



THE PLATFORM SUTRA AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Master Jiqun

Translated by MPI Translation Center

**Addressing the “Chan and Psychotherapy” Forum
at Suzhou West Garden Monastery of Vinaya School,
2013**

Contents

I	Worldlings vs. Sages: Delusion or Enlightenment ...	50
1.	The Foolish vs. the Wise: Delusion or Enlightenment	51
2.	Worldlings vs. Sages, Affliction vs. Bodhi: Delusion or Enlightenment	52
3.	Dull vs. Sharp Faculties: Delusion or Enlightenment	54
II	The Root of Psychological Problems—Delusion ...	58
1.	Delusion: Losing the Inherent Enlightenment	59
2.	Delusion Breeds Attachment, Greed, and Afflictions	60
III	The Foundational Understandings of Psychotherapy	64
1.	Potential for Enlightenment in Everyone	64

1) The significant discovery of the Buddha	64
2) The Buddha's discovery is also the insight of the <i>Platform Sutra</i>	66
2. A Pure and Complete Mind	67
1) The mind realized by the Sixth Patriarch in the Preface of the <i>Platform Sutra</i>	67
2) The characteristics of Prajna in the Prajna Chapter of the <i>Platform Sutra</i>	69
3. Capacity for Self-Healing in Everyone	75
IV Methods of Psychotherapy	81
1. No-Thought as the Principle	81
2. No-Form as the Essence	82
1) Understanding emptiness breaks attachment to inherent existence	83
2) Understanding formlessness breaks inherent existence and nihilistic emptiness	84
3. No-Abidance as the Basis	86
V Summary	91
VI Q&A	92

This year marks the 1,300th anniversary of the perfect extinction of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism.

Chinese Chan Buddhism was transmitted in a single lineage from the First Patriarch Bodhidharma to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. After Huineng, Chan Buddhism branched into five schools, flourishing during the Tang and Song dynasties and continuing its legacy to the present day. The *Platform Sutra* records Huineng's life, achievements, teachings, and realizations, profoundly influencing Chinese Buddhism for over a thousand years.

Master Taixu once said: “The distinct characteristic of Chinese Buddhism lies in Chan.” In Buddhism, “Chan” refers either to the Chan of the Chan school or the Chan of meditation. The Chan of meditation is a common practice shared by Buddhism and other religions for cultivating meditative concentration. However, the Chan of the Chan school is unique to Buddhism and represents the awakened mind.

There are many Buddhist schools, and in terms of practice methods, they can be divided into two major systems: gradual teaching and sudden teaching. Both are methods for attaining Buddhahood. The gradual teaching emphasizes step-by-step practice, while the Chan school belongs to sudden teaching, which does not follow a step-by-step practice or require one. It is characterized by “directly pointing to the mind, seeing one’s true nature and becoming a Buddha”—providing the most complete and highest insight, using the most direct and fastest method, so that practitioners can directly realize the core of Buddhist teachings, and attain the awakened mind.

The essential “insight” required in psychotherapy is a correct understanding of human psychology. The depth of this insight, representing the therapist’s understanding of the mind, determines the effectiveness of psychotherapy. In this sense, the insights and methods of Chan Buddhism provide the most profound theoretical basis and the most direct practice approach for resolving psychological issues.

The *Platform Sutra* is a fundamental sutra among many Chan Buddhist texts.

If one wishes to understand and learn about Chan Buddhism from the standpoint of psychotherapy, the *Platform Sutra* is the best starting point, as its perspective and methods represent the core views and approaches of Chan Buddhism.

I

WORLDLINGS VS. SAGES: DELUSION OR ENLIGHTENMENT

The “Worldlings” refer to ordinary beings, while “Sages” refer to enlightened beings.

People’s differences may stem from varying attitudes towards life or distinctly different qualities of life. The *Platform Sutra* analyzes the qualities of life through three perspectives: the differences between the foolish and the wise, worldlings and sages (also affliction and Bodhi), as well as between those with dull and sharp faculties.

Upon recognizing the differences in the quality of life,

it is essential to identify the basis of these differences to pinpoint the key to improving the quality of life. In this regard, the *Platform Sutra* succinctly addresses its crux with two characters: “delusion” and “enlightenment.”

1. The Foolish vs. the Wise: Delusion or Enlightenment

What is the difference between the foolish and the wise? The *Platform Sutra* explains it this way:

Good Knowing Advisors¹! The wisdom of Bodhi and Prajna is inherently possessed by all people. It is only because their minds are deluded that they cannot enlighten themselves and must rely on a great Good Knowing Advisor to guide them to see their Buddha-nature. You should understand that the Buddha-nature of ignorant and wise people is fundamentally no different. It is only due to the difference between delusion and enlightenment that some are ignorant and some are wise.

1. Good Knowing Advisors refer to teachers or friends who have mastered Buddhism, or to the listeners of the Sixth Patriarch's teachings in the *Platform Sutra*.

