

Dr. Bokin Kim

*Material and Spiritual Balance*

Week One: “The Dangers of Advanced Material Civilization”

July 4, 2020



Hello everyone. Thank you for joining my Dharma Talk series. I'd like to start by briefly introducing myself. I was born into a devout Won Buddhist family in South Korea. As the daughter of one of the Head Dharma Masters [Venerable Taesan], Won Buddhism naturally became part of the fabric of my life. It was also what influenced me to pursue the Won Buddhist minister path at the age of 19. After completing my minister education training in Korea, I decided to come to the USA in 1979 to further my studies. I finished my doctoral degree at Temple University in 1989. During my doctoral program, I also started a Won Buddhist temple in Philadelphia in 1987, and later the temple moved to Glenside, a suburb of Philadelphia.

Since 1999, one of my missions was to establish the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, a graduate school that offers professional master's degrees. I first started by completing all the necessary paperwork and when the school finally opened, I became the academic dean. I've now been the president of the Won Institute since 2012.

The mission of the Won Institute is very much grounded on the principles of Won Buddhism. Some of you may not know much about this tradition. Won Buddhism started with the enlightenment of its founder, Venerable Sotaesan, Pak Jun Bin. With his enlightened mind, he observed the rapid growth of scientific civilization, the overturning of moral values, and the dehumanization of society. Sotaesan proclaimed his founding motive a hundred years ago, “As material civilization develops, cultivate spiritual civilization accordingly.”

I don't know if any of you have visited a Won Buddhist temple. If you have visited a Won temple, one of the first things you may have noticed is that we do not enshrine a buddha statue at the altar. Instead, you will see a simple circle, called the *Il-Won-Sang* (One Circle Image). The word *Won* is a transliteration of the Korean word circle and symbolizes the Won Buddhist core values of openness and interconnectedness. It also symbolizes the awakened mind of Buddha, or our original nature.

Sotaesan opened a new religious order with the teaching of Buddha as the central doctrine. He said that the buddhadharma of the future will not be the buddhadharma of institutions like those of the past; rather, it will be a buddhadharma that will allow everyone to practice without leaving their home, occupations, or family. In other words, he made the teaching applicable to daily secular life. The tradition that started in Korea later migrated to the USA in the early 1970s, and now about 30 temples offer services in Korean and English.

My overall topic for this Tricycle series is how to cultivate spirituality, how to cope with materialism and the dominance of materialism, and how to view human suffering in the 21st century. I feel a good starting point is Sotaesan, the founder of Won Buddhism, and his understanding of modernity.

Living in rural Kora in the late 20th century, he saw the world heading for an era of advanced material civilization. Human's inner greed, society's collective ideology, and systematic



structure would establish a culture of materialism and consumerism. If we place a magnifying glass in front of the human situation, we see evidence that many humans are under the control of the material. That's suffering. Sotaesan clearly described contemporary human suffering in the following quote:

*Today, with the development of scientific civilization, the human spirit, which should be making use of material things, has steadily weakened, while the power of material things, which human beings should be using, has daily grown stronger, conquering that weakened spirit and bringing it under its domination; humans therefore cannot help but be enslaved by the material.*

How can we relate human suffering in the 21st century with the dominance of materialism? I'd like to explore this question by explaining three important terms found in the passage I just read: first, “the power of material things,” second, “weakened spirit,” and third, “humans enslaved by the material.”

Let's first discuss matter and the dominance of matter. According to the dictionary definition, ‘matter’ is any object used for human life. If we look around us, we see that contemporary civilization and scientific and technological progress have produced abundant material goods. People receive benefits and rely on their conveniences.

Then, how about the dominance of matter and dominance of any equivalent to matter? To use a simple example, just think about the power of money. Perhaps that example is too obvious, we don't need to explain how powerful money is. What about the power of advanced technological devices? How many of you out there do *not* have a smartphone? There's also the internet, YouTube, and social media. These devices are no longer merely tools. With repeated usage, our psychology and physiology create strong bonds to them and we cannot separate ourselves from them both in terms of space and time. If we are not in control of our digital devices, then we cannot be free. This is what it means to be dominated by matter.

Sotaesan also talks about spirit versus a weakened spirit. Sotaesan defines spirit as “the state in which the mind being clear and round, calm and tranquil, is free from a tendency toward discrimination and a penchant toward attachment.” Following Sotaesan's definition, what would be an example of a weakened spirit? A weakened spirit would lack calmness and tranquility and would ceaselessly chase external objects or internalized objects. In this state, the spirit is under the control of objects and loses its autonomous power.

Given that humanity may be dominated by matter, leading to a weakened spirit, then at this point, humanity is enslaved. At this point, humanity loses freedom of choice or action and loses sovereignty over the power of material things.

Each individual loses control of their assets: time, money, energy, health, family, and more.

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We are constantly stimulated by commercials that repeatedly tell us to *Purchase, purchase; possess, possess; purchase and possess more for your happiness*. As society and the world continue to compete for more products and wealth, Mother Nature slowly walks the path to extinction.

Let's take a moment to think about the novel coronavirus that is affecting so many lives. The virus is not a living organism. It is a protein molecule covered by a protective layer of fat. It requires a host to even begin to function. It's a parasite, right? The virus is an example of how matter can dominate the world. This COVID-19 pandemic shows the fragility of humanity and how many people can lose their sound and fresh spirit during an unprecedented situation. Many feel fear, worry, depression, or despair. Our weakened spirit takes over. The weakened spirit drives us to a state where we lose the sovereignty of our autonomous spirit, especially in the face of hardship. Are we entitled to give up a fresh and sound spirit? Are we doomed to suffering and despair?

One medical doctor in palliative care on the West Coast shared his reflection. His reflection seems to clarify where we are now. “We are moving from an acute crisis to a more chronic one. The coronavirus, a simple little bundle of protein, may be not much of an enemy. The much more formidable foe may be how we perceive and react.”

In my next talk, I will look at human suffering a bit more in-depth as we experience it in the 21st century. I will also share my personal journey of suffering. See you again at the next session.