
On Chan's Mortality Anxiety management

Li Bing-quan*

The professor and doctor of psychology, the Vice-dean of Educational Science School, Zhaoqing University*

ABSTRACT

It would result in anxiety and terror for death that human being is aware of his own mortality, which is existential anxiety and terror. In order to eliminate or sublimate this existential anxiety and terror, every culture in the world constructs the mechanism of mortality anxiety management with their own cultural characteristics, so is Chan(Zen) culture no exception. Chan culture is one of three major components of Chinese culture, which constructs the thought of mortality anxiety management with Chan cultural characteristics based on its core thought that “Xin(心: heart or mind)is Buddha, Buddha is Kong(空: emptiness)”. Chan thought of mortality anxiety management mainly embodied in that death is return of Ben-xin(original heart), and that everyone is Buddha, and that Xin’s capacity is vast and great. Its psychological mechanism is mainly rationalization, identification and sublimation. This thought of Chan has great realistic value, which can serve an important and positive role in the psychological adjustment of critical patients especially the dying, life education, life meaning and value education, prevention suicide, etc.

Keywords:*Mortality anxiety management(MAM), Chan(Zen), Mortality; Xin(心: heart or mind)*

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Introduction:

In the process of human formation and development, a very important symbol to distinguish human from animals is the emergence of consciousness and self-consciousness. With the emergence of consciousness and self-consciousness, human ancestors found that they were just passers-by in the long river of time. One day, their time would run out and their life would end with time. It is inevitable to cause their anxiety or terror for death that they cognize the existential limitation——death[1]. McKee&Gerace[2] found that consciousness and self-consciousness gradually made human beings have time consciousness and death consciousness. When human ancestors began to realize that they would die in the future, but not do anything about it, the terror or anxiety for death begin to arise. It is a kind of existential anxiety, which is the inevitable problem faced for human existence. It is for this reason that human beings, in the process of their development from barbarism to civilization, try their best to solve the contradiction between life and death, in order to alleviate or even eliminate mortality anxiety or terror, and sublimate mortality anxiety or terror into human existential motivation under certain conditions. This is Mortality Anxiety Management(MAM).

Management is a process of rational allocation and utilization of resources to achieve the established goals effectively. According to this concept, Anxiety Management refers to a process of rationally allocating and utilizing external environment resources and one’s own internal resources such as intelligence, mental resilience, and mentality, etc., to relieve or even eliminate his own anxiety or terror, and even to turn anxiety or terror into the impetus of his survival and development under certain condition. In this process, various information should be cognized, processed, organized and understood. The same is true of mortality anxiety management, which is a process of fully allocating and utilizing internal and external resources to reduce or even eliminate the anxiety or terror caused by death, and then sublimate mortality anxiety into living motivation. Its essence is rationalization, identification, projection and sublimation in ego defense mechanism. Rationalization refers to find some reasons to justify themselves in order to get mental comfort, and sometimes find some excuses to cover up their behavior or the facts unwilling to admit when a certain goal is not achieved. Any culture has its rationalization mechanism[3]. Identification is a defensive means of taking the advantages of others generally esteemed and respected by people as oneself, and expressing them as part of his own behavior, to relieve anxiety and adapt to environment where he lives. Identification embodied in the MAM is the psyche mechanism that imagines oneself as some kind of long-term thing or entity to dispel inner anxiety or terror for death. Projection refers to the attributing or projecting unacceptable impulses, desires or concepts to the objective things or other people, that is, individuals transfer their own characteristics to others according to their needs and subjective orientation of emotions. The projection in MAM mainly manifests that those who have more money and power than

oneself would also die, that there would be tall people against it when the sky falls down, that someone is more afraid of death. Sublimation refers to turning one's libido energy accompanied by sexual desire or aggressive impulse that is unacceptable to society into their inner impetus to come true higher targets or channels that is acceptable to society or to carry out various creative activities. It is the most positive and productive defense mechanism, which essence is to transfer instinct impulsion, mainly sexual energy, to an object or goal with social value. The sublimation in MAM is transforming the suffering and death that people have to face early or late into the motive force for people to strive for success. For example, Mencius' thought of "born in suffering and died in peace and happiness"[4].

