

Water, Fire, and the Ascent Above the Mountain: Symbolism and Its Application in a Buddhist Temple on Mt. Gwan'ak (冠岳山), Seoul

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Abstract

The Gwan'ak Mountain range in the southern part of Seoul was in pre-modern times home to a significant number of Buddhist monks and hermits. At present, few of the Buddhist establishments remain, and it is rare to find a temple with more than five resident monks. Instead, the main campus of Seoul National University has been built in a ravine of the mountain range, and on weekends, hikers crowd the mountain routes. Many use the occasion to visit the temples on the way. The present article describes one of the intact temples, Gwan'eum-sa (觀音寺), on the mountain slope facing towards the city of Seoul. The temple was built in the ninth century near a river source with the specific task of empowering the land according to the principles of "Wind and Water" (*pung'su*, 風水).

The flooding on and around the Gwan'ak mountain range in August 2022 recommended a re-examination of the traditional role and symbolism of the temple, amidst changes such as dense settlement on the lower mountain slopes, shifts in funeral customs and family structure, and the increased occurrence of heavy rain. This inquiry mainly concerns the symbolism associated with water, the ascent to higher realms after death, and mountain hermits, as well as some practical implications on water management, funeral culture, and retreat to the mountain. As a conclusion, some future perspectives on the symbolism of hermits, fire, water, and mountains will be presented.

Keywords

Korean Buddhism, funeral rites, rain rituals, water management, ecology

1. Introduction: Rain on Gwan'ak-san

On the fifteenth of August, 2022, the Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies was scheduled to begin in the College of Humanities of Seoul National University, located in a ravine

below Mt. Gwan'ak (冠岳山, 632 m), in the southern part of the Seoul area.

A few days before the conference, on August 8, heavy rainfall ravaged Seoul, causing at least nine fatalities. The flooding disproportionately

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affected poor city dwellers who lived in flood-prone locations such as underground apartments. Already in pre-modern times, precarious locations such as river banks were inhabited by lower income groups.

Also high up on the mountain, the building in which the IABS conference was scheduled to take place was hit by a torrent that destroyed the interior of the first and second floors. The conference was safely shifted to a newer building of the faculty, a few meters from the affected area. As the conference began, recovery work was in progress. The events were a reminder that the mountainous locations of many modern universities were previously considered unfit for human settlement.

In pre-modern times, Buddhist temples and hermitages were often the only buildings in such areas, and mountain hermits were respected for mastering this forbidding environment. The image of the white-haired hermit stood for braving the elements, and by implication for braving death itself.

Recent centuries have seen the end of agricultural society and the development of new technologies, allowing building and settlement in mountainous areas. The industrial age began with the steam engine and the increased combustion of fossil fuels. Mostly unforeseen, this has in the long run effected climate change, including changes in the timing and amount of precipitation in the rainy season. An explanation heard in more traditional Buddhist circles points to the overuse of fire, one of the five basic natural elements, as the cause for an imbalance in the elements as a whole. While the categories used in such a traditional explanation partly differ from modern physics, the disbalance of wood (trees) and fire is unquestionably at the core of this phenomenon.

2. Buddhist Mountain Rituals of Water and Fire

Akin to the modern universities built in these remote places, traditional Buddhist temples were places of silent contemplation and, in some cases, of higher learning. Furthermore, timely rainfall and flood prevention played a significant role in the ritual calendar, especially in East Asia (Hodous 1924:23–28, Trensou 2013:114). Funeral procedures were another main area of ritual activity. In many regions and historical periods, Buddhist funeral rites included cremating the corpse, while in Korea, burial became the prominent practice, and only the clothes of the deceased were burned during the temple ritual.

Although the word “ritual” may have a connotation of rote activity, authorities such as Bo'jo Jin'ul (普照知訥, 1158–1210) encourage young adepts to “view the meaning while reciting the text” (誦文觀義, see Buswell 2012:199) and not let their mind wander when reverently viewing a Buddha's appearance (lit. “face”; 瞻敬尊顏 不得攀緣異境, *ibid.*). All religious services should be performed in a spirit of meditative concentration and transcendent wisdom, in every single moment (念念之中 [...] 等於定慧, *ibid.* 179). Jin'ul warns that some practitioners only cling to outer forms and do not listen to the Mahāyāna instructions on mind-only (或有行者 堅執名相 不聞大乘唯心法門, *ibid.* 179). Such a merely ritualistic approach will incur the ridicule of the wise (執相外求 恐被智人之所嗤矣, *ibid.* 120).

