

# The Story of Hwaeomsa Temple

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## **1. The Building Where the Ritual is Held for the Spirit of Jirisan Mountain**

As you cross the bridge that leads to Hwaeomsa Temple, on the right side you will see a small house. The people who live in this area believe in a god that watches over Jirisan Mountain. This house is the building where the ritual is offered to the mountain spirit. The ritual is held every year around the time that farmers begin planting their crops, and they have been doing this for more than a thousand years.

Around 2,000 years ago, the rulers of the Korean Peninsula chose five sacred mountains as the site for the rituals. The mountain in the capital was at the center, while another mountain was chosen for each of the four cardinal directions. The ritual was held at each of these locations as a prayer for the gods to bring peace to the country and the people.

Jirisan Mountain was one of those mountains. While dynasties have changed and the capital is different today, this mountain is still considered a holy site.

The mountain also plays a role in the ancient Eastern geomantic system known as *feng shui*. Practitioners of *feng shui* look at the geographic features of mountains and rivers to predict people's fortunes and to decide where to build a house or dig a grave. According to this system, the mountain is believed to have risen up out of the ground after absorbing energy that shot south across the peninsula from Baekdusan Mountain. The highest mountain on the Korean Peninsula, Baekdusan Mountain is located in the northern region of present-day North Korea.

This is why many generations of Koreans have believed that they must climb Jirisan Mountain at least one time before they die.

## **2. The First Gate to Hwaeomsa Temple**

The first gate to Hwaeomsa Temple is called Burimun, and it looks like pillars holding up a huge roof.

Hwaeomsa is as huge a temple as Jirisan Mountain is high, and it holds a number of important cultural heritages.

The temple was founded in the year 544 by a Buddhist monk from India. Legend has it that he flew here on a winged turtle with the Buddhist scriptures in his hand. The temple was named for the scriptures that the monk brought with him.

After that, a number of great monks stayed here, helping the temple to thrive. At one time, it's said that the nation ordered people to pay their taxes directly at this temple. This shows us that the temple had a lot

of authority.

### **3. Monument for Byeogam**

If you continue on toward the temple after passing through the first gate, on the right you will see a large stone monument on the back of a turtle with the head of a dragon.

The panel by the monument tells you that the text here was written in memory of a Buddhist monk who lived at that time. The fact that such a monument could be built at a time when Buddhism was being suppressed in Korea shows us this person must have been greatly revered.

The monument was built for a monk named Byeogam. This monk raised an army of monks during the time of the Japanese and Mongolian invasions and led them against the attackers. Later, he also played an important role in rebuilding many of the important temples in Korea that had been destroyed in the war.

One interesting fact is that, at the time of the Japanese invasion, he took charge of training the army here at this temple. In addition, at the time of the Mongolian invasion, he led a group of monks to the site of present-day Seoul to repair the defensive walls.

When the Mongols invaded again, he led 3,000 soldiers into battle himself even though he was over 60 years old. It was to commemorate such deeds that this memorial was built.

### **4. Temple Guards and Four Guardian Spirits**

Let us move on to the temple's second gate.

Here you'll find the gatekeeper clay statues that serve as the temple's spiritual guardians. These statues were made under the direction of the monk who appeared on the memorial that we just passed by.

Of the two huge clay statues, the guard on the right is said to have the strength of a million elephants. The guard on the left is in a defensive stance. The weapons in their hands are said to be made of unbreakable stone.

Let's move on and into the next gate.

As you enter the temple's third gateway, you will see the figures of the Four Heavenly Kings.

The role of these figures is protecting the temple as well. In their hands are various symbolic items such as an ancient Asian stringed instrument, sword, dragons with a pearl in their mouths and a pagoda. As the story has it, these four had once been gods of ancient India, but they accepted the teaching of Buddha and converted to Buddhism.

Since these wooden statues were made in a time when there were many wars, they look more fierce and warlike than those made at other times.

### **5. A Place that Helps Many People**

After passing through all of the gates and going up a long staircase, you will find yourself at a building, whose name can be translated as "a place that helps many people." The monks at the temple also hold Buddhist services at this place. You might think of it as an auditorium where monks or laypeople gather for a religious service.

Take a look at the thick, rough-hewn logs that are the pillars holding up the building. These show us the aesthetics of traditional Korean architectural, which tries to accept nature as it is.

We are told that the builders did their best to ensure that the placement of this building would be in harmony with the bell tower and other buildings in the area.

### **6. The Building that Houses Buddha**

Located directly in front of you is the most important building in the temple, as the statue of Buddha is located there. This structure, which was rebuilt in 1630, is an important cultural heritage.

At most temples, the statue of Buddha, the founder of the religion, is located in the very center of the main hall. At this temple, however, a celestial Buddha that is the personification of truth is considered important, and so his statue is placed in the center.

