

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

On the Practice and Prospects of Gongan Seon in Modern Korean Buddhism: Focused on its Relation with Vipassana Meditation

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THE LARGEST BUDDHIST ORDER in Korea is the Jogye 曹溪 Order, to which more than ninety percent of all Korean Buddhists belong. Its name, Jogye, originated from Caoxi Huineng 曹溪慧能 (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch of the Chinese Chan Order; nevertheless, its thought belongs to the Linji 臨濟 school. Especially, among several Linji sects, the one introduced in Korean Buddhism was from the post-Song era, which has been transmitted until today.

The major practice method of the Linji school has been composed of *gongan* 公案 (Jp. *kōan*) investigation since Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163). Ever since Gongan Seon 公案禪 (Ch. *Gongan Chan*; Jp. *Kōan Zen*) was first introduced in Korea by Bojo Jinul 普照知訥 (1158–1210), it has been established as the most important practice in Korean Buddhism. One of the reasons why Gongan Seon plays a major role in Korea is that Korean Buddhism could not afford nor accept any other practice system for it had to spend so many years surviving various ordeals through the long history of the Joseon 朝鮮 Dynasty (1392–1910) and subsequent Japanese colonial period (1910–1945). Moreover, as the Jogye Order was responsible for over ninety percent of the Korean Buddhist community, naturally a climate favorable to *gongan* practice came to be formed. After the national liberation from Japanese colonial rule, however, Southern Buddhist practices began to be imported as the Buddhist community became more stable and the number of Buddhist priests who had studied in India or Southeast Asia gradually increased. Conspicuous among these practices was Vipassana meditation, which was first introduced in Korea in 1980. According to statistics

from 2003, there were sixteen Vipassana sites in Korea wherein practitioners numbered fifteen thousand.

Meanwhile, the Jogye Order, stimulated by the spread of the Southern Buddhist practices, has made various efforts to systemize and popularize Gonggan Seon. Such efforts have taken the forms of holding seminars on Gonggan Seon, systemizing the practice of Gonggan Seon, publishing various instruction books about practice, and so on. Accordingly, encouraged by the application of Vipassana meditation to psychotherapy, a new trend to examine possible connections between Gonggan Seon and psychotherapy came into being, and several Seon centers have succeeded in spreading Gonggan Seon to the public.

This paper aims to examine the current state of *gongan*-cultivation in contemporary Korean Buddhism particularly in relation to Vipassana while at the same time considering the prospects of Korean Gonggan Seon in the future.

Gongan Seon and Psychotherapy

The application of Vipassana meditation in psychotherapy has been undertaken for many years, and this use originally occurred in western society. Vipassana meditation in particular was verified to have outstanding efficacy when applied to the program of “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” by Doctor Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979. Currently in Korea, too, there is a marked tendency to utilize Vipassana in psychotherapy; to be more specific, such a phenomenon has been realized through the founding of Buddhism-related psychotherapeutic societies and the opening of academic courses for counseling psychotherapy in various colleges throughout the country. For the past few years, several academic societies have been newly formed which study the possibilities for the relation of Buddhism to psychotherapy. These groups are actively utilizing Vipassana in psychotherapy.

In this way, in the relationship between Buddhism and psychotherapy, Vipassana meditation is playing a major part. Stimulated by such recent trends, a movement to apply Gonggan Seon to psychotherapy is also emerging in Korea. This is, of course, a most recent development and since it remains in its germinal stage, it is still lacking in sufficient clinical applications. Nevertheless, this new trend can be considered a significant change given that there had been no serious discussion on the relationship of Gonggan Seon and psychotherapy until it emerged.

Korean Buddhists discussing the issue of the relationship between Gonggan Seon and psychotherapy present two divergent avenues of connection

between them: one is to compare behavioral psychology with Gongan Seon while the other is to discuss the relation between transpersonal psychology and Gongan Seon. Here, behavioral psychology, first proposed by the American psychologist, J. B. Watson, refers to that which targets mainly the responses to stimuli that are objectively observable (i.e., behaviors), since it is impossible for any research targeting consciousness to be totally objective. Human beings, according to behavioral psychology, are originally born in a state of *tabula rasa* (blank slate), so that they come to be conditioned through learning, thus showing conditioned responses to conditioning stimuli. Therefore, if a certain person shows a pathological behavior, they can be returned to normal by “extinguishing” the previously conditioned states.

For example, Pavlov’s experiment in which he trained a dog to salivate upon hearing a bell is a paradigm of the conditioned response in behavioral psychology. However, the dog will cease to salivate by degrees if it hears the bell repeatedly but is not given food. If the dog anticipates food whenever it hears the bell but is not given anything, it will soon die of disease. In this case, it is necessary to turn the dog back to the state previous to its conditioning in order to restore it to normal.

