

Korean Americans
and *Their Religions*

Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore

Edited by
Ho-Youn Kwon,
Kwang Chung Kim, and
R. Stephen Warner

The Pennsylvania State University Press
University Park, Pennsylvania

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Korean Americans and their religions : pilgrims and missionaries from a different shore/
edited by Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-271-02072-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-271-02073-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Korean Americans—Religion. 2. Korean Americans—Ethnic identity. 3. United States—Church history—20th century. 4. United States—Religion—20th century.
I. Kwon, Ho Youn. II. Kim, Kwang Chung, 1937— III. Warner, R. Stephen.

BL2525.K67 2001

2000'.89'957073—dc21

00-037452

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Printed in the United States of America

Published by The Pennsylvania State University Press,
University Park, PA 16802-1003

Chapter 3 appeared in *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 1 (1996): 149–59. © UCLA Asian American Studies Center. An earlier version of Chapter 7 appeared in *Emerging Generations of Korean Americans*, edited by Ho-Youn Kwon and Shin Kim (Kyung Hee University, 1993). An earlier version of Chapter 12 appeared in *Pacific World*, Journal of the Institute for Buddhist Studies (1988).

It is the policy of The Pennsylvania State University Press to use acid-free paper for the first printing of all clothbound books. Publications on uncoated stock satisfy the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1992.

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Turning the Wheel of Dharma in the West

Korean Sŏn Buddhism in North America

Samu Sunim (Kim, Sam-Woo)

THE FIRST KOREAN BUDDHIST CLERGY who traveled to the West were Paek Sŏng'uk (1897–1981) and Kim Pŏmnin (1899–1964). Paek Sŏng'uk traveled to Paris in 1920. In 1922 he went to Germany and studied Western philosophy. After receiving a doctorate in 1925, he returned to Korea. Kim Pŏmnin traveled to Paris in 1921. There he studied philosophy at the University of Paris. After graduating in 1926, he returned to Korea. Both Paek Sŏng'uk and Kim Pŏmnin were student monks. After their return to Korea, they became active in the young people's Buddhist movement. Through the 1930s up to 1945, Kim Pŏmnin was involved in Korea's independence movement and was imprisoned twice by the Japanese, while Paek Sŏng'uk devoted himself to Buddhist studies, his meditation practice, and training students. Following Korea's Liberation in 1945, Paek Sŏng'uk and Kim Pŏmnin actively participated in rebuilding the nation and contributed to the modernization of Korean Buddhism, particularly in the field of education.

The first Korean Buddhist priest who took up residence for the purpose of the propagation of Korean Buddhism in the West was Tough Chinho (To, Chinho, 1889–1986?).¹ In July 1930 Tough Chinho attended the first

1. Margaret K. Pai mentions meeting “the Venerable ninety-year-old Tough Chin Ho” in the 1980s without indicating the year. See Margaret K. Pai, *The Dreams of Two Yi-Min* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), xii.

Pan-Pacific Conference for Buddhist Young People as a representative of Korean Buddhist young people. The conference was held in Honolulu, Hawaii, and organized by the Japanese Buddhists. In August of the following year, Tough Chinho returned to Honolulu to found the Koryö Sön-sa (Korean Sön Temple). This Koryö Sön-sa must have been the first Korean temple in the West. Unfortunately we do not know what activities were carried on at Koryö Sön-sa, nor do we know how long the temple lasted.

On July 5, 1978, Professor Yöng-ho Ch'oe of the Department of History, University of Hawaii, had a long conversation with Mr. Tough (Chin-ho Do).

When he arrived Hawaii in 1931 to assume the task of Buddhist missionary, the political situation of the Korean community in Hawaii was going through a bitter turmoil. He accepted . . . the editorship of the *T'aep'yöng-yang Chubo* upon repeated prodding from different people, on the condition that he would have the final authority on the contents and the editorial policy. Not satisfied with the acrimonious attacks exchanged by the organs of opposing organizations, he hoped to tone down the editorial and news contents of the *Chubo*. The subscription and advertisement fees were not sufficient to defray the cost of publishing the *Chubo*, and it was supported by the Dong Ji Hoi financially. When he worked for the newspaper, he was not paid. Since he came as a Buddhist missionary, he was not allowed to have gainful employment and had to depend on good-will support from his friends, such as Kim Sang-ho, who had a rooming house in downtown, and others.

In January 1932, he was accused by Kim Chin-ho and Hyön Sun of having been sent here by the Japanese Government-General to spy on the Koreans, and some 800 people gathered at a Chinese restaurant to discuss the status of Mr. Do. Informed of this accusation, the Immigration and Naturalization Service called on him to investigate, in which he explained his innocence to the satisfaction of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. At one time he taught the Korean language and history at the Korean Christian Church in which he explained Buddhism in Korean history, and many criticized him for spreading Buddhism.²

Tough Chinho stayed on in Honolulu and eventually became an American citizen. From the late 1930s to the early 1940s he was involved in the overseas Korean independence movement as an active member of Tongji-hoe (the Comrade Society) of Hawaii, a political organization started by Dr. Syngman

2. Two pages of typewritten notes of professor Yöng-ho Ch'oe dated July 5, 1978. I am indebted to Professor Ch'oe for this and other information on Tough Chinho.

Rhee. In 1946 Tough Chinho visited South Korea as one of the Hawaiian members of United Korean Committee in America and stayed for one year.

It was no coincidence that these three Korean Buddhist pioneers who traveled to the West separately were friends who worked together in Korea for national independence and Buddhist reforms. For instance, as active members of Chosŏn Pulgyo Ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe (Korean Buddhist Young People's Association), Tough Chinho, Paek Sŏng'uk, and Kim Pŏmnin played important roles in organizing the historic Chosŏn Pulgyo Sŏn'gyo Yangjong Sŏngryŏ Taehoe (Conference of Korean Buddhist monks representing both meditation and doctrinal schools), which was held in January 1929.³

In May 1930, Kim Pŏmnin, Tough Chinho, and other monks formed the Man Party, a secret anti-Japanese society, with the famous nationalist monk and author of *The Treatise on Revitalization of Korean Buddhism*, Han Yong'un (1878–1944), who was the real leader of the group, although he was never openly recognized as such.⁴ All three priests received higher education abroad and pursued socially engaged Buddhism for the threefold purpose of promoting a youth Buddhist movement, Buddhist reform, and national independence. Their exposure to secular and liberal education abroad helped raise their social consciousness and awakening, which in turn led them to social activism.

However, the Buddhist activities of these three pioneers in the West suffered from the political situation in Korea. Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, so Koreans either had to endure the humiliation of carrying Japanese passports as Japanese citizens in order to travel abroad, or they had to go into exile. After graduating from the Buddhist college, Paek Sŏng'uk went to Shanghai in 1919 to assist the Korean Provisional Government there. Later he continued on to Paris to study. Tough Chinho had to convince other participants of the Pan-Pacific Buddhist Conference that he was representing Korean Buddhism as a Korean and not as a Japanese citizen.⁵ This is just one example of how the independence of their motherland always preoccupied their minds.

However, Tough Chinho had other difficulties as well. He had to learn to get along with the Korean Christians who formed the majority of the Korean community in Hawaii. They were not sympathetic to Buddhism. Some of them became suspicious of his presence among them, partly because he was educated in Japan and initially came to Hawaii to attend a Buddhist conference

3. See Kwangsik Kim, *Han'guk Kŏndae Pulgyo-sa Yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Minjoksa, 1996), 315ff.

4. *Ibid.*, 274ff. Also see Chŏng, Kwangho, *Kŏndae Hanil Pulgyo Kwan'gyesa Yŏn'gu* (Inch'ŏn: Inha Taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1994), 146ff.

5. Kwangsik Kim, *Han'guk Kŏndae Pulgyo-sa Yŏn'gu*, 244ff.

organized by the Japanese Buddhists. The irony was that his fellow Buddhists on the island were all Japanese, most of whom supported and/or collaborated with Japanese imperialism. Many Korean Buddhist leaders and intellectuals felt that they were betrayed by the Japanese, who owed Korea for the Buddhist culture and advanced technology of their past. It seems that Tough Chinho chose to work with the Korean Christians in Hawaii for the Korean independence movement.

After Tough Chinho, it took more than three decades before another Korean Buddhist priest was able to make it to the West. In the intervening years, Liberation, political division of the country into Communist North and Capitalist South, American occupation in the South from 1945 to 1948, the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the authoritarian rule of the Syngman Rhee regime, the April the 1960 Student Revolution, the Military Coup in 1961, and the *Minjung* Movement, all in the South, followed each other at a breathtaking pace.

Sŏn Buddhism in Korea

The nonethnic Korean Sŏn Buddhist movement in the West owes its beginning largely to the courageous efforts of three masters: Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo; Kusan Sunim; and Zen master Seung Sahn. All three are from the Korean Buddhist Chogye Order, which represents traditional Korean Buddhism. It is important to know something about traditional Korean Buddhist thought and practice in order to understand the teachings and activities of these three masters. In the following section I will introduce three earlier monks who made critical contributions to the shaping of native Korean Buddhist thought and practice.

