

Zen and the art of soul maintenance

Abbot Soobul Sunim answers questions on life with restful silences and unrestrained laughter

DEEPA ALEXANDER

The abbot takes his time. Question number 1 on a childhood spent in the shadow of the Korean War is greeted with a smile.

Question number 2 on Zen Buddhism is greeted with silence. Eleven seconds, to be precise – it's in the recorder.

In that pause suspended by time, the entourage of interpreters, staff and Korean expats surrounding us in a softly-lit room at the InKo Centre sits still in the chairs, the ferns outside the glass window stir in the breeze and Abbot Soobul Sunim peers deep into my eyes.

"Can you see your own eyes?" he asks me in Korean. The interpreter translates in a hurried staccato. I shake my head. "Then how do you know what your eyes see?" he asks again. I mumble an answer. The abbot throws his head back and laughs – the kind of laughter that comes from trying to find answers to most of life's questions and succeeding most of the time.

Sunim has been at it since he was in his teens, exploring religions outside of Ch'on-dogyo, a Korean way of life that his family followed when they lived in Daejaeon. In 1973, when he was 20, he decided to become a Buddhist monk, shaved his head and a year later received the novice precepts from Jimyung Sunim at the Beomeosa temple in Busan, the head temple of the Jogye order.

Four years later he graduated as a monk and over the next decade opened the Anguk Zen Center where he has been chief director since. The centre works at popularising Ganwha Seon, a deep earnest questioning and the official practice method of the Jogye order, to both lay and spiritual, young and old audiences across South Korea and the world.

"So far I've guided more than 25,000 people above the age of 18 to experience Ganwha Seon," says Sunim, author of *Golden Light Phoenix* and the *Flying Bird Without Trace: the Dharma Summary of Delivering the Mind from the Seon point of view*.



Enlightenment isn't the end point. It's an emotion that pushes you towards a place you return to, a place of bliss

"Mastering the art of Zen depends on the master, and Mahayana Buddhism calls for its practice over 24 hours. That is because work and study are not separate," says Sunim who has also helmed posts at Buddhist press organisations, media networks and universities. Interestingly, he has been both abbot of the Beomeosa temple, and the head of Buddhist policemen at Busan's regional police headquarters.

Sunim says the US has many practitioners trying to explore the vast realms of consciousness that exist below the seeming calm and chaos of our lives. "When you are pricked does your body or mind feel the pain first?" he asks. "The mind senses it," I reply, but my answer indicates that I'm clearly yet to feel a sense of oneness with the truth.

Sunim, who has been a vegetarian for 43 years and counts among his interests the cultures of the world, says "I love Indian food," but laughs when asked to name a favourite. The abbot who wakes up at 3.30 am every day believes that "enlightenment isn't the end point. It's an emotion that pushes you towards a place you return to, time and again, a place of bliss. It gives you great hope and can bring world peace."

Sunim who is in the city on a private visit, presses his palms together to indicate the end of the interview. He carefully unwraps the seung-bok, a monastic grey robe made of fibre, wears it and floats out like a cloud into the garden for the photo shoot. "I want you to be happy," he tells me as I leave. And, this time I don't need the translator.

Keep calm and take a walk Abbot Soobul Sunim at the InKo Centre • R RAVINDRAN

HISTORY & CULTURE

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