

Korean Zen Legends Illustrated in Temple Murals

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Part IV: Buddhism Takes Root in Korea

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Part IV:
Buddhism Takes Root in Korea

I

Buddhism in the Kingdom of Koguryo: Many Famous High Priests are Trained

According to the records, Buddhism was first introduced into Korea in the time of King Sosurim (371-384). In the year 372, Bogyun—the king of Chunjin in China—dispatched an envoy, the priest Soondo, who brought a statue of the Buddha and a copy of the scriptures to Korea. This was how Buddhism began to take root in the land. Two years later, a priest named Ado arrived, and the following year, two temples were built: Sengmoonsa and Boolransa. Then, in the year 396, a man named Damsi from Ganjung in China brought and preached many laws of Buddhism. However, even before Soondo's arrival brought Buddhism to the Koguryo nobility, Korean Buddhist priests were known as far as China because the religion had already begun to spread among the common people of the country. All of these things can be confirmed in the *Yanggoseungjeun* and the *Haedonggoseungjeun*.

In the year 392, Kogukyang, the eighteenth king of the dynasty, commanded that the people believe in Buddhism and engrave the heart of Buddha deeply in their minds. In the second year of his reign, the nineteenth king, Kwanykaetho the great (375-413), established nine temples in Pyongyang in order to spread the laws of Buddhism. In this way, each king in his turn strove to further Buddhism, and so there came to be many honorable priests in Koguryo whose fame spread abroad.

One of these famous priests, Haeriang went to the Shilla kingdom where he entered government service as a *seungdong* or monastic martial arts commander, according to the orders of King Jinheng. Another priest named Sengrang was one of the pioneers of the *Samnonchong* (“three great books denomination”) sect of Buddhism. Furthermore, in the 26th year of King Pyungwon (559-590), a priest named Haypyun went and preached Buddhism in Japan. Another priest named Hayza also went to Japan where he became a teacher of Prince Shootoku. The priest Damjing, who lived in the age of King Youngyang (590-618), drew a wall painting known as the *Gemdang* (“the main temple”) in Buprungsa, Japan. This was only the first of his meritorious deeds in the development of Japanese culture.

Thus, the people of Koguryo both studied doctrines and made great contributions to the propagation of Buddhism in other countries. However, the 27th king, Youngyou accepted *Odumigyo*, a branch of Taoism, and thus Buddhism began to lose its light. Buddhism was suppressed, and its temples were changed into Taoist academies.

Observing these things, the high priests, such as Boduck, repeatedly warned the king thus:

“Buddhism has been the central core of Koguryo's culture. If you suppress Buddhism, you will lose the hearts of the people and thus you will compromise the safety of the country.”

However, the 28th king, Bojang (642-668) paid no attention to this advice. Realizing that his relations with Koguryo were at an end, Boduck went southward in 677. The following year, Koguryo was destroyed by the alliance of Shilla and Dang.

II

Buddhism in the Kingdom of Baekjae: Preaching Buddhism in Japan

Buddhism was accepted in Baekjae in 384, thirteen years after it was accepted in Koguryo (371). In the first year of King Chimryu (384-385), an Indian priest named Marananta came over the sea and preached Buddhism, thus planting its roots in Baekjae. When Marananta arrived, King Chimryu gave him a warm welcome and accommodations in the palace as a mark of respect. The following year, the king established a temple for him in Hansanju. Marananta taught there and consecrated ten priests who attained the Truth and prepared a base for the development of Buddhism. Baekjae thus received Buddhism directly from an Indian priest and then accepted it as its state religion.

In the year 526, during the reign of King Song (523-554), the twenty-sixth monarch of the dynasty, a high priest named Kyomik who had gone abroad to study brought back a copy of the scriptures and laws, which he then interpreted. At the same time, the priests Damwook and Hyein wrote thirty-six books of *Yoolso* (the Buddhist law devoted to kings), for which King Song in person wrote the preface to celebrate the work. Therefore *Yoolchong* (“the legal sect”), of which Kyomik was the founder, prospered.

After its establishment, Buddhism flourished in Baekjae, and in the thirtieth year of his reign (553), King Song began sending missionaries to Japan, and this was the beginning of Buddhism in that country. In this era, Japan received not only religion from Baekjae, but many other cultural influences as well. Artists and technicians accompanied the priests who went over the sea to Japan and laid the foundations of Japanese Asukha culture.

In the first year of the twenty-ninth monarch, King Beop (599-600), issued a command, in accordance with the rules of Buddhism, forbidding the killing of animals. People set their home-raised hawks free and burned their implements of hunting and fishing. The following year he established a new temple, named Wangheung, in Pooyoh in order to help more people seek after the Truth.

The thirtieth king, Mu (600-641), to show his devotion, built the enormous temple of Meeryuksa together with a huge pagoda for the prosperity of the kingdom and the happiness of its people. In the time of King Mu, priests like Kwalryuk went to Japan, where they taught the *Samnon* (“three great books”) sect and conducted studies such as cosmology, astronomy, and geography. Kwalryuk also studied medicine to the degree that he has been revered as “the father of medicine of Baekjae.”

Although the large temples built in Baekjae adhered too closely to a fixed form and the power of the nation was dissipated by its strict, rule-centered ideology, a glorious culture still flourished in the land, which contributed much to the development of Japanese culture by sending the very first Buddhist missionaries to that island kingdom.