Behavioral psychology posits that in all human behavior, too, conditioning and the extinction of conditioning repeat. Therefore, depending upon what one experiences and what one does, one’s personality comes to vary. In other words, one may become a robber or beggar according to the conditions they are in. In certain cases, inextinguishably strong conditioning factors, such as drug addiction, a fire disaster, etc., can become deeply ingrained, making restoration to the original state of emptiness extremely difficult. This sort of conditioning is thought to occur in a vast range of experience—the members of a society are said to be collectively conditioned by the ideologies, beliefs, institutions, religions, cultures or a set of values which they experience and learn commonly. In consequence, individual personalities and behavioral characteristics are nothing other than the totality of what is experienced and conditioned collectively in the course of life. Even the pettiest whatsoever may affect subsequent behaviors; it never vanishes. According to behavioral psychology, the reason why natural behaviors like having breakfast, urinating, defecating, and such, are disturbed can be explained by the existence of an “I” or “mind” formed through past experiences. In this way, all human behaviors are thought to result from the conditioning of past experiences. Hence, when one develops a pathological behavior, you can make them get back to normal by extinguishing the conditioning that is causing it.

A representative scholar who links behavioral psychology with Gongan meditation, Dr. Kim Bogyong takes “dependent origination” and “no-self” as the cores of Buddhist thought and from that standpoint argues that the two are not different from the mechanism of behavioral psychology, which analyzes man’s problem behaviors through the unified context of situation-behavior-result. In both systems of thought, there is nothing like an inherent self, nor human mind, either.¹ Human beings are in a perfect state from birth with their minds originally in a blank condition. Therefore, from Kim’s perspective, spiritual practice in Buddhism can be seen as an attempt to “recover the originally perfect state,” which is equal to the “extinction of the conditioned state” in behavioral psychology.

Chinese Chan Buddhism of the post-Huineng era was divided into the Northern school (*beizong* 北宗) and Southern school (*nanzong* 南宗). Here, the former school aimed to “attain salvation through active cultivation,” while the latter to “recover one’s born pure mind.” These two orientations correspond to positive and negative reinforcement in behavioral psychology. Gongan meditation is a practice method succeeding to the Linji school, an inheritor of the Southern Chan.

Human beings were and are originally in their perfect state. Due to (or conditioned by) their discriminative minds, however, they indulge habitually in all kinds of delusions and disorderly (or pathological) behaviors. Therefore, if only one can remove such discrimination (or conditioning) in their mind through spiritual practice, one’s pure mind comes to reveal itself spontaneously. But, how can one cause this to occur? In Gongan meditation, this state can be achieved through “*gongan* investigation.” That is, by turning the mind into original emptiness using a *gongan* as a means of eliminating discrimination. In behavioral psychology, on the other hand, it can be done by making the mind recover the S (stimulus)–R (response) behavior pattern from S–O (organism or human)–R through the extinction of the human-conditioned factors. In other words, behavioral psychologists’ theory is not different from the Chan aphorism that “ordinary man is the Buddha,” as the former contends that mind can return to its original purity

¹ In the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄, it is recorded that Bodhidharma (Damo 達磨, 346?–528?) heard Huike 慧可 (487?–593) say, “I am so ill at ease.” At this, Bodhidharma instructed, “Show me your distressed mind.” When Huike responded in the negative, Bodhidharma put Huike at ease by saying, “Originally, there exists nothing like the mind” (T no. 2076, 51: 219b21–23). This type of Dharma talk on the peace of mind has much in common with psychotherapy.

of no conditioning so long as one extinguishes the conditioning, after all the mind stays the same whether conditioned or not.

Gongan, on the other hand, is said to have the function of cutting off the process of thoughts. Namely, ceaseless investigation of a *gongan* allows its practitioner to cut off all discursive thinking and then to remove discrimination. Here, cutting off the thoughts also means the cessation of all thought-related emotions or behaviors. Viewed from behavioral psychology, this corresponds to the method of extinction or unlearning which can be done by neglecting or “punishing” the mind already formed through learning. Furthermore, making one see into the mind-nature on the spot is none other than a therapy applying the principle of “reciprocal inhibition” in behavioral psychology. Reciprocal inhibition refers to the method of allowing only one (or inhibiting the other) of two responses or behaviors that cannot occur reciprocally.

Similarly, *Gongan* meditation is an attempt to return to the original nature through blocking the way in which various thoughts arise. That is to say, it is like returning to ordinary states of mind following self-nature, which can be seen as the same as returning to the state of no conditioning in which Pavlov’s dog will recognize a bell and food separately and independently from each other.

Gongan meditation as shown in the above is a practice seeking to restore the original mind and achieve a state of no discrimination by resolving the *gongan*, which is similar in nature to recovering to normal (i.e., to the state of no previous learning) by means of extinguishing the conditioned state in behavioral psychology.

Above, I have presented an outline of the main points in the argument for the similarity between *Gongan* meditation and behavioral psychology which has come to the fore recently in Korea. As far as I am concerned, however, such a contention has the following problems: First, it confines the function of *gongan* to the “inhibition of the thoughts.” Thoughts, of course, will be cut off by ceaseless investigation of a *gongan*, and yet *gongan* investigation has another function: the “resolving of *gongan*” (*gongan tapa* 公案打破), or the spiritual awakening which results from inhibiting the effect of thought. There is no explanation for the psychological mechanism of “*gongan*-resolving” in Kim’s description. Second, behavioral psychology seems too simple to apply immediately to human behavior as it is based upon animal experiments. Even if dogs, for instance, are free of neurosis in the natural state, they cannot awaken to self-nature by cultivating the Noble

Eightfold Path (*pal jeongdo* 八正道), the Six Pāramitās (*yuk baramil* 六波羅密), and the Three Learnings (*samhak* 三學); nor can they reach awakening merely by maintaining the ordinary mind of “having a meal when hungry and sleeping when tired” in their freedom from conditioning. Only human beings are afflicted with neurosis from questioning their existence, but such questioning causes them to awaken to their self-nature.

