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Onto-Epistemology of Sudden Enlightenment in Chan Buddhism

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Summary

For the purpose of understanding the nature and meaning of “enlightenment” in the Chan/Zen philosophy, it is first necessary to distinguish four levels of human knowledge and see how Chan enlightenment (Chanwu 禪悟) occupies the deepest level of knowledge. Then it is also necessary to see how the Chan Buddhist would argue for the import and necessity of the Chanist enlightenment within the Buddhist tradition and hence how the Chan enlightenment would stand out as a necessary form of human experience which is unique, yet could be universal. Finally, we could see how one may even bring out a hidden dimension of the Chan enlightenment to bear on the problem of life in order to make the

Chan enlightenment more significant for a modern human being in his or her struggle with modernity. In connection with this uncovering of the dimensions of the Chan enlightenment, we will come to see how the Chan philosophy of enlightenment could evolve into a post-modern form of spirituality as self-consciously rooted in the rich tradition of Chinese philosophy.

關鍵詞：1.Ontology 2.Self-knowledge 3.Chan
4.Sudden-enlightenment

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I. Knowing Oneself in an Age of Automata

We know that knowledge makes a difference to life. But how great is the difference? When someone has knowledge of a factual situation, even though he could pretend not to know and therefore not to disclose the fact what the situation is, he cannot eliminate what he knows in his mind and says to himself that he did not know. He could of course genuinely wish that he did not know that so that he need not pretend his ignorance. Still he could not hide from himself the fact that he does know or did know. The consequence of his knowledge may not be simply limited to some regrettable burden in his wishful thinking that he did not know, for he could even have to bear the blame of his conscience in his not telling the truth, particularly when not telling the truth has very serious consequence for himself and others. We agree that not all kinds of knowledge make the same degree of indelible imprint on a person. Thus merely knowing arithmetic or having common sense knowledge of health care needs not change an educated person for the better or for the worse in his expectation to live an average form of life in a community. But when he becomes more specialized in a field of knowledge, he would normally live up to a higher standard in some area which his knowledge commands. In other words, a mathematician is expected to be precise in his work on mathematics, and his math expertise would lead to a habit of seeking precision in his activities in life. Similarly, a musician who knows music may bring a musical element to

his life, just like a medical doctor would be more likely to be more medically conscious in his daily living.

But then the question can be raised as to whether knowledge as a specialization would resolve grave and deep doubts of life when a person faces difficult problems of life, such as problems involving choices of life and death, one's self-knowledge or self-understanding, faith in other people or oneself, meaning of life and

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existence, valuation of love, moral action and sacrifice, suffering and evil, loss and great change of life, old age, death and after-death. These are not simple matters of knowledge, not knowledge of fact nor knowledge of skill, not even knowledge of common morality. It is not a matter of technology of knowledge nor knowledge of technology; no scientific knowledge or technology would answer questions of self-knowledge even though it may try to reduce the concept of self and self-knowledge to a theory of brain and ultimately to a theory of neurons. But given such a reduction, there could not be self-knowledge as one would want to call self-knowledge.[\[1\]](#)

There is no denial that science and technology may change the conditions of human life to such an extent that questions of meaning and significance of life and death would not arise in the human person. Then the humankind would lead a life without an internal (or self-oriented) quest for a meaning of life, without internal quest for the meaning of the ultimate reality and without an internal quest for explanation of science and technology. In short, the human person would lead a life without inner content and self-reflection. But then under these circumstances would we still want to call that life a human life?

It is clear that the fast development of science and technology in the twentieth century tends to transform humankind into a society of intelligent automata, to be willingly or unwillingly controlled and conditioned by machines and computers. One already sees the powerful impact and grip of TVs and computers and Internet on both adults and children. Because of this powerful influence of these gadgets, talented minds are allured to spend their best minds and time on inventing more of the same for the consumers in the market. Human society becomes a huge market and daily life

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becomes a game. Individuals become players on a board of life-game as designed and controlled by commercial designers and hungry power—and/or money—mongers. This form of life, as we witness, has led to a counter revolution in the revival of religions, often resulting in short-lived self-defeating cults. But these phenomena nevertheless amply show that human life and human minds cannot be satisfied with the mechanization, commercialization and automatization of human life and human intelligence as human beings still wish to live as human beings. Hence there could be a revival of a genuine religion for the spirit and self-knowledge of the human person.

What then is the revival of a genuine religion? It is the revival of a quest for a consciousness of reality beyond depictions by science and technology. It is even more the revival of a mind for an understanding of the mind or the human self so that the human being could reach peace and harmony in his heart and mind. It is a quest for a humanity which would testify to the truth of love, compassion, justice and self-fulfilment.

