

# B U D D H I S M

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## Hagiographies of the Korean Monk Wŏnhyo

*Robert E. Buswell, Jr.*

The Buddhist scholiast Wŏnhyo (“Break of Dawn,” 617–686 C.E.) was the Korean monk who contributed most to the development of an indigenous approach to Buddhist doctrine and practice. Wŏnhyo wrote some one hundred treatises and commentaries on virtually all of the East Asian Buddhist materials then available to him in Korea. Over twenty of the works in this extensive oeuvre are still extant and tell us much about Buddhism during its incipency on the Korean peninsula.

As is all too common with the lives of Buddhist monks, however, we know comparatively little about Wŏnhyo the man. Virtually everything available about his life derives from two sources: the Chinese hagiographical anthology *The Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Song gaoseng zhuan*; hereafter *Song Biographies*) and the Korean quasi-historical miscellany *Memorabilia and Mirabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa*; henceforth *Memorabilia*); the portions of both of these dealing with Wŏnhyo will be translated in full below. These biographies are emblematic of the approaches East Asian hagiographers took toward Buddhist biography, and display the type of symbolism and imagery often used in such works.

East Asian hagiography was principally intended to preserve for posterity the achievements of an eminent individual who personified a particular spiritual ideal, cultural symbol, or religious accomplishment. Hagiography also functioned as a didactic tool, offering a spiritual exemplar for religious adherents, a model of conduct, morality, and understanding that could be imitated by the entire community. East Asians tended consciously to emulate the lives of past moral paragons, which meant that religious virtuosi tended to follow strikingly similar patterns in their vocations. This penchant for sacred biography to become self-perpetuating and mutually imitative is what Ernst Kris has termed “enacted biography.” Hence, Wŏnhyo’s biographies should give implicit indications about the character of Korean Buddhism as a whole, for Wŏnhyo became a cultural archetype of the entire Korean tradition, not solely because of his religious and scholastic achievements but also because his character as recounted in these bi-

ographies exerted a profound influence on the personal development of religious adepts on the Korean peninsula.

The first of Wŏnhyo's biographies translated here appears in the *Song gaoseng zhuan*, compiled in China between 982 and 988 by Zanning ("Extolling Repose," 919–1001), a noted Buddhist historiographer and polemicist. The anthology is typical of the East Asian Buddhist hagiographical tradition in typecasting its eminent monks as models worthy of emulation. Hence, we should not expect to find much information on Wŏnhyo the man in this hagiography; rather, the stories about him will have explicit didactic purposes. The short introduction to the biography, full of literary allusion and martial euphemism, is little more than the stereotyped encomium appropriate to any respected teacher, and its style betrays the biography's lack of concern with Wŏnhyo himself.

The *Song Biographies'* treatment of Wŏnhyo is a quintessential example of the way in which East Asian Buddhist hagiography employs folkloric topoi to present a stereotyped characterization of an eminent religious personage. The incurable sickness of a female member of the royal family, the scriptural repository in the dragon king's palace, the use of the thigh as a secret hiding place, the theft of a sacred book—all these are common topoi found in folklore throughout Asia.

Rather surprisingly, the single strand of the *Song Biographies'* narrative concerns not Wŏnhyo's religious career but instead the question of the scriptural authenticity of the *Book of Adamantine Absorption* (*Jingang sanmei jing*, or *Vajrasamādhisūtra*), a Buddhist apocryphal text that I have shown elsewhere to be of Korean provenance and probably composed toward the end of Wŏnhyo's lifetime. Only after the long description of the rediscovery and promulgation of the *Book of Adamantine Absorption* does Zanning once again return to Wŏnhyo the man. But there too he is content to summarize in just a few short phrases some of the other legends that circulated about Wŏnhyo, even though in a real biography these should have been of intrinsic interest equal to the story surrounding this apocryphal text. So little of Wŏnhyo himself emerges from this hagiography that Zanning clearly appears to have used Wŏnhyo primarily as a stratagem for discussing the legend about the recovery of the *Book of Adamantine Absorption*.