The wise can comprehend the true essence of life and unlock the great wisdom of awakening; the foolish or ordinary beings, filled with delusion, fail to grasp the true nature of life and the wisdom of awakening. The more delusion, the deeper the folly.

2. Worldlings vs. Sages, Affliction vs. Bodhi: Delusion or Enlightenment

What is the distinction between ordinary beings and sages, affliction and enlightenment? The *Platform Sutra* expounds it this way:

Good Knowing Advisors! Ordinary beings are themselves Buddhas; afflictions are themselves Bodhi. The deluded mind is that of an ordinary being; the awakened mind is that of a Buddha. The mind attached to phenomena is afflicted; the mind detached from phenomena is enlightened.

“The deluded mind is that of an ordinary being” means

that when one's mind falls into delusion, their state of being at that moment is that of an ordinary being. "The awakened mind is that of a Buddha" implies that as soon as one realizes their inherent nature of enlightenment in a single thought, they are a Buddha at that moment.

"The mind attached to phenomena is afflicted" suggests that when one is engulfed in delusion and becomes attached to external conditions, their life falls into a state of affliction. "The mind detached from phenomena is enlightened" indicates that once one lets go of dependence on and attachment to external conditions, their life enters a state of awakening or enlightenment.

Thus, the difference between ordinary beings and Buddhas is essentially the difference between afflictions and Bodhi. This is determined by whether one's current state of life is in delusion or enlightenment. As distinct starting points of life, delusion and enlightenment develop into different personalities—either ignorance or wisdom. This shapes different life qualities—afflictions and suffering or

awakening and freedom. Ultimately, this manifests as different forms of life—either as ordinary sentient beings or saintly bodhisattvas.

3. Dull vs. Sharp Faculties: Delusion or Enlightenment

What determines whether one's spiritual faculties are dull or sharp? The *Platform Sutra* addresses this question:

Good Knowing Advisors! When people of limited faculties hear this sudden teaching, they are like the plants and trees with shallow roots which, washed away by the great rain, are unable to grow. But at the same time, the Prajna wisdom which people of limited faculties possess is fundamentally no different from the Prajna that men of great wisdom possess. Hearing this Dharma, why do they not become enlightened? It is because the obstacle of their deviant views is a formidable one and the root of their afflictions is deep. It is like when thick clouds cover the sun: if the wind does not blow, the sunlight will not be visible. Prajna wisdom is itself neither great nor small. Living beings differ because

their own minds are either confused or enlightened. Those of confused mind look outwardly to cultivate in search of the Buddha. Not having awakened to their self-nature yet, they have small roots. If one awakens to the sudden teachings, they will not cling to external practices. Instead, with the right views constantly arising in their minds, they remain undefiled by the mundane afflictions. Then, this is seeing one's true nature.²

The *Platform Sutra* uses the metaphor of dust on the mind to illustrate the sharpness or dullness of one's spiritual faculties. The dust of the mind refers to the various afflictions created in the mind due to delusion.

The distinction between sharp and dull faculties in individuals primarily depends on whether the dust on their minds is thick or thin. If one's mind is deeply mired in delusion and heavy with afflictions, this indicates they have dull faculties. Conversely, if the dust on their mind is thin,

2. Buddhist Text Translation Society, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, p134-135

and can be cleared away by a gentle breeze of insight, this indicates they have sharp faculties. This is akin to many Chan masters who, with just a slight hint or guidance, attained enlightenment.

Buddhist teachings differentiate into “gradual teaching” and “sudden teaching” based on the practitioners’ dull or sharp faculties. Those with sharp faculties and keen wisdom can realize enlightenment anywhere, such as by striking bamboo or reflecting by water, thus naturally entering the path of sudden teaching. However, ordinary beings are controlled by a powerful system of delusion, making it difficult to directly reach their true nature. For them, it is advised to “constantly clean the dust within; let the mind be free of dust.” Through gradual practice, one removes the obscuring dust bit by bit, eventually realizing their true nature.

Improving the quality of life is a common human aspiration, but first, several key questions must be addressed: How does life develop? Can life truly be improved? Do

people have the ability to improve their lives? To what extent can life be improved? What methods should be employed to improve the life quality of individuals with different spiritual faculties?

Addressing all these questions entails correct answers to the fundamental causes of differences among individuals.

The answer provided by Chan Buddhism is simple, yet it clearly indicates that life takes divergent paths due to the difference between delusion and enlightenment in the mind: either leading to further delusion and endless cycles of rebirth, or awakening and transformation from ordinary beings into sages.

We clearly understand that the key difference between ordinary beings and sages lies in the mind. This insight is essential for exploring the inner world, healing psychological ailments, and transforming the quality of life.

II

THE ROOT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS—DELUSION

Chan Buddhism believes that the root of all psychological issues is delusion.

Delusion is like walking into a dense fog; its main characteristic is that it prevents people from seeing the truth clearly. For those deeply immersed in delusion, their mental sky is shrouded in dark clouds, not only hindering their path to enlightenment but also leading to all sorts of emotional issues and even psychological disorders in their secular life.

