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

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Chapter Six: Pain in the narrations of the practitioners

6.1 Pain as experience

As mentioned in Chapter Two, this dissertation approaches *ki*, *suryŏn*, pain, and mountains as culturally shaped notions that mold and modulate experience. These notions manifest in the interviews of GiCheon trainees and anchor their narratives. After reviewing the notions of *ki* and *suryŏn* in Chapters Three and Four, I have discussed personally colored experiential modalities in Chapter Five. I presently proceed to reviewing the notion of pain in this chapter in a more concentrated fashion, before moving towards the image and concept of mountains in Chapter Seven.

As I have clarified in the Introduction and in Chapter Two, I suggest to view GiCheon and similar practices as mountain practices, contemporary offshoots of the Korean tradition of mountain worship. This manifests also in GiCheon lore and in the interviews with the practitioners. Viewing GiCheon as a mountain practice means perceiving the goal of GiCheon practice as the transformation of the body into an ideal body, the body of a mountain immortal. The path of this transformation is painful and difficult. In this chapter we consider different aspects of this pain experience. Using the accounts of other practitioners as a narrative axis, I will also relate to my own experience of GiCheon training and practice.

The notion of pain is central to GiCheon. The static positions (靜法 *chŏngpŏp*) are at the core of the practice, and their maintenance is painful. However, only the first among the six positions (六合 丹功 *yukhap tan'gong*), *naegasinjang* (내가신장), is maintained by the students in the studios for long periods of time, sometimes for thirty minutes or more. Most of my interviewees talked about this position and the pain it brings.

Naegasinjang has been described as the perfect application of *yōkkūn*, the principle of the maximal bending of the joints. The ankles, the knees, the spine, elbows, wrists and finger joints have to be bent to their maximum capacity. In GiCheon thought, joints are gateways, or passages of *ki*. Twisting the joints with *yōkkūn* is believed to open *ki* channels in the body and the mind-heart, thus improving the flow of *ki*. This is painful. The adepts conceptualize pain, its function and the mechanism of its origin, in different ways and to different degrees of intensity. Some of the insights of the GiCheon practitioners regarding pain correlate with the findings of anthropologists, made on the basis of their studying chronic pain patients.

The current chapter investigates how the self is created on the basis of the experience of *naegasinjang*. How is the body in pain perceived and approached? What kind of self is created therein, and by what means? GiCheon practitioners and people with chronic conditions both experience pain on a regular basis. As argued in the text below, their articulation and understanding of pain have much in common. According to anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, very little is known about cross-cultural similarities and differences in the ways the body is experienced. This is also true regarding the body in pain. Kleinman thinks that we have to learn how the self is created on a daily basis as a locally shaped experience (Kleinman 1986: 191, quoted in Del Vecchio Good et al. 1992: 198-200).

Anthropological studies of chronic pain patients, define pain as an “intimate inner experience” unifying the mind and the body, thus highlighting the inadequacy of the Cartesian dualism (Kleinman et al. 1992: 5-14). In *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* edited by Mary-Jo DelVecchio, contributors consider what is learned through the experience of pain. How is the meaning of pain created, expressed and negotiated? How is it reflected in the stories people tell? (Kleinman et al. 1992a: 15). When in pain, the world is under the constant threat of dissolution, as the building blocks of the perceived world, such as time and space, begin to melt down (Good 1992: 41). Pain

experienced on a regular basis affects the way people think about themselves, their lives and their future, causing them to perceive their bodies differently. In interviews, chronic pain sufferers report having grown through their pain. Pain forces them to re-experience the body, to become self-conscious about eating healthy, getting enough rest, and avoiding excessive stress (Garro 1992: 104-105, 117, 126).

6.2 Pain as transforming

In GiCheon, pain is transforming. A close analysis of the interviews conducted with GiCheon adherents reveals a detailed perspective on how exactly pain in the *naegasinjang* position is perceived and articulated, and what kinds of changes it brings. We will start with an extract from an interview with Chŏn Sŏngho.⁸² At the time of the interview Mr. Chŏn was 49 years old. He previously worked as a news reporter for the Research Institute of Korean Medicine Policy (Hanŭihak chŏngch'aek yŏn'guso 한의학정책연구소), and now engages in organizational activities for the same institute. This is how Chŏn Sŏngho talks about pain:

Pain and satisfaction (manjok 만족)[...] and the sense of accomplishment (sŏngch'wigam 성취감) [...] come together. The greater the pain, the greater is the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It is only hard at that moment [...], people who enjoy pain, are happy with it. For the people who are not like that ... to adjust to it ... at the end of the day [...] they are hesitant. [...]

Mr. Chŏn talks about the satisfaction and the sense of accomplishment that come together with pain. After performing *naegasinjang* many practitioners experience pride in their ability to persist in spite of the pain, and joy due to its cessation. As I will elaborate

⁸² Interview of 23.09.2010, Seoul, South Korea. Mr. Chŏn gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

below, a peaceful state of relaxation and almost enjoyment occur also during the performance of the position.

People who enjoy pain, are happy with it. GiCheon practitioners often joke that they are masochists, and that normal people would never engage in the self-inflicted pain of *naegasinjang*. This connotes an elitist element within GiCheon and other similar practices of self-perfection. These practices welcome everyone in theory, while in actuality only few can accept them (Foucault 2001: 109-112).

[Pain] confirms your identity, makes you confident in facing the world, considerate towards others [...], develops endurance and the sense of sacrifice. [...] Pain does not have just negative aspects. There is a difference between the pain you experience by yourself and the pain inflicted by others. The pain experienced by yourself [...] elevates you. [...] The pain inflicted by others brings frustration, anger, vengeance. [...] What I have chosen by myself, I can accept. [...] If there is a purpose directed at myself, the meaning [of pain] is different ... [The other type of pain] is not pain, it is torture. One can turn into joy, the other one can turn into real pain. If you see that the martyrs could have themselves killed, then for them it was not pain.⁸³ [...] It was pain from the point of view of the onlooker. From the point of view of the martyrs ... [...] they could accept it.

Chŏn Sŏngho divides people into those who can accept pain and those who cannot. The former are GiCheon practitioners whom Chŏn Sŏngho compares to martyrs. They are those *who enjoy pain, are happy with it*. The latter are ordinary people *who are not like that, hesitant*. As there are two categories of people in Chŏn Sŏngho's narrative, there are two categories of pain. Mr. Chŏn defines pain in GiCheon as self-inflicted; he calls it *the pain you experience by yourself*. He places it in the same category as the pain felt by martyrs who died

⁸³ The term *sun'gyoja* (殉教者 martyrs) is usually utilized within a Christian context.

willingly. In the opposite category is the pain inflicted by others against the will of the self. When accepted, pain brings positive development of the personality. The pain inflicted by others, when not accepted, brings destruction. The second type of pain Mr. Chŏn calls torture. The first type of pain *can turn into joy*, according to Chŏn Sŏnggho it *elevates you*. Chŏn Sŏnggho's thoughts remind us of the experience of chronic pain patients, who have claimed to have grown through their pain (Garro 1992: 1176).

