

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

## Globalizing Feminism: Taking Refuge in the Liberated Mind

*Buddhism beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity.*  
By Rita M. Gross. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2018.

*Women and Buddhist Philosophy: Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryöp.*  
By Jin Y. Park. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017.

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(Received 13 May 2019; revised 15 August 2019; accepted 13 September 2019)

**Key words:** Feminist Buddhism; Feminist philosophy; Existential philosophy; Engaged Buddhist philosophy; Korean feminist philosophy; Confucianism; Zen

One of the most pressing and urgent academic tasks of the day is to dismantle the persistent Eurocentrism of philosophy. In the quest to remedy the white, middle-class, heteronormative, and European biases of philosophy's initial expressions, feminist theorizing has cultivated culturally and ethnically specific forms, intersectional analyses, and global articulations. *Buddhism beyond Gender* and *Women and Buddhist Philosophy* breathe new vitality into these pursuits. Both books underscore the immense potential of the core doctrines of Buddhist philosophy, such as the nonsubstantialist view of self, the nondualistic outlook, and the ontological premise of the interdependence of all beings (*pratityasamutpāda*), for overcoming Western hierarchies, reified conceptions of identity, and pernicious dichotomies. The two women represented in these books—Rita Gross herself (1943–2015) and Kim Iryöp, a Buddhist nun (1896–1971)—ground philosophy in a narrative, existential journey and in their personal practices as Buddhists. In contrast with Gross's second-wave methodology and revisionist aims, Park's contribution to comparative feminist scholarship underscores the originality of Iryöp's attempt to rethink Buddhist ideas in a contemporary feminist context. Particularly compelling is that Park unequivocally defends existential narrative as a genre of philosophy largely through an analysis of the Buddhist nun's love letters.

*Buddhism beyond Gender* marks the culmination of Rita Gross's pioneering scholarship in religious studies. A student of Chögyam Trungpa, a kagyü (Tibetan) lineage holder and the founder of the Naropa Institute, Gross's lifework combined spiritual discipline with feminist scholarship. Broadening her trailblazing *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Gross 1993), Gross dissects the “intolerable” contradiction in classical Buddhism between its foundational “gender-egalitarian teachings” and its entrenched

“*male-dominant institutions*” (Gross 2018, 25; italics in the original). Posthumously published, this last and unfinished book interweaves several methodological aims: (1) to unleash the radical potential of the teaching of egolessness for dismantling sexual dimorphism; (2) to challenge androcentric scholarship; (3) and to refute the contentious claim that Western feminists thrust an outsider standpoint upon Asian traditions.

A defining premise of Gross’s corpus is that the Buddhist teaching of egolessness grants women the resource, commonly missing in feminism, to envisage the self beyond gender. *Anatta* (Pali) or *anatman* (Sanskrit), literally the nonself, denotes the ontological view that there is no permanent, unchanging, static, or eternal core that defines the “ego” (3) but only a fluid, ever-changing, interdependent, and co-conditioned experiential reality of self (11). Whether hooked on self-aggrandizing or self-effacing habits of perception, feeling, and action, “clinging to gender identity subverts enlightenment” (26); it generates alienation from existence and the poisonous afflictions of ignorance, endless craving, and enmity.

In her life and scholarship, Gross navigated a courageous intercultural path against opposition from both feminists and Buddhists. Her second-wave feminist critics beheld Buddhism through Western-centric eyes and discounted egolessness as a hopelessly sexist ideal that inevitably reinforced female subservience. In practice communities both Western and Eastern, she met incredulity, haughty condescension, and accusations of betraying the teaching of egolessness by “genderizing the dharma” (12), using “gender talk” (75), or pressing the small-minded concerns of a few women (8, 133). For Gross, Buddhism teaches feminism to relinquish rather than refashion ego-identity, whereas feminism calls Buddhism to abandon its centuries-long betrayal of its “beyond gender” teachings.

