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**Ko Un’s Hwaom-kyong:** **A Modern Korean Pilgrim’s Progress**

by Brother Anthony (An Sonjae)

What follows are the opening lines of Hwaom-kyong, a Korean novel I have translated but that has not yet been published:

The river was beginning to loom into view beyond a cluster of rose hibiscus trees that hung in a kind of drunken stupor; it flowed onwards hurriedly in the early morning light, the sound of its rippling subdued. For little Sudhana, that glimpse of the river was his first awareness of the world.

“He’s coming back to life ... he’s alive!” Majushri rejoiced. The child had been rescued the evening before, as he came floating close to the river bank; all night long the aged pilgrim had kept watch beside him on the sandy shore of the vast triangular reach where the Son united with another river before flowing down to join the Ganges.

“The world’s all dark. The Himalaya’s snowy peaks have died!” Sudhana murmured, gazing towards the river in the dim light of early dawn. Manjushri’s companions were rolling up the tents of their little encampment.

“This little fellow knows all about snowy peaks! Ha ha, mountains dying .... Who ever heard of such a thing?” Asvajit asked, quite mechanically; Asvajit stood out among the disciples accompanying the holy man by his habit of always asking questions, even when there was nothing to ask questions about.

The bodhisattva Manjushri stayed silent for a moment, then replied.

“A child knows everything, as a river at dawn knows everything; the reeds and trees along the banks of the Son know that the far-off Himalayas are dark; to know one grain of the sand on this shore is to know the whole universe....” [page 2]

He spoke in a low voice, not wanting to trouble the river’s murmur.

“Child! Your eyes are open! you’ve come back to life, you’re alive!”

‘I’ve seen you somewhere before, grandad, haven’t I?” Sudhana’s voice rang with the pure tones of dew pearling in mango flowers at daybreak. Manjushri nodded, as if to suggest that they had surely shared an abundance of times together in past lives. (...)

“Grandad, I want to go home. There’s plenty to eat there, and lots of slaves, and elephants to ride on. Where am I?”

The old man had an inner vision of Sudhana’s house. First he saw a palatial mansion built of stone blocks carted down from mountain quarries, filled with every kind of treasure; then it turned into a heap of smoking rubble. Such was the knowledge he gained from his serene meditation. He opened his eyes and the vision faded, giving place to Sudhana’s face.

“No,” he said, “there’s no call for you to go back there. I’ll show you the way you must go.” He pulled him to his feet. Only a moment before, Sudhana had looked as though he could barely stagger, yet now, astonishingly, he had regained his full health and strength. Manjushri rejoiced again.

Just then, Asvajit and others came to propose that Sudhana should join their company, but the master would not allow that, although Sudhana longed to stay with his new companions.

“No, it wouldn’t do. Look at that old sal tree branch. In a mysterious manner, that branch is showing you the way. That is the way you must go, Sudhana. I have other work to do.”

The Sage bowed towards the tree with joined hands, then gave Sudhana a gentle shove in the back, as if pushing a boat off from the shore. Morning broke, and Sudhana the orphan found himself alone in the world.

Go. Don’t you see that branch pointing the way?

As trees know the past, and tremble in the wind,

Each one knows which way to follow, their branches stretch.

The novel’s title in Korean is *Hwaom-kyong*; the huge Buddhist scripture called in Sanskrit *Avatamsaka Sutra* is known in China as the Hua-yen and in Korea as Hwaom-kyong. Whatever name we use, it will hardly be familiar to Western people who are not well versed in Buddhism. Even among Korean Buddhists, it is a book that few have read and it is generally considered to be extremely difficult as well as very long. Recently translated into English by Thomas Cleary (published by Shambhala 1993) with the title “The Flower [page 3] Ornament Scripture,” its complete name means “The Teaching of the Garland of Buddhas” and its final, thirty-ninth section, which is really an independent Scripture called the Gandavyuha or Entry into the Realm of Reality, tells the story of a child’s pilgrimage in search of the Wisdom that brings enlightenment. Young Sudhana encounters fifty-three teachers from whom he receives instruction. These teachers are not all conventional holy men and monks, they include several women of various social levels and people involved in worldly activities.

