

Korean Buddhism on the International Stage

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This paper attempts to situate Korean Buddhism in a global context. A basic concern of the paper is the simple question: what does Korean Buddhism have to offer the global community? Though not coming up with any concrete answers to the above question, the paper concludes that the Korean Buddhist tradition has indeed got much to offer, but has thus far failed both to adequately announce itself on the international stage and to interact on a critical level with the wider Earth community. An example of one of the challenges facing Korean Buddhism is the call to move beyond the nation state community and move towards the global community, as seen in the challenge to move away from the concept of 'nation protecting Buddhism' (護國佛教) and towards the more inclusive concept of 'Global-community protecting Buddhism' (護地球村佛教). It is also suggested that many of the riches which Korean Buddhism might share with the wider community may be found when Korean Buddhism's philosophical and spiritual views are studied through the various lenses of history, ecology, colonialism, economics, etc.

Key words: Korean Buddhist Studies, Ecology, Colonialism,
Religious Ethics, Religious Leadership.

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International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture September 2008, Vol.11, pp.7-20.

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I. Introduction

In the following paper I will put forward some reflections regarding Korean Buddhism in relation to both contemporary Korea and the wider global community. I will also attempt to outline some of my basic assumptions regarding the possible roles of religion in the modern world, but more specifically I will speak about the possible positive roles which Korean Buddhism might undertake in this the twenty-first century. Of necessity much of this paper will consist of personal reflections and conjecture; what is more, it ought to be remembered that any critique of Korean Buddhism presented in the following pages is in an effort to encourage the Korean Buddhist community, lay, clerical and academic, to move forward and outwards in a confident and compassionate manner. The Korean Buddhist tradition has got much to contribute to the modern global reality; however, if it does not become more proactive and positive in this regard, not only will Korean Buddhism suffer, but the entire global community will also miss out on the opportunity to share a wealth of religious, ethical and spiritual resources.

II. Religions and the Earth

It would seem that many of the crucial challenges facing our world today are essentially religious ones. We find ourselves living in a world where the gap between those with money and access to resources is ever widening, and, as a result, those living in poverty are becoming ever more marginalized and alienated. Even a cursory viewing of world-news reports can make one all too aware of the political and human rights issues facing the world community. And, perhaps most serious of all, for the first time in the Earth's story, humanity and the entire Earth community is facing catastrophic changes brought about predominantly by humanly induced climate change.¹ Ultimately, climate change is the result of human beings leading lifestyles which are not

¹ See the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report of 17 November, 2007. Report can be accessed at <http://www.ipcc.ch/index.htm> (accessed on 24/04/08).

only harmful to those around them, but also to the planet itself.

From a religious perspective, to the degree that the above-mentioned problems and challenges are the results of humankind's worldviews and lifestyles, they can ultimately be viewed as religious issues demanding religious responses. And if either religious institutions or people of faith fail to respond to these challenges, it would seem to me that, they forfeit to a great extent, if not completely, their moral authority and position of leadership within not only their various local communities but also the world community (Forward 2001: 148). Or to put it another way, just as religions throughout history have placed challenges and questions before their followers, now it is the followers and non-followers alike who in union with the Earth itself are posing radical questions to religions: questions about human rights, poverty, justice, environmental issues, and global warming. Hans Jonas states the case concisely:

It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgement at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation—from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of the Buddha)—is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation (Jonas 1996: 201-202).

How will religions respond to these questions? Personally, I believe that religions of all shades and colours have got a great deal to offer when challenged by the above mentioned issues. However, what each religion concretely brings to the table as way of answer can, I think, only be ascertained through active involvement in concrete issues and through reflection on that religion's particular experiences, history, and philosophy. Therefore, if it is the case that all religious traditions have got something different to offer when faced with the major issues and problems of the day, specifically, what has Korean Buddhism got to offer that other religious traditions do not?

III. Possible Roles for Korean Buddhism

At this juncture, I would like to make the claim that although Korean Buddhism has got much to offer on both an international and global scale, it is my belief that, in this regard Korean Buddhism has, in fact, failed to reach its potential and that it has actually underachieved thus far. This is an unfortunate state of affairs not only for the Korean Buddhist community but also for the wider global community. As a result of Korean Buddhism's failure adequately to announce itself on the world stage the Korean Buddhist community has subsequently been denied the opportunity to interact at depth with different Buddhist and other religious traditions as found in other cultures and countries; furthermore, other Buddhist and other religious traditions have also been denied the opportunity to learn from and share the wisdom and experiences found within the Korean Buddhist tradition and community.

