

Understanding Female Ordination and the Status of Bhikkhunis in Thai Society Through a Sociological Perspective

ความเข้าใจเรื่องการอุปสมบทเพศหญิงและสถานะของภิกษุณี

ในสังคมไทยผ่านมุมมองทางสังคมวิทยา

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คำสำคัญ: ภิกษุณี, พุทธศาสนาไทย, ประเทศไทย, การแพร่กระจาย นวัตกรรม, สังคมวิทยา

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Since the beginning of bhikkhuni (female Buddhist nun) tradition long ago, much difficulty surrounding their existence has been recorded. At present, a lot of controversy about the status of bhikkhunis occurs, including both opponents and supporters. However, discussions are often limited to issues of gender equality, religious precepts, or legal matters. This article seeks to move beyond the existing frameworks of debate by focusing on the 'existence' of bhikkhunis, their characteristics, and the various factors influencing their development and perception in Thai society. It also examines the religious practices that affect the status of bhikkhunis, as well as the significance of women's roles and positions in Thai Buddhist society.

Methods: This article is qualitative research. It consists of a comprehensive literature review and an interview with the Venerable Dhammananda, de facto leader of the Thai bhikkhuni movement. It also points out that previous studies on bhikkhunis and Thai Buddhism have often overlooked the application of sociological frameworks in their analyses. This article therefore employs Wejnert's (2002) 'Diffusion of Innovations' framework to analyze the status of bhikkhunis as a new innovation within Thai society. Although bhikkhunis once existed in the past, their reemergence in contemporary Thai society represents a new concept. The use of this framework provides a clearer understanding of how this innovation is accepted within its contextual environment, as well as the characteristics of the initiators (bhikkhunis) and the dynamics of the bhikkhuni movement. The data from the literature review and interviews were analyzed based on a conceptual framework concerning factors related to the bhikkhuni movement, including legal, gender, and social problems.

Results: It was found that the status of bhikkhunis in Thai Buddhism is uncertain, changing, and even misunderstood, but the bhikkhunis are persevering and involved in their ongoing activities. Past legal issues appear to have no significant impact in the present because the Constitution provides protection for the fundamental rights of bhikkhunis. Concerning gender, the bhikkhunis do exist outside the patriarchal framework of Thai society but they still have the freedom to engage in social initiatives as they see appropriate and are also entitled to certain rights, such as the right to vote, which male monks sometimes do not possess. The bhikkhunis are sometimes misunderstood as feminist religious activists. In fact, bhikkhunis merely follow their own dispositions and the teachings of the Dhamma. Moreover, the debates concerning religious legitimacy have no significant effect on the current status of bhikkhunis, as they have already emerged and established their presence in society. Both the literature and interview data indicate that bhikkhunis have gained recognition at the local community level from laypeople and some monks, and that they play a significant role in Buddhist traditions, such as morning alms rounds.

Application of this study: This article has advanced beyond other papers which have only examined the validity of female ordination in Thailand. It has examined the status of the bhikkhuni as women in Thai Buddhism, and considered the conflict between the others' opinions and the role of bhikkhunis by applying the sociological framework of 'Diffusion of Innovations' to analyze the bhikkhunis in Thailand for the first time. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the various contexts that affect the status of bhikkhunis. Viewing bhikkhuni ordination as a social innovation within Thai society provides broader insights into its implications and meanings. Therefore, this research is suitable for those seeking a more profound understanding of the bhikkhuni movement—whether monks, religious organizations, or scholars. Future research should regard the bhikkhunis not merely as a site of social or religious conflict but as an existing social movement, whether it has supporters or not.

Conclusions: The framework revealed that surrounding factors, the characteristic of the bhikkhunis as an innovation, as well as personal characteristics all impact their status within Thai society, in both positive and negative ways. The conclusion drawn from this research is that despite controversy and debate, the bhikkhunis are not feminist religious activists, they are simply women who follow the Buddhist path and seek to claim their own space within the religion. Although these bhikkhunis may be at a disadvantage in a patriarchal social structure, they continue to play vital roles within their local communities. Instead of perceiving the bhikkhunis primarily through the lens of activism or conflict, attention should be given to their existence and the performance of their monastic duties. In spite of ongoing controversies and diverse interpretations, the bhikkhunis continue to exist and perform their duties as nuns with their own potential.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: นับตั้งแต่การเริ่มต้นของธรรมเนียมภิกษุณีในอดีต ได้มีบันทึกถึงความยากลำบากที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการมีอยู่ของภิกษุณี ในปัจจุบันยังคงมีการถกเถียงเกี่ยวกับสถานะของภิกษุณี ซึ่งมีทั้งฝ่ายที่สนับสนุนและฝ่ายที่คัดค้าน อย่างไรก็ตาม การอภิปรายส่วนใหญ่มักจำกัดอยู่ในเรื่องความเสมอภาคทางเพศ ข้อบัญญัติทางศาสนา หรือประเด็นทางกฎหมายเท่านั้น บทความนี้ต้องการก้าวข้ามกรอบการถกเถียงดังกล่าว โดยมุ่งเน้นไปที่ “การมีอยู่” ของภิกษุณี คุณลักษณะของภิกษุณี และปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ที่ส่งผลต่อการพัฒนาและการรับรู้ในสังคมไทย บทความนี้พิจารณาการปฏิบัติทางศาสนาที่ส่งผลต่อสถานะของภิกษุณี รวมถึงความสำคัญของบทบาทและตำแหน่งผู้หญิงในสังคมพุทธไทย

วิธีการศึกษา: บทความนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ประกอบด้วยกรอบทบทวนวรรณกรรมอย่างครอบคลุมและการสัมภาษณ์พระภิกษุณีธัมมัทธา ซึ่งถือเป็นผู้นำโดยพฤตินัยของขบวนการภิกษุณีในไทย อีกทั้งยังชี้ให้เห็นว่าการศึกษาก่อนหน้านี้เกี่ยวกับภิกษุณีและพุทธศาสนาไทยมักละเลยการใช้กรอบแนวคิดทางสังคมวิทยาในการวิเคราะห์ บทความนี้จึงนำกรอบแนวคิด “การแพร่กระจายนวัตกรรม” ของ Wejnert (2002) มาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์สถานะของภิกษุณีในฐานะนวัตกรรมใหม่ในสังคมไทย แม้ภิกษุณีเคยมีอยู่ในอดีต การกลับมาของภิกษุณีในสังคมไทยปัจจุบันนับเป็นแนวคิดใหม่ การใช้กรอบนี้ช่วยให้เห็นภาพการยอมรับนวัตกรรมนี้ตามบริบทแวดล้อม ลักษณะของผู้ริเริ่ม (ภิกษุณี) และขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวของภิกษุณี ข้อมูลจากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมและการสัมภาษณ์ถูกวิเคราะห์โดยอิงกรอบแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ที่สัมพันธ์กับขบวนการภิกษุณี รวมถึงประเด็นด้านกฎหมาย เพศ และปัญหาสังคม

