Won Buddhism in America: Exploring Ways to Balance Tradition and Innovation

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Abstract

The introduction of Won Buddhism to the United States has reached its fifty-year mark. Brought to the West by Korean *kyomus* (Won Buddhist clergy), these initial Won Buddhist clergy set a foundation for future ordained devotees to reside in America and further the religion's mission. Innovation has always played an important role in the formation and growth of Won Buddhism. The founder, Sotaesan, declared the necessity to reform traditional Buddhism to make it accessible to the laity and espoused values such as inclusiveness, equality, public work, and practicality. Over the past few decades, these innovations have helped Won Buddhism in America to shift from a strictly ethnic-related context to an emphasis on its universal nature. However, as the religion continues achieving a foothold in Western soil, critical questions arise such as how can Won Buddhism honor its Korean origins while becoming increasingly international? What are the detriments to decontextualizing and de-emphasizing elements thought to be "too Korean" or "too traditional," or thought to be irrelevant in the West? When Buddhism spreads to a new country, it not only influences the culture it enters but is also shaped by the adopting culture. In American history, this has often meant the erasure of Asian cultures that were home to Buddhism for millennia and from which the dharma is inextricable. I argue in this article that if Won Buddhism is to thrive in the United States conscious consideration will have to be given to the indispensable aspects of its Korean roots and tradition while connecting with the current circumstance in fresh, relevant, and effective ways that include the multi-cultural and ethnic makeup of the US. This entails understanding American history and Asian Buddhism's history in America, as well as cultivating a competency or fluency in the cultures that allowed Won Buddhism to survive for decades.

Keywords: Won Buddhism; Buddhism in America; Asian Buddhism; tradition; innovation

Introduction

Tradition[1] and innovation have always been at the heart of Won Buddhist history and practice. Won Buddhism was founded during a time of great transformation. Previously known as the 'hermit kingdom', Korea opened its doors to foreign influence. It introduced and spread Catholicism, Western learning, scientific technology, and the Western political and economic system in the middle of the nineteenth century. This new perspective on the world resulted in a tremendous desire on the part of Korean Buddhists to overturn the persecution of Buddhism during the Joseon Dynasty. Won Buddhism grew out of the movement to reform and renovate Buddhism for the contemporary secular world. In 1920, the founder, Sotaesan (少太山, 1891–1943), drafted the *Joseon Bulgyo Hyeokshinnon* [2] (朝鮮佛教革新論 *Treatise on the Reformation of Joseon Buddhism*), which was published in 1935. The themes in the *Joseon Bulgyo Hyeokshinnon* focused on reforms to make Buddhism accessible and relevant to the masses.

> Buddhism became a religion for a few when it was ill-treated and persecuted [during the Chosŏn dynasty]. The doctrine and system of traditional Buddhism were mainly structured for the monastic livelihood of the Buddhist monks who abandoned their secular lifestyle, and hence, were unsuitable for those people living in the secular world. Although there were faithful lay devotees in the secular world, they could not become central in their roles and status, only secondary. Accordingly, the lay devotee could not stand in the lineage of the direct disciples of the Buddha or become an ancestor of Buddhism easily except for those who made unusual material contributions or attained extraordinary spiritual cultivations. How can this doctrine and system be beneficial for the majority of ordinary people? (Park 1997, 297)

Sotaesan was concerned with how to carry out the Buddhist teachings in an accessible way. He spent a great deal of time formulating a doctrine based on *buddhadharma* but adapted it for modern society. He was not rejecting the efficacy of buddhadharma, but argued that the societal needs were incompatible with the traditional Buddhist structure. In this case, Sotaesan's reformation was compatible with the flow of the needs of the masses and the times. For example, he opened up new opportunities for women by allowing them to serve as ordained clergy on an equal basis with men (Adams 2009, 25). In his teaching on the *Development of Self-Power*, Sotaesan states that "Regardless of whether we are men or women, we should not live a life of dependency as in the past, unless we cannot help but be dependent due to infancy, old age, or illness. Women too, just like men, should receive an education that will allow them to function actively in human society" (*CATWS 2016*, 41). Therefore, during the formative years of Won Buddhism, women actively engaged in spiritual training alongside men and were also significant financial contributors (Song 2023,

369),[3] who supported the sustainability of the Order during challenging times.

Despite Won Buddhism's commitment to an egalitarian doctrine and its significant efforts to promote gender equality among its clergy, historical practices mandated female clergy to adhere to the archetype of "chaste women," a requirement that was not equivalently imposed on their male counterparts. This longstanding tradition saw a significant shift in 2019 when the Supreme Council (Suwidan 首位團), alongside the Head Dharma Master, serving as the highest authorities within the order, ratified modifications to the "*Jeongnam Jeongnyeo* (Celibate Male and Female Ordained Devotees) Regulations." These amendments specifically abrogated the necessity for female *kyomu*[4] (Won Buddhist ordained devotee) candidates to submit a "*Jeongnyeo* Application Form," a document that formerly served as a formal vow of lifelong celibacy. Consequently, the constitutional reform eradicated the celibacy mandate, thereby granting female kyomu the autonomy to marry, aligning their marital rights with those afforded to male clergy (Jo 2019). The Sixth Head Dharma Master Jeonsan elucidated that, although Sotaesan had delegated the choice of marriage to the discretion of the individual, this liberty had not been extended to women. He further indicated that the implementation of regulatory modifications within the order would necessitate a phased approach, with an anticipated timeline of 20–30 years for complete assimilation (Mun 2019).

This significant shift in policy regarding the celibacy mandate for female clergy within Won Buddhism not only addressed disparities in the treatment of male and female kyomus but also set the stage for further discussions on modernization and inclusivity within the order. Such discussions have extended beyond the parameters of marriage and celibacy, touching upon aspects of daily ministerial life, including attire for female kyomus. The younger cohort of female Won Buddhist clergy has raised concerns regarding the need to modernize the attire of female kyomus. According to one newspaper article, female clergy actively engaging with young people have encountered mockery and intense scrutiny. These female kyomu argue that traditional attire is perceived as antiquated, uncomfortable, and at times projects an odd image to the youth (Pak 2020; Kim 2017; Kim 2018). In response, the Won Buddhist Supreme Council initiated a trial period allowing female kyomus to don western-style suits.

