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Body and Ki in Gicheon : practices of self-cultivation in contemporary Korea

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Chapter Five: Personally colored experiential modalities

5.1 Supporters of *suryōn*: their personally colored experiential modalities

The narrations of many GiCheon adepts convey phenomena and experiences related to the mind, the body, family and society, in clusters of sensations, feelings, impressions and ideas. These clusters often contain vectors of progressive advance from the body to the family (body→family or individual→family), from the body to society (body→society or individual→society) or from the body toward the universe (body→universe or individual→universe). For example, the sensations of warmth and softness start in the body and continue toward the family, or toward “openness”, which can be openness to the words of others or toward other things, such as music (the case of Sin described in this chapter). These are examples of personally colored experiential modalities. They originate in the bodily self, but continue outward, toward the familial, social and universal self.

The power words *ki* and *suryōn* often serve as the axes of narration for the practitioners. Culturally recommended experiential modalities generated by these notions have been examined in the previous two chapters. I define them as “culturally” recommended experiential modalities by the very fact of their generation through power words. This chapter follows a few additional themes or directions of the interviews which I have decided to call “personally colored experiential modalities” and they differ from the culturally advised experiential modalities. Personally colored experiential modalities are individual for each person.

Culturally advised experiential modalities form individual experience from the outside, according to the cultural norms and following the second vector of progression. Though the experience originates with the self, it is formed, formulated and articulated within and according to a culturally advised modality. Personally colored experiential modalities

concern the formation, formulation and articulation of an experience following the first vector, that is according to the preference of the self. When using the term “experiential modality” in this chapter, I refer to such personally colored experiential modalities, and not to the culturally recommended ones.

Narratives are trying to express bodily experience, but also bodily experience creates narration. Experiential modalities originate in the body. In the case of GiCheon practitioners, the tonality, the direction and the pattern of their narratives are rooted in the bodily experience of GiCheon positions, and mostly in *naegasinjang*. At times, the bodily experience that foregrounds the narrative tonality occurs not at the exact moment of performing a GiCheon position, but is felt in everyday life as a general result of or in connection with the practice. Looking back at the protagonists of Chapter Four, in this section I will review again the experiential modalities central to their accounts. I will identify the bodily experience they stem from, thus attempting to access reality through the representation, or to find experience in the narration.

The experiential modality of Cho is “identifying and understanding old behavioral patterns”. According to his narration, this experiential modality stems from that one moment when Cho had a problem with performing a GiCheon exercise, as he described in Chapter Four. At that moment he felt physical discomfort and emotional distress. A conversation with his teacher Kim Hŭisang then took place and Cho had a flash of enlightenment. He gained a better vision of his past behavioral patterns. Additionally, he also gained a better vision of others – now he can recognize the “desire to look competent in the eyes of other people” in his own GiCheon students. This experiential modality of Cho starts in his own body, but continues toward the bodies of others.

The expansion of the experiential modality from the individual body toward the social

body is equally evident in the case of Pak. Her experiential modality is “bearing pain with fortitude”. Ms. Pak’s pain is clearly connected to standing in the *naegasinjang* position, but for her this pain becomes a metaphor for the general pain and burden of life. This metaphor in turn informs how she understands not just herself, but life on its myriads of levels. As we have seen in Chapter Four, Pak’s wish to remedy her pain by developing strength progresses toward her aspiration to introduce other women into GiCheon practice. Life is difficult not just for Pak alone - *in this society women easily get hurt*. An evolution of a personal self into a social self occurs in the narratives of both Pak and Cho. Pak’s desire to build her own strength continues toward an objective to cultivate the strength of other women. Cho’s understanding of his old behavioral patterns develops into a yearning to help others achieve an awareness similar to his. Both Pak and Cho identify with their group. For Pak these are women in general and young female colleagues in particular; for Cho these are people with specific character traits in general and those practicing GiCheon at his studio in particular. These are two examples of experiential modalities starting in the bodily self and unfolding toward the social self, along the first vector of progression. A social commentary is implicit in the narrations of Pak and Cho, who portray contemporary South Korean society as a challenging place for working women with families (Pak) and a marked sensitivity to social pressure (Cho). Yet Pak and Cho do not show interest in criticizing their social circumstances. Instead, they are both looking for survival strategies which will work for them personally, but also for others, socially.

For Kim Yŏnghŭi the experiential modality of self-discovery and self-confidence starts in *naegasinjang*. Maintaining the arduous position seems almost impossible during the first seconds. *It is really hard, how can I continue doing that?* asks Kim in the extract quoted in Chapter Three. The self-confidence that is rooted in sustaining the painful *naegasinjang* develops through the discovery of an unexpected ability of the self. This ability, however, is

not limited to *naegasinjang* alone. As we have seen in Chapter Four, sustaining the position provides Kim with the confidence to accomplish other rigorous enterprises in life: *I could achieve anything!* The rise of self-confidence contributes to further self-discovery on multiple planes: *what I wanted to do, what I liked ... I discovered things like the dream [of my future]*. Kim's self-assurance spreads toward other areas of her life, including social skills. *I did not talk to people first [...]. But now I have approached them, asking "what is your name?"*. Arising in the bodily *naegasinjang* experience and extending toward various other spheres of life, Kim's self-confidence expands toward her social self, following the first vector of progression.

5.2 Kim Pohŭi: experiential modality of "hardship and boredom"

Kim Yŏnghŭi came to the GiCheon studio together with her sister younger by one year, Kim Pohŭi (not a real name). Unlike her elder sister Pohŭi did not report any remarkable changes in her life stemming from the GiCheon practice. I think she used her interview with me as a chance to voice her anger and resentment about being forced to participate in the training from the age of twelve till the age of seventeen. Most likely Kim Pohŭi perceived me as a representative of the GiCheon organization. A number of times she stressed how much she hated GiCheon because it is hard and painful. However, her negativity was not always clear-cut, and at times she was ambivalent. For her, the positive things gained by learning GiCheon were thinking more, opportunities for retrospection, becoming stronger physically, and feeling pride when GiCheon was shown on TV. She could tell her friends "I did that!". However, her general evaluation of GiCheon experience was rather negative:

[...] It was awkward and unusual. It was also hard. I was an elementary school student, but there were many grandfathers, adults. It was uncomfortable [...] so I hated that. [...] Socializing with Taekwondo children of our age would be better. But we practiced with

grandfathers. [...] I hated that. I wanted to mingle with the children of the neighborhood [...]. One should talk with friends with whom one has common points of interest, and play. Alone one gets the feeling of being a “loner”. [...] If I tell my friends [...] that I did Taekwondo, they know Taekwondo. [...] If I say “I do GiCheon”, they do not know it, so [...] ...

