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**Won Buddhism in Korea: A New Religious Movement Comes of Age**

DANIEL J. ADAMS

On August 23, 2009 the government of the Republic of Korea held an official state funeral for former president Kim Dae-Jung. Four religious traditions participated in the funeral rites, the assumption being that these four traditions were representative of the major religious movements in Korea. The four were Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Won Buddhism. Since former president Kim was a Catholic and his wife received a portion of her education at a Methodist college in the United States, it is understandable that these two varieties of the Christian tradition would participate in the funeral rites. It is also understandable that Buddhism, both as the major traditional religion of Korea and as a supporter of many of former president Kim’s reforms, would be participating as well. But Won Buddhism? It is both a relatively new religious movement and its participation in Korean politics has been relatively low key. Historically in the Donghak Movement of the 1860s and in the Independence Movement of 1919 Cheondo-gyo played a far more prominent role, and during the more recent student-led demonstrations for democracy Jeongsan-gyo attracted thousands of adherents. Yet neither of these two religious movements was selected to participate. Clearly, in the eyes of the government and the funeral planning committee, Won Buddhism was both more representative, conformed more closely to the ideals of former president Kim, and perhaps most significant, had clearly come of age and deserved to be recognized.

This was not always so, however. As recently as 1967 in a special issue of the Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society―Korea Branch on [page 2] the new religions of Korea, Won Buddhism was not even mentioned.1 Five new religious movements were studied and it appeared that these would be the most influential in Korean society. The Olive Tree Church of Pak Taesun has all but faded away in the midst of scandal. Jeongsan-gyo has split into at least fifty different sects many of which are in direct competition with one another. Sindonae located at Kyeryongsan west of Daejon is almost unknown today. Cheondo-gyo continues on but has little influence in contemporary society. Tong-il, better known as the Unification Church, has been mired in scandal, involved in controversy over its recruitment methods, accused of heresy by orthodox Christians, and the question remains as to whether the movement will outlive its founder. From a relatively unknown movemen, Won Buddhism has emerged to outlive its founder, remain free from accusations of scandal, avoid spitting into different sects, and while being seen as somewhat unorthodox by traditional Buddhists has never been accused of heresy. Unlike other new religious movements in Korea whose influence has waxed and waned with the times, Won Buddhism has experienced a slow but steady growth and its overall influence in Korean society has grown considerably. Thus in the view of one observer, “Won Buddhism continues to grow and remains one of the most solid national religions of Korea.”2

The Life and Times of Sot’aesan

The late-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was a turbulent time for Korea, and it was during this period that the majority of the new religions in Korea came into being. A detailed analysis of this period and its influence upon Korean religion can be readily found in the available literature and need not be repeated here.3 However, it should be

1 Spencer J. Palmer, ed., The New Religions of Korea: special issue of Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society—Korea Branch, Vol. XLIII (1967).

2 Choi Joon-sik, “New Religions,” Religious Culture in Korea (Seoul: General Religious Affairs Division, Religious Affairs Office, Ministry of Culture and Sports, 1996), P. 116.

3 See Spencer J. Palmer, “Introduction,” The New Religions of Korea: special issue of Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society—Korea Branch, Vol. XLIII (1967), pp. 1-8; Choi Joon-sik, “New Religions,” Religious Culture in Korea, pp. 103-117; and Ro Kil-myung, “A Sociological Understanding of Korean New Religions,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, ed. Kim Sung-hae & James Heisig (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 2008), pp. 117-142.

[page 3] noted that the majority of the initial members of Won Buddhism came from the Cholla Provinces and were impoverished farmers. Their perspective on things was limited by their lack of education, experience with the wider world, and continual poverty. The old Confucian order was clearly in disarray, the Donghak Rebellion had failed and disgruntled Donghak soldiers were roaming the countryside terrorizing the rural population, Chinese armies had entered the country with the Japanese colonial rulers soon to follow, and new ideas from the West―including Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant forms―were challenging the old traditions. In addition Buddhism was in decline after centuries of being marginalized by the dominant Neo-Confucian social and political order Confused by these rapid social changes, these farmers watched helplessly as their world around them crumbled. The political, religious, and social underpinnings of their worldview appeared to be slipping away and they grasped at whatever they could hold on to for support. One should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that among the early adherents of Won Buddhism were former members of the Donghak movement later known as Cheondo-gyo, former members of Jeongsan-gyo, and even former Christians including a prominent elder who had established a church in a nearby village.

Even as the old order crumbled it was obvious that a new order was in the making.4 The introduction of electricity, the railroad, the automobile, education for women, and western medicine were some of the more notable modern innovations with which even rural farmers were familiar. They could see that a new era was dawning, an era for which they were ill prepared. Sot’aesan, the founder of Won Buddhism, was born between these two eras―the passing of the old Neo-Confucian era and the advent of the new modern era.5

4 See Yi Kyu-tae, Modern Transformation of Korea (Seoul: Sejong Publishing Co., 1970).

5 A number of studies focus on Sot’aesan’s role in the modernization of Korea. See Kelvin Barrett, “Won Buddhism: A Modern Way—A Study of Sot’aesan’s Spiritual Response to Modernization,” M.A. thesis, Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University, 1996; Kwangsoo Park, The Won Buddhism (Wonbulgyo) of Sot’saesan: A Twentieth-Century Religious Movement in Korea (San Francisco: International Scholars Press, 1997); and Key Ray Chong, Won Buddhism: A History and Theology of Korea’s New Religion [Studies in Asian Thought and Religion, Vol 22] (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

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Born on May 5, 1891 in Killyong Village, Paeksu Township, Yonggwang County in South Cholla Province, Sot’aesan’s original name was Park Chin-sop.6 He was the third of four sons and one daughter and his father was a farmer. Like many rural boys, he married young at age fourteen. Life was difficult for the family and when Sot’aesan was twenty years of age his father died and he became responsible for the economic support of the family. The eldest brother had been adopted out to another family and the second eldest brother had died as a youth. In this sense his life was not all that different from other farming families in the Cholla provinces. Like most young boys in his village, Sot’aesan was enrolled in a local school where he studied the Chinese classics however he soon dropped out as he found the classes to be of little interest. Unlike other youth Sot’aesan was deeply interested in metaphysical questions and it soon became clear that he had an unusual sensitivity to matters of the spirit. From an early age he embarked on what was to become a life-long spiritual journey.7

Sot’aesan’s spiritual journey began at age seven when he asked questions concerning the meaning of the universe. At age ten he was told about

6 To date there is no book-length biography of Sot’aesan. The closest to an official biography is Park Chong-hun, compiler, Hanuranh hanich’i-e (In Unitary Principle within One Force) Iri: Wonbulgyo Ch’ulp’ansa, 1982 and Yi Hye-hwa, Sot’saean Pak Chung-bin ui munhak segye (The Literary Realm of Sot’saesan Pak Chung-bin) (Seoul: Kip’unsaem, 1991). The latter book was published for the one-hundredth anniversary of Sot’saesan’s birth. Biographies in English are limited to introductions in essays and books on Won Buddhism and to academic theses and dissertations.

7 The story of Sot’aesan’s spiritual quest is told in greater detail in Chung Bong- kil, “What is Won Buddhism?” Korea Journal, Vol. 24, No. 5 (May 1984), 19-22. This essay remains one of the best introductions to Won Buddhism available in English. See also Bongkil Chung, An Introduction to Won Buddhism (Wonbulgyo), revised third edition (Iri: Won Buddhist Press, 1994).

