

Keyword

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(*honwonilgi*)

Abstract

Donghak: Towards life and spirituality

At this great turning point of our civilization, human beings have realized that our life on earth is one of coexistence with others. So our mode of consciousness is being changed from an anthropocentric life to an ecocentric life. Now we are facing the new values of coexistence, symbiosis and communal life. Even more, we have found that our spirituality can sympathize with real life.

This paper discusses Donghak, the first native Korean religion and doctrine that pursues an ecocentric life and human spirituality. In the middle of the 19th century, Donghak claimed that human civilization was diseased and declared the "Beginning of a New World." Donghak claims that all the human beings are dignified beings that bear "Hanullim"(God) within. Hence, Donghak teaches one to "respect human beings as one would Hanullim," on the premise that all nature should be respected because it bears Hanullim.

Donghak aims to recover human spirituality and provide humans with a new level of life, or life at the level of the universe, by communicating with the reality of universal life. Moreover, Donghak shows us a specific life that we sympathize and mutually communicate with every single life in the universe with our minds and bodies. Thus, Donghak not only teaches about ecocentric life but also practices it.

In this paper, I elucidate three ideas in Donghak; first, the idea of a "New Beginning," second, a new viewpoint of the world called "*sicheonju*" (the idea that every human being and life from have Hanullim in themselves), and third, the spirituality of Donghak to actualize the ideas of a New Beginning and *sicheonju*. I examine whether these ideas of Donghak are a new and promising that can replace the existing one.

Donghak: Towards Life and Spirituality

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Introduction

Environmental pollution and destruction of the ecosystem foretell the demise of all living things. Desertification is progressing at an alarmingly rapid speed in many parts of the world and meteorological disasters such as floods, typhoons, extreme heat, cold waves and avalanches have killed numerous people and other living creatures. If the atmospheric change worsens in the future, no one can be expected to survive on the earth. Faced with this reality, criticism and doubt about Western civilization, the pioneer of modern civilization, is on the rise.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist and environmental activist, criticizes that “지금까지의 서구문명은 지구상의 다양한 생명체가 얼마나 빠른 속도로 사라지고 있는지에 대해서는 아무런 평가도 없이 과학과 발전에 이끌린 진보라는 이름으로 생명을 파괴하기 시작하였으며 이러한 과학과 발전은 진보의 보편적인 범주가 아니라 서구 가부장제의 특별한 기획이라.”¹⁾(주 1은 삭제해도 무방하겠습니다.) Putting a special focus on modern science and the crisis of the ecosystem, he sternly warns that “세계가 세계관과 생활방식의 차원에서 생태학적으로 재구성되지 않는다면 인류의 생존 그 자체가 위협받을 것.”²⁾(직접적인 인용문구 찾아봐야 할 것 같습니다.)

It is time to realize the fact that the problems humanity is currently experiencing are not limited to certain areas or regions, but are global and general, and search for a new alternative for the sake of human beings, nature and human society. Many assertions have been made that we must view nature, humans and human society as one organic life, treating them as parts of a single body, and create a new mode of life of coexistence.

The patriarchal industrial civilization of the Western world putting forth scientific technology has dominated, conquered and exploited the relatively weak dichotomizing all living things and understanding them in conflictual and competitive relations. It has overlooked precious spiritual values which cannot be reduced to material values and has continued to destroy nature and kill life in the name of development and progress. Consequently, Western, male-centered ideologies are now rejected in many parts of the world and new discourses have been raised to establish new values and look for alternatives.

Particularly, as the sense of crisis surrounding environmental problems is intensifying, catch phrases like "Let's Save the Sick Earth" have become familiar to the common person. However, despite heightened interest in the environment among people, environmental problems are regarded as technological and economic problems. That is, many people tend to believe that the current environmental problems can be solved with further progress of science and increase of government funds. They are not interested in the fundamental problems and resort to scientism to avoid this. Whitehead says that "Of course most men of science, and many philosophers, use the Positivistic doctrine to avoid the necessity of considering perplexing fundamental questions — in short, to avoid metaphysics —, and then save the importance of science by an implicit recurrence to their metaphysical persuasion that the past does in fact condition the future."³) He also criticizes that scientism is nothing but a blind metaphysics.

Environmental destruction is not a problem that can be solved simply with technology or money. This paper emphasizes that environmental problems are as fundamental as the worldview of nature and value of life. The question of deciding our life values and attitudes is crucial. The environment movement needs a more fundamental approach on top of concrete practices to deal with immediate problems. By a fundamental approach, I mean a fundamental change in the mode of life and thinking.

The new science in the West urges a fundamental change of view of the earth we live in, arguing that the earth is a "Gaia," a gigantic body of life itself where all forms of life are connected in an intricate web.

This organic worldview demands a shift in the understanding of the earth, from simply the "environment" humans live in, to an ecological understanding that it is a community of all living creatures. During great period of transition of civilization, the world has begun to pay attention to the value of life for "coexistence," "symbiosis" and "communal life," and there has been a surge of interest in spirituality and spiritual life which can connect with the [essence](#) of life. The interest in spirituality and human nature as the foundation of life has led to increased interest in Eastern religion.

Interestingly enough, the achievements of modern physics have much in common with Eastern philosophical thought. As Western science which investigates the objective world and Eastern wisdom which pursues subjective enlightenment give each other mutual inspirations and wisdom, intellectuals all over the world have started viewing in a new light intuition, insight and enlightenment, which were disregarded as mysticism in rationality based thought. This change is transforming our understanding of humanity and the world. Now is the time to adopt a new framework of life, which requires a new worldview that will create a new way of life.

