

# The Life and Letters of Sŏn Master Hanam

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*This article is the first of a series examining the life and letters of sŏn master Hanam Sunim. One of several outstanding sŏn masters who appeared in Korea during the end of the Chosŏn dynasty and the Japanese occupation of Korea, Hanam Sunim played a major role in sustaining and invigorating the Buddhism of Korea. Yet until recently there has been very little research on his life or thought in any language, let alone English. To this end, this first article will examine his life while following articles will examine the major themes that appear in his letters.*

Key words: Hanam Chungwŏn, Biography, Letters, Kyŏnghŏ, Kŏngbong.

## **I. Introduction**

The end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was a turbulent time for the people of Korea. As the old Chosŏn dynasty

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weakened and modern influences seeped into the country, Japan took advantage of the confusion to seek control of the country. However, as hardships increased and the era became more perilous, a number of great Buddhist masters arose, seemingly in response to the need of the times. Through their guidance, traditional Buddhist values were upheld and individual spiritual practice was encouraged.

Surprisingly, given the crucial role these masters played, there has been only sporadic research about their lives and teachings in the Korean language, and in English virtually none. One of these monks was the outstanding sŏn master, Hanam Sunim.<sup>1</sup>

Hanam Sunim was one of the foremost sŏn masters of his day, but unfortunately most of his writings have been lost. A fire at Sangwŏn Temple in 1947 claimed all known copies of the collection of Hanam Sunim's writings titled *Ilballok* (一鉢錄), and the ensuing Korean war destroyed and scattered much of what remained. What is left today consists of articles published in Buddhist journals, book prefaces, and letters and poems sent to individuals.

Hanam Sunim maintained an extensive correspondence with major Buddhist figures of the day, and fortunately, 37 of these letters survive. This study examined these letters with the goal of identifying major themes of Hanam Sunim's thought, and relevant biographical details that may have been overlooked in previous research. One of Hanam Sunim's correspondents, Kyŏngbong Sunim,<sup>2</sup> kept an extensive diary for nearly all of his life, which provides much new information about his correspondence with Hanam Sunim. Surprisingly, before this paper, no one had ever used Kyŏngbong Sunim's diary to try to date Hanam Sunim's letters, and only cursory efforts had been made to use the diary to determine the questions that Kyŏngbong Sunim sent Hanam Sunim.<sup>3</sup>

1 Hanam Chungwŏn 漢巖 重遠 (1876-1951). Chungwŏn was his Dharma name and Hanam was his nickname, and was pronounced *han-am*. His family name was Pang (方). "Sunim" (*su-nim*) is the respectful address for a Buddhist monk or nun in Korea.

2 Kyŏngbong Chŏngsŏk 鏡峰 靖錫 (1892-1982).

3 Yoon, Chang-hwa incorporated the results of this research in his Korean-language paper, *Hanam sŏnsaui*

## II. Previous Research

It has only been since 2005 with the formation of the Research Institute of Han-am's Thought, that systematic examination, in Korean, of Hanam Sunim's thought has begun to take place. In spring of 2006, and again in 2007, the Research Institute of Han-am's Thought held a two day conference at Woljŏng Temple. Each conference produced four in-depth papers, each followed by a commentator, which were published as the *Journal of Han-am's Thought*.<sup>4</sup> Also, in 2006 Kim, Kwang-sik published *Missing our Teacher, Hanam Sunim*, an outstanding collection of interviews with various people who knew Hanam Sunim.

Before 2005, Korean-language research about Hanam Sunim consisted largely of the body of research done by Kim, Ho-sŏng, much of which is included in his book, *Sŏn Master Pang Hanam*. Hanam Sunim was also the topic of a master's thesis, *A Study of Sŏn Master Hanam's Thought about Buddhist Education*, by Choi, Su-do. Unfortunately, none of the research discussed so far is available in English.

The letters of Hanam Sunim are an attractive object of research for several reasons. First, as mentioned before, no previous research has closely examined them as a group. Next, these letters represent a private correspondence with advanced practitioners, where Hanam Sunim may have discussed ideas different from those he did in texts intended for the general public. Also, nearly all of them are an exact record of what he wrote, not someone else's summation, and there is no question about their authenticity. Last, they provide an opportunity to observe the personal interactions between himself and another well-known Sŏn master, Kyŏngbong Sunim.

While there has been much interest of late in Korean-language research

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*soganmun goch'al* (A Study of Sŏn Master Hanam's Letters). In this paper, Yoon covers much the same ground in Korean as the author's 2002 English-language thesis, while also covering several new points and filling in important details. Yoon also provides copies of two newly discovered letters by Hanam Sunim.

4 While the English titles are the same, the April 2006 edition was published under the title *Hanam Sasang Yeongu* (漢巖思想研究) and the May 2007 edition was published as *Hanam Sasang* (漢巖思想).

about Hanam Sunim unfortunately there is still very little English-language research. Aside from this author's research, which was originally submitted as a Master's thesis to Dongguk University (Zingmark 2002), there is only one other substantial examination of Hanam Sunim in English. This is the forthcoming article by Patrick Uhlmann, "Sŏn Master Pang Hanam: A Preliminary Consideration of His Thought According to the Five Regulations for the Sangha." This is an excellent treatment of Hanam Sunim's thought along the lines of the five regulations he set forth for sunims: namely that monks understand and be able to practice sŏn, chanting, sutras, ceremonies, and be able to take care of temples.