[page 5]the mountain spirit and for five years he climbed a nearby mountain each day in the hope of meeting the mountain spirit. When this effort failed he began at age sixteen a six year search to meet an enlightened person who could become his teacher. He met a series of teachers, traveling monks, and just plain rogues but none could answer his questions. He soon fell into depression and ill health and by age twenty-five was considered by his acquaintances to be somewhat of an eccentric.

The breakthrough took place in the early morning of April 28, 1916 when Sot’aesan experienced enlightenment. He attained clarity of understanding of the nature of reality as he saw the stars shining in the predawn sky. Known as the Great Enlightenment by Won Buddhists, this experience forever changed Sot’aesan’s life. He took on a new religious name, Park Chung-bin and sought to understand the nature of his enlightenment by reading the various texts of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. He concluded that his enlightenment experience was similar to that of the great sages but was closest to that of the Sakyamuni Buddha. This came about through a reading of the Diamond Sutra.8 Sot’aesan decided that his new religious movement was closest to Buddhism and would therefore be a new reformed type of Buddhism.

He soon gathered a group of around fifty followers, most of whom were neighbors and relatives and in 1918 and 1919 took several decisive steps in the founding of Won Buddhism. First, he selected a group of nine disciples to be his closest aides. They formed a financial mutual aid society and in March of 1918 began work to reclaim some twenty-one acres of beach land into a productive rice field. A year later the work was completed. Second, on August 21, 1919 this group of nine disciples signed a pledge to follow this new religious movement even at the cost of their lives. As they pressed their thumbs on the paper they left their bloody thumbprints as their signature. According to Chung Bong-kil these two decisive events laid both the financial and spiritual foundations for the formation of Won Buddhism.9

8 A. F. Price & Wong Mou-lam, trans., The Diamond Sutra and Sutra of Hui-Neng (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), pp. 1-53. Divided into thirty-two chapters，the Diamond Sutra is both concise and clear enough for most laypersons to read.

9 Chung Bong-kil, “What is Won Buddhism?” p.21*.*

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With the foundations of his new religious movement firmly in place Sot’aesan spent the next four years in seclusion in the mountains of the Pyunsan Peninsula on the west coast of North Cholla Province at a small hermitage known as the Pongnae Cloister. Here he studied Buddhist sutras and the texts of Korean religions. He also traveled around to well-known Buddhist temples in Korea and participated in Seon (Zen) retreats and in doctrinal discussions. Finally in 1924 he established the headquarters of Won Buddhism on donated land at a site which now lies within the city of Iksan (previously known as Iri). His new religious movement was formally established under the name The Research Society of the Buddha Dharma. The name was changed to Won Buddhism in 1947 by his successor Chongsan.

As the founder of this new religious movement he took on the honorific title Sot’aesan, and today Park Chin-sop a.k.a. Park Chung-bin, is known by this name. Sot’aesan spent the remainder of his life preaching, teaching, and laying the groundwork for the organization of Won Buddhism. The institution that later became Wonkwang University was founded, the canonical scriptures were organized, doctrine was clarified, and new temples were founded throughout Korea. Perhaps the most significant of all of Sot’aesan’s actions was the preparation put in place for the orderly succession of leadership following his death. Sot’aesan died on June 1, 1943 after twenty-eight years of teaching. Sot’aesan built up an organization that not only outlived him but has continued on while at the same time revering him as the Great Master. The life of Sot’aesan is, in the words of Kelvin Barrett, “a fascinating story of a man with little formal education, who moulded a group of dispossessed people to be masters of their lives and valuable members of society.”10

Doctrinal Beliefs of Won Buddhism

Of course Sot’aesan was much more than a social refonner―he was the founder of a new religious movement in Korea. Understanding the man and his times and his unique efforts at reform coupled with his indisputable administrative and organizational skills is one thing. Understanding

10 Kelvin Barrett, “Won Buddhism: A Modern Way—A Study of Sot’aesan’s Spiritual Response to Modernization,” p. 2.

[page 7] the doctrinal beliefs which he expounded is quite something else. The scholarly literature provides more than adequate testimony to this.

Frank M. Tedesco asserts that “Won Buddhism cannot be considered traditional Korean Buddhism. Won Buddhists do not take refuge in the Three Jewels or support the traditional teaching, customs, and sangha in Korea.”11 Duk-Whang Kim believes that Won Buddhism is a quasi-relig- ion and thus of little permanent significance in Korea.12 The Korean Buddhist Research Institute categorizes Won Buddhism as form of belief in the Miruk, the Buddha of the future.13 Thus “Won Buddhism could succeed in attracting and helping many people without misguiding them. That is the reason that Won Buddhism is still highly successful.”14 James Huntley Grayson states that Won Buddhism “does not fit into any neat schema” and “must be seen as a genuine reform of Buddhism, but a reform movement which started outside the traditional orders.”15 At the same time it has been strongly influenced by Protestant Christianity, especially in the organization and worship of the local temples.16 Perhaps the most common viewpoint, at least by those in the West who are non-specialists in Korean studies or Korea Buddhism, is that of Helen Waterhouse in her review of the book Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition. After reading Bongkil Chung’s chapter in the book, “Won Buddhism: The Historical Context of Sot’aesan’s Reformation of Buddhism for the Modern World” she wrote that this essay “was my challenge!”17

11 Frank M. Tedesco, “Korean Buddhism at the Crossroads,” interview on May 6, 2001 in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

[http://www.buddhapiaxom/eng/tedesco/cross.html], accessed 11/28/2009.

12 Duk-Whang Kim, A History of Religions in Korea (Seoul: Daeji Moonhwa-sa,

1988), PP- 447-448.

13 The Korean Buddhist Research Institute, ed., Buddhist Thought in Korea (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1994), p. 201, pp. 203-204.

14 Ibid., p. 202.

15 James Huntely Grayson, Korea: A Religious History (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 250.

16 Ibid., pp. 253-254.

17 Helen Waterhouse, Review of Buddhism in the Modem World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition, ed. Steven Heine & Charles S. Prebish (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) in Journal of Global Buddhism, Vol. 6. [http://www.global Buddhism.org/6/waterhouse05.htm], accessed 10/13/2009. Waterhouse was reviewing the entire book but she found the following essay to be a challenge to understand: Bongkil Chung, “Won Buddhism: The Historical Context of Sot’aesan’s Reformation of Buddhism for the Modern World,” pp. 143-167.

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Certainly one of the difficulties in understanding Won Buddhism lies in Sot’aesan’s attempt to synthesize the three traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism into one. According to Sot’aesan Buddhism is concerned with overcoming delusion by means of enlightenment, Confucianism focuses on the nature of human relationships, and Taoism is centered on the development of one’s own nature in harmony with the universe. Thus “In the past the three religions, namely, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, taught their specialties exclusively; however, in the future the world cannot be delivered by any one of them; hence, we intend to unify the three doctrines...”18 This synthesis took place according to three principles:

(a) The threefold practice, namely, the cultivation [of spirit], inquiry [into facts and principles], and mindful choice [in karmic action] shall be unified in the truth of Irwon. (b) Spiritual and physical life shall be improved together in complete balance, (c) Principle and fact shall be pursued together. Anyone who sincerely practices in this way will not only master the essences of the three religions but also comprehend the essences of the doctrines of other religions of the world as well as all the truths of the universe, attaining to the supreme enlightenment.19

It was Sot’aesan’s intention to unify these three Asian traditions into one in the doctrines and practices of Won Buddhism.