The Korean poet and writer Ko Un was a Buddhist monk for ten years in the 1950s. During that time an old monk suggested that he should write about Sudhana’s journey. He left the monastic life in 1960, but he continued to write. He began to publish the story in installments in a magazine and had reached the middle of Sudhana’s pilgrimage before life took him in other directions. In the 1970s his main concern was with social issues, he was a leading spokesman for dissident writers, he was often arrested. In the later 1980s, now married and recognized as a leading poet and writer, he returned to the task and to a closer relationship with the world of Buddhism. The completed novel was published in 1991. Ko Un has said that the child’s pilgrimage his novel relates is a reflection of his own life’s journey. In recent years, Ko Un has not only published this novel, he has also written a series of short Son (Zen) poems, and begun to publish a huge series of novels on the development of Son (Zen) Buddhism in China.

It has long been recognized that the Avatamsaka has played an extraordinarily important role in the development of Far Eastern Buddhism since its introduction into China at the start of the modern era, when it underwent various translations in multiple versions. In Buddhist tradition, the Avatamsaka’s entire contents are said to derive from a series of sermons preached either by the historical Buddha, Gautama, or (according to Ko Un’s 59th chapter) by his disciple the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, in various locations, both earthly and heavenly. In the course of his novel, Ko Un refers to this tradition and to the problem posed by the difference in contents and style between this and other, simpler scriptures which also claim to transmit the teachings of the Buddha; one solution proposed is that the Buddha preached the A vatamsaka early in his teaching, realized that the contents were too difficult for people and preached the other scriptures at a level better adapted to their capacities. The Avatamsaka remained hidden until the time came when a few people could understand its contents.

Modern secular scholarship naturally discounts this kind of legend and prefers to see the Avatamsaka as an encyclopedic compilation of a whole [page 4] series of originally independent works of high philosophy and spirituality, cul-minating in the story of Sudhana’s pilgrimage. The first Chinese translation of a fairly full version of the Avatamsaka was done under the direction of an Indian monk, Buddhabhadra (359-429); later a translation of a longer version was directed by a Khotanese monk, Shikshananda (652-710). Much of the original Sanskrit or Pali text has since then been lost. The powerful vision of the work inspired a vast school of philosophical Buddhism in China, the Huayen school, and was equally important in the development of Ch’an (Son/ Zen).

The dramatic potential inherent in the story of Sudhana’s journey has long been recognized. In contrast to other scriptures or other parts of the Avatamsaka, something human happens in these page s, a child meets individual people with specified names and occupations. Above all, it is striking, not to say revolutionary, that the enlightened wisdom that Sudhana finds in them is not the monopoly of monks and recognized teachers. However, the immense philosophical discourses which Sudhana’s initial question provokes each time are not very exciting or accessible and there is no development of the potential for dialogue inherent in the structure. Sudhana listens, says thank you, and is directed to his next teacher.

Ko Un’s novel takes very little of its actual contents from the Avatamsaka, beyond the bare structure of the fifty-three encounters with people who often, though not always, have the same names as in the scriptural story and who sometimes live in places with the same name. There are also encounters with people who do not count among the fifty-three, to say nothing of a talking elephant. The encounters in the novel rarely lead to prolonged discussions of abstruse philosophy; exactly what Sudhana learns is often not made explicit at all. The story is set in India at the time of the historical Buddha, divided into many warring states. The work evokes the Buddhist reaction to the caste-system and at times suggests a Buddhist Utopian society. As in the original Sutra, the text frequently passes into poetry in order to transcend the limits of mere factuality. The presence of so many poems gives the story much greater intensity.

It is not easy to summarize the central message of the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra. One of its central concerns is the universal potential that, according to its form of Buddhist vision, exists everywhere for what is usually known as enlightening or awakening. Only since this enlightening is what characterizes the nature of a Buddha, and since the potential is present everywhere once there is any trace of enlightened compassion, every sentient being is potentially Buddha. This opens the way to an immense vision of unity and equality. There is “The Buddha” but at the same time there are “all the bud- [page 5] dhas,” not just a few special beings but an innumerable host. Every being and every atom of every being is full of potential buddhahood.