It is interesting to note that science and technology and hence scientific knowledge need not be used for transforming human and humanity into computer-controlled entities. Instead science and technology could produce more time and space for human beings to seek self-understanding and self-knowledge. If this is made possible, there would be then no conflict between scientific knowledge and self-knowledge which goes beyond scientific knowledge and which would not be reduced and not reducible to scientific knowledge nor to technological control. This is indeed possible if the human self could define for himself a reality which would define himself, and at the same time define his self for a reality beyond science and technology, a self which could make science and technology possible and yet not be confined nor manipulated by science and technology. This requires that the human self sets himself free from what binds him and sets him free

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at any time when he feels he is not free. Specifically, this requires him to set

himself free from scientific and technological reality at any time and yet at the same time be also able to make use of science and technology for seeking self-knowledge which would transcend science and technology. It would be in this sense that we can say that a human can be self-fulfilled in his seeking a freedom which opens to a new world of reality of his own. In this sense we can say that his scientific rationality has brought in his spiritual rationality. It is also in this sense that we can say that his spirituality or spiritual rationality has made his scientific rationality possible, just as his scientific rationality brings back his self-consciousness of spiritual rationality.

It is in the light of this need for a spiritual self-making of a human, this need for an inner turn toward self-understanding of human personhood, that an antecedent emancipation from scientific knowledge is desirable and that the destined zest for “enlightenment” (wu 悟) in the Chan/Zen philosophy or religion makes most sense, and it would render the humankind the most needed help in his ever present predicament of self-bondage.

For the purpose of understanding the nature and meaning of “enlightenment” in the Chan/Zen philosophy, it is first necessary to distinguish four levels of human knowledge and see how Chan enlightenment (Chanwu 禪悟) occupies the deepest level of knowledge. Then it is also necessary to see how the Chan Buddhist would argue for the import and necessity of the Chanist enlightenment within the Buddhist tradition and hence how the Chan enlightenment would stand out as a necessary form of human experience which is unique, yet could be universal. Finally, we could see how one may even bring out a hidden dimension of the Chan enlightenment to bear on the problem of life in order to make the Chan enlightenment more significant for a modern human being in his or her struggle with modernity. In connection with this uncovering of the dimensions of the Chan enlightenment, we will

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come to see how the Chan philosophy of enlightenment could evolve into a post-modern form of spirituality as self-consciously rooted in the rich tradition of Chinese philosophy.

II. Four Levels of Knowledge and Knowing

If we use the term “knowledge” and the term “to know” in a common sense and cross-age sense, we can see that knowledge is more or less a reason and cause for action and decision making, and therefore basically practical. Knowing, in other words, is rooted as a function of human activity in a human's effort to survive and to seek self-fulfilment. It is factually true that both the survival and the well-being by self-fulfillment of a human being depends on his ability to know and also the knowledge that he has already developed. In this sense of knowledge we can categorize four types of knowledge and rank them as four levels depending on how much each contributes to the physical survival and spiritual fulfilment of a human being.

The first type of knowledge is that which one normally receives and accepts very quickly, and also that which would normally be taken for granted as reporting and hence reflecting an on-going reality of facts and events as already understood by a community of people. This is knowledge in the form of information or information given the form of knowledge. Information in other words consists of sensory data or statements from a language which convey to people what subject matter is presented and communicated so that people can use the information for serving whatever purpose they wish to serve. The information that there was a war in South America may caution people against going to South America, but it may also present an opportunity for war fortune makers. It is also true that information could have any content, whether scientific knowledge, philosophical wisdom, or heresy superstition, and therefore is subject to a critical examination regarding its true content and true value. But this merely says that information is

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not knowledge in any deeper sense; it is a set of data of any kind that is given the form of knowledge. Hence it is knowledge on the surface of human communication and is circulated on the surface of human communication.

Once we take the true content of information seriously, we come to the notion of knowledge as truth. But here again the concept of truth needs to be understood as referring to an objective world so that our knowledge could be said to be knowledge of an objective world and hence to be warranted by reference to an objective world. It is in trying to determine how the objective world functions that science develops and it develops by way of the scientific methodology of hypothesis-making, deduction and verification or confirmation. It is clear that we cannot be said to know an objective state of the world if we cannot verify or confirm our knowledge by reference to the objective world. Without going into details of the methods for scientific inquiry, it suffices to say that all scientific knowledge makes claims regarding reference to the objective world and therefore always tells us what things are and how they behave.

In order to focus on to or pin down the true nature of an objective world, the overt material objects become reduced to atoms and atoms reduced to subatomic particles and their quantum motion. Hence we can talk about all the basic material elements as constructed or discovered by physics and chemistry. This mode of knowing no doubt has its strong merits and value and thus commands the most wide and most serious acceptance among human beings because it gives us technology to control our environment, to produce things we need and like, and to make our basic comforts better and richer in their content. It is in fact now the most dominating form of knowledge which transforms societies and humanities into something very different from any time in the past. It has also transformed the humankind into not being able to see the relevance of any knowledge on a deeper level.

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The third level of knowledge is knowledge of people or other human beings in the sense of inter subjective understanding of people and other human beings. In traditional Western epistemology, knowing others' minds is always a thorny problem for justification. The skeptic can always raise questions on how one could perceive what others perceive and experience what others experience. It is clear that any such perception or experience must be analogical, because they must be drawn on the basis of observable similarities in bodily behaviors. But the fact is that we do seem to feel what

others feel, and the language of pain and pleasure does make genuine common sense. The reason for this is that we could directly project (not infer) our own feelings and understanding of others under normal circumstances if there is no evidence to the contrary. Similarly, other people could project their feelings about us and their perception of us in so far as there is no reason for us to object or disagree.

