

The young Buddhist monk from South Korea could not believe what his hosts in China were telling him: that North Korea was experiencing famine and that people there were dying of hunger.

If they had been talking about Africa, he said, he would have believed them. But North Korea? “No way,” he said, reasoning that at one time North Korea was better off than South Korea. No matter what problem that country was experiencing, he thought, it could not be that bad. It was 1995.

The following year, the monk returned to China and was again told about the famine in North Korea, this time by an acquaintance who was a Chinese official. This acquaintance said that, due to starvation, North Korean children were becoming stunted. The monk responded by showing his acquaintance pictures taken during a trip to India, where he had been helping to feed the starving children of Dalits (outcastes or untouchables). India was where the need lay, the monk said.

The monk’s acquaintance looked over the photographs and then said, “Well, sir, North Koreans are worse off than this.”

“You’re lying,” the monk shot back.

“I am an official of the Chinese Communist Party,” his acquaintance said, adding that he had been invited to North Korea personally by North Korean leader Kim Jung-il. “Why should I lie?”

Dressed as a common man, the monk set out with and his Chinese friend on a boat in the river that divides China and North Korea. While they were cruising, the monk noticed a child, a small girl, on the North Korean riverbank. As they drew closer, the monk was shocked at what he saw: the child was bony, hollow-eyed, unkempt, and extremely malnourished—very much like the destitute children he had seen in India.

The monk called the little girl, expecting her to run toward the boat and to shout and ask for whatever they might give her. But she made no such move. She bowed her head and did not even look at the boat or its occupants. The monk’s acquaintance said, “They don’t even have the freedom to beg.”

The monk then asked that the boat be steered to where the child was, but his acquaintance said no. “This is a border,” he said. “We can’t stop the boat.”

This answer set the monk thinking: a lot of food could be had on the Chinese side of the river. In fact, he had enough money in his own pocket to help the child. But he could not do anything because of the border—a mere man-made boundary and yet a powerful political divider. North Korea used such borders to keep its impoverished people *in* and, at the same time, to keep the rest of the world at arm’s length, ignorant about the true condition of the people living inside the country and unable to them help.

The South Korean monk felt the pain of living in a divided country. It was coursing “through my bones,” he said. He had been able to help poor children in India, “but I could not help a child who was only ten meters away from me. I felt hopeless and frustrated.” Moreover, he realized that by having long refused to believe that North Korea was going through a famine,

he had actually let many people suffer and die. Upon his return to South Korea, the monk decided to abandon everything he had been doing and to devote all his energy to helping North Koreans get the food they so desperately needed.

For this monk, known in his younger years as Sukho Choi and later as Pomnyun Sunim (*sunim* means venerable in Korean), there is much more at stake for any country or society than political or military supremacy; there is also the life and dignity of the people themselves, irrespective of creed, gender, class, caste, or race.

Sukho Choi was born on April 11, 1953, to a farming couple in a poor rural community in Kyongju, Kyongsang Province, South Korea. His father, Changkyu Choi, never went to school but learned to read Chinese through self-study. He was not warm or loving, but he was not a disciplinarian, either. He was industrious, waking up at four each morning to work, starting with feeding the family cow. He hated people who woke up late and people who did not work. Sukho Choi helped by gathering grass to feed the animal.

Sukho Choi's mother, Boonsun Yoo, also never went to school. But unlike her husband she was very warm. And, according to Pomnyun Sunim, she was smart. Most of her attention, however, went to her eldest son. In rural Korea, it is usually the eldest child, and not the youngest, who is loved and spoiled. The youngest tends to be regarded almost like an outsider; Sukho Choi was the youngest boy in the family and the fifth of six children. He and his three brothers and two sisters all slept together in one room, sharing a single mattress and blanket. The family owned about three acres of farmland on which they grew rice and some vegetables. Their house, made of wood and with a roof made of straw, was built into the side of a mountain.

During the Korean War (1950–1953), the fighting had come as close as sixteen kilometers to the family home. Kyongju itself was hotly contested. Pro-communist South Koreans controlled the area at night and government officials by day. Anyone who showed sympathy toward one group or the other was killed. There were many refugees and internally displaced persons. Sukho Choi, who was born the year the war finally ended, grew up in the wake of this wrenching struggle that ended in the country's partition. He recalls being “surrounded by propaganda meant to increase enmity toward North Koreans.”

Pomnyun Sumin's village was so poor it had only one communal well. It had no electricity and no telephone; the nearest main road—where buses passed two or three times a day—was three kilometers away. The nearest government school, Doobuk Primary School, was two kilometers away by foot. This is where his parents sent him and his siblings. Each morning, they and the other village children gathered in front of the only house in the village that had a clock, to check the time before trudging off to school in the morning.

Although Doobuk Primary School served ten villages, it had only four teachers. There were many mixed-grade classes. During planting or harvest season, the school declared a two-to-three-week holiday to enable children to help their parents with farmwork. Pomnyun Sumin says he did very well in school.

After primary school, Sukho Choi attended Gyungju Junior High School and Gyungju High School in Gyongsang Province, a town sixteen kilometers away. In the beginning, he stayed with one of his brothers who was studying there. Later, he moved out and lived alone in a room, visiting his family about once every two weeks. He made his way home on foot. But on the way back to school, laden with rice and food for the next two weeks, he took the bus. He learned to cook for himself.

In school in Gyongsangdo, Sukho Choi enjoyed mathematics and a particular math teacher who emphasized precision and structure. He also enjoyed science, and learning through

experimentation and step-by-step processes. He says his own parents had no special aspirations for him aside from being healthy. But he dreamed of becoming an astronomer or a physicist and of solving problems that even Einstein had not solved.

