

Reinventing Female Identity: A Brief History of Korean Buddhist Nuns*

Cho Eun-su

Through an examination of historical records and biographical excerpts of Buddhist nuns, we can see, albeit fragmentarily, that Korean nuns have maintained a tradition of religious practice and commitment to the dharma from the very inception of Buddhism in Korea, despite the common perception that Korean Buddhist history equals the history of monks. With a long history of 1,600 years, Korean nuns stand out in the history of world religion. The established theory holds that when the monks' order was formed upon the transmission of Buddhism to Korea, a nuns' order was established at almost the same time. It is a well known fact that nuns from Paekche went to Japan and played a decisive role in the establishment of a nuns' order in Japan. At present, of all the Buddhist countries, Korea is the first among the East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist countries that maintain a bhikṣuṇī order with full precepts. Moreover, when we take into account its long history, the status of the tradition of Korean nuns is very significant. They have now built a viable monastic community that has not only survived near-obliteration during Chosŏn and afterwards, but continues to flourish and develop, reflected in the order's continuing growth, its social activism, and its meditation programs, making it one of the most flourishing female monastic communities in the modern Buddhist world.

Keywords: Buddhist nuns, religious women, feminism, history of Korean Buddhism, revival of Buddhist nuns' practice

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How can there be [gender distinctions between] monks and nuns in the Buddhadharma?

How can there be the worldly and the nonworldly?

How can there be north and south?

How can there be you and me?

Pon'gong Sünim (1907-1965)¹

One of the fundamental tenets of Sōn (Ch. Chan; J. Zen), which forms the basis of modern Korean Buddhism, is that in the Buddhadharma there is no distinction between male and female, worldly and non-worldly phenomena. There is, however, a considerable gap between this nondualistic ideal and what is actually practiced. Pon'gong's verse quoted at the beginning of this article seems to question this gap, as the author is conscious of her dual status as a woman and as a Sōn teacher who defies that womanhood.² Poems and other overlooked sources offer us glimpses of the enduring vitality displayed by Korean nuns, who have maintained a history of thorough practice that has been almost completely ignored: the history of Korean Buddhism has so far always been restricted to the history of monks alone.

The nuns' sangha began when the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, ordained his maternal aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpati, and five hundred other women. When the Buddha permitted the ordination of nuns, he demanded that they observe eight chief rules of respect to monks. For anyone concerned about the status of women in Buddhism, this is a problem that causes considerable anguish. Scholarly research to date on this subject is largely divided into two camps. The first maintains that these regulations did not reflect the thinking of the Buddha himself but were created in later times by his conservative disciples. The second holds that although the Buddha may have said this himself and his own disciples may have created these regulations, this was merely an expedient means, an empty statement to placate Indian society of the day. This second view emphasizes the fact that Buddhism is one of the few major religions in

1. This poem was composed in 1935. It is featured in Pon'gong Sünim's biography in *Kkaedariṁ iū kkot* (Flowers of Enlightenment; Seoul: Yōrae, 1998) by Ha Ch'unsaeng, a volume that has contributed to the recent upsurge in interest in the lives of Korean nuns.

2. The locus classicus of the metaphor of north and south in the poem is the famous dialogue between Hongren and Huineng; upon his arrival at Hongren's monastery, Huineng was asked where he is from and what he is looking for. Hearing that he is from the south, Hongren challenged Huineng by saying: "If you're from Ling-nan then you're a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?" Huineng replied: "Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature." (Translation from Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 127.)

which female clergy exist alongside their male counterparts, with equally independent organizational structures and religious functions. Regardless of which interpretation is adopted, at the time of Śākyamuni it was codified that the Buddhist Order is made up of the four assemblies – female and male clergy, and female and male lay believers – a fact that in itself indicates the longevity of the egalitarian and democratic nature of the social and political ideas of Buddhism.

However, unlike the Buddha, who advocated and practiced the idea of gender equality within the limitations of his time, the later institutions of Buddhism were corroded by the patriarchal society and cultures in which they formed. Korea was no exception to this, and its nuns suffered constant ordeals solely and specifically because they were women.

The environment for female clergy in Korea has changed rapidly, however, in the past thirty years. Nuns occupy a crucial position in the modern Chogye order, the largest Buddhist denomination in Korea, and rival the monks in terms of importance, even though this is not always acknowledged. Like monks, they receive full ordination (at present only the Korean and Taiwanese institutions maintain the traditions of full ordination for nuns). Not only does the total number of nuns equal the number of monks (5,413 monks against 5,331 nuns as of 2008), nuns are active participants in the tradition in various capacities: as avid meditators, compassionate caretakers for the needy, adept administrators of social welfare facilities, attentive and powerful leaders of city-based Buddhist centers, and ardent activists demanding democracy and opposing prejudice, within both the Chogye Order and the broader society as well. Korean nuns have built a viable monastic community that has survived near obliteration and established its own power of regeneration, as reflected in its continual growth, its social activism, and its meditation programs, making the Korean nuns' sangha one of the most flourishing female monastic communities in the modern religious world.

Korean Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth Century to the Present

Despite the paucity of historical materials, it is generally agreed that a nuns' order was established at almost the same time as the order of monks, namely, upon the transmission of Buddhism to Korea. The two seminal historic sources for ancient Korea, the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms; written by the monk Iryōn [1206-1289] toward the end of the thirteenth century) and *Samguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms; an official history

compiled in 1145 by Kim Pusik and others), both contain records of Buddhist nuns and female lay practitioners, proving the existence of Korean nuns from the very beginning of Buddhism in Korea some sixteen hundred years ago.

Buddhism came to the Korean peninsula in the latter half of the fourth century through China, during the Three Kingdoms period. Koguryō (37 B.C.E.-618 C.E.) in the north was the most powerful of the three kingdoms, and received the new religion first. There is a record stating that the introduction of Buddhism to Koguryō took place in 372 C.E., when King Fu Jian (r. 357-384) of the Former Qin dynasty (351-394) sent the monk-envoy Shundao (K. Sundo) to the Koguryō court with scriptures and images. Around the same time, the Paekche kingdom (18 B.C.E.-660 C.E.), occupying the southwestern part of the peninsula, was introduced to Buddhism in 384 through another monk-envoy, who had come from Eastern Jin. The kingdom of Silla (57 B.C.E.-935 C.E.), in the southeastern part of the peninsula, was officially introduced to Buddhism about two centuries later than the other two, in 527. However, even though these dates are regarded as the official introductions of Buddhism, it is believed that actual contact happened much earlier, probably by the third century.³

1. The Three Kingdoms Period and Unified Silla (676-935)

The earliest record of Buddhist women in Korea comes from the *Samguk yusa*, which records a woman known only by her surname, Sa, a younger sister of Morye, a local leader in the Ilsön area of Silla. Both of them are said to have helped Ado, a monk from Koguryō, perform his missionary work of spreading Buddhism some hundred years before it was officially accepted by the Silla court. Lady Sa became a nun, thus marking the first recorded appearance of a Buddhist nun in Korean history. The queen of King Pōphüng (r. 514-540), along with her husband, converted to Buddhism at the time of its official acceptance in 527. When the king became a monk after renouncing the throne in 540, the queen also became a nun, “out of respect for Lady Sa’s path.” However, Lady Sa and the queen could not have received official ordination. Women were only allowed to become Buddhist nuns after a decree was issued to that effect in 544, the fifth year of the reign of King Chinhüng (r. 540-576),⁴ the successor of King Pōphüng.

3. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul’s Korean Way of Zen* (Kuroda Institute, University of Hawai‘i Press, 1991), 5.

4. *Samguk sagi*, fascicle 4, in the third month of the fifth year of King Chinhüng.

It is well known that nuns from Paekche went to Japan and played a definitive role in the establishment of a nuns' order there. The first record of Paekche nuns comes from a Japanese history, *Nihon shoki*, which states that Paekche sent Buddhist missionaries, including a nun, to Japan in 577. It is known that Paekche began to regularly dispatch Buddhist doctrinal specialists, psalmologists, iconographers, and architects to Japan over its well-developed sea lanes, thus transmitting the rudiments of sinified Buddhist culture and laying the foundation for the rich Buddhist culture of the Asuka (552-645), Hakuhō (645-710), and Nara (710-794) periods.⁵ It is also mentioned that a Paekche nun named Pōmmyōng went to Tsushima island in 655 and cured a Japanese high official of an ailment by reciting the *Vimalakirti-nirdeśa Sūtra*.⁶

This exchange also went in the opposite direction. There is a record that three Japanese nuns, whose names are recorded as Zenshin-ni, Zenzo-ni, and Kenzen-ni, came to Paekche in 584 and received novice precepts as well as full ordination in 588.⁷ An envoy from Paekche explained their ordination ceremony to the Japanese court as follows:

The way to receive their bhikṣuṇī ordination is thus: they receive their *pratimokṣa* precepts from ten bhikṣuṇī preceptors and then they go to a bhikṣu temple and request ten bhikṣu preceptors, such that they receive precepts from twenty monks and nuns. However, in this country [i.e., Japan] there are only bhikṣuṇī. There is no bhikṣu preceptor or bhikṣuṇī preceptor, thus if these bhikṣuṇīs want to receive the bhikṣuṇī ordination properly, they should establish a bhikṣu order. Also, they have to invite bhikṣuṇī preceptors from Paekche.⁸

This description of the process and requirements for bhikṣuṇī ordination shows that the first ordained Buddhist priests in Japan were women and that they became ordained without meeting the standard requirement of receiving precepts from ten bhikṣus and ten bhikṣuṇīs, a fact that may have caused some controversy. At any rate, this passage tells us that a formally recognized female

5. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "Buddhism in Korea," in Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings, eds., *Buddhism and Asian History* (MacMillan Publishing, 1989), 152.

6. Nukariya Kaiten, *Chōsen zenkyōsi* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1930), 30.

7. The three Japanese women traveled to Korea to receive full ordination, and that event marks the beginning of Japanese Buddhist nuns. See Akira Hirakawa, translated by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The History of Buddhist Nuns in Japan," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 49; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 128 and 131.

8. Kim Yōngt'ae, *Paekche Pulgyo sasang yōn'gu* (Study on Buddhist thought of Paekche), (Tongguk taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1986), 75.

order existed in Paekche in a much-advanced form at that time.⁹

Once Silla adopted Buddhism and ordained Buddhist nuns, the religion flourished throughout their society, which had previously been without any organized form of religion, and thus regarded this new tradition as providing an advanced worldview and a loftier principle of morality. It was during this time in Silla and the subsequent Unified Silla period (676-935) that the doctrinal study of Buddhism made its greatest advancements in Korean history. At the same time, the society of Buddhist nuns also seems to have flourished. The existence of a position called Toyunarang,¹⁰ apparently denoting the head of bhikṣuṇī affairs, also indicates that there was a bhikṣuṇī order with a substantial number of members.

After Silla's unification of the three kingdoms in 676, the Unified Silla period brought about great prosperity in Buddhist activities and the deepening of Buddhist doctrinal understanding. The *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* contain many stories related to Buddhist women.¹¹ Moreover, *Ennin's Diary* even records the presence of Korean nuns outside of Korea by 839-840, in a monastery called Fahua-yuan (Lotus Cloister) in the Shandong area of China, originally built by Chang Pogo, a Korean general.¹²

2. The Koryō Dynasty (918-1392)

After the Unified Silla period, the Koryō dynasty made Buddhism a state religion, and the Buddhist Order became more organized and secularized.

9. From early on, Paekche developed a strong tradition in the study of Vinaya (the Buddhist precepts and moral rules), as indicated by the record of the monk Kyōmik, who went to India in 526 to study Sanskrit and acquire Vinaya texts. He returned with an Indian monk specializing in the Vinaya in 531, after which he is known to have translated the *Vinaya pitaka* in 72 fascicles. Kyōmik's disciples composed commentaries, and the entire project was then dedicated to King Sōng, the ruler at that time. Based on these records, we can assume that the Paekche Buddhist order already had a well-established protocol for the ordination ceremony by 588. However, it has been argued that the record of Kyōmik's travels is suspect, because it only appears in Yi Nūnghwa's 1918 *Chosŏn pulgyo t'ongsa* (General History of Korean Buddhism). See Best, "Tales of Three Paekche Monks Who Traveled Afar in Search of the Law," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51-1 (1991): 139-97, esp. 152-178.

10. *Samguk sagi*, chikkwan-ji section.

11. See Kim Young Mi, "Silla Pulgyo-sa e nat'anan yösöng ū sinang saenghwal kwa sŭngnyō dül ū yösöng-kwan" (The Religious Life of Women and Monks' Understanding of Women in the History of Buddhism in Silla), *Yösöng sinhak nonjip* (Feminist Theology Review), vol. 1 (Ewha Woman's University, Yösöng Sinhak Yön'guso, 1995).

12. Edwin O. Reischauer, trans., *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 131-161.

There was a centralized administrative body that dealt with clerical affairs and the monks' examination system. Many notable monks were appointed to various positions and given various titles throughout the dynasty, whereas nuns were apparently excluded from both the examinations and the official positions and titles. Bhikṣunī ordination ceremonies were performed, but we do not find records of female masters whose names are singled out for notable Buddhist practice or deeds. The only exception is Bhikṣunī Chinhye (1255-1324), who was granted the posthumous title of *yōdaesa* (literally, "female master").¹³

Thus the nuns and laywomen of this period remain generally anonymous. In the few cases where nuns' names do appear, it is in the lists of disciples on the stelae inscriptions for great male masters. In such cases, the women are all from distinguished family backgrounds. The bhikṣunīs found in the stela inscription for Hyesim (1178-1234), who was the successor of the famous Pojo Chinul (1158-1210) and was posthumously invested as National Master (*kuksa*), can be cited as examples. Altogether only three inscriptions have been found so far that record the names of male masters' female disciples, and these masters were all Sōn monks rather than monks belonging to the doctrinal schools.¹⁴

It has also been argued that there is a relative abundance of historical information on the financial and spiritual support of Buddhism by Koryō women in Yuan China, where a good portion of the ladies attending the court, as well as some women married to high officials, were of Korean origin.¹⁵

13. See Hö Hüngsik, "Chosŏn ūi Chōngyu wa Koryō ūi Chinhye: Tu sidae yōdaesa ū pigyo" (Chōngyu of Chosŏn and Chinhye of Koryō: A comparison of two female masters of the two eras), *Chōngsin munhwa yōn'gu* 27-4 (2004 December): 175-198.

