

# Gateways to Enlightenment

By Jill Matthews

Korean Buddhist temple gardens encapsulate the many elements of spiritual belief that have influenced them over the centuries.

When I wrote about Confucian scholarly gardens in South Korea in 'Poetry and Plum Blossom' in *HGR 39*, I concentrated on surviving gardens of the Joseon dynasty which mostly date from the 1,500s. This time, I am going to describe the much older gardens which surround major Korean Buddhist temples, several of which date back more than 1000 years.

Buddhism came to Korea from India via China in AD 372. By the time of the Unified Silla dynasty, almost 1,000 years later, it had become the state religion and remained so until Neo-Confucianism supplanted it around the mid-1300s during the Joseon dynasty, which ran for 700 years until the early 20th century.

Over the centuries the numbers and political power of Buddhist monasteries may have fluctuated, but their cultural influence has been continuous for at least the last 1,600 years. During this time many elements of earlier spiritual beliefs – such as animism, shamanism, Zen and Daoism – were gradually incorporated into a uniquely Korean type of Buddhism. Consequently, both the monasteries' temples and their surrounding gardens display a syncretic mix of symbolism stemming from these earlier beliefs.

While there are younger thriving temples in or on the outskirts of the main cities of Korea, such as Seoul and Pusan, and these are easy and interesting to visit, the oldest temples are prudently situated in isolated mountainous

areas. Here, urbanisation and the imperatives of the modern world in general have not made much of an impact on their gardens and surrounding landscapes. Several of the great Buddhist temples surviving today, including Bulguksa, Haeinsa, Unmunsa and Tongdosa, are known to date back at least 1,400 years, and others have 1,000-year histories. The gardens of these venerable temples display a remarkable number of common features.

The siting and construction of early Korean Buddhist temples were modelled closely on Chinese temples and followed Chinese *feng shui* principles, but the Koreans soon developed their own unique set of geomantic principles known as *pungsu*. *Pungsu* mandated that the temples and their gardens should be sited on the lower slopes of significant mountains, be protected on three sides by additional mountains, always have permanent sources of flowing purifying water and should do as little damage to the original topography of the site as possible. Groves of trees were planted to block evil energy flows, and pagodas were placed so as to concentrate and enhance weak positive energy flows.

No one who has had the good fortune to visit one of the great Buddhist temples at dusk and to listen to the ancient

*Above:* Morning at Unmunsa temple demonstrates the effects on site selection of *pungsu*, the Korean version of *feng shui*.



*Above:* Monks and tourists mingle on the ritual walkway to Haeinsa temple.

*Below:* A typical ritual walkway, never straight, always rising upwards through cultivated forest.

temple-closing chants and drumming will ever forget the experience. As the clouds roll down the surrounding protective mountains like the closing curtain of a dramatic performance and the music reverberates through your own body and the whole landscaped valley, you will be in no doubt that the application of these *pungsu* principles leads directly to the creation of profoundly beautiful temple gardens. All of these geomantic principles, first applied to Buddhist temple gardens, were later applied to palace, tomb and Confucian scholarly gardens throughout Korea.

Surprisingly, given Korea's turbulent history and the practice by some temples of training fighting monks to defend the homeland, the old temples are never fortified or even enclosed. Their gardens simply shade off into the surrounding forest and it is almost impossible to discern where cultivation ends – except in autumn or if you have a drone and can obtain an aerial view!

The exact mix of trees found in the cultivated forests surrounding the temples is influenced to some extent by geography. Thus Woljeongsa, located in the cold high mountain area of Gangwon-do province, is surrounded predominantly by fir trees, whereas temples further to the milder south tend to have forests with many more broad-leaved and deciduous trees. Bongjeongsa temple in

