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Authors: Chang, Raylene
Page, Richard C.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SELF-ACTUALIZED PERSON: VISIONS FROM THE EAST AND WEST

This article compares and contrasts the ways that Chinese Taoism and Zen Buddhism view the development of human potential with the ways that the self-actualization theories of Rogers and Maslow describe the human potential movement. Many similarities exist between the ways that Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and the self-actualization theories of Rogers and Maslow describe the characteristics of the optimally functioning person.

FOR THE LAST 25 years, the self-actualization theories of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow have profoundly influenced the humanistic psychology movement in the United States. Although these theories may not be complete, they tantalize us, nevertheless, with their visions of the individual's potential within a synergistic society. Rogers and Maslow both emphasize that self-actualization represents the optimal psychological condition for all humankind; the goal of psychotherapy, then, is to help people to develop their own potential for self-actualization. Many of the concepts of self-actualization put forward by Rogers and Maslow are also those that, coincidentally, have been considered elemental in Chinese Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

The founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu (Ch'en, 1977), viewed human life as being an integral part of the cosmos. His philosophy of the functioning of the cosmos centered on his concept of the Tao. The Tao was defined as being the creative processes present in Nature that were responsible for all creation in life, and indeed for life itself. This concept, although intrinsically metaphysical in nature, nevertheless also served as the backbone of Lao Tzu's social and political ideas. Lao

Tzu, in defining his philosophy of the Tao, abstracted the processes he observed in the phenomenal and natural worlds. Zen Buddhism developed in China after Taoism and was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Taoism (Chan, 1963). Zen Buddhism (Coan, 1977) derived its antischolastic bias from Taoism, and Zen Buddhists, subsequently, were inclined to refrain from elaborate philosophical speculations.

Instead, Zen Buddhism emphasizes human naturalness and spontaneity and acknowledges the illusory nature of the ego. Zen Buddhism stresses the importance of participation in each moment of living and the potential retained by each human being for achieving full independence in thought and action. Japanese or Zen Buddhism in many ways offers a contrast to other Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism, that stress the importance of the mutual interdependence of people and the importance of clearly defining the roles people assume in society. Corresponding to the Zen idea of human independence is the characteristically paradoxical notion that individualism never places one in conflict with nature or with other people. Thus, the goal in Zen is to open the way for people to see into the "suchness" or "beingness" of things, thereby enabling them to know themselves and to unite themselves with all of nature.

Thus, it appears that the sage in Taoism and the enlightened person in Zen Buddhism bear similarities to the self-actualizing person of Western psychological thought. Zen Buddhism and Taoism are both concerned with the development of the full human potential. A cross-cultural comparison of views on developing human potential can provide a broader perspective than can an isolated consideration of either Western or Eastern disciplines. Perhaps this common view of humanity, shared by philosophical and psychological perspectives as diverse as Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and the self-actualization theories of Rogers and Maslow, indicates a universality in human experience.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN POTENTIAL

Maslow and Rogers

Both Maslow (1956,1968,1971) and Rogers (1961) assumed that all persons have an intrinsic potential for self-actualization that can be stifled, however, by extrapsychic determinants. According to Maslow (1968), people's basic needs must be sufficiently gratified before they can pursue the fulfillment of what he calls the higher, transcendent metaneeds related to self-actualization. Maslow asserted that people's complete psychological maturation occurs only when their potentialities are fully developed and actualized.

Rogers (1977) stated that self-actualization is a process of differentiating potentialities inherent in the makeup of the individual. This process, which is forward-moving, constructive, and self-enhancing, becomes possible only when people receive positive regard from others and learn to think positively of themselves. Each individual, according to Rogers, has the capacity to be self-aware and to label what occurs accurately; when one's need for positive regard is met, then, one's tendency toward self-actualization becomes manifested. When an individual's self-concept is relatively congruent with his or her experience, the actualizing tendency can

operate without impediment. The individual can develop, then, into a fully functioning person who is open to the richness of experience, who has few defenses, and who is self-aware.

