

Korea's Won Buddhism: Is it Really a New religion?

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Won Buddhism is one of the oldest, largest, and most respected members of what are called “the native religions of the Korean people” (minjok chonggyo).¹ Koreans use that term to refer to organized religions which emerged in Korea, distinguishing them from religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity which were imported onto the peninsula. Outsiders usually refer to the 14 religious organizations which are members of the “Association of Korean Native Religions” (Han’guk minjok chonggyo hyöbühoe), as well as many other new Korean religious movements such as the Unification Church, as new religions. Some of the members of that association, such as Taejonggyo [the religion of the grand progenitor], reject that label, insisting that they are not new religions since they are revivals of the original religion of the Korean people. Won Buddhism, however, does not shy away from being described as new. In fact, it proudly proclaims that it is “a new religion for a new age.”²

¹ Yoon Yee-heum, Kim Sang-yil, Yook Suk-san, and Park Kwang-soo, ed. *Korean Native Religions* (Seoul: Association of Korean New Religions, 205)

² See, for example, what Won Buddhism says about its founder and why he founded what he himself considered a new religious movement. <http://www.wonbuddhism.info/info/page/3.html>

Some people, however, dispute Won Buddhism's claim that it is a new religion. They do not deny that the religious movement known today as Won Buddhism traces its origins to a group brought together in the second decade of the twentieth century by Park Chungbin (1891-1943), usually referred to by his sobriquet as Sot'aesan. However, they insist that Won Buddhism is nothing but another Buddhist denomination and therefore is quite different from the other "native religions of the Korean people," those which worship Korean gods such as Tan'gun (worshipped by Taejonggyo) or Kang Chŭngsan (worshipped by Daesoon Jinrihoe and several other new religious groups).³



Park Chungbin

Not only does Won Buddhism not promote the worship of a Korean god, it doesn't promote the worship of any God at all. Instead, its practitioners direct their spiritual gaze at an empty circle. Some might question, therefore, whether it is a religion at all. There are at least two other new spiritual movements emerging from modern Korea that do not promote worship of any particular God, Dahn World and Maum Meditation.⁴ Both, because of their promises of spiritual enlightenment, their reliance on prescribed rituals, and their use of terminology similar to that

³ Kim, Bokin, *Concerns and Issues in Won Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Won Publications, 2000), p. 12; Kim Dogong, "Relation between Buddhism and Won Buddhism" *Journal of the Korean Academy of New Religions*, August 2010, pp. 166-198; Daniel J. Adams, "Won Buddhism in Korea: A New Religious Movement Comes of Age," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch* 84 (2009), p. 7

⁴ Dahn World sometimes goes under the name Dahn Yoga. See <http://www.dahnyoga.com/> For information on Maum (Mind) Meditation, see <http://maum.org/eng/>

used by Daoism and Buddhism respectively, appear to some outside observers to be new religions. However, both Dahn World and Maum Meditation insist that they are not religions at all. Won Buddhism does not share their aversion to the “religion” label. Instead, as already noted, despite the fact that it is anthropocentric rather than theocentric, it insists that it is a real religion. After all, if Zen Buddhism can be called a religion, why can’t Won Buddhism be likewise?

If we accept self-definition as sufficient, then Won Buddhism is without a doubt a new religion. However, just as some groups that say they are not religious have the religion label pinned on them by outside observers, it is possible that outsiders may not agree with the self-labeling of Won Buddhism as a new religion, separate and distinct from “old Buddhism.” We therefore should examine its origins, its doctrines, its scriptures, its rituals, and its distinctive practices to see whether, in fact, it is truly a new religion or is merely one more occupant of the big tent that is Buddhism.

