

The Path of Emptiness Practice in Zen Thought

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Abstract: "Dharmas in the world are not separate from worldliness; seeking enlightenment apart from the world is like searching for a rabbit's horn." This classic Chan saying profoundly reveals the practical path of Buddhist practice, emphasizing the awareness and realization of practitioners in the world. The "emptiness" in Chan Buddhism is not merely a theoretical exploration but a wisdom that practitioners should embody and practice in their daily lives. The emptiness of Chan Buddhism is not just a philosophical or religious truth but also a manner of thinking and a state of mind practitioners should personally encounter and utilize in their daily lives. Emptiness enables practitioners to see through illusions, transcend attachment, and reach true wisdom and emancipation since it helps them to acknowledge the impermanence and absence of inherent existence in all things. It is not a passive void. The concept of emptiness in Chan Buddhism breaks through the conventional boundaries of philosophy, blending Eastern traditions of intuitive and profound thought. It helps practitioners to find deeper truths in the apparently daily environment. This emptiness is intimately related to the practitioner's life, ideas, and deeds; it is not a theory disconnected from daily existence. By means of immersion in every instant of life, it helps one to realize the actual nature of existence and achieves inner emancipation. Therefore, the practical realization of emptiness is not only about personal spiritual awakening but also a way of life. It helps practitioners maintain inner purity and wisdom in a busy and chaotic world. This article will explore the path of actualizing emptiness in Chan Buddhism, analyzing the profound meaning of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," and, with historical examples, illustrating the integration of gradual practice and sudden enlightenment. Finally, it will emphasize the importance of a firm heart (Dao Xin) in practice. Through exploring these core concepts, this paper aims to provide modern practitioners with a practical guide, helping them better understand emptiness in Chan Buddhism and integrate it into their daily lives, achieving spiritual awakening and the elevation of wisdom. In Chan Buddhism, the idea of emptiness is still rather important today not only for clarifying inner changes but also for directing us to discover actual calm and emancipation among the distractions of life. Thus, the understanding of emptiness is a great experience of the soul and a useful road for spiritual development, not only intellectual knowledge.

Keywords: Chan Buddhism, Emptiness, Gradual Practice and Sudden Enlightenment, Spiritual Awakening, Wisdom and Liberation.

1. The Relationship between Emptiness and Form

In Chan Buddhism, "emptiness" does not exist independently but is closely related to "form." [1] As stated in the Heart Sutra: "Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form." This indicates that form and emptiness are interdependent; the essence of form is emptiness, and emptiness is manifested through form. Specifically, "form" refers to all the external things we perceive, whether objects, phenomena, or any sensory experiences, while "emptiness" refers to the essence of these things, which do not have independent or permanent existence but are in a state of constant change. This emptiness is not a passive void; it indicates that all existence and phenomena are interdependent and constantly changing. The existence and manifestation of each thing depend on external conditions and the coming together of causes and conditions, so their existence is not self-sustaining, but rather involves mutual interaction and dependence.

By means of awareness of the "five aggregates"—form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness—practitioners progressively learn to understand the great relevance of "stilling." Letting go of attachment to objects, releasing inner restlessness and desire, and finally returning to a state of tranquilly and purity is known as "stillness". In Chan practice, practitioners are not only expected to observe and experience the appearances of "form," but also to see

through the emptiness beneath these appearances, thus reaching inner calm and awakening of knowledge [2]. Through this procedure, practitioners can experience the cessation of their restless tendencies, reaching the level of Buddhahood. Restlessness relates to the innate sufferings and ignorance of human beings, while Buddhahood signifies enlightenment. Experiencing and recognizing "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," practitioners progressively release their attachment to the physical world, therefore attaining inner purity and enlightenment.

This insight not only marks spiritual release but also motivates practitioners to see the world with better eyes and find latent compassion and knowledge in daily life. Attachment to "form" keeps us from seeing the actual essence of things; but, when we release this attachment, we can enter the actual nothingness. Thus, emptiness is not a hollow detachment from the world; rather, it is a process of awareness, realizing the impermanence and emptiness underlying all events, so transcending afflictions and guiding toward enlightenment. Chan Buddhist practitioners are guided through this process to see the actual laws behind things by the emptiness theory, which helps them to reject the false appearances.