ผลการศึกษา: จากการศึกษาพบว่าสถานะของภิกษุณีในพุทธศาสนาไทยยังไม่แน่นอน มีการเปลี่ยนแปลง และบางครั้งถูกเข้าใจผิด อย่างไรก็ตาม ภิกษุณียังคงมุ่งมั่นและมีบทบาทในกิจกรรมต่าง ๆ ที่ทำอย่างต่อเนื่อง ปัญหาด้านกฎหมายในอดีตดูเหมือนจะไม่ส่งผลกระทบต่ออย่างมีนัยสำคัญในปัจจุบัน เพราะรัฐธรรมนูญให้การคุ้มครองสิทธิพื้นฐานของภิกษุณี แม้ภิกษุณีจะอยู่ในสถานะไม่เป็นทางการและนอกระบบชายเป็นใหญ่ แต่ยังมีอิสระในการขับเคลื่อนงานทางสังคมตามเห็นสมควร อีกทั้งยังได้รับสิทธิ เช่น การลงคะแนนเสียงเลือกตั้ง ซึ่งพระภิกษุชายไม่มี ในบางครั้ง ภิกษุณีอาจถูกเข้าใจผิดว่าเป็นนักเคลื่อนไหวเฟมินิสต์ทางศาสนา ทั้งที่จริงแล้ว ภิกษุณีเพียงปฏิบัติตามจิตและคำสอนทางธรรมมากกว่า นอกจากนี้ข้อโต้แย้งเกี่ยวกับความชอบธรรมทางศาสนาไม่ส่งผลกระทบต่อสถานะปัจจุบันของภิกษุณี เพราะภิกษุณีได้ปรากฏตัวและดำรงอยู่ในสังคมแล้ว วรรณกรรมและการสัมภาษณ์แสดงว่า ได้รับการยอมรับในระดับชุมชนท้องถิ่นจากประชาชนและพระภิกษุบางส่วน และมีบทบาทสำคัญในประเพณีของพุทธศาสนา เช่น การบิณฑบาตในตอนเช้า

การประยุกต์ใช้: บทความนี้ได้ก้าวข้ามจากการอภิปรายในอดีตเกี่ยวกับความถูกต้องของการบวชภิกษุณีในประเทศไทย มาสู่การวิเคราะห์สถานะของภิกษุณีในฐานะผู้หญิงในบริบทพุทธศาสนาไทย และมองถึงความขัดแย้งระหว่างความคิดเห็นของผู้อื่นกับบทบาทของภิกษุณี โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดทางสังคมวิทยาเรื่อง ‘การแพร่กระจายนวัตกรรม’ มาประยุกต์ในการวิเคราะห์ภิกษุณีในไทยเป็นครั้งแรก ซึ่งทำให้เข้าใจบริบทต่าง ๆ ที่ส่งผลต่อสถานะของภิกษุณีได้ลึกซึ้งขึ้น หากมองการบวชภิกษุณีว่าเป็นนวัตกรรมหนึ่งของสังคมไทย จะช่วยให้เข้าใจถึงผลกระทบและความหมายในวงกว้างมากขึ้น ดังนั้นงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จึงเหมาะสำหรับผู้ประสงค์จะทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับขบวนการภิกษุณีให้ลึกซึ้งยิ่งขึ้น ไม่ว่าจะเป็นพระสงฆ์ องค์การทางศาสนา หรือนักวิชาการ งานวิจัยในอนาคตควรมองภิกษุณีไม่ใช่แค่เรื่องขัดแย้งทางสังคมหรือศาสนา แต่เป็นขบวนการทางสังคมที่มีอยู่จริง ไม่ว่ามีผู้สนับสนุนหรือไม่

บทสรุป: กรอบแนวคิดนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่า ปัจจัยแวดล้อม ลักษณะของภิกษุณีในฐานะนวัตกรรม และคุณลักษณะส่วนบุคคลล้วนส่งผลต่อสถานะของภิกษุณีในสังคมไทยทั้งเชิงบวกและลบ ข้อสรุปที่ได้จากงานวิจัยนี้คือ แม้จะมีการถกเถียงและข้อโต้แย้ง แต่ภิกษุณีไม่ใช่ นักเคลื่อนไหวทางสิทธิสตรี แต่เป็นเพียงผู้หญิงที่เดินตามแนวทางพุทธศาสนาและเรียกร้องพื้นที่ของตนเองในศาสนา ภิกษุณีอาจเสียเปรียบในสังคมที่มีโครงสร้างแบบชายเป็นใหญ่ แต่ก็ยังมีบทบาทสำคัญในชุมชนที่อาศัยอยู่ แทนที่จะมองภิกษุณีในแง่ของการเคลื่อนไหวหรือความขัดแย้ง ควรมองถึงการมีอยู่และการปฏิบัติหน้าที่ของภิกษุณี แม้จะมีข้อขัดแย้งหรือการตีความหลากหลาย ภิกษุณียังคงดำรงอยู่ และปฏิบัติหน้าที่ในฐานะนักบวชตามศักยภาพของตนต่อไป

Introduction

‘What does womanhood matter at all
When the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.’

(Bhikkhuni Soma, Samite Nikaya, SN 5.2, 1997)

The discussion around women in Thai Buddhism pervades far into the realms of law, religious practice, gender equality, culture, and society. Theravada nuns, also known as *bhikkhuni* or ภิกษุณี (bhikṣuṇī) in the Thai language, are said to have ceased to exist by the 12th or 13th centuries (Crosby, 2014 : 218), and history shows that there was never a nun order in Thailand (Kabilsingh, 1998 : 40). The closest alternative to female ordination in contemporary Thai Buddhism is being a แม่ชี (Mae Chi)¹, but they follow only 8–10 religious precepts as compared to 311 that nuns follow and are not regarded as fully ordained monastic members (Seeger, 2010b : 1). In this respect, they remain at a level inconsistent to monks, and do not enjoy the same advantages or social status that accompanies being a monk (Seeger, 2010b : 1). Because of the lack of female ordination in Thai history, the female status in relation to bhikkhunis in Thai Buddhism has received much attention and controversy (see Kabilsingh, 1998; Seeger, 2008; Seeger, 2010b). However, in English literature, almost no research employs the use of a sociological conceptual framework to analyse the debates over women in Thai Buddhism. Moreover, much of the controversy existing in the literature surrounds only the legitimacy of the Bhikkhuni, and has yet to examine their status and presence in spite of this. To address this gap, through literature review and an interview, this paper aims to explore the various arguments and topics surrounding the status of the bhikkhuni as women in Thai Buddhism, through Wejnert (2002)’s conceptual framework of Diffusion of Innovations, in order to expand the discussion around the bhikkhuni’s status.

