

Korean Philosophy 1

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1. Shamanic beliefs

1.1 Family and Life

1.1.1. Polytheist Worldview

Korean shamanism, unlike many Western religions, does not hold the existence of a monotheistic god to be the center of the universe, but that the entire universe is a unified whole without levels or classes. Thus, humanity is also a unified part of the rhythm of nature. Humanity and nature are parts that make up the whole, and thus neither of them fears or attempts to conquer the other. The best way for humanity to live is in tune with the rhythm of nature.

In addition, since humanity is a part of nature, there is no need to recognize any transcendent state. Thus, Korean shamanism positively affirms the now.

[cf. NOTE 1: More accurately speaking according to Prof. David Mason (Kyunghee Univ.), the old Korean shamanist worldview is not atheist at all, it's more polytheistic and panentheistic in regards to the shamanic spirits (certainly not to a monotheistic "God".

- Note: Panentheism (from Greek: πᾶν ('pan') = all, en = in, and theos = God; "all-in-God") is the theological position that God is immanent within the Universe, but also transcends it. It is distinguished from pantheism, which holds that God is synonymous with the material universe. In panentheism, God is viewed as creator and/or animating force behind the universe, and the source of universal morality. The term is closely associated with the Logos of Greek philosophy in the works of Herakleitos, which pervades the cosmos and whereby all things were made.

And this is important because some strong strains of Western Christianity got their Panentheistic outlook from Neo-platonism, and so when Christianity arrived in Korea, it was more easily accepted because the basic shamanic background was fairly similar.

Serious Neo-Confucian scholars and advanced Seon-bulgyo monks were more like

Western atheists, in his opinion, in that their ideas of deities were quite vague, and their belief in them was very weak, unimportant to their core beliefs and practices – quite unlike shamanists.

Also, traditional Koreans did “fear nature”. In particular, they very much feared Bad Fortune coming from the spirits and unsatisfied ghosts in the form of natural disasters, natural diseases, attacks by animals and etc., and that they employed shamanism to defend against these problems, to resolve their fears. They may not have attempted to “conquer” nature, but they certainly tried to manipulate it, to control it to some degree, with their shamanic practices.

To say that on its side nature did not fear or try to conquer human beings in Korea just doesn't make any sense; “nature” doesn't have feelings and intentions like that.

NOTE 2: Here are more comments, if one would claim that “Ultimately, the humanity of shamanism does not need to recognize any sort of levels of humanity and the distinction between body and spirit becomes meaningless.”

1. “The humanity of shamanism does not need to recognize any sort of levels of humanity”: What does that mean? That the shamanism did not recognize social classes like King and Yangban and slave? That's not true. Or that it did not recognize more spiritually-developed human beings (Dosa, Doin, Shinseon) from ordinary people? Not true. Or that it didn't recognize a distinction between spirits and humans? Also untrue, in Prof. Mason's opinion.

2. “The distinction between body and spirit becomes meaningless (in shamanism).”: On the contrary, Korean shamanists certainly believed that we people have spirits that are different from our bodies, and when the body dies the spirit can live on (as a ghost on earth, or in heaven or hell); and they believed that the spirits of heaven, earth and hell can exist without physical bodies, and can transform those bodies.]

1.1.2. Marriage

In Korean shamanism, marriage is not the union of two individuals, but the union of two households. This is due to recognition of the extended family as the fundamental unit of society, and the tendency to place importance on blood relationships, stemming from the recognition that nothing is permanent. Thus, marriage becomes a process of ensuring the continuance of life. As humanity is a part of nature, Korean shamanism is liberal in its views on sex as well. There is a distorted view of sex in Korea today because of the influence of Confucianism. Both men and women are a part of nature, and so they must exist in a complementary relationship without conflict. The distorted view of the nature of women, their rights and their proper roles in society that is still popular and operative in modern Korea is also due to the influence of Confucianism.

1.1.3. Blood Relationships

For Koreans, confirming one's bloodline is the same as confirming one's existence. Accordingly, kinship relationships are a means of escaping solitude and securing one's own humanity. This is an effort to ensure the continuity of life by confirming bloodlines. In the same vein, Koreans hold intimate human relationships as the most important value. This is the opposite of Western values, which emphasize individualism.

The tendency to place great importance on human relationships appears in the importance placed on physical contact. The devotion of a mother who has as much physical contact as possible with a baby reduces the hatred and hostility towards others that person feels when it grows to be an adult. In this way, intimate human relationships may be viewed as an overlapping of selves, but usually in the long-run formal or businesslike contact is avoided.

