Wisdom, Compassion, and Zen Social Ethics: The Case of Chinul, Sŏngch'ŏl, and Minjung Buddhism in Korea

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Abstract

This essay examines the possibility of Zen social ethics by contemplating the relationship between wisdom and compassion in two Korean Zen masters, Pojo Chinul and T'oe'ong Sŏngch'ŏl. Unlike the common assumption that wisdom and compassion naturally facilitate each other in Zen practice, I contend that in both Chinul and Sŏngch'ŏl, they are in a relationship of tension rather than harmony and that such a tension provides a ground for Zen social ethics. In this context the Minjung Buddhist movement in contemporary Korea is discussed as an example of Zen social activism that makes visible the social dimension of Zen philosophy and practice.

Recent Buddhist scholarship in the West has raised a question regarding how to understand Zen teachings in the larger milieu of the life-world beyond monastic experiences. In other words, is ethics possible in Zen Buddhism and, if so, what kind of ethics does Zen offer? This further raises the question of whether Zen Buddhism can contribute to social activism. To answer these questions, in this essay, I will examine the relationship between wisdom and compassion in the context of how an

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individual's path to realizing the teachings of Zen Buddhism influences the person's relationships with others, that is, his or her practice of compassion.

A common assumption is that wisdom and compassion are like two wings of Zen practice, and, thus, the attainment of the one "naturally" facilitates the other. This essay questions that very assumption and claims that wisdom and compassion are, in fact, in a state of tension, and even create a theoretical gap in two major Zen teachers in Korean Buddhism. This essay further contends that addressing the nature of this tension and, thus, finding its position both in Zen discourse and in its practice could be one of the first steps to understanding the status of Zen Buddhism in the ethical discourse. I will discuss the issue by examining the Zen teaching of Pojo Chinul (普照知訥, 1158-1210) and comparing it with the Buddhist thoughts of T'oe'ong Sŏngch'ŏl (退翁性徹, 1912-1993). After discussions on Chinul and Sŏngch'ŏl, I will examine Minjung Buddhism (民衆佛教, Buddhism for the Masses) in contemporary Korea as a possible example of Zen social activism.

1. The Mind: Doctrinal Ground for the Identity of Wisdom and Compassion in Pojo Chinul

Chinul's Buddhist thought developed around the idea of the mind. At the very beginning of his early work, *Encouragement to Practice: The Compact of the Samādhi and Prajñā Community* (*Kwŏnsu chŏnghye kyŏlsa mun* 勸修定慧結社文, 1190), Chinul states[1]:

> *When one is deluded about the mind and gives rise to endless defilements, such a person is a sentient being. When one is awakened to the mind and gives rise to endless marvelous functions, such a person is the Buddha. Delusion and awakening are two different states but both are caused by the mind. If one tries to find the Buddha away from this mind, one will never find one.*

In another of his essays, *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind* (*Susimkyŏl* 修心訣, 1203-1205), Chinul also teaches (HPC 4.708b):

> *If one wants to avoid transmigration, the best way is to search for the Buddha. Though I said "search for the Buddha," this mind is the Buddha. The mind cannot be found in a distant place but is inside this body.*

Also in Straight *Talk on the True Mind* (*Chinsim chiksŏl*, 眞心直說, around 1205), Chinul advises that the role of patriarchs is "to help sentient beings look at their original nature by themselves" (HPC 4.715a).

By identifying the Buddha with the mind and one's original nature, Chinul joins many other Zen masters to whom the identity between the Buddha and sentient beings in their original state marks the basic promise of the school. Chinul further characterizes the original state of a sentient being as a state of liberation and, thus, advises his contemporary practitioners (HPC 4.700b):

> *Why don't you first trust that the mind is originally pure, the defilement empty. Do not suspect this but practice, by relying on this. Outwardly observe precepts, and forget about binding or attachment; inwardly practice samādhi, which, however, should not be suppression. [Then, w]hen one detaches oneself from evil, there is nothing to cut off, and when one practices meditation, there is nothing to practice. The practice without practice, the cutting off without cutting off, can be said to be real practice and cutting off.*

Through such paradoxical statements as "practice without practice" or "cutting off with nothing to cut off," Zen Buddhism, including that of Chinul, emphasizes that the ultimately realized liberated state of enlightenment is none other than the original state of a being. Chinul describes such a state of the mind as the original mind of both the Buddha and sentient beings. In the *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*, Chinul clarifies this non-existence of the differences between the Buddha and sentient beings through his emphasis on "the mind of marvelous knowing" (Kor. *yŏngchi chisim*, 靈知之心) which is empty and quiet (Kor. *kongjŏk*, 空寂). As Chinul states (HPC 4.710a):

The deluded thoughts are originally quiet, and the outside world is originally empty; in the place where all dharmas are empty exists the marvelous knowing, which is not dark. This mind of marvelous knowing, which is empty and quiet, is your original face. This is also the dharma-recognition that has been mysteriously transmitted through all the Buddhas in the three worlds and all the patriarchs and dharma teachers.