While Western science and religion was conquering the East through wars, Choe Je-Woo (pen name: Suun, 1824-1864), a Confucian intellectual of Korea, spent many years in anguish searching for a new form of life and found his answer on 5 April 1860. Suun, who founded Donghak in the mid 19th century, declared human civilization outdated and sick⁴⁾ and claimed that every human being is a respectable being who has sacred Hanullim⁵⁾ (God) within. By employing the concepts of [sicheonju](#) (every human being and existence in universe bear God within) and [a single sacred energy which works in a variety of ways and levels \(honwonilgi\)](#), he maintained that a sacred spirit connects humans with Hanullim (God), with nature, with other humans and even with the entire universe. In other words, he made it clear that Hanullim interacts with [every single existence](#) in the universe through the [sacred energy](#). Suun offered a new paradigm of civilization with which to overcome the anthropocentric world view of the modern Western world. He talked about the [beginning of a new world \(gaebyeok\)](#) to usher in a new

civilization and build a different framework of human life. All that he meant by *gaebyeok* cannot be discussed here in minute detail. Instead, I want to shed light on Donghak (Eastern Learning) as an alternative world view with which to overcome the limitations of the Western modern civilization and examine if it offers help for preparing for the future.

Gaebyeok: A New Mode of Life

Suun established Donghak on 5 April 1860 based on his personal religious experience.⁶⁾ What was that he created exactly? He opened an entirely new horizon for Hanullim (God; the ultimate reality), the universe and human beings. He showed that humans have an inseparably close inner relationship with God and they are cosmic beings in that they are connected with all other beings in the universe through a connecting energy (*gihwa*). When humans come to realize this inner and outer relationship, this results in the beginning of a new world (*gaebyeok*) at the human level. If such human beings create a community, it becomes a new beginning at the level of civilization. Let us examine what he meant by a new beginning at the human level, or the state in which humans bear God in themselves and breathe with the universe.

Through a deeply religious meditation which is often called the meditation of “My mind is your mind” (*osim jeuk yeosim*), Suun realized that God's mind and his mind are not two but one.⁷⁾ He also learned that a great sacred energy forms each human being and all the creatures in the universe, and intervenes, orders and unifies them. Thereby he declares everyone equal and worthy of respect, and says all things are sacred for they all bear God. He teaches never to try to find God outside of oneself.⁸⁾ By realizing the concept of *sicheonju*, he does not separate God from people and tries to understand human life at the level of the universe.

Choe Si-hyeong (pen name: Haewol) (1827~1898), who was ordained by Suun as the second great teacher of Donghak, inherits this organic view of humans and nature, saying that all things in the universe are connected through a sacred energy and are the actions of life engaged

in continuous interaction. To take a step further, he elevates them to the level of reverence. The following citation from Haewol's teachings well demonstrate that the **great energy** penetrates each and every thing in the universe and that he personally practiced this truth in his life.

"I always say that **all things and events are a manifestation of God**. If you agree with this, you must also agree that there is not a thing which God does not eat or which does not eat God. This sounds absurd, but only from the biased view of the human mind. What would it be like if things were seen from God's point of view. To bring about the **connection of sacred energy**, God makes homogeneous ones mutually help one another and makes heterogeneous ones eat God so that their spirits can be connected. Therefore, God cultivates species through homogeneous linkage on the one hand while promoting growth and development of species through connection of the heterogeneous on the other hand. In short, that God both eats and is eaten can be understood as God's putting into action of **the connecting sacred energy**. When the Great Divine Teacher Suun explicated on the meaning of *si* (bear), *naeyusillyeong* (the internal divine spirit) meant God and *eoyugihwa* (the external connection of sacred energy) meant that God eats and is eaten. The marvelous law of heaven and earth is in connection through a **sacred energy**."⁹⁾

Understanding that the entire universe is connected through a **sacred energy**, Haewol explains the relationship of things in the universe with the concept that "**God eats God**" (*icheon sikcheon*). This is a very interesting expression. The idea that **God is the eater and at the same time the eaten** shows that the entire universe is conceived as a network of relations. Of course, as Haewol said, this is so from God's standpoint, not from that of ordinary people. Man eats rice, but how can God eat God? From Haewol's viewpoint, rice is a **solidified spiritual energy created** by nature and man is the most outstanding **spiritual energy** among all creatures in the universe. So man the most outstanding **energy**

eats an essential energy in the universe. Because all sacred energy is one energy from God, as Haewol states, it can be said that God eats God. The doctrine of *sicheonju*, which is a new paradigm offered by Donghak, presents life at a new or cosmic dimension where human beings can recover and revere their sacredness and respond and communicate with all things in heaven and earth. This new paradigm connects nature with actual human life and discovers sacredness in it, elevating it to an object of reverence. Furthermore, it entails contemporary ecological thinking by understanding nature, the stage of our lives, within the connecting framework, and by seeking a life of aesthetic harmony between the body and the mind.

Sicheonju is a new paradigm to make an "another new beginning" of human civilization and is the principle of a new beginning sought by Donghak. But in Donghak, a new beginning is not brought about suddenly nor made by an absolute supernatural being, but by humans who transform themselves through internal spiritual change and build a new world. In other words, humans create a new life of humanity, including politics, economy, society and culture, and achieve harmony between humans, humans and nature, and humans and the universe. Thus, Donghak focuses on the "here and now," "this world" or "the life of humans" on earth rather than abstract, transcendental values separated from their real life. Since its inception, Donghak never turned away from contemporary real problems, such as supporting the national and comforting the people despite so many attempts of persecution and suppression. It was at the vanguard of historical social movements to change society, including the Donghak Revolution, the March First Independence Movement, the Gapjin Cultural Reform Movement and the New Culture Movement. Yet Donghak had an even greater ambition to make an entirely new beginning of human civilization. It opened a new horizon in the understanding of humans as the unifier of God, an abstract metaphysical being, and the universe, the concrete world of nature and things. It was not an ideology but a concrete historical reality in Korean modern history that humans who gave a concrete form to a metaphysical ideal existence called God realized the ideal in the real world.