In other words, we come to know other people's minds by an interaction process of projection of feelings and understanding between ourselves (or myself) and others. This interaction process can be a generalized one or a constructed one from our common experience of actual interactions between myself and others, and hence it need not be attributed to any specific real person. This is why we could feel deeply moved by fictitious characters and human episodes in a story or novel. The reason is that we can deeply feel our own emotions through them. This is called the inter subjective understanding of people. On this level of knowledge, it is clear that our knowledge is not a matter of knowing people as objects, but knowing objects as people. It is a knowledge which deeply involves us as people.

Now we come to the fourth level of knowledge which we may refer to as self-reflective knowledge of myself or simply as self-knowledge. When Socrates admonishes his disciples to know themselves, he is taking an ancient Orphic wisdom seriously. For

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to know oneself is to reflect on and therefore to assess oneself as a knower and also as an agent who could do harm or achieve good. It is to ask what the ultimate basis of one's knowledge and action is, and also to ask oneself to be responsible in one's self-knowledge, for one's well being and for the well being of others. As knowledge is an internal state of mind, one would come to know whether one knows or not relative to a subject matter by reflection and self-examination. In such reflection and examination one may discover that one does not really know, because one would be conscious of certain criteria of knowledge such as derived from scientific knowledge of objects and inter subjective understanding of people or even from the available information in the community.

When a man knows and also knows that he knows, his knowledge in the first order becomes more certified and critical as it is certified by his second-order knowledge. If a person knows and yet does not know that he knows, what he knows may not be knowledge and therefore one comes to see or know that one is in fact ignorant in those relevant subject matter. But even if one knows that one does not know, he still has a knowledge about himself which is useful for deciding his actions. That is that he knows that he does not know.

In the case of discovering one's ignorance one only comes to examine the content of one's knowledge. One has not come to examine what the mind or the self which knows is. What do we know about the subject-knower which is the elusive I? This I-self or I-subject or mind is not only intimately linked to my knowing activities, but to my other kinds of activities such as feeling, willing and acting. Here we see that the I-subject is no object and therefore cannot be examined like an object. Nor is it to be projected in my understanding as I feel or perceive it to be. It would be too arbitrary to do so. Kant has developed his epistemology of the transcendental ego in terms of his analysis of our intuitive experience of time and space and our

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conceptualization of objects as revealed in common experience and classical physics. But this is clearly not a reflective knowledge of the acting self, the knowing self or the willing self. In the sense that the thing-in-itself is not knowable as we do not have a prior concept of it like we have in the concepts of objects. So, similarly the I-subject is not knowable and therefore remain as a thing-in-itself. In short, there is no prior concept of the I-subject which is capable of being subject to a conceptual analysis. What then is the I-subject? Can we come to know it? If we can, how do we come to know it? If we do come to know it, what would be the form or nature of this knowledge? What would be the consequence of this knowledge?

So far I have not seen any Western sources for answering these questions, not even any direct confrontation with these questions. Although Plato has a mystic answer in identifying the knowing subjects with soul-substance, there is no justification of such identification except by separating mind from body. But in doing so, one is to conceive mind as another kind of body-like substance which however is not subject to the worldly laws of

nature and which belongs to a world of after-life or before-life. Since then, the Western psychology has been based on this or similar concepts of self as substance. In recent years, we have structural analysis of the self in modern psychology. In philosophy there is also the strong trend to identify the I-subject with the mind and the mind with the brain. In this trinity of I-subject, mind and brain, it is the brain that is identified as the defining character of both mind and the I-subject. The mind is the subjective feel of the brain activity, whereas the I-subject is simply the focus of such activity in a brain individuated in a specific time and space.[2] This is nevertheless a subtle form of reductionism, for it amounts to denying any creative

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or initiative function of either mind or the I-subject.

However, this reductionism is not totally out of place if we realize that it is also intended not to explain what the mind and the I-subject are, but also intended to explain how the mind or the I-subject arise as a phenomenon. Hence the theory of “supervenience” is born. The supervenience theory explains mind and thus the I-subject as the emergent quality of the brain which comes into existence when the brain has developed to a certain marginal level of sophistication and complexity.[3] This however remains a tendentious and tempting hypothesis, but there is no scientific verification of such emergence nor a clear self-verifying instance of supervenience of mind and the I-subject. In normal circumstances, as long as we are given a brain, we are also given a mind and an I-subject. The brain and the mind or the I-subject co-rise and co-exist as two correlates as posited by Descartes. Perhaps more studies of child psychology, animal psychology, schizophrenia and other pathological cases of brain damage would shed more light of the formation of the “supervenient” mind and the I-subject in the future.

