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**Hui Neng in Korea: A Chapter in the Story of Korean Religion**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In September of 1583 two Jesuit missionaries by the names of Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci set sail in a Chinese junk from Macao to Canton in China’s Kwangtung Province. From there they settled in the city of Chaoching where they were to remain until 1595 when they moved north to Nanking and Nanchang.1 The two Jesuits shaved their heads and dressed in the simple robes of Buddhist monks and were immediately accepted as guests in the Nan-hua Buddhist temple. Ricci, who was primarily interested in the Confucian literati and had his sights set on beginning mission work in Beijing, found residence in the temple to be distasteful. He refused to bow before the Buddha images and he “looked down upon” Buddhism as being idolatrous and superstitious.2 It was not long until he and Ruggieri moved to new quarters, and when they finally left Chaoching to move northward, they exchanged their Buddhist monks’ robes for the robes of the Confucian scholars.

One of those Buddhist images in the Nan-hua Temple was in fact not an image at all, but the preserved mummified body of Hui Neng (637-713), the Sixth Patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism and the founder of the Southern School of Ch’an which stresses sudden enlightenment. At first enshrined in the Kuo-en Temple where Hui Neng died, the body was later covered with layers of black lacquer and moved to the Nan-hua Temple.3 Ricci was certainly one of the first Europeans, if not the first, to see the 870-year-old body of Hui Neng seated in a lotus position on a [page 2] platform in its own special pavilion. Unfortunately, because of his prejudices against Buddhism, he did not realize the importance of what he had seen. Nor was he aware of the significance of Hui Neng for the development of Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan.

Hui Neng has emerged as one of the pivotal personages in the history of Buddhist thought due to his colorful life and his Dharma lectures which have been collected into The Platform Sutra, the only Chinese- language scripture to be named as a sutra.4 In the history of early Buddhist thought and practice three names are prominent: Sakyamuni the historical Buddha, followed by a succession of twenty-eight Indian patriarchs; Bodhidharma, the first Chinese patriarch; and Hui Neng, the sixth Chinese patriarch. A disciple of Hui Neng, Shen-hui (670-762) mounted a vigorous campaign against Hui Neng’s rivals and firmly established his master as the legitimate Sixth Patriarch. Thus “by the end of the eighth century Hui-neng was accepted as the Sixth Patriarch by all schools of Ch’an, and all present-day Ch’an derives ultimately from two of his putative heirs....”5 Today Hui Neng’s position in Buddhism in general and in Ch’an/Seon/Zen Buddhism in particular is firmly established.6

In recent years the general public has also become fascinated with Hui Neng. Following the desecration of Hui Neng’s body during the Cultural Revolution, and the later opening of China once again to foreign influence and tourism, the body has been re-lacquered and restored to its proper position in the Nan-hua Temple. Both devout pilgrims and curious travelers flock to the temple and it has become an accepted stop on the tourist trail in Kwangtung Province. In the 1980s a film The Story of Hui Neng caused a brief sensation in Taiwan. Much of the film was in fact made in Korea and a number of scenes were shot at Haein Temple near Daegu. Hui Neng’s rebuffing of a mountain temptress added spice to the film, but as devout Buddhists were quick to point out, this episode had no basis in any of the several accounts of Hui Neng’s life. A flurry of interest in Hui Neng arose again with the publication of Snow in August by Gao Xingjian, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature. Published in Taiwan in 2000 and in Hong Kong in 2001, the drama, based on the life of Hui Neng, was translated into English in 2003. Snow in August was directed by Gao Xingjian and staged as a full dramatic production in Taiwan, and premiered at the National Theater in [page 3] Taipei in December 2003 with performances in Marseilles, France in 2004.8 It appears, therefore, that Hui Neng’s position in popular culture is also firmly established.

But why this interest in a Buddhist monk who spent the latter half of his life teaching at various temples in southern China? The answer lies, first of all, in a life that can only be described as unique and engaging.

**THE STORY OF HUI NENG**

The various accounts of Hui Neng’s life are taken from the extant versions of The Platform Sutra, and while there are minor variations and even some conflicts, it is possible to arrive at a reasonable biography.9 Hui Neng was born in 638 in what is now Kwangtung Province, China. His father died when he was still a child and he and his mother lived in a district which included the city of Canton, now modern Guangzhou. The family lived in poverty and made a meager living by selling firewood in the city. According to the traditional accounts, Hui Neng was illiterate, since the family’s poverty made it impossible for him to attend school.

When he was twenty-four years of age, Hui Neng was out selling wood when he heard someone reciting passages from the Diamond Su- tra. Some accounts say that it was one of his customers that he heard; other accounts state that he was passing by a temple and heard the monks chanting. In any event, Hui Neng experienced sudden enlightenment. Realizing that he now needed to learn more about Buddhism and the practice of meditation, he inquired as to where he could go to learn more about the Diamond Sutra. He was directed to go to Huang-mei in modern Hubei Province where the Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen was teaching. Upon arrival at the temple Hui Neng was told that he was a barbarian from the south who could never attain Buddha-hood and that he had best return home. This was, of course, a way of testing his calling to the mo-nastic life. Hui Neng continued to present himself to Hung-jen with the argument that while people may make such distinctions, such distinctions did not exist so far as the Buddha-nature was concerned. Finally he was admitted to the temple as a novice but given the task of pounding rice in the kitchen, one of lowest positions in the monastery. Again, this was a way of testing the depth of his monastic vocation.