Mr. Chŏn thinks that the meaning of pain changes if it has a *purpose directed at myself*. The martyrs had this purpose, and this is why their pain was different. What is for Mr. Chŏn the purpose of pain in GiCheon? What does *directed at myself* mean? In order to answer this question, it may be helpful to remember that in GiCheon theory pain has concrete meaning and direction. It is not pain for the sake of pain. GiCheon positions might be compared to the recording of a text, or the inscription of "GiCheon letters" on the body. The process of inscription is painful, but this inscription provides sense and purpose to the pain. When a blank page is inscribed with text, it is transformed. In GiCheon thought, a body in the *naegasinjang* position is metaphorically compared to a piece of metal that is being forged into a sword by a blacksmith. The bending of the joints in *naegasinjang* subjects the body and the mind-heart to a harsh and severe process. At the beginning of practice it can be shocking for those who are not yet physically, mentally and emotionally prepared for this type of experience. The body is in pain, and heat is generated. This body in pain is allegorically compared to a piece of metal on an anvil, pounded by a hammer. The self must be altered, forged into something different, just as a piece of metal must be forged into a sword.

Now let us return to the metaphor of the body as a scripture, and *naegasinjang* as the text inscribed on the body. The mind-heart and body are like a book, in which all past life experiences are recorded, both positive and negative. Our past makes us who we are at

present. This past is our entire history starting from the time in our mother's womb and going on to birth, growth, education, work, actions, and relationships with others. Whatever we ate, drank, saw, heard, touched, thought, said, did or have undergone is documented in our body and mind-heart. This way, our yesterday influences our today and programs our tomorrow. This process shows the workings of the second vector of progression: the unconscious influence (mainly from the outside towards the inside) forming the self. GiCheon practice is believed to transform the present, thus healing the past and changing the future.⁸⁴

In GiCheon thought, the traumas, shocks and illnesses of the past can be cured. But the negative past is not rectified easily. With conscious effort, a student has to willingly undergo painful training. This effort is a conscious and defined intention of the self, occurring along the first vector. Metaphorically speaking, the painful *naegasinjang* experience almost erases the old self, inscribing a new self instead. Of course the old self is not erased completely, but modified. This is what Mr. Chŏn calls *a purpose directed at myself*. He compares it to the willingly accepted pain of the martyrs, inviting comparisons with ascetic experience.

6.3 Pain as a characteristic of ascetic practice

GiCheon trainees are not the only ones willingly engaging in painful practices. Across cultures and historical periods, many individuals have voluntarily taken part in various painful activities. They sometimes are referred to as ascetics. In his recent work *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion*, Tullio Federico Lobetti discusses the meaning and the use of pain by the adepts of various contemporary practices. He uses the notion of Japanese

⁸⁴ Just as Buddhist practice could improve the karma.

asceticism as an umbrella term for a variety of bodily exertions undertaken for spiritual empowerment in Japan (2014: 1-2).

In the introduction to Lobetti's book, Hirochika Nakamaki suggests that the world of asceticism cannot be understood or described without personal experience. Without becoming a practitioner, we cannot understand the essence of the thing we are observing (Lobetti 2014: xiv). Lobetti considers his active participation in many of the ascetic practices as a necessary prerequisite for their theoretical analysis (2014: 6). He attempts to construct a theory for asceticism as a form of philosophy of the body. He defines asceticism as an embodied tradition inscribed as a text upon a body. The ascetic text is embodied because it is produced by the human body, which also becomes its recording medium (2014: 5-6). Analyzing the text thus means analyzing the body itself, its records of sensations and feelings (Lobetti 2014: 119). The body is used as a tool through which texts are enacted, similar to those enacted by other practitioners. This allows a translation of their bodily texts into terms that are immediately understandable by the body of the translator. When the practitioners Lobetti interviewed spoke about their feelings of gain, loss, exhaustion and so forth, he was able to critically evaluate their verbal translation of bodily sensations because he has accessed similar bodily text himself (2014: 6-7). In GiCheon a terminology is employed that is similar to that used by Lobetti in talking about letters and contents.

The practices serving as objects of Lobetti's anthropological study include walking in the mountains and climbing dangerous cliffs, cold water ablutions, climbing the ladder of swords, walking on burning coals, standing under a waterfall, enduring smoke produced by burning herbs and peppers, fasting and vigils (2014: 30, 36, 58, 61, 84). Often the same kind of practices are utilized by different and unrelated religious groups (2014: 30). Lobetti's focus is on the practices themselves rather than on their religious contexts. He looks also at the motivations of the practitioners, which include wishing for advancement within the

hierarchy of a group, or obtaining some other kind of benefit. The benefits might be desired for oneself only, for her or his family or group, or for the nation. Personal or familial benefits include getting a new job, success in business, finding a spouse, begetting a child, recovery from an illness, acquiring good luck, gaining strength, self-discovery, getting through a difficult period in life, reconciling with family after estrangement, or generally improving relationships within the family.

The motivations of the practitioners studied by Lobetti are at times congruent with the inspirations of the Beijing *yangsheng* adepts and *ki suryŏn* trainees in Korea. Also the types and elements of practices often coincide. Yet, due to the different focus of the investigations carried out for studying these cultural phenomena, comparison is difficult. The study of Farquhar and Zhang on the Beijing *yangsheng* focused on pleasurable practices, or the pleasurable aspects of various practices (2012). The research of Lobetti on Japanese asceticism centers on painful practices, or painful aspects of different practices. My own analysis, unlike that of Farquhar, Zhang and Lobetti's, concentrates not on a range of practices, but on one particular practice, GiCheon. Yet, I argue that *yangsheng* in contemporary Beijing, *ki suryŏn* in South Korea and what Lobetti calls Japanese asceticism constitute different developments of a similar East Asian cultural tendency toward self-cultivation and self-improvement, or, in Abayev's terms, a psycho-physical culture (1982, 1983).

As such, these cultural developments in different countries of East Asia provide terms of comparison for each other. There are, not by chance, linguistic ties. Japanese ascetics often refer to their activities as *shugyō* (修行 practice in general) (Lobetti 2014: 9). These two Chinese characters are pronounced as *suhaeng* in Korean; this word is used interchangeably with *suryŏn* by GiCheon practitioners, as I elaborated in Chapter Four. As pain is one of the

central themes of Lobetti's research on Japanese asceticism, I refer to his findings and conclusions, drawing parallels between Korean and Japanese contemporary practices, to clarify the place of pain in GiCheon and the ways in which it is experienced and articulated by the trainees.

