

Buddhist Daily Rituals in Korea: Their Structure and Meaning*

—Focusing on *Sasi bulgong*

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This paper examines the structure and meaning of *sasi bulgong*, a Buddhist daily ritual performed to offer rice to the Buddha in late morning, that targets lay Buddhist followers at the Three Jewel Monasteries affiliated with the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the mainstream Buddhist order in contemporary Korea. An in-depth analysis was conducted of the spatial, temporal, and contextual structure of *sasi bulgong* as well as the functional, ideological, and practical meaning of the ritual. This research led me to conclude that *sasi bulgong* is highly stratified both spatially and temporally and no clear evidence was found to support the contentions that it functions to solidify the identity of monastic members and is an outward expression of key Buddhist doctrine. Rather, the ritual currently used is a product of uncritical acceptance of “tradition,” serving as a kind of performance itself that contained the lay participants’ wishes for the betterment of their family, both living and dead.

Keywords: Buddhist ritual, lay followers, meaning, structure, *sasi bulgong*

Introduction

In contemporary Korea, Buddhist rituals are performed by Buddhist monks and a study of the structure and meaning of Buddhist rituals by monks has already been conducted (Kim 2006b: 129-57). While lay people are able to participate in these rituals, there is no Buddhist ritual solely for them in the strict sense of the term. Even Buddhist rituals that target them are led by a monk. Nevertheless,

Buddhist rituals for the laity are important in the sense that they constitute an important part of monastic life for the laity.

This paper will examine the structure and meaning of *sasi bulgong*, a Buddhist daily ritual performed to offer rice to the Buddha from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., which targets lay Buddhist followers in contemporary Korea. An in-depth analysis will be conducted of the spatial, temporal, and contextual structure of *sasi bulgong* at the Three Jewel Monasteries, which are representative Buddhist monasteries affiliated with the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (*Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong*),¹ the mainstream Buddhist order in contemporary Korea, and the functional, ideological, and practical meaning of *sasi bulgong*. In addition, this article will criticize the conventional view of Buddhist ritual, and by extension, ritual in general. Traditional scholarship has argued that “Buddhist daily rituals function to solidify the identity of the monastic community” and “These rituals are none other than the representation of key Buddhist doctrine.” However, this research is critical of such conventional ideas and proposes a new interpretation of the function of *sasi bulgong*.

This research led me to conclude that the structure and meaning of *sasi bulgong* in Korea are different from common view. The ritual was highly stratified both spatially and temporally with monks in the center and the laity in the periphery, and no clear evidence was found to support the contentions that *sasi bulgong* functions to solidify the identity of monastic members and is an outward expression of key Buddhist doctrine. Rather, the ritual currently used is a product of uncritical acceptance of “tradition.”

Around the time of Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, new Buddhist orders, including the Jingak Order, the Jineon Order, the Chongji Order, the Cheontae Order, the Beophwa Order, and the Taego Order that focused on this- and/or other-worldly benefit, emerged and the types of Buddhist rituals became diversified.² Among these, Buddhist rituals of the Jogye Order represent their kind in Korea. In addition, Tongdosa, Haeinsa, and Songgwangsa

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1. For the history and characteristics of the Jogye Order, refer to Kim (2004: 158-9).

2. For the history of research on Buddhist ritual in Korea, refer to Kim (2006: 129-31). For trends in overseas research on Korean Buddhism, see Kim (2006: 5-8), Jorgensen (2006: 9-25), McBride (2006: 27-48), and Mohan (2006: 49-68).

are representative monasteries of the Jogye Order and each of them signifies the Buddha Jewel Monastery, the Dharma Jewel Monastery, and the Sangha Jewel Monastery, respectively. Buddhist rituals in contemporary Korea are composed of daybreak rituals (*saebyeok yebul*), *sasi bulgong*, and evening rituals (*jeonyeok yebul*). Among these, more lay people join *sasi bulgong* and that is the reason it was chosen for analysis.

The research methodology was textual criticism, field research, interviews, and use of audio-visual aids. With regard to textual criticism, both domestic and foreign academic works, including Buddhist ritual texts used at the Three Jewel Monasteries of Korea, were analyzed. Traditional scholarship is primarily based on textual criticism. This research paid particular attention to field research since “rituals are not static, but, on the contrary, more often subject to dynamic changes” (Kreinath 2004: 1). Regarding field research, I participated in and observed the rituals held in Seolbeopjeon (Hall of Dharma Lecture) at Tongdosa on May 27, 2006;³ in Bogyeongdang (Hall of Universal Respect) at Haeinsa on April 22 and August 16;⁴ and in Daeung Bojeon (Hall of the Great Hero) at Songgwangsa on August 15. I also interviewed monks who were in charge of monastic education and ritual, a lay Buddhist follower who has served in the main hall of a subject monastery,⁵ and other lay Buddhists.⁶ In addition, audio-

3. More Korean Buddhist followers visit monasteries on the first and the fifteenth days of each lunar month than any other time. The day I visited Tongdosa was May 1 according to the lunar calendar and the number of participants at the assembly reached more than 300 with additional twenty choir members who wore a traditional Korean outfit in pink.

