Introduction

Background

A proper introduction to Chŏngsan’s thought requires an account of the historical context in which new religions indigenous to Korea came into being. Around the turn of the twentieth century, in the final decades of the waning Chosŏn kingdom (1392–1910), Korea was going through what has been described as a degenerate age. The Chosŏn kingdom was plagued by internal corruption and a predatory Confucian ruling class that dominated both the capital of Seoul and the rural areas, and that had gained wealth at the expense of the common people. To make matters worse, different factions of the ruling class fought among themselves. Foreign powers took advantage of the kingdom’s weakness and launched repeated attacks against the impotent Chosŏn court. The common people, especially the peasants, suffered grievously under oppression, exploitation, and extortion by the ruling class and by local government officials. They were made even more miserable by recurrent epidemics, floods, bitterly cold winters, and famine.

Under these deplorable conditions there arose a religious movement called Tonghak (Eastern Learning). Tonghak was founded by Ch’oe Cheu (1824–1864; “Suun”) as a result of a divine revelation. In April 1860, “the Supreme Lord,” appeared to Ch’oe Cheu, directing him to teach people “the Eastern way” as opposed to the Western way (Catholicism), which was spreading rapidly in the upper classes.¹ The religious doctrine of Tonghak was a synthesis of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, which Ch’oe Cheu thought should not be replaced with the Western learning. He claimed, however, that the three Eastern ways were exhausted and in need of reform.²
The central tenet of Tonghak theology is the belief that humanity is heaven. Human mind is none other than God's mind; heaven originates in the human mind. Thus, the Lord on High, or God, is enshrined in the human body. Hence, humanity should be treated as heaven. This tenet aims to restore the dignity, liberty, and equality of human beings and raise them from the abjectness of their condition under the Chosŏn kings. Tonghak divided history into “earlier heaven” and “later heaven”; past culture and civilization, Chŏe Cheu claimed, had ended and the new culture of the future had opened: the period of the later heaven had begun. A universal, humanitarian culture would, he predicted, unfold through an opening-up of the spirit, of the Korean people, and society.

Because the ruling class suppressed open political discussion, the peasants turned to the religious movement of Tonghak to express their grievances. In June 1861, as the number of people following him increased, Chŏe Cheu announced the new religion. He asserted that the era had come when the nation should be strengthened and the livelihood of the people be assured, and called for reform of the corruption-ridden government. The Chosŏn court viewed this millenarian claim as a serious threat and moved to stop the spread of the Tonghak faith. It started to oppress Tonghak followers just as it had persecuted Christians earlier. In 1863, Chŏe Cheu was arrested on charges of misleading the people and sowing discord in the society, and he was executed the following year. Tonghak did not, however, fade away, and the second patriarch, Chŏe Sihyŏng (1829–1898; “Haewŏl”), systematized the doctrine of Tonghak as a new religion, collecting it in a volume, the Tonggyŏng taejŏn (Great canon of Tonghak).

The peasants’ deep hostility toward the aristocratic class helped the Tonghak movement to gain momentum. In 1894, a peasant revolt broke out against the local government in North Cholla province, and Chŏn Pongjun (1853–1895) organized a Tonghak army, overwhelmingly defeating the government army. Alarmèd by this defeat, the Chosŏn court asked China, ruled at that time by the Qing dynasty, for military reinforcements. The Japanese government took the opportunity to invade Korea, claiming that it had sovereignty there, thus beginning the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The Qing army was defeated by the Japanese forces, and the Chosŏn kingdom was dissolved, to be succeeded by the Taehan dynasty (1897–1910). Now threatened by the Japanese presence in Korea, the new Taehan court turned to Russia for help. But the Russian presence
in Korea led only to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), in which the Japanese were again the victors.

Eventually, Korea was annexed to Japan (1910), thus losing its national identity, and endured thirty-five years of Japanese occupation. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule, but the Korean people soon realized the painful truth that freedom is not free. The country was divided into the North and South Koreas and suffered three years of civil war, starting in 1950, which devastated the Korean peninsula and ended with two million Korean people dead. The people had suffered a hundred years of almost unbroken strife and misery between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, and numerous religions indigenous to Korea arose in this period to address the deep needs of the populace.

Besides Tonghak, there was Chûngsan'gyo (religion of Chûngsan). Because the Tonghak rebellion (1894) had failed without achieving its goal, some of the activists from that rebellion were still searching for a way to bring about social reform. Kang Ilsun (1871–1909; “Chûngsan”) had followed the Tonghak army, watching the course of the rebellion but not participating in the fighting. He observed the failure of war and the social chaos that ensued, and came to the conclusion that the situation could not be rectified by any existing religious or human power. He thought that only divine magical art could open up a New World. Hoping to attain such power, he studied Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, as well as yin-yang philosophy, geomancy, divination, and medicine; he dabbled in such occult disciplines as calling down rain and hail and the magic art of shape-shifting (transforming his own body into something else). He then wandered about Korea for three years, beginning in 1897, in order to attain a clear understanding of national and social conditions. Upon returning to his home village in 1901, he started ascetic practice at Taewôn-sa, a Buddhist temple on Mount Moak in North Cholla province, with the aim of attaining omniscience, with which he would deliver the world. He became spiritually awakened to “the great way of heaven and earth,” and began to attract followers from 1902 onward. He gave sermons, claiming that he had the authority to rule heaven, earth, and humans. He said that he had come to the world in order to open a new heaven and earth, a paradise into which he would deliver all men and women suffering in the bitter seas of misery. Kang Ilsun was believed in as a messiah, the incarnation of God. The fact that so many people believed his claim
to be the supreme lord of heaven has to be seen in the context of his
times: first, the social chaos that followed the failure of the Tonghak rebel-
lion; the anticipation among Christians that Christ would come again;
the Buddhist belief in the coming of Maitreya Buddha; and the rumor
that Ch’oe Cheu, the founder of Tonghak, had reincarnated. Kang Ilsun
propagated his teaching from 1902 to 1909 but never instituted a religious
order. Still, he called his religious work “the reconstruction of heaven and
earth,” and this was the essence of his religious planning. Some of the
followers, however, complained about the delay of the promised opening
of the new heaven and earth. They frequently pleaded with him that the
paradise be realized quickly. In the midst of these difficulties, in 1909,
Kang Ilsun died, and those followers who were disillusioned at his death
dispersed without even attending the funeral; only a few Ch’ungsan’gyo
followers were said to have remained to hold the funeral.