III

Buddhism in the Kingdom of Shilla: The Golden Age of Buddhism

Koguryo and Baekjae were able to accept Buddhism easily due to their geographic locations. The kingdom of Shilla, however, received Buddhism several decades after Baekjae, for it was situated in the southeast region of the Korean peninsula.

It was in the time of Nulji (417-458), the nineteenth king of the dynasty, that Buddhism was first introduced to Shilla. Mukhoja, a priest from Koguryo, came to the home of a man named Moryei and converted him to *sambo*, “the doctrine of three treasures.” This was the beginning of Buddhism in Shilla. After this, Mukhoja contributed further to the spread of Buddhism by healing a sick princess before he went elsewhere.

In the time of the twenty-first monarch, King Bicho (c. 475), a priest named Ado also stayed secretly in Moryei’s house and worked for the enlightenment of the people. However, because the powerful clans in the kingdom opposed Buddhism, it did not spread well at first.

Buddhism was not approved until the time of King Bupheung (514-540). He personally and firmly believed that Buddhism brought blessings to the people and gave benefits to the kingdom, and therefore he aspired to establish Buddhism when he ascended the throne. However, he could not achieve his will due to the resistance of his subjects until Lee Chadon’s voluntary martyrdom in the fourteenth year of his reign (527). Before he died, Lee Chadon prayed thus:

“I stand before death for the sake of the law of the Buddha. If there is divine protection in the Buddha, he will cause a miracle at this moment.”

When the executioner cut off his head, white blood spurted out of his neck, flowers rained down, and both heaven and earth vibrated. After the king and his subjects witnessed this scene, they first ceased to slander Buddhism and then finally acknowledged it.

In the time of the twenty-fourth monarch, King Jinheung (540-576), Buddhism lit up Shilla like the rising sun. Jinheung succeeded King Bupheung, who had accepted Buddhism, and strove to develop and spread it further. Therefore, in the fifth year of his reign (544), the construction of Heungryun Temple was completed, and it was ordained, according to the law of Buddha, that anyone who so desired could enter the priesthood. Thus, Buddhism prospered as time went on, and the *Hwarangdo*, a training organization for youth according to Buddhist ideals, was established. The *Hwarangdo* contributed to the articulation of the nation’s ideology and to the cultivation of men of ability; it also laid the foundations for Shilla’s power to become well known. In his later years, King Jinheung took the tonsure of a monk and received the Buddhist name, Bupoon. The queen also became a Buddhist priestess and practiced Buddhist doctrine in Youngheung Temple.

In both the first year and the thirty-eighth year of his reign, the twenty-sixth monarch, King Jinpyoung (579-632) sent missionaries to Japan with Buddhist scriptures and statues.

At that time, many great priests emerged. For example, a priest-teacher named Wonkwang, who had gone to the Chinese Jin dynasty to study, came back and taught the *Sesokohkye* or “the five worldly principles” (respect for the king, filial piety for one’s parents, fidelity between friends, refusal to admit defeat or retreat in battle, and respect for life that ought not to be randomly destroyed) to the *Hwarangdo*. These teachings became the nucleus of the people’s morality.

There were also many priests who went to India to seek after the Truth. Concomitant with the flourishing of Buddhism, an academic system was established as a process for the independent acceptance of Buddhism. In this system, the theory of *Poolgooktosol* was stressed; according to this theory, Shilla was a place where the Buddha had taught his laws, and thus Buddhism was not a foreign religion for the native culture.

During the reign of the thirtieth monarch, King Moonmu (661-681), the Kingdom of Shilla led the other two kingdoms of ancient Korea into a unified and peaceful reign, which initiated an unprecedented Golden Age of Buddhism. High priests such as Wonhyo, Weesang, Zajang, Wonchuk, Hyecho, and others flourished in Shilla, where the national culture blossomed during a glorious millennium.

IV

The First Martyr: The Venerable Lee Chadon

Bupheung, the wise and generous king of Shilla who reigned from 514-540, established a new military office to strengthen the national defense and promulgated laws to establish social order. His goal was to firmly unite the three countries of Koguryo, Baekjae, and Shilla. Although Lee Chadon was young and of low rank, he was able to fathom the heart of the king:

“Your Majesty, these days Buddhism has spread and prevailed among the people. You must now enlighten the nation by the law of the Buddha.”

“That is exactly what I intend to do. However, it is not easy because all the noblemen and the ministers consult shamans and invoke their blessings.”

At that time, Shilla was facing an alliance of noblemen who opposed the centralization of government and thus confronted the king. King Bupheung knew that it would be difficult to achieve his will simply by reforming or maintaining the system. What was needed was to reform the mentality of the people, of the noblemen, and of the officials, all of whom believed in shamanism. Thus, not only political but also religious opinions were sharply opposed to the king.

King Bupheung said to Lee Chadon: “Yes, you are right. What, then, should we do first?”

“Your Majesty, first of all we need to build a temple in which to enshrine the Buddha and in which priests can dwell and train in order to spread the laws of Buddhism.”

“In that case, let us build a temple. However, I am worried that the stubborn ministers will oppose this.”

“I will take full responsibility. If they make a strong protest, you will shift the blame onto my shoulders and cut off my head.”

“What? I want to give the people peace and goodness, so how on earth can I do that by cutting off the head of an innocent man?!”

