

**PARADOX OF AN ANTI-TEXTUAL  
TEXTUAL TRADITION IN KOREAN  
SŌN/ZEN BUDDHISM**

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The Western scholar's search of Zen Buddhism has been directed overwhelmingly towards the Chinese and Japanese traditions. Although Korea has preserved one of the oldest and richest Buddhist traditions in Asia, contemporary Korean Buddhism is largely ignored by Buddhist scholars in the Western hemisphere. When the Communist government emerged in 1949, Chinese Buddhism was stricken and the traditional forms of the monastery were seriously damaged. Japanese Buddhism is more secularized than in any other Asian countries. Most Japanese Zen monks are married and stay in their monasteries only for periodical intensive retreat sessions, unlike Korean Sŏn monks who commit themselves for a lifetime in the monastery. After intensive periods of Zazen, Japanese monks typically return to their home parish temples and work as pastors. In comparing Buddhist traditions with its neighbouring countries, Korean Sŏn monasticism still remains closer to the most traditional forms of Buddhist monastic life.

Hagiographical accounts of Zen Buddhism prevail in classical Zen literatures such as "transmission of lamp anthologies" (Ch. *ch'uan-teng lu*) or "eminent monks' anthologies" (Ch. *kao-seng chuan*) and other similar works. Legendary accretions to the biographies added to the prestige of the Zen Masters but were lacking in historical accuracy. The result has been often misrepresentation or exaggeration of one-sided characteristics of Zen Buddhism in describing its illogical absurdity, intuitive spontaneity and all antinomical views of Zen Buddhism.

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Zen (Kor. *Sŏn*) Buddhism in Korea offers a valuable alternative to the usual Western portrayals of Zen Buddhism. Korean Sŏn Buddhism preserved a scholastic tradition (*Kyo*) combined with the meditation (*Sŏn*) practice in the same tradition. This combination provides in many respects the most ecumenical tradition throughout Asia. This alternative paradigm of Korean Buddhism offers its uniqueness in the history of Buddhism. Its alternative vision yields quite a different picture of the reality of Zen Buddhism from that to which many in the “West” have become accustomed.

### 1. Uniqueness of Chinul's Life and Thought

Pojo Chinul (1158-1210 C.E.) was a great reformer in medieval Korean Buddhism, and is considered the actual founder of the Chogye Order<sup>1</sup>, which is the largest and exclusively dominant Buddhist sect in Korea. Chinul's reform marks a turning point in the history of Korean Buddhism, and his writings have since become the standard frame for Son monastic life.

Chinul was born amidst political turmoil and the decline of Buddhism. Buddhist monasticism in the middle ages in Korea had become extremely wealthy and lax in discipline. Chinul was distressed by the vices of the nominally Buddhist monks and nuns and as a result, left the city to retire to a secluded place and established the religious reformed society movement, called *chŏnghye kyŏlsa* (*samādhi* and *prajñā* society) in 1190 C.E.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> “Chogye” is the Korean pronunciation of Chinese “Ts'ao-ch'i” which derived from the name of the mountain of the monastery where the sixth patriarch of Chinese Ch'an, Hui-neng, resided.

<sup>2</sup> This type of movement, which Chinul established, was not alone or the first in the Buddhist history. Chinul could be inspired by an original idea from the Amitābha society movement of Hui-yūan (334-416) in China. This society movement was also established in other Scholastic Schools (*Kyochong*) listed in fourteen different places throughout Korea in Koryŏ period. See Han Ki-du, “Koryŏ Pulgyo ui Kyŏlsa Undong”, in *Sungsan Pak Kil-chin Paksa hwagap Kinyŏm: Han'guk Pulgyo Sasangsa* (Presented in Commemoration of the Sixtieth Birthday of Dr. Sungsan Pak Kil-chin: History of Korean Buddhist Thought), Sungsan Pak Kil-chin Paksa Hwagap Kinyŏm Saŏphoe, ed. (Iri: Won Pulgyo Sasang Yonkuwon, 1975), pp. 551-583; Chŏng Ui-haeng, *Han'guk Pulgyo Tongsa* (Through

movement arose and sought afresh to embody the monastic ideal of a pure, uncompromising monastic life. The movement challenged the decadence of contemporary Buddhism as a gross distortion of the purity of the monastic spirit and the pursuit of intensive practice and to lead a pure religious life through renunciation of all secular affairs. His austerities soon brought fame: many who were seeking to follow the perfect monastic life came to him. His religious role and movement can be compared with the reformers of the medieval era in the Christian Church history of Europe.

