

PART V

*Body and Health*





# SICKNESS AND HEALTH:

## *Becoming a Korean Buddhist Shaman*

HI-AH PARK

*Hi-ah Park was the first woman in modern times to be trained as a court musician in Korea. She was initiated as a Korean shaman in 1981, and has since translated the Korean shamanic tradition into vibrant, multi-cultural forms for a global context.*

SHAMANISM IS AN ANCIENT indigenous Korean spiritual tradition dating as far back as the Neolithic era, and has long been practiced as a way of life. During the Three Kingdom Period (57 B.C.E.–676 C.E.), the aristocrats abandoned shamanism and embraced religions imported from China, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. However, the common people have continued to practice shamanism up to this day.

### *Shamanic Initiation*

A female shaman is called a *mudang* in Korean. The word *mu* means “sacred dance,” and *dang* means “altar.” In this case we can translate the term as “sacred dancer,” meaning the one who offers the sacred dance to the altar of the spirit or god. The *mudang* is called to her profession by a mystical illness, known as *sinbyong*, and is then initiated in a *naerim kut*, a Korean shamanic initiation ceremony, which resolves her suffering by enshrining the possessing god in her body.

Through her initiatory sickness, the *mudang* escapes from the ordinary world by withdrawing into darkness so as to be reborn into a purely creative realm. By surrendering, and thus dying in her own heart, the shaman starts to see streams of light and awakens to the possessing god. In “dying,” however, the shaman does not wither away, but rather lets her heart become undivided and gathered into one with divinity. When her heart is fixed on one point with divinity, she finds that nothing is impossible. The shaman thus taps into the divine world with the intention to work for the benefit of all sentient beings and, as a result, starts to understand the meaning of their lives.

The *mudang* is a female shaman healer and ritual specialist. As such, she acts as an intermediary with other worlds, such as the world of the ancestors. She has the



*Hi-ah Park performing in Italy, 1993 (photo provided by Hi-ah Park)*

ability to transform a reality of problems into positive living energy by expelling “devils,” that is, the projection of negative human emotions of bitterness and fear. Shamans understand that all problems arise because of an inability to change hidden emotions. By allowing herself to express those hidden negative emotions coming from the psychic unconscious and to purify them, she cures the sick and defends the psychic integrity of the community. Thus, the *mudang* is also a seer, mystic, poet, musician, and dancer—one who practices techniques of ecstasy to communicate with the divine world.

In Korea, when the female shaman has completed her initiation, she is immediately referred to as a *posal*, a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a “being destined for enlightenment” who in her compassion for humankind delays her entry into Buddhahood in order to help others. When one becomes a shaman in Korea, the initial and most important vow, that of the bodhisattva, is to work for the benefit of all sentient beings who, because of the suffering condition of their existence, are in need of help.

In Korea today, almost all shamans are women. In the distant past, there were male as well as female shamans but, over the centuries, male shamans have become much rarer. It may be that women have special access to the feminine principles of spirituality, which enable them to bridge the abyss between this world and multiple states of bliss. Or, it may be that Korean women have traditionally not had the same opportunities for education as men and, therefore, have become less

alienated from their intuitive and psychic powers than those who have had years of over-intellectualization. I, for example, had to unlearn twenty years of education before I was ripe for initiation.

While living in southern California as a dancer, I received several requests to perform shamanic rites for the Korean community—even though I had not yet become a shaman. My first ritual performance was in June, 1980, at the Mingei International Folk Art Museum in La Jolla, California. Mr. Zozayong, the director of the Emile Museum in Seoul, Korea, asked me to perform a *kut*, a “Happiness and Guardian Spirit” dance. I was surprised when Mr. Zozayong respectfully introduced me as a *mudang*, particularly since *mudangs* are looked down upon in Korea. I was a little concerned about how I was going to perform the ritual, but when it came time to give the actual performance, I somehow knew how to do it.

During the next year, I performed two more *kut* in California. Each time, the spirits entered me in a most powerful way, guiding me to perform rituals whose meaning I only later learned. After these ceremonies, I sensed deeply that I could not treat these spirits who entered me lightly.

Every time I returned home from these performances, I felt oppressive aching in my shoulders and pelvic area. There was a great weight on my chest, and I felt as if someone or something were binding my body. Then I became completely incapacitated, unable to do even the simplest domestic chores. I was sick for two months, and I knew I needed help.