A few other publications have had a page or two about Hanam Sunim,<sup>5</sup> but they tend to contain substantial misinformation and mistranslations.

For example, Mu Soeng Sunim (1991: 188) says "before his ordination, (Hanam Sunim) was employed as a farmhand where one day he witnessed the merciless beating to death of a farm laborer by his master." According to the story, this incident brought home to him the suffering of human existence, which lead him to become a monk. However, none of Hanam Sunim's disciples have ever mentioned this story. Where it originated is a mystery.

Likewise, the Sino-Korean for Hanam Sunim's first enlightenment poem reads: 脚下青天頭上巒. This can perhaps best be read as "Under my feet, the blue sky, overhead, the earth," which seems to mean that everything was turned upside down. However, Seo (1969: 399) translates this line as "Blue mountain under foot, mountain peak on my head." Mu Soeng Sunim (1991: 188) repeats this same translation, while the unknown translator of Mok (1993: 254) translates this as "Under the bridge there is the sky, above the head there is the earth." None of these translations convey a meaning even close to "upside down."

Although these kinds of errors are frustrating, they're also understandable, given the difficulties of language and availability of primary materials. Checking every single fact that has appeared in previous research with original texts is an extremely tedious and time-consuming effort. In an

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5 i.e. Seo (1969: 398-400), Mu Soeng Sunim (1991: 187-189), and Mok (1993: 253-257).

emerging area of study like this, these kinds of mistakes are part of a natural process of successive approximations, with each new work gradually improving the overall understanding.

Nevertheless, it does raise the question: If the available translated materials about Hanam Sunim contain this many mistakes, what of the works of other major figures such as Kyōnghō and Mangong?

### III. The Life of Hanam Sunim

In Korea, the general understanding of Hanam Sunim's life comes from primarily two sources, a biography written by his disciple, Tanhō Sunim,<sup>6</sup> and a popular radio drama of his life, broadcast by Korea's Buddhist Broadcasting Station.

However, the letters that Hanam Sunim wrote clarify two general areas of his life. The first is the idea that he never left the Odae Mountains for the 25 years he was there. The second area is the mystery of his activities between 1914 and 1925, which Tanhō Sunim passes over without saying anything. Perhaps the best place to begin is with Tanhō Sunim's biography. What follows is a summary of Tanhō Sunim's work, with additional details filled in by the author.

The information about Hanam Sunim's life that has been available to date in English is so filled with errors, with few, if any, sources cited, that the reader is urged to view these materials with due caution.

#### 1. Early Life

Hanam Sunim was born on March 27, 1876, in the district of Hwachōn, Kangwōn Province, in what is now South Korea. His family was of the

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6 Kim, Tanhō (Tanhō T'aeksōng 呑虛 宅成, 1913-1983) was one of Hanam Sunim's outstanding disciples. His fame as a scholar is renowned to this day in Buddhist circles in Korea. He became a monk under Hanam Sunim in 1934. For a more detailed account of Hanam Sunim's practice from 1899-1914, see the recently discovered *Isaeng p'aegwōl* (Yoon 2006).

upper, or Yangban, class and he went through the traditional course of study in the Confucian classics. The first sign of his spiritual questioning happened when he was eight years old. Upon reading in a traditional text, called the *Shilue*, that a giant named Pangu had created the world, Hanam couldn't stop wondering about what had existed before Pangu.

Hanam Sunim was about 20 years old, in 1896, when he became a sunim. Until recently, it was unknown if Hanam Sunim had been previously married or not. Men often married as young as 13 or 14, so an unmarried 20 year old would have been a bit unusual. However, in Kim, Kwang-sik (2006: 356), Hanam Sunim's nephew, Pang Jinsŏng, recounts that as a boy he heard that Hanam Sunim's family had arranged for him to be married, but his future wife rejected him because he was poor and had no house of his own. Whether this was the excuse Hanam Sunim was looking for, or the cause of a spiritual crisis is unknown. Following this, Hanam Sunim went on a tour of the Diamond Mountains, and apparently unexpectedly, decided to become a sunim.

He entered Changan Temple as a haengja,<sup>7</sup> and his guiding sunim was Haenglŭm Kŭmwŏl. Some time later he left there to continue his studies at Shingye Temple.<sup>8</sup> One day, he came across the following paragraph while reading Pojo Chinul's *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*:

If they aspire to the path of the Buddha while obstinately holding to their feelings that the Buddha is outside the mind or the Dharma outside the nature, then, even though they pass through kalpas as numerous as dust motes, burning their bodies, charring their arms, crushing their bones and exposing their marrow, or else copying sutras with their own blood, never laying down to sleep, eating only one offering a day at the hour of the Hare (5-7 a.m.), or even studying through the entire Tripitaka and cultivating all sorts of ascetic practices, all of this is like trying to make rice by boiling sand—it will only add to their tribulation (Buswell 1983: 140-141).

<sup>7</sup> 行者: A haengja is someone who has entered a temple with the intention to become a sunim but has not yet been ordained. Their position is similar to a trainee.

<sup>8</sup> These temples are in the Diamond Mountains, in what is now North Korea. However, both were utterly destroyed during the Korean War.

Upon reading this Hanam Sunim experienced his first enlightenment. The year was 1899, and he had been a monk for three years.

