

Korean Perspectives on Psychology and Morality : Korea's overlooked contributions to the global debate over how people can live moral lives

Donald L. Baker, University of British Columbia

All peoples wherever they are on the face of the earth, once they have reached the stage of reflecting on issues that we today consider religious or philosophical, have asked themselves two questions: what is the proper way for human beings to behave and why do human beings so frequently fail to behave the way they should behave. Koreans are no exception to this universal rule. However, the answers to those two questions have varied widely. Peoples around the world, depending on their religious or philosophical orientation, differ on the core demands of morality, on the defining characteristics of the proper way to behave. Some, for example, say people are obligated to obey laws handed down by God above. Others say that people are simply obligated to treat their fellow human beings as they themselves wish to be treated. Differences in the answers to the first question often lead to differences in the answers to the second questions. Some blame external forces, such as evil spirits, for human failures to act morally. Others blame human bodies or minds for pulling people off the moral path.

Koreans over the centuries have tended to downplay or dismiss entirely the notion that God above has pronounced moral principles which human beings must act in accordance with or face the wrath of God. Instead, they have tended to define morality in human terms. To be moral in traditional Korea (before the introduction of Christianity) meant to act with a greater concern for the common good rather than pursuing personal benefit at the expense of others. In other words, a moral human being was a human being who was not self-centered. Obedience to God played no role in the traditional Korean concept of morality.

This human-centered morality has encouraged Koreans to look inward rather than outward for the origins of evil. Koreans have often assumed in centuries past that human beings all have the potential to be perfectly moral human beings (there is no original sin in pre-Christian Korean thinking) and that the reason why they so often fail to realize that potential is because their mind is leading them astray. They have let their bodies share some of the blame for evil but usually attributed human moral failure more to the failure of the mind to control the body than to the body itself.

This has led, in both Buddhist and Confucian circles in Korea, to what I call a moral psychology, an interest in understanding the mind and how it functions as a way of both explaining why human beings fail to act the way they know they should act and how such deviation from appropriate behavior can be eliminated.

Though I just used the term psychology, that is actually an anachronism, since people in pre-modern Korea did not use that term, just as they did not use the terms “philosophy” or “religion.” Yet I will go ahead and use such terms because I find them useful in identifying various strands in pre-modern Korean thought in ways that people in the 21st century can understand. At the same time, it is important to remember how artificial those categories are, since both Buddhists and Confucians engaged in philosophical examination of cognition and volition in order to identify more effective ways of achieving their religious goal of becoming better human beings. They were not seeking to understand how their minds worked for the sake of understanding alone. Their moral psychology was a practical psychology, so their focus was on identifying cognitive and volitional processes that they believed could either help them become better human beings or could lead them astray.

Since being a better human being to them meant acting selflessly, they sought ways to cultivate (or activate) a mind that sees interconnections and unity more than individualization and diversity. Koreans for centuries sought a psychology, an explanation of the mind, that would tell them the most effective way to do that.

The Buddhist approach was to focus on the ignorance, the misunderstandings, they believed the mind generated. When Koreans first began thinking philosophically, they did so from a Buddhist perspective. Moreover, the philosophical Buddhism that had the greatest impact on early Korean Buddhist thinking is *yogācāra*, consciousness-only Buddhism. Consciousness-only Buddhism appeared in China first but Koreans added to what Chinese Buddhists taught. One of the earlier builders of consciousness-only Buddhism was Wōnch’uk, a 7th-century Korean monk whose writings influenced Korean, Chinese and even Tibetan Buddhism. He taught that “consciousness is the essence of the Buddha’s teachings... everything is derived from consciousness.”¹

¹ Eunso Cho, “Wōnch’uk’s Place in the East Asian Buddhist Tradition,” in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. ed. *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on East Asian Buddhist Traditions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 189.

