

An Examined Life: Women, Buddhism, and Philosophy in Kim Iryöp

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The four reviews collected here are the result of two author-meets-critics panels on my translated volume *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (Önũ sudoin ũi hoesang 어느 修道人的 回想). The first panel was held at the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy's annual meeting in October 2015, and the second panel was held at the International Society for Buddhist Philosophy's group meeting at the Eastern Division American Philosophical Association meeting in January 2016. I would like to thank those who organized and participated in these panels. The reviewers addressed different aspects of Kim Iryöp's life and philosophy, which demonstrates the richness of her life and thought.

Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun is the translation of Kim Iryöp's (金一葉 1896–1971) book published in Korean in 1960. At the time, Iryöp was a Zen/Sön master, a well-known figure not only to Korean Buddhist nuns and lay practitioners but also more broadly to the general public in Korea. Iryöp's fame was not solely based on her position as a Zen master. Before she joined the monastery, she was a provocative female writer and a leading figure in Korean women's movement in the 1920s. Around the late 1920s, Iryöp began to practice meditation and eventually joined the monastery in 1933. She was in her late thirties at the time.

As I was translating Iryöp's book, I asked myself a question: How and why do women engage with Buddhist philosophy? To put it differently: Women, Buddhism, and philosophy—how and where do they meet? This topic became a major theme in my monograph *Women and Buddhist Philosophy: Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryöp*, published in 2017. Inquiry on gender in world religions emerged as an important topic among religious scholars starting around the mid-1980s. The *Women and World Religions* series that was published in the 1980s examined the images and treatment of women in the world's major religious traditions, including Buddhism. However, when gender was discussed in the context of Buddhism, the examination was usually limited to the context of religious tradition, and gender in Buddhist philosophy has not yet been seriously and critically explored. The division between religion and philosophy has western roots, and East Asian thought-traditions, including Buddhism, usually contain both religious and philosophical dimensions. Still, I think that Iryöp offers us an exemplary case to explore the philosophical dimensions of women's engagement with Buddhism.

Philosophy has been one of the most male-dominated disciplines in the humanities. Asian philosophy, including Buddhist philosophy, is still at the margin of philosophy in western academia. Bringing the two marginal positions of gender and Buddhist philosophy together exposes issues and questions that we might not usually find in our discussion of women in the context of western philosophy.

1 Women and Buddhist Philosophy

Iryöp's position on the women's movement after she joined the monastery has been one of the questions Iryöp's critics have consistently asked. In her pre-monastic life, Iryöp was an active member of the New Women movement, the first-generation Korean feminist movement that demanded women's freedom and gender equality. Did Iryöp give up her idea of gender equality after she joined the monastery?

In this context, Erin McCarthy points out an important and seemingly controversial issue of the relationship between Buddhism and feminism. The Buddhist concept of self is known as “no-self,” which teaches that one should let go of the self, since the self we cling to is illusory and becomes a source of suffering. Feminism claims that patriarchal society deprives women of their identities, portraying them as a nameless existence living in the shadows of men. For women to liberate themselves from such an invisible position and live the lives they deserve, the first step from a feminist perspective is for women to gain a clear sense of identity, instead of realizing that the sense of self is illusory as Buddhism teaches. Some might argue that one needs to find the self before letting it go. In her review, McCarthy discusses Iryōp’s position on women’s issues side by side with that by Hiratsuka Raichō (平塚 らいちょう 1886–1971), a representative Japanese New Woman who must have had a significant influence on Iryōp’s work. McCarthy argues that the problem of women’s identity in patriarchal society is not that women do not have an identity. The problem arises from the anonymity of their existence. Namelessness is itself women’s identity, and that is why it is illusory.

