

## **Martine Batchelor**

### **The Korean Way of Tea**

<https://web.archive.org/web/20051125144527/http://terebess.hu/english/koreantea.html>

Visiting Songgwangsa, an important Son monastery in Chollanamdo in South Korea, if you take a walk up a steep hill and deep in the forest you reach Bulilam, an hermitage nestled in a bamboo grove with a wide vista of Chogye mountain. There, resides Popjong Sunim, a writer and a leading monk of his generation. One of the joys of visiting him is to be offered a cup of tea. He does it in a very traditional way:

"In preparing green tea one should first bring the water to the boil. Then one should pour it into a largish bowl and let it cool to about 60 degrees celsius. If the water is too hot, then too much of the tea's bitterness will be extracted into the water. At this lower temperature the fragrance of the tea is extracted more slowly. The teapot and cups should be warmed with some of the water. After warming the tea leaves into the teapot, pour in the water and let the leaves infuse for two or three minutes. It is important when pouring the tea to make sure that the taste is evenly distributed in all cups. Therefore, never fill each cup in a single pouring, but fill them little by little -- up to three servings each. While drinking the tea, refill the teapot with water.

Do not gulp the tea but sip it slowly allowing its fragrance to fill your mouth. There is no need to have any special attitude while drinking except one of thankfulness. The nature of the tea itself is that of no-mind. It does not discriminate and make differences. It is just as it is. There are four inherent attributes to tea: peacefulness, respectfulness, purity and quietness. In drinking tea these qualities should be cultivated in the drinker. Drinking tea gladdens the mind. The taste of the tea is the taste of the entire universe because it is produced entirely through natural sunlight, water, wind, clouds and air."

Popjong Sunim is very knowledgeable of the history of the Korean Way of Tea: "Tea is first mentioned in the ancient texts as an offering. In the Buddhist scriptures it is often spoken of as an offering made to the Buddha. Originally, rice was not offered to the Buddha; just tea, incense and flowers. Nowadays, although water is offered instead of tea, the character for tea is still used for the water used in death ceremonies and harvest festivals. In old times, as a sign of mutual respect, husband and wife would serve each other tea at their marriage. During the Koryo dynasty all people, commoners as well as aristocrats drank tea.

Because of the need to make utensils for tea, pottery was highly developed during this period. At the end of the Koryo era the drinking of tea decline in popularity because the ceremonial aspect had become too elaborate and ritualised. During the Confucian Choson dynasty wine replaced tea as a formal drink. However, even in this period the court demanded a tea tax from the Buddhist monasteries. Although Buddhism was suppressed at this time, the tea

drinking which had come to be associated with it still prevailed and influenced life at the court.

During the Silla Dynasty tea was often used as a medicine. First the leaves would be steamed and then pounded into the shape of a coin. This compressed form would be boiled for a long time in a medicine pot before being drunk. In Koryo, powdered tea was drunk in a large bowl. During the Choson period the drinking of simple green leaf was introduced. In this way one can observe a progression from complexity to simplicity in the preparation and the drinking of tea. Nowadays in Japan they use tea-bags. As life becomes more busy, the complex forms of tea drinking are dispensed with in favour of quick and simple methods. The style of pottery in Korea also changed according to the ways in which tea was prepared and drunk. Thus, both in China and Korea, tea was first developed as a medicine and only later adopted for the pleasure of drinking it. After the Choson period when Buddhism started to revive, an interest in drinking tea also revived. Nowadays it is growing in popularity in Korea. Tea plants grow wild near most monasteries. In addition they are now being cultivated commercially. "

In Songwangsa, one can find a hill surrounded by bamboo groves glistening with the leaves of the tea plants, Popjong Sunim introduces us to the the making of the tea: "In spring we gather the tea leaves and then roast them by rolling them in a hot iron plate. This gives the tea in Korea a slightly burnt flavour. Such a flavour is very much liked by Koreans; it is also discernable in our rice water and barley tea. In Japan the people like the taste of seaweed. So often their tea has a similar taste to seaweed. The Chinese enjoy heavy, oily food. Thus they also tend to like their tea to have a strong flavour. In this way you can see how the different tastes of people determine the flavour of their teas.

