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UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EMPTINESS AND HUI-NENG'S SELF-NATURE THROUGH THE LENS OF GESTALT SHIFT

The realization of “Self-nature” is often considered the ultimate goal of practice in Ch’an Buddhism, encompassing a direct understanding and complete comprehension of the concept of emptiness. However, the Platform Sutra attributed to the Sixth Patriarch HuiNeng asserts that all sentient beings are primordially enlightened and share the same “Self-nature”. It is intrinsically pure and self-sufficient. If one thinks we need to gain something to reach that realization, it’s a misunderstanding. Because we cannot gain what we already have. If one thinks we need to lose something instead, it’s a misunderstanding again. We cannot lose what we don’t have. If we don’t need to gain or lose anything to realize our “Self-nature”, while most of us are still blind from it, what soteriological approach should we practice? To answer this question, applying Gestalt Shift, a psychological tool originating from the Western tradition, offers valuable insights. This essay will first explore the Gestalt Shift, its relationship with Hui-Neng's realization of “Self-nature”, the concept of emptiness, and the paradox of duality. Furthermore, through the lens of Gestalt Shift, we will unveil Hui-Neng's final teaching, which employs the utilization of the “36 pairs of opposites” as a means to transcend duality, genuinely grasp the essence of emptiness, and attain full emancipation while embracing the world.

Keywords: Chan Buddhism, Hui-Neng, concept of emptiness, self, liberation.

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ПОНИМАНИЕ КОНЦЕПЦИИ ПУСТОТЫ И САМОСУЩНОСТИ ХУЭЙ-НЭН ЧЕРЕЗ ПРИЗМУ СДВИГА ВОСПРИЯТИЯ

Осознание «самосущности» часто считается конечной целью практики в чань-буддизме, охватывающей прямое понимание и полное постижение концепции пустоты. Однако сутра Платформы, приписываемая VI патриарху Хуэйнэну, утверждает, что все живые существа изначально просветлены и разделяют одну и ту же «самосущность». Она изначально чиста и самодостаточна. Если кто-то думает, что нам нужно что-то обрести, чтобы достичь этой реализации, это заблуждение. Потому что мы не можем обрести то, что у нас уже есть. Если кто-то думает, что нам нужно что-то потерять, это снова заблуждение. Мы не можем потерять то, чего у нас нет. Если нам не нужно ничего приобретать или терять, чтобы осознать нашу «самосущность», в то время как большинство из нас все еще слепы к этому, какой сотериологический подход мы должны практиковать? Чтобы ответить на этот вопрос, применение гештальт-сдвига, психологического

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инструмента, происходящего из западной традиции, дает ценные идеи. В этом эссе сначала будет рассмотрен гештальт-сдвиг, его связь с реализацией Хуэй-Нэном «самости», концепции пустоты и парадокса двойственности. Кроме того, через призму гештальт-сдвига мы раскроем последнее учение Хуэй-Нэна, которое использует использование «36 пар противоположностей» как средство преодоления двойственности, подлинного постижения сущности пустоты и достижения полного освобождения при принятии мира.

Ключевые слова: чань-буддизм, Хуэй-Нэн, концепция пустоты, самость, освобождение.

Gestalt Shift

Gestalt Shift is a psychological concept rooted in Gestalt psychology, a school of thought that emphasizes the importance of holistic perception and understanding. The term "Gestalt" originates from the German word for "form" [Wheeler & Axelsson 2015: 15]. The essence of the Gestalt Shift lies in perceiving a new configuration or pattern emerging from the reorganization or restructuring of elements within a field of perception. In psychology, Gestalt Shift refers to a cognitive process through which individuals experience a sudden shift in their perception or interpretation of a situation, object, or concept. It involves a change from a fragmented or incomplete understanding to a more comprehensive and integrated perception of the whole [Baker 2012: 576].

