



An Analytical Study on Pure Land Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism: A Case Study of Jungto Society in Korea

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Abstract

This paper aims to review Jungto Society, a dynamic modern movement to see if it follows the Buddha's teachings. All materials were analyzed in a systematic and academic way for a better understanding of Pure Land teaching and its application in Jungto Society, Korea. The research shows that Pure Land teaching with its root in *Mahāyāna* must always be understood from *Mahāyāna trikaya* teaching. Main *Mahāyāna* concepts of Interconnectedness, Dependent Co-arising = '*sunyata*', Pure/ Original Mind, Non-duality in practice and the *Bodhisattva* Path are also to be considered. The Pure Land teaching is dynamic and adapts its practice through changing times and needs. The study shows that Jungto Society is a modern example of reinterpretation for Dependent Origination, Four Noble Truths, Eight Noble Path, *Tilakhana* and *Bodhisattva* path in *Mahāyāna*.

The results of the study indicate how the concept of Pure Land and its later day innovation are taught by Jungto Society. The Pure Land foundational *sūtras*, background of Jungto Society, its Buddhist activities, impact and contributions on Korean society were examined.

Keywords: Jungto Society, Korea, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Pure Land.

1. Introduction

In Korea, the Jungto (Pure Land) Society under the leadership of Pomnyun Sunim (Pomnyun Sunim, 2015, 162-163) is said to be an attempt to bring back its original teachings through modern methods in a global perspective (Ibid., 147-156). The Jungto Society dreams of Jungto (Pure Land), a world where individuals are happy, societies are peaceful, and nature is beautiful. With an emphasis on individual Buddhist practice, which transforms people's lives, the Jungto Society has been promoting various movements such as ecological awareness campaigns; the eradication of famine, disease, and illiteracy; advocacy of peace and human right; and the unification of the Korean peninsula. The *Amitābha Buddha* Name can be recited anywhere anytime either verbally or mentally depending on the venue and feasibility. As a result, there is a misunderstanding, misinterpretation or overlooking of the whole *sūtra* teachings.

Pomnyun sunim advises returning to the fundamental teachings of the Buddha with “Ultimate Buddhism”, “Simplify Buddhism to Everyone”, and “Buddhism based on Everyday Life”. To root out our suffering, we need to return to the basic teachings of the Buddha and recover the true faith of Buddhism. This research attempts to study if the Jungto Society can be a model of present day innovation without deviating from the intention of the Pure Land eradication of *dukkha* for oneself and mental purification.

2. The Founder of Jungto Society

Pomnyun Sunim is the founder and the guiding Dhamma teacher of Jungto Society. A volunteer run organization modeled after the *Saṅgha*; it was created to address problems and crises of today's world based on a Buddhist world view that all beings are interconnected. Under *Pomnyun* Sunim's guidance, members aspire to embody Buddhist teachings, life examples of the Buddha and *Bodhisattvas* by making themselves happy, free and contributing to making this world a better place to live for everyone (Jungto Society, 2018).

Pomnyun Sunim is also well known for his unique ways of engaging audiences in live Dhamma Q&A. His talks occur in public places like community centers, libraries, universities and churches and are free of charge. This way, people from all walks of life and from different ages and religious backgrounds can easily come. He is also freer to use everyday language to engage with the audience than he would be in traditional Buddhist temple settings. Responding to a variety of questions that people ask, Pomnyun Sunim

shows how we can apply the insights and wisdom of Buddhist teaching in tackling issues in our everyday lives, such as feelings of stress, anxiety or sadness, as well as social issues. His recorded Dhamma Q&A on YouTube (Jungto TV, 2018) and podcasts have also healed and inspired people around the world (Jungto Society, 2018).

Pomnyun Sunim is one of the most recognized and influential religious leaders in South Korea with active following. He has been advocating a new paradigm of civilization movement in which everyone becomes happy through practice. Every practitioner creates a happy society through active participation in social movements, protects our environment and the Earth by adopting a simple lifestyle. This vision is expressed in the Jungto society's motto "Open Mind, Good Friends, and Clean Earth" (Jungto Society, 2018). Instead of lecturing about profound Buddhist philosophy, he invites individuals in his audience to ask him questions about their concerns and doubts. He then engages them in a dialogue to help them gain insight into the true nature of their problems with his extraordinary gift for explaining the Buddha's teachings in simple layman terms.

