

Pojo Chinul (普照知訥 1158-1210) and Huayan Buddhism

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Abstract

Pojo Chinul (普照知訥 1158-1210) is known as the founder of Korean Chan/Sŏn (禪) Buddhism. Kanhwa Sŏn (看話禪), which Chinul introduced in the last stage of his life, has been the main form of Sŏn practice in Korea until today. Chinul was also keenly interested in Huayan Buddhism, agonized over the relationship between Sŏn and Huayan Buddhism, and finally concluded that the Buddha's mind (Sŏn Buddhism) and patriarchs' teachings (Huayan Buddhism) cannot come into conflict with each other. His Huayan Buddhism was especially influenced by Li Tongxuan (李通玄 635-730), the Chinese lay Huayan Buddhist. Chinul's acknowledgement of Huayan Buddhism as a valid companion for the Sŏn practitioner, however, faced a challenge in recent years. T'oeong Sŏngch'ŏl (退翁性徹 1912-1993), one of the most influential Sŏn masters in Korea in the second half of the twentieth century, criticized Chinul as a heretic in the Sŏn tradition, defining Chinul's Sŏn Buddhism with a derogatory expression Huayan-Sŏn, a Sŏn amalgamated with Huayan Buddhism. In this paper, I examine the nature of Chinul's Huayan Buddhism and the influence of Li Tongxuan on Chinul. In doing so, I challenge the validity of Sŏngch'ŏl's criticism of Chinul and demonstrate the importance of Huayan Buddhism not only in Chinul's Buddhism but in Korean Sŏn Buddhism in general.

Keywords: Pojo Chinul, Li Tongxuan, Chan/Sŏn Buddhism, Hwaŏm-Sŏn

This paper examines the nature of Pojo Chinul's (普照知訥 1158-1210) Huayan Buddhism and the influence of Li Tongxuan on Chinul. In doing so, I challenge the validity of T'oeong Söngch'öl's criticism of Chinul and demonstrate the importance of Huayan Buddhism not only in Chinul's Buddhism but in Korean Sön Buddhism in general.

1. Huayan-Chan and Heretics

Do awakening and cultivation happen suddenly or gradually? The question might sound counterintuitive. Awakening requires cultivation, and cultivation (修) is a process of acquiring a quality or skill. As with cultivating crops, it is by definition an act that has a temporal duration. What would it mean to claim that practice or cultivation in Chan/Sön Buddhism should be sudden?

In his 1981 publication *The Orthodox Path of the Sön School* (禪門正路), T'oeong Söngch'öl (退翁性徹 1912-1993) claimed that the true form of Sön practice is sudden awakening followed by sudden cultivation (頓悟頓修) and that anybody who allows sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation (頓悟漸修) is a heretic in the Sön tradition. Söngch'öl had a clear target to ostracize with this claim: Pojo Chinul (普照知訥 1158–1210), the founder of Korean Sön Buddhism.

Chinul introduced Kanhua Chan (看話禪) to Korean Buddhism and strongly encouraged practitioners to follow it, as he claimed it was the fastest way to attain awakening. For Söngch'öl as well, Kanhua Chan was the best way to practice Buddhism, but he did not believe that Chinul actually practiced Sön Buddhism correctly or led practitioners as he should.

At the core of Söngch'öl's criticism of Chinul lies Huayan Buddhism. According to Söngch'öl, Chinul was aware that *hwadu* (話頭; Chi. *huatou*) meditation was the authentic way of practicing Sön, but Chinul still hung onto the understanding-awakening (Kor. *haeo* 解悟). Söngch'öl observes, “During the later years in his life, Chinul was clearly aware that complete-sudden-understanding-awakening (圓頓解悟) is not Sön practice, but he still maintained complete-sudden thought. This proves that Pojo Chinul was not an authentic teacher in the direct transmission of the Sön tradition, and the core of his teaching is Hwaö̃m-Sön (華嚴禪).”¹

¹ T'oeong Söngch'öl 退翁性徹, *Sönmun chöngno* (*The Orthodox Path of the Sön School* 禪門正路) (Seoul: Pulgwang Ch'up'ansa, 1981), p. 209.