## 2. Meeting Kyōnghō Sunim

After Hanam Sunim's first enlightenment experience, he made his way south to Sudo Hermitage,<sup>9</sup> he met Kyōnghō Sunim.<sup>10</sup> Meeting Hanam Sunim, Kyōnghō Sunim quoted the following phrase from the *Diamond Sutra*: "If one sees all forms as non-form, then can one directly see the Tathagata" (T.8.749a24-25).

Upon hearing this, Hanam Sunim experienced a second enlightenment, and "felt that the whole universe could be seen in one glance and whatever was to be heard or seen was nothing other than that which was within himself." He composed the following poem:

Under my feet, the blue sky, overhead, the earth.  
 Inherently there is no inside or outside or middle.  
 The lame person walks and the blind person sees.  
 The north mountain answers the south mountain without words  
 (HIBL: 453).

From 1899 to 1903, Hanam Sunim spent the retreat seasons either studying under Kyōnghō Sunim or attending retreat seasons at other meditation halls in the region. They spent the summer retreat season of 1903 together at Haein Temple, and later that fall, Kyōnghō Sunim headed north by himself. He passed away in what is now North Korea in 1912.

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<sup>9</sup> This hermitage is located in the mountains north of Haein Temple.

<sup>10</sup> Kyōnghō Sōng-u 鏡虛 惺牛 (1846-1912).

### 3. Hanam Sunim's Name

A curious thing about Hanam Sunim's letters is his use of two different characters, both pronounced "han," to spell his name. Although Hanam Sunim almost always used the character "漢,"<sup>11</sup> in his fourth letter he used the character "寒," which means cold. In some of his early Dharma talks that were published in Buddhist journals, Hanam Sunim's name was also spelt "寒巖." The character "寒," means cold or distant, but it can also have a meaning of returning to the root or foundation, such as plants do when the weather turns cold. Also, on some letters Hanam Sunim used the Dharma name Chungwŏn (重遠) rather than Hanam (漢巖).

For many years the reasons for these differences was unclear, but in Kim, Kwang-sik (2006: 162), a sunim who studied under Hanam Sunim helped clarify this issue. Apparently Hanam Sunim had received the dharma name 寒巖 from Kyŏnghŏ Sunim. Feeling that the meaning was too cold, Hanam Sunim later changed the first character to 漢. This would also imply that Chungwŏn (重遠) was probably the original name Hanam Sunim received upon his ordination.

### 4. 1904-1912

In 1904, at the age of 29, Hanam Sunim became the head of the meditation hall at Tongdo Temple. However in 1910, while studying a scripture, he came across a passage that he himself didn't fully understand. The next day he ordered the meditation hall closed and made his way to Udu Hermitage near Maeng-san district in Pyŏngan-do (in the northwestern area of present-day North Korea) in order to continue his practice. He stayed in that area until at least 1912. As the Maeng-san district is just south of the Myohyang Mountains,<sup>12</sup> it's probable that Hanam Sunim spent time at different

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11 This is also the name of the Han river that flows central Korea and has a nuance of "great flowing," while "寒, 巖" has a meaning of great rock or cliff.

12 The Myohyang Mountains are large mountainous area near the border with China. They are about 70-80 kilometers north of Maeng-san. The Myohyang Mountains were a major Buddhist center, with



temples in this area.

One day, while starting a fire, Hanam Sunim had his third enlightenment experience, and composed the following poems:

Making a fire in the kitchen, suddenly my eyes became bright.  
It's clear that the path leading here was due to karmic affinity,  
If someone were to ask me why Bodhidharma came from the west,  
I'd say that the sound of a spring under a rock is never wet.

The dogs in the village bark, suspicious of me  
Magpies cry out, as if mocking me.  
Eternally shining, the bright moon that is mind,  
Swept the wind out of the world in an instant (HIBL: 456-457).

## 5. 1912-1925

Although it is known that Hanam Sunim was at Udu Hermitage in 1912, for many years it was not clear where Hanam Sunim went afterwards. In his biography of Hanam Sunim, Tanhō Sunim says nothing more about Hanam Sunim until he appears in Seoul in 1925.

However, a careful reading of the letters sent between Hanam Sunim and Mangong Sunim provides some hints of Hanam Sunim's travels. At the very end of the first series of letters, it says, "This series of letters was sent while Hanam Sunim lived in the Myohyang Mountains." (Mangong Sunim 1968: 96) It's unclear who recorded these exchanges, but Tanhō Sunim appears to have accepted them as authentic (c.f. HIBL: 457-459).

The next series of letters Mangong Sunim sent to Hanam Sunim starts off with the statement, "By going to the Diamond Mountains, you've...", indicating that Hanam Sunim was at that time residing in the Diamond Mountains. Thus, these letters provide a reason to believe that Hanam Sunim spent time at both the Myohyang and Diamond Mountains.

Mangong Sunim and Hanam Sunim's role as Dharma teachers was often described as "Mangong in the South, Hanam in the North," with Mangong

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several major temples and many smaller hermitages.

Sunim at Sudŏk Temple and Hanam Sunim at Sangwŏn Temple. However, I wonder if this saying didn't actually originate during Hanam Sunim's time in the Myohyang Mountains. Sangwŏn Temple isn't particularly that far north of Sudŏk Temple. In fact it is about twice as far east as it is north. Whereas the Myohyang Mountains are very far to the north of Sudŏk Temple.

