*A Tour of the Buddha’s Dragons*

Fred Jeremy Seligson

*Young nun ~*

*As you*

*Pound your*

*Dragon’s drum*

*I swim*

*Only to*

*Drown*

*In those*

*Charming*

*Sounds*

*Rolling off*

*Your tongue*

One scene of the Buddha’s life depicted on temple walls is of nine dragons (representing the sons of the Dragon King) shooting water from their mouths over the standing baby Buddha. Meanwhile, he points one forefinger toward the sky and the other the earth, declaring the Oneness of all things.

Now, on Buddha’s Birthday, Baby Buddha stands in a fountain in the temple courtyard waiting for us to fill a bamboo ladle with spring water and spill it thrice over his head. Doing so, we purify our own minds, re-enacting the legend of the Buddha’s birth when he was bathed in a warm and a cool stream by two *nagas* (serpent deities).33 years later, while the aspirant was seated in meditation under the Bodhi Tree, the enormous *Naga* king Mucalinda coiled around it and, with seven-hooded heads, sheltered him for seven days during a rainstorm. After the Buddha’s Enlightenment, the N*aga* king invited him into his underworld palace and became his disciple.

Clifton Mabery, an Australian anthropologist, addressed our tour: “One day, a *naga*, a super snake, who longed to become a monk, shape-shifted into a human body. Carrying a begging bowl, he stood in a line of monks in order to receive the Buddha’s blessings. When his turn came, the Buddha said, ‘I can see that you are not a monk, but rather a *naga* in disguise. Sorry, but an animal cannot be ordained. However, since your longing is genuine, you can guard my temples. In a future life, you’ll be reborn as a human being.’ The Buddha decreed that from then on a monk candidate would be called a “*naga*.’”

In *Women of the Way*(2006) Sallie Tisdale says, “The great Lotus Sutra was spoken by the Buddha but he knew the people weren’t ready to understand it. Much maturing was required, and so the Nagas, the beautiful dragon people who live beneath the sea, took the Lotus and other sutras under their protection until it was time.”

In a popular story, 2nd century, Indian scholar Nagarjuna (Dragon Tree Bodhisattva) mystically transported himself down to the Dragon King’s undersea palace. In the royal library, he memorized the *Avatamsaka* Sutraand emerged to share it with humanity. Over time, others, including Korean monks, would visit the Dragon King’s palace to receive teachings. That’s why the full Buddhist canon is called “The Dragon Treasury (*Yong Chang*).”

In China, *nagas* transmogrified into dragons as the guardians of Buddhism and accompanied Chinese missionaries to Korean kingdoms in the 4th century.

My neighbor Professor Ryu Tong-shik says in *The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism* (1975) that during Korea’s Three Kingdoms Period (42BC-918) the Buddhist Lotus Lantern Festival (*Yeon-deung-hoe*) and folk religion’s worship of dragons and light merged into one celebration on Buddha’s Birthday. “… the belief in *Yeon-deung* was readily accepted by the ancient beliefs of worshiping the dragon god and the bright light …”

One reason, Ryu points out, is that the words, *Yeon-deung* “Lotus Lantern,” sound like *Yong-dong* “Dragon East.” This refers to the Dragon King who dwells East of China; that is, in the Yellow Sea which laps against Korea’s west coast.

Professor Michael Seth, my colleague at HUFS, says in the *History of Korea from Antiquity to the Present* (2010) that the sounding of the Korean name for the future Buddha Maitreya, *Mi-ruk* and the one for dragon, *Mi-leu* were “the same.” He guesses, “The popularity of the cult of Maitreya (Korea: Mi-ruk) Buddha, the Messiah, may be linked to dragon worship ….”

Professor Lewis Lancaster in “Maitreya in Korea”(*Korean Journal*1989) paints a picture of *Mi-ruk* waiting in *Tushita* Paradise under the jewel-like “Dragon Flower Tree.” After descending to earth, devotees from Silla times up until the present have been anticipating that he will preside over “The Dragon Flower Realm” and the “Dragon Flower Assembly.”

