

## Sul's Unmoving Mind

### The Setting: Tang Dynasty, China

The Tang Dynasty stretched from 618 to 906. It is widely regarded as the pinnacle of imperial China, with great cultural and political achievements (Lewis, 2009). It is considered the greatest age of Chinese poetry. Many famous painters were active. Court music flourished. Woodblock printing was developed (Tang Dynasty, 2023).

It was also the golden age of Zen. Within a few teaching generations we have the Sixth Patriarch, Great Master Ma, Shih-t'ou, Nan Cheon, Chao-chao, Huang Po, Lin-chi and many others (Dumoulin, 2005).

In the middle of the Tang Dynasty, from 755 to 763, was a horrific war, the An Lushan Rebellion. Accounts vary, but according to some up to two-thirds of the population perished, many by famine. There was wide-spread displacement of the population resulting in many starving refugees.

Census record keeping after the war wasn't as good, so there is some doubt on the two-thirds estimate, but in any case, it was devastating (An Lushan Rebellion, 2023). The Tang Dynasty never recovered, and soon after the rebellion people were already referring to the period before the rebellion as the golden age (Lewis, 2009).

### Introduction to Sul

The story of Sul comes to us from *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (Sahn, Dropping Ashes on the Buddha, 1976). I couldn't find any additional information about her, although there may be some available that hasn't been translated into English. The story does have information that allows us to piece together some more things about her.

Sul's teacher was none other than Great Master Ma, who lived from 709 to 788. The last 20 years of his life was spent at his temple, and since Sul encountered him at his temple when she was a little girl, we can estimate that Sul was born between 758 and 778 (assuming she was 10 when this story begins). Sul was either born during the An Lushan Rebellion or not long after. She certainly grew up during a very difficult time, to say the least.

Many Zen Masters have said that difficult situations are good for our practice. We've heard it said that a bad situation is a good situation. Sul, and the remarkable group of Zen Masters produced during this time, are testimony to that truth.

Here's Sul's story:

*Among the students of the great Zen Master Ma-jo, there was a layman named Chang. This man was a very devout Buddhist, who bowed and chanted sutras twice a*

*day and paid frequent visits to the Zen Master. He would always take along his little daughter Sul.*

*The little girl was even more devout than her father. She would join him every day for bowing and chanting, and looked forward with the greatest pleasure to seeing the Zen Master. One day, during a visit, Ma-jo said to her, "Since you are such a good girl, I will give you a present. My present is the words Kwanseum Bosal. You must repeat the Bodhisattva's name over and over, as much as you can. Then you will find great happiness."*

Great Master Ma is often seen as this fierce, towering, powerful Zen Master, but you can see here he also has a gentle side, where a little girl looks forward to seeing him.

*After they came home, Sul's father gave her a picture of the Bodhisattva to hang up on her wall. She spent many hours in front of it, chanting Kwanseum Bosal, Kwanseum Bosal. Gradually she came to chant it all day long, wherever she was—while she was sewing, while she was washing clothes, cooking, eating, playing, even while she was sleeping. Her parents were very proud of her.*

Before the pandemic I routinely did a mantra practice when walking here or there. After many months of being sequestered at home I noticed how big of an impact that simple practice had on me. My practice wasn't as strong.

What mantra practice does for me is help me stay in the present moment. It can be a constant reminder to practice. It can help cut off thinking.

During the pandemic I started to vocalize things more...talking to myself...being home alone all the time who's to give me funny looks? After a while I recognized that this was generating a lot of unnecessary thinking and was hurting my practice. I ran it by PSN, and he concurred. I used a mantra to help corral that. As soon as a word starts to come out of my mouth my internal voice repeats "Kwanseum Bosal, Kwanseum Bosal," and the dialogue ends. It really helped.

