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Chan Practitioners as Agents of Social Change

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that sociological insights into how social structures are perpetuated and change, are congruent with Dharma teachings of dependent origination and are useful for Chan practitioners' cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Examples of social change, in the economy and family, are used to illustrate how these Dharma principles are manifested in the social construction of norms and beliefs, and in the ways macro-level social structures and change are founded on micro-level social interactions embedded in mundane moments of our daily life. I then argue that for Chan practitioners to truly align their actions with their bodhisattva vows, conceptual understanding of social processes, yielded from sociological analysis, is essential in cultivating clear total awareness of the operation of the social world and the impact of their actions. Lastly, cultivation of clear awareness of the subtle dynamics of racial domination is used to demonstrate how Chan practitioners can be agents of social change in bringing about a more

compassionate and just society to benefit to sentient beings.

Keywords: Buddhism, Chan, social change, Dependent Origination, Social Construction of Reality

Introduction

We believe that to bring about social change involves being an activist and engaging in activities outside our ordinary daily life such as protesting, lobbying, and organizing. Buddhists who want to work for social change are engaged Buddhists, implying that working for social change is a sub-field in Buddhist practice and is optional. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate that to practice Chan, through the cultivation of clear awareness of subtle dynamics that maintain structural injustice, in addition to conceptual understanding of social dynamics and knowledge of social issues, is to be an agent of social change.

Using sociological insights, I explain how society is held together by patterned social interactions, norms, and beliefs and how social change occurs as these patterns shift interaction by interaction, redefining social norms and beliefs. These changes are gradual and under the radar of our awareness but profoundly alter the way we think, behave, and relate to each other. I use sociological theories on group dynamics to describe the mechanisms by which new norms emerge in micro-level face-to-face interactions in groups and how these ideas spread through our social networks, resulting in a change of mind at the collective level without anyone controlling or designing the process. When the shifts in our way of thinking and relating to each other become sufficiently widespread, we recognize the phenomenon as social change. This is the sociological articulation of the process of dependent origination, the recognition that the social

world, like the self, is a flow and not a fixed entity. What we call culture and social structure are merely conceptual representations of this flow exhibiting some consistent patterns.

The dynamics of social interactions that perpetuate existing beliefs and social structures are pervasive and subtle, rendering them invisible to, and thus, outside our awareness. Chan practice is the cultivation of clear awareness of even the subtlest process of the body, mind, and our surrounding environment, and that includes the social world. Conceptual understanding of these invisible dynamics in our social interaction sheds light on these dynamics, facilitating the cultivation of clear awareness of how we perpetuate existing social structures and the effects of doing so to ourselves and others. This clear awareness illumines whether our actions conditioned by cultural beliefs and compelled by group dynamics are in accordance with wisdom and compassion. When they are not, the bodhisattva vows of Chan practitioners motivate them to change their actions to undo harmful social structures. I use the case of racial domination to illustrate how Chan practitioners can be agents of social change by using sociological insights to cultivate clear awareness of otherwise invisible dynamics to undo the structure of racial domination, one interaction at a time in our ordinary daily life, hence contributing to the co-creation of a more just and compassionate society.

Society and Social Change

To understand what we mean by social change, we need to first understand what we mean by society and how it is held together. Society consists of relationships among its members who are organized into units such as family, organizations, friendship groups, communities, associations, etc. It is held together by shared beliefs, values, and norms that

shape these relationships. For instance, when we believe that we are all part of a larger whole and working toward the collective good is our responsibility, we value sacrifice and loyalty and hold norms that expect fellow family and community members to prioritize the collective good over their individual interests that jeopardize the collective good. Prioritizing individual gains over the collective good, especially at the expense of the larger community, would be frowned upon and sanctioned by other members of the community. A society valuing individual rights over the collective good would develop corresponding norms that compel its members to behave individualistically. The society's beliefs, values and norms are upheld by its members through their interactions in each social setting. Interaction by interaction, family members, friends, work teams, community groups, members of professional associations or hobby club members react to each other by applying these values and norms; society is held together by these shared beliefs.

