

# Why is the ‘Lonely Saint’ so lonely in Korea’s Buddhist Monasteries?

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## ABSTRACT

In Joseon Korea where Buddhism was suppressed by the Confucian ideology, different iconographies appeared and a special syncretism can be observed. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards we can trace a special figure, called the “Lonely Saint” (Dokseong) or Naban jonja, who is usually represented as a monk in landscape settings, full of symbols of immortality. His figure is usually enshrined together with shamanist and daoist images, thus making a special connection with those practices. The connection is especially strong with them, since he is also used in the same fashion, for real-world benefits and for long life.

From these features we can identify this Buddhist saint with one of the foremost pupils of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Indian Pindola Bharadvaja, who is called Binduro in Korea, and Binzuru in Japan. This particular Arhat, Pindola Bharadvaja, was worshipped as a separate figure from the very early times (we have evidence that in China the cult of Pindola was existent by the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.). Since he has associations with magic and longevity (he had to stay in Earth until the coming of the Future Buddha, Maitreya), he became surrounded by longevity symbols and placed together with Daoist and folk-deities in Korea. This form of enshrinement is unique to Korea. In Japan he is conceived as a healing saint and his figure is usually represented in a sculpted form outside the halls of Buddhist temples from the Edo period onwards. The common feature of these images in Korea and Japan that both are approachable and very human figures who are intermediators to the holier and more psychologically-distant Buddha-realms. This feature is supported by the background religious texts which discuss Pindola as not entering Nirvana, but living on Earth maintaining a unique direct living connection with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, whom he used to see face-to-face.

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# Why is the ‘Lonely Saint’ so lonely in Korea’s Buddhist Monasteries?

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## **A Buddhist monk in Confucianist Korea, together with shamanic and daoist images**

In the Joseon era (1432-1910) Buddhism was suppressed in favor of Confucianism, however Buddhism never ceased to exist, and it produced very interesting iconographies. The styles became more diverse, the materials cheaper, and the patrons were coming from a much wider audience as before. In this milieu, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards we can see the existence of a particular representation of a Buddhist monk, appearing together with shamanistic and Daoist deities in the furthest Samseong Halls of the Joseon temple complexes. This monk is called *Dokseong* or “Lonely Saint”, and he is a popular and frequently-worshipped deity in South Korea. His representations can almost always be found in Korean Buddhist temples. However, his identity and characteristics remain obscure and little-understood by both Buddhist believers and scholars of Korean culture. His iconic representations are usually placed together with the popular Korean Shamanist/Daoist deities the *Sanshin* [Mountain-spirit] and the *Chilseong* [Seven Stars spirit] and possibly other non-Buddhist representations in a special shrine for non-Buddhist deities, usually a triad of them, within temple complexes, usually above and behind or next to the Main Halls. However, sometimes he has his own shrine, but again, so far away from the other Buddhist deities.

But why is this happened? Who is this Buddhist figure, so far away from the more venerated Buddhist deities? Why does he appear together with the shamanistic and daoist deities? Why can we find very similar background motifs on the paintings aimed to represent him?

To answer these questions I have collected the available sources representing him, putting

together my own photographs and the splendid photo-collection of Prof. David Mason, a long-time resident in Korea and an avid collector of the Korean Mountain spirit-representations.<sup>1</sup>

We could glean from this that *Dokseong* is regarded as a somewhat shamanic deity and supplicated for real-world benefits in the Korean Shamanic fashion, but is generally accepted as more of a Buddhist figure than the others enshrined with him, creating a surprising mystery and controversy about his historical origins and religious identity. As looking through the material (which I put on a special website), some aspects suggested that his origin goes back to one of the foremost Buddhist enlightened-saints (Arhats in Sanskrit), Pindola Bharadvaja, a mythical figure widely held by Northeast Asian Buddhists to be one of the sixteen original and primary disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha. Aspects of this figure's mythology help explain his Shamanistic status and function in Korean temples. We have analyzed these images together with the written sources in order to shed light on the origins of the representation of the Korean "Lonely Saint" and to place them into a wider context, and to rediscover his functional identity.

### **Description of the Lonely Saint**

Let's have a look at the image! How Dokseong looks like?

