

THE KOREAN STŪPA: ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT & FEATURES

Kyoung Hee Lee¹

Introduction

The Stūpa is the oldest Buddhist religious monument. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of *Dīgha Nikāya* describes that the remains (*sarīra*) of the Buddha were divided up in the best and fairest way and there after ten Stūpas were built for the relics (8), for the urn (1) and for the embers (1). The Stūpa was to be located at four corners to remind people of the awakened state of mind and an architectural representation of the entire Buddhist path. The body, speech and mind of the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is contained therein. Vessels containing hair, fingernails, relics, and ashes of the Enlightened One were also buried there along with jewels, seeds, herbs, and other earth-symbolic items.

Introduction of Buddhism to Korea

Buddhism was first introduced in to Korea from China in A.D. 372 when King Fújiān (苻堅) of the former Qin Dynasty sent the diplomatic corps and one monk with the Buddhist Scriptures and the Buddha's statues. Buddhism seems to have been fused with contemporary folk beliefs, Shamanism and Taoism without much friction. Buddhism was adopted as the official state religion in the Goguryeo, Silla and Baekje kingdoms during the Three Kingdoms Period (BC 57– AD 668). The Unified Silla kingdom (668–935) succeeded in applying Buddhism as the psychological force for the unification of the Korean peninsula. During the Unified Silla Period, Buddhism played a preeminent role in cultural development, resulting in the construction of many artistic Stūpas as well as world-renowned historical sites as Bulguksa Temple and Sokguram Grotto.

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, PGIPBS·University of Kelaniya, Visiting Professor,
Nāgānanda International Institute for Buddhist Studies.
jennyco2011@yahoo.co.kr

Stūpa in Korea

The time and channels of being introduced Buddhism are very important to understand the concept and characteristics of Stūpas and Buddhism in Korea. Since it was transmitted from China directly without passing through its birthplace of India at an interval of eight centuries after the Buddha's Great Death, Korean Buddhism was considerably different from Early Buddhism in many ways. Stūpa is a good example to indicate these differences. Originally, Korean Stūpa was also simply mounds of earth and stones to bury kings or the dignitary away from the village. But, since Buddhism took root in Korea, the Stūpa changed from a king's burial tomb to a religious monument. Korean Stūpa is named by 'tap' (pagoda) and in most cases it designates the very Buddhist Stūpa (bultap). With main building of the temples, most of Stūpas are regarded as outstanding example of Buddhist architecture as well as a principal object of worship at temple.

Generally, constructing Stūpas were encouraged as a matter of national policy. Throughout Korean history and culture, Stūpas constructed in order to maintain nations' political independence and to preserve cultural and ethnic identity against frequent foreign invasions. Stūpas are classified variously depending on the materials and shape. At the beginning, wooden pagoda was constructed like China's, before long the materials changed by stone from the 7th century. At present, there are 1,500 Stūpas in Korea, and over 1,000 Stūpas among them were made of stones (mainly granite) and of spire in shape. Korea is the most developed country in stone pagoda's progress.

Status of Stūpa

Likewise the Buddhist monks usually live quiet and solitary lives, the Buddhist temples have kept traditional Buddhist ways of life, separated from secular affairs. They are ranked the undisputed top place as National and World Cultural Heritage site and most pagodas were designated National Treasures as works of art. The influence of traditional beliefs of Korean Shamanism, Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism has remained an underlying religion of the Korean people as well as a vital aspect of their

culture. All these traditions have coexisted peacefully for hundreds of years up to today despite strong Westernization from Christian missionary conversions in Korea. Although today Christianity has competed with Buddhism in Korea, still, Buddhist architectures such as Stūpas and the main buildings of the temple are continuously admired and appreciated by Korean beyond religious dimension.

Conclusion

In the past most Koreans were Buddhists because Buddhism was the state religion for over a thousand years. Korean people regard Buddhism as a religion for defending of the state. Buddhism is fused in the everyday language and life as a traditional culture of Korea. Once a year, on the Buddha's birthday, millions of Buddhists and secular people visit the temples to light incense and make donations. Korean people, whether they are believers or not, celebrate the special day by making colourful lanterns, hanging them in Buddhist temples and walking around pagodas.

Keywords: Stūpa, Pagoda, Korean Buddhism

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