

***Women and Buddhist Philosophy: Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryop.* By Jin Y. Park. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 292 pages. \$28.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-0-8248-7936-5.**

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In *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*, Jin Y. Park focuses on Zen Master Kim Iryop (1896–1971), who grew up in a Christian family and eventually became a Buddhist nun. In light of the experiences of Iryop, Park asks the following questions: How and why do women engage with Buddhism? Is women's engagement with Buddhist philosophy and philosophy in general different from that of the patriarchal approach? Park's aim is to point to the differences while asserting that these differences are not impenetrable. To attain this penetration, Park claims that we first need to gain the awareness of the differences. Park's discussion of the life and thought of Iryop gives the reader a chance to consider how to start achieving this task.

Park highlights Iryop's unique engagement with philosophy through what Park terms "narrative philosophy," in which her lived experience is contrasted with the traditional tools of abstraction and theorization (p. 1). Park underscores various aspects of and influences on Iryop's life, constructing her book by following the steps of Iryop's life and adopting a biographical approach rather than attempting to fit her exposition into an account predefined by academic philosophical categories.

Park notes Iryop's initial emphasis on gender discrimination and her turn to Buddhism to grapple with the existential dimensions of life. Park extends her focus beyond Iryop's life and thought and addresses how women in Buddhism construct meaning. Park suggests approaching philosophy as "a human effort to understand the meaning and values of our existence" and to base these efforts on "our lived experience" (p. 5). She constructs this book in several layers of issues:

a critical biography; an investigation of identity construction; and women's ways of doing philosophy. She defines narrative philosophy as "a philosophy that deeply engages itself the narrative discourse of our daily experiences instead of relying heavily on theorization and abstraction" (p. 6). Park's overall goal is to examine how we "produce meaning for our existence and try to define the conditions and requirements for this production" (p. 6).

The book is divided into two parts: Iryop's life from 1896 to 1933 when she joined the monastery and Iryop's life from 1933 to the 1960s when she followed the advice of the Zen master Man'gong (1871–1946) and withdrew from the literary world. The two parts of the book follow somewhat different conventions: the first part of the book follows the conventions of literary criticism, women's studies, history, and Asian studies; the second part of the book devotes attention to Buddhism as both a philosophy and a religion.

In the first part of the book, Park devotes considerable attention to Iryop's incessant exposure to death, first of her brother and toddler sisters. She also addresses Iryop's progressive views and her becoming in 1920 a founder of the journal *New Women*, which represented progressive Korean society in the early twentieth century. The *New Women's* movement included an odd mixture of the views of the liberalists, who were socialists influenced by Marxism; and the nationalists, who emphasized conservative values. Influenced by the women's movement in the U.S., the journal highlighted the distinction between the views of progressive women in Korean society and U.S. women.

Park points to Iryop's felt concern with the limitations of the women's movement, which led her to embrace "new individualism." This change resulted in Iryop's focus switching from group consciousness to individual awareness and the efforts to develop oneself. The change from group consciousness to individual-focused consciousness culminated in Iryop's transition to religion as a means of a search for freedom. This transition led to nearly thirty years of silence in a Zen monastery. Iryop recorded the reflections on this spiritual search in her *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (1960). Prior to her conversion to Buddhism, she had at one time considered it to be heretical and false, having been brought up in a Christian home that regarded Buddhism as such. Park underscores Iryop's spiritual quest in a way that challenges our understanding of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Park provides a detailed outline of each chapter, which allows the reader to avoid a linear approach and encourages reading according to one's interests. Chapter 1 starts with biographical vignettes. Here Park recalls Iryop's experiences with death and her overbearing sense of loss and loneliness. Park provides a discussion of Iryop's family and paints a picture of Iryop's mother as wanting to raise "the most excellent, mannish woman in the world, so that she would not have to envy someone who had ten sons" (p. 21). Iryop's mother believed in education for everyone and gave Kim an experience of a "girl student" (p. 21). Park points out the discrepancy between Iryop's public and private image. While Iryop's discussion of herself presented an image of someone whose heart was full of sadness and loneliness, her public image was of someone who appeared glamorous and sophisticated. In this chapter, Park also provides a detailed discussion of the *New Women* journal. She notes that in the inaugural issue, Iryop stated her goal to achieve "reformation and emancipation, which is to start with reforming the family by liberating women first" (p. 30). Iryop's focus on women's liberation was central to her identity formation.

In chapters 2 and 3, Park offers a more detailed account of Iryop's influences both as a writer and as a liberal thinker. Not until chapter 4 are we introduced to Iryop's engagement with Buddhist thought and the transition from her Christian upbringing to Buddhist philosophy. Chapter 5 continues with the Buddhist theme, but builds on Iryop's unique interpretation of Zen Buddhism. It is here that the reader becomes introduced more fully to Iryop's *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (1960). In addition, Park provides a comparative overview of Iryop's thought juxtaposed with the thought of two Japanese thinkers: Inoue Enryo and Tanabe Hajime. In chapter 6, to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of East Asian philosophy of religion, Park turns to Iryop's response to the criticism of Zen Buddhism's individualistic focus contrasted with Engaged Buddhism. In this chapter, Park also discusses the way in which Iryop integrated philosophy with narrative philosophy. In chapter 7, Park demonstrates the commonality of women's thought and Buddhist philosophy. She starts by provocatively highlighting women's marginality and maintains that Iryop's autobiography became a "primary mode of philosophizing" (p. 15) as a means to break these barriers and reduce the marginality.