“My death will bring about a great awakening. After all, if the sun of the Buddha rises in the middle of the sky and it makes you peaceful, then I am willing to do it.”

That is how the construction of the temple at Chunkyoungrim, in eastern Kumgyo began. Now, Chunkyoungrim was a holy shamanic locus, and, in choosing it, the king deliberately intended to directly oppose the forces of shamanism. As expected, the ministers came in crowds to challenge the king and to strenuously protest the building of the temple. Therefore, King Bupheung was compelled to command that Lee Chadon be brought forth.

When Lee Chadon, who was supervising the construction at Chunkyoungrim, was seized and brought to the palace, all the ministers glared vehemently at him.

“Death to Lee Chadon! He deserves to die because he ignored official discipline and

offended against our customs.”

“Your Majesty, let them kill me. I do not fear death for the law.”

Though King Bupheung was reluctant to do so, he had to order the death of Lee Chadon: “Cut off his head!”

When the day of his execution arrived, swarms of people came to witness the last minutes of Lee Chadon’s life. Even as he faced death, he prayed calmly to the Buddha:

“Oh Lord of the Great Law! I do not care about my physical life, but only for the divine order of the law of the Buddha. Therefore, please show the people an omen. For the sake of the Great Truth, let them know that my death is not in vain.”

Moments later, his head was cut off by a sword like a grass leaf being cut in the spring. White blood spurted out of his neck, the sky grew dark, both heaven and earth vibrated, and flowers rained down and covered the place of execution. All those who witnessed this stood in awe. Tears came to their eyes because of his noble spirit. A funeral was held for him at Bukak and the memorial temple of Chachu was erected in order to pray for the dead.

In the year 527, Buddhism was publicly and officially approved in Shilla and a brilliant Buddhist culture began to blossom. Centuries later, in 1285, the priest Ilyeun praised Lee Chadon’s martyrdom in his *Samgookyousa* (“the Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”).

Although death for righteousness is astonishing enough,
Flowers from heaven and white milk are more moving.
As soon as his body is destroyed by the sword,
Bells ring in all temples everywhere.

V

Drinking Water from a Skull: The Story of the Venerable Wonhyo

The venerable Wonhyo was born in Amnyang (a town in the Jain district of Kyoungsan county in Kyoungbuk province) and his family name was Seul in the secular world. He was not tied to any one special teacher, but sought freely and widely after the truth. In the course of this pursuit, he left for the kingdom of Dang to study advanced Buddhism. Buddhism was well established in Dang, which had a flourishing culture. When he first went abroad to study, he was accompanied by the venerable Weesang, who was seven years his junior. When they tried to pass over the border of the kingdom of Koguryo, however, they were captured by soldiers, and, after undergoing many hardships, they returned to Shilla.

Wonhyo's thirst after Truth remained unquenched, and so he and Weesang set out again, this time by a sea route. One day, after they had landed and were heading through some trackless mountains, it grew dark and so the venerable Wonhyo and the venerable Weesang were forced to sleep where night overtook them. Unknowingly, the two priests lay down and went to sleep amongst some graves in order to avoid the wind and chill. During the night Wonhyo awoke and felt extremely thirsty. When he opened his eyes, it was pitch dark. Searching about for something to drink, he found what seemed to be a gourd holding water. It tasted very sweet. The priest drank the water in one gulp and then slept soundly until daybreak.

The next morning, as soon as he woke up, he looked about for the gourd from which he had drunk the water during the night. However, there was no gourd, but only a wobbly skull that he had mistaken for gourd, and the sweet water he had drunk was actually rotten rainwater that had collected in the skull. He became sick to the stomach and vomited, but at the same moment, he attained spiritual enlightenment.

"When I knew nothing last night, the water tasted sweet and mellow. However, as soon as I knew that it was rotten rainwater in a skull, I imagined all sorts of terrible things and vomited!" Thereafter, the venerable Wonhyo perceived the truth and expressed his mind at the same time through this poem:

When the mind awakes, all laws arise and,
When the mind vanishes, the skull also disappears.
The three worlds* are all mind, and all laws are only understanding,
There are no laws out of mind, and no one seeks after the truth alone.

* Heaven, earth, and people

Weesang, who had slept beside Wonhyo during the night, woke up and prepared to depart. When he noticed that Wonhyo was not getting ready, he asked him why:

“Priest, why are you not preparing to leave?”

“What is the purpose of our going abroad to Dang?”

“To seek after Truth, of course.”

“Well then, if I have attained the Truth already, there is no more need for me to go.”

After saying this, he separated from the venerable Weesang and immediately returned to Shilla, where he preached the truth that he had attained in the graveyard and wrote many books. His great virtue was known all through the country of Shilla. He tied the nuptial bonds with Princess Yosuk, who bore him a son, Seolchong, who was a great scholar and compiled the literary text known as the *Eetoomoonja* (“the use of Chinese characters for writing Korean”).

The venerable Wonhyo grew his hair long and called himself Sosenggesa (“small monk among ordinary people”). He danced waving a clown’s gourd and sang songs so as to instruct the poor and illiterate people in the laws of the Buddha. In this way, the Buddhism of Shilla, in which only the aristocracy and the upper classes had believed, became popularized among the common people.

