A Methodological Reflection on the Subitist/Gradualist Debates Regarding Sŏngch’ŏl’s Sŏn Soteriology

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1

Korean Buddhists have engaged in debates concerning theories of Sŏn (Ch. Ch’an, Jp. Zen) practice and enlightenment for many years. Recently, the doctrinal propriety of the entire Korean Sŏn Buddhist tradition has been put into question by its own supreme patriarch, T’oe’ong Sŏngch’ŏl (1912-1993). Through a series of publications and lectures, Sŏngch’ŏl has presented a radical subitist theory of Sŏn soteriology which contradicts the traditional position of Pojo Chunjul (1158-1210), who has been respected as the systematizer and re-founder of Sŏngch’ŏl’s own sect. While Chunjul advocated the doctrine of ton’o chŏmsu or “sudden enlightenment and gradual practice,” which has become the theoretical framework of Sŏn soteriology in Korean Buddhism, Sŏngch’ŏl claims that this doctrine is heretical and that only the doctrine of ton’o tonsu or “sudden enlightenment and sudden practice” represents authentic Sŏn soteriology. He states: “Enlightenment is achieved all at once, and the whole spiritual development or cultivation also is achieved all at once without any gradual process” (1992, Vol 2, 317-18 and passim).

Besides presenting doctrinal arguments against Chunjul’s gradualist soteriology, Sŏngch’ŏl also tried to prove that Chunjul was not a legitimate “Dharma heir” to the Lin-chi lineage of Sŏn, especially in his book entitled Han’guk Pulgyo-ŭi Pŏnmaek. He thereby meant that Chunjul should not be regarded as the founder of the Chogye

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In response to Sŏngch’ŏl’s claims, a series of debates arose among Buddhist scholars, in both Korea and the United States, and many arguments, both for and against Sŏngch’ŏl’s radical subitism, were presented. More than forty academic and other articles were presented, and three international academic conferences were held regarding the issue of subitist and gradualist approaches of Sŏn soteriology during the period of 1990-1994, when the debates were most heated.

The topic of these debates touches the very core issue of the whole Buddhist tradition, that is, the nature of enlightenment experience and of practice. The debates have provided a rare opportunity for Buddhist scholarship to engage in philosophical discourse on the legacy of the Sŏn doctrine of enlightenment and practice in a contemporary milieu.

However, one of the striking features of these debates is that the arguments presented in them lack a fully shared context in which an effective discourse can take place. A closer examination reveals that each dispute is framed within its own premises, whether spoken or unspoken, thus preventing any real discourse. In particular, apparent discrepancy can be found between the premises of Sŏngch’ŏl’s subitist doctrine and those of the modern Buddhist scholarship regarding Sŏn enlightenment and practice. It seems to me that this explains why Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory has been under-represented in the debates, and the debates, although much heated, so far have been hardly productive.

In what follows, I will make an attempt to identify and assess some presuppositions imposed by scholars on Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory. The purpose of this attempt is to suggest that improper scholarly presuppositions should be removed from the debates, so that the debates can be developed on the basis of a common premise and be more productive in understanding and assessing the legacy of Sŏn Buddhist doctrine regarding enlightenment and practice in the contemporary milieu.

2

As mentioned above, the topic of the subitist/gradualist debates undoubtedly touches the very core issue of the whole Korean Buddhist tradition. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. notes:

Sŏngch’ŏl’s criticism of Chinul should not be dismissed as trivial monkish quibbling. His critique in fact goes to the very heart of what it means to be a Korean Buddhist, since so much of that definition has traditionally been tied to the distinctive
contributions made by Chinul to Korean Buddhist thought and practice. Hence, we would do well to consider carefully whether Chinul’s views are as “diametrically opposed to the orthodox road of Sŏn”—that is, to the Lin-chi school as Sŏngch’ŏl would make them out to be (1990, 437-38)

Nevertheless, for many years after the first publication of Sŏnmun chŏngno, Korean Buddhist scholarship kept almost complete silence regarding it. It seems that the gravity of Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory, as well as the tendency among many Buddhist scholars to view it as “trivial monkish quibbling,” may have contributed to this silence. Some Buddhist scholars and monks have occasionally expressed their displeasure with Sŏngch’ŏl’s charge against Chinul. Yet their opinions were only expressed in the form of fragmentary comments, rather than thorough analyses. For example, Yi Chong-ik states.

Recently, a Sŏn monk [Sŏngch’ŏl] labelled Pojo an “advocate of chihae (intellectual understanding)” His reason was that Pojo taught his disciples with Pŏpchip pyŏrhaeng nok chŏryo (The Excerpts from the Special Edition of the Dharma Collection), and that Ho-tse Shen-hui, the compiler and exegete of Pŏpchip pyŏrhaeng nok, was an “advocate of chihae.” The monk further claimed that followers of Pojo’s teaching should be labelled as “advocates of chihae.”