1. Delusion: Losing the Inherent Enlightenment

Buddhism describes delusion in various ways, such as ignorance or *avidya*. Ignorance is like turning off the lights at night, leaving everything in complete darkness, where nothing can be seen clearly. Delusion prevents people from seeing themselves clearly, the truth of the world, and the reality of life.

What is the truth of life? What is the truth of the world? These questions are of interest not only to Eastern and Western religions but also to philosophers and scientists who have been diligently exploring for centuries.

How can humanity truly come to understand itself? This question concerns the ultimate meaning of life and is an eternal inquiry for humanity.

If we cannot see ourselves clearly, what will be the result? We will lose ourselves—lose our true nature and the nature of awakening.

2. Delusion Breeds Attachment, Greed, and Afflictions

Buddhism, based on wise observations of human nature, reveals that all human psychological activities originate from three mental viruses: greed, aversion, and ignorance. These three mental viruses are also the root causes of all psychological issues.

The first is ignorance, or avidya. Because of ignorance, we not only fail to see ourselves and the world clearly, but also develop incorrect perceptions of ourselves, forming what is known as the “self.” This is the source of all wrong views, cognitive distortions, and mental disorders.

The second is greed, where the “self” one identifies with becomes the master or center of their life, leading to clinging and greed. They become concerned with the beauty or ugliness of their “self,” the happiness or suffering of their “self,” and tirelessly seek wealth and fame for their “self.” This attachment to the “self” is the core of many psychological issues. Moreover, the sense of “self” not only gives

rise to feelings of self-importance, superiority, and a desire to dominate, but also leads to immediate greed and dependence upon encountering objects that satisfy these self-centered desires, such as wealth, food, fame, fortune, etc.

Greed and dependence are the root causes of various psychological issues such as anxiety, fear, insecurity, loneliness, etc.

Finally, aversion is triggered automatically when things do not align with the needs of the “self.” For instance, when one’s sense of self-importance, superiority, or desire to dominate is challenged, or when one’s judgments or perceptions of the external world are challenged, it can result in displeasure and the arising of aversion.

Aversion is the root cause of destructive emotions, such as non-acceptance, opposition, hostility, jealousy, rage, etc.

Through in-depth analysis, Buddhism has traced the

origins and developments of negative emotions and psychological issues: due to delusion, and ignorance (avidya), an erroneous concept of the “self” is formed. Subsequently, attachment to this “self” develops, giving rise to greed and aversion. These seeds of greed and aversion are easily ignited by favorable or adverse circumstances, ultimately triggering a range of corresponding negative emotions and psychological problems.

Knowing the causes and course of psychological issues allows for prescribing a targeted remedy.

The first step is establishing the Right View, fundamentally dispelling delusion and ignorance. The Noble Eightfold Path begins with the Right View, aiming to help individuals recognize the true nature of life and the world, free themselves from misconceptions about the “self,” and thereby deprive their roots of greed and aversion.

Based on the Right View, Buddhism offers various teachings to counteract the states of greed and aversion. For

instance, within the Six Perfections, the practice of Generosity teaches people how to overcome greed, while the practice of Patience instructs on how to counteract aversion, learning to accept without opposition. This enables one to face any situation without falling into the traps of greed and aversion, and even to offer unconditional love and help.

III

THE FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Facing the complexities of delusion and numerous afflictions of life, can ordinary people truly understand the mechanisms behind their formation? Do they have the ability to change them? Does life inherently possess the potential for healing? These basic understandings are related to the value of psychotherapy.

1. Potential for Enlightenment in Everyone

1) The significant discovery of the Buddha

In Western religions, it is often believed that humans do not have the ability to redeem themselves and can only rely on the grace bestowed by an omnipotent God. However, Buddhism denies the existence of an omnipotent God.

Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, made his most significant discovery under the Bodhi tree: he saw that every sentient being possesses an innate Buddha-nature, the potential for enlightenment. This means that everyone's mind is originally healthy, every life inherently possesses a complete mind, and every being has the ability for self-salvation.

I believe that Buddha's enlightenment was a discovery, not an invention. The significance and impact of this discovery in human history are unparalleled—it brings hope of awakening to everyone who is deeply mired in confusion and affliction, and sheds light on the complete eradication of all suffering and psychological issues.

2) The Buddha's discovery is also the insight of the *Platform Sutra*

The self-nature of Bodhi is originally clear and pure. Simply use that mind, and you will straightaway accomplish Buddhahood.

Good Knowing Advisors! The wisdom of Bodhi and Prajna is inherently possessed by all people. It is only because their minds are deluded that they cannot enlighten themselves.

Chan Buddhism, taking Buddha's discovery as its core insight, believes that Buddha-nature is like the sky, and that afflictions are like clouds and mist. The clouds and mist drift unpredictably, coming and going with the wind, but the nature of the mind remains unchanging like a cloudless clear sky, still and deeply blue.