"A community based on Buddhist practice by committing ourselves to the life of a *bodhisattva*, we vow to live as free individuals without suffering and contribute to making the world around as a better place." The Jungto Society dreams of Jungto (Pure Land), a world where individuals are happy, societies are peaceful, and nature is beautiful.

The Jungto Society is a Buddhist community focused on solving problems prevalent in a modern society such as greed generated issues, poverty, conflict, and environment degradation, based on the teachings of Buddha (*Avatamsaka sūtra*, 2018).

Typical of Pure Land and *Ch'an/Seon* master, Pomnyun Sunim uses every day, simple words for profound teachings of Buddhism. Interconnectedness and mutual influencing of *paticcasamuppada* is practiced in individual daily life not only within the society but with a global perspective due to the *Avatamsaka* teaching of interpenetrative and interconnectedness for all physical and mental phenomena in the whole universe. Key practice of *Mahāyāna* – the *Bodhisattva* ideal is also practiced with altruistic service to all both local and abroad. Creating Pure Land here and now through mental purification in practice with *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha* is the basis as in the motto – purify hearts, good friends (*kalyanamitta*) and clean earth (purified land both physically and mentally).

3. Background of Jungto Society

Jungto Society dreams of a Jungto, Pure Land where individuals are happy, societies are peaceful and nature is beautiful = Pure Land here and now on this earth. The founder leads by example, is actively engaged alongside the JTS branches for global humanitarian and environmental issues. Member organizations of the society are Join Together Society (JTS) 1993, an NGO which focuses on international relief, Good Friends, Peace Foundation, 1996 and Eco Buddha with headquarters in Seoul, Korea. Other branches both in Korea and abroad were then set up according to needs with local governmental blessings.

JTS is committed to eradicating famine, disease, and illiteracy in many Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Philippines and North Korea. Nepal, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are also included. This humanitarian aid organization is committed to working with people of developing countries in Asia to promote equality, rights to development and sustainable livelihood. It also focused on the 10.000 Day resolution (Jungto Hanja, 2018) since 1993 so that every individual can be free and happy with others.

Every practitioner creates a happy society through active participation in social movements, protects our environment and the Earth by adopting a simple lifestyle. The Jungto Society is a Buddhist community focused on solving problems prevalent in a modern society such as greed generated issues, poverty, conflict, and environment degradation, based on the teachings of Buddha and work without salary, ensuring that funds from donations are spent fully to benefit the marginalized community whom they are working with. Founded in 1988 at Seoul with the aim to purify hearts, foster profound friendships and promote a clean environment. Various characteristics of different individuals come together and form a mosaic Buddha, creating a new civilization of love/*metta*, harmony, and peace is promoted. Key ideas of the Pure Land *Sūtras* are contained in the beliefs and practices of the Jungto practitioners as below:

If suffering is caused by social disorder, then social disorder must disappear for our suffering to end. And, in order for social disorder to disappear, individuals must control their desires (Pomnyun, 2008, 17-21). Ultimately, balance and control of desires will lead to happiness. If we can view our world in its entirety, we will know how to live happier lives and realize why we keep falling into misfortune even when we are striving so hard to be happy.

The Jungto Society has been working to create Buddhist communities that enable their members to view the problems people face today from a global perspective and to play leading roles in solving these problems. The Open Mind, Good Friends and Clean

Earth formula is further translated into daily living as advised for daily awareness and awakening with present moment focus of the *Ch'an* teaching throughout one's family, work-front, societal and global interactions.

Every practitioner should aim to create a happy society through active participation in social movements, protects our environment and the Earth by adopting a simple lifestyle. Another way to see the development of Jungto society is through the founder's audience growth and recognitions in Korea and abroad.

Pomnyun sunim's world of wisdom can be accessed through his books, social media, YouTube, TV, and Radio. He has published more than 50 books since 1994. His latest book, "The Moment of Enlightenment." Published in January 2015, became the #1 bestseller in Korea within two weeks of publication. He has over 1 million followers in Korean's Kakao Talk, 100,000 daily download of his podcasts, and over 3 million views of his YouTube videos.

4. Pure Land Concept by Jungto Society

From the *sammuti* aspect, Pure Land (Jungto) refers to a clean and idealistic world. People are always with wholesome mind, happy, joyous and live in harmony with each other and mindful of his responsibility to preserve the nature. Everyone is Pure Land and has a pure mind originally. They are covered by our defilements – *dosa*, *moha* and *tanha* due to their discriminatory views of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'.