A key to understanding the doctrinal beliefs of Won Buddhism can be found in the motivation behind Sot’aesan’s efforts at reform. Sot’aesan took as his guiding motto the words “As material power is unfolding, let us unfold spiritual power accordingly.”20 This summarized the founding

18 Wonbulgyo Kyojon (The Scriptures of Won Buddhism), p. 178.

19 Ibid., p. 178

20 Ibid., p. Ib7. There are three translations of the scriptures of Won Buddhism in English. The first is The Canonical Textbook of Won Buddhism (Won Pulkyo Kyojun), trans. Chon Pal-Khn (In: Wonpulkyo Chongwha-sa, 1971). It was updated and reprinted in 1981 and fully revised in 1988. The second is Bongkil Chung, The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the ‘Wonbulgyo Kyojon’ with Introduction (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute/University of Hawaii Press, 2003). The Wonbulgyo Kyojon consists of two parts―the first being “The Canon” which focuses on doctrine and the second being “The Scripture of Sot’aesan” which consists of the doctrinal teachings of Sot’aesan, sayings of Sot’aesan, and stories related to Sot’aesan. References in this essay will be from Bongkil Chung’s translation, herein referred to as Wonbulkyo Kyojon. There is also a third translation The Scriptures of Won-Buddhism (also known as the Wonbulgyo Kyojon), trans, the Committee for Authorized Translations of Won- Buddhist Scriptures (Iksan: Wonkwang Publishing Co., 2006). This third translation replaces the Won Pulkyo Kyojun as the official translation of the text. Its primary use is for religious purposes. Bongkil Chung’s translation is considered to be “a product of personal scholarship” by Won Buddhism and its primary use is for academic purposes. It contains numerous scholarly aids such as an informative introduction, numerous helpful footnotes, two appendices, two glossaries, and an extensive bibliography of works on Won Buddhism both in Asian and western languages.

[page 9]motive: “The founding motive of this religious order is to lead all sentient beings suffering in the bitter seas of misery to a vast, immeasurable paradise by expanding spiritual power and thereby subjugating the material power through faith in truthful religion and training in sound morality.”21 From these two statements at least three important elements of Won Buddhism can be seen. First, it is a movement that brings together religion and morality. Second, important doctrinal ideas are restated in simple, easy to understand mottoes. Third, the focus is clearly upon the laity rather than upon a professional monastic order. Clarity of thought using hangul rather than the classical Chinese of the traditional sutras was used by Sot’aesan.

As one opens the scriptures of Won Buddhism five of these mottoes are stated. In addition to the guiding motto, four others appear:

Everywhere is the Buddha-image;

Do everything as making an offering to Buddha.

Timeless Zen and placeless Zen.

21 Ibid., p. 117.

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Maintain one mind in motion and at rest.

Perfect both soul and flesh.

Buddha-dharma is living itself;

Living is Buddha-dharma itself.22

Sot’aesan was troubled by the fact that traditional Buddhism was―in his view―focused on the monastic orders and was, therefore, “not suitable for people living in the secular world. Anyone who wished to be a true Buddhist under such a system had to ignore his or her duties and obligations to the secular life and give up his or her occupation.”23 Central to these duties and obligations in Korean Neo-Confucian society was filial piety.24 According to Sot’aesan true Buddhism should not require one to leave one’s family, occupation, or even geographical location. The above four mottoes all focus on being a Buddhist in one’s ordinary life. One does not need to worship before a Buddha image in a temple deep in the mountains. Meditation can be practiced anywhere and at any time; it is not necessary to spend weeks at retreats in isolated temples. True religious practice is both spiritual and physical, and the Buddha-dharma is immersed in the midst of life.

Sot’aesan began his radical reform of Buddhism by replacing the Buddha image with a simple circle. Hence the name Won (circle) Buddhism. In order to understand Sot’aesan we must remember that he reached enlightenment outside of any particular religious tradition. Only later, through intensive reading and study, did he come to the conclusion that his enlightenment was common to all great religious traditions. And, only later after reading the Diamond Sutra, did he come to believe that “Buddha-dharma embodies the supreme truth. It elucidates the principle

22 Ibid., p. 115.

23 Ibid., p. 117.

24 According to Bongkil Chung “the moral issue is whether the Buddha dharma can be followed without jettisoning one’s filial duty to one’s parents,” from Bongkil Chung, “Won Buddhism: A Synthesis of the Moral Systems of Confucianism and Buddhism,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy, Vol. 15 (1988), 426.

[page 11]of true noumenal nature, solves the grave matter of birth and death, brings the causal law to light, and provides the method of practice.”25 In other words, while supreme truth is embodied in the Buddha-dharma, it is not limited to it.

Sot’aesan thus developed a new religious symbol which encompassed Buddhism but also moved beyond it. He called this circle by two different names―Irwon and Irwonsang. Irwon refers to the unseen reality of the Dharmakaya, that is, the Buddha nature of reality which is the formless, unchanging and transcendental and is the essence of all beings. Irwonsang is the physical symbol of Irwon; the actual circle which is found in Won Buddhist temples. Irwonsang is, to use traditional Buddhist imagery, “the finger pointing at the moon.” Since Irwon cannot be seen but only experienced, devotion is centered on Irwonsang.

A verse composed by Sot’aesan summarizes the concept of Irwonsang in the following manner:

Being turns into nonbeing and nonbeing into being,

Turning and turning,

Then, ultimately, being and nonbeing are both void,

Yet the void is complete.26

This circle is the distinguishing symbol of Won Buddhism and the spires and steeples of Won Buddhist temples (which are built more like Christian churches than traditional Buddhist temples) all display the symbol of Irwonsang.

Using this circle as central, the Doctrinal Chart of Won Buddhism states the Truth of Irwonsang and the Verse on Irwonsang and then develops the major doctrines as two “wings” attached to this central truth. Each “wing” begins at the top with the personal cultivation of religious

25 Ibid., p. 167.

26 Ibid., pp. 123-124.

27 Ibid., p. 116. The remaining pages of The Canon consist of a doctrinal exposition of this chart, see pp. 117-138; and an exposition on putting the various doctrines into practice, pp. 139-164. The Doctrinal Chart is found at the beginning of both the Won Pulkyo Kyojun and the Wonbulkyo Kyojon.

[page 11]faith and ends at the bottom with the social or ethical expression of reli-gious faith.

The “wing” to the right of Irwonsang focuses on faith while the “wing” to the left of Irwonsang focuses on practice.28 Thus the right “wing” begins at the top with the words ‘‘Awareness and requital of beneficence (or grace).” The way of faith is based on karma, a cause and effect response. There are four beneficences or graces―of heaven and earth, of parents, and brethren, and of laws. In order to requite or repay these four beneficences one must follow the principles of: (1) the way of harboring no false idea after rendering favors; (2) the way of protecting the helpless; (3) the way of mutual benefit; and (4) the way of doing justice and eradicating injustice. In this way one makes an offering to Buddha, for everywhere is the Buddha image and one must do all things as an offering to Buddha. At the bottom are the words: “Selfless service for the public.”

