

7. Yulgok's Seclusion in Mt. Geumgang

Yulgok lost his mother Saimdang at sixteen. After completing the three-year mourning period, he decided to devote himself to Buddhism and entered Mt. Geumgang in March when he was nineteen, and stayed there for one year. Next spring, he came back to the mundane world.

Later, some people criticized this incident as a betrayal to the pure Confucian path. Although one year's deviation was otherwise no big issue, it may be worth noting that this mountain is secluded. The following are some related stories extracted from the *Complete Works of Yulgok*.

Motives for Yulgok's mountain seclusion

First, determination to cultivate Ki in nature

Before going to Mt. Geumgang, Yulgok bade farewell to some friends in writing. The following passage is found among such writings.

Everybody is born with Ki [Qi in Chinese, vital energy]. Ki can be controlled by the mind if well-cultivated, but the mind is controlled by Ki if ill-cultivated. The Ki controlled by the mind can function in a way

that its owner becomes a sage, but the mind controlled by Ki can make its owner a foolish maniac devoid of any control over his lowly passions. Mencius set an outstanding example of well-cultivated Ki, and anybody who seeks this profound principle and fulfillment of the highest nature must follow his footsteps.

Confucius said that the wise finds pleasure in water and the virtuous, in mountains. However, enjoying mountains and water is not limited to their external nature of rising and flowing but embraces their dynamic and static essence, and cultivating the Ki by the virtuous and the wise can be done only in water and mountains.

Reading this, it becomes clear that Yulgok's mountain seclusion was motivated by his will to cultivate Ki in water and mountains and not to devote himself to Buddhism.

Second, contemplations on life and death after Saimdang's death

Yulgok's sorrow over losing his beloved mother at the young age of sixteen was so deep that he did not know where to rest his troubled mind. Records indicate that he did not stop crying day in, day out. Moreover, intelligent as he was, he must have had deep contemplations about life and death.

One day, while thumbing through Buddhist books in Bongeunsa, a temple located in Seoul across the Han River from Ttukseom at that time, he was attracted to the Buddhist idea of life and death and the mystic depth of its philosophy. This experience probably drove him to his decision to enter Mt. Geumgang.

Uam Song Si-yeol once said that Yulgok had read many Buddhist

and Taoist books by Laozi and Zhuangzi early on, and that Hwaeomgyeong [Avatamaka Sutra, dealing mainly with cosmic inter penetration] and Neungeomgyeong [Suranama Sutra, dealing mainly with the mind and illusion] were his favorite. It is assumed that Yulgok, who could not find any guidance for his troubled mind after losing his mother in Confucian books, sought to find the answer to the question of life and death in Buddhist books.

Another story of a quite different nature can be read in the records of Cheonhyu Yi Yu-gyeong, one of Yulgok's disciples:

In Yulgok's household, there was a Buddhist book passed down over many generations. Yulgok read it in his childhood and remembered a passage that if one acquires a mysterious plot in Buddhism, one can see even the deceased. Yulgok was always curious to know its significance and was set to find the truth of it out of his longings for his deceased mother.

Of course, it is true that Yulgok missed his mother and entered Mt. Geumgang, driven by his philosophical urge to find the answer to the existential issues, it is out of the question that he succumbed to a superstitious belief of seeing the deceased.

Third, the family conflicts caused by his stepmother Kwon

Since Yulgok's stepmother Kwon joined the family, Yulgok had to put all efforts to mitigate the continuous conflicts between her and Yulgok's eldest brother Seon. However, his endeavors to bring harmony between them were fruitless. Severely stuck in his own sadness over

the loss of his beloved mother and unabated longings for her, the problems with his stepmother exacerbated his pains.

Yulgok finally made his mind to retreat in the mountains and left home, leaving letters to his father, stepmother Kwon, and his brother Seon on his bookcase. At the end of these letters, it read: "If there is no hope for harmony and peace of the family, living is not better than not living," entreating them for reconciliation.

