



Between *Hwadu* and Mindfulness: *Seon* Meditation in Korean Templestay Programs for International Audiences

Andrea Maria NENCINI

Abstract

This study explores how Korean Seon Buddhism has adapted its meditation practices in response to modern influences, particularly through the integration of mindfulness-based approaches within the Templestay program. While rooted in traditional Ganhwa Seon, which emphasizes hwadu contemplation for self-inquiry and master-disciple transmission, contemporary Seon practice has evolved to accommodate a broader audience, including international and secular practitioners. However, the push for greater accessibility in Seon meditation has sparked debates about whether these modern adaptations dilute traditional Seon training or make it more relevant to contemporary practitioners. Focusing on English conducted Templestay programs targeting foreigners, this study aims to analyze how these adaptations shape the experience of Seon meditation and make it accessible to a global audience. Through first-hand experiences at four Korean Buddhist temples offering Templestay programs—Hwagyesa, Gulgulsa, Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center, and the International Seon Center—the study examines the distinct meditation approaches used, ranging from hwadu practice to Seonmudo, breath awareness, and mantra meditation. The findings suggest that rather than homogenizing with global mindfulness, Templestay programs constitute sites of pragmatic negotiation, in which the degree of adherence to traditional Ganhwa Seon varies significantly according to the specific institutional history and pedagogical orientation of each temple.

Keywords: Templestay, Korean Seon meditation, mindfulness meditation, Ganhwa Seon, spiritual tourism

This study was supported by the Next Generation EU (line M4.C2.1.1) project: “Making Korea a Religiously Plural Society? Historical, Legal, and Social Approaches” (CUP H53D230003 10001).

Andrea Maria NENCINI is an affiliate scholar in history of religions in the Department of History, Archaeology, Geography, Art and Entertainment at the University of Florence. E-mail: andreamaria.nencini@gmail.com.

Introduction

In recent years, foreign visitors to South Korea interested in its cultural heritage have become increasingly acquainted with a distinctive aspect of the country's cultural and religious heritage, which is *chamseon* "Seon meditation." Seon (Chan in Chinese, Zen in Japanese), meaning "meditation" or "contemplation," refers to the specific school of meditation developed within Korean Buddhism. While Seon traces its origins to the Chinese tradition of Chan, it has evolved into a distinct practice with characteristics that set it apart from Chinese or Japanese Zen schools. These features have played a decisive role in the formation of Korean Buddhist history.¹ Today, the tradition commonly known as Seon Buddhism is the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in South Korea, represented primarily—though not exclusively—by the Jogye order of Korean Buddhism.

Given this central role of Seon within the Korean Buddhist landscape, it becomes understandable that visitors are readily introduced to this meditative tradition when exploring Korean Buddhist culture. This growing exposure has heightened with foreign interest in experiencing authentic forms of Buddhist meditation, such as Seon, within their original cultural context.

In fact, while Seon meditation is rarely encountered by foreigners outside Korea, growing international exposure to mindfulness practices has made meditation more familiar to the general public and it is no longer seen as an exclusively *religious* practice. Defining mindfulness in a single, clear way is nearly impossible:² its semantic range spans from canonical Pāli texts

-
1. It would be inaccurate to describe Seon as a single, unified school, whether from a doctrinal or practical perspective. Like the Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen traditions, Seon encompasses multiple lineages and schools of thought that have continually evolved over time. The aim of this contribution is therefore not to refer to a fixed or monolithic portrait of the Seon tradition, but rather to examine its dynamic character within the contemporary context of international tourism. For contributions that emphasize the historical plurality, evolving practices, and internal diversity of Zen traditions, see Welter et al. (2022).
 2. The translation of the Pāli word *sati* as "mindfulness" was first introduced by the English Orientalist Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922) in his translation of the Pāli

such as the complex *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* to the secular method developed and trademarked by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, based on cultivating “bare attention” for treating stress and anxiety (Gethin 2011). Beyond monastic traditions or registered programs, mindfulness today can also loosely refer to a simple awareness meditation shared by influencers and wellness gurus across countless digital platforms and meditation apps (Wu et al. 2022).

It is undeniable that meditation has become embedded in the daily lives of many people, not so much as a religious technique, but as a secular, evidence-based tool recommended by therapists, whether psychologists or physicians, to promote relaxation and mental-physical well-being (Baer 2003, 139; Bishop et al. 2004, 236–237; Khoury et al. 2013).³ Consequently, it is unsurprising that many individuals experience meditation primarily as a practice resembling a wellness routine—one whose defining qualities include flexibility, intuitiveness, and the ability to evoke a comforting spiritual atmosphere without strong religious associations (Sharf 2014, 942).

Nonetheless, one of the factors contributing to the appeal of the modern mindfulness therapeutic adaptations is its purported descent from an ancient religious tradition such as Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 146) even if such lineage has been highly disputed (Sharf 2015, 477–478). This perceived lineage often lends the practice an aura of authority, reinforced by associations with antiquity, gravity, and doctrinal complexity. Moreover, the presence of institutions devoted exclusively to the cultivation of meditative practice—and of experts dedicated to its transmission—serves to evoke a spiritual potential that is seldom paralleled by other disciplines or routine practices.⁴

In this context, a sector of tourism commonly referred to as “spiritual tourism” has developed. This form of tourism in which travel is motivated

canonical texts in the late 19th century. However, he never explicitly clarified the rationale behind this lexical choice. See Gethin (2011, 264–265).

3. For a critical review of the results of empirical studies employing mindfulness meditation, see Van Dam et al. (2018).

4. Modern yoga has served as a forerunner in its adoption as a secular meditative wellness technique. See Newcombe (2021, 162).

by the search for engagement with a place or tradition within a context perceived as historically and culturally *authentic*, such as ashrams, monasteries, and temples, moves beyond traditional, more passive modes of knowledge acquisition and, crucially, seeks engaging activities, experiential and transformative in nature, as exemplified by spiritual retreats (Norman 2011, 42–43).

From this perspective, the Templestay program offered visitors to South Korea by the Jogye order of Korean Buddhism has clearly established itself as a successful tourism scheme. Through this program, participants can visit and reside in various temples across the country, where, for a fee covering accommodation and meals, they may take part in temple activities, receive instruction from monks on aspects of the Buddhist tradition, and participate in meditation sessions (Moon and Somers 2023).⁵ Soon after its inception in 2002, the program quickly began to attract international visitors owing to its ability to provide an immersive introduction to the history and culture of Korean Buddhist tradition, while simultaneously offering a restorative retreat often set in tranquil natural surroundings.

Given that this program offers meditation sessions led by monks within temple settings, and considering its success in attracting foreign visitors eager to experience meditation in an authentic atmosphere, this article seeks to examine how meditation is employed within the Templestay program. In particular, it will focus on four representative temples renowned for offering programs in English to an international audience, analyzing both the challenges of maintaining a homogenous Seon traditional meditative practice in relation to the expectations of foreign participants, and the opportunities for internationalization and dissemination it provides, as well as the strategies employed to make Seon meditation a flexible and accessible practice. The aim is to explore the effect of the convergence of Seon meditation, mindfulness, and spiritual tourism, analyzing how traditional contemplative practices such as Seon meditation are adapted for non-monastic audiences and to what extent accessibility and authenticity can

5. "What Is Templestay," <https://www.templestay.com/en/MI000000000000000020/html/view.do> (accessed December 21, 2025).

coexist. The analysis reveals that this coexistence is not uniform but context-dependent: each temple negotiates the tension between accessibility and authenticity differently, shaped by its founding history, the profile of its teachers, and its degree of institutional orientation toward international audiences.