Wŏnhyo (617–686) was a great scholarly monk. But he was also a great popularizer of Buddhism. He lived close to common, ordinary people, often unrestrained. As a scholar he faced the daunting task of not only comprehending the vast array of varied Mahayana scriptures brought by Korean monks returning from China but also reconciling and harmonizing the diverse and contradictory teachings they represented.

Aside from his scholarly interests, Wŏnhyo must have been concerned with the possibility that the diverse and contradictory teachings of the different scriptures might confuse the minds of believers and that sectarian disputes could arise among the adherents of the different schools of teachings. After all, the country was small and could ill afford any serious dissension that would fuel national disunity. Wŏnhyo read widely and expounded on

more than eighty texts. In interpreting them, he recognized their intrinsic nature of equality and unity and minimized their differences. The methods he used to achieve this were *hoit'ong*, or total understanding, and *wönyung*, or perfect interfusion. Over the centuries the spirit of *hoit'ong* as a means of achieving harmony and unity has been one of the main characteristics of Korean Buddhism. For this reason, Korean Buddhism has been often known as *t'ong pulgyo*, which means interdenominational or ecumenical Buddhism. For his work, Wönhyo is seen as the father of *t'ong pulgyo*.

However, Wönhyo was more than a thinker. He was also a “mad monk” who practiced “perfect interfusion” and “nonobstruction.” He composed a song of “unlimited action” and sang and danced for people. He always urged the people to return to their “One Mind.” He compared the One Mind to the great ocean mind, where all the waters return in order to enjoy peace, equality, emancipation, and unity.

The story of his awakening to this One Mind is well known. In 661 Wönhyo and his good friend Ŭisang (625–702) set out to travel to China in order to pursue the advanced study of Buddhism there. After days of traveling on foot, they retired one evening near a roadside grave mound. In the middle of a summer night, Wönhyo woke up with a burning thirst and was groping for water in the dark when he felt something in the shape of a gourd. He drank from it deeply. Refreshed, he went back to sleep. Waking up the next morning, he discovered that the vessel he drank from so sweetly was a human skull. Wönhyo became violently ill and threw up several times. Then he wondered if he had one mind or two different minds. The last night's experience was so sweet. Now when he knew what he had drunk—bloody rainwater—it made him sick. Suddenly his wisdom eye opened, and Wönhyo awakened to the great unknowing One Mind.

He saw no need to continue his journey to China, so he bade Ŭisang farewell. It was a heartbreaking experience for Ŭisang, but the two dharma companions parted. Ŭisang traveled alone to China. When Wönhyo returned home, people noticed a change in the scholarly monk's conduct and behavior. Wönhyo spent more time playing with the children on the streets and hanging out in the marketplace. In one of his trips to the downtown section of the capital city (now Kyöngju), he met Tae'an (Priest Great Peace). This monk was so named because he always made people happy with shouts of peace and happiness and great chuckles. Wönhyo learned *minjung pulgyo* (the way of people's Buddhism) from Tae'an and served him as his student.

Wönhyo followed the ways of commoners and slept with women, drank wine, and played music. Now, as a fallen monk, he called himself “a lowly layman.” With deep humility and reverence, the lowly layman “would enter

taverns and brothels”⁶ in order to share Buddhism with society’s underbelly. However, his Buddhism did not exclude high Buddhism, because he continued to write commentaries on the sutras and was invited by the court to give lectures. Basically, he was free and happy to “do as he pleased according to the occasion, without schedule or restriction.”⁷ Whether it was sacred or profane, the ultimate or conventional path, for Wŏnhyo everything served as a nondual gate of liberation and the practice of “perfect interfusion and non-obstruction.”

People who admired him addressed him as Great Master Wŏnhyo, while people who had contempt for him just called him lowly “layfart.” But Wŏnhyo taught them all the dance of nonobstruction so they could become free from the two basic hindrances. The movement of the dance consisted of raising the left foot with a bent knee and stretching out one’s right sleeve into the sky in order to exorcise attachment to one’s self, and raising right foot with bent knee and stretching out one’s left sleeve into the sky in order to drive away one’s delusion of assuming thoughts and feelings are real. For his efforts to harmonize and reconcile differences and to establish peace and harmony, Wŏnhyo was honored posthumously as the “National Teacher Who Harmonizes Disputes.”

Like Wŏnhyo, who never had a formal teacher or traveled to China, Chinul (1158–1210) was a self-trained, homegrown master. Chinul had three Awakenings, all while he was reading scriptures. One of the scriptures he read was *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Adornment Scripture). Chinul was a Sŏn monk. He practiced meditation eagerly but had no formal teacher, so he relied on Sŏn literature and sutras to guide his practice. Chinul was concerned with the tension and split between Sŏn practice and doctrinal schools that had been building up in the *sangha* (community) during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Therefore, using his own understanding of the scriptures, he incorporated doctrinal teachings into Sŏn practice and promoted the basic unity of Sŏn and doctrinal teachings. His role was to promote interdenominational Buddhism from the standpoint of Sŏn—that is, that “Sŏn is the mind of Buddha and sutra the words of Buddha.”

Unlike Wŏnhyo, Chinul pursued a monastic life. He lamented the worldly life of the Buddhist clergy of his time and formed a Community for the Cultivation of Samādhi (Meditation) and Prajñā (Wisdom) with his like-minded friends. At a retreat center called Susŏn-sa, which he established at the present-day Songgwang-sa for the purpose of cultivation of meditation and

6. Peter H. Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 1, *From Early Times to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 140.

7. *Ibid.*

wisdom, Chinul introduced pure rules for the training of monks and urged the student monks to read the scriptures as well as do meditation practice and manual work. The establishment of Samādhi-Prajñā Community served as a reform movement and inspired retreat community movements for more than two centuries.

Chinul is also known for his systemization of Korean Sōn training and for revitalizing the Chogye Order during the mid-Koryō dynasty (918–1392). His theory of Sōn Enlightenment is based on a premise of *sudden awakening* and *gradual cultivation*. According to Chinul, sudden awakening means clearly understanding that “one’s own mind is the true Buddha.” This is called understanding awakening. To practice meditation without understanding awakening is not a true practice and “will only add to their tribulation,”⁸ he warned. As for the period of gradual cultivation following an initial sudden awakening, Chinul wanted to provide a comprehensive and practical guide to meditation practice that would work for students of all different capacities, regardless of traditions. For instance, a student could use awareness of his meditation in order to transform himself in everyday life, or a student could stay focused on the awareness of the innate nature of his Buddhahood, becoming at one with all situations. Finally, the adroit student would know that true cultivation is no other than realization awakening.

Chinul came up with the three primary and two supplementary practice gates in order to support his teaching of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. The three main gates are balanced Cultivation of Samādhi and Prajñā, Faith and Understanding according to the complete and sudden teachings, and Hwadu (koan) Investigation. Each is based on the three awakenings he had while reading the Platform Sutra, the Exposition of the Avatamsaka Sutra, and the Records of Ta-hui. Two supplementary gates include the gate of No-Mind that coincides with the Way, and the gate of Chanting the Buddha’s Name. Within the range of these five practice gates, from the Pure Land-style of chanting to the teachings of Hwaōm (Avatamsaka) school to the direct pointing hwadu Sōn, any student could find a suitable path and follow the dharma regimen of sudden awakening/gradual cultivation to the realization of his Buddhahood.

All schools and traditions benefited from Chinul’s inclusive program and method of awakening. In the case of Hwaōm and other doctrinal schools, Chinul’s incorporation of their teachings strengthened their stand and made it more viable. Perhaps more than anything else, Chinul’s accomplishment

8. Robert E. Buswell Jr., ed. and trans., *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 141, “Secrets of Cultivating the Mind.”

was that he could accommodate all the traditions and put students through a flexible training program without compromising authentic practice. The thought and practice of Chinul's Sön was unique in the history of Ch'an and Zen, where patriarchs and dharma lineage ruled in the exclusive manner and the wordless tradition that took place outside of any scriptures prevailed. The legacy of his syncretic vision and ecumenical Buddhism greatly influenced Korean Buddhism. Today he is regarded as a founder of native Korean Sön Buddhism.

In 1564, following Chinul's work, Hyujöng (1520–1604) wrote *Sön'ga Kugam*, or *The Handbook for Sön Students*, which advocates *sagyo ipsön* (abandoning doctrine and entering into Sön). Student monks were encouraged to acquire a basic doctrinal knowledge and to gain an understanding of the training process geared toward attaining Enlightenment. In his handbook, Hyujöng says, "Therefore, students should first understand clearly through the study of true teachings that the meanings of immutability and adaptability are, respectively, the nature and appearance of one's own mind and that the ways of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation are the beginning and end of one's practice. Afterward, the student should abandon *kyo* doctrine and enter Sön practice with one thought constantly present in his mind. Only then will he gain something without fail. This is called the living road out of *samsära* [cycle of birth-and-death]."⁹

In the same book, Hyujöng comments on the above, saying,

This does not apply to men of great capacity and wisdom but to people of middling and inferior capacity who would not be able to jump and skip the steps. The intention of *kyo* is that there is a sequence in the teachings of immutability and adaptability, and those of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. The purpose of Sön is to show that immutability and adaptability, nature and appearance, and essence and function, are all concurrent in one thought. . . . Therefore, the adepts, relying on Dharma free from words and pointing directly at one thought, see into their own nature and attain Buddhahood. This is the meaning of abandoning *kyo* [teaching].¹⁰

It is clear from the above quotations that *sagyo ipsön*, or the Sön teaching promoted by Hyujöng, included *kyo* teachings, but *kyo* teachings played only a secondary role in entering the way of Sön. In other words, Sön was superior to *kyo*. One important point to note here is that Hyujöng classifies

9. *Sön'ga Kugam* (Seoul: Yonghwa Sönwön, 1984), 45ff.

