

# Yulgok's Perspective on Buddhism

Heejae Yi

*Yulgok Yiyi was the most popular of the Song Confucian scholars in Korea. During the Joseon Dynasty, Confucianism was accepted as the dominant ideology, while Buddhism was scorned as heretical religion. Yet, even though Yulgok was the great Song Confucianist, he had read Confucian classics on Buddhism while in his teens and had also lived for a year on Mount Geumgang, where he engaged in ascetic practice. A year in Mount Guemgang undertaking mountain ascetic practice, he returned to society and successfully led his life.*

*He did not just accept the Confucian doctrine without criticism, but through in-depth analysis and introspection, he realized the world of truth and endeavored to practice it in his own world. Although he did not gain a certainty from his Zen experience while practicing on Mount Geumgang, nevertheless, he did come to firmly realize that ordinary human nature is just the same as that of Buddha, Yao and Shun. In this manner, Yulgok was not a blind Confucian, merely adopting the prevailing trend of criticizing Buddhism as with other fanatics of the time, rather, he was sincere in his determination to develop his mind and to search within himself for truth.*

*It would be misleading to say that Yulgok was a Buddhist ascetic although he studied Buddhism and Taoism without prejudice, but he never*

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*remained dependent on these teachings, instead, he became even more critical. And through his ability and commitment to seek deeper truths both by examining other doctrines and through his own practical experience, he was able to broaden the world of Confucianism.*

Key Words: Mountain asceticism, Zen practice, Human nature, Bowo, Song Confucianism, Yi-Qi.

## I. Introduction

Yulgok Yiyi (1536-1584) was the most popular of the *Song* Confucian scholars. He enjoyed a high social position and was greatly respected by Korean people of his time. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), Confucianism was accepted as the dominant ideology, while Buddhism was scorned as heretical religion. Buddhist monks were greatly oppressed and were banned from the cities, leaving no choice but to take refuge in the mountains.

*Song* Confucian values were applied as national ethics throughout the Joseon period in Korea; Buddhism was not even studied by Confucian scholars at this time. Yet, even though Yulgok was the great *Song* Confucianist, he had read Confucian classics on Buddhism while in his teens and had also lived for a year on Mount Geumgang, where he engaged in ascetic practice. This kind of practice was actually prohibited for civil servants at the time, or for anyone who was seeking to become a civil servant, but Yulgok did not concern himself about this. There is quite a lot of speculation today about whether Yulgok actually shaved his head or not during his period of mountain retreat, and whether he entered the Buddhist priesthood at that time, as both Yulgok and his apprentices skillfully evaded making comment on the matter; but it is generally presumed that he took tonsure by a Buddhist order. This belief is mainly based on the fact that the Korean word *ipsan*, which is loosely translated as ascetic, has the same meaning as the word for entering the Buddhist priesthood. A contemporary Korean historian

Byeongdo Yi presumes that Yulgok became a mountain ascetic in order to soothe his senses, which were upset because of sudden death of his mother's; that traces of Buddhist thought are very evident in Yulgok's philosophy (Yi, 1988:17). The Japanese scholar Takahashi mentioned that among the Confucian students of the Joseon period, Yulgok and Susin Ro had studied Buddhism together. In several writings of Yulgok's, there are references which amount to something of a confession of having once studied Buddhism, but he maintains that he later recovered himself to respect only the Confucian values.

What is clear is that after Yulgok spent a year in Mount Guemgang undertaking mountain ascetic practice, he returned to society and successfully undertook the State Examination which was required at that time to become a civil servant of the Confucian government. After Yulgok passed, he was considered to become a sage at a Confucian shrine, some people took the side opposite him, and argued if he deserves such high and admired position with all those time spent as a mountain ascetic<sup>1</sup>. However, Yulgok's apprentices, Jangsaeng Kim (1548-1631) and Siyeol Song (1607-1689), both insisted that despite Yulgok having ventured into asceticism, he deserved to be regarded as an excellent prototype of a Confucian leader, and spoke of his wide knowledge and wisdom to all people.<sup>2</sup>

Because Yulgok was regarded so highly as a most popular

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1 Confucian scholar Gang Kim in Gyeongsang-do presented a memorial to the king that Yiyi and Seong-hon cannot become a member of Confucian shrine. Epitaph of Yiyi wrote that he entered the Buddhist priesthood at his age 19. Proponents of Yiyi compare him to Heng-qu Zhang who escaped to Buddhism and Taoism. But critics insisted that this cannot be treated as the same case because Heng-qu didn't enter the Buddhist priesthood really (June 10th of the lunar calendar, 1663 C.E., AHR-R Vol.8:52; AJD. Vol.37:320). Minjeok Yi presented another memorial to the king to object the appeal from Gang Kim: "When Yiyi went into public service, he appealed that when young he had looked for the truth ignorant of straightforward way. Therefore he was wandering among all classes of philosophers. And for almost one year, he studied Buddhism but he finally realized the truth one day. The late king said 'From ancient times, every extraordinary scholars were indulged to Buddhism. He may have spent some time practicing Buddhist meditation but it was just a little mistake in old days. This cannot be a reason that Yiyi should give up his role as a very important civil servant (June 20th of the lunar calendar, 1663 C.E., AHR-R Vol.8;AJD. Vol.37:322)."

2 Siyeol Song explained all details of the relations between Yiyi and the Buddhism, defending his master, Jangsaeng Kim (September 30th of the lunar calendar, 1685 C.E., ASR. Vol.16:41-44; AJD. Vol.37:322).