The venerable Wonhyo completed the Buddhist conversion of Shilla and has continued to have a great influence in many countries until this day. He is one of Korea’s most profound thinkers and men of religion. He was also the greatest writer in the age of Shilla. He produced a prolific body of works, about 100 volumes containing 240 books, although only 20 volumes and 22 books have survived. His central idea was *hwajaeng*, which means reconciling the prejudices that derive from denominational egoism and teaching that Buddhism is essentially one.

VI

The Profound Meaning of *Hwaumkyoung*: The Story of the Venerable Weesang

The venerable Weesang was born in the forty-second year of King Jinpyoung (579-632). He was a son of Duke Hanshin from Kyerim and his family name was Kim. Before becoming a Buddhist priest, he was known as Ilji (“sun-iris”) because his mother, the Duchess Sunna, had had a dream of her forthcoming conception. She had seen the sun rise in the sky and a kind of red iris, the size of a tray, was shining in her dream. After that, she had a boy, Weesang. From his early childhood, he was very bright and clearly had the dignity of a seeker after Truth. When Weesang was twenty-nine years old, he told his parents of his desire to become a priest.

“I have a sense of meaninglessness in this secular world. Please, give me your permission to search for a new way in the law of Buddha.”

Weesang went first to Hwangbok Temple and then decided to go the Dang dynasty to continue his training. Upon arrival in the Yangju area of China, he was assisted by the general, Yoo Jiin, and stayed in his official residence for a few days. Yoo Jiin’s daughter, Sunmyo admired the priest, but his mind was not shaken from its search for the Truth. Weesang spurned her advances and went on to Mount Jongnam.

At that time, a priest named Zium taught the Law of the Buddha in Zisang Temple on Mount Jongnam. He was a master of the Chinese *Hwaumkyong* sect. He knew that Weesang would come, so he cleaned the temple and waited for him. When Weesang arrived, Zium said:

“I already knew you would come because of a dream that I dreamed last night.”

Zium went on to explain that he had seen a branch stretching from Shilla, and on it sat a phoenix holding a precious stone in his mouth. The light shone to a distant place.

The venerable Zium accepted Weesang as his pupil and taught him the deep and profound meaning of the *Hwaumkyoung*, the text that contains the principles of this sect. Master and disciple grew to trust each other entirely as they studied over the years.

One day, the venerable Zium said to Weesang:

“It has already been four years since you came to Zisang Temple. You can now intuit great meaning by reading the *Hwaumkyoung*. Its every word, its every sentence, and its entirety is the best teaching there is about the wonderful state of deliverance of the Buddha.”

For eight more years, Weesang studied enthusiastically, and, in the end, he was able to attain the marvelous state of Buddhist deliverance. Therefore, his doubts disappeared and he clearly recognized the principle that all relations are like shadows reflected in a mirror. Thus, he composed a poem of two hundred and ten words divided into thirty verses of seven characters each. In this song for the Buddha, he expressed his recognition of the principle of *Hwaumkyoung*. He also painted a mandala entitled the *Hwaumilseng Bupgyedo* or the

Haeindo or the *Bupsungdo*, which all mean, “the picture of the world of the macro- and microcosm.”

His poem begins like this:

The nature of the law was harmonized and originally there were no two shapes
Every law is calm and does not move
There is no name, no shape, all things cease
To know obligation, there are no other cautions
For true nature is extremely deep and delicate
It is changed by relations, not by itself
One is everything, everything is one
One is all, all is one.

Weesang wished to ascertain whether this agreed with the truth of the *Hwaumkyoung* or not, and so he burnt brushwood and offered this prayer:

“I have tried to express the profound meaning of the *Hwaumkyoung* in a poem of two hundred and ten words divided into thirty verses. Put together with the meaning of the masters, the Buddha, the Manjusri of Wisdom, and the Venerable of Truth, I believe it will be impervious to fire.”

Having said this, Weesang threw the *Bupgyedo* into the fire, but, as might have been expected, it did not burn. Weesang showed the *Bupgyedo* to Zium, who was pleased and said joyfully:

“This is truly praiseworthy: all the great meaning of the *Hwaumkyoung* couched into thirty phrases! Merely reciting this poem for the Buddha is the equivalent of reading the *Hwaumkyoung*, so you can spread it widely.”

Having attained the Truth, Weesang no longer needed to remain in the Dang dynasty. Coincidentally, he learned that the Dang dynasty was planning to invade Shilla, so he returned to his home country ahead of the invading army and warned the people, thus preventing a great crisis.

After this, King Moonmoo (661-681) planned to build a huge wall by means of all the strength of his nation, so Weesang said to him:

“If a king possesses virtue and ability, he need only draw a line above the earth to mark a boundary and none will come and go over it. However, if a ruler does not practice righteousness, there is no use in building an iron wall.”

Likewise, Weesang taught and admonished the king about the basis of his politics. He also established the Busuk Temple on Mount Taebaek and lectured on the *Hwaumkyoung* for the prosperity of *Hwaumjong* in Shilla.

VII

Live for a Day and Then Die: The Spirit of the Religious Laws of the Venerable Zajang

The venerable Zajang, the founder of the *Kaeryuljong* sect, was known as Sunjongrang in his youth. His father was a high-ranking government official named Kim Murum who, because he did not have a son until late in his life, made the following vow to the Merciful Goddess:

“If you grant me a son, I swear that I will make him become a Buddhist so that he can teach the laws of the Buddha.”