10. *Ibid.*, 46.

Chinul's sudden awakening/gradual cultivation as *kyo* teaching. With that classification, Hyujöng skillfully replaced Chinul's sudden awakening/gradual cultivation with his own teachings of *sagyo ipsön*. *Sagyo* and *ipsön* are compared to the boat that has crossed the river and the landing on the other shore. People of great strength and superior capacity would be able to swim across the river, but people lacking in great faith and true heart, as well as those caught up in theoretical understanding, would need a boat (*kyo* teachings) to take them across to the other shore. Once they have crossed the river, they must land. In order to land (*ipsön*), they must abandon the boat (*sagyo*).

Hyujöng's spirit of *sagyo ipsön* was firmly established in the monastic educational system by his disciples via a curriculum called *sajip* (four collections), which consists of four textbooks, one of which is *Excerpts from the Dharma Collections and Special Practice Record* by Chinul. As such, *sagyo ipsön* has had lasting influence on Korean Buddhism.

Korean Sön Buddhism in the West

Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo (1914–1996)

The first Korean monk to visit the West in the postwar period was Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo,¹¹ who taught at the Buddhist College of Seoul's Dongguk University and served as abbot of the well-known Pulguk-sa Temple in 1962. In 1964 he visited the United States as a visiting scholar at Columbia University, the University of Washington, and the University of Hawaii. He returned in 1966 to enroll in a Ph.D. program at Temple University in Philadelphia.¹² In 1969 he received a Ph.D. from Temple University for his *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism Approached Through the Chodangjip*. It was during this period that Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo started teaching Korean Sön to a small group of Americans in Philadelphia. In his *A Life Story of Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo*, Dr. Seo relates his experience in America and his reasons for "making up his mind to devote himself to propagate Korean Zen Buddhism in America." He was very much impressed with the great interest in Zen and Buddhism among young Americans. However, he deeply regretted that "most of the Koreans in America believed in Christ because there were few [Buddhist] priests to lead them to Buddhism. Generally, they [Koreans]

11. Throughout this chapter, titles and honorifics used by the person in question are followed.

12. In his "Miguk-e issösö Han'guk Pulgyo-üi Changnae," Grant S. Lee says, "In 1964 when I was taking a Ph.D. course at Temple University in Philadelphia the following year Seo, Kyung-Bo Sunim of Chogye Order arrived from Korea to do Ph.D. course. I had heard that he taught Sön meditation to some people at his apartment. This was the occasion when Korean Buddhism took the first step in the U.S" (in Kwak T' achan et al., *Chaemi Hanin Sahoe* [Seoul: Yangyönggak, 1991], 240).

thought it good for their business interests to believe in Christ.”¹³ He met many Americans who wanted to know more of Korean Buddhism but did not have any information.

In May 1969 Dr. Seo’s Korean disciple Rev. Shin, Il-Kwon (later Gosung) arrived in the United States at the invitation of his teacher. In 1970 they established the World Zen Center on ninety acres of land near Newport, Virginia, which was donated by the family of Col. and Mrs. Thell H. Fisher. The inspiration for the World Zen Center was “a scholar, Zen Master and Bishop in the Cho Ke Jong of Korean Buddhism, the Ven. Dr. Kyung-Bo Seo, whose energy and bright laughter light up the whole mountain, leading his students towards self-realization through the wordless teachings of his daily life.”¹⁴ In its first winter ten people sat eight hours a day in a hundred-day winter retreat.

By 1970 Dr. Seo had seven American disciples. However, he never took up residence in the United States. After completing his Ph.D. program at Temple University, he returned to Korea and was invited to serve as the academic dean of the Buddhist College at Dongguk University. Although he was based in Korea, he frequently traveled abroad, visiting the United States almost every summer until he passed away.¹⁵

The teaching style of Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo was both spontaneous and impromptu. For instance, in the late 1960s when Murshid met the Korean Master Rev. Seo, Kyung-Bo, “there was immediate recognition. He accepted Seo as ‘My present Zen Master’ and upon request submitted a Gatha to him. Seo ordained him immediately as a Zen-shi and gave him the name HeKwang.”¹⁶ Don Gilbert “began his career as a Zen teacher. He became a member of the World Society for Zen Academy. . . . In 1972 he met the Korean Zen Master Il Bung Seo, Kyung-Bo in California. He began to study with Master Seo, and was empowered as his dharma successor in the United States.”¹⁷

In the mid-50s Robert Maitland became interested in Asian Religions. . . .

His prevailing interest however was the practice of meditation. . . . In 1970

13. *A Life Story of Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung Bo* (Seoul: Ilbung Samjangwön, 1981), 208.

14. World Zen Center Brochure, June 26, 1970.

15. A letter from Edward Wilkinson dated July 4, 1974, reads, “Dr. Seo is expected to arrive in San Francisco on July 17 (1974) and stay here about three weeks, and travel to the other cities for three weeks. He will return to Korea around September 1.”

16. Letter from Wali Ali to Royall Tyler dated January 29, 1973.

17. “Search for the Bone of Enlightenment,” review article of *The Upside Down Circle* by Zen master Don Gilbert (Nevada City, Calif.: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1988), in the *Vajradhatu Sun* (August/September, 1989): 19.

he formalized what he had learned and upon request began classes in meditation in Huntsville, Alabama, at the Free University of Alabama. . . . In 1972 he wrote to the Hui Neng Zen Temple at Easton, Pennsylvania, requesting admission for Zen training. . . . Shortly thereafter Master Hearn visited Huntsville where he lectured on the “Origins of Zen” and the “Training of the Zen Monk.” Mr. Maitland visited Hui Neng Temple for a week’s meditation training during August. . . . During the course of the next year, a group of meditators formed in Huntsville. Eight of them visited Hui Neng Zen Temple along with Mr. Maitland in August 1973, where they received Buddhist names and meditation training from the Ven. Korean Zen master Il-Bung Seo, Kyung-Bo. . . . Disciple Maitland was then called to San Francisco during August 1974 where he was ordained a Dharma Master (lay Zen Minister) and authorized to start a Zen center in Huntsville with the understanding that Master Seo would come to the U.S. from Korea for permanent residence and that support would be received from Master Seo’s descendents, Masters Söng Ryong Hearn and Tae Hui Gilbert. In San Francisco, a Holy Name ceremony was held by Master Seo and eight more Huntsville students were named in absentia. Upon his return, Maitland proposed the formation of a Zen Center in Huntsville in the line of Dharma Father Seo. From the monthly donations of students and friends, a house at 307 8th Street, Huntsville, AL., was rented in October of 1974 and the Il-Bung Zen Center was founded.¹⁸

By 1975 five Zen centers, or Sön Wön, run by Dr. Seo’s instant Zen disciples had sprung up around the country. Aside from the World Zen Center, there were the Hui Neng Zen Temple in Easton, Pennsylvania; Il-bung Sön Wön in San Francisco, established in November 1974 by Rev. Donald Gilbert and Rev. Ed Wilkinson; Cho Ge Sön Wön in Santa Fe, New Mexico, run by Gary Brown; and Il-Bung Zen Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Most of his American disciples had previous Zen training in the Japanese tradition, except Robert Maitland (whose Korean Buddhist name was Tae Chi) and Edward Wilkinson (whose Korean Buddhist name was Ilsan), who became interested in Buddhism while serving as a Peace Corps teacher in Korea from 1966 to 1968.

Ven. Dr. Seo’s Sön (Zen) teachings included silent sitting, *tanjun* breathing, walking meditation, Sön question-and-answer in writing, and eye-to-eye “confrontation.” He stressed three things for his disciples, “A Zen Master, a Zen Temple, and friends.” Although he showed interest in propagating the

18. Robert Maitland, *Essentials of Meditation*, Lakemont, Ga.: CSA Press, 1975, 138–39.

Korean Sön of Chinul and Hyujöng,¹⁹ there is not much evidence that he actually tried to teach their Korean Sön to his disciples. His poor English and restricted visiting time must have prevented him from doing so. Instead, he resorted to simple and easy teachings such as abdominal breathing, walking meditation, or just laughing.²⁰ His two American dharma successors, Söng Ryong Hearn and Tae Hui Don Gilbert (1909–), and Murshid Wali Ali and Robert Maitland (1922–), who received almost instant recognition and ordination from Ven. Dr. Seo, were all mature, well-read in Buddhism and Eastern philosophy, and spiritually developed.²¹

19. Dr. Seo wrote one book on Hyujöng in Korean, *Sösan Taesa* (Seoul: Poryon'gak, 1972); and an English translation of Chinul's Chinsim Chiksöl, "Master Bojo's Zen Teachings," *Maitreya* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala Publications, 1970), 12–14.