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Tradition holds that Hui Neng pounded rice for eight months and was largely ignored by the other monks. It is probable, however, that he also attended lectures in the main hall, meditated on the sutras, took part in the daily chanting, and perhaps even began to learn to read and write. As a novice, and as an illiterate southerner, he was definitely not among the monastic elite. This period of Hui Neng’s monastic life is a frequent theme in paintings found on the exterior walls of Korean temples. Hui Neng is depicted with a huge stone strapped to his back, while he stands on one end of the wooden lever used to pound the rice. Sometimes the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen, is also shown, carefully observing Hui Neng from a side door where he cannot be seen. The implication is clear: this southerner bears careful watching, for he shows great promise in the monastic life.

As Hung-jen was growing old and the end of his life was obviously drawing near, he decided it was time to choose a successor and pass on to him the signs of the transmission of the patriarchate, the robe and the bowl. Among all of the monks there was one who appeared to be the obvious choice to become the Sixth Patriarch, Shen-hsiu. Hung-jen decided that the choice would be based upon the writing of a metrical poem called a gatha. All of the monks were invited to take part in the competition. However, only Shen-hsiu actually submitted a poem, as the other monks all deferred to him, assuming that he would automatically be selected. Hung-jen let it be known that he was searching for a poem that would summarize the main idea or “great meaning” of Ch’an.

The poem which Shen-hsiu submitted was as follows:

The body is the tree of enlightenment.

The mind is the stand of a bright mirror.

Wipe it constantly and with ever-watchful diligence,

To keep it uncontaminated by the worldly dust.10

As was the custom, the poem was written on the wall of the temple’s meditation hall. When Hung-jen read it he was far from satisfied, but not wishing to embarrass Shen-hsiu he said nothing in front of the other monks. However, late at night he summoned Shen-hsiu to his room and informed him that the poem was unsatisfactory. Hung-jen requested that Shen-hsiu submit another poem.

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Several days later Hui Neng heard another monk chanting Shen-hsiu’s poem, and he asked the monk to take him to the meditation hall wall where the poem had been written, and requested that he recite it again and explain it to him. Hui Neng then asked the monk to write another poem on the wall next to the original one. Hui Neng’s poem read as follows:

Enlightenment is no tree,

Nor is the Bright Mirror a stand.

Since it is not a thing at all,

Where could it be contaminated by dust?11

When the other monks read this poem they were deeply impressed, and it was not long until the word spread throughout the entire monastic community that this poem had been composed by Hui Neng. Realizing that they had underestimated the wisdom and insight of the illiterate novice from the south, a commotion soon ensued. Finally Hung-jen had Hui Neng’s poem erased from the wall in order to restore calm. Meanwhile, Hui Neng continued to pound rice in the temple kitchen.

The Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen went to the kitchen and secretly told Hui Neng to come to see him late at night after all the other monks had gone to bed and were fast asleep. As they discussed the meaning of the poem, Hung-jen quoted these words from the Diamond Sutra to Hui Neng: “Keep your mind alive and free without abiding in anything or any where.”12 Upon hearing this, Hui Neng was completely enlightened and Hung-jen gave him the robe and the bowl, thus officially transmitting the patriarchate to Hui Neng and making him the Sixth Patriarch. He also composed the following gatha for Hui Neng:

Sow the seed widely among the sentient beings,

And it will come to fruition on fertile ground.

Without sentience no seed can grow;

Nor can there be life without nature.

He then sent Hui Neng out in the dead of night with instructions to transmit the teaching to succeeding generations, although the patriarchate would cease with Hui Neng and there would be no Seventh Patriarch.

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Scholars are uncertain as to whether or not Hui Neng’s life was actually in danger due to an intense rivalry over the succession. Certainly there must have been jealousy since Hui Neng was not yet fully ordained. In any event, he spent the next few years of his life in anonymous obscurity. Tradition holds that he roamed the mountains with a group of hunters whom he eventually converted to vegetarianism. The reality is that he probably wandered to various mountain temples engaging in meditation and study, learning to read and write, and preparing himself for his future work. However, nothing definite is known con-cerning these years.

What is known is that in 676 he went to Canton to study under the Ch’an master Yin-Tsung at the Fa-hsing Temple. It was there, during a discussion on the Nirvana Sutra, that Hui Neng heard two monks debating the nature of a banner blowing in the wind. One monk said that the banner was moving; the other monk asserted that it was the wind that was moving. Entering the discussion, Hui Neng is reported to have said: “Neither the wind nor the banner moves; what moves is your minds.”14 Upon hearing these words of deep insight, the other monks were amazed and wondered just who this wandering monk really was. Unable to con-ceal his true identity any longer, Hui Neng identified himself as the Sixth Patriarch, presented the robe and bowl which had been given to him by Hung-jen as signs of the transmission, and on the fifteenth day of the first month he had his head shaved by Yin-tsung and on the eighth day of the second month he formally joined the Buddhist monastic order. He was ordained by Chih-kuang and at the age of thirty-nine became a Buddhist priest. In the fourth month of 676 he began preaching and teaching at the Fa-hsing Temple.

