

Women's Roles in Buddhism:

The Hegemonic Verses the Negotiated

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Overarchingly, Buddhism is viewed as the most favorable of the five major world religions to female spirituality. From afar, Buddhism gains a type of women-friendly seal of approval by practitioners and those cursorily interested in religious studies. After all, women and men can both achieve enlightenment or the attainment of *nibbana*,¹ the cessation of rebirth. Buddhism is described as a raft across the suffering (*dukkha*) inherent in the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) into *nibbana* and everyone is allowed on the raft. However, in examining the lived experiences of women in Thailand the situation becomes less clear. Thailand is a Theravada Buddhist country, and Theravada is notoriously conservative in practice and views on women's religious roles. The modern everyday practice of Thai Buddhism places little value on a woman's spiritual contribution, and there is a devaluation of female spiritual contributions. Females are denied full ordination in Thailand, thus relegating women to lay expressions of devotion. With the monastic bias firmly in place, women have an inferior status directly affecting the attainment of *nibbana*; because monasticism is the so-called "fast-track"² to enlightenment, women are at a spiritual disadvantage precisely because they are denied full ordination. Using ancient textual references and hegemonic modern-day Buddhist practice in Thailand as a basis, women's roles are denied a full expression. However, broadening an examination of historical roles of women in Buddhism and exploring current reform movements demonstrates that this hegemonic view of women's roles has room for negotiation. A space for women's spirituality is created through a negotiation with dominant discourses on the value of women's spiritual contributions and this dynamic process is ongoing.

In examining the history of women's roles in Buddhism, there are two arenas of exploration—the study of early textual Buddhism as relates to ancient India and the history of

¹ I try to consistently use Pali spellings of Buddhist concepts versus the more readily recognizable Sanskrit spellings due to the Thai Theravada Buddhist context of the reform movements discussed in the essay.

² Interviewee A, please see Appendix One.

early Theravada Buddhism's spread into Southeast Asia. Additionally, these ancient texts and attitudes influence women's roles in modern times and affect current reform movements involving greater religious expression for women. During all three phases of Buddhism under discussion—ancient Indian, early Southeast Asian, and modern Thai—there have been dominant discourses on suitable roles for women heavily influenced by cultural contexts and patriarchal assumptions of female worth. Conversely, there have also been negotiated spheres of female spirituality. However, the actual practices of women and a clear picture of how women's spiritual contributions were viewed by the dominant/hegemonic/male structures in place at the time are not always available. The biases of Western scholarship, the relatively neonate position of feminist historiography, and modern attitudes regarding reform movements all contribute to an incomplete picture. By acknowledging these limitations of Buddhist scholarship, an exploration of women's roles in Buddhism, both hegemonic and negotiated, can proceed.

Buddhist scholarship in the West has been framed by various biases over the years, one of which has been a relegation of gender to a marginal subject of investigation. The methodology of feminist historiography attempts to present a fuller, gender inclusive history. Through “feminist histories of religious traditions...the intricately imbricated effects of religion, gender, and culture” are more closely studied.³ Because a study of history has routinely meant a normative study of males, the field of traditional historiography can be described as andocentric. During a roundtable discussion on feminist religious history, Margaret R. Miles stated, “Indeed, attention to the gendered discourses of historical societies alters the questions historians ask and the evidence they seek, as well as their reconstruction of those societies.”⁴ Therefore, previous

³Margaret R. Miles, “Roundtable Discussion—Feminist Religious History,” In *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (22 (1), 2006) 45-52.

⁴ Ibid.

assumptions are undermined by a fresh approach that is more inclusive and highlights previous biases.

According to Alice Collett in her article entitled “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” the vast majority of textual research on women’s roles in early Buddhism has been characterized by various distinct biases the foremost of which is the taxonomy of value.⁵ Buddhism is exceptional within the context of ancient Indian religions in the amount of texts by, about, or concerning women still in existence today. However, while there are eleven texts⁶ that should be considered core to the Buddhism and gender debate, the Pali Vinaya and the Therīgāthā have been privileged resulting in a “significant imbalance in the assessment of the textual records in this field of study.”⁷ While the lacuna created by a lack of readily accessible translations may account for some imbalance, Collett stresses that other factors are at work.

