

# Wŏnhyo's Writings on Bodhisattva Precepts and the Philosophical Ground of Mahayana Buddhist Ethics

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Wŏnhyo's thoughts on Buddhist precepts have been strongly colored by his image of a free thinker highlighted with the expression, "Wŏnhyo, the unbridled" (Kor. *Wŏnhyo pulgi*. T.49, 2039.1006a7). His transgression of Buddhist disciplines has also been celebrated as evidence of the superiority of the Mahayana spirit over a strict observation of rules in the Theravada tradition. The sectarian discourse of whether Theravada Buddhism, which Korean Buddhism continues to refer to with the derogative term "Hinayana," is actually an inferior and narrower version of Buddhism as Mahayanists wish to project is an issue that needs a separate essay.

Considering the issue in a smaller scope, I want to point out that, accentuating Wŏnhyo's free spirit as a major feature of both Wŏnhyo's Buddhist thoughts and Mahayana Buddhism, Wŏnhyo scholarship has been blind to problems that could ensue when "Mahayana liberalism" is escalated without being properly thought out. As a result it has disregarded the gap in Wŏnhyo's writings when they are interpreted as

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a mere celebration of liberalism (Park 2002). Also, the scholarship risks the danger of falling into what an American Buddhist scholar calls a “transcendence trap” (Whitehill 2000: 21).

This essay claims that Wŏnhyo's ethical thoughts as expressed in his major works on bodhisattva precepts do not support such irresponsible mystification of transcending Buddhist disciplines, nor do they remain silent on the importance of maintaining, before violating or transcending, bodhisattva precepts in Buddhist practice. Exploring Wŏnhyo's thoughts on bodhisattva precepts in his writings, this essay challenges the prevalence of Wŏnhyo scholarship of an overemphasis on the liberalist spirit in Wŏnhyo's Buddhist thoughts. This will be accomplished by examining the philosophical ground of Mahayana ethics in Wŏnhyo and examining his guide for practicing this ethics. In this process, I also want to consider contemporary American Buddhist efforts to create Buddhist ethics proper and provide this study as one example of the philosophical investigation of Mahayana Buddhist ethics.

## **I . The One and the Many**

Understanding of Wŏnhyo's ethical thought has been subject to two major factors. The first is interpretation of Wŏnhyo's philosophy based on his biographical records. (For Wŏnhyo's biography see Buswell 1995; Lee 1993: 140-144; Kwŏn 1996). The second is a strong emphasis on his Buddhist philosophy as “reconciliation of conflicts”(Kor. *hwajaeng*). The fact that Wŏnhyo's life was a series of breaking, violating, or “transcending” traditional ethical codes has been celebrated by Korean Buddhist tradition as Wŏnhyo's way of acting out Mahayana liberalism. This has further been endorsed as his way of overcoming what Korean Buddhism calls a narrow concept of Buddhist precepts in the “Hinayana” tradition. For that purpose, a strict separation between monastic and lay Buddhisms need be broken down as Wŏnhyo did by having a relationship with a princess and fathering a child in that relationship. Disrobing was understood as a necessary step for a mass-proselytization through which he spread Buddhist teaching,

marching through a village after a village singing and dancing. All the events in Wŏnhyo's life were understood as evidence that Wŏnhyo's life of freedom represents his vision of transcending boundaries, or to borrow B. Faures expression, "Wŏnhyo's life as thought" (Faure 1995).

To many scholars, Wŏnhyo's life still is his thought. To them, not only does Wŏnhyo's life provide living proof of the Mahayana liberalist spirit, but it efficiently demonstrates the core teaching of Wŏnhyo's vision of "reconciliation of conflicts." Admittedly, Wŏnhyo's Buddhist thought is solidly anchored on Huayan (Kor. *Hwaŏm*) Buddhism which emphasizes the unobstructed interpenetration of all the things in the phenomenal world. However, it still seems valid to consider possible problems that might arise in this exclusive and sometimes even naive elevation of the harmonizing nature of the world. I do not think that uncritical acceptance of the concept of harmony was the intention of the Huayan Buddhist emphasis on the forth level of the Fourfold worldview. In a similar vein, we can ask the following questions which someone might think too simplistic and naive to endeavor to ask: why are there so many conflicts in the world while the Buddhist views the world as a harmonious co-existence of beings? If Wŏnhyo's liberalist life represents the model of transcending the dichotomies in the world and limits of artificially constructed rules and regulations, where is the demarcation between the transcendence and the violation of precepts? And how do sentient beings also "transcend" the rules and regulations of the world instead of "violating" them? If we consider these questions in the context of Wŏnhyo's Buddhist philosophy, we come to ask whether Wŏnhyo's life actually demonstrates the harmony of the conflict and dichotomies in the world, and whether Wŏnhyo himself thought of his life as one which transcended boundaries of the secular and the sacred, the monastic and lay Buddhisms, and thus one which achieved the reconciliation of the two. What I am trying to get at here is to pose a question on the function of our desire in our scholarly activities called interpretation.

