

Article

Labor of the Bhikkhuni Sangha: Communal Work as Female Buddhist Practice

Gisun Kang

Department of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University, Seoul 04620, Republic of Korea; 11doup@naver.com

Abstract

This study explores the role of labor as Buddhist practice within the Korean bhikkhuni sangha, with particular attention to *ulryeok* (communal labor). Bhikkhuni is not a term for a general female Buddhist practitioner, but a technical Buddhist term referring to a woman who has formally undertaken full ordination (a fully ordained Buddhist nun). Unlike ordinary labor, which is primarily aimed at livelihood, Buddhist labor in the context of the Korean monastic community integrates personal practice with communal life. This study, drawing on the *Madhyama Āgama*, Vinaya regulations, and Baizhang Huaihai's maxim "A day without work is a day without food," examines how the Buddha's participation in communal labor is depicted in early Buddhist texts and how such practices were institutionalized and interpreted within the Vinaya tradition. Furthermore, by comparing the duty assignment system of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* with the duty roster system of the *Yongsangbang* at Unmunsa Monastery, the study explores how traditions of labor practice have been transmitted and reinterpreted within the specific historical and cultural contexts of Chinese and Korean Buddhism. The findings show that communal labor (*ulryeok*) functions to sustain both communal life and spiritual practice, operating as a form of collective discipline within the Korean monastic tradition. Principles of the early Vinaya tradition remain reflected in Unmunsa's organizational system today, demonstrating that interpretations of Buddhist labor practice formed in historical contexts continue to shape contemporary Korean monastic culture.

Keywords: bhikkhuni sangha; labor; *ulryeok*; practice; *Madhyama Āgama*; *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*; *yongsangbang*; Unmunsa

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, modern society is undergoing rapid transformation, entering an era led by artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced technological innovation. Scientific and technological progress has driven diversification and specialization of occupations, fundamentally restructuring the global labor system. Labor is no longer merely a means of survival but has become a core element that defines identity, status, and social roles. The work an individual performs directly influences their social standing and serves as a crucial factor in determining how their contributions are perceived within the community. Amid these changes, labor has emerged as an important subject of study not only in economics and sociology but also in religious studies, as a way to understand human existence and community. Buddhism likewise regards labor as a vital aspect of human life. However, in Buddhism, labor carries a meaning distinct from the economic activity understood in general society.



Academic Editor: Hong Luo

Received: 26 June 2026

Revised: 1 August 2026

Accepted: 11 August 2026

Published: 18 August 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

In Buddhism, the concept most closely associated with labor is expressed in the Sanskrit term *karma* and the Pali term *kamma*. Both terms are commonly translated as “karma” (*eop* in Korean) and broadly signify intentional physical and mental acts. Within the context of the Buddhist monastic community, labor was not understood merely as productive activity, but as a practice connected to sustaining the sangha and cultivating the ethical and spiritual discipline of practitioners. In this sense, labor was regarded as one of the diverse modes of practice through which a practitioner both cultivates self-discipline and participates in communal life (see *Āṅguttara Nikāya* III, 45–46, 67–68, 76–78).¹ In early Buddhist teachings, the economic activities of lay followers are distinguished from the practices required of monastic practitioners. Regarding lay life, Buddhist texts emphasize diligent livelihood, ethical conduct, and restraint from material desires. In contrast, for monastic practitioners, activities that sustain communal life were not understood as economic production, but rather within the framework of Vinaya and spiritual practice. In subsequent Buddhist traditions, labor within the sangha came to be interpreted as a meaningful practice that links communal responsibility with spiritual cultivation (see *Āṅguttara Nikāya* III, 45–46, 67–68, 76–78).

Early Buddhist texts record the Buddha participating in communal activities together with members of the sangha. The *Madhyama Āgama* presents such scenes as evidence that communal labor was not merely an obligation imposed on disciples, but an integral element of monastic life (Saṃghadeva 1924b, pp. 551c–54c). This communal practice was later systematized in the *Vinaya* as regulations for shared duties and the administration of the sangha. In the historical development of Chinese Chan Buddhism, Baizhang Huaihai’s dictum, “A day without work is a day without food” (一日不作 一日不食), interpreted communal labor (*ulryeok*) as a vital component of monastic practice. This East Asian Buddhist tradition has been inherited and reinterpreted within the historical and cultural context of Korean Buddhism, where communal labor continues to be practiced in contemporary bhikkhuni communities.

Because labor has been understood within the framework of practice and communal life, it has carried significant religious meaning across various Buddhist traditions. In particular, within the East Asian Buddhist tradition, communal labor has been interpreted as an essential element of monastic practice (see Kovács 2020, pp. 180–220; G.-J. Park 1998; Brown 2017). Buddhism views human existence as fundamentally situated in suffering (*dukkha*), and practices such as meditation, ethical discipline, and diverse forms of communal engagement have been regarded as crucial components of the path toward liberation (*nirvāṇa*).² Within this framework, communal labor has held particular significance in the bhikkhuni sangha of East Asian Buddhism.

Research on Buddhist women has steadily grown (Heirman 2001; Gutschow 2004; Havnevik 1990; Tsomo 1999; Suh 2006; Falk 2008; Gross 1993; Blackstone 1998; LaMacchia 2008; Cho 2011; J. Park 2025), with most studies focusing on broadly introducing the lives, roles, experiences, and challenges of Buddhist women across different regions of Asia. In contrast, scholarship specifically addressing the labor of bhikkhunis remains very limited. Furthermore, there has been almost no comprehensive study examining how the understanding of communal labor, formed within the Vinaya tradition, has been interpreted and developed in the distinct historical and cultural contexts of Chinese Chan and the Korean bhikkhuni sangha.

To address this imbalance, the present study focuses on the labor of the bhikkhuni sangha—particularly communal labor—and examines its significance as a form of practice within the historical development of East Asian Buddhism. First, it compares the general concept of labor with the Buddhist monastic understanding of labor, and analyzes passages in the *Madhyama Āgama* concerning communal activities as well as the duty

regulations found in the early *Vinaya*.³ Next, it compares the duty assignment system of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* with the organizational structure of the *Yongsangbang* at Unmunsa Monastery, in order to explore how *Vinaya*-based modes of monastic administration have been interpreted and practiced in the Korean *bhikkhuni sangha*. Finally, by examining Baizhang Huaihai's dictum "A day without work is a day without food" alongside the communal labor and self-sufficient culture of Unmunsa's monastic college (*gangwon*), the study investigates how communal labor has been understood and practiced as a monastic tradition within the historical and cultural context of Korean Buddhism.

Building on the above discussion, this study is organized as follows. First, it compares the general concept of labor with the Buddhist monastic understanding of communal labor, and analyzes the descriptions of communal activities in the *Madhyama Āgama* and the duty regulations found in the early *Vinaya*. Next, it examines the duty assignment system of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, Baizhang Huaihai's thought, and the *Yongsangbang* system and communal labor at Unmunsa Monastery, in order to explore how communal labor has historically been interpreted and developed in East Asian Buddhism. On this basis, it analyzes how communal labor has been understood and practiced as an element of spiritual cultivation within the historical and cultural context of the Korean *bhikkhuni sangha*. Finally, the study synthesizes its findings to highlight the significance of communal labor as a Buddhist practice that integrates monastic administration with spiritual discipline, and discusses the scholarly implications of this research.

2. The Buddhist Perspective on Women's Labor

2.1. The Difference Between Buddhist Labor and General Concepts of Labor

The basic condition of human survival is the maintenance of livelihood. To sustain livelihood, productive activities and resources that fulfill the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter must be secured. Labor provides such productive activities and resources. Labor is the activity in which human beings apply their physical and mental energy to nature, transforming it into forms suitable for human life (Lee 1981, p. 694).

Among Buddhist concepts, the one most closely related to labor is karma. Originating in ancient India, karma derives from the root *kr*, meaning "to do, to make, to act, to perform," and encompasses a wide range of meanings such as "action, achievement, labor, activity, task, occupation" (G.-J. Park 1998, p. 131; S.-M. Park 2002, p. 86). In Korean, the term *eop* (業) originally referred to religious acts, but later expanded to include all intentional human actions. Karma manifests through the body, speech, and mind, and as a result of such actions, one experiences either the suffering of *samsāra* or the bliss of nirvana. In this way, karma encompasses all physical and mental acts performed by human beings, embodying the essence of intentional action and thought.