Here you can see three sitting Buddhas. In the middle is the Buddha representing truth, on the left is the founder of Buddhism, and on the right is the Buddha representing morality.

These three Buddhas are regarded as most important in traditional Korean Buddhism.

### **7. The Former Site of the Stone Scriptures**

The original use of this building is to store the portraits of the temple's great monks, but currently it is the repository of 14,000 fragments of Buddhist scriptures made of stone.

Buddhist scriptures were engraved on stone so that the teachings of Buddha could be passed on to future generations.

The reason that they are in pieces today is that, when the Japanese made war on Korea a long time ago, the building that stored the stone tablets collapsed in a fire, breaking all of them. Even the fragments are still regarded as very valuable and have been designated as a cultural heritage, which is why they are being protected today.

These stone scriptures were engraved around 400 years before the famous *Tripitaka Koreana* wooden scriptures were carved in the 13th century. If they had survived into the present in their original condition, they would probably be highly valued as one of the world's great cultural artifacts.

### **8. The Building That Houses the God That Grants People's Wishes**

This is the building that houses the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy that grants people's wishes. Even today, when Buddhists pray, they call on the name of this goddess as they pray for their heart's desire.

On the outside, it may look very plain, but if you look inside, you can see that the building has the exact structure that is found in buildings at much larger temples. This has led certain scholars to suggest that the building was once used for praying for the prosperity of the royal family.

The other building next to this one houses the 16 disciples of the Buddha. In here, we see the Buddha in the middle, surrounded by his two most outstanding disciples and various other followers.

Unlike the solemn expressions on the faces of Buddhas in other temples, here you can see a variety of human expressions playing on the faces of the disciples.

### **9. The Biggest Building at Hwaeomsa Temple**

You have reached the building at Hwaeomsa Temple that is regarded as the biggest, grandest, and most beautiful. It's currently designated as one of Korea's important culture heritages.

Look inside to find the statue of the Buddha and around it figures of various Buddhist gods and saints.

Behind the Buddha statue, there are also colorful Buddhist paintings that are drawn with delicate lines and red tones.

We are told that, a long time ago, this was the site of a three-story building that contained a statue of the Buddha that was nearly five meters tall. However, that building was burned down at the time of a severe Japanese invasion 400 years ago and was rebuilt in its current form about 100 years after that.

The stone lantern in the yard in front of this building is another important cultural heritage.

The lantern was made in imitation of an imaginary flower that represents Buddhist ideals. This flower is said to bloom only once every 3,000 years when the king appears who will lead the world into righteousness. With a height of 6.4 meters, this is the largest stone lantern in Korea.

Standing in front of the lantern, you can see that it rivals the height of the building itself. This is because the lantern was originally associated with the three-story building that vanished long ago.

### **10. The Pagoda Where the Sarira are Kept**

If you turn to the left of the building, you will find a set of stairs leading up the mountain.

There are 108 stairs in all, a number that corresponds to the kinds of physical and mental torments that humans must undergo according to Buddhism. If you count the Buddhist prayer beads that monks use, you will find that there are 108 of these as well. As monks go up and down the stairs fingering the prayer beads, they discipline their mind to overcome pain.

At the top of the steps, you will reach a three-story stone pagoda. This is the place that stores the *sarira*, the little stones that came from the body of the Buddha.

From below, four stone lions are holding up the pagoda, while on the first floor, a number of Buddhist gods and saints are engraved in the stone.

If you look between the pillars of the stone lantern that is facing the stone pagoda, you can see the figure of a kneeling person. This person is the monk who came from India to establish this temple. He is politely holding up a glass of tea toward the pagoda.

## **11. As You Drink a Cup of Green Tea**

If you follow the path that starts behind and to the right of Daeungjeon Hall, you will come upon a mountain path that leads to the temple's hermitage. Go past a valley and a grove of bamboo trees to find the place where guests are served tea and, further along up some stairs cut into the rock, the hermitage.

As you look inside the hermitage, you will see 1,000 small statues of the Buddha. Take a closer look, and you will realize that the facial expressions and sizes of these statues are all slightly different. Below the roof of the hermitage, you can see the figure of a rabbit on the back of a turtle. In Buddhism, since Buddha was a rabbit in his former life, the animal is viewed as a symbol of dedication and sacrifice.

Go back down the stairs and take a look at the building where tea is served. The rough pillars that form the frame of this building were made from quince trees. The builders did their best to preserve these trees in their natural state.

This is where guests are served tea. The monks have been making the tea themselves since the temple was first built, and its flavor and scent are so superb that in times past it was even served to the king.

There is no charge for the tea, so why not take this chance to experience the delicious flavor and aroma for yourself?