Recently, attempts to link transpersonal psychology with Buddhism, particularly Seon Buddhism, have been emerging in Korea. Compared to existing psychoanalysis or behavioral psychology which aims at the recovery of ordinary normal lives, transpersonal psychology asserts that human beings have spirituality and that they can be liberated only by recovering such spirituality rather than through the fulfillment of immediate desires or the resolution of urgent problems. In particular, this viewpoint holds that modern man’s uneasiness and lethargy cannot be overcome merely by satisfying his desires but by restoring essential meaning to life.

Meanwhile, this spirituality is likely to be recovered not by self-expansion or self-realization but by becoming one with the whole or cosmo-consciousness through self-denial, which is similar to enlightenment in Buddhism. Therefore, in some essential senses, the solutions proposed by established analytic psychology or behavioral psychology do not overcome the attachment to “ego,” which transpersonal psychology does by requiring the denial of the ego in the course of the ceaseless pursuit of union with the whole.

The therapeutic approach of transpersonal psychology is to deal with problematic states actively. For example, there is a clinical case wherein a student with a stutter was cured immediately when “encouraged to make an effort to stutter,” instead of being induced to avoid or gradually adjust to stuttering. It is rather like attempting to cause one to transcend one’s problems by wrestling with them positively. In other words, existing psychology tries to solve a client’s problems by encouraging them to avoid or escape from extremes while transpersonal psychology forces one to break through those problems by pushing oneself to the limits. This approach is in a way very similar to the method of *gongan* investigation. Concerning *Gongan* meditation, Dahui Zonggao stated as follows:

If afflictions arise because deluded feelings still remain, that is the very moment when you have only to be absorbed in the *gongan* question. There is no other way out except for constant *gongan* investigation. . . . Then, when you go into the stage of nowhere to

use and direct your mind, you do not have to worry about “falling into voidness.” That is the very right place of your practice.²

Dahui requires that one should drive one’s mind to the limits by penetrating one’s *gongan*. In doing so, when one is pushed into a great quandary of not knowing what to do, that is the penultimate stage of enlightenment. After undergoing it, one can pass through the *gongan* to achieve enlightenment. *Gongan* investigation is similar to transpersonal psychology in its methods of making one “go to the limits”; therefore, enlightenment is not different from “transcendence” or the “recovery of spirituality” that is posited by transpersonal psychology. *Gongan* investigation is sometimes said to be like “proceeding on further from the top of a hundred-foot pole” (*baichi gantou jin yibu* 百尺竿頭進一步). That is to say, one can be free from the problem of life and death only when one jumps down risking death from the top of a pole a few hundred meters long, that is, going one step past the extreme.

Above, I have examined the trend of applying *Gongan* meditation to psychotherapy that has been emerging in Korea of late. Such a trend, however, is still relatively new and remains at the stage attempting to establish its theoretical basis. It has not yet attracted wide attention nor been applied in clinical tests. In order for *Gongan* meditation to be practically applied to therapy for patients, further research will be required in the future.

As for transpersonal psychology and *Gongan* Seon, however, a meditation counseling institute in Korea is running a program that links the two together. According to the program, it divides meditative activities into three sectors such as the body, mind, and character and then depending upon the type and level of the practitioners, it runs a four-stage program: (1) breathing and *sati-samatha-vipaśyanā* (being mindful while calmly abiding and clearly observing), (2) LIDA meditation,³ (3) image observation meditation (*yeongsang gwanbeop* 映像觀法), (4) transpersonal *Gongan* Seon (*ja-a chowol gongan seon* 自我超越公案禪). Here, *Gongan* Seon belongs to the highest among the four levels.

² *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu* 大慧普覺禪師語錄 (Records of Chan Master Dahui Pujue), T no. 1998A, 47: 941b9–10; 16–17.

³ LIDA meditation is a term coined by the Venerable Ingyeong 印鏡, the director of the institute, and is an acronym for “Labeling, Inquiring, Diffusion, Acceptance and Action,” which refers to a four-stage meditative process. “Labeling” means to give a name to the emotion one is experiencing; “Inquiring” refers to exploring the thoughts that gave rise to the emotion; “Diffusion” is to separate those thoughts from the emotion; and “Acceptance and Action” refers to focusing on performing behaviors that are in accord with values.

Interface Between Vipassana and Gongan Seon

The two major meditative practices in contemporary Korean Buddhism are Gongan Seon and Vipassana. The former is being practiced largely by the members of the Jogye Order; the latter, by Buddhist priests who have been to South Asia to study Southern Buddhism, by lay Buddhists, or even by non-Buddhists.

