

Native Tradition in Korean Zen

Part II: The Teachings of Chinul

by Mu Soeng Sunim

Bojo Chinul (1158-1210) is considered the founder of a native tradition of Zen in Korea, combining the cultivation of prajna (wisdom) and samadhi (meditation), of sutra study and Zen practice. As such, he is the seminal thinker in the tradition of Korean Zen. In the first part of this article (PRIMARY POINT, June, 1989) we examined the turbulent times in which he was born and the background of his monastic training.

Zen Master Chinul became the first Zen teacher in Korea to systematically use “hwa-tou” (or kong-an, C: koan) practice in the training of monks in his community. This was also an interesting transitional time in Korean Zen. The founders of the Nine Mountain schools had trained in Ma-tsu’s method of shock tactics, but even in China itself, the use of koans as a teaching tool was not adopted until the third generation after Zen Master Lin-Chi in the mid-tenth century. By that time, it had become very difficult for Koreans monks to travel to China; also Korean Zen itself had lost its original vigor and was entering a period of decline. For these reasons, it fell to Chinul to introduce this new teaching tool in Korean Zen. His own knowledge of it came through the writings of Zen Master Tai-hui (1089-1163).

Before we go into Chinul’s method of investigating the “hwa-tou”, I want to emphasize Chinul’s insistence again and again on One Mind. This is the core of Chinul’s teaching: that both the deluded mind and the enlightened mind are part of the same landscape, the One Mind. The deluded mind is not separate from the enlightened one and the enlightened mind is not separate from the deluded mind, and they are both within us. Most of us have the idea that there is something outside of us that we must look for. Chinul firmly demolishes this notion again and again in his writings and talks. For a record of Chinul’s writings, we have a translation of Chinul’s works by Robert Buswell (*The Korean Approach to Zen*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu), a premier work of Buddhist scholarship in America.

In Buswell’s translation, Chinul’s writing is very clear; part of the reason is the writings are answers to questions put to him in open assemblies. Thus his words become live and have a sense of immediacy about them.

At an assembly, someone asked Chinul, “How is it that saints and ordinary people are not the same?” We all have this idea that we are very ordinary and are not saints, that we are inferior, that we don’t have the qualities of saints. The questioner is asking Chinul why, if both the ordinary person and the saint have the same One Mind, they are not the same? Chinul responded to this question, “The true mind is originally the same in the saint and the ordinary man, but because the ordinary man endorses the reality of material things with the false mind, he

loses his pure nature and becomes estranged from it, therefore the true mind cannot appear. It is like the tree’s shadow in the darkness, or a spring flowing underground. It exists.”

When asked, “When the true mind is beset by delusion, it becomes an ordinary mind. How then can we escape from delusion and achieve sanctity?”, Chinul replied, “When there is no place for the deluded mind, that is Bodhi. Samsara and Nirvana always remain equal.” It becomes a very interesting question: how can we reach this place where the deluded mind has no place?

Chinul describes this place as “luminous awareness”. Later on, someone asked him how we approach this place and, in response, we have an interesting exchange:

Chinul: Do you hear the sound of the crow cawing?
That magpie calling?

Student: Yes.

Chinul: Trace him back and listen to your hearing nature. Do you hear any sounds?

This is an interesting experiment all of us can do. Anytime we hear a sound, whether it is the sound of a jet plane overhead or a bird singing outside, all we have to do is bring this sound inside and listen one hundred percent. If we listen one hundred percent, there is no idea of “I am listening to the sound”. So when Chinul asked the student what happens when you listen to the sound of a crow or the magpie, one hundred percent, the student said, “At that place sounds and discriminations do not obtain.” That can be our experience, too. If we really go deep into a sound, the idea of “I am listening to a sound” disappears; then you become the sound.

Sometimes at Zen Centers this happens — we are listening to the morning bell chant, being a little sleepy, not completely asleep, but just a little bit and the bell is hit. All of a sudden, there is nothing but the sound of the bell resonating deep within ourselves. Then, there is no sound and no discrimination. “I, my, me” disappears and the whole universe is just one sound. This place of no discrimination is what Chinul calls luminous awareness. This is the whole point of Zen practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn always talks about cutting off I, my, me mind. Our mind is deluded because in every situation we apply I, my, me to everything that appears. When we don’t see things through I, my, me then we can see, hear, taste, and touch everything clearly. It’s that simple.

