

# The Body and Practice In Western Philosophy and Buddhism

Hye-Jung Jung

*Enlightenment comes from body-mind. The concept of truth is not disembodied, as modern philosophy has largely upheld instead it arises from the nature of our bodies, and bodily experience. The body is not an instrument for thinking. In modern Western philosophy, mind is separated from body. Descartes defines the human subject solely as a "thinking substance", thus separating the human subject from the body. Locke's statements also fit well into the dualism model, and this model seeming to be well suited to addressing both mind and matter, the individual and the world. But in phenomenology the human body is really a body-mind, rather than a mere body, or a body to which a mind is somehow attached.*

*From long time ago Buddhists also deny the spirit separated from the lived body. The very concept of truth itself comes from the details of our embodiment as while the truth is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Rather, it is crucially shaped by the peculiarities of our human bodies and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world.*

*Enlightenment itself is also not simply a mental achievement. When a person is enlightened, the entire mind-body complex is enlightened. One*

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*International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* February 2006, Vol.6, pp.313-327.

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*becomes a Buddha in and through this very body. Enlightenment is the immersion of the individual's mind-body complex into the Buddha mind-body complex. So Seonmudo, Korean Zen Martial Art, is a Buddhist training method which has been as one of many paths to enlightenment. Diligent training leads to harmonious integration of mind, body and spirit. The practice and study of Seonmudo focuses on integration of body and mind by breathing and training.*

Key Words: Buddhism, Seonmudo, Modern Western philosophy, Phenomenology, Body-mind, Body schema.

### **I. The Body in Modern Western Philosophy**

The traditional concept of mind and body in Western Philosophy is based on dualism. This idea originates with the universal rationalist views of Plato and Aristotle who considered that the Unity of the human soul is complete only insofar as one comes to know the source of this world's order - which for Plato was the realm of Ideas and for Aristotle was pure thought in thinking itself. Ultimate Being is a universal concept, in that it characterizes the objective categories of the world. Human reason is the capacity of the human mind to use some portion of Universal Reason. Reasoning can be performed by the human spirit but its structure is defined by Universal Reason, independent of the human body, human reason is therefore disembodied reason. Since human reason is disembodied, it is separate from, and independent of, all bodily capacities: perception, bodily movement, feelings, emotions, and so on (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999:553). An understanding of Being is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends in entities.

But, according to M. Heidegger, the universality of Being is not that of a class or genus. The term 'Being' does not define that realm of entities which is uppermost when these are articulated conceptually according to genus and species. The universality of Being transcends

any universality of genus (Heidegger, 1962:22).

In modern Western philosophy, mind is also separated from body. Descartes defines the human subject solely as a “thinking substance”, thus separating the human subject from the body. Locke's statements also fit well into the dualism model, and this model seeming to be well suited to addressing both mind and matter, the individual and the world. According to J. Locke, reason, universal principles and a priori notions, are blank forms which have to be filled in by experience and sense observation in order to gain significance and validity. Bacon called it “anticipated nature”, imposing upon it merely human opinions which require one to resort to experience to find out what nature is like (Boydston Ed., 1962:275).

Locke puts the two distinctions together, and thereby generating a scheme by which all ideas are divided according to origin, sensation, and reflection, and are simple ideas. Simple ideas of sensation are subdivided into the categories of those which come through only one of the external senses, and those which come through more than one. Locke believes that all knowledge comes from experience and, hence, he rejects innate ideas, maintaining that the mind is a blank tablet on which experience writes and for that reason, he argues against the possibility of innate ideas and principles. For Locke, sensitive knowledge of existence is secure (Chappell, 1998:8-27). He postulates that there is a certain causal mechanism for sense-perception, the final result of which is an ‘idea’ in the mind (Tipton, 1977:58). According to Locke's view, Universal Reason is outside one's body and mind and only a human subject has sense-perception which is able to passively receive some portion of Universal Reason.

Due care must be taken to keep the body strong and vigorous in order to attain “Universal Reason.” In addition, it is necessary to safeguard the mind so that, on all occasions, it may be disposed to consent only to what is suitable to the dignity and excellence of a rational sentient being.

Just as the strength of the body lies chiefly in being able to endure hardships, so also does the mind's strength, and the great

principal and foundation of all virtue and worth is placed in this body. A man is able to resist his own desires, counter his own inclinations, and follow what reason directs as best, even though the appetite leans the other way (Penniman Ed., 1947:228-229). "A sound mind in a sound body." These are the very words that express Locke's educational view.