These two main spheres of ritual activity, funerary rites and water control, seem unrelated at first sight, but they overlap in important points. Both kinds of ritual are related to natural cycles: The summer rains are part of the collectively experienced cycle of the seasons, while funerals are rites of passage in the individual life-cycle of birth,

reproduction, and death. In an agricultural society, water and human life are obviously closely related. In better years, water brings the fertility of plants, thus feeding the younger and the older generations of human beings. In times of drought and famine, the elderly may have to leave the family, and even if they did, there was no guarantee that all children could be fed.

Agriculture required settlements near rivers. This meant rich harvests close to people's houses when things went well, but also the constant dread of flooding. Water, life, and death stood in a close relation.

Rice farming required that rural communities cooperated in field irrigation, creating a close-knit society of mutual dependence. In this society, funerals and other rites of passage were communal rather than individual events. Individual mountain hermits were a possible exception to that rule. When less famous hermits passed away, a smaller ritual may have been performed by their peers, or they may have died without a trace, adding to their myth.

3. Temples and Hermitages on Gwan'ak-san

The Jo'seon Dynasty (1392–1897) curtailed the influence of Buddhist institutions in favor of Confucianism, while still supporting the Buddhist order in rural settings. Temples were mostly banned within the city of Seoul, formerly known as Han'yang (漢陽, “[Castle on the] Sunny (i.e. northern) Side of the Han River”) or Hanseong (漢城, “Castle at the Han River”). Mt. Gwan'ak, close to the southern shore of the Han River (Han'gang, 漢江), was one of the locations near Han'yang where Buddhist temples could be found. During the Jo'seon era, Buddhist place names and historical legends were changed, making the history of Buddhist establishments more difficult to assess.

One of the major Buddhist sites on the mountain

is a Buddhist temple of the Jo'gye Tradition (曹溪宗), on a cliff today called Yoen'ju-dae (戀主臺, “Platform of Love for the Sovereign,” i.e. the king, 629 m). The location was formerly known as Ui'sang-dae due to the legend that the Buddhist master Ui'sang (義湘, c. 625–702) founded a small hermitage there in 677 (Cultural Heritage Association 2022). The hermitage allows easy access to the peak of Gwan'ak-san, just a few meters above. Its location on the eastern side of the mountain offers protection against winds coming from the Yellow Sea (Hwang-hae, 黃海), also known as Western Sea (Seong-hae, 西海). The religious significance of access to the peak should not be underestimated since the veneration of mountains and their respective mountain deities continues to be strong in Korea. In contemporary Korea, also Buddhists and Christians occasionally participate in self-organized rituals centered on the mountain deities, involving the presentation of meat and alcohol on the offering altar. On a more mundane level, access to the peak from Ui'sang's hermitage would have facilitated an early warning in case heavy weather or hostile armies were approaching.

Buddhist members of the Joseon royal family used the Ui'sang-dae hermitage for retreat (Cultural Heritage Association 2022). On the other side of the mountain, on the upper western slopes, Ja'un-am (慈云庵, “Cloud of Benevolence Hermitage”) is located just above Seoul National University. According to a plate installed at the entrance, it was similarly used for retreat by members of the royal family.

Further west in the Gwan'ak-san range, the “Three [Hermit] Saints Mountain” (Sam'seong-san, 三聖山, 421 m) shields the ravine in which the university is located from western winds. True to its name, various Buddhist establishments are still found on this mountain. The present article, however, will focus on only one temple, located on

the north-western side of the mountain Gwanag-san itself, in the area closest to the Han River.

4. Gwan'eum-sa (觀音寺)

Numerous temples in the Seoul area are named after Gwan'eum-bo'sal (Skt. Avalokiteśvara), the bodhisattva of compassion. Among those, the Jo'gye temple Gwan'ak-san Gwan'eum-sa (冠岳山觀音寺) lies on the "Seoul Trail," a major hiking route that is well developed and maintained with public funds. These routes attract thousands of hikers from the Seoul metropolitan area every weekend.

4.1. Ascent to Gwan'eum-sa

Although the northern, shady side of a mountain was traditionally considered unfavorable for settlement, the lower slopes of the Gwan'ak-san are densely populated today. The arrays of multi-story buildings end before a small stream that flows down from the mountain.



