

CHINA TRIP

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China previously). Without the two of them, the trip would have been very difficult indeed. When we visited the old monks, Soen Sa Nim often engaged them in Dharma combat, and Jon would translate. It would have been almost impossible without an interpreter who knew Soen Sa Nim's style.

After visiting the south we flew to Beijing in the north and got quite a different view of the huge country. Beijing, administrative and political head of China, gave us a look at history—the Summer Palace, the Imperial Palace, the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall. We were able to make contact with some officials of the Chinese Buddhist Association, which hopefully will open the door for future contacts between Buddhists of China and the West, and also South Korea.

From there we took an overnight train to Louyang, capital city of China until the end of the Tang Dynasty, and famous as the beginning of the "Silk Road" to the Arab countries. Tired from the long train ride, we boarded a bus for another several hours out to Deng Feng: miles and miles of rugged roads through farmlands where very few tourists ever go.



Reunion after 40 years: Ms. Chun and her aunt in Manchuria.

There were people everywhere, imprinting the realization that China truly does have one fourth of the world's population, pulling, pushing and lifting endlessly it seems. Although the land itself is beautiful, there is little to relieve the eye from the drabness of the way people live, even though now there is at least something to eat for almost everyone. Many changes have been and are continuing to be made over the years since Communism took root in China and as they find out what works. We were impressed with how pragmatic and experimental the government is, especially since the end of the devastation caused by the sadly misguided Cultural Revolution. We found that nowadays people can own their own homes or apartments if they can afford to do so and also can earn more money if they work hard, and even run small private businesses. More and more the country is trying to open up and catch up to the rest of the world, after its long period of being completely closed off. There is more freedom and less fear of the influences of the West, although perhaps with some good reason (as some of us felt when we returned at the end of the glitter and materialism of Hong Kong) there are attempts at controlling what kind of influences they want.

Near Deng Feng we visited the Shaolin Temple and climbed the steep trail to the cave where Bodhidharma sat facing a wall for nine years. Some of the young monks and nuns hiked along with us. In the temples now there are the very old monks, back

from the fields, who basically act as custodians and museum guides, taking tourists around to see the new structures going up and the few remaining artifacts that were not destroyed, and some very young monks who have very little teaching available.

It will be some years before there will be any real practice going on in the temples, until they are rebuilt and there are more monks. Also, the government is financing the work and its aim, understandably enough, is to make some money from tourism. Probably the government also feels that Buddhism itself can help the country too, so practice is not discouraged—there just isn't much time for it yet and there is virtually no sitting practice. As horrible as the Cultural Revolution was, those same temples had been destroyed and rebuilt already a number of different times. Perhaps when anything gets too powerful or loses its aliveness to form for its own sake, something comes along to destroy it so that the pure essence can reappear...

From Deng Feng and Louyang we went, again on an overnight train, to Shanghai and then through Hangzhou down to Ningbo, staying on the way at quite a large temple far from the beaten path, a surprise on our itinerary which turned out to be an important highlight. There we got up at 4:00 AM and practiced with the monks, doing first their chants and then ours. The feeling of solidarity we experienced as we perambulated around the large Dharma Hall in the early morning with those monks and some lay people made the whole trip worth while, somehow, even though by then people were getting a bit tired of all the long train and bus rides, the endless though delicious Chinese food, and just the general frustration that can arise from an extended travel with a large group.

Then we took one more long bus ride and a 5½ hour ferry ride out to Puto Shan, definitely the most interesting part of our Buddhist tour. Puto Shan is literally Quan Yin's (Kwan Seum Bosal's) island. There had been over 200 temples built on the island in honor of the Bodhisattva, and almost all of them had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Now about 18 of them were being rebuilt. To make matters even more interesting, there was a beach and we could put our tired bodies in the ocean—Nirvana!

At each temple along the way Soen Sa Nim had tried a bit of Dharma combat with the various old monks we met, but no one was really able to respond with any but thinking style answers. But at the first temple we visited on Puto Shan, a monk brightened when he heard Soen Sa Nim begin the dialogue, and said, "I cannot answer you, but I know who can—and he is waiting for you at another temple!" So with feathers on our feet we made for the other temple—and sure enough, we met a great Zen Master, 77 years old, clearly the real thing. The twinkle in his eyes and complete lack of pretentiousness lit up the room. Master Dharma Teacher George Bowman, asked him if he could give one word to help us—and his response was, "I have nothing to give you." He meant it. It was as if all the I, my, me had been worn away and only his smile remained.