14. See Kim Young Mi (Kim Yōngmi), "Koryō sidae piguni ū hwaldong kwa sahoe-chōk chiwi" (A Study of the Activities and Social Status of Buddhist Nuns in the Koryō Dynasty), *Han'guk munhwa yōn'gu* (Korean Cultural Studies), vol. 1 (Ewha Woman's University, Han'guk Munhwa Yōn'guwón, 2001). Cross-cultural comparative study might help us understand why women's names were better preserved in Zen (Ch. Chan, Kor. Sōn) communities. On female teachers who appear in the history of the Chinese Chan School, see Miriam L. Levering, "Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui," in Gregory and Getz, eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); and idem, "Women Chan Masters: The Teacher Miao-tsung as Saint," in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women Saints in World Religions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). Because so few primary source materials on Korean nuns have thus far been unearthed and introduced academically, these records about the elite nuns of Song-dynasty China have significant bearing on our understanding of the faith and activities of Koryō Buddhism.

15. See Tonino Puggioni, "Koryō Ladies and the Encouragement of Buddhism in Yuan China," in *Conference Proceedings: Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions*.

3. *The Chosōn Dynasty (1392-1910)*

From the beginning of the Chosōn dynasty, the government promulgated an anti-Buddhist policy, challenging a Buddhist establishment that had long enjoyed the privilege and support of both the public and the government as a state religion. With the advent of Chosōn, which adopted Neo-Confucianism as the prevailing ideology for the country, the Buddhist community faced social suppression and discrimination, and Buddhism declined. The government restricted the spread of Buddhism: monasteries could not be built near towns but had to be constructed in the mountains. Monks and nuns could not enter the capital and had to wear large hats to cover their faces when they went out. Yet despite such restrictions, the order of nuns survived.

Despite almost five hundred years of consistent oppression from the government, as well as ideological attacks and social denunciations from Confucian scholars, we nevertheless find some individual practitioners of Buddhism, even among literati. For example, Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584), one of the two most renowned Confucian scholars and statesmen during Chosōn, committed himself to Buddhist practice upon the early death of his mother. He left home and became a monk at the famous Diamond Mountains for a short time, an act that marked him even posthumously, when he was temporarily prevented from being properly enshrined in a Confucian shrine, despite having openly attacked Buddhism at the height of his career. Other members of the Confucian elite remained steadfastly Buddhist in their private lives, engaging in scholarly exchanges with monks and/or making pilgrimages to monasteries and worshipping there. Although Confucianism (as a social conception of the state) and Buddhism (as a faith in the private domain) thus would seem to have been mutually exclusive, there were overlapping elements.

Its status challenged largely on the level of policy, Buddhism persisted as an important religious and social practice of the Chosōn people. Of particular importance to its survival were female members of the royal family and wives of state officials and Confucian literati. These women acted as major patrons of Buddhist art in early Chosōn. Their activities suggest that, compared to men, women were less directly subject to the strictures of Confucian ideology and policy. These women chose to express their Buddhist faith by providing financial support for the construction of Buddhist temples and monasteries, the production of new paintings and statues, and the building and repairing of pagodas. Indeed, in the beginning of the dynasty, there was a marked increase in the number of Buddhist artworks commissioned by upper-class women, who

became the most powerful patrons of Buddhist art, taking over the role of male patrons in the previous dynasty. They also promoted the publication of some Buddhist scriptures, translated from Chinese into Korean.¹⁶

Women in the court were also the major force in maintaining the Buddhist faith tradition, for there were royal nunneries within the palace grounds during both the Koryō and Chosōn dynasties. These *piguni-won* (bhikṣuṇī convents) were institutions where women of the royal family and nobility took the tonsure and led a religious life.¹⁷ The fortune of these nunneries waxed and waned depending on the king in power, and they were eventually closed by the violent despot Prince Yōnsan (r. 1476-1506), who evicted the nuns – erstwhile court ladies of his late father – and turned them into slaves. With a policy in place banning monks' and nuns' entrance to the city, temples disappeared from the capital and other cities; only those in the countryside survived, with a few nunneries for the court ladies remaining.¹⁸ Yet the Buddhist activities of Chosōn women were not necessarily in competition or conflict with the standards of society. In fact, their form of religious practice can be considered a new form of faith that appeared in Chosōn society to avoid trouble between the two religions. From records of donations (such as paintings and statues of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings of the Underworld) – and of the dissemination of related scriptures and the like – made by the wives and daughters of respectable families praying for the rebirth of their deceased parents and other family members into a paradise in their next life, we can see the union of Buddhist faith and the Confucian moral concept of filial piety.¹⁹ It might even be argued that these women developed their Buddhist faith as a religion of the private sphere and Confucianism as a religion of the public

16. Heejong Kang, "Women as Patrons of Buddhist Art in the Early Chosōn Dynasty," paper presented at the 2002 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting.

17. Some of the earlier Chosōn kings, however, had ambivalent responses to Buddhism. For instance, King Taejong, the third king of the dynasty, prohibited temple construction on behalf of late kings and queens and sought to control the number of monks via a quota system, but then converted to Buddhism in his old age, after a brutal political career. And King Sejong, the fourth king of the dynasty, respected as the greatest and most literary among the Chosōn kings for establishing an administration based on Confucian rule, later became lenient toward Buddhism by visiting monasteries personally.

18. John Jorgensen details some of the exigencies of these times, based on his research into Chosōn court records, in "Marginalized and Silenced: Buddhist Nuns of the Chosōn Period," in *Conference Proceedings: Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions*.

19. See Zhiru Ng and Sunkyung Kim, "Women and Kṣitigarbha Worship: Examples from Tang China and Chosōn Korea," in *Conference Proceedings: Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions*.

sphere. Such a model might apply to the forms of other religious faiths in Korean society as well.

With orthodox Confucian rule well established in every nook of society, all forms of public Buddhist practice began to disappear. Buddhist women suffered a form of double oppression, in that (1) their religious lives were curtailed as a result of anti-Buddhist policies, and (2) their social lives were restricted by the legal and cultural oppression of women authorized by Neo-Confucian ideology. Lay women practitioners were publicly denounced, accused of adultery, and petitioned by Confucian officials, as recorded in Chosōn-dynasty annals. Fervent Confucian students also submitted charges against women in Buddhist robes who were living outside the city, accusing them of being involved in prostitution. Whether or not such charges were true, the practice of Buddhism by women in the later half of the dynasty deteriorated, becoming mixed in some cases with shamanistic rituals. There are records in later Chosōn of religious women wearing shamans' costumes and living with men in Buddhist robes. This mingling of practitioners of these two outcast religions and this type of syncretic practice seem to have become more prevalent in the dynasty's final years.

4. The Colonial Period (1910-1945)

The Japanese colonial period provided a platform for experimentation within Korean Buddhism. At the beginning of this period, some Korean Buddhists reacted ambivalently to the favorable attitude of the Japanese toward Buddhism and the actions of Japanese missionary-monks, which were supported by the colonial government, because they were wary of colonization in the guise of religious affinity – a concern borne out by the official annexation of the country by Japan in 1910.²⁰ Selected Korean Buddhist monks gained access to higher education and received support in their monasteries, yet stood vulnerable to the charge of collaborating with an aggressive colonizer. In contrast to the “mountain Buddhism” of the late

20. A survey by the Japanese government's domestic affairs division records that in May 1910 there were 958 Buddhist temples in Korea, with 5,198 monks and 563 nuns, according to the reports by *Hwangsong Daily* (1919. 5. 5) and *Taehan Maeil sinbo* (1919. 5. 6). See Han'guk kūnhyōndae Pulgyosa yōnp'yō (Chronicles of Buddhist Affairs in Modern and Contemporary Korea), (Taehan Pulgyo Chogye-jong kyoyuk-won pulhak yōnguso [The Institute of Buddhism of Education Division of Korean Buddhist Chogye Order], 2000), 21; requoted from Chōn Horyōn (Haeju Sūnim), “Han'guk kūnhyōndae piguni ū suhaeng e taehan koch'al” (Study on the Religious Practice of Korean Bhiksunis in the Modern and Contemporary Period), *Han'guk sasang kwa munhwa* 33 (2006): 307.