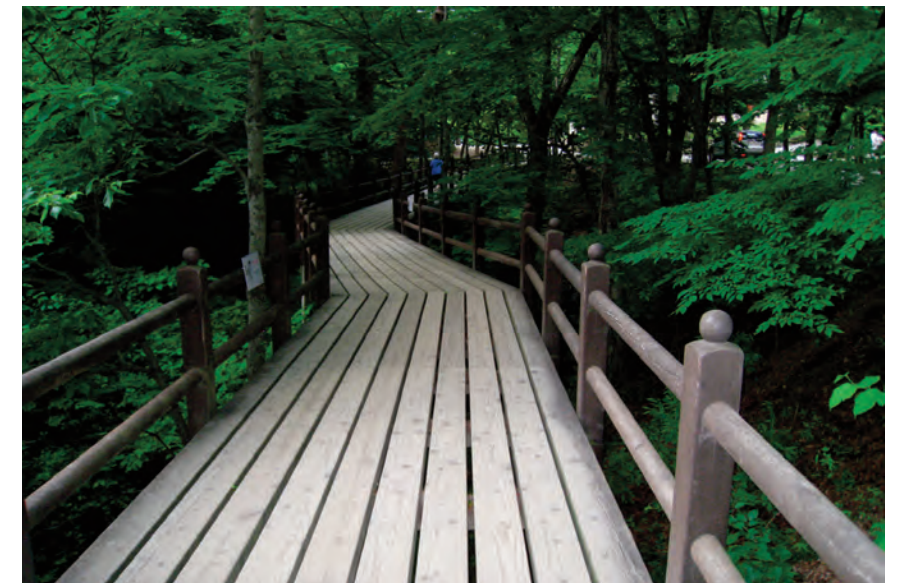
Gyeongsangbuk-do province has an oak forest, Haeinsa in Geongsangnam-do province has a mixture of Korean red pine and deciduous trees, and Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do province is surrounded almost entirely by deciduous trees.

However, there is no doubt that the monks assist Nature in her selection to encourage splendid stands of both useful timber and symbolic trees. Most Buddhist temple buildings are wooden and require constant renewal after

fire or other damage. It is not uncommon when visiting temples to hear the sound of sawing, chopping or hammering, or to smell the beautiful scent of fresh sawdust in the air, as this process of temple building and renewal continues.

Pilgrims and visitors to the temples are encouraged to approach them on foot by ritual pathways, which usually meander through managed forests. Although the trees are obviously selected and tended, they are rarely planted in straight avenues but rather are less formally arranged in the older, more sylvan, tradition. Many of the oldest trees will have heaps of pebbles forming little pagodas deposited within the crevices of their roots by passing pious pilgrims.

These ritual pathways are never straight and always lead uphill, and so could be seen as a metaphor for the difficult progress towards enlightenment. Often symbolically cleansing flowing water is crossed more than once.





## Gateways to Enlightenment

They usually pass through several lavishly decorated gateways. The number varies from temple to temple but commonly there will be an *iljumun* or 'one-pillar gate', or a *geumgangmun* or 'diamond gate' followed by a *cheonwangmun* or 'four heavenly kings gate'. Much has been written about the significance of these gates in Buddhist cosmology but the point to grasp in relation to temple gardens is their role in marking the symbolic transition from the secular to the religious or spiritual, on the 'path' to enlightenment. Frequently they are not set into walls, but stand detached, so that it would be possible to walk around them rather than through them, which only underlines their symbolic significance.

Along the pathway between these gates you may find pagodas said to contain relics of the Buddha, or funerary stupas containing the ashes of famous monks associated with the temple. Also common are flower meadows – deliberate clearings in the forest where exotic plants have been removed and low-growing indigenous plants are encouraged. These become joyous havens for butterflies, bees and other insects. Closer to the main temple buildings there are often cultivated meadows of more exotic ground cover. I once saw one that was a huge sheet of Shasta daisies in bloom underplanted with wild strawberries in fruit. Wonderful!

At the end of the ritual walkway there is frequently a tranquil reach of water crossed by an arched or rainbow-shaped bridge, such as the lovely one leading into Songgwangsa temple in Jeollanam-do. Another example is the triple-arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of the famous Bulguksa temple in Gyeongju. It may not be too

*Below:* One of several bridges decorated with stylised lotus carvings crossing the cleansing stream on a ritual walkway to a Buddhist temple.



*Above:* A symbolic gate marks the transition from the secular to the spiritual realm on the ritual walkway to Songgwangsa temple.

fanciful to suggest that these bridges and their reflections may be metaphors for the passage from the prosaic and ephemeral outside world into the contemplative higher realm of the inner world beyond.

