

# One Korean's Approach to Buddhism

SUNY series in Korean Studies

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Sung Bae Park, editor

# One Korean's Approach to Buddhism

The *Mom/Momjit* Paradigm

Sung Bae Park

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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# Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One. Initial Considerations	11
Sociological Concerns	11
Individual Needs	12
Human Ignorance	14
Ordinary and Absolute Aspects	15
Suffering	21
Definition of <i>Mom</i> and <i>Momjit</i> : A Closer Look	21
The Experience of <i>Mom</i>	23
Practical Applications	26
Stages of Access	28
Coexistence of <i>Mom</i> and <i>Momjit</i>	30
Two Dimensions of Human Existence	32
Chapter Two. Tools for Transformation	35
The Need for Transformation	35
The Use of the <i>Hwadu</i>	35
Initial Thoughts on <i>Hwadu</i> Practice: The Three Disciplines	38
No-Thought	41
Getting Down to Practice	42
Faith and Doubt	42
Faith and Surrender	44
Faith and Understanding	47
What Is Enlightenment?	48
No Need for Transformation	54
Attaining Salvation?	56
The Strange Behavior of Zen Masters: Beatings and Shoutings	59
Problems in Practice	62
The Nature of the Problem	63
The Real Meaning of <i>Hwadu</i>	65
The Solution	70
The Nature of Death	73

Chapter Three. Other Teachings	77
Wŏnhyo's <i>Commentary on the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith</i> (First Chapter)	77
Wŏnhyo's <i>Treatise on the Vajrasamādhi Sūtra</i> (First Chapter)	81
Wŏnhyo's Logic of Negation	87
Hua-yen Theory	90
The Diamond Sūtra	93
The Seminal Message of the Platform Sūtra	96
Chinul	99
Chinul and the Three Gates	99
Chinul's Views on <i>Hwadu</i> Meditation	102
Chinul's "Enemy"	103
Ch'an and Taoism	106
Confucianism	108
Chapter Four. Present-Day Applications	115
Letter and Non-Letter Culture/One Mind	115
Stages of Practice	117
The Raft	120
Faith Revisited	120
Daily Practice	121
The Unknown Factor	122
Desire	123
The Five Stages of Practice According to Chinul	124
Personal Story: Application of the <i>Mom/Momjit</i> Paradigm	126
Conclusion. Final Thoughts on <i>Mom</i> and <i>Momjit</i>	131
Notes	135
Glossary of Terms	139
Bibliography	145
Index	147

## Preface

At the very outset I would like to say that the ideas discussed on the following pages may seem repetitious at times. You may think, “The author has already said this before. Why is he saying it again?”

In response, I would like to relate the following anecdote about Confucius, the Chinese sage of the fifth century BC. He was asked by a student, “Aren’t you tired of always saying the same thing over and over again?” Confucius replied, “Does the sun get tired of shining? Every morning it rises and shines all day long. It has done so since the beginning of time. Does it ever get tired?”

Similarly, you eat two or three meals every day, and have been doing so all your life. Do you ever get tired of eating? You go to sleep every night—does this ever seem repetitious? As far as life is concerned, there is always much repetition. Actually, repetition is an important part of the creative process. In terms of learning and absorbing new ideas, repetition is a crucial factor. Each time the student hears a new concept and reflects on it, his understanding deepens. It is a slow, ongoing process. So be patient—try to read with an open, nonjudgmental mind. Reflect on the ideas presented here—if at first they seem strange and unfamiliar, their repeated emphasis may help them seem less so. Hopefully, by the time you finish the book, you may find that you indeed have learned something new, or perhaps have begun to view certain things in a different light.

I also would like to offer my sincere thanks to the following people, who continually provided their unerring expertise and assistance: Hearn Chun, Yongpyo Kim, Hongkyung Kim, Robert Siegel, Biggie Ubert, and Albert Jung. I am grateful to my editorial assistant, Nancy Clough. She not only converted all my discourses into a smooth and readable written manuscript, but also provided me with invaluable guidance and suggestions concerning various controversial areas. Without her help, this book could never have been written.