Social change occurs when a society's structural order, and the cultural ideas that shape and support it, shift. In recent decades in the United States, structural changes in the economy and technological changes have been some of the key drivers of social change. In his book *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life* (Vintage Books, 2007) economist Robert Reich detailed how Americans found themselves living in perpetual state of economic insecurity as corporate America was no longer asked by the state to put job security and shared prosperity as their priority over profits in the American battle against communism. The social contract between corporate America and labour established in the post-WWII decades was abandoned with deindustrialization in the United States and globalization that made outsourcing to countries with lower labour cost possible. With real income stagnant since the late 1970s and job security disappearing, American families responded by working longer hours, having both parents work full-time

while juggling childcare responsibilities, and by going into debt that contributed to the financial crisis in 2007-08.¹ Women's increased contribution to family income fundamentally changed the power structure within the family. The time bind,² as sociologist Arlie Hochschild called it, experienced by parents juggling demands from home and work changed the relationships within the family. The home stopped being the safe haven from the world where one could relax. It became their "second shift," especially for women but increasingly for men, after finishing their paid work outside the home. Strategies to increase efficiency and productivity used at their paid job slowly crept into the home. Hochschild spoke of the "cult of efficiency" and how working parents applied economic logic at work to do relationship work in the family, such as having 30-minute "quality time" and purchasing services for tasks that used to be done as a family for relationship-building, such as cooking or cleaning together.

As the ideology of market fundamentalism continues to dominate our culture, we increasingly think of each task we do for our loved ones in the family in terms of the market rate for the labour involved to determine which task to outsource. It started with small things. Instead of spending hours to make a cake with the kids for their birthday party, we determine that our time is worth more than the amount we pay the bakery. So, we outsource the work by purchasing the cake-making service as if the entire activity is only about producing a cake, implicitly devaluing the bonding experience of learning and working together as a family without giving it a thought. To achieve efficiency through specialization³ like

¹ Reich, *Aftershock*.

² Hochschild, *The Time Bind*.

³ Max Weber identified rationalization as the trend in modern society, characterized by the urge to organize human activities by specialization to enhance efficiency and to treat all activities as means to an end. Weber referred to this mode of thinking as formal rationality, as distinguished from substantive rationality where clusters of values

we would do at work, it becomes sensible to (and even irrational not to) pay a tutor to help the kids with their homework and a nanny to feed and clean and cloth and play with the kids, pay someone to put together the family album, pay a professional to identify a suitable mate, pay someone to scatter the ashes of our loved one, all for the sake of efficiency. We don't have time to be with our family because we are busy making more money to pay for all the services we purchase in order to save time. We live in anxiety wondering whether we are being a good spouse, parent, child, and sibling as we navigate the uncharted territory of what else in our personal life is appropriate to outsource to the market.⁴

Changes in our political economy compelled us to approach family life very differently from that of the previous generations. As more services became available to support busy working parents, supercharged by information technology, the outsourcing culture became more entrenched. Along the way, our ideas of what is sacred in our most intimate relationships also began to shift. For many, relationships with family members increasingly take on a transactional nature despite a strong yearning for emotional intimacy. The time bind also brought about a retreat from community life documented by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2001). Sociologists found a continued

shape social actions (Weber, *From Max Weber*). With formal rationality, we value efficiency and predictability resulting from the application of universal rules and criteria regardless of the particularities of the historical context or human emotional ties involved. Bureaucratization of the workplace, schools, hospitals and any large-scale organizations in early modern world facilitated the entrenched of this mindset where individual human beings are reduced to numbers. The focus on manipulating quantitative aspects of human existence, such as the number of accomplishments and the speed at which they are done, at the expense of the complexity and quality of human experience lies at the heart of the "cult of efficiency" discussed by Hochschild.