View south from the bridge, upstream.

When crossing the bridge, one can see newer hydraulic structures for flood control and a plate recording their completion in 2011. On August 20th 2022, severe damage to some of the structures was still visible. A name for the river is not recorded on the plate, and local residents could not tell me whether the river even had a name.

The "Seoul Trail" then leads uphill along the stream, passing the usual facilities (open-air gym, public toilet, air compressors for dusting off hiking gear, other sports facilities) at well-developed hiking trails. The temple is accessible by car, and there are parking lots within the temple precincts.



The first temple gate.

Approaching the temple, the road continues through the first temple gate. Volunteers were feeding cats near the gate, giving the impression that the mountain has become a refuge for abandoned pets.



Jang'seung protectors and pagoda lanterns below the temple.

From the first gate on, pagoda lanterns are placed along the way. Standing near the road shortly before the entrance through the main temple wall, two protective wooden pillars (*jang'seung* 長承) greet the visitor and create a rather eerie atmosphere. Although such protectors were formerly found along roads to ordinary villages, they are an unusual sight today.



Male and female protector pillars.

The names of the two protectors give a somewhat hybrid Buddhist-Confucian impression: “Avalokiteśvara Great General” (Gwan’eum Dae’jang’gun, 觀音大將軍) and “Avalokiteśvara Female General” (Gwan’eum Yeo’jang’gun, 觀音女將軍). Protective wooden pillars such as the two encountered here were once known as “Dharma protectors” (*beob’su*, 法守), although *jang’seung* now seems to be the standard expression.

Having reached the temple wall, one sees the river, in this altitude a small stream flowing out from underneath the temple through underground pipes.

As a whole, the scenery confirms Steven Heine’s observation that the entry into mountain temple precincts “demarcates the transition from mundane reality to [...] a spiritual realm. Mountain landscapes are originally uncultivated, untamed, and

primordial, beyond the limits of society or the fringes of civilization” (2002:21).



River flowing out from underneath the temple wall.

4.2. History of Gwan’eum-sa

Past the temple wall, a plate informs the visitor that the temple was founded in 895 with the declared purpose of “empowering the land” in accordance with the principles of “Wind and Water” (*pung’su*, 風水). We further learn about historical documents that mention a village of monastic quarters (*seung’bang*, 僧坊) and a monastic-quarters bridge, indicating that the monastery formerly housed a significant number of monks. The temple was recognized as a place for practicing prayers to Gwan’eum (*Gwan’eum gi’do do’jang*, 觀音祈禱道場).

4.3. Fire and the Ascent Beyond the Mountain

As is common with mountain temples, a crematorium for the clothes of the deceased is located within the temple precincts. In India, in the centuries before

Buddhism was transmitted to Korea, cremation became increasingly popular among the Brahmanic traditions, while burial and tumuli were partially associated with Buddhism (Pandey 1969:263). Although the Buddha himself was cremated, at least according to a later tradition, it seems that Buddhist wandering monks often died in remote places where their fellows could not organize a cremation. Probably, Buddhist clerics also officiated at funerals for the poor who could not afford firewood.



Crematorium for clothes, with altar.

In Korea, however, the situation was rather the reverse. The Buddhist order supported cremation of the dead, while the Jo'seon administration promoted burial and the construction of tumuli, eventually banning cremation in 1470 (Park 2010:96). This fostered connection to the ancestral soil (Park 2010:97), an issue that was originally not a matter of concern for Indian Buddhist wandering ascetics. As the cremation of the body was banned in Jo'seon times, Buddhist temples symbolically cremated clothes of the deceased. Over the centuries,

however, burial space has become increasingly rare so that in recent decades, a government campaign was launched in order to promote cremation. While the Buddhist custom of burning the clothes is maintained, cremation in centralized crematories is now the majority funerary practice.

In either case, the symbolism of fire as purifying the deceased and carrying them to a higher sphere is well attested in literature on the Brahmanic fire-offering (*homa*) ritual. In contrast, early Buddhism basically advocated the purification of mind through mind itself, thus distinguishing itself from both the *homa* and the ritual bathing of the Brahmins. Also in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the distinctions between light and darkness, above and below should be ultimately transcended. Still, on a colloquial level, the symbolism of purification and elevation by fire remained valid. Similar to the Buddhist doctrines that de-emphasized light and elevation, Confucian burial customs in the Jo'seon era were more affirmative of darkness and earth, the “shadow” (*yang*, 陰) aspect of burial. Nevertheless, even within this framework, the dead were ideally buried on mountains (Shin 2020), close to heaven and light. A tumulus was raised, in effect a mountain on a mountain, indicating elevation.

