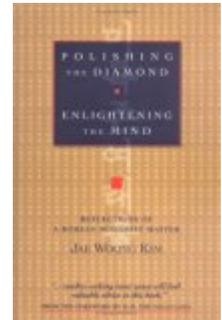


Jae Woong Kim. *Polishing the Diamond, Enlightening the Mind: Reflections of a Korean Buddhist Master.* Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999. 245 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-86171-145-1.



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Based on my prior exposure in Korean Buddhism, when I first picked up *Polishing the Diamond* I expected to see something of the more typical Korean Jogye fare--*gongan* explanations, advice on meditation, maybe some lectures containing citations from classical Seon or scriptural literature, or something like the Zen-style sermons of Seung Sahn. What I found instead was a refreshingly new and unusually eclectic blend of teachings, and at least in the extent to which the focus is on the actions of karma in daily life, perhaps more on the order of what one might expect to find in a text from a modern Theravada tradition.

Polishing the Diamond is composed as a synthesis of the teachings of two teachers: the author, Jae Woong Kim, and his teacher, Sung Wook Baek. Though the claim on the book cover, that Master Baek was "the most prominent Korean Buddhist leader of the 20th century," will no doubt raise some eyebrows for those with some sense of the modern Korean tradition, the brief sketch of Master Baek's life shows him to be a personage of some significance in Korean society: not simply as

a Buddhist monk, but as an accomplished scholar with a Ph.D. in philosophy from Wurzburg, a long-time political opponent of the Japanese occupation, and later on, a president of Dongguk University.

Jae Woong Kim became the founder of a school of "new Korean Buddhism" called Gumgangkyung Doksonghweh (Diamond Sutra Recitation Group, established in 1973), which, although not as large as the better-known Won Buddhism, has over ten temples in Korea as well as a few in North America. (Unfortunately, almost nothing about this group is explained in the book, aside from a two-line statement on the back cover).

Polishing the Diamond is not a scholarly examination of a teaching system, or even an inquiry into a distinctive Korean cultural manifestation of Buddhism. It is rather a collection of stories, anecdotes, and lectures by the master and his master--a modern "teaching record" (K. *orok*), as it were. The central Kim/Baek teaching can be characterized as follows:

"Surrender to the Buddha the thoughts, impression, emotions, and ideas that arise in your

mind. The practice of surrendering should be done out of the reverence that arises in your mind and not at someone else's request ... you should surrender constantly. When surrendering is accompanied by reverence, you will attain bright wisdom." (p. 12)

And:

"While reciting [the mantra] *Mireuk jon Yeoraebul* [Maitreya-honored-tathagata-buddha] with your mind, hear it through your ears, and practice surrendering all your thoughts to the Buddha. If you hold onto the thoughts in your mind, they will cause you to become ill.... Read the *Diamond Sutra* in the morning and in the evening." (p. 14)

These two paragraphs capture the core of the formal teachings of Masters Baek and Kim, and these formulae are repeated throughout the text, often as solutions in response to particular problems. There is barely a mention in this book of the practice of meditation—even in the monastery. While the exact content of the practice schedule is not explained, we can infer that the core of the practice lies in getting up at 3:00 a.m., chanting the *Diamond Sutra* and *Miruk jon Yeoraebul*, and listening to the master's lectures, followed by a somewhat typical daily monastic routine.

The lectures presented in this book are captivating in their down-to-earth orientation, and in their aim toward showing monks and lay practitioners how to make practical use of Buddhist principles in the solution of everyday problems connected with such matters as running a business, raising children, working, finding a suitable spouse, securing economic security, and simply getting along with others. There is much spiritual inspiration to be found in the extensive discussions of the action of karma, especially the anecdotes showing how a certain kind of behavior will result in a certain kind of rebirth. For example, a lifetime of "stretching" to satisfy excessive sexual desire may result in rebirth as a snake, or as a human with a skinny, snakelike body.

Both masters claim to have full recollection of their previous lifetimes, as well as the ability to see the past lives of their students, and thus therapeutic solutions for mental disturbances are offered on the basis of this superknowledge. It is this emphasis on the effects of karma, along with the dire importance placed on the task of "purifying karmic hindrances" that gives a very un-Zen like feel to the teaching. At the same time, the strikingly mundane discussions of karma are well balanced by an evidence on the part of these masters of a broad knowledge of and deep insight into Buddhist doctrine as a whole. Students of Yogacara will note the extensive and tangible usage of Yogacara concepts related to the store consciousness, *vasanas*, karmic "imprinting," and so forth. The practice of "chanting while offering up" is reminiscent of Lotus and Pure Land teachings. Thus, the teaching offered in this book is eclectically pan-Buddhist in character.

Since the setting is Korea, and the practitioners presented in the book are Korean, we also get a certain amount of insight into interesting Korean cultural norms and habits. Also, in terms of affinity with the Korean Buddhist tradition, the exclusive emphasis of the *Diamond Sutra* is significant (one of the later chapters in the book is devoted solely to discussion of the *Diamond Sutra*), in that the *Diamond Sutra* has long been one of the most favored texts in Korean Seon for chanting and study. Here the *Diamond Sutra* is playing a role that we might imagine for the *Lotus* or *Amitabha* sutras in Japan.

While *Polishing the Diamond* is obviously aimed at practitioners, its presentation is sophisticated enough that one might use it in some kind of basic undergraduate course on Buddhism, perhaps to provide some interesting reading content as a supplement to a core course text that properly grounds students in historical and doctrinal background. The style of teaching is refreshingly innovative; the prose is well written and flawlessly translated. It is a joy to read.

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