“The self-nature of Bodhi is originally clear and pure. Simply use that mind, and you will straightaway accomplish Buddhahood.” The *Platform Sutra* conveys through this

verse that everyone's Bodhi-nature is both the nature of enlightenment and the essence of the mind. It is inherently pure, complete, and healthy. Our practice is to realize it. Once we realize this inherently pure nature of the mind, we attain Buddhahood.

Therefore, Chan Buddhism believes that cultivation is not about creating something that did not originally exist. On one hand, it may not be possible to create it, and on the other hand, what is created is not it, because it has always existed. Cultivation is about unlocking the treasure that has always been present and available in everyone's life. As long as the right path is found, we can make it.

2. A Pure and Complete Mind

1) The mind realized by the Sixth Patriarch in the Preface of the *Platform Sutra*

In the Preface of the *Platform Sutra*, the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, reported his insights on enlightenment to the

Fifth Patriarch, Hongren:

Upon hearing Hongren's teachings, Huineng had a great awakening: All dharmas are inseparable from one's true nature. Then he said to his Patriarch:

How unexpected! The self-nature is originally pure.

How unexpected! The self-nature is originally neither arising nor ceasing.

How unexpected! The self-nature is originally complete.

How unexpected! The self-nature is originally unmoved.

How unexpected! The self-nature can produce all dharmas.

After his enlightenment, the Sixth Patriarch saw the inherent nature of awakening within each of us. It is pure, complete, independent, and undisturbed by external influences; it can give rise to all phenomena and has infinite marvelous uses. Meanwhile, the mind does not dwell on anything and is free from attachments.

2) The characteristics of Prajna in the Prajna Chapter of the *Platform Sutra*

What are the characteristics of this Prajna wisdom? The *Platform Sutra*, Prajna Chapter describes them as follows:

What is meant by Maha? Maha means “great.” The true mind is as vast and boundless as the void. It is neither square nor round, neither big nor small. It is neither blue, yellow, red, nor white. It is neither above nor below, neither long nor short. It is neither anger nor joy, neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil, and it has no beginning nor end. All Buddha-lands are ultimately like the void. All worldly beings share the same inherent nature of emptiness, without a single dharma that can be obtained. The true emptiness of self-nature is also like this.

This describes the formless and infinite characteristics of Prajna wisdom.

Do not listen to my explanation of emptiness and then become attached to emptiness. The most important thing

is to avoid becoming attached to emptiness. If you sit still with an empty mind you will become attached to undifferentiated emptiness.¹

From the perspective of emptiness and existence, Prajna wisdom is neither empty nor existent.

The emptiness of the universe can contain all forms and shapes: the sun, moon, and stars; the mountains, rivers, and the great earth; the fountains, springs, streams, torrents, grasses, trees, thickets, and forests; good and bad people, good and bad dharmas, the heavens and the hells, all the great seas, Sumeru and all mountains—all are contained within emptiness. Similarly, the nature of worldly beings is also empty.

The true nature can encompass all dharmas, thus it is called “great.” All dharmas exist within the nature of all people. When seeing all people, both the bad and the good, if

1. Buddhist Text Translation Society, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, p118

you neither accept nor reject them and do not become attached, your mind will be like the void. This is what is meant by “great,” thus it is called “Maha.”

Prajna wisdom can encompass all dharmas, yet it does not become tainted by any single dharma.

The deluded speak with their mouths, while the wise practice with their minds. There are also deluded people who sit quietly with empty minds, thinking of nothing, and call this greatness. One should not speak with such people, as they hold wrong views.

The capacity of the mind is vast and great, encompassing the Dharma realm. Its function is to understand clearly and distinctly. Its correct function is to know all. All is one; one is all. Coming and going freely, the mind’s substance is unobstructed. That is Prajna.²

2. Buddhist Text Translation Society, *The Sixth Patriarch’s Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, p120-121

Ultimately, the wisdom of Prajna can understand everything without becoming attached to anything.

The *Platform Sutra*, Prajna Chapter uses the vastness of space as a wonderful metaphor to reveal the characteristics of Prajna. For example, it speaks of the mind's vastness—how vast? As vast as the void! This makes the profound and mysterious concept of Prajna feel approachable and natural. So, what aspects of Prajna are “as vast as the void”?

First, it is limitless and boundless like the void.

Second, it possesses the characteristic of formlessness, just like the void.

Third, it encompasses everything, just like the void.

Forth, its function of “Right Knowing” is pervasive like the void, present in everything yet not dwelling in anything. The term “Samyak-sambuddha” (Correct Peerless Enlightenment), one of the ten great epithets of

the Buddha, refers to the Prajna wisdom that knows everything without attachment. It's the same with the void, as put in the saying, "The vast sky does not hinder the white clouds from flying."

Why does the mind of an ordinary being attach to everything? This is rooted in greed, which is a characteristic feature of an ordinary mind. Those who study Buddhism often advise others "not to be attached." It's easy to say so, but difficult to practice it. The difficulty lies in the fact that many people have never seriously contemplated how an attached mind is formed.

