

Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun. By Kim Iryŏp. Translated and with an introduction by Jin Y. Park. Korean Classics Library: Philosophy and Religion. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. Pp. 328. Hardcover \$49.00, ISBN 978-0-8248-3878-2.



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Kim Iryŏp (1896–1971) was raised and initially educated in a devout Methodist Christian environment under the strict guidance of her fideistic pastor father and her mother, who believed in female education. Both parents died while she was in her teens, and she questioned her Christian faith at an early age. She was one of the first Korean women to pursue higher education in Korea and Japan. Kim became a prolific poet and essayist, her writings engaging cultural and social issues, and a leading figure of the feminist “new woman” (*sinyŏja*) movement in the 1920s, which promoted women’s self-awareness, freedom (including sexual freedom), and rights in the context of the complex intersection of traditional Korean Confucian society, Westernization and modernization, and Japanese colonial domination. Iryŏp (her pen and dharma name) embraced Buddhism during this period, first in her writing and later as a lay practitioner, as a path to universal liberation. She was ordained in 1933 and became a prominent Sŏn (Chan/Zen) Buddhist nun. After two decades without publishing, she returned to print in 1960 with *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (*Ŏnŭ sudoin ũi hoesang*).

Jin Y. Park has been at the forefront of introducing Iryŏp as a modern female Buddhist thinker to the Western world.¹ *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* is an elegant translation that includes all but two of the essays from the original *Reflections*, omitted to avoid repetition, and four additional essays that illuminate Iryŏp’s thinking on Buddhist thought and practice. In her introduction Park provides an overview of Iryŏp’s biography and works in relation to the multifaceted social-political and intellectual situation of her era. Park articulates the existential passion and commitment that run throughout Iryŏp’s life and writing and through her shifting identities as a youth who dreamed of becoming a Christian missionary, a young woman who questioned her fideistically defined faith and dedicated herself to receiving an education in a society that typically denied that opportunity to women, a feminist writer who advocated social change and free love, and a Sŏn nun devoted to meditation and the promotion of the dharma. Iryŏp resisted the artificial constraints of society as a feminist and one’s own habitual self as a Buddhist for the sake of realizing the autonomous and comprehensive life that is a fundamental theme of *Reflections*.

The existential character and passion of Iryŏp’s writing, which blends reflection and intimate autobiographical narrative, is evident from the beginning in her preface (chapter 1). She introduces basic existential questions such as: How does it stand with my own existence and what value does my existence have? How can I achieve

freedom and how do I become myself, a genuine self, in response to a situation in which we are unfree and “have lost ourselves”? The phrase “having lost myself” (*silsöngin*) is used throughout the work and primarily means “to go crazy” in Korean. It is Buddhist practice that offers a response to the lostness of the human condition by providing a perspective of wholeness, a tranquility and clarity of mind, and a freedom in the midst of the fluctuating conditions of life through the dedication and purity of one’s thought in meditation.

Iryöp’s existential, individualistic, and in some ways modernistic understanding of Sön Buddhism is further developed in the chapters that follow. In the second chapter, “Life,” she focuses on the primacy of life (*insaeng*) and its fulfillment in “independent life” where one is of utmost value to oneself through realizing one’s relational interconnectedness with all beings. Such autonomy becomes possible through the deconstructing of conventional boundaries and limitations. These include the limiting ideas or idols of the Buddha and God that lead away from mindfulness of one’s own self, which is realized through seeing the original emptiness of things and one’s own mind. Faith might be an initiation into the religious, but the religious means overcoming all objects in no-thought, in which the dualities of subject/object, self/other, internal/external, good/evil, and God/demon fall away: “The Buddha as the completed ‘I’ unifies within himself both a demon and a buddha” (p. 42).

In the third chapter, “Buddhism and Culture,” Iryöp maintains that there is no need for fixed hierarchies, and no need to fear God or Buddha, since these are conventional designations for the open, unbounded, genuine self of each thing. All beings are buddhas, and are primordially equal to and in themselves—from a maggot to the Buddha, as she says later (p. 230). The differences between beings are due not to an established hierarchy and inequality of beings but to their degree of culture or their actualization of their original self-empty nature. Whereas we live “like dolls” (p. 46) controlled by environmental and karmic conditions, the Buddha is the greatest exemplar and teacher of a culture of freedom and responsibility that “only I” can realize for myself.

Philosophy and autobiography are frequently assumed to be incompatible categories in orthodox Western thought. The remaining chapters of Iryöp’s *Reflections* reveal how autobiographical writing can be responsive to and reflective of an existential situation. Chapters 4 and 5 describe her journey as a Buddhist nun in response to the fifteenth anniversary of the death of her master, Man’gong (1871–1946), and to her twenty-fifth year as a monastic. Chapters 6 and 7 address social-political questions such as peace and the Korean Buddhist purification movement.

Chapters 8 to 11 are written as letters. They have an intimate self-reflective style revealing the existential import of Buddhist practice and thought in her life. Iryöp responds to Ch’oe Namsön’s (1890–1957) conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism in chapter 8. Iryöp replies to a childhood friend in chapter 9 to explain her own conversion to Buddhism. Chapters 10 and 11 are the most personal of the work as these are addressed to two of her lovers from her life as a “new woman” in the 1920s: the poet Im Nowöl (fl. 1920–1925) and the Buddhist philosopher and non-celibate monk Paek Sönguk (1897–1981), whose influence was crucial to her initial interpretation

and practice of Buddhism. These chapters reveal in a personal way the complex intersections and tensions between tradition and modernity, secularism and religion, Christianity and Buddhism, and male and female gender roles in twentieth-century Korean life.

Part 1 concludes with letters from Paek Sönguk and Iryöp's attendant. Part 2 sheds additional light on her understanding of Buddhism with the translation of three dharma talks and a letter to journalists. The letter to journalists raises the issue of whether she abandoned her earlier views of gender fairness, as critics argue, or employed the traditional language of male superiority to address male correspondents.

Park's important edition of Iryöp's writings will interest those readers concerned not only with modern Korean intellectual history and Korean Buddhism but also with examples of reflective or philosophical autobiography, experiences of crisis and conversion, and how one singular person responds to her existential condition.

Note

- 1 – See Jin Y. Park, "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Iryöp and Buddhism," in Jin Y. Park, ed., *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp. 109–130.