

Ganhwaseon (看話禪) in Korea: From a Seon Practitioner's Perspective

Ven. Jinwol
Dongguk University

Introduction

It has been a significant occasion, almost every year for the last decade, that Buddhists from various traditions get together to share their thoughts and experiences about Buddhist idea and practice on the UN Day of Vesak celebrations in Thailand, in May.¹ Considering its numbers of participants from different countries and traditions, about 2,000 Buddhist delegates from more than 80 countries, including Theravada and Mahayana tradition, it seems the biggest event of Buddhists around the world in recent years. It is also noticeable that most Buddhists have commemorated and celebrated the 2,600th year of Buddha's attainment of Great Enlightenment (大覺) since the last year, BE 2555 (2011). We have to review and remind that what is the Enlightenment of Shakyamuni and how Siddhartha attained the Enlightenment. Seon (禪 Chan/Zen) Buddhist meditation practitioners believe that Enlightenment means Seeing Nature (見性) of Dharma, or Reality, which is the same as Buddha Nature (佛性) and Nature of Mind (心性) for all Sentient Beings (衆生). Seon practitioners believe that Seon meditation practice is the best way to attain Enlightenment. The characteristics of Seon tradition have been known as: "Without standing on letters [of words] (不立文字), [the Mind] especially transmitted beside the doctrinal (教外別傳), [it] directly points the human mind (直指人心) to see nature [of mind] for attaining Buddhahood (見性成佛)." Seon practitioners also believe that Seon tradition started from the event, so-called "[the Buddha] Held up a flower and [Mahakasapa] smiled (拈花微笑)," when a Buddhist assembly was held on the Spiritual Mountain (靈山會上) for preaching Dharma.² According to Seon tradition, the Buddha declared that he transmitted the Correct Dharma of Eye Store (正法眼藏) of him to Mahakasapa at that moment of the smile and therefore, Mahakasapa became the First Patriarch of the tradition. Then, having passed away, Mahakasapa transmitted his Dharma to Ananda who accordingly became the Second Patriarch.

It is significant to appreciate that because of his spiritual quality of enlightenment Ananda could not join the First Assembly of Compiling Buddha's Teachings (Samgiti 結集) which was held in Rajagriha with 500 Arahats after Buddha's Parinirvana, the Great Passing Away in peace (善逝入寂/圓寂) completely. It is said that Ananda was an attendant of the Buddha and had remembered all what the Buddha spoke, but he had not attained enlightenment yet by himself before the Buddha's passing. When Ananda attended the First Assembly, Mahakasapa, who was the convener and in charge, did not allow him to join the meeting, but expelled him with the assignment to attain enlightenment. Then Ananda took an intensive meditation practice for a week and eventually attained enlightenment. Then, he could

¹ UN Day of Vesak celebration has been based on a resolution of the 54th General Assembly of United Nations in December, 1999. Visit website <http://www.vesakday.mcu.ac.th>

² The spiritual mountain refers to Vulture Peak Mountain (Gridhrakuta), where Shakyamuni Buddha expounded *Lotus Sutra*.

join the Assembly and played the role to recite what he had heard as the words as “thus what I have heard (如是我聞) [from the Buddha]” which was put at the beginning of the Sutras, Buddhist Scriptures.

It is worthy of notice that the chief editor’s remark on *Ganhwaseon: A Way of Practice of Jogye Order* in which he confesses that as a Seon practitioner, he had been hesitant to take a part in the compilation of the book because he thought that Ganhwaseon practitioners had to be serious about practice for having the experience of meditation than the expression of words, so he should refuse the request to make such a book. However, the editorial committee, consisting of senior Seon practitioners, had intensive discussions on the matter and eventually made a decision to join the works to show their intention of the book as “a pointing finger to moon.” In this paper, I would like to share some information of the situation of Ganhwaseon in Korea and my thoughts about the practice with a sense of the same feeling of the editor above mentioned. I will first review and point out characteristics of Ganhwaseon and the situation in Korea.