Just as the revision of the female kyomus' dress code signifies a response to contemporary societal values and the practical needs of its clergy, so too has Won Buddhism's foundational philosophy been shaped by a receptivity to diverse religious traditions. After his enlightenment, Sotaesan explored a wide range of religious texts, including the *Four Classics* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* from Confucianism; *The Diamond Sutra* and the *Palsang-nok* (Record of the Eight Scenes of the Buddha's Life) from Buddhism; the *Eumbugyeong* (Yellow Emperor's Hidden Talisman Classic) and the *Okchugyeong* (Scripture of the Jade Pivot) from Daoism; the *Donggyeongdaejeon* (Great Canon of Eastern Learning) and the *Gasa* (Hymns) from Cheondoism; along with the Old and New Testaments of Christianity. Despite a particular resonance with

the *Diamond Sutra*, Sotaesan held the view that each religion emerged in its own time to guide people towards righteousness and morality through faith (CATWS 2016, The Gist of Indebtness to Laws: 1). Therefore, there was no need for religions to compete against each other, as each tradition had its own unique role in the salvation of sentient beings. This approach was further echoed by Second Head Dharma Jeongsan (鼎山 1900–1962), who expanded upon these ideas, highlighting the harmonious coexistence and mutual respect among different religious paths.

> This means that all religions and churches should achieve a grand unity and harmony by understanding that their principles all derive fundamentally from a single source. In this world, there are the three great global religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, and many other established religions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and so forth (*The Dharma Discourses of Cardinal Master Chŏngsan* 2016, XIII. The Fortune of the Way, 35).

The inclusive nature of Won Buddhism, with its receptivity to multiple religious traditions, seems to make it a fit for the diverse religious landscape of America, where individuals from various faith backgrounds coexist. However, as Won Buddhism establishes its presence in the United States and undergoes expansion, critical inquiries emerge regarding the adaptability and suitability of the Won Buddhist doctrine and practices, originally formulated within a Korean context, for Western adherents. It prompts an examination of whether these doctrines and systems align with and benefit the broader spectrum of Western individuals. Furthermore, it raises the question of how Won Buddhism can evolve to present its teachings in ways that are both faithful to its traditional roots and innovatively relevant within the diverse cultural and ethnic landscape of a multicultural nation.

Fortunately, the reformed dimensions of Won Buddhism, originating from Korea, exhibit significant parallels with the evolution of American Buddhism, including the emphasis on a lay-oriented sangha, simplification of tradition, an inquiry-driven approach, and a tradition that is both socially aware and engaged. Nonetheless, Won Buddhism faces the imperative challenge of honoring its foundational principles while innovatively adapting its teachings for effective conveyance within a new cultural context. This juxtaposition highlights the broader discourse on the authenticity and legitimacy of Buddhist practices in America, where Asian and Asian American expressions of Buddhism have often been marginalized and labeled as superstitious or inauthentic, thus challenging the integrity and historical depth of these traditions.

Up until now Won Buddhism has maintained strong ties to its Korean roots, which was a result of the kyomus being predominantly from Korea, which meant closer ties to the culture and language. However, moving forward, more focus has to be placed on how to maintain its necessary roots as it branches out, to avoid the pattern of Asian Buddhist erasure and in turn often the essence of buddhadharma itself. This is not about ownership, as the teachings should be free to all. However, the teachings cannot

be separated nor is it necessary to separate them from context. In fact, doing such as was just mentioned might prove detrimental. In this article, it will be argued that if Won Buddhism hopes to thrive in America it needs to understand the historical context in which it arrived and find ways to balance tradition and innovation. Tradition with innovation and adaptation invites vitality. It is unwise to embrace beliefs that contradict Won Buddhism's profound understanding of the world and its workings. Yet, spirituality without the anchor of tradition becomes superficial, merely echoing individual preferences.

Won Buddhism Comes to America

In its 50-year history in the US, Won Buddhism has experienced a slow and steady growth. Won Buddhism's entrance into the West can be divided into stages, beginning with the 1973 establishment of Won Buddhism of America, Inc. in the State of California under the leadership of Lee Je Seong (李濟性, 1935–2009) and Baek Sang Won (白想源, 1941–2015).[5] Lee and Baek started the process of incorporating the temple. This facilitated the assigned clergy in securing permanent residency, and also permitted them to legally undertake educational and spiritual activities in America. In January of 1973, Jeong Ja-Seon (丁慈善 1922–1974), a Won Buddhist ordained devotee with a strong desire to support edification in the West, helped establish the Chicago Won Buddhist temple (Pak 2005, 137). The first Won Buddhist clergy who entered the US were assigned by the Korean headquarters to establish temples in populated or accessible locations. These were primarily clerics with limited English proficiency who had made a strong spiritual commitment to create the financial foundations for future generations. At this stage, Won Buddhism was exported to the US and initial interest came more from the exporter than from potential devotees or practitioners.

One of the first Won Buddhist ordained devotees to be assigned abroad was Park Jang Shik (朴將植, 1911–2011). In his memoir, Park describes his early years in America during the 1970s. His encounter with unfamiliar western customs forced him to learn new forms of communication and reflect on the hurdles of acculturating a religion in another country. He wrote, "When modifying the teachings, the core message should, of course, remain unchanged, however purveyors of the teaching need to attain a deep understanding of the region, its traditional culture, and subtle and peculiar usages of language…to do so the order must actively engage in society and reach out to other religions through the United Religions movement." He later adds, "Developing the arts as a means of edification is just as urgent as modifying the teachings. Humans are rational as well as emotional beings. Therefore, the emotional side should not be ignored" (Pak 2005, 158–159).

In this initial stage, Won Buddhism in America can be characterized as an ethnic Korean religious movement. For the first fifteen years, Won Buddhist temples focused their energy and resources on attracting Korean immigrants struggling to adjust to a

new environment. This population were those coming to North America as immigrants in search of jobs, new opportunities, and a better future for their families, simply bringing their religion along. Won Buddhist temples provided immigrants with religious ideas and practices but more importantly helped them preserve a sense of cultural identity.