4. The wooden Buddhist images that were recently found at Haeinsa are presumed to have been established in the ninth century and are considered the oldest extant Buddhist statues in contemporary Korea. In commemoration of this discovery, *sasi bulgong* at the monastery was being performed as “Haeinsa Birojana Bucheonim Gwangmyeong Gido Beophoe” (The Dharma Assembly for Prayer for the Brightness of Vairocana Buddha at Haeinsa). The assembly period was from February 17, 2006 to September 21, 2006. Prayers were performed four times a day at daybreak, morning, afternoon, and evening from Monday to Thursday. In particular, prayers from 9:00 in the morning to 3:00 at dawn were performed from Friday to Sunday. Fee for participation in the assembly varied: 200,000 won (\$200) for the entire period, 10,000 won (\$10) for one day, and 30,000 won (\$30) for three days from Friday to Sunday. Participants were requested to fill out their address, telephone number, family members’ names and ages, and wishes in their application form.

5. Interviewed monks were Jian, Hyecho, and Seonho. Jian is the Chief Educator of Tongdosa and Dean of the Monastic Graduate School at Eunhaesa Monastery. Hyecho is the monk in charge of Buddhist ritual at Tongdosa, and Seonho is the section chief of general affairs at Tongdosa. In addition, I also had an interview with a female lay believer called Geumwonhwa *bosal* (*bodhisattva*) at Songgwangsa, who was around fifty and had served in the hall for a long time. The

visual material on *sasi bulgong* was utilized.⁷

Unlike in the West,⁸ ritual studies in Korea have been considered a peripheral subject. In addition, conventional research in the field has primarily focused on clarifying the relationship between ritual and doctrine. Therefore, this article hopes to broaden scholarly horizons in two ways. First, this paper will provide the impetus to Korean studies scholars so they will recognize the significance of Buddhist rituals and related research. Buddhist rituals can serve as an important medium of research on Korean history and society and do much to manifest the identity of the Korean people.⁹ Second, this research also hopes to write a new chapter in the field of ritual studies, and by extension, religious studies, and world peace. This is because this research will contribute to defining the relationship between religious ritual and religious identity and to widening scholarly understanding of other religious traditions, other peoples, and other cultures.

The Structure of *Sasi bulgong*: Space, Time, and Content

1. The Spatial Structure

Sasi bulgong at the Three Jewel Monasteries of Korea is performed in their main halls. The spatial structure of the three monasteries shares some commonalities.

term *bodhisattva* in Korea refers to a female lay Buddhist believer.

6. It will be necessary to make an interview with participants in *sasi bulgong* in order to identify their reason for participating in the ritual. However, I did not do the interviews because it is already known that the majority of lay Buddhist followers in contemporary Korea are ignorant even of basic Buddhist doctrine and my associate lay followers, including my own mother who has been a Buddhist for decades, mentioned that they just followed the tradition.
7. "Yeongchuk chongnim Tongdosa *sasi bulgong*" (The Ritual to Offer Rice to the Buddha at Tongdosa, the Vulture Ecuemenical Center), *Bulgyo* (Buddhism) TV, <http://www.btn.co.kr>, telecast on December 1, 2005.
8. Since the publication of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* in 1987, ritual studies has attracted growing attention among scholars in the West. Sessions on ritual studies at the 2006 American Academy of Religion annual meeting, held in Washington D.C., U.S.A., on November 18-21, represent well such a trend. For the sessions on ritual studies at this conference, refer to A18-52; A19-18; A19-51; A19-112; A20-70; S20-134; A21-18 in *AAR & SBL Abstracts 2006*. In addition, for the dynamics of ritual in terms of socio-cultural processes in a historical, cultural, and comparative perspective, refer to the website of Collaborative Research Centre 619, Heidelberg University, <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.
9. For the historical development and significance of Buddhist rituals in medieval Korea, see Kim 1994.

Traditional colorful paintings (*dancheong*) on the ceiling, canopies (*datjip*), scroll paintings, the Buddhist altar, Buddhist images, contribution boxes (*bokjeonham* or *buljeonham*), a dharma pedestal, a metal drum, a wooden gong, a metal bell, a bamboo cracker, cushions, lotus lanterns, a clock, a microphone, flowers, incense burners, candles, pure water (*dagi mul*), and rice bowls (*maji*) are found at all three monasteries. The monasteries also emphasize prayer for this- and other-worldly benefit (*gido bulsa*), as shown in posters such as “*Baegil gido jeopsu*” (Application for Prayers for One Hundred Days) and “*Cheondojae jeopsu*” (Application for Prayers for the Repose of the Dead) affixed around the entrance gate of the main hall of each monastery. The spatial structure of the monasteries also reflects each monastery’s unique characteristics.