Ganhwaseon (看話禪)

Ganhwaseon is a way of Seon which has developed through various traditions of Buddhist meditation. However, the main practice of Ganhwaseon is to observe and contemplate (看) “Hwadu” (話頭 topic of critical words) in order to comprehend the intention of the speaker who said the words. It is a way to see one’s Nature (性) which is identical with Buddha’s and everyone’s. Therefore, it is also called “Hwaduseon(話頭禪),” Seon of Hwadu. In fact, a Hwadu is not for reasoning, but contemplating. ‘Seon’ is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese word ‘Chan (禪),’ which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word Dhyâna, which can be translated as Quiet Meditation (靜慮) or Speculation Practice (思惟修). Seon also refers to a school of Mahayana Buddhism, which was remarkably developed in East Asian situations as a practice-oriented tradition. However, Seon emphasizes mind practice to attain Correct Enlightenment (正覺), which generates Wisdom (智慧) and Compassion (慈悲) for all sentient living beings (衆生). As such, it de-emphasizes theoretical knowledge in favour of intuitive self-realization through meditation practice.

According to the tradition, Seon originated in India as a transcendental non-verbal Dharma as “[the Buddha] Held up a Flower and [Mahakasapa] Smiled” which communicated and transmitted directly by the Buddha to Mahakashapa at Vulture Peak Mountain. Moreover, it is known that the Buddha told Mahakasapa “I transmit to you the light of the pure dharma eye which is birthless, deathless, wondrous, spiritual, the real form of no-form, delicate, the true teaching,” at the end of the event.³ Therefore, we can say that the story of the event was a Gong’an (公案 Public Case) and the critical key words, “Holding a flower and Smiling,” is a Hwadu. In this case of Hwaduseon, the practitioner should comprehend the intention ‘why [the Buddha] Held a flower and why Mahakasapa smiled at the moment.’ And a practitioner should comprehend the intention of the Buddha’s remark and that the meaning of the words that “the light of pure dharma eye,” could be called a Hwadu to question what is the real meaning of the words or intention of the Buddha to say that.

³ Tao-yuan, Sohaku Ogata trans., *The Transmission of the Lamp*, Wolfeboro, NH: Longwood Academic, 1990, P. 5.

It is known that in Buddhism there the Threefolds Wisdom: Wisdom of Reality (實相般若), Wisdom of Observation (觀照般若), and Wisdom of Letters (文字般若). It can be said that through observing letters (words), one could comprehend reality as to attain wisdom. It is similar that through observing Hwadu, one can attain awakening or enlightenment. To appreciate the Seon tradition, one should remind the well-known statement of the characteristics of the Seon tradition that: "Without standing on the letters, having transmitted outside the Scriptures, it directly points the human mind to see one's true nature as attaining Buddhahood." These words teach practitioners that they should not attach to scripture and words, but use them as Upaya, or Skillful Means. Seon can be practiced anywhere and anytime because it is dependent on one's single mind or intention regardless of any particular conditions. It is important to note a well known Seon proverb that says, when a finger is pointing to the moon, "one should not see merely the finger, but the moon." in terms of the ultimate purpose and communication. Seon stresses on meditation and concentration.

It is said that this tradition of transmission of the Dharma Lamp (法燈) was later taken from India to China by Bodhidharma in the 6th century, where it was subsequently transmitted to other parts of Asia. Seon was introduced into the Unified Silla (統一新羅), Korea, in the 9th century by the Venerable Doeui Myeongjeok (道義 明寂), a Korean Buddhist monk. The Seon Master Doeui, who received Dharma transmission from the Chan Master Xitang Zhizhang (西堂 智藏 735-814) in the lineage of Huineng (慧能 638-713), was the first pioneer of The Seon School (禪門) and to be known as the Patriarchal Founder of Jogye Order (曹溪宗祖), which is the major Buddhist order in Korea these days. It is believed that Ganhwaseon is one of the most developed methods for seeing one's true nature since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Moreover, the tradition was transmitted and developed in China and then came to Korea. It is recognized that Ganhwaseon was advocated by Chan Master Tahui Tsungkao (大慧 宗杲 1088-1163) in Song (宋) China and evolved from then onwards. Seon Master Bojo Jinul (1158-1210), in Goryeo, was a pioneer of Ganhwaseon in Korea. Though the traditions have produced several lineages around world, they all share the same principal ideas that reality is essentially empty and stress on the practice of meditation on Hwadu.

