

Selected
Works of
Korean
Buddhism

Pure and Fragrant

The Prose Anthology
of Korean Buddhist
Master Beopjeong

by
Beopjeong

Translation and Introduction by
Matty Wegehaupt



Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism

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The Samboryun (Three-Jewel-Wheeled) symbolizes the ideas of Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism: this symbol indicates faith in the Three Jewels of Buddhism; the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha and Two Traditions of Seon (Meditation) and Gyo (Doctrine). It also symbolizes the harmonization of all the clergy and laypeople and the realization of the Pure Land of Buddha by way of religious propagation.

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Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism

Foreword

Buddhism's impact on the spirit and culture of the Korean people has been deeply rooted. Its presence had significant effect from the very beginning of history on the Korean peninsula, through the Joseon period, a time of state suppression of Buddhism, and past the early stages of modernity up to the modern era.

On the occasion of publishing this new series, there is a sense of regret for not having introduced Buddhism widely to foreign countries due to the language barrier and the uniqueness of the Buddhist tradition and thought found only in Korean Buddhism that has accumulated in its long history. The Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism with the intention of sharing with the rest of the world the treasures of the Korean Buddhist culture, has published the *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism* and the *Collected Works of Modern Korean Buddhism* series in thirteen and ten volumes respectively. We are now embarking on the translation project of the *Selected Works of Korean Buddhism* in ten volumes.

The representative texts of Korean Buddhism that are published for this project are the result of a careful selection of important Buddhist texts that extend historically from the Unified Silla all the way up to the early part of the modern era. It includes a wide range of texts including on the philosophy of Hwaeom, Seon (Zen), and on the Buddhist culture, and even on the lives of eminent monks and their thoughts, texts that can be considered to be representative of Korean Buddhism.

In particular, the *Ganpye Seokgyo so* 諫廢釋敎疏 (Memorial Remonstrating Against the Suppression of Buddhism) is a memorial of

8,150 characters in length submitted to the throne during the 500 years of the Joseon period when Buddhism was direly suppressed. It is included in the *Buddhist Apologetics in Early Modern Korea: Treaties and Memorials by Joseon Period Monks*, which is one of the first translations to be published in the current series. As an important piece of historical literature, it argues for a dialogue between Buddhism and Confucianism by emphasizing the role of each tradition like the two wings of a bird or the two wheels of a cart.

Another historically significant composition, the *Seonmun jeongno* 禪門正路 (The Orthodox Path of Seon) by Ven. Seongcheol, brings to light the importance of Korean Seon and has left an enduring legacy of early period of modern Korean Seon. The *Seonmun jeongno* is a controversial book which stimulated a discourse that was not previously seen in the history of East Asian Seon. Moreover, Koh Hyeonggon's writing, *Seon ui segye* (The Ontology of Seon), is a highly respected work which reveals the meaning of existence through a comparative analysis of Seon with Heidegger's thoughts, a prominent German philosopher of existentialism.

Other representative texts included in the current series are by authors who have emphasized cultural dialogue with prominent thought of the times. This is fitting for the modern era which can be recognized to be a heightened period of dialogue and communication. Even among traditions of great thought there is needed dialogue and exchange and discussions of co-existence, and through such dialogue, Buddhism will prove to be a system of thought that can lead humanity in the twenty-first century. By publishing ten volumes of representative texts of Korean Buddhism, and stimulating communication between the thought and culture of Korean Buddhism with the world, it will be an opportunity to write the many ideas and hopes into humanity's history of thought.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the scholars who have participated in this translation project for their effort and for joining this meaningful project. I would like to also extend my deep gratitude to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Korea

and its representatives who have given support to this project for the globalization of Korean Buddhism.

With the Palms of My Hands Joined in Reverence

Byeoksan Wonhaeng 碧山圓行

The 36th President of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism

President, Publication Committee of the *Selected Works of Korean Buddhism*

Editor's Preface

Buddhism which originated in India some 2,500 year ago and spread throughout East Asia has now become a global religion. Through the people of the Arian ancestry, Indian Buddhism came to be recorded in the ancient Indo-European language of Sanskrit and the Indo-Aryan language of Pali. Chinese Buddhism was then communicated through its long history using the ideograph sinoscript of the Han people. The differences of language and ethnic-culture led to diverse methods of practice of Indian and Chinese Buddhism. In Indian Buddhism, becoming a buddha was pursued by awakening to the Dharma through the repetition of practices in the cycle of samsara. The transcendent aims of Indian Buddhism were accepted by the Chinese after transformations that were fitting to their own ways. Different from the Indian method and despite the gap in time and space, the most effective means were to believe that everyone was born with the inherent nature that allowed, whoever it may be, to become a buddha. That is why, in Chinese Buddhism enlightenment was transformed from the aim of becoming a buddha to realizing the “nature of the Buddha,” of “inherently enlightened” human nature. After having gone through this transformation into this unique doctrine of original nature, there emerged two phenomena; in theory—Tiantai and Huayan schools of thought—and in practice—Pure Land and Chan Buddhism.

Chinese Buddhism that became established into individual schools of thought based on this doctrine of original nature was accepted into Korea and Japan, which shared the same culture that was based on the system of sinoscript. However, in Korea there developed a unique

pattern in the acceptance of Chinese Buddhism. It is characterized by the tendency towards synthesis by finding what commonly permeates, leading to a realization of harmony, for example, among the theories unique to the individual schools and its diverging claims. Though the establishment of the individual schools of thought based on the doctrine of original nature is the achievement of Chinese Buddhism, the attempt at creative synthesis through finding what commonly permeates has been consistent on the Korean peninsula, a uniqueness of Korean Buddhism.

It has been several years that the *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism* (2012) was published by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, which consists of representative Korean Buddhist literature selected from the *Complete Works of Korean Buddhism*, a compilation of 323 fascicles into a compositional archive that contains literature from the Silla all the way to the Joseon period. This was done as part of the effort to globalize Korean Buddhism with the generous support of the Korean government. With the intent to continue and to further develop this tradition, modern representative Buddhist compositions were selected, translated into English and published, again with generous government funding. It was with the aim of sharing with the world the intellectual legacy left behind by modern Korean Buddhism, which lead to the publication of the *Collected Works of Modern Korean Buddhism* in 2017.

However, these two series do not contain all of Korea's pre-modern and modern Buddhist literature and it was suggested that translations of additional representative Korean Buddhist classics among the traditional and modern Buddhist literature be introduced for the purpose of globalizing Korean Buddhism. That is why starting from 2018 the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism proceeded to publish English translations of selected Buddhist literature that can be considered to be the core of pre-modern and modern Korean Buddhism in a series titled "Project for the Translation of Representative Korean Buddhist Literature," once again with the generous support of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Korea.

For the operation of this project, the Jogye Order established the

Compilation Committee for the Translation of Representative Korean Buddhist Texts (President: Ven. Wonhaeng), a steering committee (President: Ven. Seobong), and an editorial committee (Director: Prof. Kim Jong-Wook). In particular, the editorial committee that is in charge of the management of translations and publishing operations, adopted the recommendations of over fifty experts of Korean Buddhism and selected five representative literature from the premodern era, including Silla to late Joseon, and five representative literature from the modern era—post-liberation from Japanese colonialism.

The first among the five compositions from the premodern era is titled *Questions and Answers on the Avatamsaka-sūtra: An Early Korean Hwaeom Text* which is a compilation of the lectures of Uisang recorded by his students. It is exemplary of the Korean Hwaeom studies that has had a long tradition and has had far-reaching influences on the formation of Kegon studies early in Japanese history. The second, *The Moon Reflected in a Thousand Rivers* by the Great King Sejong, the life story of the Buddha composed in poetic form, is the highlight of Buddhist literature that harmonized religious and literary forms. The third is titled *Biographies of Eminent Monks of Korea*, which is a collection of three separate texts, *Haedong goseung jeon* by Gakhun, *Dongsa yeoljeon* by Gagan, and the *Jogye goseung jeon*, by Bojeong. Through this English translation, the international audience can gain a firm understanding of the important monks who appear in the history of Korean Buddhism. The fourth text is titled *Seon Thought in Korean Buddhism*, which consists of *Seonmun bojang nok* and *Seonmun gangyo jip* by the monk Cheonchaek, where the first of the two is a compilation of extracted sayings of various Seon masters and the latter is a summary of core Seon teachings. *Seon Thought in Korean Buddhism* will provide to the readers a comprehensive summary of the essential teachings in Korean Seon tradition. The fifth translation is titled *Buddhist Apologetics in Early Modern Korea: Treaties and Memorials by Joseon Period Monks*, which is a translation of three Buddhist compositions, the *Hyeonjeong non* by Hamheo Gihwa, *Ganpye Seokgyo so* by Baekgok Cheoneung, and “Sang Han Neungju Pilsu jangseo” by Yeondam Yuil. These are

apologetic texts that have refuted Confucian charges against Buddhism and argued for the legitimacy of Buddhism. Through this literature we can gather the tension that existed between politics and religion during the Joseon period.

The first among the five modern Buddhist literature is Toeong Seongcheol's *The Orthodox Path of Seon* where he critiqued Jinul's soteriological system of sudden awakening—gradual practice, which is often referred to as an important characteristics of Korean Seon Buddhism. In its place, Seongcheol claimed a system of sudden awakening—sudden practice, and by doing so he was intent on establishing a uniquely Korean method of *ganhwa* Seon. The second is Beopjeong's the *Pure and Fragrant: The Prose Anthology of Korean Buddhist Master Beopjeong*, which consists of fifty compositions that he selected from among all his writings and published in a book form. This translation opens up the world of simple and pure philosophy of Beopjeong who is much loved by modern Koreans.

The third translation is Koh Ikjin's *Buddhist Thought of Korea*. This book is a masterpiece in the history of thought where the author adopted an independent approach to history and has brought to light Korean Buddhism from psychological historical perspective. The fourth translation is Koh Hyeonggon's *The Ontology of Seon*. Although this is a portion of his original voluminous *Seon ui segye* (The world of Seon), it is the more exemplary of his intellectual thought of Seon. In this composition, he compares the main passages from Yongjia Xuanjue's *Chanzong Yongjia ji* (Yongjia's Collected Works of the Chan Tradition) with the phenomenology of Husserl and existentialism of Heidegger and investigates the existentialism of Seon thought. The fifth text is Chin Hongsup's *Korean Buddhist Sculpture*. Here, he discusses the origins and forms of Buddhist statues, the tradition of Korean Buddhist statues and its stylistic transformations. With regard to studies of Korean Buddhist statues, the text *Korean Buddhist Sculpture* is one of the most informative and historically comprehensive.

Through these ten translations, it was the intent of the editorial committee that the various faces of Korean Buddhism, including

philosophy, literature, history, politics, and art, will be brought to light for the global audience.

In the work of translating these texts, world-renowned experts and specialists in the field of Korea Buddhism were invited, who were familiar with original sinoscript, and in doing so created a group of Korean and international scholars who combined their efforts in publishing the most authentic translations. Furthermore, based on the expertise of a team of translation editors, the translations were reviewed and the most precise expressions were ensured. In this way the editorial committee made sure that the translations most accurately reflected the deeper intentions of the original sinoscript compositions.

The highly esteemed translators include Richard D. McBride II, Thorsten Traulsen, Marek Zemanek, Henrik Sorensen, John Jorgensen, Sung-Eun Thomas Kim, Juhn Young Ahn, Matty Wegehaupt, Koh Seunghak, Kim Seong-Uk, and Ha Jungmin. The translation editors include Robert M. Gimello, Park Boram, Kim Kijong, Sem Vermeersch, Jin Y. Park, Yun Woncheol, Daniel Kane, Sumi Lee, Kim Jong-Wook, Rhi Juhyung, Kim Sunkyung. Furthermore, Kim Ryunseon was the administrative assistant who overlooked the entire process of translations and editing.

Yi Deokyeol worked tirelessly in copyediting the translated texts, and the entire publication was carried out by Bulkwang Media Co. It was due to the passionate efforts and contributions of these people that this project has come to fruition.

Above all, the endless initiatives and support from Ven. Wonhaeng, the president of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the hosting organization of this project, and Ven. Jinwoo, the director of the Educational Bureau of the Jogye Order, cannot be forgotten. Ven. Wonhaeng, as the president of the Compilation Committee, has presided over the entirety of the project with much enthusiasm and interest. Ven. Jinwoo provided invaluable guidance and encouragement, especially from the planning stages of the project up to the final publishing stage. Moreover, the president of the steering committee, Ven. Seobong, and the director of the Research Institute of Buddhist

Studies, Ven. Bomun, both gave generous and helpful advice for the smooth completion of the project from planning, to operations, and to the final stages of publication. Furthermore, the promotional efforts of Jeon Indong, the deputy director of the Department of Education of the Jogye Order, have contributed tremendously to maintaining a relationship of cooperation with the government agency, and Ko Myoungsuk from the Educational Bureau has been most dependable for resolving difficult administrative issues when they arose.

This project would not have been possible without the participation and contributing efforts of these people. In this process, it reminds us once again of the Buddha's law of dependent arising where all things come to fruition depending on the harmonization of innumerable conditions. Lastly, as the director of the editorial committee, it is my sincere hope that through the publication of the current series, the 1,700 years of the Korean Buddhist tradition consisting of the multifaceted aspects of philosophy, history, literature, and art will be brought to light. And as a result, it is hoped that Korean Buddhist culture will be held up in esteem on the global stage and assist in furthering the transmission of the Dharma to every corner of the world.

Kim Jong-Wook
Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University

Series Editor & Chair of the Editorial Board,

Selected Works of Korean Buddhism

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Acknowledgments

First, to Beopjeong Seunim himself, all gratitude is owed and a great debt must be repaid. Though I never took discipleship from him, his life example is indeed my greatest teacher and I strive to follow it, deeply humbled and regretful of my own inability to capture his power or explain him and his work properly with my own.

This translation would not have been possible without the insights shared in print by Beopjeong's friends like Pak Gwangsun and Yun Cheonggwang, his Songgwangsa Temple sibling Venerable Beopheung, his disciples Ven. Deokjo and Ven. Dohyeon, lay disciple and writing colleague, Jeong Chanju, and researchers Yeo Taedong and Woo Uyeong, all of whom provided critical details explaining Beopjeong's biography and the context in which his writing skills developed and his life's worth of essays were produced. Especially helpful was finding the recollections left by Sister Claudia Lee Hae-in, who was not afraid to mention all of Beopjeong's traits, good and bad.

Thank you to the benefactors of this project, including the Republic of South Korea, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, and the Committee on the English Translation of Modern Korean Classics, together with their assistant Kim Ryunseon, whose help each step was most appreciated. Much gratitude goes to copy editors Daniel Kane and Jin Y. Park whose thoughtful critiques and careful hands helped polish this rough text to bring out whatever shine it may have achieved. Thank you especially to my mentor, Professor Cho Eun-Su who always brings confidence through her unfailing wisdom, bravery, and kindness.

My friends and family have endured my lack of sharing the

collective burdens for too long and their patience helped produce this text, so they deserve immense gratitude and my continued devotion and recompense. Whatever fruits and flowers may come from this book, may they always be bountiful and spread widely among us, in thanks to our ancestors, past and present, who would not have it any other way.

Finally, my thanks to proud Gwangju citizen, Yi Chuni, who gave me a wonderfully *meotjin* copy of *Musoyu* as a birthday present on a beautiful November afternoon in 1997, when I was barely able to put together basic sentences in Korean. Little would we know that many years later, Beopjeong would contact me to translate his work, but only because of people like Chuni and all the other Honam *meotjaengi deul* whose *jeong* helped teach me enough to make Beopjeong understandable. Thank you to all of Honam, to Jogyesan Songgwangsa, Mokpo, Yeosu, Haenam, Naju, Hwasun, and especially Mudeungsan Mountain and Gwangju. Without you taking me in and letting me learn from you, none of this would have been possible.

Matty Wegehaupt
Wisconsin, Early Winter, 2021
With palms together

Conventions

Pure and Fragrant uses the standard Romanization systems of Revised Romanization for Korean promulgated by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2000 and Pinyin for Chinese.

Inspired by the pioneering Korean Buddhist scholar Park Sung-bae, there has been an effort made here to introduce more key concepts from the text in their original Korean, rather than fewer. Though some may find this disruptive, all efforts have been made to reduce any friction for the reader, instead offering to those new to Korea and Korean Buddhism an opportunity to quickly access some of its core concepts via the language of the author himself. The educational and cultural benefits, especially at this particular moment in history, seem to outweigh the potential stylistic flaws.

An effort has also been made to capture the colloquial charm, directness, and informality of Beopjeong's original prose through the use of contractions. While the rules of formal prose generally prohibit such usage, the personable intimacy of his essays seems best captured with the natural sound of the English contraction. The flexibility of the Korean verb tense allows flexibility in the English as well, so this usage will not follow a hard rule. But when natural with the flow of the prose in the original, contractions will be the norm. Again, the benefits seem to outweigh the flaws.

While Beopjeong's frequent use of citations without sourcing in the original have been cleaned up here, a few have been left as is. There is something to be said about his lack of attention to such detail, given the limitations of his research environment. Perhaps it offers an antidote to those who fall too far on the side of worrying about methods more than essences.

The essays of this book were selected from *The Sound of Souls* (*Yeonghon ui mo'eum*, 1973), *Musoyu* (1976), *Standing People* (*Seo inneun saramdeul*, 1978), *Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin* (*Sanbang handam*, 1983), *Sound of Water, Sound of Wind* (*Mul sori baram sori*, 1986), *Totally Empty Abundance* (*Teong bin chungman*, 1989), *Throwing Away and Leaving Behind* (*Beorigo tteonagi*, 1993), *The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely* (*Saedeuri tteona gan supeun jeongmakada*, 1996), *Letters from the Cabin* (*Odumak pyeonji*, 1999), and *The Pleasure of Living Alone* (*Hollo saneun jeulgeoum*, 2004).

Entering Beopjeong's World

Defending the original true mind is the greatest diligence.

Master Hyujeong, *Models for Seon Practitioners*¹

The scriptures say that the most important work in Buddhism is to see things correctly, to judge things correctly, and the practice that makes this possible.

Master Beopjeong, "Cowards"²

"You don't know who Beopjeong Seunim is?" she said incredulously, politely trying to hide her shock that I hadn't immediately recognized the new book she'd handed me as a birthday present. "You came all the way to Korea to learn about Buddhism and you don't even know who Beopjeong Seunim is? *Musoyu*?" Such was my introduction to the author whose book you now hold in your hands. My friend's surprise was eventually matched by my own, when over time I learned more about Beopjeong until I too wondered along with my friend, "Why hadn't I heard of him before?"

He was born as Bak Jaecheol in the 1930s, during Korea's period of Japanese Imperial occupation, and died as Beopjeong Seunim in the 2010s, with Korea split in two, but South Korea now one of the richest countries in the world. In these nearly eighty years, he was not only one of Korea's best-selling authors, but also one of its most beloved human beings, providing a life of endless service to others, specifically as a Buddhist monk, but also as a writer, teacher, organizer, philanthropist, philosopher and spiritual trailblazer.

Blending strict austerity with social engagement, his unwavering integrity allowed Beopjeong to place himself on the front lines of Korea's decades long life-or-death struggle against political, economic, and social oppression. For some fifty years, he provided a

voice of opposition and comfort, daring to be a lone voice against an increasingly loud and narrow mainstream, one that demanded silence in the face of stark injustice and conspicuous consumption in the face of rapid environmental degradation. Saying no to injustices of his age and yes to the common people, recognizing their suffering, and more importantly, offering a way out, his teachings recognized the harsh brutalities of their daily lives even as he urged us to overcome them. Finding strength and power in the precious traditional values that the era of mass commodification was quickly corroding, Beopjeong's life of satisfied simplicity, sharing without limit, and steadfast engagement in critical issues of his day, helped make his perch one of the most authoritative in the country. Beopjeong Seunim was not simply a servant to the people, he was heroes their.

Why was it then that even after having studied about Korean Buddhism for a few years, I had never heard of him? To answer this question and to begin the great honor of introducing a person who has changed many lives and can indeed now change yours if you are ready, we need follow one of Beopjeong's most important lessons, beginning not with the man himself, but the specific details of the world in which he could come to flourish.

Land's End to the Bestseller List, Bak Jaecheol to Beopjeong Seunim

The Korean Peninsula does not yet occupy much space in the global mind. It is still the case that not everybody can locate Korea on a map and fewer still would recognize the language if they heard it. Until most recently, with the global success of award-winning movies like *Parasite* and television sensations like *Squid Game*, Korea had been known to the outside world primarily as a war or via technology, like Samsung smartphones or Hyundai automobiles. What the world has yet to discover are facts such that movable metal type was invented here or that two dynasties, the Goryeo (918–1392) and Joseon (1392–1897), account for an almost one-thousand-year record of relatively stable

governance that is seemingly unmatched anywhere else in history.

The heroes of the peninsula do not enter the global pantheon and its greatest poets and philosophers are rarely, if ever, recognized as such. Korea's many centuries of culture, flowering through language, literature, and a lifestyle rooted in a pursuit of harmony, truth, freedom, and pleasure, has been earned through generations of suffering transcended. Yet for those who do not yet know it, Korea is truly a hidden gem.

Within this hidden gem lies another, the southwestern region of Korea called Honam (the provinces of Jeollabuk-do and Jeollanam-do). Though far from the centers of power and long on the receiving end of discrimination and disregard, it is here that some of Korea's greatest accomplishments and treasures lie. Renowned not only for having the best cuisine in Korea, Honam is also home to some of Korea's greatest glories, whether natural or cultural, a place where some argue the soul of Korea is being protected. At the very southern end of Honam, in the most remote part of this already remote region, is a place known as the "land's end" (*ttang kkeut*). It is here, in the tiny port village of Seonduri, that Master Beopjeong's world, and our journey within it, begins.

There is one thing, though. Just as the remote and hidden gem of Honam has long been accessible only after much travail, so too does the fullness of Beopjeong's life and work become accessible only after a bit of work. As one of Beopjeong's greatest supporters and closest lay-disciples, Jeong Chanju, said about crafting the definitive biography of one of Korea's greatest modern figures, "the most wearying and worrisome thing was acquiring the wisdom to convey to readers with fealty the essence of his *musoyu*³ teachings. The entire time I was writing, I never stopped struggling with how best to match the reader's mind with Beopjeong's."⁴ Jeong's sense of struggle matches my own. His response to this challenge was to start in Seonduri and we will be wise to do the same.

At first glance, Seonduri seems like any other Korean sea-side village, with little to distinguish it from others. Yet just outside of this small port village lies Jindo Island and between that island and Seonduri

ri, the Yellow Sea races through the channel with such great force that this has taken on the name of the Uldolmok (Roaring Currents). It was here, some four centuries ago, that these raging waters helped Admiral Yi Sunsin defeat the invading Japanese navy and protect the Joseon dynasty from annihilation during the Japanese invasion of 1597. Harnessing the natural forces of the Uldolmok to channel the Japanese navy's 133 ships towards their doom, Admiral Yi and his 12 ships overcame seemingly insurmountable odds and earned legendary status as a testament to Korean strength, determination, and ingenuity.

Just beyond these straits, gradually rising to the east beyond Seondu-ri is Duryunsan Mountain. Nestled within is an ancient forest temple known as Daeheungsa. It was here that Admiral Yi's comrade, Master Hyujeong, one of Korean Buddhism's greatest and most beloved masters, not only began his monastic life, but made, too, legendary.

This Master Hyujeong is the same whose quote serves as the opening epigraph of this introduction. That quote was chosen not only because it appears twice here in *Pure and Fragrant*, but also because Hyujeong's name is the one mentioned more than any other Korean master in this text. Given his importance to Beopjeong, a bit more context to explain Hyujeong's importance will help us understand Beopjeong's significance, as well.

Duryunsan Mountain was the place where, in 1592 at the age of 73 after a life of training in strict monastic discipline, Hyujeong organized a monastic militia in response to King Seonjo's pleading for help in defending the Joseon kingdom against Japanese invasion. A lifelong spiritual practitioner whose "greatest diligence" had been focused on "defending the original true mind," Hyujeong was suddenly charged with defending the entire nation.

Through great service and sacrifice of those like Hyujeong and Yi Sunsin and the brave companions they led, the Japanese invasion was repulsed. They had succeeded where those before them had failed and saved countless fellow Koreans and centuries of cultural inheritance in the process. Monuments to these sacrifices are honored with reverence and pride in Honam and people here will not hesitate to remind those

who forget Yi Sunsin's own words, that "without Honam there is no nation" (若無湖南 是無國家).

Yet when young Bak Jaecheol stared out at the roaring currents from the playground of his elementary school where a statue of Yi stood, could anyone have thought that Honam would again see someone rise to the nation's defense or that this boy would be the one to do it? By the time Beopjeong was born, the only signs of heroics in Seondu-ri were the ruins of the Naval Headquarters Protecting Western Haenam (the Haenam Jeolla Usuyeong or Usuyeong, for short) behind his school. It was from this site that the school got its name as "Usuyeong Elementary." Though the words "Inherit Admiral Yi's spirit" shouted out from placards on classroom's walls and the school's song urges the "raising of proud new heroes," no admiral has yet to come out of Usuyeong Elementary.

There would be one alumni, though, who greatly resembled Yi and his Buddhist comrade Hyujeong's great spirit of sacrifice and service. Like his predecessors, he would stir the spirit of the Korean people to protect the nation's soul when it was under attack. Yet unlike Hyujeong and Yi Sunsin, this hero would not use ships and guns against the Japanese, but rather his brush and books, his style and wit, to pitch a relentless spiritual battle against the forces of political dictatorship and rapid industrialized modernization that threatened not only his and his compatriots' safety and sanity, but that of the entire planet.

In 1975 he would find himself in direct defiance of the dictatorship's order to remain silent about the suspicious death of his dearly departed revolutionary comrade, Jang Junha,⁵ announcing that he was "sharpening the wisdom (*banya*) sword" and ready to serve as a Buddhist warrior, defending the nation's soul against seemingly insurmountable odds.⁶ Retreating from the front lines of the democratization struggle, he rebuilt a neglected hermitage and published a collection of essays with a simple, catchy, and profound title that would soon make Beopjeong a household name. This monk, activist, and author, best described with the quintessentially Korean word *meotjaengi*,⁷ would continue to pen one best-seller after another,

using his essays to strike at the spiritual heart of a dictatorship, comforting the souls of a weary and burdened people, and establishing himself as another of Honam's legendary heroes. Before any of that could happen, though, he would need to make it out of Seondu-ri.

Like many Koreans of his era, Bak Jaecheol was raised in a life of loss with a sharp sense of burden. Born in 1932 under colonial occupation of the Japanese, by the time he was five, his father had died of lung cancer (the same ailment that would take Beopjeong himself in 2010), and his mother had left the family to find opportunity elsewhere. Though Cheoli, as he was called by his friends, shared a home with a grandmother, uncle, and cousin who became his stand-in mother, father, and brother, the loss of both his biological parents at a young age was a sort of orphaning that may help explain the sense of solitude, loss, and transcendence that one can find in his work.

Both of Bak Jaecheol's parents may have been absent in his childhood, but the presence of family was his salvation. His grandmother told him stories and made her lap his pillow. His uncle worked hard selling tickets for the ferry that served as the only transportation in and out of the region. This business allowed his uncle to pay for Jaecheol's schooling, even more so than his own son's. Beopjeong would never forget such generosity and called his uncle his most generous benefactor. Many Koreans across the peninsula were taking great pains, even in these most difficult circumstances, to educate the best and brightest amongst them and Beopjeong was evidence of that. His family immediately supported his efforts to educate himself and they certainly had hopes that this support would lead to him taking over leadership of the family, not abandoning it. Understanding how Jaecheol could make such a difficult choice helps open one of the doors into Beopjeong's world.

More a bookworm than a monk, and far from an admiral or a Buddhist warrior, this sensitive boy's simple dream was to be a lighthouse keeper, living a secluded existence while helping his neighbors by providing light through the darkness. He would look up from his books often enough to stare at the sky above and the

mountains beyond and his hikes to the ruins on the hill from which he would gaze at the sea were a testament to his early love for nature's beauty. As Beopjeong himself expressed unabashedly later in life when he met a poet from his hometown county, "Haenam is also my hometown and it is truly great to see you. My hometown Usuyeong and the sea . . . that's not only where my body (*mom*) was born, but my heart (*ma'eum*) as well."⁸

The solitude of Seondu-ri was lost when Jaecheol left for Mokpo to attend high school, but it was replaced by a new kind of enrichment. In one of the strangest ironies of many in his life, the years building up to and including the Korean War (late 1940s to early 1950s) were the most carefree of his youth and in many ways he was able to live almost an ideal college life, reading a broad and wide curriculum and engaged in constant passionate discussion. Though he'd go back to Seondu-ri to help on the weekends as much as he could, these Mokpo years were abundant in ways Jaecheol hadn't previously known. The problem was that college would have to end.

Along with college, the war was also ending, but in its destruction, the opportunities available to young men in Korea were few and those in Honam, even fewer. Suicide and depression were not unknown among his peers at the time and Jaecheol's own sense of despair was such that he said he felt great sympathy with the prisoners of war he saw, fellow Koreans, who wanted to go to neither North or South Korea when given the choice upon their release. Like those prisoners, Jaecheol longed to start over somewhere new, to find a place of opportunity where his spirit could flourish. It would be decades before Honam could offer substantial economic opportunities for their youth, but what they had in the present was a cultural legacy unlike anywhere else in the world, the mountain temple tradition of Korean Buddhism.

Jaecheol had already brushed up against the Buddhist tradition through his general education, learning about the local hero Hyujeong, and having more personal experiences, venturing to temples with his friend, Pak Gwangsun. As Pak recalls about their visit to nearby Daeheungsa Temple, it was not the exploits of the monks or the

monuments that was so inspirational, but the forest enveloping them as they walked towards the temple. Noting how all the other mountains around had literally been stripped bare during the colonial period and the war that followed, Pak recalled that these forests gave them a sense of awe and hope for the first time in a long time.⁹ Beyond these forests and the great power of nature that would inevitably draw him to a life of solitude in the mountains, Jaecheol was also propelled by a quest for answers to his deepest questions in life.

Why had Korea become so weak and poor? Why did his father die? Why did his mother leave and have a child with someone else? Why were we alive at all? His college years allowed him time and energy to share these struggles with his friends as he sought answers in his studies. Their curriculum was broad enough to cover all of Western and Eastern thought, and he partook of it all, in multiple languages. Yet for Jaecheol, it was not enough. Nothing provided the answers he needed. Even worse, post-war roadbuilding was bringing an end to much of the ferry business, meaning there would soon be no more money to support his continued studies. After his friend group failed in its attempt to muster another term's worth of tuition to help, Jaecheol finally had enough. It was time to quit, not just school, but the entire secular world. It was time to become Beopjeong.

On a snowy November night in 1955, the fraternal group that Jaecheol himself had founded years ago held his going away party. Everyone was sad but none more than Jaecheol's close friend, Pak Gwangsun, who realized the guest of honor was the only one not drinking. Sensing that Jaecheol didn't want to arrive at the temple with any sign of alcohol on him, Gwangsun knew he was already looking at the person who would become Beopjeong. "He'd always sung of a longing to live in the mountains and now he'd finally done it." Instead of the guest of honor indulging, it was Pak who got drunk and ended up "crying his eyes out."¹⁰

What exactly was it that Jaecheol had done? Beopjeong's own explanation of his joining the monastery, or "leaving home" (*chulga*),¹¹ proves helpful to understanding his widespread and ecumenical appeal.

As he notes in the essay “Chulga” found in chapter 1, if asked by the Buddha himself the reason he decided to become a monk, Beopjeong would admit, “I can’t say it was because of the meaningless of life, a fascination with Buddhist truth, or to save all sentient beings.” Though he would end up living very much as a bodhisattva, dedicated to saving all sentient beings and spreading the Buddhist teachings, his first impulse was not to save others or even to become Buddhist, but simply to save himself. “I left home to live like me, to live my true style of life.”

With the shaving of his head and acceptance under the tutelage of the eminent Master Hyobong, Beopjeong the monastic was born in Seoul in the winter of 1955. *Beop* 法 (rhymes with ‘up’) is the Korean word for “dharma,” the Buddhist word for “truth” and “the Buddha’s teachings,” in particular. *Jeong* 頂 (rhymes with ‘lung’) means “apex,” the top of the top. Together, they form Beopjeong, meaning “dharma apex” or “the pinnacle of Buddha’s teachings.” Such a name seems amazingly appropriate for a monk who would become one of the most beloved teachers of his time.

Beopjeong’s first ten years in the Buddhist order were devoted to becoming a spiritual practitioner (*subaengja*)¹² in the Korean tradition, studying precepts, sutras, and meditation. His first role was to serve his master, primarily by chopping firewood, cleaning, and preparing meals. Though such days left Beopjeong exhausted and sometimes in tears, his development of moral discipline and cultivation of a legendary work ethic seeped into every part of his body and mind. His precept study, learning about and maintaining strict monastic discipline, would culminate in his receiving not just full ordination from Master Jaun (1911–1992), Korea’s pre-eminent modern precept master, but also his special attention. Speaking of Beopjeong, Jaun famously advised, “You need to take good care of him. He will be of great help to the future of Korean Buddhism.”¹³

After a year of this initiation through hard labor, Beopjeong’s meditation training blossomed during a solitary period with his master Hyobong at Ssangyesa Temple, one of Korea’s most ancient and renowned temples. It was his training here at Ssangyesa that Beopjeong

would later grade as “A” and then use to measure the rest of his life’s training as “D” or worse. Such harsh appraisal speaks to a strict level of self-accountability that hints toward the friction Beopjeong would face in the years ahead.

After the luxury of such secluded meditation training, Beopjeong went to the bustling temple of Haeinsa in 1957 to complete his formal monastic education. Here he successfully graduated from the meditation and sutra schools and took his full monastic vows, but he also began to develop a harsh prickliness to those around him whose dedication to the *suhaengja* role fell short of his own. Some called him “odd duck” (*goegak* 乖角), for the trouble he had mingling with others. Though such oddness was not entirely unexpected among those who chose the monastic path, the other nickname Beopjeong earned at this time, the “sharp-edged grass of Gayasan Mountain” (*Gayasan eoksaepul*), spoke to something deeper and perhaps darker. If merely brushing into Beopjeong could end in one getting cut, was he really on the right path? Being weird was one thing, but being wounding was another. For him to move past this prickliness, a critical point in Beopjeong’s transformation from mere monk to national treasure would need to take place. What spurred Beopjeong’s transformation “sharp edged grass” into a “dignified lotus” would be his deep penetration of his meditation topic and a renewed love for reading, particularly the *Hwaeom-gyeong*.¹⁴

Before Beopjeong could find awakening in the text, he needed to find it in his own meditation. While training at Haeinsa Temple, Beopjeong had grown frustrated with his Seon practice and was vexed by his assigned *hwadu*,¹⁵ “what is the appearance of your original face?” Sharing his frustration with his teacher, Beopjeong was awakened when the master replied, “Fine! Forget that face. Just tell me what your face looks like right now!” It was from this moment on that Beopjeong says he developed his lifelong *hwadu*, the simple question, “Who am I?” from which led the larger questions, “What am I?” and “What is all of this?” His deep penetration into these simultaneously personal and existential questions unlocked a surging source of energy in his daily

and dynamism in his meditation practice that would remain with him until his death.

Having unlocked the power of his pure daily life practice and penetrating meditative insight, his focus could now be directed towards the sutras in his studies with Master Unheo (1892–1980), who, together with Master Jaun, were the two most important mentors in Beojeong's life and both of whom are mentioned in this text. It was now that the budding of Beopjeong the writer could begin: “My life as a monk changed drastically. Before then, I was a mere drifter with a backpack, wandering from mountain to mountain, but from then on, I got my feet wet filling in the blanks of a manuscript paper. You could say that my *suhaeng* had become social, but it's more the case that the gloomy mood of the sharp-edged grass had gone.”¹⁶

What was it that cast his gloom away? A few anecdotes from his time at Haeinsa Temple help explain. The first was his encounter with an elder laywoman at the temple who mistook one of the woodblocks from the famed *Tripitaka Koreana* Buddhist canon stored there as a mere “laundry washboard.” Startled that the common people of his country had become so deeply alienated from objects of such great worth sparked a great resolve in him to bridge the gap between the spiritual tradition and common people he both loved so deeply.

One further experience helped create the final conditions from which the lotus called Beopjeong could bloom. In his essay “The Book I Read That Summer,” he recalls a hot, humid day when he was reading the *Hwaeom-gyeong* and “a disgusting smell was wafting from the outhouse.” While that smell could have inspired a habitual response of disgust or annoyance, his current reading of the *Hwaeom-gyeong* primed his mind to go a different direction that day. “In that moment, I just thought ‘isn't there an outhouse right here inside my own body?’ Is this smell any worse than a rotting human conscience?” At that point, there was no problem. ‘Everything arises within mind.’¹⁷

When the stench of the world mixed in his mind with the text he was reading, he was moved to a new level of understanding. “About an hour before dinner I finally got up and saw that the cushion and I

were drenched in sweat. . . . I rushed to the valley, threw off my clothes, and immersed myself in the stream. The heat soon dissipated and it is like I am flying, my body and mind becoming so buoyant. My heart swells with gratitude for everything.”¹⁸ Gaining the power to control his response to his environment through reading, contemplation, and action, Beopjeong transformed the stench of the outhouse into something pure and fragrant. When he purposely shifted tenses at the end of this passage, he not only collapsed his past experience into the present, but he offered/offers an invitation to the reader to share in the experience. Having learned the magic of what reading could do for him, he began realizing what his own pen could do for others, as he invited them to dwell in “Beopjeong’s World.”

The Text

The silence of those in positions demanding them to clearly distinguish right from wrong is cowardly silence. Cowardly silence stains our generation. . . . Only a totally unhindered person can speak bold words. Bold words are able to unite a scattered people and pierce through a bright path ahead.

Beopjeong, “The Meaning of Silence”¹⁹

If you seek the wisdom
Of the Buddhas past, present, and future,
Just perceive the nature of the dharma realm.
Everything arises within mind.

Four Line Teaching of the *Hwaeom-gyeong*²⁰

Pure and Fragrant is a representative collection of prose essays selected by Beopjeong on the culmination of his fifty years as a Buddhist *suhaengja*. It draws from ten books spanning his three-decade literary career. These works can be separated chronologically into those written during his days travelling between Haeinsa Temple and Daraeheon in Seoul, including *Yeonghon ui mo'eum* 영훈의 모음 (The Sound of Souls,

1973) and *Musoyu* (1976), those written at his hermitage Buriram at Songgwangsa Temple, including *Seo inneun saramdeul* 서 있는 사람들 (Standing People, 1978), *Sanbang handam* 산방한담 (Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin, 1983), *Mul sori baram sori* 물소리 바람소리 (Sound of Water, Sound of Wind, 1986), and *Teong bin chungman* 텅 빈 충만 (Totally Empty Abundance, 1989), and finally, the largest collection, representing his longest and most secluded residency in the small cabin known as the Suryu sanbang in Gangwon-do, *Beorigo tteonagi* 버리고 떠나기 (Throwing Away and Leaving Behind, 1993), *Saedeuri tteona gan supeun jeongmakada* 새들이 떠나간 숲은 적막하다 (The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely, 1996), *Odumak pyeonji* 오두막 편지 (Letters from the Cabin, 1999), and *Hollo saneun jeulgeoum* 홀로 사는 즐거움 (The Pleasure of Living Alone, 2004).

Each of these books were curated collections of materials written across very different cultural periods and in a variety of venues, including newspapers, journals, letters, and public lectures. *Pure and Fragrant* is thus rightfully seen as Beopjeong's "curation of curations," capping the end of a very long literary career. In common with the literary greats of the Korean Buddhist tradition, his selection itself provides a final teaching. Thus, looking a little more deeply into the pattern of his choices helps better understand the essence of this text and Beopjeong's "genuine mind" (*cham ma'eum*).

Instead of a retrospective of his own personal accomplishments, the content of Beopjeong's work challenges us to address the progress of our own lives, through a rhetoric of admonition and comradely exhortation, all stemming from specific experiences in everyday life. The challenges come in the form of questions, first daunting, "Where Are You in Your World?" (chapter 1) and then intimate, with "Are You Happy?" (chapter 2). Then, after pushing us to account for ourselves, he offers respite in the form of penetrating observations that detail precisely, pragmatically, and persuasively how to engage in "Simple Humble Living" (chapter 3) and "A Life I Love Living" (chapter 4). To finish, in anticipation perhaps of our possible rebuttals, he summarizes his encouragement doing what he does best, boiling things down to

their essence and making them plain, not only telling us, but showing us how to “Do What You Really Want to Do” (chapter 5).

Organizing these essays thematically rather than chronologically, Beopjeong’s purpose seems neither to chart his progression as a writer, nor to pay too much attention to the changes in what was capturing his or the nation’s attention across time. To the contrary, what interests him the most are not accomplishments or whimsies, but rather what he sees as the very essence of things, the things that do not change. Again and again, Beopjeong tells us to look closer and more deeply into the worlds around us, not just externally but internally. He reminds us of the ways we are collectively and individually hindering ourselves, lost in paradoxes that could be saving us, causing suffering and adding burdens to ourselves and others, even as we desperately pursue the opposite. Again and again, Beopjeong lovingly recognizes our desire for salvation from suffering by reminding us to work harder, look closer, and delve deeper into our own everyday realities.

While the first and last essays in the book, “Encounters” written in 1967 and “The Pleasure of Living Alone” written in the early 2000s, are also the oldest and newest essays in this collection, the rest of the essays are spread evenly from his career, though the second half of the book is slightly favored towards his later works. Throughout them all, if you read carefully, you can find the traces of a writer whose work is formed by a career spanning the roles of translator, columnist, editor, and finally, essayist.

Beopjeong’s translation work began in the early 1960s, with the compilation of the first Korean language Buddhist dictionary and the publishing of the first book in his name, a translation of Hyujeong’s *Seon’ga gwigam*, a quote from which begins this introduction. His creative writing began in 1963, with columns written under pseudonyms in the Buddhist newspaper, *Daehan Bulgyo*, and elsewhere. These columns featured translations of early Buddhist parables, often followed by short commentaries, bringing the lessons a bit of contemporary flourish. The first totally original work written under his own name was his October 1963 poem, “A Tree’s Fury,”

followed immediately by a revolutionary broadside against the entirety of Korean Buddhism, “Letter to Buddha.” Casting a slew of charges against his own religious order, Beopjeong opened with a confession: “Dear Buddha! I think I need to talk. I tried to live like a tree in the deep mountains, as if there were no other world. I tried to stay silent like a mute, yet here I am opening my mouth again. I can't get rid of this depression without talking to you.”²¹ It seems some of the gloom had returned.

While his writing had begun as a project of translating the basics of Buddhism and interpreting ancient parables, it developed into a tool of far more comprehensive critique, not just of his religious order but Korean society in general, and often both. In his blistering attack against a 1966 Buddhist ceremony blessing the dispatch of South Korean soldiers to Vietnam, not only did Beopjeong call it a blasphemy of Buddhism, but also a betrayal of Korea, noting that the slogans used to “support” the troops were the same as those employed previously by the Japanese empire.²²

He switched between writing newspaper columns and working on a translation project credited with being the single greatest contribution to the modernization and popularization of Korean Buddhism.²³ Travelling between the mountain redoubt of Haeinsa Temple and his capital city residence at Daraeheon at Bongeunsa Temple in Seoul, Beopjeong’s worlds were expanding and sometimes colliding. He was gaining erudition in his field and practical experience in society, mingling with democracy activists from multiple spheres, and translating his own thought and practice in a wide number of venues. Training himself in this way, Beopjeong honed his craft of making ancient wisdom comprehensible to a contemporary audience, no matter their religious affiliation, becoming a master of the classic Confucian teaching to “seek knowledge in the old to illuminate the new” (溫故知新). This was no simple task, but it seemed the one towards which his life was aimed.

The storm of criticism his columns brought down proved a double-edged sword in that his word gained authority with the masses while

his ability to keep himself and his comrades safe from the authorities was becoming strained. The culmination of this would come in 1975, in what became known as the Inhyeokdang incident, when eight revolutionaries were caught, tried, and executed by the government in a swift twenty-four-hour period. Feeling direct responsibility for their deaths, defeated by his powerlessness to protect them, and increasingly bitter in his reproach for humanity, Beopjeong decided to return to his roots in Honam. Rebuilding a small hermitage from the ruins of another, Beopjeong wanted not just to deepen his *suhaeng*, but to reconsider what the purpose of that *suhaeng* was. In the process, his literary craft deepened and the fruits of this “retreat” are the essays in this book.

Collectively integrating his personal thoughts with concrete observations, threading together citations old and new, Buddhist and Western, with the crystal-clear perception of a highly advanced meditator. These essay collections provided Beopjeong with a way to offer his country both critique and comfort, reaching people with *meotjaengi* charm and a level of authenticity and authority that had become beyond reproach.

Such authenticity, rooted in his mastery of precepts and an austere lifestyle of utmost integrity, brought with it the authority that he nurtured carefully within the pure vision and insight of his Seon training. Both of these aspects of Beopjeong’s Buddhism permeate these essays. While the precepts may never be referred to directly, the purity of his lifestyle is evident, as is his sadness and sometimes disgust at those who refuse to value the benefits of a disciplined moral lifestyle. More prevalent are mentions of the Korean Seon tradition where the key concept of “original mind” features prominently, as do the names of numerous early Chinese Chan masters and the Japanese Zen master Dōgen. In many ways, it would be easy to simply say that this is a Seon book, with an emphasis on developing our meditative vision, or more broadly a Mahayana Buddhist book, giving equal emphasis to wisdom and compassion. However, when we contemplate the essays as a whole, there lies beyond the evident Seon contents a larger frame that takes

shape and when we recognize it, we may have opened one of the most important doors into the world of Beopjeong and his essays.

At the center of Beopjeong's world, there seems to lie a metaphor binding his observations and giving them their particular power. This metaphor is rooted in a traditional pilgrim's tale, featuring a "spiritual seeker" (*gudoja*) who wanders the world in a quest for truth and freedom, undergoing challenges and encountering diverse "spiritual friends" (*seonjisik*) who reveal specific glimpses of insight from their particular perspectives in the world, all serving as teachers along the path. This *gudoja* is perpetually young in spirit yet continually deceived by a confusing, and often cruel and contradictory world. Ultimately, after meeting enough *seonjisik* and grasping the insights of their multiple perspectives, the *gudoja* ends up back where they began, though now having gained enough experience to see the same world differently, at a deeper level of consciousness.

The source of this metaphor is the same *Hwaeom-gyeong* that not only inspired Beopjeong's initial experiences of bliss in the mountain stream at Haeinsa Temple but also helped develop his deep sense of repentance, which aided him greatly in blunting his "sharp grass" tendencies. Most specific to Beopjeong's development as a storyteller was the penultimate chapter of this sutra, known as the "Entry into the Realm of Reality," (*ip beopgye* 入法界) and featuring the spiritual quest of a *gudoja* named Sudohana, known as Young Seonjae or Seonjae Dongja in Korean. As Beopjeong explains, on this journey the boy meets "a boatman, a rich man, a wise man, a king, a brahmin, a pagan, a child, and even a prostitute, and comes into contact with the world of truth. The constant lesson is that there is nothing in the world that is not truth and that there is no one who is not a teacher."²⁴ Most important to this metaphor is that "as Young Seonjae goes through this process of enduring all sorts of struggle visiting the 53 *seonjisik* one by one, we too must be able to discover a new self, strengthen the meaning of our search, and begin ourselves anew again and again. . . . It is not ok to simply look at all the bodhisattvas in the sutras as figures from the past who lived in the time of the Buddha. As I see myself today, all the

scriptures we learn echo before us as concrete, living discourses.”²⁵

The concrete and living discourses that Beopjeong praises in the sutras are the precise kind he has created in the essays of *Pure and Fragrant*. When he asks us to focus on the fact that the *Hwaeom-gyeong* “narrates through all kinds of parables and stories how a human life can be achieved through relationships with neighbors” and that we “read the scriptures to regain our own existence and the space on which we will stand,”²⁶ he may as well have been introducing his own essays and the neighbor centered spirituality featured throughout *Pure and Fragrant*. So deeply do these essays immerse us in a world where we repeatedly discover our full existence only as truly cosmic neighbors, a suitable subtitle for this work could be, “Entry into the Realm of the Beopjeong” (*ip beopjeonggye* 入法頂界) or “Entering Beopjeong’s World,” because when we read his essays, we begin to perceive the world as he does, gaining a better perception of our own connections to this world, and growing more able to find our place within it.