Later in that year he moved to the Pao-lin Temple where he preached and taught for the next thirty-seven years, although in the tradition of Buddhist priests he visited many other temples where he delivered dharma lectures. Much of The Platform Sutra was delivered, for example, at Ta-fan Temple where, as monks still do, he presented his lectures while seated on an elevated platform in the front of the lecture hall. As he continued to teach, Hui Neng’s fame increased and in 705 he was invited by the emperor to visit the capital, but he declined the invitation. However, in 707 the emperor did honor him by providing the funds to [page 7] remodel his temple and presented him with an imperial tablet. The emperor also gave Hui Neng a crystal bowl and a robe called a mo na. This mo na was a special Buddhist robe made in Korea. The fact that the emperor presented such a robe to Hui Neng served to illustrate the close relationship which existed between China and Korea at the time. In 712 Hui Neng returned to his native district, and in anticipation of his death he had the Kuo-en Temple remodeled and a pagoda erected. On the third day of the seventh month in 713, Hui Neng died at the age of seventy- three. With his death the institution of the patriarchate ceased and, in the words of one observer, “the genealogical tree of Zen put forth branches.”15

Hui Neng is credited with founding the Southern School of Ch’an while his rival Shen-hsiu is recognized as the founder of the Northern School. How did these two approaches to Buddhist meditation differ? According to Sung Bae Park, the Northern School of Shen-hsiu focused on doctrinal faith and gradual enlightenment with the goal being “I can become a Buddha.” The Southern School of Hui Neng, on the other hand, was centered on patriarchal faith and sudden enlightenment leading to the discovery that “I am a Buddha.”16 Thus an illiterate Hui Neng could attain enlightenment upon hearing the Diamond Sutra, without having to spend years in doctrinal study of the written sutras. What was needed, however, was a master to guide Hui Neng in the proper way of meditation, and thus he sought out the Fifth Patriarch Hung-Jen. Although the patriarchate ceased with Hui Neng, what developed in its place were lineages, all of which could be traced back to Hui Neng and through him to Bodhidharma and to the Buddha himself. It was vitally important, therefore, that one’s master couid trace his lineage back to Hui Neng.18 Thus even today, Ch’an, Seon, and Zen masters take great pains to become associated with a recognizea lineage.

The matter of establishing Hui Neng as the recognized Sixth Patriarch was not a simple affair, however, for the symbols of transmission had been given to him secretly by Hung-jen, and for some years following Hui Neng lived in complete anonymity. Thus there was time for Shen- hsiu to lay claim to the patriarchate. It fell to a disciple of Hui Neng, Shen-hui (670-762) to mount an attack upon Shen-hsiu and the Northern School of Ch’an. This was done with such vigor that Hui Neng emerged [page 8] with his position of the Sixth Patriarch firmly established. For good measure, Shen-hui accused P’u-chi, the heir of Shen-hsiu “of falsely claiming to be the Seventh Patriarch and of sending an emissary to deface Hui-neng’s stele and sever the head from his mummified body.”19 As we shall see, this was not the only time that an attempt was made to steal the head of Hui Neng. Shen-hsiu’s lineage did not continue, however, and today he is virtually forgotten and “his legacy lay in establishing Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch and assuring the historical presence of the once little-known priest.”20

Shen-hui’s task was accomplished primarily through The Platform Sutra which was compiled by a priest by the name of Fa-hai. Almost nothing is known about Fa-hai but he apparently collected the dharma lectures of Hui Neng, added a brief biography of Hui Neng, and provided a preface as well as an appendix. There are numerous extant manuscripts of The Platform Sutra but there are three primary manuscripts. The first is the Tun-haung Manuscript dated between 830 and 860, and so named because it was found by Aurel Stein in the famed Tun-haung Caves. The second is the Hui-hsin Manuscript dated at 967 which became the basis for two significant Japanese versions. The third is the 1291 version which was included in the Buddhist Canon during the Ming Dynasty and is therefore known as the Ming Canon Version. The fact that the Tun-haung Manuscript has 12,000 characters, the Hui-hsin Maunscript 14,000 characters, and the Ming Canon Version 21,000 characters strongly suggests that there has been considerable editing and adding to The Platform Sutra down through the years.21 The Platform Sutra appeared in China and Korea in some twenty-six editions during the Ming and Ch’ing Dynasties and a full Korean version appeared in 1316.22 The Platform Sutra undoubtedly contains much material that was in fact added by Shen-hui in order to bolster the argument that Hui Neng was in fact the legitimate Sixth Patriarch. Indeed, it appears that some of the points made in The Platform Sutra were placed there after the fact to deal with doctrinal disputes which developed in Ch’an following the death of Hui Neng. Some critical scholars go so far as to suggest that almost nothing of either Hui Neng’s biography or of his teachings in The Platform Sutra is original at all.23 However, this later critical study was unknown and therefore irrelevant to the Korean Buddhist monks who[page 9] traveled to T’ang Dynasty China to learn directly from the great Ch’an masters.