Sacred biographies often explicate the mythic trials of a religious hero in three major stages: the exile of the subject from his community, his trials and tribulations to redeem himself, and his eventual reinstatement in the community, often at heightened status. In Wŏnhyo's hagiography, the community of monastic elders first tries to bar him from participating in the prestigious state-protection ritual using the *Book of Benevolent Kings* (*Renwang jing*). While Wŏnhyo is out traveling among the people, as the Korean version of his biography tells us, the dragon king calls on Wŏnhyo to write a commentary to the *Book of Adamantine Absorption*. His lecture on this scripture redeems his reputation and restores Wŏnhyo to his rightful place in the Buddhist community.

Wŏnhyo also appears prominently in several sections of the Korean *Memorabilia and Mirabilia of the Three Kingdoms*, compiled sometime during the thirteenth century by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn ("The Blazing of Oneness," 1206–1289), of

which only the main entry on Wŏnhyo is translated here. Although Iryŏn culls passages from earlier Chinese hagiographical anthologies in writing his hagiographies, he also incorporates stories from local legend and regional biographies into his accounts. Because of his interest in stories about the actual events in a subject's life, Iryŏn's accounts tend to convey a genuine sense of flesh-and-blood individuals who achieved their renown through personal trial and tribulation. Thus Iryŏn's biographical style offers a somewhat more vivid sense of the personalities who helped to forge the Buddhist tradition than is usually found in Chinese hagiographies.

Iryŏn's tendency to place greater focus on the individual is probably attributable to the fact that one of the purposes of *Memorabilia* was to preserve all Buddhist lore then extant on the Korean peninsula that had not been preserved in the major historical records. The only other systematic account of Korea's ancient period, the *Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi*), a Korean secular history written in 1145 by Kim Pusik (1075–1151), included minimal references to Buddhist personages or ceremonies in its treatment of early Korean history. (Wŏnhyo, for example, is given just one line in the biography of his literatus son, Sŏl Ch'ong ["Sŏl the Astute," date unknown].) Iryŏn was concerned that this lore not be lost, and packed his miscellany with any and probably all stories circulating about the past eminences of Korean Buddhism.

Although the *Memorabilia's* biography gives us a somewhat better sense of Wŏnhyo the man, like any East Asian hagiography it also is not immune to pious embellishment of his life, and is still prone to portray Wŏnhyo as embodying the ideals of his religious community. The ideal Iryŏn most emphasizes is "unhindered action," in which enlightenment is said to liberate the saint from such dualistic concepts as right and wrong or good and evil, freeing him from the normative standards of morality. This liberty to frequent even bars and brothels with impunity was obviously a controversial matter within the ecclesia of the Silla kingdom of Korea.

The fusion of mythic and historical elements in Buddhist hagiographical writing is crucial to remember in examining the following biographies of Wŏnhyo. Although it is common for most hagiographers to treat Buddhist eminences as epitomes of specific religious qualities, whether that be talent in theurgy, erudition, or proselytization, this depiction is often corroborated by anecdotes presumably taken from the personal life of the subject. Both *Song Biographies* and *Memorabilia* are episodic in their treatments of Wŏnhyo, but the overall concerns of the two biographies are somewhat different and convey distinctly varied impressions of their subject. *Song Biographies* adheres more closely to the Confucian biographical tradition in presenting its subjects more as types than as individuals. Zanning offers little information about Wŏnhyo's personality; indeed, *Song Biographies* explicitly typecasts Wŏnhyo as "certainly in the same class with Beidu ["Cup-crosser", d. 426] and Zhigong ["The Gentleman Precious Expression"]," two well-known theurgists during the Chinese Liang dynasty. *Memorabilia*, by contrast, is more apt to expand its accounts to include anecdotes that illustrate

the day-to-day life of Wōnhyo rather than simply recounting his emulation of a given ideal. Iryōn provides only minimal details regarding Wōnhyo's ancestry, training, and awards, and prefers instead to focus on Wōnhyo's debauchery and his exploits among the ordinary people of Silla. By adopting such an approach, Iryōn's compilation is lively, robust, and even ribald on occasion.

