

## **Socially Responsive Buddhism in Contemporary Korea**

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Certain progressive and critical reform movements among both clergy and lay Buddhist communities in recent decades in Korea represent Korean Buddhism's turn toward greater social engagement and relevance to Korea's newly urbanized and better educated population. Buddhist concerns for economic justice for the disenfranchised, environmental activism, the rights of foreign workers, international humanitarian efforts in India and North Korea, hospice care and reforms within Chogye Order leadership, among other activities, are changing the stereotyped image of Korean Buddhism as a "traditional mountain religion" focused on personal enlightenment or benefit alone without an ethic of social service. Contemporary Korean Buddhist social activism may be seen as a response to the challenges of persistent Confucian bias against the faith, massive Christian conversion in the Korean population and a traditionalist response to secularization.

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There is a void of scholarly knowledge about the activities of Buddhist practitioners in contemporary South Korea. This paper is a record of notes and reflections on organizations and events as the writer actually experienced them in the course of fieldwork and participant observation in Korea over the last decade (1991-2001). It is a very short introduction to a very exciting area of research that requires greater exploration and analysis. Any attempt to explain

religious phenomena in Korea without full cognizance of the depth and breadth of Buddhist history and influence in contemporary Korean

culture will remain incomplete.

Buddhists in South Korea have responded in various ways to the multiple needs and crises in contemporary society. Their activities, however, have gone unnoticed by the mass media in Korea for the most part. They have also been neglected by academic observers within Korea and in the West, too, with a few exceptions.<sup>1</sup> Korean Neo-Confucian bias against Buddhism, large-scale conversion to conservative forms of Protestantism and Catholicism, and the secularization or abandonment of traditional cultural values accompanying modernization have all contributed to the disregard of Buddhism by mainstream Korean intellectuals and foreign social scientists. Litterateurs, artists and specialists in Korean humanities and spiritual traditions are exceptions but even they have not reported on Korean Buddhist activism in social welfare, environmental protection, human rights and international assistance. This article will provide a general introduction to a few of the more dynamic Buddhist organizations and leaders in Korea in the past decade in order to begin to balance the uneven representation of modern Korean Buddhism in recent academic writing.

The writer became aware of “socially engaged” Buddhist activism in Korea little more than fifteen years ago.<sup>2</sup> By national standards the Buddhist social action movement is small in number but it is growing in many ways parallel with the growth of engaged Buddhism in other

1. There are a few exceptions such as articles by Shim Jae-ryong, Mok Jeong-bae, and Frank M. Tedesco in *Korea Journal* 33:3 (“Vitality in Korean Buddhist Tradition” Autumn 1993) and “Buddhism and Social Welfare in Modern South Korea” by F.M. Tedesco in *Festschrift for Mikhail Pak* (Moscow State University: International Center for Korean Studies, 1998) 429-442.
2. The expression “socially engaged Buddhism” was first used to describe the activities of politically outspoken Buddhist leaders exemplified by the prolific Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn and Thai layman Sulak Sivaraksa. According to K. Kraft, *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 18, Thich Nhat Hahn employed the term “engaged Buddhism” in a title of a book published in 1963. While the term was first used in the context of opposition to the involvement of the French and then the Americans in Vietnam in previous decades, it is presently used to describe all “Buddhist compassionate action” to protect, nurture and preserve all forms of life, be it through legislation for environmental protection, improved care for the disabled, universal education initiatives, human rights and democratization or other “liberal” causes.
3. See the collections, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, edited by C.S. Queen and S.B. King (Albany: Suny Press, 1996) and *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000), edited by C.S. Queen.

parts of Asia and among converts in the West.<sup>3</sup> Most progressive Korean Buddhist social leaders view their activities as a re-empowerment or revitalization of their ancient national Buddhist heritage that is blooming anew after centuries of suppression, demoralization and social impotence. The rebirth or re-emergence of Buddhism's social presence is an important component of South Koreans' growing confidence in their national identity and cultural distinctiveness, especially since hosting the Olympics in 1988.

Of South Korea's total population of nearly 47 million in 2000, about one fourth identify themselves Buddhist in Republic of Korea government and Gallup polls. Among these approximately 11-12 million Buddhists, only somewhat less than 40,000 are ordained and affiliated with one of the approximately 80 sects. The Korean Buddhist Chogye Order is by far the wealthiest, most visible, and most influential of those sects with more than 16,000 monks and nuns. Most of the historically important temples are under the Chogye Order umbrella and represent what we may call the "Korean Sōn (Zen Buddhist) monastic stereotype" but there are actually about 19,000 temples belonging to many small sects in the country. The beliefs and practices of those various sects draw from Pure Land, shamanist and Sōn Buddhist traditions. Many are predominantly oriented to achieving worldly success and happiness (*kibok pulgyo* - Buddhism of good fortune) in this life and the next rather than experiencing "enlightenment." The great majority of lay Buddhists are married women, usually middle aged and elderly (*ch'ima pulgyo* - "skirt Buddhism"), some of whom are devoted environmentalist activists, hospital and prison volunteers, and aides to the elderly. Statistically, the total number of Buddhist temples is swollen with very small, family-style temples or shrines, usually owned by married clergy and their families or devout lay women (*posallim*).<sup>4</sup> There are only a few dozen ordained foreign monks and nuns in Korea, if that many, and fewer foreign lay Buddhist practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhist monasteries were renowned in the past for disaster relief during famine and flood. Temples were dependable refuges for the dis-

4. Various compendia of statistics are available, and like statistics published by Christian and other non-Buddhist organizations, they are of dubious accuracy!