In fact, an attached mind relies on a system of delusion and is psychologically based on greed, aversion, and ignorance. The degree of attachment is directly dependent on the extent of greed and dependence. The deeper the dependence, the deeper the attachment; the deeper the attachment, the more one is controlled.

How can one truly achieve non-attachment? One way

is to develop a sense of detachment towards the external world, and thereby reduce dependence, despite delusion not being completely eliminated—like calmly watching the clouds rise and vanish in a light breeze. Another way is to genuinely experience the nature of enlightenment, adhering to nothing. A mind dwelling in awakened nature is like a mirror reflecting everything without retaining anything; when objects come, their reflections appear, and when they go, no trace is left.

The Prajna wisdom revealed in Buddhist teachings is precisely to help practitioners clearly see themselves and the world, thereby diminishing their attachment to the self and to the world.

For example, the *Diamond Sutra* repeatedly expounds the principle of no-self—“no form of self, no form of others, no form of sentient beings, and no form of longevity.” And the *Heart Sutra* goes even further, stating, “...no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind...no wisdom and no attainment.” No-self does not imply that the individual

“self” does not exist. Instead, it means walking out of the wrong perception of the self and reducing attachment to the self.

Similarly, we need to correctly understand that the external world is inherently without self, and it is a false appearance of conditional relationships, just like a dream or an illusion. Only by realizing this can we reduce attachment to the external world.

When we no longer have incorrect attachments or dependencies toward ourselves and the world, our greed can be diminished. This allows us to return to the original mind, maintaining inner transcendence, purity, and freedom.

3. Capacity for Self-Healing in Everyone

Based on the principle that “The self-nature of Bodhi is originally clear and pure,” Chan Buddhism’s practice focuses on directly unlocking the power of self-realization

and self-liberation.

The *Platform Sutra* places importance on the guidance of a teacher and affirms the significance of a great and wise teacher, but it emphasizes more strongly that self-liberation is the key. No matter how insightful the teacher is, if the practitioner does not seek self-realization and self-liberation, and solely relies on the teacher for liberation, it is definitely not a feasible approach.

Huineng said, “When one is deluded, a teacher guides. When one is enlightened, one guides oneself. Though the term ‘guide’ is the same, its application is different. I, Huineng, was born in a border region, and my pronunciation is not proper. Having received the Dharma transmission from my teacher, I have now attained enlightenment and only rely on my self-nature to guide myself.”

If you are unable to enlighten yourself, you must seek out a great Good Knowing Advisor, one who understands the Dharma of the Most Superior Vehicle and who will

direct you to the right road. Such a Good Knowing Advisor possesses great karmic conditions, which is to say that he will transform you and guide you and lead you to see your nature. It is because of the Good Knowing Advisor that all wholesome Dharmas can arise. All the Buddhas of the three periods of time, and the twelve divisions of Sutra texts as well, exist within the nature of people, originally complete within them. If you are unable to enlighten yourself, you should seek out the instruction of a Good Knowing Advisor who will lead you to see your nature.³

If you can enlighten yourself, you need not seek externally. If you persistently believe that a great Good Knowing Advisor is necessary for liberation, it is not so. Why? Because a true Knowing Advisor arises within your own mind to enlighten yourself. If your delusion and false thoughts arise, even if an external Good Knowing Advisor provides guidance, you cannot attain liberation. If you give rise to true Prajna contemplation, in an instant, your false thoughts

3. Buddhist Text Translation Society, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, p145

will be extinguished. Recognizing your true nature, you attain Buddhahood in a single moment of enlightenment.

If the basic understanding that “The self-nature of Bodhi is originally clear and pure” helps establish confidence in psychotherapy, then recognizing that everyone possesses the ability for self-healing and self-liberation can inspire a longing for the sudden enlightenment methods of Chan Buddhism.

Although everyone possesses the self-nature of Bodhi, how can one realize it? It must be through Prajna wisdom.

The Prajna wisdom in Buddhism is divided into three types: the Prajna of texts, the Prajna of contemplation, and the Prajna of ultimate reality. The introspective meditation familiar to many mostly stays at the level of contemplative Prajna, which cannot be separated from the active engagement of the sixth consciousness. However, the meditation practice in Chan Buddhism is based directly on the Prajna of ultimate reality, aiming to experience the

uncontrived mind. Engaging in meditation from an uncontrived mind can more thoroughly, directly, and swiftly resolve psychological issues.

The self-liberation ability in Chan Buddhism comes from this uncontrived mind, which can only be realized by oneself and cannot be granted by buddhas, bodhisattvas, or great and wise teachers. When an ordinary being's mind is trapped in delusion and unable to comprehend the true nature or attain awakening on their own, they indeed need the guidance of a great and wise teacher to see their true nature—but only as a guide and helper, not a substitute. After receiving direction from a wise teacher, one must personally practice it. This is because truly understanding one's true nature depends on their own effort; and resolving psychological issues also depends on their own effort, just as the saying goes, “When one is deluded, a teacher guides. When one is enlightened, one guides oneself.” If one makes no effort, merely hoping for salvation from a wise teacher, this is stated as “you are mistaken” in the *Platform Sutra*.

