

EVIL AND THE OVERCOMING OF SUFFERING IN BUDDHISM

Jae-Ryong Shim

1. Opening Remarks: The Diversity of Buddhist Traditions and the Universality of Suffering

It is impossible for anyone to describe and explicate the origin of evil and the overcoming of suffering in Buddhism, because nobody can legitimately claim to represent the whole of Buddhist traditions. I, for one, specializing in the Korean Seon Buddhist tradition and groping for an alternative way in the multi-faceted transformations of Mahayana Buddhism, can never write about the proposed topic of discussion in this epoch-making millennial meeting. But I dare say that the diversity of traditions would never efface the universality of suffering. However we may try to define it, we can never deny that we suffer, from the lowest degree of physical pain to the grave psychological pang of mortal anxiety, as long as we live an imperfect life in this conditioned world full of anxiety and danger. By dint of that universality of suffering, I venture to share my understanding of Buddhist approaches to the problem of suffering.

At the outset I would like to digress a bit by mentioning my subjective experience of suffering from the moment of my birth. Perhaps nobody can ever consciously remember what happens at the time of birth except the very laboring mother. This story of my birth was told again and again by my mother and my maternal grandmother. Whenever I visited my grandmother's house in my childhood days, I was constantly called by a nickname "Kkeokkuri," which means "a child born with his foot first." My left foot came out before my head was born, so I was told. Both a Western gynecologist and a traditional midwife were asked to come to the scene of my mother's labour. The Western doctor, it was reported, advised my father to have the newly born baby cut to pieces so that at least my mother's life could be saved. At that moment, the midwife in my home village interjected and implored my father: "Before you cut the child, let me try. If I fail, you can have your way." With his reluctant assent, the midwife tried almost an hour or so to help me come to the world. I could not even cry out, it was told, so exhausted during delivery. All the physical scars I carry along throughout my life until today still witness to that traumatic experience that I can never remember, and yet is so deeply built into my childhood memory

and onwards. My constant headache and fragile physique might be attributed to my early birth-condition. Later on, when I was initiated to the study of Buddhism, I learned that birth is the first of the eight kinds of suffering that the Buddha Sakyamuni enumerated in his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths. I wonder whether Gautama Siddharta himself might have gone through a similar experience: it is said that his mother, Maya, gave birth to Gautama on a street under a tree. Perhaps because of the difficult labor, she passed away a week later. When I was three years old, my father passed away, leaving my mother, a young widow, with three children in the whirlpool of the rocky modern history of the Korean peninsula in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Korea was "liberated" from the harsh colonial exploitation for half a century, and then immediately catapulted into the trajectory of ideological warfare, which is still going on in the only country in the world that is torn apart between North and South. The Koreans are still suffering, regardless of their religious affiliation. I can vividly remember my mother's haggard face, a small photo of almost a skeleton with sunken eyes, juxtaposed with so many corpses along the street in the war-devastated port of Inchon. Even though I do not even remember my father's death, during the short period of the twenty years of my teaching career in my *alma mater*, I could have eye-witnessed at least twenty young students falling from the rooftop, yelling for "democracy and freedom" in a sort of "fire ball" and burning themselves to death. The traditional Buddhists would never condone such suicidal attempts. Nonetheless, in the recent history of nation-building, the collective destiny of the Korean people is graphically portrayed in the late Ham Sok Hon's spiritual history of Korea, entitled "Queen of Suffering." Using very harsh words, he shouted:

Haven't you all nailed my mother to a cross and exposed her private parts to her shame, Red China holding her one arm and Japan grasping the other, while the polar bear holds down her head and the eagle from the Rocky Mountains holds down her legs?¹

With this understanding of both a very private experience of this author's childhood memory of suffering and the Korean people's collective perception of historical destiny, this author would venture to deal with the problem of evil and suffering in Buddhism.