In the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa, signs containing “*mugeon*” (no speech) are posted on the mid-lower part of the wooden pillars.¹⁰ In front of the Buddhist altar in the Hall of Universal Respect at Haeinsa, there are two big wooden pillars with red-colored hanging screens, where “*Gwangmyeong jineon darani*” (Mantra of Brightness) is written in both Korean and Sanskrit. A piano is also located in the hall, which is unique to this monastery. A contribution box is placed on the right and left sides of the hall and placards of “*Haeinsa Birojana Bul gwangmyeong beophoe darani*” (True Words of Brightness of Vairocana Buddha at the Dharma Assembly of Haeinsa) and “*Gwangmyeong jineon darani*” (Mantra of Brightness) are hung beside the contribution boxes. Unlike in the main halls of Tongdosa and Haeinsa, the main hall of Songgwangsa is decorated with Buddhist paintings on its walls, depicting Four Noble Truths, the Flower Garland Divine Assembly, and successive patriarchs in the transmission of Dharma. There are altars in front of those paintings for offerings such as flowers, incense, and rice.

Canopies, the Buddhist altar, and the floor constitute the major spatial structure of the Three Jewel Monasteries. Among these, it is the Buddhist altar that best illustrates the characteristics of a monastery.

a. The Buddhist altar

The Buddhist altar is generally three tiers composed of upper, middle, and lower, representing the worlds of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhist deities.

10. For a detailed account of the spatial structure of the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa, refer to Kim (2006: 133-4).

i. The upper tier

The Buddhist altar in the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa is different from other major monasteries in Korea, including Haeinsa and Songgwangsa. There isn't a Buddhist image on the upper tier of the altar in the hall of this monastery.

Two gilt wooden Buddhist images are enshrined in the center of the Hall of Universal Respect at Haeinsa. These images are twin statues recently found in the monastery.¹¹ The twin Buddhist images are flanked by two gilt bronze bodhisattvas. A wooden panel, on which "*Gugun yungchang nambuk tongil seongchwi*" (National Prosperity and the Achievement of the Unification of Korea) is written in Chinese characters, is positioned behind the two gilt bronze images. In addition, a big background placard with the message of taking refuge in the Buddha is printed in Korean and is hung behind the altar. Numerous small gilt bronze Buddhist statues are also enshrined in a large wooden box that is located beside the bodhisattva image to the left.

Three Buddhas and four bodhisattva images are located on the upper tier of the altar in the Precious Hall of the Great Hero at Songgwangsa. They are arranged in order of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, Śākyamuni Buddha, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, Maitreya Buddha, and Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva from left to right. The three Buddhas signify the savor of past, present, and future, respectively, and each of the four bodhisattvas represents compassion, wisdom, practice, and salvation. The Buddhist images are flanked by the bodhisattva statues and the former is much greater than the latter, manifesting that the Buddhas are the masters on the altar.

ii. The middle tier

Rice bowls are placed on the middle tier of the Buddhist altar, which is common at the Three Jewel Monasteries. Two wooden panels in the Hall of Universal Respect at Haeinsa, on which "*Haeinsa Birojana Bul gwangmyeong botap darani*" (Mantra of the Brightness of Vairocana Buddha in the Precious Pagoda at Haeinsa) is written, are positioned beside the rice bowls.

iii. The lower tier

Pure water, flowers, incense burners, candles, and fruit are offered on the lower

11. These Buddhist images are considered a product of love between a high-ranking official and a queen during the Unified Silla period (668-935). The high-ranking official and the queen are presumed to have been Wihong (?-888) and Queen Jinseong (r. 887-97).

tier of the Buddhist altar, which is also common at the Three Jewel Monasteries.

b. Floor

The inside of the main halls at the Three Jewel Monasteries is generally composed of a spacious wooden floor. Buddhist believers—both monks and the laity—perform their service there while seated on cushions. The location and color of the cushions are different among monks as well as between monks and lay followers. A *sūtra* table (*gyeongsang*) and contribution boxes are located in front of the Buddhist altar. A wooden gong, a small metal bell, a bamboo cracker, a ritual text, a watch, and a microphone are on the *sūtra* table.

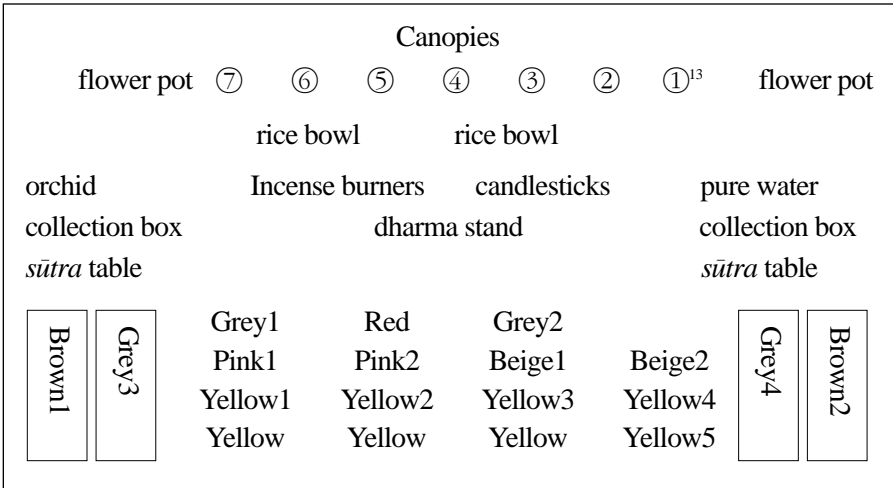
c. The location of the laity

The location of the laity in the ritual space at the Three Jewel Monasteries is different from that of monks and even the entrance gate is different between them. While monks enter the main hall through the main gate located at the front, which is called *eoganmun*, lay people must enter the hall only through the side doors.