The Orientalist-essentialist tendency to conceive of Buddhism as a “textual object” and an obsessive “quest for the ‘original’ or ‘pure’ form of Buddhism through a manufactured notion of religion has had a profound effect on subsequent Western research on early Buddhism.⁸ The hypostatized notion of “originality” has constructed the primacy of the Pali texts, particularly the Pali Vinaya and the Therīgāthā, to the exclusion of a larger body of texts. By making Pali texts central to the Buddhism and gender debate there has been a trend to equate “Pali with Buddhism in its entirety.”⁹ Furthermore, “the tendency to concentrate on the written word is

⁵ Alice Collett, “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (22: 2006), 55-84.

⁶ According to Collett, these eleven texts are the Vinaya (from various schools and sects of Buddhism), the Therīgāthā, the Samyutta Nikāya, the Apadānas, Avadānaśataka and the Divyāvadāna, Dhammapadattakathā, Manimēkalai, Paramatthadīpanītherīgāthattakathā (or Paramatthadīpanī VI), Anguttara Nikāya, and the Manorathapūranī.

⁷ Alice Collett, “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (22: 2006), 55-84.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

particularly problematic in regard to pre-modern societies, where literacy was far less common among women than men.”¹⁰ Within the taxonomy of valuation, texts are construed as authoritative, more so than other modes of expression. Moreover, texts that are more doctrinal are considered of more worth than texts that are creative or artistic.

By broadening the examination of ancient texts and regarding other sources of information, such as archeological evidence, as being legitimate and of value, the contradictions of the depictions of female roles come into sharper focus. Women are neither categorically depicted as evil nor are women given broad agentive control of their own lives. There is a multiplicity of voices contained in Buddhist texts which Sponberg’s conceptual taxonomy breaks down into four separate themes or strands—soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny.¹¹ Sponberg states, soteriological inclusiveness “asserts neither sameness nor lack of hierarchical differentiation”; as the Therīgāthā attests, women can attain enlightenment and are associated with characteristics of full humanity.¹² The second theme is institutional androcentrism, which “refers to the view that women can only pursue a religious career within a regulated institutional structure that preserves male authority and female subordination.”¹³ In Thailand this also includes the denial of full female ordination, the lack of respect for *maechii*,¹⁴ and the placement of the heavy burden of supporting the monastic order squarely in the shoulders of laywomen. Ascetic misogyny is far more outstanding as outright hatred of women, “hostile, vituperative attitudes toward women; it probably has roots in a pre-Buddhist set of beliefs associating women with dangerous,

¹⁰ Barbara Watson Andaya, “Localizing the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (33: 2002), 1-30.

¹¹ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Maechii*, a Thai word for women who shave their heads, wear white robes, provide domestic services for monks and follow eight precepts. These women are commonly referred to as nuns and are different from *bhikkhunis*, who follow 310/311 precepts.

uncontrolled sexuality, and polluting bodily fluids.”¹⁵ Women are seen as powerful but only in an utterly negative sense through a fetishization of the female body, “ascetic misogyny perpetuates the fear of the power of women to undermine celibacy...the image of women as impure temptresses may also be cited as evidence of ascetic misogyny.”¹⁶ Finally, soteriological androgyny is described as offering the most fertile grounds for developing a Buddhist feminism.¹⁷ To understand why, there are several core Buddhist teachings that must be expounded upon.

According to Buddhist belief, The Three Characteristics of Existence describe the truth about all life—*anatta* (no-self), *anicca* (impermanence), and *dukkha* (frustration/suffering). What humans think of as “self” is actually the five aggregates or *khandas*—body, feelings, perceptions, consciousness, and volition or will. These *khandas* are in constant flux, always changing in a state of impermanence or *anicca*. Gender is therefore also impermanent, not a fixed state of being, as gender is variously socially embedded in the body, feelings, perception, consciousness, or volition/will. Bodies are coded male and female based on genitalia or genetic make-up, but even in one lifetime these are changeable, not fixed and ridged; particularly with the transsexual movement. The inner emotive feeling of “being” masculine or feminine is not restricted to male and female bodied categories as Judith Halberstam adeptly portrays in her book entitled *Female Masculinity*;¹⁸ and further, individual and societal perception and consciousness of gender are also changeable, fluid, non-ridged, as seen in the queer and transgendered movements. The idea of will being the motivating force behind actions cannot be said to be fundamentally gendered as motivation is not a gendered concept. Thus even in the scope of one lifetime, let alone numerous rebirths, gender is hardly static. However, the ignorance of these truths (*avijja*) fuels desire (*tanha*), the driving force of *dukkha*. Consequently, *kamma* is independent of gender as well, “the

¹⁵ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

karmic condition sequences of cause and effect are what motivates and explains behavior, not any attribute of self such as masculinity or femininity.”¹⁹ Van Esterik explains,

At the higher levels of consciousness, there is no male, no female. Nirvana, the cessation of rebirths, is beyond any consideration of masculinity and femininity, and to argue that both males and females can reach this level in an error of understanding, and a distortion of Buddhist logic concerning gender. Enlightenment is simply not embodied, and therefore could not be embodiment in either gender.²⁰

Remembering these divergent themes in Buddhism regarding women is helpful to an exploration of early Buddhism.

