

# Why Korea? Why Buddhism?

Marian Werner

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*In this essentially personal article the author, an Englishwoman, describes how her interest in Korea started and developed, and what drew her from her Christian roots towards Buddhism. A student of English literature, she found in poems such as those by John Keats a poignant expression of the unsatisfactoriness of life which is the basis of the first Noble Truth expounded by Gautama Buddha. She and her husband became acquainted with the richness of Korean culture through an exhibition in London, and subsequently through reading various books, but it was not until 1999 that they paid their first visit to South Korea. What they found so entranced them that they have been back six more times. Their main interest has been in seeing as many Buddhist temples and hermitages as possible, and so far they have visited about 170. No two temples are alike, and all are treasure-houses.*

*In exploring all the halls open to visitors, the author was intrigued to see the shrines to Sansin and the ubiquitous tiger, and has since made a point of paying her respects to the mountain spirits who, she believes, occupy an important role in Korean tradition and seem even to have the power to change the weather. The beauty of Korean sculpture, architecture and painting, together with the exquisite natural surroundings in which most Korean*

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*Buddhist temples are located, is part of the reason for the author's enthusiasm, but more especially there is the way of life demonstrated by the monks and nuns who are resident in the temples. She wonders if eventually her karma will bring her in that direction.*

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From time to time on my visits to South Korea, now numbering seven, Koreans have asked me the above questions. Naturally they are curious. Korea is a long way from my country, England, and my white hair tells them that the journey to and fro may be arduous. Some Korean Christians who meet me are amazed that a westerner should be interested in Buddhism (and I for my part feel initial surprise when a Korean tells me they are Christian), and Korean Buddhists often want to know how widespread Buddhism is in England.

First, then, I will briefly explain, why Korea? I was born in London in 1935. At the age of fourteen I started to keep a large diary, and the entry for Tuesday, 27 June, 1950, includes: "Nasty situation in Korea - Russians - listened to news. Russian planes shot down." That was the first time, perhaps, that I looked at an atlas to see exactly where Korea was. The June War also made me aware of the dangerous ambitions of the Soviet Union. Six years later, when I was at Bristol University, I walked with other undergraduates to lay flowers on the war memorial in memory of the students killed by the communists in the Hungarian Uprising. After graduating in French, English and History, I worked for nearly six years in Montreal, where the secretary at the next desk to mine told me that her brother had been killed in the Korean War. I was very moved, on visiting Seoraksan for the first time, to read the poem on one of the war memorials, " ... may grass

and trees, and the loyal spirits of the bygone warriors ... together with the rock remain ever and for ever ... ”

It was many years before Korea presented itself as a possible holiday destination. My husband had got out of communist Czechoslovakia in 1968, and we had married in 1970. In 1984 the British Museum held an exhibition of “Treasures from Korea,” which opened our eyes to the richness of Korean culture, but it was not until 1999 that we finally paid our first visit, full of eager anticipation to see the country from which the treasures had been brought.

We knew, from seeing the exhibition and from reading a number of books, that South Korea’s Buddhist temples were abundant and beautiful and we wanted to see as many as possible, which brings me to an explanation of, why Buddhism? My husband’s personal and scholarly involvement has been explained in interviews, books and articles over the years, but this is the first time I have set down my own reasons for being drawn to Buddhism. My parents were Christians, my father coming from a Wesleyan Methodist, my mother from a Baptist background, though she later became a Christian Scientist. Many members of my family were and remain devout, church-going Christians.

