

Humanistic Egalitarianism in Donghak

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Introduction

Feudal society in the Joseon Kingdom of Korea was near collapse in the early 19th century. The country was under constant threat of invasion from foreign powers. The squabbling aristocracy had little concern for the future of the nation or the suffering of the common people. Choe Che-woo (1824-64)¹, better known by his penname Suun, founded Donghak (Eastern Learning) in 1860 to give hope to the masses and save the country. It soon became Korea's most influential indigenous religion. The name Donghak was later changed to Cheondogyo (Heavenly Way) in 1905.

The basic philosophy of Donghak was that “everyone possesses the mind of God.” It is a humanistic belief in egalitarianism, human dignity and mutual regard for all people under Heaven. Donghak advocated universal equality, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination, irrespective of age, gender, race, education, and social status. This egalitarian standard sought to restore dignity to every individual while in turn improving their standard of living and sense of worth. It was a school of thought and a movement that called for radical social reform for the benefit of the oppressed and it opposed corruption and injustice in late Joseon society.

This paper reviews the historical background, scriptures and beliefs of Donghak. The scriptures include the Donggyeong Daejeon (Great Scripture of Eastern Learning) and the Yongdam Yusa (Legacy of Yongdam), which contain the main doctrine of the faith and the religious

¹ Choe was a member of an ancient and well-respected clan that counted among its numbers the prominent Silla scholar Go-un Choe Chi-won (857-908?) and Choe Jin-rip (1568-1637), who led troops during Japanese and Manchurian invasions of Korea.

experiences of Suun.²

Suun's Great Awakening and the Birth of Donghak

Recognizing the seriousness of the problems facing Joseon, Suun at age 21 began to make pilgrimages throughout Korea to discover the "Way" to salvation. During his travels, he met all kinds of people from different classes. He experienced the confusion and disorientation of Korean society firsthand. He studied widely including Taoist scriptures, ancient books of divination, Confucian classics and Catholic texts, even meeting Thomas Choe Yang-eop (1821-61), Korea's second Catholic priest.³

After ten years of this, he concluded that Joseon was in deep decline, and that both Confucianism and Buddhism were limited. To Suun, traditional East Asian culture had reached a dead end, and disharmony was widespread. Korean intellectuals had lost their moral bearing and were adrift. Seeing that a superficial reform of the old culture was not enough, Suun vowed to create a new culture.

At age 31, he returned to his wife's natal village in Yeoshi valley in Ulsan, where he built a mountain hermitage, practicing asceticism and studying for six years.

His religious object was neither emancipation from birth, aging, disease, and death, nor salvation from original sin. His goal was to relieve the pain of social conflict and decay. He practiced ascetic self-purification to find the basis of a new culture to heal Korean society.⁴ The answers did not come immediately.

After a year of ascetic practices, he was disappointed in his failure to find the answers to the nation's problems. He had a mystical experience while meditating and praying. A stranger appeared to him, dressed like a monk, and gave him a mystical book.⁵ The monk asked Suun to explain its contents, and when he did so, the monk thanked him profusely. The monk handed Suun the book and declared, "Heaven has bestowed this book on you. I have only carried it. Proclaim its message to all mankind."

² I translated the scriptures into English with the assistance of Dr. Frank Tedesco decades ago.

³ Choe Chong-kan, *Haewol Choe Sihyeongga eui saramdeul* (Seoul: Ungjinchulpan, 1994), 14-19.

⁴ Cheondogyo jungangchongbu, *Cheondogyo* (Seoul: Cheondogyo jungangchongbu 1988), 6.

⁵ That book was *Ulmyo Cheonseo* (乙卯天書) in 1855. Cheondogyo jungangchongbu, *Cheondogyo Gaekwan* (Seoul: Cheondogyo jungangchongbu 1988), 12.

After this profound encounter, Suun concentrated more deeply on the religious spirit, “praying to Heaven,” rather than merely meditating. He prayed to Heaven every day after this supernatural encounter.

Suun also made two pilgrimages to Ulsan’s Cheongseong Mountain to pray to Heaven. At 33, he became distressed and sold his house and the rest of his property in Ulsan, and afterwards chose to live in a grotto where he stayed for years. But he was not discouraged, and continued to adhere to his daily spiritual practices at home. Continuing on his holy path, he returned to Yongdam Pavilion on Gumi Mountain in Gyeongju, his hometown, in 1859, and changed his name from Che-sun to Che-woo, “Savior of the Foolish.”

Suun immersed himself more deeply in spiritual practices and vowed to remain inside until he awoke to the Way. Winter passed, and on April 5, 1860, his heart unexpectedly froze and his body shivered. He heard a mysterious voice: Hanullim (“God” of Cheondogyo) told him, “Receive my spiritual amulet (a piece of paper with sacred letters inscribed on it) and deliver mankind from suffering. Receive my incantation and teach all the people for me.” On that day, Suun finally achieved the Great Awakening to the Infinite Great Way.

Development of Donghak and its scriptures

Like Socrates’ teaching that “all human beings are equal in the most fundamental sense,” the basic beliefs of the Donghak philosophy promote humanistic egalitarianism and decried any form of discrimination. This revolutionary religious and social perspective provided common people with a new sense of dignity. It taught compassion and respect for all creation. In response to the growing popularity of this movement, the Joseon court executed Suun in 1864, on charges of misleading the people and sowing social discord. Following Suun’s martyrdom, Haewol Choe Si-hyeong (1827-98), assumed leadership of the dispersed movement.⁶ Fleeing government persecution, Haewol travelled surreptitiously all over the country, spreading the teachings of Donghak as he went. He eventually published the Donggyeong Daejeon (Great Scripture of Eastern Learning) from woodblock engravings in Inje, Gangwon Province, in 1880. He published the Yongdam Yusa in Danyang, North Chungcheong Province, with colleagues in 1881. These were originally written by Suun and are

⁶ His teachings included “treat men as you would Heaven” and “please love children, respect all beings including the animate and inanimate” which inaugurated Korea’s first children’s welfare movement, environmental movement and respect for life movement.

believed to be the first editions. However, the original copies of the Donggyeong Daejeon and the Yongdam Yusa are presumed lost. About 1,000 copies were republished in Mokcheon, South Chungcheong Province, and in Gyeongju in 1883, and distributed to Donghak believers. The work bears the subtitle “issued in Gyeongju and Gye-mi, year of the sheep in 1883.” The Cheondogyo Central Headquarters republished these several times. They are now called the Cheondogyo Scriptures.

The Donggyeong Daejeon was written by Suun himself during his 1860-64 ministry. Suun is an uncommon spiritual leader in world religious history because few religious teachings are written down by the founders themselves. Even Jesus and the Buddha did not write anything we know of. The world’s major religious scriptures were memorized and transmitted orally from generation to generation before being inscribed.

Suun was not only the founder of Korea’s first indigenous religion but also a well-educated scholar, a prominent writer, a poet, an inspirational social leader and a pioneer of democracy. As a disenfranchised and disillusioned scholar-aristocrat, he lived a life consistent with his teachings regarding the innate dignity and equality of all humans, whatever their caste, social status, lineage, gender, age or education. Living his liberating truth, he freed his servants and returned them to their parents. He adopted one young servant girl and arranged for his son to marry another. These actions were truly revolutionary in Joseon-era feudal society. Donghak’s tenets are comparable to Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863.

Cheondogyo’s most prominent teachings center on the belief that divinity resides within each individual (Innae cheon), that each person is identified with the divine, and as a result of this exalted status, all human beings are equal. This revolutionary religious and social concept imbued demoralized Korean commoners with a new sense of dignity, and with a consequent compassion for others, as well as a respect for all creation including animals and plants, and even the smallest living things.

The egalitarian and humanistic ideals of Cheondogyo played a formative role in the development of Korean nationalism, the struggle for justice and for national independence. These ideals played a pioneering role in the 1894 Donghak Peasant Revolution, as well as in the March 1 Independence Movement in 1919 against the 1910-45 Japanese occupation. They also influenced the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948.

The 33 leaders selected to represent the people of Korea signed the Korean Declaration of Independence on March 1, 1919. Among them were 15 Cheondogyo adherents, 16 Christians and two Buddhists, with the

main leader being Son Byeong-hui, the third great leader of Cheondogyo. Possessing an established presence nationwide, Cheondogyo amassed significant grassroots support and lent its organizational experience to the movement. Substantial funds from the Cheondogyo treasury were also made available to Christian and Buddhist participants, as well as for independence activities of Korean representatives abroad. Moreover, Cheondogyo printed a large number of pamphlets and posters at its own publishing company, Boseong-sa, for distribution throughout Korea. They lithographed, with hand-carved woodblocks, the Declaration of Independence and a memorandum to the Japanese government. At that time, the Cheondogyo religious movement was quite popular, with more than 2 million followers, ten times bigger than Korea's Christian community, which had around 200,000 followers. Thus, Cheondogyo was well-off financially and able to finance the independence movement. It played a critical role in leading a nationwide movement through nonviolent actions that were centrally planned and executed for Korean independence. Cheondogyo's philanthropic support of the March 1 Independence Movement was significant.⁷

The Donggyeong Daejeon contains many instructive poetic writings and is comprised of four major sections: Podeok-mun (Propagating Virtue), Nonhak-mun (On Truth), Sudeok-mun (Cultivating Virtue), Bulyeon-giyeon (The Hidden Truth and the Common Truth). It was originally written in Chinese characters (Hanja) for scholarly readers who favored classical literature. However, aware that the general population did not know Chinese, Suun composed the Yongdam Yusa in vernacular Korean lyric and colloquial style, using Hangeul, the Korean alphabet, which was read by more people. It includes the Gyohun-ga (Song of Instruction), Ansim-ga (Song of Comfort), Yongdam-ga (Song of Yongdam), Mongjung Noso Mundap-ga (Dialogue between the Old and the Young in a Dream), Dosu-sa (Song of Cultivating the Way), Gweonhak-ga (Song of Encouraging the Study of Truth), Dodeok-ga (Song of the Morality), Heungbi-ga (Song of Parables of Success) and Geom-kyeol (Song of the Sword).