The combination of emptiness and the non-empty nature of emptiness deserves further analysis. Emptiness and quietness are the ontological reality of a being, whereas marvelous knowing is the epistemological ground for the being's awareness of the empty and quiet nature of one's existence, which is repeatedly represented as the mind in Chinul. Chinul responds to the question requesting a further elaboration on the quiet and marvelous mind by pointing out that neither an entity (an individual) nor the actions of the entity—both physical and mental—has one identifiable control center. Hence, both an entity and its actions are empty. Their source, which Chinul describes as nature (Kor. *sŏng* 性), is empty and, thus, cannot have a shape. Hence Chinul states (HPC 4.710c):

Since there is no shape, how can it be either big or small? Since it is neither big nor small, how can there be limits? There being no limits, there is neither inside nor outside; there being neither inside nor outside, there is neither far nor close; there being neither far nor close, there is neither this nor that; there being neither this nor that, there is neither going nor coming; there being neither going nor coming, there is neither life nor death; there being neither life nor death, there is neither past nor present; there being neither past nor present, there is neither delusion nor awakening; there being neither delusion nor awakening, there is neither the secular nor the sacred; there being neither the secular nor the sacred, there is neither purity nor impurity; there being neither purity nor impurity, there is neither right nor wrong; there being neither right nor wrong, all the names and sayings cannot explain it.

The statement succinctly sums up the logical development of the ontological status of a being, and its implications in religious practice, and then its position in ethical discourse. The non-discriminative nature of one's being negates the secular distinctions of binary opposites, which has been identified as one major obstacle that Zen Buddhism needs to deal with in order to make it viable as an ethical system. For the sake of convenience, let us identify this as the first problem of Zen Buddhist ethics: ambiguity of ethical categories in Zen Buddhist discourse.

Despite this non-existence of the binary reality between the Buddha and sentient beings, the gap still exists, in reality, between the two. Chinul explains this bounded state of sentient beings on three levels: the first involves being bound through outside phenomena, the second, through inner desire, and the third, through the desire for enlightenment. One can identify them as epistemological, psychological, and religio-teleological bondages respectively, which an individual experiences as obstacles to the full realization of one's original nature.

Liberation from outside phenomena has to do with the relationship between an individual and the outside world. In this encounter, the disturbance of the mind by the phenomenal world indicates that the practitioner is bound by the characteristics of the object of her/his perception. Whether the object is a thing or an event, the disturbance of the mind by an outside phenomenon gives evidence that the subject takes the phenomenon as if it had a substance of its own, and this perceptual illusion, according to Chinul, is created through the function of the mind. By understanding the phenomenon as if it had a substantial nature, the mind not only mistakes the nature of the object of perception, but misunderstands the subject's own nature by imposing on the object certain qualifications. In this process, both the mind and the phenomenon turn into substances, creating a dualistic structure of the subject and the object, and binding both of them to imaginary substances.

The second and the third instances of bondage—i.e., bondage through an inner desire (or psychological binding) and bondage through the teleological idea (or religio-teleological binding)—can be explained through

the same logic. Such emotional reactions to the outside world as greed, anger, or pleasure have meaning only when the outside phenomenon has a substantial nature in and of itself. When its nonsubstantiality is understood by the practitioner in the first place, not only does the emotional reaction lose its meaning, but it proves to the practitioner the non-substantiality of the practitioner's reaction itself. The realization of the first and second instances of bondage opens a way of being liberated from the third, for a logical conclusion indicates that, from the beginning, there was nothing for the practitioner to free her/himself from. Searching for a goal, that is, enlightenment per se, turns out to be the practitioner's illusion. At this point, the original state of the practitioner is confirmed as the state of full liberation, that of wisdom.

This brief analysis of the status of sentient beings in bondage reflects the inward movement in Zen Buddhism's understanding of an individual's reality, and, thus, the practitioner's realization of innate wisdom. Bondage begins with one's mind and so does liberation from bondage. The subjective and individualistic nature of one's realization of original nature has been addressed as another problem in the construction of Zen Buddhist ethics. We will identify this as the subjectivism of Zen practice.

This identity of difference and difference of identity between the enlightened and unenlightened leads us to the third problem in Zen ethics: the issue of the ethical agent. In his essay on Chinul's Buddhism, Hyŏnghyo Kim introduces the idea of existentiality (Kor. *siljonsŏng,* 實存性) and essentiality (Kor. *ponjilsŏng,* 本質性) of self-nature (Kor. *chasŏng,* 自性). Characterizing Chinul's Buddhism as "metaphysics of the self-mind [Kor. *chasim,* 自心]" (Kim 1996:8), Kim defines the meaning of awakening in Chinul as follows: "As the mind becomes calm in the process of its acceptance of self-nature, the existential mind experiences a metaphysical acceptance of self-nature; such acceptance is the awakened mind [Kor. *osim,* 悟心]" (ibid:19). In other words, the existential mind is the unenlightened aspect of the mind, whereas self-nature is the mind in its original state; the former is bound to various aspects of the worldliness of an individual, whereas the latter is free from such bondages. When the former, the

existential mind, becomes one with the essence of self-nature, the existential mind turns into the true mind (Kor. *chinsim*, 眞心). Kim's philosophical rephrasing of Chinul's Zen thought elaborates on the problem of ethical agency in Chinul's thought. Is the essential (enlightened) mind the ethical agent (i.e., for compassion) or the existential (unenlightened) mind? On a theoretical level, they cannot be separated. On the other hand, it is true that there exists a gap between the two in the real world.