According to the *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* (大毘婆沙論), karma has three meanings. First, it signifies "action," derived from the root *kr* ("to do"). Second, it refers to the norms (precepts) that members of the *sangha* (monks and nuns) must observe. Third, it denotes the discernment of the results of actions (Lee and Jung 1990, p. 22). Within Buddhist philosophy, labor can be understood as a subcategory of karma, encompassing all activities performed by human beings.⁴

While labor is originally associated with physical activity, its distinctiveness in Buddhism lies in the integration of bodily acts with verbal and mental acts to deepen spiritual practice. Labor is not regarded merely as a necessity of daily life; rather, it is understood as social participation deeply rooted in the spirit of compassion (Songamjiwon 2007). Compassion is expressed in action by helping and benefiting others,⁵ and labor carried out with altruism—tempering one's own desires—can be understood as a practice of significant meaning within the process of cultivation.

This perspective can also be found in the early Buddhist scriptures' understanding of practice (Beopjeong 1994, p. 47). Mental activity, too, is regarded as a core element of practice. The spirit of "seeking enlightenment above and guiding sentient beings below" illustrates the ideal of practice that integrates the three karmic activities of body, speech, and mind, grounded in compassion. This understanding provided a crucial foundation for interpreting labor as a form of practice in the Buddhist traditions of China and Korea. Such interpretations are reflected in the labor practices of contemporary Korean bhikkhuni communities. Therefore, the labor discussed here refers to the meaning of practice as understood within the interpretive and practical contexts of scriptures and *Vinaya* in the Chinese and Korean Buddhist traditions.

Buddhism frames labor in three dimensions—economic, social, and spiritual (religious). Economically, labor functions as a means of acquiring and producing resources, requiring the three factors of production—labor, land, and capital—along with the knowledge and skills (Gunabhadra 1925, p. 486a). Socially, labor emphasizes the importance of division of labor and cooperation. This is clearly expressed in the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* (Bodhiruci 1925, p. 343b), which states: "Everything in the world has its own difficulties, leading to the development of specialized skills that are hard to master, and to the discovery and study of various medicines." Social labor not only contributes to communal welfare but also provides individuals with stable resources. In this sense, labor serves both as repayment for the countless benefits received and as a cornerstone for sustaining society. Spiritually, labor is vividly expressed in the *Baizhang Qinggui* (百丈清規), a foundational Chan Buddhist monastic code compiled by Master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814). It declares: "A day without work is a day without food" (Deokhui 1928, p. 1119b). This maxim reflects the view that labor is inseparable from Buddhist practice, embodying the integrated enactment of discipline, compassion, and cultivation (Jung and Shin 1999, p. 107)⁶.

A comparison between monastic labor and labor in broader society reveals a fundamental difference in purpose. In general society, labor seeks to secure the resources necessary for daily life through physical and mental activity. By contrast, monastic labor places religious practice above the accumulation of material goods. This distinction reflects the Buddhist value that emphasizes the practitioner's independent pursuit of enlightenment. According to the *Vinaya* regulations adopted in the monastic traditions of China and Korea, practitioners were required to refrain from commercial activities or productive labor such as cultivating land, sowing seeds, farming, or buying and selling goods, and instead devote themselves entirely to practice. This conception of practice is also evident in the *Sutta Nipāta*—one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, compiled around the third century CE—where a dialogue between a Brahmin and the Buddha illustrates that the practitioner's life, as depicted in the early Buddhist canon, is oriented not toward material gain but toward spiritual cultivation and growth (Seok 1997, p. 313).

[Brahmin] Ascetic, I plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat the grain. You too should plow and sow, and eat the grain that you have plowed and sown.

[Buddha] Brahmin, I too plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat the grain.

[Brahmin] But we have never seen the Blessed One, Gautama, with a yoke, plow, plowshare, stick, or oxen. How then can you say, "I too plow and sow, and eat the grain that I have plowed and sown?"

[Buddha] Faith is my seed, austerity is my rain, and wisdom is my yoke and plow. Shame is my plow-handle, will is my binding cord, and mindfulness is my plowshare and goad. I restrain myself according to the precepts, guard my speech, and avoid excess in eating. Truth is the weeding I do, and harmony is

the unyoking. Energy is my ox, leading me to the field of peace. Without turning back, I advance to the place where sorrow is no more.

Such scriptural accounts demonstrate that the life of a practitioner is directed toward spiritual cultivation and the eradication of afflictions. This understanding of practice is likewise affirmed in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*—particularly the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (四分律), which served as the foundational monastic code in the Chinese and Korean Buddhist traditions—and in the *Therīgāthā*, which records the enlightenment experiences of early bhikkhunis. These texts reveal that nuns did not engage in domestic labor that was commonly and unfairly imposed upon women in secular society. Instead, within the sangha community, they pursued spiritual practice equally alongside monks and attained enlightenment as the ultimate result (Jeon 2017, pp. 21, 143–44). Considering that ancient Indian society was deeply rooted in structural discrimination against women, the Buddha’s recognition that nuns could reach nirvana through dedicated practice, just as monks did, can be regarded as revolutionary.

According to the *Code of Manu*, which set forth the norms of Indian society, women were not regarded as independent beings but were defined in relation to, and dependent upon, men (Lee and Lee 2005). Their roles were restricted, making it difficult for them to sustain a livelihood independently, and they were denied the opportunity to realize spiritual value through labor. Women’s work was confined to roles determined by social status (Horner 1930, p. 1). In a context where inequality and gender discrimination were institutionally entrenched, the Buddha declared that all human beings possess inherent dignity and Buddha-nature. He emphasized the equality of men and women, asserting that bhikkhunis, like bhikkhus, could attain liberation through practice under the same conditions.

In a society where inequality and gender discrimination were institutionally entrenched, the early Buddhist scriptures present a vision of practice that recognizes all human beings as possessing inherent dignity and Buddha-nature. Moreover, these texts affirm that bhikkhunis, like bhikkhus, could attain liberation under the same conditions of practice, thereby demonstrating the equality of spiritual potential between men and women. This understanding of practice, grounded in human dignity, underscores the importance of equality in both labor and cultivation. As a result, many women—including Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, who became the first woman to be ordained—joined the sangha as bhikkhuni, thereby establishing the order of nuns (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926f, pp. 922c–23c). As recorded in the *Therīgāthā*, numerous bhikkhunis faithfully followed the Buddha’s teachings and attained enlightenment and liberation.

However, monastic practitioners did not devote themselves exclusively to spiritual labor. While they did not engage in livelihood-oriented work outside the community, they did take responsibility for various small-scale tasks within it. For example, the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, the foundational monastic code in the Buddhist traditions of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, permits bhikkhunis, when making a new sitting mat, to “cut a piece of cloth about a handspan from an old mat and attach it to the new one to soften its color” (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926b, p. 616). This illustrates that practitioners undertook everyday duties within the community, and that such routine labor was integrated into the observance of the Vinaya and the practice of cultivation.

In this same context, disciplinary rules were equally applied to both monks and nuns, and the *Dharmagupta Vinaya* records several specific tasks carried out by bhikkhunis. Among the 178 minor offenses (*pāyattika*), Article 68 stipulates: “Do not make the legs of a bed too high.” Article 69 states: “Do not make cushions with soft cotton (*tūla*)” (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926d, p. 736b). Furthermore, Article 102 prescribes: “Do

not make bathing robes excessively large,” and Article 103 declares: “Do not exceed the prescribed period for making garments. For instance, if a bhikkhuni takes more than five days to make a *saṃghāṭī* [outer robe worn by Buddhist monastics], this constitutes a minor offense” (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926d, p. 736b).