enfranchised, orphans, the homeless aged and the frail. Today, however, the government social service system has assumed primary responsibility for serving public welfare demands. Religious NGOs and others try to supplement inadequate government assistance. Korean Buddhist social service institutions are relatively few compared to Christian organizations but they are growing and quickly becoming more professionally networked. However, you will not yet find many Buddhist hospitals, clinics and nursing schools in Korea except for traditional Chinese medicine practitioners.<sup>6</sup>

As for Korean Buddhist educational facilities, there are few Buddhist K-12 schools and only one full scale Buddhist university foundation (Dongguk University) that is now building the nation's first Buddhist medical school and Western-style medical hospital. For sake of comparison, although its population is triple that of Korea, Japan has approximately 70 established Buddhist institutions of higher education and about 3,000 scholars pursuing Buddhist studies while Korea has scarcely more than 20 full-time Buddhist studies scholars in academia. Temple-based daycare centers in Korea are becoming more numerous, however, with Buddhist nuns (*piguni*) and lay women operating them with varying degrees of profitability depending on the neighborhoods in which they are located.

In general, Korean Buddhists do not realistically view themselves as a very influential or prestigious force in Korean society and they have little political clout compared to Christians. Buddhist monks during the

5. The Korean monasteries best known for foreign ordained practitioners are Songgwangsa (especially when the famous master Kusan was alive), Hwagyesa in Seoul, and Musangsa near Taejŏn affiliated with the Kwanum Zen School of Master Seung Sahn and the Kanghwa Island meditation retreat of the Lotus Lantern International Buddhist Center. There are a few other temples where foreign monks and nuns reside for unspecified lengths of time. Guryongsa in Seoul led by Abbot Jeongwoo (Chŏng-u) has been the home for a few monks from north India and Ladakh. One young Tibetan monk lived at the great Buddha Jewel monastic complex of T'ongdosa for two or three years before being given his own temple in Pusan.
6. The informal roles of temples as places of solace, sanctuary and recuperation are still greatly appreciated by a minority, though, and romanticized in movies and novels as refuges for the homeless, heartbroken and martyred. For a discussion of healing and the role Buddhist clergy played in it, see Don Baker, "Monks, Medicine, and Miracles: Health and Healing in the History of Korean Buddhism" in *Korean Studies* 18 (1994): 50-75.
7. Kwon Kee-jong, "Buddhism undergoes Hardships: Buddhism in the Chosŏn Dynasty," in *The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea* (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1993), 212-213.

latter half of the long Yi dynasty were assigned a social status no higher than “the lowest of criminals.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Japanese pressure at the end of the 19th century freed Korean monks from the outcaste status that the Confucian Yi dynasty had imposed on them. Encouraged by the Japanese to leave their isolated mountain monasteries, the majority were soon coerced or tempted to forsake their traditional vows of celibacy as well and marry, as Japanese Buddhist clerics had been doing during the Meiji period. After Korea regained its independence, this association of married monks was an aspect of the chaos that engulfed Korean society after the Korean War, as those elements who wanted to root out every vestige of Japanese influence in Korean culture won ascendancy with the support of the arch-nationalist Christian President Syngman Rhee. The struggle between celibate monks, who considered married clergy pro-Japanese, and married monks, who believed they represented a modernized Buddhism, split Korean Buddhism, with the celibate (Chogye Order) on one side and the married priesthood (T’ aego Order) and many other smaller Buddhist orders on the other. This division led to tension and litigation over temple property ownership. Even within the dominant celibate order, there have been many public disputes, even gang-like violence on temple grounds, over control of the order’s administration and finances. This internal squabbling within the clergy has not only harmed the public image of the monastic order, it has also absorbed much of the energy that could otherwise have been directed into socially visible welfare projects.<sup>8</sup>

Those who are determined to change Korean society as openly committed Buddhists are a minority. Socially engaged Buddhists who work in public welfare positions often feel self-conscious and remain low-key compared to more assertive and evangelical Christians.

8. Many short news reports about incidents can be found in national Korean news media and even the international press but a detailed chronology and analysis of these complex and rapidly changing events around Chogye Order elections has not been attempted as far as the author knows.

## An Engaged Buddhist Social Vanguard

Among the various Buddhist associations that are active in Korea today, four in particular are a sharp contrast to the image of quarreling monks seeking material advantages. Each of these associations comprise independent and active working groups that focus on particular problems of civic concern within Korea and overseas. Some focus on issues with international ramifications beyond religious boundaries like the invitation to Korea of the exiled Dalai Lama of Tibet and the movement for the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula. The Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice (*Kyōngbullyōn*) or “BCEJ,” the JungTo Society (*Chōngt’ohoe*) also known as “JTS” or the “Join Together Society” in English, the Buddhist Solidarity for Reform (*Ch’amyōpulgyo chaega yōndae*) or “BSR” and the Indranet Life Community (*Indūramang saengmyōng kongdongch’e*) are committed to the renewal of Buddhist values in Korean society by reforming or innovating new relationships among the four components of the Buddhist community (male clergy, female clergy, male lay Buddhists, and female lay Buddhists) and purport to extend compassion to all others regardless of class or religion in the spirit of the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* ideal.

### The Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice (*Kyōngbullyōn*)

The Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice was founded in July 1991 by a group of lay Buddhists who were members of the influential national NGO called Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice or “CCEJ,” founded in July 1989. The BCEJ, the first Buddhist civil movement organization, purports to establish a democratic civil society where all people can prosper equitably regardless of their nationality, race, religion or social status. BCEJ members are involved in a wide spectrum of activities such as fair election campaigns, campaigns to prevent sexual violence, protection of human rights for foreign and migrant workers, aid to North Korean famine refugees and ethnic Koreans in China, aid for the impoverished in Third World countries, environmental protection, and a consumer frugality movement.

