

Grace Song
The Threefold Practice of Won Buddhism
Part 1: “Three Practices in Harmony”
June 5, 2021



Hello everyone, my name is Grace Song, and I'm the chair of the Won Buddhist Studies Department at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies. I'm also an ordained Won Buddhist *kyomunim*, which means one who's devoted to teaching the Won Buddhist Dharma.

I'm here today with *Tricycle* magazine to talk about the Threefold Practice of Won Buddhism. In this four-week Dharma Talk series, we're going to discuss how to incorporate simple but powerful practices that will help us know our mind, cultivate our mind, and use our mind well so that we live a happier life.

Just a little bit about myself: I was born and raised in Toronto, Canada to a father who was a devout Won Buddhist. Growing up as a Won Buddhist was quite lonely because I was usually the only Won Buddhist student in my class. When people asked me, "Grace, what's your religion?" my answer was either "I don't have one" or "I'm a Buddhist." It was my way of getting out of having to explain the "Won" in Won Buddhism.

In Won Buddhism, we do not enshrine Buddha statues at the altar. What you will see is a circle called the *Il Wong Sang*, which means One Circle Image. This is the symbol of truth, it's the symbol of our original nature, and it's the symbol of our interdependence.

When I was young and my friends would come over to my house, they'd always ask, "Why do you have all these circles around your house?" I couldn't explain the fundamental truth of it, so I just said, "Oh, they're decorations from Korea."

Like any teenager who rebels against their religious parents, I resisted against my father and whatever he said about Won Buddhism. I remember that every time I did something wrong, he would say, "If Master Sotaesan (the founder of Won Buddhism) saw this, what do you think he would say?" I found it very frustrating.

Many people asked me the question, "Then why did you choose to ordain as a Won Buddhist *kyomunim*?" I chose this path, but I also feel it came to me after certain causes and conditions, especially after experiencing my father's death. At the time, I wasn't sure how to process dying and death, so I was suddenly teeming with existential questions like, "Why was I born in Toronto to these parents? Why do I have only one older sister?"

The 49-day deliverance service helped me to grieve and to process death. It was one of the moments in my life that pushed me in this spiritual direction. There was one day when I said to myself, "You know what, I don't know what I'm getting into, but I'm going to give this path a try."



So that's why I decided to come here to the Won Institute of Graduate Studies to train, and then I decided to head to Korea to do more training because that is where Won Buddhism was founded. I spent many years in Youngsan, which is the birthplace of Founding Master Sotaesan.

It was also the area where he spent many years on a spiritual quest. It was also an important area during the formative years of Won Buddhism. My time training in Korea was precious because I met so many wonderful Won Buddhist teachers and dharma friends.

It was there that I realized the many gifts of Won Buddhism. I realized the teachings are very practical, scientific, rational, creative, and, most importantly, open. There were many Won Buddhist teachers who inspired me, who truly lived the teachings. They wouldn't have to say anything—the teachings would just manifest in how they used their mind and body.

They were so full of love that you thought that they loved you the most. That's what I thought. But then you would have conversations with other people who would say the same thing. They would say, "No, she loved me the most," and then you'd realize that you weren't so special anymore. And that was their compassion.

Their message to me was always, "Grace, don't just memorize what I say. You practice it yourself—see what works, see what doesn't work, and if something is not working, then go and ask and receive guidance." Their message was also hopeful. They'd say, "Believe in yourself. You can reach buddhahood," because Won Buddhism is truly about making buddhadharma daily life and daily life buddhadharma. My teacher would say, "Your work is your practice, and your practice is your work."

If someone were to ask me, "What do Won Buddhists practice?" I would answer, "Won Buddhists practice timeless and placeless meditation." And if they ask, "Why do Won Buddhists practice?" I would reply that our founding motive is to lead all sentient beings who are drowning in the sea of suffering to a vast and immeasurable paradise here on earth.

And if they ask, "How do you practice?" then I would direct them to this training method that helps you to use the mind well in any situation. And when we use the mind well, it should look like that circle, the Il Won Sang, which is perfect, complete, utterly impartial, and selfless.