Alongside this, the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (*Sifen nikai ben*) prohibits nuns from learning secular skills and using them as a means of livelihood (Buddhayaśas 1926, p. 1038b). This does not negate labor itself, but rather shows that the purpose of monastic labor is fundamentally different from that of laypeople’s economic work. While lay labor is directed toward legitimate livelihood and the accumulation of material wealth, monastic labor is understood as a religious practice aimed at sustaining the community and realizing cultivation. Thus, this precept serves as an important basis for distinguishing between the general view of labor and the Buddhist practitioner’s understanding of labor.

These records demonstrate that both male and female practitioners in the early Buddhist sangha carried out a variety of communal duties within the community. Monastic labor was not imposed according to social status but undertaken voluntarily, and it was integrated into daily life as part of spiritual practice. In this way, the sangha, organized as a community of practice, collectively performed routine tasks, with physical labor fully incorporated into the systematic rhythm of cultivation.

2.2. Conceptions of Labor in Early Buddhist Scriptures

In Buddhism, the meaning of labor, as understood in early Buddhist scriptures, is grounded in the teaching that both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis can attain liberation through “right practice.” Physical labor—especially *ulryeok*—is regarded not merely as work but as a practice closely connected to the cultivation of the mind. It functions as a process of training in mindfulness, concentration, and compassion. More specifically, Buddhist physical labor is intimately linked to practice in the following respects. First, physical labor anchors awareness in the present moment, enabling practitioners to cultivate mindfulness, which lies at the heart of the Buddhist path and leads toward *samādhi*, a state of intense concentration of mind. Everyday tasks—such as cutting wood, watering plants, or cleaning—can thus be transformed into meditative practice. Second, repetitive physical labor naturally strengthens concentration, which is deeply related to the formation of *samādhi*. Third, physical labor encourages one to let go of pride and attachment, thereby fostering inner growth. Fourth, the experience of arduous labor deepens awareness of the preciousness and equality of all beings. Fifth, physical labor often benefits others, contributing to the cultivation of altruism. This aligns with the spirit of the Bodhisattva path, serving others selflessly. Sixth, physical labor helps maintain a healthy body, which in turn provides the conditions for deeper self-reflection. Finally, though demanding and exhausting, physical labor offers the opportunity to cultivate patience. In Buddhism, this is emphasized as part of the ongoing process of practice and is closely connected to *kṣānti-pāramitā* (the perfection of patience), one of the six *pāramitās* of the Bodhisattva path.

This understanding of labor can also be seen in accounts of the Buddha’s own actions recorded in the early Buddhist scriptures. According to the *Madhyama Āgama* (*Kaṭhina-sūtra*), the Buddha personally participated in spreading and cutting cloth during the process of making Anuruddha’s robe (Saṃghadeva 1924b, pp. 551c–54c). This episode depicts the Buddha engaging in communal labor within the sangha, showing that in early Buddhism productive work was regarded as an important activity for sustaining the community and embodying practice. In other words, labor was understood not merely as a means of livelihood but as an integral part of maintaining the community and carrying out spiritual cultivation.

This perspective can be observed not only in the labor of bhikkhunis discussed in this study but also in the case of Huineng (慧能, 638–713 CE), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, who worked in a rice mill for about eight months. Such examples show that physical labor was not merely a supplementary activity but constituted an essential element of practice in the Chan (Zen) tradition. Moreover, the purpose of labor was understood quite differently between monastic practitioners and laypeople (cf. Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, pp. 70c–71a). For monastics, labor was interpreted within the context of practice aimed at liberation, whereas for laypeople, labor was primarily regarded as a means of securing resources necessary for livelihood. In this regard, the early Buddhist scriptures explain as follows:

People sustain their livelihood according to the work they do. Some become servants of the king, some become farmers, some engage in trade, and some raise livestock. According to their work, they endure toil, cold, and heat. They must not fear wind and rain, hunger and thirst, fullness, or mosquitoes, insects, flies, and bees. Even if it is difficult, they cannot abandon their work, but must diligently strive to complete the task entrusted to them. (Translator unknown 1924a, p. 404c)

This passage illustrates that for laypeople, labor is an unavoidable activity for sustaining livelihood, carried out under real conditions that involve various physical and environmental hardships. In this sense, lay labor is understood primarily as a means of survival rather than as a form of spiritual practice. By contrast, although the labor of monastic practitioners may involve similar physical acts, its meaning and purpose are fundamentally different. Within the sangha community, labor goes beyond mere livelihood, being understood as an activity autonomously practiced within the process of cultivation. In particular, for bhikkhunis, labor serves not only to sustain communal life but also to deepen self-discipline and inner reflection. In this respect, the labor of the bhikkhuni sangha can be said to possess a distinctive religious significance that sets it apart from lay labor.

In broader society, people engage in various occupations—such as agriculture, commerce, animal husbandry, and political service—in order to sustain their livelihoods and acquire wealth. The early Buddhist scriptures distinguish between right livelihood and wrong livelihood. Occupations that violate the fundamental precepts of Buddhism—such as selling weapons, trading slaves, or dealing in meat and alcohol—were regarded as forms of wrong livelihood (Guṇabhadra 1924a, p. 23c). Moreover, the early scriptures criticize the accumulation of wealth through dishonest professions (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, p. 72a; 1924b, pp. 84a–b) and encourage maintaining a sound livelihood and acquiring resources through ethically legitimate occupations (Anonymous translator 1924b, p. 483a; Guṇabhadra 1924b, p. 353b). In addition, the early Buddhist scriptures emphasize diligence and warn against idleness (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, p. 70c). Diligence and sincerity were presented as important virtues in performing labor, with emphasis placed on faithfully fulfilling one's assigned role. In this context, labor was understood as a meaningful practice that alleviates anxiety and worry while stabilizing life. Furthermore, the early Buddhist scriptures encourage learning skills and acquiring professions that enable one to sustain a livelihood (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, p. 72b). This can be understood as a recognition of the practical conditions necessary for maintaining a stable life.

This ethical view of labor extends to the relationship between employers and workers. The early Buddhist scriptures set forth five principles that an employer should observe: (1) assign tasks appropriate to the worker's ability; (2) provide food at the proper time; (3) pay wages promptly; (4) offer proper care and treatment when the worker falls ill; and (5) ensure adequate rest (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, p. 72a). Workers,

in turn, were expected to fulfill five responsibilities: (1) begin work on time; (2) complete the assigned tasks diligently; (3) refrain from taking what has not been given; (4) carry out duties in the prescribed order; and (5) contribute to the honor of the employer or workplace (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1924a, p. 72a). These guidelines reveal a vision of labor relations that rejects exploitation and conflict, instead framing the relationship as one grounded in cooperation, fairness, and mutual trust.

This perspective also extends to a critique of inequality and exploitation. The *Āryasatyaka-parivarivarta* emphasizes the correction of labor exploitation: “Those who fail to share properly with wives, children, slaves, servants, and workers, or who make excessive demands that make their livelihood difficult, or who force them into dishonorable work, must be corrected” (Heo 2010, p. 350). Thus, labor is understood not merely as physical activity but as a practice that shapes and expresses human value and capability. Through physical labor, individuals sustain their livelihood, support their families, and extend ethical practice by sharing acquired resources with others through generosity (*dāna*). Mental labor likewise plays a role in deepening self-discipline and inner reflection. Participation in both physical and mental activities transforms labor from a mere obligation into a practice that gives meaning to life. Within this framework, the early Buddhist scriptures regard labor not simply as a means of livelihood but as a practice closely connected with cultivation.

The Buddhist view of labor, therefore, encompasses values such as communication and cooperation in the workplace, fair compensation and distribution, commercial ethics that avoid excessive greed, and compassion toward all living beings. These principles provide meaningful insights for reconsidering challenges in modern labor relations.

2.3. Cases and Regulations of Bhikkhuni Labor in Buddhist Scriptures

The Buddhist scriptures contain numerous cases and regulations concerning the labor of practitioners. Unlike the discriminatory norms against women prevalent in broader society at the time, the early Buddhist scriptures present both male and female practitioners as beings with equal potential for practice and equal religious capacity. The Buddhist order was founded on maintaining a pure and harmonious sangha, and accordingly, labor within the community was shared equally. In this sense, labor can be understood as a practice closely tied to the principles of communal life.