Sukho Choi also enjoyed going to the school library where he read the histories of China, Korea, and the world. The area in which the school was built was also a source of fascination for him because it was in the former capital of the thousand-year-old Shilla dynasty. The area had many historical sites, most of them Buddhist or Buddhist-oriented. (Sukho Choi's mother was nominally Buddhist, his father nominally Confucian.)

Because Sukho Choi was interested in Buddhism, at sixteen he took up lodgings in the Buddhist temple next door to the school. He shaved his head, like the monks, but continued to attend school in his school uniform.

The senior monk at the temple was Most Venerable Bulshin Domoon Sunim, an unconventional Zen Buddhist monk who was a rigorous practitioner of question-and-answer teaching exercises. Each exercise could take from three to five hours. Once, while Sukho Choi was just about to study for a school exam, Domoon Sunim got hold of him. When Sukho Choi told Domoon Sunim that he would be busy that night, Domoon Sunim asked a series of questions about whether or not the young man knew where he had come from and where he was going. When Sukho Choi replied that he did not know the answer to either question, Domoon yelled into his ears, "You don't even know where you're coming from or where you're going, and you're still busy?"

Sukho Choi then asked his master whether anyone knew the answers. Domoon Sunim replied that Sukho Choi himself should know the answers, but that would happen only if he entered the temple. At the end of his school examination, Sukho Choi, over his mother's objections and protests, entered the temple. "He's such a young boy," she told Domoon Sunim, "he should be more grown-up." Domoon Sunim replied by asking her, which did she think was better: That someone knows what he is going to be when he grows up, or that someone does *not* know what he is going to be when he grows up? Domoon Sunim also told her that if Sukho Choi stayed in the secular life, "he would die pretty soon." Upon hearing this, Sukho Choi's mother told Domoon Sunim, "Then he's your son," and left Sukho Choi in the temple.

As a junior monk, Sukho Choi received religious instruction from Domoon Sunim constantly—when he was eating, when he was standing, after school, during the night. Domoon Sunim did not require novices to take any vows and would not speak of anything other than Buddhism.

The Most Venerable Domoon Sunim's own master was Yongsung Sunim, one of the pioneers of modern Korean Buddhism. During Japan's fifty-year occupation of Korea, the Japanese destroyed Buddhist temples and prohibited Buddhist monks from preaching in cities. Yongsung was an activist against Japanese colonization and the first to translate the Buddhist Sutras from Chinese into Korean. He was imprisoned by the Japanese for three years for his role in the independence struggle.

When Yongsung Sunim died in 1940, he passed on to Domoon Sunim his spirit of independence, nationhood, and ethnicity. Domoon Sunim, in turn, passed all this on to Sukho Choi, who says that Domoon Sunim's teachings opened his eyes to issues related to nationhood, ethnicity, and the values of the universe and made him lose interest in the sort of knowledge that was taught in school. He began spreading Buddhism among his classmates. He was concerned that they, like other members of his generation, regarded Buddhism as something meant only for mothers and grandmothers.

This led Sukho Choi to the Buddhist student movement, in which he became heavily involved. Indeed, he soon became president of the Federation of Buddhist Student Associations of Gyongsang Province. In this capacity, he organized retreats (at which Domoon Sunim would teach) and encouraged the establishment of more youth associations in an effort to reform Buddhism. Toward the end of Sukho Choi's high school days, Domoon Sunim told him to "go out and do good work for the people."

Then, one day, master and student had a falling out. Domoon Sunim insisted that, as a way of reforming Buddhism, all students should become monks. Sukho Choi disagreed. "Leave them as lay persons and we will carry on from that," he told Domoon Sunim. Two years later, in 1972, Sukho Choi left the monkhood and the temple. But he carried on his leadership of the Buddhist youth movement, which now focused less on the temple and more on himself. He also let his hair grow again.

At this point, Sukho Choi's brother Sukjin, who had been conscripted into the Korean army, returned home from the war in Vietnam (where Korean soldiers were fighting on the side of South Vietnam and the United States). The brother "grabbed me by my throat," he says, "and dragged me to Seoul to come live with him." He also ordered Sukho Choi to go to university, adding that, if he truly wanted to become a monk, he could still do so after completing university.

In order to earn money to attend university himself, the brother set up private-tuition classes for high school students. Faced with one-too-many students, Sukjin asked Sukho Choi to tutor one of his applicants. Although Sukho Choi's formal education was only up to high school, he did not find it difficult teaching the student, who was failing his high school classes. This student brought along his younger brother, who brought along a friend. Sukho Choi developed a reputation as an excellent teacher and was soon called upon to teach mathematics on a regular basis. "I just started on the spot," Pomnyun Sunim recalls. Although he had no license to teach, he ended up teaching private-tuition classes for five years. He taught so well that many of his students were able to enter the best universities in Korea. "They even thought I majored in mathematics," he recalls with amusement. Pomnyun Sunim says his students liked him because he could show them where and how they were going wrong in trying to solve math problems. His classes were so popular that, sometimes, in a single day, up to a thousand students attended them.

While teaching, Sukho Choi remained active in the Buddhist Youth Association and engaged in other activist activities, such as raising people's awareness about the Vietnam War and about urgent domestic issues, particularly those affecting farmers. He earned so much money from his teaching job that he was able to keep a small apartment in the city and to give some money to fellow activists.