What is funny and ridiculous here is that the monk has read only a few lines of Pŏpchip pyŏrhaeng nokŏch ryo. He did not even read the whole Chŏryo (The sagi Personal Notes to the Excerpts). Furthermore, he did not read those basic writings of Pojo’s such as Wŏndon sŏngbul ion (The Treatise on the Complete and Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood) or Kanhwŏ kyeŏnt ron (The Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Studying Hwadu). It is tremendously surprising that he is completely ignorant of how the tradition of Korean kanhwŏ Sŏn was originated while he himself has been practicing it (1982, 237).

Yi went on to criticize Sŏngch’ŏl’s claims with such words as “ridiculous speculation,” “crazy thoughts” and “reckless sayings.” This quote actually represents a typical attitude of many Buddhist scholars toward Sŏngch’ŏl’s claims, that is, taking them as mere “monkish quibblings.”

The presupposition underlying this attitude seems to be that Sŏngch’ŏl should have presented his ideas with academic accuracy. Yi wrote the above words pointing out a mistake Sŏngch’ŏl made in Sŏnmun chŏngno. Chinul wrote at the beginning of Pŏpchip pyŏrhaeng nok chŏryo pyŏng ip sa’gi: “Although Ho-tse Shen-hui was an advocate of chihae and thus could not be a legitimate Dharma heir to Ts’ao-ch’i Hui-neng, he had attained a very high level of awakening and understanding and had very clear discernment” (HPC 4, 741a). However, Sŏngch’ŏl
cited only the former half of this sentence when he wrote in the Introduction to Sŏnjun ch'ŏngno: "Chinul himself ... clearly stated that Shen-hui was an advocate of ch'ihae and thus could not be a legitimate Dharma heir to Hui-neng" (1981, 3). Similar mistakes, some of which seem to be made on purpose, can be found at several places in Sŏngch'ŏl's writings.

It is true that Sŏngch'ŏl tried to present his ideas in a kind of academic format, which is an unusual way for a Sŏn monk. However, we must ask this question: is it appropriate to evaluate his writings in terms of academic style? Sŏngch'ŏl is concerned with presenting what he thinks is the authentic Sŏn doctrine of enlightenment and practice, not with academic accuracy. He merely borrowed a scholarly writing style, which is a more prevalent than religious sermon style in today's secular society, to articulate his Sŏn soteriology. Therefore, his writings should be taken as religious messages, not as scholarly presentations. Sŏngch'ŏl wants to be faithful to what he regards as the orthodox Sŏn tradition, which has discontented intellectual knowledge while scholars have taken such knowledge as most valuable. Hence, Yi's criticism, "Sŏngch'ŏl's textual knowledge is doubtful" (1982, 237), cannot be truly effective. It just shows that he has imposed standards of scholarly writing on Sŏngch'ŏl's religious writings.

We do not expect an accurate format of modern academic writing when we read Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Confucius, Lao-tsu, Wŏnhyo, Chinul, Shen-hui, or Tsung-mi. We just attempt to interpret, analyze and understand their truth claims. Then why do many Buddhist scholars, including Yi, expect it in Sŏngch'ŏl's writings? Here we see an a priori presupposition that they unduly have. Scholarly truth claims regarding Buddhism, presented in appropriate academic writing style, are more authentic than contemporary Buddhist monks' truth claims regarding their own religious tradition. Then we must ask this critical question: Which is the task of modern Buddhist scholarship, to "study" a Buddhist religious tradition or to "create" one?

3

Sŏngch'ŏl's subitism has not yet been accurately represented or scrutinized. This is true not only with regard to Sŏngch'ŏl's theory, but also with regard to the subitist doctrine of Buddhist enlightenment and practice in general. Both subitist and gradualist theories have played a major role in the formation of East Asian Buddhist doctrine, however, most analytical presentations of East Asian Buddhist doctrine have focused on the gradualist position.
One factor that may have contributed to this bias of scholarship is the distinctive nature of these two theories. The relatively logical and clearly explicative concepts of gradualist theories lend themselves more readily to modern scholarship. In contrast, subtitst theories do not rely upon logical concepts but instead focus on first-hand experience, which is not, in many ways, suitable to the methods of modern scholarship.

Another factor that seems to be at work is the ideology of t'ong bulgyo, or “all-including and penetrative Buddhism,” that has characterized Korean Buddhism throughout its history. It has been represented by the idea of Sŏn gyo ich’i, or “the convergence of Sŏn and scholastic Buddhism,” since Chnul systematized it. It has been regarded as a virtue of Korean Buddhism, and most Korean Buddhist scholars simply accept t'ong bulgyo or Sŏn gyo ich’i ideology and refute any ideology which may seem to undermine it.\(^1\)

One of the influences of t'ong bulgyo ideology on Korean Buddhism is the avoidance of sectarian disputes by devotees. An inclusive attitude and attempts to harmonize differences are esteemed as virtuous qualities, natural for those who have attained a comprehensive insight into truth. On the other hand, an exclusive attitude and sectarian disputes have traditionally been regarded as signs of spiritual immaturity.

