

Chapter 1082

That's the duty of a true Taoist. (2)

The memorial service was conducted in a modest manner. They lacked the necessary items to perform a formal service as done in a Dogwan [Taoist temple — 도관]. They didn't even have the basic incense and incense burner.

While the formality was not complete, the Hwasan disciples, after offering their prayers, reciting the scriptures, and chanting, displayed utmost reverence.

In the end, a ceremony is merely a form of respect for the deceased. Regardless of how elaborate the ceremony may be, the true value lies in the sincerity of each gesture.

The disciples of Hwasan, well aware of this fact, poured their hearts into every movement and every uttered word. They wished for the deceased to find peaceful rest even in death.

It was an unforgettably important fact that they were disciples pursuing the Tao before being Hwasan's disciples. However, even the disciples of Hwasan occasionally forgot who they were. This act served not only as a tribute to the souls of the deceased but also as an act of rediscovering their purpose.

Chung Myung looked at the disciples who were reciting the scriptures, standing at the back. From Tang Soso on the far left to Baek Cheon on the far right. Chung Myung observed the back of each of them without missing a single one and closed his eyes silently.

‘Sahyeong.’

In the past, they had often conducted ceremonies in Hwasan. Chung Myung had tried to avoid the tedious ceremonies, but Chung Mun had made every effort to make him stand in a corner when they took place.

— Before you are a sword master, you are a practitioner of the Tao.

— A sword without the guidance of the Tao is no different from a bandit's blade. It's not someone else but you, so you must not forget your duty as a Taoist.

— You talk about following the Tao and all, but the essence of a memorial service is a sincere heart. If you haven't developed that on your own, you should at least observe and learn. It's the first thing you should possess as a disciple of Hwasan.

‘...Just the same old nagging.’

Yes, that's how he used to think. In the past, he thought that all these repetitive and tedious ceremonies had no real meaning.

People simply become nothing when they die. What's the point of paying respect to those buried in the earth, and what value is there in shedding tears for them?

‘That's right.’

Chung Myung slowly opened his eyes.

Back then, Chung Myung couldn't understand. He had not climbed Hwasan to learn the value of the Tao but had been abandoned there.

He had grown up listening to the scriptures like lullabies and watching the ceremonies like games. Therefore, to him, all of this was a natural part of life, without the need to ponder its meaning.

That's why he couldn't comprehend why people honor and remember those who can never return.

For those who never had anything to begin with, there's nothing to lose.

'Sahyeong, I...'

What he had lost was not something he had held from the beginning, but something he had built throughout his life. No... It had surrounded him almost as if it was natural, even when he didn't want it.

That's why he only understood it after losing it.

He understood that even to the deceased who couldn't come back, there was meaning. He understood the feelings with which those who were left behind sought the Tao.

And here, there were people who understood that meaning, who knew what he, the former Chung Myung, didn't know and who wanted to uphold what he had failed to protect.

The sound of the young disciples of Hwasan reciting the scriptures reverently echoed across the desolate land.

At the front, Un Geom stood with his one hand placed on his chest, making a gesture of respect. Every movement he made was filled with a deep sense of sorrow for those who had died here.

As he began to recite the scriptures once more, the disciples followed suit. Chung Myung, who stood at the very back, slowly closed his eyes. The Tao sutras flowed from his lips.

It was not a particularly special or extraordinary sight. However, anyone who knew who Chung Myung was would not see this scene as just that.

Chung Myung had participated in countless memorial services, but he had never recited the scriptures himself. Even though he could recite the scriptures perfectly, having listened to them countless times, he had never done it even once.

He found it awkward and out of place. He believed it didn't suit him.

But in this moment, Chung Myung recited the scriptures with sincerity. He wasn't just reciting them out of rote knowledge but pouring his heart into the words.

This was a prayer for the deceased, a consolation for the ones left behind, and perhaps a reaching out to those who couldn't find a place anywhere.

Once he had finished reciting the scriptures, Un Geom stepped back, and from the rear, Hye Yeon moved forward cautiously. With solemnity, he began to recite the Buddhist scriptures. They each had different beliefs and goals, but in this moment, their hearts were surely in the same place.

As Hye Yeon's clear recitation filled the air, the disciples of Hwasan maintained their positions, their eyes reflecting an inexplicable sadness as they looked out over the desolation of Hangzhou.

Baek Cheon lightly clenched his fist to keep his emotions from spilling over and to remember.

Jo Geol, Yoon Jong, Yu Iseol, and Tang Soso had similar expressions.

Finally, Hye Yeon finished the lengthy recitation. He bowed deeply and then turned to stand beside the others with a sorrowful expression on his face.

Baek Cheon naturally turned his gaze to Un Geom, who responded with a soft smile, as if to say,

‘My guidance ends here.’

Baekcheon let out a deep sigh.

‘I...’

He clenched his fist tightly.

‘...I couldn’t save anyone.’

Coming to this place, their original goal was to stop Magyo and to save those still alive. But somewhere along the way, their focus shifted solely to survival. They had survived, felt relief and happiness, but now they knew that it wasn’t enough. The weight of what they couldn’t protect here was too great.

Baek Cheon stopped in his tracks, realizing that now was not the time to preach. Instead, he needed to speak from this very spot.

«If Sect Leader had been here, he would have shed tears first for those who perished,»

Baek Cheon spoke in a calm tone, and everyone bowed their heads.

«If the elders were here, they wouldn’t have forgotten the sacrifices during the battles.»

His words were filled with sadness.

«The reason we couldn’t do it was our own weakness.»