GiCheon practitioners accept pain willingly and so do other ascetics. But what is the definition of "asceticism"? This term originates with the Greek ἄσκησις, askesis, meaning "exercise" or "training". Joseph Alter translates it as "disciplined practice". He sees in the askesis of ancient Greece a practice of virtue as an embodied exercise, an end in itself of a lived body of experience (2013: 124). Michel Foucault draws a direct connection between askesis and technologies of self, or techniques of self-formation in ancient Greece (1994b: 800). Richard Valantasis sees Foucault's work as the formulation of the theory of asceticism which proposes forming a subject through ascetic practices, what is called subjectivation. (1995: 546). Valantasis himself sets down his own theory of asceticism. According to him, asceticism initiates a practitioner into a new culture and into social and psychological systems associated with this culture. In order to engage this new alternative culture, an ascetic must retrain her or his senses and perceptions and acquire a new self, become a different person in new relationships and in a new society, which constitute a new culture (1995: 547-551).

Geoffrey Harpham defines the basics of asceticism as self-observation and self-criticism. He sees asceticism as a kind of "operating system" of cultures, the "cultural" element in cultures which makes them comparable, permitting their mutual understanding and communication. Harpham's findings stem from his analysis of Christian ethics and spirituality. Asceticism in a wider sense is any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy for empowerment or gratification (1987: xi-xiii). In this Harpham draws on Max Weber, who was among the first European scholars extending an interpretation of asceticism toward non-religious spheres of life (Weber 2001 [1904]).

Scholarly attempts to define and represent various religious and non-religious practices in the East and the West as more ascetic or less ascetic can be portrayed as a spectrum or a subspace, in which the presence of pain and its degree constitute one of the axes. Building on examples from Christian and Buddhist textual narratives, Lobetti suggests a definition that emphasizes the malleative, transformative character of asceticism.⁸⁵ In Christian tradition the body has to be transformed through harsh labor in order to become the perfect temple for a perfect soul. The idea of the human body advancing towards a sacred body is equally present in Buddhism (Lobetti 2014: 15, 22). In East Asian traditions of nourishing life and immortality, often associated with Daoism, the body progresses towards immortality through a process which is often complex and demanding. As I have elaborated upon in the Introduction and in Chapter Two, I argue that GiCheon could also be analyzed as a contemporary practice of nourishing life and immortality. The next chapter, Chapter Seven, will discuss this aspect in greater detail.

The malleation of Lobetti does not necessarily have religious connotations. He compares it to sculpture, carving, polishing and other ways of alteration that reshape the object into a new form. An irregularly shaped log becomes a plank, a rough block of stone turns into a statue (2014: 124). According to Lobetti, if malleation is central to asceticism, athletes and other sportsmen might be included among ascetics. The quantity and quality of effort that is needed to reshape the self, to awaken new energies in the body, make a practice into an ascetic one. The pain that may ensue from a transformative practice is valuable in its contribution to the alteration of the self (2014: 9-11, 118). According to this view, pain is not

⁸⁵ Equally, in some branches of the Jewish esoteric teaching of Kabbalah, a body has to be malleated through painful effort, in order to serve as a vessel for receiving god's radiance. In the years 1995-1996 I studied Kabbalah with the followers of Rabbi Baruch Shalom HaLevi Ashlag (1907-1991) in Israel. For instance the painful effort of waking in the middle of the night to study the texts was considered vital for the practice.

an indispensable element of asceticism, yet it is constructive for self-transformation. If more pain heightens the effect, then it could be said that the degree of pain strengthens the ascetic character of the practice. Pain that is conducive to self-transformation is a basic character of the GiCheon practice. We can thus pose the question of whether, and to what extent, can the GiCheon practice be called ascetic.

6.4 Body as text

The painful striving toward self-transformation in the *naegasinjang* position follows the motto of GiCheon “Do not cling to words and letters, just practice with your body” [말과 글에 집착하지 말고 몸으로만 수행해라]. This is an attempt to shift the emphasis from written or verbal articulation, which is considered useless, toward the bodily practice, which is believed to be efficacious for self-transformation. This antipathy toward symbols relates only to letters written on paper. “We write letters with our bodies” say GiCheon teachers. GiCheon stances themselves are compared to letters. As to the meanings conveyed in these “letters”, there is a general unwillingness in the GiCheon community to put them into words. The official statement is that “these meanings are conveyed through the body only and read through the body only”. When asked to introduce GiCheon verbally, the teachers usually reply “you cannot understand it until you try it yourself”. This is slightly contradictory to the fact that GiCheon students and teachers have produced a number of books, as well as orally transmitting a body of knowledge. But then, these books and explanations are intended for those who already practice GiCheon. The major resistance of GiCheon representatives to the written word is directed at those yet unfamiliar with the bodily practice.

In GiCheon thought, the idea that the postures themselves are letters for writing and reading through the body has an additional aspect. Observing a student performing the *naegasinjang* position is supposed to give a teacher an understanding of the student's state of mind-heart and body, including knowledge of her or his illness and personal problems. Besides constituting a letter inscribed on the body, this position is believed to be the key for decoding the history inscribed on the body through previous life-experience. Through continuous practice, the teacher is expected to make her or his body acquainted with GiCheon texts. This gives her or him ability to read the bodies of others.

6.5 Pain is akin to death

Writing letters on the body, carving the body into the shape of *naegasinjang*, is hard and painful. As quoted in Chapter Four, Kim Yŏnghŭi says *it is so hard as if I am dying*. *Naegasinjang* is so painful that it is often compared by the practitioners to death itself. When I personally stood in this position for two hours, it was so terrible that indeed I was reminded of death. The dissolution of the world and of the categories of time and space, as experienced by chronic patients in pain (Good 1992: 41), are familiar to GiCheon practitioners. Control over the pain has to be maintained, which implies the ability to hold the position and fight the desire to release it before it is time. Sometimes one minute in *naegasinjang* feels like one hour, at other instants time passes by very fast. And after releasing the position the world looks different, as if the categories of space and time have shifted.

When alone, I found myself almost incapable of performing *naegasinjang* for long periods of time without setting an alarm – a method later taken up also by other practitioners. Once I had decided not to give up until the alarm rings, a secondary dilemma was “whether to look at the watch to see how much time is still left”. Similarly to what chronic pain patients

report (Good 1992: 41), in *naegasinjang* time feels as melting, disintegrating, breaking down. I felt that looking at the watch interrupts this special flow of time, returning me to the usual time.

Naegasinjang is compared to death, but also to overcoming death. The *yökkŭn* principle of GiCheon with its seemingly unnatural twisting of the joints is viewed in GiCheon as “reversing the flow of life”. “Life is a progress toward death” say GiCheon instructors. “The application of the *yökkŭn* principle is painful. This is the price we have to pay for going against nature – against death. *Yökkŭn* makes us head towards life instead, towards youth, not towards old age”.