In presenting his theory, Sŏngch’ŏl uses many sectarian arguments that are not welcome in such an atmosphere. The essential premise of Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory is that aspects of kyo, especially chihae, should not be allowed into Sŏn, and that the most prominent feature of kyo is gradualism. Sŏngch’ŏl’s starting point is not t'ong bulgyo ideology but the differences between Sŏn and kyo that have served as the grounding principles of Sŏn’s sectarian identity since its very inception. His concerns are different from those found in t'ong bulgyo or Sŏn gyo ich’i ideology. Hence, it is futile to approach his doctrine with the same concerns that produced t'ong bulgyo or Sŏn gyo ich’i ideology. In order to have a meaningful discourse on the subject, it is necessary to formulate arguments in a shared context. Finding a shared context requires understanding of an opponent’s milieu.

As mentioned above, one of the striking features of the particular series of debates under consideration is that the arguments presented in them lack a fully shared context in which an effective discourse can take place. Each side’s position is framed within its own unspoken premise, and therefore, many terms used in these

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1 Shim Jae-Ryong points out that Ch’oe Nam-sŏn (1890-1957) was the first to characterize Korean Buddhism as a whole as t'ong bulgyo, thus initializing ideological usage of the term (1992)
debates have different meanings according to the speaker’s own contextual framework. It seems then that the sudden/gradual problem may actually lie in reaching a consensus on the meanings and usage of these key terms. Many factors have contributed to this lack of consensus, such as the divorce of the scholarly and religious vocations that were once unified in the tradition.

A crucial factor in the lack of a shared context is the lack of a common notion of exactly what “ultimate enlightenment” is. The backbone of the Buddhist tradition is the faith in the possibility of valid spiritual development and ultimate awakening. However, modern scholarship avoids this issue. Modern scholarship relies on “intellectual understanding” and emphasizes logical cohesiveness and transparency, while the Sŏn tradition has mocked these things as all about mere chithae. As was pointed out above and will be discussed more in the next section, this emphasis predisposes modern scholarship, in regard to the sudden/gradual dispute, to be biased toward gradualism. The significance of Sŏngch’ŏl’s work is that presents textual evidence, or what he thinks is a textual evidence of the validity of the subitist position in the East Asian Buddhist tradition. It is not a new theory, but a representation of old theories. One of the main streams of thought in the Sŏn Buddhist tradition, especially beginning with Ma-tsu Tao-i’s Hung-chou school and continuing through the Lin-chi line, has been the doctrine of “sudden enlightenment and sudden practice,” although its content might be understood differently according to particular advocates. Sŏngch’ŏl’s work forces Sŏn Buddhist scholars to re-examine their current position. It forces them to consider that their position may not necessarily be the result of valid study, but may stem from the very nature and premises of modern scholarship itself.

Although modern Buddhist scholarship often claims that its identity and tasks are formulated in a completely different way from those of traditional Buddhist scholarship, many scholars involved in the sudden/gradual debate are equipped with traditional premises, mostly the gradualist ones. In Sŏn Buddhist tradition scholarship has been located on the side of gradualism and thus on the “margin” against the subitist orthodoxy at the center. Therefore, modern scholarship involved in the sudden/gradual debates appears to oscillate between its traditional gradualist position in Sŏn Buddhism and its modern self-ordained role as an independent agent of new truth claims.

Seen from this perspective, the real issue in this series of sudden/gradual debates is the contrast between the “subitist” orthodoxy represented by Sŏngch’ŏl and the ethos of modern Buddhist scholarship, rather than the confrontation of Sŏngch’ŏl’s doctrine with Chinul’s, which most scholars think is the core issue of the debates.
This awareness prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between modern Sōn Buddhist scholarship and Sōn Buddhist tradition. A discrepancy is revealed between academia's self-given definition of its own relationship with tradition and its actual relationship with tradition as revealed through what it actually does. Modern Buddhist scholarship considers itself a sovereign territory of truth claims independent of tradition. However, what it does, especially in regard to the sudden/gradual issue, puts that perception in doubt. In the West, the questions generated by the conflict between religious tradition and modern religious scholarship have been discussed extensively since the latter was established in the nineteenth century. However, the problematic relationship between the Buddhist tradition and modern Buddhist scholarship has not been seriously discussed. What is the question is whether modern Buddhist scholarship, as it implicitly asserts, would be able to articulate truth claims superior to those of its tradition, or stop at establishing its own alternative world of truth grounded in its own premises, which have nothing to do with Sōn Buddhist concerns, while claiming groundlessly to address those same concerns in a better way.