⁴ Hochschild, *So How's the Family?*.

decline in the number of people Americans could confide in.⁵ Social isolation reduces trust among members of society, rendering it more challenging to find collective solutions to problems such as climate change, and rising income and wealth inequality, and thus contributing to the current dysfunctions in the political system.⁶

This is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the state of American society and our world. There are many social issues and aspects of social change that are worthy of discussion in addition to the ones mentioned above. Hence, I am not claiming that these are the most pressing issues warranting our attention at the expense of others. What I would like to highlight is that the process of social change is complex, often taking place in subtle and gradual ways that are beneath our radar. When we stop trying to fit the world into our favorite way of explaining the world, the interconnectedness of all aspects of our social world becomes clear. It becomes clear that changes in one part of the society are reflected in other seemingly disparate parts of the society.

Social Change and Dependent Origination

The process of social and cultural change is the manifestation of the interconnectedness of shifting macro social structures and micro-level social interactions in different social institutions. The process is complex, subtle and gradual and we are all participants, very often without being aware of it. Let me elaborate with an example. When a middle-class family decided that mom needed to work full-time to improve the family's financial security as the couple's friends got laid off, other working moms who

⁵ McPherson, Miller, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears. "Social Isolation in America," 353-375.

⁶ Hetherington and Rudolph. *Why Washington Won't Work*.

decided to work full-time for similar reasons felt validated and less ostracized. Working mothers began to socialize with each other more as they now had more shared experience. New social groupings emerged and as the network of working mothers grew, their childrearing practices that may involve using daycare, baby-sitters and takeout meals increasingly became socially accepted to the extent that even stay-home-mothers and their mothers became less critical of these practices. As more tasks in the home are outsourced, new jobs are created and filled by women who have been performing these tasks without pay at home. Caregiving work, once an unquestioned obligation to family members, began to be questioned. Expectations associated with family roles that were taken for granted began to be challenged or questioned by thoughts such as “maybe I don’t always have to cook all the meals myself” or “why is it always my responsibility to feed and bath the baby?” When these thoughts are validated or encouraged by others in one’s social networks through interactions, family roles begin to be redefined.

Individuals experience the inner conflict between the emotionally charged importance attached to the previously taken-for-granted way of playing their role and the desire to fit in with others who invest less importance in these obligations. As much as we might like to believe that our moral conviction or principle is in charge, the worldview and beliefs of the groups to which we belong also shape our beliefs and actions. The influence of these groups on us depends on how emotionally invested we are in the group which in turn depends on the structure of the group and the form of social interactions of the group. In general, the more tight-knit the group is, the greater its influence on its members.⁷ The emotionally-charged ideas we internalized from one group may be invoked when

⁷ Durkheim found that the more tight-knit a group is, where there are many interpersonal ties with plentiful opportunities for members to interact with each other and where community members are strongly bound to its shared beliefs, the greater is the

we interact with others in another group, reinforcing or challenging the beliefs held by members of that group.⁸ In this way, socially constructed norms and beliefs spread and are redefined, interaction after interaction from group to group, in turn compelling participants to act, feel and think in ways sanctioned by the group. The Buddhist concept of emptiness can be used to understand this process of constant change at the micro, interpersonal level of social life as well as the macro-level structural and cultural changes as we see that each social interaction is conditioned by innumerable previous social interactions. As social interactions take place across a population and over time, the sense of patterned social relations and thought processes emerged to form what we call social structure and culture.

degree of social control exerted on its members by the group, manifested in individuals feeling compelled to conform to the group's expectations even when it is not their personal preference (see Durkheim, *Suicide*). Individuals would feel freer to disregard what is expected of them by the group where gatherings are infrequent and there are few opportunities for members to form personal ties and strong attachment to the group's shared beliefs.

⁸ I draw on Randall Collins's theory of interaction ritual chains in this discussion (see Collins, *Interaction*). According to Collins's theory, face-to-face interactions are Durkheimian rituals that require ingredients such as the copresence of at least two people, common focus of attention, and their sharing of emotional tone. Conversations are interaction rituals that generate emotional energy. The stronger the focus of attention and shared emotional tone in these face-to-face conversations, the stronger is the emotional energy generated, experienced by the participants as emotional attachment to the group. Symbols in the interaction ritual, such as ideas shared in our conversations with copresence, focus of attention and mutual awareness of shared emotional tone, are charged with the emotional energy generated in the interaction. An idea charged with emotional energy can be invoked in subsequent conversation when people gather, the next interaction ritual in the chain, and serve as the focus of attention, resulting in more emotional energy attached to the idea, motivating participants to invoke the idea in their future interaction rituals.