Chosŏn period, however – which had been characterized by private and individual modes of practice, and hence almost devoid of any institutional vigor for participating in public affairs or opportunity for self-restructuring – the colonial period allowed modern Buddhist monks the social space in which to play an active public role. The Japanese incursion thus forced Korean Buddhists to face the social demands for modern initiatives. This sense of urgency, from both inside and outside, demanded a response.

Amid this rapid social and political change, Korean Buddhist women, who had long been silenced, emerged to form their own modern community. After centuries of social disdain both toward Buddhist practice and toward women taking part in religious life, what these women found were crumbling, humble monasteries that inspired in them a fervent desire to establish bhikṣuṇī shelters where they could live and practice. It is remarkable that in this difficult time female clergy started institutionalizing their community.

Under the leadership and with the support of Man'gong Sūnim (1871–1946), a renowned Sōn master of the time, a bhikṣuṇī Sōn meditation facility, or community (*sōnwōn*), was established at Kyōnsōng-am hermitage belonging to Sudōk-sa monastery, and accepted bhikṣuṇī meditators for the retreat season in January 1916. This is the first record of such a meditation facility for nuns in modern Korea. In many ways Man'gong Sūnim was the founding father of the bhikṣuṇī practice traditions that resumed in modern times. Many of the nuns whom he accepted as his disciples and encouraged to practice later became leaders of bhikṣuṇī society.²¹ In 1918, Ongnyōn-am of T'ongdo-sa was designated a seminary for doctrinal study (*kangdang*, or *kanguōn*), and doctrinal education for bhikṣuṇīs was resumed after a long period during which the community of female monastics seems to have lacked a strong organizational basis.

After the opening of Kyōnsōng-am in 1916, Seman Sūnim opened the meditation facility Sorim *sōnwōn* of Naejang-sa in 1924; Sōngmun Sūnim opened Pudo-am of Tonghwa-sa in 1927, Sōjōn of Chikchi-sa in 1928, Yung'il-am²² of Taesŭng-sa in 1931, and Samsōn-am of Haein-sa in 1945; Pon'gong

21. Without historical materials to attest to their existence, we cannot say that there were doctrinal lecture facilities or meditators' communities for nuns during the Chosŏn dynasty. Yet because there were meditation facilities and seminaries for monks during this period, we cannot rule out the possibility of such communities for nuns. The establishment of Kyōnsōng-am *sōnwōn* is well noted in various histories and the training and living there took an institutionalized form, so this facility can be considered the first modern bhikṣuṇī *sōnwōn*. How Buddhism was practiced during the Chosŏn dynasty needs further investigation in the future.

22. Yung'il-am meditation hall was the essential glue that held together many activities of bhikṣuṇī meditators in the 1930s. How this important meditation hall came to be established and

Sünim opened Chijang-am of Wölchöng-sa in 1937; and Taewön Sünim opened Kugil-am of Haein-sa in 1944. And after the 1918 opening of the seminary at Ongnyon-am of T'ongdo-sa, two other seminaries for doctrinal studies were opened at Pomun-sa and Namjang-sa, in 1936 and 1937 respectively. The *Pangham-nok* records (a register maintained at meditation facilities for their biannual, three-month-long summer and winter retreats) show that many Buddhist nuns were actively engaged in meditation practice during this period.²³

Although the social perception of Buddhism had been changing – and Korean Buddhists' yearning for serious practice increasing – during the colonial period, the actual conditions of living and practice were utterly poor. The facilities for Sōn meditation and doctrinal studies listed above were opened in ancient hermitages attached to main monasteries in the countryside. This meant that bhikṣuṇīs had to rehabilitate and rebuild these long-neglected structures from scratch. They gathered wood for repairing the buildings and collected rice and other alms on foot. Sometimes their donation-collecting trips to other parts of the country took many months. They also walked many miles to find a master and listen to Dharma talks and teachings. Stories of these brave women circulated in meditation halls and temples, encouraging many serious practitioners who became dedicated to the religious path.

Myori Pöphüi (1887-1974) stood out in this period. She spearheaded the movement to revive religious practice and Sōn meditation among bhikṣuṇīs and is regarded as the builder of the modern Korean bhikṣuṇī sangha. Myori Pöphüi was born to a humble family in a village in South Ch'ungch'ong Province. Her father died when she was three years old. A year later, her Buddhist grandmother took the four-year-old girl to Mit'a-am, a hermitage of Tonghak-sa temple on Kyeryong-san mountain, where she was cared for by Kwiwan Sünim, the abbess of the hermitage, who treated her like her own daughter. Her mother accompanied her and became a nun, taking the name Toch'ön. When she was eight years old, her mother suddenly died. From then

who its leader was are not known. *Pangham-nok* records are available only from the year 1936, so we do not know who the resident meditators were before that. However, it is known that this facility was established in 1929 for monks, and was converted into a nuns' facility in 1931. We also know that Yongsöng Sünim, another great Sōn monk and revitalizer of Korean Buddhism in the modern period, resided there and supervised the meditators in the community in 1931, so we can make a circumstantial guess that he had played some role in drawing together the community of meditators, making establishment of the facility possible.

23. Chön Horyön (Haeju Sünim), "Han'guk künhyöndae piguni ū suhaeng e taehan koch'al," 308.

on, separation and death became central questions in her life. At the age of fourteen, she took the ten śramaṇera precepts from Tong’ŭn Sūnim and received the Dharma name Pōphūi (Dharma Joy).

Her life at Mit’ā-am was spent as a novice nun, taking care of daily temple affairs, studying Buddhist scriptures and the teachings of various Sōn masters, and practicing rituals and ceremonies. In 1910, when she was twenty-three years old, Pōphūi received full ordination as a bhikṣuṇī from Hae’gwang Sūnim at Haein-sa temple. She then traveled to the Ch’ōng’am-sa temple in North Kyōngsang Province and studied the *Lotus Sūtra* under the guidance of Kobong Sūnim (1890-1961), a renowned doctrinal master. Kobong encouraged her to meditate and told her about his teacher Man’gong Sūnim. Man’gong was a Dharma successor to Kyōnghō Sūnim (1849-1912), a renowned master who has been labeled a “superstar in modern Korean Buddhism” because of his revival of the Korean Sōn Buddhist tradition after the stifling Chosŏn period. He was also the first male master in modern Korea who received bhikṣuṇīs as his students, trained them in Sōn practice, and certified them as Sōn masters.²⁴

Pōphūi resolved to study with Man’gong and left for Chōnghye-sa temple on Tōksung mountain, where he was teaching. Man’gong had a vision of her arriving and came down the mountain to greet her. “Who are you?” he asked. “My name is Pōphūi, but I do not know who I am or where I came from.” Man’gong accepted Pōphūi as his student, and she stayed at the nearby nuns’ hermitage, Kyōnsōng-am (Seeing into One’s Nature Hermitage). Other nuns gathered, and together they rehabilitated Kyōnsōng-am to make it their meditation facility. Man’gong once wrote a poem recounting the pitiful sight of young nuns carrying soil and wood in their A-frame backpacks, and encouraging them to carry these burdens as if they were the Buddha’s golden robes.²⁵

Pōphūi later devoted herself fully to *hwadu* practice under Man’gong’s guidance.²⁶ She eventually experienced enlightenment and truly understood all

24. Hwang Ingyu, “Kündae piguni ū tonghyang kwa Tōksung ch’ongnim pigunidūl” (Trends of Modern Korean Buddhist Nuns and the Tōksung Forest Lineage), in *Kyōnghō Man’gong ū sōnp’ung kwa pōmmaek* (Kyōnghō, Man’gong and Their Sōn Buddhist Practice and Lineage), edited by Taehan Pulgyo Chogye-jong kyoyuk-wŏn pulhak yŏn’guso (Chogye Order Publishings, 2009).