The word for green leaf tea in Korean is Chaksol . This literally means 'bird's tongue'. It is so-called because the first leaves of the tea resemble the shape of a bird's tongue. It is also called chugno, which means 'bamboo dew'. It derives this name from the fact that tea plants often grow in bamboo groves and are nourished by the water which drips from the leaves of the bamboo.

To determine whether the tea is a good one or not, one should examine its colour, scent and taste. The perfect colour is like that of the first leaves in spring. The taste should resemble that of the skin of a young baby. The taste cannot be described but only appreciated through experience. Tea is drunk either to quench the thirst, savour the taste or simply to spend a quiet hour appreciating the pottery and the general atmosphere that accompanies tea drinking."

Sonhae Sunim is a buddhist monk who is fascinated by the Way of Tea and its connection with Buddhism. He made extensive research into the history of the Korean Way of Tea. "The first mention of tea in Korean texts is found in a record which speaks of a small kingdom called Garak, which existed before the time of the three kingdoms of Koguryo, Paekche and Silla. It is claims that the first king of this country married an Indian princess who brought buddhist scriptures,

images and tea with her from India. However, this account is usually discounted as legendary. At the time of Unified Silla, an envoy called Kim Taeryom was sent to Tang China. He returned with tea seeds which he then planted in the south of the country on Mount Chiri, near Sanggyesa monastery. An eighth century Chinese record written by an 'immortal of tea' mentions the use of tea in Korea. The author claimed that although the best tea was found in his home province in China, the next best was grown in Silla and Paekche and the third best in Koguryo. There is a record in a Japanese temple which states that the first tea seeds were brought to Japan by a Buddhist monk from Paekche.

In Unified Silla tea was used as an offering both to the Buddha as well as social occasions. At this time there were special tea houses with the character for tea incised on the tiles of the roof. Inside would be an image of the Buddha around which the aristocrats would sit and drink tea.

In Koryo tea was drunk by the common people as well as the aristocrats. Only the smaller leaves would be used to make tea; the larger ones being prepared for medicinal purposes. During this time the king would be formally offered tea every morning before receiving his audiences. At the beginning of each year the king would symbolically tend to the tea plants in the fields in order to set an example to the populace. The people would make daily tea offerings to the king, their ancestors and the Buddha. A contemporary Chinese record remarks that the Koreans were overly scrupulous in their observance of the formal aspects of the tea ceremony at this time.

In general the drinking of tea took place at times of marriage, upon the death of one's parents, during commemorations of the ancestors, when receiving guests or foreign envoys, as well as meetings between a teacher and his disciple. Specifically three ways of drinking tea were discernable during the Koryo period: those of the aristocracy, the monks and the common people. For the aristocracy the attitude to be cultivated through drinking tea was one of respect and harmony. For the monks the important point was to give rise to the mind of the 'right middle way'. This attitude is one of equanimity. This means that under all circumstances the monk should remain deeply introspective and, without any mistakes, taste the tea from the place which is both the highest and the deepest. Many great monks of Koryo discussed the drinking of tea in their writings. The drinking of tea was also incorporated in the teaching of dharma. For example in observing how his disciples drank tea a master would determine the level of their understanding of Son. For the common people, tea drinking was appreciated in terms of its value to one's ancestors.

After the death of King Sejong (the third king of the Choson Dynasty) all Buddhist ceremonies were replaced with Confucian rites. Since tea was strongly associated with Buddhism it was replaced by wine as the formal drink. But since wine is forbidden to monks, the custom of drinking tea was preserved in the monasteries. In the poetry of the early Choson period regret for the decline of tea drinking is often expressed. However, although tea was officially looked down upon, it still continued to be drunk at court and among the aristocracy. This is evident from the fact that a heavy tax in tea was levied from the Buddhist monasteries. Because of this tax burden many monasteries deliberately reduced

or destroyed their crop. Only in the southern provinces of the country, where there were fewer aristocrats, were fields of tea preserved. Nevertheless, tea drinking fell into decline even in the monasteries.

