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* SON - THE BUDDHISM OF KOREA *
By Graeme Lyall

Following his Enlightenment, the Buddha instructed his disciples to spread his teaching in all directions of the world. It was not until the early years in the Christian era that his teaching eventually reached China. Around 520 A.D. an Indian monk named Bodhi Dharma

arrived in Canton by sea. He eventually settled in the north of China where he founded the Shaolin monastery. Bodhi Dharma was the first patriarch of the Cha'an or meditation sect of Chinese Buddhism. It is suggested that Bodhidharma was born to the Pallava King Simhavarman between 440 and 470 CE. Although born a Brahmin, he was converted to Buddhism. His teacher was a monk called Prajnatarā who came from Magadha, the birthplace of Buddhism. His teacher instructed him to go on a mission to China. The actual date of his arrival in China is somewhat confused. The recorded dates vary from 475 to 520. On arrival he was summoned to the capital Chienkiang by the Ling dynasty Emperor Wu-ti. The Emperor Wu was an ardent Buddhist who prided himself on his generous support of the religion. Legend has it that, on their meeting the following conversation took place.

Emperor: I have richly endowed the Buddhist religion so how much merit would you say I have gained.

Bodhidharma: No merit whatsoever.

The Emperor was somewhat taken aback, having heard that good begets good and evil begets evil - the Law of Karma. What Bodhidharma was trying to convey was that the Emperor's intention was wrong and it is the intention that determines the Karmic effect. The Emperor's intention was not altruistic giving but more for his own gain or to boost his own ego.

The Emperor then asked Bodhidharma, "What then is the essence of Buddhism?". Bodhidharma replied, "No essence whatsoever" The Emperor, somewhat confused said, "Since you say that in Buddhism, all things have no essence, who then is speaking before me now?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know". Thus, after China had its first initiation into Cha'an teaching, the thoroughly confused Emperor Wu-ti dismissed the monk.

Bodhidharma made his way to the north of China where he eventually settled in the Shaolin Temple on Mount Sung in Honan Province. It is said that it was here in a cave on Mount Sung that Bodhidharma spent nine years in meditation. Legend has it that Bodhidharma cut off his eyelids to prevent himself from falling asleep. Shaolin temple has become famous as a training centre for Kung-Fu, for which Bodhidharma is also attributed as the founder. Although Bodhidharma is considered to be the first Patriarch of Cha'an or Zen, the most famous Zen Patriarch is Hui Neng who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries and was responsible for Zen flourishing in China as never before. It is said that Hui Neng was an illiterate wood gatherer who made his living selling firewood. After hearing a recitation of the Diamond Sutra, Hui Neng had a realisation. Hearing that the Fifth Patriarch, Hung Yen, urged his students to study this Sutra, he decided to visit his monastery. The Master ordered him to work in the stable by chopping firewood and pounding rice. After being at the temple for eight months, Hui Neng heard that the Master was about to choose his successor. The Master addressed the disciples: "Day after day, instead of trying to free yourselves from this bitter sea of life and death, you seem to go after tainted merits - which cause rebirth.

Merits will be of no help if your Essence of Mind is obscured. Go and seek for Prajna (Wisdom) in your own mind and then write me a stanza about it. He who understands what the Essence of Mind is, will be made the Sixth Patriarch."

Most of the disciples felt that the one to inherit the Patriarchy would be their instructor Shen Hsiu, so they left it to him to write the stanza. Shen Hsiu was worried that any stanza he might write might expose him to the Master as lacking in understanding. He chose the dead of night to secretly write his stanza on a wall where the Master would pass by and see it. If the Master expressed delight at the stanza, he would admit to being its author otherwise he decided to remain silent. The stanza that he wrote said:

Our body is the Bodhi tree,
And our mind a mirror bright,
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
And let no dust alight.

After seeing the Stanza, the Master sent for Shen Hsiu, asking him if he was the author. Shen Hsiu admitted writing it and asked the Master if it demonstrated the least grain of wisdom. The Master replied:

"Your Stanza shows that you have not yet realised the Essence of Mind. So far you have reached the 'door of enlightenment', but you have not yet entered it."

Hui Neng, being illiterate was unable to write a Stanza, but he asked a young boy to write it for him. The boy agreed on condition that, should Hui Neng demonstrate that he is the worthy successor of the Dharma Master, he will help him to attain enlightenment. Hui Neng's Stanza read:

There is no Bodhi tree,
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can dust alight?