1.1.4. Ethics

Because Koreans place great importance on human relationships, the severance of human relationships is considered the greatest sin. Accordingly, the most severe punishment is to banish the individual from the community.

In addition, Koreans think of emotional expression as an expression of humanity, and so they make every effort not to hurt the feelings of others. This contributes to the prevention of crimes against individuals.

Koreans place great importance on living in the present, and so the suicide of prominent individuals as a form of rebellion against injustice has a great influence on the general populace. Ultimately, shamanic ethics do not recognize an absolute standard, but are relative and flexible in accordance with the situation. Accordingly, they reject the conflict of any absolute good and evil, but include both in a single continuum. This rejection of duality appears in the Korean language, where "we" is often used in place of "I."

1.1.5 Death

Shamanists regard death as a part of the continuity of life and do not give any consideration to an afterlife.

[NOTE 3: The last phrase is true in principle but because of Buddhist influence compromised shamanists are very much concerned with the afterlife of those who have passed away, conducting all kinds of funeral and memorial services for them, and sometimes shamans communicate with them on behalf of their families to see if they are happy and comfortable, and if not, how that can be corrected so that they don't cause bad fortune to the family.]

The desire for corpses to decompose quickly comes from the desire to quickly adjust to the rhythm of nature.

Koreans have a particular affection for the deceased. This is because the importance placed on human relationships is extended even to those who have died. This tendency can be seen in the search for a good tomb site or the observance of memorial ceremonies for ancestors.

1.2 Society and Life

1.2.1. The Denial of Permanence

Shamanism does not believe in the permanence of humanity. Everything is perceived as circular, temporary phenomena. Accordingly, the vicissitudes of life are taken to be an empirical fact. Due to this worldview, Koreans tend to have a more humble and tentative attitude about their situation; this becomes a factor in restraining the active use of authority, even by the powerful.

1.2.2. Conflict and Resolution

Koreans do not seek to resolve public conflicts in a courtroom. This is because they do not recognize an absolute standard of good and evil, and they believe that a judgment would only increase hostility between parties, partly because the laws were unfair and the courts were corrupt.

Thus, the best solution to conflict is concession and compromise. Ultimately, the best resolution is one in which both parties are emotionally satisfied.

If this attitude is applied to public problems as well, the feelings of the other are always considered and an effort is made to remove the cause of the conflict. This leads to the development of refined senses of fairness and perceptions.

Crimes are punished, but even then confession is considered the best way, in that it allows the accused to regain his or her dignity. In that humanity is respected, the death penalty is only reluctantly applied, in the worst of situations and to those who will not confess and repent their evil behavior.

1.2.3. Apolitical Attitude

The concept of harmony with nature develops into a respect for human relationships, and this develops further into the tendency to avoid clashing with others. In a word, shamanic human beings are relatively apolitical.

Because of this attitude, there was little resistance even when Confucianist political philosophies were introduced, and when authoritarian rulers appeared little effort to overcome them could be seen. Rather, the respect for human relationships appeared in the form of personal loyalty,

and this often proved to be an impediment to public politics.

1.2.4. Religious Tolerance

Although shamanism by its very nature is tolerant, there was initial resistance to the introduction of new religions. However, shamanism and foreign religions influenced each other and broadened their foundations even further.

[NOTE 4: Recall the shamanic resistance to the introduction of Buddhism in the Shilla Kingdom, the Yi Chaedon story, also the Buseok-sa foundation story – Prof. Mason has a whole section in his book ([Spirit of the Mountains:](#)

Korea's *San-Shin* and Traditions of Mountain-Worship, 1999, Hollym) on the conflict between early Buddhism and Korea's native beliefs – and when Christianity arrived here, it was certainly resisted very strongly by some Koreans from all walks of life. Shamanism is quite tolerant and inclusive in theory, but in practice was somewhat different. This just hasn't been an issue in recent centuries because Shamanists have had no political power.]

2. Korean Buddhism

2.1. The character of Korean Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced to Korea in 372 A.D.,

[NOTE 5: It was “introduced”, to Goguryeo and Baekje areas at least, well before that – 372 is the date of ‘formal official acceptance by royalty’ in Goguryeo. It was certainly introduced in the Silla Kingdom far earlier than its formal official acceptance by Beopheung-wang in 527.]

and it became an ideological pillar of the ancient kingdoms and the foundation for cultural arts. Accordingly, Buddhism was protected and promoted by the royal family, it became the national religion, and it had a higher position as a national ideology than any other foreign ideology for about 1000 years.