- So also now you wish you did Taekwondo, and not GiCheon?

- [...] Half-half [...]. Sometimes I think like this, sometimes like that. Through GiCheon I learned self-defense.

I identify the major experiential modality of Kim Pohŭi’s narrative as “hardship and boredom”. Her difficulty and discomfort were grounded in the pain of the *naegasinjang* experience and the physically and emotionally uncomfortable association with *grandfathers* instead of children of her own age. GiCheon was difficult for Kim Pohŭi not just physically, but also mentally and socially.

Like her older sister, Kim Pohŭi is also a practicing Catholic. When asked to compare GiCheon and Catholicism, she portrayed Catholic practice as effortless and enjoyable, and GiCheon as problematic and demanding: *When I go to Catholic Church, my friends are there, I can hang out with them, I feel good, lots of people to talk to, I feel at ease. But GiCheon is hard for the body because you have to bend [the joints] ...*

Kim Pohŭi contrasts Catholicism with GiCheon. The former is easy and pleasant, the latter is hard and painful. Interestingly, in the extract above the easy and pleasant experience of visiting the church involves her social self - *hanging out with friends*, while the hard and painful experience of practicing GiCheon involves her bodily self - *bending [the joints]*. Yet, GiCheon was distressing to Kim Pohŭi on various planes of the self, including the bodily and social level. Equally, Catholic practice was agreeable for her both bodily and socially, and the above extract serves as a summary of that. However, the social element is a key element for

Kim Pohŭi. In her relation to Catholicism and to GiCheon Kim Pohŭi focuses on their social context, being happy about the former and frustrated about the later.

Kim Pohŭi's account is remarkably different from the narrative of her sister who is just one year older. As sisters Pohŭi and Yŏnghŭ lived in the same home, were brought up similarly and attended the same school and church. But my interview with the older sister lasted three times longer than the interview with the younger sister. The former had much more to say. The same circumstances were perceived by two sisters in contrary ways. Training together with adults was in retrospect an eye-opener for Kim Yŏnghŭi: *Through GiCheon I met many adults. I [saw their] ways of behavior. I got to know the way people should treat each other. ... "There is also an [adult] world like this" [I realized].* However, for Pohŭi being with much older people was distressing and almost traumatic. The many benefits that Kim Yŏnghŭi named as resulting from the GiCheon practice, such as the tendency to wake up at dawn, the habit to organize her thoughts and future plans during regular meditation, growing self-confidence, a deeper perception of Catholic religion, improving relationships with family and friends – did not exist for Kim Pohŭi: she did not mention any of them. This is an example of how the same *ki suryŏn* practice can affect different individuals in totally dissimilar fashion.

The examples of other GiCheon practitioners show that the deciding experiential modality for each individual is partially conditioned by gender, social position, family situation and environment. Yet, the case of the Kim sisters demonstrates that at times the individual tendency might be decisive in defining the modality of the experience. The social

position, environment and gender of the two sisters were identical. In spite of that, their experiential modalities are almost contradictory.⁷⁶

5.3 Sin Hyŏnju: the modalities of experiencing “softness and warmth”, and “smooth and effortless passage”

In the autoethnographical dimension of the present text I study my own experiences of the GiCheon practice, together with the experiences of my interviewees. Verbal articulation of GiCheon experiences has always been difficult for me, and the diary held for the purpose of this research did not help much in my analysis. But when I listened to and read the interviews of women of an age similar to mine, of similar body types and similar personalities, I saw myself connecting to many points of their accounts. Focusing on an interview with Ms. Sin, in this chapter I will also refer to my own experiences of GiCheon practice which I recalled as I listened to her story. At the end of this section, I will briefly present a few extracts from the interviews of other trainees, which allude to some points brought up in Sin’s narrative.

In my personal case, performing GiCheon positions did not pose a problem. It was the recognition of the sensations and perceptions brought to me by GiCheon practice through observing myself, which was difficult. I also appeared to forget quickly whatever I experienced. During my interview with Ms. Sin my impression was, that for her the reading of GiCheon text inscribed on her body was not difficult. Besides being orderly, logical and rich in detail, her narrative was smooth and clear, manifesting her ability for self-reflection and articulation. And that while at the time her GiCheon experience was one year only, whereas I had reached almost ten years of practice. I was also a GiCheon teacher, and thus trained to teach, but I had not learned to relate my own experience. As evidenced by her interview, Ms. Sin could register, remember, voice and analyze the sensations related to her

⁷⁶ A counter argument could be that the age difference, even of only one year, was an important factor. At such an age children can develop very quickly. This might explain why one enjoyed getting to know older people and the other found it awkward.

GiCheon training. It is for me, however, to attempt a second layer of analysis, this time not of the direct experience, but of Ms. Sin's articulation of that experience, which I recorded and here translate into English.⁷⁷

[...] Sometimes [during GiCheon practice] I felt sleepy, I felt tired [...]. [...] I felt numb in my hands; sometimes three left fingers went numb. It was as if the blood did not circulate there. Or the fingers got very cold. [...] First I felt pain in my back, legs, shoulders. After that I felt anger and annoyance. Like tickling. Strong tickling. Like itching. [...] Sometimes I get angry, I think: "why do I do it?" [...] Once I had a very good feeling. While doing it [the position] I suddenly thought about very happy events. [...] Sometimes, it is funny, when the music was on, I wanted to dance, to the music.

