

*Essay from the Editorial Advisor*

## Dialogue between Korean Buddhism and World Buddhism in the Global Era

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*The most important point for us to understand is this: there exists no clear-cut difference between Korean Buddhism and world Buddhism. All the denominations and all the different cultural forms of Buddhism are in fact connected to each other, as they all have their origins in the teachings of the Buddha. Further, all these forms of Buddhism have a connection to all the other types of religions that are being practiced in the world today. All these various religious systems are continuously exerting an influence on each other; thus, as a Buddhist I am also affected by the teachings of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism, and so forth.*

*When two people, or two groups of people, are engaged in any kind of dialogue, the element of trust and respect for each other is required in order for them to have a successful communication. “Don’t throw out the baby with the bath water.” Let us not negate or ignore an aspect that is actually extremely valuable within another religion out of our own haste or ignorance. We need to respect the strong points that exist there, just as we need to acknowledge our own religion’s weak areas. Such an attitude must become the new ethic for this Global Era. Therefore, if I am to find peace in my own life, I need to accept others just as they are. Let us then, here at this conference, adopt this slogan: “Let’s live together no war.” Let’s make a clear announcement of our understanding. Let’s not only announce it, let’s live it*

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### **I. What is the issue to be discussed today?**

The issue that we need to focus on today is this: the world is rapidly changing. Actually, things are always changing; this was one of the Buddha's primary teachings twenty-five hundred years ago. He used the term *anitya*, stating that the nature of all phenomena is impermanence, or constant change. When the Buddha discussed *anitya*, he was generally referring to the idea of change as it occurs in the natural world. This included not only geographical changes as experienced by the earth, but also the changes that occur within the human body and mind, such as birth, aging, illness, and death, as well as the vast variety of mental and emotional fluctuations that we are all prey to.

These days all of us would probably agree that our society is in the process of undergoing a profound transformation. The structures that support our society, such as our political and economic systems, as well as our own value systems, are all experiencing tremendous upheaval. Our views are constantly being tested with each new experience and thus our understanding of things rarely remains constant. What we perceived as antagonistic or unpleasant to us yesterday does not always prove to be so today, and vice-versa. Thus, our enemies are not always our enemies. Similarly those we consider our friends are themselves constantly changing, and may not appear tomorrow as they are today. Such a situation is indeed not only confusing, but deeply unsettling as well.

Armed with this awareness, what can we now say about Korean Buddhism? What is Korean Buddhism? It is also *anitya*. Just like everything else in this world, it is experiencing deep changes. What happens when we turn our gaze to world Buddhism? It, too, is subject to the same unsettling fact of change. These terms, “Korean Buddhism” and “world Buddhism,” of course, are just that: they are terms which we have created. These forms of Buddhism are seen to be changing due primarily to the fact that our own views of them are constantly being revised and altered.

The most important point for us to understand is this: there exists no clear-cut difference between Korean Buddhism and world Buddhism. All the denominations and all the different cultural forms of Buddhism are in fact connected to each other, as they all have their origins in the teachings of the Buddha. Further, all these forms of Buddhism have a connection to all the other types of religions that are being practiced in the world today. All these various religious systems are continuously exerting an influence on each other; thus, as a Buddhist I am also affected by the teachings of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism, and so forth.

In recognition of this fact, then how, as a Buddhist, should I proceed with my life? The most important thing for me to acknowledge is that if there is anything that is good or worthwhile in me, then that goodness or worthiness, in whatever form it may appear, also exists within others. Similarly, what is important to me, or what has value for me, is also important to and has value for others. The opposite, of course, is also true: If there is something that is destructive or unhealthy for me, it will be destructive and unhealthy for others as well. This is primarily because, as the Buddha taught, we are all fundamentally the same. We are all *anatman*, or devoid of any separate independent identity called a “self.” As such, it only stands to reason that we all share the same needs and desires.

## II. The Mirror of Karma

When two people, or two groups of people, are engaged in any kind of dialogue, what is required in order for them to have a successful communication? In my opinion, it is the element of trust and respect for each other. Yet it is often the case that either one or the other of these elements is lacking. If so, then there can not be viable exchange between the two parties. What is the cause for one's distrust and/or disrespect of the other person or group? The answer lies within one's own personal karmic history. This is where it becomes so important for me to examine myself deeply in order to determine my own karmic weakness or difficulties.