Towards the end of the Choson Dynasty it underwent a certain revival under Ch'oui Sonsa (1786-1866). He emphasised the complementarity of tea drinking and meditation maintaining that the highest state of tea drinking and the highest state of meditation were the same. As the Choson Dynasty collapsed and the Japanese colonial era began, the general turmoil in the country prevented the further development of tea drinking. However, in the last decade it has once again been revived."

Sonhae Sunim reflects on why tea drinking is a Way: "Green tea is chosen over other beverages because of its subtlety. In order to fully appreciate it the mind must be quiet and empty of distracting thoughts. If you talk while drinking, it is likely that you will miss the fullness of the taste. As the ability to appreciate the subtle taste develops over the years, the person changes accordingly. For this reason tea drinking is said to be a 'Way'. Someone who has drunk tea for twenty years or so is able to maintain the state of mind required to appreciate tea at all times. At the beginning one may even find the taste to be rather too bitter or unpleasant. It is an acquired taste that takes many years to fully mature.

The best state of mind in which to drink tea is one of deep meditation; the second best is while looking at a beautiful landscape or listening to music; the third best is during a stimulating conversation. In all cases it is necessary to aspire towards a quiet and tranquil frame of mind."

Han Ugbin, a retired agricultural economist, is a scholar of traditional Chinese culture. This is what he had to say about tea drinking in which he had done some research: " Before Kim Taeryom it is not certain what tea the Koreans drank, but it was probably imported from China. After Kim Taeryom they would drink home-grown teas. In China Ch'an Master Paichang (749-814) incorporated the drinking of tea into his rules for Ch'an monks. The monks originally drank tea because it helped them keep awake, aided digestion and subdued sexual desires. These rules of conduct were likewise introduced into the Son temples in Korea. Since there are no written records of the implements used in Silla or Koryo for drinking tea, it is hard to ascertain exactly what forms were customary for performing tea ceremony.

The current custom of drinking leaf tea cannot be considered the Way of Tea. The Way of Tea requires that powdered green tea be used. Until the end of the Koryo Dynasty this was how tea was drunk in Korea. But after this period it was no longer drunk this way. The powdered green tea would be prepared in the following way. In the sixth or seventh month the leaves would be picked. Then they would be pressed and kept in a jar until the eleventh month. The pressed block of tea would finally be ground into powder in the presence of one's guests each time it was served. This tradition was lost perhaps because it was complicated and too time consuming. But once the preparation degenerates into simple, short-cut methods, the Way of Tea is no longer present. Every detail

from the boiling of the water to the grinding of the tea into powder are all integral parts of the Way of Tea.

In Buddhism, one often speaks of the 'essence' and the 'function'. The essence represents the unmoving, the fundamental. It is associated with the left. The function represents the moving and the active. It is associated with the right. Although the left is the essence it does not constitute the absolute. It is through the harmony between essence and function that the 'right middle way' (i.e. the absolute) emerges. Nowadays in Korea the fire used for boiling the water for tea is placed on the right of the server. However, since fire is not really active, it should correctly be placed directly before the server, in the middle. That which is unmoving, the cups for example, should be placed on the server's left, since they belong to the essence. In moving the cup to drink, function and essence then come into harmony. Most teachers of tea ceremony in Korea today are not aware of these important points.

In addition, the guests should face the West and the host should face the East. The place in the North facing South should be reserved for the king. In the Orient there is no custom for people to sit in a circle. Ideally, tea should be served to three guests. The eldest of the three should sit facing the host, the next eldest to his right and the youngest to his right. The eldest is compared to the sun, the next eldest to the moon and the youngest to a star. These customs too tend to be ignored while performing the tea ceremony in Korea today.

Even in Korean Son monasteries the way of drinking tea no longer follows the rules laid down by Paichang. Two things are important in this regard: the spiritual practice and the external form. The spiritual practice should include both the inner realisation and the active manifestation of the Buddha's word. The external form comprises such things as the taste, scent and color of the tea as well as the benefits it provides to the body. While engaging in the inner practice of Buddhism one should also maintain the correct outer form. For example, the bamboo serving spoon should be exactly six 'chi' (approx. six inches) long, representing the six perfections. In the middle of the spoon there should be a single natural indentation to represent the one-mind to which all ten-thousand things return. Without observing these details, one cannot really speak of the 'Way of Tea'."