From the beginning, we observe in the account of Ms. Sin a notion of diversity. She felt many different things. She mentions numbness, cold, tickling and itching in the body. On the level of the emotional and cognitive self she felt anger, but also happiness – she thought about very happy events. She also wanted to dance, which testifies to a sensitivity to music, a point to which I return later on in this section.

[...] In the middle [of my practice], I felt many temporary things [that later disappeared]: I could not sleep, or was not at all hungry, or I was very hungry, or very sleepy. The amplitude of the changes, of the ups and downs in my bodily sensations, has increased. And in my mind-heart, the same thing. In the beginning, when I started GiCheon, I always felt very good. I felt joyful and had a bright mood. Other people said that my personality became much brighter than before. Later, I sometimes felt in the mind-heart similar [things as I felt] in the body. After feeling very bright, I sometimes felt very gloomy. The rise and fall of emotions became very sharp. [...] Usually, as we live in society, we have to regulate our emotions, not to show what we like or dislike. We have to keep up an

⁷⁷ Interview of 08.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea.

appropriate appearance. But the amplitude of my emotions became very large, to the degree that I could not manage my emotions sometimes.

The other theme central to Sin's account is contrast. She talks about insomnia and sleepiness, hunger and the absence of hunger, joy and gloominess. The rise and fall of these various contrasting sensations and feelings reached an amplitude that expanded to a degree that Ms. Sin was almost unable to control. The expanding amplitude is another chief motif of her narrative.

An important point in the narration of Ms. Sin is the connection she draws between the processes occurring on the level of the bodily self and the developments on the level of the emotional self. *The amplitude of the changes, of the ups and downs in bodily sensations, has increased. And in my mind-heart, the same thing.* The ability of Ms. Sin to note and articulate the similarity of the processes in the body and in the mind-heart has contributed greatly to my conceptualization of experiential modalities. Her account is a vivid example of how the experiential modalities manifest similarly on different levels of the self. I have applied my insights regarding experiential modalities from Ms. Sin's interview to the reports of other GiCheon practitioners. I have found that the mechanism of specific experiential modalities operating similarly on different levels of the self works equally well for analyzing the interview materials of other informants. Yet, the account of Ms. Sin is the most lucid and intelligible in this respect.

Up to now we have identified in the account of Ms. Sin an experiential modality of expanding amplitude of various sensations, both bodily and emotional. An additional experiential modality is articulated by Sin as *pain in my back, legs shoulders. After that I felt anger and annoyance. Like tickling. Strong tickling. Like itching. [...] Sometimes I get angry, I think: "why do I do it?" [...]*. Pain in the *naegasinjang* position, to which I dedicate Chapter Six, is a constant companion of the GiCheon practice. For most practitioners, pain in

naegasinjang is not evenly balanced, but wave-like, rising and falling as the minutes pass. Kim Wŏn'gyu, whose narrative I examine at the end of this chapter, is an apparent exception to this perception of pain. From my own experience I testify that the moments of stronger pain are accompanied by tickling or itching sensations, causing anger and annoyance. These are also the moments of self-doubt, when I ask myself, like Ms. Sin “why do I do it?”. So the descriptive instances in the narrative of Sin that connect pain, annoyance, tickling, itching, and anger to self-questioning “why do I do it?” are not accidental. They manifest a particular experiential modality. This is a modality of certain unpleasant bodily sensations that on a level of the emotional self show as anger, while on a level of the cognitive or intellectual self they appear as self-doubt.

A different experiential modality manifests in Sin's account when she says *once I had a very good feeling*. Here she relates to the feeling in her body. I will attest from my experience that in the *naegasinjang* position, after the moments of tickling, itching, anger, annoyance and self-doubt, a good and peaceful feeling comes, of stability and relaxation. Ms. Sin, however, describes something a bit different. *While doing it [the position] I suddenly thought about very happy events. [...] Sometimes, it is funny, when the music was on, I wanted to dance, to the music*. Pleasant feelings in the body develop into happiness and joy, which evolve into a desire to dance. This is an additional experiential modality, occurring at several levels of the self: bodily, emotional and cognitive.

I find that some of the leading notions in Sin's account are warmth, softness and a smooth passage. This is how she articulates it: *[...] As the physical strength grows [...] I feel softness in my body, as if my bones are moving. ... I felt that my muscles were a bit stiff and hurt. But recently [my muscles] became soft and warm. My hands and feet are cold, and I am sensitive to cold. ... But [after starting GiCheon] there were times when I did not feel cold at all. Now I am less sensitive to cold. And now I sweat easily. Before I did not sweat much. ...*

And my skin became softer, better. And I have the feeling of lightness. My body became much lighter. And I sleep well now...

Ms. Sin talks about the softness and warmth of the muscles, as opposed to the stiff and hurt muscles of before, and about softness of the skin. She is less sensitive to cold, sweats easily, sleeps better and her body feels light. I would like to divide these bodily sensations into two categories: the first category is softness (of muscles and skin) and warmth (of the muscles and the whole body, the second category is smooth and effortless passage (sweat appears and sleep comes with greater ease than before starting the practice). The following extracts of Sin's interview demonstrate that "softness and warmth" and "smooth and effortless passage" manifest also on other levels of the self.

[...] [As a result of GiCheon practice] my heart was getting larger.⁷⁸ And when something was OK, I said "OK". And when it was not OK, I said "not OK". ... In Korea the position of a woman is a bit different from that of a man [...] At home I have to be a "good-natured daughter". [...]. In my communication with other people, instead of checking myself and keeping silent, now, as I became much healthier, I tell them what I have to tell, and I can help them more, and I treat them better. I became calmer.

Not only does the sweat appear with greater ease, but also words and feelings are expressed more freely and social communication is accomplished with greater straightforwardness and simplicity. Ms. Sin connects her physical strength to softness and a sense of movement in the body. *As my physical strength grows [...] I feel softness in my body, as if my bones are moving.* This connotes motifs of transformation, echoing the experiential modality of *expanding amplitudes of contradictory sensations* in the body and the mind-heart, as discussed above. A dynamic process is occurring, bringing with it softness and warmth.