Confucian scholar, people were bewildered as to why he had sought to enter the Buddhist priesthood and read Buddhist scriptures. His actions could well be an indication that even though Buddhism was so strictly censored and ostracized throughout the Joseon Dynasty it still performing a role in the society. Confucianism generally, and *Song* Confucianism in particular, regarded individuals as members of the community but Buddhism, which Yulgok had studied in his younger years, regarded each human being as an individual in an existential sense. When his mother passed away, Yulgok became depressed and felt a sense of futility about life. He asked himself the question ‘what is a human being?’ And he sought to find an answer to this question by reading Buddhist scriptures. So we understand that he became a mountain ascetic not purely from a curiosity, but because he dared to risk everything to find an answer to his existential dilemma.

Indeed, Yulgok had a thirst for truth, and *Song* Confucianism was not the only truth as far as he was concerned. He was also interested in Taoism and Buddhism, and he believed that there is value in such philosophies as well as in the principles of *Song* Confucianism. Yulgok always questioned what he read, never just accepting something the first time he came across it, he would read something at least twice, even if it was from Zhu-xi (1130-1120). He was a serious and diligent student.

學道卽無著	There shouldn't be an excessive fondness for studying the truth
隨然到處遊	I'm just staying open to where affinity leads
暫辭青鶴洞	Leaving Cheonghak-dong for just a moment
來玩白鷗州	Came visiting Baekguju
身世雲千里	I'm in a cloud that stretches a thousand miles
乾坤海一頭	A universe at the end of the sea
草堂聊寄宿	A night indifferent, spent in a cottage
梅月是風流	Moonlight on the ume plum flowers, this is elegance

(「與山人普應下山至豐巖李廣文(之元)家宿草堂」, CCY. Vol.1:23).

Here, Cheonghak-dong refers to the Taoist philosophies, while Baekguju means Confucianism. Yulgok was looking for truth, which is neither prejudice nor fixed doctrine.<sup>3</sup> So-called truth which is blindlike

idolatry, was meaningless for him. But unfortunately, Yulgok's apprentices, Kim and Song, both believed that *Song* Confucianism was the only legitimate value and was beyond reproach, requiring nothing in the way of further amendment or complementation. But, because the experiences of their master Yiyi on Buddhism could not be reconciled with any part of *Song* Confucianism, and because such experiences were regarded as an unfortunate mistake of his younger years, discussion about this 'phase' of his life was never taken seriously.

Nowadays there is not one extant thesis or writing of Yulgok's own on Buddhism remaining. However, there are some poems that he wrote in correspondence with monks, and which contain descriptions and images that reflect Buddhist thought. When he returned to the society after his year on Mount Geumgang he proclaimed Buddhism to be a heresy and he gave no further consideration to its value in his writings directly. However, this article focuses on the question of why he became an mountain ascetic at a time when Buddhism was spurned and outlawed in his country; as well as examining the nature of his Buddhist predilections, based on his choice of reading material and practice methods. And finally, we will consider what influence Yulgok Yiyi's foray on Buddhism may have brought on *Song* Confucianism.

## II. Buddhism in Yulgok's time

Yulgok never left even a single writing about Buddhism yet, although in his role as a Confucian civil servant he did correspond with some monks in the form of poetry. In the reign of Queen Munjeong (1501-1565), mother of King Myeongjong (r.1545-1567), the State Examination for monk was re-introduced by the Royal Court and Buddhism was beginning to recover its social status slightly.

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3 Professor Han analyses Yulgok's Buddhism through the conversation of Yulgok and an old monk in Mount Geumgang. Han concludes that Yulgok had hold his ground by moderation, not by false reputation, after the long interpretation of the short original. This is the official ground of Yulgok from the view of Confucian society. However, from the view that the hidden meaning is beyond the statement, Buddhism and Confucianism have no difference. Two religions are explaining about aspects that are different from each other, but in those aspects there still are some parts which are the same (Han, 2005:118-147).

But even so, the Buddhist influence could not extend very far as Confucianism was the principal government ideology. Still, at that time 395 Buddhist temples were authorized and protected by government edict.<sup>4</sup> Because of Queen Munjeong's benevolence, *Zen* Buddhism was also revived through the efforts of master Heo-eung Bowo (1509-1565)<sup>5</sup>, who was greatly trusted by Queen Munjeong and was popular with the people. master Bowo became the chief abbot of *Zen* Buddhism in 1551 (6th year of King Myeongjong's reign), while master Sujin was appointed to the post of the chief abbot for doctrinal Buddhism. Bongeunsa temple was the headquarters for *Zen* Buddhism, while the religious affairs related to other doctrinal Buddhist traditions were based at Bongseonsa temple. Bongeunsa temple was originally the Royal mausoleum temple of King Seongjong (r.1469-1494), who was grandfather of King Myeongjong. The State Examination for monk was restored for both doctrinal and *Zen* applicants and was held every three years. At this time also, the Buddhist monastic law was restored and the monks were able to retrieve their monastic identification. During five periods of the State Examination for monk, figures such as, master Cheong-heo Hyu-jeong (1520-1604) and master Sa-myeong Yu-jeong (1544-1610) became monks and later, leaders in Joseon Buddhism.

A Naewondang was located in the palace, and Queen Munjeong also built a *bhikkhunī* temple, Insuwon, on the grounds of Jeong-eop-won, which was to be the retirement home for Royal concubines and Court ladies after the king had passed away. There was also Jasugung called as Jasuwon that had a belfry and the sanctuary for *arhats*. During the reign of King Myeongjong, many additional Naewondangs were built around the country. In the 9th year of King Myeongjong, there were 70 temples with a total of 400 Naewondangs and Confucian scholars were prohibited to enter into them. The number of monks residing in each Naewondang was determined by Naesusa (Yi, 2001:253-280). But in the 20th year of King Myeongjong, Queen

4 January 27th of the lunar calendar, 1552 C.E. (AMR. Vol.13:9; AJD. Vol.20:72).

5 Early from age 15, he entered the Buddhist priesthood and started to study at Mahayeon temple in Mount Geumgang. In 1548, he was appointed as the head priest of Bongeunsa temple by Queen Munjeong.

