

Dr. Bokin Kim

*Material and Spiritual Balance*

Week Two: “Maintaining a Strong Spirit in a World of Capitalism, Consumerism, and Materialism”

July 11, 2020



Welcome back! The topic of this series is about how to cultivate spirituality and how to recover the sovereignty of spirit to cope with human suffering created by material dominance. In this talk, I will discuss our suffering in-depth, as well as my own personal experience.

My experience seems like a typical example of a 21st-century human situation. I arrived in Pittsburgh in 1979 and started my doctoral studies at Temple University in the spring of 1980. At that time, counseling was quite popular in the USA. I asked why suffering was rampant in the USA. According to my observation and perception of the USA, it seemed like middle-class Americans had no need to worry because they were materially affluent and had access to technology which provided conveniences. It seemed like enough for human life. However, when looked into at some depth, the dominance of matter appeared to be weakening the spirit and enslaving humanity. The USA had started to show this phenomenon by that time. Now, the whole world shows this same phenomenon.

Let me introduce Gautama Buddha’s definition of human suffering after his awakening. After the Buddha was awakened, he declared: “Life is *dukkha*.” The term seems pretty familiar to everybody now. Dukkha is a translation of suffering or dissatisfaction. Gautama declared that “Life is *dukkha*” regardless of any human situation: rich or poor, young or old, from a noble family or not, with or without power. Then he went further to explain that physically, we have to face what we dislike, such as getting old, being sick, and eventually dying. This pandemic reveals human suffering very vividly.

Psychologically, we have to face those whom we hate or dislike and separation from those whom we love. How much loss we have experienced during this pandemic! Then there are the large losses and failures as a result of this pandemic amidst the transient and changing nature of life itself, which is hard to face.

As one of the psychological dimensions, let us think about suffering as a failure at getting what we want. Have you been successful in getting all you want without any failure? Gautama Buddha diagnosed that desire and greed are the causes of suffering. We cannot get all that we want.

But interestingly, contemporary worldviews are quite different or even *opposite* to the Buddha's position. Capitalism is how to satisfy human desire, maximize human interest, and stimulate human greed. Capitalism has become the driving engine for business and economy. Capitalism, consumerism, and materialism are the ideologies underpinning our culture, aren't they?

Now, I'll discuss the phenomenon of suffering using the lens of Venerable Sotaesan, the founder of Won Buddhism. Sotaesan defines suffering as enduring what we dislike, similarly to Gautama Buddha. Sotaesan listed suffering categorically: everlasting or temporary; appropriate or inappropriate; self-created or happening inadvertently or accidentally. We can ask seriously, is suffering accidentally faced and endured? Against the COVID-19 pandemic is any one of us free

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from responsibility? The 21st century is characterized by the dominance of matter, weakened spirit, and enslaved humanity. COVID-19 seems like a snapshot of the 21st-century human situation.

Let's think about the dominance of matter in terms of desire, craving, and addiction. Any food, any medicine, any matter can cause addictive behavior. Then, is matter the cause of addiction or suffering?

I would like to share my experience during my Ph.D. journey. It was a hard lesson. In the spring of 1980, I started my first semester at Temple University. As many people experience in foreign countries, I had difficulty in communication due to my limited language capacity. In the beginning, I couldn't even understand the simplest instructions, like “There will be no class next week,” or “Read this chapter for homework.”

My struggle continued due to my deficient language capabilities. I felt bad and frustrated. I would come home from class, and to escape this miserable feeling I would start eating sweets. My eating wouldn't stop until I felt really sick. So the sweets consumed me instead of me consuming the sweets. I think this represents a universal expression of any addictive behavior: drink drinks me, drug drugs me, and shopping shops me.

Retrospectively, I visited my past struggle. What do I mean by “I eat sweets?” That means, I was eating the sweets but I didn't have the awareness that I was doing so. So my struggle started due to the absence of awareness. I avoided facing negative emotions by burying myself in the sensory taste of sweets. This lack of awareness of what I was eating while eating can be described as a weakened spirit, the spirit losing its sovereignty.

As a result, I actually started to blame the sweets and the external environment for my suffering. It may sound funny, but it's true. I would wonder: *Why does the store sell sweets? Why do my roommates bring me sweets? Why does a factory make sweets? Why were sweets invented in the first place?*

I went through seven years of this vicious cycle, feeling lost in a dark tunnel. The moment of awareness happened when I visited the hospital for an indigestion problem. There I met patients senior to myself—I was in my 30s at that time—who had very similar symptoms. I identified with their suffering. It was the same as the suffering I saw in my mirror. At that moment, I realized that my suffering was not going to end by itself. *I created it. I caused it to happen.* I realized that I needed to own the suffering and its cause. It was now in my hands to change the situation. From that moment of awareness grew a moment of determination.

To recognize suffering is the beginning of healing. The weakened spirit must recognize its source of suffering in order to recover its sovereignty, which characteristically is calm and

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clearly aware. So, in my next talk, I will talk about the sovereignty of spirit and the recovery of sound spirit.

Thank you for joining me today and I will see you at the next talk. Thank you.