In Korea, a three-night vigil is normally held after the death of a family member (Shin 2020), normally in the family home or now increasingly in a special room at the hospital. Similar to the flame that globally symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and vigor over stagnation, the vigil, too, is a global phenomenon. Victory over sleep here symbolizes victory over death. At the same time, both fire and the vigil can be used as gestures of respect and communal coherence.



Gwan'eum crowned by Buddha Amitābha, holding a water bottle.

4.4. Gwan'eum and the Ascent to the Pure Land

On the plaza in front of the main hall, a statue of Gwan'eum in standing position faces the visitor moving on the standard route through the temple. Modern Korean Buddhism depicts Gwan'eum with either male or female features, and the present statue is clearly male.

Gwan'eum features an image of Buddha Amitābha on his crown, symbol of an ascent to Amitābha's pure land after death. Possibly, it also symbolizes an ascent of consciousness within the body, to the crown of the head, at the moment of death.

Beneath Buddha Amitābha, Gwan'eum holds a vase of water. While depictions of Gwan'eum pouring the water from the vase seem to be more common with female features, the symbolism of water is nonetheless present and quite in line with the mission of the temple to "empower the land" according to the principles of "Wind and Water."

4.5. The Downward Movement of Water

The water symbolism implied in the vase becomes more obvious when the statue is viewed from the side.



Gwan'eum, with a well, a nāga shrine, and a river source in the background.

In the background, a lotus-shaped well is visible and, behind it, a shrine dedicated to the dragon king (Yong'wang-gak, 龍王閣), the ruler of the dragons (Skt. *nāgas*) who control the element of water. Originally, the assumption that dragons live underground and control underground water (Mumford 1989:65, 95) may have been supported or even caused by reports of dinosaur bones found underground (cp. Stromberg 2012).

Inside the shrine, copies of the *Flower Ornament Sūtra*, which contains a section on the *nāga* kings, are kept for recitation. The Dragon-King shrine is located near one of the main sources of the river, which today is diverted to an underground pipe close to the Gwan'eum statue.



Dragon King standing on two dragons in water.

4.6. The Upward Movement of Water

The somewhat abstract upward movement of the water cycle becomes clearly visible in mountain areas in the summer: As the sun shines on the mountain slopes, clouds rise up from the woods, promising rain in the near future. Commonly, clouds rising from mountain forests are depicted in black-and-white landscape paintings, known as “mountain and water” (*san'su* 山水) paintings. Also place names such as “Cloud of Benevolence Hermitage” draw on the cloud imagery.

In Indian mythology, a similar cycle of rising and falling is equated with human death and rebirth. As the smoke of the funeral fire rises up, it carries the soul to heaven. Eventually, however, the soul will descend as rain, enter plants, be eaten by men and enter the womb, leading to rebirth (Halbfass 2000:48). This, of course, is not exactly the Buddhist conception of rebirth, but Buddhism, too, teaches a conception of perpetual ascent and descent, symbolized by the incessantly turning irrigation wheel.

In the natural world, water is found both underground as well as in the clouds. Accordingly, dragons control water not only from below but also from above, as expressed by images of dragons and clouds above the Buddha (see also Trenson 2013:121,

126). The same imagery can be found in Chan (禪) prayer for rain, “May the cloud dragon rise on the mountains and rivers” (T2025, 1115b2: 起雲龍于山川).



Dragons in the clouds above the Buddha, main assembly hall.

4.7. The Tree and the Hermit

In the main hall, an image of the Buddha is seated beneath dragons and clouds, with the tree of awakening (Skt. *bodhi*) barely discernable in the background. Its symbolism is nonetheless significant. The Buddha lived in the Ganges plains, where the forests were roamed by ascetics, pilgrims, and elderly people who had left home in order to relieve their families from the burden of care. The hermit lifestyle was associated with trees rather than mountains. *Stūpas* and *caityas* were built as artificial sacred mountains, often associated with sacred trees.

In terms of ascent and descent, trees symbolized the ascent from the dark underworld, where the uncremated dead are buried (Mumford 1989:65).