Hui-Neng's realization of "Self-nature"

In the Platform Sutra, one of the most prominent texts for Early Ch'an Buddhism, the Fifth Patriarch instructed his disciples to compose a "mind verse" to demonstrate their level of enlightenment. To respond, Shen-Xiu, the head monk at that time wrote:

> The body is the Bodhi tree.
> The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
> At all times we must strive to wipe it constantly
> So dust will not accumulate [CBETA 2023: Q4, T48, no. 2008, p. 348b24–25][1].

The simile of mirror and dust is one of the most important metaphors in early Ch'an [McRae 1986: 146]. While the "mirror stand" represents "Self-nature", the "dust" on the "mirror" refers to our delusive thoughts which obscure the mirror from shining. Therefore, from a conventional perspective, the sensible act of removing delusion from our "Self-nature" would have been wiping the dust off the mirror. Logically, the more diligently we wipe, the cleaner the mirror will be and so will the "Self-nature". However, this seemingly to be rational act accorded to conventional understanding was refuted by Hui-Neng who wrote:

> Bodhi originally had no tree
> The mirror also has no stand

[1] 《六祖大師法寶壇經》 The Platform Sutra：「身是菩提樹， 心如明鏡臺， 時時勤拂拭， 勿使惹塵埃」。 The translation is modified from McRae, 2000 and Yampolsky, 1967.

Fundamentally there is nothing
Where is there room for dust? [CBETA 2023: Q4, T48, no. 2008, p. 349a7–8][1].

This is a very mind-blowing claim: if there is no tree or mirror in the first place, how could dust ever accumulate? While Shen-Xiu's proposition of wiping the dust constantly off the mirror seems to be "practical" and "realistic" from a conventional perspective, it is only true from a worldly phenomenal point of view. Since there is countless dust in the world, keep wiping constantly not only sounds repetitive and tiring, but more importantly, it is an endless task.

Indeed, attempting to address worldly challenges solely through the lens of conventional phenomena 事相 is destined to be ineffective. In light of this understanding, Hui-Neng adopted a revolutionary approach. He recognized that the root cause of our delusion lies in our fixation on the superficial "existence" of conventional phenomena 事相 while remaining unaware of its underlying fundamental principle 法理: the emptiness nature of all phenomena. But the question now is: when the "existence" of both the Bodhi and the mirror might look so real to many of us, how could we ever come to the conclusion that they both possess emptiness nature?

With this, Hui-Neng's revolutionary approach can be likened to a "Gestalt Shift": a sudden awakening from an incomplete understanding to a more integrated perception that occurs when we realize the fundamental principle: the ultimate nature of co-dependent co-arising amid the "existence" of conventional phenomena around us. It entails seeing what we always see but have never truly seen before – a revelation of the universal emptiness nature of all phenomena that has always been there but previously unnoticed.

To see merely the image of either the duck or the rabbit would be akin to recognizing only the conventional phenomena 事相 without awakening to its underlying fundamental principle 法理.

Gestalt shift and the concept of emptiness

If we are attached to the duck, we cannot see the rabbit. Likewise, if we are attached to the rabbit, we cannot see the duck. Only by letting go of both images can we truly perceive the presence of a duck within the rabbit and a rabbit within the duck, unveiling their co-dependent co-arising nature: when the duck appears, the rabbit emerges simultaneously and when the rabbit disappears, the duck vanishes too. They are intricately interdependent.

This reciprocal interdependence of the duck and the rabbit is like what the Buddha called the two sheaves of reeds leaning against each other: removing any one of the sheaves would lead to the fall of the other [S.II 1994–2001: 114]. Their relationship is inter-dependent, simultaneous, and reciprocal with no time lapse [Somaratne 2021: 163]. Since the commonly agreed definition of "intrinsic nature" is being independent and permanent with controlling power, as the rabbit and duck are interdependent, they are devoid of instrinic nature. Nothing truly "exists" but only a manifestation with its inherent nature as empty.