In his discussion on asceticism, Lobetti notes that asceticism aims at putting the practitioner in a condition proximate to death, while still preserving a degree of self-control. An ascetic practice is an experience of death-in-life. By gaining power over death (2014: 126), the flow of life is reversed (Lobetti 2014: 126, Flood 2004: 15). Lobetti connects this structured and defined process of the reversal of the bodily flow with the ontological progression of the body of the practitioner toward a purer and holier state, which, as a consequence, produces power and benefits (Lobetti 2014: 136).

6.6 Benefits of pain

In an extract of his narrative quoted in section 6.2 above, Chŏn Sŏngho lists the advantages pain brings: it *confirms your identity, makes you confident in facing the world, considerate towards others [...], develops endurance and the sense of sacrifice*. The idea that pain brings benefits is generally recognized within GiCheon circles. In the accounts of Pak Kyŏngae and Kim Yŏnghŭi below, their comments on the pain of *naegasinjang* continue the articulation of

experiential modalities central to their accounts, and the benefits stemming from these modalities. Let us look at some extracts from the account of Ms. Pak.⁸⁶

[...]. Unfortunately, even very weak pain I feel strongly. [...] In the perspective of a longer period of time, I gradually learned to endure (kamnaehada 감내하다) the pain in the arms and in the shoulders [...]. People say that every person feels pain differently. Another person, for example, feels it only a little bit, but my body feels it much. The degree of the sensitivity is different.

Pak Kyöngae sees herself as particularly sensitive to pain. This short extract from her interview follows the experiential modality of bearing the burden of life with fortitude, as elaborated in Chapters Four and Five. *Gradually I learned to endure the pain.* The benefits that Ms. Pak obtained through pain are greater perseverance and forbearance.

[...] It is hard, but after finishing, your body is very light. Also, wönjangnim told us to accept pain. He said it is a healing process. And actually [...] if we balance the pro and cons, we believe it is beneficial. [...] It is painful at that moment, but later we feel good. [...]. The pain is there in order to benefit us, to bring recovery.

Ms. Pak accepts the authority of the teacher and the idea that pain is healing. In the last sentence of the interview extract quoted above she explicitly stresses the beneficial aspect of pain. She also remarks on the good feeling that comes after completing *naegasinjang*. Finishing *naegasinjang* stops the pain. This is a very special moment. Many GiCheon practitioners report feeling calm relaxed and refreshed after releasing this position. Myself I have a clear, light and peaceful feeling. It is also a sensation of stability, grounding and balance, as if everything falls into place. In this state, useless thoughts or worries do not

⁸⁶ Interview of 17.01.2011, Seoul, South Korea.

bother me, and I can easily fall asleep if tired. If I have to work at that moment, I can focus easily and work efficiently. When I look at myself in the mirror after *naegasinjang*, I notice that my facial expression is calmer and my eyes shine. A similar state of peace, composure and balance comes at times also during *naegasinjang*. Kim Chŏnghyŏn, quoted below in section 6.8, alludes to it as a *feeling of immersion*.

And these are a few extracts from the interview with Kim Yŏnghŭi: *Feeling the pain ... not the pain brought by injury ... [it is caused by using] the parts of the body we usually do not use. Feeling stitches of pain (kyŏllinŭn 결리는) ... throbbing (ssusinŭn 쑤시는) ... as if being pricked by a needle ... the knees also – because we bend the knees all the time, they are aching, we have to stretch the back, so it hurts, we have to hold the arms [above the shoulders level], it is painful because it is hard.*

Like Ms. Pak, Ms. Kim felt the pain strongly. She explains the pain through bodily strain: the back hurts because it is stretched, the knees ache because they are bent, and the throbbing in the arms comes from the fact that they are held above shoulder level.

[...] *At that moment I perceive it as something negative, but after completing the position it is a refreshing feeling. Adults call it “the feeling of awakening (kkaeunŭn köt 깨우는 것)”. Because [I did] such a hard thing for a long time [...] other difficult things do not seem difficult to me. There isn’t anything harder for the body than GiCheon, [...] physically. If I do anything else, it won’t be as hard as GiCheon.*⁸⁷

Ms. Pak calls the feeling which comes after completing *naegasinjang* good, Ms. Kim calls it refreshing. This extract from Ms. Kim’s interview accords with her experiential modality of self-discovery and growing self-confidence. She feels certain that she can

⁸⁷ Interview of 15.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

achieve any endeavor she wishes in life. *Because [I did] such a hard thing for a long time [...]* other difficult things do not seem difficult to me. The claim of Ms. Kim that after completing something as hard as *naegasinjang* she is not afraid of future life trials is seconded by many other GiCheon practitioners. Though Kim Yŏnghŭi does not phrase it as such, it is clear from her account that for her, self-confidence is one of the benefits acquired through practice.

Lobetti categorizes two different kinds of power or benefits produced during ascetic practice: benefits for oneself and benefits for others (2014: 87). However, as elaborated in the Introduction, in my theoretical framework of multiple selves flowing into each other, the distinction between self and others is not absolute, but relative. If my individual body is myself, then the other is another person. If my family is myself, then the others are other families. In this conceptualization, the effects of the GiCheon practice begin with the inner layers of the self and expand toward outer layers, generally following the first vector of progression. For example, the ability of withstanding cold temperatures and an attribute of greater warmth in the body can be acquired through the practice, and on an emotional level this can translate into a milder, warmer attitude toward other people, which can bring about warmer and more harmonious relationships in the family. Warmness is one example of such benefits or results of the practice; it was explored in greater detail in the previous chapter on personally colored experiential modalities. The experiential modality of warmth relates both to oneself and to other people.

Yet, as reviewed in the previous chapter, experiential modalities are not always positive. I have examined the experiential modalities of Kim Pohŭi and Kim Wŏn'gyu, and identified the former's to be hardship and boredom, while the latter's is lack and disappointment. In the case of these two practitioners, their slightly negative experiential modalities do not match the benefits they acquired through the practice. In the case of

practitioners with more positive experiential modalities, the major benefits acquired in GiCheon often constitute the experiential modality itself, and cannot be separated from it.

6.7 Greater pain brings higher efficiency

As discussed above, in GiCheon, the pain comes with the application of *yökkŭn*, the maximal twisting of the joints. The degree of the bending can be modified, thus increasing or decreasing the amount of pain. When a certain level of *yökkŭn* is mastered, the student has to proceed to the next. *Yökkŭn* is bending the joints to a *maximal* degree, and this maximum is different for each person. As the joints acquire greater flexibility, the degree of the bending has to be increased. The practitioner is required to strive for the maximal bending continuously. If she or he does not do so, *yökkŭn* is not achieved.

