

Buddhist Meditation Tradition in Korea

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1. Introduction

It is commonly known that two principal pillars of Buddhism are ‘Wisdom’ and ‘Compassion.’ These two are understood as the ‘Essence’ and the ‘Function’ respectively. It is also said that the perfect wisdom is mainly attained by meditation practice and eventually realized by enlightenment; the great compassion is naturally derived by the perfect wisdom of non-duality and applied by the skilful means through the wisdom. It is remarkable that ‘Mindfulness’ has been gotten attention from people of the world and popularized as a representative word of Buddhist spirituality in recent decades. Mindfulness is a mind practice and refers to some practical characteristics including awareness, attention, concentration, insight, remembering and the certain positive state of mind. It is a way of attaining clear and peaceful mind as well as insight overcoming troubles of mind in terms of the mental and psychological aspects. It is known as a Buddhist meditation itself or the state of mind which has developed by meditation depending on contexts.

It is very significant that scholars and practitioners from various Buddhist traditions get together to share their ideas and experiences about ‘Mindfulness,’ as the theme at the 3rd IABU conference for UNDV celebration, not only good for them but also for people around world. To join this global conference, I would like to introduce “Buddhist Meditation Tradition in Korea” focusing on Seon (Chan/Zen). At first, I will review the historical background and lineage of the topic from its beginning to the present. Secondly, I will introduce its way of practice and the results of it. Then, I would make a comment on it related with mindfulness as a conclusion.

2. Historical Background and Lineage

It is known that there have been various Buddhist traditions and schools around the world for two thousand five hundred years, including Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. History shows that there were many different Buddhist sects and lineages under the different situations of sociopolitical and cultural diversity of the regions in India, East and Southeast Asian countries and other parts of the world. It is recognized that Korean Buddhism is classified as a Mahayana tradition. Seon (Chan/Zen) meditation practice has developed in Mahayana region and recognized in Korea as the best among all Buddhist practices to attain Enlightenment. According to the tradition, Seon originated in India as a transcendental non-verbal Dharma which communicated and transmitted directly by the Buddha Shakyamuni to Mahakashapa, one of his principal disciples. It was later taken to China by Bodhidharma in the 6th century, where it was subsequently transmitted to other parts of Asia. Seon was introduced into Korea by Doeui Myeongjeok in the 9th Century. Though the traditions have spawned numerous lineages, they all share two elements: a metaphysical system postulating that reality is essentially empty and a stress on the practice of meditation.

It is known that Buddhism was first officially introduced through China to Korea in 372 C.E., 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. During the Unified Silla Period, Buddhism was driving force in cultural development. It is noticeable that during the Unified Silla Period, Seon (Chan/Zen) was brought from China and led to the development of the Seon Schools, thereby adding other spiritual dimension to philosophical advance which had been led by the scholastic Buddhists. The Venerable Seon Master Doui Myeongjeok, who received Dharma transmission from the Chan Master Xitang Zhizhang (735-814) in the lineage of Huineng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch from Bodhidharma. Doui was the first pioneer of Seon School and to be known as the patriarchal founder of Jogye Order which is the major Buddhist order in Korea in these days. During the period from the Unified Silla to the early Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) the Gusanseonmun (Nine Mountain Seon Schools) were established and dominated spiritual field of the nation.

During Goryeo Dynasty, Buddhism became a unifying factor and the grounds for further national and cultural flourishing. For instance, the Tripitaka Koreana was carved into more than 80,000 woodblocks (UNESCO Heritage) as an offering for national protection from outside forces and invasion. In the middle of Goryeo, Seon Master Bojo Jinul (1158-1210) established Suseonsa monastery in which he tried to integrate meditative practice and doctrinal studies as one system. There he introduced Hwadu meditation practice which was later promoted by National Master Taego Bou (1301-1382) as the main Korean form of meditation. During Goryeo period, the number of Buddhist orders diversified and flourished but eventually integrated into Jogye Order by the master Taego. However, the increasing economic and political influence of the Buddhists led to condemn nation 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 the period of 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 monks 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 Joseon period, Cheongheo Hyjeong(1520-1604) has been recognized as the most important and influential leader of the Buddhists so far. In the 19th century, Choui Uisun(1786-1866) and Gyeongheo Seongu(1846-1912) were eminent in reviving Seon tradition, and Youngseong Jinjong(1864-1940) and Mangong Wolmyon(1871-1946) were outstanding in the 20th century. In recent decades, Goam Sangeon(1899-1988) and Teong Seongcheol(1912-1993) were influential and remarkable for promoting Seon practice in the world. 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 winter retreat periods for 3 months in each season. During the

period of the 90 days, the practitioners must not go out of the temple area, but concentrate on the Seon practice..

