



# **The Power of the Samboilbae: The Korean Experience of Three Steps and One Bow**

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## **Abstract**

In Buddhism, bowing is the greatest show of respect a person can make to the Buddha or the teacher. The custom of taking three steps came to signify the shedding of the three poisons as well as a method of cultivating blessings and lessening our sickness, sufferings and misfortunes, so that getting reborn in the Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land can be more promising. By analyzing the history and practice of protesters in Korea, it is clear that violence can be replaced by essentially non-violent Buddhist practice which aims to reach the Pure Land. In Korea, there have been large scale violent movements which were effective at changing the oppressive military junta. But non-violence stops the decline of the social movements. The Korean people had criticized the violent historical movements and turned down their participation until the Samboilbae was effectively and collectively practiced. With the strong commitment of the non-violence and newfangled forms of power, people began to participate in the Samboilbae movement against the Saemanguem Land Reclamation Project.

*Keywords:* bowing is the greatest show of respect, Pure Land, Buddhist practice

## Introduction

In Buddhism, bowing is the greatest show of respect a person can make to the Buddha or the teacher. It lowers yourself to the lowest level, literally, by putting your head, knees and elbows on the ground while elevating the object of the bow. This is regarded as an important form of worship or veneration. The bow in Buddhism differs according to the culture where the religion has spread. In Tibet, it is done with hands and feet spread and body flat on the ground. In Thailand and Vietnam, one bows his head three times while on one's knees.

The tradition of sam-bo, or “three steps,” is rooted in the idea of “three poisons.”<sup>1</sup> Buddhist teaching has it that unless a person is able to shed the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion there is no use in practicing the religion no matter how hard that person tries. So the custom of taking three steps came to signify the shedding of the three poisons.<sup>2</sup>

Especially, if we seek to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, then we need to recite Amitabha Buddha frequently. However, there is no guarantee that a person who only recites Amitabha Buddha will definitely be reborn in the Western Pure Land. It is stated in the commentary on the Amitabha Sutra, “It is not possible through conditions lacking in virtuous roots, blessings and merits to be born in that land (i.e. Western Pure Land).”<sup>3</sup> This means that besides reciting the name of the Amitabha Buddha, we must also cultivate our blessings and wisdom, and until the fulfilment of many, many conditions relating to our blessings and merits, is it possible to be reborn in the Western Pure Land. For example, cultivating the 3-steps-1-bow is also a method of cultivating blessings and lessening our sickness, sufferings and misfortunes.<sup>4</sup>

To walk and bow is a cultivation practice common to East Asian Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism held outdoor and cover over varying distances. Generally, the practice is to walk three steps followed by one bow, called the Samboilbae or three steps, one bow,

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<sup>1</sup>Bhikkhu Bodhi(2012), p. 343 , “Bhikkhus, there are these three causes for the origination of kamma. What three? Greed is a cause for the origination of kamma; hatred is a cause for the origination of kamma; delusion is a cause for the origination of kamma.”

AN. i.263 : Tīṇimāni, bhikkhave, nidānāni kammānaṃ samudayāya. Katamāni tīṇi? Lobho nidānaṃ kammānaṃ samudayāya, doso nidānaṃ kammānaṃ samudayāya, moho nidānaṃ kammānaṃ samudayāya.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.birdskorea.org/Habitats/Wetlands/Saemangeum/BK-HA-Saemangeum-Samboilbae.shtml>

<sup>3</sup>佛說阿彌陀經疏 (大正藏 37, P. 350a), “不可以小善根 福德因緣 得生彼國。”

<sup>4</sup><http://www.jenchen.org.sg/vol7no3e.htm>

(三步一拜).<sup>5</sup> Though this practice of Samboilbae did not have any canonical resources,<sup>6</sup> it was adopted widely as a popular way of practice in Korean Buddhism. Recently in Korea, this Buddhist practice was linked with the social movement to solve the social conflicts.



**Figure 1.** Samboilbae for stopping the Saemangeum Reclamation Project, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2003<sup>7</sup>

The historic experience of Korean social movements had been bloodshed. From the 1960s onwards, Koreans have been experienced excessive violence from protesters and the riot control police. There were thousands of civilian deaths and casualties during these social movements such as the Democratic Revolution 1960, the Democratic Rally 1980, the Kwangju Massacre 1980, the People's Revolution 1987, and the Democratic Union Rally 1990.

During all these movements, police repression have been heavy and in response, many demonstrators have also used extremely violent strategies such as firebombs or bamboo spears. In the theory of the vicious circle of violence, the riot control police responded using more excessive force to suppress protesters such as water cannon tanks, tear gas, and helicopters.