BCEJ's various sub-committees (such as policy-making, women, environment and international cooperation) cooperate closely in order to raise social awareness among Buddhists throughout Korea. They also associate with other civic organizations in order to enhance the public recognition of Buddhism in Korea as an autonomous social force. The Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice sees itself as a non-violent peace movement based on "the teaching of the middle path" and the Buddhist teaching of interdependence "to rescue humankind and nature from suffering." It seeks to bring Buddhism into the daily life of the newly urbanized populace and to bring about systemic and structural reform in order to realize universal social and economic justice. The BCEJ also claims to raise the awareness of the need for the reform of social inequities in order to heighten "the spirit of all citizens as one community."

Various interdependent organizations within the BCEJ are the House of Compassion (*Chabiüi jip*), the Migrant Workers' Human Rights and Culture Center, Helping Our Neighbors (*Yiusül tomnün saramdül*), the Nepal Bihani Basti (*Ach'im-ül yönün chag'un ma-ül*), the House of the Morning (*Ach'im-ül yönün chip*), Open Schools of Hope (*Hüimang mandülgi yöllin hakkyo*), and My Green Friend (*Nae ch'ingu ch'orogi*).

The House of Compassion of BCEJ is located in a poorer, working class section of Seoul that is undergoing redevelopment and consequent forced resettlement of many disadvantaged households. It provides various social service activities and programs to help poor families headed by youngsters without parents and other neighbors in need, including free lunches for approximately 150 poor elderly people without families. It is sustained by donations from about 1,600 supporting members and 200 committed volunteers.

The Migrant Workers' Human Rights and Culture Center of BCEJ was established in immediate response to needs of foreign workers in Korea. According to Jung Jin-woo (Chöng Chin-u), a BCEJ leader at the above MWHR Culture Center,

it is estimated that more than 250,000 workers from foreign countries are employed in Korea at "3D" companies where Koreans are reluctant to work. Though they are doing essential labor in the service of Korea, they are nevertheless treated as

“strange aliens.” The cold treatment is aggravated by the discriminatory attitude toward persons whose skin is a darker color or who come from poorer countries.

... Foreign workers are human beings just like Koreans. It is unacceptable for Koreans, who are known for our kindness and generosity, to discriminate against and mistreat foreign workers merely because they look different and speak different languages. We must act immediately to stop the cruel and deadly mistreatment, and to guarantee their equal status as workers and as human beings. Citizens and civil organizations should pay close attention to the proposed Employment Permit System for foreign migrants, now under discussion by the government, and make efforts to have it enacted as soon as possible.<sup>9</sup>

In early January 1994, some foreign workers began a sit-in at the offices of the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ). They had lost fingers and suffered other serious injuries in Korean factories where they worked for minimum pay, but they had been denied overdue wages and other compensation. They protested this unfairness and asked for CCEJ's help.<sup>10</sup> The Buddhists responded and eventually formally established the Community Center for Foreign Workers in April 1995. The Center not only provides counseling and other assistance but also helps foreign workers (many are whom are in Korea on expired visas) understand Korea better by teaching them Korean language and guiding them on cultural excursions.

The Community Center for Foreign Workers was reorganized and re-named the Migrant Workers' Human Rights and Culture Center in November 2000. Its main activities are assistance in labor disputes, medical assistance, legal counseling, education and cultural activities, monthly worship meetings, temporary shelter, and activities in solidarity with other related organizations.

Helping Our Neighbors of the BCEJ was established in June 1996 in order to help families and children suffering from famine and disease around the world. Main activities include the Nepal Bihani Basti

9. From the CCEJ Web site, [www.ccej.or.kr](http://www.ccej.or.kr).

10. See web site above for cases that illustrate the conditions of many foreign workers in Korea.

(*Ach'imül yŏnūn chag'ūn maül*), which is located in Kathmandu. This center provides free medical service, vocational training, Nepalese language and math education as well as Korean language education.

On the domestic front, the House of the Morning of BCEJ opened in May 1998 at a park near the main Seoul railroad station. Seoul Station had become a meeting point for despairing homeless men and families who would sleep in cardboard boxes throughout the station's complex underground hallway system. The House of the Morning provided free meals, employment counseling, and medical care for those who became homeless and unemployed due to the so-called "Korean IMF (International Monetary Fund) debt crisis" at the end of 1997. The House served dinners for more than 600 persons and facilitated 700 people to earn daily subsistence on public works projects until it closed on May 1999. Another House of the Morning opened in Pomundong, northern Seoul, in January 1999 and gave assistance to about twenty homeless and unemployed people over the next two years.

The BCEJ Open Schools of Hope provide free dinner and after-school programs for elementary school age children of the unemployed. My Green Friend (*Nae ch'ingu ch'orogi*) is a store specializing in the sale of used goods, the proceeds of which are used for welfare activities.

### **The JungTo Society (*Chŏngt'ŏ hoe*, JTS)**

The innovative and multidimensional JungTo (*Chŏngt'ŏ* - Pure Land) Society (*Chŏngt'ŏ hoe*) is cooperatively led by the founder Venerable Pomnyun (*Pŏmnyŏn*) and a group of about ninety full-time activists and supporters (about 60 in Seoul and 30 in other cities) and many temporary staff and short term volunteer workers in Korea, India, China, the United States, Thailand, and other parts of the world. The central office, lecture rooms and communal living center of this organization have recently been established in a newly constructed building in the Kangnam area of Seoul, south of the Han River.