Drawing from their definitions of self-actualization as well as from their therapeutic experiences and observations, Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1961,1977,1980) defined certain unique characteristics of self-actualizing people. Such a person, they maintained, has the following: an accurate perception of reality, a high level of creativity, few defenses, a high level of integration, personal autonomy, unconventional ethics, a need for human kinship, compassion, humility, deep and harmonious interpersonal relationships, a respect for others, a desire to establish new forms of communications and intimacy, and an ongoing concern with personal growth. In addition, Maslow (1954) highlighted these characteristics: spontaneity, receptivity, a problem-centered approach to life, detachment, a fresh appreciation of things, a democratic attitude, a unique value system, a capacity to cope with circumstances, and a likelihood of having peak experiences. Rogers (1961) added, moreover, these qualities: an openness to nature and other people, an unconditional self-regard, an inner freedom, authenticity, a yearning for a spiritual life, an indifference to material comforts, a feeling of closeness to nature, and a skepticism of science and technology.

Taoism and Zen Buddhism

The aim of human existence, from a Taoist standpoint, is to experience and maintain harmony with the Tao. The Tao is metaphysical reality, a kind of natural law, a principle or pattern for human life. Lao Tzu (Ch'en, 1977) stated that people should return to the original condition of nature: the complete emptiness and tranquility of all things. He believed that one can cope with and, ultimately, resolve life's agitation, disorder, and strife by attaining personal tranquility. Only when one intuitively understands a problem can it be dealt with effectively. And, according to Lao Tzu, an effective solution to such a problem is achieved by patiently waiting for nature to present a solution, because nothing is accomplished by creating nonexistent difficulties or by responding with overly elaborate measures.

Zen Buddhism, like Taoism, emphasizes that all people possess an inner perfection, a Buddha-nature. The intent of Zen Buddhism is to help people to attain satori, an inner state of perfection or tranquility. When one becomes enlightened (or attains satori), one's entire personality merges with nature or reality, and a state of perfect harmony is experienced (Chan, 1963). To become free from negative feelings such as fear, anxiety, insecurity, and frustration or from inhibiting ideas or imaginations, it is necessary for people to experience themselves without division. When a person becomes enlightened, his or her perception of self and surroundings are changed. All the opposites and contradictions of the world are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole (Suzuki, 1949, 1962).

Both the sage of Taoism and the enlightened person of Zen Buddhism have attained an inner state of perfection or, in Western terminology, have developed their human potential to its maximum extent. Thus, the sage in Taoism and the enlightened person in Zen Buddhism might serve as models of what the self-actualized person is thought to be like in Eastern thought. The

sage and enlightened person are said to have the following characteristics: an openness to life, tranquility, simplicity, genuineness, and reserve. They also lack arrogance, have few or no wants, hold no tendency to discriminate between opposites, have compassion for others and maintain an indifference to worldly affairs while remaining involved with them. Such people are also able to comply with nature and to transcend the effects of karma (cause and effect and the relationship between the two [Humphreys, 1951]).

In addition to these qualities, the Taoist sage has the following characteristics: receptivity, contentment, intellectual honesty, an unassuming attitude, a sense of responsibility, a natural perspicacity, and determination. The enlightened person of Zen Buddhism has the following additional characteristics: no division between thought and action, an absence of rigidity, a nonattachment to things, a perfect freedom, a thoroughly purified mind, and an enjoyment of emptiness. The enlightened one is also friendly toward all persons, maintains a unique life-style, is natural and simple, and has the ability to live in the here and now (Chan, 1963; Ch'en, 1977; Suzuki, 1949, 1962, 1970; Wawrytko, 1981).

COMPARISONS

It may be helpful here to describe the similarities and differences found in descriptions of the self-actualized person according to Maslow, Rogers, Lao Tzu, and the Zen Buddhists.

Personal Freedom. The ideas Maslow and Rogers had of human freedom contrast with philosophies that emphasize human bondage or determinism. Both Maslow and Rogers described the self-actualizing person as one who has personal autonomy and who is free to make choices. The actions of the self-actualizing person are not determined solely by the physical and social environment, because such a person has access to personal resources that are, in turn, growth promoting. According to Maslow (1968), the self-actualizing person does not avoid facing or acting on feelings or thoughts that are experienced. The extent to which this person is able to be self-accepting allows for a high degree of freedom in interpersonal interactions.

The self-actualized person of Taoism and Zen Buddhism is content because no attempt is made to possess anything in life. These people do not obtain personal meaning or pleasure by seeking material possessions and thus are not affected by avarice, licentiousness, and extravagance. They are free because they have nothing to gain or lose in life. It is when people live without desires in this manner, said Lao Tzu (Ch'en, 1977), that they are able to regain an original, genuine state of mind and are free to develop their human potential.

