

On Wŏnhyo's Enlightenment

Sung-bae Park

In contemporary phenomenological thought, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger has made widespread the hermeneutic methodology of etymological analysis, in order to uncover the hidden meaning of words, i. e., to bring the meaning of words from concealment into nonconcealment. Through etymological analysis one unlocks and unfolds the inner meaning of words and concepts by tracing them back to their originary and primordial verb roots. I would now like to apply this hermeneutical method of etymological analysis to the central concern of all Buddhist sects—the notion of “Enlightenment.”

In China, such terms as *Wu* (悟), *Chüeh* (覺) or *Chien-sheng* (見性) are employed to express the experience of enlightenment. Whereas in Japan, the concept of enlightenment is conveyed by such terms as *Kenshō* (見性) or *satori* (悟り). However, in colloquial Korean vocabulary, enlightment is communicated by the term *Kkaech'im*. The verbal root form of this term is *Kkaech'ida* meaning “to awaken.” Again, the root may be etymologically analyzed into the archaic verb root *Kkaeda*, meaning (i) to awaken; (ii) to become sober; (iii) to become aware; (iv) to be hatched [born anew]; (v) to return to life; (vi) to wake up; (vii) to break. From this archaic root, there are principally two major derivative verbal roots, these being *Kkaejida*, meaning “having been broken” or “breakage,” as well as *Kkaech'ida*, whose noun form, *Kkaech'im*, is the Korean word for “Enlightenment.”

What is especially of interest here is the relation between *Kkaech'im* as “enlightenment” and *Kkaejim* as “brokenness.” For the concept of enlightenment, in its Korean context, now assumes the meaning of “breaking,” “brokenness,” “breakage,” “to break” or “break-through.” At once, two questions thus arise here, namely (i) What is it that is “broken” in the enlightenment experience? and (ii) How, in fact, does this total breakage actually occur?

We have asserted that in Korean Buddhism, a total breakage is the necessary

prius to enlightenment. What is to be broken? It is precisely the "ego" which must be broken-down or broken-up or broken-apart, and all of the ontological-intellectual-axiological systems posited and sustained by the ego. Again, one may state that there must be a total breaking-up of one's sedimented thought system which functions to "discriminate" the originally uncarvad or nondivided continuum of reality.

Next, how does this breakage occur? I would like to propound here that the necessary precondition for this "breaking" of one's intellectual system occurs through a type of identity crisis established by a radical bipolar tension constituted by the contradictory belief patterns:

- 1) "I am a Buddha," and
- 2) "I am an ignorant sentient being."

These contradictory structures of belief may in turn be related to the struggle arising between the following two components:

- 1) Respect (for one's teacher), and
- 2) Honesty (towards one's self).

The teacher or spiritual preceptor tells me that "I am a Buddha." Because of my total respect for my teacher's instruction, I believe that indeed, "I am a Buddha." Yet, due to my self-honesty, I am compelled to acknowledge that in fact, "I am an ignorant sentient being." The student must meet both the above requirements if this identity crisis and subsequent breakage episode is to emerge, i. e., both total faith (*hsin* 信), trust or respect for his teacher, and complete self-honesty. Enlightenment cannot occur if either of these obligations are not satisfied. Finally, it is this inner dialectical tension or struggle between Respect and Honesty, as well as between the conflicting beliefs "I am a Buddha" and "I am an ignorant sentient being," which generate the acute identity crisis resulting in a "total breakage" of enlightenment in the *Kkaech'im* experience. But here yet another set of questions emerges for our attention. What, in fact, does it mean to be "a Buddha" or to achieve "enlightenment," and next, What does it mean to be "an ignorant sentient being"? At this juncture, I would like to relate the above discussion to the concept of enlightenment articulated by Wŏnhyo (617-686), Korea's greatest intellectual and spiritual personage.

Wŏnhyo's theory of enlightenment, while very subtle and intricate, may be generally asserted as follows. There are two dimensions—the dimension of an enlightened Buddha and the dimension of ignorant sentient beings. Again, “What is the dimension of Buddha,” and “What is the ignorant world of sentient beings?” Succinctly stated, the ignorant world of sentient beings is the world of *discrimination*, whereas Buddha's world is the world of *nondiscrimination* (Taisho. 1844, p. 208a-b). The mundane world experienced by sentient beings is a mental construct posited by discriminative consciousness. *Awakening Mahāyāna Faith* states: “All people are said not to be enlightened because they have had a continuous stream of deluded thoughts.” However, according to Wŏnhyo, in the “wordless” and “no-thought” (*ŏn-jŏllyo*) state of the “Great Enlightenment” (*taeo*) no discrimination whatsoever occurs. In this state, sentient mind is realized as identical with “suchness,” whereupon the fourfold nature of thought is made clear, in its four aspects of *jāti* (arising of thoughts), *sthiti* (abiding of thoughts), *anyathātva* (transition of thoughts), and *nirodha* (ceasing of thoughts). Wŏnhyo's theory of enlightenment may thus be encapsulated by this key *śloka* from *AMF*:

If a man gains [insight into] that which is free from thoughts, then he knows how those [thoughts] which characterize the mind [i. e., deluded thoughts] arise, abide, change and cease to be, for he is identical with that which is free from thoughts (Y. Hakeda, tr. by, *The Awakening of Faith*, p. 40)

Finally, I would like to criticize a tendency in present day Zen Buddhism to overemphasize the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* or the interfusion of *li* and *shih*. For as has been asserted, the Korean doctrine of enlightenment maintains that a dipolar tension between Buddha's world and the world of sentient beings is the necessary precondition for the “breaking” experience of *Kkaech'im* to occur. Keeping in mind that Wŏnhyo was a Hua-yen scholar and fully grounded in the theory concerning *li-shih wu-ai* or the unhindered interpenetration of *nirvāna* and *samsāra*, still, at the level of practice, he advocated Pure Land Buddhism, in order to accentuate the radical dipolar tension between “Pure Land” and “Filthy Land.” Again, Wŏnhyo makes the clear distinction between the enlightened world and the mundane world. The enlightened world is the realm

of non-discrimination, no-thought, and word-lessness, whereas the mundane world is the realm of discrimination produced by the stream of deluded thoughts. In the enlightened world, one's mind is identical with suchness, and is fully aware of the four marks of thought, in its arising, abiding, changing and ceasing. This world of non-discrimination is to be deeply loved and cherished, whereas the defiled world of discrimination is to be detested. And whereas the enlightened world of non-discrimination is to be realized, the mundane world of discrimination is to be "broken." Thus, Wŏnhyo advocates Pure Land practice which maintains this contradictory struggle between "Pure Land" and "Dirty Land." Only when this inner conflict between Pure Land and Dirty Land mounts into an acute identity crisis is there a "breaking" experience of *Kkaech'im*, whereas at the level of practice, the overemphasis on the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* only serves as an opiate, relaxing one's aspirations towards realization. Late in his life, Wŏnhyo relinquished his monk's robe, singing and dancing the Pure Land Faith all over Korea, inspiring the whole nation to chant the name of Buddha and to long for Pure Land. This bipolar tension between Pure Land and Dirty Land is powerfully articulated in Wŏnhyo's great poem "Aspiration and Practice." I would like to conclude with a translation of verse 13 of this poem, by Wŏnhyo, which reads:

"People recoil from toilet worms

Because they do not distinguish

Between the filthy and the clean

Similarly, sages detest practitioners who cannot

Distinguish purity from filth." (*Han'guk Pulgyo Chŏnsŏ* vol. I, b. 841b Seoul, 1979)

(Assistant Prof. State University of New York)