The idea of “opening the later heaven” had undergone a drastic
change in Kang Ilsun’s thought. From an exclusive reliance on magic, he
thought that the ideological foundation of “the later heaven” could be
laid only with a new synthesis of the best elements of all religions. His
doctrine thus came to include Taoism and yin-yang philosophy as well
as traditional shamanism and geomancy. The Confucian cardinal moral
virtues were promoted as the moral ideals; to these were added Tonghak’s
moral virtues, and together, these virtues comprised the moral discipline
of Ch’ungsan’gyo.

In the cosmology of Ch’ungsan’gyo, the earlier and later heavens are
divided in accordance with the “schedule of the universe” controlled by
the authority and power of Kang Ilsun. The age during which the earlier
heaven is replaced by the later heaven is identified with Korea’s degenerate
age. The earlier heaven is characterized by extreme inequality, disorder,
and injustice (all abundantly evident in Kang Ilsun’s time), and the later
heaven by equality, justice, and prosperity. During the degenerate age, all
the conditions accumulated in the earlier heaven were clearly exposed
and all hidden antagonisms and conflicts surfaced, with violence, ten-
sion, struggle, and chaos. It was due to the “reconstruction of heaven and
earth” performed by Kang Ilsun that the schedule of the universe was
readjusted toward the opening of the later heaven; the promised paradise
would eventually be constructed in the later heaven with all conflicts and
antagonism dissolved. One of the salient features of Kang Ilsun’s later
thought is the “resolution of grudges and enmities.” He identified the
cause of continuing tension, enmity, and fighting as rooted in resent-
ments characteristic of the earlier heaven, in which the principle of mutual opposition was in charge of human affairs. Consequently, the universe was full of grudges and enmity, so that resentful spirits maneuvered to cause all the cruelty and calamity in the human world. Kang Ilsun therefore intended to amend the blueprint of heaven and earth by correcting the actions of these myriad spirits—correcting, that is, nothing less than the way of divinity—so that all ancient resentments could be resolved and a government of creative transformation could be erected.

A third indigenous religion is Wŏnbulgyo (Won Buddhism), described in detail below. The founders of these three major religions were all aware that they could not rely on any one of the three ancient religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, although they did incorporate some of the tenets of these religions into their new doctrines. As Korean Buddhism, ostracized by the Confucian ruling class, had barely survived in remote mountain areas during the five centuries of the Chosŏn kingdom, it could not be relied on to correct the direction of the Korean destiny. Confucianism, as practiced by the ruling class of the Chosŏn kingdom was blamed as the direct cause of Korea’s ruin, so it too could not be used as the leading principle for any new religion. Some Buddhist thinkers tried to reform the Korean Buddhist system so that it would be more relevant to the Korean secular world. Han Yongun (1879–1944) and Paek Yongsŏng (1865–1940) were two of the most active figures in this attempt. It should be noted here, however, that Korean Buddhism has come a long way since the liberation of Korea in 1945 and is now arguably the soundest Buddhism of modern times.

The Life of Chŏngsan

In Search of a Mentor

Song Kyu (1900–1962), better known by his dharma title, Chŏngsan, would eventually become the head dharma master of Wŏnbulgyo, succeeding the founder, Pak Chungbin (1891–1943; “Sot’aesan”). As his biographer points out, Chŏngsan lived through the Korean national tragedies of the first half of the twentieth century. As a young child in North Kyŏngsang province, he was already aspiring to become a sage. At age six, he started learning the Confucian classics from his grandfather. At age eight, while studying the Zizhi tongjian, he was already aspiring to
be a great man. Two years later, in the year Korea lost its national identity to Japan, Chŏngsan was studying the Confucian classics; he would become, he had decided, a great figure capable of correcting the ills of the Korean national destiny. Enshrining the name tablets of ancient heroes and sages in his room, Chŏngsan offered prayers in front of them. He was thirteen when he began studying Confucianism at a private school run by Song Chunp'il (1869–1943). After two years of study, however, Chŏngsan realized that Korea could not be saved with Confucian moral and social teachings, and he started to deepen his interest in inquiry into the metaphysical principles of the universe and in moral cultivation. At age seventeen, Chŏngsan searched the Mount Kaya region three times in search of a recluse named Ryŏ, who was alleged to be an enlightened person, only to be disappointed. Chŏngsan offered prayers on Mount Kaya with three other men for three months; they advised him to go to North Chŏlla province to meet there with Song Ch'ano (1874–1939), who they said would help him find a great mentor.