The next stage starts in the mid-1980s. Won Buddhist services in English were held first in Miami and later in Philadelphia, San Diego, Manhattan, and San Francisco (Kim 2000, 42). English services and programs were created for second-generation Koreans born in the United States (Adams 2009,21). As the need for English-led services grew, many Won Buddhist clergy pursued higher education as a way to enhance their English and also their knowledge of Western culture.

In 2001, the establishment of the Won Institute of Graduate Studies marked a significant milestone in the preparation of students for Won Buddhist service within the English-speaking realm. This initiative was aimed at translating and adapting texts, rituals, and practices for Western application, as well as promoting academic research on the integration of Asian religions into Western culture. The curriculum was designed to encompass a broad spectrum of studies, including the traditional spiritual teachings of Won Buddhism and the practical applications of these teachings in contemporary society.

With the inception of the Won Institute, the scope of Won Buddhism expanded significantly beyond the confines of the ethnic Korean community, embracing a more inclusive approach. The Institute introduced programs in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, recognizing the importance of holistic health practices as integral components of spiritual well-being. These programs were established with the dual purpose of equipping students with professional competencies in the ancient healing arts and integrating these practices within the spiritual and philosophical framework of Won Buddhism. The Won Institute's approach is designed to cultivate a holistic conception of wellness that reconciles the interrelations among mind, body, and spirit, thereby aiming to furnish its students with the requisite skills and knowledge for proficient service to diverse communities.

Nearly two decades later, another significant development occurred for Won Buddhism in the United States. On January 12, 2021, Venerable Juksan[6] was formally appointed as the Head Dharma Master of Won Buddhism in the USA, a decision that reflected the organizational principle articulated by Sotaesan's regarding the strategic localization of leadership roles within the movement. Third Head Dharma Master Daesan[7] articulated the rationale, noting, "For the sustained growth of our religious community, establishing clear guidelines for the position of overseas head dharma masters is crucial. According to Master Sot'aesan, while the central head dharma master would reside in Korea, each foreign country should have its own head dharma master. These leaders are expected to gather every three years at Kŭmgang Mountain for a conference" (The Discourses of Master Taesan 2014,166).

Figure 1. After finishing the kyomu training at the Hawaii International Retreat Center, each temple was gifted with the Il-Won-Sang calligraphy by Master Daesan (1996)

Consistent with this strategic direction, the Won Buddhism Constitution was revised in 1999 to add a new section, "The Overseas Headquarters."[8] This amendment established the legal groundwork required for appointing head dharma masters in countries beyond Korea, thereby facilitating the further global dissemination of Won Buddhism.

Figure 2. Fourth Head Dharma Master Jwasan strolls along the Moro Rock Trail accompanied by kyomus (2002)

As Won Buddhism evolves within the American context, it exemplifies the capacity of a spiritual tradition to preserve its core values while actively integrating into new cultural and community landscapes. The appointment of a Head Dharma Master for the USA, along with the establishment of legal and organizational structures to support its international growth, reflects a strategic balance between honoring its heritage and embracing necessary adaptation. Nevertheless, specific members of the Won Buddhist clergy residing in the United States, such as Yang Euncheol, harbor concerns regarding the level of autonomy that can be realistically attained for North American missionary operations, especially in light of significant shortcomings in self-sufficiency concerning both personnel and financial assets. Furthermore, Yang argues that, according to the current statutes and regulations governing Won Buddhism, the scope of authority vested in the North American Headquarters closely resembles that of a merely "autonomously expanded version of the Korean Central Headquarters." This is evident in several critical areas, including the compilation of scriptures and amendments to the constitution, which still require the approval of the Head Dharma Master based in the Central Headquarters in Korea. Yang further queries the effectiveness of establishing the North American Headquarters, pondering, "If a resolution regarding the attire of

female clergy, reached in consensus in North America, fails to be enacted due to divergent views from the Central Headquarters, then what meaningful impact does the establishment of the North American Headquarters actually convey?"[9] These challenges raise important questions about the effectiveness of the North American Headquarters in embodying a truly autonomous entity within the global Won Buddhist community. Moving forward involves addressing the complexities of autonomy and adaptation, yet the core mission to disseminate teachings of enlightenment and well-being remains steadfast.

Table 1. History of Won Buddhist Temple/Institution Expansion in the Eastern and Western Districts of North America

Year Established	Won Buddhist Temple/Institution
1972	Won Buddhism of Los Angeles
1973	Won Buddhism of Chicago
1975	Won Buddhism of New York (Flushing)
1984	Won Buddhism of San Francisco
1985	Won Buddhism of Valley
1987	Won Buddhism of Philadelphia
1989	Won Buddhism of Fresno
1991	Won Buddhism of Washington Won Buddhism of Orange County
1992	Won Buddhism of San Diego
1994	Won Buddhism of Manhattan
1996	Won Buddhism International Retreat Center of Hawaii
1999	Won Buddhism of Miami Won Buddhism of Hawaii
2000	Won Buddhism of Houston Won Buddhism of Richmond
2001	Won Institute of Graduate Studies
2003	Won Buddhism of Boston
2004	Won Buddhism of Denver
2005	Won Buddhism of Atlanta
2007	Won Buddhism of Berkeley

2010	Won Buddhism of New Jersey
2011	Won Buddhism of North Carolina Won Dharma Retreat Center
2013	Won Buddhism of San Bernardino
2014	Won Buddhism of Austin
2020	Won Buddhism of Houston

Won Buddhism's Innovations

The presence and perception of Won Buddhism in America have evolved significantly over the years. Its progressive expansion in the West is largely due to its transition from an approach primarily associated with a specific ethnic context to a focus on its universal applicability (Kim 2000, 42). The foundational principles laid out by Sotaesan at the inception of Won Buddhism—emphasizing practicality, inclusiveness, equality, and social engagement—remain pertinent in today's Western milieu. Historically, Won Buddhism has distinguished itself as a religious movement through its commitment to innovation (Adams 2009, 25).

