

Communications to the Editor

Charles Muller's response to Richard McBride's review of *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation* (JAS 59.4:1053–55)

I appreciate the fact that Richard McBride has taken the time to review my book, *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation* for the *Journal of Asian Studies* (JAS 59.4, pp. 1053–1055). Unfortunately, however, I feel that this review has poorly represented the overall content and contribution of this work, and is further guilty of fundamental errors and mischaracterizations, which I should not leave uncorrected.

I must start by finding some solace in the fact that Mr. McBride has at least gleaned my basic intention: to offer a scholarly translation of a seminal Buddhist scripture and commentary that would be reasonably accessible to the general reader. Nonetheless, the effort I have put into developing a thorough, scholarly exegesis to the sutra/commentary combination, has, it seems, been largely ignored in the review, to the extent that the reviewer seems not to have recognized this to be the primary aim of the work. But my larger concern is the extent to which the reviewer actually relays disinformation regarding the book, which leads me to the conclusion that either he did not read it carefully, or came to it with some sort of negative predisposition.

The second paragraph on page 1053 opens with the objection: "From the title, one would expect that the book would convey something about the history of Korean Buddhism and the importance of the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* in the Korean Sŏn tradition." Readers might well assume from this that no historical background has been given. In fact, a full 20 pages (18–37) are devoted to discussion of the history of the sutra in Korea.

Included in this discussion are examples of prominent Korean Buddhists (such as Kihwa and T'aego) for whom contemplation on the SPE was instrumental in their awakening experiences. The SPE is also discussed in the context of Chinul, for whom the text was one of the most important resources in the development his sudden/gradual approach to meditative cultivation. In addition, due in large part to the influence of Kihwa, the SPE became a central text in the curriculum of Korean monks, remaining in this position down to the present. Thus, it is hard to understand the reason for the further complaint on the part of the reviewer of failing to see the reasons for the characterization of the text as a "guide for meditation" in Korean Buddhism.

Moving down to page 1054, we find further evidence of a non-reading of the book, when the reviewer states "A translation of the sutra, which was rendered into English previously by Charles Luk . . . is found in an appendix." The reason for the retranslation of the text in the appendix is precisely because it is *not* the version of the text rendered by Luk (that is, T 842, *as is*) but a version of the text extensively edited and revised by Kihwa, which alters significantly the content of numerous seminal passages—a fact that is stated in very large type in the title page of the appendix itself (p. 245). The significance of Kihwa's revisions, which are the primary motivating factor for this retranslation, is also clearly stated (e.g., p. 33–34, esp. note 76). It is surprising and unfortunate that the reviewer has missed this point entirely.

The content of my discussion of the earlier (pre-Korean) history of the text and East Asian apocrypha in general is also severely mischaracterized, as the reader is led to believe that the entire discourse going from pages 4–24 is derived from prior studies

by Robert Buswell (McBride's mentor) and Peter Gregory. Of course, in the providing of background discussion of a text like the SPE, I could not but duly acknowledge and make good use of the landmark scholarship on apocrypha, Zongmi, and the general sinicization of Buddhism done by these two scholars. But the actual reliance on the works by these two men cited by McBride amounts to only 3–4 pages, and is honestly and accurately attributed.

Wholly ignored in the review is my central contribution to the discussion—the identification of the essence–function paradigm as the defining mark of East Asian apocryphal texts—a point which, to my knowledge, has not been made elsewhere, and is certainly not discussed in such a manner in the above-cited studies.

The most blatant error in the review concerns McBride's assessment of the breadth of background coverage offered on Kihwa. He writes on page 1054: "The biographical introduction to Kihwa unfortunately ignores the crucial role the monk played in preserving the Buddhist church in Korea during the difficult years of the early Chosŏn period (1392–1910), when Confucianism replaced Buddhism as the state religion. (p. 27)."