⁷⁸ *Maŭmi k'ōjinda* (마음이 커진다), literally "the heart becomes larger", means being emotionally available, capable of connecting to others, not being engrossed with oneself.

After being stiff and hurt, the muscles become soft and warm. Also in her relationship with the people around her Ms. Sin now demonstrates a warmer human attitude: *I treat them better. I became calmer.*

I would metaphorically compare this process to the melting of the old self, and the forging of a new one. This half-melted self, soft, warm, and flexible is to a certain degree an ideal of GiCheon. It is contrasted with rigidity, ossification and coldness. Ms. Sin talks about the warmth of her skin, her muscles, her ability to better withstand cold temperatures, but also about her increased warmth and acceptance toward other people. The sense of warmth and softness of the skin, the muscles and the whole body develops into a mild and flexible attitude toward life, toward others and toward oneself. This is how Ms. Sin elaborates on her improved communication with the people around her.

[After beginning GiCheon] ... my ability to accept grew. Before that, although I did not express it, I had different thoughts in my mind-heart. Sometimes when we say “OK” on the outside, actually inside we feel “not at all OK”... [You should say “OK”] without connection to how you feel inside. There is this standard, Koreans have it. ...

Ms. Sin remarks on her growing ability to accept others, yet actually she continues to discuss not just acceptance, but also the expression of her feelings. She brings up a “two-way” communicative movement: from the others toward herself (acceptance), and from herself toward the others (expression). She voices criticism toward what she perceives as a social convention to say “OK” on the outside, *while feeling “not at all OK” inside*. If in the past she conformed to etiquette, this is not the case anymore:

When people feel hardship in the body, they become annoyed, without knowing it [...]. Then my relationships with close people, with my family, became more harmonious [...]. As I became more relaxed [...], instead of putting up with others and staying silent, I can accept

and understand other people, talk with them a bit more. After listening to another person [...] I can find out what she wants, right? If I can do for her what she wants, I do that. If not, then not. Then the relationship, instead of being ambiguous, becomes a bit clearer. [...] Making peace is easier [if you talk] [...]. This talk does not turn into a dispute, but space is created for listening to each other and agreeing with each other.

GiCheon practice helps Ms. Sin to better carry out her familial and social duties as a woman and as a daughter of the family. *In Korea the position of a woman is a bit different from that of a man [...] At home I have to be a “good-natured daughter”.* Yet, Sin follows a new path in her attempt to conform to this standard. Before, she tried to be a “good-natured daughter” by *putting up with others and staying silent* in communicating with her parents and other people. She followed the principle of *saying “OK” on the outside*, while *feeling “not at all OK”* inside. Her new attitude, however, consists of *accepting and understanding other people by talking with them a bit more*. Sin is not silent anymore, she is expressive. *Making peace is easier [if you talk]*. Her improved self-expression brings about harmonious communication and greater mutual understanding.

Sin Hyŏnju does not rebel against the existing familial or social order, nor does she openly challenge any social conventions. She does not argue with her parents or superiors. *This talk does not turn into a dispute, but space is created for listening to each other and agreeing with each other.* Her way of modifying the existing relationships lies in *making peace*. She achieves this by clarifying the ambiguous elements of the relationship by listening and talking.

The narration of Ms. Sin clearly connects bodily phenomena to mental, emotional, and social occurrences. Ms. Sin also links the uncomfortable feeling in the body resulting from ill health with annoyance and lack of patience in communicating with the people around

her. *When people feel hardship in the body, they become annoyed, without knowing it [...].* Her newly acquired methods of relating to others stem from her improved physical and mental-emotional condition. *So my relationships with close people, with my family, became more harmonious [...]. As I became more relaxed [...].* According to Ms. Sin, becoming more relaxed in her body and mind-heart contributes to better human communication. Other effects of relaxation are increased self-confidence and slowing down the pace of life:

[...] I became more relaxed in the mind-heart. I do not try to do things right now, immediately. I can wait until the right time to do things comes, and prepare. I am not hasty. Although it is not a perfectly calm mind, I can wait with tranquility. And something like trust. If I want something, I have confidence that I can achieve it. This is because my body follows [me when I want to do something]. For example, [if I plan] not to sleep at night but study for a few days, or whatever. I have thoughts like “I can do it!”.

Besides Sin, many other practitioners comment on a growing self-assurance and self-trust resulting from the GiCheon practice. A classic example of self-confidence as a leading experiential modality is the case of Ms. Kim Yǒnghŭi described in Chapters Three and Four. Slowing down, which Sin expresses as becoming *not hasty* and *waiting with tranquility* is an effect of practice to which I strongly connect myself. I experienced increased *peacefulness*, and *slowed down the rhythm* of my life. I started listening to my body, ceasing working or studying when tired or sick. Within the dialog between the bodily self and an emotional-cognitive self, my bodily self started to assert itself. It obtained a voice in a decision-making debate on “what to do”. As a result, my usual stress has decreased.

Ms. Sin describes a similar process when she talks about trust. *And something like trust. If I want something, I have confidence that I can achieve it. This is because my body follows [me when I want to do something].* The intentional-emotional-cognitive self of Sin trusts that the bodily self will be able to achieve the projects she planned. This has to do with

the greater strength of the physical self, but also with a better communication between Sin's intentional-emotional-cognitive self and her bodily self. In my case, the trust is related more to the demands of the bodily self, and the growing tendency of the emotional-cognitive self to agree to the requirements of the bodily self - to eat or to sleep, for example. Both in my own case and in the case of Ms. Sin GiCheon practice brings better accord and affinity between different selves. The general standing of the bodily self within one's personal hierarchy alters. The bodily self is acquiring greater significance and power.

I have mentioned previously that the feeling of happiness during the GiCheon practice connects in the narration of Ms. Sin to a desire to dance. She discusses this sensitivity toward music more explicitly in the following extract from her interview.

[...] I liked music, but it was not deep. But after GiCheon I started to perceive music more deeply, emotionally. My heart started ringing together with the music. ... My ears have changed. [...] music [...] comes into me. [...] Suddenly, when I listened to Korean traditional music, which I had not listened to before, I could really understand and accept it, could feel its value.