Chŏngsan decided to travel there. In 1917 he met, not Song Ch'ano, but Ch'a Kyŏngsŏk (1880–?), the founder of Poch'ŏn'gyo, a sect of Ch'ungsan'gyo that was centered in North Chŏlla province. Ch'a Kyŏngsŏk did not have the qualities that Chŏngsan was looking for in a teacher, but Chŏngsan did decide to travel to the house of the founder of Ch'ungsan'gyo, Ch'ungsan. Ch'ungsan had died in 1909, but at his house Ch'ungsan found Ko P'allye (1880–1935), Ch'ungsan's widow, and he stayed there for several months. Ch'ungsan's only daughter, Kang Sunim, who was four years younger than Ch'ungsan, regarded him as her elder brother. One day when they were alone, she told him that her father had hidden a small book in the ceiling and instructed her to give it to someone who would come to her later. She took Ch'ungsan to a small back room and pointed to a spot in the ceiling that was patched with pieces of paper. Carefully tearing open the patched spot, he found the *Essential Secrets of Correcting the Mind* (*Chŏngsim yogyŏl*). This book reflected the Daoist method of spiritual cultivation. Ch'ungsan later incorporated part of this book in the section on “cultivation of spirit” in the *Correct Canon of Buddhism* (*Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*). According to Ch'ungsan's biographer, the widow Ko P'allye found, after a while, that Ch'ungsan's spiritual power conflicted with her own religious practice; so she wrote Ch'ungsan's father to take him back to North Kyŏongsang province.

In November 1917, Ch'ungsan left Ch'ungsan's house and entered the Buddhist temple Taewŏnsa on Mount Moak, where the great monk Chin-
muk (1562–1633) had briefly stayed and where Chūngsan had attained his spiritual awakening in 1901. It was common for those connected with Chūngsan’gyo to visit it. Chŏngsan stayed at this temple accumulating spiritual power by reciting mantras.21

While Chŏngsan was dedicating himself to mind cultivation at Taewŏnsa, a middle-aged woman, Kim Haeun, stopped by the temple. She was a devout follower of Chūngsan’gyo, thinking that Chūngsan was truly a man of the Way but that he had simply appeared at the wrong time. Her maternal aunt had told her that she had seen a truly enlightened man at Taewŏnsa, and now Kim Haeun wished also to see him. According to the biographer, her first impression of Chŏngsan was that he was like the “full moon in the empty sky.” The sight of the young Chŏngsan, with his clear countenance and mind like the moon rising high in the sky, inspired her deeply. From that time on, Kim Haeun visited the temple frequently and learned about Chŏngsan’s aspiration and goals. She wanted to serve him and help him. She therefore asked her son, Kim Toil, to invite Chŏngsan to her house, which he did, and Chŏngsan accepted the invitation.22 In January 1918, at the age of eighteen, Chŏngsan left Taewŏnsa for Hwahae-ri, in Chŏngŭp county. He stayed there, at Kim Haeun’s house, developing his spiritual power by prayers and chanting, until such time as he would meet his long-awaited mentor.23

This description of Chŏngsan’s life would not be complete without considering his position in his mentor’s plan, so we will turn briefly to Sot’aesan and the development of the order that would become Won Buddhism.

The Chief Codifier

In South Chölla province, Pak Chungbin (1891–1943; “Sot’aesan”) attained a spiritual awakening in 1916, six years after Korea lost its national identity to Japanese imperialist ambitions. Sot’aesan appeared to his villagers as a figure with extraordinary charisma. About forty men, most of them his seniors, became his followers. Sot’aesan saw that human beings could become enslaved by the powerful seductions and pressures of the material world. He thought that the world could be transformed from one of torment and misery into one that was safe and happy as long as the spiritual power of human beings was strengthened and expanded. He felt it urgent, therefore, to strengthen the spiritual power of humankind, and he believed that the only way to accomplish this end was through faith
in truthful religion and training in sound morality. Sot’aesan’s first step in opening his new religious order was to choose eight of his followers as disciples, who, with the addition of himself and one new disciple, would form a ten-member body; this became the first unit of the new religious order he was establishing. The ten members would correspond to the traditional “ten directions”: the leader corresponding to heaven, the central member to the earth, and the eight other members to the eight cardinal directions. Sot’aesan kept the center position vacant, appointing a proxy to hold it until the arrival of the right person “from afar.” Sot’aesan told his disciples that his aspiration and plan to open a new religious order could not be realized until he met the right person. And the right person was Chŏngsan, from North Kyŏngsang province. According to Chŏngsan’s biographer, Sot’aesan located the young Chŏngsan by studying the stars. In April 1918, Sot’aesan went to Hwahae-ri to meet the person who would become, in Sot’aesan’s words, the “chief codifier of the new religious order,” and in July, Chŏngsan moved to Yŏnsan, South Chŏlla province, the cradle of Won Buddhism, where he was appointed to the center position of the ten-member body, the first supreme council of the order. In July 1919, Chŏngsan received his dharma name, Kyu, and the dharma title Chŏngsan shortly afterward. When Sot’aesan ushered Chŏngsan into the new order, he meant Chŏngsan to be the creator of the doctrine. To an extent, the word creator is more correct than codifier, because the details of Won Buddhist doctrine were in fact defined and articulated by Chŏngsan, not Sot’aesan. The third patriarch, Kim Taegŏ (1914–1998; “Taesan”) called Chŏngsan “the mother of Dharma of the new order,” a description that was inscribed on the Chŏngsan Monument at the headquarters of Won Buddhism.