Chinul was an ordained monk who formally belonged to the Sagul-san Sŏn school whose lineage traced back to the Southern school line in China. His monastic training was quite an exceptional type in Sŏn tradition — neither had it any close formal master-disciple relationships, nor was his enlightenment recognized by other Sŏn masters. He had a series of three awakening experiences in his life but scriptural reading was his only guidance, and all of his enlightenment experiences were rather confirmed by the readings of scriptures. His first initial awakening experience happened while he was reading the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* as follows:

By chance one day in the study hall as he was looking through the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, he came across a passage which said, “The self-nature of suchness gives rise to thoughts. But even though the six sense-faculties see, hear, sense, and know, it is not tainted by the myriads of images. The true nature is constantly free and self-reliant.” Astonished, he was overjoyed at gaining what he had never experience before and, getting up, he walked around the hall, reflecting on the passage while continuing to recite it. His heart was satisfied. From that time on, his mind was averse to fame and profit; he desired only to dwell in seclusion in the mountain ravines. Bearing hardship joyfully, he aspired to the path; he was obsessed with this quest.<sup>3</sup>

History of Korean Buddhism) (Seoul: Hanmadang, 1991), pp. 234-238; *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul*, trans. with an introduction by Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> See *Pojo kuksa Pimyŏng* (Memorial Stele of National Master Pojo), p. 338, 1-3. For the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liu-tsu t'an ching*) quotation see, p. 353b, 4-5; quoted in Korean Approach, p. 23.

The second awakening also happened through the reading of Li T'ung-hsuan's (635-730 C.E.) exposition of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and the third was through the *Records of Ta-hui*.<sup>4</sup> These awakening experiences show clearly that enlightenment is not a sudden once-for-all process, but rather a gradual process, and at the same time relies not only on meditation. His personal experience demonstrated why he ardently supported harmonizing the two antagonistic branches between the meditative practices of *Sōn* school and the scriptural studies of *Kyo* school.

Chinul was deeply influenced by Kuei-feng Tsung-mi's (780-841 C.E.) "sudden awakening and gradual cultivation" theory.<sup>5</sup> He believed that sudden awakenings represented only the initial force, but not complete enlightenment, because of the awakening's long-inherited karmic habits. Sudden enlightenment is not sudden but takes a long time of struggle to lead to a sudden awakening. His theory seems parallel with Tsung-mi's "sudden awakening as a perfect bridge between the practices of Ch'an and the scholastic schools."<sup>6</sup> Here, the path of enlightenment is an ongoing process for him. This initial awakening experience gives firm confidence to one's own nature, but must be followed by a continual "cultivation [which] allows his initial understanding to infuse gradually all of his being until that absolute Buddha-wisdom and the relative positive qualities of Buddhahood have become an inexorable part of his patterns of thought and behavior."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Pjokuksa Chōnsō* (A Compendium of Pojo kuksa), translated and annotated by Kim Talchin (Seoul: Koryowŏn, 1987), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Chinul's view of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation was ironically rebuked by Sōngchōl, late Patriarch of Chogye Order (1980-1993). Sōngchōl claimed that sudden enlightenment is once-for-all, and not a gradual achievement. He criticized Chinul as a follower of the Northern school, not a legitimate heir of the Chogye school which claims to descend from Southern school. See Sōngchōl, *Sōnumn Chōngro* (Right Path of Sōn School), 3rd ed., (Seoul: Changkyongkak, 1990), pp. 3-4 & 158-18; Shim Jaeryong, *Tongyang ui Chihae wa Sōn* (Sōn and Wisdom of Orient) (Seoul: Saekyesa, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *The Korean Approach to Zen*, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