Not only is the page number listed here incorrect (it should be 28), but the entire criticism is problematic, as:

(1) The introduction to this work is focused appropriately on Kihwa's relationship with the SPE. It is not intended to be a full biography, and there is no reason why it should be. As the reviewer (ostensibly a specialist in Korean Buddhism) should well know, I have already given full treatment to the life and works of Kihwa, as well as detailed treatment of his role in the early Chosŏn Buddhist–Confucian struggle, in my 1993 Ph.D. dissertation.

(2) But even in the present book, I have certainly not "ignored" this matter by any means. On page 28, I have written:

[Kihwa's] notoriety in general Korean intellectual history is mainly attributable to [his] fourth work, a treatise that he wrote during the onset of the purge of Buddhism from its central role in the Korean society and government during the shift from the Buddhist-influenced Koryŏ to the Neo-Confucian-dominated Chosŏn. Since this dynastic shift occurred right during the middle of Kihwa's life, he, as the leading Buddhist figure at the time, was placed in the position of being the primary Buddhist spokesman in answer to Neo-Confucian anti-Buddhist polemic. . . .

The ensuing footnote (#60) reads: "For more detail on the *Hyŏn chŏng non*, see chapter seven of my Ph.D. dissertation, or my article "The Buddhist–Confucian Conflict in the Early Chosŏn and Kihwa's Syncretic Response: The *Hyŏn chŏng non*."

McBride has found some "stylistic problems," concerning a couple of less-than-complete-footnotes, sutra names offered in more than one language—and, much to my dismay, an apparent dislike for the usage of conventional text name abbreviations. All I can say to this is that yes, you can find a couple of technical missteps (if that is what they indeed are), but I have not yet come across an academic work that has not had a couple of errors like this here and there, and I seriously wonder if these are sufficient in number or weight to be raised as a major issue in the review.

The major overriding point of misunderstanding is no doubt a difference in methodological orientation as to what constitutes the valid "scholarly" treatment of a Buddhist classical text. This difference in approach is revealed in the complaint that I have not made a thorough enough investigation of the apocryphal Chinese origins of the work. This, as I understand it, is the primary motivation for the reviewer's

assessment that the character of the work lies “somewhere between the scholarly and popular.”

This difference in expectation is critical here. The reviewer wants to see a study in East Asian Buddhist historical reconstruction. What I have provided instead, is a study of Korean Buddhist scriptural exegesis and interpretation against the background of a continuing intellectual problem in the Chinese Buddhist, and more generally, Chinese philosophical tradition. In this regard, I believe that my introductory essay on the significance and absolute importance of the SPE for Korean Buddhist thinkers/meditators, before and after Kihwa, is one of the book’s greatest contributions.

McBride’s concerns can be seen as the reflection of a prevalent trend in the Japanese and North American scholarly treatment of East Asian Buddhist texts, which is to focus exclusively, and sometimes even myopically, on the attempt to track down the precise origins of texts, often to the extent of complete dismissal of explication of the text itself. Within this methodology, the matter of where a text came from is of paramount importance, while *what it says* is not of major concern. While this approach to Buddhist textual scholarship can be very useful for certain purposes, it is still only *one kind* of approach, and I see no need for all scholars who work in this field to feel that they must remain stuck in the clutches of this one-track methodology. The approach that I have taken here, and which I am continuing to take in subsequent works, is an exegetical approach that includes not only philological background, but also personal engagement in interpretation—something that we commonly see in areas of philosophy and theological studies, both in the West, and in Korea.

McBride, absorbed in the identification of stylistic errors (both real and imaginary) in my 48-page introduction, has, aside from crediting me with “smoothness,” fully ignored discussion of the quality, value, or major issues of the 200+ page translation itself, giving no comment at all regarding the vitally important doctrinal themes of the sutra, or the sparkling commentary by Kihwa. Accordingly, there is no discussion of the scripture’s central arguments, such as the matter of original enlightenment, the sudden-gradual issue, or my own interpretation of these through the essence-function paradigm. The main point of the work, then, is missed, and potential readers are led to believe that the book is nothing but a patchwork of half-scholarship written for Zennists.

