**Huineng’s Chan Buddhist Educational Psychological Path of Seeing Self-nature (jianxing)**

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**Abstract.** A significant change of recent times in the field of Western psychology and therapy is introducing Chan Buddhist concept of “seeing self-nature” into psychology and therapy. The aim of “seeing self-nature” is to realize the basic nature of enlightenment in sentient beings through insight into the nature of things. This paper is an integrated study of Huineng’s Chan Buddhist educational psychology: self-cultivation pointing directly at the mind, and the topic of the paper will be carried out from two aspects: 1) the concept of “Buddha nature” and “Prajñā” (the perfection of wisdom) in both *The Platform Sutra* and *Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan)*, and 2) self-cultivation pointing directly at the mind: sudden-enlightenment path of seeing self-nature (jianxing).

**Introduction**

Descriptions of Huineng (638-713) in both *The Platform Sutra* and *Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan)* show that Huineng’s Chan Buddhist core teaching of psychology and therapy is the concept of “seeing self-nature,” which is known as “jianxing” in Chinese, it means realizing the nature of sentient being’s own mind. The principal Buddhist psychological and philosophical foundation of the concept of “seeing self-nature” is the “Buddha nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) and “prajñā” (the perfection of wisdom).

**“Buddha Nature” (Tathāgatagarbha) and “Prajñā”(the Perfection of Wisdom)**

According to both the Dunhuang Library version of the Dunhuang *Platform Sutra* and *Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan)*, Huineng was born into the Lu family in 638 in Lingnan, Guangdong. Soon afterwards his family moved to Nanhai. In his youth, he supported his mother and himself by selling firewood in the market place. He did not have the chance to learn to read and write.

He was selling firewood one day, when he happened to see a man who was reciting the *Vajracchedikā praṇāpāramitāsūtra (Diamond Sutra)*. Upon hearing it his mind became clear and he was awakened. The man told Huineng that the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren (602-675), was teaching the Dharma at East Mountain Fengmu in Huangmei, and that Hongren encouraged the monks and lay followers there by telling them that if they recited just one volume of the *Vajracchedikā praṇāpāramitāsūtra (Diamond Sutra)*, they would be able to see into their own natures and with direct awareness become a Buddha. Therefore, Huineng made up his mind to make obeisance to the Fifth Patriarch and study the Dharma.

According to *Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan)*, in the first year of Xianheng (670) of the Tang dynasty, Huineng passed through Caoxi of Shanzhou on his way to Huangmei and met Liu Zhilue (date uncertain) there. They became close friends. Liu Zhilue’s aunt was a nun. Her Dharma name was Wujinzang, and she recited parts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra (Daban niepan jing)* everyday. Descriptions of Huineng in *Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan)* show that Huineng always listened to her reciting the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* at night. In spite of the fact that he could not read, he was intelligent and could completely understand the meaning of the text. The nun, Wujinzang, was surprised and asked him how he could understand the meaning without being able to read. Huineng replied that...
understanding the teaching of Buddha nature was perception and not letters. Huineng later studied and practiced Chan with both Ven. Yuan and Huiji, northern Shaoguan Lechang monks.

It is thus clear that Huineng had been exposed to the teachings of both Buddha nature (tathāgatagarbha) and prajñāpāramitā (the perfection of wisdom) before he became the Fifth Patriarch’s disciple to study Chan Buddhism.

According to Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan) and the Platform Sutra, after travelling for over eight months, Huineng arrived at Huangmei. At his first interview, when answering the Fifth Patriarch’s question, “How could a barbarian of Lingnan expect to be a Buddha?” [1] Huineng answered, “Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north or south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian body and yours are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?” [2]

Huineng’s answer meant that all sentient beings possess Buddha nature and thus are guaranteed the realization of Buddhahood. All sentient beings are promised that Buddhahood awaits them. Buddha nature is the foundation of Huineng’s sudden enlightenment teaching.

Since Huineng’s answer apparently met Hongren’s standards of what constitutes the right answer, he was then ordered to join the others in work. A description of Huineng in Wang Wei’s (701-761) “Inscription of Chan Master Huineng” (Liuzu Huineng chanshi bei) of the Complete Collection in Tang Dynasty Literature (Quantang wen) shows that when Hongren taught the Dharma and Huineng quietly joined classes with concentration and outside of class reflected and practiced it. He cleansed his mind and retired in the state of no-thought, non-form and non-abiding [3]. This inscription which was written to express Huineng’s contribution to the Chan Buddhist tradition shows that during his eight months stay in Huangmei, Huineng not only practiced but also studied Buddha nature and prajñāpāramitā doctrines [4]. Obviously, the sudden enlightenment Chan idea of Huineng depends upon these doctrines, although it underlines itself as being independent of words and letters. The Chan of Huineng was made up of a combination of Buddha nature and prajñāpāramitā doctrines. This can be expressed in the following verse attributed to him,

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?