According to the principles of Wind and Water, the element of wood (*mok*, 木, lit. “tree”), represents plant life and fertility in general (Mumford 1989:107). Thus, trees are yet another sign of the victory of life over death. This connotation seems to play a role in the ascent of tree burials in which ashes are either buried under trees or placed in the branches (Shin 2020). Already in pre-modern India, leaving the corpse in the branches was occasionally practiced, both by hermits and lay people (Pandey 1969:268).



Hermit image in the shrine of the three saints, Sam'seong-gak (三聖閣).

While the tree symbol is somewhat underrepresented in the main hall, this is fully compensated for in the shrine of the three [hermit] saints, a structure that is common in Korean temples (Hae'ju Seu'nim 2007:39, Chun 2007). Readers will remember that also the secondary peak of the Gwan'ak Range is named after the three saints. In the shrine, one of the saints is depicted as a white-haired man stroking his long beard in wise contemplation, surrounded by symbols of vigor and fertility: a mountain landscape with waterfalls, a tiger, a child with a flask made from bottle gourd, ripe peaches, clouds, and a tree with visibly strong roots, its branches covering almost the whole sky, touching the clouds.

5. The Dragon King Reconsidered

According to legend, when the king who first unified the three kingdoms of Korea was approaching his death, he vowed to become a dragon king and protect the land (Inoue 1989:43f.). The dragon king was thus more than a king of dragons. Human kings did well in taking him as a role model in water management. In rice-farming societies, efficient control of water (*chi'su*, 治水) could secure prosperity, prevent flooding, and thereby stabilize the position of the king.

In the case of prolonged rain or drought, elaborate Buddhist rituals for the *nāga* dragons focused public attention and prevented public unrest until, hopefully, weather conditions improved. This shifted some of the blame from the king to the monasteries. However, it also placed the monks in a position from which they could blame society (and by implication the king) for unrighteous conduct, the cause of irregular weather (Hodous 1924:28).

Also the monastic village and bridge mentioned in the historical documents (see section 4.2) are quite significant, though on a more practical level. The river source obviously supplied the monks with fresh water, but its location on the monastery grounds also meant that monks could guard the source and make sure that no enemies, animal cadavers or other calamities poisoned the water. If elderly people went to the mountain to die, or if hermits passed away, the monks were in a position to make sure that basic standards for burial or cremation were observed. This was quite surely the case for elderly monks who had retreated from a mountain monastery to even higher hermitages. Monasteries usually feature a smaller or larger amount of stone pagodas in which remains of past masters are kept (Buswell 1992:52). While I could not find research on monastics burying lay followers in Korea, in 17th-century China, burying the dead

was partly seen as the monks' responsibility (Brook 1993:100, 346, n. 33). In Japan, monks of the Ritsu Tradition (律宗) buried the poor (Glassmann 2014:162).



Gwan'eum and Buddha Amitābha

6. Monks as Geomancers

The lay Confucian application of “Water and Wind” prescribed that the dead should be buried at a site with “a mountain to its back with a flowing stream in front” (Shin 2020). This custom brings a risk of water contamination in densely populated areas, especially during epidemics. I am unaware of specialist research on this the issue, but it seems at least possible that the Buddhist monks prevented such risky burials. A folktale recorded by Yoon (2006:191) suggests that monks living in a mountain retreat were trying to keep an auspicious place for burial secret. Clearly, those of the Buddhist monks

who specialized in geomancy were actively involved in finding appropriate gravesites for lay families in the mountains, telling them where and how to bury the dead. Some of them wandered far through the country and talked about the geomantic conditions with like-minded monks (Yoon 2006:184).

A famous example is the legend of the monk who wandered the plain north of the Han River in search of an ideal location for the royal palace, to be located at the southern foot of a mountain. When he met a farmer on the way and described his criteria for an ideal place, the farmer told him to “walk ten *li*” to the north-west in order to find such a place. This phrase has become the name for the Wangshimni (往十里) district in the eastern part of Seoul.

The royal palace was accordingly built in a plain area protected by mountains in the west, north, and east. The western mountain was named after the Benevolent King (In'wang 仁王), an epithet of the Dharma protector Vajrapāṇi (Geum'gang'su, 金剛手).



Clouds rising after rainfall on the Mountain of the Benevolent King (In'wang Jae'seng-do, 仁王霽色圖, 1751).

The artist Jeong Seon (鄭敼, 1676–1759) has captured the mountain and clouds rising up on the Benevolent-King Mountain in a “mountain and water” painting that has been recognized as a national treasure.