A complete, detailed picture of the background, decade-long history and many activities of the JungTo Society since its inception would require a monograph. A chronology of JTS's growth in Korea can be

found in English on the JungTo Society web site.<sup>11</sup> The charismatic leadership of former social activist and lay dharma teacher Venerable Pomnyun has attracted many idealists who have been trying to bring about positive change in Korea and other parts of the world. A recent murder of a volunteer in India in January 2002 was a shock and a challenge to the organization.

An instructive vignette is worth retelling for the insight it provides about the nature and background of socially engaged Buddhism in Korea. In 1984, Venerable Pomnyun went to Sörim Sönwon (a temple meditation center) with four activist students and started a community. In 1985, he was driven out from the temple because of his advocacy of a Buddhism of the oppressed (*minjungbulgyo*). He reflects on what happened thus:

What I asserted at the time was that democratization without national consciousness is problematic. In order to change our society, we have to understand our own national identity. We have to look into ourselves with our own eyes and understand exactly what the problems are. But all they did was examine us through Western eyes. I did not like that. They accepted foreign religion and foreign philosophy. I'm not saying that foreign things are wrong. But we have to study our own tradition to firmly establish our roots. Another thing that I pointed out was that our movement should not be used for personal success and fame. Spiritual practice is a must in a social movement. One has to devote his whole life to it without expecting personal gain. (Kön' gangdan, June, 2000)

The motto by which JTS members live is simple: "There are pure minds. There are good friends beside you. Here and now we are creating a land of bliss." This pledge JTS members take to uphold these ideals distinguishes from average lay followers and most of the ordained clergy as well.

Venerable Pomnyun himself is not recognized as an authorized Chogye Order monk by the Chogye Order Central Headquarters since

11. See [www.jungto.org](http://www.jungto.org) for information in Korean, Japanese and English.

he did not undergo training in a *kangwon* (monastic scriptural training hall) or Dongguk University and he did not receive formal ordination from the Order.<sup>12</sup> Venerable Pomnyun's freedom from the constraints and factional disputes within the Chogye Order has not inhibited the success of the many projects JTS has initiated and may even have helped the group garner more support from the general populace outside the boundaries of religion and denomination. He is also able to maintain more egalitarian relationships with his colleagues and followers and not be subordinated to the customary age hierarchy and lineage fealties of mainstream monks.

As socially engaged Buddhists, members of the JungTo Society in Korea pursue practical action in environmental preservation and ecological education inspired by Buddhist Pure Land thought and communitarian idealism. According to JTS literature, the JungTo Society is "a community established to realize 'JungTo' or *Sukhāvatī*, a Pure Land, a Land of Bliss in the world, here and now. This is a place where every individual is happy in a peaceful society surrounded by beautiful nature."

By understanding that I myself, society, and nature are parts of one Being interrelated with "other beings" and subject to the law of cause and effect, we can discard the concept of "mine" (non-possession) and "my thought" (non-self-assertion). Then, we set ourselves free from any adherence, keeping our minds peaceful, consuming the least amount of materials, and sharing with others. Therefore we are able to form a peaceful community with good relations among people and create a world with harmony and balance between human beings and nature.<sup>13</sup>

JTS teaches a kind of Buddhist-inspired eco-idealism that many Korean youths find attractive. It does not require the burden of the

12. Venerable Pomnyun was privately ordained as a *sramanera* (sami-novitiate) in 1969 when he was 16 and was made an "ordained" shaven head monk thirty years later in 1989 by his teacher, the senior monk Venerable Tomun. It was and is still not uncommon for Buddhist teachers in Korea to establish their own lineages in this way without the recognition of the Chogye Order hierarchical establishment.

13. See [www.jungto.org](http://www.jungto.org) web site. The original English translation is preserved.

scriptural study and exegesis of classical Chinese texts of the mainstream establishment. JTS literature and dharma study is done in simple, pure Korean for the most part and is not intimidating to younger people who have not been schooled in Chinese characters. Literature produced by the Academy of Ecological Awakening, a unit of JTS, is similar in style, yet incorporates the most recent scientific thinking on environmental issues and intentional communities from overseas while keeping Buddhist values central to its orientation.<sup>14</sup>

JTS is an organization whose members attempt to adhere to the following slogan:

To Strive for Pure Minds, Good Friends and Clean Lands

Pure minds are thoroughly controlled minds, which are delightful, peaceful, and unfettered in any situation

Good friends are those who, with a full understanding of interdependency, offer respect and are grateful to others and work together cooperatively, not competitively, for a peaceful society.

Clean lands refer to a world where balance and harmony with nature are well established and the Earth is no longer something to be conquered but to be preserved by observing the following three precepts.

- 1) To abandon lust and desire in order to develop a pure mind in our livelihood.
- 2) To work together in harmony in order to make good friends with others.
- 3) To reject consumerism in order to keep the Earth a sustainable, peaceful and clean environment.<sup>15</sup>

14. The author has been associated with the Academy of Ecological Awakening since its inception and has cooperated with its head, Mr. Yoo Chong-gil (Yu Chông-gil), in networking with other international Buddhist leaders such as Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratne, and American poet and activist Gary Snyder.

15. See note 7 above.

Those who commit themselves to the goals of JTS take vows that are indicative of a modern perspective on world problems yet integrated with traditional Mahayana teachings. Extracts from their vows will illustrate their “progressive yet traditional” commitments:

From *Vows of JTS Members* (paraphrased and abbreviated translation)

Today we are faced with a decline of humanity, the breakdown of our communities, and the destruction of the natural environment. To overcome these crises we look to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism for solutions.