Emphasis on Personal Authority. The self-actualizing person of Maslow (1954, 1968) and Rogers (1980) remains detached from societal and cultural influences and, in general, is antipathetic to highly structured, inflexible, or bureaucratic institutions. Such a person is characterized in large measure by a sense of personal autonomy and clear decision making, even when the decisions may seem unconventional (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1980).

Both Rogers and Maslow and the Zen Buddhists and Taoists would not emphasize the importance of accepting authority that comes from sources external to the person. Nevertheless, the self-actualizing person of Rogers and Maslow is not independent of society's influence to the extent that the self-actualized Zen Buddhist or Taoist might be. The enlightened person of Zen Buddhism has an independence that allows for an unconditioned response to life's events. The enlightened one enjoys the here and now but does not indulge in it, for he or she lives life detached from either past or future concerns (Suzuki, 1970). The Taoist sage lives in a state of genuineness and naturalness in harmony with the Tao (Stensrud, 1979). That is to say, the sage's life is based on principles of a universal structure that he or she intuitively knows but does not seek to know (Ch'en, 1977).

Emphasis on Caring Interpersonal Relationships. The self-actualized person of Maslow, Rogers, Zen Buddhism, and Lao Tzu feels a kinship with all human beings. These people care about others with a caring that is gentle and not moralistic. These people have a deep desire to help others and, thus, establish interpersonal relationships that are harmonious and profound.

Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, 1970) indicates that because the enlightened person is not disturbed by the differences that exist among people, everyone is experienced openly and receptively. Even though Zen Buddhists might sometimes use relatively harsh methods to help people become enlightened, this is done because the master cares deeply about his or her pupil's ultimate welfare. Lao Tzu (Ch'en, 1977) stated that the sage has no individual will and desires, and forms no absolute standard of right or wrong. The sage, then, acts in accordance with the principles of the Tao and cares about others because all people have an underlying human nature that is the same as the Tao.

Acceptance of Reality. Maslow (1954) indicated that the self-actualizing person has more accurate and realistic perceptions than most people. Because such people know themselves, they do not need to distort the ways they see reality because they are defensive or anxious. They are able to accept whatever happens and to respond to life's circumstances in a realistic and effective manner.

Rogers (1959) indicated that to appreciate how a person perceives reality, it is necessary to understand the phenomenal field, or the frame of reference of this person. Reality, for Rogers, includes both the phenomenal field of a person and the stimulating conditions of external reality. And, the self-actualizing person, perceiving both elements accurately, can experience reality with openness and receptivity.

Reality in Zen Buddhism is viewed as a spatiotemporal unity in which wholeness is beyond division into subjective and objective aspects and can be contrasted with the philosophy of Plato, which stressed the importance of ideas or universals in nature. In Zen Buddhism, the only way a person can comprehend the nature of reality is to become enlightened. When a person becomes enlightened, he or she experiences everything that exists in the "here and now" encounter with nature or with other people. Satori is experienced by intuitively embracing reality

rather than by obtaining objective knowledge about phenomena. The enlightened person is completely aware of both internal and external reality but does not make a distinction between the two and, thus, fully grasps the meaning of all things (Chan, 1963).

Taoism sees occurrences of the phenomenal world as an evolutionary process initiated by the interaction of opposites. It is only when the apparent and the potential are comprehended as complementary that the phenomenal world can be fathomed and the constant changes of this world can be fully accepted (Ch'en, 1977).

Capacity of Coping. The self-actualizing person of Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1977) is resilient and flexible and thus has the capacity to cope with changing circumstances. Having a sense of responsibility, duty, obligation, and commitment, such people are likely to use their talents, capacities, and potentialities to the utmost. Rogers (1977) pointed out that self-actualizing people are confident enough to trust their perceptions as being an appropriate guide for their actions.

In Zen Buddhism, the enlightened person responds fully to all that happens in life without retreating from experience in the here and now. This person responds to reality openly, without having preconceptions about things, because every moment is experienced as being new and exciting.

The Taoist sage displays tolerance and inner strength when dealing with others and when coping with problems. The sage can handle difficult responsibilities and can also endure disgrace when necessary. The sage takes life seriously and looks at all the possibilities for action inherent in any particular situation. Sages develop and fulfill their innate human potential without taking any one aspect of their potential to an unnatural extreme (Ch'en, 1977).

The Transcendence of Birth and Death. The enlightened person of Zen Buddhism intuitively understands the meaning of birth and death and is not bothered by changes inherent in the life cycle. This person allows the law of causation, moral and physical, to take its course, and free and independent, this person continues on, unaffected by karma. This person does not worry about dying because life and death are not perceived as being contradictory occurrences.