Despite being sent to three Catholic convents for my early education, and despite earnest efforts at university to acquire faith in a creator God, I was left searching, and increasingly aware of the unsatisfactoriness of life. I found it well expressed by the English poet, John Keats, who wrote in his *Ode to a Nightingale* about

“The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan,”

and in his exquisite *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, conveying the human longing for permanence:

“Ah, happy, happy boughs, that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu ... ”

A friend in whom I confided, said just two words to me before I emigrated to Canada: “Try Buddhism.” I bought Christmas Humphreys’ book, *Buddhism*, and very soon felt I had come home. I was not being required to accept one truth as being the only one, but was being shown Four Noble Truths, on the basis of which I could work out my own salvation. The sort of faith which is required of the practising Christian is not required of someone following Buddha’s teaching. Here I must add that I dislike having to say, “I am a Buddhist.” Inevitably the practice over the centuries of adopting exclusive labels has led to misunderstanding, resentment and, in the extreme, hatred and violence. However, saying “I am a follower of the Buddha” or some such phrase, would sound rather odd to a non-Buddhist. (I was saddened to hear in Korea of isolated instances of damage being done to Buddhist temples and statues by some Christians, who clearly are not following the teaching of Jesus Christ to love their neighbour.) It was while attending the Summer School of the British Buddhist Society that I first met my husband-to-be, during a lecture he gave on Nirvana.

The challenge, in 1999, was to see in three weeks as many temples as we could squeeze in. It was only on our last visit, in November 2006, that a friend escorting us around coined the word “templing” to describe our activities. “You are templing people,” he said.

I could see that our desire to explore every single temple we came across, whether large or small, and no matter to which sect it belonged, might seem strange. After all, I could imagine the reaction of

a Christian in England if a Korean visitor set out to see every single church within range, regardless of denomination.

The fact is, Korean Buddhist temples and hermitages - of which we have now seen a mere 170 - are all treasure-houses. No two are alike, and our thirst to see ever more reflects our appreciation not only of the architecture, sculptures, paintings and natural surroundings, but above all the atmosphere created by the monks and nuns resident in them, and also the commitment and modest behaviour of the lay people with their varying methods of following the teachings of the Buddha.

I have never been able even to sit cross-legged, and lately kneeling has become difficult, so my participation in services is limited to standing at the back of the hall, content to gaze at the shrine and listen to the chanting, the moktak, the bells, the gong. I take away mental and visual impressions that I will never forget. I have always kept notes of our visits, and now have more than a thousand handwritten pages to remind me of wonderful experiences. Once a monk asked my husband to explain his view of Buddhism to him; our Korean companions did their best to translate the carefully worded explanation, but the monk seemed dissatisfied. I chipped in, "Life is suffering; the Buddha shows the way out of it." The monk smiled his approval.

I have not needed to pray for anything, but was once on my knees in a Sansin-gak and was politely asked by a Korean lady when I emerged, what I had been praying for. I replied that I had been thanking Sansin for looking after us on our potentially hazardous walks in the mountains. She told me that women usually prayed to Sansin for a son, which I already knew. My husband commented, "That would be a miracle baby!"

The presence of Sansin at nearly all the temples we have visited has greatly appealed to me. Over the years I have come to accept that there is in mountains a force I call energy, for lack of a better word, and the delightful statues and paintings of Sansin, whether male or female, and of the symbolic tiger, represent that energy. Twice I have asked Sansin to change the weather, and it has at once been dramatically changed, once on Namsan in Seoul, once on Hallasan on Jeju. The Spirit or Spirits of the Korean mountains have been around for thousands of years, and my instinct tells me that the Sansin tradition is not shamanic, though the whole matter is not, of course, as simple as that. We have met a few shamans on our travels, and also a fortune-telling monk, and are not uncomfortable about the juxtaposition at the temples of halls with what is called folk art and halls containing sculptures and paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Sakyamuni, Kwansum and Jijang, and a host of other transcendent beings, beckon people to take charge of their own destinies, guided by the wise words of the Buddha. The experience of going round a variety of halls, offering a variety of levels of worship, I find very satisfying.

