

A Commentary on Venerable Songchul's Method for Seon Practice

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Venerable Songchul's diverse but contradictory outlook on Seon practice might give rise to questions about the integrity of the Jogye Order's Seon (zen) practice. Ven. Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice points to a dualistic way of practice. Thus, we can see that he introduced a syncretic practice of both Seon and Esoteric Buddhism which impairs the pure tradition of traditional Hwadu-seon as recognized by the Jogye Order. If he suggested a different method of Seon practice according to individual capacities, it would mean diversification of Seon practice and we have to reconsider his outlook on 'gradual practice'. It is quite contradictory that he encourages the mantra while he disapproves of gradual practice.

Venerable Songchul claims that Chinul's 'sudden enlightenment' is different from that of the Jogye Order. He insists that Shenhui (神會) was the first to emphasize 'first enlightenment, then later practice' and Tsung-mi (宗密) strongly claimed 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice'. But it is difficult to agree with Venerable Songchul's interpretation of Shenhui's Seon practice as a scheme for sudden enlightenment and gradual practice, because

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Shenhui strongly emphasized 'seeing into one's original nature (見性)' and suddenness (頓) in Seon practice.

The contemporary practice of the Jogye Order lacks systematization and consistency. In this context, Songchul's diverse outlook on Seon practice needs to be reinterpreted in order to be as authentic in terms of Korean Seon Buddhism.

I . Introduction

Hwadu-seon (話頭禪) is the recognized practice of the Korean Jogye Order to attain realization. But recently, many practitioners have sought other contemplation methods in order to realize Buddhahood. From the latter part of the twentieth century up until now, the Jogye Order has been active in debating different approaches to Seon practice. The debate concerning Venerable Songchul (性徹, 1912-1993)'s outlook on Seon practice, that is, 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice (頓悟頓修)' and Venerable Chinul (知訥, 1158-1210)'s 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice (頓悟漸修)' has been a hot issue among many Seon practitioners.

Recently, various kinds of practice method have been introduced alongside Korean Seon practice. Among them, vipassanā has become popular among many Seon practitioners, and some even consider this practice is the only way to gain enlightenment. Amidst these varying opinions, the Jogye Order endeavors to establish 'a practice system and guidelines' for Seon practice, with the help of highly experienced Seon practitioners whose job is to advise on an acceptable theory and practice base. The need for such an advisory group stems from a lack of firm understanding about correct practice. The current practice debate indicates that many practitioners have doubt about the Jogye Order's traditional method of Seon practice.

The purpose of this study is to consider Venerable Songchul's views on Seon practice which purport that only 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice (頓悟頓修)' can be considered true Seon practice (Ven. Toeong Songchul, 1990:210). Other practices such as mantra which were suggested and encouraged by Venerable Songchul will be examined.

II. 'Seeing Self-nature and Attaining Buddha-hood (見性成佛)' according to Ven. Songchul's Way of Practice

Venerable Songchul (1912-1993) started practicing before he became a monk. At first, he studied analects of the Seon School such as *The Song of Realizing the Way* (證道歌). His mind was opened up through reading analects of the Seon school. Venerable Songchul became a monk in 1936 and attained enlightenment when he was 29 years old. In 1947, he organized a community at Bongamsa temple dedicated to practice according to the way of early Buddhism. Venerable Songchul was a leading figure in establishing an association to revive the tenets and authentic precepts from earlier Seon schools.

He himself observed original precepts and rules including regular recital of Bodhisattva precepts and daily chanting of the mantra accompanied by many lay Buddhists. He also encouraged trainees to recite the Bupshinjineon (法身真言) mantra. In 1967 during his one hundred days Dharma Talks, Venerable Songchul expounded that the fundamental truth of Buddhism lies in the Middle Path, that is, realization of the perfect universal wisdom of a Buddha. He also asserted that the authentic Seon practice is 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice'. In 1993, he passed away at the age of 82 in Hae-in temple.