Though we ordinarily assume evil or badness to be similar to suffering, I believe we can distinguish the two notions and thus deal with them separately. My preliminary Buddhist understanding tells me that both evil and goodness, as

¹ This passage is from the author's preface to Ham Sok Hon, *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, trans. E. Sang Yu, ed. and abr. John A. Sullivan (London: Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1985), p. x.

long as they do not last forever, can produce suffering. Hence, the following order of presentation.

First, an initial understanding of evil in the original Buddhist tradition, that is, among the Theravada Buddhists, will be presented. An additional T'ien-t'ai sectarian notion of radical evil in the Buddha-nature will be introduced in passing to clarify, as well as modify, the claim that there is no problem of evil in Buddhism. Also, the nature of suffering as conceived by the Buddha will be explained, in order to mitigate criticising Buddhism as pessimistic.

Secondly, the Buddhist ways of overcoming suffering will be explained, with special emphasis on the "engaged" Buddhists in Asia, in order to counter-balance the meek way of appeasing or purifying method of eliminating suffering in traditional Buddhism. By "meek" I mean a sort of psychological or mental approach to eliminating suffering without paying much attention to the structural or societal aspect of suffering.

As a tentative conclusion, I would like to point out a certain tendency in Buddhism toward a shift of perspective and practice, in order to catch up with the problem of suffering in the contemporary world, especially related to the sufferings of persons caught up in and created by the relentlessly mechanistic enterprise of capitalistic-consumer society, the evil of which is intricately wrought into the very nerve and skein of its structure.

2. Evil and Suffering in Buddhism

2.1. THE CONCEPTION OF EVIL IN BUDDHISM

The basic Buddhist attitude to evil is not to deny its existence nor merely to reconcile its presence in the world, but to observe carefully, and study its nature and causes in order to eliminate it. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha dictates: "Never commit any evils; but practice all the goods. Simply purify your mind/heart. This is the teaching of the Buddhas" (Verse 183). Perhaps this is the single most important passage we can find among the Buddhist scriptures, the *locus classicus* from which we can derive the Buddhist conception of evil. Both good and evil are posited as real, and the fundamental way of eliminating evil, i.e. the mind-purification method, is prescribed.

All sentient beings then, Buddhist would claim, are subject to evil in various forms, until they attain Nirvana, the highest state of well-being, characterized by bliss, perfection, and freedom, in which our finitude comes to an end. Everything that falls short of that Nirvanic reality is therefore ridden with the evil of unhappiness and suffering. Until we attain this *summum bonum* of Buddhist realization, while we are living in the world of repeated birth, death, and re-birth (*samsara*) *ad nauseam*, we are prone to experience all forms of evil. There are

external and physical evils (natural and man-made), such as floods, earthquakes, cancer, terminal illness, and nuclear weapons; internal and psychological evils, such as mental agony and remorse; moral evils, such as jealousy, hypocrisy, and ingratitude; social and political evils, such as poverty, injustice, inequality, and slavery. I will summarily examine two typically Buddhist notions of evil, namely, hell and *mara*. Hell is the worst state of being in the *samsara* world, and *mara* is a cluster of psychological hang ups. I will also pay special attention to the Buddhist notion of human nature, whether it is good, bad, or neutral.

It is noteworthy that in the Buddhist texts we cannot find any existence to be inherently evil. Even the most horrible existence in hell, for example, is understood as a term representing painful bodily sensations. The popular beliefs in hell are, therefore, denounced by the Buddha: "When the average ignorant person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a hell (*patala*) under the ocean, he is making a statement which is false and without basis."² Of course, there abound graphic portrayal of hells, from ancient India through medieval China to contemporary Korea, in almost every Buddhist temple. According to the Mahayana notion of expedient device (*upaya*), however, they serve ceremonial and didactic purposes only to commoners in order for them to alleviate suffering.³