As McMahan describes, Buddhism in the contemporary era shows a "modern world-affirming stance, a sense that the locus of a meaningful life is not in another realm but in the way this life, everyday life, is lived, and second, the shift toward interiority, reflexivity, and self-scrutiny" (McMahan 2008,13). Unlike some movements which held negative perceptions of material civilization during the 1960s and 1970s (Kim 2000),[10] Sotaesan was clearly aware of the problem of modernity and spoke of the necessity of a re-creation of spirit that would be able to respond to the influences of Western material civilization positively (Kim 2000,43). His response was not to reject matter, but to teach concrete methods of accomplishing spiritual development that were not separate from secular life. Sotaesan saw the positive value of material civilization and knew it would be an essential element in creating a truly developed civilization (Kim 2000,44). However, Sotaesan emphasized that "mind practice becomes the basis for all other studies" (CATWS *2016, The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Eleven, Maxims: 1). Sotaesan argued for a spiritual revolution of the whole world through the power of the mind. This meant, first, a reform of unreasonable systems and customs; second, to bring people a religion that enlightens their innate Buddha-nature, helping them to cultivate, sharpen, and apply it in their everyday lives.

A key aspect often highlighted by those who engage with Won Buddhism is its emphasis on actionable guidance for personal transformation. Won Buddhism provides clear, practical instructions for daily practices, suggesting that adherence to these practices can lead to significant changes in an individual's spiritual life and, consequently, influence all facets of their existence, including their interactions with

others. To support practitioners in their practice, Won Buddhist temples place a strong emphasis on community, facilitating regular group activities and offering continuous engagement. Additionally, some temples provide opportunities for individual or group scripture study, as well as short-term retreats designed to offer intensive training periods away from urban distractions. As Adams points out, Sotaesan recognized a gap in traditional Buddhism between understanding doctrines and applying them ethically. Won Buddhism strives to ensure that faith translates into tangible ethical actions affecting society and culture (Adams 2009, 13). Therefore, Sotaesan steered the movement away from shamanistic or superstitious practices, anchoring it solidly in Buddhist principles while also integrating key concepts Confucianism and Daoism (Adams 2009, 23).

Won Buddhism adopts a world-affirming approach, organizing its structure to enable lay individuals to actively participate regularly. In the United States, many Won Buddhist temples are increasingly recognizing and enhancing the role of lay teachers. For instance, at the Philadelphia, Manhattan, and North Carolina temples, lay members are entrusted with various leadership responsibilities, including conducting services, delivering dharma talks, leading projects, facilitating study groups, or managing financial tasks. By integrating lay leaders into the temple's daily operations, a system of mutual learning and communication is established between ordained members and the laity, promoting an environment of shared support and respect. Temples fostering a tightly knit community often maintain an open-door policy, allowing members to freely engage in meditation practice or seek guidance from teachers. The use of the *Il-Won-Sang* symbol (a simple circle) by Won Buddhism signifies the vision of a unified religious community rather than a narrow sectarian group, offering a symbol that is accessible and not alienating to the general American public. Indeed, this approach aligns more closely with Western perspectives that often eschew various forms of idolatry, which has led to discomfort with traditional images or statues of the Buddha. (Kim 2000, 51)

In *The Scripture of the Founding Master* a person inquires, "If Śākyamuni Buddha is your foundational teacher, why do you not enshrine an image of him but instead enshrine *Il- Wo ᴗ n -Sang*?" Sot'aesan replies, "With an image of Śākyamuni Buddha, it is difficult to elucidate and teach a realistic understanding of the evidence of bestowed transgressions and merits. However, *Il- Wo ᴗ n -Sang* represents the pure Dharmakāya Buddha. Heaven and earth, parents, and our fellow beings are all transformation bodies of the Dharmakāya Buddha; laws as well are bestowed by the Dharmakāya Buddha. We can easily expound and teach the evidence that heaven and earth, parents, fellow beings, and laws bestow transgressions and merits on us. Therefore, we enshrine *Il-Wo ᴗ n-Sang* as our object of faith" (CATWS 2016, *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Two, Doctrine: 9).

Figure 3. Il-Won-Sang at the altar of the Won Buddhism of Manhattan temple

Beyond transitioning the focus of faith and practice to *Il-Won-Sang*, Sotaesan also crafted a scripture in simple Korean vernacular, thereby enabling a broader audience to easily understand its teachings.

> A disciple esteemed knowledge of literary Chinese over vernacular Korean script, so the Founding Master said, "The Way and its power originally have nothing to do with letters, so let go of such thoughts. In the future, we will compile all our scriptures in simple language that the general public can readily understand; the day is not far away, either, when the peoples of the world will each translate and widely study these scriptures we have compiled in our own vernacular language. So do not revere only difficult literary Chinese." (CATWS 2016, The Scripture of the Founding Master, Chapter Fourteen, Prospects: 3).

Aiming to make its teachings globally accessible, Won Buddhism undertook a significant effort to translate its core scriptures from Korean into various languages. This effort was institutionalized with the formation of Institution for Overseas Missions at Wonkwang University in 1962, supported by a grant from the Korea Ministry of Education. Under Dr. Pal Khn Chon's leadership, the institution initiated the biannual publication of an English booklet titled *Won-Buddhism*, which reached over 400 recipients in 26 countries. The booklet aimed to clarify Won Buddhist principles and document important historical developments within the movement. Regrettably, the publication ceased in 1993, three decades after its first issue. Numerous readers voiced a keen interest in the availability of additional Won Buddhist materials in English, including commentaries, articles, and books. The cessation revealed a strong demand for more Won Buddhist resources in English, spanning commentaries, articles, and books. Responding to this need, Dr Pal Khn Chon[11] took on the formidable task of translating Won Buddhist scriptures into English. In 1971, the first English edition of *The Canonical Textbook of Won Buddhism* was published, later renamed *The Scripture of Won Buddhism* in June 1988. This translation became a foundational text, leading to further editions and revisions.[12]

Following the important step of making its scriptures available in English, Won

Buddhism broadened its scope beyond mere textual translation, stepping into active participation within the global religious and interfaith arenas. This engagement has marked a significant area of growth for the tradition. Since 1992, the Department of Public Information of the United Nations has recognized Won Buddhism as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). This status has enabled the establishment of the Won Buddhism UN & Interfaith office in Manhattan. Representatives from Won Buddhism have assumed significant roles, including the presidency of Religious NGOs at the UN, co-founding the Values Caucus at the UN, and organizing significant events such as the Universal Ethics Millennium Conference. A key figure in these efforts, Rev. Chung Ohun Lee, served as the Won Buddhist representative at the UN since 1992 to 2018. In her article titled *Building a Fraternal World* (2015), Lee writes, "Now is the time to translate our words, visions, and ideas into actions—to embody spirituality and practice mindfulness at all times. We have to work together to incorporate into our daily lives the spiritual practices of meditation, wisdom, loving-kindness, and compassion to build a fraternal world" (Lee Chung Ohun 2015,108).

