

Going beyond Tradition and Striving for the Future: Challenges and Tasks Faced by the Korean Buddhist Community in American Society

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I. Introductory Remarks

FIRST OF ALL I WOULD LIKE to congratulate Kwanum-sa temple in Los Angeles for its thirtieth anniversary of the establishment. Kwanum-sa's importance in the Korean community in L.A. and its place in Korean Buddhism in America cannot be overemphasized, and in that sense it is my honor to be invited here and contribute my small thought in this meaningful moment.

This is a precious occasion joining together scholars with the respectable members of the sangha for the purpose of sharing their understanding, prospects for, and expectations about the role of Korean Buddhism in the United States. While reflecting on the thirty-year history of Kwanum-sa temple as well as its founding mission and its significance in the context of the Korean-American Buddhist community, we would like to ponder over the broader theme of Korean Buddhism in America. By doing so, we would, furthermore, like to identify future directions in which Korean Buddhism should attempt to move, so that the consensus and the ideas brought up in this symposium will therefore serve to help the members of the Buddhist community come up with concrete and practical ideas to promote Kwanum-sa's mission and that of Korean Buddhism in this country.

With this purpose in mind, that is, to develop meaningful and practical tactics to strive for the future, I would like to begin this talk by paying attention to the unique combination of diverse Buddhist traditions and other religions that are practiced in the United States, so as to broaden our understanding of the position of Korean Buddhism in the age of religious diversity.

As someone who is teaching about Korean Buddhism at a university in this country, I am used to questions such as: What made Korean Buddhism in particular relevant to a non-Korean or a Western audience? There are already so many kinds of Buddhism that are being taught here in the United States—Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese Zen, many different Tibetan schools, and Theravāda traditions. There are already so many traditions and they are already claiming their truth and advocating their most effective way to Buddhahood, why do we need to add Korean Buddhism here? What makes it special such that we should learn about it? In discussing and trying to answer these types of provocative questions, you may quickly realize that nationalist presumptions about why Korean Buddhism is important and what characteristics make it unique and relevant here in the United States cannot work. In other words, saying, “Korean Buddhism is good because we are Korean” cannot work for those students who are neither Korean nor Buddhist. I have my own candid answers to this question as a scholar, but I would like to toss this question to the audience as a question to ponder, so as to aid your future efforts preparing for upcoming demands and challenges, both from within and without, and to determine the tasks required to promote Korean Buddhism.

II. Korean-American Buddhism as a Part of American Buddhism

The question can be paraphrased in another way: How is Korean Buddhism relevant to the already well-established American Buddhism? In this question there are two types of Buddhisms being supposed: Korean Buddhism and American Buddhism. Some may say, “Where is American Buddhism?” Buddhism started in India and spread to the south and the north. The former transmission resulted in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, and the latter so-called Mahāyāna tradition was transmitted through Central Asia to China, Korea, and Japan, such that “Chinese” Buddhism, “Korean” Buddhism, and “Japanese” Buddhism were established as national traditions. But American Buddhism has never existed as such a historical entity. Might Buddhism in America be a more correct term, instead of American Buddhism? Especially for those who come from countries where Buddhism is regarded as a national religion, the appellation of American Buddhism might even be threatening, undermining their own long history and tradition: “Even if the Buddhism currently practiced in America can be called ‘American Buddhism,’ the origin and root of Buddhism belongs to us, therefore American Buddhism should always refer to ‘us’ and ‘our Buddhism’ as its origin. Everything comes from us, so we should be in a position of authority.” In response to such a critique, I

would briefly point out that the term American Buddhism makes no claims to represent any one such national tradition as does such a term as Korean Buddhism. In fact, American Buddhism refers specifically to a plurality of traditions, and beyond that, the blurring or transformation of all these traditions. However, within that blur, stark contrasts remain in the pigmentation of American Buddhism.