20. Dr. Seo occasionally engaged himself in Sön question-and-answer with his American students. The following are his own response and responses from his two Dharma successors to the question, "What is Zen?"

Willows are green and flowers are red.
Flowers are red and yet not red,
Willows are green and yet not Green,
Now again, willows are green, flowers are red.

There is nothing so close as the teaching of "Suchness."
A grain of sand contains all land and sea.
When we have found the Truth,
Mountain is mountain, water is water,
Willows are green, flowers are red,
One is all, all in all, I am Universe, Buddha is I.

Ven. Dr. Kyung-Bo Seo, Korean Zen Master

'Every sound
penetrates silence;
Silence penetrates
every sound ...'

Rev. Söng Ryong Hearn

On writing-on speaking
Use a pen with no
Point
for paper use the
Sky
Remember speech is
but a warm breeze
Rustling dry leaves
as it passes by

Rev. Gilbert

Sö Paksa-wa Pulgyo Kyori Mundap (Taegu: Chöksön-sa, 1974), 319–22.

21. I met Wali Ali in San Francisco in the summer of 1967 and Söng-Ryong Hearn in Los Angeles in the 1980s. I did not see any sign of the traditional Zen masterly style of detachment and aloofness from them. They were warm, friendly, and humble; and I was impressed with their spiritual cultivation. Söng-Ryong Hearn, born in England, was the grandnephew of the famous Japanologist Lafcadio Hearn.

As the two titles he loved to use, Zen Master and Tripitaka Master, indicate, it seems that he tried to represent both Sön practice and *kyo* doctrinal teachings as much as possible without favoring one over the other. Now he added Sön poetry and Sön calligraphy to his propagation and social activities. This artistic side of his was picked up by one of his American disciples. Don Gilbert founded Blue Dragon Zen Academy after being inspired by his Korean teacher's Sön calligraphy and humor and produced two books of comic strips and Sön commentary, *Jellyfish Bones: The Humor of Zen* (1980) and *The Upside Down Circle: Zen Laughter* (1988). They are about a dog, Unk, and his search for Enlightenment. Praising *Jellyfish Bones*, Dr. Seo writes,

Master Ta Hui's book is a fresh approach to Zen. He does not adhere to tradition nor does he deny it. The work seems light and humorous, but his pen is a Zen sword and it is very sharp indeed. Humor is an integral part of Zen and here it is employed with consummate skill. Those that have studied under Master Ta Hui know him for his gentle humanism. They know too that he can, in one flash of incisive wit, burst conceptual bubbles in a cascade of laughter. In his book be aware of the little dog with his bone. He is often depicted as saying, "This bone is delicious." This is a most important clue. This book then is a finger pointed at the moon. If the reader can stop staring at the finger and look at the moon, the moon will be revealed smiling back at the looker. When the little ego is recognized for what it is, then the Buddha will romp and play, filling the world with unimpeded laughter. Master Ta Hui's book may just be the instrument that will help bring this about.²²

Sometime between 1971 and 1976 the World Zen Center must have dissolved, and the main training center for Dr. Seo's disciples in America moved to Hui Neng Zen Temple in Easton, Pennsylvania, where Dr. Seo's Korean disciple Shin, Gosung (Shin, Il-Kwon) resided before he moved to New York State. Around this time the World Society for Zen Academy was created, perhaps in lieu of the World Zen Center, and Dr. Seo served as president. It appears that Dr. Seo's activities with his American disciples peaked toward the end of 1970s. The World Zen Center and the World Society for Zen Academy suffered from both a lack of a sustained teaching relationship with the teacher and a lack of organization. In the early 1980s most of the groups of the World Society for Zen Academy, if not all, ended their activities and

22. Back jacket of Zen master Don Gilbert's *Jellyfish Bones: The Humor of Zen* (Oakland, Calif.: Blue Dragon Press, 1980).

folded or merged with the Zen Meditation Center of Washington run by Shin, Gosung, who was also setting up the American Zen College on a ten-acre property in Germantown, Maryland. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Dr. Seo's shift in focus contributed to the demise of the World Society for Zen Academy.

In 1975 Dr. Seo created Il Bung Sönjong-hoe or Il Bung Zen Buddhist Association with a view to consolidating all of his activities in Korea and abroad. The World Society for Zen Academy was one of the organizations created to support his multifaceted activities under the Il Bung Zen Buddhist Association. His popular and favorite activities included holding Sön calligraphy art shows, receiving people who wanted to see him, collecting letters of commendation and plaques of thanks, and assuming perfunctory positions of distinction. He was a prolific writer, and as of 1993 he had authored more than five hundred books. Apparently he loved honorary doctoral degrees and by 1993 had collected sixty-seven of them.²³

In 1994 when Dr. Seo was asked in the middle of a radio interview in New York about his quest for titles, he said, "It is not because I seek fame. I am a Korean and a Buddhist. Korea and Buddhism need to be better known and they deserve publicity. If I can make a small contribution, if I can go in the Guinness Book of Records, both my country and Buddhism will benefit from that."²⁴ There are many in the Korean Buddhist world who would disagree with him. Part of the reason is that traditionally Buddhists are used to the values of renunciation, seclusion, and ego attrition; and what Ven. Dr. Seo did was almost completely the opposite. It is very possible that Dr. Seo was practicing nonrenunciation and self-advertising as values for modern-day Buddhism.

In September 1988 Ven. Dr. Seo split from the Chogye Order and established his own religious order, Il Bung Sön'gyo-jong or Il Bung Order for Sön and *kyo* (doctrine) named after his style, Il Bung. In 1989 Dr. Seo became the first dharma king of Korea for the secretariat of world dharma-raja. In 1991 he obtained approval from several Buddhist organizations in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Myanmar to serve as the first world dharma-raja. The office of world dharma-raja or dharma king, and the position of

23. When it was learned that Dr. Seo wrote so many books and received so many honorary degrees, Korean newspapers reported that a listing in the *Guinness Book of World Records* was almost a certainty. However, according to the 1996 edition, Dr. Seo was neither listed as the most prolific author nor as one who was awarded the greatest number of honorary degrees. The world record for the greatest number of honorary degrees is held by Rev. Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, who has received 130.

24. Information supplied by Ms. Kim Chawon, who runs a Korean radio Buddhist program in New York City.

world dharma-raja, were supposed to be the Buddhist equivalents of the Vatican or the papal government and pope.

The Ven. Dr. Seo must have felt that world Buddhism suffered from the lack of a central hierarchy. At the World Fellowship of Buddhists conferences, he constantly raised the issue of the great need for world Buddhist leadership in order for Buddhism to cope with changing world situations. However, to most inward-looking Buddhist elders this was a strange and novel idea. Undaunted, Dr. Seo forged ahead and established a secretariat for the office of the world dharma-raja and then campaigned for the position. It is true that his incongruous behavior turned off many serious Buddhists. But he was popular with his lay followers, who admired him for his courage and accomplishments. It is too early to assess his achievements and failures.

Kusan Sunim (1909–1983)

Kusan Sunim was the first traditional-style Korean Sön master who visited America. After his teacher Hyobong Sunim (1888–1966) passed away, he moved to Songgwang-sa in 1967. It was here that Kusan Sunim was first ordained as a monk under his teacher Hyobong in 1937. In May of 1969, Kusan Sunim was installed as a Sön master of Chogye Ch’ongnim of Songgwang-sa. In the spring of 1970, Kusan Sunim completed the renovation of an old Susön-sa building as a Sön meditation center.

Kusan Sunim arrived in the United States on the last day of 1972 at the invitation of layman Töksan (Han-Sang Lee) to attend the ceremony of the completion of the dharma hall of Sambo-sa Temple. Sambo-sa, the first traditional-style Korean temple in the United States, was built by layman Töksan and his wife in Carmel Valley, California. After the ceremony on January 28, 1973, Kusan Sunim delivered his first formal dharma talk in America. The master “struck his staff three times, and said, ‘Throughout the length and breadth of the world, people in all societies say ‘I, I.’ But actually what is this ‘I?’ Clearly, all men need to realize this ‘True-I.’ When you can truthfully say, ‘With one stroke I can knock down the Empire State Building; in one gulp I can swallow the entire Pacific Ocean,’ then and only then will you have realized it.”²⁵ After the ceremony, Kusan visited the New York area and the West Coast. In March he returned to Korea with his first foreign disciple, Hyön Jo, a seventeen-year-old American boy. Later that year he started Bul-il International Meditation Center at Songgwang-sa in order to

25. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992), 352.

accommodate the growing number of Westerners interested in the practice of Korean Zen. The first of its kind in the history of Korean Buddhism, the center was the brainchild of Kusan Sunim's vision and opened an opportunity for the globalization of Korean Buddhism.

In 1976 the foreign *sangha* (community) of the International Meditation Center translated his teachings into English and published them in a book form, *Nine Mountains: Dharma Lectures of the Korean Meditation Master Kusan*. *Nine Mountains* (literal meaning of Kusan) was distributed gratis as a dharma gift. By 1982 four editions had been printed.