The Buddhist no-self theory enabled both Iryōp and Raichō to find the real self, and they did so not by consolidating the self before letting it go but by realizing that the socially imposed and marginalized self was not their real identity. Iryōp called it the small self (*soa* 小我) and encouraged both men and women to embrace the no-self, which Iryōp called the great self (*taka* 大我). Raichō emphasized the importance of spiritual concentration in women’s search for the authentic self that she believed every woman has inside, as she beautifully described in her essay in the inaugural issue of the *Seito* (青鞜), “In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun” (Genshi, josei wa taiyōdeatta 元始・女性は太陽であった). For both Iryōp and Raichō, meditation facilitated the path to the authentic self. Against the claim that Iryōp distanced herself from women’s issues after she joined the monastery, McCarthy states, “we can read Iryōp’s early feminist work as laying the foundation for her spiritual awakening and her later Buddhist writing” (McCarthy 2020: 156).¹ For Raichō, Zen meditation was essential not only for the process of finding the self but also for social engagement. She observed, “Had I not practiced Zen, I would have led a life utterly unrelated to social activism” (cited in Yusa and Kalmanson 2014: 613).² McCarthy evaluates that Raichō’s urge for women’s liberation through meditation was rather metaphysical, whereas Iryōp’s was more existential.

Leah Kalmanson raises another seminal question regarding the relationship between women and Buddhism. In her nuanced analysis of Iryōp’s Buddhism, Kalmanson connects Buddhist self-cultivation with the classic feminist slogan, “The personal is political.” Kalmanson asks where we should locate the personal when subjectivity is always already the effect of social power and shaped by political institutions.

As much as each of us is a product of our biological, social, and political environments, we are also individuals. The environment produces each of us, but the suffering we experience is our own as well. One can feel empathy for other people’s suffering and pain, but we are the ones who have to deal with our own: our suffering is personal. This is so true, but if our thinking stops there, we become the prisoners of our own world, and solipsism will be the condition of our existence. Buddhism proposes a different path. From the Buddhist perspective, one’s suffering is one’s own on the surface. However, if one gives serious thought to the causes of the suffering, the person will not be able to pin down a single exclusive cause of the suffering. To use a Buddhist expression, suffering is empty. This is why Buddhism teaches the four levels of understanding suffering, known as the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths teach us that “I” might feel dying pains as an individual in my own situation, but those pains do not have an essence or independent identity. From the Buddhist perspective, a positive response to and overcoming of “my” pains and “my” suffering is

possible when one realizes that this “mine-ness” of “my” pain explains only a fragment of the suffering one deals with.

We need to be careful about the claim of an individual’s suffering as illusion. The proposition that one’s pains are illusory does not negate the actual existence of pain. Instead, it offers a path to deal with the pain and turn the current predicament into an experience of awakening to the human existential condition. This is also what gives meaning and power to the autobiographical narrative that Iryöp employed in her writings. One’s life story is personal, but in our effort to find meaning in the raw material called life, we realize that what we considered personal does not remain personal but is always intertwined with various domains that connect the individual with others and the world.

In this context, Kalmanson asks what a “person” means to Iryöp and notes that for Iryöp, a person was understood as a being with “creative and dynamic” power (Kalmanson 2020: 163). Kalmanson connects Iryöp’s concept of a person with the idea of transformation. Buddhist practice has heavily invested on the importance of the transformation of the self. If any change is to take place in the self or the world, the epistemic self needs to change his or her way of looking at the world. Kalmanson rightly points out that meditation, which is at the core of the Buddhist experience of self-transformation, is never an individual act. Instead, as she observes, “meditation is not a break from politics but is itself a force for social change” since “meditation does not just affect the single self who meditates” (Kalmanson 2020: 165). In her recent publication *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, Kalmanson further observes, “meditation is not simply a private experience but an efficacious practice that conducts the transformative energy into the surrounding world” (Kalmanson 2020: 81).³ In this sense, Kalmanson sees the “political potency of Buddhist practice” to the extent of declaring, “Practice is political” (Kalmanson 2020: 165).⁴