Seon Meditation and Modern Mindfulness

Far from being a monolithic tradition, Seon developed under the influence of the disputes and transformations occurring in the place of origin of the Chan tradition, namely China. Chan—the name being the result of the transliteration of the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*, meaning “meditation”—is a school that emphasizes meditation as the primary means of attaining enlightenment (Hershock 2023). It emerged around the 6th–7th centuries CE and reached Korea almost immediately during the Unified Silla period, thanks to monks who traveled to China to study directly with Chan masters and upon their return to Korea in the 8th century founded mountain monasteries to transmit the Dharma, the “teaching” they had received. These monks also brought back the scholastic debates that had arisen among the various Chinese Chan schools, sometimes attempting to reconcile them (Jee 2024).

The most significant of these debates concerned whether enlightenment was to be achieved through the gradual cultivation of morality, doctrinal knowledge, and meditative effort, or whether it could be attained spontaneously and immediately through a personal, idiosyncratic realization. In response to this controversy, Korean Seon—particularly through the contributions of the eminent master Bojo Jinul (1158–1210)—sought to harmonize these opposing tendencies. Jinul systematized the Chan method of introspective inquiry called Ganhwa Seon, meaning “phrase-observing meditation,” used to produce the sudden enlightenment through the contemplation of “critical phrases” known as *hwadu* (Buswell 2013, 175–185). Bojo Jinul emphasized that enlightenment required both meditation aimed at immediate awareness and the cultivation of doctrinal

knowledge applied within the ethic of monastic life, and although in his later writings he came to privilege the method of sudden enlightenment (Buswell 1989, 36–37), from his perspective, these two approaches were ultimately complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, despite the conciliatory efforts characteristic of the Korean Buddhist tradition, the approach centered on the attainment of sudden enlightenment known as Ganhwa Seon became the core of Seon meditative practice (Cawley 2022, 272–273). This approach maintained that the realization of ultimate reality—namely, emptiness—could be grasped instantaneously by transcending dialogical and categorical thought, which were understood as inherently illusory. Such realization was thought to be facilitated by meditating on paradoxical phrases, whose very irresolvability through dialogical thinking could trigger, for the meditator, an experiential realization of one's true nature, namely emptiness.

Specifically, drawing on methods developed by Chinese Chan masters, monks were given a “critical phrase,” or “case,” a *hwadu* (*huatou* in Chinese, *watō* in Japanese), a key-phrase or word derived from a *gongan* (*gongan* in Chinese, *kōan* in Japanese), a precedent from a famous public case contained in Chan traditional texts, on which they were to meditate in order to attain enlightenment (Buswell 2006, 78–79). In the Seon tradition, monks might receive only a single *hwadu* to contemplate their entire monastic lives (Heine 2014, 20–21; Senécal 2011, 79–80). These critical phrases—often presented as terse riddles, anecdotes, or stories—are profoundly paradoxical, such that their meaning cannot be grasped through logical reasoning. Their content is often highly obscure, frequently referring to places, objects, and images from the Chinese Chan tradition from which Ganhwa Seon first developed (McRae 2003, 77–78). At times, the phrases also conveyed coarse or violent language, whose very bluntness and severity were likewise regarded as conducive to triggering sudden realization (McRae 2003, 128–129).

Famous *hwadu* such as “What is this?” or “Who am I?” are still used today as tools to dissolve conceptual thought and produce intense doubt so as to open direct experiential awareness of one's true nature (S. Park 2009, 35).

When a monk attains enlightenment, the authenticity of enlightenment

is traditionally confirmed through “mind-to-mind transmission” between master and disciple, preserving in this way the lineage integrity of Seon—a process known as *inga* (Buswell 1992, 150–153; J. Park 2022, 253–255). This certification underscores the transmission of the *dharma* between master and disciple, a recognition considered essential for maintaining the unaltered continuity of Chan Dharma lineage, of which Seon Buddhism claims to be the sole preserver through its pure Ganhwa Seon practice.⁶

That said, although the practice of Ganhwa Seon is considered by the Jogye order as a fundamental aspect of Korean Buddhist tradition and unique in its kind, it remains a meditative technique whose elusive formalism has remained difficult to define homogeneously (Senécal 2011, 78–81).

In this sense, at first glance, the points of contact between a complex and initiatory practice such as Ganhwa Seon and the accessible, intuitive techniques of modern mindfulness may appear minimal. Nevertheless, a historical link emerges in the development of contemporary mindfulness. In particular, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the MBSR program and the most prominent figure in the modern mindfulness movement, trained under the modern Seon master Seung Sahn (1927–2004), who significantly contributed to popularizing Seon meditation among international lay audiences, during a period in which Westerners became fascinated by Japanese Zen tradition and the use of *kōan* (Heine 2014, 58–59; Husgafvel 2018, 303–305; Kabat-Zinn 2011, 286–289). Seung Sahn used a teaching method, which he called “Don’t Know Mind,” that he developed by blending elements from the Japanese Rinzai school with traditional Korean Seon, adapted for his American practitioners who could find it difficult accommodating to Seon’s traditional monastic formalism. According to his approach, meditation shouldn’t fixate strenuously on a single *hwadu* in order to attain enlightenment, but provide help for functioning and dealing with clarity in everyday life (Low 2010, 276–277; Senécal 2011, 80).

Drawing on elements of Zen meditation, *vipassanā* meditation, and

6. The uninterrupted continuity of Korean Dharma transmission is disputed. On this, see Senécal (2011, 81–82).

haṭha yoga, Seung Sahn's trainee Kabat-Zinn developed a method for stress management and reduction centered on a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. In Kabat-Zinn's approach, mindfulness requires no specific prior doctrinal requisites to be acquired, is simple to cultivate, and a great tool for managing stress (Kabat-Zinn [1990] 2005, 264–265). While mindfulness traces its roots to several ancient meditative traditions, it is presented as a methodology stripped of religious or doctrinal references, allowing for seamless integration into secular contexts such as schools, corporations, and hospitals. Its therapeutic success—supported by a wide body of psychological and neuroscientific research praising its effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety—is undeniable, and it is now incorporated into many official therapeutic protocols (Cullen 2011, 190–191). Yet arguably mindfulness' greatest impact lies in how, understood as a general practice of awareness meditation, it has gained global recognition and has come to be associated primarily with psychological and physical well-being as defined by contemporary Western norms, often separated from explicitly religious soteriological goals (McMahan 2008, 217–218; Rahmani 2020, 263–265).

While Buddhism across its various traditions grounds the practice of meditation in the understanding of the origins of suffering—through the Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence, that is, the core message of the historical Buddha—modern mindfulness meditation appears more concerned with offering an immediate and practical response to suffering, in the form of anxiety, stress, or even physical pain, since mindfulness has been frequently employed in the management of chronic pain and many other ailments (Zhang et al. 2021). Its presentation as entirely accessible and intuitive has facilitated its application in schools, even with very young audiences, where it serves as a tool for stress management and improved concentration, as well as among older adults, where it is employed to alleviate loneliness and strengthen cognitive functions (Gkintoni et al. 2025; Zenner et al. 2014). The increasing use of mindfulness meditation in secular settings is quite recognizable in South Korea as well, where mindfulness is often stripped of its religious context and applied for therapeutic means in urban communities, schools, and universities (Y. Kim et al. 2022; Lee and Bang 2010; K. Park et al. 2020; Song and Lindquist 2015).

Such stress on its lay attitude is curious as the traditional practice to which mindfulness meditation is most commonly associated is *vipassanā* or “insight” meditation, a meditative style belonging to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, popularized in the West by American practitioners and mindfulness popularizers such as Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, which teach to apply momentary awareness on the rise and fall of mental phenomena (Goldstein 2013, 269). This style in its *Westernized* form, based on cultivating mental presence in the moment, is widely employed as a psychological and therapeutic tool and it has often been related with Zen traditions for its similar emphasis on meditation as a path to awakening instead of ritual and doctrine (McMahan 2008, 186). Indeed, the simplicity of the instructions associated with the various protocols developed to make mindfulness meditation easily teachable without requiring a complicated doctrinal framework has favored the increased use of *vipassanā*-inspired meditation even in contexts such as South Korea. Even within the Jogye order there is a tendency to assimilate the *vipassanā* meditative styles, especially when having to engage in dynamics of internationalization or respond to a society increasingly interested in meditation for its psychological benefits rather than its soteriological ones (Jeong 2011, 143–145; Joo 2011, 626–627; Senécal 2011, 89–93).