Given the present state of knowledge from the third level and the fourth level points of view, it appears that it is in only the experience of “sudden enlightenment” (dunwu 頓悟) in the Chan philosophy that a profound answer could be found regarding the question of what the I-subject is or what the mind of a person is. On answering this question, all other related questions will be also answered. We may call knowledge of this sort the fifth level of knowledge.

III. Beyond the Fourth Level: Distinctive Chan Enlightenment Perspective

The Chan school is a separate transmission (from the Buddha), that is to say different from the regular Buddhist schools of teaching. It does not establish itself in words or language. It directly points to the original mind. (On attaining enlightenment via this), one would immediately become a Buddha.

Although these words from the earliest Chan historical account *Jingde Records of the Transmission of Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu* 《景德傳燈錄》) in the Song Period concerning the essence of Chan Buddhism has been well-known, how one would take it philosophically remains largely unclear. What is reason for the Chan School to claim direct transmission from the Buddha? The answer is that words of language can never fully and directly embody the living insight of the Buddha concerning his enlightenment, and thus the original insight which goes beyond language should be only transmitted beyond language and preserved in the living spirit and mind of an enlightened master. This also means that the actual experience of enlightenment of a master is the most important benchmark of the Buddhistic wisdom.

Set in a historical framework, Buddha was said to have shown a flower to his disciples and in the audience only the disciple Kasyapa smiled. Thus Kasyapa was taken to understand and receive the wisdom of the Buddha at the moment of his smiling and can be said to be the first Buddhist devotee to get suddenly enlightened apart from the Buddha (the Enlightened One). But there is no claim that only transmission from mind to mind is the only legitimate or genuine line of transmission of the Buddhistic insight. To make this claim into a doctrine or a philosophy, one needs to appeal to the Daoistic writings of Laozi, Zhuangzi and Wang Pi for strengthening the point of existential transmission and direct

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communication beyond language. It is indeed an insight to see this being the insight, for the truth is not something which can be pinned down in language, but is something one has to live through. Just as the dao can not be described nor fully identified by language, so it is with the ultimate truth of mind, self and life.

It is clear that even in the Daoist case, language is not totally discarded. Language is recognized to serve a limited purpose of communication or teaching, even though not the purpose of identifying the truth of reality and the truth of the mind or the I-subject. Laozi speaks of the spoken dao as not the constant dao, where as Zhuangzi speaks of the supreme man as having no self (zhiren wuji 至人無己).[4] But on the other hand, even though language serves no positive function of identification, it does serve a negative function of inviting its transcendence so that by transcending language or limits of language one could come to reach the dao or a realization of the self. This Daoist view is well preserved in the Chan philosophy even though the Chan history would not explicitly mention the Daoist connection. What is preserved is the use of the language in whatever way to reach a non-language enlightenment or enlightenment beyond language. This is the way of kung-an (presenting a concrete case for understanding the self and the reality). But what is usually less understood is the existential character for enlightenment which concerns the meaning of “enlightenment.”

Enlightenment is not knowledge on the conceptual level, nor can it be conveyed by descriptive information made available in the community. It is also not the same as understanding by projecting one's feelings and perceptions. It is not about the subject-knower either, for it still does not deal with the deeply layered I-subject behind all the activities of knowing and valuation. On all these

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levels of knowledge as mentioned above, the I-subject does not reveal itself, but instead is assumed a mystery. In enlightenment occurs the revelation of the self as that which knows and feels, even though for the Chan Buddhist the revelation of the self or mind in fact is the revelation of self as no-self or

mind as no-mind. For the self as revealed would not pertain to any knowledge, any desire or any activity. It is as Hui Neng says: a matter of no thought (wunian 無念), no form (wuxiang 無相) and no abiding (wuzhu 無住).[5] As such, if the self is no self, or if the mind is no-mind, what would the self or the mind be? To say that the revealed self or mind is no-self or no-mind is not to say that it is absolutely nothing. It still remains that the no-self self or the no-mind mind does give rise to thoughts, forms and places of abiding for the self or mind in the phenomenal world. That it does give rise to the self or mind in one form or another, in one thought or another, in one abiding or another, bespeaks of the fact that the no-self or no-mind is the reason and ground for the self or mind of the individual person. It is in this light that one may thus speak of the no-self or no-mind of the self or mind as the “self-nature” (zixing 自性) or “original mind” (benxin 本心) of the self or mind.

As self-nature or original mind of self, the no-self or no-mind of the self performs two functions: it dissolves the self or mind into no-self or no-mind in the act of enlightenment, and in the same act of enlightenment it creates the self or mind from no-self or no-mind. But the important thing is that the enlightenment has occurred, and that the self or mind has shown its true nature as no-self or no-

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mind, and the no-self or no-mind on the other hand has shown its true nature as self or mind. The enlightenment has created a two-faced I-subject as both no-self and self or as both mind and no-mind. In fact it faces the no-self or no-mind on the one hand and faces the self or mind on the other, just like Janus the two faced God facing past and future at the same time.