The openness to music mentioned by Ms. Sin demonstrates increased acceptance of diverse sensorial experiences. It echoes a better communication with nature reported by other adepts, although Ms. Sin gave it more prominence in her narration. They talk about a greater openness toward and awareness of nature, and how they perceive themselves as part of it. I interpret this ability to perceive and incorporate music smoothly and efficiently as an indication of “smooth functioning” on the level of the universal self. Feelings of cold are associated in GiCheon thought with blockages and hindrances in *ki* flow. Warmth and smoothness at various levels of the self reported by practitioners are explained by GiCheon instructors as improved flow of *ki*. In GiCheon thought, improved *ki* flow relates not only to the body, or the “self” but also involves greater openness toward the outside, or “intensive

exchange between *ki* inside the body and *ki* outside the body” (Kim Hŭi-sang and Kich‘ŏnmun Ponmun ed. 2000: 153). Greater awareness of nature and of music could be examples of this.

The smoothness in communication and relationships with others is articulated in Ms. Sin’s interview as a “two-way street”. It means being able to better express herself, and to better understand others. It helps her to better carry out her familial-social role of a good-natured daughter. She connects these developments to becoming healthier, more composed and self-possessed. This element of Sin’s narrative has much in common with the accounts of other practitioners. Many report on modification of their familial self, which result from getting calmer and more relaxed.⁷⁹ This is how Mr. Kim Yŏngbo in his early 50s, working in retail business, expresses it.

I became calmer, more relaxed. [Before] when I talked with different people [...] I felt annoyed, nervous. [...] I tried to force people to accept my opinion, but not now. [...] In the family, before, I had a very sharp character. [...] I hated dirty things. [...] My children and wife, it was hard for them. [...] After beginning GiCheon [...] I changed. I hang the laundry, do a washing, cook rice, wash the dishes, fold the clothes, clean the room. [...] I used to hit people, paid fines. Also in the family [...] When I fought with my wife [...] in the past [...] actually [among] Koreans, an impulsive man who says that he never has hit his wife, it is a lie. I hit my wife in the past, but after doing GiCheon it is not OK. [...] Also the children. But now - not anymore.

In the extract above Mr. Kim associates frequent annoyance and nervousness with hitting people. Greater composure is related to greater acceptance of others’ opinions and of unpleasant circumstances, such as a messy environment at home. The changes brought by the GiCheon practice lead to a different perception of life and to a better functioning within the

⁷⁹ Interview of 09.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea.

family. *When people feel hardship in the body, they become annoyed, without knowing it [...]* says Ms. Sin, and Kim Yŏngbo would probably agree with her. Similarly to the narrative of Sin, in Kim's narrative GiCheon positions cause the mind to become calmer, and result in smoother familial functioning, following the first vector of progression from the bodily-emotional self toward the familial and social self.

The experiential modality manifesting in the above extract from Kim's interview can be identified as "lowering the level of conflict". Kim's old self often found itself in a state of conflict, which he explained was due to his edgy character. He was in conflict with himself and it manifested as an annoyed and nervous state of the mind-heart. He got into disputes with others and had difficulty accepting their opinions. By arguing he tried to compel people to agree with him. He was in conflict with the people he hit, including his family members. He had a problem with accepting an untidy environment at home. He had run-ins with the police and had to pay fines. These expressions of conflict lessened after practicing GiCheon. The relaxation of his previous sharpness and annoyance shows in Kim's narrative mainly through the description of his familial functioning, depicted in actions: *hanging the laundry, doing a washing, folding the clothes, making rice, washing the dishes, cleaning the room.*

When Ms. Sin talks about her familial functioning, she talks less about actions and more about feelings, attitudes and communication. Besides the alteration of her familial self, the important points in her narrative are developing self-confidence and a greater regard for bodily self. Yet, the shift in the hierarchal position the bodily self occupies within a personality does not always manifest in a peaceful way as it does in Ms. Sin's case. This is how Mun Chonghun, in his early forties, working in car sales talks about the changes in the way he perceived his body.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Interview of 09.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea.

My body became powerful [...] my arms and legs got stronger, so I got confident in my relationships with people. [...] Drunken courage [...] provoking others [...] verbal fights ...showing off your strength in front of others [...]. Mainly men are like that [...]. A man without self-confidence, when he gets a bit stronger [...] he acts with reckless bravado [...]. When I drank, I made many mistakes like that [...]. Recently I am not like that [...].

Mr. Mun talks about drinking culture and how his newly found self-confidence found expression in his behavior as a drunkard. When his body gained power, Mun's behavior changed. He describes a process, seeing himself as not very confident at the outset. However, his body got stronger, and his level of confidence increased: *my arms and legs got stronger, so I got confident in my relationships with people*. The position that the bodily self occupied in the personal hierarchy shifted, and new types of behavior appeared: *drunken courage, provoking others, verbal fights, showing off strength in front of others, acting with reckless bravado*. It took time for Mun to get used to the changes and to integrate his newly acquired power into his personality. At the time of our interview he categorized a recent manner of behavior connected to *drunken courage* as *mistakes*. He noted that lately he is *not like that*.

As a result of GiCheon practice Ms. Sin became more tranquil and self-assured. She feels calmer and less hasty in her mind-heart. Now she does not have an urge to do things immediately, but can hold back. Feeling capable of achieving whatever she chooses to pursue is also related to trust and tranquility toward her bodily self. This translates into self-confidence and also influences her communication abilities. Mr. Kim became less conflictual and this can be seen in different areas of his life, but mainly in the family. Mr. Mun talks about an interesting aspect of his GiCheon experience that is connected to his short-lived tendency to engage in drunken fights. These three accounts demonstrate significant changes brought by GiCheon into the lives of these individuals. However, this is not always the case with GiCheon practice, the effects of which are sometimes very mild or almost non-existent.

In the following section I relate the story of Kim Wŏn'gyu. For him, the GiCheon experience was often, though not always, associated with disappointment.