Soon after he prayed sincerely in this manner, his wife dreamed that a huge star fell onto her bosom. Soon thereafter she felt that she was pregnant, and indeed, she gave birth to a boy, none other than Sunjongrang, later known as the venerable Zajang.

Due to his father’s prayer to the Buddha, Sunjongrang was bright and showed remarkable ability from his childhood, to the degree that his teachers were highly impressed with him. Sunjongrang rose in fame because of his mastery in writing, his eminent learning, and his virtue. He grew up, got married, and had offspring, and was enjoying a life free from worry and sorrow until he lost his parents and entered a period of deep grieving. Although he was delighted to have children, he mourned at losing his parents so soon, and so Sunjongrang came to meditate on the agony and transitory nature of human life.

Ultimately he came to believe that the way to avoid suffering was to realize the Truth by means of upright faith. Therefore, Sunjongrang suddenly left his family and went to practice asceticism in the deep mountains. He wore worn-out clothes and disciplined himself out by practicing while sitting surrounded by a thicket whose thorns would prick him if he drowsed or moved even the slightest bit.

When Queen Sunduk (632-647), the twenty-seventh monarch of the Shilla dynasty, ascended the throne she sought a proper person to appoint as her prime minister. She heard about Sunjongrang, who was practicing in the mountains, and about his scholastic achievements and his personality. Therefore she repeatedly sent envoys to visit him and ask him to proceed to the Royal Court to become prime minister, but he always declined. Finally, Queen Sunduk grew enraged and ordered her lieges:

“If he says that he does not want to come once more, cut off his head and bring it here!”

The envoys went to him again and told him of the queen’s orders, but Sunjongrang just answered with composure:

“I would rather keep the Law for a day and then die than apostatize and live for a hundred years.”

Having spoken thus he stuck out his neck, but the envoy could not bring himself to cut off his head. He returned to Queen Sunduk and told her the truth, whereupon she realized that she could not but allow his asceticism:

“How can I punish him when he has ardently devoted his heart to the Buddhist doctrines?”

After this incident, he changed his name to Zajang by a Buddhist commandment. While the venerable Zajang practiced asceticism, if his provisions gave out, birds brought fruit to him in the mountain. The venerable Zajang observed the commandments, devoted himself to discipline, and then went abroad to the Dang dynasty, where the emperor honored him greatly.

The venerable Zajang went to the district where Mount Chengryang was located. On that mountain was a grove sacred to the Manjusri of Wisdom, and there he prayed sincerely. On the seventh day, whether in a dream or a vision, Manjusri appeared to him and said:

“Because you are keeping the commandments, I will now give you the clothes that Buddha himself wore, so hold yourself up and consecrate these things.”

After seven years of studying abroad, he returned to Shilla with the Buddha’s clothes and with many scriptures and statues of the Buddha that were previously unknown in Korea, so the whole people welcomed him enthusiastically.

The next queen, Sungduk, appointed the venerable Zajang to be her *daeguktong*, the title of an official who managed the legal problems of priests in Shilla times. Therefore, the venerable Zajang took the opportunity to spread the laws of the Buddha and to improve discipline. Every fifteenth day, he sent an order to all the temples in the nation to preach the Buddhist commandments and enforce *posal* or the confession of sins and the assurance of good deeds. He also held tests twice a year, once in the winter and once in the spring, in order to improve the quality of priests, and he further appointed an official to inspect local temples. Additionally, he established certain manners of adorning statues and temples so that, all in all, the laws of the Buddha were established in an orderly way. Thus, in accordance with these laws, there was great prosperity and most people received the Buddhist commandments and believed that it was great honor to one’s family to become a priest.

The venerable Zajang built Dongdo Temple as a repository for the Buddha’s garments and as the basic seminary of the *Kaeryuljong* sect. In this manner, the foundation of Buddhism in Shilla was firmly laid.

VIII

Commandments for the World: The *Sesokohkye* of Priest Wonkwang

There was once a Buddhist priest named Wonkwang who was an avid reader from his early childhood. He read extensively in the books of Confucianism and Taoism, and moreover he mastered the *Zeijabaekga* or “disciples hundred volumes,” namely the canon of all the scholars and schools in China. When he was twenty-five years old, he went abroad to the Jin dynasty, which at that time was reputed to be the most civilized country, and there he devoted himself to Buddhism, became a priest, and took the name Wonkwang.

“Although the commandments of worldly knowledge may reach a divine stage, compared to the teachings of the Buddha, they are mere rotten straw,” thought he.

When Wonkwang became a priest he studied the scriptures of the Buddha again and again until there was nothing that he did not know. When rumors that Wonkwang was saving many people through his lectures on Mahayanist scriptures spread back to Shilla, King Jinpyoung (579-632) sent an ambassador to the emperor of the Soo dynasty to ask him to allow the priest to come home. When Wonkwang finally returned to Shilla after several decades, not only the king, but all the people as well revered him as a venerable.

At this time, Kuisan, who was a *hwarang* [see chapter III] and lived at Moryangbu, made friends with another youth from the same village named Chuihyang, and together they set out to seek men of virtue in order to learn the Truth. They thought like this:

“If we want to associate with scholars and wise men, we should first set our minds right and be prudent with our bodies or we will certainly come to shame, so why don’t we find a man of virtue and ask him the Truth?”

Therefore, Kuisan and Chuihyang went to the Gaseelgap Temple to meet Wonkwang. They said to him:

“We are foolish people who have lived in the secular world and so we know nothing. We entreat you: teach us words that we can regard as a lesson for all our lives.”