Although Won Buddhism has made notable strides in areas such as interfaith dialogue, some scholars argue that it has yet to fully embrace aspects of 'modernization'. Joon-Sik Choi, a Korean Studies professor at Ewha Womans University, believes that Won Buddhism's failure to take a prominent role in the modern era stems from the substandard presentation of its teachings and rituals. "The 'content' of Won Buddhism is excellent but it is packaged terribly. Although Sot'aesan's teachings are among the best in the world, it is not being presented on the same level as the quality of its parts" (Choi 2011, 153).[13] Choi further points out an intriguing aspect: a significant drawback in the way Won Buddhism is introduced to the Western world lies in its minimal architectural impact. This means there's no clear indication that a space is dedicated to Won Buddhism or the level of dedication and sincerity involved in creating such a sacred environment.

> "Wŏn Buddhism is like a venture business. What, by definition, is 'venture'? A venture company has to have a unique set of strategies to maintain a competitive edge in the face of older and larger companies. This is the only way that it can remain competitive and survive. Then how can Wŏn Buddhism survive? I do not yet see a unique Wŏn Buddhist strategy…As I said earlier, Wŏn Buddhist temples are not very attractive. If I held an influential post within the order, I would assemble a Wŏn Buddhist Committee on Religious Culture and recruit the best architects in Korea (and from other countries if necessary) to create a completely different type of temple structure that is also still rooted in tradition" (Choi 2011, 154).[14]

Choi further contends that Won Buddhism has not yet developed a distinct religious culture. He notes that Won Buddhist ceremonies bear a strong resemblance to church services, with activities such as hymn singing and sitting in pews. He suggests that Won

Buddhism should emphasize its Korean origins and distance itself from the Christian framework, which many temple visitors might be seeking to leave behind (Choi 2011, 154–155).

Honoring Won Buddhist Tradition

Building on Choi's critique of Won Buddhism's cultural and ritual presentation, Daniel Adams (2009) delves deeper into the tradition's identity crisis with a thought-provoking inquiry: "How can Won Buddhism remain Korean while becoming increasingly international?" In other words, how is Won Buddhism to preserve its religious and cultural heritage? And why is this significant? This is when we must examine Won Buddhism in the landscape of American Buddhism and the history of Asian Buddhism in the West. American Buddhism is a history of Asian immigration and the cultivation of Asian American Buddhist practices in the context of exclusion and white supremacy.

The fact is that there has been a history of erasure of Asian cultures, and of Asian and Asian American people, in contemporary Western Buddhism. Asian immigrants brought Buddhism to the U.S. more than 150 years ago, and Asian Americans are now two-thirds of Buddhists in the U.S. The history of Buddhism in the U.S. also generally centers on white practitioners; it is often said to have started with white converts who traveled to Asia and the counterculture movement of the 1960s. When Asian American Buddhists are acknowledged, it's often to create a binary between the "true" or "pure" Buddhism of white meditation practitioners and the "cultural baggage" or "superstition" of Asian ritual, as experts say. But in the racial reckoning sparked by Black Lives Matter and the murder of George Floyd, growing anti-Asian racism during the pandemic and the coming of age of a younger, more outspoken, generation, Asian American Buddhists are challenging the white-dominant narratives of Buddhism and re-centering Asian American identity in what it means to be Buddhist in the US (Kandil 2021).

Scholars like Funie Hsu, Duncan Williams, and Chenxing Han provide political context for how Western Buddhists converts often dismiss Asian Buddhism as lesser than—either by critiquing institutions themselves or by considering Asian Buddhists as lacking adequate intellectual or spiritual understanding of their own traditions (Moon 2020). As Funie Hsu explains, "The historical racial-religious marginalization, both from the dominant mainstream and white Buddhist cultures, has structured an internalized shame for many Asian American Buddhists who have picked up on the not-so-subtle hegemonic critiques of Asian and Asian American Buddhisms as 'heathen,' 'idolatry.' 'superstition,' and 'cultural baggage': code words for 'foreign'" (Hsu 2021, 80; Wu 2002,79).

Chenxing Han highlights the existence of a "two Buddhisms" classification, which separates convert Buddhists, often characterized as white and middle-class, from the non-convert, Asian, immigrant "ethnic" Buddhists. Reflecting on this division, the

editor of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review Magazine* in 1991 remarked that Asian American Buddhists "have not played a significant role in shaping what is known as American Buddhism," suggesting that they are considered Buddhists residing in America rather than fully integrated American Buddhists (Han 2020).

Engaging with Buddhism in a cultural framework necessitates a critical examination of the historical and interconnected narratives of the cultural and religious traditions we inherit or adopt. The exclusion of Asian American Buddhists from depictions of Buddhism in America is detrimental. Addressing inaccuracies in the portrayal of American Buddhism requires a unified and concerted endeavor. For *kyomus* who were born and raised in Korea, this means examining American history and the history of Asian Buddhism in America as well as assimilation to belief in the dominance of the Western world and whites (Lee Erika 2015; Zia 2000). For many years, Asian Buddhist institutions in the West have transitioned leadership to primarily white successors through Asian teachers. These teachers may not have fully understood the complexities of American racism or acknowledged their own biases (Moon 2020).

This phenomenon is evident in the realm of scripture translations, where terms are often considered unfamiliar or awkward from the perspective of individuals with a Western Christian background or limited Buddhist knowledge. There's a tendency to dismiss these terms as irrelevant due to their perceived lack of coherence or comfort. Consequently, Korean kyomus may defer to Westerners, who are presumed to possess superior proficiency in English or have notable professional credentials, leading to modifications of the original wording. However, substituting English terms based on subjective experiences or feelings, without a comprehensive understanding of the original Korean lexicon, Chinese characters, or the historical Buddhist framework, introduces a risk of significant inaccuracies. Achieving a genuine understanding of specific terms, especially those without direct English analogues, necessitates an openness and willingness to engage deeply with Buddhist practice and scholarship.

