

The Story of Cheoneunsa Temple

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1. About the Course

Cheoneunsa Temple, situated on the main route to Jirisan Mountain's Nogodan Peak, is one of the three greatest Buddhist temples in Gurye.

About 1,200 years ago, a Buddhist monk from India built this temple here, after considering many other mountains in Korea. Since then, it has been one of the most visited temples in the country, and home to many great Buddhist priests.

The temple also has a number of cultural relics, including a gilt-bronze miniature shrine. This miniature is about 43 centimeters in height, and it became a nationally-designated treasure in 2008. Historical records show that it was a gift from a Buddhist priest who held the official title of national preceptor in the ancient past.

Due to the ravages of both fire and war, the original form and records of the temple have been lost. The structures remaining at the temple today were rebuilt about 240 years ago.

As you head toward the main gate of the temple, you will see pagodas in between the pine trees to the right. These pagodas contain *sarira*, the bead-shaped objects that were found after cremating bodies of Buddha or monks.

2. One Pillar Gate

The writing on the hanging board by the main gate of the temple was written by a distinguished Korean calligrapher. It reads "Cheoneunsa Temple of Jirisan Mountain".

Originally, this temple was called Gamnosa, which literally means "a temple of sweet dew", because there was a natural spring nearby. One day, a large snake came out of the water but someone killed it. After the incident, the spring dried up and there were frequent outbreaks of fire at the temple. To prevent any more damage to this temple, a renowned calligrapher wrote a new name "Cheoneunsa" on a hanging board, which means "a temple of the hidden spring."

Since the name has been changed there have not been any more fires, so perhaps the new name has had a positive effect.

3. Suhongnu

When you step into the front gate, you'll see a small reservoir and a pavilion just across the bridge over the valley. A rainbow frequently appears over the valley in the summertime and as such, the pavilion is named Suhongnu, meaning "a pavilion with a rainbow."

The large, stone basin in front of the pavilion is full of clear water, and the inscription on it means "a stream of sweet dew".

Representing the auspicious energy of the spring that dried up so long ago, the water seems to protect the beauty of the temple from being lost to another fire.

4. Gate of the Four Heavenly Kings

After climbing up the long stairway, you will pass the final gate into the temple, and there are statues with frightening expressions at the gate. They are the Four Heavenly Kings, the guardians that repel evil spirits in the Buddhist world.

Statues like these can be seen at other Buddhist temples in Korea. Their stances differ slightly in order to repel the evil spirits that may attack from all sides.

Each one is holding a symbolic object in its hand to scare the evil spirits that try to enter the temple. If you look at their feet, you will see what are supposed to be evil spirits that have been trampled.

5. Bojeru

When you enter the temple, you will see a building called Bojeru, which means “leading all people to the right path.” Korean Buddhist temples usually have this building in their precincts and all the important ceremonies take place here.

When looking at it from the front it may look like a one-story building, but from the back you will see that it’s actually a two-story structure. Also, a special feature of this building is that it has walls and doors, while the same kind of building in other temples normally has an open form without walls and doors.

Upon passing this building, you will see a hall enshrining the Buddha and the main yard of this temple. The two buildings standing on both sides of the main yard are living quarters for monks.

6. Tree of Enlightenment

To the left of the monks’ living quarters, there is a large tree called the “Bodhi Tree”. It means “the tree of enlightenment”, and it is believed that Buddha first reached enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

But the name Bodhi does not refer to any specific species of tree, and each country has a different Bodhi tree. Here at this temple, the monks use the berries from this tree for beads to make Buddhist rosaries. Just about every monk wants to have one made of the berries, because they become shiny when rubbed enough.

This 200-year-old tree is the oldest at the precincts, and seedlings from this tree are distributed to other large Buddhist temples in Korea.

7. Geungnakbojeon

The Buddha is enshrined in this hall called Geungnakbojeon.

If you look at the bronze statue of Buddha, you will see his thumb and middle finger touching to form a circle, the pose in which he would give lectures.

Above the head of the statue, there is a hanging scroll of Buddha in this same pose. This painting from 1776 was designated as a cultural heritage in 2002, because it shows the features of Buddhist art during the 18th century. Also, because the names of the figures in the artwork have been recorded, it provides valuable material for Buddhist research.

8. Buddhist Art for Outdoor Ceremonial Use

In front of Geungnakbojeon Hall, there are two pairs of stone pillars that were used as supports for setting up hanging scrolls. When religious ceremonies are carried out, a huge painting of Buddha was hung on two long poles that were inserted between each pair of these supports.

When many people were gathered at the temple, they couldn't all enter the hall, nor can the statue of Buddha be brought outside. So this method allows Buddha to be seen by the masses.

The hanging scroll for outdoor ceremonial use is also designated as a cultural heritage.

Usually, Buddhist paintings are of several figures other than Buddha, but this is a large image where Buddha fills the space, and it is said that this painting was designed to help people be comforted during wartime.

9. Stone Base for Lighting the Temple

Walking around Geungnakbojeon Hall to the left takes you to several buildings clustered together in the back yard.

There is a large stone shaped like a turtle in the middle of the yard. In the past, when there was no electricity, this was used as a place for gathering and kindling pine branches to light up the temple. At one point, removal of the stone was considered for reorganizing the temple, but it was decided to leave it here as a part of the history of the temple.

To the front of the stone are the building where disciples of Buddha gathered, the building that enshrines the paintings of Buddha's life story, and the building enshrining the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy who examines the world with her thousand eyes and hands, as well as the building with folk gods enshrined in a Buddhist style.