

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AND CHAN BUDDHIST PRACTICE. A
COMPARISON.

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I

In Phenomenology we try to see the world as it appears to us in our immediate experience. Through the use of the so called "reductions" or "bracketings" we try to free ourselves from all our prejudices, our preconceived ideas of what we experience. We try to see the world as it is, as we experience it before any conceptualization. Chinese Chan Buddhism, what we better know in the west as Zen Buddhism, strives to achieve a very similar goal: to see the reality as it is. This applies to the world around as well as to the human being and his life. Both in the Phenomenological school and Chan it is considered that to achieve this goal man has to practise his mind, he has to become aware of the structure of his consciousness, he has to become aware of the way the world is constituted in our conscious acts.

In this paper, I approach the relationship between the phenomenological method and Chan Buddhism through an example. My example is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976) and his later philosophy, where he describes the characteristic features of thinking. I combine his analysis to the way the same question is approached in Chan practise. In this way, I hope to be able to point to the affinity of the methods.

II

Heidegger teaches the art of thinking in many passages of his later philosophy. To learn to understand the character of thinking and to learn to really think according to Heidegger, you have to practise your thinking. However, this does not mean the practise of formal logic. On the contrary. What you have to do according to Heidegger is to look closely at the process of thinking. And to this kind of practice, which I would also call the basic exercise of the phenomenological method, Heidegger gives many practical advice especially in his books *Was heisst Denken* (What is called Thinking) and *Gelassenheit* (Discourse on Thinking).

In his *Gelassenheit* -book Heidegger writes, that "there are two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: calculative thinking and meditative thinking" (46) He also writes that meditative thinking requires greater effort, it demands more practice than calculative thinking. The concept of meditative thinking has caused many western philosophers to compare Heideggers thought with Chan Buddhist thought, because it is known that in Chan there is also a practise of meditation. The basic bias in this comparison has usually been, that these two ways have been compared as similar philosophical discourses. The mistake has been, that Chan Buddhism has been considered to be a philosophical discourse in the same way that the western philosophical schools usually are. However, this is not the case with

Chan. Chan is first of all a way or practice that aims at the transformation of the whole personality of its practitioner. I believe that Heidegger's philosophy can be interpreted in this way, too.

Gelassenheit -text is more concerned about describing the method of meditative thinking. *Was heist Denken* -text describes both of these ways of thinking in more general terms. I interpret the *Gelassenheit* -text to be a kind of textbook of "existential meditation", which teaches the reader the basics of the phenomenological method, too. And I would say that the exercises in the book can be seen to be very similar to some of the basic Chan exercises. Some of the famous concepts of Heidegger's later philosophy, such as "releasement toward things" (*Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*), "waiting" (*warten*), "thinking as thanking" (*Denken als Danken*), "indwelling" (*Inständlichkeit*), can be interpreted as practical descriptions of these exercises or the description of the existential attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) when the goal has been reached. The real meaning of these kind of concepts can be understood only through personal practice. I shall later show how the same concepts appear in Chan practise, too.

Heidegger writes, that "we come to know what it means to think when we ourselves try to think." (WCT, 3) When we do this, we notice that we are not yet capable of thinking. The fact that we are doing philosophy does not guarantee that we could think. Learning to think, according to Heidegger, means that first we should get rid of our traditional conception of what thinking really is. The fact that "we are not yet thinking stems from the fact that the thing itself that must be thought about turns away from man, has turned away long ago." (7) Actually "since the beginning". Heidegger also compares thinking with the art of the craftsman. Nobody can be a skilled craftsman naturally, his skill can only emerge after a long practice.

Now -we can ask, what does this "turning away from man" means and what is this "beginning" Heidegger is referring. What is the beginning of thinking? Heidegger further writes that "when man is drawing into what withdraws, he points into what withdraws. As we are drawing that way we are a sign, a pointer. But we are pointing then at something which has not, not yet, been transposed into the language of our speech. We are a sign that is not read." (18) Of course this is very poetic, very heideggerian description, but it raises the question: what is the place in our thinking where the concepts do not yet appear. The answer has to be: it is the place where the concept is just about to rise. It is stillness. This place can be experienced by looking carefully at our thought process and locating the exact place where the concept is just appearing - as it appears from stillness. This place is also a very concrete place of the beginning of a thought.

II

For a western philosopher to look at this place is not easy, because we have stopped to do mental or spiritual exercises of this kind. It is a process that requires

lots of practise and ability to learn just "to listen", as Heidegger writes. I think that in eastern traditions this place of stillness in our consciousness and its meaning has always been appreciated throughout their history. It is also one of the most essential practises of Chan Buddhism. The original form of the so called *kung-an* practice was called *hua-tou*. This Chinese concept means "the head of the word" or "the beginning of thought" and it refers to that place in our consciousness, where the thought is born.¹

It has to be noticed that looking at one's thought process this way is different from reflection. When I reflect my own thinking, I think of my thinking with new concepts. Reflecting means to re-conceptualize the already conceptualized. This means that in Heidegger's terminology reflection belongs to the same category of representative thinking as all other conceptual thinking, or "calculative thinking". Meditative thinking does not reflect. It means "throwing light on thought", as Heidegger writes. It means becoming aware of the process of thinking. Because it means to look closely at one's own process of thinking, it can be called "thinking about thinking". To be more precise, it is locating that place in thinking where the concept has not yet formed, it means: locating the beginning of thinking.

All this description is difficult to understand without actually practising the thing itself - and this brings us back to Chan. I shall describe the very first exercise used in Chan Buddhism to lead the student to what Heidegger called meditative thinking. But before that I shall summarize briefly Heideggers position:

1. There are two kinds of thinking: calculative thinking and meditative thinking.
2. To understand this distinction, we have to become aware of our own process of thinking. And how do we become conscious of our thinking and its nature instead of just thinking?
3. We have to take a closer look at our thinking process, the association stream in our minds. We have to learnt to listen to it. And how is that done?

There are many methods. I am going to describe you a Chan exercise that has three phases. They are all methods of listening to the process of thinking by concentrating on the breathing. At the first level the instruction goes as follows: *Take the meditation position, sit still and count your breathing from one to ten again and again. Count every outbreath and inbreath and when you have reached the number ten, start from the beginning.*

This sounds very simple. If you do this practise every day for some months, little by little you will become more aware of what happens in your consciousness. This is the Chan way to approach the acts of consciousness, the Chan way to look closely at the thinking process, the thinking that can really be called "calculative thinking".

¹ Lu K'uan Yü: Ch'an and Zen Teaching. First Series. Century: London 1987, s. 37-41. Second Series, s. 21-22.

Without going to further details of this method I shall ask: what does this kind of practice teach to us?

First - we become aware of the fact that the association stream of our thoughts is not under our control, or if it is, it is that only weakly.

Second - we shall notice that we are not free to think what we want, even if we exert our willpower to that.

Third - our thoughts come from somewhere and go beyond us. They form into concepts, memories, feelings the origin of which remains invisible.

Fourth - we can find an experience where "I" do not think, but "thinking is happening in me".

Heidegger has the idea that thinking is an art in the same way as the handicraft is. It requires practise. The Chan method of counting the breaths I described above confirms this claim. Even a very simple task of thinking: counting the breaths from one to ten without interruption, is almost impossible to someone who has not done such a practise. However, if we begin to practise this kind of exercise we shall notice that little by little it becomes more and more easy. So, if we want to think skillfully, let say philosophically, we should practice the art of thinking. Normally in my thinking I am like a drifting boat in a river, the rower of which thinks he can control the boat freely, but in reality he is always carried ahead by the currents. My freedom is an illusion.

III

Now I shall go to the second phase of the exercise, which is the same as the previous one with one exception: now only the outbreaths are counted. During the inbreaths the mind is kept still, empty of thoughts of any kind. This is much more difficult. Emptying the mind during the inbreath, which is required here, is not easy. But if you have done the previous practice for a while, you shall notice that changing over to this method is not impossible. Little by little you begin to succeed. From the point of view of the phenomenological method, what happens here is that we try to "put to the brackets" our empirical ego.

What does this practise has to show to us?

First of all it shows to us that with practise we can gain at least some control over the association stream in our consciousness.