The term "Yongdam" is derived from Yongdam-jeong, or "dragon pool pavilion," which nestles sedately amidst the beautiful scenery of Gumi Mountain, close to Suun's home in Gyeongju, the ancient capital of Silla (57 B.C.–935 A.D.). It was here that Suun cultivated his spirit and refined his mind, achieved enlightenment and founded the Donghak religion in

⁷ Chong-dae Choe, "Spirit of March 1 Independence Movement," *The Korea Times*, March 1, 2019.

1860.

The essential teachings of the Donggyeong Daejeon and the Yongdam Yusa differ only in their style. Their fundamental teachings promised a revitalized, bright future for the Korean people, through which Korea could be protected and strengthened, and a secure peace⁸ for its people could be realized.

The true identity of individuals and their relationship to Hanullim is realized in “Si Cheonju”: Every person has divinity within themselves. Suun’s teaching of divinity in humanity later developed into the principle of “In nae cheon” (each person is identical to God; humans and God are one).

The correlative principle “Donggwi Illche” (all life evolves toward unity, origin and social oneness through the realization that Heaven and man are one) has equally great ethical value and power. The principle “Jisang Cheonguk” (Paradise of Heaven on Earth) urges us to improve our present life rather than focusing on the hereafter. This principle exemplifies Cheondogyo’s deep and lasting concern for humanity, which traces its roots back to Suun’s awakening.

Many foreign scholars have undertaken research on Donghak intensively since its establishment and have introduced Korea’s native religion outside the Korean Peninsula.⁹ We must point out, however, that most foreign scholars in Donghak studies who published in English had difficulties with the original language of the scriptures. I have been working for decades on translation of Cheondogyo scriptures into English. The complete translation of these sacred books has been a long process because the original texts are profound and difficult to understand. My articles on the Cheondogyo Bible were published in *The Korea Times* in 1990 and 1991.¹⁰

This English translation of the scriptures has benefitted from annotated Korean translations provided by the Central Headquarters of Cheondogyo. However, I have not always followed their interpretations because I think

⁸ Boguk anmin (輔國安民).

⁹ Some of these texts include: *Korea: Key of the Far East* (1903) by Waclaw Sieroszewski; *Religions of Old Korea* (1931) by Charles A. Clark, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* (1964) by Benjamin B. Weems, *The Donghak (Eastern Learning) Movement and Chondo-gyo Scripture* (1978) by Susan Shin, *Soaring Phoenixes and Prancing Dragons: A Historical Survey of Korean Classical Literature* (2000) by James Hoyt, and *Suun and His World of Symbols: The Founder of Korea’s First Indigenous Religion* (2009) by Paul Beirne.

¹⁰ Chong-dae Choe, “Translation of the Chondo-gyo Bible,” *The Korea Times*, Dec. 16, 1990.

they do not represent the original meaning of the scriptures adequately.

My attempt at a translation of Cheondogyo scriptures embraces the entire Donggyeong Daejeon, including its poetic writings, as well as the Yongdam Yusa. However, many poetic passages such as the Gyohun-ga, Dodeok-ga and Heungbi-ga within the Yongdam Yusa are not included here.

Gyohunga, the lyrical “Song of Instruction” written in 1861, describes Suun’s journey to Eunjeokam in Namwon, North Jeolla Province. It describes Suun’s expression of concern for his followers who were left behind in Yongdam, and his guidance on the true path to spiritual cultivation.

In Dodeok-ga, the “Song of Morality” written in 1863, Suun criticizes the prevailing morals and values of his time, passionately rejecting the “misguided” thinking of newly introduced Catholicism (Western Learning). Through powerful lyrics, Suun encourages believers to embrace a virtuous life guided by a renewed sense of morality.

Heungbiga is a collection of parables on success written in 1863. In contrast to the elegant tone of “Heungjo” in the “Book of Odes,” the central theme of “Heungbiga” is the significance of being reborn as oneself, which represents the Infinite Great Way of Donghak. The parables emphasize the importance of embracing one’s true self to achieve success in life.

Conclusion

Donghak was the earliest example of a social reform movement in Korea. It called for the promotion of justice and freedom for the exploited lower classes. It planted a valuable seed of reform within the greater Korean populace and ideals to guide Korean society toward peace and harmony without injustice and discrimination.

Korea’s first children’s welfare movement, an environmental movement, a respect for life movement, and the intellectual roots of egalitarianism and philanthropy originally stemmed from the egalitarianism of Cheondogyo. These movements are highly lauded today in Korea and around the world despite philosophical and religious differences. Cheondogyo, originally referred to as Donghak, was representative of the patriotic and humanistic spirit of Korea that helped lay the foundation for the nation’s modern democracy.

I am grateful to Dr. Paul Beirne and Dr. Frank Tedesco for their help

with this English rendering.¹¹ Any misinterpretations are my own. I also wish to thank Mr. Hong Chang-hwa who was director of the Division for Propagation of the Faith in the Central Headquarters of Cheondogyo when I was appointed the official English translator of the Cheondogyo scriptures in the early 1990s.

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Donggyeong Daejeon [The Great Scriptures of Eastern Learning]

Podeok-mun [On Propagating Virtue]¹²

1. From ancient times, spring and autumn rotate, the four seasons come and go. This movement is everlasting, a clear manifestation of the work of Hanullim.

2. Ignorant people may not know the origin of the rain and dew, but they know that they are natural.

3. From the time of the Five Emperors of ancient China,¹³ sages have appeared who set down the laws of the days and the months, of the stars and the universe, and have charted the unchanging Heavenly Way. Movement and silence, waxing and waning are all subject to the mandate of Heaven. This is because they revere the Heavenly Mandate and obey the Heavenly Principle. Therefore, when humans succeeded in becoming virtuous and, through study, attained the Way and its virtue, this Way was the Heavenly Way and this virtue was the Heavenly Virtue. By clarifying the Way and cultivating its virtue, one succeeded in becoming a person of virtue and a sage, and people were full of admiration and wonder.

4. In recent times,¹⁴ however, the people of the world have acted

¹¹ Dr. Paul Beirne is former dean and professor of Comparative Religion at Melbourne College of Divinity, Australia. Dr. Frank Tedesco is a renowned American Buddhist scholar, teacher and human rights advocate.

¹² Chong-dae Choe, "Translation of the Cheondogyo Bible, 'Podok-mun'" *The Korea Times*, December 16, 1990. Written in spring 1861.

¹³ Yellow Emperor, Zhuangxi, Emperor Ku, Emperor Yao and Shun, legendary figures in ancient Chinese mythology and history.

¹⁴ The mid-19th century.

according to their own desires. They neither follow nor respect the Mandate of Heaven. This troubles me deeply. I did not know what to do [to save our troubled world].

5. In 1860 I learned that Western people were attacking and seizing our world, and were building cathedrals and spreading their religion, proclaiming the will of the Western God even though they told people that they did not seek wealth and glory in accordance with the Cheonju, Lord of Heaven's will. Their only desire was to convert everyone, however. I asked myself, how could this be? How could such a thing happen?

6. In April 1860, my heart became frigid unexpectedly and my body shivered. I did not know if I was ill or not; I was unable to explain what was happening to me. Then I heard a mysterious voice echoing within me. Startled, I questioned it and the voice replied: "Have no fear. Humans call me Sangje, the Supreme Being. Do you not recognize your Lord?" I asked Him why He said this. He replied: "I have yet to fulfill my purpose, so I brought you into the world to teach man my Heavenly Way. Doubt not."

I then asked, "Shall I teach the Western Way?" The Supreme Being replied: "No. I have a spiritual talisman, sacred medicine¹⁵ in the shape of Taegeuk (太極), the great moral principle, the essence of all things in the universe and characters like Gung Gungs (弓弓---),¹⁶ innumerable arched shapes. Take this talisman and deliver all humanity from sickness. Use my sacred formula and teach the human race for me. You shall live forever, and virtue shall be propagated throughout the world."

7. I heeded His words. I wrote down the sacred talisman that He gave me, burned the paper, dissolved the ashes in water, and drank the mixture. My body was invigorated and I glowed with energy. I realized that this was sacred medicine. I applied it to the sick around me. Some were healed and some were not. I questioned why this was so. I realized then that only the faithful who followed Hanullim were healed. The doubters were not. The cure depended on the sincerity and faith of the recipient.

