

Temple Solace



*Zealous to deliver the suffering people,
He fought on the mountains and plains.
Oh, how many times did he go
Without food and drink?*

*When you sup on Northern viands and southern dainties,
When you have superb wine and precious grain,
Remember, My Lord,
His fortitude and fervor*

*- Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven
Canto 113*



When Taejo first returned to the Hanyang area, it was proposed that perhaps the former King could take up residence in the old house of his deceased son, Bang-beon, who had been murdered in the First Strife of the Princes. But Taejo would not consider such a possibility. So King Taejong resolved to build new residential buildings in the small Deoksogung side palace that he began to expand specifically for his father to live in while in Hanyang.¹ While a permanent new residential structure was being built, Taejo lived for a time in a tent on the Deoksogung grounds.²

But this arrangement didn't last long. The fact is that Taejo didn't enjoy being back in the capital, nor being close to his son, King Taejong, who had caused him such pain. At one festive occasion after returning to Hanyang, Taejong and his ministers were celebrating and dancing up a storm. King Taejong happened to mention how great it was that his father had returned to the capital, "and has become comfortable." "It is the will of Heaven" that things turned out the way they did, Taejong said as he invited his associates to drink and dance. Taejo grew angry at the hubris and insult and suddenly drew

his sword, rebuking Taejong, and ordering him never to say that again. Both Taejo and Taejong ended up in tears.³ On another ceremony uniting the two Kings, Taejo provoked everyone by staring at the sky for a long time. Then he looked to Taejong and asked him coldly: “How many of your relatives are left alive to help you?” Then he gave some blunt advice.

Some [of your relatives] are already dead and some are exiled. There are many helpers around when things go well, but few helpers are around when things go poorly. There is no such thing as a relative who helps when dead. So if you preserve your relatives, there will be fewer national catastrophes, fewer celestial disturbances and less havoc on earth.

Hearing this cold reminder that the family tragedy remained very much alive, Taejong became shocked, shed tears, and withdrew.⁴

With a dark mood like this, it is not surprising that King Taejo didn't spend much time joining court soirees, though he had returned to the capital area. Instead, throughout 1402 and beyond, Taejo mostly spent his days and nights at the nearby Buddhist temple of Hoemsa on Mt. Soyosan.* The Hoemsa temple was one of the largest in Joseon, located right between the two capitals of Hanyang and Gaegyeong, about 80 li from both. It must have pleased the former King Taejo that Monk Muhak spent substantial time at Hoemsa as well, typically splitting his duties between Hoemsa and Geumgangsán, the east-coast temple where Taejo once performed the Maitreya ritual. Through winter and early spring of 1402, Taejo mostly used Hoemsa temple as his retreat.⁵ “I am now too worn out for diligent effort and have put off the heavy burden, wishing

* Taejo visited many other temples during this time as well. For example, he often spent time at Heungcheonsa, erected in honor of Lady Kang. He visited Mt Geumgang as well, the east coast site of the old Maitreya rituals just before he became King. See *Taejong Sillok* 1:1 [1401] (3.1.1) (3.11.1).

only to devote myself entirely to the service of Buddha, prostrating myself before him morning and night," the former King explained.⁶ On the slopes of Soyosan, Taejo constantly gave prayers to his deceased wives and murdered sons.

King Taejong came sometimes to Soyosan to offer supplicating meals to his father and sent ministers begging him to enter the capital, but to no avail. "I'm out of the palace because I don't want to be with you, who has killed my son-in-law, as well as Bang-seok and Bang-beon," Taejo bluntly informed his son. "I will follow them soon, so there is no need to be in the palace."⁷

Though the Confucian students of Sungkyunkwan mostly denounced Buddhist practices, King Taejo remained a devout Buddhist until the end of his days. It is ironic that the founding King retreated to Buddhist meditations in his final years, since his Confucian *sadaebu* had endeavored to turn Joseon firmly against Buddhism from the earliest days of Taejo's reign. In the very first list of key principles that Taejo received from the *sadaebu* after taking the throne, there were denunciations of Buddhism. "The so-called Buddhism is a religion that originated in a barbarian country," the advisors critiqued, bemoaning how Buddhist temples now rose all over the country. And although Buddhism originally taught people to seek austerity, "obtaining a pure mind and restraining desires," retreating into remote mountains and "eating nothing but vegetables and drinking nothing but water," that is hardly what monks in our country do.

They themselves amass fortunes and enjoy womanizing, riding fat horses, and wearing light robes. Their immoralities know no limits, undermining the state and making the people sick, and no problem is more serious than they.⁸

Throughout Taejo's reign, the Confucian scholars were relentless in such critiques of how the Buddhists were undermining national will and wealth and needed to be removed from prominence in public life. In their otherworldly dedication to the Buddha, monks were accused of harming the

relationship between father and son, and between ruler and subject. They undermined the people's commitment to daily weaving and farming. When the public granaries became empty, people still offered food to the monks, who never seemed to go starving.⁹

In their first advisement to the king, Taejo's Remonstrators with the Office of Inspector General advised that Taejo should gather all the monks together and test them for their sincere commitment to Buddhist ideas. Those found virtuous could be sent to remote mountains to practice pure Buddhism, while the others could be forced to abandon their robes, grow their hair back out, pick up a shovel, and get to work building the country with the rest of the people.¹⁰