Coming from a farming community, Sukho Choi could relate to farmers' problems. Studying this issue in books and progressive magazines and in conversations with activist friends led him to a better understanding of many of Korea's social ills. He learned that many problems facing farmers were not inevitable but systemic: as a matter of government policy, rice farmers were paid low prices for their produce, so that the price of rice would remain low for urban workers, whose wages are also kept low. He concluded that this policy was destroying rural communities and giving birth to urban slums. In other words, Korea's industrialization was actually being "built upon the sacrifices of ordinary, vulnerable, and marginalized people" and was being maintained by a military dictatorship. Moreover, all of this was directly related to the political division of the Korean peninsula.

As Sukho Choi delved deeper into these issues, he became more interested in changing Korea's social and political structure than in promoting religion; to his frustration, he could not find a connection between Buddhist philosophy and addressing the inequalities and injustices that gripped modern Korea. In contrast, Christian beliefs, whether Catholic or Protestant, seemed to support the country's "social movement." This was why most social activism took place in Christian circles, and why the struggle for social justice in Korea was conspicuously supported by Christian organizations. Korean Christianity had learned from the experience of Europe and the United States in dealing with the problems of modernization. But Korean Buddhism had no such experience to fall back on—in part because, under Japanese rule, it had been suppressed and cut off from much of Korean society.

In the brutal crackdown that followed the assassination of South Korean president Park Chung-hee in October 1979, Sukho Choi was arrested and held for almost a week by South Korea's secret police, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Pomnyun Sunim says that his abduction had nothing to do with the assassination. Rather, the South Korean government was cracking down on an underground communist organization. Sukho Choi's name had come up, and he had been arrested without a warrant. Since he was earning well as a private-tuition teacher, his captors surmised that he was financing the organization. He was subjected to the notorious "water cure" and other forms of torture and threatened with death. When his captors finally realized he was not directly related to the organization, however, they let him go.

Following his release, Sukho Choi accepted the invitation of his brother Sukyong Choi to join him in New York City, where Sukyong had relocated and opened a shoe store. The store was struggling and he wanted Sukho Choi to help revive it.

After Sukho Choi arrived in New York, he discerned that Sukyong and his wife were quite different. His brother was serious and precise; his sister-in-law was easygoing but business-oriented. Sukho Choi suggested that the three of them enter into a partnership. He would provide the concepts; his brother would launch new businesses and provide oversight; and his sister-in-law would handle day-to-day management. Specifically, Sukho Choi proposed that the three of them set up new shoe stores, manage them themselves until they were going concerns, and then sell them to new immigrants from Korea. This idea succeeded in part because the number of new arrivals from Korea was on the rise and many were in search of ready-made business opportunities.

Indeed, the business did so well that Sukho Choi was soon contemplating a life of prosperity in the United States. Looking back on this period, Pomnyun Sumin recalls a moment when he gazed down from his New York high-rise apartment upon a forest of city buildings and thought, "If I work my butt off, really, if I work to my best for thirty years, I could own one of those buildings." But then he thought, "In a forest of buildings, owning one building does not mean much. What meaning could that provide in my life?"

By this time, the political upheaval in South Korea surrounding the assassination of President Park had mounted. Major General Chun Doo-hwan had seized control of the military and declared martial law. He would soon claim the presidency. Meanwhile, in May 1980, hundreds and possibly over two thousand South Korean protesters demanding elections and an end to martial law were gunned down by Special Forces in the city of Gwangju. The massacre and other troubling news from Korea were agonizing for Sukho Choi. Just six months after arriving in the United States, he decided to go home.

His decision to do so was strengthened when he learned that his brother Sukjin was dying in South Korea. Sukjin had also been arrested in the wake of President Park's assassination and was

accused of subversive activities and communist ties. He was beaten and sentenced to death (the sentence was subsequently changed to life imprisonment). Sukho Choi wanted to nurse this brother back to health and to regroup the country's Buddhist circles into an activist social movement.

Upon his return, Sukho Choi first went to Seoul, then to Gwangju, and then to his hometown. Sukjin was now out of prison. While nursing him back to health, Sukho Choi reentered the temple as a lay teacher. He did so, in part, because of his faith. But he also needed a base from which to reactivate Buddhism as a positive social and political force. All of his activist friends and acquaintances were in prison. So he decided to pioneer a social movement in his own hometown, drawing high school and university students to learn about Buddhism from the perspective of the social movement.

While carrying on this work, Sukho Choi received an invitation from the Korean Federation of Buddhist University Student Associations to lecture at its summer retreat. He spoke on the lessons of Buddha's life as they applied to contemporary Korean society. His audience was made up of student activists already steeped in Marxist ideas. They found inspiration in his interpretation of Buddhism and its social relevance. As a consequence, the federation asked him to move to Seoul and become its leader. He did so in 1983.

In the capital, Sukho Choi formalized his relationship with the students as head of the federation and was soon in the thick of things. Later the same year, he led a two-hundred-strong protest march to Jogye Temple, one of the symbolic sites of Korean Buddhism. There he clashed with local temple monks, who refused to let the group enter the temple, and proceeded to lead a rally in the courtyard outside. He demanded that the government explain its oppression of Buddhism and raised questions about the "Star Wars" defense initiative of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was visiting Korea at the time and who supported South Korea's military government. Sukho Choi was promptly arrested for violating the law against public assembly (which permitted indoor gatherings but banned outdoor ones), after which he was interrogated "fiercely" and "endlessly" in a red soundproof room and kept from sleeping for days.

Pomnyun Sunim remembers his second imprisonment well because it led him to recognize the importance of nonviolence in the struggle against oppression. "In the exclamation of excruciating pain," he says, "I saw the animosity burning like a fire inside me. At that moment, I saw that I was no better than they were, and that I could not realize true peace based upon anger and animosity."