Dokseong is always depicted as an elderly man with a distinctly bald head (sometimes protruding a bit at the top) and no hat, with kind but sad eyes, with white hair on the sides of his head and long white eyebrows, usually with no beard or moustache (shaven face), but occasionally with an "unshaven" stubble of facial hair (never a long beard). He is always depicted seated (cross-legged or with one knee up), wearing Buddhist robes<sup>2</sup> and barefoot, and holding a *yeomju* [Buddhist rosary] and/or a wooden staff. In some cases he may be making a *mudra* [an iconic gesture in Hindu / Buddhist art] with one hand. He is almost always depicted as sitting on a rocky cliff-top beneath a pine-tree, and there is usually a rich background of mountains and forest, with clouds and a waterfall. There may also be an incense-burner, books (presumed to be Buddhist sutras), mushrooms, bamboo, flowers, deer, turtles and cranes or other birds (whether perching or flying)

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank prof. Mason for his great generosity to share his photo-collection with me, enabling me to scan the related slides into a digitalized format for this research.

<sup>2</sup> Often in the "southern" style, with one shoulder bare. He is never painted wearing the gray and brown robes of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Korean monk. This acknowledges his Indian origins (Mason 1999).

nearby him. All of these are symbols of the powers of natural factors to grant or inspire health, longevity and wisdom to spiritual practitioners in the mountain-forests; they are common in Korean religious paintings and appear with equal frequency in Sansin (Mountain-spirit) paintings and in other associated artworks. Child-servants may be shown attending him, holding (offering) gifts such as fruits that symbolize longevity, fertility and fecundity, and possibly brewing some sort of tea for him; these are called *dongja* in Korean, and are common secondary figures in East Asian religious iconography. A statue of Dokseong is usually placed on the altar in front of his *taenghwa*, as with Sanshin, and it often shares iconographic motifs with the painted portrait, although a statue of a Buddha, Bodhisattva or Arhat is sometimes used instead. Many other examples- same features!

### Searching for the Identity of the Lonely Saint

Because his representations appear to be portraits of some elderly master-monk, there are a few Korean Buddhist monks who hold the opinion that he may represent venerable master Payak 波若 (562-613), a renowned monk from the Goguryeo Kingdom<sup>3</sup> (who studied Tiantai Buddhism<sup>4</sup> on China's Mount Tiantai, gaining enlightenment and dying there, never returning to Korea. However, this theory is not widespread among Buddhist believers or scholars, and plays no discernable role in the ritual veneration of the Dokseong (Mason 1999: 100).

There is no evidence from historical or contemporary sources, nor motifs from his iconography, that suggests identification with any other historical master-monk of India, China or Korea itself. However, it is an interesting addition to the reception and appropriation of this figure.

Dokseong is named also as “*Naban jonja*” 那畔尊者. This name can also be found as an identification written on some of his representations and in later Korean texts.<sup>5</sup> The meaning of

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<sup>3</sup>고구려 or 高句麗. One of the Three Ancient Korean Kingdoms, traditional dates 37 BCE – 668 CE.

<sup>4</sup>天台, Wade-Giles: T'ien T'ai. He is recorded to have studied under Founding-Master Zhiyi (智顓, Wade-Giles: Chih-I, 538–597). Mount Tiantai is now in Zhejiang Province.

<sup>5</sup> Baekpa Geungseon (백파공선 白波巨旋, 1767-1852): *Jakbeopgwigam* 작법귀감 *Jebanmun*, Dokseong *Jaewimun* 독성재의문 獨聖齋義文. In: Pak Semin 박세민 (朴世敏): Korean Buddhist Ritual Data Collection 한

this name can be explained as *naban* 那畔 “another way”, in contrast with the word *joban* which means the “ordinary way” according to Lee (*ibid.*).

The first literary evidence remained in Korea can be found in a ritual text stored at Haeinsa, one of Korea’s greatest monasteries, titled the *Haeinsa Jebanmun* (해인사제반문 海印寺 諸般文) which has a postscript written by Nakam Winul 낙암의눌 落巖義訥 (1666 -1737) dated to 1719 referring to the cult of Dokseong as a traditional practice, thus showing that it had already existed well before that time ( Lee Ji-kwan 1999: 13).<sup>6</sup>

The Haeinsa Jebanmun and other ritual texts also contain other details which help us understating the visual representations, and in addition they refer to a Buddhist saint, or Arhat, who had very similar features to our Korean Lonely Saint thus connecting it with some Indian and Chinese legends. This way the name ‘Naban jonja’ can be also understood.