[1] 《六祖大師法寶壇經》 The Platform Sutra：「「菩提本無樹， 明鏡亦非臺； 本來無一物， 何處惹塵埃？」. The translation is modified from McRae, 2000 and Yampolsky, 1967.

Ultimately, when we see the perspective that they are nothing more than a bunch of scratching lines and dots and hence, originally and fundamentally, no duck no rabbit, we come to understand their true essence: the emptiness nature inherent in all phenomena despite the provisional appearance of the duck and the rabbit. Since the duck and the rabbit have never been born (out of nothing) as their presences are always depending on each other; nothing has ever arisen nor ceased and hence: non-arising and non-ceasing.

While everything in the world possesses a provisional name and temporary appearance on a worldly conventional truth level, the ultimate truth reveals that they all, being codependent-co-arising, are devoid of intrinsic nature.

More profoundly, not only do all phenomena exhibit the nature of emptiness through the principle of Dependent Origination, but in fact, the very principle itself, is also empty and devoid of intrinsic nature. The logic is like this: according to the definition of the principle of Dependent Origination, "this being present, that comes to be; on this arising, that arises. This being absent, that does not come to be; on this ceasing, that ceases" [M.I 264].

Initially, as we see, there is still a conventional "this" and "that" being recognized. However, it is precisely due to this principle that everything depends on everything, by definition everything that lacks independency has no instrinic nature, leading to the ultimate truth of non-arising and non-ceasing. Since everything is non-arising, there has never been a substantial "thing" to arise at all from the very beginning. As there is nothing that depends on anything; consequently, the very principle itself loses its foundation and dissolves itself too. Thus, not only do all phenomena including the self-referential "I", lack inherent existence and possess emptiness nature, but the principle itself is also empty, symbolizing that even the Dharma is empty.

Gestalt and the paradox of duality

Besides the nature of emptiness, the "Gestalt Shift" also helps explain the paradox of duality beyond all aspects: left vs right, conventional vs ultimate, name-and-matter vs consciousness, world vs mind as well as samsara vs nirvana, etc. Although they are all opposite at first glance, they are deeply interrelated inherently. However, we don't need to get rid of one side to see the other i.e. we don't need to get rid of conventional to go to the ultimate. On the contrary, when the right appears, the left appears. When the right disappears, the left also disappears. Only by perceiving the co-dependent co-arising nature of all phenomena on a conventional level could we gain insight into the ultimate.

In other words, conventional truth is a key condition that is necessary for the ultimate truth to be revealed. They are like the intertwining between the "rabbit" and the "duck" in the Gestalt shift. The provisional existence of the duck necessitates the provisional existence of the rabbit but ultimately, all we need to see is their emptiness nature inherent to achieve full awakening. Nagarjuna said it very well in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā verses 24: without relying upon the conventional truth, the ultimate truth could not be obtained. Without obtaining the ultimate truth, then nirvana could not be attained. Gestalt shift can also be applied to the mind/world relationship debate: a notion that both scientists and philosophers have been pondering for millennia. On the one hand, one camp insists that the world only exists when one is looking. On the other hand, others believe that the world is there irrespective of whether one is looking or not. However, one strand of early Buddhist

canonical thought, which foregrounds the doctrine of dependent origination holds that the world we perceive arises concurrently with the mind.