Although sudden/gradual theories seem to be logically and practically incompatible with each other, they have both secured their place in the East Asian Buddhist tradition. To better understand this tradition, we should examine exactly how this is possible. Bernard Faure's explanation in terms of the concepts core and margins is helpful for an understanding of the overall picture regarding the coexistence and interaction of subtivism and gradualism in Sōn Buddhism:

With the development of the sudden orthodoxy toward the eighth century, the main tendency that was thereby marginalized was the notion of mediation and the various intermediary schemas that derive from it. The elements suppressed or repressed at the core, however, either reappeared at the periphery as the others on the margins of Chan (i.e., popular religion, scholasticism, ritualism, gradualism), or they reinvested and subverted the tradition from inside (1991, 7).

Seen from this perspective, what matters in a study of the sudden/gradual controversy is not so much the issue of which doctrine is right or wrong, but the interactive relation between the core and the margin. There is no core without margins and no margins without core. Therefore, to see the sudden/gradual issue in terms of the interactive relationship between the two contrasting theories is to grant
both of them legitimate places within the doctrinal context of Sŏn Buddhism. In other words, it is to see the interaction between “sudden” and “gradual” theories as constituting and characterizing the doctrinal matrix or “structure” of Sŏn Buddhism as a whole.

Another issue that is clarified through this perspective is the “location” of scholarly activities in Sŏn Buddhist tradition. Insofar as subitism occupies the core or center in the context of Sŏn Buddhist tradition, intellectual activity including scholarship, categorized as an aspect of scholastic Buddhism, has been marginalized. This is because scholarship shares a common ground with gradualism, that is, the notion of “mediation.”

“Mediation” is crucial to intellectual activity. This explains why Buddhist scholarship, whether traditional or modern, has leaned toward the gradualist view. However, from the standpoint of its “core,” Sŏn Buddhism has denied validity to such crucial aspects of intellectual activity as language and reasoning, because they are aspects of sentient beingness and thus hinder truth. Instead, Sŏn has insisted that direct and immediate intuition of the truth is the only authentic enlightenment. Such an intuition of the truth requires the complete removal of all that covers the truth, including intellectual activity. Therefore, “mediation” is not a mere casual “hindrance,” but the very problem responsible for sentient beings’ failure to see the truth, the cause of misleading and distract illusions.

The point made above explains why scholarly concerns have been marginalized, if not practically then at least ideologically, in the Sŏn Buddhist tradition. It also explains why the subitist position has been under-represented in the theoretical articulation of Sŏn Buddhist doctrines regarding enlightenment and practice. Scholarly concerns, together with gradualism, belong to the area of “mediation” on the “margin” of Sŏn Buddhist tradition.

However, the elements suppressed or repressed at the “core,” including scholasticism and gradualism, always reappear in the margins of the “subitist” orthodoxy in some way, while the “core” has significance only in contrast to the “margins.” The same is true with the “margins”: Gradualism and scholarship can assume a significant locus in Sŏn Buddhist tradition only through their antithetical relationship with the “subitist” orthodoxy at the “core” of that tradition.

A comprehensive understanding of the whole doctrinal matrix of Sŏn Buddhism regarding enlightenment and practice cannot be achieved from the standpoint of either “core” or “margin.” What is required for an understanding of why the sudden/gradual issue has been a recurring theme in Sŏn Buddhist history is to see the two opposing positions in terms of their relationship with each other. In order to
understand the relationship of these opposing positions one has to identify the borderline drawn between them as well as the supposedly different contexts in which they are articulated.

This may sound like the deconstructionist concepts of reading *in-between* or *différence*; however, what should be done first in this particular instance of subitist/gradualist debate is thorough and appropriate *re*-construction, rather than *de*-construction, of Sŏn soteriology. Only then will it be possible to revalorize the sudden/gradual paradigm by explaining how it has effectively addressed the soteriological concerns of Sŏn Buddhism. This task should be coupled with a reconsideration of the role of modern Buddhist scholarship, seeking to revalorize Buddhist scholarship, both traditional and modern, through a rediscovery of their appropriate places in the functioning of Sŏn Buddhist doctrine in modern society.

5

The issues discussed in the sudden/gradual debate under consideration can be classified into three distinct, though closely related, groups: (1) Historical issues that revolve around Sŏngch’ŏl’s sectarian arguments regarding Sŏn “orthodoxy” and his repudiation of any legitimate status for gradualists in Sŏn Buddhism, especially with regard to his denial of Chinul’s status as the “re-founder” of the Chogye order; (2) praxeological issues regarding applicability or “utility” of suggested theories for actual practice, as well as regarding the method of practice; and (3) doctrinal issues regarding the meanings of such crucial soteriological concepts as enlightenment, ignorance, practice, and so forth.