Donghak declared a new dimension of life and a new beginning of human civilization with the epistemological shift to *sicheonju*. This means to feel intensely the life and spirit of the universe acting through one's body and mind, and to "revere" them like one's parents, and to expand it to the social public realm. Donghak urges one to cultivate the true self by realizing one's innate sacredness and eternal life and to create a new civilization in which such actors establish true equality through reverence and "bearing." This shows that the new beginning does not remain at the level of individual character, but is treated at the level of civilization.

Gihwa: Ecological Life

Western, modern civilization, which is based on dualism and a mechanical world view, understands the relations between the mental and the physical and between humans and nature as oppositional. The communal life between humans and other humans, between humans and society, and between humans and nature has been dismantled and particularly, humans and all other living forms are faced with a serious crisis due to the destruction of the ecosystem. But Eastern societies have sought harmony with nature for ages maintaining a monistic tradition and an organic worldview. In Eastern traditions, nature is the origin of life before it is the space for survival and it is the abundant flow of **spiritual energy**. Thus, in Eastern life, nature is a treasure house and the origin of life at the same time. The order and change of Nature is the unspoken lesson and wisdom given to humans.

In the East world, nature is not conceived of as a material object, much less an object of conquest and exploitation.¹⁰⁾ It is not regarded as the physical object of modern science but as a living world which never ceases to create and is the basis of life or the life world where one lives one's life concrete. Eastern philosophers believe that the universe is full of **energy** from time immemorial and hold an organic world view in which the world is viewed as one **energy**. Moreover, they try to explain the universe with the idea of the *samjae* (three elements) which posits an organic relationship between heaven, earth and humans.

Inheriting the concept of the three elements, Donghak posits an organic view of heaven, earth and humanity and explains the universe as the actions of **one** great **energy**. Suun said that "Heaven is the center of *ohaeng* (the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and dirt); earth is the foundation of *ohaeng*; and humans are the excellent spirit of *ohaeng*.¹¹⁾ This does not seem very different from the Confucian worldview. However, what differentiates Donghak from Confucianism is that it does not regard heaven and earth simply as the order of the energy called *ohaeng*, but as a totality of spirits, *yin* and *yang*, and nature (a harmony with spirits and *yin* and *yang*). Suun says, "If they do not know that heaven and earth are spirits, and spirits are *yin* and *yang*, what is the use of studying the scriptures?,"¹²⁾ criticizing shamanistic worship of spirits. Spirits are not real, but they are the activities of the **energy** of heaven and earth and they are *yin* and *yang*. Suun's point argument is that metaphysical truth, human heart, and the natural order are connected as one. The natural order is a sign of God's work.

From time immemorial, spring and fall arrive in time taking turns and the rise and fall of the four seasons never change in order. This is a clear sign of God's work manifested in this world....¹³⁾

Donghak inherits the traditional Eastern view of nature and at the same time views it as a world of "harmony" which the great **sacred** energy of God is continuously creating and changing. Therefore, nature is not just material or energy, but an embodiment of the holy, formless God. While Western modernity makes a clear distinction between the divine and the natural order, Donghak foresees the dawn of a new civilization by opening the blocked communications between the three (heaven, earth and humans) and connecting them. With the concept of "bearing," Suun establishes a superb linkage between internal relatedness to God and external interactivity with all things in the universe.

Donghak is not very different from other *gi/qi* (energy) philosophies in the sense that it claims the universe is filled with one cosmic energy. But

Donghak emphasizes its spiritual actions, such as intervening and ordering. While *gi* philosophies in the East view humans and nature as an integrated framework and try to discover a common law, through which one can live a healthy, aesthetic life, Donghak pursues such a life through the subjective cultivation of the mind. *Gi* philosophies focus on humans' passive nature that conforms to the universal **energy**, whereas the concept of **energy** in Donghak emphasizes the active nature of the human mind. But because the active nature of human mind has its roots in God, the **energy** is ultimately connected to God. Suun's understanding of "God" becomes significant at this point.

Suun does not conceptualize "God"; instead, he explains its meaning and mode of existence with the notion of "*si*" (bearing).¹⁴ He says, "By bearing, I mean that it exists internally as a sacred mind and externally as an active **connecting energy**. Every individual in concrete space and time understands and does not move from it." Here, the internal sacred spirit (*naeysillyeong*) and the external connecting energy (*oeyugihwa*) is how God exists in all creation. That is, **everything** in the universe, including humans, have an innate sacred spirit and an **external sacred connecting energy**. When the **internal** sacred spirit and the **external** energy come together and form a body, a life is born. Thus, deep inside this life exists a sacred spirit and **a single sacred energy**. **Becoming one with** this deep sacred spirit and the universal energy (become one) **삭제** and not separating is what Suun means by the expression *gakjibuli* (all attain complete enlightenment and do not part from it). While the internal sacred spirit and the external connecting energy refer to the mode of God's existence, **gakjibuli** is the human realization of consciousness and practice, or the mode of human existence. Therefore, God in Donghak is not an absolute transcendental universal being. Suun views it as an ultimate reality that **one sacred energy** creates all things in the universe and communicates with them ceaselessly as an internal sacred being and as an external connecting energy. Thus, God is not a metaphysical real being, but "a being in the process of becoming," or in progress. Concerning *ju* (the Lord or God), he also says that "we must revere God like our parents."¹⁵ This means that God is being that works concretely creating everything in the universe, including humans, and

taking care of them, just like our parents. Because humans and all other creatures are born through this great energy and live interdependently within this great energy, God is addressed by an honorific term with the same Korean deferential suffix, "*nim*," used in addressing parents.

An examination of the principal doctrines of Donghak shows that God, humans and all other creatures are inseparable and they are one in origin. Moreover, the creatures and nature are not mere materials, but are embodiments of sacred infinite God and concrete forms of formless God. Haewol extends the concept of *si cheonju* to all creatures and makes it even more thorough.