An Kwangsok, a retired university teacher, is also a calligrapher and a seal engraver. He is considered one of the foremost specialists of the Way of Tea. He has this to say: "To fully understand tea one should be well acquainted with four things: the attitude behind the ceremonial and formal aspects of tea drinking, the way in which to prepare the tea, the history of tea and the Way of Tea. A true 'man of tea' should be aware of the meaning of ethical conduct and history and should comprehend the truths of Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity. In essence the truths of these religions are one. Only a person with such an understanding can be regarded as a 'Man of the Way of Tea'.

The Way of Tea demonstrates to people how to proceed in their evolution as human beings. This way is one of the 'right middle way' i.e. that of equanimity and harmony. As the tea infuses in the pot, the bitterness remains at the

bottom with the leaves. Thus on the first round of pouring the tea each serving become progressively more bitter. To equalise the taste, during the second round of pouring one fills the cups in the reverse order. In this way the taste is evenly distributed. When drinking wine, for example, it is customary to first serve the guest in order of their age. However, in serving tea such distinctions should not be made. One first serves the cups. And the tea which is poured in, with its taste evenly distributed, becomes a symbolic basis for harmony and equanimity.

No matter how the details of the external ceremonies of tea drinking may differ, the Way of Tea should remain unchanged as a basis for harmony and equanimity. As a means of developing the proper tea attitude, six aspects of harmony should be cultivated: living together in physical harmony, being harmonious in one's speech and not creating discord, working in harmony to accomplish common aims, according to one's religion or outlook on life, behaving in harmony with the prescribed rules of ethical conduct, maintaining harmony of outlook by being open and receptive to the views of others, and distributing equally whatever benefits are gained. The forms themselves are not essential; they have to be adapted to the needs of the present. The essence is to cultivate the six aspects of harmony.

All the five tastes there are can be found in green tea: bitterness, sweetness, astringency, saltiness and a fifth one that is hard to describe (sourness?). Previously, both in China and Korea, when a wife went to her husband's house she would first make an offering of green tea to his ancestors. She did this because the tea symbolically represented, through its five tastes, all the various sufferings in life. In this way she completely dedicated herself to her husband's family. There are also other specific dates in the calendar when it is customary to make such offering of green tea."

Many Korean luminaries have made remarks on the Korean Way of Tea.

Yodong once chanted the following: "The first cup of tea makes the mouth and throat glisten; the second brings all worries to an end; the third cup brings comfort to dry intestines and even if surrounded by thousands of books you can absorb yourself in studying a single topic without distractions; the fourth produces a light sweat which expels all complaints of the mind through the pores of the skin; the fifth cup cleanses both the flesh and bones; the sixth cup is akin to penetrating the meaning of the immortal spirit; after the seventh cup you can drink no more. From the armpits a fresh breeze gently rises, you start to wonder where Mount Ponglae is, and Yodong wishes to ride the fresh breeze and fly away."

Toryung wrote that, "Drinking tea induces a light sweat which washes away one's worries and prevents the body from becoming fat. If one drinks a strong cup of tea after a meal, it will remove any oil or fat and make the belly feel refreshed. The tea will help remove any fibres that are lodged between the teeth thus making it unnecessary to go to the trouble of using a toothpick. It strengthens the teeth and gradually eliminate 'worms' and poisons in the body."

Ch'oui Sonsa remarked that, "Tea causes one's eyes and ears to brighten. It stimulates the appetite and removes the effects of alcohol. It dispels tiredness and quenches thirst. It both prevents one from getting cold and causes the body to cool down when too hot. Tea also makes a very good fertilizer for potted flowers and plants.

After drinking tea one should not throw the tea leaves away since they can be put to further use in a number of ways. They can be prepared and eaten as vegetables. They can be put in a cloth bag and left to soak in one's bath water before bathing. They can be used to wash one's hair and clothes. By putting them in a cupboard or in one's shoes they will dispel any unpleasant odours. They are good for curing athlete's foot. They are excellent for cleaning glass. They can remove any grease or dust from carpet and floormats. By letting them smoulder over glowing coals the smoke will keep mosquitoes away. By stuffing a pillow with them the brain is benefitted during sleep."