This also applies to the basic understanding of psychotherapy: Are psychological issues ultimately resolved by the patients themselves or by the psychotherapists? What role exactly does a psychotherapist play? I believe the answers to these questions share common ground with Buddhist practice.

In an era with a high prevalence of psychological disorders, the three basic understandings provided by the *Platform Sutra* for psychotherapy have unique and practical significance.

IV

METHODS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

The essence of Chan practice, as summarized in the *Platform Sutra*, can be encapsulated in three phrases, “No-thought as the principle, no-form as the essence, no-abidance as the basis.” The first phrase represents the goal, the second phrase the understanding, and the third phrase the method. It can be said that these three phrases provide a supreme and direct methodology for psychotherapy.

1. No-Thought as the Principle

The practice of Chan Buddhism centers around realizing the Prajna—the mind of “no-thought,” as its principle.

“No-thought” does not mean the elimination of thoughts. Rather it means that the wisdom of Prajna is not presented in the form of thoughts. It transcends thoughts, yet it can generate all thoughts. When thoughts arise, seeing that thoughts are empty is to understand no-thought. When one abides in emptiness, the arising thoughts manifest as the infinite wondrous functions of no-thought.

Once one realizes the essence of no-thought and develops the inner awakened mind, all psychological issues will naturally be resolved.

2. No-Form as the Essence

“No-form as the essence” refers to the understanding of awakening and emptiness, meaning that the nature of enlightenment is boundless and formless, neither empty nor existent.

The *Platform Sutra* is a classic based on the *Diamond Sutra*. To understand the concept of formlessness, it is

also advisable to refer to the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and other Prajnaparamita texts.

1) Understanding emptiness breaks attachment to inherent existence

Among the various confusions that lead to psychological issues, the most typical erroneous cognition is the view of self-nature.

The view of self-nature refers to the belief in an indivisible, unchanging, and inherently existing entity. Ordinary beings tend to perceive the Five Aggregates—form, sensation, conception, mental formation, and consciousness—as “self” and cling to them as real. This “self” further generates a view of self-nature and a sense of reality toward everything it perceives, from the self itself to the external world.

In fact, whether the *Heart Sutra* states, “form is emptiness,” or the latest discoveries in modern physics, both tell

us that neither the external world nor our own lives are indivisible entities. However, ordinary beings have been firmly trapped in the view of self-nature since beginning-less time. Because of this view, they cling to a tangible self and external world, giving rise to greed or aversion. When confronted with favorable or adverse circumstances, it can trigger negative emotions and psychological issues at any time.

The inability to transcend the view of self-nature is the cognitive root of all psychological problems. Only by understanding emptiness can one break free from the attachment to inherent existence.

2) Understanding formlessness breaks inherent existence and nihilistic emptiness

Chan Buddhism takes formlessness as its essence, guiding practitioners to establish an understanding of formlessness. This approach thoroughly negates the view of self-nature and completely breaks the attachment to

inherent existence.

On one hand, formlessness negates the attachment to the inherent existence of external phenomena. As stated in the *Diamond Sutra*, “The essence of forms is no-form.” According to the wisdom of Prajnaparamita in the Madhyamaka (Middle Way), all phenomena are devoid of self-nature. The self-nature that we believe to be real does not actually exist. “No-form” does not aim to negate the existing phenomena, but rather to negate the inherent unchanging perception that people project onto these phenomena, thereby leaving no foothold for the arising of greed and aversion.

On the other hand, by establishing an understanding of formlessness, one can realize that the mind of no-thought, the awakened mind, is formless. It is “neither empty nor existent”—meaning it is not inherently existent in any tangible form, nor is it attached to emptiness, but rather infinitely functional in its wondrous use.

3. No-Abidance as the Basis

With the understanding of formlessness, one can achieve the awakening of the mind through the method of no-abidance (no-dwelling).

What is no-dwelling? The *Platform Sutra* says:

No-dwelling is the basic nature of human beings. In the world of good and evil, attractiveness and ugliness, friendliness and hostility, when faced with language which is offensive, critical, or argumentative, you should treat it all as empty and have no thought of revenge. In every thought, do not think of former states. If past, present, and future thoughts succeed one another without interruption, it is bondage. Not to dwell in dharmas from thought to thought is to be free from bondage. That is to take no-dwelling as the basis.¹

1. Buddhist Text Translation Society, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, p209-210

No-dwelling means that the mind does not cling to any object.

This is precisely the method Chan Buddhism teaches for experiencing the nature of enlightenment, directly transcending the attachment to dualistic opposition. Dualistic opposition is a characteristic of ordinary beings' cognition, constantly distinguishing between existence and non-existence, good and bad, beauty and ugliness, impurity and purity, etc. The practice of no-abidance leads one to directly experience the true mind: all phenomena of dualistic opposition are merely illusory and conditional, without any fixed or unchanging entity.

