A TASTE OF WATER

by Malia Politzer

IT IS NEARLY one o'clock in the morning. According to traditional Korean Buddhist temple etiquette, the crack of the *moktak*—a fish-shaped wooden percussion instrument played by Korean monks to signal the beginning of their day—will awaken practitioners in exactly two hours for the morning meditation. Nodding off, I jerk my eyes back to the *kong-an*—a Korean Buddhist word play meant to facilitate contemplation—written on the tearoom whiteboard that has been the focus of my meditation for the past six hours.

Snoring softly in perfect lotus position a few feet away from me is the head monk of the International Zen Center, Pohwa Sunim. As I consider sneaking off to my small, windowless room for a quick nap, he snaps to attention. "Do you have the answer?" He demands. Sighing and shaking my head, I shift my focus back to the kong-an. Titled "Mount Surinam," it is one of two kong-ans Mr. Pohwa challenged me to solve during my stay. The short sentence is printed in precise, deceptively neat black handwriting, reading simply: "A student asks his master, 'Not even a thought has arisen, is there still a sin or not?' The master replies, 'Mount Surinam.'"

I find the exercise professionally exasperating. It is difficult for me not to fixate on the poor sentence structure and grammatical errors. I have to remind myself that this is not meant to be a literary exercise, but a tool in the quest for attaining a higher state of being. It is not an easy task. Then again, I suppose, if finding enlightenment were easy, everyone would have already done it.

It is the final night of a week-long "temple stay" at Seoul's Hwa Gye Sa International Zen Center, a program initiated by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism to encourage "the popularization and appreciation of traditional culture in daily life." The standard temple- stay program ranges from one night up to one week, allowing visitors the opportunity to sample traditional Buddhist practices such as sitting and walking meditations, Dharma talks, Zen chanting, tea ceremonies, lotus-lantern and traditional Buddhist bead making. Although the program is relatively new—the Korean government first opened temples in 2002 to provide extra beds for visitors during the World Cup—it has exploded in popularity. Originating with 17 participating temples, the program has expanded to 82 throughout South Korea, and in 2007 attracted 68,119 Korean and 13,533 international participants.

The more than 500-year old Hwa Gye Sa complex houses the distinctly nontraditional International Zen Center—founded nearly 10 years ago by Sahn Haeng Won Sunim, the first Korean Zen Master to teach in the West. Inspired by a vision that came to him while meditating, Sahn Haeng revolutionized traditional Korean Buddhism by moving it out from isolated mountain monasteries to the global community—founding more than 100 centers in 30 countries around the world. In the International Zen Center—the place he would live until his death in 2004—he

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created a place where people of all nationalities, genders, and even religions could come together to practice and search for spiritual enlightenment.

PASSING THROUGH THE gates on to the serene confines of the temple grounds, it's hard to imagine that the chaotic city streets of Seoul are only a 10-minute walk away. But on the third day of my visit the temple is bustling with visitors. It is the three-day holiday for Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, a Bodhisattva who dedicated his life to helping others find enlightenment, and vowed not to achieve Buddhahood until "all Hells are empty." From dusk until dawn, the deep, melodic drone of Buddhist chanting can be heard echoing across the grounds.

Head monk Pohwa Sunim, dressed in the traditional grey, loose-fitting linen temple garb grins and tosses me a straw hat. "Are you ready to go?" He asks, walking away before I have time to respond. I have no idea where we are going. He leads me to a rocky path parallel to the stream, winding up to the mountain. Today, it seems, I will be participating in a "walking meditation."

As I leap from rock to rock, struggling to keep up with Pohwa Sunim's brisk pace, I query him regarding Korean Buddhism, Zen practice and the search for enlightenment. Pohwa Sunim has only been the head monk of the Zen Center for a few months, having recently returned to Korea after more than a decade in the United States. His vision for the Center is as revolutionary as that of his predecessors: He is commited to teaching traditional Korean Zen by drawing the wisdom of the "sages of the ages"—such as Jesus, Mohammed, the Dalai Lama and Ghandi.

Pohwa Sunim is a complicated, contradictory character. Possessed of puppy-like enthusiasm and almost inhuman energy (I'm later told he sleeps only three hours each night,) Pohwa Sunim is hardly the serene, ascetic monk of the Western imagination. Upon learning that I am an American journalist, he promptly recruits me to edit and rewrite the temple Web page. Despite an aura of naiveté and almost childlike optimism for the potential of Zen Buddhist practice to achieve world peace, the moment I ask a serious question about Buddhism, enlightenment or spirituality he instantly snaps into the very image of the serious, learned teacher in possession of profound and ancient wisdom.