It works just the same for unnecessary internal chatter, and it amazing how much is unnecessary. We've all walked into a room and then thought "why did I come into this room?" and then start thinking "what was it I wanted?" and so on. I've found that as soon as I think "why..." Kwanseum Bosal...cut off that thinking and just stand there silently, unknowing. After a bit my sub conscientious informs me. It's remarkable. So much more can be done without thinking than I ever realized.

Doing this helps develop the ability to act on your intuition before thinking arises. This is necessary in order to function freely and correctly.

Using a mala supports this style of mantra practice. The mantra reminds me to stay in the present moment, and the feeling of the beads slipping thru my fingers does too.

When I do mantra practice, how it goes depends on my intention. If I do it just to be doing mantra practice, it goes on autopilot and it's just white noise in the background of my loud thinking. If I do it because I am intent on being aware without thinking, then the mantra helps me to let go of my thoughts as they arise, and my mind settles. It's like the mantra is telling the thought "shhh." Those non-stop thought waves eventually become little ripples. Why we do things, our intent, our direction, matters a lot. Success depends a lot on intent, on motivation.

### **Sul's First Enlightenment**

*Several years passed, and her friends had long since concluded that Sul was a little crazy. This didn't affect her at all; she continued to chant all day long, wherever she was. One day she was washing clothes in the river, beating the dirt out of them with a stick. Suddenly the great bell from Ma-jo's temple rang. The sound of the stick and sound of the bell became one, and her mind opened. She was overwhelmed with joy; she felt as if the whole universe were dancing along with Kwanseum Bosal, who was none other than herself. She herself was Kwanseum Bosal! And Kwanseum Bosal was the earth, the sky, the great bell from Ma-jo's temple, the dirty clothes which lay in a heap on the riverbank. She ran back home, leaping for joy, and never chanted Kwanseum Bosal again.*

### **Sul's Second Enlightenment**

*During the next few days, her parents noticed a great change in her. Whereas before, she had been a quiet, well-behaved little girl, now she would burst into wild laughter for no reason, have long conversations with trees or clouds, run down the road to the village at breakneck speed, like a boy. Her father became so worried that he decided to peep in at her through the keyhole of her door to see what she was doing alone in her room. He looked in, and first saw the picture of Kwanseum Bosal on the wall, and next to it her altar, where the holy Lotus Sutra should have been, surrounded by incense and flowers. But today it wasn't there. Then he saw Sul, sitting in a corner, face to the wall, sitting on...the Lotus Sutra! He could hardly believe his eyes. After a moment of shock, he burst into the room, shouting. "What do you think you're doing! Are you out of your mind! This is the holy scripture! Why are you sitting on it?"*

*Sul smiled and said, calmly, "Father, what is holy about it?"*

*"It is Buddha's own words, it contains the greatest truths of Buddhism!"*

*"Can the truth be contained in language?"*

*At this, Chang began to realize that what had happened to his daughter was beyond his grasp. His anger turned to intense puzzlement.*

*"Then what do you think that the truth is?"*

*"If I tried to explain," Sul said, "you wouldn't understand. Go ask Ma-jo and see what he says."*

Sul sending her dad to ask Master Ma reminds me of a widely known encounter involving him:

*“Once a monk asked him, ‘Without resorting to the four affirmations and hundred negations, will you please point out directly the reason why Bodhidharma came from the West?’ Ma-tsu said, ‘I am too tired today to speak with you. Go ask Chih-ts’ang about it.’ The monk went to ask Chih-ts’ang, who said, ‘Why don’t you ask the Abbot about it?’ The Abbot it was who referred me to you,’ the monk replied. Chih-ts’ang evaded the question by saying, ‘I have a headache today and am not in a position to speak to you. Go ask my elder brother Huai-hai about it.’ So the monk went to Huai-hai with the same question. Huai-hai said, ‘Arrived at this point, I really don’t know what to say.’ The monk then went back to Ma-tsu, reporting what the two had said. Ma-tsu remarked, ‘Chih-ts’ang wears a white cap, while Huai-hai wears a black cap.” (Wu, 1996)*

There is an old Chinese story of two robbers, one wears a white cap and the other a black one. The black capped robber tricked the white capped of all his spoils. White capped Chih-ts’ang said, “I have a headache today and am not in a position to speak to you”; black capped Huai-hai said, “Arrived at this point, I really don’t know what to say.” Sul said “If I tried to explain, you wouldn’t understand.” What color cap does Sul wear?