The non-Buddhist origins of Won Buddhism

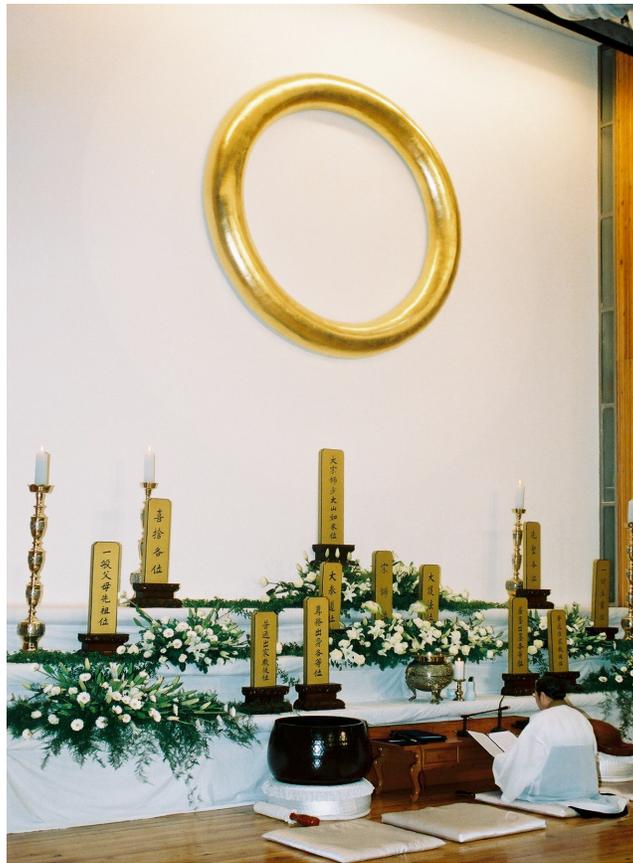
There are two reasons often cited for declaring Won Buddhism a new religion rather than just another Buddhist denomination. First of all, when Sot’aesan has his enlightenment experience on April 28, 1916, he had not received any Buddhist training or been directed in his search for enlightenment by a Buddhist master.⁵ In fact, he claimed that he didn’t even realize that his insight into the interconnectedness of all phenomena, and that behind all those interconnected phenomena lay one unified cosmic Thusness, was similar to what the Buddha had taught 2,500 years earlier until he read the Diamond Sutra.⁶ Since he reached his insight independently, Won Buddhists say, it is more accurate to say that his insight is similar to that of the Buddha but is not a “Buddhist” insight.

Secondly, Won Buddhism emerged out of a series of non-Buddhist changes to Korea’s religious culture before Won Buddhism itself was formed. The first non-Buddhist alteration to Korea’s traditional religious culture came from the introduction of Christianity, in the form of Roman Catholicism, to Korea in the last quarter of the 18th century. Catholicism introduced a radical new idea to Korea--monotheism. Traditionally Koreans, when they believed in gods, believed in many gods. They may have believed that some of those gods were more powerful than the other gods, but they never singled out one God and one God only for worship. Even Buddhists in Korea worshipped many different manifestations of Buddha and never used the sort of exclusivist language we associate with monotheism (There was no equivalent of Japan’s Nichiren Buddhism in pre-modern Korean). However, Catholics insisted that there was only one God and no other spirits should be worshipped. The first modern Korean new religion, Tonghak, which emerged in the 1860s, accepted this Catholic notion of monotheism. Although it did not teach worship of the Catholic God, it focused its spiritual gaze on a single supernatural presence called Sangje (C. Shangdi), Ch’ŏnju (the Lord of Heaven, the Catholic word for God in Korea), or Hannullim (a variant vernacular version of the Lord of Heaven) and did not talk about or try to

⁵. Kim, Bokin, pp. 3-4; Yang Eun-yong, “The History, Basic Beliefs, Rituals, and Structure of Won-Buddhism,” in Kim Sunghae and James Heisig, *Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, 2008), p. 81

⁶. Park Kwangsoo, “Sot’aesan’s Essays on the Reformation of Korean Buddhism,” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture*, 3 (September, 2003), p. 170

interact with other supernatural personalities.⁷ Early in the 20th century, another new religion appeared which then fragmented into a cluster of new religious organizations focused on the worship of Kang Chŭngsan (1871-1909), whom they call Sangjenim, the Lord of High. Though the Kang Chŭngsan religions are not strictly monotheistic, since they preach the existence of many powerful supernatural personalities, their emphasis on Sangjenim as the incarnation on earth of the supreme lord on high and the most powerful by far of all the gods shows that they, too, have been influenced by the monotheism Catholicism introduced to Korea. Won Buddhism emerged after Tonghak had been preaching its theology for over half a century, and a decade after Kang Chŭngsan left this earth. However, Won Buddhists didn't adopt the God of Catholicism, of Tonghak, or of the Chŭngsan religions. Instead, they promoted what may be called a mono-devotional rather than a monotheistic approach. Influenced by the new trend away from polytheism, Won Buddhists have excluded from their worship halls the many statues found in traditional Korean Buddhist temples. In their place, they have a circle, called Ilwönsang, which they use to represent the undifferentiated thusness of ultimate reality. (In a bow to the Buddhist elements in Won Buddhist teachings, they also call that circle the Dharmakaya Buddha).⁸