1. Background

The Contemporary Bhikkhuni and The Story of the Original Bhikkhuni in History

In more modern times, the contemporary revival of the bhikkhuni tradition can be traced back to 1996 and 1998 when Sri Lankan women received ordinations to become bhikkhuni (Ito, 2012 : 56). Not long after this, a former Thai professor, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh made the journey to Sri Lanka in 2001 to ordain as a novice female monk (*samaneri*) (Yavaprabhas, 2018 : 31). After an additional 2 years, she returned for full ordination and became the Dhammananda Bhikkhuni that we know today (see Kabilsingh, 2016). However, along with this establishment of the bhikkhuni tradition in Thailand, much controversy around their movement exists.

Moving back in history, to understand bhikkhuni in a Thai context, we must first understand them from a historical viewpoint. According to the Buddhist canonical text Cūlavagga, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama’s aunt is to be credited with the influence and motivation to allow for women to ordain as nuns (Owen, 1998 : 13). According to Bhikkhu Sujato (2018)’s translation of Gotamī Sutta (AN 8:51), on three occasions Mahāprajāpatī requested from the Buddha to be allowed to ordain and seek enlightenment, and on each occasion, she was denied by him. The translation explains that at the time, the Buddha resided in Kapilavatthu, and when he had deemed his residence sufficient, he ventured on to Vesālī. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī subsequently shaved her head and bore robes of ochre

¹ These are often mistranslated as ‘nuns’, as this word in Thai is used to describe Catholic nuns. However, in Buddhist terms, this paper will treat nuns as ‘female monks’ and Mae Chi using romanised English for the Thai word.

colour, and with a group of other brave women, followed the Buddha to Vesāli. At the gates to the Great Woods to where the Buddha then resided, she cried, standing in poor physical condition. Ananda, a venerable cousin of Buddha, saw Mahāprajāpatī and the ladies who followed her and questioned her purpose of visit and her poor condition. Upon learning of her wish to ordain, Ananda took it upon himself to ask the Buddha one last time to allow her and the other women to ordain. He initially declined, but Ananda changed his tactic and questioned whether women were equally capable of achieving enlightenment. To which, the Buddha conceded that they were, and after consideration and on the condition that Mahāprajāpatī would accept the subordination of nuns to monks and his terms, Mahāprajāpatī became the first nun. The significance of the story found within the Gotamī Sutta points to the equal capacity between men and women to achieve spiritual enlightenment by ordaining, and is a base foundation for the contemporary status of women in Thai Buddhism.

2. Research Problem & Gap

Consequently, some questions arise from this: if women are indeed capable of such enlightenment, why are they not recognized, and why are they somewhat discouraged in modern Thai Buddhism? What controversy exists because of Thai bhikkhuni, and how legitimate are these arguments? Little research has examined the status of bhikkhuni through different aspects that affect them, such as law, gender, and religious practice impact their status. These points raise important questions, which underpin the objectives of this research.

Research Objectives

According to the introduction and background, two objectives have been identified:

1. To examine the status of the bhikkhuni and female ordination in Thailand through various aspects such as law, gender, and religious practice.
2. To investigate the role and position women inhabit within the framework of Thai and Thai Buddhist society.

These objectives are thought of collectively to gain a better understanding of women's status in Thai Buddhism and thus form a more objective opinion of said status with a specific focus on bhikkhuni ordination. It is hypothesized that not only because of historical factors allowing females to ordain but also the fact that Theravada nuns became extinct, there will be both factors for and against female ordination, making it difficult to ascertain the status of women in Thai Buddhism.

Research Methods

1. Resource Collection

This study uses a qualitative approach through the use of a framework analysis. The main methods used for this paper are through literature review as well as primary sources. Concerning the scope of the documents used for the study, the literature was analyzed according to the themes discussed: law, gender, and religious practice.

For the main primary source, Venerable Dhammananda of the Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Thailand was interviewed in a semi-structured Q&A session on April 29, 2023, during a visit to the temple. Firstly, the main questions used in the session will be presented and followed by the conceptual framework used in this study. Prior to preparing this paper for publication, a confirmation of consent was received from the Venerable Dhammananda and her temple.

2. Interview Questions

Table 1 Outline of Questions Used in Semi-Structured Interview With Venerable Dhammananda

| Question Number | Question |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. | To what extent are bhikkhuni in Thailand important to the gender equality movement? |
| 2. | Do bhikkhuni have any local problems? |
| 3. | Can you speak to the official status of bhikkhuni in Thailand? |

As this Q&A session was semi-structured, these questions only served as a guide or a theme to what was asked, as more interesting points were revealed through the course of the discussion. The idea was to understand the bhikkhuni movement as the bhikkhuni understand it, and not just how scholars, as sceptics, view them. To fully understand this, questions were designed to understand their status as both local and national entities, and the nature of their movement as well.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is the de facto leader of the bhikkhuni movement in Thailand, as she was the one to reignite the bhikkhuni tradition in Thailand, being the first Thai bhikkhuni to receive higher ordination. While currently over 285 bhikkhunis exist in Thailand (Ven. Dhammananda, 2019), it is because of the Venerable Dhammananda that the movement has spread so far and that it has gained much recognition. Moreover, as a former professor of Buddhist studies, she has valuable insight as an academic to be able to give informative answers for this interview. For these reasons, her input was important and beneficial for the research questions of this study.

3. Analysis and Rationale

This paper aims to set itself apart from other papers in the field by using an unconventional approach, the use of a sociological conceptual framework. Despite gender being a clear component of religion, it exists as an underrepresented component of sociological inquiry of religion (Avishai, 2015 : 5–7). The use of any sociological conceptual framework to investigate the status of women in Thai Buddhism would also appear to be rare in the literature. Through a sociological lens, we can reframe the discussion of the bhikkhuni from their validity as religious practitioners to examining their status based on their existence and participation in society.

As the study involves an interview, the framework serves as a useful tool to analyse the information provided in multiple different facets. In doing so, it was hoped to avoid particular bias, which some existing papers show by giving one particular stance on the bhikkhuni debate. Because of this, Wejnert (2002)'s framework on the Diffusion of Innovations was used, and Table 2 outlines its main points.