Finally, I would like to express my most sincere and hearty thanks to Chin-hoe, my wife. Her consistent support and understanding have given me the strength to complete this project. To her I dedicate this book.





# Introduction

I have several motivations for writing this book and would like to discuss them here in the hopes that my experiences will serve as pertinent background to the study and understanding of *mom* and *momjit*. In this way I hope to provide an easier transition into the subject for the reader whose knowledge of it may be sketchy at most.

My greatest motivation by far stems from an experience I had in the summer of 1965, an experience that directly altered the course of my life. Previous to this event, I had been employed as an assistant professor of Buddhist studies at Dongguk University in Seoul, Korea. At that time, there was a student group called the Korean Buddhist Association of University Students, within which was formed a subgroup of fifteen male students who called themselves the Seekers After Truth. I served as the advisor for this subgroup. The members were enrolled at universities near Seoul, and majored in such diverse fields as business, education, literature, philosophy, and so forth.

We decided to form our own university students' monastery, where we could live together and practice Buddhism while still attending to our academic responsibilities. We were fortunate to be allowed to stay in a nearby temple called Bong'en-sa Monastery; we lived there for about a year. The abbot of this monastery, Kwang-dök Sunim, became one of our two sponsors. We were given one building, which hosted a meditation hall, a lecture hall, sleeping quarters, and so forth, for our exclusive use. We were also given permission to use the temple's remaining facilities if needed. The resident monks cooked all of our meals.

Our other sponsor for this project was Mr. Han-sang Lee, who was the president of a Buddhist weekly newspaper operating out of Seoul. Mr. Lee provided us with various books and other materials as we needed them, as well as transportation between the temple and our various college campuses. He also donated money to the temple itself. Furthermore, every bit of information concerning our experience, from the beginning to the end, was written up in his newspaper

and thus made known to the general public. These news items were often reported quite dramatically; I remember the first article saying something to the effect of, "This is the first student monastery ever to have existed in the 1,600-year history of Korean Buddhism." Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike became informed in this way of our every move.

During the year that we stayed at Bong'en-sa, we followed the monastery schedule at all times; the only exception to this was during the day when we had to leave the temple to attend our classes. We rose every morning at 4:00 a.m. with the monks and participated with them in the morning service, which consisted of various rituals involving bowing, chanting, and seated meditation. We then had breakfast and departed for school. At the end of the day we returned to the temple in time to have supper with the monks and to take part in the evening service, a variation of the morning's procedure. We were usually in bed by 11:00 p.m.

In the beginning, we were all very excited about our new way of life. We quickly became paragons of Buddhist practice: we were devoted and sincere, and felt extremely motivated to practice the Buddhist dharma. However, we had not taken into account the limitations of our human energy systems. Our daily life was similar to that of someone who has two jobs: we had our monastery "job" as well as our school "job." It is possible for this kind of situation to succeed for awhile, but fatigue eventually builds up and becomes overwhelming, with the result that neither job is performed satisfactorily.

Our main difficulty was that we simply had no time to do our homework, write papers, or study for exams, all of which were necessary for the maintenance of our academic careers. As the quantity and quality of our academic output degenerated, everyone began to feel the strain. The only solution seemed to be to abandon the monastery schedule so that we would have the time to attend to our academic needs. Yet if this was the case, we asked ourselves, why should we continue to live in the temple at all? Furthermore, we felt that we could not back out of our commitment; as the Buddhist newspapers continued to faithfully report all of our activities, we felt that we had an ideal to uphold, both to ourselves and to the Korean community at large.

After our situation had been deteriorating in this way for a month or so, the students all began to complain. At first they discussed their problems secretly among themselves, but eventually they began to share their doubts with me. I, too, of course was experiencing the same difficulties as they. It became an increasingly agonizing set of circumstances for which no solution seemed possible.

Somehow we managed to endure these conditions for the remainder of the semester. Fortunately for us, since we had begun our monastery project in the spring, the end of that semester heralded the beginning of the summer vacation. This gave us a few months' reprieve from our academic duties, valuable time in which we hoped to find a way out of our difficulties. After some discussion we decided to embark on a journey to visit various Zen masters and seek their advice. In Korea at this time there were about twelve monks who were considered to be enlightened. Each had his own temple and most of them lived in remote mountainous areas. We decided to visit them all. The newspaper naturally reported this new development and featured an article entitled "Students Pay Visit to Zen Masters."