Alongside its various benefits, several scholars have also highlighted the commodifying features of globalized modern mindfulness, in which the practice increasingly adapts to the needs of the consumer (Purser 2019). For example, it is often offered in formats that can be easily integrated into daily routines as a quick break, as revealed by the proliferation of meditation apps that employ gamification techniques, offering rewards to incentivize continued engagement. A frequently noted characteristic is that the goal of mindfulness practice often appears to be enhancing individual performance within the consumeristic system, rather than offering alternative paths toward liberation (Poirier 2016).

In light of both its widespread popularity and the effects of globalization, it is therefore unsurprising that many individuals are drawn to experiencing mindfulness in contexts perceived as more authentic and traditional, such as the Korean Templestay programs (Song et al. 2015).

However, it should be recognized that while the promotion of psychophysical well-being and stress reduction are explicitly central to contemporary global mindfulness, these goals stand in sharp contrast to the soteriological aims traditionally associated with Seon meditation, chief among them the maintenance of dharmic transmission and the realization of emptiness.

The therapeutic dimension of the two practices thus rests on fundamentally different premises, which has in turn given rise to distinct modes of cultivating sustained attention. In Seon, meditation on the *hwadu* tends to be intense and prolonged, oriented toward generating a profound existential doubt; modern mindfulness, by contrast, cultivates a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, free from any explicit soteriological aspiration or formal strenuousness.

Precisely because of these divergent aims and methods, the learning process also unfolds according to markedly different parameters. Within the Seon tradition, the practitioner's progress is assessed according to the evaluative criteria inherent to *inga* transmission: the teacher assigns the *hwadu* individually, establishing a relationship with the practice that is personal, continuous, and idiosyncratic—and therefore resistant to standardization. In mindfulness, by contrast, standardization is not an obstacle but a defining resource: protocol-based instruction makes the practice readily teachable, assimilable, and replicable across diverse cultural contexts, with no requirement for a specialized transmission lineage. These structural distinctions provide the analytical framework through which the following section examines how each of the four Templestay programs negotiates the tension between Seon tradition and global accessibility.

The Templestay Program: Origins and Present Challenges

Spiritual tourism is a relatively modern phenomenon that began to develop in the 1960s and 1970s with the diffusion in the West of Asian philosophies and holistic approaches to well-being and spirituality. Unlike traditional pilgrimages to sacred sites—where participation is largely composed of devotees and the religious dimension is omnipresent—spiritual tourism

presents itself as a primarily historical-cultural journey, in which no specific religious adherence is required of participants. Rather than seeking to consolidate personal faith, the spiritual tourist pursues a path of personal enrichment that fosters engagement with other cultures and practices, without the necessity of embracing them (Norman 2011, 146–147; Şahin and Güzel 2024). Moreover, unlike pilgrimage, which generally constitutes an end in itself, spiritual tourism is often integrated as a component within broader travel itineraries. It represents a growing economic sector,⁷ with Asian countries standing out as a very popular destination, being perceived as *spiritually* engaging and where temples and ashrams represent points of attraction for seeking spiritual growth (Norman 2011, 139–140, 190).

The Templestay program fits seamlessly within the described framework of spiritual tourism. Launched by the Jogye order of Korean Buddhism in 2002, during South Korea's co-hosting of the FIFA World Cup, it was originally conceived to accommodate visitors while offering them an immersive encounter with Korean Buddhist culture. The initiative rapidly gained popularity, providing participants with the opportunity to experience aspects of monastic life—such as meditation, rituals, and daily practices—while enjoying the tranquility of temple settings. The program appeals to diverse audiences: Koreans seeking self-growth, rest, and communion with nature, as well as foreigners drawn to relaxation coupled with authentic, affordable cultural immersion. In recognition of its success, the program was listed in 2009 by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as one of the world's leading tourism initiatives and the OECD recognized Templestay as a model for sustainable cultural tourism, illustrating its success in bridging traditional monastic practice and contemporary global curiosity (OECD 2009, 119–126). Between 2002 and 2021, the Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism reported that 6,014,737

7. The global market share of religious tourism reached US\$174.9 billion in 2024 and is projected to exceed US\$263 billion by 2028: "Religious Tourism Market 2025: Detailed Insights into Market Size and Future Growth," <https://www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com/market-insights/religious-tourism-market-insights-205> (accessed December 21, 2025).

people had participated in the programs, of which approximately 11 percent were foreign nationals (Moon and Somers 2023).

The purpose of a program like Templestay is not primarily to target an international audience, but rather to attract both local and foreign participants. In response to the decline in religious affiliation in South Korea, particularly among Buddhists, and the growth of religious “nones,” that is to say, people who define themselves more as spiritual than religious, the opening of temples to lay visitors and the possibility of staying within them has made the Buddhist Seon tradition more accessible (A. Kim et al. 2025; Somers 2024). Participants are given the opportunity to take part in ceremonies and monastic activities, while also learning about the history and practice of Buddhism in Korea. At a time when Korean society is struggling with the pressures of competitive work culture, providing spaces such as Buddhist temples for relaxation and respite from social demands has proven to be a valuable way of engaging lay Koreans, who are increasingly drawn to meditation, for managing stress and cultivating psychological well-being (Hwang et al. 2018).

For foreign visitors, the appeal lies both in the chance to actively immerse themselves in a cultural context often perceived as very different from their own and in the opportunity to experience moments of rest at an affordable price during trips that might otherwise be fast-paced and consumer-driven. Moreover, the wide range of temples located across the country allows visitors to personalize their experience according to their preferences—whether that be based on the historical age of the temple, the natural scenery surrounding it, or its proximity to major tourist routes.

It remains clear, however, that one of the program’s strongest points of appeal for foreigners lies in the possibility of entering an immersive setting that is perceived as particularly *authentic*, with a clear interest in Korean and Buddhist culture (Moon and Somers 2023). Paying participants are housed in quarters resembling those used by resident monastics, are required to wear temple-issued garments characterized by modest tones and simple cuts, and are asked to avoid inappropriate clothing, makeup, jewelry, as well as the consumption of any food other than what is provided by the monastery kitchens at designated times. Visitors are also given a short video

introduction to the etiquette expected in shared spaces and to basic terminology referring to the objects and practices they will encounter during their stay.⁸ Together with a tightly regulated daily routine—often supervised by a monk or nun assigned to the program—these elements contribute to the impression of gaining access to a privileged, traditionally grounded experience.

At the same time, it is worth noting that temples offer three distinct types of programs. “One-day Templestay” allows one to visit the temple for only a few hours, aimed at those who have a “busy lifestyle”; the “Experience-oriented Templestay” provides a structured sequence of activities and practices, while the “Rest-oriented Templestay” allows participants to reside at the temple and take part freely in the Templestay activities according to their own interests, providing a more flexible schedule for reflection and rest in temple settings.⁹ This differentiated structure reflects the program’s emphasis on making available forms of retreat that are genuinely restorative, without requiring visitors to follow a strict schedule, permitting them instead simply to enjoy the atmosphere of the temple, based on their needs. For those who opt for the more structured format, the activities provided vary from temple to temple, as individual sites—often drawing on their specific histories or local traditions—tend to specialize in particular experiential packages.

In any case, the programs offered by the various temples generally share a common daily structure. This is due in part to the need to ensure that scheduled activities do not interfere with the temple’s liturgical obligations or with the fixed times for meals and evening retreat to the rooms. For this reason, the experience-oriented programs allow visitors, on the one hand, to participate in the regular services and canonical activities of the resident monastics—such as liturgical services, formal monastic meals, ritual instrument playing—and on the other, to take part in activities specifically

8. “Everything about Korean Templestay,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDiozVC6XP8> (accessed December 21, 2025).