**THE KOREAN CONNECTION**

China in the T’ang Dynasty (618—907) was a center of Buddhist teaching and practice. This was also a period when literature and the arts flourished and a time when China maintained an openness toward other cultures. As a result monks from the Buddhist world were drawn to China. Thus “from Chinese records and from travelers’ reports, it appears that Korean monks were indeed relatively familiar visitors in Chinese temples, along with Japanese and South Asians and Central Asians.”24

Specifically those Korean monks “traveled to China and made contact with schools of Buddhist philosophy influential there, and returned to Korea as their representatives.”25 The first Korean monk to represent the mature sudden enlightenment tradition of Hui Neng was Toui (d. 825). He left for China in 784 and became a disciple of Jizang (735-814) who was of the lineage of Mazu or Ma Tsu (d. 788). Mazu in turn was the second generation dharma descendant of Hui Neng.26 Toui remained in China for thirty-seven years, returning to Korea in 821. However, his ideas were not readily accepted and Toui retired to Sorak Mountain where he spent the remainder of his life in seclusion.27 It was one of Toui’s followers, Hongchup, who was responsible for founding Silsang Temple on Chiri Mountain. This became the first of the, so-called Nine Mountain Schools of Seon in Korea, all which traced their origin back to Hui Neng via the lineages of Hui Neng’s disciples. With the establishment of the Nine Mountain Schools the Ch’an tradition—now Seon—was firmly established in Korea.28

Virtually all of the famous Buddhist priests in Korea such as Chajang (608-686), Wonhyo (617-686), and Uisang (625-702) spent varying amounts of time in China studying, visiting famous temples, and becoming acquainted with new trends in Buddhist thought. Once the Ch’an tradition was established in Korea, priests in the Seon tradition such as T’aego (1301-1382) traveled to China where they either experienced enlightenment, had their enlightenment confirmed, or spent time studying and meditating under Chinese Ch’an masters. It was most important to return to Korea as a member of a recognized lineage.

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Significantly, there was one famous Korean Buddhist priest who did not study in China, and that was Chinul (1158-1210). Yet even Chinul maintained a connection to Hui Neng, for he experienced three separate spiritual awakenings while reading Hui Neng’s The Platform Sutra, Li Tongxuan’s Exposition of the Avatamsaka Sutra, and The Records of Dahui.29 Furthermore he founded the “Chogye School (named after the abode of the sixth patriarch of Zen, Caoqui in Chinese, Chogye in Korean) in order to reunify the various Son schools.”30 Today the temple most associated with Chinul, Songgwang Temple in South Cholla Province, is located on Mount Chogye, and the major Buddhist order in Korea, established in 1941, is the Chogye (Jogye) Order. Even though Chinul was not a member of a lineage formally established by one of Hui Neng’s successors, he certainly could lay claim to be following in the spirit of Hui Neng.

It was conceivably possible for spurious claims to be made concerning one’s lineage, and as there were numerous lineages all in competition for legitimacy there had to be a way of authenticating lineages. One such way was the collection and veneration of relics of the great Chinese Ch’an masters. If one could get hold of such a relic it would at least prove that one was at the temple where the great master had taught. In-deed, it might even show that one obtained the relic from one of the great master’s own disciples. The possession of an authentic relic was one way to legitimize a lineage. According to accounts in The Platform Sutra numerous attempts were made to steal the robe of Hui Neng and several attempts were made to sever the head of Hui Neng from his mummified body. None of these attempts were successful. The robe was always recovered and temple guards foiled those who tried to steal the head. There were, however, several instances where clippings of hair were removed from the mummified head. These were taken to other temples and placed in special pagodas and venerated as relics of Hui Neng.

The Platform Sutra does record one celebrated attempt to steal the head of Hui Neng in an appendix by Ling-t’ao, the stupa keeper at the Pao-lin Temple.31 The mummified, lacquer-covered body of Hui Neng and the treasures associated with Hui Neng, namely the original robe of transmission, the Korean mo na robe and the crystal bowl presented by the emperor, and other ritual items were placed under the protection of [page 11] the stupa keeper. The treasures were placed inside the stupa and the mummified body was placed in a lotus position upon a raised platform. Mindful of a prediction made by Hui Neng that someone would attempt to steal his head, a cloth-covered iron collar was placed around the neck of the body and chained firmly to prevent such a theft. Temple guards were always on watch.

According to the stupa keeper’s account an attempt to steal the head was made on 18 September 722. Awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of the iron chains being moved, the monks and temple guards rushed to the stupa in time to see a man dressed in mourning clothes running from the site. Upon examining the body of Hui Neng they discovered that the neck had been cut in an unsuccessful attempt to remove the head. Local government authorities were immediately informed and a warrant was taken out for the arrest of the culprit. Five days later the would-be thief was caught in a small village and brought before the authorities. His name was Chang Ching-man. He told the authorities that he was given twenty thousand cash by a Korean monk named Chin Ta-pei who was associated with the K’ai-yuan Temple in Hung-chou. This monk had planned to take the head of Hui Neng back to Korea so that it could be venerated in a Korean temple.

According to Chinese law, Chang should have been executed for the attempted theft, but one of Hui Neng’s disciples pleaded for clemency on the basis that the motive for the crime was a good one—the veneration of a relic of Hui Neng—and that Buddhist compassion treats friend and enemy alike. As a result Chang was freed.

Clearly the Korean connection with Hui Neng was a significant one, and the desire to obtain a relic of Hui Neng for veneration in a Korean temple was so strong that at least one Korean monk was willing to resort to questionable means to fulfill that desire.

**HUI NENG AND SSANGGYE TEMPLE**

In 722 two Korean monks returned from China. One was named Taebi (undoubtedly the Chin Tabei who paid twenty thousand cash for the head of Hui Neng) and the other was named Sambop. According to a legendary account, they brought with them “the skull remains of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism.”32 In a dream they were instructed to build a [page 12] temple in a valley on Chiri Mountain where the arrowroot blossomed even in the winter season. They found such a place and in 724 founded Okch’on Temple.33 Here they constructed a memorial for the relic of Hui Neng which they had brought with them from China.

