

MUSHIN (WUHSIN) AND ITS PLACE IN A WESTERN THEORY OF MIND

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It will be the contention of this paper that much of the sheer irrationality that Western writers attribute to Ch'an and Zen Buddhism is a result of an implicit but erroneous assumption that a successful translation of the semantic range of certain technical terms is possible between Oriental and Western languages. Rather, this paper will argue that philosophical assumptions and theories adhere in the technical terminology of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism on the one hand, and Western psychological theory on the other, making a direct translation of such terms nearly impossible. As a case study, we will consider the term 'mushin (wuhsin).'

The term 'mu-shin' literally means "no-mind." 'Mu' is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese 'wu,' meaning "lacking" or "without." 'Shin' is the same as the Chinese 'hsin' which is conventionally translated into English as "mind." However, in English the combination of 'lacking or without' and 'mind' can refer only to an automaton. The English word 'mind' is generally used to refer to the entire range of mental functioning. It thus subsumes terms such as 'reasoning,' 'thought,' 'consciousness,' and 'cognition,' as well as 'unconsciousness,' 'perception,' and 'experience.' Thus, the meaning of 'no-mind' in English would have to refer to the automatic or fugue-like behavior which occurs when a person experiences complete disassociation. Such behavior is observed in abnormal mental states such as psychomotor epilepsy and hypnotic states.¹

It seems most peculiar to assert that Ch'an and Zen Buddhism explicitly seek such states and have techniques for generating them in normal individuals on a daily basis. Yet, a number of Western writers have interpreted 'musin' in just this way.²

Nevertheless, this would seem to represent an implausible meaning to ascribe to the term. Why would any culture seek to maximize automatic behavior? It is only by asserting that Ch'an and Zen Buddhism are essentially illogical (as opposed to allogical) that such an assertion can be maintained.

Beyond the inherent implausibility of interpreting 'mushin' to mean "without mental functioning," an examination of classical oriental writers shows that this term is not used in context in this

way. For example, we find 'wu-hsin' used interchangeably in Hei-neng's works with 'wu-nien,'³ (Japanese munen) which may be translated as "lacking thought, volition, attention, wish, or desire."⁴ The semantic range of 'hsin' can not be 'mind' if it is equivalent to 'nien' which means thought, since thought is generally taken in Western theory to be only one part of the functioning of mind.

Likewise, in an early manuscript quoted by Suzuki⁵ seeing, hearing, remembering and recognizing are said to be acts of wuhsin. These functions, like nien, are generally seen in the Western tradition as parts of mind. Clearly, also, such functions should not be acts of a non-mental entity.

Further, in the *Tengu-Geijutsu-Ron* of Chozan Shissai,⁶ an eighteenth century Japanese treatise on swordsmanship, and in the nineteenth century writings of Tesshu on swordsmanship,⁷ we find mushin presented as a necessary mental state for success in a sword fight, as it is in Takuan's letters on swordsmanship.⁸ These references make it particularly clear that mushin can not be some form of automatic or fugue-like behavior, since such a mental state is certainly not conducive to martial arts success.

These few references of the many which could be cited from throughout the literature of the Orient make it clear that mushin can not be correctly translated as "no-mind" in the sense of automatic behavior. This being the case, we must consider the possibility that some other one word translation would serve. Krammer, in translating the *Tengu-Geijutsu-Ron*⁹ chooses the word 'heart' (herz) for shin and 'inadequate heart' for mushin. While this is not a too unsatisfactory translation in this context and captures the connotation of the Japanese on pronunciation of 'kokoro' fairly well, it would not serve in the text quoted by Suzuki.¹⁰ One can be said to see, hear or remember with the heart in English only in a poetic sense. Further, such a poetic usage in English would carry a connotation of emotionality which is quite inappropriate to the other Japanese works cited.

Suzuki¹¹ chooses to translate mushin as "unconscious." However, he is forced to add that we are not to understand unconscious in its usual psychological sense. Since, for all practical purposes, the term 'unconscious' has no other meaning but psychological, it would seem that Suzuki's translation is really a refusal to translate the term into English, and 'unconscious' has in his writings a new, stipulative meaning of "mushin."

The other approach by which we can undertake to understand this difficult term is that proposed by Nishida.¹² He suggests that the term be examined experientially since the essence of Zen lies in experience and not in theory. Nishida asserts that the, "self becomes conscious of the object. . . and finally (itself) without mediation."¹³ That is to say, mushin is that state of mind in which

all mental events are direct rather than mediated through expectations, theories, assumptions, or other "clouding ideas."

Shibayama¹⁴ likewise describes the experience of mushin as that in which each event is experienced as new and unique. Suzuki,¹⁵ who has probably written more in English on mushin than anyone else, describes it as the experience in which the, "mind flows like water, filling every corner." The mind of mushin is unattached to any particular thought, observing idea, or perception as such entities appear in the mind, neither seeking them nor rejecting them. Mushin is free of both activity and passivity.