9. “Types of Templestay,” <https://www.templestay.com/en/MI000000000000000020/html/view.do> (accessed December 21, 2025).

designed or adapted for them—that is, temple tours, tea ceremony with Q&A with a monk, meditation, practice of 108 prostrations, calligraphy, crafting, hikes and/or physical training activity.

Given the international success of the program and the frequent difficulty of accommodating the linguistic needs of visitors who cannot follow explanations in Korean, it is significant that the Templestay initiative has developed a range of programs explicitly oriented toward international participants.¹⁰

A particularly interesting feature of internationally oriented centers lies in the offer of meditation in their experiential programs. Meditation is not, in fact, a universal component of all temple programs—even if *chamseon* is presented as a crucial activity part of the Templestay experience¹¹—yet it is often present in the scheduled activities of temples with an international orientation, sometimes even signaled in the name of the temple itself—as in the case of the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center. This presence likely responds to the expectations of an international public already accustomed to encountering globalized forms of meditative practice, and eager to engage in meditation within a context where they expect to find it, and especially in a manner perceived as authentic and traditionally grounded.

If meditation is presented as an integral component of the temple experience for foreigners, it becomes legitimate to ask what kind of meditation is actually offered within Templestay programs: is it traditional Korean Seon meditation—historically cultivated and developed within Korean temples—or a form more closely aligned with global mindfulness, and thus more in line with the expectations of an international audience? The answer is not straightforward. Emphasizing the traditional heritage of Seon could potentially alienate part of the Templestay participant base, as its practices may appear too complex to be intuitively grasped within the

10. The Templestay website lists 158 temples on the Korean page of the site and 29 on the English page: <https://www.templestay.com/fe/main/view.do#> (accessed December 21, 2025).

11. “Introduction of Templestay Activities,” <https://www.templestay.com/en/MI000000000000000020/html/view.do> (accessed December 21, 2025).

limited time frame of a short retreat. On the other hand, relying predominantly on mindfulness-based techniques might strip the meditative component of Templestay programs of the distinctive authenticity and uniqueness that differentiates them within the broader landscape of international spiritual tourism. Moreover, the increasing exposure to and employment of such techniques could eventually alter the very characteristics of the Seon meditative tradition within Korean Buddhist temples. The effects of the *psychologization* of Buddhism in Korean society, together with the incorporation of Westernized meditative practices, raise important questions about the transformations that may result from this strong push toward accessibility and innovation (Joo 2011, 628–629). Such pressures now emerge not only from foreign contexts but also from within South Korea itself, particularly from younger generations who have grown up in constant interaction with global trends and spiritually oriented needs shaped by continuous engagement with the new interconnected digital medium of information, affecting and influencing their relationship with Buddhist spirituality. Digital platforms are in turn strategically mobilized by the Jogye order, which actively utilizes social media and online channels to attract new visitors to the Templestay program (S. Kim 2017, 124–126; Park and Kim 2023).

As already mentioned, one crucial aspect that may influence the future development of Seon meditation concerns the way mindfulness is perceived by modern practitioners as a secularized practice—one that maintains only a genealogical connection to Buddhism, sufficient to grant it historical authority, yet does not require adherence to any doctrinal, soteriological, ethical, or formal Buddhist frameworks. It is difficult for this type of secularized meditation to develop within a Buddhist Seon context without tension, unless one of the two poles is willing to negotiate its defining features in order to accommodate the other, especially considering that many foreign visitors might come from countries where Buddhism is not among the primary indigenous religious traditions and might appreciate a type of practice that does not encroach possible personal religious or a-religious background.

It is also important not to underestimate the challenges the Jogye order

currently faces as it confronts the dynamics of contemporary society. The decision to open monasteries to the accommodation of lay public, along with the implementation of tourist programs that enable continuous interaction with both local and international lay visitors, has certainly allowed the Jogye order to present itself as a dynamic and accessible presence within a population whose secular attitudes and religious disengagement continue to grow each year (Kaplan 2010, 135–136; Somers 2024). Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that, beyond being a successful framework for building relationships with local communities and foreign visitors, the Templestay program also functions as an economic enterprise. This occurs within a broader context in which international spiritual tourism is expanding in other countries as well, making it necessary to question what adjustments the Templestay program must undertake in order to remain competitive—whether in terms of accessibility, appeal, or affordability.

The surveys administered to Templestay participants—asking about satisfaction, motivations for joining the program, and the aspects they found most compelling—help guide the allocation of resources and allow for a more precise customization of the program's offerings. Yet, this inevitably implies that visiting participants, as *clients*, exert some influence on the very *traditional* and *authentic* package they receive during their stay at the temple, especially when *relaxation* and *flexibility* must be factorized as important for participants satisfaction (Kaplan 2010, 138; Moon and Somers 2023; Williady and Kim 2023). Specifically, S. Kim et al. (2023, 1117) found that Seon meditation in Templestay shows an increasing marginal utility relative to other meditative activities offered in the temples, such as the tea ceremony and 108 prostrations, suggesting that it may become an increasingly decisive factor in shaping participant satisfaction and encouraging return visits.

Within all these interconnected issues—namely the tension between tradition and innovation, and between authenticity and accessibility—the question of Seon meditation is closely intertwined and far from secondary and it becomes clear how the setting provided by the Templestay program can serve as a privileged site for examining the ongoing tension between global and local forms of meditative Buddhism. The touristic framework, in

fact, creates a concrete point of encounter between these two tendencies.

Meditation can be perceived as an *expected* component by tourist participants who are accustomed to considering it an integral part of spiritual and well-being practices associated with Buddhism and Asian spirituality more broadly. It is therefore understandable that there is an interest in offering a form of practice that, on the one hand, meets expectations of authenticity typical of immersive tourist experiences, while on the other avoiding disorientation or boredom for paying visitors seeking an experience situated within the rather vague domain of *leisure* or *personal enrichment*. Striking such a balance can be particularly challenging, especially because both Korean and foreign visitors value satisfaction across multiple components, such as relaxation, being with nature, self-growth and reflection, and learning about Korean and Buddhist culture (Chun et al. 2017a, 2017b). Given the decrease in participation since 2012 in the Templestay program after its initial success, better marketing strategies that could either target potential consumer differences or exploit the similarities across foreigners and Koreans could be crucial for the future growth of the scheme (Chun et al. 2017a, 2017b; Moon and Somers 2023).

Indeed, the Jogye order has invested in producing informational and educational material in English aimed at foreign audiences. This includes translations and transliteration of the chants used in morning and evening services and access to books and pamphlets explaining the history of Korean Buddhism and the Templestay program, so to help make the experience for foreigners as immersive and accessible as possible.¹² Even more importantly, temples with an international focus employ monks or staff members proficient in English, allowing foreign visitors to receive guidance and instruction in a language they can understand.

It is noteworthy then that the emphasis placed on the Ganhwa Seon tradition in defining Seon meditation appears clearly in the introductory

12. During my visit, English resources available to foreigners in the temples included *108 Prayers* (2012); *Everyday Chant* (2012); *Korean Buddhism and Templestay* (2022); *Korean Buddhism* (2009), *Understanding Korean Buddhism: Questions and Answers* (2017), *A Journey to Find True Self, Templestay* (2018), as well as the latest issues of the *Templestay Magazine*.

and informational materials provided to foreign visitors participating in the Templestay program. In the short booklet *A Journey to Find True Self*, Templestay is explained as follows:

One of the most influential practice lineages of Korean Buddhism is the vibrant Ganhwa Seon tradition. Of the many types of Seon (Zen) traditions in the world today, Ganhwa Seon sustains the core essence of Seon. Thus, in Korea, Seon is naturally represented by the Ganhwa Seon tradition. It involves focusing on a *hwadu* (keyword) deep within one's heart. Here one does not search for an intellectual answer. In fact, a *hwadu* cannot be resolved by conceptual thinking. For example, the most common *hwadu* "Who am I?" or "What is This?" is to be held in our hearts with a sincere curiosity and sensation of questioning. This is to arouse an experiential understanding of the nature of our being. One day, the *hwadu* will be shattered, and the truth will be seen just as it is. That is enlightenment. (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2018, 10)