Much to our chagrin, our journey proved to be equally as arduous, if not more so, than our experience at the temple. For one thing, most of the Zen masters we visited had several hundred disciples, either as monks or laypersons. When they learned that we were coming, they all gathered together to await our arrival. Again, we had the uncomfortable experience of being watched. In addition to this, we were required to follow each temple's daily schedule of practice, just as we had done at Bong'en-sa. Actually we had to work even harder at these temples because we could not escape to our classes during the day. Before each Zen master received us, he would require that we first spend several days living in his temple and practicing with the other monks there. Then, after our interview with the master, we would leave the temple and board a bus that would take us to our next destination. These buses were always very crowded and we usually found ourselves having to stand for the duration of the trip, with only the straps above us to hold onto for support. We were so tired at this point that we literally fell asleep as we stood, our heads unconsciously falling to one side or the other. Occasionally one of us would accidentally jostle his neighbor, especially if the bus suddenly hit a bump in the road. Then the neighbor would wake with a start, mutter under his breath at the one who woke him, and immediately fall back to sleep. To an onlooker this may have seemed amusing, but we were in great discomfort. Needless to say, the quarreling and complaining among ourselves continued on without abating.

At last we reached our final destination, the temple of Sungchol Sunim. When we first arrived, little did we realize that our experience here would prove to be dramatically different from what occurred at the other temples. To begin with, Sungchol asked us to pay him a certain amount in tuition fees in return for our stay. When we told him we had no money, he said he did not want his payment in Ko-

rean *won*, but rather in Buddhist currency. When we asked him what he meant, he said he wanted us to prostrate three thousand times to the Buddha, that is, to the Buddhist statue in the meditation hall. We were shocked. We had thought that our fatigue was obvious. We passionately protested that we were exhausted and that there was no way that we could possibly bow three thousand times to the Buddha. Sungchol answered that if we were indeed seekers after truth, as the name of our group proclaimed, then we should be willing to follow the seeker's way of life, even if it meant our own death. He told us in no uncertain terms that if we were unwilling to do as he asked, we would have to leave the temple. He added, however, that he knew we were able to carry out his request, otherwise he would not have made such a request in the first place. He inquired whether we thought he was stupid, asking us to do something which he knew we could not do. He said that if that were case, then we should leave immediately, but then reiterated that he knew we could do what he was asking.

Somehow, I think primarily due to his faith in us, we were finally persuaded to give it a try. However, at this point, as soon as we had agreed to make the effort to perform the bows, Sungchol warned us that we would not be allowed to stop in the middle, adding that if we felt we could not perform all three thousand prostrations, then we should not even bother to begin them. He thus probed our degree of determination, making sure to emphasize the importance of our full commitment to the task at hand. We all said that we would definitely be able to complete the full program of three thousand prostrations.

The day of July 31, 1965, dawned hot and sticky; it turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year. That date is clearly etched in my mind. Thirteen of us solemnly entered the Buddha hall that morning; it felt as if we were entering a sauna. There were no windows, no air conditioner, not even a fan, and the bare wood floor did nothing to ease the impact of our bodies coming into contact with it over and over again in seemingly endless succession. Furthermore, we were not permitted to leave the meditation hall at any time for any reason, not even to drink a glass of water or to use the bathroom. Various monks took turns beating the rhythm of our movements with a drum and performing a ritual involving incense sticks to count out the number of prostrations as we performed them.

We all began to move in unison. After the first hundred prostrations, we were truly exhausted. After three hundred, we realized that what we were attempting was impossible, yet somehow we kept going. Sometimes one of us would stay down on the floor in the middle of a prostration, and refuse to get up. However, soon his

neighbor would haul him back up to a standing position, exhorting him to keep moving. The last five hundred bows were the worst. I don't know how we managed to keep on going. Yet somehow, thirteen hours after we had begun, we were amazed to realize that every single one of us had performed his final three thousandth prostration! However, I must admit that during those thirteen hours, there were few of us who did not resist criticizing, if not out-and-out condemning wholeheartedly, the entire religion of Buddhism, including all the Zen masters who practiced it!