These translations are from *Tang Xinluoguo Huanglongsi Yuanxiao zhuan* ("Biography of Wōnhyo of Hwangnyong Monastery in the Tang Dominion of Silla"): *Song gaoseng zhuan* 4, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (Tokyo, 1924–1934), 2061; vol. 50, p. 730a6–b29. *Wōnhyo Pulgi* ("Wōnhyo, the Unbridled"): *Samguk yusa* 4, *Taishō* 2039; vol. 49, p. 1006a7–b29. The section titles have been added.

## Biography of Wōnhyo of Hwangnyong-sa in the Tang Dominion of Silla

From Song Biographies of Eminent Monks

### INTRODUCTION

Shi Yuanxiao's [Sōk Wōnhyo, "Break of Dawn"] patronym was Xue [Sōl]; he was a native of Xiangzhou [Sangju] on the Eastern Sea. During his queued-haired youth, he willingly entered the law [and became a monk]. He traveled around the country without any constancy, studying under various teachers. He valiantly assaulted the ramparts of meaning, and heroically thwarted the marshaled lines of text. Resolutely, martially, he marched forward without retreating. He covered the depth and breadth of the three trainings [morality, concentration, wisdom]. In his country, he was known as a "match for myriad people." Such was his mastery of doctrine and his attainment of mystery.

Once, together with the master of the law Ūsang [alt. "Marks of Meaning," 625–702 C.E.], he tried to go to Tang China, longing to join the canonical master Xuanzang's ["Mysterious Stoutness," d. 664] school at Cien ["Loving Grace"] Monastery. But as his conditioning was discrepant, he was content just to wander around for a while.

His utterances were mad and outrageous, and his conduct perverted and remiss. Together with householders, he entered bars and brothels. Like Zhigong ["Gentleman Expression," viz. Baozhi ("Precious Expression,"), 418–514], he carried a metal knife and an iron staff [when he traveled]. Sometimes he composed commentaries in order to explicate the "Assorted Flowers" [of the *Flower Garland Scripture*, *Huayan jing*]. At other times, he plucked the zither in order to enliven the shrines and temples. Sometimes, he dwelled overnight at the village gate. At other times, he sat in meditation in the mountains and along the streams. He followed the turn of events in any way that he pleased, completely without any fixed regimen.

## RECOVERY OF THE BOOK OF ADAMANTINE ABSORPTION

At one time, the king of the Silla kingdom inaugurated a Great Assembly of One Hundred Seats [for eminent monks] for the recitation of the *Book of Benevolent Kings* (*Renwang jing*), and sought out everywhere learned venerables [to participate]. WŒnhyo's native province, on the basis of his reputation, nominated him, but the other venerables despised his personal character and recommended that the king not accept him.

WŒnhyo had not been present long [at the convocation] before the brain of the king's queen-consort was afflicted by a tumorous swelling that had exhausted all the doctors' remedies. The king and the crown prince, the vassals and subjects, prayed and petitioned at the numinous shrines in the mountains and along the streams; there was no place that they did not visit. There was a shaman who said, "Only if you dispatch a person to a foreign kingdom to seek medicine will this illness be cured." The king then ordered an envoy to sail across the sea to Tang [China] and seek out their medical arts.

While en route over the murky swells, [the envoy] unexpectedly saw an old man jump up from the billowing waves and climb aboard ship. He invited the envoy to enter into the sea, where he saw the awesome splendor of the palace basilica. There he had an audience with the dragon king, whose name was Qienhai ["Holder of the Seal of the Seas"]. He told the envoy, "The queen-consort of your country is the third daughter of Jingdi [the Green Emperor, ruler of the east, who controls the spring season]. Since times of old, [the scriptural repository in] my palace has contained a copy of the *Book of Adamantine Absorption* in which the two enlightenments [innate and actualized] are completely imparted and which discloses the practice of the bodhisattva. Now, taking the queen's illness as an ideal pretext, I wish to entrust you with this scripture so that it may be circulated and disseminated in your kingdom." He then took the thirty-some folios, which were loosely stacked in unbound form, and entrusted them to the envoy.

He said again, "While this scripture is being taken across the sea, I fear that it might incur some interference from Māra [the devil]." The king then commanded that the envoy's thigh be slit with a knife and [the scripture] placed inside. [Surgeons then] used waxed paper to wrap and bind up [the scripture] and spread his thigh with unguents so that it was just like before.