8. At that time, epidemics raged throughout our country; everyone was fearful and troubled. This was our sad fate. Westerners won every battle. They were insuperable in everything they did. I was very worried; if the whole of the East was conquered, Korea would fall as well. How will we ever find a way to protect our people and secure lasting peace?

9. Alas! Our generation is not aware of our good fate even though a better time has arrived! When they hear my teaching, they return home and defy me. They criticize me, and they ignore my Way. This is my great sorrow. Virtuous people said that they would not criticize me like others when they heard my teaching. However, I cannot make all ignorant people awoken to my Way. I will quickly inscribe what is on my mind. I will teach

¹⁵ Elixir of immortality, spiritual symbol called Yeongbu (靈簿).

¹⁶ Symbol of eternity, ultimate source of God or universe.

them and show them what I believe to be correct. I hope that you will accept and respect my teaching.

Nonhak-mun [A Discussion on Learning]¹⁷

1. The truth of the Heavenly Way has no form, yet it is still very real. The Earth and all its contents, are incredibly immense, yet have their dimensions. The nine stars [entire sky] in Heaven harmonize with the nine territories on Earth. As there are eight directions on Earth, the realms of humankind have eight trigrams¹⁸ which symbolize the waxing and waning, the change and the constancy in human life. While myriads of transformations emanate through the intertwining of Yin and Yang, humankind remains the most intelligent and spiritual being in existence.

2. Therefore, the Sage identified three dimensions of existence: Heaven, Earth and Humankind, and recognized the principle of the five elements of the universe: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Heaven is the origin of the five elements, and Earth is its basis. Hence we realize that Heaven, Earth and Humankind are the three dimensions of existence.

3. As the four seasons come and go, wind, dew, frost and snow appear in their proper order. The ignorant multitudes of humanity are unaware of this. Some say it is due to the grace of Hanullim. Others say that it is simply a sign of natural harmony. Yet although some say that it is due to the benevolence of the Lord of Heaven and others profess it to be a sign of natural harmony, it is difficult to perceive which it is. From ancient times until now, this has never been clear.

4. In April 1860, the world was in turmoil. People's minds were disturbed and they did not know what to do. A strange rumor spread through the land that Westerners had discovered the Truth and that there was nothing they could not do. Nothing could stand before their military power. Even China was being destroyed.

Would our country too suffer the same fate? Their Way is called the Western Way, the religion of Catholicism and their doctrine the Holy Teaching. Is it possible that they know the Heavenly Order and have received the Heavenly Mandate?

5. As there was no way to express all my feelings toward the Western Way at that time, I cringed in fear and sighed at this pitiful situation and

¹⁷ Chong-dae Choe, "Treat People As You Would Heaven, the 'Nonhak-mun of the Cheondogyo Bible,'" *The Korea Times*, Jan. 27, 1991. Written by Suun in winter 1862.

¹⁸ Eight basic principles of the Universe in the *Book Of Changes* (I Ching, 周易).

my late birth into it, I felt a vital force, a Divine Power, descend into me. A chill swept through my body and a mysterious teaching suddenly came to me.

I heard an inner revelatory voice. I looked but could see no one; I listened but could not hear anything. I felt perplexed and mystified. After clearing my mind and calming my spirit, I asked, “How can this be?”

6. The Divine Voice replied, “My mind is your mind, yet how could humankind know this?”

They may know Heaven and Earth, but they cannot understand Gwishin,¹⁹ the Spiritual Being. I am the Spiritual Being. Now you shall realize the Eternal Truth, cultivate it, study it, record it, and teach it to all humankind. You shall set down its practices and propagate its virtue. Then you, too, shall be immortal. You shall prosper in this life and virtue shall be propagated throughout the entire world.”

7. I meditated on these words for a year and realized the natural principle. I composed the Sacred Formula and perfected the technique of making the Divine Spirit descend. I wrote the verses “Not forgetting Hanullim.” The procedure for practicing the Way is contained in the Sacred Formula of 21 letters.

8. The following year, many learned scholars came from all directions and asked, “We have heard that the Heavenly Spirit descended upon you; how could this happen?” I answered, “It happened according to the cycle of fate in universal history,” They asked, “Then what is the name of the Way?” I replied, “Cheondo (天道), the Heavenly Way.”

They asked, “How does it differ from the Western Way, Christianity?” I replied, “The Western religion is similar to our religion. But also different. Worship in the Western religion is not authentic. The forms of our truth may be similar to those of the West, but the doctrines are very different.”

9. They asked, “How is this so?” I answered, “Our Way emphasizes accomplishing everything through natural predilection [transformation]. If believers cultivate their spirit, refine their minds and rectify their vital force, receive the Divine Teaching and put it into practice, transformation comes naturally. But the Westerners have neither order in their words nor logic in their writing. They are ignorant of the spirituality of the vital force and lack the concept of Hanullim. They merely pray for their own welfare. Their hearts are not truly open to Hanullim, the Lord of Heaven, nor is there any of His teaching in their doctrine. They act like they are praying, but they have no Sacred Incantation. Their Way is vain and their doctrine does not commune with Hanullim. How can one say then that their Way and our Way are the same?”

10. The learned scholars asked, “There are some similarities between

¹⁹ 鬼神, *Spirit* or *God* in Cheondogyo.

your Way and theirs. Do you call your Way a Western doctrine?” I replied, “No, I was born in the East and received the Truth in the East. The Way is called the Heavenly Way and my doctrine is called Donghak (東學), Eastern Teachings. Since there exists a division between East and West in geography [and culture], how can one say that East is West and West is East? Confucius was born in the province of Lu in China²⁰ and promulgated his teaching in the state of Zou [which is also the birthplace of Mencius]. Thus, the intellectual traditions of Confucius and Mencius spread throughout the world. Our Way was born in this land and will spread in this land in the name of Donghak. So how can one call it Western?”

11. They inquired, “What is the meaning of the Incantation?” I replied, “Its words embody the highest reverence for Hanullim. Hanullim is revealed in its words and in a similar style of writing to the Incantation, ‘praying and wishing’ found in the ancient books and writings.”

12. They asked, “What is the meaning of your sacred formula which refers to the descent of the Spirit?” I answered: “Ji (至) means the Ultimate, that which has nothing to precede it, and is therefore worthy of ultimate respect. Gi (氣) is vital energy, spiritual and infinite. It pervades all things and directs all things. It is formless and therefore difficult to describe, although sometimes it can almost be heard. It is the ultimate, original energy of the universe. Geumchi (今至), the present encounter, refers to initiation into the Way, the initial encounter with the ultimate energy. Weonwi (願爲) means petitioning through prayer for the descent of the spirit. Daegang (大降) refers to the great descent of the spirit, pouring energy into and transforming creation.

13. Si (侍) means serving or bearing the Spirit within and channeling this Ultimate Energy externally so that the Spirit can be universally recognized and respected. Cheonju (天主) means serving the Lord of Heaven who is to be treated with the utmost respect and served as one would one’s parents. Johwa (造化) means being in complete harmony with creation, being fused with and effortlessly serving the Spirit. Jeong (定) means participating in the Divine Virtue, focusing one’s mind and energy and coming to a decision. Yeongse (永世) means forever, the term of one’s natural life. Bulmang (不忘) means not forgetting and remembering forever.

Mansa (萬事) refers to innumerable things, that is, all creation. Ji (知) means to know, to realize the truth and to receive wisdom.²¹

²⁰ Lu (Chinese: 魯, ca. 1042–249 BC) was one of the major vassal states during the Zhou dynasty of ancient China.

²¹ 至氣今至願爲大降 侍天主造化定 永世不忘萬事知 (Ji Gi Geum ji Won Wi Dae Gang, Si Cheon Ju Jo Hwa Jeong Yong Se Bul Mang Man Sa Ji) are the 21 syllables of the Cheondogyo Sacred Formula which translate as follows:

14. A scholar asked, “If the Lord’s mind is the human mind, why do good and evil co-exist?” I replied, “Although it is said that one’s honor and shame, one’s joy and suffering are predestined, the truth is that the virtue of a righteous person is in harmony with the virtue of the universe because of the purity of the person’s mind and conduct. But a petty person, through foolish conduct, conflicts with the Will of the universe. Thus, do good or evil, prosperity or decline follow the principle of cosmic rotation.”²²

15. The scholars asked, “Why do people not respect the Lord of Heaven?” I replied, “When people face death, they call on Hanullim for help. This is common reflex. Even now, people recall what the ancient Sages taught, that human destiny depends on the Lord of Heaven, and the Lord gives birth to all. They say this, but they do not understand it.”

16. I was asked, “Why do people deny and denigrate your Way?” I replied, “This does happen.” They asked, “How can this be?” I replied, “Our Way was not known before, and its Truth cannot be compared to other religions, modern or ancient. Those who practice and cultivate in our Way may appear foolish to others, but they have the Truth. If you just hear our teaching without studying and cultivating it deeply you may think that you have the Truth, but actually you have nothing.”