The name of this arhat who can be connected to the Korean Lonely Saint is Pindola Bharadvaja, who is considered as one of the most important arhats according to several legends.

His veneration has preceded the common in-temple veneration of Arhats in groups of 16 or 500. His name refers to his role as a protector of refectories (Sanskrit *panda* = alms, food for monks).<sup>7</sup>

The American historian of religions, John Strong has shown that in contrast to the earlier beliefs which understood Pindola as a negative person, as many of the Pali sources report, he originally was to be understood as a means for the lay-people to gain merits through offering food for him (Strong 1979). We can see in our collected photos of Korean representations that it is very rare to see him depicted as a distinctly fat monk as we might have thought reading only these Pali sources.

In the Jebanmun texts it is emphasized that Dokseong had very long eyebrows, a motif that appears on most of the images. The distinctively long eyebrows can be seen also on representations of Pindola amongst the 16 Arhats.

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국불교의례자료총서 韓國佛敎義禮資料叢書), Samseong-am 삼성암/三聖庵, 1993

<sup>6</sup>해인사 제반문 (Haeinsa Jebanmun) 1719. In: Pak Semin 박세민 (朴世敏): 한국불교의례자료서 (韓國佛敎儀禮資料書), 2. p.683a

<sup>7</sup> This role is also mentioned in the Buddhist sources in Korea in the so-called Pindola-sutra (Cheongbindurogyeong 청빈두로경), in: Daejeongjang 대정장, 32, p.784b5)

We have evidence that in China by the fifth century CE the cult of Arhat Pindola was already existent, due to a 457 CE translation of the '*Ching binlutou fa*' ('Method of Inviting Pindola') into Chinese, T. 1689, 32, 784b-c (Kent 1995:16, note 11). The episode where Dokseong was mentioned as sentenced to live on the Earth after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha until the coming of the Future Buddha Maitreya can also be found in several stories about Pindola. The Korean source *Daejeongjang* refers to the famous story found in the Indian Ashokavadana Sutra, where we can read about Pindola performing a magical feat in front of the laity. The story is well known as it is found in the "Vinayas of Five Different Schools" scripture and is recounted in a number of Pali commentaries as well:

"Jyotiska, a rich man of Rājagṛha, had a begging bowl made from a block of sandalwood, and, wishing to see a display of supernatural powers, he suspended it from the top of a high bamboo pole and organized a contest: whoever could bring the bowl down using magical powers could keep it. Different heretic masters (*tirthikas*) all try to obtain it, each one pretending in various devious fashions to be endowed with supernatural faculties. But the rich householder is not to be fooled; he wants graphic proof of their powers. Then Pindola happens by together with Mahā Maudgalyāyana. He urges the latter (who is well known as a master of supernatural faculties) to take the bowl, but Maudgalyāyana declines and suggests that Pindola do it instead. Pindola, therefore, flies up into the air in full view of the assembled crowds, tours the city several times, grabs the bowl and brings it to the rich man who fills it and honors him. He then goes back to the vihāra. The whole incident, however, is reported to Buddha who questions Pindola, reprimands him severely for having exhibited his supernatural powers, and then makes a Vinaya rule to the effect that the performance of magical feats in the presence of laymen will henceforth be a *duskrta* offence."<sup>8</sup> (Strong 1979:71-72).

Another famous story from the Ashokavadana can also be found in one of our Korean texts which shows the cultic importance of the long eyebrows of Pindola very clearly; it goes as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> See the various Vinaya accounts in Lévi and Chavannes, pp. 233-47, and the expanded version of the story in The Commentary of Dhammapada, ed. H.C. Norman (London: Pali Text Society, 1912, vol. 3: 199-203 (cf. Buddhist Legends, trans. Eugene Watson Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 30, part 3: 35-38).

“Aśoka invites the community of the four quarters to come to him in Pātaliputra where he plans to make them offerings of food and clothes. (*pañcavārsika*, a quinquennial entertainment of the Sangha). A great number of monks are assembled. However, it is immediately apparent that the reunion is incomplete, for at its very center, the seat of the elder has remained empty. Aśoka, in consternation, asks Yagas, the most venerable elder present: "How is it that the elder's seat is not mounted? Is there here someone else who is older than you?" "There is, O great king" comes the answer. "This seat is that of Pindola Bhāradvāja whom the Buddha designated as foremost of lion-roarers."<sup>9</sup> Aśoka is astonished that Pindola is still alive, and asks: "Is it possible for us to see him?" "Great king," answers Yagas, "you will see him now." And there follows the account of Pindola's spectacular arrival. Flying through the air surrounded by several thousands of Arhats in "half-moon formation," he alights in the midst of the assembly and takes his place on the empty seat, his white hair flowing and his white eyebrows so long that they hang down and cover the pupils of his eyes.<sup>10</sup> Pindola Bhāradvāja has arrived to receive his food offering, and his presence is clearly a sign that Aśoka's offering is being carried out properly.” (*ibid.*:83-84).