Since Sŏngch’ŏl first made his historical claims regarding the issues of the “orthodoxy/heterodoxy” of Sŏn and the legitimacy of Chinul’s legacy, virtually no historic evidence has been presented to support these claims. Most scholars who have supported Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory have simply kept silent on this issue. As recent studies of the history of Sŏn Buddhism have made clear, traditional accounts of the “legitimate lineage of the authentic transmission of Dharma” were not always based on historical facts, but were usually fabricated; thus, extensive work will be required in order to address Sŏngch’ŏl’s claims effectively, including an analysis of the validity of the textual evidence Sŏngch’ŏl has presented to support his claims in his Han’guk pulgyo ŏi pomnaek, or The Dharma Lineage of Korean Buddhism. Although it seems obvious that Sŏngch’ŏl’s historical evidence has many defects and that his “orthodoxy” claims are out of date, the proof that his claims regarding historical issues are inaccurate will not be complete without proving the invalidity
of Sŏngch'ŏl's textual evidence, or presenting decisive counter evidence, or both.

Modern Buddhist scholarship is obviously in an advantageous position, compared with traditional scholarship, in reconstructing "historical facts." Needless to say, this is not due to a difference in quality of scholarship, but due to a difference in concerns in modern scholarship, a "historical fact" is given the utmost authority and value. However, in religious concerns, the authority of a "historical fact" is subservient to that of soteriological concerns. To approach a religious claim regarding "orthodoxy" only from a concern with a "historical fact" cannot reveal its full meaning.

From the standpoint of modern scholarship, other important questions regarding the denunciation of "orthodoxy" claims are: (1) What are the denunciations exactly based on; and (2) exactly how far should they go? Although political, economic and social factors play a major role in the formation of "orthodoxy/heterodoxy" claims, another essential factor in their development is the absolute truth claim of a religion. Virtually all religions, especially historic religions, claim to have exclusive knowledge of some absolute or universal truth. They build "myths of separation" to reinforce their exclusivity. The "orthodoxy" claims within a religion are based on the same principle.

If, according to the principle of objectivity, modern secular scholarship is to avoid involvement with the absolute truth claims of the religions it studies, then, to the extent that they entail absolute truth claims, modern secular scholarship would also have to avoid involvement in orthodoxy/heterodoxy claims, except in relation to the political, economic and social factors. However, it is the truth claims of a religion, along with the political, economic and social factors, which shape the religion and the people who practice it. Hence, the investigations this type of modern scholarship carry out regarding religious "orthodoxy/heterodoxy" claims have very limited relevance to the significance of those claims.

On the other hand, if a scholar is denouncing a religious "orthodoxy" claim on the basis of historic truths, then it should be asked: Is the ground of that denunciation absolutely justifiable? If the answer is positive, then the scholar is executing what he believes to be absolute historic truth claims when he denounces the religious "orthodoxy" claims, and he will then have to answer another question: What is the essential difference in nature between the absolute historic truth claim and the religious truth claim being denounced?

These issues can be traced to a problem involving the relationship between two different human functions, which scholarship and religion represent, namely, "reason and faith" respectively. The nature of their relationship has been the subject
of much debate, especially since the study of religions was institutionalized by modern secular scholarship during the last century. Presumably, reason prevails in secular scholarship, though perhaps not justifiably so with regard to religious studies. This point seems particularly relevant with regard to the sudden/gradual debate under consideration, because scholars continue to engage in discussions for or against certain religious truth claims, but they do not engage in discussions simply about them.

The same problem affects the second issue of the sudden/gradual debate under consideration, namely, the range of applicability, or the “utility” of suggested theories of practice.2 “Utility” has always been an important matter of concern in Buddhist didactics: for example, the use of such concepts as tae’gi p’angg’yŏn sol, or “teachings in skill-in-means according to the level of audience or opportunity.” However, it should be taken into consideration whether or not a scholar’s concern for “utility” is the same as the concern of traditional Buddhist didactics. It is worth noting that in Buddhist didactics “utility” is not a primary concern, but only a secondary concern. In Buddhism, as well as in other religions, when “utility” and “principle” conflict with each other, “principle” is usually emphasized. Furthermore, Sŏn Buddhism is often characterized by its radically iconoclastic attitude toward the meditative pedagogy in skill-in-means. Hence, “utility” is not an “all or nothing” criteria for assessing the validity of a Buddhist theory of practice.