Gongan Seon, however, was a practice method originally belonging to Northern Buddhism while Vipassana is associated with Southern Buddhism. What is the difference between them? Currently as Vipassana practitioners gradually increase, there is a tendency to search for the similarities and differences between Gongan Seon and Vipassana and then to seek for exchange between them. This trend is emerging primarily from the Jogye Order since the increasing number of Vipassana practitioners has led to a sense of crisis within the order. In academic circles, seminars on Gongan Seon and Vipassana are frequently held. Also in 2005, Woljeong 月精 temple in Korea and Mahasi Monastery in Myanmar made an agreement to work to learn each other's practice methods. However, we cannot deny that there have been not a few misunderstandings between both practitioners. The following is just a sampling of those difficulties in the process of these exchanges.

First, established Gongan practitioners have denigrated Southern Buddhism as the Lesser Vehicle (*soseung* 小乘), and have refused to learn Vipassana. However, as it has come to be understood that the term "Lesser Vehicle," in fact, had been invented arbitrarily by proponents of its counterpart, the Greater Vehicle (*daeseung* 大乘), the mistaken impression about Southern Buddhism caused by this appellation has gradually begun to disappear. Southern Buddhists, on the other hand, have criticized their Northern counterparts, saying, "They are not faithful practitioners as they do not abide by the precepts." It may be true that Northern practitioners in a way did not adhere to the precepts, but this was due to the historical situation of Northeast Asia.

Second, as to the method of practice, Gongan practitioners have criticized Vipassana, saying that it is an approach of gradual cultivation which requires a long time to come to fruition. Compared to this, they argue proudly that Gongan meditation is a path of sudden awakening (*dono* 頓悟) and a shortcut approach (*gyeongjeol mun* 徑截門). Vipassana practitioners, on the other hand, have criticized that Gongan Seon is merely a *śamatha* (cessation) practice through which it is impossible to reach nirvana.

Gongan Seon	Vipassana meditation
No establishment of words and letters; cutting off the path of language	First stage (<i>choseon</i> 初禪): cessation of speech and language
Cessation of discrimination	Second stage (<i>iseon</i> 二禪): cessation of discrim- inative thoughts following the stop of linguistic function
Alertness and calmness	Third stage (<i>samseon</i> 三禪): right wisdom (extreme mindfulness)
	Fourth stage (<i>saseon</i> 四禪): forsaking (extreme tranquility or calmness)

Figure 1. Correlations in Course of Practice

From my perspective, it seems that since both of them have similarities, one can complement the other. In the following, I will discuss three commonalities between the two systems of thought and practice: (1) similarity in their course of practice, (2) similarity in the understandings of *gongan* and “*sati* establishment” as skillful means for entering into *samādhi*, and (3) similarity in the spiritual stage achieved through cultivation.

First, one can see a great similarity in the courses of practice that are laid out in Gongan Seon and Vipassana meditation techniques. Vipassana is based on four stages of meditation (*saseon* 四禪). In the first stage, one attains the “abandonment of speech and language” which can be said to correspond to “no establishment of words and letters” (*bullip munja* 不立文字) and “cutting off the path of language” (*eon-eo do dan* 言語道斷) in Gongan Seon. In the second stage, the “cessation of discriminative thoughts following the stop of linguistic function” can correspond to the “cessation of the intellect” in Gongan Seon. The stage of “alertness and calmness” (*seongseong jeokjeok* 惺惺寂寂) emphasized by Gongan Seon has something in common with the third stage of Vipassana, *sampajāna* (right wisdom, *jeongji* 正智), which stresses “extreme alertness,” and with its fourth stage, *upekkhā* (forsaking, *sa* 捨), which means “extreme tranquility or calmness.” These correlations are summarized in figure 1.

Moreover, what matters most in Gongan Seon is “absorption in the *gongan* question,” which is not different from *sati* (mindfulness, or *yeom* 念) that is achievable in the third and fourth stages and also forms the basis of Vipassana. *Sati* is a term that has been held to be important since the early days of Buddhism which means “establishing the encounter with the object

of observation in meditative practice,” and in actual practice, one is required to maintain the encounter constantly without losing it even for a moment. In order for the encounter to be established, naturally a high degree of concentration is required. Therefore, the “establishment of *sati*” in Theravada Buddhism can be regarded as the same as ceaseless “absorption in a *gongan*” amid the state of “alertness and calmness.” The difference between Vipassana and Gongan Seon, if any, is that the former emphasizes ceaseless encounter with all objects such as the body (*sin* 身), feelings (*su* 受), mind (*sim* 心) and things in general (*beop* 法), while the latter focuses on an “intensive encounter with one specific *gongan*.” Accordingly, Gongan Seon can be viewed from the stance of Theravada Buddhism as a specialized practice method of Vipassana in a limited sense.