Consciousness has name-and-matter as its condition which in turn, name-and-matter has consciousness as its condition too, and does not go beyond. This is mentioned a few times in Early Buddhist texts namely the Dīgha Nikāya "Collection of Long Discourses" 15, PTS: Dii55, sections 21-22; the Mahānidāna Sutta "the Great Discourse on Causations" and the Saṃyukta Nikāya "The Connected Discourses on Causation" 12.67 – the Sheaves of Reeds a reciprocal loop: an irresistible lifeworld feature that any serious reflection on the mind/world relationship is bound to get entangled in it [Sharf 2021: 1039]. While consciousness refers to our mind, name-and-matter refers to the world. For the question of whether the mind comes first or the world, it's just simply inconceivable. More precisely, it's not even the right question to ask. Since it's a circular loop, there is neither a start nor an end. Does a circle ever have a beginning or an end? No! Like the Gestalt picture, does the duck or the rabbit come first? Neither! They are co-dependent-co-arising. The world depends on the mind and reciprocally, the mind also depends on the world. Their relationship is like the rabbit and the duck in the Gestalt shift. They are mutually interdependent. Indeed, the loop is not a problem for us to solve. The more we want to escape from the loop, the more we get entangled. Instead, to solve the unsolvable, all we need to do is not try to solve or escape from it but embrace it. Fundamentally we are all part of the loop so trying to solve or escape from it is useless. Just like an eye cannot see its own eye. However, we don't need to see our eyes to know that our eyes are here. The moment we use our eyes to see, we have already attained our eyes. Problem solved. Similarly, to have wisely accepted the unsolvable means we have already solved it. The moment we see and embrace the principle of Dependent Origination that there is no such principle [as everything is non-arising], we see the principle: saw the unseeable; solved the unsolvable. The moment we see through this delusion, we have already let go, embraced the truth and realized our Self-nature.

When the "mind" comprehends the ultimate truth of this profound emptiness nature of the "world" and the "mind", known as the "loop" aforementioned, delusion will be dispelled, and the mind of Bodhi will be achieved. Again, like the "duck" and the "rabbit" in the Gestalt shift, this highlights the interconnected and inseparable nature of our "mind" and the "world". However, the mind can only perceive the emptiness nature of both the "mind" and the "world" when the "mind" as a subject has an object to confront with which is the "world", providing a crucial opportunity for awakening to happen with the "world" acting as an agent for the "mind" to perceive the interdependent looping structure between the "mind" and the "world" and hence, seeing its own original Self-nature. Hui Neng is among the few who recognize this particular manner in which the "mind" and the "world" enfold each other and resonates it with the "Formless" poem:

> Buddha Dharma is in this world;
> (Thus), awakening can only be found in this world;
> If you search for Bodhi outside of this world;
> It is like looking for a rabbit's horn.
> Right view is called renunciation of world;
> Wrong view is called worldly;

When both right and wrong views are completely taken away;
The nature of Bodhi appears [CBETA 2023: Q4, T48, no. 2008, 351c9–12][1].

Right and wrong views are dualistic opposites. We can draw a parallel between the concept of "right view" to be akin to the image of the "rabbit", and the concept of "wrong view" to be likened to the image of the "duck" in the context of the Gestalt Shift. However, as emphasized by Hui-Neng, the key lies in transcending both the notions of "right" and "wrong". By recognizing their interdependence and, consequently, the inherent emptiness of both the "duck" and the "rabbit" – representing concepts of "right" and "wrong" – we let go of the attachment to rigid views, break through the limitations of conceptual frameworks, open ourselves to a more expanded perspective where the conventional distinctions of right and wrong lose their absolute hold, and gain insight into original Selfnature.

In the poem, we can also see how Hui-Neng advocates the importance of embracing the world. The mind can perceive the emptiness nature of both itself and the world only when it directly engages with the world. It is this interaction with the world that allows an opportunity for Bodhi to appear. When the mind encounters the experiences and phenomena of the world, it is presented with a chance to observe and investigate their true nature. By closely examining the impermanence, insubstantiality, and interdependent nature of these experiences, the mind can begin to recognize their inherent nature of emptiness. Thus, the world serves as an important catalyst for awakening, offering the mind an indispensable opportunity to penetrate the façade of inherent existence and perceive the underlying principle: emptiness. Only through this transformative process can the mind be freed from delusion and awakened to the true nature of reality.

