



PRACTICAL DHARMA AND OUR KOREAN SISTERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTINE BACHELOR

by Jacqueline Kramer



Martine Batchelor is a well-respected Dhamma teacher and writer living with her husband, Stephen Batchelor, in France and teaching throughout the world. Martine started on her path as a young activist with a heartfelt desire to change the world for the better. In her late teens she came upon a copy of the Dhammapada and was struck by the advice that in order to transform the world, you need to first transform your own consciousness. Upon reading this she took up the challenge to transform her own consciousness and embarked on a journey to the East. By accident, she ended up in Korea, and there she stayed, studying and practicing as a nun in a Korean monastery for ten years. It is this Korean perspective of fully empowered nuns that she brings to us, reminding us of places where women are spiritually supported and empowered.



Jacqueline: Can you trace back your first inclination towards Buddhism?

Martine: From a very young age, I was more political. I wanted to save the world, I wanted to change the world. When I was eighteen, I got a copy of the Dhammapada. In it there was one passage that said something like, before you can change the world, you have to change yourself. That really hit me. I was really idealistic and that didn't work. Then I stopped the political thing and became in-

terested in meditation. This was in the 70's. I traveled to the East. Getting to Korea was really an accident. I was going to go from Bangkok to Tokyo via Kyoto. Instead the plane stopped in Seoul and then I met a Korean monk in Bangkok who told me there was a lot of meditation in Korea. So I decided to go to Korea for a month, and stayed ten years.

Jacqueline: I've heard that the Korean monasticism is quite female friendly. Could you tell me about that?

PERSONALLY, I FEEL THAT ANY BUDDHIST MEDITATION IS A COMBINATION OF CONCENTRATION AND LOOKING DEEPLY, OR EXPERIENTIAL INQUIRY.

Martine: I would say the Korean system, of all the systems, is the one that is the most equal. Korea is in a Confucianism society so there is some hierarchy of male over female, but I would say it is 95% equal. Women monastics get the double ordination, they have their own temples, their own seminaries for nuns, they have their own teachers. So they're quite autonomous.

Jacqueline: Do the Korean monastics have any commerce, such as selling the food they grow?

Martine: No, they are just supported by the people, but this is Chinese style. If your temple is in the countryside, or in the mountains, then you will grow food, not to sell but to eat yourself. In the Chinese Zen tradition, there is the saying about a day without work goes without food. If you want to eat, you have to work the fields. So that's where they changed the precepts. Although they have the Vinaya, what is more important, actually, are the Bodhisattva Precepts. What you are told is not to till the soil during the month when it is most dangerous for the animals, or to light fires when they are the most dangerous. The system is a little different. The monks and the nuns can handle money and they don't need an assistant to be with them. Before they become monks or nuns they are postulates for at least a year. Then for three years they are 10-precept nuns and then they take the full bhikkhuni ordination. So they are very strong nuns. When the Sakyadhita conference happened in Korea, which I went to, everyone was amazed by these Korean nuns.

Jacqueline: I had the opportunity to meet Korean nuns at the Outstanding Women in Buddhism awards. I was impressed with how fully in their power these women were. They were like mountains, so strong.

Martine: Exactly.

Jacqueline: Do you still practice like you did when you were in Korea? What's your practice like now?

Martine: The practice in Korea, although it was in the Rinzai Zen tradition, was more the style from China than the style from Japan. Hakuin introduced in the 17th century the tradition of passing koans. In Korea it's

more following the practice of the huatou suggested by the 12th century Chinese Zen master Ta Hui. He taught that, what was more important than the koan, was the main point of the koan, which is called the huatou in Chinese and the hwadu in Korea. So you are given a question (hwadu) and if you break through that question, then you break through all the koans, so you don't change koans. One of the questions you can be given is, "What is this?" The idea of asking the question is that you develop a sensation of questioning. That was my practice for ten years. When I left, when I stopped being a nun and returned to England, I met people who did vipassana. Then I did a few retreats as a participant to see what it was like. I thought, "This is a good method, this being aware of the breath, being aware of the body, etc." In terms of my own practice, over time what I am doing is sensation of questioning and then I might actually complement it with awareness of the breath, or the body, or listening. So this is a kind of combination.

Jacqueline: How interesting to combine these things. Do you do regular retreats?