Nevertheless, most scholars who defend gradualist theory commonly raise the issue of “utility” in their critique of Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory. They consider the universal or wide applicability of the Sŏn Buddhist theory of practice and enlightenment to be an important criterion for establishing its validity, even though “utility” is a matter of secondary importance in Sŏn Buddhist tradition, especially in the Lin-chi style of Sŏn that Sŏngch’ŏl advocates. The traditional Sŏn Buddhist idea of the “utility” or “applicability” of soteriological doctrines has been confined to that of the universality of Buddha Nature. Furthermore, although the need for “teachings in skill-in-means according to the level of audience or opportunity” is frequently mentioned, the Sŏn Buddhist tradition has not been interested in developing theories with regard to their technical details. However, modern scholars appear to consider the “utility” or “applicability” of a theory to be of the utmost importance. The ideology underlying this disposition can probably be called a kind of functionalist,

2 Many scholars who have participated in the debate under consideration criticized Sŏngch’ŏl’s substitut theory for its limited applicability or utility For example, see Kim Ho-sŏng (1992), 221-22, Shim Jae-ryong (1990), 498, and Robert E. Buswell (1988), 70; Buswell (1990), 446, 447
pragmatist, or democratist one. Modern scholarship may cherish it under the Zeitgeist of modern society, however, it is inappropriate for modern scholarship to impose an ideology of its own on a traditional Sŏn Buddhist soteriology in order to “judge” its truth or falsity, and/or to “create” a new one.

The sudden/gradual debate may never be completely resolved because of the many different issues within Buddhism that it addresses. Nevertheless, it has revealed that the important concepts in Buddhism, namely, enlightenment, ignorance and cultivation, to name a few, need to be methodologically examined. Although the major concern over Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory originally focused on his sectarian claims regarding Chinul’s legitimacy, Sŏngch’ŏl’s explication of these concepts in his theoretical system has stimulated both scholars and Buddhists alike to make an effort to clarify them.

The productivity of this debate in the third area, that is, the clarification of doctrinal concepts and further enhancement of the understanding of Buddhist soteriology in general, seems to have been considerably marred by a lack of reflection on the methodological issues raised above. One tendency among many of the scholars involved in the debate, as explained so far, is that they impose their own premises on these concepts. Such an imposition is in the long-run unavoidable, and is actually what scholarly work is all doing about, since an absolutely “objective description” of religious phenomena is a fiction. Nevertheless, an acknowledgement of and identification of these premises is required for further progress in the debate to take place.

This particular instance of the sudden/gradual debate has the potential to be an extremely significant event in the history of Korean Buddhism, as well as in East Asian Buddhism in general, in the sense that it provides a rare opportunity for Buddhists and scholars to observe the vital interaction between the Sŏn Buddhist tradition and contemporary scholarship in Korea which is one of the few countries in the world where the traditional features of Sŏn Buddhism, such as monastery life, social influence, and so forth, are still largely intact. It seems, though, that the debate and the problems it raises will not be productively dealt with unless they are accompanied by a methodological reflection on Buddhist scholarship.

The methodological reflection on Buddhist scholarship required for the sudden/gradual debate under consideration needs to begin with a clarification of the relationship between scholarship and the Sŏn Buddhist tradition it studies, though
the work of clarifying that relationship is such a huge task that is not only something to begin with, but perhaps something to conclude Sŏn Buddhist studies with also.

Seen from the perspective suggested so far, the sudden/gradual debate under consideration can be seen as a confrontation between Sŏngch’ŏl’s “within” approach, to borrow Winston L. King’s term, and modern scholarship’s approach.3

It is not probable that the different approaches will reach the same conclusion. Subsequently, the question of how to view the relationship between the two different truth claims which are reached by these two different modes of approach should be raised. The fundamental problem with that question is that truth claims regarding such crucial issues as enlightenment and which are made ultimately from the experiential standpoint of “within”, cannot be proven or disproven by an “outside” approach, but only by a first-hand experience of the same dimension.

Nevertheless, there are many religious truth claims that are fully or at least partially subject to the “true/false” judgements of a scholar’s “outside” viewpoints, through such methods as philological studies, historical reconstruction, textual analysis, and logical reasoning. For example, truth claims made from the standpoint of faith regarding historical facts can be justifiably evaluated in terms of “true/false” judgments from an “outside” standpoint. Among Sŏngch’ŏl’s truth claims, those regarding the “legitimate lineages of authentic transmission of truth” also fall into this category. Another truth claims subject to such examinations are the propriety of Sŏngch’ŏl’s interpretation and citation of textual sources. However, it should be kept in mind that the propriety of Sŏngch’ŏl’s way of handling textual sources and the “truth or falsity” of his truth claims regarding Sŏn practice and enlightenment are two different things. They are different because the latter is not solely dependent upon the former in his doctrine.