25. Wōlchu Chimyōng Sūnim, *Talpit ūn uju ril pich’une* (Moonlight Brightens the Cosmos), (Seoul: Pulch’ōn, 1996), 144. This is a memoir of Pōphūi Sūnim written by her disciple Wōlchu Sūnim.

26. In *hwadu* (Ch. *huatou*, J. *wato*; literally, “word-head”) practice, meditators focus on the point, or key line, of a *kongan* (Ch. *gongan*; J. *kōan*; “public case”).

the words of the Buddhas and the masters. In front of the general assembly, Man'gong recited a Dharma poem and then issued the following challenge to the audience: "Tell me something about the flagpole!" The assembly remained silent. The silence was finally broken when Pōphūi rose quietly and said, "A fish is swimming around and the water gets clouded; a bird is flying in the sky and a feather is falling down." Later, Man'gong publicly acknowledged Pōphūi's enlightenment, granting her another Dharma name, Myori (Mysterious Principle), and composing a poem endorsing her Dharma transmission. Pōphūi was thirty years old at the time.

She later gained an impressive reputation and enormous respect as a Sōn master, both among her own disciples and from other Sōn masters. The most eminent male Sōn masters – Ch'unsōng, Kūmo, Chōng'gang, Kyōngbong, Hyanggok, Kobong, and others – visited her for Dharma exchanges. In 1966, she returned to Kyōnsōng-am, which she turned into a modern institutionalized Sōn meditation facility for bhikṣuṇīs. For the next ten years, she served as the center's headmaster and devoted herself to training disciples. As a result of her efforts, monastic training centered on Sōn practice became the basis of the Korean nuns' tradition.²⁷

Another great nun master of the twentieth century was Mansōng, who was ten years younger than Myori Pōphūi and also famous for her practice of Sōn. She was renowned in the Pusan area for her excellent preaching. Mansōng's life is vividly described by Sōn'gyōng Sūnim (1903-1994), a Sōn nun who studied under her:²⁸

She was born in 1897 in a poor farmer's family. She was married at a young age but, to her great distress, lost her husband very soon afterward. One day she went to Sangwönsa to hear a dharma talk from Master Hanam. His talk comforted her, and she asked him, "I have heard there is a method for invoking the spirit of the dead. I have no other wish but to meet my husband one more time." Master Hanam looked at her carefully and said, "You can only meet him if you become a nun. If you want to be free of suffering, take refuge in the Buddha!" Later she visited Master Man'gong and received instruction. She continued to investigate her *hwadu* for five years, still as a laywoman, until she received confirmation of her awakening from Man'gong. Unfortunately Man'gong's poem of transmission

27. See Eun-su Cho, "From Anonymity to Self-Reinvention: Korean Buddhist Nuns in the Twentieth Century," in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices across Generations* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004), 125-130.

28. From Martine Batchelor's interview of Sōn'gyōng Sūnim, in Martina Batchelor, *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 98-99. Martine Batchelor's interview of Sōn'gyōng Sūnim provides another personalized and vivid account of life as a nun in early twentieth-century Korea.

to her has been lost. Shortly afterward, in 1936 at the age of thirty-nine, she became a nun and Master Man'gong gave her the dharma name of Mansōng (Manifold Nature).

Mansōng later stayed at Taesōng-am in Pusan and taught many female disciples. She also raised Dharma topics with meditation guests, and there is a famous story of her bold words when she met Ch'unsōng and put her leg on top of the male master, asking, “Is this leg mine or yours?” This exchange became legendary among the seniors of the meditation rooms.

These women practitioners practiced together or separately. Even before the meditation halls and seminaries for bhikṣuṇī were established, individual practitioners are known to have received teachings from notable teachers. For example, Myoöm Sūnim (who is the dean of the Pongnyōng-sa Bhikṣuṇī Seminary, one of the two most prestigious in Korea, the other being Unmun-sa Seminary) recalled that she practiced meditation along with male practitioners at Taesüng-sa *sōmwōn* in 1944 – men such as Ch'ōngdam, Sōngch'öl, Ubong, Sōam, who became patriarchs and leaders of Korean Buddhism after the 1960s.²⁹ There were also nuns who sought out individual scholar-monks to learn the sūtras.

Taken together, these women's individual stories give us an overview of how they began to revive the long-lost traditions of meditation and doctrinal studies for Buddhist nuns in Korea. Their diverse and scattered efforts, combined with more structured activities, were later transformed into an institutionalized effort to reestablish the bhikṣuṇī sangha in Korea.

Besides the nuns' efforts to restructure the Buddhist sangha and rejuvenate the traditional way of practice during the colonial period, there was also a resurgence of Buddhist practice among laywomen, after long years of suppression during the Chosön dynasty. However, just when the Korean Buddhist sangha was focusing on the discourses of modernization of Buddhist society, laywomen's practices were often undermined as “superstitious” and “irrational.” For example, Manhae Han Young-un (1879-1944), a leading ideologue-monk for modernization of Korean Buddhist society and an anti-Japanese activist, put the “old” ways of practice at the center of his criticism, believing them to be a major obstacle to Korean Buddhism prospering and adapting to the changed era. He criticized the practice of “group chanting of Buddha's name” (*kosōng yōmbul*); Buddhist practice combined with folk

29. Chōn Horyōn (Haeju Sūnim), “Han'guk künhyöndae piguni ū suhaeng e taehan koch'al,” footnote 9.

religion, such as worshipping the seven dippers, mountain gods, and others; and praying for good fortune – the very modes of practice that were most popular among Korean laywomen during the 1920s. His criticism was not explicitly directed toward women, but with the weighted influence of his call for modernization, a negative social perception, labeling women's practice as superstitious, had entered the mainstream by the 1930s.

Against this backdrop, a meditation facility called *puin sōnu hoe* (literally, “an organization for women meditator friends”) was established under the Sōnhak-wōn Institute in Seoul in 1931; later, another facility was opened at P'yohun-sa monastery, called the P'yohun-sa *puin sōnwōn* (“women's meditation facility at P'yohun-sa”), in the Kūmgang-san mountains area.³⁰ Many intellectual women were converted or entered monastic life, such as Kim Iryōp (1896-1971), the famous writer and social commentator, who converted to Buddhism and began the life of a monastic at the age of thirty-eight, upon the instruction of Man'gong Sūnim. Although the emergence of women as intellectuals, writers, and artists during the modern period in Asia is often assumed to have been prompted by the introduction of Christian beliefs and civilization, many such “New Women” in Korea found Buddhist religious practices and perspectives interesting to explore and of use in their professional worlds.³¹

5. The Postcolonial Period (1945-present)

After the Korean War of 1950-1953, the Korean bhikṣuṇī community made remarkable advancements in its social presence and internal strength. Nuns rebuilt monasteries that had either fallen into ruin because of the war or been unoccupied for a long time. They also served as front-runners in the 1954-1955 “purification movement.”³² They saw this movement as providing the strategic momentum necessary to gain their rightful place in the sangha as a whole.