After Puto Shan we returned to Shanghai via a short sojourn near the beautiful city of Hangzhou which is at the edge of Westlake, truly lovely. There we had our closing circle talk before returning by plane to Hong Kong. Soen Sa Nim ended by saying that it didn't really matter if one could do Dharma combat or not, but what was important was whether a strong center and gentleness and compassion had been attained. We certainly had experienced those qualities in the monks we met, who have stayed loyal to their strong direction through so much suffering. Soen Sa Nim also said that he believed there were probably some great monks living in caves and small hermitages in the mountains, waiting for the time to be a little more right before reappearing.

It was an amazing experience to be able to visit China with Soen Sa Nim—to see where so much of our practice had its roots, to hapchang to those old monks who had endured and transcended so much. It made us realize how incredibly lucky we are to have the luxury of being able to practice and have the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha—the Three Precious Jewels—so readily available. □

A SIDE TRIP TO MANCHURIA



Dancer Myung Sook Chun demonstrating at Yan Bian Performing Arts School in Yen Ji, Manchuria.

A fascinating sidelight to the China trip was the almost spy movie drama that ensued for Myung Sook Chun, a well known performer of Korean traditional dance in New York City, who left the tour in order to visit her birth place. Ms. Chun was born in Yenching, Manchuria in a Korean community 42 years ago and at the age of 2, was secreted out of the country to South Korea with her mother and some friends after her father, a prominent, wealthy community leader, was killed. A long-term student of Zen Master Seung Sahn and well-known to many East Coast Zen Center people, Ms. Chun runs a dance studio in New York city.

All her life she has wanted to go back to Yenching to find out if any relatives remained. She had heard that in this particular area there were many dancers like herself, who were continuing the Korean cultural tradition. When at Soen Sa Nim's suggestion, she expressed interest in going on the China trip, it was not at all clear whether she would be allowed to go into this particular region of China. However, having a lot of faith, she decided to go anyway and just try.

After we arrived in China, she talked to Mr. Zhao, the national guide, about her situation. He understood how important it was and helped her arrange the trip. She had hoped to have companions, even one person to help with the language, but this proved impossible. Feeling a little uneasy, but knowing she had to do it, we left her alone in Shanghai to await a flight two days later. Had any of us known it might be dangerous for her to travel alone, we might have worked harder to find a companion. Korean style, Ms. Chun didn't want to worry us, and with a big smile waved us off to our next temple.

The flight took her to a place that had no connections to Yenching. She had to go back to another taking-off place so it took an extra day and lots of lucky karma to get to Yenching. She met people along the way who were eager to help her, some who spoke a little English and even some visiting from Korea. She had no idea what to expect when she finally reached Yenching.

Through a series of wonderful happenstances, she met some performing artists. When they discovered who she was, they were ecstatic. Since she is very famous in her field, they had all heard of her and they treated her like a princess. The fact that she had been born there and wanted to come

back moved them to tears. News of her arrival spread quickly. Soon a special work shop with almost 300 dancers, some even coming from other provinces, was scheduled. She was amazed at the quality of their technique, and also that all of them seemed to be Korean.

They did many dances for her and then insisted that she perform for them. They were very excited to have such a great artist come and share so much with them. They wanted her to teach them, not only about Korean dance but also about modern, improvisational and jazz dance. As she watched them, she began to realize that although their outside technique would be considered excellent anywhere in the world they lacked something on the inside. Spontaneously she began telling them (without using Zen words) about Zen practice, about developing a center from which dance would evolve. They were very excited and wanted more of her teaching.

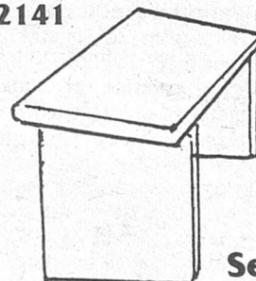
With great difficulty she finally extricated herself so that she could try to find some relatives whom she thought must still be living in the area. Everyone began to help her. They finally located an aunt, the wife of a doctor in a medical school. After a long, harrowing drive far into the countryside, travelling by car with four new friends and relatives over almost impassible roads, she found a half-sister, two years her senior. Neither had known about the other.

The half-sister was living in very poor circumstances and told a story full of heartache and dead ends during the Cultural Revolution. Even though, like Ms. Chun, she had been very good at gymnastics and other studies in school, she was never able to continue them. Both women cried and cried. Such different karma! But how wonderful that they could connect after so long.

Ms. Chun finally left Yenching, accompanied on the 16-hour train by one of the most famous dancers in the area, who wanted to use every possible moment to learn from her new teacher. It was with great joy and relief that we greeted Ms. Chun in the lobby of a Hong Kong hotel at the end of her adventure. She hopes next year to return to Manchuria with some Zen students and dancers—and perhaps even set up a Zen Center there. She says that Zen and dancing are not different for her, and that she wants to teach this in depth to the performers there who seemed so interested. □

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