First, we accept the law of Dependent Origination as our world-view.

Existence of this is dependent on the existence of that. Without that, this will not exist. This mutual interdependence of existence is the true nature of all things. If you die I too will die and if you live I too will live. If you are unhappy, I am unhappy and if you are happy I am also happy. Hence, based on the world-view of Dependent Origination, we pursue a path of coexistence and mutual happiness.

Second, we take Buddha and the Bodhisattva as paragons of life.

Taking the exemplary life of Buddha, having only a begging bowl and a robe, as an example to follow, we also live as seekers of truth. Eating less, having fewer clothes, and sleeping less, we become free from any attachment.

Third, we take non-self, non-possession, and non-attachment to my own ideas as objectives of our cultivation.

To build a Pure Land I vow to let go of self, possessions, and attachment to my own views, and strive to become a bodhisattva who is compassionate towards all sentient beings. Reflecting on

my mind and becoming free from attachments, I vow to become a liberated person who is free from suffering and hindrances.

Part of the discipline of full-time JTS volunteer-members entails the following:

When we have an injured finger, our nerves, hands and feet instantly cooperate to cure the finger without any expectation of reward. Similarly, we shouldn't expect any reward from others when we have worked for others. Understanding the realization of "JungTo" is our duty, we voluntarily work for pleasure without expectation of any reward.

In order to strengthen our oath for "JungTo," the members of JTS began 10,000 days of prayer for thirty years commencing in March 1993. The 10,000 days are divided into ten 1,000-day periods, and every 1,000 days are divided again into ten 100 days. JTS members congregate every 100 days to evaluate the achievement of the goals in three fields - self-discipline, charity and voluntary service - then renew our oath and commitment. Through prayer, all members solidify their will to become awakened persons who are free and happy, to make a society free from competition and conflict and a world where humans and nature are in harmony.<sup>16</sup>

The Join Together Society is the international branch of JungTo that began in early 1991 when Venerable Pomnyun witnessed extreme

16. See note 7.

17. Venerable Pomnyun, the chairperson of JTS, explains the motivation for establishing JTS below. "I first went to India in 1991. There I witnessed eye-opening poverty and suffering. At Calcutta, where beggars are visible everywhere, I was appealed by a woman with a baby in her arms. She pulled me by the sleeve into a small shop and pointed at something with an appealing gesture. It was a can of dried milk. However, the price of 60 *rupees* surprised me enough that I ran away from her. It was because I was very frugal during my trip and ate meals worth only 5 *rupees* at the food vendors on the streets. Later, during my trip I saw many people, particularly children who were malnourished and I began to feel compassion for the people's suffering. I regretted and came to repent for having ignored the woman at the shop because of a measly 60 *rupees* (US\$1.5). I made an oath then to compensate for my behavior by working for a greater number of unfortunate people who suffered from hunger, disease, and illiteracy."

poverty first-hand in India.<sup>17</sup> Since then, JTS has grown into a small but effective international assistance organization that has instituted educational and medical programs in the poorest villages in Bihar province near Bodhgaya, India, as well as community development work in the same area in cooperation with the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement of A. T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka. JTS began food relief efforts to feed starving children in North Korea in 1997 with the operation of a nutrient factory in the Rajin-Sŏnbong Economic and Trade Zone and also a successful agricultural assistance project on a farm in North Korea (1998-1999). JTS has also provided financial support for the elderly and poor ethnic Korean families in China (1995), support for the education of refugee children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (1999-2000), educational opportunities for Burmese refugee children in Thailand (1999-2000), a field survey for relief work in African countries (May 2000), and food and clothing assistance to Mongolia (summer 2000). There are long term plans to continue these activities. The ultimate aim of these projects is “to help people to be independent and to create self-sufficient and sustainable societies” where people can “balance the spiritual and material aspects of life and live in harmony with the natural environment.”<sup>18</sup>

JTS is led by former student activists. Venerable Pomnyun and JTS members claim to go beyond both violent and non-violent resistance, however, and are actively pursuing positive alternatives for action. They believe that environmental education at the grassroots that leads to care and concern for nature through mindful conservation, rather than demanding prohibitions against dumping waste, will bring about slower but lasting change. Venerable Pomnyun and other leaders in JTS understand that meaningful social change in Korea is difficult and they had even been tortured and imprisoned for their anti-establishment activities during past dictatorial regimes. The *bodhisattva*-activists of JTS demand strong commitment from new members. They are concerned that a member have a firm resolve to adhere to JTS vows and demand 10,000 deep bows for new JTS volunteers. This requirement was decided by JTS members themselves at a General Assembly Meeting.<sup>19</sup> Those who complete this ordeal usually stay with the orga-

18. See <http://www.jts.or.kr/eng/index.html>.

nization at least three months.

### **Buddhist Solidarity for Reform (*Chamyöpulgyo chaega yöndae*)**

The Buddhist Solidarity for Reform (BSR) is an association of over forty Korean lay Buddhist civil organizations. The main focus of the BSR is to bring about fundamental reforms within the Chogye Order. The organization was formed in 1999 as a kind of emergency social response to the violent clashes and evidence of corruption and malfeasance at Chogye Order Headquarters at the time of the Order's General Assembly elections. Deeply distressed by the ordained monks' lack of self-discipline and inability to sustain peaceful transitions of monastic authority during their elections, a number of concerned lay Buddhist men and women began to protest against the troublemakers and demand that the guilty parties withdraw or face temple boycotts or disbarment from the Order. Rallies and parades of lay people were held in the streets in the vicinity of the Headquarters to attract public attention and support for reform. Lay leaders of concerned Buddhist organizations quickly organized to form the Buddhist Solidarity for Reform in order to articulate an agenda of action to reform the Order and strengthen the morale of all Buddhists in the country.