As recent scholarship has tried to demonstrate, scholarship on Wŏnhyo, or on any thinker in that sense, is inevitably constructed by

the interpretation of later generations who in turn have never been free from socio-historical contexts (Buswell 1998, Cho 2001, Park 2001). To bring our attention to the interaction between a scholar's hermeneutical effort and her/his socio-historical and intellectual conditions does not suggest that our understanding of Wŏnhyo as a thinker on harmonization or his life-long effort to proselytize Buddhism to the masses is fictive. Rather, we might embark an adventure by unrolling our imagination, and, instead of focusing on the "harmony" he might have achieved as a National Master of Reconciliation of Conflicts, we might want to bring our attention to the status of the non-harmonized reality of the world in Wŏnhyo's philosophical world of harmony. In other words, I want to suggest that we project, for a moment, Wŏnhyo's Buddhist thought as demonstrating the existence of conflicts, rather than reconciling them, and thus speaking out the difficulty of understanding, not to speak of "living," the Buddhist ideal world of the unobstructed interpenetration of all the beings in the world. When we try to imagine Wŏnhyo from this perspective, we come to find a bridge to connect Wŏnhyo's life style of violating Buddhist precepts with his emphasis on the importance of maintaining them in his works. At the same time we will see that his writings on bodhisattva precepts discuss precepts in line with his life instead of conflicting with it.

## **II. Emptiness in Mahayana Ethics**

The seeming conflict between Wŏnhyo's life and his writings on bodhisattva precepts (Rhi 1989/1994; Han 1993/2000; Faure 1995; Park 2002) might not be a problem exclusive to Wŏnhyo but one that applied to Mahayana Buddhism in general because of the uneasy relationship between the basic stance of Mahayana Buddhism and conventional concept of ethical codes. To put it simply, to create precepts is to get practitioners to observe them; observing precepts inevitably involves a substantialization of the concept, action and thought presented through precepts. The basic stance of Mahayana Buddhism seems to go against this. The opening passage of Wŏnhyo's

*Posal yŏngnak ponŏpkyong so* [Commentary on the Sūtra of bodhisattva's bead-ornamented primary activities. Hereafter Commentary.] deals with this issue:

What is known as the Two-levels of Truths and the Middle Path do not have a ferry point which can be [used as] a path. The gate of profound dharma also does not have a principle that can be [used as] a gate. Since there is no path, there is no way [based on which] to practice one's mind. Since there is no gate, there is nowhere to enter by practicing. However, even though the ocean itself does not have a ferry, people get through it with a boat and an oar; also even though the sky does not have a ladder, [birds] spread wings and fly high above. Therefore learn that pathless path means that anything can be a path; gateless gate indicates that anything can be a gate. Since there is nothing which is not a gate, each and every thing can make itself a gate to lead to subtlety. Since there is nothing which is not a path, each and every place becomes the path that leads [one] back to the origin. (HPC, 1-498a)<sup>1</sup>

This passage clearly articulates the direction of Wŏnhyo's view on bodhisattva precepts. As Wŏnhyo indicates with the simile of the ocean and the sky with their qualification of having no set routes, Buddhist teachings of the Two-levels of Truths and the Middle Path provide no pre-fixed paths to master them. The nonexistence of set rules for precepts however does not deny the existence of a path for the practitioner to follow. In explaining this, Wŏnhyo paradoxically states that the non-existence of a set path means that anything can be a path and non-existence of a specific gate opens up a possibility for anything to be a door to practice in Buddhism. Following this logic, the demarcation between precepts and non-precepts, rules and non-rules, begins to become blurred.

Wŏnhyo sends a similar message in his *Posalgyebon chibŏm yogi* [Essentials of observation and violation of bodhisattva precepts. Hereafter

<sup>1</sup> Translation mine. All translations from Classical Chinese and Korean in this essay are mine unless noted otherwise. Quotations from Classical texts will be identified either by HPC (*Han'guk pulgyo chŏnsŏ*) or T (*Taishī shinshū daizkyū*) followed by volume, work, and page numbers.

*Essentials*], another of his works on bodhisattva ethics. (On *Essentials*, see An 1985; Kwŏn 1989) Wŏnhyo writes:

The bodhisattva precepts are a ferry which turns the currents around and send them back to their origin. They are the necessary gate in rejecting the wrong and selecting the right. Characteristics of the right and wrong might be easy to distinguish; however to tell the nature of good reward from that of bad is not. For example, a wicked intention can take the appearance of rightness. Or a contaminated appearance and lifestyle can also contain genuine purity at its inner core. Or a work which seems to be bringing at least a small amount of good luck might turn out to have caused a great tragedy. Or someone whose thoughts and activities seem profound might turn out to violate simple and minor things. (HPC, 1-581a)