In order to compare the nature of his own enlightenment with those of ancient sages, Sot’aesan perused the classics of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Christianity, and Tonghak. Upon reading the Diamond Sūtra, Sot’aesan declared that Śākyamuni Buddha was the sage of all sages and that he would take the Buddha’s teaching as the central tenet of the doctrine of the new religious order he was planning to establish. He did so because he realized that the Buddha’s teaching was best in explicating the fundamental truth of the universe. However, he could not advocate traditional Buddhism to his disciples because Buddhism in Korea by that time had been marginalized for five hundred years by the Chosŏn kingdom’s national ideology of Confucianism, and Buddhist monks were treated as the lowest of the Korean society’s eight low classes. In Sot’aesan’s
view, Buddhism as practiced in Korean society could not be relied on for unfolding the spiritual power for the new era. Because the spiritual lights of ancient sages had been dimmed for such a long time, thought Sot’aesan, they were not bright enough to illuminate the spiritual darkness of those troubled times. The light of wisdom and compassion was obscured by the three mental “poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion, which in the Buddhist view are the ultimate cause of all human miseries. Sot’aesan thus set aside what no longer seemed effective and incorporated into the doctrine of the new religious order a selection of relevant tenets of the ancient sages, taking Buddha-dharma as the core of the teaching.

Before mentioning anything about Buddhism to his disciples, the young Sot’aesan accomplished several things as examples of a new religious life. In order to show the way in which the old world would be transformed into a new one, he set up such precepts as diligence and frugality, the abolition of empty formalities, doing away with superstition, and abstinence from alcohol and tobacco. First, he set up a savings association. He then ordered his nine disciples to construct an embankment to stop the seawater from the tidal estuary beside his village, so that what had been wasteland could be used for growing crops. He launched the reclamation project in March 1918 and had it completed after one year of hard labor. Although the land reclaimed was only twenty-five acres, Sot’aesan had set an example of the new religious life. The farmland thus created provided a financial foundation for the new religious order.

Upon completing the embankment project, he ordered his nine disciples, including Chŏngsan, to offer special prayers, citing the precedent of some ancient sages who wished to save the world and who had offered prayers to Heaven and Earth in order to obtain authentication of their sincerity. The prayers began on the twenty-sixth day of the third month (lunar calendar) of 1919 and ended on the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month.26 As there was no sign that the numinous spirits of Heaven and Earth had been moved by their prayers, Sot’aesan quoted the saying “One sacrifices oneself in order to preserve one’s integrity.” The disciples understood this to mean that they should be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the well-being of all sentient beings, and this they resolved to do. Sot’aesan prepared a document inscribed with the words “Sacrifice with no regret” followed by their names, and asked all nine to “seal” it by pressing their thumbs on the paper. As the story goes, they used no ink or wax, just their bare thumbs. Before the nine disciples left for the nine mountain tops, Sot’aesan asked whether they wanted to say anything;
they said that they had nothing to say. The young Chŏngsan said, “We are going to sacrifice our lives with pleasure like this; however, we pray that you should not be troubled a bit by this matter of ours.” When the disciples were leaving for their prayer sites on the mountaintops where they planned to commit suicide, Sot’aesan called them back. Under the nine names on the sheet of white paper were nine fingerprints, the color of blood. The appearance of the fingerprints was taken to be the sign of authentication of their selfless devotion. Sot’aesan told them that they did not have to carry out their sacrifice since the numinous power of Heaven and Earth was moved by their selfless sincerity and devotion.28 This demonstration of selfless devotion became the spiritual foundation of the new religious order and the standard of Won Buddhist priesthood for future generations, the standard that a Won Buddhist priest ought to serve selflessly for the well-being of all sentient beings.

In March 1919, when the embankment project was almost complete, Sot’aesan had traveled to Wŏlmyŏngam on Mount Pyŏn, in Puan county, North Chŏlla province, and stayed there for ten days. In August, after the dharma authentication, he told Chŏngsan that he was planning to return to Mount Pyŏn in order to give repose to his spirit and to avoid the suspicion of the Japanese. He expressed his intention to draft, while he was there, a doctrine and system that would renovate the past Buddhist doctrine and system, and to prepare to open the gate of a new order by building up affinities in the surrounding districts. He told Chŏngsan to go to Wŏlmyŏngam before him, to shave his head, become the senior disciple of Zen monk Paek Hangmyŏng (1867–1929), and pursue various inquiries; but not to read any Buddhist scriptures.29 Chŏngsan went to Paek Hangmyŏng, who received him warmly. After a few rounds of Zen questions and answers, the Zen monk gave Chŏngsan a Buddhist name, Myŏngan (Bright eye). Chŏngsan, with the Buddhist name Myŏngan, did his duty as the chief disciple of the Zen monk, making inquiries into various areas on which Sot’aesan would test him upon his return.

On October 6, 1919, Sot’aesan renamed his group the Preparatory Association for the Establishment of the Society for the Study of Buddha-dharma and ordered that the phrase “Buddha-dharma” should enter all records. He said, “From now on, what we should learn is Buddha-dharma and what we should teach our followers is Buddha-dharma. Exert yourselves to be enlightened to the fundamental truth by inquiring into the gist of Buddha-dharma.” He explained that because Buddhism had been treated contemptuously in Korea for several hundred years, no
one would respect anything bearing the name “Buddhism,” and hence he had been reluctant to introduce Buddha-dharma lest it would not be respected by the world. He explained that Buddha-dharma was, however, the best means to discover fundamental truth and to lead sentient beings to the gate of merit and wisdom through correct practice, and that he would therefore take Buddha-dharma as the central teaching of the new religious order he was planning to establish. He predicted that Buddhism would be the major religion of the world in the near future, but declared that it should be renovated for the new age. For instance, the worship of the Buddha should not be focused on the Buddha statue, because people should realize that all things in the universe are none other than the Buddha. Hence, Buddha-dharma would not be separated from daily life; daily life would itself be Buddha-dharma.31