Table 2 Breakdown of Wejnert (2002)'s Conceptual Framework on Innovation

| Characteristic | Relevant Factors & Explanation |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Characteristics of Innovations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public vs. Private Consequences ● Benefits vs. Costs |
| Characteristics of Innovators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Societal Entity ● Familiarity with the Entity ● Status Characteristics ● Socioeconomic Characteristics ● Position in Social Networks ● Personal Characteristics |

Table 2 Breakdown of Wejnert (2002)'s Conceptual Framework on Innovation (cont.)

| Characteristic | Relevant Factors & Explanation |
|-----------------------|--|
| Environmental Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Geographical Settings ● Societal Culture ● Political Conditions ● Global Uniformity |

The goal of the framework is to attribute the factors to which an innovation diffuses or spreads throughout society. For this paper, the target innovation is the status of women in Buddhism, specifically the (non) acceptance of female ordination. This is because the concept of bhikkhuni in Thailand is relatively new, as the ordination of Venerable Dhammananda occurred just less than 25 years ago. Therefore, the framework is thus ideal for the analysis of the bhikkhuni, as its purpose is specifically to analyse innovations as opposed to other sociological frameworks and theories. The status of women in Buddhism is complex and requires in-depth analysis, with debates surrounding the validity of bhikkhuni ordination (innovation), the religious capacity of women being debated (innovators), and the social and political factors, such as government and the Thai Sangha, that influence these factors. The goal is to examine existing arguments on both sides of the debate around bhikkhuni to gain a clearer understanding of their status. The following three subsections explain each part of the framework, and the explanations are all drawn from Wejnert's paper.

4. Characteristics of Innovations

The innovation in question is the bhikkhuni and their movement to bring back the bhikkhuni order in Thailand. 'Public vs. Private Consequences' refers to the effect (s) that the innovation may occur in relation to other parties as a result of the innovation (the bhikkhuni movement) and effects on the innovator themselves (the bhikkhuni). Moreover, 'Benefits Vs. Costs' indicate those issues or benefits which occur because of the innovation (the bhikkhuni movement), and these could be both financial or non-financial in nature.

5. Characteristics of Innovators

The 'Social Entity' of the innovators (the bhikkhuni) refers to their existence within Thai society, and how this existence influences the diffusion and acceptance of their innovation (the bhikkhuni movement). As Wejnert explains, important factors regarding 'Social Entity' are the size of the innovator groups (small or big), their relationship with society, as well as the type of interactions which occur between the bhikkhuni and greater society. Moreover, 'Familiarity With The Entity' encompasses to what extent the innovation is radical and how familiar the target social group is with it. For example, how familiar Thai society is with the bhikkhuni, and how radical this concept is to them. 'Status Characteristics' of the innovators involve those features of the innovators that may influence the adoption of the innovation. For example, if the bhikkhuni were members of parliament, how different would their movement's success be compared to if they were not? On the other side of this, 'Socioeconomic Characteristics' of the innovator refers to those economic and sociodemographic features which affect the bhikkhunis' success in their movement. For example, are the bhikkhuni financially able to promote their movement, and how does their education influence this? 'Position in Social Networks' refers to the relationship of the actors (bhikkhuni) in regard to other social entities and how this may influence the conveyance of information and affect the adoption of the innovation. Finally, 'Personal Characteristics' refer to features the bhikkhuni possess which may influence the acceptance of their movement. For example, their persevering nature to not give up their cause could influence the acceptance of it by others who eventually come to accept it.

6. Environmental Context

The 'Environmental Context' refers to the surrounding environment of the innovation and the innovators. In other words, how does the environment the bhikkhuni exist in affect the acceptance of their existence? 'Geographical Settings' would refer to those factors in Thailand where the bhikkhuni exist, both on a national and local level, and how this could be relevant to Thai people who have yet to accept the bhikkhuni. 'Societal Culture' refers to the dominant belief systems which may influence the acceptance of the bhikkhuni. For example, does the Thai Sangha and its non-recognition of bhikkhuni impact their status? 'Political Conditions', on the other hand, refer to any effects that Thailand's political and legal system could have on the (non) acceptance of the bhikkhuni and their cause. Finally, 'Global Uniformity' treats the world as one community, affected by structured and systematic change based on three variables: institutionalisation, global technology, and communicative connections such as media. For example, does the formal foundation of bhikkhuni lineages (in and outside of Thailand) affect the acceptance and recognition of their movement? Does technology play a part in this? How does the existence of media promote the diffusion of the bhikkhuni cause? These are just some considerations which are important to consider.

Research Results

1. Analysis by Literature Review

1.1 Law and Regulation

The Sangha Act of 1928 affirms that the allowing of women to become bhikkhuni opposes the Thai Sangha, and Thai penal law prohibits those who wear robes but have not been officially ordained (Battaglia, 2015 : 29). To understand the law, the Thai Sangha regulations, their application and its current day status as well as the case of Chongdee and Sara, Thailand's first bhikkhuni must be discussed. In 1927, with the pressure and support of their father, the two girls ordained as novice nuns (Kabilsingh, 1998 : 41–42). However, their ordination was not valid as it was only carried out by monks, and consequently, through demands of the Thai Sangha, which then became the government's responsibility, the two were arrested and initially forced to disrobe (Kabilsingh 1998 : 42).

The monastic rule which invalidated the ordination of Chongdee and Sara has never been repealed and still is in effect to this very day (Department of Religious Affairs, Thailand, 1928 : 157 : Crosby, 2014 : 227). An expression of legal struggles in a contemporary context is the higher bhikkhuni ordination held in Thailand. In 2014, bhikkhuni ordination was conducted at the Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama (Yavaprabhas, 2022 : 147). The Supreme Sangha Council who greatly opposed this, reaffirmed the 1928 Sangha Act and said that such ordinations held no validity and dictated that they should not occur within the country (Yavaprabhas, 2022 : 147). In addition, they called upon the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to only provide visas to those bhikkhus and bhikkhuni coming for the ordination with official approval only from the Supreme Sangha Council (Yavaprabhas, 2022). This is a clear example of how officially, bhikkhuni have been opposed by the dominant Buddhist institution in Thailand.

On the other side of this discussion, the current Thai constitution expresses that both men and women must be treated equally, and that all Thai people have the right to freedom to practice a religion, in the way they wish to, provided that their practices do not pose security issues, poor morals and respect public order (The Secretariat of the Senate, 2017 : 9). As such, the argument that bhikkhuni ordination and its establishment of a Bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand is argued as a right under the constitution for the freedom to practice religion (Seeger, 2008 : 160). However, the existence of constitutional law and the preservation of Buddhist scriptures and traditions would seem to be at odds, since a defining feature of Theravada Buddhism is its conservatism by preserving original texts and practices (Seeger, 2010a : 90).

Particularly, it has been argued that the creation of constitutional law is by unenlightened people vs. the Buddhist canonical law which is by Buddha, a divine being and thus carrying more authority (Seeger, 2010a : 65). Such arguments would disagree with the acceptance of the bhikkhuni.

1.2 Gender Equality and Religion

Compared to other South, and East Asian countries, Thai women are thought of as having achieved a higher level of gender equality in some aspects of society (Falk, 2008 : 96). However, under the realm of religion within a societal framework, Thai women are expected to marry and birth children, and men who pursue ordination are praised, whereas women are seen as going against traditional values (Seeger, 2010b : 558). However, it is important to differentiate between cultural perception, teachings from scripture, as well as teachings endorsed by living people (monks and spiritual professionals). Using the Tripitaka as an example, consider Figure 1.