We, humans, are born bearing the sacred spirit of God and live on with God's sacred spirit in us. But how can we say that humans alone bear God? There is not a thing in the universe which does not bear God. The bird's chirping is also God's voice... Every life is born only after it receives this mind and energy. All creation in the universe is penetrated by the same energy and mind."¹⁶⁾

Asserting that it is not that humans alone bear God, but that animals, plants and even lifeless things bear God, Haewol urges us to realize this and practice it in everyday life, i.e., live the life of "bearing God." God is alive in everyday life. No, life itself is the self-expression of God. One who bears God knows this as a fact and one who does not bear God does not know the acting, doing and working God. In Donghak, the life of bearing God means living with the same energy and mind that penetrates everything in the universe. Those who live the life of bearing cannot think of land as an object to conquer, of neighbors as foes to compete with and beat, or of animals and plants as prey or material mass. Therefore, there would be no killing even if it were not forbidden.

There is not a thing which does not bear God. If people realize this, there will be no killing even if it is not forbidden. A phoenix flies in where sparrow eggs are not

broken. Forests grow thick if tree buds are not picked.... Each of the 3,000 animals have a species to breed and each of the 3,000 hairy insects have a life to live. Respect everything, then virtue will spread afar.¹⁷⁾

Donghak is different from Western dichotomous thinking and dualism that distinguish body from phenomena, matter from mind, God from humanity, humanity from nature, and God from nature, and understand them as separately. God, humans and all other creatures in the universe are different expressions and outcomes of the activities of *jigi* (the Ultimate Energy). In this sense, Donghak can be classified as a variant of monism. Showing that God, man and nature are one in origin, it helps us acquire a new understanding of nature. Since Descartes, Western dualism sees nature as nothing more than the surroundings, the environment or resources, producing a worldview that nature is an object of domination and exploitation for human beings. But in the notion of *si cheonju* or bearing God, nature is no longer conceived as the environment or resources, but as an embodiment of God, or God's body. Haewol concretized this notion in his idea of "Honoring the Three" (*samgyeong*).

Firstly, humans must honor God. This is the first principle of the Way expounded by the late Great Teacher. One who does not know why one must honor God does not know how to love truth. This is because God is at the center of the truth. Honoring God does not mean honoring the higher being in the empty space. Honoring one's own mind is the right way of honoring God....

Secondly, honor fellow human beings. Honoring God comes in effect through honoring human beings. If one honors God but not one's fellow human beings, it is the same as knowing the principles of farming but not sowing the seeds.... If one abandons humans and venerates only God, it is the same as dumping water and wanting to be relieved from drought....

Thirdly, honor things. One cannot reach the highest stage of virtue by only honoring human beings. One can unite with the virtue of connecting with heaven and earth only by honoring things.¹⁸⁾

This is completely different from the conventional Western view of nature based on a reason-centered view of humanity and a dualistic notion of the material and the spiritual, which have made reckless violation of nature possible. Indeed, we cannot unite with the spirit of heaven and earth unless we reach the state of revering all creatures. But if this is done, the crisis of the ecosystem and modern civilization can be overcome. Reverence for heaven is common in most religions and thus is known to all. Meanwhile, reverence for humans has been acknowledged as the highest of all values since the birth of humanism. What is particularly interesting in Donghak is the reverence for things not found in the teachings of any other religious person or philosopher. This is an expression unique to Donghak. It teaches us to honor all things in nature as we do God or fellow human beings. In the Western world the modern era started with the awareness that human consciousness is different from that of things, and that humans exist independently without depending on an absolute god. Donghak does not deny this, but it does not want to stop at this. Because the sacred spirit of God penetrates everything in nature, one must learn to revere them and only when this is done can one reach the highest level of morality. This does not mean a return to the time of animism, but an expansion and deepening of human consciousness. It means that humans must learn to see the divine in things, the sacred in fellow human beings, and infinity and eternity in God. It is no wonder that from the notion of reverence for things, Haewol developed the idea that heaven and earth are our parents.

Heaven and earth are our parents and our parents are heaven and earth. Thus, heaven and earth are one with our parents. The womb of parents is the womb of heaven and earth. People know the logic of the womb of parents, but do not know that of heaven and

earth.... Milk is grain generated from the human body and grain is milk of heaven and earth. The womb of parents is the womb of heaven and earth. A child sucks milk from his mother's breasts, which is the milk of heaven and earth. When the child grows, he eats grains, which is the milk of heaven and earth.¹⁹⁾

Haewol states that people know the logic of the womb of parents but do not know that of heaven and earth, so they do not feel the need to serve and be dutiful to heaven and earth. By arguing that "grain is the milk of heaven and earth," he indicates that humans grow on grain or the milk of heaven and earth as a child grows on a mother's milk. Compared to Haewol's doctrine of filial piety which teaches one to serve all creation in the universe as one's parents, that of Confucius seems narrow in scope. Haewol believes that because one not only receive one's body from one's parents but also gets nutrients from all things in the universe, one must show gratitude to them. To Haewol, heaven and earth are not only the base of our lives, but our parents who give birth to us and raise us, and are deserving of reverence. He treats nature as a sacred, holy life, or God itself. Haewol lived out these beliefs by sanctifying this attitude in everyday practice. A model of a sanctified life is revealed in his teaching "Treat land as precious as your mother's flesh." Here we meet the ideal of ecological life.

The universe is filled with one cosmic energy, so one should not dare to take a careless step. I was resting when a child passed by me quickly wearing clogs. The click clack of the clogs reverberated through the earth. I stood up frightened and said soothing my chest. The sound of the child's clogs made my heart ache. Treat land as precious as your mother's flesh.²⁰⁾

This experience was ultimately not a result of rational or philosophical thinking, but an awakening and a lived experience arising from a deep religious spirituality. This made it possible for Haewol to practically live it out in real life. It is at these moments

that human life is sublimated to the universal level. From his teaching to treat land as one's mother and to serve and be dutiful to it, one confirms that the essence of the new ethics needed today is "reverence."²¹) Haewol's reverence is not limited to reverence for one's father or king as in Confucianism, but extends to mother, wife, and all living things, including nature.