The three issues that I have identified as problems in Zen ethical discourse—i.e., ambiguity of ethical categories, subjectivism of practice, and ambiguity in the identity of the ethical agent—are not separate issues, but closely related. As the fourth entry in this list, we also need to consider the public meaning of Zen awakening. In other words, if original nature is an awakened state, how does it enable an individual to practice virtuous behaviors, which are understood as a natural outcome of one's recovery of the state of original mind? Why does the ontological recovery of one's original state facilitate moral behaviors and *bodhisattvic* activities?

More often than not, Zen Buddhist tradition has offered, if any, a foggy response to this issue. Chinul could be one example. Examine the following statement by Chinul from his *Encouragement to Practice* (HPC 4.699b):

> *Vain is all phenomena. [When you encounter phenomena] search for the fundamental cause of them. Don't be influenced by them, but keep your entire body in a calm state, firmly close the castle of your mind, and make more efforts for concentration. You will find a quiet returning place, which is comfortable and without discontinuity. In that situation, the mind of love or hatred will* naturally *disappear; compassion and wisdom will* naturally *become clearer as your evil karma will* naturally *cut off and meritorious behavior will* naturally *be advanced* [emphasis mine].

In this passage, correction of perceptual illusion is directly connected with moral activities. In other places in the same text, Chinul quotes a *gāthā* that runs: "Dhyāna is the armor of diamond. It is capable of fending off the

arrows of defilement; Dhyāna is the storehouse of wisdom; it is the field of all kinds of meritorious virtues" (HPC 4.701a). In this *gāthā*, meditation leads one to virtuous behaviors. Not only is there no explanation of why that should be the case, Chinul does not explain the nature of this meritorious behavior either. Does it have to do with social engagement, or is the fact that one is free from all illusionary thoughts itself virtuous behavior?

Chinul's "naturalist" position exposed in the above seems a good example of what James Whitehill criticized as a "transcendence trap" of a romanticized version of Zen Buddhist ethics: "The trap misleads them [interpreters of Zen] and us into portraying the perfected moral life as a non-rational expressiveness, something natural, spontaneous, non-linguistic, and uncalculating" (Whitehill 2000:21). Although it is true that Zen Buddhism has not been very eager to provide a clear response to the problem that Whitehill identified here, a close examination of Chinul's texts indicates that Chinul was actually keenly aware of this problem and constantly emphasized the gap between sentient beings and the Buddha, as much as confirming their identities. The coexistence of both the emphasis of identity and, at the same time, the differences between the Buddha and sentient beings, and thus the intrinsic identity of wisdom and compassion and their differences, could confuse practitioners and cause a theoretical conflict in Chinul's Buddhism. However, binary postulations in Zen tradition, including the Buddha and sentient beings, wisdom and compassion, the unenlightened and the enlightened, awakening and cultivation, are actually in a relationship of tension as much as in a state of harmony. To consider the nature of this tension will take us into a new dimension in Zen Buddhist ethical discourse.

2. Sudden Awakening and Gradual Cultivation as an Ethical Paradigm

In the *Secrets of Cultivating the Mind* and the *Excerpts from the Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record with Personal Notes* (法集別行錄節要幷入私記, 1209, henceforth *Personal Notes*), Chinul constantly brings up sudden enlightenment, followed by gradual cultivation, as he emphasizes the

importance of returning to one's original mind. In that context, Chinul also brings the practitioner's attention to the fact that the existence of the mind, which is void, calm, and marvelously knowing, only confirms the ontological reality of a being, and thus, its realization is not accomplished naturally. That is, to Chinul, the exercise of the mind of the Buddha requires continuous and strenuous efforts, which Chinul articulates as sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation (Kor. *ton'o chŏmsu*, 頓悟漸修).

In the *Personal Notes*, Chinul summarizes the four Zen schools of China as they appear in the *Special Dharma Records* of Guifeng Zongmi (圭峯宗密, 780-841), and connects them with the theory of subitism and gradualism. In his commentaries, Chinul states that the doctrinal school spreads out teachings and that Zen makes a selection, and, thus, simplifies. The simplified teachings can be summarized in the following two aspects: "With regard to the dharma, there are absolute (Kor. *pulbyŏn*, 不變) and changing (Kor. *suyŏn*, 隨緣) aspects; with regard to humans, there are sudden awakening (Kor. *ton'o*, 頓悟) and gradual cultivation (Kor. *chŏmsu*, 漸修)" (HPC 4.734c). This statement suggests that, in Chinul, sudden awakening and gradual cultivation are not in the relationship of either/or, but represent two aspects of the same phenomenon. In the later section of the text, Chinul further clarifies his position on the relationship between awakening and cultivation and, thus, wisdom and compassion, as he states (HPC 4.755b):

> *Practitioners in our time often say, "if one is able to look into one's Buddha-nature clearly, the vow and altruistic behaviors will naturally be realized." I, Moguja, do not think that is the case. To see clearly one's Buddha-nature is to realize that sentient beings and the Buddha are equal and that there is no discrimination between "me" and others. However, I worry that if one does not make the vow of compassion, they will stagnate in the state of calmness. The* Exposition of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra *says: "The nature of wisdom being calm, it needs to be guarded by the vow." Therefore in the deluded state before the awakening, the strength of the mind is dark and weak, and thus is unable to realize the vow. However, once one experiences [the initial] awakening, one will be*