All cultures in the world have ideas, method and mechanism of MAM. Chan culture is no exception. Chan culture is one of the three major components of Chinese traditional culture. It is not only a cultural theory, but also a cultural practice. It plays a very positive role in shaping the positive spirit of self-transcendence, core ideas of Chinese culture, Chinese traditional virtues, world outlook and the attitudes of getting along with others and dealing with affairs. Chan culture contains rich and unique thoughts and methods of MAM. These thoughts and methods are still of great practical significance, which are of great benefit to the contemporary people to properly manage death anxiety.

Chan's MAM:

The core ideas of Chan is "understanding one's Xin and seeing one's self-nature", which essence is to see that Xin or self-nature is vast and great. MAM of Chan culture is embodiment of its core idea. Mainly in following some aspects.

Death is return of Ben-Xin(original heart):

According Chan ideas, Ben-Xin is neither produced nor destroyed, people are born in Ben-xin and return it after their death. In fact, it is the spiritual immortality in literal immortality, which can console people's anxiety or terror for death.

"Xin" is the core of Chan founded by Hui-neng. After a careful reading and analysis of *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, it can be found that it is an ideological system built around the "Xin", which is not only the starting-point but also the end-point of Chan thought and Chan culture created by Hui-neng. In other words, "Xin" runs through Chan thought and Chan culture. According to the discussion of "Xin" in *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, Chan actually divides the "Xin" into two aspects: Ben-Xin(the original mind) and Sheng-Xin(生心:the born-heart) or Shi-Xin(识心:the cognitive heart). Ben-Xin is the ontology of human "Xin", that is, Qing-jing-xin(清净心: pure heart) mentioned in Buddhism. Ben-Xin is the original "heart" possessed by human beings, so it can also be called "Yuan-Xin(元心)". "Yuan(元)" has the meaning of primordial, primeval and original. That is to say, Ben-Xin is the origin or genesis of human mind or heart. Other mind or heart originates from it and is produced or created by it. This original or primeval mind or heart is empty, which is neither increasing nor decreasing, neither living nor dying. It is the creator of the world in which people live, that is, the world and all things including individual himself in the world where the people exist, which are recognized by people and have a real effect on people, are created by people's Ben-Xin. The concepts, ideas and thoughts in the human heart are also created by it. Therefore, it can be said that Ben-Xin has ontological significance for human existence, and what it creates determines the height, depth and breadth of human existence, and even the fate or life direction of people.[5].

From the thought that "Xin is Buddha, Buddha is Kong(空: empty)"[3], Chan culture believes that people are born in Ben-Xin or self-nature that is originally empty, and returns Ben-Xin or self-nature from Shi-Xin(识心: cognitive heart) or Sheng-Xin(生心:the born-heart) after death of their body[6],[7]. The state at this time is Parinirvana called by Buddhism[8]. Parinirvana is that the practitioner returns to Elysium(the bliss world) after all virtues are completed and all evils are extinguished. Therefore, Chan, like Buddhism in general, believes that Parinirvana is becoming a Buddha. Since

Hui-neng's Chan believes that "all beings are Buddha", it can be to say that Parinirvana is actually a return to the Buddha that everyone is originally, that is, the original state of all beings. So is Parinirvana actually the rebirth of human beings, which is a very optimistic reason for people's death found by Buddhism. Its essence is the rationalization and sublimation. Its psychological mechanism is spiritual immortality, belief immortality and ideological immortality.

As far as rationalization is concerned, Chan's thought that "Xin is Buddha, Buddha is emptiness" clearly points out that Ben-Xin is like empty space, neither produced nor destroyed, neither increasing nor decreasing, and can produce the ten thousand Dharmas. In other words, the fundamental characteristic of Ben-Xin is Kong (空:emptiness) or Wu (无:nothingness). Kong is the natural attribute, the original state and the ontology of Ben-Xin. This is the same meaning as

"Five Skandhas are all empty.....form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So too are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.all Dharmas are empty of characteristics.....in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or Dharmas."

in *The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra*. The way to see Ben-Xin is to have no nostalgia or attachment to the worldly things. As *The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra* says:

"When Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita, he illuminated the Five Skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty."

Because the Ben-Xin is empty, it is large and boundless, neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor diminishing, which is a permanent Xin that is real and unchanging, contains all the Dharmas. Since everything including life is empty, there is nothing to worry about, including the concern of life, and there is no anxiety and terror for death. In the words in *The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra*,

"Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisattva through reliance on Prajna Paramita is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid".