Haewol's understanding of *si cheonju* (bearing God) takes firm root in his life through practice. He shows human life at a new dimension. In addition to the teachings above, he thought, "If saliva or snivel is spattered on the land, wipe it off." and "Spitting afar, sniveling afar, or sprinkling water afar is the same as spitting on the face of your parents or heaven and earth, so please be careful." This seems to be offered as an ethical virtue, but it is not something forced from outside but a behavioral norm acquired from an existential lived experience of actually feeling pain in his heart when he failed to do it.

What should be noted here is that Haewol's understanding of heaven, earth and nature did not remain at a conceptual level, but it was concretized and practiced at the level of real life. It was not simply an ecological concept, but a direct embodiment of an ecological life. He reached the state where he actually felt the pain of heaven and earth. It surpassed the conceptual level of viewing nature to a transformed life through a reverent attitude. It does not stop at ecological awareness, but is living an ecological life. It means one's life is changed entirely and becomes sacred with a complete realization that God acts in the self as a divine spirit and outside the self as a connecting energy. One reaches the state where one can feel that heaven and earth are not separate from the self and have become one with the body and one is receptive to silent messages from heaven, earth and nature. Here the objective order of heaven and earth and the subjective experience of humans become one. Donghak pursues a harmonious life with heaven, earth and nature by seeking a fundamental transformation of body and mind.

In this way, nature in Donghak is a living organism and a world filled with God's Ultimate Energy and Spiritual Energy, so it holds

divinity or rather is divinity itself. Humans and all other things depend on the connecting energy of heaven and earth for life, so they must revere heaven and earth like their own parents. The true nature of life cannot be understood by theory or knowledge, but reveals itself when felt through one's mind. Thus, Haewol teaches that one can truly practice the Way only if one reveres not only God and human beings but things.

Everyone knows through experience that reverence is not achieved through reason or logic. Reverence is based on interdependent, not conflictual, and equal relations. Modern day catch phrases such as "Protect nature," "Save the environment," or "Preserve the ecosystem" are based on a rational attitude and conflicting relations with nature and the environment. It is time for the environmental movement to go beyond its realistic and practical struggles and to try a more fundamental approach by presenting a new dimension of human life. What is needed is not just transformation through ecological awareness but an ecological life. It is high time for humanity to realize and increase the value of life. For this, one must be able to empathize with life.

One can find the potential and wisdom to resolve the problems facing humanity in the life of Haewol, a hard-core ecologist who lived in full harmony with all creation in the universe. Haewol's understanding of nature contains a new worldview which embraces both creationist theology and evolutionary science and presents a Korean model to the recent achievements of new science at the juncture of a shift to a new paradigm.

Sinnyeong (Divine Spirit): Harmony between Womanhood and Manhood

These days [spirituality](#) is often discussed as an alternative to overcome the conflicts and contradictions of human society and to coexist in symbiosis with all living forms existent on earth. David Steindle-Rast claims that spirituality is the mode of existence where religious experience is manifested in or seeps into everyday life.²²⁾ Spirituality refers to a fusion between the mystical world and everyday

life, or sympathy with life in the universe. It can also mean the state of mind or ability to communicate and sympathize with the essence of existence. It is the intuition and insight that enables one to connect with the essence of things and is what is alive inside of all things. Thus, [spiritual life](#) is a life in which one communicates with, feels and responds to the inner essence of all things engaging in direct relations rather than superficial, external relations. Spiritual life differs from rational life in which all things are objectified, analyzed and understood as objects. In the former, one does not separate things from the self and feels the organic relationship with them in one's body and mind. Thus, spiritual life deals with essence as well as relations, is unbiased and whole, and seeks life at a universal level.

What does it mean exactly to say that humans are organically related to the universe? Is it an ordinary state of mind, or a different state of mind free from ordinary life? In the East, what is ordinary and extraordinary at the same time is called *cheondo* (Heavenly Way).

In a famous aphorism in the [Daodejing](#) that "Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao." Laozi makes it clear that Heavenly Way is beyond expression and human understanding. This is also the case in Confucianism. "In nature, Heavenly Way is so profound and mysterious that human intellect cannot grasp it. But the mysterious subtlety of the Heavenly Way begins to show through the sage's practice of virtue. The sage never explains the Heavenly Way in words; he just realizes it with pure virtuous acts." This means that the sage works the Heavenly Way in reality.²³⁾ We can only confirm the Heavenly Way in the sage. In Buddhism, this place is often conceptualized as *seong* (nature) and is expressed as *gong* (space), *mu* (non-being) or *heo* (emptiness). Sometimes, it is explained using such concepts as "neither existent nor extinct," "neither impure nor pure" and "neither increasing nor decreasing." In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna, who is regarded as an embodiment of the spirit of India and is worshipped as a living God there, proclaims, "There is no sun, no moon or no light. Once you get in there, you can never get out. That is the highest place I am."²⁴⁾

That place can be called the essence or the center of existence. One cannot say that it exists or doesn't exist. In a Buddhist expression,

it is the place which cannot be thought of nor not be thought of. Both being and non-being come from it. This is the place where being and non-being are together and which transcends them both at the same time. Thus it is impossible to explain what spirituality is. Krishna states the following about himself: "All things that exist are mortal and things that do not change are immortal. But there is the highest being above them all. That is called Paramatma (the self on earth). The immortal god enters the [three worlds \(samgye\)](#) and supports them. I transcend the mortal and I am higher than the immortal. I am revered as Paramatma in this world and in the Vedas (knowledge)."²⁵) How, then, can one explain that place? This is why metaphors are usually employed to describe the place. It cannot be directly described, depicted or expressed.

