

## **Seon (Chan/Zen) Enlightenment of Taego Bou: Practical Wisdom for Awakening Society**

*Ven. Dr. Jinwol Lee  
Dongguk University, South Korea*

### **Introduction**

It is assured that Buddhist wisdom of enlightenment can awaken the global society, as well as individuals, to be humane. Buddhist wisdom is based on the concept of enlightenment which is mainly attained by meditative practice. I would like share my thoughts on Seon Enlightenment as a source of wisdom for awakening society, through the example of Korean Seon Master Taego. In Seon tradition, enlightenment means awakening from ignorance - like a dream or sleep, and to attain enlightenment means to attain Buddhahood. Enlightenment or awakening refers to know reality or nature of oneself and the world. First, I will review the meaning and its tradition within Seon enlightenment based on the Korean Buddhist context. Wisdom for awakening society could be derived from the Seon practice. Second, I will introduce Seon Master Tago Bou with his life and contribution to the society.

### **Seon Enlightenment:**

The term “**Seon**” is Korean pronunciation of Chinese letter **Chan** 禪 which was transliteration of the Sanskrit *dhyāna* and shortened. It has been known in English as **Zen**, the Japanese pronunciation of 禪 since Japanese people first introduced it to the West. It is a spiritual practice referring to Buddhist meditation: a way of concentration or contemplation on the certain point and to attain the state of mind, as *samādhi*. Through this practice, one can make one’s mind calm, clear, and bright. From that state of mind one can see one’s nature or Buddha Nature and reality of the world, which means attainment of Enlightenment or completion of wisdom and freedom from samsaric transmigration. Seon sometimes refers to silent meditation practice, or the meditative tradition and school – depending on the context. In Seon tradition, its origin has been traced to the meditation of Siddhartha just before he attained enlightenment and became Shakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, Seon is recognized as the best way of practice to attain Buddhahood. It is noticeable that the Dharma lineages of Chinese and Korean traditions were started from Shakyamuni Buddha.

Seon enlightenment is said to be like the same principle or experience as any person themselves drinking water and only then do they know if what they are drinking is hot or cold. Certain persons who have drunk the water of Enlightenment could properly communicate with each other through their common experiences without verbal explanations. The enlightened one is able to see reality through their spiritual eyes and enjoy limitless freedom from delusion and defilement. As the point, the dynamic phenomena cannot be explained with words and cannot be expressed in writing; as a premise, we should talk about the subject briefly through common sense. As we can imagine as if one overcomes ignorance and is awakened - it is like waking from a dream, it indicates that the enlightened state recovers the original nature of normality from ignorance and defilement. Moreover, for the enlightened, all existences are united into one, and the enlightened one becomes a person of great freedom and compassion. From these points, we can assume that the state of enlightened one is to

become one with the others and the world or universe without all dichotomous discrimination, and who has attained peace and harmony with the world without conflict and suffering.

The traditional concept of enlightenment indicates three aspects such as enlightenment of self, others, and complete with life. It means that proper enlightenment is related not only to oneself but also to others and society or the world - not only spirituality but also in concrete life. Therefore, one's enlightenment should be concerned with and oriented to the people of society or the world. It is noticeable as stated that the enlightened correctly handle all things ceaselessly with a compassionate mind, and show the characteristic of life that one obviously lives here and now. We should know that the enlightened one does not enjoy the state oneself but shares it with others in the society. The enlightened one could be seen as a Bodhisattva who is working or living for people through wisdom and compassion, appearing as a compassionate social teacher or a selfless public servant. Ordinary people could not see or know the spiritual state of the enlightened one but observe or feel the action and living of the enlightened one. We could not properly understand the state of enlightenment of Shakyamuni but appreciate even a part of his compassionate teaching and living for all sentient being. Therefore, it can be said that wisdom for awakening society is come from Buddhist enlightenment which is produced through meditative practice of mind.

