

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

Learning from Venerable (Pangjang) Kusan Sunim

Buddhistdoor International, 2014-08-22

<https://web.archive.org/web/20141016054230/http://newlotus.buddhistdoor.com/en/news/d/41527>

I arrived in Songgwangsa (one of the oldest Seon, or Zen, temples in South Korea) in 1975 on the first day of the biggest ceremony of the year, the commemoration of the death of national master Bojo. The next morning, Haemyong Sunim (Robert Buswell) took a young American who had recently arrived, Larry Martin (who became Hyunsung Sunim), and myself to see Venerable Kusan Sunim, the renowned master of the temple. I had never met a Zen master before, and went with great trepidation. We paid our respects by bowing three times as instructed, and then sat and waited. He smiled warmly.

First, he asked us where we had come from and our nationality. Then, with a penetrating gaze, he looked at me and said:

"What is the most important thing in the world?"

I replied: "Two people smiling at each other."

He smiled: "Yes, that's good, but there is something even more important than that. You know your body, but do you know your true mind?"

I could not answer.

He then proceeded to encourage me to meditate by asking myself at all times:

"What is this?"

Then he turned to the young American and said:
“What is the most frightening thing in the world?”
“To walk alone in the dark at night.”

The master laughed heartily: “No, there is something much more frightening than that—not to know your own mind.” He then gave him the same question to investigate: “What is this?”

So impressed was I that over the next three days I decided to become a nun. Up to then I had not sat in meditation for very long, nor did I have any idea what Buddhist nuns actually did. Nevertheless, I made up my mind and immediately told Ven. Kusan Sunim. He seemed pleased, and straight away began to consider which of his nun disciples could serve as my preceptress.

My preceptress and Ven. Kusan Sunim agreed that it would be best if I stayed at Songgwangsa for the meditation season. I could practice with two other Western women who had recently arrived, work in the kitchen, and learn Korean. Whenever necessary, I could talk to Ven. Kusan Sunim with the help of a translator. It was a great opportunity, although I was rather anxious since I had never really meditated before.

One day, Ven. Kusan Sunim came to meditate with us. I diligently applied myself to my *hwadu*, moving only occasionally on the cushion, but after that I could not face another hour and left. Upon my return, the monk-in-charge approached me, dictionary in hand. Ven. Kusan Sunim had asked him to tell me to “okchiro ch’amda”! We pored over the dictionary together. It meant “to bear beyond strength.” I took a deep breath and promised to mend my ways. These words were among the first I learned in Korean. I’ve never forgotten them.

Ven. Kusan Sunim used to tell us that we should work with our hands, but with our mind, we should keep investigating the *hwadu*. He used to encourage us not to succumb to confused states of mind. If the practice did not go well, one should not be sad, and if the practice did go well, there was no reason to be especially joyful. He emphasized the cultivation of patience and endurance. These would then help us develop tranquility and enquiry.

Often Western students of Japanese Zen Buddhism would come to visit, and I would translate during their meeting with Ven. Kusan Sunim. He would try to check their understanding by asking them: “What is it?” Some of them would push a cup towards him, or babble or give a shout. Then he would ask: “Before you move the cup, before you babble, before you shout—What is it?” None of them could answer. It seemed that he was trying to direct them towards the essence of things rather than remaining caught up in traditional gestures and responses.

Once, while we were on our way to the fields to work, I was waiting with a Western monk and Ven. Kusan Sunim for some tools to arrive. The German monk took the opportunity to tell Ven. Kusan Sunim of his difficulties in keeping the *hwadu*, especially when working. Ven. Kusan Sunim said that for himself, he was able to maintain the *hwadu* all the time. The German monk exclaimed: “But why should you need to work on a *hwadu* once you are enlightened?” Pangjang

Sunim said: "As the practice evolves, the *hwadu* also evolves. I still use a *hwadu*, but in a different way." The German monk asked him how he did it now as opposed to before. But the master refused to reply, pointing out that any explanation would be meaningless and concepts about it would only be a hindrance to real enquiry.

After the bimonthly lecture (*popmun*) was over, the foreign monks and nuns would follow Ven. Kusan Sunim up to his room. I would translate what he had said, and then he would answer questions and give us tea. Sometimes he would catch us out as we drank the tea. After the first sip he would ask: "Does it taste good?" We would answer: "Oh yes, it's very good." Then he would say: "What is it that tastes the tea?" Everyone would remain silent.

In June 1983, Ven. Kusan Sunim's health began to deteriorate. His eyes and his ears began to trouble him, and this affected his balance when walking. To remedy this condition he decided to exercise by working in the fields. Since the nuns' compound, Hwaeumjon, was on the way to the fields, he would often stop by and ask me to join him. Once there, we would pick stones out of a field or cut the blackened, diseased heads of the barley. He would sometimes call out to me and ask me about well-known koans, for example: "What did Chao-chou mean by 'the cypress in the courtyard'?" I would reply that I did not know. He would stress that I should awaken to the meaning of this by practicing diligently. Then we would rest by the side of the field and he would tell me Zen stories.