One of the most common metaphors employed in [Confucianism, Buddhism, and Seon Buddhism](#) is that of a mirror. A mirror reflects whatever is placed in front of it but it has no colors or shapes, and does not sway or move. Likewise, the place of Heavenly Way is empty but active. So everyone is silent about this place. Laozi states, "One who knows [The knower] does not speak." Buddha replied with silence when he was asked if God exists. Suun provided no interpretations of heaven. Refusing to describe or interpret it, he explained the Way as the Infinite Great Way (*mugeukdaedo*) and as non-distinction between good and evil (*bultaekseonak*). The Infinite Great Way means the empty [locus](#) of origin and non-distinction between good and evil means the realm beyond relativity. Of course he was not completely silent about the center of the eternally tranquil internal mind. In explaining the meaning of bearing, he said that the divine spirit is inside. The divine spirit is Suun's way of expressing the ultimate being. Suun said that one could directly communicate with the divine spirit inside and that to live according to the place was to live bearing God, as stated above. God is the true self and to live bearing God is to "nothing other than the self becoming the self."

Paradox is often used to explain what it is to live a life as God or as the true I. This is common in traditional Eastern learning. Paradox can be very effective, from the idea that a divine spirit

exists deep inside of life in the phenomenal world. The metaphor of mirror is a paradox, too. It is quite paradoxical that something completely tranquil and empty performs an action of reflecting everything. In the chapter titled "bulyeon-giyeon" (Not So, Yet So) in *Donggyeong daejeon* (Eastern Great Scripture), Suun provides a logical explanation of spirituality, divine spirit, God and the Heavenly Way.²⁶⁾ Based on keen observations of things and reflection on human affairs, he explains in "Not So, Yet So" that the phenomenal world which we can easily understand, listen and see can only exist in an inseparable relation to the world which we cannot understand, listen or see. The idea of *innaecheon* (man is heaven), the core doctrine of Donghak, is also paradoxical expression because man, a phenomenal being, is treated equal to eternal God.

Unlike modern philosophy which led to the flourishing of subjective philosophy in recognition of the **constitutive** ability of reason and active and directive consciousness, Donghak gives focus to receptive and non-directive spirituality while being based on formative power and directiveness. Often Western reason is called a masculine principle and Eastern spirituality, feminine. Even if one does not agree with it completely, it is true that modern Western philosophy gives an excessively superior status to rationality. The roots of the destruction of ecosystem, the conquest of other cultures and socio-political engineering can be traced to the **constitutive** and directive nature of Western philosophy. In the East, the formative directive quality of the mind (*sim*) is treated as a kind of desire or individual distortion. The true self reveals itself after proactive energies such as directiveness and **constitutive** ability completely decrease, and this state or place is viewed as the truth. Suun explains that after this is reached, all actions are divested of intention, directiveness, **constitutiveness** and proactiveness, and the intention of heaven alone is realized. He also employs the concept of *muwiihwa* (becoming without acting) to describe the activities of mind after entering the place of tranquility. Laozi compares this place to a female, but this seems inappropriate from the perspective of Donghak. It would be more plausible if it is viewed as a place where *yin* and *yang* are joined and transcended.

In Donghak, conflict between femininity and masculinity disappears with spirituality. However, because the locus of spirituality is in the mind, femininity and masculinity cannot disappear at the level of the body. There can be no difference or discrimination between men and women as spiritual beings. Interpreting "ju" (God) in the word *si cheonju* in "nonhakmun" (On Learning the Truth), *Eastern Great Scripture*, Suun says that "One must revere God as one's parent." Here he makes it clear that God possesses not only masculinity but also femininity. That God is not a father but a parent means that God is always revealed as a union of femininity and masculinity in the phenomenal world. Indeed, Suun takes up the problems of women first, after his religious experience in 1860. His "ansimga" (Song of Comfort) which consists of elaborate and caring entreaties to his wife, was written from the awareness that women are the very actors [to initiate the new beginning in the new era](#). After his enlightenment, he spread virtue to his wife Lady Park before anyone else and freed their two female servants. One of them became his daughter-in-law and the other was adopted as his daughter, which was quite radical even by the standards of his time. He practiced gender equality in his life and worked toward harmony with his wife.

Following his enlightenment, Suun wrote scriptures both in Chinese, the written language letter of educated intellectuals, and in *hangeul*, the script used mostly by women, to spread his beliefs. In "Song of Comfort", which he wrote for women, he calls his wife "my venerable wife" or "my virtuous wife," expressing his utmost respect for her rather than his authority as a husband. He did not confine his wife to the private realm but treated her as a partner with whom to discuss social issues and national problems.²⁷) *Sicheonju* (man bear God) is a realization that humans are respectable beings who have God in themselves and a declaration of equality of humanity. The word man does not refer only to men but all human beings, including women.

Attaining profound religious spirituality from Suun's teachings, Haewol presents completely new, unconceivable at that time, views on women and children who were outsiders in the patriarchal Confucian society. Stating the "Woman is the master of the family" and "Children

have God in themselves, so beating a child is the same as beating God," he asserts a radically different conception of women and condemns repression and violence against the powerless. Haewol does not merely call for the liberation of women; he seeks a rediscovery about women and a creation of "femininity" as the character of a new civilization. For women to become true actors of a new era, femininity, life-creating ability and spiritual sensitivity of women must be developed through divine spirituality.

The fact that Haewol's only writings are on women's prenatal culture and everyday ethics demonstrates best the interest he had in femininity. In "Naechik" (Rules for Women) and "Naesudomun" (A Writing on the Cultivation of Women), he presents how women can attain spirituality in great detail. "Rules for Women", a writing on prenatal culture, discusses guidelines for health and proper attitudes for women during pregnancy. On the surface, it does not seem very different from the teachings of prenatal training in the East. The critical difference is that it does not just offer tips on how to give birth to a good human being, but it presents principles of virtue on how to nurture God. Haewol regards pregnancy as the advent of God, the energy of heaven and earth. To grow a baby's life in one's body is to directly experience God. Thus, prenatal culture or the process of nurturing God becomes the most precious form of self-cultivation. Haewol earnestly entreats, "The ultimate truth of heaven and earth is in 'Rules for Women' and 'A Writing on the Cultivation of Women'. Please do not overlook them and practice it as written."