5.4 Kim Wŏn'gyu: the experiential modality of “lack and disappointment”

The effects of the practice reported by Sin are articulated also by other practitioners. The accounts of many informants were less concise and systematic, but related similar phenomena. People talked about various feelings during practice, and the sensations of heat or cold while standing in *naegasinjang*. In this context, the interview of Kim Wŏn'gyu (not a real name) is interesting, because it stands out. I identify the leading experiential modality of Kim Wŏn'gyu as “lack and disappointment”. Lack and disappointment relate to different aspects of his narration and experience of GiCheon, including the absence of sensations that are common for other practitioners. Let us now turn to a few extracts from his interview.

[...] That program [...] I was looking for something like that so ... not too well known, slightly mysterious [...], it was shot at the Munmak [GiCheon Mountain Center], I do not remember the details [of the program] well, [...] I just had a good feeling [when I saw it].

Kim Wŏn'gyu first learned about GiCheon from a TV program, shot at the Munmak GiCheon Mountain Center.

Also before that I thought that [abdominal] breathing [...] should not be [result of] conscious [effort]. [...] If [...] abdominal breathing is important, then there should exist some postures [...] that stimulate abdominal breathing. When I heard Pak Sagyu munjunim explaining that in a position called naegasinjang the breathing naturally reaches down (till the abdomen), [...] ... it agreed with me.

By watching the TV program Mr. Kim discovered that GiCheon leaders saw eye to eye with him regarding abdominal breathing – it should be induced by the position of the

body and not just stimulated by the effort of the mind. Kim has been previously thinking about these kinds of practices, as he elaborates in the following extract.

Before that, for about ten years or so, [...] I did ordinary things for health, you know, like mountain hiking or running on a regular basis. [...] But [...] when a friend of mine asked me “How about doing some exercises you could show [to others]?”, in the beginning I was not interested. But on the other hand, if you exercise a lot, it shows somehow [in the way you hold yourself, on your body language, so other people notice that] [...]. But not something too common, like Taekwondo ... [...] if you practice something too common, [...] it is easier to adapt [to this practice, because many people do it], but it feels a bit empty [...], so I was thinking about doing something [not very common] [...].

Kim wanted to practice something unusual, something that would differentiate him from other people, something that others would notice. Here we are reminded of the desire for self-promotion through one's performance as a marked characteristic of South Korean society, hinted at by Cho Chinsik in Chapter Four. From this point of view, GiCheon really suited Kim. Nevertheless, from the very beginning his GiCheon experience was marked by clear disappointment.

And then I watched that TV program I told you about [...]. People talk about karma a lot ... [...] so it happened by chance when I was about 40 years old.⁸¹ By coincidence, someone told me there was a job, and I was free at that time. [...] So I thought it was a paid job. [...] I went there and that was [work related to] GiCheon. [...] They needed someone to watch over the houses at the Munmak [GiCheon Mountain Center].

A significant amount of time has elapsed between the moment when Kim watched the TV program featuring GiCheon and the moment he went to the Munmak GiCheon Center. The former has not induced him to seek GiCheon. His encounter with GiCheon occurred

⁸¹ The Sino-Korean term karmic connection (*inyŏn* 因緣) signifies a chain of cause and effect. In the everyday speech it is used to indicate invisible connections between people and events.

much later, when he heard that there is work at Munmak, and decided to go there. Nevertheless, making money was not his sole motivation.

[...] The atmosphere was not that of discussing payment terms and the amount of money, [...] I knew that it was [work related to] GiCheon, [...] and I decided to go and stay there [...] no matter how low the payment is [...]. I stayed there for two months only. [...]. On TV, they showed many things similar to martial arts. But when I came [to Munmak], there were almost no things like that. [...] We did a lot of static positions, yukhap - six basic positions [...].

Kim Wŏn'gyu went to Munmak to work and to earn money, but he also aspired to study GiCheon. He decided to work *no matter how low the payment is*. Yet, his hopes to earn money were disappointed, as there was no payment at all. The program carried out at that period at Munmak proposed free board, food and GiCheon training for young men and women, with the purpose of turning them into future GiCheon instructors. However, as a result of miscommunication and disinformation, Kim Wŏn'gyu found himself in the wrong place.

His other expectations related to the practice itself were not met either. He believed he would learn martial arts, but the training was focused on static positions instead, with emphasis on self-healing. Mr. Kim, as he told me later in the extract of his interview not quoted here, was not interested in healing. He found other elements of the program equally frustrating.

And then, Kim Hyŏnt'ae wŏnjangnim ... Enlightenment ...[...] I had no interest in such things [...], because I started GiCheon [...] as sports (undong) and this talk was totally foreign to me [...]. Kim Hyŏnt'ae wŏnjangnim said that one can reach enlightenment [...] watching running water or falling leaves; this talk [...] had nothing to do with me. [...] I came because I heard there was a job, but later I saw that this work was not for receiving a

salary. [...] Besides that, I have not studied [...] systematically. And I could not earn money. [...] So I told Kim Hyŏnt'ae wŏnjangnim that I was leaving. [...]

I will presently outline a few background facts related to the Munmak program in order to contextualize the narrative of Mr. Kim. The training of potential teachers at the Munmak Mountains Center was not systematic. Instruction was random and no teacher stayed at Munmak on a regular basis, with different teachers coming and going. This was in accordance with what the students of Lee Sangwŏn called his principle of “casting seeds and letting them grow”. The seeds are a metaphor for future GiCheon instructors, while “letting them grow” refers to the lack of nurture for the seeds, or ordered and planned instruction for recruits. The strong and persistent seeds are supposed to grow by themselves, a metaphor for the talented and promising persons expected to bud independently of circumstances. The Munmak program for potential GiCheon leaders yielded just one success story, and was later abandoned.

