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Do monks and nuns crave pizza? The Korean monastic lifestyle and food preferences

Introduction.

As an omnivore but a selective eater, I eat what I want when I want. To me, choosing what to eat is simple - do I want it or not. But for some people it is more complicated. Their decisions depend on factors like health issues, personal dietary preferences such as vegetarianism, and very often, religious beliefs. In Korea, Buddhist nuns and monks have a special dietary regimen according to their faith. Food has played a significant role in Buddhist practice and has evolved into a unique cuisine of its own, especially for Buddhist nuns and monks who live at temples and monasteries. Once they enter the monastery to become nuns and monks, they have to change their everyday eating habits completely, overnight. Simple and common things like Friday night drinks with friends, dining at Korean BBQ with family or kimchi with spicy garlic kicks, all have to be left behind.

My initial idea and group selection for the 'craving' topic was very simple. I wanted to investigate candid food memories of this religious group as they successfully alter and adjust to one of basic instincts - eating. I was convinced that they would miss foods from the outside world and that they would crave foods they no longer can have. But I found out that, in general, they do not crave much for foods they used to have.

Background for my approach & interviews

Buddhism was introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdom period around the 3rd century. Since then, this religious belief has been practiced and evolved throughout Korean history and influenced Korean culture for over 1,600 years.¹ So, Buddhism is familiar to Koreans even for those don't practice it.

JulGa or 'going forth' refers to act of living your ordinary life to pursue life of Buddhist priesthood.² In Korean, it literally means 'to leave home' as she leaves everything about herself behind — name, family circle, belongings and any other possessions. She shaves her head and

¹ Naver Dictionary, *Naver*, accessed 18th May 2014, <<http://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?docId=1177327&cid=40942&categoryId=31643>>

² Naver Dictionary, *Naver*, accessed 18th May 2014, <http://krdic.naver.com/search.nhn?dic_where=krdic&query=%EC%B6%9C%EA%B0%80>

wears neutral coloured clothes of white, cream or grey. She does have some belongings which can fit into a box or two, usually one for summer and one for winter. Temples are often in mountains, and she spends most of her day praying, studying and carrying out given duties like cooking, cleaning, maintaining temples etc. She was reborn at Buddhist temple as a nun, learning how to do everything all over again including her eating habits and manners.

Food is a big part of their committed life. At Buddhist temples, roles and values of food are viewed differently. Buddhist monks and nuns eat enough to physical sustenance and energy. Only small portions of food are consumed at meal times. There cannot be any greed, over eating, self-indulgence or waste of food. When cooking, common herbs and vegetables that are used for Korean cooking such as garlic, spring onion, garlic chives, Korean wild chives etc. cannot be used as these ingredients are stimulants. According to Culture corps of Korean Buddhist:

The prohibition of the five pungent vegetables is a preventive measure to guard Buddhist practitioners from possible distractions during meditation. In addition, the prohibition is also meant to prevent any attachment to the flavour of strong spices, which may also disturb practice.³

So, in order not to disturb, natural plant ingredients are used to encourage calming energy. Hence, Korean Buddhist cuisine, or *SaChalEumShic*, has developed into distinctive vegetarian cuisine within Korean food traditions.⁴

I assumed, even if it was they made the choice, drastic changes in menus and eating portions would be unsatisfactory at some stage. I first looked for studies, articles, writings that may contain any statements of nuns and monks' cravings but was unsuccessful. So, I decided to interview some nuns and monks on the topic, hoping to gather their honest feelings on food including their cravings. As I am not a Buddhist, I needed someone, a Buddhist, to approach them with my intentions and introduce me to nuns and monks who were willing to sit down and talk to me. Arranging meetings were one thing, having them understand what I was after was another and getting them to open up on the subject was yet another obstacle. I had declines and last minute cancellations for the meetings. But once we met, they were all nice, not necessarily open but friendly. A few of them shared some of their cravings. None of them said it to my face that what I am asking was disrespectful or offensive but often they remarked 'I really shouldn't be saying this'.