Examples of bhikkhuni labor are primarily found in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which records that bhikkhunis carried out the same daily tasks as monks within the sangha community. These accounts are particularly well documented in the *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律).

Do not use materials donated for temple construction to make robes, and do not use materials donated for robes to build temples for teaching the Vinaya. Likewise, one must not make robes from materials donated for building other rooms, nor build rooms from materials donated for making robes. ... When a bhikkhuni receives a new robe, she must soften its color by dyeing it in one of three hues—green, brown, or black. Wearing an undyed robe without applying one of these three colors constitutes a *pāyattika* offense (a minor transgression requiring confession). (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926c, p. 728c)

Under the category of “at the time of work” (作時), the *Vinaya* sets forth regulations specifying that bhikkhunis, in addition to meditation and spiritual practice, were subject to rules and exceptions when engaging in physical and social activities such as constructing temples, managing monastic robes, and sewing (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926d, p. 735c), and preparing beds and seats (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926e, p. 749c). For example, one passage records: “At that time, many bhikkhunis were engaged in building temples and monastic dwellings” (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926d,

p. 736b). Another regulation stipulates regarding the management of new robes: “They must not be made with three dyes—blue, black, or purple” (Buddhayaśas and Chukbul-nyo 1926c, p. 731a). These examples illustrate how labor was naturally integrated into the daily rhythm of monastic life.

In this way, bhikkhunis, as members of a community devoted to simplicity, engaged in labor not for livelihood but as part of practice and discipline, while also participating alongside monks in tasks such as constructing sacred halls. This integration of practice and labor is further confirmed in the *Sarvāstivāda-bhikkhunis-vinaya-vibhaṅga*, the section of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* detailing disciplinary rules specifically for Buddhist nuns. For example, the text records specific regulations:

If a bhikkhuni deliberately pours water onto grass or soil containing insects, or mixes that water with cow dung, this constitutes a *Pācittiya* offense. When constructing large dwellings, bhikkhunis must ensure that the walls are fitted with bolts, and that the building has multiple windows and drainage channels. When erecting fences, they must use wet clay to build two or three layers, and the walls must be constructed to a height that reaches the bolts of the gates. (Yijing 1925, p. 974b)

These regulations and examples show that the labor of bhikkhunis was not merely auxiliary but an essential component in the operation of the sangha community. The daily life of the sangha, as depicted in the early Buddhist scriptures, was generally austere and accompanied by rigorous practice and physical work, in which both monks and nuns equally participated. In this context, bhikkhunis, like the monks, engaged in various tasks associated with constructing dwellings—plastering walls with cow dung, making bolts for doors, and installing drainage channels to prepare for the rainy season. These records thus demonstrate that female practitioners shared in the diverse labor of the sangha community alongside male practitioners, thereby contributing to the operation of the community.

Such labor of bhikkhunis is concretely attested in other *Vinaya* texts. For instance, the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* (十誦律), translated by Puṇyatāra, provides additional examples of bhikkhuni labor.

When bhikkhunis in monasteries of the Arabian region extend new rooms, build or repair bathhouses, or replace the roof of a bathhouse with new materials, they must carefully observe where they place their feet so as not to fall. (Puṇyatāra and Kumārajīva 1925, p. 436b)

This record shows that the labor performed by monks and nuns was not confined to simple daily tasks but sometimes involved physically demanding activities that carried risks of accidents. Furthermore, another *Vinaya* text, the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya* (摩訶僧祇律), documents cases in which the Buddha himself directly instructed the monks on the order and method of labor. This scripture, in particular, explains in detail that bhikkhunis must carry out their assigned duties while maintaining the dignity (*dignitas*) of a practitioner. Such teachings are presented in detail even within specific rules of daily life:

If one sees that a dwelling is leaking or collapsing, it must be repaired. Items woven from grass must be patched with grass... Damaged walls must be repaired with a mixture of clay and cow dung... If the seat, pillow, or cover used for meditation becomes dirty, they must be washed, and if torn, they must be mended. From today, during the summer retreat, rooms, chairs, and sitting mats must be repaired. Drainage channels must be maintained so that water flows properly, and moldy items must be dried in the sun... When entering the summer retreat, both monks and nuns must repair their rooms according to the regulations. (Buddhabhadra and Faxian 1926, pp. 502c–3a)

These records show that in the early Buddhist scriptures, the labor of monks and nuns was managed under the same system of monastic regulations. In line with the understanding that there is no distinction in Buddha-nature or enlightenment, the early scriptures present a perspective that does not fundamentally differentiate between monks and nuns in matters of labor and practice.

Thus, when repairs to dwellings or walls were needed, bhikkhunis participated in the work just as monks did. In actual practice, however, certain divisions of labor were made: bhikkhunis primarily focused on maintaining the living spaces and surrounding areas where they resided and practiced. Their tasks included repairing beds and mattresses, cleaning bedding and sitting mats, regulating humidity in rooms, and removing soot or cobwebs from wall crevices and building structures. Such labor of bhikkhunis played an important role in maintaining the cleanliness and order of monastic dwellings, thereby creating essential conditions for practitioners to devote themselves to practice in a pure and suitable environment.

In this way, the labor of bhikkhunis as recorded in Buddhist scriptures was not limited to ordinary daily activities but was concretely manifested in diverse forms such as construction, repair, and the making and management of robes. These examples show that bhikkhunis carried out specific roles and responsibilities within the sangha community, practicing labor in accordance with the regulations.

2.4. The Soteriological Meaning of Bhikkhunis Labor

These examples of bhikkhuni labor can be understood not merely as everyday activities but as practices imbued with soteriological meaning. In this respect, it is necessary to examine the significance of labor in a broader context.

In modern society, people engage in labor to secure wealth while simultaneously realizing the values and goals they pursue in life. By finding occupations that align with their purposes, they receive compensation or wages, thereby establishing the economic foundation to support themselves and their families. In this way, labor enables individuals to express their individuality, realize their ideals, and contribute to society. By contrast, the labor of renunciants is distinguished from such secular aims. Rather than serving as a means of economic advancement, monastic labor bears the purpose of completing spiritual practice and sustaining the sangha community. According to the *Yijiaojinglun* (異教經論), which can be translated as *Treatise on the Sutra of the Buddha's Last Teaching*, it is taught that renunciant practitioners should follow the following instructions:

Those who uphold pure precepts must not engage in buying or selling, nor trade. They must not own fields or houses, nor employ people or slaves, nor raise livestock. They must also not sow any kind of seed, nor even accumulate wealth. All such things must be avoided as one would flee from a pit of fire. (Vasubandhu 1926, p. 283c)

Therefore, renunciants were required to refrain from productive activities such as trade, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Unlike ordinary people who labored to accumulate wealth, monks worked solely with the purpose of deepening practice and attaining liberation. In the early Buddhist texts, labor is described as pure and wholesome, understood as a noble practice for accumulating merit and completing cultivation (*Jātaka I*, p. 256). Thus, the labor of bhikkhunis was not directed toward satisfying material desires but was regarded as a religious and moral duty (*dharma*) aimed at benefiting sentient beings and deepening spiritual practice.