Furthermore, besides passing “true/false” judgments on Sŏngch’ŏl’s use of textual sources and historical claims, modern Buddhist scholarship may also justifiably assume the task of evaluating the “applicability” and the cultural, political, or social significance of Sŏngch’ŏl’s doctrine. However, it should be kept in mind that the evaluation of these aspects does not affect the “truth or falsity” of Sŏngch’ŏl’s truth claims.

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3. King suggested five possible approaches to religion from within; from semi-within, from semi-without, from without, and from detached-within (1968, 1-8)
Thus far an attempt has been made to identify and assess some presuppositions scholars have employed in the sudden/gradual debate. Those scholars who took the gradualist position and defended Chinul’s gradualist theory against Sŏngch’ŏl’s criticism have commonly criticized Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory for its extremely limited applicability, its elitism and its sectarianism. Although such criticism is justifiable because Sŏngch’ŏl’s theory does, in a sense, actually have such aspects, it does not follow from this that these aspects qualify as criteria for “true/false” judgements on the religious truth claims of the theory, for religious truth claims are not subject to such kinds of true/false judgements. It seems that the underlying motivation for establishing such notions as criteria for the “truthfulness” of religious truth claims are modern secular scholarship’s own pragmatist (or functionalist) and democratist ideologies.

There is another serious problem in the modern secular scholars’ general disposition toward the reality of the enlightenment experience. Denial, or a skeptical attitude toward the reality of final enlightenment and its being the perfect “fruition of Buddhahood” is popular in modern Buddhist scholarship. Many scholars, either explicitly or implicitly, consider “final enlightenment” to be a nominal rhetoric. Some think that truth can be served better by putting in question “the primacy of ‘enlightenment’ as the ultimate concern of Ch’an training.” It is true that Buddhist truth claims include aspects which do not necessarily refer to “enlightenment as the ultimate concern.” Also, the social and ideological issues of various Ch’an doctrines, especially subitist and gradualist theories regarding practice and enlightenment, can be re-examined in a new light when the primacy of enlightenment is set aside. However, even in that case, the scholarly process does not allow making judgements on the “validity” of Sŏn Buddhist truth claims regarding such enlightenment and practice.

Many scholars engaged in the sudden/gradual debate, especially those on the gradualist side, have not confined their tasks to a description of the involved doctrines but passed true/false judgements on them from the standpoint of concerns with yung, such as the scope of applicability or utility. Hereby they have adopted,

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4 For example, see Kim Ho-sŏng (1990, 221-24), where the author suggest that the final enlightenment is a mere nominal concept, not a real experience. Also see Faure (1991, 37) where this quotation is from.
Despite of the self-imposed identity of modern scholarship as a sovereign realm of truth, one of the alternative positions in the traditional construction of the Buddhist doctrinal matrix: the gradualist "margin" against the subitist "core." However, to speak in terms of the t'i-yung construction, a traditional conceptual framework that East Asian religions and philosophies used to employ in articulating their nonduality principle, the difference from the traditional feature of that construction is that the concerns in utility and other yung aspects occupy the "core" in today's society, while concerns in enlightenment and other t'i aspects are exiled to the "margin".

What compounds the problem is that those scholars have done so without the "primacy of 'final enlightenment' as the ultimate concern" of Sŏn training as the basis of their judgements, while this primacy is always of utmost concern in both Sŏngch'ŏl's and Chinul's theories. Instead, they have passed judgement on the basis of their own concepts of "enlightenment," which in many cases deny the reality of "final enlightenment," or on the basis of criteria which do not apply to religious truth claims, such as notions of historical fact and applicability. Pak Sŏng-bae notes:

Many scholars are discussing the theory of "sudden enlightenment and sudden practice" nowadays. However, it seems that many of them simply analyze the writings presenting the subitist theory, without taking into their consideration the premise where the theory is born and practiced out. They rather seem to attempt to take the subitism out of its original locus and force it into the scholars' own premise. A theory becomes nothing but a bunch of lifeless propositions when it is taken out of its own premise (1993, 182-83).

On the other hand, scholars who have defended Sŏngch'ŏl's theory have either simply agreed with it without providing supportive arguments or have applied, in their effort to interpret Sŏngch'ŏl's theory, conceptual tools which are inappropiate for the task because they are borrowed from a Sŏn style (such as Dŏgen's style) which is different from Sŏngch'ŏl's and Chinul's Sŏn style and in which experiential actualization of the "final enlightenment" is not emphasized in Sŏn training.