The historical Buddha known as Shakyamuni plays virtually no role in this vision of reality; beyond and in the illusory nature of things buddhahood is everywhere latent. Time or history are not important since buddhahood is not attained by any techniques or cause-and-effect processes. The key question that the scriptural Sudhana keeps asking is “how?” yet all the replies he gets tend to suggest that it is not a matter of doing but of seeing: “I seek the practice of bodhisattva. Please tell me how to learn the practice of bodhisattva, how to orient myself to the disciplines that will perfect all sentient beings while I am learning, how to see all buddhas...” The English language has no word able to translate the term “bodhisattva” which is central to the Avatamsaka. Cleary uses the phrase “enlightening beings” but on the whole I find it confusing and prefer to use the Sanskrit word.

One of the main features characterizing the bodhisattva, the person in whom the wisdom and will leading to awakening exist, and have already born fruit, is a concern for the good of all other beings. That in turn leads us to consider the Buddhist response to pain and suffering, which is not very similar to any of the responses knwon in the West since it leads to a recognition of the illusory nature or emptiness of all sensory awareness and of “reality” itself.

For Ko Un, this aspect of the work must have been of great importance since his life’s vision is deeply marked by social commitment and concrete concern for the common good. He knows that Buddhism has often been criticized as encouraging self-centeredness; he himself turned away from all religious dimensions for many years with similar feelings. If he returned to work on the novel, it was in part because he found that the central vision of the Avatamsaka Sutra includes a strong call to altruism, life-for-others.

In contrast, an important aspect of the Sutra that is given less development by Ko Un is what might be termed the “mystical” theme of the interpen- etration, the interdependence and oneness, of all things. This reaches its climax in the Avatamsaka nearly at the end of the pilgrimage, when Sudhana meets the future world-Buddha Maitreya outside a great tower, the chamber of the adornments of Vairochana, the illuminator. Together they enter the tower:

He saw the tower immensely vast and wide, hundreds of thousands of leagues wide, as measureless as the sky, as vast as all of space, adorned with countless attributes; countless canopies, banners, pennants, jewels, garlands of pearls and gems.... Inside the great tower he saw hundreds of thousands of other towers similarly arrayed; he saw those towers as [page 6] infinitely vast as space, evenly arrayed in all directions, yet those towers were not mixed up with one another, being each mutually distinct, while appearing reflected in each and every object of all the other towers. by the power of Maitreya, Sudhana perceived himself in all of those towers....

Not surprisingly, the cosmic vision of the Avatamsaka appeals to mathe-maticians and astrophysicists. In particular, it is striking to find such an ancient work intensely aware of the immensely vast dimensions of the universe, and of the molecular tininess of its component parts. The scripture employs both the vastness and the minuteness of things: “In a single atom (bodhisattvas) see all worlds.... In every single atom are all things of all places and times.” In the West, there is a somewhat similar pattern in the Platonic notion of microcosm and macrocosm, where each distinct concrete reality here is seen as the reflection of an eternal Idea; but in the traditional image of Indra’s Net or of the tower of Vairochana, everything is a reflection of everything and contains everything while remaining itself, and there is no absolute reality giving origin and form to contingent realities.

For a novelist, whose raw material is mostly the difference between individual persons and places, it is not going to be very helpful or interesting to declare that “each thing is everything, each moment is every moment, each being is all beings.” There is, however, an important influence on Ko Un deriving from these perspectives; his novel is not a Bildungsroman in the usual Western sense, indeed it is not quite sure that it should be considered a “novel” in the normal sense at all. For there is virtually no sense of growth and development in the central character as one encounter follows another. Sudhana is never felt to get any older or any cleverer, humanly speaking, in the course of his vast pilgrimage which happens without any clear time-scheme being established. He is always simply himself, a child.

It is only near the end of Ko Un’s work that the narrator looks back over Sudhana’s travels and explains that he has gone through various traditionally recognized stages in the passage towards awakening. One of the challenges to the novel as a literary form that Ko Un cannot avoid is the fact that the Buddhist vision of the nature of things almost denies the reality of progress and the possibility of ending. Another challenge is that the deeply philosophical Buddhism of the Avatamsaka tradition does not lend itself to simplification.

