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THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF
BUDDHISM IN KOREA

Edited by

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to all the Masters of the past, present and future who, by their own realization and teaching, have inspired us on the path to enlightenment.

Preface

This is a book about the history of Buddhism and its impact and influence on the artistic, educational and political development of the people of Korea.

Over the last 2,500 years, Buddhism has spread throughout Asia. Wherever Buddhism has been accepted, it has developed affecting and integrating with the indigenous culture. The result has been a unique form of Buddhism in each country, even though the basic tenets and ideas remain the same.

Due to the proximity of China to the Korean peninsula, Chinese culture has greatly influenced all facets of Korean life. Buddhism is no exception. Successive generations of Korean masters went to China and learned Buddhism and culture and they returned to their homeland bearing their experiences with them. Little by little, Korean masters developed the ideas that they had received and so Korean Buddhism was born. Many masters then went on to influence the development of Buddhism in China.

The main thrust of Korean Buddhism is harmony. The masters were careful to continually harmonize Buddhism with Korean culture so that the imported seed slowly sprouted and produced a unique tree. Not only did they arrange the various teachings and ideas of Buddhism systematically, but they tried to understand other philosophies and religious ideas from a broad-minded standpoint. Thereby they established a unique brand of Buddhism. Based on reconciliation, Korean Buddhism has "harmony and syncretism" as its keystone and can be called "A Whole-Buddhist View."

So great has the influence of Buddhism been on Korea that it is impossible to speak of Korean culture without considering Buddhism. In spite of this, the history of the development of Korean Buddhism is little known and the materials that are available are poorly organized.

Therefore, The Korean Buddhist Research Institute attached to Dongguk University decided to publish this book, *The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea*, as a first link in the chain of

an effort to introduce Korean Buddhism systematically to anyone interested.

This book has a general introduction and five chapters, each one concerned with one of the main periods of history. It starts off by looking at the introduction of Buddhism to the peninsula and its subsequent development during the Three Kingdoms period. The next section deals with the unification of the peninsula in 668 C.E. when Buddhism developed rapidly in the Unified Shilla period. The 3rd section considers Buddhism during the Koryŏ period (935~1392). The following section is concerned with the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392~1910) during which Buddhism was largely persecuted. The Modern period covers the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910~1945) and more recent developments. Each chapter was written by a specialized scholar, all professors at Dongguk University.

I am grateful to the professors for taking the time to write the articles. In addition, I wish to thank Venerable Wonmyŏng, the Chief Director, Venerable Mujin and Mrs. Kim, Ini from Lotus Lantern, Int'l Buddhist Center for the translation and help in the editing. I am also thankful to the members of the Korean Buddhist Research Institute, especially research fellow, Mr. Park, Kyoung-joon, executive secretary, Mr. Lee, Bong-choon, and other researchers like Kwon, T'an-joon and Chang, Kye-hwan for editing and also contributing to the project in many different ways.

I sincerely hope that this book will be a beacon to the world of understanding and especially to anyone who wants to learn about Korean Buddhism.

May any merit coming from this work be shared by all sentient beings everywhere!

Chae, Taeg-su

Notes

- 1) We have chosen to use C.E. (Common Era) for the old fashioned A.D. and B.C.E. (Before Common Era) for B.C.
- 2) The Lunar Calendar is still used in Korea, especially in temples and for Buddhist holidays and ceremonies. Therefore most dates are expressed in terms of lunar dates, i. e. 1st month or 10th month.
- 3) Throughout the book, the word “Dharma” is frequently used. We decided that it was best to conform to the usual pattern of using “Dharma” for the teaching of the Buddha and using “dharma” for most other uses of this multifarious word. Therefore “dharma” is used for the teaching handed down by a master to his disciple but “Dharma” refers to the 2nd of the Three Jewels.
- 4) We have kept the Korean “-san” for mountain and “-sa” for temple. Thus Kaji-san means Kaji Mountain and Haein-sa means Haein Temple.
- 5) In Korean, there are two special vowel sounds. They are “ö” as in Koryö. In English it sounds like the “o” in “stop.” The other sound is “ü” which sounds like the “ue” in “blue.” Both sounds are found in the name “Üich’ön.”

This book is a first step in the better understanding of the history, ideas and teachings of Korean Buddhism. Great efforts have been taken to give a clear and truthful account of events and circumstances. We only hope that any shortcomings will be forgiven.

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Introduction Buddhism From India to Korea

**Lee, Bong-choon
Professor of Department
of Buddhism**

Introduction Buddhism From India to Korea

1. The Beginning of Buddhism, the Religion of Enlightenment

Buddhism is often called “the Religion of Enlightenment” or “the Teaching of Wisdom and Compassion.” In the 5th century B.C.E., the Buddha Śākyamuni lived in India. He attained enlightenment and, understanding the truth of life, he taught people how to live. This was the beginning of Buddhism.

Buddhism, a new teaching in India at that time, must have been like a fresh wind in the ancient world of Indian thought which faced constant conflict, confrontation and chaos. Little by little, the Buddha’s teaching spread and gradually it has greatly influenced more and more people from around the world giving meaning to their lives and bringing glory and culture with it.

From this point of view, the beginning of Buddhism has a special significance which is more than just the start of a new religion. For the beginning was a great turning point in the Indian world of thought, and this turning point became the mark of a new epoch in the history of spirituality.

At the time that Buddhism first appeared, Indian thinking had developed very diversely, in complicated ways. Two of the main trends were through the Brahmins and through the Śrāmanas. The former followed texts such as the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyaka

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5. Conclusion

As we have seen so far, the 1,600 years of Korean Buddhist history are characterized by liberality, nation-protecting, and harmony. These characteristics speak for present-day Korean Buddhism. Not only this but they also point the way to the direction of the development of Korean Buddhism of tomorrow. For, if Korean Buddhism enhances the Korean people's lives with peace, self-esteem and religious ideals, then these spiritual values are centrally important values for the people of today, in spite of the changes in the world.

Today, original Indian Buddhism remains a monument and a symbol of the past glory of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent. But it is a dead symbol, hardly breathing at all. And Chinese Buddhism which was so grand and so radiant remains merely a potential force, waiting for the day of its revival. Considering the present situation, Korean Buddhism, which is proud of its realization of the highest ideals, should commit itself to play a role in the world which reflects its great history, culture and dignity. Needless to say, that role is to create a new Buddhist culture which takes over from the old tradition and at the same time willingly gives direction to the universalization of Buddhism.

I Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms

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