In "A Writing on the Cultivation of Women", he emphasizes that we must tell God everything before acting. To tell everything in one's mind is an everyday discipline to practice in real life the teaching that heaven and earth are one with our parents. This is the Way to cultivate and protect one's mind and in and through everyday life. Those two writings contain practical methods to attain a high level of mental cultivation or the core of refining one's body and mind in Donghak, which is often expressed as the state of "Keeping a good mind and having the right spiritual force" (*susimjeonggi*). In his teachings, Haewol opens the way for women to be treated like God and to realize

the truth by revering and serving God sincerely in everyday life.

Patriarchal male-dominated culture makes abstract transcendental values centered on rationality absolute while destroying concrete vitality, a feminine principle, and femininity. The order of the universe, nature, life and human society are no exception. When we look at the concrete, real life of Haewol who declared that "the bird's chirping is also God's voice," we can tell that he felt, served and revered life of the universe in his whole body. His teachings represent the spirit and life of the universe.

In Donghak, probably the most representative example of spirituality expressed in everyday life is harmony between husband and wife. While in Confucianism is found a vertical family order such as filial piety (*hyo*), there is no horizontal family order like harmony between husband and wife. Haewol proclaims that husband and wife are not in a relationship of domination and subordination, but one of equal complementary relations in which both sides strive to achieve harmony. For equal relations, women must be held with greater importance. He states, "Women were oppressed before, but in the new era they will make many people live through their spiritual enlightenment. It is the same as the fact that all humans are born from a mother's womb and grow," predicting the birth of a new civilization. He foresees the coming of a new civilization based on femininity in the following passage:

The woman is the master of the family. She prepares food, makes clothes, raises children, hosts guests and is in charge of the ancestral rites offerings. If she prepares food without sincerity, God will not respond. If she raises children without care, they will not grow up honest, so the spiritual cultivation of a wife is the foundation of the Way. From now on we will have many spiritually enlightened women. I would say, nine females for every male. Women were oppressed before, but in the new era they will save many people through their spiritual enlightenment. It is the same as all humans being born from a mother's womb and growing up."²⁸)

Haewol asserts the importance of the cultivation of women, who perform all the menial tasks but are not treated as valuable, by stating that they are the masters of the family and predicts that they will be the main actors in the new civilization. The new civilization will not require authoritative dominant power but try to realize the ability of life to "bear" and "make others live" in the holy life world by exercising their vital nature. Thus, gender equality does not mean women attacking the privileged males in a structure of conflict with them. The feminist movement must move beyond conflictual relations between men and women and consider men as partners to ally and unify with for common goals. He thinks that men and women are more than just partners; they cannot exist independently of each other in any circumstances. Therefore, to be true leaders in the new civilization, women must seek, instead of conflict and struggle with men, a transformation within and through the cultivation of their life-creating ability and mental sensitivity through the divine quality in them. Whether one is a man or a woman, one becomes a true human being when one reaches spirituality. To be a true human being means to live a harmonious life with one's spouse in actual life. Thus, Haewol states that "harmony between husband and wife is the end of the Way," an unprecedented utterance in the history of world religion. At this point, the dogmas of the established religions that one must sever one's ties with the secular world to enter priesthood and not marry collapse. Spirituality is not up there somewhere far away; it is in ordinary everyday life, in the harmonious life between husband and wife, in calm weather and the prosperity of all things that result from the harmony between *yin* and *yang* forces.

Conclusion

Donghak believes that nature is a cosmic world filled with the Ultimate Energy and Spiritual Energy and that it should be revered just like one's parents because humans and all other things are raised by the connecting energy of heaven and earth. Unlike conventional *gi*

philosophical worldviews which understand nature as a structure of energy, Donghak presents a new level of life in which humans feel nature as their own body and feel its pains through the cultivation of the mind. It is important to feel in our body that "all things are a manifestation of God" and to live it. Because the human mind is connected to things and bears God inside at the same time, life can only exist in relation to spirituality. Spirituality is a tranquil empty center which cannot be touched, seen or heard, but it is in ceaseless action at the center of every creature in the universe. Engaging in brisk activities in body and mind, spirituality reveals itself as harmony. Spirituality's actions are realized as harmony between humans and other humans, between humans and nature, and between humans and God. In Donghak, harmony also means harmony between femininity and masculinity and this is expressed as the harmony between husband and wife.

Donghak does not stop at ecological awareness, but demonstrates ecological life itself. It does not look for the ultimate foundation of life in an transcendental being, but in the order and connecting activity of heaven and earth, and the discovery of it in the spirituality in humans enables humans to participate in the cosmic life. In the Western world, God is seen to possess absolute supernatural power and is associated with masculine values. Thus, God is a fearsome being and demands the submission of humans. The Western rational view granted absolute power to the constitutive power and inclination of the human mind and developed it to masculine activeness, and produced socio-engineering ideas and imperialist ideologies of domination and conquest. But in Donghak, God is always compared to a parent and is addressed as the harmony between femininity and masculinity. Spirituality lies at the basis of human reason and here spirituality can be conceived as a feminine principle, like tolerance, sensitivity and tranquility. Compared with Donghak which emphasizes life and spirituality, Western civilization centered on male-domination, rationality and transcendental God seem one-sided and flat.

Without a drastic change of character and mind through a complete shift in thinking, the train headed toward the demise of humanity and the end of life cannot be stopped. Donghak provides the prototype of

life which attempts a comprehensive change of the framework of human consciousness and life with the paradigm of respect in which nature is treated like one's own body or parents.