Tanabe Hajime (田辺元 1885–1962), a Kyoto school thinker, mentioned that solipsism is not possible because the world and the self from the beginning cannot be separated from each other. Seen from the Buddhist perspective, beings do not exist as isolated islands, but their existence is possible because they exist in the web of connections with other beings. To be aware means to be aware of something, which means that one cannot isolate one’s thinking and stay within it. Knowing the self already means knowing the self in the midst of the world. Once one realizes the interconnected nature of one’s existence, one should be able to see one’s self not just as a being with a boundary drawn by one’s physical reality but as a being with others. Iryöp describes this transformed self as “the great self,” the “complete person,” or the “original mind.” This self is the one that fully exercises “life energy,” and its mode of existence is characterized by qualities such as “creativity” or “culture.” In Kalmanson’s understanding of Iryöp’s life and philosophy, one notices that the seemingly binary postulations of tradition versus modernity, personal versus political, and private meditation versus social change come together, revealing the very synergy of our existence, which Buddhism calls dependent co-arising.

2 Kim Iryöp’s Buddhism, Christianity, and Recovery/Discovery of the Self

Mark Nathan connects Iryöp’s transformed self with her Christian background. In her discussion of Buddhism, Iryöp repeatedly emphasizes that one should become fully human, and becoming fully human for Iryöp meant living as a free being. Before joining the monastery, Iryöp devoted her time to challenging gendered social structures, believing that social change will bring about a way for her to regain freedom from the gender discrimination in her society. As she further considered the

human condition, Iryöp realized that gender discrimination was only one aspect of the existential conundrum. Iryöp's realization of human existential conditions led her to Buddhism, through which her focus changed from a feminist social activist perspective to that of a religious practitioner.

"Creativity" and "culture" are the words with which Iryöp characterizes the state of freedom. Nathan asks why Iryöp used these expressions instead of more traditional Buddhist ones, such as "Buddha nature," "suchness," "tathāgatagarbha," or "no-thought." His answer is to examine Iryöp's Christian background. I believe that this is a viable path of inquiry. Iryöp's relationship to Christianity is more complex than the story of a simple conversion from Christianity to Buddhism. On the surface, Iryöp was a Christian until her young adulthood and then became a Buddhist nun. Based on this fact, we can rightly say that Iryöp converted from Christianity to Buddhism. But changes in our lives do not happen as a linear movement from one island to another. In his book *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck, a theologian, proposes that we should understand religious doctrine not as an exclusive truth claim but more like a language.⁵ Religious teachings structure our thoughts and construct our worldview. Questioning which religion is right or wrong is like asking whether French is right or wrong. As Nathan pointed out, in Iryöp's interpretation of Buddhism and later in her interpretation of Christianity, we see mutual influences of Buddhism and Christianity in the construction of her worldview and also her understanding of these two traditions.

In *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*, Iryöp reinterpreted Christianity based on her Buddhism. God, for Iryöp, is a creator, not in the sense that God created the world, but in the sense that God is the being who fully exercises the capacity of free being and engaging with life without constraint, which Iryöp calls creativity. This is the capacity that Iryöp claims every being possesses. Iryöp even claims that God and the Buddha come from the same seed. Nathan makes a refreshing connection between Iryöp's use of the expression "creativity" and the Christian creation myth. When Protestantism came to Korea at the end of the nineteenth century, many Koreans were intrigued by the theory of creation, and as Nathan pointed out, Buddhist intellectuals like Paek Yongsöng (白龍城 1864-1940) envisioned a Buddhist version of the creation story, not in the form of a creation myth but by creating a Buddhist cosmogony.

Iryöp's interpretation of Christianity, God, the Buddha, and their relationship to human beings also offers us a new way of engaging with the philosophy of religion, as I have discussed elsewhere (Park 2018).⁶ A philosophy of religion drawn from Buddhism offers different ways to conceptualize the traditional themes of the western philosophy of religion, including the transcendental being, human beings' relationship to it, and the idea of good and evil.

