

# The Life and Times of Won Hyo

by Mu Soeng Su Nim, Director of the Providence Zen Center

From 37 B.C. to 688 A.D. the Korean peninsula was divided into three warring kingdoms: Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla. Chinese Buddhism was first introduced into Koguryo, the northernmost of the Three Kingdoms, in 372 A.D. Twelve years later (348 A.D.) the Indian monk Marantara brought Buddhism to Paekche. It wasn't until 150 years later that Buddhism was officially recognized as the state religion of the Silla kingdom. This belated recognition reflected the conservative nature of Silla society at that time. Silla's geographical location in the south, far from the influence of the Chinese continent, made it less open to influences from Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. However, once Silla embraced Buddhism, no effort was spared in promoting it. Believing that Buddhism would protect the state and bring good fortune, the ruling Silla elite lavished state funds on temples and Buddhist images.

King Chinhung of Silla was instrumental in constructing several major temples, and in founding the "Hwarang-do," a kind of West Point, a paramilitary youth corps for training the nobility. Some of Silla's ablest leaders were shaped by this austere military training and the Buddhist and Confucian ideals embodied in the "Hwarang."

Coming through India and central Asia as well as China, Buddhism brought not only a religious ideology but also an artistic culture which resulted in an artistic renaissance in the Three Kingdoms, finding its fullest flowering in the Unified Silla period

(668-935) known as the Golden Age of Buddhism in Korea.

The monk Won Hyo set the shape and form of Silla Buddhism and was the dominant figure in the Korean Buddhist tradition as well. Along with two other famous Korean Buddhists, Chinul and Sosan Taesa, Won Hyo was one of the most influential thinkers Korea has ever produced. It is said he authored some 240 works on Buddhism; of these, 20 works in 25 volumes still exist. During his lifetime he dominated the intellectual and religious arenas both inside and outside Korea. He made extensive commentaries on all the different schools of Buddhism that were competing for supremacy at that time.

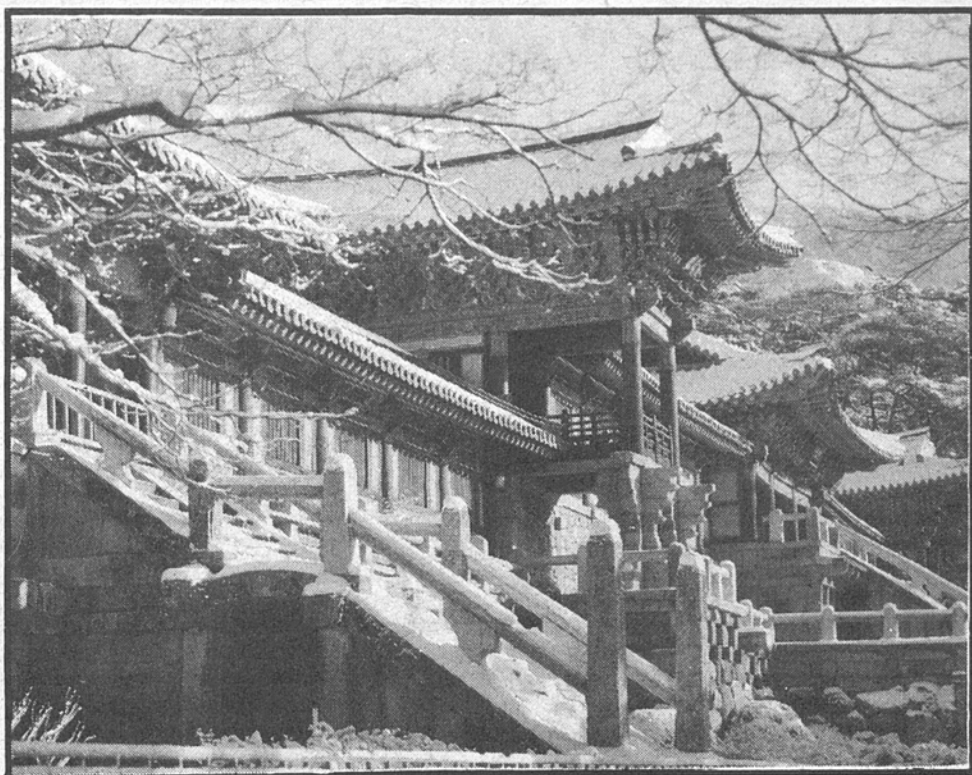
Won Hyo was born in 617 A.D. in the town of Za-in-myon in Kyongsang Province in Silla. One legend has it that Won Hyo's mother, while pregnant with him, was passing by a sala tree when she suddenly felt birth pangs. Without having time to reach her home, she gave birth to Won Hyo right there. A five colored cloud hung in the sky. This story is similar to the legend that Shakyamuni Buddha died under a pair of sala trees in northern India. The mythmaker's aim seems clear: to glorify Won Hyo as the greatest Buddha born in Silla.