The second commonality is in the understanding in both schools that the central practices (*gongan* and *sati*-establishment) are a means to enter into *samādhi*. Generally, Gongan Seon explains that meditative concentration can be reached through the establishment of doubt-feelings (*uijeong* 疑情) and their development into a doubt-mass (*uidan* 疑團), or a state of unification between the *gongan* and the practitioner. Such concentration is otherwise called the “sole revelation of a doubt-mass” (*uidan dokno* 疑團獨路), “appearance of the *gongan*” (*gongan hyeonjeon* 公案現前), “being one with the *gongan*” (*taseong ilpyeon* 打成一片), etc. It is also referred to as the “*gongan samādhi*” (*gongan sammae* 公案三昧). Here, raising doubt through *gongan* investigation, and then establishing a doubt-mass serve as skillful means to reach *samādhi*.

For example, the *Chanyao* 禪要 (Essentials of Chan) by Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峯原妙 (1238–1295) states:

If one has even a bit of a doubt-feeling, one is able to become one with the *gongan* and remove the discriminative mind. When such discrimination disappears, the calculating mind ceases as well. Furthermore, without making an intentional effort, all the worldly matters and connections fade away in themselves. The six sense faculties become clean and clear of themselves without intentional effort to calm them down. Not spoiled by afflictions, one can enter into thought-free *samādhi* (*musim sammae* 無心三昧).⁴

Here, the master says that doubt-feelings from *gongan* investigation calm down and clarify the six sense faculties and cause the cessation of the afflictions, directly leading to thought-free *samādhi*. A similar process is

⁴ *Gaofeng heshang chanyao* 高峰和尚禪要, X no. 1401, 70: 703b18–20.

described in the teachings of early Buddhism related to *sati*. The *Samyutta-nikāya* states as follows:

If you stay in *sati* when you look at forms, you can remove desires and attachment to the forms. You do not feel any desire nor have any attachment to the forms since all you do is merely feel them. If so (or, if you look at the forms without arousing any desire), you can carry out your actions widely while staying in *sati*. Accordingly, sufferings may not accumulate with nirvana drawn near.⁵

That is, the establishment of *sati* decides whether or not the six sense faculties are calmed and afflictions arise. That is the function and role of *sati*, which resonates with the role of doubt-feeling regarding a *gongan* described by Gaofeng.

Thirdly, one can discern great similarity in the way each school understands the ultimate goal of practice, or the stage achieved through cultivation. According to the *Samyutta-nikāya*, once *sati* is established, one can reach a state of no-discrimination:

Mālukyaputta, let us suppose you see, hear, sense, and understand all things. When seeing, you just see; when hearing, you just hear; when sensing, you just sense; when understanding, you just understand.⁶

In other words, when one sees, hears, and recognizes anything, according to the Buddha, one should merely see, hear, smell, and recognize without importing any discrimination and then one can achieve the extinction of suffering. This refers to the non-discriminative state of “knowing and seeing the reality as does the Buddha” (*yeosil jigyeon* 如實知見) or the state of detached concentration. That is, the establishment of *sati* refers to just seeing when seeing something, just hearing when hearing, just smelling when smelling, just understanding when understanding, which exactly corresponds to the efficacy of *Gongan Seon*.

Dazhu Huihai 大珠慧海 (fl. c. eighth century) expresses this state without discrimination in the following way.

Preceptor Yuan 源 asked Huihai, “Master, do you make efforts when you practice?” Huihai replied, “I do.” Preceptor: “How do you?” Huihai: “When hungry, I have a meal. When tired, I go

⁵ SN 4: 74.22–26.

⁶ SN 4: 73.4–7.

to sleep.” Preceptor: “Don’t all people make efforts as you do?” Huihai: “Theirs are not the same as mine.” “How are they different?” “When they have a meal, they not only have a meal but seek hundreds of other things. When they go to sleep, they not only go to sleep but think hundreds of other things. So theirs are not the same.” At this, the preceptor was at a loss for words.⁷

That is to say, unlike ordinary people, Chan Master Huihai did not arouse discriminative mind. Instead, he simply just ate when eating and slept when sleeping. In conclusion, the establishment of *sati* and the resolving of a *gongan* alike are both meant for attaining the spiritual stage of no-mind and no-discrimination.

However, such a non-discriminative state is achievable only when one is constantly “mindful.” To reach such “mindfulness,” one has to maintain the same level of awareness both when awake and asleep. The *Samyutta-nikāya* says as follows.

Bhikkhus, then what is a *bhikkhu*’s *sampajāna*? *Bhikkhus* remain clearly mindful whether they are going forward or backward. They are clearly mindful whether they are looking forward or around. . . . Whether they are going, standing, sitting, *sleeping*, speaking or in silence, they are clearly mindful.⁸

In the above, *sampajāna*, which is said to always accompany *sati*, means to be “vividly mindful” in all situations. To put it another way, this term refers to “vivid mindfulness” in all activities in daily routine life such as walking, staying, sitting, or lying down (*haeng ju jwa wa* 行住坐臥), and speaking, being silent, moving, or being still (*eo-muk dongjeong* 語默動靜), which is also called for in Gongan Seon. For our purposes, that one should develop a degree of mindfulness that is maintained even while “sleeping” is especially worthy of note.