Several questions arise in response to Sōngch'ōl's attitude toward Chinul. Are Hwaōm and Sōn such disparate teachings in the context of Korean Sōn Buddhism? Is the incorporation of Hwaōm such a serious problem that it makes one a heretic? If, as Sōngch'ōl claims, Chinul was aware of the authentic nature of Sōn Buddhism and still incorporated Hwaōm into his Sōn teaching, why did Chinul take that path? What is the nature of Chinul's Hwaōm and his Sōn teaching? We will examine these issues with a focus on Chinul's view of Huayan Buddhism as it appears in his *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden Attainment of the Buddhahood* (Wondon SōngPul non 圓頓成佛論, hereafter *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden*).

2. Chan and Huayan in Chinul

The *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden* is one of two works of Chinul's that were published posthumously by his disciple Hyesim (慧諶 1178-1234) in 1215; the other is *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Hwadu Meditation* (Kanhwa kyōlūi ron 看話決疑論). In the latter, Chinul proposes *hwadu* mediation as the fastest way to attain awakening, and in the former he presents his position on Huayan Buddhism. Sōngch'ōl's criticism of Chinul as practicing Hwaōm-Sōn (華嚴禪 Huayan-Chan) is based on this text and two other sources.² For our discussion, we will focus on *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden*, as this is the text where Chinul explicitly explains his views on Huayan Buddhism and its relation to Sōn practice.

Why did Chinul feel it necessary to consider Huayan Buddhism in his practice of Sōn Buddhism? We can consider at least two reasons, one historical and the other philosophical.

By the time of Chinul, Sōn Buddhism was settling down in Korea, competing with other schools of Buddhism, and Chinul received credit for giving the Sōn school its distinctive identity.

The fact that Chinul focused mainly on Hwaōm in competition with Sōn but not on other schools of Buddhism should indicate that Hwaōm was in a strong position in Korean Buddhism. Chinul's focus on Hwaōm may also suggest that the tension between Hwaōm and Sōn practices was serious too.

² The two other sources are *Pōpchip pyōrhaeng nok chōryo pyōngip saki* (*Excerpts from the Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record with Personal Notes* 法集別行錄節要并入私記), *Han 'guk Pulgyo Chōnsō* (Hereafter HPC), vol. 4, 740a–767b; and *Hwaōm non chōryo* (*Excerpts from the Exposition of the Huayan Jing* 華嚴論節要), HPC, vol. 4, 767c–869c.

Tension between the Hwaōm and Sōn school was not necessarily something a Sōn master would need to address, unless the master himself felt something was lacking from Sōn Buddhism, or that Sōn Buddhism could learn something from Hwaōm Buddhism. In fact, Chinul did notice that the Huayanists in his time seemed to emphasize the unobstructed interpenetration of the realm of reality without reflecting upon their mind and practice, whereas Sōn practitioners just thought that the mind is the Buddha, and that nothing therefore needs to be done, and they idled away their time.

This leads us to the philosophical issue related to Chinul's investigation of Hwaōm Buddhism. The core of Chinul's Buddhism can be summarized in one phrase: "The mind is the Buddha" (心即佛). From early in his practice, Chinul took the core of Sōn Buddhism to be the cultivation of the mind. In *Encouragement to Practice: The Compact of Samādhi and Prajñā Community* (*Kwōnsu chōnghye kyōlsa mun* 勸修定慧結社文), he argued that one's own mind is the source of awakening.