The left “wing” begins at the top with the words “Correct enlighten-ment and right practice.” The way of practice is based on true emptiness coupled with marvelous existence. There are three ways of practice: (1) mindful karmic action (sila [precepts]―follow the Nature); (2) spiritual cultivation (samadhi [concentration or contemplation]―nourish the Na-ture); and (3) inquiry into facts and principles (prajna [wisdom]—see into the Nature). This can be accomplished through following eight articles. One should keep: faith, zeal, doubt, and sincerity; one should forsake: disbelief, greed, laziness, and delusion. At the same time one can practice Zen meditation both when in motion and at rest. How? “When the six sense organs are free from work, eliminate worldly thoughts and cultivate One Mind; when the six sense organs are at work, eliminate injustice and cultivate justice. This is called “Timeless Zen, placeless Zen.” At the bot-tom of the left “wing” are the words: “Practical application of Buddha-dharma.”

This doctrinal chart is a clear and logical presentation of the major beliefs and practices of Won Buddhism. It is immediately obvious that it is a greatly simplified form of Buddhism that is primarily suited for use by

28 This is according to Bongkil Chung’s translation of the Wonbulgyo Kyojon. In the two authorized translations the position of the two “wings” is reversed.

[page 13]lay persons. Sot’aesan was concerned that many traditional Buddhists did not really understand the doctrines of their faith nor did they make a clear connection between doctrinal belief and ethical action. Won Buddhists assert that it is better to believe and practice a faith that can be understood. Furthermore they make certain that faith results in concrete ethical actions which impact society and culture.

Of course there are refinements of these beliefs and practices, among them being different kinds of training. Religious education in Won Buddhism is centered around eleven types of training: (1) intoning the name of a Buddha; (2) sitting in meditation; (3) studying the Won Buddhist scriptures; (4) giving lectures in front of an audience; (5) discussing and exchanging points of view; (6) observing uido or a topic of doubt; (7) investigating the principle of nature; (8) keeping a regular term diary on main matters relating to one’s life; (9) keeping a daily diary on matters of one’s faith and keeping the moral precepts; (10) being heedful concerning what one has learned; and (11) behaving well and living a life worthy of humankind.29

Although Sot’aesan was not familiar with human development theory as expressed by such well-known psychologists as Erik Erikson and James W. Fowler, he did work out a six-level theory of dharma stages. The six levels are: (1) Elementary faith; (2) Unwavering faith; (3) Dharma-mara struggle or struggle between good and evil; (4) Dharma power’s subjugation of mara by which one attains emancipation from the ills of birth, aging, illness, and death; (5) Transcendence; and finally (6) Tathagata (full realization) of supreme enlightenment. A series of precepts for daily living correspond to each of the dharma stages with a special concern for the first three stages.30

In dharma stage 5, Transcendence, one of the characteristics of a person who has reached that stage is that “One is well versed in the essentials of the doctrines of the extant world religions.”31 Given the exclusiveness of many, if not most, of the world religions today, this concern for world religions on the part of Won Buddhism is highly significant. It undoubtedly

29 Wonbulgyo Kyojon, pp. 140-151.

30 Ibid., pp. 158-164.

31 Ibid., p. 164.

[page 14]arises from Sot’aesan’s personal experience of enlightenment, but unlike other new religions in Korea, Won Buddhism has resisted the move toward exclusivism. This is in spite of the fact that it initially held strong nationalistic beliefs which included viewing Korea as the center of a world religious reform movement and the belief that Korean would someday become the global international language. Interfaith cooperation and dialogue have become a hallmark of Won Buddhism today and Won Bud-dhist leaders have called for the establishment of a United Religions comparable to the United Nations. In the words of Chwasan Lee Kwang- Jeong the fourth Prime Master of Won Buddhism, “We have to develop our relations with others into that of mutual beneficence, and find the greater ‘WE’ rather than the smaller ‘I’ ....We should be aware of the fact that all religions are of one and the same truth, although their rites and interpretation of the truth may be different.”32

Concerning dharma stage 6, Tathagata of supreme enlightenment, Chung Bong-kil asserts that this “is none other than the manifestation of Dharmakaya Buddha or Irwon....Thus, the enlightened is aware of the ultimate reality in one’s own phenomena] self every moment.”33 Obviously very few persons realize this final stage of development. However, what is described here is similar to the experience of the union with the Divine found in western mysticism, and indeed, the union of the human with the Transcendent in all of the great world religions. Thus there is in Won Buddhism a basis for interfaith relations both on the intellectual and practical level and on the level of religious experience.

What is particularly unique about Won Buddhism is that this focus on interfaith relations is not simply a matter of opinion held by more progres-sive members of the order; rather, it is a matter of doctrinal belief and practice clearly stated in the canonical scripture the Wonbulgyo Kyojon.

32 Venerable Chwasan, Lee Kwang-Jeong, “Inter-reUgious Cooperation for the Development of World Community,” Won Buddhism: A New Religion in the Era of Creation (Iri: Won Pulkgyo Chonghwa-sa, n.d.),P. 15.

33 Chung Bong-kil, “The Concept of Dharmakaya in Won Buddhism: Metaphysical and Religious Dimensions,” Korea Journal Vol. 27, No. 1 (Jan. 1987), 12.

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The Organization and Development of Won Buddhism

Although a reform movement in Buddhism, Won Buddhism has clearly borrowed its organizational structures from Christianity. This has, of course, been pointed out by Christian observers such as James Huntley Grayson from the Protestant side and Kim Sung-hae from the Catholic side.34 Sot’aesan was familiar with Christianity and at least three of these encounters are described in the Wonbulgyo Kyojon.35 He obviously knew of the success in the growth of the Protestant churches as a result of the 1907 revival which started in Pyongyang and rapidly spread throughout the entire country. Then too he was aware that the Roman Catholic Church seemed to be immune to the tendency to divide into sects. The hierarchical organization of Won Buddhism is, in the opinion of Kim Sung-hae, “very similar to that of Catholicism: that is, it is greatly centralized. I suspect that Won-Buddhism has borrowed such a system from Catholicism and even some Won-Buddhists admit this to some degree.”36 Won Buddhists such as Yang Eun-yong are among those who readily concede this point: “The highest leader of the religion is known as Prime Dharma Master, and the way of electing the master is similar to that of electing the Catholic pope.”37 Immediately below the Prime Dharma Master in rank is the Supreme Council which would correspond to the College of Cardinals in the Catholic Church. Next are various overseeing administrative bodies which would correspond to the Congregations in the Catholic system. For example

34 James Huntely Grayson, Korea: A Religious History, pp. 273-274 and Kim Sung-hae, “The New Religions of Korea and Christianity,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 25.

35 Wonbulgyo Kyojon, pp. 297, 280-281, 339-340. See also Bokin Kim, Concerns and Issues in Won Buddhism (Philadephia: Won Publications, 2000), pp. 134-144.

36 Kim Sung-hae, “The New Religions of Korea and Christianity,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 25.

37 Yang Eun-yong, “The History, Basic Beliefs, Rituals, and Structure of Won- Buddhism,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 88 and pp. 91-92. It should be noted that in recent years Won Buddhists in Korea have italicized Won and use Wow-Buddhism as the preferred way of writing the name of the movement. However, this has not been followed in most English language writings outside of Korea.