Of course, the famous Buddhist temples all have vehicular access for delivery of essential services and to assist the handicapped, but it is no accident that tourist car and bus parks, as well as food and souvenir shops, are situated at a considerable distance away from and below the temples and their gardens. The whole process of walking up to a Buddhist temple through beautiful, peaceful woodland or forest and a sacred landscape, is designed to be a calming, meditative and mind-clearing process, and should be experienced as such.

A whole book could be written concerning plant symbolism in Korean poetry, art, architecture and garden-making. In Korean Buddhist temple gardens the preponderant symbolic plant is the lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), which is both cultivated and represented in paint, carving and statuary. These lotuses may in fact have been introduced from India via China, alongside Buddhism itself.

Statues of Buddha may show him sitting on representations of lotus flowers, while temple buildings are often decorated with paintings and carvings of all parts of the plant: bud, bloom, seed heads, leaves, even cross-sections

**Unmunsa**, in the Taebaek Mountains, is the oldest and largest nunnery in Korea. Here nuns cultivate several acres of vegetable garden on flat land approaching the main entrance and a large meadow garden within the temple grounds. Careful succession planting ensures colour for most months of each year. In season you will find spirea, peonies, day lilies, camellias, plum blossom and numerous bulbs and ground covers. This garden shades off into the surrounding forest, which comes alive with azaleas in spring and vivid maple foliage in autumn. Closer to the main buildings is a series of pergolas covered with wisteria and other flowering vines. There are also several isolated old trees, including a grand pair of ginkgos, but pride of place, near an elegant lotus fountain, is taken by a marvellous old pendulous Korean red pine tree (*Pinus densiflora* f. *pendula* Mayr), designated Natural Monument No. 180. Reputed to be more than 500 years old, it is fertilised each spring with 216 litres of Korean rice beer during an ancient ceremony.

of the root tubers. Buddha's birthday is widely celebrated by decorating temple courtyards with hundreds of paper lotus blossom lanterns, the mindful creation of which is regarded as a form of meditation.

While lotus symbols abound in temple decorations, other plants are also depicted. When visiting Buddhist buildings, always look up. The screens, structural rafters, ceilings and canopies within the major halls may well be superbly



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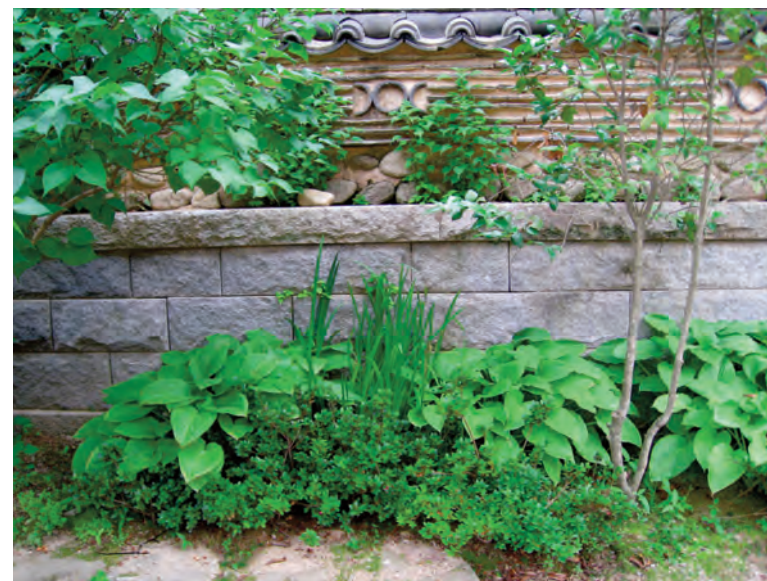
*Above:* The famous triple arched rainbow bridge at the threshold of Bulguksa temple.  
*Below:* A birds'eye view of Bulguksa.

decorated with carvings and paintings of numerous symbolic plants. A glorious example is the ceiling in the Jeokmyeolbogung hall (where the Buddha's bones are said to be preserved) of Tongdosa temple, which is covered with three-dimensional bands of richly painted peony plants and chrysanthemum blooms.

Other plants commonly depicted are plum blossom, persimmon fruit, bamboo, orchids, mushrooms and pine branches. Like the lotus, all these plants have symbolic significance; the art of painting stylised versions of them is known as *dancheong* and is a tradition preserved by monks.

