

Through studies, it has been found that humans are naturally drawn to stimulating experiences due to the dopamine reward system. Just like hamburgers at McDonald's, people love fast food because of its intense and addictive taste. Mundane experiences seem to fall short of satisfying our excitement. However, do people really eat this kind of food every day, at every meal? I doubt it. Ironically, people tend to return to more ordinary, familiar foods. Likewise, we overlook the quiet, stable beauty around us. Much like our brains chase stimulation, we come to long for quiet, enduring beauty just as people often return to ordinary, familiar things. That is a truth I came to realize over summer break.

On the first day of my summer break, I went on a 4-day trip to Gyeongju. While I visited many historical landmarks, my attention naturally gravitated toward the Buddhist heritage sites, as my family practices Buddhism. One destination that's considered a must-visit in Gyeongju is Bulguksa Temple, and it was within its grounds that I encountered Dabotap.

To be honest, I have to admit something: compared to something like the Eiffel Tower, with its fascinating presence and worldwide fame, Dabotap felt modest, almost forgettable as it seemed to lack the "wow" factor. The Eiffel Tower draws millions of visitors every year; people travel across the ocean to admire it. But Dabotap? I never heard of anyone booking a trip to Korea just to see it. I, too, was caught in that bias, and couldn't enchant the quieter elegance of Dabotap. It doesn't sparkle. It's not massive. It felt... underwhelming.

But something shifted during this trip. I had the unexpected opportunity to speak with a scholar specializing in Silla heritage. I confessed my underestimation of Dabotap, and he patiently responded, not with judgment, but by sharing the story behind the structure, unfolding layers of meaning I had never considered before. "It's okay to feel that way. Dabotap isn't made to impress at first glance—it's meant to last. Unlike structures that shine and fade, this one teaches you something only if you choose to look closely." That single comment has stayed with me ever since.

So, why is Dabotap important? Across the world, Buddhist pagodas, essentially symbolic tombs of the Buddha, have been built with materials most common in each region, reflecting local geography and tradition: brick in China, wood in Japan. On the other hand, Korea is known for its stone pagodas. But Dabotap isn't just an ordinary stone pagoda. What sets it apart is its remarkable ability to mimic the complexity of wooden structures, all while being carved entirely from granite, a notoriously difficult material to sculpt. It's an architectural paradox: innovative reinterpretation of delicate complexity rendered in immovable stone. The craftsmanship is so refined that even today, such precision would be difficult to achieve with modern tools.

Beyond its structural brilliance, Dabotap isn't just a structure—it's a visual expression of Buddhist philosophy. Whereas most teachings are demonstrated through scripture or image, Dabotap represents them silently, through its form and proportion. It is a stone translation of the Lotus Sutra, one of the most important texts in Mahayana Buddhism. Beyond its distinctive blend of aesthetics and philosophy, Dabotap was a symbol of an Silla in which Buddhism had a profound influence not only on private faith, but also on national identity and cultural art. Even after nearly eighteen centuries have passed, seeing both the literal and spiritual message in stone, rather than in any words, struck not just the eyes, but the soul. It felt more tangible. More grounded.

And why is Dabotap recognized as a global heritage site? Simply put, there's nothing else like it in the world. No country has ever constructed a pagoda with such a singular fusion of spiritual depth, remarkable level of precision, architectural ingenuity, and artistic harmony. It is totally unique. It doesn't scream for attention. It doesn't try to impress with scale or flash, but it invites stillness. Reflection. Presence.

This experience with Dabotap didn't just reshape how I see an ancient monument. It changed how I perceive beauty itself. If you pause and really look, you'll start to see why it's a treasure—quiet, enduring, and profoundly human.