Munjeong died, and twenty days later master Bowo was impeached. In 1565, master Bowo was banished to Jeju island where he later died. Thus, in the 21st year of King Myeongjong, the State Examination for monk was abolished. But during the years of Yulgok's lifetime Buddhism enjoyed a brief revival, thanks to Queen Munjeong, who was a great admirer of Buddhist thought.

### III. Yulgok's Buddhist perspective

#### 1. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism

The *Śūrangama Sūtra*<sup>6</sup>, meaning the 'best teaching', is believed to have been Yulgok's favorite, it tells of the secret laws that were practiced by the Buddha. Buddhist scholars of the Joseon Dynasty attached great importance to the teachings of the *Diamond Sūtra*<sup>7</sup>, the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*<sup>8</sup> and the *Awakening of Faith*<sup>9</sup>, and the *Śūrangama Sūtra*. Yulgok believed that the *Śūrangama Sūtra* should also be included as a *sūtra* of great importance. The *Śūrangama Sūtra* is the best Buddhist scripture, stands strong with the criticism that only the spell was Buddhist but actually the Confucian substances.

The *Śūrangama Sūtra* instructs about the mind. What does not originate from true mind, is 'wild fancy' or *vijñāna*, meaning discrimination. If this discriminating mind can be conquered, true mind will appear; this is the final illumination on the path of learning.

“Your mind is originally beautiful, bright and clean. Why do you keep giving birth and death to yourself, in the course of a confused and heavy mind?”<sup>10</sup>

6 The *Śūrangama Sūtra* (大佛頂如來密因修證了義諸菩薩萬行首楞嚴經. usually abbrev. as 首楞嚴經 or 楞嚴經, T.19. No.945).

7 The *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (金剛般若波羅蜜經. usually abbrev. as 金剛經, T.8. No.235-239).

8 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經, usually abbrev. as 圓覺經 (T.17. No.842).

9 The *Mahāyānasaddhotpāda-sāstra* (大乘起信論, usu. abbrev. as 起信論, T.32. No.1666-1667).

10 知汝心本妙明淨。汝自迷悶喪本受輪。於生死中常被漂溺 (T.19.111b10-11).

The *Śūrangama Sūtra* tells us that our mind is originally beautiful and holy, but we allow ourselves to get caught up in desires and infatuations which ruin the pure state of original mind, causing us great suffering. This is the same as the belief that people are born with a good spirit, it is not necessary to be constantly seeking here and there to find your own mind, all you have to do is look inside yourself to know your beautiful and original nature. This is the main message the *Śūrangama Sūtra* delivers to us. “Nature is good and everyone is Buddha, life and death don't exist.”<sup>11</sup> What this means is that people's original nature is good and harmonious, and everyone has the possibility to become a Buddha according to this original nature.

“There's a story of a person who is wearing a cintamani or precious jewel beneath his clothing, but he is homeless and begging for food, not knowing that he has this precious jewel. But even though he is a homeless beggar he still owns this precious stone and one day he meets a wise man who tells him about his precious stone, and so he becomes a very rich man. This precious jewel is within ourselves, it does not come from anywhere outside ourselves.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a metaphor from the *Śūrangama Sūtra* which tells us that all people have the potential to become sages, except they don't realize it and go on living in ignorance. Sages and ordinary folk are essentially the same, except sages have come to realize their precious stone within. It is reported that Yulgok was fond of reading the *Śūrangama Sūtra*, and he was no doubt well aware of the real meaning and strength of his mind in his book, titled *Gyeokmong yogyeol*, he places great emphasis on the importance of mental attitudes:

“A beginner should set his mind firmly in the direction of sagehood, and with his every breath he should contemplate the

11 性真圓融。皆如來藏本無生滅 (T19.118b27)。

12 譬如有人於自衣中。繫如意珠不自覺知。窮露他方乞食馳走。雖實貧窮珠不曾失。忽有智者指示其珠。所願從心致大饒富。方悟神珠非從外得 (T19.121b28-c2)。



true self so as not to become wrapped up in false nature.”<sup>13</sup>

“Human nature is naturally good, and is not different in ancient and up to present times. But how come some people attain the wisdom of sages and yet I myself, am only one of the ordinary people? It is because I wasn't able to firmly establish my belief and I didn't know what it was that I should follow; also, I wasn't sufficiently sincere.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, Yulgok continued to insist that all people should try continuously to attain sagehood, never giving up. All men are noble and have great human nature. That is to say, The nature of Buddha, Yao and Shun, the great sage, already exists within all of us, but most of us are not looking for it because we don't know we already have it.

The essence of the *Śūrangama Sūtra*, which Yulgok favored among many other Buddhist scriptures, is the core of Buddhism, and central to *Mahāyāna* philosophy. The idea that ‘every human being is Buddha’ was a most attractive philosophy to Yulgok.

The *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra*<sup>15</sup> is another *sūtra* from the *Mahāyāna* Canon which Yulgok favored. Song Confucianism had originated in China when *Zen* scriptures and the *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra* were enjoying great popularity, and so it was natural that Song Confucianism was closely related to ideas drawn from the *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra*.

It especially connects with the Buddhist philosophy of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) as demonstrated in the *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra*. The *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra* regards the world as divided into *Shi* (事) and *Li* (理) which abide in harmony, without conflict or collision between the two. In Buddhist thought, *Li* is understood as the negative principle of emptiness (空) and nothingness (無), while *Shi* is regarded as the universe, which includes human beings.