On October 20, 1919, Sot’aesan left for Wŏlmyŏngam. On his arrival, he was met by Chŏngsan and the head monk, Paek Hangmyŏng, who welcomed him to the temple. People began to arrive from Chŏnju and Kimje, the two towns in North Chŏlla province, to receive teachings from Sot’aesan, so he needed larger quarters to accommodate them. With Paek Hangmyŏng’s help, Sot’aesan purchased a house and field four kilometers away from Wŏlmyŏngam for use as a cloister, paying for them by selling the pocket watches used by the nine disciples during their prayers and with a donation from one of his followers from Chŏnju, Yi Man’gap (1879–1960). Chŏngsan stayed at Wŏlmyŏngam for two more years, until the cloister, Sŏktuam, was completed.

In all, Sot’aesan spent five years developing his personal spiritual practice, retiring from public activity during turbulent times, and crystallizing his ideas for the new religious order. In 1920 Sot’aesan announced the outline of the doctrine for the new religious order. It consisted of two related ways: the “way of humanity” and the “way of practice.”

The first way outlines the path we are to follow in the world: to honor the sources of Fourfold Beneficence (of heaven and earth, parents, brethren, and laws) and follow the four essential rules of social reformation (equal rights of man and woman, using wisdom rather than seniority or relationship as the standard, educating the children of others, and venerating those who devote themselves to the public cause). The second way concerns moral culture and comprises a Threefold Practice (cultivation of spirit, inquiry into facts and principles, heedful choice in karmic action) and eight prerequisites for the Threefold Practice (four to keep, namely, faith, zeal, doubt, and sincerity; and four to forsake, namely,
faithlessness, greed, laziness, and delusion). These tenets are summarized below. It should be noted that the outline of the doctrine at this point does not mention Buddha-dharma. Nor does it mention the circular symbol.

Irwŏnsang, the symbol of the source of the two ways, is now the distinguishing emblem of Won Buddhism worldwide. The word wŏn meaning “circle,” appears later in the history of the order, and becomes important enough a concept to give the order its final name, Wŏnbulyo (literally, “circle Buddhism”).

While staying at Sŏktuam, Sŏt’aesan shared his ideas for Buddhist reform with Buddhist monks. Eventually, he wrote the On the Renovation of Korean Buddhism (Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏkshillon) and the Essentials of Spiritual Cultivation and Inquiry (Suyang yŏn’gu yoron). The main point of the former is that the outmoded and obsolete Buddhism should be modernized and renovated to be useful for the general salvation of sentient beings. The latter contains the proper method of spiritual cultivation and articles of inquiry as the correct ways of discipline.

In 1924, Sŏt’aesan left Mount Pyŏn and temporarily rented Pogwangsa Temple in Iri (now Iksan), in North Chŏlla province. The name of the order at this time was Pulbŏp yŏn’gu hoe (the society for the study of Buddha-dharma). This name was used until the order was renamed Wŏnbulyo (Won Buddhism) by Chŏngsan in 1947, two years after Korea was liberated and four years after Sŏt’aesan’s death. In the fall of 1924, eight years after Sŏt’aesan’s enlightenment, two straw-thatched houses were built at Shinyong-dong, Iksan, the first structures in what would become the order’s general headquarters. When construction of these buildings was under way, the communal life of the devotees took shape. The nine disciples, as well as other disciples of the earlier years, were mostly poor peasants, and hence their communal life through the construction period was a continuation of poverty and hardship. However, by all accounts, according to Chŏngsan’s biographer, they found their life full of joy and happiness as they were trained in the doctrine of the new religion. They were happy to know that they were the founders of a new grand religious order.

In 1935, the Taegakchŏn (great enlightenment hall) was built in the precinct of the general headquarters and, instead of a Buddha statue, the circle symbol Irwŏnsang was enshrined there as a symbol of both object of religious worship and the standard of moral culture. The first Irwŏnsang consisted of a wooden board with a circle drawn on it; two phrases were written below the circle: “The Buddha-nature of the Tathāgata” and “The Fundamental Source of Fourfold Beneficence.” This simple Irwŏnsang was
soon replaced with another, without the two phrases, and this is the form in which it is enshrined to the present day. Sot’aesan’s reasons for selecting the circle image and Chŏngsan’s role in codifying it are discussed in detail below. With the enshrinement of Irwŏnsang, Sot’aesan completed the foundation of the new religious order. By means of the new doctrine, Sot’aesan taught his disciples the way toward the realization of buddha-hood in this mundane world and produced large numbers of enlightened disciples, who were sent to branch temples, where they taught the new religion to the public.

For twelve years after the establishment of the Iksan headquarters in 1924, Chŏngsan devoted himself to the preparation of the teaching material for the edification and cultivation of talented youth, both men and women. For the following six years, from 1936 to 1942, he resided at the Yŏngsan branch temple, putting his heart into the construction of what is now revered as a sacred place and into the education of younger generation. During that time, he wrote the *Founding History of the Society for the Study of Buddha-dharma* (*Pulbŏp yŏnguhoeh chianggŏnsa*). In 1942, he returned to the general headquarters, helping Sot’aesan compile the *Correct Canon of Buddhism* (*Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*) and manage the general administration of the order.