In the illustrative section "How do I meditate?" that follows in the same booklet—after explaining how to sit, maintain correct posture, and release tension throughout the body—the use of a *hwadu* is mentioned, yet the text also opens the possibility of employing additional methods depending on the needs of the practitioner:

Imagine you are a snowman and you are melting. Then your mind is peaceful and at ease. In this state you may focus on your breath, build concentration by counting numbers, or concentrate on a *hwadu* (a shortened keyword of a *koan*). Various methods are available to concentrate your mind. You can also consult a monk or nun to find a method that suits you. (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2018, 41)

Continuing the analysis of the illustrative materials, in the book *Understanding Korean Buddhism: Questions and Answers* it is noteworthy that there is a chapter dedicated to "Meditation" distinct from the one dedicated to "Seon Practice." In the chapter on "Meditation," the text

introduces “the two most common and useful types of meditation are Mindfulness of Breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and Loving-Kindness Meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*)” (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 76), and proceeds to offer a brief explanation along with instructions on how to perform them. It is interesting that this chapter also mention that “meditation is widely used today by psychiatrists and psychologists” (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 81) and that:

Meditation is now accepted as having a highly therapeutic effect upon the mind and is used by many professional mental health workers to help induce relaxation, overcome phobias and bring about self-awareness. The Buddha’s insights into the human mind are helping people as much today as they did in ancient times. (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 81)

It is also significant that Seon practice is presented not as fundamentally distinct from “meditation” in general, but only when understood as part of the *observation* stage (*gwan*) of Ganhwa Seon, which precedes the deeper stage of *investigation* (*cham*) (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 86). When asked what a person should do to practice Seon, the text responds that one must find a trustworthy teacher who can offer a *hwadu* and instruction. Regarding how to obtain a *hwadu*, it reiterates that only a “venerable teacher” can grant one, and that the practitioner should follow the teacher’s guidance (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 87).

Despite this initiatory and complicated framework for approaching Ganhwa Seon practice, it is interesting that the book still provides practical guidelines, such as holding one’s *hwadu* every day—even for only 5 to 10 minutes—while emphasizing that one should never cease maintaining and investigating it, in order to realize the root of one’s existence (Association of Korean Buddhist Orders 2017, 88).

This approach that presents Seon practice as a specific discipline—one that maintains its traditional depth and cannot simply be assimilated into general forms of meditation, yet remains partially open to being framed as an accessible path for curious visitors—is also found in other instructional

materials aimed at non-Korean audiences. Such an approach may reflect the challenges faced by the Jogye order in attempting to engage foreign spiritual tourists and younger generations seeking practices for psychological and physical well-being that can be integrated into fast-paced secular lives, without, however, straying too far from the foundational principles of Ganhwa Seon or reducing it to a form indistinguishable from more secularized meditation techniques. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether this tension has influenced the characteristics of the meditation practices offered within Templestay programs, particularly given that Templestay also operates as a scheme reliant on consumer satisfaction.

In order to explore this issue, I visited four English-led, internationally oriented Templestay programs that offered explicit meditation sessions in their list of activities, in order to analyze how much of the Ganhwa Seon practice was retained in the meditative instruction.¹³

The four programs were selected on the basis of three criteria: instruction conducted in English, an explicit international orientation, and the inclusion of dedicated meditation sessions in the program schedule. Beyond these shared features, the four sites were chosen to represent distinct institutional profiles: an urban center with a modern vocation (International Seon Center), a temple historically associated with the international transmission of Seon (Hwagyesa), a recently founded center with an explicit focus on meditation for a global audience (Lotus Lantern International

13. All four Templestay programs were attended by the author as a participant-observer during the same month, January 2025. Specifically: the two-day, one-night program “Only Don’t Know (The experience program)” at Hwagyesa, January 11–12; the two-day, one-night program “Hear the Sound of Your Inner-Mind! (2D1N Seon Meditation Experience)” at the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center, January 24–25; the two-day, one-night program “STOP. Take a Break” at the International Seon Center, January 25–26; and the three-day, two-night program “Special Weekend Templestay (3D 2N / Seonmudo & Meditation near Beach / Fri.–Sun.)” at Gulgulsa, January 17–19. Observations are based on the author’s direct participation and reconstructed through notes compiled following the completion of all field visits. Additional clarifications regarding the role and approach of meditation within the programs were gathered through recorded interviews—conducted with the informed consent of the interviewees—with Hyedal Seunim (Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center), and Jinkwa Seunim (International Seon Center).

Meditation Center), and a site specializing in a physically oriented form of Buddhist practice (Golgulsa). The sample is not representative of all Templestay programs, but maps the internal variation among those with an explicitly international orientation.

Meditation at Templestay: Analysis of Four Temple Programs

The first temple I visited was Hwagyesa. Located on the slopes of Samgaksan mountain in the northern part of Seoul, the temple was founded in 1522 by King Jungjong as the hermitage Bodeokam—named after a nearby hermitage of the same name dating back to the Goryeo period. During the reign of King Gojong, the temple was frequently visited by the royal family, but it became widely recognized as a center for meditation only in the 20th century, largely due to the work of the Seon master Seung Sahn. Revered by many as a “Korean Bodhidharma” for his efforts to disseminate Seon Buddhism—particularly abroad—Seung Sahn emerged as one of the most influential figures in the global spread of Zen meditation and, indirectly, in the development of the modern mindfulness movement (Low 2010, 270). He was, as already mentioned, one of the teachers of Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the MBSR method.

According to the Jogye order, during his years abroad Seung Sahn taught more than 50,000 disciples.¹⁴ His success undeniably attracted a large number of international practitioners to Seon Buddhism, and he ordained over one hundred foreign monks and nuns. He died at Hwagyesa, the monastery where he had become abbot in 1957. It is claimed that at his funeral international monastics outnumbered Korean ones (Joo 2011, 617–618n7; Senecal 2011, 89–90; Somers 2024).

Seung Sahn’s work clearly reflects an effort to bring Seon meditation closer to Western expectations. His teaching emphasized the accessibility of Seon practice, often smoothing out those aspects deeply rooted in the

14. “Hwagyesa,” <https://www.templestay.com/en/MI000000000000000019/temple/introView.do?templeId=Hwagyesa> (accessed December 21, 2025).

historical tradition of Korean Buddhism that could appear obscure to an international audience. Throughout his life, he published numerous introductory works on Seon meditation in English and developed his own teaching method, shaped in part through his interactions with foreign disciples.

During my visit, the Templestay program was led by one of Seung Sahn's disciples, Cheongshim Seunim. Still residing at the monastery, Cheongshim Seunim is committed to actively transmitting Seung Sahn's teachings and overseeing his meditation hall, where objects used by the master during practice—as well as copies of his published works—are displayed.

During my stay, I participated in the experience-oriented program “Only Don't Know.” The meditation session was scheduled on the second day of the stay. After completing breathing exercises using a candle placed at the center of a small circle of visitors—a group practice to learn breath control by observing the movement of the flame—and after receiving instructions on correct sitting posture during meditation, Cheongshim invited participants to focus during meditation on the *hwadu* “Who am I?” To prevent the mind from stirring in search of an answer when doubt arose, visitors were instructed to mentally respond “Only don't know.” This approach, rooted in Seung Sahn's “Don't-Know Mind,” emphasizes spontaneous awareness and detachment from fixed identity.

Among the temples visited, Hwagyesa was the only one to preserve the explicit *hwadu* practice. The seated meditation lasted approximately 10 minutes, as Cheongshim considered this an appropriate duration for beginners.