The epistemic implication of *anatta* is that gendered perception gives rise to worlds that are essentially delusional though empirically real in the suffering they work. Gross carefully unpacks the dharmic (Buddhist) teaching of egolessness because it harbors a revolutionary potential to dispel the illusions of dichotomies of all types, whether racial, ethnic, “national, religious, cultured, or gendered” (11). Armed with the powerful tool of *anatta* and the closely related Buddhist doctrine of the two levels of truth —“a non-conceptual *absolute* truth” and the “*relative* truths” of phenomenal life —Gross probes the delusions of premature abstraction into the absolute truth that the enlightened mind lies beyond gender (15). In an appeal to Zen Master Dōgen’s beautiful teaching that you must study the self in order to lose the self, she skillfully demonstrates that intellectual abstraction promotes denial of, defensiveness about, and reinforcement of the misogynistic structures of social life. Abstraction is not sound spiritual practice. Nothing short of painstaking self-examination can strip away the pernicious habits that imprison heart and mind in the fantasies of gender essentialism and gender denial.

A crucial ramification of these twin teachings for feminist social theory, as Gross articulates it, is that identity politics proves limited in its power to effectuate liberation beyond gender. “Identity-views,” though central to eradicating the suffering caused by “patriarchy, heteronormativity, extreme sexual dimorphism,” can “entrap one” when absolutized. Both books highlight that reification of identity inevitably produces “the confusion of self-centeredness” that cannot quell the spiritual disturbances of insatiable longing, incurable disappointment, anger, rage or bitterness, and alienation from the conditioned nature of life (Gross, 14). A decisive experience for Gross occurred when she ceased clinging to her rage. Feminism “beyond gender” operates without an “anti-men stance” (136). It is not perpetually at odds with life, even as it opposes social injustice.

A second strategy takes aim at androcentric scholarship in the West that invariably perpetuates the resilient streams of misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes that run through Asian cultures and Buddhist institutions. Gross systematically pinpoints the selective nature of androcentric readings and exposes the scholarly bias implicit in using “generic masculine language” (Gross 2018, 135). Androcentrism, she intones in sound Buddhist fashion, “*resides in the scholar’s head*” (134). She specifically examines conventional concepts—like the five woes of female birth, the ostensible karmic inferiority of female rebirth, the three subservient duties of women—that normalize male bias (31). These analyses unquestionably elaborate the intuitions of progressive Buddhist philosopher-practitioners and masters who, over the centuries, have roundly refuted such superficial and culturally infected views.

Gross’s careful exegetical studies supplement other Buddhist feminist literature, like *The Hidden Lamp* (Caplow and Moon 2013) and *Zen Women* (Schireson 2009), that compile centuries-old stories of female greats indigenous to the Buddhist canon. To explorations of iconic figures that debunk female stereotypes and position women as transmitters of the dharma, she adds coherent analyses of themes like motherhood and contrasts the dyadic imagery in esoteric Vajrayana (Tibetan) symbolism with the dualistic narratives of the Western theistic tradition. A form of skillful means, esoteric imagery forms part of a spiritual practice that can be likened to a phenomenological reduction. It moves the practitioner from conventional belief in complementarity to insight into nonduality. Or it dispels the hierarchical view of father, restores egalitarian apprehension of the parents, as the *Therigatha* (51) states, as a “compound unit” (64) and, in a further reduction, grants the insight that each parent is “father-mother” (67). Finally, she culls the Pali canon for its usage of linguistic phrases that depict gender equality, presume a “bi-sexed” rather than generic view of humanity (78), and treat sexuality as affecting “men and women in the same ways” (80). Careful to mention textual contradictions and contrasting interpretations, she positions these readings, alongside similar contestations by monks, against a dominant history of androcentric views of women as impure, unenlightened, or hypersexed (81).

Admittedly, it is difficult to judge a posthumously published work with a planned but unwritten section on transgender identity, yet Gross’s second-wave methodology ignores subsequent developments of intersectional analyses and the emergence of transgender studies. Critics perceptively argue that Gross conflates *abolishing gender roles* (societal perceptions) with *erasing gender identity*. A healthy comparative examination of these viewpoints could yield nuanced analyses of differing conceptions of gender identity, Gross’s view of Buddhism, and the nature of liberation. In addition, probing Gross’s intention to treat “clinging” to roles, and not the identity roles prescribed by society, as the problem raises questions about divergences in particular psychological and spiritual approaches to sex–gender oppression. One psychological view is that a person must first “cling” to and strengthen identity before it can be dismantled. In the dialectical and atemporal view held by Gross, a person can begin straightaway with the dissolution of attachment to identity roles because this dissolution fortifies growth of a genuine and free self. Her view finds some support in the tradition of sudden enlightenment in Buddhism or among Buddhist scholars who regard the sudden and gradual paths as mutually informing one another.