This stage is not unlike that of “continuous awareness whether one is dreaming or awake” (*omae iryeo* 寤寐一如) in Gongan Seon. This phrase refers to a state of constant alertness and calmness whether awake or asleep. About this state of mind, Dahui Zonggao says:

In addition, my deceased teacher said, “Only after the numerous delusions that you have are finally cut off will you reach the same awareness whether awake or asleep.” At first, on hearing that, I

⁷ *Jingde chuangdeng lu*, T no. 2076, 51: 247c1–6.

⁸ *SN* 5: 142.13–20. Italics added for emphasis.

did not believe him. Looking back on myself every day, however, I found out that I was not in the same awareness whether awake or asleep, so how can I dare open my mouth to mention Chan?⁹

Here, Dahui Zonggao emphasizes that one should achieve the stage of continuous awareness whether awake or asleep through investigating a *gongan*, which, I think, corresponds to the Vipassana practice, as is emphasized in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, that “one should remain in *sampajāna* even when one is asleep.”

*Popularization of Gongan Seon in Contemporary Korean Buddhism:
Focused on the Anguk Seon Center*

Since Gongan Seon was first introduced to the Korean peninsula by Bojo Jinul during the later Goryo 高麗 period (918–1392), it has been established as the most important practice method in Korean Buddhism up until today under the name of the “Ultimate Vehicle” (*choesang seung* 最上乘) or the “Shortcut Approach” (*gyeongjeol mun*). In the 1990s, however, the Jogye Order started to feel threatened by such factors as: (1) the appearances of a variety of spiritual training methods like Vipassana, Guksundo 國仙道, Danhak 丹學, etc.; and (2) the conspicuous activities of foreign monks like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and other internationally prominent representatives of different Buddhist traditions. Although the sense of crisis in Gongan Seon was amplified by external factors such as these, there are also other problems inside of the order. First of all, there is a shortage of eminent monks qualified to instruct Gongan Seon, a problem that was particularly brought to the fore in the 1990s with the successive passing away of several such personages. Actually, until modern times teachers used to test their disciples regularly to check their degree of advancement. Indeed, such testing was a daily phenomenon during retreat seasons. These days, however, almost no testing is done by teachers. Of course, it may be because Gong-an Seon itself aims for instantaneous awakening (*donno*) without gradual advancement through stages of practice, but Vipassana is far easier for students to access since it has an established system of examination by its teachers. Second, Gongan Seon has not yet established a definite practice system for the public. Ordinary people vary in their purposes for practice: some practice to promote their health, others to attain peace of mind and so on. They are not necessarily aiming for enlightenment in the way professional Buddhist priests do. The Jogye Order is not yet equipped with suitable

⁹ Dahui Pujue *chanshi yulu*, T no. 1998A, 47: 936a15–18.

programs to respond to the demands of ordinary people, but instead unconditionally requires ordinary practitioners to awaken to the *gongan* in the same way that it does for renunciant practitioners.

At any rate, the addition of other spiritual training methods into the religious environment of Korea starting in the 1990s stimulated the Jogye Order to make diverse efforts to systemize and popularize Gongan Seon.¹⁰ These efforts have borne some fruit, yet Gongan Seon is still seen as a difficult method of practice among the majority of the populace. However, the Anguk Seon Center (Anguk Seonwon 安國禪院) has succeeded in its popularization effort, which has significant implications for Korean Buddhism.

The Anguk Seon Center is an organization with headquarters in Busan and branches in both Seoul and Changwon. Currently, the number of faithful associated with the center amounts to three thousand five hundred. There are many other temples which outnumber the Anguk in terms of membership. However, what makes this organization especially noteworthy is that daily practice sessions of sitting meditation that is solely focused on Gongan Seon attract five to seven hundred practitioners everyday. In addition, about sixty percent of the lay members of the center participate in the three-month retreats that are held twice each year, and over ninety percent of the participants manage to complete the retreat. Of course, these lay participants need only to be engaged in the meditation for over two hours a day during these retreats, not all day long as the renunciant practitioners have traditionally been required to do. Nevertheless, daily participation for three whole months is not easy for ordinary people.

The Anguk Seon Center has the following four characteristics which distinguish it from other, more traditional temples.

First, it practices only Gongan meditation. Most Korean Buddhist temples engage in several practices along with Seon meditation such as the chanting of the Buddha's name, or prayer. This tendency has been prevalent in Korean temples since the Joseon 朝鮮 era. One reason that such practices have been incorporated into the Jogye Order's temples is that they are easier than Gongan Seon. There are also many temples committed to the chanting of the Buddha's name and prayer but not Gongan meditation. The Anguk,

¹⁰ The Jogye Order has published several manuals like *Ganhwaseon* 看話禪 (2005), *Ganhwaseon immun* 看話禪入門 (2006), *Ganhwaseon* (Revised Edition, 2008), all of which aim to familiarize lay followers with the core of *gongan* practice, which is expressed in the titles as *ganhwa*, or "perceiving the issue" at hand in a *gongan*. The order has developed and conducted the "Ganhwaseon Introduction Program" and has also held the "Ganhwaseon Seminar" twelve times since 2006.

unlike others, instructs the beginners to investigate a *gongan*, “What is this?” (*si gae sim ma* 是個甚麼), as soon as they are initiated into the practice.

