

Songgwang-sa Temple

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Second in an occasional series on noteworthy Korean temples.

Songgwang-sa (“Vast Pines Monastery”) is one of the three treasure temples of Korea — the sangha treasure — (the others are Haein-sa, the dharma treasure, and Tongdo-sa, the Buddha treasure). It is so called because it has been the premier Zen temple in Korea for the last eight hundred years, and because of the number of eminent monks it has produced. From 1210 to 1428, sixteen successive resident teachers at Songgwang-sa were given the title of National Teacher by Korean kings, attesting to the unique teaching lineage established by Bojo Chinul (1157-1210). Like most Korean temples, Songgwang-sa is located amidst the magnificent scenery of the Chogye Mountains in the south-central part of what is now South Korea.

Songgwang-sa was established as a small temple in 770, and called Kilsang-sa. At that time, the temple was associated with the Hwaom (Avatamsaka) sect, the predominant doctrinal school of Korean Buddhism. In 1197, Bojo Chinul moved his “prajna and samadhi” (wisdom and meditation) community there and brought it to prominence.

Bojo Chinul is known to us today as the founder of the native tradition of Zen in Korea. He was born at a time when Buddhism under the Koryo dynasty (969-1392) had become corpulent and corrupt. When Chinul went to the capital city of Kaesong as a young monk to take his monk’s examination, he found his colleagues to be interested only in the pursuit of fame and power. Disgusted, he circulated a manifesto proposing a community designed to foster constant training in samadhi and prajna. Ten of Chinul’s fellow monks signed the compact, but it took many long years for the community to take shape.

The first forming took place at a small temple called Kojo-sa, but the needs of the community soon outgrew the small temple. They found the remains of Kilsang-sa temple on Songgwang-mountain. Although the area of the temple was not big enough, the site was outstanding and the land fertile; the springs were sweet and the forests abundant. It was truly a place which would be appropriate for the community’s goals of cultivating the mind, nourishing self-nature, gathering an assembly, and making merit.

In the spring of 1197, the community moved to the new site and work began on restoration. Later, Kilsang-sa was renamed Songgwang-sa after the mountain on which it was located. Chinul’s pioneering efforts at Songgwang-sa were directed towards an integrated,



complementary approach to the study of Zen and sutras, thus taking the edge off centuries of rivalry between these two approaches to understanding Buddha’s teachings. In 1205, King Uijong ordered a change in the name of the mountain from Songgwang-san to Chogye-san, Chogye Mountain being the site in south China where Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch, had his temple.

After Chinul’s death in 1210, his successor Hyeshim (1178-1234) became the leader of the community, and under his leadership, Songgwang-sa blossomed even more into a center for the cultivation of samadhi and prajna. Hyeshim compiled more than 1700 kong-ans into one single volume, a seminal work which continues to be integral to the practice of Zen in Korea. Chinul and Hyeshim provided a dynamic and authentic leadership not only for Songgwang-sa but for Korean Zen in general.

The present temple of Songgwang-sa has undergone six major reconstructions in its history. The latest reconstruction was completed just prior to the Seoul Olympics in 1988, and turned the main Buddha hall into a huge and magnificent room. This latest phase of reconstruction repaired the damage done to many buildings during the Korean War, when more than half were destroyed by fire.

In this century, Songgwang-sa reestablished a position as the premier Zen temple in Korea under the leadership of Zen Master Hyo Bong (1888-1966). In a religious culture where most of the monks came from farming families and could barely read and write, Hyo Bong stood out because he was a judge before donning monk’s robes. He became the archbishop of Korean Buddhism in 1958 and held this position until his death. His most famous disciple was Zen Master Ku San (1909-1983) who became the resident teacher at Songgwang-sa in 1967, and established the first facilities in the country for Western men and women to become monastics. Ku San’s students are now dispersed around the world, and have been instrumental in making Korean Zen known and available to their western audiences.

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