John Dewey criticizes Locke's empiricism, as initially, Locke's idea of experience denied the practical aspect which had been accepted from the time of Plato.<sup>1</sup> By this we mean the apprehension of material which should be weighed up and checked by reasoning. In the case of the modern philosophical empiricists and their opponents, experience has come to be looked upon as merely a way of knowing. In this case, the interest in experience as a means of basing truth upon object and nature, led to looking at the mind as purely receptive. The more passive the mind, the more truly objects will impress their imprint upon it. However this view has been criticized, as experience is in truth a matter of activity, instinctive and impulsive, in interaction with things.

## II. The Body in Phenomenology

Unlike modern philosophy, phenomenology argues that the human body can be viewed as a living process, integrating a complex variety of mental and physical processes. In other words, the human body is really a body-mind, rather than a mere body, or a body to which a mind is somehow attached. The way to view body-mind is as an image of a field on which various physical and mental forces interact with each other and hence modify each other.

This idea is based on the book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, by M. Merleau-Ponty, who developed a phenomenology of the body which promotes a non-dualistic account of human existence. Merleau-Ponty clearly distinguishes the 'lived body' from the objective or physiological body. The lived body is the body experienced in a non-objective way. It

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<sup>1</sup> To Plato, the sense-perceptive experience means habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials. Reason means the principle of reform, of progress, of increase of control. Devotion to reason means breaking through the limitations of custom and getting at things as they really are. J. Dewey writes that modern empiricism presents us with an complete reversal of the classic doctrine of the relations of experience and reason.

is not the objective body seen by microscope or x-ray, or one which can be perceived as an object. The lived body is non-object that is involved in the perceptual process (Moran and Embree, 2004:265). "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather, I am it. The body is, to use Leibnitz's term, the 'effective law' of its changes" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:150). Merleau-Ponty implies this in such statements as "I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body", and, "consciousness is being towards the thing through the intermediary of the body." So a person is a body subject. This term 'body-subject' was later adopted by Merleau-Ponty to refer to the active body he used it in place of the traditional philosophical term 'subject' in his work.

Human beings do not stand in relation to their world as subject to object. Their primordial relation to their world is their embodied action within it. They belong to their world, as an active part of it. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty identifies social, embodied action with the production of meaning. Meaning is not produced by transcendentalism or constituting consciousness, but by an engaged body-subject (Aberdeen Body Group Ed., 2004:221).

When there is a loss of equilibrium between body and environment the body is brought into presence in the form of a body image. What is a "Body image?" "Body image" can be considered synonymous with such terms as "body concept" and "body scheme." Broadly speaking, the term pertains to how the individual perceives his own body. It does not imply that the individual's concept of his body is represented by a conscious image rather, it embraces his collective attitudes, feelings, and fantasies about his body without regard to the level of awareness. This body image depends upon a prior and operative performance of the body. Moreover, the original schema or organization of the lived body has been modified in this presence. The body schema is a changing postural style of being-in-the-world, in other words, it is the lived body in its environment. Hence, much of a person's conceptual system is either universal or is widespread across different language groups and cultures.

The lived body organizes itself within the conditions of its

environment. It appropriates habitual movements, actions, and instruments and incorporates a certain style of relationship with its environment. The performance of the lived body is prior to any subject-object distinction. In regard to performance, no distinction can be made between the lived body and the environment. Our conceptual systems are not totally relative and not merely a matter of historical contingency, even though a degree of conceptual relativity does exist and even though historical contingency does matter a great deal. The grounding of our conceptual systems in shared embodiment and bodily experience creates a largely centered self, but not a monolithic self (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:6).

This body is referred to as a field which is modified by the experience of perception and is dependent on cultural repertoires and skills. Moreover, in this sense, it is the habituated or instituted actions of bodies which are responsible for the reproduction of the social formation and of historical time (Aberdeen Body Group Ed., 2004:224).

Although it develops an awareness and understanding of its environment, it is not an object of its own awareness in any straightforward sense. However, this does not mean that the body-subject is perpetually unaware of itself. Rather, Merleau-Ponty maintains that it acquires such awareness by means of its engagement in a cultural world. He discusses the role played by language acquisition and 'taking the point of view of the other', in the formation of objectification of one's own carnal-being. The body-subject is precisely the being that takes up the mechanisms of culture and achieves an awareness of itself in the process. Speech and thought would admit of this external relation, whereas in fact they are interwoven, the senses being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the senses. Nor can we conclude, as is commonly held, that speech is done, in that it is a mere means of fixation, nor that it is a container or clothing for thought.