*Li* was adopted as a Buddhist term during the Tang Era (618-907) when Buddhism was prosperous.<sup>16</sup> The *Avataiṁsaka Sūtra* considers that

13 初學先須立志 必以聖人自期 不可有一毫自小退托之念 (『立志』, CCY. Vol.27:3).

14 人性本善 無古今智愚之殊 聖人何故獨爲聖人 我則何故獨爲衆人耶 良由志不立 知不明行不篤耳 (『立志』, CCY. Vol.27:4).

15 大方廣佛華嚴經, usu. abbrev. as 華嚴經 (T.9. No.278-279).

*Li* cannot be limited while *Shi* maybe regarded as so. It is said that unlimited *Li* exists in every single thing. “*Shi* and *Li* are not the same, yet they are not different from each other. They are indifferent to each other but are not the same, and can be divided into two parts. *Shi* and *Li* are like the relationship between the ocean and the waves” (Shim, 2000:46).

Originally *Song* Confucianism was influenced by the *Avataṛsaka sūtra* which says, “One is all and all is one (一即多 多即一). *Nirvāṇa* is for everyone (義味寂滅 悉平等). Far and near are reversed with each other (遠離一異 顛倒相)” (T.9.448b16-17). This is the core principle of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*). Zhu-xi recognized the connection between this theory and the *Avataṛsaka Sūtra*. He said “One moon appears on all water surfaces, and every moon on the water surfaces becomes one” (AZ. 18:29).

Yulgok's understanding of *Song* Confucianism didn't discriminate between *Li* (理) and *Qi* (氣), he did not regard *Li* as noble existence and *Qi* as a humble one. He insisted that *Li* and *Qi* are neither two nor one. And because they are not one, they are two, and because they are not two, they are one. This idea accords with the principle of harmonization presented in the *Avataṛsaka Sūtra*. *Li* means commonness, *Shi* means limitation (理通氣局) as referred to by Yulgok. It reminds us of the Buddhist ideas that ‘*Li* and *Shi* is not an obstacle (理事無礙)’ and ‘Commonness and limitation is not an obstacle (通局無礙)’ (Yi, 1988:29).

The *Avataṛsaka Sūtra* also deals with the issue of mind. In Yulgok's earlier practice of Buddhist meditation, his question, ‘Everything returns to one (萬法歸一), so where does the one go? (一歸何處)’ means that everything returns to one's mind, as the *Avataṛsaka Sūtra* teaches. If one is not aware that the only thing that matters is mind, he can have wild fancies and massive confusion about all the ‘outside’ arisings. But once it is realized that everything comes from one mind, then all existence is realized as empty.

16 Dū-shùn (556-640): the founder of the *Hua-yen* School of China. established the concepts on three *dharmadhātu*. 真空觀第一, 理事無礙觀第二, 周遍含容觀第三 (T.45.672.c20-21).

Yulgok's interpretation of *Song* Confucianism is based on Zhu-xi's *Song* Confucianism. There is no evidence that it comes from the *Li-Shi* of the *Avatāmsaka Sūtra* or from the *Śūrangama Sūtra* either. Yulgok never made direct reference to the Buddhist *bodhisattva* or the *Mahāyāna* Elysium. His understanding of Buddhist philosophy is based solely on the Buddhism that was reflected in *Song* Confucian writings.

## 2. Zen Buddhism

The only writings that Yulgok composed about Buddhism were the short poems he wrote in correspondence with *Zen* monks,<sup>17</sup> thus, it is difficult to understand fully his thoughts on Buddhism. In his poems to the monks it is evident that he realized Buddhist values going beyond the mundane world. For Yulgok, Buddhism meant *Zen* Buddhism:

“In my younger years, I thought that *Zen* was a shortcut to realize the Tao, and so I used a question as in Buddhist meditation, ‘Everything returns to one, so where does the one go?’ I spent several years contemplating this question but I could not get an answer, and so later, I realized that the question was not sincere.”<sup>18</sup>

Here we can see that Yulgok realized that the mountain ascetic exercises were making no sense during the period he was engaged in *Zen* practice. And this story tells us how Yulgok regarded *Zen* Buddhism. First of all, he uses an expression ‘spent several years thinking about it (數年思之).’ Previously we mentioned that Yulgok spent only one year practicing as an ascetic, yet in this correspondence to the Buddhist monks he acknowledges that he spent several years

17 The master corresponded to the poems were Boeung (普應, 1541-1609), Chijeong (智正), Yeong-hee (靈熙), Gyeong-yeol (敬悅, 1580-1646), Cham-ryo (參寥), Yu-myeong (惟命), Seol-ui (雪衣), Un-su (雲水), Hyeon-ok (玄玉), Bun-am (墳庵), Hyun-uk (玄旭), Ui-min (義敏), Cheon-yeon (天然), Sinbyeon (信辯). And the places were Sangwonsa temple (上院寺), Woljeongsa temple (月精寺), Silleuksa temple (神勒寺), Gumsansa temple (金山寺), Simwonsa temple (深源寺), Singwangsa temple (神光寺), Yeongyeongsa temple (衍慶寺), Amcheonsa temple (嚴泉寺) etc (Chong, 1997:63-64).

18 吾少時。妄意禪家頓悟法。於入道甚捷而妙。以萬象歸一。一歸何處為話頭。數年思之。竟未得悟。反以求之。乃知其非真也 (CCY. Vol.35:4).

contemplating the question in *Zen* Buddhist meditation form. His practice was typical of *Zen* study in the framework of sudden enlightenment. His question for the Buddhist meditation was 'Everything returns to one, so where does the one go?' Although there are various *Gong-ans* or questions that can be used in *Zen* Buddhist meditation, Yulgok chose this one. It is not surprising, however, as *Zen* Buddhism at that time was generally focused on sudden enlightenment. Although he couldn't attain a satisfactory answer to his question, believing instead that the question was not sincere, nevertheless, he understood the formula of the *Zen* exercises he was practicing at that time.