Facing the illusion of dualistic opposition, as long as the mind abides in something, it will lead to either greed or aversion. For instance, in the case of beauty and ugliness, if we crave beauty, we will naturally reject ugliness. Therefore, only by fully recognizing that all phenomena are conditional and illusory can one transcend dualistic opposition and achieve a state where the mind abides in nothing.

No-abidance implies that, by not clinging to the external world of dualistic oppositions, we do not become dependent on it, allowing the mind to remain independent and pure, and return to its inherent nature of awakening. Conversely, if deeply attached to the dualistic world, we will be trapped with greed, suffer from afflictions, and fall into a system of delusion.

The sudden enlightenment approach of Chan Buddhism directly transcends dualistic opposition and thoroughly distances one from attachments to self and the world. This enables us to break free from greed and aversion and to merge into our inherent awakening. The Sixth Patriarch himself attained enlightenment upon hearing a verse from the *Diamond Sutra*, “A pure mind arises out of no-dwelling.” As a principle of Chan practice, no-dwelling runs throughout the *Platform Sutra* and Chan Buddhism as a whole.

In guiding practice, the *Platform Sutra* consistently reveals the non-dualistic approach.

The Sixth Patriarch instructs Huiming, saying:

“Think of neither good nor evil. At this very moment, what is your original face?”

The Sixth Patriarch also expounded the Dharma to Master Yinzong.

Yinzong asked, “How did the Fifth Patriarch transmit the teaching to you?”

“There was no transmission,” replied Huineng. “It was only about seeing one’s true nature, not about meditation and liberation.”

Yinzong further asked, “Why did you not discuss meditation and liberation?”

Huineng said, “Because they are dualistic dharmas, not the essence of Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha’s teaching is the teaching of non-duality.”

Non-dualism transcends dualism. Once we eliminate the attachment to dualistic opposition, we can eliminate afflictions, see the true nature of the mind, and completely resolve psychological issues, achieving the ultimate effectiveness in psychological healing—becoming a fully enlightened Buddha and a genuinely mentally healthy individual.

From the perspective of psychotherapy, Chan Buddhism is a psychological therapy system that achieves self-healing through sudden enlightenment. This sudden enlightenment therapy follows the methods of “no-thought as the principle, no-form as the essence, and no-abidance as the basis.” After following the methods of no-form and no-abidance, we can transcend duality, break free from attachments, and ultimately realize the mind of no-thought. Then, grounded in the mind of no-thought, we can clear all delusions and afflictions from our lives, thereby achieving a healthy and complete quality of life.

V

SUMMARY

As a classic text of sudden enlightenment teaching, the *Platform Sutra* pinpoints the root of psychological issues, based on delusion and enlightenment. Meanwhile, it proposes a method that directly addresses these roots, based on the insight of awakening nature, offering a complete solution to psychological problems. Therefore, it is of significant importance in contemporary times to study the *Platform Sutra* from a psychotherapeutic perspective and to understand the value of Chan Buddhism in psychotherapy.

VI

Q&A

Shen Heyong: Thank you, Master Jiqun!

I am a Jungian psychoanalyst. Let me share a story with everyone.

Just now, Master Jiqun mentioned Master Taixu. He had a good friend named Richard Wilhelm. Richard Wilhelm lived in China for over twenty years and was the Marco Polo of the inner world of China. He not only helped Master Taixu spread the Dharma to the West but also was Jung's teacher about China. He once wrote in an article, "I met Jung in China." However, Jung never visited

China. He said, “Jung is an incarnation of Huineng.”

Xu Guangxing: I was deeply moved and joyful upon hearing this, becoming more and more lucid as I listened. It felt as though I was not hearing with my ears, but rather absorbing it into my body.

Psychologists have also been studying the *Platform Sutra*. However, Master Jiqun’s interpretation from a psychotherapeutic perspective is a pioneering endeavor in research. This has greatly benefited me.

Master Jiqun said that the root of psychological disorders primarily lies in inner ignorance and lack of enlightenment. I think, when we conduct psychological diagnoses during consultations, we are assessing the extent of the visitors’ delusions: Are they unable to see the truth of external things, lost in external delusions? Or do they fail to see their own inner nature, lost in internal delusions? Or are they unable to grasp the nature of life in society—what Jung refers to as the common and universal consciousness

of humanity, the flow of life—feeling pessimistic, weary of the world, or even hopeless?

There is also a relationship between delusion and karma. When psychology explains everyday human behavior, it considers cultural contexts. As Eastern and Western cultural contexts differ, the cultural influences people experience also vary. Additionally, it takes into account the influence of an individual's personality and habits, which should correspond to what Buddhism refers to as karma. I believe that delusion and karma may influence each other as well.

Master Jiqun just mentioned that before the awakening of life, one must first experience an awakening of inner personality. It seems that psychotherapy can facilitate the awakening of personality, but that is not sufficient. How can we further develop this into a full awakening of life?

