

Marme Sunim, a Buddhist Nun



A Buddhist-inclined friend suggested I reach out to a nun of the faith, Marme Sunim. He mentioned her friendliness toward foreigners and her openness to discuss her religion. I called her a few weeks ago and was delighted to find out she was willing to meet me and discuss her path towards enlightenment in both the Korean and Tibetan traditions. Although not a Buddhist myself, I found Gwangju-based Marme to be charming, generous and personable during my visit to her temple near Wolgook Market.

She picked me up in her older model SUV at a neighboring bus stop and immediately, I was struck by her adapted modern style. Wearing the traditional gray attire of the Korean ordained and a small woolen cap covering her shaved head, her smile beamed as she greeted me. I was equally surprised that her touch screen mobile phone was more sophisticated than my used push button one.

A friend from Sri Lanka was seated in the front seat, as she drove me a few short blocks to her temple, the Sangay Choeling Tibetan Buddhism Studies Center. At the altar were photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist dignitaries carefully placed around the room. Colorful lotus flower decorations adorned the ceiling with blessings written in Korean. I found out later I had just missed the Lunar New Year celebration the previous day, so I only saw what was left.

Finally, Marme received me in her private chamber, a cozy room just off the main altar room. An avid table tennis player, she has certificates on the wall showing off her number one ranking. Originally from Seoul, Marme has been ordained for nearly 20 years in the Jogye Order, the largest in Korea. She knew she always wanted to be a nun and recounted to me the story of her mother's wish to have a boy. After 100 days of prayer for a boy, she was born. When hearing this story as a child she made the decision at an early age to be a nun. "It was my Karma," she says. "It was my dream to be a student of Buddha." After more than two years at her center in Wolgook,



Marme Sunim, relaxing over tea

however, she is at a crossroads between teaching and practicing.

As part of the Jogye Order, Marme must remain celibate as she practices a life of asceticism. Before becoming ordained, she practiced her vows for three years, even though after six months it is possible to become an apprentice nun or a monk, then pass a 4-year course to gain more knowledge. Although nuns and monks perform the same tasks, monks take 250 vows while nuns take 348 vows. Despite reports that nuns are under appreciated and even discriminated against elsewhere, nuns in Korea, she says are 'very well respected' because of the structure in place to become a nun. "Nuns in Taiwan are very similar because of the structure there," she adds. Even her name 'Marme' Sunim was given to her by a high-ranking holy official from India, 'Marme' meaning 'bottle lamp' and 'Sunim' being the respectful title for a senior nun or monk in Korea.

She already had some guests visiting and was serving



Marme Sunim's temple, the Sangay Choeling Tibetan Buddhism Studies Center



them gangra tea from India. Soon after I arrived her doctor friend arrived and she stated her reticence in talking to me. "Wait until I talk to my friend, and we'll see," she said. I sat quietly sipping tea and taking it all in as she spoke Korean to her guests.

Her doctor friend seemed to put her at ease, when he said to me "I feel like we've met in previous life," he said. Soon afterwards, Marme felt comfortable enough to invite me for lunch. We moved to the kitchen area, where her cook served us a filling meal of traditional vegetarian side dishes. "This is made without garlic, onions and other [pungent] spices. It is forbidden to eat them," she says. "Really? I never knew that," I said. I learned later that in the Buddhist faith, this is to avoid lustful arousal and sparking a temper as well as risking rejection of one's flesh and blood by the gods and saints. The meal was delicious and ended with a tasty dish of persimmons marinated in honey, ginger and pine nuts called sujung gua.

Finally, she agreed to a short interview and continued serving me some tea. "What is the difference between Tibetan and Korean Buddhism?" I ask. "Well they are very similar in that they are about getting enlightenment and using the Mahayana sutras (holy scriptures thought to have come directly from the Buddha). Tibetan Buddhism however proposes a different way of thinking about compassion for others, wisdom and bodhistaava (aspiration in attaining Buddhahood or a state of liberation and knowledge)."

She proudly tells me she recently traveled to New Zealand to study abroad and met many westerners who were eager to learn about Buddhism and her beliefs. Marme tells me she is now attending Donggang College in Gwangju to

pursue a degree in social work, and tells me through her study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, how she has embraced community service more than ever. "The first social welfare worker was Buddha," she declares. "Ten years ago, a monk asked me to study social work, and I refused. Today I am studying social work."

"I have no teacher in Korea though," she says. Today, while constantly in pursuit of wisdom, she is unsure if she will stay at her present temple or move on, but is leaning towards inviting other nuns which would make the temple even better. As such, Marme tells me she is considering moving to another temple in the Himalayas or inviting other nuns to stay with her at the temple. She says she is torn between practicing Buddhism and teaching it. Soon, she will be preparing an upcoming pilgrimage to India where she will participate in Tibetan New Year on March 3, 2010 and meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other ordained friends and teachers.

Upon her return she may decide what her next steps will be. In the meantime, she enjoys receiving visitors most mornings at her temple in Wolgook, including the occasional foreigner. Some of her friends are in a local rock band called Euphoria, she tells me and insists I meet them. "They are like my family," she says of her friends and followers. "Family."

To visit Marme at the Sangay Choeling Tibetan Buddhism Studies Center, take Bus 29 or 40 to Wolgook Market. Call: 062-956-2351(2) for additional directions.

Story and photos by Alva French