In this way, the daily activities of bhikkhunis—their labor—were understood as a form of spiritual practice that deepened cultivation. Labor was not performed as an external occupation but as an activity carried out within the framework of practice, ac-

cording to necessity. For example, renunciants used donated goods to make clothes or cushions, which they then distributed to those in need; they also constructed buildings, repaired dwellings, and expanded rooms or bathing facilities. Among the forms of labor undertaken by both monks and nuns, one of the most frequent was the building and repair of temples and residences. What is particularly noteworthy is that, despite differences in physical strength, both monks and nuns performed the same daily duties in accordance with the monastic regulations and communal norms of the early Buddhist sangha. The early Buddhist scriptures present the path of practice as equally open to both monks and nuns, and from this perspective they praise the practice of bhikkhunis as follows:

They possessed supreme spiritual powers that even the gods revered. They prepared places for gatherings, carefully guided people to open fields of generosity, eloquently expounded the truth, and discerned profound teachings to share with others. Their compassion extended even to those who had not yet found the path, as they went on alms rounds to help and save people. (Samghadeva 1924b, pp. 558c–59c)

Moreover, the early Buddhist scriptures declare: “Whether woman or man, whoever mounts this chariot takes it as a guide and ultimately attains nirvana” (see Jeon 2017, pp. 103–242). In the labor of monks and nuns, equal roles and duties meant that they were independent yet cooperative beings in the course of life and practice. Bhikkhunis were not regarded as dependent or protected individuals but recognized as independent and equal agents who guided not only themselves but also the sangha. Because of this independence, bhikkhunis did not live according to the demands of others, nor were they confined merely to personal practice or growth. They actively supported one another’s labor within the community while deeply devoting themselves to their own spiritual attainment (Blackstone 1998, p. 117; Samghadeva 1924a, pp. 559a–c). As a result, bhikkhunis transcended the boundaries of social status and gender to achieve spiritual realization (*Vinaya Piṭaka* IV, p. 255), and they spread the Buddha’s teachings, guiding the expansion of Buddhism and the growth of others (*Therīgāthā*, verse 43).

Consequently, in early Buddhism, labor was not regarded merely as a means of livelihood but was recognized as a core element constituting practice. In particular, the labor of bhikkhunis encompassed both the deepening of personal practice and the maintenance of the sangha community. Moreover, such labor provided the foundation for bhikkhunis to function as active and independent agents within the community, and it can be understood not simply as adherence to regulations but as a concrete way of practicing. Therefore, the labor of bhikkhunis as recorded in early Buddhist texts was a key element organically linking personal practice, community maintenance, and the observance of discipline, and in this respect its soteriological significance can be clearly recognized.

3. Labor in the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha

3.1. Baizhang Huaihai’s Thought and the Communal Labor (*Ulryeok*) of Bhikkhunis at Unmunsa

After Buddhism was transmitted to China, significant changes appeared in the practice environment due to natural conditions and cultural contexts different from those of India. These changes gave rise to a new form of Buddhist practice based on self-sufficiency through labor. In Chan Buddhism, it was emphasized that all members—from the abbot to newly ordained monks—collectively participated in labor as an essential part of practice (Koo 2020, p. 202). The concept of *ulryeok* (共同勞動, communal labor) formed the foundation of this egalitarian labor, signifying activities carried out together by the community. The tradition of *ulryeok* is closely related to Korea’s *pumasi* culture, which involved coopera-

tive labor in farming tasks such as sowing, weeding, and harvesting. In Korean Buddhism, *ulryeok* refers to the cooperative labor of monks and is also called *unryeok* (運力).

Korean Buddhist labor practices were deeply influenced by the thought of the Chan master Baizhang Huaihai (百丈懷海). He is well known for the saying, “A day without work is a day without food” (Deokhui 1928, p. 1119b). Baizhang’s philosophy of labor continued to shape the practice of labor in Korean Buddhism, which inherited the traditions of Chinese Chan. His ideas on labor can be summarized as follows.

First, Baizhang regarded labor not as a mere means of livelihood but as an essential element of Buddhist practice. He believed that labor played an important role in disciplining the mind and deepening practice. From this perspective, various forms of work such as farming, cleaning, and cooking were naturally integrated into the daily practice of the monastery, and practitioners continued to cultivate both body and mind through them. Second, Baizhang emphasized an independent and self-sufficient life. This had a profound influence on the self-sustaining lifestyle found in Korean Buddhist monasteries. By preparing food and daily necessities themselves, practitioners reduced dependence on external sources and established a foundation for greater devotion to practice. Third, Baizhang stressed the close connection between individual Chan practice and communal life. Labor was not understood merely as a personal task but as a key element in sustaining the interdependent life of the community. Finally, Baizhang emphasized that labor and Chan practice, as well as daily life and ultimate attainment, are not two separate realms. This understanding was grounded in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which teaches that all beings are interconnected. Within this non-dual perspective, labor was established as a practice inseparable from Chan cultivation. In summary, Baizhang’s philosophy of labor had a significant influence on integrating labor with practice in Korean Buddhist monasteries. This paper analyzes the labor practices at Unmunsa Monastery as a representative case, showing how communal labor (*ulryeok*) became a cornerstone of Korean Buddhist practice.

Unmunsa, located in Cheongdo County, Gyeongsangbukdo, is one of Korea’s leading monasteries for bhikkhunis and houses a prominent monastic academy. Affiliated with the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the nation’s largest Buddhist sect, the temple was founded in 560 and has since developed into a major complex with more than thirty buildings. Following the Buddhist Purification Movement of 1958, Unmunsa established a specialized academy for bhikkhunis, which in 1987 was renamed Sangha University. Since then, it has become a leading institution for the education of nuns and the study of Buddhist scriptures, producing generations of monastic practitioners and solidifying its role as a central hub for bhikkhuni education and scriptural study in modern Korean Buddhism.

At Unmunsa, seasonal cycles of communal labor (*ulryeok*) are seamlessly integrated into the rhythm of practice. These activities are not incidental but form part of the monastery’s discipline, embodying Baizhang Huaihai’s principle that “a day without work is a day without food.” In 2024, for example, several notable *ulryeok* activities were carried out: on 21 March, salt was buried in the mountain behind the temple to prevent forest fires; on 30 March, first-year students (*chimunban*) and second-year students (*sajipban*) picked azalea flowers, while third-year students (*sagyoban*) prepared flower pancakes (*hwajeon*) with azaleas, all participating in communal labor. On 6 April, rice wine was poured on pine trees with drooping branches, and on 11 April, mugwort was gathered at Janggunpyeong, a flat area located near Unmunsa (Unmunsa 2024, p. 54). In addition, from 28 to 30 November 2023, a communal labor was held to make gimchi—a traditional Korean fermented vegetable dish seasoned with various ingredients—in preparation for winter (Unmunsa 2023, p. 50).

In this way, the various forms of communal labor practiced by the bhikkhunis of Unmunsa continue even today. Beyond these examples, both large- and small-scale *ulryeok* have become a routine part of daily life in Korean bhikkhuni monasteries. A distinctive feature of *ulryeok* in the Korean bhikkhuni sangha is its emphasis on cooperation and collective effort. It is not compulsory labor imposed on individuals, but rather a voluntary and intentional act of collaboration grounded in the Buddhist spirit of *jariita* (自利利他, literally meaning “what benefits oneself also benefits others”). This principle reveals the interconnectedness of the community and highlights the importance of mutual support. Therefore, in the Korean Buddhist sangha, *ulryeok* functions not merely as a customary practice but as an important discipline that sustains the practice community and deepens relationships among its members.

The principle of labor practice proposed by Baizhang Huaihai was not confined to abstract thought but was concretely realized within the division of duties and the communal regulations of the sangha. This institutional foundation can be confirmed through the system of duty assignments presented in the *Vinaya*.

3.2. Division of Temple Duties and Vinaya Regulations

In Korea, the division of duties within a temple is known as the *Yongsangbang* (龍象榜), a duty roster that lists responsibilities assigned to each member through collective agreement. These assignments are determined by considering the practitioner’s level of practice, experience, and years since ordination. Literally meaning “the plaque of the dragon and elephant,” the term *Yongsangbang* symbolically likens practitioners to the most powerful beings—the dragon in water and the elephant on land—underscoring their strength and significance in sustaining the sangha.

A *Yongsangbang* is drawn up whenever an *angeo* (安居, retreat) begins or when a large Dharma assembly is held, and the daily life of the sangha, based on self-sufficiency, is organized around such duty assignments. Each practitioner takes on a specific task, contributing to the community while fulfilling the responsibilities and obligations that come with it. This duty roster is posted on the wall of the *daebang* (大房, main room), serving as a visible reminder of the collective discipline and shared responsibility that structure monastic life.

This duty roster records the Dharma names of practitioners alongside their assigned duties, ensuring that members remain aware of their roles and that all tasks are smoothly carried out during retreat or Dharma assembly periods. Such systems of duty allocation in temples are closely connected to the normative traditions found in the *Vinaya*. A representative example is the *Wagu-fa* (臥具法, bedding protocol) in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* (*Shisong lü*), which illustrates how major responsibilities within the community were divided and managed (Punyatāra and Kumārajīva 1925, pp. 248a–51a).