Martine: I am a meditation teacher so I teach either weekend retreats or week-long retreats about once a month. When I teach, I do all the sitting like everyone else, unless there is an emergency. This is my practice, to sit when I do retreats. We did a month-long as well when we were trying out the Forest Refuge at Barre. When I'm home, I do maybe thirty minutes of sitting everyday unless we are traveling and tired. Then I do less formal practice while lying down or going for walks. My practice is just to be aware, to be compassionate. Nowadays I help out more with my mother, getting her to the doctor, helping out when there is an emergency and things like that remaining—kind and open, that's my practice.

Jacqueline: There's a question that's been coming up in my own practice. With vipassana there is the practice of cultivating wholesome mind states and weeding out negative mind states. With Rinzai Zen, there is teaching to welcome all thoughts as guests and allow them to dissipate in their own way and time. Since you have experi-

RITUAL NEEDS TO HAVE MEANING. FOR EXAMPLE, IN KOREA, YOU LIGHT A CANDLE, YOU BURN INCENSE, YOU PUT OUT WATER. THIS IS A SYMBOL OF AWAKENING. WE CAN REFLECT ON THAT.

ence in both traditions, I wonder if you have anything to say about these two different perspectives?

Martine: When I was in Korea and we were doing the questioning, one of the things the teacher said was “songsong jokjok” which meant, cultivate together deep calm and clear awareness. Then after doing a little vipassana, I realized that what he was talking about was samatha and vipassana. Personally, I feel that any Buddhist meditation is a combination of concentration and looking deeply, or experiential inquiry. I think it doesn’t matter what one does as long as these two elements are cultivated together. I see it as focusing on something with a wide open awareness. I think of the concentration I develop as inclusive concentration. I’m focusing on the questioning and in the background I might have the breath or I might have everything else. Or, I might put the breath in the foreground and then the questioning will go in the background. Or I might do the body scanning and everything else in the background. So I see meditation as cultivating the two elements, through different tools of awareness. All these things: the breath, the listening, the body scanning, the inquiry, really are a means to cultivate quietness and clarity. Whether you do it the Zen way or the Theravadan way, it ends up in the same place if you don’t hold it too tight. I think what is problematic is when you have too much of a framing. For example if you do this or that system, this or that is what is supposed to happen. The problem with that is it frames you in. Personally, what I like to do is have a more open framework.

Jacqueline: The wonderful thing about Buddhism in the West is that we are exposed to so many meditation technologies offering us a lot of freedom to get to the heart of the practice.

Martine: Yes. And what I think meditation is really about is de-grasping, about releasing. Of course we have meditative experiences, but I think what is more important is the subtle effect. Even if we do not have the greatest meditation, we still manage to concentrate a bit, to look deeply a little, and that has a freeing effect. That is more important than the technique. The way I think concentration works is that when you come back from distracted thoughts, you’re actually not feeding your mental habits, for example. You’re dissolving their powers. And then they can come back to their creative functioning. So I see the concentration as really helping us to create

space. Space is arising because you have less grasping. You have thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising, but you have more space around them. And then there is vipassana or looking deeply, that is to be aware of change, to be aware of conditionality. It counteracts our ten-

dency to permanentize, if “I have a headache” to think straightaway that it will last a long time, that if “I have a problem,” it’s always like that. And then to be aware of feelings and sensations as they arise and pass away, dissolves the pattern we have to grasp, to amplify, and to exaggerate. Concentration and inquiry together make us devel-

op quietness, spaciousness on one side and brightness and openness on the other side. And together it enables us to develop this creative awareness, which then will manifest as wisdom and compassion.

Jacqueline: Well put. I experience that with my practice of shikantaza. Do you and Stephen share this practice, or do your practices differ?

Martine: Very likely we don’t do exactly the same thing when we sit on the cushion, but we both cultivate the sensation of questioning. We do similar things but each person is very individual, but we are on the same wave length.

Jacqueline: It must be nice to live with another practitioner, to share practice.

Martine: Oh yes, I feel very lucky. We have similar background experiences. We were both monks and nuns for ten years. We have the same aspirations. We are both more interested in a living, modern Buddhism. We are very much on the same wavelength. He’s more philosophical. I’m more practical, but with both of us going in the same direction.

Jacqueline: Lovely. As you know, Present is an arm of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis which was created by lay people to support female monasticism. Leaving aside any assertions that male or female spiritual capacity is either inferior or superior, do you see any differences in how the female psyche approaches unfoldment and how the male psyche approaches unfoldment?

