

Article

Understanding *Seon* in Go Eun's 108 Poems in *What* (*Mwonya* 뭐냐)?

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The Review of Korean Studies Volume 20 Number 1 (June 2017): 145-170

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Introduction

In the history of Korean Literature, Go Eun is considered as “one of the most outstanding poets inspired by Buddhism” and in most of his poems “there are the elements of the *Seon* which intuitively understood the things” (Gim and Gim, 1996, 448).¹ It is agreeable that *Seon* spirit in Go Eun’s poems is the most fundamental element characteristic of his creative works since he “has been continuously writing poems that are properly considered *Seon* poems” (Baek 1993, 152) and “even in the poems of the early period that showed instability of emotions outwardly and looked like they accentuated the idea of meaningless... there flowed the spirit of *Seon* inwardly” (Yu 1998, 110).

The spirit of *Seon* in his poems closely relates to the poet’s personal history because he lived a life as a Buddhist monk for more than 10 years. Go Eun became a disciple of Master Hyobong in 1952 and lived as an ascetic of *Seon* practice in a Buddhist temple until 1963, when his poem “Declaration of Returning to Secular Life” (Hwansokseoneon 還俗宣言) appeared in a newspaper.² In regards to the *Seon* spirit in his poems, Go Eun said: “I already got wind of the *Seon*. Even in prison, when I was bored I treated myself with *Seon* practice” (Choe et al. 1993, 30).³

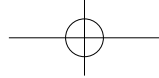
The selection of the creative writings of Go Eun *What?: 108 Seon Poems* is classified as a collection of poems from his later years, which is specified as the spirit of *Seon*.⁴ However, while many critics agreed with the *Seon* spirit in

1. According to Go Eun (2008a, 16), *Seon* is defined as “the Buddhist meditative tradition, known as *Seon* in Korean, *Zen* in Japanese, *Chan* in Chinese, *Dhyana* in Sanskrit.” Among the tradition of these countries, “the Korean inculturation of Buddhism was marked by bold speculative breakthroughs, catalyzed by this quest for total integration” (The Staff of Nanzan Institute 1999, xvi-xvii).

2. In relation with this personal history of poet, Vietnam monk Thich Nhat Hanh remembered that when he was with Go Eun he felt “a Dharma brother”: “In 1995, the poet Go Eun interviewed me for a program on the Buddhist television network in Seoul. As we sat together in the studio, sharing our thoughts and experiences on many topics, I felt I was in the presence of a Dharma brother. I told him I had the feeling we had done this many times before. The more I learned about his life, the closer I felt to him.” (2008, 13)

3. Go Eun was arrested by the military force of government and confinement by them in jail. In this period he experienced the limitation of human capacity to endure the pain. It is this period that poet began to write his prominent two epic poetries about history, *Baekdusan* 白頭山 and *Steps of Ten Thousand People* 萬人譜 (Song 2005, 124).

4. There is a common consensus of many scholars about the three periods of Go Eun’s



Go Eun's writings, there were also skeptical views, because a few critics raised questions about the achievement of literary imagery of *Seon* in this selection. While one critic sets forth his views that in this selection the attribute of *Seon* poem has been weakened in its "inherent meaning," that is, in the meaning of ideality absolutely exalted far above reality or the Buddhist ideas implicated in "the world of illogical and barely understandable"(Go 1992, 200); another points out that in poems of this selection communication structure is not strong because neither addressee nor sender is a credible practitioner who attains the awakening (Seo 2003,16); and one critic even worries that this selection makes people misunderstand *Seon* and get superficial ideas of it (Jamyong 1992, 368). This raises the question as to why these critics showed disagreeable opinions with the *Seon* spirit in the selection of *What?*, specially subtitled *108 Seon Poems*.

Answer for this question could be found in the notion of "Realism." While the spirit of *Seon* is characteristic of all Go Eun's creative writings, in this selection, as indicated by Baek Nakchung (1993, 153), the poet especially "shakes off the immaturity of his early period" and the *Seon* "inherent in all his works at last gets into a groove solidly and accomplishes Realism," which is not so easy for short poems.

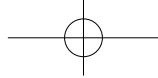
Of course, at first sight it seems difficult to accept this critic's idea because *Seon* and Realism look like contradictory. The generally accepted notion regarding the *Seon* practice is that when doing meditation one is not concerned with anything but enlightenment, while Realism relates to matters of all contemporary events in the world. However, in Go Eun's creation, it is not difficult to associate *Seon* with Realism because the elements of both them co-exist harmoniously.

The secret of this harmony of two contradict concepts could be found through the Intuition:

Actually, I saw the highly realistic action in *Seon* poem—it is intuition itself.
I think, to intuit something, that is, not to explain nor to analyse, but to

writing. In the early period young poet experienced the war which made him wander searching for the meaning of life. It is reflected to his poems as nihilistic imagination. In the middle period Go Eun stopped wandering and lived life closely related with history and society of contemporary Korea. And in the late period he tried to write poems with the *Seon* spirit in short form of verses (Song 2003, 122-24; Yi 2010, 351).

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intuit something directly without any deduction nor induction, is one of the forms of Realism. In this way I understand the association of *Seon* poem with Realism. (Yi 2008, 189)⁵

According to Go Eun, intuition is “highly realistic action” because to intuit something is to understand the state of things in itself without any induction nor deduction. In this way he considers the *Seon* as one of many aspects of Realism and understands the possibility of the harmony of *Seon* Poem with Realism. Therefore, it is noticeable that this harmony became possible in his poems when the poet placed Realism in the center of *Seon* on the base of intuition.