The Master had found his successor. He Said to Hui Neng:

"You are now the Sixth Patriarch, take good care of yourself, and deliver as many sentient beings as possible. Spread and preserve the Teaching and don't let it come to an end. Take note of my Stanza:

Sentient beings who sow the seeds of enlightenment
In the field of causation will reap the fruit of
Buddhahood.

Inanimate objects void of Buddha nature
Sow not and reap not."

Cha'an is the Chinese form of the Sanskrit word "Dhyana" (Jhana in Pali), which is a state of meditative absorption. Although not the first form of Buddhism to reach Korea, it was this school of Buddhism which was eventually to become the main Buddhist tradition in Korea where it became known as Son, from where it later spread to Japan where it was known as Zen. Cha'an, the roots of which are found in the Sattipathana Sutta, the most important sermon on meditation preached by the Buddha himself, emphasised realisation by personal effort rather than reliance on study of the scriptures which are externally based and related more to the experiences of others. Eric Zurcher, in his article in "The World of Buddhism" describes Cha'an thus: "It holds

that the universal 'Buddha nature' is immanent in ourselves and must be realised 'directly', in a mind to mind communication between the master and disciple, without relying on canonical texts or rational theorising. To effect this, all reasoning must be broken down; hence the characteristic use of unconventional means to evoke in the disciple the sudden and 'wordless' experience of Enlightenment: perplexing meditation themes, paradoxes, baffling answers; even yelling and beating are used to let 'the bottom of the tub fall out' and to plunge the practitioner into a state of 'no-mind'. In this state no distinction is made between the holy and the profane, between the religious career and the simple tasks of everyday life: the Highest Truth is contained in carrying water and chopping firewood."

Evidence of the importance placed in meditation in Korean Buddhism may be gained by the prevalence of the famous "Ox herding Pictures" adorning the exterior walls of the main hall of most temples. These pictures originated in China in the 12th century during the Sung Dynasty. In these pictures, the herder is you, the person on the spiritual quest and the ox is the mind. The herder is searching for the ox. It is the beginning of the spiritual search, a time for a change of lifestyle and the eradication of bad habits. Sometimes the Path is difficult to find. He finds evidence of the ox. The struggle is difficult and success seems far away, however, a murmur of achievement is heard faintly. He sees the ox for the first time. The way appears and he recognises it as right, even though it is still unclear. He catches the ox. It is difficult to tame. The mind wanders. He tames the ox. the mind is unruly but by perseverance the ox (mind) follows by itself. You may notice that the ox is changing colour from dark to light. The underlying idea is that the mind is naturally pure but is polluted by extraneous impurities. Through discipline and meditation practice it is cleansed and regains its original nature. The herder mounts the ox. The mind has submitted. He transcends the ox and stands alone. The herder pays no further attention to the ox. The herder and the ox are transcended, neither matter any more. This is the moment of Awakening. The circle is the symbol "Il Won", the Dharmakaya Buddha, the essence of enlightenment. He reaches the origin. Returning to the origin he 'recognises' what he knew before. He returns to the world where he lives to teach others. This model of the "Ten Ox herding Pictures" has its roots in the Pali commentaries where it says: "Just as a man would tie to a post a calf that should be tamed, even so here should one tie one's own mind tight to the object of mindfulness".

Prior to the arrival of Buddhism, the main religious practice in Korea was that of Shamanism which still holds a significant place in Korean life. Shamanism holds that human beings as well as natural forces and inanimate objects all possess spirits which must be appeased. Professor Eric Sharpe, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, once remarked to me that if you scratch the back of any Korean, you will find a Shaman lurking beneath. When I visited Korea, I found this to be true. Even the highly educated and

devout Buddhist Koreans have a strong belief in spirits and regularly visit the Shaman for a protective ritual. Since Shamanism was not seen to be morally in conflict with Buddhism, the two religions blended to produce a form of Buddhism that is uniquely Korean.

It is assumed that Buddhism first arrived on the Korean peninsular in 372 A.D. when a monk arrived from China bringing Chinese texts and statues. It was an elementary form of Buddhism that he taught, consisting of the teaching of Karma and the search for happiness which seemed to blend well with the indigenous Shamanism, so it was quickly assimilated.