Micro-level group dynamics of social change

Every one of us participates in and contributes to this process of social change in one way or the other. When a working woman shares that she would order takeout when she was too busy to cook, our saying, “I do that when I am busy too,” signals to everyone present that it is socially acceptable to get takeout when we are busy and does not mean that one is being a bad mother or wife. Our approval encourages others present to share their takeout experience, further affirming the shared belief of the group that it is entirely sensible to outsource our meal preparation occasionally, an idea that is emerging here through the process of social construction. The emergent idea holds its validity for the group even if someone in the group has never ordered takeout but remains silent instead of voicing her thoughts about the virtues of cooking our own meals. In fact, the apparent unanimity may make this person feel a little bit like an outsider. If it is a tight-knit group, she may feel compelled to order takeout occasionally to fit in even though she was brought up with home-cooked meals only. Without intending to, each person’s action contributes to the spreading of this practice and the culture of outsourcing housework.⁹ If, however, she chooses not to succumb to the social pressure and says something like, “it may be okay to get takeout every once in a great while when it is simply impossible to cook, but I find cooking very therapeutic and it’s a great way to bring the family together,” the notion that there is an undisputed “rightness” about this practice is disrupted, allowing others who feel differently from the apparent “consensus” to voice their thoughts. Of course, the status of this person in the group also plays a role in how everyone responds.

⁹ Centola, *How Behaviour Spreads*.

As we can see, a lot goes on in a few moments of social interaction. What we say can become part of the group's identity if sufficient emotional energy is generated in the interaction. The social pressure to conform to the emergent shared beliefs of the group is often invisible to us and we often conform to the group's beliefs out of the strong desire to fit in and the fear of being ostracized. Both the group's power over us and our strong desire to fit in are often outside of our awareness. As we reinforce certain beliefs embedded in the ideas being expressed in these interactions through our approval or silence, these ideas turn into actions among group members and increasingly become part of everyone's way of life as these practices spread. When we prefer convenience over family time and commercialized services over communal activities, over and over again in small ways, even without the awareness that we are doing so, we are changing our cultural value and social structure. In this way social structure and culture are perpetuated and changed by the actions and interactions that go on in everyday life. While politicians, leaders of social movements, corporations, and thought leaders may have a great deal of influence on society, their visions and ideas result in social change only if we all participate to validate their ideas in our interactions. Otherwise their ideas will just collect dust on bookcases and be forgotten.

Cultivating clear awareness using sociological insights

As Chan practitioners, we cultivate clear awareness of the workings of our mind in our interactions with the world. When we become more aware of the effect of our actions on others, we begin to see the need to take responsibility for our actions. When we cultivate a deep understanding of how every moment is the manifestation of the coming together of many causes and conditions, including our actions, we see how we play a crucial role in co-creating the next moment. Sociological analysis of the dynamics

and structure of social life provides us with the conceptual understanding of these causes and conditions that come together in the process of social change. These sociological concepts shed light on, and bring awareness to, the dynamics of our life lived in social interactions that would otherwise be taken for granted and remain outside our awareness. Using sociological concepts to cultivate awareness of the subtle, invisible dynamics in our social interactions, Chan practitioners can see more clearly that what we call social structure and culture are mental constructions that are socially constructed. These mental constructions, although empty of independent, permanent and inherent existence, exert a great deal of power over us, shaping our worldview and thoughts in such pervasive ways that make them appear natural, rendering our role in perpetuating them as invisible and outside of our awareness.