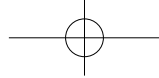
It is true that intuition is the indigenous attribute of *Seon*, and in the mention of poet the important point is that it extends the realm of established concept of reality to consider intuition as a form of Realism. If Realism in existing concept includes the cognition for the phenomenal world which can be explained by deduction or induction, the reality caught the angle of intuition, as Go Eun said, encompasses broader meaning. That is why it is possible for those elements with a sense of *Seon* to be easily traced in the plentiful descriptions of reality in his poems.

Go Eun clarifies his own concept of Realism as follows:

I want to talk about Realism on my own. I think Realism includes the reality that “has been,” “should be,” and is “imaginable,” but not been experienced yet... We must accept the psychologism and even romanticism of individual limitlessness as the function of deepening the realistic world. (Choe et al. 1993, 29)

That is, in his own concept of Realism, reality contains the realm of not only what “has been” (real), but what “should be” (responsible) and has “not been experienced” (imaginable). Like this, the sphere of reality is extended to a world that is wider and more meaningful—to the world of possibility. This view of poet to the world becomes the starting point of a new interpretation of Realism in the category of literature. In his idea, therefore, academic sphere, such as

5. Quotations from the original text were translated by the author, unless quoted from the edition which has already been translated.



psychologism, and artistic tendencies, such as romanticism, are also included in the realm of Realism.

Finally, the view of possibility is related to the ultimate goal that the poet wants to attain through his creations. Regarding the goal of encountering a new world, he said:

The world renewed! I want to give water to every person journeying in search of a new world...I have to thaw out their frozen bodies with a blazing fire on cold evenings...More than that, I long to give them strong bars of iron to hold on to, to prevent them from being swept away by raging storms...I too need to encounter water, fire, and iron, because my ceaseless dream and desire is for a new world. (Go 2008a, 15-18)

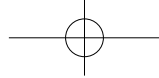
Above all, the poet wants to encounter a new world through their creation. Thus, to access the new world through meditation is the ultimate aim of *Seon* practice, on one hand, and the aim of the creation of the poet, on the other hand.

Go Eun's *What?* is the selection of poems in which the aim of encountering with a new world is represented through literary style. Thus, in this article, I will analyse Go Eun's poems to find the elements of *Seon*, and try to define the concept of Realism in the selection *What?* Beforehand, we will examine the attribute of *Seon* language and Go Eun's idea about poetic language, find the common element they share, and relate them to the aim of Go Eun's creation.

Main Issues

Language of Seon Poems and What?

A *Seon* poem is a combination of *Seon* and poetry. However, at first it seems that there are inconsistencies in this combination because *Seon* and poetry are concepts that are contradictory to each other. *Seon* is included in the sphere of intelligence, while poetry belongs to the sphere of sensibility. Therefore, the ultimate goals of *Seon* and poetry are apparently different. If the aim of *Seon* practice is an awakening that makes it possible to understand one's own inner world and the whole cosmos, the aim of poetry is to show the reality of this



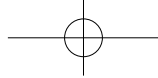
world through sensibility.

Moreover, a crucial thing to be pointed out for understanding *Seon* is that in the tradition of meditation, language is denied as a hindrance to awakening, where poetry is considered the essentials of language. In the practice of *Seon*, there is a notion that the closer one is to language, the farther he is from awakening. There are related traditions in Buddhism, such as “breaking of the way of words” (*eoneododan* 言語道斷) and “without standing in language” (*bullipmunja* 不立文字). These phrases express the world of absolute, which cannot be understood by way of human language, and cannot even be imagined in human thought. This distrust of language is caused by the fact that it is impossible to represent the complete world of Buddha by way of language, which is apparently incomplete. Therefore, the “unspeakable” and the “intuitive discernment of Buddhahood” are emphasized in *Seon* practice.

However, it must be noted that although *Seon* denies language, they share some aspects to help each other. As a matter of fact, “the truth of Buddha cannot be exposed without language” (Jamyong 1992, 377), so to speak, it’s impossible to understand the world of awakening without any help of language. If it is crucial to share this truth of Buddha with other people to help their practice, that is possible only through language. Additionally, a *Seon* practitioner writes poetry because it is one of the best ways to attain awakening, and the poet writes about meditation because *Seon* practice is the most effective way of realizing the truth of human being and whole cosmos. In both cases, *Seon* and poetry help each other to achieve their aims.

Regarding the attributes of *Seon* language, its peculiarity could be described as the destruction of meaning. In Buddhist teachings, it is believed that this world cannot be described by language (De Logos) because language originates from the need to describe the outer world—things, events, or people. For that reason, it cannot express the insights or inner feelings experienced by meditation. Thus, if there are moments when one must say something with words, a meditator uses *extremely compressed* ones—that is, “highly symbolic and metaphoric words” (Seo 2003, 23). As a result, “the world of the absolute” is expressed in realistic language. When this fact is applied for a poem, the verbal expression appears ordinary, but the content is very serious. Therefore, the language of a *Seon* poem is extraordinary; its form is very simple, but the meaning of it is very complicated, which cannot be facily understood.