As far as sublimation is concerned, Kong is the highest realm of spirit. It is necessary to increase people's wisdom and promote their own cognitive capability constantly in their living in order to come up to the realm of Kong (emptiness). In this way, the death as a return to Ben-Xin is transformed into a driving power to improve people's wisdom, cognitive capability, the ability to mastering the heart (驭心力: Yu-xin-li), meditation capability, etc.[9].

The value that "All beings are Buddha" for MAM:

Chan believes that "all living beings are Buddha", which meaning is that everyone is possible to become a Buddha, all sentient beings have Buddha nature, and the Buddha nature of all living beings is the same. This kind of thought contains positive value pursuit. The thought that "Zi-Xin (自心:Self-mind) is Buddha" emphasizes the promotion of people's moral consciousness and self-cultivation. Hui-neng pointed out:

"What I see is the transgression and error of my own mind. I do not see the right, wrong, good, or bad of other people. This is my seeing and not seeing. How can you say it both hurts and does not hurt? If it does not hurt, you would be like a piece of wood or a stone. But if it does hurt, you would be just like a common person and would give rise to hatred. Your 'seeing and not seeing' are two extremes and your 'hurting and not hurting' are production and extinction. You have not even seen your own nature and yet you dare to ridicule others.....If your mind is enlightened, then see your own nature and cultivate according to the Dharma. You yourself are confused and do not see your own mind, and yet you come to ask me whether or not I see"[10].

This is actually the embodiment of the moral self-discipline and self-examination of Chinese culture. This kind of thought puts the moral value, strength and judgment criterion in people's heart, requires people to believe in their own

strength, pay attention to the excavation and improvement of their own internal quality, reflecting the pursuit of human intrinsic value. This is a major feature of Chinese culture, which is quite different from western moral outlook. Western morality bases on belief in God, and comes from God's will and judgment. God is the premise of morality [3].

The thought that "all beings are Buddha" can serve a role of identification in MAM. Its essence is that people identify themselves with Buddha. Because Buddha is neither born nor died, they regard themselves as non-production and non-extinction by identifying themselves with Buddha. As the result, people give themselves a spiritual belief or ballast of consoling their own mortality anxiety and terror.

The thought that "all beings are Buddha" can serve a role of sublimation in MAM. The meaning that "all beings are Buddha" is that everyone can become a Buddha. (1) Since the whole Buddhism, including Chan Buddhism, believes that the Dharma of the Buddha is boundless, it can be understood that "everyone is a Buddha" as an inexhaustible power that everyone can possess like Buddha. Hui-neng and Chan Buddhism founded by him believe that "Buddha is enlightenment", and "enlightenment" is awakening that is aware of his own nature of Dharma or "original nature of True Suchness", which is the spiritual level of human beings. Therefore, Dharma power is the spiritual power of human beings, and the boundless Dharma power is the boundless spiritual power. By this way, the thought that "everyone is Buddha" transforms people's anxiety or fear into improving their spiritual strength, enlightenment or awareness. (2) The whole Buddhism including Chan believes that the suffering and death of human beings in the world is a kind of self-discipline or honing himself, which function is to increase people's wisdom and promote people to realize their own Buddha nature, that is, enlightenment. In this way, people would transform their anxiety and fear of suffering and death into the power to increase their wisdom and promote their enlightenment.

The thought that "all beings are Buddha" can serve a role of cultivating people's positive mentality in MAM. This kind of positive mentality is philosophical and open-minded, no-object, unconcerned. The vaster and greater the capacity of Xin, the more open one can see and think, the less he cares about others, gain or loss, success or failure, devalued or reputation, etc. Its essence is people's ordinary mind. "Emptiness" is a core concept of the whole Buddhism including Chan. It contains the meaning of regarding everything as emptiness, thinking freely and not clinging. According to Hui-neng's thought that "mind is Buddha, Buddha is emptiness", to see emptiness is actually to see one's own nature, that is, self-nature or Ben-Xin (original mind), Buddha nature actually. Its essence is not to cling to all things of the self and the outside world, including gain and loss, success or failure, defamation or reputation, right or evils, etc., but to treat them with a natural and ordinary mind. This kind of ordinary mind is vast and boundless. Anything and even life are regarded as emptiness [6]. It is for this reason that Chan master Mazu Daoyi calls Tao "ordinary mind" [11]. Only in this way, can people not grasp me, not self-centered, not disturbed by external marks and various stimuli [6].