Human being is a net of relations which connect with each other there is something which is an amalgam of being and nothingness to the notion, 'being exists'. "I am not tied to any one perspective but can

change my point of view” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:397). Because being is connected with nothingness (無) we are from the start outside ourselves and open to the world.

Nothing is determining me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary, because I am from the start, outside myself, and open to the world. We are true through and through, and this truth is with us by the mere fact of belonging to the world, there is no need to transcend ourselves.

### III. Training the Body in Buddhism

#### 1. The Body in Buddhism

Indian philosophical tradition draws an ontological line between body-mind, which relates to both physical and mental characteristics. Unlike modern Western philosophy which draws the line between mind and body, regarding them as substantially different and sometimes exclusive entities, Indian philosophers have tended to see both the mental and physical as aspects of an integrated process. This means that from an Indian philosophical perspective, body is never rejected in favor of mind, as the authentic self, unlike in much Western thought since Descartes. The Self, associated with the idea of body-mind complex as the ultimate self, denies both the existence of any Self separate from this complex, and the possibility of liberation, since mind is inseparable from body.

Buddhists also deny the existence of a Self separate from the lived body-mind complex. They recognize the possibility of liberating a person from karmic bondage which is a result of thoughts and actions rooted in ignorance and selfish desires (Aberdeen Body Group Ed., Vol.1:290-292).

In other words, Buddhism does not admit a non-*karmic* self or realm of existence. It denies the existence of a transcendent self that is pure consciousness, declaring the truth of no-Self, teaching that all existence is devoid or empty (*śūnya*) of Self. The positive view of

no-Self is brought out in the teaching of *madhyamā-pratipad*, the Middle Way, which denies both being and non-being, in favor of becoming. This Middle Way means that existence is to be understood in terms of *pratītya-samutpāda*, or interdependent arising. 'Becoming' is seen as a creative process, a continuous arising and perishing, in which everything is related to every thing else in mutually dependent ways.

There is no consciousness without impulses, perception, sensation/feeling, or bodily processes. Buddhists, however, in their insistence on *anātman* and *sūnyatā*, not only deny that there is an already constituted physical being or body which is a person's true identity, but also deny that there is an already constituted transcendent being or self which is a person's true identity (Aberdeen Body Group Ed., Vol.4:297-298).

The Buddhist perspective facilitates seeing oneself as a creative, unified, and continuous process of becoming - a lived, conscious body capable of actualizing the potential represented by the so-called objective factors of existence. This is not so for esoteric Buddhism, of course, which is a continuing vital effort to spiritualize the body, an attempt to overcome the dominant tradition's tendency to devalue the body.

Buddhism's premise, despite its profound differences with the Indian tradition, agrees in taking this lived body-mind as ultimate, rejecting any self beyond the lived body-mind. Body-mind is the key to liberation. Because the bonds to be loosened are those created by the body-mind, and because the path to liberation is followed by the embodied self, full knowledge of body-mind is seen as a necessary condition for liberation of the true self from its bondage.

Our conceptual system is crucial in its grounding in perceptual systems. Conceptualization can only occur through the body and we can only form concepts through the body. Therefore, every understanding that we can have of the world, ourselves, and others, can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies.

Enlightenment comes from body-mind. The concept of truth is not disembodied, as modern philosophy has largely upheld instead it arises

from the nature of our bodies, and bodily experience. The body is not an instrument for thinking. This is not an innocuous claim that the very concept of truth itself comes from the details of our embodiment. The truth is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Rather, it is crucially shaped by the peculiarities of our human bodies and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world.

Enlightenment itself is also not simply a mental achievement. When a person is enlightened, the entire mind-body complex is enlightened. One becomes a Buddha in and through this very body. Enlightenment is the immersion of the individual's mind-body complex into the Buddha mind-body complex (Aberdeen Body Group Ed., 2004:104-105).