Secondly, the center gets initiates to cultivate Gonggan meditation so as to lead them to experience inner transformation from the moment of the initiation. Unlike other temples, which instruct beginners in basic Buddhist doctrines or how to sit in meditation before practicing Gonggan Seon, the Anguk Seon Center directly makes a novice enter into considering a *gongan* question. Then through an intensive training session of seven days and six nights, trainees come to experience their own inner change. As they are not even taught how to sit in meditation, sometimes many of them assume incorrect postures.

Thirdly, the center is managed with the mutual consent of the members and opens its financial records to public scrutiny. More traditional temples, on the other hand, have long been run by a few monks, or often by just an abbot, so lay Buddhists associated with them have generally taken a passive attitude regarding the financial affairs of temples. Most just make offerings of money without knowing where and how it is used. The Anguk Seon Center, however, is run by a consultative group of lay Buddhists and the details of its management are open to the public.

Fourth, the center’s temple structures are both functional and conform to the aesthetic tastes of many contemporary Koreans. Most traditional Korean temples are located in mountainous areas and their Dharma halls and meditation rooms are built in the traditional style. Accordingly, they are often unsuitable for the lifestyle to which contemporary people are accustomed. Specifically, since the Dharma halls of most established temples are made of wood and have high ceilings, they are less than efficient for heating and cooling. In comparison, the structures of the Anguk Seon Center are built in the style of contemporary buildings, and not only include many beautiful design elements, but are also equipped with amenities such as an efficient system for air conditioning and heating, and a state-of-the-art audio-visual system. Upon entering the building, visitors hear classical music instead of Buddhist hymns being played. Moreover, since the center has installed fairly good day-care facilities, people of younger generations can easily attend without worrying about finding childcare elsewhere. In actuality, a distinct feature of the Anguk Seon Center is that it has many young Buddhists in their teens, twenties, and thirties as members.

The initiation course at the Anguk Seon Center is simple. The center instructs the beginners to take note of some points—mainly through a

general lecture on “What is a religion?”—and then has them participate in an intensive training session that lasts six to seven days. Throughout the period, the beginners continue to investigate a *gongan* without stopping, and after an examination by the abbot, they can be officially initiated into the center. The daily schedule of the intensive training is as follows:

5 a.m.	Opening the gate and voluntary meditation
7 a.m.	Breakfast followed by voluntary meditation
10 a.m.	Dharma talk followed by questions and answers
11:30 a.m.	Lunch followed by voluntary meditation
2 p.m.	Dharma talk followed by questions and answers
6 p.m.	Dinner followed by voluntary meditation
10 p.m.	Closing the gate and voluntary meditation

As can be seen in the above, all one does during the training week is “investigate a *gongan*,” except for having meals and listening to Dharma talks. Here, the meditation is done voluntarily, so the trainees are free to sleep in the next room or return to their homes at anytime. But what matters is the result. Usually from the third to fourth day, questions and answers are exchanged between the abbot and the trainees, wherein frequently questions revolve around the issue of the “inner changes resulting from *gongan* investigation.” If the trainee passes the test, he becomes eligible to become a member of the Anguk Seon Center.

Through actually participating in a week of “intensive training” at the center, I discovered that the center places emphasis on the following three points, which sets it apart from more traditional temples.

First, the center gets one to investigate the *gongan*, “What is this?” The abbot, although he does not force a particular *gongan* on the trainees, asks them to investigate the question of “What is that which makes this finger flip?” This question is no different from the *gongan*, “What is this?”, which is one of the most conventionally examined in Korea together with the one regarding Zhaozhou’s dog (*joju muja* 趙州無字).

Also, the center does not stick to sitting meditation. The abbot just urges one to “investigate the *gongan* ceaselessly,” but does not require participants to sit in meditation. If one is only to be absorbed in the *gongan*, any posture, even lying down or walking, is acceptable. This, in fact, is in accordance with the original intent of Gonggan Seon. After all, it is a method of practice that can be done while going, staying, sitting, lying down (*haeng ju jwa wa*), that is, anytime and anywhere. Nevertheless, other temples in the Jogye Order demand that sitting in meditation should be maintained as

the center of practice. This is one difference between the Anguk Seon Center and other existing temples.

Third, the center makes much of experiences. In the Anguk Seon Center one is asked to be absorbed in *gongan* investigation directly without receiving any explanation about basic Buddhist doctrines or how to sit in meditation. This indicates that the center places a high value on one's experiences. That is to say, it calls the trainees to be aware of "inner changes," great or small, through practicing vehemently, and also encourages discussion of these experiences in question and answer sessions. Actually, many of the trainees push ahead with their practice without sleep. Those who underwent such experiences naturally gave rise to a faithful mind. Accordingly, the faithful of the center take great pride in themselves.

In the twenty years since its foundation in 1989, the Anguk Seon Center has developed into a large temple with more than three thousand five hundred lay Buddhists registered as members. What is the secret of success for this "popularization of Gongan Seon"?