This system, as transmitted in the *Shisong lü* (十誦律), was established to resolve problems of communal management that arose when many practitioners gathered together during the rainy-season retreat. At that time, the repair and maintenance of monastic dwellings, the collection and distribution of alms food, and the management of daily necessities were not carried out in an organized manner, showing the need to establish order in the operation of the community. Against this background, the *Shisong lü* records that various duties were instituted to ensure the smooth functioning of the community and the maintenance of the practice environment. These duties divided the labor required for communal living according to function, including the management of dwellings, utensils, and food preparation, as well as the oversight of storerooms, reception of visiting monks, and care for the sick. This provides an example of how labor was institutional-

ized not as mere subsistence activity but as a practice that sustained communal order and supported cultivation.

As can be seen in Table 1, the duties described in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* were not merely administrative divisions of labor, but rather a system that organized the work necessary for operating the community. Roles such as room management, bedding management, meal preparation, supplies storage, and care for the sick all served to maintain the order of the sangha and to create an environment conducive to practice. Each practitioner participated in the operation of the community by fulfilling their assigned duty, and labor was understood not simply as an individual obligation but as a collective practice carried out together by all members of the sangha. For example, one monk was appointed as *jisaseung* (知事僧), tasked with supervising and managing bedding, while another monk bore responsibility for coordinating the schedule of alms rounds and overseeing the monastery's operations, which tended to become lax after the retreat (Punyatāra and Kumārajīva 1925, p. 248a). In addition, various duties were established to manage essential items such as medicine, clothing, alms bowls, and food, ensuring that communal life was maintained smoothly.

Table 1. Monastic duties (assignments) in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, Fascicle 34 “Regulations on Bedding”¹.

Duties (in Korean/in Chinese)	Main Role	Nature of Labor
Room Management (<i>Bangsa damdang</i> /房舍知事)	Management of monastic quarters and living spaces	Housing and facility upkeep
Bedding Management (<i>Wagu damdang</i> /臥具知事)	Management of bedding, mats, and related items	Daily necessities care
Guest Management (<i>Gaeseung damdang</i> /客比丘迎接)	Welcoming visiting monks and guiding them to lodging	Hospitality and protocol
Clothing Management (<i>Uibok damdang</i> /衣物知事)	Storage and distribution of robes; goods management	Clothing and supplies handling
Food Management (<i>Eumsik damdang</i> /飲食知事)	Preparation and distribution of meals	Meal preparation and service
Storehouse Management (<i>Changgo damdang</i> /庫藏知事)	Storage and accounting of communal goods; property management	Asset and inventory control
Cleaning Management (<i>Cheongso damdang</i> /掃地人)	Cleaning of the monastery; environmental upkeep; facility care	Cleaning and maintenance
Patient Care Management (<i>Byeongja damdang</i> /看病人)	Nursing sick practitioners; convalescence support	Caregiving and health support
Other duties	Miscellaneous tasks necessary for sangha operations	Administration and communal management

¹ Table 1 is a summary prepared by the author of the duties described in fascicle 34, *Regulations on Bedding* (臥具法), of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* (Punyatāra and Kumārajīva 1925, pp. 248a–51a).

However, the purpose of subdividing duties in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* was not simply to increase the efficiency of sangha administration. Its true significance lay in ensuring that all members of the community faithfully carried out their respective roles, thereby maintaining harmony within the sangha and jointly establishing the living foundation necessary for practice. In other words, labor was not an obligation imposed only on certain practitioners, but a shared responsibility collectively practiced by all members of the sangha, and the division of duties functioned as an institutional mechanism to embody this com-

munal responsibility. Thus, the duty system of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* demonstrates that labor was understood as a practice that simultaneously sustained the community and realized spiritual cultivation. Moreover, the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* did not stop at assigning individual duties, but also established the overarching position of *yuna* (維那), who was responsible for maintaining order in the sangha and coordinating cooperation among its members. This system of duty allocation provided the institutional foundation for members of the sangha to sustain the community while fulfilling their own responsibilities, and its operating principles have been inherited in the *yongsangbang* of contemporary Korean Buddhist temples.

Ultimately, the division of duties in temples does not remain at the level of an administrative system for community management. The very process of each practitioner fulfilling their assigned role is the practice of *ulryeok* (communal labor), and the labor required to sustain the community is understood as a practice that completes spiritual cultivation. Thus, *yongsangbang* can be regarded as an institutional device of the sangha that organizes labor as practice. This system of duty allocation functions as an operational foundation that both maintains communal order and enables the continuous practice of *ulryeok*, and its principles are concretely embodied today in the daily communal labor and self-sufficient culture of Unmunsa Monastic College. This shows that the principle of duty allocation institutionalized in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* continues to be inherited in the modern bhikkhuni sangha, and suggests that labor is understood not merely as a functional activity for community management but as a central mode of spiritual practice.

3.3. Communal Labor in Monastic Colleges and the Formation of a Self-Sufficient Culture

The labor ethic transmitted from Chinese Chan Buddhism was directly inherited in Korean Buddhism, exerting a significant influence on the formation of a self-sufficient culture within the sangha. In particular, the perspective that understands labor as a form of practice became firmly established in the Korean Buddhist tradition. Within this framework, bhikkhunis have continued to engage in diverse forms of *ulryeok*, centered around temples and local monastic colleges (*gangwon*, 講院).

Communal labor in temples is organized through detailed divisions of duties, including *gongyangju* (供養主, in charge of preparing meals), *byeoljwa* (別座, assistant to the kitchen head), *jigaek* (知客, guest reception), *ganbyeong* (看病, care for the sick), *jeongtong* (淨桶, sanitation), *dagak* (茶角, tea service), *jongdu* (鐘頭, bell-ringer), and *hwadae* (火待, fire keeper). These roles are systematically arranged, especially in large temples where many practitioners and visitors reside together, thereby enhancing the efficiency of community operations through cooperative labor. In small temples, however, limited personnel often require bhikkhunis to shoulder heavier labor responsibilities. Furthermore, with declining ordinations and shifting social conditions, the labor force required for temple management has gradually diminished, leading some temples to rely increasingly on lay Buddhist assistance.

This self-sufficient labor culture functions not merely as a means of livelihood but as a fundamental basis for sustaining and operating the practice community. Bhikkhunis perform various physical tasks to maintain the daily functions of the temple, thereby securing the order and continuity of the community. Such labor is understood as a practice that benefits not only the individual but also the entire community, and it has become an important way of concretizing the vows and practices of practitioners.

This labor practice is carried out in an especially systematic way in the *gangwon* (monastic college). As an educational institution for bhikkhunis, the *gangwon* provides a space where practitioners learn harmony and cooperation within the community and cultivate the ability to take responsibility. Labor here is not merely manual work but is in-

corporated into the educational curriculum, with responsibilities expanding progressively by academic year. Within this system, students thus experience a variety of duties, gaining insight into the overall management of the community.

At the *gangwon* of Unmunsa, the division of labor is systematically organized according to the students' four-year curriculum.⁷ First-year students in the *chimunban* (置文班) take on relatively light, basic tasks, serving as bell-ringers (*jongdu*) and assisting senior nuns. They also participate in various communal activities necessary for temple life, such as preparing *jasaek* (紫色, a type of pancake) or gathering wild greens during mountain walks (Unmunsa 2018, p. 54). Second-year students in the *sajipban* (四集班) combine study with physical labor such as farming, contributing to the community's food supply through sowing and harvesting. Third-year students in the *sagyoban* (四教班) support the community mainly through kitchen duties, including meal preparation. Fourth-year students take on the responsibility of overseeing and guiding the overall management of the sangha.