Venerable Songchul insists that we need practice in order to gain experiential knowledge (證智) of the Buddha's teaching which is actualized through enlightenment (Venerable Songchul, vol.2, 1993:104). The essence of the Buddha's teaching is 'to escape from all suffering, and attain nirvana' (Venerable Songchul, vol.1, 1993:35). In order to reach that ultimate goal, we need to practice the Middle Way, the right path of Seon practice.

Venerable Songchul emphasizes that the Middle Path is essential in the Jogye Order's philosophy. He insists that practitioners of the Jogye Seon school have followed the Middle Path and attained the Perfect Universal Wisdom (Venerable Songchul, vol.1, 1993:242). In respect of Matzu (馬祖, 709-788), his 'Ordinary mind is the way (平常心是道)' is the Middle Path, free from extremes (Venerable Songchul, vol.1, 1993:205).

Practitioners should realize this ordinary mind, which is, the Middle Path.

Baizhang (白丈, 720-814) also emphasizes the Middle Path saying that the Buddha's teaching is about avoiding the two extremes of being and non-being (有無二邊). Six patriarch Huineng (慧能, 638-713), and all the Masters emphasized the Middle Path in Seon practice, and thus Seon practice should be understood as the sudden gate (頓門), not the gradual gate (漸次門).

Venerable Songchul insists that Hwadu-seon is the short-cut to enlightenment. Enlightenment is 'seeing self-nature and attaining Buddha-hood (見性成佛)'. *The Platform Sutra* explains it as 'Seeing the original nature, and accomplishing a Buddha-way by itself (識心見性 自成佛道).'

In order to understand fully 'seeing into one's own nature (見性)' as expounded in *the Platform Sutra*, we should understand how Shenhui (神會, 668-760) sees it. In his understanding of Seon, 'seeing (見)' is a deep experience in itself.

In Shenhui's analects, *Treatise on Defining Right or Wrong (定是非論)*, "The character '見 (seeing)' is the outcome of his 30 years study (神會三十年 所學工夫 唯在見字) (Hu-di, 1970:277)."

Let's take a look at the meaning of '見 (seeing)' in *the Shenhui's analects (神會語錄 21)*:

'Seeing' is to see one's original nature. (如是見者 卽是本性)

If one sees his original nature, he is a Buddha.

(若人見本性 卽坐如來地)

Seeing is to abandon all characteristics, that's the way of a Buddha. (如是見者 離一切諸相 是名諸佛)

'To see one's own originally enlightened mind (見性)' is a very important aspect of Seon experience in Shenhui's understanding. What Venerable Songchul suggested as to the meaning of 'to see one's own original enlightened mind' should be interpreted in terms of Shenhui's outlook on it. It is difficult to agree with Venerable Songchul's interpretation of Shenhui (神會, 668-760) about Seon practice as a sudden enlightenment and gradual practice scheme. Venerable Songchul

criticizes Chinul's outlook on Seon which followed Tsung-mi's scheme of sudden enlightenment and gradual practice. He insists that Shenhui was the first to emphasize 'first enlightenment, then later practice' and later Tsung-mi strongly claimed 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice'. But Shenhui strongly emphasized 'seeing into one's original nature' and suddenness (頓) in Seon practice.

According to Venerable Songchul, 'seeing self-nature and attaining Buddha-hood' is the stage of ultimate enlightenment void of subtle delusive thought. Ultimate enlightenment is the state of no-thought (無念). Venerable Songchul refers this as 'absence of delusive thought (無念無想)'. In order to reach this state, one must go through the three stage breakthrough (三關突破). In other words, the practitioner must persist in this process of using Hwadu for inward questioning without interruption and with complete one-pointed concentration throughout the three states of wakefulness (動靜一如), dream (夢中一如), and deep sleep (熟眠一如).

Naong (懶翁, 1320-1376), the fourteenth-century Korean Seon master of the Koryo dynasty, was the founder of the Lin-chi tradition of Kong-an Seon in Korea, and he introduced the three stage entrance criteria. In order for a practitioner of Hwadu-seon to receive confirmation of his experience of enlightenment from a Seon master, this criteria of the three stage breakthrough must be fulfilled.