In 1943, two years before the liberation of Korea from Japanese occupation, Sot’aesan was ordered to pay homage to the Japanese emperor. Sot’aesan was obliged to prepare to visit Japan, as he had no choice in the matter. The Japanese colonial government in Korea saw Sot’aesan as Korea’s Gandhi, fearing that he would organize the Korean people against the Japanese aggressors. For reasons that are unclear, the order to go to Japan was rescinded. Sot’aesan, however, understood that his Society for the Study of Buddha-dharma would be harshly repressed as long as he remained alive. On May 16, Sot’aesan, apparently still in good health, fell ill; he died on June 1 at a Japanese hospital in Iri (Iksan).

**Head Dharma Master**

In June 1943, upon Sot’aesan’s sudden death, Chŏngsan succeeded Sot’aesan as the head dharma master of the order. Immediately after the liberation of Korea from Japanese occupation in 1945, he ordered relief for the Korean refugees returning from overseas. At that time, Chŏngsan expressed his ideas about Korean national reconstruction in his *A Treatise on National Foundation* (*Kŏng'ungnon*). In 1947, Chŏngsan changed
the name of the order from Pulbōp yŏnguho (Society for the study of Buddha-dharma) to Wŏnbulgyo (Won Buddhism) and proclaimed it to the world as a new Buddhist order. If Chŏngsan had not renamed the order, the question would have arisen whether Won Buddhism was a sect of Chogye order of Korean Buddhism. The Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]), which was completed and published after Sot’aesan’s death (1943), allows such an interpretation: books 2 and 3 of the volume consist exclusively of some Buddhist scriptures and only book 1 was a new writing, which was redacted as the Canon (Chŏngjŏn) of the Scriptures of Won Buddhism (Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn [1962]).

In 1946, Chŏngsan established the Yuil Institute to educate the leading figures of the order and developed it into Wŏn’gwang Junior and Senior High Schools and Wŏn’gwang College (now Won Kwang University). He established Wŏn’gwangsa (Won Buddhist press) to publish the order’s magazine, the Wŏn’gwang (Consummate light). When the North Korean military forces occupied the general headquarters of Won Buddhism in 1950 during the Korean War, Chŏngsan, while staying at a nearby dwelling, sent his followers to branch temples, instructing them not to take part in the communist activities. Despite the difficult circumstances before and after the Korean War in 1950, Chŏngsan ordered the construction of a pagoda and stele to commemorate Sot’aesan’s work. Amid the ravages of war, he maintained the viability of the order and continued to guide the populace. He assessed the public service and other merits of the first founding members, for which they were assigned appropriate dharma ranks, and in 1953 he called for a general meeting to celebrate the first generation’s work. At the meeting, he was proclaimed head dharma master of the order for a second term (six years).

Chŏngsan suffered a stroke in 1953, brought on by overwork, and people in and associated with the order were filled with great anxiety. His condition improved a little, though his right side remained paralyzed. According to his biographer, followers as well as visitors reported that, despite his illness, they found respite from their afflictions in his presence, and he was able to lay foundations for numerous projects of religious edification, education, and charitable work, which is the threefold mission of the order. Chŏngsan established Tongsan Monastery, Central Monastery, and the Wŏn’gwang girls’ junior and senior high schools. He established Chŏnghwasa (a press) to launch his publication project. The publications included the Canon of the World (Sejŏn [1972]) and the History of the Order (Kyosa [1975]). He also ordered the establishment of charitable organizations such as orphanages, asylums for the aged, and sanatoria.
In 1959, Chŏngsan was proclaimed head dharma master for a third term. He ordered his followers not to observe the traditional formalities on his sixtieth birthday in August 1960, establishing instead the Dharma Beneficence Foundation, the medical foundation for the Won Buddhist clergy, with contributions from his followers in celebration of his birthday. It was Chŏngsan who designated Sot’aesān “the new presiding Buddha for the New World,” when Sot’aesān was recognized as one of the patriarchs of the Buddhist tradition. The title was subsequently engraved on the epitaph erected in memory of Sot’aesān. It was Chŏngsan, also, who began to compile a new scripture for the Won Buddhist order: the analects and chronicles of Sot’aesān, in the *Scripture of Sot’aesān* (*Taejonggyŏng*). On December 25, 1961, he instructed the members of the order’s supreme council to complete the compilation of the *Scripture of Sot’aesān* and to proceed with the redaction of the *Canon* (*Chŏngjŏn*, published posthumously in 1962) in the *Scriptures of Won Buddhism* (*Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn*). By publishing the new scriptures of the order, Chŏngsan sealed Won Buddhism's identity as a new, independent religious order with Buddha-dharma as the central tenet of its doctrine.

Chŏngsan’s health deteriorated, despite various medical treatments, and he became critically ill in the first days of January 1962. On January 22, a group of men and women, laity and priests, gathered around his sick bed. Chŏngsan asked someone to explicate “the ethics of triple identity” (*samdong yulli*), which states that all religions come from the same source, all sentient beings have the same vital force, and all enterprises have the same goal. Chŏngsan told the people around him to create “one household under heaven” through the great Way of Irwŏn, the Way of “great cosmopolitanism.” Two days later, on January 24, 1962, he passed away. After his death, the supreme council of the order met and conferred on him the posthumous dharma rank of “tathāgata of great enlightenment.” In doing so, they recognized Chŏngsan’s achievements and merits, and signaled to Won Buddhists and others how exemplary he had been as a spiritual leader and as an embodiment of the values of the order.

**The Central Doctrine of Won Buddhism**

The central doctrine of Won Buddhism that Chŏngsan helped Sot’aesān systematize is set out in the *Correct Canon of Buddhism* (*Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* [1943]). In this section, I offer a summary of that doctrine by way of background for an understanding of Chŏngsan’s own contribution; in the
Four Pillars

Won Buddhist doctrine is determined by the ultimate goals of the order, which are to deliver sentient beings from misery and suffering and to cure the world of moral ills. The whole doctrine of Won Buddhism is structured in order to realize these two goals. The ways to realize the goals are presented as four “pillars.”

The first pillar is expressed in the maxim “Correct enlightenment and right practice.” This pillar has its ground in Buddhism. One should be enlightened to one’s own Buddha-nature and practice in accordance with light of its wisdom. Since deluded beings are not aware of their own Buddha-nature, they are advised to be enlightened to and practice the truth of Irwŏnsang, which has been correctly transmitted as the mind-seal by buddhas and patriarchs. This first pillar is expounded in the tenets of Irwŏnsang and Threefold Practice in the Canon, and aims to deliver the sentient beings from suffering.

The second pillar is expressed in the maxim “Awareness and requital of beneficence.” The purpose of this pillar is to change the life of resentment and grudges to that of gratitude. By “beneficence” is meant what gives you life. In Confucianism, filial piety is the most important moral duty. In Won Buddhism the idea of this Confucian moral duty is extended beyond one’s own parents to include heaven and earth, brethren, and laws (the Fourfold Beneficence), without which one cannot exist.

The third pillar is expressed in the maxim “Practical application of Buddha-dharma.” In the Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]), the maxim was “Propagation of Buddhism.” This reflects the fact that Buddhism in Korea at the time was confined to remote mountain valleys and had no religious impact in Korean society. Although the teaching of the Buddha embodies truth and skillful means to save sentient beings from misery, the Buddhist system was formed mainly for the life of monks in monastic orders, and was not suitable for people living in the secular world. Under such a system, the Buddha-grace, no matter how great it may be, could not reach the numberless sentient beings of the world. Thus, Won Buddhism teaches that Buddha-dharma should not be separated from daily life. The spirit of practical application of Buddha-dharma is expressed in such mottos as “Buddha-dharma is daily life, and daily life is Buddha-dharma” and “Timeless Zen and placeless Zen.”
The fourth pillar is expressed in the maxim “Selfless service for the public.” This pillar reflects the ideal of the bodhisattva who benefits himself or herself only by benefiting others. Sot’aesān could see that the pursuit of material good, without a concomitant increase in spiritual good, was fanning the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion, and, to use the classic Buddhist metaphor, plunging humanity into ever-worsening, bitter seas of misery. Sot’aesān felt it urgent to strengthen the altruistic moral sense. Sentient beings could not be delivered into “the limitless paradise” as long as they remained selfish and egotistic with the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion in their hearts. Though this ideal may seem too lofty to reach, it expresses a widely held truth that human beings will save themselves from misery only by transforming themselves. The spirit of this pillar is expressed in the motto “Everywhere is the Buddha-image; do all things as an offering to the Buddha.”

Irwŏnsang (as the symbol of Dharmakāya Buddha)

As a way of reforming Buddhism, Sot’aesān had the Irwŏnsang (unitary circular form) enshrined as the symbol of the Buddha-nature or Mind-Buddha in 1935. The circular symbol is traditional to Buddhism; it had been introduced in Korea by Sunji (fl. 858), who studied in China under Yangshan Huiji (803–887), cofounder of the Guiyang school of the classical Chinese Chan tradition. In the doctrinal chart of the Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]) it was noted that Nanyang Huizhong drew the circle and transmitted it to his disciples, but this phrase was deleted in the Canon (Chŏngjŏn [1962]). Sot’aesān did not explain what the Mind-Buddha was, except that the circle Irwŏnsang was its symbol. In 1937, Chŏngsan wrote a treatise, “On Irwŏnsang,” which explains the whole tenet of Irwŏnsang. A year later, Sot’aesān wrote “An Account of the Mind-Buddha-Irwŏnsang and Vow,” in which he gives an account of what the ultimate truth is and how one should practice. In 1943, Chŏngsan wrote three sections of the chapter “Irwŏnsang,” which Sot’aesān allowed to be inserted in the Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]). Since there are significant differences between Sot’aesān and Chŏngsan on the truth and practice of Irwŏnsang, Sot’aesān’s view is presented first, leaving Chŏngsan’s view to the section below that is devoted to his thought.

Sot’aesān calls the ultimate reality of the universe “Irwŏn” and says that it is the ineffable realm of samādhi. He characterizes Irwŏn as transcending being and nonbeing, and calls it the gate of birth and death.
It is the fundamental source of the Fourfold Beneficence (heaven and earth, parents, brethren, and laws), later identified as the Dharmakāya Buddha. Thus, “Irwŏnsang” is synonymous with “Dharmakāya Buddha” for Sot’aesan. It is also the original nature of all buddhas, patriarchs, ordinary humans, and all other sentient beings. This reflects the Mahāyāna Buddhist tenet that all sentient beings are endowed with the Buddha-nature. To this point, Sot’aesan is describing the essence of Dharmakāya Buddha-Irwŏnsang as the ultimate reality of the universe.

Sot’aesan then expresses his view of the function of Irwŏn, saying that it includes permanency and impermanency. A rough analogy is the permanency of the ocean, compared with the impermanency of the waves. Viewed as permanent, Irwŏn—being invariable, immutable, and spontaneous—has unfolded itself as an infinite world. Viewed as impermanent, Irwŏn has unfolded itself as a world in constant flux: first, in the formation, abiding, decay, and destruction of the universe; second, in the arising, abiding, decay, and extinction of all things; and, third, through the changes undergone by beings through many lifetimes in keeping with the operation of laws of karma. Sot’aesan then shows what a practitioner should do with the understanding of this principle of the universe.