A series of Dharma talks that Hanam Sunim at the 1922 gathering of Sŏn practitioners<sup>13</sup> at Kŏnbong Temple establish that Hanam Sunim was in the Diamond Mountains at least as late as 1921-1922. In one of these Dharma talks, he says that he was at Changan Temple in the Diamond Mountains when he received the invitation to come to Kŏnbong Temple.<sup>14</sup>

With this new information it is possible to construct a tentative description of Hanam Sunim's activities between 1912 and 1925. Keeping in mind that there may have been some backtracking in his travels, Hanam Sunim probably left Maeng-san and traveled north the Myohyang Mountains. Based upon his activities at Tongdo Temple, and later at Pongŭn Temple and Sangwŏn Temple, it's likely that he supervised the meditation hall of one of the large temples and probably also taught sutras. He probably spent at least a year or two here before moving to Diamond Mountains and eventually to Changan Temple, the temple where he was ordained. It was from here that he left to go to the 1922 gathering of Sŏn practitioners at Kŏnbong Temple, in the outer Diamond Mountains. His presence at the gathering of monks at Kŏnbong Temple in 1922 would also have almost certainly elicited a number of requests to teach at other temples. He might have accepted some of these, or he may have returned to Changan Temple.

Perhaps it was due to one of these invitations that Hanam Sunim next appears as the spiritual head of Pongŭn Temple in Seoul in 1925. This is where his official biography picks up the trail of his life. He stayed there for about a year, but left suddenly in early 1926. It was from here that Hanam Sunim eventually went to Sangwŏn Temple and the Odae Mountains. He did not go there directly, but rather went first to Kangwha Island on the west

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13 Much'a sŏnhoi 無遮禪會.

14 "Sŏnjung banghamlok so (Address to the Assembly of Sunims at Kŏnbong Temple)" (HIBL: 335).

coast and then to the city of Kaesŏng.<sup>15</sup> After visiting Kaesŏng, he started walking east. When Hanam Sunim traveled, he would never ride in a car or bus, nor would he stay at an inn, instead he would sleep only in temples. If there was no temple nearby, he just kept walking. In due course, Hanam Sunim and his attendant arrived on foot at the Odae Mountains.

As Hanam Sunim left Pongŭn Temple, someone asked him why he was leaving. He replied, "It's better to be a crane that hides all traces of itself than learn to be a parrot that never shuts up" (HIBL: 460). Based on this statement, it is generally felt that the reason he left Seoul was to avoid becoming entangled in the politics of the day. However, the monk who was his attendant at the time remembers another reason. He reports that for some time Hanam Sunim had decided that he would return to the Diamond Mountains because he was suffering from some sort of gastrointestinal illness and wanted to go somewhere that had good water. But, sometime before Hanam Sunim left, he received a request from the new abbot of Wŏljŏng Temple, who asked for Hanam Sunim's help in saving the temples of the Odae Mountains (Yongmyŏng Sunim 2002).

This raises the question: Which was the real reason Hanam Sunim left Seoul? I suspect that both reasons are accurate. It's unlikely that Hanam Sunim would have confided his thoughts about the political situation in Seoul to his young attendant, whereas it would have been much less dangerous to discuss things like his health or where he hoped to move someday. At any rate, after Hanam Sunim's arrival, Sangwŏn Temple became a major practice center far from the events of Seoul, where monks from throughout Korea came to study and practice under Hanam Sunim.

## 6. The Odae Mountains and Sangwŏn Temple.

The Odae Mountains (五臺山) lie in the northeast corner of what is now South Korea. They are named after the Wutai Mountains in China, and the Sino-Korean characters are exactly the same for both mountain ranges.

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15 Kaesŏng (開城) is located just across the DMZ in what is now North Korea.

Both are as have five peaks, and it was because of the resemblance of these Korean mountains to the Wutai Mountains of China that a monk returning from China gave them their name. The Odae Mountains form a U-shape, facing south, that surrounds a large valley that is almost all farmland. Because of the high altitude, over 700 meters above sea level, potatoes were the staple crop. The biggest temple in the area is Wŏljŏng Temple (月精寺), which sits at the far end of the valley. There are several meditation halls and many hermitages in the mountains and smaller valleys behind Wŏljŏng Temple. Wŏljŏng Temple was founded in the year 645 CE, and Sangwŏn Temple (上院寺) was founded about the same time. Sangwŏn Temple sits several kilometers away from Wŏljŏng Temple, higher up in the mountains, and is well known as a meditation hall.

After Hanam Sunim entered the Odae Mountains, he went to a small hermitage above Sangwŏn Temple, called Saja Hermitage (獅子庵).<sup>16</sup> Upon arriving, he drove his walking stick into the ground and left it there. It sprouted and grew into a large tree that can still be seen in front of Saja Hermitage. There is no record of Hanam Sunim explaining what this event meant.

For the next 25 years at Sangwŏn Temple, Hanam Sunim taught meditation along with the sutras and encouraged his students to be able to perform all the ceremonies that a monk might be asked to do.<sup>17</sup> This is today considered quite an unusual way to run a meditation hall, especially since Hanam Sunim was such a well-known Sŏn master. He was also very diligent in keeping all of the precepts, and visitors frequently remarked on his humility, kindness, and gentleness.