"American Buddhism" has been getting a lot of attention from scholars lately, with its more than a hundred years of history and a unique identity emerging from the individual ethnic Buddhist traditions that it has grown out of. Rick Fields, the author of *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, distinguishes two types of Buddhism in his article contained in *The Faces Buddhism in America*.¹ These two types started separately and have more or less existed separately: the first is the construction of America's first Buddhist temple in San Francisco Chinatown in 1853 by a Chinese company; and the second begins with the taking of the Three Refuges Vow by a New York businessman, Charles Strauss, from the Sinhalese Anagarika Dharmapāla in the aftermath of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. On one hand, an Asian ethnic community builds a temple to protect and preserve its values as well as to minister to the spiritual needs of its members. On the other hand, a mostly white and middle-class group adopts and adapts a Buddhism taught by a charismatic missionary. These two very different beginnings symbolize the dual development of American Buddhism.

Today, more than a hundred years later, Buddhism in America has proliferated wildly. There remain communities of Asian Buddhist immigrants, or their descendants. At the same time, groups of mostly white, middle-class students continue to organize around missionary teachers from Japan, China, Korea, Burma, Śrī Laṅka, Vietnam, and Tibet. While the former has come to be called "ethnic Buddhism," the latter has garnered the title "American Buddhism."

In light of this development of different Buddhist communities in America, two types of Korean Buddhism in America can also be identified: that which is derived from Korean sources and taught in English primarily within an environment of non-Koreans, and the community of immigrants and their re-creation of their native religious tradition. I would call the former "American Korean Buddhism" as one of those American Buddhisms, and the latter "Korean American Buddhism," or "immigrant Buddhism" or "ethnic Buddhism." The reason that I articulate these artificial terms to distinguish those two streams is to acknowledge the difference that exists between the two as well as to identify both the resonance and discord that these communities share. By doing so it is hoped an environment can be established that could be mutually stimulating, compensating, and beneficial, even while acknowledging the present distance that separates these two groups.

III. Trends and Differences

If we might consider ourselves in a situation trapped by the cultural and ethnic boundaries of our own tradition and we wanted to try to overcome the boundaries by opening the scope and vision of our own traditional way of practice in Korean Buddhism, the first thing we would have to do is identify those major cultural differences that lay between us. Here I would like to list a few areas of differences.

(1) Monastic Versus Community Life

One of the most conspicuous differences is the American Buddhist's preference for ministry-focused Buddhism over monastic practice. The temples are the places where those ethnic or American Buddhist leaders teach and train new, incoming practitioners, after having done their own training and practices elsewhere. Traditional Korean monasteries perform both functions of teaching disciples as well as training their own monastic members while deepening their own religious practices. However, as the case in a Christian church where ministers who have done their theological training elsewhere and are then dispatched to perform their pastoral work, the central role of an American Buddhist temple lies in teaching and training lay disciples.

This preference also has a significant impact on the expectations that shape the role of clergy, not only in terms of how they relate with the lay population, but also in regard to the mode of administrative and operational control of their religious communities. Korean Buddhism is quite practice-oriented, and the emphasis on religious practice strongly dominates the minds of the Buddhist followers. They are generally expected to be great practitioners, and have more alternatives to select from if they are not interested in running a temple. In other words, even the monks and nuns who seclude themselves from society and make no "concrete" contribution to humanity earn respect and support from the Buddhist followers. In that scheme of expectations for themselves, the majority of monks and nuns in Korea rely mainly on donations coming from lay members of the temple, especially those major and important supporters, who donate as a means of accumulating merit.

In contrast, the degree to which American Buddhist monastics rely on lay members or disciples for their own support and spiritual development is relatively much less than in ethnic Buddhism. Instead, they earn their means of support by providing religious services to the members, such as offering meditation courses and seminars, or engaging in fundraising activities, which are more like an earned income at the cost of their labor.

As we know, in Western society it is quite unusual for someone to live the isolated life of a monastic. It is also not quite plausible for those who have been taught to live independently to become a monk and live on others' donations. Reflecting this social milieu of the West, many monks and religious leaders do not require their aspirants to make monastic vows of leading a complete life of renunciation, leaving family or any secular ties.

