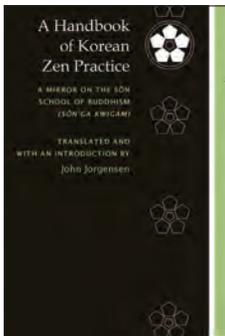


Book Review

A Handbook of Korean Zen Practice: A Mirror on the Sôn School of Buddhism (Sôn'ga Kwigam)

Translated and with an introduction by John Jorgensen
University of Hawaii Press, 2015

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)



In 2006 Shambhala published a slim book by the great 16th-century Korean Zen master So Sahn Hyu Jong, *The Mirror of Zen*, which became a constant companion to me—I've read it at least 20 times, probably more. *Mirror of Zen* was written as a handbook for monastic training, still in use today, and is perhaps the most inspirational book—in the sense of encouraging hard practice and pointing to our true

nature—that I have ever read. Since first encountering it I have recommended it enthusiastically to many people. I still do.

But wonderful as *Mirror of Zen* is, there is a slight haze about it. The author listed on the cover is not So Sahn but the contemporary Korean monk Boep Joeng. The American translator, the monk Hyon Gak Sunim, focuses his preface largely on his reluctance to take on the task of translating such a significant work. Boep Joeng's Korean preface gives an idealized biography of So Sahn with little context. Most frustratingly, while the form of the text consists of very short chapters (often less than a page) beginning with boldface statements (said to be compiled by So Sahn from earlier texts) followed by commentaries and the occasional poem (both said to be by So Sahn), none of the source texts are identified, and when I asked Hyon Gak Sunim about this he cheerfully said that no one could identify them.

Well, John Jorgensen has. And more. *A Handbook of Korean Zen Practice*, his version of *Mirror of Zen*, is a heroic work of scholarship that illuminates far more than the immediate work at hand.

A word about provenance here. So Sahn's *Sôn'ga Kwigam* was essentially conceived of as a set of notes. He wrote the first version in Chinese, in 153 sections, each consisting of a base text with commentaries. It was instantly translated into the Korean of his day, and published in Korean before it was published in Chinese. Apparently his students found 153 sections too much to handle, so he came up with a shorter Chinese version of 86 sections, which is and isn't a subset of the original. To complicate things further, these versions differ significantly from each other, as ver-

sions are successively edited. It is the shorter version which Boep Joeng translated into contemporary Korean. Hyon Gak Sunim essentially translated Boep Joeng's text, which explains the strange attribution in the Shambhala version.

In *A Handbook of Korean Zen Practice*, John Jorgensen has translated the 16th-century Korean translation of the long version of the *Sôn'ga Kwigam*, also giving translations from the Chinese text, noting variants, identifying sections in the second, shorter version, and noting changes from the first.

But the real revelation is the notes. The base text of section 133 states that a monk's "preaching of the dharma depends on the examination of the ancients. Words are the shoots of this mind, so how can you leave it up to your conjectures/judgement?"

This is the key to So Sahn's method. As we learn from Jorgensen's extensive notes—632 of them for 153 sections—almost everything derives from or contains allusions to other sources: not only the base text, but the commentary, and even the poems. So Sahn is not interested in writing an original text proclaiming his personal theories. He is shaping—and there is a deliberate arc to this text—the tradition using the tradition's own words. The *Sôn'ga Kwigam* is a pastiche, a collage, of direct quotes and paraphrases, seamless, natural, reading as if directly written from the mind of one author. In fact it is not. Only someone who has completely absorbed his tradition could pull this off.

Jorgensen has tracked all this down and more. He frequently gives variant sources for the same phrase or sentence—it is clear that pastiche, collage, and paraphrase are common techniques in ancient and not-so-ancient texts (for example, the poem on the five precepts certificate given to students of the Kwan Um School is a pastiche of standard teaching phrases chosen for their undeniable power—and one of the pleasures of reading Jorgensen is finding some of their sources in his notes). The notes also give variant translations of problematic phrases, refer the reader to contemporary discussions, and explain the many allusions and references to what in So Sahn's day was widely known and is now either known only to a few or pretty much forgotten. The introduction gives an excellent, non-hagiographic biography of So Sahn, embedding him in his time: Confucian repression of Buddhism; the conflict or conflation between the sutra (Kyo) school and the meditation (Sôn, that is, Zen) schools; the Japanese invasion during which So Sahn, by raising an army of monks, was crucial to driving out the invaders, for which he is remembered as a national hero. There is an extensive description of So Sahn's intellectual concerns, a helpful summary of the *Sôn'ga Kwigam*, which delineates the arc that So Sahn is constructing, and an explanation of the complexities of the

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provenance of the text.