To sum up these three possible reasons, Yulgok may have decided to set off to Mt. Geumgang i) simply to cultivate Ki in nature, ii) to delve into Buddhism to find answers to the existential issues, still stuck in painful longings for his mother, and iii) to come to terms with his frustration from the family conflicts caused by his vile stepmother.

All these three events may have played their respective roles in driving Yulgok to decide to go into seclusion in the mountains. It makes sense that Yulgok, a rational and intelligent young man, only wanted to devote himself to reading Buddhist books in search of the answer to the existential issues, to assuage his unabated desolation at the loss of his mother.

Did Yulgok shave off his hair?

Accordingly, seclusion in the mountains does not mean joining a monastic order. He came back to the mundane world after a year. Nevertheless, it may be an important point whether Yulgok shaved his hair off and became a monk during this one-year seclusion in Mt. Geumgang.

When Yulgok's disciple Sagye Kim Jang-saeng asked him later wheth-

er he shaved his head and changed his appearance after entering Mt. Geumgang, Yulgok answered, smiling, "Once you are in seclusion in the mountains, it does not matter whether you have changed your appearance or not, if the heart is there." Here, Yulgok did not make it clear whether he shaved his hair off and became a monk. It is evident that he did not officially join a monastic order. As for whether he shaved his head, clues that can satisfy the curiosity are presented below.

First, from the fact that he gave himself an art name of Eui-am, it can be inferred that he did not intend to become a monk because it has a Confucian connotation.

Second, Yulgok had never cut his hair. He paid a visit to his earlier teacher Eo Suk-kwon on the second day of his return from Mt. Geumgang. Eo Suk-kwon asked him to take off the hat to see whether it was true that he lived as a monk during his mountain seclusion. As Yulgok resisted, he snatched the hat and was overjoyed, clapping the hands, to see the full-length of Yulgok's hair appearing, and said, "I will tell the world that you have never been a monk." This scene was also witnessed by one of Yi Suk-kwon's disciples named Yi Bung-sang.

Third, upon Yulgok's return, it was a big social issue whether Yulgok shaved his hair off. This can be understood in light of the deeply rooted Confucian tradition of Joseon. The exhilaration shown by his former teacher Eo Suk-kwon on seeing that Yulgok had kept his hair can also be understood in this context. On the same note, when his sister Maechang met Yulgok, she was overjoyed to see Yulgok's full-length hair and said,

"I am so happy that you are back. However, you have no time to sit idly at home because it is now on everybody's mouth whether you have shaved your hair off. It happens that many scholars have gathered together to sit for the state examination, and you can put this matter to rest if you go there and comb your hair before their eyes." Hence, Maechang sent him away with a comb pouch. Yulgok did as he was told and satisfied people's inquisitiveness. This story can be read in Jeong Hong-myong's Giam-Japnok [*Giam's Miscellaneous Records*].

Considering these records, although it is evident that Yulgok stayed for one year in Mt. Geumgang, and became committed to Buddhist books and deep contemplations, he had no intention of taking refuge in Buddhism or shaving his head and becoming a monk. As he himself said, however, it is true that he was immersed in Buddhist thoughts, although he did not change his appearance, and brave enough to cut all threads linking to the mundane world in an honest search of the truth of life and death.

Why did Yulgok return?

Regardless of the question of what motivated Yulgok to go into seclusion in the mountains, it is needless to say that Yulgok dedicated himself to seeking the truth confronting all his skepticism and existential questions. In light of this, it is also logical to assume that Yulgok was "awakened" to truth that he had been seeking, whereupon he decided to return to the world. The following record included in the *Complete Works of Yulgok*

provides clues to his state of mind.

Since a while back Yulgok had been in a deep and calm space immersed in contemplation, forgetting even eating and sleeping. One day, a question arose why Buddhist disciples are warned against thinking more and thinking less. Then he came to realize why.

This was because the practice of Buddhism of simply cutting the scattering mind's paths and gathering the mind thus held to create an empty illuminated world with absolute imperturbability, in lieu of being anchored on a sophisticated theory. If the followers knew the significance of that practice before arriving at that state, they would lose their sincerity in their pursuit and would not gain anything. This was at the origin of the delusive prohibition of inquisitive thoughts.