Guiding us through a montage of vignettes, characters, and settings, Beopjeong the storyteller serves as the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra from the *Hwaeom-gyeong*, who urges us to be like the Young Seonjae, searching for teachers within our daily life and learning lessons from every experience, all to reveal within ourselves a pure “inner garden” (*soktteul*). It is here in the inner garden that we access the surging source of life’s endless energy, adaptability, and rejuvenation. Here in our garden, we can better understand our uniqueness, develop our creativity, and learn how to integrate our special nature into the harmony of all creation. With stories from his revolutionary lifetime and citations from a variety of literary genres, periods, and cultures, Beopjeong teaches us how to escape suffering by searching for truth in all of its guises, accepting it, and then putting into action a response rooted in a reflection of our most authentic selves. By living excellent versions of our own unique lives, cultivating our inner gardens and nurturing the seeds of better relationships with ourselves, our neighbors, and our neighborhoods, we find truth and freedom within our daily lives, “using the same ground upon which we have fallen to help push ourselves back

up.”

While the metaphor of Young Seonjae’s journey towards enlightenment is never mentioned in *Pure and Fragrant*, it is helpful to remember that metaphors do not have to be stated directly in order for our awareness of them to be useful. As Beopjeong notes in “An Abundant Prison,” “one of the hidden secrets about things is that they often look more beautiful the more properly they’re concealed.” So, while Seon and the discipline of the precepts are mentioned and directly referred to, neither Hwaeom, nor Seonjae, nor even Beopjeong’s favorite Western stand-in for Seonjae, Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince, are mentioned once in *Pure and Fragrant*. And yet, if we approach these essays and their collective characters, settings, and situations as realms we are guided into as individual and collective spiritual seekers, then the deepest lessons coursing through the essays take clear shape. By perceiving the nature of Beopjeong’s world, the essays form chapters that bring his many observations into an integrated whole, one that is not only more comprehensible, but more importantly, more “implementable.” With our own *mom* (body), within our own *ma’em* (heart/mind), adding our own *mat* (taste) and *meot* (style), right here in the daily life of our neighborhoods, we can find our spiritual teachers and transform from child to bodhisattva, escaping suffering, defending our original mind, and making our neighborhoods pure and fragrant.

Evaluation

In the next life, too, I want to be born again on the Korean Peninsula. No matter what anybody says, because of my deep attachment to my mother tongue, I will never be able to abandon this country. I want to *chulga* and become a *suhaengja* again, finishing all the things I could not do in this life.

Beopjeong, “A Preliminary Will”²⁷

Youngju Ryu describes the age of Beopjeong’s ascent to best-selling

author as one where writers “had to locate themselves, and not just their craft, within the festering ‘wound of the times.’” Though this mission was admittedly “hopelessly confounding,” it was precisely within such times that Beopjeong retreated physically from the front lines of the democracy struggle and became an essayist. But retreat has more than one meaning for Buddhists. Indeed, this turned out to be a time of great advance for Beopjeong. As Ryu argues, no matter how difficult the task, it was such “extraordinary times that were calling for heroes in the first place.”²⁸

In the 2001 introduction to a reprint of *Seo inneun saramdeul* (Standing People), a collection of his essays originally published in 1978, dedicated to those in society who “were forced to stand while others got to sit,” Beopjeong recounts that, “during the grim military dictatorship of the 1970s, it was a suffocating time when you could not say what you had to say or write how you wanted. It was a time when you had to put your mind between the lines with every line you wanted to write.”²⁹ The stakes of literature were so high during this period because, as literary scholar Youngju Ryu explains, “the very brutality and oppressiveness of the government meant that even more attention had to be paid to spiritual reform and ideological inculcation.” Park’s reign of forced industrialization and consumerism left a deep mark and as Ryu asserts, “Koreans are still playing the game according to the rules he set.”³⁰

Ryu looks back upon the literature of this period for anything that can help answer “how to practice neighborly love in a society of anonyms,” and praises Cho Se-hui’s *The Little Ball Launched by a Dwarf* as she calls for a politics of literature that “consists of waging the fight to apprehend, make visible, and resist the conjuncture of forces that makes human life less than humanly livable.” Yet even as she praises this work, she admits the omnipresent despondency pervading these dystopian worlds. Wondering, whether anything can “serve as the basis for ethical relations between people anymore, given the all-pervasive logic of capital?” she seemed to be pointing directly to Beopjeong’s work without even knowing it.

While never ignoring the suffering of the masses or the circumstances that causes it, Beopjeong's essays consistently refuse despair, and instead urge us to transcend the limitations of our surroundings, instead of surrendering to them. We are called to be the interdependent creators of our own worlds, "owners of the land, wherever we stand," as the Seon classics put it. Urging readers to be *gudoja* in search of *seonjisik*, living pure and fragrantly together, working hard, maintaining a passionate desire for righteousness and integrity, individuality and pleasure, through a lifestyle rooted in nature every step of the way, he seems in many ways exactly the kind of writer Ryu was looking for. When we consider the fact that at the end of the 1970s, it was the works of Cho and Beopjeong that were chosen as the two most highly regarded books of the decade, it seems the Korean people agreed.³¹

The deep metaphors of *Pure and Fragrant* do not aim merely to display the darkness, hypocrisy, and cruelty of the age, but as Beopjeong himself said, to "pierce a clear path through it." The essays here show that Beopjeong was indeed "taking up the call and becoming heroic," by joining the writers of the Winter Republic who had "gathered onto them the authority to speak for the collective and to shape a shared vision of the future."³² This is precisely why, when Ryu is arguing persuasively that we need to "understand how writers emerged as a public conscience at one of the most formative moments in modern Korean history," she is pointing to the value of writers like Beopjeong and a text like *Pure and Fragrant*.

Beyond his overt and implied political references, Beopjeong's theory of neighborhood ethics, rooted in the extended metaphor of the truthseeker Seonjae's search for "spiritual friends" on his journey through the "realm of reality" from the *Hwaeom-gyeong*, is perhaps the most radical and beneficial teaching he offers us today. Devoted as he was to valuing the lives of the overlooked and centering their stories, Beopjeong's writings are literary examples of the sort of aesthetic and ethical vision hailed by Sharon A. Suh when she discusses Chang Sun-woo's 1993 cinematic version of the *Hwaeom-gyeong*. Noting the

specific power of this sutra to provide “an image of the affirmation of the marginalized and the low as integral to the religious life,” she argues that this “offers a significant resource through which to revise the Buddhist tradition.”³³ Further, this sort of art has the power of cultivating in its viewers the creative imagination of “a world where the existence and value of all beings, from the highest to the lowest, are radically affirmed as an integral part of humanity and the cosmos.” Such awareness can help create a “a model and lens through which to critique the fragmentation of the individual in contemporary Korean society precisely because the text argues for the complete interdependence of all phenomenon through its emphasis on the enlightening potential of all members of society.”³⁴ These qualities that Suh extolls are precisely the ones that bring such great value to Beopjeong’s work.

Beopjeong’s identification of himself as a neighbor and his sensitivity towards his neighborhood and the suffering within it is perhaps best captured in his treatment of *ajumma*. While the word *ajumma* means middle-aged women in general, as used here in *Pure and Fragrant*, it refers specifically to working-class *ajumma*, the women who receive the brunt of society’s disregard even as they carry the bulk of its burdens. In “The Poor Next Door,” Beopjeong hears cold and rain-soaked *ajumma* gathering roots in the fog-drenched valley and wonders “How much are they going to sell those medicinal herbs for? It won’t even be enough to buy the nail polish or mascara that the other women in town wear.” Unable to bear such a scene, he brings them into his hermitage to share rice-cake soup (*tteokguk*). If you notice carefully, these are the only people in the book who share a meal together with Beopjeong. These are the kind of “spiritual friends” he is asking us to center in our lives.

Kim Jongwon, professional essayist and critic, believes Beopjeong’s essays have been unfairly ignored, and worse, he sees this active disregard as a deep flaw in the field itself, not Beopjeong. “Among the most pressing issues in our field is the inclusion of essayists who’ve had great success with the public and yet we’ve been treating as if we have no

connection whatsoever. When the most successful person writing essays ‘isn’t an essayist,’ where does this make any sense?” Paying particular attention to this war of definition, Kim wonders whether, “perhaps a lot of the responsibility for the shabby state of the contemporary essay literary field has something to do with the closed-mindedness in the exclusion of popular essay writers.”³⁵ While Kim speaks here about the field of Korean literary essays, his rebuke holds true for other fields as well, and the effect worsens across the Korean-English boundary. Whether Buddhist studies, Korean studies, or comparative literature, Beopjeong’s absence in English language Korean-related literature so mismatches his Korean language presence as to render the English version of Korea’s recent cultural history at least partially unrecognizable without him. It would be as if Malcolm X were missing from one’s version of 1960s American history in general, or Black culture and American Islam, in particular.

Ironically, even as we try to evaluate this work as “literature,” some of Beopjeong’s staunchest defenders are those putting forth the strongest arguments for keeping Beopjeong and the realm of “literature” separate. Jeong Chanju, Beopjeong’s closest lay disciple, argues that judging Beopjeong as a writer is not appropriate. “The monk was a *suhaengja*, not a *supilga* (essayist). There were few hours he could dedicate each day to writing. He arose at dawn, performed Buddhist ceremonies alone, drank tea, and prepared his own meals. He tended a vegetable garden, practiced seated meditation, and read Buddhist texts. . . . In spring and fall outside of the three-month Seon retreats, he visited various temples around Korea . . . he never deviated from the daily routine of monastic life.”³⁶ Noting what we miss if we focus on Beopjeong simply as a writer, Jeong elsewhere notes that Beopjeong was “performing the morning and evening chants alone in his bed, even in his worst condition a few days before his death.”³⁷ Beopjeong’s senior disciple, Deokjo Seunim, is equally adamant. “The title he disliked the most in his whole life was that of ‘writer.’ He insisted that his identity is that of a *suhaengja* not a writer. . . . He said he wasn’t trying to write well, but to spread the Buddhist message more widely.”³⁸

Whether Beopjeong approved of the title or not, when Dobeop Seunim, one of Beopjeong's junior contemporaries, explains that, "thirty or forty years ago, Beopjeong had no standing in the sangha," we get a sense why others might want to defend the idea that being a writer was critical to the power of Beopjeong's spiritual practice and perhaps the two need not be in opposition. Dobeop explains that monks would ask "What kind of *suhaengja* writes? What kind of *suhaengja* could a writer be?" But in noting how Beopjeong was now "considered to be the greatest *suhaengja* of all," he argues, "That's how much Buddhism, and the social demands on Buddhism, have changed."³⁹ In other words, the world responded to Beopjeong's integrated practice precisely because his writings and lifestyle were no longer being seen as separate. As he advanced his craft, Beopjeong's writing and the audience's reading were together becoming a collective spiritual practice.

As far back as the 1970s, prominent cultural critic Kim Byeong-ik, whose essay "Beopjeong Theory" was featured in Beopjeong's first best seller, *Musoyu*, understood that Beopjeong's exclusion from the realm of the literary essay was "no trivial concern." Arguing that "the experience of a Buddhist monk and the world they seek has created for us, steeped as we are in a tradition dominated by Buddhist culture, the deepest and longest spiritual strain of thought," Kim laments "that there have been no Buddhists among the world of the literary essay, where a single body of thought, a world view, and life perspective can be expressed in the most plain, lucid, and logical way." This absence represents "a great loss for that world of thought and literature," and in recognition of that loss, Kim encourages us to recognize that, "Beopjeong fills that void."⁴⁰

The fact that Beopjeong was able to accomplish this feat, gaining mainstream acceptance for views otherwise seen as antithetical to a dictatorial regime, seems nothing less than miraculous. Even his editor was not convinced that it was possible to sell such a vision. As Beopjeong notes, "When I first published *Musoyu*, it was a novel concept and worse, *musoyu* was not appreciated for its spiritual value. The president of the publishing company was reluctant about the title,

but I persisted.”⁴¹

In overcoming such obstacles, we can confidently say that in political, literary, and religious terms, *Pure and Fragrant* absolutely succeeds. As enriching Buddhist doctrinal propagation or direct spiritual teaching, the many specific Buddhist references and life anecdotes offer concrete solutions to concrete problems. With erudition, experience, and *pungnyu* sensibility,⁴² the stories serve as a living testament to a master truth seeker, exemplifying Korean Buddhism’s long quest for liberation.

Beopjeong’s pursuit of the “absolute freedom of the totally unhindered person” harkens directly back to Master Wonhyo. In his ability to distill the sophisticated world of Hwaeom into an approachable and artistic format, whose shape and style teach us to understand the simple yet sophisticated beauty of the world, we see echoes of Master Uisang. Through his constant urging that we approach the path of enlightenment as a never-ending process, we hear Master Jinul. When he takes up the defense of his true genuine mind as his greatest diligence and uses that mind to protect the nation, seeking help from all fellow truth seekers, no matter what their creed, we see Master Hyujeong. In his lifestyle of “farming Seon,” we see Master Hangmyeong.⁴³ And finally, in a contemporary Korean master inspiring the masses through the sheer force of his ascetism, we see a parallel with Beopjeong’s greatest contemporary, Master Seongcheol. In sum, even though Beopjeong often actively distanced himself from the formal institutions of his day, his life and works are resplendent with the finest qualities of Korean Buddhism’s rich and varied tradition.

The greatest merit in this text, however, might be Beopjeong’s ability to share with people of any religion the knowledge to tap into one’s own presently existing power, so as to find value and meaning in their own lives, particularly in a time of increasing disregard for all life. By instilling in others a deep belief that “what determines my own human worth is not the height of my social status, nor how much honor or wealth I have, but how much I live in accordance with my own soul,”⁴⁴ Beopjeong fulfills what Jeong Chanju said was Beopjeong’s

deepest desire as a writing spiritual practitioner, “to share power with as many people as possible.”⁴⁵

Beopjeong the *meotjaengi* truly did everything with style. Whether it was his use of language, so frank, familiar, and invigorating, or his work beyond the writing, so heroic, dependable, and loyal, as much as Beopjeong had a way with words, he had a way with life. One of the best examples of this was his relationship with laywoman Kim Yeonghan.

Kim’s life deserves a volume of its own, but suffice to say, her life was an exceptional one, rising from the lower class to billionaire status on her talent as a private entertainer. In the process, she remained committed to one true love, the poet Baek Seok, whose family refused his marriage with a woman of her status and who eventually left Seoul and Kim, for Manchuria and then North Korea, never to return. As Kim honored Baek’s memory for the rest of her life, never marrying, she also amassed great wealth, entertaining Korea’s often corrupt and oppressive elite in her mountainside restaurant complex. Near the end of her life, wanting both to honor her one true love and purify this space of debauchery through its conversion into a temple, Kim spent ten years trying to persuade Beopjeong to accept her donation. Greatly inspired by his essays, Kim thought him the only person worthy of accepting such a massive offering. When asked by an incredulous press how she could just simply give away such an immense amount of money, she simply replied, “None of it is worth even a single line of Baek Seok’s poetry.”

Such a *musoyu* mindset in Kim was perhaps precisely what made it possible for Beopjeong to finally relent and accept the many million-dollar donation and convert it into a temple called Gilsangsa Temple. The temple’s opening in 1997 was every bit what could be expected of Beopjeong, as he put ecumenicalism and purity first and foremost, inviting Catholic Cardinal Steven Kim Sou-hwan to give the inauguration speech, commissioning Catholic artist Choi Jong-tae to make the central Gwaneum statue, and using his opening address to assert that “this temple must forever remain a poor temple.”

To the fragrant end, he spoke out against injustices that threatened his neighborhoods, whether local or global. When anti-Buddhist sentiment rose in the early 1990s, it sparked his founding of the Malgo hyanggiropge (Pure and Fragrant) civic movement, represented by lotus flower bumper stickers that quickly spread to car windows across the country. When a massive dam building project spearheaded by Korea's president threatened the nation's major rivers, Beopjeong's newspaper columns took aim without holding back. After America entered two wars following the attacks on 9/11, Beopjeong went to New York City and offered both condolences and condemnation, pointing towards America's arrogance, resentment, and refusal to understand other perspectives as the sources of mass suffering in the world. He never stopped standing up.

Even when Beopjeong could literally no longer raise his physical body, he used his funeral to leave one final teaching. In accordance with his "Miri sseuneun yuseo" (Preliminary Will) written in the 1970s, Beopjeong received a simple cremation (*dabisik*), one of the least formal funerals possible, with a single shroud covering his corpse and a simple name plaque labelled "Bhikkhu Beopjeong," his quick cremation without fanfare was followed by a prohibition from searching the remains for relics, as was customary. Such a scene, in direct relief to other far more extravagant funerals, left a deep impression. As senior disciple Deokjo noted, "from now on, every funeral will be measured next to his."⁴⁶

It is not just every Buddhist funeral that is measured next to Beopjeong, but every Buddhist writer and celebrity as well, some for better and others worse. Strive to make Beopjeong's social vision a material reality, and some can be seen as more successful than Beopjeong's own organization. A more unfortunate case is that of a Korean Buddhist monastic who inherited Beopjeong's mantle as a "Best Selling Monk" but was then exposed for not equally living up to the "pure and fragrant" lifestyle standards of his predecessor. When questions about these issues were raised as the Covid pandemic flared in 2020, Korea's witty public quickly labelled his case as a situation of

pulsoyu, or “full possession,” which is the exact opposite of Beopjeong’s *musoyu*, or “no possession.” Thus, while Beopjeong’s books have gone out-of-print according to his final wishes and his name seems to be fading from the younger generation’s memory as a result, his impact as a moral measure remains as indelible as ever.

Epilogue

When democracy activist Jang Junha was murdered under mysterious circumstances in 1975, the Park dictatorship made all discussion of Jang’s death illegal. Beopjeong, who had been working directly with Jang, joined together with others on the editorial board of the progressive journal, *Ssiar ui sori* (Voice of the People), to defy this injunction and commemorate Jang’s death on its one-year anniversary. In a letter to his teacher, Beopjeong lamented, “How can you sleep peacefully with so much of this life’s work left undone? Neither we nor our dearly departed teacher can ever sleep soundly when we have so many sleepless neighbors by our sides.”⁴⁷

Though there is comfort in knowing that the people of Seonduri and South Korea sleep better now than they may have at any time in Beopjeong’s life, enough suffering remains both there and in the rest of our world that we find ourselves standing like Beopjeong did before his teacher’s grave, finding it far too difficult to simply let our teacher sleep. Beopjeong’s deep humility has made it difficult to build a lasting movement from the strength of his words and personality alone. While his social organization and temple serve as institutional testaments to his teachings and will likely endure as sites of great potential, because so much of Beopjeong’s power was rooted in the charismatic storytelling of his essays, it seems difficult to maintain the momentum that his popularity created without access to those stories themselves.

Thus, even though Beopjeong called for the halt of any further publications in his name after his death, so as to “end his word debt,” the threats to our neighbors’ sleep still seem too great and our own

power too weak to simply move on without his words. After learning that only a small percentage of students receiving scholarships from the Pure and Fragrant social organization even knew who Beopjeong was, his disciple Deokjo and others have argued that defiance of his will and publication of future works is either justified, or if not, at least in line with similarly defiant actions Beopjeong took in his own life.⁴⁸ Whether Beopjeong agrees with this reasoning or not, his record of service seeking truth, spreading the dharma, and comforting his neighbors in times of pain, inspires us now to defy him, if only for the sake of others. Whatever his response, we must endure, buffered by the knowledge he imparted, that our greatest diligence is not to follow his will, but to “defend the original true mind.” The aid his words brings to this defense seem too indispensable for us to abandon and it is with his own words that we ask for his forgiveness in defying his final will.

Teacher! How can you sleep peacefully with so much of this life’s work undone?

Notes

- 1 *Subonjinsim jeiljeongjin* 守本眞心第一精進. From the *Seon'ga gwigam*. “Seon” is the Korean pronunciation of the character 禪 (Ch. Chan, Jp. Zen), which is based on the original Sanskrit word, *dhyanā*.
- 2 “Geopjaengi deul” 겁쟁이들, *Daehan Bulgyo*, July 1, 1963, quoted in Yeo Taedong, *A Study on the Formation and Development of Ven. Beop-jeong's Thought—Focused on the Manuscripts of The Buddhist Newspaper Daehan-Bulgyo*, PhD diss., Dongbang Culture University, 2021, 84.
- 3 *Musoyu* 무소유: “non-possession,” “without possessions,” “without possessing.” This term cannot nor needs not be pinned down with a single consistent translation and its gist becomes clear enough in its many uses. That being so, and given that it is easy to say and now a well-known word in the Korean lexicon, leaving it at *musoyu* allows these interpretations to remain open and also teaches non-Korean speaking audiences a Korean word with lots of *meot* 몇. On *meot*, see note 7.
- 4 Yi Hakjung, “Sam gwa jugeum majeo musoyu han Beopjeong, *Soseol musoyu ro saba e osida*” 삶과 죽음마저 무소유한 법정, 소설 무소유로 사바에 오시다 [Beyond Life and Death, *musoyu* Beopjeong Comes to the Mundane World in *Musoyu the Novel*], Media Buddha (website), April 29, 2010, <http://www.mediabuddha.net/news/view.php?number=50>.
- 5 Jang Junha (1915 – 1975) was an independence fighter and democratization activist in Korea's fight against Japanese colonialism and internal dictatorship. His death under suspicious circumstances in 1975 brought great outrage and an equal amount of repression. To this day, Jang's family is trying to prove he was murdered by the dictatorship. <https://tinyurl.com/JangJunhaEvidence>.
- 6 Beopjeong, “Jang Junha seonsaeng kke ttuiuneun pyeonji” 장준하 선생께 띄우는 편지 [A Letter to Teacher Jang Junha], *Ssiar ui sori* 씨알의 소리 [Voice of the People], August 1976.
- 7 The *meotjaengi* 몇쟁이, a “cultured person with charm, style, skill, and charisma,” harkens to an archetype of Korea traditional *pungnyu* culture. *Pungnyu* 風流, literally meaning “the flow of the wind,” refers to what may be called a fundamental folk theology in Korean traditional culture, cultivating a life centered on harmony with nature and one's neighbors, cooperatively enduring life's burdens while working diligently and seeking pleasure through play. If a person could be said to be

a combination of *mom* 몸/máeum 몸 (body/mind) and *mat* 맛/meot 맛 (taste/style), then a *meotjaengi* is somebody who puts them all to greatest use. “Cool” is a partial attempt at a vague translation, but only if “wise, compassionate and stylishly effective” are part of the definition. Among the many great things said about Beopjeong, the world *meotjaengi* was used by two people he knew well, his disciple Dohyeon and his friend, ceramicist Kim Kee-Chul (mentioned in the essay “Two Faces Emerge”), as the best way to describe him in a single word.

- 8 Kim Juntae, “Nae gohyang Haenam gwa Beopjeong Seunim” 내 고향 해남과 법 정 스님 [Beopjeong and My Hometown Haenam], *Haenam sinmun* 해남신문, March 22, 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/Haenamsinmun>.
- 9 Yeo Taedong, “Beopjeong Seunim yeolban 10 jugi teukbyeol gihoek 6: ‘Cheongnyeon Bak Jaecheol’ chulga reul kkumkkuda” 법정 스님 열반 10주기 특별 기획 6: ‘청년 박재철’ 출가를 꿈꾸다 [Special Series Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of Beopjeong’s Nirvana 6: “Young Bak Jaecheol” Dreams of Becoming a Monk], *Bulgyo sinmun* 불교신문 [Buddhist News], October 2, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/YeoTaedong6>.
- 10 Pak Gwangsun, “Chulga songbyeoreyon eseo ureumbo teoteuryeo” 出家 송별연에 서 울음보터트려 [At His Going Away Party, I Cried My Eyes Out], *Wolgan Chosun* 월간조선 [Monthly Chosun], July 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/PakGwangsun>.
- 11 *Chulga* 出家 is another of the Korean words used continuously in the original and easily learned by the reader as a helpful entry point into the topic matter. Literally, “leaving home,” it refers to the act of renouncing the secular world and becoming a monastic practitioner.
- 12 A person who practices *suhaeng*, or “spiritual training.”
- 13 Kim Bongrae, “Jeon Jogyejong pogyowonjang Hyechong Seunim ‘meolli naeda bosin seuseung Jaun Seunim ui dangbu’” 전 조계종 포교원장 혜총스님 “멀리 내다 보신 스승 자운스님의 당부” [Former Head of the Jogye Order’s Head of Propagation Ven. Hyechong “The Farsighted Master Jaun’s Request”], *BBS News*, April 6, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/MasterJaun>.
- 14 Also known as the *Flower Garland* or *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, this work created a world view of great expanse, complexity, and interconnection. Though the schools that developed around this text were ultimately not as successful as the Seon (Ch. Chan) school, the thought and motifs of its resplendent and interconnected world remain a core element of Korean Buddhist practice and thought, including Beopjeong’s writings.
- 15 *Hwadu* is a term from Korean Seon Buddhism derived from Chinese Chan, referring to a question one takes as the unceasing focus of meditation.
- 16 Yeo Taedong, “Beopjeong Seunim yeolban 10 jugi teukbyeol gihoek 18:

Songgwangsa Buriram eun'geo" 법정 스님 열반 10 주기 특별 기획 18: 송광사 불 일암 은거 [Special Series Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of Beopjeong's Nirvana 18: Seclusion at Buriram Hermitage of Songgwangsa Temple], *Bulgyo sinmun*, October 29, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/YeoTaedong18>.

17 *Ilche yusimjo* 一切唯心造. "Everything arises within mind." He is quoting the final line of the four line stanza that encapsulates the entire teaching of the *Hwaeom-geyeong*. See note 20.

18 Beopjeong, "Geu yeoreum e ilgeun chaek" 그여름에 읽은책 [The Book I Read That Summer], *Dong-a Ilbo* 동아일보, August 2, 1972.

19 "Chimmuk ui uimi" 침묵의 의미 [The Meaning of Silence], *Samok* 사목, no 35 (September 1974). <https://cbck.or.kr/Documents/Samok?no=35&page=31>.

20 華嚴經四句偈:若人欲了知/三世一切佛/應觀法界性/一切唯心造.

21 Beopjeong, "Bucheonim jeon sangseo" 부처님 전상서 [Letter to Buddha], *Daehan Bulgyo*, October 11, 1964.

22 Yeo Taedong, "Beopjeong seunim yeolban 10 jugi teukbyeol gihoek 17: Sahoe minjuhwa undonggaui myeonmo" 법정 스님 열반 10주기 특별 기획 17: 사회 민주화 운동가의 면모 [Special Series Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of Beopjeong's Nirvana 17: Face of a True Activist in the Social Democratic Movement], *Bulgyo sinmun*, October 3, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/YeoTaedong17>.

23 Jeong Byeongjo, "Naega bon 'Beopjeong Seunim'—Botong saram do bulgyeong ilgeul su itge han Bulgyo daejunghwa ui juyeok" 내가 본 '法頂 스님'—보통 사람도 불경 읽을 수 있게 한 불교 대중화의 주역 [The 'Beopjeong Seunim' I Knew—Pioneer in the Popularization of Buddhism that Allowed Ordinary People to Read Buddhist Scriptures], *Wolgan Chosun*, April 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/BeopjeongIknew>.

24 Bak Giryeon, "Hwaeomsasang haeksim dameun balchwe beonyeokbon" 화엄 사상 핵심 담은 발췌 번역본 [Excerpted Translation Infused with the Core of Hwaeom Thought], *Bulgyo sinmun*, October 11, 2006. <https://tinyurl.com/Hwaeomthought>.

25 Beopjeong, "Gayasan hubaedeul ege" 가야산 후배들에게 [To the Juniors of Gayasan Mountain], in *Teongbin chungman* 덩빈 충만 [Totally Empty Abundance] (Seoul:Saemteo, 1989), 171.

26 Yi Sunmin, "Beopjeong Seunim gyeongjeon pyeonyeokseo segwon dongsu chulgan" 법정스님 경전 편역서 세권 동시 출간 [Beopjeong Seunim Sutra Translations Published in Three Volumes Simultaneously], *Chosun Ilbo* 朝鮮日報, December 19, 2002. <https://tinyurl.com/Hwaeomparables>.

27 Beopjeong, "Miri sseuneun yuseo" 미리 쓰는 유서 [A Preliminary Will], *Yeoseong*

Donga 여성동아, March, 1971.

28 Youngju Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung Hee's Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 6.

29 Yeo Taedong, "Beopjeong seunim yeolban 10 jugi teukbyeol gihoek 18: Songgwangsa Buriram eun'geo" 법정 스님 열반 10주기 특별 기획 18: 송광사 불 일암 은거 [Special Series Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of Beopjeong's Nirvana 18: the Buriram Hermitage of Songgwangsa Temple], *Bulgyo sinmun*, October 29, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/YeoTaedong18>.

30 Youngju Ryu, *Cultures of Yusin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 4.

31 Jeong Jonghyeon, "Beopjeong Seunim 'musoyu,' yongmang ui 70 nyeondae e deonjin geunwonjeok hwadu" 법정스님 '무소유', 욕망의 70년대에 던진 근원적 화두 [Beopjeong's 'musoyu,' a Conundrum Posed in the Age of 70s Greed], *Hankyoreh* 한겨레, August 20, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/musoyudwarf>.

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Pure and Fragrant

The Prose Anthology
of Korean Buddhist
Master Beopjeong

Late Spring, As the Book Gets Published

This morning as I watched the late blooming mountain cherry blossoms scatter in all directions as a fierce wind swept through the valley, it seemed that the more beauty they had, the shorter their stay, making me all that much sadder and missing them all the more. By the time new leaves sprout in those empty spaces where the blossoms fell, a cuckoo will assuredly be perched there, crying deep into the night near my bedside.

Though I live isolated deep in the mountains, I am always together with other beings. There is never a moment's chance to think I am something separate from the rest of creation. It makes no difference whether time or space comes between us, people are social creatures and cannot help but create relationships with one another. For monastic ascetics like us who rely on others for our material sustenance, this is all the more true. In matters big and small, we are bound to be dependent on our neighbors. Just as a body is followed by its shadow, so too do we carry with us a sense of indebtedness to the world.

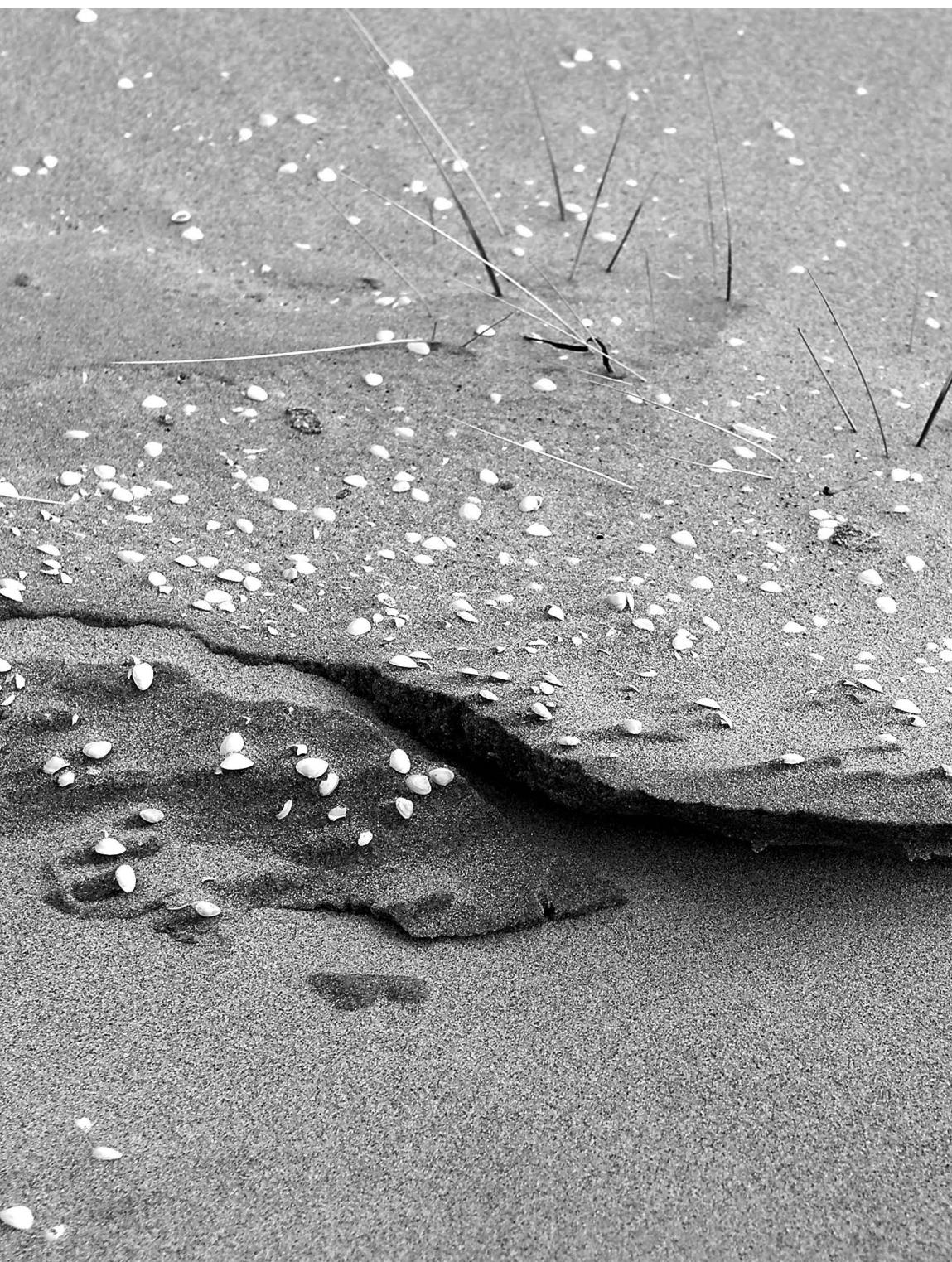
The things I see, hear, think, and feel here on the mountain sometimes overwhelm me. It can become a bit too much to carry all by myself. My expressive instinct prods me to share these things with my neighbors. So, even though I am not a writer by trade, this is why I write. Maybe, if only by a little bit, it can help fulfill my wish to relieve myself of this sense of debt I feel toward the world.

This late spring, as the cherry blossom petals scatter in the winds to disappear far away, I have been going over everything I've ever written, picking through the traces of a life gone by, way back then, way back there, to choose a single volume's worth of writings to share. I do so simply to follow the wishes of my neighbors. All the same, I feel humbled.

One of the ancients put it this way:

True mountain dwellers
Love to share stories about the mountain.
Longing to tell you about the sound of the May breeze
But always fearing you will never understand.

A Late Spring Day, 2006
Gangwon-do, Suryu Sanbang
Beopjeong
With palms together





Chapter 1

Where Are You in Your World?

Encounters

People don't become human just by being born from a human mother. That merely marks our animal age; the age of our human consciousness does not begin there. It is only through continuous and various encounters that we mature and take shape as human beings. Whether with people, books, or thoughts, it is through these encounters that we are continuously being shaped.

"To encounter" means "to open one's eyes." A world previously unseen is newly unveiled and the stream of life's spring surges within. Living only happens in the awareness of something.

There was a young man who once plowed through a rugged, snowy path in search of a master. This guy was tenacious, refusing to budge as a frigid snow fell all night and buried him, all so he could meet this teacher. The next day, he showed his faith by cutting off his own arm in front of the master. For the sake of truth, he had abandoned his body and his own life. This is how the young *suhaengja*¹ Huike met Master Bodhidharma. It was by first throwing part of himself away that he was reborn. In an encounter, you have to face the pain of abandoning a part of yourself.

Today as every day, the lively streets bustle with people who all seem to be on the way to meeting somebody as they race home. But if no joy of life or sense of gratitude comes with it, these are not encounters. This is merely bumping into one another. It's a mere social interaction. In an encounter, one must have the solemn attitude of a truth seeker.

"Who am I? How should I live my life?"

Encounters are only possible when you take on these questions and wander deep in search of their answers. Only the kind of people who cannot help but spend nights awake trying to clarify such questions are able to have encounters.

When you have an encounter, from that moment on you are no

longer alone. Freed from the loneliness of the singular, you transcend more clearly and deeply, pulsating within the joy of plurality.

People cannot become human by their own power. It is only through encounters that we become human.

This spring, we should encounter something.

We must open new eyes.

The Sound of Souls (1973)

Seeing Things from Upside Down

The silent forest clears its throat, waking up one layer at a time. There's the frequent sound of a woodpecker hammering into an old tree out back in search of food and the cooing of the turtle doves echoes mournfully.

There is a bush warbler who comes to the forest every year around this time and a wagtail hops down and bounces around lightly to share a greeting. From the valley below, like a fog, the buds burst open and climb the sides of the mountain like a rising tide.

Soon the doors of this raucous verdant season will open in the forest. That's when I want to head out and become a hearty old tree myself. I want to be just like those trees, drenching the world in green as I sprout new buds and shoot out new branches. Like the flowers, I want my itchy inner garden to open wide.

Ha ha! This spring day's really trying to shake me up!

It's true what they say, your ears are happy to hear something they've heard before, while your eyes always want to see something new. Familiar songs are the ones we love listening to, but the eye is always in search of something new, never wanting to quit the sightseeing adventure. So you can say ears are a bit conservative while eyes are quite progressive.

It was the year before last. Something happened one summer day. Sunny weather allowed me to attack the stack of laundry that had piled up. By nature, I'm a fairly rushed person, and even when doing laundry I'm the type who can't relax until everything is all done. That day too, I washed and pressed all of my summer clothes until my weary body collapsed on the floor in need of rest. Lying down with my arm as a pillow, I stared at the open sky peaking out from the end of the rafters. The next thing I knew, I turned over to see there was snow all over the mountain peak! Suddenly, the mountain looked totally different. "Huh!"

Wouldja look at that!" I noted, jumping up in a flash. But as I did, I happened to bend over for a bit and stare out at the mountain from between my legs. I looked like I did back in the days when I was a kid playing my friends.

It was a totally new discovery. The sky had become a lake and the mountain was now a shadow reflected upon it. The ridgeline that normally looks like winding curves, appeared so much more ruggedly majestic upside down. The colors of the forest were also too beautiful for words, as the primary shades separated into fine detail and the near and far were revealed more distinctly. It was so amazing that I kept on standing up straight to take a normal look before going back down again to see it all upside down.

Had anyone been witnessing this whole affair, I'm sure they'd have thought of me as some kind of crazy monk. Yet here I was, able to discover a brand-new truth.

The way we interact with others or perceive material things in our daily lives rarely extends beyond our strictly fixed conventions. This is why it is so difficult to find something new in things we already know well. When something comes into our perception, we can't see anything that falls outside of the existence already fixed in our minds. What a grave misunderstanding of reality! Whether it be people or things, they are constantly developing and transforming.

The problem is, it is only from a variety of perspectives that the new aspects and beautiful secrets of a person or thing can be discovered. Even things we've come to think most indifferently about, if we can break free from preconceptions and look purely and warmly with "wide open eyes," vitality can return to a garden of withered relationships.

It's a fact that when my eyes open, the world seen through those eyes opens together with them.

As the Indian meditator, philosopher, and guru Krishnamurti says in *Freedom from the Known*, "If we know how to look, then all will become clear. And seeing doesn't require any philosopher or teacher. No one needs to teach you how to look. You just have to look."

This means not getting stuck in fixed perspectives and looking with

an open mind. It's saying that when we look with our own eyes instead of borrowing everyone else's, we are able to understand whatever it is we're seeing with so much more clarity.

Tea lovers often proclaim that teas from certain locales are exceptional, while others just never seem to hit the spot. Of course, though we can say that one is to our personal liking, the tea itself possesses no such standard. Unless it is really bad, every cup of tea has within it the ability to help us feel tranquil pleasure and gratitude for life. Ultimately, you can only really know each tea's "best taste" by steeping it just right. People are just the same. There's no fixed mold in our personality. If I can discover somebody's virtues, that person can become a good friend.

After a while, I could no longer enjoy this exciting upside-down perspective all by myself and had to show it to everybody who passed by. Whether old monks or young novices, young men or women, it didn't matter. Like a skilled instructor, I guided them in the movements to look at the mountain between their legs. Like innocent children, they too stared upside down in awe, proclaiming "Wow~!"

Though this mountain otherwise has no special attractions, we often enjoy looking at things from different perspectives, even when it might seem a bit undignified. The sight of the old masters playing around like that was in itself a sight worth seeing. If we weren't in these mountains, but back in the world where everyone is always putting on airs, is there anywhere that you'd be able to do such a thing?

Last March when I went to Seoul, with the guidance of my Catholic friend Teresa I had the chance to visit a small abbey. The word "abbey" conjures an image of a handsome building with high walls and a guard gate. But the monastery we visited was a tiny cottage at the base of a hill on a dead-end street. Gyeonggi-do Goyang-gun Jung-myeon Ilsan 9-ri Bamgasigol. "Little Sisterhood of Jesus" was written on the faded wood, the doorplate the size of a name tag on a student's uniform. Like the doorplate, the monastery was probably the smallest of its kind in the world. They had moved into a house they bought in the village, so if you looked at the buildings all side by side, their place seemed no

different from their neighbors.

The main hall of the church had a wood floor, a small tabernacle without any decorations on the wall, and beneath it a small dinner table used as an altar, and a candle lit upon it. With two nuns from France and some young seminarians included, there were fewer than ten of them altogether.

When lunch time arrived, the hosts and travelers sat around a table and shared a delicious meal of savory shepherd's purse soup and kimchi. Even to these first-time visitors, the cozy place felt entirely like home. The sisters said that when work picks up in the village, they go into the fields to lend a hand. Their fellow villagers are clearly very grateful for the help and it seems like the neighbors have all grown very close. When I saw that tiny thatch-roofed house alive with constant laughter, it seemed the "Little Sisterhood of Jesus" was really living up to its name.

I imagine the earliest churches were like this. When Morye² turned his house at Ilseon-gun into a Buddhist temple during the Silla dynasty, wasn't it probably something just like this? Nowadays though, when we consider our churches and temples, just to speak of the buildings alone, how luxurious and extravagant they've become! With structures and organizations so bloated, can religion's original purpose truly be fulfilled? When drunk with an elite mentality, don't the monastics create a relationship with the people that becomes like that between oil and water?

In that thatch-roofed abbey in Ilsan's Bamgasigol, I received the gift of sight, looking at modern churches and temples with new eyes. To those of us hollowed out by today's superficiality, hopefully the presence of these sisters, whose peace and happiness overflows in spite of their meager means and austerity, can be our salt and light.

Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin (1983)



A Healthy Regimen

Last summer, on the recommendation of a *doban*,³ I read a book about natural foods. Though I had previously been more conscious than not about the things I ate every day, this time I really decided to improve my diet. Especially given that I was the one doing my own cooking, it wouldn't be difficult to do.

The first thing I eliminated was calcium-depleting white sugar. Even strict vegetarians like us are lacking in calcium so being robbed of more because of white sugar can't be any good. I also got rid of my entire stock of white rice, going to the market that day to bring home millet, sorghum, barley, beans, and brown rice.

Long accustomed to the smooth white rice, my tongue found the course, multi-grain rice unpalatable at first, but in order to get out of this dietary rut, drastic measures were necessary. I don't need to eat as much of the new rice. Compared to the white rice, only half of the multi-grain is enough. Instead of eating a larger amount, I need to chew it more thoroughly, savoring the flavor. My appetite for side dishes is minimal now, too. If I happen to go out and eat white rice like before, nothing could be blander. And then I'm hungry again right away! The white rice seems to have none of the invigorating power of the mixed grains.

I had been trying to eat like this for a long time, but now that I live alone again, I am finally making it happen. Softly at breakfast, sufficiently at lunch, lightly at dinner—this is my dietary reality. I cannot overburden this stomach that will serve me so diligently my whole life.

It's never a good idea to brag about the food one eats. That's especially true in the Korean monastic tradition. But if there is something that you know from personal experience that's worth recommending to your neighbors, there's no harm in sharing your

gains. Before I ate mixed grains, right after every meal I would be hungry again and totally lacking in energy. Now, even if I happen to skip a meal for some reason, I don't even notice that I'm hungry.

Here in Korea, we're still not self-sufficient in food and even with last year's bountiful harvest, \$1 billion worth of foreign grain still had to be imported at a high price. As a matter of fact, our economic structure teeters on the brink as the third largest debtor in the world. Within such a debt-ridden life, how can we really eat well, dress well, and spend as well as everyone else?

We know of shameless and insidious men who import and ingest so-called "health-enhancers" and fake aphrodisiacs in the form of snakes, cicada larva, worms, and even cats. These people consider only their own pleasure as they grasp onto life as long as they can. If they think of the vast majority of their poor neighbors, shouldn't they be able to restrain themselves at least a little bit?

If you look at the healthy regimens across all times and places, simple meals are always recommended, not oily ones. Moreover, one's health can never be maintained merely by one's diet alone.

To preserve our health, our peace of mind must be made our first priority. As the body is like the mind's shadow, no matter what price you pay for some medicine to cure your body, if your mind is not at ease, the cure will instead only act as a poison. The less of a clue people have about how to control their minds, as they eat to their hearts' content and go on about like kings and queens, the more they will end up suffering from high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and other such "civilization diseases."

If you want to calm your mind, you cannot agitate it. Greed for things beyond our reach shatters our mind to pieces. We must be able to take our perspective that has been stuck outside and gather it back inside. When you stop staring only out there and begin looking inside, you can easily measure what's within your reach.

There is a great saying in Master Hyujeong's *Seon'ga gwigam* (Models for Seon Practitioners): "Defending the original true mind is the greatest diligence" (守本眞心 第一精進). In other words, our

primary religious task is to protect our originally pure hearts.

No matter who you are, if you want to live “like yourself,” in sync with your own special light and character, you have to reveal it to the fullest. That’s the only way we can find harmony as social creatures. But most people let their own natures go fallow, constantly striving to copy others. Though our current education system and social mores are part of the problem, the ignorance of those who have forgotten who they really are is a much bigger issue.

When we can devote ourselves to something while making full use of our own unique characteristics, our minds are freed from all kinds of burdens and brought to a great state of clarity and calm. This is the state of a mind at peace.

Second, if we want to stay healthy, we have to lead a pleasurable and upbeat life. Pleasure and lightheartedness are exactly what give a life its rhythm and gravity. Wherever there is no pleasure, no genuine life is possible either.

We must be able to create pleasure for ourselves. Because ours is not a world of joy alone. Try singing once when you are sad. Bit by bit, your clenched heart begins to open. If that doesn’t work, take a few deep breaths and tidy up your living space. Exfoliating the dust and dirt from your mind, a pure wind lingers and warm sunlight shines in its place.

No matter what we do, we can sense that actions in accord with our original nature are pleasurable and those that offend it are not. Given that my life is the only one I have to lead, I might as well do it pleasurable and cheerfully. That’s the only way life becomes valuable and precious. If you aren’t in a pleasurable and cheerful place, you won’t be digesting your food well, either.

Finally, if you want to stay healthy, you have to eat proper meals. A proper meal isn’t greasy, it’s well-balanced. Though I already mentioned it before, if possible, it’s better to eat unprocessed natural foods. Aren’t the same Westerners who developed and savored processed foods now at the forefront of natural foods themselves these days?

For the health of mind and body, we need to guide our tongues,

long trained in the soft and sweet, towards the pure and natural. The food we eat has a major influence on our peace of mind and our ability to live a pleasurable and upbeat life.

