Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: An Overview

The arrival of Buddhism in Korea led to the fundamental transformation of local society and a blossoming of Korean civilization. Situated at the end of a long trade route spanning the Eurasian continent, the three Korean kingdoms of Koguryo (37 BCE-668), Paekche (18 BCE-663), and Silla (57 BCE-935) not only benefited from the intellectual sophistication of the Buddhist thought system, but also absorbed the numerous continental cultural products and ideas carried by Buddhist monks. It was the beginning of a golden age on the peninsula.

Religious life itself was directly and irreversibly affected by Buddhism. Korean states had been familiar with Chinese religions in the forms of Taoism and Confucianism, but the impact of such belief systems on the kingdoms was disparate and limited. Buddhism, on the other hand, was adopted as the state religion by rulers as early as the fourth century, in spite of considerable local oppositions. It is believed that until then Koreans had predominantly practiced animism centered on tribal gods and ancestor worship. Elites in particular considered the worship of clan deities as their source of authority and found royal support for Buddhism to be an effort to render the old religion obsolete and encroach upon aristocratic power.

Royal houses had an obvious motive in sponsoring Buddhism: they desperately needed a ruling ideology that would help centralize political power in the body of the sovereign. The notion of the Buddha as the supreme being whose reach was not confined to the spiritual realm but all-pervasive even in politics held promise as a possible justification for privileging royal authority over that of aristocracy. As Chinese and Japanese rulers had or would soon do, Korean sovereigns wove elaborate theories equating themselves to either the Buddha himself, or at least a ruler sanctioned by Buddhism to wield political authority. For instance, Sondok (r. 632-647), a seventh-century queen of Silla, was said to have been born to parents who coincidentally had the same names as those of the Buddha’s father and mother. The reign of Sondok’s great-grandfather, King Chinung (r. 540-576), allegedly saw the beaching of an Indian ship laden with treasures and a Buddha triad: an event understood in the second-oldest Korean historical document to mean that political authority invested in an Indian king by the Buddha was transferred onto the lord of Silla.

But Buddhism never completely eradicated the local religion. Instead, it incorporated local gods into its system and gave them legitimacy as protectors and devotees of the Buddha, albeit at a lower status than the one accorded him and his original retinue. The local religion, too, did not denigrate Buddhism for long, inviting the Buddha into its rituals and treating him as just another transcendental entity with tremendous power to benefit humans. The harmonious co-existence of Buddhism and the local religion—which some scholars have taken to calling “shamanism”—can still be observed today in Korea when one visits a Buddhist temple, where a shrine may be set aside for gods of mountains and stars, or a shaman’s house, inside which are paintings and statues of multiple deities including the Buddha and bodhisattvas (all-powerful Buddhist practitioners with superhuman attributes).

Buddhism also offered a more complex understanding of the universe at large, both theoretical and physical. With its many moral injunctions, Buddhism served as a foundation of Korean ethics, best exemplified by the precepts that were given to military youths but yet grounded in Buddhist teachings of non-violence and life’s preciousness. Concerning death, the notion of six realms of reincarnation, ranging from paradise at the most desirable end of the spectrum to hell as the world of unbearable pain and suffering at the other, was first articulated by the Buddhists and went on to be commonly accepted by the population. As a reward for good behavior, Buddhism presented a vision of the western paradise as the ultimate destination of purity and bliss under Buddha Amitabha’s guidance, a concept well-known to all Koreans.

On the earthly plane, Buddhism inculcated a concrete awareness of India as a real place to which one could conceivably journey to; at least one Silla monk did so and wrote a travelogue about it. Many of the travellers who regularly went back and forth between Korea and China were monks fuelled by a desire to more closely study Buddhism on the continent. But most importantly, Buddhism became a kind of universal language spoken by people of all countries in East Asia. By influencing the shapes of politics, ethics, metaphysics, geography, and life here and even thereafter, Buddhism presented East Asians with a common way of thinking, against the backdrop of
which exchange of ideas and goods could unfold and thrive.

The fall of Paekche and Koguryo between 663 and 668 at
the hands of Silla and its ally, the Tang dynasty (618-907)
of China, only hastened Buddhism’s spread across Korea. Fabulously wealthy monasteries and their rich and powerful following assumed the role of patrons for craftsmen and encouraged production of spectacular artistic treasures the likes of which Koreans had never seen. Buddhist monasteries especially, buoyed by state gifts of land and slaves, asserted their reputations as centers of culture and learning. Grand temples and pagodas mushroomed everywhere, and paintings and statues of the Buddhist pantheon appeared in places high and low as tangible manifestations of people’s devotion. It is necessary to note that without Buddhism the Korean art of sculpture would not have reached its level of refinement. Korea had no strong indigenous tradition of sculpture, especially of the three-dimensional human form, and it was only after Buddhism and Buddha images were transmitted that Koreans crafted significant sculptural representations of human and divine figures.²

The art of printing was another important legacy of Buddhism in Korea. Buddhists found it incumbent upon them to propagate the Buddha’s teachings because it led to accumulation of positive merit known as karma.³ One way to spread Buddhism was through production of images of the Buddha, but duplication of the sacred texts was considered equally important as an expression of faith. Hand-copying, however, was a difficult proposition in early medieval Korea: literacy was low, and qualified scribes too few; scriptures were written in complex Chinese characters and difficult to read; and the amount of time and energy required to individually copy texts was too great compared to the volume of output. It was inevitable that the printing technology would evolve to meet the voracious appetite of Buddhists for more sacred words.

The oldest surviving example of woodblock printing in the world dates to the Unified Silla period of Korea (668-936), found alongside several treasures inside a stone pagoda undergoing restoration in 1966. Although scholarly debates continue over the origin of the scroll, at the very least the artifact attests to the high esteem in which early Korean Buddhists held sacred words.⁴ Seen through that history, it is not a surprise that Koreans would go on to twice create the tripitaka, more than eighty-thousand individually carved woodblock printing panels containing the entire canon of Buddhist texts.⁵ The second batch of panels, commissioned in 1251, remains nearly intact as a set and is protected as a national treasure as well as a UNESCO world heritage.

More Readings


Notes:

1. A smaller kingdom by the name of Kaya (1??-562) existed between Silla and Paekche until it was absorbed by Silla. The standard chronology nevertheless refers to the period as the Three Kingdoms.

2. A similar suggestion has been made about China.

3. Karma is a term for both positive and negative merit, the final tally of which upon a person’s death determines his or her next incarnation.

4. Some Chinese scholars have argued that the scroll is of Chinese origin, given the appearance in the text of Chinese characters invented and used only during the reign of Empress Wu (r. 690-705) over China.

5. Tripitaka, literally “Three Baskets,” is the term used to refer to the collection of Buddhist texts comprising three categories: sutra (words of the Buddha), vinaya (monastic rules), and abhidharma (commentaries).