During the session, the students are instructed “to put themselves into as much pain as possible”- that is to maximize the *yökkŭn* bending of the waist, knees and wrists. In practice, students follow these instructions sporadically, at times increasing but sometimes decreasing the degree of the bending of the joints, and thus the amount of pain that is felt fluctuates. After standing in the *naegasinjang* position for a few minutes, the joints start to unbend involuntarily. Therefore, maintaining a constant degree of *yökkŭn* demands focus and effort. Such focus and effort strengthen or weaken progressively, contributing to an increase or decrease of pain. This way the *naegasinjang* position turns into a little war with oneself, where one strives to perfect the position by optimizing *yökkŭn* on one hand, but at times gives in to the pain and unbends the joints, diminishing the degree of *yökkŭn* on the other hand.

Lobetti connects asceticism to the willing production of some degree of pain and physical exhaustion. When a certain practice starts becoming too easy because of the practitioner’s experience and increased prowess, the practitioner has to wisely re-adjust the

practice to make it harder, thus retaining its effectiveness. Ascetic pain is not aimed at destruction, but it is a wise pain through which the ascetic malleates her or his body. Besides, the body is employed for the interpretation of the various sensations that arise through pain (2014: 117-118). The GiCheon definition of *yŏkkŭn* reverberates with the notion of avoidance of a practice that is too easy, as mentioned by Lobetti. The goal here is the perpetual striving for efficiency. The level of the difficulty of the practice is directly proportional to the level of pain and effort that the practice requires, and the benefits or powers obtained (2014: 126).

Lobetti argues that in an ascetic tradition the body demonstrates the possibility of being ontologically improved: it is a perfectable entity that can ascend toward something purer and holier (2014: 119). His comment on perfectability is consistent with my view of GiCheon and similar practices as representing technologies of self, aimed at transforming the self to achieve a different state. In GiCheon, this perfected state indeed involves benefits or abilities proportional to the effort invested. Interestingly, not only the greater bending of the joints in *naegasinjang* brings more sustainable gains and advantages to the practitioner. Similarly, the amount of money paid to the teacher is thought to contribute directly to the degree of benefits gained. Perhaps that is why a famous Korean Buddhist monk gave an expensive car to Lee Sangwŏn *sabunim* as payment for three days of GiCheon training. GiCheon teachers often tell this story to the students (probably attempting to prompt them to support the GiCheon organization financially). This perspective is based on the understanding that any investment, personal or economical, counts towards the outcome. Both investing in yourself during practice, and investing economically into your teachers and into the GiCheon organization are supposed to bring benefits. Personal effort and donating money are different forms of contribution, but both of them are viewed as increasing the chance for the practitioner to obtain the desired results from the practice.

6.8 Pain as restoring *ki* flow and as healing

This is how Mr. Ha, a doctor of Korean traditional medicine, talks about his pain experience.⁸⁸

It seems to me that pain comes when the channels are blocked. In Korean traditional medicine [...] when it hurts, it means that the [ki] does not pass, does not flow [...]. The [ki] tries to pass, it creates the strain and the heat comes. [...] I have to send the kiun (기운 strength) to the tips of the toes through the shoulders [...], concentrating [the strength] here, but here it cannot pass, so it hurts.

Mr. Ha describes pain as something that occurs when the *ki* channels are blocked. GiCheon thought metaphorically compares this process to an old, unused hose tube, the walls of which stick together in some sections. Water is being pumped into the tube. First it is partially filled, then the tension increases and the hose starts shaking. The dried parts are soaked through, the consolidated mud starts to dissolve and finally the water begins to pass. In this metaphor the water is *ki* and the dried out hose tube is the body of the adept. GiCheon positions induce the pumping of water (*ki*) into the tube (the body). The whole process is marked by painful pressure and strain. In this metaphor, the pumping of *ki* into the body is likened to the *naegasinjang* position. Another metaphor is a bottle which is suddenly shaken. When the bottle vibrates, the liquid and its components inside the bottle are stirred. The dregs come up from the bottom, the layers of the liquid shift. Here the bottle is an analogy for the body, and the liquid a symbol of *ki*.

Performing the *naegasinjang* position is usually perceived as going through a number of phases – it is an absence of these phases that caused Kim Wŏn'gyu from Chapter Five to

⁸⁸ Interview of 07.10.2010, Bundang, South Korea.

complain, characterizing his own experience as monotonous. One of the phases is that of anger, annoyance and impatience, as we have seen in the extract of Ms. Sin's interview in Chapter Five. Pain is very strong during this phase, the arms and legs shake sometimes. When I experience this phase, I feel how sweat is appearing on my skin. It is to this stage of the *naegasinjang* experience that Mr. Ha relates in his comment on pain and *ki* flow:

When I just started GiCheon practice, the body part that hurt the most was my left shoulder. [...] I was injured there in the past. [...] I felt as if my shoulder was falling off, it was so painful, I felt an urge to put my arms down, but I endured the pain [...] and the pain went away [...] and my shoulder got a lot better. [...] And then the pain transferred to another place, [...] to my knee. The knee hurt a lot, [...] and after getting through, the pain shifted to the back. [...] When I practice GiCheon now, my back hurts the most, my back is not healed yet. [...]

This part of the account of Mr. Ha conforms to GiCheon theory which considers pain to be part of a healing process. According to this view, the healing of a particular body part is perceived as pain. The healing is conceived as moving into a certain direction which is different for each practitioner and also differs for the same practitioner on different occasions, depending on the mood, the body condition, the weather of that day etc. However, the practitioners who subscribe to this theory notice a particular system in the pain/healing process that they pass through. They observe in their body a particular phenomenon for some period of time, which is often, but not always, perceived as pain. Later this feeling diminishes or disappears. Practitioners often report pain in the body parts that were hurt or unwell before.