30. The information here on laywomen practitioners in the colonial period is based on Seung-mi Cho, “Kündae Han'guk Pulgyo ū yösöng suhaeng munhwa – Puin Sōnuhoe wa Puin Sōnwōn ū chungsim ūro” (On Women's Practice of Buddhism in Modern Korea – Focusing on the Women Sōn Practitioners' Organization and the Women's Meditation Hall), *Han'guk sasang kwa munhwa* 34 (2006): 383-410.

31. Jin Y. Park's “Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Iryeop and Buddhism” (*Korea Journal* 45-1, 2005) approaches Kim Iryōp from the perspective of modernity in colonial Korea.

32. For the role of Buddhist nuns in the purification movement by the Buddhist sangha, see Pori Park, “The Establishment of Buddhist Nunneries in Contemporary Korea,” *Conference Proceedings: Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions*.

After the Japanese colonial period, only a handful of celibate bhikṣus remained in Korea (most well-educated elite monks had either converted to Japanese Buddhism or joined the order of married monks), so at the peak of the movement, when married monks were purged through street demonstrations and legal suits, bhikṣunīs outnumbered bhikṣus.

At the beginning of the purification movement, some bhikṣus opposed the participation of bhikṣunīs, and the title of the first rally was “National Bhikṣus Rally.” But the third rally, in December 1954, was called the “Third National Rally of Bhikṣus and Bhikṣunīs” (*chōn’guk pigu piguni taehoe*), and thereafter, whenever a proclamation was read, usually by a monk, it began, “We bhikṣus and bhikṣunīs. . . .” Thus the monks clearly acknowledged that the sangha should actually denote a community of both bhikṣunīs and bhikṣus, with each group having the other as an indispensable and equal partner to make a whole. Indeed, at the rally of December 11, 1954, the number of bhikṣunīs who attended was 221, whereas the bhikṣus numbered 211. The final document, signed when the protracted struggle was drawing to a close, bore the signatures of those who had attended or who had sent in their letter of vote/attorney: 571 bhikṣunīs and 430 bhikṣus, for a total of 1,001 votes. It is interesting that the numbers of both monks and nuns attending had doubled in the course of a year.³³

In the middle of this long process of activities and discussions, the central administrative body for the sangha (*chonghoe* 宗會) and other committees were formed, and bhikṣunīs came to participate in those committees. Also, new agendas for the renewed sangha were discussed and written down.³⁴ A document submitted to the Superintendent General’s Office in December 1954, as a response to the public negotiation initiated by the police after a series of public disturbances, called “Counter measurement plan for the purification of the Buddhist community,” with 807 signatures (366 bhikṣus and 441 bhikṣunīs) is noteworthy in many ways. First, it defines roles, functions, and responsibilities in explicit form: monks and nuns (*sūngnyō*) are those who are dedicated in five areas of Buddhist practice – Keeping the Precepts, Meditation, Chanting, Studying Sūtras, and Reciting Mantras. Second, it mentions the criteria for becoming the head of a monastery, but does not specify gender: no

33. Chōn Horyōn (Haeju Sūnim), “Han’guk kŭnhyōndae piguni ū suhaeng e taean koch’al,” 310.

34. During the colonial period, Japanese Buddhist cultural practices (such as ceremonies, robe style, and, most importantly, allowing married sangha) had been imposed; to renew the Korean sangha, these influences had to be removed and Korean practice traditions reestablished.

matter what the size of a monastery or temple, monastics must complete a certain number of meditation retreats and finish their studies at the seminaries to be considered. Therefore, it is no wonder that, after the successful conclusion of the purification movement, many bhikṣuṇīs were actually appointed as abbots of monasteries.³⁵ Even the abbot of Tonghwa-sa monastery, one of the 23 head monasteries of the nation, was a bhikṣuṇī, Sōngmun Sūnim (1893-1974).³⁶

After these years of turmoil and toil, the bhikṣuṇīs added to their power and institutional structures. Many meditation halls were established or reopened for formal training of nuns: Kugil-am of Haein-sa by Pon'gong Sūnim in 1948, Hoeryong-sa by Tojun Sūnim in 1954, Taesōng-am by Mansōng Sūnim in 1956, Sōnhae illyun of Naewōn-sa by Suok Sūnim in 1957, Pudo-am of Tonghwa-sa by Sangmyōng Sūnim in 1957, Tongguk Cheil Sōnwon of Taewōn-sa by Pōbil Sūnim in 1957, Chōngsu Sōnwōn of Sōngnam-sa by Inhong Sūnim in 1957, Yangjin-am of Tonghwa-sa by Sōngnyōn Sūnim in 1958, and Naewōn-am of Tonghwa-sa by Changil Sūnim in 1959. In addition, bhikṣuṇī seminaries such as Unmun-sa and Tonghak-sa Seminaries began to be rebuilt in 1955 and 1956, respectively, and Hwaun-sa Seminary was opened by Chimyōng Sūnim in 1957.³⁷ Monastic education and doctrinal study, which had been neglected throughout the Chosŏn and colonial periods, thus began to receive a lot of attention. Initially, the emphasis was on meditation practice, but with the modernization of Korean society, the importance of Buddhist education was agreed upon by masters and disciples alike. Along with the establishment of modern education facilities for Buddhist monks and nuns (such as Myōngjin School in 1906, which later became a university of general education), support for the traditional education occurring at *kangwōn* (monastic seminaries for doctrinal study) was also underway. No longer perceived as an outdated and obsolete way of educating young minds, the traditional *kangwōn* education regained its status as a legitimate way of training monks and nuns. At first male doctrinal masters and lecturers taught at the reestablished bhikṣuṇī *kangwōns*, but later the lineage of scholarship was handed down by female masters to female disciples.

35. The *DongA (Tonga) Daily* reported on August 14, 1955 that bhikṣuṇīs had been appointed as abbots at 623 temples in the nation. Quoted from Chōn Horyōn (Haeju Sūnim), “Han’guk kūnhyōndae piguni ū suhaeng e taehan koch’al,” footnote 18.

36. Chōn Horyōn (Haeju Sūnim), “Han’guk kūnhyōndae piguni ū suhaeng e taehan koch’al,” 312; the document also set criteria for selection for the central administrative body (*chonghoe*), without mentioning gender. However, the number of bhikṣuṇīs to be selected for the seats was agreed to be limited to one-sixth the number of bhikṣus.