When I was a young man of 19 or 20 years, I visited a Buddhist temple as a serious seeker for the first time. One of the rooms in the temple contained a sculpture depicting the King of Hell as he made judgments about various people who had just died. He judged their sins through the use of a mirror called the Mirror of Karma. Reflected in the mirror was a record of the complete contents of the person's previous life, including both his inner thoughts and motivations as well as his outer speech and actions. It was this Mirror of Karma that the King relied on in order to make his judgment. I was shocked when I saw this sculpture; it was so clear that the mirror perfectly reflected each and every detail of the person's entire life.

What would I see if I stood in front of the Mirror of Karma? What would it show me about my real concerns as I move through the events of my life? Am I more interested in practicing Buddhism or in attaining worldly success? Am I more involved with others or myself? What have I been doing with the last 24 hours that have just passed? The Mirror of Karma would have no difficulty in answering such questions. We need to create our own Mirror of Karma, establish a dialogue with it, and then reflect on what it tells us. It will neither exaggerate nor deceive us.

### III. Vow and Confession

In terms of Buddhist practice, two elements are fundamental: 1 the making of a vow to be a bodhisattva, that is, one who is dedicated to helping others and 2 the practice of confession, that is, repentance of our negative thoughts, words, and actions. Who is performing these practices? Both the vow and the confession are performed by me as a human being. We can say that the vow and the confession represent actions which are performed within the reality of our ordinary *momjit* existence. Yet at the same time we must remember that these *momjit* actions have their origin in the invisible, universal realm of *mom*. *Mom* in this context is me as a human being. However, as a thinking being, all my thoughts are colored, and indeed controlled, by my ego. No matter how beautifully I may decorate my body, no matter how fancy my ideas, at the core of my existence lies my ego. Who do I serve? Do I give priority to myself or to my teacher, who is a reflection of the Buddha? If I am a Buddhist, I must follow the Buddha and not my ego.

How can I know if I am really following the Buddha and not my ego? The only way is by observing whether or not my life is about caring for others. If I am dedicated to showing compassion and concern for other sentient beings, then I can rest assured that I am following the way prescribed by the Buddha and his teachings.

### IV. Acceptance

How can we, as particularized individuals living in a particularized society, exhibit our care for others? It is only by accepting them in all their myriad forms and identities. For example, as I am a keynote speaker here at this conference on Buddhism, it will probably be understood by the majority of this audience that I am a very motivated

and committed Buddhist. Yet there undoubtedly exist many people who do not share my enthusiasm. I certainly cannot force others to follow my example; that would be going against the Buddhist teachings. Rather, I must simply accept them as they are. This is the most effective way for me to exhibit my compassion as one who embraces the bodhisattva ideal. I'm sure we all feel that Korean Buddhism is unique, and that it contains some wonderful teachings or practice that sets it apart from the way Buddhism is practiced in other countries, such as China, Japan, Tibet, or wherever. In my opinion, however, once we understand the importance of caring for others, we should not emphasize the uniqueness of Korean Buddhism. No matter how much value we may think it has, we should not stress this too much.

Within Korean Buddhism there exist many different denominations, such as Zen, Hua-yen, T'ien-t'ai, Pure Land, and so forth. No matter how powerful I may consider my own practice of Zen to be, I must concede that Zen is not the only way. As Buddhists we are all practicing the same basic teaching, which came from the enlightened Buddha himself. One denomination should not assert its superiority over another. There exist now so many different types of people and cultures, all living together as one country, that it is only natural for there to also exist many different types of religious practices and beliefs. For Buddhism in Korea to be successful, its followers must acknowledge and accept all of these different systems.

Although I am not an expert in the field of Christianity, I have noticed that the Catholic Church seems to openly allow for all sorts of variations as pursued by its followers with regard to their basic beliefs and practices. In my opinion, this is praiseworthy. By accepting these variations the Catholic Church, far from becoming weaker, is gaining strength and multi-leveled support. On the other hand, President George W. Bush in America, by aligning himself with the much more narrow-minded and exclusive Fundamentalist group, is weakening his own position as well as that of his followers.