Sukho Choi was held for two months. He was repeatedly told that if he signed a confession and resigned as leader of the student federation, he would be released. He refused, saying he had nothing to confess: he had not broken any law. One day, a monk from the monks' general assembly came to sign a statement on Sukho Choi's behalf, after which he was set free. Until now, Pomnyun Sunim does not know why the monk came and what he signed.

After his release, Sukho Choi reassumed his position in the Buddhist student movement, expanding its membership, raising the quality of its members, and making it an integral part of the student movement at large. Within the movement, he sought to relate Buddhism with democracy. The Buddha, he said, lived at a time when there were very sharp social differentiations in society; discrimination thrived on caste, gender, religious, and ethnic differences. The Buddha wanted to get rid of all laws and rules that perpetuated this. Thus, Buddhism and democracy taught the same social values. One thing differentiated the two, however. In a democracy, the majority rules. In Buddhism, consensus is the goal.

In 1985, Sukho Choi established the Central Buddhist Education Institute, where reform-minded students could study the Buddha's life and teachings and the ways they applied to contemporary society.

As Buddhism increasingly infused Sukho Choi's political thinking, he rejected the Marxist idea of class conflict as the basis for liberating the working class, one of the major aims of the social movement. The idea of class conflict was not only "very white and European-oriented," he concluded, it also failed to address issues of Korean nationhood. He decided instead to focus on reconciliation between the two Koreas (and eventual unification), along with the realization of democracy and equality—these being achieved not by class conflict but by a commitment to equal opportunity.

This perspective can be traced to an insight that Sukho Choi gained from Venerable Seoam Sunim, a Korean Zen Buddhist monk who was visiting the United States at the time Sukho Choi was there. Pomnyun Sunim relates that, during a conversation with Seoam Sunim, he began to criticize Buddhism in Korea. Seoam Sunim told him, "If a person has a pure and open mind at the ridge of the rice paddy, that person is a monk; there is a temple, and that is Buddhism." Pomnyun Sunim says this answer "absolutely shocked" him and made him realize that a certain reform he was seeking in Buddhism "was not Buddhism at all." He says Seoam's reply taught him to work out alternatives and try new perspectives, rather than simply to criticize. "It was a moment of major transition of my attitude," he says.

When Roh Tae-woo came to power in 1988 and a civilian government was established in South Korea, Sukho Choi tried to convince other leading activists that the time had come to adjust the tactics and goals of the social movement. This would mean posing questions such as: Which of the movement's ideas are still valid in the new political climate? And what, exactly, should the movement now *oppose*? Should not there be initiatives to stop environmental degradation and gender discrimination and to end Third World poverty—issues that had been set aside in the past?

When Sukho Choi presented this new framework to his colleagues in the social movement, he was met with stiff opposition. Many of his one-time followers dropped out altogether. Some even became his critics and enemies. In the face of this opposition, Pomnyun Sunim says he "stopped in the middle of everything" and retreated to a temple in the mountains where no one knew him. He threw himself deep into thought and tried to make sense of the situation. He came to the conclusion that many of South Korea's activists and social-movement leaders were actually confrontational, self-righteous, patriarchal, and gender-insensitive people. Some were materialistic and ambitious—to enter politics, for example. And some, alas, were ethically bankrupt.

This made Sukho Choi realize that changing people's attitudes and ways of thinking was as important as bringing about structural changes in society, perhaps even more so. If the social movement was really a good thing, he says, activists should not consider it a sacrifice to be in it. Rather, they should enjoy it and derive satisfaction from it. If they did, he says, "other people would say, 'Look at that person. That person is really enjoying life.' That's how the social movement will expand." At the heart of Sukho Choi's realization was this: "Buddhism isn't a cover for the social movement, or clothing for the social movement. It's the core of the social movement that encompasses and includes all the other social movements."

From this point on, Sukho Choi committed himself to reorienting the Buddhist social movement. Buddhism should not be regarded as an institutionalized religion, he said, but simply as the teachings of Buddha. The most immediate concern was environmental degradation, which,

he believed, was rooted in consumerism. If people will let go of their desire to consume more, they will be freed from greed and from seeking to acquire more. Then, they will be at peace with everyone else because they will not be feeling, “There is something lacking in my life.”

In pursuit of this new goal, in 1989 Sukho Choi established the Jung To Society. In the Buddhist Sutras, *jung to* means land of bliss—a place where every individual lives happily and mindfully in a peaceful society surrounded by beautiful nature. This is reflected in the society’s slogan: “Open Mind, Good Friends, Clean Earth.” The Jung To Society aims to help people lead a happy life through the cultivation of their minds (Open Mind), through balanced and harmonious human relationships (Good Friends), and through serving rather than conquering nature (Clean Earth)—thus creating a beautiful world, or *jung to*.

Members of the Jung To Society take three simple vows, says Pomnyun Sumin: “First, we take the law of interrelation for our view of the world. Second, we take the Buddha and Bodhisattva as the models for our life. Third, take non-ego, non-possession, and non-self-assertion for an index of our self-discipline.” In their daily lives, members observe these basic precepts: “We should always keep our minds pure and light, and therefore happy. We should live healthily with clean air, pure water, and simple meals. We can share laughter with our neighbors and realize that this can be the natural relationship among all human beings. We try not to harm living beings, try to help others, care for them, speak only what is true, and we do not consume addictive substances.” The society recommends that people desire less, consume less, and sleep less. People who want and consume less have fewer reasons to quarrel, are happier, have better relationships with others, and bring less harm to the environment. And people who eat less and sleep less have clearer minds and healthier bodies.