So that is what I hope to cover in this four-part series: how can we use our mind well through the Threefold Practice. And the starting point is by renewing myself. When I renew myself first, it has a ripple effect: it then helps to renew my family, my community, society, and the world.



In our four-part series, we're going to look at the Threefold Practice of cultivating the spirit, of honing wisdom through inquiry, and making mindful choices in our everyday life. In this first week, we're going to explore how these three parts work in harmony. As I mentioned before, Won Buddhist practice is done in any place at any time, so this is our training ground. Every moment is an opportunity for me to grow spiritually.

We are growing this strength, this power of mind, through the Threefold Practice. And this is the essential teaching in Won Buddhism. Some people will ask me, "Well, why do you use the word 'threefold'? Why don't you just call it three practices?" which is a good point. I say, take a piece of paper, for example, and fold it twice. If you fold it twice, then there are three parts, but they're still part of that one piece of paper.

The threefold practice works exactly like this. There are three parts to it, but they work in harmony. Our Won Buddhist Fourth Head Dharma Master Chwasan explains it beautifully by saying that every object in this world has a foundation that permits it to be, as well as principles and elements that constitute it.

For example, the three main nutrients that make up our bodies are proteins, carbohydrates, and fat. The three major components of fertilizer for plants are nitrogen, phosphoric acid, and calcium. The three prerequisites for the lives of humans are clothing, food, and shelter.

Similarly, there are three principles that constitute our mind and character, that oversee and sustain them. We call them the Threefold Practice of cultivating the spirit, inquiry into human affairs and universal principles, and mindful choice in action.

Simply speaking, it's about cultivation, inquiry, and choice. And when we put it into practice, it means that in everything we do, we do it with sound thought. These are the three major prerequisites for our spiritual life. We may not be conscious of it being the Threefold Practice while undergoing something, but it's always there functioning in whatever we that we do, either instinctively or automatically.

Just as we can't physically live without clothing, food, or shelter, we cannot live spiritually without this Threefold Practice. This is not true only for people—it's also true in the animal worlds as well. Those creatures that have senses, at least, use this practice as they live their life.

I usually say, think of yourself as spiritual farmers. The three principles of cultivation, inquiry, and choice help you to cultivate your mind field. Cultivation is the subject that clears the field in preparation for farming the mind field. Inquiry is the subject that teaches you various farming



methods and enables you to distinguish between crops and weeds. Choice is the subject that enables you not to fail at farming and to have an abundant harvest by putting into practice what you've learned.

Founding Master Sotaesan emphasized the importance of practicing them all together. Our Third Head Dharma Master Daesan drew pictures to show what happens when one doesn't practice them together. He draws in stick-figure form a practitioner who only cultivates the mind and doesn't practice inquiry or choice in action. That visual is someone with a huge stomach because in our tradition, we do lower abdomen breathing meditation. Someone who just cultivates their spirit has a huge stomach.

And what would happen for a practitioner who only inquires? He drew a picture of someone with a huge head, and the rest of the body is small. People who only inquire are so much in their head that that's the only part of the body that inflates.

And what about a practitioner who only focuses on choice in action? Their head and body are very small, but the arms and legs are long and huge. They don't contemplate much and don't focus on calming their minds, but instead, they're always in action, using their arms and legs.

Of course, these drawings are all exaggerations, but they are meant to show what happens when we are only leaning to one side of the practice. There's an imbalance. Although he drew it as a body, this also applies to our mind. To be physically healthy, there has to be a balance between the parts of our body. In the same way, our character should be in balance through practicing the mind, inquiry, and mindful choice. Another example is to picture it as three legs of a stool. If one leg is shorter than the others, the stool topples over.

How does this relate to our everyday life? Imagine someone who is very intelligent, who is very good at doing work, but is full of desire and greed and only focuses on themselves and their well-being. Do you think that person would be welcomed wherever they go? They may have that bright mind, but that bright mind could be used to cause harm.

In another case, there could be a person who has not much greed, is very giving, and if you give them work, they'll do it diligently, but they lack that discernment, that wisdom. If you give them work, they're always doing it the hard way, the difficult way, so you hesitate to give them any important projects.