As a result, the last third of the novel grows increasingly burdened with a technical Buddhist vocabulary of considerable difficulty. Yet the main narrative is quite simple, indeed almost austere. Like the Sutra itself, Ko Un maintains a separation between Sudhana and the historical Buddha although the [page 7] two are considered to be living in the same moment of time and on the same Indian subcontinent. They are destined never to meet. If all are potentially Buddha, no one Buddha stands above the rest as The Buddha. This kind of Buddhism lays little stress on the specificity of the historical Buddha.

Ko Un’s poetry often depends for its effect on a cumulative effect. He has published a series of nine volumes with the overall title Maninbo “Ten Thousand Lives.” containing hundreds of short poems in which he tries to record all the individuals who have left a mark in his memory and in his life. If his plan materializes he will continue this series. He writes about those who are usually considered insignificant people: children who died or were killed, village women whose only task was housekeeping, about farmers and layabouts, a host of figures. He is convinced that the only true history of Korea is a collective history paying attention to each of these, not the usual “history book” picture of famous men, important politicians and such.

The same happens in the Avatamsaka Sutra itself, with its page s of repetitions, of lists and cumulative imagery. This is no simple allegory of the moral and spiritual challenges of ordinary people’s daily life like the Pilgrim’s Progress told by Bunyan, and yet it is a tale evoking a great variety of lives in a multiplicity of styles. To read a few sections is the only option available, but it is not the way this work ought to be read, and we really need to pursue our path through its lengthy text like Sudhana, nearly dropping with fatigue under the blazing sun, unsure if there is anything ahead of us waiting to be found, or not.

Because the novel was written over nearly twenty years, at different stages of the author’s career, its style and its main concerns vary greatly. The early sections are lyrical, set in a delightful fantasy world. The central chapters develop more directly social themes, such as the need for the rich to free themselves of their accumulated wealth, the democratic nature of good government, the need to abolish dictatorships. Towards the end, Ko Un introduces more and more explicit Buddhist terminology, not only the cosmological system with its multiple systems of heavens and worlds but also the traditional stages of the enlightening life.

Many Koreans think of Ko Un as a “dangerous radical” and some even call him a “Leftist” yet the contents of Hwaom-kyong show him telling tales far removed from ideology and often very close to the idealism of St Luke’s Gospel. For a long time in the second half of the story, the characters that Sudhana meets are not human beings at all, but spirits of the night and spirits of the underworld, to say nothing of heavenly beings. Their messages are sometimes very much more pragmatic than is usual in Buddhism, about feeding the [page 8] hungry and sharing wealth, for example. But always as a way of practicing compassion (Chapter 41).

Then the spirit of darkness began to tell Sudhana stories about its past lives, as if it were Sudhana’s father or uncle.

They had been standing, but at a given moment they sat down on the ground at the foot of a centuries-old anantha tree. It was impossible to tell which sat first, they had grown so close in their relationship, teller and listener.

“Long, long ago, many many ages before this present world, I was a young girl. I met that world’s bodhisattva Samatabhadra and at his encouragement went to visit someone. In order to provide a lotus-flower throne for Sariputra to sit on, I offered up the keyura necklace that hung around my neck. It had been passed on to me by my mother. She had it from her mother, who had it from hers ... and so it was passed on to me. It was something that I was expected to pass on to my daughter, only I gave it up for Sariputra’s throne.” “Divine spirit, most sacred teacher.”

“Listen further. Thanks to that necklace, I established firm roots of good karma merit, I was able to get free for ever from the effects of evil karma. I was reborn in the heavens, as well as on earth, always enjoying a comfortable life; I was able to become a ruler, a leading citizen … but naturally I could not help asking myself if it was right to become a ruler or heavenly spirit by virtue of good merit. I only had to say one word, I received at once whatever I wanted; if I spoke, condemned criminals were granted their lives, even seconds before they were to be executed. All the people considered my rule to be blessed and bowed down towards me three times or more every day. The treasures of mountains and oceans were offered before me. My subjects went so far as to say that the food they ate, the clothes they wore, their houses too, were all effects of my gracious rule. I was indeed a sovereign the whole world looked up to. And yet....”

Jahshri broke off the tale and began to sing in a low voice,

Bliss enjoyed in this world is the fruit

Of ten thousand people’s ten thousand suffering lives.

Henceforth I will become a beggar

Become a joy filling a moment in ten thousand lives

Will flow as a spring in the early dawn.