The intricacies encountered in the translation of scriptures highlight the vital necessity of preserving and respecting the Korean origins of Won Buddhism, a principle fervently supported by Sotaesan and his disciples. They spiritually identified with Korea as a homeland, recognizing its crucial significance for the future. An illustrative example of this is Sotaesan's allusion to the Diamond Mountain. He instructed his followers that the guardians of the Diamond Mountain should cultivate characteristics reflective of the mountain's essence; sincerity, respectfulness, steadfastness, and the preservation of one's innate purity. In this manner, the mountain embodies the essence, while the individual exemplifies its expression (CATWS 2016, *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Fourteen, Prospects: 6). This implies that while the mountain remains static, serving as the essence, it is up to the individual to effectively harness this essence to realize its function. Yet, Sotaesan's reference to the Diamond Mountain extended beyond metaphorical significance, hinting at its physical reality as well.

As Sotaesan stated, "As the Diamond Mountains become known to the world, Korea

will again become Korea. Then, the Master said, 'The Diamond Mountains are mountains peerless under heaven, so in the near future, they will be designated as an international park and be tended resplendently by various nations. Subsequently, people in the world will vie with each other to find the host of this mountain. Thus, if the people who are to be its hosts have nothing prepared in advance, with what will they treat their guests?" (CATWS 2016, *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Fourteen, Prospects: 5)

His immediate successor, Jeongsan, echoed this sentiment in the following passage:

> Seeing the mugunghwa [the rose of Sharon, the Korean national flower] and the T'aegŭkki [the T'aegŭk flag, the Korean national flag] in front of Sandong Temple, the Master said, "Mugunghwa is a good name. Mugung means limitless and unchanging; and mugunghwa foretells that this country will become the origin of the Way and its power in the new world. T'aegŭkki involves a profound principle. T'aegŭk [the Grand Ultimate, taiji] is the principle of the universe, which is the parent of the myriad things. T'aegŭk is also mugŭk [the ultimate of nonbeing] and mugŭk is Il-Won. The T'aegŭkki indicates that the great Way of Il-Won will in the future become the place of refuge for the whole human race; and this country, which is its place of origin, will become the spiritual-parent nation of all living creatures"(*Dharma Discourses of Cardinal Master Chŏngsan 2016*, On the Korean National Destiny: 33).[15]

Jeongsan continues by saying, "The Founding Master was reborn several times in this land of Korea in preparation for establishing this Order. Both overtly and covertly, he created in advance many affinities in this nation." He continued, "The legend that Mount Kŭmgang (the Diamond Mountains) is the practice site of Dharmodgata (Elevated Dharma) Bodhisattva is a prediction that a new dharma that will save the world will arise in Korea. And the legend that Sadāprarudita (Ever Weeping) Bodhisattva will come from the West to meet Dharmodgata Bodhisattva means that Westerners will come to the East to seek the dharma" (*Dharma Discourses of Cardinal Master Chŏngsan*, Chapter XIII, The Destiny of the Way: 14).[16] These quotations, steeped in spiritual tradition and forward-looking perspectives, emphasize Korea's significant contribution to the development of a transformative spiritual movement. Drawing from this lineage of anticipation, Sotaesan and Jeongsan inspire the cultivation of moral integrity and a reverence for the deep spiritual foundations of Won Buddhism rooted in Korean tradition. They foresee the beginning of a new period characterized by a shared dedication to the betterment of humanity, indicating that the core of Won Buddhism integrates respect for its historical heritage with a proactive approach to innovation.

A Balancing Endeavor: The *Bridge Builders*

Maintaining the Korean foundations of Won Buddhism, while also accommodating necessary modifications and updates, presents a complex yet essential challenge. Achieving an equilibrium between preservation and adaptation is key. Tradition encompasses the handing down of customs, beliefs, and rituals through generations, acting as a means to preserve history and honor the insights of ancestors and mentors. In contrast, innovation focuses on breaking new ground and expanding horizons. It involves embracing uncertainty and experimenting with novel approaches to forge improvements. While they might seem at odds, tradition and innovation complement each other: tradition offers a steadfast base for innovation, and innovation ensures tradition remains applicable and significant.

Attaining this nuanced equilibrium necessitates a collaborative effort, requiring the involvement of individuals deeply rooted in the traditional aspects of Won Buddhism as well as versed in the modern environments where it aims to thrive. The individuals suited for this pivotal role can be described as 'bridge builders.' These practitioners and clergy members possess a deep comprehension of Korean culture and the historical foundations of Won Buddhism, coupled with the ability to adeptly engage with the dynamics and expectations of Western societies. Their responsibilities are diverse: they act as guardians of tradition, educators, cultural intermediaries, and agents of change. Through maintaining a diligent personal spiritual practice, they live the teachings of Won Buddhism, serving as genuine exemplars of its principles and values.

The methodology employed by these 'bridge builders' is distinguished by a profound comprehension of the challenges inherent in transplanting an Asian spiritual tradition into predominantly uncharted cultural landscapes. They acknowledge that cultural assimilation is a slow and complex process, replete with obstacles. Consequently, they temper their expectations, understanding that rapid transformation or smooth acculturation is improbable. Their patience and forward-looking perspective are essential attributes in managing the nuances of this cross-cultural endeavor.

One tangible aspect of their work involves the preservation of tradition to provide a sense of continuity and stability. This aligns with the principles of Sot'aesan, who focused on both preserving and advancing the Buddha's dharma lineage and work by respectfully receiving the Buddha's fundamental spirit (*The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Two, Doctrine: 9). By adopting Sakyamuni Buddha as his original guide, Sotaesan established a link to the revered Buddha, aiding followers in grasping the deep foundations of Won Buddhism. While Sotaesan updated the teachings for modern times, he drew upon early Buddhist traditions to foster a sense of identity and community. Sotaesan said, "In our country, Buddhism has been treated contemptuously for several hundred years and people have tended to show little reverence for whatever is associated with Buddhism. But now if we wish to guide all

sentient beings to the two roads of wisdom and merit by discovering the fundamental truth and accomplishing essential practice, we must take buddhadharma as our core principle. Moreover, Buddhism will become the major religion of the world" (CATWS 2016, *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter One, Prefatory: 15).