I would like to ask Master Jiqun for further guidance.

Master Jiqun: In Buddhism, defilements have three categories: karmic defilements, afflictive defilements, and maturing defilements. Among these, the afflictive defilements refer to the troubles inflicted on the mind, also known as delusion; the karmic defilements are troubles caused by actions; and the maturing defilements are the results of both the mind and actions, manifesting as the suffering of the cycle of life and death. The lives of ordinary people are a cycle of delusion, karma, and suffering because they are based on delusion; therefore, both karma and its results are also deluded and tainted.

The root of afflictions, karma, and karmic effects is ignorance. Once we realize the true nature of the mind, ignorance can be dispelled, and karma and its results will gradually be purified. After enlightenment, although there will be moments of clarity, the strong inertia of past defilements accumulated over time remains. Therefore, after seeing the Way (enlightenment), we must continue to cultivate it in order to gradually break free from and clear away the accumulated delusions and

afflictions of the past.

Buddhism provides a comprehensive explanation of this process.

Wu Heming: I would like to ask Master Jiqun to expound on “the principle of realizing the mind of no-thought—to see this mind with an uncontrived mind.”

Master Jiqun: An uncontrived mind represents the nature of enlightenment and is the natural state of an awakened mind. All practices in Buddhism aim to eliminate delusion, which is the focus of Buddhist teachings. Chan Buddhism is based on directly recognizing this uncontrived, awakened mind.

Directly realizing this awakened, uncontrived mind can be very simple and natural, because the mind in the present moment represents the true nature of life. So Chan Buddhism often says, “The lush green bamboo is entirely the Dharma body; the vibrant yellow flowers are nothing

but Prajna (wisdom).” Because it is readily present, it is like “the intention of the ancestors on the tips of a hundred grasses,” without the need for any extra effort. It’s too easy!

However, for a life filled with delusion, the pattern of the contrived mind has already formed an inertia and is constantly overwhelmed by the habits of delusion and affliction. Now, recognizing that naturally inherent, uncontrived mind becomes quite unfamiliar. So it is necessary to engage in many deliberate practices to break through the heavy encirclement.

Many people do not understand why Chan masters sometimes say, seeing one’s true nature is as easy as turning over one’s hand, while other times they say, it’s extremely difficult. In reality, it is because the practitioners they are guiding have different causes and conditions, making the level of difficulty naturally different.

Hanyan: I’d like to seek the guidance of Master Jiqun:

What is the relationship between greed, aversion, ignorance, and emotions? There are several prominent doubts in this regard.

Psychology generally thinks that human basic emotions, such as sadness, anger, etc., are not inherently good or bad. When these emotions arise, they are usually hard to control. By the time one becomes aware of them, it's already too late. So psychotherapy focuses on dealing with emotions after they are recognized, including attempts similar to experiencing emptiness.

My question is: if basic emotions themselves are not inherently good or bad, what is their relationship with greed, aversion, and ignorance? Are greed, aversion, and ignorance emotions? Are they basic emotions, or different kinds of psychological state beyond basic emotions?

Master Jiqun: Psychology solves psychological issues after greed, aversion, and ignorance arise. This is because psychology considers normal levels of greed, aversion, and

ignorance as acceptable. For instance, normal greed does not generate excessive negative emotions, and moderate aversion does not lead to psychological disorders. Only when greed and aversion become excessive do they become sources of psychological problems.

Buddhism, however, traces the roots of psychological issues, finding that these roots are related to greed and aversion, which in turn are linked to ignorance, with its erroneous cognitive origins. By identifying the source, Buddhism starts with reconstructing correct cognition, then addresses greed and aversion through meditation, and subsequently resolves ignorance. Ultimately, it aims to eradicate all negative emotions and adverse personality traits from their very roots.

I think this may be the difference between Buddhism and psychology. The reason why Buddhism is considered the ultimate psychology may also lie here.

Hanyan: Thank you, Master! I have another question.

Does a person still experience emotions after sudden enlightenment?

Master Jiqun: Attaining enlightenment is merely reaching a very important stage in practice. The practitioner gains the ability to see oneself clearly, manage their emotions independently, and know how to address emotional issues. However, after enlightenment, one must continue to cultivate the Way, which is what Chan Buddhism refers to as “maintaining enlightenment.” This involves familiarizing oneself with the nature of awakening, strengthening the inner, positive, awakened forces, which in turn enhances the ability to clear inner delusion and various emotions.

A person who has just attained enlightenment is still unfamiliar with the nature of awakening and may appear not much different from an ordinary person.

Shen Heyong: The emotions discussed in psychology include cognition, attitudes, and general emotional responses.

In fact, the greed, aversion, and ignorance mentioned by Master just now may not be emotions as defined in psychology, but rather the underlying factors behind these emotions.

Even after enlightenment, a person may still experience emotions, but I believe these should not be narrowly defined as emotions by psychology.