The mind is the Bodhi tree,
The body is the mirror stand.
The mirror is originally clean and pure;
Where can it be stained by dust? [5]

From Huineng’s experiences mentioned above, we can see that Huineng had studied and practiced the teachings of Buddha nature and prajñā during the early part of his life. Allegedly, he was good at intertwining the value of Buddha nature and prajñā, and used it in everyday life to seek liberation from suffering, to see into the true nature of things and to attain enlightenment. He was accepted as a disciple of Hongren at his first interview because of his perfect understanding of the meaning of Buddha nature, and the Dharma of Sudden Enlightenment and the robe was later transmitted to him because he incorporated both the essence of Buddha nature and prajñā into his verse. He realized the true nature of mind. Huineng transmitted the Dharma of Sudden enlightenment at Caoxi for nearly forty years.

The surviving Platform Sutra and Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan) are records and collections of Huineng’s life and teachings. These show that from the very beginning he was invited to give Dharma lectures on prajñā at Shaozhou Dafan Temple. At a later period he transmitted the Dharma to his disciples on different occasions. He mainly used the teachings of Buddha nature and prajñā to guide his disciples to realize their minds and for seeing their self nature.
Seeing Self-nature (jianxing)

Descriptions of Huineng in both The Platform Sutra and Another Biography of Master Caoxi (Caoxi dashi biezhuan) show that while he returned to southern China to teach the Dharma that when he referred to Buddha nature he would seldom use the Buddhist philosophical term “Buddha nature,” but instead used Chan Buddhist psychological terms “original mind” (benxin), “original nature” (benxing), “self-nature” (zixing) and “own mind” (zixin). Evidence of this is found in The Platform Sutra,

The deluded recommend the gradual method, the enlightened practice the sudden teaching. To understand the original mind of yourself is to see into your own original nature. Once enlightened, there is from the outset no distinction between these two methods; those who are not enlightened will for long kalpas be caught in the cycle of transmigration.

“Thought” means thinking of the original nature of True Reality. True Reality is the substance of thoughts; thoughts are the function of True Reality. If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although you see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments, and are always free. [6]

In these quotations, the terms “mind,” “original mind,” “nature,” “original nature” and “self-nature” are used to refer to Buddha nature. Moreover, descriptions of Buddha nature in The Platform Sutra show that of all these terms, “self-nature” is used on most occasions. An important characteristic of Huineng’s Chan Buddhist psychology was the interpretation of Buddha nature as being in the mind. The universe in its entirety is regarded by Huineng as constituting single absolute mind, known as the Tathāgatagarbha, Buddha-dhātu or Bhūtatathatā (genuine suchness). These ideas were further interpreted in the Zongbao version of The Platform Sutra as follows,

“Who would have thought,” I said to the Patriarch, “That the Essence of Mind is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the Essence of Mind!”

“Knowing that I had realized the Essence of Mind, the Patriarch said, ‘For him who does not know his own mind there is no use learning Buddhism. On the other hand, if he knows his own mind and sees intuitively his own nature, he is a Hero, a Teacher of gods and men, Buddha.’”[7]

The original Chinese term zixing is often translated as the “Essence of Mind” or “self-nature.” Thus, all things (dharmas) depend upon mind to have their being, and take mind as their substance. This “mind has two aspects: one is the aspect of mind in terms of absolute”[8] (Bhūtatathatā, genuine suchness), which is regarded as, “self-nature” (zixing) by Huineng; “the other is the aspect of mind in terms of phenomena (samsara, the cycle of birth and death).”[9] All things (dharmas) that are the manifestation of the absolute mind (Bhūtatathatā, genuine suchness) are all void and illusory, and their being is not real being. In spite of the fact that they are really non existent, they have the appearance of undergoing generation and destruction because of illusory causation.

According to Chinese Mahāyāna texts, he Buddha of the past, present and future (three ages), together with sentient beings, all equally have one pure mind as their substance. All things, both ordinary and saintly, each have their own differences and diverse appearances, whereas this genuine mind is devoid of either diversity or appearance [10]. That is why it was termed “self-nature” or “zixing” of all things by Huineng at the moment when Hongren expounded the Diamond Sutra to him. He suddenly enlightened and realized that all things in the universe are the self-nature of sentient being’s mind itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Huineng’s Chan Buddhist educational psychological concept of “seeing self-nature” takes “Buddha nature” (tathāgatagarbha) and the perfection of wisdom (prajñā) as its foundation. Huineng interpreted Buddha nature as self-nature being in the sentient being’s mind, according to this interpretation, the sudden-enlightenment path of seeing self-nature had become directed at the mind, taking its fundamental duty to be the purification of the human mind, making
the social customs simple and sincere, and assisting in edification. This is the reason why Chan Buddhism has been able to adapt constantly to the trends in all times and constantly achieve development; also the reason why Western psychologists introduced Chan Buddhism into psychology and therapy.

Abbreviation


References