[page 16]the Won Buddhist Inspection Bureau would correspond to the Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Next in rank are various sec-tions which carry out the actions of these administrative bodies. These would correspond to the various Secretariats in the Catholic Church. Re-gional bodies in Won Buddhism and Catholicism are known as dioceses and the overseers each diocese would correspond to Catholic bishops. Fi-nally there are the local Won Buddhist temples and the clergy are known as priests. The structure is both hierarchical and highly institutionalized in terms of rules and regulations. One difference from the Catholic system is that all staff of the Won Buddhist order serve designated terms of office, including the Prime Dharma Master also known as the Prime Master. An-other difference is that there is gender equality, at least in theory. The majority of the priests in local temples are women and women serve at all levels including membership in the Supreme Council. Although a woman could become the Prime Master, all of the Prime Masters so far have been men.

Religious workers in Won Buddhism are classified into three catego-ries. Kyomu guide followers according to the doctrines and practices of the faith. The priests (sometimes called ministers or reverends) of local temples are known as Kyomu. Domu are ordained for professional service and usually serve in administrative positions and non-pastoral positions. Deokmu are ordained for practical service and occupy staff positions.

While the organizational structure of Won Buddhism is similar to that of the Catholic Church, the local temples are closer to that of the Protestant churches. To begin with the temples are built very much like churches. The only distinguishing exterior architectural feature that differentiates them from churches is that the steeple is usually rounded at the top and instead of a cross (as in churches) or a swastika (as in Buddhist temples) the sign is a circle, Irwonsang. The interior of Won Buddhist temples is almost exactly like that of Protestant churches. In the rear of the church is a place for members to pick up their weekly bulletins, pick up a copy of the scriptures and hymnal if they did not bring one from home, a table for available literature, and a bulletin board for announcements.38 In many of

38 Ibid, pp. 87-88 where Yang Eun-yong states: “A Won-Buddhist religious ceremony is similar to that of the Protestant service. The ceremony is held on Sundays, and includes meditation, hymns, and preaching. Wow-Buddhist hymns appear to be influenced by Christian hymns.”

[page 17]the city temples people even sit in pews. In the front of the temple is an altar table with candles or flowers on it, and on the center wall behind the table is the circle or Irwonsang. There is no Buddha image. Dharma lectures are delivered from a pulpit Kyomu wear a special liturgical robe for services which is grey or white in color and wear a bib-like stole which is orange with a gold Irwonsang on the front. When not leading worship services, female Kyomu wear a modified hanbok which is white on the top and black on the bottom and they wear their hair in a bun in the traditional Korean manner These women are commonly seen in the Cholla provinces where Won Buddhism has a strong and visible presence.

Because most Won Buddhist temples are located in urban areas and the majority of members are employed in various non-religious occupations, the weekly services and activities of a typical temple are similar to those of Protestant churches. Weekly activities usually include the following: regular Dharma meeting on Sunday mornings (which includes hymn singing and preaching), special Dharma meeting including prayer on Wednesday evenings, student Dharma meeting on Saturday afternoons, and children’s Dharma meeting also on Sunday mornings. In addition throughout the week there are meditation sessions, scripture study sessions, programs for married couples, and committee meetings related to the operation of the temple. Once each month a special meditation and prayer meeting is held. Some temples even have early morning meditation and prayer services. Many temples operate kindergartens and day care centers, and one large temple in Jeonju operates a traditional guesthouse and cultural program in the hanok maeul which has become quite popular not only with Koreans but also with international visitors to the city.

Throughout the country Won Buddhists operate a number of training centers and retreat centers which are used for various activities including programs for youth and university students. There are two kinds of training: Term Training and Constant Training.39 The first deals with training in the eleven practices stated above and is intended primarily for new members. The second, Constant Training, is for everyone and focuses on

39 Won Buddhism: A New Religion in the Era of Creation, p. 9.

[page 18] maintaining moral discipline and right practice in one’s religious activities and in one’s daily life.

Sot’aesan placed special emphasis upon education, including educa-tion for girls and women and Won Buddhists have established a number of educational institutions. These include Wonkwang University in Iksan, a junior college, as well as a number of middle schools and high schools. Ordained clergy receive their education from Wonkwang University, Yongsan College, and the Won Buddhist Graduate School.

In the last year of his life Sot’aesan said, “Since the goal of our reli-gious task is religious edification, education, and charity, we will succeed only if these three areas of work are completely carried out in balance.”40 With the words of Sot’aesan in mind, Won Buddhists have been quite ac-tive in various forms of social service. Among the charitable work of the order are orphanages, homes for the elderly, providing free medical treat-ment to those in need, and operating a series of Oriental medicine hospitals. Wonkwang University Hospital in Iksan is well-known throughout Korea for its school of Oriental medicine. During times of crises or natural disaster Won Buddhist charity organizations can be counted on to make their presence known. In recent years Won Buddhists have become involved in working with other religious groups and NGOs in dealing with the environmental crisis.41

In the area of interfaith relations Won Buddhists have provided considerable leadership. According to Kim Sung-hae the Won Buddhists are rarely absent from interfaith meetings in Seoul and she states that “Sometimes Won-Buddhists act as bridges in dialogues between Bud-dhism and Christianity, and it will be interesting to see how communication

40 Wonbulgyo Kyojon, p. 350.

41 A recent example was an interfaith movement in October of2009 in the city of Jeonju to clean up the trash along the river and major roads in the city. Local television news showed a Catholic priest，a Presbyterian minister，a Buddhist monk，and a Won Buddhist Kyomu working together in this effort Although such interfaith cooperation is uncommon in Korea，the environment is one area where the different religious traditions can work together toward a mutually agreed upon goal. See Lee Jae-hun, “Ecological Discourses and Ideologies in New Religions in Korea： Focusing on Donghak，Won Buddhism, and Kumkandaedo,” Journal of New Religions, Vol. 15 (Oct. 2006)，145-176.

[page 19]between Won-Buddhism and Christianity, both of which differ in thought will develop.”42 Chongsan (1900-1962), the second Prime Master and successor to Sot’aesan taught what he called Samdong Morality, that is, morality based upon the Three Principles of Identity.

The First Principle of Identity, “All Doctrines Have the Same Origin,” suggests that each religion should expand beyond its own boundaries to open up to other religions, since all religions share One Truth and the same goal. The Second Principle of Identity, “All Living Beings Are Co-related by the Same Force (of Life),” suggests that the human race ought to live as brothers, free from fighting or resentment, since all human beings are of one family.

The Third Principle of Identity, “All Enterprises Are for the Same Purpose,” suggests that all human enterprises and assertions need to cooperate with each other, rather than rejecting one another, in order to construct a better world on earth.43

Chongsan summed these principles up in the verse of enlightenment which he left for his followers:

All religions are of

one and the same Truth;

All beings are of

one and the same family;

All of us are coworkers working

for one and the same goal.44

Chongsan’s successor as Prime Master Taesan (1914-1998) left behind a similar verse of enlightenment:

42 Kim Sung-hae, “The New Religions of Korea and Christianity,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, pp. 25-26.

43 Won Buddhism: A New Religion for the Era of Creation, p. 11,

44 Ibid., p. 12.

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There is only

one and the same Truth;

There is only

one and the same

world; and

Human race is one

big family.