3. Way of Seon Practice and Transfer Result to Society in Compassion

Major Seon practice in Korea has been Ganhwaseon which had developed through various traditions of Buddhist meditation. However, the main practice of Ganhwaseon is to observe and contemplate “Hwadu” (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’ which is identical with Buddha’s and everyone’s. Therefore, it is also called “Hwaduseon,” Seon of Hwadu. In fact, a Hwadu is not for reasoning, but contemplating. ‘Seon’ is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese word ‘Chan,’ which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word Dhyana, which can be translated as Quiet Meditation or Speculation Practice. However, Seon emphasizes mind practice to attain Correct Enlightenment, which generates ‘Wisdom’ and ‘Compassion’ for all sentient beings. As such, it de-emphasizes theoretical knowledge in favor 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. Therefore, we can say that the story of the event was a Gonggan (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.

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.

According to Hyujeong, Ganhwaseon practitioners should practice with the ‘Live Words’ and must not practice with the ‘Dead Words’. 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 like 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; to attain ‘Wondrous Enlightenment,’ one has to completely cut off the way of thinking.” 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’ for the practice which is possible; the second is ‘Great Zealous Determination’ of practice to attain enlightenment; the third is a ‘Great Feeling of Doubt’ on the Hwadu. If one of these is lacking, then it is like a tripod pot with a broken foot and is useless.

It seems a developmental process of Seon culture that the ‘Ten Oxhearding Pictures’ were the visual expression of the Seon thoughts to directly appeal to people. Therefore, these pictures have been painted on the walls of Seon meditation hall of most Buddhist monasteries in Korea. The contents of the Ten Oxhearding Pictures are: ① Searching for the Ox, ② Finding traces of the Ox, ③ Seeing the Ox, ④ Catching the Ox, ⑤ Taming the Ox, ⑥ Riding the Ox Home, ⑦ Forgetting the Ox, ⑧ Transcending the Ox, ⑨ Returning to the source, ⑩ Entering the marketplace. The Ox symbolized the practitioner’s seeking goal, hidden or forgotten nature of mind, Buddha Nature, Dharma Nature, Truth, Real Self, Original Body, Original Face, and so on, as well as the Self for cowboy or the shepherd. These pictures show the way of practice to attain Enlightenment and save the ignorant people of suffering in the society through the recovering the original and non-dual nature which had been confused and divided into the subject and object. It could be said that the process do not have to be fixed in the ten pictures but anyway to depict the basic stages of practice, Enlightenment, and serving the world. We should pay attention to the last picture among the pictures that Chan or Seon practitioners should keep in mind that completion of practice is not stopped at the stage of enlightenment but gone into the society to help people with wisdom in compassion.

4. Conclusion

The word “Hwadu” has been used not only by Seon practitioners, but also by general people of society in Korea in these days of 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. Their purpose of using the word, Hwadu, may be 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. I would say regarding relevance that anyone can apply the way of Ganhwaseon practice or spirit for facing one’s own critical situation in any context.

As we have seen above, the way of Ganhwaseon meditation practice, as well as the brief history of meditation tradition in Korea, there are many similarities between Ganhwaseon practice and ‘Mindfulness’ practice, in terms of attention, concentration, contemplation, awareness, insight, observing and remembering it at all the time and space, focusing on here and now. It seems good and

useful that practitioners of the two traditions should learn and apply each other's way of practice to improve their attaining the goal, as well as to extend their understanding of other practices and cultures of different traditions in global context. We need to discuss and to cooperate about that how we could promote and spread the way of meditation practices to people of society for peace and happiness of all sentient beings around world.

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