Tanhŏ Sunim briefly mentions that in May 1941 Hanam Sunim was elected as the spiritual leader (宗正) of the newly formed Jogye Order (曹溪宗). It appears that Hanam Sunim didn't even know that he had been nominated. However, Hanam Sunim swore that no matter what they did, he wasn't leaving the Odae Mountains. Perhaps he felt that this was an attempt

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<sup>16</sup> This hermitage is also called Chungdae Hermitage (中臺庵).

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this, see Patrick Uhlmann's outstanding paper, "Son Master Pang Hanam: A Preliminary Consideration of His Thoughts According to the Five Regulations for the Sangha."

to drag him into the politics of the day, or an attempt to use his reputation to support the policies of the Japanese government. Although he literally said that he wasn't leaving the mountains (Lee 1941), this is perhaps best read as saying that he wouldn't go to Seoul. It's more likely that he just didn't want to have anything to do with the Japanese government, because in 1946, after Korea had been liberated, Hanam Sunim said in his letter to Hyobong Sunim<sup>18</sup> that he was thinking about moving to Haein Temple (海印寺) (Sök 1998: 352). Several eminent members of the new Jogye Order went to Sangwön Temple and repeatedly asked Hanam Sunim to serve as the spiritual leader. He consistently refused, but in the end he accepted after they said that he could stay in the Odae Mountains and that they would take care of all the duties of the position (Lee 1941). Perhaps Hanam Sunim felt that the sunims who visited him were sincere in their request, or perhaps he sensed that there was a limit to how strongly he could refuse the position without bringing the wrath of the Japanese authorities down on the sunims living in the Odae Mountains.

The Japanese government required that those in public positions show their support for the Japanese rule of Korea. Even silence would have been interpreted as opposition, and dealt with harshly. If the person involved was too famous to touch, pressure would have been applied to those under him. Thus, when the Japanese government ordered the Jogye Order to issue a public statement supporting some policy, it appears that it fell to the Jogye Order headquarters in Seoul to write and publish the statement. This may have been what headquarters staff meant when they told Hanam Sunim that they would take care of the all duties associated with the position of spiritual leader of the Jogye Order. They appear to have published several spurious proclamations and Dharma talks under Hanam Sunim's name. All of these documents were published only in the journal *Shinpulgyo* and published with a Japanese-style, four-character name for Hanam Sunim—山川 重遠.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Hyobong Wönmyōng 曉峰 元明 (1888-1966).

19 The Japanese government in Korea required that all Korean change their name from three-character names, pronounced in Korean, to four-character names, pronounced in Japanese. This policy was especially hated by Koreans. From its introduction in the late 1930's to the end of the Japanese

One particularly blatant example is a proclamation published shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Published in every Buddhist newspaper for the week of January 15, 1942, it lists Hanam Sunim as the author, has a four-character Japanese-style name for him, a large formal picture of him, and says, in effect, that, “it’s unfortunate that war has started, but, since it has, everyone should do their utmost to support the (Japanese) Emperor (and the war).” The start of the Pacific War would have most certainly been an occasion when everyone was required to show their support for the Emperor. Thus, it appears that someone on the staff at the Jogye Order headquarters wrote the necessary statement of support and made up the required Japanese-style name for Hanam Sunim. It’s doubtful that Hanam Sunim even knew that this had been published. It was so unlike any of Hanam Sunim’s other writings that it’s equally doubtful that the article fooled many people into thinking that he had actually written it. In fairness to the staff at the Jogye Order headquarters, not to have issued such a statement probably would have led to their arrest and imprisonment.

After Korea was liberated from the Japanese in August of 1945, the Jogye Order was dissolved, possibly because of the appearance of having been too close to the Japanese occupation government. A new Jogye Order was founded in 1946, and after its spiritual leader passed away in 1948, Hanam Sunim again served as the spiritual head of the Jogye Order. There is no record of him having been as reluctant as before to accept the position, but all the same, he did not go to Seoul.

In 1947, a fire burned down Sangwŏn Temple. In a letter to Kyŏngbong Sunim, Hanam Sunim relates the circumstances of the fire. Fanned by a strong wind, the fire arose suddenly one evening and burned down both the Dharma hall and the living quarters on either side. Hanam Sunim states that the Buddha statue and the box containing the sutras were the only things that were saved. However, as Hanam Sunim describes,

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occupation in 1945, enforcement of this policy became progressively harsher. However, Hanam Sunim ignored this policy and continued to use his family name, Bang-方, plus his Buddhist name, Hanam-漢巖, or Chungwŏn-重遠 on his letters and Dharma talks. There is no example in his handwriting of him ever using the four-character name that these articles were published under.

reconstruction was started almost immediately. Although Hanam Sunim himself was uncertain about the outcome, Sangwŏn Temple was rebuilt within a year. In letters and newspaper accounts of the time, people seem to have been quite amazed that such a cash-poor, remote temple could have been rebuilt in such a short time.

Among the casualties of the fire was the collection of Hanam Sunim's writings, titled *Ilballok*. It is believed that all existing copies of this book were destroyed in the fire.

### 7. Never Leaving the Mountains

Even while Hanam Sunim was alive, visitors were impressed that he didn't leave the Odae Mountains, and after Hanam Sunim passed away, much was written about him never having left the Odae Mountains for the 25 years he lived there. Even his biographer, Tanhŏ Sunim, stated that Hanam Sunim had never left the Odae Mountains for 25 years.