**Bulguksa**, on Mount Toham, is probably the most visited of all the historic temples, partly because it hosts the famous Seokuram Buddha statue, itself an object of pilgrimage, in a nearby grotto. Autumn colour shows the extent of forest cultivation and lack of boundaries surrounding the temple.





Left and above: Transient plantings on *hwagye* soften the sheer retaining walls of a mountain temple.

**Haeinsa**, in the Gaya Mountain National Park, is recognised as one of the three jewels amongst Korean Buddhist temples, the other two being Tongdosa and Songgwangsa. Haeinsa has existed since 802 AD and houses the Tripitaka Koreana, a set of 81,258 woodblocks carved with 52,382,960 beautiful, uniform and faultless Chinese characters. Featuring on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites, it is the world's most complete set of Buddhist sutras, precepts and other literature, and is more than 1,000 years old.

Because of the need to protect this treasure from fire, insect or water damage, the layout of the gardens is not typical, but the ritual walkway is a grand one and features several very ancient trees, including an elm which died more than 70 years ago but is still treated with reverence by passing pilgrims because it is believed to have been planted by the Silla king Aejang (see opposite page), who endowed and founded the temple.

It also has several lovely flower terraces, planted with deciduous shrubs such as viburnums, magnolias and maples, a surprising stand of banana trees, and under-planted with flowering bulbs, chrysanthemums and azaleas. One terrace, near the exit, has a complex colourful planting of ground cover including clover, ivy, climbing Boston ivy and pink evening primroses.

Right: Paper lotus decorate a temple courtyard in honour of Buddha's birthday.



Most temple buildings are wooden and therefore flammable. This vulnerability affects the inner gardens. Mostly they are island beds within raked sand or gravel planes. Plantings are more restrained and formal than those on the approaching ritual walkways. Any trees are naturally small in stature and habit or, more rarely, cloud pruned. Due of the deep-seated reverence for mountains in Korean culture the old temples are built on platforms, which do no damage to the integrity of the mountains behind them. This necessitates the building of major retaining walls in stone, or stone tile and rammed earth.

Frequently any harshness in the appearance of these walls is softened by flower terraces known as *hwagye*. There appears to be no particular colour preference in these terrace



Above: Stylized lotus, chrysanthemum, plum blossom and bamboo decorate an entrance to a temple main hall, an artistic practice known as *dancheong*.

plantings, but there is a clear preference for shrubs and plants that express the passage of the seasons – deciduous trees such as plums, magnolias, lilacs, viburnums and crepe myrtles which burst into bloom in spring, and smaller plants such as evening primroses, hydrangeas, cosmos, day lilies, aquilegia, pinks, irises, various daisies, narcissus, peonies, chrysanthemums, azaleas, clover, hostas and Boston ivy.

The main objective of the selection of plants in these flower terraces seems to be to mark the changing of the seasons and perhaps to re-enact the birth/life/death cycle common to many religions.

One final and unexpected element in most temple gardens is a small shrine to the pre-Buddhist Shaman deity, *san shin*, which literally translates as 'mountain spirit'. These small, detached buildings (or *gak*) usually stand high at the back of the temple complex against a background of red pines, which are a symbol of longevity. They commonly house a painting of an old man, invariably accompanied by a tiger and a red pine. Indeed any painting of a sage figure

Right: King Aejang's elm tree at Haeinsa temple, where it flourished for more than 1,000 years. Even today, pilgrims deposit votive pebbles around its dead trunk.

accompanied by a tiger and a red pine, whether male or female, in Buddhist or Confucian garb, is almost certain to represent a *san shin* recluse who has retreated from the outside world, seeking enlightenment and immortality. Plantings in front of these shrines often include peach trees because peaches are one of the symbols of immortality.

The antiquity and cultural richness of many Buddhist temples in Korea make them well worth visiting. There is a remarkable consistency in the elements of the gardens surrounding them, which has persisted through many centuries. Sustainably cultivated forests, revered trees, ritual walkways, symbolic bridges and gateways, respect for nature and indigenous plants, and the choice of symbolic plants, all make such visits both enlightening and enriching. 🌸

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