This thought regarding Buddhism led Yulgok to call its doctrines into question and reread and reinterpret the books of the Confucian sage and worthies. After realizing that Confucian teachings were truthful and not illusory, he ended the seclusion and came back to the mundane world. According to a record of his disciple Yi Yu-Gyeong, the book that led Yulgok to this realization was the *Analects of Confucius*.

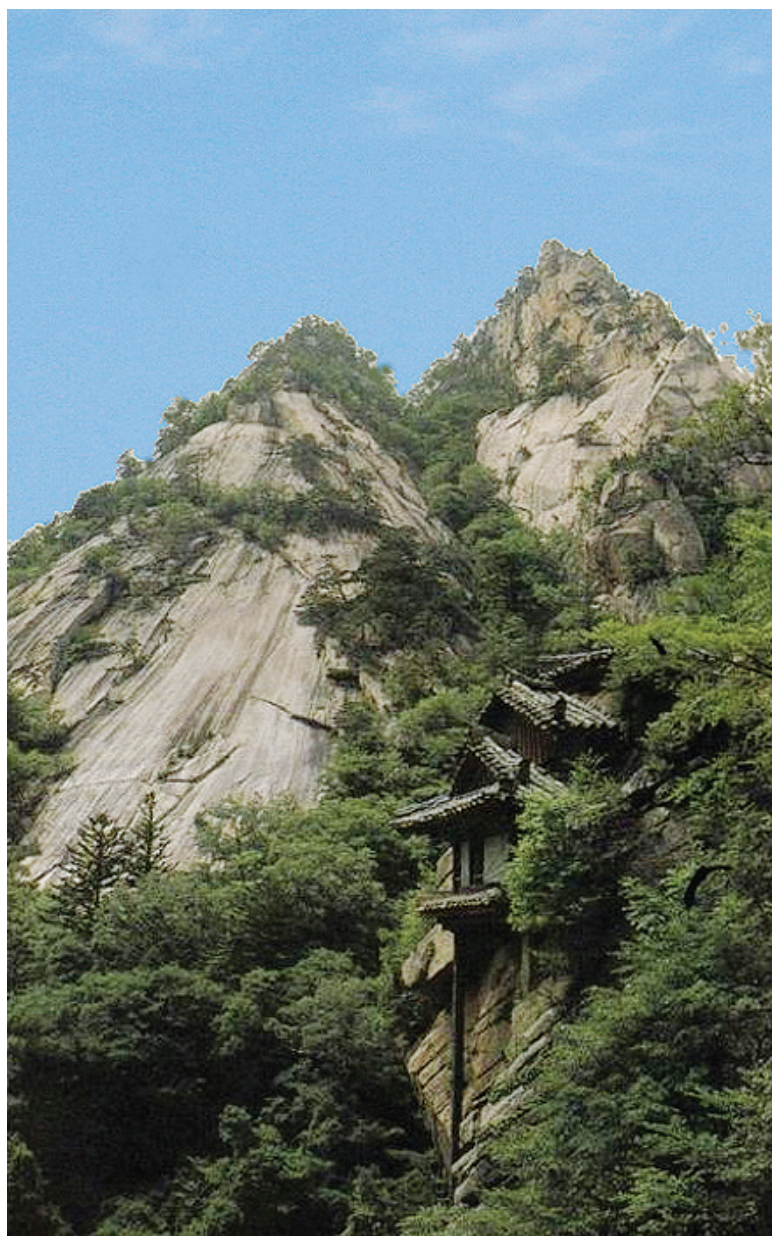
Yulgok's works written in his seclusion period

Yulgok wrote "*Leaving the East Gate*" at the moment of leaving Seoul. He wrote "Looking at Mt. Bogae" on his way to Mt. Geumgang. He also wrote poems that, among others, describe Manpokdong [Valley of Ten-thousand Waterfalls] and the landscape of Mt. Geumgang, that were written at Songna Temple, and that depict the sunrise at the summit of Gu-jeongbong [Peak of Nine Wells]. The most famous of them is a poem he wrote after a conversation with an old monk in a small temple, his contemplation on the state of "Flying Kite and Jumping Fish."⁵²⁾ The questions and answers between the old monk and Yulgok are presented below.