Then, to our utter disbelief, we found that Sungchol had one more surprise in store for us. He asked us to climb the mountain behind the monastery. Although you, the reader, may now be groaning in empathy at the seeming cruelty of this request, I actually felt that it was not a bad idea, as it would enable us as to stretch our muscles in a new way, which they greatly needed to do after being restricted to performing just one up and down motion for so many hours. And the truth was, we all felt like heroes at this point; we ended up gleefully undertaking the climb, sometimes even shouting for joy as we walked.

When we returned, bone-tired but radiant, we were at last granted an interview with Sungchol. He asked us what we had come for and we explained our dilemma. He then responded with a discourse that significantly altered both the course of my philosophical and religious studies as well as my entire life. He told us that our problem was simple. "You are attached to *momjit*," he proclaimed. Now every Korean has heard of the terms *mom* and *momjit* since childhood. They are words with very ancient origins and may be here translated as "essence" (*mom*) and "function" (*momjit*). Yet in all the years that I had studied Buddhism, I had never before heard these words used in a Buddhist context.

At this point, I would like to interrupt my story in order to describe the pedagogical principle we were attempting to follow at our student monastery. We had chosen Samantabhadra Bodhisattva as our model for practice. This important bodhisattva of Mahāyāna Buddhism is associated with a well-known text entitled "The Ten Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva."<sup>1</sup> This text exists as the last chapter of the Avatamsaka Sūtra, a noted work of the Hua-yen school of Buddhism. This sect, founded in China, teaches the equality of all things and the dependence of all things on one another. It was due to our enormous respect and appreciation for this text that we organized our little group in the first place, and then made our plans to stay at Bong'en-sa.

According to Sungchol, the ten vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva represent the realm of *momjit*, or his natural way of functioning; therefore, making these vows came very naturally to him. However, Sungchol told us, you are not Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, and no matter how hard you try to imitate his world of *momjit*, you cannot succeed. What you must do, he said, is to transform your *mom*, your own essence; you must in effect transform your own *mom* to that of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. If you can do this, then you will have no problem, for then your *momjit* will be the same as his. Without such a transformation, you are merely imitating the behavior of a great bodhisattva.

Sungchol then reminded us of an old Korean proverb, which states, "A sparrow cannot win a race if he is competing with a crane." This is because the crane's long legs will easily outdistance the sparrow with its short little legs. Sungchol told us that our *momjit* was that of the sparrow, yet we were attempting to imitate the *momjit* of the crane. If we pursued in such an endeavor, he warned, our legs would break.

It was at this point that I realized my mistake. I have learned many things from the Buddha and bodhisattvas, yet up until this point I had always viewed them from a *momjit* perspective, that is, their functions and operations as human beings, and had tried to imitate them as such. This had provided the basis for my system of philosophical and religious inquiry. I had never really attempted to incorporate their *mom* into myself, transforming it into my own *mom*. Sungchol truly opened my eyes to the error of such a position.

As a result of this experience, I resigned from my position at Dongguk University and became a monk at Sungchol's temple for a number of years. Ever since that day in 1965 I have been examining myself unceasingly, asking, "What are you doing? Are you merely imitating the *momjit*, the external appearance?" There is a qualitative difference between the act of seeing into one's fundamental structure and that of merely imitating appearances. The former brings one into contact with his own *mom*, whereas the latter is just following along in the realm of *momjit* and will not produce any deep, long-lasting results.

Sungchol's sermon had the effect of a deep shock, waking me up from what I viewed as my bitter failure both at Bong'en-sa and at the other Zen masters' temples (before our visit to Sungchol). Most people tend to view the spiritual life in terms of their own fantasies and dreams, perceiving spiritual practitioners as utterly tranquil, devoted, and selfless. I knew from my own experience that this was

not the case; people who pursue a spiritual way of life are normal human beings, possessing the same hopes and fears and suffering the same disappointments as anyone else. When Sungchol delivered his earth-shattering (at least, to my ears) sermon on that hot summer day in 1965, it served to awaken me to a deeper understanding of the real meaning of spirituality.