五臺山下月精寺 Woljeongsa temple  
 right under Mount Odae  
 門外清溪不息流 Stream outside with clear water  
 runs endlessly  
 可笑衲僧迷實相 Silly monk doesn't realize the truth  
 只將無字謾推究 And hopelessly looks for the question  
 to point to 'Nothingness'  
 (「贈山人」, CCY. Vol.1:39).

Sometimes he forgot to eat and sleep he was so absorbed in his *Zen* practice; this tells us that he wasn't just experimenting but that he was seriously concentrated. The purpose of his question was to gather his spirit inside to clear and empty it, A question is necessary for a practitioner to pursue the work of concentration, but Yulgok believed that if they first knew the purpose of the question they would not concentrate at all. He ended the long study of his *Zen* question with the conclusion 'no gain (無所得)'. And with this conclusion at the end of his years of hard practice and concentration he made up his mind to return to society. His question was 'Everything returns to the one, so where does the one go?' And the answer he got was 'no gain.' Indeed, Yulgok may have tasted the extreme freedom that goes beyond good and evil, but he decided that there was no need for him to continue on for 'no gain.'

"Earlier I forgot to eat and sleep and sat in a quiet place

concentrating deeply. And one day, an idea came into my mind, 'Why does Buddhism ask me to stop guarding myself against everything?' Then I realized that the answer was not a particular thing, but rather, to stop my mind from going all over the place. Concentrating on one's mind and sitting in a quiet place is to clear and empty one's mind. This is the purpose of the question in Buddhist meditation and ascetic exercises. But if someone realized the answer before beginning the practice, then the exercises themselves might lack a necessary degree of concentration. There is, in fact, no answer! Finally, I doubted whether my study was for any purpose, so I read a book written by a sage instead. This book was knowledgeable and sincere and so I thought 'How can this be dishonest in its teaching about the world's truth?' Then at last I understood and packed my bags and returned home."<sup>19</sup>

Here Yulgok confesses that Buddhist study is less important for him than Confucianism. However his poem still has very clear and bright images about *Seon*-Buddhist meditation. When he returns to the mundane world, his thoughts on *Zen* detachment are evident in his translation of the *Tao-te Ching* about Taoist morality, "Empty your mind so you can be free from personal attachment and allow other people's good in your mind. That will help you to make progress in your study and bring it to reality."

While Yulgok's writing is never overt about *Zen* Buddhism, we only have to study one of his poems to discover his deep experience of the subject.

禪房坐蒲團	Sitting on a cushion in a <i>Zen</i> room
灑落魂夢清	Fresh soul has fresh dreams
晨磬發深省	Deep introspection into myself with hand bells ringing at dawn
澹澹吾何營	How can I describe my unconcerned mind? (「遊南臺西臺中臺宿于上院」, CCY. Vol.1:38).

<sup>19</sup> 嘗至深處。靜坐凝思。至忘寢食者久之。一日。忽思以爲佛氏戒其徒勿作增減想者。何意也。因究其所以戒之之意。蓋其學無他奇妙。只欲截斷此心走作之路。凝聚精神。以造靜極虛明之域。故假設話頭。使之依靠下功。而又恐人先知此意。則著功必不專精。卒無所得。故又設此禁而誑之也。遂疑其學之邪。復取聖賢書而溫繹之。知其說之真不我欺也。始乃大悟。束裝而歸 (『行狀』, CCY. Vol.33:14).

Sitting in a *Zen* room he felt a fresh soul encountering fresh dreams. This poem shows that he is experienced with *Zen* Buddhist ascetic exercises. Later, when he is back in the mundane world and reflecting on his mountain ascetic practice, he doesn't know how to express this mind that is very calm. In *Zen* Buddhism, we refer to this as 'Unspeakable (言語道斷)', which means that we cannot explain with words. But Yulgok knows how it feels to experience a state of complete calmness.

排門忽見入定僧	Open the door, stare at the monk sitting in <i>samadhi</i>
鍊得身形瘦如鶴	Body in the posture of a crane
欣然見我不相語	He seems to be pleased to see me, but no words are spoken
淨掃禪床留我宿	Tidy up the floor for <i>Zen</i> and let me stay (「楓嶽記 所見」, CCY. Vol.1:22).

This poem shows the calmness of the *Zen* monk, and the respect that they have for each other's practice, they don't disturb each other. It is said, 'mind to mind (以心傳心)' and 'never lean on letters (不立文字)' which means, greet in silence and let the guest concentrate on the *Zen* meditation. In this poem Yulgok is a practitioner of *Seon*.

Politically, from Yulgok's perspective of Buddhism, he is critical of Buddhist monks such as master Bo-u, but he apparently is positive about the practice. In the poem above, the image of a monk who looks like a crane is of one who is concentrating on *Seon*. This image is obviously distinguished from an ordinary man in the mundane world.

鈴齋簿牒閒	When the affairs of civil office are not busy
幾叩清平寺	How often might I visit Cheongpyeongsa temple
自嗟絆風塵	I'm tied to worldly affairs
空懷遠遊志	Hopelessly I dream of getting away
何當入禪扃	When can I open that door to the <i>Zen</i> room
共對蒲團睡	Sit on the cushion and fall into a doze (「送沈公直作宰春川」, CCY. Vol.2:26).