After its establishment, the Jung To Society became Sukho Choi’s institutional base. It has grown to become a significant force in South Korea, with several interlocking units. Among these are the Jung To Temple, through which people may participate in social movements such as the Prayer for Helping Our Brothers in North Korea; the Eco Buddha; or the Campaign on Zero Waste (one of Eco Buddha’s activities). Yet another, Good Friends (originally, the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement), provides humanitarian assistance to refugees from all over the world, seeks peaceful resolution to conflict, and acts to protect and improve human rights. The Join Together Society (JTS) is Jung To’s subsidiary, which works to eradicate famine, disease, and illiteracy.

In 1990, Domoon Sunim, Sukho Choi’s first Buddhist master, told him that he should be working within the structure of the Sangha, or monkhood. Pomnyun Sunim recalls the critical exchange between them. Sukho Choi asked Domoon Sunim, “Sunim, is there an inside or outside to the truth?” “No,” Domoon Sunim replied, “there is neither an inside nor outside to the truth.” “But why do you insist that I should work inside the Sangha?” Sukho Choi asked. “It’s because *you* insist on the outside, so it creates an inside,” Domoon Sunim answered.

Silence.

Sukho Choi then realized that he had created his own artificial distinctions of “inside” and “outside.” At that very moment, he shaved his head and became a monk. He was ordained at the Bunhwang Temple in Gyungju and given the name *Pomnyun*, which means wheel of dharma. It is by this name, Pomnyun Sunim—meaning Venerable Pomnyun—that Sukho Choi, the peasant boy from Kyongsang, is known today.

In January 1991, shortly after being ordained into the monkhood, Pomnyun Sunim went to India for a pilgrimage to the holy places of Buddha. These included a mountain near the village of Dhongheswari in Bodhgaya, Bihar, where Buddha practiced austerity for six years. When

Pomnyun Sunim first visited the place, it was completely inhabited by *harijans*. As he came near the mountaintop, he saw something that he had never seen before. Little children had lined up in two rows and appeared as though they were welcoming him. In fact, they were begging. Pomnyun Sunim asked them, “Is it Sunday today?” “No, it’s not,” they replied. Since it was morning of a weekday, he asked why they were not in school. There’s no school, they answered. Pomnyun Sunim was taken aback. “I just couldn’t understand it,” he recalls; “It’s understandable if there’s a school and children are not going to it. But for a school not to be there at all—that was hard to understand.”

When Pomnyun Sunim met with the villagers, he saw how poor they were. They were all unclean, unkempt, and malnourished, and each had only one or two sets of clothing for the whole year. At the meeting, he helped these villagers see the need for a school and asked them what they could do. They replied that they could donate land and labor for its construction. So, with land and labor from the villagers and with funding from JTS and the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka, Pomnyun Sunim launched a school project for Dhongheswari. This became the Sujata Academy.

The Sujata Academy began with only one floor. Later, another floor had to be added because there were so many children in the village. Still later, a kindergarten was added because the elementary school children brought the younger siblings they were minding to school with them. By 2002, the school had four hundred students and was the center of a network of some fourteen kindergarten schools in Dhongheswari. In the meantime, the Indian branch of JTS had opened a technical high school equipped with sewing machines, computers, and typewriters. This school now offers technical courses such as agriculture, architecture, tailoring, typing, and computer education. The students attend classes at night and serve as volunteer teachers for the kindergarten children during the day. Some mothers and teachers in the village also come to receive technical education.

As the school system grew, JTS volunteers tackled another problem in Dhongheswari. Doctors who examined the school children found that they were suffering from chronic malnutrition. For six months each year, the village experienced a food shortage, leading some children to beg or steal from tourists. To solve the problem, JTS India set up supplementary feeding centers and, somewhat later, the Jeevaka Free Medical Clinic to look after the health needs of children. Eventually, the number of patients who came for medical help grew so large that JTS transformed the clinic into a general hospital.

As Pomnyun Sunim and JTS volunteers carried out their good work in India, a human crisis of profound proportions was unfolding much closer to home. This was the famine in North Korea. After he had personally witnessed evidence of the famine in 1996—from the river dividing China from North Korea—Pomnyun Sunim began making impassioned appeals for assistance. But officials in South Korea, Europe, and the United States continued to belittle news of a famine. His appeals were met with demands for evidence. So he set out to provide it.

Because there was no way Pomnyun Sunim could obtain such evidence in North Korea itself, he went to the next best place, the Chinese border area closest to North Korea. He began by conducting an investigation in Yanbian, China, and along the Tuman and Amnok rivers, to put together a picture of life, agriculture, and the environment in the closed country. Then, to obtain an objective and accurate basis for asking for help, in September 1997 Pomnyun Sunim began a secret survey among North Korean refugees who had crossed the border illegally to seek food in China. Some of these North Koreans had made the crossing more than once. This survey sought to determine the true food situation in North Korea, and how victims were coping.

While carrying out the survey, Pomnyun Sunim and his associates had to hide themselves from the press and to refrain from openly attacking the Chinese government for being unsympathetic to the plight of the refugees. During the course of nineteen visits, up to October 1998, they surveyed some 1,855 refugees in hundreds of remote hamlets scattered across northeastern China. Pomnyun Sunim was assisted by JTS volunteers, by a few sympathetic Chinese, and by a group of ethnic Koreans in China who, some five years previously, had already organized themselves to help the refugees. Without their help, he says, “nothing would have been possible.”

The survey included gathering extensive testimonies from the refugees. The interviews were voluntary but had to be done in secret; the respondents had to be assured of complete anonymity. They usually took place at night, in mountain areas or in village homes, and could take as long as three to four days for each person. Often, the day and place of the interview had to be abruptly changed; the refugees were constantly on the run, suspicious and fearful of being caught by the Chinese authorities.