2. The Path of Gradual Practice and Sudden Enlightenment

2.1. The Path of Gradual Practice

Gradual practice is a progressive approach to cultivation,

suitable for practitioners who have a more peaceful nature or a weaker foundation in practice [3]. The core idea of gradual practice is to deepen one's understanding of emptiness through continuous practice and reflection. The advice of Master Shenxiu, "Always diligently wipe away the dust, lest it accumulate," captures this. Like cleaning their brains of distractions, this proverb advises practitioners to remain watchful at all times and to always rid their minds of all kinds of distractions. In this process, practitioners must be vigilant in their daily life, continuously evaluating their behavior and ideas to prevent allowing outside distractions to contaminate them. Gradual practice is not merely formalism; it involves a meticulous approach to continually observe and purify the inner distractions. As practitioners engage in gradual practice, they gradually come to understand that all things are impermanent and empty, eventually gaining a profound understanding of emptiness through this day-by-day accumulation of practice.

Furthermore stressing self-observation and introspection is the gradual practice method[4]. Through constant self-reflection, practitioners progressively let go of attachments to all things and in the course of preserving self-awareness they progressively see the changes and impermanence in their minds. This method stresses ongoing awareness until the mind is free from outside distractions, therefore attaining a condition of peace and enlightenment. Daily practice helps gradual practitioners finally realize nothingness and acquire peace and knowledge deep inside their hearts. In his work, for instance, Tang dynasty Master Huineng stressed inner awareness and observation. "Originally, there is nothing; where can dust be caught?" he asked, summing his approach following his flash insight. Huineng went through a protracted period of discipline and cultivation during his slow practice, gathering much wisdom and experience that finally resulted in a flash of insight upon the awareness of emptiness. This unexpected insight developed depending on accumulation and introspection, not apart from the slow practice process. Huineng broke beyond his connection to self and the world in an instant to attain a straight inner awakening.

2.2. The Path of Sudden Enlightenment

Sudden enlightenment is meant for practitioners with better natural ability and sharper faculties so they may quickly realize the truth of emptiness [5]. Long periods of cumulative practice are not necessary for instantaneous enlightenment; rather, it depends on an abrupt awakening that directly strikes the core of emptiness. "Originally, there is nothing; where can dust be caught?" Huineng asks in a classic statement of this concept. This sentence denotes that everything starts from emptiness, that all events are empty, and that the existence of all things is interdependent, without an autonomous essence. Practitioners no longer hang to outside forms but rather directly perceive the void therein during sudden enlightenment. Direct awareness helps one to understand the truth; sudden enlightenment is an intuitive experience devoid of external words or conceptions [6]. For instance, the Record of Pointing at the Moon's metaphor of "pointing at the moon" highlights how direct experience, not words or notions, realizes the truth. Pointing at the moon helps the light of wisdom pass by intuition rather than via rational deduction.

Those who experience unexpected illumination directly enter the domain of truth, transcending the constraints of self, language, and reason. Suddenly realizing this, they grasp at away that all events are transient, and that life is empty.

Practitioners of this experience of sudden enlightenment reach a total awakening to the nature of emptiness, an understanding that cuts beyond words and the boundaries of reason.

3. The Integration of Gradual Practice and Sudden Enlightenment

Actually, many practitioners have to mix sudden enlightenment with gradual practice [7]. Chan practice is the two are entwined and complimentary, not depending only on either gradual practice or sudden enlightenment [8]. Whereas sudden enlightenment is the instantaneous understanding of truth or emptiness, gradual practice is the process by which practitioners progressively gather wisdom. The secret to combining both is how slow practice offers the means for unexpected illumination. Gradual practice generates an internal accumulation and prepares the wisdom required for the unexpected arrival of enlightenment, not only a protracted period of patience and waiting. Though it depends on the slow accumulation over time, the appearance of sudden enlightenment itself is instantaneous and logical.