Neither the extreme theme of ascetic misogyny nor that of soteriological androgyny is completely valid when approaching early textual Buddhism. While women are portrayed as having equal spiritual potential for enlightenment, they are also viewed as a potential threat to males, monastic life, and are uncontrollable, necessitating male dominance for social stability. The portrayal of women in Buddhism cannot be divorced from Indian cultural assumptions about women during the Buddha’s time and that of his monks.²¹ In his book, “The Different Paths of Buddhism,” Olson recounts the cultural position of women in ancient India, the revolutionary aspects of Buddhist doctrine, and the positive and negative portrayals of women in Buddhist texts.²² The chapter entitled “The Feminine Narrative in Buddhism” delineates the social position of women under Brahmanism wherein women were greatly respected if they fulfilled the role of virtuous and fertile wife, being considered “an instrument of immortality” through the bringing forth of sons.²³ However, female education was limited and freedom to choose a non-maternal life was not a viable option.²⁴ With the advent of Buddhism, women had a “career choice” as

¹⁹ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Carl Olson, *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 110-122.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

bhikkhunis, were considered worthy of instruction in the *Dhamma*, and could attain enlightenment on relatively equal terms with male counterparts.²⁵

The story of the formation of the female Sangha is contained in the Pali Vinaya text known as the *Cullavagga*. The Buddha is approached by his aunt/step-mother, Mahāpajāti numerous times requesting the creation of a female order and he denies her requests. Only after the intercession of Ānanda, his attendant and cousin, is the female order begrudgingly created. In the story, Ānanda obtains confirmation of female ability to attain *nibbana*. This story has alternately been viewed as an example of the Buddha's misogyny and an example of Buddhism's radicalism. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni has also pointed out that there were no *bhikkhunis* present when the Vinaya Pitaka was recited at the first council in Rajagaha shortly after the Buddha's death.²⁶ This fact in itself may reveal the personal bias of monks, but also means there was no impute from the female Sangha regarding the transmission of the *Tipitaka*. However, there is undeniable evidence of hierarchical difference subjugating women to male authority. This can be seen in the precepts and rules they must keep.

In the Theravada tradition, male monks must observe two hundred and twenty seven precepts while females must observe three hundred and ten. There are also the *garudhammas* or eight special rules regarding *bhikkhunis*. Yet, even here there is ambiguity as there is the possibility of a late interpolation of the *garudhammas*, one of the reasons being

at the time the nuns' (*bhikkhunis*) order was established, the two-year probationary period for novitiates (*siksamāna*) had not been instituted. This was a much later development. However, four of the eight rules refer specifically to probationary training...such incongruity is indicative of interpolation, and that it is the section on the eight special rules that has been appendaged²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

²⁷ Alice Collett, "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (22: 2006), 55-84.

However, the actual motivations behind the addition remain unknown. Of course, not all ancient Buddhist texts confer a lesser status on women. The Therīgāthā, sometimes referred to as *The Psalms of the Sisters* making use of a Christian linguistic code, is a collection of poems attributed to various Buddhist women.²⁸ The women of the Therīgāthā did not need the popular Thai prerequisite for attainment of *nibbana*, rebirth as a male; women are portrayed as active agents in soteriological strategies.²⁹ Most worthy of note regarding hegemonic views on women are the poems by sex workers: “In the Therigatha, prostitutes reach enlightenment on hearing the words of the Buddha.”³⁰ These women did not need to repent of some terrible moral downfall, keeping in line with the Buddhist philosophy regarding impermanence and the transitory nature of life. With such incongruities in the depiction of women and the power of local cultural interaction with religious tradition, women’s roles in Buddhism are not uniform across countries. Therefore, specific study of women’s roles in early Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia is necessary to gain more understanding of current reform movements.