Let us work together and

build one world of Truth.45

With this Samdong Morality as a basic foundation it can be said that two distinct characteristics of Won Buddhism are (1) “Its effort to cooperate with other religions in order to realize a peaceful world that transcends religious barriers” and (2) “Its insistence of tolerating other religions.”46

The steady growth of Won Buddhism can be ascribed in part to this openness and tolerance of other religions in Korea. Rather than spending time and effort in competition with other religious traditions, Won Buddhism focused on developing its own identity and space in Korean society. Although it was founded by impoverished farmers the movement today is largely urban and many of the members are employed in the professions. Within Korea there are a total fifteen dioceses, 550 temples, and 180 associated organizations. Overseas Won Buddhism has temples in fourteen countries organized into five dioceses and there are fifty-one temples and nine associated organizations. Currently there are approximately 1,400,000 global followers of Won Buddhism.47

One of the most successful overseas missions of Won Buddhism has been in the United States. Introduced into the United States in 1972, Won Buddhism began as an ethnic Korean religious movement first in Los Angeles and later in other cities such as Chicago, Boston, and New York.

45 Ibid., p. 12.

46 Yang Eun-yong, “The History, Basic Beliefs, Rituals, and Structure of Won- Buddhism,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 80.

47 These figures are taken from [http://wonbuddhism,info/info/page .18\_1.html], accessed 11/28/2009.

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Indeed, for the first fifteen years Won Buddhism in the United States was confined to the Korean community.48 In the mid-1980s it became apparent that English services and programs would be needed for second- generation Koreans who were born in the United States. In order to meet this need a number of Kyomu went to the United States for graduate study and several obtained doctorates in religious studies from American universities. Well educated, fluent in English, and articulate these women and men served in temples in New York, San Francisco, Miami, Boston, and Philadelphia. Several Won Buddhists also occupied faculty positions in American colleges and universities. Two of these immigrants to American soil―Bokin Kim at the Won Buddhist temple in Philadelphia and Bongkil Chung, professor of philosophy at Florida International University have made significant contributions to making Won Buddhism known in academic circles.

Undoubtedly the most influential Won Buddhist mission as far as the English speaking community is concerned is found in Philadelphia. The reason is that in 2000 the Won Institute of Graduate Studies was founded in the basement of the Won Buddhist temple in suburban Glenside. One of its goals is “To develop as a center in the United States for education and research in Won Buddhist Studies (WBS), preparing students for: Won Buddhist service in the English-speaking world; translating and adapting texts, rituals and practices for use in the West; and advancing scholarship on Asian religions entering Western culture.”49 Now housed in its own campus building, the Won Institute of Graduate Studies was granted full academic accreditation by the regional accrediting body in June 2008. Masters degrees are offered in Won Buddhist studies, applied meditation studies, and acupuncture studies. This is the first academic institution outside of Korea approved for the training of Won Buddhist clergy and the

48 Bokin Kim, Concerns and Issues in Won Buddhism, pp. 41-42.

49 [http://woninstitute.edu/index.php?page =about-us], accessed 9/16/2009. In the official press release announcing the receipt of accreditation, Joel Ostroff, the secretary of the Institute’s Board of Trustees said, “Temple University started in the basement of a church a little more than 100 years ago. With this solid foundation and our determination, one can only imagine where we will be in another hundred years.” Bokin Kim, Kyomu of the Won Buddhist temple in Philadelphia, received her Ph.D. from Temple University.

[page 22]first to do so using English as the medium of instruction. In addition to formal academic programs leading to graduate degrees, the Institute also holds non-degree programs in meditation and holistic medicine for the general public and operates a fully licensed acupuncture clinic. It should be noted that the majority of the members of the faculty are non-Korean.

The significance of the Won Buddhist Institute of Graduate Studies is twofold. First, this means that Won Buddhism has moved beyond the ethnic Korean community. This is something that most of the new religious movements in Korea (with the exception of the Unification Church) have failed to do. Second, it is clear that the United States will now become a center for Won Buddhist studies and this will put pressure on the movement to make adaptations and changes in various traditions carried over from Korea. It is also probable that the Institute will eventually enter into interfaith cooperation with other academic institutions thus leading to a fruitful interchange between religious traditions, an interchange that has not yet taken place among religiously affiliated academic institutions in Korea. Whatever else may be said, it is clear that Won Buddhism has moved from being a nationalistic movement to becoming an international movement.

Won Buddhism Comes of Age

It is obvious that Won Buddhism has come a long way from its origins in a small village in South Cholla Province to being recognized as one of the four major religions of Korea to participate in the state funeral for a former president. Truly Won Buddhism has come of age. But what are the reasons for the success of this movement? There are at least five reasons which can be given.

First, Won Buddhism has managed to outlive its founder, and do so without any hint of scandal. Sot’aesan was an excellent administrator and he set up an organizational structure that would survive him. The Prime Masters who followed continued to uphold Sot’aesan’s vision and maintain the organization and its principles. This has enabled the movement to avoid nepotism and to provide for the smooth succession of Prime Mas- [page 23] ters.50

Second, at no point has Won Buddhism been accused of being a Bud-dhist heresy. This is due in part to Buddhist beliefs concerning the Buddha nature which is found within every person. Sot’aesan can be called a Buddha without diminishing the Buddha.

In addition Sot’aesan avoided grounding his new movement in shamanistic beliefs and practices. He grounded his movement firmly within Buddhism and borrowed most his major ideas from Buddhism. To be sure, Won Buddhism is considered to be highly unorthodox by traditional Buddhists, but being unorthodox is not the same thing as being heretical, and Won Buddhism is a member of most international Buddhist organizations such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists.51

Third, as a movement focused on lay persons rather than on the monastic orders, Won Buddhism has presented its doctrines and practices in a clear manner It is a religious movement that is organized so that lay persons can maximize their participation on a regular basis. The Doctrinal Chart is easy to understand and commit to memory. The Korean text of the Won Buddhist canon was first published in 1932 and revised in 1943 and revised again in 1962. It is written in an easy-to-understand style using hangul rather than the more difficult Chinese characters. The thee English translations of the text the Won Pulkyo Kyojun (1971), the Wonbulgyo Kyojon (2003) and the new Wonbulgyo Kyojon (2006) maintain this easy-to-understand style so that even a nonbeliever can grasp the essential doctrines and practices of Won Buddhism.

Fourth, Won Buddhism is committed to education and in order to maintain this commitment over time it has established academic institutions both to train leadership and to spread its influence. These institutions—such as Wonkwang University, Yongsan College, and the Won Institute of Graduate Studies—have adhered to the highest academic standards,

50 The Prime Dharma Masters since Sot’aesan have been: Ven. Chongsan, Song, Kyu (1900-1962), Ven. Taesan, Kim, Daega (1914-1998), Ven. Chwasan, Yi, Kwang-Jung (born 1936), and the current Ven. Kyongsan, Jang, Eung-chul (born 1940).

51 Among the congratulatory messages received on the occasion of the centennial celebration of Sot’aesan’s birth in 1991 were letters from the Dalai Lama and Sanya Dharmasakti, President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

[page 24]are fully accredited by government and regional accrediting agencies, and all totaled enroll thousands of students.