Buddhism was adopted and developed for the purpose of strengthening royal authority and achieving national ideological unification, but by subjugating the existing primitive belief systems it also raised the level of Korean philosophy and consciousness. The religion was practical, in that its supplicants prayed for improvements of ordinary matters related to daily life, and it also strongly promoted the defense of the nation, uniting the masses and instilling in them a strong will to protect and expand their kingdoms.

Buddhism also transmitted the arts and learning of China and the countries west of China and

became a catalyst for the development of pagodas, Buddhist statues, sculptures and temples, and generally encouraged the development of all Korean arts. However, it should be noted out that it gave rise to social problems, gradually becoming secularized under the protection of the aristocracy and under the pretext that national peace and prosperity were inversely proportional to the growth of Buddhism.

[NOTE 6: Buddhism grew very strongly in United Shilla 680-800 and there was great prosperity and peace in early Goryeo 935-1100s. However, there was also the Joseon Neo-Confucian prejudice against Buddhism, that it was wasting the national money and reducing the People's productivity.]

2.2. Buddhism during the Three Kingdoms Period

2.2.1. Buddhism in Goguryeo and Baekje

In the second year of the reign of King Sosurim (372), Buddhism was officially transmitted to Goguryeo by the missionary monk Sundo from Jin China and gained the active support of the royal family. Following this, such temples as Chobunsa Temple and Yibullansa Temple were founded, and the *Samnonjong* Sect prospered greatly, producing such famous monks as Hyegwan.

Buddhism was officially introduced to the Baekje Kingdom in the first year of the reign of King Chimryu, by Marananta of Eastern Jin China. The Yuljong Sect, represented by Gyeomik, flourished. The Buddhism of Baekje contributed greatly to the rise of Japanese Buddhism owing to the missionary activities of aristocrats like Gwanhyeok.

2.2.2. The development of Buddhism in Silla

A) Buddhist Policies

Unlike Goguryeo and Baekje, Silla experienced great difficulty in introducing Buddhism; it was officially recognized in the 14th year of the reign of King Beopheung (527), with the martyrdom of Yi Chadon. After its official recognition, though, Buddhism flourished more in Silla through the active encouragement of the state than in either Goguryeo or Baekje. This is made evident by the construction of such national temples as King Beopheung's Heungnyunsa Temple, King Jinheung's Hwangnyongsa Temple and King Seondeok's Bunhwangsa Temple. Beginning with King Beopheung, Silla monarchs used Buddhist royal names and were buried at temples, demonstrating the Buddhist aspect of the dynasty. Silla Buddhism also produced such famous monks as Wongwang, who set down the five Buddhist commandments for lay-followers, Jajang of the Gyeyuljong Sect, who proposed the construction of Hwangnyongsa Temple's nine-story pagoda and founded many of Korea's greatest temples, and Goguryeo's Master-monk Bodeok

who became a citizen of Silla after fleeing his kingdom in protest against its conversion to Taoism.

B) Buddhist sects in Unified Silla

After unification, Buddhism flourished through the continued protection and encouragement of the royal family. Unlike the Three Kingdoms period, which saw little establishment of sects and doctrine, after unification Buddhism's ideological system was established and the Buddhist philosophy of Great Master Wonhyo emerged. He organized and reconciled various sects and promoted a belief in the pure land that focused on the popularization of Buddhism. This Buddhist philosophy of Wonhyo could be called a sort of reform of the standard state-oriented Buddhism that preceded him.

This development of Buddhism eventually led to the birth of five sects centered on the Buddhist scriptures and nine sects that centered on meditation. The five sects were the *Yeolban-jong* Sect (led by Bodeok), the *Gyeyul-jong* Sect (led by Jajang), the *Beopseong-jong* Sect (led by Wonhyo), the *Hwaeom-jong* Sect (led by Uisang) and the *Beopsang-jong* Sect (led by Jinpyo). Of these the *Hwaeom-jong* Sect had the largest and longest-influential following.

The nine meditative *Seon* (Zen) sects, popular toward the end of the Unified Silla period, were founded by high-ranking Silla nobles supported by powerful rural gentry-clans as central authority crumbled.

2.3. Buddhism during the Goryeo Period

2.3.1 Buddhist Policies in Early Goryeo

Seon Buddhist philosophy combined Taoist Feng Shui ideas and some elements of Confucianism to become the ideological and spiritual foundation for the Goryeo Dynasty, a period that produced splendid artwork, including temples, pagodas and statues.