At this time, denominational debate created a bitter conflict between the two extremes of scholastic and meditative schools. The *Sōn* schools emphasized meditation only, and abandoned scriptural studies. The scholastic schools were in contrast to this. There were initial attempts of synthetic approach by Ŭich'ōn (1055-1101 C.E.)<sup>8</sup> in order to establish mutual coexistence within the *samgha*. However, sectarian disputes escalated and exclusivism was polarized in each sect. Chinul found his ecumenical theory through reading Li T'ung-hsuan's (635-730 C.E.) exposition of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and Chinul's synthetic approach to Huayen/Sōn is not antagonistic but rather complementary. Chinul puts it in this way:

Thereupon I set aside the volume and, breathing a long sigh, said, "What the World Honored One said with his mouth are the teachings. What the patriarchs transmitted with their minds is Sōn. The mouth of the Buddha and the minds of the patriarchs can certainly not be contradictory. How can [students of both Sōn and the scholastic schools] not plumb the fundamental source but instead, complacent in their own training, wrongly ferment disputes and waste their time?"<sup>9</sup>

For him, the mind and the word of Buddha cannot be separable and so *Sōn* and *Kyo* is not two. He provided here the theoretical ground of his ecumenical approach toward sectarian disputes. Chinul

<sup>8</sup> Ŭich'ōn was a monk, born in a Royal family, the son of King Munjong, attempted to unify the various Buddhist schools by establishing the *Ch'ōnt'ae* (Chinese, *Tien-t'ai*) School. However, he had a bias opinion towards meditative schools and died at the early age of 46. His attempt backed by state ended with the creation of one more school and these ecumenical movements had to wait to bear fruit through Chinul, one century later. See Shim Chaeyōl, "Taekak Kuksa" (National Master of Taekak), in *Hanguk Pulgyo Inmul Sasangsa* (History of Korean Buddhist Thinker's Thought), Pulgyo Sinmunsa ed. (Seoul: Minchoksa, 1990), pp. 166-174.

<sup>9</sup> Chinul quoted here Tsung-mi's word in his *Preface to the Complete Explanations on the Fountainhead of Ch'an Collection* [*Ch'an-yūan chu-ch'ūan chi tou-hsü*], p. 400b. 10-11: "The sutras are the Buddha's words. Sōn is the Buddha's mind"; quoted in *Korean Approach*, pp. 25 & 84.

condemned both of these extreme views which created tensions between Buddhist communities.

Chinul saw that most people required initially the help of scriptural instruction but they should not remain in its conceptual analysis: "once he understands the path of practice, he should abandon all relative descriptions of dharma and enter upon the living road of Son practice: the way of *hwadu*<sup>10</sup> investigation."<sup>11</sup> Chinul provided the harmonious coexistence of scriptural studies and meditative practices within a single institution, and also established the basic outlook for future Korean Buddhism. This achievement was rarely paralleled, even in Chinese Buddhism. Chinul's writings have become the norm of basic monastic training, which even contemporary monasteries in Korea still use today.

## 2. Observation on Monastic Training at Songgwang-sa Monastery

The actual founding of Songgwang-sa was accomplished by National Master Pojo Chinul. He selected this monastery as the ideal place to set up his reformed community. Because of the monastery's strict observance of religious practice, Songgwang-sa has been traditionally regarded as a temple which is representative of the *samgha-jewel* (*sŭngbo sachal*). It is one of the oldest, most traditional forms of Son Buddhist monasticism existing today in Korea.

My interest is in analyzing and comparing different aspects of the Zen monastic patterns of life and institution. I believe my direct observation of the above monastic institution can offer important insights to this particular phenomenon. The information derived from what I observed and learned during 72 days at Songgwang-sa in 1993 and 1994.

<sup>10</sup> *Hwadu* (Chinese, *Hwa-t'ou*), literally means «head (topic) of speech», in given as a problematic topic from master to disciple forcing an intuitive breakthrough, and not by intellectual analysis.