17. Someone asked, “Why do some people revere the Way at first but reject it later?” I replied, “It is useless to talk about these people.” They asked, “Why is that?” I answered, “Respect them, but keep them at a distance.” The questioners continued, “What causes a person to have a change of heart, first entering and then leaving the Way?” I replied, “They are like grass in the wind.” They asked, “If that is so, how can the Divine Spirit enter their heart?” I answered, “Hanullim treats both good and evil the same way.” They asked, “Are those who betray the Way really harmless and without virtue?” I answered, “In the time of Yao and Shun,²³ peace spread throughout the land and all people became as benevolent as the king. But now the world is revolving in another phase of its destiny. Fortune and misfortune are subject to Hanullim; they are not under control. If we look at others, it is impossible to discern whether they have been afflicted by misfortune, but nor should we say that they are happy and have found good fortune either. Consequently, you should not ask these questions as this all depend on Hanullim.”

“Ultimate Energy Being Now Within Me. I Long for the Communion of My Ultimate Energy with the Mysterious Energy of Supreme Holiness [Hanullim]. [Revering] Bearing Hanullim, the Lord of Heaven, I shall become One with The Divine Virtue. Remembering Him Forever I shall Grasp the Essence and wisdom of all things.” Cheondogyo jungangchongbu, *Cheondogyo*, 15-16.

²² Waxing and waning.

²³ Legendary peaceful kings of ancient China.

18. Ah! It is truly wonderful. Your questions concerning the Way are so brilliant even though my unskilled writings are not clear and perfect, yet people may still cultivate their minds, develop spiritually, and purify their hearts. How are people wandering from their true destination? The eternal destiny of Heaven and Earth and the infinite Truth of the Way are contained in my writings. Revere what I have written. The taste of our Way is sweeter and more profound than other truths. My joy in the Way is so great and I am delighted to share it with you. Consider its Truths carefully and make them part of your life.

Sudeok-mun [On Cultivating Virtue]²⁴

1. The birth of all things in spring, the cultivation of all things in summer, the harvest of all things in autumn and the preservation of all things in winter, these are the unchanging phenomena of the Heavenly Way. To maintain the right Way with single-mindedness is the proper course for humankind. Native intuition is a gift of my ancestral lineage like Confucius' virtuous disposition, whereas other classical scholars learn by passing knowledge from one to another. Even the little knowledge and shallow understanding which scholars have achieved are due to the ancient sage, which the emperor [king of the ancient Zhou Dynasty of China] preserved in the Laws of Propriety and Rites [to maintain social order].

2. Born in the East, I wasted years without accomplishing anything. Living as an impoverished scholar, I barely preserved the honor of our family tradition. The loyalty with which my ancestors served the nation is recorded in Yongsan.²⁵ Although the royal virtue of the king declined during the Imjin [Japanese] and Pyeongja [Manchurian] invasions, some hidden virtue remained in the nation and flowed like water to my father²⁶ at birth. His name became famous throughout Korea and every scholar was aware of his reputation. My family's undiminished virtue endured through six generations. Is this not a glorious inheritance for our family lineage?

3. Alas, my father's scholarly life passed like a dream in spring. Having studied until he was 40, his knowledge was as ephemeral as old things discarded beside a hedge. He had no desire to obtain high office. He composed a poem about returning to rural life and renouncing government service, and he recited moral poems which distinguished good from evil.

²⁴ Chong-dae Choe, "Sudok-mun," *The Korea Times*, April 5, 1991. Written in June 1862.

²⁵ A shrine was built at Yongsan in Gyeongju to commemorate the great contributions of Choe Jin-rip (1568-1637) during the Japanese (Hideyoshi) and Manchurian invasions.

²⁶ Noted Confucian scholar Choe Ok (1762-1840).

Carrying a staff and wearing straw shoes, he looked like a hermit or the ascetic scholar Tao Yuan-ming. Dwelling in high mountains and beside winding rivers, his aura was that of Master Yan Ziling.²⁷ The mysterious peaks and rock formations of Gumi Mountain lay to the north of Wolseong [an ancient Silla fortress] and Geumo Mountain [Namsan in Gyeongju]. The crystal pond and sparkling mountain stream of Yongchu²⁸ are to the west of the ancient village of Maryong [near Gumi Mountain]. Peach blossoms from the garden floating down into the pond in front of the pavilion are afraid of being caught by fisherman.²⁹ The deep blue water of the river and the boats in front of the pavilion are reminiscent of the locations made famous by Chiang Tai-kung [(姜太公), renowned statesman who loved fishing during ancient China]. The lake near the pavilion would attract Chu Tun-ni [a famous scholar and naturalist]. The pavilion is named Yongdam to evoke the memory of Zhue Liang.³⁰

4. There was no way to stop the flow of time and the feelings of loneliness when my father passed away one morning that left me orphaned when I was sixteen, little more than a child. I knew precious little about anything. Then the lifetime work of my father was lost in an instant, totally consumed by fire. I grieved because I could do nothing worthy of honoring his memory.

5. I intended to support my family, but I did not know how to farm. I had little education, so I could not expect a high government position. As the family fortune declined, I worried about our future. As I got older, I became even more troubled. Starvation loomed. Reviewing the past 40 years of my life, I deeply regretted that I had not been more successful. I did not even own a house. How could I appreciate the vast beauty of the world around me? “Nothing is working out for me. I can’t find my proper place.” The moment this thought surfaced, I forsook the confusion and anxiety of the world to purify my sorrowful heart.

6. My father lived and taught in the old pavilion at Yongdam, near the village where I grew up in Gyeongju. In October 1859, I returned to my hometown with my family. In April 1860, I was destined to realize the Way. This experience was like a dream. It is difficult to describe. When I examined the laws for determining the hexagrams in the I-Ching, The Book of Changes, and studied the three principles of Heaven in the Hsia,³¹ I discovered that the ancient scholars followed the will of Heaven, and I

²⁷ Yan Zuling (嚴子陵) was a scholar of China’s Han Dynasty who forsook high office and spent his days fishing.

²⁸ The waterfall of Yongdam.

²⁹ Utopia depicted by Tao Yuan-ming in the Peach Blossom Garden.

³⁰ (諸葛亮) statesman and military strategist of ancient China.

³¹ In the Hsia (Xia) dynasty, the earliest recorded ancient dynasty in Chinese history, there were three principles associated with Heaven.

lamented that later generations did not. As I proceeded with my spiritual cultivation, I realized that the principle of nature was of primary importance. When I considered the teachings of Confucius, I realized that he taught only one Truth, and when I compared his truth with the Way, I discovered no significant difference. They only differ in minor points. If you consider my Way carefully and with an open mind, you will be able to accept it. If you search the past and present, you will realize that my Way is the most important path for humanity to follow.

7. Originally, I did not think of teaching others, but rather concentrated on my own spiritual cultivation. I delayed preaching until the summer of 1861 when my colleagues came and filled the room, and I established a method for spiritual cultivation. Scholars came and inquired about the Way and asked me to spread it to the world.

8. I had the elixir of immortality in my bosom, its shapes like characters Kung (☯) and Ul (乙).³² I memorized the incantation of immortality, the sacred formula composed of 21 syllables. I opened my door and received many guests. When I taught the Truth, the Law, to the assembled group, I was filled with unspeakable joy. People came and went like the 3,000 disciples of Confucius. Children bow and salute me, like the disciples who sang before Confucius. There is a disciple who is older than I am, like Tzu Kung³³ was older than his master, Confucius. We maintain a proper, respectful relationship, just like Confucius and his older disciples. As I sing, compose poems and dance, is it any different from the songs, poems and dances of the ancient sage?

9. Benevolence, right conduct, decorum and knowledge were the virtues taught by the ancient sage. I, too, taught cultivation of the mind and refinement of the spirit. The ceremony that one performs when entering the Way is a solemn vow to serve Hanullim forever. It is imperative to dispel doubts to strengthen sincerity and loyalty. Dressing properly is the behavior of a person of virtue. To eat in the street and to walk with hands clasped behind one's back are affectations of inferior men. Believers do not eat unclean meat. To immerse oneself abruptly in icy water is injurious to your health. Mistreating women is against the code of law. To intone the Sacred Formula loudly while reclining shows disrespect for our holy Way. Therefore, I have put forth these normative principles of conduct for the benefit of followers of the Heavenly Way.

10. How beautiful is our Way! People marvel at my writing about my Way, comparing it to the script of Wang His-chih [a famous Chinese calligrapher]. When I open my mouth to speak about my Way, no one disobeys my teachings. Those who repent of their mistakes will not covet the wealth of Seok Seong [the richest person of ancient China]. A person

³² Symbol of eternity.

³³ A disciple of Confucius.

with utmost sincerity will not envy the wisdom of Sagwang [a renowned philosopher of ancient China]. As my face brightened, a mysterious breeze seemed to blow, and my chronic affliction disappeared. I had no need of medicine and could forget the name of Ro [a famous Chinese doctor].

11. To understand the Way and cultivate morality, sincerity and guidance are essential. Some people, however, believe in rumors and memorize false incantations. This is such a pity! I agonize over this continually, fearing that harm may come to our holy Way. Because there are so many people, we do not have the opportunity to meet. We understand each other even though we are far apart, and we think about each other often. We wish to be closer to exchange friendship, but we fear the government authority's surveillance. So, I am writing these verses for you, my believers, so that you may hear these teachings and cultivate virtue.