What is being described here is clearly a particular mental state, describable in such a way as to be recognizable to those who have experienced it. It is clearly not a total lack of mental functioning. However, the above description might be stretched to include automatic behavior.

However, the same can not be said of the mental state described as 'mushin' in such arts as kyudo, chado, shodo, or aikido.¹⁶ While practitioners of these arts are advised to empty their minds, the emptying is to be of extraneous thoughts, forced attempts, egoistic anxieties and the like. The student is advised not to intellectualize, not to make use of verbal categories. He or she is advised to "merely act," a parallel to the Zen notion of "just sitting." The student is therefore not expected to exhibit mushin until mastery of the art is such that the technical aspects of the art can be done without intellectualizing.

Mushin is therefore being described as a conscious mental state in that it is under volitional control. The student *does* it. It is unconscious in the sense that it is unmediated by intellectual activity. It is thus, at least in part, the mental state of mastery. Thus, it somewhat resembles the mental state found in walking or driving a car, in that it is volitional and yet does not require constant conscious input.

However, mushin is more than merely mastery of an art to the point where the behavior does not have to be observed deliberately. Mushin also includes the notion of non-ego or no-self; that is, it is described as a state in which the ego or self-image of the individual is not involved. Thus, in a state of mushin, the person does not feel anxiety as to the outcome of the activity, does not feel his "self" is in danger. Thus, the swordsman seeks to win while at the same time experiencing no anxiety that he may lose and therefore die. The view that one is indifferent to the outcome is true only in the sense that there is no *emotional* involvement with the outcome. Clearly, a swordsman who was intellectually indifferent to the outcome of a match would not participate in it in the first place. We can see that mushin is involved with both the concepts of wu-wei and no-self. However, to discuss these two ideas is beyond the scope of this paper.

We thus find that mushin describes a particular mental state. It is unconscious in the sense that it does not involve intellectualization, mediation or reflection. It is conscious in that it is volitional and deliberate. It is a state of calmness engendered by a lack of ego involvement or personal anxiety. It is plausibly a right brain function, although experimental data for this is not available.

There is no single term within Western psychology or philosophy which describes this state. It is volitional, but it can not be properly termed thinking, feeling, perceiving, experiencing, knowing, or any other single category of mental functioning in Western thought. It partakes in part of all of these terms.

It is, however, a term which, within the cultures and languages of its origin, has a clear semantic range which can be experienced by anyone in the proper circumstances, which can be taught and which (subject to the other mind limitation) can be observed. Mushin is only one example of such a term. However, the impossibility of translating what is clearly a meaningful term describing a recognizable mental process or state in any simple way, strongly suggests that the categories of Western philosophical and psychological theories do not exhaust human experience in this area. If the converse is the case; that is, if there are Western technical psychological and philosophical terms which are not straightforwardly translatable into Japanese or Chinese (as seems possible), then we are forced to consider the possibility that neither world view has successfully captured the nature of mind in toto. Each system would thus represent an incomplete model of the mind, the two systems having some overlapping area. Some terms, such as 'experience (Japanese keiken),' appear to have the same meaning for the two systems. Others, such as 'unconscious' or 'mushin' capture different parts of an ultimately undescribed whole.

Notes

¹ James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (Chicago: Scott, 1964) 491-492 and 577.

² See for example:

Christmas Humphreys, *A Western Approach to Zen* (London: Allen, 1971) 81.

Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meanings*, trans. John C. Maraldo (New York: Weatherhill, 1976) 50.

³ Hei-neng, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript*, trans. and ed. Philip B.

Yampolsky (New York: Columbia UP, 1967) 138.

⁴ Seiji Miyazaki, *The Japanese Dictionary: Explained in English* (Tokyo: Kendyusha, 1943) 450.

⁵ *Tun-Huang Buddhist Mss.*, British Museum, quoted in: D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Samuel Weisen, 1971) 23-24.

⁶ Chozen Shissai, *Tengu-Geijutsu-Ron*, trans. Reinhard Krammer (Wilheim, obb, 1969) pt. I.

⁷ Quoted in:

John Stevens, *The Sword of No-Sword* (London: Shambhala, 1984) 157.

⁸ Takuan Soho, "Letter of Takuan to the Shogun's Fencing Master," in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: Vintage Books: Random House, 1972).

⁹ Shissai p. 20.

¹⁰ D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Samuel Weisen, 1971) 24.

¹¹ Suzuki p. 23-24.

¹² Nishida Kitaro, *A Study of Good (Zen no Kenkyu)*, trans. V. H. Viglielmo (Tokyo: Printing Bureau of the Japanese Government, 1960).

¹³ Nishida Kitaro, "The Intelligible World," in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Westport: Greenwood P, 1958) 127.

¹⁴ Shibayama Zenkei, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (New York: New American Library, 1974) 226.

¹⁵ D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove P, 1960) 115-117.

D. T. Suzuki, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, ed. Bernard Phillips (Westport: Greenwood P, 1960) 445-457.

D. T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (London: Rider, 1958).

¹⁶ The following section is based on the author's experiences as a student of traditional Japanese and Chinese arts.