The venerable Wonkwang answered:

“Well, there are the *bosalgae*, which are ten commandments for a Buddhist living at home, but you cannot keep them because you are other people’s subjects and sons. Instead, I will teach you the five commandments that a man who lives in the secular world has to keep, so listen attentively and do as I say.

“The first commandment is the *saguneechung*, according to which one is to serve the king with loyalty. The second is the *sachineehyo*, according to which one is to respect one’s parents with filial piety. The third is the *kyooeeshin*, which requires one to keep faith with one’s friends. The fourth is the *imchonmootway*, which requires one to refuse to admit defeat or retreat in battle. The fifth and final one is the *salsaengyootaek*, which is the principle of not killing life carelessly, but only selectively.”

The Buddhist commandment or *kye* is a principle that human beings in general ought to observe. Thus, the venerable Wonkwang regulated the fundamental spirit of the commandment and preached it so that people came to call the commandments the *sesokohkye* or the *hwarangohkye* [see chapter III].

Kuisan and Chuihyang had no problem understanding four of these commandments because they had often heard them. However, they could hardly make out the fifth one, “not to take life carelessly but only selectively” because the Pulsalsaeng (“don’t-kill-life,” 不殺生) teaching is the best commandment in Buddhism.

For this reason, they asked:

“We already heard and knew the others, but we cannot understand the meaning of the fifth commandment.”

In response to this, Wonkwang explained two situations related to killing, one indicating the time and the other indicating the objects.

“The former is not kill during the *yokjaeil*, [six days of every month, i.e., the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 29th and 30th days] and latter is not to take even trivial life carelessly. Although there may be situations for killing, you should kill only what you may need and not kill too much. This is the right way to behave in the secular world.”

“From now on, we will observe and practice these five commandments without fail,” said the two youths, who bowed politely and left with joyful hearts.

After this, they participated in a war and rendered meritorious deeds. The *sesokohkye* became the life principle not only of Kuisan and Chuihyang, but also of all the youth in Shilla and the basic idea of *hwarangdo*. In addition, it was the foundation on which Shilla unified the three kingdoms of ancient Korea (Koguryo, Baekjae, and Shilla) and created a brilliant culture.

The venerable Wonkwang received the reverence of the whole people and, when he was ninety-nine year old (640), he went to Nirvana while sitting calmly in Hwangryong Temple. At the moment of his departure, music was heard from heaven and a mysterious fragrance filled the temple; afterwards, the entire nation performed funeral rites for him on a regal scale.

IX

Carrying a Burning Brazier on his Head: The Venerable Hyetong and the Venerable Mooway (Fearlessness)

The venerable Hyetong was a priest in the time of Shilla and it was he who founded the Zinunjong sect of Buddhism in Korea. The following story is told about the time before he became a priest.

One day he caught an otter in the mountains. He ate it and threw the bones out into his backyard. When he awoke the following dawn he could not find the otter's bones, but when he looked all around, he did see a bloody trail. Thinking that this was strange, he followed the bloody trail into the mountains and finally came to a cave where he saw the rawboned otter embracing five baby otters. This sight astonished him and for a long time he stood dumbstruck until he realized that this beast, which he had regarded as a small trifle, had not forgotten its babies even after death, and so its life, too, was precious. This realization made him think profoundly about what a terrible sin it is to kill.

After this moment when he realized the dignity of all living things, he prayed for the souls of the lives that he had killed. Thereafter, he became a priest in order to seek the true way, and took the Buddhist name of Hyetong. In order to discipline himself, he set off for the Dang dynasty on his truth-seeking path.

At this time, there was a great priest of the *Zinunjong* sect named the venerable Mooway (Fearlessness) in the Dang dynasty, so the venerable Hyetong went to him and asked him to teach him.

“Where do you come from?” said Mooway.

“I have come from the far kingdom of Shilla for the sole purpose of seeking the Buddha's Truth,” said Hyetong.

“What, you are a barbarian from the shore of the East Sea? How can *you* be a vessel that can be filled with the law of the Buddha?”

“There are four cardinal points in the human realm, but how can this cause any distinction in the heart of those who seek the Law?”

“You speak too much, go back home!”

Although the venerable Mooway spoke thus and did not even glance up at him, Hyetong thought this was a test of his faith and endurance so he kept practicing constantly under Mooway's instruction even though he was maltreated.

After three years, Hyetong once again asked for his teachings, but Mooway's attitude was still indifferent.

Hyetong decided that he would rather die than fail in receiving the law of the heart. He put a burning brazier on top of his head and thought of the ancient saying, ‘do not spare your life to seek the Law.’ Therefore he appeared in front of Mooway only to fall down as his head burst open from the flames of the burning brazier.

When the venerable Mooway saw this, he went up to Hyetong, removed the fire-pot, smoothed his burst-open head with his hands, and uttered an incantation. Immediately, the wound was healed and Hyetong recovered consciousness. From this moment, people called him, Hyetong Zonja Wanghuasang (“The venerable Hyetong king-scar”) because the scar that was left by the flames of the brazier was similar to the character “wang” (王), which means “king.”

Thus, the venerable Hyetong received the law of the heart from Mooway, returned to his country of Shilla, and founded the *Zinunjong* sect there in order to spread the law of the Buddha. He was said to have supernatural powers and to be able to work miracles, such as bringing rains during droughts.