"The first is called other-world Pure Land (Pomnyum Sunim, 2006, 8-9) (*Tabang Jungto in Korean* and 他方净土 in Chinese). The *Sukhāvatī* Pure Land of the west belief best represents the other –world Pure Land. This refers to the much-described manifested aspect in the Larger *Amitāyus Sūtra*. The other-world exists in a different spiral dimension but in the same time dimension as the one in which they live. It is believed that those who aspire to be reborn in the *Sukhāvatī* are able to make their wishes come true by earnestly chanting the name of *Amitābha* Buddha.

The second category of Pure Land is the Future – world pure Land (Ibid., p.10), they do not need to try to find where Pure Land is because the world where they live right now can become a Pure Land of the future. Once *Maitreya* (Future Buddha) descends to this world from *Tusita* Heaven. The *Maitreya* Pure Land is Future –World Pure Land, which will someday manifest itself in the world they live. However, in order to attain enlightenment by being born during the era when *Maitreya* descends to this world, they must conduct the ten Virtuous deeds (Ibid., 8-11; 83-86).

The third is Within –Mind Pure Land (Pomnyum Sunim, 2006, 11-13). Pure Land does not exist in some other place or in the future. When anguish disappears from their minds, the current world in which they live become a beautiful place as it is. When their minds are pure, the world is clean and pure. They realize that the world in which they live is actually Pure Land. Even though nothing has actually changed, when their mindset changes in a positive direction, things seem different and better. This is Within –Mind pure Land.

No single one among Other-World, Future-World, or Within-Mind Pure Land can be said to be absolute because all three of the Pure Lands exist in their manifested aspects in this world. With a conception of a ‘Pure Land’ in three dimensions but not in ultimate reality, Pomnyun Sunim further proposes – right Buddhism, easy Buddhism and everyday Buddhism. In an attempt to correct the contemporary practices and views in Korean society such as prayers for blessings, for longevity and for the deceased etc. which “cannot fundamentally alleviate the suffering in their lives. To root out their suffering, they need to return to the basic teachings of the Buddha and recover the true faith of Buddhism, the truth in Buddhism, all Buddhists should return to the basic teachings of the Buddha, this is Ultimate Buddhism.” (Pomnyum Sunim, 2008, 32-39).

Basically, ‘truth’ in Buddhism refers to the core teachings of the historical Buddha. All Buddhist teachings lead to one thing in their *sammuti* life – peace of mind, peace between peoples, and also how to live a uncertain life conducive to our mental purification towards the ultimate truth – *nirodha* in early Buddhism or achieving *Bodhi*, enlightenment becoming a *Sammāsambuddha* (*Sammāsambuddha*, 2018) in the *Bodhisattva* ideal of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

Ultimate Buddhism refers to getting rid of fixed notions and always seeing the truth of the Dhamma and not deviating from the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. Mental purification in all they do is highlighted. In other words, they practice the *Bodhisattva* path cultivating the six *Paramitas* but ultimately, they should not claim or owned that there is an ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘mine’ in either the practice or the ‘self’ involved. If they insist on the theoretic of the fundamental Buddhist principle such as non-self, non-form, and emptiness, Buddhism will come across as mysterious and too difficult to most people. In order to overcome this problem, Buddha taught with various methods according to the individual’s character. Therefore, fundamental Buddhism should begin by first solving the real problems of each person. This is “Simplify Buddhism to everyone” (Pomnyum Sunim, 2008, 17-21).

All they need is the right intention to begin any form of spiritual practice, whether it is according to a certain school or teaching or simply bowing to the Buddha, chanting

Sūtras, repentance, meditation, or other such practices. Any of these can form the basis of a daily practice. One can also visit a Buddhist temple or monastery to participate in pilgrimages, precept retreats, seminars, summer camps, short-term monastic retreats, or other such activities. Right view and right intention are most important in whatever one chooses to do.