Directing the spiritual gaze at the Ilwönsang

⁷. For a detailed argument that Catholicism introduced monotheism to Korea, see my “Hananim, Hanūnim, Hanullim, and Hanöllim: The Construction of Terminology for Korean Monotheism,” *Review of Korean Studies*, vol 5, no. 1 (June, 2002), pp.105-131.

⁸. Bong-kil Chung, “The Concept of Dharmakaya in Won Buddhism: Metaphysical and Religious Dimensions,” *Korea Journal* 27: 1 (January, 1987), pp. 4-15

Moreover, Won Buddhism shows in its scriptures that it picked up some key ideas from earlier non-Buddhist Korean new religions. A very important idea in Won Buddhism is that Korea is undergoing a great transformation (*Kaebyoŏk*) that will create a paradise on this earth. This is an idea that had been earlier promoted by Tonghak as well as by Kang Chŏngsan. The Won Buddhist notion of *Kaebyoŏk* is a little different from theirs. In Won Buddhism, *Kaebyoŏk* does not refer to an actual physical cosmic cataclysm out of which the new world will emerge. Instead, it is used in a more metaphorical sense to refer to the dramatic changes science and technology are bringing to the modern world, and the spiritual transformation that should accompany that transformation in the material world. This is not a Buddhist notion, yet it is core to the teachings of Won Buddhism. Won Buddhism also reflects some influence from the “there is a spark of the divine in every human beings” teaching of the Tonghak religion as well as some influence from the assertion of Kang Chŏngsan that the problems of the world today arise from the competitive nature of the human community and that those problems can be overcome if we learn to work together for mutual benefit rather than against each other for individual benefit.⁹ These are not traditional Buddhist ideas either. Yet they are core to the Won Buddhism worldview. Nor are the similarities between Won Buddhist ideas and those of Tonghak and the Chŏngsan religions simply a coincidence. Both Sot’aesan and his most important immediate disciple, Song Kyu, better known today as Chŏngsan (1900-1962), had contact with the ideas of Tonghak and Kang Chŏngsan before the founding of Won Buddhism as a separate religious tradition.¹⁰

Buddhist elements in Won Buddhism

I do not want to suggest, however, that there are no traditional Buddhist elements in Won Buddhism. Won Buddhists believe in karma and reincarnation. For example, Sot’aesan is quoted as saying, in support of belief in karma and reincarnation, that “When one commits sins with one’s body, mouth and mind, one is repaid by various means. Here are some examples. If one hurts the feeling of others by saying untrue things, one will be sick with stomach pains in one’s future life. If one is nosy and likes to spy on others, one may be born as an illegitimate child and be received with humiliation. If one likes to expose the secrets of others and to embarrass others in public to the extent that they blush, one will be born with ugly defects on one’s face and have to live a life of humiliation.”¹¹

Won Buddhists also believe that the problems we see in the world around us are caused by our own minds and can be cured when we become enlightened. And Won Buddhism is similar to Buddhism in its assertion that we don’t need to rely on a divine being to help us overcome our problems but instead we only need to look within to discover the strength that lies within our own true nature. Moreover, Won Buddhism promotes sitting meditation as one approach to discovering our own true nature. However, these traditional Buddhist ideas are not as prominent in Won Buddhism as they are in mainstream Buddhism in Korea. In addition, they are often overshadowed by Won Buddhist teachings that are quite different from what is taught in Buddhist temples and in Mahayana sutras.

⁹ Chung, Bongkil, *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo Kyojŏn with Introduction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), p. 19

¹⁰ Bongkil Chung, “Won Buddhism: the historical context of Sot’aesan’s reformation of Buddhism for the modern world,” in Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish, ed. *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 143-167

¹¹ *Daejonggyeong* [The discourses of the Great Master], p. 65, www.wonbuddhism.info Accessed June 5, 2011.