Venerable Songchul also emphasized the need for this kind of certification by an authentic Master. That is one of the reasons why Venerable Songchul criticized Chinul's Seon. The Jogye Order lineage has always been transmitted by formal recognition received from a Seon master. Venerable Songchul insists that Chinul had no such recognition. But there is also no evidence that Songchul had certification by a Seon master.

III. Venerable Songchul's Outlook on Seon Practice

1. Sudden Enlightenment and Sudden Practice (頓悟頓修)

Venerable Songchul's practice direction for 'seeing self-nature and attaining Buddha-hood' is 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice'. It is based on *the Platform Sutra* (壇經) which states that awakening to self-nature comes from 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice', not from gradual practice. Venerable Songchul's outlook on sudden enlightenment can be traced back to the stream of Seon thought from the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, especially to Huangpo (黃蘗 -850)'s *The Chuanxin fayao* (傳心法要 *The Dharma Essentials for Mental Transmission*) and Linchi (臨濟 -866)'s *The Linchi lu* (臨濟錄 *The Record of Linchi*).

But Shenhui (神會) explained more specifically about 'sudden enlightenment'. In his book '*Treatise on Defining Right or Wrong* (定是非論)', he disapproves physical sitting as a seon practice, and he defines the essence of Seon as 'seeing original nature without discriminatory and delusive thought (念不起 見本性)'.

In his *The Platform Word* (壇語), he explains that 'Sudden entrance from the gate of life and death to the gate of suchness..... the very mind is Buddha (從生滅門頓入真如門 卽心是佛)'.

In his *Analects* (語錄 37), he further defines suddenness (頓):

One cutting with sharp sword..... sudden cutting..... sudden enlightenment..... all delusory thought suddenly disappears (利劍一斬.....一時俱斷.....豁然曉悟.....妄念一時頓盡)

His definition of suddenness (頓) is clearer than any other explanation. However, Venerable Songchul never quotes from Shenhui's analects in explaining the meaning of 'sudden enlightenment'. Maybe Shenhui belongs to the lineage of 'Sudden enlightenment and gradual practice' which later was transmitted to Tsung-mi (宗密, 780- 841) and Chinul (知訥, 1158-1210).

Venerable Songchul claims that Chinul's 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice' scheme is grossly mistaken in terms of the Jogye

Order's traditional method of Seon practice which is based on 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice'. He maintains that it is entirely contradictory to the 'sudden enlightenment' of the Jogye Order. Venerable Songchul claims that Chinul's 'sudden enlightenment' is different from that of the Jogye Order. He insists that Shenhui was the first to emphasize 'first enlightenment, then later practice' and later Tsung-mi strongly claimed 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice'. But it is difficult to agree with Venerable Songchul's interpretation of Shenhui's Seon practice as a scheme for sudden enlightenment and gradual practice. As mentioned previously, Shenhui strongly emphasized 'seeing into one's original nature' and suddenness (頓) in Seon practice.

Venerable Songchul criticizes Chinul's outlook on Seon which followed Tsung-mi's scheme of sudden enlightenment and gradual practice. Venerable Songchul made it clear that Tsung-mi's 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice' and Chinul who succeeded Tsung-mi's outlook on Seon practice are quite contradictory to the Jogye Order's orthodox view. He refuted Chinul's theory of 'faith and understanding (信解)', but he didn't explain why he disagree with the initial enlightenment (understanding and awakening, 解悟) in Chinul's sudden enlightenment and gradual practice scheme.

Venerable Songchul also maintains that 'seeing self-nature and attaining Buddha-hood' should be actualized only through 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice'. The practical method of Venerable Songchul's sudden enlightenment and sudden practice is Hwadu practice.

“Any practitioner should seek the short-cut practice of Hwadu instead of cultivating a gradual method through using a dead phrase (死句), which is, a doctrinal interpretation of perfect and sudden enlightenment (Venerable Songchul, Vol.2, 1993:356).”

However Venerable Songchul's ideas on 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice' do not provides a practice base. A more specific theory of practice is necessary to explain his method. His approach to 'sudden practice' might bring about laxity in the pursuance of continuous practice because of a mistaken idea about 'suddenness'.

