The Value of Wonhyo's Thought for Contemporary Buddhist Studies

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I rarely accept a paper title exactly the way a conference organizer suggests it—in fact, I think this is the first time in my entire career that I've done this. I did so because I found it challenging and refreshing, and I was also reminded of my days as a student when my mentor at Stony Brook University, Sung Bae Park, was, on what seemed like a regular basis, asked to present papers on topics such as “Wonhyo and World Peace,” “Wonhyo and the Reconciliation of the Korean North-South Problem,” and so forth. So my basic first impression of Wonhyo was that he was someone who was regarded as a timeless figure, for some reason perceived as having special qualities that made him relevant for scholars and nonscholars in other times and cultures.

So now that it has become my turn to be called upon to explain Wonhyo's apparent relevance for a modern audience, I have to begin by asking: “Why it is always Wonhyo who is seen as the one who is in some way qualified to speak to modern-day issues and values?” I don't recall hearing of anyone being invited to make a presentation on the value for contemporary Buddhist Studies of the thought of Xuanzang, Fazang, Dōgen, Daehyeon, Uisang, or any other major classical-period East Asian Buddhist eminent monk. Or even Nāgârjuna or Vasubandhu for that matter. I suppose that there may have been such cases, but I have not heard of them.

If the question of this paper were “what is the significance of Wonhyo's *scholarship* for modern scholars,” the answer would be quite easy, since, through his massive volume of lucid and fluid writing we can get one of the clearest pictures of the actual state of the Buddhist intellectual climate of seventh-century East Asia. But when we ask about the significance of his “thought,” it seems that we are asking whether there was something in his approach that we might be able to adopt, that would aid us in our own studies—or perhaps even in our daily lives.

As modern scientific scholars we would probably start off by being somewhat skeptical of this possibility, given the rather large differences in both aims and approaches of ancient scholar-monks like Wonhyo and we modern researchers. At least we would have to ask the basic question that arises from time to time in present-day Buddhist studies, of whether being engaged in Buddhist belief and practice has relevance, either positive or negative, for the quality of scholarship one is pursuing. I know scholars who believe that personal experience in Buddhist practice is absolutely essential to conducting any meaningful study of Buddhism. Yet there are others who think that any form of personal involvement with Buddhism cannot but lead to distortions of facts, the prejudicial narrowing of one's view, which removes the possibility of conducting any truly scientific inquiry. And yet others might say that it depends on what kind of scholarship one is engaged in. When we consider the significance of Wonhyo's thought for modern research, we must keep in mind this kind of problem, as he was, after all, a different type of scholar than most of us.

The basic edifice for the establishment of Wonhyo's unusual reputation as a scholar is his unparalleled level of erudition. There are very few scholars in the entire history of Buddhism who demonstrated such a broad mastery of the canon, or who produced such a voluminous literary output. There is no one we know of who even came close to the breadth and range of his work, as he commented extensively on the full gamut of the Mahāyāna tradition as known in his time: he explicated texts from the Vinaya, Madhyamaka, Prajñāpāramitā, Yogâcāra, Tathāgatagarbha, Huayan, Lotus, Nirvāṇa, Pure Land, Maitreya, Logic, and State Protection systems, along with focused essays on doctrinal problems and works of exhortation to beginning practitioners. No one else in the East Asian tradition displayed even half this kind of range in scholarship, and I am as yet unaware of any scholar from any other cultural region of Buddhism who can be considered a match from this perspective (except for...).

But what is more important about Wonhyo that distinguishes him from his East Asian Buddhist colleagues is the degree of even-handedness with which he treated the texts derived from the various schools. Virtually all other commentators of the post-Han through the Sui and Tang and Silla eras wrote with the primary motivation of valorizing the doctrinal system of their own school. They carried out the bulk of their commentary on the texts of that school, with in some cases a smattering of work on texts related to other traditions. Wonhyo, not being the adherent of a particular school (although the Hwaeom school has always wanted to claim him as their own), distributed his commentaries with a remarkable level of evenness, always doing his utmost to treat the representative texts of various traditions on their own terms, to seek out any given text's own thematic framework, not trying to impose his own. Rather than trying to establish any single text as the culmination of the Mahāyāna, he strove to show where the teachings of the various schools fit into the Mahāyāna system as a whole.

In this aspect of basic evenhandedness, Wonhyo sets an excellent, but nonetheless difficult-to-match example for modern scholars. However, I think we can say that one major reason most modern scholars tend to specialize in a particular school or system is simply due to limitations in time and energy (although there are, of course, many reputable scholars who intentionally do sectarian-oriented work). To even begin to develop a breadth of scholarship comparable to Wonhyo, one would have to achieve a high level of linguistic and doctrinal mastery at a young age, and be able to devote oneself full-time to study, without teaching courses, chairing departments, serving on university committees, and so on. If we were able to do this, it might be the case that we, as modern scientific scholars, could also approach Wonhyo's breadth in the treatment of texts.

But in that case, our work would still potentially suffer from a lack of the profound spirit of the faith-driven Buddhological inquiry that was motivating Wonhyo's efforts. Wonhyo was a Buddhist of deep conviction, whose purpose was to draw out the most profound soteriological message of each text, and in so doing, to identify its most essential and distinctive themes, and to go on to clarify the precise location of each text within the Mahāyāna spectrum. But his inquiry was not an exercise in *pangyo* 判教— a practice of merely pigeonholing texts into specific categories. Wonhyo strove to find a way of reconciling doctrines that appeared to be disparate, but which he was certain had to be in some way commensurate within the Mahāyāna system.