In the extract quoted above Kim Wŏn'gyu complains about this unsystematic training, in addition to his dissatisfaction about the lack of payment for his work of guarding the houses. He did not connect to the speeches of enlightenment either, and saw the training as *undong* only. As I have discussed in Chapter Four, the distinction between *suryŏn* and *undong* is important for many Korean GiCheon practitioners. Those classifying GiCheon as *suryŏn* demonstrate a greater degree of affinity with GiCheon ideology, and display more trust and openness toward GiCheon instructors and their discourse. The instructors and the most devoted of the practitioners form the core of the GiCheon community, while those tagging it as *undong* are closer to the periphery. A similar division takes place in relation to the interpretation of *ki*. I have mentioned in Chapter Three that Sin had not previously believed that *ki* existed and she changed her mind after starting the practice. Also Kim Yŏnghŭi and Ha Tongju, as quoted in Chapter Three, view the GiCheon practice as

developing sensitivity for *ki*. The terms *suryŏn* and *ki* are indicators of a kind, measuring the level of dedication and commitment of a practitioner, the degree of her or his acceptance of GiCheon thought, and the estimated or assumed success resulting from the practice. Kim Wŏn'gyu sides with those who label GiCheon as *undong*. In a similar vein he voices his opinion on *ki*.

-What did you feel in GiCheon?

-Almost nothing. [For me] it is still sports (undong) [...] There seems to be something beyond sports (undong), but for me it is only an idea, I have never really experienced it. [...]

- What do you think is ki?

-Ki? I do not know at all. [...] When one stands in naegasinjang [...] there should be some feeling. I didn't have that feeling, I never experienced it. I was only thinking about it in my head ... I am talking about something I do not know.

Kim Wŏn'gyu does not argue with GiCheon theory, agreeing that *there should be some feeling in naegasinjang or something beyond sports (undong) in GiCheon*. Yet, he claims to never have experienced it. The experiential modalities connected with lack, disappointment and unfulfilled expectations color most aspects of his narrative. Sometimes his disappointment is articulated strongly and clearly, for example in the complaint about his unpaid work at Munmak. In other instances, the disappointment is mild and patient, as when Kim talks about his feelings, or the lack of them.

[...] Usually people say they have some feeling, some energy is circulating. [...] After about five or ten minutes pass, it gets less hard [...]. ... [...] If we stand thirty minutes in naegasinjang, [...] from the beginning till the end the degree of hardship alters [...]. [...] But for me it is [equally] hard from the beginning till the end. I forcefully make myself stand [in naegasinjang] [...] as if I am doing something hateful. And when I stand [in naegasinjang] for two hours, I do not have any feelings, [...] for me it is monotonous.

Kim Wŏn'gyu sees himself as an exception to the rule according to which *naegasinjang* is experienced differently as the minutes elapse. For him *it is monotonous*. The lack of sensations that others report experiencing is an important factor, which is characterized by a somber surrendering to the reality of not feeling what others feel, with a slight hope that it might change in future.

[Naegasinjang] is just painful. [...] Through it we accumulate inner power. Actually, I never felt that through it I accumulated inner power. [...] I think it is good. Not that I think it is good, but the others say it's good, so I think it should be good. [...] Personally, I do not know. I never felt anything special, so I don't know yet. [...] One day I might know, so [for now] I just do it.

Kim articulates a certain openness toward what is the consensus in GiCheon community: *others say it's good, so I think it should be good*. Simultaneously, he is disappointed because he *never felt anything special*. Yet, the disappointment of Kim is neither acute nor absolute. The lack of feelings others share is not a uniform feature of his story. When describing his practice of *tanbaegong* in the mountains, Mr. Kim accounts for sensations of energy and liveliness. In this respect his experience is in accord with the reports of other practitioners.

After his unsuccessful two months long GiCheon experience at Munmak, Kim Wŏn'gyu kept training at home for two years and a half. Then he went to the Kyeryŏng Mountain Center to practice GiCheon under Pak Sagyu *munju*, who advised him to take a teacher's course. Upon completion of the instructor's course, Kim Wŏn'gyu was about to pass the official teachers' test. The official test consisted of standing in *naegasinjang* position for two hours and performing *tanbaegong* one thousand times. In order to prepare for the test, Kim decided to try *tanbaegong* in the mountains alone.

I finished ten hours [of practice]. I was worried my knees [...] might hurt, but after completing [the training] my knees did not hurt at all, I ran down the mountain [...] feeling really alive and energetic. Yet, this optimistic moment is rather exceptional in Kim's narrative, the axis of which is continuous, though moderate and composed, melancholy.

Another rather positively colored period of Kim's GiCheon story took place immediately after the conclusion of his Kyeryŏng training: [...] *In the beginning, when I met Kim Hyŏnt'ae wŏnjangnim and heard the talks about enlightenment [...], they were things I never thought about, but finally I realized that the spirit cannot be separated from the work of cultivating the body [...]. Pak Sagyu munjunim also talked about the Way (to 道) [...]. So I thought that if I practice really hard [...], and at the starting point of the way I don't know what lies at the end [...], but after a while a road will split and a few offshoots will appear. Maybe I will develop power and the world will applaud [...]. But in any case, I thought that I will see something, and [...] I decided to practice as much as I can [...].*

In the past, Kim Wŏn'gyu did not connect to the enlightenments talks by Kim Hyŏnt'ae. However, as time passed he opened up to this kind of discourse, and decided to train really hard. His hope to see something at the end of the way parallel similar articulations of my other interviewees, who expect some outcome out of the GiCheon practice, yet do not picture exactly what it could be. I have heard only male GiCheon practitioners talk this way, never females. A few devoted male practitioners articulated vague longing about the possibility of *the world applauding* when in the future they reveal their achievements. Kim Wŏn'gyu expresses this metaphorically: *after a while a road will split and a few offshoots will appear*. Still, the continuation of his narrative is not very encouraging.

But as I was alone now, it did not work out. Some days I trained for eight or nine hours a day, but after that I rested for a few days. In the past, for two years and a half, though for short hours, I have practiced continuously [...]. However this time I made it into a

vocation [...] and since then it became a burden. Because I attached too much importance to the necessity of practice. [...] I wanted to practice harder, but I could not accomplish that.