The main purpose of spiritual practice is to develop one's power of will to persist. Even with things like offering incense, bowing to the Buddha, reading or chanting *Sūtras*, or meditation. Easy Buddhism does not mean *Amitābha Buddhanussati*, *Buddhanussati* or any other Buddha, it is the right view of the core teaching, non-discrimination, interconnectedness and interdependence of all in the society. It is the right intention to purify oneself, develop oneself according to whichever Buddhist practice one devotes oneself to towards enlightenment. Every day Buddhism (Pomnyum Sunim, 2015, 153-156) is to know the interconnectedness and interdependence of all without an ultimate 'I' and 'you'. We are only five *khandhas*, mental and physical phenomena subject to causes and conditions. Remember the non-discrimination of the two truths. Keep a free, peaceful and pure mind in all they do. Be happy, cheerful and hopeful that they each create their own *kamma* and they are responsible for their destination.

Practice seeing the *trikaya* in their daily life, the more they see, the more they can change their perception and live a more mindful life every day in all that they think, say and do. The practice of daily prayer prevents neglect and maintains their dedication. Jungto retreat strictly follows manuals. Jungto people join consistently and practice. Many changes and more joyful individual practice and social activities involvement are reported. During the retreat, their experience makes them hopeful, believe and confidence with practice power.

Anyone who goes back to the Buddha's fundamental teachings and practicing "Easy Buddhism and "Everyday Buddhism" can attain liberation and nirvana even in his daily life.

5. Buddhist Teachings of Jungto Society

In Jungto Society, the focus is on practical applications of Buddhist principles according to their threefold conceptions of Pure Land – Ultimate Buddhism, Simplify Buddhism to everyone and Buddhism based on Everyday Life. While promoting the Pure Land teaching, Jungto Society integrates core teachings of the Buddha and *Mahāyāna Bodhisattva* ideal through *Mahāyāna* worldview of non-discrimination, '*sunyata*', as well as interconnectedness and interdependence of all. Pure Land teaching with its root in *Mahāyāna*

must always be understood from its *trikaya* teaching, Pure/Original Mind, non-duality in practice and the *Bodhisattva* Path.

Investigation of cause and effect and the working of *paticcasamuppada* in daily life is called for at all levels of interactions – family, societal, national and international.

Jungto advocates that all beings are interconnected, influencing and are mutually influenced through a countless of causes and conditions. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (JC Cleary, 1994, 236) says that non-duality is pure awareness and away from any views. Non-duality is the virtues and mind of enlightened beings. Jungto proposes transformation of ordinary beings to enlighten by adopting the enlightened beings' virtues and mind in their daily life through their *Bodhisattva* path adopted.

Pomnyun Sunim uses ordinary life examples in 'Dhamma Q&A' with a problem-solution approach. Mundane problems from studies, family, work relationships, consumerism, politics, environmental, security, stress, depressions and other global issues are often given humorous and practical stories with underlying *Mahāyāna* worldview and core teachings of the Buddha.

Pomnyun Sunim's easy, clear, and insightful advice based on Buddha's teachings shows us how to be happy and free in our daily life.

Firstly, the founder of Jungto attempts to change perceptions and perspectives of the masses with the practical principle of *paticcasamuppada* through daily experiences. He tries to teach interconnectedness as an answer to overcome the self-centrism of our modern living today.

Jungto began as widespread communities based on Buddhist principles, seeking an alternative way of thinking and living in response to contemporary society's emphasis on mass consumption, commercialism, competition, and the misuse of the natural resources. While their activities overlap in promoting peace and ecological preservation, Jungto is well known for its humanitarian aid programs in impoverished areas of the world.

A historical being means that humans are linked by time. Your current mental state is not a problem that concerns you alone. Your parents' mental state played a major role in creating your mental state because the society we live in affects our lives, we need to understand social issues to the same degree we understand our own personal problems.

The working of *Paticcasamuppada* is highlighted. Hence, trying to effect a paradigm shift from discriminated 'I' and 'You' with its self-interests to holistic and holistic view of care and compassion for the interconnected 'selves' of ever changing mental and physical

phenomena in the world. Thus, Jungto with practical advice of key Buddhist principles seek to create a Pure Land right here and now.

Secondly, according to the *Paticcasamuppada* and interconnectedness teachings, the *Bodhisattva* Path is to be actively applied in life throughout the Jungto Society and beyond. As Mahāyāna practitioners, ‘*Bodhisattva*’ here is the term for anyone who, motivated by great compassion, has created *Bodhicitta*. In addition to no differentiation of ‘I’ and ‘you’, *sammuti* = *paramatha* and vice versa is also the practicing concept for Bodhisattva path practitioners in engaged Buddhism.