Since I’d had two similar illnesses prior to this one, I intuitively knew that this was not something a regular medical doctor could handle. The clarity, freedom, and heightened awareness I had experienced while performing the rituals conflicted with the rationalizations, anger, fear, and defensive feelings that plagued my normal state of consciousness. The conflict had given rise to a psychosomatic ailment.

During this illness, I had three consecutive visions. In my second vision, I saw Tan-Kun, the heroic founder of the Korean nation, sitting in a meditation posture inside a yurt and wearing a red hat and robe. As I gazed intensely at him, we became one; then I saw myself actually sitting as Tan-Kun. This clear vision of Tan-Kun convinced me to visit my homeland after an absence of fifteen years.

I didn’t have any specific plan for my visit. However, from its start, everyone I met and everywhere I visited turned out to be connected somehow with shamanistic practices. Within a week, I was introduced by a friend, Professor Choi Jong-Min, to Kim Keum-Hwa, a well-known *hwang-haedo manshin* (a shaman from a western province of Korea).

When Kim Keum-Hwa came into the room in her house where I was waiting, we both shuddered. She told me she had the sensation that her spirits wanted to talk with me. She brought in her divination table and started to pronounce oracles:

“Double rainbows are surrounding in all directions. The fruit is fully ripe and can’t wait anymore!” She told me I was very lucky to have surrendered to the spirits’ orders and to have come to her. Otherwise, she said, I would have died, like an overripe fruit that falls onto the ground and rots.

My body started swaying uncontrollably in a circular motion. With tears running down my face, I tried to hold my knees still with both hands, but I couldn’t stop the swaying. Kim Keum-Hwa continued to explain that I had disobeyed twice already and, consequently, I had to go through unbearable pain and loneliness and near-death experiences. She warned that if I were to resist a third time, there would be no forgiveness. It was absolutely essential that I undergo the *naerim kut* (initiation ceremony) without delay.

On a more positive note, Kim told me that she saw double rainbows stretched around my head, celestial gods surrounding and protecting me in four directions, and warrior spirits descending on me. She said that the warrior spirit in me was so strong that I would want to stand on the *chakdu* (sharp blades) of the initiation ceremony.

She predicted that, in the near future, I would be a famous shaman and I’d travel around the world as a global shaman. Then she set a date for the initiation—June 23, 1981, less than two weeks away.

My new godmother, Kim Keum-Hwa, asked me to eat no meat during the week before the ceremony. As in the previous rituals in the United States, I didn’t know what would happen, but I was determined to find out what power had brought me here and what the meaning and purpose of my life were.

In the morning, I bathed in a cold mountain stream, then climbed Mt. Samgak (located to the north of Seoul) with my godmother. At one point, she asked me to climb up a steep cliff to get a branch from a pine tree. This task was the first test of the day. I did as she asked to receive *sanshin* (the mountain spirit), and we talked as little as possible.

At the mountain altar, I offered rice, rice cakes, three kinds of cooked vegetables, fruits, candles, incense, and *makgholi* (homemade rice wine). As my godmother chanted and beat a small gong, I held up the *sanshin dari*, a long piece of white cotton cloth called *minyong* (white cotton bridge) through which the shaman receives the mountain spirits.

My body started to quiver uncontrollably—a sign that the spirit was entering me. I completely surrendered to the spirit, turning off my internal dialogue and entering into inner silence. I sensed light coming from every direction, and I started to feel drunk with the spirit in me. It was the dramatic close encounter with the separated “lover” at long last. I felt the ultimate completion of my primordial self before separation. I knew that the spirit loved me and forgave my long resistance to accepting it. Bathed by the light of spirits, I felt clean and reborn. I practically flew down the mountain.

I joined the group of shamans and guests in my godmother's house at the foot of the mountain. I was the sole initiate. We began with a short ceremony invoking and greeting the spirits, followed by a *huhtun kut* (purification ritual). The *huhtun kut* is conducted to cleanse and humble the initiate, in order to dissolve the infantile image of her personal past and prepare her for transformation into a pure spirit of unlimited power.

The ritual started with drumming and chanting, while the shaman's assistants put a basket of cooked millet on my head. Then I danced in a circular motion toward each direction, ending the dance by throwing the basket. This process is repeated until the basket lands in an upright position—that is the sign that the evil spirits have been repelled. It wasn't easy in the beginning. The weather was very hot, and I was wearing a full Korean costume. Moreover, I felt self-conscious and a little ridiculous in front of all the onlookers. I kept failing until I couldn't bear the embarrassment anymore. Then, suddenly, something magical happened—all the onlookers disappeared from my view, I felt a point of true fire in my center, and I achieved complete tranquility. Finally, the basket landed correctly.