We need to open the door of our understanding and not allow ourselves to be confined or limited by ancient dogmas or practices. As a Buddhist, I need to be able to admire and respect Christian doctrine. I also need to embrace the teachings of Confucius. In the religious world there should be room for all of the various belief systems to be acknowledged and accepted. The simile of a parent and child is appropriate here. A good mother will always embrace the differences that exist among her children. She may hold opposing beliefs of her own, but she will allow each child to grow and develop in the way that is best suited for its disposition.

Such an open way of regarding other religious beliefs is not often encouraged in Buddhist society, yet we should not let this fact deter us. Communism may be viewed as an enemy of religion, but Communism also has its own strong points. There is a saying in America: "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water." Let us not negate or ignore an aspect that is actually extremely valuable within another religion out of our own haste or ignorance. We need to respect the strong points that exist there, just as we need to acknowledge our own religion's weak areas. Such an attitude must become the new ethic for this Global Era.

## **V. What are we supposed to do?**

The real significance of this discussion is: I am not alone. I do not live a life devoid of contact and relationships with others. I live together with millions of other human beings on this planet called earth. Therefore, if I am to find peace in my own life, I need to accept others just as they are. The most important slogan we need to adopt in these modern times is: let's live together. It is precisely because we are not alone that we need to understand how to live harmoniously with others. The Buddha's teaching of *anatman* is just as vital now as it was when he was alive. We need to re-acquaint ourselves with this teaching,

and understand its relevance to our lives. If we live contrary to the understanding of *anatman*, then we are living selfish, ego-oriented lives.

We need to remember this slogan “let’s live together” and practice it daily. Furthermore, this understanding needs to be applied as a new ethic for all the various religions being practiced today. No matter how distasteful another religion may seem to me, I should not view it as wrong or incorrect. I need to remember that if I can find something evil in others, this means that there is something evil that exists within me as well.

Let’s create this new commandment, this new precept, for our lives. Its primary principle, “let’s live together,” is worth repeating again and again. What could be more powerful or more meaningful? The theory of dependent origination, as developed by Buddhist philosophers, is very appropriate here. This term “dependent origination” means that the world exists as one organic whole. Every single moment, every phenomenon, every individual entity these are all interconnected with every other moment, phenomenon, and entity. No person, place, or thing can ever exist entirely disconnected from another.

One of the precepts prescribed by the Buddha was that of *ahimsa*, which is usually translated into English as “non-violence.” This is a rather abstract term; the ancient Chinese term is “bulsalsaeng 不殺生” which has a more specific, concrete meaning: “don’t kill any human being.” I would simplify it as “No war.”

Let us then, here at this conference, adopt this slogan: “Let’s live together no war.” Let’s make a clear announcement of our understanding. Let’s not only announce it, let’s live it as well. We can all live together. Let’s do it, and have no war.

At this point there is one thing I would like to confess. I once read a book when I was just beginning my Buddhist practice that greatly influenced me at the time. In his preface the author stated, “Buddhism is not a religion of faith.” I was immediately fascinated; I was so tired of all the religions which emphasized the primacy of faith.



I was repelled by what seemed to me at the time to be a dogmatic, arrogant attitude. Yet later, when I became a monk, I discovered that those monks who practiced the most seriously and with the greatest diligence were motivated by their own deep and abiding faith. This confused me at first, as it contradicted what I had read. I finally realized that what I witnessed among the monks was the truth of the matter, and that the sentence written by that author was incorrect.

Later I became involved with the *hwadu* 話頭 meditation of the Lin-chi school. When using the *hwadu*, raising doubt is considered a crucial part of the practice. The advantage to such a practice is that I don't need to remove myself from society in order to perform the meditation. I don't need to abandon my family or my job to go live in a monastery. I don't even need to adopt a formal sitting practice wherever I am, I can raise the doubt. This is because this practice exists beyond the limits of time and space. Wherever I am put, whatever situation I am in, the *hwadu* is there with me. Why do I need to go to the temple? Why do I need to schedule a regular sitting practice? I have felt this way for many years, enjoying my freedom from all such external bondages.

Yet lately I have come to a realization: to go to the temple, or to meditate with others, or to schedule my own sitting practice these are all valuable pursuits in themselves. Similarly, all the teachings are good; they all have merit. All the various practices, such as chanting, *tan-t'ien* 丹田 breathing, prostration, and so forth each has its own value. Each one leads me to a greater depth of understanding, to a greater penetration of the Buddha's teaching. All these practices enrich me and therefore I embrace them fully with gratitude.