- To the old man in a small temple in Mt. Geumgang

While I was enjoying nature in Mt. Geumgang, I walked some 10 kilometers into a deep valley and came across a small temple. An old monk was sitting there in his habit, but he did not stand up or greet me. I looked around inside the temple. There was nothing in the temple, and herd in the kitchen seemed to have not been kindled for many days. Asked what he was doing there, the monk just smiled, without uttering a word. Asked again what he ate as food, he pointed to the pine tree, saying, "That's my food." To test him, I started to ask him:

52 This is a poem in *Shijing* [Book of Odes] and refers to the state in which all creatures function in accordance with their intrinsic nature.



A small temple in Mt. Geumgang.

Yulgok : "Who is the sage, Confucius or Buddha?"

Old Monk : "Please don't tease this old monk."

Yulgok : "As Buddhism is Orangkae doctrines, it cannot be practiced in China, right?"

Old Monk : "King Shun was from an Eastern country and King Wen came from a Western country. Do you mean they are also Orangkaes?"

Yulgok : "The most sophisticated in Buddhism spot is still within the boundary of Confucianism. This being so, why the conversion from Confucianism to Buddhism?"

Old Monk : "Is there also a saying in Confucianism that 'the mind is Buddha'?"

Yulgok : "Mencius said that human nature is good and always referred to Yao and Shun. How is it different from 'the mind is Buddha'? We only seek the mind in reality."

The monk did not agree, but reflected a long time and asked,

Old Monk : "Do you know what it means 'neither being nor nothingness'?"

Yulgok : "That refers to the perceived boundary."

Yulgok added, seeing the monk smiling :

Yulgok : "Is a kite flying and a fish jumping being or nothingness?"

Old Monk : "It's neither being nor nothingness. That is the essence of truth. How can you compare it with a phrase of a poem?"

Yulgok : "If you name something, there is already a phenomenal boundary. How can you call it the essence? If so, the subtlety of Confucianism cannot be transmitted with words, and the Buddhist logic is within words."

The monk was surprised and told me, holding my hand:

Old Monk : "You are not a mundane scholar. Please write me a poem and interpret the phrase 'a kite flying and a fish jumping' for me."

I wrote a poem and gave it to him. He read it, rolled the paper, slid it into the sleeve, and turned back toward the wall. I left the temple and came out of the valley. Then I realized that I did not even know who he was. When I went there three days later, the monk had already left it.

A Fish Jumping and a Kite Flying
A fish jumping and a kite flying, the same law above and below,
It is neither being nor nothingness.
Smiling at nothing, I look at my abode,
I stand alone at sunset in a deep forest.

Yulgok's first resolution after his return

Yulgok wrote *Jagyeongmun* [*Self-Admonitions*] was the first thing he did after returning to his maternal grandmother's (aged twenty) side. He was away for one year, being secluded in Mt. Geumgang in search of

truth in Buddhism, Jagyeongmun was meant to be his signpost for a life dedicated to self-cultivation. For this reason, all those who wanted to follow his footsteps learned it by heart. The following is its translation (from Chinese) of the entire text.

Jagyeongmun [*Self-Admonitions*]

1. Set a lofty goal of reaching the standard set by sages and do not stop cultivating yourself until you have reached it down to the tip of the finest hair.
2. A man of steady mind is not voluble. Hence, be parsimonious with words to have a steady mind.
3. Words issued at the right time cannot be long.
4. It is never an easy task to muster the forces by gathering the mind set loose for a long time in one morning. The mind is a living thing and can become steady only after being held by firm forces. When your thoughts are scattered, if you try to cut them in order not to be bothered by them, the mind will grow even wilder due to those recurring entangled thoughts. Even if they are cut, if the thought of having cut those thoughts lingers in the heart, that is also a delusory thought. Therefore, if your thoughts cannot be gathered, gather your mind and treat it carefully and gently, with-

out getting dragged by those thoughts. If you persevere in these efforts, a tranquil moment will surely come. If you devote all of your heart and force, that also is a good discipline for holding on to a steady mind.