One may query why must the I-subject reveal itself as no-self or no-mind? The answer is also simple: if it is revealed as something substantial, i. e. something as other than no-self or no-mind, it would be like anything else ready to be conceptualized as an object, but the I-subject is not experienced as an object and in the revelatory experience of the self or mind, there can not be anything identified as an object, otherwise another I-subject would be required to experience or cognize this object. Hence the logical way out is the negation of the self or mind as no-self or no-mind. But what this logical negation of the self or mind as no-self or no-mind means ontologically

remains to be seen. At the present, it is necessary to see that the experience of no-self or no-mind is nothing but the experience of experience as such, as well as the experience of suchness and thusness; this is because it is an experience of experience not to be described by any form of language except the form of language which transcends and denies itself.

Before raising the question of the ontological content of this no-self or no-mind revelation, I want to stress the fact that the enlightenment of the Chan is to be experienced as a real happening or an existential transformation, therefore as an experience of transformation of existence into non-existence and vice versa. This sense of enlightenment makes all the qualitative difference between the other schools of Buddhistic teaching and the Chan School. We may describe the difference as a difference between reliance on faith or belief and reliance on existential experience. We have seen that all major Buddhist Mahāyāna schools more or less depend on enlightenment for their teaching, though not as completely as the Chan School. In Huayan and Tiantai Schools, stages of development of Buddhist understanding are recognized. We have

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for example in Huayan the recognition of the five stages of such development: the Hīnayāna teaching (xiao 小), the beginning Mahāyāna teaching (shi 始), the ending Mahāyāna teaching (zhong 終), the Sudden enlightenment teaching (dun 頓) and the perfect doctrine teaching (yuan 圓). How does one understand these developments?

It is clear that it is not just a matter of theoretical teaching, but there must be some scale of enlightenment as in sight and existential experience to go with each stage of teaching. The theoretical teaching must be recognized as a mental and intellectual explication or articulation of such insight and existential experience. In the fourth stage of the sudden enlightenment teaching in the above, one can see that it is necessary that the sudden enlightenment be attained before one can speak of such attainment and its nature. For this reason, I believe that the Huayan Buddhism has to incorporate the existential experience of Chan enlightenment as a part, for without it one cannot hope to actually reach a higher stage of Buddhist understanding. The so-called understanding is and must be understood as enlightenment, namely as existential embodiment of a vision and an insight

which is to be realized in one's action and whole life. It is also an transformative experience because it would transform the individual into a higher state of being, in the sense that the total truth of being would be better realized in the person than in a previous state.

This certainly holds for Four Manners of Teaching (huayi sijiao 化儀四教) and Four Methods of Teaching (huafa sijiao 化法四教) in the Tiantai School, in which one has to fuse the truth of being (You/jia 有/假), the truth of nonbeing (kong 空) and the truth of the middle (zhong/buyoubukong 中/不有不空) in an existential experience of the self-emptying prajñā. Even the doctrine of “3000 worlds in one thought” (Yinian sanqian 一念三千) has to be given an intuitive meaning based on the existential enlightenment of the self or mind

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into the no-self or no-mind of the prajñā.

It is to be noted that among all schools of Buddhism, it is the school of Pure Land which seems to exclusively base its doctrine on faith or belief alone, not on understanding or enlightenment. The fundamental difference between the Pure Land School and other Chinese Buddhist Schools lies in that. While other schools emphasize self-transformation and self-salvation by way of existential enlightenment and mental understanding, the Pure land would appeal to a faith on complete dependency on a Savior-Buddha (Amitābha Buddha) for salvation. But even in the Pure Land, the insight on the possibility of salvation by faith is to be supported by an existential understanding of the human condition, which is further explained in the Pure Land as complete blessedness. This means that when an individual cannot achieve enlightenment, his complete faith in salvation would bring about a genuine possibility of salvation, and this would provide a way out from the burdens of this life. This no doubt shows a soteriological insight in a religious faith which is existential in nature, although shorn of the self-lifting force of the sudden enlightenment of the self-nature of a person. It nevertheless substitutes enlightenment for an unconditioned blessedness which is needed and more appealing to a large populace.

IV. Preontology and Postontology of Enlightenment

The question has been raised as to what constitutes the enlightening experience of the self as no-self (or mind as no-mind) in terms of our understanding. This question leads right into the Buddha's original insight, that is into the nature of self or mind and things. According to this insight, self (or mind) and all things have empty nature for they are products of composition of contingent causes collected from nowhere and collected at random or by karma. This is the well-known doctrine of “co-origination and emptiness of nature” (yuanqi xingkong 緣起性空). In fact, the very

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idea of co-origination (Pratītya-samutpāda) implies the idea of the empty nature of things. If things are considered to be arbitrarily caused and all causes are equally arbitrarily caused, there is no way to trace the origin of things except one can see that there is no fundamental nature to any thing. A thing is simply a form (xiang 相) which arises from the contingent connection of contingent causes or causes of causes.^[6] Hence one must see the emptiness of the nature of the thing. One could even come to regard the thing itself as basically an illusion or an empty form. The fleetingness of life and changeability of things also seems to reinforce this understanding.