When Chinul is talking about entering into the sound, the same can be applied to tasting, seeing, touching, everything. In “just doing it” one hundred-percent, there is no discrimination.

So, the student says, at that point, the sounds and discrimination do not obtain. Chinul says, "Marvelous! Marvelous! This is Avalokitesvara's method for entering the noumenon. Let me ask you again. You said that sounds and discriminations do not obtain at that place. But since they do not obtain, isn't the hearing-nature just empty space at such a time?" The student says, "Originally, it is not empty, it is always bright and never obscured." Chinul asks again, "What is this essence which is not empty?" The student: "As it has no former shape, words cannot describe it."

The student describes the hearing-nature as being always bright and never obscured. We can find the same thing in our own experience by bringing any sound within ourselves and going deep into our hearing-nature. You will find that there is something there, some kind of radiance; it's not just blankness. This radiance or brightness is our luminous awareness. This brightness does not come from the sun, it's our own original true nature. This experience can be reached through our eye-consciousness, through nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, touch-consciousness and thinking-consciousness.

Chinul further says, "If you believe me to the point where you can suddenly extinguish your doubt, show the will of a great man, and give rise to authentic vision and understanding; if you know its taste for yourself, arrive at the stage of self-affirmation and gain understanding of your true nature, then this is the understanding-awakening achieved by those who have cultivated the mind. Since no further steps are involved, it is called sudden. Therefore, it is said, 'When in the cause of faith, one meshes without the slightest degree of error with all the qualities of the fruition of Buddhahood, faith is achieved'."

Chinul is asking us to show the will of a great person and have this complete faith. That's all we have to do: apply this resolution and courage to every situation that appears for us. Rather than holding onto our idea and applying I, my, me mind to every situation, we can let go and perceive things as they really are. It's a simple matter of whether a situation controls us or we control the situation. Who is in control? By control, I don't mean in a neurotic sense, but perceiving things with complete clarity and acting clearly. This is the mind of a saint. But if a situation clouds our vision, we act with the mind of a deluded person. The choice is ours; we have the One Mind from which comes the action of a saint or an ordinary man.

In his writings, Chinul comes back to this issue again and again. And he gives some interesting examples. One of the examples he is fond of quoting many times, is of a frozen pond. "Although we know that the frozen pond is entirely water, the sun's heat is necessary to melt it. Although we awaken to the fact that an ordinary man is Buddha, the power of Dharma is necessary to permeate our cultivation. When the pond is melted, the water flows freely and can be used for irrigation and cleaning. When falsities are extinguished, the mind will be luminous and dynamic, and then its function of penetrating brightness will manifest."

In our day-to-day life, our mind is like a frozen pond, frozen by our conditioning so that we respond in deluded ways



Main Hall of Songgwang-sa Temple in Korea.

and continue to wander around in samsara of anger, desire, and ignorance. But when we start to practice, it's like the sun's heat; it comes down and melts the ice. The only thing that happens through practice is that the frozen waters of our conditioning melt and start to flow.

At another point, Chinul says, "A person who falls to the ground gets back up by using that ground. To try to get up without relying on that ground would be impossible." We all have the same dilemma: How to let go of the conditioning of anger, desire, and ignorance. Chinul says we have to use our own deluded mind to get out of its delusion, to use our deluded mind to awaken to the fact we are already Buddha. In this way, the deluded mind is not a liability but a necessity. This means we can use our delusions or any bad situation skillfully to understand what the correct situation is.

Chinul goes on to say, "Sentient beings are those who are deluded in regard to the One Mind, and give rise to boundless defilements. Buddhas are those who have awakened to the One Mind and have given rise to the boundless sublime functions. Although there is a difference between delusion and awakening, essentially both are derived from the One Mind. Hence, to seek Buddhahood apart from the (deluded) mind is impossible." It is a remarkable statement for Korean Zen of the 12th Century, because at that time the whole notion of Buddhism was filled with the idea that the Buddhahood is something out there, maybe in the Pure Land, and that you had to do these rituals or read these sutras and then maybe someday you will become Buddha. But Chinul says again and again, that to seek Buddhahood apart from the mind is impossible.