Martine: The first thing I want to say is when I did my book, Walking on Lotus Flowers, about women on the Buddhist path, there were two questions I asked the

women and then I stopped asking them. The first one was about the problem of men and women in terms of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. After a number of times I got the same answer, that bhikkhus and bhikkhunis were two wings of the same bird. So it was very clear that they felt an equality. And then the other thing I asked them was what is it that inspires you. I thought they were going to answer these great teachers or whatever. Again, I asked them two or three times and then I stopped because whenever I asked they would say, "Who inspires me? I inspire myself." After hearing this a few times, I thought, I don't need to ask this question.

Jacqueline: How interesting!

Martine: It was really interesting, the autonomy they had, the strength that they had. I was really inspired by that. Because what's interesting in Korea is that it's a Confucian society and, often in the past, not so much now, women who wanted to have their own lives became nuns so that they would not have to be the daughter of so-and-so or the wife of so-and-so or the mother of so-and-so, being defined by the male in their lives. They would become nuns in order to become their own women. In Korea, I met a lot of women who became nuns because of that. They wanted to have their own life, to explore their own potential, not be restricted by a certain role in society.

Then, in terms of practicing differently, when I interviewed forty nuns and laywomen, Westerners and Easterners, for my book, what I saw was actually the only possible difference (compared to men)—and I would even question that generalization—is that all the women I interviewed talked about their experiences. I came out with something quite practical, quite pragmatic, something that was not too abstract or philosophical. While at the same time I know women who are very philosophical and men who are very practical. I would not make too much of a generalization there. In terms of practice, in that I teach men and women, I really don't see any difference. When you are in meditation, you are just a human being, a human being who has pleasant or unpleasant feelings. I really don't see difference there. The difference we might see is one of culture. If you have a Zen retreat, often you'll have a bit more men than women. If you do an awareness retreat, you might have more women. I think this is not so much about the teaching itself than the format.

Jacqueline: How do you see the difference in format?

Martine: Some men might go for something that is really kind of tough and a woman might think, why do I need to go through that? More pragmatic like, do I have to do boot camp Buddhism? You'll find women who can sit for hours on end too, who are great ascetics, but there may not be much into the macho thing. But one has to be careful with generalizations. Personally, I don't see much difference in terms of difficulty with the practice. It appears to be quite the same.



Jacqueline: That's an important qualifier. I'm wondering, how do you feel about the need for ritual? There are people who think that ritual is an unnecessary appendage and others who value it highly. What is your perspective?

Martine: I think it's a question of sensibility. For example, if you have somebody with a really beautiful voice, that person is more likely to do chanting because they do that very well and they enjoy it. Me, I sing like "pans" as we say in French, like "casseroles." I can never get the tone right. I am tone deaf so I'm not going to do lots of chanting. Then you have the bowing.

Some people are really into bowing. Me, I have trouble with my knees and my back. I don't mind bowing, but it is physically tough. But if I go to a temple in Korea, I am happy to sing and bow. I have nothing against it. I really love Korea because the rituals there are very short. In the morning, you have thirteen minutes at the most, lunchtime fifteen minutes, evening seven minutes. This is my kind of thing. I am happy with this. And there is even less ritual in the meditation hall. Three bows in the morning, fifteen minutes of chanting at lunchtime, and three bows in the evening, and this is it, very little ritual. Then you also have the Bodhisattva Precepts. To me, the Bodhisattva Precepts are very interesting. Once every two weeks, we would recite the Bodhisattva Precepts or the Vinaya. As we recited the Bodhisattva Precepts, or someone else recited them and we listened, then over time I understood what they were as my Korean improved. Then I saw what people did in the monastery was according to the Bodhisattva Precepts. Finally, I translated them because I thought they were very interesting. So personally,

I would prefer, if there is ritual, to keep it to a minimum so that people who don't like it won't have too much and people who like it will have enough of it. Ritual is for coming together as a group or if you are the devotional type who likes to do this activity. If you do it as an activity, as a practice, than you choose what you do. If you do it as a group, it seems to me you need to do something that most people can agree with and can do. If you chant anything, it needs to be in English so that people can understand what you are saying.

Jacqueline: Chanting doesn't have the same power behind it if you're saying words you don't understand.

Martine: That's it. I would do a ceremony every day because I had a little place, that was my job, but I knew what I was saying. I knew the Korean. I wrote down all the Chinese. I studied the text. I knew what I was saying. It was not just words. Ritual needs to have meaning. For example, in Korea, you light a candle, you burn incense, you put out water. This is a symbol of awakening. We can reflect on that. The incense disappears and creates fragrances. It is the symbol of selflessness. The candle disappears as it gives light and the water reflects and can adapt to any situation. So, are we doing ritual strictly to imitate something or are these aids to the practice? In a ritual, everybody comes together in some way. In a way sitting in meditation is a ritual too, but it's a silent ritual. When everybody sits together in silence, that's a ritual. When you listen to the teaching of someone, that's a ritual. When you have a discussion, if you do it each week, that's a ritual. What kind of ritual do you decide on? If you have a potluck dinner once a month, that's a ritual for the sangha. You think, what's the aim for the ritual, to imitate the tradition? To look like we're doing the right thing? Or is it to fulfill the needs of the individual, or the group, or to cultivate practice?