By 1976 the foreign *sangha* had grown large enough to require its own compound separate from the Korean monks. Toward the end of 1979, Kusan Sunim made his second visit to America, accompanied by his two Western female disciples, Suil and Söngil, who served as his translators. During this trip Kusan Sunim dedicated Koryö-sa (Korea Temple) in Los Angeles as the first overseas branch of Songgwang-sa and held a Bodhisattva precepts-taking ceremony therein. He also led a week-long meditation retreat at Sambo-sa. While visiting the East Coast he was invited to the Zen Arts Center in Woodstock, New York, and to Princeton University to give dharma talks.

Pöpch'ön Stephen Batchelor, who arrived at Songgwang-sa in 1981, describes his first encounter with Kusan Sunim: "Accompanied by a translator, I entered the Zen master's room. . . . He was a tiny, radiant man of about seventy. . . . He smiled with much kindness. . . . He listened with patient bemusement as I nervously explained why I had come to Korea and expressed my wish to study with him. He confidently told me just to look into the nature of my mind and ask myself 'What is it?'"²⁶

At the formal opening of the three-month summer retreat right after Pöpch'ön's arrival,

Kusan Sunim pounded his heavy wooden staff on the platform and asked, "Is your original face brilliantly clear to you?" No one said a word. He insisted, "If you have the Dharma-eye, say something!" Again there was silence. He gave a loud shout, "HAK!" and said, "When the eye on the boulder opens, then you will understand." He read a verse he had composed:

In the beginning awakening shines perfectly.
Now the circle of illumination is scattered with broken tiles
Which people claim are precious gems.
Flowers bob softly on the river as they float beneath the bridge.

26. Stephen Batchelor, *The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1990), 21.

He turned to his audience with an impish smile and casually asked what kind of teaching these swallows could be giving. After another perplexed silence, he replied for us, “Brrr, skwok, skwok, brrr . . .” There then followed a more intelligible account of Zen practice, “The Dharma taught by the Buddhas and patriarchs is medicine prescribed according to the kind of disease. What would be the use of medicine if there were no disease to fight? The darkness of the mind is due to your delusive thoughts and emotions alone. When you find yourselves in good or bad circumstances, you neglect your true mind and surrender to the power of conditions. To be swayed by circumstance and to indulge in rash, ill-considered actions causes the mind to be diseased. For the great truth to appear, stop all this now. Throw it away! To awaken your mind, press your face against the wall and ask with all your strength, ‘What is it?’”

The retreat began in earnest the following morning at two. And this insane routine—thirteen hours of meditation ending at ten at night—was to continue for eighty-nine more days. Fifty minutes seated on a cushion followed by ten minutes walking briskly around the hall, each session measured by the tedious ticking of an ancient clock and the shocking cracks of a wooden clapper: such were the new parameters of my temporal world, interrupted only for food (as above) and insufficient sleep. The first two weeks were the worst. After that knees and mind become resigned and, imperceptibly, the routine switches from an outrageous exception to the very norm against which all else is understood.²⁷

In the late spring of 1982, Kusan Sunim visited America and Europe. In Europe he traveled to Switzerland and Denmark to teach. In Geneva he dedicated Bulsung-sa temple, the second overseas branch of Songgwang-sa with the help of his disciple Hyehaeng. In early fall of the same year, Kusan Sunim dedicated another temple, Daegak-sa (Temple of Great Enlightenment), the third overseas branch of Songgwang-sa in Carmel Valley, California, for his first Western disciple, Hyön Jo.

In the new year of 1983, Kusan Sunim reminded himself of his teacher Hyobong Sunim’s injunction to restore previous fame to Songgwang-sa as the Sangha-Jewel Temple by training prominent and distinguished disciples. So he made a vow to launch the second spiritual movement for building the Community of Samādhi and Prajñā according to the legacy of Chinul. In March he appointed an abbot to carry out this historic task. On the anniversary of Master Chinul’s death in May, the national support organization

27. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

Bulil-hoe met to discuss Kusan Sunim's proposal and to develop a master plan for the eighth development project of Songgwang-sa. In early October Kusan Sunim came down with an illness and suffered a series of strokes. On December 16, 1983, he passed away at his residence in a meditation posture supported by his disciples. The time was 6:20 P.M., on Friday.

Pöpch'ön captures the moment of the Parinirvana of Kusan Sunim in his "When the Light in Your Eyes Falls to the Ground":

At six that evening we . . . were preparing to sit until nine. But at twenty past six they rang the main bell. . . . With each successive note I realized with a mounting certainty that Kusan Sunim had died. One by one we stood up from our cushions and paced around the hall. It was as if the pressure of the bell was too unsettling to be contained in stillness: the echoes of each stroke spread into my belly and limbs and forced me to move. The monastery was roused. . . . The bell was still ringing when the nine of us assembled in the courtyard in front of the hall. We had put on our formal gowns and robes and stood in a group waiting to go up to his room. . . . We walked in single file through the tile-covered gate and up the path to his room. A single lamp flickered across the sad and bewildered faces of the monks. . . . We lined up and bowed in unison. Then Yongjin (Kusan Sunim's attendant) . . . beckoned us to come and see the body behind the screen. . . . I peered behind the screen. Fully robed, his slumped body was seated clumsily on a chair. . . . His face. . . . It was as though the light had gone out of his eyes.²⁸

In October after he became ill, Kusan Sunim prepared his Parinirvana (deathbed) verse:

The autumn leaves covering the mountain are redder than flowers in spring.
 Everything in the universe fully reveals the great power.
 Life is void and death is also void.
 Absorbed in the Buddha's ocean-seal Samadhi, I depart with a smile.²⁹

Although he quoted from Chinul's teachings from time to time in his dharma talks, Kusan Sunim's Sön teaching was *hwadu Sön*, or the shortcut path. His main *hwadu* for his Western students was "What is this?" Following his dharma talk at the Zen Arts Center in Woodstock, New York, in 1980, Kusan Sunim was asked, "How can I raise a great doubt?" He answered,

28. *Ibid.*, 89 and 91.

29. Stephen Batchelor, ed., and Martine Fages, trans., *The Way of Korean Zen* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 50.

Our mind is present when we are talking and listening, but because we have forgotten the mind and live for the body, our minds have become dark. Mind, self, soul, I, and spirit are all names. So before the name, what is this? Question, “WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THIS?” this will make a doubt arise. When sentient beings awake, they become Buddhas, and when Buddhas sleep, they become sentient beings. We are all originally Buddhas. So you have to believe that the reason you are living the life of a sentient being is that your mind has become deluded. Practice to awaken the mind, question before the word, “WHAT IS THIS?” To a question, “What is the original mind?” he counter-questions, “What is asking?” To the answer “Mind” he replies, “If you have the mind, why are you asking me? You should know Buddhism is a very simple thing. A person is a combination of a body and a mind. If you have a body and no mind, you’re dead. And if you have a mind and no body, you’re a ghost. When a person has both a body and a mind and only knows his body, we call him a sentient being. Sentient beings mean all creatures. . . . When we practice and awaken the mind, we know both the body and the mind; then we are complete people. We are the Buddhas.”³⁰

The purpose of *hwadu* questioning, “What is this?” (that is, what is this before everything?) is to develop the power of concentration (*king samādhi*) or a single mind. To develop a single mind is to remove all of our defilements. To remove all of our defilements is to awaken to the original mind. To awaken to the original mind is to discover that we have been Buddhas from the beginning. To the confused and deluded, it is simple but incomprehensibly hard. To the awakened mind it is simple, clear, and easy.

In the late fall of 1982, I visited South Korea and paid a visit to Söngch’öl Sunim at Paengnyön-am (White Lotus Hermitage) in Haein-sa Monastery and Kusan Sunim at Samil-am (Three-Day Hermitage) in Songgwang-sa Monastery. At the time, Söngch’öl Sunim and Kusan Sunim were two giant towering figures representing Korean Sön Buddhism. However, they differed in their views on attaining Enlightenment. Söngch’öl Sunim maintained *tono tonsu* (sudden awakening sudden cultivation) or “radical subitism,” while Kusan Sunim seemed to support *tono chömsu* (sudden awakening gradual cultivation) or “moderate subitism.” For instance, Söngch’öl Sunim maintained that *kyönsöng* (seeing into your true nature) is identical to *söngbul* (attaining your Buddhahood). In other words, you are a Buddha if you clearly see into your true nature. When I met Kusan Sunim, I asked for his views. “If so, has Söngch’öl become a Buddha?” he retorted. He disagreed with Söngch’öl

30. Lectures by Venerable Ku San, Carmel Valley, California, n.d., 3–4.

Sunim and pointed out that *kyönsöng* and *söngbul* are different. Was Kusan Sunim following the line of Chinul's Korean *Sön* in this? I do not know.

In the eleven years following the establishment of the International Meditation Zen Center at Songgwang-sa, Kusan Sunim ordained forty-six foreign disciples from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, both male and female. Among them were Anna Proctor (Suil), Martine Fages (Söngil, now Martine Batchelor), Renaud Neubaur (Hyehaeng), Stacey Krause (Hamwöl), Larry Martin (Hyönsöng), Kim Quennalt (Hyön Jo), Audrey Kitson (Jagwang), Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Hyemyöng), Gerald Eule (Hyegak), Henrik H. Sorensen, and Deborah Caine (Chi Kwang).

