

Master Xuyun's Chan and Life

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Abstract: Since its introduction to China from India, Chan has become a Buddhist school with Chinese characteristics. In the process of its development, because of its tenet of “special transmission outside of the doctrine that does not establish words and letters”, Chan school encountered difficulties in realizing the practice of living. In recent years, Buddhist masters have made many contributions to the development of Chan School. Master Xuyun's advocacy of Chan philosophy and practice made it possible to popularize Chan in people's lives. Master Xuyun's initiatives to promote the development of Chan School have filled out a complete picture of the history of Chan Buddhism.

Keywords: Xuyun; Chan; Life; Practice

1. Introduction

In the modernized era where the pace of life is significantly accelerated, Chan can highlight its importance all the more. Whether it is to cultivate the body and mind, to balance family and work, or even to serve the motherland and benefit human beings, the wisdom of Chan's purity, equality, and compassion can serve as a guide to the current generation. Chan has thousands of years of cultural heritage from ancient India to China, and its theories are vast and profound, and its methods of practice are even more complex. So, how does Chan integrate into our lives in all aspects to guide us in our practice? Master Xuyun (1840-1959) was an important figure in the modern Chan school. He gained great achievements in Chan practice and had an important influence on modern Chan and even on the history of Chinese Buddhism. Master Xuyun's greatest contribution to Chan is that he explained a method of Chan practice suitable for modern people. Based on the practical experience of his predecessors and his practice, he provided specific methods for modern lifestyles.^[1]

2. The present situation at Chan School

Chan is a combination of Chinese and Indian cultures. The doctrine and philosophy of Chan and even Mahāyāna Buddhism are closely connected with the mundane. Chan was introduced to China by Bodhidharma and passed on to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, who developed five branches and seven schools, and his ideas spread overseas. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng put forward the idea that dharma exists in the mundane and is to be realized through the mundane, which advocates the pursuit of liberation in life. The Mahāyāna Buddhist, Nāgārjuna, even proposed that the mundane is Nirvāṇa. In other words, there is no Nirvāṇa to be attained and no Buddha to be realized apart from the mundane. Śākyamuni also became a Buddha as a human being, and even the future Maitreya Buddha will become a Buddha as a human being. Therefore, the ideas of Chan School are also compatible with Mahāyāna Buddhism and closely related to life. However, the legend that Buddha held up a flower and Kāśyapa smiled seems to imply the difficulty of Chan's dissemination. It also shows that it is a daunting task for Chan's methods to be realized among the masses. In terms of the history of Chan, although Chan School and Pure Land School became the mainstream of Buddhism in China after the Song Dynasty, it is undeniable that the development of Chan was in decline. In the late Qing Dynasty, Chan was challenged by foreign religions, including Christianity.

Chan school has been in decline since the Song Dynasty.^[2] The reason for this is that, on the one hand, the doctrine of Chan that special transmission outside of the doctrine that does not establish words and letters is difficult to understand. It can be seen from the Chan koans that there is no logic to follow in the enlightenment of the great masters. Therefore, Chan has high barriers to entry, and it

is difficult for lesser capacity. People like the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, who can have a sudden realization of Intrinsic Nature, must be rare, so he said that his teaching of morality, meditation, and wisdom lead the people with faculty of great or supreme vehicle. However, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng also said that people with the lowest social status may have supreme wisdom, so Chan School can also lead people with lesser capacity, that is, Chan School can embrace the general public.

Therefore, the key is to find out a suitable way for the Chan practice. On the other hand, the practice of Chan often deviates from the original purpose of Chan that the practitioner is not separate from the worldly life. Excessive emphasis on meditation and enlightenment for liberation from life and death gradually made Chan deviate from public and social life. In the Yuan Dynasty, seven days of recitation of the Buddha's name came into fashion unduly. Although the practice of this sort still adhered to Mahāyāna teachings, it actually followed Hinayana. This made Chan gradually become the monopoly of Chan masters who avoided the world and practiced austerities.

The development of Chan School has improved to some extent in recent times. In response to the shortcomings of Chinese Buddhism, Master Taixu put forward the idea of "humanistic Buddhism", in which Buddhist doctrine and practice are no longer castles in the air, but are closely related to people's lives. As Master Taixu said, "One only converts to the Buddha and receives the perfection of the personality. The fulfillment of the human being is the one of the Buddha; this is the true reality." Master Xuyun was even more innovative in his Chan style, proposing the "combination of motion and stillness" in Chan meditation, so that Chan could be better integrated into life, both in teaching and in practice. Throughout his life, Master Xuyun made many contributions to the development of Buddhism and the revitalization of Chinese Buddhism by combining both the mundane and supramundane aspects of Buddhism. Jinghui, who once served Master Xuyun, had inherited Master Xuyun's ideas and put forward the concept of "Chan for Life" to integrate the spirit of Chan into life universally, to realize the transcendence of Chan in life.[3]

3. Master Xuyun's style of Chan

Master Xuyun's style of Chan is characterized by a combination of motion and stillness. As the old saying goes, "When one is still, not a single thought is born, and when one is moving, all good things are realized". That is, when a student sits for meditation, he should extinguish the delusion of his mind, and meanwhile he should enter into meditation tranquility. He should also combine his practice with his motion to accumulate and cultivate goodness and propagate the dharma to benefit human beings. If one can realize that motion and stillness are complementary when performing all good deeds, there will be no excess delusion, that is, no attachment, and the practitioner's mind will be pure and free. So, one can realize Chan in one's life, and this is the correct Chan practice.