In *Secrets of Cultivating the Mind* (*Susim kyōl* 修心訣, ca. 1203-05), Chinul repeats his view that the mind is the Buddha. Here he contends that observing precepts or memorizing entire Buddhist *sūtras* will not help one attain Buddhahood if done without the realization that each sentient being is equipped with the Buddha nature. Chinul continues his exploration of the mind in *Straight Talk on the True Mind* (*Chinsim chiksōl* 真心直說, ca. 1205) where he argues that there is no other teaching than seeing through one's own mind and attaining awakening.

While proclaiming that the sentient being's mind is the Buddha, Chinul must have thought about its relation to scriptural tradition. He must also have been aware of the Huayanist criticism of Zen Buddhism. In the preface to *Excerpts from the Exposition of the Huayan jing* (*Hwaōmnon chōryo* 華嚴論節要, 1207), Chinul wondered about the criticism of Sōn meditation raised by a Huayanist, who said, "If you contemplate only your own mind and do not contemplate the unimpeded interfusion of all phenomena, you will lose the fruit of the perfect virtue of the Buddha's enlightenment" (汝若但觀自心, 不觀事事無礙, 即失佛果圓德).³ Chinul was not convinced by this remark, and he thought to himself, "If one uses the mind to contemplate the phenomena, since the phenomena must have obstacles [among themselves] one will have to pursue worries in one's mind and there will be no end of it. If one is only to clear up one's mind and clarify its wisdom, then one hair and the world will become interfused, and this cannot possibly

³ *HPC*, vol. 4, p. 767c.

be something that happens outside of one's mind" (將心觀事，事即有礙，徒擾自心，何有了時？但心明智淨，則毛剎容融，必非外境).⁴

Chinul obviously had an answer to the Huayanist criticism, but still he does not seem to have been satisfied with his answer, and he spent the next three years examining Buddhist literature to confirm his ideas. Eventually, he came to the following conclusion:

What the World Honored One said with his mouth constitutes the teachings of the scholastic schools. What the patriarchs transmitted with their minds is Zen. What the Buddha said and what the patriarchs transmitted can certainly not be contradictory. Why do [students of both scholastic and Sōn schools] not explore what is at the core [of these teachings], but instead, complacent only in their own training, vainly involve themselves with debates and waste their time?

(世尊說之於口即為教，祖師傳之於心即為禪。佛祖心口，必不相違，豈可不窮根源，而各安所習，妄興諍論，虛喪天日耶？)⁵

This is the moment when Chinul confirmed for himself the compatibility between Sōn and Hwaōm practice. He reached this conclusion, however, not by following through the Huayanist question about the relationship between the potential solipsism of the mind-focused practice and the “unobstructed interpenetration among phenomena” of Huayan Buddhism. His realization was inspired by the lay Buddhist Li Tongxuan (李通玄 635-730) who claimed the mind of the sentient being is the very mind of the Buddha; that there is no difference between the Buddha and the sentient being.

Li Tongxuan is an obscure figure in Huayan Buddhism in comparison with the patriarchs of the school, and his understanding of Huayan Buddhism is distinctively different from that of the orthodox Huayan teachers. Not much is known about his life. After studying the Eighty Fascicles *Huayan Jing*, Li wrote commentaries known as *Exposition on the Eighty Fascicles of Huayan Jing* (新華嚴經論), which must have given inspiration to Chinul. After Chinul read Li, he came to a complete resolution of the Sōn-Hwaōm issue, which he describes as follows:

⁴ HPC, vol. 4, p. 767c.

⁵ HPC, vol. 4, p. 768a.

Having returned to the mountain [after the encounter with the Huayan lecturer], I sat down and examined scriptures, searching for the Buddha's words which would comply with the school of the mind. Three winters and summers had passed by, when I came to read in the chapter of "Appearance of the Tathāgata" of the *Huayan jing* a simile stating that a single mote contains a thousand volumes of scriptures. The passage is later explained with, "The wisdom of the Tathāgata is like that. It is equipped in the bodies of the sentient beings; however, the common and foolish people do not know it, nor do they realize it." I placed the scripture on my head [with joy] and was not aware of tears coming out.