Seasonal communal labor further structures life in the *gangwon*. In spring, mugwort and wild greens are gathered; in summer, shiitake mushrooms are harvested; in autumn, acorns and other food ingredients are collected; and in early winter, the entire community cooperates in making a large quantity of gimchi (*gimjang*) to last throughout the season (Unmunsa 2021, p. 50). These activities are understood not merely as labor but as a process of realizing self-sufficiency and practicing cooperative living. Consequently, *ulryeok* in the *gangwon* functions as a core practice for forming and sustaining a self-sufficient culture, while at the same time serving as an important educational mechanism through which practitioners internalize roles and responsibilities within the community.

4. Conclusions

This study has examined the labor of the bhikkhuni sangha from the perspective of practice, focusing on the early Buddhist sūtras and vinaya texts, and has sought to clarify how this understanding of labor has been inherited and enacted in the modern Korean bhikkhuni sangha. Previous research has largely concentrated on the status of Buddhist women, monastic regulations, or institutional structures, but systematic analysis of bhikkhuni labor as practice has been relatively lacking. To address this gap, the study reviewed records related to labor found in texts such as the *Madhyama Āgama* and the early *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and compared and analyzed the duty-allocation system of the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* with the *yongsangbang* at Unmunsa. In doing so, it explored how the early Buddhist view of labor has been transmitted into the communal labor culture (*ulryeok*) of the modern Korean bhikkhuni sangha.

The findings of the study can be summarized as follows. First, the monastic labor differs fundamentally in purpose from lay labor. While lay labor aims at livelihood and wealth, monastic labor is directed toward practice and the maintenance of the sangha. Regulations such as those in the *Sarvāstivāda Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, which prohibit nuns from learning secular skills for livelihood, do not negate labor itself, but clarify that monastic labor is oriented toward practice rather than economic gain. This distinction marks a key criterion separating general conceptions of labor from the Buddhist view.

Second, the early Buddhist scriptures recount the Buddha himself participating in communal labor, and such records show that labor was not regarded as separate from practice but understood as an integral part of it. In the *Madhyama Āgama*, the Buddha is depicted working alongside his disciples, even remarking in old age that he must rest due to back pain and entrusting the remaining work to them. Such accounts reveal that labor was a shared practice of the entire community, not an obligation imposed on certain individuals.

Third, the labor of bhikkhunis was systematically institutionalized in the early vinaya through various regulations. Tasks such as robe-making and repair, bedding and seating management, maintenance of quarters, nursing the sick, and meal preparation were not mere chores but practice norms essential to sustaining the sangha. Bhikkhuni labor was essentially identical in nature to that of bhikkhus, carried out as a shared responsibility without fundamental gender-based distinction.

Fourth, the duty-allocation system found in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* has been institutionally inherited in the modern Korean bhikkhuni sangha. The text subdivided responsibilities such as room management, bedding, meal preparation, storage, guest reception, and care for the sick, and appointed overseers to maintain sangha order. These principles are evident today in Unmunsa's *Yongsangbang*, which preserves the traditional duty system while adapting it to the educational and administrative functions of the monastic college.

Finally, communal labor at Unmunsa Monastic College continues the Korean Buddhist tradition of self-sufficiency while integrating practice and education. *Ulryeok* is not merely work for temple operation but is incorporated into the curriculum, functioning as a vital practice method through which practitioners gradually learn roles and responsibilities within the community. The spirit of Baizhang Huaihai's dictum, "A day without work is a day without food" (一日不作 一日不食), remains a central principle in the *ulryeok* culture of the Korean bhikkhuni sangha, where practitioners embody responsibility, cooperation, compassion, and endurance in daily communal labor.

In this way, *ulryeok* is both labor that realizes communal self-sufficiency and a Buddhist practice that organically integrates education, community management, and spiritual cultivation. Ultimately, the labor of the bhikkhuni sangha is not merely physical work or a means of community operation, but a religious practice that establishes both the sangha and the path of cultivation. Such labor was codified as practice norms in the early sūtras and vinaya, institutionalized in the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* as a system of community management, and continues today as a practice culture through *yongsangbang* and *ulryeok* in the modern Korean bhikkhuni sangha. In other words, labor was both a practical necessity for sustaining the sangha and a process of completing spiritual practice. The significance of this study lies in its systematic consideration of bhikkhuni labor not merely as daily work or temple administration, but as part of a historical continuum linking the early Buddhist view of labor, the duty-allocation system of the Ten-Song Vinaya, and the practice of *yongsangbang* and *ulryeok* at Unmunsa today. By clarifying the uniquely Buddhist perspective that understands labor as practice, centered on the bhikkhuni sangha, this study contributes scholarly value and provides a foundation for further research on Buddhist women's practice, sangha communities, and Buddhist conceptions of labor.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Buddhism acknowledges the positive aspects of the formation and utilization of material wealth through labor, which can be summarized as follows: First, it enhances one's own livelihood stability and welfare. Second, it contributes to the livelihood stability and welfare of friends and acquaintances. Third, it provides a foundation for protecting oneself from disasters, dangers, or wrongful acts. Fourth, it enables one to host relatives and guests and to practice offerings to ancestors. Finally, such a foundation

alleviates the anxiety and burden of daily subsistence, thereby creating conditions for wholehearted dedication to practice. On the basis of material support, it becomes possible to pursue religious cultivation and the orientation toward liberation (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* III, pp. 45–46, 67–68, 76–78).

- 2 This understanding is related to the context in which various practices in the Buddhist tradition have been explained as processes oriented toward liberation. For example, the importance of precepts and everyday practice is affirmed throughout the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and it is emphasized that diverse forms of practice function in a mutually complementary way.
- 3 In this study, the term “early Vinaya Piṭaka” refers to the Vinaya texts of the early Buddhist schools together with the early *sūtras*. Major sources for research on female Buddhist practitioners include the Pali scriptures such as the *Dīgha Nikāya* (Davids and Carpenter 1975), the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Feer 1884–1904), the *Therīgāthā* (Oldenberg and Pischel 1883), as well as the early Vinaya texts of the Buddhist schools (Oldenberg 1969). Among these, this study particularly employs the early Vinaya and *sūtras* as its primary materials of analysis. The Vinaya was originally transmitted orally, and scholars generally understand it to have been committed to writing in Sri Lanka around the 1st century BCE (Gombrich 1988, p. 292). It was later transmitted in diverse versions by different Buddhist schools. In the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (*Sifen lü*), monastic regulations were systematized into 250 rules for monks and 348 rules for nuns (Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926a). This Vinaya tradition was transmitted through China to Korea, and it continues today in the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism through institutional practices such as ordination (*sugye*), initiation (*ipmun*), and retreat (*angeo*) (see Buddhayaśas and Chukbulnyo 1926a).
- 4 In fact, whether physical labor or mental labor, both can be regarded as practices that purify karma and lay the foundation for liberation.
- 5 This becomes the starting point of compassionate labor. Such compassionate labor, regardless of social status, is regarded as an important element in achieving personal happiness and social harmony, fostering moral growth, generating social benefit, and ultimately guiding the way toward enlightenment. From the perspective of the Noble Eightfold Path, the practical framework of the Four Noble Truths, compassionate labor in Buddhism is understood as a crucial foundation for practice oriented toward liberation. Within the eight virtues of the Eightfold Path, labor is not seen merely as a means of livelihood, but as a process of moral cultivation, character formation, and the realization of a righteous life. For example, Right Livelihood (*samyag-ājīva*) signifies maintaining one’s occupation in a morally and spiritually pure manner, and this can be considered the starting point of compassionate labor. Such compassionate labor, regardless of social status, is thus regarded as a vital factor in stabilizing individual life and fostering communal harmony, while promoting moral growth, creating social benefit, and ultimately directing one toward liberation.
- 6 An example of physical labor grounded in mindfulness can be found in the life of Dajian Huineng (大鑑慧能, 638–713), commonly known as the Sixth Patriarch. Huineng continued his practice while working in a mill for about eight months (Yuan 1927, p. 440a), demonstrating that spiritual cultivation can take place even within ordinary labor. When Master Zhaozhou asked, ‘What is the Way (Dao)?’, Master Nanquan replied, ‘Ordinary mind is the Way’ (Zongsou 1928, p. 295b). This illustrates that both physical and mental labor must be continuously integrated into daily life, serving as a classic example of the concept of ‘the unity of Chan and farming’ (禪農一致).
- 7 The following account is based on field observation conducted by the author, who lived for four years at the *gangwon* of Unmunsa Monastery, directly observing both practice and communal labor.