We often hear of the "forces of Mara" being similar in stature to Satan in biblical religions. *Mara* literally means "death," and figuratively symbolizes all the oppositions and obstructions that spiritual seekers have to deal with on their paths to final liberation. *Mara* is, in this sense, the epitome of evil. Actually, the scholastic tradition classifies four kinds of *mara*: 1) physical death (Buddhism takes over the ancient Indian concept of *Mara*, personified), 2) constituents of personality which are decaying and destructive, 3) moral defilements which lead to the repeated birth and death, and 4) the evil one as a person who tempts and obstructs us humans who seek to liberate ourselves from the conditioned world. Hence we are told concrete examples of the forces of *Mara*, such as "lust, aversion, hunger and thirst, desire, sloth and torpor, fear, doubt about the truths, hypocrisy, hardness of heart, the gain of praise, respect and fame obtained by false pretense, as well as boasting of oneself while denigrating others." On the basis of this description, we are certain of the fact that the forces of *Mara* are nothing but the cluster of psychic hang ups.

What about the Buddhist conception of human nature? Just as there is no conception of "eternal hell" in nature, as in some forms of theistic religion, the evil in humans is considered to be an adventitious defilement. It is true that Buddhism recognizes that man is capable of sinning. But the evil that he com-

² See K. N. Jayatilleke, "The Buddhist Conception of Evil," in Jayatilleke, *The Message of the Buddha* (New York: Free Press, 1974), pp. 250-60, esp. p. 251.

³ See Stephen F. Teiser, "'Having Once Died and returned to Life': Representations of Hell in Medieval China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 48 (1988), pp. 433-64, esp. p. 461.

mits is not due to his inherent wickedness, but to his ignorance. This ignorance can be gotten rid of, because man is fundamentally good by nature. The mind of man is often compared in the Buddhist texts to gold ore, which is covered incidentally by defilements of iron, copper, tin, lead, and silver. If these impurities were removed, the gold could shine with its natural lustre. So shines the mind when the evil is removed.

In sum, denying eternal hell, and not regarding man as a sinner, Buddhism gives us a less pessimistic account of man and nature than is to be found in other theistic religions. The following claim is in agreement: "There is no problem of evil in Buddhism," for "Buddhism accepts the existence of both good and evil in the world of conditioned existence." Thus states the late K. N. Jayatilke. For the reader who is interested in the problem of theodicy, it may be worth quoting his argument at length:

Evil becomes a problem only for a theist, who maintains that the world was created by a perfect Being, omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good.... If God is good, whence comes evil?... What is the Buddhist solution? *The problem does not exist in the above form* for the Buddhist, since he does not start with the theistic presumption that the world was created by a perfect Being. Instead he accepts the fact of evil and argues on its basis that the world with all its imperfections could not be the creation of a perfect Being.... The Buddhist is under no compunction to deny or explain away the fact of evil. If we deny the existence of evil, there would be no reason nor even the possibility of getting rid of it. If we justify it, it would be still be unnecessary to try and eliminate it. But evil is real for the Buddhist and must be removed as far as possible at all levels of existence for the good and happiness of mankind, by examining its causal origins (emphasis added).⁴

One important addition is necessary to counterbalance the above remark about the Buddhist conception of human nature. In China, from the third to the tenth centuries, Buddhism took over the classical debate of the pre-Chin period about whether human nature is good, evil, or neutral. T'ien-t'ai, one of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist sects, claimed that even the Buddha-nature has inherent evil, a rather remarkable feat considering the traditional Chinese penchant to insist on the inherent goodness of human nature. Some may call it a creative reinterpretation of Chinese Buddhism, distinct from the original Indian Buddhism.⁵

⁴ See, K. N. Jayatilke, *ibid.*, pp. 252-53.

⁵ "What makes the Chinese doctrine of *tathagatagarbha* or Buddha Nature outstanding and unique is that Chinese Buddhists developed and reinterpreted it creatively. A good example of such creative reinterpretation is the T'ien-t'ai doctrine that evil inherently exists in Buddha Nature." Heng-ching Shih, "T'ien-t'ai Chih-I's Theory of Buddha Nature: A Realistic and Humanistic Understanding of the Buddha," in *Buddha Nature*, ed. Paul Griffiths and John Keenan (Tokyo : Buddhist Books International, 1990), pp. 153-69.

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