Goryeo King Wang Geon's policy of respect for Buddhism promoted Buddhism in the first of the *Hunyo*, ten teachings he left behind to his followers, and Buddhism's influence on the dynasty can be seen in the founding of the Lotus Lantern Festival and *Palgwanhoe* Festival, and in the appointment of the Sumisan Sect monk Yi Eom as the royal tutor. Following Wang Geon, King Gwangjong established a system of royal and national monks, King Hyeonjong began the typesetting of the entire Buddhist scriptures, and King Munjong completed Heungwangsa Temple and held there the first Lotus Lantern Festival, a national Buddhist event. Thus many great monks could appear, such as the National Monk Uicheon. There was also a national test for service in the Buddhist priesthood, and doctrinal and meditative sections were established.

2.3.2 Buddhist sects

Goguryeo Buddhism was inherited from Silla and at first divided into five doctrinal sects and nine meditative sects, but after royal-prince-turned-monk Uicheon imported the *Cheontae-jong* [Tiantai or Heavenly-Platform Sect] in an attempt to unify Korean Buddhism under it, the five doctrinal sects and nine *Seon* sects were replaced by two major sects, the *Cheontae-jong* and the *Jogye-jong*. The *Cheontae-jong* was transmitted back to China (after it had died out there) by the monks Chegwan and Uitong. Its all-encompassing doctrine sought to unify all of the contending Buddhist sects, with the meditative ones becoming subsumed under a unified view of the doctrinal ones.

The influence of the *Cheontae-jong* Sect began to wane after an uprising of military officials. That is, with the military uprisings, the desire to escape the political and other arena naturally led people to withdraw from the secular world and embrace the meditation-oriented *Seon* sects. Thus, the *Jogye-jong* Sect, which sought to unite doctrine through meditation, rose to prominence. The *Jogye-jong*, which was founded in 1200 by the monk Jinul (known to us posthumously as National Master Bojo-guksa), could not overcome the social contradictions of the time, but it was certainly an important reform in the world of Buddhism, effectively uniting the meditative and doctrinal points of view in both theory and practice, an achievement that was never accomplished in any other Mahayana Buddhist nation. Accordingly, the *Jogye-jong* went on to become the mainstream sect of Buddhism in Korea, and remains so today.

2.4. Buddhism in the Joseon Dynasty

2.4.1 Buddhist policies in the early Joseon period

Buddhism received a severe blow during the Joseon Dynasty, which was centered on the Neo-Confucian teachings of Chu-Hsi and thus consistently implemented policies that repressed Buddhism. Through its long tradition and the individual efforts of early Joseon kings, though, Buddhism was able to flourish to a significant degree. That is, even while Founding-King Taejo put into effect a system that required monks to register with the government and the second King Taejong reduced the number of temples, Buddhist policies were continuously promoted. These efforts can also be seen in the system of royal and national monks during the time of Taejo and the building of a temple within the palace grounds by King Sejong. In addition, intermittent support for Buddhism appeared in the pro-Buddhist policies of King Sejo, such as his building of Wongaksa Temple and establishment of Gangyeongdogam (a government agency whose purpose was to annotate and publish the Buddhist scriptures), and the preferential treatment and supportive policies of Queen Munjeong during the early years of King Myeongjong's reign.

Accordingly, even during the Joseon period there was talk of unifying Buddhism and Confucianism, and the *Imjejong* Sect ceaselessly produced such great monks as Jieom, Hyujeong and Yujeong. However, due to strict control by the thoroughly Confucian dynasty, Buddhism could not expect to develop as much as it had during the previous dynasty.

2.4.2 Buddhism in the late Joseon Period

Joseon Buddhism, under the oppressive policies of the dynasty, could not play a great role in politics or culture, but when Joseon faced the national crisis of the Japanese Invasion of 1592, great monks such as Hyujeong Seosan-daesa and Yujeong Samyeong-daesa formed "righteous armies" and lead the way for troops fighting to save the nation. After this, however, Buddhism again withered beneath the ruling system centered on the Neo-Confucian teachings of Chu-Hsi, and almost disappeared from the political scene. Then, toward the end of the 19th century, Buddhism once again found its place during the enlightenment movement. Yu Daechi and Yi Dongin contributed greatly to modernization through Buddhism. In particular, "Manhae" Han Yong-un's Buddhist reform movement, which took place in the midst of the transmission of modern Western culture and new religions, was a reflection that was conscious of national culture and the protection of national sovereignty.