In the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa, while monks are located in the front and center of the hall, lay believers are positioned at the back or on either side of the monks. In the Hall of Universal Respect at Haeinsa, the distance between the leading monk and lay participants is quite far, reaching about ten meters. Lay participants in the Precious Hall of the Great Hero at Songgwangsa are also situated in the corners or at the back of the hall.

The color of cushions is different between monks as well as monks and lay followers. At Songgwangsa, cushions for monks assigned to positions such as abbot, are embroidered with the Chinese character “*shang*” (*sang* in Korean), which means upper, senior, or superior, in the center, whereas those for the laity are plain and without embroidery. This difference represents the seniority of monks to the laity in the ritual space. The color of a floor cushion is also different in accordance with a monk’s position: red or pink for supreme patriarch (*bangjang*), abbot (*juji*), and the senior-most monk (*hoeju*); beige for senior monks (*hanju*); yellow for provost (*dogam*), chief lecturer (*gangju*), prior (*chongmu*), catechist (*gyomu*), and proctor (*wonju*); and grey for verger (*jijeon* or *bujeon*) and student monks (*hakseung*). That is, pink or red cushions are reserved for the senior-most monks, yellow for monks on duty, and grey for lower monks in monastic status. In addition, the laity sits on reddish brown cushions.

Figure 1 The spatial structure of the Precious Hall of the Great Hero at Songgwangsa¹²



2. The Temporal Structure

Sasi bulgong at the Three Jewel Monasteries is generally performed for about an hour from 10:00 to 11:00 in the morning. Table 1 is the timetable of the ritual in the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa.

The ritual held in the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa is held for 66 minutes from 09:56 to 11:02. It begins when the leading monk starts reciting the “Mantra of Universal Courtesy.” This mantra is chanted by the monk alone for one minute. Then, the monk recites the *Thousand Hands Sūtra* for sixteen minutes from 9:57 to 10:13. In the meantime, a novice (*sami*) offers rice to the Buddha at 10:04. Next, both the monk and lay followers repeat “*Seokkamoni Bul*” (Śākyamuni Buddha) in unison for twenty-four minutes from 10:16 to 10:40. All participants chant homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism and to the founder and successive eminent monks of the monastery, accompanied by

12. The color in the square refers to the color of the cushion: red for senior-most monk; grey 1 & 2 for vergers; pink 2 for supreme patriarch; pink 1 for abbot; beige 1 & 2 for senior monks; yellow 1 for provost; yellow 2 for chief lecturer; yellow 3 for prior ; yellow 4 for catechist; yellow 5 for proctor ; grey 3 & 4 for student monks; and brown 1 & 2 for laity. This information was provided by my informant, Geumwonhwa *bosal*.

13. ⑦ ← ①: Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva ← Mitreya Buddha ← Samantabhadra Bodhisattva ← Śākyamuni Buddha ← Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva ← Dīpaṅkara Buddha ← Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.

Table 1 Timetable of *sasi bulgong* at Tongdosa¹⁴

Time	Mins	Content
9:56-57	1	<i>Borye jineon</i> (Mantra of Universal Courtesy)
9:57-10:13	16	<i>Cheonsugyeong</i> (<i>Thousand Hands sūtra</i>)
10:13-16	3	<i>Sambo tongcheong</i> (Invitation of the Three Jewels of Buddhism)
10:16-40	24	<i>Jeonggeun</i> (Recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha”)
10:40-49	9	<i>Dae yecham</i> (Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism) ¹⁵
10:49-51	2	<i>Jineon gwongong</i> (Mantra of Offering)
10:51-11:00	9	<i>Chugwon</i> (Supplication)
11:00-02	2	<i>Banya simgyeong</i> (<i>Heart Sūtra</i>)
Total	66	

full prostration, for nine minutes from 10:40 to 10:49. Then, the leading monk recites mantras wishing for merits from offering for two minutes from 10:49 to 10:51. Subsequently, he prays for this- or other-worldly benefit of the lay participants’ family members for nine minutes from 10:51 to 11:00. The content of supplication includes the residential address of the lay person who asked for supplications, and the names of his or her family members, and his or her wishes.

Sasi bulgong at Haensa, which takes about two hours, is composed of two types, recitation of the ritual text and prayers for brightness of Vairocana Buddha. The ritual starts with the recitation of the “Tea song” and “Mantra of the Incense Offering” by the leading monk at 9:05. “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” is performed for seven minutes from 9:06 to 9:13, led by the monk and followed by lay participants. The first supplication is addressed by the monk for two minutes from 9:13 to 9:15. All participants on standing recite the *Heart Sūtra* for two minutes from 9:15 to 9:17, thus finalizing the recitation of the ritual text.