Consciousness is important to Buddhists because they believed that we fail to interact properly with people and things around us because our mind is misled into thinking that those people and things are fully real, and are separate and distinct entities. For Buddhist philosophers, only that which never changes, and is uncaused, is fully real. However, we assume that things around us are fully real and that causes us to be frustrated and disappointed (to “suffer,” as the Buddhists put it), when they change and are no longer what we want them to be. Moreover, we mistakenly treat them as different from ourselves and therefore pursue what is best for ourselves rather than what is best for everyone. The solution they proposed is to recognize that everything we experience is created by our minds, meaning that there is no real distinction between ourselves and others.

Buddhist philosophers teach that our minds can, and often do, go astray by masking the ultimate undifferentiated nature of ultimate reality and instead creating distinctions, differentiating among various phenomena which actually are essentially the same. Encounters with such constructed entities inevitably lead to “suffering.” However, our minds don’t have to do that to us. As the Vajrasamadhi sutra argued, “The nature of the mind of sentient beings is originally void and calm. The essence of the mind that is void and calm is free from form and characteristics.”² All we have to do is recover our original mind.

That raises the question: how do we do that? Robert Buswell many years ago argued that a 7th-century Korean paved the way for a solution that many Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Tibetans have employed ever since. That solution is known in the Western world primarily by its Japanese name, Zen, but here we should call it by its Korean name Sŏn.

Sŏn first developed into a full-blown Buddhist school in China but Buswell argues that some of its roots lie in the Vajrasamadhi sutra that appeared in Korea decades before it appeared in China and therefore, he argues, that text was most likely written by a Korean he calls Pŏmnang (“Buddhist lad”).³ That sutra proposes two approaches to activating our original mind so that we can escape the problems a differentiating mind creates.

The first approach is the somewhat passive approach of simply realizing that we already are a Buddha (i.e., we already have a mind that is void and calm). If we can do that, we will realize that the different things we see around us are all transitory constructions of our own mind. That will keep those imagined entities and events from disturbing us. The second approach is more active. It calls for the practitioner to exert the effort necessary to keep the mind in its original state so that, calm and void,

² Robert E. Buswell, Jr. *The Formation of Ch’an Ideology in China and Korea: The Vajrasamadhi-Sutra, a Buddhist Apocryphon* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 84.

³ Buswell, 166-173.

⁴ Buswell, 130.

it will be able to dismiss the distractions of constantly changing phenomena and therefore won't be frustrated when they change.⁴ Moreover, a calm and void mind won't let illusionary self-interest lead us to pursue personal self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Several centuries later another Korean monk, Chinul (1158-1210), developed further this Korean technique for using your real mind to overcome the delusions differentiating thinking creates. He proposed a concrete way of implementing consciousness-only philosophy: remaining cognizant at all times that our minds create the distractions around us by "tracing back the radiance," focusing not on what is created but on what created it, i.e. our real mind. He also suggested that we need to cultivate a mental state that is simultaneously calm and alert. That is to say, we need to be aware of what our mind is creating at the same time that we remind ourselves that those are just creations of our own mind and therefore do not deserve to be taken too seriously.⁵ If we remain both calm and alert, and "trace back the radiance" to confirm that the phenomenal world of separate and distinct things and processes is not truly real, we will be aware of the underlying unity of everything of everything there is and will be able to escape the self-centered attitude that causes us to act inappropriately.

Unlike his predecessor Pönnang, Chinul was not read outside Korea--until the 20th century, when Korean Buddhism began to reach out beyond the peninsula and attract non-Korean practitioners. Nor did the solutions Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians proposed to the same problem of overcoming the selfishness that leads us to act inappropriately attract non-Korean attention, until scholars in China, Japan, Europe, and North America began to pay attention to Korean Confucianism in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

Before the arrival of Christianity, Koreans focused on two explanations for why human beings fail to fulfill their full human potential, why we so often fail to do what we know we should do and act in ways that hurts ourselves and others. I have just given you a glimpse of one explanation, provided by Buddhists. Buddhist say the reason is psychological. It is our mind and its ignorance of what is real and what is not that causes moral and cognitive failure. Confucians also promoted a psychological explanation, but it was different from the Buddhist explanation. Confucians focused not on ignorance but on the role of emotions in motivating behavior. Their concept of the mind as involving both thought and emotions is the reason many scholars of Confucianism today prefer to use the term heart-mind for what Buddhists simply call the mind.