7. Mountain Temples and Water Management

Reconsidering the mountain temple Gwan'ak-san Gwan'eum-sa, the mention of the monk's bridge, should not be underestimated. A bridge is more than a means to cross a river. It should be built to last through all seasons. This requires an estimation of possible floods as well as sufficient construction (*to'mog*, 土木, lit. "earth and wood") to withstand them. The presence of the bridge implied at least a minimum of hydraulic construction at the upper reaches of the river, and the same presupposition applies to the dragon shrine and monastic buildings at the source. Furthermore, in pre-modern societies, bridges were used as points to observe water levels and to initiate a warning if necessary.



A well below the *nāga*-shrine, featuring a monk bestowing water. River source and cover of the cistern in the back.

In the monastic regulations ascribed to the eighth Chan patriarch Baizhang Huaihai (百丈懷海, 720–814 CE) but only available in a fourteenth

century redaction (see Ichimura 2006, xiii–xvi), it is recommended to inspect the monastery's sewage and drainage systems in the fifth lunar month (T2025, 1155a7: 直歲點檢諸處整漏 疏浚溝渠), preparing for the summer rains. In the same month, prayers for the growth of seedlings on the rice fields were held (T2025, 155a6: 住持上堂次第建青苗會). If rice fields belonged to the monastery, they were to be registered in a record book along with other facilities (T2025, 1123c22: 該寫本寺應有田產物業). In other words, the water that came from the monastery in some cases went to fields that were owned by the monastery itself.

Similar to Chinese Chan monasteries, Korean establishments often owned fields and villages in the vicinity, occasionally the inheritance of aristocratic youth who had entered the order (Buswell 1992:124). All Korean monasteries are built according to principles of "Wind and Water," preferably in a wind-protected valley and near a spring (*ibid.* 49). Water from the spring is often channeled into large granite reservoirs for use by the monastery (*ibid.* 53). In Gwan'eum-sa, at least one such cistern seems to be located underground directly in front of the *nāga*-king shrine. In addition, Korean temples often feature underground waterworks for supplying the monastic quarters with fresh spring water and drainage systems leading rainwater off the monastery precincts (*ibid.* 49).

As of 2022, hydraulic construction at Gwan'ak-san Gwan'eum-sa had not only been carried out on the temple premises but also at the river, as said above, by the city authorities. For these measures, completed in 2011, the asphalt road to the temple was undoubtedly used to transport materials, tools and workers. After the heavy rain in August 2022, monks and hikers using the road directly along the river could see and report eventual damage immediately. It is naturally quite common that the

road to a mountain temple leads along the respective river as also reported by Buswell (1992:59) for Song'gwang-sa (松廣寺) in the southernmost part of Korea. It would seem sensible to assume that pathways to mountain temples were used to maintain flood control infrastructure already in pre-modern times. Yoon's (2006:184) mention of wandering monk geomancers could speak in favor of such an assumption.

The above mentioned Chinese Chan monastic regulations treat weather rituals in detail and include some remarks on weather conditions and their impact on harvests (T2025, 1115a7–b26, Ichimura 2006, 22–26, esp. T2025, 1115a26: 切見亢陽爲災 百物就稿). In the same work, we find the designation “clouds and water” (雲水 T2025, 1140a9, Ichimura 2006, 228), for wandering novices, which has been explained as “moving clouds, running water” in the later Japanese tradition (T2574, 562a2: 天上星地下木. 廬山煙雨浙江潮 行雲流水 墜葉飛花). However, Korean monks usually stay in strict retreat in the monasteries during the rainy season (Buswell 1992:102). If they played a role in reporting the state of rivers, dams, and bridges outside the monastery, this was confined to spring and autumn, when monks travel extensively, visiting other monasteries and hermitages.

8. Conclusions: Ancient Symbolism in Present and Future Society

The Seoul metropolis is undergoing rapid social and cultural change, much of which will occur elsewhere in the future. In this environment, ancient symbolism is at risk of preserving antiquated values which neither fit the present nor the future.

Critical academic research has the freedom to recognize cases in which ancient symbolism depicts culture as nature and therefore unchangeable. If the gap between traditional values and the advancement

of natural sciences becomes too wide, tradition can become a burden rather than a treasure from the past.