Civil war marked the period of Won Hyo's birth and childhood. China launched unsuccessful attacks on Koguryo in 598 and 612. T'ang dynasty also sent unsuccessful expeditions against Koguryo in 645 and 647. Then China allied with Silla and attacked Paekche. By 660, T'ang had destroyed Paekche, and then with Silla, turned on Koguryo, defeating it in 668. Silla was able to thwart the T'ang dynasty's effort to rule the Korean peninsula, and established its own rule. A unified country finally existed and became known as the Unified Silla period.

Won Hyo was born 100 years after Buddhism was officially recognized by Silla. National policy was being reshaped in line with Buddhist ethics, and Buddhism was coming into its own as a national religion. An apocryphal Chinese Buddhist scripture, the "Scripture for Wise Royalty and National Protection," was frequently preached.

A legend asserts that Won Hyo, as a young man, took part in a bloody civil war and saw many of his friends slaughtered and homes destroyed. Most sources agree that he became a monk at the age of 20. One story says he remodeled his home as a temple which he named Ch'ogae-sa; another says he shaved his head and went into the mountains to live as a monk. It is not clear which teachers he studied Buddhism under. Some say it was Nangji on Yong-ch'wi Mountain, others say he was a disciple of priest Popchang at Hungnyun-sa. Still another legend has it that he learned the Nirvana Sutra from Podok, a Koguryo priest in exile in Silla.

A major event in the history of Buddhism at this point, and one which was to affect Won Hyo, was the return to China of the scholar Huan-Tchuang, after 17 years of Buddhist studies in India. His return was a



turning point for the translation of Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist priests from Silla travelled to China to study him. In the year 650 when Won Hyo was 33 years old, he set out for T'ang China in the company of his friend Uisang, who later became the National Teacher of Korea. Both had been inspired to study under the famous Buddhist scholar. Their journey was smooth, except in Koguryo near the Chinese border when they were mistaken for spies by the Koguryo sentries and barely escaped being captured. One of the most famous stories in Korean Buddhism concerns Won Hyo's enlightenment during this attempted journey to China.

"One evening as Won Hyo was crossing the desert, he stopped at a small patch of green where there were a few trees and some water. He went to sleep. Toward midnight he awoke, very thirsty. It was pitch-dark. He groped along on all fours, searching for water. At last his hand touched a cup on the ground. He picked it up and drank. Ah, how delicious! Then he bowed deeply, in gratitude to Buddha for the gift of water.

The next morning Won Hyo woke up and saw beside him what he had taken for a cup. It was a shattered skull, blood-caked and with shreds of flesh still stuck to the cheek-bones. Strange insects crawled or floated on the surface of the filthy rainwater inside it. Won Hyo looked at the skull and felt a great wave of nausea. He opened his mouth. As soon as the vomit poured out, his mind opened and he understood. Last night, since he hadn't seen and hadn't thought, the water was delicious. This morning, seeing and thinking had made him vomit. Ah, he said to himself, thinking makes good and bad, life and death. And without thinking, there is no universe, no Buddha, no Dharma. All is one, and this one is empty.

There was no need now to find a master. Won Hyo already understood life and death. What more was there to learn? So he turned and started back across the desert to Korea."

His friend, Uisang, continued on to China and learned the doctrines of the Chinese school Hwa-om (in Chinese: Hua-yen) and later established this school in Korea when he returned.

Back in Silla, Won Hyo wandered the streets one day, chanting a mysterious song. "Who dares lend me an axe without a handle? I'll hew down the pillars supporting the heaven." No one in the streets knew what he meant, but when King Mu-yul heard the song, he interpreted it to mean that Won Hyo was anxious for a noble woman and a bright son. The king invited him to Yosok Palace and arranged for Won Hyo and Princess Kwa to fall in love. The result of their liaison was the child Sol Ch'ong, who became one of the great Confucian

scholars of the Silla period. His annotations of the Confucian scriptures in Korea remained the standard reference work for many centuries.

Won Hyo's re-entry and life in the secular world was complex and brilliant. Some of his most notable religious activities took place after he left the priesthood. His life in this period was filled with prodigious scholarly work and a life-style that was shocking to both his religious and secular contemporaries. He never presumed to be a renunciate monk, but called himself "Sosong Kosa" or "small layman."

