well. All these sources show once and again that Chan Master Shouya was truly a member of the Supreme Ultimate lineage and transmitted the Supreme Ultimate to Lianxi. This fact, well-known to Helin Temple monastics, has not been discovered by most of researchers even though they have worked on the topic of the Supreme Ultimate of Shouya, Shao Yong and Zhou Dunyi.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, based upon the overlooked and significant descriptions of Zhou Dunyi in the Passing Down the Light to Laity (Jushi fendeng lu), Records of Helin Temple (Helin sizhi), Buddhist Literature (Shishi zijian ) and the Collection of Zhou Lianxi (Zhoulian xiji), which appears to be objective, reliable, equitable and acceptable, it is clear that Zhou Dunyi studied Buddhism and practiced Chan. Chan Buddhism has influenced Zhou Dunyi, including his ways of thinking. The spirit of Chan is shown in almost every well-known Zhou Dunyi’s cultural activity, such as poetry, philosophy of the Book of Changes, Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate and neo-Confucianism, etc.

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**References**

[1,2,3,] Zhu Shien, *Passing Down the Light to Laity (Jushi Fendeng Lu)*, X, vol. 12.


[6,7,8] *Buddhist Literate, (Shishi Zijian)*, X, vol.1.