As one deeply sympathetic to the sudden element in some Buddhist views of awakening, I nevertheless resist all efforts to generalize at a conceptual level a single path to and understanding of enlightenment. Two notable dangers that plague false generalities include, first, the assumption that at a practice level, every individual should pursue a

single path. The second ignores that in the life of an individual, the path or practice may assume different forms and reflect contrary or corrected understandings at different times, as it did in the life of Iryöp. Whether one needs to foster rather than dissolve identity attachments at a practice level at a given stage of life may resist generalization.

Jun Y. Park's *Women and Buddhist Philosophy* introduces the reader to a relatively unknown yet fascinating figure, Kim Iryöp, an early pioneer among the New Women who championed the struggle for women's liberation in Korea in the first half of the twentieth century, only later to turn to Buddhist practice to find spiritual liberation. As critical biography and narrative philosophy, this work adds a new character to Park's field-defining comparative books on Buddhism from Derridean deconstructionist and phenomenological perspectives. The two books by Gross and Park can be said to share the aim to critique the "disturbing discrimination" against women (Park, 3) within Buddhist traditions by mining the emancipatory potential of the Buddhist worldview of "absolute equality" (1).

Yet Park does not limit her focus to a feminist intervention in Western Buddhism but instead creatively appropriates and interprets Iryöp within a modern context. She explicitly rethinks the nature of philosophy as a necessary step in dismantling Eurocentrism. Using critical biography, Park argues that "women's way of engaging with Buddhist philosophy" differs from "patriarchal modes of philosophizing" (1) through the use of narrative, lived experience, and, like Augustine, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, confessional styles of writing (3). Only by establishing the legitimacy of "narrative philosophy" or "philosophy of life" (15) can Park assign Iryöp rightful standing in the philosophical canon, counteract the discredited view of her life, and rewrite her place in Korean history.

Like other Asian feminist scholars, Park debunks the romantic view of Confucian social mores. Iryöp's critique of group identity makes a unique contribution to feminist and existential philosophy. The first half of *Women and Buddhist Philosophy* gives the reader a visceral sense of the immensely *deaden*ing impact that the Confucian ideal of "a wise mother and good wife" (32) wrought on the lives of women. The conservative virtues of docility, obedience, and passivity confined women to *extrinsically defined* collectivist and formal roles that deprived them of self-determination and individuality. The existential quest to become an *authentic self* thus drove Iryöp's political activism, defined her philosophical questions, and fueled her critique of group consciousness (73). Publications like the "New Theory of Chastity" shifted the meaning of chaste wife into *the inward domain* of self-actualizing and meaning-endowing choices that cultivate love, care, individuality, equality, and creativity. Without creative self-realization, these societal roles, New Women argued, harmed women, children, and society by producing loveless marriages (67), passivity in sex, economic dependency (51), lack of access to free divorce, lack of education (32), no rights for mothers after divorce (52), and mandated reproduction.

Rewriting the dominant historical view, Park's enriched existential interpretation of Iryöp's liberal lifestyle makes an immeasurable contribution to Korean history and philosophy. Perceived as a powerful "threat" to the ideal mother and wife, these New Women were ostracized, stigmatized, and sensationalized as "'play girls' and 'high-society madams'" by Korean society (55). Park specifically decodes how the patriarchal system ignores the hardships and tragic outcomes of economic deprivation and ostracism met by two other first-generation New Women, Kim Myöngsun (Korea's first female modern-style writer) and Na Hyesök (Korea's first female painter). Historically, the dominant ideology triumphed by *re-externalizing* the values of the

New Women. Even though Iryöp's publications demonstrate clearly that cultivation of existential inwardness does not promote "unruly" conduct (9) or destroy the institution of marriage, the patriarchal system reduced their lifework to aesthetic pursuits, underwritten by an adolescent chase after the consumerist gratifications of faddish Western hairstyles and dress. Such "frivolous female vanity" (32) ostensibly promoted a debased modernism that loosened the binding power of traditional morality to foster meaningful social relations.