I personally perceived performing *naegasinjang* in a low position as accompanied by a strong heartbeat. This continued for a few years of practice, then gradually lessened and receded. The strong heartbeat in *naegasinjang* position still comes back when I am tired or

sick. This might be an example of my acceptance and appropriation of the systematic healing theory as moving from one body part to another, sometimes returning to previous locations for additional treatment. To me it happened involuntarily, as if by itself. I did not direct this flow, I just performed the *naegasinjang* position as usual. However, the usual performance of GiCheon involves application of the *yökkŭn* principle with its maximal twisting of the joints. Exercised continuously, the maximal limit of *yökkŭn* shifts. The execution of *yökkŭn* changes, the *naegasinjang* position alters, and the pain experience is modified. This progressive transformation is likely to be imperceptible on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis, but when considered on a yearly basis it becomes noticeable and recordable. Mr. Ha describes this progressive healing metaphorically:

Long ago [Lee Sangwŏn] sabunim told us to practice as if we go up the mountain [...], in the mountains you see each time a new peak, it means there is no end to GiCheon practice [...]. So I think [the pain] will emerge again. [...] The weak body parts are continuously revealed [...]. The problem [I have now] is my back. [Ki] does not circulate in my back, it seems. [...] After the circulation in my back is restored, [the ailments] will be revealed in other points [in the body]. Maybe the wrists or the neck [...].⁸⁹

As reviewed in the following chapter, the mountain metaphor is frequently brought up in the interviews. In the extract above Mr. Ha compares healing to ascending a mountain. Seeing new peaks is like discovering new points in the body which need therapy. I further elaborate on this motif in Chapter Seven. Similarly to Ha Tongju, Kim Chŏnghyŏn (not a real name), a businessman in his early forties, also stresses the healing aspect of pain.⁹⁰ If Mr. Ha compared the pain experience to mountain climbing, Mr. Kim compares pain to

⁸⁹ This does not really mean that ailment moves through the body, but that existing ailments successively become evident.

⁹⁰ Interview of 08.10.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

shouldering a burden. Both activities of ascending a mounting and shouldering a burden connote the motifs of endurance and persistence.

In the beginning I accepted pain as pain. But after some time passed, I started perceiving this pain as my burden that I have to shoulder.⁹¹ [...] Something that I need in order to practice GiCheon. [...] From birth, the human body progresses toward death, the functioning continuously declines, gets worse. [...] In order to return to a normal [state of functioning] this pain is needed. [...] If we just lie in a comfortable position, this [restoration] won't happen. [...] To normalize the declining physical functioning of the human body [...] [pain] is needed. The functioning is declining, so naturally pain is generated [...]. Shoulders, or neck, or back, or knees try to mend, so the pain comes.

Mr. Kim emphasizes the necessity of a drastic alteration in the usual mode of being in order to achieve transformation. *In order to return to a normal [state of functioning] this pain is needed. [...] If we just lie in a comfortable position, this [restoration] won't happen.* This attitude differs from the opinion of Chŏn Sŏngho above. Chŏn Sŏngho was inclined to divide all people into two categories. The first category is the *people who enjoy pain, are happy with it*. To the second group belong those *who are not like that*. His comment connoted a view that these two groups of people are inherently different. In contrary fashion, the account of Mr. Kim stresses the difference between two states of being, rather than between two kinds of people. The first state of being is the *declining physical functioning of the human body*. It is associated with *lying in a comfortable position*, letting things be as they are. The second state is the normal state of functioning of the human body. This can be restored only by a drastic alteration.

⁹¹ Mr. Kim uses the word *mok* (몫 share, portion), which I decided to translate as “burden”.

In GiCheon, this drastic alteration is accompanied by pain but also is a step toward immortality. *From birth, the human body progresses toward death, the functioning continuously declines, gets worse.* The usual, the normal and the comfortable is the way of nature, the way toward death. As mentioned earlier, *yŏkkŭn* twisting of the joints is painful and in a way unnatural. It is believed to constitute a drastic alteration of the normal, reversing the flow of life, turning this flow back, away from death.⁹²

In this and in Mr. Ha's narrative pain is theorized to be an inevitable aspect of the practice, which brings restoration of the correct functioning of the body. Another point is that the pain is always there, but that the way in which it is perceived alters. *In the beginning I accepted pain as pain. But after some time passed, I started perceiving this pain as my burden that I have to shoulder.*

Similarly to the experience of Kim Chŏnghyŏn, what I perceived as pain in the beginning was not painful for me a few years later. I definitely recognize and remember a particular feeling in the body, and can testify that it was painful, but is not so anymore (or is still painful, but much less). The pain in GiCheon is severe in the beginning, but becomes moderate and bearable as you go on.

[...] In the state of complete immersion, the mind-heart does not feel the pain, and there is no pain. [...] In a state of immersion, there are no thoughts and there is no pain. I have experienced this a few times. [...] The pain of GiCheon training and ordinary pain are 100% different. [...] This pain comes by in order to enable GiCheon practice, to bring relaxation, [while] ordinary pain is harmful, injuring [...].

⁹² Many practitioners accept the belief in GiCheon that becoming an immortal (*sinsŏn* 神仙) who live for a few hundreds of years is possible upon leaving society, entering the mountains and practicing *naegasinjang* for about ten hours per day, as the first GiCheon teacher Taeyang Chinin did in his legendary childhood. For themselves, though, GiCheon trainees attempt to take just a few steps toward immortality, which is to significantly improve the state of their mind-hearts and bodies. I discuss the legends and notions of *sinsŏn* in Chapter Seven.

Mr. Kim describes a *state of complete immersion with no thoughts and no pain*. This is another phase of *naegasinjang*, that of peace, tranquility and comfort, when the pain is almost not there. In my experience it involves a light and clear feeling, and also a sense of moral correctness. This state is similar to the feeling after concluding *naegasinjang*, though it comes sometimes during performing this position. I would compare it to the feeling of settling down, similar to the weather calming down after the storm has passed.

Like Mr. Chŏn above, Mr. Kim also compares the pain in *naegasinjang* with other kinds of pain. Mr. Chŏn distinguishes two types of pain, joy and torture. Mr. Kim talks about the pain that comes *in order to enable GiCheon practice, to bring relaxation*, as opposed to ordinary pain which is harmful, injuring. In his account, GiCheon pain comes to heal, while ordinary pain comes to abuse. However he does not stipulate what this ordinary pain is, whether it is pain inflicted by others, pain resulting from ill health, or both.

6.9 Pain in the narration of Ms. Sin

Let us look at a few extracts from the account of Ms. Sin.⁹³ A substantial part of her interview was discussed in detail in Chapter Five, but in this chapter I will address a few extracts where she talks about pain: [...] *From the start I felt pain in my shoulders, near my neck... Then in my back, knees, ankles, joints. [...] [When I did naegasinjang] I felt pain in my back, and also pain in the knees. The upper spine also hurt. My arms also hurt. Sometimes all the parts hurt simultaneously. Sometimes I felt intense pain concentrated in one part of the body. When one body part hurts severely, the pain in the other parts is not felt strongly. Because that body part hurts so much. It seems that I felt these pains for a long period of time. Recently I feel less pain.*

⁹³ Interview of 08.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea.