When the spirit of darkness had finished singing, it took the fruit it had been holding, broke it in half, and the two of them ate together. The fruit was both sour and sweet. These were paru fruits, only a few of which ripen on each tree. His hunger abated. [page 9]

They rose from where they had been sitting at the foot of the anantha tree and started to stroll slowly through the shady forest clearings. Jahshri began to reminisce again, whether continuing the previous tale or starting a new thread was hard to tell. Sudhana came to feel close to Jahshri, as if he had penetrated the spirit’s heart. Was one now two? Or were two now one?

“I came to a decision. Late one night I resolved that henceforth I would not be served, I would become a servant. To follow that path, I left the palace.… I had scarcely begun to travel before I fell ill and only survived thanks to the help of one humble fellow, then I became a slave of the warrior caste as that fellow was until, after more than ten years as a slave, I and several others of the same humble class escaped from a nobleman’s slave camp and went to live in mountains that were covered with eternal snows.

“During those ten years of life as a slave, I came to see clearly how wrong this world’s system of wealth and honour is, I got to know many poor people who were crushed with countless torments so that the rich and powerful could flourish. What then were the so-called roots of the good karma I had received? What was the sense of my offering up that precious necklace? What was the throne of Sariputra? What was my good karma merit?

“I wandered through the mountain, pondering those questions, until I found myself separated from those I had run away with. I got lost while I was out looking for something to eat, and could not find the way back. For three days I wandered through the trees and shrubs of that mountain’s valleys, until I glimpsed a kite hovering in the sky visible between the trees; I walked in the direction it was flying towards and arrived at a mountain village of the Allia tribe. There I met the gentlest people in the world, and there I met one old man from whom I heard talk of many Buddhas.”

As the spirit continued this tale, it would sometimes break off and sing.

The old man left that place with her and went to where the Buddha lived in company with a large number of other Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples. There she became a disciple and attended the Buddha with great devotion. The doubt nagging at her gradually eased, and she sensed that she was turning back into the girl she had been before. Before offering up the necklace, that is. All she lacked was the keyura necklace that had been a family heirloom for so many generations. There was no way she could know that the necklace was buried deep in the mud at the roots of a lotus that was blooming in a pond not far from the throne occupied by the Buddha of that place. The necklace she had offered had summoned her. Her ignorance of the fact was a credit to her virginal purity. [page 10]

One young girl

Had a necklace, a family heirloom.

That keyura necklace she offered up

For a lotus pedestal.

A merchant received that necklace,

Exchanged it for the pedestal’s stone slab

And it became the stone-mason’s daughter’s

Only she soon left this world.

The now ownerless necklace

Following its previous owner’s intention

Found itself thrown into a lotus pond

Where a lovely lotus grew.

Tangled among the lotus roots

Long sunk in that watery filth

Though hidden in a gloomy cesspool

It summoned its former owner.

Then the story continued. The girl visited many other places inhabited by Buddhas and bodhisattvas, no less than five hundred places in all, meeting Buddhas and bodhisattvas, disciples and pilgrims of every caste. She drew water for them to wash with, in exchange for something to eat, and took care of them when they were sick.

Nobody knew where she got the strength from, she worked so hard She received high praise from Buddhas and bodhisattvas alike. At the four hundred and ninety-fifty station on her pilgrimage, she was praised in the words, “Her vow made in a previous life began with the sage Samatabhadra and today has become a great river.” There they knew that her existence had been marked by an encounter with the bodhisattva Samatabhadra.

At once she left her tasks within the shrine and went to join the humble folk outside, sharing their poverty and disease, their ignorance, and their violence. Out there she tried to discourage one gangster, he raped her and after that she passed from one man to another, ending up in a bar.

There she enchanted everyone with her sad songs and beautiful dances. It was said that she could raise a nation up and bring a nation down by her songs.

The five hundredth station was in a forest grove not far away from that bar and one day she went to visit the Buddha there with the bar owner and his family. On arrival, she offered her songs and dances at a party to welcome the gathered company, in the presence of a host of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and [page 11] disciples.

Delighted by her performance, the Buddha sent out a ray of light to her. Receiving the light, she became a goddess more beautiful than any hitherto seen, and enjoyed the Buddha’s love.

Ah, such bliss.