Early Theravada Buddhism’s spread to Southeast Asia came about through the international missionary focus of Buddhism under King Asoka, the famous Indian king from the fourth century B.C.E.³¹ He sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka and from there Buddhism spread to Burma/Myanmar and eventually Thailand. The particular manner and reasons associated with Theravada Buddhism’s spread in Southeast Asia are not clearly known.³² Often theories surrounding Theravada’s proliferation are based on political reasons, particularly kingship. This focus is insidiously andocentric and an assumption that women “conform to a

²⁸ Ibid. Referred to in Collett as elder nuns or *therīs*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

³¹ Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 63-77.

³² Barbara Watson Andaya, “Localizing the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (33: 2002), 1-30.

generic humanity.”³³ However, a “gender-oriented study should do more than put women into history. It should also throw light on the history—male and well as female—into which women are put” and help explain the apparent contradiction that a conservative religion, in which textual assertion of male spiritual superiority is the norm, gained substantial female support.³⁴ Andaya claims that “early Southeast Asian beliefs about female spiritual inferiority were countered by the public space Theravada ritual permitted women as lay devotees.”³⁵

In her article entitled “Localising the Universal: Women, Motherhood, and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism,” Andaya first discusses the “far-reaching developments in Sri Lankan monasteries” and the decline of female asceticism versus the increased emphasis on female lay practices.³⁶ In addition, she discusses how the Buddhist practice of *dana* (generosity) provided a space for women’s spirituality through three preexistent, quintessentially female pursuits—food preparation, weaving, and pottery.³⁷ The emphasis on female lay practice and the centrality of *dana* (generosity) as a principle means of making merit in lay practice was specifically promoted by the monastic order.³⁸ The promotion of the *upāsikā*, the devout laywoman, in preference to *bhikkhunī* had the dual effect of lessening the importance of female ordination while expanding on the religious role of ordinary women. The domestic sphere of Southeast Asian into which women were relegated was defined by food preparation, the weaving of cloth, and the making of pottery. By including these preexisting tasks as having religious significance as fields for the accrual of merit, the monastic order was afforded material support as well as constructing women as the primary supporters of the Sangha.

³³ Alice Collett, “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (22: 2006), 55-84.

³⁴ Barbara Watson Andaya, “Localizing the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (33: 2002), 1-30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

This lay-friendly device had a familiar structure to practitioners in Southeast Asia because “soteriological notions attached to the accumulation of merit through gift-giving would have had profound resonances in societies where offerings to supernatural beings had long been part of domestic rounds.”³⁹ For example with regards to food, the story of Sujātā is held up as a great example of the “supremely pious act of *dana*” a laywoman can perform; she offered gruel to the starving Buddha at the end of his extreme asceticism, thus saving him from death.⁴⁰ Because the pre-Buddhist animistic practices of the Southeast Asian region had a place for female agency, the introduction of Theravada Buddhism as a cultural force, widely accepted and popular, needed to have a suitable outlet for female spirituality.

The situation remains unclear if the emphasis on female lay contributions were necessarily constructed as a way of gaining female support, were used as an excuse of female exclusion from other spiritual pursuits, or were negotiated by women as an outlet denied by male centers of authority. Precisely because there is a profound monastic bias in Thailand, it can be said that the role of laywomen is validated as a way to support the Sangha. So rather than becoming a negotiation with the hegemony and a way of liberating female religious expression, the emphasis on *dana* can also be seen as a veiled attempt by the Sangha to further subjugate women. Consequently, Thailand has seen a rise in modern reform movements with regards to women’s religious expression that has taken several forms.

The first, more conservative focus of reform in Thailand is improving the situation of *maechii*, a Thai word for women who wear white robes and are commonly referred to as nuns. Without financial resource from the state supported Sangha, often without educational opportunities, and reduced to little more than monastic servants, *maechii* are not viewed highly

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

in Thai society in general. Efforts to advance the cause of *maechii* serve as a middle ground, helping women without upsetting the status quo. The financial and educational support of *maechii* rectifies both material deprivation and the stigma of non-education.⁴¹

The second reform emphasis is lessening the perceived knowledge gap between Buddhism laymen and Buddhist laywoman, “The gap between men and women lies more in legitimized authority than in knowledge, particularly now that women have increasing opportunities for acquiring knowledge of Buddhism. In addition, women’s knowledge of Buddhism may well lie in the domains other than texts.”⁴² Again the trope of food preparation is used as a negotiation with dominant discourses in an effort to decentralize textual knowledge as superior: “Even esoteric and paradoxical knowledge can be coded through everyday practices, providing alternative frameworks for interpretation.”⁴³