The initiation ceremony continued with an examination to test my psychic ability and to determine if I could identify the deities who had descended on me, by selecting the appropriately colored clothes. After I revealed all the spirits (sun/moon/stars, mountain spirits, high nobility, ancestors, and warriors) through dancing accompanied by drumming, my godmother nodded her head to signal my having made the correct choice and asked me, "Where are your bells and fan?" When I hesitated, she teased me for trying to figure it out. She said that "too much time in the university" was clouding my non-rational, intuitive, and all-knowing self. Then I moved into an ecstatic deep trance and found the bells and fan hidden under the big skirt of the drummer.

Next they put seven brass bowls with identical covers onto a table. My task was to uncover the bowls in the correct order. While dancing to the drummer's accompaniment, I started to feel and touch the covers. My hands followed the energy. Under the first cover that I removed I found clear water—which one is supposed to uncover first and symbolizes clear consciousness and face. I danced while holding that cover, then opened the rest of the bowls in this order: rice, ashes, white beans, straw, money, and filthy water.

My godmother interpreted the meaning of each. Rice is for helping people's lives. Ashes are a symbol of name and fame. Beans and straw feed the horse for the shaman's journey and are good omens for the successful growth of the new shaman. By picking the clear water first and the filthy water last, I showed a purity of consciousness and successfully passed the test. I saluted, with a big bow on the ground to my godmother and her assistant, and thus symbolized my rebirth as a new shaman.

The Korean shamanic initiation ceremony consists of many rituals, but I would like to describe in detail the *chaktu kori* (sharp blades ritual), the highlight of the *naerim kut*, the initiation ritual. This ritual takes place around a seven-foot tower of *chaktu* blades, which is made of seven layers that include drums, a table, a water jar, a rice pot, and boards.

My initiation ritual began when my godmother pulled me next to her. She started to sing a *mansubaji*, a shamanic invocation chant, and gave me two swords. Taking them, I began dancing and, connecting with my spirit body, I arose transformed as a spiritual warrior. I knew then that I had to contact my deep fear of death, to die completely, and to be reborn with the warrior spirit.

Initially, I was overwhelmed by my unconscious fear of death. When I started dancing with the swords, my normal awareness shifted into one of the primal spirit. As I increased my energy tremendously, I gained sufficient courage to enter the room where the two *chaktu* blades were kept wrapped in red cloth. Entering the room was like going into the underworld, some unknown distant place an eternal journey away.

The moment I brought the red cloth close to my eyes, I felt the unknown warrior in me smiling and I grabbed the *chaktu*. With this elation, a totally different person emerged who knew no fear or limitation. I unwrapped the red cloth and the big sharp *chaktu* blades revealed themselves—looking like large meat cleavers with handles on both ends.

I started pressing the heavy *chaktu* against my arms, legs, face, and mouth, but it didn't cut me. All around me the onlookers were very afraid and paid close attention to the ritual. After I proved nothing could harm me, I did the most vigorous dance I have ever done in my life and, at its peak, I flew up to the *chaktu*. People told me later that my eyes did not look human, but took on the luster of the eyes of a tiger.

When I stood barefoot on the sharp blades, I was freed from the constraints of being in time and space. People pleaded with me to come down to the ground but, as they told me later, I stayed up there nearly an hour. Everyone was breathless, and some wept from the sheer intensity of the experience.

When a *mudang* enters into a *mu-a*, the shamanic trance state, her body transforms into the apparitional body known in Buddhism as the *nirmāṇakāya*. She becomes one with the divine presence, and this union creates the pure pleasure of the *dharmakāya* or emptiness. I emphatically believe that the highest level of human evolution is experiencing this union with the divine presence, the mystical rapture of the shaman's ecstatic trance or the "empty" state of the Buddhist meditation. Preceded by the submission of the persona or ego, this is the key to the most creative processes. The shaman's journey of ecstasy, or profound Buddhist

meditation, makes the human mind capable of exploring and discovering a higher state of being. It truly helps us to understand the art of divine energy.

*Naerim kut*, the Korean shaman's initiation with its sacred dance and music, provided me with a direct introduction to the primordial state through the unification of mind, body, and spirit. This ritual became my most significant personal rite of passage and it led me to self-empowerment. Fundamentally pure from the very beginning, there is nothing now for me to reject or accept. I experience myself as I am, as the center of the universe. Maintaining this utmost pure, primordial state, "the body of light" is achieved—the common ground of both the *mudang* and the bodhisattva.