I remain convinced that the book is in total, a solid work, centered on a rigorously precise and eminently readable translation, which provides significant new information regarding one of Korean Buddhism’s most influential figures, as well as a clear explanation of the role that a scripture of a particular genre played in the development of Korean Buddhist theory and practice. It can be used by scholars as a valuable reference on a seminal text/commentary in East Asian Buddhism. It can also readily be used as course text for an upper-division class on Buddhism. And yes, the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* may perhaps even be used as a meditation resource by modern Zen practitioners.

Richard McBride’s response to Muller:

I stand by my overall assessment that Muller’s book provides very little information to the reader about the place of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* within the Korean Buddhist tradition. It is instead Muller’s personal encounter with the text through Kihwa’s commentary. Muller provides little or no evidence to support his

characterization that this sutra is “Korean Buddhism’s Guide to Meditation”: there is next to nothing in Muller’s book about the influence of Kihwa’s revised version of the sutra, or of Kihwa’s commentary, on later Korean tradition. The relevance of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* to Korean Buddhism can only be seen within the context of the Korean monastic examination system, and especially in conjunction with the study of other important sutras and “apocryphal” Chinese scriptures. This system is comprised of four levels. First, the Śrāmanera Course (*samikwa*) uses primers to instruct prospective monks in the monastic lifestyle and their responsibilities. Second, the Fourfold Collection Course (*sajipkwa*) reviews the primers studied earlier and introduces texts by Zongmi and Chinul on the complementary nature of meditation (Sōn) and doctrinal (Kyo) studies. The foregoing courses take five years to complete (two and three years respectively) and most monks do not advance past this point. At the third level or Fourfold Doctrinal Course (*sagyokwa*), a monk studies the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, the *Śūrangama-sūtra*, and the *Awakening of Faith*, as well as the *Diamond Sūtra* and its five commentaries. The third course also comprises three years of study. In the final or Great Doctrinal Course (*taegyokwa*) a monk studies the entire *Avatamsaka-sūtra* over the space of three years. Pūmhae Kagan’s (1820–1896) *Tongsa yōlchōn* (Biographies of the Korean Buddhist masters), which was completed in 1894, contains biographies of seven Chosŏn-period monks who studied the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, but that study occurs only in conjunction with their reading of some or all of the other texts mentioned above. It may be implied that two more monks studied the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* within this examination context since their biographies say that they learned the “fourfold doctrine” (*sagyō*). Even more tellingly, Kihwa’s own biography in that collection makes no mention of his exegetical work on the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*. [See *Tongsa yōlchōn*, in *Han’guk Pulgyo chōnsō* (Complete works of Korean Buddhism) (Seoul: Tongguk Taehakkyo Ch’ulpansa, 1979[–2000]), vol. 10, pp. 1011a5–11 (Kihwa); 1015b15–16; 1027b2–4; 1027b14–16; 1030b17–22; 1055c13–15; 1058c2; 1064c19–20; 1065a16–18; 1068a15–21.] While not wanting to downplay the relevance of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* to Korean Buddhism, I would be careful not to overemphasize its importance, as Muller does here. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Chosŏn-period Korean monks were familiar with Kihwa’s revisions of the sūtra. They apparently used the version (T 842) that was translated by Charles Luk. Kihwa’s alteration of several “seminal passages” in the received text only makes sense within the context of lingering suspicion about the veracity of the sūtra. Even though Muller’s study is putatively concerned with textual explication, the salient issues of dating and provenance of this “apocryphal scripture” cannot be ignored because they must be related to Kihwa’s reasons for emending it.

I included the reference to Charles Luk’s translation of *The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* in my review because it was cited neither clearly nor accurately in the reference matter in Muller’s book. Muller has lambasted such concerns about style and precise academic annotation. Nevertheless, the field has standard expectations for scholarly citation that, if absent—as they are in this book—seriously impair the value of the book. In conclusion, as I said in my review, despite the book’s shortcomings, Muller’s translation of Kihwa’s commentary is an important achievement. It is as a serious scholarly study that the book falls short.

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