退歸山中，坐閱大藏，求佛語之契心宗者，凡三周寒暑。至閱華嚴經出現品，舉一塵含大千經卷之喻，後合云，「如來智慧，亦復如是，具足在於眾生身中，但諸凡愚，不知不覺。」予頂戴經卷，不覺殞涕。⁶

In the following section, we will examine what Chinul discovered in Li's exposition on *Huayan Jing* and how that resolved the tension between the two schools for Chinul.

3. Chinul's Sōn Buddhism and Li Tongxuan's Huayan Buddhism

As I have discussed in other places,⁷ one major claim of Li in his *Exposition* is that there is no difference between the sentient being and the Buddha. Li observes:

Between the mind of the Tathāgata and that of all the sentient beings, there is originally no difference. ...They are both one mind and one wisdom. All the Buddhas, with the wisdom in the mind of sentient beings, attain the correct enlightenment. All sentient beings are confused about the wisdom of all the Buddhas and make themselves sentient beings.

以如來心與一切眾生心本不異故。是一心一智慧故。……一切諸佛以一切眾生心智慧而成正覺。一切眾生迷諸佛智慧而作眾生。⁸

⁶ HPC, vol. 4, p.767 c.

⁷ See Jin Y. Park, "Temporality and Nontemporality in Li Tongxuan's Huayan Buddhism," in *Dao Companion to Chinese Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Youru Wang and Sandra A. Wawrytko (Springer, 2019), 325-347; Jin Y. Park "A Huayanist Reading of the Lotus Sūtra: The case of Li Tongxuan," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 35 (2012/2013):295-237.

⁸ Li Tongxuan, *Xin Huayanjing lun (Exposition of the New Huayan Sūtra 新華嚴經論)*, T. 36.1739.853c.

This was exactly the passage that Chinul was hoping to find in Buddhist literature. At the bottom of this idea of the sameness of the Buddha and the sentient being lies the confirmation of the Buddha of the Unmoving Wisdom (不動智佛). For Li, the Buddha of the Unmoving Wisdom is the body and essence of the Buddha's wisdom, and this wisdom is also the body and essence of the sentient being's wisdom. Li explains the meaning of "unmoving" in the "Unmoving Wisdom" as follows: "the wisdom of one's mind recognizes the differences [in the world] but is not affected by it, and thus does not move" (自心智隨分別性無所動).⁹ If we accept that sentient beings are Buddhas as they are, as Li emphasizes, for Chinul, the seeming tension between the principle and the phenomenon—and the doctrinal school and Sōn meditation—loses its ground.

At the beginning of the *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden*, Chinul launches a conversation with a fictive discussant, a Hwaōm practitioner who asks Chinul about the nature of the Buddhahood attained through the Buddha of the Unmoving Wisdom. The practitioner asks: "Is the fruition of Buddhahood of the unmoving wisdom the noumenal Buddha of original enlightenment or a newly produced phenomenal Buddha? (此中不動智佛果，是本覺理佛耶，是新成事佛耶?)"¹⁰

The assumption behind this question is to make a distinction between the principle and phenomena and between the Buddha and the sentient being. In other words, the questioner is making a distinction between the idea of the Buddhahood and its realization in the phenomenal world. In response to this question, Chinul introduces Li's *Exposition*. Here, Chinul is already following Li Tongxuan's idea that there is no difference between the Buddha and sentient beings. That is, what is called "the noumenal Buddha (理佛)" refers to the Buddha who is pure and who is a presentation of the principle. And the "phenomenal Buddha (事佛)" is the Buddha who eventually attained Buddhahood after long practice. From Chinul's perspective, backed by Li's *Exposition*, the distinction between the principle and the phenomenon, the original pure Buddha and the Buddha in the lifeworld, is itself misleading. That is because the sentient being's own ignorance and discrimination is the same as the unmoving wisdom of the Buddha. Neither of them has self-nature. This is the core of Li Tongxuan's teaching. If there is no difference between the Buddha and the sentient being, then the Huayanist's question asking about the identity of the mind between the Buddha of the principle and the Buddha of the effect is nothing but theoretical. Chinul presents Li's exposition to support his argument:

⁹ Li Tongxuan, *Exposition of the New Huayan Sūtra* (新華嚴經論), T 36.1739.766b.