<sup>5</sup><http://thanhsiang.org/kl/archive/2007/s-religion/OneStepOneBow/tanOneStepOneBow07.htm>

<sup>6</sup>*Kasan Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol.12, Seoul: Kasan Buddhist Institute, p. 1291.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/view/at\\_pg.aspx?cntn\\_cd=A0000123461](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/view/at_pg.aspx?cntn_cd=A0000123461)



**Figure 2.** The June 1987 Democracy Movement<sup>8</sup>

Confrontation and increasing forms of violence between the riot police and protesters have been increasing over time. This violent repertoire replayed over and over again has served to label and define the Korean social movement as ‘militant’ without addressing the role of the State in this process.

By analyzing the history and practice of protesters in Korea, in this paper I will show how violence can be replaced by essentially non-violent Buddhist practice which aims to reach the Pure Land.

### **Korean habitus: as history, transformation and under the military**

During the peak of the People’s Revolution in 1987, thousands of people were arrested daily, and several people killed during what proved to be harsh interrogations. The riot control police abused their power to oppress and to harass people on a daily base. In response, the social movements generated the violent methods against the riot control police. It was during this cumulative era that violence fed unto violence and the social movements, though not intending to be identified as such, were labeled as militant. During all these interactions, the violent

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<sup>8</sup><http://kor.theasian.asia/archives/28612>

habitus of protesters evolved within the social movement. As a natural response to threatened power, the riot control police produced more repressive skills to control demonstrations.

These conflicts if not consensual violent habitus between demonstrators and the riot control police have produced negative impacts to the entire social movement. The violent habitus reproduced what seemed like an unbreakable and vicious cycle of violence. The violence became “the codification of culture” and came to be identified with contemporary Korean social movements.

Since 1987 the democratic transitions, the growth of civil society has spanned contemporary issues in the relation to women, farmers, labor, human rights, and environmental issues, not to mention good governance and public accountability. As a result in 1990s has been seen a significant increase in the influence of civil groups or social movements on such matters as the formations of public opinion, policy-making, elections, and social relations. The transformation that followed this period of opening up within Korean society is, in many ways, a remarkable turning point in the history of Korea, if not the world.

## **The transformation of violent habitus in Korean social movements**

Despite the successful democratic transformation, the social movements took a precipitous decline beginning in the mid-1990s. Several issues contributed to this reversal. First, civil society had grown as evidenced by the numbers of burgeoning non-governmental organizations (NGOs). But, as has often been the case around the world, the NGOs had their independent agendas and failed to increase the ordinary citizens’ participation. Second, in many areas, the protestors remain involved in what they knew best—the violent social movement advancing for a change in the social relations with labor, farmer and student unions. At the same time, the violence of Korea’s social movements had worn its citizenry down and the majority became tired of the violent movements and likewise kept a distance from these former catalysts of change. This isolation, as it has been defined by some scholars, has been criticized for ‘citizenless’ civil organizations<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup><http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=sambolove&logNo=220450424035>

The result of this consistently re-emerging violence in the social movements, a growing number of social movements became engaged in empowering non violent actions. Over the last two decades, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King's rhetoric and practice were revived as suitable models of civil resistance in Korean social movements.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Samboilbae march of the anti-Saemanguem Land Reclamation Project Campaign**

The Venerable Sugyeong of the Sudeoksa temple in South Chungcheong province first linked this Buddhist practice of the Pure Land with environmentalism, and the Samboilbae became the signature protest against the plan to drill a tunnel through Mount Bukhan(2002) and build a reservoir in Mount Jiri(2000). While prostration practices such as the 108 prostrations of repentance have long been part of Korean Buddhist tradition, the Samboilbae practice of walking three steps followed by a full body prostration originates with the Tibetan Buddhist practice of *yan lag lnglng'ai phyag*. Commonly undertaken by pilgrims to Mt. Kailash seeking to expunge their bad karma, this practice typically involves taking one step followed by a single bow but occasionally includes three steps as repentance for the Three Poisons or as homage to the Three Jewels. The Samboilbae was first introduced to Korea during monastic training sessions at Tongdosa Temple in 1992 and was practiced during lay retreats later in the decade. Thus, while the Samboilbae was a recent import from Tibetan Buddhism, Venerable Sugyeong appropriated this traditional Buddhist practice to invent a new, non-violent, and recognizably Buddhist protest tactic.<sup>11</sup>

The Saemangeum Reclamation Project, started in 1991, is threatening one of the most important wetlands in Korea and the Yellow Sea Ecoregion. In 2003, when four religious leaders, Catholic Father Mun Gyu-Hyun, Buddhist Venerable Sugyeong, Won-Buddhist Venerable Kim Gyung-Il and Protestant Reverend Lee Hee-Un found out that countless living creatures in the Saemangeum tidal flat would be killed by the closure of the 33km long sea wall, they decided to devote themselves to those creatures.