<sup>11</sup> See English translation of Chinul's *Pŏpchip pyŏhaeng nok chŏryo kwamok pyŏngip sagi* (Excerpts from the Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record with Personal Notes), quoted in *Korean Approach*, pp. 55 & 322.

My approach was that of observer-as-participant, whereby I was accepted by most as a researcher in the monastery, and the traditional spirit of hospitality in the monasteries helps to dispense with many of the formalities of a guest's relationship. I have been able to observe this monastery in most aspects of its monastic daily routine, and in varying degree of participation. As observer-as-participant, I was attempting as much as possible to be empathetic and understanding without prejudging monastic values, beliefs, and ideals through a continuation of connections and personal observation.

Zen Buddhism was born from the critique of all speculative philosophy and formalism in China. Lin-chi (Kor. Imjae) Zen Buddhism is especially culminated in the anti-textual stance. It emphasizes meditative practices almost exclusively as the sole means to enlightenment. The essence of Zen can be summed up following four rules:

1. point straight to the human mind;
2. attain Buddha state through insight into your own nature;
3. do not cling to scriptural writings;
4. follow a particular tradition outside traditional teachings.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, in the world of Zen monks, academic learning is not significant, and experience is regarded as the primary measure of a monk's rank. Although Korean Sŏn Buddhism shares the same lineage of the Linchi School (there is no Soto school in Korea), Sŏn Buddhism in Korea differs in certain respects from the Zen traditions in China or Japan. The Songgwang-sa monastery consists of a lecture hall (*kangwon*), for scriptural studies at least three to four years prior to entering the meditation hall (*Sŏnwon*). The two different divisions structurally coexisted in all major monasteries in Korea.

The motto of Sŏn monasteries is often "do not read". But this motto is intended only for the time when monks are in meditation, and emphasizes the risk of slavery to literal concept or letter.

<sup>12</sup> Shim Jae-ryong, p. 18; Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, edited and with an introduction by Bernard Philips (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1962), p. 106.

Korean Sŏn Buddhism traditionally treats scriptural studies as a guiding map or theoretical aid toward enlightenment but not as a goal in itself. So, scriptural study is the preparatory stage to enter meditation practice. All daily monastic moves and scriptural studies are nothing but means (Skt. *upāya*) which finally lead to inner awakening. Sŏn monks often show a profound interest in the scriptures and study diligently except during retreat sessions. Songgwang-sa also has well-organized collections of classical and modern books in its library. Sŏngchŏl, the late patriarch of Chogye Order, a staunch supporter of the Linchi line, was a brilliant commentator of sūtras and had equipped his residence with several thousand. Although the radical approach of Linchi line prevailed in the Chogye Order, a thousand-year-old Buddhist Sŏn centered federation, adaptation of scholastic traditions was never totally rejected in their monastic training in Korean Sŏn Buddhism.

### 3. Summary

At its inception in Korea, Buddhism provided a national ideology of unification, and developed the idea of "State Protection Buddhism" (*Hoguk Pulgyo*) which has used the role of Buddhism as a political tool.<sup>13</sup> Later, this became one of the main features of Korean Buddhism. Especially during the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910 C.E.), Buddhism was suppressed by the government, which adopted Confucianism as its political ideology. Under this regime, anti-Buddhist policy lasted 500 years. Under the pressures of State, all disputed sectarianism was forced to blend together, or to coexist, through compromise to survive which ended up producing a unique system of Korean Buddhist beliefs and practices. So, the ecumenical trend of Buddhism (*Tong Pulgyo*) throughout Korean history initiated from Wonhyo (617-686 C.E.), through Uich'ŏn and completed with Chinul.