Ms. Sin first describes where and how she felt pain. The pain of Ms. Sin does not have a specific location, it travels in the body from one part to another, sometimes relating to several, or all body parts, and the degree of pain varies as well. The location, degree and character of the pain fluctuate. Many practitioners feel that the pain gradually shifts from one location to another, as Ms. Sin, Mr. Ha and Mr. Kim narrate in the extracts of their interviews quoted above. Often the adepts talk about waves of pain rising and falling. In the case of Ms. Sin, the pain moved from her shoulders and neck towards her back, knees and ankles. Mr. Ha describes a progressive pain with a similar direction. As mentioned earlier, in GiCheon this fluctuation of pain is conceptualized as a healing process. However with time, the pain recedes. *Recently I feel less pain.*

Ms. Sin also offers an explanation for why the feeling of pain modifies. *When one body part hurts severely, the pain in the other parts is not felt strongly. Because that body part hurts so much.* She considers bodily sensations in their complexity, perceived in relation to each other. This view agrees with the opinion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He sees a particular bodily sensation as relative, measured and perceived against a background of other bodily sensations (1945: 93-95).

Other practitioners, for example Kim Yŏnghŭi, Kim Chŏnghyŏn and Ha Tongju above, also mention knees, back, wrists shoulders and neck when talking about pain. Most GiCheon students feel the pain in these locations of their body, rather than in others. That is not surprising, as the *naegasinjang* position puts the joints under strain. We can question GiCheon theory here, contesting why the pain is felt in the joints. If, according to GiCheon theory, the pain is identical with healing coming to an ailing body part, why doesn't pain come to the stomach, eyes or ears? Many people have problems there, rather than in the knees, wrists, shoulders or neck. The answer to this question again lies with GiCheon theory, from its understanding of the body as a conduit for a *ki* flow structured around the backbone and

the joints. It is believed, that any disorder or affliction starts or manifests through the body balance. *Naegasinjang* is aimed at correcting the general posture and the way the body lives, functions and moves in space. This is achieved through straightening the backbone and balancing the left and the right halves of the body. As the backbone and the joints, including knees, waist, shoulders, elbows and wrists are key points in this vision of the body, they manifest in the process of correcting the body by being stimulated. In GiCheon theory, this stimulation reveals itself as pain. This pain is hard to bear, but GiCheon students presume that there are compensations.

The testimony of Ms. Sin: *Now almost one year has passed. In my back I feel light pain, but it is rare. [...] I did not think about it [pain] much. My body, the muscles, hurt ... After releasing the position, I had a feeling of being refreshed. [...] I bear pain well, it is in my personality. Pain is not very hard for me. [...]*

Ms. Sin relates her attitude toward pain: *I bear pain well, it is in my personality. Pain is not very hard for me.* Acceptance of the pain or the lack of it, the degree and character of this acceptance or rejection, are another key issue in the discourse on pain in GiCheon. Most practitioners accept the pain. Within the GiCheon community, however, “funny” stories circulate about newcomers who dropped out of GiCheon practice after a few seconds of *naegasinjang*, leaving the studio with angry expressions on their faces. In group dynamics, I observed that the decisive factor is the presence of co-practitioners. Some students of mine barely accepted a few seconds of *naegasinjang* when practicing alone, but changed drastically when surrounded by co-practitioners. Together with others, they maintained the position for two or three minutes without apparent problems.

But while doing [naegasinjang], I felt refreshed, and also after releasing the position. On the contrary, when I did not do GiCheon, I felt empty, I felt that I had to do [GiCheon

exercises]. Should I say I felt sad [that I did not do GiCheon exercises]? Like a feeling of omission. I really had to do it, but it slipped away. So I did GiCheon every day for one year, almost without break, except weekends [...].

Ms. Sin talks about a refreshing feeling during and after performing a position. As mentioned above in the text of this chapter, the special feeling of calmness and satisfaction usually comes after completing *naegasinjang*. Yet, a very similar feeling comes at times also during performance of the position. Ms. Sin and other adepts gradually got used to it and after some time they started needing it. As time passes, the GiCheon bodily sensations become addictive.

For myself, after ten years of practice I also started feeling a need for GiCheon on a regular basis. Without it, I sometimes cannot fall asleep or sense unrest in my back. My body has modified as a result of the practice and I often feel an insistent need to exercise my joints. Particularly I feel this on the days I have practiced GiCheon, as if my body becomes more alive on those days.

When I am standing in naegasinjang position, it is very hard. First of all, when wŏnjangnim [the instructor] tells us [to do it], I was thinking: "I should not give up, I should do it till the end. It is hard, but I should endure a bit more". So I did it. Sometimes I did not want to do it. I wanted to stop in the middle, but I did not, it seems that my inclination to endure was stronger.

Ms. Sin discusses her inner dilemma on whether to keep the position or to release it. Though outwardly peaceful, the acceptance of pain masks dramatic inner conflicts, confusions and contradictions. Ms. Sin puts it mildly: *when wŏnjangnim tells us [...], sometimes I did not want to do it.* In *naegasinjang*, the relationship with the teacher and the feelings towards them can intensify. The position is assumed and maintained voluntarily, but

in a way the student lends her or his free will to the teacher for a while. The teacher decides the moment of releasing the position. Before that instant, the student often hates the teacher. The teacher becomes a torturer, the one who is responsible for my pain, as it is in her/his power to stop it, but she/he does not. I often heard instructor Lee Kit'ae say to his students "Don't hate me, I am helping you to get healthy". Speaking for myself, I feel unhappy and disappointed as an instructor when I see this expression of hatred on my students' faces. I feel it is unfair, as I invest so much and exert myself in teaching.

Though occasionally hated, a GiCheon teacher is usually trusted by the students. I recollect that during the first year of practice the pain in *naegasinjang* was so intense that I could not remember why I had to do it. While performing the position, I no longer knew what my reason was for doing it. I only remembered that there was some reason, but not the reason itself. At those moments I trusted myself – that self which has previously decided to perform *naegasinjang*. And of course I trusted the teacher.

6.10 Conclusion: is GiCheon an ascetic experience?

In conclusion, the question of pain in GiCheon, its character, or its acceptance, is controversial among different practitioners and complex. The extracts from the interviews discussed in this chapter demonstrate a variety in the sensitivity to pain, as well as different ways of appropriating GiCheon philosophy. Yet, there are common points in the discourse of the adherents. As elaborated earlier in section 6.2 of this chapter, many trainees comment on the feeling of satisfaction that comes after completing *naegasinjang*. But also pain can bring bodily satisfaction while maintaining the position, and then both are experienced simultaneously, as stated by Mr. Kim and Ms. Sin in sections 6.8 and 6.9 respectively. Besides pain, people usually feel heat in the *naegasinjang* position, as Ms. Ha remarks in

section 6.8 and as I have explained in the section 6.2. The body becomes hot. I turn off the heater and open the window while practicing.