Located in offices near Chogyesa Temple and Chogye Headquarters in downtown Seoul, the BSR has been monitoring the activities and dealings of monk-officials in the Headquarters in order to expose abuses of power. Unlike the JungTo Society (JTS) that functions independently of the restraints and power of the Chogye Buddhist authority, relatively indifferent to its approval, BSR is striving to reform the inherited tradition within the establishment by applying heretofore untested

19. There are three types of people who are working for JTS. 1) Those who are spiritually prepared and committed to social action. Most of them have given up personal life such as marriage. They are the main force of JTS and know what they have to do. They make decisions on major projects through bi-annual meetings and accept their job as part of the organizational activity rather than Venerable Pomnyun's work. 2) Those who work with JTS because of their love of the work but still have some conflict within themselves, and 3) Those who live at the center and help work with JTS in an attempt to avoid their personal difficulties. They do not stay long. The center is open to these people. They can live there if they want and they are free to leave voluntarily.

pressure from the laity.

Historically, monks have had almost total control of temple finances and decision-making and have not shared power with the lay people who support them. Buddhist Solidarity is trying to break the monastic monopoly on temple finances. It seeks transparency in temple book-keeping and a responsible accounting of revenues and expenditures. Famous, large and historically important temples in Korea earn huge amounts of income from a variety of sources including admissions fees if they are located in national parks, national tax support for the preservation of traditional cultural assets, and anonymous donations from believers. The size and allocation of this money has not been open to the public. Priests have had all the authority to make decisions arbitrarily with only negligible consultation with the laity. Often the clergy is totally wrapped up with the expansion and support of their monastic family or lineage (*munjung*) with huge building projects rather than being of service to society.

As indicated earlier, it is common knowledge that rancorous disputes over the corrupt selection of abbots of cash-flush regional temples and Headquarters officials repeatedly break out at the time of Chogye Order elections. Dharma centers (*p'ogyodang*) located in the cities where the lay public has more input in temple affairs have better financial management. Lay people are often better trained and more experienced than Buddhist clergy in worldly matters, and "it is high time for both clergy and lay people to seriously explore ways to share responsibilities" according to Dr. Gwang-seo Park (Pak Kwang-sŏ) a Brown University-educated professor of physics who is chairperson of the BSR.<sup>20</sup> The exclusive and closed hierarchical patriarchy that has monopolized authority within major monasteries and temples for centuries is now being challenged by a sophisticated lay public. Monks can no longer expect unquestioning support from a passive laity as in the past.<sup>21</sup>

The Buddhist Solidarity for Reform recently exhibited its strength to

20. *Hankyoreh* 21, #342, January 18, 2001. While most of the news about disputes and issues within the Chogye Order is only available in Korean, some news articles are available in English in the print and electronic archives of *The Korea Times* and *The Korea Herald* published in Seoul as well as popular Asian news magazines such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek*.

bring about change within the Chogye hierarchy by successfully forcing the resignation of a newly appointed Director of Planning.<sup>22</sup> Although this monk was publicly recognized as a habitual gambler and had attracted media attention for his scandalous behavior, the Headquarters refused to remove him on grounds that gambling was not a disqualification under the constitution and regulations of the Chogye Order. The General Assembly had in fact approved his appointment. Buddhist Solidarity welcomed his resignation at a news conference the day after it was announced as an indication that Buddhist tradition accepts suggestions and recommendations of lay members of the four-fold sangha if those suggestions are good and desirable. BSR hopes that this case will lead to the revival of a tradition that will be formally adopted by the administration of the Chogye Order. The present Chief Executive Venerable Chongdae has stated that it was desirable for lay people to participate in the management of the Order.<sup>23</sup>

To quote a Buddhist Solidarity for Reform manifesto,

BSR plans to continually investigate the ignominious activities of sangha members in order to purify society and reestablish true Korean Buddhism through a reform of consciousness. Lay Buddhists in particular should review and reform their lives and devotional activities in order to become 'true Buddhists' who, in turn, can uphold Korean Buddhism. Lay Buddhists should commit themselves to take the lead in restoring the social status and capabilities of Buddhism in Korea. This is the turning point of Korean Buddhism. 'Buddhist Solidarity' shall make efforts to realize the teachings of the Buddha in this society truthfully, thus enabling Korean Buddhism to play a leading role in directing the spirit of the times.

The Buddhist Solidarity will lead a repentance movement focusing on the issue of violence that surfaced during the Chogye

21. See earlier references to "skirt Buddhism" and "good luck" practices.

22. "Concrete actions" to protest Venerable Songhye's appointment were the submission of a formal letter of protest by the BSR, a signature collection drive for his dismissal, picketing in front of the Headquarters Building, and an internet survey coupled with media releases.

23. *Hyundae Bulkyo* news, Feb. 12, 2001 and personal communication.

Order conflict in 1998. We (members of BSR) would like to clarify our position that no violence shall be tolerated. Other urgent tasks are ‘transparent management of temple finances’ and ‘decision-making by the four-fold sangha.’ We will create a ‘pure & clean sangha’ that can be trusted by the laity as well as the general public through the eradication of violence, and drastic reform in the questionable management of temple finances.

BSR will be an open, democratic institution and act to provide external protection of Buddhism and to actively address the oppression and desecration of Buddhism in Korea and elsewhere.