2. Mantra Practice

It is noteworthy that he organized a community at the Bongamsa temple in 1947 dedicated to practicing according to the way of early Buddhism, observing pure precepts and rules including regular recital of Bodhisattva precepts and daily chanting of the mantra (sitātapatroṣṇīṣa-dhāraṇī). He also encouraged trainees to recite the Bupshinjineon (法身眞言) mantra.

Reciting mantra is a gradual practice. Venerable Hyujeong (休靜, 1520-1604) says in his *Mirror of the Meditation School* (禪家龜鑑):

"The karma of this life is easy to correct by practice, but the karma of previous lives is difficult to erase by self-practice. So we have no choice but to use the mystic power of mantra (*Seon-ga guigam* (禪家龜鑑), HPC, 7-640)."

If what Venerable Hyoo-Jung is saying is correct, then Venerable Songchul's mantra practice is in gross contradiction with the 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice' which is based on *the Platform Sutra* (壇經). However, it is considered that Venerable Songchul accepted mantra practices as an example of a gradual form of practice.

Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice seems to be similar to mantra practice associated with Tibetan tantric Buddhism. Sorcery includes mantra, vidya and hrdaya-mantra (心眞言). The principal role of these methods is to prevent a practitioner's distraction and to help retain a memory of religious teachings or doctrine. In this respect, Venerable Songchul encouraged his students to use mantra recital. But ironically, he never mentioned *the Sutra of the Heroic Ones* (*Shūrangama Sūtra*), or the use of syncretic practice of both Seon and esoteric Buddhism. It is all the more mysterious that he always encouraged his students to recite the mantra, sitātapatroṣṇīṣa-dhāraṇī but never expressed his outlook on syncretic practice.

It is not certain when the mantra was to be recited during practice. According to Chinese Buddhist history, the most favored sutra of the Song (宋) dynasty was *the Shūrangama Sūtra* rather than *the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra* (圓覺經). The reason as to why *the*

Shūrangama Sūtra was most favored can be attributed to the prosperity of Seon Buddhism. But still it does not clearly explain the relationship between Seon practice and mantra practice. I agree that the Seon school's tradition of 'a special transmission outside the scriptures (教外別傳)' makes it easier to accept such mantra practices. But it is quite certain that Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice deviates far from the traditional method of Hwadu contemplation.

Where can we trace the origin of Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice? Mantra practice can be found Venerable. Cheongheo (清虛 休靜)'s *Seon-ga guigam* (禪家龜鑑, *Mirror of the Meditation School*), and it is traced to the mantra practice of Venerable Sonchul's teacher, Venerable Yongseong (龍城, 1864-1940). It is said that he himself beheld the Buddha-nature by virtue of mantra practice and then he encouraged mantra practice to his students. It is believed that Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice has a direct relation with his teacher, Venerable Yongseong.

Mantra practice is thoroughly a kind of gradual practice which is far from the world of Venerable Songchul's Seon practice. Mantra practice which intends to remove 'hindrance of karma' and distraction by reciting Dharani is quite different from the short-cut approach of Hwadu-seon.

Ta-hui (大慧, 1089-1163) says "If one concentrates all doubt into one big doubt, a thousand doubts are crushed against the kongan. Hwadu-seon is a practice in which the mind is concentrated into one point so that the discriminative consciousness is unable to take effect (T.47.1998.930a)". Apparently, Hwadu-seon looks like Indian mind-seeking meditation. 'tapas', a technique of used in Indian yoga practice, is an asceticism. In 'tapas', the ascetic practice itself is the main goal, but in Hwadu-seon. Ta-hui emphasizes 'enlightenment' through 'big doubt'. He criticizes mere mind concentration as false seon practice as practiced in 'silent meditation (默照禪)'. He asserts that the weakness of silent meditation lies in the lack of 'big doubt'. He insists that big enlightenment' comes from 'big doubt'. Big doubt which concentrates one's body and soul into the kongan is the essence of Hwadu-seon. On the other hand, mantra practice might be said to be another form of silent practice.