4. Master Xuyun's phrase-observing meditation

From Master Xuyun's writings, it can be noticed that he paid special attention to phrase-observing meditation, which is a Chan meditation method that seeks direct attainment of enlightenment through investigation of the beginning of "keywords" (话头). Master Xuyun's phrase-observing meditation is different from that of the Chan masters in the history of Chan School.[4] So how did Master Xuyun define "keyword" and how to observe the beginning keywords?

He said, "The ancients had a lot of koans, and later they specialized in observing keywords, some observing 'who is dragging the dead body', some observing 'What I was before my parents gave birth to me', and more recently, the various parties observing 'who is chanting the Buddha'. They are all the same. If you want to observe who is chanting sutras, who is holding mantras, who is worshipping the Buddha, who is eating, who is wearing clothes, who is walking, who is sleeping, all are the same, and the answer to the word 'who' is the mind. Words start from the mind, the mind is the beginning of keywords; thoughts start from the mind, and the mind is the beginning of thoughts; all dharmas are born from the mind, and the mind is the beginning of all dharmas. In fact, the beginning of keywords is the beginning of thoughts, and the beginning before thoughts is the mind. In other words, before a thought is born, it is the beginning of keywords. It will be seen from this that to observe the beginning of keywords is to observe the mind, that what I was before my parents gave birth to me is the mind, and to observe what I was before my parents gave birth to me is to observe the mind. Pure awareness is the mind. At this moment, the mind is the Buddha. Practitioners maintain the purity of the six senses, from the beginning of a thought, observe this beginning of keywords, and then perceive that the five aggregates are empty in their intrinsic nature, there is not a single thing. If you can maintain unmoving thusness when walking, standing, sitting and lying down, you will be able to see the self-nature and become a Buddha and liberate all sentient beings from suffering." [5]

The beginning points to the original mind at the time when the thought has not yet arisen. Therefore, according to Master Xuyun, before a thought arises, it is the beginning. The beginning of a discourse is usually caused by a question, so there must be something specific to observe at the beginning of a discourse. That is a specific doubt. Otherwise, there is no object to observe. Because the beginning of keywords is the mind, to observe the beginning of words is also to observe the mind, the pure mind that is free from thoughts. By observing one's pure essence through doubts, the focus is on the observation, and it doesn't matter what the answer to the doubt is. If one succeeds in observing the beginning of the keywords, one can use the present thought to correct all deluded thoughts, and at the same time observe the pure self-mind. As Master Xuyun elaborated, the beginning of keywords is the current thought of the essence.^[6]

However, modern people are generally unable to observe the "beginning of the keywords". How can we carry out phrase-observing meditation into our daily routine? Concerning the inability to observe the beginning of keywords, Master Xuyun pointed out, "Why is it that in modern times, there are many people who observe the beginning of words, but not many who realize the way? This is because modern people are not as well grounded as the ancients, and also because practitioners do not have a clear understanding of the rationale for Chan meditation and the way to observe the beginning of the keywords. Some people study everywhere, but in the end, they do not even understand what the beginning of keywords is. This kind of person spends his or her life clinging to the concepts of language and paying attention to the end of the keywords. This is the opposite of phrase-observing meditation. Then it is impossible to actualize the unexcelled great path."^[7] When you are just clinging to a question by itself, instead of gathering your mind to observe yourself, you can only see the end of the question. This means that the key to observing the beginning of keywords is to detach oneself from the concept of language and that one cannot just work on the end of keywords.

Moreover, Master Xuyun thought that one should not look at the "beginning" and "end" of words separately, pointing out: "As for the beginning and the end of keywords, if one is a true practitioner, there is no such thing as the beginning and the end of the keywords, and this is the way it is. If you are a beginner, you might have to pursue the matter from the end of the keywords. Presumably because in the age of the end of the Dharma, the sentient beings have more obstacles and less wisdom, if they don't start at the end of the keywords, they can't grasp its beginning. If they don't practice from the beginning of the words, it is difficult to realize the state of mindlessness."^[8] The implication is that for those who can truly grasp the beginning of the words, there is no difference between the beginning and the end of the keywords. It is especially important to emphasize that those who are just beginning to practice phrase-observing meditation can use both the beginning and the end of keywords at the same time.

5. Conclusion

Master Xuyun's Chan Style of the combination of motion and stillness embodies the aspects of the mundane and supramundane of Buddhism. Early Buddhism emphasized morality, meditation, and wisdom, which in layman's terms means maintaining morality, attaining meditation, and then developing wisdom in meditation. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the attainment of Nirvāṇa in the world. Therefore, master Xuyun's Chan style was to take into account both aspects of the mundane and supramundane of Buddhism. He advocated that both monks and laymen should live their daily lives by practicing Chan and that they should work diligently in their daily lives to quench their delusions, and ultimately attain achievement in their Chan practice and meditation. Master Xuyun's Chan style and his practice are also consistent with the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism, and point out the direction of development of Chinese Buddhism.

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