¹⁰ *HPC*, vol. 4, p. 724a.

A poem of the commentator says:

“The Buddha is the buddha in the minds of sentient beings,

In terms of personal capacities, [buddhas and sentient beings] are not different things.

If you want to know the source of all the buddhas,

Awaken to the fact that your own ignorance originally is buddha.”

If you carefully examine the words of this verse, you will be able to understand it.

Those who are contemplating the mind nowadays should realize that the fruition wisdom produced by awakening from their own ignorance is both the ideal buddha [the Buddha of the principle] and the phenomenal buddha. It is the buddha within themselves and the buddha within others; it is the causal buddha and the fruition buddha. Consequently, it is said: “Whether it is the water at the beginning of the river or the water at the end, it is of one nature—water. Whether it is a causal buddha or a fruition buddha, it is of one nature—buddhahood.” As he said, “The Buddha is the buddha in the minds of sentient beings, / In terms of personal capacities, they are not different things.”

又論主頌云，「佛是眾生心裏佛，隨自根堪無異物。欲知一切諸佛源，悟自無明本是佛。」將此頌意，字細思看，可以知之，今日觀心之士，悟自無明所成果智，即理佛即事佛，即自佛即他佛，即因佛即果佛。故云，「初水後水一性水，因佛果佛一性佛。」既云，「佛是眾生心裏佛，隨自根堪無異物。」¹¹

I cited the long passage to demonstrate Chinul’s resolution. From Chinul’s perspective, Huayanists of his time are consistently asking him whether the Buddha-mind of Sōn school is the mind of the ideal Buddha (the Buddha of the principle) or the Buddhahood achieved through practice (the Buddha of phenomenon). Chinul is responding that such a distinction is only in the minds of sentient beings. For sentient beings to attain awakening, what is needed is not to make such a distinction, but to realize that there is no original difference between the Buddha and the sentient being, the Buddha of the principle and that of the phenomenon; instead, one must realize that one’s own mind is the Buddha.

¹¹ *HPC*, vol. 4, p. 726b. English translation, Robert E. Buswell, *Chinul*, p. 270. Translation modified. The passage 「佛是眾生心裏佛，隨自根堪無異物。」 appears in 《宗鏡錄》，T48, no. 2016, p. 513b6-7。

Chinul's incorporation of Huayan thought in this context does not have much to do with relying on doctrine and deviating from the "authentic" teachings of Chan/Sōn Buddhism, as Sōngch'ōl claims. By employing Li's idea of the identity of the Buddha and the sentient being, Chinul was offering a philosophical foundation for Sōn meditation.

The philosophical foundation of Hwaōm for Sōn might not have been possible if Chinul had not encountered Li's teaching. Here, we find another aspect of Chinul's Hwaōm-Sōn collaboration. The Sōn Buddhist criticism of Huayan Buddhism has been that all of the Buddhist schools, including Huayan Buddhism, focus on the theoretical level of Buddhist teaching, whereas Sōn Buddhism focuses on Buddhist practice. Chinul was not different. In his *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Hwadu Meditation*, Chinul made his stance on this issue clear.

In this work, Chinul emphasizes that the problem is not that discourses on Buddhist teachings are useless in their entirety, but that such discourses focus on the state of enlightenment, whereas the issue is how to lead unenlightened sentient beings to the state of awakening. Li's interpretation of the *Huayan Jing*, from Chinul's perspective, is doing exactly the opposite. Li repeatedly emphasizes that theory. From Chinul's perspective, unlike Li, the orthodox Huayan thinkers were focusing more on the theory of interpenetration instead of leading sentient beings to how to experience that interpenetration.