The phenomenal world is a world of good and bad, up and down. A world of dualities. Everything is what it is because it is relative to something else. Without these relationships, beyond this relativity, these dualities, is the absolute. We really can’t say anything about it. We can’t even say it is an it. What is this? I don’t know.

Back to Sul’s story:

*So Chang went and told Ma-jo the story of the past few days. After he had finished, he said, “Please, Master, tell me: is my daughter crazy?”*

It is a shame that Chang didn’t ask master Ma the more important question, the one Sul wouldn’t answer, the one Sul sent her dad to ask master Ma. Chang had asked Sul “What do you think that the truth is?” That’s a big question. He missed an opportunity there.

*Ma-jo said, “Your daughter isn’t crazy. You are crazy.”*

*“What should I do?”*

*“Don’t worry,” Ma-jo said, and handed him a large rice-paper calligraphy, with the following inscription:*

*When you hear the wooden chicken crow in the evening,  
you will know the country where your mind was born.  
Outside my house, in the garden,  
the willow is green, the flower is red.*

*“Just put this up in your daughter’s room and see what happens.”*

*Chang was now more confused than ever. He walked home like a man who has lost his direction. He could understand nothing.*

That he understands nothing is good. I hope he continued with that and turned it into great doubt. There is a saying: great doubt, great enlightenment; little doubt, little enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment.

*When Sul read the calligraphy on her wall, she simply nodded and said to herself, "Oh, a Zen Master is also like this." Then she put the Lotus Sutra back on her altar, surrounded by incense and flowers.*

### **Tested by Great Master Ma**

*After more hard training, she went to see Ma-jo at his temple. Zen Master Ho Am happened to be visiting Ma-jo at the time, and the two Masters' invited Sul to sit down and join them for tea. After she had sat down and poured herself a cup of tea, Ho Am said to Ma-jo, "I hear that this young lady has been practicing very hard." Ma-jo said nothing. Ho Am turned to Sul and said, "I am going to test your mind."*

*"All right."*

*"In the sutra it says, 'The great Mount Sumeru<sup>1</sup> fits into a mustard seed; someone enters and breaks the rocks to smithereens.' What does this mean?"*

*Sul picked up her cup of tea and threw it against the wall, where it smashed.*

*Ma-jo laughed and clapped his hands. "Very good! Very good! Now I will test your mind."*

*"All right."*

*"In Buddhism, the word 'karma' is used very often. You have good Buddhist karma. So I ask you: what is karma?"*

*Sul said, "Excuse me, but could you explain the question once more, please?"*

*"In all the three vehicles of Buddhism, the concept of karma is used in one sense or another. I am asking you what precisely karma means."*

*Sul bowed to Ma-jo, said "Thank you," and then was silent.*

*Ma-jo smiled and said, "A very good trick. You understand."*

Karma is often called cause and effect, but that fails to convey its utter incomprehensibility. Karma encompasses the interpretation of all phenomena (Sahn, *The Compass of Zen*, 1997). How could anyone really understand that?