### *On the Path to Shamanic Initiation*

When I began studying shamanism in 1975, I had neither the wish nor the intention to become a shaman. I initially considered the process solely an artistic endeavor, and began my inquiry as a way for me to reach deeper into the core of my being and work. Yet everything I encountered along the shamanic path seemed to create a thirst in me for spiritual fulfillment.

My first experience of shamanism was in early childhood. A neighbor of ours had a severe case of hiccoughs that continued for several days. I remember that a *mudang* came to the man's house and waved her sword around his head—chanting, singing, and dancing with total integration. At that time I did not know what a *mudang* was, but I was literally entranced by the shaman's performance. I found it difficult to talk about this experience to anyone because of my staunch upbringing as a Christian. Shamanism and supernatural activities were viewed as superstition, so I kept this experience a separate reality deep in my heart.

It wasn't until I was a graduate student in the UCLA dance department in 1975 that I began to integrate that childhood experience. One day in class, Allegra Snyder, chairperson of the Dance Ethnology Department, asked us each to remember and then describe the most extraordinary experience in our lives. As I closed my eyes in the meditation process, I entered an altered state. My body started to shake uncontrollably, not from nervousness but, rather, as if someone were shaking me. As I talked about my experience of seeing the *mudang*, I felt as if someone else were speaking through me.

Later I experienced a similar physical sensation while watching a film called *Pomo Indian Sucking Doctor*. I immediately recognized that the Pomo Indian healing ceremony was related to the dancing and chanting I had observed as a child.

After those incidents, I began to experience frequent episodes of physical trembling and inner vibrations, which frightened me. Until then I had never thought



it important to talk about my childhood experience, but I now found that it was necessary to do so if I were to understand myself. I began to explore who I was, where I came from, how I got here, and where I was going.

Although I wholeheartedly loved and respected traditional Korean music and dance, my real quest was to answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Where am I going from here?” Entertaining onlookers who were hungry for amusement was not enough of a reason for me to perform, and I started to feel that some very important element was missing. For a while the performances made me very happy, but I started to lose interest doing the performances just for their own sake. I realized I did not get any new information or insight from them. I needed to push my limited mind beyond what I saw as cultural conditioning. I needed to be free from any established religion or fixed cultural boundaries, and I wanted to know a deeper meaning of my life.

At this point, I suffered from about nine months of insomnia, tedium, and terrible paralysis. My interest in mundane affairs and domestic chores waned completely. I longed for the mountains, and spent many nights weeping endlessly or dreaming of impending death. In my dreams, I was imprisoned in the underworld and chased by wild animals who dismembered my body. I endured many sleepless nights until I had an incredible, lengthy dream about an ancient royal funeral procession. My insomnia stopped right after this mysterious dream. I was happy without any specific reason and felt elevated, as though somebody were lifting me into the air. After this dream, my dreams started to become lighter, more celestial ones.

In one unforgettable dream journey during this period, a white unicorn with wings appeared and rode with me through the galaxy and the almost endless Milky Way to an incredible, infinite space of dark indigo. In that space, I heard a deep and resonant voice ask me, “How are the people down there?” I still remember clearly the conversation I had with that voice, and the ecstatic feeling I had. The voice then told me I had to go back to earth to teach people. Without any sense of waking up from a dream I found myself in my bed.

For a while I was obsessed by this dream and felt very connected with another reality. Although I couldn't understand it, the other space was so clear that I now felt as if my waking state were the dream. I allowed myself to be completely lost, without knowing who I was and without the benefit of any spiritual map or specific form of guidance. The more I was lost, the more I began to improvise with sound and movement to create energy in my meditation. I started to experience the power of sound and movement as healing to my own wounded child, as personal transformation, and even as empowerment.

During this time, the fall of 1977, I was invited to perform with an avant-garde improvisation group called Kiva at the University of California at San Diego. The night before my first participation with Kiva, I had an extraordinary dream.

As I started to dance in the studio, the studio became an underwater place in the ocean. I started dancing in slow motion like an octopus, absolutely out of breath and time, and weightless. I still remember the luminous sensation. As I continued to dance, various kinds of light and forms passed, ending up with a radiant bright rainbow light. Then I saw Emilie Conrad D'aoud sitting, watching me dance—she is a founder of Continuum dance studio whom I met shortly after this dream and with whom I eventually studied movement meditation. She was smiling brightly and was nodding her head as a sign of special recognition. The wave forms were singing, and I was riding on their song. Each song lifted me higher; I was blissful, and radiant light came from every direction. I experienced “love’s body” as the fluidity that can openly embrace the creative unknown—an experience I was later to have over and over with Kiva and Continuum.