In this passage, Wŏnhyo meditates on the problems of employing binary opposites in the construction of ethical codes. Distinguishing right and wrong forms the basis of ethical behavior according to conventional wisdom. In Buddhism as well, to know right from wrong and thus create good karma to bring good rewards can be an important part of the Buddhist code of behavior. Wŏnhyo however states that to distinguish right and wrong is easy while to consider their real impact is not. The examples Wŏnhyo provides here tell us once again that to Wŏnhyo set rules cannot ultimately serve as a ground for bodhisattva ethics because of contextuality and the complexity of human existence. For example, one can learn the first of Buddhist precept, no-killing, and thus know that killing is wrong. However, it is not an easy task to evaluate an instance of killing when it takes place in various situations in life and thus is contextualized. There lies the difficulty of ethical discourse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Let's look at a contrasting example. Korean Buddhist tradition has uncritically celebrated Buddhist monks involvement with killing when the situations are justified. The creation of a monk soldiers' army during the Japanese invasion of Korea in the sixteenth century is well known and well advertised as an example of Buddhist patriotism. On the other hand, some Buddhist schools strictly observe the precept of no-killing regardless of situation. An example is the Dalai Lama's declaration that killing is an intrinsically bad action, and even on war field the situational logic cannot change the nature of the action of killing (Dalai Lama 1999:

Another important aspect of Wŏnhyo's ethical thought appears at the beginning of *Pŏmmanggyŏng posal gyebon sagi* [*Personal records on the chapter on the bodhisattva precepts in the Sūtra of Brahma's Net*. Henceforth *Personal records*]. Wŏnhyo begins this *Personal records* with his interpretation on the title of the Sūtra, that is Brahma's net. The "net" in the title "symbolizes the dharma taught by the Buddha"(HPC, 1-596a). Explaining it in three ways, Wŏnhyo shows how different aspects of the world are encompassed in the teaching of the Buddha. In the first explanation Wŏnhyo states that different dharmas in the world, though different on the phenomenal level, are the same at the ultimate level of the Buddha's teaching. In his second explanation, this difference and the sameness are also compared with the relationship between the net and the knots in the Brahma's net. Wŏnhyo writes:

The second [aspect of the net as a symbol of the Buddhas teaching] refers to the teaching of the Conditional Truth [in the Two Levels of Truths]. This being is different from that being and that being is different from this being. Hence there exist ten thousand different things in the world. What this indicates is that this knot in the net is different from that knot and that knot is different from this knot [in the net]. At the same time [however] since the oneness of the absolute nothing is the Ultimate Truth [in the Two Levels of Truths], and although the differences in the Conditional Truth cannot not exist, the Ultimate Truth encompasses the Conditional Truth, and thus there is one dharma

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29). In other words, one might want to justify one's action of killing based on the situation. However, the fact that one took an other's life itself does not change. Regardless of whether one gets punished or not because of that action, the fact is still the same: s/he violated the precept of no-killing. Wŏnhyo's argument in the quote above also falls in line with this. As he states, to distinguish good and bad seems easy: killing is prohibited. However, complicated math of karmic construction involved in the act of killing is not easy for human beings to calculate.

This also brings us the issue of whether a strict observation of *sila* necessarily means that such a tradition is narrower than a tradition which resorts to a rather free interpretation of precepts. When Korean Buddhist tradition has accepted killing of Japanese soldiers by Buddhist monk soldier's army, the tradition relies on the flexible interpretation of basic Buddhist precepts as a stance of Mahayana Buddhism. Such flexibility however does not necessarily indicate a broader interpretation nor that the Dalai Lama's observation is a narrower vision. I am not making a judgment here about which side is right or wrong. Instead, I demonstrate the difficulty and complexity of ethical judgment even with preset rules.

which is the same through and through. This is like the net encompassing all the knots in the net. No knot exists beyond the net. (HPC, 1-586b)

After this passage, Wŏnhyo again compares different beings in the phenomenal world with diverse teachings of the Buddha, and confirms that both will eventually be encompassed into one law in the Ultimate Truth. The idea applied here is unmistakably that in *Huayan* Buddhism. The simile of the Indra's net reminds us of the perennial teaching of *Huayan* Buddhism on the unobstructed inter-penetration of all things in the world. Putting side by side the three quotations which serve introductions to three of Wŏnhyo's major works on bodhisattva precepts, we can outline his thoughts on the topic as follows. The *Huayan* Buddhist idea of non-obstructed interpenetration among beings in the world provides a ground for Wŏnhyo's understanding of the world. Since all beings in the world are part of the endlessly expanded net, conventional wisdom of the ethical discourse, which distinguishes shoulds and should-nots, dos and don'ts, does not have an independent status or intrinsic value. In other words, the world of the Brahma's net, like the ocean without a ferry point or the sky without a ladder, is vast emptiness before being divided into the ethical labeling of good and bad, right and wrong. Seen from this perspective, our value judgment based on the phenomenal nature of things frequently betrays our inability to see the complicated nature of things.