The aforementioned example of a working woman, revealing that she ordered takeout when she was too busy to cook, can be used to illustrate how a Chan practitioner can be an agent of social change in that situation by cultivating clear awareness of the structural forces that shape each situation. It is important to understand that I am not arguing that the response in the example is the only right response. There is no one right way to respond. As highlighted in the discussion, each person contributes to the co-creation of the emerging situation by their actions. Every situation is unique. A Chan practitioner cultivates awareness of what is going on in the situation, what is spoken and unspoken but assumed as the interactions unfold, based on one's understanding of who is there and the social context in which the group operates. A Chan practitioner would also bring into the situation one's understanding of how macro-level economic and social changes have reshaped family life, gender relations, and cultural norms. One would also need to develop a conceptual understanding of the structure of gender stratification and the mechanisms through which it is maintained in our society to make visible

subtle processes for which one cultivates clear awareness as a Chan practitioner.

For the situation described in this example, for instance, it would be helpful to understand how “doing gender,” behaving according to one’s assigned sex category, legitimizes gender inequality.¹⁰ A working woman insisting on doing what has been defined as “women’s work”—cooking and taking care of the children—regardless of her situation is an example of “doing gender.”¹¹ Equipped with this conceptual understanding and knowledge of macro-level changes and micro-level group dynamics, a Chan practitioner in this situation can be more aware of the anxiety behind a working woman sharing that she is sometimes too busy to cook and the impact of others’ responses on how she feels about her action. She is likely to be worried that she may be judged negatively for not doing what society has defined as “women’s work,” and wondering if she was being a bad mother by so doing. Others’ approval would alleviate her guilt and validate her understanding that cooking should not only be her job.

¹⁰ See Risman, “Gender as Structure.” Risman explains that “doing gender” reinforces the belief that male and female are essentially different by enacting the traits and behaviours based on one’s assigned sex category. For instance, female athletes wearing makeup and working women performing all the housework and childcare, reinforces the idea that certain tasks are inherently “women’s work” and there are inherently feminine traits that all women are expected to exhibit. The belief that men and women are essentially different, rather than understanding that gender difference is socially constructed, is used to justify male dominance and perpetuate gender inequality. In a patriarchal structure, what is associated with the female is devalued. Levanon et al illustrated this dynamic by showing how the pay of a job category went down when more women entered the previously male-dominated profession and how the opposite happened when men began to dominate a previously female-dominated field such as computer programming. See Levanon, England, and Allison, “Occupational Feminization and Pay.”

¹¹ I focus on the concept of “doing gender” here to illustrate the role played by conceptual understanding of structural forces in cultivating clear awareness of the situation as a Chan practitioner. There are processes besides “doing gender” at work in maintaining the structural of gender inequality that will need to be elaborated in a different paper.

Disapproval of her not doing the “women’s work” of cooking meals by getting takeout, may compel her and others to work harder to conform to the existing gendered division of labour in the household, in turn perpetuating the structure of patriarchy. A Chan practitioner may see disapproving thoughts arising in her mind and would be aware that they reflect one’s gender socialization in a sexist society that has instilled in us the socially constructed notions of “men’s work” and “women’s work” that we habitually use to judge each other. With this awareness, one can refrain from vocalizing these thoughts that may turn the group into protectors of existing gender norms. It does not mean, however, that one cannot express one’s love of home cooking. Being aware of the dynamics of gender stratification, and understanding how one’s comments may be perceived as disapproval and potentially encourage others to pass negative judgments, a Chan practitioner expresses her view mindfully. By validating the working mother’s decision to get takeout when she was too busy, she takes care not to perpetuate the structure of gender inequality inadvertently by reinforcing the existing gender norms regarding housework. At the same time, she skillfully reminds everyone of the value of mundane activities for cultivating emotional bonds among family members and to beware of outsourcing housework mindlessly. In each moment, with clear awareness of the dynamics of social interactions and structural forces, a Chan practitioner takes seriously the effects of one’s actions, choosing actions that dismantle structures that inflict suffering, while promoting values that nourish our shared humanity.

Chan practitioners as agents of social change—the case of racial domination

Whether we choose to or not, we are changing the social world through our social interactions as we live in groups. To further illustrate what I

mean by Chan practitioners as agents of social change, I would like to examine the phenomenon of social inequality, focusing on racial inequality in particular. If we are all changing the society through our social interactions, do we know what kind of change we are generating? Without clear awareness of our worldview and beliefs, and the ways in which our actions perpetuate an existing structure, we may well be making the world more unjust and oppressive for the powerless in spite of our intention to promote greater equality. Hence, it is important to understand how the structure of inequality is perpetuated by studying the phenomenon of institutional racism and paying attention to how it is manifested in our society.