Lao Tzu's sage is not bothered by the apparent contradictions of life such as being and nonbeing, life and death, construction and destruction. This sage is not attached to material things or concerns and, while able to identify completely with reality, is yet entirely free from it (Wawrytko, 1981).

Maslow and Rogers, on the other hand, did not attempt to deal with questions concerning the meaning of life and death, for their concerns were those of secular psychology and psychotherapy. Unlike many Eastern philosophies that deal with the paradox of life and death, Western psychologists generally leave the consideration of the life and death cycle to the more metaphysical thinkers.

Closeness to Elemental Nature. Rogers (1977), Lao Tzu (Ch'en, 1977), and Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, 1962) agreed that the self-actualized person feels close to nature and respects its processes. Zen Buddhism believes that nature exists as an objective entity and that the unconscious mind of a person and nature spring from the same life source or principle. Zen Buddhists abstain, then, from making use of nature for selfish purposes and advocate lives of simplicity, frugality, straightforwardness, and virility.

Lao Tzu recommended that people comply with nature by practicing the principle of nonaction. All individuals should, on one hand, intuit and strive to develop their own unique endowments, but, on the other hand, nonaction is to be advocated in response to natural conflicts and dichotomies. Only by nonaction can people see beyond nature's multifarious subjectivities to find its inherent balance and harmony. The sage, by experiencing rather than acting against nature, is able to grasp the truth of the Tao and so is guided into effective behavior.

A Peaceful Mind. According to Rogers, the fully functioning person has a peaceful mind, is free, and is well integrated. These people experience psychological equilibrium because they act in a way that is harmonious with an internal actualizing principle (Rogers, 1980). The enlightened person of Zen Buddhism lives in a state of absolute quietness and calmness and is seemingly pure and unattached. These people are unaffected by internal and external delusions because they are unattached to conceptual ways of viewing life, to people, and to things (Chan, 1963). The sage of Taoism, too, is said to live in a state of tranquility, simplicity, genuineness, and reserve (Ch'en, 1977).

IMPLICATIONS

Maslow, Rogers, Lao Tzu, and Zen Buddhism all assumed that every person has an actualizing tendency that promotes growth, direction, and productivity. Rogers believed that the ongoing actualizing tendency is the primary force that counselors rely on to bring about positive changes in clients. Because there appear to be certain similarities between American and Chinese concepts of self-actualization, or the ways that human potential is developed, therapists in Eastern and Western cultures might broaden their perspectives by becoming familiar with alternative theories of human potential.

It is significant that the central concept of the person elaborated by the Taoists, the Zen Buddhists, Rogers, and Maslow has some common elements. All of these theories, for instance, emphasize that the self-actualized person feels close to nature, is independent in thought and deed, and experiences reality openly without being overly controlled by thoughts. The individual in all of these theories is involved in caring and responsible interpersonal relationships.

Certain implications can be drawn from the fact that these four theories, which were developed in two very different cultures, have some common perspectives about how the potential of people is developed. Possibly, the perspectives of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Rogers, and Maslow have congruent elements because these theories reflect something universal about human experience. The ways that people fully develop their human potential may be seen as a central

concern for both Eastern and Western cultures. Taking note of such commonalities may bridge the gap between helping theories of the East and West and may provide a synthesis that can only broaden the perspectives of both.

Because the self-actualization theories of Rogers and Maslow bear certain similarities to concepts in Taoism and Zen Buddhism, the cultural contexts in which the theories of Rogers and Maslow apply may be quite broad. It can be hypothesized that the theories of Rogers and Maslow indicate a universal movement toward human completion relevant to any human culture or society. Patterson (1985), for instance, stated that self-actualization is a concept that has universality because the drive for self-actualization is based in the physiological nature of all living organisms. It may be that there exists an inherent human tendency toward self-actualization that can be expressed in a number of different ways, always within the context of a particular culture. Other articles might compare and contrast the self-actualization theories of the East and West with the ways that the development of human potential is seen in vastly different cultures, such as African or American Indian.

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By RAYLENE CHANG RICHARD C. PAGE

Raylene Chang is an instructor at the Hualien Normal College and was formerly director of the Student Counseling Center at the Hualien Normal College, Taiwan, Republic of China. Richard C. Page is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia, Athens.

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