“No day passed without tears,” said one of the team’s interviewers. “We were deeply moved by (the refugees’) heartbreaking grief. Their pain was enormous and brutal. For those who saw their parents and children perish before their eyes and in the worst situation that a human being can be in, it was like killing them a second time to recall those moments of hell, and the faces of loved ones who were no more.”

To inform South Koreans and the international community about the seriousness of the famine and the plight of the refugees, Pomnyun Sunim published reports of his investigations and surveys. One newspaper, the *Hankyoreh Daily*, ran some of the refugee testimonies. Here is Pomnyun Sunim’s account of one of his encounters with refugees:

Around 5:00 p.m. on June 9, as soon as we arrived in Changbai, we went to a stone quarry near a cemetery in the mountain behind Changbai. There were three women there and two children. One woman was lying there, whose hands were peeling; a child aged six, who looked smaller than a child aged three, was seriously infected with scabies. It was raining and they were sitting down without any vinyl to cover them. I could see a bowl, which they used to cook soup.

The sick woman lost her mother, father, husband, and two children; she and the six-year-old girl had survived. The other woman had a bedridden husband at home and another woman was holding a four-year-old child. All are from Hamhung (North Korea) and thirty years old.

When I asked, “Have you been to hospital?” She answered “How can I afford to go to the hospital while we are all dying from hunger?” and begged him to help her.

Desperate questions came to my mind. “Can’t I give any help to a woman dying in front of my eyes? Why do the border and the law make me helpless?” But I couldn’t stay there long because . . . the situation was quite dangerous. I took some photos of her to show to a doctor and came down the mountain. . . . Tears and rain were streaming down my face.

When I got back, I asked at several places to find a possible way to help the woman but at each place the answer was they had no way to help. I prepared medicine according to a doctor’s prescription and sent it on the next day, but it was found that all of them [had already been] arrested by the Chinese police.

Pomnyun Sunim's interviews continued until 2001, when four of Good Friends' field-workers were arrested, accused of espionage by the Chinese government, and sentenced to two months' imprisonment. Afterward, the Chinese authorities expelled the other survey-team members who were also aiding refugees.

These were some of the key findings of Pomnyun Sunim's remarkable investigation and survey:

- Possibly as many as 3.5 million North Koreans, most of them children or elderly and all of them poor, had died from starvation and famine-related illnesses.
- Very few of the dead were buried in coffins. Most were buried directly in a tomb, or buried together with other corpses in a hole, abandoned, or barely covered on the spot where they collapsed.
- Survivors of the famine continued to be under high risk of death from malnutrition and hunger-related illnesses including tuberculosis, hepatitis, stomach problems, fever, and heart disease.
- At least three hundred thousand North Koreans had fled their country for China, putting their lives at risk and experiencing violations of their human rights.
- The great majority of refugees were women. Most were sold for a few hundred dollars as wives to Chinese or ethnic Korean men living in China. Women who ended up with Chinese husbands lived under lock and key because Chinese law forbids bride-trafficking.
- Some of the refugees were as young as twelve; often orphans, they ended up as scavengers and beggars at markets and outside hotels.
- Refugees who were exposed and refused to return home voluntarily were reported to the authorities, arrested, kept in prison camps, and then forcibly repatriated.
- In North Korea, famine victims took desperate measures to survive, including selling their furniture, scavenging for timber, eating pine bark and wild roots, and leaving home to forage, beg, steal, bribe, or swindle.
- By 1992, the collective food distribution system in North Korea had, for the most part, broken down, leaving individual families with only occasional rations of rice. By 1994, the year before the country was hit by the worst floods in its history, the food distribution system had broken down completely.
- Little food could be grown because seeds, fertilizer, chemical inputs, and plastic sheeting were lacking. Crops, such as they were, were stolen before they could be harvested; the little that was left was taken by the military.

- The mountains have already been stripped of trees, seriously endangering the population during times of drought or flood.
- By 1998, 90 percent of North Korean industry was at a standstill. Only munitions and a few other types of factories were still operating.
- Scarce electricity and tap water were available. There was no heating and there were no medicines. Most hospitals were nonfunctional, and hardly any classes were being held in schools.
- The North Korean government considered itself on emergency wartime footing. Achieving nuclear capability was a matter of the highest priority.
- North Korean officials had assured the people that the crisis would be under control in two or three years and that, in the meantime, the people would have to bear with the situation. No public discussion of the famine was permitted. Protesters were regarded as destroyers of the nation and those who complained loudly courted death.

Using available statistics, Pomnyun Sunim was able to deduce the number of deaths from the famine. Of North Korea's 22 million population, he reckoned about three million could be categorized as the upper class who are free from starvation. These included Communist Party officials and high-ranking military officers. Assuming that they and the country's six million farmers were safe from hunger, the remaining 13 million people would be on the verge of starvation. Using a 27 percent death rate derived from his clandestine survey, Pomnyun Sunim could safely assume that at least three and a half million North Koreans died during the famine, which peaked between 1996 and 1997. But some refugees who were interviewed insisted that more than five million had already died, including many of the theoretically safe farmers and even Party members.

According to Pomnyun Sunim, Pyongyang had placed the death toll from the famine at only 220,000. South Korea's National Statistics Office estimated in August 1999 an equally dubious 270,000. Reports of the United States Congress placed the death toll at two million. "Both Koreas are hiding the real picture for their own reasons," Pomnyun Sunim said—the North to downplay its problems, the South to keep its own people from feeling sympathy for the North Koreans.