Then, the monk alone chants the “Mantra of Universal Courtesy” for one minute from 9:17 to 9:18. Following the monk, lay believers recite the *Thousand Heart Sūtra* for twelve minutes from 9:18 to 9:30. Two novices offer rice to the Buddha and pure water at 9:31 and they leave the hall thereafter. The leading monk reads the “Chapter of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Wishes,”

14. For details, refer to *Jeongmyeol bogung gidojip* (Collection of Prayers at the Precious Palace of Calmness and Serenity), pp. 11-66.

15. *Dae yecham* is also called *Jisim jeongnye gongyang*.

Table 2 Timetable of *sasi bulgong* at Haeinsa¹⁶

Time	Mins	Content	Remarks
9:05-06	1	<i>Dage</i> (Tea song) <i>Heonhyang jineon</i> (Mantra of the Incense Offering)	Yebulmun (Ritual Text)
9:06-13	7	<i>Jisim gwimyeongnye</i> (Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism)	
9:13-15	2	<i>Chugwon</i> (First supplication)	
9:15-17	2	<i>Heart Sūtra</i>	
9:17-18	1	Mantra of Universal Courtesy	Gwang- myeong gido (Prayer for Brightness)
9:18-30	12	<i>Thousand Hands Sūtra</i>	
9:30-44	14	<i>Bohyeon haengwon pum</i> (Chapter of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Wishes)	
9:44-47	3	<i>Geobul</i> (Invitation of the Buddha) <i>Bosocheong jineon</i> (Mantra of Inviting the Buddha)	
9:47-52	5	Second supplication	
9:52-57	5	<i>Sanggong uirye</i> (Offering rituals)	
9:57-10:02	5	<i>Jisim jeongnye gongyang</i> (Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism)	
10:02-05	3	Mantras	
10:05-30	25	<i>Gwangmyeong jineon</i> (Mantra of Brightness)	
10:30-57	27	Third supplication	
10:57-11:00	3	<i>Heart Sūtra</i>	
Total	115		

which includes the salvation of all living beings, and lay participants follow suit for fourteen minutes from 9:30 to 9:44.¹⁷ The leading monk recites mantras to invite the Buddha for three months from 9:44 to 9:47, addresses the second supplication for five minutes from 9:47 to 9:52, and repeats from memory mantras of offering for five minutes from 9:52 to 9:57. All participants chant “Homage to Vairocana Buddha” for five minutes from 9:57 to 10:02. The leading monk recites mantras for fulfilling wishes for three minutes from 10:02 to 10:05 and all participants chant “Mantra of the Brightness [of Vairocana Buddha]”¹⁸ 108 times for twenty-five minutes from 10:05 to 10:30.¹⁹ The leading monk address-

16. For the ritual text, refer to Beopbo Jongchal Haeinsa (2006: 5-64).

17. Two novices offer rice and pure water on the middle tier of the Buddhist altar at 09:31.

18. The mantra text is as follows: “Om amoka bairocana mahamudra manipadma chubara prabartaya hum.”

19. In the meantime, two monks join at 10:28, but after a while, they leave the hall.

es the third supplication for twenty-seven minutes from 10:30 to 10:57, and finally, all participants recite in unison the *Heart Sūtra* while standing. After the ritual, the leading monk makes a closing remark to lay participants while saying “May all your wishes be fulfilled!”

Table 3 indicates the timetable of *sasi bulgong* at Songgwangsa.

A novice offers pure water and rice to the Buddha at 10:06 and 10:13, respectively. The striking of the metal ball at 10:20 signals the beginning of *sasi bulgong* at the monastery.²⁰ The ritual procedure begins when the leading monk recites the “Mantra of the Incense Offering” for one minute from 10:32 to 10:33. Then the monk recites the *Thousand Heart Sūtra* for eight minutes from 10:33 to 10:41 and lay participants follow suit. All participants chant “*Seokkamoni Bul*” (Śākyamuni Buddha) repeatedly in unison for twelve minutes from 10:41 to 10:53.²¹ All participants recite “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” Hyerin (fl. 10th century), the founder of the monastery, Jinul (1158-1210), its reviver and National Master, and fifteen other National Masters and dharma masters for four minutes from 10:53 to 10:57. Then the leading monk addresses supplication²² for praying for lay participants’ wishes and national prosperity. All participants chant “Śākyamuni Buddha” and the ritual ends with participants

Table 3 Timetable of *sasi bulgong* at Songgwangsa

Time	Mins	Content
10:32-33	1	Mantra of the Incense Offering
10:33-41	8	<i>Thousand Hands Sūtra</i>
10:41-53	12	Recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha”
10:53-57	4	Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism
10:57-11:01	4	Supplication
11:01-02	1	Recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha”
11:02-04	2	<i>Hands Sūtra</i>
Total	32	

20. According to my informant, Geumwonhwa *bosal*, the rituals at Songgwangsa started at 10:00 or 10:20 in the morning. When Buddhist ritual for the repose of the dead is performed at *Jijangjeon* (Hall of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva), *sasi bulgong* is held at 10:00. Otherwise, it starts at 10:20.