It also shows that if we want to empty our mind during the inbreath, we just have to "wait" or "listen" in a certain way. It is the same kind of mental condition that I have to had if I want to hear a very distant and low voice. I turn my head to the direction of the voice, I may hold my breath and just listen, just wait with my mind empty. If the voice is a very low one, even one thought in my mind prevents me hearing it. My mind becomes empty in a natural way. Heidegger has the same kind of

description in *Gelassenheit*, where he tries to describe the meditative thinking. He writes: "We are to do nothing but wait." (62)

This practise shows us the point in our consciousness where a thought arises. When our mind stays occasionally empty, as it is during the inbreath, the number we recite in our minds has a definite starting point and ending point. Concepts arise to our consciousness and disappear from our consciousness and we are able to look closely at this point. This the "beginning of thought", "hua tou", in Chan Buddhism. When we are able to do this we have advanced a long way in the art of thinking because we can experience, how the concepts are formed in our mind. At the same time we became more aware of the way we use concepts to represent the world around us. In a way, the concepts are already in us. It is part of our "prejudice". It does not belong to the world as it is, it is a name we use. It does not belong to "the things in themselves", towards which we are actually stepping. Heidegger describes in *Gelassenheit* a practise where he tried to release himself of all re-presenting, "because waiting moves into openness without re-presenting (Vorstellen) anything" (69). My interpretation is that Heidegger describes the same experience that we encounter in Chan practise.

Maybe the most crucial experience connected with this way or practise is that we get the experience of how the "ego" or "I" is arisen when the concept is arisen. When the concept disappears, the ego disappears. This is an experience that makes us understand better and deeper the structure of our consciousness, our ego and the nature of our thinking in general

IV

The third level of this exercise consists of deepening and expanding the state of mind where the thought does not arise. It means exploring deeper the emptiness of the mind. The instruction goes usually as follows: *Be aware of your breathing and keep your mind empty*. A Japanese Zen master had this advice that sounds like Heidegger: "Think of non-thinking. How is this done? By thinking beyond thinking and non-thinking." (Yokoi 1984, 46.)

From the point of view of the phenomenological method here we try to reach a state of "pure consciousness" where the empirical ego is totally "reduced", "put to brackets". This is naturally a very difficult form of practise that usually takes the effort of many years. Nevertheless, again we can ask: what does this practise has to teach to us?

1. First of all, it can not be achieved by trying to achieve it or by willing it, because the willing is already a thought that arises. Heidegger deals extensively with this problem in his *Gelassenheit* -book. He writes for example: "I want non-willing." (59)

Also in Chan tradition this is a familiar problem. A Japanese zen-master Takuan Soho has described this problem in one of his love poems. He writes:

To think that I am not going
to think of you any more
is still thinking of you.
Let me then try not to think
that I am not going to think of you. (Suzuki 1973, 112)

2. According to Heidegger it can be achieved by "releasment" (*Gelassenheit*), letting go. When we have found this place in our mind where the thought arises, we can just stay and wait there. When we just wait and let it be, nothing moves, the thought does not arise. There is just an experience of the pure consciousness.

3. When there is no "I" or "ego" arising, no "object" opposite the "subject" arises. There is just the experience of being and the consciousness of this being.

4. When we have had this experience and after that we experience the thought and an ego arising, there is a different awareness of this process than before. We become aware of the framework, to which the thought imprisons the world. We become aware how the concepts arise, how the theories arise in our thinking and at the same time we see how the conceptual frames through which we interpret the world, are born.

5. Our awareness of these frameworks makes us capable of freeing ourselves from them, too. And this is exactly the aim of the phenomenological method: to get access to the things themselves as they appear to us without our prejudices, without our preconceived ideas of how they *should* appear to us.

6. To summarize, the Chan exercise I have this far described is one way to learn to recognize our prejudices, to free ourselves from them and to return to the beginning, to the beginning of thinking. We learn to stop the stream of the mind, the river where we are rowing and we become aware that it is a river that has a beginning, too. I am convinced that Chan Buddhist practice and the phenomenological method are both very similar and profound ways to go back to the experience of thinking and at the same time to the very beginning of philosophical thought, too.

Litterature

Heidegger, Martin: Discourse on Thinking. Harper & Row: New York 1969.

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