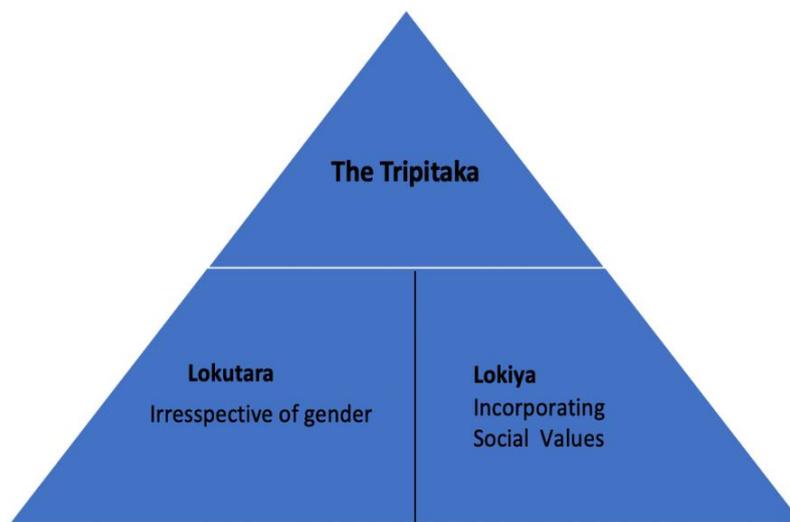


Figure 1 Framework of Tripitaka as per the Idea of Gender Equality Based on Chatsumarn Kabilsingh
(Source: Kabilsingh, 1998 : 22)

According to Kabilsingh (1998 : 22), the Lokuttara portion of the Tripitaka refers to 'dharma and mental freedom' which are universal amongst genders. However, the Lokiya is written based on two ideals: historical Indian society and Buddhist Spirit which promotes and supports women in their spiritual and societal liberation (Kabilsingh, 1998). Examples of these conflicting views include the written belief that women can achieve enlightenment, but also a simultaneous lack of support for women. Many more examples exist of the conflicting views in the Tripitaka, but Kabilsingh (1998) argues that we must examine each part carefully and consider the important point which is the difference in views and the reasons for them, i.e., the difference in social values in ancient India.

Consequently, much like the split in values amongst Buddhist scripture, a parallel is to be drawn among the split in values amongst existing literature on the subject. In the context of the introduction of bhikkhunis in Thailand, because men carry out all social duties within (Thai) Buddhism (Tomalin, 2006 : 389; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2005 : 48), a patriarchal framework within religion and society is established and it is argued that the introduction of a Bhikkhuni Sangha could help rebalance the scales and promote gender equality (Tomalin, 2006 : 385). However, the patriarchal undertone of Theravada Buddhism also pervades modern discourse around women in Buddhism. Consider the following words of a monk from a Bangkok temple:

Women are the gender with little merit: they cannot be ordained and are not able to attain awakening. For these reasons, they have to create a lot of merit and make a vow so that they can be reborn as a man in their next life. Then they will be able to become ordained and achieve awakening and be free from suffering [dukkha].

(Prapapornpipat, 2005 : 37-38; Seeger, 2010a : 559)

This quotation contradicts the words of the Buddha, which believe in the equal opportunity of both men and women to achieve spiritual enlightenment. In this case, it would seem that we should separate Buddhism from Thai Buddhism and examine its influence on gender status in Thailand. Moreover, Yavaprabhas (2018 : 20) introduces two groups of scholars: those who believe that Buddhism is patriarchal and thus causes an inequality amongst women and men in Thailand (see Wongthet, 2015), and those who believe that this inequality is not Buddhist but rather a result of local beliefs (see Kabil Singh, 1991). However, it would seem that the two can not be separated because of examples such as the quote above, whereby some monks promote ideas that do not support the spiritual enlightenment of women.

Other examples include the frequent appearance of women as barriers to men achieving enlightenment in temple murals (Seeger, 2010b : 559) as well as the long-established teaching that being born as a woman is because of previous wrong doings in past-lives (Van Esterik, 2000 : 67). As can be seen, in contemporary discourses there is a conflict between women becoming bhikkhuni, promoting gender equality and the established idea that women inhabit social positions which are socially and religiously inferior.

When comparing to other countries such as Sri Lanka, where the Theravada Bhikkhuni lineage was restarted, a lack of recognition of them is recorded, but they are not blocked from ordaining. Despite issues with recognition, bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka have achieved more acceptance from the local government and Buddhist organisations, and also carry out a lot of social work for lay people (see Phanthanaphruet, 2024). For example, they offer aid for social issues such as domestic violence, drug abuse, and poverty (Phanthanaphruet, 2024 : 46). It is clear that there is much opportunity for the bhikkhuni to carry out important work as female practitioners of Buddhism.

1.3 Religious Practice – Conservatism and Liberalism at Odds

However, gender equality is not the sole issue when discussing female ordination in Thailand (Bhikku Analyo, 2013 : 315). Bhikku Analyo (2013 : 316) notes that if a woman were to ordain as a Mahayana Bhikkhuni and carry out monastic duties, then no objections would be made, as it would be in the name of Mahayana Buddhism. This statement seems consistent, as the Venerable Dhammananda's mother was the first Mahayana Bhikkhuni in Thailand, and while she did eventually amass many supporters, she had no followers (Falk, 2008 : 99–100). From this perspective, we can see issues with the Benefits vs. Costs of the innovation (bhikkhuni movement), in the sense that people see the benefit of bhikkhuni having supported Venerable Dhammananda's mother, but the cost as in the logistical issue of the bhikkhuni ordination.

Consequently, of core significance to the bhikkhuni controversy is the legitimacy of their status surrounding their ordination into the Theravada order. On a basic level, it is argued that in order for a nun in the Theravada order to be ordained, she must be ordained by both monks and other nuns, and because there is no living established nun order in Thailand, this renders the ordination process impossible, at least in Thailand (Seeger, 2008 : 119). However, women choosing to ordain often go to Sri Lanka, like Venerable Dhammananda, Thailand's first Theravada Bhikkhuni, who sought a higher ordination there in 2003 after her initial novice ordination in 2001 (Seeger, 2008 : 155). This was after the East

Asian Dharmaguptaka lineage of nuns joined hands with Theravada monks in Sri Lanka in 1996 to reignite the Theravada bhikkhuni lineage (Crosby, 2014 : 226). One controversy arising from this is the tradition that Theravada ordinations must be carried out in Pali because any imperfections in 'ordination formulae' causes the process to be invalidated, and because the Dharmaguptaka lineage uses another language, it is thus argued to be an inauthentic process (Seeger, 2008 : 163).