The Shūrangama Sūtra which has esoteric elements is based on a gradual practice scheme. It is quite contradictory to the Jogye Order's traditional Seon practice. In this sense, Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice demonstrates a dualistic way of practice. If he suggested different methods of Seon practice according to individual capacities, it actually constitutes a diversification of Seon practice and thus we must reconsider his outlook on 'gradual practice'. It is quite contradictory that he encourages the mantra while he disapproves of gradual practice. Thus we can see that he introduced a syncretic practice of both Seon and Esoteric Buddhism which impairs the pure tradition of traditional Hwadu-seon as recognized by the Jogye Order.

IV. Conclusion

Venerable Songchul asserts that all theory and practice other than 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice' cannot be considered as true Seon practice. He emphasized the necessity to pass the 'three gates (三關突破)' as a seal to confirm 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice' and approval of enlightenment given by the master (印可). Venerable Songchul insists that Venerable Chinul's 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice' is not a true, orthodox way of Seon practice as recognized by the Jogye Order.

Venerable Songchul's encouragement of mantra practice points to a dualistic way of practice. If he suggested different method of Seon practice according to the individual capacities, it means diversification of Seon practice and we have to reconsider his outlook on 'gradual practice'.

Accordingly, a number of contradictory points arise from Venerable Songchul's views on Seon theory and practice, as follows:

- 1) His ideas on 'sudden enlightenment and sudden practice' do not provides a practice base. A more specific theory of practice is necessary to explain his method.
- 2) He refuted Chinul's theory of 'faith and understanding (信解)', but he didn't explain why he disagree with the initial enlightenment (understanding and awakening, 解悟) in Chinul's sudden enlightenment and gradual practice scheme.

- 3) His approach to 'sudden practice' might bring about laxity in the pursuance of continuous practice because of a mistaken idea about 'suddenness'.
- 4) The lineage of the Jogye Order has always been transmitted by formal recognition received from a Seon master. Ven. Songchul insists that Chinul had no such recognition. But there is also no evidence that Songchul had certification by a Seon master.
- 5) It is difficult to agree with Venerable Songchul's interpretation of Shenhui about Seon practice as a sudden enlightenment and gradual practice scheme. Venerable Songchul criticizes Chinul's outlook on Seon which followed Tsung-mi's scheme of sudden enlightenment and gradual practice. He insists that Shenhui was the first to emphasize 'first enlightenment, then later practice' and later Tsung-mi strongly claimed 'sudden enlightenment and gradual practice'. But Shenhui strongly emphasized 'seeing into one's original nature' and suddenness (頓) in Seon practice.
- 6) It is quite contradictory that he encourages the mantra while he disapproves of gradual practice. This shows that he introduced a syncretic practice of both Seon and Esoteric Buddhism which impairs the pure tradition of traditional Kongan contemplation as recognized by the Jogye Order.

The above points concerning Venerable Songchul's diverse but contradictory outlook on Seon practice might give rise to question about the integrity of the Jogye Order's Seon practice. This shows that the contemporary practice of the Jogye Order lacks systematization and consistency. In this context, Songchul's diverse outlook on Seon practice needs to be reinterpreted in order to be as authentic in terms of Korean Seon Buddhism.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(C=Chinese K=Korean S=Sanskrit)

- Bai-zhang (C) 白丈
 Bongam-sa (K) 鳳巖寺
 Bupshin jineon (K) 法身眞言
 Chengdao-ge (C) 證道歌
 Chi-nul (K) 知訥
 Hrdaya-mantra (S) 心眞言
 Hwadu (K) 話頭
 Huang-po (C) 黃蘗
 Hui-nung (C) 慧能
 Hyu-jeong (K) 休靜
 Jogye Seon (K) 曹溪禪
 Lin-chi (C) 臨濟
 Lin-chi-lu (C) 臨濟錄
 Mantra (S) 眞言
 Ma-tsu (C) 馬祖
 Seon (K) 禪
 Seon-ga gwigam (K) 禪家龜鑑
 Shen-hui (C) 神會
 Tsung-mi (C) 宗密
 Yongseong (K) 龍城

Abbreviations

- HPC *Han-guk pulgyo chŏnsŏ* (韓國佛教全書) Complete Works of Korean Buddhism.
 T *Taisho shinshu Daizokyo* (大正新修大藏經) Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon.

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