In all three writings, Wŏnhyo takes the nonsubstantiality of precepts and being as the ground of his ethical discourse. Observing and violating precepts itself does not have intrinsic value. From this perspective, bodhisattva precepts are not merely rules and regulations which maintain order and train practitioners. Realizing and accepting bodhisattva precepts themselves comprise the embodiment of Mahayana Buddhism in its entirety. In other words, ethical awakening encompasses the ontological status of being in Mahayana Buddhism. How is it so? Let's consider the scenario of a practitioner violating a precept.

In a conventional sense, violation of a precept stands opposite to observing it. Recovery from the commitment of violation generally takes



the steps of realization of one's fault, acceptance of appropriate measures to compensate the violation and resolution not to make the same mistake again through firm observation of the precept. From the Mahayana Buddhist perspective however such a treatment of the situation only explains part of the meaning of observing or violating bodhisattva precepts. Actually, a mere acceptance of one's violation and accompanying repentance, followed by efforts to be a better keeper of precepts, might create a potential danger of substantializing the act of violation. Here lies the salient point of Mahayana ethics. As mentioned, the basic stance on precepts from the Mahayana perspective lies in their non-substantial nature. The Middle Path, which is nondual and which is emptiness, is the condition of our existence. Violation, as much as observation, of precepts is not an exception. It does not escape the scope of the Brahma's net. Violation then does not have a reality with substance. Hence, a genuine awareness of the meaning of violation not only includes realization of the mistake made by the act of violation but, more importantly, the emptiness of violation itself. Violation is non-substantial and so is the violated (precept) and the violator. The real understanding of either observing or violating precepts comes from the awareness of its non-substantiality. In this sense, both observation and violation of precepts are ways of practicing, realizing and embodying the non-substantiality or emptiness of the world and being.

This Mahayana emphasis on emptiness in ethical discourse, however, when not properly contextualized and elaborately spelled out, can be subject to serious misunderstanding. James Whitehill calls this incomplete employment of "emptiness" in Mahayana ethical discourse the "transcendence trap"(Whitehill: 21). The context of his discussion is the discourse on Zen Buddhist ethics in American Buddhism. In discussing the American Buddhist tendency to fall into a naive irrationalism, Whitehill laments how the trap "misleads them" [e.g. Robert Aitken in *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics and others*] and us into portraying the perfected moral life as a non-rational expressiveness, something natural, spontaneous, non-linguistic, and

uncalculating”(Whitehill: 21). And he further states:

This ethical conception results in the kind of ontological dismissal of morality and ethics preached by Aitken at the end of his chapter: "Thus, in the world, too, there is nothing to be called virtue" [Aitken: 159]. The common corollary, 'there is also nothing to be called character', is unstated by Aitken, although it is part of the same syllogistic net of claims deduced ostensibly from no-ego and *nyatā* axioms. This net is true and helpful only within the deconstructive mood and context of *sūnyatā* dialectics and metaphysics. When the net of no-self is thrown to catch truth in an ethical context, villains laugh and demons thrive. (Whitehill:21)

Whitehill's argument provides an important perspective on the ethical implication of major Mahayana doctrines. Whitehill claims that the Mahayana concept of emptiness or no-self inevitably contradicts the ethical concept of virtue or character. He also contends that *sūnyatā*, and no-self theory, can be used as a deconstructive mechanism to demonstrate Buddhist philosophy but cannot be the part of Mahayanist ethical, and therefore I assume, ontological, reality. Does this imply that Buddhism is not capable of making any contribution to ethical discourse? Whitehill answers in the affirmative. Claiming that a clear and appropriate ethical strategy is essential for the survival of Buddhism in the West, Whitehill proposes that such a Buddhist ethics is possible when Buddhist ethics is “grafted to and enriched by the ethics of virtue”(Whitehill: 17).

I support Whitehill's criticism of the transcendence trap for its irresponsible and uncritical employment of Buddhist concepts of emptiness and no-self. However, by dismissing emptiness as a mere deconstructive device which lacks a role in the Buddhist ethical discourse, Whitehill positions himself at the other end of extremes. To borrow Wōnhyo's expression, the transcendence trap is one case of “being stagnated with non-being,” while Whitehill's rejection of the ethical function of *sūnyatā* is one example of getting “attached to being.” Mahayana ethics has cautioned such a partial understanding of *sūnyatā* as it calls attention to the dual function of emptiness as being

and non-being.