## 2. Training the Body in Korean *Seon* Buddhist Martial Art

### A. *Seonmudo* Instruction

*Seonmudo*, *Seon* Martial Art, is a Buddhist training method which has been secretly handed down through families over countless generations in Korea. After many centuries, Korean masters cultivated the art by teaching it to *Hwarang* warriors, an elite Silla-era youth corps revered for their beauty and bravery. In the late 16th century, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a Japanese commander, unleashed a massive attack on the Korean Peninsula with 200,000 battle-hardened soldiers. Just as an army of Korean monks were on the verge of defeat a master named Seosan, accompanied by his disciples, rallied more than 5,000 additional monks from their monasteries in the mountains to repulse the Japanese invaders. When the battle was finished the monks were forced into hiding and compelled to keep their art which was known as "*Geumgang-yonggwan*", a secret. *Seonmudo* in its modern form has been taught to the public for forty years, thanks to Grand Master Yangik. *Seon* is the Korean word for *Zen*, which is the way to attain illumination of mind and spirit through meditation. *Seon* Buddhism

emerged as a *Mahāyāna* discipline during the late Silla Dynasty. ‘*mu*’ refers to the martial art form, and ‘*do*’ means the way those who practice *Seonmudo* say one can attain a higher state of mind through disciplining both movement of body and attaining spiritual calm. *Seonmudo* is a way to attain enlightenment through integrating the three aspects of body, mind and breath. By purifying and integrating the three parts of *karma*-body, speech and thought, this training enables the practitioner to enter into perfection of spiritual concentration (*samādhi*) to ultimately attain *nirvāṇa*. For Buddhist monks, *Seon* martial arts practice is seen as one of many paths to enlightenment. Diligent training leads to harmonious integration of mind, body and spirit. The practice and study of *Seonmudo* focuses on six key areas.

- (1) Experiencing that truth comes from body
- (2) Practicing correct breathing and discipline
- (3) Focusing on integration of body and mind by breathing
- (4) Concentrating body with stretching and strength training
- (5) Purifying body and mind
- (6) Restoring the whole self to attain liberation, *nirvāṇa*

## B. Training the Body with *Seonmudo*

The goal of *Seonmudo* is *nirvāṇa*, which is to restore the oneness of mind. Oneness mind is an integration of the individual as a whole: subject and object, mind and body. In order to do this, *Seonmudo* uses the three teachings of Esoteric Buddhism in body (身), speech (口), and consciousness (意). By purifying the three *karmas* of body, speech and thought, this training enables an integration of the three parts in order to accomplish a revelation of truth in body-mind. This is the *Geumgang-samādhi* and is attained through *Mudrā* (a posture of body or hand gesture signifying truth), *Dhāraṇī* (speech of truth or Buddha), and *Samādhi* (concentration of truth and unity of subject/object).

The *Seonmudo* training is focused on mind and body. It is wrong to separate mind from body and regard the mind as more important, because every true consciousness comes from body. Our body is not a

prison to hold the spirit, as rationalist belief suggests, nor is it an instrument to obtain reason, as is maintained in empiricism. Rather, through a body we are able to realize spiritual awakening, and this spiritual awakening purifies the body. Thus, the training is the practice of unity of body and consciousness.

In the beginning practice, we use the breathing to connect mind and body, and to bring calm both to body and mind, as well as concentrating the body consciousness. An average person breathes in and out 18 times in a minute. But a *Seon* monk breathes only 4-5 times a minute. With the practice of *Samādhi* we are able to slow our breathing to one or two breaths a minute. It is important to correct our breathing so that it is deep, thin and long, in both the in-breath and out-breath. With this correct way of breathing we obtain concentration of consciousness, while at the same time, we can view the *vipaśyanā* (觀) of non-self (無我) and whole-self (大我).

The second concern is to purify our body-mind by both calming the spirit (*Geumgang-yongjeonggwan*) and activating the spirit, (*Geumgang-yongdonggwan*), which we can do by adopting the *Mudrā* and repeating the “Om” *Dhāraṇī*. *Seonmudo* applies generally to any somatic attitude taken in a spiritual or ascetic activity, such as the movements of a *Seon* martial artist or the postures assumed in meditation.

The *Mudrā* is both a means of purification and the expression of awakening itself. In the same way, the view of calm spirit, *Jeonggwan*, is inseparable from the view of active spirit, *Donggwan* they can only be distinguished conceptually. The motion of serene contemplation (*Jeonggwan*) expresses the state of accomplishing a oneness with the whole world, while the motion of active contemplation (*Donggwan*) means a variation and creation of a new state of spirituality (Seol, 1997:23). It is easy to understand why we usually think only of the active expression, but we should remember that active expression is inseparable from contemplative motion. When the harmony of contemplative motion and activity has arisen we enter the *Geumgang-samādhi* of *Nirovāṇa*. This is the integration and harmony of subject and object, self and others, universe and me. This body-spiritual

experience gives a more exalted enlightenment and the constituent cycle continues for as long as one lives.