In the year 840 this temple was greatly enlarged and its name was changed to Ssanggye Temple by the priest Chin’gam (d. 887). An old stone pagoda was moved from the site of the abandoned Mokab Temple to Ssanggye Temple and became the place where the relic of Hui Neng was enshrined. Known as the Yujo-jungsantap, it was placed in a hall called the Gumdang, or Golden Hall. This hall was remodeled in 1979 under the direction of the priest Kosan. In addition to the pagoda containing the relic of Hui Neng, a striking early twentieth-century portrait of Hui Neng was also placed in this hall. Recently, however, the portrait has been moved to the more secure location of the Ssanggye Temple Museum. The exterior walls of the Gundang are adorned with a series of paintings depicting the major events in the life of Hui Neng.

The reason for all of this effort to bring a relic of Hui Neng to Korea was to firmly establish Korean Seon in the Ch’an lineage of Hui Neng. At least four elements were involved in this veneration of relics.34 The first was the popularization of Ch’an or Seon. Coupled with this was a second element, the humanization of the sacred. By providing visible objects for veneration and worship, the common people were able to relate to something concrete. This led to the third element, the development of a sacred topography for pilgrimage to sacred sites. Mountains were considered to be sacred places by the Korean people, and the placing of a relic in a mountain temple served to enhance Ssanggye Temple as a pilgrimage site. Fourth and finally there was a deification of the ancient Ch’an masters such as Hui Neng. Already in China there were legends concerning Hui Neng’s staff being used as a dowser to find wells and springs and his robe being used to renew dried up springs.35 It was not long until stories began to be told of mysterious light emanating from the pagoda in the Gumdang. Devout pilgrims who placed their hand inside an opening in the back of the pagoda were able to feel the hair attached to the skull and miraculous healings were said to take place. Ssanggye Temple was not only a center of Seon Buddhist meditation, [page 13] but also a center of pilgrimage which drew a great variety of people to the temple.

Among those who were associated with Ssanggye Temple was Ch’oe Ch’i-won (b. 857), who is sometimes called the father of Korean literature. The inscription on the large memorial stele found in the temple courtyard was written by Ch’oe. Mysteriously, he disappeared on Chiri Mountain. Over the years other “mountain men” followed after him, and some of them also disappeared on the mountain. All, however, were attracted to the sacredness of the mountain and to its temples such as Ssanggye Temple.36 There were even stories which placed the legendary original site of the Utopian Chonghakdong in the vicinity of Ssanggye Temple. Surely the presence of a relic of the Sixth Patriarch served to add to the spiritual aura which surrounded Ssanggye Temple and its immediate environs.

The question for contemporary scholars, of course, is: Does the pagoda in the Gumdang at Ssanggye Temple actually contain the skull of Hui Neng? According to the account of the stupa keeper recorded in the appendix to The Platform Sutra, the answer is clearly “no.” Indeed, a life- size photograph of the mummified body of Hui Neng kept on display in the Ssanggye Temple Museum would appear to support this answer, for it is obvious that the head is fully intact and firmly attached to the body. At the same time, however, it is highly probable that the pagoda contains a “skull relic,” that is, some part of Hui Neng that would normally be attached to the skull or the head, such as a lock of hair or perhaps even a patch of skin with the hair still attached. Chinese records note that bits of hair were taken from the mummified body from time to time to be used as relics. It is most likely that when it was obvious that it would be impossible to remove the head from the body, the thief simply grabbed a few locks of hair and these were given to Taebi and Sambop to take back to Korea.

As for the “hair attached to the skull” which devout pilgrims feel when they place their hand inside the opening in the back of the pagoda, it is obvious that this is not literally the hair of Hui Neng. The actual relic would have been placed in a reliquary and sealed inside the pagoda where it would be out of public view and kept safe. This is the case with [page 14] relics in other Buddhist temples in Korea and there is no reason to assume that things would be different at Ssanggye Temple.

While it has been suggested that Taebi and Sambop were legendary figures, there have also been questions raised concerning the historicity of Hui Neng. Indeed, some scholars have asserted that so little is known about Hui Neng, and so little of what is in The Platform Sutra was actually spoken by Hui Neng, that almost everything about Hui Neng is a fabrication designed wholly for the purpose of establishing him as the Sixth Patriarch and thus establishing the basis for a Jineage.37 Perhaps the entire truth of the matter will never be known, but what is known is that Hui Neng has been established as the Sixth Patriarch and the Ch’an, Seon/Zen lineages in existence today originate from this source or are, as in the case of Chinul, in some way related to this source. Scholars may engage in a critical debate as to just how this was accomplished, but it is difficult to argue against the fact that it has been accomplished.

There is no doubt, therefore, that devout pilgrims, Buddhist scholars, and the merely curious will continue to come to Ssanggye Temple to visit the Gumdang. It is located within a walled inner courtyard of the temple where several Seon meditation halls are also found. At the top of a stone stairway, nestled against the mountainside, is the Gumdang. Inside the small stone pagoda is the “skull relic” of the Sixth Patriarch which serves as mute testimony that Hui Neng, or at least a part of him, is indeed in Korea.