I epitomized here briefly and focused on the paradoxical nature of scriptural study in Korean Sŏn Buddhism. According to the traditional account of radical Linchi tradition, Chinul is seen quite heretical in many ways: from his awakening experiences through readings of sutras, to his synthetic combination of the theoretical

<sup>13</sup> Yi Ki yŏng, *Hanguk Pulgyo Yŏnku* (Study of Korean Buddhism) (Seoul: Hanguk Pulygyo Yŏnkuwon, 1987), p. 163.

and practical stances toward enlightenment. He noted that "although both sects [Sŏn and doctrine] employ these two faculties, they stress them differently. Hence neither of them can be criticized."<sup>14</sup> He successfully combined the two antagonistic branches between *Sŏn* and *Kyo* into a holistic system. Theoretically, Chinul was deeply influenced by Tsung-mi's idea but Tsung-mi's approach remained more or less in a theoretical level and never gained any followers in China under the domination of the Southern School of Ch'an. Practically, Chinul developed further this theory by establishing a reformed society movement, and provided a balanced cultivation of theoretical aids with meditative practices. Using his creativity, he incorporated diverse instrumental techniques and provided practical guidance depending on people's abilities. Though the opponents criticized him, his approach to Sŏn became the standard for Korean Buddhism, and Songgwang-sa, which he set up as his reformed community, has continued to be the leading Sŏn monastery in Korea and still maintains their traditional methods of training monks. So, this balanced syncretical combination of the Korean Sŏn paradigm shows clearly its, as Bernard Faure noted, "paradoxes of an anti-textual textual tradition."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Chinul's *Pŏpchip pyŏhaeng nok chŏryo kwamok pyŏngip sagi* (Excerpts from the Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record with Personal Notes) in *Korean Approach*, p. 322.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 18.

## SOMMAIRE

**LE BOUDDHISME SON/ZEN CORÉEN:  
PARADOXES D'UNE TRADITION  
LITTÉRAIRE ANTI-INTELLECTUELLE**

Le bouddhisme zen (*ch'an* en chinois) est né en réaction au formalisme et à la spéculation philosophique qui caractérisaient le bouddhisme d'alors en Chine. Le bouddhisme zen se distingue sur plusieurs points de la plupart des autres sectes bouddhiques de l'école *mahayana*. On peut résumer l'essentiel de sa pensée en suivant quatre règles:

1. aller directement à l'esprit de l'homme;
2. parvenir à l'état de Bouddha à travers l'intuition de sa propre nature;
3. ne pas s'attacher aux textes scripturaires;
4. suivre une tradition particulière qui se situe en dehors des enseignements classiques.<sup>1</sup>

Le bouddhisme zen *lin-chi* (*imjae* en coréen) a fini par développer une position particulièrement anti-intellectuelle. Il insiste presque exclusivement sur les pratiques de méditation en tant que seul moyen d'atteindre l'illumination. Il en est résulté une déformation ou une exagération unilatérale de l'un des traits distinctifs du bouddhisme zen, soit son absurdité pleine d'illogisme, sa spontanéité de nature intuitive et ses points de vue contradictoires.

Bien que le bouddhisme zen coréen (*son*, en coréen) provienne de la même origine que l'école *linchi*, il diffère à plusieurs égards des traditions zen de Chine et du Japon. Il offre ainsi une alternative de grande valeur aux représentations habituelles du bouddhisme zen qui ont cours en Occident. Le bouddhisme zen

<sup>1</sup> Jae-ryong Shim, «Characteristics and Context of Korean Zen Buddhism», *Dongyang eui Jihae wa Son (La sagesse et le Zen de l'Orient)*, Séoul: Saegye-sa, 1990, p. 18. Voir D. T. Suzuki, *The Essentials*, p. 106. Claude Geffré, «The Discovery of the Special Nature of Buddha», *Buddhism and Christianity*, New York, Seabury Press, 1979, p. 34.

coréen a conservé une tradition scolastique florissante jointe au sein du même ordre monastique à une pratique zen intensive. La tradition bouddhique coréenne a combiné l'école monastique (*kyo*) avec l'école contemplative (*son*) au sein de ce qui a constitué sous plusieurs aspects la tradition la plus oecuménique d'Asie. La combinaison des écoles scolastique et contemplative est très importante pour le Zen coréen et met en valeur son caractère unique.