However, a careful reading of Kyŏngbong Sunim's diary reveals that he did in fact leave the Odae Mountains at least once (Sŏk 1992: 102-104). In an entry dated October 4, 1931, Kyŏngbong Sunim says that Hanam Sunim arrived there that evening and goes on to record the Sŏn questions and answers that passed between them. On October 6, Kyŏngbong Sunim says that Hanam Sunim left early that morning, before anyone else had awakened.

Further research revealed an interview, published in 1934, in Chŏsen Bukkyo, a Japanese-language Buddhist journal, where Hanam Sunim actually said that he had left the Odae Mountains twice (Yamashita 1934). He said that he left once to go to Seoul to get his teeth fixed and once to make a pilgrimage to Bulguk Temple (佛國寺). Bulguk Temple is an impressive temple outside of Gyeongju city, north of Pusan. Hanam Sunim probably did go there, as it is relatively close to Tongdo Temple where Kyŏngbong Sunim was staying, but it's doubtful that was his real purpose in going south. Hanam Sunim and Kyŏngbong Sunim had exchanged several letters, and it seems likely that Hanam Sunim's real purpose was to meet Kyŏngbong Sunim

and to perhaps ascertain for himself the awakening that Kyŏngbong Sunim had written about.

The person Hanam Sunim told all this to was the supervisor of all Japanese police forces in Korea. So it appears certain that Hanam Sunim wasn't trying to keep his departures a secret. Nor does it appear that he was trying establish an excuse for not being able to travel to Seoul, i.e., that he had some sort of spiritual practice that required him to stay put in the Odae Mountains. The question then arises: Why did people think that he had never left the Odae Mountains? There are a few likely reasons for this.

First, Tanhŏ Sunim himself may have been unaware that Hanam Sunim had left the Odae Mountains. Tanhŏ Sunim became a monk in 1934, the same year as the interview, and as a novice monk it's unlikely that he would have been present at the interview. Further, from the contents of his letters, it's probable that Hanam Sunim never did leave the Odae Mountains after 1934. It's also likely that those monks close to Hanam Sunim at the time didn't view his travels as anything of interest. Next, the interview was published entirely in Japanese, probably for a Japanese audience, whereas Korean was the language of the Buddhist journals that usually printed Hanam Sunim's Dharma talks. On top of all this, Hanam Sunim's letters weren't available to the public until 1991, with the publication of *The Collected Works of Hanam* (Sŏk 1991). Apparently, Tanhŏ Sunim, who passed away in 1983, just didn't know that Hanam Sunim had left the Odae Mountains.

A popular radio drama about Hanam Sunim's life by the Buddhist Broadcasting Station of Korea furthered the misconception that Hanam Sunim had determined never to leave the Odae Mountains. It even included a story about him making the trip over the mountains that separated Sangwŏn Temple from the East Sea<sup>20</sup> in order to see the ocean before going back to the Odae Mountains. In the drama, when his disciple asked him why they were going to the ocean, Hanam Sunim answered that he wanted to see it one last time because he never intended to leave the Odae Mountains again. However, there is no evidence whatsoever for any of this. All of it appears to be the

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<sup>20</sup> Also known as the Sea of Japan.



product of the scriptwriter's imagination.

In the 1941 newspaper article that reported Hanam Sunim's reluctance to assume the position as spiritual head of the Jogye Order (Lee 1941), Hanam Sunim is reported as saying, "I've decided not to leave the mountains." However, this may be a polite way of saying, "I won't go to Seoul." As will be seen, in several of Hanam Sunim's letters he mentions his hope that he will be able to visit the writer. It's worth noting, however, that none of these places were near Seoul, all were in the deep mountains. When Hanam Sunim said that he would never leave the mountains, this was more a statement about his determination to focus on spiritual practice, and avoid getting involved in power politics and administrative issues, than it was a statement about some desire on his part to stay in one particular location without ever leaving.

It has been my experience in talking about Hanam Sunim that many people, including monks and nuns, have the impression that Hanam Sunim never left the Odae Mountains because he was engaged in some particular form of asceticism. However, Hanam Sunim himself never said anything to the effect that his staying in one place was a form of spiritual practice. Nor did Tanhō Sunim, he just said that Hanam Sunim hadn't left for 25 years.

In fact, it seems like it would be a grave misunderstanding to think that a sōn master like Hanam Sunim would try to engage in a practice that required the practitioner to stay in only one particular place. After all, Hanam Sunim had his first enlightenment experience after reading a paragraph that warned about the futility of trying to find Buddha or the Dharma outside of the mind. Similarly, in his first letter to Tanhō Sunim, Hanam Sunim emphasizes this theme, saying, "inherently the way (i.e. the Buddha-dharma) exists everywhere and is complete as it is ..." (HIBL: 218). Further in the letter, he continues,

You may think that (your surroundings are) too bothersome and so seek tranquility, or feel that you have to throw away the worldly and find the true, but above all you must not do this. Search for the tranquil in the noisy, and find the true inside the worldly (HIBL: 218).

Thus, it seems to imply that any ascetic practice that required the practitioner to stay in one place for years on end would be tantamount to saying that the location was more important than the mind. Such a view would be the complete antithesis of what Hanam Sunim had taught.