**HUI NENG IN KOREA TODAY**

During a visit to Ssanggye Temple in January of 2007 the writer was unable to visit the Gumdang because of the winter meditation session. The walled enclosure was closed to all visitors so as to provide an environment in which the monks could practice Seon meditation undisturbed. In the evening, following a light supper, the monks had a period of free time during which they were allowed to take walks down to the nearby village. There were many small groups of between five to ten monks taking their evening walks. It was obvious that monks had come from temples all over Korea in order to practice meditation at Ssanggye Temple. While there may have been questions concerning the historical existence of Hui Neng and Taebi and Sambop, and perhaps even questions [page 15] about the “skull relic” inside the pagoda in the Gumdang, there was no question that the spirit of Hui Neng is very much alive in Korea today.

This is due in part to the belief that the Korean Seon tradition is carried on through established lineages that can be traced back to Hui Neng. The Ven. Song Chol (1912-1993), Patriarch of the Chogye Order and celebrated hermit at Haein Temple on Kaya Mountain, was especially insistent on this point. When asked: “Is there anyone you have a special respect for?” he replied as follows:

There are many outstanding figures throughout world history, but I would have to say that the ones I respect the most are first, the Buddha, and the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng. Based on his own experiences, the Buddha addressed the issue of the true self and how to go about realizing it. And both the Buddha and Hui-neng gave the most profound and clear explanations on three important things: the Buddha nature of sentient beings, the fact that this world is a paradise, and the fact that present reality is absolute.38

In the same series of interviews he also asserted that the Buddha and Hui Neng held to a similar position on the middle way. He said: “The Middle Way goes back to the Buddha’s first sermon to the five ascetics at the Deer Park where he introduced the concept of non-suffering, non- joy. The Sixth Patriarch of Ch’an, Hui-neng, also made an important statement with his ‘Think no good, think no evil.’”39 Commenting on the assertion that the present world is a paradise, Song Chol referred again to Hui Neng, this time in a dharma lecture: “They say that paradise is in the west. So the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng asked where the people in the west went if people in the east chanted and went to paradise in the west.... Paradise is right here, right now, in all directions. This is, of course, an echo of Hui Neng’s celebrated comment concerning the wind, the banner, and the mind.

One can see in these statements not only an implied assertion of an association with a lineage going back to Hui Neng, but also a statement of the belief in sudden enlightenment—the realization of the nature of a reality which already exists. This is not a reality which must be sought after following many years of concentrated study; it is a reality that can only be realized through a sudden awareness. In contemporary Seon understanding and practice the Yen, Song Choi stood firmly within the[page 16] lineage and tradition of Hui Neng and thus assured that the spirit of Hui Neng would remain alive within Korean Buddhism.

This has brought to the fore a longstanding dispute within the Korean Seon community which centered around the teachings of Chinul, who did not study in China and thus lacked an “authentic” transmission through a Chinese Ch’an master via an established lineage. The dispute was further aggravated by Chinul’s emphasis upon studying Seon doctrines, thus leaning toward the more gradual enlightenment position advocated by Hui Neng’s chief rival Shen-hsiu. Still another element which contributed to the dispute was the position of Korean Ch’an masters in the pre-modern era and the degree to which they maintained their Korean distinctiveness in a context largely influenced by Chinese Ch’an masters.

Some scholars are of the opinion that there never was a single line of transmission and that in reality there were numerous lineages which developed from both Hui Neng and Shen-hsiu,41 Others point out that Koreans who went to China to study under Ch’an masters always “worked to maintain their own independent sense of self-identity” so that an authentic Korean Buddhist tradition was able to develop.42 Still others assert that Chinul actually taught that sudden enlightenment and gradual practice go together so that true practice is possible only after one has attained enlightenment.43 Thus “although Chinul criticized Hui Neng, he did so without contradicting him.”44 The fact is that in contemporary Korean Buddhist practice the two emphases upon sudden enlightenment and gradual study of the doctrines go together. Thus the majority of Korean monks spend some time at each of the Three Jewel Temples—Haein Temple, Songgwang Temple, and Tongdo Temple—in addition to practicing under Seon masters at other temples such as Ssanggye Temple.

Whichever position is taken concerning this ongoing dispute, it cannot be denied that Hui Neng is one of the most significant personages in Korean Seon Buddhism. To favor sudden enlightenment and transmission through a Chinese lineage is to follow in the way of Hui Neng. To favor gradual enlightenment and transmission through a distinctly Korean lineage is to follow in the way of Chinul, yet at the same time respecting the spirit of Hui Neng. Either way an encounter with Hui Neng cannot be avoided. Thus the presence of Hui Neng continues to be felt in Korea today.

[page 17] **CONCLUSION**

When dealing with a person such as Hui Neng and a text such as The Platform Sutra it is impossible to avoid controversy over that which is “real” and historically happened, and that which is “imaginary” and has no verified historical basis. This is especially true concerning the story of the attempted theft of Hui Neng’s skull and the subsequent placing of a “skull relic” of the master at Ssanggye Temple on Chiri Mountain.

In considering Hui Neng and The Platform Sutra we can identify three distinct yet interdependent traditions. The first is the legendary tradition. It is this tradition that appealed to the early Korean monks who went to China to study in the T’ang, and it is this tradition which they brought back to Korea. Relics, both authentic and inauthentic, are very much a part of this tradition. Transmission from a master to his disciples is also a part of this tradition. And a good engaging story is very much a part of this tradition.