We will encourage a “merit transfer movement” through engagement in the society by initiating a universal community and peace movement entailing public culture of repentance and self-reflection, the peaceful reunification of Korea and a restoration of human rights movement and a recognition of religious conflict and need for inter-religious dialogue

We will also initiate a ‘together with our neighbors’ movement on a regional basis according to local interest. We must promote an ecologically friendly culture in our daily lives and campaign to restore ethics for life and the environment. Our local “Centers for Merit Building through Social Engagement” will develop programs to demonstrate the potentiality of Buddhism to create a better society.<sup>24</sup>

### **Indra Net Life Community (*Indūamang saengmyōng kongdongch'è*)**

There are apparently “progressive” developments within the Chogye Order proper, too. In September 1999, an important Buddhist community movement called the Indra Net Life Community was launched with the leadership of Ven. Toböp, the abbot of Shilsangsa Temple, who is its chairperson. Twenty-three socially active temples and Buddhist NGOs such as Chogyesa, Pongūnsa, Shilsangsa, Nūng-in

24. Translation of excerpts of a working manuscript, December 2000.

Sŏnwon, Hwagyesa, Tosŏnsa, Shinhŭngsa, Together for Good (*Urinŭn Sŏnu*), the Buddhist Academy for Ecological Awakening (BAEA) and others have participated in the network from its inception. Its major activities include “back to the farm” education, a cooperative livelihood movement, alternative education, the creation of local communities, and a movement to cement solidarity among groups working for the environment. These activities had been independently run by member organizations before consolidation in the Indra Net Life Community. This union has created a stronger social presence that can facilitate more effective social action programs that can resist government and corporate pressures to destroy what is left of Korea’s pristine mountains. The Indra Net Life Community is expected to play a major role in identifying Buddhism with the growing community spirit in Korea that is concerned for the natural environment of the peninsula. The Buddhist Academy for Ecological Awakening (BAEA), which is affiliated with the JungTo Society, has a particularly strong role in the post-IMF period “back to the farm” movement for the unemployed as well as in the Korean environmental action network.

The monk Tobŏp began to attract public attention to Buddhism in 1990 when he organized a Buddhist practice community called the “Good Friends Community” (*Sŏnu toryang*) with a group of young monks at Shilsangsa. They advocated the purification and reform of Buddhist practice within the Chogye Order in order to improve the public image of monks. During the Chogye Order election dispute of 1994, Tobŏp served as executive chairman of the Reform Council (*Kaehyok hoe-ŭi*). When the situation was resolved along with a new system of administration, he quietly returned to his mountain temple.

Tobŏp found himself in the public eye again in 1998, at the next unfortunate occurrence of Chogye Order election conflict. This time he was appointed acting Secretary-General (Chief Executive) of the Chogye Order. After the resolution of the conflict, he again retreated to the mountains.<sup>25</sup> He now runs the Buddhist Back to the Farm School (*Pulgyo kwinong hakkyo*) that opened in 1998 and is identified with

25. Shilsangsa is located in the southern basin (valley) of Chirisan Mountains in Namwon-gun, Chŏllabuk-to. The temple was founded at the end of the Unified Shilla period (A.D.828) as one of the Nine Mountain Zen Schools (Kusan sŏnmun).

the national Buddhist environmental and ecological education movement.

Those who study agricultural techniques at the Back to the Farm School apply their knowledge in practice on the Shilsangsa organic farm (approx. 24.5 acres, substantial in mountainous Korea). The Back to the Farm School offers three-month long courses twice a year. So far just over one hundred people have completed the program. A permanent farm community of six families was founded in 1996.

Another of Tobŏp's innovations is the "Small School," the first alternative Buddhist middle school in Korea. It is an attempt to connect Buddhist teachings to society and it is receiving a lot of attention in religious circles. The Korean educational system is intensely competitive, solely intent on preparing students to pass college entrance exams. Classes are very large (40-60 in Seoul) and conformity and discipline rule the day. Originality and creativity are almost squashed because parents and teachers fear that deviation from the accepted texts will hurt their children's chances of success in standard exams. Most children attend extra-curricular "cram schools" and also receive expensive home tutoring by university students who passed the entrance exams of their school of choice. Parents make great financial and personal sacrifices to give their children a competitive edge. There is no time for creativity. It is truly "exam hell" for years. Non-acceptance of this mode of life presages failure.

The Small School at Shilsangsa is a pioneering alternative for Korea. Only fifteen students are enrolled so far. Classes are held in the temple compound and taught by eight teachers. Two to three students live with a teacher in a nearby village and share household chores. Students take the usual subjects like Korean, math, English, social science and natural sciences but learning is integrated with guided work and instruction in agricultural principles, special assignments to develop personal interests, and meditation in the morning. National teacher certification is not required and it is no surprise that Small School is not accredited by the government yet.<sup>26</sup> Small that it may be, the appearance of the Small School is an indication that some Korean Buddhists are committed to changing Korean society at its deepest

26. The Small School website is <http://silsang.edufree.co.kr>.

roots - in the character and education of its children. This experiment in education is being noticed in some progressive sectors of Korean society who have little experience with Buddhism but seek a less-pressured school life for their children.