At that time the peninsular consisted of three separate kingdoms of Koguryo to the north, Paekje to the south west and Shilla on the south east. It was in Koguryo that Buddhism was first established. In 384 the King of Paekje was converted to Buddhism and decreed that his subjects should follow suit. It was not until 527, however, that Buddhism became established in Shilla where it flourished. In 668 A.D. Shilla conquered the other kingdoms and Korea was unified. During the United Shilla Period, the arts flourished producing such magnificent items as the Sokuram image, which is in a cave near Kyongju, the beautiful Maitreya image and the Pulguksa temple in Kyongju with its famous twin stupas. The Koryo Dynasty which gave its name to present day Korea, assumed power in the 10th century. Its era heralded such important events as the creation of the Korean Tripitaka, the most complete collection of the Buddhist scriptures carved by hand in Chinese characters on over 80,000 wood blocks, as well as the birth of the famous monk Chi-nul who stressed a balance between the "mind only" meditation practice of Son and the study of the scriptures which is today the main feature of Korean Son practice. Chi-nul founded the Songgwangsa temple on Mount Chogye, and this temple remained the headquarters of the Chogye sect which is the main sect of Korean Son to this day. From the 14th century, with the assumption to the throne of the Chosun or Yi Dynasty and their adoption of Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism fell into decline. They destroyed all Buddhist temples in the main cities and banished the monks to the mountains where, even today, the main temples are to be found. With the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, Buddhism was again tolerated but the celibate monks were forced to take wives. Today, Korea, which was once a leading Buddhist country, boasts only 50% of the population practicing this religion.

The daily routine in a Son temple usually commences at 3 a.m. where the monks awaken to the sound of the Moktak, wooden hand drum, shaped like a fish. The legend tells of a naughty monk, who, after he died, was reborn as a fish. Out of his back grew a tree which caused him much pain. One day, his former teacher saw him swimming in a river and recognised him. He begged his teacher to remove the tree and carve a fish shaped instrument from it. The master did so and the sound of the Moktak has inspired the people whenever it is played in the temple. The monks arise and prepare themselves for morning chanting and meditation. The monks are summoned to the

meditation hall by the sound of a large bell which calls all humans, a drum which calls the animals, a cloud shaped gong which calls creatures of the air and a large log carved into the shape of a fish which calls all creatures that live in water. These sounds invite all sentient beings to listen to the chanting of the words of liberation taught by the Buddha. Buddhism holds as sacred what is known as the Triple Gem (Triratana in Sanskrit), which is the Buddha - the Teacher, the Dharma or his Teaching, and the Sangha or the order of followers - the clergy. Korea has temples devoted to each of these Gems. The T'ongdo - Sa (Sa is the Korean word for temple) is devoted to the Buddha as relics of the Buddha are enshrined there in a sacred stupa. The Haein - Sa represents the Teaching as it houses the famous wood blocks of the Buddhist texts or the Tripitaka Koreana. These wood blocks which are held in the library are, perhaps, the oldest wood blocks still used for printing still existing in the world. The third temple of the Triple Gem is Songgwang - Sa. This temple, as I have already pointed out, was founded by the great master Chi-nul in the 12th century. Early in the present century, the great master Ku-San established the International Zen Centre at this temple and it attracted students, from all over the world, who live and practice the Zen way of life there. The only important temple in Seoul, the Capital City, is the Chogye - Sa, which is the current headquarters of the Chogye sect founded by Chi-nul and the largest of the more than eighteen sects of Buddhism currently operating in Korea. The Chogye Order, which demands celibacy of its clergy, is currently undergoing some turmoil due to a scandal involving the Venerable Eui-hyun, the President of the order, whom it is alleged is secretly married with children.

A more recent sect, or new religious movement, which is gaining popularity, claiming more than one million adherents, is Won Buddhism which is a fusion of Buddhism and Confucianism. Its object of worship is not the traditional Buddha image but a circle the il Won. It is shunned by the Chogye Order as a heresy and parody on traditional Buddhism. It is claimed by its followers that the Founder, Soetaesan, born in the month of May, 1891, gained enlightenment at the age of twenty five after many years of struggle. He surveyed the world and felt that nobody would understand his enlightenment, however, after a few months he gained nine disciples. He called a gathering of these disciples at the village of Kunsan where he sat them at a table upon which were nine daggers and a death pact that they had to sign with their thumbprint, promising that they would each climb to the summit of the nine mountains surrounding Kunsan and after meditating, they would offer their lives for the sake of all sentient beings. They pressed their thumbs to the document and, miraculously, the print appeared in blood, even though they had not cut themselves. Because they fearlessly expressed their intention, they were excused from actually making the sacrifice. His disciples spent a year building a dam to reclaim some land from a sea swamp on which they grew rice which, when sold, supported the new religion. Soetaesan passed away in 1943 when, it is claimed, he