Jacqueline: I really like the practicality of your approach to ritual. It makes a lot of sense and those metaphors are beautiful. Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

Martine: I'd like to say something about the bhikkhunis because I'm really all for the bhikkhunis and the nuns. It's not that everybody must be a nun or bhikkhuni, but I think it's important that women have the opportunity to do that. You have wonderful nuns, like Tenzin Palmo, who is one of our elder nuns. It's wonderful to have

the example of such a great nun. If you go to Asia, you also have great nuns. It's important to have examples of people who have dedicated their lives to this. I think in terms of the teachers of the tradition. It's important that they are respected and supported. What's wonderful in

Korea is that the nuns and the monks are supported equally. Often the nuns are seen as very ethical, very virtuous, even more than the monks. There is a word for a bad monk who breaks the rules but there is no word for being a bad nun who breaks the rules. The lay people in Korea recognize this so if you go in the temple in Korea, the nunneries are as beautiful as the monasteries.

Jacqueline: How wonderful! I can see an entirely different vision for bhikkhunis in this model.

Martine: What is wonderful in Korea is that now the nuns, because they have more opportunity, are doing a lot of social work. They're doing a lot of really interesting things. They are really creative. At the conference in Korea, you could see the nuns being in the modern world. They were using all the technology. They were showing us all the power points. They were doing Zen cookery on the TV, working in the hospitals, all kinds of things. I knew it was like that but it was wonderful to see the nuns who are also practicing, teaching the precepts, and taking care of the laypeople. They did everything. The role of the bhikkhuni can be multi-professional. If you have a good foundation, a good support for the nuns, then they can really use their potential. Then you can have different nuns expressing themselves in different aspects, always, of course, teaching the precepts, etc. To me that was one of the greatest examples of living in Korea, these amazing nuns. After I left and then returned in 2003, I was impressed by how the nuns have developed. The Korean people were richer so they could give them more money and with that money they are doing a lot of good things. They are exploring many things. Of course they have the tradition of meditation in addition to creatively engaging with the modernity as a nun. To me this was really inspiring, going to that conference and seeing them all in action, showing us what they did.

Jacqueline: This is really a joyful thing to hear, and a wonderful addition to our Winter issue, which is featuring the ordination of three new bhikkhunis.

Martine: If these new nuns have support, they can do wonderful things.

Jacqueline: At Alliance for Bhikkhunis, we are working to develop a support system for the bhikkhunis. At this time, being able to afford things like health insurance and strong working monasteries is challenging. These new bhikkhunis are amazing pioneers, cutting their way through the brambles to make a clearing, eking out an existence. They are rugged. I would love to see more support for them.

Martine: I think what is important is for people to see that it's wonderful nowadays that we have lots of lay-women teachers. I think that's wonderful because we show that women have the same possibility as men. It's beneficial for the world to see women who are empowered spiritually, but I think it's also important for people to see that it's good that there are female monastics who are also empowered to benefit the world. In order to do that, they need the four requisites: food, clothes, shelter, and medicine.

Jacqueline: There's a lot of work to do to build up this sort of cushion for bhikkhunis in the United States. It's helpful to see another perspective, to see how beautifully female monasticism works in Korea. It gives heart to our process. It's so helpful to hear you talk about this and give

such cogent details about what it's like to be a nun in Korea. There are many lay Buddhist teachers in the United States but the public has not yet been educated about the importance of monasticism. We can see what fully supported female monasticism looks like by watching Korea. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your perspective with us.



Jacqueline Kramer is Executive Editor for Alliance for Bhikkhunis online magazine Present and the director of the [Hearth Foundation](#), where she teaches Buddhism to mothers online.

The 2nd Annual International Bhikkhuni Day Meditation Pledge-a-thon September 29, 2012

This second annual global celebration and fundraiser will honor Sanghamitta Theri, the enlightened bhikkhuni who brought the Bhikkhuni Sangha to Sri Lanka. From this island nation, the Bhikkhuni Sangha has spread to distant countries and survives to this day. All ordained women remain in Sanghamitta's debt.

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