This speciality of language in *Seon* poetry is also related to Go Eun’s



understanding of language. The inconsistency of form and content in *Seon* language is translated into liberation from the rules in his idea of poetic language. The poet thinks that the nature of poetry has *Seon* elements, that is, poetry is another kind of *Seon* because they both seek for the “new world,” which is “liberated from the rule”: “Poetry is in nature *Seon*. It is the new world, which is liberated from the rule of language...So there is no reason to discern *Seon* with poetry” (Choe et al. 1993, 30).

At last, for Go Eun this idea of language enlarges the meaning of language as a world “which includes the unreal realm”:

...if we thought the fact that there exists the language unexperienced, which is present, penetrating through the past and future, the poet should have the capacity, not only verbal, but language-oriented, which includes the unreal realm, like the imagination or occult power. The enlargement of language—it is exactly the same as the enlargement of the world. That's my realization connected with the practice of *bullipmunja* in my youth. (Choe et al. 1993, 30)

In the description of poet “the enlargement of the language” as the “enlargement of the world,” it is clear that he thinks of *Seon* as the encounter with a new world beyond the real one.

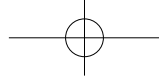
Therefore, if Go Eun defines *Seon* as a way of overcoming the limitations of the physical world, poetry makes this possible through liberation from the limits of language. Thus, in his selection of *Seon* poems, *What?* this view of the poet is reflected in different themes.

***Seon* in 108 *Seon* Poems**

Historicity

When analysing the *Seon* poems in *What?* the primary focus should be on its historicity. If we agree that history is defined as “all the events that happened in the past” (*Oxford Dic.*), this definition could also be possibly paraphrased as the whole reality concerned “in the development of a particular place, subject” in the past. In this definition it can be easily understood that history itself contains the meaning of Realism in its own sense.

As for the viewpoint of Go Eun regarding history, the poet himself stated



the origin of *Seon* as a historic event. The problem is that, according to Go Eun (2008a, 16), early Chinese Buddhism, when introduced to China from India, prematurely hardened into the grand metaphysics of the upper classes, therefore, it was shaped as spoken and written styles only for the elite. In that condition, *Seon* shattered those styles to become a powerful grassroots movement.⁶

In this situation, he insists, *Seon* is generated as the sphere of practice from “the protests of people.” In other words, the very origin of *Seon* practice is related to the history of protest against authority of tradition:

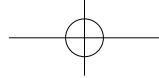
Seon was generated from the protests of people who had no power against the big world of the Avatamska Sutra (Hwaeomgyeong 華嚴經). The sixth patriarch, Huineung, was not a monk. He was a slave in the temple...Also, the third Sengcan was not a monk, but an ordinary man. As we can see in these patriarchs, *Seon* is the free spiritual act that throws away the dogmatic system and oppression of tradition. From here, it issued the possibility for *Seon* to have historicity. (Choe et al. 1993, 30)

That is, as claimed by Go Eun, this view of poet about the origin of *Seon* as the protest against “the dogmatic system and oppression of tradition” made it possible for *Seon* to be considered a “free spiritual act.” This historic view of *Seon* is the central theme in Go Eun’s poems.

In his poems, Go Eun denies the tradition of *Seon*, definitely its embodiment—scriptures and patriarchs. So, in the poem “The Lotus Sutra” (Beophwagyeong 法華經), the protest is described as a struggle with the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the most crucial scriptures of Buddhism:

The Lotus Sutra. Ultimate reality.
So far
You’ve been bashing me badly.

6. A short history about Korean *Seon* tradition is follows: “Buddhism originated in India, spread through China to Goguryo late in the fourth century, and was officially sanctioned in Silla by the early sixth century...However, Korean Buddhism adapted the *Seon* master Bocho Chinul’s idea that there is no distinction between doctrine and practice. *Seon* is Buddha’s mind and doctrine his teaching, hence they are inseparable. This is the tradition from which Korean Buddhism’s emphasis on enlightenment derives (Choi 2005, 15).



Now
 I'll cudgel you, bastard.
 Oh! Ouch!
 You're made for bashing.
 Oh! Ouch!
 Oh! Ouch!

The Lotus Sutra dashed away.

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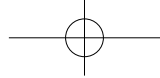
(Go Eun, "The Lotus Sutra")⁷

The *Lotus Sutra* is one of the most important scriptures in Buddhist history. In this scripture, there are so many essentials of the Buddhist teachings that those who have decided to practice *Seon* consider it the most valuable. "I," the subject in this poem, is trying to awaken with the help of the *Lotus Sutra*, too. "I," eager to attain liberation, duly depends on this scripture ("So far you've been bashing me badly"). But he realizes the fact that awakening does not come from scriptures, therefore, "I" takes up the "cudgel" to attack the *Lotus Sutra*.

In this poem, while the Lotus Sutra represents the traditional value, the cudgel appears as the metaphor of the very act of practicing *Seon*. Actually, in *Seon* practice, the cudgel of the subject does not have a negative meaning, but a positive one. In the tradition of *Seon* practice, it is stated that the cudgel can offer lessons that cannot be learned through verbal language. The cudgel used in *Seon* practice is specially is named "Tongbong" 痛棒, and, when waking sleep, "Jukbi" 竹篾. Hence, if the teacher beats his student with the cudgel, it means that the student should beat himself inside just as the teacher beats him on the outside. This way, in the language of *Seon*, cudgel does not mean "rod," but "lesson." So, beating the *Lotus Sutra* strongly is the right action of one who seeks the truth of Buddha—the stronger the poetic subject bashes the *Lotus Sutra*, the deeper he goes to his inside and the closer to attain enlightenment.

