Kim Iryŏp’s Existential Buddhism


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 a 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 1920’s that 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 as a lay-practitioner, as a path of 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 ŭi hoesang*).
Park has been at the forefront of introducing Iryŏp as a modern female Buddhist thinker to the Western world.\(^1\) This elegant translation includes all but two of the essays from *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 runs throughout Iryŏp’s life and writing and through her shifting identities as a youth who dreamed of becoming a Christian missionary, a young woman questioning her fideistically defined faith and dedicating herself to receiving an education in a society that typically denied that opportunity to women, a feminist writer advocating 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 the *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 one). 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” (*silsŏngin*) 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 fluctuating conditions of life through the dedication and purity of one thought in meditation.
Iryŏp’s existential, individualistic, and in some ways modernistic understanding of Sŏn Buddhism is further developed in the following chapters. In the second chapter “Life,” she focuses on the primacy of life (insulaeng) 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 limiting ideas or idols of the Buddha and God that lead away from mindfulness of one’s own self that is realized through 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” (42).

She maintains in the third chapter on “Buddhism and Culture” that there is no need for fixed hierarchies, and no need for fear of 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 from and in themselves from the maggot to the Buddha as she says later (230). The differences between beings are not due to an established hierarchy and inequality of beings but their degree of culture or their actualization of their original self-empty nature. Whereas we live “like dolls” (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 Iryŏp’s Reflections reveal how autobiographical writing can be responsive to and reflective concerning an existential situation.
Chapters four and five describe her journey as a Buddhist nun in response to the fifteenth anniversary of the death of her master, Man’gong (1871-1946), and her twenty-fifth year as a monastic. Chapters six and seven address social-political questions such as peace and the Korean Buddhist purification movement.

Chapters eight to eleven are written as letters. They have an intimate self-reflective style revealing the existential import of Buddhist practice and thought in her life. Iryŏp responds to Ch’oe Namsŏn’s (1890-1957) conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism in chapter eight. Iryŏp replies to a childhood friend in chapter nine to explain her own conversion to Buddhism. Chapters ten and eleven 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 1920’s: the poet, Im Nowŏl (fl. 1920-1925), and the Buddhist philosopher and non-celibate monk, Paek Sŏnguk (1897-1981) who 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 one concludes with letters from Paek and Iryŏp’s attendant. Part Two 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 language of male superiority to address male correspondents.

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