The Buddha’s Birthday tour bus brings us to Bongwon-sa (Adorn Greatness Temple) my neighborhood temple, where it is evident that the dragon is also “the Spirit of Buddhism.” Inside an open-air pavilion, old dragon heads, on opposite ends of a firm body, support a great bell. They are called “Dragon Hooks (*Yong Nyu*).” The two heads belong to one dragon, named *Poroe*, the 1st son of the Dragon King.” *Poroe* abhors whales. When the monk swings the whale-shaped log, suspended from a chain, and hits the bell surface *Por-oe* moans. At dawn and dusk he cries throughout our village.

Entering the 1,000 Buddhas Hall (*CheonBulJeon*) we are inspected by blue and yellow tongue-thrusting dragons. They fly about a flaming *Yeouiju* above the giant gold statue of *Amita*, the Buddha of Wisdom. Mouthing pearls of spiritual power, other dragons revolve among the raftersandclutch candelabra lights in their claws, or else hang by strong tails from beams, eager to scoop up evil-doers.

Gray-robed monks are chanting. Blue and yellow dragons glare from the sides of a big drum, *booming* for terrestrial creatures. Metallic dragons float on a cloudy copper plate (*Un-pan*) clanging for birds. A huge blue wooden fish dragon (*Mogeo*) mouths a red *Yeouiju,* clicking for fish. Another *Poroe* bites the top of a cast-iron bell, crying out for us to awaken our Buddha Nature. Up front, four dragon heads cap a miniature sedan chair’s poles, ready for pallbearers to grasp when the hour comes for escorting a soul to *Amita*’s “Pure Land.”

Glancing around, the left side of the 10,000 Buddhas’ Hallis crowded with conservatively dressed women and a few men wearing black suits, standing and bowing repeatedly. It is a “49 days” ritual for a deceased relative or friend who is on the way to a new life. On the right side, three hoary musicians garbed in gold-color costumes and broad-rimmed pheasant-feathered hats are standing in a row. The 1st plays mournfully on a short double-reed oboe (*Taepyeongso,* Great Peace Bowl) that squeaks crackles and cuts into our hearts. The 2nd blows on a conch shell, sounds of wind and sea. The 3rd beats steadily on a blue and yellow dragon painted drum. Up front, four monks chant along with the vigorous beating of a young nun on a big blue and yellow dragon-decorated drum, enrapturing us. Clifton asks, “How would you like to die and ride to the “other world” upon the beats of that young nun’s drum?”

“I’d like nothing better.”

Dragons frolic along outer wall panels illustrating Buddhist legends. On one mural, a bearded open-chested monk lounges on the rocky shore conversing with a green dragon who has looped out of the sea. Curious, Maria asks a small, elderly monk standing nearby, “What is your name?”

“YongDam Seunim (Dragon Pond Monk).”

“Who is that person in the painting?”

He replies, “That’s *Gwanseum Bosal* (The Bodhisattva of Mercy).”

”But isn’t *Gwanseum Bosal* a woman?”

“Can be a man, too!”

“What is the dragon doing?”

“Saying ‘Thank you!’”

YongDam sparks the memory of another monk bearing the same name, met over 30 years ago in a hermitage behind Hwaeom-sa (Flower Garland Temple). Sitting cross-legged on the floor beside an alarm clock, he told me, “Most monks my age have given up on reaching Enlightenment and have resigned themselves to just eating and sleeping in the temple. I have been meditating daily for 35 years and shall keep on until I die.” This “Dragon Pond” lived up to the promise of his name.

The temple’s roof is called “the Dragon Ridge (*Yong Maru*)”since it slopes gracefully like a dragon’s spine. On either end, an open mouth, deer-horned “Dragon head (*Yong Mori*)” watches vigilantly; one up mountain and the other down valley. Overlapping tiles shape dragon scales. The whole 1,000 Buddhas Hall is called a “Dragon Boat (*YongPae*).” Clifton says, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it sails off on an errand of mercy while the monks are sleeping!”