Whatever we eat and drink becomes part of our blood and nervous tissue, so food has a critical effect on our mental capabilities. That's why the question "what kind of food do you eat?" is directly connected to the question, "what kind of mind do you have?"

In general, carnivores are vicious and wild. Herbivores, on the other hand, are generally gentle and kind. Strange as it may be, I kind of distinguish between people who are more plant- or animal-like. I can grow intimate with people who are clear and transparent, but I've no desire to get closer to people who are dull and opaque.

I can hear the sound of acorns plopping to the ground out back. Fall is ripening again.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)





Waters Flow, Flowers Blossom

On top of the mountain, the leaves have already fallen and only on the sunny side do any of the rare colored stragglers hang on.

I've been busy for a while rebuilding the *jeongnang*.⁴ That's the old-fashioned name we've used for monastery outhouses. I have been working so hard I hadn't even paused once to gaze at the mountains, and before I knew it, the leaves had all fallen, together with the cold shade of the afternoon.

This outhouse was a shabby little thing, loosely built long ago, and though it had been reinforced numerous times with tiles and wooden struts, when a big storm tore through, the wind shook it such that it now had a permanent lean and I couldn't help but rebuild. As luck would have it, the temple was in the process of a large construction project building a new dharma hall and museum, so we were able to include our project within theirs, making the rebuilding a lot easier than it would have been otherwise.

Though I was aiming to build this one smaller than the previous single *pyeong*⁵ hut, when the prior at the big temple suggested that since we were building it again we should do it right and make it so anyone could use it comfortably, I adhered to his request. As I worked on it, I got thinking about something: why was it that human life had to be so complicated? It's because we need separate places for taking food in and then sending it back out. In Western houses, it's okay for the two spaces to be under one roof, but in Korean traditional homes, they always had to be built separately. We even have an old saying, "The further away the outhouse is from the main house, the better."

This time of year also happened to be the main harvest time and laborers were hard to come by, so the carpenters from the big temple carried the materials on their backs. Ferrying the tiles up the mountain, we needed more hands, so the roof only really started to get covered

when the demand for labor settled down a bit. We finally got some tiles delivered yesterday from a factory in Gangjin and we'll be able to finish our work today. As we started on the twelfth of last month, it's taken about a whole month to finish.

This little outhouse sitting in the great forest has become the most charming building at the hermitage. And since it was built by the hands of such experienced carpenters, it might just become an architectural model for building outhouse at other temples in the future.

Elder Master Gyeongbong referred to the outhouse as the *hae'uso* 解憂所, meaning, a “place (*so*) to relieve one’s burdens (*hae'u*).” That’s such a perfect example of an elder master’s sense of humor. On the day we raised the rafters and set the beams, I said a prayer for everyone who would make a pit stop here, that all of their worries may be left behind and they may descend more lightly down the mountain with a clear mind.

Many hikers now come to see the fall colors. The main temple is always like a marketplace because of the crowds and the ripple effects have spread all the way to the top of the mountain where I live. I meet people of all social classes and each has their own particular way of speaking.

“What brought you here?”

This is my first greeting to the folks who’ve sprung up here all unannounced.

“I dunno, I just came to check it out.”

“Having come to the main temple, I thought I’d come all the way up here just to have a look.”

Most folks who respond like this look around for a bit then head back down. That’s because my place is a measly hermitage with nothing special to see. Now and then, there are people who say that they’ve come up to the mountain top to get some good advice.

To them, I have a uniform response, “please just enjoy the view of the mountain and be on your way.” I myself have yet to possess clear eyes to see, so what good advice could I possibly offer? Anything of worth I would happen to say would be nowhere near as good as nature. There’s no esteemed master anywhere who can compare with Mother Nature. Compared to the sounds of nature, the language of human

beings is little more than the buzzing of mosquitoes and flies.

When you go to the mountain, you have to liberate yourself from who you are. Learning to close our mouths and leave behind the silly chatter in which we're constantly engaged, we need to be able to return to being one with nature. Our eyes and ears that have been so outwardly focused must be turned back inside. We just need to rest, looking at our surroundings with a relaxed and open mind. Bringing our complex thinking to a pause for a bit, with our most comfortable mind, we need to listen carefully to nature's breathing. What words are necessary outside of that?

Immersed in such petty talk for so long, a cold hard look at how blind and deaf this has made us is what we really need. Staring at others' faces constantly, we have to reflect on whether we've forgotten our own. Instead of falling prey to what others say, we must use our own eyes to see and our own ears to hear.

When we don't, it's not our own lives we're living. Nature purifies all those who are tired and dirty, taking us in for as long as we need to rest. All we need to do is return to Her embrace. As worn-out as we are, mere empty shells stuck in fixed views, this is the only way we can recover ourselves.

A while back, a young man who seemed to be a student came by and suddenly asked, "Where is the 'Water Flowing, Flower Blooming Pavilion'?"⁶

When I replied just as abruptly, "You're standing in it!" he was puzzled.

Where else would flowers be blooming and water flowing? On a mountain, of course! There were flowers blooming and water flowing all around him. But it's not just in the mountains that flowers bloom and waters flow. Even for those who only know life in the city and living in a concrete-box like apartment, if you know how to live, there's somewhere nearby where fragrant flowers are blooming and pure water always flows.

We need flowers blooming and waters flowing in our lives, no matter our situation or the sort of work we're engaged in. If we don't,

the burdens of day-to-day life grow all the more tedious, annoying, and debilitating. Looking for answers anywhere besides the very place you're standing right now is nothing but a waste of time. That's why each of us must make wherever we are right here and right now the space where our lives actually come to life.

One day, Chan Master Linji⁷ ascended the dharma platform and said: "Within this hunk of flesh there is a 'true person of no rank,' coming and going freely without restriction through your five senses. Those of you who still have no clue—Look carefully!"

Hearing this, a monk came forward to pose a question.

"What do you really mean by a 'true person of no rank'?"

The master came down from the dharma platform, grabbed him by the collar, yelling and pressing him to answer, "Speak! Speak!"

Unable to comprehend the situation, the young monk was dumbfounded and the master responded by shoving him away with a growl, "This 'true person of no rank' right here? What a dried piece of shit."

That true person of no rank isn't anyone else but you right here right now, is it? Linji's rebuke demands to know where else the young monk could be searching when he has already completely forgotten his own vibrant life that he's living right now.

Every great seeker wants to reach all the way to the heavens in their journey, that's why I can't blindly follow the paths of even the greatest masters. The only ones worthy of being called "true people of no rank" are those who proceed along their own paths, not others.

It looks like the tiles were delivered yesterday; I can hear the sounds of the workers from below carrying their loads up the mountain. I'd better go out and help. Once this work is completed today, I should make the flowers bloom and waters flow in my own inner garden.

Another year passes from my life. Time isn't something that's coming, it's going, right?

Totally Empty Abundance (1989)

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind

The silver magnolia tree on the edge of the garden has shaken off every last leaf and only empty branches remain. Even just looking at it, how unencumbered and refreshing! Sometimes a titmouse or a jay flies up and rests on those empty branches. The cherry tree in front of the memorial stones stands silently after dropping its blazing red leaves all at once. By the side of the well, the gingko suddenly cuts a slim bare figure.

Gazing at the trees that have cast off their leaves and stand silently with empty branches, I can't help but reflect whether there aren't some things I need to shake off, too.

Compared to the trees, it seems we humans can't be as simple and pure, nor can we be as healthy and wise. Endlessly wanting to possess more, we easily envy and despise one another, even wanting to inflict violence. Sometimes we're so foolish it's like we can't see what's right in front of our faces.

This afternoon, the weather was really gloomy and the chilly wind was enough to make me pull my collar in tight. I decided to climb the mountain. I know it sounds a bit strange to hear that mountain dwellers also like to go mountain climbing, but even when you live here on a mountain, there are plenty of other mountains to climb. Hence the phrase, "mountains piled upon mountains," no?

I climbed up the back ridge and visited a forest of alders. These trees had also dumped all their leaves and they huddled together in preparation for winter. Walking through the woods of these bare trees, as weird as it might seem, their body heat was strangely cozy and warm. I couldn't get that sense when they were covered thick with leaves, but now that they were standing with all their branches bare, I could feel the warmth.

I think the same holds true for people. For those who possess

everything, it's difficult to feel their humanity, but when you meet people living in pure and humble austerity, you can feel something heartwarming right away. This austerity we are talking about here is not the forced destitution of the extremely poor, it is the chosen asceticism of those who want to lead simple lives in accordance with their fair share, taking only that which they need and are entitled. While forced poverty is an evil and humiliating, chosen austerity is by no means a vice, but a virtue.

In a world such as ours, everybody laughs at old phrases like "the happy path of peaceful poverty," but our scholarly ancestors were serious about creating pure and simple lives by cultivating their own worlds, not relying on the wealth, fame, and power of the rest of the world. Not everyone is able to do this of course, but for those with a clear vision of life who are setting the world on fire in their profession, this unyielding spirit should lie at the foundation of their daily lives.

Whatever it may be, when people are fixed on possessing and filling themselves up with something, they end up coarsened and dulled. That's because there's no room left for any pure wind to blow. Living as we do today, simply trying to maximize our own share at all cost without any thought of our neighbors, has left us vexed with conflict, contradiction, and corruption. Put simply, whether as individuals or groups, when our senses are unstable, we miss the entire truth and meaning of life.

Letting go and emptying never means living passively, it is a choice made within a wise life. If you're not letting go and getting rid of things, nothing new can come in. In some sense then, possessing and filling up with things means being stuck in the swamp of a stagnant past, and the path that opens towards a new life comes in the single thought of reflection that allows you to get rid of everything, even when you've got it all.

If a tree were stuck with its old leaves on its branches even after the season had turned, the new leaves could never sprout. If the new leaves didn't sprout, its growth would be stunted and it would become sick and soon wither. Looking closely, you'll notice that even evergreens like pines, junipers, and bamboo all drop their old leaves and add new ones

with the turn of the seasons. Their evergreen appearance is due to the fact that the process of replacement is gradual rather than all at once, as with deciduous trees.

The sprouts that will open next year on the silver magnolia and ginkgo trees are already appearing in the empty spots left on their leafless branches. This phenomenon is a perfect example of an ecosystem's rhythm. Without it, life becomes boring, wearisome, and meaningless. The cycle is what makes nature such a magnificent teacher.

A fundamental problem lies in the fact that only humans, and especially ourselves these days, turn their backs on the natural order, wishing to disobey and even destroy it. As autumn passes and winter arrives, we should not just accept this process as the simple cycle of the seasons. We must know how to take this as a lesson, a divine revelation even, an urging from the universe for us to throw away the remnants of our non-essential lives so that we can achieve our fundamental ones.

If we want to learn from nature as our teacher, it requires no extra study or preparation. Indeed, such extra tutoring is more a hindrance than anything else. It's good to just sit and stare silently with an empty mind, without any thought whatsoever. Then take time now and again to get close to the soil, to gently touch the trees, and look at the sky that opens up at the ends of their branches. The sky entrusts us with boundless universal space, freeing us from our obsession to cling to and settle in any one place.

In a life blocked incessantly by walls, offering no wide-open spaces, our awareness loses its spirit and then withers away completely. This is why blank spaces force us to reassess our perception of reality's true nature. Reforming our consciousness does not mean changing all the things that are already there, it means finding the pattern for a new life within the nooks and crannies of the one you already inhabit. Without any reformation in consciousness, creation of any new life is impossible.

It was the fruit of an incredibly refreshing fall afternoon that I learned this profound lesson in a forest of leafless alders. Caressing the trunks, even in their knotted ruggedness, there's an almost immaculately tender softness. Isn't it a sign, that even in a world as

harsh and violent as our own, there exists within us all a fundamental open tenderness?

I've climbed to the top of a mountain and gazed at a distant peak layered behind countless others. Unlike when I look straight upwards, my field of vision is wide open and my mind feels likewise. I was experiencing for myself the words of that old poem that says, "If you wish to see further, you must ascend to the next level."⁸

In some of our traditional paintings, there are scenes of scholars climbing a hill, hands clasped behind their backs as they gaze off at distant scenery. Though at first glance, these scenes may appear somewhat dull, a more careful look at these images reveals life's wisdom, ease, and charm.

The panorama from the top of a city building just reveals more buildings. With such little open space in the city, it's all just so much densely packed congestion. That's why it's so difficult to find any blank spaces. And when our thinking has no empty spaces, it's easy to fall into fantasy and delusion. I'd venture that the origin of the great variety of crimes that plague some cities lies in this problem.

Open places and blank spaces aren't empty of things. The openings and blanks are what support and sustain our true essence and reality.

In the middle of life's turmoil, to willingly give everything up and let it all go is to embark on a new life. That's why if you really want to tear yourself out of a worn and withered, mediocre life of monotonous repetition, you need the courage and determination of the trees that cast their leaves off all at once.

Here in this last month of a waning year, we should be able to look back and consider whether the lives we've been leading are in accordance with our proper share in life. If you're already completely satisfied with your life, it's like you're already giving up on a new life and settling for a second-hand one. Your soul has lost its luster in this case. Living has to mean endless striving, exploring, and experimentation. A life without it is as good as over.

The rhythm of nature never pauses nor ends. Nature exists most naturally when it is purifying itself. We humans are the same. Whether

we are eating, wearing clothes, thinking, moving, or interacting with others, if done without force or pretension, we can become exceptionally natural in all that we do. This naturalness is precisely what creates a wholesome life.

Having grown a bit tired of the solitary life, I've decided to leave my old nest. This winter, I'd like to visit the Himalayas and try starting a new life. When it comes to my life, it's I who must tend to it, not anyone else.

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)



The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely

The March calendar has pictures of mountain camellias blooming, but my surroundings remain buried deep in snow. Even so, when I go down to the stream, I can see the pussy willows in the frozen ice have their fuzzy warm coats on.

A mountain's desolation in winter isn't because of the cold, it's because the birdsong has disappeared. Birdsong isn't just the sound of a vibrant environment, it is life's flow, its harmony and balance. This morning amidst the winter mountain desolation I heard the unseasonable cries of birds. With bated breath and closed eyes, I set my ears to the sounds of a bush warbler and cuckoos, a titmouse and nuthatches, a wagtail, a golden oriole, a grosbeak, a turtle dove, a scops owl, a chickadee, and a kingfisher.

I unpacked a gift this morning that I received yesterday from one of the elder *bosalnim*⁹ on my way back from town. It was an audio tape put out by a publishing house on the "birds of Korea," recorded by an ornithologist while traveling through our country's forests, fields, and islands.

Listening to these birds on the recording in a cabin surrounded by snow, I feel as if I've transcended time and space, entering in an entirely different world. When you hear the sound of a beautiful bird accompanied by the purely murmuring stream, before you notice it, the fresh scent of the lush green forest seems to be wafting over you, as the wildflowers and green moss of a forest path drenched in pure slanting sunlight are brought to mind.

What we call "imagination" may be the shadows of earlier memories or unfulfilled wishes. Either way, a good imagination is all it takes to enjoy the pleasures of being alive. On the other hand, a dark and gloomy imagination pushes us towards sadness and depression. The reason being that it is our thoughts and imagination that all contribute

to our particular *eop*.¹⁰

A few years ago in early spring, I took a boat from Yeosu to visit the remote island of Baekdo in the south sea. Baekdo Island is a beautifully natural and uninhabited island not yet tainted by mess-making humans. On the way back, we had some spare time and stopped at Geomundo Island to climb the ridge to see the lighthouse and camellia flowers along way.

That was when I suddenly heard the sound of a yellow-billed grosbeak which perked my ears right up. Unexpectedly hearing the grosbeak singing under the camelia flowers, I couldn't contain the excitement in my heart as I welcomed back the sound of this little old friend. Back in the mainland mountains, we would still have to wait until midsummer to hear this song. For that one day of life, at that particular time and in that place, I was immeasurably grateful.

This morning, listening to a recording of these birds' voices, I realized something new. When you catch only a sample of their songs, there's a similarity between the grosbeak and the bush warbler, but when you listen closely and compare them, the warbler's volume is slight and the sound is hard, with a weak echo. The grosbeak's song is tinged with a perfectly melodic sound that seems to come from honey-coated vocal chords.

I learned something else, too. Though I'd spent a lot of time listening to all these different birds surrounding me in this lush forest, I couldn't name many of them. I was glad to now finally be able to say "that's the Indian cuckoo" and "this one's the Himalayan cuckoo."

Listening to the sweet silvery voice of the ruddy kingfisher brings the paulownia trees at my old hermitage Buriram¹¹ to mind. Covered from feather to bill in a blazing red, kingfishers are summer migratory birds.

On the paulownias out front, there are already four or five holes drilled in a line from bottom to top by woodpeckers to nest their chicks. Nevertheless, without fail, a kingfisher will come along acting like they own the place and take over these houses into which the other birds have poured all their efforts. In human terms, we would call this

the brazen theft of somebody's home. As bad as it sounds though, just listening to their voices makes it worth it.

The plum blossoms are likely blooming now down south. It's when the plum blossoms bloom each year that the wagtails come by, shaking their tails back and forth and strutting their stuff around the yard. Whenever I hear the wagtail's call, I immediately wonder how the plum blossoms are doing.

A sight really worth seeing are the plum blossoms at Seonamsa Temple in Seungju. When the age-old plum trees entwined on the stone temple walls come into bloom, an incredibly beautiful harmony transpires, like an ancient scene, reminiscent of the spirit of a refined and dignified old scholar. When the flowers blossom from these old branches, their delicate fragrance is enough to make a traveler sorry that they have to leave.

There's a professor who teaches Korean literature at a university in Seoul who takes his wife down south every year when the time comes for the plum blossoms to bloom. On the way, they would visit Buriram Hermitage and we would talk deep into the night about plum trees. Loving flowers like we do, talking about them this way, it is as if a tiny part of us also becomes a flower. I heard that somewhere in Gwangyang there's a huge orchard with tens of thousands of plum trees. I'd really like to visit there this spring. Hearing that wagtail's song really got me going about plum blossoms!

The distant sound of a cuckoo seems to come from beyond the ridge. When people hear this call, it seems to plant a sense of distance in our hearts. Though my ear is drawn to the bright and cheerful song of the golden oriole, my heart hears the mournful sound of the cuckoo. As the sharp metallic call of the scops owl at night provides the brass, the cuckoo's voice brings the woodwind instrument from afar, leaving a faint sensation of the warm rings around the moon.

While golden orioles are more enjoyable to hear together in a group, it's better to listen to cuckoos all by yourself, even better while just leaning against some wall. In the southern mountains, every year around the fifth or sixth of May, there is a steady stream of golden

orioles and cuckoos.

The first time I heard them it was a wonderfully welcome delight, similar only to the pleasure I feel when a full moon just starts to peak up over the mountaintop in front of my home. The closer you are the better when it comes to hearing the golden orioles, but with the cuckoos, it's best to listen to their song from a distance.

It reminds me of something from Yi Kwangsu's¹² novel I read a long time ago. A young woman was abandoned by the man she loves and was withering away from her lovesickness. When a relative searches for and finds her one day, with a barely audible voice she says: "Uncle, when I die, I am going to become a cuckoo, flying from mountain to mountain, singing my song of bitter sorrow. . . ."

Hearing the cuckoo's cry suddenly conjures these words I read as a child.

The mourning doves cry, too, as if they are harboring some deep pain. Their sorrowful song is like a sobbing that seems to stain my own heart with its sadness.

When the sounds of bird song disappear from our surroundings, it makes life incredibly harsh and barren. Birdsong is not just some simple sound in nature, it is the beautiful music nature sings through the sounds of life's essential vibrancy. Now these bird sounds are gradually disappearing from our lives and it is pitiful.

Whether it be young sparrows, magpies, or even any variety of rare wild bird, human beings will catch and eat them. Other birds die horribly in fields and forests exposed to excessive pesticides. Air pollution has already caused not only migratory birds, but resident birds to now avoid this land.

Think of a forest where no birds dwell. That forest cannot be alive. Likewise, when we are indifferent to nature's vitality and harmony, our human lives become as if they were struck by a terrible disease.

Every time anybody opens their mouths these days, it's about money or the economy. We have a deep need to ponder where human happiness really lies and where we can find our values. The economy is definitely not the only thing that brings us happiness. The resources to

create happiness are spread all around us. It is our heart that knows how to turn this material into the happiness we are now losing.

The forest the birds have all left is so lonely.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)



Where Are You in Your World?

It's December. The last month of the year is here again. We've climbed to the top of a hill where we can look back with fresh eyes upon the days that have passed.

It brings to mind the words of Martin Buber from his book on Hassidism, *The Way of Man*.

"Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?"

Don't just let your eyes skim over those words. Read them aloud to yourself, clearly and quietly.

When we ask ourselves these questions, we are able to estimate the weight and color of our time lived so far. From time to time, we must reflect on our lives with such questions.

In December, you really get a sense of that adage, "Time isn't something that's coming, it's going." We should reflect on everything from the past year, what we've done, how we've lived, which neighbors we've met, how much of our hearts we've shared, and whether our sincerity in raising our children or helping others has been for their own sake or ours.

If you are negligent about looking deeply inside, it is easy to become a mechanical, expressionless person. Building layer upon layer of only your most animal instincts, life's entire rhythm gets lost.

While we humans are indeed also animals, our potential to become human lies in our ability to look back on our lives and reflect upon ourselves.

Ask yourself again with a soft voice.

"Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?"

Questions like these allow us to hear the sounds of our genuine selves that come from deep inside our minds. At the same time, we can come to know where to be placing worth and meaning in our lives.

An interesting thing happened in the middle of last October. It was late in the afternoon and I was on the way home from Doyewon in Icheon where I was busy making some earthen bricks. The weather that fall day was so perfectly clear and refreshing.

It was the time of day when the sun was just setting and the tail lights on all the cars were starting to come on.

In the clear and cloudless sky, the azure rose forever. Just before darkness fell, the golden rays of the setting sun shining on the foot of the mountain revealed its ridges in brilliant clarity. Soft and supple, they felt just like the lingering rhythm of the universe. Just then, the fresh crescent moon started rising right above the ridge line.

The sunlight that spread upon the mountain ridge was tinted with silence and peace. As time passed, the sunlight faded, darkness fell, and the outline of the mountain blackened, revealing the figure of the crescent moon more clearly. Early evening stars began sprouting up here and there one by one.

Taking in this scenery all at once as I gazed out of my car window on this west facing road, I was brought to the most beautiful and touching time of the whole day.

Nature is really this beautiful.

Nature is truly this mysterious.

In living our daily lives, we carelessly overlook the beauty and mystery that's been given to us. How many times in our lives are we able to feel such beauty and mystery, such tranquility and peace?

Back when our emotions were tender and transparent, we used to be able to pause for a bit, even just to gaze at the grass and flowers on the side of the road, moved by their beauty and the mystery of life. Facing the sunset as nightfall brought each day to a close, we used to be filled with a solemnity that made us want to put our two hands together in prayer. Whenever we'd see the full moon, we used to call our family to make sure they came to take a look.

I have to say “used to” here because we’ve become creatures who now remain completely unmoved in the face of nature’s beauty and life’s mystery.

As our lifestyle becomes more industrialized and urbanized and we’re thrust further into this information age, so much the more our need to cultivate a sincere awareness of the beauty of things and the mystery of life, as these are the pillars that support our lives. It doesn’t matter what country, we see in the rise of injustice, corruption, violence, and murder the inhumane diseases of a modern society blinded to the beauty and mystery of life.

Since the beginning of human history, we’ve debated endlessly over what it means to live as a human being. Though it’s way too complex a question to sum up here in a few words, if we were at least able to look closely at the world, seeing the beauty of things and the mysteries of life, we wouldn’t have created the cruel and desolate “human scum” we face today.

Can we imagine that a person who habitually and recklessly shoots and kills migratory birds, these vulnerable guests whose lives depend on us and who’ve travelled such long distances and simply want to rest, can also raise children and live happily with their families? Can we include among the ranks of human beings our neighbors who destroy innocent wild animals, our fellow living creatures, with traps and snares?

When natural friends such as birds and wild animals disappear from the land, humans will be all that’s left of what we call “life.” Imagine ourselves surrounded only by appliances, garbage, cars, and toxic fumes. What absolute horror. Those wouldn’t be “people” anymore. Unlike the beings we know today as humans, these would be monsters.

Sentimentality (*gamsang*) and sensitivity (*gamseong*) sound alike but they don’t mean the same thing. When a person loses their sensitivity, the ability to cognize, then they are not completely human. When a feeling brings pain to our heart, that is sentimentality. When our sensitivity is dulled, we lose the function of our sentimentality as well. Numbness and apathy in the face of any object or situation are never the

signs of a living being.

In our modern society that places the highest value on economics alone, our human sensitivity, which is humanity's most intimate inner garden, is drying up. We need to start listening again.

“Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?”

Letters from the Cabin (1999)





Making Each Day Anew

It's so windy today. A nasty cold northern gale is tossing the dead leaves all around, their souls now long since abandoned. The weather is so cold that I haven't even heard the woodpecker's *ttok ttok ttok ttok ttok* out back. The green of the mossy stone I left under the sunny window shines all the brighter.

Winter two years ago, there wasn't a single living thing here in this room. A cold season during a mountain retreat devoid of life is really lonely. I once came upon this spot where there was a half-submerged stone, about the size of my fist, modestly clad with blue green moss like a carpet over half its body. I kept this stone in a white bowl with some water and it gave the place a slight air of elegance, as if there were a cloud in the room. At first glance, it kind of looked like a curled up little rabbit.

Changing the water now and then, we spent that winter together on excellent terms. The stone listened to my words in silence and I accepted its silence just as gracefully. We were in the same room, living eye-to-eye, each getting along with our business without any interference. In the early spring, when the ice started thawing in the valley and blossoms started swelling at the ends of the plum branches, we made a promise while saying our goodbyes. As I returned it to its place by the stream, we decided to meet again next winter.

Last winter, the stone indeed stayed with me in my room again. It was then, owing to the mystery of life, that all of sudden three or four stalks of grass-leaf sweet flag started sprouting from the stone. Now it looked just like a big-eared rabbit.

The day before yesterday, on the way back up the mountain after going down to the main temple to attend the memorial service for Master Hwabong, I suddenly thought of the stone and went to the stream to go get it.

I searched for a bit, worrying that it might have been buried in the soil washed down the mountain by last summer's monsoon rains, but there it was, greeting me with a look of recognition. Wait, what was this? Within a year, the grass-leaf sweet flag had grown into three separate clusters, now giving it a thick layer of leaves. Life is such an amazing mystery!

To borrow an expression from India's world-renowned teacher, Krishnamurti, life is something surprisingly deep and wide. A singular great mystery, life is this huge country that we are all moving within. As he put it, when we are just worried about earning money and making a living, we are never able to see the totality of life.

Life is truly surprising and mysterious. And that's not just human life, it is the birds and flowers, trees and rivers, stars and wind, earth and stone, all of it is life. The harmony of the entire universe is life, that's the mystery of life. It is something truly beautiful, something that nobody will ever be able to stop. I mean, is there anything that can suppress this mystery of life?

"If you don't begin to understand life while you are young, you will grow up inwardly hideous; you will be dull, empty inside, though outwardly you may have money, ride in expensive cars, put on airs."¹³ These are again the words of Krishnamurti.

Our "rabbit" lived for a winter on the occasional fresh change of spring water, the sound of wind passing through the forest, and the sunshine coming in through the window. In my eyes, I was cultivating life's secret garden. By looking at each other in silence, we were sharing in the quiet pleasure of existence.

Another year again dwindle down to nothing. It reminds me of a New Year's Eve experience a few years back. Lying down to sleep and closing my eyes after a long day's work, the thought struck me, "How old am I this year?" Being in circumstances where I have no reason to calculate my age, this sort of question couldn't help but be kind of unexpected. I was counting my age when the dizzying thought struck me, "Well then ... the day after tomorrow I'll be 50 and not long after that 60, and then 70?!" Realizing belatedly that the days ahead were

now far shorter than the days idly wasted behind, my life suddenly seemed tottering toward a sense of voidness.

But then another thought quickly got me turned back around. Living for a hundred, two hundred years, what would be so great about that? How weakened would a human body be at that point? How degraded and worn out? Trees, on the other hand, grow sturdier and more elegant with age.

You live long enough and your body becomes like an old cart, creaking as it breaks down, making a bit of a mockery of itself as it gets uglier all the while. That's why there is no need to cling to life and no room for regret when you have lived as much as you are meant to.

It is the same with our eyes darkening and ears dimming. After a lifetime seeing some things you needed to and many others you didn't, hearing things you needed to and many you didn't, maybe it means that with age we naturally cease with trivialities and only see and hear what's required.

Since it would be both sad and unfair if one morning you just suddenly died, this gradual waning in advance of death seems quite considerate, giving us practice in dying piece by piece.

This is another aspect of life's great order. If it weren't part of one great harmony, what else could it be?

In this world some babies die just as they are born, some pass away before they even reach ten, and countless numbers in their 20s and 30s meet unnatural deaths way before their prime. Given this, there is really nothing at all for me to be sad about, having lived a full half-century in a wretched age like this without dying!

The dizzying futility I'd felt just before was now quickly dispelled when it occurred to me that the problem was not how long a person lives, but the extent to which they live within their own share of life. The new task I had before me was to live a life where I gave my best in every moment to live like a decent human being, confidently and without regret.

Seeing the passing of several elder monks who lived well into their nineties, the truth that living too long becomes a burden and a curse, not only to yourself but to those around you, became keenly evident to

me.

If at all possible, the day I can no longer function with the abilities and roles of a human, I want release from this body immediately. If I have to be force fed or have a needle stuck in my skinny arm to eke out a few more days of life, I will indeed get angry and foster sincere resentment. As you must shine in life, so too in death you must not lose your light. This is all that much truer since life and death exist together within an inseparable relationship.

One of the preeminent monks in the thirteenth century Goryeo dynasty,¹⁴ Master Hyesim, made a speech on New Year's morning.

"For children, one year of age is added, for elders, one year subtracted, and to those who have nothing to do with either young or old, nothing will be added or subtracted. Adding or reducing, put it all to one side and let it all go! And once you have let it all go, what then?"

Why is a vibrant dragon, able to grab the clouds and seize the mist, mired in stinking waters? Why does a brave horse that chases the sun and follows the wind lie down on withered camellias?

May you make every day anew!

Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin (1983)





Chulga

The wind has been blowing in the forest since yesterday and it sounds like waves crashing on a seashore. The forest trail is going to be covered in leaves. As they all fall away, the branches alone remain, empty and lonesome under the early winter sky.

Where are those fallen leaves headed? They'll be tossed about in the wind for a while until eventually coming to rest and drying up under a tree or next to some grass. When spring comes, they'll be absorbed by the roots, turned into sap, and transformed into new leaves and flowers. That's right. Just like the leaves that were cast from the trees, without letting something go, change is impossible.

Last fall, after I'd returned to the mountain, I was repeatedly woken from my midnight sleep by the sound of the rustling leaves. Though the mountain was speechless, the noise of the rustling leaves out back woke me again and again. It seemed the mountain winds were trying to cleanse these ears that had grown so dirty in the secular world.

Humans possess a determination to improve their own environments. This holds true for individuals or organizations. Those in control utilize the power of the organization itself with the intention to improve their own environment. Some who enforce their will to achieve their desired ends will do so to the extent that it causes great damage to the status quo.

But if an individual without any power wants to renew or restructure their environment, because they know their limitations and don't want to bring any trouble to their neighbors, they have to throw it all away it leave it behind. Casting off all choking constraints, they seek to create their own worlds along their own lines.

Chulga, "leaving home," the formal term for joining a monastery and becoming a monk, is a similar sort of casting off. It's called "leaving home" because it refers not only to the process of leaving the literal

homes we were raised in, but also the home we've made of attachments and conflict. Entering the monkhood is also called "leaving desire" (*iyok* 離欲) which means "freeing oneself from the restraints of desire" or "leaving the dirt of the secular world" (*chuljin* 出塵) which refers to one's retreat from the "realm of dirt and dust" (*jin'gaegwon* 塵芥圈). In each case, you can see that "leaving home" is not an act of passive escape, but a very active pursuit and an endless expression of life.

People who enter the monastic world and live according to ascetic vows are often asked this question, which ends up sounding like a familiar line in a pop song: "Why did you *chulga* and become a monk?" This line of questioning is familiar to Catholic priests or nuns, as well. Questioners always ask with an odd curiosity, but to the listener, it just sounds like a line from a pop song. When it seems the questioner's curiosity will be satisfied by the kind of story featured in a weekly magazine but there is no such story to meet these expectations, one can't help but feel sorry.

I once told this story once when I was giving a lecture. If we were in a situation like Shakyamuni's, most of us would have never left home. He had a beautiful wife, Yasodhara, who could be compared in modern day terms to someone like Miss India. No superficial modern beauty with only a nice figure and pretty face, she was imbued with deep wisdom and virtue, which is to say, he was blessedly matched with a perfectly beautiful partner, inside and out.

He was also guaranteed a royal inheritance. He had immense material wealth and the absolute power of a monarch with no worries about what his people might think or whether there were laws to take into account. Nevertheless, he threw it away and left it all behind. Because no matter what anyone could say, these circumstances simply could not suit him.

Alright then, why did you *chulga*? You know, even if the Buddha were to ask me that right now, I'd answer briefly as follows. In order to live like me, in order to live life my way, that's why I left home. I can't say it was because of life's meaninglessness, or a fascination with Buddhist truth, or to save all sentient beings. What in the world isn't

fleeting? Leaving home ends in vain all the same. And frankly, I didn't know much of anything about Buddhist truth before I left home. As for saving all sentient beings, such an expression is absurd within the current state of Korean Buddhism. How is it, then, that out of all the paths one could take in life, I came to follow that of a Buddhist monastic practitioner? Though it is something very difficult to put into words, I can say that it was what my life demanded. Facing the circumstances of my life and finding the path before me unavoidable, I felt like an agent of many lives worth of karma was acting upon me and leading me down this path.

When people who want to live like themselves are able to do so, they are filled with gratitude and joy, but when they cannot, they suffer. This is because they know they cannot afford to waste any of their precious share of life. That's why we practice giving up and letting go. When our daily lives become too easy going or enervated, when we always want things to be other than how they are, we need to willingly get rid of what we have. Organizing our books and clothes, we keep what we need, share what we can, and throw away the rest. We also prune ourselves of banal relationships. If after all that we're still not settled, then we need to just leave everything behind all at once.

My *eop* (karmic debt) has brought me into contact with this sort of situation a few times in my twenty years of monasticism. Still waters stagnate. Water is resuscitated as it flows away from dank swamps towards a vast ocean. Sloshing, flowing water is never the same as water that is stagnant. The bearing of monastic practitioners living solitary lives with few entanglements is relatively free and easy. In my early monastic days, it was said "it's no good to spend more than one day under the same tree." Though one of the reasons for this was to never become attached to one's living quarters, the idea that spiritual practice and growth must always be alive and moving was even more important.

When it gets to the end of the retreat period, the requirement to practice in one place is eased. During this post-retreat period, monastics are told to travel "like clouds and water," going wherever they are carried, unhindered. It is from this saying that we get terms like "cloud

water monk” (*unsuseung*) or “cloud water pilgrim” (*unsuhaenggak*). Only as a pilgrim who travels like clouds and water can monastic practitioners enjoy such light-hearted happiness.

What *chulga* absolutely does not mean is simply shaving one’s head and following the monastic path. Living in different clothes and adopting a different lifestyle from ordinary people is not what constitutes the *chulga* life. The essential meaning of *chulga* must be found in leaving our inessential selves behind and returning to our essential selves. By letting go and leaving behind, we must maintain the ability to be reborn again and again. Just like the leaves that let go and leave the branches behind, returning to the roots helps new sprouts grow.

If humans were simply satisfied with the environment they’ve been given, would there be any difference between us and other animals? Rebuilding ourselves through creativity and the constant improvement of our surroundings, we can truly fulfill our billing as a higher-level animal.

The idea that only those who abandon greatly can gain greatly is the eternal *chulga* motto. This is because new things can never be created if old things have not been cast away.

The Buddhist term “no self” doesn’t mean to get rid of the self altogether. It means casting off an unnatural self to bring about a great awakening of the natural self. The act of spontaneously and willingly letting go and leaving in order to bring about such awakening is a traditional Indian way of thinking. If you aim to discover truth, the spirit to free yourself from desire must be stronger than everything you encounter along the way.

There’s a story in Ramakrishna’s *Kathamrita*. A man went to take a bath with a towel over his shoulder when his wife came out: “It’s horrible. You’re growing old, fooling around all day with no skills at all. Without me you wouldn’t survive a day. Someone in the neighborhood with more than a dozen wives is renouncing them one by one. You’ll never be able to do that.”

The man replied. “Casting them off one by one? He’ll never be able

to throw them all away. People who really give things up never do it one at a time.”

The wife laughed at her husband mockingly, to which the man responded, “It’s me who can really throw it all away. Watch, because here I go.”

Then the man, with only a towel over his shoulder, left the house and never returned, neither to settle his domestic affairs nor to look back even once at those he left behind.

This behavior is called “leaving desire” or “leaving home.” As soon as you realize it, you leave that place behind. All you need is a strong will that knows clearly what to do. If you do it piecemeal, there will never be an end to it, but when you do it all at once, you can leave it all behind.

Though some people feel unfree because they don’t have everything they want, letting go and leaving it all behind is how you really experience unencumbered freedom. My life, lived for its own sake.

Standing People (1978)



Fallen Leaves Return to Their Roots

I opened the window at daybreak to see the whole mountain frozen from last night's early frost. With every branch all wrapped up in this thin icy grip, one might mistakenly think it had snowed. Unlike at the foot of the mountain, here in the deep valley we have a few days of frost before the first snow.

The sunflower that blazed yellow to its heart's content under the blue sky last fall now bends awkwardly at the waist, its stalk scarily bowing its heavy head. Where did the brilliant yellow disappear to? Now an exceedingly dull brown, its speechless face is full of seeds. This particular plant came from a seed at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, brought as a gift from a friend who is a big fan of the artist.

When a sunflower is brought into a dim room with long eaves like mine, the darkness is cast out and it immediately makes the place shine. With a sunflower on the dinner table, even without any side dishes, it looks abundant. When I look at the pictures I took then, the sense of time's emptiness rises like a great wave. It's like that strange feeling you get when you see the photo at someone's memorial service is one taken from their youth.

Though we can't know exactly what causes a flower to blossom or wither, when it comes to living out our life's allotment of time, there's a natural order to which flowers and humans alike all fall in line. Trees flower each spring and in winter they shed their clothes. The flowers bring beauty, fragrance, and joy to their beholders. People who live with style frequently experience just how much comfort, vitality, and joy a single flower can bring to a life that is otherwise easily worn and rusted.

Though on the surface the difference between a house with or without flowers seems slight, in terms of quality of life, the difference inside is as great as heaven and earth. When you see a person carrying flowers on the street, you feel a bit closer to them, no matter their

relation to you. This is because you are able to peek into their flower-like heart.

When you go to Hawaii, people greet you by hanging a lei around your neck. The fragrance is so powerful it wakes you right up from the slumber of the overnight flight. When I gave a lecture at a university there, one person after another came up on stage to give me a lei until finally they had piled all the way up to my face and the scene brought a great round of laughter.

These days in the cabin, a small bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums I picked at the foot of the mountain stands in a vase and gives off a subtle fragrance. At the window, a Cornelian cherry branch with clusters of hanging red fruit juts out of a clay vase, sharing its radiant glow. The fruit and flowers really help lend this mountain room some simple elegance. Though the Cornelians are indeed incredible when blooming like clouds in early spring, the red fruit hanging under the cool azure sky from late fall to early winter creates an especially brilliant harmony.

Becoming quieter and more relaxed, I grind the ink stone a bit and let my brush wander on the page, writing freely under the scent of the flower and the gaze of the fruit. All living creatures on this earth survive in dependence upon one another, sustaining their lives through relationships of give-and-take. Roots constantly receive nutrients from the earth and then return fruits and flowers as compensation. This is the order of the universe, the law of circulation, that life cannot be sustained if there's only receiving and no giving. The day is bright because the night supports it; night is dark because the day empties itself and darkness fills the void.

It is due to our ignorance—we who are trapped in the materialism of the modern age—that the universal order, the law of circulation, is being violated all over this planet. The end result is an ecological crisis that only grows graver. We steal constantly from the earth, giving nothing in return. And so, our earth is dying as it slowly grows more barren. If Mother Earth is dying, our spaces of human habitation are dying as well. Humans are not independent beings, they are just one

part of a single earth.

We must never let ourselves be blinded to the fact that we are only one of the myriad organisms in the great universe. Pools of water are overcome by moss when they are not connected to a river. A living river never stops flowing, not for an instant.

The last time I went to the pavilion near the river, there was a single chestnut tree beside it, and I can still vividly picture the beauty of its yellow-dappled leaves, fluttering in the refracted sunlight at dusk. I've seen many chestnut trees in my life, but this was the first time I'd ever seen leaves colored quite like the ones on this burly fellow next to the pavilion.

The dark brown branches, yellow leaves, blue sky, and light of the sunset mingled together to create a perfect unity. In the river breeze, the yellow stained leaves rustle and fall. What's been received from the earth cannot be stored away but must be given back. When it's not, we become unable to sustain ourselves. Modern people are not excused from having to understand the natural order of this cycle.

The leaves that fall to the ground do not fear death. They simply welcome it. They are so immersed in life that they can't worry about death. At the appointed time and place, they leave everything behind, living for each moment as it comes. Humans are the only creatures who fear death as we do, because so often we're not truly living. Life is a verdant garden that has to be discovered anew each moment.

We fear the end of life because we think of life as if it were a possession. But life isn't a possession, it is a moment-to-moment existence. Is there anything in this world that's eternal? All things are merely temporary. That's why, within this one moment, we must be able to give our very best and live it to the fullest. A life of constant discovery is an amazing mystery, it is beauty.¹⁵

Last night the entire valley was in an uproar with ferocious gusts of wind, but from the moment the sun rose, the weather has been so perfect you can't help but wonder where it came from. I gave my windows a fresh papering after tearing off the old covering, caked as it was with years of dirt and paste. I finished the task listening to Vivaldi's

Violin Concerto no. 3, *The Harmonic Inspiration* all in succession, and I was freshly grateful just to be alive.

Sitting before a clear and bright, freshly papered window, my inner garden seems freshly pure and bright. Sitting in front of this kind of window and holding a fragrant cup of tea gives rise to a certain sense of fulfillment that is difficult to express. In an otherwise dull home, giving the window a bright and fresh update is the only way to quickly inject some life and let it breathe.

A house itself may be nothing more than a structure woven from various materials, but the people living within make it a home worthy of its name. Only when people have hearts that are warm and caring, eyes that see everything with kindness and love, and mouths that are full of song, will their house be full of warmth, with flowers blossoming, and birds soon gathering.

More than anything else, living here in this cabin I've been grateful to have been able to encounter and recover my genuine self. Casting off concerns about the already-gone-past and the yet-to-come future, I've discovered the buoyant freedom of a life immersed completely within the present moment. To those who live in the moment like this, there are no chains. No chains of memory and no chains of desire, either. There is simply accepting everything calmly, like stream water flows. True freedom is spiritual.

I sit under this window and listen intently. My ears hone in on the soundless sound. Listening carefully to this world of silence, the garden of existence opens. The universe is a giant organism and each of us is simply one part of it. When we direct ourselves towards this greater organism, opening ourselves fully to its nature, we can get closer to its source.

The withered leaves flutter in the frosty wind. The fallen leaves return to their source in the roots. Where has the year gone?

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)





Close Your Mouth and Listen Carefully

Sitting in the shade of a tree and gazing at the mountainside, pure sap flows and sweet flowers blossom in my inner garden. Gazing at the forest as I sit alone in perfect silence, my self becomes a hearty tree, too. When you engage nature with an empty mind free of thoughts, it's so incredibly abundant and fulfilling, you can never be bored.

At times like this, more than anything I just want to give endless thanks. Without this daily twenty-four hours of pure, fresh blank space, my life would lose all momentum and I'd wither inside.

The peonies have bloomed in a splendid fashion again this year. This winter wasn't as cold as the past few and the bloom is about ten days earlier than usual. The yellow rape flowers that blossom at the same time by the peony fields perfectly match their purple blossoms. The colors and shapes of the flowers are the same, and though it's called rape flower, it's actually a mustard flower. I scattered some of the leftover mustard from kimchi making season last winter and now that spring has arrived, they're blossoming into magnificent flowers.

Of the migratory birds, the starlings were the first to arrive. Looking at the calendar, it says April 9. Their hoarse voices crying through the valley prick my ears. I'm really happy to greet them. On the night the peonies began to bloom, the scops owls added their cries to the mix. Now it says April 16. A little while later, the night jar arrives. Before long, the orioles and cuckoos will be here. Though this happens every year, greeting the migratory birds on their return always gets me so excited. The birds' songs (they are 'songs' not 'cries') awaken our sleeping souls. They bring healing water to our parched hearts.

Last year, in early April, on a trip to Baekdo, an island in the middle of the southern sea, I stopped at Geomundo Island. The first lighthouse in Korea was built there and on the mountain path of camellia trees leading up to it, I heard a yellow-billed grosbeak that left

me happy all day long.

Nature showers us with gifts and yet, immersed as we are in our everyday realities, we have no clue how to accept them. When we lose this ability to receive such gifts, how empty and filthy our lives become! To regain this ability, we first need to shut our mouths. Then we need to just watch and listen carefully. Habituated in the ways of our daily lives, most of us are stuck in habits that keep us from closing our mouths, watching as we listen, and falling into nature's embrace. It's pitiful.

There's this thing that happened. Opening my notebook, it says it was the afternoon of April 9. Every once in a while, I have those days where there's lots of work to do and I just don't want to be interrupted, so I close the shutters and bring my shoes inside the kitchen. This was that sort of day. I was just about to finish up a book I'd been reading when some signs of life appeared. From the approaching sound, it seemed to be a young couple.

Then, for nearly two hours, the young woman spoke by herself in a constant stream of meaningless remarks without pausing for even a moment. As my *hanok*¹⁶ cabin lacked any sound proofing, there was no way I could just concentrate on my work here inside. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and just waited for the stream of words to come to an end.

The patience of the man who listened without reply to that endless story left me awestruck. That guy must really be in love, right? It's only when you're in love that such nonsense can be mistaken as music to your ears. Though the urge to burst out the door and yell at them to go back down the mountain welled up inside, that would have just left the poor young lovers embarrassed. Instead, I was left with no choice but to yet again cultivate patience.

If you really understand that someone is listening intently to your torrent of words, could you possibly be able to continue rambling like that? Bear in mind, though. The truth is, someone's always listening!

There's an ear that is listening, right there in that space between our meaningless talk and our words of deep meaning. You can give it the name "God," you can call it the "soul," or you could call it "Buddha

nature.”¹⁷ The words we speak offer direct exposure to our inner garden. As layers and layers of words build up, the contours of our inner worlds are clearly understood.

Despite the fact that you feel an incredible sense of satisfaction getting out into the lush woods for a change, with a closed mouth and ears wide open, among blooming flowers and sprouting new leaves, most people simply have no clue. When and how are you ever going to recover yourself while stuck within a worn-out daily life?

Get into the habit of keeping your mouth shut and your ears wide open. When our words and thoughts are many, we gradually grow distant from the truth. Meditate on the fact that a new life begins in the space where we quiet our thoughts and speech.

Father Thomas Merton, a Catholic contemplative monk, says this in his book, *Contemplative Prayer*.

“Through silence, the saints developed themselves, through silence, God’s power resides within them, and within silence, the mystery of God was revealed to them.”

This helps explain the logic behind the saying, “The more you’re alone, the more you’re together.”

Father Merton also said, “Many are avidly seeking but they alone find who remain in continual silence. Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within. More than all things love silence: it brings you a fruit that the tongue cannot describe.”

There is a passage in the early Buddhist scriptures of the *Sutta Nipāta*. “People are born with axes inside their mouths, with which fools cut themselves using thoughtless words.”