12. Sincere is the person who firmly believes in our Way. The word belief (信) is a composite of the ideographs for person (人) and for word (言). Words may be either true or false. Select the true and reject the false. Ponder this deeply and cultivate your spirit. Make your decision after careful consideration and stick to it. Do not be led astray by different opinions. This is true faith. If you do this, your heart will be pure.

The ideographs for sincerity (誠) and faith (信) are very similar. Since sincerity is communicated through language, have faith first and sincerity will follow naturally. I have taught you this very clearly. How can you not believe in my teachings? Practice reverence and maintain a pure heart. Abide by what I have said very carefully.

Bulyeon Giyeon [The Hidden Truth and the Common Truth]³⁴

1. Everything in the world, over generation to generation, has its own essence and form. If we judge all things by their appearance with the naked eye, they appear real. If we seek to probe the essence of things, it is much more difficult. When I consider my own existence, I know that my parents gave birth to me. When I consider my own future, I know that I will have many descendants. As for the future, one can make certain judgments based on present experience, but as to understanding the origin of humanity in the distant past, no one knows anything with certainty.

2. Ah! Consider this: If one ponders the passage of generations, the development of lineage is easy to understand [Giyeon, the Common Truth], but if one considers the origin of one's original ancestors [Bulyeon, the Hidden Truth], it is hidden from us. Why is this so? In the most ancient

³⁴ Kim Cheol, *Donghak jeongui: donggyeongdaejeon haeseol* (Seoul: Dongseonsa, 1989), 276. Written in November 1863, it compares the theory of creation to the theory of evolution.

times, how did Cheon-hwang³⁵ become man and king? It is said that he had no ancestors. This remains hidden and unknown. This truth is apparent to everyone: we have all been born into the world, and our children and their descendants will also.

3. Thus the world came into being and kings and teachers arose. Kings rule by law and teachers instruct with propriety and ceremony. The first king had no one before him. From whom did he receive the codes of law? The first teacher had no one to instruct him. How could he learn propriety and ceremony? This truth is hidden and impossible to understand. Is it because he knew without being taught? Did he have natural understanding? If he knew without being taught, how can we understand this? Even if it was through natural understanding, we still cannot comprehend how it came about. It is an enigma.

4. People cannot explain these hidden truths because they lack understanding. They believe in obvious reality because it is easily recognizable. Yet if we contemplate the origin of the universe, it is a mystery that we can never understand. Until this moment, the truth of creation was completely beyond people's ability to grasp.³⁶

5. How many years have passed since the New Heavenly World was created? This destiny of the New Heavenly World recurs naturally and past and present remain unchangeable. Yet how can we say that it is destiny? And how can we say that it is recurring? There are mysterious and hidden aspects to everything, so I count, clarify them and record them for reflection. There is order in the four seasons. Why is this so? Babies who cannot utter an intelligible word still recognize their parents. Ordinary people cannot fathom this.

It is said that the Yellow River in China becomes clear once in a thousand years, whenever a sage is born. Is this because of the natural cycle of change or is it because the river itself alters its appearance? The ox that plows the field abides by the words of its master. It has a mind of its own and a sense of judgment. Why, as it is so much stronger than humans, does it live and die serving them? Adult crows bring food to their nestlings as their mothers did for them when they were young. They, too, practice filial piety. A swallow knows its master and always returns to him, even though he may be poor.

6. We call what is difficult to understand "The Hidden Truth" and what is easy to understand "The Common Truth." When we ponder the distant origin of things, creation becomes increasingly incomprehensible.

³⁵ The legendary founder of the human race.

³⁶ 50,000 years before the establishment of the New Heavenly Way have entirely passed and the New Heavenly Way was created. However, people are unaware of this truth.

Pil Beop [The Way of the Brush Stroke]³⁷

Practicing self-cultivation is like learning to use a brush. You will realize the Truth if you concentrate on one Way. Korea is Wood in the five elements.³⁸

Our destiny is favorable. In harmony with Heaven, Earth and Humanity.

As I was born and awakened to the Way in my native land, I consider Korea and the East of primary importance. All people in the world are not the same and their minds are different, but we treat them equally. So, I write to refine these people's minds.

We should remain the same inwardly and outwardly. With your mind at ease and spirit refined, begin to move the brush. All truths can be found in the first stroke. Place the tip of the brush softly on the page. Concentrate on drawing with your whole being. Make the ink yourself by rubbing an ink stick. Draw a little at a time and repeat the procedure.

Select fine paper to write on. Write large or small. There is a difference between high and low in the Way. But try to avoid mistakes. Begin with dignity and care. Draw an image as lofty as the greatest mountain. Piled high, rock upon rock.

Yongdam Yusa [The Legacy of Yongdam]

1) Ansim-ga [Song of Comfort]³⁹

1. Virtuous ladies, take comfort in my writing. All living things depend on Heaven for their existence. Humans are the most spiritual and intelligent beings in creation. When I reflect upon my past, I realize that all the blessings I have received have come from Hanullim. Yet I have suffered too. Everything has been in the hands of Hanullim. Could I have done anything else?

2. Ignorant women and children envy the rich who eat and live without toil, saying "are they human or are they divine? We were all born under the same Heaven. How are we different?" When I hear people complain against Heaven, I pity them with tears in my eyes. I tell them to abandon their sorrow and repent and abide by my words. The Lord of Heaven does not discriminate between good and evil. All high government officials were born with the blessing of Hanullim. They enjoy wealth and

³⁷ This poem, written in 1863, illustrates the correlation between brushstrokes in calligraphy and the pursuit of self-cultivation on the Way.

³⁸ Wood is the symbol of the east, the season of spring, and the color blue.

³⁹ Written in 1860, this song describes Suun's religious experiences of awakening to Hanullim. He taught that the fate of Korea will improve and urged followers to devote themselves to spiritual cultivation and refining their minds.

prominent position, while the poor and those in lowly position remain commoners. Even so, they can be accepting in their modest lives. Abandoning their good fortune and envying others, people quarrel and slander [my Way]. Consequently, I fear misfortune. There is a saying: “Sudden wealth and honor may not bring genuine happiness.” Did not Confucius say that a poor person, too, can follow the Way and that joy follows suffering, and suffering follows joy? The joy that follows suffering is more fearful for us. Do not be fretful and afraid but wait patiently for the future.

3. I am 40 now and I have nothing to show for it. Yet I can do nothing about the past. My pitiful father! His purpose in building this [Yongdam] pavilion on Gumi Mountain was for my cultivation of the Way. I have no choice in this. There is a saying that Hanullim provides for all beings. If I contemplate deeply, I know that Hanullim decided my fate. If we do not follow Him, we will live in fear of misfortune.

4. Time passed uneventfully like flowing water while I was at Yongdam Pavilion. On April 5, I entered a dream-like state and could not find my way out. Then a voice came from Heaven, and it seemed as if the Earth trembled. My wife was startled and disturbed when she saw me. “Pitiful my fate. What has happened to my husband? How can we get medicine to help him on a dark night like this? Who can I ask to help me?” she cried.

Our children cowered in fear in the corners of the room. My wife collapsed and ran around in great confusion. A voice from Heaven said: “Do not be afraid. Do not fear.” “How could I possibly recognize the Lord who dwells in the Golden Palace in Heaven? How could I who grew up isolated in the countryside know that I would become the founder of the new Way?” I quickly wrote about the origins of our nation. Ignoring the history of the distant Twelve Nations,⁴⁰ I concentrated on the great Way for our nation. My ecstasy subsided gradually.

5. A short time passed, and a voice commanded me to light a lamp and study all night.

“Spread out some writing paper,” I was told. In awe and surprise, I arranged some paper and lifted a brush, and behold, an odd talisman appeared on the paper. I was dazed and called my wife and children and asked: “Have you seen this? Have you ever seen such a symbol?” My children replied: “What happened, Father? Wake up please! You spread out paper and drew a symbol with your brush. You are in a pitiful daze. Mother! Why is our fate like this? What has happened to our father? Look how he is acting. How can he speak like this?” Mother and children sat holding their hands together and weeping.

⁴⁰ The entirety of the ancient world.

Hanullim said: “Ignorant people! Can any ignorant person find the elixir of immortality on Samsin Mountain?⁴¹ Unwise people! Write the symbol, burn it in a bowl and drink it with water.” As soon as I heard these words, I drew the symbol and did as He bade me. It had neither taste nor smell. This made an impression me. I consumed it again and again. Hundreds and hundreds of times. Seven, eight months passed; my body became healthy, and my face shone. Worldly people, I am like a Taoist master. All is well, so good, so right. I am indeed ageless and immortal. Even the mighty Emperor Qin Shi Huang⁴² of Qin Dynasty suffered death and was buried in Yongshan. The Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty in ancient China was unable to achieve immortality through divination. I am so fortunate! How fortunate! I am to be immortal and everlasting. Wonderful, wonderful, I am so fortunate! I would not exchange this for gold or silver. The emperors of Qin and Han died without this. If I were born at that time, I would have happily shown them the medicine of immortality and ridiculed them. I regret that I was born too late. My life is so blessed, so well.

