

THE KOREA TIMES

June 7, 2006

Won Buddhism's Gratitudes

By Timothy Chambers

"Sometimes I think, 'How could it work? It's too amazing!' And other times I think, 'How could it not work? It's so simple!' — Catherine Ryan Hyde, *Pay It Forward* (1999), page 237.

I'll never forget the first time I saw it: the grand photographic frame in my hosts' house, peering down from its place of honor on the living-room wall. Except, instead of a photograph, the frame held a gleaming gold circle.

“That's the il-won sang,” my host explained. “It means, 'one-circle image.' It's the symbol of our faith, Won Buddhism.”

I made a mental note to research the symbol's meaning.

It took some time before I made good on my self-imposed commitment; but at last, I located and read the texts revered by over 1.25 million Koreans: the *Wonbulgyo Chongjon*, which outlines the faith's basic tenets, and the *Taechongjon*, a collection of meditations by the sage who first framed the faith in 1916, Sotaesang.

The texts helped me resolve not one, but two, questions I'd long had. They explained the concepts symbolized by the il-won sang I'd seen. But they also explained the patience and generosity I'd routinely noticed among Won Buddhists over the years; as I read, I began to realize the contours of the faith, which inspired their thoughtful character.

The most helpful key, for me, resided in the *Chongjon*'s second chapter, entitled "The Fourfold Grace." The chapter's starting-point is a straightforward observation. A moment's reflection reminds us how fortunate many of us are: we're healthy, educated and cultured. But none of this would have been possible were we not fortunate to have been blessed, when we were young, with nourishment, schooling, and care.

These gifts, in turn, call for gratitude toward those who freely gave them to us, with no expectation of compensation — the very essence of “grace.” Specifically, think of the teachers who stayed after class, and showed us patience and devotion over and above what their job-descriptions required. Think of lawmakers and judges, who devote thankless hours in planning, and sagaciously applying, the Laws which make our society's cooperative liberty possible. And we of course can't neglect the countless times our parents invested in our maturation — nor, for that matter, should we withhold thanks from Mother Nature, whose numerous displays of dynamic equilibrium, from photosynthesis to the Krebs Cycle, make the world welcome for life, in the first place.

In light of such examples, Sotaesang declares that “if there is a relationship where we cannot live without the other” — such as our reliance on Nature, our debt to our parents, and our cooperation with our neighbors under the Law — “then where could there be a grace greater than that?”

So we ought to be grateful, but how might we best manifest it in our lives? Sotaesang offers a pair of guidelines. Obviously, one way to show gratitude is to repay kindnesses to those who first gave them to us. Thus, ``in the event that our parents become helpless," Sotaesang writes, ``we should offer them mental comfort and physical sustenance, as best we can."

But Sotaesang's second manner of manifesting gratitude receives far greater emphasis. Rather than just ``paying back" those kindnesses we've received, we should also, to borrow the phrase of Hyde's novel (later made into the film starring Helen Hunt and Haley Joel Osment), pay those kindnesses forward: ``If people wish to show gratitude," Sotaesang writes, ``they first must practice by modeling themselves wholeheartedly on that way," i.e., the way of our benefactors. Thus our protective instinct shouldn't show favoritism, and only apply to our own parents; rather, ``we should offer protection as best we can to all those who are lacking in self-power." And it's not enough just to repay our society's scholars, farmers, and merchants, for their products' cash-value; we should, instead, ``consistently act [to] benefit all others... [and] love and rejoice in one another."

The result of such a world governed by gratitude, rather than the resentments which rear their heads far too often, goes without saying. As the scholar Chung Bong-kil observes, whereas resentments ``aggravate the human predicament, gratitude ameliorates it and leads to a Paradise on Earth." At first, this might seem too good to be true — but I prefer to think, with Hyde, that it's so simple that it can't fail to be true.

In short, then, Won Buddhism invites us to recognize the graces we've received in life, and to bestow like grace upon others in our paths, so that grace comes full circle. That, more than anything else, is what the il-won sang means to me.

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