This leads us to the all-important notion of *hwajaeng* (which, I would like to suggest, should be rendered into English as a *method*, or *approach* of harmonization, not a *theory[[1]](#footnote-2)* of harmonization). And I'd like to characterize *hwajaeng* primarily as an exercise of rigor, thoroughness, curiosity, and fairness. I do this to avoid repeating the tired labels of oneness, interpenetration, or ecumenism, and so forth. It is important, I think, to be aware of the need to counter tendencies among both Eastern and Western scholars to cast Wonhyo as some kind of arbitrary monist, as he was anything but. He recognized and acknowledged both the obvious and the subtle differences between traditions and sub-traditions with a greater degree of depth and precision than any of his contemporaries. He sought to thoroughly grasp the paradigms, worldviews, and idiosyncratic frameworks that the exponents of the various Buddhist schools were bringing to their material.

So Wonhyo was broadminded and fair, qualities that any modern scholar should want to embody. But how does one become truly fair and broadminded? Even if one studies the doctrines of a wide range of systems, and even if one's motivations for doing so are entirely sincere, it is still hard to avoid the trap of interpreting the doctrines of another system through our own paradigms. Proceeding in this way, it is doubtful whether we have really been able to fully grasp what the representative of another tradition is thinking. I would like to suggest, that it is only when we are capable of loosening our attachment to our *own* worldview that we are able to fully apprehend the positions of another. And I would further like to suggest that Wonhyo was a person who was able to do this, to a greater extent than most.

Thus, I would like to suggest that what is most valuable in Wonhyo's way of thinking is his ability to understand and embrace the views of others, and that this ability was based on a distinctive level of awareness of the need to be unattached to his own views. And he was able to do this only because of his keen awareness of the need to be free from the trap of language itself. This awareness is expressed clearly and forcefully in the final passages of many of his most important commentaries and essays, where he wraps up his exegetical exercise by bemoaning the fact that all the words he has articulated cannot but fail in expressing the most profound truth, and that therefore, if the reader *really* wants to get it, he should seek to free himself from the words, and approach the truth through a deep experience of faith—which is free from language. Thus Wonhyo admonishes himself and his readers to recognize that the only real recourse for proper understanding is to have ready access to the domain of the non-conceptual. Examples of this kind of exhortation on his part can be seen in most of his major works. For example, in his *Doctrinal Essentials of the Sutra of Immeasurable Life* (*Muryangsu gyeong jong-yo*), he says:

Outside the two truths one resides independently, in non-duality. Both barriers and their two external expressions transcend the barrierless. One should just have faith, because it cannot be apprehended through reason. Therefore it is called the incomparable, unequalled, supreme cognitive faculty (i.e., the Yogâcāra mirror cognition). (HBJ 1.562a6–10)

In the closing passage of the *System of the Two Hindrances* (*Ijangui*), Wŏnhyo says:

Yet these sentient beings, as well as all dharmas, are not really person or dharmas in the commonly understood sense of the word, nor are they nonexistent. I am offering this explanation, yet the truth of the two hindrances can be fathomed only by the enlightened ones. [We sentient beings] should consider it relying on pious faith. (HBJ 1.814b18–20)

Finally, as Wŏnhyo says in his oft-cited preface to his *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*:

Who, besides Vimalakīrti or the One-glance Gentleman,[[2]](#footnote-3) can discuss the Great Vehicle without language, and produce profound faith within the state of severance of thought? (HBJ 1.698b13–14)

Have we here reached a point where the thinking of Wonhyo veers into a realm that is outside the purview of modern scholars? Should scholars seek to plumb the meanings of a text by entering into a state of religious faith? It would seem, in terms of the everyday sense of the term “faith,” that there would be implications of narrow-mindedness, abandonment of criticality and rationality, that are the basic tools of scholars.

But as I have tried to argue in some recent writings, the meaning of “faith” as understood by Wonhyo in this case, is not the kind of faith that requires a specific object, nor is it simply a blind, uncritical belief in a dogma presented by a teacher or text. I understand the faith that is expressed by Wonhyo to be an expression of what is known as \**lokôttara-samyag-dṛṣṭi* — the “transmundane right view” which is in fact viewlessness, also interpreted by some as “not abiding in views.”[[3]](#footnote-4) In other words, Wonhyo is saying that when you let go of all your views and preconceptions (thus, are free from language), that is when you can really understand what a text is trying to say. Or what your disputant in an argument is trying to say. (Or even…?)

Did other textual commentators of Wonhyo's era, or of his category, take such a stance? Maybe, but I have not come across another eminent Buddhist scholar who regularly closes his essays and commentaries with this kind of admonition, so I am inclined to believe that he was special in this regard.

Is such an approach incompatible with modern-day scientific scholarship? I don't think so. It seems to me that lesser forms of faith—conventional forms of faith, might indeed be impedimentary to doing critical work. But faith understood at this level, with the implications of being free from preconceptions, attachments, paradigms, etc., should have the effect of making our critical faculties more acute. Is such a state beyond our reach? Again, I don't think it need be the case. We may never match the level of Wonhyo, but there is nothing to stop us from attempting the exercise of letting go of our own views on a moment-to-moment, case-by-case basis, and gradually getting better at it. Might this lead us to do better scholarship? I believe so.

References

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1. Theory: (1) an idea that is suggested or presented as possibly true but that is not known or proven to be true. (2) the general principles or ideas that relate to a particular subject. (Merriam-Webster) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A reference to Confucius and Wenbo Xuezi, who, according to the *Zhuangzi*, did not say anything to each other when they met, even though Confucius had wanted to meet Wenbo for a long time. When Confucius was asked the reason by his disciple Zilu, he replied: “With that kind of man, once glance tells you that the Way is there before you. What room does that leave for the possibility of speech?” This discussion occurs in Chapter 21 “Tian Zi-fang.” See Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu* (NY: Columbia University Press), p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See Muller 2011 and 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)