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<sup>10</sup>Regarding the Korean Buddhist NGO, see Cho, Daeyup, "The enlargement of citizens' political movement and the prospect of Buddhist citizens' movement," *Buddhist Review*, vol.1, pp. 293-309, Seoul, 1999; Lee, Youngchul, "The reality and the task of the Buddhist NGOs," *Buddhist Review*, vol.17, pp. 79-92, Seoul, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Yoon, Younghae and Jones, Sherwin, 'Ecology, Dharma and Direct Action: A Brief Survey of Contemporary Eco-Buddhist Activism in Korea', *Buddhist Studies Review*, vol. 31.2 (2014), p.298

They led the Samboilbae from Saemangeum to the capital city, Seoul. For the entire distance of more than 320km (about 200 miles), they took three steps and then dropped to their knees and bowed down to the ground, then got up and took another three steps and a bow. They explained that three steps meant one's own greed, hatred and delusion and one bow meant sincere penitence for those three. It took 65 days in cold rain and burning sun. The religious marchers said, "We are practicing Samboilbae with the most sincere and bold spirits. Along the way, there will be pain and hardship. However, we will save the Saemangeum tidal flat, in order to persuade the world to expiate its sins and save life and peace."

At the end of the march, more than 8,000 people joined the religious leaders in Seoul: their determination and devotion to life and peace touched every Korean, and resulted in a majority of the Korean public becoming concerned for the Saemangeum tidal flat for the very first time.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 3.** Samboilbae for The Saemangeum Reclamation Project<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.birdskorea.org/Habitats/Wetlands/Saemangeum/BK-HA-Saemangeum-Samboilbae.shtml>

<sup>13</sup>[http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/view/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0001088381](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0001088381)

Due to previous experience with violence and massive social movements, the Korean citizenry was used to turning away from the militant participation in the former social movements. But the Samboilbae was able to transcend this historical fact and revive the people's participation. The Samboilbae was so effective that it was infectious and soon after, a dozen similar movements sprouted with similar strategies: to stop the construction of the nuclear waste dump(2004), and to save the salamander on the construction of the high speed train road(2004). Furthermore, the Samboilbae practice has had far-reaching effects and has served to inform other militant union movements. From the streets of Cancun (Mexico) in 2003 to Hong Kong in 2005, Korean farmers and union leaders led the popular resistance to practice of the Samboilbae against the WTO negotiations. In 2014, the relatives of the Sewol ferry disaster performed the Samboilbae to demand for a special law to investigate the disaster. In the end, the Samboilbae has been empowering to the transformation of nonviolent movement in Korea and ultimately around the world.



**Figure 4.** Families of the Sewol ferry victims' march  
on presidential palace<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup><http://news.kukinews.com/article/view.asp?arcid=0008643686&code=41121111&cp=nv>

## **Conclusion: the power to change, with three steps and one bow**

In Korea, there have been large scale violent movements which were effective at changing the oppressive military junta. But non-violence stops the decline of the social movements. The Korean people had criticized the violent historical movements and turned down their participation until the Samboilbae was effectively and collectively practiced. With the strong commitment of the non-violence and newfangled forms of power, people began to participate in the Samboilbae movement against the Saemanguem Land Reclamation Project.

While leading the Samboilbae movement against the Saemanguem Land Reclamation Project, the non-violent habitus equally affects people's minds and living patterns through its symbolic power, and at the same time allows for diverse strategies of resistance. Relying on the power of internet and a history of bloodshed that had effectively worn the populace down, the Samboilbae successfully transformed from the violent habitus of Korean social movement to the non-violent habitus.

Despite of the domination of violent discourse, the Samboilbae has led to peaceful transformation from a violent to non-violent habitus in the history of Korean social movements. First, it has effectively shaped a new tradition of non-violence in the social movements. Second, the non-violent practice of the Samboilbae has empowered people to more fully participate in social change. Finally, it can be again said that the Samboilbae is a good example of how the social conflicts could be handled upon the Buddhist way of practice for the Humanistic Pure Land.

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, who originated Engaged Buddhism, said, "The notion that the Pure Land is an exterior reality, a place to be found far away in the western direction, is just for beginners. If we deepen our practice, the Buddha and the Buddha's land become a reality in our mind. Our ancestral teachers have always said this. If we practice well, we can experience Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land wherever we are in the present moment."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup><http://justsomereadings.blogspot.kr/2012/11/i-bow-to-you-enlightened-being-to-be.html>

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