And finally, there's a third type of person: one who doesn't have a lot of greed and is quite bright, but they don't get up to do the work. They're great at talking, but they fail to put it into action.



How could you trust them to do important tasks, especially if you put them into a role of leadership?

When we practice these three parts, the emphasis is to do our best to practice them together, especially when we encounter difficulty in life. It's natural for us to sometimes focus on one part because there are practices that we gravitate to. Some people like meditation and chanting. Others are more work oriented, so they prefer doing action. And still others are wise and have good judgment and would rather spend hours reading scripture.

Of course, there are some people who have all three aspects. As practitioners, reflect on that. It's easy to only focus on one area because we feel comfortable and it's natural for us, but see if we can balance all three. And that's the emphasis I will be making throughout these talks.

There was a story of a disciple of Sotaesan who once talked about how he would sweep the ground. This is in the headquarters in Korea. He'd be sweeping the ground with the broom, and Sotaesan came to him and started scolding him, and he said, "Why are you using the broom and only sweeping using one side? If you only use that one side, your mind becomes one-sided as well." He taught him to use the broom with one side first than the other.

My dentist, when I went to get my teeth checked, also pointed out the same thing: "Why are you only chewing on one side of your face?" I didn't even notice that I was doing that. He told me, "This side of your face is bigger. Try to balance that—chew on both sides."

Master Sotaesan was warning against leaning to one aspect of the practice. If we do all three, we gain the three great powers of absorption, the power of wisdom, and the power of mindful choice. Even Sotaesan would ask his disciples, "Which of the three do you feel I need to work on?" He would ask that to his students.

Think about the world that we live in right now. Things are becoming brighter. In the past, there were many people who wanted to be practitioners, but they had to leave everything behind in order to become a practitioner of the way. They'd have to leave their work and their family.

But now, times are changing. We are now coming into a time when practice is not separate from what we do. We don't have to escape to the mountains. Our work now is the practice. Sotaesan didn't teach us to finish our work first and then practice. They're not separate.



Make the teachings relevant and realistic to your life. If it's cold in the morning, you wear a sweater to keep you warm. But if it gets warmer, what do you do? You take the sweater off. And if you don't, you will be very uncomfortable and you'll get too hot.

If the teachings are not relevant, it's like wearing a winter jacket during the hot summer. If the time changes, so do the teachings. If you attach to the teachings without looking at the changes that are happening in society, then it could turn into dogma.

Won Buddhism is a set of teachings that is realistic, so when you see the circle, it's saying that this is the symbol of all things in the universe, so all things are Buddha. When I bow to the Il Won Sang, I'm not only bowing to the buddha nature within myself, but I'm bowing to all things in the universe.

Some people will say it sounds like a simple teaching. It's not easy to do. That's why my teachers would say, "Set a firm intention." Remind yourself why is it that I'm practicing. If you forget your intention, set it again at night. If you forget the next morning, just set it again. Don't give up.

When we continue doing this over and over again, at some point, you will set your spiritual intention, and that intention will last until the next day. Then it will eventually last a few days, then a week. And eventually that intention will go for a month, a year, and then it will continue.

My teacher once asked me, "What do you think dedication is?" I said, "Well, isn't dedication doing something from A to B perfectly and not making mistakes?" And he said, "No. That's one way you could think of dedication. I'll give you another definition of dedication. True dedication is when you're doing something and then there are some times where you fall down. This dedication is to get back up, to continue. And you'll fall back down again, but then you get back up because that's true dedication."

I never forget that. I never forget that especially during the hard times because there are times in my practice where I'll get down on myself and create labels of myself, "I should be this type of practitioner," but I just try to let that go.

During these four talks, during the series, we are moving towards becoming truly living and active buddhas. Active living buddha. Acting living buddhas practice not just for oneself but so that eventually we can be of service to our communities.

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In the next talk, I will explain the practice of cultivating our true mind, which is clear and round, calm and tranquil. It's free from discrimination and attachment. This talk is important because it's going to show us how we can integrate the practice of cultivating the mind in both action and at rest.

At rest we have the practice of seated meditation and chanting, and when we're in action, we have the practice of pausing. I hope you will join us.