### Future in the Present Reflecting the Past

The Buddhist organizations we have described above have implemented practical social programs both in Korea and abroad. They have also addressed economic inequities and distorted values in modern society. Their success is remarkable when we consider the context of Korean history. The past six hundred years have not favored Buddhism in Korea. Generally speaking, Korean Buddhists witnessed their prestige and influence fall from being the established national religion of over a thousand years to a pariah faith driven into distant mountains during the Yi dynasty. They experienced a brief and confusing resurgence during the Japanese colonial period, then have been virtually overshadowed by secularization and the loss of believers to Christianity since the Korean War. However new Buddhist organizations have arisen with revitalized social commitment like lotus flowers frequently cited in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist scripture.<sup>27</sup>

Very importantly besides the activities of the four larger umbrella organizations described above, there are expansive urban-based temples such as Nūng-in Sōnwon, led by the former *Korea Times* journalist Venerable Gi Gwang (Chi' gwang), that invest the new wealth of the Korean middle and upper classes in Buddhist social welfare and educational programs. These more progressive lay *sanghas* support causes that strengthen Korea's nascent democratization, such as protesting government resistance to the Dalai Lama's visit and exposing corrupt political practices in elections.<sup>28</sup>

Working for changes in social values in Korea, too, are associations like the Buddhist Volunteer Association (*Pulgyo chawonbongsa*

27. Korean Buddhism's complex modern history is outlined in a special issue of the *Korea Journal* 33:3 (1993). See "Buddhism in Modern Korea" by Mok Jeong-bae (Mok Chōng-bae).

28. To learn about efforts to invite the Dalai Lama to Korea, see [www.tibetfriends.org](http://www.tibetfriends.org).

*yŏnhaphoe*) run by the Buddhist nun Sŏngdŏk who teaches at a personal grassroots level. The BVA has initiated free hospice volunteer and funeral ritual education courses, home caretaker training programs, soup kitchens, clothes distribution drives for the poor, and elderly and wild animal feeding and reforestation projects during times of extreme weather and forest fires.

Venerable Sŏngdŏk also initiated a Buddhist Fetal Life Protection campaign that honors the “consciousness” whose lives are abruptly terminated by abortion. In the Korean government’s intense drive to limit family size to build the national economy, abortion has become a convenient “final solution” in family planning. Korea’s unwanted pregnancy rate is very high due to ineffective birth control implementation and cultural inhibitions to attend to issues of sexuality and “female matters” directly. Many Korean women, regardless of religion, have experienced multiple abortions (five, ten, fifteen or more!). Among these, numerous Buddhist women have sought out Venerable Sŏngdŏk and other clergy to perform “auspicious rebirth ceremonies” (*nakt’ aea chŏndoje*) to transfer merit to the babies they have sacrificed and to assuage their conscience.<sup>29</sup> Sŏngdŏk has used these mothers’ concern to publicly educate Buddhist women and men about the first precept against killing and the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva agenda. The senior nun Sŏngdŏk and other female Buddhists like the nationally recognized volunteer lay women like Ahn Ch’ŏnjŏnghaeng,<sup>30</sup> can be regarded as feminist heroines of Korean Buddhism outside male lineage struggles and the obscure Zen dialogues of patriarchs.

A common spiritual exercise among socially engaged Buddhists in Korea today is the traditional and ubiquitous *Mahāyāna* practice of calling the name of Kwanŭmbosal (*Avalokiteśvara*), a prominent *bodhisattva* of the Pŏphwagyŏng (*Lotus Sūtra*) with a thousand hands and

29. See Frank M. Tedesco, Chapter 7 “Abortion in Korea” in *Buddhism and Abortion*, edited by D. Keown (Manoa: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

30. Ahn Ch’ŏnjŏnghaeng (b. 1920) continues to pursue a Buddhist prison mission and dharma teaching program throughout the Korean penal system, including death row, for over thirty years and virtually alone. She continues to encounter resistance from Christian ministers who try to limit her work. She received little support from Buddhists until a few years ago. She was recognized as “Volunteer of the Year” by Korean president Kim Young-sam in the mid-1990s. Her “hwadu” or focus of spiritual query is “serving others” (pongsa). “How can I be of service?” Personal communication.

eyes who sees and helps all beings,<sup>31</sup> and the bodhisattva of action Pomyōn (*Samantabhadra*) of the Hwaōmgyōng (*Avatamsaka Sūtra*) who takes rigorous vows to employ all skillful means possible to practice good.<sup>32</sup>

Depictions of these “ideals of virtuous action” can be found in most Korean Buddhist temples. The social commitments of contemporary Korean Buddhists appear to be a revitalization and extension of historic Buddhist social responsiveness adapted to the modern arena. Progressive Buddhists in Korea recognize that the future of Buddhism in their country is tied to visible pro-active social engagement. Historians in the future will judge whether today’s Buddhist activists succeeded in transforming the “mountain” Buddhism of the past six hundred years into a force to match the impact of Western secularization and Christianity in Korea. Responsiveness to the needs of Korea’s changing society requires more open, flexible and democratic styles of organization and increasing cooperation with the lay public rather than exclusive allegiance to the vested interests of closed, hierarchical monastic lineages.

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31. Read about Korean Avalokiteśvara devotion in “The Activities of the Korean Buddhist Chōnt’ae Order Toward World Peace” by Venerable Jeon Chong-yoon in *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*, ed. David W. Chappell, (Wisdom, 1999) 103-111.
32. A brief and general exposition of the *bodhisattva Samantabhadra* ideal as expressed by a former Chogye Order administration under Chief Executive Venerable Song Weol-ju (Song Wol-ju) in “A Mahāyāna Vision of Dharmic Society in Korea: Through The Enlightenment of Society Movement” by the Buddhist monk Jinwol (Chinwol) in *Entering the Realm of Reality: Towards Dhammic Societies*, ed. J. Watts, A. Senauke and Santikaro Bhikkhu (INEB: Bangkok, 1997), 182-217.

flict in Korea and a diversity of topics related to contemporary Buddhist cultures and teachings worldwide.

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