2.5. The Role and Influence of Buddhism

Above we took a brief look at the development of Buddhism and policies concerning it in each period of Korean history. Ultimately, it can be said that Buddhism played an important role as the root of Korean national culture up until the Joseon Dynasty, and even during and after the Joseon Dynasty its hidden influence could not be ignored. We offered an outline of these contributions and influence of Buddhism in the introduction, and from this the following conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, as a religion that unified the philosophies of ancient peoples, Buddhism was not only a spiritual pillar in ancient Korean states but its philosophy of defending the nation became the ideological background for the protection of the Korean people. This was clearly seen during the Mongol Invasion in the 13th century, with the completion of the 80,000 character Buddhist scriptures on Ganghwa-do Island, and in the activities of the "righteous armies" during the Japanese Invasion of 1592.

Secondly, as explained above, Buddhism raised the spiritual and intellectual level of Koreans above their previous primitive Shamanic beliefs. Also, Buddhism transmitted the culture of China and the countries west of China and became a catalyst for the development of Korean national culture in the arts and learning. Such treasures as Bulguk-sa Temple, Dabo-tap Pagoda Seokgur-am Grotto, and the complete Buddhist scriptures – the most famous treasures

of our national culture – were products of Buddhism.

Thirdly, in spite of the above, Buddhism led to many social ills. Frequent events and ceremonies held under the pretext of pursuing national interests and the welfare of the people, along with exemption from taxes and public labor for monks, emptied the national coffers. Also, as monks began to participate in government and become secularized, this gave rise to anti-Buddhist sentiment. Furthermore, Korean Buddhism was divided and in conflict, and there were chaotic rushes for power. These problems demanded new solutions.

2.6. Wonhyo's Buddhist Philosophy

2.6.1 Wonhyo's Buddhist Philosophy

Wonhyo (617-686) was a famous monk active before, during and after the unification of the Three Kingdoms, responsible for the systematization of early Korean Buddhist philosophy. He was born to a high-ranking noble Silla family. Most of the famous monks of the time went to study in Tang China, but he elected not to go to Tang and he came to realize the truth of Mahayana Buddhism.

His Buddhist philosophy advocated, first of all, the elimination of rivalry between the various sects of Buddhism and the promotion of mutual harmony and union. That is, while Buddhist texts each had different currents, they all ultimately sought equity and impartiality.

Secondly, as is shown in his representative work, "Commentary on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith," the primary characteristic of his ideology was the philosophy of enlightenment. There are two types of enlightenment: enlightenment only for one's own self and perfect enlightenment with universal accomplishment. These may be understood as *a priori* and *a posteriori*, and Wonhyo explained enlightenment through the interrelation of the two. However, enlightenment is fundamentally a state of mind that seeks enlightenment with a practical attitude through knowledge and observation. These advanced concepts are thought to be fundamental to the new *Chan (Seon, Zen)* Buddhism rising in Northeast Asia in that era.

Thirdly, Wonhyo's Buddhist philosophy stressed the salvation of humanity and the popularization of Buddhism. That is, the difference between this world and paradise is in the mind, and anyone who cried out the name of Buddha and listened to his teachings could go to paradise, and anyone could enter Nirvana. Thus, through his advocacy of "Pure Land" Buddhist sect, which emphasizes an ideal heavenly afterlife where ordinary people as well as monks could be reborn in a paradise containing Amita Buddha, in which they could learn and practice the *Dharma* without corruption or distraction, Wonhyo popularized Buddhism and pioneered new territory in Silla Buddhist theory.

2.6.2 The Position of Wonhyo's Buddhist Thought

Wonhyo was born into a noble family and spent his entire life devoted to the task of integrating Buddhist thought. In other words, it can be said that he overcame the division between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism and the divisions within those sects, transcended the existing, native religion of shamanism and established a system of thought in Buddhist philosophy, and began a Buddhist reform movement emphasizing practicality for the benefit of the common people. In that his work not only became the background for the popularization of Buddhism, but also the basis for the establishment of the Jogye-jong sect of Korean Buddhism during the Goryeo period, and became influential in China, Japan and Vietnam, his Buddhist thought has earned a high place in the history of Korean and global Buddhism.

1. The most important characteristic of shamanism is polytheism. What was influenced to the Korean way of thought by this characteristic?
2. How much were Buddhism contributed to the Korean history?