Contrary to the situation, in Asia where meditation is largely limited to monks and nuns and lay people dedicated to meditation training, in American temples meditation is practiced as part of their regular program for all members, even though the degree to which meditation is emphasized within an individual regimen of practice is different depending on their traditions. An American temple's activities include a diverse array of ongoing programs as well as annual events. A typical temple would be a place where men and women gather and do meditation together as well as have occasional retreats. Rather than a locus of practice for monks and nuns, the temple is a place for practice and training for the lay members. In this respect, American Buddhism is a movement of lay people. The foremost role of the monks and nuns is that of a dharma master who guides and trains lay practitioners. The first generation of lay disciples learned Buddhism from the "pioneer dharma masters," so they also assume that they themselves will eventually take on the role of their dharma master and devote their lives to training disciples when their generation later takes over the leadership role. They wanted to be both practitioner and teacher, but perhaps most of all, a respected dharma master.

This type of self-identification explains the unique tendency emphasizing pedagogy. In Korea, "dharma pedagogy" is not something you would learn or devise, but rather a skill that would automatically come to you as your level of religious attainment rises. There is another reason for American Buddhism's emphasis on pedagogy: many students of meditation and members of a temple approach Buddhism basically as a type of psychology, a way to appease your mind, or even a technique for you to improve your concentration level. In other words, religious commitment would not be considered as the first category to identify them as Buddhist. Accordingly, the degree of your respect for your teacher is less related to how accomplished he or she is as a practitioner (though this is, of course, still important) as it is to whether or not he or she is a charismatic teacher with a unique pedagogical skill.

The Dalai Lama of Tibet and the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh are the most prominent and celebrated religious leaders in this country. Thich Nhat Hanh describes this characteristic of American Buddhism in this way: "Buddhism in America may be mostly lay Buddhism. The family should become a field of practice, and the Buddhist center should be a center for families to come and practice. That does not mean that monastic Buddhism should not exist. But it should exist in a way that has a very close

link to other kinds of Buddhism. Democracy, science, and art should contribute as well. We should build Buddhism with the local materials.”²

(2) Issue of Women and Family

The ever-present issue of acculturation is a significant area of discord between ethnic Korean Buddhists and their American counterparts. Common social concerns that Americans grew up with in their churches and elsewhere, specifically regarding the role of women and families in religious communities, bring a sort of challenge to traditional ways of practice in Korean communities. As identified in Thich Nhat Hanh’s quote, Buddhist centers should become a center for families to come and practice, which means that religious leaders should put themselves in a position of providing their advice and wisdom to those issues that many families go through, such as child-rearing and better ways of educating children. They are expected to provide their advice to those in need, and help the parents lead wholesome lives and become better parents. Holding a seminar focusing on those issues would be one way of addressing this concern. As we might expect, to a celibate monk or nun, this might not be an issue of much interest. This scenario shows clearly the kind of cultural differences that Korean Buddhism would have in this country.

Attitudes towards the role of women is also an area of interest. It is important for us to understand that feminist ideas have been central to the development of American Buddhism. Female Buddhist leaders and practitioners have played and continue to play a major role in shaping new attitudes and practices. Buddhism is almost the only major religion in the world that has recognized a community of female monastic practitioners, *bhikṣuṇī-s*, as equivalent to their male counterparts, *bhikṣu-s*. This contrasts sharply with the experience of Protestant female ministers who have only recently been accepted, and then only within some sects. In addition, Catholic nuns cannot be considered an equal partner of male priests. Compare this to Buddhism, where the female sangha was formed at the very beginning by the founder of Buddhism, the Buddha. This is not to say that Buddhism has been a feminist religion. However, in spite of a lot of deliberations and hesitation, and even though historically female practitioners have suffered from an unjust status and inferior treatment from male practitioners as well as from the society, it is equally important to understand that fundamentally, they are the equal partners and full-pledged members of the monastic community.³ The fact that traditionally women have been more ardent in religious affairs than men and that about seventy to eighty percent of the lay members of Korean Buddhist temples are women should be taken into account, as well.⁴

American female Buddhists are keenly aware of Buddhist egalitarian ideas and expect their masters to behave according to them. During the

1980s many complaints were brought to masters who are mostly from East Asia for their patriarchal perspective and authoritarian ideas. Some of those complaints are still relevant to Korean Buddhist society in America. In American Buddhist dharma centers we now see increasing numbers of women masters, and they also talk about a special regimen and ways of practices especially for women, such as holding retreats only for women or changing the wording of traditional chants to include more gender neutral language.