⁴ Buswell, 130.

⁵ Robert Buswell is the leading authority writing about Chinul in English. See, for example, his introduction and translations in *Chinul: Selected Works*, vol. 2 of *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism* (Seoul: Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012). Also see his *Numinous Awareness is Never Dark: The Korean Buddhist Master Chunul's Excerpts on Zen Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

The best-known example of the Korean Neo-Confucian approach to understanding why we act in ways we know are inappropriate, and what we can do to stop doing that, is the Four-Seven debate which began in the 16th century and continued all the way to the end of the Chosŏn dynasty.

The Four-Seven Debate refers to differences between T'oegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570) and Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584), and their respective disciples, over the relationship between four innate virtuous tendencies to consider the needs of others first, and seven emotions which often are rooted in personal self-interest. Note the word "often." Yulgok believed that those seven emotions could stimulate both proper and improper behavior while T'oegye doubted they could ever prompt appropriately selfless behavior. Their debate was expressed in terms of the li-ki metaphysics of the Neo-Confucianism Korea had acquired from China. Both in China and Korea li referred to the fundamental normative force in the cosmos, serving as both those moral principles by which human beings should guide their lives and as those invisible directive patterns of interaction which defined, generated, and sustained all appropriate activity within the human community as well as within the natural world. Li was seen as a unifying force, defining how people and things should fit into the world around them. Ki, again in both China and Korea, was seen as more of a divisive force, since, though everything originated from the same ki, that ki coagulated into separate and distinct entities.

Both T'oegye and Yulgok agreed that appropriate behavior was behavior oriented toward the common good, and inappropriate behavior was behavior motivated by the pursuit of individual self-interest. They disagreed, however, on how we should use the li/ki distinction to ensure that we should always act appropriately. T'oegye suggested that we should calm our minds to the point that hardly any emotions are active. Then, he argued, we can see clearly whether any emotion that begins to emerge in our heart-mind is one of the four selfless instincts or is one of the seven self-centered emotions. If it is the latter, we should repress it before it was able to stimulate us to act in inappropriate ways.⁶ Yulgok argued that it was impractical to try to separate the li-based and ki-based emotions before they were strong enough to prompt action. Instead, we should cultivate a calm mind free of strong emotions so that we can focus on having li guide all of the emotions that then emerge, including the four virtuous tendencies as well as the seven emotions T'oegye was so concerned about, so that we would always act appropriately.⁷

The Four-Seven debate is often viewed today as metaphysical and therefore lacking any practical applicability. That is a misunderstanding. It was a debate over the best approach, within the Neo-

⁶ Yi Hwang T'oegye sŏnsaeng munjip [The collected works of T'oegye Yi Hwang], in Pae Chongho, ed Han'guk Yuhak charyŏ chipsŏng, [A collection of Korean Confucian documents], (Seoul: Yonsei University Press 1980), 16:32a

⁷ Yi I, Yulgok chŏnsŏ [The complete work of Yulgok Yi I] Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo Taedong Munhwa Yŏn'guwŏn, 1958), 10:26b-27b)

Confucian world view, to explaining both why we sometimes act inappropriately and how we can avoid doing so. It reflects a much greater concern for moral psychology than we see in Chinese Neo-Confucianism, either in the “investigate things” injunction of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) or the “rely on your innate knowledge of the good” of Wang Yangming (1472-1529). It has been recognized in recent decades as an unusually perceptive exploration of the psychology behind moral behavior and, as such, has begun to attract the attention of non-Korean scholars, both in the rest of East Asia and in the broader world as well.

So far I have outlined two fundamental approaches to the connection between psychology and morality which Koreans explored at great depth. There is much we can learn from those Korean thinkers from long ago, whether we want to blame our moral frailty on ignorance resulting in an inability to see the underlying unity of the world around us or we prefer to blame our bodies which generate self-centered emotions that keep our heart-mind from directing us to act in appropriate ways. However, those are not the only alternatives Korea provides us. There is one more recent Korean thinker we can learn from. His name is Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836). Unlike Korea’s early Buddhists or its early Chosŏn Neo-Confucians, he was influenced by Christianity, though he remained a Confucian at heart.