There is also some anecdotal evidence that contradicts the idea that Hanam Sunim intentioned to stay forever in the Odae Mountains. It is widely known that during Hanam Sunim's first years in the Odae Mountains he stayed above Sangwŏn Temple, at Saja Hermitage. However, less well known is another story that says after he had stayed at Saja Hermitage for a year or two, the spring that supplied water to the hermitage dried up. After meditating on this event, Hanam Sunim said, "It seems that my karmic affinity with the Odae Mountains is finished." He packed his things and left. He was nearly out of the Odae Mountains when sunims from Sangwŏn Temple caught up with him and repeatedly asked him not to leave, and to instead stay at Sangwŏn Temple. Eventually Hanam Sunim relented and agreed to return to Sangwŏn Temple.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, the letters Hanam Sunim wrote contain several statements about his hope to visit, or even move, to other places. In four early letters to Kyŏngbong Sunim, Hanam Sunim talks about his intention to visit Kyŏngbong Sunim. In Hanam Sunim's third letter to Kyŏngbong Sunim, dated May 4, 1929, he says, "Writing the memorial verse for the ceremony doesn't seem very urgent, so if it's okay with you, I will write it when I go down there (to Tongdo Temple)" (HIBL: 237). In his next letter, dated August 30, 1929, Hanam Sunim says, "I still don't know when I will be able to go down there (to Tongdo Temple), so please have someone else write the verse" (HIBL: 240). His undated fifth letter to Kyŏngbong Sunim says, "P.S. I was very pleased to receive your invitation to go to Tongdo Temple, but I have determined to stay here until this fall. I hope you will understand" (HIBL: 245). In Hanam Sunim's next letter to Kyŏngbong Sunim, dated September 30, 1930, he says, "I'm not sure whether I can move there next

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21 This story is known among the monks in the area and was related to me on July 3, 2002 by the most senior monk at Wŏljŏng Temple, the Venerable Inhŏ (印虛) Sunim, who was also a disciple of Hanam Sunim.

March or April. Anyway, all of the preparations for the coming winter have been completed here” (HIBL: 249). In a letter to Hyobong Sunim, dated February 3, 1946, Hanam Sunim says, “If I feel that it is necessary to move, then I will do as you suggested. Even though you don’t ask me to come, I’m thinking about moving there (to Haein temple) if my condition improves” (Sök 1998: 456). In a newly discovered letter sent to a disciple living at Tongdo Temple, and dated August 12, 1949 (Yoon 2007: 245), Hanam Sunim discusses his poor health in detail, and says that it’s impossible for him to make a long journey. He finishes the topic saying, “This is why I can’t go there. Please understand that it is not some other reason.”

It seems that beginning some time in 1934, a combination of ill health and his role as a teacher made it difficult for Hanam Sunim to leave the Odae Mountains. In his eleventh letter to Kyöngbong Sunim, dated June 14, 1936, Hanam Sunim says:

Although I would like to attend the second-anniversary memorial service for my Dharma teacher, I am afraid that I am unable to travel far with this ill body. Not only that, many practitioners from other temples have come here, and looking after them requires my constant attention, such that it is impossible to leave for even a few days (HIBL: 258).

In most of the letters after 1934 Hanam Sunim mentions that his health was quite bad. The Japanese monk, Sōma, who visited Sangwōn Temple and lived there between December 1932 and spring 1933, mentions that Hanam Sunim suffered from a severe gastrointestinal disease that weakened him quite a bit (Sōma 1933). When reading Hanam Sunim’s post-1934 letters, one notices that almost every letter has a comment stating how bad his health is. Hanam Sunim wasn’t complaining, rather he was replying to inquiries made by Kyöngbong Sunim, often over a year apart, but this does give the impression that Hanam Sunim suffered from some sort of long-term ailment. There is no evidence that the statements about his health were something he made up as an excuse to avoid going to Seoul.

Thus, it appears clear that Hanam Sunim himself didn’t have any hard

and fast ideas about never leaving the Odae Mountains, and that he would have been willing to move to other places had the circumstances permitted. He wasn't engaged in some form of spiritual practice that forbid him to leave, nor was he trying to create an excuse that he could give to the Japanese government for not going to Seoul. (He apparently just said no and refused to yield to their requests.) Hanam Sunim was famous for the intensity of his own spiritual practice, and it seems that people afterwards assumed that this was the reason he never left the Odae Mountains. In reality, it appears that what kept him in the Odae Mountains was the feeling of responsibility for the people who came to study there, combined with his later ill-health. It would be a mistake to think that Hanam Sunim remained in the Odae Mountains because of some sort of spiritual practice that did not allow him to leave.

#### 8. Protecting the Temple and Nirvana

After the Korean War started in June, 1950, Hanam Sunim continued to stay at Sangwŏn Temple and refused to leave. He was apparently left alone by the North Koreans after they occupied most of South Korea. After the September landings at Incheon by United Nations forces, the North Korean army retreated from the Odae Mountains. However, in November, communist Chinese forces entered the war, and in a January 1951 offensive, it seemed as if Chinese forces would advance far into South Korea. These circumstances led the South Korean army to order the destruction of all the homes and temples in the Odae Mountains, in order to deny shelter to the advancing Chinese troops.<sup>22</sup>

Wŏljŏng Temple was already burning when a South Korean army unit arrived at Sangwŏn Temple. The lieutenant stated that he had orders to burn Sangwŏn Temple, whereupon Hanam Sunim asked him to wait a moment. Hanam Sunim put on his formal robes and then entered the Dharma hall, sat down, put his palms together and told the lieutenant to go ahead and burn the temple. When the lieutenant asked Hanam Sunim what he was doing, Hanam

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<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the Chinese forces were stopped before they reached the Odae Mountains.