Yulgok gave this poem to a civil servant who was appointed to a

near place to the Cheongpyeongsa temple. Here he confesses that he is tied to worldly affairs when what he really desires is to concentrate on *Zen* Buddhism and often fall into a doze. We learned that Yulgok quit the mountain ascetic life because he thought he had realized the limits of Buddhism, but this poem shows his longing to leave behind worldly affairs and the fame and wealth of the world. He longed to be free from restrictions.

採藥忽迷路 Got lost during picking herbs  
 千峰秋葉裡 Went into the autumn tints  
                   that dyed the mountain  
 山僧汲水歸 Buddhist monk draws water from the stream  
 林末茶煙起 Tea smoke rises at the end of the forest  
                   (「山中」, CCY. Vol.1:20).

Again the image of the Buddhist monk is very clean, and he sees far into the world a remote autumn mountain, the Buddhist priest and smoke rising from boiling tea, shows his hope to experience *samādhi*. Tea is intrinsic to *Zen* Buddhism since the time of *Zen* master Zhao-zhou's influence. Dualities are arising constantly in the world in the way of the fight between good and evil, legitimacy and heresy, but *Zen* master Zhao-zhou gave simple teaching to his students such as 'drink tea and go (喫茶去).' Complicated theories and skillful tricks are useless in *Seon*, Yulgok's image of smoke arising from tea at the end of the forest shows a reality free of complexities and confusions.

山月斜移萬木陰 The moon is going down  
                   and shadows from the trees are moving  
 溪風吹雜六絃音 Wind blows from the valley  
                   and buries itself in the sound of strings  
 香煙銷盡長廊靜 Incense smoke is gone  
                   and the room is quiet  
 兀對高僧坐夜深 Sitting face to face  
                   with an old Buddhist monk all night  
                   (「深源寺月夜季獻彈琴次玄玉上人韻」, CCY. Vol.2:24).

Yulgok's idea of Buddhism is to forget about worldly affairs and

drink tea in a remote and calm mountain, while concentrating his mind, and living a calm life. "Sitting" in this poem means *Zen* meditation. "Sitting with the old monk all night" means that he practiced his question in meditation all night. While the poem doesn't mention anything particularly about *Seon*, it shows us that Yulgok was not just trying *Zen* out of curiosity, rather he was seriously trying to concentrate on this practice, which goes beyond worldly things.

### 3. Communication between Confucianism and Buddhism

As mentioned, Yulgok's favorite Buddhist scripture among all was the *Śūrangama Sūtra*.<sup>20</sup> In summary, the *Śūrangama Sūtra* examines the true state of the mind. The reason that Yulgok was interested in Buddhism was not as a religion that would bless his life, but as a method he could use to train his mind. He believed that the most essential aspect of Buddhist teaching is to develop the mind, while the possibility of receiving blessings in this life or the next was of no value to him.

"I know, there are two kinds of Buddhism, one is crude, and the other is fine. The crude form encourages people to believe in transmigration, and keeps them busy offering rice and food to Buddha. But the fine one teaches people how to make their mind calm by recognizing the inherent emptiness of all things (*Li*). This is the most important element among thousands of principles in the world. And by recognizing the original nature of mind, it is possible to attain *nirvāṇa* and be free from worldly affairs" (CCY. Vol.20:64).

For Yulgok, the ideology of Buddhist transmigration and religious retribution was not important, his only interest was in the Buddhist teachings pertaining to mind control. And in regard to this point, Buddhism and *Song* Confucianism shared a common interest in developing the mind. Yulgok's perspective on Buddhism did not deviate very far from Confucian thought, therefore his understanding in this

<sup>20</sup> September 30th of the lunar calendar, 1685 C.E., (ADJ. Vol.39:44).



regard helped to deepen his study of Confucianism.

Yulgok acknowledged that the Buddhist *sūtras* support deep mind development. And it was for this purpose alone that he took tonsure and spent a year in the mountains studying and practicing *Zen* with the Buddhist monks. A secondary purpose was his desire to develop greater courage (Choe, 1995:46). But it's clear that he didn't become a monk out of despair, it was solely an effort to cultivate his mind. This is the singular important consideration in Yulgok's Buddhist perspective. He became a mountain ascetic because he wanted to establish a practice dialogue between *Zen* and Confucianism. This is evident in the letter that he sent to his monk friends where he says,

“Everyone can get *Qi*, but we have to learn to control this *Qi* ourselves, because if we fail to control it then *Qi* will rule our mind. When the *Qi* is under control, it helps us to develop our mind and attain wisdom, but when we are under the control of *Qi*, we are likely to be foolish and mad. There is an old man who knew how to work with *Qi* very well, his name is Mencius. Confucius once said, ‘Wise men are fond of water and generous men are fond of mountains.’ ... And where else, unless I go to the mountain and to water, can I develop my *Qi* in order to become more wise and generous?” (CCY. Vol.35:3).

Speculation on Yulgok's motivation for pursuing a period of ascetic practice has engendered a lot of controversy. But here we can see that his reason was clearly not to avoid life, either from despair or some other reason, but because he had read Buddhist *sūtras* and understood that *Zen* could possibly offer practical guidance about how to develop his mind, and so he decided to try a period of mountain ascetic practice. Choosing to reside in a natural environment far from worldly concerns and to concentrate on developing one's *Qi* is not a practice that is so far removed from mind development practices promoted in Confucianism. We can see from records of the teachings of Confucius and Mencius that this kind of mountain ascetic practice was not uncommon to Confucian. But Yulgok was not only a scholar of *Song* Confucianism, he also had deep understanding of Buddhist truth which

we can glean from the following conversation he had with an old Buddhist monk. The conversation took place in a small Buddhist temple in Mount Geumgang. Yulgok had already had experience with *Zen* and the level of his understanding of this practice as it related to both Confucianism and Buddhism, was well illustrated in this conversation.