Jungto Society practices the Pure Land practice but it is under Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna is based principally upon the path of a Bodhisattva. Mahāyāna Buddhism encourages everyone to become bodhisattvas and to take the *Bodhisattva* Vows (Thich Thien Tam, 1993, 254). Although not real Bodhisattvas yet, hopeful bodhisattvas with these vows, promise to work for the complete enlightenment of all sentient beings by practicing the six *Pāramitās* (Ibid., 250-251). Hence, the motto of Open Mind, Good Friends and Clean Earth – striving to create a Pure Land on earth right here and now through mental purification in daily life through mindful living.

Jungto practice also involves being actively engaged in humanitarian issues – reliefs, volunteer service, propaganda for unification of North and South Korea etc. Jungto members are to concentrate on:

- 1) Individual practice – this involves morning chanting and 108 full prostration to reinforce and form wholesome habits for mental and physical purification.
- 2) *Dana* – this does not mean financial but all other forms of *dana*.
- 3) Volunteer work – at home and abroad for the needy, mainly education, medical, agricultural advice, environmental preservation, conflict resolution, unification of North and South Korea, conservation of peace.

They are also to meet regularly for guidance through Dhamma teaching, Dhamma Q &A, Dhamma discussions with the founder either in person or through modern media. Next, the members are to cultivate their *Bodhisattva* path within their family, relatives, friends, community, societies and globally as well. *Kalyanamitta* is highly emphasized for mutual sharing and advice in their Buddhist path.

Lastly, every phenomenon arises, stays and goes away according to the *paticcasamuppada* principle – when A is B is, when A is not, B is not. The ‘*sunyata*’

principle at work. Ultimately, there is no ‘I’ or ‘you’ in the interconnectedness of all beings through the *Paticcasamuppada* principle of life.

Jungto members are to combine their practice with social change. They seek to change their individual self-centeredness and self-interest to selfless practices through perception and perspective change. The practitioners need to understand the Buddha’s teaching, then consistently practice the chanting and 108 bows to instill pure mind away from delusion, anger and greed.

According to the Buddhist tradition, all phenomena other than *nirvāṇa* are marked by three characteristics, sometimes referred to as the *Dhamma* covers: impermanence, suffering, and no-self. According to tradition, after much meditation, the Buddha concluded that everything in the physical world (and everything in the phenomenology of psychology) is marked by these three characteristics.

All these are in line with the basic Buddhist teachings of *trikaya*, *paticcasamuppada*, Eight-fold Path, Four Noble Truths etc. It can perhaps be said that the Pure Land concept in Jungto Society is the advice to first change the selfish perceptions and perspectives, then experience the interconnectedness of all in the society with engaged Buddhist practices.

At the same time, each practitioner should have the underlying thought of all *Mahāyāna* conceptions of *pañña* aspects - *trikaya* teaching.

6. Conclusion

This study starts with the concept of Pure Land (*Sukhāvatī*) in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Meanings of Pure Land from the *sūtras*, dictionaries and its change in contemporary times are first looked into. Significance of Pure Land concept to individual practitioner and its social consequence are then studied. After the above, the Jungto Society which strongly promotes creating a Pure Land on earth is studied in detail – its concept and application of Pure Land teachings, its contributions and impact both locally and abroad. Having a better understanding of Jungto society in Korea, the researcher then compares and contrasts the results with the Pure Land teaching in *Mahāyāna* teaching as a whole before conclusion remarks and suggestions for further studies are decided as below.

Jungto Society is found to follow *Mahāyāna* teaching even it is presented in modern ways. Five important factors below show that Jungto Society is a present day interpretation to fit the needs, but it still follows key Buddhist teachings.

As Pure Land Buddhism spread from India into China, Korea then to Japan and Southeast Asia, technical terms have been reinterpreted and reworded but we can still make important conceptual linkages between Jungto Society, a reformed Korean Pure Land teaching and early Buddhist teaching.

The discussions above show that Jungto Society follows early Buddhist teachings within *Bodhisattva* ideal in *Mahāyāna* teaching and practice. The world is seen as a practicing ground based on our collective kamma but not put into words, the interconnectedness of all is focused instead. There is a lot of psychology, sociology integrated with early Buddhist teaching and *Mahāyāna* concepts in practice although not mentioned. The dynamic 1000 prayer speech for Unification of North and South Korea for world peace is a clear example.

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