However, when the poetic subject decided not to deepen of the scripture, the position of the *Lotus Sutra* with me has changed. If the *Lotus Sutra* occupied

7. Go Eun's *What* has two editions in Korean: Cheongha (1991) and Munhakhdongne (2013). The citation of poems in this article is taken from English translation of the first edition by Gim Yeongmu and Brother Anthony (2008).



a higher position than “I” at first, now “I” becomes higher. “I” calls the *Lotus Sutra* a “bastard,” and the holiness of this scripture degenerates instantly. It created the world of “carnival” (Yi 2010, 358). At last the *Lotus Sutra* cannot endure the attack and runs away with a cry (“Oh! Ouch!”).

The fact to be taken notice here is that, in this farcical situation, it is concealing one of the main elements of *Seon*, that is, “absurd”: “The absurd is needed to bring you out of your mind because mind is reasoning. Through reasoning you cannot come out of it. Through reasoning you will move and move, but you will move in an order. So all religious people, all the masters, have devised ways to bring you out of the reason” (Osho 2010, 87). Additionally, this battle of the *Lotus Sutra* with the subject in the poem “The Lotus Sutra,” creates an amazing world of relevance, representing the fact that the *Seon* is a religion not of authoritativeness, but of generosity.

The subject of protest against tradition and denial of the scriptures moves from the *Lotus Sutra* to the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Byeogamrok* 碧巖錄). In the poem “The Master’s Scroll,” there is an inserted episode of Dahui burning the *Blue Cliff Record*:

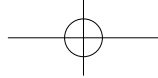
The monk Dahui of ancient Sung
Set fire to his master’s scroll
Of the Blue Cliff Records.
Well done. He did well.

.....

(Go Eun, “The Master’s Scroll”)

The *Blue Cliff Record* is a classic text of *Seon* Buddhism, “specially designed to assist in the activation of dormant human potential” (Cleary 2002, ix). The core of this extraordinary work is a collection of one hundred traditional citations and stories, selected by one of the greatest masters. Therefore, the *Blue Cliff Record*, like the *Lotus Sutra*, is considered one of the most important scriptures in *Seon* practice. The problem is that this text is such a prominent literary creation that practitioner could easily be attracted by its poetic charms. However, Dahui, one of the initiators of *Seon*, was so concerned about it that he eventually burned it so as not to confuse the practitioner.

If the very act of bashing symbolizes the serious practicing *Seon* in “Lotus Sutra,” in “Master’s Scroll” the act of burning contains the same meaning. In the



poem “The Master’s Scroll,” this episode of burning *The Blue Cliff Records* also gives the practitioner a lesson not to depend on the scriptures while practicing *Seon*. And, as we see in both cases, it is emphasised that the scripture which is written in verbal language is nothing but an obstruction in meditation. Go Eun strongly opposed old scriptures in *Seon* practice, because they do not help with the enlightenment of the practitioner. So, when Go Eun inserted the episode of serious historic event like burning scripture in his poem, it contain the warning that if a meditator depends on only scriptures it is impossible to attain the goal of liberation.

This idea of protest against tradition is continued in *What?* with the negation of the patriarchs of *Seon*:

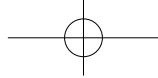
Dharma’s father, Huike.
 Shenzhiu and Huineng, Hongren’s fathers.
 Shenzhiu had fun in the palace.
 Huineng had so many fathers
 That the whole southern region got dizzy.

A really immoral family!

(Go Eun, “Idle Talk”)

This text apparently shows the parody to the lineage of patriarchs of *Seon*.⁸ The patriarchs of *Seon* are continued as “Dharma—Huikē—Sengcan—Daoxin—Hongren—Huineng.” However, in “Idle Talk,” the poetic subject mingled this lineage. He changed the first with the second (“Dharma’s father, Huikē”) and the fifth with the sixth (“Huineng, Hongren’s father”). Besides, Huineng, the progenitor of *Seon* of the southern region, is blamed for “the whole southern region [getting] dizzy.” At last, he accused all patriarchs of being an “immoral family.” In the poem “Idle Talk,” Go Eun repudiates the lineage of patriarchs and makes it powerless so as to manifest that “there’s no any meaning in following the teachings of patriarchs in *Seon* meditation for the purpose of enlightenment”

8. The history of *Seon* patriarchs began with the first patriarch Dharma to attain its peak at the period of the sixth Huineng. And in this period the *Seon* is conceptualized completely, so, after Heuneng, followers referred to it as “Seon of the Patriarchs” (Josaseon 祖師禪). For further details, see Dunmonlin 1988, 123.



(Seo 2003, 68).

The true reason of this denial is that *Seon* is not “teaching” but “educating.” While patriarchs teach disciples, “education” brings out something from his inside to the outside. That is the difference between them. Accordingly, education is an act of creation that is drawing out the inner quality of a human nature, as pumping out water from the well. *Seon* draws out the thing from deep inside the human mind, therefore, *Seon* is something that cannot be taught, but just revealed.

Awakening

In essence, the ultimate goal of the practice of *Seon* is the revelation of one’s own self to become a Buddha. This aim of meditation is revealing the spirit of Buddha that exists deep inside one’s own mind. Awakening is another name for this revelation of one’s true self. In language of *Seon*, there is a notion “seeing the true self and becoming a Buddha” (*gyeonseongseongbul* 見性成佛), which means in every human being’s mind there is the spirit of Buddha. In other words, every human being in nature has a quality to become a Buddha.