Social stratification by race, or other characteristics, is perpetuated by belief in the inherent inferiority of certain categories of people occupying the disadvantaged strata. This belief justifies and legitimizes the unequal distribution of wealth, privilege, and power. As a result, the disproportionately larger share of wealth, status, power, and any scarce resources enjoyed by the advantaged group, is believed to be acceptable and even right, leaving us to see no reason for structural change to promote greater equality. Many believe that policies to reduce inequality help the disadvantaged at the expense of the advantaged groups. Research published by UNICEF showed that equality improves society and well-being for all. In highly unequal societies, both the poor and the middle class suffer greater distress than those in more equal societies.¹² In other words, inequality causes suffering for everyone regardless of one's place in the social structure. At first glance it may seem counterintuitive but is quite obvious from a Buddhist perspective: The dehumanizing experience of being kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy is suffering. To keep someone down by turning a blind eye to their suffering, distorting our view in

¹² Adamson, "Child Poverty in Perspective; Wilkinson, and Pickett. *The Spirit Level*.

order to deny their full humanity, and justifying society's unfair treatment of the oppressed, is to inflict suffering. The oppressors also suffer from the delusion that they are gaining something valuable by oppressing others when in reality they are creating unwholesome karma, both by causing harm to others, and by deepening their fundamental ignorance of the true nature of reality. From the perspective of Dharma practice, perpetuating inequality causes suffering to self and others and is not in accordance to wisdom and compassion.

Social structures are, though durable, quite fragile. They need to be maintained by us collectively, by what we do and do not do, and by what we continue to believe and by how we view and treat each other based on these beliefs. In theory, if everyone stops interacting based on the norms and beliefs prescribed in a particular social structure, the structure ceases to exist.¹³ In actuality, social change happens more gradually and subtly. The structure of racial inequality is based on the belief of the inherent inferiority of certain categories of people, thus justifying their domination and oppression by others. These beliefs are perpetuated by many distorted views we hold regarding our fellow human beings, and these views are reinforced through social interactions. These views include the belief that we are completely separate beings with inherently different characteristics, and that a person's behaviour in a few moments of interactions with us represents the full reality of this person and everyone in their racial category. These views are manifested in the blanket

¹³ Herbert Blumer argued that social structure is maintained by repeated actions as the result of people defining the situation in the same way (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*). Definition of situation, however, is fluid and the meaning of various components of a situation can always be reinterpreted. Meaning of the situation is attributed through social interactions to which participants can bring aspects of their self. Hence, in theory, when everyone stops believing in the established definition of the situation and acting accordingly, the social structure ceases to exist. This is really a sociological articulation of how each social situation is the coming together of changing causes and conditions or dependent origination.

statements we make about an entire racial or ethnic group from an interaction we had with someone from the group.

Being willfully blind to the reality of racial inequality is not in accordance with wisdom. Not acting on the knowledge that people are suffering unnecessarily due to racial inequality is not in accordance with compassion. The cultivation of total clear awareness to live more in accordance with compassion and wisdom through Chan practice is antithetical to the willful blindness to the mechanisms that maintain racial domination. To be willfully blind is to insist on being ignorant of the true nature of reality. When we are ignorant, we act in ways that cause harm to ourselves and others without even being aware of it. To recognize that we have been willfully blind to protect our established worldview is the beginning of awakening. This recognition is unsettling and often triggers well-honed defense mechanisms of the mind that block our awareness. It takes courage, vigilance and integrity not to fall back into the habit of perpetuating ignorance as this default position is comfortable and, for the privileged, profitable. Our attachment to the comfort and benefits we have been yielding from the existing structure is suffering. Not only do we loath letting go of the attachment, we crave for more benefits and cling to the belief and worldview that keep us comfortable. This craving and aversion further feed the habit of turning a blind eye to what has been going on right in front of our nose. Cultivating clear awareness of the reality of racial inequality starts with understanding how racism perpetuates and is perpetuated by the structure of racial domination.