Ganhwaseon in Korea: A Brief History and Background

It is known that Buddhism was first officially introduced from China to Korea in 372 CE, and adopted as the official state religion in the Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla) and Unified Silla Kingdom (668-935) which applied Buddhism as the spiritual force for the unification of the peninsula.⁴ During the Unified Silla Period, Buddhism was the driving force in cultural development, resulting in the construction of temples, such as Bulguksa (佛國寺 Temple of Buddha Land), which has been known as a World Cultural Heritage recognized by UNESCO. It is noticeable that during the Unified Silla Period, Seon (Chan) were brought from China and led to the development of the Seon Schools, thereby adding another spiritual dimension to philosophical advance, which had been led by the scholastic Buddhists. During the period from the Unified Silla to the early Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), the Gusanseonmun (九山禪門 Nine Mountain Seon Schools) were established and dominated the spiritual field of the nation.

⁴ The Korean Buddhist Research Institute ed., *The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea*, Seoul: Dongguk University Press, p.40.

During Goryeo Dynasty in general, Buddhism became a unifying factor and the grounds for further national and cultural flourishing. For instance, the Tripitaka Koreana (高麗大藏經 a World Cultural Heritage) was carved into more than 80,000 woodblocks as an offering for national protection from outside forces and invasion. However, in the middle of Goryeo, Seon Master Bojo Jinul established Suseonsa monastery in which he tried to integrate meditative practice and doctrinal studies (定慧雙修) as one system.⁵ There he took initiative in Ganhwaseon or Hwaduseon practice. At the end of Goryeo Seon Master Taego Bou (1301-1382), a representative of the period, had practiced Ganhwaseon and promoted it as the main Korean form of meditation.⁶ During Goryeo, the number of Buddhist orders diversified and flourished, but eventually integrated into the Jogye Order by the master Taego. However, the increasing economic and political influence of the Buddhists led to condemnation by the common people, and ignored by the aristocracy, Buddhism came in to a period of political repression with the ensuing Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910).

During Joseon, Neo-Confucianism rapidly gained favor, and although royalty continued to practice Buddhism privately, Confucianism ruled administration and society. Under a continuing policy of repression, Buddhism was banished to the mountains and monastics were generally treated harshly. However, this banishment proved to be quite valuable to Buddhism in two respects: the temples became centers for the communal flourishing of Seon practice, and Buddhism established strong bonds with the common people. Among the Seon masters of early Joseon period, Cheongheo Hyujeong (1520-1604) has been recognized as the most important and influential leaders of the Buddhists. He wrote *Samgagwigam* (Ideal Mirror of the Three Religions) and *Seongagwigam* (Ideal Mirror of Zen School) which has been a classical Seon text in Korea.⁷ In the late Joseon period Seon Master Choeui Euisun (1786-1866) was eminent and popular in the society for his cultural and educational influence including Tea Way with Seon practice.⁸

In the last century, Seon Masters Gyeongheo Seongu (1846-1912) and Yongseong Jinjong (1864-1940) were most eminent as a reviver of the Seon tradition. Most of modern Seon masters were disciples or descendants of them, such as Seon masters Hyewol (1861-1937), Mangong Wolmyeon (1872-1946), Hanam Jungwon (1876-1951), Dongsan Hyeil (1890-1965), Goam Sangeon (1899-1988) and Toeong Seongcheol (1912-1993).⁹

Ganhwaseon in Korea: Recent Situations

Ganhwaseon practice has been recognized in Korea as the best among all Buddhist practices to attain Enlightenment. Seon training emphasizes daily life practice, along with intensive periods of meditation. Practicing with others is an integral part of Seon practice. However, focusing on the Awakening or Enlightenment

⁵ Jinul, *The Collected Works of Chinul*, Hemyeong (Robert Buswell Jr.) trans. Seoul: Buri Chulpansa, 1985, pp. 62-64; Shim Jae-ryong, *Korean Buddhism: Tradition and Transformation*, Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Co., 1999, pp.31-142.

⁶ Mu Soeng Sunim, *Thosand Peaks: Korean Zen-Tradition & Teachers*, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987, pp.109-111; J. C. Cleary, *A Buddha from Korea: The Zen Teachings of T'aego*, Boston: Shambhala, 1988, p.65.

⁷ Young Ho Lee (Jin Wol), *Common Themes of the Three Religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism): The Samga Kwigam of Hyujong (1520-1604)*, A Master Thesis at University of Hawaii, 1990.

⁸ Young Ho Lee, *Ch'oui Uisun: A Liberal Son Master and an Engaged Artist in Late Choson Korea*, Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 2002.