Another argument mentioned by Seeger (2008 : 162-163) is that because the lineage which Ven. Dhammananda bases her ordination on a different *vinaya* (monastic regulations) from Theravada, it includes different moral values and understanding of the dhamma. This then incites a state of incongruous '*nanasamavasa*', rendering ordination impossible. Conversely, it is also argued that the Dharmaguptaka lineage is actually a subset of Theravada Buddhism (Kabilsingh, 1991), as it was transmitted to China via Sri Lanka before the Theravada order in Sri Lanka died out (Bhikku Analyo, 2013 : 313). Despite small differences in the *vinaya* codes of the two lineages, neither lineage suggests a split Sangha, and thus it is argued that canonically speaking, ordination with help from Dharmaguptaka is permitted (Crosby, 2014 : 226). Consequently, there is a clear difference between traditionalists who conservatively stick to Theravada belief and understanding, and liberalists who posit that a Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination is possible, as it is ultimately not opposing Theravada values.

2. Analysis by Interview With Venerable Dhammananda

After interviewing Venerable Dhammananda in a question-and-answer session, several themes arose, which provoked thought-provoking discussion over the status of women in Thai Buddhism.

2.1 Gender Equality and Bhikkhunis

When asked whether she thought the bhikkhuni in Thailand were important to the gender equality movement, which often underpins their controversy, Venerable Dhammananda responded: '[my ordination] is to answer to my responsibility from Buddha. If I have faith, I must preserve what he established. It is by duty, not right' (Venerable Dhammananda, April 29th, 2023). However, an interview conducted by Battaglia (2015 : 45) with a mae chi revealed that some think of Ven Dhammananda's efforts to achieve spiritual rights for women were instead 'politically motivated, not spiritually motivated'. Therefore, it would seem there is a disconnect between the motives behind what others think Ven. Dhammananda's efforts are about, and her order of nuns, as opposed to what the actual situation is.

2.2 Bhikkhuni Contribution to Society and Social Status

When asked whether locally, Ven. Dhammananda and her monastery had had any issues, she replied that there had been none. Further to this, she informed that local lay people will give alms to her and that monks come to assist in the recitation of scripture, as per their duty, and provide their support despite official denunciation of the bhikkhuni order. It was noted that other Thai bhikkhuni temples also go on alms rounds (Yavaprabhas, 2022 : 153). Moreover, for those not willing to overcome bias or listen to her side of the story, she says, 'we don't waste our time on them' (Venerable Dhammananda, April 29th, 2023). She also mentions, 'It is in their text that they have to teach bhikkhuni, but when they recite it, which is twice a month, they say there are no bhikkhuni to assist' (ibid.). From this perspective, it would seem that in an unofficial capacity, the bhikkhuni are accepted and supported by some monks and locals.

Furthermore, Ven. Dhammananda also spoke as to why she did not become a mae chi, despite some scholars seeing it as a better alternative to being a bhikkhuni (Seeger, 2010b : 557). Her response was, 'I don't look for easier. I don't ordain to be accepted' (Venerable Dhammananda, April 29th, 2023). She does, however, recognise their contributions to Thai society. In her view, these women are not ordained and are only women who wish to lead religious lives, following fewer precepts. Consequently, in this way, given her previous answer, by becoming a mae chi, she could not achieve her

own path to spiritual advancement as prescribed by her ‘duty to Buddha’. Additionally, as a part of her platform, Ven. Dhammananda advocates for a socially engaged Buddhism. She talked about many projects that the monastery is involved in, including ‘eco-temples’, helping female inmates in prison, and the management of an orphanage school.

2.3 Official Status

On the topic of their status in Thai society, the Venerable Dhammananda said:

The existing members of the Elder Council will not speak on this issue. However, it is good to be outside [the system] and have freedom. The monks themselves are not happy under the Sangha. Sometimes, to be accepted is not always good.

(Venerable Dhammananda, personal communication, April 29th, 2023)

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and her order of nuns do not push to be a part of the official Thai Buddhist institution because she and her monastery enjoy freedom. An example of this, provided by one of her other nuns, was that because bhikkhunis have no official status, they are sometimes afforded the right to vote in national elections. Male monks, on the other hand, are absolutely not permitted to do so according to the law (Larsson, 2016 : 19). In one way, the unofficial status leaves bhikkhunis and women in Thai Buddhism unrecognized and underappreciated. However, in another sense, it also affords them privileges which even monks do not receive, such as voting and freedom outside the bureaucratic framework of the Thai Sangha.

2.4 Results Summary

Table 3 Basic Summary of Literature Review Results

| Aspect | Result |
|--|--|
| Law and Regulation | The Sangha Act of 1928 forbids bhikkhuni to ordain, but the constitution allows freedom of religion. |
| Gender Equality and Religion | There is a conflict between women becoming bhikkhuni, promoting gender equality and the established idea that women inhabit social positions which are socially and religiously inferior. |
| Religious Practice – Conservatism and Liberalism at Odds | There’s a contrast between conservatists who recite scripture and rules surrounding ordination to argue that the bhikkhuni are invalid, and liberalists who argue bhikkhuni ordination is valid. |

Table 4 Basic Summary of Interview Results

| Aspect | Result |
|---|--|
| Gender Equality and Bhikkhunis | Venerable Dhammananda explains that their duty is religious. The literature occasionally views the bhikkhuni as politically motivated. |
| Bhikkhuni Contribution to Society and Social Status | The bhikkhuni are supported locally both by monks and lay people, carry out important charitable work and are not concerned with those who do not accept them. |
| Official Status | The unofficial status of bhikkhuni affords them freedom to pursue work they wish to pursue as well as the right to vote. |

Tables 3 and 4 outline basic summaries of the results from both the literature review and the interview with the Venerable Dhammananda. Table 3 shows that despite Sangha regulations, the constitution allows the bhikkhuni to exist unofficially, as is their right to express their religion. However, there is a contrast between women becoming bhikkhuni, Buddhist scriptures both supporting and not supporting women, and certain androcentric teachings and beliefs within Thai Buddhism that hinder them. This is accompanied by a contrast between conservatists and liberalists who disagree over the legitimacy of the bhikkhuni ordination. Concerning the interview, Venerable Dhammananda's answers highlighted a contrast in that some would appear to view the bhikkhuni movement as political, but she affirms it is out of religious duty. Interestingly, it is revealed that bhikkhuni receive local recognition, and their lack of official status means they are free to pursue charitable work they are interested in and gain certain freedoms, such as the occasional right to vote.

Discussion

1. Discussion of the Literature Review

1.1 Law and Regulation

Whilst the discussion of the bhikkhuni's legality is important in both research and real life, it excludes how occasionally such issues go beyond legality. Rather, it seems that there is a lack of willingness to accept their existence, which in turn affects their legal and official status as nuns. As such, the religious arguments which speak to the legality of the bhikkhuni appear to be lacking base, because to this day, there are at least 285 bhikkhunis spreading to as many as 30 provinces in Thailand (Ven. Dhammananda, 2019). Moreover, despite previous government opposition to bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand, and a report to the Council of Elders made by the governor of Nakhon Pathom (Ven. Dhammananda 2019), it would seem the bhikkhunis have been able to live relatively freely according to their religious practices. This can be based simply on the numbers and testimony provided by the Venerable Dhammananda and the increasing number of bhikkhuni within the country.