There are two significant results from this, both continuing the original emphases of Sot’aesan when he gathered his original nine disciples. First, these institutions guarantee a steady income for Won Buddhism. Wonkwang University enrolls some 25,000 students on both the undergraduate and graduate levels.52 It has a well-known medical school which provides training in Oriental medicine. It also operates Wonkwang University Hospital as well as twelve satellite hospitals which specialize in Oriental medical treatment. Won Buddhism also operates middle schools and high schools in addition to numerous kindergartens and day care centers. All of these educational institutions are income producing. Furthermore, these institutions enroll thousands of students and admit thousands of patients who are not Won Buddhists, thus assuring an income base that comes from outside the membership.

Second, these educational institutions guarantee that the movement will continue in the foreseeable future. New leaders will be trained, new members will be recruited, and Won Buddhism doctrine and practice will be taught. Through academic scholarship the religious tradition will be developed and a body of Won Buddhist literature will continually be expanded.53 Won Buddhism is the only new religious movement in Korea to establish such a high level of academic discourse and this has been accomplished through its educational institutions.

Fifth and finally, Won Buddhism is a religious movement characterized

52 [http://www.wonkwang.ac.kr/English/main01\_04.html], accessed 1/15/2010.

53 See Bongkil Chung, The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the ‘Wonbulgyo Kyojon with Introduction, pp. 377-394. Chung lists twenty-one canonical texts in Korean which include early editions and partial editions of the Wonbulgyo Kyojon, teachings of successive Prime Masters, a hymnal, books of regulations and rules, and an edition of The Collected Works of Won Buddhism. He also lists 180 academic articles in Korean which deal with Won Buddhist doctrine. Some twenty-five works are listed in English which deal specifically with Won Buddhism. This is by no means an exhaustive list of what is available in English. Suffice it to say that there is a growing body of Won Buddhist literature that has assured Won Buddhism a place in the world of academic discourse.

[page 25]by innovation. Three of these innovations in particular are noteworthy given the times in which Sot’aesan lived. First, Won Buddhism opened up new opportunities for women by allowing them to serve as ordained clergy―Kyomu―on an equal basis with men. The movement also encouraged women to receive the highest level of education available, and many Kyomu are holders of doctoral degrees. Second, Won Buddhism was, from its inception, open to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. This continues to be an emphasis, especially as Won Buddhists cooperate with members of other faiths in working for world peace and the elimination of nuclear weapons. More recently they have joined together with other world religions in seeking a just global economic order and in working to protect the environment. Third, Won Buddhists stress that personal faith and social ethics go together and cannot be separated. Thus Won Buddhism was, from the earliest years, involved in efforts to alleviate poverty, provide social services, and overcome injustice.

It should be noted that Won Buddhism has studiously avoided becoming identified with any particular political movement. During the 1919 Independence Movement Won Buddhists withdrew to the mountains to pray for the nation. It was the view of Sot’aesan that Won Buddhism should work to establish its identity as a movement for religious and social reform outside any particular political party.54 Of course individual Won Buddhists have their political preferences but the movement as a whole has refrained from supporting any specific political agenda. This has been considered a weakness by critics and a strength by supporters.55 This is not simple escapism, however, for the commitment to social concerns remains a constant but from a religious rather than a political motivation.

Won Buddhism has avoided the pitfalls of many other new religious movements in Korea while at the same time it has―quite openly and without embarrassment―borrowed from the strengths of other religious and ethical traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism,

54 Bongkil Chung, “introduction,” The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the ‘Wonbulgyo Kyojon’ with Introduction, pp. 45-47. See also Wonbulgyo Kyojon, pp. 307-309.

55 Kelvin Barrett, “Won Buddhism: A Modern Way—A Study of Sot’aesan’s Spiritual Response to Modernization,” pp. 75-82.

[page 26] and Protestantism. Is has firmly established itself in Korean society and even reached out beyond the nation of Korea and the Korean people as a distinct ethnic group. In every way, Won Buddhism has come of age. Prospects for the Future

While Sot’aesan was certainly a religious visionary he was not a prophet, and there were events in Korean history and religious development that he did not foresee. For example he did not foresee the second period of growth of the Christian churches following the Korean War. Nor did he foresee the revival and renewal of traditional Korean Buddhism following the industrialization of the 1960s through the 1980s and the movement toward democracy in the 1970s through the 1990s. Perhaps most significant is that he did not foresee that Korea would not become a global leader in spiritual development, but rather it would become a global leader in economic development. When most people today think of Korea, what comes to mind is not Won Buddhism but rather, Samsung, LG, and Hyundai. Were Sot’aesan living today he would undoubtedly believe, and with considerable justification, that his original motto “As material power is unfolding, Let us unfold our spiritual power accordingly” is even more valid now than when he first proposed it.

Sot’aesan would also find that there are a number of issues related to Won Buddhism that he did not face in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. These issues are, perhaps, common to all religious movements when they come of age. Four of these issues deserve further comment: (1) Is Won Buddhism a new Korean religion or is it a form of Buddhism? (2) How does one reconcile differences in the 1943 and 1962 editions of the Won Pulkyo Kyojun? (3) Must female Kyomu remain celibate? and, (4) Now that Won Buddhism is firmly established in the United States will it eventually move away from its Korean origins? In a sense all of these issues are interrelated.

The answer as to whether or not Won Buddhism is a new Korean religion or a form of Buddhism largely depends upon who is asking the question—Koreans or westerners. Koreans tend to view Won Buddhism as a new Korean religion while westerners tend to view it as a new form[page 27] of Buddhism.56 This is similar to the same question in relation to Catholics and Protestants. In the popular Korean mind Catholicism and Protestantism are two separate religions and when the term Christian is used, it often refers to not to Catholics but to Protestants. This comes from the different Chinese terms for Catholics and Protestants and in the early days these terms were believed to refer to two distinct religions. In the West such thinking would be shocking, for Catholics and Protestants are not only one religion―Christian—but they also cooperate ecumenically in ways that as yet are not possible in the Korean context.57 Doubtless within the Korean context this kind of thinking has spilled over into how one views Won Buddhism. In the case of Won Buddhists the matter is further complicated by the fact that Sot’aesan’s enlightenment took place outside any recognized Buddhist lineage so that the movement cannot be considered to be a sect of traditional Buddhism. There can be no doubt that this issue will continue to remain an important one, especially in light of the second issue concerning reconciling the 1943 and 1962 texts of the Won Buddhist Canon.

Textual criticism is a definite sign that a religious movement has come of age, for it means that members of the tradition are beginning to engage in critical reflection upon the origins of the tradition. The 1943 edition of the text was faithful to the exact teachings of Sot’aesan and was known as the Pulgyo chongjon (in English The Correct Canon of Buddhism). In 1962 Prime Master Chongsan appointed a committee to revise

56 Kim Sung-hae states unequivocally that in relation to traditional Korean Buddhism “it [Won Buddhism] is quite a different religion.” See Kim Sung-hae, “The New Religions of Korea and Christianity,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 24. On the other hand Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish include Won Buddhism in their book Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition a book which “explores how a variety of traditional Buddhist schools and movements have been affected by encountering the myriad forces of modernization, especially those factors unique to the Asian experience” (p. 5).