Gestalt and the 36 pairs of opposites

This process of embracing the world and engaging with its manifestations provides fertile ground for awakening to unfold. It is through this direct embracement with the world that the mind can transcend its habitual patterns of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. By seeing through the illusory nature of all phenomena, the mind can be awakened to a deeper understanding of the emptiness nature of both itself and the world. As we see how Hui-Neng appreciates worldly "engagement", it is not surprising that his approach of practice is alien to this seemingly hostile but in fact, the most irrepressible proposition: whenever a person asks you a question, answer with the opposite so that a pair of antonyms is created. For example, "coming" and "going" is the reciprocal cause of each other, so when the interdependence of the two is entirely done away with, there would be – in an absolute sense – neither "coming" nor "going" [CBETA 2023: Q4, T48, no. 2008, 360a28–b1][2].

In Hui-Neng's final teaching as per the Platform Sutra, he introduced a framework known as the "36 pairs of opposites" i.e. long vs short, good vs evil, appear vs disappear,

[1] 《六祖大師法寶壇經》 The Platform Sutra：「「佛法在世間， 不離世間覺， 離世覓菩提， 恰如求兔角。正見名出世， 邪見是世間， 邪正盡打却， 菩提性宛然。」. The translation is modified from McRae, 2000 and Yampolsky, 1967.

[2] 《六祖大師法寶壇經》 The Platform Sutra：「「忽有人問汝法，出語盡雙，皆取對法，來去相因。究竟二法盡除，更無去處。」

Bodhi vs delusion, etc. He proclaimed that by understanding and skillfully employing these 36 pairs, one can access the all-pervading principle present in every Sutra. Through the negation of the absolute existence of these opposites, one can liberate themselves from the shackles of dualistic attachments [CBETA 2023: Q4, T48, no. 2008, 360b20–22][1].

To further illustrate this concept, we can again employ the analogy of the Gestalt Shift. Imagine a person who claims to only see the rabbit, indicating one's attachment to that particular perception. In response, Hui-Neng would point out the presence of the duck to disrupt their attachment to the rabbit, and vice versa. This act of pointing out the alternative perspective serves a twofold purpose.

Firstly, it allows the person to expand their perception and see both the duck and the rabbit. By acknowledging the coexistence of these seemingly contradictory and opposite forms, the person moves beyond the confines of a singular viewpoint and embraces the richness of multiple perspectives. Secondly, pointing out the duck and the rabbit enables the person to recognize the inherent emptiness inherent in both forms. They come to understand that the rabbit exists within the duck, and the duck exists within the rabbit.

This realization highlights the importance of wise attention (yoniso-manasikāra). We all have choices: to be enlightened that although we cannot readily alter the external world; the control lies within our minds. We can train our minds to make wise choices and pay attention to the interdependence of all phenomena instead of their superficial appearance, transcending the boundaries of fixed concepts and revealing the emptiness nature at its core. This approach undoubtedly set the stage for the "Kung-an" practice and the later development of Ch'an Buddhism.

Conclusion

Hui-Neng's approach of directly embracing the world through engagement with opposite pairs, illuminated by the Gestalt Shift is intriguing in its depth. While it may initially appear counterintuitive, it presents an irresistible proposition that allows individuals to directly experience the interconnectedness and inherent nature of emptiness that underlies fixed perspectives. Instead of conforming to conventional expectations, Hui-Neng encourages responding with questions of opposing viewpoints that contradict the norm. This deliberate juxtaposition of antonyms serves to expose the interdependence and mutual causality between the seemingly opposing concepts, such as "coming vs going" and the "world vs mind". By challenging the limitations of language and ordinary conceptual frameworks, practitioners are invited to transcend fixed viewpoints. This disruption of habitual cognitive patterns triggers a sudden shift toward a more holistic perspective, skillfully challenges paradoxical dualistic thinking and thus, ultimately opens the door to a deeper realization of the ultimate truth.

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[1] 《六祖大師法寶壇經》The Platform Sutra：「「師言：「此三十六對法，若解用即道，貫一切經法，出入即離兩邊。」

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