Yulgok: Buddhism cannot be practiced in China because it originally came from savages.

Old Buddhist monk: King Shun is from the eastern savage and King Wen is from the western savage.

Yulgok: The perfection of Buddhism is at a much lower level than that of Confucianism. So why are you abandoning Confucianism to practice Buddhism?

Old Buddhist monk: Does Confucianism have such a teaching as 'Buddha is mind?'

Yulgok: Whenever Mencius explained innate goodness he always mentioned Yao, Shun. What is the difference between this teaching and the saying 'Buddha is mind?' (「楓嶽贈小菴老僧」, CCY. Vol.1:21).

The old Buddhist monk raised the question to clarify whether Confucianism was able to offer the same level of teaching as the Buddhist core teaching of "Buddha is mind, which shows that we must search for Buddha in our own mind." He said it would be difficult for Confucianism to really understand this because Confucian ideology supported a variety levels of social rankings and grading, so how could people be regarded as equal within such a system?

Yulgok went on to explain that "the basis of Confucianism is innate goodness, which means that everyone can be sage." Knowing the importance of developing human nature and cultivating one's own mind to attain sagehood as Yao and Shun do, is the same as the Buddhist understanding of, "Buddha is mind."

Yulgok's understanding of Buddhism is partially evident in his explanation that the highest level of enlightenment is to attain sagehood. To become a sage like Yao and Shun in Confucian terms, and to attain the highest level of Buddhist enlightenment, is the same.<sup>21</sup> The conversation continues.

Yulgok: However, Confucianism is sincere.

Old Buddhist monk: (not agreeing at first but after a while) How do you speak of 'Neither existence, nor emptiness' in Confucianism?

Yulgok: It's the same as I said before.

Old Buddhist monk: (smiles).

Yulgok: There is a saying, 'A Black kite is flying in the sky, and fish are swimming in the water (鳶飛戾天 魚躍于淵).' Is this existence or emptiness?

Old Buddhist monk: It is neither existence nor emptiness. It's truth. What can be more precise than this?

Yulgok: (laughing) That is already existence, so how can it be truth? The ultimate principle of Confucianism cannot be delivered with words, and maybe Buddhism also exists beyond words? (「楓嶽贈小菴老僧」, CCY. Vol.1:21).

The conversation based on the saying "Buddha is mind", is about existence and emptiness. What is existence and what is emptiness? The old Buddhist monk said that "Truth is neither existence nor emptiness," but Yulgok disagreed, he explained that "This is still not truth because it is already speech, and just as Buddhist principles cannot be described with words, so too with Confucianism." Thus, truth is the same for both, but if words are used it is not the same.

The old Buddhist monk was surprised at Yulgok's level of understanding and he took Yulgok's hands in his own and said, "You are not an ordinary Confucian scholar. Please explain your understanding to me in the form of a poem." So Yulgok composed a poem and gave it to the monk. After the monk had finished reading it he put the poem in his pocket and turned to face the wall, taking up the sitting posture for *Zen* meditation. At this Yulgok left the place, he had no idea who the monk was. Three days later he visited there again but the monk was gone, there was only the small temple. At first glance, this conversation might be seen as an argument between

21 The person who had the same Buddhism with Yao and Shun was Gui-shan Yang. He persisted that the 9th *alaya-vijnana* of Buddhism was the seed of good and bad (善惡種子) and self-purification without dirt (自淨無垢), which was equivalent to Mencius' good human nature (性善).

Confucianism and Buddhism. However, this would be misleading as neither Yulgok nor the old Buddhist monk were concerned with issues of true *dharma* and heresy. The essence of the interchange was about truth, which is the common goal of both Confucian and Buddhist thought. Yulgok's truth is beyond his religious standing, he was not so concerned about issues of Confucianism or Buddhism, he was only focused on sincerity and truth.

魚躍鳶飛上下同	Swimming fish and flying kite are the same
這般非色亦非空	It is neither existence nor emptiness
等閒一笑看身世	Smiling without intention and staring at me
獨立斜陽萬目中	Alone in the dusk, in the forest
	(「楓嶽贈小菴老僧」, CCY. Vol.1:21).

#### IV. Conclusion

Yulgok is the most respected sage in Korean Confucian history. He did not just accept the Confucian doctrine without criticism, but through in-depth analysis and introspection, he realized the world of truth and endeavored to practice it in his own world. Of course he was fortunate that, in the age that he lived, Queen Munjeong was a powerful force in support of Buddhism because in the period of *Song* Confucian rule it was not easy for a Confucian scholar to read Buddhist *sūtras* and undertake Buddhist mountain ascetic practice. But after his mother died his pressing question about life and death led him to enquire deeply into the nature of existence in order to find truth.

Although he did not gain a certainty from his *Zen* experience while practicing on Mount Geumgang, nevertheless, he did come to firmly realize that ordinary human nature is just the same as that of Buddha, Yao and Shun. In this manner, Yulgok was not a blind Confucian, merely adopting the prevailing trend of criticizing Buddhism as with other fanatics of the time, rather, he was sincere in his determination to develop his mind and to search within himself for truth. This was based on 'the study for the self cultivation (爲己之學)' and was evidenced by his sojourn into Buddhist practice and his

continued practice for a number of years after returning to the world.