The most heavily debated call for reform has been that of reestablishing full female ordination and a female Sangha in Theravada Buddhism, specifically Thailand. The opposition’s argument takes on a chicken-or-the-egg type of logic—since Thailand has never had a *bhikkhuni* Sangha the establishment of an order in Thailand would not be legitimate as ancient textual rules call for female ordination to be attended upon by both male and female orders. The reappearance of *bhikkhunis* in Thailand was first championed by Voramai Kabilsingh and then by her daughter, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, now known internationally by her Pali ordination name Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. “We have to prove to society that it is possible that women can lead ordained lives,” Dhammananda said in an interview.⁴⁴

Female lay practitioners of Buddhism in Thailand hold a diverse range of views on reforms for greater expression of women’s spirituality and how women’s needs can best be met.

⁴¹ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sheila B. Lalwani, “Female monk causes a stir,” in *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Dec 23, 2005).

But if the assumption is made that the male-lead religious structure in Thailand, the Sangha, is primarily responsible for the subjugation, repression, and negation of female religious roles and the neglect of women's spiritual needs, then how do individual males feel. While women must negotiate and actively pursue religious actualization, males must also bear some responsibility in ameliorating the situation.

In an interview with a monk studying at Mahachulalongkorn University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the subject of a woman's place in Thai Buddhism was discussed.⁴⁵ In talking about the place of *maechii* and *bhikkhunis* in Thai society, he said that "as women stand up for their rights" there will be an increase in *maechii*. He sees their place in society as important and necessary. However, he was less sure of the increase in *bhikkhunis* in Thailand. Asked if he was familiar with Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, he said not very much. He only knew that she was "skilled with Abidhamma."

Further, when the observable fact of primarily female material support of the Sangha through the giving of alms and donations was discussed, he said that "women are more soft-minded." From the context, a better word choice would have been "soft-hearted." He explained that men are more self-interested, "only wanting to go off alone and think of themselves," but women want to care for others and are more generous; thus the appellation of "soft-minded." Perhaps he realized the disadvantage of being denied the "fast-track to nirvana." The way he expressed matters proposed a view that a woman's inclination toward greater *dana* and everyone's ability to exercise self-constraint made the denial of a monastic life less harsh for women. In his opinion, the monastic life was/is dangerous for a woman, with the possibility of rape. He said nothing of the male monks' responsibility to not rape female monks, but spoke of the danger as a reality that must be acknowledged and accepted. On the other hand, during an

⁴⁵ Please see Interviewee A, Appendix One

informal interview with a Buddhist layman an acknowledgment of women's disadvantages regarding religious expression in Thailand was revealed.⁴⁶

Given the multiplicity of voices on women's roles in Buddhism—in ancient Indian texts, early Theravada practice in Southeast Asia, as well as views of both male and female, monastic and lay, practitioners in modern-day Thailand—what *is* a woman's place in Buddhism? The issues of the importance of women as nuns (*maechii*) versus full fledged female monks (*bhikkhuni*), how women should/can best contribute to the *Sangha*, if there is a material difference between a female's path to enlightenment versus a male's path, and how best women's needs are met continue in flux. The situation can best be understood by the dynamic ongoing establishing of a feminist hermeneutic: “[G]reater attention to reinterpreting the primary canonical texts from a Thai feminist perspective might open up a new way of conceptualizing the relation between Buddhism and gender ideology.”⁴⁷ By avoiding a imperialist notion of “burden,” Western feminist ideals do not need to be imported to resolve conflict in the negotiation of women's roles, “Since Buddhist concepts of self (and non-self) differ so fundamentally from Western concepts of the individual, a Buddhist feminism may be able to integrate class and moral action into its ideology more successfully than had Western feminism”

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Thus women's roles in Buddhism have never been, and remain, non-static. They are characterized by multiplicity and ample room for negotiation around culturally influenced repressions of female spirituality. In the field of academic Buddhist scholarship a broadening of textual and non-textual examinations of historical roles of women in Buddhism is needed. As current reform movements gain popular appeal, progress can be made for improving women's

⁴⁶ Please see Interviewee B and Interviewee C, Appendix One

⁴⁷ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

⁴⁸ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2000), 65-91.

opportunities. Combined, these efforts will create a space for women's spirituality that is fully actuated.