In connection with Iryöp's treatment of Christianity, Nathan asks whether Buddhism is the only way, for Iryöp, for one to become fully human. This is a challenging question that reveals Iryöp's ambivalent attitude toward Buddhism. She claims that God or the Buddha is not an object of our worship and that we all have the capacity to be like them. She also says that people do not need Buddhist temples to practice Buddhism. Iryöp was envisioning Buddhism and religious practice beyond institutional limits. On the other hand, she severely criticized Ch'oe Namsön (崔南善 1890-1957), a Korean celebrity intellectual and historian, when he converted to Catholicism. If Iryöp was proposing religious practice beyond institutional boundaries, why should one's religious affiliation be an issue of any significance? One cannot but say that she was contradicting herself on this issue. Nathan also asks whether monasticism, for Iryöp, would be the only way to be fully human. Iryöp does not offer a clear answer to this.

I should admit that both questions reveal the limitations of Iryöp's position with regard to inter-religious dialogue and Buddhism's capacity for openness. Despite her claim that one does not need a temple or a church to practice Buddhism or Christianity, it seems that she is implying that

Buddhism should be the religion that one must practice to become fully human and joining the monastery is the path one must follow in that effort.

Douglas Berger places Iryöp's Buddhist practice in a broad spectrum of the evolution of Buddhist ideas about enlightenment. Berger asks whether awakening is a discovery of the existing self or the recovery of the original self. Zen Buddhist tradition claims that the sentient being is already Buddha, and in that sense Zen practice is a way to discover one's self as it is. Faithful to that tradition, Iryöp constantly emphasized that we are all free beings of infinite capacity, and that when we realize this truth about our existence, we realize the great self, as opposed to the small self of our daily lives.

But it is also a recovery, as Berger demonstrates well in his review. The original self—the great self—must be recovered while we are immersed in the small self. The important point of Iryöp's Buddhism, according to Berger, is that discovery and recovery are not in tension but interdependent. In the environment where we live our lives, we constantly make mistakes and still make efforts to overcome them and be like the Buddha, which according to Buddhism is our original face. Berger observes that this is why Buddha, for Iryöp, is the combination of Buddha and demon, and Buddhahood is humanhood through and through. In this sense, Berger points out, Iryöp's philosophy “reminds us of our own situatedness as academics and scholars of Buddhist thought” (Berger 2020: 169).⁷ In practicing Buddhism without isolating it from the reality of human existence, Iryöp recorded both beauty and ugliness, and success and failure, in her own life and others. As Berger states, “Instead of writing, so to speak, a hagiography about herself, Kim in *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* speaks about her struggles, her failures, her pain, her misgivings both about others and about her own capacities to make progress on the path to awakening” (Berger 2020: 169).

In *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*, Iryöp offers a creative interpretation of Buddhist philosophy and practice. One distinctive aspect of the book is her use of her own life stories to discuss Buddhist philosophy. These stories involve the lives and deaths of her family members, her relationship with Christianity, the meaning of the Buddha, and her own intimate relationships. These diverse topics, together with Iryöp's unique way of interpreting Buddhism, mark her book as an alternative way of philosophizing and understanding Buddhism in the milieu of daily existence.

3 Buddhism, Modernity, and Existential Search

The four reviewers presented here aptly answer the core of my previous question: Why and how do women engage with Buddhism? The essays collected in *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* contain more than just Iryöp's writings on her life and practice. In it, and in her last book, *In Between Happiness and Misfortune* (Haengbok kwa pulhaeng ūi kap'i esō 幸福과 불행의 갈피에서), Iryöp combined her life stories and those of her friends with her discussion of Buddhist philosophy. Her writings were a way of remembering her existence in words. By retelling her own and her friends' stories, Iryöp made women's lives visible. Her narratives are witnesses to her life and the lives of other women. This was her way of engaging with women's issues. Remembrance is testimony, and Iryöp's writing is her testimony about what it means to live as an independent being, challenging the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal society.