Bliss nothing can surpass

Receiving Buddha’s light

Receiving Buddha’s love

Bliss nothing can surpass above

Bliss nothing can surpass below

This body born and dying a trillion times

One lotus blossom.

It is important to notice what happens at the end of Ko Un’s work. In Bunyan’s Pilgrim Progress, the main character Christian comes to the gates of the Heavenly Jerusalem; the sense is that every journey, every human life has a goal and an ending. “Journey’s end in lovers’ meeting” as Shakespeare’s song puts it, even if here the lover is God. Very many novels end in lovers’ meeting; Western lives end in a tomb; the West is unconsciously but deeply apocalyptic in its vision of time. There is to be an end, which beyond death is expressed in Christianity as Heaven, union with the Eternal (usually called God) who is believed to be the origin and unending fulfillment of all that ever has been.

In Buddhism, as in modern astrophysics, there is not the same form of end proposed and this might even help explain why Buddhism did not develop the narrative form so popular in the West: there is no end, yet you cannot have an endless book. So when we reach the last page of Ko Un’s tale of Sudhana’s pilgrimage, we are not surprised to find there is no end but instead a new beginning. If Sudhana has indeed attained bodhisattva enlightening, and there is no way anyone can be quite sure about that, it does not give him any kind of privilege. He has not in any sense “made it” and he will have to continue living even if he dies since it is in the nature of “enlightening beings” to remain turned towards those still caught in the sufferings of the illusory worm. On the first day, or was it the second, of his journey through the forest, he came across a little boy. He was about ten years old, and he was crying.

As soon as Sudhana asked why he was crying, the answer came:

“My mother died a while ago.”

Asking just how long ago she had died, he intended to suggest they pray for her repose. He thought the prayers for her repose would bring comfort to [page 12] the child.

The crying stopped the time it took to repeat, “a while ago.”

Once again Sudhana asked:

“Yesterday? Or the day before?”

The child replied he didn’t know exactly, but about ten years ago. Sudhana was taken aback. Then from within his heart, like a sudden slap on the knees, glee came surging up.

That was it. It was characteristic of the people of India that when they said, “just here,” they might mean anything up to a million leagues away, while “a little while ago” might mean ten years or it might signify several hundred aeons. For them, time meant primeval time, while time taken without the cosmic realities of primeval time was nothing more than the foam left by the waves that come crashing onto a sandy shore.

Surely that is the unfolding of the cosmos of empty eternity, the coming into being of ten infinities of cosmos and selfhood.

Among all the teachers Sudhana had met, there had been one woman called Gopa. She had talked about her past to Sudhana. Mother and daughter were both whores and because they thought their bodies belonged to all men, a prince’s suit had been rejected, on the grounds that such a woman could never become just one man’s wife. Not withstanding, the prince had made a strong appeal, determined to take that beautiful whore to be his wife. Gopa’s tale had ended without any mention of the prince’s appeal, but Sudhana had guessed what had been omitted.

That was it. The little bodhisattva Sudhana would visit many places in the world, appealing for love. Thus he would attain the gateway of universal union where subjective and objective, active and passive fuse into one, entering by force into unrestricted freedom in the Flower Garland Dharma Realm where the particular and the general, the general and the particular, active and passive, passive and active alternately fuse together and part again.

Yet whether at this high level or at the most basic level, the principle of the identity of differences which establishes unity between different natures is always the same. For unless the resplendent Flower Garland is seen at one and the same time as a madman’s ravings and a Buddha’s samadhi, there is nothing but hell implacably waiting there.

The little traveller and the weeping child emerged from the depths of the forest and headed together for the harbour.

“Come on, let’s be off.”

What has finished is the story of Sudhana’s meetings with fifty-three masters, a story that had been related in the preaching of the Avatamsaka even [page 13] before Sudhana was born! Sudhana is now free, since the essence of awakening is that it is a liberation from all determinisms, and he can go where he will. The bodhisattva’s place is not on a podium in a temple or a university, though it may sometimes be there too, but buried deep in the living fabric of suffering humanity. The bodhisattva needs no teachers, needs indeed nobody, but has chosen to be there, embodying the great Compassion wherever life leads, for anyone that life sets on the path. For Sudhana, the story is over; life can begin.