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Appendix One

Interviewee A:

I completed one interview with a monk from Wat Suan Dok. The monk I interviewed was named Arlit (pronounced Alex) and he is from Cambodia. He has been living in Thailand for several years and is studying at Mahachulalongkorn University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. He describes the monkhood as a “fast track to nirvana.” He emphasized that Buddhism does not advocate disparate treatment of men and women, or of monks and laity, “everyone has the chance to obtain nirvana.” He further explained there are three chief things that practitioners, regardless of gender should practice—charity, self-constraint, and concentration or meditation. The information he provided was fairly basic and was well rehearsed.

The only insights I gained were when he felt comfortable sharing his personal opinions. In talking about the place of *maechii* and *bhikkhunis* in Thai society, he said that “as women stand up for their rights” there will be an increase in *maechii*. He sees their place in society as important and necessary. However, he was less sure of the increase in *bhikkhunis* in Thailand. I asked him if he was familiar with Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, but he said not very much. He only knew that she was “skilled with Abidhamma.”

Further, when I related that in my research women are described as being the chief sources of alms and donations, he said that “women are more soft-minded.” From the context I feel a better word choice would have been “soft-hearted.” Arlit explained that men are more self-interested, “only wanting to go off alone and think of themselves,” but women want to care for others and are more generous; thus the appellation of “soft-minded.”

I didn’t get the sense that Arlit thought negatively of women’s spiritual potential, but perhaps he realized the disadvantage of being denied the “fast-track to nirvana.” The way he

expressed matters proposed a view that a woman's inclination toward greater generosity/charity and everyone's ability to exercise self-constraint made the denial of a monastic life less harsh for women. In his opinion, the monastic life was/is dangerous for a woman, with the possibility of rape. He said nothing of the male monks' responsibility to not rape female monks, but spoke of the danger as a reality that must be acknowledged and accepted.

He also expressed some views on domestic violence; while of personal interest, I feel that subject is beyond the scope of my paper.

Interviewees B:

I interviewed a male student who self-identified as a Buddhist via MSN messenger. The following is the transcript:

Me: Is there a difference between a female's path to enlightenment versus a male's path?

Interviewee B: Within Buddhism practice in Thailand, yes. This notion of women being spiritually inferior to men has had ramifications on women's state of mind and many of them, who i have talked to make merit so that they might be born into a better place with more money, but few view being enlightened as a actual goal in which they will strive to accomplish

Me: Do you think this is part of a greater materialist trend in Thai Buddhism (a goal of better rebirth vs. *nibbana*) or do you think there are particular gendered differences?

Interviewee B: in Thai Buddhism a women's place is to be a provider, a provider for the family, for the monks and for guest[s]. Within the religion looking though a Thai sense there is very little for women, unless the[y] want to be a nun. I can relate to the many who [have] chosen other religions to follow their spiritual expression. Women can always pr[a]y, meditate and make

merit these are the things the Buddha did so...Therefore they should be able to reach the same status and spiritual ability as women

Me: ok, so a Thai woman feels differently about her place in Buddhism and what opportunities are available to her, in your opinion...

Interviewee B: She can study some writings, go to preaching of the Dharma, and make merit. It is like she can understand Buddhism but not participate in it...Oh an meditation too

Me: how do you feel about the maechii versus bhikkhunis debate?

Interviewee B: A maechii in a Thai sense is someone who takes care of the temple and can perform chants with the monks but are not viewed as being equal, where a bhikkhuni is a monk who is a women, which is not found in Thai Theravadan Buddhism.

Me: so maechii fulfills a role as a supporter, just like lay women...but are there differences between them, i.e., value or importance to the Sangha...or from a religious stand point, a more proper position for Buddhist practice...

Interviewee B: Yes...they can participate in ritual...and like chanting or meditating with the abbot of the temple

Me: but don't laywomen participate in ritual, like offering of robes?...is there a value for the maechii in the special role?

Interviewee B: The man is the one who gives them[,] a women only touches the man giving the robes to gain some of the merit

Me: ah...so do you think women should be allowed full ordination?

Interviewee B: I am not sure I think if they had separate Wat then yes but the mix would be too much and there might be temptation many monks say the hardest desire to let go of is sex

and many bhikkhunis say the hardest thing to give up is being desired...in Mahayana there are texts that Bhikkhunis have written about this...seriously no joke

Me: structure aside, do you think it is legitimate in a Thai context, as there was no female Sangha here before.

Interviewee B: legitimate by me yes by the popular population no...it will be a long time before it is accepted

Me: popular population or the Sangha itself?

Interviewee B: Both...I think certain individuals would accept it but it is too drastic of a change and the Sangha would be scared to lose the people taking care of them