John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address of 1961 finished his speech with the now famous challenge: "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." For a moment I would like to rephrase this question and direct it towards the Korean Buddhist community: ask not what Buddhism can do for Korea—ask what Korean Buddhists can do for Buddhism. Or to push the limits even further, what can Korean Buddhism do for the global community and for the Earth as a whole? Or to restate the question in different but familiar terms, has the time come for Korean Buddhism to move away from the historical notion of 'nation protecting Buddhism' (護國佛教), and instead move towards the more inclusive and far-reaching ideal of 'Global-community protecting Buddhism' (護地球村佛教)?

Let us now return to the question of what Korean Buddhism has got to offer the global community that other religious traditions do not? As pointed out, all religious traditions, Korean Buddhism included, which intend to become involved in today's important global, ethical and spiritual issues, must first endeavour to understand, reflect upon, and incorporate into their own structures and worldview the lessons they have learned from their own histories. Any religions which fail to do this will eventually become

disconnected from their social, cultural and religious contexts, and that religion's words and actions will gradually grow hollow. On top of this, many of the valuable and painful lessons learned through historical events and undertakings will be lost to future generations within that religious tradition.

In our contemporary world, an essential element in the process of providing authentic religious witness and effective religious leadership is the enormous challenge of joining together both philosophical and historical debate along with the important questions of practical religious lifestyle.² In today's world there seems to exist, at least in certain circles, a healthy trend towards the unification of spiritual, philosophical and ethical aspects of religion so that they have a direct bearing on and relevancy for the everyday life of the believer. John Caputo states this reality succinctly: "Religious truth, being truly religious, is not a formula to recite but a deed to do" (Caputo 2001: 130).

This, above mentioned, unified approach to religion has direct relevancy for the academic study of religion also. In the future, scholars of religion are going to be increasingly called upon to play roles in the areas of interactions between different religions, between religions and society, and culture, and between religions and the living Earth. In turn, this means that the idea and ideal of religious studies as a value free and completely objective discipline will come under greater pressure when challenged by the needs of our modern world. A good example of how scholars of religious studies are being challenged to employ their skills in the service of a greater goal is outlined by Mary Evelyn Tucker in her, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase*. Tucker demonstrates now the study of religion can be employed to build a healthier approach to and understanding of the Earth community in a time of need (Tucker 2003). In short, religions and religious scholars are currently faced with the challenge of discerning what contributions religions might make to humankind and to the broader Earth community in this the third millennium. This is also the case for scholars of Korean Buddhism, they must ask themselves in what ways and in what shape might

2 Although Lai and von Brück make this point in connection with Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan, the importance of situating and contextualizing a religious tradition is true of all studies. See Lai and Brück (2001: 151).

Korean Buddhism become an actor for the good not simply on the local stage, but also on the global.

IV. Korean Buddhism—What’s That?

In this section I would like to focus more closely on the Korean Buddhist tradition and its place in the wider global community. Or perhaps, it might be more accurate to characterize the situation as the Korean Buddhist tradition’s anonymity on the global stage. Here I would like to draw on some anecdotal evidence to highlight my point. A few years ago in England an informal survey was carried out in which a selection of secondary school students was asked a set of questions dealing with religion. One of the questions was: “When you think of Buddhism what country comes to mind?” The most popular response to this question was Japan, followed by Thailand, Tibet and Sri Lanka; sadly, Korea was not mentioned in the various survey answers. Although the students questioned were not experts in religions studies nor were they adherents of Buddhism, the fact that none of them so much as mentioned Korea as a Buddhist country is quite worrying and ought to be of concern for the Korean Buddhist community.

On a more demonstrable level, when compared with the number of available English language studies of Buddhism, as found in various countries, there is a dearth of studies concentrating on Korean Buddhism. Although there are many Korean language studies, it seems that Korean academics and Buddhist scholars have been rather remiss in making their scholarship available to the wider international community. If one were to survey some of the available literature dealing with Buddhism in East Asia, it would be easy to think mistakenly that Korean Buddhism has been, and still is, a minor tradition in the unfolding story of East Asian Buddhism. Examples of this approach are found in the old but still oft read works of Edward Conze and Kenneth Ch’en. In their respective studies, both authors paint a picture of Korean Buddhism as a static tradition, and one that should be remembered for little

more than introducing Buddhism to Japan (Ch'en 1968: 171). Conze's summation of Korean Buddhism is simply this: "There were no notable developments in doctrine. Korean Buddhism was chiefly significant by acting as an intermediary between China and Japan" (Conze 1993: 101). And in a more recent study, 2006, authored by Perry Schmidt-Leukel Korean Buddhism is again presented as having been little more than a bridge between China and Japan with no special characteristics mentioned nor analysis provided (Schmidt-Leukel 2006).