One traditional Buddhist idea that is prominent in Won Buddhism appears in the founder's statement of why he founded this new religious movement: "our founding motive is to lead all sentient beings, who are drowning in the sea of suffering, to a vast and immeasurable paradise by expanding spiritual power and conquering material power."¹² However, the Won Buddhist approach to saving all sentient beings from suffering differs in many significant aspects from traditional Buddhist approaches.

The Unique Appearance of Won Buddhism

First of all, even on the surface level, Won Buddhism looks a lot different from traditional Korean Buddhism. Won Buddhism uses its own terminology, has its own clerical wear, and has its own architecture. Won Buddhists clerics, both men and women, are called "kyomunim," which literally means "someone devoted to the teachings." Mainstream Buddhist clerics in Korea are called "sūnim" instead. Moreover, the majority of Won Buddhist clerics are women (1,300 Won Buddhist clerics are women compared to only 700 men) and wear a modified version of the traditional Korean women's clothing rather than the traditional Buddhist nun's robes. They also don't shave their head like traditional nuns do. Instead, they wear their hair up in the bun worn traditionally by married Korean women. Despite their hairstyle, like mainstream Buddhist nuns Won Buddhist nuns are celibate. However, male Won Buddhist clerics tend to be married. Moreover, except when they are performing some ritual function, male Won Buddhist clerics dress like any other Korean man living a white-collar life style. They do not shave their head or wear monk's robes. The clothing styles and hair styles for Won Buddhist clerics are not used just to distinguish them from traditional Buddhist monks and nuns. Instead, they dress the way they do to emphasize that Won Buddhism is a Buddhism that is integrated into everyday urban life, not a Buddhism of remote mountain monasteries. (According to Won Buddhists, as well as many scholars of the history of Korean Buddhism, mainstream Buddhism during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) withdrew from society into isolated temples in the foothills of Korea's many mountains.)



From left to right, a Won Buddhist nun, a mainstream Buddhist nun, and a Catholic nun.

¹². *The Principle Book of Won Buddhism* (Iksan, Chŏnbuk: Wonkwang, 2000), p. 17

Similarly, Won Buddhist temples, both inside and outside, tend to look more like the Christian churches so common in Korean cities than like traditional Korean temples found in mountain valleys. They call their temples “kyodang,” which means “a place for teaching,” and don’t use the mainstream Korean Buddhist term “sach’al” or “chöl.” Moreover, you enter a typical Won Buddhist parish temple through a foyer, where you can pick up a copy of the weekly parish bulletin. On a Sunday morning, you then normally sit in pews during a service that, one prominent contemporary Won Buddhist admits, “is similar to that of a Protestant service. The ceremony is held on Sundays, and includes meditation, hymns, and preaching.”¹³ I have found some newer Won Buddhist temples that have pushed the pews to the sides of the main worship hall to leave room in the middle for cushions for the use of those who prefer the traditional Buddhist practice of sitting on the floor during rituals. Nevertheless, no one familiar with traditional Korean temples would mistake a Won Buddhist temple for a typical Korean Buddhist temple or a Won Buddhist ritual for a traditional Korean Buddhist ritual. Someone who walked into a Won Buddhist temple expecting the usual display of multiple Buddhist statues would be particularly struck by the lack of such statues. In their place, prominently displayed on the front wall, in front of an altar, is a large circle, the Ilwönsang. It is toward that circle, rather than Buddhist statues, that Won Buddhists direct their devotions.



A typical Won Buddhist urban temple.

¹³. Yang Eun-yong, p. 87



A typical Sunday service

Unique aspects of Won Buddhist Teachings

The central role of the Ilwönsang is just one indication that the differences between Won Buddhism and mainstream Korean Buddhism are more than matters of appearance. Significant doctrinal and philosophical differences can also be found. For example, little is said in Won Buddhist scriptures or Won Buddhist sermons about the world being “unreal” or about a need to cultivate detachment from the phenomenal world of constant change. Nor are Won Buddhists told to still all their desires. Instead, they are told that they need to make sure that their actions are informed by correct knowledge and appropriate desires.