It is because the Seon Center has accommodated itself to the religious desires of contemporary people. Specifically, the center answers to these religious needs in the following two ways:

First, the Seon Center appeals to contemporary man in that it accepts the "lay Buddhists as its core" in its framing of the relationship between laypeople and religious. Until the period of the Joseon Dynasty, Korean Buddhism had renunciant priests as its center with lay Buddhists playing inactive, peripheral roles. In the matter of spiritual cultivation, laypeople could not but do what they were instructed by the monks and furthermore they were excluded from the management of the temples. In both cultivation and the management of the temple, however, the Anguk Seon Center regards laypeople as important. In the matter of cultivation, above all, it rejects an overly rigid practice system while securing voluntary practice by maintaining a time schedule and rules flexible enough to accommodate an urban lifestyle. In the management of the temple, too, it has organized a consultative body and made public its finances, which gives the faithful a sense of ownership of their temple.

Second, the center is equipped with the facilities suited to modern urbanites. It has a beautiful building, the design of which resolved many of the inconveniences existing in the structures of older, established temples while excelling in function and aesthetics. These efforts contribute to transforming the heavy, dark images associated with existing temples into ones of

bright and beautiful ambience. The success of the Anguk Seon Center, I think, owes much to this effective accommodation to the demands of the aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary people. Another merit of this center is that upon initiation as an official member, one enters into a group of twenty to thirty people, and this group becomes the center for most of an individual's practices and relationships. I think the strong solidarity of the Anguk Seon Center is due to these types of small organizations.

Prospects of Korean Gonggan Seon

In the above I have examined the current state of modern Korean Buddhism from the perspectives of the relation between Gonggan Seon and psychotherapy and the issue of the popularization of Gonggan Seon. Stimulated by the spread of Vipassana, Gonggan Seon has been systemized and popularized, producing a profitable result of its own. However, it is still considered by many ordinary people as a difficult practice method. There may be several reasons for this view, but I think it is primarily because there is no systemized set of stages for practice. At this point in time, the three stages of practice proposed by the contemporary Korean Seon master Seongcheol 性徹 (1912–1993) are significant. He describes these three as: (1) continued awareness whether at rest or active (*dongjeong iryeo* 動靜一如), (2) continuous awareness whether one is dreaming or awake (*mongjung iryeo* 夢中一如), (3) continuous awareness even during deep sleep (*sungmyeon iryeo* 熟眠一如). To attain these three stages, one should investigate one's *gongan* constantly without cease. It is not until one reaches the level of "continuous awareness during deep sleep" that one can awaken to enlightenment.

Seongcheol also applies these three stages to the "Ten Grounds" (*sipji* 十地), or the ten practice levels described in the Huayan 華嚴 school, as well as associating them with Yogācāra doctrine. Specifically, the first stage "continued awareness whether at rest or active" is the one in which the sixth, seventh, and eighth consciousnesses (*sik* 識) are still operating, and therefore is allocated to stages up to the sixth ground. The second, "continuous awareness whether one is dreaming or awake," is associated with the seventh ground of the Huayan, the "ground of far-reaching" (*wonhaeng ji* 遠行地) wherein the sixth *mano* consciousness (*uisik* 意識) disappears. The third, "continuous awareness even during deep sleep," is associated with the eighth ground of the Huayan, the "immovable ground" (*budong ji* 不動地), or the ground of being unperturbed, wherein the seventh, *manas* (*malna sik* 末那識), disappears with only the eighth *ālayavijñāna* (*aroeya sik* 阿賴耶識) remaining. As there still remains *ālayavijñāna* even at the third stage,

it is necessary for one to remove it completely in order to reach ultimate enlightenment.¹¹

I think it may be worthwhile to attempt to systemize Gongan Seon using Seongcheol's three stages. The phrase "continuous awareness whether awake or asleep" (*omae iryeo*) was presented as early as the period of Dahui Zonggao as a testing course in Gongan Seon. However, Seongcheol broke it down into *mongjung iryeo* and *sungmyeon iryeo*.

Meanwhile, I think the successful case of the Anguk Seon Center has positive implications for promoting Gongan Seon. Efforts of this sort may contribute to removing the sense of ponderousness and difficulty which people commonly have held regarding Gongan Seon. So, to popularize Gongan Seon, factors such as voluntary practice, ambience, functional facilities, and laypeople's active participation in the temple management provide a good guide for future attempts at popularization.

Another important fact is that practitioners vary in their purposes of practice: they are not necessarily aiming at spiritual enlightenment, but at attaining peace of mind or recovering their health, and may have other goals, as well. Accordingly, in the practice of Gongan Seon, too, a variety of practice programs should be developed and applied in order to accommodate these diverse objectives, instead of just the one of penetrating a *gongan*.

ABBREVIATIONS

- SN *Samyutta-nikāya*. 5 vols., ed. L. Feer, 1884–98. Reprint, London: Pali Text Society, 1975–2006.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 100 vols., ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–34.
- X *Shinsan dainihon zokuzōkyō* 新纂大日本續藏經. 90 vols., ed. Kawamura Kōshō 河村孝照. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–89.

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¹¹ Seongcheol's three stages are similar to the four levels leading to enlightenment as established in the Upanishad: the awakening stage, the dream and sleep stage, the deep sleep stage, and the fourth stage. Here, when reaching the fourth and last stage, one is said to be able to see Brahman.

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