A representative critique by the students of the Confucian academy was that deleterious Buddhist monks should be stripped of their religious exemption from military duties and driven out of their temple life. "We should make them return to their home villages, force them to join the military, burn their books, use their lands for military rations, redistribute their slaves, melt their statues and bells for coins, confiscate their utensils, take over their buildings for government and educational use, and ban their funeral rituals," went one critique. "Then, in a few years, the human mind would be corrected".¹¹

King Taejo was non-plussed with such dire proposals. "What kind of books did these people read to dislike Buddha so much?" he once wondered.¹² Taejo was a practicing Buddhist, so none of these dire proposals went too far while he ruled.¹³ He did reduce state support for some temple activities, returned some temple lands to state ownership or taxable status, and considered requests to abolish various Buddhist festivals. He also required some monks to serve in the military and provide corvée labor for public works.¹⁴

But overall, Buddhism flourished throughout Taejo's reign, and he himself was a dedicated supporter. He appointed Monk Muhak his Royal Preceptor and Monk Chogu as the State Preceptor. The *Taejo Sillok* mentioned 60 different times that Taejo sponsored Buddhist rituals or hosted monks for banquets during his six-year reign; sometimes hundreds of monks at a time would come to his banquets.¹⁵ Taejo even

encouraged his royal guards to chant Buddhist sutras during their work hours, “making the sound of bells and drums ring throughout the whole capital,” much to the chagrin of his Confucian Remonstrators who found it a dangerous diversion from guard duties.¹⁶

In addition, Taejo sponsored printings of the *Koreana Tripitaka* with his own funds and oversaw the transport of the *Tripitaka’s* wood printing blocks from Seoul to Haeinsa temple, far down the peninsula. In his first year of reign, Taejo made a votive text for the printing of the *Tripitaka*, over the objections of his *sadaebu*. The text was enshrined at Haeinsa, sharing Taejo’s prayer: “when I think of my lack of virtue, the burden becomes too much to bear, thus I still rely on the power of Buddhist skillful means (*upaya*)...I hope that through the secret protection and the wide spread of the dharma cloud, all things will flourish and bless the country and benefit the people.”¹⁷ King Taejo even had a Buddhist temple built in the very center of the capital to offer daily prayers to the deceased Lady Kang’s tomb, and sponsored other new temple projects after he had abdicated the throne.¹⁸

But things were changing with the coming of King Taejong. The Confucian scholars ramped up calls for a more thorough cleansing of Buddhist influence, while King Taejong (an accomplished Confucian scholar himself, who never appreciated Buddhism) hungrily eyed the substantial land holdings of Buddhist temples up and down the peninsula. Three years into Taejong’s reign, immediately after the retired Taejo had returned most of the way to the capital and prayed at his nearby Buddhist shrine, the hammer fell. In the 4th lunar month of 1402, King Taejong’s Office of Astronomy and Geomancy proposed to abolish almost all Buddhist temples in Joseon, and confiscate their land, save for seventy temples.¹⁹

The former King in his temple was deeply angered by the proposal, so much so that he started a hunger strike. By the seventh lunar month of 1402, the retired Taejo was eating very little, would eat no meat at all, and was growing more and

more gaunt.* Alarmed, King Taejong rushed to the temple and begged his father to begin eating meat and to recover his health. He prostrated himself and offered a gift of four fine horses to encourage the King to eat well again. The weakened Taejo replied that he would not eat meat and that he would starve himself to death unless his son rescinded the order to confiscate temple lands and returned lands to the monks. Furthermore, “you should not push monks and nuns to get certificates, and not forbid women from going to temples and also you should build temples to continue my will.”²⁰

Confronted by his father’s immoveable will, Taejong bowed to filial piety, agreed to the old King’s demands, and issued an edict to restore the temple lands. Taejo then began to eat well again and even broke Buddhist precepts by eating meat. For the time being, the campaign against the Buddhists slowed down, and hundreds of Buddhist temples and shrines across the country were saved.²¹

After these events, King Taejo finally agreed to travel to Hanyang more often, living in the small palace of Deoksogung that King Taejong had built specifically as a home for the former king. When Taejo arrived to move some things into Deoksogung, most of the ministers were terrified and wouldn’t even go to see him. What if the former king held them responsible for the events of the Strife(s), or for working with King Taejong? No one dared to visit Taejo, and the founding King was left alone in his empty palace.

Finally, just two ministers—Gilchang and Okcheon—went to welcome the former King back to the capital. “They came running and confessed with tears. I only consider these two loyal,” Taejo later said, remembering how the three of them sat down together and had drinks until dawn.

* There were several other times that King Taejo swore off meat and alcohol as part of his Buddhist sensitivities. See, for example, *Taejong Sillok* 6:3 [1403] (12.17.1), where Taejo drank a bowl a tea and then announced, “from now on, I will not eat alcohol and meat.” But this hunger strike occasion in 1402 was unique because Taejo was choosing to eat so little as to threaten his health, as part of a protest against his son’s policies.