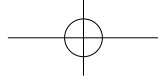
The ultimate goal of meditation is revealing Buddha in one’s mind by way of seeing it. To reveal the true self, meditator must keep in mind that this goal is possible only when he goes his own way, not depending on others. See the saying of Linchi as follows:

If you’re thinking you want to attain a beholding according to dharma, you must not get discombobulated by *persons*. On the inside or on the outside, whatever you meet, instantly kill it. Meeting “a buddha,” kill a buddha. Meeting “a patriarch,” kill a patriarch. Meeting “an arhat,” kill an arhat. Meeting “your mother and father,” kill your mother and father. Meeting “your relatives,” kill your relatives. In this manner, for the first time you will attain liberation. (Broughton and Watanabe 2013, 59)

It is noted to these phrases that, “‘killing a Buddha’ is not to continue the notion of a Buddha view and ‘killing the patriarchs’ is not to continue the notion of an already-adept level of understanding” (Broughton and Watanabe 2013, 210). Thus, the practitioner must go his own way, not be captivated by inner or outer things, and it is the theme of Go Eun’s poem “The Path”:

Take this path. It leads to Nirvana.

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Excuse me.
I'll follow my own path.
Over rocky crags or under water.

That's the old master's path, the corpse's path.

(Go Eun, "The Path")

The path for which poetic subject searches is the way of enlightenment, the way of Buddha. While practicing *Seon* to attain this aim, there were two paths in front of "me"—that of old master's, and that of his own. The former is the way of death, the latter—the way of awakening. In poem "The Path" these two paths are concretized in the form of "corpse" and "rocky crags and water."

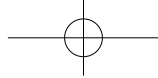
In fact, to become a Buddha, it is really difficult to follow one's own way without any help of others. Thus, the practitioner of *Seon* is easily tempted to go the way the old masters indicate. Therefore, in this poem, when patriarchs said to follow ("It leads to Nirvana"), the poetic subject is really tempted by the indication of these masters, because it makes meditation more difficult to go without any help of scriptures and patriarchs. But the subject of "The Path" is wise enough not to be fallen into temptation by the old way of patriarchs. "I" knows that it cannot be possible to become a Buddha if he follows the way of others, even though it is the way of patriarchs. Thus, although the way of old masters attracts, he must go his own way—it is the single way to attain to the enlightening, that is, it is the only way to find his true self. For that reason, "I" decides not to go the way of old patriarchs, but to go his own way "over rocky crags or under water."

However, even after the decision is made, the question remains as to what it means to go one's own way and how to go:

To mountains at dusk:
What are you?

What are you are you...

(Go Eun, "Echo")



This is the same question as not only in the famous *gongan* 公安⁹ in *Seon* practice “What is this” (Imwosgo 이뵈고), but the title of this selection 108 poems “What” when the question which the poetic subject in “Echo” gives to mountains at dusk returns, it is just the same as asking to oneself: “What am I?” This question is very simple but not easy to answer because it is the question about one’s true self. It is the process of discovering oneself, in other word, going back to one’s source: “Enlightenment is to go to the source, and the source is within you...nobody will answer you...go to yourself” (Osho 2010, 7). The process of trying to find the answer to this question is exactly the same as the process of attaining enlightenment by way of meditation. While the poetic subject keeps silence, that question remains waiting for the answer.

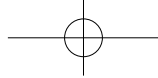
However, it is correct not to answer this question because searching for the answer is impossible. Poetic subject rightly falls into silence because it is in vain to try to answer this question. That is, it is right to be silent about this question, since silence is the most correct response. Actually, in the practice of *Seon* silence is one of the most powerful modes of languages. In the world of *Seon*, silence is not discontinuance of practice but the strongest way to practice, because *Seon* is the understanding of things that cannot be said in language. Silence is the transcendental language, which is saying without any denotation, so, in *Seon* practice it is considered that silence is the only correct answer for any *gongans*.

Furthermore, in silence there lies idea of “emptiness” (*gong* 空), the preliminary condition for awakening in *Seon* practice because it, beyond logic, never be reduced to a concept:

In a word...what is *Seon* to you?...A very provision answer is that, for me, in a word, is simply “Emptying”...What is regarded in *Seon* as “talking dirty”—using conception of language in the attempt to describe what basically can never be reduced to a concept. (Habito 2004, 11-12)

More often than not, this kind of language only manages to hide rather than reveal. Instead of saying anything, poetic subject is in deep silence to become emptying. And while he sinks into contemplation only the mountain echoes ceaselessly. Therefore, the languages of the *Seon*, silence and emptiness, is

9. *Gongan* is the same as *koan* in Japanese and English.



embodied in the poem “Echo” as the sound of nature, “echoes”: “what are you are you...”

In the poem “Walking Down a Mountain” there is an allusion that poetic subject attained to awakening:

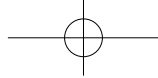
Looking back
 Hey!
 There's no trace of the mountain I've just come down.
 Where am I?
 The autumn breeze tosses and turns lifeless
 Like a cast-off snakeskin.