### III. Existence and Non-existence of Precepts

The dual nature of precepts in Wŏnhyo's bodhisattva ethics is well articulated in the section on “the ultimate observation and violation” [of bodhisattva precepts] (Kor. *kugyŏng chibŏm*) in his *Essentials* of bodhisattva precepts. In the following passage, Wŏnhyo provides his accounts on the function and nature of emptiness in the Mahayana bodhisattva ethics:

With regard to committing or not committing a violation, if one does not transcend the two extremes [of being and nonbeing] one will not be able to ultimately observe precepts and thus not violate them. Nor is the person able to obtain the perfection of pure precepts. Why is it so? Precepts themselves do not have self-nature. Since they exist depending on various conditional causes (Kor. *yŏn*), they can never have their own independent features. Since conditional causes are not precepts, if separated from them, the precepts do not exist. [Try to] remove conditional causes one after another, and [note that] nothing can exist in the halfway [between conditional causes and precepts as entities]. If one tries to find precepts in this manner [by removing conditional causes in search for a precept as an independent entity], one will realize that they can never be obtained. (HPC, 1-585a)

As in many Mahayana discourses, irony and paradox prevail here. In order to observe precepts, one should realize that precepts are not real. Like Zen Buddhists who try to learn that there is nothing to practice while practicing (Kor. *musujisu*), Mahayana ethics demands that the observation of precepts in its ultimate sense amounts to the awareness that there are nothing to abide by. This surely is a deconstructive mode, as Whitehill states. If there is nothing to abide by, what are the precepts? Why do Mahayanists have precepts at all? And how does one observe precepts if they are unreal? Obtaining answers to these questions are possible only when we see the dual aspect of *sūnyatā* discourse in Manahaya Buddhism. The nonsubstantial

nature of precepts tells only half of the story of Mahayana precepts. If one stops at this stage, one will find it difficult to ground Mahayana ethics with the reality of body and flesh. However, as important as realizing the emptiness and non-substantiality as the ontological foundation of precepts is understanding their existence in reality. Precepts do not exist but at the same time are as real as things in the world. Thus Wŏnhyo continues:

That precepts exist only based on multilevel conditional causes does not negate their existence in reality. Violating precepts is also like this; so is personal identity. In dealing with precepts, if one sees only their non-existential aspect and says that they do not exist, *such a person might not violate precepts but will forever lose them*, because s/he denies their existence. Also, if someone relies on the idea that precepts do exist and thinks only on the existential side of precepts, even though s/he might be able to observe the precepts, observation in this case is the same as violation, because such a person negates the ultimate reality of precepts. (HPC, 1-585a, emphasis mine)

A deconstructive operation seems complete in this passage. Mahayana ethics, or bodhisattva precepts in that regard, cannot be fully understood, if we only apply the conventional sense of ethics and rule-based morality constructed out of the binary opposites of good and bad. However, the utility of rule-based ethics with its emphasis on binary opposites has also been bankrupted in the Western ethical discourses as well. At the doorstep of the twentieth century, Nietzsche declared the problems of taking binary opposites as the basis of morality. The Nietzschean and later postmodern, deconstructive ethical discourses which traced the grounds of the ethics of good and bad back to the subject-object dualism in the traditional western thought resemble in many aspects the Mahayana attitude toward ethics in emphasizing the non-substantial nature of moral-ethical categories. In this sense, the deconstructive function of *sūnyatā* in Mahayana Buddhism is not something external or strategic to Mahayana Buddhism, nor is it irrelevant to Mahayana Buddhist ethics as Whitehill

treats it, but is the ground of Mahayana Buddhist ethics.

The sophistication of the Mahayana interpretation of the precepts and ethical stance obviously brings worries to some because of the difficulty in applying it to reality. Like the postmodern discourse in our time, Mahayanists refuse to provide a clear cut outline for moral and ethical codes without first problematizing the outline itself. We discussed that this stance is solidly anchored in the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness. That said, what would it mean to teach non-reality of precepts to practitioners? What would be the ethical implication of the Mahayanist claim that observation is the violation of precepts in its ultimate sense? Is such ethics practical at all? Is the Mahayana ethics based on emptiness deceiving itself about the unpracticality of its ethical blueprint and thus helping "villains laugh and demons thrive"?

In the *Essentials*, Wŏnhyo does not go into this issue in detail but is not completely ignorant about the difficulty involved in the Mahayanist vision of bodhisattva ethics. After explaining the importance of the foundation of emptiness in bodhisattva ethics, Wŏnhyo asks, borrowing the voice of a fictive inquirer, whether Mahayana Buddhist ethics is too sophisticated for a beginning practitioner to follow and whether its lofty spirit can be digested only by great bodhisattvas. Wŏnhyo responds in the negative. His logic is that even beginners should try to practice the dharma of non-obtainment and then gradually they will be able to understand and embody bodhisattva precepts of no-precepts. There is always the first time, Wŏnhyo encourages, and if one does not try, one can never obtain the result. Wŏnhyo's advice however is far from convincing. The advice of "Just try it" cannot amount to much when the questioner does not know how to try or where to begin. Like the "Just be good" advice of the good-and-bad binary morality to the person who has doubts about the qualifications of goodness, Wŏnhyo's "just try it" loses power as ethical advice. In order to fully address this issue, Wŏnhyo needs to move to the next stage of his ethical discourse, which I define as the stage of faith.