In his mountain ascetic *Zen* practice he had experienced calm and clear mind and he had a great fondness for this kind of mood he had known in the mountains. At the time Buddhism was newly emerging, but the fundamentals of the society were still firmly based on *Song* Confucianism, so that it was hard to appreciate the merits of Buddhism as it was firmly outlawed by Confucian edicts. Nevertheless, Yulgok sought to understand the truth of both doctrines and came to believe firmly that “There is not a big difference between Buddhism and Confucianism, as both follow the way of *Zen* and emphasize that all human nature is equal and important.” Although Yulgok was a critic of master Bo-u, a noted Buddhist monk at that time, we do not find anything in his writings in the *Complete Collection of Yulgok* that is disparaging of Buddhist teachings. Instead, we find evidence of his efforts to further communication between Confucianism and Buddhism, within his understanding of *Song* Confucianism. And indeed, it is possible to find that such a commonality as *Song* Confucian and Buddhist philosophy had largely affected each other in that historical period.

Yulgok considered *Li* and *Qi* to be equal in value and he sought the means to fuse them into one, and this was the main reason for his efforts to establish communication between Confucianism and Buddhism. His ideas were not contrary to *Song* Confucianism, and, in fact, from the middle period of *Song* Confucianism's influence, the philosophy was amended to more closely mirror Buddhist and Taoist ways of thinking. Yulgok believed that “It is not possible for a idle person to represent the basis of truth and the most important thing is whether truth is logical.” In this regard he was free from Zhu-xi absolutism.

It would be misleading to say that Yulgok was a Buddhist ascetic although he studied Buddhism and Taoism without prejudice, but he never remained dependent on these teachings, instead, he became even more critical.<sup>22</sup> And through his ability and commitment to seek deeper

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<sup>22</sup> There is no interpretation for the Buddhism, the only interpretation of Taoism is *Sun-eon*. The writing is not definitely fascinated by Buddhism or Taoism. He said that *Tao-te Ching* made people to practice Buddhism or Taoism in an inappropriate ways, and the number of the

truths both by examining other doctrines and through his own practical experience, he was able to broaden the world of Confucianism.

### Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese, S=Sanskrit, P=Pali)

- Ālaya-vijñāna (S) 阿賴耶識  
 Arhat (S) 阿羅漢  
 Avataṃsaka Sūtra (S) 華嚴經  
 Baekguju (K) 白鷗州  
 Bhikkhuni (P) 比丘尼  
 Bongseonsa (K) 奉恩寺  
 Bongseonsa (K) 奉先寺  
 Cheonghak-dong (K) 青鶴洞  
 Cheong-heo Hyu-jeong (K) 清虛 休靜  
 Cheongpyeongsa (K) 清平寺  
 Confucius (C) 孔子  
 Dharma (S) 法  
 Dù-shùn (C) 杜順  
 Gang Kim (K) 金綱  
 Geumgang (K) 金剛  
 Gong-an (K) 公案  
 Gui-shan Yang (C) 楊龜山  
 Gyeokmong yo-gyeol (K) 擊蒙要訣  
 Gyeongsang-do (K) 慶尙道  
 Heng-qu Zhang (C) 張橫渠  
 Heo-eung Bowo (K) 虛應普雨  
 Insuwon (K) 仁壽院  
 Ipsan (K) 入山  
 Jangsaeng Kim (K) 金長生  
 Jasugung (K) 慈壽宮  
 Jasuwon (K) 慈壽院

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temples grew and made the spirits stronger. He blamed *Tao-te Ching* for being guilty for all people and it was not the justice" (*Sun-eon*, Chapter 35; Yu, 2002:115-116).

Jeju (K) 濟州  
Jeong-eop-won (K) 淨業院  
Joseon (K) 朝鮮  
Li (C) 理  
Mahayeon (C) 摩訶衍  
Mencius (C) 孟子  
Minjeok Yi (K) 李敏迪  
Munjeong (K) 文定  
Myeongjong (K) 明宗  
Naesusa (K) 內需司  
Naewondang (K) 內願堂  
Odae (K) 五臺  
Pratitya-samutpāda (S) 緣起  
Qi (C) 氣  
Samādhi (S) 三昧  
Sa-myeong Yu-jeong (K) 泗溟 惟政  
Seong-hon (K) 成渾  
Seongjong (K) 成宗  
Shi (C) 事  
Shun (C) 舜  
Siyeol Song (K) 宋時烈  
Song (K, C) 宋  
Sujin (K) 守眞  
Sun-eon (K) 醇言  
Śurangama Sūtra (S) 首楞嚴經  
Susin Ro (K) 盧守愼  
Tang (C) 唐  
Tao-te Ching (C) 道德經  
Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā sūtra (S) 金剛般若波羅密經  
Vijñāna (S) 識  
Wen (C) 文  
Woljeongsa (K) 月精寺  
Yao (C) 堯  
Yuan-jiao-jing (C) 圓覺經

Yulgok Yiyi (K) 栗谷 李珥  
 Zen (J), Seon (K), Chan (C) 禪  
 Zhao-zhou (C) 趙州  
 Zhu-xi (C) 朱熹

## Abbreviations

- AHR-R *Annals of king Hyeonjong's Reign - Rev. Ed* (顯宗改修實錄). In AJD.
- AJD *Annals of Joseon Dynasty* (朝鮮王朝實錄). Seoul: National Institute of Korean History. 1955-1958.
- AMR *Annals of king Myeongjong's Reign* (明宗實錄). In AJD.
- ASR *Annals of king Sukjong's Reign* (肅宗實錄). In AJD.
- AZ *Analects of master Zhu* (朱子語類).
- CCY *Complete Collection of Yulgok* (栗谷全書). Seoul : Daedong Institute of Cultural Studies at Seongkyunkwan Univ. 1978.
- T *Taishyō-shinsy-daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經; Japanese Edition of Chinese *Tripitaka*). Tokyo: Taishō-Issaikyō-Kankōkai.

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