In May 1999, Pomnyun Sunim was quoted in an American newspaper as saying that 11 million to 13 million people in nonessential industries in North Korea were hardest hit by the famine. "These are the ones who are dying and these are the ones who are fleeing over the border," he said. The same article traced the roots of the famine to both natural and political causes. The North, incompetent in agriculture, had never been able to feed itself. In the early 1990s, when relations between China and North Korea began to deteriorate because of economic and ideological differences, food aid from China stopped. Soviet assistance also disappeared when the communist regime in the Soviet Union fell. The supply of oil from both China and the former Soviet Union also shrank, as did North Korea's own production of fertilizer. The problem became worse in 1995 when the country was hit by catastrophic floods.

In 1998, North Korea was short by two to three million tons of grain. Yet, international food aid came to only a little more than half a million tons—much too little to alleviate the food

shortage. When foreign organizations monitored how food in North Korea was distributed, they found that the government selected the recipients. The order of priority was: soldiers, first; coal miners, second; and residents of the capital Pyongyang, third.

Despite the work done by Good Friends, many people around the world still continued to deny that famine existed in North Korea. For example, the August 23, 1998, issue of the *Independent on Sunday* said a European Union inspection team that visited North Korea in May 1998 had reported that there were no signs of famine. The team included a representative of the medical charity, *Médecins du Monde*, who reported after a trip to the same country by its own team in July 1998 that “one does not feel one is looking at a country that is suffering from total catastrophe. The impression we got . . . was one of shortages but not of a recent crisis.” Aid agencies operating out of Pyongyang also reported widespread malnutrition but few deaths. But *Independent on Sunday* reported further that, privately, some foreign diplomats gave “cautious credence to the estimates of private, non-governmental groups which have independently reached shocking conclusions about the scale of the famine.”

Even before his investigations in China were launched, Pomnyun Sunim had concluded that the only appropriate South Korean response to the famine in North Korea was to provide food. This course of action, he said, “is in accordance with my religious convictions; is in the interest of the majority of the North Korean people; is vital to the reconciliation and reunification of north and south Korea; and will contribute to peace in Northeast Asia and peace in the world.”

When Pomnyun Sunim began making the case for sending food aid to the North in the mid-1990s, however, most of his fellow activists and Buddhist colleagues did not at first believe the seriousness of the problem. They were also against helping a communist state. Some even said, “They deserve to starve to death!” And still others said to Pomnyun Sunim, “You really should get more anti-communist education.” Even members of his own Jung To Society were skeptical and resistant. Pomnyun Sunim told his followers that, irrespective of what they might decide to do, if they wanted to see him happy, they should let him work on humanitarian assistance to North Korea—even on his own.

The resistance showed him that he needed to build a stronger case for offering assistance to North Korea, not only among his own people but before the international community. So, as he continued to pursue his investigations in China, Pomnyun Sunim also went to Los Angeles where he met with members of a Korean group that had close links with North Koreans. They provided him with information and materials on the famine in print and on video. During the same trip and several succeeding visits to the United States, he met with officials of various international institutions, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Food Program. He also met with officials of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and selected members of the U.S. Congress. He also met with international organizations in Europe and Japan.

Representatives of United Nations agencies told him that they had no power; the United States did, but its policy on North Korea foreclosed any humanitarian assistance. When Pomnyun Sunim made his appeal to the U.S. government, its representatives asked him for “evidence.” But there were a few who did listen to him. Among these was Andrew S. Natsios, then vice president of World Vision Relief and Development, and, before that, head of USAID in Ethiopia. Natsios read the preliminary results of Pomnyun Sunim’s survey and questioned him

for three hours. After Natsios noted the striking similarities between the ways that North Koreans, Ethiopians, Somalians, and Cambodians responded when they faced famine, he was convinced of the seriousness of the famine in North Korea. After that, he linked Pomnyun Sunim with other American organizations.

But the times were not propitious for Pomnyun Sunim's cause. At about this time, a North Korean submarine was caught in South Korean waters; propaganda machines were saying North Koreans were coming to shoot South Koreans. Because of this incident, even the work of the South Korean National Committee of the Red Cross was put to a stop. Pomnyun's own supporters told him, "This is not the time. Let's wait."

But the image of the starving child on the North Korean riverbank kept flashing through Pomnyun Sunim's head. He persisted. He met people in small groups and tried to get the support of other organizations, even if just on paper. In December 1996, he and his supporters organized the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement (KBSM)—known today as Good Friends: Center for Peace, Human Rights and Refugees—to mobilize South Korean and international support for relief to North Korea and to protect the rights of Korean refugees in China.

Given the scale of the catastrophe in North Korea, civic organizations alone could not provide the resources needed. Pomnyun Sunim's movement therefore led a drive calling for the government, the press, and business corporations to support a relief effort. Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and some twenty thousand Korean Americans joined the drive and, by December 1996, they had persuaded thirty-three organizations to join the cause and gathered a million signatures. The movement's supporters also staged noise protests that forced the government to re-allow the Korean Red Cross to resume its aid to North Korea.

But none of this changed the South Korean government's policy toward North Korea. It fiercely resisted moves to help the famine victims, including proposals by South Korean religious groups to purchase Chinese maize for distribution in North Korea. It also opposed efforts by the same groups to purchase surplus potatoes from Kangwon Province to send to North Korea, even though the potatoes were beginning to rot in the fields. When the potato farmers themselves said they wanted to sell their produce to the religious groups, the government relented—on the condition that the potatoes be sent to the North in the name of the South Korean Red Cross. Later, Pomnyun Sunim and KBSM campaigned with civic and religious organizations for permission to send Chinese corn to North Korea. In the end, they succeeded.