In the Korean-mountain monastic community, old ways and conservatism prevailed, and negative reaction to outsiders was still strong in the 1970s. It was revolutionary and unprecedented that Kusan Sunim invited Western men and women and ordained them as disciples for training. Robert E. Buswell Jr., who spent five years (1974–1979) training at the International Meditation Zen Center, recalls: “His monastery [Songgwang-sa] was at the time the only one in Korea that allowed foreigners to participate in the traditional Buddhist training. While I could travel freely among Korean monasteries during the vacation seasons of spring and autumn, I was never able to spend a retreat season elsewhere.”³¹

Under the circumstances, Kusan Sunim had to make extra effort to protect his foreign *sangha*. Buswell continues: “Westerners seeking to study Buddhism in Korea had no stronger proponent than Kusan, and I personally would never have been able to practice for so many years with the Korean monks in the main meditation hall at Songgwang-sa without his constant backing. Korean monks from other monasteries who came to practice at Songgwang-sa were often suspicious of foreigners’ motivations in meditating; Kusan did everything possible to assuage their concerns about my presence among them.”³²

During his career, Kusan Sunim made three visits to the West and dedicated three temples, two in the United States and one in Geneva, Switzerland. The temple in Geneva closed in 1985. The temple in Carmel Valley, California, stopped functioning not long after it opened. Koryö-sa in Los Angeles is still operating for local Korean Buddhists but is not what it was envisioned for Americans. The International Meditation Center in Songgwang-sa that Kusan Sunim had hoped to develop as the world center for the study and training of Korean *Sön* now exists more in name than in reality. In 1985

31. Robert E. Buswell Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 19–20.

32. *Ibid.*, xii.

when Jagwang left the center, Chi Kwang was the only Westerner remaining.³³ Many of them were brokenhearted when Kusan Sunim passed away. In addition to the death of Kusan Sunim, lack of direction from the new leadership contributed to the departure of the Western sangha. Out of forty-six Western monks and nuns ordained and trained at the center, only three or four function as Buddhist teachers now. Have they all failed Kusan Sunim's wishes?

Robert E. Buswell Jr., Stephen Batchelor, Henrik H. Sorensen, and Martine Batchelor all have written about their teacher Kusan Sunim, Korean Buddhism, Songgwang-sa, and Korean nuns; and they have been active in their academic research and dharma teaching. Among them, Robert E. Buswell Jr. stands out for his contribution to introducing Korean Sŏn Buddhism to the academic and Buddhist world and Zen practitioners. He has written three books and numerous articles on Korean Buddhism. *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul* (University of Hawaii Press, 1983), which he started with Kusan Sunim's encouragement and help while still in training at the Center of Songgwang-sa, was the first major work on Korean Buddhism. It helped to remove the general ignorance about Buddhism of Korea. In 1989 Princeton University Press published his *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea: The Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra, A Buddhist Apocryphon*, which explores Wŏnhyo's syncretic vision and reevaluation of East Asian traditional Buddhism. In 1992 Princeton University Press published *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*. The book is dedicated to Kusan Sunim and the monks of Songgwang-sa. As an honest first-hand account of Korean monastic life and practice, this book is an outstanding documentary that removes the myth surrounding a Zen monk's life.

All this may seem a far cry from what Kusan Sunim may have expected of his Western disciples. Perhaps some of his Western disciples decided to repay their indebtedness somewhat differently to the "true man of Zen" who cared for them so much.

Zen Master Seung Sahn (1927–)

Zen Master Seung Sahn, or Soen Sa Nim as he is addressed by his American students, arrived in the United States in May 1972 from Tokyo, where he had been teaching the dharma to Korean residents in Japan. Haengwŏn Sunim, as he was known to the Buddhists in South Korea, held important

33. Telephone conversation with Jagwang, August 17, 1999.

positions in both administrative and legislative sections of the Korean Buddhist Chogye Order (KBC) before he ventured overseas. With full backing from the power circles in the Chogye Order, he visited Japan in 1964 and established the first overseas KBC, Hong Poep Wön (Korean Buddhist Chogye Order Dharma Propagation Center), in Tokyo in 1966. In 1969 he established KBC Hong Poep Wön in Hong Kong.

Soen Sa Nim was the first official Buddhist missionary representing the Korean Buddhist Chogye Order abroad. As the youngest of the three pioneers and one who actually took up residency in America and was able to communicate in Konglish (broken Korean-style English often without verbs) with a flourish of gestures, he had a distinct advantage over Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo, and Kusan Sunim in doing dharma work in the West. In addition, his wonderful chanting voice and vibrant dharma spirit helped and inspired many people.

In October 1972 Soen Sa Nim opened the Providence Zen Center in Rhode Island for his American students, his first Zen center in the United States. In 1974 the Cambridge Zen Center was started. In 1975 the New Haven Zen Center, near Yale University, and the New York Zen Center opened. In January 1976 he and his American disciple Lincoln Rhodes went to Los Angeles to begin a Zen center there. By 1977, five years after his arrival in the United States, he had started and helped to start eight Zen centers, and had conducted many precept ceremonies. The first one was held on November 8, 1972. He approved two master dharma teachers to teach *kong-an* study and retreats, and many dharma teachers. In 1976 his first English book, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, edited by Stephen Mitchell, was published. It was a dharma blitzkrieg! He stormed into New Age America with an empty mind (no money, no English) and great enthusiasm.

The year 1978 was an important one for his growing Zen center movement. The Providence Zen Center, which had started in his apartment on Doyle Avenue in 1972 and then moved to 48 Hope Street in 1974, now acquired a 50-acre property in Cumberland, Rhode Island. This new Providence Zen Center in Cumberland became the headquarters for Seung Sahn's movement in the United States and abroad. In 1978 he made his first trip to Europe. His visit to Poland was a great success. His dharma relationship with Poland over the following years blossomed into four full Zen centers and ten affiliated groups. Numerous Polish Zen students later visited Soen Sa Nim's Zen centers in the United States and South Korea for study and practice.

Since 1982 was the tenth anniversary of Soen Sa Nim's mission in the West, he wanted to do something big and meaningful to celebrate the

occasion. So he had his disciples organize a “Great Masters World Peace Assembly” to formally mark the tenth anniversary of the “Korean Buddhism Chogye Order Hong Poep Won.” Soen Sa Nim invited Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, and Söngch’öl Sunim, the Supreme Patriarch of Korean Chogye Order, as well as other religious leaders. Each declined to attend. According to Mu Sang, a Jewish American Zen monk and Soen Sa Nim’s secretary during the three-day event September 17–19, 1982, Soen Sa Nim “wanted the Pope, the Dalai Lama and the Pope of Korean Buddhism all to come here to Cumberland for this ceremony, have a hot meal together, take off their clothes, have a hot bath, get dry, get dressed, say thank you very much and leave. It would have been a demonstration of how we are of different cultures, races, religions, but that—underneath our clothes—we all have human minds. We are all one. It’s so simple, everyone would probably have been blown out by it.”³⁴

Bodhisattva Monks

The event of KBC Hong Poep Wön still managed to attract five hundred people. A large contingent of delegates to the World Peace Assembly came from South Korean Chogye Order. They consisted of the head of the administrative section of the Chogye Order and abbots of head monasteries. Many were Soen Sa Nim’s old friends. They were all impressed with his dharma work in America. Everything went smoothly except for one incident. Some of the Korean delegates noticed that many of Soen Sa Nim’s ordained American disciples did not quite look like traditional-style monks, even though they were dressed in *changsam* and *kasa*, a monk’s formal dress and robe. Many had hair, and some were holding their own children. Upon inquiry they were told that these American monks were Bodhisattva monks, that is to say, married priests. Furthermore, when they learned that Soen Sa Nim had a plan to found a new school of Buddhism to replace KBC Hong Poep Wön, they were hurt and upset.

The issue of married Buddhist clergy is an emotional one for Chogye Order monks.³⁵ Obviously the new realities of Buddhism in America had no relation to South Korea’s Chogye Order’s recent past. Soen Sa Nim was just trying to cope with the realities of Buddhism in America. Young people in America are more inclined to ministry Buddhism than to monastic

34. *Providence Sunday Journal*, September 19, 1982, C-16.

35. See Sam-Woo Kim, *Zen Buddhism in North America* (Toronto: Zen Lotus Society, 1986), 23–26.

Buddhism. Even when they are interested in leading a monastic life for sustained cultivation, most are not prepared to spend the rest of their life as a celibate monk. They prefer a middle ground where they can combine their commitment to Buddhist practice with their secular life. Soen Sa Nim was responding to these realities. As one of his disciples put it, Americans needed a “wider approach” to Buddhism than the traditional narrow approach.