Sot’aesan’s goal of practice is to attain the mighty power of Irwŏn and be unified with Irwŏn, because without it, one cannot be on the path of improvement, and one cannot keep oneself from demotion and harm. Sot’aesan’s method of attaining such power lies in modeling oneself after the Mind-Buddha, Irwŏnsang, when one practices in the triple discipline: guarding one’s mind and body perfectly, knowing facts and principles perfectly, and using one’s mind and body perfectly. Here the model of practice is the well-roundedness of the circular form, which is employed to depict the pure, complete, and perfect mental state of a Buddha-bodhisattva.

The Ethics of Beneficence

The chapter “Fourfold Beneficence” in the Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]) is a discourse on the Won Buddhist religious ethics. The chapter explains how one is indebted for one’s life to heaven and earth, parents, brethren, and laws, conceived of as a single beneficence made up of four parts; and how and why one should requite them. The appearance of the Fourfold Beneficence in the Correct Canon of Buddhism (Pulgyo chŏngjŏn [1943]) has its origin in Sot’aesan’s reflection on
the source of his enlightenment in 1916, in which he realized his debt to these four things. This realization developed into the ethics of beneficence. Sot’aesan challenges us to consider whether it is possible for one to live without what heaven and earth provide, whether one could have brought oneself to the world without one’s parents, whether one could survive without the help from brethren or fellow beings, and whether one could live without the protection of laws. He says that even a person of limited intelligence will recognize that to live without these is impossible; even a person of limited intelligence will know, for instance, that one cannot exist without air and water provided by heaven and earth, just as fish cannot live without the beneficence of water. He then declares that nothing can be a greater beneficence than that without which one cannot live. Just as the ocean is “the universal beneficence of nature”\textsuperscript{48} for fish, the Fourfold Beneficence is “the universal beneficence of nature” for human beings. Because the concept of “the universal beneficence of nature” does not imply any transcendent, anthropomorphic deity, the Fourfold Beneficence does not imply anything like “divine grace.” Once it is proven that one is indebted to the Fourfold Beneficence, no further argument is necessary to prove that it is one’s actual duty to requite it; Sot’aesan thinks it a matter of necessity to requite the beneficence to which one owes one’s life.\textsuperscript{49}

The ethics of beneficence provides the deontological reasons for requiting the Fourfold Beneficence (because one owes one’s life to it); beneficence requital also is an act of religious faith in the teleological efficacy of making an offering to Dharmakāya Buddha, the fundamental source of the Fourfold Beneficence.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, the making of offerings to Buddha as supplication for blessings has undergone a drastic change in Won Buddhism; it is replaced by the requital of the Fourfold Beneficence. However, the question was raised how one can ever repay one’s immense debt to the beneficence of heaven and earth, just as how a fish can repay its debt to the ocean. Sot’aesan’s model for beneficence requital is that a disciple indebted to the beneficence of the mentor can pay the debt by putting into practice the virtues of the mentor, returning the honor to the mentor.\textsuperscript{51} Since it is impossible for one directly to requite the Fourfold Beneficence, one can fulfill the duty to requite the beneficence by perfecting one’s moral virtues through observing the moral maxims derived from the principle of indebtedness to them.

Now the two principles, religious and moral, are assimilated to each other by the imperative that one ought to requite beneficence as a way
of reverent offering to the Buddha. If, for instance, I treat other human beings on the basis of fairness required by the maxim of requital of beneficence of brethren, I will be treating them as buddhas and thus be blessed insofar as they have the power to bless or punish. If, however, I treat them unfairly, violating the moral principle of fairness, I will be punished by them, the living buddhas.

In the following paragraphs I summarize Sot'aesan’s views on how one is indebted to, and how one ought to requite, the Fourfold Beneficence. He sets out the schema in an orderly analytic fashion, for each of the four aspects, progressing through a statement of the kinds of situations in which beneficence manifests itself, to statements of the principles of gratitude and ingratitude and their consequences, and the moral duties entailed by it.

*Beneficence of Heaven and Earth (Ch’ónjiün)*

First, Sot’aesan states as a matter of fact that all human beings owe their lives to heaven and earth: from the largest cosmic motions down to the phenomena of sunlight and rain. Heaven and earth have “ways” and “virtues,” which we can follow in our requital of these beneficences, namely, that they are (1) extremely bright, (2) extremely sincere, (3) extremely fair, (4) natural, (5) vast and limitless, (6) eternal, (7) not subject to good or evil fortune, and (8) free of thought in their bestowals of beneficence.53

The way to requite the beneficence of heaven and earth lies in one’s moral improvement by modeling oneself after their ways. One can form one body with heaven and earth if one practices such virtues as wisdom (brightness), immutability (eternity), imperturbability in the face of one’s good or ill fortunes, and benevolence (not harboring or “abiding in” the idea of doing favors to others). Once one has perfected one’s moral character with these virtues, one’s moral influence on other sentient beings will be like that of heaven and earth.

Ingratitude to heaven and earth, on the other hand, brings on punishment. Although heaven and earth are empty and silent to one’s deeds, ingratitude will lead to unexpected hardships and sufferings in life and sufferings caused by one’s deeds.

The fact that heaven and earth act without calculation or partiality implies the moral duty “to harbor no notion of rendering favors to others.” To neglect this duty, Sot’aesan points out, may cause resentment. The point is not to act dutifully or morally in order to avoid these harmful consequences, but to do them in order to show gratitude to the extent