How much more often do we regret what we’ve said compared to what we haven’t said?

I withstood a test of patience once on the train from Seoul to Busan. I’m really adverse to cigarette smoke, so much so that I always take a non-smoking car when I travel. It’s primarily non-smokers and women in that car.

That day, too, I chose a non-smoking car. One row ahead and

across from me, a young woman in her thirties with a small child sat down with a similar aged woman who seemed to be her friend. The moment the train crossed the Han'gang River bridge, the gates opened and the torrent of words began. With only an occasional utterance in response from her friend, the young woman continued talking without rest. Her child, who himself had grown bored of his own mother, left her side and took off for the aisle.

On the Saema'eul train, it takes four hours and 10 minutes from Seoul to Busan, and she didn't stop for a moment, so full of these words she just had to get out. It's undeniable that I can't but admire the incredible patience of anybody who could partner with a person like this for their entire lives.

Our train that day seemed fueled not with diesel but her abundant eloquence. When I left Busan station that day, my ears were numb. I haven't taken the non-smoking car since.

Mahatma Gandhi, who kept Mondays as a day of silence in order to cleanse his soul, once said: "Think first. Then say it. Stop before hearing, 'Cut it out already!' Men are higher than animals because they have the ability to speak. But if you no longer hesitate to use this ability harmfully, you're certainly no better than a beast."

Just as I'm about to end this essay, I hear the first song of the oriole. May 6. This marvelous cycle that returns each year at the same time. Compared to the sound of humanity, these sounds of nature are so wonderfully pure and refreshing. We need to learn these sounds of nature. Let's start by closing our mouths and listening carefully.

Totally Empty Abundance (1989)

Notes

- 1 “Spiritual practitioner.” As one of Beopjeong’s most important and commonly used spiritual concepts, *suhaejang* is used repeatedly in this text.
- 2 Morye is credited with being a fifth century layman who helped usher in Buddhism to the Silla dynasty, welcoming the foreign Master Ado into his home, allowing him to hide there while trying to propagate the dharma.
- 3 More than just a friend, *doban* is a companion, *ban*, on the spiritual path, *do*. Beopjeong mentions numerous *doban* here in *Pure and Fragrant*. “Spiritual companion or comrade” might be an applicable translation.
- 4 Literally “clean hall,” but in practice, it refers to “the outhouse.”
- 5 Standard unit of Korean measurement, equaling about 3 m².
- 6 *Suryu hwagaesil* 水流花開室. This was a nickname for Buriram Hermitage, but the lofty title confused the young man who expected something far more impressive.
- 7 Linji Yixuan was a ninth century Tang dynasty Chan Buddhist master whose teachings focused especially on “recognizing one’s original nature.” His text, *Records of Linji*, is referenced here and his influence on Korean Buddhism and Beopjeong in particular are clear throughout this work.
- 8 Beopjeong is referencing Wang Zhihuan’s classic Tang dynasty poem, “Ascending Stork Tower” (登鸕雀樓).
- 9 Literally, “bodhisattva,” but in practice, this word refers to those lay people, primarily women, who attend to the daily tasks around a temple.
- 10 Pronounced like the English word “up,” *eop* 業 is technically a Buddhist term for the well-known concept of karma. But *eop* is also a more widely held Korean notion that one comes into the world inherently carrying a burden produced by one’s past actions that one must pay back in the present. *Eop* can be seen as the unseen reason for the struggles one faces in life, even when you otherwise feel innocent.
- 11 Located on Jogyesan Mountain in southwestern Korea’s Honam region, this is the hermitage that Beopjeong revived from the ruins of another, on the mountain behind Songgwangsa Temple. Beopjeong lived here from 1975 to 1992, by himself for the first ten years, and then with young disciples for the last seven. This space is referenced continuously in this work, Songgwangsa, the

larger temple of which Buriram is but one part, is known as the sangha temple of the “three jewel temples” in Korean Buddhism, and is one of the oldest and most prominent temples not only in Korean, but all of Buddhism. Founded in the ninth century and then re-established in the twelfth by the great Master Jinul, Songgwangsa played a critical role in Beopjeong’s life and it was here that he was cremated in a simple ceremony in March, 2010.

- 12 Yi Kwangsu was a prominent colonial era writer and activist who was later implicated as having collaborated with the Japanese. His work *Mujeong* [The Heartless] is considered one of Korea’s first novels. Beopjeong’s inclusion of this mention seems a small but generous gesture of reputational rehabilitation.
- 13 J. Krishnamurti, *This Matter of Culture* (London: Gollancz, 1964), 46.
- 14 The Goryeo dynasty was founded in 918 and lasted until 1392 when it was succeeded by the Joseon dynasty, which lasted until 1910.
- 15 Beopjeong chose the noun “beauty” here instead of the adjective “beautiful.” A life of constant discovery doesn’t possess the characteristic “beauty,” it is beauty itself. Here we see Beopjeong’s ascetic and aesthetic theories becoming one.
- 16 *Hanok* means “traditional Korean architecture.” The materials are natural, with an emphasis on wood, earth, paper, and open space, and the arrangement is meant to successfully integrate life inside with the natural world outside.
- 17 In a text that otherwise avoids Buddhist terms, it is difficult to avoid them altogether when you are a monk, and *bulseong* 佛性 (Buddha nature) is at the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teachings. Whereas previous iterations of Buddhism were thought to limit the scope and potential for full enlightenment within all beings, the transformation of the teachings as it spread to China and beyond brought this unique innovation that lies at the heart of East Asian Buddhism.

Chapter 2

Are You Happy?

Intensifying the Everyday

How free we humans would be if only we could just survive all by ourselves, right? To be “unfree” means being attached to something, being entangled somewhere. In just this way, people are inevitably entwined in relationships with other people and things outside of ourselves. Living as a human being means living in a web of relationships. So, when we say we’re “living well,” we could just as well be pointing out that “our relationships are harmonious.”

When a person is born, they’re already born into natural relationships with their parents, siblings, midwives, and things like money and other complex systems of distribution. When we die, we’re then set free from the boundaries of all those relationships.

It’s the constant continuation of these various relationships that makes up our daily life. The thing is, in the habitual repetition of this day-to-day routine, people tend to become mediocre. Day in, day out, returning to the exact same patterns, our unique colors fade. We’re carried off by the swift flow of an inertia that has no beginning or end.

When you get to the heart of it, it is true that “I” am the one who lives my life, but my life is determined less by my own intentions and more by the blind sweeping along of this external invisible flow. It leaves me such that I can’t know exactly what causes me to be the way I am and not sure I even want to know.

This is the result of how far we’ve thrown ourselves into this flow and all the clamor that comes with it. The external noise is so loud it blocks us from hearing our own internal sound. We attend so busily to the external din, from the very moment we open our eyes in the morning. Whether it’s the sound of a car, a TV, a radio, a phone, or an argument, the sound of metal on metal . . . it’s all just noise. And this noisiness doesn’t just refer to sound. If we look really closely at aspects of our personal relationships, there are many similarities with this noise.

In the same way, when there are too many unnecessary branches in my everyday world, the fruits of my life are not able to ripen.

Self-awareness of the mediocrity in our daily lives is the work of tending to our own roots. Put another way, it's the work of critical reflection on one's current situation and place in life. This is how and why we prune away the non-essential branches without regret. It requires determination. Whether it is our conscious or unconscious, the entangled branches of our attachments from the past are tenacious. But in order to create new life, there must be an endurance of the pain in pruning raw branches.

Clearly, there will never be any other place to create our lives outside of the ordinariness of the everyday. To create any positive meaning within this ordinariness, it has to come from a deepening or intensification (*simhwa* 深化) of what's already there. This deepening is your life's big knot. This knot is not the kind someone could actually tie. It's the kind that inevitably comes about all on its own as we endure the pain of pruning.

When this happens, we need time for ourselves. We need time alone to allow ourselves to become our original selves. In order for that to happen, first we need to look objectively at the pure "me" that exists when liberated from all relationships.

"Who am I?"

"Why is it that I am alive?"

These are the essential human questions we must stand face to face with. That's the only time when humans really begin to feel solitude. This solitude is not the sentimentalism that one experiences with a brilliant sunset. It's not the loneliness of separation in a pop song. It is the kind of solitude that brings a certain shiver when we face our naked selves. This is the commanding presence that humans have cast over the horizon from the very beginning.

Recall Leonardo da Vinci's words: "When you're alone, you're totally yours. When you're with a friend, you're only half yours." In situations like that, solitude is so liberating. That's why freedom is such a solitary thing.

This kind of solitude has a similar quality to despair. But the despair that arises from one's own sense of self-awareness never turns into a disease that leads to death. To the contrary, it is an opportunity to open our eyes to the pure "me" that exists freed from external relationships. That's the point where we can begin to figure out our own place in life and how to live it.

To borrow a Buddhist expression, we call this the "wonderous being of true emptiness."¹ In the feeling of relief that comes after abandoning all attachments, a profound existence or marvelous action can emerge.

To those whose self-examination has really gotten to the very core of their own tedious daily lives, a new eye opens. Things you hadn't been able to see yesterday are now visible. Sounds from within, no longer blocked from the noise outside, become audible.

I become aware of what it is I have to do. My spirit beats with a new sense of duty, one not forced upon me by someone else. My "job" is to find this purpose and seek to fulfill it all by myself. When everything has meaning only because of this, when I feel delighted by throwing away everything else just for this—that's a true sense of purpose. A sense of purpose this strong becomes a stream of life, providing us with fresh courage and overflowing energy.

Life isn't something that just develops internally, it has to extend beyond itself towards something higher. Just as a flower becomes a fruit, it's only at the right time that our relationships with our neighbors and the material things in our world can take on a positive meaning. There is a fundamental difference between this kind of relationship and the ones spoken of before. These aren't the meaningless repetitions of the everyday. This is the newness of "deepening" everyday. It's everyday becoming a "new day."

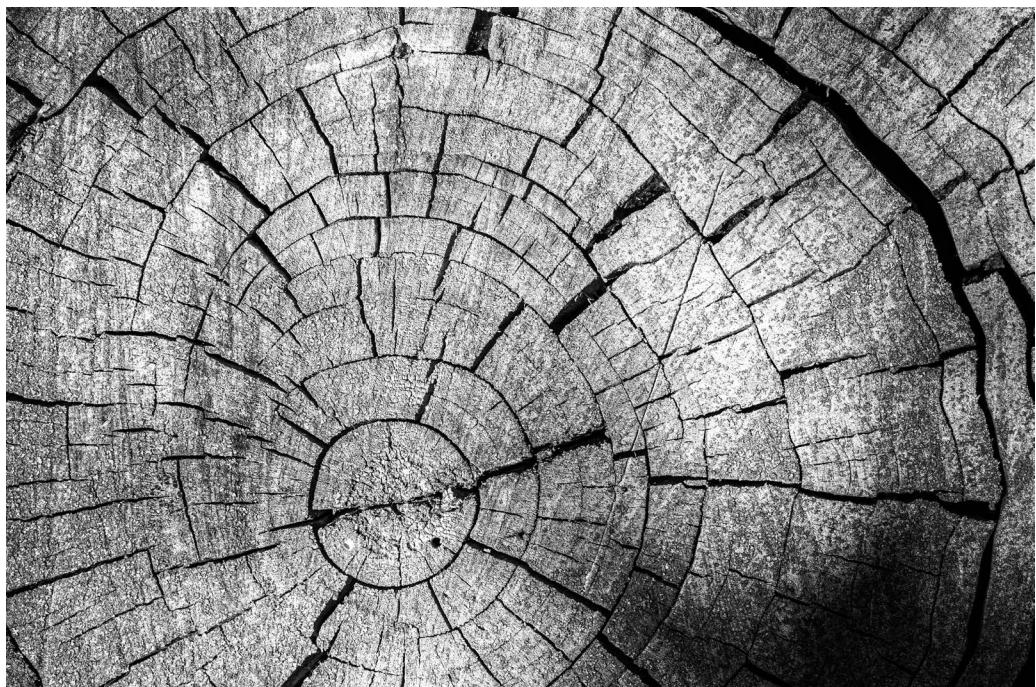
Humans are by no means abstract beings. What we call "living" is a moment-to-moment process of doing all the things we have to do. That's why "living well" can't refer to something impossible right here and now and reachable only in the distant future. "Living well" has to mean finding fulfillment in life every single day.

And nobody else gets to say that their success in life means that you have to live exactly the same way. Just as everybody's tastes and personalities diverge, our paths in life can't help but be diverse. The question isn't what you do but how you live. In a sense, the way I do things is who I am. It is through my actions that my own self blossoms and bears fruit.

"Even if I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I'd still plant an apple tree today."

These words are the sounds of life, spoken only by those who really know how to resiliently go about the task of living their own lives.

The Sound of Souls (1973)



Pure Happiness

After finishing the evening Buddhist service, I went out on the front porch to see the December full moon just as it was starting to rise. Not a cloud in this purely clear sky, the round moon rising above the mountain before me was a most welcome sight. I brought my two hands together in prayer and chanted the name of the Moonlight Bodhisattva, Wolgwang bosal.

The moon is simply fantastic rising above the mountain ridge out front, which looks softer and more delicate now than it does in the summer sunset. The classic Korean expression “a face like a full moon” (*daldeongi gateun eolgul*) usually refers to a pretty round face, but it’s just as apt for tonight’s lovely moon.

It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen a full moon rising, all I can feel is gratitude and happiness. A scops owl cries from the back forest. The mountain descends another level deeper into darkness. It’s times like these I feel the pure pleasure of solitude.

It sounds ironic, but it is by yourself that you can really be together with so many neighbors. I mean, what kind of neighborhood consists only of people? My loving neighbors are the bright green trees, the pure-hearted birds and animals, the fresh and absolutely unbounded breezes, and the sounds of the stream echoing from the valley below. It’s with these neighbors that I can enjoy such gratitude and happiness in being alive.

Of course, every person has their own sort of enduring pleasure. There are those who find life’s fulfillment in billions of dollars in profits, while others, kind and unselfish, find happiness when securing a few hundred coal briquettes. Some people live contentedly as rural post officers and others aren’t satisfied until they have the power to bend the sovereignty of an entire nation to their will.

For folks like us stuck deep in the mountains, there are numerous

opportunities to find the gentle pleasures of life within the extremely small and trivial. For example, there's the security that comes when a new belt arrives after having suffered some days with an old rubber one that had lost all its elasticity and left me with my pants constantly falling and my anger rising. Even if only a bit, this kind of thing adds some happiness.

Every time I opened the kitchen door, a squeak was setting me on edge until one day the thought occurred to me to melt a bit of candle wax on the hinges. Ever since, it's been silent and I can't help but beam with satisfaction every time I open and close it. This is another of my tiny pleasures.

After the rainy season was over, I was cutting the thick grass with a sickle when I came across a massive pumpkin hidden in the overgrowth. The happiness it brought felt like hitting the pumpkin jackpot! I heard thunder rumbling across the mountains, so I rushed out to the yard to bring in the things that shouldn't get wet. As soon as I got that taken care of, I watched the sky darken with the sudden shower and it brought a sense of relaxed contentment. When the shower finished, watching the leaves sway, all brimming with life after the rain, brought another little bit of joy.

Passing through the dog days of summer, I'm taking short naps right after lunch. Laying my head down on a ceramic pillow made just for me by Kim Kee-Chul at his Bowon Kiln in Gonjiam-ri in Gwangju-si, Gyeonggi-do, I listen to the pure sound of the breeze. At first, this kind of pillow felt really hard and I'd toss and turn, but over time, it became so refreshing that soft pillows now feel more uncomfortable. When I first saw these ceramic pillows in a museum, I envied the beauty I admired in the lives of these ancient people. As life would have it, eventually that little desire came true. My head feels clear as a bell when I wake up from a nap on the ceramic pillow. Again, I can't help but feel a sense of simple elegant pleasure.

Lots of birds nest in the roof, living together with us here at Buriram Hermitage. When I rebuilt this hermitage seven years ago, I got a bit upset looking at the supporting blocks. These blocks are half-moon

shaped pieces of wood that hold the tiles on top of the beam at the end of the rafters. The carpenter and mason had both put off the job for the other to do, but in the end, the carpenter just chiseled something out. Since the lumber he chose was not the best quality, a gap developed between the tiles and the support. In each of the gaps, some mountain birds have come to live. They're usually wagtails and parrotbills.

Something interesting happened once. I was headed out to the kitchen to light the fire when I noticed a chick had fallen out of a nest and was trembling on the ground. It was a pearl gray feathered baby parrotbill. Either it had rolled out of the nest and fallen or it had fallen while hurriedly practicing to fly. Feeling sorry for the little thing as I tried to touch it with my hand, it opened its mouth and chirped as it staggered away to escape. When two parent birds heard that sound, they swooped in to defend against me.

Even as I kindled the fire, my mind was on that baby bird and I kept a close eye on it. The parents came by from time to time with worms they'd caught to feed the baby. The mother bird didn't just feed the baby right away. Instead, she forced the baby to practice flying by taking the worm in and out of the baby's mouth. The parents took turns like this for two days straight until finally the patient recovered its strength and flew off. Taking in such a scene, I shook my head, shrugged my shoulders and gave a big sigh. The birds' exceptional parental love earned a silent round of applause.

When the season comes for migratory birds like the golden orioles, cuckoos, scops owls, and yellow billed grosbeaks to say hello for the first time, only those who've lived in the mountains can understand the palpitations of joy that welcome their arrival. Given the importance of the event, it always gets a mention in my notebook. Every early May the golden orioles and cuckoos return all at once within a span of one or two days. But this year the cuckoos are at least a week late and I can't help wondering what's going on. It was only when I heard their first greeting on May 11 while picking tea in the garden that my mind was put at ease. When the honey-throated yellow billed grosbeaks sing, I reply immediately with a whistle in return. The orioles respond to my

whistling as if I were a friend, singing as they fly close by. Yet another joy of living, no?

These days, rabbits often run between the bamboo forest and the peonies. When I see them, I can still hear the childhood song “Ongdalsaem” (The Spring). One summer morning the year before last, students from Suncheon Girls’ Commercial High School who were training at the main temple came up the mountain singing as a chorus with voices like the morning dew. They were singing “Ongdalsaem.”

Deep in the mountains is a spring. Who has come to take a drink?

At dawn, a rabbit rubs his eyes and rises.

Though he came to wash, he just drinks and leaves.

It’s true. I’ve had a few chances now to see rabbits come to drink the spring water and it’s really just like in the song. I mean, I’m not exactly sure if they washed their faces or only drank, but nevertheless, living together on the same mountain with these indifferent creatures is an elegant little blessing.

Right now, a bright silvery moon hangs off the edge of the eaves like a lantern. The sound of the stream is the only thing awake in the sleepy forest. This sound of the stream at night, is it the sound of the time’s endless flow?

Dear moon, please rise high!

Wuh-ho! Shine bright and far away!²

Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin (1983)





The Fragrance of Honest Poverty

Snow blossoms on the winter mountain are a sight to behold. When there's not a hint of wind, snow piles up on the branches of the naked trees and charming snow flowers bloom. Even where it doesn't snow, in the foggy spots it's cold enough that the empty branches freeze and magnificent frost flowers bloom. Seeing them you feel the same as when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom under delicate moonlight. When I see these snow blossoms sprouting from these empty branches that only shed their leaves a few weeks ago, a sense of the great abundance of emptiness wells up. It was there on the empty branch, where it held absolutely nothing, that a beautiful snow flower could blossom. Finding such sublime beauty on verdant green plants is quite difficult. With so much hanging there already, there's no space for anything else to be added.

One of my *doban* is the kind of person who lives by creating purity. When you entered his living space, there was just a lovely blank wall and a solitary cushion on the floor. Even his beloved tea set was put in a cabinet out of eyeshot. He left his ceremonial robes right in the Buddha hall. There was absolutely nothing to hinder the eye. Rid of the unnecessary, equipped only with the essential, his room was literally a great silence. Sitting there, nothing at all needed to be said and you naturally felt relaxed and cozy.

Though “honest poverty” (*cheongbin*) and “penury” (*bingon*) share the concept of privation (*bin* 貧) in common, these words refer to two fundamentally different things. One is a poverty of one's own choosing, while the other is a poverty caused by deprivation.

In a world overflowing with things, becoming relatively rich isn't too hard. It is far more difficult to maintain one's own pure lifestyle of privation. Of course, just as not everyone can become rich, not everyone can live in poverty. The value of your life is determined by

whether you follow the path of your own choosing or not.

There was always a bright energy surrounding the places where he lived. Inside his room, it was like a personal fortress, and though it felt perfectly full in its silent emptiness, its exterior was always well-maintained and cultivated to exude a tidy, graceful beauty. The yard was always neatly swept by his straw broom and on the stone steps there was always a clay bowl with a few flower petals floating in water. At the base of the earthen wall, flowers were planted to bloom in succession with the seasons: peonies, oleander and bellflower, iris and chrysanthemum. An orange pumpkin hung from the vines, draping over the wall to strike a perfect harmony with the clay tiles stacked on top.

As a lover of flowering trees, he knew almost all of their names. Everyone has experienced that exhilarating feeling when you realize the difference between knowing and not knowing the names of things you see. It's like looking at the night sky when you know the constellations compared to when your mind is like a blank slate. My friend loves to get illustrated plant books and pamphlets on wild flowers and share them with his neighbors who have similar interests. When his followers donated materials to him, he'd never keep them for himself but instead purchase the dozens of volumes to donate to the temple. The contents of books he donated were as pure and elegant as his own character.

Usually reticent, he talked about others as little as possible. In a soft tone of voice, his character is to never say any more than necessary. And I've never seen him angry. Well, there was exactly one time I saw him get really mad. After repeatedly smelling with his own nose and seeing with his own eyes several times an elder monk living in a neighboring room cooking meat, he became so angry that he had to get up and leave for a while. It would be difficult for anyone to accept such breaches of conduct in a spiritual training ground like that, but him especially. Without blaming others, though, he himself just decided to leave that place on his own. The phrase "Bad money drives out good" applies to this situation quite well. If you mix with muddy water, you get dirty too. When persuasion is impossible, we have no choice but to escape the muck.

He never does anything that bothers others. He'll go drink tea at the invitation of a neighbor, but only stay there long enough to not become a nuisance. Acting like this, like the fragrance of tea, he leaves a delicate afterglow. It's hard to share the virtuous peace and calm of a cup of tea when somebody is sitting in this space of purity and mindlessly chattering away. When he noticed a fellow monk carefully listening to the tiny wind chime that was hanging from the end of the eaves in front of his room, he secretly took it down and hung it by his friend's room. Every time that friend hears the bell, it reminds him of our dear comrade's pristine personality.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, a single person's pure and simple life, like moonlight or the scent of grass, casts a delicate shadow throughout their neighborhood. Having lived together with him and able to see his life up close, whenever I think of him now, it's like catching a gentle scent on a breeze wafting through the flowers.

I wonder on which mountain he's doing his sitting this winter. Early last winter he sent me a book on American Indian wisdom that he had been reading called *Naneun wae neoga anigo nain'ga?* (Why Am I and Not You?) and I could tell he was still living exactly like he always had.

This thing we call "life's fragrance" is the vitality naturally given off by people who live pure and simple lives. Just as a scentless flower will not be quite as beautiful, a life without fragrance will not be complete.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)

With Whom to Share a Seat?

I saw the smoke from the chimney hanging low and at the end of lunch I rushed to get bundles of thorn brush and scrub protected from the rain. The circumference of the cabin had become so overgrown last fall I tore it all out. Then last spring I got all the bundles gathered and dried and I should have stacked them in the firewood shed, but I never got around to it. Every time they got wet in the rain, I had yet another chance to lament my laziness.

Thanks to the diligence of my arms and legs, the work was finished neatly. It'll be enough to burn through early winter. I went down to the stream to wash my sweaty clothes and got some water to heat up so I could wash myself, too.

At the same time, I brought the bed of woven bamboo inside. In summer, it's a lot more comfortable to sleep outside on this portable cot than inside on the floor. It's just big enough for one person: 2.5 feet wide, 6 feet long, and only a foot off the ground. Whenever I toss or turn, the legs shake and it feels really nice because it's like I'm in a cradle.

With the work all done, I decided to take a breather. I got to thinking that when my time comes, it'd be good to just put me on this bamboo bed and cremate me. With nobody there any longer, please just quietly cast off this shell without delay and leaving nothing behind.

As I slept, gusts of wind came down and the sound of the driving rain on the front mountain woke me up. Having stocked the wood properly and brought my laundry in off the line, I proclaimed: "If you want, just go ahead and rain!"³

Since it hadn't rain for a while, I've been having to bring up water to sprinkle on the vegetable garden, so they're really going to love this rain. Everything is really going to come alive.

Nature moves along in a flow. If people simply stop themselves

from going beyond their means, if we stop going against the flow, everything we need is provided for as long as you live. We must learn how to be grateful to nature.

One scholar lived in the valley of a deep mountain and the king called on him to ask what he wished for. The scholar replied: “What I pray for is that the dense pine trees and clear springs never disappear from the mountains.”

In other words, as long as the pines were dense and the spring waters gushed forth, there was not a single thing lacking in his life. The mere mention of this story refreshes my heart. His life itself can be considered as verdant as the pines and pure as the springs.

The rivers, mountains, winds, and moon don’t each have different owners. If you are free from greed, pure, and easy going, anyone can be their owner. If you are a person with eyes to see and a heart open and willing to accept the world, no matter where you are, you will be able to assume ownership of the mountains and rivers, the wind and the moon.

A monk I visit occasionally has a plaque on his totally blank wall that says, “With whom to sit?” (*yeosu dongjwa* 與誰同坐). With white characters on a black background, the plaque always silently welcomes me whenever I come to his room. “With whom to sit?” It seems to do the talking for the room’s owner, representing his pure character perfectly, so whenever I see this wood plaque it brings a smile on my face.

In the ancient text called the *Heshi yulin* 何氏語林,⁴ a man named Xie Yanhui was not prone to make friends rashly and so wastrels never came by his house. He’s said to have made the following quip while raising his tea or wine glass alone: “The only thing coming into my room is the pure wind. The only one sharing a drink across from me is the bright moon.”

Having made friends with the pure wind and bright moon, it seemed nobody else could get close to him. Without ever getting close to him, just looking carefully at the life he led is enough to give us a great sense of humility. In our world as it is today, so loud, rude, and sticky, the mere presence of a person like him in a neighborhood serves

the same function as a pure breeze and the bright moonlight.

In that room with the plaque asking, “With whom to sit?” there are only three tea cups. That’s because the mood for tea drinking is lost with more than three people.

I ask myself, here on this mountain, with whom should I sit? As for people, there’s only me, and one is enough, so there’s not much occasion to sit with others. Here in the mountains, with the bright moon, white clouds and a crystal stream as a backdrop, whether anybody sits with me or not isn’t really a problem. Seeing with my eyes, listening with my ears, feeling with my skin, and accepting with my heart is good enough.

On the corner of the eaves, the titmice have built nests in three spots. In two of them, babies have already hatched and left, while in the other, the eggs are still there. Soon enough, these birds, too, will hatch and fly off. The titmice aren’t picky and will nest their eggs anywhere they can. In winter, there’s very little to eat and I sprinkle some seed for them, but in summer there’s so much to eat in the forest they don’t need anything from me.

These titmice often poke holes in the cabin windows. I don’t know if they’re doing it because they’re pecking at worms stuck to the window or they’re just bored. I warn them not to complete their tasks, but they don’t listen. Still, having these guys poke little holes in the windows is nothing compared to having the rowdy kids trampling in behind their parents and leaving holes in the windows all around the temple.

There are rabbits that live under the gooseberry vines out back. When darkness falls, they saunter out into the garden until I open the door and come out and then they run away in fright. “Don’t be surprised!” I say, trying to comfort them but to no avail. Still, when I put out some bread crusts and fruit skins, they’re all eaten up neatly. Seeing the rabbit poop pile up by the side of the boulder, I can tell there’s a little bunny among them, too.

At this same time, I had become quite close with the squirrels. If I put some food out for them on the offering stone, they’ll come right up next to me and eat without running away. When I leave and come back to my empty house, their chirping welcomes me with their fine

manners. So commendable of them!

With whom shall I be together in this space? As “birds of a feather flock together,” living things are well suited to live together with one another. This is why must understand that we are the alter egos of the people with whom we share space.

With whom will you be sitting?

Totally Empty Abundance (1989)



Sound of Water, Sound of Wind

At Buriram Hermitage, I lived with the sound of wind, but here in my new place, it is the sound of the stream I'm always hearing. On top of the mountain, the wind was always blowing. Here in the valley, instead of the wind, water's flowing.

Though the sounds of water and wind are both natural, the emotional impact when you hear each one is different. When listening to the sound of the wind passing through the forest, I sometimes get that feeling where life starts seeming empty and I get the urge to hit the road. On a stormy day when the wind and rain rages, the bleakness leaves my insides like a torn-up field.

But now my new home is stream side, where the sound of the water never rests, and you can't escape hearing it whether you like it or not, day or night. For the first few days I was here, it was after quite a bit of rain had fallen and my mind wasn't at all ready for the sound. Now I've grown so used to it I barely notice. When I think of it as the sound of time flowing, of lifetimes elapsing, my perspective feels all that much more refreshed.

The sound of wind can often be prickly and dry, while water sounds like someplace lush and abundant. It sounds like something being eternally cleansed.

It's been a while now that I've been living up so high and easily visible to others, I want to come down and lie low. I've been living an exceptional life all by myself, but now I want to live nestled in the shadows of others. Since I can't change the world on my own, even if it's just my own daily life, that is the thing I must try and renovate. Through new changes, I want to open my eyes to the potential "me" I can become. Because life isn't some goal or final perfection, it's an endless experiment and a constant attempt.

Altogether I lived about seven and a half years at Buriram

Hermitage. Once I decided to leave for good, first there was a certain Buddha statue that I was sad and sorry to part with. I'd enshrined this Buddha since my days at Daraeheon⁵ about ten years ago. Rescued from a temple that had fallen into ruin, this Buddha statue had been enshrined on the altar in the main hall. When I saw it for the first time, my heart trembled as it never had before. This was a true "encounter." I determined to make that Buddha statue the one I would worship my whole life. Though it was not an old Buddha, its graceful figure appealed to me.

Though everything else was packed away, when I moved from Daraeheon to Buriram Hermitage, I carefully kept this Buddha right by my side. When you live alone, the slightest provocation makes it far too easy to become lazy. But each morning and evening this Buddha raised me from my idleness. He listened to my prayers and magnanimously accepted all my bad habits. Sometimes I had to leave the hermitage and take care of business at the main temple. What roused my energy and got me back up the mountain when I was tired and the folks at the temple urged me to spend the night was the thought of the Buddha in the empty hermitage all alone. I'd been thinking about having to leave this Buddha now for some time and it was hard not to feel sad.

Next on my mind were the trees I'd planted all around. On the day I left, the silver magnolia tree, the juniper, and all the ginkgo trees seemed really sad to see me go. Staring at me with blank faces, they all seemed to be asking, "Are you really leaving us for good?"

We who had spent so much time living with each other taking in the pure rays of sun and staring at the stars and the moon together. Blizzards and rainstorms, these too we accepted together. In return for our pruning and providing them fertilizer, they stemmed the heat of so many summers, casting cool shade with its lush green leaves. Sharing life together in this one space, we kindled a sincere and mutual affection.

Though I'd often had this feeling when preparing to set off on the vagabond's path, as I packed up my belongings, one by one and all by myself, I was really able to feel the fundamental hollowness of existence.

It really made me feel like I was coming to the end of a life and about to disappear, like I was about to return to the path I had originally come from.

The experience made me think that I could understand better the bitter lonely hearts of those who live in rented rooms and have to move constantly from one place to the next. In my own case, it was my own choice to move, but for people without their own homes who tread carefully around the mood of their landlords, they can be crushed with a single word when told they have to leave. I think I can understand a bit of the hopeless sadness they feel when they pack their belongings yet again. Isn't this why people work so diligently and sacrifice so much so that they can have homes of their own?

In trying to create my own personal living space, according to my own style, I busied myself for a few days getting things just right. I rewired loose electrical wiring, cleared out the attic, and re-papered the walls. Connecting a pipe from the spring in the back, I created a small fountain on one side of the yard and with a flat stone placed in its stream, I made a laundry spot.

The under-ducts of the fireplace for heating water have a big iron pot set upon them, making it hard to get a fire going. I disassembled the entire thing and reset the fireplace headstone. Now it can really get burning. The chimney is higher than before as well. When we build these chimneys at temples, they're often jokingly referred to as "wood smoke pagodas."

I cut down a few stalks of bamboo and put together a laundry rack. Picking up some old boards in the barn and after a bit of tapping with my nimble hands, I cobbled together a small sutra reading table, too.

I put two bamboo pegs into the wall of the room to hang my robe and vestments and then cut a sprig of half-blooming camellia and put it in a white porcelain vase. This seemed to bring a jolt of spring to an otherwise lifeless room. After that, I hung a scroll with one of my favorite lines from the *Records of Linji*, "There is only right now, no other time exists."⁶ Though the room was still unfamiliar, I was starting to get a little more used to it.

This phrase “There’s only right now, no other time exists,” means not to linger over what’s already past or worry too much about what’s to come, but instead to live to the fullest right here, right now. Every time I face this dharma teaching, I’m invigorated. If we are able to live ourselves to the utmost, moment by moment, right where we are right now, no matter what situation we’re in, we’ll be able to live a life without regret.

The night has grown old and it’s been a while since the evening bell rang in the Buddha hall. The sound of the stream at night has returned again and it sounds just like falling rain. This water never stops for even a moment, flowing on and on until it reaches the sea. Our life stream is much the same, flowing continuously towards a sea of oneness.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)





Desert Fathers

Of the two books that Father Kim Sangjin of the Waegwan Abbey gave me when he last came to visit the mountain, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is what I've been reading for the past several days. Though our situations as *subhaengja* aren't the same, it's impossible not to greatly admire the Desert Fathers' lucid and austere passion for spiritual truth. When it forces me to reflect on the life I'm living and whether I'm worthy of calling myself a monastic spiritual practitioner, I'm deeply humbled.

“Desert Fathers” is the name given to the entire group of early Christian ascetics from the second to fifth centuries who created spiritual communities in the desert where they could lead lives “walking in the steps of God.” The external factor that compelled them to live in such a barren locale was Rome’s persecution of Christianity. The persecution itself compelled the construction of a monastic lifestyle in the desert and the end of that persecution allowed this monastic lifestyle to reach its full development.

The historical situation of China’s Chan school worked out very much the same way. When the other Buddhist schools that depended on royal support suddenly faced brutal state-sanctioned persecution and fell into disarray, the Chan school, relying on nothing, upheld a pure and firm life together with the common people, displaying its full potential and greatly contributing to its flourishing.

Any religion dependent entirely on state control and standing mute in the face of persecution cannot be regarded as a fully sound religion. A healthy religion is able to guide society with a vitality, like grasses that only grow lusher the more they’re trampled upon.

Seen from the eyes of worldly outsiders, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* may seem too naive, too obstinate, and too full of strange anecdotes, but between the lines of these stories you are brought face to face with the unwavering presence of unyielding spiritual seekers. This

book is a clear mirror to hold up to ourselves and compare the shape of our lives today.

It's said that the monks in the *skete* communities⁷ were such that if they did something virtuous and somebody found out about it, then from the moment the act was, the virtue wouldn't be seen as such and would now be considered as a sin.

Their sense of purity really shines through in such anecdotes. We might want to look back on our own deeds and ask whether all the effort we threw into them was motivated by fame and popularity.

One of the fathers visited an elder and asked, "Father, please tell me something. How can I be saved?"

"If you want to save your soul, whenever you meet someone, say nothing until they ask you first."

Silence was a constant reminder to help them realize what role they would take up on the road to salvation. They did not blindly stick to silence but understood its instrumental value.

"Some people keep silent outside, but in their hearts they scold others. In other words, they are actually talking nonstop. Others speak from morning till evening, yet they maintain silence. That is because not a single one of their words was unnecessary."

Another father said, "If a monk hates two things, they can be free from this world." A student asked, "What are they?" The priest answered, "Comfort and vanity."

For monastic practitioners, comfort and vanity are like metastasizing cancers eating away at the spirit. Wanting always to be comfortable, minds become like stagnant water. Thanks to comfort, they end up rotting. Living beings move, they're always wiggling about. A living, moving existence is the only one that can continuously resurrect and renew our own lives.

Vanity and posing are useless ostentations. For monastics who have ostensibly turned their backs on the world to fall back into the world's vanity and posing shows that they've still got a lingering attachment to that world. Thus, they're blind to their own position in the world, not knowing how to distinguish whether someplace is suitable for a monk

or not. Acting thoughtlessly they lose their bearing.

One of the fathers, preparing to bid farewell to this world, said to one of the students caring for him: “Since the day I came to this desert and started building my own cell to live in, I have never had any bread that I had not worked with my own hands to get, nor have I regretted a single word I’ve said. But only now that I am about to leave for the Lord do I feel that I haven’t barely even begun to serve Him.”

This monk spent his entire life cultivating himself through humility and asceticism, yet while facing the final moment of his life, he felt he hadn’t yet begun to serve the Lord. If that isn’t a mind of pure humility, what is? As one of the Desert Fathers said, “The closer you get to God the more you realize what a sinner you are.”

Saint Anthony the Great was deeply contemplating God’s profound thoughts when he asked: “Oh Lord, while some people live so long, why do others die tragically young? Why do some people have an overabundance of good things while others have nothing? Why do the wicked live in luxury while the good languish in poverty?”

A voice from the void responded. “Mind your own business, dear Antonio! Since those are the matters of God, what good would it be for you to understand them?”

This is reminiscent of the analogy of the poisoned arrow in the *Cūlamāluṅkyā-sutta* of the *Middle Length Āgama Sutra*. When asked metaphysical questions, the Buddha offered no answer, instead saying: “I won’t say whether the world is finite or infinite because doing so is not in accordance with reason or the dharma, it’s not spiritual practice, it’s not the path to wisdom, nor the way to nirvana.”

The dharma the Buddha consistently taught was about craving, the cause of craving, the extinction of craving, and the path to the extinction of craving. He did this because it made sense and was in accordance with the dharma; it was the path of wisdom and awakening for a spiritual seeker and the way to nirvana.

The Desert Fathers maintained austere lives of *musoyu*. They considered the amount of material possessions you had to be in accordance with the impurity of your soul. Their collective virtue was

their poverty, asceticism, humility, and exile from other people.

A person was sharing all of his material possessions with the poor in order to become a monk. He had kept one last share for himself, when he met an elder who said, “If you really want to be a monk, go to town and buy some meat. Take off your clothes, put the meat on your bare skin, and come back.”

He did as he was told. A flock of wild dogs and birds attacked him, injuring his entire body as they tried to tear the meat from his flesh. The elder said to him, “Those who want to cast off the world yet still keep their money will be attacked by demons and have their flesh torn away in much the same way.”

What can we possibly make of the current situation where abbots in charge of rich temples go to war with one another, bearing iron pipes like armed thugs to take possession of each other’s possessions? We really have to consider the fundamental reason we severed ties with our parents, our siblings, and the rest of the world to enter the monastic life.

Didn’t Master Hyujeong warn us about this a long time ago?

“Leaving home to become a monastic practitioner is no small thing. You’re in search of neither comfort or leisure, not looking to eat a lot or be warm, and not out to make money or earn any title. You’re doing nothing else but emancipating yourself from the cravings of the world of life and death, cutting off the root of our afflictions, cultivating the Buddha’s wisdom, forever in an effort to save all sentient beings.”

A person asked one of the Desert Mothers if poverty was good practice and this was her response.

“Poverty, to those who’ve never known it, is an incredibly good practice. Because a person who is able to endure poverty may suffer physically but they create peace in their soul. Strong souls become stronger through voluntary poverty.”

Poverty and hunger help inspire our aspiration for enlightenment, abundance and satiety are destined to bring anguish and delusion.

A desert father was living in the wilderness, and struggling to make bread. One day, he went to the market to sell his handmade goods.

Just then, somebody lost his wallet with a thousand gold coins and the priest found it, whereupon he sat and waited for the owner to return. Sure enough, the owner returned, looking crestfallen. The father called to him and gave him back his wallet.

The owner wanted to give him some gold as a reward, but the father refused him in no uncertain terms. This was because the monks at that time considered unearned income to be immoral. That made the owner shout. “Come everyone and see! Look what this man of God did!” Afraid that others would find out about this act and praise it, he snuck away in retreat.

“How’s a monk supposed to live?”

The elder replied, “Pursue all that is good and eliminate all evil.”

“Create no evil, cultivate all good.”⁸

A man asked an elder, “What should I do to receive salvation?”

Weaving a mat, the elder replied without taking his eyes off his work, “Work on what’s in front of your eyes right now.”

Religion isn’t something to be found through words but in our immediate actions right here, right now.

As Mephistopheles said to Faust, “All theories, my friend, are gray. But the tree of life is ever green.”

Totally Empty Abundance (1989)

Are You Happy?

This winter, there are two small plants by my side that I've been keeping my eye on, a grass-leaf sweet flag and a marlberry. They're two living things I got in early winter for a dollar a piece at the flower shop.

The grass-leaf sweet flag looks best together with an oddly shaped stone in a bowl. The marlberry has leaves like a tea tree, its stems with red dangling berries creating a perfect match. Without these two plants, my winter cabin would be really cold and lonely. Under the bright window, looking at one another and sharing pleasant conversation from time to time, we're no longer strangers, we're family. These kids give my winter a really fragrant pick-me up.

In a belated letter I received a few days ago, my monk friend abruptly asked me if I was happy these days. This question led me to think about happiness in a really deep way. Everyone wants to live happily. We all ought to be sufficiently happy. I think the standard we use when we ask whether or not we are living well is based upon happiness.

When we talk about happiness, we think first of ourselves and our family, because these are the basic units of happiness.

Those who find pleasure in whatever it is they have to do each day are happy. A mother finds happiness in a day by picking out a pretty tea cup for her daughter-in-law, preparing some side dishes, and giving her granddaughter a warm hug. In finding her daughter-in-law's charm and loving her well, a mother kindles happiness in her own heart.

Another happiness is our relationship with our neighbors. These days the dream of a mother I know is to return to her hometown when her husband retires so she can make delicious soybean paste (*doenjang*) and share it with all their relatives. She's already come up with names for it, like "Pine Breeze and Pure Water oo Doenjang."

Even just hearing about it refreshes the mind. If you make a person

happy, you make yourself happy, too.

Modern people often set the standard of their happiness on possessing bigger and more things than others. They feel satisfied only after having million-dollar mansions and cars costing tens of thousands of dollars and by acquiring this and that exclusive membership.

Of course, happiness is rather subjective and it's impossible to define in just a few words, but happiness can never be defined simply in terms of bigger and more.

Somebody thankful and satisfied with the small and few is a happy person. The unhappiness of modern folk isn't rooted in a lack. On the contrary, we must understand that our problem lies in excess. When a lack is filled up, you understand gratitude and satisfaction, but within excess, gratitude and satisfaction never follow.

That's why the Gospel of Matthew (5:3) says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This teaching has a profound meaning. The brilliant 13th century German Meister Eckhart describes "the poor in spirit" this way: "The poor in spirit don't want more, don't want to know more, don't want to possess more. In other words, they are free from desire, free from knowledge, free from possessiveness."

He goes so far as to say that the truly poor in spirit are free even from God.

We're not unhappy because of things we don't have, but because we've lost our originally warm hearts. If you don't want to lose this warm heart, you need to kindle your affection and share it with your neighbors, all of them, the plants and animals included. We need to know how to commune with all the living beings around us.

I've been moving the plants to follow the sun and using a watering can to keep them moist. When their leaves and berries catch my eye, it just warms my heart. Sitting next to the fireplace as it burns and listening to the tea pot boiling, it sounds like the wind in the trees and my heart is warmed again.

Once in the middle of the night, a persistent cough woke me up. Opening the window to take in the brilliant moonlight, I saw not just

a brilliant white moon but fresh white snow and all of heaven and earth were aglow in white and my heart was warmed again. The next morning, I went out to clear the snow that had piled up and I saw the footprints of the rabbits and deer and my heart was warmed.

As the year came to an end, I was trying to get my pile of letters sorted out when I happened to see a letter from one of my deceased relatives. Carefully reading it line by line, realizing the great distance between this world in which we'll never meet again and the next, reflecting on the transience of a life's history, part of my heart surged with an ardent stream of love.

The fact that we haven't died yet and are still alive is cause enough for us to be most grateful. There's nobody and nothing in this world or any other that lasts forever. We have to share our hearts with those around us. That's the only way we won't lose our sense of being human, the only way we can fulfill our duty to be human.

There's an English proverb that says, "People who think they are happy are happy." Those words are right. The opposite is true as well. People who think they are unhappy are most likely unhappy. That's why happiness and unhappiness are not things given to us externally, but something created and found within ourselves.

Under the exact same conditions, you could have one person living gratefully, satisfied, and cheerful, while another lives in darkness and struggle, consumed by discomfort and dissatisfaction.

I ask myself, am I happy or unhappy? I don't need to ask again to know conclusively that I want to stand among the ranks of the happy, never among the unhappy. That being so, I must create this happiness inside myself.

Happiness must be shared together with our neighbors and unhappiness must be overcome.

It's only right that we're all happy.

The Pleasure of Living Alone (2004)





Buds Sprouting in the Trees

Last winter was a very boring and cramped one for all of us. We were helpless in the face of the brutal cold, whose tenaciously frozen grip on the earth was fueled by dry high pressure coming down from Mongolia.

Contemporary human culture may be proud to know no bounds, yet it must always ultimately bend to the forces of nature alone. What fortunate providence. We can't feel sorry for ourselves and cry in the corner, we must learn from this truth to recognize the limits of human civilization and learn some humility.

We currently live in a situation where the condition of nature itself is affected by the influence of humanity. The traditional winter pattern of three cold days and four warm ones now sounds about as believable as a ghost story. When my cauldron froze, the kimchi jars burst, and the water turned into a solid mass on the kitchen floor where I shivered as I made my meals, I was reduced to little more than a wild beast. Eating had always been one of the daily tasks I never thought I could go without, but what eased the hunger was the thought of my comrades shivering in their jail cells. The searing image of them constantly moving to fend off freezing to death gave me perspective. Whether a single person or many, the significance of the suffering they endure eventually reaches everyone, everywhere.

The expression "to survive" brings with it so many different meanings. Why should we survive? It is not just "to keep going." That's just being alive. Living is to endure suffering, but "surviving" is to endure suffering and find meaning within that experience. Is it possible to say life has a specific reason? Life in and of itself is a sacred purpose.

That's why it is evil to torment something as dignified as Life, it's a sin. As Shakyamuni Buddha says:

All tremble at violence;

All fear death.
Putting oneself in the place of another,
One should not kill nor cause others to kill.

All beings desire peace,
But those who try to reach it through violence,
Though they seek their own peace,
In the end they will never achieve it.

When our measure of value is centered on humanity alone, then egotism, stubbornness, and exclusion are always lurking. Even to this day, people discriminate and persecute others just because they think differently or because their skin color is different. Modern humanism's great flaw lies right here.

When our consciousness shifts from a human-centric one to an orientation where life comes first, that is where we will find the ethics of coexistence, where we can all live in mutual interdependence. I mean, after all, is there anything as precious as one's own life? Everyone cherishes their own life in this same way. That's why it is the logic of Life that if you are a person who loves and cherishes your own self, you could never bother or harm others.

During that desperately cold and lonely winter, reading a few books lit me up inside just as would a fire in the furnace. The traces of those who have lived before us give precious suggestions on how to live now and in the future. Whether they're marked by history as great people or not doesn't really matter. Our concern is to figure out through those traces the extent to which they lived their own lives genuinely and sincerely.