(3) Moral Concerns

Korean Buddhist temples in Korea as well as in America now face the demand to develop new interpretation of existing precepts and rules as well as to provide Buddhist morals and interpretations toward the Western society. Regarding the former point: scholars have observed that in comparison with Taiwanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism is marked by a relatively lax application of precepts. This is seen for example in such matters as vegetarianism and other requirements found in the monastic rules. There are other examples. It is oftentimes the case in a Korean monastery (in which rice is the major food item) that they set mousetraps or some other means of killing mice. In this case, if there is a need to redefine the no-killing precepts it should take into consideration those who would be shocked by such inconsistencies and might lose faith in the integrity of the Buddhist rules. A clarification in the application of precepts so as to prevent possible confusion or the appearance of being evasive can only help in the task of bringing trust to Buddhist institutions.

American Buddhists teach not only about focusing on your own spiritual progress or your own enlightenment, or transcending this worldly life, but also about how to lead your everyday life in a "Buddhist" way, the latter of which is not regarded as a central message of Buddhist teaching in Korean tradition. Thus in the American dharma centers we can see classes and seminars offered exploring how to do your business in Buddhist ways, how to perceive material accumulation or your commercial activities, or how to live a simple and frugal life.

(4) Social Concerns as One of the Areas with Which a Religion Should Be Involved

Social engagement is another area that Korean Buddhism has been criticized for having traditionally paid insufficient attention. Their passive attitude towards political and social issues is contrasted with the fact that social engagement has traditionally been a major locus of Christian concern. The rationale of Buddhist social welfare and relief work should come directly from Buddhist teaching, according to the idea of "*gongjeop*,"

common responsibilities and consequence of common actions. As a point of comparison, we can look to the development of a movement labeled “engaged Buddhism” which advocates a Buddhist understanding of “universal human responsibility” based on the central notion that “nothing can exist by itself.” Among the concerns of engaged Buddhism are the opposition to the use of violence and advocacy of peaceful solutions based upon tolerance and mutual respect, concern for environmentally sound development, anti-racist/sexist/homophobic activism, and activities aimed towards economic and social justice.

Samu Sunim, the Korean master who has been teaching Korean Buddhism in Toronto, Chicago, Ann Arbor, and other places in North America, is one of the leading and most active masters practicing American Korean Buddhism in this country. After seeing the tragedy of 9/11, he resumed *Spring Winds*, a Buddhist magazine that had been dormant for many years because of financial difficulties. I remember him as the first Buddhist leader in this country who issued a message as a Buddhist that reacting to physical violence with more violence, no matter what the reason, would be simply wrong—as taught in Buddhism. As stated clearly in Buddhist scripture and also taught by the Buddha and other previous masters, violence will bring more violence. While this may seem like a very clear-cut interpretation, Samu Sunim’s advocacy for non-violence is especially important when contrasted to the more ambiguous responses to 9/11 that came from other quarters of American Buddhism.⁵

There is really no limit to the number of issues that Buddhists can address. I was glad that one of the Korean Buddhist temples in California was providing a lunch for the homeless. Within the capacity of our purpose and resources, we should think deeply about the gradual development of similar programs.

IV. Entering into Diversity

So far we have identified some areas of difference that have prevented a greater intermingling of Korean Buddhism in America. This separation has been a key element in preventing Korean Buddhism from taking its place as a full-fledged member of American Buddhism and in being a more active participant in the diversity not only of Buddhist traditions, but of all the myriad religions practiced in this country.

Nevertheless, even after acknowledging the differences between Korean and American Buddhists, with the right effort, ethnic Korean Buddhists can seek to meet the interest of those Americans practicing Korean Buddhism in America, directing them towards the abundant opportunities for contact with Korean cultural and spiritual resources that exist within the ethnic Korean tradition in America. At the same time, these groups can

also take a more active role in introducing Korean culture and traditional religious values as a means of adding to the richness of American cultural pluralism. Such activities would of course only benefit from an increased interaction with sympathetic American interlocutors.

However, with this in mind, I am not proposing to have both communities merged or bridged into one, nor do I think that there is only a unilateral way of Korean Buddhist advancement to the West. I rather propose that the real change should come from the Korean Buddhist community to become a part of this greater American Buddhist community, and that the two communities sustain their own identities and ways of practices. The point being made here is that each should remain open to the other, so that each can utilize the resources and strengths of the other. I would predict, however, that eventually, when the younger generation takes up an initiative in the affairs of the Korean Buddhist community, gradual and progressive change will come in the ways Korean Buddhism is practiced, so that present gaps existing between the two communities will be narrowed with the center shifting away from a closed ethnic tradition towards the direction of American Buddhism.