References

Original Scriptures (原典)

- Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 3 vols. Edited by R. Morris and E. Hardy. London: Pali Text Society, 1985–1990.
- Jātaka*, 2 vols. Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids. London: Pali Text Society, 1962–1964.
- Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, 3 vols. Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter. London: Pali Text Society, 1968.
- Samyutta Nikāya*, 6 vols. Edited by M. Leon Feer. London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1904.
- Therīgāthā*. Edited by Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel. London: Pali Text Society, 1883.
- Vinaya Piṭaka*, 4. vols. Edited by Hermann Oldenberg. London: Pali Text Society, 1969.

Primary Sources

- Beopjeong, trans. 1994. *Suttanipata*. Seoul: Saemteo.
- Bodhiruci (菩提流志), trans. 1925. *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* (大寶積經), Vol. 59, T11. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhabhadra (佛陀跋陀羅). 1925. *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* (十誦律), Vol. 34, T23. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhabhadra and Faxian (法顯), trans. 1926. *Mahāsaṅghikavinaya* (摩訶僧祇律), T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍), trans. 1926. *Sifen bhikṣuṇī jieben* (四分比丘尼戒本) (in Korean), T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.

- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1924a. *Dīrgha Āgama* (長阿含經), Vol. 11, T1. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1924b. *Dīrgha Āgama* (長阿含經), Vol. 13, T1. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926a. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 1–30, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926b. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 8, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926c. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 24, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926d. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 25, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926e. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 26, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Buddhayaśas (佛陀耶舍) and Chukbulnyo (竺佛念), trans. 1926f. *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (四分律) Vol. 48, T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Davids, T. W. Rhys and J. Estlin Carpenter. 1975. *The Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. 1–3. London: Pali Text Society.
- Deokhui (德輝), recompiled. 1928. *Imperially Commissioned Baizhang Qinggui*, Vol. 2, T48. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Gombrich, Richard F. 1988. *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Guṇabhadra (求那跋陀), trans. 1924a. *Samyuktāgama* (雜阿含經, Sacred Scripture), Vol. 4, T2. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Guṇabhadra (求那跋陀), trans. 1924b. *Samyuktāgama* (雜阿含經, Sacred Scripture), Vol. 48, T2. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Guṇabhadra (求那跋陀), trans. 1925. *Lankāvatārasūtra* (aka *Lengjiaabaduoluobaojing*, 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經), Vol. 1, T16. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Guṇavarman, trans. 1926. *Dharmaguptabhikkhuniskarman* (四分比丘尼羯磨法), T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Jeon, Jae-seong, trans. 2017. *Therīgāthā-Jangnonigegyong*. Seoul: Korea Pali Text Society.
- Myeonghui (明徽), ed. 1926. *Wufenbiqiunijieben* (五分比丘尼戒本) (in Korean), T22. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Puṇyatāra (弗若多羅) and Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什), trans. 1925. *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* (十誦律), Vol. 34, T23. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Samghadeva, Gautama (瞿曇僧伽提婆). 1924a. *Aṅuttarānikāya* (增壹阿含經), Vol. 3, T2. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Samghadeva, Gautama. 1924b. *Madhyamāgama* (中阿含經), Vol. 19, T1. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Seok, Ji-hyun, trans. 1997. *Sutta Nipāta*. Seoul: Minjoksa.
- Translator unknown. 1924a. *Samyuktāgamasūtra* (別譯雜阿含經, Shorter Chinese Samyuktāgama), Vol. 5, T2. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Translator unknown. 1924b. *Samyuktāgamasūtra* (別譯雜阿含經, Shorter Chinese Samyuktāgama), Vol. 15, T2. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Vasubandhu (天親菩薩). 1926. *Yijiaoinglun* (遺教經論), trans. by Paramārtha, Vol. 1, T26. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Yijing, trans. 1925. *Mūla Sarvāstivāda-bhikkhunī-vinaya-vibhaṅga* (Gēnběn shuōyīqiè yǒubù pichúni pínàiyé, 根本說一切有部苾芻尼毘奈耶), Vol. 13, T23. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Yuan, Dao. 1927. *Jingde Chuandeng Lu* (景德傳燈錄, The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp), Vol. 28, T51. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.
- Zongsou, ed. 1928. *Mumungwan* (The Gateless Gate), T48. Tokyo: Taishō Tripitaka Publishing Association.

Secondary Sources

- Blackstone, Kathryn R. 1998. *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*. London: Curzon Press.
- Brown, Clair. 2017. *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Cho, Eun-Su, ed. 2011. *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2008. *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Gross, Rita M. 1993. *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Gutschow, Kim. 2004. *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Havnevik, Hanna. 1990. *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norms and Social Reality*. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.
- Heirman, Ann. 2001. *Rules for Nuns According to the Dharmaguptakavinaya*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Heo, Nam-Gyeol, trans. 2010. *Bulgyoyullihak immune* [An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics]. Seoul: Ssial.
- Horner, Isaline Blew. 1930. *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*. Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press.
- Jung, Seong-Bon, and Gyu-Tak Shin. 1999. Seonbulgyoui nodongmunje [Labor Issues in Seon Buddhism]. *Taegaksasang* 2: 105–48.
- Koo, Mirae. 2020. Chulgajai tonggwaeuryejeok salme tuyeongdoen bulgyo huwonmunhwa [Buddhist Patronage Culture Projected into the Rite of Passage Life of a Monk]. *Muhyeongyusan* 8: 185–208.
- Kovács, Gábor. 2020. *The Value Orientations of Buddhist and Christian Entrepreneurs: A Comparative Perspective on Spirituality and Business Ethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- LaMacchia, Linda Jean. 2008. *Songs and Lives of the Jomo: Nuns of Kinnaur Northwest India. Women's Religious Expression in Tibetan Buddhism*. Delhi: Sri Satguru.
- Lee, Huiseung, ed. 1981. *Gukeodaesajeon* [Korean Dictionary]. Seoul: Minjungsearim.
- Lee, Jae-Suk, and Gwang-Su Lee, trans. 2005. *Manubeopjeon* [Code of Manu]. Seoul: Hangilsa.
- Lee, Taeyoung, and Yangsuk Jung, trans. 1990. *Eopsasang* [The Concept of Eop]. Seoul: Minjoksa.
- Park, Gyung-Jun. 1998. Bulgyoui nodonggwang sogo [Study of the Buddhist Perspective on Labor]. *Bulgyohakbo* 35: 129–48.
- Park, Jeongeun. 2025. Reshaping Gendered Boundaries: Buddhist Women's Monastic Experience in Korean Buddhism. *Religions* 16: 214. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Park, Seon-Mok. 2002. *Yulli-Sahoesasangsajeon* [Dictionary of Ethical and Social Philosophy]. Seoul: Hyeongseolchulpansa.
- Songamjiwon. 2007. *Nodongui gachi, bulgyoe mutneunda* [The Value of Labor in Buddhism]. Anseong: Dopiansa.
- Suh, Youngae. 2006. *Bulgyoui yeoseonggwang* [Buddhism's View on Women]. Seoul: Pulgyosidaesa.
- Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 1999. *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Unmunsa. 2018. Unmun. Vol. 145. Available online: http://www.unmunsa.or.kr/data/file/unmun_01/145.pdf (accessed on 7 May 2026). (In Korean)
- Unmunsa. 2021. Unmun. Vol. 157. Available online: http://www.unmunsa.or.kr/data/file/unmun_01/157.PDF (accessed on 7 May 2026). (In Korean)
- Unmunsa. 2023. Unmun. Vol. 166. Available online: http://www.unmunsa.or.kr/data/file/unmun_01/166.pdf (accessed on 11 May 2026). (In Korean)
- Unmunsa. 2024. Unmun. Vol. 167. Available online: http://www.unmunsa.or.kr/data/file/unmun_01/167.pdf (accessed on 11 May 2026). (In Korean)

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.