From Saint Francesco in Assisi, I learn about radical austerity, and in Charles de Foucauld, the "Saint of the Sahara," I see the meaning of genuine prayer and his clear, kind eyes. Following their traces, the same question kept coming into my head, "We today, what are we? Me today, what am I?" There was only shame and regret. There are more than a few people in this world who silently walk the path of self-sacrifice in

service to the present and future of humanity, ashamed if even their name were to become known in the process. Even in a world like ours, polluted with so much contradiction, conflict, and absurdity, it's not hard to see that what's keeping us going is the virtuous merit coming from the endless prayers, sacrifice, and service of great people like these.

Take the Mexican revolutionary hero Pancho Villa, whose frank and simple, yet righteous and manly spirit I can't help but admire. The always unsettling aspect is the accounts of his excessive violence. Even if such things seem unavoidable in the service of justice, it is unacceptable that so many lives must be sacrificed. Most of the people who are called heroes fit into this category, though I'm not sure why. "I do not give the name hero to those who have triumphed by infinite thought or by sheer physical strength—but only to those made great by goodness of heart." This exclamation from Romain Rolland's *The Life of Beethoven* is worthy of inscription on the foreheads of all heroes.

The last chapter of Pancho Villa's biography, where he meets an old girlfriend and receives a stinging rebuke with a gentle smile, is etched in my memory as if it were a scene in a movie. As she noted in her criticism that his time of banditry including not only killing but also a lot of stealing, Villa said this in reply.

"Madam, I have never stolen. I took from people who had too much and gave to people who had nothing. I myself have never taken other people's things except in desperate circumstances. Grabbing something to eat when you are starving does not equal theft. That is just following one's survival instinct to save oneself. Quite to the contrary, it is the rich who steal. Though they have more than enough of everything they need, they will even take a pitiful loaf of bread from the poor."

When it comes to thieves, they too have their own codes of honor and logic, though such forms may not be socially acceptable. From the side of the *minjung*⁹ or the masses who have suffered poverty and unbearable political oppression, being called a thief is taken as the badge of honor of a righteous outlaw. It's a testament to the righteousness of the act that throughout human history such acts of thievery have consistently been praised.

Speaking of which, let's talk a bit more about Villa's economic ethics. As the villagers reveled in a festival, Villa was engaged in conversation with Alvarado, once a rich man who justified his wealth by claiming that it harmed nobody else. Villa replied:

"A truly rich person is one who is always able to fulfill their duty. The way I see it, money doesn't belong to the rich, but to those who made it, the nation's people. The rich should not spend their money for their own pleasure, but to relieve the afflicted from their plight."

Let's hear how Alvarado came into his money.

"Poverty and wealth are just a game of fate. It is fate that I hit the jackpot on some mountain and became a rich man. I think it was also fate that the lode was soon cut off and ruined. It's nothing more than coincidence that we have accumulated wealth. Because it's not something I made but something that came up out of the ground. Therefore, I thought this fortune came to me because it was God's will for me to share these riches with the poor and so wages were paid handsomely to the miners."

More than the pleasure of raking things in, rich people's happiness lies in the heart that gives to those who go without. What a contrast to the nouveau riche of today, unsatisfied unless they have at least three or four houses, with an escalator, indoor pool, and a bar in the basement.

After days of rain and being immersed in fog, the trees are all damp. A few days ago, the squirrel from whom we'd heard no news all winter emerged beside the offering stone into the sun and was waiting for my daily gift. Her glossy hair that flowed long in the fall had grown haggard during the tough winter. The cedar that turned brown in the cold grew freshly green over the last few days. In the oak groves, too, shoots are pushing out from the ends of the branches.

The cooing of the turtle doves I hadn't heard all winter began and now their cries echo in the mountain valley out front every evening. They often wake me in the middle of the night, too. These are the signs people point towards to say that spring has begun.

Indeed. This power that keeps creation alive and making a ruckus is what we call spring. Is there anyone, any power, that could prevent

such a magnificent surging of life? How could anybody stop the frozen ground from loosening and the dry trees from sprouting?

Though people can go so far as to betray their own faith in pursuit of self-benefit, in the sacred order of the universe, there are no lies. Look at the trees shooting their branches into open space. Notice with how much confidence they express in their lives! Then notice where our branches are headed. Are we worthy of being called honorable human beings?

Let's ask! What it is we are? Let's ask nice and loud, with the way things are going today, can we really be called "human"?

Spring's here, they say. In the dead earth, creation is sprouting, they say. But we can't ever forget that human spring isn't something that's just given to us, it's what we ourselves dig and sow. On the silent trees, buds are sprouting. On our own branches too, there are verdant buds of life we must sprout.

Standing People (1978)



A Mountain Monk's Letter

Passing through *ipchu*¹⁰ which marks the traditional beginning of autumn, the sound of the insects at night is starting to fade and the constellations of the night sky are becoming clearer. Laying in the yard on a mat and staring at the stars, I thought about how lonesome and desolate the night would be without the moon and stars.

The moon and stars don't simply light up the dark. They wrap our lives, so worn and weary from the bustle of the day, in a warm embrace and they expand our inner garden of thoughts and emotions.

The trees and grasses that had been languishing in the midday heat are refreshed by the cool winds that descend from the forest and river at night. The flow between day and night provides a home for all living beings to work and rest. The star-studded moonlit night is not only a blessing in our lives, it forces us to reflect upon our hectic and harried daily life.

Night compels us to ask us what it is we're living for and how we're spending the precious years we've been allotted. Without time to look back and self-reflect, we're just hurtling towards life's end.

A few days ago, a letter arrived from a monk who was spending his summer retreat at a mountain monastery. During my Daraeheon days, when he was a fresh high school graduate, he had come to see me and tell me that he wanted to become a monk. I told him to go to Songgwangsa Temple and helped introduce him to an elder monk there. He received his ten novice precepts the day we founded Buriram Hermitage, so the hermitage and his time as a monk share the same age.

His letter read as follows.

Though I've been a disciple under a master I still have no clue about my studies and some 15 years have already passed. I've been thinking lately how, for the unprepared, even if you're studying by the Buddha's side

you're bound to fail.

This is my first summer retreat. Two months and three days of bliss have already passed by. The retreat makes me think that the entirety of my life up to now was to prepare for this summer retreat.

As Yogananda said, “The first blessing to the spiritual seeker arrives through the waist.” I can really feel that logic these days. From the moment I sensed the subtle energy flowing up my spine, happiness and vitality came surging out. The abundance of joy and energy was so overwhelming, my desire for food disappeared, and having cast off that desire, it feels like all the secular desires of the material world are melting away.

Half way through the 90-day retreat, I started the practice of one-meal-a-day, and ten days ago, I started fasting. After only three days, I completely emptied my bowels and the entire energy of my mind and body were one. I was no longer even feeling my own weight. I ate half a bowl of plain porridge a day for four days to recover and now I’m back to one full meal a day. My body’s not ready yet for side dishes, laver, mushrooms, stew, peppers or anything like that. A bowl of rice, some soup, and a few vegetables a day is plenty.

After that glance into such a magnificent and joyous world, I understood that humans are sustained by joy and light. Silence, happiness, and brilliance arrive simultaneously as fatigue, drowsiness, and hunger disappear. This seems to be what they call “taking meditative bliss as your food” (*seonyeol wisik* 禪悅爲食) and I can’t help but be brought to tears.

He’s having one of those exceptional experiences during his summer retreat—the raw experience of a truly dedicated and genuine practitioner. For those whose attention towards food is on an animal-like instinctual level, *seonyeol wisik*, literally “the taking of meditative bliss as your food,” is incomprehensible. Still, when we are reminded of the fact that humans are more than just blood and bone, that we are souls, too, then we realize how joy and light are the bread of life. The fact that people are brought to tears without even knowing it when

they are at their most gentle and pure is a sign that their hearts are overflowing with love and gratitude. The disappearance of such tears from the eyes of modern people means this purity and gentleness have disappeared and it is a sign that our love and gratitude have all run out.

His letter continues:

There's a great joy learning day by day from direct experience the logic of these dharma lessons of great comfort, "sitting Seon for the sake of Seon alone"¹¹ and "casting off both mind and body."¹²

Practitioners all agree with the profound dharma lesson that breaking the precepts is actually very difficult. When one has a true sense of satisfaction and compassion, they cannot be broken. That's why they call the life of a practitioner a road to joy and a path of blessings.

When you take the case of us Seon monks who train in Seon halls, an extreme desire for awakening and insight into our Buddha nature only further blinds us to our most absolutely fundamental appearance, which is "originally open and overflowing." Like when you try harder to get to sleep and it only makes it worse, your search for God and your pursuit of Buddha fuels a bitterness of longing and desire, creating a barrier. Spiritual seekers are referred to as *sanyassins* in India, and its original meaning is, "one who has given up." With no artificial elements involved, mind, body, and breath in a most perfectly natural harmony, I saw the disappearance of the mind and body. Though I'm eager to see you again, I'm happy staying here until the retreat is released. Here's where I've felt the impact of Master Dōgen's teachings most clearly.

From now on, I'm wanting to bring my life in the capital city (*sudo* 首都) to an end and begin my life of spiritual cultivation (*sudo* 修道). Now that I've left home, I really feel like I've encountered Buddhist dharma. I want to stay here a while and cultivate my compassion and meditative absorption. I'll come to see you on the day the retreat is released. I pray that heaven's peace may be upon you.

O O O three bows

The morning after I got his letter, I wrote the following reply with a pure heart.

I was so happy to receive your letter, I read it twice. And I share your joy in hearing that you've turned meditation into sustenance. Even if our bodies have left home, if we can't feel any of joy of that choice in our minds, how are we ever going to become real monks?

Chulga suhaengja must strive to constantly shake off pre-existing conventions and rise above them. Constantly reflecting on what got you to turn your back on your worldly home to enter the mountains on the spiritual path, you'll never make it, indulged in fruitless vanities and lost in a dream.

For the *chulga suhaengja*, there must be no tomorrow. How much time has been wasted procrastinating because of that "tomorrow"? I too can now only regret. You must always live "right here, right now, just like this." Like a flower, you have to bloom again every day. Austerity, silence, peace, and purification must be the duties of the *suhaengja*.

I totally agree with Master Dōgen's teachings and welcome your words. Really bear in mind the devotion of "original enlightenment and magnificent action, undefiled."¹³

Our practice isn't towards realizing something new, it's a practice that reveals our original brilliance and awareness. Our constant devotion is because of the filth that comes when we don't practice. That's why sitting meditation is referred to as the dharma gate of great comfort. Just as Master Hyujeong said, we must take the protection of our fundamental pure minds as our primary task.

I hope you won't be satisfied with the experience of temporary pleasures and blessings and will continue to push yourself further. "If you want to see further, you have to go higher." As much as possible, speaking less, sleeping less, and eating less are what lead the life of a *suhaengja* toward a path of blessings and joy.

Devoted *suhaeng* is a process of self-improvement moving towards new understandings. Through this process, our lives become more fulfilled and we're no longer captive to confusion and fear. Genuine

spiritual practice is an awakening through the intimate act of constant self-discovery.

Hearing such great news from your summer retreat leaves me surging with energy, too. Let's enjoy your release from the retreat together. I pray that your practice may progress without a hitch!

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)



Listen Carefully at Dawn

I long to enjoy the crystalline time of daybreak, after I've washed and finished the morning worship, seated with my back straight, facing the gradually brightening window.

Out back, jungle nightjars sing religiously for a long time, *ssokdok ssokdok ssokdok*, their sound carried along with that of the cold stream water. Another name for these birds who often sing on moonlit nights or at dawn is “servant bird” and when you see their diligent bird ecology, you understand why the name is apt.

Eventually, the morning brightens with the sound of the Indian cuckoo whistling its four-beat song and a Himalayan cuckoo cries in rhythm, *ung ung ung*. These sounds of nature throw our closed and withered minds wide open. It's a small pleasure that early risers can't help but love.

At this hour on the street, there's the bustle of the sanitation workers doing the sacred work of silently cleaning up after everybody's mess from the day before. At the market, diligent *ajumma* and *ajeossi*¹⁴ open their dawn shops. On the highway is a procession of overnight truckers loaded with goods and running on no sleep.

Just looking at this daybreak scene brings me a great sense of pride and security. An invigorating life force extends all the way to our neighborhoods. Surely as dawn awakens each day, so too are these people loyal to their own lives.

According to the experience of experts, the best of the twenty-four hours for meditation are the periods of intersection between light and darkness. Now, meditation shouldn't be seen as something outside of our ordinary lives, but one part of an awakened life. Silently sweeping and cleaning, calmly buying and selling goods at the market, driving attentively with a clear mind—all of this work leads directly to meditation.

No matter what profession you are in or what job you are doing, paying attention to your task and knowing what you are supposed to be doing is precisely what mediation is. If we want to know what kind of people we are, we can take a cold, hard look at ourselves, inside and out. What sort of people do we hang out with, what do we like to do, what kind of effect do we have on our neighborhood, and where do we place the ultimate meaning in our lives? If we dig down really deep, the reality of our existence becomes perfectly clear.

Without any meditation time to self-reflect like this, you end up with a life no longer in your own control, but instead hopelessly tangled in a vortex of external forces. Without looking inside ourselves, the more time passes the drier our hearts become, until finally they become wastelands.

In much the same way, when we deeply consider the condition of the present world, reduced to a state of near total corruption (the situation among those with plenty, of course), before shifting the blame to structural contradictions, I'm worried about the contribution played by each one of us not taking time for introspection to reflect on our lives at least once a day.

Our society would be so much healthier if we could each pause for a moment each day to straighten out our thoughts, knowing exactly what we're living our lives for and what our responsibilities should be.

Because our material conditions were so poor in the past, even now when we have plenty to eat, we're still not free from an extremely materialistic orientation. Our current government pays attention only to the gross domestic product, totally ignoring the people's gross happiness. Looking at the trend of the wider spiritual world though, the strictly materialistic view is being cast off for one devoted to making the quality of life our most important issue.

Though we all inhabit the same biological world, what makes it possible to become human, a species quite different from the others, is our ability to seek value in life. One reason for the continuation of the endless labor struggle may be because the wrangling over wages never gives full consideration to the total worth of labor itself.

If a company is truly interested in the welfare of its workers, they should put as much attention into valuing their workers' labor as they do wages and vacation. Isn't it because people are being treated as mere tools that we see so many industrial accidents? As Gandhi said, "More than the creation of things, the purpose of labor has to be the development of human beings."

In the process of making things, human beings shape their own selves. As our humanity is engraved on objects through the work we do, labor can be said to be a means of human self-expression. From this perspective, defective products can be seen as inauthentic expressions of the persons who made them. When the maker puts their concern into understanding the situations and comforts of the people who will use what's being made, a human bond is created between a product's creator and its user. No simple wage laborer, the maker might also be a self-actualizing spiritual seeker (*gudoja*).

Farmers too, who toil to meet the seasons, getting their seeds planted and their crops grown, when they have time to reflect upon the grains and vegetables they've cultivated, all those nutrients for so many people, they realize quickly that farming is no simple thing, it is unified with the path of human formation. These days, I'm loving to go out barefoot at sundown to weed the vegetable garden. Naked feet on this soft garden dirt, noticing the sprouts bursting out fresh and green as I yank out the weeds, mind¹⁵ is so relaxed and at ease. Soil does this for people because it is a fountain of energy.

Some meditator once said, "Meditation is the gentle breeze that comes in when you leave the window open. But if you throw the window open and try to force it in, the breeze never comes."

Just get up at dawn and listen carefully to your life. Ask yourself, "Who am I?"

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)

Living Outside Time

Hope everything is ok for everybody here in the dog days of summer. You must be tired of the heat. Try not to resent it too much. The hot summer allows the cool autumn breezes to blow, and in those breezes the grains ripen and fruits sweeten.

Without the seasons turning as they do, living beings wouldn't be able to enjoy life properly. So when the weather turns really hot, it's nothing to get too bothered by. It's a great blessing to live here on the Korean Peninsula where spring, summer, fall, and winter are all so clearly defined.

I spent the entire month of July hunkered down on the mountain without leaving once. I really wanted to cast off the repetitive routine of my old daily life and try living a new way following nature's rhythm. Having to cancel an appointment for personal reasons allowed me to break free from the mold for the first time in a while. As luck would have it, all of my batteries died, my watch stopped, and I couldn't listen to the radio. It was a really great opportunity to get out of my rut.

The efficient use of time that came with the invention of clocks has certainly brought great benefit to social life, as is attested to by human history. Nevertheless, since becoming dependent on watches, there's also the negative effect that people now always feel pressed for time. With my watch stopped and the radio on break from telling me what time it is, for the first time in a while I was really able to live outside of time. I ate only when I was really hungry and slept only when my eyes grew heavy. Instead of the hands on the clock, it was nature's flow moving me to eat and sleep and in the process my mind became very easy going and peaceful.

Out of the loop of clock-measured time, it felt like only now was I taking my first steps on the path towards an independent life. The thought came to me as I looked back, that I'd uselessly been running all

around in vain as a slave to time.

My first experiences with clocks were uncomfortable. In my childhood, I always went to play at my aunt's house and I really loved for her kindness. But when I had to play alone in her empty room, the tick-tocking of the clock pendulum always gave me the creeps. I'd end up trying to sneak out of the house to escape, pretending to go get something to eat. When my aunt realized I was gone, she was of course very worried and came to our house to make sure I was there.

Though now there's just one clock here in my cabin, back at the Buriram Hermitage there was a clock in each room. I certainly appeared as time's faithful servant. Though I loved their design, those "tick-tock" clocks were always sent back down the mountain. It's the same when I travel, I'm always taking the batteries out of noisy clocks in my guest rooms. Of course, I always return them to their original state before I leave.

Hating the feeling of having anything on my wrists, as if they were handcuffs, I had totally avoided wearing a watch until travelling abroad more or less forced it upon me. Since then, it's been a sign of my slavery to time with which I've marked myself.

When I was leading training sessions at Songgwangsa Temple,¹⁶ I made everyone take off their watches and store them away before the retreat began. I had to do this so I could impart to the trainees the practice of freeing themselves from the restraints not only of the watch but of the perspective of time in general.

How much time is wasted in vain looking at our watches? Saying "Still a few minutes left," or "Still a long way to go," so much time wasted with nothing getting done. Successful people live the same twenty-four hours a day as others, but they know how to make better use of it. The ones who can really live outside of time aren't absorbed in what time the clock hands show, they live in perfect accordance with each moment given to them.

In today's industrial society, time presses us all to grow gradually colder and more ruthless. It's now common practice to stop in the middle of a task by pointing to one's watch. You could be on the brink

of a solution with just a bit more effort and folks would still be looking at their watch ready to call it quits. This is the kind of evil spirit that time slavery instills in you. We have to master the secret of labor, that its greatest virtue is brought out in a workplace where the hands of the clock don't reach.

The saying is that time solves everything. That's because our living and our dying all take place within time. Still, when we free ourselves from the perspective of time and don't rely on clocks, we're much better able to live in sync with each moment. This means that when you're not pressed for time, not impatient, but with eyes open to the limitless world outside of time, you're able to relax and grow no matter what time it is.

Whenever wise elders with much life experience run into some problem, they always advise not to rush and to just wait a bit. In a crisis, the ins and outs of what's good or bad are constantly changing. Our elders grasped this secret of time in the process of surviving the many woes of this world.

Time can sometimes solve the problems human brains cannot. Hence the saying "patience is a virtue." It's always better to sleep on problems that cannot be solved right away. The more difficult a problem is to fix, the wiser the solution will be if you don't jump in and attack it right away, but instead retreat a step to quietly take in every aspect of the situation.

I look forward to us being able to meet outside of time.

Letters from the Cabin (1999)





Notes

- 1 *Jingongmyoyu* 真空妙有. Buddhism is often understood in the West as a religion focusing on the concept of “emptiness,” particularly in its apophatic form, where the fundamental essence of the universe is expressed in absence and lack, always “beyond words.” However, emphasizing the cataphatic element of emptiness is a key innovation of Mahayana Buddhism, not only in the Hwaeom (Ch. Huayan) teachings, but in Seon (Ch. Chan), as well. Indeed, it may be the skillful blending of these approaches, the apophatic and cataphatic, through both Hwaeom and Seon teaching and practice, that helps explain the success of Korean Buddhism’s greatest masters, Beopjeong included.
- 2 From the “Jeongeupsa,” one of the oldest songs in Korean history. Said to be from the Three Kingdoms period, a woman prays in the song that the moon might shine the way for her dearly beloved.
- 3 Beopjeong is quoting the *Dhaniya sutta* here, where a cattleman speaks with defiant confidence to the Rain God.
- 4 A text of collected morality tales compiled by He Liangjun in the 16th century Ming dynasty.
- 5 Daraheon 茶萊軒 is a residence within Bongeunsa Temple in Seoul. Today it is surrounded by the bustle of Gangnam, but when Beopjeong resided between here and Haeinsa Temple from the mid-1960s to 1975, it was on an island accessible only by ferryboat. These years correspond to the period when Beopjeong was on the front lines of the political struggle against dictatorship.
- 6 *Jeuksi hyeon'geum gaengmu sijeol* 卽時現今更無時節.
- 7 *Skete* is the word used to refer to some of the earliest Christian monastic communities.
- 8 *Jeak makjak jungseon bonghaeng* 諸惡莫作 衆善奉行. Beopjeong interjects with a reference to a core Buddhist teaching here, likely to highlight its perfect similarity with the teaching of the Desert Fathers. This phrase comes from a famous anecdote in the “Gatha of the Seven Ancient Buddhas” where Tang poet Bai Juyi is schooled in the simplicity of the dharma by Master Daolin.
- 9 Meaning, “the people” or “the masses,” at the time of the writing during the worst period of the 1970s dictatorship, this is a charged word choice with radical implications and deserves to remain untranslated here.

- 10 The traditional Korean and Chinese calendar features 24 solar terms. *Ipchu* is the thirteenth, corresponding to roughly mid-August.
- 11 *Jigwantajwa* 只管打坐. This concept of “silent illumination” is linked to the phrase made most popular by the twelfth century Chan Buddhist monk Hongzhi Zhengjue.
- 12 *Sinsim tallak* 心身脱落. Japanese Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen often used this phrase to describe his enlightenment experience.
- 13 *Bonjeung myosu bul yeomo* 本證妙修 不染汚. Again, a phrase used often by Dōgen.
- 14 As in many traditional cultures, the words used for men and women of a certain age are similar to aunt and uncle. In Korea, it is no different. *Ajumma* “auntie” and *ajeossi* “uncle” are the Korean versions of the same. That said, these days, there are often subtle class distinctions given to these names, such that they tend to have a more working-class connotation, especially *ajumma*. See “The Poor Next Door,” chapter 3.
- 15 Sometimes Beopjeong says *nae ma'eum* “my mind.” Here he just says *ma'eum*, “mind.”
- 16 Though Beopjeong never served in senior administrative monastic roles, he did head the Meditation Hall at Songgwangsa Temple and it was here that he instituted a popular and innovative citizen-based meditation training program that would eventually develop into today’s successful Temple Stay program.

Chapter 3

Simple Humble Living

Violet-like Violets

There was a mathematician who loved math all his life, studying, teaching, researching only math for so many years because he liked it that much. He was such a master of his craft that he could grasp the aesthetic beauty in numbers. He said, “There are times when problems I couldn’t solve in the lab were solved when I wasn’t thinking about them, climbing a mountain or strolling on the beach.” At times, his colleagues would ask him, “You never tire of it, spending your whole life studying only math? What benefit does any of your work bring to society?”

Whenever this happened, the mathematician was always said to have answered, “If a violet blooms as a violet, that’s enough. What effect its little bloom has on spring’s grand unfolding in the entire field is not for the little violet to know.”

Though in some ways his answer might sound a bit impertinent, it expresses him and his beliefs quite vividly. If that flower just blooms as itself, even if just one or two of its flowers blossom, it can set the whole spring meadow in motion. But what would happen if the violet didn’t bloom as a violet and it wanted to bloom as a forsythia or a cherry blossom instead? It would be an unseemly sight, no doubt, and it wouldn’t just be some bizarre mutation of the violet, it would be a tragedy for spring.

These days it’s becoming impossible to survive while showing your true colors. It’s not so much that our individuality and opinions are challenged by those around us, but rather that our own aims and goals are determined by them. Because it is in our fate to be endlessly adrift, swept away by the raging currents of uniformity.

If we reflect on our daily lives, we can touch with our own hands how we’re living. Beginning with the newspapers that brag of themselves as if they were uncrowned royalty, and continuing through their weekly magazines, radio, television and other mass media

products, all of it implores us in a singular voice to become the same type of uniformly shallow materialist.

They rob our colors and steal our spirits. They corrupt our power to think and our ability to make value judgments. Like the power of an addictive drug, they leave us floundering inside their world alone. That's when even in the most obvious situations of blind and unconditional following, it's difficult to maintain our own point of view.

This is how we've all come to resemble one another so much the way we do these days. Like the homes in the new housing districts, this one and the next are all exactly the same. Not only our actions but our thoughts are becoming increasingly homogenous. It's to the point that proper nouns seem rather cumbersome. Wouldn't it just be more convenient to refer to ourselves with serial numbers or common nouns?

Fortunately or not, humans aren't satisfied looking for happiness within their daily routines alone. We possess an urge to develop our own lives. Namely, we want to do something creative. This is the desire to "live like ourselves," even if it means taking risks or facing danger. That's life's great demand. Is it something on the mountain that makes so many people risk their single precious life just to climb it? Of course, it's when we see a mountain that we climb it, but it's not the mountain that calls me. It's my demand to climb that mountain that surges up inside. The energy that cannot be otherwise; that's exactly the thriving vitality of life.

It takes a lot of knowledge and information to partake in our creative pursuits. Intertwined as we are with so many neighbors, it's hard to live well if you lack such information. That's why we have to memorize piles of newly promulgated regulations, paying a steep price to obtain our share of this knowledge, enduring countless inhumane struggles as we flock through these narrow gateways.

I don't know if everybody feels like this, but whenever I go to the bookstore, I'm overwhelmed by the huge amount of knowledge and information piled up in heaps in front of me. I'm unnerved by the sense that I'll never be able to digest it all. What I know wouldn't even fill but a few of these volumes. I suddenly feel really small and a little depressed.

How much knowledge does it take for us to survive? Though each of us has our own answer, of course, more seems to be better. This is because the more knowledgeable people there are, the more helpful we can be to one another, and the better treatment we can receive as well.

But there is a problem. Though we do need knowledge to survive, the truth is that too much of it is deadly. People naturally like to argue. Among them, intellectuals especially love to make further and further distinctions as they engage in speculation. As creatures who always have many reasons, none of us is simple. And that's why it's so easy for us to end up hoisted on our own petards.

When we ask how much we're supposed to know, we're asking how complicated and precisely we want to make distinctions. Relying exclusively on external knowledge, we're stripped of our own voice and language. That's why modern people aren't suffering from a lack of connections, hardly. We're becoming alienated from our humanity by an excess of them. We've become endlessly meandering wanderers, unable to put roots down into the ground. Without bringing up Faust's entire parable, the green tree of life is withering, buried under gray theory.

What is the relationship between humanity and knowledge, then? Has knowledge become the fundamental element that shapes humanity? In Sanskrit, knowledge is referred as cognition. Etymologically, knowing is linked to the idea of dividing, specifically, the understanding of distinctions. That's why this sort of knowledge is referred to as "discursive cognition." But this sort of discriminating knowledge has no relationship to our human character. It's just the things you know.

From early on, the ancient masters placed little regard on this sort of discriminatory knowledge, thinking of it as illusory. Instead, they seek the indivisible world that lies beyond division and they do their best to get there. This non-discrimination doesn't refer to a confused state of incomprehension, but to a state that transcends the discriminatory delusion that quibbles constantly over ever finer details.

Wisdom means "to put together" or "to integrate" that which you

know. That's why wisdom is also referred to as non-discriminating cognition. This wisdom has a direct correlation to our character and that's why action and duty follow from it. So, what we need to depend on isn't speculative knowledge, but the endless light, what the Buddhist scriptures emphasize again and again as wisdom.

In the ninth century, there was a Chinese Chan master named Guishan.¹ His collected sayings were so widely known that they've been used in the textbooks for ascetic trainees from early on in the Korean monastic community. Under his tutelage was one Xiangyan, a nearly seven-foot-tall scholar of great intelligence and skill. Guishan saw with one glance Xiangyan's aptitude for Buddhahood and one day said to him,

“Leave behind everything you've seen and heard before and tell me in one word about your original face.”

Xiangyan thought about this and that and rambled on as he tried to answer, but the master rejected everything he said summarily. Racing back to his room, he searched through all his books and couldn't put aside all that he'd seen or heard before to see his original face. He went back to Guishan and requested his teaching. But Guishan had this to say in reply,

“What I say is my point of view, what use would it be to you?”

Xiangyan was so shocked by this remark that he burned all of his books and having reached the end of his solo training, he finally came to realize his “original face.”

It's not rare to hear such terms as “milquetoast intellectual” or “helpless academic.” Xiangyan is exactly us today. Those intellectuals who normally raise their voices with world-dominating vigor can't utter a peep in certain situations and then when the situation really demands their actions, they shrink. If this is what intelligence leads to, then what's so great about it? Here is where we can clearly see the distinction between intellect and human character.

Wise actions don't emerge from the kind of discursive thinking that splits and calculates. Wise actions only arise from a sense of conviction. But where does such conviction come from? Not from discursive

knowledge. It wells up spontaneously from non-discursive wisdom.

Thus, the fundamental element shaping human character isn't knowledge of "grey theory," it is wisdom, which gushes forth like a spring no matter how many times it's been pumped. For knowledge to fulfill its original purpose, it has to deepen and sublimate all the way into wisdom.

Schools are the fundamental educational institutions we use to shape human beings. But these days, the aim of school curricula is entirely to transmit information. If we look at the etymology of "education," it is rooted in a sense of "bringing out" not "cramming in." That's why the main point of education can't simply be "knowledge delivery" but "wisdom development." The exchange of data ends with cold and dry information, and it's impossible to create any exchange of human personality. Unlike in the olden days, the gulf that's formed between teachers and students can also be found here, as well.

In the days when one hesitated even to tread on their shadows, our teachers were sacred and absolute. These days, the selling of information makes the relationship merely contractual. You pay a certain amount each term and expect a certain amount of information in return. That's why now, even in the middle of a contract, if somebody gets offended, they'll go so far as to stomp on the owners of the shadows themselves! Because modern humans are shaped in this kind of context, you can't help but create heartless citizens.

If we try and count the ideal teachers who stick out in our memory, there probably aren't that many. The ones who are remembered didn't get that way because of the information they passed on. It was the stimulation from the epiphanies they gave us as we grew up. Through their encouragement, they helped us spread our wings of wisdom that had been residing within. These ideal teachers continue giving us lessons about ourselves long after our classes with them have ended. A teacher's character dissolves into our own. If we really want to know what a proper education looks like, these kinds of ideal teachers make it readily apparent.

For knowledge to develop into wisdom, there has to be some kind

of filtering process. More than anything, there must be an objective self-reflection upon one's own daily life. Pure concentration gives us some sense of life's depth. By really examining ourselves thoroughly, we can awaken to the reality of our own being. Doing this requires us to ask ourselves fundamental questions like, "Who am I? Why am I here? What kind of life am I living?"

It takes time alone by ourselves to do this. We need to listen to our inner voice and free ourselves from external information. Being alone is a fully intact existence. Because of our overwhelming number of connections, modern folks have almost entirely lost our alone time. Within our tightly packed density, we need to awaken to a wide-open emptiness. We're lacking completely that pure consciousness, that untainted state of mind.

That's why this special kind of being alone doesn't refer to a gloomy loneliness, but a path returning to our original self. This is a dignified human existence. When we're alone, we become more genuine. Everything starts over again from the beginning and one ponders the laws of nature. We're brought into deep and noble thoughts, our gaze rising to the loftiest heights. When we're alone, we can come to understand eternal and extraordinary things like death and eternity. To that extent, we can even come to see the image of our own selves dying a little bit each day. We're searching for the kernel in the shell. That's what brings us to our senses.

The phrase *jin'gong myoyu*,² or, "the wondrous being of true emptiness" means that within total emptiness is something profound and mysterious. If something isn't fully emptied, you can't receive anything truly new. Your own "well of life" can't spring up. That's why the Seon school argues that "if you want to enter this gate, you have to put intellectual learning aside." It's an urgent assertion that we can only open new eyes when we've freed ourselves from the fixed views we currently possess.

An understand of our worth and the meaning of our existence comes through this filtration process. We become sure of what to do in each moment. This is when we're able to hear the voice of history and

develop our own creative life.

Where is our teacher? The pride and responsibility of humanity lies in the fact that we ourselves can't but be our own essential teacher. External things, whether a person or material object, are nothing but stimuli to me, and responding to these positively or negatively depends on nobody else but me. Therefore, while it is important for those who are seeking what is right to look for something external, when it turns out not to be right, they need to be able to let it go and turn away at once. We know from repeated experience how much harder it is to get rid of things than to find them.

That each person is unique and sacred is a knowledge gained outside of textbooks. This is why we can't live trivial lives or just die for nothing. What is living? Without saying too much, we can just call it a kind of self-combustion. It's not others we burn, but my own self I must burn completely to become myself.

Hasn't the unique and sacred aspect of humanity from early on been subject to the kind of dehumanization we see today? We've long been floating along in a river of homogeneity, endlessly adrift in a sea of conformity.

What makes us not only animal, but human, is that part of us that is able to have a change of heart.³ It's exactly this part that can fix things as soon as we know something's wrong. And in this critical moment when our heart turns, our new eyes open.

I was looking at the paper the other day and read about some celebrity who had left to live the high life in the United States. From the position as his fellow countryman, I thought it seemed a bit sad, pitiful, even. Then about a month later, I heard that this guy who'd left it all behind had returned. One of the reasons he came back was that he felt like he was sitting in a first-class compartment with a third-class ticket and he couldn't stand it any longer. Here's someone who really knows what it's like to have a change of heart. Even when we know something's wrong, there are so many times we shrink in fear of another's glance or to save face. Though those who speak out in such situations get blamed for being rash, no matter what anyone says, people like this are living as

themselves and maintaining their own convictions.

This is why violets have to bloom like violets. That's a violet's job. But in the atmosphere like the one we're breathing in today, at the point where violets can't bloom as violets, we've got a problem. We're hounded day and night to all resemble a singular flower. When only the very same flowers are blooming in each of our gardens, we'll end up losing our own sense of touch and vision. When all the flowers can bloom as themselves it creates the harmony of a majestic symphony. Over four seasons, life's pleasures will overflow.

How great, how truly magnificent it would be, if we could live like this, too.

Standing People (1978)



The Winter Woods

In woods where only empty branches remain, their leaves and fruits all torn away by the winter wind, dried leaves crunch beneath my feet with each step as I walk down the forest path at dusk. As they do, I suddenly realize just how much of my life's share I've already used up and to where I've come up to now. Wondering whether I've really lived well or not with this time I've been given, which passes just once and which I can never get back, it leaves me melancholy.

I'm a bit more careful as I crush the dead leaves under my feet. Every single one of these scattered leaves has a meaning to its existence. They have a world of their own within an order that exceeds us and which we cannot see. Everything in this world has an inevitable reason for why it has to be present, that's why they exist as they do.

Last fall, in the process of trying to pay off some of my *malbit*⁴ (word debt) I was so much on the go that my mountain life had seemed to dwindle to nothing. By the time I'd finished my work and returned to the mountain, the leaves had already turned and started falling. My long-forgotten inner garden is revived in the sound of the night breeze passing through the forest. This inner journey is steeped in peace and quiet.

This sound of the wind I hear on the mountain doesn't just reach my ears. Every particle of dust, down to the very marrow of my bones, seems cleansed and purified. This sound of the mountain wind soothes our mind, straightening things up and smoothing things out, like a freshly raked garden. It cleanses us of the pollution of urban life and opens up a mind free from desire and distraction.

This wind, this vagabond we can neither see nor catch, is forever alive and moving, precisely because we can't ever see or grasp it. Yet, its fingers bring life to everything it touches. What would happen if there were suddenly no longer any wind in the world? Every living thing would fade away and turn to ash.

Can we say something doesn't exist just because you can't see or touch it? Things become visible on the foundation of the invisible; things become audible depending on what's unheard.

The Indian guru Rajneesh⁵ put it this way:

When a drop of water is spilled
The whole universe goes thirsty
When you pick a single flower
Part of the universe is broken
When a single flower blooms
It is like ten thousand stars sparkling
Ah, every single thing in the world is like this,
Created in direct connection with one another!

A common occurrence among the folks who come up the mountain here is that they'll sit on the porch and gaze at the mountain and say hurriedly, "Why is it so silent?" or "I don't like how it's so quiet." They're a restless and uncomfortable sort who seem like they're being chased by something. Of course, these folks are perfectly smart and capable in the city. You know the type, urban intellectuals. They're so addicted to the hustle and bustle of the city that they've completely forgotten the silence of the primordial order. They're unable to spend time alone purely as themselves, dependent on nothing else. They can't stand on their own without leaning on something.

Unable to endure natural silence, they flee that discomfort by blasting their radios or shouting at one another, burying the burbling of the flowing stream, drowning out the sound of the crystal pure bird song. I look at people like this and wonder how they could possibly merit the title, "master of all creatures." Modern people, so estranged as they are from their own selves, are degenerating into something strange, something truly bizarre.

Why are we so dependent these days on things that "are"? Is it that we're bound only to those things that can be seen, heard, and grasped? If it weren't for silence, how would language have space to create

speech? Without the sea, how would land rise up so stately? Without a foundation of emptiness to build on, there can be no existence.

One of the four-line verses of the *Diamond Sutra*⁶ says,

Where there are things with characteristics
There is emptiness and delusion
Seeing characteristics as not characteristics
Is direct perception of the Buddha.

What the sutra is saying is that “every thing or phenomenon that we can see, hear, and touch is illusory. That’s why it’s only when we can simultaneously see both characteristics and non-characteristics, essence and phenomena, that we’ll find yourself looking straight into the reality of the universe.” To put it another way, if you want to directly perceive any phenomenon, you have to go beyond its mere aspects alone and pierce deeply into what lies behind.

There are jackrabbits and pheasants in the woods around Buriram Hermitage. Trusting I won’t harm them, they never run away when they see me. When the snow really piles up, I spread out some beans or something and they come really close and feel free to eat peacefully. Watching this sort of thing really warms my heart. When they see strangers, though, they flee right away.

When villagers come up and see a pheasant or rabbit lounging about the garden, they’re delighted. The animals can’t trust or seek neighborly affection with wild beasts who look upon them only as things to be caught and turned into a meal. These simple beings seem to instinctively grasp the exquisite principle of tacit understandings.

Here it’s early December and there’s still fruit dangling from the two persimmon trees at the head of the bamboo grove. They’ll hang around a bit longer until the deep freeze arrives. Though some pheasants and birds have pecked away and left some fruit half eaten, a few remain intact. Everyone who sees them smacks their lips and asks why those two still remain unpicked. I know the secret that fruit isn’t just a feast for your mouth but your eyes as well. The truth is, I’ve

nothing to offer all the birds who come to the garden, so I leave those last ones on the tree as a treat for my bird guests. Their pleasure is mine as well, as I get to enjoy looking up at the dangling orange persimmons several times a day.

Anybody who has seen that brilliant glow of the persimmon dangling from black barren branches on a white snowy day in the mountains knows exactly what I'm talking about. Master Hyedam, who lived in the Munsujeon Hall down at the big temple, used to glide up the slippery slopes just to see those mysterious colors glow on a winter day. It's truly a masterpiece of winter's vibrant colors. If you've only eaten it with your mouth, how would you ever be able to taste this breathtakingly beautiful flavor of persimmon with your eyes? It was in a Yeats' poem, wasn't it, where it said that wine comes in the mouth and love comes in the eye? Beauty is another thing we partake of with our eyes.

The winter woods reveal the original faces of the trees, stripped of every pretension, all the way down to their essentials. The forest understands the meaning of silence. It stands upon and raises itself from the silence. On a spring day, its heart flutters as sprouts blossom and saturate the world in green. Then in summer, it receives the hot sun and casts a cool shade upon the earth. When autumn comes and the fruits have ripened, the forests of every valley beckon to one another waving their vibrant colors until finally their leaves all come down at once, their heads and arms reaching to the sky as they fall silent, absorbed in meditation.

Life is a process of constant self-creation. There's nobody else to create yourself but you. Whether it's a tree or human being, when this creative effort ceases, aging, disease, and death soon follow.

On the surface, the trees may seem to be standing there mutely with a lost expression, but if you look inside, their creative forces never cease. Listening to the secrets in the soil, the sprouts of next spring are all preparing themselves. When the new season's conditions are just right, we'll see this internal vitality blossom across the entire land.



Be Satisfied with Less

Greedy people have so many anxieties because their pursuits for profit are likewise so numerous. Those with few desires aren't searching for anything so their cares and worries are also few. Those who try to rid themselves of greed feel more at peace, without fear or worry, able to do the work at hand without being hard pressed. That's why the stage of enlightenment where all of your torments have all finally completely disappeared is referred to as "few desires."

If you're interested in freeing yourself from suffering, you first need to know how to be satisfied. Knowing simple satisfaction is a peaceful ease of abundance and pleasure. Such people are comfortable and happy, even when lying on the bare ground.

But those who don't know how to be satisfied, even if they found themselves in heaven it wouldn't be enough.

People who don't know how to be content may seem wealthy but really are quite poor, while those who know how to be satisfied may seem poor but are in fact very wealthy. This is what is called "contentment." *(Sutra of the Deathbed Injunction)*

Master Jaun, who presided over our full ordination, once replied to a letter with only eight characters.

"Less sickness, less anger, less desire, understand satisfaction."

That was the whole letter. To interpret, if you're sick only a little bit and stressed just a little bit, with few desires you'll know how to be satisfied with less.

Letters from ascetics are always concise like this. Saying only what needs to be said, wasting no time with pleasantries, they can even seem rude. Because the entire life of a *suhaengja* is simple and austere, the stories they share can't help but be the same.

I've exchanged more than a few letters with people from all walks

of life over the years, but his letter, written in a fountain pen, was so clearly and genuinely imbued with his character, it still remains fresh in my memory some twenty years later.

These days, we are flooded with material things wherever we go. Whether in a home or a temple, the situation isn't much different. Things are now so common and many that it's difficult to appreciate them or understand their value. Objects that in the olden days could be sewed, patched, or fixed are thrown away, even when they're like brand-new. And it's not just material things we're throwing away too easily. Our spirit that knows how to cherish and value things is getting tossed out with it.

Looking at the memoirs of the old masters, they didn't know any better but to be thankful for being able to sling their single robe over their shoulder, and they gave a dharma sermon in praise of the Buddha and his virtue to show their appreciation. These days, I'm not sure we can even comprehend such gratitude.

In the past, every temple was also very cautious about the things that were donated to it, whereas these days you almost never hear any such concern. It's to this extent that our consciousness has been blunted and fallen asleep.

With material things so common, we've lost sense of their worth. No matter how many things there may be in the world, the mindset with which we respond to those things must always remain the most precious.

A single piece of tissue paper can give us a glimpse of a person's mindset. Whether mine or someone else's, paper should only be used as much as necessary, yet some people throw away a whole pile after wiping their nose just a bit or dabbing up some tiny spill. Whenever I see this kind of thing, I lament the damage they do to their own fortune and can't help but feel what a waste it is. This seems a great point to reflect on where we've come from in order to have gotten to this point of being so wasteful and extravagant.

We currently seem to want nothing else but to have more than others. It's like we're possessed of no will to control that desire on our

own. People in the past, that would be us in the past, were very grateful even when they had little. Treasuring whatever they had, they knew how to make do. But the we in the present is a different story. Even with a lot, we don't know how to be thankful, nor how to treasure what we have, nor how to make do with it. Ours is an endlessly insatiable thirst.

The "we" in the past was wise and virtuous with little. The present "we" are neither wise nor virtuous with abundance. Wisdom and virtue aren't things that arise by accident. They only accumulate when cultivated day to day. Blind as we are to this, our human domain withers with each passing day.

A commonly heard phrase in the dharma sermons of the recently passed Great Seon Master Gusan was that "in cold and hunger is the determination to practice the Way." It means that even when we're cold and hungry, our mind for practice still emerges. This is exactly right. Growing too accustomed to a life of few annoyances and too much wealth, one ends up dulled like a sated pig who has had its fill at the trough. It's impossible to cleanse the mind without a sincere spirit to awaken it.

Given that we can only hold on to our hopes and expectations if there is something we lack or long for, without such an absence, there's no space for expectations and hope to arise. For example, if each time we pass a storefront we think that when things get better we'll be able to bring some fancy thing home, this thought alone can bring flexibility to a mind that might otherwise easily end in stagnant despair. The further into the future you are able to put off those expectations, all the greater the happiness you can create. However, if you obtain whatever it is you want all at once, you'll never develop a deep sense of precious appreciation with that expectation and hope. When things come too easily, you're pleased with what you've got and everything is great for a few days, but then this wanes and whatever it was you obtained just becomes "another thing you have to take care of."

Still, as unfortunate as it may be, it's the person who lives with less who really knows how to live. In our world where new products come out every day to grab our eyes and wallets, if we don't keep our right

mind, we quickly become slaves to monthly payments, taking on the role of caretaker to our things. To see someone else possess something and then want it for oneself, even when we're of very different means, is mere vanity and extravagance.

The less you have, the less your mind becomes dispersed. And the less you have, the more you understand what it means for something to be precious and rare. Those who don't understand this have lives that are like empty shells, lacking any true core.

There is no limit to a person's desires. Desire that extends beyond our means makes us sick. This is true not just for material things, but any honor or position we have that exceeds our true share is bound to make us uneasy and opens us up to the world's ridicule.

As the scriptures say, those not content with their own share may appear rich on the outside but are poor inside, while those who are content with what they have may appear poor to others, but in reality, they are wealthy and totally unhindered.

This is why, more than anything, we have to learn how to live as comfortably as we can with as little as possible. We must know how to live with a light heart and calm mind, as our true selves without hesitation, no matter where we are. It's only when we understand how to live as our true selves that we're worthy of being called authentic human beings.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)

More Simply and Humbly

As the snow melts and tumbles down the roof of the cabin, it causes quite a ruckus. The sound of big chunks of snow sliding down and crashing startles me. Beginning the day before yesterday, the brook that had been frozen silent all winter is gradually beginning to make more sound. On the sunny side of the mountain, birds have begun chirping in the bushes. The air of spring floated in late winter's noonday sun.

Though snow still lingers in these parts, in the south, camellia flowers are blooming and the plum blossoms swelling. Spring is sprouting all over.

Even though I submit a monthly essay to the newspaper, I myself barely get a chance to read one. The only information I receive of the world comes from what I can make of the snippets of news I get on the radio.

Living in the mountains, the things one learns from nature just by seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking leave not a single thing lacking. If you don't control the overflow of information and news, it can bury you and leave your life withering beneath it all. How much time and energy do we waste on things we have absolutely no need to see, hear, or know about?

I try to strictly distinguish what I need and what I don't need in life. Without this particular sense of order, my life can never become autonomous. Even though the radio is my only source of information, more often than not it's a useless noise machine. That's why I make a point of tuning in only for the news and weather and then turning it off as soon as it's over.

We seem to live our lives through days of seemingly endless repetition, but in the strictest sense, in life there really isn't any repetition. Our lives are constantly new, a constant stream of unique moments. In such singularly unique moments of life, there's not a single

thing that can be carelessly thrown away.

Life can't help but depart from reason and analysis. Life is something that can only be lived, experienced, and enjoyed. Don't waste a precious and mysterious life with thoughts that get you nowhere. This means getting out of your head and diving head first into the totality of existence. We have to start again, over and over, releasing ourselves from where we are stuck and hindered. With a fresh start, you can lead yourself back to your original self and reshape your life.

A great master once said: "Life is not the future. It's not the past. It's not the present, either. It's a never completed thing, yet all of it takes place in the present. Death, too, is in the present. But bear in mind, perceiving the real truth, there's neither life nor death."