While the use of the *hwadu* made the meditative practice clearly identifiable as belonging to the traditional repertoire of Korean Seon, at the same time it is noteworthy that the employment of the *hwadu* in this case goes beyond the traditional assignment method that passes through an individual relationship with one's master, who evaluates the assignment of a *hwadu* based on the student's advancement in practice and study. This is particularly significant considering that *hwadu* meditation is a path that is anything but intuitive and relaxing: the meditator must learn to dwell

extensively in the doubt that arises, carrying it in every moment so as to foster the conditions for the development of awakening, in a process that can be mentally strenuous¹⁵—hence the importance of a master experienced in meditation who can assess and guide the practitioner’s capacities. It is interesting to note, however, how the use of the *hwadu* in this case, following the teaching methods already experimented by Seung Sahn with foreigners, can be employed as an intuitive aid to facilitate relaxation and concentration, almost in the manner of a mantra, accessible even to those who have never meditated.

The second Templestay program I visited was Golgulsa temple, located on Hamwolsan mountain near the city of Gyeongju. Although historically less prominent than the nearby Bulguksa temple, Golgulsa attracts significant international interest because of the type of practice that has developed there. Golgulsa is the headquarters of the Seonmudo martial arts center, a discipline cultivated by Buddhist monastics that traces its origins to the tradition of Korean warrior monks. The contemporary form of Seonmudo—developed in the latter part of the 20th—constitutes a revival of this ancient art, incorporating elements also of qi gong, yoga, and Seon meditation.

The practice has been exported abroad through the establishment of Seonmudo schools in various countries, and international practitioners regularly visit Golgulsa to participate in retreats.

Given this combination of physical and mental discipline and its long-standing relationship with foreign practitioners, the Templestay program at Golgulsa naturally appeals to an international audience accustomed to

15. The traditional function of the *hwadu* in Ganhwa Seon differs structurally from its use as observed at Hwagyesa. Far from being a tool for relaxation or concentration, the *hwadu* is traditionally embedded in a demanding soteriological framework that combines intense, totalizing faith along with what Buswell describes as “fury” in the practice: a disposition designed to sustain the practitioner through the existential crisis generated by the *hwadu* itself. Significantly, even when directed at lay audiences, this framework has traditionally sought to cultivate a controlled sense of emotional anxiety and uncertainty, understood not as a side effect but as the very condition necessary for nurturing the sensation of great doubt (Buswell 2019).

encountering meditation within holistic well-being practices.

Indeed, the program at Golgalsa is distinct from those offered in other Templestay settings. Participants not only engage in multiple meditation sessions but also take part in intensive Seonmudo training, meditate on the beach, and for an additional fee can also train in archery. Meditation functions as an integral component of the practice, framing the physical training sessions by opening and closing each practice period.

All these elements make Golgalsa the temple offering the most physically oriented set of activities, and this has undoubtedly contributed to its appeal among international visitors seeking to combine both physical and mental well-being.

At Golgalsa I participated in the “Seonmudo & Meditation near Beach” program, a three-day program led by Master Hyunwoong, a master of the Seonmudo discipline though not an ordained monk. The program schedule included several Seonmudo training sessions which were preceded and concluded by meditation sessions of variable duration, but generally around 10–15 minutes. The meditation instructions were very intuitive and emphasized breath control rather than contemplative *hwadu* work, which was never employed. The continuity from meditation to morning warm-up exercises and martial activity throughout the day, culminating in stretching on the beach followed by meditation by the sea, certainly seemed to recall a much more intuitive and heterodox approach to meditation, used more as a component of physical practice and in this sense similar to its use in other types of disciplines that combine physical and mental relaxation, such as yoga or qi gong—disciplines which, as already mentioned, Seonmudo references for some components of its exercises. Certainly, among all the programs I explored, the one at Golgalsa was the one with the fewest doctrinal and soteriological references connected to the Seon tradition and Korean Buddhism, which were normally conveyed in the other three programs through temple visits and explanations of the temple’s structures, ceremonies, and religious depictions.

Assessed against the comparative framework outlined above, the meditation practice at Golgalsa is the one that most naturally converges with the structural logic of global mindfulness: breath-centered, largely non-

doctrinal, and integrated into a holistic physical wellness routine. Rather than reflecting a departure from tradition, this orientation appears consistent with the specific identity of Seonmudo as a discipline that has historically combined physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, and which has developed its own distinctive approach to the cultivation of meditative awareness. That said, the absence of *hwadu* practice and the framing of meditation as a component of physical training rather than an explicit path toward soteriological realization mean that, of the four programs examined, the one at Golgulsa sits furthest from the formal parameters of Ganhwa Seon, while simultaneously offering an accessible engaging format to an international audience unfamiliar with the Korean monastic tradition.

The third temple I visited was the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center, which—already evident from its name—signals its international orientation and its emphasis on meditation as its defining practice. This relatively recent temple was founded in 1997 by Wonmyeong with the aim of promoting Korean Buddhism worldwide. Wonmyeong (1950–2003) was a disciple of the well-known Seon master Seongcheol, who also became the Supreme Patriarch of the Jogye order in 1981. Like Seung Sahn, Wonmyeong had taught and lived abroad and had trained foreign disciples (Joo 2011, 618n8).

Situated in the natural landscape of Ganghwa Island, far from heavily touristed areas, the temple nonetheless attracts many international visitors and is also one of the few sites to offer regular, ongoing intensive meditation retreats.

The program in which I took part, “Hear the Sound of Your Inner Mind!” was guided by Hyedal Seunim, an Indian-born monk who integrates Theravāda *vipassanā* and Korean Seon methods. The meditation emphasized breath awareness and doctrinal explanation rather than direct *hwadu* contemplation, reflecting an accessible pedagogical style for foreign audiences.

Although *hwadu* were not employed in the meditation session nor were there specific references to the Seon tradition, and the meditation had the characteristics of a *vipassanā* meditative session, it was nevertheless preceded by an articulated introduction by Hyedal regarding the objective of

meditation for a beginner, to slow the vortex of thoughts and try to free the mind from the hindrances that prevent one from concentrating on the breath and the present moment. Certainly, the explanation offered by Master Hyedal was the most elaborate I encountered in preparation for meditation. It did not focus primarily on the formalism of correct posture and focus on the breath, but instead provided an in-depth examination of the problems arising from the intrusion of cognitive complexes. The introduction/lesson was followed by the most intense and prolonged meditation session of all the programs I visited, lasting approximately twenty-five minutes without interruption. At the end of the meditation, time was allocated to discuss the impressions derived from it.

From the perspective of the analytical framework proposed here, the approach at the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center occupies a distinctive position. The absence of *hwadu* and the *vipassanā*-inflected structure of the session align it more closely with global mindfulness formats than with the Ganhwa Seon tradition. Yet the doctrinal depth of Hyedal Seunim's introductory explanation—which addressed the cognitive obstacles to concentration in explicitly Buddhist terms—introduces a theoretical grounding largely absent from secular mindfulness protocols. This suggests a form of hybridization in which the introductory approach to the meditative technique is drawn from a non-Seon tradition, but the interpretive framework retains a recognizably Buddhist soteriological orientation.

The fourth and last program I visited was in another temple with an explicitly international orientation, and located in the very heart of South Korea's global tourism landscape. The International Seon Center was opened in 2010 in Seoul's Yangcheon district, as a "Seon meditation center" for the propagation of Seon meditation and Korean Buddhism to the world. Accordingly, it develops international study-exchange programs, forums, and lectures on Buddhism. The temple's architecture is highly modern—an urban, multi-story building—but this lack of traditional exterior appeal is offset by its proximity to central Seoul and to Incheon International Airport.