Before moving on I would like to make an important, and perhaps controversial, observation in relation to both the study of Korean Buddhism and the publication of information about Korean Buddhism on the international stage. When speaking about the lack of English language materials dealing with Buddhism as lived out in Korea I have frequently come across both Korean Buddhist adherents and Korean scholars of Buddhism who lament the fact that foreign scholars have neglected the study of Korean Buddhism, and that as a result of this failing on the part of foreign scholars and foreign institutions Korean Buddhism has remained largely unknown on the wider stage. This is a point of view about which I have a great number of reservations. Personally, I am of the opinion that responsibility for the promotion of and encouragement to study Korean Buddhism lies squarely with the Korean Buddhist community: needless to say this responsibility must include the provision of financial aid. There are historic and, indeed, legitimate reasons as to why such support has been lacking in the past, but the vast majority of these reasons have become redundant in contemporary Korean society where Buddhism is now far from being a financially and socially poor relation.

V. Korean Buddhism: A Complex Tradition

Although Korean Buddhism has lacked quality coverage and has not been promoted well on the international stage, in reality the Korean Buddhist

tradition presents us with a rich and complex tapestry to be investigated. However, on the part of Korean scholars many of these rich and complex aspects have on occasion been neglected for a number of reasons, and not least among these reasons is the existence of what seems to be an inward looking stance on the part of the Korean Buddhist community. As way of example, the failure critically to reflect on, engage with, and draw conclusions from Korean Buddhism's experiences during the Japanese colonial period reveals this tendency well.

For a moment let us examine this situation in more detail in order to flesh out the above point. It is possible, I think, to demonstrate that during the Japanese colonial period Korean Buddhism, in the face of extremely difficult circumstances, endeavoured actively to engage with the rapidly changing world in which it found itself. These efforts on the part of Korean Buddhism are exemplified in the shape of such reform minded figures as: Gwon, Sangno (1879-1965), Han, Yong-un (1879-1944), Yi, Yeongjae (1900-1927), and Bak, Jungbin (1891-1943). When these, and similar, reformers are studied and their respective works dealing with the reform of Korean Buddhism examined the depth of Buddhism's creativity and engagement with the situation it encountered in early twentieth-century Korea becomes evident.³ This engagement can, I think, be characterised in three ways: one, Buddhism drew inspiration from a myriad of resources; two, it attempted to respond to various challenges; three, Buddhist thinkers reflected on and endeavoured to transform traditional practice, doctrines, and structures in order to adapt to the modern world, and in particular to modernizing Korea. And of course all this occurred under the restricting and oppressive rule of a colonizing Japan (Adams 2007).

Although I appreciate that the colonial period for many Korean Buddhists is difficult to investigate because links to the period are still so strong and the hurts of those years so vivid, I think, it is precisely these above mentioned realities which make such an in-depth investigation necessary. By moving beyond an overly restrictive viewing of the colonial period where

³ These works are: Gwon, Sangno (1912), Han, Yong-un (1974), Yi, Yeongjae (1922), Bak, Jungbin (1935).

things were primarily identified through the lens of pro- or anti-Japanese / nationalism or collaboration, a much more colourful and vivid representation of the period can be unearthed. In fact, if we are to do justice to the study of Korean Buddhism and its undertakings during both the colonial and post-liberation periods we must adopt a wide, interdisciplinary, and even disjointed approach to the topic. We cannot approach this subject as a seamless or one-dimensional reality: the story of Buddhism in twentieth century Korea was not a simple linear unfolding of events and decisions. Rather, it was the story of disjointedness, interaction, leaps forward, and falls backwards. In fact, the history of Buddhism in Korea during the twentieth century is a complex and untidy one.⁴

During the colonial and post-liberation periods of its history Korean Buddhism's experiences and efforts to reform provide a rich sources for spiritual and intellectual reflection. Any study of these periods must include questions dealing with issues such as colonialism, post-colonialism, liberation, intra-religious discord and in-fighting, to mention but a few of the relevant issues. It is through reflection about and investigation into issues such as these that will provide Korean Buddhism with the necessary resources better to play a positive role on a global level. It is not by avoiding or brushing sensitive and painful issues under the carpet that Korean Buddhism will become a truly global religion. Nor is it by emphasising essentialist concepts such as 'nation protecting Buddhism' or 'Buddhism of interpenetration' (通佛敎) that Korean Buddhism will be propelled into a leadership role on an international level. Rather, Korean Buddhism's most positive and valuable attributes are to be found when it examines its own history, actions, decisions and philosophical concepts through compassionate yet critical eyes. When Korean Buddhism better takes onboard and digests the hard and often bitter lessons of its history—ancient, modern, and contemporary—then it will be in a much more positive position from which to promote a truly global dharma. In other words, when Korean Buddhism's philosophical and spiritual traditions are investigated in conjunction with its social, political, historical and economic realities then

4 Thankfully, scholars such as Gim, Gyeongjip and Gim, Gwangsik have done much to encourage such a study of colonial period Korean Buddhism. See Gim, Gwangsik (2000) and Gim, Gyeongjip (2001).