At this point there occur some intriguing verbal exchanges between Ashoka and Pindola which provide clues to the interpretation of his cult and legend as a whole. By virtue of the fact that Pindola personally knew (and attained enlightenment under) the Buddha, he establishes a connection between the age of the Buddha and the present, the time of Ashoka. In an actual, more experiential sense, Pindola also makes the Buddha himself present in the here and now situation. This is expressed in the text in a rather intriguing way:

“Although Pindola is physically there on the seat in front of him, Aśoka does not immediately see him "face to face." As we have mentioned, Pindola's long white eyebrows hang down and cover the pupils of his eyes, and this, in quite literal

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Aśokavadāna, p.96 (cf. Burnouf, p.353)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

terms, keeps them from "eye to eye" contact.” (*ibid.*:84)

This noteworthy physical feature of Pindola, which is mentioned in only one other text, but taken-up by the Korean sources, is on the one hand simply indicative of Pindola's great age; he has, after all, been alive for a number of centuries. But the text is so curiously specific about his eyebrows and his eyes that some further interpretation is called for.

The matter becomes clear when it is put in the context of the Buddhist ceremony of the consecration of Buddha images. As it is well known, the climax of any ritual of dedication of a painting or a statue of the Buddha is the moment of the "insertion of the eyes."<sup>11</sup> Until they are painted or put in, the image is considered to be lifeless, ritually irrelevant, just a lump of clay or stone or metal. “But with the eyes in, it becomes alive, consecrated, a Buddha-image rather than an image of the Buddha” (*ibid.*: 84).

With his white brows covering his pupils, Pindola at first sits before Ashoka in much the same way as an unfinished "blind" Buddha image. It is, therefore, a moment of great importance in the text when, we are told, with King Ashoka bowing down before him, "the elder lifted up his brows with both hands and gazed straight at the king."<sup>12</sup> Here, in the cultic situation established by Ashoka and confirmed by his offerings and devotion, the live Pindola is consecrated, or we could say, is sacralized in much the same way as an image of the Buddha. And just like the Buddha image at the precise moment of its consecration, Pindola "makes present", ritualistically speaking, the Buddha who is absent in Nirvana (*ibid.*:85).

A story of Chinese origin also appears in our Korean sources (*Daejeongjang* 50, p 353 b 17):

“Tao-an (or Kor. *Doan-beopsa*) in fearing that his Sutra-commentaries would not be in perfect harmony with the original contents had a dream where an Indian

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, one of the first records of this ceremony attributes its earlier performance to Ashoka. See Samantapāsādikā: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya Pitaka, ed. J. Takakusu and M. Nagai (London: Pali Text Society 1924), vol. 1, p. 43., quoted by Strong 1979, p.84. note 118. The rite spread all over the Buddhist world and continues to the present day. For several examples of *kaigen* (the opening of the eyes) as it is called in Japan, see M. W. De Visser, Ancient Buddhism in Japan, 2 vols (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1935), 1: 34, 39, 299, 324, and 2: 481, 582, 605, 642. For a modern Sinhalese example, see Richard Gombrich, "The Consecration of a Buddhist Image," *Journal of Asian Studies* 26 (1966): 23-36.