At the temple, I joined the "STOP. Take a Break" program led by Jinkwa Seunim. Among the four programs I visited, the one guided by Jinkwa

Seunim proved to be the most accessible, perhaps demonstrating the distinctly international vocation of the center. Instead of offering a *hwadu*, to help focus the mind and coordinate the breath, Jinkwa Seunim provided the invocation “Namu Amitabul” (‘Homage to Amitābha’), associated with Pure Land Buddhism, whose recitation is traditionally considered conducive to achieving enlightenment. Although more properly described as a devotional invocation than a mantra in the strict technical sense, its use in this context—recited mentally in coordination with the breath—fulfills a function analogous to that of a mantra, serving as a focal object for sustained attention. Additionally, extremely detailed information was provided by Jinkwa Seunim regarding the correct positioning of the hands and body posture during meditation. The meditation session was divided into three parts of approximately five minutes of meditation each, interspersed with brief pauses to discuss the impressions derived from the short meditation in order to understand which aspects had helped or complicated concentration, before resuming with another meditation period. The structure of three short five-minute sessions with reflections in between to reflect on the quality and disturbance was designed to accommodate beginners and reduce the difficulty of maintaining prolonged focus.

Within the comparative framework developed above, the session at the International Seon Center presents a particularly revealing case. The use of the invocation “Namu Amitabul” reflects a pragmatic pedagogical choice oriented toward accessibility: by providing a simple, rhythmically recitable focal point coordinated with the breath, it supports the beginner practitioner in sustaining short periods of focused attention without the cognitive and emotional demands typically associated with prolonged meditation. The structured alternation of short meditation intervals with reflective pauses further approximates the format of contemporary mindfulness-based protocols. At the same time, the precision of the instructions regarding posture and breath coordination, and the explicit framing of the session within a Buddhist context, distinguish this approach from a fully secularized mindfulness format. The result is a practice that is institutionally Seon in its setting and framing, but methodologically closer to the accessible, standardized formats associated with global meditative culture.

Conclusion

What emerges from the description of the programs I have visited is that the meditation offered to international visitors in the context of Templestay does not follow a uniform standard. Rather, the visitor, based on the temple they choose, may encounter different approaches to the practice.

Certainly, the approach to meditation is very intuitive and generally characterized by being close to the mindfulness meditation structure, requiring simple presence in the present moment, concentration on breath, and an attempt to free the mind from thoughts. Interestingly, however, depending on the teachers encountered and the context, characteristics belonging to the Korean Seon tradition have been integrated into the meditation.

At Hwagyesa temple there was the use of *hwadu*, which followed the teaching style of Seung Sahn with the adaptation of the *hwadu* as an aid to relaxation that can be employed for lay purposes besides soteriological ones.

At Gulgusa, although meditation was combined with physical practice similarly to how it is often encountered in globalized contexts where it is integrated into holistic approaches to wellness, the specific characteristics of the intense martial tradition of Seonmudo made it not a specific moment of the day but a recurring practice, approaching the more comprehensive approach to meditation in temples of the Seon tradition.

At the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center meditation was most explained in the context of mental analysis, approached as a technique inseparable from a doctrinal and theoretical understanding of the purposes of such a practice in the context of Buddhism.

Finally, the International Seon Center provided the most approachable method for beginners by presenting very precise instructions, but at the same time introduced the use of a mantra belonging to Amitābha, of Pure Land Buddhism, an additional practice employed in the context of the Korean Buddhist tradition to facilitate the attainment of enlightenment.

It remains to be seen whether this polymorph approach to meditation, when applied in a touristic context with economic implications like Templestay, can effectively promote the spread of Korea's Seon tradition

abroad. Certainly, the risk of homogenization with the currents of mindfulness-*vipassanā* meditation is real, but at the same time the strategic choice to give uniformity to the formalism of Seon practice could favor its diffusion through its use in therapeutic and secular contexts.

From this point of view, the official account of the proceedings of the Opening Ceremony of the 2024 International Seon Meditation Summit, held September 28, 2024 at Gwanghwamun Plaza in Seoul, reported that the president of the Jogye order, Ven. Jinwoo, outlined a series of institutional commitments, including the promotion of research and development of various Seon meditation techniques, among them Ganhwa Seon; the training of Seon meditation leaders; the establishment of dedicated Seon meditation centers accessible to the general public; and the revitalization of practice across approximately one hundred monastic Seon centers and Templestay temples nationwide. The proceedings further reported that Ven. Jinwoo proposed a campaign for “Five minutes of daily meditation” and a “Pause five-second meditation” initiative, alongside plans to develop a Seon meditation app and publish a dedicated guide, with the stated aim of making Seon practice available to all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.¹⁶ These institutional efforts were accompanied by the donation of US\$1 million to Yale University—the largest ever made by the order to a foreign organization—to promote the study of Korean Buddhism, further signaling the Jogye order’s commitment to expanding its international presence.¹⁷

It is important to read these actions as expressions of the Jogye Order’s strategic orientation and institutional aims rather than as direct evidence of meditative practice on the ground. Significantly, initiatives such as the five-minute campaign and the meditation app exemplify the very dynamics this article has sought to examine: the institutional pressure to adapt Seon to the

16. “The Jogye Order, Declaration of Seon Meditation for National Peace of Mind,” <https://online.fliphtml5.com/spaoh/rtdx/#p=80> (accessed December 21, 2025). The official Jogye Order Seon meditation app (Seonmyeongsang 선명상) was launched on September 14, 2024.

17. “Yale receives \$1 million donation for Buddhist Studies,” <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2024/10/11/yale-receives-1-million-donation-for-buddhist-studies/> (accessed December 21, 2025).

logic of secular wellness culture, even at the cost of decontextualizing the practice from its soteriological framework. Whether such adaptations strengthen or dilute the living transmission of Ganhwa Seon remains an open question, and one that future research will need to address. Still, the gap between the order's stated goal of universal accessibility and the significant variations observed across the four temples is itself a revealing pattern, suggesting that the negotiation between tradition and accessibility is not centrally coordinated but locally determined, shaped by the specific history and pedagogical approach of each temple and its teachers.

Programs like Templestay, as shown by the analysis of the different meditation methods offered in the various temples, could therefore become the very laboratories where the flexible negotiation between traditional Seon meditation and global Seon meditation takes place. The four programs examined concretely illustrate that, while a shared tendency toward accessible formats for audiences unfamiliar with Seon meditative tradition is clearly discernible, the distinctive elements offered by each temple suggest that this accessibility does not necessarily produce homogenization, but may instead constitute a form of differentiated engagement capable of sustaining the perceived authenticity of the experience. Several questions nonetheless remain open for future research: the long-term sustainability of these hybridized forms, their impact on the formation of new monastics, and, perhaps most productively, a systematic comparison with Templestay programs that include meditation but are not explicitly oriented toward an international audience. Such a comparison would allow for a clearer assessment of whether the variations observed here are specific to the dynamics of international outreach or reflect broader transformations within Korean Buddhist practice more generally.

REFERENCES

- Association of Korean Buddhist Orders. 2017. *Understanding Korean Buddhism: Questions and Answers*. Seoul: Jogye Order Publishing.
- Baer, Ruth A. 2003. "Mindfulness Training as a Clinical Intervention: A Conceptual and Empirical Review." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10.2: 125–143.
- Bishop, Scott R., et al. 2004. "Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11.3: 230–241.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. 1989. "Chinul's Ambivalent Critique of Radical Subitism in Korean Sŏn." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12.2: 20–44.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. 1992. *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. 2006. "The 'Short-cut' Approach of K'an-hua Meditation." In *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on Zen Koan Introspection*, edited by John Daido Loori, 75–90. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. 2013. "Bojo jinul-gwa don-jeom nonjaeng: Ganhwaseon-gwa hanguk bulgyo-ui sujeungnon" (Pojo Chinul 普照知訥 and the Sudden-Gradual Issue: Kanhwa Sŏn and Korean Buddhist Soteriology). *Bulgyo hakbo* (Journal of the Korean Buddhist Research Institute) 66: 167–189.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. 2019. "A Place for Doubt: The Theory and Practice of 'Questioning Meditation' (Kanhwa Sŏn 看話禪) in Korean Zen Buddhism." Lecture delivered at University of British Columbia, Tianzhu-Hurvitz Lecture Series, Frogbear Project. Video recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hzkt3EuFgbQ> (accessed April 10, 2026).
- Cawley, Kevin N. 2022. "Mindful Interactions and Recalibrations: From Chinul to T'oegye." In *Approaches to Chan, Sŏn, and Zen Studies: Chinese Chan Buddhism and Its Spread throughout East Asia*, edited by Albert Welter, et al., 263–288. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Chun, Byunggil, et al. 2017a. "Living Like a Monk: Motivations and Experiences of International Participants in Templestay." *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 5.1: 6.
- Chun, Byunggil, et al. 2017b. "Predictors of Templestay Satisfaction: A Comparison Between Korean and International Participants." *Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 40.5: 423–441.
- Cullen, Margaret. 2011. "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon." *Mindfulness* 2.3: 186–193.

- Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism. 2018. *A Journey to Find True Self, Templestay*. Seoul: Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism.
- Gethin, Rupert. 2011. "On Some Definitions of Mindfulness." *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.1: 263–279.
- Gkintoni, Evgenia, et al. 2025. "Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy in Clinical Practice: A Systematic Review of Neurocognitive Outcomes and Applications for Mental Health and Well-Being." *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 14.5: 1703.
- Goldstein, Joseph. 2013. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.
- Heine, Steven. 2014. *Zen Koans*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Hershock, Peter. 2023. "Chan Buddhism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/buddhism-chan/> (accessed June 5, 2026).
- Husgafvel, Ville. 2018. "The 'Universal Dharma Foundation' of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Non-Duality and Mahāyāna Buddhist Influences in the Work of Jon Kabat-Zinn." *Contemporary Buddhism* 19.2: 275–326.
- Hwang, Wu Jeong, et al. 2018. "The Effects of Four Days of Intensive Mindfulness Meditation Training (Templestay Program) on Resilience to Stress: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 23.5: 497–504.
- Jee, Lucy Hyekyung. 2024. "Korean Buddhism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2024/entries/korean-buddhism/> (accessed June 5, 2026).
- Jeong, Yeongsik. 2011. "On the Practice and Prospects of Gonggan Sŏn in Modern Korean Buddhism: Focused on Its Relation with Vipassanā Meditation." *Eastern Buddhist* 42.1: 131–150.
- Joo, Ryan Bongseok. 2011. "Countercurrents from the West: 'Blue-Eyed' Zen Masters, Vipassanā Meditation, and Buddhist Psychotherapy in Contemporary Korea." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79.3: 614–638.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. [1990] 2005. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Delta Trade.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 2003. "Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10.2: 144–156.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 2011. "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps." *Contemporary Buddhism* 12.1: 281–306.
- Kaplan, Uri. 2010. "Images of Monasticism: The Temple Stay Program and the Re-Branding of Korean Buddhist Temples." *Korean Studies* 34: 127–146.

- Khoury, Bassam, et al. 2013. "Mindfulness-Based Therapy: A Comprehensive Meta-Analysis." *Clinical Psychology Review* 33.6: 763–771.
- Kim, Andrew Eungi, et al. 2025. "Beyond Belief: Understanding the Demographics and Dynamics of South Korea's Religious 'Nones.'" *Religions* 16.10: 1317.
- Kim, Se-Hyuk, et al. 2023. "Willingness to Pay for Attributes of Templestay and Implications on Marginal Utility of Different Meditation Forms." *Tourism Economics* 29.4: 1100–1120.
- Kim, Seung Soo. 2017. "Authenticity, Brand Culture, and Templestay in the Digital Era: The Ambivalence and In-Betweenness of Korean Buddhism." *Journal of Korean Religions* 8.2: 117–146.
- Kim, Yuri, et al. 2022. "The Effects of Mindfulness and Buddhist Meditation Coaching on Mental Health Outcomes in College Students." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2022.1: 8178930.
- Lee, Woo Kyeong, and Hee Jeong Bang. 2010. "The Effects of Mindfulness-Based Group Intervention on the Mental Health of Middle-Aged Korean Women in Community." *Stress and Health* 26.4: 341–348.
- Low, Sor-Ching. 2010. "Seung Sahn: The Makeover of a Modern Zen Patriarch." In *Zen Masters*, edited by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, 267–286. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, David L. 2008. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McRae, John R. 2003. *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Moon, Hyungong, and Brian D. Somers. 2023. "The Current Status and Challenges of Templestay Programs in Korean Buddhism." *Religions* 14.3: 409.
- Newcombe, Suzanne. 2021. "Yoga and meditation as a health intervention." In *The Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop, 156–168. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Norman, Alex. 2011. *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*. London: Continuum International.
- OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2009. *The Impact of Culture on Tourism*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Park, Cheonghwan, and Kyungrae Kim. 2023. "'Let's Propagate the Dharma': A Critical Survey of the Activities of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism's Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau." *Religions* 14.12: 1524.
- Park, Juhn Young. 2022. "Gender and Dharma Lineage: Nuns in Korean Sŏn Buddhism." In *Approaches to Chan, Sŏn, and Zen Studies: Chinese Chan Buddhism and Its Spread throughout East Asia*, edited by Albert Welter, et al.,

- 239–262. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Park, Kwang-Hi, et al. 2020. “Moderating Effect of Mindfulness on the Influence of Stress on Depression According to the Level of Stress among University Students in South Korea.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17.18: 6634.
- Park, Sung Bae. 2009. *One Korean’s Approach to Buddhism: The Mom/Momjit Paradigm*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Poirier, Marc R. 2016. “Mischief in the Marketplace for Mindfulness.” In *What’s Wrong with Mindfulness (and What Isn’t): Zen Perspectives*, edited by Robert Rosenbaum and Barry Magid, 13–28. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Purser, Ronald E. 2019. *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. London: Repeater Books.
- Rahmani, Mahdi. 2020. “Secular Discourse as a Legitimizing Strategy for Mindfulness Meditation.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop, 255–269. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Şahin, İlker, and F. Özlem Güzel. 2024. “Dimensions of Spirituality in Tourism: Developing the Spiritual Tourism Experience Scale (STES).” *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 34: 100955.
- Senécal, Bernard. 2011. “A Critical Reflection on the Chogyé Order’s Campaign for the Worldwide Propagation of Kanhwa Sön 看話禪.” *Journal of Korean Religions* 2.1: 75–105.
- Sharf, Robert. 2014. “Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan.” *Philosophy East and West* 64.4: 933–964.
- Sharf, Robert H. 2015. “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters).” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52.4: 470–484.
- Somers, Brian D. 2024. “Korean Buddhism in the Era of ‘Spiritual, but Not Religious’: Adapting to Contemporary Society.” *Religions* 15.11: 1305.
- Song, Hak Jun, et al. 2015. “The Influence of Tourist Experience on Perceived Value and Satisfaction with Temple Stays: The Experience Economy Theory.” *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 32.4: 401–415.
- Song, Yeongsuk, and Ruth Lindquist. 2015. “Effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on Depression, Anxiety, Stress and Mindfulness in Korean Nursing Students.” *Nurse Education Today* 35.1: 86–90.
- Van Dam, Nicholas T., et al. 2018. “Mind the Hype: A Critical Evaluation and Prescriptive Agenda for Research on Mindfulness and Meditation.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13.1: 36–61.
- Welter, Albert, et al., eds. 2022. *Approaches to Chan, Sön, and Zen Studies: Chinese*

- Chan Buddhism and Its Spread throughout East Asia*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Williady, Angellie, and Hak Seon Kim. 2023. "Case Study of a Templestay and Temple Visit in Korea Using Customer-Generated Content to Evaluate Customer Satisfaction." *Environment and Social Psychology* 9.2: 72.
- Wu, Jinlong, et al. 2022. "Effects of Mindfulness Exercise Guided by a Smartphone App on Negative Emotions and Stress in Non-Clinical Populations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Frontiers in Public Health* 9: 773296.
- Zenner, Charlotte, et al. 2014. "Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Schools: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Frontiers in Psychology* 5: 603.
- Zhang, Dexing, et al. 2021. "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Overall Review." *British Medical Bulletin* 138.1: 41–57.