Traditional Korean Zen Buddhism, he explains, differs from other Buddhist disciplines in that it emphasizes "mind-to-mind" teachings rather than on the scriptures and doctrines of Buddha—leaving practitioners free to tap the wisdom from many different faiths. "All religions are searching for the same thing, he says. "They are searching for enlightenment. Each religion has dug its own well—looking for the water at the bottom. Sometimes they are so deep inside their well, they can't see all the wells others are digging, or that the water is the same." The practice of Zen, according to Powha Sunim, is a way to bridge this divide—a method individuals, regardless of their religion, can draw upon in their own "search for water."

Part of the Chogye Order of Buddhism, the International Zen Center aims to help people "find water" by allowing them to participate in every aspect of the monk's life—a life that I find to be much more challenging than I had anticipated. For example a given day begins at 3 a.m. with the crack of the moktak. Fighting an almost overpowering desire to go back to sleep, I roll off my bed mat, and put on the traditional temple garb: loose-fitting grey linen pants, shirt and sash. I join the others in the main meditation hall, find a mat and sit half-lotus, waiting for the next crack of the moktak, which will signal the beginning of an hour-long "sitting" meditation.

Such meditations are not for the feint

of heart. Although we sit on cushions, the posture quickly becomes extremely uncomfortable. My lower back aches, the muscles around my hips and thighs begin throb, and while I manage to stay awake, my right leg does not. The next crack of the moktak signals the 108 bows—a vigorous exercise meant to cleanse the body of bad karma—followed by chanting, and than another hour of meditation. By the time we are done with this meditative marathon, it is barely 6 a.m.—breakfast time, to be followed by chores and more meditation.

And this is a light day. I've come in the off-season, having just missed the intensive spring retreat. Although the temple is open year-round to visitors and participants, the focus of the program is on Kyol Che, "Tight Dharma," one of the most significant annual activities for Buddhist monks. From between 21 to 90 days during the summer and winter, monks and nuns spend a minimum of 10 hours each day in meditation. In more traditional temples, this sacred time is restricted to those already sworn to the order. Nuns and monks rarely interact, belonging to separate temples and orders, and laypeople are not permitted to participate. But at the International Zen Center, this is the busiest time of year.

Mu Sang, a French-born former emergency room nurse who took the vows of a Buddhist nun more than eight years ago, tells me that meditating for 10 hours a day is perhaps the least strenuous version of Kyol Che. There are even more rigorous meditations—some will only be allowed three hours of sleep a night for month, eating just enough to keep them alive. More advanced monks and nuns will not lie down to sleep at all. These activities are meant to rid practitioners of worldly attachments, such as sleeping, eating, and in some cases speech and human contact, enabling them to better focus on how to achieve the elusive, ultimate spiritual transformation—enlightenment.

Sometime in the middle of the week, I notice a change in myself. Although sitting meditation still feels like a chore most of the time, once in a while I lose all sense of time, possessed of a feeling of peace so complete I hesitate even to breathe too deeply for fear of losing it. I begin to understand why so many non-Koreans have chosen to give up previous, more lucrative and "successful" careers to take the formal vows to become nuns and monks. Waking up at three does not bother me as it did before—I feel more present, more able to separate myself from the endless rattle of deadlines, plans, bills, etc. Perhaps this is a taste of enlightenment?

I ask Sunim, and he says probably not. How does a person know if they've achieved enlightenment, then? I want to know. Is it gradual or does one simply snap into it? He smiles and says, simply "What is the taste of water?"

A glance at the temple's participants illustrates the range of people searching for the answer to this question: Home to international monks and nuns from countries ranging from the Czech Republic, France, and Russia to Singapore and China, the International Zen Center demonstrates a remarkable trend: While Buddhism is being supplanted in South Korea by Christianity as the fastest growing religion, interest in Buddhism is spiking in Western countries. Buddhism is the third-fastest growing religion in the United States and the fastest growing in Australia. To what can we attribute such interest? "People, in their busy lives, are hungry for meaning," Sunim Powha suggests. He has observed a particular rise in interest among American youth—educated twentysomethings.

Determined to solve the kong-an before I catch my plane home the next day, I focus back on it. Suddenly, I have an answer. I tentatively explain it to Sunim Pohwa. He smiles widely. "Now you have a taste of water."