From this perspective, it may initially seem that 'Environmental Context' and 'Political Context' provide barriers to the legal acknowledgement of both the government and the Thai Theravada Buddhist institution because of a lack of willingness to give recognition to the bhikkhuni. However, because bhikkhuni are able to practice their religion somewhat freely in accordance with religious freedoms under the constitution, the lack of legal recognition would appear to be more of a direct impact from 'Societal Culture'. This thus impacts the political and environmental contexts, barring the wider participation of Thai bhikkhunis in Thai Buddhism. In addition, this can be further evidenced by Ven. Dhammananda (2019)'s previous efforts and interactions with the Thai government and their interactions with the Buddhist Council. According to her, they have not considered reports, investigations, and arguments to accept their introduction into Thai society and instead recite the Thai Sangha law without any further consideration. The 1928 regulation, which put Sara and Chongdee behind bars, does not seem to provide the same limitations to bhikkhunis in a modern age, but its continuing existence points to the social factors that support its maintenance. The framework would suggest that while historical law and rule may exist, contemporary trends have allowed the bhikkhuni a more secure, yet unofficial status as Innovators of the bhikkhuni calling.

1.2 Gender Equality and Religion

In terms of the conceptual framework, 'Characteristics of Innovators' and the 'Environmental Context' must be examined, whereby the 'Environmental Context' is the patriarchal social and religious framework in which the innovators exist.

As a 'Societal Entity', women seek equality in many domains, and of course, within Buddhism. One way in which they do this is through ordination and the attempt to be accepted through this practice. While women are a large group forming half of any given country, their relationship to Thai society, as well as the religious authorities in it, puts them at a disadvantaged position to achieve that equality. Moreover, not all women would necessarily agree with the introduction of the bhikkhuni order for other reasons, such as the logistical issues mentioned later, which means the actual scale of those women who are bhikkhuni or support them is possibly less than one would consider. Both 'Status Characteristics' and 'Position in Social Networks' also contribute to the status of bhikkhuni because of the downgraded positions in Thai Buddhism that women are assigned by society, and the unofficial status of the bhikkhuni that arises from this affects their movement. From the 'Environmental Context', we can see that the status of both lay women and women who are bhikkhuni is impacted by the 'Societal Culture' which does not necessarily understand or accept the higher ordination of women.

However, interestingly, when we examine Buddhist movements as actors in the bhikkhuni movement, we can see that 'Global Uniformity' and 'Position in Social Networks' also impact the status of bhikkhuni and women seeking spiritual enlightenment in Thailand. This is because Buddhist movements such as *Sakyadhita* are said to contribute to the starting of the bhikkhuni tradition in Thailand and were a factor in the revival of bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka (Yavaprabhas, 2018 : 31). Moreover, the Thai Sangha is slowly losing its authority due to scandals and disagreements within its group (Yavaprabhas, 2018 : 32; see McCargo, 2012) and concurrently, women have been achieving more significant parts in religion and regard from society (see Seeger, 2009). Consequently, this is also said as a reason for the emergence of the bhikkhuni (Yavaprabhas, 2018 : 32). In an 'Environmental Context', it seems that a shift in the 'Political Conditions' and recent 'Societal Culture' in Thailand has also allowed for a status shift of both women and bhikkhuni, as they are able to gain more respect and regard than previously, because of social changes. Finally, a lack of 'Familiarity With The Entity' (the ordination of women) in Thai society may also be a factor opposing the acceptance and advancement of women within Thai Buddhism, as there has never been a bhikkhuni order in Thai history (Kabilsingh, 1998). In some sense, there is a parallel that can be drawn about the conflicting teachings in the Tripitaka as a reflection of ancient Indian society and the values existing in a contemporary setting in Thailand today.

The conceptual framework highlights the ever-changing status of women in Thai Buddhism, and reflects their status of being in a limbo. As they try to push forward with their religious and spiritual advancements, and achieve this to some extent with Buddhist movements and capitalising on recent social changes in Thailand, they are met by social values from both original Buddhist scripture and Thai society. These, in turn, act as barriers in their path to spiritual enlightenment as well as the acceptance of their existence and movement.

1.3 Religious Practice – Conservatism and Liberalism at Odds

Under the conceptual framework, it is the 'Environmental Context' which explains the status of women in relation to female ordination. The 'Political Culture' here, as well as 'Societal Culture', refers to the philosophical debate over the legitimacy of bhikkhuni ordination abroad and how scholars both argue that is valid and invalid. Moreover, 'Geographical Setting' is also relevant here as the full ordination for bhikkhuni must be completed abroad, using nuns from another lineage, which underlines the unrecognised status of the Thai bhikkhuni. This adds to the unofficial status of Thai bhikkhuni in Thailand, who have to ordain in other countries. As 'Social Entities', this geographic element means that the bhikkhuni exist outside the official framework of Thai Buddhism, and the scholarly debates impose and establish this uncertain, controversial position upon them within Thai society. However, an important point is that while the legitimacy of the status of Thai Theravada bhikkhuni is caught between the debate of scholars and religious leaders alike, the bhikkhuni and their followers do exist as societal entities in Thailand, and stick strong to their beliefs. Whilst impacts exist from the

'Environmental Context' surrounding their legitimacy, their status is rather that they have found a way to exist irrespective of the debates. Their 'Personal Characteristics' thus include their own self-acceptance and determination as they chose to follow the monastic path, and their own convictions which exist in spite of the controversy. Whilst legitimacy is an important status characteristic debated by many, it fails to capture the true status of the bhikkhuni, and whether legitimate or not, goes beyond the discussion of rules and into the perseverance for their cause, as innovators.

2. Discussion of the Interview

2.1 Gender Equality and Bhikkhunis

According to the conceptual framework, 'Characteristics of Innovators' and 'Innovations' must be considered. Firstly, as an innovator and a leader of the bhikkhuni movement, as well as a representative of the bhikkhuni 'Social Entity', Venerable Dhammananda is misunderstood as a politically motivated women's rights activist lacking the Buddhist principles needed to fulfil such a role. As she is the de facto leader of the bhikkhuni movement in Thailand, her 'Personal Characteristics' are affected by this view, as there seems to be this understanding that she is an activist, not a spiritual leader. Furthermore, whilst women such as Venerable Dhammananda are able to practice as ordained nuns as a 'Private Benefit', the 'Public Consequence' is that some people may have misinterpreted or may be misinterpreting the Bhikkhuni movement as solely a politically based gender equality movement (see Owen, 1998). In reality, the goal of Venerable Dhammananda and her following would appear not out of political justification but solely out of religious duty. Therefore, concerning the status of women in Thai Buddhism, despite those individuals who want to pursue spiritual advancement, they may often be misunderstood as those who solely have political motives.