Chinul further talks about the mind of the saint and says: "All the sound of slander and praises, acknowledgement and disapproval that deceptively issue forth from the throat are like an echo in an empty valley or the sound of the wind. If in this manner, we investigate the root cause of such deceptive phenomenon in ourselves and others, we will remain unaffected by them." In our own daily life too, whatever appears in front of us, if someone badmouths us or gives us a hard time, says something unpleasant and our minds don't move, then that's the mind of a

saint. It happens to all of us at some point that our center does not move and we remain unaffected by other peoples' slander or bad speech.

QUESTION: You talked about Chinul's impact around the year 1200. What has happened in the 800 years since then?

MSSN: Chinul established the temple called Songgwang-sa and throughout these 800 years it has remained the premier Zen Temple in Korea. It's a remote temple, situated in the mountains, and has continued the tradition of Zen teaching which Chinul founded. After Chinul, sixteen of his successors were given the title of "National Teachers". Fortunately for Songgwang-sa, that does not seem to have caused any permanent damage to them. Chinul's successor, Hae Shim, compiled the collection of sixteen hundred kong-ans, which is now the standard reference in Korean Zen. So, Songgwang-sa is the lasting legacy of Chinul and its influence has continued even to this day. When the Yi dynasty came into power in Korea in 1392, they

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turned to Confucianism and undertook a very open and systematic persecution of Buddhism. So for five hundred years, Buddhism had to go underground. At that time, there were no temples in urban areas and Zen was practiced only in the mountains. Songgwang-sa remained the only large temple which had a clear function in Zen training. All other Zen monks had to find caves in the mountains or small temples:

When the Japanese armies invaded Korea in 1592, Sosan Taesa was one of the few well-known Zen monks in Korea. Sosan is the most famous Zen Master between Chinul and this century and his fame came largely because of his role in organizing a monks' militia against the Japanese. Sosan is the prime example of a Zen monk of those dark times; he didn't have a high profile and lived in a succession of temples in the mountains. In those years, the lineage was handed down in a rather obscure manner. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn's great-grand teacher, Zen Master Kyong Ho, appeared at the turn of the last century (he died in 1912) and revived Korean Buddhism. For about two hundred years before him, Korean Buddhism had become almost extinct. Even at temples like Songgwang-sa, there was nothing much going on.

Zen Master Kyong Ho and his students revived Korean Buddhism in this century. Zen Master Mang Gong, Kyong Ho's best known successor, was a very charismatic teacher and became the first person to really popularize Buddhism, even among lay people. The Japanese occupied Korea from 1910-1945 and

tried to abolish Korean Buddhism. In 1945, when the Japanese rule ended, there were only four or five hundred traditional celibate monks in Korea. Of these, about two hundred and fifty were at Zen Master Mang Gong's temple, Sudok-sa, and the rest were scattered all over the country. Today, there are about thirteen thousand monks and nuns in Korea. So, we have this dramatic shift from about five hundred to about thirteen thousand monks in only forty years.

QUESTION: Was there any lay support for Buddhism during the years of persecution?

MSSN: The only support for Buddhism during these years came from ladies of the royal household. There was a Queen Regent in the mid-16th Century, too, who was able to revive Buddhism for a few years. To some extent, these royal ladies were responsible for Buddhism not dying out. Now, there is tremendous support from lay people, and Mahayana Buddhism in Korea is probably the strongest Buddhist church anywhere in the world. But the focus is very different now. For five hundred years the monks kept alive the flame of intense meditation in mountain caves and temples, just practicing very hard and giving transmission from one generation to the next. Now it is more a popular religion, involved with politics and social action. It's very different from the focus of Chinul and Sosan Taesa. They would hardly recognize it. Chinul's community, when he first founded it at Songgwang-sa, was open to lay people; lay people could enter the monastery for a period of time and leave any time they wanted but while they were there, they had to live the life of a monk. They had to give up all connections with the outside world.

QUESTION: What about Chinul's writings? Are any left?

MSSN: As mentioned earlier, these writings are now available in English translated by Robert Buswell. Though not extensive, these writings had a major impact on the subsequent development of Buddhism in Korea. For example, in Buswell's translation, we have a chapter called "Admonitions to Beginning Students". Today these admonitions serve the function of temple rules in all Zen temples in Korea. Our own temple rules, here in America, are adapted from Chinul's guidelines. His temple rules are to Korean Zen what Pai-chang's temple rules were to Chinese Zen. Also, the chapter on "Secrets of Cultivating the Mind", has been very influential on Korean monks for the last 800 years, an obligatory reading for them.