Once when King Shinmoon (681-692) suffered from an abscess on his back, he asked Hyetong to come and heal his disease. When the priest uttered a single incantation, the king was healed completely. Thereupon Hyetong said:

“Your majesty, when you were a prime minister in a previous existence, you made a good citizen named Shinchong (“faith and loyalty”) into a slave. Therefore, because of Shinchong’s resentment, he works revenge upon you in every rebirth through the laws of samsara. You suffered from this disease as a result of Shinchong’s influence, so you should establish a temple for him and pray for his soul in order to remove his desire for revenge.”

As soon as the king heard this, he built a temple, named Shinchongbongsungsa (“the temple for Shinchong”). As soon as the temple was completed, a voice was heard from heaven:

“Your majesty, because you established this temple, I have been relieved of my sufferings and born into heaven, so my need for revenge has been removed.”

The king thought that this was a miracle, and so he built another temple, called Zulwondang, which means, “removing revenge,” on the spot where the voice was heard, and he also made Hyetong the national high priest.

X

Entering a Perfect State of Spiritual Concentration: The Story of the Venerable Heerang

The venerable Heerang was a Buddhist priest in the last period of Shilla. He was born in Guechang and he entered the temple of Haein, where he became known as a master of *hwaumhak*, the study of a particular Buddhist sect that emphasizes meditation, practice, and good works (see chapter VI). He exchanged poetry and prose with Choi Chiwon (857-?), an outstanding scholar of the Shilla dynasty. Furthermore, Heerang gained the spiritual trust of Wanggen, the first king of the Koryo dynasty.

When the unified kingdom of Shilla collapsed and was divided back into three kingdoms, a scion of the royalty of Baekjae named Wolkwang opposed Wanggen at Mount Misoong. Wanggen was entrapped and cut-off by Wolkwang's strategy, so he sent an envoy to the temple of Haein in order to announce the emergency to priest Heerang, who thereupon concentrated upon *hwaum* and called upon the guardian gods to help Wanggen in his difficulty.

When Wolkwang's soldiers invaded Wanggen's territory, they saw heavenly warriors surrounding them, and so they said:

“There is surely a divine entity among them, so there is no way that we can win,” whereupon they ran away in fear.

It is reported that after this Wanggen so admired the venerable Heerang's spiritual powers that he rebuilt the temple where the priest was staying.

The tower known as Heerangdae was built by the venerable Heerang on his place of prayer, and a wooden figure that was made by imitating his image in person was also enshrined in Haein Temple. The venerable Heerang's scholastic mantle was handed to the venerable Kyoonyoh, who composed the *Bohyunshipwonga*, a song of ten letters and eleven stanzas for the popularization of Buddhism. In the legend of Kyoonyoh, there is a short story about the venerable Heerang.

XI

Changing the Location of a Cauldron Nine Times: The Story of the Venerable Goojung (Nine-Kettles)

There was once a young man who eked out a bare living by selling silk fabric. One day, while resting on the ridge of a mountain, he saw an old priest dressed in rags and standing alone without moving for long time. The silk merchant went up to him and said:

“Sir, what are you doing here?”

The old priest smiled beneficently and answered:

“I am providing living things with food.”

Hearing this, the merchant wondered and asked again:

“What kind of living things are you providing with food and how are you doing it?”

“If I move, the louse that is sucking my blood inside my clothes will be inconvenienced; so, I will not move for a while.”

The youth was so impressed by this speech that he suddenly felt that life in the secular world was terribly trivial and so he desired to become the old priest’s disciple and to practice under him. He made a firm decision to do this, threw down his bundle of silk, and followed the old priest as he climbed up the mountain.

When they finally reached Kwanumam, a rock carving of the Bodhisattva Kwanum on the eastern peak of Mount Ohdae, the youth addressed the old priest, saying:

“I used to scratch out a living by selling silks, but today I was so impressed with your benign appearance and behavior that I had a sudden desire to practice asceticism, and so I followed your trail. Please take me on as your pupil.”

“Do you want to be a priest? Will you do whatever I tell you?”

“Yes! I will do whatever you tell me.”

The priest only allowed the youth to follow him after getting this assurance from him.

The following day, the priest made the ascetic move a cauldron from its place in the kitchen to a different location, and so the youth dug up earth, mixed soil and straw, kneaded them together, and then placed the cauldron on top of them. By the time he was finished, the middle of the day was long past and the sun was sinking.

When the old priest went to the kitchen and saw the cauldron, he again ordered:

“You have placed the cauldron very well, but it is useless here, so move it over there and position it again.”

Thereupon he left, and beginning early the next morning, the youth moved the cauldron that he had secured so diligently the previous day, shifted it to another fuel hole, doing all his work in detail and with much care, so that he finished the job well. However, after a while the old priest returned and rebuked him with an angry voice:

“You rascal! How could you place the cauldron like this? It is leaning to one side, so reposition it again.”

Thereupon he knocked the cauldron over with his staff and went out. When the youth saw this he knew that there had been nothing wrong with the placement of the cauldron, but he simply repositioned it silently, without even a single word of complaint.

He repeatedly moved and repositioned the cauldron as many as nine times, for this was the priest's way of teaching him endurance and humility. Thereafter, the priest approved of him and accepted him as his pupil, giving him the Buddhist name, Goojung, which means "nine kettles," to reflect his moving the cauldron nine times.