Over extended periods of self-reflection and development, practitioners constantly improve their mind and spirit by means of slow practice, therefore removing internal distractions and attachments and increasing their inner consciousness. Gradually, the insight gained from this practice increases until practitioners can see the impermanence and selflessness of things and understand emptiness. The practitioner's will on the road grows during this process; attachment in the heart gradually reduces; and the intuitive experience of truth becomes clearer and deeper. Gradual practice is a means of always growing knowledge of emptiness, always surpassing self-imposed limitations, therefore laying a strong basis for unexpected illumination.

Though at first glance sudden enlightenment seems like a startling awakening, it is really the inevitable outcome of wisdom gathered during slow work. After long periods of inner development, sudden enlightenment happens when a practitioner breaks away from traditional patterns of thinking and immediately touches the essence of truth—not depending just on a moment of inspiration. Sudden enlightenment lets the practitioner directly experience and realize the reality of emptiness and non-self, therefore transcending dependence on language and rational thinking. This flash of insight is not just a logical knowledge of emptiness, but also an intuitive experience that surpasses knowledge, a great awareness of the principle "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." For instance, historical Chan master Huineng at last realized emptiness in a flash of unexpected enlightenment after building insight over protracted periods of slow practice. Huineng did not hurry the process even though he followed a protracted time of asceticism and practice and developed tremendous inner knowledge and insight. Rather, by use of regular awareness, he gently anticipated the flash of insight. Huineng immediately realized the nothingness of all events at a specific point, and in that instant, he crossed all conceptual limits to reach total awareness.

Gradual practice combined with sudden enlightenment let the practitioner progressively strengthen their awareness of emptiness and, at the same time, undergo a breakthrough in spiritual awakening at a certain moment [9]. Gradual practice helps the practitioner develop inner wisdom and readiness for sudden insight; when that sudden enlightenment happens, it

marks a higher degree of realization. Through gradual practice, the practitioner constantly improves their awareness and wisdom, progressively removes inner distractions, and finally creates the conditions for unexpected enlightenment. Sudden enlightenment comes from great introspection and accumulated practice; it is not a spontaneous awakening. It is the accumulation of inner knowledge and awareness that helps the practitioner to reach a higher spiritual dimension and experience a sudden awakening at a designated point.

Combining gradual practice with sudden enlightenment helps the practitioner not only develops their inner steadiness and determination on the road but also deep awareness of nothingness. This mix helps the practitioner to have constant awareness and contemplation in daily life as well as, at some point, to undergo a great awakening, therefore attaining total emancipation and the elevation of wisdom.

4. The Firmness of the Dao Heart

Whether either sudden enlightenment or gradual practice, both depend on the steadfastness of the Dao heart at last. The basis of practice, the Dao heart is the strength enabling practitioners to keep awakening [10]. Two outstanding models of a company Dao heart are Shenxiu and Huineng's single-minded dedication to the Dao. Practitioners of emptiness have to keep a strong conviction in the Dao if they are to be relentless against outside distractions. True enlightenment, as the Vimalakirti Sutra emphasizes, is about discovering the road to enlightenment inside the world rather than about leaving it. Practitioners may only achieve real serenity and wisdom in a chaotic environment by a strong Dao heart.

The firmness of the Dao heart means that the practitioner may keep an unquestionable mind among the continually shifting surroundings, always aiming for enlightenment and carefully advancing, not depending on a set of ideas or theories [11]. The ultimate aim is to gain total enlightenment by the firmness of the Dao heart, whether by means of the wisdom gathered via slow effort or the direct experience of instantaneous illumination.

5. Conclusion

Chan Buddhist path of actualizing emptiness stresses the

great significance of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." By means of the combination of gradual practice and sudden enlightenment, practitioners can always foster awareness and introspection in their daily life, so attaining inner clarity and freedom. Whatever the path taken, the firmness of the Dao heart stays the secret to a practitioner's road towards enlightenment. Deeply knowing emptiness helps practitioners to not only go past the distractions of the daily life but also discover actual calm and wisdom inside themselves. The idea of emptiness in Chan Buddhism is still very important in the complicated and turbulent modern culture. It offers professionals a useful road of awakening that helps them go beyond attachment and reach wisdom and peace.

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