Yet one cannot deny that this is an ontological reductionist observation and argument by the Buddha. Nonetheless, as an existential insight on which the Buddha becomes enlightened, it is much richer than an ontological reduction, for it is something which reveals the existential truth of human self as no-self and human mind as no-mind and of all things as no-things. If things do appear to have their phenomenal forms and natures, and also that human beings have their ideas and emotions as well as their life-cycles of birth, aging, illness and death, they must be transcended in the existential experience of enlightenment, as all forms, natures and minds will appear to be empty in such an experience. Clearly there are no such entities in the pre-ontological state of reality as revealed in the Buddha's enlightenment. In this sense, ontology of things and human selves are reduced, emptied and transformed into a pre-ontological reality of emptiness and lose their meaning and importance.

The original intent of the Buddha's efforts to achieve enlightenment is to retrieve human beings from their life-suffering. He comes to see that human suffering is not only man-made but is

actually mind-made. One needs to be awakened to this seeming reality of life and its sufferings, and one needs to seek a permanent land of pure freedom as well as a permanent life of perfect spirituality. It is, therefore, in this understanding that one is saved or self-saved by one's enlightenment, which has not only the practical effect of lessening suffering from past but also the practical effect of not making attachment to things or selves in the future. Hence we come to the conclusion that the content of Chan enlightenment is therefore explicable in terms of the doctrine of yuanqi xingkong (緣起性空), even though the actual experience is existential and transformative for Chan Buddhists. This also means that the existential enlightenment is preconditioned by an intellectual understanding and belief in this doctrine, even though understanding this doctrine has the power to reach for an enlightenmental experience of the no-self or no-mind as understood by the doctrine.

There are many theories of co-origination of self and things which are developed from the Buddha's vision of reality as emptiness (*śūnyatā* or nonattachment to things); specifically we could mention the co-origination by *tathāgatagarbha* (hidden store of Buddha-nature 如來藏) and the co-origination by *dharmadhātu* (nature of dharma or faxing 法性). Hence it is possible to explain Chan enlightenment as an enlightening of the truth of either the *rulaizang yanqi* (co-arising from *tathāgatagarbha* 如來藏緣起) or the *fajie yuanqi* (co-arising from realm of the dharma 法界緣起). But even so, the enlightenment has to be taken both as a pure experience and at the same time as an understanding. Yet the pure experience cannot be separated from the understanding or it will lose its meaning and impact toward existential transformation. We might then construe Chan enlightenment as an experience of the self and things as either *tathāgatagarbha* or *dharmadhātu*. We know that in either *tathāgatagarbha* or *dharmadhātu* the self and reality of things are given a proper positioning in the ultimate

reality of the *tathāgatagarbha* or the *dharmadhātu*. The ultimate purpose of the *tathāgatagarbha* idea is to assure that each and every individual person can achieve enlightenment of Buddhahood and gains freedom from

suffering and illusion and yet enjoys peace and tranquility. The ultimate purpose of the dharmadhātu idea in the Huayan School is to assure that all things and selves can be presented and realized in a state of supreme harmony and unobstructedness. Therefore, there is a great value and a profound meaning in achieving this enlightened vision of reality. At the very least, this enlightened vision could help people to lead a life with hope, compassion and open-mindedness.

With this understanding of the content of the enlightened understanding, it is then clear that not all cases of the experience of enlightenment are of equal depth or breadth in their vision.[7] But for the Chan Buddhist the most important thing is that underlying all possible different interpretations of the experience of enlightenment, there is always an experience which will lift one from all worldly involvements and free one from all the attachments, in this way one is free to construct a world of wisdom and goodness of his own. And, even from this good world that he has constructed, he can remain free from attachments. Instead, he can be free at any time to deconstruct it and create another one according to his otherwise moral faith of life.

For a person's freedom from mundane attachments and involvements, I have formulated the principle of “Ontological Non-Commitment” which is founded or premised on his existential enlightenment on a pre-ontological no-mind emptiness (śūnyatā).[8] In and after his enlightenment, a person is able to pursue his life as

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usual or to see different meanings of his life and his world in a full vision of his freedom from any ontological commitment. This is the principle I have called “Contextual Reconstitution.” (*See op.cit.) But what life and reality one would choose to have or lead still depends on what one already has. Therefore one will have to recognize existence of one's given life and work and ask what life one would wish to have in the light of one's enlightened vision. This implies that one has to account for one's life and one's world in which the life is being lived. This need no doubt contributes to a person's wish to seek an enlightenment in order to recognize his self-nature in which he can identify the nature of his given life, and yet in which he can also transcend his given life to lead a free or freer life. This principle I call the principle of “Self-nature Recognition/Identification,” which would be the

source of creative recreation or transformation. In the light of this principle and the principle of “Contextual Reconstitution,” we must also come to see the importance and significance of a post-enlightenment task of reconstruction and reconstitution. This is what I like to describe as a post-ontological understanding of self-reality based on analysis of the experience of enlightenment. The process and achievement of the reconstruction of reality is what I refer as the principle of “Post-Ontology of Enlightenment,” which is actually a reconstituted restoration of ontology in a post-enlightenment stance.