2.2 Bhikkhuni Contribution to Society and Social Status

As innovators, the bhikkhuni gain status as more people become familiar with Venerable Dhammananda's order of nuns, and this can be evidenced by the support of local monks and people who come to give alms. On an 'Environmental' level, it appears that the bhikkhuni, at least on a local geographic level, have gained recognition from others through her and her followers' dedication to her work and geographic presence. Although unofficial, the status of the bhikkhuni order is very much present and carrying out its work despite official opposition to their cause. In this sense, their 'Socioeconomic Characteristics' can be said to be stable, as no support from the local community would mean that the bhikkhuni temple could not sustain itself.

Moreover, the act of giving alms is an interaction between the local community and the bhikkhuni, and a tradition normally carried out by male monks. By taking part in such rituals, the bhikkhuni are establishing their 'Position in Social Networks', by carrying out an important role which is often assigned to male monks. In such a manner, this is another way in which the bhikkhuni establish their status and legitimacy as a religious group. By going on alms rounds, they are taking on traditionally male-prescribed roles, and the local communities are reciprocating by accepting this. As such, lay people who take part in giving alms perceive those monks/bhikkhunis as being able to bring them good merit (Yavaprabhas, 2022 : 153). This tradition is, in a way, an unconscious act, which serves as evidence that, from a local perspective, where bhikkhunis operate, they are respected and given an official status as religious leaders, albeit unofficially in the eyes of the law. Under the conceptual framework, it is important to look at both the 'Characteristics of the Innovator and Innovation' as well as the 'Environmental Context'. Firstly, it would seem the 'Social Benefits vs. The Costs' would be the struggle between acceptance, but also the social deeds—including helping female inmates—which the established bhikkhuni order carries out. 'Global Uniformity' is also relevant here, as bhikkhunis in other countries, such as Sri Lanka (see Phanthanaphruet, 2024) and Korea (see Cho, 2009), also focus on working for the benefit of

society. The Thai bhikkhuni can be observed as following this trend by carrying out work which seems to be important to all bhikkhunis, and this aspect of their institution may be important for their recognition. Moreover, concerning 'Societal Entity', it would appear that the freedom in existing outside the official framework of Thai Buddhism affords Ven. Dhammananda and her temple the freedom to pursue projects and initiatives which have much 'Benefit' to the local communities they operate in. Rather, it seems that in conducting such charitable and noble work, Ven. Dhammananda and her followers fulfill a societal role in helping people, and it is through this role, which is sorely needed not just in Thailand but globally, they are able to gain status.

2.3 Official Status

As innovators, Thai bhikkhuni live outside the official Sangha as their own 'Status Characteristic'. However, this unofficial status affords them other benefits, such as freedom from hierarchical bureaucracy within the Sangha and the privilege to vote. In an 'Environmental Context', because of these unique 'Political Conditions', they exist outside of the framework of traditional Thai Buddhism and Thai law, but at the same time do not push for this acceptance because of the freedoms they are allowed. In this way, the status of bhikkhuni in Thailand, whilst unofficial, allows them to lead a less rigid lifestyle and live according to the values of Buddhism, which they deem appropriate. This is rather interesting because whilst women could be said to experience inequality in a Thai Buddhist hierarchy, their non-acceptance of the status quo and further pursuit of enlightenment affords them some extra, albeit unexpected freedom in their spiritual journeys. As an innovation, the bhikkhuni are afforded a status of freedom that male monks are not.

Significance and Future Directions

This paper has advanced beyond other papers which have sought to look at the validity of female ordination in Thailand. It has examined the status of the bhikkhuni in their capacity as women in a Buddhist Thailand, and how the different opinions about them, along with their own platform, clash and affect their status. No paper has sought to deconstruct the bhikkhuni and their existence in Thailand using a sociological framework such as Wejnert's Diffusion of Innovations and by using this framework, a more detailed understanding of the factors impacting their existence has been achieved. By understanding female ordination as an innovation for Thai society, we can gain a deeper insight into its status and its wider implications for Thailand. On that note, it would be wise for future research to investigate the bhikkhuni not as a controversy, but to examine them as a veritable social movement which exists regardless of their supporters and non-supporters alike.

Limitations

Through the Diffusion of Innovations Framework, this article has expanded the discussions around the status of bhikkhuni in Thailand through the lens of law, gender, religious practice, official status, and social contribution. As a sociological framework, it analyses the bhikkhuni as an occurrence within society and what status arises from the various factors which interlace with this. Because of this, we gain an outside perspective of the bhikkhuni, with some insight into their perspective through the interview. However, this study has not fully captured the inside perspective of the bhikkhuni due to this lens, so future studies may wish to address this by approaching the bhikkhuni from a different angle. In pursuit of such an approach, more bhikkhuni could be interviewed.

Conclusion

Wejnert's conceptual framework demonstrated that the status of women in Thai Buddhism is complex and has deepened the discussion of their status through law, gender, religious practice, social status, and bhikkhuni contribution to society. Despite differences in religious perspectives as well as an androcentric social component to Buddhism in Thailand, the bhikkhuni exist, persevering and strengthening their cause. The Q&A session with the Venerable Dhammananda revealed that there seemed to be a contrast in her devotion to her religious duties, being mischaracterized as a political movement. However, one key finding was that the bhikkhuni's unofficial status allows them the freedom to pursue charitable projects of their desire and sometimes receive the right to vote, as they are not officially monks in the eyes of the law.

The Women who wish to ordain, the environments in which they navigate, and their personal characteristics all influence the perception and acceptance of the bhikkhuni movement. However, it could be argued that what the literature occasionally misses, and the framework demonstrates, is that despite the fierce debate surrounding the bhikkhunis and women in Thai Buddhism — the rules, debates, scriptures, and the opinions of scholars — the bhikkhuni order exists regardless of the controversy. As 'Innovators' reviving a once extinct lineage of female monks, their status and resolve is unwavering and plays an increasingly important role in the interaction with religion for laypeople. It is this involvement and role in Thai society that gains them recognition and status as a movement in a more receptive, contemporary time. Rather, a lack of awareness and misunderstanding from some scholars and laypeople alike would depict the bhikkhuni as activists, when it would appear their cause, their 'innovation', is their religious duty to both the Buddha and within Thai society. Future works would be wise to not only continue debates around scripture but also to study the work that the bhikkhunis carry out and the changing perceptions and awareness of them within Thai society. As it has been 20 years since the introduction of their order, an investigation into local and national perspectives and the impacts of the bhikkhuni order would be an important next step to understand the women pioneering in the field of Thai Buddhism.

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