

Siderits 교수님 인터뷰

Interview

Q. As students, we are very curious about your school days. Because we know that you are multilingual, we think you must have been a good student when you were in school. Is it true? Also, as you have a unique background of having studied Eastern philosophy in Western schools, we would like to ask if you have any special story that led you to major in Buddhism.

A. I would not say that I was ever an especially good student, particularly at languages. I have just been lucky to have had the opportunity to live in different countries: one year in Germany when I was 19, then two years in Japan when I was a graduate student. I studied Sanskrit for three years at the University of Hawaii with an excellent teacher, Prof. Walter Maurer. Sanskrit is the one language I did not learn by speaking and listening; Sanskrit is a 'dead' language, something no one speaks any more. But it is also a very logical language, and studying it is like learning to do crossword puzzles or Sudoku; anyone who enjoys those games will also find it easy to learn Sanskrit.

It was at University of Hawaii, where I obtained my BA, that I began serious study of Asian philosophy, especially Buddhist philosophy. I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in high school. In those days the form of Buddhism most widely known in the West was Zen. And Zen was represented as a kind of spiritual practice that did not require acceptance

of doctrines wholly based on faith. So it seemed to me like it might have interesting things to say about how we ought to live our lives in a scientific age where nothing is supposed to be taken on faith alone. And then when I began studying Western philosophy, I discovered that philosophy offered some tools that might be useful in trying to work out just what Buddhists mean when they say there is no self. That inspired me to investigate the Buddhist philosophical tradition. And in those days the only place one could do that in the U.S. was University of Hawaii. So that is where I went for my BA.

Q. Maybe many people would think that studying Buddhist philosophy is studying history of Asian philosophy. And also they would think that history of Asian philosophy has no close relation with contemporary issues of Western philosophy like language, the mind-body problem etc. What do you think about such thoughts? What are the implications of Buddhist philosophy in relation to contemporary philosophical issues?

A. Of course it is important to study the history of Buddhist philosophy, as well as the other schools of philosophy that Buddhism interacted with in Asia, such as Nyāya and Vedānta in India, and Confucianism and Taoism in East Asia. Just as there are many different schools of Western philosophy, so there are many different schools of Buddhist philosophy. And the theories and arguments of those schools developed through the debates they held with their rivals, such as Nyāya in India and Confucianism in China. People who do not study this history are more likely to mistake one particular Buddhist school or approach with all of Buddhist philosophy. Today the Tibetan school of Geluk-pa (the school that the Dalai Lama

was trained in) and Korean Seon are both popular, and people sometimes have the idea that one of these is ‘the real Buddhism’, but of course that is a mistake.

Within the vast tradition of Buddhist thought, there are some Buddhist thinkers who deny that the techniques of rational analysis and argumentation commonly used by Western philosophers have any role to play in Buddhist practice. Indeed some Buddhist thinkers believe it is rational analysis and argumentation that get us in trouble in the first place. Others, though, deny this, and see those techniques as useful tools in the quest for nirvana. As a result these Buddhist thinkers developed a variety of different theories about the same sorts of issues that Western philosophers investigate, including issues in the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. So I think it would be a mistake to conclude that Buddhism as a whole rejects logic and rationality. No doubt some Buddhists do, but others have embraced the sorts of practices that are distinctive of philosophy. Like philosophers everywhere, Buddhist philosophers disagree among themselves about the issues they discuss. So it is not possible to say just what implications Buddhist philosophy has for contemporary issues in the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. That depends on which particular Buddhist philosopher one is talking about. What I think we can say is that learning more about their theories in these areas may be useful when it comes to making progress in solving them. Here is why I think that. Buddhist philosophy and Western philosophy have been trying to solve problems like the mind-body problem for a long time, using similar techniques, but completely independently of one another. Sometimes when two groups of people are working on the same problem but neither knows what the other is doing, one will get stuck because of an

assumption they made while the other makes progress because they did not make that assumption. Or one group hits on a strategy that simply never occurs to the other. This might be the case with Buddhist and Western philosophy. The only way we will ever find out is by carefully investigating what each group is doing and seeing what new approaches emerge as a result.