### **Sul's Adult Life**

*As Sul grew up, she always kept a perfectly clear mind. Outside, her actions were ordinary actions; inside, her mind was the mind of a Bodhisattva. Eventually she married*

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<sup>11</sup> Mount Sumeru is a mythical planet-sized mountain, surrounded by seas and continents, under which are the hell realms and hungry ghosts, while above are the devas and gods of the pure form realm, then the formless realm and finally the Buddha-fields, i.e., the Pure Land. (Multi, 1991)

*and raised a large, happy family, all of whom were devout Buddhists. Many people came to her for help and teaching. She became known as a great Zen Master.*

### **Sul's Unmoving Mind**

*One day, when she was an old woman, her granddaughter died. She cried bitterly during the funeral and kept crying back at her home, as the visitors filed past to offer their condolences. Everyone was shocked. Soon they were whispering. Finally one of them went up to her and said, "You have attained the great enlightenment, you already understand that there is neither death nor life. Why are you crying? Why is your granddaughter a hindrance to your clear mind?"*

These people don't understand their situation and correct function. What do you do when someone is crying? You comfort them.

*Sul immediately stopped crying and said, "Do you understand how important my tears are? They are greater than all the sutras, all the words of the Patriarchs, and all possible ceremonies. When my granddaughter hears me crying, she will enter Nirvana." Then she shouted to all the visitors, "Do you understand this?"  
No one understood.*

Sul, being a great Zen Master with an incredibly strong center, an unmoving mind, let go of her pain and with great compassion taught them. This is a remarkable demonstration of her having long ago "taken that one more step" of functioning as a Bodhisattva in this moment. She is fully awake to substance, truth and function. She is a Zen rock star.

### **CODA**

How do we improve the ability of our minds to stay centered, unmoving? Zen master Ta Hui (1088-1163) wrote a letter to old layman Chang Yang-shu and explained how (Cleary, Swampland Flowers, 2013):

*"As soon as you become aware of gradually conserving power in the midst of the afflictions of daily activities, this is where a person acquires power. This is how a person achieves Buddhahood and becomes an ancestral teacher, this is how a person changes hell into heaven, this is where a person sits in peace, this is where a person gets out of birth and death. ... At this point it's extraneous to speak of buddhas or ancestral teachers, of mind or nature, of the original or the wondrous, of principle or phenomena, or of good or bad.*

...

*If you can believe in these words, this is what Yung Chia meant when he said, "Walking is also meditation; sitting is also meditation; speaking or silent, moving or still, the body is at rest."<sup>2</sup> These are not empty words; please act according to them, without ever*

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<sup>2</sup> From *The Poetry of Enlightenment* by Sheng Yen, more of the quote from Yung Chia: "Walking is Ch'an; sitting is Ch'an; Speaking or silent, moving or still, the essence is undisturbed. Remain composed even if facing a sharp

*changing. Then, although you have not yet witnessed the scenery of your own fundamental state fully, though you have not yet seen your own original face clearly, what was raw will become ripe, and what was stale will become fresh. Be sure to remember where you save power is where you gain power.”*

This power that Ta Hui is talking about is having an unmoving mind. How we keep our minds is very important. Zen Master T'aego (1419-1465) said the same thing when teaching how to work on kong-ans (Cleary, A Buddha from Korea THE ZEN TEACHINGS OF T'AEGO, 1988):

*“Just go on like this, more and more alert and clear, investigating closely, like an infant thinking of its mother, like someone hungry longing for food, like someone thirsty thinking of water. Rest but do not stop; contemplate more and more deeply. This is by no means a contrived state of mind [we aim for here].”*

About a contrived state of mind, Ta Hui wrote “...you must diligently reflect back on this, but without struggling with it as you reflect back—if you struggle, you waste power. Didn't the Third Ancestral Teacher say so?—“When you try to stop motion to return to stillness, the stopping causes further commotion.”

Continuing the quote from T'aego:

*“If you can truly function like this, then you arrive at the place of saving power. This is also the place of gaining power.”*

Saving power means not throwing away power. Not throwing away power means coming back when your mind moves. It is very simple.

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weapon, Be at ease even if given poison.” The rest of this quote (“Remain composed even if facing a sharp weapon ...”) shows that indeed this is about maintaining a still, clear mind, conserving power, in the midst of afflictions.

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