⁹ Mu Soeng Sunim, *Thosand Peaks: Korean Zen-Tradition & Teachers*, op. cit. p.153-183; Sungshim Hong, *The Great Seon Masters of Korea*, Seoul: Eastward, 2007, pp.80-181.

has always been the ultimate goal no matter where or when one is situated, but should always be aware of being in the here and now. Many Korean monks have few personal possessions and maintain a quiet and simple lifestyle. According to recent reports in Korea, there have been about 1,200 monks and nuns who practiced Seon at meditation halls in more than 100 Seon monasteries around South Korea every summer and in winter retreat periods for 3 months. During the period of the 90 days, the practitioners must not go out of the temple area, but concentrate on the Ganhwaseon.

Sangha seminaries of traditional Buddhist monasteries have taught *Jeondeungnok* (傳燈錄 Record of Transmission of Lamp) and *Yeomsong* (拈頌 Panegyric Phrases of Holding-up) with reference texts in graduate curriculums which have been used as encouragement and guidelines for Ganhwaseon practitioners. It is known that *Jeondeungnok* includes about 1,700 stories related to the Dharma transmission between the masters and their disciples including the Buddha and Mahakasapa. Therefore, we can find out the so-called 1,700 Gongans from the stories of the book.¹⁰ From the *Yeomsong* we also find out more than a thousand Hwadus based on the Gongans and panegyrics.¹¹ However, most Seon practitioners have sought their Hwadus from their Seon masters who give a proper one for the disciples.

According to Hyujeong, Ganhwaseon practitioners should practice with the Live Words (活句) and must not practice with the Dead Words (死句).¹² The Live Words here means the Hwadu, which is unthinkable and beyond explaining by reasoning; the Dead Words refer to be a scholastic one. Therefore, it is recommended that practitioners should contemplate on the Live Words with sincerity of mind; questioning likes a hungry person longing for food and a child longing for its mother. Hyujeong stresses that “In seon practice, one must pass the barrier of Patriarch (祖師關); to attain Wondrous Enlightenment (妙悟), one has to completely cut off the way of thinking (心路絕).”¹³ It can be said that Ganhwaseon practice is like an intuitive comprehension of a Hwadu through contemplation with questioning to seek intention of the speaker of the Hwadu. It is well known that Ganhwaseon practitioners must have three things of essential importance: The first is a Foundation of Great Faith (大信根) for the practice which is possible; the second is Great Zealous Determination (大憤志) of practice to attain enlightenment; the third is a Great Feeling of Doubt (大疑情) on the Hwadu. If one of these is lacking, then it is like a tripod pot with a broken foot and is useless.¹⁴

Conclusion

These days, among Koreans, the word “Hwadu” has been used not only by Seon practitioners, but also people of society in general in various contexts, such as political, economic, social and cultural. If there is an urgent and critical task or a serious problem for people as well as individuals, they call it as a Hwadu to be solved and overcome. It seems popular that Hwadu stands not only for Seon practitioners, but everyone and institutions, even the government, for their survival or improvement

¹⁰ Tao-yuan, *The Transmission of the Lamp*, op. cit. p.xi.

¹¹ Hyesim & Gakun, *Seonmun Yeomsong & Yeomsong Seolhwa*, Wolun Kim trans., Seoul: Dongguk Yeokgyeongwon, 2005, p.13.

¹² Young Ho Lee (Jin Wol), *Common Themes of the Three Religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism): The Samga Kwigam of Hyujong (1520-1604)*, op.cit. p.101.

¹³ Ibid. p.102.

¹⁴ Ibid.

of lives. Their purpose of using the word, Hwadu, is not the same, but similar as Seon Practitioners to concentrate to solve the problem or get an answer for the question of each one's own task. However, I would say to conclude in short that wherever and whenever, anyone tries to face one's task or challenge and to solve a problem, it is better that one could use the way of Ganhwaseon practice or spirit. Let us appreciate how Steve Jobs had practiced and used Zen wisdom and power. I guess that Ganhwaseon's relevance to apply for all situations depend on one's mind.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ven. Prof. Jinwol Lee, "Global Recovery through Mental Well-Being by Practicing Seon (Zen) Meditation" in *Global Recovery: The Buddhist perspective*, Ayutthaya: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2010, pp.618-627.