Q. Could you give some concrete examples of Buddhist philosophy's contributions to solving contemporary philosophical problems?

A. Unfortunately I cannot give you an example because philosophers very seldom solve problems. Philosophers just keep talking about the same problems over and over and over again. And it's very rare that all philosophers agree that this is the right answer. That's just the way we philosophers are. We love to talk, we love to argue. And so it seems like we never actually solve the problems that we discuss. However, we do in fact make progress because one thing that we do is show why certain sorts of answers to the questions we ask could not be right. Why, for instance, the common sense ideas about how to solve this problem are actually wrong. And that is something philosophers do tend to agree on. They just take the question further and deeper and then they still disagree among themselves but at least they have made progress because they have shown that certain kinds of ways of solving this problem are not going to work.

Right now we are in the middle of an explosion of interest in trying to figure out how the human mind works. The problem is the relation between the mind and the brain, and whether there is anything more to the human mind than just the brain

with all of its workings, its very, very complex workings. And this is an area where philosophers have a great deal to say. Now of course there are philosophers on both sides of that question. Some philosophers who say no, the mind is nothing more than just the brain and what we call mental states are really just very, very complicated physical states. And there are philosophers who say, no, you will never in fact succeed in understanding the mind if all you're doing is looking at the brain. Because when you're looking at the brain it's like walking around inside a great big factory where they manufacture things and you're never going to see thoughts inside that factory. All you're going to see is big machines taking parts and putting them together, but that is a very different sort of thing from the thought, that's what other philosophers will say.

Buddhist philosophy never directly dealt with this particular issue, because Buddhist philosophers always simply assumed that there is more to reality than just the physical things that go to make up our bodies and other parts of the natural world. They thought that there is more to reality than just matter and material states. However, they did address the question, how is it that we know that we are conscious, how is it that we are actually aware of our own mental states? Like right now I'm aware of hearing the sound of that radiator. Okay. I'm aware not just of the radiator but of the fact that I am hearing it. How is that possible? That's the question. And this is the question that Indian philosophers in general discuss. They debate it; and they had different answers. Some Buddhist philosophers actually claim that it must be the case that every cognition, every mental state is actually aware of itself at the same time that it is aware of something else. And they gave arguments for that view, which have recently been introduced

into the Western, the contemporary discussion in philosophy of mind, looking to see if that might help us make some progress in trying to answer this question. So that's one particular contribution that Buddhist philosophy has made to a contemporary philosophical issue.

Q. Your book, "Buddhism As Philosophy" explains the Buddhist tradition based on a categorization of philosophy into metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. But, we can say such methods are those of Western philosophy. What implications do you think we can get by analyzing Buddhism with Western philosophical method and language?

A. From what I know of the Indian Buddhist tradition, I would have to say that the division of philosophy into the areas of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics is not exclusively Western. Buddhist philosophers in India engaged in lengthy debates with one another and with the non-Buddhist schools over questions concerning what exists, what time is like, how causation works — questions that we think of as belonging to metaphysics. Then there were philosophers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, who developed a whole school of Buddhist epistemology in order to help defend Buddhist metaphysics against the attacks of the non-Buddhist philosophers. Ethics is the one area of philosophy that may not have been as extensively developed in the Buddhist tradition as in the West. But even here Buddhist thinkers like Śāntideva have interesting and important things to say.

Q. Like your book's title, "Buddhism As Philosophy," we can comprehend Buddhism as philosophy. As Buddhism analyzes

the world in logical and rational ways, it is possible to view Buddhism as philosophy. But, definitely, there are also religious matters that require faith and belief. Suppose that there are people who understand the principle of karma and rebirth but do not believe them. Someone would think that they have incomplete acceptance of Buddhism. But another would think that there is no relation between Buddhism as philosophy and Buddhism as religion. What do you think?