It's late in life for this, but if I could have one wish, it's not to see my Buddha nature or achieve Buddhahood. Many spiritual practitioners are stuck in the swamp of terms like "perceiving one's nature" and "achieving Buddhahood," giving it their total devotion day and night, but I don't want either of those. I put full confidence in the "original purity" that all the saints and sages speak of. My only devotion is to exert myself to the fullest in revealing this original purity.

How can I achieve a simpler and humbler life? This is the present me's only wish. Starting with my food and shelter, I want to enjoy a simpler, humbler life. I want to escape the endless cycle of the consumer who buys, possesses, uses for a while, and then gets rid of. How is it that humans, possessed of such great creativity and capable of endless adaptation and sublimation, degrade into mere consumers?

We have to realize that the only possession we have is our selfness. And it seems the only way we can live authentically as ourselves is to live simply and humbly.

I started the "Pure and Fragrant" (Malgo hyanggiropge) campaign with one thought, but it wasn't a particularly unique one. It all started with the simple and humble idea of revealing the pure and fragrant human mind in an age that is so chaotic, fierce, and barren.

Before blaming the world, by making sure my own heart is pure and fragrant, my surroundings and environment become more pure

and fragrant, and the world we live in will also become filled with pure and fragrant energy.

Savoring the *Daodejing* next to the fire in the cabin during a late winter's snow, here's what Laozi says: "What is more dear, fame or your life? Which is more precious, your life or your possessions? Which pains you more, whether you've satisfied your desires or abandoned your greed? This is why great desire leads to great consumption and great possession can only come to great loss."

Thus, Laozi advocates the following: "If you know your own share, you will suffer no shame, and if you know how to stop, you will be in no danger. Doing this, you will live long and comfortably."⁷

Whenever I read from those classics of human history that have survived the great filter of time, a new path always seems to open. With these wise teachings offering their support, the garden of humanity is always replenished.

This essay was originally a letter written in response to loved ones who've been wondering how things have been for me up here in the snow. The new spring is sprouting. The day's soon coming when the life that's been stored up all winter long is going to burst out.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)





The Poor Next Door

The drizzling rain spread a thick fog throughout the forest, as signs of life emerged from the valley below with the intermittent sound of hoes digging at the earth. On a day as rainy as this, I couldn't help but worry about whomever had to be out and about, so I sauntered down the mountain to take a look. There were two white haired *ajumma* who looked to be in their mid-50s, soaking wet in the rain as they dug tree roots.

Turns out they live over the mountain in Omisil village. Tomorrow is market day in Gwangcheon, some 30 *ri* away, so they came here today to collect medicinal herbs. They'll sell them so they can buy some necessities. In spring, they pick bracken and wild greens and collect bellflower roots. In fall, they collect acorns and make *muk* (jelly) to sell at the market. In winter, they'll even come to cut bamboo and sell that, too.

When some people have to work nonstop like this even on rainy days just to support their families, the inequality of the world is made so stark. How much will they get for those herbs? It won't even be enough to buy the nail polish or mascara the other *ajumma* in town are wearing. Seeing their rain-soaked hair and clothes, there was no way I could just pass by, so I invited them up to the cabin where I lit a fire and made some *tteokguk* (rice cake soup) to share.

After the *ajumma* left, I tried to meditate, but today, sitting on this soft cushion next to the fire filled me with sorrow and emptiness. Of course, we're never all going to be able to have the same lives, and today wasn't the first day I ever thought about poverty and inequality, but seeing the *ajumma* today churned up all sorts of self-recrimination.

These days, the trend toward materialism and jumboism is seeping into everything, including the sphere of religion, a space meant to protect and nurture the human spirit. Look at the lavish churches

and temples racing to be the biggest and tallest, spending thousands, millions of dollars along the way. Are we going to be able to keep our human minds in check amidst such grandeur and luxury? I mean, are these really the kinds of palaces that Jesus and the Buddha lived in back in the day?

The size of the building and the number of people will never be what makes a church sacred or a temple great. It's whether or not the congregation is made up of true believers or a bunch of folks there to make deals and show off. It can either be a sacred space or it can degenerate into just another swell place to be seen and do business.

When you look at the public dharma meetings that monks like Fenyang Shanzhao and Yaoshan Weiyan had,⁸ we find that congregants would gather in groups no bigger than seven or eight and Master Zhaozhou⁹ never had more than ten monks under him. Whether then or now, it's a reminder that we call the location where a public dharma gathering takes place a "great monastery" when the people there are gathered in one mind, with clear eyes, to apply themselves in a way suitable to their times. What people have long valued in genuine religion is not its tumultuous expansion but its quiet, reliable sense of inner cohesion. This is how religions gained the public's trust and respect and helped create a sound foundation for their development.

One great master lived in a totally decrepit temple and refused to do any repairs. With broken rafters and cracks in the walls, rain and wind came right into the room. In winter, a storm would blow snow through and it would pile up on top of his head if he didn't shake it off. When his disciples saw this, they couldn't help but offer to refurbish his dwelling, but each time he refused.

"The monks of the past used to practice while sitting under a tree or on the bare ground in a cave. Even though this cabin is old, can't we just sit inside and devote ourselves to practice? Life is an ephemeral existence and we only have thirty or forty years for good practice, at best. I'm going to waste some of that precious time and energy to fix up this old house?"

All the same, students came day by day and didn't leave, gathering

like clouds. It wasn't the building they came to see. It was the master's virtue and sincere wisdom-seeking spirit they sought.

The same principle holds true in the secular world and sober minded people always try to live in modest houses when at all possible.

Why is it, then, that folks supposedly devoted to the task of spiritual cultivation and reformation want to live in lavish mansions? It's very rare for people to live in opulent houses far exceeding their means and not also have messed up lives.

Before there's a building, there's a genuine belief and practice. With the right faith and practice, in due time the building will be built.

What's at the core of all genuine religious assemblies is a pure, awakened spirit. Churches or temples without this core are nothing but mere buildings.

Chan Master Lingyou, after receiving an endorsement of his enlightenment from Master Baizhang,¹⁰ immediately returned to the deep rugged mountains of Guishan. Crafting a small hut from wood and earth with his bare hands, he lived with nothing and practiced with vigor, making friends with the birds and animals. Living on the vegetables he grew and the acorns and chestnuts he gathered, his hunger was kept at bay. He had no Buddha hall, no wealth, no followers. The only thing he could truly be said to possess was his constant practice. He spent thirty years like this.

Once his virtue became known to the world, exceptional monks gathered to build a monastery. It was only then that a simple cozy temple was founded. As you can see, before the temple was founded, there was sincere practice. These days, though you see plenty of churches and temples wherever you look, sincere practice and faith are hard to find. Compared to the past, when it comes to what we eat and wear and how we live, everything is so much more abundant and convenient. And yet, righteous and clear-eyed people are preciously rare.

When monks and nuns neglect their duties of spiritual practice and edification, when people aren't raised in families that respect humanity, their focus tends only towards the grandiose decorations of the temple

buildings alone. None of this is done for Buddhism, let alone for “truth.” You can’t help but see this all being done for nothing more than the fame or profit of those who manage these temples.

Is there really anyone who equates the true practice of Buddhism with founding temples, building pagodas, crafting statues, and making thousands of bells?

No matter how many billions of dollars you spend building and decorating a magnificent temple, this can never be the essence of religion. Even if you lived in a crumbling hut, when you practice with an enlightened spirit, that’s the only way Buddhism will blossom again in this land.

In this situation where we’ve already torn down our own inner sanctuary, is there someplace else where we can just build a new one? Even if we follow hurriedly behind Europe and the United States in trying to raise our income and living standards to their levels, the path to become an “advanced nation” will never be smooth if we fail to eradicate the absolute poverty in our own neighborhoods in our country. Religious believers who claim to want to “save the soul of man, regardless of sect,” must focus on waking from their own empty illusions of commercialism and jumboism. That’s how they can become the light and salt of our age.

Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin (1983)



Humans and Nature

Nature self-regulates; it doesn't destroy itself. Human beings, "civilized people," sully and destroy nature. Through the unrestrained industrialization and urbanization that disrupts the harmony between nature and humanity, the pure air and clean water that serve as our life source have become unspeakably polluted. Today's foolish reality is one in which we've become entranced by a massive heap of material objects, destroying with our own hands a natural bounty bestowed by heaven.

From the most ancient mists of time, nature has given without hesitation or pause in great abundance to humanity. Pure air and refreshing breezes, bright warm sunlight, natural springs and rivers, the tranquility of silence, the night sky shining with stars, the fertile soils of rice paddies, beautiful and fragrant flowers, lovely birdsong, and forests overflowing with life.

You could go on all day and still not be able to list all the benefits nature gives to us freely. This grace that nature bestows is what most of us take for granted and fail to appreciate. Even though life in this very space we are living wouldn't exist without it for even a single moment, that natural bounty is something modern people are able to stare right in the face and remain completely indifferent to.

This sort of modern person, shrewd and greedy, interested only in accumulating material objects to live in comfort, is oblivious to the cries of a nature suffering from having so much taken from her. This predatory and dominating relationship between humans and nature of taking and only more taking is untenable.

Nature is humanity's foundation, the space that gives us our source of life. Civilization is a tool we use to survive, a means. It can't become a final end unto itself.

The relationship between humans and nature needs to be restored to one between a mother and her children. It's only in an unpolluted,

undestroyed nature that we humans can allow our own original purity to emerge as we become less corrupted and contaminated. Nature is the only kind of space where damaged and wearied lives can find true respite and comfort. Mother nature, let it be remembered, is also the place where our cold bodies will be buried or our ashes scattered after we've lived our final day.

Approaching the twentieth century's end, the destruction and pollution of nature is so severe that human life itself is threatened as never before. Many of those who are most concerned about humanity's future have warned that this is as serious a problem as humans have ever faced.

In 1971, we'd already had our eyes opened by the famous *Limits to Growth* report of the Roma Club, pointing out the many problems that came along with modernization. Together with the threat of nuclear war, problems of over-population, wealth inequality and impoverishment from industrialization, the destruction of the environment was one among the many problems they warned were threatening humanity's future.

These problems, and others like them, can be said to be due to the breakdown of relationships among humans but also the destruction of the relationship between humans and nature. I mean, the unfortunate reality is that we're now at a point where, in the name of peace, we've created enough nuclear weapons to destroy the entire world some ten times over, which says about all that can be said about the ultimate deterioration of relationships between human beings. And the severity of pollution, now spread to nearly every part of this globe's land, sea, and air, is clear evidence of how massively we've messed up our relationship with nature.

The international academic conference being held in conjunction with the Seoul Olympics, a gathering that promises to advance humanity's harmony and progress, can play a meaningful role in overcoming these great challenges.

Receiving nothing in return, nature provides free of charge so many material and mental necessities indispensable to human life. Like a loving mother who gives whatever she has without hesitation to care for her child, nature gives as generously.

Receiving such gifts from nature and using them properly brings us great benefit and allows our lights to shine. But when we go overboard and use too much or use it incorrectly, we have to pay back in equal amounts for our ingratitude.

The nuclear fuel that the earth possesses was never meant to be used for intra-human slaughter or the destruction of the planet. What are we to make of this paradox, that humans have developed weapons with the capacity to wipe out all of humanity?

Rather than allowing us to live well, our overuse of fossil fuels like coal and oil have now imperiled our survival. Research shows how excessive consumption has created a greenhouse effect around the earth and the result may be excessive drought, putting livestock in danger and decimating our agricultural output.

It goes without saying that such a situation is payback and a warning for the greed and foolishness of humanity. It's a sort of retributive justice to the children who have grown too arrogant, knowing neither their own place in the world nor that benevolent grace of their Mother.

Going over is as bad as falling short; excess is as bad as lack.¹¹ The less of something the more you can love it.

As the British economist E. F. Schumacher put it, "Small is beautiful," because infinite growth is unsuited to a finite world.

Nature isn't merely this great Mother figure for us, She's our great teacher. Nature has its own distinct order. There's the order of the seasons in spring, summer, fall, and winter and the order of the harvest with sowing, growing, and reaping.

A drought becomes severe, then rain comes and it breaks. A flood sweeps through and then the rain stops and the sun comes back out. Big winds rise up to cull what's old and release what's trapped, flowing endlessly to fend off rot and decay. Darkness falls giving space to rest, so to lessen the fatigue of working through the bright day.

We humans need to learn how to adapt to natural orders such as these. That's why we look to nature to learn from, to make our own lives as natural as possible. Because what's natural is precisely what's healthy.

Nature is not a simple organism comprised of trees, water, soil, and stone. It is itself a massive life form, an eternal bosom that never dries up.

Nature isn't just the space where flowers bloom and fall, there's poetry and music there, silence and ideas there, religion is there. Let's bear in mind that it wasn't within towering halls of cement and brick that the greatest ideas and religions of human history were first created, it was within nature that they took root and blossomed.

The fact that such great thoughts and religions blossomed in forests of trees spreading their pristine branches, on the banks of rivers whose flow knows no beginning or end, and in silent deserts where the temperature rises and falls so sharply each day, has great implications for modern humans.

If we fall sick or get some disease, we can go to the hospital to get treatment, but if we go to the hospital with a worn out or diseased soul, getting better is not nearly as easy. Just like a child goes to their mother's embrace for comfort, we can also recover in the embrace of nature's bosom, listening to nature's song, accepting nature's rhythm into ourselves, and restoring our health.

Neurosis, the most common mental illness of modern people, is difficult to cure via drugs because it is a disease of civilization. These maladies can largely only be cured by adapting one's life to nature as much as possible, such that one's mental state can also function as naturally as possible.

The closer we get to the land, to the trees, plants, and water, the more one's mental state becomes naturally peaceful. Without any need to rush, immersed in a sea of life ordered by nature, we come to realize for ourselves what kind of life a human being is meant to lead.

Nature enlightens us without saying a thing. In its face, we're forced to put aside our superficial knowledge. We're forced to keep our mouths shut. That's when we're finally able to hear within silence the "language of the universe."

Within this silence, the secrets of creation and the mysteries of love emerge. From the moment a single seed is buried in the earth, its sprouts rise, leaves appear, flowers blossom, and until a fruit is borne, nature's

patience and silence is an absolute necessity. Because nature is itself a fundamental silence, any effort to recognize nature's substance must be premised upon this silence more than anything else.

We have to be able to imagine the weighty silence at the beginning of creation that existed before words. Nature only speaks through silence because this is the universe's language. We also need to grasp the fact that our loftiest ideas and great religions sprung from this silent root, not some noisy linguistic offshoot.

There's a major lesson, especially for those of us today who find it impossible to stop speaking, in the fact that the Christian Desert Fathers and the Buddhist meditation masters developed and reformed themselves within this silent language of the universe.

In the face of nature, humans have to learn the meaning of silence. In doing so, we have to realize that we too are merely one part of nature's totality.

In the Christian book of Genesis, God said this when bestowing blessings to the man and woman He had made, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Replacing "earth" with "nature" here and it makes no difference. European history, built upon the ideology of domination, is replete with tales of conquest, force, and oppression, and this fact needs no further retelling here.

But nature is neither subject to domination, nor can it be. How could humanity ever truly dominate something as massive as nature? Are humans in any way capable of dominating the driving rains of a typhoon, the droughts that leave paddies crack-ridden and reservoirs empty, or the exploding volcanoes or earthquakes that tear the earth to pieces?

It's now a familiar story to see that some adventurer "conquered" some peak in the Himalayas, but isn't this all just so much nonsense, really? Were the peaks really "conquered," these folks would have to be able to live there for a bit, no? But they can't last there for even an hour before they're crawling back down to safer climes.

Those in mass communications are better educated than to think like this, yet they persist without fail in using such ignorant expressions. It seems they're all descendants of Genesis, after all.

How arrogant is it to call this "conquest"? How ignorant to the fact that the mountain has merely accepted for a short while those willing to raise great courage and risk their lives? Most of those who come into distress on a mountain are those who are ignorant to its true nature and to their own place within it, dropping their guard and overcome by excessive greed and pride.

F. S. Smythe, a British mountaineer of the early twentieth century said in his diary, *Spirit of the Hills*.

"Nature isn't something bestowed to us, nor is it something we must train to conquer. It is a part of us, a beauty and majesty that brings all creation together. On the mountain, we cultivate enlightenment and learn the meaning of life."

That's why when a person ascends a high mountain, it's not a conquest of nature, but rather a realization of our fellowship with it.

Smythe also said: "Reaching the top isn't what mountain climbing is all about. That's just one golden thread in that day's design. Trampling on the mountain top like soldiers entering a city their comrades have already occupied is wrong. Just make sure you visit with a grateful and humble heart."

This kind of mindset is suitable not just to mountain climbing, but to our own life stories, as well. Life's purpose isn't to see what kind of lofty position we can reach. Life's purpose is found in living the life we've been given to its utmost, moment by moment.

More valuable than the peak is the work reaching it, the process. To borrow Smythe's phrase, it's not the crown, it's the kingdom, and mountain climbing's joy comes with each step as you ascend, gazing at a sky full of peaks, taking in the fragrance of the hills, and listening to the pulse of the mountain.

As for that silence at the summit, we should realize that it is the most relaxed and holy rest. As in life, having overcome so much pain and hardship, surviving a rugged world, when a person reaches their own

sunset, what is there really left to say? All you can do is silently look back upon the traces of your life.

Well then, what is it that nature really means to us? It's not just the present land, it spans our entire past, present, and future as the foundation for life. This earth that has sustained the lives of our ancestors from long before our grandfathers' grandfathers and our grandmothers' grandmothers; this soil, stained with the blood, sweat, and tears of our friends and family, where our countless souls are laid to rest, is sacred land.

This is why land shouldn't become just a means for making money. Nor should it be subject to territorial expansion. Land should only be cultivated and protected by the people who love it most.

In 1855, President Franklin Pierce demanded Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Tribe sell the land where they were living in what would become present day Washington state. Here's part of what Chief Seattle wrote to President Pierce in response:

How can you buy and sell the sky or the warmth of the earth? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and sparkle of the water, how can you buy it? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he continues his advance. His ravenous appetite will devour the earth leaving only a desert behind.

If I decide to accept your offer, I will make one condition. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts are gone, men will die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to the man.

Our God is everyone's God. His compassion is the same to whites

and Indians alike. This land is precious to Him. To harm the land is to heap contempt upon its creator. The white people will also come to pass. Continue to sully your own beds and someday you'll come to suffocate on your own waste.

When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses are tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of man, that is the end of life and the beginning of death.

When the last Indian has perished from this land and his memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people.

So if we sell you our land, love it as we've loved it. Care for it as we've cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children and love it.

Chief Seattle's letter isn't just something sent to an American president more than 130 years ago. For us today who pollute our environment and destroy nature indescribably, it would be wise to read it like the book of Revelations.

Human life can't escape the ecological cycle. Now that human actions have a direct impact on this cycle, the consequences of our behaviors are coming back to us in return. This phenomenon is the law of causation and the order of the universe.

Our thoughts must change now. Because a catastrophe like the one we face can only be overcome when humanity has a genuine internal transformation. For any fundamental solution to take place, major changes must come to the ignorant and ingrained practices of our daily lives.

The worst thing of all is mistaking our current way of life as something normal. The present regard of consumption as a virtue is something extremely recent in human history.

We have to develop new relationships between humanity and nature. Our relationship of conquest and exploitation has to become one of cooperation and coexistence.

There's an old saying, "Those who've fallen to the ground can only get up from it with the ground's help." It means that if we want to live truly human lives in healthy natural environments, it will only be by overcoming the problems we face here today in the present.

The coldhearted reality is that in our modern civilization, the interest earned by nature can no longer keep up, eating away at its accumulated capital. We can't forget that the cries of a terribly wounded Nature soon become our own sickly groans.

To achieve a more humane life, we must live more simply, using as few household goods as possible. Knowing that everything we use depends upon a portion of Earth's limited resources and requires factories, machinery, petroleum and chemical products for its production, excessive consumption can only lead to the destruction of nature and pollution of the environment.

A single pair of shoes, a person's suit, a household appliance, a piece of furniture—each one brings with it so much smoke, industrial waste, and polluted water.

The less you have, the more precious it all is. The more you have, the more the human realm withers away.

To finish, let's appreciate the communion our wise ancestors created to live in harmony with nature, looking at a poem from the sixteenth century Joseon dynasty poet Song Sun.¹²

It's ten year's and running I've been building this humble three-section hut
There's a part for me, another for the moon, and one for the cool breeze
With no room left for the mountains and rivers, I'll just leave them right
where they are

Totally Empty Abundance (1989)





Simple Humble Living

The fleetingness of time is etched inside me as I gather the magnolia leaves scattered about the garden. The thought comes to me that I too will one day sink into the earth just like these dried up leaves. Even the dark shade under the overgrown trees is fading away in the frosty wind. Over the past couple of days, the morning fog has made it look like the green-dyed mountain ridge is floating like an island on a sea of clouds.

We too can be seen to have been cast upon this world to live each of us as a single island. An island floating silently in a vast and limitless universe. Of course, this island sets its roots in a place called Earth, but each one floats by itself alone. That's why we look inside from time to time and measure our own life's worth. Autumn is a season that brings about a reflection on whether we've taken our proper share of life within the many long years that have passed.

Fall is often called the season of contemplation. Compared to spring, summer, and winter, fall no doubt helps us widen our field of reflection. Even if you're not much of a philosopher, when you have to stare down at the leaves under your feet it gets you to ponder what kind of life you've made for yourself up to this point.

This fall I've had hopes fermenting within to re-start my life. I want to live more modestly; I want to live more simply. So, I decided to drastically cull my old books. If you keep an old book for a long time, it's hard to escape the old thoughts that come with it. If you want to break free from fixed conventional views, you first have to break away from the existing value system.

What is a book? It can have methods, knowledge, and information, and even be a guide to wisdom. On the other hand, it's also a warehouse already cast of hardened thoughts and words. It's hard for new words to sprout and thoughts to stir when you're living tethered to words and thoughts that are already fixed. It's said that language can be the "house

of Being,” but it can also be a factor that undermines our creative thinking.

Without births and new beginnings, our lives gradually grow stale and get worn out. As we slowly become stuck in the inertia of everyday habits, the light and vitality of our birthright is lost. A life without light and vitality is already no different from somebody who is already dead. Our illnesses come when this very light and vitality is lacking.

At the end of the Chuseok holiday,¹³ I called for a delivery truck from the lower village and had the books transported to Yaksuam Hermitage in Seoul. The library there is well equipped with bookshelves and the spiritual community has an academic spirit, so it seemed a fitting place to cram in a few more “old thoughts and words.” No matter the object, its value can best be put to use only when it’s in a place where its light can properly shine.

I’ve already handed no small number of books over to the library in the temple below, including a complete set of the copied version of the *Korea Tripitaka*.¹⁴ However, there was nobody reading them and because of poor management, the books had grown full of mold, filling me with regret for ever having sent them. This time, I’m treating them with enough consideration that there will be no such regret.

Though it sounds rude to our elders, recently there are times when I think “Wow! Me too! Even I’m getting older.” It used to be that whenever a thought struck me, even in the middle of the night I’d jump up and attend to it immediately. One time, the bell at the end of the eaves was making too much noise in a storm. Unable to sleep, I grabbed a flashlight, climbed a ladder, and tossed it far into the woods. When the thought would cross my mind to move my desk to another place in the room, I’d proceed to try it out, place to place, all around the room without delay. It didn’t matter if it was night or day. This is how I used to act immediately on the spot whenever my mind was so inclined.

That spunky spirit has grown lazier these days and I’ve developed the bad habit of procrastination. Even though I said I would start organizing the books in the loft a long time ago, I put it off forever such that at the end of Chuseok, it was only through groans of complaint

and missing a full night's sleep that I managed to get them all cleaned up.

Procrastination is such a lazy habit. If there's something that you alone must eventually do anyway, it's always best to do it as soon as you think of it. The work should just become part of that day's share of life. Like the morning dew, procrastination leaves its mark on a pure life.

When you want to start over again and escape a daily routine that's bringing no pleasure, the first thing you need to do is to organize your possessions and relationships and put them in order. Without reflecting on and putting these possessions and relationships into their proper places, it's too easy to get tangled in their weeds and too difficult to create a genuine life.

Maybe it's not just to conform to the natural order that trees don't hesitate to shed their leaves in autumn. It may also be a giving of notice, that the old will be cast off in order to foster new life. Not getting rid of the old is the surest way to stifle the arising of new.

Our lifestyles and attitudes are directly related to how we spend our time in rest and leisure. I witnessed this directly last summer wherever I went during the vacation period. Whenever even a few people gathered, no matter whether it was a mountain valley or a beach, to a person they'd build a fire and feast on boiled or grilled meat. Then would come the inevitable game of cards. Now I understand better why the U.S. government has been so persistent in constantly browbeating us to import more of their beef.

It felt so pitiful that so many people were spending so much of their precious leisure time on eating binges and cards alone. For us to enter the ranks of developed nations in this regard still seems nothing but a big dream.

Just as humans must know how to live, so must we know how to play. Without knowing how to live, one wastes a precious life on useless things. Without knowing how to play, we miss out on perfect opportunities for healthy self-reflection and rejuvenation.

If we are not just animals but humans with the ability to think, we must give ourselves the time to do so. Contemplation is one of

life's great arts, but reflection is not something you can just earn from someone else. All you really have to do is to keep your mouth shut and turn your attention to the source and essence.

This is what Krishnamurti, a great teacher of our age, says.

“When you learn about yourself, watch yourself, watch the way you walk, how you eat, what you say, the gossip, the hate, the jealousy—if you are aware of all that in yourself, without any choice, that is part of meditation.”¹⁵

When you clearly look at your physical movements, language habits, and inner movements as they are, your mind stabilizes itself. The world of meditation is exactly what calmly settles the mind, making it clear and brilliant, without a single thought.

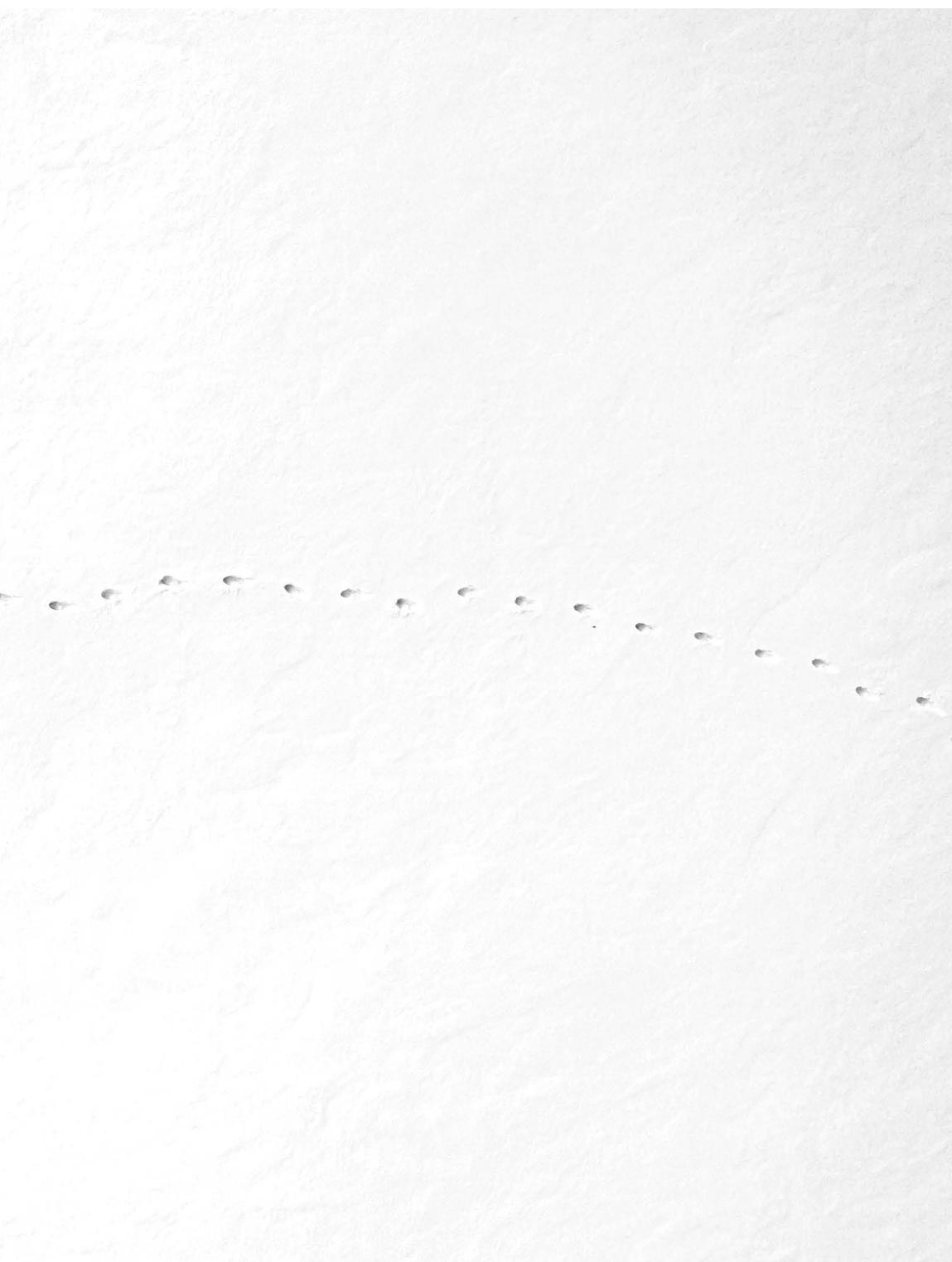
He continued, “Meditation can take place when you are sitting on a bus or walking in the woods full of light and shadows, or listening to bird song or looking at the face of your wife or child.”

Contemplation and meditation are not out of the ordinary from daily life, but another part of it. In this precious time we're given, we can't simply devote it all to eating and playing. We've got to learn how to spend at least some of this time in life's purest and most transparent state.

In order for us to realize a simpler, humbler, and more essential life, we can't neglect to look inside and thoroughly examine our own existence. As a voice of remorse for our over-consumption starts to rise from one segment of our society, it is worth thinking deeply about the meaning of a “simple, honest life.” Aren't we something that will blow away in the wind one day, just like the fallen leaves?

Standing People (1978)





Kitchen Motto

As autumn draws to a close, here at the hermitage, too, it's quite busy. When you live in a remote spot deep in the mountains, if you want to get everything done all by yourself, your two legs and both hands have to be in constant motion. Firewood needs preparing, the meditation room needs repairing, and kimchi has to get made before the cold sets in. The fact that you can be running around everywhere on these two legs and it still won't be enough is what gave rise to the phrase "Autumn monks have nine legs" (*chuseung gujok* 秋僧九足).

My body gets tired, but being able to live my own way makes it all worthwhile. The thing is, these days I don't want to fit in any more. And even if I tried to fit in, whatever gain there might have been seems to have disappeared.

Ever since I entered monastic life, I've lived in large temples with lots of other monks. I've seen and heard so much that I think I've become a bit of a nag without even realizing it. Living together in one place of course requires us to rely on each other and live in harmony, but nobody can stand nagging. And the mood among my fellow monastics these days no longer carries with it the traditional spirit it once had. Whatever the case, since I came to this place having set off on my own, it's fitting that I'm setting off on my own once again. As the Buddha said, the path of a monastic practitioner is "a solitary one, like the horn on a rhinoceros."

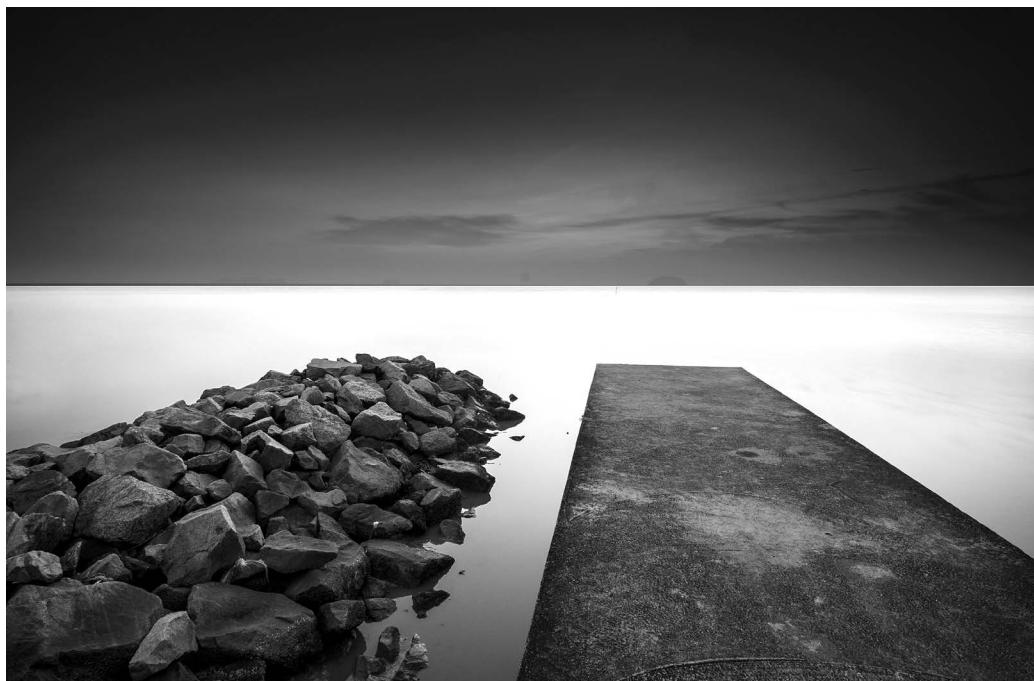
Surviving is no small thing. As anyone who cooks for themselves knows, eating is often seen as more of an annoyance than a pleasure. Since you'll get sick and weak if you don't eat, your first priority is to avoid that by filling up. If there's leftovers, you eat those just so they don't spoil. Who's going to go all out showing off your skills when you're just cooking for one? If it's good food and a comfortable life you desire, the bustling city temples have everything you want.

The first thing I built when I came to the mountain was a dinner table. When I ate inside, it was a real pain to go in and out to the kitchen all the time, but if I wanted to eat outside, I needed a table. I gathered some boards to make something that I could also use to prepare meals, and with some pieces of oak firewood, I crafted a chair. As I sat there about to eat, it reminded me of the movie *Papillon* and so I decided to give the new table that name. This guy, with his endless determination to escape, through countless attempts to free himself from a prison of injustice and oppression, sought affirmation of his own existence.

There's some writing on the front of my *Papillon* table that says, "Eating simply and plainly" and I guess that would be the motto of our kitchen at the hermitage. Though kitchen work isn't the only thing that a mountain monk should be doing "simply and plainly," at the very least I wanted to make sure I didn't turn eating into something burdensome, so I left this bit of graffiti here. Our preferences are such that when we're faced with a table full of dishes, our thoughts become scattered, and the taste lost.

My friends worry about my health when they see my "simple and plain" eating, but I know that health is about a lot more than just eating. One winter on Jirisan Mountain,¹⁶ I had a great experience going without any real food, limiting myself to salt and soy sauce, and even that, only one "meal" a day. If you eat everything you want and sleep as much as you want, how can you call yourself a monk? For those like us, the present meal alone is always reason enough for great thanks and we already feel like it's more than we deserve.

When the weather grows cold, I have less of a mind to go out into the kitchen. Worried about this, one of my *doban* at Haeinsa Temple wanted to send a young monk to cook meals for me, but because I wanted not just my eating but my living to stay simple and plain, I went against my normal ways and refused his kindness.



Getting Ready for Winter

As frost forms and ice appears along the stream, things at my cabin also grow quite busy. Whatever sweet potatoes are still left in the ground have to be dug up and a winter's worth of firewood needs to be sorted and stacked under each of the eaves. If the firewood's too long it won't fit in the stove, so you have to cut it into smaller pieces. And to make kindling, the knotty pine must also be split.

As long as there's enough firewood to last the winter, the mountain cold is nothing to fear. As for provisions, you're fine carrying some in as you need it. The iron stove that's going to work so hard all winter gets a nice wipe down with perilla oil and I have to block up all the gaps in the stove pipe, carefully wrapping silver tape around each crease.

Chilly days that make your skin tingle suit my temperament a lot better than lukewarm weather. Maybe it's because my life is full of tension. As soon as that tense feeling returns, my taste for mountain life increases.

I live alone because I can spend my time without a care in the world, without anyone's help or interruption. If there's work that needs doing, I return to my former hermitage once every three or four months and then stay for two or three days. It is true that there is some comfort in eating other people's cooking and sharing the joy of dining together with others, but I can feel my life rhythm start slackening there, so I don't stay more than three days.

When you live alone, you're constantly taking care of your life all by yourself. You have to carefully examine the ins and outs of your current surroundings. Like with your hand on the wheel when you're driving, you can't let your guard down and you've got to actively protect yourself. Without maintaining a rigorously coherent order in life, it's easy for anyone to fall way out of line and things can get really ugly.

Living things move and are always new. If you want to become

something new, don't become stuck in old ways of thought and fixed ways of being. No matter where you are, if you're too calm and settled, mold and rust sets in.

One day after I finished up working, I was washing the muddy tools in the stream when I was suddenly struck with the urge to go and find the source of this endless water. I changed my shoes, grabbed my walking stick, and headed out.

After heading upstream for nearly two hours, the flow still seemed to have no end and that's when the thought hit me.

"Aha . . . this whole world is made up of soil, water, fire, and wind. What are you going to do when you find the source of this stream?"

This body too is made up of the four elements—soil, water, fire, and wind. This world we're immersed in is also made up of soil, water, fire, and wind. Separated from these four things we can't survive. Without earth and soil, where would we live? Without water and fire, wind and air, how would we survive?

This fall, to my surprise, I learned about the grace of the soil. In the highlands, vegetables that have no commercial value are left unattended. On the path up to the cabin, there is a cabbage field where the gleanings are plenty, so I'll pick them all autumn long, making lots of soup and kimchi. Without soil, where else would these fresh vegetables grow?

The heads of cabbage almost seemed compensation for the nauseating smell of fertilizer and chemicals I endured each time I went up and down the trail. The benefits from this cabbage will continue to accrue until the snows pile up and the cold snap comes. Each fall, dark-blue gentian (*yongdam*) bloom along the damp stream bank. Its root is more bitter than a dragon (*yong*) gallbladder (*dam*) and hence the name. I have to wonder, who was it that saw this dragon? And who tasted its gallbladder? Names often have these kinds of absurdities.

Anyways, among the autumn wildflowers, the *yongdam* are really precious. But they always seem so tight-lipped. Until now, I'd never seen them in full blossom. Even in plant book illustrations, most of the sketches show them primarily with buds.

Each time I go to the stream to fetch water, there's one young plant at my feet that usually catches my eye. When we make eye-contact, I say "How've you been?" and inquire into its well-being. Though all the surrounding plants throbbed with healthy buds, this one alone was left behind, still young in its growth. One day, I whispered these words to the *yongdam*.

"I haven't seen your room yet. Might you open the door a little bit?"

The next day I went to the stream to get my water and indeed the *yongdam*'s door had opened a bit. I could see its slender white pistil. This was the first *yongdam* pistil I'd ever seen. Our little *yongdam*, as thin as it was, even when all the others had disappeared without a trace, hung around and stayed to chat with me.

The effect that eye-contact and warm concern can have on plants is already well known. Botanist Luther Burbank once said, "When I want to cultivate a plant in a really distinct way, I'll always kneel down and talk to it. Plants have more than twenty perceptual capabilities, but we fail to know any of them, simply because they differ from our own."

Last summer, an abandoned vine in the temple yard caught my eye, so I dug it up and planted it in a pot. I only recently found out that its name was *Syngonium*. At that time, there were two leaves, and then one withered away. Every day, I give it direct eye-contact and when it looked thirsty, I give it plenty to drink. In time, the vine was revived for the first time in a while, putting out new stalks and leaves. As the vines grew longer, I propped them up with sticks, nourishing the plant with water steeped in used tea leaves.

What used to be only one leaf now has more than thirty and it's grown more than two and a half feet long. Seeing the fruits of this care, I could feel the truth that plants were living creatures with feelings rooted in the universe.

Plants may give off useful energy to humans, but only sincere people can feel it. I've heard that when some American Indians sense they're losing energy, they'll go into the forest on their bare feet and lean against a pine tree to embrace and receive its energy.

It's only when we get closer to other living things that life's vitality really emerges. Let's learn from the plants the mysteries of life and how to accept their vital spirit.

Letters from the Cabin (1999)



Letter at the Start of Summer

It's been a long time since I've taken the opportunity to write a letter. I've been so out of touch with the mail I had no idea the price of stamps had risen to 110 won.¹⁷ Here in these far out reaches without a postal carrier, there's no mail to send or receive. "No news is good news they say," but even when we're not exchanging news with others, each of us lives in an internal world creating our own news along the way. No matter what kind of letter it is you might get, when the initial excitement of its arrival cools down, the urge to respond fades with it.

I've been constantly busy every day since late April. I'll work some more until tomorrow but then I'm going to take a break for the first time in a while. As you know, it's already been about a year since I started resting my bones here at the cabin. I made up my mind that I should plant a tree, at the very least, just to pay back the grace bestowed upon me by these mountains and streams in the connection we've made. I went to the forest cooperative some 30 miles away to buy seedlings and then planted them in an old field around the cabin. I planted 230 firs, 30 spruce, 100 birch, and 50 peony trees and with a few good rains, the seedlings are healthy and sprouting new leaves.

Planting these trees here on a mountain I do not own wasn't something I did in search of some future reward. I did it because planting trees is both enjoyable and good in and of itself. Throughout our lives, we gladly enjoy the benefits of trees and forests planted by good people who came before us. Given that, it seems our human duty to properly fulfill the intentions of our wise elders by planting and nurturing trees and forests of our own.

It's only after coming here to these mountains that I realized the beauty of birch trees. While it's nice to see them standing bare in the middle of winter, their soft and tiny new leaves fluttering in the wind are too lovely. In Daegwallyeong Pass, the tall birch trees all lined up

outside the fir forest windbreak create a beautiful harmony of light and form. These days, you can see the forest from the Yeongdong Expressway and now the great beauty of the birch spreading their light green leaves is apparent for all to see.

What I love more than anything about the fir trees is the verdant spirit stretching out and rising from them. These trees grow especially well in the Yeongdong area. The black bark spruce at first glance looks similar to the firs, but can't quite match their spirit. Even so, they are neat and tidy enough in their own way. I saw them when I went to the nursery and the name caught my eye, so I got a few to plant.

It was at this time that I totally rebuilt the heated floor stone. The original construction of this cabin's furnace was very uncomfortable, as you had to fling open the floorboards in the living room, get on your knees, and lie on your stomach just to put the firewood in. Stream-side here at this high altitude, there's always a swirling wind and it makes starting a fire difficult. More than once or twice my eyes have shed tears, stung by the smoke as I struggled to get a fire started. Each time, I couldn't help but curse some original unknown architect who built such a messed-up furnace as this. Since I've moved to this cabin, I don't know which I've complained about more, the horrible construction of this furnace or the crazy drivers on the highway to the mountain.

After inquiring around a bit, I hired an old worker who was said to be good at building a heated floor stone system at a remote place like mine. Moving the furnace and changing the location of the chimney, he has it set up really well now. Since the room was being renovated, I wanted to raise the height of the front door, too. From the very first time I came to this cabin, I've suffered more wounds than I can count banging my head against that low entry. You won't have to stoop so much anymore and you can go straight on in with your shoulders back and chest spread wide open.

I called a carpenter from not too far away and instructed him on the job. He wasn't particularly skilled nor did he manage to get any part of the job right in the first try. Everything was a process of repeated trial and error, making the project quite slow. Even so, he had such a kind

heart, I could hardly scold or dislike him, so, what was I to do but just pat him on the back and laugh each time something went wrong?

When the work was all done, there was a bit of lumber left, and we built a small pavilion under the plum tree. It was just a little structure like the gazebos in the farm fields, some pillars holding up a thatched roof raised from a wood platform we made with floorboards from the disassembled veranda. Nevertheless, we bestowed upon it the grand name of “Mountain Plum Pavilion.”

In the yard behind the cabin now, a dozen or so wild plum trees are in full bloom with each and every branch blazing white with flowers. They are old trees and last winter many branches and even some trunks snapped under the heavy snow. The branches aren’t very stretched out and the flowers bloom in clusters, quite different from other plum trees. Their fruit also grow much bigger than the regular plums. Under the branches of trees with blossoms like this, a name like “Mountain Plum Pavilion” was only fitting for our little structure.

The Asian pear trees blooming white here and there around this mountain are also a sight to see these days. In this region, they call it a “new pear tree,” and compared to a regular pear, they have far more blossoms. From a distance, they can be mistaken for a fringe tree, as it’s entirely decked out in ivory flowers. This is also the season when the bridal wreath spirea bloom at the foot of the mountain and at the edges of the paddies.

Some might ask how long I plan on living up here in the mountains alone in my cabin, but as I’ve said before, I only do it because I like it, not for any other purpose. Even if the plan were to live here today and leave tomorrow, I’d be doing it because that’s what I wanted to do. Isn’t life always in the eternal present? No matter the environment or situation we find ourselves in, we’re always living in this space right here, at this moment right now.

Fixing up the cabin, I learned a lot, as I was able to really appreciate the many various aspects of this person working with me. Again and again, the truth is reaffirmed that every single one of us carries inside our own particular world. From his work alone, I could figure out

whether he was a virtuous person, or somebody who was selfishly cold and calculating. I could see that he was someone who, though lacking a bit in skills and intelligence, was deeply good at heart.

I was quite moved by how diligently these young people worked from beginning to end, and came to really trust and feel an affinity for them. One man drove a small pickup that could travel on the narrow, sloping mountain path, and he often ferried up materials, always going about his business in the most refreshingly brisk manner. The other young guy was always full of smiles and energy even while digging sand and bringing up heavy stones from the stream. I felt like I could see the real core of their humanity. Working diligently in silence like this is where humanity's sincerity really blossoms.

No matter what it is you're doing, as long as it doesn't harm anybody else, you've got to give it all you have. Partial and ambiguous things create separations between people. The partial can never attain the ultimate.

I often hear from my relatives who are curious about my place of residence and want to come visit. Every time, I answer the same way, speaking frankly from my heart: "However unfortunate, if this cabin, my life's little nest, were exposed to my relatives, it would be on that very day that I'd have to pack my belongings and move deeper into the mountains." It's both helpful and of great understanding to simply let curmudgeons who want to break away from cumbersome relationships live alone in peace.

The work's still not done and I haven't had a chance to taste the Jirisan Mountain spring tea you sent from Unsang Seonwon.¹⁸ I offer this letter with gratitude unto Venerable Hyeonmuk's pure mind, elegant as the scent of the tea he sends every year without fail.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)





Notes

- 1 Tang dynasty Chan monk who, along with Xiangyan 香嚴 and others mentioned here in this text, comprise the cast of figures from the early period of Chan, from which Beopjeong and Korean Buddhism, find much influence. Both Guishan 滬山 and Xiangyan were students of the earlier Chan Master Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海, mentioned in connection with Guishan Lingyou 滬山靈祐 later in “The Poor Next Door.”
- 2 *Jin'gong myoyu* 眞空妙有.
- 3 *Hoesim* 回心.
- 4 This term became particularly famous when Beopjeong used it as the reason he called for a halt to any more works published in his name. He said he didn't wish to incur any further “word debt” in this world.
- 5 Given the later ignominy of this teacher, modern eyes might find this reference jarring. However, during the 1970s dictatorship, heavy censorship left radical reading choices few and far between. Foreign spiritual titles were an exception and Beopjeong was among those making use of these opportunities to find within them applicable theories for their time. The interconnected universe, where an injury to one is an injury to all, is also the motto of the Industrial Workers of the World. Instead of quoting a radical labor union, he quotes a spiritual figure, but while the message is no different, the authorities seemingly had less leverage to push back against him. Thus, far from being a mere “New Age” citation, it is a sophisticated and revolutionary appeal for universal solidarity against oppression.
- 6 Part of the larger genre of Mahayana *Prajnaparamita sutras*, the *Diamond Sutra* is significant for many reasons, not least of which is that it is known as the earliest dated printed book, printed during in the fifth month of 868, during the Tang dynasty, and also the first explicitly public-domain book in the world. More specifically, the sutra has been a foundational text in Chan Buddhism.
- 7 *Daodejing*, section 44.
- 8 Yaoshan Weiyan 藥山惟嚴. A Buddhist master of the Tang dynasty in the ninth century, he is frequently referenced in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏.
- 9 Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 was another monk of the ninth century Tang dynasty. Well-known as the subject of *kongan* 公案 in the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyan*

lu 碧巖錄) and the *Gateless Gate* (*Wumen guan* 無門關), particularly the *wu* 無 *kongan*.