Scholars who have engaged in the debate have discussed the issues in contexts, cultural, social and ideological contexts that are different from those of Sŏngch'ŏl's and Chinul's. Sŏngch'ŏl and Chinul discuss the issues in the context of religious soteriology, while for most scholars the intellectual appeal and logical coherence of

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5. For application of the t'i-yung construction to the interpretation of Buddhist soteriology and especially to the sudden/gradual issue, see Park Sung-bae (1983, 35-42, 1993, 188-95)

6. For example, see Yi Tong-jun (1992, 309, 318, and 322).
the theory and the empirical transparency of the subject are the primary concern. Many crucial issues involved in the sudden/gradual debate are not subject to a full resolution through scholarly concerns and tasks, especially due to the limited context of modern secular scholarship. Also, many scholars who are engaged in the sudden/gradual debate have pulled the major concepts of Sŏngch'ŏl's and Chinul's Sŏn soteriologies out of their original context and have imposed upon them their own interpretations based on their own concerns and have passed true/false judgments according to criteria which should only be applied to their own ideologies.

Therefore, what is required for further progress in this debate is methodological reflection on the scholarly tasks, namely, what they are doing and how they are doing it. With regard to such methodological reflections, an acknowledgement and clarification of the differences between “scholarly” concerns and “religious” concerns and how this affects the context of issues, terms, concepts, and debate is needed. This would enable scholars to see better where the limits of the task they have set before them lie and to avoid distorted interpretations of the subject of their inquiry. It would also enable scholars to apply their efforts to what is more suitable to the methods of modern scholarship without committing reductionism, that is, without imposing findings from such tasks on the “true/false” judgment of religious truth claims per se.

Yi Hyo-gŏl, in a review of the subitist/gradualist debate under consideration, suggested some tasks to carry out in order to have productive discussion of the issue. All sectarian presuppositions and partisan concerns should be avoided; it should be kept in mind that the purpose of the discussion is not to judge which soteriology is right; the discussion should be always carried out within the premise of the fundamental purpose of Buddhism, that is, enlightenment and practice; the discussion, as much as possible, should be based upon real experience of the Buddhist practice; therefore Sŏn monks should participate in it; and we should aim at creating a Buddhist soteriology suitable to the contemporary milieu through this discussion so that this particular instance of the debate can be utilized as an opportunity for the revitalization of Buddhism (1995, 66-68).

However, we should have answers to some questions in order to decide whether to accept such tasks or not. With what kind of ground and method shall a modern secular Buddhist scholar accept such tasks? And how far is it legitimate and justifiable for a modern secular Buddhist scholar to accept them? More specifically: Is it appropriate for modern scholarship to aim at creating a new religious soteriology for the contemporary milieu? Would it be possible to create one without
any judgment of which soteriology is right? What kind of authority how much and in what kind of ground if any can scholarly opinions have in the process of creating a new religious soteriology? We may approach the sudden/gradual issue either with a religious concern with how to practice and attain enlightenment or with an academic purpose and method. Some may say that both approaches should meet somewhere. However, it should not be overlooked that the two approaches are clearly distinguished from each other both in Sōn Buddhist tradition and in modern academia. Before we accept or deny such tasks as Y1 suggests, we should do a serious methodological reflection on what modern Buddhist scholarship is all about, that is, on exactly what it does and exactly how it does that, or in other words, on the scope, principles, premises, purposes, methods, raison d'être of its activities, and so forth. Jacques Waardenburg stated the reason for the necessity and importance of such a methodological reflection as follows:

There is here a massive problem: that the results of a scholar's work in the field of religion depend not only on his precise scholarly findings and the immediate research problems which have given rise to them but also on his notion of religion and the way in which he has arrived at this notion. And here not only his thought and experience but also the ideas on religion current in his time and environment are important factors in his conceptualization of religion, which is affected equally by the result of his scholarly research.

Now it is our contention that in a scholar's work his methodological statements are of utmost importance for our understanding not only of the concepts he used but also of the perspective from which he worked and the very intentions of his investigations. To put it briefly, we do not understand a scholar's work unless we understand his methodology, and we cannot work in a discipline unless we can practice its methodology. (1973, 4)

Abbreviations and Linguistic Conventions

Ch. Chinese pronunciation

HPC  Han'guk puigyo chōnsŏ 韓國佛教全書

Jp  Japanese pronunciation

T  Taishō shinshō daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經
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**GLOSSARY**

An Hyo-rye 安孝禮

chihae 知解

Chinul See “Pojo Chinul”

Chogye order 曹溪宗

Hui-neng See “Ts’ao-chi Hui-neng.”

Hung-chou 洪州

hwadu 話頭

kahnwa 看話

Ma-tsu Tao-t 藻祖 道一

Lin-chi 臨濟

Pojo Chinul 普照 知訥

Pojo sasang 普照思想

Sŏngch’ŏl See “T’oe’ong Sŏngch’ŏl”

Sŏn 禪

Sŏn gyo ilch’ı 禪教一致

t’ı 體

t’ong bulgyo 通佛教

ton’o tonsu 頓悟頓修

ton’o chŏmsu 頓悟漸修

T’oe’ong Sŏngch’ŏl 退翁 性徹

Ts’ao-chi Hui-neng 智溪 慧能

yung 用