What had filled the space left by pride, relief, youthful enthusiasm was now replaced by regret.

«It’s not because we lack strength, but because we are weak as humans. We claim to follow the way of Tao, speak about pursuing it, and yet, we haven’t truly looked at others.»

Everyone nodded slowly, understanding the painful truth of his words.

«Sects Leader’s hope for us is not the power to subdue others. It’s not about having the strength to save our own lives, but the strength to turn back to those weaker when their lives are in danger. Yes,»

Baek Cheon’s voice was slow but firm.

«Perhaps it’s the strength of being human.»

He paused, closing his eyes briefly.

«Going forward, we will experience many things. But let’s never forget what we fight for, why we need to fight.»

Un Geom bowed his head and recited the Doho [a prayer]. As if that was a signal, Hwasan’s disciples all chanted their prayers in unison. Their voices echoed through the desolate land, each note carrying their resolve.

Doho – pouring oneself into the act, is a cry to save others, to not forget one’s path. It is a plea, a reminder, a beacon to remember something that should never be forgotten. Their Doho was louder and more heartfelt than ever before.

And as their voices filled the vastness of Hangzhou’s desolated land, the weight on their bowed heads felt heavier than ever.

For a moment, silence covered the area.

It is apparent that they gained many things, yet in reality, they gained nothing at all. It was only after their hearts had sunk that they truly comprehended the essence of this devastating war, a term too feeble to describe the tragedy they had witnessed. In that moment, a faint clear voice reached their ears.

«Let’s go back.»

«Yeah...»

Everyone turned their steps back slowly. The place they had desperately wanted to escape from just a moment ago now strangely held their feet firmly. Perhaps it was due to lingering regrets about what they couldn’t protect.

«Next time...»

Although they tried to speak calmly, traces of regret ultimately clung to the end of that clear voice. Chung Myung, who had been looking at the ruins before them, finally turned away.

«Next time, we must protect it.»

«... Yes.»

Baek Cheon’s voice, filled with emptiness, spread in looming silence.

“That’s right.”

As he tried to lighten the atmosphere by patting the shoulders of his comrades, who also had burdened hearts...

‘Hmm?’

For a brief moment, his brows furrowed slightly. It was because amidst everyone turning around, he had seen Yu Iseol’s eyes grow wider as she continued to face forward until the very end.

‘Enemy?’

Startled, Baek Cheon quickly turned his head. However, there was nothing particularly visible. What was visible was merely the same desolation as before...

«Haah?»

«N-, now?»

At that moment, astonished voices erupted from the mouths of the disciples of Hwasan. They immediately closed their mouths and held their breath with rigid faces.

At that moment.

«Ah...!»

Everyone heard it.

A faint voice, as if it was an auditory illusion, but unmistakably someone's voice, reached their ears.

Without thinking, their feet moved before their thoughts caught up. When they came to their senses, they were already running with all their might. The back of someone who seemed the most desperate, even beyond urgency, was the first to sprint forward, and then forward again. Chung Myung kicked the ground with all his strength. Then, he began to frantically dig through the debris of the building, as if he has gone insane. His hands, covered in wounds, were trembling.

The disciples of Hwasan, who arrived a little later, also rushed in without hesitation, clearing away the mess with their bare hands.

Towards the faint sound of breathing inside. Towards the faint warmth they had now finally found, even though it was here all along.

«Uh! Uh...»

An oppressed groan burst from Chung Myung's desperate lips as his hands, which had been digging through the rubble so vigorously, gradually became more cautious.

Eventually, Chung Myung's hands came to a halt.

«...He...lp...»

The faint voice, almost buried beneath the sound of the wind, became distinctly clear at last.

«...He...lp...please...»

Thunk!

The debris of the building that Chung Myung had in his grip crumbled. He had started breaking it into dust out of concern that the person buried underneath might get hurt.

How many times did he repeat the process?

At the end of an incredibly cautious and careful effort, a figure finally emerged from the rubble.

No, not just one person.

«Here, here!»

«And a baby... There's a baby!»

Amidst the dust-covered scene, a partially unconscious woman and a small child cradled in her arms became visible.

Seemingly too weak to open her eyes, the woman's voice kept pouring out, as if it would never stop.

«...He...lp...»

«...»

«My...baby...»

No one dared to speak.

In the silence, Chung Myung extended his trembling hand into the debris. He gently held the woman's wrist and started pushing his internal energy with utmost care. The same was true for the child.

«They're alive...»

At that moment, everyone witnessed it. They saw Chung Myung's shoulders drop as he discovered the two survivors. When the strong man, upon discovering the two survivors, could no longer hold on and hung his head.

«They're alive...»

Chung Myung with his head lowered, the unconscious woman, and the child sleeping in her arms. Baek Cheon stared blankly at them and bit his lip, gazing up at the distant sky.

They must have held their breath, frightened by the clashing sounds of swords, the unimaginable forces colliding in battle, and the fear of losing her child, even in the impenetrable darkness. They must have kept their mouths sealed shut, fearing that a scream might escape.

The woman's final effort wasn't powered by the strength that defeated the cult, pierced the Bishop's throat with a sword, or threatened the allied forces of Sapa.

It was a Doho that resonated, filled with compassion. A voice that longingly hoped and prayed, devoid of any great power.

That's why... It reached those who were wounded and frightened.

What ultimately saved them was not the power to conquer the world but the small heart they had momentarily forgotten but should never have forgotten.

Baek Cheon's eyes became wet.

The blue sky appeared strangely bright, almost painful to the eyes.