> *able to sympathize with the suffering of the sentient beings through*
> *one's discriminative-wisdom, and thus exercise one's compassion*
> *and make a vow, and practice the bodhisattva path according to*
> *one's capacity, which will gradually complete one's awakened-*
> *behaviors. How could this not be joyful?*

Chinul, in this passage, emphasizes that a mere awareness of wisdom cannot be directly connected to compassionate wisdom; this statement, in a sense, contradicts his remarks in the *Encouragement to Practice* in which he emphasized the natural flow from wisdom to compassion. However, we should interpret this in two different ways. In this sense, Sung Bae Park makes a distinction between the realm of faith and the realm of practice in understanding the sudden–gradual paradigm in Chinul (Park 1993:217-224). In terms of the realm of faith, practitioners believe that their minds are the original Buddha; thus, enlightenment should be sudden. In the realm of practice, the realization of the innate Buddha-nature requires a constant cultivation. From this, one can further move on to the idea, as expressed by Kŏn'gi Kang, that sudden awakening is the realization of wisdom as gradual cultivation is the exercise of compassion (Kang 1999:43).

Pŏpchŏng moves one step further in his interpretation of the relationship between wisdom and compassion in the soteriological structure of sudden-awakening-and-gradual-cultivation in Chinul and states: "In the case of Śākyamuni Buddha, awakening under the bodhi tree represents sudden enlightenment, whereas forty-five years' activities of guiding numerous sentient beings represents gradual cultivation. This also represents the two wings in Buddhism: wisdom and compassion" (Pŏpchŏng 1987:4).

This view on sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, especially in our exploration of Zen Buddhist ethics, suggests to us that the seemingly exclusive dominance of inward movement of the practitioner in understanding Zen practice needs reconsideration. At least in Chinul's case, his constant reference to and emphasis on the importance of gradual practice after the initial awakening and further compassionate *bodhisattvic* behaviors as main activities of the gradual cultivation point to several issues

in our previous discussion. Unlike the common assumption that Zen practice is exclusively dominated by introspective subjectivism, Chinul contends that even though introspectivism facilitates one's awakening, it should also accompany social activities of compassion to reach its perfection. In other words, to Chinul, compassionate activities are manifestations of wisdom. This is an important point because, unlike the romantic version that envisions a natural flow of compassion upon the realization of wisdom, Chinul is claiming that compassion is wisdom; that is, wisdom per se without compassionate actions cannot be obtained. The commonly accepted movement from wisdom to compassion, then, is reversed here.

A support for such a claim—that wisdom is nourished by and perfected through compassionate activities—is ironically found in the teachings of the opponent of Chinulean gradualism. Known as the sudden-gradual debate (Kor. *tonchŏmron*, 頓漸論), the subitist critique of Chinul's gradualism occupied the center stage of Korean Buddhist debate on Zen Buddhist soteriology in the 1990s, and continues to spark debates on the nature of enlightenment, cultivation, and the identity of Korean Zen Buddhism.

The debate was triggered by Zen Master T'oe'ong Sŏngch'ŏl who challenged the authenticity of Chinul's Zen Buddhism in his publication entitled the Right Path of the Zen School (*Sŏnmun chŏngno*, 禪門正路, 1981). In this book, Sŏngch'ŏl claims that Chinul's teaching of the sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation is a heretical teaching of Zen Buddhism.[2] On a surface level, the contrasting claims between gradualists and subitists seem clear. Enlightenment, for Chinul, means realizing one's own nature; hence it is sudden. Chinul identified this first stage of awakening as understanding-awakening (Kor. *hae'o*, 解悟). This initial awakening, however, cannot be sustained continually due to the influence of the habitual energy accumulated within the practitioner throughout many lives. Thus, gradual cultivation after the initial awakening is necessary for the practitioner to reach ultimate enlightenment. To Chinul, the subitist idea of sudden awakening, followed by sudden cultivation, is

also a part of sudden enlightenment, followed by gradual cultivation, because what is meant by sudden practice is none other than the result of gradual cultivation that practitioners performed in their previous lives, which makes sudden cultivation in this life possible.

Sŏngch'ŏl claims that realizing one's own nature is possible only in the state of ultimate enlightenment; hence, the understanding-awakening that takes place in the first stage of the Ten Faiths falls far short of being any kind of enlightenment. Sŏngch'ŏl contends that the sudden awakening in sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation is mere knowledge, which creates the worst kind of obstacle for Zen practitioners. Whoever endorses sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation, Sŏngch'ŏl further claims, is a follower of intellectual knowledge, which is the heretical and wrong way of practicing Zen Buddhism.