³ Characteristics of Korean Temple Food, *Korean Temple Food*, accessed 12th May 2014, <<http://www.koreatemplefood.com/common/eng.html>>

⁴ About Korean Temple Food, *Korean Temple Food*, accessed 12th May 2014, <<http://www.koreatemplefood.com/templefood/templefood.htm?cmd=definition>>

They kept sidetracked from the topic and gave me recipes of temple food, commented on the popularity of temple food and talked about Buddha's teaching on food and eating. They were all great but not exactly what I was searching for. From their point of view, they were talking about 'food'. So, I tried to limit my questions on Buddhism as I was not researching for the relation of faith and food. I was more interested in getting to know them as people, not as nuns or monks. I led them to focus more on what they had in the past, remember their childhood foods, any memorable social gatherings with friends, favourite restaurants, comfort foods, mom's cooking, junk foods they loved etc. But I quickly realised that my 'simple' question was not a simple one. In order to get answers to food memory questions, I had to ask about life before the big decision of become the nun or monk which in due course took the conversation to why they made the decision. That, of course, was more a private question to any nuns and monks than their cravings. None of them were willing to share their stories and I could not insist on it.

With their permission, I recorded most of the conversations. Some asked me to delete these once the writing is done. I had to assure them that it would be anonymous and I would not share the recordings with anyone. From my point of view, what they were saying was nothing shocking but it was clear that discussion on 'craving' was a touchy subject for them. The following sums up a few interviews that showed glimpses of what nuns and monks crave:

Nun #1 is in her mid 80s. She comes from a Buddhist family so when she decided to become a nun at young age, it was accepted by the family members with no objections. She has been a nun for a long time so she does not remember much of foods she had as a girl. Her family was wealthy so she recalls eating well but has no specific food that she craves from her childhood. She is part of an older generation of nuns. According to her, salt was the only seasoning they used for cooking at temples in the past. Now they use soy sauce along with bean sauce, chilli paste and other traditional seasonings. And for health and nutritional reasons, the young generation of nuns eat anchovies, which are common ingredients in Korean cooking, as well as eggs which were not commonly used in temples in the past.

Nun #2 never really liked food especially foods with strong flavours, even beef. She told me once she got sick on her way to school as a young girl after eating beef soup for breakfast. She liked white meat fish and non-smelly seafood. She has fond memories of foods from her childhood but that does not necessarily mean she wants to have those foods. However, she sometimes does crave

for *Hoe Deopbap*, rice with sliced raw fish.⁵ During a trip to Germany, she had sausage and beer. Sausage she liked but not the beer. She likes wild edible greens from mountains and fields which she believes are the best food and ingredients. She said she waits for certain vegetables when in season.

Nun #3 is from a younger generation of nuns in her 30s. She took her vow when she was 21 which is very young age to become a nun nowadays. Unlike others, she loves eating and food. So she did think about food when she decided to become a nun. However, it was more about concerns over the forbidden ingredients like onions rather than of foods she would miss from outside world. For instance, she could not imagine *Japche* without onions but she realised temple-style *Japche* with no onions tasted just fine.⁶ She commented that one of reasons why she does not crave meat or other absent ingredients is because there are substitutes like mushrooms, beans and seitan. Plus, at temples there is an abundance of ingredients from the surrounding wilderness. Temple foods take full advantage of every edibles which provide natural full and rich flavours.

Upon our meeting, Nun #3 offered me some tea. I assumed she meant green tea as green tea is traditional tea and widely consumed at temples. But she meant black tea — darjeeling to be more exact. So at her Korean temple tea room, we drank English tea. She said an exchange monk introduced black tea to her some years ago. Since then she has been drinking black tea. My question at the moment was: how does she supply this black tea? Isn't it inappropriate for nuns and monks to crave or show desire for food? She explained that while she cannot directly express her fondness of certain food, black tea in this case, gifts or offerings to Buddha are accepted. She drinks black tea gifted to her by those who know she likes black tea. Then she said "...and I sometimes buy it".

I met up with Nun #3 again for a further interview. She suggested we meet somewhere in public, at a cafe. She said it is one of her favourite places to be. We ordered sweet puff pastry pie and coffee. We also shared a baguette and cheese which I brought for her as she mentioned at our previous meeting that she likes chewy textured bread with smelly cheese.

⁵ *Seoul Metropolitan Government*, accessed 15th May 2014,

<<http://dictionary.seoul.go.kr/spelling/dictionary/search?lang=&keyword=%ED%9A%8C%EB%8D%AE%EB%B0%A5>>

⁶ *Japchae*, *Wikipedia*, accessed 15th May 2014,
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japchae>>

I asked if she remembered what she had for dinner the evening before she left for the monastery. She said she cannot remember her last meal as an ordinary 21-year-old as she was too occupied with excitements of her new life.

Later we were joined by another nun, Nun #4.