(Go Eun, “Walking Down a Mountain”)

In this poem the line “There's no trace of the mountain I've just come down” means that the poetic subject has bade farewell to his past—that is, to meditation in the mountain. From this, it can be guessed that he attained some kind of awakening through ascetic exercise. The mountain where he practiced disappears, and “I” became different one, like a snake that took off its skin. “A cast-off snakeskin” is a metaphor for the past self of poetic subject and the renewed world encountered after awakening is described as “the autumn breeze [tossing]”: “a cast-off snakeskin’ is an allusion to awakening and poetic subject experiences returning of the mountain with autumn breeze tosses” (Baek 1993, 154).¹⁰

“Walking Down a Mountain” refers to the return to the secular world after a long and hard time of meditation in mountain. But this returning is not an end to the practice of *Seon*, it's just a beginning of a new world. If the mountain is the place of ascetic practice for individuals—the mundane world in which one lives with others is another kind of the place for *Seon* practice. Accordingly, the mundane world is represented as one of the serious places for a person who wants to continue *Seon* practice. Therefore the importance of everyday life appears to be crucial in the practice of *Seon* in Go Eun's poems.

10. However, in the Eastern thought there are some different ideas about the allegory to the “snake” from that of Western. If in the Christian Bible the “snake” is represented as the image of seducer, the evil one, in the sphere of *Seon*, it has a more positive image: “Although snake is crawly it is a spiritual being too. It goes without legs and swallows the prey without chewing. A man who tries the flavor of anything must learn from this animal” (Jang 2016, 87).



Everyday life

As discussed above, when the poetic subject comes down from a mountain, Go Eun clarifies that the mountain is not the only place to practice *Seon*. However, through this episode the poet reminds us that if one lives in the mountain only to concentrate on meditation, one easily loses one's sense of the real. This leads to the fact that awakening exist not only in the mountain but also in the ordinary life. For the poet, this world we live in is the true place of *Seon* practice.

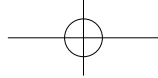
In fact, ordinary life is closely related with *Seon* practice. It is also considered as one of the inherent places to practice in the Buddhist tradition. The master Qingyuan Xingsi 青原行思 made reference to the relation of practicing *Seon* with ordinary life as follows:

30 years ago when I did not practice *Seon*, mountain is mountain, water is water for me. When I encountered a *Seon* master and began to practice, mountain is not mountain, water is not water. And now when I let go all things, for me mountain is mountain, water is water again.

This is a very famous *gongan* in Korea, simply known as “mountain is mountain, water is water” 山是山水是水.¹¹ In this *gongan*, there are three stages of dialectic in the way to enlightening. The first stage is the world of common sense, where “mountain is mountain, water is water.” In this stage, all things are such as we know commonly—there are differences between mountain and water. The second stage—“mountain is not mountain, water is not water”—is the world of denial of that sense. In this stage, all the common senses known to the world as such are confused. The third stage—“mountain is mountain, water is water again”—is the stage of high level of self-awareness.

In the third stage, although the outward appearance is the same with that of the first, the level of understanding is completely different. In this stage, a man of enlightenment lives the same way as ordinary man—without any difference on the outside, but the quality of the being has change. Now his “mind is open”: “He can look outside, but he remains inside. He can move in

11. The full text of this *gongan* is: “Mountain is mountain, water is water” 山是山水是水; “Mountain is not mountain, water is not water” 山非山水非水; and “Mountain is mountain, water is water” 山是山水是水. This *gongan* became well known to Koreans as the last words of high priest Seongcheol 性徹.



the world, but the world never moves in him. He remains in the world, but the world is no longer a part of his being. He can do whatsoever in needed, but he is never attached” (Osho 2010, 153).

A variation of the *gongan* “mountain is mountain, water is water” appears in Go Eun’s poem as follows:

“Mountain is mountain
Water is water,” Daineng chanted.
“Mountain is not mountain
Water is not water,” Daineng chanted.
Eat your food.
Once you’ve eaten, go shit.

(Go Eun, “Mountain is Mountain”)

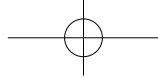
In the poem “Mountain is Mountain” the place for *Seon* practice is indicated to be the ordinary life. If in the original version of the *gongan* the third stage is represented as the world of a high level of awareness, in Go Eun’s poem this world appears as extremely humble and naive—the world of ordinary life in which eating must be followed by excrement. In this way, the poet turned to the world of mediocrity, that is, food and excrement presented as metaphors of everyday life. In this rhetoric poet insisted that ordinary life is rightly the place for practicing *Seon* and that the truth is in ordinary people.

So in the poem “Asking the Way” the poet asked the way of enlightening not to Buddha but to people:

You blockheads who ask what Buddha is.
Ask now about every living being instead.
Ask about all living things.
When you’re hungry
Ask about food.
Ask the moonlight about the way.
Find a port where lemon trees bloom
Where lemon trees bloom.
Ask about places to drink in the port.
.....

(Go Eun, “Asking the Way”)

It is a famous episode in history of *Seon* when a man asked to a monk “what



is Buddha?” the monk answered, giving the question back: “What is sattva?” This reply contains the meaning that there is none but Buddha—sattva is Buddha certainly. Thus, Buddha exists in the mind of ordinary people. Go Eun illuminates this question in his poem with the notion that asking “about every living being” is correct. In this way, poet reminds us that Buddha exists in everyone’s mind to emphasize the truth: Buddha already exists inside me, inside us and inside all living beings. Therefore, it is futile to seek Buddha in other places out of one’s mind.

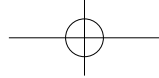
It is interesting that the main theme of the poem “Asking the Way” is also connected with the world of mediocrity. In this poem, food and drink could be considered as the same rhetoric as the eating and defecating in “Mountain is Mountain, Water is Water.” In other words, all these acts in ordinary life are the objects of practicing *Seon*. When the poet writes about food and drink he keeps in mind the life people experience on the basic level. It is true that Buddha subsists not in the mountain but in the ordinary life, not the space of the ideal but the space of reality. Thus, now Buddha, who lives in the secular world, like ordinary people, has to eat when hungry and drink when thirsty.