The effect of the vast and great capacity of Xin for MAM:

Huineng, the founder of Chan, pointed out:

"The capacity of the mind is vast and great like empty space, and has no boundaries. It is not square or round, great or small.....All Buddha-lands are ultimately the same as empty space. The wonderful nature of worldly people is originally empty, and there is not a single Dharma which can be obtained. The true emptiness of the self-nature is also like this.....The emptiness of the nature of worldly men is also like this.....the ability of one's own nature to contain the ten thousand Dharma is what is meant by 'great'. The myriad Dharma are within the nature of all people.....If you regard all people, the bad as well as the good, without grasping or rejecting, without producing a defiling attachment, your mind will be like empty space. Therefore it is said to be 'great', 'Maha' [10].

Here, the Xin that is vast and great said by Hui-neng is Ben-Xin(original mind). As mentioned above, Chan regards death as a return to the Ben-Xin, which is actually a return to the Xin with a vast and great capacity. In this way, Chan thought of “vast and great capacity of Xin” has a positive value for MAM.

However, the “vast and great capacity of Xin” believed by Chan is only the realm that individuals can achieve, not the real mental quantity that everyone presents in their daily life. Just like the above-mentioned that “everyone is Buddha”, but not everyone can really become Buddha. To be truly fearless of death and return to Ben-Xin, it is necessary for people to practice in their daily life to acquire the wisdom of Bodhi Prajna. This cultivation is mainly self-cultivation. By this way, Chan transforms the anxiety or fear for death into the impetus of continuous cultivation. Its essence is sublimation. For people’s cultivation, Chan emphasizes “self-cultivation and self-enlightenment, and becoming a Buddha by themselves”. Its essence is to explore and enhance one’s own potential, constantly surpass oneself in daily sufferings, and improve one’s mental realm. This is the fundamental embodiment of humanism and humanitarianism in Chinese culture, which is a self-control thought different from the western external control thought. Western culture established God as an unquestionable and undeniable “metaphysical” God, requiring people to hand themselves over to God. God outside of People control their mind and behavior. The motive force or reason of people’s mental activity and behavior should be attributed to the belief in God[3],[12].

Tolerance, one of the embodiment of “vast and great capacity of mind”, is one of the characteristics of Chinese traditional culture. The meaning that “the terrain is Kun(坤), the gentleman carries things by virtue” said by *I-Ching* is mainly tolerance. *I-Ching* uses the earth as an analogy to say that the tolerance is as broad as the earth. Confucius way of Shu(恕:forgiveness) is also about tolerance. The word that “the reason that all rivers run into sea is great capacity of sea” said by Chinese people usually is also about people’s tolerance. Hui-neng pushes the tolerance to a new height, puts it in the ontological position of human existence, compares it with the infinite universe, and emphasizes that the tolerance that people originally have is embrative. The strong tolerance needs to be cultivated. Only attaining this strong tolerance by practicing, can people be fearless of death, just like the Buddha “feeding the tiger with his body”.

The “vast and great capacity of mind” has the meaning of strong spiritual power. Spirit is the core and soul of human survival and development, which is the inner core mental characteristics or maintenance to support human existence. It is the psychological lifeline or wisdom life of human beings also, which manifests in the aspects of people’s integrity, moral courage, demeanor, value pursuit, conduct and so on. According to Hui-neng’s thought, we can define Xin as spiritual power. Spiritual power is the general term of psychological forces. It is not a single force, but a variety of psychological forces, such as determination, perseverance, anti-frustration, stamina, influence, enterprising and anti-interference. In this sense, the “vast and great capacity of mind” refers to the boundless mental power. With such a strong mental power, of course, people are not afraid of death. However, the boundless mental power refers to the infinite spiritual power that people might possess, not the actual spiritual power that is usually limited. It is necessary to practice in order to upgrade the limited spiritual power to the infinite spiritual power. In this way, Chan thought of “vast and great capacity of mind” turns death into the impetus of human cultivation. Its main psychological mechanism is sublimation.

Conclusion:

In summary, MAM of Chan is a positive thought with Chinese cultural characteristics that is rich in practical character, realistic value and contemporary significance. Its thoughts such as that “death is to return to the original mind”, and that “all beings are Buddha”, and “vast and great capacity of mind” all have great active value for MAM. It transforms mortality anxiety and terror into active power by rationalization, sublimation, identification, and projection.

This has very important enlightenment and reference significance for the psychological adjustment of critical patients especially the dying, life education, life meaning and value education, prevention suicide, etc. We can develop some effective ways of psychotherapy and health care and education from Chan thought of MAM.

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