Which brings us, finally, to the translation. I wish I liked it. I wish I could recommend it. Unfortunately, despite the truly heroic scholarship in which it is embedded, I cannot. Rather than choosing one version to translate, Jorgensen wants us to see all versions at once, so the text bristles with typographical conventions meant to help us distinguish between the different versions (which are then further spelled out in the notes). He uses language that, while philosophically precise, is used only by specialists (for example, “percepts” for the mental concepts created by the process of perception, which he ambiguously glosses as “objects of perception”). And, unfortunately, his translation does not flow gracefully. I will give one example comparing his translation with the Shambhala version.

Here is the Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak translation of the base text of their 9th section:

In all of the sutras expounded by the Buddha, he first draws distinctions between various kinds of Dharmas, and then only later explains the principles of emptiness. The Zen meditation tradition handed down from the Patriarchs teaches, however, that when all traces of thinking are cut off, the principle of emptiness appears clearly, of itself, as the very origin of mind.

Here is Jorgensen’s base text of the corresponding section 18:

However, while the sutras preached by the buddhas first discriminate between the dharmas and later the [buddhas] preach the ultimate emptiness [of the dharmas], if the sentences [of the hwadu] shown by the patriarchal teachers eliminate the

traces [of discriminative forms of teaching] in the ground of intention, they will reveal the principle in the source of the mind.

Jorgensen inserts three footnotes for his single sentence, directing us to eight precursor texts. The Shambhala version has no footnotes for this section. More substantively, Jorgensen’s version does not separate the Kyo and Sôn traditions, as the Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak version does, but allows for coexistence; and he says that it is Sôn practice that cuts through to reveal the origin or source of mind, not, as Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak do, Sôn teaching. This seems closer to two of So Sahn’s overarching themes: reconciling Kyo and Sôn even as he finds the latter superior; and emphasizing the importance of practice. That said, Jorgensen’s translation, unlike Hyon Gak Sunim’s, can only be read laboriously.

So I conclude this review with ambivalence. I am sincerely grateful to John Jorgensen for his deep immersion in the text and its origins, and for his clear exposition of So Sahn’s life, context, and thought in the introduction. This book is an invaluable resource. But it is a book for scholars, not a book everyone should have in their home library. I am deeply grateful to Hyon Gak Sunim for giving us a graceful and accessible translation of a contemporary Korean version of this text. But his version lacks scholarly context and, as a translation of a translation, is necessarily distant from the original. What is needed is a version of So Sahn’s seminal work that draws on Jorgensen’s immense scholarship without such bristling detail, and provides a graceful translation close to So Sahn’s 16th-century text. Given the daunting nature of the task—requiring familiarity with 16th-century Korean usage of Chinese, immersion in Buddhist practice and philosophy, access to primary materials, and financial support during the necessarily lengthy process—I’m not holding my breath. ♦

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Because You’re Suffering (Continued from p. 22)

But right when we started chanting, I broke into tears suddenly because it was so beautiful! There were a lot of people there that day, and everybody was chanting, so there were probably some among them who thought that *Charlie Hebdo* wasn’t a good thing or was delivering hate speech. Probably there were also some people who barely knew about what happened, or who didn’t care a lot about it. But they were chanting, because I asked for it. And for me it was very powerful. It meant at that moment, “because you’re suffering, I’m suffering.” And it didn’t matter what they thought about *Charlie Hebdo*.

It really relieved me and I understood at that moment that that’s all I needed! Finally I didn’t need everybody to agree on my opinion, I didn’t need every single American to be convinced. I just needed compassion. And I got it.

On that day I really and finally took refuge in the sangha. And I understood also on that day that if for some extraor-

inary reason, one day I had to meet with the mother or the sister of one of the terrorists who had been killed by the police, and if they asked me to chant Kwan Seum Bosal for their loss, or even Ji Jang Bosal for their dead son or brother, I would do it. Without any hesitation. Because suffering is suffering. ♦



Photo: Won Haya

Manu Garcia-Guillén (Won Jin) is a French citizen. She has been living in Brooklyn for six years with her wife and their two cats. Manu is a primary school teacher at a bilingual French school and a volunteer interpreter for French-speaking asylum seekers. She is also studying Freudian psychoanalysis, and she’s preparing a thesis on the connections between Zen and psychoanalysis. Manu joined the KUSZ in 2013 and she will be taking 10 precepts in August 2016.