This small layman had no scruples about eating and sleeping in the houses of nobles or the lowly. He didn't conform to the accepted social code, didn't care about his language, and had no hesitation about visiting drinking houses or brothels. He played the zither at shrines, and used to drum on an empty gourd singing, "Only a man with no worries and fears can go straight and overcome life and death or transmigration." This was a phrase borrowed from the Hwa-om sutra, to which he made extensive commentary. He often went to mountains and streams to meditate. At the same time, he was involved in the military activities going on around him. It is said that he interpreted a letter of military secrets from one of the T'ang generals.

He named his trousers "no obstacle" and wearing them, wandered around villages and hamlets, singing and dancing. A story from this period of his life, perhaps apocryphal, sheds light on his transformation from an ordinary monk to an unorthodox personality.

"There was a great Zen Master in Silla—a little old man with a wisp of a beard and skin like a crumpled paper bag. Barefoot and in tattered clothes, he would walk through the towns ringing his bell. De-an, de-an, de-an, de-an don't think, de-an like this, de-an rest mind, de-an, de-an.

Won Hyo heard of him and one day hiked to the mountain cave where he lived. From a distance he could hear the sound of extraordinarily lovely chanting echoing through the valleys. But when he arrived at the cave, he found the Master sitting beside a dead fawn, weeping. Won Hyo was dumbfounded. How could an enlightened being be either happy or sad, since in the state of Nirvana there is nothing to be happy or sad about, and no one to be happy or sad?

He stood speechless for a while, and then asked the Master why he was weeping. The Master explained he had come upon the fawn after its mother had been killed by hunters. It was very hungry. So he had gone into town and begged for milk. Since he knew no one would give him milk for an animal, he had said it was for his son.

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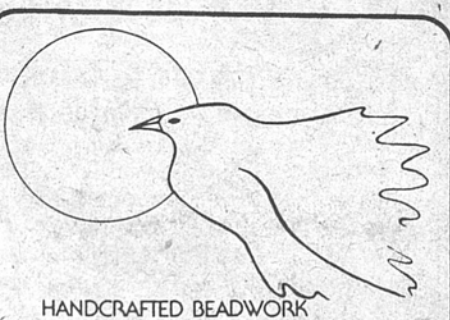
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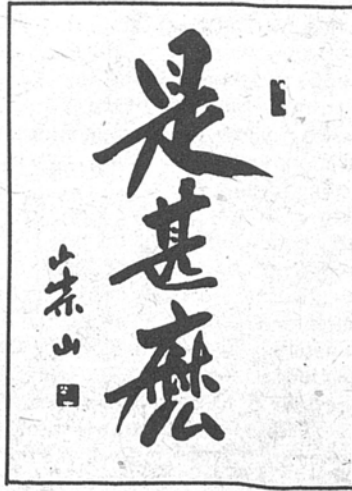
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## Won Hyo

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"A monk with a son? What a dirty old man!" people thought. But some gave him a little milk. He had continued this way for a month, begging enough to keep the animal alive. Then the scandal became too great, and no one would help.

He had been wandering for three days now, in search of milk. At last he found some, but when he returned to the cave, his fawn was already dead. "You don't understand," said the Master. "My mind and fawn's are the same. It was very hungry. I want milk, I want milk. Now it is dead. Its mind is my mind. That's why I am weeping. I want milk."

Won Hyo began to understand how great a Bodhisattva the Master was. When all creatures are happy, he was happy. When all creatures were sad, he was sad. He said to him, "Please teach me." The Master said, "All right. Come along with me."

They went to the red-light district of town. The Master took Won Hyo's arm and walked up to the door of a geisha-house. De-an, de-an, he rang. A beautiful woman opened the door. "Today I've brought the great monk Won Hyo to visit you." "Oh! Won Hyo!" she cried out. Won Hyo blushed. The woman blushed and her eyes grew large. She led them upstairs, in great happiness, fear and exhilaration that the famous handsome monk had come to her. As she prepared meat and wine for her visitors, the Master said to Won Hyo, "For twenty years you've kept company with kings and princes and monks. It's not good for a monk to live in heaven all the time. He must also visit hell and save people there, who are wallowing in their desires. Hell too, is "like this." So tonight you will ride this wine straight to hell."

"But I've never broken a single Precept before," Won Hyo said. "Have a good trip," said the Master. He then turned to the woman and said sternly, "Don't you know it's a sin to give wine to a monk? Aren't you afraid of going to hell?" "No," said the woman. "Won Hyo will come and save me." "A very good answer!" said the Master.