Tasan argued that the reason we so often fail to act the way we know we should act is not because of ignorance or our self-centered emotions. Rather, he insists, we fail to live moral lives because we choose to engage in inappropriate behavior. Though Tasan was Confucian, he rejected the li-ki metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism. Instead, probably influenced by his reading of Catholic publications from China when he was young, he said that human beings were a mysterious combination of ki (our physical body) and a spiritual heart-mind. He insisted that the heart-mind was totally spiritual and had no material components at all.⁸ Moreover, he said human nature which, unlike Buddhists, he believed was real but, unlike Confucians, did not believe was innately moral, was composed of two contradictory inclinations: a desire to act morally and a desire for personal benefit or pleasure.⁹ As Tasan sees it, the task of the heart-mind is three-fold. First of all, it is the seat of consciousness and it can use that cognitive ability to determine what is the appropriate way to behave in specific situations. But that is not enough. The heart-mind also has to evaluate its competing inclinations and choose the one that leads to moral behavior. That is its second function. Third, and this is where Tasan differs most from his Korean predecessors, once the heart-mind has decided to act properly, it must then exert will-power to do so. Tasan noted that was often not an easy task, since pursuing personal benefit is as

⁸ Chŏng Yagyong, *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The complete works of Chŏng Yagong], “*Simgyŏng milhom*” [Personal Experience with the Heart Classic], II, 2, 25a.

⁹ Chŏng Yagyong, *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, “*Simgyŏng milhŏm*,” II, 2:26a–28a.

easy as falling down a steep hill but putting aside personal wishes and pursuing the common good is as hard as climbing up that steep hill.¹⁰

Tasan went on to say that we will only be properly motivated to climb that steep hill if we abandon the Buddhism injunction to empty our minds and the Neo-Confucian injunction to quiet our emotions and instead cultivate a constant feeling of caution and apprehension. What does he want us to be cautious and apprehensive of? Of the Lord on High (Sangje), who watches our every move and even observes our every thought and therefore will make us feel ashamed if we think or act selfishly. Tasan believed that only such a feeling of caution and apprehension can motivate us to make the effort necessary to act morally.¹¹

Like Chinul, T'oegye, and Yulgok, Tasan was not widely read outside the Korean peninsula until the twentieth century but he, too, is now attracting more attention from the world beyond the peninsula. That is a positive development since he also has many useful things to say about the psychology of the mind, about the role of the mind in directing us to behave either appropriately or inappropriately. Though the Koreans I have discussed today all lived long ago, those of us living in the 21st century should take seriously their explorations of the psychology of morality.

We all want to better human beings. We all want to live moral lives. And, I think it is safe to say, we all find it difficult to consistently do so. Whether we agree with the Buddhists that we need to overcome our ignorance of the true nature of the world of everyday experience, whether we agree with T'oegye and Yulgok that we need to carefully observe our emotions and try to ensure that only emotions that are not self-centered determine our behavior, or whether we agree with Tasan that we need to have the fear of God in us before we will find the strength to act appropriately, or whether we prefer a different explanation of both the reason for human moral frailty as well as how to overcome it, I think we can all agree that over the centuries Koreans have explored an issue that is important to us all, and have suggested original, creative, and useful perspectives on that issue. As scholars of Korea from around the world, we should all try to let the rest of our fellow human beings know how much Koreans have contributed to the global debate over how we can live moral lives so that Korea's rightful place in the history of civilization will become better known.

¹⁰ Chŏng Yagyong, *Yöyudang chönsö*, "Maengja yöü," [Essential points in Mencius] II, 5:34b–35a.

¹¹ Chŏng Yagyong, *Yöyudang chönsö*, "Chungyong chajam" [Admonitions for myself upon reading the Zhongyong] II: 3, 4b-5a.