Pojo Chinul (1158-1210 ap. J.-C.) fut l'un des plus grands penseurs bouddhistes de Corée. Il a fait une synthèse de la combinaison des positions théoriques et pratiques concernant l'illumination. Le bouddhisme zen coréen a traditionnellement traité l'étude des textes comme s'il s'agissait d'un plan directeur et non d'un but en soi. Il considérait que l'étude des textes constituait l'étape préparatoire à l'entrée dans la pratique zen. Chinul avait compris que la plupart des gens avaient d'abord besoin de l'enseignement donné par les textes scripturaires mais qu'ils ne devaient pas en rester au stade de l'analyse conceptuelle: «une fois qu'il a saisi ce qu'est la voie de la pratique, il devrait mettre de côté toutes les descriptions relatives du *dharma* pour s'engager dans la voie vivante de la pratique *son*: la voie de l'investigation *hwadu*<sup>2,3</sup>»<sup>3</sup> Chinul a ainsi jeté les bases d'une coexistence harmonieuse entre l'étude des textes scripturaires et les pratiques contemplatives, créant également la perspective fondamentale du futur bouddhisme zen coréen. Cette réussite a rarement été égalée, même dans le bouddhisme chinois. Les écrits de Chinul sont devenus la norme en ce qui concerne la formation monastique de base, norme que même les monastères coréens contemporains suivent encore de nos jours. Le bouddhisme zen coréen ne peut donc être qualifié d'anti-intellectuel ou d'anti-littéraire. L'intellectualisation du Zen en tant

<sup>2</sup> Le terme *hwadu* signifie littéralement «tête (thème) du discours». Il est appliqué au thème problématique que le maître donne au disciple pour l'amener ainsi à une compréhension basée sur l'intuition et non pas sur l'analyse intellectuelle.

<sup>3</sup> Voir la traduction anglaise de *Popchip pyohaeng nok choryo kwamok pyongip sagi* de Chinul («Extraits de la Collection sur le *Dharma* et les pratiques particulières accompagnés de notes personnelles»), citée dans *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul*, trad. et introduction de Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 55 et 322.

que tradition témoigne de l'existence paradoxale d'une tradition littéraire anti-littéraire.

J'ai eu l'occasion d'observer la routine quotidienne de la vie monastique au monastère bouddhique zen coréen de Songgwang-sa durant une période de soixante-douze jours, en 1993 et 1994. Ce monastère appartient à l'une des formes les plus anciennes et les plus traditionnelles du monachisme bouddhique *son* existant aujourd'hui en Corée. J'ai pu observer la plupart des aspects de cette routine monastique quotidienne, et j'ai pu y participer à divers degrés. J'ai pu constater que les moines zen coréens démontraient souvent un profond intérêt pour les écritures et qu'ils les étudiaient assidûment, sauf durant les sessions de retraite. Le monastère de Songgwang-sa possède également une riche collection de livres classiques et modernes dans sa bibliothèque. L'ancien patriarche de l'Ordre *chogye*, Songchol, qui était un partisan à toute épreuve de la pensée *linchi*, était également un commentateur brillant de *sutras*, et il avait rassemblé plusieurs milliers de livres chez lui. Malgré le fait que l'approche radicale de la pensée *linchi* ait prévalu au sein de l'ordre *chogye*, une fédération basée sur le bouddhisme zen et vieille de mille ans, le monachisme bouddhique zen de Corée, n'a jamais totalement rejeté, dans le cours de la formation monastique, l'adaptation des traditions scolastiques.

Cette combinaison synthétique et équilibrée propre au paradigme *son* coréen démontre donc clairement qu'il constitue, comme Bernard Faure l'a souligné, «le paradoxe d'une tradition littéraire anti-intellectuelle».<sup>4</sup> Ce paradigme différent que constitue le bouddhisme coréen offre un exemple unique dans l'histoire du bouddhisme. Son point de vue nous donne un portrait de la réalité du bouddhisme zen qui est fort différent de celui auquel sont habitués plusieurs Occidentaux.

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 18.