As have examined, ordinary life has significance of place for *Seon* practice. This world of mindfulness is considered as the ultimate goal of *Seon* practice. One should be mindful at every time and every place—this is referred to as “ordinary mind” (*pyeongsangsim* 平常心). Ordinary mind is the last stage of *Seon* in which one searches for enlightening. In this stage, there is not any differentiation of right or non-right, holiness or secularity, or having and not having. It is the world of peace. In this stage of enlightening, all the actions of ordinary life—eating, drinking, saying, sitting, standing, and lying—are done with *dharma*.

This is expressed by the *Seon* Master Joshua as “ordinary mind is the way” (*pyeongsangsim* 平常心是道). See the following dialogue of Joshua with his master Nansen:

The master asked Nansen, “What is the Way?”

Nansen said, “Ordinary mind is the way.”...“The way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. To know is to have a concept; to not know is to be ignorant. If you truly realize the way of no doubt, it is just like the sky: wide open vast.” (Green 2001, 11)



In the saying of Nansen there's the meaning that ordinary mind is the way to realizing without any doubt, that is, ordinary mind is in itself *dharma* ("ordinary mind is the way"). So, there is no need to find the truth of Buddha in another place because it already exists in our everyday life. The only problem is that ordinary life exists so close to us that it is easy to forget its importance. We must remain aware of this truth.

However, one of the secrets in practicing *Seon* is that when people have an ordinary mind in everyday life they can live in the world of Buddha. Let's see the following poem:

The wash flaps, a bodhisattva not
Knowing it's a bodhisattva.

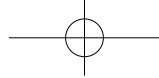
(Go Eun, "The Wash")

It's one moment of *Seon* state in ordinary life. "The wash flaps, not knowing it is wash, and bodhisattva does her work, not knowing she is a bodhisattva" (Jang 2013, 215). Just the wind blows and the wash flaps. Here the wash, the thing material, is equivalent to the bodhisattva, the spiritual being.

The last thing to be taken notice in this peaceful scenery is that there is not any actor only action. The actor hides behind the action and in the scene there is only the wash flapping. This is the *Seon* state itself. It is exactly the same as when the master of music plays the instrument and forgets himself. There remains only the act (i.e., playing music) and its instrument. This state is possible only when the master is in a state of "no mind" (*musim* 無心). No mind is the mind of enlightening. A man of no mind is neither attached nor detached. In that state of mind, "the world has become a dream, the world has become a play, a game. It is no longer real, it is no longer substantial" (Osho 2010, 153). The woman in "The Wash" has no mind when she washes, so she is referred to as "bodhisattva."¹²

There is another moment of ordinary life:

12. However, in this figure of a woman, we can understand the specialty of Korean Buddhist poems. According to American poet Laureate Hass (1998, 124), "the difference between Buddhist poems of Korea and Japan is that Korean poems are not so esthetic than Japanese poems. I feel that reason is comes from the history of Korean Buddhist poems that is issued not from the tradition of academy but from the tradition of the people. Korean Buddhist poems are more popular, more natural occurrence, more strong and tenacious, and less satisfied with the comfort of beauty."



As I went strolling down Jongno Street in Daegu
I bought and drank a bottle of schnapps.

(Go Eun, "Jongno Street")

This poem "Jongno Street" captures the one moment in city life and we can read in this picture one of the main themes of *Seon*—"spontaneity." "Spontaneity" is the state of natural, without any intention—that is, without any artificial efforts or devise—but to absorb to the moment and exist naturally. In the state of *Seon*, there are not any mechanical actions. *Seon* is an instantaneous awareness, understanding: "It has nothing to do with the rational, philosophical, or theological mind. It is just a gesture....It is here, this very moment, the very essence of *Seon*" (Osho, 2009, 17). *Seon* reacts spontaneously.¹³ Walking the street, "I" bought and drank a bottle of schnapps inartificially. There are only actions that are spontaneous in the moment. In this state, if one sees that one's own mind is issued from inside, he acts as needed for that moment. When all the actions of everyday life inspire the spontaneity in the moment with conscious, life itself becomes the living *Seon*.

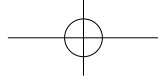
Nature

In his later period, Go Eun internalized the realistic point of view to the world and introspected the nature. Owing to this view, the poet recognizes that you and I are not two but only one and that everything in the whole cosmos is united together. This sense of unity is reflected in his poem as insight into nature and sympathy for it. Therefore, while poet appreciates the fact concerned with the human being—words, gestures, and any other human activities—as lie and falsehood, "he discovered the true meaning of every beings in the very nature" (Go 1992, 205).

Here, is the one example:

The sightless sunflower follows the sun
The sightless moonflower blossoms in moon light.
Foolishness.
That's all they knew.

13. Critic Baek (1993, 154) comments on this poem that "this poem suggests some kind of *Seon* but there is not any way to differentiate it from other similar ones."



Dragonflies fly by day
Beetles by night.

(Go Eun, "Summer")

The reason why nature is great is that all things in nature exist as they duly do. The sunflower follows the sun and moonflower blooms in the night. Also, dragonflies fly by day, beetles by night: "This is not any intentional gesture of action but the phenomenon of nature itself" (Go 1992, 206). That's all they knew, so they are called as fools. Thus, it is the very harmony of nature and in this harmony there is the truth of cosmos.