21. The provost and a senior-most monk (*hoeju*) join the ritual at 10:51 and 10:52, respectively.

22. One thousand day prayer, other prayers, pure male and female followers, success in academic achievements, and success in business are examples of supplications by the laity.

reciting the *Heart Sūtra* in unison.

In the Tongdosa ritual, relatively more time was spent on the recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha,” the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” “Supplications,” and the *Heart Sūtra*, while in the Haeinsa ritual more time was taken for “Supplications,” “Mantra of Brightness of Vairocana Buddha,” the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, the “Chapter of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Wishes,” “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” and the *Heart Sūtra*. In the Songgwangsa ritual, more time was spent on the recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha,” the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” “Supplications,” and the *Heart Sūtra*. The majority of time was allocated to reciting “Śākyamuni Buddha” at Tongdosa, supplications and Mantra of Brightness at Haeinsa, and “Śākyamuni Buddha” at Songgwangsa.

3. The Structure of Content

Sasi bulgong at the Three Jewel Monasteries is almost identical in content, and focuses on the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, the *Heart Sūtra*, mantras, supplications, “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism, and the recitation of “Śākyamuni Buddha.”²³ In particular, “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” reflects the characteristics of each monastery, thus requiring a more in-depth analysis.

“Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” at Tongdosa is composed of eleven refuges (Kim 2006b: 140-1), or an additional four to the basic seven.²⁴ Additional content includes the characteristics of the monastery as the Buddha Jewel Monastery and respect for its founder, Jajang (fl. 636-50),²⁵ and successive patriarchs. Its counterpart at Haeinsa consists of twelve refuges and represents the characteristics of the monastery affiliated with the Flower Garland School (*Hwaeomjong*). Unlike at Tongdosa and Songgwangsa, Vairocana Buddha appears as the sole object of devotion at Haeinsa. The Songgwangsa version of homage is composed of eight refuges with one additional refuge to the founder of the monastery, National Masters from the monastery, and other important

23. For principal chants used in Korean monasteries, refer to Buswell (1992: 229-42). For a detailed account of the “Tea song,” “Mantra of the Incense Offering,” “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” “Supplications,” the *Heart Sūtra*, the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, refer to Kim (2006: 139-45).

24. For the seven basic “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” see Song (1999: 40-1).

25. For the life and thought of Jajang from a comparative perspective, refer to Kim (1995a: 23-55).

monks associated with it, and reads, “We wholeheartedly take refuge in Zen Master Hyerin, the founder of this monastery, Jinul,²⁶ the restorer of patriarchal teaching as well as National Master Buddha Sun Universal Illumination, fifteen other National Masters who succeeded Jinul, and the three dharma masters of Zhigong (Dhyānabhadra, ?-1363), Naong (1320-76), and Muhak (1327-1405).”

The Meaning of *Sasi bulgong*

The significance of *sasi bulgong* to lay Buddhist followers in contemporary Korea will be examined in terms of functional, ideological, and practical meaning. The common view of the function of ritual is that the ritual contributes to solidarity of the community and this is the same view held by mainstream scholars of Korean religious rituals (Kim 1994: 16-8; Song 1999: i; Kim 2001: 42-3; An 2005: 1-11; Young 2005: 47-59). However, this research challenges this view.

1. The Functional Meaning

The number of participants, time frame assigned to each procedure of *sasi bulgong*, and the style of the ritual indicate that its functional significance is not great. In addition, there is no clear evidence that the ritual contributes to the unity of lay participants. These findings are supported by Smith (Smith 1990: 310) and Goody (Gavin 2003: 7).

The number of participants is small, just around ten at all Three Jewels Monasteries. There were several hundred lay believers in the Hall of Dharma Lecture at Tongdosa when I visited. Since it was the first day of the lunar calendar, more lay followers visit a monastery in Korea, but under ordinary circumstances only about ten lay believers participate in the ritual. There were seven lay participants in the Hall of Universal Respect at Haeinsa, six female and one male, all over fifty. There were twelve lay followers at the ritual held in the Precious Hall of the Great Hero at Songgwangsa, including the elderly, adults, and elementary and middle school students.²⁷

26. He has been considered the philosophical founder of Korean Zen Buddhism. For his thought and life, refer to Buswell (1983), Keel (1984), Buswell (1991), and Shim (1999: 3-158).

27. I also participated in *sasi bulgong* at Bulguksa on April 19, 2006. There were twelve lay par-

Chanting of “Śākyamuni Buddha” and mantras, recitation of the *Thousand Hands Sūtra* and the *Heart Sūtra*, supplications for fulfilling this- or other-worldly wishes, and “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” are the main procedures of *sasi bulgong* at the Three Jewel Monasteries that require more time than others. However, the style of *sasi bulgong* shows that they do not contribute to the solidarity of lay participants. The rituals are led by the leading monk alone and lay participants just follow or listen to him. Except for a couple of procedures such as “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” and the *Heart Sūtra*, the majority of the ritual text is recited by the monk alone and lay followers participate only in gestures, including bowing. For the most part, the monk alone performs the ritual with lay people seated on the floor. In addition, as soon as the ritual comes to an end, the participants disperse. There is not a question and answer period at any of the Three Jewel Monasteries. Lay believers are left only with mechanical recitation of the ritual text. In addition, most of the lay participants in the rituals don’t know each other. Therefore, there is no clear evidence that *sasi bulgong* performed at those monasteries creates solidarity among lay participants.