6. Ignorant people of the world say: “Give us copies of the talisman.” They say this mockingly, “Is this a Divine act?” The foolish people do not like people who are superior to them. Why did they know this? Personally, I can do nothing about this. How could the talisman I received through Hanullim be used as if it were magical medicine? The medicine of immortality will not be given to the foolish and the ignorant.

Laughable, laughable. The foolish people! Objects of fun are the foolish people who slander the Way. They are laughable. I am the only one who has not slandered others or committed harm. So, I have no need to be ashamed. There is no need for concern, even if an epidemic were to ravage our country in the future. So, come and see, eat and see. Cunning people are spreading rumors that falsely claim Donghak as a type of Western Learning. Ignorant, worldly people say that a great man was born in Yongdam on Gumi Mountain and became a veritable dragon, a tiger who is conversant with Western Learning. Saying and run away. I cannot listen to all the thoughtless things.

7. Respected ladies, be comforted by these words. There are no great men who follow Western Learning — people even say my Way is the Western Way, my Way is not the Western Way. How can I spread the great Way in the name of the Western Way? Even though I live in an obscure farming village, I have great hope. The wisdom I received from Hanullim will cure all diseases. My success depends on Hanullim. No one has anything that surpasses my mysterious Divine medicine. I shall be

⁴¹ Three Divine Mountain in ancient China.

⁴² The emperor sent people to Samsin Mountain to seek the grass of immortality.

considered a great man by all future generations.

8. The fate of our nation is pitiful. Remember the Hideyoshi invasions [1592-98] about 240 years ago? Also, when the Twelve Nations suffered calamity, did not a new order emerge? The peaceful days of the legendary sage kings of ancient China, Yao and Shun, may return and nations will live in peace. Yet still our nation suffers. The plundering Japanese should repent for what they have done. What did they gain by invading our country? If there had been no great ministers like Oseong [Lee Han-bok, 1556-1618], and Hanum [Lee Deok-hyeong, 1561-1613], who could have preserved the sovereignty of our nation? There is no wise person in our country now. I, too, received a mandate from Hanullim to preserve the sovereignty of our nation. People who wish to survive war will live according to the blessings of Hanullim and will beg me for immortality. The present condition of our nation is harsh and difficult. Respected ladies, listen to these words and be comforted. Because the Japanese despoiled Korea during the Hideyoshi invasions, they did not learn [civilization], how to use the spoon [civilization] from Heaven. It is common knowledge that they do not use the iron spoon [civilization]. If General Kim Deok-Ryeong [1568-96]⁴³ had survived at that time, the Japanese would not have succeeded in invading Korea and the war would have ended in three months and not continued for eight years. How can we forget the hardship endured during the Japanese invasions? It is unfortunate that many loyalists have been sacrificed as a result of the schemes of malicious individuals, leading to unrest and turmoil. Though I am also a Supernatural Being, why this world is so harsh. Even though I have been privileged to receive this Divine Mystery from Hanullim, there is no suffering like the present suffering. There are many plots against me. Yet wonderful indeed, dear ladies, if I were a Supernatural Being who could fly to Heaven, I would use my divine power to destroy evil in one night and I would hand on the destroyed historical site to my descendants eternally [and take revenge for the Byeongja Horan (Manchurian invasion of 1636)]. Making a sacred pledge at the Daebodan⁴⁴ to take revenge against Han,⁴⁵ I would crush the surrender monument like a piece of straw.

Wicked people are not concerned about the future of our nation. With whom can I discuss these things? A memorial to our ancestor [General Choe Jin-rip] was erected in Hongcheon [in Yeosu County] to preserve his memory forever. The common people do not recognize unwavering integrity. Pitiful are the wicked who conspire against others; they will

⁴³ Commander of Korea's Righteous Army during the Japanese invasions of 1592-98.

⁴⁴ The memorial hall in commemoration of China for their dispatching troops to Korea during the Hideyoshi invasions.

⁴⁵ Chief of Qing military in China who invaded Korea.

speak against others again. Hanullim bestowed virtue upon me to protect the fate of our nation. Do not listen to common rumors, respected ladies. Do not worry. Be happy, free of care. Memorize these lyrics. Let us sing of peace when peaceful spring has come.

2) Yongdam-ga [Song of Yongdam]⁴⁶

1) The name of our nation is Joseon, the name of our city is Gyeongju. The name of this area is Wolseong and the name of flowing water is Munsu [south stream]. Gyeongju was the ancient capital city of the Silla Kingdom more than 1,000 years ago. Hanyang is the present capital, but there has never been a capital like Gyeongju since the beginning of history in the East. The water is pure and so are the mountains. Geumo is the southern mountain and Gumi is the western mountain. Phoenixes fly over the [ancient] tombs of Bonghwang. The tombs stand alone after they have flown away.

The high tower of Cheomseongdae [astronomical observatory of Silla] stands watch over Wolseong [royal castle of Silla]. A pair of flutes made of blue and yellow jade offer protection, and the echo of the thousand-year-old Silla Kingdom is still heard. People gather to see this wonderful place! When I see the three mountains to the east of Gyeongju, it is difficult to believe that there could be no Divinity. Central Gumi Mountain is located to the west of Gyeongju. Why are there no traditions of Mencius and Confucius in Korea?⁴⁷

All people please come and see this ancient capital and its magnificent terrain! Herein enshrines the spirit of the Earth. Famous, wise and distinguished men have come from it. Gumi Mountain is the central mountain of the Eastern capital. The Kunlun Mountains [崑崙山] in China have been called the source of the world's culture, but henceforth Gumi Mountain is this source. Everyone knows that I was born here and that this will protect the ancient capital and its natural surroundings. I will preserve its heritage.

2. Wonderful and lofty is Gumi Mountain. Is not this a mountain full of virtue and good fortune for the Choe lineage? Our ancestors were born here after Gumi Mountain existed. They knew the fortunes of mountains and rivers. They served their country with distinction.

It is a pity that my father did not attain a government position, despite the famous mountain and its water, although he studied diligently and cultivated virtue at the wonderful pavilion on Gumi Mountain. My father

⁴⁶ Written in 1860, this song depicts the joy of awakening to the Infinite Great Way from Hanullim thanks to the good deeds of ancestors and parents. It also admires beautiful scenery of Yongdam and the legacy of Gyeongju.

⁴⁷ There is teaching of Confucius and Mencius on Gumi Mountain.

named the building the Yongdam Pavilion. He spent his life as a scholar secluded in this forest. Pitiful indeed is the fate of my family. I, too, lacking worldly success like my father, feel guilty before my ancestors. I am full of regret because I have not fulfilled my filial duty.

I wasted many years in poverty. I reached 40 after trying everything and gaining nothing. What did I accomplish in 40 years of my life? Yet there is nothing I can do about the past now. When I returned to Yongdam Pavilion, I was greeted by the sound of flowing water and the lofty mountains. When I looked at the mountains and the rivers surrounding me, they were unchanged. The trees and grass approached me like friends. However, I was sorrowful because I had not fulfilled my filial duty. The crows overhead seemed to mock me. The pine trees were tall and green and always loyal. I continually remembered my filial duty and my heart overflowed with sorrow and regret. I remembered my father who deserved glory and honor for the virtuous life he lived.

3. I gathered my wife and children [at Yongdam] in order to instruct them and spend time with them. The eternal grace of Heaven came to me on April 5, 1860, in what seemed like a conscious dream. It was then that I awakened to the Infinite Great Way of Truth. It is difficult to express words for it. I have been very fortunate!

Hanullim said: “You are the first one in 50,000 years of creation. I could not find the right person in that time though I tried to. I have succeeded in finding you. I have succeeded and so have you. Your family is very fortunate.”

4. Upon hearing these words, my heart was full of joy and contentment. How could people know that this boundless fortune would be mine? Admirable, admirable my future. I cultivated the Infinite Great Way in the beautiful Gumi Mountain and its rivers. This is a boon that is available only once in 50,000 years.

How unique is my destiny! A birth like mine occurs only once in a million years. The beautiful scenery of Gumi Mountain and the rivers seems to reflect my good fortune. Every branch and leaf lauds the beauty of this place. Is this not a paradise for a man of virtue? Is not this the most exquisite place in the entire world with its thousand peaks and valleys, its mysterious rocks and stones? How could this happen to just one among millions? How extraordinary is my fortune! No matter how majestic Gumi Mountain and its rivers, would it be so grand without the discovery of the Way? Yet could we experience such mountains in our nation without awakening to the great Way? Even if I were a supernatural being and could fly to Heaven, it would still be difficult to find a place as sacred as Yongdam.

Even after the passage of 10 million years, I would never forget Yongdam Pavilion. However, it is sad to contemplate its destruction.

3) Mongjung Noso Mundap-ga [Dialogue Between the Old and the Young in a Dream]⁴⁸

1. The Kunlun Mountains in China reach the Geumgang (Diamond) Mountain in Korea. Herein are found myriad strange rock formations, mysterious stones and fascinating scenery. Is not Geumgang Mountain considered one of the most beautiful and distinctive mountains in Korea?