A rather sober, analytical approach to archaic symbolism can already be found in various sūtras and Buddhist treatises. While in this article, smoke rising from a mountain has been treated as a symbol for the journey to the higher realms, the Buddhist logicians used the same image merely as an example for the logical process of inference. In this usage, the smoke stands for anything that can be observed directly with the five senses, and the fire for any conclusions that can be drawn from such observations, nothing more.

There is, however, a danger of falling into the extreme of denying all congruence between ancient symbols and the real world, or denying the value of the higher truths about mind, matter, and existence as expressed in these symbols.

8.1. The Hermit Saints and the Aging Society

In critical scholarship, the images of hermit saints can remind us that also ancient society had to find a “middle way” attitude towards the elderly. On a global scale, pre-modern societies took respect for the elderly as a self-evident value. Factually, however, grandparents often had to leave the house for lack of provisions. Many died while living in the open, of starvation or suicide. Industrial societies saw respect for the elderly as a value dwindle, while at the same time, social security systems provided a high material standard of living. In the future, the relation between a reverend attitude and factual financial support will have to be recalibrated continuously.

In formal education, understanding the distant past will always help mastering the future. On the scale of a much lesser time-span, it will always be good for children to hear the stories of their

grandparents, to take an interest in a world long gone even when more immediate forms of entertainment are available. At least to this extent, it will be helpful to maintain the traditional respect for the elders. Furthermore, the young will be old sooner than they think. This is underemphasized in a world of mass-tailored media supply. Excessive reverence for the elderly and concern for the deceased may take some of the innovativeness and freshness out of cultural life, but the young will be led by the old, whether they realize it or not. A moderate amount of respect for the aged may be realistic.

8.2. Water, Fire, Wood, and Sustainability

The ancient systems of five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water, or earth, water, fire, wind, and space) were originally not focused on the protection of nature. As early forms of abstracting and categorizing natural phenomena, this alchemical system factually helped human society to manipulate the environment for practical purposes. Beyond the categorization and balancing of the five natural elements, the “mountain and water” paintings express an even more fundamental longing for oneness with nature. However, considering the recent history of various East Asian states, this high esteem for nature and harmony did not necessarily lead to effective environmental policies. It may be helpful to take a step back and accept that humanity is not merely a part of nature but exerts significant power over the ecosystems on this planet. With this in mind, the ancient symbolism can in fact teach us to be aware of the interaction of water, fire, and wood, and actively aim at a world where fire and trees are in balance.

8.3. Mountains and Fire, Cremation and Burial

South Korean society seems to have reached a point where the decision between cremation

or burial is more and more made on practical grounds. Understanding Buddhist history means understanding that there was originally no strong preference for either of the two. In my personal opinion, ecology should be the main criterion for future developments. The imagery of the tree with extensive branches and strong roots can be read as encouragement to adapt corpse disposal to the interplay of elements in the most befitting way, whatever it may be.

8.4. Earth and Wood, Hydraulic Construction

Concerning the history of Buddhism, the main point of this article is the connection between Buddhist rites for water management and material flood control infrastructure. Hydraulic construction is becoming an increasingly important and costly issue for temples in flood-prone areas. It may be helpful to remember this played a central role already in ancient times.

Considering the flood-control measures on Gwan'ak-san, contemporary services use an ancient path to the temple. Even though the area below was severely affected by the rains of August 2022, this could have been much worse without the long tradition of caring for the source and the river. In general, while Buddhist temples in such mountain areas may seem aloof and segregated from society, they were intimately linked to lay society, even in the practical question of water management.

The flood of August 2022 is hopefully understood as an encouragement to continue the government policy of developing mountain hiking trails with public funds, both as a path to the rivers as well as an eco-friendly recreation facility.

8.5. Earth and Sky, Reality and Ideals

Returning to the basic question of ancient symbolism in present and future society, it may be advisable to

creatively aim at a better future while keeping two feet on the ground. Parts of the Buddhist tradition challenged ancient dichotomies of above and below, light and darkness, as well as the felicities of sacred trees, holy mountains, and elevated trances. Even when such cultural traditions were continued in Buddhism, they were taken with a grain of salt.

Ideally, a departure from archaic symbols can

lead us to a space of unhindered creativity. However it will not lead us to a space where the facts of natural science do not matter anymore. They do. Just as fire needs to be balanced by trees, unchanging truths (the earth) and creative thought (the sky) need to be united. As it were, the Buddha sits between the roots and branches of the tree, between heaven and earth.

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