Buddhist ritual is said to focus primarily on the middle or lower level of people in spiritual faculty. In addition, an influential Korean monk in charge of monastic education argued that contemporary Korean Buddhist ritual, including *sasi bulgong*, just followed “tradition” and had no substantial meaning.²⁸ More importantly, as is the case at most Chinese Buddhist institutions (Welch 1973: 207), *sasi bulgong* appears to serve as the principal source of income for monasteries in contemporary Korea. Therefore, the role of *sasi bulgong* for the laity is not different from that of monks’ Buddhist daily rituals in contemporary Korea, which primarily serve as a kind of process, performance, ritual itself, a type of metaphysical thought, or a necessity of a particular group (Kim 2006b: 154). More significantly, *sasi bulgong* functions as a major source of income for monasteries rather than a means to provide the laity with essential Buddhist teachings as a life education system.

participants, including two female believers who were in charge of application for prayers from lay people.

28. Monk Jian testified to this throughout my interview with him on May 25, 2006.

2. The Ideological Meaning

The common view argues that Buddhist ritual represents essential Buddhist thought (Kim 2006b: 148-9). However, an observation of current Buddhist rituals, including *sasi bulgong*, manifests that this commonly accepted view needs to be reconsidered.

The essence of Buddhist thought is represented by the Theories of Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths, the Four Great Elements, the Twelve Abodes of Sensation, and the Three Modes of Existence. In particular, “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism,” supplication, mantra, the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, and the *Heart Sūtra* constitute the key content of *sasi bulgong* texts at the Three Jewel Monasteries. Their content primarily focuses on faith in the Three Jewels of Buddhism. “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” is the most significant part of the ritual text. However, its content emphasizes devotion to the Three Jewels of Buddhism, the Buddha’s disciples, and successive patriarchs, but does not include the essence of Buddhist thought. Mantra forms an important part of *sasi bulgong*, but its content is also far from the essence of Buddhist thought. In principle, supplication constitutes prayer for divine protection from Buddhas and bodhisattvas rather than reflecting the essence of Buddhist doctrine. The *Thousand Hands Sūtra* is considered so important in Korea that Korean Buddhism is often called “Buddhism of the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*.” Its content is composed of prayer for divine protection from Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Therefore, the content of the ritual text except for the *Heart Sūtra*, which is represented by the concept of emptiness, does not contain the essence of Buddhist thought.

The ritual halls at the three monasteries are structured to focus on monks rather than on the laity. Entrance gates, ritual participants’ locations in the ritual place, and the cushions’ colors are different between monks and lay followers. These differences are based on a thoroughly stratified order. However, this phenomenon is contradictory to the Buddha’s teaching for various reasons. The four groups of Buddhism are monks, nuns, and both male and female laity and Buddhism emphasizes equality among them. Lay Buddhist followers are the financial backbone of Korean monastic communities, including the Three Jewel Monasteries. The last phrase of the “Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism” stresses the attainment of enlightenment of all sentient beings, including lay believers. Lastly, Han Yongun (1879-1944), a reform-minded Korean monk, considered egalitarianism as the core of Buddhist thought (Kim 1995b: 429). In

addition, prayer for divine protection from Buddhas and bodhisattvas is not in accordance with the Buddha's emphasis on salvation by self-effort through correct recognition of existence.

In short, it appears that *sasi bulgong* hardly reflects the basic teachings of the Buddha for the laity.

3. The Practical Meaning

In terms of the style of mantra, recitation of the ritual text in classical Chinese, and the lack of interest in contemporary issues, it appears that the practical significance of *sasi bulgong* for the laity is minimal. Most of their time was spent reciting "Śākyamuni Buddha," supplication, and mantra at the three representative monasteries of Korea. However, the main interest of lay followers, who are generally women in their forties and older, rests in praying for this- or other-worldly benefit for their family members and they also lack understanding of Buddhist doctrine.

The entire content of ritual texts is none other than the expansion of the "Homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism," constituting repentance, prayers, and merit-making. It is also said that Buddhist ritual is performed to eradicate one's own karma (Kim 1991: 27); the meaning of mantra does not need to be interpreted (Kim 2006: 32-4); and the recitation of mantra aims at the purification of speech function and the eighth consciousness (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*) (Kim 2006: 259). However, these conventional views are not in agreement with the early teachings of the Buddha. In addition, scholars suggest that the primary cause for the decline of repetitive ritual is the "tedium effect" (Yelle 2006: 389). Then, what's the practical meaning of *sasi bulgong* in contemporary Korea?