On another occasion, I accompanied him and his attendant for a walk. At one point we stopped and sat on a tree trunk. He said: "No matter how much you have practiced, you are never sure how you are going to be at the moment of death. You must practice diligently all the time, to be as well prepared as you can." This great and humbling Dharma teaching touched me deeply.

I left Songgwangsa and disrobed in 1985. But the teaching of Ven. Kusan Sunim has never left me. I still endeavor to put it into practice and teach it to others. Not a day goes by that I am not grateful for the training and guidance I received from Ven. Kusan Sunim.

Martine Batchelor

Beopjeong Sunim's Korean Way of Tea

Buddhistdoor International, 2014-09-05

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140920012735/http://newlotus.buddhistdoor.com/en/news/d/41672>

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.

“The word for green tea in Korean is *chaksol*, which 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*, meaning ‘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 color, scent, and taste. The perfect color 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 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.

Martine Batchelor

“What is This?”: Seon Practice in the Korean Tradition

Buddhistdoor International, 2014-09-19

<https://web.archive.org/web/20141012013605/http://newlotus.buddhistdoor.com/en/news/d/41785>

After I became a nun in Korea in 1975, I visited a number of Taiwanese Buddhist temples and Japanese Zen temples. This made me realize what a great piece of luck it was that I had become a Seon nun at Songgwangsa, as Korea is the only place where someone like myself could have become a nun and kept my ordination for ten years.

Korean monasteries and nunneries corresponded more to my temperament for three main reasons. Firstly, I feel that Korean people are like the Irish or Italians of the East. They are kind, incredibly hospitable, and somewhat formal—though not too much so, otherwise it would have been too much for a young French girl like me. Secondly, the amount of Seon practice one can do each year as a nun is remarkable—six months of the year and more if one wants to—in ideal conditions, with supportive Dharma friends, beautiful mountains, and great teachers. Thirdly, Korea is the most egalitarian place for Buddhist nuns. The nuns are equal to the monks in terms of practice, training, and the respect and support that they receive from laypeople.

Moreover, Korean Seon has its own flavor. I value having had the opportunity to

study it in depth. At the beginning, I was given the *hwadu* "What is this?" to investigate in meditation. "What is this?" comes from an encounter between the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, and a young monk who became one of his foremost disciples, Huaijang:

Huaijang entered the room and bowed to Huineng. Huineng asked: "Where have you come from?" "I have come from Mount Song," replied Huaijang. "What is this and how did it get here?" demanded Huineng. Huaijang could not answer, and remained speechless. He practiced for many years until he understood, and then went to see Huineng to tell him about his breakthrough. Huineng asked: "What is this?" Huaijang replied: "To say it is like something is not the point. But still it can be cultivated."

I used to sit in meditation and still do, asking again and again "What is this? What is this?" What is it that moves, thinks, speaks? And also before we think, move, speak, "What is this?" I am not asking about an external object: "What is the carpet, the cup of tea, the sound of the bird?" I turn the light back onto my experience, asking "What is this in this moment?" I have to be very careful that it does not become an intellectual enquiry. I am not speculating with my mind, I am trying to become one with the question. The most important part of the question is not the meaning of the words themselves, but the question mark—"?". I am asking unconditionally "What is this?" without looking for an answer, without expecting an answer—I am trying to develop a feeling of openness, of wonderment. As I throw out the question "What is this?" I am opening to the whole moment. I am letting go of any need for knowledge and security. There is no place to rest. The body and mind become a question.

In terms of concentration, I try to return to the question again and again. The question anchors me and brings me back to this moment. But I am not repeating the question like a mantra. These are not sacred words, and it does not matter how many times they are repeated. What is important is that the questioning is alive, that the question is fresh each time I ask "What is this?" I am asking because I do not know. It is similar to when I lose some keys. I look and look and look and I have no idea where they might be. I think "keys," but I don't know, and there is only a sensation of questioning.

There are several ways to ask the question. At the beginning especially, it is possible to connect the question with the breath. Master Songdam Sunim recommended this method to me once. One breathes in, and as one breathes out one asks "What is this?" Otherwise one can try to make the questioning cyclical, asking gently but steadily; thus as soon as one "What is this?" stops, another "What is this?" starts. Once one's concentration is better, one can just ask the question from time to time and stay with the sense of questioning it evokes. As soon as the sensation of questioning dissipates, one can ask the question again.

In Seon Buddhism it is said: "Great questioning, great awakening; small questioning, small awakening; no questioning, no awakening." Over time, the questioning meditation helps one to develop quietness and clarity together, but

also to become more aware of impermanence and conditionality, and thus to cultivate and manifest a wise and compassionate attitude and actions.