The dragon king said, "Have the saint Tæan ["Great Peace"] collate [the loose folios] and sew them together [into a bound volume]; ask the dharma master WŒnhyo to write a commentary explicating [the scripture]. Then the queen's illness will undoubtedly be cured. Even the efficacy of the agada [herbal] panacea of the Snowy Mountains [the Himalayas] does not surpass this."

The dragon king saw him off to the surface of the sea, where [the envoy] then climbed aboard ship and returned to his kingdom. At that time, the king was delighted to hear [of his adventure], and summoned first the saint Tæan to bind and collate the [folios].

Tae'an was an unfathomable person. His appearance and dress were unusual and bizarre. He was constantly among the shops of the marketplace striking a bronze alms bowl and calling out, "Tae'an! Tae'an! ['Great Peace']." This was how he earned his sobriquet. The king summoned An, but An said, "Just bring the scripture; I don't wish to cross the threshold of the royal palace." An received the scripture and arranged [the folios] into eight chapters, which were all in accordance with the Buddha's intent.

An said, "Quickly take it and entrust it to Wŏnhyo to lecture; don't let anyone else have it." Hyo, who was just then residing at his birthplace of Sangju, received the scripture. He said to the messenger, "The theme of this scripture is the two enlightenments—innate and actualized. Prepare an animal cart for me." Taking his writing table, he set it between [the ox's] two horns and laid out his brushes and inkstone. While riding continually on the ox-cart, he wrote the commentary, complete in five fascicles.

The king requested that, on a given day, a lecture be convened at Hwangnyong ["Yellow Dragon"] Monastery. At that time, a menial lackey [of Wŏnhyo's opponents within the order] stole the new commentary. The matter was therewith reported to the king. [Wŏnhyo] delayed [the lecture] for three days and re-recorded [his words, this time] complete in three fascicles, and called it the abbreviated commentary. Then the king and his vassals, the monks and laypeople, thronged like clouds into the Hall of the Law. Hyo then expounded [his commentary], which was elegant, elucidated disputed points, and could serve as an exemplar [for commentarial writings]. The sound of the praise, acclaim, and snapping fingers [signaling approval] welled up into the sky.

Hyo then spoke openly:

"Although I was not welcomed at the convocation when a hundred rafters gathered, I am the only one qualified here this morning to lay a single beam."

At that time, all the famous venerables bowed their heads, embarrassed and ashamed; humbled by their pettiness, they were repentant and contrite.

#### CONCLUSION

From the first, Hyo's appearances were unpredictable and his method of proselytism was variable. Sometimes he rescued people [monks threatened by an impending earthquake] by throwing his tray. At other times he put out [monastery] fires by spitting water. Sometimes he displayed [transformation] bodies at several locations. At other times he announced his extinction at six regions. He was certainly in the same class with Beidu and Zhigong! When it came to understanding people's temperament, that would become completely clear to him in a glance.

His commentary [to the *Book of Adamantine Absorption*] had two versions: an expanded and an abbreviated one. Both are in circulation in their native land. The abbreviated version was transmitted to China. Later, a canonical master who was a translator of scriptures finally changed [the title from a



commentary] to an exposition [thereby placing the status of Wŏnhyo's text on a par with that of Indian scriptural exegeses].

#### CLARIFICATION

In connection [with the above story]: How is it that there are scriptural texts in the dragon king's palace?

Explanation: The scriptures say that in the basilica of the dragon king's palace there is a reliquary adorned with the seven precious jewels. All the profound principles spoken by all the buddhas—such as the twelfold chain of conditioned origination, mnemonic devices, meditative concentrations, and so forth—fill completely a separate trunk adorned with the seven jewels. Truly, it was fitting that this scripture was put into circulation in the world and, moreover, it revealed the theurgic uniqueness of Taean and the venerable Hyo. [The dragon king] then used the sickness of the queen-consort as a great pretext to propagate the doctrine.