QUESTION: What are differences between Japanese and Korean Zen, since you have drawn a parallel between Dogen and Chinul? (Ed: see last issue.)

MSSN: Zen came to Japan through Dogen and Eisai, but it was adopted by the samurai who had the base of their political power in Kamakura. In Japan of the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century, there was a clash of two kinds of religious cultures. On the one hand, there was the imperial capital at Kyoto where they patronized the Tendai sect and all the other

sects which had dominated Nara Buddhism for five hundred years. On the other hand, the samurai adopted the new religion of Zen as their own; its training and discipline seemed perfectly suited for their purposes. A new form of Zen appeared which had not been seen in China before. In Korea, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Zen was adopted by the royal court and thus became absorbed in the larger Korean Buddhism. In Japan, it remained separate from Buddhism as the culture of the samurai. For the next two hundred years, Zen developed a very distinctive personality in Japan. But, there also, it started to die out. Between Ikkyu (who died at the end of the fourteenth Century) and Hakuin there is a period of about three hundred years, and during this period there are no more than three or four notable Zen Masters. Once the Kamakura shogunate fell out of power, the patronage for Zen dried up and Zen had to compete against the Tendai and other sects.

In Korea, during the same period, Zen was not allowed to have any temples in the cities; the monks were not even allowed to enter the city gates. But in Japan, Zen had always flourished in or near urban areas. For all these reasons, there is more continuity and a sense of uniqueness in Japanese Zen than there is in Korean Zen.

QUESTION: Was there ever a warrior class in China who also adopted Zen like the samurai did in Japan?

MSSN: If we look at the history of China, we find that T'ang unified the whole country in the late sixth century. The T'ang was a fierce warrior race but without the same code of conduct which the samurai had. The samurai code was much more codified and their Zen was made to fit into their code. The T'ang didn't have a similar impact on Chinese Ch'an. In fact, since Ch'an was not patronized by T'ang, it remained unaffected by whatever warrior-ideas they might have had. The contrast and

contest in China (Zen) was more between Zen and Confucianism. In some ways, Ch'an was a reaction to the institutionalized norms of behavior which Confucianism provided for the Chinese people. Even today, Oriental cultures are very much based on hierarchy and how you are supposed to behave in a given situation with given people. So the boundaries of social behavior are well-defined. A child knows what his boundaries are, and when he grows up he knows what his boundaries as an adult are. That's Confucian culture. So, within the context of Confucian culture, a Zen interview with a teacher is probably the only time when you have the freedom to be yourself. You can hit the teacher, shout at him, you can be your authentic self. If we read the exchanges in the Blue Cliff Record or Mu Mun Kwan, they shed some interesting light on the unorthodox behavior of Zen monks.

QUESTION: What was Bodhidharma's practice when he sat at the cave in Shaolin temple?

MSSN: What we know from the legend of Bodhidharma, it would seem that his practice was Shikantaza; at the same time, his interview with the future second patriarch would suggest a mastery of the techniques which later developed into kong-an practice. But most certainly, he was not reading sutras at that time. The interesting thing about Bodhidharma, though, is that when he gave transmission to the second patriarch, he passed on a copy of the Lankavatara Sutra along with his robe and bowls. These were the items of transmission until the Sixth Patriarch. For a long time, the Lankavatara Sutra remained a basic text of the Ch'an school in China. Hui Neng himself had his awakening upon hearing a verse from the Diamond Sutra and this Sutra was also revered by Ch'an students in China. All of this changed in the hands of Ma-tsu when Ch'an became very experimental. Even then, it seems that most of the teachers in Ma-tsu's lineage were well-versed in the sutras, they just didn't refer to them in their teachings.

In closing, we have talked about how Korean Zen became absorbed by the larger Buddhism by the time of Chinul's birth (*Ed: see last issue*) and how Chinul was able to revive it through the elements of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, using both Zen practice and sutra study for this purpose. His lifelong teaching can be summed up in just one phrase: The self-nature is just your own mind; what other experience do you need? In keeping with this tradition of Korean Zen, Zen Master Seung Sahn travels all over the world and teaches "don't know". When people ask him how to keep this "don't know", he says "only don't know". Thus, there is a very direct connection between Chinul's teaching and Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching — having faith in your self-nature. And that's enough. In every situation, asking "What is this?" is in itself an expression of our self-nature. And that's our challenge and our practice.

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Wooden Pagoda at Popju-sa Temple in Korea.