So Won Hyo stayed the night and broke more than one Precept. The next morning he took off his elegant robes and went dancing through the streets, barefoot and in tatters. "De-an, de-an, de-an! The whole universe is like this! What are you?"

At this point while Won Hyo was living the life of a hippie monk, he was also writing extensive commentaries on the sutras. In spite of his lifestyle, it is said he was the trusted adviser to the king of Silla, and preceptor to the noblest and most powerful families. Apparently he lived in different temples around the capital and was completely accessible to the common people, who would listen to his spontaneous talks. These missionary activities were greatly responsible for popularizing Buddhism in Silla.

Won Hyo died at 70 in the year 686, nine years after the unification of the Korean peninsula under Silla. His body laid in state by his son, Sol Ch'ong, at Punhwang-sa temple.

Won Hyo is formally credited with being the founder of the Popsang (Dharma-nature) school of Buddhism, a uniquely Korean school of thought. He made extensive commentaries on sutras belonging to different schools of Buddhism and was the first major Buddhist thinker to attempt to harmonize them. In his treatise "Ten approaches to the Reconciliation of Doctrinal Controversy" (Sim-nun hwajaeng non), he aimed to harmonize the different schools and explore ways of finding an all-inclusive vision of these sects. At the time he preached and lived a popular form of Buddhism which directly affected the lives of his ordinary followers.

What mattered most to Won Hyo was not interpreting words or demonstrating wide learning, but understanding the central spirit of the scriptures. To him, Buddhism was no longer Indian or Chinese, it was his, the everyday religion of a Silla subject.

Won Hyo's scholarly reputation was secured by his theory of "One Mind and Two Doors" in Kishinnon (Awakening of Faith). Clearly dissatisfied by trends current among contemporary Buddhist scholars, he wrote in the beginning notes on "Kishinnon:"

"Only a few of those who presume to interpret the deep meaning of this theory understand all the essential points. Most of them are busy with preserving what they have learned and quoting phrases, not prepared to explore the main core openly and freely. Without attributing to the intentions of the theoretician, they stray near tributaries, although the source is nearby, or let go the trunk, holding onto leaves, or sew the sleeves with cloth cut from the collar."

Won Hyo authored many works on Kishinnon, but only two still exist: "Taesung Kishinnon So" (Treatise on the Awakening of Faith) and "Taesung Kishinnon Pyolki" (Special Commentary on Taesung Kishinnon). The two works are inseparable, the former containing his main theories on Kishinnon, the latter revised annotations. Together they are known as the "Kishinnon Haedong Sogi."

Won Hyo gave a brilliant series of lectures after his re-entry into the secular world, on the Kumgang-sammaegyong sutra. One day the Silla king invited all the noted scholars, including Won Hyo, to a gathering at the royal palace. Disturbed by Won Hyo's care-free and unorthodox lifestyle, the other monks asked the king not to invite Won Hyo. The king agreed, but sometime later fell ill, and his illness lingered. He asked Won Hyo to come see him in the palace, requesting that he give a public lecture on the Kumgang Sammaegyong sutra. Within a very short time, Won Hyo completed a five-volume annotation on the sutra. It was believed that only the monk Tae-an, who also practiced the truth of "no obstacles," could compile this scattered sutra, and only Won Hyo could append notes to it. However, jealous monks stole the manuscript. In three days, Won Hyo had restored the first three volumes and lectured on them at the Hwangnyong-sa temple before the king, ranking court officials, monks and laymen, displaying profound learning. (This three-volume annotation still exists.) After the lecture, Won Hyo declared, "When they needed a hundred rafters some time ago, they omitted me. This morning, they needed one large beam. I was the only person possessing the function."

This display of learning was a vivid reminder of how great an influence Won Hyo's practice of "no obstacle" could be on the Buddhist world of his time, bound as it was by such formality. The three volumes of Kumgang Sammaegyong So, considered to be one of Won Hyo's major works, was introduced to China, where it was printed and received as a truly great treatise.

Won Hyo's great historical significance lies in his role as a harmonizer and founder of the syncretic trend in Korean Buddhism, a trend which has dominated its entire historical development. His personality combined a major intellect and a talent for popularizing Buddhism. His life-style led not to polarization but to a spirit of harmony. Won Hyo's spirit is his most lasting legacy. Even today it continues to have an immeasurable impact on Buddhist thinkers and monks.

Footnotes:

- (1) **Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn**, edited by Stephen Mitchell (Grove Press, New York, 1976) pp. 60-61.
- (2) *Ibid.* pp. 61-63.
- (3) **The Korean Approach to Zen**, Robert Buswell, Jr. (published by University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1983) pp. 7-9.

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