Training the body in correct postures also corrects the mind, and this training is a discipline which shapes the body into a form. The body's education is embodied through cumulative training, thus one comes to find enlightenment through one's body. The training discipline is to help the mind's movements to be in accord with the movements of the body, because the mind comes from body and mind controls the body. Thus, the truth which also comes from body is what purifies the body. At last the truth is more exalted through the body.

So why do the forms of movement have to be standardized? Presumably there are two reasons, one is physiological and the other is educational. In physiological terms, certain postures are better for certain activities than others. Balance, for example, is critical to the success of a martial artist. Since a relaxed state of breathing is important for meditation, a stable, erect posture for *Mudrā* is essential.

Educationally, spiritual awakening is learned in discipleship, by following the movements of a master. In other words, a student learns to a large extent through imitation of standardized movements which he or she sees the master perform the same way each time. These standard postures are an expression of enlightenment which stimulates spiritual awakening.

The World (environment) is not an "other" to us, nor is it a collection of things that we encounter. Rather, it is the whole of our being, the locus of our existence and identity, we cannot, and do not, exist apart from it. It is through the experience of oneness in subject and object that we understand ourselves as holistic Being. An integrative embodied mind is universal spirituality, described as big (holistic) mind. If small mind is the ongoing grasping and fixating activity of focal attention, big mind is the background of this whole awareness. *Seonmudo* reveals awareness as a unified field in which strict divisions between subject and object, mind and body, inner and outer, conscious and unconscious, simply do not exist.

#### IV. Conclusion

In Western philosophy the mind is separated from the body. Human reason is disembodied, and is separate from and independent of all bodily capacities: perception, bodily movement, feelings, emotions, and so on. Unlike modern philosophy, phenomenology argues that the human body is viewed as living processes that integrate a complex variety of mental and physical processes. In other words, the human body is really a body-mind, rather than a mere body, or a body to which a mind is somehow attached. Body-mind is presented in the image of a field in which various physical and mental forces interact with and modify each other.

Buddhism, despite its profound differences with Indian philosophical tradition, agrees that this lived body-mind is ultimate, and rejects any self beyond it. Body-mind is the key to liberation. Because the bonds to be loosened are those created by the body-mind, and because the path to liberation is followed by the embodied self, full knowledge of body-mind is seen as a necessary condition for liberation of the true self from its bondage.

From the Buddhist perspective, such dualistic divisions as an inner world separate from outer reality, the unconscious as a separate mental realm, or ego as a defense against unconscious contents - are concepts that only reinforce the self/other split, which is the basis of a confused state of mind. This body is a field with its modifications, and is constituted from the great elements (earth, water, fire, air, and emptiness), sense-of-mind, intelligence, desire, aversion, happiness and suffering, the embodied whole, consciousness and steadfastness. Ignorance is the failure to recognize this larger ground of holistic awareness which underlies all objects of consciousness, while treating the latter as objective reality. Whole mind is our original nature, and meditation is the primary way we can bring about its emergence. In Seonmudo the emergence of liberation and *nirvāṇa* can trigger a sudden and dramatic quality of ever-present awareness of oneness through body. Seonmudo is a way to attain enlightenment through integrating

the three aspects of body, mind and breath. By purifying and integrating the three parts of *karma*-body, speech and thought, this training enables one to accomplish the perfection of spiritual concentration (*samādhi*) and ultimately, *nirvāna*.

The truth comes from body, and it makes the body purified. At last the truth is more exalted through the body.

### Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese, S=Sanskrit, P=Pali)

- Anātman (S) 無我  
 Do (K) 道  
 Dhārani (S) 呪  
 Donggwan (K) 動觀  
 Geumgang (K) 金剛  
 Geumgang-samādhi (K) 金剛三昧  
 Geumgang-yongdonggwan (K) 金剛靈動觀  
 Geumgang-yonggwan (K) 金剛靈觀  
 Geumgang-yongjeonggwan (K) 金剛靈靜觀  
 Hwarang (K) 花郎  
 Jeonggwan (K) 靜觀  
 Madhyamā-pratipad (S) 中道  
 Mu (K) 武  
 Mudrā (S) 印相  
 Pratitya-samutpāda (S) 緣起  
 Samādhi (S) 三昧  
 Seon (K), Chan(C), Zen (J) 禪  
 Seonmudo (K) 禪武道  
 Seosan (K) 西山  
 Silla (K) 新羅  
 Śūnya (S) 空  
 Vipāśyanā (S) 觀  
 Yangik (K) 兩翼  
 Yonggwan (K) 靈觀

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