Sŏngch'ŏl has been well known for his relentlessly strict view on Zen Buddhism. His radical subitism claims that there is only one complete enlightenment, which he defines as "seeing one's true nature" (Kor. *kyŏnsŏng*, 見性). In the preface to his *Right Path of the Zen School*, Sŏngch'ŏl writes (1981:2):

> *The essence of the Zen school is seeing one's true nature, which means to get through one's true nature of suchness. To see through one's true nature is not possible unless one completely cuts off the finest delusion in the eighth* ālaya-vijñāna, *the fundamental ignorance, which hides one's true nature.*

To Sŏngch'ŏl, "seeing one's true nature" cannot be partial; in order to truly see one's own nature, even the most infinitesimal and coarse delusion should be eliminated. Claiming subitism as the only authentic form of Zen practice, Sŏngch'ŏl insisted that, without maintaining consistency or integrity in one's practice of *hwadu* (Ch. *huatou*, 話頭) in the state of moving or staying still (Kor. *tongjŏng iryŏ*, 動靜一如), in the state of dreaming (Kor. *mongjung iryŏ*, 夢中一如), and in the state of a dreamless sleep (Kor. *sungmyŏn iryŏ*, 熟眠一如), one should not mention being awakened. This is known as breaking through the Three Gates in Sŏngch'ŏl's theory of enlightenment. Not only was he adamant in his view on the authentic way

of Zen enlightenment in theory, Sŏngch'ŏl himself has been known as an uncompromisingly strict Zen practitioner. He undertook, for eight years, the practice of "never lying down" (Kor. *changjwa purwa*, 長座不臥) and, for ten years, the practice of seclusion (Kor. *tonggu pulch'ul*, 洞口不出, 1955-1965). He was also obstinate in his belief that practitioners should remain isolated on a mountain without becoming involved in worldly affairs.

Sŏngch'ŏl's teaching of Zen Buddhism raises an important question in the context of our discussion on Zen ethical structure. Earlier, I proposed that sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation provides us with an ethical paradigm of Zen Buddhism in Chinul's gradualism. If we apply this idea to Sŏngch'ŏl's subitism, in which only rigorous Zen practice on a secluded mountain is validated, how do we find an ethical dimension? In what way is Sŏngch'ŏl's rigorous subitist vision of enlightenment turning wisdom into compassion? His search for wisdom being so rigorous, there does not seem to exist room for compassion. Does this mean that Sŏngch'ŏl 's Zen teaching remains in the solipsism of practitioners, cutting itself off completely from the outside world, including the world of other sentient beings?

It is true that Sŏngch'ŏl has been a target of such criticism by more socially oriented thinkers. However, if we look into Sŏngch'ŏl's *Dharma* talks, we find another aspect of Sŏngch'ŏl's Buddhism, which seems to go directly against this subitist vision, and which endorses the Chinulean gradualist view and, thus, emphasizes the importance of compassionate activities as gradual cultivation in the process of one's practice of Buddhism.

One of Sŏngch'ŏl's major teachings includes his emphasis on making offerings to the Buddha (Kor. *pulgong*, 佛供). In his efforts to reform monastic life in Korea in the early twentieth century, Sŏngch'ŏl prohibited the practice of monks making offerings to the Buddha on behalf of lay practitioners in exchange for donations. Sŏngch'ŏl claimed that one cannot make offerings or pray "on behalf of" others: one should make offerings oneself. Sŏngch'ŏl further contended that "one cannot pray to the Buddha by mindlessly beating a wooden block in a temple. It should be practiced by helping others" (1987:112). Sŏngch'ŏl emphasized that making offerings to

the living beings in the world is equal to making offerings to the Buddha since all the beings in the world are the Buddha. In his *Dharma* talk to Buddhist practitioners, he brought special attention to the practice of Samantabhadra-*bodhisattva* in the Huayan jing. In the section in which Sudhana hears of Samantabhadra-*bodhisattva*'s great vows, Samantabhadra explains the *Dharma*-offerings as follows (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 10.293.845 a.):

> *[Dharma-offerings mean] making offerings to the Buddha by practice as taught by the Buddha; by helping sentient beings; by respecting and embracing sentient beings; by emphasizing the suffering of sentient beings; by producing the root of goodness; by not deserting bodhissatvic activities; by not leaving the bodhissatvic mind . . . Such an utmost and universal offering should be made until the empty sky becomes exhausted; until the world of sentient beings becomes exhausted; until the karmic result of the sentient beings and their defilements become exhausted, and then my offering-makings will come to an end. But the empty sky and all of the above including the defilement of sentient beings cannot be exhausted, my offering-making cannot come to an end.*

Sǒngch'ǒl emphasizes that, among the above seven *Dharma*-offerings, helping sentient beings is the marrow of the Buddha's teaching. He also cites the story from the same *sūtra* that to offer a bowl of cold rice to a starving dog is a better way to make offerings to the Buddha than offering thousands of prostrations to the Buddha (Sǒngch'ǒl 1987:104-105). Sǒngch'ǒl's teaching of making offerings to the Buddha, which was at the forefront of his teaching throughout his life, conveys the meaning, which is rather similar to Chinul's teaching of the gradual practice of compassionate altruistic activities after the initial awakening. In one of his public *Dharma* talks, Sǒngch'ǒl even moved closer to Chinul in his gradualist position as he stated (Sǒngch'ǒl 1987:156-157):