Now we might summarize my content analysis of the Chanenlightenment in terms of the following recognitions and their subsequent formulations as principles: Mundane Ontology before Enlightenment, Enlightenment on Pre-Ontological Reality, Ontological Non-Commitment, Contextual Reconstitution, Self-nature Recognition/Identification, Post-Ontology of Enlightenment. I shall call the whole process of enlightened realization of the self-mind or the self-nature of the self-mind as “Onto-Epistemology of Sudden Enlightenment.”

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V. Enlarging the Meaning of Suddenness of Enlightenment

I speak of sudden enlightenment as versus gradual enlightenment, following the example of Hui Neng. In the Platform Sutra the idea of “sudden enlightenment” (dungwu 頓悟) is first clearly illustrated by Hui Neng's Verse “Bodhi has originally no tree and the clear mirror is no platform, the Buddha nature is always tranquil, where does one find the dust?” (or “Mind is bodhi-tree, the body is the mirror platform, clear mirror is originally pure, where could the dust come from?”)[\[9\]](#) One directly and completely sees what ultimate reality is, and it is clear that either one sees this or one does not. Furthermore, it is also clear that either Buddha nature is pure or tranquil or it is not. The point here is whether Buddha nature is divisible and whether

enlightened seeing is divisible. If Buddha nature is not divisible, then it can only be realized as a whole or not realized at all. Similarly, if seeing and realizing Buddha nature is not divisible then it has to be holistic, and one either sees or realizes something in a holistic manner or one does not realize or see anything at all.

It seems clear that in the case of Chan enlightenment or any enlightenment as existential experience, there is a clear-cut distinction between the whole of rediscovering or recovering Buddha nature and not rediscovering or recovering at all. (*Is it possible to say “discover” as a possibility? I believe so, because accounting for or justifying Chan enlightenment is entirely a matter of self-understanding and self-definition.) Hence the so-called Sudden Enlightenment should refer to this full and complete retrieval of the Buddha nature in one's full and complete exercise of the mind. This amounts to a full and complete experience and vision of the ultimate reality. One might say that there simply cannot be any

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partial or piecemeal rediscovery or recovery of the full Buddha nature, for in that case one would not recognize that what one rediscovers or recovers is Buddha nature. Yet, this recognition itself is essential to the meaning and requirement of Chan enlightenment.

A second argument pertaining to a full realization of full Buddha nature is that there is a clear-cut distinction between the state of Enlightenment (wu 悟) and the state of Delusion (mi 迷). In fact, for Hui Neng these two states are equally existential, but are qualitatively worlds apart. One is Bodhi and the other is Hell, one is blessedness and tranquility and the other is anxiety and passion, one is pure and good and the other is impure and defiled, one is Nirvāṇa and the other is Saṃsāra. One is damned and the other is redeemed. Hence the realization of one must exclude the other. Enlightenment as a momentous existential experience of full revelation of Buddha nature is identifiable with existential realization of Bodhi, blessedness, tranquility, Nirvāṇa, redemption and purity, and hence excludes their opposites as their opposites, because they are qualitatively diametrically and radically different. In this sense, “sudden enlightenment” simply means reaching and attainment of the former states to the exclusion of the latter ones, and

specifically is attainment of complete freedom of the self-nature (in the former states) from the latter states.

In the light of these two arguments, it is then clear that sudden enlightenment in Chan Buddhism characterizes an existential emergence of a totally separate system of understanding in total transcendence from the state which is considered belief, faith or understanding. The term “sudden” simply captures the momentous change and transformation of the state in time. It is the difference which change and transformation makes to the mind or self that is important, not the apparent reference to time.

In addition, there is also the question on how gradual cultivation of a person, especially in terms of both moral and

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religious performances of right and good (zhushan fengxing 諸善奉行) and avoidance of wrong and evil (zhu-e-mozhuo 諸惡莫作) may relate to the ultimate form of complete or sudden enlightenment. In order to see relevance for existential transformation of a person in terms of sudden enlightenment, we may stipulate or require these moral and religious performances as mere conditions or pre-conditions for sudden enlightenment. Although it is possible for an evil person to become suddenly enlightened (not suddenly become enlightened), it is not likely that this would actually occur, because the mind and the understanding of the person simply could not function to bring about this existential change. How could we expect a drunkard to say his name clearly and correctly or/and to give a full account of his work of the day? It is simply not possible that without any achievement on a first level life performance that one could leap over to a second level perfection of life.

But here we encounter an ambiguity of the term “enlightenment” : Does the gradual cultivation of moral virtues contribute to a model life of a religious or moral practitioner? The answer is yes. But does this also make the person a sage or an example of the second-order level perfection (even to be only emergent from the first order level perfection)? The reply is no. What the Chan Buddhist requires is that one need not abandon the first order level perfection in seeking to achieve the second-order level perfection, even though achieving the former does not guarantee achieving the latter. One

must do both in order to be both morally good and super-orally enlightened. It is no doubt that if a person does become suddenly enlightened, this would undoubtedly contribute to perfection, whether moral or intellectual, at the first level. In fact, we may see that the gradual enlightenment doctrine is most useful in helping maintain the sudden enlightenment state in its post-enlightenment engagement with the world, even though this may not directly contribute to one directly becoming suddenly enlightened.