- A. The doctrine of karma and rebirth is a particularly difficult one for Buddhists today. When Buddhism began in India, this idea was already widely accepted, so it was not something that one had to accept on the authority of the Buddha; almost everyone already held it to be true. Nowadays, though, scientific knowledge makes karma and rebirth more difficult to accept. (There is also the concern that the doctrine can be used to justify an unjust social order.) What someone might say to resolve the problem is this: the Buddhist tradition has always contained the idea that certain teachings are not strictly speaking true, but believing them is useful at early stages on the path to enlightenment; and perhaps the doctrine of karma and rebirth is one of these teachings. If they said this, though, they would have to question other things many Buddhists believe. For instance, it could not then be literally true that I might make progress toward enlightenment by doing good deeds in this life and earning a better rebirth where it would be easier for me to renounce the life of the householder. So it is not easy to see how to adjust Buddhist doctrine to modern knowledge of the nature of the world and human beings.

But I do not see this as a problem of ‘philosophy’ vs. ‘religion’. There are some questions that philosophy is good at answering,

but others it is not. No one expects philosophers to find a cure for cancer, for instance; we leave that to medical science. When it comes to attaining liberation from suffering, Buddhists have claimed that philosophy is an important tool, but not the only tool that is needed. Some Buddhist doctrines come not from Buddhist philosophy but from other sources of belief, such as common sense. The difficulty that Buddhists face today is how to deal with doctrines that once seemed to be supported by common sense but no longer do. Does one continue to accept the doctrine simply because of what the tradition says, or does one try to adjust the teachings to a new and different common sense? This is a problem that is faced by every spiritual tradition that has endured for any length of time.

Q. You said some Buddhist doctrines did not come from Buddhist philosophy but from common sense. I take it you distinguish between philosophy and belief. But I think that all parts of Buddhist religion are integrated, so they are not easily distinguished. What do you think?

A. I disagree. It's true that a religion tries to integrate all the different beliefs that make up the core of that religion. However, take the case of a religion that includes philosophy, Christianity for instance, in the Middle Ages, the Western Catholic form of Christianity. You can talk about philosophy and particularly you can talk about the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas as another example of philosophy being one part of this larger thing called a religion. And in the case of St. Thomas, he believed that there are certain parts of the doctrines of Christianity that philosophy can prove, but there are other parts that can only

be taken on faith, that one must take on faith in order to be a Christian. For instance the doctrine of the trinity that God is one person who is also three persons. Now how in the world could you give a logical proof that one person is three persons? It does not make sense in fact and that is a doctrine that can only be taken on faith.

Might there be elements of Buddhism that are likewise doctrines that cannot be proven philosophically? Now in the case of Buddhism, I would argue that the core teachings require that there be very few doctrines that one must take on faith. The Buddha himself said, do not take what I said on faith. Do not believe what I say just because I have said it. Instead accept what I said as a useful hypothesis and then put it to the test in your own life, and if it works for you that will be the proof. But the proof is in its success, not in the fact that I said it. Okay, so that idea suggests that the Buddha thought his teaching should be taken philosophically, taken not on the basis of faith but instead to be tested through some sort of empirical means or through rational means.

But nonetheless there are those elements of Buddhism, and I use the example of karma and rebirth there, elements of the Buddhist teachings that look like they could not be proven philosophically. And nowadays we have got some evidence that in fact they could not be right. It could not be the case that people undergo rebirth and that there is karmic causation. So that suggests that what the Buddhist philosopher needs to do is work out what are the core teachings, the most important elements of Buddhism and how we can use philosophy to support them.

Q. So you think understanding Buddhist philosophy has no

important relation with understanding Buddhist religion. Right?

- A. No, actually the opposite. Okay, back to this question of faith, of taking certain doctrines, certain beliefs on faith. It's always important, I think, to remember that in Buddhism the core teaching is non-self, that suffering exists because we falsely believe we have selves, that there is really such a thing as a true me. Now, taking something on faith, and clinging to that belief is actually a way of reasserting and reaffirming this I. "I believe that." "That belief is central to my existence." That's what someone does when they take something on faith. The Christian says "I am a Christian, I accepted Jesus into my heart." Okay. That use of the word "I" suggests that it's central to that expression of faith that there be this feeling of a me.