The term “racial domination” highlights the fact that the maintenance of racial inequality involves the use of power. It helps us move away from the discussion of race as if members of different racial groups simply have different cultures or preferences, such as food, music, and lifestyle. To conceptualize the issue of race this way is to turn away from the reality

that power plays a crucial role in maintaining the racial inequality responsible for sustained wealth, income, and educational opportunity gaps¹⁴ between black and white Americans. This also manifests in the persistence in poorer physical¹⁵ and mental health¹⁶ of black Americans, and their disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards.¹⁷ According to sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, institutional racism is “systemic White domination of people of color, embedded and operating in corporations, universities, legal systems, political bodies, cultural life, and other social collectives.”¹⁸ The exercise of power is often invisible to us. Part of its invisibility has to do with our unwillingness to acknowledge the exercise of power in our social life. Remembering that power is an integral power of social life can help Chan practitioners to unlearn the habit of denying or ignoring it. The next step is to practice cultivating clear awareness of how power is being exercised and how we are taking part in it and thus perpetuating the structure of racial domination.

Once again, conceptual understanding of racial domination in sociology can shed light on the phenomenon and help Chan practitioners cultivate clear awareness of its operation in social settings. According to Desmond and Emirbayer,¹⁹ racial domination involves the exercise of four types of power. We are familiar²⁰ with economic power that “privileges

¹⁴ Shapiro, *Hidden Cost*.

¹⁵ Williams, “Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Health,” 173-188.

¹⁶ Williams and Williams-Morris, *Racism and Mental Health*, 243-268.

¹⁷ Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

¹⁸ Desmond, and Emirbayer, “What is Racial Domination?,” 335-355.

¹⁹ Desmond, and Emirbayer, “What is Racial Domination?,” 335-355.

²⁰ If not, that would be knowledge we need to develop through reading and studying research on income and wealth disparity between racial groups.

Whites in terms of job placement, advancement, wealth, and property accumulation” and political power²¹ that “withhold basic rights from people of color and marshal the full power of the state to enforce segregation and inequality.”²² The dominant racial group also exercises symbolic power by classifying the dominant racial group of people as “normal” and people of colour as “abnormal” as well as social power by “denying people of color full inclusion in associational life.”²³ As discussed earlier in this paper, what we consider “normal” is socially constructed in our group life. The dominant group, using its power, was able to define its characteristics as the norm in the culture. Deviance from the norm automatically puts one in a socially inferior position even though some of the characteristics are out of one’s control. Skin colour and facial features are good examples. In American society, people with fair skin and Caucasian facial features are considered “normal” and thus enjoy the privilege of automatic inclusion in society. People of colour, while allowed to participate, have to work hard to earn their way into the group owing to their “deviant” status and often still suffer social exclusion. In social settings, our identification with the group compels us to view those labeled as deviant with suspicion due to the sense that “something is wrong with them” that comes with the deviant label. “Deviance” here refers to what the group defines as non-conformity to the norm. Since norms are socially constructed, they are arbitrary and do not have any inherently existing truth to their “rightness” beyond the group’s defining them as such. In the United States, for instance, the dominance of the people of European descent results in their physical and cultural characteristics being defined as the norm, when

²¹ The exercise of political power can be seen in the renewed effort to disenfranchise African Americans using the notion of voter fraud that cannot be substantiated with evidence. Connecting news report of these issues to the conceptual understanding of racial domination is part of the practice of cultivating clear awareness.

²² Desmond, and Emirbayer, “What is Racial Domination?,” 345.

²³ Desmond, and Emirbayer, “What is Racial Domination?,” 345.

there is nothing inherently more right about having lighter skin and eating bread than having darker skin and eating soup noodle. Yet, without being aware of these group dynamics that are invisible to us, despite our belief that we are not racist, our desire to fit in and the fear of being ostracized compel us to act in ways that perpetuate racial domination. We may join others to make fun of the characteristics associated with a racial minority to generate a sense of solidarity. We may leave a person of colour standing by herself in a crowded room where everyone is enthusiastically socializing and block that out of our awareness, rendering this person invisible. These seemingly harmless acts are how symbolic and social power is exerted at the micro level of social life to perpetuate the structure of racial domination.