The second tradition is the critical tradition. This is the tradition of the scholars who are seeking to uncover what “really happened.” This tradition seeks to get behind the legends, the relics, and the appeals to questionable lineages. How did Hui Neng actually become the Sixth Patriarch? How was The Platform Sutra actually written, and who actually wrote it? Why were other lineages suppressed? And what really lies encased inside that pagoda in the Gumdang at Ssanggye Temple? This tradition seeks to get behind the story and uncover the facts.

Thirdly, there is the received tradition. Of course everyone is aware that a good part of what we know about Hui Neng is probably pure legend or even outright fabrication. The fact that there are three manuscripts of The Platform Sutra each of a different length is evidence enough of questionable authorship. Nor would one deny that Chunil was a great Korean Seon master even without being part of a Chinese lineage. As for the “skull relic” at Ssanggye Temple, no one is going to even think of desecrating the pagoda by opening it up to answer the question once and for all. Why? Because, in a very real sense, none of this matters. What matters is the received tradition. Hui Neng was the Sixth Patriarch whose line of transmission and lineages brought to Korea a new way of Buddhist understanding and practice—Seon. The theft of the “skull relic” and its repository at Ssanggye Temple cemented this relationship be[page 18] tween the Ch’an of Hui Neng and the Seon of Korea. The spirit of Hui Neng continues to energize Korean Buddhism even as that spirit is reinterpreted within a uniquely Korean context. As the legendary and the critical traditions interact and sometimes even come into conflict, the received tradition will continue to inspire, educate, and perhaps even enlighten those who take it seriously.

Truly the presence of Hui Neng in Korea is a fascinating and significant chapter in the story of Korean religion, a story that is still very much in the process of being told.

**NOTES**

1. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, SJ, “Translators’ Introduction,” Matteo Ricci, SJ, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T’ien-chu Shih-i), trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, SJ, ed. Edward J. Malatesta, SJ (Taipei/Paris/Hong Kong: Ricci Institute, 1985), 5-8.

2. Bernard Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 22-23.

3. Keith Stevens, “Two Groups of Chinese Deities Rarely Seen on Chinese Altars,” [http://64.233.187.104/custom?q=cache:nJjsnreYgnMJ:sunzi1.lib.hku.hk/hljo.vie...] (11/16/2005).

4. Philip Yampolsky, “Hui-Neng,” The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 6, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1987), 495-96. The term sutra is usually “confined to works that are attributed to a Buddha.” (p. 495)

5. Ibid., 495. The name Hui Neng is transliterated from the Chinese in various forms: Hui Neng, Hui-Neng, Hui-neng, and Huineng. From Korean it is sometimes written as Hye-neng. In Japanese the name is rendered Eno or Yeno. Two other names for Hui Neng in the Chinese are Caoqi, referring to the place where he lived, and Liu Tsu or Lu Tsu meaning “workman Lu,” referring to his humble origins as a wood cutter.

6. The term Chan is the Chinese modification of the Sanskrit term dhyana which means “meditation.” It is rendered as Chan or Ch’an in the Chinese; Son or Seon in the Korean; and Zen in the Japanese. The terms are often used interchangeably. See Ernest Wood, Zen Dictionary (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1957, 1977), 25-26.

7. Gao Xingjian, Snow in August, trans. Gilbert C. F. Fong (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003).

8. Chang Meng-jui, “Made From Scratch: The Premiere of ‘Total Theate,’” and Chang Meng-jui, “Behind the Scenes with Council for Cultural Affairs[page 19] Chairperson Tchen Yu- chiou,” Sinorama, January 2003, 100-07.

9. This summary of Hui Neng’s life is adapted from the author’s master’s thesis which in turn is based upon Chinese and English translation editions of The Platform Scripture. See Daniel J. Adams, “The ‘Great Meaning’ of Hui-Neng: A Buddhist Hermeneutic,” unpublished M.A. thesis, Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan, 1979, 47-58.

10. There are of course numerous English translations of this poem. This translation is taken from John C. H. Wu, The Golden Age of Zen (Taipei: National War College/Committee on the Compilation of the Chinese Library, 1967), 60.

11. Ibid., 62. See also Michael Pye, “Comparative Hermeneutics in Religion,” in The Cardinal Meaning—Essays in Comparative Hermeneutics: Buddhist and Christian, eds. Michael Pye and Robert Morgan (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1973), 45-47, where the “cardinal meaning” and the “great meaning” are discussed with reference to Hui Neng’s understanding of the essence of Ch’an teaching and practice.

12. Ibid., 62-63.

13. Ibid., 63.

14. Wing-tsit Chan, “Introduction and Notes,” The Platform Scripture (Asian Institute Translations, No. 3), trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: St. John’s University Press, 1963), 10.

15. Alan W. Watts, The Way of Zen (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 94.

16. Sung Bae Park, Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 20-23 .

17. See D. T. Suzuki, The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind: The Significance of the Sutra of Hui-neng (Wei-lang), ed. Christmas Humphreys (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1969).

18. See, for example, Charles Luk (Lu K’uan Yu), trans. & ed., The Transmission of the Mind Outside the Teaching (New York: Grove Press, 1974). This book is a collection of biographical sketches and summaries of the teachings of the first six generations of the Nan- Yo lineage of Hui Neng.