And the Buddha taught that the belief in a me is the source of suffering. That's what must be overcome. And that's why I think philosophy has played such an important role in Buddhist tradition. Because philosophy requires you to find the truth not by an act of faith but instead by working through rational processes, by finding proof. And that's why I think it is something of a mistake to think of Buddhism as a religion in the same sense in which we think of things such as Christianity and Islam as religions. For those religions this act of faith is central. And for Buddhism, if my understanding of the Buddhist teachings is correct, it could never be central, it could only be—take something on faith provisionally and see if it works. Okay?

That is why I think in fact Buddhist philosophy is so interesting. Precisely because it plays such an important role in what we think of as a religious question. How do I make my

life better? How should I live my life? Where do I fit in the world? What's the point of it all? It tries to answer those questions, but without commitment to certain elements of faith. That's why I think Buddhism is something that is worthwhile for philosophers to pay attention to and study.

Q. How did studying Buddhism affect your actual life.

A. Good question and, okay, a very simple answer but it is also a very complicated answer. First of all, I have to say I am not myself a Buddhist. I am not a practicing Buddhist. I am a scholar of Buddhist philosophy. I admire Buddhist philosophy. I find a great deal of interest and importance in Buddhist philosophy. But I do not consider myself a Buddhist. In spite of that, I'm a vegetarian. And that's a very big element of my daily life, especially living here in Korea. Well now we have the vegetarian buffet in the second cafeteria and that's great but outside of Seoul National University it's very difficult to walk into a restaurant and get something to eat that does not have meat or fish in it. Okay. So that is in fact a big part of, a very concrete and major element of my daily life that is affected. I guess I could say that there are particular arguments in Buddhist philosophy that I take seriously enough that they convince me that vegetarianism is the way to go.

Q. There is an interesting description in your curriculum vitae. I noticed that you are also interested in 'feminist philosophy'. Is there any special relation between Buddhist philosophy, which is your major research area, and feminist philosophy?

A. Buddhism and feminism are both concerned to deal with human

suffering. In the case of Buddhism, though, it is the existential suffering that everyone faces, whereas in the case of feminism it is the suffering that women face through oppressive patriarchal social structures. So there is a major difference between the two. As for Buddhist philosophy and feminist philosophy, both are interested in exploring just how much philosophical analysis can contribute to the amelioration of suffering—to understanding it and its origins. But because of the differences between existential suffering and socio-political oppression, the two kinds of philosophy focus on different topics. Buddhist philosophy concentrates on questions concerning what it means for the individual person to exist, whereas feminist philosophy looks at questions about socio-political structures. I have found both types of philosophical investigation extremely interesting, but I have not found any particularly deep and important connections between them. Some people believe that Buddhism is itself patriarchal and so is incompatible with feminism. And it is true that there have been some Buddhist institutions and practices that subordinated women. But for my own part I am not convinced that Buddhism is intrinsically sexist. I suspect that where Buddhist institutions have treated women in discriminatory ways this has been due to influence from a larger patriarchal culture.

- Q. I want to hear more about your interest in Feminist philosophy.
- A. Okay, as far as my politics are concerned, I would describe myself as a feminist. However, I do not do feminist philosophy any more. I used to teach feminist philosophy and I continue to read works in feminist philosophy but I no longer teach it. For one thing, I could not teach it here. I can teach feminist philosophy in the United States but I could not teach it here.