I stayed at Sungchol's monastery, Haein-sa, for a period of about three years, studying and practicing under his tutelage. By the way, this monastery still exists today. Now, however, it has spread out into various locations, in which approximately five hundred monks and nuns live and practice together.

Returning to lay life, however, after my three-year monastic experience served as another kind of shock for me. I quickly realized that there now existed quite a large gap between my inner world and the world that surrounded me. I saw that my philosophical understanding had been strongly influenced by the *mom*-oriented culture of the monastery. I perceived over and over again, at almost every moment of contact with the outer world, that people were not in touch with this *mom* realm, but rather lived their lives primarily within the tenacious yet all-pervading confines of the *momjit* sphere of activity. I myself had no interest whatsoever in seeking a reputation or making a lot of money, for I saw that those things were impermanent and thus illusory. It dawned on me that my entire value system had undergone a complete and radical transformation. Before becoming a monk, even though I had considered myself a Buddhist, I still saw myself as a participating member in the world of *momjit*. My stay in the monastery, however, had significantly altered my karmic direction. Although I was not aware of these inner changes while they were occurring, after I left the monastery it became increasingly obvious to me that I had become a completely different person.

All the great sages of Korea, both Confucian and Buddhist, have been deeply aware of the distinction between *mom* and *momjit*. Each in his own way has striven to impart the primary value of *mom* to his disciples and students. After I had experienced a *mom*-oriented way of life for myself, I truly appreciated for the first time the crucial point these sages were trying to convey. I believe that the crux of their message is this: in order to operate freely, *mom* cannot be forced or interfered with, nor can it be produced by the manipulation of *momjit*. Many people attempt to imitate a spiritual leader's deeds or actions (his *momjit*) in the hopes of attaining what he has attained. This is a self-defeating task. To try to produce an effect based on one's own limited understanding or desires will never yield the hoped-for results.

Rather, what is needed is to allow *mom* to operate on its own, in its own way and in its own time. Only then, when the conditions are right, will the desired effect automatically spring forth.

I stated above that ordinary people (as opposed to monks and nuns) live in a *momjit* culture. Yet the majority of these people, at least in East Asian society, although not sages themselves, possess at least some understanding and appreciation of the value of *mom*. Furthermore, although this may no longer be the case, when I was growing up in rural Korea about sixty years ago, the goal of every Korean parent was for his or her child to become a Confucian sage. This was certainly the case in my own family. By this time, Korea had been heavily influenced by the teachings of Confucianism for many hundreds of years, and a Confucian education was considered to be of primary importance. The purpose of such an education, as I said, was to make the child a sage, who may here be defined as a person who values *mom* over *momjit* and lives his life accordingly.

Before my monastery experience, I had been unable to fully appreciate this principle of education, which had been so diligently pursued by my parents. Throughout my childhood my father had constantly urged me to act like a "great man" (Chinese: *da ren*), the paragon of Confucian sagehood. Yet although what he was saying seemed to ring true, I cannot say that I really made any strong efforts to achieve such a goal for myself. I think that this is probably true in most households and within the educational system as well. People may respect what their parents are trying to convey to them, yet they are unable to deeply appreciate or respond to their words on a fundamental level. Their respect tends to remain rather superficial, as it is based on an intellectual understanding rather than being a gut-level realization stemming from their own experience. My own case is certainly no exception.

When I returned to lay society, however, and became cognizant of the many disparities between things, disparities that I had never seen before, I realized that there existed a strong similarity between my parents' principle of education and that of the sages. Although my parents never used the word *mom*, its underlying message was continuously present in whatever they attempted to teach me. I saw that although the effect of their teaching was hidden, it ran like a steady undercurrent throughout my life. I had not realized this before. Yet again, I saw with sadness that although others respected the value of *mom*, both within their home and out in the world, they were not able to make use of it as the fundamental motivating force in their lives. They paid it a certain lip service, so to speak, yet continued