For Sōn Buddhist, Huayan ideas of the unobstructed interpenetration among phenomena or mutual identity and mutual penetration (相即相入) are merely theories that do not help sentient beings attain awakening. In Li's interpretation of the sameness of the Buddha and the sentient being, however, Chinul saw the mutual identity and mutual penetration between the Buddha and sentient beings. As mentioned above, the idea of the Buddha is possible only because there is the idea of the sentient being. In the mind of the sentient being, the sentient being creates the being who is different from itself: the perfect being, the Buddha. Wisdom (慧) and ignorance (無明) are also mutually interpenetrated and are not two different states.

In order to accept the sameness of wisdom and ignorance, one needs "faith" (信) in addition to logic. Chinul finds that Huayan Buddhism offers this faith through the idea of the identities of the Buddha and the sentient being.¹²

¹² For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Sim Chaeryong, "Pojo Kuksa Chinul ūi "Wōndon song Pul non sangsōk" (In-depth explanation of National Master Pojo Chinul's 'Treatise on the Complete and

An important aspect of faith is that faith is an action. Faith is enabled by making wishes (誓願); the wishes become real by faith, and faith becomes real by practice. Here, we see how a series of things occurs. Thinking is an action, especially in Buddhism. For Chinul and Sŏn Buddhism, the source of all of these happenings—logic, thinking, wishing, faith, and practice—is the sentient being’s mind. Hence Chinul’s declaration: the mind is the Buddha.

4. Conclusion: Sŏn, Hwaŏm, and Buddhism in Context

The fundamental teaching of Buddhism is that nothing exists in isolation. Things exist in connection with other things. Buddhist teaching and Buddhist scholarship are no exception. When the Buddha teaches how to eliminate suffering in life, the Buddha doesn’t say that everybody should get rid of suffering. The Buddha’s proposal is that, if you want to get rid of suffering, then Buddhist teaching can help you. Buddhist teaching does not subscribe to a “categorical imperative” that should be followed without conditions and context. Buddhism is always making hypothetical recommendations: “If you want to have a peace with your neighbor, then try to love them.” The theory of upāya (or *fangbian* 方便) teaches us exactly this. Each and every sentient being will need a different method, depending on the different situation they are in and without a hierarchy of different teachings.

The sectarian identities of Buddhism go against such a teaching. Sectarianism violates the foundational teaching of Buddhism, which is contextualization. By claiming the superiority of one Buddhist sect over others without considering the function of the school in working to help sentient beings, sectarianism fails and weakens Buddhist teaching.

Sŏngch’ŏl’s criticism of Chinul for his incorporation of Huayan Buddhism seems to be largely motivated by his desire to create a perfect Sŏn Buddhism without considering the context of Chinul’s time and Chinul’s agony to provide a way to lead the sentient being to practice.

That being said, Sŏngch’ŏl’s claim should also be understood in the context of Korean Buddhism in his time. One of the most valuable credits that Sŏngch’ŏl must receive in the context of modern Korean Buddhism is regarding his efforts to rebuild the dignity of Korean Buddhism after the religion suffered from social marginalization for

Sudden Attainment of the Buddhahood), in *Chinul*, edited by Yi Tŏkchin (Seoul: Yemoomseowon, 2002), 436-463.

centuries. He launched a compact community movement in the middle of the twentieth century with the goal of living the life of the Buddhist practitioner and following the original teachings of the Buddha. He criticized practitioners who compromised regarding the time taken and ease of practicing, and his absolutism can be interpreted as a part of his determination to (re-)establish Buddhist tradition incorporating rigorous practice. Whether such an effort needed a scapegoat and the wholesale criticism of a tradition that was established by Chinul is a different story.