But my interest in feminist philosophy comes out of a different area of my life, and so it's not actually directly related to my interest in Buddhist philosophy. It grew out of my political beliefs, which were forged, developed in the 1960s, the time of the civil rights struggle in the United States and also the time of the anti-war struggle, protesting the Vietnam War and at the same time the beginnings of feminism. And I participated to some extent in all of those struggles. So that's the background of my politics. And that's how I became interested in feminist philosophy. Because being a philosopher, of course, one wants to know, can philosophy be useful here? Can it be helpful here? Most of the important academic work in feminism is done not in philosophy but in the social sciences—in psychology, sociology, and to some extent in political theory. But philosophy can help. Because as with any other large question that lots of different people are debating and bringing their expertise to, there's always a problem of different people talking to one another at cross purposes. Each will not really understand what the other one is saying because they are working from the perspectives of different academic disciplines. For instance, this person is a political theorist, this other person is a psychologist, they use the same words but they mean the words in different ways. Philosophers are often very good in that sort of situation at helping people clarify, at helping people identify assumptions that I am making, that you might not be making, and why I make that assumption, why you do not make that assumption, helping people sort out those things so that they can have a more productive conversation. Okay, that's one thing philosophers are generally good at. And that's part of what philosophy has I think contributed to feminist politics.

I think it's useful to study feminist philosophy if you're

interested in feminism because it is working at such an abstract level, but it's not particularly helpful when it comes to trying to solve these sorts of concrete issues that feminists are really all about. And so for that it is purely academic. But it's nonetheless interesting so I enjoy thinking about these questions and studying them and seeing what other people have to say about them.

- Q. This is a casual topic. Buddhist culture has lasted for 1,500 years in Korea. There are many Buddhist remains. And we think Korean Buddhist culture has unique features in comparison with other countries. Have you visited Korean Buddhist temples? As a Buddhist scholar, what's your impression of Korean Buddhist culture? And if you had ever studied Korean Buddhist philosophy, could you tell me about the impressions of Korean Buddhist philosophy?
- A. I have visited a number of Korean Buddhist temples, and found their beauty, dignity and tranquility quite inspiring. As for Korean Buddhist philosophy, I have not been able to study it in any detail. And I know that there are some parts of Korean Buddhism that reject the sort of rational analytic approach to doing philosophy I favor. But then when I look at the great Korean Buddhist philosopher Wônhyo I see just the same kinds of analysis and argumentation that I always appreciated in the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. This makes me wish that I had more time to investigate the Korean Buddhist tradition.
- Q. You said in an interview with Public Relations Department of Seoul National University that one of the reasons that brought

you here is to pay off debt to Professor Kim Jae Gwon. Professor Kim Jae Gwon is a renowned philosopher. So students are interested about your relationship with Professor Kim. Especially your expression 'debt' drew great interest.

- A. I'm sure I did not mean to say that I wanted to literally pay off a debt to Professor Kim Jae Gwon. I do feel indebted to him, but in the following sense. I have immensely enjoyed my time here, and I believe that were it not for Prof. Kim I might not have had this opportunity. Here is why. I did not meet Prof. Kim until recently, but I have long known of him and have found his work extremely valuable and important. In a book on Buddhist metaphysics I wrote several years ago, I discussed one of Prof. Kim's arguments and suggested some ways in which Buddhist ideas might be used to improve the argument. This caught the attention of Prof. Hong Chang-seong, a former student of Prof. Kim's who now teaches in Minnesota. (Prof. Hong is also a graduate of SNU's philosophy program.) Prof. Hong's research had been in Western philosophy of mind and metaphysics, but he was interested to find out if Asian philosophy had any new insights to offer. So he and I began a long philosophical conversation, and that eventually led to my being here.
- Q. Because you are the only foreign professor in the department of philosophy, students sometimes talk about you. what's your impression of Korean students or university during the past three years?
- A. I have greatly enjoyed teaching in this department and at SNU. The overall quality of the students is extremely high. I have

especially appreciated the fact that students are willing to express their own ideas even when they do not necessarily agree with those of the instructor. Disagreement and debate are the lifeblood of philosophy. I have learned new things from my students. I have also had great fun in the classroom here. I will miss teaching philosophy at SNU.

Q. What plans do you have after your retirement?

A. Lots of baby-sitting! (My wife and I now have three grandchildren under 3 years of age.) But I also expect to do a great deal of reading, thinking and writing. Thanks to the intellectual stimulation I received while here, I now have a number of new projects I want to work on and complete. I expect to also do a certain amount of guest lecturing in Europe, Asian and North America. And I hope I shall be able to come back here and teach the occasional course at some point in the future.