Sunim told the lieutenant to follow his orders and burn the temple. After thinking about it for a long time, the lieutenant ordered his men to remove the doors from the Dharma hall and put them in a pile in the courtyard. He then lit them on fire, thus creating a lot of smoke for others down the valley to see and burning (a part of) the temple.

A traditional Dharma hall like this usually has eight to twelve sliding or hinged heavy, wood-lattice and paper doors. Although removing the doors would make a Korean temple quite cold in the winter, this lieutenant could very easily have been shot for disobeying orders. During the war, Korean military discipline was swift and harsh. As it turned out, the lieutenant survived the war, while the general who gave the order to burn all the buildings in the valley died in a helicopter crash as he left the Odae Mountains.

Two months later, after a minor illness that had lasted for a week, while having the usual rice porridge for breakfast, Hanam Sunim asked someone, "Today's February 14, isn't it." It was February on the lunar calendar, March 21, 1951, on the solar calendar. He put on his formal robe, and later in the morning, passed away during meditation. He was seventy-five years old, and had been a monk for over fifty years.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Hanam Sunim was a major Buddhist figure in Korea during the early twentieth century, but until recently, his life and thought have attracted little attention. Thus, this first article examined his life, with an emphasis on those aspects clarified by his letters.

While practicing in the Diamond Mountains, Hanam Sunim came across a verse by Pojo Chinul that precipitated the enlightenment that set the course of the rest of his life. He went in search of the great *sŏn* master, Kyŏnghŏ, and spent the next four years studying under Kyŏnghŏ Sunim's guidance. Traveling across Korea, Hanam Sunim went on to lead the meditation halls at

Tongdo Temple, at various temples in the Myohyang Mountains and the Diamond Mountains, and finally at Sangwŏn Temple in the Odae Mountains. He was a kind-hearted teacher who was strict in his personal deportment, and a sŏn master who taught sutras during meditation retreats and emphasized upholding the precepts.

Previously, the years between 1912 to 1925 have been a completely unknown period of Hanam Sunim's life, with his official biography saying nothing about this period. However, his letters reveal that he was at well-known centers of Buddhist practice in northern Korea, until his eventual arrival in Seoul in 1925. His letters also show that, contrary to popular belief, he did not remain in the Odae Mountains without leaving for 26 years. In fact he had left at least twice, and was open to moving to other temples. It seems that it was Hanam Sunim's devotion as a teacher and later his ill health that lead him to stay in the Odae Mountains.

Subsequent articles will continue this research by examining the major themes that appear in Hanam Sunim's letters.

## Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese)

Changan temple (K) 長安寺

Chungdae hermitage (K) 中臺庵

Diamond mountains 金剛山

Diamond sutra 金剛經

Haein temple (K) 海印寺

Haengja (K) 行者

Haenglŭm Kŭmwŏl (K) 行凜 錦月

Hanam Chungwŏn (K) 漢巖 重遠

Hwachŏn (K) 華川

Hyobong Wŏnmyŏng (K) 曉峰 元明

*Ilbalkok* (K) 一鉢錄

Inhŏ (K) 印虛

Jogye order (K) 曹溪宗

- Kaesŏng (K) 開城  
 Kangwŏn province (K) 江原道  
 Kŏnbong temple (K) 乾鳳寺  
 Kyŏngbong Chŏngsŏk (K) 鏡峰 靖錫  
 Kyŏnghŏ Sŏng-u (K) 鏡虛 惺牛  
 Maeng-san (K) 孟山  
 Mangong ŏlok (K) 滿空 語錄  
 Mangong Wŏlmyŏn (K) 滿空 月面  
 Much'a sŏnhoi (K) 無遮禪會  
 Myohyang mountains (K) 妙香山  
 Odae mountains (K) 五臺山  
 Pangu (C) 盤古  
 Pojo Chinul (K) 普照 知訥  
 Pongŭn temple (K) 奉恩寺  
 Pulguk temple (K) 佛國寺  
 Saja hermitage (K) 獅子庵  
 Sangwŏn temple (K) 上院寺  
*Secrets on cultivating the mind* 修心訣  
 Shilue (C) 史略  
 Shin pulgyo (K) 新佛教  
 Shingye temple (K) 神溪寺  
 Sōma shōei (J) 相馬 勝英  
 Sŏn (K), Chan (C), Zen (J) 禪  
*Sŏnjung banghamlok so* (K) 禪衆 芳啣錄 序  
 Spiritual leader 宗正  
 Sudo hermitage (K) 修道庵  
 Tanhŏ T'aeksŏng (K) 吞虛 宅成  
*The collected works of Hanam* 漢巖集  
 Tongdo temple (K) 通度寺  
 Udu hermitage (K) 牛頭庵  
 Wŏljŏng temple (K) 月精寺  
 Yangban (K) 兩班

## Abbreviation

HIBL *Hanam ilballok* (漢巖 一鉢錄: *The One Bowl of Hanam*) Pang, Hanam.

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