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On a pre-ontological level, we want to answer the question of whether defilement (ran 染) and ignorance (wuming 無明) are original or enlightenment and purity are original in one's original nature. This question has been sharply raised and discussed in the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment (Yuanjiao Jing).[\[10\]](#) what would be a logical and reasonable answer to this difficult question? Both the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment (Yuanjiao Jing 《圓覺經》) and Awakening the Mahayana Faith (Dashengqixinlun 《大乘起信論》) insist that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa live together and ontologically they are the same thing. It is a matter of our mind's perception, feeling and acting which makes a difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. We could feel and see saṃsāra as nirvāṇa or we could feel and see nirvāṇa as saṃsāra. If the mind is pure and clear, then saṃsāra is nirvāṇa; if the mind is impure and defiled, then nirvāṇa is saṃsāra. All depend on how the original nature (the substance or essence) of oneself applies itself in actualization of itself (in using and functioning).

Of course one may point out that this answer seems to beg the question. The question is precisely to seek how defilement or impurity occurs in one's original nature or mind, and if defiled, how mind could regain its purity. I believe that one good answer to this question is that, the original mind or the self-nature of a human person has a natural bent to actualize itself in the world, and thus it has the ability to create its lifeworld, but in doing so pollution and defilements could also occur. Hence it is up to the individual to make amends and to correct his life by seeking an enlightenment or engaging a practice and belief which would promote good deeds and prevent doing bad deeds. It may be also pointed out that it is not a bad thing that the

original mind or the self-nature of a person has this natural bent to actualize itself in the world, and that it also

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has the ability to make his world either good or to pollute it. It is in this sense we can interpret the Dashengqixinlun (《大乘起信論》) doctrine of one mind with two gates (yixin kai ermen 一心開二門, one directed toward nirvāṇa and the other directed toward saṃsāra) as either presenting a predicament of the human being or as indicating an achieved state of perfect enlightenment in which saṃsāra is affirmed as part of nirvāṇa and vice versa. Needless to say, there is no harm and no obstruction between the two; on the contrary, it is good and right to maintain the two in a unity of perfect enlightenment. In this sense, we require perfect enlightenment to be a would-be post-ontological unity of the pre-ontological original enlightenment (benjiao 本覺) and the post-ontological actualized enlightenment (shijiao 始覺), and, for that matter, a post-ontological unity of the Buddha nature and the human world.

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本體知識論與禪學中的頓悟

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提要

在科技的現代，自我的知識仍是一大哲學問題，而且在科技的日新月異的壓力下意義更為加重，可說已形成危機。此一形勢促進宗教的復興。

但此處的宗教究為何指？如果一個宗教不能自主為個人(1)帶來自我的

理解，與(2)內心的安寧與精神的自由，同時也將(3)促進人間的相愛，與

(4)世界的和平，則此一宗教的意義也是可疑的。當然在此四方面要求一個宗教或許過於嚴格，但這也是一個宗教成爲一個真正宗教的基礎。此一真正宗教必須掌握自我精神自由而不排斥科學的理性，形成一個既超越又內在的人的性與理的統一體驗與境界。本文將就此一認識與要求探索中國禪學作爲真正精神宗教的實際與潛力。本文首將區劃知與知識的四個層面，再將禪學的頓悟定位在最深或最高的第四層面上，顯示禪學作爲現代中後現代的宗教精神的特徵與自覺的精神宗教性能。

關鍵詞： 1.本體 2.自我知識 3.禪 4.頓悟

[1] Here one may simply say that self-knowledge is the knowledge that one would know that it is self-knowledge.

[2] See, *Aspects of Mind-Body Identity*, edited and introduced by Chung-ying Cheng, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1965.

[3] See, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, John R. Searle, Cambridge (Mass): The MIT Press, 1994, See Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

[4] See Laozi, *Daodejing* (《道德經》), chapter 1; Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi* (《莊子》), chapter on “Dazongshi (〈大宗師〉)”.

[5] See Hui Neng's *Tanjing* (《壇經》), English translation by Philip Yampolsky. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.

[6] In the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* (《大乘起信論》) the notion of form is posed along with the notions of substance (ti 體) and function (yong 用).

[7] Unfortunately we do not have a detailed study of all available cases of enlightenment in the Chan tradition in either China or other East Asian countries.

[8] See article 'Chan (Zen) Language and the Zen Paradoxes,' chung-ying Cheng, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 1-1, 1973, pp.77-102.

[9] Translation by author. Also consult Philip Yampolsky's English translation of the *Tanjing* (《壇經》) as mentioned in note 5.

[10] See *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, translated with an introduction by A. Charles Muller, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999, p.45, pp.123-145.