However, Sotaesan warned that one must not cling to a single point of view: "Virtually everyone today clings to a single point of view, preventing them from achieving the perfect Way. Confucian scholars are attached to Confucian customs, Buddhist monks to Buddhist customs…In consequence, they do not manage to become well-rounded persons…I am not saying that you should lose your principal convictions and adopt other dharmas indiscriminately, but rather that you should widely apply other dharmas after you have established your principal convictions" (CATWS 2016, *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Three, Practice: 27). Sotaesan emphasized the value of embracing a broad perspective and avoiding attachment to personal viewpoints. Similarly, when considering the adaptation of Won Buddhism, it is crucial to reflect on which innovations are essential for its development and expansion in Western contexts.

To address this question of essential innovations for Western progress and growth, we turn our attention to a specific yet pivotal endeavor: the translation of Won Buddhist scriptures from Korean to English. This task is emblematic of the broader mission of adaptation and renewal. Translating sacred texts is not merely a linguistic exercise but a profound act of cultural interpretation. It requires sensitivity to the nuances of language, a deep understanding of both the source language and the target language, and an openness to ongoing revision. As Imami et al observe (2021), "Full attention in the translation process is on cultural procedures rather than linguistic procedures. Translating is the most challenging job because if the two cultures cannot correlate or give a clear idea about the aspect of the culture in question, it may be meaningless" (Imami et al 2021,179)[17] Recognizing these translations as works in progress rather than definitive versions reflects a humble acknowledgment of the complexity of this endeavor. It is an ongoing journey of discovery, learning, and adaptation, aiming to make the profound wisdom of Won Buddhism accessible and relevant to a diverse global audience.

Therefore, the role of 'bridge builders' in Won Buddhism encompasses the crucial task of cultural and spiritual interpretation. Their deep engagement with Won Buddhist practices enables them to internalize and embody the essence of its teachings, which is vital for conveying the depth and nuance of the tradition to those who may not have been exposed to its principles. A significant aspect of their work involves elucidating complex concepts that are intrinsic to Won Buddhism but may be unfamiliar to Western practitioners. A prime instance is the term 'mind-ground (心地),'[18] which, although not commonly used in everyday language, carries considerable importance within the Won Buddhist tradition, particularly regarding practice. Bridge builders, therefore, must possess not only a deep understanding of these concepts but also the skill to

convey them in a manner that resonates with a Western audience. Moreover, certain Korean terms used in Won Buddhism may not have direct English equivalents, presenting an additional layer of complexity. Bridge builders are tasked with not just translating these terms but also providing comprehensive explanations that capture their full meaning and significance. This requires a nuanced understanding of both Korean and Western cultures and the ability to navigate the subtleties of spiritual language. In essence, the role of bridge builders in Won Buddhism is not only to translate words but to translate meaning, context, and culture. Ultimately, the goal is to assist practitioners in integrating Won Buddhist teachings into their everyday lives.

Serving as a 'bridge' entails more than just translating concepts from one language to another or adapting practices to fit new cultural norms. It involves a deep commitment to understanding the historical journeys of Buddhist communities in America, recognizing the challenges they have faced, and drawing lessons from their resilience. The experiences of Japanese American Buddhists, for instance, serve as a poignant example. Historical accounts reveal their determined efforts to safeguard their religious beliefs and freedoms in the face of adversity, showcasing a steadfast commitment to their faith amidst widespread misunderstanding and discrimination (Williams 2019). The history of Asian American Buddhism offers valuable lessons on the consequences of cultural and religious erasure. For Won Buddhists, this knowledge acts as a foundation for building a future in which their tradition remains vibrant and stable, firmly rooted in its Korean origins yet flexible enough to grow and flourish in a global context. This approach not only honors the rich history of Asian American Buddhists but also contributes to a richer, more inclusive tapestry of religious and cultural expression in the modern world.

Convert Won Buddhists can also be bridge builders, and can serve as vital links between the original Korean Won Buddhist teachings and the diverse cultural environments they inhabit. As a personal anecdote, the dedicated convert Won Buddhists I have met show a similarity which is that they integrate Won Buddhist principles into their lives, demonstrating the universality and practical applicability of these teachings. Their lived experiences and stories serve as powerful testimonials to the transformative potential of Won Buddhism, encouraging others (especially those new to Won Buddhism) to explore and adopt its practices. They also show compassion and care in creating supportive environments for the Won Buddhist clergy from Korea as well as new and long-standing practitioners, whether by organizing gatherings and study groups or presiding over Dharma services. Through their experiences and overcoming their own inner biases or attachments, they can offer guidance and support to those new to the tradition, helping them to overcome challenges and integrate the teachings into their personal contexts. Long-time practitioners who go on a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Won Buddhism in Korea often return with a fresh outlook and deepened appreciation for the Korean origins. Therefore, this group can be considered advocates for Won Buddhism, raising issues that need to be resolved within Won

Buddhism but always grounded in faith and respect for the community.

The intricate dance of preservation and adaptation that defines the journey of Won Buddhism in the modern world is a testament to the enduring relevance and resilience of spiritual traditions. The 'bridge builders,' whether they are seasoned practitioners, clergy, or devoted converts, stand at the heart of this transformative process. They embody the living link between the ancient wisdom of Won Buddhism and the ever-evolving tapestry of global cultures. As the tradition evolves and adjusts, attracting young individuals remains a significant challenge. This delicate balance of honoring the past while embracing the potential of the future constitutes the legacy of the 'bridge builders,' whose dedication ensures that Won Buddhism remains a dynamic and significant path in the pursuit of understanding and enlightenment in our increasingly interconnected world.

Conclusion

The spread of Won Buddhism into the United States highlights the complex task of transplanting a spiritual tradition from Korea into a significantly different cultural setting. Despite its core teachings advocating for equality, implementing these principles within Won Buddhism has been a gradual process. The tradition has shown adaptability, influenced by its history of navigating cultural and spiritual shifts, which has allowed it to remain relevant in modern contexts. Sotaesan, the founder, envisioned a Buddhism that transcended traditional monastic restrictions, advocating for a spirituality that is actionable, inclusive of all genders, and encourages interfaith dialogue and community engagement.