Park addresses the complex notion of Buddhist "no-thought" and intertwines it with the idea of creativity by stating that "thinking

refers to the subjective way of understanding the self and the self's environment, whereas no-thought is the subject's creative engagement with the world" (p. 125). Creative engagement, Park avers, is not tied to one's biased views and "fixed mentality" and therefore "the subject is free" (p. 126). As Park reflects on Iryop's views, she reminds the reader that no-thought is "a state of creative engagement with environments, whether natural, social, or interpersonal" (p. 126). She points out Iryop's view of the Buddha as "the great person of culture" (p. 126). Park notes that for Iryop, a person of culture is free from karmic constraints and is in charge of their original mind. Part of being free requires recognizing that one is not separate from others. Park writes that for Iryop, "the 'I' attains power not by creating a hierarchical relationship between the self and others but by realizing the source of its existence, which is the unity of the self and others" (p. 126). She notes that Iryop reconciled Christianity and Buddhism by holding that the "I" is "a being of absolute freedom in whom the self and others are one and who does not need an idol, be it the Buddha or God, or an institution called Buddhism or Christianity" (p. 126).

Another concept worth mentioning is Iryop's definition of the Buddha as someone who "unifies within himself both a demon and a buddha" (p. 127). By using this approach, Iryop deconstructs the notions of good and evil. For Iryop, "Attaining Buddhahood means attaining humanhood" (p. 128). Iryop re-envisioned Christianity as well and maintains, "God and the Buddha were the ones who were fully aware of and exercising their capacity" (p. 132). As Park demonstrates, for Iryop, neither God nor the Buddha should be worshipped.

Throughout the book, Park reminds the reader that Iryop accepts paradoxes and holds the world as being comprised of "the inevitable polarization of things and beings at the phenomenal level and lack of grounding substance behind those phenomena" (p. 146). Moreover, merely depending on rational thought or defining events or actions in terms of good and evil are viewed by Iryop as inadequate. Park writes: "The challenge that East Asian thinkers pose to rational thinking and reason, especially in connection with the 'act' of religion, proposed that both philosophy and religion need to go beyond the limits of reason" (p. 146). In Iryop's view, religion is a means to find awe and wonderment, which lead to discovering "the basis of human existence" (p. 159). Park writes that Iryop articulates most fully her view of women's issues, Buddhist philosophy, and her life philosophy in her last book, *In*

Between Happiness and Misfortune. This book is divided between stories of love and discussion of Buddhism.

Park concludes her book by tying together Iryop's commitment to the women's movement with her commitment to Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy. Throughout the book, Park emphasizes the importance of narrative in Iryop's life and her work. Park states: "The text was her life story." And she adds: "Writing an autobiography is an attempt to humanize life events by restoring them to the context in which they occurred" (p. 153). Park underscores, however, the need for the reader to keep in mind that Iryop's life and thought cannot be properly understood without taking into account that women's and Buddhist philosophy "are distinct from male-dominated Western philosophical tradition." She stresses that her goal was not to "essentialize these philosophies" or to argue that "this demarcation is firm or impenetrable" (p. 186). Rather, as Park concludes, her goal was to engage with philosophizing that invites readers to go "beyond the limits of the reason" and challenges them to see Iryop as a perfect example to do so. Park's introduction to Iryop's thought and her comfortable relationship with paradoxes might be one of the best ways to enhance our understanding of women's place Buddhist philosophy.

To conclude, this book is written in a very engaging style. It exposes the reader to the intricacy of one's embeddedness in a tradition of one's birth (Christianity) that becomes reconsidered as the author attains her intellectual maturity (see chapter 5, specifically "Beyond Good and Evil"). The exact motivation for this change might need to be discussed more extensively.

The author addresses Kim Iryop's engagement with the women's movement and states that at some point, this engagement lessened as she decided to enter the monastery. While this is a fascinating point, more information might be helpful, including a more sustained discussion of women's roles in the monastic setting. Park also provides some discussion related to Buddhism in general and Zen in particular, which might allow a person interested in these themes to pick up this book and perhaps focus their attention on this chapter (see chapter 4).

In the introduction, Park states that this book's reading can be "customized," not limited to a particular target audience. This being said, this text can be well suited for an upper-level college course in women's studies (either undergraduate or graduate) as well a course on Buddhism and particularly Zen Buddhism. However, this book's

focus on narrative philosophy allows it to be used in a college course that addresses the alternative ways of doing and studying philosophy. Park invokes Derrida's words that he admires the texts that are "soaked through with the life of their authors" (p. 3), and indeed, Park skillfully "soaked" this text with Kim Iryop's life.

In addition to an academic setting, this book is well suited for the general public that might be interested in women and Buddhism or women and Buddhist philosophy. However, this book will not be effective as an introduction to Buddhism or Buddhist philosophy as it does require at least some prerequisite knowledge.