5. Always be on alert and never stop being vigilant at any moment even when you are alone. Then all petty thoughts will be calmed down and held in check.
6. Losing your hold on your mind because nobody is around is the source of all evils.
7. Only after you have achieved the control over your mind, you can realize the noble meaning of loving and enjoying nature.
8. Wake up at dawn and think about what to do in the morning. After breakfast, think of what to do during the day. Before falling asleep, think of what to do the next day. If there is nothing to attend to, let it be. If there is something to do, make a plan how to do it. Only after that, start your daily reading. The purpose of reading books is to learn how to discern right and wrong, and put it into practice. Reading without attending to the state of affairs is knowledge good for nothing.
9. Even if thoughts about wealth and honor have been uprooted, if you are inclined to choose something more convenient in the slightest in your dealings with daily affairs, it's an expression of a profit-seeking mind. More care must be taken to control such a mind.

自警文

先須大其志以聖人爲準則一毫不及聖人則吾事未了。
 心定者言寬定心自寬言始。
 時然後言則言不得不備。
 久放之心一朝收之得力豈可容易心是活物定力未成則搖動難安若思慮紛擾時作意厭惡欲絕之則愈覺紛擾欲起忽滅似不由我假使斷絕只此斷絕之念橫在胸中此亦妄念也當於紛擾時收斂精神輕輕照管勿與之俱往用功之久必有凝定之時執事專一此亦定心功夫。
 常以戒懼謹獨意思存諸胸中念念不息則一切邪念自然不起。
 萬惡皆從不謹獨生。
 謹獨然後可知浴沂誦歸之意味。
 曉起思朝之所爲之事食後思晝之所爲之事就寢時思明日所爲之事無事則放下有事則必思得處置合宜之道然後讀書讀書者求辨是非施之行事也若不省事兀然讀書則爲無用之學。
 財利榮利雖得埽除其念若處事時有一毫擇便宜之念則此亦利心也尤可省察。
 凡遇事至若可爲之事則盡誠爲之不可有厭倦之心不可爲之事則一切截斷不可使是非交戰於胸中。
 常以行一不義殺一不辜得天下不爲底意思存諸胸中。
 橫逆之來自反而深值以感化爲期。
 一家之人不化只是誠意未盡。
 非夜眠及疾病則不可偃臥不可跛倚雖中夜無睡思則不臥但不可拘迫豈有睡思當喚醒此心十分猛醒眼皮若重起而周步使之惺惺。
 聖公全書 卷十四 月十一
 用功不緩不急死而後已若求速其效則此亦利心若不如是裁磨遺體便非人子。

Jagyeongmun [Self-Admonitions]

10. If you take on a task, attend to it wholeheartedly without getting upset or neglecting the duty. If you judge a thing unworthy of your effort, you must cut it off resolutely, without giving room for an inner battle between right and wrong.
11. Always take to heart Mencius's thinking: "Even if the whole world can be gained by doing one unrighteous deed or killing one innocent person, this must not be done."
12. If you encounter a tribulation and hardship imposed by others, take them as an opportunity to examine your own heart and reflect on your own shortcomings, so that your sincere heart can touch the hearts of your opponents.
13. If you cannot win the hearts of those living in your own house, it is because you have not yet done your utmost in showing your sincerity.

14. Except when you go to sleep at night or you are ill, you must neither lie down nor lean back. Even at night, if you are not sleepy, do not lie down but do not force yourself to keep awake. If you feel drowsy in the daytime, spur yourself to keep your mind alert, and if your eyelids are still heavy, stand up and walk around to invigorate your mind.
15. Be steady in your efforts to learn without deliberately accelerating or decelerating. Learning continues until the day you die. Thus, if you want to see the fruits of your efforts as soon as possible, it is also a profit-seeking mind. If you are driven by such a mind, overwork will harm the body you received from your parents, and it is against your filial duty.