Kwan Um School of Zen

In August 1983 the Kwan Um School of Zen was established as an umbrella organization in order to meet the growing demand of the many Zen center duties and to “facilitate teaching schedules and communications among the many centers and groups.”³⁶ KBC Hong Poep Wŏn had outgrown its useful purpose. “The first annual School Congress was also initiated at that time, providing opportunities for people from all the centers and groups to gather, hold teaching workshops, and share ideas for making their practices stronger and their Zen Centers function better. The first School Council Meeting was also held with representatives from all the Zen Centers. The decision-making process became much more democratic.”³⁷

In 1984 the school started the publication of *Primary Point*, a quarterly newspaper, in order to spread Soen Sa Nim’s teaching worldwide, carry the school news, and announce the retreats and special programs of the different centers. “In the summer of 1984, the Diamond Hill Zen Monastery was dedicated in a formal ceremony on the site at the Providence Zen Center. . . . the Monastery was established for the ‘traditional-style monks’ who would remain celibate and follow the Korean style of training. . . . The first Kyol Che (ninety-day intensive meditation retreat) at the new monastery was held from December 1984 through March 1985.”³⁸ In the same year, Soen Sa Nim established Seoul International Zen Center at Hwa Gae Sa, the temple in Seoul where his relationship with the temple began in 1958.

Although Soen Sa Nim made important departures from the Chogye Order style of Buddhism by creating a new form of Bodhisattva monks (married male and female) and founding a new school of Buddhism, he always maintained a strong connection with the Chogye Order and made sure that the Korean Buddhist world was informed of his activities. It was not an easy task to bring together traditional Korean-style Buddhism and the New Age

36. Zen Master Seung Sahn, *Ten Gates* (Cumberland, R.I.: Primary Point Press, 1982), 122.

37. Diana Clark, ed., *Only Doing It for Sixty Years* (Cumberland, R.I.: Kwan Um Zen School, 1987), 34.

38. Sam-Woo Kim, *Zen Buddhism in North America*, 25.

American-style Buddhism and make it work. Soen Sa Nim had to perform many balancing acts and dance skillfully in order to smooth out the difficulties and obstacles he faced. The Diamond Hill Zen Monastery in America and the Seoul International Zen Center had as their purpose serving as link-ups for the Korean Chogye Order and the Kwan Um School of Zen as well as for traditional-style monks and nontraditional temporary or Bodhisattva monks. With this in mind, the Seoul International Zen Center has been organizing international ninety-day Kyol Che in the summer and the winter, first at Su Dok Sah and then at Shin Won Sa since 1990 for those who can sit the full ninety days; and Hwa Gae Sa for those who can sit a minimum of one week. In 1994 a new modern building of the Seoul International Zen Center was dedicated on the site of Hwa Gae Sa. Since 1983 Soen Sa Nim has been presented in the Kwan Um Zen School literature and publications as “the first Korean Zen Master to live and teach in the West” and “the 78th patriarch in the Korean Chogye Order” who “became a Zen Master at the age of 22.”³⁹

International Traveler and Funky Zen Master

“Something like a comet rushing in from the unknown universe and engaging all the little asteroids for a few moments, and then rushing out again into the vast reaches of empty space.”⁴⁰ This remark by Robert Aitken-roshi of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, Hawaii, pretty much sums up the lightning speed with which Soen Sa Nim travels around. One of his disciples who traveled in South Korea with him once commented to me: “A busload of us would pull up at famous temples. Some of us are still in line to enter the Buddha hall for three bows while others would come out the other door to return to the bus.”

In the early years the whirlwind trips and sightseeing of this energetic and “funky Zen Master” were confined to the East Coast, the West Coast, and Canada. Then in 1978 he made his first trip to Europe. From this trip the “Polish connection” was established, and many wonderful dharma fruits were produced from Polish dharma trees. In 1980 Soen Sa Nim undertook a journey around the world with his students. They visited Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Nepal, India, and Europe. The highlight of this journey was a pilgrimage to the sacred places of Buddhism in India. In 1985 he visited

39. *Primary Point* 2, no. 2 (May 1985): 11; *Ten Gates*, 121.

40. “Do you see this? An Appreciation for Tubby Teacher,” *Only Doing It for Sixty Years* (Cumberland, R.I.: Kwan Um Zen School, 1987), 49.

China with twenty people. In 1986 he visited Russia. He was the first South Korean monk to visit the communist countries of Poland, China, and Russia. These trips are his first visits to different countries in the world to “spread apple seeds” and do not include his annual whirlwind teaching tours to the many centers and groups of the Kwan Um Zen School worldwide. Following his first visit to Europe and Poland in the spring of 1978, he returned in 1980. Since then he has visited Europe once every year. With the establishment of the Kwan Um School of Zen of Eastern Europe at the Warsaw Zen Center in 1984 and with the Centre Zen de Paris starting in 1985, Soen Sa Nim began visiting Europe three or four times annually.

Since 1992 for health reasons Soen Sa Nim has operated out of Hwa Gae Sa, his Korean home base, and visits countries in Asia in addition to his annual dharma trips to the United States and Europe. According to a report in *Dharma Light*, “Despite repeated threats of retirement, Dae Soen Sa Nim shows no sign of slowing down. On the contrary, his schedule gets busier by the month. Since leaving here in February, he has been teaching in Korea, as well as travelling to Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia, where new Zen groups have been forming. Following his stay in Los Angeles, he will continue to the East coast, officiating at a Transmission Ceremony and his birthday celebration at the Providence Zen Center on August 1. The next weekend, Dae Soen Sa Nim will attend the opening ceremony for the newly built temple at Furnace Mountain in Kentucky.”⁴¹

The Teachings of Master Seung Sahn

Soen Sa Nim’s teachings are three-dimensional. The first is doctrinal teaching (*kyo*) and the second is meditation (Sön), both of which he inherited from Korean Buddhism. To this he added his own third dimension, teaching by correspondence, or Postcard Zen. Since he was always on the move, his students contacted him by letters or telephone calls when they had questions or sought advice. He would always answer their letters, signing with his initials, SS. These teaching letters and the letters to him were collected and then distributed periodically to the Zen centers. The reading of these letters formed an important part of morning and evening practice.

From early on, Soen Sa Nim devised a Buddhist catechism for his students called the *Compass of Zen Teaching* (ca. 1976). *Compass of Zen Teaching* was his

41. “Traveling Zen Master,” *Dharma Light* (Newsletter of Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles, Summer 1994).

version of *sagyo ipsŏn* and represented his doctrinal view of Buddhism. In 1982 Providence Zen Center published *Only Don't Know: The Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn*. Along with *Compass of Zen Teaching*, Soen Sa Nim came up with *Your Mind Meal* (1979), which consisted of ten Kong-ans called "Gate." Over the years his teachings have expanded. The two-page *Your Mind Meal* has turned into two books of Kong-an collections: *The Whole World Is a Single Flower: 365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1992) and *Ten Gates: The Kong-an Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn* (Cumberland, R.I.: Primary Point Press, 1987), while the 39-page *Compass of Zen Teaching* has expanded into a 394-page book, *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997). *The Compass of Zen*, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, *Ten Gates*, and *Only Don't Know* form the three-dimensional nucleus of his teachings. Add to these his famous slogan practice, "Only don't know," "Only go straight," "Just do it," and "Don't make anything," and so forth.

Soen Sa Nim comes from the Kyŏnghö (1849–1912) and Man'gong (1871–1946) line of Korean Sŏn. The *sagyo ipsŏn* of Kyŏnghö, who revitalized Korean Sŏn in the late nineteenth century, is well known. Kyŏnghö was a sutra teacher. When he finally realized that his knowledge of doctrinal teachings was no help to people dying of cholera, he abandoned it for hwadu Sŏn. Soen Sa Nim's experiment of Korean Sŏn with his American students proved over and over again that they know and think and worry a lot. So he began to promote "don't know" practice. Being a highly versatile and engaging teacher, he would always have proper prescriptions ready in his dharma shop with, "Clear mind, don't know" mantra, doing prostrations, including kido chanting or some kind of one-hundred-day practice, all to attain a "don't know" mind. It would not be wise to risk examining his Kong-an system here. But his cure-all "don't know mind" would sum up his teaching style.

"A don't know mind is a before-thinking mind. Before-thinking is clear like space. Clear like space is clear like a mirror."⁴² This "don't know" comes from Chinul's *Susim-gyŏl* (Secrets on Cultivating the Mind), where it says, "Only if you know that you don't know, this is seeing into your nature."⁴³ Seeing into your nature is *kyŏnsŏng* (J. kensho). Soen Sa Nim's *sagyo* (abandoning *kyo* doctrinal teachings) has been to help his students *abandon* a discriminating mind by practicing "don't know" so they can enter into Sŏn,

42. *Only Don't Know: The Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1982), vii.