A considerable portion of ritual texts constitutes mantra, which is a translation of the Sanskrit into Chinese characters. It appears that lay followers hardly understand the meaning of Buddhist spells at all and no education of the spells is provided to them. Following the principle of non-translation in five issues by the Chinese monk, Hsüan-tsang (622-64), mantra was not translated, but transliterated for recitation in China, Korea, and Japan. Korean Buddhist circles seem to have been faithful to this tradition, but this tradition needs to be reviewed. Since the Buddha taught his teachings in the then vernacular languages, to which his audience easily comprehended, mere verbal chanting of mantras without recognition of their meaning is of no value.

Sasi bulgong is performed primarily by verbal recitation. For example, lay

followers at Haeinsa recited the “Mantra of Brightness of Vairocana Buddha” for about thirty minutes. However, it appears that they don’t understand the actual meaning of the mantra and were not interested in recognizing it. Furthermore, there is neither an explanation of the ritual, nor a question and answer period, nor discussion time. In fact, Buddhist ritual in Korea is in general conservative, incantatory, and outdated. Participants tend to join the ritual, but lack understanding of the meaning of the ritual text (Yu 2004: 44).

Ritual texts used for *sasi bulgong* are primarily written in classical Chinese. Lay participants in the rituals barely understand the content because most of them are ignorant of classical Chinese (Yu 2004: 44). For example, the majority of the laity can memorize the *Heart Sūtra*, which is composed of 270 Chinese characters, in its entirety, but few understand its meaning. As a result, people who have been Buddhists for twenty years are no different from new followers of Buddhism in their understanding of Buddhist doctrine (Geumgang Bulgyo Gija 2006). A similar phenomenon is also found among Tibetan Buddhists. Although they follow the arguments of tantric rites, the Tibetan laity does not understand them (Mills 2003: 204). According to a recent survey in Korea, eighty-six percent of the lay people surveyed agreed that Buddhist ritual needs to be performed in Korean. They also wanted to understand the meaning of the ritual text (<http://news.buddhapia.com>). In such a context, the Bureau of Propagation of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism recently published the standardized ritual text in Korean, entitled *Hangeul tongil beobyong jip*, for the first time in its history (Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong Pogyowon 2006).

In contemporary Korea, the Sunday rituals of the Religion of Heavenly Way (*siilsik*) (Ko 2006: 12) and the Sunday worship of Christianity (*juil yebae*) (Park 2006: 9) do not emphasize ritual itself, but sermons. They place an even greater focus on contemporary issues. However, *sasi bulgong* performed for lay followers lacks such a focus, primarily focusing on prayer for divine protection from Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

As was the case with monks (Kim 2006b: 145-53), the functional, ideological, and practical meaning of *sasi bulgong* performed for the laity at the Three Jewel Monasteries in contemporary Korea is not significant. Furthermore, my informant at Songwangsa Monastery informed me that the monastery authorities were not much interested in lay people’s participation in the rituals.

Conclusion

This research examined the structure and meaning of *sasi bulgong* performed for the laity at the Three Jewel Monasteries associated with the Jogye Order in contemporary Korea. The ritual was highly stratified both spatially and temporally with monks in the center and the laity in the periphery, which is different from the Buddha's emphasis on equality of human beings; and no evidence was found to support the contention that *sasi bulgong* functions to solidify the identity of monastic members and that they are outward expressions of key Buddhist doctrine. Rather, the ritual currently used is a product of an uncritical acceptance of tradition, serving as a kind of performance itself that contained the lay participants' wishes for the betterment of their family, both living and dead. It also functions as the principal source of income for the monasteries.

Concerning the grounds of worship, no account is successful (Bayne 2006: 299-313). Then, why do people have obligations to worship the Buddha? This issue still remains for further study. Bowing is a performance of identity in relation to power, a bow is performance of a vertical distinction (lower to higher) (Reinders 2005: 55), and people often engage in seemingly irrational ritual behavior. Thus we also need to explain human behavior rather than attempt to make judgments about its rationality (Mort and Slone 2006: 424-39). In addition, the historical transformation of Buddhist ritual and its adaptation in contemporary Korea remains an important topic for further discussion. Comparative research on Buddhist ritual among the three East Asian countries of China, Korea, and Japan as well as the Confucian influence on Korean Buddhist ritual would also be a workable theme for future research.

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Glossary

Bogyeongdang 普敬堂

Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong 大韓佛教曹溪宗

Daeung Bojeon 大雄寶殿

Gugun yungchang nambuk tongil seongchwi 國運隆昌南北統一成就

Haensa 海印寺

Han Yongun 韓龍雲

Hsüan-tsang 玄奘

Hwaeomjong 華嚴宗

Hyerin 慧璘

Jajang 慈藏

Jinseong 眞聖

Jinul 知訥

Muhak 無學

Naong 懶翁

sasi bulgong 巳時佛供

Seolbeopjeon 說法殿

shang (sang in Korean) 上

Silla 新羅

Songgwangsa 松廣寺

Tongdosa 通度寺

Wihong 魏弘

Zhigong 指空

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