One green frog,
As you croak
Black clouds are filling the sky.

The strongest guy in the world,
You squirt.

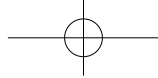
(Go Eun, "A Green Frog")

A green frog's cry—it is prediction of rain. When the weather is humid, the watery air stimulates the skin of the frog, and then he burst into "tears." This is the natural phenomenon of the living world. When the green frog cries, then it rains. And, when the rain drenches the earth, then plant grows in that earth. It is a casual relationship in nature in which all living things are connected each other. They exist in relation with others to live together. They participate to the world of existence altogether and have the feeling of "oneness"—this is state of *Seon*.

At dawn three cuckoos sit side by side.
Not a word about
How fine this world!
How fine that world!
Yesterday's cuckoo-cuckoo quite forgotten.
Too early yet for today's cuckoo-cuckoo.
The best time of day!

(Go Eun, "Cuckoo")

In this poem, cuckoos exist only in this place in this time, in other words, "here and now." "Here and now" is the state of existence in reality itself. In this poem



cuckoos are not concerned with whether the place is this world or that world (“How fine this world...that world”). They forgot yesterday, don’t wait for today, and only enjoy right now (“The best time of day!”). Thus, these creatures exist only “here and now.” It is true that when beings exist “here and now,” they live in the world of every living moment. And in the moment of “here and now,” the beings enter to that of bliss and feel fullness. Furthermore, when beings are “here and now,” they exist in the state of clear consciousness, that is to say, a state of awakening. And this state of awakening makes every moment in the world become miraculous. It is the *Seon*.

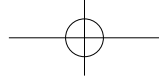
Conclusion

As we have seen above, the themes in Go Eun’s selection of 108 poems *What?*—its historicity, the way to awakening, and the importance of the ordinary life and nature—clearly reveal the sense of *Seon*. When all the themes are put together, the concept of Realism in Go Eun’s *Seon* poems could be defined in the following ways.

First, it is “tangible.” In Go Eun’s poems the *Seon* spirit is represented in tangible materials, as the history of *Seon* practice, episodes in individual practitioner, a sketch of everyday life or natural world. These are the things a man could come across or experience while he lives and they are described in his poems in plain vocabulary. This way Go Eun proves the truth that *Seon* is not the thing beyond experience nor transcendental, but the thing that exists in every human life and gets along with it.

Second, it is “intuitional.” While creating poems, the poet did not depend on the existing concept of *Seon*, but just followed his own intuition. Therefore, things, events, and phenomena in Go Eun’s poems are depicted instinctively and naturally without any artificial devise. Thus, it is easily understood without any thinking and explaining. In this way, poet demonstrates that doing creation is another way of practicing *Seon*: as the ultimate goal of the *Seon* practice is revealing one’s own self, it parallels the author’s aim of creation which is to find himself and represent it in his work.

Finally, it is “ongoing.” When referred to Realism that includes the reality that is “imaginable,” Go Eun extends the sphere of reality to a world wider, to a world of possibility. Therefore, Realism in his *Seon* poems, which is caught by

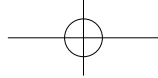


the depth of poet's insight and depicted in simple expression, is not stationary, that is, processing. It is a process of finding and making a new reality in the sense of literature because it is on the march to the new world which is not experienced until now. This way, Go Eun suggested a new kind of reality and it can be considered as the starting point of a new interpretation of Realism in literary criticism. And we can reach the conclusion that Go Eun in his selection of 108 *Seon* poems *What?* succeeded to "encounter with the new world" which he considered as the crucial aim of his creation, on one side, and "enlarge the concept of Realism" in the sphere of literature, on the other.

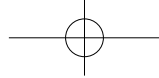
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Abstract

The selection of the creative writings of Go Eun *What?:108 Seon Poems* is specified as the spirit of *Seon*. It is true that the *Seon* is inherent in all his works, but it is considered that in this selection this spirit of *Seon* accomplishes Realism, especially. First of all, Go Eun pays attention to the history which is duly regarded as the whole reality of the past because he saw the origin of *Seon* as a historic event. In his opinion, *Seon* as the sphere of practice is generated from “the protests of people” against authority of tradition. So, in the theme of historicity, it represented the old scriptures as the *Lotus Sutra*, included the episode of burning the *Blue Cliff Records*, and also parodied the lineage of patriarchs of *Seon*. In this way, Go Eun insists that old scriptures and teaching of patriarchs are only a hindrance to awakening, so, if a practitioner depends on such things, it is impossible to attain the goal of liberation. Along the same lines, it is strongly emphasised in the theme of awakening that while practicing *Seon* meditator must go his own way because going one’s own way is the only way to find the true self and attain the enlightening. Meanwhile, the world of mindfulness is the ultimate goal of *Seon* practice, and to achieve this aim one should be mindful at every time and every place, referred to as ordinary mind. Therefore, in Go Eun’s poems it is emphasised that everyday life is very important. The scenes of ordinary life in which we live come to the fore for *Seon* practice in the theme of “everyday life.” At last, recognizing that whole cosmos is united each other, the poet represents this sense of unity as insight into nature and in the theme of “nature” every creature is being in the very state of existence in whole reality —“here and now.”

Keywords: Go Eun, *Seon*, awakening, ordinary life, here and now