V. Concluding Remarks

There are many points remaining to be addressed, such as the issue of whether one's own practice can be simultaneously achieved while dedicating oneself to proselytizing and training others. I would rather conclude with my rather candid suggestion that I wanted to toss to the leaders of Korean Buddhist communities in America by introducing you to this anecdote of the Dalai Lama on the future of American Buddhism, quoted from Rick Fields' observations.

When a reporter asked him if he had any observations to make about the future of Buddhism in America, His Holiness scratched his head in his characteristic way and seemed momentarily stumped. "Difficult question," he said, and thought some more. "I think that any person is the same human being, and has the same problem," he began, "birth, old age, and internal attachment. As far as the teaching aspect is concerned, it will always remain the same because the origin is the same. But the cultural aspect changes. Now you see Buddhism comes to West. Eventually, it will be Western Buddhism. That, I think, is very helpful—that Buddhism become a part of American life."⁶ So, it is still in the process of becoming, it's still carving its own image.

Korean Buddhism should be contributing first as simply one of many forms of "Buddhism," and then add the cultural aspect of being specifically Korean Buddhism. With its diverse ethnic cultural backgrounds, ethnic Buddhism has been and will continue to be an important transmitter of

culture to American society. With the addition of their unique cultural patterns, not only American Buddhism but Americans will become more diverse and beautiful. Bearing that in mind, it should be more important and fruitful for us to participate in the efforts of other Buddhist traditions in America to establish and spread Buddhist teachings and practices in general, rather than always emphasizing our own unique patterns and their being more beautiful than others. While participating in those common and communal efforts of American Buddhism, the cultural color and personality of Korean Buddhism will be naturally established.⁷

NOTES

1. Rick Fields, "Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: UC Press, 1998), pp. 183–195.

2. Re-quoted from Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala Books, 1992), p. 377.

3. Rita Gross lists the following points that she identifies are common in Buddhism and feminism. (1) Preference of experience over theory, (2) thus you are encouraged to move forward and practice to achieve the goal, (3) both Buddhism and feminism are interested in how the human mind works.

Sandy Boucher's theory: (1) Buddhism does not assume an absolute god, nor a submissive relationship between omnipotent Father and me. Buddhism teaches how to trust one's own experiences. (2) In terms of methodology, Buddhism questions any existing hypothesis. Feminists question patriarchal hypotheses and their norms. Buddhism teaches meditation to reveal the reality of feelings and ideas. Feminism is neither dogma, nor creed or faith. (3) Buddhism presupposes Buddha nature which is covered by the veil of ignorance. It teaches us to take away the veil and realize our own beauty and potential. The purpose is to obtain freedom out of limited ideology and conditions.

4. On the contemporary religious landscape of Buddhism, nuns are equal and indispensable partners for monks in many senses, regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged. Like monks, they receive full ordination (Korean and Taiwanese are the only two traditions that maintain full ordination for nuns). In the past, Buddhism was almost entirely a man's world. Nowadays, radical changes have been taking place. Nuns are not only equal in numbers with monks, but have also proven themselves to be active participants in the tradition in various capacities: as avid meditators, compassionate caretakers for the needy, organized administrators of social welfare facilities, attentive and powerful leaders for city-based Buddhist centers, and organizers and demonstrators in rallies demanding democracy, whether within the Chogyo Order or against prejudices in the media and government policy.

5. A not so insignificant number of American Buddhists supported war after 9/11; I was really disappointed to see a large number of American Buddhists publicly express a very extreme ambivalence about "non-violence." While those such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have maintained non-violence in the face of decades of horrible trauma, all it

took was one tragedy for many American Buddhists to turn to violent retribution. It was truly shameful in my opinion and kind of laid bare the relative superficiality of American Buddhism. In light of such lack of integrity, Samu Sunim's position is even more valuable.

6. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 379.

7. For example, a tradition of Zen practice, liveliness, flexibility, etc.