The second half of the book deepens the significance of existential philosophy for women by rooting authenticity in spirituality. Park deflates the facile patriarchal standpoint that Iryöp's retreat into the celibate life of a nun marked a wholesale renunciation of her early feminism. The period of her induction into *hwadu* meditation, her turn away from her Christian upbringing to Buddhist teachings, and a lengthy pause in authorship refined her model of existential individualism, deepened her view of liberation, and, as a major female personage in the Buddhist community, granted her the vocation that society had denied her. Akin to Gross's resolution of rage, spiritual practice granted Iryöp freedom from the cosmic loneliness (27), guilt (23), and bitterness (77) that the indignities of her societal fate, and that of her friends, induced. These included being treated like a "victim" or "plaything" and finding little reception for her ideas among male colleagues (79).

Particularly salient for philosophy and Buddhism are two riveting discussions of the nonself and nonduality. Alongside her edited collection of Iryöp's writings in *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (Iryöp 2014), Park highlights the special pathos and unique insights that Iryöp's experience as a woman brought to interpreting the nonself as "a liquid reality" whose "provisional boundary" causes suffering (98); to articulating the pathway to independence from being manipulated by the environment; to apprehending the value of return to "the root of being" in nothingness (114), preservation of "the original spirit," and the ability to live with nonconflicted openness (124). In her philosophical search for truth, Iryöp demonstrated an unflinching capacity to follow the logic of nonduality through to the conclusion that God, like Buddha, must contain demon and angel alike. The dualistic ontology that objectifies God as omnipotent, infallible, and separate from humans, she maintained, "was an insult to God," who, like Buddha, models our quintessential potential for full awareness and free capacity (132). This nullification of the theistic view of God establishes spiritual discipline as a labor of integration; awakening to an enlightened mind beyond good and evil involves working with, rather than repressing, demonic impulses, craving, and hatred. It dissolves the all-too-convenient benefits of stubborn adherence to socially inculcated perceptions.

Most deserving of considered attention in feminism and intercultural philosophy, Iryöp and Gross trace the root of freedom to spiritual liberation. For Iryöp, the realization that we are "free beings with infinite capacity" dispels the delusions of craving worldly power (113), reveals the arbitrary and relative nature of social constructs, and shatters the fatalistic passivity foisted upon women by erroneous views of gender and karma (120–22). Even though Iryöp swayed at times toward withdrawal into spiritual life, her existentialist outlook places a premium on the healing of the individual, accentuates the value of time away for inner cultivation, and shows the need for retreat-type environments. Fostering authentic individuation, spiritual practice saves women from the dissatisfaction of "superficial happiness" (155), cultivates a liberating rather than consuming love (166), and, ironically, by realizing the transient nature of conditioned existence, fortifies rather than enervates the push for change.

Although both books probe gender discrimination in Buddhism, Park's methodological aims far exceed those of Gross. In the hands of Park, who has eminently postmodern and third-wave sensibilities, Iryöp's life and writings are shown to expand the view of philosophical discourse in ways that accommodate women and other traditions: love letters constitute philosophy, story-telling and trivial experiences form material for philosophical, moral, and social education, and creativity can be said to form the heart of Buddhist insight and practice. This portrayal makes a key contribution to Buddhism and feminist theory by showing that dissolution of attachment yields a satisfying, positive, and productive life rooted in creativity, even in the very midst of entrenched sexist and oppressive traditions. Still, Iryöp, no more than Gross, developed a third-wave methodology. Nor was her pathway to dismantling dyadic symbolism and social relations through Buddhist nonduality consciously informed by transgender, queer, or cisgender distinctions. It is Park who overturns the conservative and falsifying reading of Iryöp's life, demonstrates the relevance of Iryöp's existential questions for contemporary concerns, and examines the masculinist underpinnings of European conceptions of philosophy.

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