- 10 Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 was another monk of the eighth century Tang dynasty. He is particularly important in the Korean Buddhist tradition for creating the foundational rules of monastic discipline.
- 11 Beopjeong is echoing Kongzi's *Analects* "Xian jin" 先進 here. *Gwayu bulgeup* 過猶不及.
- 12 "Sipnyeon eul gyeong hayeo" 십년을 경영하여 [Ten Years and Running].
- 13 Chuseok is the holiday of the harvest full moon in the eighth lunar month. Also known as Han'gawi.
- 14 Korean Buddhism has been at the forefront of print technology and the *Korea Tripitaka* is one example of this. Originally carved into some 80,000 woodblocks, it contains the entire Buddhist canon and was created not once, but twice during the Goryeo dynasty, owing to the burning of the originals during the Mongol invasions. The second woodblock version is currently at Haeinsa Temple. Print and digital versions are now available all over the world.
- 15 As this essay was published in 1978, Beopjeong was clearly referencing a different copy than the one where this quote can be sourced. See Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Meditations* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).
- 16 In Beopjeong's life, there were a few important mountains and Jirisan Mountain was one of them. Straddling the east and west provinces of the southern peninsula, this mountain has numerous ancient temples and small hermitages.
- 17 About 15 cents.
- 18 *Seonwon* are meditation centers located within certain Korean Buddhist temples. This *seonwon* is in Chilbulsa Temple, high on Jirisan Mountain, hence its name Unsang, or "Above the Clouds."

Chapter 4

The Life I Love Living

Musoyu

“I am a poor mendicant. My earthly possessions consist of six spinning wheels, prison dishes, a can of goat’s milk, six homespun loin-cloths and towels, and my reputation which cannot be worth much.”¹

These were Mahatma Gandhi’s words in September 1931 to the Marseilles customs officer examining his personal belongings while on the way to the second round-table conference in London. As I was reading K. Kripalani’s book of Gandhi sayings, I saw this line and was filled with shame. I knew my possessions were indeed too many, or at least far more than my current share.

The truth is, when I was first born into this world, I came without a thing. When I’ve lived out my life, and my name is struck from the earthly register, I’ll be leaving this earth empty handed as well. But as I’ve lived, I’ve accumulated my share of this and that. Of course, many of these things can be seen as daily necessities. But are they all really so indispensable that I couldn’t live without them? The more I think about it, the more things I realize I’d be fine without.

Though we accumulate things because we need them, sometimes these things cause our mind great aggravation. That’s because another aspect of possessing something is being tied down to that something. When the things we accumulate through need start binding our freedom, we can say that subject and object have traded places and we’ve become the object of possession. Therefore, though having many possessions can be a source of pride, at the same time, there is an aspect of bondage in proportion to what we possess.

Up until the summer of last year, I was taking care of two orchids and really putting all my heart into them. They were gifts sent from another monk to my room at Daraeheon when I moved here three years ago. Since I lived alone, the only living things here were just me and those kids. I sought out and read whatever I could about these guys. For

their health, I even sought out a particular fertilizer called “Hyponex.” In the summer, I’d find shade to move them into and during winter, I always raised the heat for them higher than I needed for myself.

If I had treated my parents with the same devotion when I was younger, how much praise I would have received as a filial son. As a result of this cherished care, in early spring the leaves were as pure as the new crescent moonlight and the green flowers gave off a subtle scent that made my heart flutter. Everybody who came to visit Daraeheon enjoyed these bright orchids with the same pleasure.

Last summer, during a break from the monsoon rains, I went to see Elder Master Unheo² at Bongseonsa Temple. When midday came around, the sun that had been shut out for so long by the rains suddenly shone brightly and the voices of the cicadas rang out from the forest, blending with the sound of the stream out front.

Oh no! The thought suddenly struck me. It was the sight of the orchid left out in the yard. In a moment, I switched to resenting this long-awaited shining sun. I could see the orchid leaves going limp in the hot rays and it was unbearable. I rushed back home. Just as I’d feared, the leaves had dried out in the sun. With utter and total regret, I brought over some spring water to moisten the leaves and they rejuvenated a bit. But some of its vitality seemed to have faded.

This was the moment that a very strong sense coursed through my whole body and deep into my mind. Attachment is suffering, it’s exactly true, and I’d developed a deep attachment to the orchid. I decided to let go of this attachment. Taking care of this plant, I’d been completely stuck here, bringing to a complete halt any following of the wanderer’s path and taking part in the monk’s travel season. When I left to run errands, I made sure to leave the window open a little for good circulation, and it was more than once that I had to rush back to bring the orchids in after leaving them outside. This was truly an intense attachment.

A few days later, a friend as quiet as the orchid came by for a visit, when all of sudden I thrust the plant into his chest. Only then was I freed from bondage. It’s like flying, the buoyant sense of liberation. Although I was leaving behind an “affection” I’d had for almost three

years, my mind had more a sense of ease than sadness or loss. From here on out, I pledged to throw away at least one thing a day. The orchid made me realize what *musoyu* (non-possession) really means.

In one sense, human history just feels like a history of ownership. It seems like people have fought endlessly to increase their possessions. The desire for possession has no limits and takes no holidays. It surges with a desire to always possess just one more thing. And it doesn't stop at material objects alone, it even seeks the possession of people. When another person doesn't act according to our wishes, we're willing to do unthinkably horrible things, losing our best judgment, we seek possession of others.

Greed for possessions is directly proportional to one's sense of loss or gain. This is true not only on an individual level, but in relationships between nations. Yesterday's allies oppose each other today and many nations that once hated each other are now exchanging goodwill. This is all based on relationships rooted in the gain and loss of material goods. What would happen if humankind could change from a possession (*soyu*) culture to a non-possession (*musoyu*) oriented one? Maybe the fighting would all die down. You'd never hear people fighting because somebody "won't give it to me."

Gandhi also said, "Possession seems to me to be a crime." His wish was to possess something only when everyone else who also wanted one could have it. Since this was more or less impossible, he couldn't help but feel his ownership was a crime. Sometimes, our perspective towards possession blinds us. We get so excited to the point we even lose track of who we are. But then the time comes when we have to leave it all behind, empty handed. Even this body gets thrown away and then we're promptly gone. No matter how great or many our possessions, we won't be able to make any use of them.

There's a saying that only those who give up the most can gain the most. For those of us preoccupied with material possessions, such words are precious. Because the paradoxical truth of *musoyu* is that it's only when we don't possess a thing that the entire world can be ours.

Musoyu (1976)

Unspoken Covenant

As life grows crueler and more complicated, the more entangled we become in a constant stream of laws and regulations whose names, let alone contents, we can't even remember. I can't understand how our survival now somehow depends entirely upon how many rules we have. When the sharp blade of the law comes down, it's supposed to make the world a more peaceful place. Yet, as the number of horrific and sensational crimes only seems to grow, that's clearly not the case.

Tacitus' words, that "the more corrupt the state, the more numerous the laws" are really worth savoring. We know all too well how much lawlessness goes on in the name of those countless laws. It's to the point where we can't but envy our ancestors who managed to survive without any of our laws at all.

When you're hiking in the mountains and come to an unclear fork in the trail, you'll often see a pile of stones or large branches indicating the right direction. These markings are welcome guidance to those on the path. Without speaking or leaving any words behind, everyone who has come after has been led the right way. We don't feel controlled by these signs. To the contrary, they bring us joy and gratitude. Promises can be like this as well. When they're built on a foundation of simple human faith, they're sacred.

I once heard a story from my initiating Seon master Hyobong. In the master's youth, while venturing all around, north to south, during the annual travelling season (the "rain and cloud period"), there was a hermitage where a silent covenant was kept. Located at a high altitude and far from the reach from other people, this hermitage was where meditation monks could practice during the summer season with particularly intense devotion. By October however, the snow would start and if you didn't get down the mountain by the middle of the month, you wouldn't be able to leave until the following spring.

One year when Master Hyobong arrived at the hermitage to do his summer retreat, the empty cabin was fully stocked with food and firewood and the jar buried out back was stuffed to the brim with kimchi. The master was able to spend the summer without any worries about food or supplies. When autumn came, just before coming down from the mountain he went to the village to beg for alms and get enough firewood, food, and kimchi to restock the cabin as he'd found it. Some years later, he went to the same hermitage again and though there were signs that someone had stayed there, the stocks were filled as before.

Such tales may sound corny or like an old-fashioned legend, but in those years at that hermitage, they'd successfully handed down a family tradition that had begun who knows how many years earlier.

What they had was a silent covenant, a beautiful custom, built in human faith, dependent on and trusting in one another. There was nothing compulsory about it and there were no threats of punishment. As a result, it was dependent entirely on voluntary kindheartedness. Is there anything more beautiful than a human being trusting and depending upon another? Is there any greater human tragedy than when people are unable to overcome their fear and mistrust of each other? In a community where people don't trust one another, it doesn't matter how many promises are made in public or how many reams of contracts are signed, you'll never get people to uphold this sort of silent covenant.

A while ago I was hiking on Jirisan Mountain and I came to a small hermitage nestled away at an altitude some 1,700 km above sea level. Though the room itself was tiny, inside there was a cabinet locked tight and the sight of it left me with a bitterness I couldn't shake. I can't help wondering what on earth on that solitary mountain peak could have been so precious it had to be locked up? It seems the unspoken covenant wasn't being fulfilled here.

Standing People (1978)





An Abundant Prison

The days grow dry when the wild roses blossom like clouds and the cuckoo cries pierce the forest. Yesterday at dusk I carried some spring water to pour on the vegetable garden. It pains me to just go and pluck this lettuce, curled mallow, and crown daisy I've been raising. While I'm able to quench my parched thirst not only with water but any number of beverages, how can I just sit by and pretend not to notice my thirsty plants? This morning I could already see the life that's returned to the garden. This rejuvenation is a direct response to the care that been given.

I hung up some blinds today. When your surroundings are seen through slits like this, it takes on a certain elegance. That's one of those hidden secrets about things, they often look more beautiful the more properly they're concealed. Today, of course, we prefer to reveal everything at once instead of keeping anything hidden. It might be because we're too internally weak to keep anything inside for cherishing.

When you've been living in the mountains for a long time without any knowledge of the ways of the world, it's easy to slip into a rather extreme mindset. Only when I venture back out to the city with others do I really get a sense of how the world works and at the same time, my mountain lifestyle is cast in a fresh new light.

A few days back, I went to the market in a nearby town to get some rice, beans, and supplies to fix the chimney. I also grabbed a few tarps to cover the rice stalks that will serve as firewood during the coming monsoon season. Though it's only just June, summer is already in full throttle. Folks aren't hesitating in the least to reveal as much skin as possible, arms totally exposed, pants rolled all the way up the calves, chests wide open, and nearly see-through outfits revealing undergarments to all.

This look is refreshing and cute in children, but with adults it just seems kind of unseemly. I'm not clueless to the fact that our modern age is one of bravado and ostentation, but when such excessive exposure is on the streets, not in one's own home, it goes beyond mere expression to become something vulgar and rude. Doesn't the fact that our bodies aren't covered in fur like animals seem to mean our bodies are meant to be covered with clothes? It's only in learning how to distinguish what to cover up and what to reveal that we become human.

At the intercity bus terminal, a group of people sat amidst the hustle and bustle, solemnly mesmerized before a TV, congregants at some worship service. Slaves to images, they were believers of the new religion of Televisionism.

Such a scene isn't limited to the terminal. Folks set off to the store to get something and end up camped out there in front of the idiot box. Even in the car or on a bus, everybody's heads are turned to a screen showing some game or low-brow movie. It's deplorable how we've gotten to this point.

Scholars have shown that watching TV makes a person's brain lethargic. When a brain is active, with attention focused on something, while reading, for example, beta waves appear, and when the brain decreases activity, alpha waves appear. These alpha waves seem to indicate a muddled state of passive inaction. According to clinical trials, some twenty minutes after flipping on the TV, almost every viewer displays these muddled alpha waves. This is why, should you become an adherent to Televisionism, it becomes so difficult to avoid the total loss of your own judgment and complete seduction with whatever content the broadcasters send your way.

Though crafty politicians couldn't be more grateful for such media to make their demagoguery all the more convenient, for those of us who want to live humanely, it's a terrible trap.

American philosopher Herbert Marcuse likens the era we're living in to a "luxurious prison." We're relatively well-equipped with every accessory—refrigerator, washing machine, TV, stereo, et cetera—and yet, locked inside this prison of abundance, we haven't a clue what's

actually happening.

Is it possible to escape a prison like this? Such is the dilemma we all must face.

It takes a coherent sense of order to extract yourself from the swamp of drudgery, the withered and rotten mediocrity of the habitual. In order to develop such self-discipline, you need resistance to laziness and a determination to make big decisions. You need to prune a lot of useless branches to grow a single tree, how much more so in the development of a human life?

In a world as noisy, complicated, and messed up as ours, there's nothing more essential than living a simple life. And for such a life to happen, we must look honestly inside ourselves. We ourselves must determine what we will become and what we must accomplish.

A simple lifestyle calms our mind and creates an authentic life. As with furniture and decorations, where simpler means less burdensome and annoying, so too with human relationships, where simplicity beats complexity by far and makes things much easier for everyone. The bulk of us are dominated by temporary impulses, whims, moods, and habits of inertia. We're powerless to do anything but go entirely with the flow of our surroundings. If we want to escape currents as strong as these, looking outside won't help, we must develop the new habit of clearly reflecting on ourselves.

Wanting to live simple lives, guided by our own sense of order and self-restraint, let's refrain from looking at what doesn't need looking at, quit reading what doesn't need reading, stop listening to what doesn't need hearing, and quit eating what doesn't need ingesting. As much as possible, the less you see, read, listen to, and eat, the better. This is the only way that human beings can become less worn out and the gardens of our lives less withered. Because less is indeed so much abundantly more.

The conditions for happiness never rest in how big, how many, or how grandiose something is. The answer is somewhere extremely pure and simple. We can be unbelievably happy with the tiniest things. In a simple life with a lofty soul, knowing how to live our own lives well,

though we may come upon any number of difficult circumstances, we'll always be able to make ourselves happy.

In late May, I went to Busan for business and visited a relative I hadn't seen in a long time. It couldn't have been but ten minutes of sitting together that it was already becoming a bit exhausting. After exchanging greetings, there really wasn't much we had in common to discuss and we couldn't manage to do anything beyond sharing some half-hearted small talk. Even among close friends, without common intellectual interests, conversations tend to hover around the banalities of daily life. But when daily life itself has become just another sort of empty performance, without any real core, this sort of ritual display is really exhausting.

Family dysfunction is something we hear a lot about nowadays. There are of course myriad reasons behind this, but it seems in one big sense that all of it stems from a rupture in human dialogue, in the truest sense of the word. A "human dialogue" means the mutual rejuvenation of one another through the creative living of our own individual lives. Without shared creative efforts and common intellectual interests, we can't help but end up stuck in an uncomfortable daily routine. When this happens, life's vitality disappears and cold-hearted duty is all that remains as one becomes locked in an abundant prison.

To escape an abundant prison, more than anything, we must always be awakening our consciousness. Without clear recognition of the reality of our own lives, there's no promise of any escape. Only awakened people can live up to their full potential and only awakened people never cease in their endless escape attempts, striving to improve the quality of life.

What makes a life fulfilling? It won't come from satisfying a lifetime of desires, but filling that lifetime up with meaning. If it's not filled with meaning, life is just an empty shell.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)



From the Cabin of a Slash-and-Burn Farmer

There are times I just want to disappear somewhere without a trace. I want to break free from the routine of this blank-faced, tedious, and boring routine that repeats each meaningless day more or less the same. When this aspiration to restart my life starts to kindle, I want to cast myself off like the wind. Yet every time this happens, the proper destination never comes to mind. If I go in the wrong direction, I'll just end up stuck in another rut.

Last April 19, as soon as the afternoon services at Seoul's Beomnyeonsa Temple were over, I left without telling a soul. After hearing from some close friends about a cabin in a deep and secluded mountain valley left vacant by slash-and-burn farmers, I decided it was time to go.

It was only by rushing as fast as I could that I just barely managed to make it to the cabin by dusk as the long rays of the mid-spring sun began to fade. This place was like something out of the ancient past—no door plate, no address, no electricity or means of communication whatsoever. The sound of the stream and the wind blowing from the valley seeped straight into my bones. As darkness fell, brilliant stars pulsed with light pouring forth and nightjars took shifts singing the whole night through.

After a full night's sleep, my mind was incredibly refreshed. I went to the stream and drank as much as I could. Civilization had yet to get its claws in this water so it still tasted exquisite.

Checking the cabin out for the first time, I'd only planned on taking a few days to see if it was habitable, what the surroundings were like, and then just rest for a bit. But after a good night's sleep, all I wanted to do was to lie on my back and rest some more. The next day, I went down to the market some ten miles away to get tools. Most importantly, I needed an axe and saw to make firewood. I'd already

packed in enough food to eat, so that I could go without.

I ended up spending a whole week and a half there. As seems to be my nature, when I go somewhere and cook for myself with my own hands, it really brings out the “me” in me. Though the first two or three days without electricity were a bit frustrating in the darkness, soon it was no inconvenience at all. The wonderfully mellow candle light set my mind at perfect ease. I kept wondering how many pleasures we’ve deprived ourselves of by going down the path of civilization and defining everything in terms of convenience.

In the time I spent there, the most fortunate thing to happen, and what I was most grateful for, was the fact I didn’t see so much as the shadow of another person nor come into any contact with any news that would return me to the dismal world back there. In fact, I didn’t miss a soul from the time I got here. Where I just said “shadow” above, if I’d have been more frank, I’d have said, a “human form.” Having suffered at the hands of people so much, I can’t tell you how good it was not to see a human form.

The people we really need to meet are those we miss. These are the people to whom we say, as one poet put it, “even by your side, I miss you.” One of the most important things in life is to meet someone like this, the kind of person who creates waves of longing, whether you’re by their side or far away. When you miss them and can’t be with them it casts a shadow over your life. When you meet people and there’s never any sense of longing like this, these get-togethers become mere appointments, business-like meetings, or just a casual bumping into one another. There’s no space for our souls to echo in such fleeting moments. If souls aren’t ringing and echoing each other, you might be seeing other people but you’re not really meeting each other.

While I was living in the cabin, I suffered not a single inconvenience from not reading any newspapers or hearing the news. Honestly, we’re like drug addicts, the way we fling open the newspaper and tune in to the radio each day. Looking closely at the contents of what’s being reported, there’s overwhelmingly more harm done than good. I can’t for the life of me understand why the media bangs on endlessly about every detail of

each party's presidential primary affairs. In the end, what good do such detailed reports of triviality make in our lives? We must reflect on how tainted our once clear consciousness has become because of the tyranny of a media that's pushed aside its good sense and fairness and driven people to one side only. When I went down the mountain the other day and saw a newspaper, I'll be blunt and say it all just seemed like noisy blather, little more than a pile of rubbish. I crumpled it up and tossed it out the door before it could stain my mind or body any further.

What is it that we really need to know? What kind of knowledge and how much information is truly useful in our lives? People who want to live a life according to their own conscience must know how to make this sort of cold-minded distinction.

While living on the mountain, the words of an ancient song³ often came to mind:

The sun rises, we go out and work
The sun sets, we go in to rest.
Dig a well, we drink water
Plow a field, we eat and live.
What the hell does it matter who governs that?

When politics function properly, these are the songs that spring from the mouths of the people. And speaking of politics, let me just add one more word. This year we're electing a president and there's already anxiety about what a noisy spectacle it's going to be. Needless to say, at the very last minute, regionalism will be stoked and minds will be totally lost in the search of securing just one more vote. Animosities will of course linger long after the election, allowing for the vicious cycle to be repeated endlessly.

If I were asked to choose the country's president, the first condition would be picking someone who doesn't suffer from "President's Disease." No matter the sickness, once it's reached a chronic condition, it's nearly incurable. I'd also choose somebody who favors a soft politics, not a hard sort that simply fights viciously for one side. The age of

absolute power has passed. Softness in the end is quite strong and that's why it is so persuasive. Finally, the person I'd really like to put in the seat of president of this land, and I know it's impossible, is someone wonderfully cool enough to be able to sit down and chat with the people of the country each morning and night, or if that's impossible, once or twice a week, and just make us laugh.

From very early on, you'd be hard pressed to find any laughter in the politics of this land. Bringing fear and discomfort to innocent common folk with their tight-lipped smiles, have our politicians ever calmed the people with their laughter, even once? Politics that can't bring laughter is like flowers without fragrance. It's only laughter that works through problems and brings good fortune. Politics should be left to honest and competent cabinet members and the president should have the good humor to add some vitality and relaxation to people's lives by making us laugh together.

Day and night at the cabin, the tiniest motes of dust on my soul are cleansed by the sound of the water from the stream out front. Spring arrives really late here, more than 700 meters above sea level. By the time I'd left, azaleas had only just started to blossom in waves all over the mountain.

This makes the third separate spring I've enjoyed this year. The first was on the Pacific coast in California where the bougainvillea shot up like fireworks. The second was on Jogyesan Mountain,⁴ where it started with Cornelian cherries, then azaleas, and then Sargent's cherries with their dazzling blooms. The third was here at the secluded cabin, where we're seeing what seems to be a massive blossoming of flowers, waves of dandelions and azaleas all crashing into each other.

This spring has to have been one of the most fortunate of my whole life. It's allowed me to spend all this time by myself, living as purely as I can. I've come to really know what it means to say, "the more you're alone, the more you're together," because being alone isn't something partial, it's holistic, totally untainted, innocently carefree, and absolutely unburdened. To enjoy such a blessed time here, so much fresher and more enjoyable even than my time at Buriram Hermitage,

made me utterly grateful.

When I've lived all the time I'm allotted and am ready to exit this world, if at all possible, I want to end up in a cabin like that one in the next life. In crowded temples, it's too busy to even die in peace. Funeral arrangements are hard enough already, being at a big temple would just make it all the more difficult and annoying.

Deep in this secluded mountain valley, in a cabin without door plate or address, I made a wish that in the next life I remain totally unattached and become a truly free human being, absolutely broadminded, front to back. If I want to make this wish come true, I have to live today as substantially as I can.

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)





Light and Mirrors

During my afternoon Seon, the cozy room left me sleepy when the sound of frozen snow softly falling in the bamboo forest stirred me from my lethargy. Hauling the load of firewood on my back across the mountain after lunch must have really taken a lot out of me. *Ipchun*⁵ has supposedly long since passed, but the winds are still cold as ever and the skies of the mountain valley are filled with waves of snowflakes.

Walking on the mountain path just a bit ago, I ran into Seonggong Seunim who lives in the Bijeon Hermitage.⁶ When I saw this elder monk near eighty with an A-frame of firewood on his back, I was overcome by his appearance as a simple, gentle *suhaengja*. Though now there's fortunately an attendant with him to help with meals, up until just a little while ago, the two elders there were taking care of everything with their own hands. The Bijeon is a hermitage dedicated to Buddha recitation and when prayer time comes each day, their voices ring out into the valley without fail. Though Elder Master Seonggong used to lecture scholars on the Buddhist sutras, he never gives off that impression.

He maintains his modesty, speaking impeccably with the highest level of respect even to the youngest monks. Though he's had over eighty years living on this earth, he's yet to make it to Seoul. He is the sort of monk who just radiates earthiness and benevolence. Last spring, when his eldest disciple arranged a trip for him to Jeju-do, he was like a little kid, racing ahead of his younger student up the path of Hallasan Mountain.

Over at the big temple in the Imgyeongdang Hall,⁷ the Elder Master Chuibong turned eighty-five this year. Though as a young man he studied at a clerical university in Japan and took on the post of abbot many times over the years, his constant diligence, simplicity, and asceticism are his greatest virtue, serving as an excellent model to his

juniors. There was none better than him in making clear through his own body the distinction between the goods of the temple and his own personal belongings.

Once when he was laid up with a bad cold, a fellow monk brought a single piece of ginger from the proctor's room to brew herbal medicine. When the master learned of this, he told the monk to buy ginger immediately and pay the temple back. His is a figure that casts such a clear image of private and public. When he was abbot, if there would be even a dime left over on a project, he would make pains to have it returned to the coffers. Often among the majority of those who take on monastic duties, there is a bad habit of rashly using public goods as if they were one's own, so, this master's good example can't help but serve as a major lesson to everyone. Even as he's staring down the advanced age of ninety, he never skips the morning or evening services in the Buddha hall nor any of the common meals. To those good-for-nothing monks who way too easily skip services and set up little dinner tables off on their own in the rear grounds of the temple, his is a pure standard of monastic living that they should urgently learn from and follow.

It is with great fortune and gratitude that I am able to live together on the same mountain with these elder masters. Through their exemplary lifestyles, they serve as infinite lights and mirrors to everyone around them. Because with their unwavering humility and simple asceticism, they've saved themselves and influenced others.

These elder masters hardly ever discuss things like how to do Seon, what their *hwadu* is, or what "seeing one's nature" means. All they've ever done is silently express these things through the actions of their own bodies. In the case with most monks, who care primarily about showing off what they know, it is difficult to see the virtuous humility, simplicity, pure poverty, and gentle tenderness of a *suhaengja*.

It stresses and tires the mind to have to deal with people whose haughty arrogance, self-righteousness, and obstinacy is so much worse than normal people. In the Seon tradition, we have a term called *han'gochu* and it means "worn blunted awl." It means that as the state of mind of a *suhaengja* matures, the sharpness is never revealed outside.

This sharpness, then, is an expression of immaturity.

The mature wisdom of being able to know things without being hung about what you know is precious. Being too proud about what you know or what you're doing means never being able to become a *seonjisik*, a "reliable spiritual friend." Don't the mouths of the Mahayana sutras wear themselves out saying that as long as there are concepts with the residue of perspectives, one can never be a true *suhaengja*? Intellectual knowledge and information aren't what's important to a *suhaengja*, acts of wisdom and compassion are. Because religion isn't arid theory, it's living action. Knowledge brings pride, but love fosters virtue.

We also need the exquisite skills of these "clear eyed great masters,"⁸ whose discernment and capability provide enlightenment through foolishness. Even so, the virtue of unnamed monks mentioned before, their unceasingly honest, simple, and humble lives, and the moral impact they make on their juniors may be even more precious.

People are fundamentally influenced not so much by respectable words but by actions that put those word into practice with one's own body. Saying something nice and doing it are two completely different things. When a person's actions far exceed their knowledge, that knowledge is beneficial. But when one's knowledge is revealed to be much greater than one's actions, such knowledge is useless. A true *suhaengja*, no matter what the religion, enjoys the greatest happiness in simplicity.

People like St. Francis of Assisi, these are the kinds of people who make us a bit more holy just by thinking about them. He would spend Advent in seclusion fasting before Christmas. Indeed, his asceticism was so strict he suffered from various ailments in his later years. Because olive oil was detrimental to his health, he ate food that was cooked with just a little bit of pork fat. He explained this to open a sermon he gave right near the end of the fast: "You have come here with a devoted love, thinking of me as a holy man. But I must confess in front of you all that I ate food cooked with pork oil during this fast."

What he made known to God, he did not want to hide from his

neighbors. He had no desire whatsoever to hide the presence of any pride or temptation in his soul and he would confess to his brothers and sisters immediately. He said to them, “Whether in seclusion or otherwise, I want to live as if everyone were able to see me. If you think I’m a holy man and I can’t live a holy life, I’m just a hypocrite.”

He totally rejected that kind of hypocrisy that’s so easy for *suhaengja* to fall into, where their outer life and inner life differ immensely. It is a kind of redemption, a great consolation, to serve under masters who act as lights and mirrors to us all. As long as the virtuous examples of such people continues to have an impact, no matter the state of the world, humanity will not perish nor fall into despair.

Quiet Chats in a Mountain Cabin (1983)

All Living Things Are One Life

Whenever a flower blossoms somewhere in the world, it is the universe's great vitality blooming through this flower. The dead leaves scattering in the cold wind, too, these are inhabited by the same life force that dried them out and got them swirling. When the light of a candle or lantern burns bright, it is news of the warm fire at the heart of the universe, expanding brightly through the medium of wax and wick.

When you blow out a flame, where does the fire go? It returns again to the great sea of fire. In the same way, all individual lives are branches spreading out from a single massive root of life. Though some branches may wither in certain conditions, nothing withers the root, because this root of life is the fundamental principle of the universe.

Our society has grown more desolate and savage as time has gone on. Robberies and murders happen in broad daylight, violence is liable to break out anywhere, any time. Not a single day passes peacefully and without some harm being done. It's frightening to even open the paper or turn on the news, not knowing what horrible new event has taken place.

What sort of person can kill another of their kind with their own hand? Whether for money or sudden passion, we're able to kill indiscriminately, children or elders, it doesn't matter, brutally and without compunction. Could such people really be called "human" like us?

What else but to lament how we've gotten to this point? We've become a world where humans can put no trust in fellow humans. If people can't have faith among the people they live together with, what possible trust can we place in the rest of humanity? Here we are in Korea on the threshold of \$5,000 per capita income and if we still can't live as human beings, you can't help but ask what all this economic development and democratization is for.

In the agrarian society that preceded this one now racing through

industrialization and urbanization, inhumane acts such as those we have today were unimaginable. Believing deeply in the natural order of Mother Earth, plowing, sowing, cultivating, and reaping, they didn't waste time setting their eyes upon things outside this order. Using as evidence the common-sense truth that you reap precisely what you sow, such faith cultivated in the great earth was deep and firm. Living like this allowed people to naturally grow accustomed to their proper roles in the world and the ways to live them.

There's a saying that "the further you are from the earth, the closer you are to the hospital," and it's not just your physical health this refers to, either. When we turn our back on the natural order of sowing, growing, and reaping, what else can happen but to get sick? The inhumanity of our era is a disease that comes entirely from ignoring the cosmically ordered law of cause and effect.

People think they can hit it big without breaking a sweat. It's utter fiction, total fantasy. Without sowing and growing, how's it possible to ever reap any fruit?

In our world, there's no free lunch, nothing that comes without a cost. Yet constantly there's something trying to catch our eye, shouting "free lunch!" or "no cost!" The things we take as free or without cost are really, upon deeper inspection, things we've created ourselves, reaped by ourselves, not something given or fated. Even if you know nothing else, pay close attention to the world and its undeniable order and grasp the fundamental principle of the universe in the phenomena of life and the relationship of cause and effect.

How can a person murder another like oneself? Who could do that? Under what conditions does it transpire that someone takes another's life? As conditions change, the outer appearance of life can also change radically, but ultimately, there's no way life itself can ever be extinguished. Like I said before, "life" itself is the fundamental principle of the universe.

As a result, if we kill someone, ultimately, it's like we are killing ourselves. This body is an organism composed of matter and thus it can suffer some shock and be destroyed, but there is nothing that can kill

the source of life within this body, the soul.

When innocent victims face heartless atrocities, they cannot help but bear a deep grudge in their hearts. Even if it takes every last ounce of energy, they relentlessly seek for that enemy to atone for what they've done. Such bitter resentment becomes a chain of samsara⁹ and we enter a cycle of mutual retaliation from which the passage of time provides less and less promise of ever being able to escape. This is the principle of all life, that comes before any religious theory in telling us how to live.

If we reside in dark thoughts, our lives become dark. Bad food, bad medicine, bad air, bad sound, and bad living habits create bad blood. Bad blood is bound to create bad cells which create bad bodies which create bad thoughts and then bad behavior. No matter the current state of affairs, it is we ourselves who have helped usher them in.

In our transition from a traditional agricultural society, beginning with our change from a vegetable-focused diet to a meat-focused one, and continuing with the encouragement of excessive consumption, our behavior has become indescribably more impatient, coarse, violent, and brutal.

When both governments and individuals lose their grounding as humans, becoming fixated only meeting economic demands, the chances for conflict and misfortune only escalate. Leaving aside any consideration of humanity entirely while developing society on an economic logic alone, we're now buried underneath this pile of material we've created, having brought about our own misfortune.

Trust and rely on life's universal principle, that all living things are one big life. Know that harming others leads to your own destruction and maintain your humanity without falling prey to temptation. Having a human body is no small thing and if we can't use it to help others right now, aren't we just as likely to face a chain of suffering in the next life? Won't we always be finding something unbearable, no matter where we go or what we do?

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)



The Life I Love Living

Dark clouds aching to let their snow fall have descended as a freezing air mass rises from the valley. I hurried to the hardware store in town to get a small shovel to clear the impending snow. They had tools there that you can't get anywhere else now because of the weather. I had to go and get one because I didn't have the right kind of handle to make my own.

Though the sound of the fire burning in a wood-packed fireplace is great, when you wait a bit longer, it's the sound of water boiling in the stone pot on top that really conjures a warm and cozy mood. Living in the mountains, all five senses improve, but your hearing becomes especially acute. Sometimes in the middle of the night I'm woken by the sound of wild geese flying by . . . "swa swak swae swaet swa swak swae swaet . . ."

It was like the sound of a stiffly starched collar. Hearing these wild geese in the middle of the night fly south to escape the cold felt like spirits passing through the sky, bringing my mind a perfectly bright clarity. My life appeared before me and I felt I could truly measure something like the weight of my soul.

Contemplating deeply how to spend the rest of my days, I followed the flock of geese.

I should finish the story about the snow on the way to buy my shovel.

I really love the sound of the snow pellets falling in a bamboo forest. Hearing little grains of snow knocking against the wood suddenly brought back memories of childhood, using grandmother's knee as a pillow and listening to her stories about the salt merchant. Even though it was always the exact same story, hers was that kind of great old tale that got my heart pounding fresh again every time I heard it. Isn't that exactly the quality that makes a story a "classic"?

When the snow piles up for days, the road becomes blocked and I'm

totally stuck on the deep silent mountain all alone. Such times feel like something brand new and I love sharing in the sense of deep of totality with everything in my surroundings. Coming across animal footprints in the snow, there's a simple friendly comradeship you feel as fellow mountain dwellers.

Then at night when the snow stops and the moon shows its face, I hold my breath on the boundary of that ecstasy in poet Kim Satga's poem, "Moon white, snow white, all heaven and earth white!"¹⁰ That the moon is white, and the snow is white, and the whole world is white—what else needs expressing? Nights like these make it easy to imagine an ancient poet's sensibility.

In mid-winter, I love sitting by the side of the stream and listening carefully to the water flowing under the thin layer of ice. This pure and refreshingly cold sound seeps into the marrow of my bones, like an endless source of refreshment coursing through my veins. Seeing the pussy willows budding in a layer of ice, I can't help but be humbled in the face of this mysterious power of life that never pauses for even a single moment.

May all our living neighbors be happy, may they live in peace, may they be full of joy!

One summer's day, getting all sweaty climbing up the mountain side, I rose to the crest and the sound of the wind rising in the pines rejuvenated my entire insides. It made me want to plop down and take a nap underneath one of those pines, falling asleep to the sound of the wind in its branches. This is the elegant pleasure (*pungnyu*)¹¹ of mountain life that I really enjoy. It is the sort of pure blessing that can only be savored by those who trod these mountain paths step by step with their own feet.

I am loving the forest in winter so much again. Of course, seeing the early summer brim with life and its fresh greenery sprout every day is amazing, but it doesn't quite match the bold spirit of the trees standing prominently, completely naked under the winter sky, every last one of their burdens completely cast off.

While each tree in the forest has its own characteristics, together

they comprise a total harmony. Societies that bring human beings together have something to learn from the forest's natural order. If we could glean such lessons, both our excesses and deficits might disappear.

Standing face to face with a tree, if we can manage to see a little bit of ourselves in that tree, there's much we can learn. Rambling through a winter forest, you can hear them whispering to each other. Only people who can see leaves and flowers on empty branches can understand these sounds.

On the surface, the trees seem to be deep in hibernation, but there's an endless motion towards the new spring. Just look at the buds already getting started in the snow. Do people realize when they carelessly hack down a tree like this, they're hacking away part of themselves? Trees, too, are brimming with the essential spirit of life. Love the trees and love's echo will ring in our hearts.

The sun and moon seem to reveal the mystery of all life. Just as there is nothing in the universe without both yin and yang,¹² nothing can survive without the sun and moon. It's only natural that ancient societies deified them. This is true in the Buddhist scriptures as well, where sun and moon are represented by Sunlight and Moonlight Bodhisattvas.¹³

As I've long said (and of course it's just my subjective view), the sun is best when setting and the moon is best while rising. When the sun falls under the horizon or the sea, it's gorgeous and magnificent. And the sight of the moon rising anywhere over a mountainside is perfectly lovely.

There are quite a few beautiful sunsets piled one upon the other in my memory. What comes to me right away is the scene of an elderly couple carrying a couple of little chairs from their cars and silently watching the sun set into the sea off the Pacific coast. I had been to that same spot myself to watch the sunset and on that day it had rained, so the outline of the red sun was crystal clear. At the moment it submerged into the horizon, the harmony of light spreading through the sea and sky was breathtaking.

Together with the sunset itself, the image of this elderly couple entering the twilight of their lives, ending the day by coming out to the beach to silently watch, will always be with me, reflecting the beautifully tranquil sunset of our own lives.

I've yet to see a more magnificent sunset than that which burned red in a teak forest of Sri Lanka, the "pearl of the Indian Ocean."

Though "sunset" usually refers to that time when the sky turns red after the sun descends, it can also refer to the traces of a person that remain after their passing. Living well without regrets is what makes our sunset, the traces left behind, shine beautifully.

Another thing I love is the feeling of going in the garden and walking in the dirt in my bare feet. On a summer's day when the shade of the mountain descends and I'm weeding the vegetable patch, in the sensation of the soft ground's gentle tickling of my feet, I feel the energy of the soil spreading throughout my entire body. We have to know that soil is life's foundation. Seeds are buried in the soil, they sprout and spread leaves there, they blossom and bear fruit there.

The saying "the further you are away from the soil, the closer you are to the hospital" is an unmistakable truth. The soil waits for us all. When our time is up, it is there to which we'll return. We must take to heart that the pollution of the soil weakens our own roots to the same extent.

When someone asks what I love eating, it's hard to come up with a quick answer. There's not that much I really crave. I enjoy the tea I drink in a calm and leisurely mood after tidying up all around the cabin. Oh yes, and these days I'd have to say, I've been enjoying fresh seaweed quite a bit. When you have this seaweed raw, without blanching it, but simply washing it in cold water after salting it a bit so it doesn't get soggy and then dipping it into vinegar pepper sauce, you can hear the waves and the sea even though you're deep in the mountains. The leaves of fresh seaweed are a bit bitter and the stems are chewy and sweet.

Of all the things I do each day, what I love most is sitting upright in the morning, setting my eyes on the wakening window of dawn, and concentrating my ears on the sound of silence. This time is my center of

gravity. The enjoyment of sitting under a bright window and reading an ancient text is simply indispensable. My masters and friends are inside, making sure my life never withers.

This room's gotten really cold! Better go feed the furnace.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)

Soft Beats Hard

Fall arrives and I'm re-reading some of the things I studied when I first came to the monastery. Back then, I had no idea what the deeper meanings were, having half-heartedly memorized them and gleaned only the most basic conceptual understanding. Reappraising them now while living in seclusion, they've come to have a much greater impact on me. I guess when it comes to understanding profound texts or ideas, you can only really understand them when you've reached the author's mental age. When your life circumstances are similar, you're able to empathize all the more.

Master Yaun's *Watch Yourself!*¹⁴ goes like this:

Vegetable roots and tree fruits fill my hungry belly
Pine moss hat and grass clothes cover this body
Making friends with cranes in the fields and clouds floating in the sky
Spending the rest of life in a deep mountain valley.

Body and mind entering meditative concentration are unmovable,
Sitting silently in the cabin, cutting off the constant to and fro.
In silence and tranquility, there's not a single thing.
This mind returns naturally to Buddha.

It's been a long time since I saw the moon and stars in the night sky. Tomorrow is *chubun*,¹⁵ but the dark shadows of summer still hang thickly.

It breaks my heart to see the brutal remnants of two consecutive years of typhoons. The havoc wreaked in the forest left ruins everywhere. In the face of such natural power, modern technological civilization is no match. It's brutal for this land to have to face such a disaster year after year.

The idea that the world is comprised of wind, water, earth, and fire doesn't just mean some places are blessed, it also contains the subtle meaning that some places are cursed to suffer.

After facing this last typhoon, the land has repeatedly been made keenly aware again and again of wind and water's mighty power.

I couldn't get to sleep the night after Chuseok when the typhoon raged. As the sound of rolling stones and water thundered through the whole valley and rain pounded down on the tin roof, my spirit was drenched like a scared wild beast soaked in the rain, with my eyes wide open all night.

When the day dawned, I went out and the valley was literally a waterfall. It was overflowing with terrifying strength, seemingly able to wash anything away in a flash. When I went to check out back, the furnace had almost 15 inches of water inside.

I turned on the radio, and they indeed verified a deluge of some 15 inches of heavy rain in the area overnight. We were literally helpless in the face of nature's onslaught, our hands completely tied.

How was it that something so soft and humble like water could be so fierce? Is it because when softness receives energy it becomes all that much stronger and more powerful? It seems the secret to how soft beats hard is right here.

Put another way, motherly tenderness, gentleness, and generosity are what give great comfort to so many lives. Truth be told, the fact is that the only thing able to cure our diseased modern civilization is maternal tenderness and warmth. The state of arrogant empires sinking deeper into anxiety around the world, despite their possession of nuclear weaponry and military might, is testament to this.

The lesson of soft beating the strong can be a wakeup call in each of our own lives.

Laozi made this point a long time ago: "The greatest things are like water. Though beneficial to everything, water never quarrels and it resides in the places humans detest. In this way, water is close to the Way."¹⁶

In water, there are no fixed concepts. When poured in a round

bowl it takes a round shape, when poured in a square bowl it takes a square shape. In a hot place, it turns to steam and in a cold place it turns to ice. With water, there are no self-attachments. Asserting no will of its own, it follows the will of others.

Living water never stops, it always flows. A river is continuously flowing. The water itself is the same, but it's always new. The water flowing today is the same river, but not the same water as yesterday. This is how the river is always new. While on the surface, yesterday's "me" and today's "me" look the same, in reality, they're not. Today's me is a new me. All living things are like this, always new.

Where has the water that was raging so ferociously through the valley all gone? As soon as the typhoon passed, the water was back flowing in its original shape, clear and calm. In the stream where raging waters drained, familiar rocks were washed away and strangers from upstream have rolled on in. Looking at the stream, these days I come to understand again and again the reality and power of softness.

Facing his final days, an elder master called his disciples together for one last teaching. Opening his mouth and showing it to them, he asked, "What do you see inside my mouth?"

"We see your tongue."

"What about teeth?"

"The Master's teeth have all fallen out, there's none left."

"Do you know why my tongue is still there while my teeth have all fallen out?"

"Isn't it because teeth are so hard that they fall out and a tongue is so soft that it stays right where it is?"

The master nodded his head and spoke, "That's right. Soft beats hard and in all the history of the world, that's the totality of wisdom, right there. With that, there's nothing left to teach you. Please keep this close to your heart."¹⁷

The Pleasure of Living Alone (2004)





Letters from the Cabin

Today is *haji*.¹⁸ Soon the summer retreat season will already be half over. It recently occurred to me how busy I've been. That's because it's been so long since I've been able to reclaim my quiet time of mountain seclusion. Last night, I was able to stare at the stars for the first time in a long time. I saw a firefly dizzily fly by, too.

I finally went ahead with the work of fixing up the place that's been weighing so heavily on my mind. Renovating a cabin on a secluded mountain is a very difficult and nerve-wracking task. But when the wild winds blew, there was less smoke coming out of the chimney than was filling up the furnace and it got so bad the fire wouldn't burn. The floor by the fire was like a fry pan and it was so hot you couldn't even touch it, while the far away floor was so cold and damp, if you left the house alone, it would get all moldy.

This time around, I entirely relocated the fireplace and chimney and replaced their openings. Fortunately, the fire now burns really well and the room is evenly warmed. Through that experience, the faithful workers and I learned the mysteries of the *ondol*¹⁹ room. Such genuine learning isn't achieved by theory, but is developed through personal experiences. It's only after a few rounds of failure that you come to develop a natural knack for structural principles.

This lesson refers not only to home repair, but can be applied to the whole range of human affairs. Without failure, it's difficult to open your eyes to what's deeper inside. Through failure and frustration, new paths are discovered. This is why when you look at the entire course of your life, you can see that one-time failures and frustrations were stepping stones that had to be crossed in order to bring about any leaps or advances.

I finished wallpapering a few days ago, and the room still looks really empty. I haven't brought a single thing in, no cushion, study desk,

tea set, or anything like that. I kind of like the room empty like this. It's good to have an empty space with nothing to get in the way. Rather than missing anything or feeling inconvenienced, it's been a joy. I know you can't live forever in an empty room, but I'd like to extend this special period as long as I can.

Enough about my story, I want to hear about you. I wonder how well the reconstruction is coming and how well the thatched roof has been covered.

The roof must get covered before the rainy season so that you can do the rest of the construction underneath it. If I were you, I'd have that done by now, but since it hasn't been done, you're in a bit of trouble. It's been a month since you raised the ridge beam, and for a two-room house, your progress seems delayed. Of course, I know that weather and unforeseen problems can slow things down in the field. Making sure you enjoy the work as you get it done helps ensure a good result. My worry is whether it is okay spending so much time while in the grace of our generous patrons who've given alms, especially those working as volunteers. It is important to keep in mind that if you receive too many favors, you can get sloppy and your progress can become disorganized. You should reflect on how much labor, money, time and benevolence the construction of these two-rooms is taking.

As mentioned in the writing on the ridge beam, I hope this two-room earthen walled house becomes a dwelling for genuine *suhaengja*. "Those who have dreams at night cannot enter and those who have no tongues in their mouths can stay."²⁰ People who have too many dreams at night have so many anxieties. Just as a *suhaengja* should have few possessions, their thoughts should be simple and plain. Hence, there should be no dreams at night. *Suhaengja* are people of few words. The thoughts of people who talk a lot are constantly scattered outside, allowing them no chance to ripen inside. The virtue of silence must be ingrained throughout your body. I hope these *suhaengja* come to reflect on the simplicity of this humble two room earthen abode. Consider how much has been lost in our rush into the civilization of

convenience. Look directly into the fact that as you take on and use an excess of supplies, your virtue as a *suhaengja* decreases by the moment.

I'd like to take this opportunity to convey a few requests. One, don't even think of bringing electricity into this house of *suhaengja*. When electricity is connected, appliances always follow. You shouldn't need a phone, either. Seeking convenience alone just makes people weaker. Be aware that overcoming a sense of inconvenience is precisely part of your spiritual cultivation.

Two, don't bring in plumbing. When that comes in, eating and drinking follow, and people then naturally gather. For drinking water, use a small bottle to gather from the small pond just around the bend. Don't store any other beverage in the house but tea and don't have more than three tea cups. Any more is unsuitable for the space and goes against tea's tranquil spirit.

Three, the name of this practitioner's residence, Seojeon ("Western Hall"), indicates not only the hermitage's western location relative to the main temple, but also symbolizes our membership in "The Family Tradition of the One from the West"²¹ which refers to the life of pure conduct exemplified by the Buddha and the patriarchs. This being the case, women must not be allowed to enter.

Four, anyone who dwells in the practitioner's house must get up by three in the morning and not lie down for bed before ten. Predawn services are the most important daily task in the life of a *suhaengja* and must absolutely be carried out.