The next morning, as I had promised Kiva, I went to the Center for Music Experiment. I saw some very strange instruments in the studio and seeing them, I felt a little crazy. I found myself drawn to this extraordinary environment. When I got there, I didn’t have any idea what I was going to do, and yet I didn’t have any fear. This trust gave me the courage to embrace the unknown music. Since I didn’t know anything, I couldn’t do anything, so I gave up “doing.” As I surrendered to the situation, I gave up gravity. I felt the whole universe supporting me, and I was very comfortable and relaxed even though I knew nothing about the musicians and their new music. Without any idea or program, I gained freedom without choice. This strange freedom made me aloof, free from bad and good, beautiful and ugly, which I saw as my own beliefs. In other words, I didn’t have a mind to interpret, so I couldn’t give myself any identity by using language. I started to feel warm and safe, and the whole environment became loving and supportive. I kept breathing deeply and slowly, and moved on through deepening experiences. Since I had no self to be identified with, I became like a mirror, a witness to my inner being; things came and went, and I (the mirror) remained vacant and empty. I reflected together with my own being.

Then a wondrous thing happened. It actually felt like something touched my inner self—the divine infant—the spirit, the soul, the essence of who I am. I kept breathing. I sensed the presence of the divine. I experienced a blissful tingling sensation all over my body. Then suddenly the “I” that I thought was in control of my breath was gone, and my breath breathed me! As I made connection with my inner breath, I was actually connected with my inner self. I merged with my breath—flowing, glowing, soaring, awakening my inner being—and with the tranquil sounds of my soul. I relaxed more, I breathed fully and freely, and then just when I thought I was relaxed more than was humanly possible, I breathed more fully than on any day since my birth. Then came the breathing release, and then the energy release—a cosmic orgasm, the ecstasy. I’d been in touch with

something or someone that was incredible—beautiful, moving, and real. The rebirthing process went on for over an hour and a half. I felt absolutely out of time and space, in a weightless continuum. That was my first experience with Kiva. I was born again, free from mind and body.

This helped me more than anything else to touch my true nature. I slowly melted away from my ordinary, rational, intellectual mind and developed a new sense of who I am at a cellular level. I went back to being an unborn child. I still remember the intense loneliness of the quest for self during this period. The only source of medicine I had was my own movement meditation. However, the unbearable loneliness of the search for my identity took me to the threshold of genuine death and touched the abyss of my unconscious fear.

Prior to my actual shamanic initiation, and in the wake of this terrible period of confusion, I met His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa at the Shrine Auditorium at Los Angeles in 1976. Here he hosted an occasion of the special “black hat ceremony” for Westerners for the first time in history. As part of the *pūjā*, or worship, he touched everyone’s head one by one. When His Holiness touched my head, I was literally electrified, and I was “far gone” until after everybody left the auditorium. When I came back to normal consciousness, there wasn’t a single person left in that large room, and I found myself lying on the ground, trembling with uncontrollable energy. This was my first encounter with the living Buddha, the embodiment of buddha nature.

Later, after teaching summer school in 1977 at UCLA, I retired to a ranch located deep in the mountains. I left all worldly affairs behind, obsessed like a lover longing for the mountains. In the mountains I could feel the presence of something indescribably different, an exotic apparition, the spirit of which one cannot find in a human: a beautiful, bewitching spirit embracing boundless joy. I journeyed to Yosemite, Mt. Rainier, Death Valley, and the Grand Canyon, among other places.

In Canyon de Chelly, I was led by endless double rainbows to the White House cliff dwelling, which had ancient *kivas*, subterranean ritual chambers. As I emerged from a ruined *kiva*, a sudden thunderstorm came down on me mercilessly. I fainted onto the sand and, in a total surrender, I offered myself to the presence of the spirit. I awoke with the most incredible orgasm I have ever known, basking in the most luxurious ecstasy. The sky was replete with rainbows and the reflections of rainbows reaching the horizon. The mountain breeze passing through the canyon seemed to be coming and going in time to an inaudible chant. As I followed that chant, my soul ascended as a flying unicorn, higher and higher into the sky. At last I was free and flying with such a feeling of exhilaration and joy that I wanted to cry, for I was experiencing the ecstasy for which I had been yearning for so long.