After returning from Munmak, Kim trained for about one and half hours every day. This went on for two and half years. He then continued his GiCheon education at the Kyeryŏng Mountain GiCheon Center, but the location was a few hours driving away from his home, so he had to stop. Now, after returning from Mt. Kyeryŏng, his GiCheon resolve strengthened and he increased the intensity of his practice to eight or nine hours per day. Unfortunately, the results were not very positive. Too many expectations made him perceive his training as a burden, generating another disappointment. Kim Wŏn'gyu could not continue alone, so he joined yet another GiCheon group under a different leader. Despite the mellow pessimism of his GiCheon narrative, Kim does not harbor negative sentiments toward the GiCheon leaders or the practice.

- Why do you keep practicing GiCheon?

- In the old days I liked [...] sports (undong). [...] Now I do GiCheon instead [of sports]. [...] I felt it is a bit similar to boxing. [...] so I thought it suits me. [...] I learn new things one by one, and I listen to the explanations, these are interesting, so I keep practicing.

Kim likes GiCheon postures and their attendant explanations, finding them interesting and he intends to continue the practice. In our conversation, he referred to GiCheon as a product among other products, and he considers this product a good one.

I think it is a good product, so I continue doing it. [...] When we select something, we cannot try everything before we select. [...] Simply, I am satisfied with it now, and I think there are things to explore. [...] If [GiCheon practice] really disagreed with me, I would probably look for something else, but it does not seem to be the case. [...] I like different [GiCheon] positions. [...]. It is not something practiced by many people, so it has a slightly mysterious feeling, I like that [...]. So I will still keep doing it.

Though Kim Wŏn'gyu estimates his GiCheon experience satisfactory enough to continue the practice, many elements of his narrative indicate that the leading experiential modality of his narration is disappointment and lack. When he first arrived at Munmak, his discontent about not receiving payment for guarding the houses was accompanied by his perception of the bodily experience of *naegasinjang* – he did not feel what others felt and reported. His emotions are characterized by feelings of lack on the bodily level and on the economic level. GiCheon experience at Munmak lacked sufficient martial arts elements that he expected. Besides, he perceived talks about enlightenment as foreign to him, which strengthened his alienation and the sense of “this is not for me”. On an educational level, Kim felt that the Munmak teachers training program lacked a system.

The lack of feelings in the *naegasinjang* position translates into the absence of practical knowledge of what *ki* is. Later, when Kim's affinity to GiCheon had strengthened, the experiential modality of lacking appeared as an unfulfilled hope to see something at the end of the road, and a perceived inability to train hard when he wished to do so. *I wanted to practice harder but I could not accomplish that.*

Social expectations require a Korean man to get a job and marry. The life story of Kim Wŏn'gyu shows that he has not fulfilled these social expectations, which might partially explain his experiential modality of disappointment and a lack of accomplishment. His engagement with GiCheon and acquiring qualifications for a GiCheon instructor might be interpreted as directed at maintaining self-respect and contacts with people, attempts to improve social communication, social belonging, and social integration, providing a partial answer to the question of why he persisted with his GiCheon training.

5.5 Pain as a common denominator of different experiential modalities

Experiential modalities are rooted in bodily experience. For example in the narration of Cho, the GiCheon instructor from Chapter Four, the experiential modality of understanding old behavioral patterns originated in that one moment when he was training under the guidance of Kim Hŭisang, and the conversation they had regarding the nature of the practice. For many practitioners mentioned in the present chapter this bodily experience relates to *naegasinjang* and the pain it brings. Kim Wŏn'gyu's experiential modality of lack and disappointment starts with his pain from *naegasinjang*. For his interlocutors, other trainees with whom he discussed the practice, the pain of *naegasinjang* was experienced as sporadic, irregular, ever-changing. Kim had expected his feelings of pain to have a similar dynamic, but they did not. Instead his sense of pain was constant and monotonous, and thus disappointing. Ms. Sin, in the extracts of her interview quoted in the current chapter, did not dwell on the subject of pain extensively. Still, *naegasinjang* itself is the basic bodily experience that grounds her experiential modality of warmth and softness and of smooth and effortless passage. The various sensations reviewed by Ms. Sin were felt by her while in the *naegasinjang* position. These sensations included warmness of the body and swift appearance of sweat, for example. For Kim Pohŭi *naegasinjang* was hard and boring; that is her characterization of the GiCheon practice in general and it defines her experiential modality. For Pak Kyŏngae pain in *naegasinjang* became, as mentioned earlier, a metaphor for the toils and trials of life. This gives rise to Pak's experiential modality of fortitude and persistent continuation despite the obstacles. Like Pak Kyŏngae, Kim Yŏnghŭi focuses a lot on the experience of pain in *naegasinjang*. Yet, for Kim Yŏnghŭi the pain holds a completely different meaning. It builds confidence, convincing her that if she could endure something as hard as that, she *could do anything!*

The experience of pain, its understanding and conceptualization by the practitioners, is the subject of the next chapter, Chapter Six. I will discuss pain as a characteristic of ascetic practices and question to which degree GiCheon can be considered one such practice. Another aspect of GiCheon linking it to other practices of asceticism is not pain per se, but the extremity of a particular practice. Interestingly, Kim Yŏnghŭi's declaration *I could achieve anything!* echoes similar sentiments of ascetic practitioners in contemporary Japan. They regard climbing the ladder of swords as the most difficult thing of all. *If you can do this, you can do anything!* exclaimed one Japanese trainee and the rest of the group nodded in agreement (Lobetti 2014: 47). Kim Yŏnghŭi used this same expression in regard to performing *naegasinjang*.

In this chapter and in previous chapters, in my discussion of various experiential modalities I have reiterated the presence of pain in GiCheon, but I have not addressed the notion of pain directly. If the present chapter is an entry point into the subject, then the next chapter accesses the experience of pain on a deeper level. I will present extracts from the interviews where my informants describe the pain they felt in *naegasinjang* and analyze the ways in which the pain is conceptualized by the practitioners and in GiCheon theory. In that discussion I will draw comparisons with the findings of Lobetti, who studied ascetic practices in contemporary Japan (2014).