#### IV. The Ethical Meaning of Faith

Wŏnhyo's thoughts on bodhisattva precepts are expressed in three works: *The Essentials of Bodhisattva Precepts*, *Personal Records and Commentary on Primary Activities*. Since we do not know the chronology of Wŏnhyo's works, we cannot tell how these three functioned in the development of Wŏnhyo's thoughts on bodhisattva ethics. In all three works, Wŏnhyo takes the nonsubstantialist nature of bodhisattva precepts as his core. In the *Essentials*, Wŏnhyo comments on the three categories of observing and violating bodhisattva precepts: light and serious; profound and shallow; and the ultimate. The third section is where Wŏnhyo discusses the function of *sūnyatā* in Mahayana ethics. The *Personal Records* discusses the ten grave precepts which bodhisattva should observe. In both works, Wŏnhyo mostly elaborates on the Mahayana interpretation of bodhisattva precepts. *Commentary on Primary Activities* in this sense provides a somewhat different aspect of Wŏnhyo's bodhisattva discourse, about which I will provide some details shortly.

Contemplating on Wŏnhyo's discussions on bodhisattva precepts based on these three texts together, we can draw a hermeneutical diagram of his bodhisattva ethics. The diagram is tripartite. On its first tier, we can place the *sūnyatā* discourse of Mahayana ethics, which provides a philosophical ground of bodhisattva precepts. On the second tier comes a detailed discussion of actual precepts with a constant recourse to the *sūnyatā* base of all precepts. Traditional precepts are regrouped into different categories of Three Sets of Pure Precepts (Kor. *samch'wi chŏnggye*) or light and grave precepts and reinterpreted within the context of Mahayana Buddhism. The first and second levels together solidly interlock the being and non-being aspects of *sūnyatā* with full endorsement of its practical appearances. The third tier contains the position of the ethical and acting subject, who is the practitioner.

At the end of the previous section, I suggested that Wŏnhyo failed to provide a practical link between his ethical theory and the subject of

ethical behavior when he responds with the meek advice of "just try it." Wŏnhyo seems to have speculated on the issue rather seriously after the *Essentials*, (Here I am not providing any suggestion for a historical chronology of Wŏnhyo's works. I am rather trying to project a hermeneutical link among the three works.) and in the *Commentary* the issue demands, though implicit, more attention, partly because of the nature of the *Sūtra* on which Wŏnhyo comments.

Wŏnhyo's *Commentary on the Primary Activities* provides a comprehensive discussion on bodhisattva ethics even in the extant version which lacks his comments on the first two chapters and part of the third. (On the *Commentary*, see Kim 1997, 1999; Rhi 1984, 1994; Sim 1984: 481-522; Yi 1998; Lancaster 2002; Park 2002.) In the chapters on "How to learn and embody bodhisattva's life" (Kor. *Hyŏnsŏng hakkwan p'um*), Interpretation (Kor. *Sogŏi p'um*), and Mother of Buddhist Practice (Kor. *Pulmo p'um*), Wŏnhyo focuses his discussion once again on the *sūnyatā* nature of bodhisattva precepts and the mind ground of bodhisattvas activities, another major concept in bodhisattva precepts. Since I have already discussed the *sūnyatā* issue through the *Essentials*, I will focus my discussion here on two chapters, which are those on "Causality" (Kor. *Inkwa p'um*) and "The Gathered Assembly Receives Learning" (Kor. *Taejung suhak p'um*) Wŏnhyo begins his commentary on the Causality section with the discussion of the Seven Materials (Kor. *ch'ilje*), the first of which goes: "Faith is the basis of various virtues [of bodhisattvas]" (HPC, 1-513a). Faith, Wŏnhyo writes, is anchored on the faith-store of bodhisattva. After listing the ten faith-stores of bodhisattva, Wŏnhyo comments: "Contemplating the above explanations, I think they clearly indicate that bodhisattva should deeply believe that dharma is truly empty" (HPC, 1-513b), and he continues to comment on each of the ten faith-stores. I want to bring attention here to the nature of faith in Buddhist discourse. Notice that Wŏnhyo defines faith as that on the reality of *sūnyatā* in bodhisattvas understanding of all dharmas. This understanding of faith becomes more important when we combine it with the faith Wŏnhyo discusses in the following chapter, which is entitled, "The Gathered Assembly

Receives Learning.”

The title of the chapter speaks for itself. This chapter deals with the conditions, qualifications, and procedures of giving, receiving and practicing precepts and thus is somewhat different from the rather theoretical discussions on the *sūnyatā* base of precepts. In other words, it directly deals with the question raised by the fictive inquirer at the end of the *Essentials*: How do beginning practitioners, and sentient beings in general, get initiated into the world of Mahayana bodhisattva precepts?