After this, the venerable Goojung devotedly practiced asceticism to the degree that his fame spread in later days, and his story became a good model for today's priests in the mountains.

XII

The Era of the Suppression of Buddhism: The Story of the Venerable Bowoo

Although Lee Senggye (1335-1408), the founder of the Chosun dynasty, personally revered Buddhism, he insisted on Confucianism as a political idea. So, dignitaries in the Chosun dynasty followed Confucianism and regarded Buddhism, which had flourished in the preceding Koryo dynasty, as an anti-ethical religion that taught people to ignore not only their king but also their own parents. They therefore proscribed and suppressed Buddhism. Restrictions were placed upon becoming priests, who were treated as low-class men and forbidden to enter the capital city. Furthermore, Buddhist temples were desecrated and turned into amusement quarters for the royal family and the bureaucracy.

Buddhism was thus suppressed from the beginning of the Chosun dynasty, although the eighth king, Sejo (1455-1468), through his personal ascetic practices of repentance, encouraged Buddhism for a while during his reign. However, it was in the reigns of the ninth Chosun monarch, Sengjong (1469-1494), who spearheaded the prosperity of Confucianism, the tenth monarch, the tyrant Yensangun (1494-1506), and the eleventh king, Jungjong (1506-1544), that the suppression of Buddhism was most extreme.

Queen Moonjeng, the wife of King Jungjong and the mother of King Myoungjong (1545-1567), was secretly anxious about this persecution. The queen was deeply devoted to Buddhism, but King Sengjong and King Jungjong proscribed it, so she was helpless until Jungjong passed away and Myoungjong ascended to the throne at the age of twelve and she became regent. Holding supreme power, she could not trust the Confucian government officials who indulged in party disputes. On the other hand, she revered Buddhist priests, who broke away both from clique and from profit in order to become masters through thorough training and were eminent both in learning and in virtue, and so she turned to them for advice. In addition, she planned on establishing a huge temple for the revival of Buddhism.

Thus, following Queen Moonjeng's intentions, Prime Minister Zeng Manjong recommended the venerable Bowoo from the temple of Baekdam on Mount Sorak to her. After the venerable Bowoo had become a priest in the fourth year of King Jungjong (1509), he concentrated on ascetic practices and achieved both learning and virtue. He now accepted the queen's suggestion, and so she was as happy as a dragon meeting water (i.e., as a fish in water). Thereafter, Queen Moonjung and the venerable Bowoo strove to raise the light of Buddhist law with all their might and main.

In the sixth year of her regency and of King Myoungjong's reign (1551), when the queen revived *dochepje* (the public identification of priests) and *sunkyoyangjongje* (the division of two branches of Buddhism, the Sunjong (Zen) and the Kyojong), which had been abolished by King Yensangun, the ministers of the royal court and the Confucian scholars of the

Senggyunkwan (the institute for the study Confucianism) appealed to the throne to oppose her. However, Queen Moonjung followed the venerable Bowoo's advice and established the Sunjong (Zen) sect in the temple of Bongeun and the Kyojong sect in the temple of Bongsun in order to revive *sunkyoyangjongje*. She appointed the venerable Bowoo in person to be in charge of the Sunjong (Zen) sect as the high priest of Bongeun Temple, and the venerable Soojin to be in charge of the Kyojong sect as the high priest of Bongsun Temple. She also carried out the *dochepje* again and restored the public relationship between Buddhism and the Chosun dynasty.

Queen Moonjung frequently visited the venerable Bowoo at Bongen Temple, consulted him about all sorts of national matters, and sought ways to revive Buddhism. Therefore, in the ninth year of her regency and King Myoungjong's reign (1554), they revived a test for priests in order to improve their quality, and, as a result, many excellent priests were produced. In particular, two high priests named the venerable Sesan and the venerable Samyong passed the test and became priests in this time.

However, in the twentieth year of King Myoungjong (1565) the queen passed away and the ministers of the royal court and the Confucian scholars who harbored disaffection arose and appealed to the throne more than four hundred times for the execution of the Zen priest Bowoo. For example, Yolgok Leelee, called the wise man of Haedong (the Eastern region of the North-Eastern part of ancient Korea), wrote in his *Nonyoseng Bowooso* ("an appeal to the throne about the wicked priest Bowoo"):

"These days, the people are greatly indignant due to the doings of Bowoo, and so we should tear him limb from limb."

Indeed, the venerable Bowoo was exiled to the island of Cheju, where he was killed by a district official in the twentieth year of King Myoungjong (1565) and the fifty-fifth year of his own life, forty years after becoming a priest. The following year, both the *dochepje* and the quality test for priests were abolished and Buddhism was again suppressed.

For a long time, the venerable Bowoo was viewed as a wicked priest, when in fact he was an esteemed venerable and a Bodhisattva who worked in the defense of both the nation and of Buddhist laws. His collected works, the *Hoeungtangchip* ("The Empty Answer Anthology") show what an uncommon man he was.

The venerable Samyong delivered this eulogy for him:

"The venerable Bowoo was born in a small country and obtained the Law, which had not been obtained for ages. Today's scholars have learned the way to go owing to this priest, and if it had not been for the venerable Bowoo, both the poetry of Mount Ryoung and the melody of Sorim would have been lost."