Upstairs to the left, Clifton steps gingerly into theJudgment Hall(*MyongBuJeon*)*.* Gold and blue dragons guard the chair-backs and phoenixes the arm-rests for green-haired *Jijang Bosal* (Ksitigarbha, Earth Womb Bodhisattva) and the ten white-bearded judges of the deceased who sit around three walls. Nervously, he asks permission to take photographs. Granted, he tiptoes by a goateed giant who grasps a dragon-headed pole ax, sensing that our day, too, will come.

On the outer side of the Judgment Hall, Clifton admires a mural of the Wisdom Dragon Ship (*PrajnaYong Bae*). Guide King Bodhisattva (*InLohWang* *Bo-sal*) is invoked along with Earth Womb Bodhisattva (*Jijang Bosal*) to pilot it, with a dragon-head prow and dragon-tail stern, carrying souls across “the Sea of Suffering” to *Amita* ’s Paradise.

By the path, a granite dragon mouths a *Yeo-ui-ju* while coiling around a wheel of life (*Sam-sar-a*). Betty, one of our tour members, traces its outline with her hand. Beyond stands the smallMedicine Buddha Hall(*Yaksa**Yeore**Jeon*)*.* Wearing curly blue hair, a white body and smiling red-lips, Medicine Buddha (*Yaksa**Yeore Bul*) cups a ball of red herbs in his palms. Just below, dragon-shaped fumes carry up prayers from green incense sticks poked in a bronze urn’s sand, supported by four claws grasping *Yeouijus.* On either flank of the urn, another crouching dragon’s claw grips a *Yeouiju*.

Outdoors, on down the staircase, a white dragon curls under, carrying a surfing,white-robed *Gwan-seum* Bosal (Bodhisattva of Compassion) across the “Sea of Suffering.” To his/her right, stands the Great Hero’s Hall (*DaeUnJeon*) named after Sakya-muni Buddha, a hero for conquering his worldly attachments. Out front, glares an orange and a blue dragon, on either side of a gold dragon plaque, each gripping a *Yeouiju* in its toothy mouth. Scrutinizing us, their scaly necks curve on through the woodwork, looping tails inside.

On a side wall, hangs a Spirit Guardian Painting (*Shinjung-taengwha)* of the “104 Guardians of the Faith.” Among them, Clifton points at a fierce-looking, white mustachioed, bearded fellow, with a burning *Yeouiju* on his cap and a gold coin which is giving off rose-pink flames in his left hand, and says, “The Dragon King (*Yong Wang*).”

A stone dragon’s jaws are funneling mountain water into a cistern, providing cool refreshment on a hot day. Why not a sip a drop of love and life from the dragon’s lips? Cupped in hands and swallowed, the sparkling water cleases the body, mind and soul of defilements, including temptations of evil spirits. Golden dragons growl from the corners of another temple roof. Shutting my eyes, I see a golden glow. Concentrating on it, a dragon rushes out furiously. Open for it, I wait. Striking me, it splatters into gold globs.

Down to the right and up, a stairway leads to the green folding doors of Dragon Rock Temple (*YongAm-sa*). Near the ceiling, a blue *Yin* and a yellow *Yang* dragon engage in a tug of war with a blazing *Yeouiju*, the yellow turning clockwise and the blue counterclockwise. Hovering in space, they spin our life into being. Underneath, a young woman weeps and prays quietly for her dead husband’s soul. Leaving shoes outdoors, I step in and bow down to the golden Buddha, not the one on the altar, but the one in my soul, three times, as she’s doing, giving her company. When she’s gone, I sit quietly on a mediation cushion. Nothing disturbs me, save for an ear-singing mosquito.

Fred Jeremy Seligson is a councilor of the RAS and an Adjunct Professor at Yonsei University, where he is currently teaching Travel Writing: Life as a Journey.