The *Posal yōngnak ponōpkyōng* [*The Sūtra of bead-ornamented primary activities of bodhisattva*]<sup>3</sup> is well known for its radical treatment of giving/receiving bodhisattva precepts. In this *Sūtra*, all and any formalities for precepts-receiving seem to have been dismissed. Here are some examples. In regard to the qualifications for the precept-givers, the *Sūtra* states: “a husband and a wife or relatives can be teachers for each other and thus give precepts”(T.25, 1485, 1021c). In terms of the qualifications for the receivers of precepts, the *Sūtra* states that if one understands language, that person is able to observe precepts. Also, the *Sūtra* claims that the “bodhisattva precepts can be received but cannot be lost; thus once one receives them, they won't be lost till the end of the future”(T. 25. 1485, 1021b). While trying to attract people to receive precepts with these special measures on the one hand, on the other, the *Sūtra* employs a rhetorical threat to emphasize the importance of receiving precepts. Just before it declares that once received, bodhisattva precepts cannot be lost, even when violated, the *Sūtra* states that if one does not receive bodhisattva precepts, the person cannot be called “a being with feeling and consciousness; the person is not different from animals; the person cannot be called a human being; the person is always separated from the sea of three treasures; the person is neither a bodhisattva, nor a man nor a woman nor a ghost, nor a human being; that being is an animal, has a wrong view, is a heretic and not even close to human feeling” (T.24. 1485, 1021b). What are all

3 Lewis Lancaster translated the title, *Posal yōngnak ponōpkyōng* as *The Sūtra(explaining) the Primary (Yogic) Activities that Comprise the Garland of the Bodhisattva*, Lancaster 2002, 220.



these threats about and why such a radical simplification in the procedure of giving/receiving the precept? What is in between the sophisticated *sānyatā*-discourse of Mahayana ethics and to-the-ground style simplification of bodhisattva precepts? Would the simplification of the qualifications and conditions of bodhisattva precepts proposed in the *Sūtra* help us answer the question raised by the fictive inquirer at the end of the *Essentials*?

Interestingly, except for giving a brief explanation of the meaning of the no-losing of received precepts, Wōnhyo keeps silent on all these issues in his commentary. He passes lines and lines of the *Sūtra* without much comment on conditions and procedures regarding the precept, and the *Sūtra* moves on to describe that all the gathered assembly of a hundred million people has received precepts, practiced the Ten Precepts to satisfaction and thus entered the “state of initial stay.” With this, the section on the receiving precepts closes and the *Sūtra* discusses the issue of “learning practicing.” As the *Sūtra* gets to this point, Wōnhyo, after a brief introduction, brings the reader's attention to the “Ten Faiths.” Wōnhyo writes: “Regarding the Ten Faiths the Hua-yan-jing states: Bodhisattvas have ten kinds of indestructible faith. What are they? 1. indestructible faith in all the buddhas; 2. indestructible faith in Buddhist teaching...”(HPC,1-522a).<sup>4</sup> Wōnhyo continues and lists all ten of bodhisattva faiths. Why does he need to enumerate all ten faiths after he kept silent on the issues for which this *Sūtra* is well known?

Earlier we saw that Wōnhyo declared that bodhisattvas faith is the faith on the emptiness of dharma. It seems that at this point Wōnhyo is confirming the *Sūtra*'s statement: “All the sentient beings, when they first entered the sea of three jewels, they take faith as their ground” (T. 24. 1485, 1020b). Faith is the foundation, for it is the beginning of the internal movement of the practitioners, while all the rules and

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4 The rest are: “3. indestructible faith in all sage-monks; 4. indestructible faith in all the bodhisattvas; 5. indestructible faith in all teachers; 6. indestructible faith in all sentient-being; 7. indestructible faith in bodhisattvas great wishes; 8. indestructible faith in all bodhisattvas activities; 9. indestructible faith in respectfully serving all buddhas; 10. indestructible faith in the marvelous skillful means of all the bodhisattvas who help sentient beings transform themselves.”

regulations of giving and receiving precepts, however simplified they might be, are still one way removed from the practitioners themselves. Without internal initiation, one cannot take the first step toward the bodhisattva precepts. Faith is the individual's determination to be part of the ethical world called Mahayana bodhisattva. In faith-based ethics, ethical discourse and thus the ethical world begins internally with the individual's inner transformation. It places itself opposite to the rule-based ethics in the sense that in the rule-based ethics the initiation begins outside of the ethical subject. No matter how simplified a procedure might be, or how much threat is presented, unless an individual brings up her/his determination to participate to the world of the bodhisattva, the reception of precepts cannot take place. The key to this determination is faith, for faith cannot arise without a person's positive and constructive desire to get involved with the world. Hence, at the end of this *Commentary*, Wŏnhyo is now telling the fictive inquirer of the *Essentials*, instead of "just try it," that there is a positive feature in her/him which s/he should turn on herself/himself. One is the starting point and faith is the switch board which opens one's door toward the nature of dharma, toward the greatness of the Buddha and bodhisattva, and toward the road to save oneself and others. Faith in this sense is ethical as much as religious in Wŏnhyo's Buddhist thought. Also in this way the function of faith in Wŏnhyo's bodhisattva ethics has much in common with the faith in Zen Buddhism in the way it is explained in the *hwadu* (Chinese, *huat'ou*) practice. (For the faith in *hwadu*, see Park 1983).