37. Ibid.

The Contemporary Situation

After the dramatic social changes of the 1960s and 1970s – economic growth, adoption of general education for the nation, and the subsequent elevation of women's social status – the community of Korean Buddhist nuns entered a totally new stage. Over the last thirty years, the Korean nuns' sangha has grown to such an extent that half the ordained clerics of the Chogye Order are nuns.³⁸ Not only have their numbers grown but their status has risen significantly. Martine Batchelor, who lived in Korea as a Buddhist nun from 1975-1985 and traveled extensively in Asia, has observed that Korean Buddhist nuns have the second highest social status among Asian countries, next to that of Taiwanese nuns. She points out that Korean monks tend to offer the most respect to the nuns, coming closest to treating them as equals, and notes that all nunneries in Korea operate with a high degree of autonomy and are not supervised by monks.³⁹

Moreover, now that Korean nuns no longer have to focus exclusively on reestablishing their monasteries and places for practice and study, they have expanded the scope of their activities to include proselytization and social welfare work. These women also play a prominent role not only as practitioners but in the areas of education and the direct management of monasteries. They receive systematic training in lecture halls and meditation rooms, are aware of the history of their own tradition through lineage and teacher-disciple inheritance, and live a communal life in nunneries with other practitioners, in joint ownership of their own true character as a distinct movement within the larger Buddhist Order. They assert this ownership by actively creating a constructive image of themselves through their engagement in everything from running children's summer schools and social welfare facilities to popularizing Buddhist songs for younger generations as both performers and disk jockeys. Such attempts sometimes complement and at other times stand in tension with the activities of male Buddhist clerics, which still continue in the contemporary Buddhist sangha. In the culmination of these efforts lies the formation of the bhikṣunī association. It started as a loose

38. According to *Sōnwŏn ch'ongnam* (Comprehensive Review of Sōn Meditational Centers), published by the Chogye-jong Headquarters in 2000, during the Buddhist year 2542 summer retreat, there were 32 bhikṣu *sōnwŏn*, with 567 monks participating, and 32 bhikṣunī *sōnwŏn*, with 716 nuns participating. According to the official statistics of the Chogye order, as of 2008 there are 5,413 monks and 5,331 nuns.

39. Batchelor, *Women in Korean Zen*, 21-22.

association of nuns called “Udambala hoe” (Udambara Association) in 1968, which became the formal National Bhikṣuṇī Association in 1985, with Hyech’un Sūnim as its first president. As an umbrella organization of Buddhist nuns, based on membership, it has been successful in various educational, intellectual, and social activities.

My own candid assessment of contemporary Korean Buddhist society identifies the following six factors as possible explanations for the remarkable development in the Korean nuns’ sangha over the past thirty years. In the absence of any in-depth research of the factors behind the success of the Korean Buddhist nuns’ order, these are some subjective reflections based on my observations and discussions with nuns and other believers:

1. *Collective cohesive power.* In a number of reforms in the sangha, the cohesion shown by the nuns served as a striking display of their capacities within the sangha. The nuns had formed a comparatively large collective inside a relatively narrow environment. Their lecture halls and meditation rooms were always overcrowded, and their living facilities were usually insufficient and inferior. Ironically, this challenging environment helped them come up with better survival strategies and a collaborative spirit with which to cope with unfavorable political and economical situations.
2. *Improvement in the economic environment.* From the 1970s on, in accord with developments in the Korean economy, the economic strength of the Korean sangha rapidly improved. Over time, even the nunneries were able to secure considerable economic power. In particular, the nuns efficiently applied their characteristically frugal and diligent attitude to establishing a secure livelihood for themselves, unlike their monk counterparts. This increased their inner self-confidence as female monastics. Due to the deepening of their practice and their activities in the greater society, and by extending the breadth of such activities, they also gradually enlarged the basis for the populace at large to trust them.
3. *Changes in ideals and the environment of their practice.* The modern Korean sangha has been governed by an ideology that put practice first – namely, Mahāyāna meditation as a direct path to enlightenment. As a result, there tended to be a strict division between the *ip’an* (meditators) and *sap’an* (support staff). The *sap’an* were viewed as mere supporters of the *ip’an*, performing the tasks necessary for the latter’s subsistence. In this atmosphere, some *sap’an* came to feel shame at being monks who merely labored. Until the 1980s, the *ip’an* had absolute influence both inside and outside the sangha. For example, they had the authority to change the power structure of the entire order in a single morning at a monks’ conference. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the *ip’an* recognized the importance of administering the order and began to actively participate in it. After that, the division between *ip’an* and *sap’an* gradually blurred, creating an environment in which the importance of the *sap’an* was sometimes greater than that of the *ip’an*. From then on, interest

in various methods of practice besides *hwadu* meditation began to gain attention inside and outside the sangha. Practices that had been excluded as heretical – such as prayer and *yombul* (chanting/mindfulness of the name of a buddha), as well as austerities and altruistic service to others – began to rise in prominence. Such changes led to a recognition of the proper attitude toward practice and toward the strict regulations themselves. Again, in direct contrast with the corruption and power struggles of the monk-led order, the practices of the nuns were highlighted during this period of renewed emphasis on proper practice.

4. *Changes in the sangha following changes in Korean society.* Problems such as the role of religious groups, their altruistic activities, and their role in the greater society had been largely ignored due to the primacy given to meditation practice in the modern Korean sangha. Traditional monasteries located in the mountains had focused on ensuring their own economic base and were the main support for the formation of the modern sangha that gave primacy to the cultivation of meditation. However, as Korean society grew and changed quite drastically, the sangha became a large-scale organization and its role in the greater society also began to increase. Extending beyond the scope of the traditional monastery, new, modern-style monasteries appeared. They began to question the importance of the internal issues of transmission of the Dharma and conversion of laypeople, and the external issues of the role of religion in the greater society.
5. *The rapid rise in the status and role of women in modern Korean society as a whole.* The extent of social participation and the position of women in Korean society have improved rapidly, to the extent that a woman has been appointed Deputy Minister of Justice. Of course, there has been great resistance to this, and there is a huge differential between the calls for a gender-equal society and the reality of that society. However, the Buddhist world, seeing itself as a participant in the movement struggling to revise those outlooks, is actively seeking to progressively influence such trends. The recent news that a nun was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Culture in the general administration of the Chogye Order is a clear sign that the order wants to at least appear conscious of this need for gender equality. This has been welcomed heartily by many people, not just inside the religion, and the enthusiastic welcome nationwide, in newspapers and other media, shows that Korean society is much more liberal, progressive, and flexible than the order had thought it to be.
6. *The change from a society of extended families to a society of nuclear families.* There has been a recent tendency in Korean society to replace the traditional concept of filial piety with an increased interest in child-rearing and education. In this tendency, there is more sympathy than before for the emotional and psychological conflicts between the family and the individual. Female clergy, who know from experience how to interpret the nuances of such problems, will naturally be able to understand and empathize with lay believers and disciples on such matters.

Remaining Reflections

With these six trends in mind, we can return to our question about the invisibility of Buddhist women in the historical records as well as in modern research, not only in the Western world but also in Korea. Serious studies of the history of Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese Buddhist nuns have already been undertaken.⁴⁰ Specialist research on Korean nuns has been alien not only to the non-Korean academic world but to the Korean academic world as well. The number of writings on Korean nuns can be counted on one hand, and it is no exaggeration to say that the fruits of this academic research had been almost nonexistent until a few years ago.⁴¹

40. There are numerous books and articles on Chinese Buddhist women, not all of which can be mentioned here. Chun-fang Yü, Beata Grant, Miriam Levering, and Ding-hwa E. Hsieh are leading scholars in the field. Recent works have appeared in Western academic circles that trace the remarkable growth of the nuns' sangha in Taiwan, such as Heng-Ching Shih, "Buddhist Spirituality in Modern Taiwan," in Yoshinori Takeuchi, ed., *Buddhist Spirituality – Later China, Korea, Japan, and the Modern World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 427-431; Chien-Yu Julia Huang and Robert P. Weller, "Merit and Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57.2 (May 1998): 379-396; Charles Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan – Religion and the State 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); Elise Anne DeVido, "'The Infinite Worlds' of Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns," in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004); and Wei-Yi Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2007). For Japanese Buddhist women, representative books are Paula Kane Robinson Arai, *Women Living Zen: Japanese Soto Buddhist Nuns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Barbara Ruch, *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, no. 43 (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002).