The practice of drawing the pupils of the popular 'Daruma-dolls' in Japan also has a connection with this ancient custom. (Mecsi 2008)

<sup>12</sup> *Aśokavadāna*, p.97 (cf. Burnouf, p. 354)



Buddhist monk appeared in front of him whose hair was white and had extremely long eyebrows. This monk has reassured Tao-an about his work and said that he would not enter Nirvana and would help him finishing the Sutra-commentaries. Taoan, when he woke up, immediately knew that the monk he saw in his dream was no other than Pindola.”<sup>13</sup>

Elements of some stories about Pindola might have arrived to Korea quite early, as there is an interesting episode in the *Samguk Yusa* [Supplementary Legends of the Three Kingdoms, written by monk Iryeon in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century] which might be referred to as a parallel of Pindola’s story. Derived from Indian sources, this alternate old story shows Pindola’s misuse of supernatural powers and explains his exile from Nirvana:

The Chinese translation of the original Indian text (Sumagadhavadana) describes that when hurrying to attend one of the Buddha's meetings, Pindola flew through the air, absentmindedly dragging a mountain behind him as he was mending his robe on the top of the mountain before, planting the needle into the ground with the thread still attached to his hem. This caused a pregnant woman to have a miscarriage when she saw the flying mountain above her head. Thereupon Pindola’s supernatural displays could lead to a possible loss of life. (Strong 1979:74)

The Korean parallel to Pindola's story of dragging a mountain behind him appears in a *Samguk Yusa* story where it is said that “In Baekje Kingdom a holy monk brought a mountain to the site of Mireuk-sa 彌勒寺, by causing it to fly through the air. Mireuk-sa is dedicated to Maitreya.” (Samguk Yusa, 1972: 144 cf. Covell, *ibid*: 76).

In the background of Dokseong images, as we have already seen, we can often find health / longevity / good-fortune symbols well-known from Korean folk-paintings. We can see mountains, waters, waterfalls, clouds, the red sun, deer, cranes, turtles, *bullocho*-mushrooms and peaches, and we can also encounter the magpies often seen in Korean tiger-paintings. We can speculate that the reason for putting this Buddhist saint in the company of Daoist and shamanist icon-

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Lee 1999, p.17. cf. Strong 1979, p. 70.

symbols can be connected to this certain Arhat, Pindola, whose legends indicate his connection with magic and immortality, concepts which play very important roles in East Asian folk-religions. Therefore, the ubiquitous placement of this Buddhist figure into a landscape full of these symbols from the other traditions is further evidence that the original identity of Dokseong is in fact Pindola Bharadvaja.

### **Pindola in Japan**

In Japan the figure of Pindola became popular in a very different way than in Korea. There, from the Edo-period onwards he is venerated in a form of a sculpture and it is believed to cure several illnesses. Apart from that, he was also venerated as a patron saint of the refectories following the Chinese tradition. In Japan the sculpted image of Pindola is usually placed outside the temple, mainly at the entrance. This is similar to Korea in approach where the images of Dokseong are usually placed farther from the main halls, together with the non-Buddhist deities. This can be a sign that indicates Pindola's position as an intermediary between our world and the consecrated realms. In Japan his figure is usually painted red, explaining it as a sign of his gluttony, but this colour often disappears due to being touched by sick people who hope to be thereby cured.

### **Conclusion**

In Joseon Korea where Buddhism was suppressed by the Confucian ideology, different iconographies appeared and a special syncretism can be observed. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards we can trace a special figure, called Dokseong or Naban jonja, who is usually represented as a monk in a landscape settings, full of symbols of immortality. His figure is usually enshrined together with shamanist and daoist images, thus making a special connection with those practices. The connection is especially strong with them, since he is also used in the same fashion, for real-world benefits and for long life.

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Shakyamuni Buddha, the Indian Pindola Bharadvaja, who is called Binduro in Korea, and Binzuru in Japan. This particular Arhat, Pindola Bharadvaja, was worshipped as a separate figure from the very early times (we have evidence that in China the cult of Pindola was existent by the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.). Since he has associations with magic and longevity (he had to stay in Earth until the coming of the Future Buddha, Maitreya), he became surrounded by longevity symbols and placed together with Daoist and folk-deities in Korea. This form of enshrinement is unique to Korea; we have seen how in Japan he is conceived as a healing saint and his figure is usually represented in a sculpted form outside the halls of Buddhist temples from the Edo period onwards. The common feature of these images in Korea and Japan that both are approachable and very human figures who are intermediators to the holier and more psychologically-distant Buddha-realms. This feature is supported by the background religious texts which discuss Pindola as not entering Nirvana, but living on Earth maintaining a unique direct living connection with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, whom he used to see face-to-face.

This legend reportedly influenced the European legend of the “Wandering Jew”, according to the Japanese scholar Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), thus connecting not only the Buddhist traditions with the Daoist and folk-religions in the case of Asian countries, but also reaching to the Western world and colouring those Christianity-related myths and legends (Minakata 1899:123).

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