

# Won-Hyo: Why the meaning of the pattern is not enough

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It is obvious to any practitioner of Taekwon-Do, or indeed any martial art, that there is far more involved than learning to kick and punch. In Taekwon-Do, at each grade, students are required not only to learn their pattern, but also the meaning of their pattern, as part of their syllabus. While this is an invaluable part of learning the “Do”, there are far too many students that simply wrote-learn the pattern meaning just before a grading. This poses two problems. The first is that the student has only learned the superficial details about the pattern’s origins, but believes that, as it is enough to pass a theory test, that is all they need to know about a pattern. The second problem is that the very short meaning we are asked to learn in our syllabus, is not descriptive enough for one to gain a proper understanding of what the pattern is truly about. This is particularly evident when we learn about Won-Hyo.

General Choi tells us “Won-Hyo was the noted monk who introduced Buddhism to the Silla Dynasty in the year of 686 A.D.”. This meaning is also given in the International Taekwon-Do gup syllabus handbook in the syllabus for 6th gup. If a student is to read this and no further, that student would be led to believe that there was a monk called Won-Hyo and in 686 A.D., he brought the religion Buddhism into Silla. Although enough to pass a theory test, this is not sufficient knowledge to assert that they know the meaning of Won-Hyo tul. The true meaning of Won-Hyo tul can only be discovered by reading about Korean history and the life of Won-Hyo himself.

Won-Hyo was born in Kyongsang province in 617 A.D. His birth name was not Won-Hyo, but in fact, Sol-Sedang. He later assumed the pen name, Won-Hyo, once he had become a recognised scholar and monk. Legend says that Won-Hyo was born under a sal tree, which is significant because it is said the Buddha, Gautama, was also born under this type of tree. His family was not very wealthy and did not have a privileged upbringing. He was not born into Buddhism but chose to become a monk at age 20.

Though introduced to Silla during the 5th century by A-Tow, Buddhism was not a very popular religion. This is because the practice of Buddhism relied heavily on religious scripts. These scripts were written in Chinese, so in order to read them, people had to be able to read Chinese. Reading and writing was a virtue normally reserved for the aristocrats. At the time, Korea had no writing system of its own and so was unable to put it’s own language into writing. It was not until 1443 A.D. that King Se-Jong came and invented Hangul, the Korean script still used today. Prior to this, Koreans used an adapted version of the Chinese script to write in their own language, using phonetics. This adaption was created by Won-Hyo’s son, Sol-Chong, and is known as Idu. Because of this lack of accessibility, Buddhism was not a popular religion in Silla.

Although not well established in Silla, Buddhism had become popular in Baekje and Koguryo. Many attempts were made to promote the growth of Buddhism in Silla. One such attempt was the founding of the Hwarang youth group. This took place in the early 7th century. The Hwarang youth group were a group of aristocratic youths, trained in the arts and culture. These youths’

training was steeped in Buddhism. It was thought that these youths would be the future leaders of Silla and their Buddhist backgrounds would be reflected in their leadership.

Even before the Hwarang, attempts to establish Buddhism did occur. In 527 A.D., King Pop-Hung attempted to establish Buddhism as the state religion. This was not popular with the general population, so the king hatched a plan. He planned to make a martyr out of a prominent Buddhist monk. The king had the monk executed, hoping the populace would take pity on him. This plan worked almost too well. The story tells us, although almost certainly based on propaganda from the king, that once the monk was beheaded, the blood that gushed forth was not red, but a milky-white substance. Seeing this as an omen, he decreed that anybody was now free to practice Buddhism. Although this made the populace more accepting of Buddhism, the problem of accessibility remained.

With the lack of popularity of Buddhism, the places where students could study the religion were extremely limited. The usual practice was that serious students make a pilgrimage to China to learn from the Chinese Buddhist monks. This usually resulted in the students returning and sharing their newfound knowledge with the Korean people. This is how different Buddhist sects were introduced to Korea. These sects included Kyeyul, Yulban and Hwaom Buddhism.

Eventually, Won-Hyo began his own pilgrimage to China, in order to study Buddhism. He began the trip with his friend, Ui-Sang. On their way, Won-Hyo became delirious from thirst and staggered into a cave. Upon entering the cave, he found a fresh spring and drank lavishly before collapsing. When he awoke, he discovered there was not fresh spring at all and the cave was full of human remains. He discovered that the water he drank was in fact mildew that had gathered on the inside of a human skull. Upon seeing this, he realised that reality was not important, only what the mind perceives, and Won-Hyo achieved enlightenment. Once he came to this conclusion, Won-Hyo realised that it was no longer necessary to go to China to study and so returned to Silla to spread his teachings. This made him the only teacher of the time, not to have studied in China.

After returning to Silla, Won-Hyo spread his teachings, which he had called Chongto Kyo (Pure Land Buddhism). This Buddhist sect was significant because it did not rely on reading from scripture, only diligent prayer. This made Buddhism much more accessible to the general public and as a result, Buddhism grew in popularity.

The king at the time, King Muyol, took an interest in Won-Hyo's teachings and requested that Won-Hyo come and live in the royal palace. It was here that Won-Hyo entered into a relationship with the widowed princess. From this relationship, Won-Hyo and the princess had a son, Sol-Chong. Sol-Chong followed in his father's wise footsteps and became a famous scholar in his own right. As I have already mentioned, Sol-Chong was responsible for the introduction of Idu, the way of writing Korean phonetically, using Chinese characters. He also authored many works, including Kye-Hwa-Wang, which still survives today. Sol-Chong is recognised as one of the ten Confucian sages of the Silla dynasty.

Armed with their new Buddhist philosophy, Silla defeated the kingdoms of Baekje and Koguryo, under King Moon-Moo. This signalled the start of the unified Korea. Won-Hyo's Buddhism quickly spread throughout the land and Buddhism became the most popular religion in Korea. His

influence did not stop with Korea, however. Because of its accessible nature, Won-Hyo's Pure Land Buddhism spread throughout China and Japan, as well.

Won-Hyo spent the rest of his life travelling the land and teaching his Buddhism to the people. In 686 A.D., Won-Hyo passed away and he was given a state funeral. His son, Sol-Chong, was the one to lay him in state in the Punhwang-Sa temple. The temple still exists today on the same site, although in a very different form.

It is only after reading the background behind Won-Hyo, that we can start to understand the meaning of the pattern. We can now see that Won-Hyo was not simply a monk who introduced Buddhism to Silla in 686 A.D. In fact, we know that Buddhism did exist already in Silla, but was made more accessible and more popular by Won-Hyo. We also know that 686 A.D. does not refer to the year he made Buddhism popular, this happened over many years, but refers to the year he passed away. The simple explanation that we are given is not enough to gain an understanding of the pattern. We can only start to understand the pattern by looking deeper into its history. This idea is not specific to Won-Hyo but can be applied across all 24 patterns. I would encourage all students to look beyond the simple definitions we are given in our syllabus and research the patterns in more depth. This makes for a greater understanding of the pattern and is a significant part of practising the "Do" in Taekwon-Do.

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