#### Wŏnhyo, the Unbridled

*From Memorabilia and Mirabilia of the Three Kingdoms*

#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AND ANCILLARY STORIES CONCERNING WŎNHYO'S NATIVE REGION

The holy master Wŏnhyo's patronym was Sŏl. His grandfather was Baron Ingp'i, who was also known as Baron Chŏktae. Now, beside Chŏktae pool there is an Ingp'igong shrine. His father was the eleventh-degree bureaucrat Tamnal.

[Wŏnhyo] first displayed birth beneath twin sal trees in Yulgok ["Chestnut Valley"], north of Pulchi ["Stage of Buddhahood"] village, in the south of Amnyang district [now Changsan'gun]. This village was called Pulchi or Palchi ["Arising of Wisdom"].

[Note:] In the local dialect, it is called Pultŭngŭlch'ŏn.

[Note:] "Sal trees": A folk tale says that the master's family originally resided in the southwest of this valley. When his mother's pregnancy had reached full term, she happened to be passing through this valley and, under these chestnut trees, she unexpectedly went into labor. Due to the urgency of the situation, she was not able to return home; so, draping her husband's raiments from a tree, she lay amid [her makeshift screen and gave birth]. It is for this reason that these trees were called sal trees. The fruits of those trees are also out of the ordinary, and even now are called sal chestnuts.

[Note:] "Yulgok": There is an old legend that, long ago, a monastery abbot gave each temple serf a ration of two chestnuts per evening. A serf lodged a complaint against him with the [local] magistrate. The magistrate thought [this story] strange and, taking up a chestnut, examined it. One nut filled

an entire bowl! He then ruled instead that [the serfs] should be given only one chestnut. It is for this reason that [the valley] was named Chestnut Valley.]

Once the master had left home [to become a monk], he converted his residence into a monastery, which he named Ch'ogae ["First Opening"]. Beside the tree he established a monastery, named Sara ["sal trees"].

The master's *Account of Conduct* (*Haengjang*) states that he was a person from the capital [of Kyōngju], following [the records available for] his grandfather and father. The *Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks* [sic] states that he was a native of Hasangju.

[Note:] During the second year of [the Tang Chinese] Linde ["Felicitous Goodness"] reign-period [665], King Munmu ["Civil and Martial," r. 661–681] redivided the regions of Sangju and Haju and established Samnyangju. Haju then became what is now Ch'angnyanggun. Amnyanggun was originally an affiliated county of Haju. Sangju now [has the alternate name] Sangju, which is also written [with the logographs] Sangju. Pulchi village now is part of Chain district. Hence, it is right on the border with Amnyang [district].

The master's childhood name was Sōdang ["Sworn Banner"]; his local name was Sindang ["New Banner"] [both suggesting that Wōnhyo's family had military connections].

[Note:] "Banner" in the vernacular means "hair."

Initially, his mother dreamed that a shooting star entered her bosom; as a result of that, she conceived. Just as he was about to be born, five-colored clouds blanketed the earth. This was in the thirty-ninth year of King Chinp'yōng's ["True Peace"] [reign, 617], the thirteenth year of Daye ["Great Enterprise"], during the cyclical year changch'uk.

Congenitally, [Wōnhyo] was shrewd and unusual. He studied without following a teacher.

A complete account of his pilgrimages and his luxuriant accomplishments in proselytization appears in full in the *Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks* [sic] and in his *Account of Conduct*, and need not all be recorded here. But there are one or two other notable events that are only recorded in the *Local Biography* (*Hyangjōn*).

#### SELECTIONS FROM THE LOCAL BIOGRAPHY

One day the master's air was perverted [by spring fever] and he sang in the streets:

Who will loan me a handleless axe?  
I would hew a heaven-supporting pillar.

No one could understand his analogy. At that time, T'aejong ["Great Ancestor", King Muyōl ("Martial Majesty"), r. 654–661] heard [this song] and said, "It

would appear that this monk is saying that he wants a noble woman to bear him a sagacious son. There would indeed be no greater benefit than for the kingdom to have a great sage."

At that time in Yosŏkkong ["Prasine Palace"] (note: now an academy) there was a widowed princess. [The king] ordered the palace officials to find Hyo and escort him back. The palace officials honored the order and went in search of him, but he had already come from Namsan ["South Mountain"], crossing Munch'ŏn'gyo ["Mosquito Stream Bridge"], and met them there.