> *For a hundred thousand kalpas, all living beings have been Buddhas, living in the Buddha land, so how come we still get lost in*

this pitch darkness? That is because we are yet to open our mind-eyes. Then, how do we open our mind-eyes? Either one should diligently practice hwadu [Ch. huatou, 話頭] *and thus attain awakening or one should lead an altruistic life of helping others. Whether your business is selling rice-cakes, running a bar, or a butcher's shop, whatever your occupation might be, learn* hwadu *and practice* hwadu *in your heart. In your heart, practice* hawdu, *and in your actions, help others: if such a life continues, someday, your mind-eyes will become bright like lightning, then, the Buddha's teaching that everybody was originally the Buddha who has lived in the Buddha land for timeless kalpas will be clearly understood. From then on, you will be a teacher for both the human world and heaven and exercise endless great Buddha-works until the future comes to an end.*

How does Sŏngch'ŏl's emphasis on the importance of compassionate action in the practice of Buddhism in this passage go together with his rigid teaching of Zen practice that we discussed earlier? Should we dismiss the inconsistency between Sŏngch'ŏl's view on making offerings to the Buddha through the exercise of compassion and his rigid view of sudden enlightenment and sudden cultivation to attain wisdom as a mere contradiction in his theory? Or is this gap and tension between awakening and cultivation, wisdom and compassion, rather something internal in Zen Buddhist teaching?

In his essay on Chinul's view on sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, Robert Gimello proposes to understand the sudden–gradual paradigm in Chinul as a reflection of the tension within Zen Buddhism between the radical challenge to the existing status-quo and the necessity of ethical concern and responsibilities (Gimello 1990:231).[3] In other words, Gimello suggests that sudden awakening reflects the very promise of Zen Buddhism, whereas gradual cultivation meets the ethical dimension required for maintenance of religious practice. Gimello's interpretation can also be applied to the seeming conflict between acquiring wisdom and the exercise of compassion. In both Chinul and Sŏngch'ŏl, these two aspects—

sudden awakening and gradual cultivation—create a gap or a tension in their teaching and lives. In the case of Sŏngch'ŏl, his rigid emphasis on subitism, which proposes the secluded practice of *hwadu* meditation, is combined with his strong emphasis on the gradualist practice of compassion in the form of making offerings to sentient beings in one's daily life. In the case of Chinul, his emphasis on the gradualist practice of compassion as a way of obtaining wisdom created a gap with his own life, which was not much different from that of Sŏngch'ŏl in that Chinul preferred to stay away from society and remain in a mountainside monastery. This aspect of Chinul has led Woo Sung Huh to define Chinul's ethics as ethics of mind, body, and space. In Chinul, Huh claims, in order for the mind to be pure, the body should be pure, and in order for the body to be pure, the body should be placed in pure space (Huh 1996:125, 138-150). Huh supports his idea by referring to the Compact Community of Samādhi and Prajñā, which Chinul created in his early years as a way of focusing on Buddhist practice and staying away from the corruptions of the secular world. In this context, Huh asks, if one is free only within the limitations of a conditioned state, how do we overcome the limitations of Chinul's ethics, which functions only by leaving society (*ibid.:*184-185)?

3. Minjung Buddhism and Zen Social Activism in Contemporary Korea

The idea that the movement from wisdom to compassion should actually be reversed in Zen Buddhism, and that they are in a relationship that is characterized more by tension than by harmony, is in some way reflected in Minjung Buddhists' understanding of Zen Buddhism. Minjung Buddhism (Kor. *Minjung pulgyo*, 民衆佛教, Buddhism for the Masses) is a socially engaged Buddhist movement in Korea whose activities were most visible from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Critical of the collusion between the ecclesiastics and the state in the Korean Buddhist tradition, Minjung Buddhism demanded that Buddhism change its direction and actively become involved in the lives of those who are alienated and exploited in society.

The idea of Buddhism for the masses in Korea first appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century when reform-minded Buddhist intellectuals proposed changing Korean Buddhism to correspond with the life of the general public, especially those who were marginalized in society. However, as a movement, Minjung Buddhism took shape together with pro-democratic and anti-government movements in Korean society during the military dictatorship in the mid to late twentieth century.[4] By its founding principles, Minjung Buddhism is Buddhism for the politically suppressed, economically exploited, and socio-culturally alienated. This sets it in clear opposition to traditional Korean Buddhism, which had a tendency to collaborate with the state, isolate itself in mountain-side monasteries, and, in general, be at the service of the upper class. Adherents of Minjung Buddhism emphasize liberation from all forms of suppression, especially that conducted by the state and the ruling class.

A question has been raised of whether Buddhist social engagement as offered by Minjung Buddhism can earn broader support from the Korean Buddhist community without first defining its relationship with Zen Buddhism, given that Zen Buddhism has been the dominant form of Buddhism in Korea. If we examine some details of the Minjung Buddhist understanding of Buddhist history and philosophy, the issue of defining the relationship between Zen and Minjung Buddhism appears to be critical. In an essay that considers the viability of Buddhist social engagement in the context of Korean Buddhism, the author Hee-Sung Keel summarizes Minjung Buddhism with the following six characteristics: (1) Minjung Buddhism considers the nature of the suffering of the people as socio-political, and refuses as idealism the idea of ascribing the cause of suffering to the individual's mind; (2) it strongly criticizes traditional Korean Buddhism's uncritical support for nationalism and its state-oriented nature; (3) it emphasizes the social and historical consciousness which Minjung Buddhism considers as lacking in traditional Korean Buddhism; (4) in this context, Minjung Buddhism is critical of Zen Buddhism for its individualistic and idealistic philosophy of the mind; (5) it highly values the Hīnayāna tradition and emphasizes the role of *saṅgha* as an ideal social community; (6)

emphasizing the negative aspects of capitalism and nationalist Buddhism, it proposes the land of Maitreya as a Buddhist ideal society (Keel 1988:28).