Though Won Buddhists agree with mainstream Buddhists that everything in the world is connected to everything else, for Won Buddhists, as it was for Korea’s Neo-Confucians, those interconnections do not subtract from the “reality” of the world of experience. Instead, they constitute reality. Won Buddhists are encouraged to understand the network of interconnections so that they can act in accordance with it. They are not encouraged to try to rise above it.

Similarly, though Won Buddhists sound at first like mainstream Buddhists when they describe the original human mind as “empty,” they don’t use that term to focus on the mind as originally undifferentiated thusness. Instead, their discussions of the human mind resonate with Neo-Confucian descriptions of the fundamental human mind as empty of biases and partiality. In other words, an empty mind is not a mind empty of all specific content. Rather, it is a mind that

is calm and clear and therefore is able to perceive the world around it as that world really is, in all its complexity and diversity. Just as in mainstream Buddhism, one goal of Won Buddhist cultivation is cognitive clarity. However, in mainstream Buddhism cognitive clarity is a tool for gaining release from this world of suffering by seeing clearly the illusory nature of the things of this world. In Won Buddhism, on the other hand, cognitive clarity is seen as an important precondition for the sort of appropriate action that will bring an end of human suffering by making this world a better place. Even when Won Buddhists engage in the quiet sitting-meditation that is a hallmark of Buddhism, they don't do so simply to cultivate an awareness of the true nature of the universe. Their main objective is to calm the mind so that it can show them how to act appropriately.¹⁴ As Sot'aesan explained, "The purpose of a person of moral training who is trying to become enlightened to the origin of the Nature is to use the mind and body in accordance with it."¹⁵ In other words, enlightenment is not true enlightenment if the insight enlightenment has provided is not realized in action.

To understand the originality of the Won Buddhist solution to the problems of human suffering, it is necessary to note the distinctive nature of the Won Buddhist explanation of the causes of human suffering. Ignorance of the illusory nature of the world of everyday experience is not the primary reason we suffer. Nor do we suffer primarily because we look for permanence in an impermanent world. As for as Won Buddhists are concerned, those explanations are too vague to serve as usual guides for how to overcome suffering. Won Buddhism focuses instead on four specific reasons it identifies for unhappiness and suffering. They are 1) our inability to rely on our own resources, which causes us to be financially dependent on others who may not be able to provide us what we need; 2) the lack of wisdom in our leaders, who therefore mislead us into acting against our own best self-interest and the best interest of our community; 3) the lack of universal education, which keeps us from learning how to better our lives, and 4) selfishness, which leads us to act in ways that in the long run hurt us more than they help us.¹⁶

Won Buddhist teaches, therefore, that the most effective way to relieve human suffering is not to encourage detachment from the things of this world but instead to promote more appropriate ways of interacting with this world. That includes promoting universal education in all sorts of subjects, not just religion, since universal education allows everyone to gain the education they need to become economically self-reliant. Won Buddhism also encourages helping people recognize which potential leaders are wise and which are not, and encouraging them to follow those who are wise rather than those who are not. And Won Buddhists engage in various public service and charitable activities in order to counteract selfish tendencies.

These are not just abstract prescriptions. One of the first things Sot'aesan did after his enlightenment experience was lead his followers in a project to reclaim some coastal wasteland for farming.¹⁷ Won Buddhism has also built schools, including Wonkwang University, which includes one of Korea's best medical schools teaching traditional (Chinese-style) medicine.¹⁸ And Won Buddhism runs orphanages and social welfare centers in Korea and also dispatches medical missionaries overseas.¹⁹

¹⁴. Key Ray Chong, *Won Buddhism: A History and Theology of Korea's New Religion* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), p. 19

¹⁵. *Daejonggyeong*, p. 85

¹⁶. Chung Bong-Kil, "What is Won Buddhism?" *Korea Journal* 24:5 (May, 1984), p. 24

¹⁷. Key Ray Chong, p. 5; Adams, p. 5

¹⁸. For Information on Wonkwang University, go to <http://www.wku.ac.kr/english/>

¹⁹. http://www.wonbuddhism.info/info/page/18_3.html Accessed June 14, 2011.