2. Hanyang [Seoul], the capital of the Yi Dynasty under Samgak Mountain, is approaching its end after 400 years. My parents reached old age without bearing a child so they offered sacrifice to the ancestors and prayed to Buddha for offspring. They sat and spoke in agony saying: “Why haven’t we had a child during our hard life! Weren’t we born into this world with hope, just like others? Ignoring our own afterlife, isn’t childlessness a sin to our ancestors?” Do not say this. We know that from ancient time that people have prayed for children and have been given heirs. This we have heard and seen. So we, too, must cultivate merit through our prayer. We have wasted our family property, so now we must refine our minds and spirits. We must pray and practice spiritual cultivation before Buddha throughout Korea and earnestly worship mountain spirits praying for pregnancy. If we pray and worship sincerely numerous times, will Heaven not be moved? So, let us cultivate merit all day and all night. The ancient saying suggests that great people are born in beautiful lands. Thus, let us strive to reside in a renowned and picturesque location. Sacred and bright energy is always found under a famous mountain. Therefore, having left the world behind, we embarked on a journey to climb Geumgang Mountain and having selected a choice spot, we built a hut on a small valley. As time passed, my wife⁴⁹ became pregnant.

3. Ten months passed. Then one day the house was filled with mist and clouds with aurora, the whole world shook three times and a son was born to us. Behold, he was a very handsome child. His face was like a jewel, his appearance like that of Tumokchi [杜牧之, handsome Chinese scholar]. He reached the age of six and then at the age of eight, he began his formal studies. He showed outstanding intelligence and unique vision of the world. At the age of 10 he was as wise as Sagwang [師曠 philosopher of ancient China]. His wisdom was extraordinary, his talents surpassed all others. Yet he was concerned about the wicked world. He was consistently disappointed by the failure of monarchs to behave like true monarchs,

⁴⁸ It describes the birth of Suun and his spiritual life in search of the Way, culminating in his awakening to the Infinite Great Way. Written in June 1862, it uses vivid metaphors inspired by a dream Suun had.

⁴⁹ Suun’s mother.

ministers to fulfill their roles as ministers, fathers to act like fathers, and sons to behave as dutiful sons. Anxious thoughts filled his heart, and he felt misunderstood and ignored by those around him. So, he left his family and business and wandered all over the country. He observed its moral conditions and saw that it was almost impossible to correct the immoral state of the nation. The people's lives lacked meaning, for they had no concern for Heaven.

4. The Dongguk Chamseo 東國識書, a book of mystical teaching,⁵⁰ is shrouded in mystery, but some believe it contains prophetic sayings. According to one such saying, during the Hideyoshi invasions of Korea, people sought safety under pine trees. Similarly, during the Hong Gyeong-rae rebellion in 1811 in Jeongju, Pyeongan Province (now part of North Korea), people were said to be safe at home.

People of the world! Taking these examples, let us prepare for life. It was predicted in the *lù tú shū* (錄圖書) [a Chinese book of prophecy], that the Qin Dynasty would perish because of the Ho [Mongols], and so they begin to build the Great Wall in vain to protect themselves. However, the nation perished during the reign of the second Emperor Hu Hai (胡亥) in ancient China. People knew this fact after the Qin Dynasty was destroyed.

It is said that our beneficial fortune is in Gung Gung, the book of prophecy. Government authorities who sell government positions believe in Gung Gung. Wealthy landowners rich in money and crops believe in Gung Gung. Beggars also believe in Gung Gung.⁵¹

Those who act on rumors after wasting their wealth visit Gung Gung village [Utopia] as well. Some enter remote high mountains and others become Christians. Yet each one selfishly claims and argues every day that he is correct, and others are wrong.

5. Extinguishing the wishes that lay in my heart, I abandoned my travels through the country and returned home to read many valuable books. I was 14 and my future lay before me.

Alas, achieving peace in this world may not be possible even with the governance of Yao and Shun, the sage kings, or through the virtuous teachings of Confucius and Mencius.

As I sought solace for my sorrowful heart, I paused on the summit of Geumgang Mountain to catch my breath and soon fell into a deep slumber. In a dream, a spiritual guide in celestial raiment appeared and instructed me, saying: "Why are you asleep in this deep and isolated mountain where there are so few people? Instead of traveling through the mountains, why aren't you focusing on cultivating yourself and governing your family at home? It is sad that some people have an unrealistic belief in Gung Gung

⁵⁰ A collection of prophecies including Jeonggammok (鄭鑑錄), described as an unrealistic ideal world.

⁵¹ Suun was concerned about existence of Gung Gung, an unrealistic belief.

and good fortune in an ideal world [as described in Dongguk Chamseo]. We should observe the world around us with care instead of bemoaning the difficult times of misfortune we live in. In the past, people knew trees and houses, but how can they know the beneficial fortune is in Gung Gung, the real Utopia? Despite the current challenges, Heavenly fortune is returning. Therefore, we should return home and not be anxious but rather open ourselves up to the possibility of a better future and observe the cycle of destiny.

At the end of times of misfortune in this world, a cycle of creation will begin. Universal peace and prosperity will be the fortune of the nation. Therefore, do not lament and grieve, but wait patiently. The old era will pass away, a new era will dawn, and the Infinite Great Way will appear in a fortunate time. Throughout your life, you may come across numerous people who sing a song that invokes immense feelings of peace and joy.

The Infinite Great Way will continue forever! You do not yet know the will of Heaven and the mind of the people who are in communion with Hanullim. If Hanullim wills, even brute-like [ignorant] people will understand. I am a supernatural being. “When shall we meet again?” I asked. “You have a divine destiny. Do not forget this. We shall meet again,” the sage replied. Surprised, I woke up and looked around me, but could not see my spirit guide.

4) Dosu-sa [Song of Cultivating the Way]⁵²

1. I wandered aimlessly through the countryside and could find consolation nowhere. With my walking stick as my companion, I spent my nights in unfamiliar places, tossing and turning in my sleep. Then a spiritual thought suddenly occurred to me: I have received the overwhelming benefice of Hanullim, the unsurpassable Infinite Great Way which is beyond recompense. It is like a dream. Though I live in poverty, I revel in the Way and the beautiful scenery of Yongdam. A year passed and learned gentlemen from near and far gathered around me. This was a joy surpassing all joys!

2. I humbly taught the Way for a year before I had to flee aimlessly and in haste from the authorities. I left without a word and could not explain what happened to my followers who were scattered in a variety of locations. How can I explain the present situation of the Way to all my followers! Therefore, I have written a few words from afar and sent them to my kind followers in the hope that they will never forget me. If you remember and continually cultivate the two words, “sincerity” and “reverence,” you will realize the Infinite Great Way. A fortunate time will

⁵² This song teaches followers the basic attitude of spiritual cultivation, the need for being vigilant against false truths about the Way, written in 1861.

eventually come to you when your spiritual cultivation leads to virtue.

3. Kind friends! Do not forget me. Remember me forever. You have studied the Confucian classics and know the source and tradition of the Way. You know the succession of the original Way from masters to masters, and you know that those who have mastered the six arts of propriety including music, archery, horsemanship, penmanship, calligraphy, and mathematics are the ones who comprehend the truth. They handed down the source of the Way to their descendants. While it is often said that the virtuous teachings of Confucius are easy to master, how many of his numerous disciples actually became proficient in the six arts? Although 72 may have mastered them, these traditions have not been studied seriously for a thousand years. The disciples of Confucius, Cheon Cha-pang (田子方) and Tan Kan-mok (段干木),⁵³ violated his teachings and traditions. This is incredibly sad. Kind friends, learn the ancient traditions and follow Truth and its principles in accordance with the mandate of Heaven.

4. While achieving virtue through spiritual training in ten years is considered a rapid accomplishment, it is possible for anyone to realize my Infinite Great Way in three years, provided you study hard and carefully. You seem impatient and, without properly cultivating your mind, you expect to realize the Heavenly Mandate immediately. There is an ancient saying that achieving wealth and honor suddenly is harmful. You know that a person must cultivate and study our Way and await fortune from Heaven. Why are you so impatient?

5. One can distinguish high, middle and low levels of ability among people. The wise and virtuous emphatically express their dismay with the world. However, ignorant novices learn our Way and recite the Sacred Formula with their mouths alone and think that they have achieved the Way. “You and I have realized the Way in this wicked world,” they say. But this is not true. How ignorant they are. Kind friends, consider these words and be comforted. If leaders are not trustworthy, their followers will doubt them. If leaders are not respectable, their followers will become arrogant. Leaders are responsible for this.

6. If you cannot cultivate yourself and govern your own home properly, how can you practice virtue and realize the Way? Abandoning the Three Basic Principles of Conduct [Ethics] and the Five Norms of Human Relationships, how can you become a wise and virtuous person? A happy [and sweet] home depends on the wife, and if the husband is gentle and faithful, how can disharmony occur? If a husband does not support and counsel his wife, things are not as they should be, and this is a pity. If a husband goes astray, his wife may follow. Therefore, my wise friends,

⁵³ Scholars of ancient China’s Warring States period.

please continue to cultivate spirituality and inner peace by consistently refining and calming your mind. If you do not realize my Way, and feel ashamed even though I taught you, you will become unhappy. Do not just look upon others' illicit activities indifferently but instruct them with gentleness and grace. If we help others to avoid shame, it is a great virtue.