Identifying the characteristics of Minjung Buddhism, Keel is less than positive about the interface between social engagement and Zen Buddhism as he asks "whether Zen enlightenment that aims to liberate us from the secular concerns in our lives is compatible with active practice of social ethics" (ibid.:28). Keel comes to the conclusion that Zen Buddhist identification of good and evil based on its doctrine of emptiness disables Zen Buddhism from offering social ethics; further, he claims that the identification of emptiness and forms deprives Zen of any room for ethics to be sustained within its system. Keel contends that the world confirmed with the enlightened mind, in which good is identified with evil, is not the same as that where the unenlightened individual suffers from various evils, the resolution of which is necessary for the members of a society to lead a happy life. Keel ends his essay with questions (ibid.:40): "Is emptiness compatible with compassion? Is it not that emptiness dissolves the real compassion that is needed to solve the real suffering of the sentient beings? . . . Where does compassion come from? . . . Is Buddhist compassion that is anchored on the wisdom of emptiness able to take the form of practical social ethics?"

The questions that Keel has posed above well reflect our discussion in which we identified four problem areas of Zen Buddhism in its encounter with social ethics. I am sympathetic with Keel's agonizing efforts to find a place for Zen Buddhism in the social and ethical context of today's world. However, in line with our previous discussion on subitism and gradualism as a Zen ethical paradigm, I would like to suggest that the problems Keel identified as limits of the Zen ethical paradigm need further consideration. This consideration includes the very foundation of Zen philosophy and the relationship between subitism and gradualism in Zen Buddhism. One clue to this consideration can be found in the philosophy of Minjung Buddhism, as was outlined by Yŏ Ikku. Like Keel, Yŏ also criticized some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, including Zen, Tiantai (Kor. Ch'ŏnt'ae), and Huayan (Kor. Hwaŏm) Buddhism, claiming that these Buddhist schools turned

Buddhism into a subjective idealism by overemphasizing the mind and its emptiness, and, thus, obscuring the social and political reality of the general public (Yŏ 1988:123-127). However, unlike Keel, who could not find a positive connection between Zen and the Minjung Buddhist movement, Yŏ did not deny the possibility of the mutual incorporation of the two. In fact, Yŏ emphasized that only if Zen can reject the secluded shelter of subjective idealism, can Zen Buddhism's radical rejection of authority be a powerful force for Buddhism to liberate the people from suppression and suffering.

The social dimension of Zen philosophy and practice becomes more visible in another Minjung Buddhist thinker, Pŏpsŏng, who joins Yŏ in his criticism of the subjectivist position of Buddhism, and interprets hwadu practice as a form of Zen social activism. In one of his essays, Pŏpsŏng asks (1990:223):

> *Is Buddhist activism a movement to deliver the theological doctrine called Buddhism or is it a movement that pursues an inner safety of an individual through a certain mystical practice proposed by Buddhism? How do we put together these two different categories of activism and Buddhism?*

In this context, Pŏpsŏng claims that *hwadu* practice is not an individual's encounter with "internal spiritual mystery," but an activity through which one "negates the reification of conceptions and absolutization of being-in itself" (ibid.:223). And he further states (ibid.: 223-224):

> [H]wadu *practice is a thinking-activity that opposes falsity and fantasy and at the same time a creative historical movement through which one realizes one's independence in spite of situational contradictions. Therefore, hwadu practice is not a training that makes one a perfect and holy self, as many idealist Zen masters have claimed . . . It is a question-in-action that one asks oneself with regard to the situation at hand.*

Yŏ's interpretation of Zen Buddhism's potential as a social activism and Pŏpsŏng's radical reinterpretation of *hwadu* practice in its social and

ethical context help us fill the gap that Chinul and Sŏngch'ŏl, the two more conventional-style Zen thinkers, left unanswered or at least ambiguous. In other words, what does it mean exactly that compassionate activities will complete the attainment of wisdom? What did Sŏngch'ŏl mean when he said that regardless of one's occupations, one should practice *hwadu* in mind and try to help others, and then awakening will eventually take its own course? Obviously, Sŏngch'ŏl was not claiming here that practicing *hwadu* and helping others or running a bar are in two totally different dimensions; they are and should in some way be connected, however tenuous the connection might look at first regard. Chinul's admonition that compassion and wisdom are not naturally connected to each other, but require practitioners' constant efforts to make them work together is also in line with Sŏngch'ŏl's teaching about Buddhist practice and its position in the life-world.