Chan practitioners can cultivate clear awareness of the group dynamics that are exerting pressure on us vis-à-vis these actions, so that we can choose to act in ways that align with the vow to cultivate wisdom and compassion. There is much Chan practitioners can do to undo the structure of racial domination. Applying the concept of social and symbolic power of racial domination, a few examples can be identified, although they are by no means exhaustive. We can practice noticing individuals who are excluded in social gatherings, previously outside our awareness, overcome the social pressure to ignore them, and help them feel welcome and feel that they are as much a part of the group as everyone else. We can practice recognizing the tendency to dismiss certain characteristics or cultural practices as “weird” and labelling those individuals as deviants. We can cultivate clear awareness of the subtle, yet pervasive, mental habits of equating being different with inferiority, and thinking of difference as being automatically problematic thereby triggering aversion and, instead, practice not following these habits and by appreciating how differences enrich our world. For those in leadership roles, one can practice modelling for others how one can live harmoniously with each other through genuine mutual respect, instead of mindlessly reproducing the

existing structure of racial domination in our communities. This is particularly important for activists, as failure there breeds cynicism and disillusionment. Remembering how macro-level social structures are maintained by people conforming to the existing ways of thinking and interacting with each other, Chan practitioners can be agents of social change by cultivating clear awareness at all times.

Cultivating inner peace and challenging the established patterns of social interactions are not in conflict. In fact, they are two sides of the same practice. Clarity of subtle activities of mind allows us to see how our habitual reactions to the oppressed or oppressors perpetuate the structure that traps us in co-created suffering. Seeing that this moment offers a new opportunity to respond differently and choosing to do so frees us from that trap, and at the same time shifts the dynamic of the group and loosens the grip of racist beliefs in everyone's mind. When we start talking to the so-called "outsiders" as defined by our racist culture, we are shifting the group's boundary to include them, allowing others to see it as appropriate to interact with them as part of the group. As the group boundary expands, our hearts also open up together. The imagined boundaries that mark the social hierarchy between racial groups soften, while the animosity and harsh attitude maintained by the arbitrary division melt away, giving space to recognition and respect for our common humanity. When Chan practitioners' actions truly align with their vows to bring benefits to all sentient beings and stop generating suffering, they experience inner peace as they no longer need to block out inconvenient aspects of reality from awareness, itself a form of suffering, in order to hold onto distorted views.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on how Chan practitioners can be agents of social change in undoing the structure of racial domination to bring about a more compassionate and just society. I explained how subtle dynamics in social interactions exert pressure on us to perpetuate society's existing racist beliefs in our reactions to social situations largely outside of our awareness. With the help of conceptual insights from sociology to bring these dynamics into our awareness, Chan practitioners can cultivate clear awareness of these subtle dynamics and make small courageous decisions, interaction by interaction, to defy the power of the social set to perpetuate suffering in society. Needless to say, the practice of cultivating clear awareness emphasized here, takes place along with the study of global and social affairs and conceptual understanding of the dynamics of social interaction and structural forces. The bodhisattva vow of mastering limitless approaches to Dharma taken by Chan practitioners includes these efforts. Undoing racism is only one of the many possible projects. As we train our mind to see how power is exerted inappropriately in various aspects of social life, Chan practitioners can make use of conceptual insights on the workings of other structures of oppression based on gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, class, age, and so on to cultivate clear awareness of the dynamics through which our habitual tendencies have helped perpetuate these structures of oppression, thus allowing us to unlearn these habits in order to undo these oppressive structures. I have also talked about how we co-create our cultural norms and beliefs through social interactions, which can, in turn, change our social structures such as the family. In all social settings, cultivating clear awareness of what is going on, and thoughtful discernment of the impact of our responses, can ensure that our co-created actions are in accordance with wisdom and

compassion. This is another means for Chan practitioners to be agents of social change.

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