## V. Dancing with Tears

Mahayana ethics, seen in this context, is based on an individual's effort to cultivate herself/himself for an ethical life. This is the basis of overcoming what Whitehill criticized as the "transcendence trap" of Buddhist ethics in contemporary American Buddhism. In the ultimate level things are all interconnected, and thus empty, and thus there are no precepts, therefore no concern of maintaining them. In addition,

every individual is equipped with the ethical ground called the ground of mind (Kor. *simji*). These facts however guarantee nothing in terms of an individual's moral and ethical life until each and every individual turn on the igniter through her/his faith. Faith in bodhisattva ethics is not just an igniter but the igniter which interlocks the tripartite tiers of Mahayana bodhisattva ethics: the ultimate reality of *sūnyatā*, conventional reality of observing precepts, and the faith which keeps the ethical subject within the structure despite a constant struggle arising in her/him. Without considering all three levels, Mahayana ethical discourse is subject to the pitfall of the transcendence trap or the substantialization of precepts and the subject which goes against the basic Buddhist doctrine.

How do we understand Wŏnhyo's life and thought in this context? Addressing the conflict between Wŏnhyo's teachings on bodhisattva precepts and his life of violation, Bernard Faure cynically or playfully presents Wŏnhyo's position as: "Do as I say, not as I do" (Faure 1995: 209). I doubt that this is the way we should interpret the relationship between the mystified life of Wŏnhyo and his texts. However I also have reservation about the tendency of interpreting and justifying the violation-narrative in Wŏnhyo's hagiography with the reconciliation narrative. What then is the answer?

The forth level of Huayan Buddhism is not reality to everyone. The *Huay-an-jing* makes it clear that it is the vision of the world that the Buddha obtained while he was in *samādhi* right after he obtained enlightenment. The unobstructed interpenetration of the secular and the sacred in Wŏnhyo, like that in Huayan Buddhism, is the vision to be realized when Vimalakirti's sickness is ultimately cured. Wŏnhyo did not declare that Vimalakirti regained health and Vimalakirti still remains with his sickness. If Wŏnhyo did "tour thousands of villages and myriads of hamlets singing and dancing to convert people" as his biography reports (Lee, 1993: 144), his singing and dancing cannot be the Dionysian festive dance indulging in the affirmation of the world. Some wonder about the cause of the chasm existing between the non-monastic life of Wŏnhyo and his emphasis on monastic life

together with the observation of precepts in *Palsim suhaeng jang* (Han, 1993: 2000) while others think that *Palsim suhaeng jang* could be the kind of song Wŏnhyo could have spread as he was dancing and marching through the village after village (Lee, 1993:154). These seemingly conflicting interpretations can be just two sides of one coin. Imagine an ex-Buddhist monk in tattered clothes in an unknown village dancing with a mask and singing: “How many lives have you failed to practice, by passing your days and nights in vain? How much longer will this empty body survive for you not to practice this lifetime? This body will inevitably come to an end. Who knows what body you will have next time? Isn't this an urgent matter? Isn't this an urgent matter?” (HPC, 1-841c)

What we get from this vision is not a peaceful world in which the gap is bridged by Wŏnhyo between the monastic and lay or between the Buddhist ideal world of unobstruction and sentient being's reality. Instead, we are forced to face the stark reality of human existence in which conflicts, gaps, and contradictions are too clear and obvious to be mended with any one simple discourse or one individual hero. In this sense, the claim that the hero-making of Wŏnhyo in Korean Buddhist tradition has killed Wŏnhyo strongly has its validation (Park 2000). All this suggests that we need to reconsider the entirety of the reconciliation narrative in Wŏnhyo. When we open up our mind and reexamine the relationship among Wŏnhyo's texts, Wŏnhyo has much to offer us in our attempt to create a new vision in Mahayana Buddhist ethics.

## Glossary

huat'ou 話頭

Huayan 華嚴

hwadu 話頭

hwajaeng 和諍

Hwaŏm 華嚴

Hyŏnsŏng hakkwan p'um 賢聖學觀品

Inkwa p'um 因果品

ku'gyŏng chibŏm 究竟持犯

musujisu 無修之修  
 Posal yŏngnak ponŏpkyŏng 菩薩瓔珞本業經  
 Posal yŏngnak ponŏpkyŏng so 菩薩瓔珞本業經疏  
 Posalgyebon chibŏm yogi 菩薩戒本持犯要記  
 Pulgi 不羈  
 Pulmo p'um 佛母品  
 Pŏmmanggyŏng posalgyebon sagi 梵網經菩薩戒本私記  
 samch'wi chŏnggye 三聚淨戒  
 simji 心地  
 Sogŭi p'um 釋義品  
 Taejung suhak p'um 大眾受學品  
 Wŏnhyo 元曉  
 yŏn 緣

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