My nagging's gone on and on! But, you know, these days people who nag like this are quickly disappearing. The virtues of undergoing all number of difficulties building this house will be returned to the *suhaengja* who will rely on it to make progress. I know from long ago first-hand experience that building a house is not something anyone can do.

If you follow the above requests, we'll be walking on the same path together as disciples of the Buddha, and if not, even though we call ourselves master and disciple, in truth, we'll be a million miles apart.

Finally, to bring the story to an end, I'll leave some words from the

ancients: “Reduce the words in your mouth, the drama in your mind, and the rice in your belly. With these three reductions alone, you can even become an immortal.”

Never forget that state of mind you had when you first renounced the world and left home!

Letters from the Cabin (1999)



Notes

- 1 Krishna Kripalani, *All Men Are Brothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972) chapter 1, “Autobiographical.”
- 2 Together with Master Jaun, mentioned in “Be Satisfied with Less,” Master Unheo was one of the most influential senior monks in Beopjeong’s life. Master of texts and leader of modern Korean Buddhism’s translation efforts, Unheo helped usher Beopjeong into a life of writing when such activities were frowned upon by the rest of the monastic community.
- 3 The “Jirang-ge” 擊壤歌, or “Song of Rustic Pleasure,” is one of the oldest folk tunes in Chinese history, traced back to the *Lunhung* 論衡, written by Wang Chong 王充 and published in 80 CE. The protagonist is said to be a farmer speaking to great Emperor Yao himself and thus setting a standard for good governance ever since.
- 4 Jogyesan Mountain, another of the key mountains in Beopjeong’s life, is in the southwestern province of Jeollanam-do and is where Beopjeong’s hermitage, Buriram is located, just above one of his home temples, Songgwangsa.
- 5 “Opening of spring,” in the traditional calendar, usually early February. We see here the roots of this tradition in the south of China, one of the few places in this region where *ipchun* is indeed the start of warmer temperatures.
- 6 Temple complexes often have many smaller hermitages as part of their larger campus. At Songgwangsa Temple, the Bijeon is another name for Budoam, a small hermitage near Beopjeong’s Buriram.
- 7 If you search online for Songgwangsa, one of the iconic pictures you’re likely to see is that of the Imgyeongdang Hall and its veranda jutting out mystically into the mountain stream that runs beneath it.
- 8 *Myeongan jongsa* 明眼宗師. From the quotations of Chan Master Dahui 大慧.
- 9 Buddhist philosophical term for the endless cycle of life and death. Salvation in Buddhism means precisely escape from samsara, through nirvana. That said, in Korean Buddhism, the idea that samsara and nirvana are two aspects of the same reality is key to a deep stream of thought and practice.
- 10 *Wolbaek seolbaek cheonjibaek* 月白雪自天地白. Kim Satgat was a nineteenth century minstrel, a true exemplar of the Korean *nageune*, or “vagabond.” Often called, “Korea’s first rapper,” his songs of satire and simple pleasures struck a deep

chord with the common people of the Joseon dynasty.

11 This is the “elegant pleasure” *pungnyu*. See note 7 in the “Introduction”.

12 Beopjeong’s worldview is not simply Buddhist, but part of a larger East Asian, particularly Chinese, tradition of yin/yang philosophy. The fundamental binary of yin/yang is discussed at length and with great complexity in one of the earliest Chinese classics, the *Yijing*, known in the west as the *Book of Changes*. As two aspects of a single universal power, a fundamental definition would be to say that “yin” is passive while “yang” is active.

13 Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha.

14 *Jagyeongmun*自警文, a fifteenth century text composed by Yaun Seonsa for the edification of *suhaengja* and included to this day in the Korean monastic training curriculum.

15 The sixteenth of the 24 solar seasons, it corresponds to the autumnal equinox.

16 *Daodejing*, section 8.

17 This dialogue is traced back to the *Shuoyuan* 說苑 [Garden of Stories] compiled by Liu Xiang in the first century BCE and featuring the student Laozi speaking to his master.

18 The tenth of the twenty-four traditional solar seasons, this day corresponds to the summer solstice.

19 Traditional Korean architecture features an underfloor heating system where the warmth of a fire spreads through a flue system underneath a masonry floor.

20 *Yayumongja burip* 夜有夢者 不入 *gumuseolja dangju* 口無舌者 當住. Mottos like these are written on *hanok* ridge beams during construction for good luck.

21 *Seorae gapung* 西來家風 refers to the monastic standards of the followers of the Buddha, who came from India, far to the west of Korea.

Chapter 5

Do What You Really Want to Do

The Eye of Silence

We have a saying in the Seon tradition, “teaching lessons with the eyes.” It means to convey what you need through eye contact, silently, without opening your mouth. The truth is, when people grow closer together or drift further apart, it is done through eye contact, before language. Words bring along the hassle and noise of having to explain, interpret, and add annotation, while your eyes require none of that. When you are face to face, awakenings are possible and you can see all the way into each other’s minds. That’s why in close relationships our meanings are conveyed so much better through silent eyes than noisy words.

Even so, eyes can never be more than windows. We understand and discern things in the mind, not the eyes. The eyes are where the mind’s light merely shines, that’s why we look through those windows when we want to figure out who a person really is.

More often than not, when you make eye contact with somebody these days, you feel despair more than hope. We lose our taste for life when all we see are glazed over eyes that seem to have lost the plot, eyes darting back and forth on the street in a cunning race to grab the brass ring, eyes restless and anxious about whether one’s seat is comfortable or not, and bloodthirsty eyes that look ready to kill if you cause a bother.

It’s possible to endure the cold and arrogant eyes of the rich and powerful. What’s impossible to endure are the miserable eyes of those who’ve clearly already faced much suffering and yet still lack any means of escape. Those eyes that search the sky and cast down on the ground pierce our conscience. Just look into the sad and wronged eyes of an innocent cow, snatched from its carefree life and about to face death. Those who can’t go a meal without beef are incapable of interpreting the screams for life those eyes express. Their only concern is “eating well” and “living the good life.”

In Saint Exupéry’s *Land of Men*, he talks about his experience as

a young pilot stranded in the desert after a plane crash. He walked for days through 40 degrees below zero Celsius temperatures, without food, growing weaker and lingering between life and death. Suddenly his wife's face and those of his dear friends appeared to him. As soon as he saw them, his loving wife and friends agonizing in front of a radio waiting for word of his safe return, it was their eyes that changed him. He made those sad waiting eyes the object of his rescue instead of himself. He took their happiness and sadness into his own hands. This is how he finally made it back to them. The pure eyes of his wife and friends saved his life.

These eyes, so pure, kind, and calm, and therefore, maybe even a bit sad, can be our salvation.

There was a nun I ran into by chance on a mountain path some ten years ago whose gaze to this day I still cannot forget.¹ When our eyes met, it elicited something like a shudder in me.

This was the eye of silence, accustomed to silence from many lifetimes ago. Those eyes weren't the restless eyes of a modern woman whose view is always extending outward, but the pure eyes of a serene *suhaengja*, focused on her inner self and in complete command. The eyes of a sincere *suhaengja* open inwards. This inner path is how one learns to see far beyond things and phenomena.

To this day, that eye contact still purifies and revitalizes me from time to time. The saying that "the eternal feminine carries us ever forward" are hardly empty words.

Standing People (1978)

Living My Way for a Whole Day

Wandering about for the past ten days or so and having had all my meals cooked for me, making my own food feels new again. What makes habits so bad is the inertia created when we depend on others and push our own ability to the side. People who live alone must not fall prey to this inertia. When you do, you lose your autonomy and become stuck in a swamp of lethargy. What does it mean to be alive? Asking like this is too vague. The specific contents of life include watching, listening, eating, talking, thinking, and acting. That's why whatever it is we see, hear, eat, speak, think, and do is what constitutes our true existence.

Well, if that's the case, then I'm going to take a moment to think about the kind of life I've created today. Outside is really cold and the room's grown quite chilly. I got up thirty minutes later than normal. Last night, I woke up in the middle of the night to read Heo Gyun's *Please of Living in Seclusion* again. The footnote should be outside the period.² There's so much for us to learn in the traces of our ancient elders.

We can learn whether a life is human or not by how it's lived. Sometimes when I read this book, it gets me thinking that life has to be rooted in *pungnyu*, enjoying the natural pleasure of art and culture. When I finish the morning Buddha worship, I drink two cups of cold water. Drinking cold water on an empty stomach not only moistens a dry throat, it purely cleanses all the way to the soul.

Monks are often asked the secrets to their success when it comes to their good health and the answer is drinking a lot of cold water and going on lots of walks. People often end up drinking less and less "living water," relying instead mostly on "dead water" after it's been boiled. Given that coffee and so many other beverages don't use fresh living water, for your health at least, it's not great to indulge in these.

When you are thirsty you should be drinking fresh water straight

away. People who depend on the land lose their health by relying on cars instead of walking on their own feet. Walking on our own feet is to rely on the ground and accept its energy. We have to walk in order to have wholesome thoughts rooted in the earth. Living a sound life is not possible when we become alienated from the earth.

As I'm writing this right now, I gaze out at the colored leaves fluttering in the autumn breeze. The leaves that still haven't fallen will be off the branches before long. The empty branches will again be sought out by winter's snowy vagabonds.

And what have I been listening to? Bach's "Fantasy and Fugue" at the breakfast table. Some while back, I had the occasion to visit Zurich. One of Chagall's last works is there at Fraumünster. To my incredible fortune, the day I was there I was just in time to catch them in the middle of tuning the pipe organ. When they were done, the tuner played a song. Listening to the pure sound of those pipes in that cathedral was like cleansing the grime inside.

I listened to the CD I bought that day at the cathedral as a souvenir. Though the radio-like tinny sound from this battery powered machine can't compare to the solemn vibrations of that day, the music was enough to really touch my heartstrings. On really long and boring drives, Yanni's dynamic yet mellow tunes also help relieve the fatigue I've built-up.

And what am I eating? In the morning, it's usually a piece of bread and a cup of tea. If there's a banana or yogurt available, I'll garnish the meal with one of each. For lunch and dinner, I soak mixed rice and grains ahead of time. If I have to leave and don't get back to the cabin until late, I'll lean on the simplicity and convenience of pre-made rice.

People who live alone are often like this, I think, not wanting to get too hung up about what they eat. Modern folks go to the hospital with illnesses caused by eating so much of whatever they want, even as others starve around them. Overeating is also the main cause of excessive food waste. In my experience, eating by itself will never make you healthy.

Health must be premised on pure air, fresh water, and harmonious and balanced life habits, inside and out. Don't overtax these organs that

have to last your entire life. Give them a chance to rest. Your mind is most luminous and at ease when you're slightly hungry.

Words should demand a reason to be heard. Through the silence of our closed mouths, words can be filled sufficiently with meaning. Whatever we really need to say should be short and to the point. Anything beyond that easily becomes more habitual noise.

Mountain dwellers often talk to themselves not as if they were talking to another human, but as if they were talking to the birds, trees, rocks, insects, and the clouds or wind. These situations are totally absent of worldly desires, as free and easy as the wind grazing a tree branch it passes by. The fragrance of their lives seems to permeate these sounds, so absent of worldly desire. I did something else this morning, what was it? The morning temperature was only about 2 degrees Celsius. The room was cold so I lit a fire in the kitchen and then raked a bunch of dead leaves out of the gutters at the end of the eaves. If the snow piles up there and freezes, it can't catch the water.

This is a task that always needs doing, so I have to get to it immediately whenever I notice. No matter what it is, if you put it off, you end up developing a bad habit of putting other things off. Who knows what's coming next? In that time and place, if there's work I must do, then that's my existence. Leaving the work for somebody else to do is like letting part of your life's share leak out. The wind that tidies up the dead leaves rolling about in the garden will sweep it right away.

This is what I saw, ate, thought, and did today. These things are exactly what I am right now. They bring me into existence and create my *eon*, my karma. How about you? What have you looked at, listened to, and eaten today? What words and thoughts went into what you did? These things are exactly the real you. This is your karma piling up. Just like this, moment by moment, you are the one creating you. Remember this.

The Pleasure of Living Alone (2004)





Opening the Notebook

When the end of each year comes, I go and get a New Year's notebook. In the back, I write down all the names, numbers, and addresses of family, friends, and acquaintances. Yet for some reason, over the past few years, this part of the task has become so heavy and belabored that it's only by the middle if not the end of January that I finally get it done.

Wanting to live more simply, I'm trying to be as strictly selective as possible and the number of entries decreases every year. But this winnowing doesn't just happen at year's beginning or end, with every decision made, the names are already being struck. To fend off the scattering of my senses, I clean up and clear away all the withered traces from my "inner garden" without any regret.

Last year there were twelve deletions and this year another twenty-three entries were cut. There are now way more empty spaces in my address book than filled. Of course, each space is blank when I change the book each year and some of those blanks get filled. But the number of entries is clearly way down.

The extreme simplicity of mountain life becomes clearest when it is compared to life in the busy world. That's why if anyone took a look at my entries, they'd find it filled with incredibly boring material. Seriously, had I dropped it in the road and somebody were to come upon it and look inside, they'd likely smile meekly and just want to return it right away. I know it might all seem boring to everyone else, but to me, none of the things I've recorded were boring or trivial.

Let's take a look at a few entries to see what I'm talking about.

Many of the un-blossomed buds on the plum tree were lost in the snowstorm. I'm gutted. (Feb 22)

The daffodils under the stone wall have opened their doors wide open.
(April 7)

Went to the tea fields in Boseong. The pure aroma of fresh picked tea.

Peony blooming begins. (April 30)

Grosbeak calls! (nightjars already arrived last week) Brilliant rays of May
sunshine, bright morning dew. (May 7)

Later, I wrote that on May 8, I heard the first oriole song, and then two days later, a cuckoo arrived, too. When the rainy season cleared up, the day a rainbow came out at sunset, the markets I went to during kimchi making season, what tools I got, what books I read, who I wrote and got letters from, where I gave lectures, who came to visit, when I lied down and looked at the stars. . . . Mainly a bunch of entries like this.

I've already gone through about thirty notebooks, diligently keeping track of these kinds of things over the years here on the mountain. I wanted to start my life again when I moved here, so I burned all the notebooks I had written up to that point.

It's critical to burn things up once in a while to get your life neat and tidy. Without it, the current life has no place to grow among the ruins of the past. It's not like I'm some great scholar leaving behind important records. Someday this body too will be burned.

It's like a ceremony now at the end of the year. I sit in front of the furnace and burn letters, cast photographs into flames, and throw unnecessary documents into the fire. Documents are things that only mean something in and of themselves, especially to those who want to live plainly and simply like us. There's no need to extend them over time and space. After it's all burned and gone, I feel as refreshed and relaxed as if I'd shaved my head and taken a bath. It brings a surge of motivation to begin a new life.

There's a line in the *Diamond Sutra* that says, "You can't find the mind of the past, you can't find the mind of the future, and you can't find the mind of the present."

It's like being asked to put your mind somewhere that is unfindable and unobtainable. If the mind is unfindable, it has to be absolutely emptied. It's only when totally empty that echoes resound. It's only an

emptied mind, devoid of attachments anywhere, where a spirit capable of great flight can take birth.

Things are reflected in a mirror because it's totally empty. If there were something in the middle of the mirror, nothing could be reflected. Then it couldn't be a mirror.

With good friends, there's a relationship where empty minds can interact. In fact, it has to become this kind of relationship, where we're able to reflect ourselves in each other's empty minds. If there are too many pre-conceived notions, becoming friends is impossible.

When you're able to hear the echo in your counterpart's empty mind, then it's okay even to bear your inner soul. Before you reach that point, you can just want to be friends, but you can't really be true friends.

There's something about this in Khalil Gibran's *Prophet*. "And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit."

It's incredibly inspiring when people deepen each other's spirits. Through this deepening, we can create endless energy and light together. According to formal logic, one added to one can't be anything but two. But in the creative friendship of kindred spirits, one plus one can be way more than two, it can be ten or even one hundred.

To deepen our spirits, first develop a foundation of courtesy and loyalty. On this foundation you can pour your mutually creative effort. Without this, you'll end up as common friends or passing acquaintances.

Last summer vacation, I brought some people from a family I know well up to the cabin, including one young man who was a prospective son-in-law. I can't deny I was dumbfounded when I saw the young man changing into a pajama top just because it was a little warm. Though we were all on the same level as humans and it wasn't going to create a big problem, even still, one can't help but be regarded as ill-mannered and inconsiderate when you are so eager to bare your all even before you've married into the family. They said he would be getting married soon, and this was our first meeting, so I didn't want to say anything, but after he went back down the mountain, his future brother-in-law let him

know that the closer he got to somebody the more courtesy he should be showing. Of course, it was because I'd told him to.

We shouldn't be looking for friends to fill up our empty spaces or because we can't figure out what to do with our free time. If there is no mutual courtesy between two people, no loyalty or creative effort in a relationship, then no good will can come of it to either of them. Among empty husks, things are only bound to wither. However, if we pour our constant mutual efforts into renewing a relationship day by day, we can become great friends.

“Love one another but make not a bond of love. . . . Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.” More words from Gibran.

Though I did get that New Year's notebook, I haven't made any entries yet. This time, I'm getting even more strict in limiting the radius of my life's action to a minimum. Buddhist monk Hangmyeong, who died more than fifty years ago after a life well spent on Naejangsan Mountain, recited this poem one New Year's morning.

Quit making distinctions between the new and old year.

Though it seems like the year changes because winter leaves and spring arrives

Look carefully, has the sky changed?

We live like fools in a dream.

Though this all may be true, when the year changes, it's something great when each of us can lay the foundation to start our lives anew.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)

Walking Upright

I exposed myself to the winds of the world again, going out to run some errands. The closest city to the mountain is Gwangju, and that's still a good forty miles away. As usual, the world was busy kicking up noise and dust. After taking care of my business at the post office, I stopped by the market to pick up supplies for side dishes, and some furry boots that I can wear in the snow. I also got some salve to put on my fingers for when my hands get dry and cracked from the cold. I missed my bus on the way back, so I had to take a different one that let me off mid-route, leaving me to hike the rest of the ten miles on foot.

Walking down these paths between the empty rice paddies of early winter, my head was cleared and my spirits rejuvenated from the torpor of the bus ride. Walking is so liberatory and autonomous! Loping along, taking in the rays of the sun with your whole body, breathing in fresh air to your heart's content and limbs swinging with a gentle joy, is a wonderfully pleasurable experience. Walking gets me around without depending on anything or anyone but my own power.

If I'm really into it, I'll even find myself whistling and when I reach a scenic peak I'll pause my steps for a bit and cleanse my eyes with the view. It's no problem having no travelling companions. If you aren't the right match with your fellow traveler, far from being a boon, it's a real burden. Even though it can get a bit lonely, that's the burden of being a vagabond. When you're walking alone, it's great to be able to get totally lost in your thoughts. You can reflect on the traces of your past and figure out what to do with your life in the time you have left.

I might be wrong, but wasn't it walking that helped spur the birth of human thought? Stuck in one spot, it's easy for our thoughts to go in circles or get stuck, but when walking, hindrances disappear, things open up, and their depth and weight can increase. Considering the fact that great philosophers and artists like Kant and Beethoven loved

walking, it's likely because it provided great aid in awakening their creativity.

At some point, though, we started losing this. With the development of cars as our means of transportation, our confident swagger was lost and we deprived ourselves of that pleasure enjoyed only by mature human beings who stride upright. As a result, we face the slow surrender of our freedom of thought. You can't ease your nerves on a crowded bus nor do clear thoughts come easy. You're more likely to end up getting pushed around by bodies with names unknown.

And because of the loudspeaker the driver and guide conspire to play incessantly on the road, we have to empty our brains. Complaints about the poisonous exhaust belched out of the busses are dismissed as mere nitpicking, but is this really what "convenient transportation" looks like? As convenient as it may be, to the same extent something precious is being lost.

As I walked those ten miles, as happy as I was to find some space on this earth for me to lean on, it came to me how bad it is that I've pushed aside so many birds, animals, and insects from their own native migratory paths. Isn't each and every one of them also diligently searching for their own space in life to call their own?

It's really fortunate and I'm grateful that I missed the bus and had to walk today. Taking my own road on my own feet, I was able to "walk upright" for the first time in a while.

It makes me think of these words I once read: "When modern people met the automobile, it was love at first sight followed quickly by marriage. And that's why they'll never be able to return to the land of idyll."

Standing People (1978)



Even When You Are by My Side

In the morning, fog rises between the bamboo forests and in the afternoon there's a gentle drizzle. Listening to the raindrops falling on the forest for the first time in a long time, my inner garden feels like it's being watered, too. From some branch, a green frog gives out a boisterous roar, "ggeul ggeul ggeul!"

I lit a fire in the fireplace then went inside for a cup of tea. The taste of the tea you drink while listening to the sound of autumn rain is a particular delicacy.

I opened up a collection of poems that I had requested be delivered by hand from a bookstore in Seoul and read them out loud.

In water,
There's not only water.
In the sky,
It's not sky alone that's there,
And in me
There's not just me alone.

There inside of me is you,
Shaking me up there inside is you,
Flowing like water and sky,
In my deepest place
You, meeting me in my secret dream,
Even when you're right beside me
I miss you.

This is from Ryu Shiva's collection of poetry, *Even When You Are Beside Me I Miss You*. It doesn't seem to need further interpretation. Whoever reads it with an affectionate whisper will understand and feel

it well enough.

You can't properly feel a poem's inspiration with your eyes alone. It's only when you read it aloud and sense its rhythm that you really perceive a poem's inner meaning.

It's true. Water doesn't just have water inside it. Whether it's stagnant or flowing, there are so many things all together inside. In the empty sky as well, birds fly, the sun and moon rise and fall, and all the stars come out. The wind blows, clouds go by, rain and dew well up.

It's the same inside me.

There's not just me alone. Even though you can't see or touch them, there are the many entangled threads of countless relationships. Some threads fill my life with comfort and purity, others make life dark and boring, some make us angry.

Who's the one playing the protagonist in me? In the end, who is it governing me, shaking me to my core? Who's this "I," this "me"?

According to each person, this can be a God or Buddha nature or the aspiration for enlightenment (*borism*).³ For Seon *suhaengja*, this topic is another one of the spiritual riddles we pursue without pause. If you're someone who's fallen entirely in love, this can be a lover who never leaves the inside of your heart, day or night.

They flow deep in my heart, then, like water and sky, becoming one with my secret dreams. People who have someone about whom they can say they miss "even when they're by my side," really root out the meaning of life in that longing, and they allow themselves to enjoy a blossoming flower-like life.

Do you have a "you" like this in your life, who you miss even when they're right by your side? People who have this kind of "you" live a blessed life. And in those hearts that have never had such a "you," you'll have to search for this one of life's mysteries on your own, maybe by reading this kind of poem habitually.

As a bunch of people gathered inside debating the stars

I went out and watched a single bug rustling in the grass as it passed by.

Stars shone in the eyes of the jet-black bug.

To show the others,
I brought the bug back into the room.
But all of a sudden, the stars were gone.
The only thing in the bug's eyes were reflections of the lights in the room.
I brought the bug back to the grass.
All at once, the stars began to sparkle on its body again.

This is another poem from the same collection called, “The Bug’s Stars.” It’s a great poem. There’s wonderful life sense here, symbolic of so much. If you are a clear-eyed, deep-thinking person, anyone can experience these mysteries in their daily lives. Poets expose this secret through their daily life experience, showing the existence where truth and reality exist.

From all quarters, we hear the teachings of all kinds of people. Every meeting overflows with the same noise, people crying out to know “What is religion?” “What is enlightenment?” “What is the world of Seon really like?”

But if you listen carefully, you can clearly hear how barren, empty, and abstract these words sound. Is there anybody who has become enlightened by proclaiming how enlightened they are?

When a flower’s full of honey, it doesn’t have to shout for the bees, they’ll find it on their own.

Deceiving oneself, deceiving others, deceiving the world, and deceiving the Buddha and the patriarchs like this is regarded as one of the most baneful deeds in the precepts of the Buddhist order and this “big lie” is grounds for expulsion from the sangha. How is someone who can’t even come to a genuine understanding of life ever going to be able to understand the world of enlightenment?

Even if you sit in a room and hear a story about stars, you can’t really see the stars. You can only learn the mysteries of the universe when you are outside face to face with the stars, seeing them shining like jewels in the night sky with your own eyes.

Reading good poetry seems to purify my blood and gives me rhythm in life. Poetry can take everyday expressions and turn them into

something incredibly simple and sweet.

“Even when you’re right by my side, I miss you.”

This fall, such a “longing for you” is something we all need to find.

Throwing Away and Leaving Behind (1993)

Two Faces Emerge

I spend the majority of summer on the porch. Except for when I sleep, I'm almost never in my room. Under a cramped ceiling surrounded by four walls is no way to spend a summer.

Living alone here in the cabin with no worries of other people's gaze, I've no need for formal dress. My body and mind are free as can be as I go about in my bare feet and underwear. We were born into this world totally uncovered. It's when we're living together and conscious of the eyes of others upon us that we had to cover up.

When I put on my socks and formal wear again to head down the mountain, I feel frustrated the entire time. It's like the flesh of my entire body is suffocating. As soon as I get back to the cabin, everything comes off immediately and it's like I've never felt so free. Our bodies and minds clearly sense the distinction between civilization and nature.

I'm still not giving up on my dream. Someday in the future, I want to build a house somewhere with pure water and beautiful mountains. Just the minimum of space for a person to live. Soil, wood, grass, stone, and paper alone will be sufficient building materials. Constructing earthen walls, building an adobe house, with one section for the kitchen, one for my room, and one for the porch, there would be nothing else to wish for. The roof can be covered in thatched silver grass, rice straw, or dwarf bamboo. For the outhouse, I'll just build another little adobe hut a suitable distance away.

The room will have an *ondol* floor and the walls and ceiling will be plastered in the conventional way with some of the traditional paper made from mulberry bark by Yeongdam Seunim at Jiseonam Hermitage. The porch needs to be bright, with a wide opening window that lets the wind and moonlight come and go as they please. Even though it's an earthen home, the ceiling needs to be high. A high ceiling is the only way to keep the indoor air pure. The room will of course

also be bright with a big window. Under the window will be a small table with the “four treasures of study,”⁴ brush, ink, paper, and ink stone, along with a few books, and a cushion. Without any decorations hanging on them, the totally empty walls can serve as an infinite spiritual space.

If possible, the porch should be the traditional parquet style that really highlights the elegance of both the wood and the porch. Plop a wooden chair there at the end and when I’m bored, I’ll read a book and listen to the breeze.

The kitchen will have a wood-burning fireplace with a small fixed iron pot for cooking. Blocked on one side with a wall, I want to keep the kitchen simple. A bamboo gutter will channel rain water away, so that even on a rainy day there won’t be anything to worry about.

Ah. . . . I dream like this. And though I can’t know whether I’ll ever achieve this dream, in this life or the next, even if it’s just wishful thinking, right now I’m happily refreshed.

Ever since living at Buriram Hermitage, I’ve missed wide open porches, and then when I saw the porch at Bowon Kiln in Gonjiam-ri, I realized again just how wonderful it is to have a porch in your living space. We meet there once every two months. The attendees are primarily members of the Paris Gilsangsa Temple⁵ society and their membership fees are really just a pretext to make donations, so I come to offer lectures providing teachings on the sutras.

Set around the circumference of the porch are porcelain jars made by the owner of this place, Kim Kee-Chul. Lotus petaled ceramics on the floor only add to the scene’s serenity. Given how incredibly much more pure, beautiful, and mature in appearance these human-made ceramics are than the actual humans of today, we’re forced to reflect on how we’ve gotten to where we now stand. I’d like to clarify that this porch here is precisely the one that gave birth to *Flowers Bloom in Soil*, the book that nature lovers like us have been passionately reading quietly amongst ourselves.

Yellow patrinias are blooming around the cabin like last year. Fluttering in the mountain breeze, these patrinias carry the breath of

fall. Before the flower blooms, it looks like a millet plant, but when it starts blooming, it's like the Milky Way in the night sky. If you look through the magnifying glass to see the shape of the flower in more detail, you will think that each flower, though small, is a universe. With flowers too, the tiny ones seem more beautiful and lovable.

There are times when I'm here at the cabin and suddenly the faces of two monks come to mind. During my nearly twenty years of living on Jogyesan Mountain, I've had innumerable contacts with so many monks. From great masters making claims to having awakened to something, to the freshest enlisted novices, I spent not a few seasons together with monks big and small on that mountain, and in the end they're mainly an abstract crowd of faces. But among that crowd, two faces clearly emerge, because of how deep the impression their lifestyles left on me.

One of these monk's name is Hyedam.

He's over fifty by now. We spent ten years together in the *seonwon* at Songgwangsa Temple and his purity and diligence seemed to share no relation to his physical age. He is a monk who knows beauty and has great inquisitive power. He enjoyed wearing worn out clothes all year round and after his official duties were finished, he'd love to go weed in the garden, cutting the grass by himself with a sickle. He'd get so intoxicated with the scent of grass, he'd even come up regularly to cut our grass at Buriram.

He carried a magnifying glass in his ragged outfit to search out every bit of beauty from the humble grass flowers. He liked to tread the ground barefoot and was almost always barefoot when he worked. The hands of this monk, who loved working on his own without anybody needing to tell him to do so, were rough as a tree stump, likely similar to those of "Foolish Ivan" in Tolstoy's novel. Hyedam also loved the breaking dawn, so he never turned his lights on during morning Seon. Sitting in the dark and watching the morning gradually brighten around him, he gave daybreak its full devotion.

As for possessions, he literally had almost nothing. He was a genuine practitioner of non-possession (*musoyu suhaengja*). He had a

single set of ragged clothes and a rucksack. Though he was crazy about Rajneesh, he didn't have any books. Now we don't know where or how he lives, what fires he's got burning in his life. When I'm cutting weeds in the garden or fields, I'll think of Hyedam Seunim. Though in the rank of the sangha he's officially my junior, he holds a special place in my heart as an exceptional *doban*.

Another face is Hwangseon Seunim's.

Of all the countless *suhaengja* I've met in my life, he's the purest. He's into his forties by now. During his time at Songgwangsa Temple, he performed the thousand day prayer service in the Gwaneumjeon Hall⁶ twice without a hitch. I'm sure some of you know this, but if you pray for a long time, it's easy to fall into a kind of inertia. But with Hwangseon, from the very start to the very end, his practice was exactly the same. On top of it all, during these prayer sessions he wouldn't take a single step outside of the temple grounds. The furthest he ever went was climbing the mountain up here to Buriram for a cup of tea once in a while.

Hwangseon Seunim loved flowers, so he planted some in the barren garden of the Doseongdang Dormitory where the elder monks used to live. Now they always bloom there. His room was nearly empty, with a single cushion in the middle, a small mantle clock above the threshold, and a small vase with a single flower.

His inquisitive power was strong, so when we had free time from prayer, he was often reading. And he really loved the color black, so everything he had, from his rubber shoes, to his tea tray and cup holders, and even his underwear, were all dyed jet black. He had his own tools, too, which he used to make things for daily life that he could use and share with others, like his tea trays. But since the corners were a bit rough, people like me would use them only after sanding off the corners and polishing them up a bit. He said it was good to keep the corners sharp because it created a healthy sense of alertness.

On the dawn of the day he left Jogyesan Mountain, he came up to Buriram carrying the ceramic pot and pedestal from the front of his room. The pedestal at the base of the big bay tree out front is the one he left.

From time to time, I think of these two and wonder about their whereabouts and how they're doing. They are probably living in the middle of some mountain, I'd guess. These two are the kind of *doban* I really miss.

The Forest the Birds Have All Left Is So Lonely (1996)





Do What You Really Want to Do

I've thought I might have become a carpenter if I hadn't become a monk. Having your own tools to toy around with as you learn how to make things to use in your daily life seems like a real joy. The process of everything coming together one by one would be so enjoyable.

A few days ago, I made a little rake to clean out the ashes in the fireplace. I'd already fixed the old one once before, but it broke again. I sawed a board, found a little handle from the firewood pile, trimmed it nicely, and nailed it together. Putting it to the test, after raking out the ashes, the flues opened wide up and the furnace was nice and clean. There shouldn't be anything getting in the way of the fire anymore.

They don't even sell things like this rake in the market, and even if they did, it'd never be as fun to use as the one I made myself.

The chair I made when I first came to Buriram is still standing unscathed some twenty years later. I made it from a couple of pieces of oak firewood I got from the pile and nailed together, side to side. When the nails grew loose from use, I'd pound them back in. I made a small dinner table back then too, but by now the hermitage head has changed hands so many times, it's been lost somewhere.

When you're living in the mountains and limited by the wood you've got, you can't help but make things that differ a bit from your ideal size and shape. I picked out an old board of chestnut wood gathering dust in an empty corner of the big temple, sawed it down to size, planed it smooth, and made a narrow writing table that is still in use, playing a vital role in the big room of the hermitage.

Though there's no easy comparison to make between the role of monk and that of carpenter, speaking open and honestly, I'd have to say that at least in terms of the creative process, the work of carpenters far exceeds that of monks. A monk's work is dedicated to creating harmony between people, and given all the games people play, that means lots of

talk and lots of problems.

People should be able to get by in life doing a job that they really want to do. By their own labor, they should be able to experience the joy of life and display their potential.

There are all kinds of jobs in the world. But how many people are doing something they really enjoy? The vast majority aren't doing something they love or want to do, they're just doing it to survive, to make money, and support a family. That's why so many people carry no great attachment to their own work or have any sense of responsibility for it, either.

When this happens, people can't help but inevitably grow unfaithful, undependable, and detached from their jobs. If a person has a job but takes no interest in it, then the work and the person can never become one. When there's interest in what you do and a sense of responsibility, work becomes the process through which you can become human.

With eyes for nothing else, dedicated always on one thing alone, artisans put their entire lives into their work. Never distracted by questions of remuneration, they craft meaning and joy in their lives through the entirety of work they do.

At the age of 55 or 60, people are asked to stop work and enjoy retirement. What's left then?

Work has a retirement age, life does not. If you have interests, a sense of responsibility, and stay busy, you always have a role to play. If life did have a retirement age, that would be the precise moment when one's creativity and effort to explore would end. That'd be the same as death.

Tamed by a lifestyle focused on the external, we lose our autonomous ability to improve and deepen our own lives. Without taking an interest or putting meaning in what we do, we're the same as machines, wearing down day-by-day. The only people who are really able to enjoy the pleasure of work are those who have something they can pour their lives into, something to devote their perseverance, enthusiasm, and sincerity.

Here's a story some might have heard. There was a certain old lord of a manor who was out on a walk and saw his young gardener diligently working up a sweat. As he stopped for a closer look, the lord saw how everything was very beautifully taken care of, down to the last detail. To top it off, the young gardener was going so far as to carve delicate flowers onto the wooden pots of all of his plants. Taking this all in, the lord questioned the young gardener with great admiration: "You're not getting paid any extra for carving those flowers so why are you putting so much effort into this?"

The young gardener wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirt and answered: "I love this garden very much. When I finish my duties, I use my extra time to carve flowers into these wooden pots to make the place more beautiful. This kind of work is endlessly pleasurable to me."

After hearing this, the lord thought the young gardener so special and dexterous that he commanded him to study sculpture. After years of studying, the young man finally hit it big. This young gardener was none other than the great sculptor, architect, and painter of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo.

He created beauty with passion and pleasure in the work he did, regardless of the wages. In the process of beautifully carving flowers onto wooden flower pots, the flowers of the gardener's own life were able to bloom gloriously.

When looked at from the eyes of your average merciless and cynical person on the street today, the sort that take their tools and run off when there's only a few more minutes of work to do, they'd look at this young gardener as a simpleton, a total fool. The kind of people willing to break a sweat and take on a sense of responsibility in their work are rare and precious in today's society.

Find what you really want to do.

Pour your full spirit into it.

Then, let the flowers of your life blossom radiantly.

Letters from the Cabin (1999)



Stories from the Forest

It's been foggy since morning. The heads of the bamboo trees hang low and the evening primrose that bloomed last night are all soaked to the skin. On days like this, neither the ferocious red-cheeked myna birds cry, nor do the sounds of the golden orioles, the yellow billed grosbeaks, the cuckoos, magpies, firebirds and bush warblers come but every great now and then.

Yesterday at dusk, it looked like it was going to rain, so I gathered up a bit of firewood and kindling and now my body's all stiff. Today is the day we're supposed to shave our heads and bathe at the temple. I really wanted to make it down and take a hot bath, but when I thought about going all the way there and then climbing all the way back up, and how wet my clothes would be from all the dew on the trail, and then how sweaty it would make me, I no longer had the urge. I'll probably try boiling some water and pouring it over myself in the outhouse.

Living in the woods, the weather has a major effect. When snow fills the sky, your mood is just as fresh, and life is one great pleasure. But on rainy days when the wind howls wickedly, your entire mind, body, and soul grow heavy and dark. The birds and beasts of the forests are just the same. As fellow sentient beings with emotions, humans and wild animals aren't all that far apart. Still, though we can sometimes grow close and share mutual affection, as our meetings grow more infrequent, the bond in the relationship weakens and is forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind.

Something interesting happened a few days ago. Almost without exception, I'm out to the kitchen at six in the morning to prepare the dawn meal. But on that day I was a bit delayed finishing a few more pages of translation work. It was half past six when someone started knocking on the shutters. Wondering what sort of rascal was coming by to see me so early in the morning, I went to the porch and as I opened

the shutter, the little rascal revealed itself as a squirrel hopping out and bounding away.

Because I'd been opening the door at the same time every morning, when I was a little late, my forest family member, the squirrel, knocked on the door wondering what was going on. Was she perhaps paying back for the rice, wheat, and beans she'd eaten after squirreling into the house through the chimney's ventilation shaft? Creatures as smart and adorable as these are sold for fur by my countrymen blinded by a desire to acquire foreign currency.

When the day's work has totally tired me out and I fall into a really deep sleep, there are times I'm late for prayers. In such cases, I'm usually wakened from my sleep by the sound of someone calling, "*seunim*." It's an invisible but distinctly audible sound. Maybe it's the sound of the guardian angel always by our side, a kind of alter ego following us like a shadow. That's the thing about a life that has no order or has grown tedious, you can't hear this voice any more. It's only when your mind is clear and your conscience is clean that you're able to hear the sound of your alter ego.

Cock pheasants sometimes make a big racket when they start crowing. It usually means someone is coming up the mountain and sure enough, every time I go out to look, someone's there. Speaking of the crowing cocks, I have to tell a pheasant story.

In the winter, the pickings aren't easy and many of the pheasants gather in the garden to saunter about and pick for scraps. At first, even though I'd put some food out for them and everything, when they'd catch as much as a sight of me, they'd head off immediately. Only after I'd taken full leave would they come back to stay and eat. They didn't seem to trust humans at all.

Bit by bit though, they grew fonder, and the hens would even come peck the ground by my feet and eat at ease. The cocks on the other hand only stood and glared. Now and then when I had to leave for a few days, the whole bevy of hens all gathered around me when I returned. Once you've reached this point in a relationship, everything else in life kind of gets put to the side and feeding the kids becomes the first priority.

When I didn't see the pheasants for a few days, I'd really wonder. Maybe they were nabbed by a hawk or hunted by some wild animal. It'd been some time since I'd seen either cock or hen and then a few days ago, I see five or six pheasant chicks coming out of the forest together. I hadn't seen them because they'd been nesting their eggs! In summer, there is so much to eat in the forest they don't need to come by the garden so often. Sometimes, there's only the cries of the cocks and nothing more.

In the forest, just as in the city, the heartless law of the jungle takes hold. When that happens, the birds' cries get extremely urgent. One day, as the sun went down and dusk descended, I was cutting the grass in the vegetable garden when the birds by the well started chirping urgently. Wondering what was up, I headed over with hoe in hand to have a look when a hawk was looking to snatch a few.

"Hey you! Get outta there!" I shouted and the hawk took off. A squirrel who'd been watching all of this was sitting on a branch and came down. He'd been chirping, doing his part to help out in this neighborhood emergency. Slashing their tails back and forth and chirping away, they rang their shrill cries in solidarity.

The mist turned into a heavy rain yesterday and a fog hung below in the valley. Even in this downpour, a new bud on the magnolia blossomed. In my opinion, this flower's fragrance is the cleanest, sweetest, and most elegant. Every time I see a flower leaf holding up the stamen like an umbrella, I grow solemn in the face of life's mystery. Seeing the ecology of these flowers, how once they're determined to bloom, they surge ahead come rain or storm, I realize we lazy humans have much to learn.

Wasps are building a nest above the kitchen door. I saw it in the morning and it's already the size of a small pumpkin. It came to me then that I should have gotten rid of it when I'd first seen it about a week ago, before it grew any bigger.

The year before last, a wasp stung me several times and it happened to a bunch of visitors as well. Having disrespected and stung the owner of the house on which they'd built their own home, their disgrace

brought their dwelling down in spite. Yeah, then what happened? The homeless wasps wandered around the house for days and didn't know how to leave. The sight was so pitiful, my heart ached. Worried about the annoying buzz and the high likelihood of getting stung again, I'd intended to get rid of this new nest early, but then I saw how hard they were working and yesterday my mind shifted. So, I offered the wasps these words, "Hey wasps, promise me something. If you don't sting me or any of the visitors, I'm fine with you building your house here. But if it comes to pass that the owner or even one of the visitors gets stung like last time around, you'll be evicted immediately that very day. Are we good?"

Even though we don't speak each other's languages, if they never understood what I said, all beings have Buddha nature, and I believe the meaning was conveyed. With the terms of the promise having been put all the way into print, I'll be held accountable to these words until the end.

Ah! Now, let's talk about the rabbits. It starts with the one trespassing into the kale garden every night, and me trying, and failing, to stop her by lighting the lantern and leaving the radio on. It was useless! Ashamed to be quarreling with an animal over food, I just gave up.

One day when the rainy season began, a worker from the big temple came up and planted kale seedlings in the pouring rain. This year, I put a net up around the perimeter after starting from seeds in the spring. But when the leaves grew big enough to eat, the rabbits crawled under the net at night while I slept, tearing it up and eating the kale while they were at it. I'd buried the bottom of the net carefully in the dirt all around the garden, but again, it was totally useless.

I was thinking about what to do about this and then one day, in broad daylight, a rabbit that had come inside the net saw me, got spooked and couldn't find its way out as he tried to escape. Running around in terror, the little one had no clue what to do. When I cried out, "C'mon man!" she just grew more upset. After crashing into the net full speed a few times, she dug underneath it and finally escaped,

never to return again. It seems that even the wild beasts need a good shock to help them come to their senses.

It was a deep snowy night during a really cold winter. The window at that time had no shutters so the heavy draft meant I wasn't sleeping well and then I heard a sound from the back door. I opened it to see what the noise was and a gray rabbit jumped right into the room. The moment left me stunned. Being so cold and hungry, this mountain neighbor came to visit and I hosted as warmly as I could. I served some sweet potatoes I dug out of the pantry and the guest ended up spending the whole night.

Sound of Water, Sound of Wind (1986)

The Pleasure of Living Alone

People are essentially solitary beings. Entering and leaving the world, we do it alone. Even when we live closely by on another's side, each of us has a different point of view, and just as each person's face is different, so too is the *eop* each of our lives is built upon.

Solitary *suhaengja* like us want to be alone no matter what the circumstances. Even while living together in one place as a community, we each live a bit as our own little hermit. More than anything is the craving inside for autonomy and freedom. Like a predator searching for prey in the forest, we go alone in search of this autonomy and freedom.

The *Sutta Nipata*, one of the early Buddhist scriptures, speaks to this: “If you gain a wise, holy, sensible, and well-mannered companion who is able to defeat any difficulty, go happily with them. If you cannot meet such a friend, go out like the king who renounced the land he had conquered, wandering alone like a rhinoceros.”

After all, life is something where each thing has its own way of living. It is impossible for anyone to live exactly like another. People who live alone try to live like lotus flowers unstained by the mud they emerge from. When alone, their whole selves are present, when with others, their selves are partial.

One of the spiritual teachers of our time, Krishnamurti, has said this before: “The word ‘alone’ doesn’t have any bad meaning, by itself it means pure and innocent, free, total, unbroken. It’s only when you are alone that you can learn how to survive in the world even as an outsider. Alone, there can be perfect cooperation and abundance of life. This is because humans are inherently holistic.”

Is it really “by yourself” to be far from the crowd and living on your own? The lesson that “the more you’re alone, the more you’re together,” points towards the true meaning of what it means to be alone. Namely, that every individual’s nature is fundamentally social.

Everything is connected. Like the lonely island floating in the sea, it's really attached to the earth.

Loneliness and isolation are completely different. Loneliness is like a passing hunger digging in your ribs. Isolation is the state of being shut off from the world like a prisoner. Loneliness sometimes brings purity and clarity, but isolation is a separation that allows no exit.

Ohiyesa of the Dakota tribe put it this way.

“The truth is closer to us when we are alone. To the Indian, the most important form of worship is to be alone and in dialogue with the unseen absolute being. Those who spend a lot of time alone in nature know the happiness that grows day by day in solitude. This is the pleasure of touching the essence of life.”⁷

Though a person who lives alone can be lonely, it's best they not become isolated. In loneliness, relationships continue, but isolation cuts off all relationships. The development of every living thing is dependent upon the constant interconnection of relationships.

If you want to be “more together, the more you're alone,” you have to be thoroughly in control of yourself. If you neglect accountable self-management, no matter who you think you might be, things are bound to end up really ugly.

Whether individually or as a group, life must be accompanied by pleasure. Life takes no root where there's no pleasure. Joy isn't something that comes from outside, but is created internally by ourselves through our own positive outlook. We must know how to appreciate the trivial things in our daily lives, to feel happiness and gratitude in them. When we are total selves instead of partial selves, every moment radiates vitality, flexibility, and the healthy fitness of life. It's here alone that the pleasures of solitude can sprout.

“Who goes alone?”

“The Sun, it's the Sun that goes alone.”

This is an exchange from the Vedas, India's most ancient text.

And here's one of my favorite poems that I loved memorizing as a kid, “Desolate Mountain” from the poet Cheongma Yu Chihwan:

In the desolate mountain valley
Old Lord Rumble in the Hills
Sits on a boulder.
He lives all alone, like me,
Just picking lice.

The Pleasure of Living Alone (2004)

Notes

- 1 This nun is Sister Claudia Lee Hae-in. Their friendship lasted many years and was intimate enough that Sister Claudia was comfortable sharing a rare glimpse into Beopjeong's weaknesses, including his temper that he let loose once in a letter to her. This letter was then followed by subsequent ones of apology, showing that even Beopjeong had not perfected his humanity.
- 2 *Hanjeongnok* 閑情錄, written in 1618 by Heo Gyun, a scholar and man of culture whose outspoken views got him exiled and eventually executed. This work was a compilation put together near the end of his life, with anecdotes and observations about the hermetic life.
- 3 *Borisim* 菩提心 “aspiration for enlightenment” or *bodhicitta*. Together with the idea that all beings are intrinsically of Buddha nature (*bulseong*), the idea that our aspiration for enlightenment is itself Buddha-ness, is a key element of the entire Mahayana movement, and certainly for all of Korean Buddhism. Again, though Beopjeong seems almost diametrically opposed to bringing in specific theological terms, *borisim* is an important exception.
- 4 *Munbangsau* 文房四友.
- 5 Paris Gilsangsa Temple, founded in 1993 by Beopjeong's followers, is the first Korean Buddhist temple to be founded in Europe.
- 6 Among the many buildings that can comprise a Korean Buddhist temple, the Gwaneumjeon Hall is devoted to the bodhisattva of compassion, known in Chinese as Guanyin. Chanting her name and venerating her mind are very familiar forms of Korean Buddhist prayer.
- 7 It is difficult to place this quote from the man also known as Charles Eastman. Born in 1858 into the Dakota tribe, Ohiyesa led a formidable life negotiating the struggle between his people and the United States. The nature centered, solitary form of worship in his work *The Soul of the Indian* surely struck a resonance with Beopjeong.

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