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Glossary

ansimga 安心歌

bultaekseonak 不擇善惡

cheondo 天道

Daodejing 道德經

Donggyeong daejeon 東經大全

Donghak 東學

gaebyeok 開闢

gakjibuli 各知不移

gi 氣
gihwa 氣化
gong 空
hangeul 한글
 Hanullim 한울님
heo 虛
honwonilgi 混元一氣
hyo 孝
icheon sikcheon 以天食天
innaecheon 人乃天
jigi 至氣
 Laozi (Ch.) 老子
mu 無
mugeukdaedo 無極大道
muwiihwa 無爲而化
 Naechik 內則
 Naesudomun 內修道文
naeyu sillyeong 內有神靈
nim 님
 nonhakmun 論學文
oeyu gihwa 外有氣化
ohaeng 五行
osim jeuk yeosim 吾心卽汝心
qi (Ch.) ▶ *gi*

1) Vandana Shiva, *Saranamgi*, trans. Kang Su-yeon (Seoul: Sol Publishing Co., 1997); originally published as *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development in India*.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 82.

3) Alfred Whitehead, *Gwannyeom-ui moheom*, trans. O Yeong-hwan (Seoul: Hangilsa Publishing Co., Ltd., 1997), p. 214; originally published as *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 124-125.

4) "The twelve imperial nations are suffering from a plague. Is it not time for a new beginning?" "Ansimga" (Song of Comfort), 1 *Yongdam yusa* (Memorial Songs of Yongdam).

5) In Donghak, Hanullim (Lord of Heaven) means the absolute, ultimate reality. Choe Je-wu, the founder of Donghak, also called this *cheonju* (God in Heaven) in the scripture he wrote in Chinese script. He said, "One must serve (섬기다) God as one does one's parents." This shows that God in Donghak is fundamentally different from God in Seohak (Western Learning or Catholicism, which is *cheonjugyo* in Korean) and is the Chinese expression of *Hanullnim*.

6) Suun describes this experience in detail in "Podeokga" (On Spreading Virtue and On Learning Truth), *Donggyeong daejeon* (Eastern Great Scripture) and "Song of Comfort," *Memorial Songs of Yongdam*, the two main scriptures of Donghak he wrote himself.

7) 「修心正氣而問曰何爲若然也 曰吾心即汝心也 人何知之 知天地而無知鬼神 鬼神者吾也」 (He gathered his mind and spirit and asked, "Why is it so?" The Great Divine Teacher answered, "My mind is your mind. But how would you know this? You know heaven and earth but do not know spirits. I am a spirit myself.), "Nonhakmun" (On Learning Truth), *Eastern Great Scripture*.

8) "Believe in God, not me. God is within you. Why search far away when it is nearby?" "Gyohun-ga"(Song of Instruction), *Memorial Songs of Yongdam*.

9) 「海月神師法說, 以天食天」 (God Eats and is Eaten, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol), Cheondogyo Headquarters, ed. *Cheondogyo gyeongjeon* (The Scripture of Cheondogyo) (Seoul: Cheondogyo Headquarters, 2000), p. 364.

10) Haewol said, "Heaven and earth our parents and parents are heaven and earth. Thus, heaven and earth are one with parents. The womb of parents is the womb of heaven and earth. People know the womb of parents, but do not know that of heaven and earth. Heaven covers us and earth houses us. What is this but grace? The sun and the moon shed light on us. What is this if not blessing? All things in the universe are born from harmony. What is it this if not the creation of truth and the spirit of heaven and earth? " He also taught, "To revere God and serve God like one's parents is one's duty as a human being."

11) "On Learning Truth," *Eastern Great Scripture*.

12) "Dodeokga" (Song of Morality), *Memorial Songs of Yongdam*.

13) "On Spreading Virtue," *Eastern Great Scripture*.

14) 「侍者 內有神靈 外有氣化 一世之人 各知不移者也」 (By bearing, I mean that it exists as a sacred spirit internally and as a vital spirit externally. All understand and do not move from it.). "On Learning Truth," *Eastern Great Scripture*.

15) 「主者 稱其尊而與父母同事者也」 (One must revere God just like one's parents.) "On Learning Truth," *Eastern Great Scripture*.

16) 「海月神師 法說, 靈符呪文」 (Incantations to the Sacred Spirit, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol), *Cheondogyo gyeongjeon*, p. 294.

17) 「海月神師 法說, 待人接物」 (How to Treat Humans and Things, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol), *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

18) 「三敬」 (Three Things to Revere), *Ibid.*, pp. 354-358.

19) 「海月神師法說, 天地父母」 (Heaven and Earth are Parents, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol), *Ibid.*, pp. 249, 252.

20) 「海月神師法說, 誠敬信」 (Sincerity, Reverence and Faith, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol) *Ibid.*, p. 305.

21) Busan Arts College, ed. *Haewol Choe Si-hyeong-gwa donghak sasang* (Haewol Choi Si-hyeong and Donghak Thought) (Seoul: Ye Mun Seo Won, 1999), p. 60.

22) Fritjof Capra, et al., *Sin-gwahak-gwa yeongseong-ui sidae*, trans. Kim Jae-hui (Seoul: Pum Yang Co., Ltd.), p. 33; originally published as *Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality*.

23) Yangzuhan, *Jungyong cheolhak* (Philosophy of Moderation), trans. Hwang Gap-yeon (Seoul: Seokwangsa Publishing Co., 1999), p. 317.

24) *The Bhagavad Gita*, annotated by Ham Seok-heon (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1997), p. 480.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 483.

26) "Bulyeon-giyeon" (Not So, Yet So), *Eastern Great Scripture*.

27) "It is in danger. It is really in danger. The fortune of our nation is in danger... Why has it become so bad? My noble wife, look currently and be at peace... My noble wife, do

not panic or worry. Memorize these lyrics and sing the song of peace when Spring comes.”

28) 「海月神師 法説, 婦人修道」 (Cultivation of Women, Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol).
Cheondogyo gyeongjeon, p. 342.

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