41. Beginning in 2002, a group of young scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including religious studies, Buddhist studies, literature, and others, began to discuss collaborative approaches to this important area of study. After scattered talks and meetings, they gathered face to face and confirmed each other's enthusiasm at a one-day planning workshop entitled "New Directions and Strategies for Research on the History of Korean Buddhist Nuns," held in New York on February 15, 2003. This event – organized by Barbara Ruch, a pioneer in the study of Japanese nuns, and hosted by the Center for Medieval Japanese Studies at Columbia University – brought vital momentum to the initial effort, propelling it in a more organized direction. Among those who attended the workshop and became major researchers in the project were Samu Sünim, Bongak Sünim, Haewon Sünim, Suktam Sünim, Hyangsoon Yi, and myself. Samu Sünim in particular had already been a pioneer in this area by publishing accounts of notable twentieth-century Korean Buddhist nuns, such as Ünyöng Sünim and Mansöng Sünim, in his articles "Eunyeong Sünim and the Founding of Pomun-Jong, the First Independent Bhikshuni Order," and "Manseong Sünim, a Woman Zen Master of Modern Korea," in *Spring Wind, A Buddhist Cultural Forum: Women and Buddhism* 6 (1986): 129-162 and 188-193, respectively. Martina Batchelor, who was not present at the workshop, published a nonacademic but very important

Although there are a number of reasons for this, the most important is that the historical evidence is insufficient.⁴² Individual records of Chosŏn Buddhist women are rare, in keeping with the harsh cultural climate of that age. In addition, nuns reacted with certain characteristic personal attitudes, developing outlooks on practice that had a significant impact on their presence in the historical record. One response was to seclude themselves from the outside world. Many nuns lived and died anonymously, leaving little if any information about their lives. Because Korean nuns in the past five hundred years experienced both the oppression of Buddhism and the ideology of male primacy, later nuns seem to have accepted the fact that seclusion was their traditional, normative lifestyle. Determined to preserve their tradition and to avoid revealing their personal abilities, nuns have virtually quarantined themselves in their meditation rooms and lecture halls in the mountains of Korea, even up to the present day.

The passive, eremitic atmosphere of the society of traditional nuns also contributes to the difficulties of research. Within such limits, there is a propensity to create new forms of misunderstanding. That is to say, within the limits of the testimony of surviving people, one has to reproduce the achievements of the past according to the stipulations of the current ideology and the contemporary lineage environment. Therefore, one may unwillingly duplicate the biases of one's living informants. The prevailing views of informants can restrict our information about the past, present, and future.

Moreover, while many nuns complain about the external prejudices toward them, they themselves harbor varied prejudices as well. In particular, the lineage adherence that exists among them can be fatal to reliable research. Because prejudices about prejudices, and secondary and tertiary prejudices, come into play, later research about nuns will likely be forced to grope among the differing biases, potentially giving rise to even more distortions and unnecessary disputes.

Research on the nuns of the past faces the additional difficulty that it

anthology of stories about the lives of contemporary Buddhist nuns, *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

42. The lack of historical materials is notable not only in terms of classical materials, but even in our recent history. The records of the deeds of important monks of the recent past have been scattered and even now are not being properly preserved. The documentation of nuns' achievements in modern Korean Buddhist history must include a search for materials hidden deep within monastic gazetteers, as well as taped interviews with elderly nuns before they die. In terms of our understanding nuns' roles in Korean Buddhism, the urgency of this task, and the loss that will be incurred should it fail, cannot be overstated.

cannot be carried out without considering the relations of nuns with the order of monks and also with monk teachers. For example, it would be contradictory to posit the ideological and practical independence of nuns whose lives were voluntarily dependent on the position and influence of the monk teachers under whom they studied and practiced. The viewpoints of nuns' male patriarchal teachers are a further restriction. According to recent research on the status of female clergy inside religious orders, women's religious orders that operate independently of men in terms of their education, faith, and proselytization make more progress than those whose operations are dependent on male institutions.

For instance, the aforementioned Myori Pöphüi, one of the greatest female teachers/masters of modern Korea, was a remarkable guide to the first generation that established the modern order of nuns. Yet in giving her membership in the lineage of the Dharma, her teacher, the monk Man'gong, said to her, "Go before the congregation, since you have been venerated of late, but do not preach."⁴³ Pöphüi followed her teacher's words to the letter. Although she had a renowned career as a Sön master, received many contemporary male masters for Dharma exchanges, and nurtured many disciples, she never once ascended the Dharma podium to preach. The case of Pöphüi shows the ambivalent position a female disciple could fall into with her male guide in the religious order – a relationship that embodied the simultaneous guidance and restraint that men offered women in the Buddhist monastic orders.

On reflection, most research on nuns has been hampered by the preconception that "nuns are women." There are cases premised on the vague expectation that "nuns must essentially be feminists," or must have aims or starting points similar to those of feminists. However, some care needs to be taken in this approach. Many Korean Buddhist nuns certainly expressed, through their writings or personal meetings with me, that they wanted to become a nun to overcome their present "bondage" as women. Yet they also mentioned that the way to do this was through spiritual practice and its final goal of attaining enlightenment, and that this spiritual quest was the ultimate reason they wished to become nuns. Persons who choose ordination do so in anticipation of the highest religious ideal; questions of gender differences or their oppressive environment are secondary.

The practice journey of Reverend Daehaeng in contemporary Korea, the founder of the HanMaum Seonweon (One Mind Zen Center) was a stormy

43. Ha Chunsaeng, *Kkaedariüm iü kkot* (Flowers of Enlightenment; Seoul: Yörae, 1998), 121.

one. However, Reverend Daehaeng wanted to open up the possibility of a “new humanity,” regardless of gender. She challenged the existing male-centric system of practice and achieved an enlightenment totally unrelated to that issue, receiving recognition of the universal position that transcends lay or cleric, male or female. The practice and teaching of Reverend Daehaeng have discarded the form of a nun, since for her and her disciples, the idea of femaleness or maleness is itself a useless delusion. Her disciples see Reverend Daehaeng as a universal human and as a teacher.⁴⁴

Many futurists think that twenty-first-century society will see humanity achieve better results than in earlier centuries by embracing a traditionally “female style” that values experience and participation in life, in preference to a “male style” based on assumptions of the logic of difference and control, and the hegemony of power. Current religious thought, rather than invoking the dichotomy of male and female, must present a vision that will build a true “difference in unity,” one in which men and women can live together harmoniously in this world. Buddhism contributes to this ideal future society by proposing thoughts and practices of peace and coexistence. In this endeavor Buddhist nuns can serve as key contributors not only to Korean society – where they are an autonomous force in forging a new definition of a greater Buddhist society – but to the wider world beyond.

44. Many of her writings have been translated into English and other foreign languages. Most recently, *No River To Cross: Trusting The Enlightenment That's Always Right Here* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom publications, 2007).