Korean Buddhism will have a very special and challenging message to share with the wider global community; a message that is sorely needed.

VI. The Importance of Experience

As way of explanation as to why the above mentioned experiences are so important let me briefly mention my own country, Northern Ireland, its history of being colonized, its exposure to much violence, and, at a time, its daily reality of violent death. Because of Northern Ireland's difficult and violent past its people have gained much experience in the precarious skills of living in a conflict filled environment and, of late, the arts and expertise necessary to overcome such a history of conflict. These experiences have recently led to the Catholic Church and to some of the political parties in Northern Ireland being drawn in as mediators and advisors to different groups in various countries, such as Sri Lanka and the Basque region in Spain, who are grappling with the problems of conflict, violence, and conflict resolution.⁵ In other words, the Catholic Church and some of the political parties in Northern Ireland are now playing highly respected roles in various conflicts around the world on the basis of their having reflected on and worked through much, but by no means all, of their recent histories.⁶

In the same manner as the Catholic Church of Northern Ireland, I think, Korean Buddhism also has got many positive resources to share with the wider world, but these resources must be polished and refined through critical reflection and honest soul searching. In a world calling out for leadership of all sorts, including religious and spiritual leadership, Korean Buddhism has the potential to become a very important role-model and promoter of a more compassionate world; this, however, will not be achieved through simple

5 See the BBC report of March 24, 2006 accessed at on Feb. 25, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4840514.stm; see also the homepage of The Irish Forum for Peace in Sri Lanka at <http://www.ifpsl.org>.

6 However, like many religious traditions in Europe, the Catholic Church in Ireland is facing other major and difficult questions regarding such things as clericalism, declining attendance, lack of religious vocations, and clerical sexual abuse of minors.

self-promotion, but rather by Korean Buddhism becoming much more self-reflective and self-critical in its dealings with such things as the modern world, scholarly research, ecological issues and poverty. Instead of simply promoting 'unique' aspects of Korean Buddhism and famous historical Buddhist figures, Korean Buddhism must go further and incorporate its historical, philosophical and spiritual experiences and riches into a form of teaching that truly demonstrates the uniqueness of Korean Buddhism when faced with the very real problems of the modern world. Although Korean Buddhism's recent efforts at charitable works and social undertakings, both at home and abroad, are laudable, in our contemporary world what is needed is a much more radical and experiential approach to overcoming the predicament humanity and the entire Earth community find themselves in. Only when Korean Buddhism seriously faces up to the challenge of becoming a 'Global-community protecting Buddhism' (護地球村佛教) will it become a true actor on the world stage.

VII. Conclusion

In the above pages I have attempted to outline some of the major challenges facing Korean Buddhism in our contemporary world, especially on the international stage. It is not sufficient, I think, for any religious tradition, including Korean Buddhism, when called upon to provide a bill of health simply to rely on statistics about growth in attendance, financial resources, or the number of building projects it is involved in; neither is it adequate to rely on past glories and the legacies of outstanding religious exponents. Though statistics may be motivating factors for actuaries sitting in their offices, and past glories may give comfort to people searching for an anchor in the midst of uncertainty, neither can provide a sound foundation for a religious tradition that wishes to face up to the enormous challenges of the contemporary world. If Korean Buddhism is going to move beyond its quite narrow confines and enter into the wider global context, it must invest time, energy and resources

into such a project. Although Korean Buddhism has got much to offer our Earth community—philosophically, ethically and socially, if it does not engage with the wider international community in a more proactive and positive manner then opportunities will be lost, and at this stage of our history I wonder if we can afford to squander such opportunities?

If Korean Buddhism is to take up and play a truly international role in the contemporary world, it faces a variety of tasks and challenges, and a journey beyond its traditional boundaries. An excellent starting point for such a journey, it seems to me, is with the dissemination of both information about Korean Buddhism and its willingness to play a role in international religious attempts to build a more compassionate Earth community. This task of disseminating information will demand more than financial resources, it will also challenge Korean Buddhists to open up to the wider world in a positive and imaginative manner, a manner which by necessity will go far beyond the oft cited concept of ‘nation protecting Buddhism.’ Although Korean Buddhism most certainly possesses the necessary resources and energy to play a positive and significant role on the international stage, an important question remains to be answered: does the Korean Buddhist community feel inclined to take up such a challenge?

Finally, and by way of challenge, I would like to reiterate the simple question asked earlier in my paper. That question is this: what can Korean Buddhism do for the global-community and for the Earth as a whole?

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean)

Bak Jungbin (K) 朴重彬

Buddhism of Interpenetration 通佛教

Global-community Protecting Buddhism 護地球村佛教

Gwon Sangno (K) 權相老

Han Yong-un (K) 韓龍雲

Nation Protecting Buddhism 護國佛教

Yi Yeongjae (K) 李英宰

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