7. As a founder of the Way, I will not refuse anyone who comes to me. My purpose is nothing other than instruction. The way to become a disciple is to make a life-long relationship with a teacher and not deviate from the words received with reverence. There are some outstanding, superior individuals of our Way among you, and we have established a relationship of teacher and disciple whose wills are identical. Isn't this due to the high virtue of our Way? Wonderful? The disciples of the sages in ancient times memorized hundreds of words of the Classics, preserved the source and tradition of the Way, and clearly taught later generations' wholesome ethics. Is not this a joyous thing? I, too, have cultivated the Infinite Great Way in this world and instructed all people who come to me in the 21 letters of the Sacred Formula. This arose by itself, naturally. Why do foolish people abandon honor and self-respect and think themselves better than anyone else? They create laws which are not found in our teaching. Where do they find these laws? How could they realize the Way in only a few months?

8. It is such a pity! All people receive the same bright destiny and opportunity from Heaven, yet some become superior individuals while others do not. How can a narrow mind know the truth of benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, and faith? I write this clearly so that you can see it as if looking in a mirror. Consider my words carefully and be comforted. Remember how others think of you and do not engage in improper conduct. Refine your minds and lives and cultivate the spiritual Way with others.

To practice benevolence, justice, propriety and wisdom, faith is the most important. How could righteous and courageous acts be possible without faith? How could the remarkable laws of the Three Principles and Five Human Relationships be possible without respect? Wisdom and etiquette are born from a sense of shame. But pitiful are those who do not know shame and act thoughtlessly. They do not follow the Truth. Their actions are against the Way. If people say that they know Truth without being taught by a master, it is a violation of Truth. How could these violators of Truth expect to see me face to face? If they act improperly, they will have troubled destinies and they will disparage our teaching. This is our greatest concern. If you are resolute and do not change your mind, you may become a man of virtue. If you studiously ponder every word of my teaching and search for Truth with right mindfulness, we shall meet again with joy and hope in the pleasant and peaceful days of spring.

5) Gwonhak-ga [Song of Encouraging the Study of Truth]⁵⁴

1. I wandered aimlessly all over the country in this unreceptive time, idling away my days with people I met along the way, and finally arrived at Unjeok-am in Jeolla Province to greet the new year [1862]. My walking stick has been my only friend in this vast world as I ponder the original principles of existence. There is no one with whom I can share my feelings, so I must put down these words. The old has passed away and the new has arrived. Why is time so fleeting? Ah, my people, it is said that it is a rare and auspicious thing to live over 70. Even if you do, however, you only live one day at a time. When I reflect on apathetic times, life passes in a flash. How I can hand down [these words] and praise you for a worthy life of 70 years who lived aimlessly, one day to the next?

2. My people! I compose a song about my bitter life! The mountains and rivers can free me from my suffering. A song can free me from my longing for home and family. Do not laugh at these words but ponder them deeply to understand them. Most people in this world are superficial and so are many Korean lyrics. Learn all the words of my song and be sure to memorize them. Your life will be happy and peaceful like the hopeful spring.

3. Putting the beautiful mountains behind me, I observed the moral conditions of society. Although we have principles of affection between father and son, justice between king and minister, the special roles of husband and wife, the veneration of the younger for the older, and trust among friends, it is strange that many people still act heartlessly and immorally.

This was the first time I realized this. Lamenting the moral condition in [Gyeongju], my hometown, and yet, without supporting my family, I left home to learn about the condition of our land by visiting all the parts of the country. Wandering around the country, I encountered many men and women, but they treated me coldly and acted uncivilly. These were strange places with different customs. I regretted that I had left my gentle friends at home to personally experience the ways of the world outside. Leaving the beautiful rivers and mountains behind me, I went from one village to the next in winter blizzards and had to dispel sadness with a laugh. People of the world, if you do not know true morality, look at the customs of my hometown which is a cradle of morality. Morality in this world has degenerated and we have lost our good fortune. We must accept

⁵⁴ Written in 1862, this song describes giving hope to followers who were left behind in Gyeongju. It is an expression of conflicted emotions regarding the passing of the old year and welcoming the New Year, emphasizing the right cultivation of the Way.

this. Only by visiting many parts of the country and seeing the lifestyles and habits of the local people, could I know their wicked minds and customs. Now that I have seen how they are, I do not need to see anymore.

4. When I compare ancient times to the present, everyone behaved as peacefully as Yao and Shun in those prosperous days. No one is to blame in this cycle of fate. There are sages and superior individuals even in this corrupted generation of the world. They are like jewels buried in the mud. How can we distinguish the good from the bad in this harsh world? Although they follow the Way amidst poverty, who can guide them to live spiritually?

5. If we reflect on the phases of destiny, we realize they wax and wane. When decline reaches its lowest point, prosperity follows soon after. All wise and virtuous people should unite as one in the new Way. It is not easy to meet with wise and virtuous people of the older generation. If we can meet somewhere when I travel throughout the country, I will share all my reflections with you. I will explain and inquire what guides the cycles of destiny. I will save those who are suffering. Those who are now on the brink of death will be able to protect the nation and bring peace to our people.

6. All living things depend on Heaven for existence. Though people complain about unwelcome wind and rain, do they not call on Heaven when they are dying? Even the Three Great Kings and Five Emperors of ancient times in China believed in and obeyed Heaven. However, in this wicked world, there are many who have no regard for the will of Heaven. During the Battle of Changping, which was fought between the ancient Chinese states of Qin and Zhao, the Qin forces buried alive 400,000 soldiers of Zhao who had surrendered. This disobeyed the mandate of Hanullim because the prisoners were a creation of Hanullim. Those who committed this atrocity forgot the source of life. Pitiful people behave according to their own desires. Have reverence for Hanullim and obey it. Do not forget the source of all things in this harsh world.

7. Loyal ministers show respect to their king, while filial sons and daughters-in-law show respect to their parents. It is a pity that many people in the world fail to recognize the importance of these values. Consider these words carefully and respect them. I lost my parents when I was young. I feel guilty as there was no opportunity to love and give reverent service to my parents. I grew up in a small, obscure village, a descendant of a loyal minister to the king, yet I did not have the opportunity to serve the nation as an official. Therefore, my conscience is uneasy toward my monarch. I wasted 40 years of my life without accomplishing anything. What have I done in the last 40 years?

8. According to hearsay which spread in 1860 when our destiny declined, treacherous Western powers invaded China and built tall

cathedrals. They spread Western religion [Catholicism] throughout the entire world. Isn't this ludicrous? If I reflect deeply on the words I have heard, many people in our nation abandoned the beautiful ethics of the Five Human Relationships. I have heard that many foolish people, from all walks of life, gathered together to pray for a better afterlife, which seems like a waste of time. They claim that their parents are without spirits after death. They do not worship their parents' spirits after they die, and they abandon the principles of the Five Human Relationships. Yet they wish to die early so that they can go to paradise in Heaven. They do not believe in the spirits of their ancestors; they believe that they have souls which can go to Heaven. Abandon such foolish claims and worship Hanullim. Then there will be no fear of death from epidemics for three years. The more I hear about their vain practices, the more ridiculous they seem.

9. When I reflected alone in this world, I wasted 40 years of my life with little success. Then I suddenly realized my destiny. Awakening to the Infinite Great Way is my unique destiny. If one is sincere and reverent and respects Hanullim, one will be freed from all disease. If one has no trouble at home throughout the year, it is due to the benevolence of the spirits of Heaven.

10. The more I experience the Infinite Great Way, the clearer the cyclical destiny of all things becomes. Oh people of the world, ponder this advice! Remember it and put it into practice. Think about Hanullim and revere Him with utmost sincerity. Instruct your wives and children to honor Him also. Never forget these words.

Many people in our country suffer from various kinds of physical and moral evils. Is this not harmful to people? When I meet wise and virtuous people during my extensive travels, I discuss the waxing and waning phases of destiny. If they wish to know their personal destinies, I share my words with them and befriend them.

Do not forget my humble words and remember them forever. Among the thousand thoughts of foolish people, one may be righteous. Is this not a sign of virtue? An exact prophecy of human destiny does not exist. Although I have no prophecy, and although my words may not be brilliant, please refrain from laughing. Instead, I urge you to carefully remember and respect my instruction.

Geom-kyeol [Song of the Sword]⁵⁵

Time! Time! These good times will never return. Though I be born only once in countless ages, I encounter the only fortunate times in 50,000 years. What shall I do if I do not use this immaculately pure, divine sword of Yongcheon⁵⁶ right now? Wearing the robes of a sword-dancer, I raise my sword in a dance. Standing alone in this vast world, I sing the melody of the sword. “The fortunate time has come! The fortunate time has come!” The shining sword of Yongcheon toys with the sun and the moon. Shimmering energy covers the entire universe like a robe. Who is the most famous general in history? None other than I. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful is my lot.

⁵⁵ This poem written in 1861 illustrates Suun singing the Song of Sword Dancing with a wooden (mystical) sword that he received from Hanullim for a rite of celestial worship and to teach the Way.

⁵⁶ Dragon Spring (sword), an ancient, mythical sword.