[Note:] Sach'ŏn, in the local dialect, is Yŏnch'ŏn, or Munjŏn. The bridge is also named Yugyo ["Elm Bridge"].

He deliberately fell into the water, soaking his clothes and trousers. The officials led the master to the palace, where he removed his clothes and dried them in the sun. Under that pretext, he stayed overnight there and the princess ended up becoming pregnant; [later] she gave birth to Sŏl Ch'ong ["Sŏl the Astute", fl. ca. eighth century].

Congenitally, Ch'ong was astute and clever, and had extensive understanding of the [Confucian] *Classics* and *Histories*. He was one of the Ten Sages of Silla. He set up equivalencies for the names of things which figured in the local customs of China (Hua) and the Eastern Tribes (I, viz. Korea), in order to inculcate and explain the *Six Classics* and belles lettres. Even today, those in Korea (Haedong; lit. "East of Parhae") who devote themselves to interpreting the *Classics* have transmitted these [annotations] without interruption.

Since Hyo had broken his precepts in begetting Ch'ong, he subsequently changed into lay clothes and called himself Householder Sosŏng ["Humble Commoner"].

By chance one day, he came upon an actor who was dancing with a large gourd [mask], the appearance of which was bizarre and strange. He made his own religious requisite in the same shape, and ordered that it be named Muae ["Unhindered"] after a [passage in] the *Flower Garland Scripture*: "All unhindered men leave birth and death along a single path." He then composed a song that circulated throughout the land. He used to take up this [gourd] and sing and dance his way through thousands of villages and myriad hamlets, touring while proselytizing in song. He prompted all classes of "mulberry doorposts and jar windows" [the destitute] and even "gibbons and macaques" [youth and country bumpkins] to recognize the name "Buddha," and recite together the invocation "Homage." Hyo's proselytizing was great indeed!

#### A CHRONOLOGY OF WŌNHYO'S LIFE

The village of his birth was named Pulchi ["Stage of Buddhahood"]; his monastery was called Ch'ogae ["Initial Opening"]; he called himself Wŏnhyo ["Break of Dawn"], which refers to the first shining of the sun of buddhahood. [The name] "Wŏnhyo" is also the Silla pronunciation. People of his time all referred to him in the vernacular as Sidan ["First Dawning"].

When he resided at Punhwang ["Fragrant Sovereign"] Monastery preparing his *Commentary to the Flower Garland Scripture*, he reached the fourth [fascicle of the commentary] on the "Ten Transferences Chapter" (*Shi huixiang pin*) and, having completed it, laid down his brush.

Furthermore, because of the reproach he had suffered, he divided his body among the hundred pines [and appeared everywhere]. Everyone considered his status and position to be that of a first-stage (*bhūmi*) [bodhisattva].

Also, due to the inducement of the dragon of the sea, he received a royal command while on the road, and wrote his *Commentary on the Book of [Adamantine] Absorption*. He placed his brushes and inkstone between the two horns of an ox; because of this, he was known as Kaksūng ["Horn Rider"] [a name homophonous with Enlightenment Vehicle], which also expressed the recondite purport of the two types of enlightenments—innate and actualized. The master of the law Tæan collated the folios and then pasted them together. This [felicitous arrangement] also was "knowing the sound and singing in harmony."

After [Wōnhyo] had entered quiescence, Ch'ong crushed his remaining bones and cast them into a lifelike image which he enshrined at Punhwang Monastery—this in order to show his reverence and affection [for his father] and his intent [to mourn his father until] the ends of heaven. When Ch'ong prostrated beside it, the image suddenly turned its head [to look at him]; still today, it remains turned to the side.

The site of Ch'ong's house is beside a cave monastery where Hyo used to reside.

#### EULOGY

Horn Rider first opened the hub of meditative concentration.  
 His dancing-gourd was finally suspended in the wind of myriad streets.  
 At moonlit Prasine Palace he was deep in spring sleep.  
 The gate is closed at Punhwang Monastery, his glancing image is  
 hollow.