Because Iryöp presented these stories in the context of Buddhist philosophy, a new form of philosophy also emerges through them. That is a philosophy that gives priority to lived experience. In *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*, I identified this mode of philosophizing as a narrative philosophy, a

philosophy that is deeply engaged with the narrative discourse of our daily experiences instead of heavily relying on theorization and abstraction.⁸ Philosophy has a tendency to distinguish itself from the life world and stories by claiming to be the search for truth (logos), which is the opposite of story (mythos), as truth should be unchanging whereas lived experience is always fluctuating.

The binary postulation of philosophy as search for truth and of literature (storytelling) as a fictional endeavor has played a significant role in philosophy's self-defined identity in western philosophical tradition. Are philosophy and storytelling mutually exclusive concepts? Can we understand our lives in that manner? Despite a long tradition of conceptualizing philosophy as logos and of storytelling as lying outside its realm, twentieth-century French philosopher Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks in *The Subject of Philosophy* (*Le sujet de la philosophie*, 1979): What if logos is mythos and mythos is logos? Logos is mythos in the sense that it is a myth we created, and mythos is logos in the sense that storytelling contains its own truth. For Lacoue-Labarthe, "neither is more true (or more false, deceptive, fictional, etc.) than the other" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1979: 17; 1993: 7).⁹

By restoring the story of life to the context of a person's lived experience, biographical and autobiographical writing reveals truths that even that person might not have been able to recognize at the time events took place. Such writings also highlight our engagement with life through philosophizing. The primacy of lived experience and our efforts to give coherent meaning to life also reflect Buddhism's attitude toward what we call philosophy. The Buddha's rejection of systematic philosophizing is articulated in various early discourses of Buddhism. However, the Buddha did not reject philosophy in its entirety. Through his warning against certain forms of philosophizing, the Buddha refused the philosophy that is alienated from people's reality, especially the reality of suffering. In this context, we can say that Iryōp's Buddhism shows a deeply existential focus on the meaning of one's self, on leading a good life, and on how to deal with the pain and suffering of daily existence.

Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun affords us a multi-layered structure of storytelling and the production of meaning. At the basic level, we hear a story of a woman named Kim Iryōp, a first-generation Korean feminist, writer, and Zen Buddhist nun. On another level, the book deals with how we construct our identities, meanings, and values from our life experiences. At yet another level, Iryōp's writings are an effort to demonstrate how women's practice of philosophy sometimes takes a different format from the familiar, patriarchal mode of philosophizing. Finally, Iryōp's life and Buddhism tell us how the tradition was rewritten by an individual through her life and thoughts in the face of modernity, which brought her new ideas of the self, gender equality, and individual freedom in the milieu of the perennial question of the conundrum of human existence and suffering.

In the introduction to a 1945 anthology of world philosophy that included both Indian and Chinese philosophy, Merleau-Ponty asked whether cultural differences between the west and China or India make it difficult for westerners to understand these philosophies. He contended that if philosophy is about our existence, cultural differences should not hamper our understanding of it. Instead, the lived experiences of people of different cultures should offer us "a variant of man's relationship with being which would clarify our understanding of ourselves" (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 226; 1964: 139).¹⁰ Asian philosophy, including Buddhism, might pose difficulties for westerners. By the same token, women's philosophy might not look like philosophy from the point of view of the traditional patriarchal model. However, if we approach different philosophical traditions from the perspective that philosophy is a human effort to understand the meaning and values of our existence and that such an effort should be based on our lived experience, different modes of philosophizing should tell us about the different ways that humans understand our existence and generate meaning

and value in our lives. Iryōp's Buddhism demonstrates well the fundamental function of philosophizing.

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 - 3 Leah Kalmanson, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).
 - 4 Leah Kalmanson, "The Personal, the Political: Zen Practice and the Feminist Critique," *Journal of World Philosophies* 5, vol. 2 (2020): 161-6.
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