43. *Pojo Pŏbbŏ*, Sangwŏn-sa, 1937, 16. 但知不會 是即見性 which Robert E. Buswell Jr. translates as, "Simply by knowing that there is no other way to understand, you are seeing the nature." (See his "Secrets on Cultivating the Mind" in *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul*, 145. But Soen Sa Nim used 但知不知 instead of 但知不會 .

which is the practice of waking up to realize their true nature. He teaches his students “Action Zen” as everyday Zen practice and advocates “Just do it,” “Only go straight,” and “Moment to moment great love.”⁴⁴

He has been a great proponent of “together actions,” traveling all over the world and urging his students to live together for “together actions,” that is, dharma practice and fellowship. His charisma, dynamic personality, and disarming attitude have touched many people. During his twenty-seven years of dharma service, Soen Sa Nim has ordained and produced many disciples. At present, there are twenty-three monks (seventeen male and six female) and nine Bodhisattva teachers (formerly Bodhisattva monks) and eight Zen masters who received dharma transmission, eighteen Jido Poepsa (Guiding Dharma teachers, formerly Master Dharma teachers), and one hundred and twenty-five dharma teachers. Today there are three Kwan Um Zen School headquarters in the world, with a Kwan Um Zen School in Providence serving as world headquarters.⁴⁵ In the United States there are about thirty centers and groups that are affiliated with the Kwan Um Zen School.

Reactions to Master Seung Sahn

In spite of his selfless devotion and great achievements, Soen Sa Nim has not been free from criticism. One criticism involves his penchant or missionary zeal for quantitative achievement at the expense of quality. “A number of Zen centers have appeared and disappeared in Seung Sahn’s firmament with great rapidity. . . . He is most interested in gaining a large number of students, even if they turn out to be short-term catches. This striving for numbers for numbers’ sake has left a parallel impression that Seung Sahn has been remarkably unconcerned with the spiritual training of those who might come into contact with the groups within his organizations.”⁴⁶ This is harsh criticism coming from a former student of Soen Sa Nim’s. Although

44. “Zen Master Seung Sahn is a born teacher, an astonishingly adept and fertile inventor of skillful means. In the early days, just after he came to America, he would change his slogan every few months. One month it was ‘Only go straight,’ which he would repeat so often that it seemed to be the theme song of the whole universe, even in the depths of our dreams. Then, two months later, it was ‘Just do it’ (this was long before some hotshot at Nike came up with the phrase). Then it was ‘Don’t check other people’s minds.’ You get the idea.” “Foreword” by Stephen Mitchell in *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

45. I am indebted to J. W. Harrington of the Kwan Um School office for the information.

46. See “Korean Buddhism in America: A New Style of Zen” by Mu Soeng (Prakash Shrivastava) in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 124–25.

somewhat exaggerated, there is a truth in the critique. I may note, however, that Soen Sa Nim's carefree attitude and generosity must have contributed to this impression. Many people have been helped by Soen Sa Nim, some greatly, including the author of the critique quoted above. Sometimes Soen Sa Nim has tried to help too many people, with the result that an "easy come, easy go" style of his Zen centers may have created confusion in the minds of serious students. I remember his once telling me when I questioned him on his nondiscriminatory open-door policy, "Even though people have just been inside the temple and experienced peace and quiet by looking at Buddha statue, they have been helped and a Dharma seed planted." I have heard this before, growing up in the temples of Korea, but obviously I have not lived the teachings. It is comforting to know that even "short-term catches" can be helped and perhaps awakened. Hasn't this been a Mahayana approach all along?

Another criticism of his style is about his making instant-Zen teachers. "Lay students are permitted to wear the traditional Korean monk's robes. Until quite recently, almost as a matter of routine, a person who had been around for a few months was made a 'Dharma teacher' and was given a monk's robes to wear. At times it has seemed more like a sop to the practitioner's ego and to the need for identity confirmation through a uniform than an authentication of the person's immersion in practice."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the author Mu Soeng (Prakash Shrivastava) describes Soen Sa Nim as "an evangelist in the service of Korean Buddhism" and Kwan Um Zen School as "a tribe of individual nomads trying to fit into a mold of clan loyalty and group identity."⁴⁸ Apart from the truth or nontruth of this description, it has to be said that there are many mature and wonderful people in the Kwan Um Zen School, and there is no lack of sincere effort on the part of its leadership.

Since 1987 when he celebrated his sixtieth birthday, a special occasion for Koreans, Soen Sa Nim has progressively spent less time at Providence Zen Center, his American residence, and Kwan Um Zen School headquarters. Soen Sa Nim has had health problems for many years. In July of 1977 he went into the hospital to have his irregular heartbeat monitored and to begin using insulin to control an advanced case of diabetes.⁴⁹ In the last five years he had to be hospitalized for heart problems more than ten times. In April of 1999 he had to be rushed to the hospital the following morning after he

47. *Ibid.*, 123.

48. *Ibid.*, 123 and 125.

49. *Only Don't Know*, 3, footnote.

delivered a dharma talk at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. His dharma power, vital spirit, and tireless efforts are simply amazing. Bodhidharma from Korea, as he was sometimes called, will continue to travel for the sake of the Way of Buddha until his body wears out.

Conclusion

Following the forward movement of Korean culture and riding on the new wave of immigration, the three pioneers of Korean Buddhism arrived in America at the right time. In the 1960s and 1970s young people of the counterculture and the flower generation who were “turning East” started practicing meditation and looking for gurus. Zen and Buddhism became a “freewheeling enterprise” between Enlightenment seekers and Zen masters or New Age gurus. The three masters from Korea were not familiar with Western culture in general, nor did they speak the language properly. They arrived already advanced in age and came from a country that was not particularly known for its flourishing Buddhist tradition. Therefore, if anything, they were at a great disadvantage in their dharma work. What compensated for their disadvantage was the Korean character of Buddhism, flexibility and adaptability. They inherited the spiritual tradition of Wŏnhyo’s *hoit’ong*, reconciliation and integration, or syncretic Buddhism, Chinul’s fundamental unity of doctrine and meditation, and Hyujŏng’s *sagyo ipsŏn* (abandonment of doctrine and entrance into Sŏn).

Understandably, they differed with each other in their application of syncretic Buddhism in their dealings with the new environment. In the dynamic equilibrium of doctrine (*kyo*) and meditation (Sŏn) that has persisted throughout the history of Korean Buddhism, Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo and Kusan Sunim stood at almost opposite ends. Although Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo acted as a Zen master toward his Western students, he occupied himself most of the time in literary, academic, and secular pursuits. By contrast, Kusan Sunim was a Zen master with traditional and monastic background who showed no interest in the scriptures. But both suffered from the nonresidential and visiting nature of their teachings in America. I have not heard of any of Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo’s direct American disciples functioning as Buddhist teachers. However, his teaching tradition in America survives at two Korean temples run by his Korean disciples, Han’guk-sa (Korean Temple) or Zen College in Germantown, Maryland, and Paegnim-sa on Mt. Vernon in New York State.

Being the youngest and a full-time resident, Soen Sa Nim was poised best

for the dharma work. And in style and character he proved to best represent the syncretic Buddhism of Korea in America so far. The diverse activities of his modified Korean Buddhism in America included interreligious gatherings, Buddhist-Christian retreats, and the making of Christian Kong-ans. Yes, such activities are the work of his genius and a product of his eclectic mind. But they are also the extension of the legacy of syncretic vision of Wŏnhyo, Chinul, and Hyujŏng brought to America by Soen Sa Nim. A proper investigation of the experimentation of Soen Sa Nim's Korean Buddhism in America would shed much light on the future direction of Korean Buddhism in America. However, it is not within the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say for now that one can learn much, both positive and negative, from his enculturation experience of Korean Buddhism in America.

The three pioneers introduced Korean Buddhism to the West and paved the way for their followers. Perhaps unawares they also brought with them Korean traditional culture and values along with Buddhist culture. Paegnim-sa Temple on Mt. Vernon in New York State and Buddhist Pagoda at Diamond Hill Monastery in Providence were built in the traditional Korean-style architecture.

Soen Sa Nim built a Korean-style temple in Los Angeles for his Korean followers. His American disciple, Master Dae Gak (Robert Genthner), built a traditional temple at Furnace Mountain in Kentucky in 1994 following the traditional geomantic (wind-and-water) principles in order to create a great harmony of location of the temple with the land. Another American disciple of his, Muryang Sunim (Erik Berall), has been building since 1994 a Korean-style temple, T'aego-sa monastery and Mountain Spirit Center, on 318 acres of canyon area at the southern tip of a Sierra mountain in California. Muryang Sunim says that an important work takes more than one lifetime to complete. He is not in a rush. He keeps building the monastery every day on a remote mountain.

The three Korean Sŏn masters were also responsible for inviting traditional master carpenters, wood-carvers, tanch'ŏng painters, and sculptors who provided their services at Korean temples in the different U.S. cities. Since 1990 Kusan Sunim's former disciple, Professor Robert E. Buswell Jr., has been serving as editor-in-chief for the quarterly magazine *Korean Culture*, published by Korean Cultural Service in Los Angeles. Ven. Dr. Seo, Kyung-Bo; Kusan Sunim; and Soen Sa Nim were instrumental not only for the transmission of dharma from Korea to the West but also for the transmission of traditional Korean culture, thereby contributing to the globalization of Korean culture as well as Korean Buddhism.

Glossary of Sino-Korean Characters

Sön 禪

Kyo 教

Sagyō ipsön 捨教入禪

Hwadu (interchangeable with Kong-an in meaning) 話頭

Tono tonsu 頓悟頓修

Tono chömsu 頓悟漸修

Kyönsöng (J. kensho) 見性

Söngbul 成佛

Kong-an (J. koan; interchangeable with hwadu in meaning) 公案

Susim-gyöl 修心訣