

Review of
History of Korean Buddhism,
by Byung-jo Chung

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To explore any aspect of Korean Buddhism needs to have a fundamental conception of the connection of Korean traditional thoughts with Indian and Chinese Buddhism. Since he has made readers in general satisfied with that requirement by investigating various characteristics of Korean Buddhism in history, Prof. Chung tries to give readers in general a deeper understanding of Seon tradition as the most representative.

Key words: Buddhism in the Period of Three Kingdoms,
Buddhism in Silla, Mountain gods, Seon Tradition,
Nine Mountains of Seon, Cultural Life in Korean Buddhism.

This book presents an historical account of Korean Buddhism. According to the contents listing, the 15 chapters give an overview of the entire Buddhist history in Korea, from the early period of the Three Kingdoms which was the dawning of Buddhism in Korea (chapter I), right up to the

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present day (chapter XV). The book offers an insight into principle characteristics, philosophy and the monks of different historical periods, spanning more than 1500 years of unbroken Buddhist influence on the peninsula. Its arguments are well constructed to give the reader a sound basis for understanding Korean Buddhist history.

Its attention to historical and theoretical detail allows those with more than a cursory interest in the subject to better understand the context of Korean Buddhism. But in order to get maximum value from its contents, readers, whether Korean natives or foreigners, would benefit from having a little previous knowledge of Korean Buddhism, especially how it 'fits' with early Indian and Chinese Buddhism, as well as understanding a little about Korean traditional folk beliefs, such as devotion to mountain gods.

In particular, since their connections have been developed in the centre of Korean Buddhism, the author, Prof. Chung, cannot but consider both the particularity of Korean thoughts and the generality of Buddhism.

When Buddhism was first introduced from China to Korea in the period of Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla), for example, each kingdom had its own unique context and circumstances. For instance, Buddhism was introduced to Goguryeo over land from northern China, whereas Baekje Buddhism arrived from by sea from southern China; in both these cases it was protected and promoted by royal patrons. However, Buddhism's entry into Silla was very different as it was not supported by royal authority and of concrete materials which makes us know when, how, and by whom there can be Buddhism. Nevertheless, Silla Buddhism is given special consideration in this publication, not least because of its role in unifying the three kingdoms, which marks it as the most important foundation of Korean Buddhism up to the present.

Special attention is also given to the Korean Buddhist Seon (禪) or Zen tradition, which is described according to its historical sequencing rather than particular philosophical characteristics; this approach offers readers an easy understanding of Seon history without needing to tread too deeply. The historical account tells us that Seon was at its zenith at the end stage of the

Silla period, following unification of the three kingdoms. This was the time when the Seon Nine Mountain school was established in Korea, a 'union' of previously independent lineages which had their origins in the Northern Chan tradition of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (六祖 慧能, 638-713). Although there is not space to deal with each feature of the Nine Sects, it is timely that the Seon tradition has been given importance in this publication as historically, the tradition reached its zenith during unification, which may offer some optimism in our current age as we face a new set of unification challenges.

In a sense of religious dynamics, the Seon tradition in Korean Buddhism has encouraged nations in each period to seek a more moral and meaningful development in their circumstances. In the Joseon Dynasty, for example, when Buddhism was severely oppressed, many Seon monks organised an army and fought against the Japanese invasion. In this case, new developments in the tradition were pivotal on the will to address the social problems of the day. Seon best expresses itself as a driving force for growth in social life, which Prof. Chung is hopeful will re-emerge in our current circumstances.

The book's organisation of its subject according to historical periods makes Korean Buddhism in a general sense, easily accessible to readers. But it is also worth noting that while it offers a satisfactory overview of the subject, it lacks certain expertise in the detail of specific fields. Notwithstanding, the author seems to recognise the limitations of such a work and concentrates on the task of at least providing a reasonable account of the main scholars and teachers throughout Korean Buddhism's history. For readers who seek a more detailed treatment of either Korean Buddhism in general, or if they wish to study the biographies of specific figures in more depth, they will need to pursue their subject in other more detailed references. The pity is there is still so few English language publications available that offer any real depth of insight into Korean Buddhist history and contemporary life, and if only for this reason, Professor Chung's *History of Korean Buddhism* is a welcome addition to the literature.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean)

Baekje (K) 百濟

Goguryeo (K) 高句麗

Joseon (K) 朝鮮

Seon (K), Chan (C), Zen (J) 禪

Silla (K) 新羅

Sixth Patriarch Huineng (C) 六祖 慧能