As I have noted in section 6.8, pain in the *naegasinjang* position varies according to the circumstances. These circumstances may include the weather and the season, the physical condition and emotional state of that day, the social setting – the absence or presence and the number and type of co-practitioners. While holding the position, the waves of pain rise and fall, and the pain shifts within the body, a process described by Mr. Ha and by Ms. Sin. Besides these various spectrums of pain, another pain continuum is defined by the choice of the practitioner at any given moment. She or he can always increase or decrease the tension by strengthening or relaxing the degree of the bending of the joints, *yŏkkŭn*, as I have mentioned in section 6.7.

When adepts articulate their GiCheon experiences, the central theme is usually the pain of the *nagaesinjang* position. Many accounts accord with Lobetti's description that the pain voluntarily inflicted upon oneself is the key moment in ascetic practice, the agent bringing transformation. However, as I have mentioned above, the degree of acceptance or rejection of GiCheon theory in this respect varies in different interviews. For Ms. Sin pain did not constitute a big problem, but Ms. Pak cited in section 6.6 felt the pain very strongly. Ms. Sin does not emphasize the pain, she says *the pain is not very hard for me*. This is rather an exceptional case. The fact that sometimes one part of the body hurt stronger than other parts, Ms. Sin ascribes not to the healing process but to relativity: *when one body part hurt severely, the pain in the other parts is not felt strongly. Because that body part hurts so much*. Her explanation does not match the official GiCheon theory.

Another discrepancy between the practitioners' theories of pain and the way in which pain is categorized in GiCheon thought is the interview of Mr. Chŏn from section 6.2 of this

chapter. Official theory stresses the very particular bodily attributes of pain. It is the pain of *yökkŭn*, the twisting of the joints in a very particular way, and not any other pain, which is emphasized. It is this pain which is dwelled on, considered as healing, and glorified in GiCheon thought. Mr. Chŏn, however, equates his pain with the pain of martyrs, by defining it as self-invited. For him, that aspect of pain is central, not necessarily the *yökkŭn* pain. He can accept the pain of *naegasinjang* because it is self-inflicted. Because the pain is self-invited and thus accepted, pain can be not painful, but joyful.

GiCheon shares the self-inflicted character of pain with other ascetic practices. For Lobetti, pain is the specific marker of an ascetic experience. He talks not about the destructive power of the pain, but about its power to transform the practitioner and to awaken in her or him unknown energies. Lobetti thinks that the purpose of the ascetic is to grasp and control the power of pain and utilize it as a tool for her or his own benefit, or for the benefit of other people (Lobetti 2014: 11, 87). It is this creative, transformative and constructive experience of pain that Kim Wŏn'gyu was missing, when he described his pain as monotonous in Chapter Five. While absent in his own perception, he learned about its presence in the perception of other practitioners from conversations with them. The present chapter shows that examples of benefits acquired through pain in GiCheon include satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment for Chŏn Sŏnggho in section 6.2, developing fortitude for Pak Kyŏnggae and self-confidence for Kim Yŏnghŭi in section 6.6. The benefits for Ms. Sin from GiCheon practice have already been discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

If, as Lobetti argues, ascetic practice is characterized by pain that is willingly inflicted on the self for a particular purpose, then the cultural difference between ascetic and non-ascetic practices lies in the attitude toward pain. Non-ascetics usually avoid pain while ascetics seek it. According to Lobetti, willing acceptance of pain is one characteristic of

asceticism. In this way for Mr. Chŏn the willingly accepted self-inflicted pain of GiCheon is essential.

Another characteristic highlighted by Lobetti is the malleation of the body. As I have emphasized in this present chapter, according to GiCheon philosophy, the painful *naegasinjang* position malleates the mind-heart and the body, affecting her or his person, habits and life. GiCheon is a process of crafting the self, the self is malleated, just like a wooden block that turns into a plank, or as a stone that becomes a statue (Lobetti 2014: 124). In this chapter we have reviewed how different adepts describe malleation, the transformation of the body in pain. Mr. Ha sees it as a *ki* flow that heals the body, thus transforming it to a different state. Kim Chŏnghyŏn supports the healing interpretation by dwelling on the *naegasinjang* pain that restores the normal functioning of the body, as discussed in section 6.8.

As argued in section 6.4, GiCheon thought also accords with viewing the body as text and simultaneously as a recording medium, which is also common to ascetic practices (Lobetti 2014: 5-6). The painful GiCheon practice constitutes the price that people pay for going against the flow of life, a notion developed in section 6.5 of this chapter. This idea is shared by ascetics (Lobetti 2014: 126, Flood 2004: 15).

Lobetti's findings are useful for the analysis of ascetic experiences also outside of Japan, just as he intended them to be. He tries to identify common themes in Japanese asceticism that can lead to a better definition of asceticism so that it can also be applicable to other contexts (2014: 2). As I have shown in this chapter, many of Lobetti's conclusions regarding pain and asceticism are valid in the case of the GiCheon practice. So in relation to the question raised in section 6.3 of this chapter, I suggest that GiCheon and similar Korean practices could be classified as ascetic.

As noted in the Introduction and Chapter Two, GiCheon and other *ki suryŏn* practices are contemporary avatars of age-old East Asian techniques of nourishing life and internal alchemy. GiCheon practice is directed toward self-transformation. As I will elaborate in the following chapter, in GiCheon theory the goal of this transformation is defined as immortality. The Chinese character *sŏn* (仙 immortality) is a combination of a character *in* (人 a human being) with the character *san* (山 mountain). In East Asia, immortality denotes the immortality of mountain dwellers, related directly to *sŏndo* (仙道 the way of immortals) and *sŏnpŏp* (仙法 techniques of immortality). Accordingly, in the extract of the interview with Mr. Ch'oe quoted in Chapter Seven, he connects the yearning that makes him perform the GiCheon practice today with childhood fairy tales about *sinsŏn* (神仙 divine immortals) stepping on clouds and flying.

As evidenced in the interviews with the adepts and the orally transmitted and codified legends reviewed in Chapter Seven, the ideas of *sŏndo* and *sŏnpŏp* are resuscitated in the constructed tradition of GiCheon, thus constituting a part of contemporary Korean mountain culture and mythology. A perfect body, the ideal of self-transformation in GiCheon theory, is the body of a mountain immortal. In the opinion of Lobetti, ascetic practices aim at progressing from a human body towards an ideal body. The presence of the ideal perfect body contributes to this progression by defining its final theoretical goal (Lobetti 2014: 136).

The Korean peninsula is highly mountainous. Hence mountains are real spaces in the midst of which people live. As reviewed in Chapter Seven, GiCheon adepts often allude to mountains when talking about self-perfection. In their discourse, ascending a mountain is metaphorically compared to self-transformation, and reaching the peak of a mountain is

likened to an achievement of an important goal on this path. In the following chapter I will illuminate different aspect of this metaphor, examining mountains as a key site of GiCheon practice in myth and reality, the topography in which the perfect body is formed and enacted through the living experience of GiCheon trainees.