By January 1997, the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement had also collected fifty thousand U.S. dollars, which it turned over to the Red Cross for delivery to North Korea. When Pomnyun asked how long that would take, he was told four months. The reason was that North Korea and South Korea had no relationship at all—not even between the North Korean Red Cross and the South Korean Red Cross. If either Red Cross branch wanted to send anything to the other, it had to gain approval from the organization's international headquarters in Geneva first. Even after this was achieved, the shipment could not be sent directly to its destination in North Korea but had to be routed discreetly through neighboring China.

Between June and August 1997, Pomnyun Sunim and his supporters gathered another million signatures on a petition demanding that the South Korean government immediately send needed medicines and one million metric tons of food to North Korea. The petition also urged that fund-raising activities for North Korean famine relief be allowed through the mass media, and that the South Korean government meet with the North Korean government in the pursuit of reconciliation and peaceful reunification. The government's response fell short of the petition's

demand; it sent fifty thousand metric tons of food. After the next round of presidential elections, the demands were simply ignored.

Advancing on another front, in February 1999, Pomnyun Sunim and JTS obtained permission from the Ministry of Reunification to establish “an independent aid window” to channel relief goods directly to North Korea, specifically therapeutic supplementary food for children. JTS was permitted to establish factories in the North to produce such food and to distribute it to beneficiaries, namely eleven thousand children in 116 nurseries and preschools in the North Korean city of Rasun in North Hamgyung. Meanwhile, JTS supplied the rice, maize, sugar, and milk solids that are the ingredients of these processed nutrients. JTS also sent Chinese agricultural experts to North Hamgyung Province, to help farmers alleviate the food shortage and attain self-sufficiency in food; harvests in the area have increased fivefold. JTS itself has delivered meals, clothes, medicine, and stationery to eleven thousand children in North Korea’s Rajin-Sunbong region and to another fifteen thousand children, including four thousand orphans, in North Hamgyung Province. To remind themselves of the hungry North Koreans, JTS members skipped lunch every Friday and donated their lunch money to the cause.

In order to gain popular support for aid to North Korea, Pomnyun Sunim published a newsletter; released photographs and videotapes of the suffering there; and delivered lectures before trade unions, women’s groups, student groups, nongovernmental organizations, leftists, and rightists, and, indeed, anyone to whom he could make a humanitarian appeal. Between March 3, 2000, and November 22, 2002, he delivered a total of 143 lectures in an effort to overcome distrust and antagonism between the two Koreas and to provide a vision of a unified Korea. During another stretch of two months, he conducted 140 lectures throughout the country.

Pomnyun Sunim recalls that almost every time he delivered a lecture, he would be in tears. “It was just such an emergency,” he says. “I actually saw all those corpses and people suffering around the borders. All those people were going through such agony. If people had seen what I had seen, they would have felt the same.”

Pomnyun Sunim drew mixed reactions from the groups he addressed. Some disagreed with his cause. Others responded positively, with some actually taking off their wedding rings and giving them to him, saying, “Put that into your cause.” Or, “This is the bond to my house. But put it into your own cause.”

Pomnyun Sunim tells people that so long as they give humanitarian assistance to North Korea, they do not have to course their help through JTS. “Put that in the organization you belong to, or the organization you’re close to; if that’s a Christian organization—go to a Christian organization,” he says. “If you want to go to a labor organization, go to a labor organization. Whatever you feel most comfortable with.”

Once, Pomnyun Sunim told members of a trade union that was agitating for a pay increase: “You are saying that you want a one million won pay increase but you are not even giving 10,000 won to the North Korean people. Do you call that justice? Because of the lack of 10,000 won, North Koreans are actually dying of starvation.” At other times, he would tell people, “If you have fringe benefits or bonuses, you should make a donation because that is a bonus to you.”

At bottom, Pomnyun Sunim believes in the basic goodness of people—all people. He does not see race, class, religion, ideology, or nationality, only humanity that rises above the artificial distinctions that people create for themselves. He says:

Are all beings the same or different? When we start to compare grains of rice, they are all different. But when a grain of rice is being compared with a grain of barley, all

different kinds of rice can be distinguished from barley. Furthermore, when grains of rice and barley are compared with vegetables, they would all be considered grains. And if we were to compare the rice, barley, and vegetables with clothes, they would all fall into the food category. All beings can be the same or different depending on the context. It depends on the situation. Beings are neither the same nor different. Herein lies the fundamentals of peace, coexistence, and harmony.

Pomnyun Sunim believes that conflicts between nations and ethnic groups arise from their inability to recognize differences. “Large nations want to conquer smaller ones; in the process . . . oppression and conflict arise,” he says, adding, “The victims of oppression react sensitively when provoked, whereas the oppressors, desensitized from the pains of the victims, are unable to realize the seriousness of the situation.” The root of conflict and disputes, he says, is the inability of people to understand each other. Without such understanding, conflict and disputes will never cease. Insisting that one is right and another is wrong is the root cause of the violence that destroys peace, coexistence, and harmony.

Pomnyun Sunim declares, “I am determined to carry out this work through several cycles of my life. It will be several lives on my part and, for others, it will be through many generations. I have a vision that is over several generations, so I do not think that I will carry out the work on my own. All I can do is set up the foundation for the future generations to work upon.”

For Pomnyun Sunim, the most basic truth of humanity is that everyone is a human being, sharing one world, one existence. Change starts from within, not just through the reform of social, political, or economic structures. As the Jung To Society declares:

Once we are enlightened to the fact that everything in the world is connected to each other, there are no enemies and everything around the world becomes our personal affair. We have to be good friends with human beings and nature, not just among human beings. This is the world that we, Jung To Society, would like to make. The Jung To Society is a group of people who would like to realize such dreams. Happy are those who have dreams. Happier are those who hold dreams together with others. Happiest are those who work together to realize their dreams.

Vicente G. Tirol

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