### **Life and thoughts of Seon Master Taego Bou:**

The National Master Taego Bou was born at Yanggeun near the Seoul in 1301. When he was 12 years old, Taego became a Buddhist monk at Hoeamsa monastery. At the age of 18 he began to practice Seon at Mt. Gaji with a gongan (public case): "Ten thousand things return to the one, then, where does the one return to?" Taego had passed the Hwaecom (Avatamsaka) examination at age 25. He practiced Seon meditation and also studied scriptures. Eventually he experienced awakening in 1333. He went to Yuan China in 1346 and met Chan Master Shiyu Qinggong at Mt. Xiawu in 1347. Master Shiyu recognized Taego's enlightenment and transmitted Dharma to him. Therefore, Taego succeeded the lineage of Gaji Mountain Seon School of Korea and the Linji Chan School of China. Since then, at the request of Yuan Emperor, he taught Buddhism to awaken the public in Chinese society. In 1348 Taego returned to Korea and became the Royal Preceptor in 1356. He set up Wonyungbu, a special office dedicated for unification of scattered Seon schools of the Nine Mountains. Taego spent the rest of his life for awakening the society and country; then, passed away in 1382. It is known that Taego taught more than one thousand disciples and revived the Seon tradition in Korea. He left *Analects of Master Taego* which is composed of Dharma talks, admonitions, verses and an appendix.

In *Analects of the Master Taego*, he highly valued Ganhwaseon (the Seon practice of observing a Hwadu) method for meditation, and especially considered, 'Mu (literally meaning: none, or nothingness)' as one of the most important Hwadus. According to him, the word 'Mu' is neither relative nor absolute: it means neither 'non-existence' of 'existing or not existing,' nor the absolute real 'nothingness.' Then what is the definition of this 'M'? Arriving at this questioning, a Seon practitioner must stop thinking about one's body and stop doing anything at all. When one also can stop thinking about one's non-doing then one will reach to a plane of great calmness and emptiness. Do not try to figure out the meaning of 'Mu' by reasoning.

In "Japhwasammaega (Verses of Samadhi on Various Flowers)" of his Analects, Taego expressed his view on Seon and Gyo as follows: "On the day the Dharma Talk was delivered in the middle of the Bodhimanda, in deep Ocean Seal Samadhi, a sermon was given

without speech. Who heard it? Who transmitted it? Manjusri (Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom) and Samantabhadra (Bodhisattva of Great Action) heard, and their tongues transmitted. What paths were followed and how was the sermon heard by two Bodhisattvas? They could hear the silent sermon since they were in deep Samadhi Ocean. Ah! That Samadhi was the hidden-Virochana Samadhi!” This verse implies that the real dimension of the *Avatamsaka-sutra* cannot be found in the Sutra, since the dimension is the dimension of enlightenment and enlightenment is not something that can be gained simply by reading Sutras. Though Taego deeply studied the Sutras enough to pass the Hwaeom examination, he realized limits of textual study and turned to meditation practice. This turn to Seon makes his position very clear that he did not oppose the Gyo or textual studies, yet final awakening can only be completed by Seon practice.

Characteristics of Taego tried to merge varying Buddhist sects within the boundary of the Seon School. He tried to unify not only Seon schools but Gyo, as well as Pure Land. For instance, he taught that the purpose of chanting Amitabha Buddha is not the reincarnation to the Western Pure Land, instead he taught we need to be reminded continuously: the nature of Amitabha is our true nature. It is more similar with the Hwadu practice in Seon School. He proposed different Buddhist practices could be fused in to Seon method. By expanding the horizon of the Ganhwaseon, Taego tried to embrace the variety of Buddhisms.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen above, it is said that origin of Seon enlightenment came from the meditation of Siddhartha who became Shakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, Seon is recognized as the best way of practice to attain Buddhahood. It is believed that the Dharma lineages of Chinese and Korea was started from Shakyamuni Buddha of India. The wisdom from enlightenment could be attained through Seon meditation by oneself and individuals. The enlightened one could teach and awake other individuals; and because a society consists of individuals - awakening of an individual could eventually awaken a society. Therefore, it can be said that wisdom for awakening society can be produced by Seon practice. Master Taego is the paragon of a Seon practitioner who attained enlightenment and awakened the people and societies of China and Korea by his wisdom which emerged from Seon practice.

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