In Pŏpsŏng's interpretation of Zen *hwadu* practice, together with Yŏ's emphasis of a potential role that Zen Buddhism can play in social activism, Zen Buddhism does not remain as a solipsistic introspective subjectivism, but is projected as a practice for a mental revolution that further facilitates a socially engaged Buddhism, through the practitioner's strenuous efforts to transfer one's spiritual and mental change into the reality of one's social existence. More importantly, the relationship between the two—mental revolution and social engagement—are not in a relationship of lineal process in which the accomplishment of the former naturally facilitates the latter. They are rather in a relationship of tension, through which both wisdom and compassion influence each other in a dynamic action. Constituents of tension in this case cannot be mutually exclusive, but mutually nourishing and stimulating. When we foreground a certain element in the constituents of tension and suppress others in an attempt to create a harmony or consistency in Zen theory, we risk the danger of envisioning either a purely asocial version of Zen practice or Zen social activism that negates the basic tenets of Zen Buddhism.

4. Conclusion

I have proposed four categories as problem areas in terms of understanding Zen Buddhism in the context of ethical discourse: (1) ambiguity of ethical categories; (2) subjectivism of practice; (3) ambiguity in the identity of the ethical agent; and (4) the relationship between awakening and altruistic action. I would like to contend that these four seeming problems in Zen Buddhist ethics are not irreparably negative markers for Zen Buddhist ethics. Instead, a serious consideration of Zen Buddhism's position in an ethical discourse can revalorize the tradition itself—in the sense that Rita Gross claims that the feminist re-reading of Buddhism is a revalorizing of the tradition (1994:3). At the same time, considering the nature of Zen Buddhist ethics also challenges traditional normative ethics and demands a new ethical mode in our time. In the section below, I will briefly discuss why this is the case.

First, the subjectivist nature of Zen meditation has been understood as an anti-social aspect of Zen Buddhism. However, historically, Zen tradition per se has not developed as an exclusively meditation-oriented school, nor have Zen masters exclusively focused on solipsistic meditational practices in seclusion. I have tried to demonstrate this through the example of Sŏngch'ŏl. Even such a rigid Zen master as Sŏngch'ŏl, who remained in a secluded mountain place, provided a guideline for practitioners regarding how to transfer one's efforts to obtaining awakening into one's altruistic activities and vice versa. Secondly, this issue is also relevant to our understanding of the relationship between awakening (wisdom) and altruistic activities (compassion). In analyzing Chinul's gradualism and Sŏngch'ŏl's subitism, I have demonstrated that, in both cases, Chinul and Sŏngch'ŏl emphasized to practitioners that awareness of one's wisdom does not naturally transfer to the activities of compassion, and that one should constantly make efforts for altruistic behavior as one makes offerings to the Buddha.

Thirdly, ambiguity in the ethical category and the ethical agent are not so much a problem of Zen Buddhism per se as one that arises when one

views the Zen Buddhist value system from the perspective of normative ethics. If the metaphysical concept of ethics grounds itself in the belief of human beings' capacity as rational beings capable of distinguishing between right and wrong or good and bad, then Zen Buddhist ethics cannot follow the mode of normative ethics, for, from the Zen perspective, making a distinction itself creates delusion. This, however, does not mean that Zen cannot provide ethical guidelines, for ethics begins with the acceptance that such distinctions are possible only after appropriation and, thus, suppression in the decision making. One name for such an appropriation is bias; Zen Buddhism calls it delusion. What this suggests is that one cannot create Zen Buddhist ethics simply by appropriating Zen theories into the format of the current normative ethics; instead, Zen Buddhist ethics demands a new direction in our understanding of ethical categorization itself.

Zen Buddhism is not alone in demanding a new form of ethics that radically challenges normative ethics based on a metaphysical view of the world and its beings. Postmodernist thought, being a non-substantialist mode of thinking as Zen Buddhism is, has faced a problem similar to Zen Buddhist ethics; in this context, contemplation on the nature of Zen Buddhist ethics can go together with postmodern ethical thinking. In order to consider Zen Buddhist ethics in its full scope, a new ethical paradigm, to which both postmodern thought and Zen Buddhism can contribute, should emerge as an alternative to normative ethics.

Notes

[1] Kwŏnsu chŏnghye kyŏlsa mun (Encouragement to Practice: The Compact of Samādhi and Prajñā Community) in Han'guk pulgyo chŏnsŏ (Collected Works of Korean Buddhism 韓國佛教全書, hereafter HPC): 4.698a-708a, p. 4.698a. Throughout the essay, for the translations of the titles of Chinul's works, I have adopted Robert Buswell's translations (Buswell 1983); all other translations from Classical Chinese and Korean are mine, unless noted otherwise.

[2] In response to Sŏngch'ŏl's claim, a conference, "Enlightenment and Cultivation in Buddhism" was held in 1990 at the Songgwang monastery, the place where Chinul launched his compact community movement almost eight hundred years ago, and

which has become the head-monastery in maintaining the Chinulean tradition. Three years later, the Hae'in monastery, where Sŏngch'ŏl resided as a headmaster, hosted a conference in which the sudden–gradual issue was actively debated.
[3] Only a Korean translation (without an English original version) was published.
[4] The expression "Minjung Buddhism" was first used at a college students' meeting held at the Songgwang monastery in 1976 where a paper on the "Theory of Minjung Buddhism" was presented. A critical event took place in the fall of 1980 when, in the name of purifying Buddhism, the government cracked down on Buddhist headquarters and on more than three thousand monasteries. Known as the 10/27 Persecution, this event brought disillusionment to many Buddhists, which expedited the spread of Minjung Buddhism.

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