57 For example, the author of this essay is a Protestant but his doctorate in theology is from a Roman Catholic institution and the co-advisors on his doctoral dissertation were a Protestant theologian from the United Church of Christ and a Catholic theologian from the Dominican Order.

[page 28]and update the canon and it was published as the Won Pulkyo Kyojon and translated into English in 1971 as the Canonical Textbook of Won Buddhism. The translation committee made a number of changes in the original text and five of these have proved to be problematic. In his 2003 translation, known as the Wonbulgyo Kyojon or The Scriptures of Won Buddhism in English translation, the translator Bongkil Chung deleted the changes made in 1962 and restored the original words of the 1943 text. He gives his reasons in an appendix to the new translation.58 It is his assertion that Won Buddhism is strongly Buddhist and that this is borne out in the original 1943 text but weakened in the 1962 text. The essence of this textual controversy is best stated in the words of Robert E. Buswell, Jr. in his “Foreword” to Bongkil Chung’s translation:

The Wonbulkgyo ecclesiastical leadership has at various points in time been decidedly ambivalent about their religion’s association with mainstream Buddhism. Some later redactions of their canonical materials have even sought to obscure these associations by replacing emblematic Buddhist explanations of religious development in favor of explanations unique to Wonbulgyo. After a lifetime of research on these texts, Professor Chung has become an outspoken advocate of the Buddhist underpinnings of Wonbulgyo thought and in this translation has restored what he believes to be earlier, more authentic, Buddhistic interpretations that have been expurgated in later church redactions. This decision has not been without its consequences: Professor Chung’s attempts to defend his scholarly views have led to a personal estrangement from some church leaders; and even though this translation was promoted by the church itself to serve as a definitive new translation of Wonbulgyo texts for overseas proselytization, the church leadership has withdrawn it imprimatur from his activities.59

58 Bongkil Chung, The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the ‘Wonbulgyo Kyojon’ with Introduction, pp. 353-356，

59 Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “Foreword,” Bongkil Chung, The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the ‘Wonbulgyo Kyojon’ with Introduction, p. xi.

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Whatever position one may take concerning this textual controversy, it is clear that it relates to the first issue of whether Won Buddhism is a new religion or a new form of Buddhism. Bongkil Chung obviously leans toward the latter position, and since he is one of the leading interpreters of Won Buddhism in the West it will be interesting to see how this controversy will eventually (if ever) be resolved.

A third issue is also arising in part because of Won Buddhism’s movement away from the Korean context and into the western context. According to the canonical texts of Won Buddhism there is complete gender equality between men and women in the movement. However the tradition has arisen that female Kyomu must remain celibate and not marry. Male workers, including the Prime Masters, have freedom to decide for themselves whether to marry or to remain celibate. At present there are approximately 1,300 women religious workers and 700 male religious workers associated with Won Buddhism. Women Kyomu have organized into a Won Buddhist Clergywomen’s Club and publish a journal Yonipe Binaerini (Rain-Dropping on the Lotus Leaves). After a careful study of the Canon and the various sayings of Sot’aesan, many women have concluded that there is no doctrinal reason for the requirement of celibacy for female Kyomu and they are beginning to suggest that the time has come for a change. This has become an especially urgent issue in the West where gender equality is taken for granted in the more progressive Protestant churches. Bokin Kim, Kyomu of the Philadelphia Won Buddhist temple is especially outspoken on the issue and she has written extensively on the topic.60 Kim asserts that a difference has arisen concerning the celibacy of women workers between the official teachings of Sot’aesan and the Canon, and the tradition as it has been practiced over time. According to Bokin Kim the world of Sot’aesan and the world of today are vastly different and the issue is not only one of gender equality within Won Buddhism but also in society at large. She writes:

If the order promotes equality in society but does not practice equality itself, what kind of example can the order really

60 Bokin Kim, Concerns and Issues in Won Buddhism, pp. 155-196.

[page 30] provide?...A thorough study of the possibility of marriage for clergywomen needs to be undertaken... If the Won Buddhist order delays too long, the conventional requirement of celibacy could become an insurmountable reality. The inequality in the order might then function as a means to continue and even reinforce the inequality of women in society.61

Yang Eun-yong, a male professor of Buddhism at Wankwang University has also called for change. He says, “I think Wow-Buddhism should aim at gender liberation from now on because women have so much power.”62 If Won Buddhism desires to continue to be known as a religious movement dedicated to reform, the issue of full gender equality, including marriage for female Kyomu, will undoubtedly have to be faced and acted upon.

All of the above issues are perhaps related to the last one: How can Won Buddhism remain Korean while becoming increasingly international? This is an especially crucial question as the Won Institute of Graduate Studies in the United States begins to train leaders who do not speak Korean, are not ethnically Korean, and perhaps have not even visited Korea. Will these potential leaders be required to spend some time at Wonkwang University in Iksan before they are ordained? Will Caucasian female Kyomu be required to wear the 1930s style modified hanbok worn by female Kyomu in Korea? Will Won Buddhists in the West be influenced more by theological movements within Protestantism and progressive Catholicism than by traditional Korean religious and philosophical movements? Or, will it be just the opposite—Won Buddhism will eventually influence western religious thought and practice? Only time will tell.

Indeed, it is not at all clear at this point in time just how much influence Buddhism in general and Won Buddhism in particular will have in the West. Lewis R. Lancaster suggests that the influence of Buddhism in the United States may be more related to meditation and holistic medicine than to religious belief. In other words Americans will remain Christian

61 Ibid., pp. 168-169.

62 Yang Eun-yong, “A Moderated Discussion,” Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity, p. 166.

[page 31] but will incorporate Buddhist meditation into their practice. He writes of the importance of the techniques of Buddhist meditation in the relief of western anxiety and stress: “The introduction of such spiritual exercises into the dominant religious practices may in the long run prove to be the most important contribution of Buddhism to American life.”63 If this is so, then the teachings of Won Buddhism concerning meditation and acupuncture may prove to be of more significance in the United States than teachings concerning doctrine and religious practice. And is this not, in the words of Sot’aesan, a way “they can avoid suffering in the bitter seas of misery?”64

However we may answer the questions concerning the future prospects of Won Buddhism, Sot’aesan―ever the optimist―had an answer that cannot be equaled. In the last months of his life a disciple came to Sot’aesan and asked him the following question: “I can surmise that our order has been established with a great destiny; however, I would like to know how many thousands of years it will last.” Sot’aesan replied: “Unlike the religious orders of the past, this order is not one that comes into being often. Since this is the one that appears at the beginning of the cycle of the great chilicosm, the destiny of this order will be endless.”65

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63 Lewis R. Lancaster, “Growth of Buddhism in the West: Its Reality and Meaning,” Buddhism in the Modern World, ed. Lee Suu-keun & Rhi Ki Yong (Seoul: Dongguk University, 1976), p. 84.

64 Wonbulgyo Kyojon, p. 117.

65 Wonbulgyo Kyojon, p. 345.

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(1) The Discourses of the Great Master

(2) The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism (Wonbulgyo chongjon)

(3) Commentary on the Method of Sitting Meditation in Chunggeon

(4) A Diagram for Practice of the Doctrine of Won Buddhism

(5) The Essentials of the Chongjon

(6) Won Buddhism: A New Religion in the Era of Creation

Daniel J. Adams is professor of theology emeritus at Hanil University in Jeonbuk, Korea.