19. Yampolsky, “Hui Neng,” The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 6, 495.

20. Ibid.

21. Carl Bielefeldt and Lewis Lancaster, “T’an Ching (Platform Scripture),” Philosophy East and West 25, no. 2 (1975): 197-212. There are four editions of The Platform Scripture currently available in English. The first two are translated from the Tun-haung Manuscript: The Platform Scripture (Asian Institute Translations, No. 3), trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: St. John’s Univesity Press, 1963) and The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript, trans, with notes and intra Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). Both these translations include the full Chinese text. The other two are translated from the 1291 Ming Canon Version and do not include the Chinese text: The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng, trans. A. F. Price and[page 20] Wong Mou-Lam (Boston: Shambhala, 1990) and The Sutra of Hui-Neng: Grand Master of Zen With Hui-Neng’s Commentary on the Diamond Sutra, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1998).

22. Yampolsky, Platform Sutra, 104, fn. 58 and 59.

23. See John Jorgensen, Inventing Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch’an (sinica Leidensia, No. 68) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005).

24. J. C. Cleary, “T’aego’s World,” A Buddha from Korea: The Zen Teaching of T’aego, trans, with commentary J. C. Cleary (Boston and Shaftsbury, UK: Shambhala. 1988), 37. It should be noted that recent studies are showing that travel in ancient times was much more common than previously thought. See The Hye Ch’o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India, trans, and ed. Yang Han-Sung, Jan Yun-Hua, Iida Shotara and Laurence W. Preston (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press and Seoul: Po Chin Chai, n.d.); Tabish-Kjair, Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and Hanna Ziadeh, Other Routes: 1500 years of African and Asian Travel Writing (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Kim Tae Joon, Korean Travel Literature, trans. Lee Kyong-hee (Seoul: Ewha Woman’s University Press, 2006).

25. Cleary, “T’aego’s World,” 29.

26. Luk, The Transmission of the Mind, 31, 38-49.

27. See Stephen Batchelor, “Introduction to the Korean Zen Tradition,” Kusan Sunim, The Way of Korean Zen, trans. Martine Fages, ed. Stephen Batchelor (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1985), 13.

28. Duk-Whang Kim, A History of Religions in Korea (Seoul: Daeji Moon- hwa-sa, 1988), 125, 129; Chae Taeg-su, “The Unified Shilla Period: The Golden Age of Buddhism,” The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea, ed. Korean Buddhist Research Institute (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1993), 112-15.

29. Batchelor, “Introduction to the Korean Zen Tradition,” 18.

30. Cleary, “T’aego’s World,” 42.

31. See Price and Wong, The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-neng, 155-56 and Yampolsky, Platform Sutra, 86-87.

32. Robert Nilsen, South Korea Handbook, second edition (Chico, CA: Moon Publications, 1997), 515. It should be noted that this account is legendary. Toui’s lengthy stay in China from 784 to 821 has more of a historical basis. Even so, it is entirely possible that Taebi and Sambop were historical figures and did in fact attempt to bring back relics of Hui Neng to Korea.

33. The date for the founding of Okch, on Temple varies, 722, 723, and 724 being given in various publications. The most recent publications of Ssanggye Temple give the founding date as 724.

34. See Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights, 173.

35. Ibid., 172.

36. Jongheon Jin, “The Transforming Sacredness of Mt. Chirisan from an Uto-[page 21]pian Shelter into a Modern National Park: Focused on the Escapist Lives of ‘Mountain Men’,” Journal of the Korean Geographical Society 40, no. 2 (2005): 177-82, where Jin discusses the “mountain men” of Chiri Mountain.

37. See Jorgensen, Inventing Hui-neng; Yampolsky, “Introduction,” Platform Sutra; and Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights. Critical studies of the Ch’an/Seon/Zen tradition are in their infancy. However, if similar studies in the christian tradition are any indication, once “the dust settles” the vast majority of believers will enter into a “post-liberal” phase and focus their attention on the received narratives, purported fabrications and all. Religious belief and devotion will continue. People will still come to the Gumdang at Ssanggye Temple to venerate the “skull relic” of Hui Neng.

38. Ven. Song-chol, Echoes from Mt. Kaya: Selections on Korean Buddhism by Ven. Song-chol Patriarch of the Korean Chogye Buddhist Order, ed. Ven. Won-tek, trans. Brian Barry (Seoul: Lotus Lantern International Buddhist Center, 1988), 145.

39. Ibid., 149.

40. Ven. Song Choi, Opening the Eye: Dharma Messages by Ven. Song Choi, Korean Chogye Zen Master and Patriarch, trans. Brian Barry (Paju, Korea: Gimm-young Books, 2002), 71.

41. See Dan Lusthaus, “Critical Buddhism and Returning to the Sources,” Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism, eds. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 41-42; Lewis Lancaster, “The Role and Significance of Korean Son in the Study of East Asian Buddhism,” [http:/kr/buddhism.org/zen/koan/ Lewis\_Lancaster.htm] (11/17/2005).

42. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “Is There a ‘Korean Buddhism’ in the Pre-Nationalist Age?” in Buddhism and Civilization in the 21st Century, ed. Korean Buddhist Research Institute (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1966), 624.

43. See Park, Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment, 105. It is interesting to compare this dispute between sudden enlightenment and gradual enlightenment to a similar dispute in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Christianity. The revivalists emphasized a sudden conversion experience while Horace Bushnell (1802—1876) of Yale University advocated a gradual experience of Christian nurture. It is apparent that the sudden-gradual dichotomy is not unique to the Ch’an/Seon/Zen Buddhist tradition.

44. Ibid., 106.