Let me finish this article by a remark of Master Kyongbong Sunim:

"In the taste of a single cup of tea you will eventually discover that there is contained the truth of all the ten thousand forms in the universe. It is difficult to put this taste into words or to even catch a glimpse of it."

**Martine Batchelor**

## **Beopjeong Sunim's Korean Way of Tea**

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When I was a nun at the Seon (Zen) temple Songgwangsa, I would often take a walk up the steep hill that led to Bulilam, the hermitage of Beopjeong Sunim (1932–2010). Venerable Beopjeong was a renowned writer who had retired to this small hermitage and developed a "non-possession" philosophy. He was also a tea specialist. One of the joys of visiting him was to be offered a cup of tea. He used to do this in a very traditional way. Once, he explained in detail the Korean way of tea:

"In preparing green tea, one should first bring the water to a boil. Then one should pour it into a largish bowl and let it cool to about 60 degrees Celsius. If the water is too hot, then too much of the tea's bitterness will be extracted into the water. At this lower temperature, the fragrance of the tea is extracted more slowly. The teapot and cups should be warmed with some of the water. After placing the tea leaves in the teapot, pour in the water and let the leaves infuse for two or three minutes. It is important when pouring the tea to make sure that the taste is evenly distributed in all the cups. Therefore, never fill each cup in a single pouring, but fill them little by little—up to three servings each. While

drinking the tea, refill the teapot with water. Do not gulp the tea but sip it slowly, allowing its fragrance to fill your mouth. There is no need to have any special attitude while drinking except one of thankfulness. The nature of the tea itself is that of 'no mind.' It does not discriminate and make differences—it is just as it is.

"There are four inherent attributes to tea: peacefulness, respectfulness, purity, and quietness. In drinking tea, these qualities should be cultivated in the drinker. Drinking tea gladdens the mind. The taste of the tea is the taste of the entire universe, because it is produced entirely through natural sunlight, water, wind, clouds, and air."

Beopjeong Sunim was very knowledgeable about the history of the Korean way of tea:

"Tea is first mentioned in the ancient texts as an offering. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is often spoken of as an offering made to the Buddha. Originally, rice was not offered to the Buddha—just tea, incense, and flowers. Nowadays, although water is offered instead of tea, the Chinese character for tea is still used when describing the water employed in death ceremonies and harvest festivals.

"In the old days, as a sign of mutual respect, husband and wife would serve each other tea at their marriage. During the Silla dynasty [57 BCE–935 CE] tea was often used as a medicine. First, the leaves would be steamed and then pounded into the shape of a coin. This compressed form would be boiled for a long time in a medicine pot before being drunk. During the Koryo dynasty [935–1392] all people, commoners as well as aristocrats, drank tea. In this period, powdered tea was drunk in a large bowl. During the Choson period [1392–1910] the drinking of simple green-leaf tea was introduced. In this way one can observe a progression from complexity to simplicity in the preparation and the drinking of tea."

At Songwangsa, one can find a hill surrounded by bamboo groves and glistening tea bushes. Beopjeong Sunim introduced us to the making of monastic green tea:

"In spring, we gather the tea leaves and then roast them by rolling them on a hot iron plate. This gives the tea in Korea a slightly burnt flavor. Such a flavor is very much liked by Koreans; it is also discernible in our rice-water and barley 'tea.' In Japan the people like the taste of seaweed, so often their tea has a similar taste to seaweed. The Chinese enjoy rich food. Thus they also tend to like their tea to have a strong flavor. In this way, you can see how the different tastes of people determine the flavor of their teas.

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spring. The taste should resemble that of the skin of a young baby. The taste cannot be described, but can only be appreciated through experience. Tea is drunk either to quench the thirst, to savor the taste, or simply to spend a quiet hour appreciating the pottery and the general atmosphere that accompanies tea-drinking."

Beopjeong Sunim's hermitage was nestled amidst a bamboo forest on a steep hill. Climbing to visit him was a practice in itself. Arriving out of breath, the kind greeting and invitation to sit quietly and drink tea on the wooden veranda were a special treat. It is said that the taste of tea and the taste of Seon are the same, and at such times, I felt and experienced this strongly.