Nun #4 is a friend of Nun #3. She was born and raised in a rural area of Korea. She grew up eating very typical Korean foods which she did not like much. In fact, she did not like food or eating at all as far as she can remember. She said she has been eating to maintain her life, not because she sees the importance of nutrition etc. Although she eats little, there are foods she likes. When she was introduced to Western food years ago, she almost thought she was a Westerner in her previous life. Spaghetti is one of her favourite foods and she likes the salad bar at buffet restaurants. Recently, she noticed she feels more energetic when she eats meat. So, sometimes she eats pork cutlets, discreetly.

Monk #1 took his vow over 30 years ago. He was a fussy eater with poor health. Now he is content with any given food. He said he is in better health and on good days, he feels like he has no physical body and just flows in the air. He commented that food intake should be flexible and controlled depending on how much energy one needs. When he was a studying monk, he consumed minimal food as too much food would make him drowsy and lazy. But since he started running his current temple, he realised that he needed more energy so eats more. He said he is not a big eater and does not even snack much between meals but finds pleasure in food and eating. He admitted that occasionally he craves for alcoholic drinks and fulfils his craving moderately time to time.

Reporter #1 is a Buddhist who works at a Buddhist magazine. He shared a few things he noticed about nuns and monks and his opinions on their cravings. Choosing what to eat is a very sensitive matter to nuns and monks as there is stereotyped image of them. Noodles are one of their favourite foods. Also commonly consumed by the general public in Korea, foods like noodles they can eat without worries in public. Then there is imported food like pizza. Pizza is one of favoured treats for nuns and monks. He reckoned 8 out of 10 like pizza. Although pizza contains cheese, ham and pepperoni, nuns and monks are less conscious about animal proteins on pizza toppings as these are part of food called 'pizza'. The reporter assumed this is because pizza is a non-traditional food so in a sense it is not real 'food', just a 'treat'. However, it is not like they pick up the phone and have pizza delivered to temples. They can have pizza if pizza is given as an offering to Buddha by

members of congregation. Nun #3 agreed that many of them like pizza. They preferred thin crust as thick crust can be too heavy.

One of principle precepts in Buddhism is to do no harm. Reincarnation is a strong belief in Buddhism. Animals can reincarnate as human and vice versa, hence do not take lives of living creatures. What Buddha said about meat is :

“The monk had to be convinced that the meat was not specifically prepared for him. The criteria were that the monk had not seen, not heard, or did not have a suspicion that the meat had been prepared specifically for the monks.”⁷

This somehow turned into “do not eat meat”, creating an oversimplified notion that meat is a forbidden food. So, it is unacceptable for the general public to see nuns and monks eat meat. This is why Nun #4 said she eats pork cutlets “discreetly”.

Conclusion

I was told about Buddha’s teachings on food — what not to eat and why, how he ate, not to over-indulge or take pleasure in eating and others. Still, meal times are something to look forward to. Only a few of those interviewed used the word ‘craving’ to answer my question. Mostly they implied it with: look forward to, await, like, don’t mind, approve of etc. While food is a popular subject, I discovered food is appreciated more as a delicious substance, not as a topic of discussion. The nuns and monks I interviewed have their likes and dislikes of foods but most of them have never really given food much thought, certainly not much about culinary memories or cravings.

It was an interesting group to interview. I expected exciting results and findings when I first started the research. I did not get the top 10 food cravings of nuns and monks that I hoped for. But I observed they are content with foods of the temple and proved me wrong. From outside, everything looks restricted and regulated but it is not absolute “follow this” structure. Buddhism accepts diversity. It is flexible. Although it is encouraged to eat small portions, it is also acceptable to have a second helping. Head nuns or monks often eat slowly so others can enjoy and eat as much as they want. Many enjoy food and eating. Just like ordinary people, some think they are overweight and have tried dieting. They told me that when they are among themselves, they express themselves freely and more comfortably on food. For example, when Nun #4 visited the temple where they

⁷ Ohlsson M, 1998, *The Buddhist Diet*, San Francisco State University, accessed 15th May 2014, <<http://online.sfsu.edu/repstein/Buddhism/Buddhist%20Diet.htm>>

make great potato pancakes, she asked for the pancake when she did not see it on the menu. There were no public eyes to worry about, no judgements, just a group of people in the same community sharing food.

It may take some time to adjust to new eating habits in the beginning but most Korean Buddhist nuns and monks are content with variety and flavours of everyday temple meals. Therefore, they do not crave foods the way I thought they would.