A primary reason Won Buddhism encourages appropriate action in this world to reduce and eventually eliminate human suffering is that Won Buddhism assumes that we suffer because we don't realized what the interconnectedness of all things means to us personally and therefore we don't let our connections to everything around us direct our actions. We suffer because we don't realize how dependent we are on others, and how much we owe to others, and as a consequence we end up acting inappropriately, acting in ways that are contrary to both our own long-term self-interest as well as the best interest of our community.

Won Buddhism teaches that, more than an attitude of detachment, we need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. In particular, according to Won Buddhist teachings, there are four things we need to be grateful for. These "four graces," as Won Buddhism calls them, are "heaven and earth" (nature), for providing us with the air we need to breathe, the water we need to drink, and the earth we need to stand on and cultivate crops in; our parents, for giving us our lives; our fellow human beings, for providing us with such things as houses, roads, machines, medical care, and all other things we can not provide for ourselves acting alone; and, finally, law, by which Won Buddhists mean the rules and regulations that make a safe, orderly, and predictable society possible.²⁰

Sot'aesan was not the first to talk about the need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. In Japan several centuries earlier Nichiren (1222-1282) has also preached about four things to be grateful for. However, Nichiren taught the need to be grateful for those things that had made it possible for him to live as a bodhisattva on this earth. Sot'aesan was more practical. He taught that we need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude toward nature, our parents, our fellow human beings, and our laws in order to work together more effectively with others to reduce and eventually eliminate the causes of suffering in this world.²¹

Conclusion

Are the various differences we have noted between Won Buddhism and other forms of Buddhism enough to create enough of a gap between Won Buddhism and those other forms of Buddhism large enough that we are justified in calling Won Buddhism a new religion? I agree with Won Buddhists that the answer is "yes," particularly when we take into account the direction Won Buddhism has been moving in the last few decades.

Won Buddhism called itself an "association for the study of the Buddhist dharma" until 1947 when, taking advantage of the religious freedom that appeared on the Korean peninsula after the Japanese occupation of Korea ended with Japan's defeat in World War II, Won Buddhism registered for the first time as a new religion and adopted the name Won Buddhism.²² Moreover, in 1962 Won Buddhism revised some of its earlier scriptures to minimize terminology that

²⁰. *Principle Book of Won Buddhism*, pp. 33-57; Bonggil Chung, "Won Buddhism: A Synthesis of The Moral Systems of Confucianism And Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 15 (1988), p. 437-38.

²¹. Ryuei Michael McCormick, "The Four Graces According to Sot'aesan and Nichiren," *Won Buddhist Studies*, Vol. II (1997). Reprinted on the internet at

<http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Ryuei/4Graces.html>. Accessed June 14, 2011.

²². Key Ray Chong, p. 34.

appeared too close to mainstream Buddhist terminology.²³ On top of that, rank-and-file Won Buddhists themselves appear to be becoming more conscious of themselves as Won Buddhists rather than as simply Buddhists. In the 2005 census in South Korea, around 130,000 people declared that they were Won Buddhists, compared to only 86,000 ten years earlier, in the 1995 census. There are probably more Won Buddhists than that in South Korea. Won Buddhist authorities claim to have over a million members, attending over 550 temples in South Korea alone as well as over 50 temples outside of Korea.²⁴ Though that number of Won Buddhists may be somewhat exaggerated, still it is probably safe to assume that many of the 10.7 million South Koreans who wrote on government census forms that they were Buddhists are actually Won Buddhists. Moreover, given the almost 46% increase in those declaring themselves Won Buddhists in 2005, it is also safe to assume that there is a growing trend of Won Buddhists to identify themselves specifically as such. In other words, the identity of Won Buddhism as a new religion appears to be strengthening.

Therefore I argue that we can conclude that, although Won Buddhism has enough Buddhist coloring that the use of Buddhism in its name is not unjustified, it nevertheless is a new religion and should be accepted as such. After all, if we can talk about Soka Gakkai as a new religion rather than as just another Buddhist denomination, surely we can grant Won Buddhism the same independent existence.

²³. See the introduction to Chung, Bongkil, *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo Kyojŏn with Introduction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), particularly p. xiv. Also see a review of that translation by Jin Park, available on the internet at H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences at **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8735>. Accessed June 14, 2011

²⁴. http://www.wonbuddhism.info/info/page/18_1.html Accessed June 14, 2011.