On our first visit I was bowled over by the awesome beauty of the Seokguram Buddha at Bulguksa, unarguably one of the greatest works of art in the world. I also admire the statues of the Contemplative Bodhisattva, Mireuk, created at around the same time and achieving the same lofty artistic standard. An equally strong, but quite different, feeling is produced by the placid features of the ancient standing Buddha at Daejosa, a tiny temple which won my heart on our first and subsequent visits. These and hundreds of other works that have survived the destruction wrought by invaders demonstrate the depth of the reverence felt by Koreans for the teachings of the Buddha, a reverence which permeates the countryside and led a Scotsman we met beside a rock carving of the Buddha to say, "This is a very spiritual country."

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I have already used the word “modest” and now use it again, about Korean people generally. Coming as I do from a country which has lost a great deal of its spiritual culture, and which has succumbed over recent years to horrific levels of crime and the ugliness of graffiti on many buildings, public as well as private, I go around South Korea entranced by what I see, and aware that some Koreans just do not know how beautiful their country is and how immensely valuable is the heritage from fifteen hundred years of Buddhism. But some do; the Korean professor of French who kindly took us to see Biro-am, above Tongdosa, described it as Shangri-la, and I was so taken by its beauty that I wrote a little poem in French about it.

Thanks to the translations by Professor Kevin O’Rourke of poems by Koreans into English, I have been able to read some splendid writings from the Silla dynasty onwards, and have room here to quote two lines from *Quatrain in the Mountains* by the great Confucian scholar Yi I, penname Yulgok; they remind me of many instances of gracious hospitality at temples we visited:

“The mountain monk drew water from the well and came back home.

Soon the fragrance of tea wafted through the forest.”

Another charming feature when visiting the temples has been seeing the way very small children are taught to behave, and bow correctly. The shortest of legs somehow manage to climb the steep steps, with some help. Children are being brought up with a love of nature, and it gave me a lot of pleasure to visit the Froebel Institute in Seoul in 2004 to read to toddlers from the books by Beatrix Potter, the English writer who created characters such as Peter Rabbit, and part of whose life story has just been turned into a rather fanciful film, called

*Miss Potter.* Beatrix Potter wrote and illustrated twenty-three books for children, which were published in Korean two years ago, and a Korean lady called Mrs Kwak and I read, in Korean and English, on the BBC World Service to mark that event. I mention it because Beatrix Potter loved the English countryside, and my travel notes are full of praise for the Korean countryside - the pink cosmos beside the lime green rice fields, craggy pine trees, sparkling rivers, the ever present forested mountains whether mist-shrouded or clear, the crescent moon hanging over a dancheonged temple. I always pay particular attention to paintings of landscapes on temples. Often they form the background to the bull-taming pictures, and other stories, but sometimes they are there for their own sake, adding to the beauty of the temple as a whole.

I was grateful, during a conference at Baekdamsa at which my husband was giving a paper, for the opportunity to partake of a Buddhist breakfast, which taught me how deeply the monks respect nature and the environment, and how carefully the whole meal is eaten, in total silence. It was perhaps a glimpse for me of a future way of life to which my karma may eventually bring me.

## **Glossary of Chinese Terms**

(K=Korean, S=Sanskrit)

Baekdamsa (K) 百潭寺

Biro-am (K) 毘盧庵

Bulguksa (K) 佛國寺

Daejosa (K) 大鳥寺

Dancheong (K) 丹青

Dancheong (K) 丹青

Hallasan (K) 漢拏山

Jeju (K) 濟州

- Jijang (K), Kṣitigarbha (S) 地藏  
Kwanseum (K), Avalokiteśvara (S) 觀世音  
Mireuk (K), Maitreya (S) 彌勒  
Moktak (K) 木鐸  
Namsan (K) 南山  
Sansin (K) 山神  
Sansin-gak (K) 山神閣  
Seokguram (K) 石窟庵  
Silla (K) 新羅  
Soraksan (K) 雪嶽山  
Tongdosa (K) 通度寺  
Yulgok Yi-I (K) 栗谷 李珥