The role of 'bridge builders'—individuals dedicated to adapting spiritual practices for new cultural environments—remains crucial in this adaptation process. They work to keep the core of Won Buddhism intact while making it accessible within the American cultural milieu. By drawing lessons from the integration experiences of other Asian Buddhist traditions in the US, which have moved through cycles of tolerance, marginalization, and eventual acceptance, Won Buddhism must navigate the complex interplay of maintaining its traditions and embracing necessary changes. This effort to balance tradition with modernity is pivotal to its development, reflecting wider challenges faced by spiritual traditions in an era of significant change. Won Buddhism's commitment to practical spirituality, inclusivity, and social engagement illustrates its approach to staying relevant. Its presence in the U.S. illuminates the dual aspects of opportunity and challenge that come with modifying core teachings to suit the demands of modern society.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] In this context, I define tradition as the *process* of handing down from generation to generation, and some *thing*, custom, or thought process that is passed on over time (Graburn 2001, p. 6). Therefore, tradition is continually being created and used by people, which helps it to continue to exist (Finnegan 1991, p. 112).

[2] This article will use Revised Romanization of Korean as this is the standard used by *JDTREA*; however, some titles of texts and direct quotes from texts will appear in McCune-Reischauer Romanization if that is the manner in which they were translated.

[3] Records indicate that one of the first female disciples of Sot′aesan, Yi Chŏngch′un, resolved to donate all of her land holdings that she accrued with the money earned through her kisaeng labor. Her donations helped solidify the financial foundation for Won Buddhism in its formative years and signified the starting point of her many future contributions to Won Buddhism.

[4] Under Revised Romanization of Korean, this would be written as gyomu (교무/ 敎務); however, the spelling of *kyomu* is common in western nations where Won Buddhism operates temples.

[5] It is also important to recognize the critical contribution of lay members in the establishment of the Los Angeles temple. These individuals not only offered a provisional location for conducting a Dharma meeting but also dedicated their time and effort towards securing the temple's formal acknowledgment as a legal religious entity. Among these lay members were Mr. Sung-Bak Heo, Dr. Myung-Keun Yim, Mrs. Pal-Chin Yim, Mr. Do-Chul Moon, Mrs. Hyung Yeun Jung, Mr. In Sung Bak, and Mr. Nak-Chil Sung. (CLYHP 2003)

[6] Dharma Name, Hwang Doguk 黃道局 (1950–, dharma title Juksan 竹山)

[7] Dharma Name, Kim Daegeo 金大擧 (1914–1998, dharma title Daesan 大山)

[8] On November 8, 1999, during the 5th amendment of the religious constitution, Fourth Head Dharma Jwasan (李廣淨, Lee Gwangjeong 1936–) aimed to incorporate the system of overseas head dharma masters into the constitution, following the directives of Master Daesan. However, due to opposition from the majority, the overseas head dharma master system was not incorporated, but a legal foundation for the establishment of an overseas headquarters was laid. Given that Won Buddhism's international outreach was just beginning and there was a limited comprehension of global propagation among its followers, this move was pivotal. It paved the way for an autonomous religious constitution that would oversee the functioning of overseas headquarters and the overseas head dharma master system, thereby establishing the foundation for worldwide spread. See Ahn Semyŏng, "Mijuch'ongbu, segyegyohwa chŏnjin'gijirosŏŭi kyŏlshilsŏngŏp," Wŏnbulgyo sinmun, January 9, 2020. https://www.wonnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=204277. Accessed on February 11, 2023.

[9] Yang Euncheol, "Mijuch'ongbu kŏnsŏrŭi kwaje," *Wŏnbulgyo sinmun,* April 17, 2019. https://www.wonnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=203433

[10] Bokin Kim gives a good example of how the International Society of Krishna Consciousness rapidly progressed in the 1960s because of its anti-materialistic stance..

[11] This author's name would be spelled as Pal-Geun Jeon (전팔근 *Korean order) in the Revised Romanization system.

[12] The Preface of *The Doctrinal Books of* Wŏn-*Buddhism* outlines the efforts of the Committee for the Authorized Translation of the Chŏngjŏn in producing a new English rendition of the Scriptures (CATWS 2016, ix-xiv).

[13] Despite Choi's critique being published more than ten years ago, his observations remain pertinent and should be heeded as Won Buddhism further establishes its presence in America.

[14] Additionally, some scholars contend that Won Buddhism has yet to establish a unique architectural identity. (Hahn Joh and Won-Suk Kim 2018). Interestingly, this article highlights that with the advent of new architectural technologies in concrete and glass (1946-1979), a new era of architectural expression

begins, leading to the emergence of modern architectural-style temples. This resulted in the appearance of many church-like temples that mimic the spires of churches and the basilica-style longitudinal section layout. Additionally, in alignment with the expression of Korean identity in the national religion of Won Buddhism, many traditional-style temples emerged, featuring tiled roofs and lanterns expressed in reinforced concrete and masonry. Notably, there has been the appearance of eclectic temples that combine both church-style and traditional-style architecture.

[15] This harks back to Korea's founding ideology, *Hongik Ingan* (弘益人間 broadly benefiting the human realm), which is an ideal articulated at the time of the founding of the Korean nation. The origin of this idea is recorded in history as part and parcel of the story of Dangun, the first ancestor of all Korean people. It contains an exceptional aspiration that the Korean people would build a nation that "lived for the benefit of all humankind."

[16] In the Wisdom sutras, Bodhisattva Dharmodgata is described as a "good friend" who leads Bodhisattva Ever Wailing to enlightenment across numerous lifetimes.

[17] These scholars argue that the process of translating between languages presents intriguing challenges due to the inherent differences in linguistic structures and cultural contexts. Within the realm of translation issues, one encounters lexical and morphological challenges, syntactic difficulties, and semantic obstacles.

[18] Ground used metaphorically to describe the true mind that all sentient beings are originally endowed with. (Buswell and Lopez 2013, 1010).

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