

a korean holiday

On my first holiday from Mongolia in two years, within an hour of arriving at Hwa Gye Sa Monastery, I found myself dressed in the gray robes of a Korean monk and meditating with a dozen Western monks and nuns belonging to the Seoul International Zen Centre.

The daily schedule ran from 3.00A.M. – 9.00P.M, with sessions

By Ven. Thubten Gyatso

of prostrations, chanting, and meditation. Until then, my hips had given up the idea of long periods of meditation, but there was no choice, and, in another lesson of mind over matter, gave no trouble. I have to admit that to remain awake during the one-week retreat I resorted to matter over mind in the form of progressively stronger doses of caffeine. For the last five days, the Zen master, Do Kwan Sunim, extended the evening meditation until midnight, reasoning that the difference between sleep and death is that when we are dead there is no way we can ever get our legs to walk again.

Do Kwan Sunim looks and sounds amazingly like a young version of Lama Thubten Yeshe. He gave me a *Kong-an* to contemplate, “What am I,” and my answer, a brilliant rendition of Lama Tsong Khapa’s dependent-arising, was greeted with, “You deserve thirty beatings with my stick.”

Aiyaiyai, thought I, and asked, “Do you really think one can realize emptiness by stopping all thoughts?”

“Katz!” he screamed at me.

“But ...”

Whack! went his hand on the floor.

Back on the meditation cushion, I contemplated Zen books, some by Westerners and some compiled from teachings given by the founding Zen master, Seung Sahn, who has many centers around the world, and lives in the US. My initial impression was that Zen teachings, relying heavily on quotes from the *Heart Sutra*, refer to the ultimate non-existence of conventional phenomena. They take the words of the sutra literally, without inserting, as we have been taught to do, “no *inherently-existing* form, no *inherently-existing* feelings,” and so on. As far as I understand, the realization of the ultimate non-existence of conventional phenomena is valid; but is not the realization of emptiness. It does not have the power to cut the root ignorance, and is dangerously close to the extreme wrong view of total negation. The actual realization of emptiness is

the realization of the non-existence, both conventionally and ultimately, of an inherently-existing self – of the phantom projected by the self-grasping ignorance. This is not criticism; these were just my initial thoughts.

One week is not long enough to penetrate the reality of Zen meditation, and I cannot claim to understand the *Kong-an* method. What I want to say is that the genuine friendship and generosity I experienced at Hwa Gye Sa Monastery was extremely moving. I am incredibly lazy and undisciplined in my Dharma practice; and the devotion, dedication, energy, and kind heart shown by the monks and nuns were truly inspiring.

Then I moved to a monastery more fitting to my mind, attached as it is to form. Several hundred kilometers south of Seoul is Daewon Sa Temple, approached by 5km of winding road with flowering cherry trees planted three meters apart along both sides of the

road. In a south-facing valley, steep hills covered in maple, oak, chestnut, and bamboo; and gardens prolific with azalea, camellia, and magnolia trees, a rocky mountain stream with many decorated pools, buddhas, stupas, and meditation huts. The abbot, Master Hyunjang Sunim, has been to Dharamsala, Kopan Monastery, and Tibet, and strongly feels that Korean Buddhism needs an injection of Tibetan Buddhism. With the help of the government, he has established a Tibetan museum near the monastery. It must have cost well over a million dollars to build, and is filled with artifacts he has gathered from Tibet and Nepal. Two Tibetans, Lhaxsam and his wife Tsering, are making appliqué *thangkas* and painting Tibetan-style murals on the walls of the museum. It will take them two years to complete the work.

Finally, I stayed with a family at Incheon, near Seoul. They, and two other families, have made a connection with the Tokden lamas at Tashi Jong near Dharamsala. I stayed in a guesthouse built for visiting Tibetan lamas; the only previous resident was the Nechung Oracle from Dharamsala. They want to build a Tibetan temple, as there is a tremendous interest in Tibetan Buddhism. The Korean people reminded me of the Mongolians: Buddhist at heart, but with limited access to the teachings and under pressure from aggressive Christians.

Somebody said that the Koreans are the Italians of Asia. You can decide whether this is a good or a bad compliment; from my side, I have never experienced such kind and generous hospitality. I pray that their wishes to receive teachings in Tibetan Buddhism are fulfilled.



Ven. Gyatso, right, with Zen master Do Kwan Sunim, at Hwa Gye Sa Monastery

Ven. Thubten Gyatso (Dr. Adrian Feldmann), is an Australian monk who is the resident teacher at the FPMT center in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia..