

**The Values of Ordination:  
the *bhikkhuni*, gender, and Thai society**

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## **Declaration**

I, Kakanang Yavaprabhas, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Kakanang Yavaprabhas  
30 May 2018

## Abstract

This thesis concerns contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* in society in relation to the laity, particularly lay women. It adopts an approach that considers a multiplicity of voices not limited to monastics, local traditions, and local modes of thought. The thesis focuses on the social impacts of contemporary *bhikkhuni* on gendered society, a relatively unexplored aspect of the literature. In order to investigate the social impacts, the thesis examines the socially assumed values of ordination and its fully ordained form in Thai society. It pays particular attention to why and how the fully ordained form of *bhikkhuni* relates to gender in Thai society. Data for the thesis were based largely on my 12 months of fieldwork in Thailand and were obtained through participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires.

This thesis proposes that the social significance of fully ordained women – *bhikkhuni* – can be understood only when the values of ordination are fully realized in their Thai context. This can be achieved through considering at once a multiplicity of voices, local traditions, and local ways of thinking. This thesis argues that the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* has wider social impacts on Thai society where religion is not separated from the domain of gender, but is a guiding force that subsumes it. In this regard, *bhikkhuni* are not only beneficial for lay women, but can empower them. Through both full and temporary ordination, gender relations and ideologies are changing in positive ways for Thai women. This empowerment and transformation is not the result of a feminist agenda. Instead, female monastics all emphasize engagement with Buddhism as a means of transcending rather than transforming gender. This transcendental perspective, which is similar to their shared self-presentations, is arguably what secures them social acceptance in assuming the most important and consequential religious form as fully ordained *bhikkhuni*.

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Note: All photos are taken by the author.

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## Editorial notes

### Language and transliteration

As Buddhist terms in Thai are mostly generated from Pali, they tend to be portrayed in the Pali form in this thesis. However, if the Sanskrit versions of the terms are more common in English literature, they are given in Sanskrit. Thai, Pali, and Sanskrit words are presented in italics and are not pluralised.

The transliteration of the Thai language follows the system of the 1999 Royal Thai General Transcription. Exceptions are made for names of persons and places; these follow known transliterations in academia or how they are written in the vernacular.

All translations from Thai to English in this thesis are the author's own, unless stated otherwise.

### Word choices

Recognizing the diversity of forms of female Buddhist practitioners in Thailand, it is worth clarifying how I use words relating to them in this thesis. When I use the words 'female Buddhist practitioners', I refer to all Buddhist women who are committed to practising Buddhism. When I use the words 'female Buddhist renunciants', I refer to the female Buddhist practitioners who have renounced staying at their homes.

The term '*nak buat*' in Thai, which can be literally translated as 'ordained persons', is used interchangeably with the word 'monastics' in this study. It has to be noted, though, that while the word 'monastics' seems to be the closest one to use in translation, the two terms signify a different emphasis of meaning. In the term *nak buat* the emphasis is on ordination, while in the word 'monastics' the emphasis appears to be on the place – the monastery.

Also, when I use the terms '*nak buat*', 'ordained persons', or 'monastics' for women, I only refer to the *bhikkhuni*, *sikkhamana*, and *samaneri*. Female Buddhist practitioners such as the *mae chi* are not included. To clarify, in doing this I do not wish to evaluate the

religious status of female Buddhist practitioners, which remains ambiguous, but rather to follow the classifications of most of my informants

Regarding the use of the word ‘monks’, most of the time it is used to refer to the *bhikkhu*. Occasionally, and particularly in Chapter 3, which focuses on language, the word ‘monks’ is also used as a translation of the Thai word ‘*phra*’. In this case, the word is presented as ‘monks (*phra*)’ for clarification as it can include not only *bhikkhu* but also *bhikkhuni*. On some occasions, *bhikkhuni* are also referred to as ‘female monks’ and *bhikkhu* as ‘male monks’ to prevent confusion.

## Names

Thai people have both full names and nicknames given since birth. Nicknames are used in this thesis when referring to most lay people. It is also customary on a daily basis to refer to others with words like P (an elder sibling) and Pa (an aunt) before their nicknames.

Long-term monastics are mostly referred to in this thesis using their Pali names. It should be noted that in everyday practice, there is some flexibility in usages of Pali and lay names. Temporary *samaneri* are referred to by their nicknames.

While I attempt to use real names in this thesis as much as possible, pseudonyms are also used when necessary.

It should also be noted that in the bibliography and text, Thai authors are listed according to their first names as customary.

## ‘Theravada’

In using the term Theravada in this thesis, I recognize that the term itself can, as noted by some scholars (Skilling 2012; Crosby 2014), be problematic. The categorization can, according to Crosby (2014: 2), ‘make us blind to the fluidity, complexity, diversity, and richness of any actual manifestation of Buddhism in real people and communities’. The term Theravada should then not be taken for granted, but recognized as dynamic and to a

certain extent constructed (Skilling 2012). Accordingly, the term as used in this thesis is not employed for denoting static or monolithic tradition. It is only for referring to the form of Buddhism that claims its descent from the First Council and is generally viewed as dominating Sri Lanka and some countries in Southeast Asia, including Thailand.

### ‘The saffron robes’

Regardless of their actual colour, the monastic robes worn by fully ordained Thai monastics and their novices are commonly called *pha lueang*, which literally means ‘yellow robes’. The yellow colour, however, was actually banned by the Buddha. To avoid confusion, this thesis uses the words ‘saffron robes’ to refer to all monastic robes worn by fully ordained monastics and their novices. It should still be noted that the monastic robes are not necessarily in the saffron colour. Apart from the colours forbidden by the Buddha; all blue, light yellow, crimson, brown, black, brownish yellow, and dark yellow (Rhys and Oldenberg 1882 cited in Itoh 2013: 179), other colours are theoretically possible.

The colour of the robes of the monastics at Songdhammakalyani Monastery is normally saffron. It should also be noted that on special occasions the *bhikkhuni* (and not novices) wear robes which are bright yellowish orange.

By contrast, the colour of the robes of the monastics at Nirodharam is a dark reddish brown, differentiating them from the saffron colour of Buddhist monks more generally (Itoh 2013: 179). According to Bhikkhuni Warayani, this colour choice was adopted to avoid potentially offending local monks. It is also not a colour forbidden by the Buddha.

### Abbreviations

T. Thai

P. Pali

Note: If no abbreviation is indicated, the word in brackets is mostly in Thai.



Figure 1: Map of Thailand

Source: <http://www.maps-thailand.com/>



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

It was early in the morning. A few people with shaven heads and wearing saffron robes were walking calmly and solemnly along the street, each carrying a bowl. Many people in the area asked them to stop before offering alms in a respectful manner. Those with some familiarity of Thai Buddhism would recognize this scene of Buddhist monks (*phra*) going on their morning alms round. Such scenes are commonplace in a country where around 95 percent of the population identify themselves as Buddhist.<sup>1</sup> However, if one were to notice women in white clothes following the monks and, from time to time, directly assisting them in carrying the alms they have received, one would also realize that the sight is not common. Normally women cannot follow monks during their alms rounds, as Thai monks are celibate men who avoid contact with women.



Figure 2: (On the left) *Bhikkhuni* and novices at Nirodharam going on the alms round, with lay women following.

Figure 3: (On the right) *Bhikkhuni* and novices at Songdhammakalyani Monastery going on the alms round, with a lay woman and a female renunciant following

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<sup>1</sup> Among the Thai population who are aged over 13 years, 94.6 per cent is Buddhist, 4.2 per cent is Muslim, 1.1 per cent is Christian and 0.1 per cent holds other religious beliefs or does not have any stated religious beliefs (*mai mi satsana*) (National Statistical Office of Thailand 2015: iii).

The people who have created this unusual scene are the ones in the saffron robes. They are *bhikkhuni*,<sup>2</sup> female monks or fully ordained nuns, whose existence in Thai society is very recent. This thesis concerns them and the lay people, mostly lay women, with whom they interact.

## **1.1. *Bhikkhuni*, gender ideologies and Thai society**

### 1.1.1 Buddhism and gender in Thai society

Southeast Asia is a region that is often thought to support ‘gender equality’. However, what ‘equality’ means here is not that men and women have the same rights and privileges. Rather, their equality is ‘complementary’ (King and Wilder 2003: 263). Men and women are regarded as dominating different social spheres, even if their gender relations tend to be seen as socially negotiated and flexible (ibid: 263–265). The considerable autonomy and authority that women possess in the economic sphere, together with other factors such as the kinship system, have led many scholars to regard Southeast Asian women as possessing ‘high status’ (Errington 1990: 3–4). At the same time, this evaluation of women’s status is criticized as based largely on Western criteria, which may differ from indigenous views (ibid: 5–6). For alongside notions of gender equality and gender complementarity, the domination of men in religion and the perception of their spiritual power as superior have also actually long been understood as gender-specific (Ong and Peletz 1995: 7–8).

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Thailand also arguably has its religious domain largely dominated by men. While Buddhism bestows access to religious authority on both men and women, as *bhikkhu* (monks) and *bhikkhuni* respectively,<sup>3</sup> in practice only the form for men is readily available and widely accepted in Thailand (Tomalin 2006: 386). This is probably because the *bhikkhuni sangha* (Buddhist female monastic community)

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<sup>2</sup> *Bhikkhuni* is a Pali term. In Thai the word is *phiksuni*. See Selected Glossary.

<sup>3</sup> A *bhikkhu* has to keep 227 Buddhist precepts while a *bhikkhuni* has to keep 311 Buddhist precepts. Both of them have their heads shaved and wear the saffron monastic robes.

disappeared in the tenth or eleventh century,<sup>4</sup> never having reached Thailand (Skilling 1995: 55; Seeger 2006: 159). Thus, the full monastic form in Thailand has traditionally been available only to men, for whom it has remained a domain of high prestige. Men as monks receive open social respect from every sector of Thai society. Even the king himself has to show respect to a monk, regardless of the monk's social background (Seeger 2009: 812).

By contrast, Thai women cannot traditionally access a similar religious status. Instead, they mostly participate in religious activities as lay supporters (McDaniel 2006: 119; Lindberg Falk 2007: 9), while those who do wish to be female renunciants assume alternative forms such as that of *mae chi*,<sup>5</sup> a group whose social status and social capabilities remain ambiguous (see 1.1.3).

The fact that traditionally only men receive full ordination has long received attention from scholars, leading them, at least in part, to relate Buddhism to gender studies. A classic example of this focus on gender and Thai religion is evidenced in the debate between Kirsch and Keyes. Kirsch (1982, 1985) argues that Thai Buddhist women are more attached to the world than are men, and it is this that hinders their religious path to Buddhism's ultimate goal – *nirvana*. In Kirsch's view, Thai Buddhism restricts women spiritually, making them inferior to men. Keyes (1984), however, disagrees, arguing that Thai Buddhist culture regards men and women as socially different but religiously equal. For men and women, while differently attached to the world, each remain capable of reaching *nirvana*. Although women themselves cannot be ordained, Keyes argues, they can assume other religious roles, such as that of mothers who give their sons to Buddhism through ordination. In this manner, mothers, according to Keyes, nurture not only the religion, but also their own religious advancement. It is, however, to be noted here that

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<sup>4</sup> There is no consensus on the time of its disappearance. For example, Skilling (1995: 55) says that it disappeared by the tenth century and Seeger (2006) says that it was around the eleventh century (Seeger 2006: 159).

<sup>5</sup> *Mae chi* refers to a woman who has her head shaved, wears white robes and keeps eight to ten precepts (mostly eight precepts). The term is a combination of the words *mae*, meaning a mother, which is also used as an honorific term, and *chi*, which is used as an honorific word for those in religious positions (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 7).

only women who are mothers, specifically mothers of sons, can follow the religious role that Keyes describes for women in general.

But it is not only non-Thai scholars who are attracted to the issue of Buddhism and gender; Thai scholars are too. Some scholars see Buddhism as patriarchal, contributing to the gender inferiority of women in Thai society (e.g. Akhin 1990; Prani 2016). Others, while having a similar view of the gender-biased nature of local beliefs, do not think that Buddhism itself is patriarchal (e.g. Chatsumarn 1991; Kunlavir 2006). Instead, they believe that the ‘true essence’ of Buddhism is non-patriarchal and that local gender-biased beliefs are not truly Buddhist (Chatsumarn 1991: 31–34; Kunlavir 2006: 2, 8–10). Regardless of their different perceptions of Buddhism, we can see here that Thai scholars often share a common approach with global narratives that relate Buddhism with gender in Thai society.

Utilizing Buddhism in the study of gender, however, is not without its critics. The most vocal of these is surely Tannenbaum (1999), who argues that looking at gender in Thai society through Buddhist discourses reveals a Western intellectual orientation that is at least biased if not also ethnocentric. As she states: ‘A major analytical flaw has been to conceive of Thai society and culture as primarily Buddhist and to look to Buddhism to explain all cultural patterns’ (ibid: 243). Following Hanks and Hanks (1963), who view Thai men and women as equals and concerned more with status and power than with patriarchy and gender, Tannenbaum implies that if Thai society is perceived as patriarchal, it is only because scholars inappropriately study Thai gender through Buddhism. Rather, she suggests that in the study of gender scholars should focus less on using canonical, homogenous, and sometimes ahistorical models of Thai Buddhism and more on the ethnographic reality in which Thai gender emerges.

While Tannenbaum’s warning is important, her suggestion that many overstate the importance of Buddhism in the understanding of gender in Thailand is problematic. If the vast majority of Thais are Buddhist, then the ethnographic reality of gender in Thailand will, by definition, relate to Buddhism, as well as the many ways in which it is understood and interpreted by the lay and religious alike. It seems more fruitful, then, not to isolate a textually oriented view of Buddhism of the sort that Tannenbaum criticizes, but to

approach Buddhism as it is practised and upheld on the ground. This is the approach this thesis hopes to follow.

Moreover, while Tannenbaum (again following Hanks and Hanks) claims that Thais are concerned more with status and power than gender, gender is undeniably a factor in Thai views of status and power. Traditional unavailability of full ordination for women, for example, has meant that the prestigious status of becoming a fully ordained monastic has until now remained simply inaccessible to women. To ignore gender hierarchy, therefore, seems inappropriate. What is more, the work of Hanks and Hanks that Tannenbaum emulates is as of today (2017) more than half a century old. While the men and women in rural areas from whom Hanks and Hanks obtained their data in 1963 may have lived relatively more equal lives, surely the socio-religious spheres of Thai society Hanks and Hanks studied have been constantly changing. Indeed, according to some Thai scholars (e.g. Nithi and Akhin 1995), Thai women, particularly in urban areas, may well face increased oppression and gender inequality with the coming of modernity and the lessening significance of the relatively more animistic systems of belief that once characterized rural life and counterbalanced the high status of men in Buddhism with local spiritual beliefs that limited male power.<sup>6</sup>

I, then, believe it is still essential to look at Buddhism in the study of gender in Thai society. 'Buddhism', however, has to be more one that is upheld and practised in the daily lives of people where its meanings are variable and negotiated, than a canonical one that may at times remain isolated from life as it is lived. Taking this approach into account in the next section, I will portray how the traditional unavailability of full ordination for women has contributed to the creation of a gender hierarchy in which men are more socially advantaged than women.

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<sup>6</sup> To clarify, I recognize that the categorizations of religious practices in Thai society into Buddhist and non-Buddhist beliefs can be problematic, as some critics point out (e.g. McDaniel 2011). Here, I only suggest that socio-religious spheres are dynamic and, being so, will have changed to a certain extent from the time that Hanks and Hanks conducted their fieldwork.

### 1.1.2 Full ordination and gender hierarchy

Alms giving is one of the most common activities in religious acts of merit making (*thambun*) and lay Buddhists usually give alms to those they perceive as the ‘fields of merit’ (T. *nuea na bun*, P. *punna-khetta*), who can generate merit for them. To be able to be considered as a ‘field of merit’, a person should have received full ordination and assumed a full monastic form. While the monastic form for women as *bhikkhuni* would enable them to be ‘fields of merit’ similar to men who assume the monastic form as monks (*bhikkhu*) (Seeger 2006: 178), as mentioned, the monastic form of *bhikkhuni* is not locally available to Thai women. Therefore, traditionally, the best ‘field of merit’ for the laity belongs to men as monks (Lindberg Falk 2007: 140–141).

In order to understand the importance of the ‘fields of merit’, one must consider the local Buddhist concept of merit (T. *bun*, P. *punna*), which is closely related to another two important local concepts: *karma* and rebirth (*kan wian wai tai koet*). Broadly speaking, according to the concept of merit, merit is generated by doing good deeds and is regarded as something that is able to be accumulated, shared and transferred (Lindberg Falk 2007: 140; Cook 2010: 121–123). Demerit (T. *bap*, P. *papa*), in contrast, is created by doing bad deeds. Merit and demerit are created as such because, according to the concept of *karma*, all actions operate under the law of *karma*, in which good actions are seen as good *karma* that generates merit while bad actions are viewed as bad *karma* that generates demerit. This is encapsulated in a common Thai saying about *karma*: ‘do good deeds and one will receive good [things]; do bad deeds and one will receive bad [things]’ (*tham di dai di tham chua dai chua*) (Cassaniti 2015: 233–234). Moreover, following the concept of rebirth, the accumulated merit and demerit, and their influence, will also be associated with the person beyond their current life. Everyone is thought to be in the cycle of rebirths, experiencing many lives in various forms, according to their own accumulated merit and demerit, until the ultimate goal of Buddhism, *nirvana*, is reached (Lindberg Falk 2007: 44–45; Cassaniti 2015: 238–239, 269).

Thus, what a person is in this life, including their social status and gender, is also widely thought of as relating to what the person has done in past lives – past *karma* and accumulated merit and demerit (Lindberg Falk 2007: 8, 140; Terwiel 2012: 266). For

example, monks who are famous for their religious abilities and people who have legitimate power (such as the king) are seen as people who have particular merit (*mi bun*) (Lindberg Falk 2007: 140). Gender is also commonly viewed as being shaped by past *karma*. The perception that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma* and misdeeds in former lives, for example, is reported as widespread in society (Kunlavir 2006: 3; Lindberg Falk 2007: 30).

Therefore, to be able to act as a ‘field of merit’ according to these local ways of thinking, indicates that a person must have done a considerable number of good deeds in past lives, giving them enough accumulated merit to have received full ordination and be ‘fields of merit’ for the laity. Women’s lack of access to full ordination thus suggests that they do not have enough accumulated merit to have received full ordination and be ‘fields of merit’ simply because of their gender. The gender-biased beliefs about the female gender in Thai society may also have been accentuated and validated through this lack of access to full ordination, as some scholars argue (Chatsumarn 1991: 25, 31–34; Kunlavir 2006: 3–4).

Of course, this lack of access to full ordination does not mean that Thai women cannot be religiously revered. Studies show that there are female Buddhist practitioners who gain high social respect without having to be fully ordained (e.g. Seeger 2010; Seeger 2013). Seeger (2010), for example, tells the story of Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam who is highly revered and is thought to have attained enlightenment. Owing to her high level of Buddhist practice and spiritual achievement, her *mae chi* status is also viewed as equal to being fully ordained. Since her death, two stupas have also been built specifically for her and, according to Seeger, they are probably the first ever for a Thai female Buddhist saint. While it is true that women can be revered without having received full ordination, spiritually renowned women do have to be outstanding Buddhist practitioners. In contrast, men do not have to be exceptional in order to be religiously revered as they can access full ordination and its associated prestige.

Furthermore, full ordination is significantly associated with a tradition of temporary ordination for Thai men. This temporary ordination embodies various social functions and benefits, apart from being a means for engaging in spiritual practice. For example,

temporary ordination acts as a traditional transition to manhood, provides education, and boosts personal attractiveness for marriage (Keyes 1986: 84, 88; Swearer 2010: 50–53). It is also a local way for men as sons to ‘pay gratitude’ or ‘repay the debt’ to parents, and is culturally significant as it is believed that children are in debt to their parents, who gave them life and raised them. Among the parents, mothers, who traditionally cannot be ordained, are the focus (Keyes 1986: 88; Swearer 2010: 53–54) and there is even a common Thai belief that mothers can ‘cling on to the saffron robes of sons in order to ascend to heaven’ (*ko chai pha lueang lukchai khuen sawan*) (Kunlavir 2006: 4–5).

Without access to full ordination, women as daughters cannot benefit from the social functions of temporary ordination. For example, they cannot repay the debt to parents religiously in the way that men as sons can. Instead, women as daughters are expected to repay the debt to parents in other ways, such as by taking care of them and financially supporting them (Lindberg Falk 2007: 37). At the same time, these secular ways of repaying the debt are reported to be generally less valued than the religious ordination of sons (Mills 1997: 41–42).<sup>7</sup>

It is noted that the social functions of temporary ordination, from which only men can benefit, appear not to have been based on the Buddhist canon (P. Tipitaka).<sup>8</sup> Terwiel (2012: 271) states that this is the case for temporary ordination as a rite of passage for men, which is practised as such only in Thailand and two neighbouring countries – Laos and Cambodia. Similarly, the other social functions also appear to be a local creation. Again, we can see why approaching Buddhism as it is lived on the ground is important, particularly to the study of gender in Thai society.

Moreover, while women are barred from full ordination, ordination is claimed to be accessible even to gay men as they are biologically male. Jesada (2016) reports that regardless of being known as gay, gay monks receive social acceptance from the majority of Thai Buddhists, including other monks. According to Jesada, lay villagers and local

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>8</sup> Often called the Pali Canon (T. Phra Trai Pidok), it literally means ‘three baskets’ and consists of three sections: (1) the rules for Buddhist practitioners (*vinaya*), (2) discourses (*sutta*), and (3) doctrines and teachings (*abidhamma*).



monks are only concerned that the gay monks fulfil their religious duties for the laity, do administrative work for the monasteries and/or serve the higher-ranking monks. Being gay tends to be treated as a personal issue. Case studies of two gay monks, who were known to break even the most serious monastic rule of celibacy are presented as supporting evidence: one of them is widely known for having a boyfriend, while the other is accused of having sex with a man. Jesada claims that the two gay monks can continue to enjoy prestigious status within society. Here, the social advantage of being biologically male is apparent.

Looking at Buddhism as it is practised and upheld on the ground, I have shown in this section how women's lack of access to full ordination both creates and validates a gender hierarchy in which men are spiritually superior and more socially advantaged. The next section further demonstrates that while women can assume alternative forms of female renunciants to that of the fully ordained *bhikkhuni*, these forms are still socially ambiguous and arguably do not appear to be as socially significant.

### 1.1.3 Social ambiguity of alternative forms of female renunciants

Without the traditional availability of full ordination, Thai women who wish to be female renunciants assume alternative forms to that of the fully ordained *bhikkhuni*. The oldest and the most popular form is *mae chi*, which as mentioned, refers to women who have their heads shaved, wear white robes, and keep eight or ten precepts. The existence of *mae chi* dates back to at least the seventeenth century,<sup>9</sup> and currently there are thousands of *mae chi* across the country (Cook 2010: 164), mostly in temples (*wat*), governed by monks, or in their own self-governed nunneries (*samnak chi*) (Lindberg Falk 2007: 38).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Their existence in the seventeenth century is reported in written records of European missionaries, in which they are referred to as *nang chi* (Skilling 1995). As it is not my intention here to present an extensive history of *mae chi*, readers should see Itoh (2013: 109–117) for such an account.

<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to know the exact numbers of *mae chi* as there is no requirement for them to join any religious organization. There is the Institute of Thai Mae Chi, established in 1969 under the Queen's patronage, which attempts to act as an official institution for *mae chi*, for example, registering *mae chi* and setting a standard for the *mae chi*'s behaviour (Cook 2010: 153). However,

While in older literature *mae chi* are often reported as a subordinate and marginalized group who frequently experience hardship (e.g. Van Esterik 2000), more recent literature portrays a more positive view of *mae chi*, focusing on those who are socially respected and attain prestigious status (e.g. Collins and McDaniel 2010; Seeger 2010) or presenting *mae chi*'s own perspectives as satisfied with their lives (e.g. Lindberg Falk 2007; Cook 2010). The overall status of *mae chi* is also reported to have improved over the last 20 years (Cook 2010: 152), but their status and living conditions vary across the country (Lindberg Falk 2007: 115).

Other alternative forms of female Buddhist renunciants, apart from that of *mae chi*, are reported particularly to have emerged after the 1928 Supreme Patriarch's decree which forbids Thai monks to ordain women as *samaneri*, *sikkhamana*<sup>11</sup> and *bhikkhuni* (Varaporn 2006: 113). These forms include (and are not limited to) *dhammamata* visualised by the late influential Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *mae chi* in brown robes, and *sikkhamat* of the Santi Asok monasteries.<sup>12</sup> Many of the forms, for example, *mae chi* in brown robes and *sikkhamat* of the Santi Asok monasteries, take ten precepts, similarly to the scriptural form of *samaneri* (Varaporn 2006: 114, 152–153; Itoh 2013: 131–132, 155).

In spite of having no doubts about the spiritual capability of the female renunciants in these alternative forms, it is undeniable that their social status and social capabilities (e.g. conducting rituals) still remain ambiguous. As women who assume alternative forms of female renunciants other than that of *mae chi* usually do not form organized groups and their number is notably much smaller than that of *mae chi* (Varaporn 2006: 114, 152–153; Itoh 2013: 131–132, 155), their social ambiguity should be even more apparent than that of *mae chi*.<sup>13</sup> The discussion here will thus be confined to the *mae chi*.

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only limited numbers of *mae chi* (between 4,000 and 9,000) are registered with the institution (Lindberg Falk 2007: 177).

<sup>11</sup> Both *samaneri* and *sikkhamana* are the scriptural forms of female novices who keep ten Buddhist precepts. Before being qualified to be *bhikkhuni*, female candidates should ideally be *samaneri* and *sikkhamana* for two years. *Sikkhamana* is different from *samaneri* in that the *sikkhamana* intend to be *bhikkhuni* and should strictly keep the first six precepts intact.

<sup>12</sup> See Varaporn (2006) Chapter 3 and Itoh (2013) Chapter 2 for extensive explorations of these various alternative forms.

<sup>13</sup> Their social ambiguity, of course, does not mean that their existence is not important. Scholars point out that their existence, which receives support from some monks, demonstrates the

Regardless of its long and continuous existence in Thai society, the *mae chi* form of renunciant still does not have its religious status affirmed. For example, while a person whose religious status is acknowledged will be referred to in Thai as a *nak buat* (literally meaning an ‘ordained person’), *mae chi*’s status as *nak buat* is judged differently from one governmental office to another, and only in ways that are disadvantageous to them. The Department of Religious Affairs, for instance, assesses *mae chi* as not *nak buat* and thus they cannot receive benefits such as discounts on public transport and medical treatment, while the Department of Provincial Administration does view *mae chi* as *nak buat*, thereby depriving them of their right to vote (Latdawan 2005: 45–46).<sup>14</sup>

This religious ambiguity is probably what limits the social capabilities of *mae chi*. The ability of *mae chi* to conduct rituals, for example, is ambiguous. *Mae chi* in a temple are reported to have marginalized roles in rituals (Cook 2010: 116), while *mae chi* in a nunnery are reported to enjoy relatively more ritual capabilities, albeit with limitations (Lindberg Falk 2007: 166). Also, *mae chi*’s ability to be a ‘field of merit’ for the laity is as ambiguous as their religious status. *Mae chi* in a nunnery are reported to be ‘fields of merit’ on the basis that their religious status is accepted (Lindberg Falk 2007: 100–101). Most *mae chi*, however, are usually regarded as being able to generate only a little merit for those who give alms to them (Seeger 2006: 178).

The social ambiguity appears to indicate that the form of *mae chi* and other alternative forms of female renunciants cannot be as socially significant as the form of fully ordained *bhikkhuni*, nor can they be satisfying social substitutes.<sup>15</sup> Some intellectuals, particularly those who oppose the *bhikkhuni* ordination, however, are reported to view these alternative forms as a good alternative institution to the *bhikkhuni sangha* (Seeger 2009: 807). According to Seeger (2009), they argue that the women do not have to face the

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creativity, diversity, complexity and flexibility of female renunciants in Thailand (Varaporn 2006: 114, 152–153; Itoh 2013: 131–132, 155). Regardless, social ambiguity indicates that the forms appear not to be as socially significant as that of the *bhikkhuni*.

<sup>14</sup> See also Seeger 2009: 809 for further structural inequalities.

<sup>15</sup> In using the terms ‘satisfying social substitutes’, I refer to social benefits and capabilities that the form can provide for women in relation to the form of *bhikkhuni*. I do not suggest that the alternative forms cannot give satisfaction to the women who assume them or that these women cannot prefer alternative forms to that of the *bhikkhuni*.

difficulties embedded in the *bhikkhuni* order, and can enjoy more flexibility and gain social acceptance from conservative groups more easily (ibid: 807). At the same time, Seeger (2009: 812–813) notes that the *mae chi* institution has not yet established its own ‘institutional charisma’,<sup>16</sup> and their white robes are not culturally, spiritually, or symbolically significant in society, unlike the saffron monastic robes.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the point that the form of *mae chi* keeps a mere eight or ten precepts is argued as providing limited ability to facilitate the religious practices of women (Phra Phaisal 2015: 415–417).<sup>18</sup>

We have seen in this section how the social ambiguity of alternative forms of female renunciants makes them appear not to be satisfying social substitutes for the fully ordained form of *bhikkhuni*, who seem more socially important. The social significance of the fully ordained form implies that the *bhikkhuni* arguably have wider social implications, probably in ways that female renunciants in other forms cannot.

#### 1.1.4 *Bhikkhuni* and potential social implications

Probably because of the social significance of the fully ordained form, it has been claimed by scholars and proponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination that the *bhikkhuni* can be beneficial to Thai women in general (e.g. Chatsumarn 1991; Tomalin 2006). For example, Tomalin (2006) argues that introduction of *bhikkhuni* in Thai society can potentially balance gender hierarchies in the religious institution and elsewhere, leading to women’s empowerment. In examining why this would be the case, Tomalin interviewed both lay Buddhists and monastics regarding their opinions of the social benefits of *bhikkhuni* ordination and finds that two main themes emerged in their reasoning. The first relates to

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<sup>16</sup> The other term that Seeger uses is ‘charisma of office’ (Seeger 2009: 812).

<sup>17</sup> It is noted that from the perspective of *mae chi*, their white robes symbolize pureness and morality (Lindberg Falk 2007: 122).

<sup>18</sup> Phra Phaisal (2015) expresses his view that the monastic community and pattern of lives that enable men as monks to further their spiritual paths should also be available to women in the form of *bhikkhuni* and their community. While the form of *mae chi* and its pattern of lives is beneficial for women religiously, he argues that it is still not the best form as there are mere eight or ten precepts available for the women to keep. Significantly, he also stresses the importance of full ordination for individual spiritual practices and the value of that ordination (ibid: 415–417).

the practical roles of Buddhism in society<sup>19</sup> and the other concerns the view that there is a relationship between the inferior status of Thai women in Buddhism and negative social attitudes toward women in general (ibid: 388–389). Notably, these claims in the existing literature are not based on empirical data and are merely speculative.

While the claims are only speculative, the potential social implications of the *bhikkhuni* are an intriguing aspect to explore further. This is particularly the case when one considers the importance of Buddhism in Thai society, and especially the form of Buddhism that is practised and upheld on the ground.

Unlike a society where the appropriate role of religion is commonly thought of as restricted to the private sphere, in Thai society, Buddhism is prevalent and influential. The idea that religion should be restricted to the private sphere is also criticized as a product of a particular form of Enlightenment thought that is Eurocentric (Asad 1993; Engelke 2013) and the roles of religion in Asia are suggested to differ from modern Western contexts in which being religious is perceived of as a largely individual matter (Tomalin 2015). In Thai society, Buddhism is such a part of everyday life that Thais are thought to ‘live Buddhism as part of a taken-for-granted way of being in the world’ (Cassaniti 2015: 15). Important life events, for example, adulthood for men through temporary ordination, weddings and funerals, are all related to Buddhism (Swearer 2010: 50–51, 58, 62, 64–65). Buddhism has also been supported by the state and utilized to secure the divine position of the king (Tambiah 1976). Even following the change to a democratic system with a monarchy in 1932, Buddhism still retained its privileged position. For instance, it is stated in constitutions (including the current one (2017)) that the king, while having a duty to protect all religions, has to be a Buddhist.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, Buddhism is associated with nationality and the sense of being ‘Thai’ (Keyes 1993; Terwiel 2012: 58).

This importance of Buddhism in society also relates to the social significance of the fully ordained form and those who assume it. While it is suggested that the lay and monastic

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<sup>19</sup> For example, it is argued that if girls can also receive free education through respected monastic institutions as boys do, there will be fewer socially deprived girls who have to enter prostitution (Tomalin 2006: 388–389).

<sup>20</sup> See the 2017 constitution of Thailand, p. 4. Available from: <http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/040/1.PDF> [Accessed 10 June 2017].

distinctions will potentially become more blurred with the increasingly widespread practice of meditation (Tambiah 1984: 168), the monastic position still seems to retain its privilege and superior status. No lay Buddhists or *mae chi* have ever claimed a status on par with that of monks who assume the full monastic status (Cook 2010: 50). Special sets of vocabularies, reportedly used to talk about and to address monks (Seeger 2009: 809; Terwiel 2012: 105), also indicate a distinction between laity and monastics, in which the latter are of a much superior status.

In addition, fully ordained Buddhist monastics, must, according to their precepts, interact regularly with lay people – yet another fact that underscores their social significance. This dependence on the laity is itself indicated in the words *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*, which are both derived from the root meaning ‘to have a share’ and suggest that the fully ordained monastics share in the means of sustenance provided by others (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1377).

The discussions throughout section 1.1 show that when women assume the fully ordained form of *bhikkhuni* in Thai society, their existence should have important social implications, especially concerning gender. Based on data from the field, the thesis will look at this intriguing aspect, which is particularly worth investigating given that the *bhikkhuni* have ‘emerged’ in Thai society (of course, in a controversial manner). The next section provides essential backgrounds about this *bhikkhuni* emergence, as well as their current situation.

## **1.2 *Bhikkhuni* in Thailand: emergence and current situation**

The contemporary form of Theravada *bhikkhuni* was initially revived through ordinations given to Sri Lankan women in 1996 and in 1998 (Ito 2012: 56).<sup>21</sup> Their ordination and the *bhikkhuni* ordination in general still remain controversial. Broadly speaking, opponents of the ordination are reported to claim that because of technical issues – for example, that

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<sup>21</sup> These ordinations were possible through international collaboration (Ito 2012: 56). In 1996, ordination was conducted for 10 Sri Lankan women in Sarnath by the Korean Order. Again in 1998 ordination was conferred on another 20 Sri Lankan women in Bodhgaya and it was the international ordination (ibid.).

the *bhikkhuni* ordination requires both the *bhikkhu sangha* and *bhikkhuni sangha* to conduct the ordination – the *bhikkhuni* ordination is simply not possible as the *bhikkhuni* in the Theravada tradition have long been extinct (Seeger 2006: 161–163; Varaporn 2006: 216–218). Regarding this issue, supporters of the ordination are reported to claim, for example, that the *bhikkhuni* lineage can be traced back to Chinese *bhikkhuni* who originated from ordination conferred by Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni* in the fifth century (ibid.). This claim is, of course, still debated (Seeger 2006: 161–163; Varaporn 2006: 216–218)<sup>22</sup> and there are ongoing debates regarding the legitimacy or lack thereof of the *bhikkhuni* ordination, both on international platforms and in Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after the controversial revival of Theravada *bhikkhuni sangha* in Sri Lanka, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh flew to Sri Lanka in 2001 to receive *pabbajja* ordination and become a *samaneri* (a female novice). Two years later, in 2003, she flew to Sri Lanka again to receive *upasampada* ordination and became Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (Chatsumarn 2016). Her ordination, regardless of the controversy it caused, can be said to mark the beginning of the contemporary existence of *bhikkhuni* in Thai society.

One of the factors contributing to the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thai society is apparently the international *bhikkhuni* movements, of which Sakyadhita, an important international organization,<sup>24</sup> is a part. Without such organizations there would have been no contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Sri Lanka, where most Thai women go to receive the ordination.

Notably, while the international movements play a part in facilitating the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thai society, Thai women should not be seen to become

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<sup>22</sup> See particularly Seeger (2006) and Varaporn (2006) for debates in Thailand. In Chapter 2, I will also discuss recurring discourses on *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand, although my focus is not on the debates per se. Also, see Kawanami (2007) for debates in Burma.

<sup>23</sup> There is a substantial quantity of literature about the legitimacy or lack thereof of the *bhikkhuni* ordination, produced not only by opponents and supporters of the ordination but also by scholars, especially those of Buddhist studies (see, for example, Bhikkhu Analayo 2013). I recognize that there are complexities surrounding the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination, particularly from the perspective of Buddhist studies. While these debates are important and ongoing, they are not the primary focus of this thesis. It is thus beyond the scope of the thesis to critically engage with or evaluate the legitimacy of the ordination.

<sup>24</sup> Sakyadhita literally means ‘Daughter of the Buddha’. Its essential agenda is to promote gender equality and full ordination for Buddhist women (Sakyadhita 2017).

*bhikkhuni* simply because of international influence. Scholarship, which regards Thai Buddhists in modern Thailand as being either victims of or rebels against globalization and modernization, has already been criticized by McDaniel (2011) as deploying a problematic, dichotomous approach that portrays Thai society as static and pristine. Thai Buddhists, McDaniel argues, should not be seen as mere responders to changes, as they can be ‘dynamic arbiter[s]’ themselves (ibid: 6–7). Similarly, Thai Buddhist women should not be seen as only reacting to or being impacted by international influences in becoming *bhikkhuni*. There were also two locally important incidents of women’s ordination before the contemporary emergence of the movement, and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the first contemporary Thai Theravada *bhikkhuni*, was among the initiators of Sakyadhita herself.

Apart from the international movements, the current socio-religious spheres in Thai society also undoubtedly facilitate the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni*. The Supreme Sangha Council (*Mahathera samakhom*) is viewed as gradually losing its centralized authoritative power and the institution of monks appear weakened by scandals and internal conflicts (McCargo 2012). Female Buddhist practitioners are also reported to be gaining more important roles in religion and are increasingly receiving social acceptance (e.g. Seeger 2009; Collins and McDaniel 2010).

Regarding the emergence of contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni*, I subscribe to the view of Itoh (2013), who devotes her whole thesis to analysing it. The emergence of the contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni*, Itoh argues, is a part of the ongoing processes of change and negotiation that are constantly happening in Thai Buddhism in order to maintain its relevance to the ever-changing Thai society. For those who are interested in the historical aspect, and in Thai Buddhism in particular, I highly recommend reading Itoh’s (2013) thesis. This section provides only essential backgrounds, namely, incidents of women’s ordination before the current emergence of *bhikkhuni*, the beginning of the current emergence, the roles of monks and the current situation of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand.



### 1.2.1 Incidents of women's ordination before the contemporary emergence

Before the emergence of the contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand, there were two important incidents where Thai women assumed the form of female monks and novices. The first one was in 1928 when Sara and Chongdi, daughters of Narin Klueng (Narin Phasit), an outspoken journalist and a former government official, along with six other women, were ordained as *samaneri*<sup>25</sup> by a Thai monk (whose name is still unknown to the public to this day) (Seeger 2006: 159; Chatsumarn 2016: 39–40). The authorities were not happy with the incident and the women were ordered to disrobe. Four of them complied and the rest, who did not, were arrested, taken to the court and forced to take off the saffron robes (Varaporn 2006: 76–78). Even after that, Sara and Chongdi wore grey robes, but eventually they had to disrobe after Sara was assaulted by a man during an alms round (Chatsumarn 2016: 40–41).

In the same year, the Supreme Patriarch of the Supreme Sangha Council issued a Sangha Act, promulgated on 18 June 1928, forbidding Thai monks to ordain women as *samaneri*, *sikkhamana* or *bhikkhuni*. According to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (2010: 155), this Sangha Act was specifically intended to apply to Narin Klueng, the father of Sara and Chongdi, who strongly criticized both the government and the Supreme Sangha Council. This Sangha Act is still in effect today and is reported to be cited often by opponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination.<sup>26</sup>

Another important incident happened in 1971 when Voramai Kabilsingh flew to Taiwan and received ordination to become Bhikkhuni Ta Tao. The ordination was done by a *bhikkhu sangha* following a Dharmaguptaka lineage (Chatsumarn 2016: 20–21). Before the ordination, Voramai Kabilsingh had been a female renunciant since 1956, through receiving the eight precepts from Chao Khun Phra Prommuni and had been wearing light yellow robes ever since (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014a: 65).<sup>27</sup> To my knowledge,

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<sup>25</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammananda claims that Sara was ordained as a *bhikkhuni* (Chatsumarn 2016: 39); however, Seeger (2006: 159) and Varaporn (2006) report that Sara was ordained as a *samaneri*.

<sup>26</sup> Suthada Mekrungruengkun reported this in a public event titled 'The Controversy behind Thailand's Female Monks' on 15 February 2017 at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand, which I attended.

<sup>27</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammananda reports that Voramai Kabilsingh initially sought ordination as a *bhikkhuni*, but was told by Thai monks that it was not possible (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014a:

Bhikkhuni Ta Tao did not attempt to claim a Theravada identity nor to establish a *bhikkhuni sangha*. Significantly, she is the mother of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and is the person who established the Songdhammakalyani Monastery, and was its former abbess.<sup>28</sup>

These two incidents of Thai women are often recounted by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who describes the history of the female monastics as ‘the three waves’, in which the two incidents are regarded as ‘the first wave’ and ‘the second wave’, respectively (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2003). The existence of the current *bhikkhuni*, including Bhikkhuni Dhammananda herself, is referred to by her as ‘the third wave’ (ibid.). Varaporn (2006: 166–167) suggests that through such acts Bhikkhuni Dhammananda attempts to create the Thai *bhikkhuni*’s own historical narratives and situate them as part of a larger history; this represents one of her efforts to strengthen the legitimacy of the *bhikkhuni*’s existence.

### 1.2.2 Beginning of the current emergence

The ordination of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as a *samaneri* in 2001 and a *bhikkhuni* in 2003, as mentioned, can be said to mark the beginning of the existence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand. Being the daughter of Voramai Kabilsingh, who established the Songdhammakalyani Monastery and later became Bhikkhuni Ta Tao, must have influenced Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who is now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, to a certain extent. She grew up in her mother’s monastery and experienced life as a renunciant from

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65). This is probably linked to why she chose to wear light-yellow robes, instead of the white robes that female renunciants usually wear. It is also reported that the colour of her robes nearly got her into trouble (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014a: 66) The district chief was unhappy about it, and when she refused to change to white robes, the mayor of Nakhon Pathom asked the Supreme Sangha Council to consider the issue (ibid: 66). Her preceptor, Chao Khun Phra Prommuni, who was one of the Supreme Sangha Council’s own members, defended her in the meeting. Her charge of impersonating monks was dropped as her preceptor reasoned to the Supreme Sangha Council that the colour of her robes was not the colour that monks could wear according to the *vinaya* (the monastic codes) (Itoh 2013: 322; Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014a: 66).

<sup>28</sup> See Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014a and Chatsumarn 2016: 18–25 for the life history and work of Bhikkhuni Ta Tao.

the time she was only around 12 to 13 years old.<sup>29</sup> At that time, she received the eight precepts from the same preceptor as her mother, and similarly wore the same light yellow robes as her mother for 47 days (Phimphan 2011: 12–13; Itoh 2013: 322). Being the only daughter, she was also under considerable pressure from her mother, her relatives, and her friends to follow in her mother’s footsteps (Phimphan 2011: 21).

However, by her own account her decision to become ordained was not because of that pressure (Phimphan 2011: 21–22). Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is reported to have stated that she chose the path by herself because when she was in her fifties she suddenly realized: ‘Though I have been successful in the way that people generally want, [I] still do not find the real essence of life (*sara thi thaeching khong chiwit*). I also felt bored of the worldly way of life (*chiwit thang lok*), in which [you] have to wear makeup to go to work every day. I then decided to become ordained (*ok buat*)’ (Phimphan 2011: 22).

It should still be noted, as Itoh (2013: 320) remarks, that there are always mixed and complex reasons motivating women, including Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, to become ordained. Apart from the spiritual aspect mentioned by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, it is reported in the literature that the aim of establishing the *bhikkhuni sangha*, personal health problems and influences of the international movements also played their parts in motivating her (Varaporn 2006: 169; Itoh 2013: 320).

Before becoming Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, Chatsumarn pursued higher education in religious studies and Buddhist studies<sup>30</sup> and then became a scholar and a university lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and Religion, Thammasat University. After participating in a conference in Harvard in 1983, she no longer wished to maintain her objectivity about the *bhikkhuni* ordination and became more engaged in activities that helped to promote it. She started the *Newsletter of International Buddhist Women’s*

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<sup>29</sup> Phimphan (2011: 13) says that she was 12 years old and Itoh (2013: 322) says that she was around 13 years old. As Phimphan obtained her data from interviewing Bhikkhuni Dhammananda directly, her data should be more accurate.

<sup>30</sup> Bachelor’s degree in Philosophy from Visva Bharati University, India, master’s degree in Religion from McMaster University, Canada and doctorate degree in Buddhism from Magadh University, India.

*Activities*, which was later renamed *Yasodhara*.<sup>31</sup> Four years later, in 1987, she was one of the main organizers of the first international conference of Buddhist nuns in Bodhgaya, India. Significantly, the conference led to the foundation in 1989 of Sakyadhita, the main international association which promotes full ordination for Buddhist women (Varaporn 2006: 173; Phimphan 2011: 18–19; Itoh 2013: 323).

In 2000, Chatsumarn received *bodhisattva* precepts from Fo Guang Shan and later that year kept the eight precepts in daily life (Itoh 2013: 323). Then, in 2001 she flew to Sri Lanka and was ordained as a *samaneri*. In this ordination, she specifically asked monks in the Siam *Nikaya*,<sup>32</sup> whose lineage is affiliated with Thailand, to be present (Itoh 2013: 324). Her action, Itoh (2013: 324) remarks, show how she was conscious of being affiliated with Thai Buddhism as much as possible.

In 2003, being qualified to receive *upasampada* ordination, the then Samaneri Dhammananda went to Sri Lanka again for ordination and became Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (Chatsumarn 2016). Two years later, in 2005, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda also took a second *upasampada* ordination in Sri Lanka, as one of the *bhikkhuni* who conducted her first *upasampada* ordination was rumoured to be unqualified (Itoh 2013: 324.). Her decision shows that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was very concerned with the legitimacy of her ordination as it remains controversial in society. Regardless of such controversy, more and more Thai women follow in her footsteps to become *bhikkhuni*.

### 1.2.3 The role of monks

While the stance of the Supreme Sangha Council is clearly against the *bhikkhuni* ordination, it does not mean that all monks in Thailand oppose the *bhikkhuni* and their novices. There are also monks who are supportive of the female monastics, and monks do assume important roles in the *bhikkhuni* movements in Thailand and internationally (Itoh

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<sup>31</sup> To my knowledge, *Yasodhara* was continuously published until 2014. Its Thai version *Phutthasawika*, whose contents are not necessarily the same, is still ongoing today (as of 2018).

<sup>32</sup> *Nikaya* is a Pali and Sanskrit term (T. *nikai*), meaning ‘assembly’. In this case, it refers to ‘a group of monks or a monastic order’ (Keown 2003: 193).

2013: 361). Notably, the number of supportive monks in Thailand appears to be relatively few comparing to their total population.

Regardless of their presumed number, these supportive monks are crucial to the existence of *bhikkhuni*. Indeed, without these supportive monks, it would not be possible for the *bhikkhuni* to properly maintain the monastic codes, as some of them require the involvement of monks. For example, the *bhikkhuni* have to seek exhortation (*P. ovada*, *T. rap ovat*) from qualified monks twice a month, according to the *garudhamma*.<sup>33</sup>

According to Itoh, monks who support the *bhikkhuni* movement are mostly ‘monks who are peripheral to the central administrative authority of Thai *sangha*’ (2013: 368–369) such as so-called socially engaged monks and forest monks (*ibid.*). Readers should see Itoh (2013: 361–381) for an extensive discussion on the role of monks in the emergence of the *bhikkhuni*. Here, I only provide essential backgrounds on the roles of supportive monks of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries which are my main field sites.

For Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, views it as important for *bhikkhuni* to seek dependence on monks, a duty prescribed by the *vinaya* (Chatsumarn 2016: 34–35). During the course of my fieldwork, she led other monastics at the monastery to do so and regularly instructed them to adopt a humble stance toward monks, who, according to her, were like their ‘elder brothers’. The monk whom the female monastics seek dependence on the most is Phra Khru Suthammanat, the abbot of Wat Plak Mai Lai in Nakhon Pathom, the same province as the monastery.<sup>34</sup> The *bhikkhuni* seek exhortation from him twice a month in order to conform to the *garudhamma*.<sup>35</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>33</sup> *Garudhamma* is a set of eight rules that *bhikkhuni* have to observe for life. Its authenticity is questioned by some scholars (see Hüsken 2010). See Appendix 8 for the rules.

<sup>34</sup> Phra Khru Suthammanat was one of the four Thai monks who attended the historic international *bhikkhuni* ordination held at Bodhgaya in 1998 (Phra Khru Suthammanat and Somrit 2015). Notably, he seems to have become vocal about the *bhikkhuni* issue only recently (probably around 2013).

<sup>35</sup> During my fieldwork, the *bhikkhuni* went to Wat Plak Mai Lai to seek exhortation from him, but in 2017 Phra Khru Suthammanat is instead being invited to Songdhammakalyani Monastery. It is also noted that according to Itoh (2013: 380), who collected her data during 2007 and 2008, the monk who exhorted the *bhikkhuni* of Songdhammakalyani Monastery was Dhammaseni of Wat Wangtaku, who was influential and used to be the ecclesiastical chief of the city.

Phra Khru Suthammanat publicly supports the *bhikkhuni*. He argues for the legitimacy of *bhikkhuni* ordination and also gives interviews to media in support of *bhikkhuni* in general. During an interview with him, I asked why he is interested in the *bhikkhuni* issue and he simply replied that people kept asking him about it and as their teacher he had to study the issue. He further explained to me how the *bhikkhuni* ordination is legitimate<sup>36</sup> and that the *bhikkhuni* are part of ‘the fourfold Buddhists’ (*phuttha borisat si*)<sup>37</sup> who also have their share of responsibility for Buddhism and are beneficial for society.

For Nirodharam, the *bhikkhuni* and novices also stress the importance of seeking dependence on monks, and a growing number of local monks in the northern part of Thailand are particularly supportive of them. Two of the most prominent supportive monks of Nirodharam are Luang Pho Thong of Wat Phra That Sri Chomthong, who has been a teacher of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess of Nirodharam, since she was a *mae chi*,<sup>38</sup> and Phra Khru Palat (Khru Ba Ae) of Wat Saen Mueang Ma Luang (Itoh 2013: 374, 378; Delia 2014: 121–122). The warm support from local monks is seen by Itoh (2013) as being in accordance with Parnwell and Seeger’s theory of ‘relocalization’ of Thai Buddhism’, in which it is proposed that local monks play important roles in ‘localizing’ Buddhist doctrine to suit the needs of local people (Itoh 2013: 380–381). The female monastics, Delia (2014) proposes, are also probably seen by the local supportive monks as helping their local Buddhist revitalisation projects (ibid: 112–114). The simple response of a supportive monk of Nirodharam<sup>39</sup> (whom the *bhikkhuni* seek exhortation from)<sup>40</sup> to my question regarding his support for the *bhikkhuni* – ‘they help the work of

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<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 2 for his argument, which Bhikkhuni Dhammananda also agrees with and uses in the discourse.

<sup>37</sup> In this thesis, I refer to the concept as ‘the fourfold Buddhists’ in English, following the term used by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2010).

<sup>38</sup> He is also the one who gave her the Pali name – Nanthayani (Delia 2014: 122).

<sup>39</sup> To preserve his identity, the name is not revealed.

<sup>40</sup> Notably, for Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Phra Khru Suthammanat does give exhortation to the *bhikkhuni*. In contrast, for Nirodharam (both Chomthong and Sutthachit), the supportive monks do not give them exhortation, reasoning that there is no qualified monk to do so. The *bhikkhuni* still send their representatives to ask for exhortation twice a month in order to conform to the *garudhamma* and the monks conduct a brief ritual acknowledging their request. The situation at Nirodharam appears to remain similar to what Itoh (2013: 384–385) reports.

Buddhism here' – appears to support the two scholars' suggestion.<sup>41</sup> It is noted that regardless of the growing number of supportive monks in the northern part of Thailand, they tend to avoid giving interviews or appearing in the media in relation to the *bhikkhuni* issue.

#### 1.2.4 The current situation

Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices remain controversial figures. Their monastic status is not recognized by the government nor the Supreme Sangha Council. Regardless, there are approximately 270 long-term *bhikkhuni* and novices (i.e. *samaneri* and *sikkhamana*) across every region of the country (as of March 2018).<sup>42</sup> To my knowledge, most of them reside in their own monasteries and some stay in temples or meditation centres with monks and *mae chi*. Examples of the established monasteries are Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Nirodharam, and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, the first two of which were chosen as my main field sites.

The *bhikkhuni* and novices are a heterogeneous group. Their ages, education levels, hometowns and previous occupations are varied. Their ages range from 20 to 85 years old. Their education levels range from primary school to doctoral degree. Their hometowns are in every region of the country and their previous occupations range from sales people, teachers, and business owners to *mae chi*.<sup>43</sup>

*Mae chi*, as well as female renunciants in other forms, are notably reported not to be interested in or are even against the *bhikkhuni* ordination (e.g. Seeger 2006; Collins and McDaniel 2010; Cook 2010). However, as Lindberg Falk (2007) remarks, *mae chi* are not a homogenous group. As reported in Itoh (2013) and as I have met during the course of

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<sup>41</sup> See Itoh (2013: 374–381) and Delia (2014: 106–125) for extensive discussions on the supportive monks of Nirodharam.

<sup>42</sup> An interview with Kanchana Sutthikun on 25 March 2018.

<sup>43</sup> It is noted that, if we consider only Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, regardless of the heterogeneity, most of their female monastics appear to be educated and middle-class. To illustrate, at the time of my fieldwork, six out of ten long-term female monastics of Songdhammakalyani received higher education and, as of 2016, 31 out of 58 of long-term female renunciants of Nirodharam received higher education (10 out of 58 are notably *mae chi*, but Nirodharam does not provide figures that exclude them) (Nirodharam 2016: 73).

my fieldwork, there are *mae chi* who later become novices and *bhikkhuni*. Indeed, two of the established monasteries: Nirodharam and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, used to be nunneries (of *mae chi*) before. It is also not uncommon for *mae chi* to pay a visit to or stay overnight at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

Currently, there is no centralized institution for the *bhikkhuni* and novices, but there is an attempt to set a central standard for the various existing groups. Initiated by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in July 2013, the network of Thai Bhikkhuni Sangha (Theravada) was founded. It hopes to act as a centralized network for the Thai *bhikkhuni* and to create standard rules and practices related to them. For example, on 29 October 2013, at a meeting of the network that I witnessed, there was an agreement that all Thai women must be ordained as *sikkhamana* and complete a period of being *sikkhamana* for two years before being qualified to ask for the *bhikkhuni* ordination. This, according to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, is to set a good standard for the Thai *bhikkhuni* and to behave according to Buddhist rules. The network holds meetings regularly, around three times a year, at various *bhikkhuni* sites. It has to be noted that not all *bhikkhuni* and novices participate in the network. For instance, *bhikkhuni* and novices of Nirodharam, the largest *sangha* of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand, are not members. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, its abbess, simply said a couple of times during evening sessions at Nirodharam that the network had sent an invitation to her group but she does not have time to participate in it as she has so many disciples to take care of. As of 2014, *bhikkhuni* and novices from ten places had joined the network. They included those from Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama and those under the guidance of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi.<sup>44</sup>

The current numbers of *bhikkhuni* and novices may seem small, particularly in comparison to those of monks (348,433 as of December 2014) (National Office of Buddhism 2015),<sup>45</sup> however, their numbers have been gradually growing. Considering

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<sup>44</sup> The exact number of members was not available, but there were 22 *bhikkhuni* and female novices in the meeting on 29 October 2013. As of 2017, the network, according to Kanchana Sutthikun, the right hand person of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, ‘is not really working’ as the female monastics tend to be too busy to take part in the meetings. Nirodharam also does not join in. The network is now managed by Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama.

<sup>45</sup> This is the latest information I can get from the website of the National Office of Buddhism. The number also does not differentiate between ‘temporary’ and long-term monks.



that there was only one novice in 2001, the current number also shows a significant increase. Moreover, since 2009 temporary *samaneri* ordination has been made available to the public. To my knowledge, currently (as of November 2017) there are at least three *bhikkhuni* monasteries<sup>46</sup> constantly offering temporary *samaneri* ordination and there should be at least 1,434 Thai women who have received it.<sup>47</sup>

### 1.3 Literature about contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand

The topic of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand (as in other places) largely appears in literature in terms of the *bhikkhuni* ordination. The legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the ordination dominates academic literature. Scholars, particularly those in Buddhist studies and gender studies, contribute to the topic, as well as opponents and supporters of the *bhikkhuni* ordination (e.g. Rabieprat 2002; Seeger 2006). Sometimes the issue of *bhikkhuni* and their ordination also appears in the literature from perspective of *mae chi*, who, as mentioned, constitute the largest group of female renunciants in Thailand (e.g. Collins and McDaniel 2010; Battaglia 2015). As this thesis does not focus on the topic of *bhikkhuni* ordination per se, this section instead examines a growing literature on contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* which is directly related to its scope.

Ito is among the first group of scholars who pay attention to the wider issue of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand, not just the ordination, and she has written a series of articles based largely on interviews (e.g. Ito 2006, 2012, 2014). Ito's (2006) brief article about the Thai *bhikkhuni* importantly reveals social opinions and reactions to the unfamiliar women in the saffron robes, as well as the humble stance of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in relation to *bhikkhu*, a point which tends to be neglected in literature employing a strong feminist framework. Ito (2012), while focusing on what makes the ordination 'legitimate', also shows the social experiences of the women who have decided to become *bhikkhuni*, particularly their difficulties. Using Nirodharam as a case study, Ito (2014) significantly remarks that it is problematic and untrue to simply assume a

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<sup>46</sup> Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Nirodharam, and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama.

<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 7 for further details of temporary *samaneri* ordination and footnote 246 on p. 229 in the chapter for how the number is calculated.

dichotomy between English-speaking elite feminist women affiliated with international *bhikkhuni* movements, and local female practitioners, who are not interested in the *bhikkhuni* ordination.

Varaporn (2006), to my knowledge, is the first scholar to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* and she bases her fieldwork mainly at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. In her unpublished PhD thesis, Varaporn examines the relationship between the Buddhist monastic institution and female monasticism through both historical and ethnographical approaches. In contrast to previous relevant studies, she argues that the relationship between gender and institutional Buddhism is mutually reinforcing and dynamic. By examining various forms of women's monasticism, Varaporn shows how Buddhist women still find creative ways to practise religion amidst the constraints imposed by institutional Buddhism, which has become the most important legitimate religious source. The scriptural forms of *bhikkhuni* and novices in relation to institutional Buddhism are the focus of Varaporn's thesis, and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, is the central figure in it. Varaporn's focus is notably different to mine, although her ethnographic data in Chapter 6, which concerns how the female monastics construct their new controversial religious identity in society, are valuable to this thesis.

Suat Yan (2011) is another scholar who has conducted ethnographic work at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. In her unpublished PhD thesis, Suat Yan aims to portray the female monastics' life styles and religious practices, as well as what it means for them to be on this religious path. Notably, her focus is on Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, whose figure dominates the thesis. Being a feminist herself, Suat Yan employs a strong feminist framework in her work and sees the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement as part of the transnational phenomenon. Owing to her strong feminist framework, opponents of the *bhikkhuni* ordination are labelled by her as simply being androcentric. Being informed also by post-colonial studies and women's studies, Suat Yan emphasizes how Asian Buddhist women also have their own agency and argues that the female monastics and their supporters at Songdhammakalyani Monastery both resist and comply with dominant religious norms. Her main argument is that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is changing gender relations in Thailand by being a female monastic and through her feminist hermeneutical rereading of

Buddhist texts. Femaleness, she claims, can also signify ‘fields of merit’, similar to maleness, as the women become monastics. Apart from claiming that the female monastics are viewed as ‘fields of merit’, however, Suat Yan does not further examine how the gender relations are being transformed. Her limited access to only the English-speaking members of the monastery also means a potential loss of significant data from the group of non-English speakers.

The strong feminist framework and the attention paid to the international movements found in the work of Suat Yan (2011) can also be seen in the works of Lindberg Falk (2010) and Tomalin (2006, 2009). Lindberg Falk (2010) views the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement as part of the transnational *bhikkhuni* movements and even sees it as being influenced by Western feminism. Tomalin (2006, 2009), while similarly seeing the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement as part of the transnational movements, views it as another style of feminism called ‘religious feminism’, in which women use religion as a means to achieve empowerment and gender equality instead of relying on secular Western discourses.

This framework, and the almost exclusive focus on Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in these works, however, cannot represent all voices and perspectives of other female monastics, not to mention lay people. It is noted that even Tomalin herself, who claims that the *bhikkhuni* movements in Thailand can be seen as a style of ‘religious feminism’, realizes that not every monastic upholds the feminist agenda (Tomalin 2010: 84).<sup>48</sup> Regardless, the potential social implications and empowerment of the *bhikkhuni* movements that are referred to in some of Tomalin’s articles are of interest to this thesis. Tomalin (2006), as mentioned, interestingly examines the link between the *bhikkhuni* ordination and the potential empowerment of women claimed by several Thais. Starkey and Tomalin (2013) further look at the *bhikkhuni* ordination in relation to the issue of education. Significantly, they claim that the *bhikkhuni* ordination would lead to the opportunity for girls to also be temporarily ordained, similar to boys. This would offer poor girls a free education and thus would be highly likely to prevent them from entering the sex trade. They also briefly

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<sup>48</sup> I do not think that even Bhikkhuni Dhammananda can be classified into this religious feminism as she prioritizes Buddhism over feminism (see Chapter 4). Itoh (2013) also notes how Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has been misinterpreted as upholding similar agendas to the international *bhikkhuni* movements.

claim that the *bhikkhuni* can potentially offer religious education and guidance for lay women. It should be noted that these claims are simply speculation, as no solid data from the ground regarding the matter are provided in their work. Contrary to their work, my thesis explores the impacts of the ordination on society with ethnographic data.

Apart from Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Nirodharam, the largest *bhikkhuni sangha* in Thailand, is another *bhikkhuni* monastery where scholars have conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork. Three scholars, Lalita (2008), Itoh (2013) and Delia (2014) actually met one another during their fieldwork. Their ethnographic data are also helpful to this thesis.

In her unpublished master's thesis, Lalita (2008) focuses on how *samaneri* at Nirodharam<sup>49</sup> negotiate and sustain their new unconventional identity of *samaneri*. She reviews diverse forms of female renunciants in Thai Buddhism and portrays the structure and management of the monastery before analysing an act of ordination as a political negotiation. She suggests that negotiation by the monastery is done through attitudes of humility and passivity. The charisma of the abbess, which attracts lay followers, as well as good relations with local monks are regarded by Lalita as resources that the *samaneri* can utilize in their negotiation. Lalita's work is probably the first study that focuses on voices and perspectives of Thai female monastics other than the influential Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. From her work, we can also see how the monastics practically and skilfully maintain their existence at the local level.

Delving even deeper and looking even more broadly, Itoh's (2013) unpublished PhD thesis offers a richly-detailed and extensive ethnographic study of Nirodharam, as well as an impressive historical and textual examination of female Buddhist renunciants in Thai Buddhism. Her outstanding ethnographic data reveal voices, perspectives, and motivations for going forth and personal stories of female monastics, in particular those of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess of Nirodharam. Among the academic literature dominated by the figure of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, Itoh's work provides essential alternative pictures of Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices. Nirodharam's supportive communities

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<sup>49</sup> During her data collection, female monastics of Nirodharam were still *samaneri*. Notably, Lalita uses pseudonyms to refer to the monastery and its monastics.

of laity and monks are also examined by Itoh, particularly why and how they support the female monastics. Drawing on these data, Itoh convincingly shows that feminist discourses cannot capture the complexities surrounding Nirodharam and its supportive communities as well as the *bhikkhuni* movements in Thailand. Skilfully connecting her ethnographic data with her historical and textual examination, Itoh further argues that the phenomenon of the *bhikkhuni* emergence in Thailand should not be viewed as concerning a small group of women doing a revolutionary act nor as being mainly influenced by the international *bhikkhuni* movement and Western feminism. Instead, the phenomenon should be placed in its local context – the sphere of Thai Buddhism. The emergence of the *bhikkhuni* in Thailand, she argues, is part of a constant process of negotiation and change in Thai Buddhism that allows it to still be relevant to an ever-changing, globalizing Thai society.

Regardless of its merit, Itoh's approach, as noted by Delia (2014: 8), reveals very little about the dynamics of gender ideologies in Thai society. In her unpublished master's thesis, Delia (2014) employs theoretical concepts of gender, power and agency, particularly in a regional Southeast Asian framework, to examine female monastics of Nirodharam and their communities of supporters. Exclusively using ethnographic fieldwork, Delia looks at the interplay between gender notions and the contemporary emergence of women in the unconventional role of female monks. Delia's main argument concerns how the female monastics can be socially accepted in existing gender ideologies in which women are widely held as having negative *karma* and the capabilities to defile the sacred. She argues that the shared local understanding that both sexes can accumulate spiritual power and merit, as well as the continued superior status of *bhikkhu* in the monastic setting, help to negate the cognitive dissonance experienced on seeing women in the sacred robes of monks, and thus facilitates their social acceptance in existing gender ideologies. Delia convincingly shows how the unconventional women as female monks can fit into existing gender ideologies, which are in the process of changing. However, how these women can potentially effect changes in gender ideologies, gender notions and gender relations notably remains open to exploration and this will be explored in this thesis.

## 1.4 Scope and significance

In his account of a funeral in Bali, Geertz (1973: 183–185) significantly shows us the multiplicity of voices and experiences in a single event. In the funeral, which both elders and young generations attended, the elders assumed the most active roles, leaving the young people to have enough free time for discussions. The discussions revealed that even within the same generation, young people held various views and opinions of religion, an important element in the funeral itself. For example, a man voiced that he simply knows gods exist, another man reasoned that it is more about symbols, and another man said that humans cannot understand these things so we are better to follow what has been done before. Regardless, all of them were there attending the same funeral.

Similarly, the phenomenon of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand embodies a multiplicity of voices and different people can have various experiences of it. As shown in the last section, there is a growing literature on contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand and voices of the female monastics, monks and female renunciants have received considerable attention in the literature. Voices of lay people, particularly ordinary lay people,<sup>50</sup> however, seem to receive less attention. We know about their voices and perspectives mainly in relation to why and how they support the *bhikkhuni*. Other aspects of their voices and perspectives, including gender-related aspects and how the phenomenon of *bhikkhuni* plays a role in their lives, are relatively unknown. This thesis thus pays particular attention to these aspects.

To clarify, this thesis is not concerned with the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the contemporary *bhikkhuni* ordination, as that has already received substantial attention in the academic literature. It is also not primarily about the *bhikkhuni*, their lives, their emergence, their relation to institutions, their strategies for existence or their way of fitting in to existing gender ideologies, as these have been covered by other scholars (see 1.3).

This thesis, instead, mainly concerns the *bhikkhuni* in society and in relation to lay people, especially lay women. Indeed, lay people constitute the largest group of people in society and lay women are those who interact with *bhikkhuni* the most on a daily basis. This thesis

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<sup>50</sup> Here I refer to lay people who are not particularly influential or outstanding.

focuses on the social impacts of the *bhikkhuni*, an important aspect that deserves more attention in the literature, particularly on gender. It asks why and how the identity of the fully ordained *bhikkhuni* interrelates with and potentially influences gender ideologies, gender relations and gender roles in Thai society. The thesis thus explores the socially assumed values of ordination and pays detailed attention to lay people's voices and perspectives, particularly those who interact with the *bhikkhuni* (i.e. lay visitors to *bhikkhuni* monasteries and women who were temporarily ordained as *samaneri*). Perspectives of the *bhikkhuni*, especially on gender, or at least the perspectives which are conveyed to lay people, including the way they portray and position themselves, are also examined in order to understand a more comprehensive picture.

As shown in 1.1., Buddhism, full ordination, and gender in Thai society appear to interrelate with one another, leading to why the potential social impacts of *bhikkhuni*, the focus of this thesis, are an intriguing aspect to investigate. Buddhism here, as mentioned, also has to be the type that is practised and upheld on the ground. Following Napier (2013), who highlights how crucial it is to attempt to understand others in their modes of thought, I treat seriously the local concepts and ways of thinking that are embodied in a multiplicity of voices, as they constitute and influence how people think and live their lives.

## **1.5 Methodology**

The methods applied to collecting data for this study were participant observation, interviews and questionnaires. My fieldwork for data collection was undertaken in Thailand between October 2013 and September 2014. Main field sites were Songdhammakalyani Monastery, situated in the city of Nakhon Pathom, in the central part of Thailand, and Nirodharam, located in the province of Chiang Mai, in the northern part of the country.

I initially became interested in these two *bhikkhuni* monasteries since I was writing my research proposal for the PhD program in 2011. Their distinct characteristics caught my attention; Songdhammakalyani Monastery has Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the first

contemporary Theravada *bhikkhuni* in Thailand as its abbess, and Nirodharam hosts the largest community of female monastics in Thailand. They were also probably two of the most well-known *bhikkhuni* places at that time. In January 2013, I visited both *bhikkhuni* monasteries as a pre-fieldwork pilot study and found that there seemed to be interesting differences in term of gender perceptions and language usage between the two monasteries that deserved further exploration. At both places, I also discussed with *bhikkhuni* the potential of doing fieldwork there and was told that it should be possible on condition that I strictly followed rules and daily schedules that they set for lay women who stay overnight. The pre-fieldwork pilot study led me to a firm decision that these two *bhikkhuni* monasteries would be my main field sites.

Apart from the main field sites, I also went to three other *bhikkhuni* sites for data collection in order to have a broader picture of Thai *bhikkhuni*, which, of course, also meant their potential influences on Thai society. These places were Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan, located in Bangkok, Phuttha Witchalai, also in Bangkok, and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, situated in the province of Songkhla in the southern part of Thailand. These places were chosen because they are relatively established *bhikkhuni* monasteries (or are affiliated with them) and their locations were convenient for visiting, an important factor to take into consideration due to my limited time for data collection.

My fieldwork started in October 2013 when I flew back to Thailand after spending a year studying in London. In the first month, I familiarized myself again with Thai society, developed questionnaires and started distributing a set which targeted urban ‘ordinary lay people’ (i.e. lay people who are not eminent figures).<sup>51</sup> For another nine months, I focused on two main field sites: Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, starting with the first before moving to the latter. Around two months of my fieldwork were spent collecting essential relevant Thai materials and visiting the three *bhikkhuni* places: Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan, Phuttha Witchalai, and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, two to three times each.

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<sup>51</sup> I designed two sets of questionnaires: one targeted ordinary urban lay people and the other targeted lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam. Details of the questionnaires are discussed later in the section.



During my data collection at the two main field sites, I alternated between staying there for around 10 to 15 days each time per month<sup>52</sup> and staying outside.<sup>53</sup> These arrangements were mainly due to the focus of the research itself, controversy around the issue of the *bhikkhuni* in Thai society, and constraints related to being a lay person staying temporarily at the monasteries. As mentioned previously, my research does not focus on the lives of *bhikkhuni* per se, but more on how their identity as fully ordained monastics interrelates with gender ideologies in Thai society and their potential influences on gender notions of lay people, particularly of lay women. Lay people who interact with the female monasteries also do not stay at the monasteries all the time. In addition, controversy over the *bhikkhuni* issue means that obvious connections with the *bhikkhuni* monasteries can distort the objectivity of data collected from certain groups of people (e.g. local lay people). The uniform of the monasteries that lay people who temporarily stay there have to wear is one of the obvious connections and thus is one of the constraints on collecting data about these groups of people. Also, apart from wearing the uniform, lay people who temporarily stay at the two monasteries have to follow the monasteries' tight schedules and ask for permission every time before going outside, which create limitations to mobility and to interviewing daytime lay visitors.

Staying outside the monasteries when collecting data then was also beneficial. When I was outside, I visited the monasteries as a daytime visitor and followed the monasteries' activities that happened outside. I also contacted lay followers for further enquiry in order to deepen my understanding about them.<sup>54</sup> In addition, I visited surrounding areas of the monasteries and conducted interviews with renunciants or conversed with locals.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The exception was in March 2014, a transitional month from a field site of Songdhammakalyani Monastery to that of Nirodharam. In that month, I did not stay overnight at the monasteries. I interviewed lay followers of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and visited it in daytime to ensure that I did not miss the chance to obtain important data for my work. Then, from mid-March, I moved to focus on Nirodharam, visiting it in daytime, and starting to gain access to the field.

<sup>53</sup> Mostly at my home in the central part and sometimes in a hotel.

<sup>54</sup> This include face-to-face interviews, email correspondence and telephone interviews.

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that I attempted to interview *mae chi* at a nunnery which is also located in urban areas in the central part (the name is not revealed to preserve its identity) but my request was rejected. I made an initial arrangement by telephone and was careful not to mention the word *bhikkhuni*, telling them only that I was interested in the topic of female *nak buat*, and all seemed to go well. However, when I arrived at the nunnery on the arranged date and time, I was not

Admittedly, my pattern of data collection could have meant losing a certain depth in my data. However, given my research goals and the way the phenomenon is variously experienced, it is necessary to collect data in this fashion. In addition, the depth of data that I might have lost should have already been covered in previous ethnographic works focusing mainly on one *bhikkhuni* monastery (Varaporn 2006; Lalita 2008; Suat Yan 2011; Itoh 2013; Delia 2014). Also, owing to the sensitivity of the *bhikkhuni* issue in Thai society and ethical concerns, some in-depth data should not be revealed in any case. My strategy for data collection can also lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the Thai *bhikkhuni* in society and is more pertinent to my main research focus.

I gained access to both of my main field sites by introducing myself as a PhD student in Anthropology at University College London, who was interested in the issue of *bhikkhuni* in relation to Thai society. As mentioned, I initially visited both Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in January 2013 and discussed the potential of doing fieldwork there with the *bhikkhuni*. I contacted both monasteries again in August 2013, asking for permission to collect data there for my research. For Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I emailed Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, and she granted me permission to stay on condition that I strictly followed the monastery's schedules, rules and ways of living. For Nirodharam, I visited Nirodharam's Facebook page and contacted the monastery via a Facebook message. As the female monastics do not use social networks, P Fa, a devoted lay follower who managed the page, in turn contacted the monastics for me and passed on their permission.

When I was back in Thailand in October 2013, I visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery in the daytime to talk about further details. Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, the second most senior *bhikkhuni* at the monastery, was the person I met and she would also become one of my key informants. I subsequently stayed in the monastery as a lay woman, called *mae khao* (literally meaning a white mother).<sup>56</sup> I had to keep five Buddhist precepts (*sin ha*)

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allowed to conduct any interviews. I was simply told that I was not qualified and that the person who had made the initial arrangement with me must have misunderstood my request. Also, for Nirodharam, I did not manage to converse with lay people in local villages as planned. See footnote 146 of p. 135 in Chapter 3 for explanation.

<sup>56</sup> The term *mae phram* is avoided in the monastery because Bhikkhuni Dhammananda sees it as indicating the influences of Brahmanism.

and wore the white uniform of the monastery, ate vegetarian food, tied up my hair and strove to be prim and proper. I also had to follow the monastic routine by waking up at 5 a.m., attending morning and evening sessions of chanting, meditating, listening to sermons and/or watching *bhikkhuni*-related media, following the monastics during the alms round, helping out with whatever I was asked to, joining daily group work in the evening and so on. During the day I mostly stayed in a reception area, largely with Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna in the morning and Sikkhamana Dhammathiti in the afternoon.<sup>57</sup> My job here was to ‘catch’ visitors and lead them to the reception area to talk to the monastics first. I then acted as a ‘tour guide’ and led visitors around the monastery to the *vihara* (an assembly hall which usually hosts the main image of Buddha), where the Medicine Buddha<sup>58</sup> was hosted. Not all visitors wanted to have a tour; some had been there before, some only wanted to make merit with the *bhikkhuni* and/or talk to them and a few headed straight to the *vihara*. It was during the time of helping out at the reception that I could talk to visitors, most of them lay people, and hand out my questionnaire, a set that targeted lay visitors to the monasteries. During lunch time for the *bhikkhuni* and novices, I was also assigned to take care of the reception area, which included directing visitors to the dining hall where they were having lunch, and answering phone calls. A few lay women (fewer than five at any one time) also stayed overnight as *mae khao* from time to time, offering me the chance to converse with them during our daily routines. Most of the women stayed for one to five nights, with only those who were thinking of receiving ordination staying longer.

In mid-March 2014, I moved to focus my study on Nirodharam. I flew to Chiang Mai in late March and visited Nirodharam in the daytime to discuss further details before my stay. I met Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess, for the first time, and had discussions with

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<sup>57</sup> Notably, during the period of temporary *samaneri* ordination, instead of staying at the reception during the day, I participated in activities that the *samaneri* must do, which mostly involved attending classes given by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and other female monastics.

<sup>58</sup> The Medicine Buddha is also known as Bhaisajya-guru (Keown 2003). According to Keown, the Medicine Buddha is ‘especially venerated in Tibet, China, and Japan’ and is ‘a Buddha in the Mahayana who epitomizes the power of healing, both on a physical and a spiritual level’ (2003: 31). That Songdhammakalyani Monastery hosts the Medicine Buddha shows the monastery’s certain acceptance of Mahayana Buddhism. Here, I have to strongly emphasize that it is not in the scope of my thesis to examine or evaluate the extent to which female monastics’ practices and teachings conform to Theravada doctrines.

her, as she recognized my name from P Fa. After that, I went to stay at the monastery in April. I stayed there as a lay woman called *mae phram*. I had to observe eight Buddhist precepts (*sin paet*), the minimum number of precepts to be kept at the monastery, which meant, for example, that I could not eat after noon. As a *mae phram* of this monastery, I also had to wear its white uniform, eat vegetarian food, tie up my hair and attempt to be prim and proper. Every time I visited the monastery I had to pass the ritual of ‘receiving the precepts’ (*rap sin*) before my stay and also had to pass the ritual of ‘leaving the precepts’ (*la sin*) before I left. There were also other *mae phram* (around five to ten at any one time) regularly staying overnight at the monastery, which was renowned as a place for women ‘to practise *dhamma*’ (*patibat tham*).<sup>59</sup> Their average length of stay tended to be from two to seven days, with only a few staying longer; from this small group came those who finally sought ordination. As a *mae phram*, I had to follow the monastic routine by waking up at 3.30 a.m., attending morning and evening sessions of stretching, chanting, meditating and listening to sermons, following the monastics during the alms round, sweeping the floor, helping out with whatever I was asked to do, and joining the other activities for *mae phram* (e.g. chanting and listening to stories from Tipitaka from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.). Here, I was not assigned the role of helping out at the reception as at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, and largely participated in the structured activities for *mae phram*. While this meant I had fewer chances to meet daytime visitors, I could build a greater rapport with other *mae phram*.<sup>60</sup> I also handed out questionnaires to the *mae phram* and engaged in informal conversations with them during our daily activities.

Participant observation, including informal daily conversations, significantly contributed to the data collected. These data were successfully obtained only through building rapport with the monastics and lay people by sharing their daily activities. Further inquiry with

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<sup>59</sup> *Dhamma* means the Buddha’s teachings and *patibat tham* literally means to practise *dhamma*. It generally refers to realizing the Buddha’s teachings in action.

<sup>60</sup> It is notable that the schedule for lay women who temporarily stayed at Songdhammakalyani Monastery was less tight than at Nirodharam. During the day, they normally helped out with whatever they were asked to do or simply had free time. Their number was also fewer than in Nirodharam. This means that while I mostly stayed at the reception area during the day at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I could also develop rapport with the lay women.

the lay followers, which took place when I stayed outside the monasteries, was also made possible only because of my known affiliation with the monasteries.

It is notable that during my stay at the monasteries, I was repeatedly asked by many *bhikkhuni*, novices, *mae chi*, lay people and even a couple of monks I met at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam about my potential ordination. In case readers are curious why I have not become ordained myself, I provide these reasons as justification for my decision. First and foremost, my research focus, as mentioned, is not on the *bhikkhuni* (and novices) per se. In addition, if I had become ordained as a *samaneri*,<sup>61</sup> my association with the *bhikkhuni* movements would be so obvious that collecting certain data would not be possible. The way lay people would treat and interact with me would also be different and it would be much harder for me to understand their perspectives. Being a *samaneri* could also hinder my data collection as I would be regulated by rules such as not handling money. My ability to travel and to converse with people, particularly the opposite sex, for example, would have been severely limited.

Moreover, I also collected data through semi-structured interviews, most of which were recorded. Questions asked during the interviews, aimed largely at gaining a better understanding of the interviewees' stories and their gender ideologies, can be found in Appendix 1. It should be noted that questions found in the Appendix are only guidelines, and during the interviews I always made sure that the interviewees had freedom to express themselves.

For Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I arranged interviews with all long-term residents of the monastery (10 female monastics in total), two *mae chi* who intended to receive the *bhikkhuni* ordination, and 33 Thai women who were temporarily ordained as *samaneri* in December 2013. I also conducted interviews with lay followers of the monastery (around 15 lay women and three laymen), including Kanchana Sutthikun, a vocal and devoted

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<sup>61</sup> For me, being ordained as a *bhikkhuni* is out of the question. This is because one has to normally become a *samaneri* and a *sikkhamana* for two years at either of the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries before being able to receive the *bhikkhuni* ordination.

follower. In addition, I interviewed Phra Khru Suthammanat, a supportive monk of the monastery at Wat Plak Mai Lai, and a *bhikkhuni* who stayed there.<sup>62</sup>

For Nirodharam, I arranged interviews with 24 long-term renunciants of Nirodharam (22 *bhikkhuni* and novices and two *mae chi*), which comprised around half of their long-term renunciants (49 in total as of July 2014; 47 female monastics and two *mae chi*), one temporary *mae chi*, and around 15 lay women. I also interviewed five *mae chi* at two nearby temples.<sup>63</sup> Owing to the concerns of the monastics at Nirodharam and my position, I did not manage to conduct a formal interview with one supportive monk of Nirodharam.<sup>64</sup> However, this aspect has been extensively covered by Itoh (2013) and Delia (2014).

I also conducted interviews, most of which were recorded, at the other three *bhikkhuni* sites. The arranged interviews included a *samaneri* and a lay woman at Phuttha Witchalai, three *bhikkhuni* and a lay woman at Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan, and five *bhikkhuni* and novices, and two *mae chi* at Thipayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama.<sup>65</sup>

Another method of data collection was questionnaires. I designed two sets of questionnaires: one targeted urban, ‘ordinary lay people’ (i.e. lay people who are not eminent figures) and the other targeted lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam. The questionnaires comprised semi-structured interviews and Likert scales, in which the questions are largely formed based on existing literature (See 2.3) and aimed at gaining understanding of respondents’ gender ideologies. In addition to the basic questions, questions in the part related to Likert scales were similar in the two sets of questionnaires. Some questions do diverge as the two sets of questionnaires target different groups of people. For example, in the first questionnaire, respondents are asked about their opinions of *bhikkhuni* ordination, while in the other questionnaire, respondents

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<sup>62</sup> The *bhikkhuni* used to stay at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. Her name is not revealed to preserve her identity.

<sup>63</sup> Names are not revealed to preserve their privacy.

<sup>64</sup> Notably, contrary to Phra Khru Suthammanat (the supportive monk of Songdhammakalyani Monastery), supportive monks of Nirodharam do not give interviews to the media regarding the *bhikkhuni* issue.

<sup>65</sup> At these three places, apart from interviews, I also participated in their religious activities and had informal conversations with people.

are asked about the reasons they came to the monastery. The two questionnaires can be found in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3, respectively.

The questionnaires targeting urban, ordinary lay people were distributed as hard copies and in online platforms. I left 50 hard copy questionnaires at a café in an urban city near Bangkok with consent from the café owners,<sup>66</sup> and received 45 of them back. Five people helped me in distributing the remaining questionnaires, which were handed out in a private company, a public enterprise, a university, a public shopping area, and a hospital, in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai.<sup>67</sup> I received 132 questionnaires back from 135 that were given out.<sup>68</sup> For the online version, I created the questionnaires via a Google tool and put the link to the questionnaires on the online platforms of Facebook and the famous Thai web board, Pantip. I set the tool to stop receiving responses after one month and I received 240 responses in total. Two out of these 240 responses were from a monk and a *bhikkhuni*. As I intend to focus on the urban, ordinary lay people, the responses from the monk and the *bhikkhuni* were not considered. In total, I received 415 responses, 177 of which were from the hard copies and 238 from the online platforms. Microsoft Excel and NVivo were also used for the data analysis (which is reported in Chapter 2).

As for the questionnaires targeting lay visitors to the monasteries, I collected 75 responses from Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 72 responses from Nirodharam.<sup>69</sup> At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, all the responses came through the hard copy version of the questionnaires I handed out myself, while at Nirodharam 28 responses were collected through the hard copy version I handed out, and the rest (44 responses) were collected through the online version. This, as mentioned, was because of my different assigned tasks in the monasteries. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I was assigned to help out at the reception for most of the time and thus had ample opportunities to meet visitors, hand

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<sup>66</sup> The names are not revealed to preserve their identity.

<sup>67</sup> Names are not disclosed to preserve their identities.

<sup>68</sup> The response rate of questionnaires in hard copies are 95.68 per cent.

<sup>69</sup> To clarify, responses to the questionnaire that I collected from lay visitors to the monasteries do not by any means reflect the total numbers of lay visitors to both monasteries. As mentioned, due to my assigned roles there were also lay visitors whom I did not have the chance to meet.

them the questionnaires and wait for them to fill them in.<sup>70</sup> At Nirodharam, in contrast, I spent most of my time with other *mae phram* and could not simply stay at the reception area. I therefore had fewer chances to meet lay visitors who did not stay overnight, and when I did meet them many did not have time to fill in the questionnaires on the spot.<sup>71</sup> To solve this problem, I developed an online version of the questionnaires. After that, when I met the lay visitors who did not have time to fill in the questionnaire on the spot, I asked for their email addresses and sent them the link to my questionnaire later. As I met many fewer day visitors at Nirodharam in comparison to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I also asked P Fa, who takes care of Nirodharam's Facebook page, to help me post the link to my questionnaire on the page.

It should also be noted that because of ethical concerns there may be some limitations on what can be presented in this thesis. The issue of *bhikkhuni* remains controversial in Thai society and the *bhikkhuni* themselves are still in a relatively vulnerable state. Gaining trust from them and their lay supporters meant a commitment to their safety and well-being. I was also directly asked sometimes to censor some parts of the interviews. While I strive to be as objective as possible throughout the thesis, this ethical concern cannot be ignored and the thesis should be read with this caveat in mind.

## **1.6 My identities and position**

In the field, my identities as a Thai Buddhist woman and a PhD student in Anthropology at University College London were both noticed and I will thus discuss them in relation to my data collection.

First of all, being a native Thai Buddhist woman was an advantage in building rapport with female monastics and lay people, particularly lay women with whom I could quickly build rapport. My choice of research topic tended to be seen as demonstrating my interest

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<sup>70</sup> No one I handed out the questionnaires to at Songdhammakalyani monastery refused to fill them in, so the response rate is 100 per cent.

<sup>71</sup> The response rate of Nirodharam is notably lower than that at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. Around ten people I met simply did not have time to fill in the questionnaire on the spot, so the response rate for the hard copy version is around 74 per cent.



in Buddhist knowledge and thus, by implication, that I was a good Buddhist. During my initial daytime visits to both monasteries, my mother and/or father also accompanied me. The monastics and lay people who saw me with them would remark how lucky I was to have supportive parents, and some said to me that I have merit (*mi bun*). I was also regularly told by many monastics to bring my mother with me to stay at the monasteries. My personal life tended not to be seen as separated from my academic purpose. For example, as Bhikkhuni Munitsara, a Harvard graduate at Nirodharam, kindly reminded me before I left the monastery, ‘while a PhD may seem to be important now, it is just a worldly concern (*thang lok*). Do not forget that there is so much more to life [than that]’.

Simultaneously, I was socially placed into the hierarchical relationship that existed between lay people and the monastics. Spatial organization in both monasteries clearly separated the status of lay and ordained, of which the latter was held to be superior. For instance, during morning and evening sessions in both monasteries the monastics always sat in the front rows before the Buddha statues and lay people sat behind them. Lay people also always paid respect to the monastics through prostrating (*grap*) three times at the end of daily chanting and in their daily lives always showed respect to the monastics. In addition, the use of language, especially the way of saying ‘I’ and ‘you,’ which was not limited to personal pronouns, indicated a different hierarchical status, and every time I referred to myself and addressed the monastics, the hierarchical status, in which I was subordinate, was enacted. This status meant I could not keep asking them uncomfortable questions and pressing them to say what they were reluctant to say.

At the same time, as I was placed in the social position of a lay woman, I could embrace experiences similar to those of other lay people, particularly lay women. These experiences helped in deepening my understanding of the lay people who interacted with the monastics, as well as the prestigious status of the monastics. As the focus of my research is very much on the social implications of the *bhikkhuni* and novices, the advantage of my identities clearly facilitated my research.

On the other hand, my identity as a female Thai Buddhist constrained my interaction with another group of people – the monks. As monks practise celibacy, women, as the opposite

sex, should not have much interaction with them. Their position vis-à-vis lay women is also much superior. As a lay Thai woman, I was socially assumed to know my place.

Informal talks with monks I met during my fieldwork at both Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam clearly reminded me of my position vis-à-vis the monks, especially when discussing such a sensitive and controversial topic as the *bhikkhuni*. For example, a monk who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery to ask the abbess to supervise a *mae chi* he knew (I was assigned to guide him and his follower to the *vihara* and thus had a chance for an informal talk) did not reply to my very polite question regarding his support for the *bhikkhuni* and simply changed the topic. Another monk I met when following two *bhikkhuni* at Nirodharam to witness their asking for exhortation<sup>72</sup> also simply replied to the same question with a stern face, saying that I should ask the *bhikkhuni*. The *bhikkhuni* then carried on the conversation with the monk and with me to lessen the heavy atmosphere before the monk gave a further short response to my question, which I mentioned in 1.2.3. Owing to my identities and the nature of *bhikkhuni* topic in Thai society, I managed to arrange a formal interview with only one monk, Phra Khru Suthammanat, who is vocal about supporting the *bhikkhuni sangha* and publicly argues for the legitimacy of Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination. Itoh (2013:40) also reports the constraints she faced when collecting data with the monks because of her identity as a young female researcher. It has to be noted that while I also assume a similar identity in terms of being a young female researcher, my relative lack of foreign prestige<sup>73</sup> means that I was even more constrained than she was.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, interviews with the supportive monks of Nirodharam have already been conducted by Itoh (2013) and Delia (2014) (and they have already covered the role of monks in relation to Nirodharam). My

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<sup>72</sup> During the time of my fieldwork in 2013 to 2014 I did not follow the *bhikkhuni* to witness them seeking exhortation from *bhikkhu*. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery I was assigned to look after the reception area during the time the *bhikkhuni* went to Wat Plak Mai Lai for seeking exhortation and at Nirodharam I did not ask to follow representatives of the *bhikkhuni* to the temples, focusing more on other aspects. Regardless, to fill this blank, in January 2017 I went to Songdhammakalyani Monastery to witness this event and in February 2017 I went to Nirodharam to do so.

<sup>73</sup> Association with a foreign educational institution is, of course, different from having a foreign nationality.

<sup>74</sup> It is noted that Delia, who is also a female researcher, does not mention that she faced difficulty in collecting data with monks. Notably, she is German and thus has Western prestige.

research focus is also not on supportive monks nor the *bhikkhuni* movements per se. In addition, to utilize my identities to be of advantage and compensate for the constraints, I use observation, especially through the lens of language, to look at the monks, noticing, for example, their position vis-à-vis the *bhikkhuni* and their presence on ordination days. Notably, the constraints also benefitted me insofar as I can fully empathize with the lay women.

As a Thai Buddhist woman, lay people also often assumed that I would already be familiar with certain basic shared concepts, such as *karma* and merit (*bun*). Therefore, they would not provide simple explanations of the concepts but would talk in more detail about what they wanted to say. Their understanding of the concepts can be grasped from the conversations and related questions I asked. To further clarify, I do not see this as a constraint on my research as it served to emphasize which concepts tend to be taken for granted in society, rendering them powerful.

Furthermore, apart from my identity as a Thai Buddhist woman, my identity as a PhD student at University College London also played its part in my data collection. Importantly, it acted as my ‘legitimate license’ to be interested in the lives of people and to ask them questions. Affiliation with a university in the United Kingdom also stirred an interest among people, particularly the laity. Lay people tended to ask me further related questions and when they learned that I had received a scholarship for my study, and not paid for it, they seemed to approve me as qualified to ask them further questions. It has to be noted that, in comparison to my identities as a Thai Buddhist woman, my identity as a PhD student at the institution in London played a much smaller role in my social position in the field. For instance, my presumed ‘foreign prestige’ through an association with University College London did not give me a superior status to anyone in the field. The monastics, as mentioned, were of higher status than me. Lay people also tend to be older than me and it is customary for younger generations to be polite and respectful of those who are more senior.

## 1.7 The *bhikkhuni* monasteries

This section introduces the main monasteries of my fieldwork: Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam. Owing to limited space, a brief introduction to the other three places where I conducted interviews and participated in religious activities – Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, a branch of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi at Phuttha Witchalai and Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan – can be found in Appendix 5.

### 1.7.1 Songdhammakalyani Monastery

Watr Songthamkanlayani Phiksuni Aram, which I refer to in this thesis as Songdhammakalyani Monastery, is a *bhikkhuni* monastery with the first contemporary Thai ‘Theravada’ *bhikkhuni*, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, as its abbess. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has regularly engaged with the international *bhikkhuni* movement since she was a lay woman, is a prolific writer, and is vocal about establishing the *bhikkhuni sangha* in Thailand and elsewhere. Therefore, it is unsurprising that her monastery attracts huge attention from both Thai and international media, scholars, and activists and is probably the most well-known *bhikkhuni* monastery in Thailand.



Figure 4: Songdhammakalyani Monastery

The monastery is situated around 50 kilometres from Bangkok in a province called Nakhon Pathom, next to the highway and not so far from the city centre. There are urban

housing estates near the monastery, which the monastics walk past during the alms round. The location of the monastery is also in an interesting religious sphere, with Pathom Asok, a monastery that deviates from the governing power of the Supreme Sangha Council, and Wat Phra Prathon, a local Buddhist temple, nearby. A big golden statue of ‘the future Buddha’<sup>75</sup> is located to the right-hand side of the entrance and can be easily seen from the highway.

In the monastery, there is a main building, a library, a dining hall, a kitchen, a *vihara* hosting a Medicine Buddha and five buildings for residents. One building belongs to the abbess, and another belongs to her non-biological sister, who is a lay person. Another building has a sewing room on the ground floor and the second floor is for monastics to stay. Another two buildings are for both monastics and visitors. During the time of my data collection, a big building that was going to be an international centre for learning about *bhikkhuni* issues was under construction.

The monastery was established in 1960 by Voramai Kabilsingh (Bhikkhuni Ta Tao), who was ordained in Taiwan and is the former abbess and the mother of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. As the word *wat* in Thai is officially reserved for the residence of *bhikkhu*, Voramai adopted the word *watr*, a homophone of the word *wat*, to name the monastery (Varaporn 2006: 30). *Watr* means ‘practices that should be done’ or ‘behaviours’ (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). According to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the monastery uses the word *watr* instead of *wat* in order to conform to the academically correct way of writing the words derived from Sanskrit (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014d: 92). The word *watr*, she explains, means practising and the name Songdhammakalyani Monastery refers to the place of women who are practising *dhamma* (ibid.). The words ‘*bhikkhuni aram*’ were added to the name of the monastery in the era of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (ibid.).

During the course of my fieldwork, there were ten *bhikkhuni* and novices (six *bhikkhuni* and four *sikkhamana*, three of whom received their *sikkhamana* ordination during my

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<sup>75</sup> The monastery states that this statue is that of the future Buddha (T. Phra Sriariyamettrai, P. Metteyya) and that it was built here by lay followers of Bhikkhuni Ta Tao (Aksonsri 2014). It should be noted that statue of the future Buddha is not very common in Thailand, particularly as the portrayal of the ‘Laughing Buddha’ with a big stomach and joyful smile.

fieldwork) as long-term residents. Additionally, in February 2014, three more women received *samaneri* ordination from the abbess and two of them intended not to disrobe.<sup>76</sup> There were also two lay women staying at the monastery; one was the sister of the abbess and the other was Kanchana Sutthikun, the abbess's secretary and a vocal supporter of the *bhikkhuni* movements. Two lay women from a local community came to the monastery regularly; one of them was paid to do daily work while the other voluntarily came to help. Two other lay women were also hired to cook.

Aptly, given that its name contains the terms '*bhikkhuni aram*', the visibility of *bhikkhuni* in the monastery is strong. Here I do not mean the visibility of the living *bhikkhuni* as their visibility is obvious, but that of material objects related to the *bhikkhuni*, including booklets and chants. Notably, the strong presence of material objects related to *bhikkhuni* in the monastery is very unusual, as it is rare in Thailand to find such things.<sup>77</sup> In the monastery, there are at least two sets of statues of the 13 accomplished and foremost *bhikkhuni* (*etadagga*); one set was gifted to the monastery while the other was made from clay and crafted by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda herself. A big photographic portrait of Bhikkhuni Ta Tao, in her light yellow robes, can also be found in the library, and posters showing pictures of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda are in both a reception area and a dining hall. Various booklets and handouts for visitors and books for sale also contain *bhikkhuni* images or concern *bhikkhuni* issues. In addition, two chants devoted to the *bhikkhuni* are featured in the monastery's chanting book (*nangsue suatmon*) and they are chanted regularly. One of them called Mahasanting Luang is chanted every evening, while the other, named Gotami Sutta, is chanted in the evening before the holy Buddhist day (*wan phra*).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> As of 2017, one of them has become a *bhikkhuni* and is still at the monastery while the other moved to another monastery.

<sup>77</sup> Seeger (2010: 562) reports that the exceptions are, for example, the murals in Wat Chetuphon (Wat Pho) with the 13 accomplished and foremost *bhikkhuni* (and ten female lay followers), tile mosaics at Phra Mahathat Napphaphonphumsiri Stupa with a number of *bhikkhuni* (and their lay followers) from the Buddha's time, and 52 *bhikkhuni* statues at Wat Thepthidaram.

<sup>78</sup> The language of the chant is Pali but its translated meaning in Thai is also printed in the book. Mahasanting Luang here concerns praising the 13 accomplished and foremost *bhikkhuni* as well as asking for their protection and blessings (Songdhammakalyani Monastery, year not known: 31–32), while Gotami Sutta is about the historic event when Mahapajapati Gotami asked for and finally received ordination as a *bhikkhuni* from the Buddha (ibid: 91–99).

Regarding practices at the monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda states that she is open to various Buddhist traditions and aims ‘to bring the best to her monastery’. One can then, for example, worship a big statue of the Medicine Buddha, which is rather uncommon in normal Thai temples,<sup>79</sup> and join the monastics in the early mornings during weekends for meditation in the zen style, led by the abbess. Suat Yan (2011) describes the practices here as ‘non-sectarian’, in which the monastery embraces practices from various Buddhist traditions. In addition, the monastery focuses on practising *dhamma* in daily life.<sup>80</sup> The religious practices, the monastery explains, are not limited to the time that one does sitting meditation, a relatively common practice in monasteries in Thailand, but should also occur during the time that the person is doing other daily activities.<sup>81</sup>

As ‘the first stop for people who are interested in *bhikkhuni* issues’, according to Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, visitors came to the monastery daily. The majority of them were lay Thais, but there were also monks, *mae chi*, *bhikkhuni*, and novices from other monasteries, foreigners and those working in the media. During the time of my stay, there were at least two media groups coming to the monastery to make documentaries: one was from Malaysia and the other was Thai.<sup>82</sup> Occasionally, there were also non-Thai visitors, indicating the monastery’s international reputation. Every Sunday the monastery also hosted a ritual called *thawai kong than* (literally meaning offering alms) from 10 a.m. to before noon, in which between 15 and 30 lay Thai people, primarily women, came to participate. Most of them were devoted followers of the abbess and more than half were those who used to be temporarily ordained as *samaneri* at the monastery.<sup>83</sup> On special

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<sup>79</sup> While the appearance of the Medicine Buddha is uncommon in Thailand, the monastery explains that the concept of the healing Buddha has long existed as Phra Kring (Suat Yan 2011: 210–212)(Phra Kring is a small Buddha statue that is usually portrayed as holding a pot of holy water, a lotus flower, or herbs that can cure diseases (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2010)). During my fieldwork, this explanation was still regularly reiterated, particularly to new lay visitors, who would join the monastery’s ‘tour’ to the *vihara* of the Medicine Buddha.

<sup>80</sup> Suat Yan (2011) terms it ‘embodying mindfulness in daily lives’.

<sup>81</sup> See Suat Yan (2011), Chapter 4 for detailed descriptions and an examination of practices and teachings at the monastery.

<sup>82</sup> See Secret Tribes: Bhikkhunis aired on Channel News Asia in 2014 (the YouTube link was recently blocked) and *Klang Mueang* [in the city] broadcasted on Thai PBS in 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPY1gEybXsI> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLKAs2RIgjs>).

<sup>83</sup> They were called *luk thit*. *Luk* refers to a child and *thit* is a word that is also used to refer to men who had experienced being temporarily ordained.

occasions, such as important Buddhist holy days (*wan phra yai*), there were more people visiting and participating in religious activities at the monastery.

Apart from daytime visitors, a few lay women, normally less than five at any one time, also stayed overnight at the monastery with permission from the abbess. During the time of the temporary *samaneri* ordination period, which the monastery has hosted in April and December every year since 2009, the number of residents at the monastery reaches its peak (see Chapter 7).

Moreover, the *bhikkhuni* and novices have regular interaction with local community. For example, they took turns to go on the alms round twice a week, on Sundays and on Buddhist holy days.<sup>84</sup> One to three lay women and/or female renunciants normally walked behind them with a cart and helped them to carry the alms received from locals. In addition, the monastery reaches out to the public through its own website: <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org>, which is available in both Thai and English, and Facebook accounts, which are managed by Kanchana Sutthikun and Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna.<sup>85</sup>

### 1.7.2 Nirodharam

Aram Phiksuni Nirotharam, or Nirotharam, which I refer to in this thesis as Nirodharam, is the largest community of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand. Nirodharam has two branches, which are both in the province of Chiang Mai, in the northern part of Thailand. The main and older community, founded in 1995, is in Chomthong district while the other one, established in 2003, is in Doi Saket district.<sup>86</sup> Both places were under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess, who founded the two places since she was a *mae chi*. As she has been a *mae chi* for 26 years, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani had already gained a local

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<sup>84</sup> Normally, around two to three of them went at the same time, except during the period of temporary *samaneri* ordination when the newly ordained *samaneri* also took turns to join in.

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/thai.bhikkhunis?fref=ts> and <https://www.facebook.com/songdhammakalyani.monastery?fref=ts>.

<sup>86</sup> The one in Doi Saket is named Sutthachit Practice Centre, taking the surname of Dr Maitri Sutthachit, who donated the place to Bhikkhuni Nanthayani (then a *mae chi*).



reputation, networks, support and followers before receiving *samaneri* ordination in Sri Lanka in 2006 and *bhikkhuni* ordination in 2008 from the same country. Nirodharam then notably used to be a nunnery before becoming a *bhikkhuni* monastery following the abbess' ordination.<sup>87</sup>

The main monastery in Chomthong is relative remote, surrounded by green fields, mountains, and some small local villages within walking distance. It takes around 15 minutes by car from the main road, where Wat Phra That Sri Chomthong, a famous and highly respected temple, is situated. The lands of the monastery are on both sides of the road. On one side, there is a main building where people usually gather near the entrance for religious activities, a kitchen, a dining place, a library, a small building as an office for administrative purposes, and various small buildings as residences for monastics and lay people who stay overnight. On the other side, there is an ordination hall and a grand bell-shaped *stupa* (*chedi*) hosting the Buddha's relic (*phra that*).



Figure 5: Nirodharam

During the course of my fieldwork, there were around 47 long-term *bhikkhuni* and novices, making Nirodharam the largest community of female monastics in Thailand. Two *mae chi* also stayed there as residents. They were all rather mobile between the main

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<sup>87</sup> See Itoh (2013: 194–219) for a detailed life history of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani and her founding of the monastery.

monastery and the one in Doi Saket district. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani also travelled regularly between the two places to supervise her disciples.

Despite hosting the largest community of *bhikkhuni*, the material visibility of *bhikkhuni* at Nirodharam is relatively sparse, particularly in comparison to the Songdhammakalyani Monastery. In the monastery, there are no *bhikkhuni* statues and there is only one picture of a historical *bhikkhuni* hanging in a common area: the drawing of Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta on a boat. I did see Bhikkhuni Nanthayani show the others a portrait of herself, which she received from a disciple, during an evening session, but to my knowledge the portrait was not displayed in the common area after that time. In addition, booklets and handouts distributed by the monastery are never about *bhikkhuni* issues.<sup>88</sup> Also, no special chant is devoted to *bhikkhuni*, whether in its chanting book or in daily morning and evening sessions.

Religious practices at Nirodharam are seen by both their female monastics and lay followers as strict (*khreng*). The monastics also see themselves as practising Buddhism according to the Theravada tradition and the Tipitaka. Unlike at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, one can see no sign of zen-styled meditation, for example. According to Itoh (2013: 257), the monastery's focus on meditation and strict disciplinary practices can lead to it being classified as part of the forest tradition that emphasizes 'meditation (P. *patipatti*), strict observance of discipline and rigorous asceticism'. The monastery's concern to learn directly from the Tipitaka, however, makes it distinct from the forest tradition in general (*ibid.*). The teachings of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess, concentrate on reaching *nirvana*, in which the Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, particularly the cessation of suffering, are the focus (Itoh 2013: 221–232).<sup>89</sup>

As a locally renowned place for women to practise *dhamma*, Nirodharam welcomes visitors daily. Some were daytime visitors and some, who were lay women, stayed overnight (around five to ten at any one time). On special occasions, for example, Buddhist camps (*khai thamma*) and important Buddhist holy days, the number of laity

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<sup>88</sup> One exception, as far as I know, is a booklet called *Why there have to be bhikkhuni*, which was recently published in 2016.

<sup>89</sup> See Itoh (2013), Chapter 7 for detailed descriptions and an examination of the teachings at Nirodharam.

who stay overnight increases. Usually once a year, the monastery also offers temporary *samaneri* ordination, available to the public since 2011 (see Chapter 7). In addition, the female monastics regularly interacted with locals. For instance, they took turns to go on alms round every day along different routes, with around one to three lay women walking behind them with bags to help carry the alms received.

Unlike Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the monastics at Nirodharam tend to avoid giving interviews or appearing on the media. Many of them (e.g. Bhikkhuni Warayani) told me that these are their preferred practices and ones which allow them to respect the local monks who support them (so that they will not have potential problems with the Supreme Sangha Council). The official website and Facebook page of the monastery are also managed by lay followers, rather than the monastics. It is also stated clearly on Nirodharam's official website that 'the website is not in any way related to politics or to the demand for rights'.<sup>90</sup>

## 1.8 Outline of the thesis

In this introductory chapter I have examined the relationships between Buddhism, full ordination and gender in Thai society; provided essential background to the contemporary existence of Thai *bhikkhuni*; reviewed relevant literature; presented my research methodology; introduced my main field sites along with discussing my identities and position in the field; and stated the scope and significance of this thesis. The thesis is subsequently structured in three parts: (1) the fully ordained form and contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thai society; (2) the *bhikkhuni*, gender, and power; and (3) the social impacts of *bhikkhuni* on gendered society.

In Part I, this thesis explores the social aspects of the fully ordained form in relation to contemporary *bhikkhuni* through Thai discourses on women's full ordination and through the lens of language. Here, my focus is, first, on Thai social values embodied by the fully ordained form; second, on social perceptions of women assuming this fully ordained form;

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<sup>90</sup> See their website and Facebook page at <http://www.nirotharam.com/home.htm> and <https://th-th.facebook.com/Nirotharam>, respectively.

and third, on the perceived status and identities of contemporary *bhikkhuni*. This Part comprises Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 examines the fully ordained form through various and diverse discourses on *bhikkhuni* ordination. It approaches the *bhikkhuni* ordination from the perspectives of ordinary lay people, whose voices are relatively absent from Thai public discourse and from the scholarly literature. Based on my questionnaire—which targets urban, ordinary laity—the chapter looks beyond the scholarly discourse and takes the multiplicity of everyday voices into account. It shows that the legitimacy of ordination—which is at the heart of scholarly and religious debates, and receives substantial attention in those literatures—is of less concern among ordinary laity. Instead, it is gender that becomes prominent in everyday discourse. The chapter, in turn, argues that *bhikkhuni* ordination involves more than canonical concerns and, importantly, relates directly to wider gender ideologies.

Chapter 3 utilizes the lens of language and investigates perceived status and embodied identities of contemporary *bhikkhuni*, who are claiming the fully ordained form. The lens of language here refers to usages of categorical and indexical linguistic markers that reveal the way Thai Buddhists are locally categorized as having different statuses and identities. The chapter argues that the *bhikkhuni* are assuming the category of *bhikkhuni* of the fourfold Buddhists and its embodied identities by using multifaceted linguistic modes of expression. Importantly they are claiming the identity of monks (*phra*), once inaccessible to women. Here, notably, the identities and position that they are assuming are both accepted and contested across Thai society.

In Part II, the thesis explores contemporary *bhikkhuni* and novices in relation to gender and power. As Part I shows how the *bhikkhuni* form is associated with prestige and wider gender ideologies, this part examines how those concerns play out in their daily lives. The focus, here, is on their perspectives on gender and feminism, their narratives of seeking renunciation, and their everyday activities in relation to the issues of gender and power. Two approaches are used: the first involves treating their perspectives on gender and feminism, their narratives, and daily activities seriously in their own right; while the

second considers these as self-presentations.<sup>91</sup> The first approach is used because I have no doubts that the female monastics told me the truth as they knew it. At the same time, because of my identity as a lay Buddhist and my ethical concern to protect the *bhikkhuni*'s confidences, the data presented may not fully reflect the *bhikkhuni*'s perspectives and their ways of being. These approaches comprise Chapters 4 and 5, which adopt the first and the second approaches respectively.

Chapter 4 uses the first approach to examine *bhikkhuni* and novice perspectives on feminism and gender. It proposes that feminist discourse on gender equality and women's rights are not apposite for understanding female monastics, who, regardless of nuance, are not concerned with identifying as feminists. Instead, as committed Buddhist practitioners, they, first and foremost, see themselves as monastics who are engaging in Buddhist practices to transcend gender. Taking their perspectives seriously, the chapter argues that these female monastics and their commitment to transcend gender can be better understood as an attempt to achieve a certain kind of freedom. It is freedom from an attachment called gender, which is but one of attachments that for them needs to be transcended in order to reach *nirvana* – the ultimate goal which embodies no attachments.

Chapter 5 takes the other approach and looks at the daily lives and narratives of female monastics seeking renunciation as a form of self-presentation. Regardless of nuance, their daily lives and narratives fundamentally share a similarity in showing their spiritual orientation, away from power and worldly concerns. This characteristic can also be found in their perspectives on feminism and gender presented in Chapter 4. Taking an approach that treats the voices and daily lives of female monastics as a form of self-presentation, the chapter argues that the shared characteristic of not being concerned with power is crucial to the social acceptance of the *bhikkhuni* and novices. This acceptance, I argue, is largely attributable to its alignment with broader notions of power that are widely shared in Southeast Asia. In other words, the self-presentation of female monastics, who commonly share a disregard for power, is paradoxically what secures them a prestigious position that is itself endowed with power.

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<sup>91</sup> To clarify, here I simply mean 'the way they present themselves to others' without reference to Goffman's concept of self-presentation.

Parts I and II, which present the social significance of the fully ordained form for women and the perspectives of the women who are assuming this important form, provide a basis for further exploration in the final part. In Part III, the thesis finally examines the social impacts of *bhikkhuni* on gendered society. It prioritizes the perspectives of lay people who interact with female monastics, most of whom are women.<sup>92</sup> Here, the focus is on the roles of *bhikkhuni* in the lives of lay women and the impacts *bhikkhuni* have on these women and on wider gender ideologies that emerge in the social sphere of contemporary Thai society. And it is this concern that is the focus of Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 6 looks at *bhikkhuni* and novices in relation to lay women by focusing on the roles played by *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics (*nak buat*) in the lives of lay women. This Chapter suggests that female monastics act both as ‘fields of merit’ for lay women, and as their life consultants and spiritual leaders. Indeed, female monastics may also provide lay women with places of refuge in times of social and spiritual stress. Notably, I claim that these roles are enabled by the local significance of monastic identity more generally, local protocols that encourage interaction between monastics and lay populations of the same sex, and local mode of oral knowledge transmission. The Chapter concludes by arguing that as female monastics, *bhikkhuni* and novices are particularly beneficial for lay women and can even empower them.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the temporary *samaneri* ordination for Thai women, which has been offered to the public through *bhikkhuni* monasteries only since 2009. Here, the focus is on how temporary ordination impacts gender in society and becomes the vehicle for social change. It suggests that local traditions and values attached to ordination and the wearing of saffron robes are crucial to enabling and unleashing the social potential of women’s temporary ordination. Importantly, the gendered notion of repaying the debt to one’s parents is being redefined precisely through this channel, illustrating how gender roles are changing as a function of Buddhist ideologies, not in spite of them. The chapter thus argues that the temporary *samaneri* ordination is empowering for Thai women in general, as it functions as a medium for transforming gender ideologies and gender roles in new and novel ways. Though it may be too early to say with conviction, it may well

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<sup>92</sup> This includes women who were temporarily ordained as *samaneri* in the *bhikkhuni* monasteries.

also prove to be the case that it is this aspect of the *bhikkhuni* movement that in the long run will have the most social impact on Thai society and its views of gender.

Overall, this thesis proposes that the social significance of *bhikkhuni*, who assume the fully ordained form, can be completely understood only when the values of ordination are fully realized in their Thai context. And this, I argue, can be achieved only through taking an approach that at once considers a multiplicity of voices, local traditions, and local modes of thought. In the end, this thesis argues that the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* has wider social impacts on Thai society where religion is not separated from the domain of gender, but a guiding force that subsumes it. In this line of thinking, fully ordained women are not only beneficial for lay women, but can even empower them. Thus through both full and temporary ordination, gender relations and ideologies are changing in positive ways for Thai women. This empowerment and positive transformation is not the result of a feminist agenda. In contrast, female monastics all emphasize Buddhist engagement as a means of transcending rather than transforming gender. This transcendental perspective, which is similar to their shared self-presentation, is arguably what secures them social acceptance in assuming, as fully ordained *bhikkhuni*, this most important and consequential religious form.

## **Part I**

**The fully ordained form and contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thai society**



## Chapter 2

### Everyday discourse: the *bhikkhuni* ordination from the eyes of ordinary laity and gender

After the *samaneri* ordination of the current Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in particular, there have been constant public debates regarding the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thai society. Monks, *bhikkhuni* and lay intellectuals actively contribute to the debates, and their voices have also been covered in the literature (e.g. Seeger 2006; Varaporn 2006; Duean 2008).<sup>93</sup> Opinions of female Buddhist practitioners, especially *mae chi*, have also been considered (e.g. Collins and McDaniel 2010; Battaglia 2015). However, voices of those who constitute the largest group of Buddhists in society – ‘ordinary lay people’ (i.e. lay people who are not influential figures) – appear to be missing from both the public discourse and from existing literature.

In this chapter, I focus on the voices of ordinary lay people concerning the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thai society. I start by presenting recurring arguments used by supporters and opponents of ordination in Thai public discourse. Then, based on my collected questionnaire data, I examine perspectives of the ordinary laity toward ordination and further explore their gender ideologies. I argue that the legitimacy of ordination, which is at the heart of the scholarly and religious debates, is of less concern in everyday discourse. In contrast, the aspect of gender plays a significant role among the ordinary laity. Moreover, gender ideologies of the ordinary laity arguably appear to relate to their stances on ordination. Therefore, I argue that the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination not only involves canonical concerns, but also interrelates with the gender ideologies of people in society.

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<sup>93</sup> See particularly Seeger 2006 and Varaporn 2006 for eminent voices of both supporters and opponents of the ordination. See Duean 2008 for voices of monks and leading lay Thai intellectuals in Buddhism.

## 2.1. Public discourses on the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thai society

Debates on the *bhikkhuni* issue have been ongoing since the *samaneri* ordination in the 1920s. The level of public involvement and the fervent nature of the debates vary according to different situations. For example, after the Dhammananda's *samaneri* ordination in 2001, the debates became more lively and gained more public involvement (Varaporn 2006: 199–200), and when the first public *bhikkhuni* ordination occurred in Thailand in 2014,<sup>94</sup> the *bhikkhuni* were in the spotlight and again instigated further debate.

The legitimacy of ordination or lack thereof, which is closely related to Theravada-ness (e.g. identity and purity), is viewed by a number of scholars as the main issue in the debates surrounding the controversial contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand (e.g. Seeger 2006; Varaporn 2006; Ito 2012). On the other hand, using a strong feminist framework, some scholars argue that the debates concern conflicts between patriarchal and non-patriarchal minds (Rabieprat 2002; Suat Yan 2011).

As scholars (see particularly Seeger 2006 and Varaporn 2006) have covered various opinions from prominent academics, thinkers, and Buddhist practitioners regarding the *bhikkhuni*'s debates, what I intend to do in this section is to identify recurring arguments used to oppose and to support ordination. Based largely on existing scholarship and also on what has recently appeared in the media, I classify the commonly recurring arguments of both sides into four main themes. To clarify, I do not claim that all arguments in use are covered, but I believe that the main recurring ones are. To further clarify, I have no intention and I am in no position to evaluate whose arguments are more convincing nor to judge the legitimacy of ordination.

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<sup>94</sup> There were *bhikkhuni* ordinations that occurred in Thailand before, but they appear to have been held privately. In 2005 there was a *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand performed by a non-Thai *bhikkhu* and in 2006 there was another ordination in the country conducted by international dual *sanghas* (Ito 2012: 67–68).

### 2.1.1 Against the ordination

The Supreme Sangha Council (*Mahathera samakhom*), the highest clerical administrative institution in Thailand, has taken a firm position against ordination since the *samaneri* ordination in the 1920s, even before the *bhikkhuni* movement developed at the international level. In 1928, the Supreme Patriarch at that time ordered a decree forbidding Thai monks from performing ordination for women to be *samaneri*, *sikkhamana* or *bhikkhuni*. The decree's content, which is translated into English by Varaporn (2006), is as follows:

For a woman to become a *samaneri* according to the Lord Buddha's permission, she must receive an ordination from a *phiksuni*. He only permitted a *phiksuni* of more than 12 years standing to serve as a *pawattini* or *upatcha* [both meaning 'preceptor']; he did not permit a *phiksu* [male monk] to act as a preceptor [for women]. The *phiksuni* lineage has long been completely extinct. Since no *phiksuni* exists who can give a *samaneri* ordination, no *samaneri* likewise exists who has been ordained by a *phiksuni*. They declined and disappeared together. A person who confers a *samaneri* ordination lays down that which the Buddha did not lay down, and revokes that which the Buddha stipulated. Such a person is an adversary [*sian-nam*] of the religion, a condemned example.

For this reason, monks and novices of all orders may not give ordination as *phiksuni*, *sikkhamana* [*phiksuni* aspirant] and *samaneri* to women from now on. (Varaporn 2006: 102)

The Supreme Sangha Council appears to publicly reiterate its stance against ordination whenever related events happen, and regularly refers to the decree of 1928. In November 2014 when Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, a *bhikkhuni* monastery in Songkhla in the southern part of Thailand, hosted a *bhikkhuni* ordination for Thai women, the Supreme Sangha Council reacted strongly (Chatsumarn 2016: 70–71). On that occasion the monastery invited Sri Lankan monks and *bhikkhuni* to conduct the first ever public *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand (ibid.). Subsequently, the Supreme Sangha Council again ordered all Thai monks to follow the 1928 decree strictly and attempted to cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to implement a rule in which foreign monks had to inform the Supreme Sangha Council and receive its permission before being

able to conduct an ordination for women (*Daily News* 2014). Notably, the permission may never be granted since the Supreme Sangha Council also stated that it had to prevent such events from happening in Thailand ever again (*ibid.*).<sup>95</sup>

Apart from the Supreme Sangha Council, many monks are vocal against ordination. One of the most, if not the most, influential monks is the revered and renowned scholar, Phra Payutto.<sup>96</sup> He is ‘the foremost authority on canonical questions in Thailand’ (Seeger 2006: 165) and his opinion is representative of ‘the orthodox voice of Thai Buddhism’ (Varaporn 2006: 212). His book *Responses to Dr Martin*:<sup>97</sup> *Buddhist rules on bhikkhuni* was also published in Thai. A number of lay intellectuals, particularly in Buddhist studies, and female Buddhist practitioners, including *mae chi*, also voice their opinions against ordination or in disregard of ordination according to the literature (e.g. Seeger 2006; Varaporn 2006; Duean 2008; Collins and McDaniel 2010; Ito 2012; Battaglia 2015).

In this section, based on existing literature and items that have recently appeared in the media particularly during the course of my research, I classify recurring common arguments against or in disregard of the *bhikkhuni* ordination into four main themes. These are (1) the impossibility and illegitimacy of the ordination, (2) the ordination as unnecessary, (3) foreign and Western influences, and (4) the sex and gender of women.<sup>98</sup>

The most prominent recurring line of argument against ordination concerns the canonical interpretation that the *bhikkhuni* ordination is impossible and illegitimate. The authoritative Supreme Sangha Council has been propagating the argument, as have a number of opponents. In this line of argumentation, the only legitimate *bhikkhuni* ordination is a dual ordination conducted by both *sanghas* (*bhikkhu sangha* and *bhikkhuni sangha*), and since the *bhikkhuni sangha* has already disappeared, the ordination is simply impossible (Seeger 2006: 159; Varaporn 2006: 211; Ito 2012: 59–61).

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<sup>95</sup> After that, vocal lay supporters of the *bhikkhuni* made a complaint to various organizations. See footnote 107, p. 85 for further details.

<sup>96</sup> His current ecclesiastical status (as of 2017) is Somdet Phra Buddhakosajarn.

<sup>97</sup> Dr Martin here refers to Dr Martin Seeger, a prominent scholar in Thai Buddhism at the University of Leeds.

<sup>98</sup> I use the term ‘sex and gender’ here as it concerns the term *phet* in Thai. The term *phet* can refer to both biological sex and gender, or to either, depending on context.

The opponents also reject an argument of the supporters that Chinese nuns have carried on the lineage and can assist in the dual ordination (see the next section). They consider it as a cross-*sangha* ordination (P. *nanasamvasa*, T. *nanasangwat*), while a legitimate ordination is understood to be performed only by a member of the same community (Seeger 2006: 162–163; Phra Payutto 2010: 323–326). According to Seeger (2006: 163–164), this cross-*sangha* ordination can also lead to further problems. The Dharmaguptaka school that the Chinese nuns belong to uses a different language from that of Theravada Buddhism, which can render the ordination invalid because of ‘incorrect wording’ (ibid: 163). Also, the Dharmaguptaka school has different rules for authorizing *sima*, ‘the boundary that clearly defines the area in which legal acts (*sanghakamma*) can be carried out’ (ibid: 164), from those of Theravada, which, Seeger argues, can be problematic. Seeger (2006) further states that according to Chamnan Nisarath, a Thai scholar, the Dharmaguptaka school has different ways of understanding the *dhamma* and possesses different *vinaya* (ibid: 164).<sup>99</sup>

Another argument of the proponents—that the ordination can be conducted by the *bhikkhu* alone—is also dismissed by the opponents. They tend to echo the firm interpretation by Phra Payutto (2010: 332–338) that only the dual ordination by both the *bhikkhu sangha* and *bhikkhuni sangha* is legitimate. The *bhikkhuni* candidate has to ‘be ordained in the *bhikkhuni sangha* and be purified in the *bhikkhuni sangha* before receiving the ordination from the *bhikkhu sangha*. [It] consists of two procedures’ (ibid: 336). In Phra Payutto’s view, in the dual ordination the Buddha gradually gives more roles in ordaining new *bhikkhuni* to existing *bhikkhuni*, not to the *bhikkhu*. The *bhikkhuni* are principal actors in giving the ordination and the *bhikkhu*’s role is only to give approval. Phra Payutto (2010: 341–346) further voices his concerns that if the ordination solely by the *bhikkhu* is accepted as legitimate, there will be new problems in the future, particularly among the *bhikkhu* and the new *bhikkhuni*. The unity, harmony, and longevity of the *sangha*, he fears, will probably be shaken.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Phra Payutto (2010: 302) also does not see the Dharmaguptaka school as Theravada.

<sup>100</sup> Speaking in terms of rights, Phra Payutto (2010) further remarks, ‘women always have the right to be ordained. The problem is who will have the right to ordain [them]? The owner of the

Apart from the main recurring argument discussed, other lines of argumentation are also constantly in use, largely as sub-arguments, to oppose ordination. The *bhikkhuni* ordination as unnecessary for pursuing the spiritual path is the second recurring line of argument. In general, in this line of argument, it is stated that a person of whatever form and status can engage in Buddhist practice and pursue the spiritual journey. Therefore, it is not necessary for women to be ordained as *bhikkhuni*. The argument is noted by scholars to be one of the common reasons for opposing ordination (Varaporn 2006: 223–224; Ito 2012: 61; Battaglia 2015: 51).

For instance, a lay Buddhist scholar, Thongyoi Saengsinchai, is reported to use this line of argument to strengthen his stance against ordination (Varaporn 2006: 224; Ito 2012: 61). The Supreme Sangha Council also utilized this discourse in its official resolution in 2002 about the *bhikkhuni* ordination (Varaporn 2006: 224). Some monks who are against ordination also deployed it. For example, Phra Thepdilok, in arguing against ordination, is reported to reason that ‘[h]ad Chatsumarn any knowledge of *dhamma* practice and spiritual liberation, she would have known that ordination is unnecessary. Everyone is equal in practising *dhamma*...’ (Sanitsuda 2001: 297). Phra Panyananda, according to Sulak Sivalak (cited in Sanitsuda 2001: 77), also told Sara Phasit, who used to be ordained as a *samaneri*, that women do not need to wear the robes of the *bhikkhuni* to practise.

Interestingly, this line of reasoning is also used by female Buddhist practitioners, particularly *mae chi*, who disagree with and/or are not interested in the *bhikkhuni* ordination. As Battaglia (2015: 50) notes, ‘[t]he common opinion was that the possibility of achieving the highest goals of Buddhism does not rest on one’s status as a *bhikkhuni* versus a *mae chi*’. Highly educated *mae chi* scholars of Pali are also reported to view the *bhikkhuni* ordination as unnecessary as the form of *mae chi* is sufficient for their spiritual practices (Collins and McDaniel 2010). Three influential Buddhist women: Mae Chi Supanphan na Banchang, Mae Chi Sansanee, and Prof Rancuan Intharakamhaeng, are also reported to hold similar views (Seeger 2006: 173–175).<sup>101</sup>

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right, the *bhikkhuni sangha* (*phiksuni song*), is gone. This is the problem. There is nobody who has the right to ordain [them]’ (ibid: 414).

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Lindberg Falk (2007: 10–11) and Cook (2010: 162–165) for further opinions of *mae chi* on the *bhikkhuni* ordination.

Foreign and Western influence is the third recurring line of reasoning against ordination. Concerns about these influences are about both the ordination itself and about the motives of its supporters. Varaporn (2006: 215–218) notes that the contemporary *bhikkhuni* ordination tends to be seen by the opponents as non-Theravada and thus non-Thai. Its foreignness is highlighted by the act of Thai women having to seek the ordination from outside the country (ibid.). Moreover, as the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Theravada tradition is regarded as impossible by many opponents, women who receive the ordination tend to be seen as foreign and un-Thai (Varaporn 2006: 218–220). There is also a common assumption of the *bhikkhuni* movement as ‘a Western imposition’ (Itoh 2013: 20) and as influenced by Western feminism (Tomalin 2006: 393). Women who support ordination are thus seen as trying to ‘westernize the religion’ (Battaglia 2015: 46) and main supporters of ordination are viewed as feminists who prioritize women’s rights and freedom over Tipitaka (Montri 2010). The rhetoric of rights and equality, which is utilized by many vocal lay supporters of ordination, is also reportedly criticised, especially by *mae chi*, as incompatible with Buddhist values and as indicating improper motivation for seeking ordination (Cook 2010: 164–165; Battaglia 2015: 45–46).

A statement recently broadcasted on official websites, such as one that belongs to the National Office of Buddhism in Kanchanaburi city, is an exemplar of how this line of argument is used for opposing ordination. Written by Phra Thepwisutthikawi, who acts as a representative of the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, the statement underlines the impossibility of ordination, and praises the Supreme Sangha Council and monks for ‘respect[ing] the Buddha, not a principle of human rights or that of rights and freedom’. Supporters of the ordination are, in contrast, labelled as ‘those who are obsessed with trashy Western values of rights and freedom’ and ‘those who worship the principles of human rights and constitution instead of the Buddha’ (Phra Thepwisutthikawi 2014).

The fourth recurring line of argument against ordination concerns the sex and gender of women. For example, Phra Khru Thammathonkhanchitma, a senior monk, is reported as saying that his actual reason against the *bhikkhuni* ordination is that women menstruate and it makes them emotional and unreasonable, unsuited to be ordained (Sirot 2010). Reference to menstruation here seems to fit with what Terwiel (2007) describes as ‘unsaid

prejudices' against ordination.<sup>102</sup> According to Terwiel, many Thais view women, who undeniably have to menstruate, as capable of defiling the magical power of the monks, which is connected to the sacred saffron robes. Thus, he says, they do not perceive women as suitable to wear the saffron robes and become *bhikkhuni*.

An article of Bhikkhu Shitonkaro from Wat Phra Srimahathat, a prominent temple in Bangkok, which was published in *Matichon Online* in February 2010, is an example of how the sex and gender of women are used as reasons against their ordination. In the article, after citing the prevailing discourse concerning the impossibility of *bhikkhuni* ordination, Bhikkhu Shitonkaro says that women are reluctantly allowed to be ordained by the Buddha, who sets as many as 311 rules for *bhikkhuni* because they misbehaved more often than did men as *bhikkhu*. The different number of rules, he further argues, indicates that women are prone to be reprimanded by society more easily than men because of their gender. Therefore, he suggests, they should only be *mae chi* and *chi phram* (women who wear white clothes and keep eight precepts). Interestingly, he further argues that the saffron robes are not suited for women to wear as they have long been associated only with men and that 'if women come to share the same symbolic saffron robes with monks, the traditional symbolic and cultural power may be decreased' (Bhikkhu Shitonkaro 2010).

### 2.1.2 For the ordination

The most vocal person in providing arguments supporting the Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand is undoubtedly Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the first contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni*. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has been a prolific writer since she was a lay woman and she also regularly gives interviews to the media, both international and Thai, as well as participating in seminars and public talks. Some other *bhikkhuni*, a number of lay intellectuals, and a few monks, of whom the most vocal is Phra Khru Suthammanat,

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<sup>102</sup> Kunlavir (2005), although not mentioning menstruation, also claims that gender bias is one of the most important informal structural obstacles against the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thai society. Her claim is notably a speculation based on reported and widespread local gender-biased beliefs such as the idea that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma*.



also take part in producing, disseminating, and reiterating reasons in support of the ordination.

In this section, based on data from the existing scholarship and on what has recently appeared in the media, I classify recurring arguments used to support the ordination into four main themes. These are (1) the possibility and legitimacy of ordination, (2) the *bhikkhuni* as a part of the fourfold Buddhists (*phuttha borisat si*), (3) the ordination as significant and beneficial, and (4) the ‘rights’ of women to be ordained.

As the most prominent lines of argument against the ordination concern its impossibility and its lack of legitimacy, it is unsurprising that the main line of argument supporting ordination is about its possibility and legitimacy. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and her disciples regularly explain how the *bhikkhuni* ordination is legitimate. Numerous written works concern the issue (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014d; Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014c; Kanchana 2014; Suthada 2014: 249–259; Kanchana 2016), as well as public talks that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda attends. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the legitimacy of the ordination is also often explained to the public, for example, during the project of the temporary *samaneri* ordination.

One argument in support of the possibility and legitimacy of ordination is that the lineage of the *bhikkhuni* has never been broken. Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta, a daughter of King Asoka, a famous Buddhist king of India, went with other *bhikkhuni* from India to Sri Lanka in order to ordain new Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni* (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2011: 15). The *bhikkhuni sangha* subsequently flourished in Sri Lanka, and in the fifth century (433) Bhikkhuni Devason and other *bhikkhuni* went from Sri Lanka to China to ordain *bhikkhuni* there, starting the existence of the *bhikkhuni sangha* in China (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014c: 14–15; Suthada 2014: 266–268). Supporters thus reason that regardless of the *bhikkhuni sangha*’s disappearance in Sri Lanka, the *bhikkhuni sangha* in China still exists and carries on the lineage. Therefore, they argue, the lineage of the *bhikkhuni* has never been disrupted (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2011: 15; Suthada 2014: 266–268).

In addition, to further affirm that the ordination is legitimate, the supporters argue that dual ordination is still possible through the initial assistance of the *bhikkhuni* from China

who **carry on** the lineage. Also, recognizing that the assistance of these *bhikkhuni* can risk the event being labelled as a cross-*sangha* ordination, the supporters explain that after the dual ordination is performed, an act called *dalvikamma*<sup>103</sup> can also be conducted by Theravada Sri Lankan *bhikkhu* for the newly ordained *bhikkhuni* (e.g. Suthada 2014: 268–269; Nirodharam 2016: 57–60<sup>104</sup>).

Furthermore, an alternative interpretation for ‘the dual ordination’ is offered to further affirm the possibility and legitimacy of ordination. According to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, Phra Khru Suthammanat interprets it in this way and she agrees with him.<sup>105</sup> In this interpretation, the act of dual ordination does not mean that the *bhikkhuni* candidate has to receive the ordination from both the *bhikkhu sangha* and the *bhikkhuni sangha*. The point that the *bhikkhuni* candidate has to be ordained by both *sangha* is interpreted as a misunderstanding. Instead, the interpretation is that the *bhikkhuni sangha* only act as oral examiners, asking the candidate to answer the *antarayikadhamma*.<sup>106</sup> The actual ordination of the candidate, they argue, is conducted by the *bhikkhu sangha* alone as the candidate has already passed the oral examination with the *bhikkhuni sangha* (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014c: 7; Suthada 2014: 58–60; Chatsumarn 2016: 11–15). The statement that ‘[a female candidate] be purified in the two *sangha* but be ordained by the *bhikkhu sangha*’ (*borisut nai song songfai buat nai phiksu song faidiao*),<sup>107</sup> as well as a story of how the *bhikkhuni sangha* came to take part in accepting its new member, are regularly cited to support this interpretation (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014c: 7; Suthada 2014: 265–266; Chatsumarn 2016: 11–15). This interpretation of the ‘dual

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<sup>103</sup> *Dalvikamma*, which literally means ‘making strong’ is ‘a formal act through which a *bhikkhu* or a group of *bhikkhus* ordained elsewhere gain the recognition of a particular community of which he or they wish to be part’ (Bhikkhu Analayo 2013: 324).

<sup>104</sup> Notably, it was only around August 2016 that Nirodharam (the largest community of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand) explicitly defended the legitimacy of ordination. This is evident from their recent booklet: *Why [does] there have to be bhikkhuni?* (*Thammai Tong Mi Phiksun*). This topic appeared not be a concern either during my fieldwork or during Itoh’s fieldwork prior to mine.

<sup>105</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammananda states in one of her written works that this new ‘knowledge’ was discovered around the end of 2014 (Chatsumarn 2016: 56). However, I have heard this interpretation since the time of my fieldwork. Probably, while she has mentioned the interpretation since the time of my stay, she only became fully certain of its validity later.

<sup>106</sup> *Antarayikadhamma* refers to ‘points which might be obstacles to ordained life’ (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014b).

<sup>107</sup> The statement is claimed to be from Cullavagga, Vinaya Pitaka no.574 (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014b; Suthada 2014: 265).

ordination’, in which the *bhikkhuni sangha* acts as the oral examiner and the *bhikkhu sangha* is the one who confers the ordination, is notably similar to that offered in the 2003 Senate Subcommittee’s booklet.<sup>108</sup> It is, as Ito (2012) notes about the interpretation in the booklet, ‘a turn away from Thai Buddhists’ traditional conception of women’s ordination and stood in remarkable contrast to those of influential *bhikkhu*’, in which ‘the role [of] the *bhikkhu* preceptor is just to confirm the *bhikkhuni sangha*’s decision to permit its new member’ (Ito 2012: 64).

Apart from the main recurring line of arguments, other reasons are also in use as sub-arguments supporting ordination. The second recurring argument is that the *bhikkhuni* are a part of the fourfold Buddhists established by the Buddha himself. The concept of a Buddhist society comprising *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhuni*, *upasaka* (laymen) and *upasika* (lay women), known as the four ‘assemblies’ is a basic one in Buddhist thought (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1377) and is known in Thai as *phuttha borisat si*. Scholars note the use of this discourse to support the *bhikkhuni* ordination (Varaporn 2006; Battaglia 2015). Varaporn (2006: 226–227) reports the use of this argument in favour of the ordination in a scholarly discussion held at Midnight University, while Battaglia (2015: 46) indicates ‘reference to the fourfold assembly prescribed by the Buddha’ as one of the arguments ‘on Buddhist grounds’ that is in use by supporters.

The discourse of the fourfold Buddhists is regularly utilized in two ways. First, it is argued that to have the *bhikkhuni* is to fulfil the fourfold Buddhists bestowed by the Buddha (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014d: 75–90; Kanchana 2016: 1–19, Nirodharam 2016: 69). Second, it is proposed that having the *bhikkhuni*, who are part of the fourfold Buddhists, facilitates sustainment of Buddhism (e.g. Suthada 2014: 279–280; Chatsumarn 2016: 11).

That third recurring line of argument is that the ordination is significant and beneficial. In this case, it is argued that while ordination is not necessary for reaching *nirvana*, it is

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<sup>108</sup> The Senate Subcommittee is the Subcommittee for Women’s Affairs chaired by Rabiapat Phongphanit, a vocal supporter of the *bhikkhuni*. After spending six months studying the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination with advice from lay and monastic intellectuals, the 2003 Senate Subcommittee booklet was produced (Ito 2012: 62–63).

important because it can facilitate the path toward *nirvana*.<sup>109</sup> We can see, for example, from Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's words displayed on the monastery's official website *Thai Bhikkhunis*:

He [The Buddha] always says it is true that both lay men and women (*kharuehat*) can also practise for enlightenment. However, living a life of being ordained is a morally superb (*prasoet*) life because it is a direct shortcut for the ordained person (*nak buat*) to let go of worldly attachments. (*Thai Bhikkhunis* 2016)

It is also suggested that ordination is beneficial for lay women in society. This argument is noted by a number of scholars (e.g. Tomalin 2006; Montri 2010), and scholars as well as the *bhikkhuni* themselves also use it to support ordination (e.g. Kunlavir 2005; Nirodharam 2016).

The fourth recurring line of argumentation concern 'rights and freedom'. Notably, this discourse of rights and freedom is almost always used alongside Buddhist-related discourses, such as the fourfold Buddhists. To them, it seems as if they all coexist together, and Buddhism, in the way they understand it, is prioritized. This is elucidated in a news report (*ASTV Phuchatkan Online* 2014) when lay supporters of *bhikkhuni* ordination made a formal complaint to the National Reform Steering Assembly<sup>110</sup> in 2014. The complaint was made after the Supreme Sangha Council reacted to the *bhikkhuni* ordination in the southern part of Thailand by stating that stricter rules would be implemented (*ibid.*). Two lay women, Kanchana Sutthikun and Suthada Mekrungruengkun, acted as representatives of the network for promoting and fulfilling the fourfold Buddhists, the network for women's advancement and peace, and the movement of women for reforming Thailand (WeMove) when they handed in their letter of complaint. They expressed their concerns

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<sup>109</sup> It is noted that there is a common traditional understanding among Thai Buddhists that lay people who attain full awakening cannot live for more than a week (Seeger 2010: 575); this belief seems apposite to emphasizing the importance of ordination. To my knowledge, however, this point is not deployed by supporters. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda seems not to believe in it, as she once implied in her book that being in the form of *mae chi* should also be fine for a woman who has reached enlightenment (Chatsumarn 1998: 69).

<sup>110</sup> Following the coup d'état in 2014, the National Reform Steering Assembly is formed in October 2015 to guide the national reform, including legislative matters (The Government Public Relations Department 2015).

that the Supreme Sangha Council's actions limited women's rights and freedom to follow the religious path and asked the state authorities:

To provide justice to women who are affected by the [Supreme Sangha Council's] decree and propagate the right understanding of the *bhikkhuni* ordination according to the Buddhist rules (*phra thamma winai*) ... in order to create equality and justice in society. [It is also to] let women enter the religious path (*thang tham*) without being barred by certain beliefs and interpretations, which do not take the facts into consideration. The fourfold Buddhists (*phuttha borisat si*) [are] also comprised of *bhikkhu* [monks], *bhikkhuni* [female monks], *upasaka* [laymen] and *upasika* [lay women]. (ASTV Phuchatkan Online 2014)<sup>111</sup>

Interestingly, the discourse of rights and freedom tends to be used by lay supporters and is usually utilized when dealing with legal issues or the state. While Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is reported to have deployed the discourse in the past, currently she is also noted to use it much less (Suat Yan 2011: 149–151). According to Suat Yan (2011), this is because Bhikkhuni Dhamamanda had realized that using the discourse herself can stir up negative reactions from many Thais, including the monks (*ibid.*).

In this section, I have presented recurring arguments used to support and to oppose the *bhikkhuni* ordination in public discourse in Thai society. As I have made clear, my aim is not to cover voices of eminent figures as this has been done by other scholars (e.g. Seeger 2006; Varaporn 2006), but to identify and show the types of discourse that are regularly used by both sides. The various recurring arguments are presented to underline the idea that while canonical concern about the legitimacy of ordination are prominent in these debates, they are by no means the only discourse. The arguments also indicate that there are nuances among supporters and opponents of the ordination. The supporters are not simply all feminists who value women's rights above all else as they tend to be portrayed

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<sup>111</sup> They also made a complaint to other organizations, including the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. Only the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand responded positively to their complaint (Kanchana 2016: 196–200). The Commission received their complaint and ruled that the Supreme Sangha Council alone has governing power over the Thai *sangha* (*ibid.*). The attempt of the Supreme Sangha Council to interfere with foreign monks and *bhikkhuni* was not legally possible (*ibid.*). To my knowledge, the attempt of the Supreme Sangha Council to cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not achieved. At the same time, *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand has not been held again since that time.

(e.g. Duean 2008; Montri 2010). Similarly, the opponents cannot all be classified as traditionalists who strictly follow the Tipitaka and only wish to preserve the tradition (e.g. Seeger 2006; Montri 2010); nor are they all gender-biased humans who are concerned with their own interests (Suat Yan 2011: 127, 148). The various recurring arguments shown also emphasize that the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination is a complex one that not only involves canonical concern with the ordination's legitimacy, the topic which appears to receive the most attention in the literature. In the next section, this observation will become even more apparent when the voices of ordinary lay people, whose voices are relatively absent from public discourse and from existing literature, are presented and examined with respect to the ordination.

## **2.2. Perspectives of ordinary lay people toward the ordination**

As discussed, lay intellectuals and eminent figures receive attention in public discourse and in the literature (e.g. Seeger 2006; Duean 2008), but the voices of ordinary lay people remain relatively unheard. This section focuses on these relatively unheard voices based on my questionnaire data. Of course, covering all the unheard voices is not feasible and lay people, who undoubtedly constitute the largest group of Buddhists in Thai society, are by no means a homogenous group. Nevertheless, my questionnaire, which targets urban, ordinary lay people, can reveal aspects of these unheard voices, which comprise everyday discourse. In total, 415 responses were collected.<sup>112</sup>

The questionnaire was designed to contain semi-structured interviews and Likert scales. It asks respondents their opinions about the *bhikkhuni* ordination and the reasons for their opinions. It also prompts respondents to react to certain statements relating to gender ideologies and Buddhism and, if possible, to give their opinions about the statements (see Appendix 2). Their opinions regarding the ordination are examined in this section, while their responses to the statements are considered in 2.3.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See 1.5: Methodology which describes how the data are collected.

<sup>113</sup> For other results of the questionnaire which are not relevant to this chapter, see figures in Appendix 6. These are the results of responses to Questions 3 and 4 in the questionnaire.

Before turning to their responses, it is essential to initially explore who the respondents are. The majority are highly educated, with 80.2 per cent of them holding at least a bachelor’s degree. Men and women both feature equally at 49.6 per cent and 48.4 per cent respectively. The other 2 per cent belong to those who self-identify as another gender. As for the age groups,<sup>114</sup> 34.7 per cent of the respondents are between 25 and 34 years old, 27.7 per cent are between 45 and 59, 19.8 per cent are between 35 and 44, 10.4 per cent are under 25 and 5.8 per cent are 60 and over. Nearly half of the respondents are, notably, from Bangkok (46.7 per cent), 21.2 per cent are from the central region (excluding Bangkok) and the rest are from other areas of the country. Figures 6, 7 and 8 show overviews of the respondents in term of education levels, age groups, and hometowns respectively.

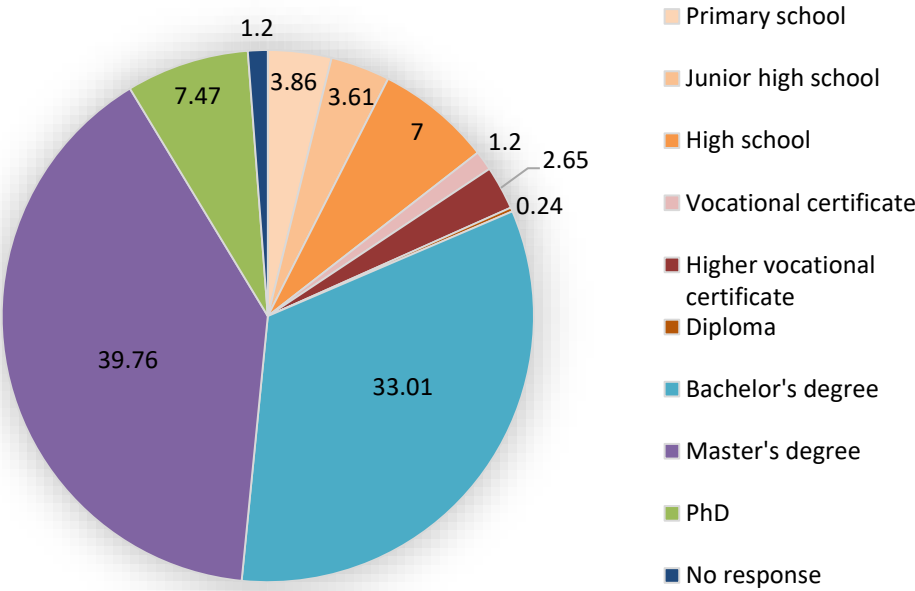


Figure 6: Percentages of respondents in terms of education level

<sup>114</sup> The age groups are classified according to National Statistical Office of Thailand. See, for example, National Statistical Office of Thailand 2009: 129.

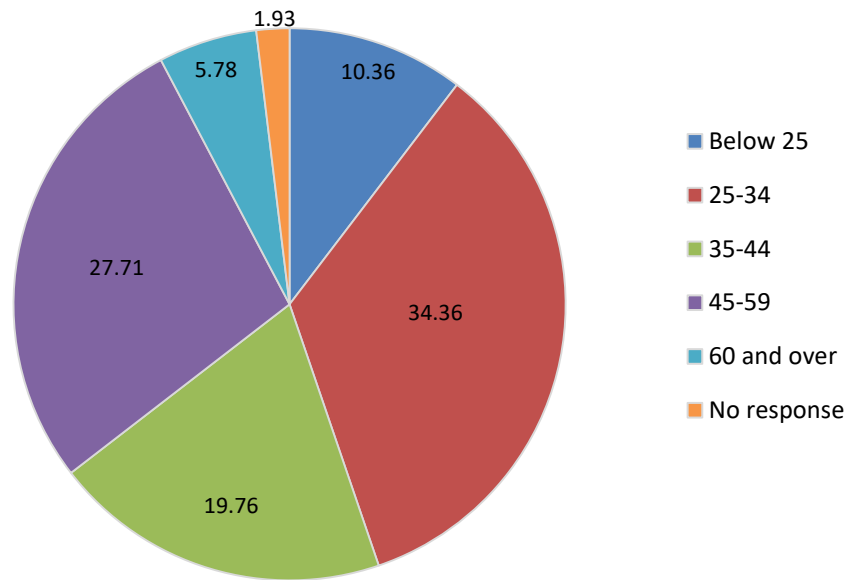


Figure 7: Percentages of respondents in terms of age group

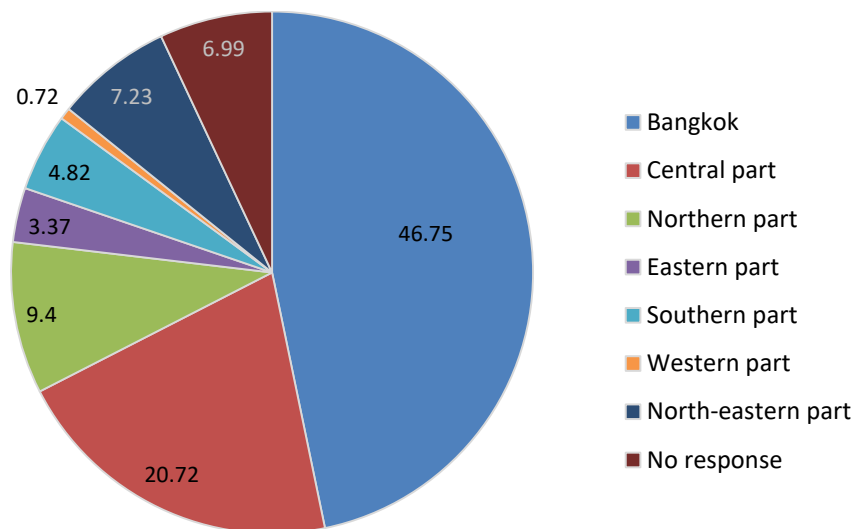


Figure 8: Percentages of respondents in terms of home town<sup>115</sup>

Overall, out of these 415 responses, 212 respondents agree with the ordination (51.08 per cent), 79 disagree (19.04 per cent), 122 are unsure (29.40 per cent) and two simply did not respond (0.48 per cent). A total of 190 (45.78 per cent) think that the *bhikkhuni* exist,

<sup>115</sup> I classify which cities belong to which parts of the country by following Office of the Royal Society of Thailand (2015).



220 (53.01 per cent) do not know or acknowledge their existence and five did not respond (1.2 per cent).

To clarify, the questionnaire by no means claims to fully represent the views of urban, ordinary lay people. Of course, 415 responses are a minimal number compared to the whole population of urban citizens and, as we have seen, the majority of respondents are Bangkokians and highly educated. The questionnaire can then be subject to under-coverage bias as certain members of the population may be inadequately represented. Overall statistics shown in this section have to be read with these caveats in mind.

Importantly, what is more interesting than the statistical overview are the reasons people give to support their attitudes toward the *bhikkhuni* ordination: why they agree, disagree or are uncertain about the ordination. Therefore, I classify the respondents into three groups based on their attitudes toward ordination: (1) those who agree with ordination, (2) those who disagree, and (3) those who are uncertain, and consider the reasons they give.

### 2.2.1 Those who agree with ordination

There are 213 respondents who state that they agree with the *bhikkhuni* ordination. Of these, 115 (54.00 per cent) are female, 92 (43.19 per cent) are male, and the rest (6, 2.81 per cent) say they are neither. Overall, 60.56 per cent think that currently there are *bhikkhuni* and 39.44 per cent do not think so. In terms of education, 43.66 per cent of them hold a master's degree, 34.27 per cent hold a bachelor's degree, and only 12.21 per cent did not receive higher education. Out of all the age groups, most of those who agree with the ordination are between 25 and 34 years old (38.03 per cent). The majority are from Bangkok (49.30 per cent).

The most cited reason in this group of respondents relates to 'rights and equality' (cited 79 times).<sup>116</sup> Notably, rights and equality here are used in two ways: first, rights and

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<sup>116</sup> NVivo was used to assist in grouping the reasons respondents gave to support their stance. It should also be noted that a small number of people do not give any reasons to support their stance or give several reasons. The total number of reasons given in this group of respondents is 240.

equality are cited solely in a secular manner (cited 49 times); second, rights and equality are mentioned together with Buddhist-related discourses (cited 30 times). The following five opinions including two which reflect the first reason, and three the second reason, are presented, respectively, as exemplars:

[It is] an individual right that does no harm to anybody. Both women and men should have equal rights. (A 30-year-old man from Bangkok who holds a master's degree and is a manager in a private company)

[Due to] equality. Men can be ordained so women should also be able to be ordained. (A 37-year-old woman who holds a bachelor's degree and is working in a state enterprise)

Both women and men have equal rights to be ordained (*buat*) as *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni*. For example, the Buddha's aunt asked the Buddha to allow [her] to be ordained and then became the first *bhikkhuni* in [the history of] Buddhism. If we are truly ready to be ordained, [people of] whichever gender can be ordained. (A 23-year-old male master's student from Lamphun)

It is according to an intention of the Buddha who provides gender equality. Also, in the Buddha's time, the *bhikkhuni* existed. (A 65-year-old male university lecturer from Bangkok who holds a master's degree)

[Due to] equality and there are currently more women who study *dhamma* than men. [*Bhikkhuni*] then may be better at sustaining the religion. (A 27-year-old-woman from Bangkok who holds a bachelor's degree and is a designer)

It can be seen that the second way of citing rights and equality seems similar to one of the recurring arguments used in public discourse to support ordination. The first set of reasons, however, seems to resonate with the image of people valuing secular Western concepts that are used as one of the recurring arguments against ordination.

The second most cited line of reasoning (50 times) is that gender is irrelevant for ordination or for pursuing a religious path. Three examples of these views follow:

Ordination has nothing to do with sex and gender (*phet*). It is about the mind (*chit*). (A 26-year-old female master's student from Bangkok)

When they (*than*) have the heart to ordain, gender should not be the obstacle. (A 20-year-old male bachelor's degree student from Ubon Ratchathani)

Everybody equally has the right to be ordained and study *dhamma*. Gender is not an obstacle to access and study *dhamma*. Only cultural biases in Thai society are. Women are barred from the world of religion even though the essence of Buddhism is for everyone regardless of gender. (A 27-year-old woman who holds a bachelor's degree and is a news reporter)

Apart from the two most cited lines of reasoning, other lines of reasoning that are given concern the capabilities of women (cited 28 times), the benefits of having the *bhikkhuni* (cited 26 times) and opportunities for women (cited 20 times), as can be seen in the following three examples respectively:

There used to be *bhikkhuni* in the Buddha's time and currently the number of *bhikkhu* is decreasing while women are the majority of those who go to temples to practise *dhamma*. I normally go to temples to practise *dhamma* and a monk told me that in the future Buddhism may have to rely on women to prosper. Many women who practise *dhamma* are also strict practitioners who deserve to be *bhikkhuni*. (A 44-year-old man from Suphanburi who holds a master's degree and works in the business sector)

Women can also disseminate *dhamma* to people and women who can be *bhikkhuni* must have great faith and be able to detach themselves from the sex issue better than men. (A female nurse from Chiang Mai)

[Ordination] is a process to uplift one's heart, which should be open to women, so that women can have opportunities to study religion seriously. (A 41-year-old woman from Surin who holds a master's degree and works in a government office)

Other reasons given are that ordination is not a bad thing, that the *bhikkhuni* existed in the Buddha's time, that *bhikkhuni* ordination is possible, and that the *bhikkhuni* are part of the fourfold Buddhists (cited 9, 7, 5, and 4 times respectively). Several other reasons given are unique and cannot be grouped; for example, one responder says she supports ordination because she has faith in Bhikkhuni Dhammananda while another states that it is not against the law.

### 2.2.2 Those who are against ordination

There are 79 respondents who disagree with ordination. This group comprises more men (69.62 per cent) than women (30.38 per cent) and the majority do not acknowledge that

the *bhikkhuni* currently exist (77.22 per cent). Bachelor's and master's degree holders comprise 34.18 per cent and 25.32 per cent of the group, respectively, while those who have not received higher education comprise 31.65 per cent, a percentage that is higher than among the first group of respondents who agree with ordination (12.21 per cent). Most of the respondents in this group are over 44 years old (58.23 per cent). The majority of the group is again from Bangkok and the central region of Thailand (36.71 per cent and 29.11 per cent respectively).

Most of the reasons given in this group relate equally to two lines of reasoning: (1) the impossibility of ordination, and (2) the sex and gender of women (cited 25 times each).<sup>117</sup> The third most cited line of reasoning (cited only eight times) concerns the ordination as harmful to religion. A few also mention that the Buddha does not want women to be ordained (cited three times), while five reasons given are unique and cannot be grouped. As the two equally cited lines of reasoning comprise most of the reasons given, they will be considered further.

One of the most cited arguments concerns the impossibility and illegitimacy of the *bhikkhuni* ordination. The following four voices are examples of their responses:

According to the Buddha's rules (*phuttha banyat*), the lineage of *bhikkhuni* has already been disrupted. The *bhikkhuni* have to be ordained by both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*, but the *bhikkhuni* have disappeared. Therefore, the ordination cannot be completed. This is a very sensitive issue. Respondents have to be knowledgeable and understand the will of the Buddha. If not, it can be an insult [to the religion]. (A 27-year-old man from Bangkok who holds a bachelor's degree and works in a private company)

The lineage of Theravada *bhikkhuni* has been disrupted. Let it be like what has been stated in the religious rules. (A 51-year-old man from Bangkok who holds a master's degree)

Currently, there is no female preceptor (*upatcha*). If [you] want to be ordained, it is better to be ordained in the Mahayana lineage. I understand that so many girls want to be ordained but [you] have to respect the rules. Also, the point that *bhikkhu* (*phra song*) misbehave is none of anybody's business. If you, girls, want to reach

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<sup>117</sup> As mentioned before, NVivo was used to assist in grouping the reasons respondents gave to support their stance. There are 66 reasons given in total for this group, 50 of which concern either the impossibility of the ordination, or the sex and gender of women.

enlightenment, keeping five or eight precepts (*sin ha rue sin paet*) is already sufficient. (A 44-year-old-man from Suphanburi who holds a master's degree and is a manager in a private company)

There are so many procedures and conditions for the *bhikkhuni* ordination. One of them is that there has to be both *bhikkhu* (*phra*) and *bhikkhuni* (*phra phiksuni*) to conduct the ordination. However, the *bhikkhuni* disappeared a long time ago. (A 40-year-old-woman from Ayutthaya who holds a bachelor's degree)

The examples show reasons given in this line of argumentation. The contemporary *bhikkhuni* ordination is deemed impossible – the *bhikkhuni* lineage has been disrupted and the legitimate ordination has to comprise both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*. Notably, this reasoning resonates with the recurring arguments used most prominently in public discourse to oppose ordination.<sup>118</sup>

Intriguingly, the other line of reasoning equally given against ordination relates solely to the sex and gender of women. This argument suggests that it is simply because women are women that they are not suitable for the ordination. Women's bodies and 'natural' emotions are referred to as inappropriate for being *phra* (monks). Being a *mae chi* or *chi phram* is also often suggested by respondents as more appropriate forms for women to assume. The following four opinions are examples:

Women are not suited to be ordained as *phra* because of the problem of [having women's] bodies. Women [also] have soft minds and are sensitive to surrounding circumstances, which can easily lead them to feel angry and frustrated (*thosa*). This is an obstacle to strict practice. If women are ordained (*buat*), [they] may be unsuited to a form of *samana* [the word basically refers to a monk's form]. (A 51-year-old woman with a master's degree)

The nature of women is not suitable to be monks (*phra*). If [women] have faith, they can find other ways to study and sustain the religion. (A 41-year-old female researcher with a master's degree)

Natural bodies [of women] may not be suited [for the ordination]. [Women] can be ordained as *mae chi* or *chi phram* (*buat chi rue buat chi phram*) (A 44-year-old woman from Bangkok who holds a bachelor's degree and is a business owner)

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<sup>118</sup> Five respondents also directly advised me to read the influential book *Responses to Dr Martin: the rules of bhikkhuni*.

Women can already keep precepts (*thue sin*) by being *mae chi* and *chi phram*. Women also have to face personal issues like menstruation. (A 43-year-old man from Nonthaburi who holds a master's degree)

There are also concerns that women, because they have women's bodies, can easily be targeted as crime victims, and this makes them unsuitable to be ordained, as the following example shows:

Regardless of having advanced technology, the current society's circumstances do not enable the *bhikkhuni* to travel as comfortably as in the past. Women, not having the strength to resist, can easily be victims of crimes. Though it is good to be ordained for propagating the religion, the risk of becoming crime victims is what concerns [me] more. (A 28-year-old male PhD student from Bangkok)

Women's limited spiritual capability due to their sex and gender is also cited by the respondents, as can be seen from the following example:

In religious practices, the gender of men is like having a silver bowl to get water, while the gender of women is like having a wooden bowl with holes to get water. Women's bodies are weaker than men's and women use emotions more than reason, which are obstacles to practising *dhamma*. (A 38-year-old male police officer)

Opinions that women should not be ordained simply because they are women are also given without any further explanations. For example:

[I] do not agree [with the *bhikkhuni* ordination] because women do not deserve to be ordained (*mai somkhuan buat*).<sup>119</sup> (A 58-year-old woman from Lampang with a junior high school level of education)

We can see that in this line of arguments, women's bodies, 'natural' emotions, capacity for religious practices and/or simply their gender are reasons why the respondents are against ordination. Notably, they appear to see the sex and gender of women as problems

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<sup>119</sup> I translated the phrase in this way because I think it can best capture a strong feeling expressed by the speaker. I do not translate the phrase as 'should not be ordained' because that sounds more as if it comes from the phrase '*mai khuan buat*'. '*Mai somkhuan*' denotes a much stronger feeling of the speaker than '*mai khuan*'. Also, I do not translate the phrase as 'are not suited to be ordained' because that sounds more as if it comes from the phrase '*mai mo thi cha buat*' and also lacks the strong feeling of the speaker.

only when women are assuming the form of monks (*phra*) and seem to see them as perfectly fine for other forms of renunciants such as *mae chi*.

### 2.2.3 Those who are uncertain about ordination

There are 122 respondents who say that they are uncertain about ordination; that is, they cannot make a decision whether to agree or disagree with it. The number of men and women in this group is roughly the same (women 50 per cent, men 48.39 per cent). More than half (63.93 per cent) think that there are currently no *bhikkhuni* in Thailand. Most people in this group hold a master's degree (42.62 per cent) or a bachelor's degree (30.33 per cent), while those who have not received higher education comprise 21.31 per cent of the group. The majority of respondents are between 25 and 34 years old (41.80 per cent) and around half are from Bangkok (49.18 per cent).

There are various reasons respondents give to support their stance; the most common one relates to their lack of information or knowledge on the issue (given 41 times).<sup>120</sup> These are some of their responses:

[I] have not done any research or read any related research so [I am] uncertain [about ordination]. (A 28-year-old female translator from Ubon Ratchathani who holds a bachelor's degree)

[I] do not have enough knowledge to voice any opinions. (A 47-year-old-man from Bangkok with a master's degree)

[I] do not have any opinions because I have never known [them]. [I] only know the *mae chi*. (A 63-year-old housewife)

Notably, as their reasons relate to lack of information or knowledge, they are likely to change their stance in the future when they feel better informed. The stance that they will choose depends on whether they will trust information propagated by the supporters or by the opponents of ordination.

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<sup>120</sup> Again, NVivo is used to assist in grouping the reasons respondents gave. In total, 82 opinions were given, as well as individual reasons that are difficult to group.

In addition, interestingly, some respondents in this group are actually against ordination, judging from their opinions (given 20 times). The reasons the respondents give are similar to those who are against ordination; they are related to the impossibility of ordination, or the sex and gender of women. The following responses are examples:

[I] have read many articles about the *bhikkhuni*. Based on Tipitaka, they say that at first the Buddha did not want to allow the *bhikkhuni* ordination. Later the Buddha did allow [the *bhikkhuni* ordination] with certain conditions. [I] have no idea whether it is true or not. [I] also basically think that it is hard for women to be *bhikkhuni* and keep 311 moral precepts. Also, keeping moral precepts as much as men is inappropriate. The *bhikkhuni* ordination in the current time should not be possible. (A 44-year-old woman from Bangkok with a master's degree)

Those who can be ordained as *phra* have to be men. (A 30-year-old man with a primary school level of education)

The reason why they do not simply state that they are against the ordination is unknown. However, we can speculate that they may have categorized me as a supporter of ordination because of my interest in the issue, and do not want to openly voice an opposing opinion in the interests of politeness.

In this section, I have looked at the perspectives of the urban, ordinary laity toward the *bhikkhuni* ordination, and particularly the lines of reasoning they use to support their stance on it. We can see that the legitimacy of ordination, which is a prominent concern in public discourse and in the literature, receives much less attention among the ordinary laity, especially among those who have formed their opinions in support of or against ordination. For the group who are in favour of ordination, their lines of argumentation tend to relate to the issue of gender. The most cited reason concerns individual rights and gender equality, either from a secular perspective or using Buddhist discourses, and the second most cited relates to their view of gender as irrelevant to ordination or to pursuing a religious path. The discourse around the ordination's legitimacy, which the vocal supporters constantly propagate in public discourse, is rarely referred to. There is, indeed, a relative lack of canonical concern about ordination among the supportive ordinary laity, and this resonates with Itoh's (2013: 297) finding among the main lay supporters of



Nirodharam. Instead, gender-related discourses are mainly in use. For the group who are against ordination, their main lines of reasoning relate equally to canonical concern about ordination, and women's unsuitability to being ordained because of their sex and gender. The argument that ordination is illegitimate and impossible is notably similar to the prominent argument of vocal opponents in public discourse. The other line of argument, however, solely concerns the sex and gender of women, without any references to canonical concerns. The issue of gender, which is downplayed in public discourse in which the opponents mostly focus on the canonical impossibility of ordination, proves to be equally important among the antagonistic ordinary laity. As for the group who are still uncertain about ordination, it is likely that they will form their opinions later when they have obtained enough information, in which the legitimacy of ordination may or may not be part of the information they require. In short, in contrast to the public discourse, it is clear that gender plays a significant role in the everyday discourse of the ordinary laity.

### **2.3. The *bhikkhuni* ordination and gender ideologies**

As gender-related discourses also play an important role among the ordinary laity about why they support or oppose the ordination, it is worth exploring their gender ideologies further. This section examines responses of the ordinary laity, including those who still feel uncertain about the ordination, from the questionnaire. Apart from asking the respondents' opinions of the *bhikkhuni* ordination, the questionnaire is designed as a Likert scale for the respondents to rate their agreement (or disagreement) with certain statements along with space for them to leave comments (see Appendix 2). The scaled statements are as follows:

Statement 1: Son(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven.

Statement 2: Daughter(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven.

Statement 3: People of whichever gender can be ordained for parents in order to 'repay the debt'.

Statement 4: Women are enemies of celibacy.

Statement 5: Men are enemies of celibacy.

Statement 6: People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment.

Statement 7: Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women.

Statement 8: Being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives.

Statement 9: If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened.

Of course, I do not claim that the gender ideologies of these people are limited only to their reaction to these statements. Their responses, however, can undoubtedly reveal their gender ideologies to a certain extent. These statements are also derived from existing literature or were created in relation to it as the subsections explain.

This section aims to further explore potential relations between viewpoints toward the ordination and gender ideologies of the ordinary laity. Responses to the statements are grouped according to the respondents' opinions of the *bhikkhuni* ordination.<sup>121</sup> The findings and discussion are grouped according to the themes of the statements and presented accordingly. These themes are (1) ordination for parents, based on the first three statements, (2) gender and celibacy, based on Statements 4 and 5, (3) gender and religious capabilities, based on Statements 6 and 7, and (4) women and Buddhism, based on Statements 8 and 9.

### 2.3.1 Ordination in order to repay the debt to parents

The first three statements concern a notion of ordination that involves repaying the debt to one's parents. As discussed in Chapter 1, it is reported in the literature that temporary ordination for men embodies various social functions, one of which is to act in such a way as to repay the debt to one's parents (Keyes 1986; Swearer 2010). The parents are thought to be able to receive merit generated from the ordination of their sons (*ibid.*) and it is even commonly believed that mothers can 'cling on to the saffron robes of sons in order to

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<sup>121</sup> For the group that disagrees with ordination, one out of the 79 respondents did not respond to the statements (1.27 per cent) and for the group that remains uncertain, two out of the 122 respondents did not respond (1.64 per cent). The tables presented in the section display only the data of those who responded as the percentage of non-responses have already been taken into account.

ascend to heaven’ (Kunlavir 2006: 4–5). In contrast, daughters are not expected to repay the debt in this manner and the secular ways they have of repaying the debt are reported to be less valued (Mill 1997: 41–42). Indeed, the notion of creating merit indicates a gender hierarchy, in which men are superior. The three statements are thus derived from the literature (or are created in relation to it), as they can potentially reveal the respondents’ perception of the two genders. The results of how these three statements were rated by (1) the group that agrees with ordination, (2) the group that disagrees, and (3) the group that remains uncertain, are presented as percentages in Tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

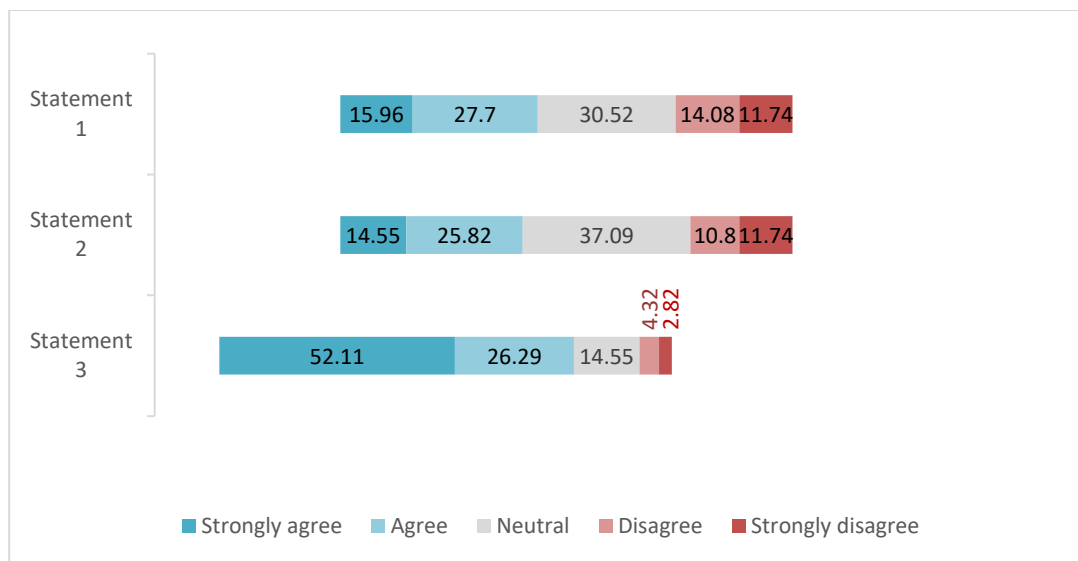


Table 1: Responses of the group that agrees with ordination to Statements 1, 2 and 3.

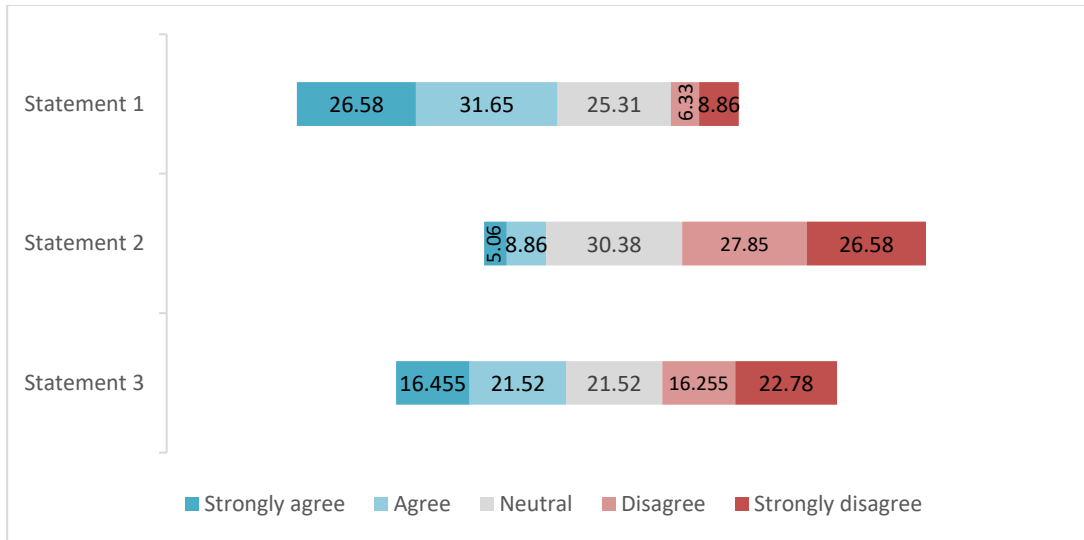


Table 2: Responses of the group that disagrees with ordination to Statements 1, 2 and 3.

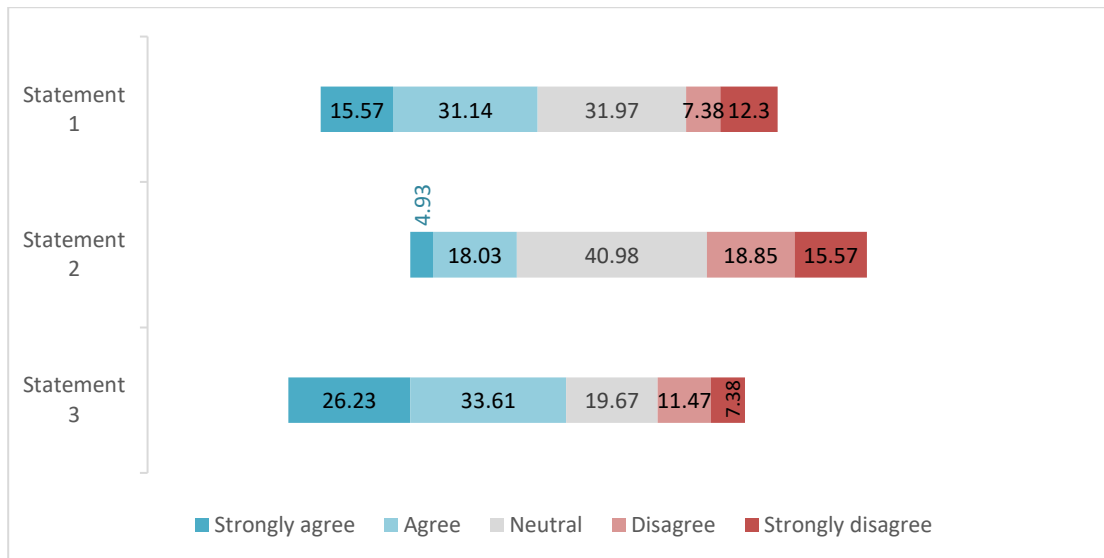


Table 3: Responses of the group that remains uncertain about ordination to Statements 1, 2 and 3.

We can see from the three tables relatively different patterns of responses among the three groups; this is particularly evident for the group that disagrees with ordination. Table 1 shows that the group that agrees with ordination treats Statements 1 and 2 in a relatively similar way; even their degrees of agreement and disagreement are largely the same. The group also responds to Statement 3 in an overwhelmingly positive manner. In contrast, Table 2 reveals that the group that disagrees with ordination responds to Statements 1 and 2 in remarkably different ways. This group also holds ambivalent views toward Statement

3. Table 3 shows that the group that remains uncertain about ordination have a rather positive attitude toward statement 1, but feel mostly uncertain about Statement 2. They also tend to agree with Statement 3.

The results of Statements 1 and 2 demonstrate the perceptions of the three groups on ordination in the saffron robes of sons and of daughters, respectively, for parents. We can see that the group that agrees with ordination treats the ordination of both genders in a relatively similar manner, while the group that disagrees holds contrasting opinions. Though they tend to agree with the ordination of sons, they largely feel uncertain about the ordination of daughters. In a way, the responses of the three groups, particularly on the ordination of daughters, reflect their opinions on the *bhikkhuni* ordination itself.

While the responses to Statement 2 can simply reflect the respondents' stances to the *bhikkhuni* ordination, many comments given by the group of respondents who disagree with the two statements reveal that they also perceive the two genders differently. For example, a 58-year-old woman from Lampang says that she agrees with Statement 1 'because ordination of sons is [our] tradition' while she states her strong disagreement with Statement 2, saying that 'daughters do not deserve to be ordained (*mai som kuan buat*)'. A 43-year-old woman expresses her agreement with Statement 1 and disagreement with Statement 2, commenting that 'a son wearing the saffron robes (*pha lueang*) looks better than a daughter'. A 57-year-old woman with a master's degree says that 'women are not regarded as *nak buat* [ordained persons] and do not wear the saffron robes', when expressing agreement with Statement 1 and fervently rejecting Statement 2. These examples clearly demonstrate how gender difference, in which men are regarded as superior, tends to be taken for granted in the minds of many people. Importantly, they also underline the finding in the last section that gender-biased discourse is an equally important line of reasoning against the *bhikkhuni* ordination as the canonical concern with its legitimacy.

As for the results of Statement 3, they reveal both the respondents' gender notions and their perceptions of the ordination for parents. Among the three groups, the group that agrees with ordination holds the most positive attitude toward the statement. Their percentage of agreement is also notably higher than their agreement with the other two

statements. This result reveals that a number of respondents in this group may believe in the ordination of people of all genders in order to repay the debt to one's parents, but not in making the parents ascend to heaven as stated in Statements 1 and 2. The overall positive attitude toward the statement can also be found in the group who are uncertain about ordination. While they mostly feel uncertain about the ordination of daughters in the saffron robes and only around one-fifth of them agree with it, they tend to agree that people of whichever gender can be ordained for parents. This difference indicates that in their minds, ordination, for parents, may not necessarily equate to ordination in the saffron robes. On the other hand, the group that disagrees with ordination is the only group of respondents who hold ambiguous views toward the statement. Notably, this group also has the highest percentage of agreement among the three groups on Statement 1 that sons can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents. This finding suggests that in the minds of many in this group, ordination in order to repay the debt to one's parents is closely associated with ordination in the saffron robes and is reserved only for men.

### 2.3.2 Gender and celibacy

Statements 4 and 5 concern gender and celibacy. Statement 4 ('women are enemies of celibacy') is derived from a certain attitude toward women in Buddhist texts like the *Pali Canon* (e.g. Crosby 2014: 223–224). The statement is also reported to be a rather common belief in Thai society (Kunlavir 2006: 4). It is also argued that the statement generates gender-biased attitude toward women in society (ibid.). Additionally, the statement may reinforce what are deemed as proper behaviours between monks, who have to practise celibacy, and women. Women have to keep their distance from monks and cannot, for example, even give alms to them directly (Terwiel 2012). The distance from monks also, however, means a distancing from sacred magical power (ibid.). Moreover, Statement 5 that men are enemies of celibacy is also claimed to appear in Buddhist texts, but is not widely circulated in Thai society (Kunlavir 2006: 4). The two statements are both displayed in the questionnaire, as they can potentially reveal the respondents' perceptions of the two genders. The results of (1) the group that agrees with ordination, (2) the group

that disagrees with ordination, and (3) the group that remains uncertain about ordination, are presented in percentages in Tables 4, 5 and 6 respectively.

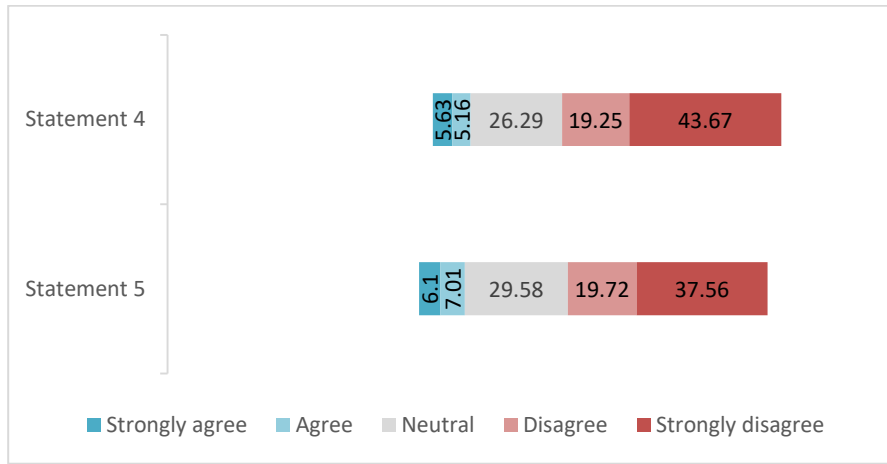


Table 4: Responses of the group that agrees with ordination to Statements 4 and 5.

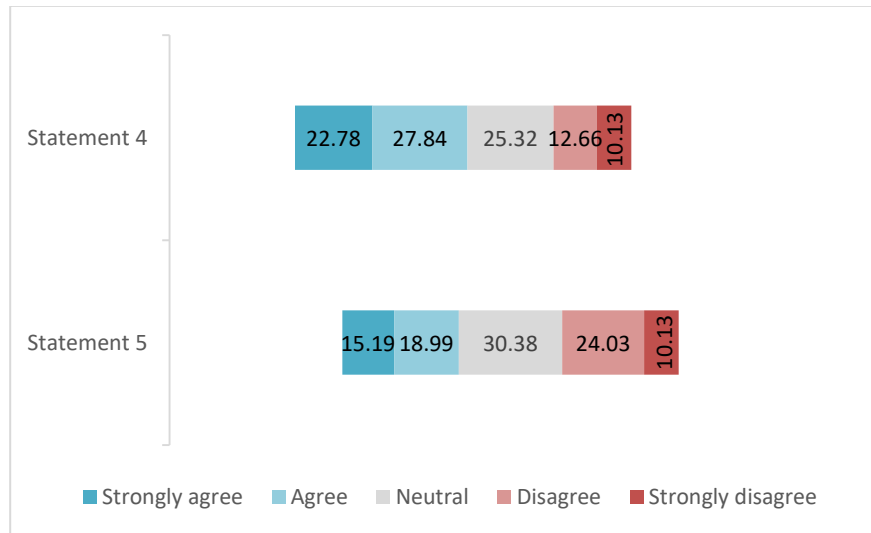


Table 5: Responses of the group that disagrees with ordination to Statements 4 and 5.

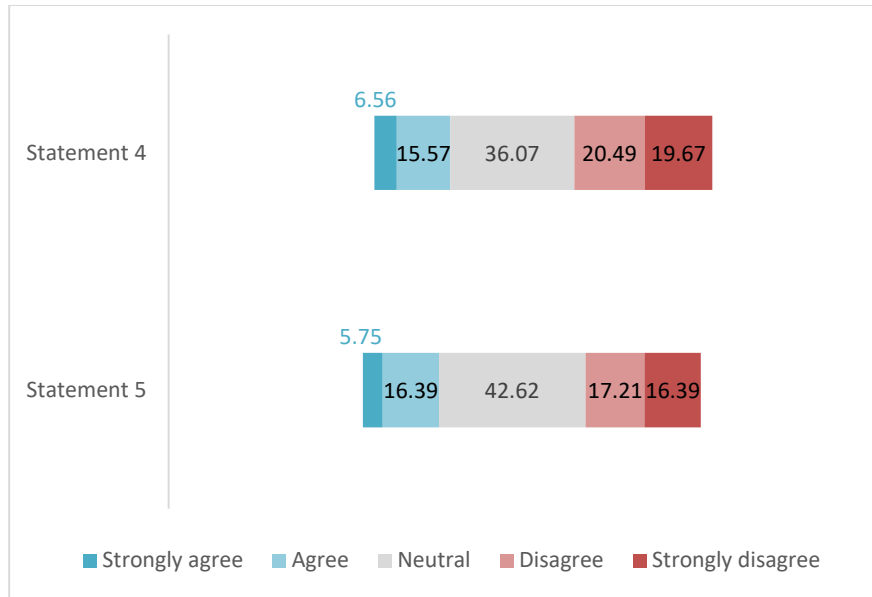


Table 6: Responses of the group that remains uncertain about ordination to Statements 4 and 5.

The three tables show that the three groups have relatively different patterns of responses, which are particularly evident for the group that disagrees with ordination. Table 4 reveals that the group that agrees with ordination tends to disagree with both statements and perceive the two statements relatively similarly. This means they tend to disagree that men and women are enemies of celibacy, and view the two genders as relatively the same. The relatively similar perceptions toward the two genders in this regard can also be found in responses of the group that remains uncertain about ordination, as shown in Table 6. The majority of this group tends to feel neutral or disagree with the statements. A slightly higher percentage of neutrality for Statement 5 (‘men are enemies to celibacy’), as well as a slightly higher percentage of disagreement with Statement 4 (‘women are enemies to celibacy’), may be due to how well known these two statements are in society. As mentioned, Statement 4 is reported to be relatively well known, unlike Statement 5; so the respondents may have formed stronger opinions toward it. In contrast, the group that disagrees with ordination is the only group that has different patterns of responses to the two statements (as can be seen in Table 5). They tend to agree with Statement 4 more than Statement 5 and also disagree with Statement 5 more than Statement 4. This group thus



appears to perceive the genders differently and views men more positively than women the most among the three groups.

### 2.3.3 Gender and religious capabilities

Statements 6 and 7 concern gender and the capacity for enlightenment. Statement 6 (‘people of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment’) is derived from the view that Buddhism is probably the first world religion to affirm the religious capabilities of women as equal to men (e.g. Suthada 2014: 56). This principle, in turn, is held to be crucial for the establishment of the *bhikkhuni sangha* and its revival (e.g. Crosby 2014: 219). Statement 7 (‘men can reach enlightenment more easily than women’) is generated from the observation reported in the literature that regardless of the belief that both men and women have the capabilities to reach enlightenment, men tend to be viewed as spiritually superior by nature in Thai society (e.g. Cook 2010: 170). The two statements are thus intended to reveal the respondents’ views of the two genders.

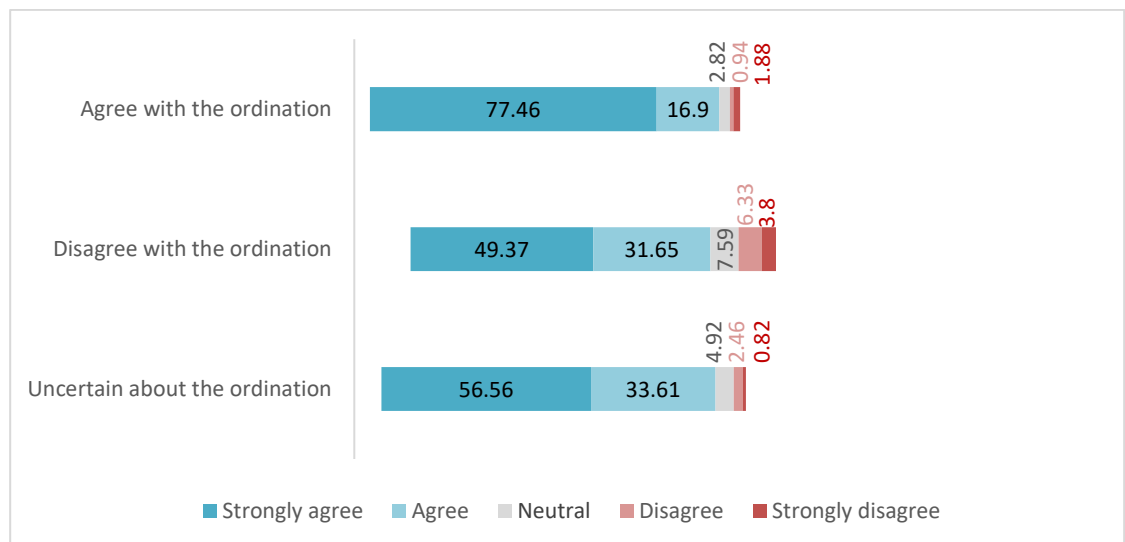


Table 7: Responses to Statement 6 by the three groups.

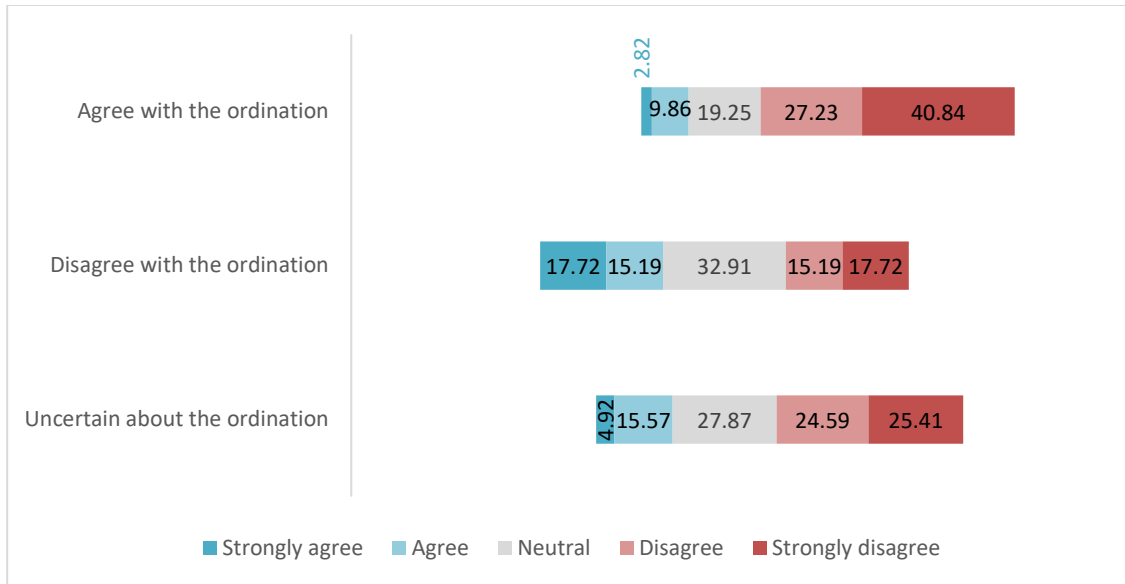


Table 8: Responses to Statement 7 by the three groups.

We can see from the two tables that all groups tend to have no doubt about the capabilities of people of all genders to reach enlightenment. However, they hold relatively different views about whether men can achieve it more easily. This divergence is particularly evident for the group that disagrees with ordination. Table 7 shows that the vast majority of respondents in all groups agree with Statement 6 that people of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment. The group that agrees with ordination seems to believe in this the most, and has the highest percentage of respondents who strongly agree. The group that disagrees with ordination, on the other hand, has the highest proportion of respondents among the three groups who feel neutral and disagree with the statement. Table 8 reveals the different responses of the three groups to Statement 7 that men can reach enlightenment more easily. The group that agrees with ordination clearly disagree with it the most among the three groups, with the highest percentage of disagreement and the lowest percentage of agreement. The group that remains uncertain also tends to disagree with the statement, albeit to a lesser extent, as half of the group disagrees and around one-fifth agrees. In contrast, the group that disagrees with the ordination is the only group whose members hold ambivalent views about the statement, with similar percentages for agree, neutral and disagree. Therefore, we can see that the group that

disagrees with ordination has the greatest tendency among all groups to believe that, while people of all genders have capabilities to reach enlightenment, men can achieve it more easily.

#### 2.3.4 Women and Buddhism

Statements 8 and 9 concern women and Buddhism. Statement 8 ('being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives') is derived from reports in the literature about the belief in Thai society that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma* (e.g. Kunlavir 2006: 2; Lindberg Falk 2007: 30). The belief implies the superiority of being born a man. Thus, the belief may negatively impact women's self-esteem, and justify the inaccessibility of temporary ordination's social benefits to women, including earning merit for parents through monkhood. Statement 9 ('if women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened') is reported to be one of the reasons used by opponents to justify their stance, as they claim it is from a message in the *Pali Canon* when the Buddha predicts the decline of religion due to the ordination of women (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2011; Suthada 2014; Crosby 2014: 223).<sup>122</sup> In a way, a view of seeing women as danger to religion is stated. The two statements are intended to reveal another aspect of the respondent's perceptions of gender. The percentage of responses in the three groups for Statements 8 and 9 are presented in Tables 9 and 10 respectively.

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<sup>122</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammananda argues that while this message does appear in the Tipitaka, it is only part of the broader message. According to her, the messages indicate that the decay of Buddhism because of women's ordination will not happen as the Buddha stated he has laid down the *garudhamma* to prevent such a thing from happening (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2011: 8–9; Suthada 2014: 57–58). Again, I have to emphasize that it is not my intention to critically engage with Buddhist texts and I will thus not evaluate the statement based on such an approach.

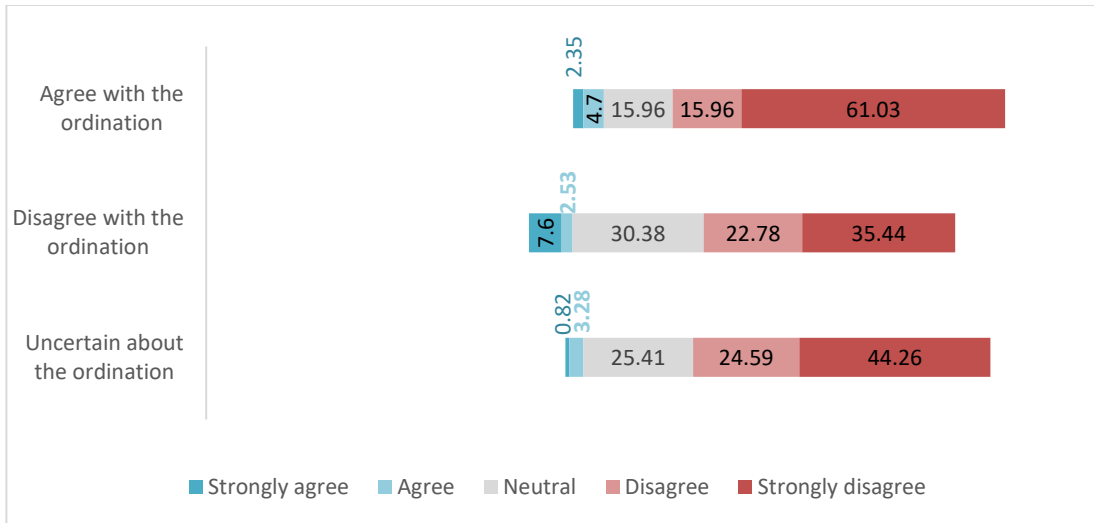


Table 9: Responses to Statement 8 by the three groups.

Table 9 shows that the majority of respondents in all groups disagree with Statement 8 that being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives, albeit to different extents. The group that agrees with ordination disagree with it the most, and also has the highest percentage of those who strongly disagree among the three groups. On the other hand, the group that disagrees with ordination has the lowest percentage of disagreement among all groups, as well as the highest percentages of neutrality and of agreement.

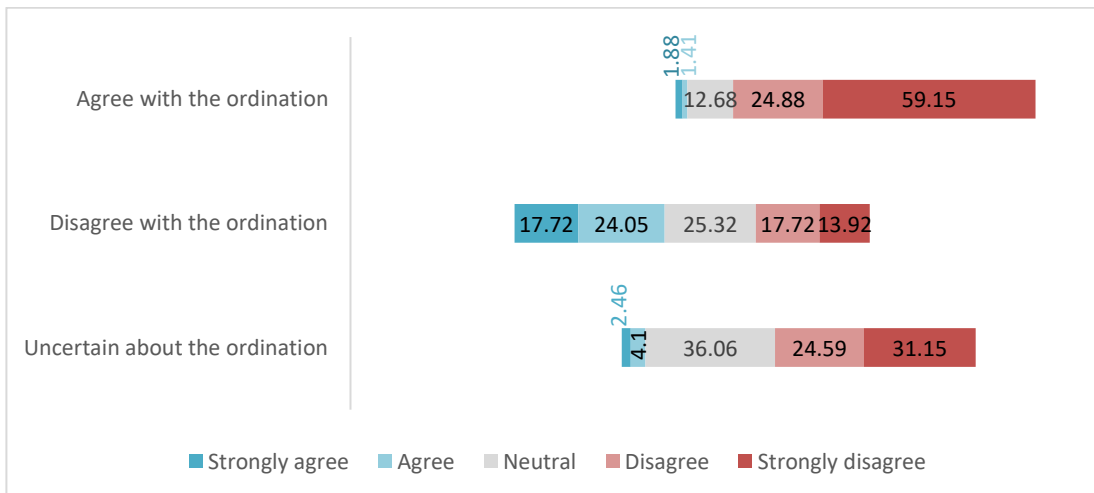


Table 10: Responses to Statement 9 by the three groups.

Table 10 demonstrates that both the group that agrees with ordination and the group that remains uncertain tend to disagree with Statement 9, while the group that disagrees with ordination is the only group with a higher percentage of agreement than disagreement. The vast majority of the group that agrees with ordination do not think that women's ordination would lessen the longevity of Buddhism, as do more than half of the group that remain uncertain about ordination. The group that disagrees with ordination is the only group that holds rather ambiguous views toward the statement, and it has more respondents agreeing that women's ordination would lessen the longevity of Buddhism than holding other opinions. It is clear that the group that disagrees with ordination has the highest tendency to think that if women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened. This is also probably one of the reasons why they are against the *bhikkhuni* ordination, although only some of them explicitly state this in the questionnaire.

In this section, responses to the gender-related statements of the three groups who hold different stances toward the *bhikkhuni* ordination (agree, disagree, and uncertain) have been discussed. We can see that the three groups of ordinary laity generally tend to respond differently to the statements in the questionnaire. While we should keep in mind that there are nuances even within a group (as the tables show), the tendencies of the groups reveal interesting findings. The discussions, which by no means intend to homogenize any of the groups, are based on these tendencies. Regarding ordination in order to repay the debt to one's parents based on Statements 1, 2 and 3, all groups respond the most positively to ordination in the saffron robes of sons for parents. However, the similar ordination of daughters is unsurprisingly treated differently by different groups according to their views toward the *bhikkhuni* ordination. Also, both the groups that agree with and feel uncertain about ordination tend to agree with Statement 3 (that people in whichever gender can be ordained in order to repay the debt to parents), and only the group that disagrees with ordination holds ambiguous opinions toward the statement.

As for gender and celibacy based on Statements 4 and 5, the group that agrees with ordination tends to disagree with both statements and the group that remains uncertain about it holds relatively similar, ambivalent views toward them both. Only the group that

disagrees with ordination clearly treats the two statements differently: as many as half of the group agrees with Statement 4 (that women are enemies of celibacy); but for Statement 5 (that men are enemies of celibacy) the group's opinions are ambiguous. Regarding gender and religious capabilities based on Statements 6 and 7, the vast majority of respondents in all groups similarly think that people of whichever gender have the capacity to attain enlightenment. However, only the group that agrees with ordination tends clearly to disagree that men can reach it more easily than women. Half of the group that remains uncertain about ordination also disagree with it; but the group that disagrees with ordination holds ambiguous views and has the highest percentage of those who strongly agree that men can reach enlightenment more easily.

As for women and Buddhism based on Statements 8 and 9, all groups tend to disagree that being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives, which contradicts reports in the literature (e.g. Kunlavir 2006; Lindberg Falk 2007). The groups, however, hold relatively different views toward Statement 9 (that the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened if women become ordained). The vast majority of the group that agrees with the ordination disagrees with this statement, and more than half of those who are uncertain about ordination similarly disagree. Only the group that disagrees with ordination chooses the option of agreement rather than other choices. Therefore, the findings overall (excluding those related to Statement 2 which may be biased), suggest that the group that agrees with ordination is most likely to perceive the two genders equally and possess the most positive attitude to women among the three groups. On the other hand, the group that disagrees with ordination has the greatest tendency among the three groups to perceive the two genders differently and to view men more positively than women. It can thus be argued that there appears to be a link between lay people's gender ideologies and their views on the *bhikkhuni* ordination.

To summarize, in this chapter, I have explored the voices of ordinary Thai laity, which are relatively absent from public discourse and the literature, about the *bhikkhuni* ordination. Recurring arguments used to support and to oppose the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thai public discourse have been initially explored so that we can see the extent to which

they resemble the perspectives of ordinary laity. Based on my questionnaire targeting urban, ordinary laity, we can see that a primary concern in public discourse and in the literature about the legitimacy of ordination receives much less attention among the ordinary laity. Instead, the issue of gender becomes more prominent in this everyday discourse. Further examination into the gender ideologies of lay people also reveals that there appears to be a link between their views on the *bhikkhuni* ordination and gender ideologies. Therefore, I have argued that the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination is not only about canonical concerns, but is also significantly interrelated with wider gender ideologies. The social significance of the fully ordained *bhikkhuni* form is thus underlined.

## Chapter 3

### **Through the lens of language: contesting identities and the status of contemporary *bhikkhuni***

In the last chapter, I examined key social values embodied by *bhikkhuni* through a discourse analysis of views surrounding women's full ordination in Thailand. This chapter utilizes the lens of language to further investigate the fully ordained form and pays particular attention to its social position and embodied identities. The lens of language here refers to the use of categorical and indexical linguistic markers that reveal the ways in which Thai Buddhists are locally categorized and identified. The chapter aims to examine the perceived status and identities of contemporary *bhikkhuni*, who are claiming this form of full ordination.

Existing ethnographic data on the use of categorical and indexical language in relation to the contemporary *bhikkhuni* are notably scarce. Indeed, they appear to be even rarer than those relating to the *mae chi*, for which such data are already reported to be 'almost wholly lacking' (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1384). Some relevant data can be drawn from ethnographic accounts of Varaporn (2006), Lalita (2008), Suat Yan (2011), Itoh (2013), and Delia (2014), but they are limited. The data used in this chapter are thus based mostly on my fieldwork and written materials collected by me at *bhikkhuni* monasteries.

The chapter starts by exploring the way Thai Buddhists' statuses and identities are locally categorized. It looks at the local categorizations and uses of indexical language that relate to Buddhist renunciants, particularly monks (*phra*) and *mae chi*. This part of the chapter provides a basis for further utilizing the lens of language to investigate social identities and the status of contemporary *bhikkhuni*. The chapter then examines the way *bhikkhuni* and novices at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam use categorical and indexical language to assume religious identities and present them to others. The chapter subsequently focuses on the way other groups of people – laity and *bhikkhu* – use categorical and indexical language when they speak to and about *bhikkhuni*. Indeed, without corroboration from others the identities that *bhikkhuni* assume could not be socially established. I argue that the *bhikkhuni* use language in multifaceted ways to



identify themselves as *bhikkhuni* of the fourfold Buddhists. Importantly, they claim to be monks (*phra*)—an identity once inaccessible to women, but now both accepted and contested across Thai society.

### **3.1. Local categorization, indexical language, and Buddhist renunciants**

The influence of language on human thoughts has long been discussed by scholars (e.g. Needham 1972) and categories of thinking are themselves argued to be embodied in language (Napier 2013: 124). Indeed some scholars argue that certain local Thai categories of thinking are different from those suggested through English terms (Sinnott 2014; Cassaniti 2015).<sup>123</sup> This argument is particularly pertinent to the identities and status of Buddhist renunciants in Thai society.

Furthermore, indexical language receives attention in this section because it is intrinsic to the use of Thai. One's status and identity are constantly negotiated indexically through many personal pronouns that function powerfully to 'evoke reality beyond the literal content of what is being talked about' (Duranti 1997: 209). In Thai, personal pronouns are far from the only options for referring to 'I' and 'you'. Indeed, as in Japanese, for example, there are multiple ways of expressing 'I' and 'you' in Thai, and Thai speakers are, as Kondo (1990) notes about Japanese speakers, 'caught in webs of relationships, in which loving concern was not separable from power' (ibid: 26). Further, indexical language in Thai includes not only abundant forms of 'I' and 'you', but also diverse verbs, phrases, and classifiers that make additional distinctions possible. Here, the identities and status of Buddhist renunciants are no exception.

This section, thus, explores the local categorizations<sup>124</sup> and uses of indexical language that relate to Buddhist renunciants. It first looks at local categorization through the common

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<sup>123</sup> For example, Cassaniti (2015), who conducted her fieldwork in a small northern Thai Buddhist village, proposes that the emotional lives of Thais are not captured in the common Western concepts of emotion. This, she argues, is also evident in the lack of an equivalent term for emotion in Thai.

<sup>124</sup> To clarify, I do not claim that all Thais must subscribe to this local categorization without having other alternatives. Nonetheless, this local categorization appears to be pertinent to most of my informants.

concept of the fourfold Buddhists and the common Thai terms of *phra* (monks) and *nak buat* (ordained persons, monastics), who are unanimously seen as belonging to the first main category of the fourfold Buddhists. By comparison, the uses of indexical language with, by and about *mae chi*—the most popular alternative form of female renunciants in Thailand—are also examined.

### 3.1.1 Local categorization: the fourfold Buddhists (*phuttha borisat si*), *phra* (monks), and *nak buat* (ordained persons)

In Thai society, a Buddhist concept called ‘the fourfold Buddhists’ (*phuttha borisat si*), is widely known. According to this basic concept, a Buddhist society is comprised of *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhuni*, *upasaka*, and *upasika* (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1377). Both the words *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* are generated from the same root, meaning ‘to have a share’, while the words *upasaka* and *upasika* are also derived from the same root, meaning ‘to serve, show respect to’ (ibid: 1377). There are thus two main categories of Buddhists: the monastics and the laity, who are further subdivided by gender, extending the categories to four (ibid.). Following this logic, *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* are in the same main category, while *upasaka* and *upasika* are in the other main category. What distinguishes the first main category from the other is apparently the act of taking ordination (*buat*).

The importance of the ordination for locally classifying Buddhists can be further found in the common Thai term: *nak buat*, which literally means ‘ordained persons’. While its closest English word – monastic – etymologically links to the monastery as a place of residence, the Thai term underlines the act of taking ordination as that which defines religious professionals (Varaporn 2006: 28). Notably, the term *nak buat* is unanimously used for men as monks (and their novices), but its usage with women is ambiguous and controversial. Varaporn’s (2006) account of her encounter with a monk who reacted strongly when hearing that her research topic was about women who are *nak buat* elucidates this point:

“What do you mean by ordained women?” the monk asked again after a slight pause. Before I could finish my answer, he shot back with a sudden change in tone.

“There are no ordained women in Thailand. *Mae-chi* [traditional white-robed nuns] observe only eight precepts. They are *ubasika* [Pali: *upasika*, meaning ‘pious laywomen’], not ordained. Those *phiksuni* who claim to have received their ordination from Sri Lanka have violated the Buddhist conventions [*phuttha banyat*]. Their ordination was invalid. So, there are no ordained women in Thailand. How can you research something that does not exist? How can you invent something that is not there?” (ibid: 9)

In this view, the common concept of the fourfold Buddhists is evoked. *Mae chi* are classified as *upasika* in the second main category of the fourfold Buddhists, and are thus not *nak buat*. Interestingly, while the contemporary *bhikkhuni* are rejected from being *nak buat*, it is because their ordination’s legitimacy and their identity as true *bhikkhuni* are denied. The category of *bhikkhuni* itself is not rejected. Of course, the monk’s voice presents but one line of thinking. However, considering how *mae chi* still have an ambiguous religious status and social capabilities regardless of their long existence, this perspective appears to be relatively influential. This view also suggests that if the contemporary *bhikkhuni* are considered as true *bhikkhuni*, they would be approved as *nak buat* since the form of *bhikkhuni* itself is perceived as such.

Another common but important Thai term relating to Buddhist monastics is that of *phra*. According to Office of the Royal Society of Thailand (2011), the term *phra* can be combined with other words, as well as used alone. When it is combined with other words, it denotes high status, respect, and/or goodness. The term can be put in front of a noun to show respect for and the high status of such a noun. For instance, in the term *phra phirun*, *phirun* is a name for a local god of rain and *phra* shows respect for and the high status of the god (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). The word *phra* can also be put after a noun to form a term that denotes goodness. For example, it can be combined with a word such as *chai* (heart) as *chai phra*, which basically means ‘to have a heart of *phra*’. The dictionary describes *chai phra* as ‘having loving-kindness, compassion and virtues like *phra*’(ibid.). It is obvious that those who are seen as *phra* are expected to embody these virtues.

Notably, the word *phra*, when used alone, mostly refers to monks (*bhikkhu*) (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). In common usage, the word then appears to be closely associated with religious authority and an image of a person with a shaved head, wearing

the saffron robes – the person in the first main category of the fourfold Buddhists. To my knowledge, this is probably also why *mae chi*, who can be ambiguously viewed as *nak buat*, are not seen as *phra*. It is noted that before the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni*, the term *phra* – when used alone – appears to have been reserved only for men.

Taking the local categorization scheme into account, we can also see how the form of *bhikkhuni* is perceived as distinctly different from that of *mae chi* as conveyed through English terms. In English usage, nun is an established term for *bhikkhuni* (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1377). Likewise, other female Buddhist renunciants (who have not received *pabbajja* or *upasampada* ordinations) tend to be referred to as ‘nuns’ (with inverted commas) (e.g. Collins and McDaniel 2010; Cook 2010) and with terms that have the word nun in them such as ‘lay nuns’ (Muecke 2004).<sup>125</sup> Through the uses of English terms, both *bhikkhuni* and *mae chi* are categorized in the same category as nuns. However, in the local categorization, in which the concept of the fourfold Buddhists is prominent, the *bhikkhuni* and *mae chi* are in different categories, and belong to the first main category of those who receive the ordination and to the second main category of the laity respectively. This is also probably why the form of *bhikkhuni* itself embodied in the identity of *nak buat* is not questioned, while the form of *mae chi* is.<sup>126</sup> The form of *mae chi* is also not considered to relate to the identity of *phra*, while the form of *bhikkhuni* is, as we will see later in the chapter.

The identities and status of Buddhist renunciants conceptualized in the local categorization discussed, are also enacted, negotiated and maintained through the uses of indexical language. The next two sections will examine the uses of indexical language by, with and about those who are in the category of monks (*phra*) and those who assume the form of *mae chi* respectively.

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<sup>125</sup> For local terms of various countries for Buddhist women, see Collins and McDaniel 2010: Appendix 2, 1402–1408.

<sup>126</sup> To clarify, here I mean that the renunciant form of *mae chi* is still religiously ambiguous, while the form of *bhikkhuni* is not. It is acknowledged that in some monasteries *mae chi* can also be seen as *nak buat* and self-identify as such (e.g. Lindberg Falk 2007; Cook 2010).

### 3.1.2 Indexical language and the category of monks (*phra*)<sup>127</sup>

In Thai society, there are only two groups of people who have special verbs, special words and special classifiers to use and to be used about them – monks (*phra*) and the royal family. The Thai writer Mukhom Wongthet (2012) criticizes these indexical forms (particularly those relating to the royal family) as functioning to create and maintain the high and holy status of the royal family. Using these indexical forms, she argues, leads users to be dominated by consent. As the royal family is beyond the scope of this thesis, my focus naturally is on monks (*phra*). Arguably, these indexical form regarding monks (*phra*) can also function similarly to enact and maintain their high status, particularly vis-à-vis the laity. As Thai women had never claimed to be categorical monks (*phra*) prior to the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni*, the discussion in this section is on the uses of indexical language by, with and about male monks, who will be referred to simply as monks.

As noted by several scholars, there are diverse and special vocabularies to be used by, with and when speaking about monks, (Seeger 2009: 809; Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1384; Terwiel 2012: 105). To my knowledge, these vocabularies are even part of the official Thai language curriculum which all Thai students have to learn and about which they are examined in school. These special vocabularies include the terms for ‘I’ and ‘you’ (which are not limited to the first and second person pronouns), verbs and classifiers.

Monks tend to use special words for ‘I’ when talking to lay people. The most common one is probably the first person pronoun *atama* (Pattana 2012: 99; Ministry of Culture 2015). The term is generated from a Pali word *atta* or a Sanskrit word *atman*, both meaning ‘one’s self’ (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). As the first person pronoun, *atama* is exclusively used by monks and novices when addressing lay people (*ibid.*).

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<sup>127</sup> Here I also include their male novices, who are called *samanen* or *nen* in Thai. To my knowledge, the uses of indexical language by, with and about them should be mostly similar to those of monks (*phra*). The slight difference lies in the use of specific terms: *luang pu* (reverend paternal grandfather) and *luang ta* (reverend maternal grandmother). Novices, aged under 20 years old, would not look old enough to be addressed with such terms.

Monks also tend to use a special word for ‘you’ when addressing lay people. This word is *yom* (Pattana 2012: 99; Ministry of Culture 2015). At the same time, lay people use special words for ‘you’ to address monks. The common ones are *luang phi*, *luang pho*, *luang pu*, and *luang ta* (Terwiel 2012: 105). The term *luang* here shows respect for the monks addressed (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011) and can be equivalent to English terms ‘reverend’ (Terwiel 2012: 105), ‘respected’ (Cook 2012: 125), or ‘venerable’. The words that combined with *luang* – *phi*, *pho*, *pu*, and *ta* – mean an elder sibling, a father, a paternal grandfather and a maternal grandfather respectively (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). We can see here that these sets of words, most of which are gender-specific, are notably comprised of the word *luang* plus kinship terms.

Moreover, there are also special verbs that are used to describe the activities of monks (Seeger 2009: 809). For example, monks do not *kin* or *than* (eat – normal verb) like lay people, but monks *chan* (eat – a special verb). Monks do not *non* (sleep – normal verb), but they *cham wat* (sleep – a special verb). Monks do not *puai* (get sick – normal verb), but they *aphat* (get sick – a special verb) (Ministry of Culture 2015). These special verbs are used by both the monks themselves and lay people when describing the activities of the monks (*ibid.*). In addition, special classifiers are used with monks. The most common and official one is the word *rup*. While a lay person is, for example, counted as one *khon* (or one *than* to be more polite), a monk is counted as one *rup* (Seeger 2009: 809; Ministry of Culture 2015).

The indexical language presented suggest that the high status and identities of those in the category of monks (*phra*) are enacted, affirmed, maintained and normalised every time this indexical language is used. It also shows that, contrary to literature proposing the blurring of boundaries between lay and monastic statuses (e.g. Tambiah 1984: 168), the fully ordained monastics are highly likely to retain their prestigious and superior status to lay people as long as the indexical language is in use.

### 3.1.3 Uses of indexical language by, with and about *mae chi*

There are no standardized and uniform ways of using language with and by *mae chi*, as Seeger (2009: 809) remarks. Existing ethnographic studies about the indexical language usage regarding *mae chi* are also noted to be relatively lacking (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1384). Data presented in this section, therefore, are drawn mostly from my fieldwork,<sup>128</sup> and from the ethnographic works of Latdawan (2005) and Cook (2010). Word choices for ‘I’ and ‘you’ and whether *mae chi* use and are referred to by special verbs, words, and classifiers are considered in this section.

The *mae chi* at a northern temple where Cook (2010) conducted her fieldwork all have similar word choices for ‘I’ and ‘you’, which are *mae chi* and *yom* respectively. For the word choice for ‘I’, Cook reports that the *mae chi* there strongly rejected the use of the first person pronouns *dichan* and *chan* (the polite ‘I’ that lay women use), viewing them as inappropriate. Instead, they always choose to refer to themselves as *mae chi* when talking to lay people. Their word choice for ‘you’ is *yom*, which is the word that monks use to address lay people. Of the *mae chi*’s choices of ‘I’ and ‘you’, Cook (2010) suggests that the words ‘construct[s] the monastic self as a generalized ‘other’ in relation to the generalized “other” of “laity”. This emphasizes the monastic identity of *mae ch[i]* and maintains social distinction within the relationship’ (ibid: 125).

While the word choices of *mae chi* and *yom* for ‘I’ and ‘you’ by the *mae chi* can arguably function positively in the ways Cook (2010) suggested, not all *mae chi* subscribe to this pattern. According to transcribed interviews and conversations that appeared in Latdawan’s (2005) work, the *mae chi* that she talked to in two monasteries referred to themselves with the words *mae chi* and addressed her with the words *nu* or *luk* (ibid: 66, 75, 79–80, 83, 87). Also, the *mae chi* I met in my fieldwork referred to themselves with the words *mae chi* and addressed me with the words *nu*, *luk*, *yom*, or *yom* plus name.

Notably, the *mae chi* seem to unanimously choose the words *mae chi* for their choice of ‘I’. This choice, as Cook (2010: 125) suggests, can underscore the *mae chi*’s monastic

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<sup>128</sup> During my fieldwork, I conversed with around 15 *mae chi*, interviewed 11 of them, and observed their interactions with the laity.

identity. Their various choices of ‘you’, however, indicate that not all *mae chi* ‘construct[s] the monastic self as a generalized “other” in relation to the generalized “other” of “laity”’, as Cook (2010: 125) notes for the *mae chi* who use the word *yom*. As mentioned, some *mae chi* also use the words *nu* and *luk* as ‘you’, words that are not particularly reserved for monastics. The word *nu*, literally meaning ‘mouse’, can be used as either a first or second person pronoun. When it is used as a second person pronoun, it is usually used by people of higher status, particularly elders, to address those of inferior status, especially young people (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). As for the word *luk*, it literally means ‘child’, and is a noun that can be used as ‘you’. When it is used as ‘you’, it tends to be used by older people to address younger ones, suggesting feelings of love and kindness (ibid.). These word choices of the *mae chi* can arguably project the image of kind and respected women, who are of superior status to the laity they are talking to.

Word choices for ‘I’ and ‘you’ used by lay people while conversing with *mae chi* seem to be rarely documented. According to transcribed interviews and conversations that appeared in Latdawan’s (2005: 66, 75, 79–80, 83, 87) work, the word choice for ‘I’ that she used when referring to herself is *nu* while those of other lay people are not mentioned. The word *nu*, as a first person pronoun, is usually used by people of inferior status to those of higher status (Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011). Latdawan’s use of the word thus shows her politeness and respect toward the *mae chi* and how she positions the *mae chi* as of higher status than herself.

As for the word choices for ‘you’ by lay people, Latdawan (2005: 79) notes that the personal relationship involved affects how lay people address *mae chi*. General visitors would address the *mae chi* just as *mae chi*. Only those who knew the name of a *mae chi* would address her as *mae chi* plus full name/nickname, *mae* (literally meaning a mother) plus nickname, or sometimes just *mae*. To illustrate, Latdawan describes that Mae Chi Rattana would be addressed as *mae chi* Rattana, *mae chi* Rat, *mae* Rat, and sometimes simply *mae*. Latdawan suggests that the change in how lay people address the *mae chi* indicates the development of their relationship. She herself used to address *mae chi* Rattana as just *mae chi* before later addressing her as *mae* Rat.



Whether special verbs, words, and classifiers are used for and by the *mae chi* is also relatively undocumented by ethnographers. According to Seeger (2009: 809), some lay people use a special classifier for monks (*rup*) along with *mae chi*, while others simply use a standard classifier for lay people (*khon*). Most Thai people use normal verbs which are formal with *mae chi* while some use the special verbs for monks (ibid.). In addition, data from my fieldwork suggest that *mae chi* tended not to utilize these special vocabularies, as did the lay people who conversed with them.

Undoubtedly, more ethnographic works regarding the uses of indexical language by, with, and about *mae chi* are needed. Nevertheless, based on the existing data, we can see that *mae chi* strengthen their religious identity through the uses of indexical word choices to various extents. However, it appears that the special indexical linguistic markers attached to the prestigious category of monks (*phra*) are rarely used by and with *mae chi*. Their ambiguous religious identities again seem, therefore, to remain underlined.

### **3.2 Assuming important identities: uses of categorical and indexical language by the *bhikkhuni***

As we have looked at local categorization and uses of indexical language in relation to Buddhist renunciants, particularly monks and *mae chi*, we can further utilize the lens of language to explore the social identities and status of contemporary *bhikkhuni*. As mentioned, existing ethnographic data on the uses of categorical and indexical language by, with and about *bhikkhuni* (and their novices) are relatively lacking. Data presented in this chapter are thus mostly from my fieldwork and written materials of the *bhikkhuni* monasteries, such as booklets, handouts, and published books.<sup>129</sup> Relevant available data

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<sup>129</sup> Written materials of Songdhammakalyani Monastery considered here are Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2004, 2011, 2014b, 2014c, Chatsumarn 2008, 2016, Kanchana 2014, 2016, Phimphan 2010, 2011, Suthada 2014, the *Phutthasawika* newsletter from 2013 onwards, and handouts. Those of Nirodharam considered are Nirodharam 2014, 2015, 2016, n.d., and handouts.

from the ethnographic accounts of Varaporn (2006), Lalita (2008), Suat Yan (2011), Itoh (2013), and Delia (2014) are also considered.<sup>130</sup>

This section examines the uses of categorical and indexical language of *bhikkhuni* (and their novices) at the two monasteries. It focuses on the way the female monastics utilize language to assume the religious identities and present them to others, particularly lay people, as their interactions are the focus of this thesis.<sup>131</sup> Word choices the female monastics of the two monasteries used when referring to their own identities are examined, before moving to look at their uses of indexical language with the laity.

### 3.2.1 The *bhikkhuni* and linguistic self-identification

Uses of categorical language by the female monastics of the two monasteries can be regularly detected during their daily lives, as they have to routinely interact with laity. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I spent most of my days assisting in the reception area and thus had ample opportunity to witness the female monastics explain who they are to new lay visitors. The categorical language is also mentioned during daily evening sessions and public events. As I was not assigned to the reception area at Nirodharam but simply joined other *mae phram*, the word choices were instead mostly noticed through daily conversations and talks during morning and evening

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<sup>130</sup> The scholars tend to discuss the data only briefly. Only Varaporn (2006) seriously looks at indexical language relating to the *bhikkhuni*. Her focus, however, is limited to word choices for ‘I’ of the female monastics.

<sup>131</sup> While the *bhikkhuni*’ and novices’ use of indexical language among themselves is also an interesting topic to investigate, it is beyond the scope of my research. I can briefly say that the language usage among the *bhikkhuni* reflects and maintains the hierarchical structure among the monastics, in which seniority is crucial. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, only Bhikkhuni Dhammananda uses and is addressed with the words *luang mae*, while the others tend to be affiliated with the words *luang phi*. *Mae* (mother) is clearly more superior in status than *phi* (elder sibling). At Nirodharam, the monastics who are more senior tend to be addressed with the word *aiye* and Bhikkhuni Nanthayani is always addressed with the term *phra achan* — *achan* means a teacher and *phra* shows respect and high status of the teacher. Itoh (2013: 256) briefly reports that the monastics tend to use their Pali name to address one another, which is a change from the use of the words *mae* or *phi* before the *pabbajja* and *upasampada* ordinations. The development of indexical language usage among the *bhikkhuni* and novices themselves is a topic that deserves further exploration in a future study.

sessions. In addition to verbal usages, written works of the monasteries, as mentioned, are also considered.

At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, probably because the terms *bhikkhuni*, *samaneri* and *sikkhamana* are not widely known in Thai society, the female monastics often explicitly explain who they are to new lay visitors who come to the reception. They regularly explain that *bhikkhuni* are ‘female monks’ (*phra phuying*), *samaneri* are like a female version of *samanera*, and *sikkhamana* are ‘intensive *samaneri*’ (*samaneri khemkhon*) who intend to be *bhikkhuni* and thus have to be particularly strict in their practice. Their explanation, unsurprisingly, echoes that of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess and their teacher, who often uses these words during her talks. In daily life, apart from the terms mentioned, another word that is used when the female monastics refer to their identities is the widely used Thai term ‘*nak buat*’.

The most interesting term that the female monastics used for their *bhikkhuni* identity is arguably the term *phra phuying*. The term, which literally means female monks, is newly coined along with another newly coined term, *phra phuchai*, which literally means male monks. As discussed, in general usage the word *phra* has long been associated largely with *bhikkhu* (who are obviously men) and those who assume the category of *phra* are seen as having very high status. In using the newly coined terms *phra phuying* and *phra phuchai*, Songdhammakalyani Monastery skilfully reiterates the gender neutrality of the term *phra*, dissociates it from its association only with *bhikkhu* who are men, and underscores the capabilities of women to also be *phra*. What is more, in using the two terms *phra phuying* and *phra phuchai* together, they also evoke the concept of the fourfold Buddhists, in which the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* are in the same category as those who receive the ordination and are only distinguished from each other by biological sex. As discussed, this category is also attached to the identities of *nak buat* and of *phra*. Through these word choices, Songdhammakalyani Monastery affirms their *bhikkhuni* identity as belonging to the fourfold Buddhists alongside the established identity of the *bhikkhu*, and clearly as *phra*,<sup>132</sup> an identity that was not previously accessible to women.

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<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, we will see from some opinions of women portrayed in this thesis (e.g. Sikkhamana Kamonkan in Chapter 5 and Luang Phi Jan in Chapter 7) that there seems to be

Interestingly, to my knowledge, these word choices of *phra phuying* and *phra phuchai* rarely appear in the monastery's written works in Thai. The term *phra phuying* does appear in a book which is mostly comprised of conversations between Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and her disciple, Suthada Mekrungruengkun (Suthada 2014: 47) and in an article written by Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna in a *Phutthasawika* newsletter (Wanthani<sup>133</sup> 2014). However, the occurrence is extremely low compared to how the word choices are verbally deployed. In most written works of the monastery, while the concept of the fourfold Buddhists is still regularly evoked, the *bhikkhuni* identity tends to be simply referred to as *bhikkhuni (phiksuni)*.<sup>134</sup>

At Nirodharam, probably because I was not assigned to stay at the reception area, I rarely heard the female monastics explicitly explain their identities of *bhikkhuni*, *sikkhamana* or *samaneri* to lay people. On rare occasions, such as in a public event arranged for Bhikkhuni Nanthayani's 60th birthday, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani would briefly give an explicit explanation saying merely that they are *bhikkhuni* who receive the *upasampada* ordination from Sri Lanka.

In daily life, apart from the scriptural terms of *bhikkhuni*, *sikkhamana* and *samaneri*, the female monastics of Nirodharam often use the term *nak buat* to refer to their identities. During the talks or informal conversations with lay people, they regularly mention being *nak buat* as something drastically different from being lay people (*kharawat*, *chaoban*) and subtly associate themselves with being *nak buat*. For instance, when Bhikkhuni Nanthayani started her daily *dhamma* preaching on complicated topics, she often began by saying something along the lines of 'normally *nak buat* do not teach lay people (*chao ban*) about these [topics], considering them too advanced. But [they] are important so I will teach [you]. Listen carefully...'. Written works by the monastery also show a similarity to the verbal communication.

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flexibility in the use of the word *phra* as it is also sometimes used with novices, who are usually called *nen* in Thai.

<sup>133</sup> A lay name of Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna.

<sup>134</sup> Notably, in her recent work, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda also sometimes refers to the *bhikkhuni* identity simply as *phra* (Chatsumarn 2016).

There is also another common term that the novice female monastics of Nirodharam associate themselves with – the term *mae nen*.<sup>135</sup> *Mae nen* is a coined term which is comprised of the word *mae*, meaning a mother, and *nen*, a word commonly used to refer to *samanera*, a male novice. The term *mae nen* is often used as a reference to either *samaneri* or *sikkhamana* in the monastery, and is also used as the term for ‘I’ and ‘you’, as will be discussed later. In using the term *mae nen*, the female monastics skilfully and implicitly explain what *samaneri* and *sikkhamana* are. As *nen* has long been used to refer to novice monks, adding the word *mae* in front of it indicates that the word belongs to women – women who are *nen*. The identity of *phra* is also then subtly suggested, as the word *nen* is commonly used to refer to the novices of *phra*. The term *phra* itself is also used sometimes by the monastics, but it is rather uncommon.<sup>136</sup>

Through examining the word choices of the female monastics of both monasteries, we can see how they perceive and present their own identities to society. In comparison, the monastics of Songdhammakalyani Monastery appear to affirm their identities more explicitly than those at Nirodharam, who tend to do it more subtly. This may be partly because of their different approaches to the *bhikkhuni* issues; Songdhammakalyani Monastery is vocal, while Nirodharam avoids media attention. Regardless of the multifaceted ways in which they use the language, the female monastics at both monasteries similarly assume the category of *bhikkhuni* in the fourfold Buddhists. They are claiming the identities of *nak buat* and also that of *phra*, once inaccessible to women. In the next section, their multiple ways of using indexical language, particularly with lay people, provides further evidence for this argument.

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<sup>135</sup> Interestingly, to my knowledge, the term *mae nen* does not appear in Nirodharam’s written works.

<sup>136</sup> Notably, in February 2017 when I visited Nirodharam for a one-night stay, I often heard the *bhikkhuni* refer to their identities explicitly as *phra*. I am certain that they use the term *phra* more frequently than during my stay there in 2014.

### 3.2.2 The *bhikkhuni* and indexical language usage with lay people

This subsection explores indexical language usage by female monastics of the two monasteries with lay people, the group who interact with them daily. The indexical language includes (1) ways of saying ‘I’, (2) word choices for ‘you’ and (3) special verbs, words and classifiers which, as discussed, are embedded within the category of monks (*phra*).

How the *bhikkhuni* and novices choose to say ‘I’ with lay people is the first type of indexical language examined. In Thai, as mentioned, there is a plethora of ‘I’ expressions available to choose from, which are not limited to personal pronouns. It is also more challenging for Thai women to choose which ‘I’ to use than for men (Chirasombutti and Diller 1999). I, as a native, female Thai speaker, for example, can use around six terms just to say ‘I’.<sup>137</sup> Choosing the inappropriate ‘I’ to use can even lead to a communication breakdown (Chirasombutti and Diller 1999: 132). A linguistic phenomenon called ‘zero anaphora’ where a speaker can avoid saying ‘I’ is possible in Thai, but it still cannot last for a whole conversation (Chirasombutti and Diller 1999: 116–117). The Thai speaker, at some point, still has to choose which ‘I’ to use (*ibid.*). Certain word choices for ‘I’ can also be used to affirm the monastic identity (Varaporn 2006: 252). The words for ‘I’ that the female monastics choose to use are therefore important.<sup>138</sup>

		Songdhammakalyani Monastery	Nirodharam
Words used by the <i>bhikkhuni</i> and novices with lay people	‘I’	<i>luang mae</i> – only used by the abbess <i>luang phi</i> <i>luang yai</i>	<i>chan</i> <i>khaphachao</i> <i>phiksuni</i> <i>mae nen</i> <i>mae</i>
	‘you’	<i>yom</i> <i>yom+name</i> <i>luk / luk luk</i> (plural)	<i>yom</i> <i>yom+name</i> <i>thoe / puak thoe</i> (plural) <i>luk</i>

Table 11: Comparison of words for ‘I’ and ‘you’ used by *bhikkhuni* and novices of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam with lay people.

<sup>137</sup> See Appendix 7 for common first person pronouns.

<sup>138</sup> Notably, the female monastics tend to deploy the zero anaphora while talking. However, as mentioned, avoidance of ‘I’ cannot last for the whole conversation and they have to use ‘I’ at some point.

Interestingly, during the course of my research, no female monastics of the two monasteries chose to use the term *atama* for ‘I’. The term, as mentioned, is a common way of saying ‘I’ for monks (*phra*) and is exclusively used by *bhikkhu* and their novices when addressing lay people. Indeed, Varaporn (2006) reports that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda used the term *atama* for ‘I’ during her fieldwork, which created a strong reaction among a group of lay people who contested the *bhikkhuni* ordination. After hearing Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s use of the term, Varaporn notes that ‘[t]heir antagonistic look intensified’ and the *bhikkhuni* had to be ushered outside to safety by her lay supporters (ibid: 251). During the time of my fieldwork, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, somehow, did not use the term *atama* anymore and chose the newly coined term *luang mae* for saying ‘I’. According to my analysis of written works, it was not until around 2011 that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda stopped using the word *atama* for ‘I’. In Phimphan (2011), in which Bhikkhuni Dhammananda gave interviews, the term *atama* was still in use,<sup>139</sup> but in written materials after that time I have not seen it used again. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda did not reveal to me her true reasons for using the term *luang mae* instead of *atama*.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, strong negative reactions were reported from the *bhikkhuni*’s opponents when hearing her use of the term (Varaporn 2006: 251), which may be a reason for why she stopped using it. In adopting a less controversial term for ‘I’, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda may hope to gain wider support from the public. The controversial use of the term *atama* by women is also probably the reason why no female monastics of the two monasteries use it to say ‘I’.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Phimphan Hansakun, who combined the interviews into the book, is Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s lay follower. Although the book was published in 2011, Phimphan states that the interviews were conducted since 2009 (preface of the author, Phimphan 2011).

<sup>140</sup> I did ask her directly why she chose to do so and she light-heartedly replied, ‘Oh, it’s only because I didn’t have *luang luk* at that time’ (*Luk*, meaning child or children, is the word Bhikkhuni Dhammananda regularly used to address her lay followers, while the word *luang* seems to simply be added for the sake of humour. So Bhikkhuni Dhammananda implies that she did not have that many lay followers at the time). Her reply did not seem to reveal her true reason for changing the way to say ‘I’.

<sup>141</sup> During the time of my fieldwork, there was only one female monastic whom I heard using the term *atama* for ‘I’ – Sikkhamana Dhammadipa, who was the abbess of Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama (as of 2018 she has already disrobed). Apart from knowing her choice of the term from conversing with her and hearing her talk to other lay people, she also uses the word *atama* as ‘I’ in her monastery’s booklet (Samaneri Dhammadipa, n.d.). In the booklet, she gives a reason why she calls herself *atama*: ‘I would like to call myself ‘*atama*’ because [I] have

At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the female monastics, not using the term *atama*, employed another term that the *bhikkhu* also use – ‘*luang* plus kin terms’. The terms for ‘I’ in use in the monastery were *luang phi*, *luang mae*, and *luang yai* (see Table 11).<sup>142</sup> The most popular one was the term *luang phi*; everyone except Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and Bhikkhuni Dhammachaya used it. *Luang phi*, where *phi* is a gender-neutral term meaning an elder sibling, was in use by male monks and the female monastics simply adopted the term because *phi* is gender neutral. The terms *luang mae* and *luang yai*, in which *mae* and *yai*, meaning a mother and a maternal grandmother respectively, were newly coined to be parallel with *luang pho* and *luang ta*, in which *pho* and *ta*, refer to a father and a maternal grandfather respectively. As the terms *luang pho* and *luang ta* that male monks use are gender-specific, the parallel gender-specific terms for women were also created. Notably, the term *luang mae* was used only by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who probably adopted the term when she stopped using the word *atama* around 2011, as mentioned.<sup>143</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammachaya, who was in her seventies, also, somehow, used the term *luang yai* for ‘I’, probably because of her age, which could be that of a grandmother.

At Nirodharam, no female monastics chose to use the terms ‘I’ that have long been used only by male monks. Instead, they used (1) conventional polite personal pronouns – *chan* and *khaphachao*, (2) a word *mae*, meaning a mother, and (3) categorical words – *phiksuni* (a Thai word for *bhikkhuni*) and *mae nen* (a categorical term used in the case of the novices<sup>144</sup>) (see Table 11). The monastics tended to stick to their choice of words for ‘I’ and each might have more than one choice. For example, Bhikkhuni Satcha used both *chan* and *phiksuni* for ‘I’. Notably, the abbess Bhikkhuni Nanthayani did not deploy

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correctly received *pabbajja* ordination according to the *vinaya*. The choice of the term *atama* may also not even be approved among all the female monastics. For example, a *bhikkhuni* from the north-eastern part of Thailand (whose name is not given to preserve her identity) remarked that using the word *atama* was ‘a bit too strong’ (*khaeng pai noi*).

<sup>142</sup> There was also a new coined term *luang ya*, which is parallel with the term *luang pu* for male monks (*ya* means a paternal grandmother and *pu* means a paternal grandfather). It, however, was not used for ‘I’ but was used specifically to refer to Bhikkhuni Ta Tao, the former abbess of Songdhammakalyani monastery and the mother of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda.

<sup>143</sup> Her lay followers, however, have long referred to her as *luang mae*, as reported in the work of Varaporn (2006: 239).

<sup>144</sup> See 3.2.1 for discussion of the words.



special words for ‘I’ that only she can use in the monastery, and instead simply used the word *chan* for ‘I’ in conversations with the laity, and the word *khaphachao* in written works.<sup>145</sup> These terms, which are polite personal pronouns, were also used by other female monastics, particularly those who had not reached middle age. For example, Bhikkhuni Munitsara and Samaneri Chiranut also used them. These young female monastics also adopted categorical words *phiksuni* and *mae nen* for ‘I’. Another word in use in the monastery was the word *mae*, which tended to be used by those who had already passed middle age and thus were old enough to be seen as mothers, for example, Bhikkhuni Warathinna.<sup>146</sup>

The second type of indexical language examined encompasses ways for saying ‘you’ when the female monastics address the laity. In contrast to the apparent differences in choices available for the word ‘I’, the female monastics of both monasteries had relatively similar choices for ‘you’, albeit with slight differences (see Table 11). The most popular choice of words for ‘you’ when addressing lay people at both monasteries were *yom* and its variation – *yom* plus name. Notably, as discussed, the term *yom* has long been used specifically by male monks to address the laity, and recently some *mae chi*, such as those in Cook’s (2010) work, also deployed them. The uses of the term by *mae chi*, according to Cook (2010: 215), help to strengthen their identity as monastics. Similarly, the use of the term by the *bhikkhuni* and novices can also reaffirm their religious identities as monastics who are different from the laity.

Apart from the term *yom* and its variation, the female monastics at both monasteries used the word *luk*, meaning ‘a child’ or ‘children’, as ‘you’ when addressing lay people. Notably, those who chose to use the term were undoubtedly old enough to be mothers and

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<sup>145</sup> Bhikkhuni Nanthayani explains that she uses the term *khaphachao* because she personally sees it as meaning ‘a slave of the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *sangha*’ (Nirodharam 2016: 6). The term is noticeably formal and is probably why she instead uses the term *chan*, which is less formal, in daily lives. During my fieldwork, she did not mention why she chose to use the term *chan* and I did not raise the issue with her directly as it was highly likely that she would simply disregard the question and see it as unimportant.

<sup>146</sup> Admittedly, I did not manage to converse with all 47 of them (as of July 2014), but according to the monastics I talked to, the words that I have mentioned should have already covered all choices of words for ‘I’ used in Nirodharam with lay people.

their choices of ‘I’ tended to have the word *mae* (mother) in them. Take Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Bhikkhuni Anong of Nirodharam, for example. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, as mentioned, uses the term *luang mae* as ‘I’ and her use of the word *luk* for ‘you’ is paired with it. Here, she refers to herself as ‘reverend mother’ and addresses lay people as ‘children’. She was already in her seventies, obviously old enough to be a mother. Bhikkhuni Anong, who was in her sixties, used the word *mae* as ‘I’ and her use of the word *luk* is also paired with it. To my knowledge as a native speaker, using the word *luk* as ‘you’ is not uncommon in society, as it can be used by parents with their children, by teachers with students or by elders with young people. Regardless of its common usage, the term appears to be used only by people in superior status for addressing others.

The only different usage in ways for saying ‘you’ between the two monasteries was in the use of the word *thoe*, a relatively informal polite personal pronoun. No female monastics at Songdhammakalyani Monastery used this word but a few monastics at Nirodharam (e.g. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, Bhikkhuni Satcha) did. The word, like the other second person pronouns used by lay people, tends to be seen at Songdhammakalyani Monastery as unsuited for monastics to use, while at Nirodharam it is not treated as an issue.

The third type of indexical language considered concern special verbs, words and classifiers, which are embedded within the category of monks (*phra*). The female monastics of the two monasteries uniformly use them both in their daily lives and in written works. For special verbs, for example, they would not use the normal verbs for eating – *kin* or *than*, but would use the special verb – *chan*, and they would not use the normal verb for sleeping – *non*, but the special verb – *cham wat*. For special words, for instance, they would use the special phrase *charoen phon* in responding to the greeting of lay people. They also would not use normal classifiers – *khon* or *than*, but use the special classifier *rup*, which is commonly used only with monks (*phra*).

We can see that, as with the usages of categorical language, the female monastics at Songdhammakalyani Monastery appear to utilize indexical language to assert their religious identities with lay people more explicitly than those at Nirodharam. Regardless, they similarly claim the category of the *bhikkhuni* in the fourfold Buddhists and,

importantly, its embodied identities of *nak buat* and *phra*. These uses of indexical linguistic markers with the laity substantiate my previous argument that the *bhikkhuni* of the two monasteries utilize the language in multifaceted ways to assume the category of *bhikkhuni* in the fourfold Buddhists and its attached identities. Significantly, they are assuming the identity of monks (*phra*), once reserved only for men.

### **3.3. Corroborating and negating identities: uses of categorical and indexical language with and about the *bhikkhuni***

The category and its embodied identities that the *bhikkhuni* are assuming cannot be socially established without collaboration from other groups of people. Every time they communicate with or refer to the *bhikkhuni*, the monastics' status and religious identities are also evoked and indexed. This section thus explores the language usages of lay people and *bhikkhu* with and about *bhikkhuni*. Particular attention is then paid to the first group as their interactions with the *bhikkhuni* are the focus of this study.

#### **3.3.1 Lay people and language usage with and about *bhikkhuni***

Lay people are the group that interacts with the *bhikkhuni* the most, and thus have ample opportunity to index the *bhikkhuni*'s identities through language usage. However, lay people are not a homogenous group and thus this section looks at lay people who come to the two monasteries and local lay people respectively.<sup>147</sup>

Lay people who come to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam similarly tend to accept the indexical language that the *bhikkhuni* and novices use, and also tend to use the indexical language that signifies and corroborates the identities that the female monastics have projected. This seems unsurprising as, logically, if they were strongly against the *bhikkhuni* ordination and their identities, it is highly unlikely that they would

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<sup>147</sup> It should be noted that the two groups of lay people are not distinctly separated from each other; some lay visitors are also locals.

visit the monasteries in the first place. Their uses of three types of indexical language: ways for saying ‘I’, word choices for ‘you’, and special vocabularies that are embedded within the category of monks (*phra*), are examined in turn.

First, uses of the first type of indexical language – ways for saying ‘I’ – of lay visitors to the two monasteries are notably similar. The first person pronoun *phom* was used unanimously by the male lay visitors to both monasteries. The first person pronoun *nu* was widely used by women, along with occasional use of the speaker’s nickname in cases where the speaker was older or the same age as the female monastics she talked to (see Table 12). All choices of ‘I’ in use were polite and the choice of *nu* particularly underscored the point that the speaker was of inferior status.

		Songdhammakalyani Monastery	Nirodharam
Words used by lay people with the <i>bhikkhuni</i> and novices	‘I’	<i>phom</i> (men) <i>nu</i> (women) nickname (women)	<i>phom</i> (men) <i>nu</i> (women) nickname (women)
	‘you’	<i>luang mae</i> – only used with the abess  <i>luang phi</i> <i>luang yai</i> – only used with one <i>bhikkhuni</i>	<i>phra achan</i> – only used with the abess  <i>mae</i> <i>than</i> <i>mae nen</i>

Table 12: Comparison of words for ‘I’ and ‘you’ used by lay people with *bhikkhuni* and novices of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

Second, their uses of the second type of indexical language – word choices for ‘you’ – while different, were relatively similar in corroborating the identities projected by the female monastics (see Table 12). At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the lay visitors addressed the monastics with the terms the monastics used to refer to themselves. *Bhikkhuni* Dhammananda was addressed with the term *luang mae*, *Bhikkhuni* Dhammachaya with the term *luang yai*, and the rest with the term *luang phi*. These terms, as discussed, are closely associated with full religious identities, and the lay visitors clearly help to affirm them. At Nirodharam, the lay visitors unanimously used the special term for addressing *Bhikkhuni* Nanthayani and addressed other female monastics with the terms *mae*, *mae nen*, or *than*. The term *phra achan*, in which *achan* means a teacher and

*phra* shows respect and high status of the teacher, was used to refer to Bhikkhuni Nanthayani. Others who called themselves *mae* or *mae nen* tended to be addressed with similar terms, while the rest tended to be addressed with the polite second person pronoun *than*. The term *mae* is also used to address female Buddhist renunciants in a respectful way, as mentioned, and the term *mae nen*, as discussed, suggests the identity of a novice *phra* (monk). The term *than*, while not reserved for addressing renunciants, also connotes respect for the speaker as well as placing the monastics in a superior status. In nuanced ways, the lay visitors of Nirodharam affirmed the superior status of the female monastics and explicitly emphasized their full religious identities in some cases.

Third, lay visitors to the two monasteries similarly and unanimously used the third type of indexical language – special vocabularies embedded within the category of monks (*phra*) – with the female monastics. They, for example, used the special verbs *chan* (eat) and *aphat* (get sick) for describing the female monastics' activities. They also used the special classifier *rup* with them. Moreover, they employed other special words and phrases, such as using the special word *ni-mon* when inviting the monastics to do something and utilizing special phrases like *namatsakan* for greeting and *namatsakan la* for saying goodbye to them.<sup>148</sup> The unanimous usage of the third type of indexical language by the lay visitors to both monasteries clearly underlined and strengthened their full religious identities.

Local lay people of the two monasteries do not all interact with the female monastics and thus their uses of indexical language, such as words for saying 'I' and 'you', are relatively hard to detect. To gain an understanding of how the locals perceive the religious identities of the female monastics, including whether they corroborate or reject them, referential words the locals use for the female monastics are also considered. Here I consider the locals of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and of Nirodharam.

At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I regularly followed the monastics on their alms round and saw that there were both locals who gave alms and those who did not. Giving

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<sup>148</sup> Delia (2014: 78–79) also reports that lay people used the word *namatsakan* and the classifier *rup*, which are reserved for monks, with the female monastics of Nirodharam. It should be noted that indexical language is not limited only to these words and various types of indexical language are in use.

alms to the female monastics is already, to some extent, an act of acknowledgement for the religious identities of the female monastics and, as mentioned, lay people tend to make merit through alms-giving with renunciants whom they regard as the ‘fields of merit’. Therefore, it seems unsurprising that the locals who gave alms to the female monastics treated them with respect and referred to them with the terms *bhikkhuni* or *phra* (monks), explicitly affirming their full religious identities. They also used the special vocabulary, *nimon*, when asking the monastics to receive the alms.

There were also locals who did not give alms to the female monastics. Indeed, I was told that the locals’ perceptions of the female monastics were varied. According to P Phen, a local who regularly works in the monastery, some locals refer to the female monastics as *mae chi*, some, recognizing their difference from the normal *mae chi*, refer to them as *mae chi pha lueang* (literally meaning *mae chi* in the saffron robes), and some properly refer to them as *phra phiksuni*.<sup>149</sup> Kanchana, the right-hand person of the abbess, also told me that some locals insist on referring to the monastery as ‘*wat mae chi Thai*’, meaning the temple of Thai *mae chi*, which suggests that they perceive the monastics as *mae chi*. Her remark is noted to be relatively similar to what Suat Yan (2011: 216) reports in her thesis, that she was told to tell bus conductors that her destination is *wat mae chi* (*mae chi* temple), since this is how they regard it.<sup>150</sup>

To obtain empirical data about referential words the locals use with the female monastics, including those who do not give them alms, I collected data during the time I was not staying at the monastery. This was so that the data obtained would not be influenced by my affiliation with the monastery, which, if I had stayed there, could be easily detected through the white clothes of the monastery I had to wear. Wearing casual clothes, I spoke with around 20 locals. Of course, I could not directly ask them which referential words

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<sup>149</sup> P Phen seems to see ‘ignorance’ as a cause of why some locals do not acknowledge the religious identities that they female monastics are claiming.

<sup>150</sup> Interestingly, Suat Yan (2011) notes how she saw Bhikkhuni Dhammananda negotiates her identity of *bhikkhuni* with a local lay man. The layman addressed her, and others who were on the alms round with her, as *mae chi*. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda corrected him and affirmed that they are *bhikkhuni* (ibid: 216). During my fieldwork, I did not witness anything similar. This is partly because Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, owing to her health problems, had already stopped going on the alms round at the time of my stay.

they use with the female monastics of Songdhammakalyani Monastery as it would influence the data collected. Therefore, after introducing myself as a student, I instead asked them about their activity in giving alms. Through noticing how they referred to those who passed on this route during their alms round, we can see which referential words the locals used for the female monastics of Songdhammakalyani Monastery. The three brief conversations that follow are exemplars:

(1)

Me: Do [you] often make merit (*thambun*) through giving alms to [those] in the alms rounds (*takbat*)?

A woman who seemed to be in her fifties: Yes. [I] regularly give alms. Normally [I] give to *phra* (monks) from Wat Phra Prathon who pass this route. Sometime *phiksuni* [*bhikkhuni*] also come this way, such as on the Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*). [I] also give alms [to them].

(2)

Me: Do [you] often make merit through giving alms to [those] in the alms rounds?

A woman who seemed to be in her fifties: [I] give alms only on Buddhist holy days. Monks (*phra*) from Wat Phra Prathon pass this route. [**Those from**] Songdhammakalyani Monastery do not pass here.

(3)

Me: Do [you] often make merit through giving alms to [those] in the alms rounds?

A woman who seemed to be around 40 years old: Yes. [I] go to do it regularly at Wat Phra Prathom Chedi. There are a lot of monks (*phra*) there.

Me: What about [those] who pass this route on the alms rounds?

The same woman: There are *phra* from Wat Phra Prathon and also *mae chi* from Songdhammakalyani Monastery.

A man who seemed to be middle-aged: [These] *mae chi* think they are *phra* but [they] only imitate *phra phiksu* [male monks].

The three examples show the ways referential words for the female monastics are used, or not used as in the second conversation. These examples can be classified into three groups accordingly. They are (1) use of the term that affirms the full religious identities of the female monastics: *bhikkhuni*, (2) avoidance of using any referential words, and (3) use of the term that reject these identities: *mae chi*. Through the use of local's referential

words referring to the female monastics of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, we can see that the full religious identities that the female monastics claim are accepted, ignored and contested in the local community.

At Nirodharam, I also regularly followed the female monastics on their alms rounds and, similar to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, there were also locals who gave alms to the monastics and those who did not. As discussed, giving alms to the female monastics is already an acknowledgement of their religious identities to a certain extent. The locals who gave alms to the female monastics also used indexical language and referential words that affirmed the monastics' full religious identities. They used the terms *mae nen* and *phra* to refer to the monastics. The term *mae nen*, as discussed, suggests the identity of novice *phra*, while the term *phra* explicitly carries the full religious identity. The special word *nimon*, is also widely used by the locals when asking the female monastics to receive the alms, and in turn it strengthens their religious identities.

There were also, as mentioned, locals who did not give alms to the female monastics of Nirodharam. Owing to many factors, I did not manage to replicate a similar pattern of data collection used with the locals of Songdhammakalyani Monastery with those of Nirodharam<sup>151</sup> and thus only obtained empirical data about locals who gave alms to the female monastics. Nevertheless, empirical data in this matter have been covered by Itoh (2013) and Delia (2014), whose work I later learned of. According to them, there are local villagers who address the female monastics as *mae chi* (Itoh 2013: 282; Delia 2014: 49). Some of them realize that the female monastics are different from other *mae chi* and not all of them are positive about this (Itoh 2013: 282). Considering these data and those relating to locals who give alms to the female monastics, we can see that the full religious

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<sup>151</sup> The main factors were my dependence on an interpreter for the northern dialect and the available time of local villagers. I had to rely on an interpreter to speak with the local villagers as many were not fluent in a central Thai language and my ability to converse was limited. When I was planning to start collecting the data, I was informed by Nirodharam (who kindly offered to provide me with a local interpreter) that most local villagers had to work in Longan fields from morning till late evening throughout the time of my fieldwork. Apart from the fact that the interpreter was not available in the late evening, walking in remote villages at that time did not seem safe, thus I did not collect the data in this part.



identities of the female monastics of Nirodharam were both accepted and contested in the local community.

### 3.3.2 *Bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*: ambiguity of language usage

As mentioned, *bhikkhu* play an important role in the emergence of the contemporary *bhikkhuni*. However, it does not mean that they have interactions with the *bhikkhuni* every day. Unlike lay people who interact with the *bhikkhuni* and novices daily, *bhikkhu* interact with them only from time to time. For example, they sometimes come to visit Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, including during the period of the temporary *samaneri* ordination,<sup>152</sup> and the *bhikkhuni* have to seek exhortation from a qualified monk twice a month. Data presented here were obtained on such occasions. Based on these data, this section explores indexical and categorical language used by *bhikkhu* with *bhikkhuni*, focusing on word choices for ‘you’ and referential words, as these were directly related to the female monastics’ identities. It should be noted that zero anaphora, the linguistic phenomenon available in Thai, is widely deployed and the data presented are drawn from instances where word choices had to be made.

At both monasteries, word choices for ‘you’ that I have heard *bhikkhu* use with the female monastics are categorical words: *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri* (in the case of novices), a polite second person pronoun *than*, and sometimes the term *yom*. We can see here that there appears to be ambiguity in the use of language. The use of the categorical words explicitly indicated acceptance of the female monastics’ identities of *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri*, as well as the use of the polite second person pronoun *than*, which connotes respect from the speaker. In contrast, use of the term *yom*, which, as discussed, is associated with the laity, implies that the female monastics’ religious identities may not be fully accepted.

A similar pattern can also be found in the use of referential words by the *bhikkhu*. The categorical words: *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri* and a polite personal pronoun *than* were widely used at both monasteries. On rare occasions, the term *yom* (plus other words) was

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<sup>152</sup> See Chapter 7.

also in use. Specifically, for Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the term *luang mae* was also used occasionally for Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. The ambiguity of the language usage was also apparent in the use of the referential words.

Notably, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the ambiguity in language use was sometimes used as a space for negotiation. For instance, while sitting at the reception area I once heard Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna negotiate her religious identity via phone with a *bhikkhu*. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna: No, [I am] not *yom*. [I] am *bhikkhuni*.

(She then listened to the interlocutor's response, which was impossible for me to hear.)

Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna: No, not *yom*.

(She listened further.)

Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna: Yes, *phra khun chao* [a term used to address a monk]. [I] am *phiksuni* [*bhikkhuni*], not *yom*.

Through negotiating indexical language usage, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna also simultaneously negotiated her religious identity. She was initially addressed with *yom*, a second person pronoun that is usually used to address lay people. She rejected it by saying that she was a *bhikkhuni* and not a lay woman, as suggested through association with the word *yom*.

What I witnessed appears to be a part of an ongoing negotiation. Raising the issue with Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, she told me that it is rather common for *bhikkhu* to be uncertain of or confused at using language with and about *bhikkhuni*. According to her, other monks at Wat Plak Mai Lai, where the abbot, Phra Khru Suthammanat, is supportive of the *bhikkhuni*, were initially confused about how to address the female monastics. She told me that a monk there even used to address Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess and her teacher, with the word *yom*. When she heard it, she raised the issue with the monk and he simply asked her 'Yom, what word should [I] use then?', further addressing her with the term *yom*. After they had built some rapport, however, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna said that the monk stopped calling them *yom* and properly called Bhikkhuni Dhammananda *luang mae*, and her *luang phi*.

On the other hand, at Nirodharam nobody seemed concerned with negotiating their identities with the *bhikkhu* through language usages. An incident when a *bhikkhu* visited Nirodharam one afternoon is an example. He came all the way from a city in an eastern province to the monastery in order to ask Bhikkhuni Nanthayani to take a *mae chi* (who also came with him) under her supervision. His purpose already indicated his acceptance of the female monastics to a certain extent. His use of language, however, revealed ambiguity. Addressing the female monastics and lay women, who were sitting on the floor, from his seat on a platform, the monk gave polite greetings to all, and his use of language was interesting. He chose to address the female monastics with the terms *yom mae phiksuni* and *yom mae samaneri*. During his praise for Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani and Bhikkhuni Nanthayani of Nirodharam for paving the way for Thai women to be ordained in the saffron robes, he also referred to them as *yom mae phiksuni* plus their ordained names.

His word choices for ‘you’ and his referential words suggest that he seemed to accept the religious identities of the female monastics as Buddhist renunciants, and perhaps was not sure how to categorize and position the *bhikkhuni* in relation to the *bhikkhu*. The terms he used are all newly coined and were comprised of the word *yom*, the word *mae*, and the categorical words: *bhikkhuni* or *samaneri*. His use of the word *mae*, meaning a mother, seemed to suggest his respect for the female monastics and his use of categorical words appeared to indicate his acceptance of their *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri* identities. His use of the word *yom*, however, showed ambiguity. The word *yom*, as mentioned, is used to address lay people, and his use of it thus suggests that, while accepting the religious identities of the female monastics, he did not see their religious identities as similar to his own full religious identity.

The ambiguity of the monk’s word choice left room for the female monastics of Nirodharam to negotiate their identities, but no one did. After the monk’s sermon had ended, we all simply prostrated before him to pay our respects. When I recalled the incident of the monk’s visit with the female monastics, they focused on how his visit indicated social acceptance of the monastery as well as the reputation of their teacher, the abbess. No one mentioned the issue of language and their identities.

To summarize, in this chapter I have used the lens of language to examine social identities and the position of the contemporary *bhikkhuni*. Initially, I explored the ways in which Buddhists are locally categorized as having different identities and statuses, as well as the uses of language indexing such categories, particularly usage by, with and about Buddhist renunciants. The focus is on male monks, who undoubtedly are considered to be in the category of monks (*phra*), and *mae chi*, the largest group of female renunciants. Then, based mostly on my fieldwork and written materials of the *bhikkhuni* monasteries, the use of categorical and indexical language by, with and about the *bhikkhuni* were explored. Through looking at the categorical and indexical usages of *bhikkhuni* at the two monasteries, different ways and degrees of affirming their religious identities can be detected. Regardless, they are both utilizing the language to index similar identities. Therefore, I have argued that the *bhikkhuni* of the two monasteries utilize multiple linguistic markers to assume the category of *bhikkhuni* in the fourfold Buddhists and its embodied identities. Importantly, they are similarly claiming the identity of monks (*phra*), which was previously inaccessible to women. Examination of the uses of categorical and indexical language with and about the *bhikkhuni* by others – *bhikkhu* and lay people – also reveals that the identities and position assumed by the *bhikkhuni* are both corroborated and rejected. Indeed, their acceptance, rejection and negotiation in society is ongoing.

## **Part II**

### **The *bhikkhuni*, gender, and power**

## Chapter 4

### Toward freedom from gender: perspectives of *bhikkhuni* on gender and feminism

Probably because contemporary *bhikkhuni* are assuming a fully ordained monastic form that was previously inaccessible to women, they tend to be defined in relation to feminism and its ideas of women's rights and gender equality. Exceptions to this tendency are few and far between and only found in a limited number of scholarly works.<sup>153</sup> Interestingly, perspectives of *bhikkhuni* and novices themselves on their popular portrayals and, importantly, on gender are relatively absent.

This chapter, thus, concerns itself with the *bhikkhuni* and novices' perspectives on feminism and on gender that are based largely on my ethnographic data. Here, I first explore the views of female monastics at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam regarding the term 'feminism'. I then examine their gender ideologies through their perspectives on (1) the eight *garudhamma*; (2) *karma* and women's merit; and (3) the spiritual capabilities of women. After that I focus on their shared perspectives on gender. In taking their perspectives seriously, the chapter suggests that feminist discourse on gender equality and women's rights is not so relevant to understanding female monastics who similarly emphasize engaging in Buddhist practices to transcend gender.

In the last section, the chapter thus questions how to properly approach the *bhikkhuni* and novices, who, as committed Buddhist practitioners, share a similar and fundamental perspective on gender. Therefore, it discusses relevant conceptual frameworks in relation to the female monastics. I propose that the *bhikkhuni* and novices should not be understood through a 'resistance-domination' framework that they reject. At the same time, they should not be seen as existing beyond the operational logic of liberal thought, which encompasses a variety of ideas and defies a single homogenized definition. Finally,

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<sup>153</sup> In particular, Itoh (2013) and Delia (2014); their works will be discussed where relevant.

I argue that their shared spiritual commitment to transcend gender can be best understood as aiming to attain a form of freedom, namely, freedom from an attachment.

#### **4.1. To be or not to be feminists, that is not the question**

One of the most popular terms associated with contemporary *bhikkhuni*, including Thai *bhikkhuni*, is probably ‘feminism’. While the term itself is open to many interpretations, its common perception appears to be linked with notions of gender equality, women’s rights, and fighting against patriarchy. Most portrayals of *bhikkhuni* in the media and in literature are filled with such uses of the term. English-speaking media headlines about the Thai *bhikkhuni*, regularly carry titles such as: ‘The rise of Buddhist Feminism?: a few Thai women are defying conservative Buddhist tradition to reinstate an ancient order’ (Hindstrom 2014); ‘Thai female monastics continue to push for gender equality’ (Wardle 2015); and ‘Rebel female Buddhist monks are on the rise to challenge the traditional male authorities in Thailand’ (*Daily Mail*, 2015). In scholarly literature as well, Thai *bhikkhuni* also tend to be linked with feminism. For example, Tomalin (2006, 2009) and Lindberg Falk (2010) strongly associate the Thai *bhikkhuni* with feminism and see their existence as a feminist response to patriarchal oppression. Perspectives of *mae chi* on the *bhikkhuni* and their ordination presented in scholarly works also reinforce this feminist portrayal. Many *mae chi* are reported to see women who wish to seek the *bhikkhuni* ordination as having to fight for status (which they view negatively) (Lindberg Falk 2007; Battaglia 2015), and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, in particular, is seen as campaigning for women’s rights (Cook 2010: 164; Battaglia 2015: 45).

Interestingly, during the course of my fieldwork, I have come to learn that associating female monastics with the prevailing portrayals of feminism can often be offensive to the women themselves. Indeed, their negative reactions appear to be strongest when linked with images of women who resist and fight against oppressive power. Even Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the only female monastic I met who does not totally deny the feminist label, strongly rejected the portrayal. During an interview, when I asked her about it, she responded fervently:

To be a *bhikkhuni* is to fulfil the fourfold Buddhists (*phuttha borisat si*), which is established by the Buddha himself. Why should it be a challenge? Why should it be a challenge to anyone? I am just doing my duty. We are just doing our duties to fulfil the fourfold Buddhists. There is no reason to think that we are challenging anyone.

Thus, it seems essential to explore the perspectives of female monastics themselves on prevailing feminist representations of them, which do not necessarily reflect their own voices and views. Here, the perspectives of female monastics at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and at Nirodharam are examined in turn, with a particular focus on the two abbesses who teach other female monastics. To clarify, my aim here is not to evaluate whether the monastics can be classified as feminists and to what extent their views can be aligned with feminist objectives, but to examine how they relate to feminism as a cultural object and react to it as a label.

#### 4.1.1 Songdhammakalyani Monastery and feminism

The abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery is Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who can comfortably be described as the most feminist of all female monastics and is not in the least indifferent to the label. But even she, notably, emphasizes her identity as a Buddhist much more than as a feminist. In replying to my question about being a feminist, she stated ‘I am a Buddhist first and a feminist second’, which resonates with what she told Varaporn more than a decade ago: ‘I am a Buddhist before a feminist’ (2006: 171).<sup>154</sup> She further explained ‘I give more importance to being a Buddhist than a feminist. But I do have ways of handling things like feminists. I have a feminist approach in some of my understanding, but I would always prioritize myself as a Buddhist’.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Among the few scholars who do not simply label Bhikkhuni Dhammananda as a feminist, Itoh (2013: 93) reports that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda emphasizes responsibility as a Buddhist, not the discourse of rights, and does not agree with all the feminist values promoted by Sakyadhita.

<sup>155</sup> It should be noted that I initiated the question of being a feminist. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda also often appears to be asked this question. For example, during a public event titled ‘The Controversy behind Thailand’s Female Monks’ on 15 February 2017 at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand, I heard a reporter ask her the same question. Her reply resonated with what she told Varaporn and me.



Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's emphasis on being a Buddhist over a feminist shows that she is far from representing the academic concept of 'religious feminism'. According to Tomalin (2006: 385), religious feminism is a strategy of utilizing religion in the service of the higher goal of women's empowerment, which concerns 're-interpretations of religious systems' in keeping with both their central values and feminism. 'Such a strategy', Tomalin notes 'is attractive to women who wish to employ a religious narrative to guide their politics of empowerment' (ibid.). Following this description, religious activities such as an ordination are only methods for realizing the feminist goal of women's empowerment. However, in the view of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who prioritizes Buddhism, religious activities like ordination are never merely strategies.

Ordination is regularly stressed by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda as a way of fulfilling the fourfold Buddhists and following the Buddha's path, and not as a strategy for achieving women's rights or gender equality. When appearing in the media, she also underlines this point. For example, in one of her TV interviews, she firmly stated that ordination is not for women who just think 'Oh, we can also be ordained now like men' (*Channel 7* 2014). Here, it is important to understand that her statement is not only made in an effort to please the public, who often perceive feminism and its related activities negatively (Roces 2010: 1–2). My time spent in the monastery can attest this point. For example, one late evening at the monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda addressed the monastics and a few lay women regarding her concern for women who take temporary ordination. 'Most women became temporarily ordained mainly to repay the debt to parents,' she said, adding 'very few [of them] are motivated to do it solely for the religion, learning and spreading it. Too few [of them] continue to stay in the robes.' Sadness and tiredness, emotions that she rarely expressed, could be detected in her voice. Here we can see that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda does not regard the motivation to be ordained in order to repay the debt to one's parents as highly as being motivated to do so for purely religious reasons. To be ordained for secular feminist reasons, such as women's rights, appears to simply be out of the question.

I propose, therefore, that what Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is doing is contrary to the concept of 'religious feminism' even though she regularly engages with global feminist

narratives. This is because she utilizes feminism to achieve a higher religious goal, rather than using religion to achieve a higher feminist goal. Before moving to that issue, however, one must first consider her view on Buddhist teaching and what she deems as its 'core'. Her perspective can be clearly seen in a passage from her influential book *Thai women in Buddhism*, which was written when she was still a lay woman:

It is important for scholars to distinguish between two levels of teaching in the tradition. The first is the core teaching of Buddhism that deals directly with the spiritual path. This level is free from contextual and gender bias by its very nature. The question of bias or oppression is not applicable here, because the Buddha's teachings transcend gender difference. The highest goal of Buddhism is enlightenment, and the spiritual path leading to it is available to all sentient beings, without discrimination. The second category of teachings exists on a more mundane level and is indeed affected by social context. (Chatsumarn 1991: 24)

From the passage we can see that, in her view, the 'core' teaching of Buddhism is free from gender bias. Of course, she uses a feminist approach to understand Buddhist texts as she herself said to me ('I do have ways of handling things like feminists'), and it could thus be argued that her perspective is consistent with the concept of religious feminism. However, her prioritization of Buddhism indicates that religion is never merely a strategy. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, contrary to the concept of religious feminism, uses feminism as a strategy to achieve a higher religious goal, rather than vice versa. The use of feminism here is in her approach to understanding Buddhist texts in order to achieve what she views as the core teaching of Buddhism that is free from gender bias. The higher goal here is a religious one.

Indeed, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Buddhism is always prioritized over feminist notions of gender equality and women's rights and other female monastics also echo the view of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. When replying to questions from the laity, including those relating to gender and feminism, they often allude to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and quote her. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's perspective tends to be treated as 'proper' knowledge by other female monastics, who are also her disciples. For example, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna told me that she and other monastics try to learn as much as they can from Bhikkhuni Dhammananda so that they can disseminate the correct information to the public at times when Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is not available.

During my stay at the monastery, no female monastics expressed discontent with Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's use of a feminist approach to Buddhist texts. In fact, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna herself appeared happy to teach a class about using a feminist approach to deconstruct patriarchal views in Buddhist texts and beliefs during the temporary *samaneri* ordination project in December 2013. This approach follows that of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who used to teach the class herself. It has to be noted that the feminist approach mentioned in this class is similar to its general usage by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda; it is used in order to achieve a higher religious goal of realizing 'true' Buddhism, which is free from gender bias.

The slight difference between Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and other female monastics in this regard is that I did not hear any of the monastics state that they were Buddhists before being feminists. They tended to ignore being a feminist or saw it as a rather insignificant matter when I explicitly questioned them. Even Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, who taught that class, seemed relatively puzzled by the question and said she had not considered it before as she did not see it as important. For her, teaching the class was seen as a means to disseminate the 'correct' knowledge of Buddhism to the new *samaneri*, not to propagate feminist ideas. Prioritizing Buddhism was again evident.

#### 4.1.2 Nirodharam and feminism

Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess of Nirodharam, in contrast to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, totally dismisses the term feminism and its related ideas. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani's indifference to and rejection of the term are also reported in the existing literature. Itoh (2013: 399) notes that feminist notions of women's equality and women's rights are not in Bhikkhuni Nanthayani's vocabulary and the topic only arose in conversations initiated by researchers. To be a feminist or not is beyond the concerns of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani and other female monastics (ibid.).<sup>156</sup> Delia's (2014: 85) work also reports that Bhikkhuni Nanthayani firmly stated, in

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<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, Itoh (2013: 407) suggests that following Rita Gross' definition of a feminist, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani can be considered a feminist.

responses to Delia's question, that she was not a feminist. My time spent in the monastery revealed similar observations and an interview with Bhikkhuni Nanthayani reinforced the point. During the interview, I initiated a topic related to feminism and *bhikkhuni*. I mentioned to Bhikkhuni Nanthayani that I had heard some say that feminism and gender equality (*khwam thaothiam kan thang phet*) may relate to the *bhikkhuni*, but being at Nirodharam I had realized that they were not so relevant in this context. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani firmly responded:

If being asked whether here [we] ask for women's rights or not, [we] would say here [we] do not ask for women's rights. There is no point in having [them].

The terms feminism, gender equality, and women's rights appear to be understood as similar to one another and it is clear that Bhikkhuni Nanthayani rejects association with such terms. It is noted that P Supap, a female lay devotee who heard our conversations in the interview, added to me, as if preaching to an ignorant child, that 'They become ordained to let go (*sala*), my dear, not to gain [anything].'

Other female monastics at Nirodharam also echoed the view of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, their revered teacher, as revealed during our informal conversations. During informal conversations, the topic was either initiated by me or occurred when the conversations concerned *bhikkhuni* issues and female monastics of other monasteries. In addition, they tended to express negative views toward feminist terms and saw them as merely worldly concerns that are antithetical to their Buddhist practices. The terms tended to be perceived as a desire to gain or to want something and these desires are considered negative traits to Buddhist practitioners, who are supposed to gradually detach themselves from everything and move toward *nirvana*.

Their perspectives in this regard can be better understood when we consider the daily preaching of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani. At Nirodharam, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani gives sermons every morning and evening, which are part of the daily routines of the monastery. The Buddhist concept of the Three Characteristics (T. *trailak*, P. *tilakkhana*), in which all things are seen as impermanent, unable to stay the same, and without any essences,<sup>157</sup> is

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<sup>157</sup> The Buddhist concept of the Three Characteristics comprises *anicca* (T. *anitchang*), *dukkha* (T. *thukkhang*), and *anatta* (T. *anatta*). It is related to a notion of the Five Aggregates (P.

regularly enacted in the sermons. This enactment of the concept also underlines her core teaching of the third truth in the Four Noble Truths – the cessation of suffering, which Itoh (2013: 228–229) notes. The following ethnographic account is an example of how she preaches:

‘[I] do not want anything because [I] cannot have anything (*mai yak dai phro man mai dai*)’, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani stated in one of the monastery’s daily evening sessions. She further preached that nothing is permanent and nothing stays the same. It is not even possible to actually ‘have’ anything, whether fame, money, beauty, or love. They are all impermanent and will have to disappear one day. It is just a fact. Pointing to a ceiling fan operating above, she said that if one looks at this fan now, one may think it looks like a circle, an eternally continuous entity. However, looking at it closely, one knows the fan is not a continuous whole circle; it is comprised of separate blades. Like this fan, one may deceptively think things are in continuous states. Yet, looking closely, one knows that actually the seemingly continuous states are made up of fragmented ones. Everything is always in flux, in the states of arising and ceasing (*koet dap*). Thus, she remarked, a person who wants to have something is just like a monkey trying to grasp a reflection of the moon in the water. That person is only attempting to attain illusions and it is thus such a useless action.<sup>158</sup>

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*khandhas*, T. *khan ha*) that describes five elements constituting an existence – form (P. *rupa*, T. *rup*), sensations or feelings (P. *vedana*, T. *wethana*), perception (P. *sanna*, T. *sanya*), mental formations (P. *sankhara*, T. *sangkhan*), and consciousness (P. *vinnana*, T. *winyan*). Harvey concisely explains the Three Characteristics in relation to the Five Aggregate: ‘[t]hey [the Five Aggregates] are seen as in a state of constant change, whether of a subtle or more obvious kind. Consequently, they are seen as impermanent (Pali *anicca*; Skt *anitya*), so as to be unstable to and fully satisfactory (Pali *dukkha*; Skt *duhkha*), and to be all ‘not-Self’ (Pali *anatta*; Skt *anatma*): not a permanent, self-secure I or Self. It is emphasized though, that normally we erroneously look on ourselves and the world as made up of permanent, desirable, substantial things. We are thus attached to aspects of ourselves and the world, and so suffer when they change or disappear.’

<sup>158</sup> Additionally, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani repeatedly emphasizes in her sermons how humans are mere temporary combinations of the Five Aggregates (T. *khan*, P. *khandhas*), which are also impermanent, unable to stay the same, and are non-self, according to the concept of the Three Characteristics. Her core message here is that we ourselves do not actually exist and our bodies do not belong to us. In order to be able to sever our attachments and move toward *nirvana*, we have to realize this basic fact from the outset. Other female monastics, such as Sikkhamana Duangkaeo, also echo her sentiments in informal conversations, which often turn into preaching, with lay women.

The influences of the abbess's sermons on other female monastics of the monastery are probably why I rarely heard them express their desires with the word 'want' (yak) during our daily life.

Following this line of thought, asking for anything is simply absurd and demonstrates lack of spiritual training. Thus, it is understandable why the feminist terms of women's rights and gender equality, which are understood in the monastery as women demanding something, are regarded as irrelevant to their lives and as antithetical to Buddhist practices.<sup>159</sup>

Generally speaking, the two monasteries hold relatively different overall attitudes toward feminist terms and notions of women's rights and gender equality, but importantly they share a similar and fundamental view that these ideas are not what truly matters.<sup>160</sup> To be feminists or not is also not a question they consider in their daily lives. Even Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the only one who is not indifferent to the label, mentions it simply because she is explicitly asked the question; she always emphasizes that she is first and foremost a Buddhist. The role of feminism in her monastery is also merely a strategy for achieving the higher religious goal of realizing 'true' Buddhism which does not contain gender bias. The prevailing depictions, in which *bhikkhuni* and their novices tend to be presented as women who firmly value feminist notions of gender equality and women's rights, thus do not appear to resonate with the perspectives of the female monastics themselves.

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<sup>159</sup> Interestingly, in this regard, the female monastics of Nirodharam share a similar perspective toward feminism and its related ideas with many of the *mae chi* as reported in literature (e.g. Cook 2010; Battaglia 2015).

<sup>160</sup> To clarify, this generalized summary is, of course, not presented in order to reduce nuances among the female monastics of the two monasteries. However, similar patterns of perspectives do exist and I believe that the overall picture is no less important than the particular.

## 4.2. Gender ideologies of the *bhikkhuni* and their perspectives on gender

As we have seen how female monastics of the two monasteries perceive the term feminism and its related ideas, this section further explores their gender ideologies and their perspectives on gender. To examine their gender ideologies, their perspectives on the eight *garudhamma*, *karma* and the merit of women, and women's spiritual capabilities are explored. Again, perspectives of the two abbesses, who are teachers of other female monastics receive particular attention. The perspectives of other female monastics are also presented, especially when they are different from the abbess of their monastery. Subsequently, the female monastics shared perspectives on gender are discussed as well as their commitment to engage in Buddhist practices that aim to transcend gender.

### 4.2.1 The eight *garudhamma*

The eight *garudhamma*, which are generally viewed as a set of rules that the Buddha gives to women as a condition of their ordination, clearly subordinate the *bhikkhuni sangha* to the *bhikkhu sangha* (e.g. Cheng 2009: 83; Hüsken 2010: 134–134).<sup>161</sup> Its gender-biased characteristics have led to debates among scholars and monastics worldwide. The authenticity of the rules is, for example, questioned (e.g. Hüsken 2010)<sup>162</sup> and the rules are sometimes opposed (e.g. Gyatso 2010; Chen and Young 2011). For example, Gyatso (2010: 14) states that patriarchal rules should be properly handled because 'they damage the reputation of Buddhism as a religion of egalitarianism and equanimity'. Many Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni* are also reported to disagree with the rules (Cheng 2007: 93–95), and some Taiwanese *bhikkhuni* even demand the abolition of the rules (Chen and Young 2011).

The patriarchal characteristics of the rules, however, do not engender opposition from Thai *bhikkhuni* and their novices. The female monastics of the two monasteries firmly

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<sup>161</sup> See Appendix 8 for the eight *garudhamma*.

<sup>162</sup> Seeger (2006: 170) reports that Thai scholars are also sceptical about the authenticity of the rules.

uphold the eight *garudhamma* (T. *karutham paet*). The perspectives of the two abbesses, who lead others in their monasteries to follow the rules, are examined below.

While acknowledging the patriarchal characteristics of the rules, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani Monastery often explains that the gender-biased elements are related to the social contexts of the Buddha's time.<sup>163</sup> According to her, the rules exist to smooth the existence of the Buddhist institution, which was established in a heavily patriarchal Indian society in the Buddha's time. Her emphasis is also on the Buddha's fairness toward women, which, she says, can be seen when one looks closely at the rules. For example, she often refers to the first rule of the eight *garudhamma* – a *bhikkhuni* who has been ordained, even if for a hundred years, must respectfully greet a monk who has been ordained only that day by rising up from her seat, saluting with joined palms, and paying proper homage – and underlines a condition for this rule. The condition is that *bhikkhuni* do not have to pay respect to monks who are not worthy of it.<sup>164</sup> Additionally, she views the rule of having to pay respect, not as oppressing women, but as 'proper' behaviour. During an interview, she explained to me that 'the *bhikkhuni sangha* pays respect to the *bhikkhu sangha* as younger sisters should pay respect to older brothers' and it is reasonable because the *bhikkhu sangha* came into existence before the *bhikkhuni*.

Bhikkhuni Nanthayani of Nirodharam approaches the eight *garudhamma* in a slightly different manner from that of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in that she sees the rules simply as the rules. They are to be upheld and are part of being *bhikkhuni*. As she explained to me during an interview, 'Living properly [as *bhikkhuni*] is to respect *bhikkhu*. We follow the order of the Buddha. That is all. This is because we respect the Buddha and we believe in the Buddha'. She also referred to the first rule and its condition to show that it is simply

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<sup>163</sup> She gave this explanation both during daily evening sessions at the monastery, (which I attended during my stay) and in written materials (e.g. Chatsumarn 1998: 23–27; Suthada 2014: 33–35, 102–103).

<sup>164</sup> She also regularly referred to an origin of the condition with a story from the Buddha's time. The story, in brief, is that once there was a group of monks who misbehaved in front of some *bhikkhuni*. The *bhikkhuni* went to ask the Buddha whether they had to also pay respect to this group of ill-behaved monks. The Buddha replied that they only have to pay respect to the monks worthy of it (e.g. Suthada 2014: 35).



good to follow the rules. In her words, ‘the Buddha also orders [us] not to pay respect to the *bhikkhu* who are not worth paying respect to. So we do not and we are not wrong. The Buddha is always reasonable so [we] live very happily.’ Additionally, it is reported that Bhikkhuni Nanthayani positively views the rules as helping to facilitate good relations between the *bhikkhu sangha* and the *bhikkhuni sangha* (Itoh 2013: 402; Delia 2014: 109).

#### 4.2.2 *Karma* and the merit of women

As previously discussed, widespread beliefs in Thai society about *karma* and the merit of women are gender-biased. These are the beliefs reported in the literature that being born a woman is due to one’s past bad *karma*, and being a woman is spiritually inferior to being a man (e.g. Kunlavir 2006; Lindberg Falk 2007). This sub-section, thus, explores perspectives of the female monastics at the two monasteries regarding this topic. The perspectives of those at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and those at Nirodharam are examined in turn. As there appears to be more varied perspectives among those at Nirodharam, they receive more consideration in this sub-section.

At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, firmly rejects such gender-biased beliefs. They are treated as ‘misconceptions’ (*maya khati*) in Thai Buddhism that stem from patriarchal Brahmanic influences.<sup>165</sup> Personally, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda does not uphold the belief that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma*. In replying to my question, she viewed being a woman as positive and stated that ‘I am born a woman because of my intention to be born a woman so that I can continue the *bhikkhuni* issue. Because if I am born as a man, I will not be able to handle this responsibility.’

The other female monastics at the monastery held similar views; they rejected such gender-biased beliefs and treated them as misconceptions. Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, for example, strongly opposed these beliefs and her explanation echoed that of the abbess –

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<sup>165</sup> Her opinions can be seen in written works (e.g. Chatsumarn 1991: 31; Chatsumarn 1998: 44–52) and she also sometimes expressed them during public talks and evening sessions at the monastery (which I attended during my stay).

that they are mere Brahmanic influences. She also said that some women could be born women simply because it was their intention in past lives to be born as women again. Another monastic of the monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammahiran, who had been a *bhikkhuni* for a year, also disregarded the beliefs and remarked to me that seeing women as an inferior gender is a common concept in Eastern patriarchal societies, and is merely a misconception.

However, gender-biased beliefs are perceived differently at Nirodharam. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess, did not reject such beliefs but seemed to treat them as rather insignificant facts. For example, in response to my question regarding being born as a woman due to past bad *karma*, she simply said, ‘Yes, the Buddha mentioned it in a story. [A person] broke the third precept.<sup>166</sup> Then [the person] was reborn as a small animal, a goat, a cow, a third gender (*katoei*), and a woman, respectively. It is a history of a person who broke the third precept.’ The phrase that ‘women possess little merit’ (*mi bun noi*) was also usually mentioned during her daily sermons.<sup>167</sup>

Similarly, the majority of female monastics at Nirodharam do not oppose such beliefs<sup>168</sup> but treat them as something rather insignificant. For example, Bhikkhuni Satcha, a local who used to be a successful business owner, told me:

I (*chan*) believe that being born a woman is because of many factors (*het patchai*), including breaking of the third precept. [I] do not know whether [I] have already been reborn as a woman for 499 lives yet. If not, [I] have to be a woman until [I] reach enlightenment as a stream-enterer (*sodaban*).

Bhikkhuni Satthasiri, a senior *bhikkhuni*, similarly told me that being born a woman is because of breaking the third precept in past lives. She added that ‘being women is less

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<sup>166</sup> The third precept is to abstain from sexual misconduct, so breaking the precepts means that a person has engaged in such misconduct. See Appendix 4 for Buddhist precepts.

<sup>167</sup> Notably, it was not her main point but simply one that was referred to in passing. It is more like a remark that she made.

<sup>168</sup> Delia (2014) reports that some of her informants also held the belief that being born a woman was because of breaking the third precept in past lives (ibid: 71). Notably, she tended not to differentiate distinctly between the views of the female monastics and lay devotees. Thus, it is hard to know to whom she was referring when saying ‘some of her informants’. She similarly reported the belief of women’s inferior merit as upheld at Nirodharam and related it to the belief in women having more mental defilements (*kilet*) than men (Delia 2014: 69–72).

meritorious (*bun noi kwa*) than being men. As *phra achan* [the abbess] said in her sermons yesterday, there are many things that women cannot be. Being a woman is simply unfortunate (*aphap*).<sup>169</sup>

Interestingly, some monastics, in replying to my question about the belief of women and past *karma*, refer positively to the opportunity they received as women to be ordained. For instance, Sikkhamana Kamonkan, a young ex-university lecturer from Bangkok, told me:

What do [I] think about belief that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma*? [I] used to feel sad and inferior (*noichai*) about being a woman. [Being a woman] is tough. [It seems] much more comfortable to be a man. Anyway [I] have been ordained (*dai buat laeo*) in this life and [I have] met *phra achan* [the abbess]. [So I now] feel that it is amazing (*wiset mak*) to be born a woman.

Sikkhamana Sompong, who received a primary school level of education and used to be a seller, similarly said:

Yes, it [past bad *karma*] may probably be one of the causes [of a person being born as a woman]. Being a woman is unfortunate (*aphap*). [I] used to think about why a woman [possesses] little merit (*bun noi*). Why is [being a woman] so unfortunate (*aphap*)? [I] want to be ordained but [I] cannot (*yak buat tae buat mai dai*) ... However, when I am ordained and have an excellent teacher who can guide me, I do not think that being a woman is unfortunate anymore. It is worth being born a woman in this life.

Importantly, their replies show that as they can now be ordained at Nirodharam, the belief about women's inferior *karma* does not matter anymore.

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<sup>169</sup> The view that women possess little merit (*mi bun noi*) is also regularly expressed in daily informal conversations by many female monastics. For instance, Bhikkhuni Warathinna, who used to work in a jewellery business and had been ordained for nearly ten years, often told me and other *mae phram* that 'women (*mae ying*) possess little merit.' Once I directly asked her why it was so, and she explained that '[Women] are prone to face dangerous situations such as being raped. [It is] also difficult [for women] to be ordained (*buat yak*).'

### 4.2.3 Spiritual capability of women

No female monastics I have met doubt the spiritual capability of women to reach *nirvana*, the ultimate goal in Buddhism. As those at Songdhammakalyani Monastery tend to have positive attitudes toward women, as previously discussed, this may not seem so surprising. Interestingly, while the majority of those at Nirodharam see women as having little merit and being inferior to men, they also hold this view. Some even perceive their gender as beneficial to their Buddhist practices.

At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda often emphasizes the spiritual capability of women. The message was in the sermons she delivered at the monastery during my stay, her public talks, and written works (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014d; Suthada 2014). For example, the large number of women who can reach *nirvana* are described by her as ‘not one hundred, not two hundred, not three hundred, not four hundred, nor five hundred. But there are even more than that’ (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2014d: 23). Her firm belief in the spiritual capability of women extends to the idea that women can also be a Buddha. According to her, the belief that women cannot become a Buddha is a misconception, which stems from a misinterpretation of the sentence that indicates one of the special characteristics of the Buddha (e.g. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2004: 22–23).<sup>170</sup> The sentence ‘having the penis inactive’, she says, is normally taken literally and interpreted as referring only to men. However, she argues that it should instead refer to a person who is beyond his/her own sexual drives and thus it is pertinent to both genders (ibid.).<sup>171</sup>

Other female monastics at the monastery also echo Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s views. The spiritual capability of women to reach *nirvana* is mentioned by all of them and it is often referred to in their own narratives of Buddhist renunciation. Notably, the spiritual capability of women to be a Buddha is rarely evoked by other female monastics, but nor is it rejected. Some, such as Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna, uniformly reiterate the perspective

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<sup>170</sup> It has to be noted that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s view in this matter is different from traditional understandings.

<sup>171</sup> This argument was also sometimes reiterated during daily sermons at the monastery during my stay. I have to emphasize that my point here is to examine her gender ideologies, and not to evaluate the extent to which her argument is in accord with Theravada Buddhist texts.

of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. For example, during a class during the temporary *samaneri* ordination period,<sup>172</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna stated that ‘everybody has capabilities to reach enlightenment and also to become a Buddha.’

It is noted that there is no female Buddha in Theravadin texts (Harvey 2000: 373). The view of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and some other monastics in her monastery – that women can be the Buddha – is thus remarkable as it does not conform to Theravada Buddhist texts. Here, I have to emphasize strongly that my aim is not to examine nor evaluate the practices and teachings of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in relation to Theravada doctrines and texts. This interesting point deserves an investigation in a separate study. My aim here is to examine the female monastics’ gender ideologies and their perspectives on gender.

At Nirodharam, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani regularly underlines the spiritual capability of humans, including women, in her daily sermons. The discourse in which women possess little merit and are inferior to men, which is also usually mentioned, is treated as rather insignificant.<sup>173</sup> The emphasis is always on the capability of women to also reach *nirvana*.<sup>174</sup> Other female monastics at the monastery, who hold similar views about women, echo her ideas. For example, Bhikkhuni Warathinna, who regularly mentioned that women have little merit, firmly told me that both men and women can reach *nirvana* as ‘*dhamma* does not have any gender’.

The spiritual capability of women was also regularly referred to by the female monastics when hearing me express doubt about the female gender. After I heard the female monastics’ statements of women’s inferiority and being born women due to past bad *karma*, I often asked them whether we, as women, should feel sad and inferior (*noichai*)

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<sup>172</sup> The eleventh generation, which took place during my stay at the monastery. See Chapter 7.

<sup>173</sup> Interestingly, it should also be noted that if men do not utilize the advantage of their gender, it tends to be seen as simply fruitless. For instance, I witnessed Bhikkhuni Nanthayani remark to a group of male disciples who joined in an evening session that ‘It is easy for you to be ordained (*phuak thoe buat ngai*). Do not waste it.’ (They were all from the Buddhist Club of Chiang Mai University and had come to pay respect to Bhikkhuni Nanthayani on her birthday).

<sup>174</sup> During an interview, she also emphasized to me that the gender of women is not an obstacle to attaining *nirvana*.

about being women. They all firmly rejected such thinking and cited the spiritual capability of women to reach enlightenment. Bhikkhuni Satcha, for example, replied:

Why do [we] have to feel sad and inferior (*noichai*)? The Buddha said in the Tipitaka that women (*matukham*) can reach enlightenment. There is nothing to feel *noi chai* about. In terms of *dhamma* study, women have an equal opportunity to men. I (*chan*) also think that the gender of women is beneficial for studying *dhamma*.

Here, Bhikkhuni Satcha discarded such a line of thought and cited women's spiritual capability. Additionally, she affirmed women's equal opportunity to study *dhamma* and even viewed women's gender as positive in this regard. Delia (2014: 98–99) also noted this positive view of gender. She remarked that female monastics utilize their own gender to facilitate their Buddhist practices, which aim to transcend gender, by treating it as 'an object of analysis' (ibid: 99).<sup>175</sup>

Notably, in contrast to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the spiritual capability of women to be the Buddha is rejected at Nirodharam. During daily evening sessions, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani from time to time mentioned that women cannot be the Buddha. The reason given was related to the special characteristic of the Buddha to 'have an inactive penis'. Bhikkhuni Warayani, for example, also reiterated this during our interview. It has to be noted that no female monastics at Nirodharam appeared to be bothered by this; instead, they paid attention to the spiritual capability of women to reach *nirvana*. Probably, as Harvey (2000: 373) remarks, it is that 'in the context of Theravada Buddhism, this is in practice hardly a restriction, as Buddhas are seen as extremely rare individuals. The key goal is to become an *Arahat* [enlightened individual], which is open to women.'

#### 4.2.4 Practising to be beyond gender

This sub-section explores the perspectives of female monastics on gender. It may not be a new discovery to note that the essence of Buddhism does not have any gender and that

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<sup>175</sup> Delia (2014) also remarks that because the gender of women is generally seen as weaker and inferior, the female monastics, and particularly the *bhikkhuni*, are admired even more than men. In her words, '[t]heir merit and spiritual authority is even more remarkable than if they had been men, already endowed by the "nature" of maleness with the spiritual and physical prerequisites for acquiring prowess' (ibid: 100).

Buddhist renunciants are practising to exist beyond gender. Regardless, the *bhikkhuni* and novices all emphasize this aspect of Buddhism when discussing gender. As Buddhist monastics, they too are engaged in practising to extend their minds beyond gender.<sup>176</sup>

I was often told by female monastics at the two monasteries<sup>177</sup> that the mind (*chit*), regarded as being abstract (*nammatham*), and the body (*kai*), viewed as being concrete (*ruppatham*), are not similar to each other. Being a man or a woman is materialized in the body, which is merely a form (*rup*). For example, a man has male muscles, and a woman has female thighs and breasts. The mind, in contrast, can be male, female, or genderless, depending on how a person manages it. If the mind clings on to being a woman, then it is of the female gender, and if it clings on to being a man, it is of the male gender. If the mind is trained to be celibate according to the Buddha's teachings, it is neither male nor female.

The female monastics' shared perspectives on gender also influence the way they perceive their own gender. As Buddhist monastics, who are engaged in practices aiming to transcend gender, the *bhikkhuni* and novices tend to relate more to the gender of the *nak buat*, which is supposed to be beyond gender. As Bhikkhuni Dhammahiran of Songdhammakalyani Monastery remarked, 'being *nak buat* is not limited to being women or being men. Being *nak buat*, there should be no gender.'

The female monastics of both monasteries also regularly use the terms *samana phet*<sup>178</sup> and *uttama phet* when referring to the gender of the *nak buat*. According to the Office of the Royal Society of Thailand (2011), the word *samana* means those who are free from mental defilement (*kilet*), and specifically refers to male monks, while the word *uttama* means the highest, great, and many. It is clear that the female monastics do not view the word *samana* as reserved only for the monks and see the term *samana phet* as applicable to both men and women who can be 'free from mental defilement'. The term *uttama phet*

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<sup>176</sup> To clarify, I do not claim that they have already transcended their own gender, only that they are working toward it. Renunciation is, indeed, as Cook (2010) remarks, a constantly ongoing process (ibid: 67–69). The gender-specific rules that are part of being a female monastic also tend to be viewed as facilitating the Buddhist practices to become genderless.

<sup>177</sup> During our daily lives, daily sermons, and interviews.

<sup>178</sup> As noted, the term *phet* in Thai can refer to both sex and gender.

was explained to me as meaning ‘the highest gender’, and it can be applied to both male and female *nak buat*, who are supposed to engage with the practices to transcend gender. As Bhikkhuni Satcha of Nirodharam, for example, explained to me:

The *nak buat* are both *samana phet* and *uttama phet*. The *nak buat* are neither man nor woman, non-defined, but following the Buddha’s teachings and rules. All rivers go to an ocean. When they reach the ocean, they cannot be distinguished from one another; all become the ocean. In the same way, regardless of your background and gender, when you become ordained (*buat*) and conform to the rules and teachings of the Buddha, you leave your past identities and belong to the Buddha’s group (*phutthawong*). There are no longer women or men, only the Buddha’s disciples who practise to be free from mental defilements (*kilet*) and to follow the path of the Buddha.

Notably, associating themselves with the genderless gender is similar to Keyes’ (1986) observations of monks and novices who have ‘*sangha gender*’ (*phet yang song*). Keyes argues that only men can acquire this gender through ordination, which requires the person to subject himself to disciplinary rules (Keyes 1986: 10–11). Arguably, the female monastics in associating themselves with such genderless gender also claim this *sangha* gender, which used to be traditionally reserved for men.<sup>179</sup>

### **4.3. The *bhikkhuni* and gender: analytical frameworks**

The perspectives of the *bhikkhuni* and novices on feminism, their gender ideologies, and their gender have been examined. Their views are varied, but they also share certain perspectives. As committed Buddhist practitioners, the female monastics see themselves as Buddhists who are engaged in practices that aim to transcend gender. To be or not to be feminists, or to hold related feminist ideas are not what they prioritize or, in many cases, even consider. They also share a perception of themselves, first and foremost, not as women but as Buddhist monastics who are supposed to be beyond gender. This section will thus reflect on how to understand their shared perspectives analytically.

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<sup>179</sup> Lindberg Falk (2007) argues that women as *mae chi* at a nunnery can also obtain this *sangha gender*. She herself notes that this attainment is on condition that lay people accept the *mae chi*’s religious status (ibid: 101).



Scholars have pointed out the limitations of utilizing some conceptual frameworks in understanding Buddhist nuns in non-Western settings (e.g. Cheng 2007; Cook 2010; Salgado 2013). For example, Cook (2010) criticizes the use of a framework that is informed by the notion of power as resistance and subordination, as well as the notion of gender equality, with reference to the *mae chi* in Thailand. Through the framework, the *mae chi* can be puzzlingly viewed as women asserting their presence in a male-dominated religious sphere and simultaneously submitting themselves to patriarchal values (ibid: 160). However, Cook argues, this framework is problematic because it cannot capture the perspectives of the *mae chi* themselves (ibid: 161, 170). In her fieldwork, the *mae chi* see all their acts as constituting their religious practices and have never viewed them in relation to domination (ibid: 159–160). The framework is thus simply ‘ethnographically irrelevant’ and should not be applied to the *mae chi* (ibid: 170).<sup>180</sup> Salgado (2013) strongly criticizes the use of ‘liberal and feminist’-informed framework with non-Western nuns. Salgado has worked with Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns for a long time and views the framework as both irrelevant to the nuns and an imposition. She argues that through these dominant frameworks, the nuns are being ‘misinterpreted and misunderstood’ (ibid: 2) and their true concerns are simply neglected.<sup>181</sup>

It seems safe to follow other scholars and simply assume the limitations of using the frameworks to understand the Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices, who are also Buddhist nuns. Nevertheless, doing so may suggest an unwarranted homogenization of all Buddhist nuns. It is thus more appropriate to look at the foregoing frameworks specifically in relation to the Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices.

This section examines relevant analytical frameworks and their applicability to understanding the Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices. It begins by exploring a ‘resistance-domination’ framework and suggests its limitations in ignoring the voices of actors that are incompatible with it. It then looks at Mahmood’s critiques of utilizing the resistance-

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<sup>180</sup> In her previous work, Cook (2009) makes a similar argument.

<sup>181</sup> Of course her argument is not without criticism. Tsomo (2015) argues that in disregarding these frameworks, Salgado simply imposes another academic framework on the nuns. My point in presenting the work of Salgado here is because she is one of the scholars who criticized a conceptual framework as inappropriate to use with the Buddhist nuns. Also, even Tsomo recognizes Salgado’s contribution in bringing the nuns’ voices to the forefront.

domination framework to understand religious practitioners, and particularly women. It subsequently examines Laidlaw's critiques of Mahmood and in particular the idea that religious women appear to exist beyond the operational logic of 'liberal thought'. I follow Laidlaw's insights that 'liberal thought' encompasses various ideas and thus it cannot be said that religious practitioners exist beyond its analytical comprehension. Instead, as Laidlaw suggests, it is more fruitful to examine the forms that freedom can take in various settings. Finally, I argue that the *bhikkhuni* and novices' shared commitment to engage in religious practices that aim to transcend gender can be analytically understood as aiming to attain a form of freedom, namely, the freedom from an attachment.

#### 4.3.1 Limitations of a 'resistance and domination' framework: when voices of actors do not fit in

A 'resistance and domination' framework here refers to a framework that is informed by the notion of power as dominating human lives. In this framework, individuals are seen as following their own interests and asserting their agency when they resist dominant norms (and in the case of women, patriarchal oppression) (e.g. Boddy 1989; Ong 2010).

The notion of resistance in the literature became particularly popular after Scott's (1985) influential work, in which he redefines the concept of resistance and proposes a notion of everyday forms of resistance.<sup>182</sup> At the same time, a number of scholars voice concerns about this genre of literature (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995). For example, Abu-Lughod (1990) cautions scholars not to excessively focus on resistance and suggests that using 'resistance as a diagnostic of power' (ibid: 42) should be more fruitful. There are also ongoing debates about which acts can be regarded as examples of resistance, and

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<sup>182</sup> Before his work, resistance was acknowledged only in large-scale confrontational acts against powerful institutions. However, Scott (1985), based on his work in Sedaka, suggests that such acts are too dangerous for the subordinated classes. This, he argues, does not mean that the subordinated people have no agency or succumb to domination. He notices that they act in ways such as 'foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feign ignorance, arson, and so forth' (ibid: 29), which demonstrate their non-compliance. As these acts could not be captured by the concept of resistance at that time, Scott redefines the concept to include such acts, which he terms 'everyday forms of resistance'.

particularly whether the intentions and motivations of actors have to be taken into account (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). The ambiguity of the concept and disregard of actors' own voices in some works are probably what has led to criticisms of the concept of resistance itself. For instance, Brown (1996) criticizes the concept of resistance as having 'inherent explanatory limitations' (ibid: 731). He uses channelling, a form of spirit mediumship in New Age practice in America, as one ethnographic example to support his point. Through the lens of resistance, the practice, in which most participants are women, can be seen as an act of resistance against dominating patriarchal power. However, Brown remarks, the female practitioners rejected such an analysis and they instead 'seem driven by a desire to transcend gender entirely, not to celebrate [their] femininity or to resist male domination' (ibid: 732). Brown thus argues that while interpreting such acts as resistance may not be incorrect, to focus only on the concept of resistance is to lose sight of more potentially comprehensive analyses that take the voices of the practitioners into account.

The limitations of the 'resistance-domination' framework when voices of the actors do not fit within it are also pertinent to the case of Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices. Both *bhikkhuni* and novices, who controversially assume the prestigious identities previously inaccessible to women, can easily be seen as resisting patriarchal domination in accordance with such a framework. Indeed, as mentioned, they tend to be portrayed in this way in the media and in literature. However, as in Brown's (1996) work, the women I worked with categorically rejected such an analysis. Many of them, as discussed, even seem offended by being associated with it. I thus propose that the female monastics should not be analyzed through a frame of interpretation that they strongly dismiss, as in so doing we may potentially lose the more comprehensive understanding attained by considering their own voices.

#### 4.3.2 Beyond 'liberal thought'? Religious practitioners and universal desires for freedom

The phenomenon whereby women choose to be religious, and by implication, subscribe to patriarchal norms, can appear puzzling through the lens of resistance-domination. Ong (1995), for example, terms the phenomenon in which educated middle-class Malaysian

women follow patriarchal Islamic ideologies as ‘the apparently paradoxical problem’ (ibid: 163). Mahmood (2001), who has long worked with religious Egyptian women in the piety movement, thus, questions the framework and its applicability to religious women.

Importantly, Mahmood (2001) criticizes the normative assumptions about humans’ natural desires, particularly for freedom and autonomy, which are inherent to the framework. In her words ‘[w]hat is seldom problematized in such an analysis is the universality of the desire – central for liberal and progressive thought, and presumably by the concept of resistance it authorizes – to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from [the] structure of male domination’ (Mahmood 2001: 206). Her criticism appears to stem from her ethnography: when women’s voices are taken into account, the assumed universal desires for freedom and autonomy do not appear to resonate (ibid: 208–209).<sup>183</sup>

Mahmood (2012) further shows that, when considering the perspectives of the religious women, an act that can be interpreted as resistance against patriarchy can also mean something different. She gives the story of Abir, a pious woman, as an example. In brief, Abir became interested in piety and changed her lifestyle to be more pious; however, her husband was against the practices involved and urged her to give them up (ibid: 176–177). Abir thus used various strategies to negotiate with her husband, including evoking the moral superiority, which she had attained from being pious, and finally she succeeded (ibid: 177–178). Mahmood notes that through the lens of resistance-domination, Abir’s acts can be seen as resistance to her husband’s authority; yet, paradoxically, the means through which she challenges his domination may also be viewed as the means that secure her subordination (ibid: 179–180). However, Mahmood remarks that Abir did not have any intention of rebelling against her husband’s authority and only wanted to follow God’s

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<sup>183</sup> Mahmood (2001) also proposes a notion of the ‘docile agent’ for alternatively understanding agency. Agency, she argues, does not only reside in acts that are against dominant norms but can also be found in acts that conform to them.

command to live religiously (ibid.). Her success is also based on her husband's and her shared religious ideology (ibid: 178).<sup>184</sup>

Mahmood has shown that a more comprehensive analysis is gained by taking into account the voices of actors that do not conform to the framework of 'resistance-domination'. Importantly, she also questioned the normative view inherent in the framework which assumes humans' universal desires for freedom and autonomy. Mahmood's insights in this regard appear to be apposite to the case of Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices. As discussed, they strongly rejected the liberal notion of resistance against patriarchy, and disregarded or at least downplayed the feminist principles of gender equality and women's rights. Taking their own voices into account, we can, thus gain a more comprehensive understanding than we might though using solely the 'resistance-domination' framework. By focusing on the ethical subject formation of religious women, Mahmood (2001, 2012) further makes an implicit argument that pious women appear to exist beyond the logic of 'liberal thought'. However, as we will see in the next sub-section, her insights in this matter can be problematic. Rather, I will argue that, we should not simply follow Mahmood in our analytical understanding of Thai *bhikkhuni* and novices.

#### 4.3.3 Toward freedom from an attachment: the *bhikkhuni* and their commitment to transcend gender

The main critic of scholars such as Mahmood who suggest that religious practitioners are beyond 'liberal thought' is Laidlaw (2013). Laidlaw argues that the 'Western liberal' concept of freedom is dismissed as non-applicable to religious people only because it is used in too limited and underdeveloped a manner. The ideas of freedom and autonomy, he argues, include broader notions than what the scholars define. Laidlaw also points out that 'there is no single liberal conception of freedom' (ibid: 142). To support his claim, he traces the ideas of freedom in liberal thought and broadly classifies them into positive,

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<sup>184</sup> This point is notably similar to Scott's (1985) remark in his *Weapons of the Weak*, in that the effectiveness of the subordinate's resistance depends on a worldview shared with the dominant class (ibid: xvii).

negative, and reflective freedoms. He argues that even when using this general categorization of freedom, it is hard to know what Mahmood actually means by the ‘Western’ and ‘liberal’ concept of freedom in her work (ibid: 150). Mahmood, Laidlaw remarks, constantly uses this concept in contrast to the religious women’s form of life, to indicate the inapplicability of the concept to them. Laidlaw argues that what appears inapplicable to the religious women is not the whole liberal concept of freedom, but only what Mahmood ambiguously defines as the Western and liberal concept of freedom.<sup>185</sup> In addition, Laidlaw suggests that it is more fruitful to understand ‘the varying social forms that freedom can take’ than simply disregarding them (ibid: 139).

Moreover, Laidlaw (2013) proposes that religious practitioners, including religious women, can be understood as ‘individuals [who] are invited to exercise individual ethical choice to embark on a path of self-formation, the end result of which is the extinction of exactly the capacity for wilful decision that enabled them to take the path in the first place’ (ibid: 154). The ultimate goals of these religious practitioners he sees as states of liberation, which are forms of freedom. He argues that the acts of these religious people to move toward religious goals, or self-realization, can be seen as resonating with Berlin’s idea of ‘positive liberty’ – ‘acting as one’s best, true, or rational self’ (ibid: 143).

Following Laidlaw’s insights, I understand that using the term ‘liberal thought’ can be problematic as it encompasses a variety of ideas. Unlike Mahmood, I do not suggest that religious women such as the *bhikkhuni* and novices exist beyond the operational logic of ‘liberal thought’. Instead, I follow Laidlaw’s suggestion that it is more productive to examine forms of freedom in various social settings. I thus examine the forms of freedom understood by the *bhikkhuni* and novices of the two monasteries, in which I worked, which further reveal a different understanding of religious women than Laidlaw’s conception of religious practitioners.

Thai female monastics (who are undoubtedly religious practitioners) committed themselves to practising to achieve *nirvana*, the ultimate goal in Buddhism. As I witnessed

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<sup>185</sup> Laidlaw (2013) further argues, in a similar line of thought, how ‘autonomy’ used in the work of Mahmood is defined too narrowly, making it seem as if the religious women are not concerned with it (ibid: 155–166).

during my stay at Nirodharam, female monastics recited their goals of reaching *nirvana* daily, as also noted by Itoh (2013: 229). At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, female monastics similarly recited their goals of reaching *nirvana* daily.<sup>186</sup> During daily sermons at both monasteries and during interviews, in which female monastics tell their own narratives of renunciation, *nirvana* is often referred to as the ultimate goal and as signifying ultimate freedom (*itsara*). Here, if we take into account the basic Buddhist concept of the Three Characteristics, which is regularly evoked in their daily lives and also in sermons,<sup>187</sup> we can better understand what freedom in this context means. As all things are seen as being subsumed under the concept of the Three Characteristics, things have no essence, are impermanent, and constantly change. Not being able to accept change and clinging on to things causes suffering. *Nirvana*, the ultimate goal, is regarded as the ‘state’ of ultimate freedom because there are no attachments (*mai mi khrueng phuk*) or suffering (*sin thuk*). In order to reach this ‘state’, the female monastics practise to gradually eliminate suffering through lessening their own attachments. Thus freedom here refers to freedom from suffering, which stems from attachments.

In this line of thought, female monastics engaging in Buddhist practices to transcend gender can be understood as aiming to obtain freedom from an attachment. As discussed, they share a view that being men or women is merely an outer form. The gender of the mind, which can be trained to be genderless, is more important. In being female monastics, the women still recognize their own female form but tend to associate themselves more with the gender of the mind than with physicality. They are also committed to train themselves to disregard gender. Thus, gender is arguably also a kind of attachment that hinders an individual from reaching *nirvana*, which entails no attachments. Therefore, I argue that the female monastics, who are engaging in practices to transcend gender, can be analytically understood as aiming to attain a form of freedom from gender on their journey toward the ultimate freedom – *nirvana*.

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<sup>186</sup> See, for example, p. 16–17 of the Monastery’s chanting book, which they chanted from daily.

<sup>187</sup> It is noted that the concept seems to be evoked more often in daily sermons at Nirodharam than those at Songdhammakalyani Monastery (at Nirodharam the sermons are normally delivered twice a day, while at Songdhammakalyani Monastery a sermon is normally delivered only at a daily evening session). However, in daily lives, female monastics at both monasteries appear to refer to it equally, especially when talking to laity.

To summarize, in this chapter I have presented perspectives of *bhikkhuni* and novices on feminism and gender, which are relatively absent in the literature. Initially, I explored perspectives of female monastics at Songdhammakalyani and at Nirodharam on feminism, with particular focus on the views of the abbesses as they are the teachers of other monastics. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, feminism and its related notions are not frowned upon, but are also not prioritized. In practice, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda utilized feminism to achieve higher religious goals, arguably an inverted form of ‘religious feminism’ where religion is used as a strategy to accomplish the higher goal of women’s empowerment. Other monastics also echoed her. At Nirodharam, feminism and its related ideas, which are essentially understood as women demanding something, are disregarded and viewed as antithetical to Buddhist practices.

Regardless of their different attitudes, the two monasteries share a basic view that feminism is not what really matters. This being the case, I next examined the gender ideologies of female monastics through their perspectives on the eight *garudhamma*, *karma* and the merit of women, and spiritual capabilities. The female monastics of both monasteries have nuanced, and sometimes different, perspectives in this regard. However, importantly, they believe in the spiritual capability of women to reach *nirvana*, which is what they consider significant. As committed Buddhist practitioners, they also share a fundamental view on gender and see it as something to be transcended. First and foremost, they share a perception of themselves as *nak buat*, who are supposed to be genderless. Subsequently, related conceptual frameworks were reviewed and discussed in relation to the female monastics. Finally, I argued that the *bhikkhuni* and novices, who are engaged in practices to transcend gender, can be analytically understood as aiming to attain a form of freedom, namely freedom from an attachment. Gender, then, is understood by them to be but an attachment that hinders one from *nirvana*, the ultimate freedom that embodies no attachments.



## Chapter 5

### **Orienting away from power and worldly concerns: *bhikkhuni*'s self-presentations and social acceptance**

The previous chapter considered the perspectives of female monastics seriously and in their own right. This chapter takes another approach — it examines the daily lives of female monastics and their narratives of renunciation as a form of self-presentation. Justification for using this approach is also discussed in this chapter.

This chapter focuses on the self-presentations of female monastics as well as on female monastics' social acceptance in local settings. It begins by exploring daily lives at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries and female monastics' narratives of renunciation, treating them as a form of self-presentation. Particular attention is paid to shared similarities in these self-presentations at both monasteries. The daily lives and the narratives are, thus, examined in turn. The chapter then considers the presentation of self in relation to social acceptance of female monastics. I argue that their self-presentations share a fundamental characteristic of showing a spiritual orientation, away from power and worldly concerns. This unworldly characteristic is crucial in securing the social acceptance of female monastics in the local context, as it aligns with broader notions of power in the Southeast Asian region.

#### **5.1 Daily lives at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries**

This section examines the daily lives at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, as well as their shared characteristics. It does not aim to present in-depth daily activities of female monastics, nor does it claim to represent how they relate to development of ethical practices and religious teachings. For such an approach, readers should see the works of Suat Yan (2011) and Itoh (2013) for Songdhammakalyani Monastery and

Nirodharam respectively.<sup>188</sup> In contrast to that literature, this section adopts an approach that treats daily living at these monasteries as a technique by which monastics present themselves to laity. Daily activities that involve the laity, thus, receive particular attention. The chapter, therefore, begins by comparing the daily schedules of the two monasteries, identifying similar daily activity configurations. It then focuses on the shared characteristics of daily life in the monasteries, the prevalent notion of *sila*, and the infusion of religious meanings into mundane activities. Finally, it discusses why an approach that sees these daily lives as a form of monastic self-presentation is apposite.

### 5.1.1 Comparison of daily schedules at the two monasteries

Songdhammakalyani Monastery	Daily schedule	Nirodharam	Daily schedule
		3.30-3.45	The wake-up bell rings
		3.45-4.00	Gathering at a building to practise <i>dhamma</i>
		4.00-6.00	Morning session: chanting, walking meditation, sitting meditation, and listening to sermons
5.20-5.30	The bell rings, indicating time for gathering at the main building		
5.30-6.00	Morning session: chanting and sitting meditation		
6.00-7.15	Alms round / sweeping leaves / helping at a dining hall	6.00-7.45	Alms round / sweeping leaves / cleaning
7.15-8.30	Gathering at a dining hall / having breakfast		
		7.45-9.00	Gathering at a dining hall / having breakfast
8.30-10.30	Staying at assigned places (e.g. reception)/ Individual practice	9.00-10.00	Individual practice
		10.00-11.00	Learning about <i>dhamma</i> from media

<sup>188</sup> For detailed portrayals of daily activities at the monasteries, see Suat Yan 2011: 184–191 and Itoh 2013: 183–192, and for in-depth descriptions and analyses of practices and teachings, see Suat Yan 2011, Chapter 4 and Itoh 2013, Chapter 7 and 8.6.1 to 8.6.3.

10.30-11.15	Helping at the dining hall / preparing for lunch		
		11.00-11.30	Individual practice
11.15-13.00	Lunch		
		11.30-13.00	Lunch (only for lay people)
13.00-16.30	Individual practice	13.00-13.30	Individual practice
		13.30 - 16.00	Afternoon chanting, listening to stories in Tipitaka, walking and sitting meditation
		16.00-17.00	Sweeping leaves
16.30-18.00	Group's work for the monastery ( <i>tawai raeng ngan</i> )	-	-
		17.00-18.00	Taking a shower, personal time
18.00-18.50	Taking a shower, personal time	18.00-19.30	Individual practice
18.50-19.00	Gathering at the main building	-	-
19.00-21.00	Evening session: chanting, listening to sermons	-	-
		19.30-21.00	Evening session: chanting, listening to sermons
21.00	Time for sleep	21.00	Time for sleep

Table 13: Daily schedules for normal days at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam. (The daily schedule of Songdhammakalyani Monastery is from my observations in the field while Nirodharam's schedule is from both a poster at the monastery and my observations).

The days at both *bhikkhuni* monasteries start with group religious activities, as shown in Table 13. To present a more vivid picture, the following is a vignette of a morning at Nirodharam, one of the monasteries:

The bell rang clearly and continuously through a quiet morning at Nirodharam. It was 3.30 am, even earlier than the time birds start singing. I got up and prepared myself so that I could reach the gathering room before 4 am. It was completely dark. With a torch in my hand, I carefully walked toward the main building where the gathering room is situated on the second floor. Many female monastics were already there, each sitting peacefully on a thin cushion placed on the ground. Lay women who were temporarily staying also gradually came and sat behind the last line of monastics, making a vivid contrast of colours between the saffron monastic robes and the white clothes that the lay women wear. Sometimes there were also *mae chi* staying at the monastery, and they would sit between the female monastics and the lay women, accentuating the *mae chi*'s religious ambiguity. At exactly 4

am a morning chant started, led by a female monastic assigned to the task. Everyone chanted together and sounds of the chants, one after the other, permeated the room. After the chanting, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, the abbess, delivered the sermon (*thet*). She normally delivered it in an interactive style, motivating others to participate by asking questions and mentioning certain people's names to keep their interest. Then it was time for silent meditation, followed by a brief session of stretching. This session was regularly imbued with the idea of keeping one's body, referred to as a 'bag of suffering' (*thung thuk*)—healthy enough in this life to work towards *nirvana*.

A relatively similar scene was also observed at Songdhammakalyani, another *bhikkhuni* monastery.<sup>189</sup>

This type of group activity occurred throughout people's daily lives at both monasteries, which shared substantial similarities. From a comparison of daily schedules in Table 13, we can see that the days at both monasteries start and conclude with religious activities. They are also similarly structured around religious practices and learning. The frequent occurrence of group activities throughout the day also indicates that the behaviours of the female monastics can be constantly witnessed and observed by laity who also participate. They are thus crucial for how laity perceive monastics and are, thus, also a form of their self-presentations.

### 5.1.2 *Sila*: a prevalent notion in daily lives

One of the most important focal points in daily living at both Songdhammakalyani and Nirodharam monasteries is that of *sila* (T. *sin*). *Sila* is translated into English as 'precepts', 'moral conduct', or 'morality', and is reported to be a common notion in Buddhist monasteries more generally (Lindberg Falk 2007; Cook 2010). Its prevalence here indicates a similarity in focus of *bhikkhuni* monasteries with other Buddhist monasteries.

In fact, *Sila* is essential for all Buddhist practitioners. It is regarded as one of the three fundamental practices in Buddhist monasteries and is also the basis for two other key

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<sup>189</sup> A slight difference (apart from the time) was that there was no sermon delivered by the abbess and no stretching. Regardless, it was also a gathering of both female monastics and lay women who chanted at length and meditated together.

ideas – *samadhi* (concentration) and *panna* (wisdom) (Lindberg Falk 2007: 102). The broad significance of these concepts is encapsulated in a remark made by Bhikkhuni Satcha of Nirodharam:

To think of things with contents as having contents is still a kind of attachment, which inhibits one from *nirvana*. The only thing that can make one realize that things with contents do not have contents is *adhipanna* (T. *athipanya*) [higher wisdom]. To be able to have *adhipanna*, one must have *adhicitta* (T. *athichit*) [higher mind/higher mental training], and to be able to have *adhicitta*, one must have *adhisila* (T. *athisin*) [higher *sila*] first.

Here, without *sila*, it would not be possible to advance religious practices.

*Sila* is also not only a focus for monastics; it is also regularly evoked by female monastics of both monasteries when talking to lay people. According to the monastics, *sila* refers to ‘normality’. Keeping *sila* is to have a normal life according to one’s conditions, either as a layperson or a monastic. For example, a layperson should in general keep the five *sila* in daily life and the eight *sila* when staying at the monasteries, while the monastics as *samaneri* should keep the ten *sila*.

Moreover, *sila* is a key criterion through which monastic hierarchies are created and maintained in both *bhikkhuni* monasteries. Those who keep a greater numbers of *sila* are regarded as having higher status. For instance, a *bhikkhuni*, who keeps 311 *sila*, is of higher status than a *samaneri*, who keeps ten *sila*, and the *samaneri* is of higher status than a *mae chi*, who tends to keep eight *sila*. These hierarchies are also manifested in the way spaces are organized in the monasteries. For example, in daily religious gatherings at both monasteries, the abbesses always sit on the most impressive seat. Other *bhikkhuni* sit in the front rows according to their seniority, followed by *sikkhamana* and *samaneri*. Lay people, who keep the lowest number of *sila*, are placed in the back.

In addition, daily activities at the monasteries illuminate the importance of *sila* in this regard. Activities during the time before breakfast are examples. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, after the bell for breakfast rings, the *bhikkhuni* and novices sit at their own places, which are hierarchically positioned. Lay people then offer food as alms to the monastics, starting with the abbess and ending with the least senior person. Only after this offering of food can the lay people take food for themselves. At Nirodharam, before

starting breakfast, people in the monastery had to take turns to go to a kitchen in order to receive food. The *bhikkhuni*, who keep the highest number of *sila*, always go to receive their food first, followed in order by the *sikkhamana*, *samaneri*, and lay people.

Even among lay people there is also a differentiation by *sila*, and the lay people who come to both monasteries seem to tacitly understand the rule. For instance, daytime lay visitors often urged lay people, who wear white clothes signifying they keep a greater number of *sila*, to receive food before them. I was also regularly told by daytime lay visitors of both monasteries to obtain my food first and some also explicitly said ‘Please go first since [you] keep a higher [number of] *sila*.’

### 5.1.3 Mundane activities as infused with religious meanings

From the daily schedules of the two monasteries presented in Table 13, we can see that there are some mundane group activities during the day that are similarly structured around religious activities. These include having a meal, cleaning, sweeping leaves, and other physical labour. Apart from the prevalent notion of *sila*, another important shared characteristic between the daily lives of the two monasteries is that even these seemingly mundane activities are also infused with religious meanings.

Having a meal is a common group activity in the daily lives of both monasteries. During my fieldwork, female monastics and lay people at both monasteries gathered at dining halls in order to have meals. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the female monastics have two meals (breakfast and lunch), while at Nirodharam the monastics only have one meal in the morning.<sup>190</sup> At both monasteries, the act of having a meal is transformed so as to embody religious meaning. Before eating, both monastics and laity have to first chant together. The chant is called ‘reflecting on food’ (*phicharana ahan*) and it is recited both in Pali and Thai. Its basic content reminds us that we eat only to be able to sustain our

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<sup>190</sup> Lay people who stay overnight at Songdhammakalyani Monastery can have up to three meals while those at Nirodharam can have two meals (breakfast and lunch). Even during the meals intended only for lay people, a protocol similar to the meals eaten at the same time as the monastics had to be followed (i.e. chanting before eating and eating with awareness of why we eat).

transient bodies. During eating, everyone sits separately and eats silently, supposedly with awareness of the main reason for eating.



Figure 9: Lay women and a female renunciant at Songdhammakalyani Monastery clean the monastery.<sup>191</sup>

Mundane physical group activities are also infused with religious meanings. At both monasteries, I was told by both monastics and laity that cleaning, including sweeping floors and cleaning fans, is not merely an activity to get things cleaned, but also serves as an ‘offering’ to the monasteries and to Buddhism more generally. These physical labours are thus also meritorious acts that offer merit.<sup>192</sup>

We can see from this section that the configuration of daily lives at both monasteries is similarly structured around religious activities and comprises group activities that almost constantly involve both monastics and lay people. In summary, we can note that daily activities at both monasteries share two characteristics: they are governed by the notion of *sila*, and are infused with religious meanings, no matter how mundane daily activities

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<sup>191</sup> During labouring work, lay women can change from white to brown clothes so that their clothes do not become dirty.

<sup>192</sup> The phrase ‘a well of merit’ (*bo bun*) was even used at Nirodharam when urging lay people to participate in the activities that would offer them merit. I did not hear this phrase at Songdhammakalyani Monastery even though the female monastics similarly told me about gaining merit from doing the activities.

seem. As already argued, I propose here again that daily lives at both monasteries can be seen as a form of monastic self-presentation.

Here, I do not suggest the female monastics behave pretentiously or do not truly practise what they preach. Nevertheless, as Cook (2010: 131) remarks '[m]onastics are "on show" to the laity for much of the time'. Based on her fieldwork in a meditation monastery in a northern part of Thailand, Cook (2010) suggests that the monastics have a moral duty to behave properly in front of the laity as they are supposed to embody Buddhist virtues such as mindfulness (ibid:124, 131–132). In addition, Cook reports that witnessing inappropriate behaviours of the monastics is seen as a demerit for the laity (ibid: 124). Ideally, proper behaviours can simply be generated from the monastics' practices, but they can also be performed because of the monastics' sense of duty (ibid: 124, 132). The bodies and behaviours of the monastics, she notes, become part of the public sphere and are also crucial in creating faith among the laity (ibid: 124, 131). Cook's insights are also pertinent to the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries I worked in, where the monastics' daily lives similarly involve the laity, and their behaviours in daily lives are thus treated also as a form of self-presentation.

## **5.2. Narratives of seeking renunciation**

Apart from the daily activities of female monastics, narratives of seeking renunciation can also, arguably, be considered as forms of self-presentation. If time allows, curious lay visitors to both monasteries tended to ask the female monastics about their reasons for choosing to live an ordained life. My own questions to female monastics about why they had become ordained were, therefore, not at all uncommon. They were also aware that their narratives would be used for academic purposes. As they were telling me their stories, monastics were similarly conscious that they were telling their narratives to a lay Buddhist woman and, in doing so as monastics, they should embody Buddhist virtues for the laity.

In this section, I thus explore the narratives of seeking renunciation of *bhikkhuni* and novices as forms of self-presentation. In this regard, my aim is different from that of Itoh



(2013), who wanted to know the ‘actual’ life stories and motivations for renunciation of the women at Nirodharam.<sup>193</sup> The four examples of narratives presented in this section are selected from my interviews with 43 female monastics in total.<sup>194</sup> These narratives are from responses by the female monastics to my questions concerning why they had decided to become ordained, and to become ordained as novices or *bhikkhuni* specifically.<sup>195</sup> It is, of course, not possible to present all 43 narratives of renunciation in an in-depth manner in this limited space. These four narratives were chosen because they belong to female monastics of diverse backgrounds. To illustrate, they belong to female monastics of various states of ordination (i.e. *samaneri*, *sikkhamana*, *bhikkhuni*), various monasteries (i.e. Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Nirodharam, another monastery), and different social classes including middle class (e.g. a lecturer in a university from Bangkok), and working class (e.g. a trader from a poor family in an eastern part of the country). The narratives of Samaneri Chiranut of Nirodharam, Sikkhamana Thitta of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Sikkhamana Kamonkan of Nirodharam, and Bhikkhuni Suthamma of a meditation centre in the eastern part, are as follows.

## 5.2.1. Examples of the narratives

### 5.2.1.1 Narrative 1: Samaneri Chiranut of Nirodharam

‘Before being ordained (*buat*) I was a naughty child’, Samaneri Chiranut began her story with a gentle smile. She was from Lumphun, a province near Chiang Mai and was only 17 years old when I interviewed her at Nirodharam. Samaneri Chiranut was the youngest monastic I had met and probably the youngest one in Thailand. Even at such a young age,

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<sup>193</sup> In this regard, much of the data that Itoh (2013) presents are gathered from her informal conversations with the women and not from their own narratives.

<sup>194</sup> Twenty-two are from Nirodharam, 10 from Songdhammakalyani Monastery, one from a meditation centre in the eastern part, one from Wat Plak Mai Lai, one from Phuttha Witchalai, three from Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan, and five from Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama. Apart from the female monastics, 11 long-term *mae chi* were also interviewed. Also, it should be noted that the narratives of women who participated in temporary *samaneri* ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery were not included in this chapter. This is because they tended to be ordained only for a limited time period unlike the female monastics in this chapter (See Chapter 7 for motivations of the women who were temporarily ordained).

<sup>195</sup> See also Appendix 1.

she looked calm and mature. During the time of this interview, she had received ordination as *samaneri* two years before and intended to be ordained all her life.<sup>196</sup>

She continued her story by recalling the first time she came to Nirodharam, when she was in Grade 7 at school, and had joined a summer camp. After that, she visited the monastery and stayed overnight as often as she could. ‘I started to recognize the differences in my mind (*chitchai*),’ she said. ‘[I] also realize that the happiness (*khvam suk*) I experienced from playing and partying with friends was merely a little happiness. When I came to learn the Buddha’s *dhamma* (*phra tham*) and keep the moral precepts (*raksa sin*), [it was] another type of happiness.’

In 2011, when she was in Grade 9, Nirodharam publicly provided temporary ordination as *samaneri*, and she decided to be temporarily ordained there. It lasted for only nine days and she had to disrobe. However, she was determined to at least keep the eight precepts<sup>197</sup> in her daily life and asked *phra achan* (the abbess) to confer the precepts on her.<sup>198</sup> At first, when returning to her school, she was worried about being teased by friends about her shaven head and also whether she could successfully keep the eight precepts. Walking through the school’s entrance gate, she saw the Buddha statue located nearby, and she made her wish (*tang chit athitthan*) to the statue: ‘*Sathu*, let me be able to keep the eight precepts purely. Let the power of the Buddha (*phra phut*), the *dhamma* (*phra tham*), and the *sangha* (*phra song*) help me keep the precepts purely.’ After this, she stopped worrying and when she finally met her friends, no one teased her. In fact, they showed their approval of her religious decision. In addition, she could feel that her life had changed for the better after keeping the eight precepts. She was used to spending money on luxuries such as cosmetics, and spending time drinking and partying with friends until

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<sup>196</sup> As of 2017, she had already become a *sikkhamana* and still resides at Nirodharam.

<sup>197</sup> See Appendix 4 for the Buddhist precepts.

<sup>198</sup> Of course, the eight precepts can be kept without needing to have them conferred by the *bhikkhuni*. However, at Nirodharam lay visitors who are going to keep the eight precepts will undergo a brief ritual to ‘receive the precepts’ (*rap sin*) from a *bhikkhuni*. Before leaving the monastery, lay women also participate in another brief ritual to ‘let go of the precepts’ (*la sin*), signifying that they are no longer committed to keeping the precepts. The then Samaneri Chiranut, in wishing to ‘receive the precepts’ and not ‘let go of the precepts’ before leaving the monastery, committed herself to seriously keeping the precepts in her daily life.

late at night, but when keeping the eight precepts she stopped all these activities and also focused more on her studies. Her parents thus worried about her less.

After experiencing the life of a *nak buat* and keeping the eight precepts in daily life, she felt that her daily life had improved, and at the same time, she realized how ridiculous her life had been. ‘Keeping the moral precepts, I understand the *dhamma* better. My *dhamma* wisdom (*panya thang tham*) also develops more. The more I understand, the more I realize how ridiculous and meaningless the worldly way (*thang lok*) of life is. [I] do not wish to be reborn and constantly experience this suffering (*thuk sam sak*). I wish to seek the ordination again’, she said.

Her father, however, was fervently against the idea and wanted her to acquire a higher education, not ordination. Despite her father’s disapproval, she could not forget the idea, saying ‘I have realized that our bodies (*kai*) are only dirty stuff and our minds (*chit*) are constantly arising and ceasing (*koet dap*). [I] have realized which path [I] would take to the life without suffering (*mai mi thuk*).’ In the end, she was able to receive her ordination and be a *samaneri* by gaining support from her mother and reaching a compromise with her father. She got her father’s permission only by promising that she would continue her studies, regardless of being in an ordained state. ‘My ultimate goal is *nirvana*, in which there is no suffering (*sin thuk*)’, she stated firmly.<sup>199</sup>

#### 5.2.1.2 Narrative 2: Sikkhamana Thitta of Songdhammakalyani Monastery

‘I was afraid I would die before being having a chance to be ordained (*buat*)’; Sikkhamana Thitta began her story with a seemingly dramatic statement. I met Sikkhamana Thitta (or Luang Phi Thitta as lay people addressed her), who had a bright personality and a friendly smile, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. She was in her mid-forties and came from the north-eastern part of Thailand. As a mother with two children, she felt a sense of duty to

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<sup>199</sup> According to Nirodharam (2016), Samaneri Chiranut’s father has already changed his attitude and approved his daughter’s intenton to be ordained for her lifetime. In Samaneri Chiranut’s own words: ‘[My] father has completely given up. The triple gems (*phra rattanatrai*) [referring to the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *sangha*] have won.’ (ibid: 15).

wait until her children had grown up enough to work and sustain themselves before seeking renunciation.

‘I did not know about the [*bhikkhuni*] ordination. So I was thinking about ordination to become a *mae chi* (*buat chi*),’ she clarified, adding, ‘I kept telling myself do not die yet. I do not have enough merit for the next lives. I would like to be ordained and also promulgate the religion.’ What strongly motivated her to follow this path was a verse from a chant for honouring Phra Phuttha Sihing (*khatha bucha phra phuttha sihing*), one of the most important Buddha statues in Thailand. It stated ‘We will promulgate Buddhism to be prosperous. Please protect us to always be able to conquer evil.’<sup>200</sup> ‘The verse just settled in my mind. I have never forgotten it’, she said. She summarized why she thinks this way: ‘Maybe I have some merit from past lives (*bun kao*). I do not know.’

When ‘the time came’, she received ordination as a *mae chi*. At first, her family thought she just felt bored and would be ordained only for a short time. When they realized she did not have a plan to disrobe (*suek*), they kept urging her to do so. She was the eldest child of three siblings, and her parents had high expectations for her. They kept telling her that if she disrobed, she could help the family business. Her ex-husband also tried for a while to persuade her to disrobe. She emphasized that she did not have any serious life problems, such as a financial crisis, and her family cared about her. For her, it was only that the worldly way of life (*chiwit thang lok*) was not the right track. She said, ‘[I] do not know whether others will think I (*luang phi*) am mad or a fool. I, however, think that I am not a fool. [I] only choose a path that can make me feel happy (*mi khwam suk*) and [I] do not suffer (*mai thuk*).’ Owing to her strong determination, her family gradually gave in. Her ex-husband even told her that he would take care of their children so that she did not have to worry while being ordained. She was a *mae chi* for five years.

Then one day a scholarly monk whom she respected<sup>201</sup> suggested to her that she could be ordained as a *samaneri* and a *bhikkhuni*. This was how she knew about the existence of *bhikkhuni* and finally became a *samaneri*. She had been staying at another monastery

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<sup>200</sup> In Thai, it states ‘*Puangkha cha prakat phutthasat hai phaisan/ Kho phra aphaiban chana man niran thoen*’.

<sup>201</sup> She did not reveal his name to preserve his privacy.

before coming to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, and hoping to learn more about being a proper *samaneri*. Seeing some interesting interviews given by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, she learnt that the abbess was the first contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand and therefore trusted her knowledge and wisdom.

I asked her whether she felt any differences between being a *mae chi* and being a novice. She said ‘yes’ and mentioned more precepts and stricter practices she has to keep, along with the feeling of being fully a *nak buat* (*nak buat tem tua*). ‘Being a *nak buat*, if I happen to do something that is characteristic of a lay person (*kharawat*), I feel ashamed and will keep training my mind more,’ Sikkhamana Thitta said, and added at length those things a *nak buat* should always take into consideration.

‘I wanted to help others and I myself do not wish to be reborn ever again. It may seem too farfetched, but it is still my wish,’ she stated. Her aim was to finally reach the ultimate Buddhist goal, *nirvana*, whether in this life or in a future life. She wished to be ordained for her whole life but whether it would be possible or not depended on circumstances, and mostly on her accumulated merit. ‘If I have enough merit, I will be able to be like this [in the ordained state] for a lifetime,’ she concluded.

#### 5.2.1.3 Narrative 3: Sikkhamana Kamonkan of Nirodharam

‘At first I only intended to be ordained [as a *samaneri*] for nine days,’ Sikkhamana Kamonkan began her story. I met Sikkhamana Kamonkan, who was in her early thirties and always had a warm smile, at Nirodharam. She was from Bangkok, received her master’s degree in the United States, and came back to work as a part-time lecturer in a Thai university for a term before deciding to seek renunciation for the first time.

She had learnt that there are *bhikkhuni* in Thailand from accidentally meeting a woman in the United States who dressed like a Thai monk (*phra*). ‘I had just learnt that there are female monks (*phra phuying*) now in Thailand’, she said recalling the incident. When she came back to Thailand, she searched the internet for more information. She wanted to be

ordained in order to ‘repay the debt’ to her parents, and thus joined the temporary ordination as a *samaneri* at Nirodharam.

After nine days of being ordained, however, she thought she still had not learnt enough about the life of a *nak buat* and decided to stay a bit longer until the next term at her university started. The longer she stayed, the more she felt she could understand the *dhamma* that *phra achan*, the abbess, preached. ‘I felt like the *dhamma* I heard was so true.’ One day, the abbess asked about her job and suddenly commented that it was ridiculous. She was shocked and kept thinking about why the abbess, whom she respected as being deeply wise, would say this. A couple of days later she followed the abbess to another branch of Nirodharam located in the district of Sutthachit; there she met a *bhikkhuni* who used to have a life that she had dreamed of. ‘The *bhikkhuni* used to work in a big international company, was successful, was very rich and had two good kids,’ Sikkhamana Kamonkan said, and added ‘She was very successful in a worldly way (*thang lok*) and lived a life that I, and many others, aspired to. However, she left everything and became ordained (*buat*).’ Meeting the *bhikkhuni*, being told that her job was ridiculous, and reflecting on all the *dhamma* she had been listening to, particularly regarding desires and suffering, she finally decided to seek a lifelong renunciation and left ‘the worldly way’ (*la thang lok*).

When she asked for her parents’ permission, her mother broke into tears. They were fine if she wanted to be ordained for a short period but not for a lifetime. The abbess advised her that she should ask them for a three-year permission first (two years as a novice and one year as a *bhikkhuni*). She followed this suggestion and assured her parents that if they insisted that she disrobe at that time, she would do so. In 2014, when I interviewed her, she had been ordained for two years. While she would disrobe if her parents insisted, she did not want to. ‘Let disrobing (*kan suek*) not happen to me. Let me be able to live an ordained life continuously,’ she said.

‘Being ordained as a monk (*phra*) and keeping more precepts, I realized what the meaning of life is,’ she added.<sup>202</sup> She further explained in detail how the happiness she experienced

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<sup>202</sup> It is notable that while she was not yet a *bhikkhuni*, the word she uses here to refer to her ordained state is *phra*.

as a lay person and what she currently felt were different. In brief, happiness as a lay person was mainly based on satisfying her own desires, desires that could be endless. For example, she had to acquire money to buy things and keep on acquiring more money to buy better things. Being ordained, she had realized that the more a person wants, the more they will suffer (*thuk*), and the more a person has, the more they will suffer. The worldly way of living, she stressed, is full of suffering. Living as a *nak buat*, in contrast, is a free, meritorious, and peaceful life. It is a way to practise an orientation toward *nirvana*, the state that is free from attachments and suffering. This was why she no longer wanted to disrobe.

#### 5.2.1.4 Narrative 4: Bhikkhuni Suthamma of a meditation centre in the eastern part<sup>203</sup>

‘There was a girl named Paeng who dreamed of being a teacher,’ said Bhikkhuni Suthamma, who appeared to be in her mid-fifties and was from Chachoengsao, a city in the eastern part of Thailand. When I met her, she did not reside at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, but regularly visited (e.g. to participate in seeking the *ovada* along with *bhikkhuni* of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and to join in special events related to *bhikkhuni*). Instead, she resided at a meditation centre in the eastern part of the country and was the only *bhikkhuni* there.

Bhikkhuni Suthamma talked at length about her childhood when she was a girl named Paeng. Paeng had a chance to practise teaching younger children in her primary school and liked it. However, when she finished fourth grade at the primary level, she was forced to quit school as her family was too poor to support her. A teacher did offer her help but only if she stayed at the teacher’s place and assisted with housework. Her father, worrying that she would send money to that teacher instead of him if she successfully became a teacher, rejected the idea. She thus had no choice but to leave her education and start working. She was only 11 years old at that time.

Before her renunciation, Bhikkhuni Suthamma was a trader, waking up very early every day to work. When she turned 23 years old, she thought of temporarily taking the eight

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<sup>203</sup> Its name is not disclosed to preserve its identity.

precepts at a temple. Her brother teased her, asking why she did not just have her head shaven and be a *mae chi*. She considered this for about a month. However, she ended up being a *mae chi* for 31 years before continuing on the *bhikkhuni* path.

‘Being a *mae chi*, I woke up at 3.30 am to prepare myself. At 4 am I chanted (*suatmon*) and practised until 6 am. Then I ate, studied, chanted, or practised. The longer I was a *mae chi*, the more I recognized how the worldly way of living (*chiwit thang lok*) outside is full of *kilesa* [defilements]: greed, anger, and delusion.’ She had realized that life, particularly living in a worldly way, is full of suffering (*thuk*). ‘People struggle to gain money so that they can buy more food and material things,’ she said, adding, ‘They struggle so hard to have more than enough. I feel sad for them.’ For her, it was not a good way of living, and she found that being a *mae chi* provided a better and more peaceful life.

Although satisfied with being a *mae chi*, in her view a *mae chi* is a devout lay woman (*ubasika*), not a *nak buat*. This status limited her religious pursuits and practices. ‘*Mae chi* are expected to deal with administrative things such as managing the bank accounts of temples. All the people who visit the temples also have to be taken care of by the *mae chi*,’ she said. She felt that these monastic duties of the *mae chi* hindered her religious practices and learning.

She said that she had not wished to become a *bhikkhuni* and only decided to become one when offered the opportunity by one of her lay followers. She became ordained as a *bhikkhuni* in Sri Lanka in 2011. I asked her whether she felt any difference after becoming a *bhikkhuni*. She replied that it was very different: ‘being a *bhikkhuni* means keeping more precepts and being regulated by more rules.’ She then provided a number of examples. One was that when she was a *mae chi*, she could buy whatever she wanted. When she became a *bhikkhuni*, she could not buy anything and could only receive what was offered to her. The regulations, which limited what she could do, facilitated her religious practices. ‘I have to always be aware of my mind (*chit*). [I] also feel more peaceful, less attached (*bao chai*) and am closer to merit (*klai bun*). It is another step in training the state of mind toward *nirvana*,’ she concluded.



### 5.2.2 Shared similarities in the narrative configuration

The four narratives presented are, of course, varied and unique, as female monastics have different backgrounds and life stories. At the same time, there are also shared similarities in the narratives' configuration. The key terms: worldly way (*thang lok*), suffering (*thuk*), and *nirvana*, can be found in each narrative. Similarly, the women also stressed the difference between life as a lay woman and life after renunciation, in which the latter was appreciated as a better way to live. The lay life was also described as a worldly way (*thang lok*) with suffering (*thuk*), and it was through renunciation that one could suffer less, as well as move toward the 'state' of no suffering – *nirvana*.

Notably, these shared similarities in the four example narratives could also be detected in the narratives of other female monastics I interviewed. These similarities could also even be seen both in the narratives of long-term *mae chi* I interviewed, as well as in those of the *mae chi* in Lindberg Falk's (2011) work, regardless of their heterogeneous stories and backgrounds. In the narratives presented in the work of Lindberg Falk (2011: 55–78), lay life was often described as empty, meaningless, and boring, as well as associated with suffering. The life of renunciants, in contrast, tended to be appreciated and seen as a way to lessen suffering and to attain *nirvana*.<sup>204</sup>

These shared similarities indicate not only that the female monastics and *mae chi* share certain similar notions and cosmology as Buddhist renunciants. They also point to the existence of conventional and proper narrative configurations, which the renunciants attempt to conform to when telling their own narratives. Thus, the narratives are not

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<sup>204</sup> These similarities are detected from the narratives presented in Lindberg Falk's (2011) work and not Lindberg Falk's own remarks. Lindberg Falk herself classifies themes of renunciation as 'realising suffering', 'the way to freedom', 'glimpse of tranquillity', 'cutting family ties', 'overcoming sickness', 'fulfilling vows' and 'access to study'. Regardless, these similarities can be found in narratives across the themes. The exceptions are narratives presented under the themes of fulfilling vows and access to study. However, it has to be noted that access to study is only cited by some *mae chi* and is but one of the motivations (Lindberg Falk 2011: 74). The *mae chi* who mention fulfilling vows were also those who intended to be ordained temporarily (ibid: 73–74). Access to education was never referred to by the *bhikkhuni* and novices, and the narratives considered in this section were of those who intended to be ordained for a lifetime.

necessarily actual life stories of the renunciants, but a communicative form for expressing themselves as Buddhist monastics.

Indeed, incidents surrounding my interviews with the *bhikkhuni* and novices further suggest that it is justifiable to treat the narratives of renunciation in this section as the self-presentations of female monastics. The interviews nearly always included a recording and I always notified the female monastics of it before recording them. Probably because the existence of *bhikkhuni* still remains a sensitive and controversial issue in society, many female monastics seemed relatively reluctant to have their voices recorded until I assured them that I would be the only person who would ever hear the recordings. Sometimes I was also explicitly requested not to include some bit of personal data they told me of or some potentially impolite language usage in the thesis.

To clarify, I do not suggest that these female monastics are different from their self-presentations and, personally, I do not see the data omitted as potentially harmful to their image as monastics. Time spent in fieldwork assured me that female monastics' spiritual motivations, determination, and commitment to Buddhism were as conveyed in the narratives. Also, while the data are not fully presented because of my respect for these women and my own ethical commitments, the fact that their stories are contextualized within the obligations of monastics to present themselves to laity in positive karmic ways, argues, I believe, for a focus on self-presentations.

Cook (2009) also examines a hagiographic narrative of Khun Yai, a highly revered *mae chi* and remarks that the narrative can be both a moral self-construction and a demonstration of one's self as a monastic. According to Cook (2009: 361), the narrative is 'a demonstration to others of what or who one is, and what one has done – both in this life and, by implication, in previous lives'. The hagiography of the highly revered Khun Yai, Cook notes, suggests her 'spiritual attainment' (ibid: 361). While the narratives considered in this section are not of those considered as saints, Cook (2009)'s insights are, nonetheless, pertinent. Though the narratives of female monastics I interviewed do not yet represent Khun Yai's level of spiritual achievement, they are similarly self-presentations and, following Cook, demonstrations of their monastic selves.

In short, through narratives of renunciation, female monastics express themselves in ways they would like to be perceived as monastics. Fundamentally, they portray themselves in the narratives as having spiritual motivations for seeking renunciation, realizing Buddhist truths such as suffering, and possessing spiritual devotion and commitment to Buddhist practices in order to reach the highest religious goal of *nirvana*.

### **5.3 Securing social acceptance: monastics' self-presentations and Southeast Asian notions of power**

Female monastics' daily lives and narratives of seeking renunciation are explored here as forms of self-presentation. Despite the nuances, monastics' self-presentations do share a fundamental characteristic. As discussed, daily lives at both monasteries are structured around religious activities, and operate according to religious principles; even mundane activities are infused with religious meaning. The narratives of seeking renunciation share this emphasis on spiritual motivation, the realization of Buddhist truths, and the commitment to pursue practices that lead towards the ultimate religious goal. Thus, I propose that the fundamental shared characteristic of the monastics' self-presentations is that they all reveal a spiritual orientation that keeps them away from power and worldly concerns.

In this section, I discuss how this shared characteristic of monastics' self-presentations plays its part in securing their social acceptance in local settings. In order to understand this interplay, one must consider Southeast Asian notions of power, as these govern what proper ways to attain power should be.

It has long been noted that power in Southeast Asia operates differently from the West (e.g. Errington 1990). An act that would be seen as an exercise of power in a Western context, such as issuing commands, tends not to be regarded as a demonstration of power in this region (Errington 1990: 5). By contrast, using force in order to dominate is viewed negatively as revealing a lack of power (*ibid.*). This region-specific conceptualization of power is termed 'spiritual potency' by Errington (1990). It is not only the exercise of force that can diminish spiritual potency; engagement with money and practical matters can

also do so (Errington 1990: 7). It thus seems unsurprising that the practice of restraint and asceticism is reported to be a common way of attaining power in Southeast Asia (Tannenbaum 1999: 255). Through acts of renunciation, one accumulates spiritual potency.

I therefore argue that the fundamental shared characteristic of the monastics' self-presentations neatly aligns with broader notions of power and its attainment in the region. As noted, the demonstration of the monastics' spiritual orientation – renouncing power and worldly concerns – is shared in their self-presentations. This presentation of self indicates to others that the monastics have truly committed themselves to renunciation, and thus that they are accumulating spiritual potency, even though they do not consider themselves as powerful individual. Thus, manifestations of this spiritual potency undoubtedly play an important part in further securing the social acceptance and prestige of female monastics, while dissuading them from thinking of themselves as individually powerful.

Indeed, scholars who have conducted fieldwork at Nirodharam (one of the *bhikkhuni* monasteries) also note that female monastics' emphasis on spiritual motivations and their orientation away from worldly matters is important for gaining social acceptance (Itoh 2014; Delia 2014). Itoh (2013: 289–290) regards the monastics' strict adherence to Buddhist practices and their indifference to worldly comforts as key elements in their support from the laity. Delia (2014: 100) notes that the 'purity' of monastics' motivations for becoming ordained is crucial for the prosperity of the *bhikkhuni sangha*, as there is a widespread suspicion that women seek ordination in order to pursue worldly prestige. Unlike me, however, these scholars do not regard what secures the monastics' social acceptance as their presentation of self.

From conversations with lay people I met at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries, it seems evident that the shared characteristic of unworldliness in monastics' self-presentations is crucial for securing their social acceptance. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, lay visitors tended to emphasize the female monastics' knowledge of *dhamma* and their strict adherence to Buddhist practices. For instance, Lung Num (pseudonym), a local man in his mid-fifties, told me: 'I have faith in the monastics here. [They are] stricter in keeping

Buddhist precepts than many male monks (*phra phuchai*). *Luang mae* [the abbess] also has great knowledge of *dhamma* and Buddhism.’ Lung Num often came to the monastery to make merit and helped out with miscellaneous tasks such as driving. P Tui, a woman from Bangkok in her fifties, similarly told me that ‘the female monastics here are strict in their practices (*khreng*) and are knowledgeable [in Buddhism]. [They] also received ordination (*ma buat*) because they truly wish to find peace and follow the Buddha’s path. [They] do not come [to be monastics] only because [they] do not have any [other] places to go (*mai mi thi pai*)’. P Tui came to the monastery whenever she had time, and regularly helped out at the monastery’s events.

At Nirodharam, lay visitors similarly tended to emphasize their good impressions of the female monastics’ strict adherence to Buddhist practices and their knowledge of *dhamma*. For example, Field, a young local woman who was studying at Chiang Mai University, told me: ‘[I’m] so impressed with the proper and beautiful behaviours (*chariyawat mosom ngotngam*) of the monastics here. [They are] very strict in their practices (*khreng*). The *dhamma* [I] heard was also so true and touching’. Field came to the monastery whenever she could, and always helped out with whatever she was asked to do. P Pui, a female accountant from Bangkok in her mid-forties, echoed this, and added: ‘[They] truly followed the path of the Buddha’. P Pui donated generously to Nirodharam after her week-long stay. I was assigned to count the money, and the amount was around 60,000 baht (£1,387 as of 2018), a large amount of money in Thai society.

Here we can see that the laity tends to underline the importance of religious knowledge and strict adherence to Buddhist practices when discussing their acceptance of female monastics at the two monasteries. These two qualifications are also demonstrated in the shared characteristic of the monastics’ self-presentations. The ability to orient oneself towards spiritual matters, and to disregard worldly matters and power, demonstrates a commitment to Buddhist practices of renunciation and the attainment of a certain level of religious knowledge. Again, the importance of the monastics’ self-presentation in securing social acceptance is highlighted.

To summarize, in this chapter I have explored the relationship between the self-presentations of *bhikkhuni* (and novices) at the two monasteries and their social acceptance. I have treated the monastics' daily lives and narratives of seeking renunciation as a form of self-presentation, and I have provided a justification for this approach. The similarities in the monastics' self-presentations at both monasteries have received particular attention in this chapter. I have proposed that, regardless of nuances, the monastics' self-presentations share the fundamental characteristic that they demonstrate a spiritual orientation away from power and worldly concerns. I have also argued that this unworldliness in the monastics' self-presentations is crucial for securing their social acceptance in local settings, because it demonstrates their spiritual potency and aligns with broader notions of power in Southeast Asia. In other words, the shared characteristic of disregarding power in the monastics' self-presentations is paradoxically what secures them their position of power.

Thus far the thesis has examined the social significance of the fully ordained form for women in Thai society (Part I), and the perspectives and self-presentations of women who assume this form in relation to gender and power (Part II). These two Parts, in turn, provide the basis for further exploration in Part III, which focuses exclusively on the *bhikkhuni*'s impact on an otherwise gendered society.

## **Part III**

### **The social impacts of *bhikkhuni* on gendered society**

## Chapter 6

### **Beneficial existence: *bhikkhuni* as female monastics for lay women**

My legs were numb from sitting cross-legged and my back also ached, but somehow I felt peaceful. It was in the evening, after the rain. The air was humid but fresh, with only occasional toxic smells from passing cars. Five of us – P Sai, P Wa, Sikkhamana Duangkaeo, Samaneri Chiranut, and I – were sitting together in the back of a pick-up truck, heading back to Nirodharam. At some point, P Sai, a middle-aged woman who had come to stay temporarily at the monastery for a week, started to talk about the deep concerns that had prompted her to come to the monastery. When I first told her that I was doing research and asked her why she had come, she told me that she had just come to practise *dhamma* (*patibat tham*). It was not a lie, but it was not her deepest motivation.

As we sat in the back of the pick-up truck, she revealed a deeper story. She had been married for more than 10 years and her husband normally treated her well. When he was drunk, however, he turned into a different person. Recently he had gotten drunk and called her names, and she felt distraught. He did apologize many times afterwards, but she did not feel any better. She then decided to leave him temporarily and sought refuge at Nirodharam, the monastery that is renowned for having only female monastics. The two monastics listened to her calmly, and one of them then asked her to hold a bottle of water in one hand. She did so with a puzzled look and continued chatting and giving more details of her relationship. After a while she said her arm felt sore and she asked the monastics for permission to put the bottle down. They said she could not do so yet. When we had nearly reached the monastery, she asked the monastics again and this time she was allowed to put it down. ‘This bottle of water is like the burdened feeling in your heart,’ the monastic, Sikkhamana Duangkaeo, said. ‘You feel it only because you hold on to it.’ P Sai put the bottle down and a look of understanding appeared on her face. She seemed to realize at that moment why she had been made to hold the bottle of water until her arm ached and probably also what she should do with her relationship.



This ethnographic vignette depicts an example of interaction between the female monastics and lay women as well as their roles in the lay women's lives. Of course, the ethnographic vignette belongs to Nirodharam, but those at Songdhammakalyani Monastery also play such roles as we will soon see. Contrary to a remark that the *bhikkhuni* issue is not so relevant to 'the lived worlds of women in those parts of Asia' (Collins and McDaniel 2010: 1400), this chapter demonstrates that the *bhikkhuni* issue is never apposite only to women who potentially intend to receive ordination. In fact, I argue that the existence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* is very pertinent and influential to the wider society, and particularly to the lives of lay women.

This chapter, then, looks at the *bhikkhuni* and novices at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in relation to the roles they play as female monastics (*nak buat ying*) in the lives of lay women. The chapter initially explores profiles of lay visitors to the two monasteries and their gender ideologies, as based on my collected questionnaire data. These reveal that the majority of lay visitors are women who generally hold positive attitudes toward the female gender. Then, based mostly on my fieldwork at the two monasteries, the chapter examines roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics in the lives of lay women. Here, it proposes that female monastics at both monasteries play three main roles in lay women's lives: (1) 'fields of merit' that lay women can have close proximity to, (2) life consultants and spiritual leaders, and (3) providers of places of refuge. I subsequently analyze three local factors that are mostly responsible for enabling these roles to emerge and flourish. Finally, I argue that *bhikkhuni* and novices are, as female monastics, especially beneficial for lay women, and that their interactions are themselves empowering.

## **6.1. Lay visitors to *bhikkhuni* monasteries**

Before exploring roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices in the lives of lay women, it is helpful to have a demographic overview of the monasteries' lay visitors. Such an overview is based on data collected via my questionnaire.<sup>205</sup> At both monasteries, those who interact with

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<sup>205</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, I had not managed to meet every lay visitors to the two monasteries. Nevertheless, the collected questionnaire should be a representative sample of the lay visitors.

*bhikkhuni* and novices on a daily basis are laity rather than monks. This group includes both locals who live in nearby communities and lay visitors, who may or may not be locals. Normally, most of the lay visitors visit the monasteries during daytime and only some stay overnight.<sup>206</sup>

Data concerning these lay visitors to both *bhikkhuni* monasteries are relatively scarce. Two exceptions are Itoh (2013: 290–297) and Delia (2014: 46–47), who look at the main lay patrons of Nirodharam. It has to be noted that both scholars largely focus on the main lay patrons and on their reasons for supporting Nirodharam. Itoh (2013) also appears to pay particular attention to lay people who participate in the monastery’s Buddhist camps rather than to everyday visitors.

This section, then, focuses on everyday lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.<sup>207</sup> In total, I collected 75 responses from lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 72 responses from those to Nirodharam during my fieldwork. Responses from Songdhammakalyani Monastery were collected during my 18-week period of focusing on this monastery (November 2013 to mid-March 2014), while those from Nirodharam were collected in the subsequent 18-week period (mid-March to July 2014). This was done mostly by handing lay visitors hard copies of the questionnaire and also by posting it online (see 1.5 Methodology).<sup>208</sup> Based on my questionnaire, profiles of the lay visitors and their gender ideologies are presented and examined.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Here I refer to normal days when no Buddhist camps were held. At Nirodharam, Buddhist camps are organized from time to time, either on special occasions (e.g. important Buddhist holy days like Vesakha (the day commemorating the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death)) or by request of the laity. According to Itoh (2013: 290–295), the main groups of lay people who ask for the organization of a Buddhist camp are Buddhist clubs at Chiang Mai University and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Buddhist camps for Thai women (Phutthasawika Training) are organized from time to time. It should be noted that during my fieldwork, Songdhammakalyani Monastery suspended this project as the abbess was too busy. Nevertheless, the monastery later continued it.

See

[http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/thai2556/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=54](http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/thai2556/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=54) [Accessed 1 June 2017].

<sup>207</sup> I focus only on lay Thai visitors.

<sup>208</sup> See Appendix 3 for the questionnaire. Also, as mentioned, the number of responses by no means reflects the overall number of visitors to the monasteries.

<sup>209</sup> For results of Questions 2, 4, and 6 of the questionnaire, see Appendix 6.

### 6.1.1 Profiles of the lay visitors

Profiles of the lay visitors to both monasteries in term of gender, age, education, and home towns are comparatively depicted in Tables 14, 15, 16, and 17 respectively.

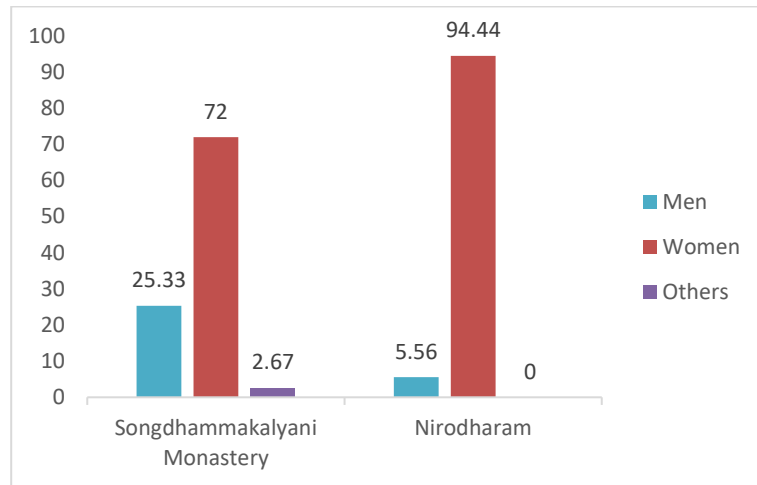


Table 14: Comparison by gender of the lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in percentages.

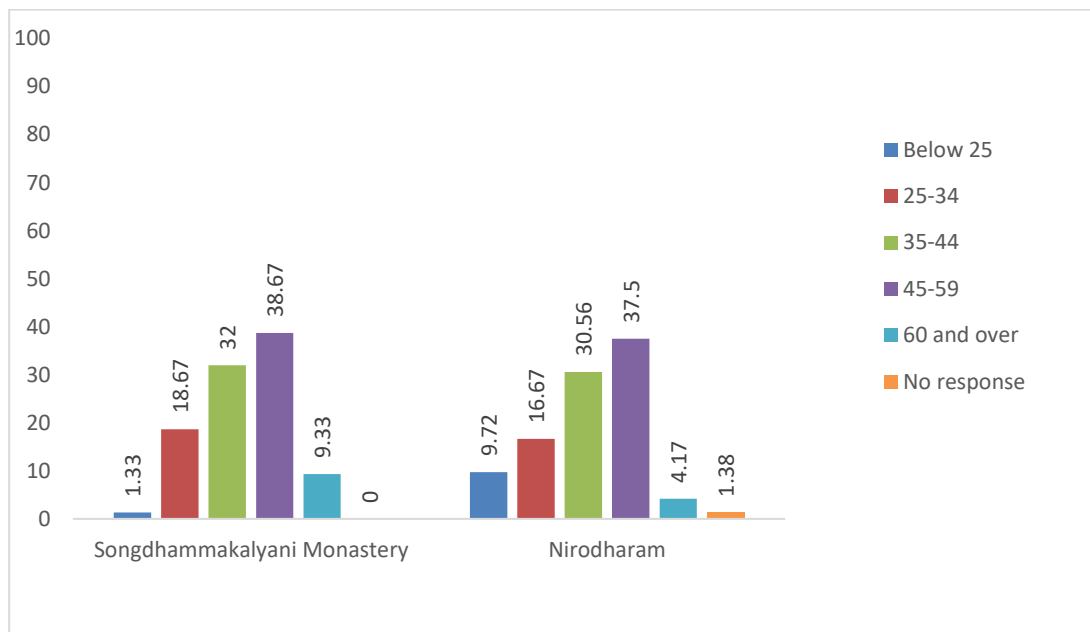


Table 15: Comparison by age group<sup>210</sup> of the lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in percentages.

<sup>210</sup> The age groups are classified according to National Statistical Office of Thailand. See, for example, National Statistical Office of Thailand 2009: 129.

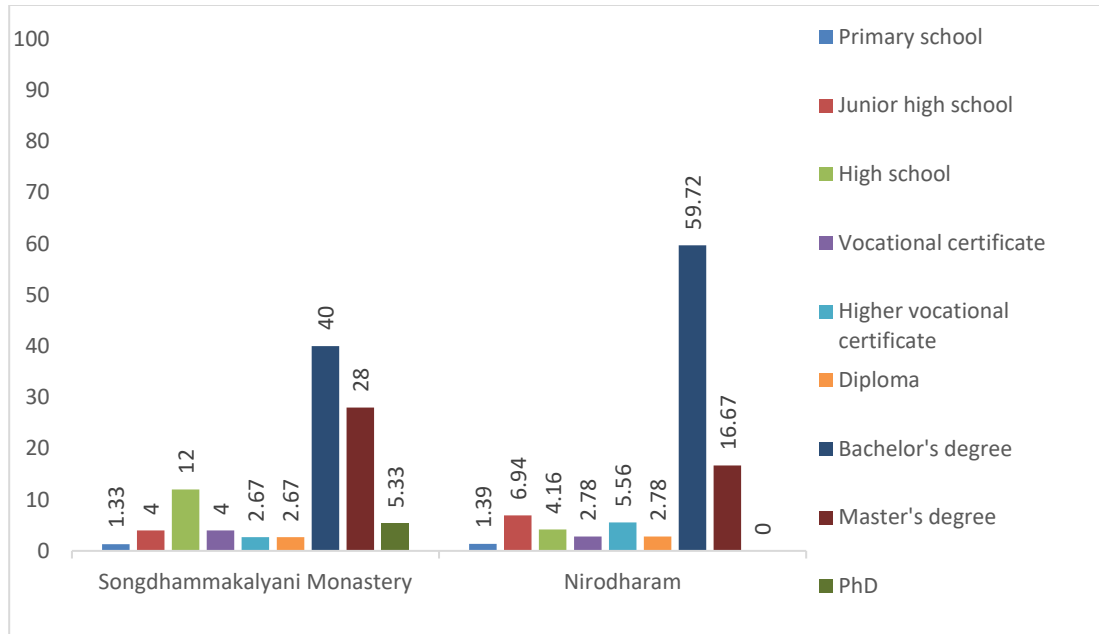


Table 16: Comparison by education level of the lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in percentages.<sup>211</sup>

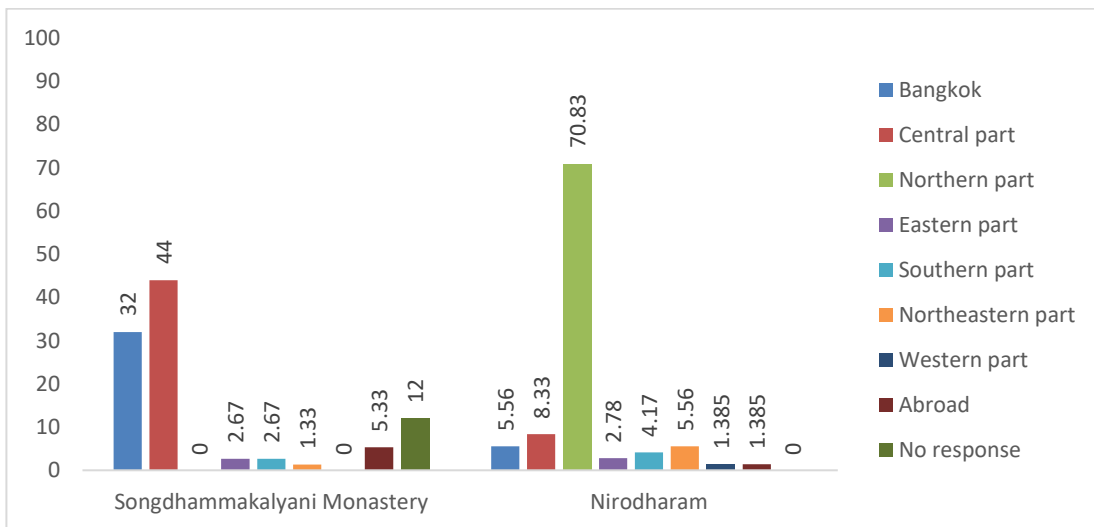


Table 17: Comparison by places of residence of the lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in percentages.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>211</sup> The percentage of 'no response' for the lay visitors at both monasteries is zero, so it is not shown in the table.

<sup>212</sup> Classification of which cities belong to which parts of the country follow that of Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2015.

From the four tables, it can be generally said that the majority of the lay visitors at both monasteries are highly educated middle-aged women from the region where each monastery is located. With respect to further details, women comprise the majority at both Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam (72 per cent and as high as 94.44 per cent respectively, see Table 14). Slightly more than one-third of the entire population of both monasteries are 45–59 years old (38.67 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 37.5 per cent at Nirodharam) and nearly one-third of the population at both sites are 35–44 years (32 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 30.56 per cent at Nirodharam, see Table 15). The majority of the lay visitors to both monasteries are also highly educated, with more than 70 per cent having acquired higher education (73.33 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 76.39 per cent at Nirodharam, see Table 16). Most lay visitors to both monasteries are also from the region where each monastery is situated. For Songdhammakalyani Monastery, 76 per cent of the lay visitors are from the central region including Bangkok, while for Nirodharam 70.83 per cent of the lay visitors are from the northern region (see Table 17). Notably, for Songdhammakalyani Monastery, only 12 per cent of the lay visitors are from Nakhon Pathom,<sup>213</sup> the province where the monastery is located, and 32 per cent are from Bangkok. This is probably why the monastery is also nicknamed ‘the temple for rich Bangkok ladies’ (*wat khunnai krungthep*), as Kanchana told me. For Nirodharam, nearly half of the lay visitors (48.61 per cent) are from Chiang Mai, the province where it is located, which underlines its local reputation.

### 6.1.2 Gender ideologies of the lay visitors

In this subsection, gender ideologies of the lay visitors are explored through their responses to certain statements relating to gender and Buddhism. The questionnaire is designed as a Likert scale for the respondents to rate their agreement (or disagreement) with certain statements along with space for them to leave comments (see Appendix 3).

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<sup>213</sup> In the questionnaire respondents specifically indicated which cities they were from (see Appendix 3).

The scaled statements are similar to those in the questionnaire for urban, ordinary laity and are as follows:<sup>214</sup>

Statement 1: Son(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven.

Statement 2: Daughter(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven.

Statement 3: People of whichever gender can be ordained for parents in order to 'repay the debt'.

Statement 4: Women are enemies of celibacy.

Statement 5: Men are enemies of celibacy.

Statement 6: People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment.

Statement 7: Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women.

Statement 8: Being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives.

Statement 9: If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened.

Again, I do not claim that their gender ideologies are limited to their responses to these statements. However, the statements can undoubtedly reveal their gender ideologies to a certain extent.

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<sup>214</sup> See Chapter 2 (2.3) for how the sentences are derived and responses of urban, ordinary lay people. See also Appendix 3 for the questionnaire.

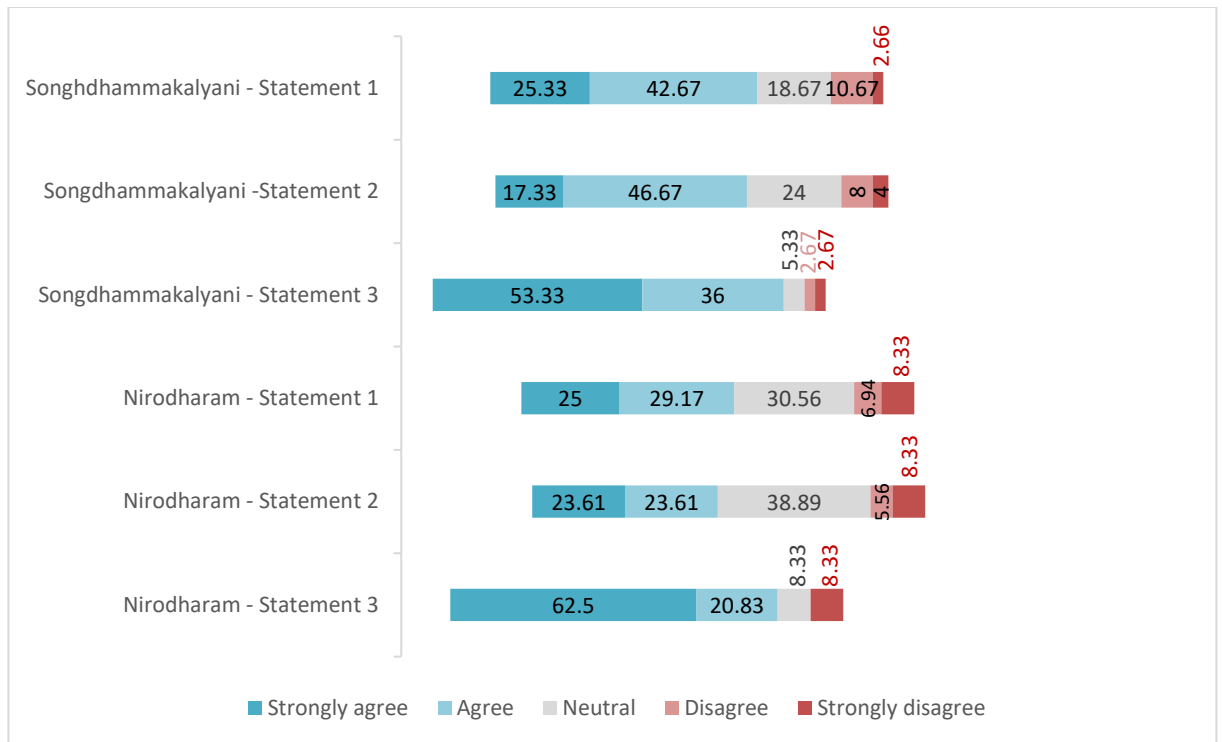


Table 18: Comparison of responses to Statements 1, 2, and 3 of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

Lay visitors to both monasteries perceive ordination in the saffron robes of sons and daughters in a relatively similar way. Table 18 shows that lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery have a similar pattern of responses for Statements 1 and 2, as do those of Nirodharam. Most lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery agree to various extents with both statements (68 per cent for Statement 1 and 64 per cent for Statement 2). Around half of the lay visitors to Nirodharam agree with the statements (54 per cent for Statement 1 and 47.22 per cent for Statement 2). Also, only a minority at both monasteries disagree at various levels with the statements (13.33 per cent for Statement 1 and 12 per cent for Statement 2 at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, and 15.27 per cent for Statement 1 and 13.89 per cent for Statement 2 at Nirodharam).

Apart from seeing ordination in the saffron robes of both genders in order to repay the debt to parents similarly, the lay visitors to both monasteries apparently tend to accept ordination in the saffron robes of women. Of course, this acceptance may seem unsurprising considering that lay visitors decide to visit *bhikkhuni* monasteries. However,

a high percentage of acceptance for Statement 2 indicates that lay visitors have faith not only in the female monastics of their monasteries, but welcome women in general for ordination in the saffron robes. In other words, women do not have to be exceptional Buddhist practitioners in order to be seen as qualified to clad themselves in the saffron robes.

Ordination of daughters in order to repay the debt to parents is, as discussed, not traditional in Thai society. High acceptance of Statement 2 and opinions about it, however, reveal that in the minds of many lay visitors ordination of daughters in the saffron robes appears to be linked to traditional beliefs. Typical opinions of lay visitors to both monasteries substantiate this point:

It is a traditional belief. If children (*luk*) do good things, parents will also benefit from it. (A 58-year-old woman from Bangkok who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery in response to Statement 1)

[I have] a similar reason to the other one [Statement 1]. Doing good things also does not have to do with gender (*mai khuen kap phet*) (The same woman's opinion of Statement 2).

It is a traditional belief. What we can do for parents to make them feel at ease (*sabai chai*), we should just do it. [We should also] take care of them. That is the best thing in this life. (A 25-year-old man from Chiang Mai who visited Nirodharam, in response to both statements)

Indeed, none of the opinions given in response to Statement 2 see ordination of daughters in saffron robes as something new and unconventional, despite its availability to the public only since 2009.

Even more interesting, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda herself does not see the belief of being ordained in order to repay the debt to parents and enable them to ascend to heaven as Buddhist. She explains that a tradition of ordination for parents, and in particular the belief that mothers can 'cling on the robes of sons to ascend to heaven' (*ko chai chiwon lukchai khuen sawan*), is from Hinduism and not Buddhism as 'Buddhism totally rejects such belief' (Suthada 2014: 23). It is highly likely, then, that her remark extends to the ordination of daughters. Nevertheless, she appears not to be explicitly against the notion as she herself recognizes that many women are strongly motivated by this belief to



become temporarily ordained as *samaneri* at her monastery.<sup>215</sup> On the other hand, the monastics at Nirodharam have not made such a strong statement as that of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. For instance, Bhikkhuni Warayani told me that it is a good belief because ordination is a meritorious act. She added that ‘when parents think of their sons or daughters who are ordained and their saffron robes (*pha lueang luk*), they can feel at ease (*sabai chai*) and their mind can be meritorious (*chit pen kuson*)’.

It is also notable that lay visitors to both monasteries are overwhelmingly positive about female ordination — that ‘people of whichever gender can be ordained in order to repay the debt to parents’ (Statement 3). As many as 89.33 per cent of those at Songdhammakalyani Monastery agree to various extents with the statement and 83.33 per cent of those at Nirodharam also agree (see Table 18). The higher percentage of agreement with this statement compared to Statements 1 and 2 may be because some lay visitors who agree with this statement may not agree that the ordination can enable parents to go to heaven as indicated in Statements 1 and 2.

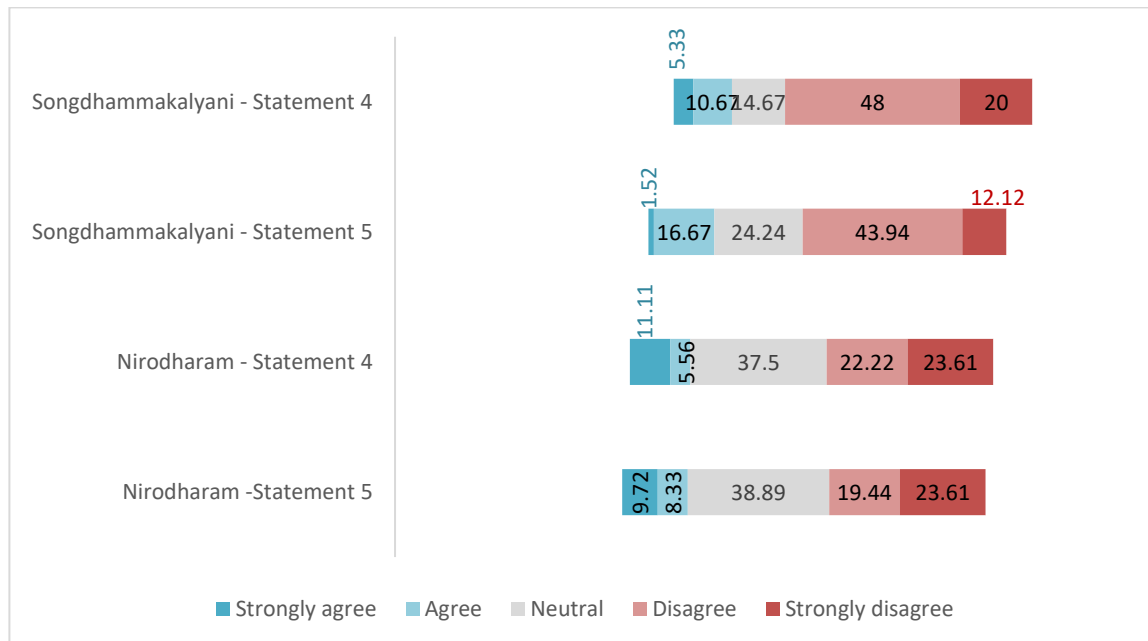


Table 19: Comparison of responses to Statement 4 (Women are enemies of celibacy) and Statement 5 (Men are enemies of celibacy) of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

<sup>215</sup> See Chapter 7 for temporary *samaneri* ordination.

Lay visitors to both monasteries also perceive men and women in relation to celibacy in a relatively similar manner. Table 19 shows that lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery have a similar pattern of responses to those of Nirodharam concerning Statements 4 and 5. This indicates that in general neither gender is seen as particularly threatening to celibacy. The opinions of respondents also reveal their similar perceptions concerning the two genders in this regard. For example, a 40-year-old female lecturer from Songkhla who visited Nirodharam says that ‘both men and women are equally enemies of celibacy’ in response to both statements. A 58-year-old female housewife from Bangkok who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery indicates that ‘[It] depends on individuals, not genders’ in response to both statements.

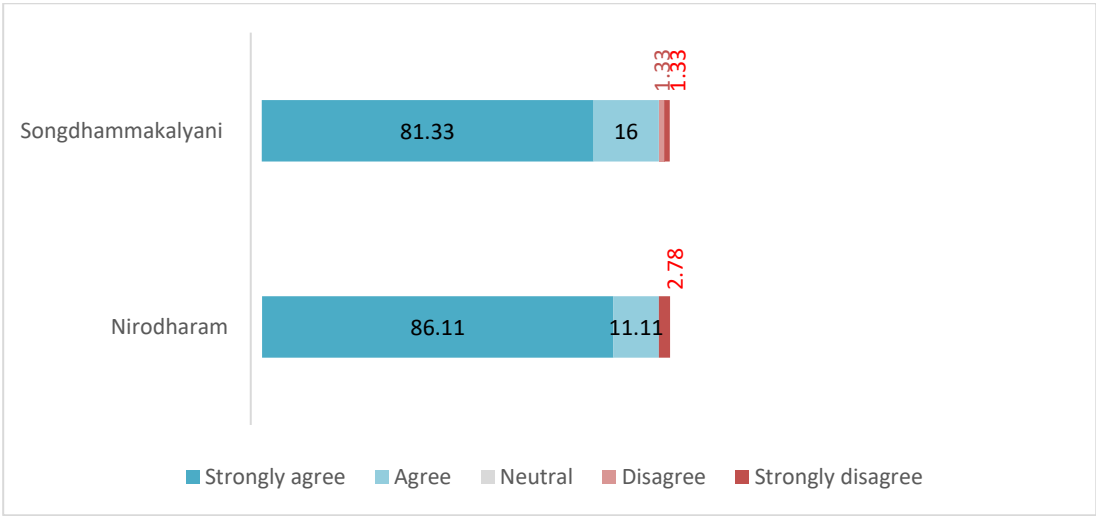


Table 20: Comparison of responses to Statement 6 (People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment) of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

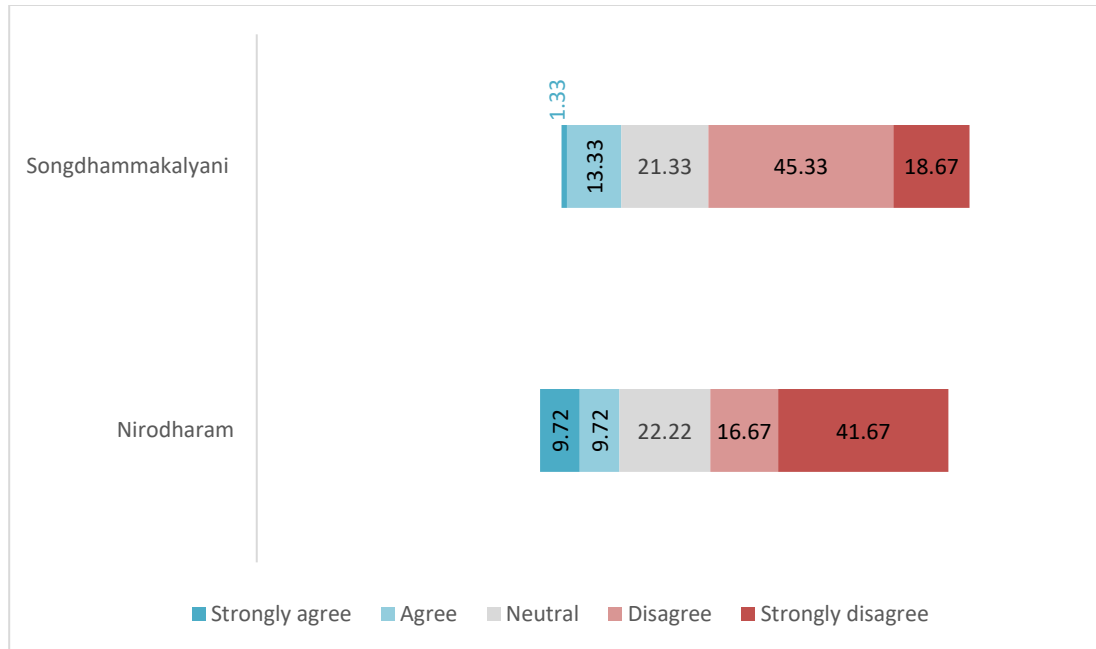


Table 21: Comparison of responses to Statement 7 (Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women) of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

Lay visitors to both monasteries are overwhelmingly positive about the capabilities of humans of all genders to reach enlightenment. As many as 97.33 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 97.22 per cent at Nirodharam agreed to various extents with Statement 6 (People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment) (see Table 20). Of these figures, the percentages of strong agreement are as high as 81.33 per cent and 86.11 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, respectively.

Moreover, most lay visitors to both monasteries do not believe that male privilege allowed them to attain enlightenment. To illustrate, 64 per cent of lay visitors at Songdhammakalyani Monastery disagreed to various extents with Statement 7 (Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women), while 58.34 per cent of those at Nirodharam also agreed (see Table 21). The lay visitors tended to reason that gender was irrelevant and/or that it depends largely on individual capabilities. For example, a 39-year-old woman from Chiang Mai who visited Nirodharam every month said ‘[I] think that reaching enlightenment should not relate to the gender [of practitioners]’ while a 41-year-

old woman from Samut Prakan who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery stated ‘[I] believe that it depends on the mind of practitioners.’

Notably, the widespread perception among lay visitors to both monasteries that men are not spiritually superior appears to contradict reports in the existing literature. Sponberg (1992: 12) notes that ‘most contemporary Asian Buddhists’ perceive men and women as equally able to access the Buddha’s teachings, but see men as naturally superior in both spiritual and social matters. Cook (2010: 170) also reports that such views are prevalent among Thai Buddhists in the Northern Thai temple where she conducted her fieldwork. In contrast, only a minority of lay visitors to the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries hold such perceptions (see Table 21).<sup>216</sup>

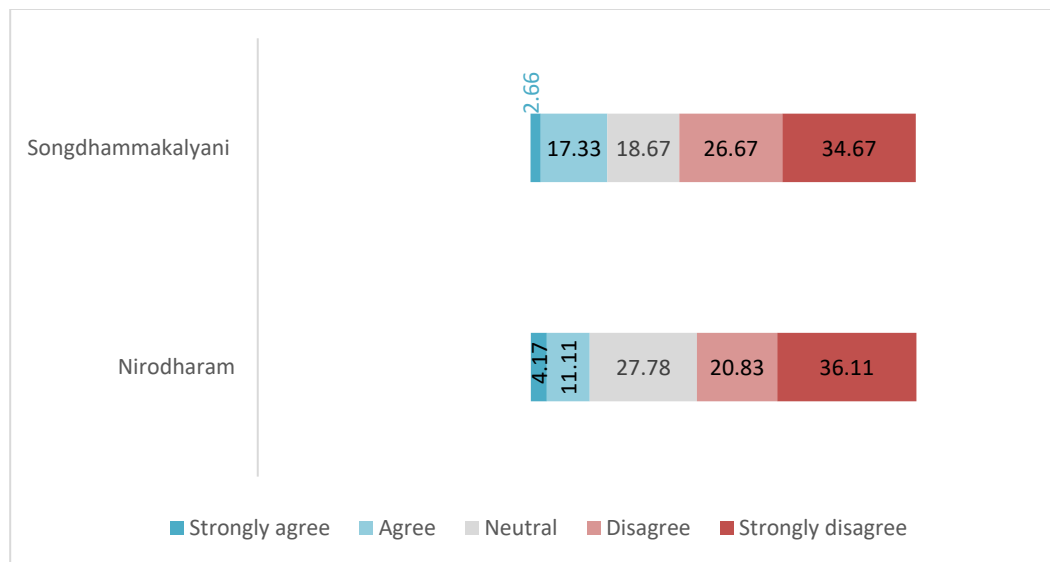


Table 22: Comparison of responses to Statement 8 (Being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives) of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

<sup>216</sup> These minority lay visitors tend to reason either along the line that men have better opportunities than women and/or that the nature of the male gender is more suitable for practising religion than that of the female gender. For example, a 49-year-old woman from Bangkok who visited Songdhammakalyani monastery said ‘men have a better opportunity and better support than women’ and a 27-year-old woman from Chiang Mai who visited Nirodharam every week suggested that ‘the mind of men is always stronger and more stable (*nak naen kwa*)’.

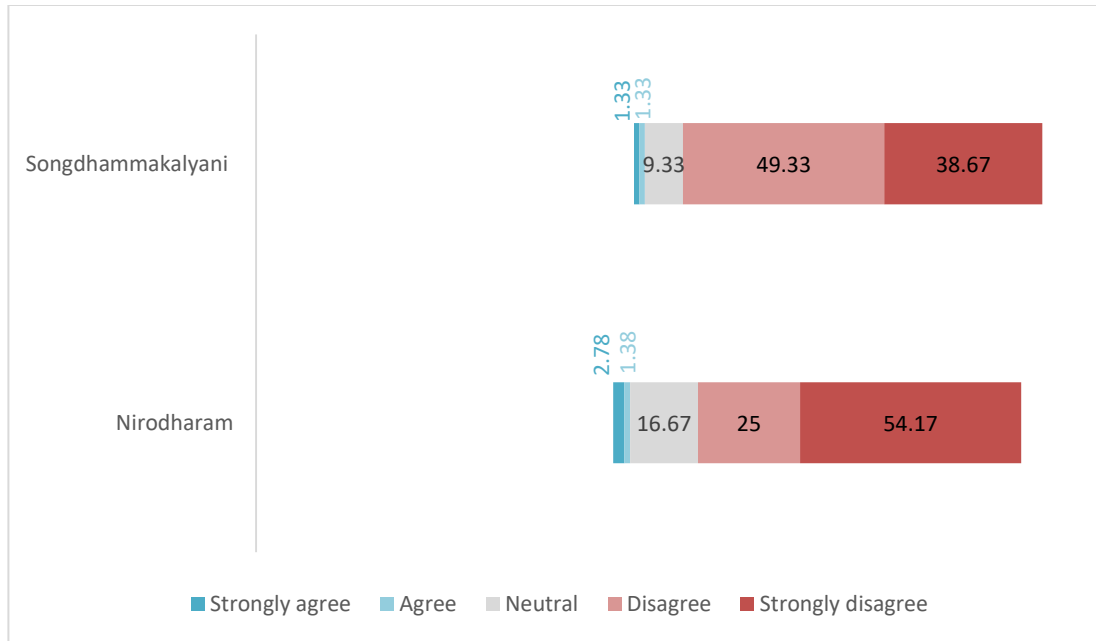


Table 23: Comparison of responses to Statement 9 (If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened) of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam.

Lay visitors to both monasteries also tended to reject an association between being a woman and bad *karma*. Overall, more than half of the lay visitors at both monasteries disagreed to various extents with Statement 8 (Being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives) (61.34 per cent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 56.94 per cent at Nirodharam). Only a minority agreed with it (19.99 percent at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 15.38 percent at Nirodharam) (see Table 22).

Both scientific discourse (i.e. that the statement cannot be proved) and Buddhist discourse (i.e. that everybody has their own past *karma*) are referred to by lay visitors who disagreed with the statement. For instance, a 42-year-old woman from Chanthaburi who visited Nirodharam said ‘Everybody, including men, is born due to past *karma*’, and a 57-year-old woman from Chiang Mai who visited Nirodharam said ‘It cannot be proved that being born women is due to past bad *karma*’. Some simply expressed strong disagreement without feeling the need to give a supporting reason. For example, a 54-year-old man from Bangkok who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery stated ‘This is an incredibly ridiculous belief (*rueng ngom-ngai yang ying*)’. Notably, this prevalent view at both

*bhikkhuni* monasteries contradicts existing literature, which treat the notion of being born a woman due to past bad *karma* as widespread in society (e.g. Kunlavir 2006: 2; Lindberg Falk 2007: 30).<sup>217</sup>

Lay visitors to both monasteries also overwhelmingly reject the notion that women's ordination is threatening to the religion. As many as 80 per cent of the lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and 79.17 per cent of those at Nirodharam disagreed to various extents with Statement 9 (If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened) (see Table 23). This result may seem unsurprising considering that lay visitors to *bhikkhuni* monasteries should logically not uphold negative views about women's ordination. However, it yet indicates that the majority of lay visitors do not hold negative attitudes toward women in general. Their opinions also further demonstrate positive attitudes toward women and Buddhism. They see women as legitimately part of Buddhism and as able to sustain the religion. For instance, a 44-year-old woman from Bangkok who visited Nirodharam says 'The Buddha has laid down the fourfold Buddhists (*phuttha borisat si*), which include the *bhikkhuni*. [The *bhikkhuni*] will not shorten the life of religion. If there are only men and they do not practise well, that will actually shorten the life of religion'. A 50-year-old woman from Nakhon Pathom who visited Songdhammakalyani Monastery also stated that '[Women as *bhikkhuni*] can be a valuable resource in sustaining Buddhism (*pen kamlang samkhan nai kan suepthot phra phutthasatsana*)'.

In short, we can see from this section that the majority of lay visitors to both *bhikkhuni* monasteries are women. There are also, undoubtedly, nuances in their educational levels, hometowns, and ages. Regardless, the majority of these lay visitors are evidently highly

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<sup>217</sup> Interestingly, the prevalent view of lay visitors to Nirodharam is different from that of the female monastics. As discussed in 4.2.2, the majority of female monastics of Nirodharam hold the belief that being born a woman is due to past bad *karma* and treat it as a rather insignificant fact. This is probably because the main messages underlined in sermons at Nirodharam are not about women's inferiority but their spiritual capabilities to reach the ultimate goal of Buddhism (see 4.2.3).

educated women who tend to hold generally positive attitudes toward the female gender as well as perceiving the genders of men and women rather similarly. Notably, many of these views contradict existing reports on Thai gender notions, as discussed. Of course, we cannot say that their positive views and attitude toward women are simply a result of the *bhikkhuni* and novices' influences. However, the roles of both *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics in the lives of the lay women can reveal, as we will now see, how beneficial their existence is for lay women. Indeed, this relationship can be positively empowering.

## **6.2. Roles of *bhikkhuni* in the lives of lay women**

The previous section demonstrates that the majority of lay visitors to both *bhikkhuni* monasteries are lay women who tend to have positive views toward the female gender. Based mostly on my data from the field, this section focuses on roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices in the lives of lay women, and the roles that appear to contribute to such positive views of female laity. This section, thus, explores three main roles of the female monastics of the two monasteries in lay women's lives: (1) acting as fields of merit that lay women can have close proximity to; (2) acting as life consultants and spiritual leaders; and (3) acting as providers of places of refuge.

### **6.2.1 'Fields of merit' and social proximity**

The Buddhist notion of 'fields of merit' is important in Thai society. Giving alms to those who are regarded as 'fields of merit' is one of the most common religious activities in Thailand (Lindberg Falk 2007: 140–141). According to Buddhist thought, during the religious act, an important factor for generating merit is not only the donor's pure state of mind, but also the sacredness of the recipient (Harvey 2000: 21–22). It is like planting a seed in a field, in which the quality of the field also affects the fruit of merit generated (ibid.). Thus, monastics, who are following a path toward *nirvana*, are regarded both as the best to make merit with and as the best 'fields of merit' (ibid.).

However, in Thailand, ‘fields of merit’ traditionally refer to men as monks (Lindberg Falk 2007: 140–141) – a fact which by definition creates complications for women. Apparently, they cannot assume the role of recipient in the alms giving if women cannot act as ‘fields of merit’. Moreover, as lay women, they cannot be close to ‘fields of merit’, as monks are of the opposite sex and there are strict rules governing interactions between women and monks in Thai society (Terwiel 2012). Women should not touch monks under any circumstances (ibid: 50, 112). For instance, in the act of giving alms to monks, women cannot even give the alms to them directly, but have to place the alms on cloths before monks can receive them (ibid.). Notably, these strict rules appear not to be norms in other Theravadin countries (Terwiel 2007; Delia 2014: 30). For example, in Sri Lanka monks receive the alms directly from lay women (Delia 2014: 30). Thus, Thai women would be able to be close to ‘fields of merit’ only when those who act as ‘fields of merit’ are of the same sex.

In that, Thai women traditionally cannot act as ‘fields of merit’; it also remains dubious whether *mae chi* can now act as merit fields. Lindberg Falk (2007) argues that *mae chi* at the self-governed nunnery she studied are regarded as ‘fields of merit’. She uses the religious act of these *mae chi* going on the alms round as evidence (ibid: 146–152). However, she also notes that *mae chi* can be ‘fields of merit’ only when their religious status is accepted (ibid: 100–101). Moreover, not every *mae chi* goes on alms rounds like *mae chi* in Lindberg Falk’s work. *Mae chi* who reside at temples governed by monks tend not to go on the alms round (Latdawan 2005; Cook 2010). In such settings, the act of *mae chi* going on the alms round can also be perceived negatively. According to Cook (2010), *mae chi* in the temple she worked with do not think it is appropriate for *mae chi* to go on the alms round. For instance, a *mae chi* is reported to say that ‘it would not have been right for *mae ch[i]* to “run for alms” because this would have been motivated by ego, would have upset the laity, and would not have been meritorious’ (ibid: 121).

Many *bhikkhuni* and novices at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries I worked in also appeared to echo this view. For example, Sikkhamana Thitta of Songdhammakalyani Monastery,



who used to be a *mae chi*, told me that ‘*mae chi* keep eight precepts<sup>218</sup> and [we] could still use money for our own sakes. So when [I was] a *mae chi*, [I] was not qualified to go on the alms round’. Bhikkhuni Nanthayani of Nirodharam is also reported to have stated that ‘most people expect the *mae chi* to have money, and might thus suspect the *mae chi* who collect alms of begging’ (Delia 2014: 80). Lay visitors to the monasteries also tend to hold this view. I was told that because *mae chi* only keep eight precepts, they should be able to sustain their own lives without having to receive alms from laity. Controversy over *mae chi* going on alms rounds shows their ambiguous capacity to act as ‘fields of merit’ for the laity and underlines Seeger’s (2006: 178) remark that *mae chi* are still generally seen as able to generate only a little merit for the alms givers.

While *mae chi*’s ability to act as ‘fields of merit’ is ambiguous, contemporary *bhikkhuni* appear to have more potential in this regard. If accepted as true *bhikkhuni*, women would naturally be regarded as ‘fields of merit’ (Seeger 2006: 178). Indeed, some scholars claim that contemporary *bhikkhuni* are upheld as ‘fields of merit’ (Suat Yan 2011; Delia 2014). Suat Yan (2011) notes that lay female followers of Songdhammakalyani Monastery see giving alms to *bhikkhuni* and monks as generating similar merit, and thus she argues that the *bhikkhuni* of the monastery are also perceived as ‘fields of merit’. Delia (2014: 83) also suggests that *bhikkhuni* at Nirodharam are seen by laity as pure ‘fields of merit’. My ethnographic data collected from both monasteries support their claims, and I will further discuss the roles of *bhikkhuni* as the ‘fields of merit’ through religious interactions with laity. Here, not only is the religious acts of performing the alms round important, but so too is alms giving on other occasions.

The act of going on alms rounds is important because it interrelates not only with the identity of fully ordained monastics, but in particular with their capacity to act as ‘fields of merit’. This is explicit in my own fieldwork, as well as implicit in other research (Lindberg Falk 2007; Suat Yan 2011; Delia 2014). The *bhikkhuni* and novices at both Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam also associate the alms round with monastic identities, and see it as their monastic duty. The alms round is used at both

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<sup>218</sup> The author recognizes that *mae chi* can keep up to ten precepts. However, a general view in society is that *mae chi* keep eight precepts.

monasteries as a reminder to strictly adhere to religious rules in order for monastics to be worthy of receiving alms from these laity, who see them as ‘fields of merit’.



Figure 10: (On the left) Lay women receiving a blessing after giving alms to *bhikkhuni* and novices of Songdhammakalyani Monastery who were on the alms round.

Figure 11: (On the right) Lay people receiving a blessing after giving alms to *bhikkhuni* and novices of Nirodharam who were on the alms round.

During my fieldwork, both *bhikkhuni* and novices at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam regularly went on alms rounds and received substantial support from their local communities. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, female monastics took turns to go on the alms rounds every Sunday and Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*). Normally, around three monastics went on alms round at once and lay women (or *mae chi*) who had stayed overnight followed them to assist in carrying the alms received. A cart was even used by the lay women to carry the received alms because locals offered the alms generously. From my observation, most alms givers were women and they regularly gave alms. Brief conversations often occurred after the female monastics gave blessings to the alms givers. At Nirodharam, female monastics took turns going on alms rounds each day, and took various routes according to the particular day in question. Lay women who stayed overnight followed them with bags to assist in carrying the alms received. Locals seemed to know their routines well as there were always locals offering alms along each

route. Similar to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, most alms givers were women who regularly gave alms.

Apart from acting as ‘fields of merit’ for the laity during the alms round, *bhikkhuni* and novices of the two monasteries also play these roles when receiving alms from the laity on other occasions. As alms giving is one of the most common acts of merit-making, it regularly occurred not only outside but within both *bhikkhuni* monasteries. Lay people, most of whom are women, often came to the monasteries to offer alms, such as money, food, and medicine, to the female monastics. After offering their alms, lay people also tend to transfer merit to others through an act called *gruat nam*, which is done by pouring water while the monastics are chanting. The female monastics then give them blessings and sometimes briefly preached to them.



Figure 12: A lay woman transferring merit through pouring water after merit-making with a female monastic at Songdhammakalyani Monastery.

Alms giving also took place when female monastics were invited to conduct rituals outside the monasteries. Events where lay people invited the female monastics to do so, include, for example, moving to a new home (*khuen ban mai*), making merit annually (*thambun prachampi*), and any and all other times when lay people simply wished to make

merit.<sup>219</sup> Alms giving was often integral to these events and the female monastics thus also acted as ‘fields of merit’ for the laity on any and all such occasions.

It is also noted that the opportunity to act as ‘fields of merit’ appears to be correlated with the perceived ability to conduct rituals. *Mae chi*, whose capacity to act as ‘fields of merit’ is ambiguous, have limited ability to conduct rituals. *Mae chi* in a temple governed by monks are reported to have marginalized roles in rituals, and they are ‘often confined to that of witness[es]’ (Cook 2010: 116). *Mae chi* in a self-governed nunnery, who go on alms rounds, also still tend to feel it necessary to invite monks to conduct the rituals in important ceremonies at the nunnery (Lindberg Falk 2007: 166). By contrast, the female monastics who act as ‘fields of merit’ are confident about their own abilities to conduct rituals and lay people also have confidence in them.



Figure 13: *Bhikkhuni* and novices of Nirodharam were invited to conduct a ritual outside the monastery, which was also an opportunity for lay women to make merit through alms giving.

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<sup>219</sup> The only slight difference between Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam in this regard is that Songdhammakalyani Monastery does not accept invitations to go to funerals while Nirodharam does. According to *Bhikkhuni* Dhammavanna of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, female monastics of the monastery do not accept invitations to funerals in order to avoid potential conflicts with monks.

Scholars have discussed the significance of women assuming this role of acting as merit fields. Suat Yan (2011) argues that women acting as ‘fields of merit’ challenge a normative notion of women and femaleness as ‘fertile, nurturing and attached’ (ibid: 1). Being seen as ‘fields of merit’, women and femaleness now can also be sacred (Suat Yan 2011). Itoh (2013:274) notes that having the chance to receive alms is a meaningful experience for women, and some of them were moved to tears by it. It is noted that Itoh does not directly say that women acted as ‘fields of merit’. However, in receiving the alms the women undoubtedly did so.

Apart from the importance of women acting as ‘fields of merit’, we should not overlook the significance of having ‘fields of merit’ that are acted by women. As discussed, lay women cannot be close to monks, who are traditional forms of merit fields because of their different sex. The availability of ‘fields of merit’ in the forms of *bhikkhuni* and novices thus has considerable implications for lay women. For one thing, lay women can give alms directly to those they consider as ‘fields of merit’. Indeed, during my time at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries, I saw lay women who offered alms to the female monastics’ hands directly. They no longer had to place them on cloths as they did when giving alms to monks.<sup>220</sup> In addition, lay women can now also be close to female monastics when they are acting as merit fields for others. To illustrate, lay women can follow monastics on the alms round and assist them in carrying the alms received. As mentioned, there were always lay women following the female monastics during the alms rounds of the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries. This new experience was highly valued by the lay women at both monasteries. They often told me how good they felt and also how meritorious it was to follow the female monastics and participate in this manner.

### 6.2.2 Life consultants and spiritual leaders

Another important role of *bhikkhuni* and novices in the lives of lay women concerns their roles as life consultants and spiritual leaders. These roles are emphasized by female

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<sup>220</sup> Delia (2014: 96) also notices this lack of constraint when women give alms to female monastics of Nirodharam. While she focuses on the relationship between teachers and pupils, I suggest that the absence of gender constraints benefits lay women in general.



monastics themselves, were made abundantly apparent to me during my fieldwork, and are readily evidenced in the stories of lay women who visit these two monasteries. Together they constitute a significant lifting of traditional gender constraints to which lay women have historically been subjected, while also becoming crucial in defining new roles for female monastics.<sup>221</sup>

*Bhikkhuni* and novices at both monasteries often remarked how they, as female *nak buat*, might help lay women better than monks, especially given their ability to understand lay women's personal problems better than monks. Also, because they are women, it is appropriate for the lay women to be close to them.

For example, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, *Bhikkhuni* Dhammavanna and *Sikkhamana* Dhammathiti told me that lay women who visit the monastery often tell them personal life problems. Because the two were in charge of the reception area most of the time, they had greater opportunities to meet lay visitors than others. According to *Bhikkhuni* Dhammavanna, one of the most shocking stories she heard was that of a lay woman who had been raped by her elder brother when she was young. She later ran away from home when her family simply ignored the incident. *Bhikkhuni* Dhammavanna told me that after listening to the gruesome story, she asked the lay woman whether she had forgiven her brother and parents because doing so could free her from suffering. The lay woman quietly listened to her advice. Indeed, this type of personal story, both female monastics emphasized, would rarely be revealed nor would they be consulted if they were not also women.

At Nirodharam, *Bhikkhu* Nanthayani similarly told me that lay women often come to the monastery and talk to female monastics about life problems. She said she sees this situation as an appropriate responses to the needs of women, and much better than when a lay woman discusses life problems with a monk. This line of thinking was, moreover, often underlined during her daily sermons, particularly when referring to what female monastics can potentially do for others. Apart from verbal sources, a recent booklet of

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<sup>221</sup> Delia (2014: 95) also discusses the benefits of a lack of gender constraints between female teachers and disciples with regard to seeking advice. I suggest that this absence of gender constraints benefits not only female disciples, but lay women in general.

Nirodharam (2015) shows Bhikkhuni Nanthayani discussing the issue. In her words, ‘the *bhikkhu sangha* is to help *upasaka* [laymen] while the *bhikkhuni sangha* is to help *upasika* [lay women] – to assist those who have not been ordained to have *dhamma* and be free from suffering’ (Nirodharam 2015: 66). She also states again that it is more appropriate for lay women to consult female monastics about personal problems than to take these up with monks (*ibid.*).<sup>222</sup>

These roles of *bhikkhuni*—as life consultants and spiritual leaders for lay women—are also confirmed through ethnographic data collected from both monasteries. The ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this chapter is but one example.<sup>223</sup> P Sai was not the only lay woman who received guidance from female monastics of the two monasteries. Two further stories of lay women, one from Nirodharam and one from Songdhammakalyani Monastery, are offered as examples of how female monastics play these roles in lay women’s lives.<sup>224</sup>

P Su was a local middle-aged woman with a vibrant personality who regularly visited Nirodharam. I first met her when she came to drive a car for the female monastics. After building some rapport, she was very keen to tell me how coming to the monastery had changed her life. P Su said she used to be addicted to alcohol, which is against one of the five precepts,<sup>225</sup> and at first did not even want to stay overnight at the monastery. Her friends, however, still continued to bring her along when they visited Nirodharam. Because there were only female monastics at the monastery, she felt at ease when visiting and did not resist coming with her friends. Gradually, she developed faith in the monastics of Nirodharam, particularly when she saw them walking steadily with bare feet. Nevertheless, she still did not want to stay overnight, as she preferred to return home and drink beer. Drinking caused problems with others, but she did not want to quit. One day

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<sup>222</sup> In addition, she thinks that the existence of *bhikkhuni* for lay women can ensure safety for monks. Her line of reasoning is that without *bhikkhuni sangha*, lay women have to rely on monks to guide them, and this can lead to their husbands feeling jealous of the monks and harming them (Nirodharam 2015: 66).

<sup>223</sup> It is noted that the ethnographic vignette belongs to Nirodharam; however, it does not mean that female monastics of Songdhammakalyani Monastery do not play these roles for lay women.

<sup>224</sup> The stories are collected both from informal conversations and interviews.

<sup>225</sup> See Appendix 4 for the precepts.

when she joined in chanting at the monastery and heard the phrase ‘getting out of evil things (*sing chua*)’, her tears kept falling. ‘This is what I am doing [the evil things]’, she realized. She then consulted the female monastics as to what she should do with life. Bhikkhuni Munitsara, in particular, gave her advice and persuaded her to stay at the monastery for a while. After staying for around a week, she became more aware of her negative emotions and before leaving the monastery she promised the female monastics that she would keep the five precepts in her daily life. This meant that she also had to stop drinking. It was hard at first but because she had made a promise she could not let them down. ‘I used to always have beer with me; now I have stopped drinking permanently. Everyone was so surprised,’ she said with a smile on her face, adding that ‘[my] life has also become better’.

P Pla was a retired woman from Chumphon, a city in the southern part of Thailand, who came all the way from the town to Songdhammakalyani Monastery. After we became acquainted with each other, she told me why she had made such a long trip to come here. The first time she heard about this monastery was when she was still a nurse and her colleague told her about a monastery of female monks (*wat phra phuying*). It was at a time she felt miserable (*mai sabai chai*) because of personal life problems. She described her situation thus: ‘My parents had passed away. My father had Alzheimer’s before passing away, and I felt that I did not treat him so well. That time I could not sleep well. I was thinking about them. I made merit (*thambun*) every day but I still felt bad’. When she heard about the monastery, she thought that she should come here as she might feel better. Puzzled, I asked why she had to come here specifically; she simply said: ‘There is no place like this in Chumphon’. She further explained that she used to go to a *mae chi*’s place but there were conflicts among them. She could not blend in, and felt that it was not the place for her (*Mae chi na khao cha taekyaek. Rao pai khao yak. Pai laeo mai chai*). As for the temple of monks, she said that it was not comfortable for her as a woman (*wat phra phuchai nia rao tham tua lambak*). When she first came to Songdhammakalyani Monastery, she had a chance to consult with Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna. The *bhikkhuni* told her that the monastery would be hosting a temporary *samaneri* ordination soon and during the project there would be more intensive teachings offered than usual. She was advised to join it, as she would have chances both to practise *dhamma* (*patibat tham*) and



to transfer merit to her parents in order to calm her mind. P Pla thus participated in the project.<sup>226</sup> She told me that she still kept coming to the monastery after disrobing. ‘[I] feel affiliated with the monastery (*ruesuek phukphan*). Coming here and meeting the monastics makes me feel happy’, she said.

### 6.2.3 Providers of places of refuge

The third roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices in the lives of lay women is that of providing places of refuge, in that *bhikkhuni* monasteries are exclusive spaces for women. Laymen may come to visit the monasteries in daytime but normally they are not allowed to stay overnight.<sup>227</sup> This women-only environment is crucial in creating safe and comfortable feelings among lay women who visit the monasteries, many of whom are under social and spiritual stress.

Delia (2014: 91–97) proposes that many women (both nuns and lay disciples) take refuge with their charismatic teacher – Bhikkhuni Nanthayani. While agreeing with her, my argument here is different and goes beyond that. First, Delia appears to focus on ‘taking refuge’ in a metaphorical sense, but I focus on the literal sense. Second, Delia suggests that women can take refuge with a charismatic teacher when they are in a teacher-disciple relationship, but I propose that the relationship is not a necessity. Lay women can take refuge at the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries without having to be in a teacher-disciple relationship with the abbess of each monastery, or even having to particularly admire an abbess. Instead, *bhikkhuni* monasteries can be places of refuge for lay women in general

Lay women who visit the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries I worked in similarly expressed their positive feelings of being in religious spaces exclusively for women. These were revealed through our informal conversations concerning daily lives, through formal interviews, and through responses to the questionnaire I administered. P Sai, a 37-year-old merchant from

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<sup>226</sup> To clarify, she is not one of temporary *samaneri* in the eleventh generation of the monastery, which I will discuss in Chapter 7. She was ordained in a previous generation and regularly kept coming back to the monastery after that.

<sup>227</sup> Laymen cannot simply stay overnight at Songdhammakalyani Monastery but can stay overnight at Nirodharam during Buddhist camps.

Lamphun, whom I mentioned in the vignette at the beginning of the chapter, told me that ‘[I] feel at ease (*sabai chai*) here. [I] feel comfortable. [I] feel safe. [I] do not have to be as careful as when [I am] in front of monks (*phra phiksu*) because the *bhikkhuni* (*phra phiksuni*) are also women.’ Other lay women, either visiting Nirodharam like her or visiting Songdhammakalyani Monastery, echoed her in the following examples:

[I] feel at ease here. [I] want to receive *dhamma* teachings from respected teachers but being a woman means a lot of restrictions [on doing so] from monks (*phiksu*). But with the *bhikkhuni*, I feel that when I have problems I dare to talk to them about every matter. (a 50-year-old woman who visited Nirodharam)

[I] feel at ease. [The *bhikkhuni*] are easy to access (*khao thueng ngai*) as we are of the same sex. [I] do not have to feel so nervous (*kreng*) as when talking to monks (*phiksu*). (a 44-year-old woman who came to Nirodharam)

[I] feel at ease here unlike when going to a temple of male monks (*wat phra phuchai*). [I] do not have to be so concerned whether I have misbehaved in front of the monks and committed demerit (*bap*). (P Muk, whom I met at Songdhammakalyani Monastery)

[I] feel safe here as it is the monastery for women (*wat samrap phuying*). (a 36-year-old woman from Bangkok who came to Songdhammakalyani Monastery)

The feelings of being safe and comfortable are apparently shared among lay women who visit the two *bhikkhuni* monasteries. Indeed, such feelings regularly transcend teacher-disciple relationships: the women simply have to visit the monasteries, but do not have to be anyone’s disciples.



Figure 14: (On the left) A lay woman asked questions during the *bhikkhuni*’s preaching at Songdhammakalyani Monastery.



Figure 15: (On the right) One of the daily sessions at Nirodharam.

Conversations with the lay women who stayed overnight at the monasteries also revealed that many of them were facing personal problems and came here in order to take refuge. Because the monasteries are supervised and inhabited by female monastics, lay women find refuge more readily than they otherwise might. For example, P Sai (mentioned in the vignette) was motivated to come to Nirodharam because of a personal problem with her husband. It was the first time she had come here, and it was not because of her particular admiration for Bhikkhuni Nanthayani. Rather, it was because she had heard that Nirodharam was a religious place for women. Absence of gender constraints with female monastics played a part in motivating her to seek out the monastery as a place of refuge. She benefitted greatly from being comfortably close to *bhikkhuni*, making her feel sufficiently at ease to tell them of her life's problems and thus receive guidance (see 6.2.2).

Pa Won was another woman who came to seek refuge at Nirodharam. She was a 45-year-old housewife from Lampang who had received a junior high school level of education. At first (and similar to P Sai), she said she came simply to further her spiritual training. Later, during our daily routine of sweeping the monastery's floors, she told me that she was having a problem with her husband. She was distressed knowing that her husband had had an affair with another woman, and did not want to see his face again. Thus, she had looked for a place at which to take refuge, one that had only women. Her nephew advised her to come saying it was a religious space for women. So she came. She told me that she was angry with her husband to the point that she wanted to kill him, but coming here allowed her to gradually feel better.

Indeed, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, lay women who came to stay overnight often faced similar life problems. For instance, Oi, a quiet 27-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree came to Songdhammakalyani Monastery to take refuge. During the time we cleaned the monastery's tables together, she told me that she was not sure what she should do with her life. Her father had long ago left her family to become a monk and her mother had already passed away. She was living alone and was suffering so when she heard that there was a 'temple of female monks' (*wat phra phuying*), she knew she had to come. P Pha (pseudonym), a 40-year-old woman from Bangkok, also told me that she had come

to take refuge. Working in a company every day, she felt stressed and empty. She thus came over a weekend, as she had heard that it was a religious space exclusively for women. In short, *bhikkhuni* monasteries are not only places for monastics but are also new and safe religious spaces for lay women in Thai society.

### **6.3 Local significance: female monastics (*nak buat*) for lay women**

The roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics (*nak buat*) in the lives of lay women examined in the last section clearly show how beneficial their existence is for lay women. Sometimes lay women also benefit to the point of being empowered. This section further analyzes main local factors that contribute to such roles and social significance of *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics in Thai society. It proposes that three main factors are crucial in this regard. These are (1) the local significance of full monastic identity, (2) local protocols that encourage interaction between monastics and lay populations of the same sex, and (3) local modes of oral knowledge transmission. Without these local factors, the social significance of female monastics and the roles they play in lay women's lives would remain unrealized at the level of empowerment.

The first factor concerns the local importance of full monastic identity. As discussed throughout the thesis, full monastic identity in Thai society embodies social values that make possible particular forms of prestige and power. In other contexts, the importance of this monastic identity can vary. Bell (1998), for example, reports that among British Theravada Buddhists in England, monks as fully ordained monastics have a relatively equal relationship with the laity and are not upheld as merit fields. According to her, 'the idea that monks should be grateful to the laity for supplying the requisites and that the laity should be grateful to the monks for providing Buddhist teaching is given much prominence in the British monasteries' (Bell 1998: 165). Bell's report reveals different sets of values and status attached to monastic identity than those in Thai society, where fully ordained monastics are of much higher status than laity and indisputably seen as merit fields. Without the local importance of full monastic identity in Thai society, therefore, *bhikkhuni* would not be so socially significant. Nor would they play such complex roles in the lives of Thai lay women.

The second factor concerns local protocols that encourage interaction between monastics and lay populations of the same sex. As mentioned, there is a long-standing cultural norm in Thai society that women have to keep a proper distance from monks. The rules are strict to the extent that women should not touch monks in any circumstance. This prohibition is instilled in women when they are young (Terwiel 2012: 50). In contrast, men are encouraged from childhood to be close to monks (ibid.). The protocols are properly generated largely because of concerns for the celibacy of monastics, which is considered by many to be the most obvious distinction between Buddhist monastics and lay people (Harvey 2000:89). Therefore, lay women are able to be close to monastics only when monastics are of the same sex. The absence of gender constraints between lay women and *bhikkhuni* as female monastics greatly contributes to the *bhikkhuni*'s beneficial roles in lay female lives.

The third factor concerns local modes of oral knowledge transmission. The importance of orality in the transmission of Buddhist knowledge is in particular underlined by Seeger's (2014) work, in which he uses the strong culture of orality in Thai society to support his argument that women can access prestigious knowledge on a par with men regardless of being illiterate. It should be noted that Seeger's case studies are based on biographies of exceptional Thai Buddhist women from the early twentieth century and these women can access the knowledge on condition that they receive support from monks. Importantly, Seeger remarks that it is not literacy that plays a crucial part in religious learning in society, but orality and memorization of the knowledge (ibid: 155–157, 181). The importance of these practices remains even after the introduction of compulsory education in 1921 (ibid: 157).

While having no doubts about the veracity of Seeger's arguments, this social emphasis on oral knowledge transmission means that literacy may not be a tool that is powerful enough on its own for women to freely access knowledge. As prestigious Buddhist knowledge is orally transferred, literate women would not have much advantage over illiterate women in accessing it. Seeger (2014: 178, 183) also acknowledges that because women are the opposite sex to the monks who confer the knowledge, they have to face constraints that men do not. Of course, women can still pursue their spiritual path and be highly respected

as Seeger emphasizes, but would it not be better if women did not have to face such gender constraints?

The importance of orality as a mode of knowledge transmission means that literate women still have to face similar obstacles to illiterate women in gaining the knowledge from monks. Indeed, literate women in Delia's (2014) work<sup>228</sup> mentioned difficulties when seeking advice from monks because of gender constraints (ibid: 95). Women would not have to face such gender constraints when those who orally transmit the knowledge are also women. This local mode of knowledge transmission underlines the importance of female monastics and contributes to the roles that *bhikkhuni* play in local lay women's lives, in particular with respect to their accessing religious knowledge.<sup>229</sup>

To summarize, I have in this chapter examined the roles played by *bhikkhuni* and novices of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam as female monastics in the lives of lay women. The chapter initially explored profiles of lay visitors to both monasteries and their gender ideologies—an exploration initially guided by my questionnaire. Indeed, the majority of lay visitors are women and they tend to display positive views toward the female gender.

Then, based mostly on data from my fieldwork, the chapter examined the roles of *bhikkhuni* and novices of the two monasteries in lay women's lives. I proposed that such roles emerge through: (1) the 'fields of merit' that lay women can now have close proximity to; (2) the ways in which *bhikkhuni* and novices function as life consultants and spiritual leaders; and (3) the role female monasteries play in providing places of refuge. The chapter subsequently analysed the main factors that enable and contribute to these

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<sup>228</sup> Delia (2014) does not state that the women are literate. However, according to World Bank 2017, in 2010 96.427 of adult women in Thailand are literate.

<sup>229</sup> In this regard, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda seem particularly important because they are teachers of other monastics in their monasteries, who also preach to and teach lay women. Delia (2014: 92–96) discusses the importance of Bhikkhuni Nanthayani as a female teacher at Nirodharam and I have cited her where relevant. I must emphasize again that I focus on the roles of the female monastics in the lives of lay women. The monastics do not have to be as charismatic as Bhikkhuni Nanthayani and they do not have to be in a pupil-teacher relationship with lay women.

beneficial roles as well as the social significance of female monastics at the level of empowerment. Here, I suggested that these factors derive from the local significance of monastic identity, local protocols that encourage interaction between monastics and lay populations of the same sex, and local modes of oral knowledge transmission. I argued that both *bhikkhuni* and novices as female monastics are particularly beneficial for lay women and can even empower them. Here, local modes of thought and the way traditions are experienced locally become crucial in making available the potential benefits for Thai women of female monastics in Thai society.

## Chapter 7

### Transforming gender ideologies: temporary *samaneri* ordination and social change

It was a sunny December afternoon in Thailand. I was sitting in the small library at Songdhammakalyani Monastery with a group of 39 newly ordained *samaneri*, listening to a lecture by a senior *bhikkhuni*, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna. She began her lecture on gender misconceptions in Thai Buddhism<sup>230</sup> by asking the *samaneri* to write on a whiteboard what they thought the Buddhist beliefs were concerning women. Women cannot enter certain sacred places, menstruating women cannot enter *ubosot*,<sup>231</sup> women cannot be ordained (*buat*), and mothers can cling on to the saffron robes of their sons in order to ascend to heaven (*mae ko chai pha lueang lukchai khuen sawan*) were examples of what was written on the board.

Then, Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna asked if any of the novices had, upon seeing *phra* (monks), wished from a young age to be ordained. In response to this question every *samaneri* raised a hand. Some even said (as others agreed), that they used to wish that they would be born as men in their next lives so that they could be ordained. The *bhikkhuni* quickly responded by saying, 'Now [you] don't have to wait until [your] next life. [You] can do it in this life.'

This group of *samaneri* amongst whom I sat had been ordained by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, on 5 December 2013. They were the eleventh generation of *samaneri* ordained through the monastery's project of temporary *samaneri* ordination, which had only been available to the public since April 2009. Since then, the monastery has held temporary ordinations twice a year – in April and in December. It is also not the only *bhikkhuni* monastery in Thailand to offer

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<sup>230</sup> See Appendix 9 for the curriculum of the project at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and other descriptions.

<sup>231</sup> One of the main buildings in a temple. It is considered sacred and is where the ordination takes place.



temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public. At least two other *bhikkhuni* monasteries – Nirodharam and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama – also now do so.

While temporary ordination of women in the saffron robes is only recently available, temporary ordination for men to become novices or monks is a long-standing tradition in Thai society. Such ordination not only embodies various social functions, but also specific benefits (Keyes 1986; Swearer 2010: 50–53; Terwiel 2012: 270–271). These benefits include, for example, the traditional rite of passage to adulthood, a means to acquiring education, and, importantly, an avenue for repaying one’s debt to one’s parents (ibid.).<sup>232</sup> Without the availability of similar ordination for women, these functions and benefits were formerly inaccessible to anyone other than temporarily ordained Thai men.

Given, then, the new availability of temporary ordination as *samaneri* for women, the social meaning and consequences of such ordination remain intriguing. Indeed, there is very little existing scholarship mentioning the temporary ordination for women (but see Suat Yan 2011: 219–232; Itoh 2013: 269–271; Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna 2017) and none of them focuses on the social impact of the ordination. Using data from my fieldwork, particularly at Songdhammakalyani Monastery where I stayed through the period of temporary ordination in December 2013, this chapter examines the temporary *samaneri* ordination for women and focuses on its impact on gender in society.

The chapter starts by providing both background information for and an overview of the temporary *samaneri* ordination offered to the public. It should be noted here that unlike the temporary ordination of men, women (regardless of age) can be temporarily ordained only as novices, *samaneri*.<sup>233</sup> The chapter, focusing on the social aspects of ordination, then looks at pre-ordination ceremonies on the ordination day and suggests that the

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<sup>232</sup> It is commonly thought that children are in debt to parents, especially mothers, who bring them into this world and raise them (Lindberg Falk 2007: 82–83; Swearer 2010: 53). The children then have to ‘repay the debt’ or ‘pay gratitude’ to the parents, and the ordination is usually regarded as the way to do so (Swearer 2010: 53).

<sup>233</sup> For the temporary ordination of men, male candidates older than 20 years can directly receive the ordination to become monks while those under 20 years become novices. As discussed, it is generally understood among the *bhikkhuni* monasteries offering temporary ordinations that women have to initially become *samaneri* and then *sikkhamana* for two years before being eligible to become *bhikkhuni*.

celebratory elements in the ceremony appear to be unprecedented in women's ordination. The chapter then examines the ordination in relation to social relations. The importance of the *samaneri*'s families and motivation to become temporary ordained as *samaneri* are considered. Finally, the chapter investigates the impacts of the ordination on gender more broadly. I argue that temporary *samaneri* ordination becomes a vehicle for social change, and that the important forces behind it are local traditions and values embodied in the ordination to wear the saffron robes. Significantly, through the ordination the gendered notion of repaying the debt to one's parents is being redefined. Gender ideologies and gender roles are thus transformed in a positive direction for women and the temporary ordination is indeed empowering for Thai women in general.

## **7.1 Temporary women's ordination as *samaneri*: background and overview**

The term 'temporary ordination' is used because most women who receive the ordination intend to be ordained only for a short period of time. Moreover, *bhikkhuni* monasteries that offer the ordination to the public also normally identify a specific time period during which women are likely to remain in robes. Of course, if the *samaneri* wish to remain in robes longer than the specified time period, they can. It is thus recognized that there is no clear boundary between 'temporary' and 'permanent' ordinations.<sup>234</sup> Nonetheless, most women who receive the ordination in this manner do remain in robes only for a short period of time. Based on my data from the field, most women who received *samaneri* ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery in December 2013 disrobed after nine days, the time period that was stated in the project. Around five of them did stay longer but with the intention to disrobe in one month, and by the end of January 2014 all of them had disrobed. Also, while Itoh (2013) reports that some women ended up staying in robes

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<sup>234</sup> Itoh (2013:269) also remarks, but specifically for the case of Nirodharam, that it is difficult to draw a line between 'temporary' and 'permanent' residents of the monastery. Some of the women who initially intend to take temporary ordination end up being ordained for longer (ibid.). Indeed, during my fieldwork at Nirodharam in 2014, I also met female monastics who said that they were ordained through the temporary ordination project in the previous year and later intended to be ordained permanently (see, for example, Sikkhamana Kamonkan in Chapter 5).

longer than initially intended (ibid: 269), she acknowledges that the majority remained in robes for a short period of time (ibid: 269–270).

The first temporary *samaneri* ordination available to the public was the ordination held at Songdhammakalyani Monastery in April 2009.<sup>235</sup> Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, conferred the *pabbajja* ordination on female candidates herself. In total, 36 women were selected out of 50 applicants to receive the ordination and it was Bhikkhuni Dhammananda who made the decision (*Traithep* 2009). On that occasion, the women were expected to be *samaneri* for nine days from 6 to 14 April 2009 (ibid.).<sup>236</sup>



Figure 16: The temporary *samaneri* of the eleventh generation of Songdhammakalyani Monastery had photos taken together with Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (their preceptor) and other female monastics of the monastery in front of the *vihara* after their ordination.

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<sup>235</sup> It is acknowledged that in 2008 a *samaneri* ordination was organized by Nirodharam as Itoh (2013) reports. However, it appears to have been held privately and Bhikkhuni Warayani of Nirodharam told me that the monastery started offering temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public in 2011. See also footnote 239.

<sup>236</sup> Stories and views of the women who joined this ordination were later made into a book titled *Samaneri Pen Pluem* [Delighted *samaneri*] written and edited by one of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's long-term female disciples, Phimphan Hansakun.

At first, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was against the idea of giving ordination for women to be ordained for only a short period of time, but she changed her mind after visiting Indonesia in 2008 and talking with an Indonesian *bhikkhuni* – Bhikkhuni Santini (Phimphan 2010: 19–20; Suat Yan 2011: 219). Bhikkhuni Dhammananda saw from the Indonesian example that giving temporary ordination to women could also be beneficial and create good Buddhists (ibid.). In the following year, she began offering temporary *samaneri* ordinations to the public. Probably because of the extensive positive feedback she received following this first temporary ordination, temporary ordinations were held at the monastery three times that year. Since then, Songdhammakalyani Monastery regularly offers *samaneri* ordinations twice a year in April and in December and the ordination dates are always on 6 April and 5 December. In total, around 608 women have been ordained at the monastery (as of November 2017).<sup>237</sup>

In 2011, Nirodharam also started offering temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public. According to Bhikkhuni Warayani, the ordination was chosen to be publicly held that year because it is the year that marks ‘the victory of the Buddha’ (*phuttha chayanti*).<sup>238</sup> In total, 51 women were ordained as *samaneri* that year (Itoh 2013: 270).<sup>239</sup> Stories and views of the women were also later compiled into a booklet named *Kao Wan Atsachan Chai* (Nine days: miracles for the heart). Since then, Nirodharam has continued to offer temporary ordination approximately once a year. The exception was in 2015 when no *samaneri* ordination was offered. According to Bhikkhuni Warayani, this is because the *bhikkhuni* ordination was held in the southern region in 2014 which the Supreme Sangha Council disapproved of. Thus in the following year Nirodharam did not offer *samaneri* ordination

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<sup>237</sup> As of December 2016, 584 women had received the ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery since it first offered ordination in 2009 (Sri Akkhara 2016). Another 24 women were ordained in April 2017 (Natthawut 2017). This number does not take into consideration women who have been ordained more than once.

<sup>238</sup> Sambuddhatva Jayanthi. It refers to the anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment.

<sup>239</sup> Itoh (2013) reports that temporary *samaneri* ordinations have been organized by Nirodharam since 2008. According to her, in 2008 seven women were ordained as *samaneri* by arrangement of Nirodharam (ibid: 270). All of the women were *mae chi* of the monastery and a Thai monk conferred the ordination on them (ibid: 316.). Five women were further ordained in 2009 and 13 women in 2010 (ibid: 270). It is noted that these early ordinations organized by Nirodharam seem to have been private ones. The numbers of candidates are few and available data reveal that they were *mae chi* of Nirodharam. Additionally, as mentioned, Bhikkhuni Warayani of Nirodharam said that the monastery started to offer temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public in 2011.

to avoid potential conflicts with the Council. Prior to 2017, Sri Lankan monks and *bhikkhuni* were invited to come to confer the *samaneri* ordination at the monastery. It was only in October 2017 that Bhikkhuni Nanthayani appears to first confer the *samaneri* ordination herself (*Matichon Online* 2017; Nirodharam Facebook 2017).<sup>240</sup> In total, around 390 women were ordained since the monastery began to offer ordination to the public (as of November 2017).<sup>241</sup>

Apart from Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam, at least one other *bhikkhuni* monastery continually offers temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public – Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama. In 2012, Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama in Songkhla started to offer the temporary ordination. Its first ordination project was held in April 2012 and 31 women were ordained. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani Monastery was invited by Sikkhamana Dhammadipa,<sup>242</sup> the abbess of the monastery, to confer the ordination. After that, the monastery continued to offer temporary *samaneri* ordination twice a year, in April and in December. In this case, the ordination dates are always on the first of the month. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda continues to come to the monastery to confer the ordination to female candidates. In total, at least 210 women have received the ordination at the monastery (as of November 2017).<sup>243</sup>

At least two other *bhikkhuni* monasteries later offered temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public, but its consistency and frequency remain in doubt. In 2013, Watr Phikkhuni Patimokha in Yasothon, together with its associated site – Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan in Bangkok, provided temporary *samaneri* ordination. Sri Lankan monks and *bhikkhuni* were invited to confer the ordination and 109 women were ordained in the monastery.

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<sup>240</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/nirodharam/>

<sup>241</sup> In February 2017, Bhikkhuni Warayani told me that since 2011 Nirodharam had offered the ordination to around 300 women and in October 2017, 90 women were further reported to receive the ordination (*Matichon* 2017). Thus the total number is around 390.

<sup>242</sup> Currently Bhikkhuni Dhammadipa (as of 2017)

<sup>243</sup> As of December 2016, around 100 women had received temporary ordination at Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama since its first offering of the ordination in 2012 (Sri Akkhara 2016). Around another 100 women received the ordination at the monastery in April 2017 and 10 women did so in October 2017 (a special occasion to dedicate merit to the late king) (Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama Facebook 2017) (see [www.facebook.com/ทิพยสถานธรรมภิกษุณีอาราม-New-เกาะขอม-สงขลา-1533179656922737](http://www.facebook.com/ทิพยสถานธรรมภิกษุณีอาราม-New-เกาะขอม-สงขลา-1533179656922737)).

Since then, it is unclear whether the monastery offers the ordination on a regular basis.<sup>244</sup> Moreover, in 2014, *bhikkhuni*-related sites under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi offered the ordination at Lamphun and 100 women were ordained as *samaneri* by Sri Lankan monks and *bhikkhuni*. According to Samaneri Sulakhana, whom I met in 2014, they planned to continue offering the temporary *samaneri* ordination once a year. However, in June 2017, Bhikkhuni Rattananandi disrobed, so it remains unknown whether the monastery still offers the ordination.<sup>245</sup>

In addition, from time to time there were also *samaneri* ordinations offered to the public at various places across the country. One ordination was held in a northern city, Phayao, in a place called Daruni Wiwekasom in 2010 (Chatsumarn 2016: 42). Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was invited by a *samaneri* who lived there to confer the ordination to 32 women (*ibid.*). Another ordination took place in the southern province of Surat Thani, in November 2013 (Chatsumarn 2016: 85–87) when Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was invited to confer the ordination to 15 women (*ibid.*). A further ordination was also reported in the southern province of Nakhon Srithammarat, but the number of women who received the ordination remains unknown (*ibid.*).

All in all, there is no central record of the total number of women who have received ordination as *samaneri*, and it is thus hard to know the exact number. Nevertheless, there should be at least 1,434 Thai women who have received the ordination across the country (as of November 2017).<sup>246</sup> That number is constantly growing given that at least three *bhikkhuni* monasteries, as mentioned, regularly offer ordination to the public.

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<sup>244</sup> In 2014, Pa Da (pseudonym), a close female follower of the monastery told me that they plan to continuously offer the *samaneri* ordination once a year. According to the monastery's Facebook page and website, it offered ordinations to become *samanera* and *samaneri* (male novices and female novices) in 2016 and 2017. However, photos shown on the website and Facebook page regarding the project are overwhelming those of male novices (see <https://buddhacatuparisainternationalfoundation.wordpress.com> and <https://th-th.facebook.com/vattabhikkhuniTH/>).

<sup>245</sup> The information is from her Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/maeshemanora>.

<sup>246</sup> As discussed, there are at least 608 women who have received the ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery (including non-Thai and those who were ordained twice). According to the statistic from the eleventh cohort of the *samaneri* at the monastery, 2.5 per cent of the women are non-Thai (one out of 40 women of the generation) and 2.5 per cent of them have received the ordination twice (one out of 40 women of the generation). Thus, there should be

From what I can deduce, it seems likely that most women who become temporarily ordained as *samaneri* are highly educated and are middle aged (on average). At Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam the majority have received higher education (Itoh 2013: 270; Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna 2017), but records of women who were ordained at other sites are unavailable. According to data offered in Itoh's (2013: 27) work, nearly 60 per cent of the women at Nirodharam received higher education and around 11 per cent of them obtained at least a master's degree.<sup>247</sup> At Songdhammakalyani Monastery, according to available data in Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna's (2017) work, 69.23 per cent of the women received higher education and 23.48 per cent hold at least a master's degree.<sup>248</sup> It is assumed that education levels of women who become temporary *samaneri* at Nirodharam and Songdhammakalyani Monastery are higher than those of women who temporarily become *mae chi* (Itoh 2013: 270).

As for the age of the women, data available from Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam indicate that, on average they are middle-aged. Again, records of women who were ordained at other sites are unavailable. According to Itoh (2013: 270), the average age of the women who received ordination at Nirodharam was 45 years old<sup>249</sup> and according to available data in Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna's (2017) work, the average age of the women at Songdhammakalyani Monastery was 41 years old.<sup>250</sup> It has to be noted,

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around 578 Thai women who were ordained out of the total 608. As for Nirodharam, all women who received the ordination in 2011 were Thai according to data from Nirodharam 2012. Based on this figure, I presume that all women who received the ordination at Nirodharam are Thai. Data concerning women who received ordination twice are not available and thus this factor is not taken into account. Based on the assumption that women who received the ordination at other monasteries and sites are all Thai and do not take the ordination twice, there should be at least 1,434 Thai women who received the ordination ( $578+390+210+109+100+32+15 = 1434$ ) across the country.

<sup>247</sup> This is the educational background of the women who received ordination between 2008 and 2011 (Itoh 2013: 270). Women who were ordained in privately held ordinations (2008 to 2010) are also included.

<sup>248</sup> The education levels of women who joined the temporary *samaneri* ordination at the monastery are not always recorded. There were eight ordinations held where the education levels of female participants were not recorded. The data presented here are from available records shown in Table 1 of Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna's (2017: 224) work.

<sup>249</sup> Again, it has to be noted that Itoh's data also include those who received the ordination since 2008 when the ordination had not yet become available to the public.

<sup>250</sup> Table 1 of Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna's (2017: 224) shows the average age of women who received ordination over eleven generations; they range from 35 to 45 years old. The total average age of 41 years is calculated from this data.

however, that the age range of the women is huge.<sup>251</sup> At Nirodharam, the youngest was 27 years old and the oldest 73 years old (Itoh 2013: 270) while at Songdhammakalyani Monastery the youngest was said to be 9 years old, while the oldest was 82 years of age.<sup>252</sup>

Notably, monks also appear to play a part in securing this new practice of temporary women's ordination as *samaneri*. At Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, where the ordinations are offered regularly, supportive monks of the monasteries are present on ordination days.<sup>253</sup> To illustrate, at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I witnessed Phra Khru Suthammanat of Wat Plak Mai Lai, who vocally supports the *bhikkhuni*, visit the monastery on 5 December 2013. He arrived after the candidates had already become *samaneri* and gave a sermon as well as blessed them for pursuing the religious path. According to the monastery's Facebook Page, the monk continues to come to the monastery to give sermons and blessings every time the ordination is held.<sup>254</sup> At Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama, I also witnessed supportive monks make their presence known on the 1 December 2013 ordination, and on the day before when the ritual of cutting hair (*phithi plongphom*) took place. Around five monks from Surat Thani came to see the ritual on 30 November 2013, and the following day another six monks from Wat Chaeng of Songkhla, including its abbot – Phra Phisansikkhakit – visited the monastery. At that time, Phra Phisansikkhakit was the one who gave a sermon to the newly ordained *samaneri* and gave the blessing.

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<sup>251</sup> While a median or modal age may be a more useful statistic in this case, no complete data are available for me to calculate those.

<sup>252</sup> This is the data from an article by Aksonsri (2013) in *Putthasawika* (46). To my knowledge, women who were ordained after the published data do not break these records.

<sup>253</sup> At Nirodharam, as mentioned, I did not have a chance to witness the *samaneri* ordination as it did not take place during my fieldwork. I thus cannot say whether supportive monks of Nirodharam make their presence apparent on the monastery's ordination day or not. However, according to photos available on the monastery's Facebook page and its booklet *Kao Wan Atsachan Chai*, no monks appear to be present. Regardless, Lalita (2008: 129–132, 143–45) reports that a monk was present on the day of the *samaneri* ordination when 13 women participated and a supportive monk from the monastery made a visit after the event to give a sermon to the *samaneri* (It is noted that Lalita's data appear to contradict Itoh (2013: 270) in that she reports the ordination of 13 women occurring in 2008, while Itoh (2013: 270) says that it was in 2009. I believe Itoh has more credibility in this regard as she also reports that the 2008 ordination was conferred on eight women by a Thai monk, while Lalita does not mention that ordination).

<sup>254</sup> <https://th-th.facebook.com/thai.bhikkhunis>.



Overall, it appears that monks are careful about not being involved in any rituals and only being present. For instance, during the candidates' hair-cutting ritual, Sikkhamana Dhammadipa politely invited the most senior monk to cut the hair first. However, the monk shook his head and silently stood to the side of where the ritual took place, alongside other monks attending. The next day, during the time the female candidates received the ordination from Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, all of the monks stayed outside the building. They only stepped indoors when the ritual finished, and the candidates had already become *samaneri*.

In short, the first temporary *samaneri* ordination became available to the public in 2009 at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. Currently (as of November 2017) ordinations are regularly offered to the public by no less than three *bhikkhuni* monasteries—Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Nirodharam, and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama. At least 1,434 women across the country have experienced being temporary *samaneri* through the ordinations offered at these three monasteries and elsewhere. So far, *samaneri* ordinations that are offered to the public are conducted by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, Bhikkhuni Nanthayani, Sri Lanka monks, and *bhikkhuni*. Monks also seem to play a role in securing this new ordination practice. Supportive monks from Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama were present during the ordination days. Regardless, their unwillingness to engage in ritual practices indicates a strategy to both express their support and yet save themselves from potential conflicts with the Supreme Sangha Council, which forbids monks to ordain women as novices and *bhikkhuni*.

## **7.2 Celebratory pre-ordination ceremonies: once absent elements in women's ordination**

After the background and overview of the new temporary ordination for women is provided, the chapter will consider the social aspects of the ordination. This section, then, explores pre-ordination ceremonies of the temporary *samaneri* ordination offered to the public.

As discussed, I witnessed the eleventh generation of temporary *samaneri* ordinations offered at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. Data presented herewith are, therefore, largely based on this ordination. Thus, this section describes pre-ordination ceremonies that took place on 5 December 2013 at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, focusing on the celebratory aspects involving the candidates' families. Here, it suggests that pre-ordination ceremonies and their celebratory tone are relatively similar to those taking place during the temporary ordinations of men—circumstances, in fact, that seems unprecedented in Thai society.

On 5 December 2013,<sup>255</sup> before receiving the *pabbajja* ordination from Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in the *vihara* of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, candidates for ordination participated in ceremonies that involved their families and friends. To show how the ceremonies were celebratory, my brief ethnographic vignette of parts of what happened on the ordination day is provided below. These begin with the the ritual of cutting hair through to the time when candidates entered the *vihara*:

As usual, the bell rang at 5 o'clock in the morning at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. The candidates, who had been preparing themselves for some time to become *samaneri*, woke up to their much-anticipated day. After breakfast, the candidates, all dressed similarly in white clothes prepared by the monastery, lined up in the library.

When the time came, the candidates walked into a prepared space in front of the main building for the ritual of cutting hair, in which Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess, was the main ritual conductor. Their families and friends were already waiting in their seats, facing the candidates. Poetry written by candidates' representatives about a feeling of gratitude toward parents, with a focus on mothers, and also about letting go of worldly matters, was read aloud, while the

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<sup>255</sup> There are also procedures that women who wish to be temporary *samaneri* have to pass before the ordination day at the monastery. They have to initially fill in the monastery's application form and hand it in with the required documents, including a handwritten self-introductory letter which says who she is and why she would like to be ordained. Successful candidates selected by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda are then notified (See Appendix 9 for criteria of the candidates). They then have to come to the monastery on the orientation day to remain eligible to receive the ordination. The orientation date for the women of the eleventh generation was 16 November 2013. I was there in the monastery and attended the orientation with the women. The women came to the monastery again on 2 December 2013 to be continuously trained for the ordination ritual until the ordination day (The exceptions were two women who initially intended to be ordained permanently and had stayed in the monastery prior to that day).

candidates walked to meet their parents, relatives, and friends with incense, candles, and *puang malai*.<sup>256</sup> Most candidates asked their parents or relatives for forgiveness for any past inappropriate behaviour. It was a very emotional scene, with many tears from both the candidates and their families. Then the candidates went back to their seats and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda started to cut their hair. Other *bhikkhuni* and novices followed her according to their seniority. After the monastics finished, parents, relatives, and friends of the candidates joined in cutting the hair. In the meantime, the candidates held big green lotus leaves in their hands to receive the falling hair. Cutting the hair of the candidates is deemed meritorious, and lay people cut not only the hair of the candidates they know but also that of others.



Figure 17: Mothers and families queued to cut the candidates' hair in the ritual.

There was also a 'behind-the-scenes' activity in a small garden nearby. Here, the candidates' hair needed to be cut and shaved further until their heads were properly shaven, and other female monastics and the candidates' own relatives and friends helped out with this process. In the meantime, there was also a short ritual led by a layman concerning the transfer of merit to those in other worlds. The lay people who could not find spaces to help with shaving the heads tended to participate in this ritual.

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<sup>256</sup> A Thai flower garland. They are usually offered to people of superior status, particularly parents and teachers, and also to the Buddha's statue. See Figure 17, in which a woman on the left side is holding a *puang malai*.

After the heads had been shaved, they were covered with white cloths. The candidates were then referred to as *nakhini*, a parallel word to *nag*, the word used for male candidates in their transitional state before ordination.

Next, there was a procession from the entrance of the monastery to the *vihara* at the back of the monastery. The procession included the *bhikkhuni*, novices, *nakhini*, whose heads were already completely shaved and covered with white cloths, and their relatives. Together we all slowly moved toward the *vihara*. The *nakhini* received flowers to hold in their hands in the *wai* gesture and walked clockwise around the *vihara* three times. The relatives followed them with the saffron robes and bowls that would be offered to them.

Then, the families, mainly parents, sat in a prepared space in front of the *vihara*. The *nakhini* came to stand in front of them to let their parents offer them their robes. It was another emotional scene. I was assigned to hold a specific bowl full of flower-like ribbons which had coins inside, and I stood just in front of the *vihara*. After receiving the robes, the *nakhini* came to collect the flower-like ribbons and threw them to their relatives, who held out their hands to catch them. The flower-like ribbons were deemed to be auspicious, and the scene was full of smiles and laughter. This beautiful, happy scene was what the *nakhini* saw before entering the *vihara* to receive the *pabbajja* ordination and become *samaneri*.

From this account, we can see that the ceremonies before the *pabbajja* ordination are celebratory and involve both the families and friends of the candidates.

Notably, the pre-ordination ceremonies for women who would be ordained as *samaneri* appear to be similar to those that occur in the temporary ordination of men. There are usually celebratory pre-ordination ceremonies for male candidates who would become ordained as either novices or monks (Ito 2007; Cook 2010). For example, there tend to be ceremonies in which songs praising the virtues of mothers are sung evoking emotions to the point where both the candidates themselves as well as other audience members are brought to tears (Ito 2007: 428). Also, a procession of male candidates with their families and friends who circle clockwise around the *vihara* three times is reported to be common (Cook 2010: 63). These ceremonial elements can also be found in the pre-ordination ceremonies of women who would become *samaneri*, as depicted in the excerpt above. While no songs were sung, poetry praising parents, particularly mothers, was read aloud and many female candidates and others in the audience cried. There was also a procession

of the female candidates with their families and friend that circled the *vihara* clockwise three times.

Moreover, these celebratory pre-ordination ceremonies appear to be unprecedented for women's ordination in the society, as they do not occur in other women's ordination. Take, for example, the ordination to become *mae chi*, the most popular alternative form of female renunciants. *Mae chi* ordination is reported not to be celebrated and is often held in private (Lindberg Falk 2007: 92; Cook 2010: 63). According to accounts of *mae chi*'s ordination available in the ethnographic works of Lindberg Falk (2007: 92–96) and Cook (2010: 62–63), celebratory pre-ordination ceremonies are absent. No poetry about parents is read aloud to the audience to evoke their emotions.<sup>257</sup> Also, there is no procession that includes families and friends for *mae chi* candidates (*ibid.*).

These celebratory pre-ordination ceremonies for women becoming *samaneri* underlines the deep social values of ordination in the saffron robes in Thai society. Indeed, the saffron robes are what visibly distinguishes women who are *samaneri* from *mae chi*. The involvement of families and friends of *samaneri* candidates in the ceremonies also indicates the social significance of the ordination. The next section, therefore, will focus on the social importance of the *samaneri* ordination in relation to the family.

### **7.3 The ordination and social relations: temporary *samaneri* and their families**

#### **7.3.1 Importance of families**

As discussed, both families and relatives of *samaneri* candidates participated in pre-ordination ceremonies at the monastery. After the candidates become *samaneri*, the families would also offer them the bowls they would use. Even after the ordination day, I

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<sup>257</sup> Lindberg Falk (2007: 95) reports that a *mae chi* candidate shed tears while her head was shaved and 'people around her laughed' (*ibid.*). While Lindberg Falk interprets this as a common behaviour among Thais (to laugh when seeing others cry in public) (Lindberg Falk 2007: 95), it should be noted that, to my knowledge, no one is reported to have laughed during the ritual of cutting hair for male candidates nor for female candidates becoming *samaneri*.

witnessed families and relatives taking turns visiting the monastery until the day that the *samaneri* disrobed. Interviews with the temporary *samaneri* also reveal how important their families are in their ordination.

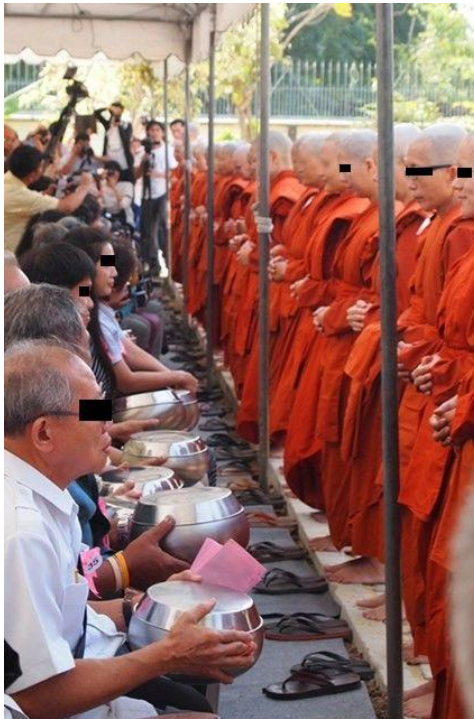


Figure 18: After being ordained, the *samaneri* came to receive their bowls, offered to them by their families.

During our interviews, temporary *samaneri* often recalled how their close family members (particularly mothers) shed tears on the ordination day and a hint of happiness was detected in their voices.<sup>258</sup> For instance, Luang Phi Ta (pseudonym) remarked ‘[my] mother attended the ordination ceremonies and she cried.’ ‘For me, [my] mother cried even before [I reached her]. [I] was walking toward her and she was already crying’, Luang Phi Pla, who was also there, added. ‘Mine too. [I said to her] “Oh mother, your tears drop” (*namta ruang loei ro mae*). Although born 26 years ago, [I] have never made her cry with happiness before’, said Luang Phi Pu, another *samaneri*.

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<sup>258</sup> For the temporary *samaneri*, group interviews were sometimes conducted.

Luang Phi Su, another temporary *samaneri* in her mid-fifties, also emphasized during the interview how her family who was against the *bhikkhuni* ordination still came to her ordination day and even shed tears. Her parents had already passed away, but her aunt and elder brother were still alive. She said:

[My] aunt (*yom na*) firmly thinks it [the ordination] is not possible. [My] beloved brother opened a meditation centre, and he is the kind of guy who grew up in a radical patriarchal society. I (*luang phi*) did not intend to bring them here but [I] made a wish (*tang chit*) that if they could learn something with me, let them come. [My] aunt kept changing her mind every day about whether she should come to attend my ordination ceremony.

They did come on her ordination day. ‘That day they came. They sat before me and cried. Their hearts touched mine. Can [you] imagine? (*nuek-ok mai*). The people who were constantly against [the ordination] but still came to carry a bowl and the robes for me.’ At the end of the interview, Luang Phi Su further added ‘They also came after the ordination day to make merit by offering lunch to monks (*liang phen*). They cried. [They] were religiously happy that they could touch my saffron robes (*khao ko piti ma chap pha lueang rao dai*).’

The remark of Luang Phi Jan, the only woman I interviewed who firmly stated that unlike others she had been ordained for herself, further underlines the importance of families in the ordination. ‘On the day I became ordained and saw their [her parents] tears of joy (*namta haeng khwam pluem piti*), I felt that it [was] the peak of my life. I have succeeded in many things – careers, money, and so on. But it was only on that day [the ordination day] that they happily cried’, she said.

### 7.3.2 Motivations to become temporary *samaneri* and the prevalence of ‘repaying the debt’ to parents

The last section describes the importance of families for the *samaneri* in their ordination. The significance of families is further underlined in this section in relation to the motives women expressed to become ordained. This section explores their motivations for becoming temporary *samaneri*, the most common of which is to repay the debt to parents.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed 33<sup>259</sup> temporarily-ordained Thai *samaneri* at Songdhammakalyani Monastery out of the 38 ordained<sup>260</sup> (86.84 per cent) regarding their motivations to be ordained as *samaneri*. As mentioned, they are the eleventh generation of women ordained as *samaneri* at the monastery. In these interviews, I specifically asked, and especially if they did not mention it, why they had chosen to be ordained as *samaneri* and not chosen other forms of renunciation such as *mae chi*. My data reveal that the women often had more than one reason motivating them to become ordained but interestingly, the most prevalent one was ‘to be ordained for parents’ (*buat hai pho mae*).

Of these 33 *samaneri*, 24 mentioned being ordained for others (so that they could receive merit) as their major motivation, and 19 referred to it as their sole motivation.<sup>261</sup> Parents, teachers, those they have been indebted to from past lives (*chao kam nai wen*),<sup>262</sup> husbands, sons, and the king were all mentioned as those for whom the merit generated from their ordination was intended. Of these 24 *samaneri*, 23 mentioned being ordained for parents as their primary motivation, and 17 specifically referred to it as their only motivation. We can see here that the motivation ‘to be ordained for parents’ is indeed prevalent; around 70 percent of the *samaneri* (23 out of 33) mentioned it and 51.52 percent of them (17 out of 33) even said that was their sole motivation.

It should be noted that my data in this regard are rather different from those presented in Suat Yan’s (2001) work. Based on women who took the ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery in December 2010, Suat Yan (2011: 223–224) suggests that most were motivated by reasons relating to *dhamma* (60 per cent), while dedication of

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<sup>259</sup> Interviews with 32 out of 33 *samaneri* were digitally recorded.

<sup>260</sup> There were, in total, 40 women receiving the ordination on 5 December 2013. One of them, however, was non-Thai. She came from Holland and used to stay as *mae chi* at another temple before coming to stay at the monastery and receiving the ordination as a *samaneri*. There was also one Thai woman who was ordained on that day but disrobed on the following day. I saw her dragging her suitcase away from the monastery. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who was also there at that time, emphasized to me that her case was very unusual as nobody has ever disrobed on the following day of the ordination before.

<sup>261</sup> For the nine *samaneri* who did not mention being ordained for others as their motivations, their motives varied and one had more than one motivation. These are practising *dhamma* (cited by four), personal mental problems (cited by one), curiosity about what being *samaneri* is (cited by two), accumulate their own merit (cited by two), and help the work of the Thai *bhikkhuni* (cited by two).

<sup>262</sup> This is the meaning according to Office of the Royal Society of Thailand 2011.



merit was the second most cited reason (around 50 per cent). However, it has to be noted that Suat Yan interviewed only eight *samaneri* out of 48 (16.67 per cent) and most of her interviews were conducted in English (Suat Yan 2011: 48). This means that her interviewees were likely to be among the educated middle classes who have a good command of English. Apart from interviews, the rest of her data is from a secondary source – an English document produced by Songdhammakalyani Monastery.<sup>263</sup>

In fact, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the abbess and preceptor, also recognized the widespread motivation of being ordained for one's parents. Having read the self-introductory letters of all *samaneri* candidates, including why they would like to be ordained, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda mentioned on various occasions<sup>264</sup> that the majority of women are motivated to be ordained for their parents.

Six voices of the temporary *samaneri* I interviewed – Luang Phi Yun, Luang Phi Buppha, Luang Phi Maeo, Luang Phi Kring, Luang Phi Su, and Luang Phi Fa – provide typical accounts of what motivates women to become temporary *samaneri*. The prevalent motivation of 'being ordained for parents' can be seen throughout their stories.

Luang Phi Yun was a confident woman in her mid-forties. She had lived in the United Kingdom for ten years and learned about *samaneri* ordination while there. It was already a couple of years before our interview when she had learned about this monastery and the ordinations it carried out. Indeed, when I met her she seemed quite familiar with the monastery and told me that this was already the second time that she had been ordained as a *samaneri* here. 'I had long wished to be ordained for my parents (*pho mae*)', she told me. However, she also said that she simply did not want to be ordained in other forms, such as the *mae chi*. Only when she heard that there was a monastery where one could 'have one's head shaved, wear the saffron robes (*nung lueang*), and go for the alms round (*binthabat*)', and only after she came to visit it, could she make the decision to be ordained. From the moment of her first ordination, she was explicit about her motives: '[My] mother was still alive that time. [My] mother could still come to offer me the robes',

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<sup>263</sup> According to Suat Yan (2011: 255), the document is named 'Temporary Samaneri Ordination Project, 2nd Batch 2010 at Songdhammakalyani Bhikkhuni Monastery'.

<sup>264</sup> For example, evening sessions at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and a public event entitled 'Ten years of Thai *bhikkhuni*' on 23 November 2013, which I attended.

she said. This time she said she came to be ordained again specifically for her mother, who had just passed away in August.

Luang Phi Buppha was 80 years old when she became a *samaneri* and was the oldest person in the group. She said that she had come here with her friend, Luang Phi Maeo, who persuaded her to be ordained at the monastery. ‘At first I intended to be ordained as a *mae chi* but my friend told me “Let’s come to be ordained as *samaneri*. They are also *phra* (monk) (*yang ngai ko pen phra*)”’, she explained. She then thought that it was a good idea as she could also be ordained (and dedicate merit) to the people she loved. ‘I can be ordained for parents, who have already passed away. They only have seven daughters [and no son]’, she said, adding that ‘[I] also become ordained for [my] husband, who has passed away.’

Luang Phi Maeo, a friend of Luang Phi Buppha was in her seventies. She had known the monastery since the time of *luang ya* (Bhikkhuni Ta Tao). When she found out that the monastery offers the temporary ordination as *samaneri*, she wanted to be ordained. ‘My mother wanted me to be ordained for a long time since she nearly died from giving birth. But I do not want to be ordained as a *mae chi*. I do not have faith to be a *mae chi* (*mai sattha chi*)’, she stated. She said that she thought that if she decided to become ordained, it was better to be a *samaneri*, who kept ten precepts and also wore the saffron robes. Also, she added, ‘My mother does not have a son, only me, the only daughter. [She] has also passed away. I want to repay her debt (*thotthaen bunkhun*). That’s all.’

Luang Phi Kring was a calm woman in her mid-thirties. She told me that she had known the monastery since the time of *luang ya* and used to follow her parents to pay homage to the the former abbess. However, she had never come to the monastery again until she knew that it offered temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public. She said that she regularly goes to a monastery in a northern part of Thailand and was persuaded to be ordained as a *mae chi* (*buat chi*) there. However, she said that ‘[I] want to be ordained as *phra* (*buat phra*) more [than *mae chi*]. [I] want to wear the saffron robes as men do.’ To this, she then added, ‘Since I was young I want to be ordained for [my] parents (*yak buat hai pho mae*), just like others who come here’. Before ending the interview, she stressed again that ‘it is great that temporary *samaneri* ordination is now offered to women. Many

feel that we can be ordained for parents, even being women. Sons can be ordained and let parents cling on to the saffron robes to ascend to heaven (*luk phuchai buat laeo pho mae cha dai ko chai pha lueang khuen sawan*). This belief, now [I] feel that being women we can also do it.’

Luang Phi Su was a kind middle-aged woman. She told me that she had known *luang mae*, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda since 2001, when she was studying Women’s Studies at Thammasat University. However, she had only thought of being ordained now. ‘This year I am already 49 years old. I feel that it is the time to go inside myself’, she explained. She said that she had been practising *dhamma* in her daily life, but she felt that it was so hard she could not do it that well. ‘I (*luang phi*) then feel like I want to receive *pabbajja* ordination once in my life. I would like to treat it as a way to start my life again. I don’t want to be ordained as a *mae chi* or *chi phram*. [I] do not say that they are not good, only that they are not for me (*man mai chai*)’, she emphasized. That was her first reason; another one was that she wanted to be ordained for her mother. ‘My mother (*yom mae*) does not have any sons. [She] has already passed away. [I] want to be ordained for her’, she said.

Luang Phi Fa was in her mid-twenties. She used to have a tattoo but had it removed specifically for this ordination as a person with any tattoos was not allowed to be ordained here.<sup>265</sup> She stated that she had specifically become ordained for her mother: ‘It is only for one drop of tears that I became ordained. I have come to be ordained only for my mother. There is no other reason.’ However, she said that her mother had not expected her to be ordained because she is a woman. Her mother placed her hope of ordination on her elder brother, but he has not been ordained yet and probably has no plans to do so. She told me that she once heard her mother talk to a woman who is an elder in the community, and the woman had told her mother how lucky she was to have a son who could be ordained for her. After that, she noticed her mother looked sad so she told her mother that ‘if women could be ordained (*tha phuying buat dai*), [I] would be ordained just for you.’ When she heard about the temporary *samaneri* ordination offered at the

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<sup>265</sup> See Appendix 9 which describes the criteria for being ordained as temporary *samaneri* at Songdhammakalyani monastery. The criterion regarding tattoos was only added in the eleventh generation of the ordinations.

monastery, she thus came to be ordained. Of course, the ordination was dedicated to her mother.

Being motivated to be ordained for one's parents is clearly prevalent among temporary *samaneri* at Songdhammakalyani Monastery. Indeed, it also appeared to be relatively common at another *bhikkhuni* monastery that offers temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public – Nirodharam. As mentioned, I did not have a chance to witness the period of temporary *samaneri* ordination at Nirodharam. Nevertheless, I managed to interview via email four women who received the ordination in October 2011. They are women who received the ordination the first time that Nirodharam offered it to the public. In short, two of them said that they intended to be ordained specifically for their parents, one mentioned wishing to keep the ten precepts, and the other said she had a personal mental problem (*panha thang chitchai*). Based on the data here, some 50 per cent of the women were motivated to be ordained for their parents.<sup>266</sup> The story of Mim, one of the women who said she intended to be ordained for her parents, is as follows.

Mim was aged 30 when she received the ordination. She was from Chiang Mai and held a bachelor's degree. She told me that she had known Nirodharam since she was 12 years old through her aunt, and went there to keep the precepts as a *mae phram* from time to time. However, she did not think of becoming ordained until she heard that Nirodharam was going to offer temporary ordination as *samaneri*. It was stated in the project that one could become temporary *samaneri* for nine days without any costs involved. She was enthusiastic and decided to become ordained as a temporary *samaneri*. In her words: 'I

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<sup>266</sup> It is acknowledged that Itoh (2013: 271) suggests that the majority of women who temporarily become *samaneri* at Nirodharam do so because of their faith in Bhikkhuni Nanthayani's teaching and to accumulate merit. Itoh also notes that they are also not so concerned with being ordained specifically as a *mae chi* or as a *samaneri* (ibid: 271). However, it has to be noted that her data are based mostly on her interviews with seven women who received the ordination at Nirodharam in 2008 (Itoh 2013: 271). At that time no ordination was offered to the public and all of Itoh's interviewees had been *mae chi* before receiving the ordination to become *samaneri* (Itoh 2013: 316–317). In this regard, it is not surprising that the women Itoh interviewed have rather different motivations to be ordained as *samaneri* than others. In addition, Itoh (2013: 271) explains that she obtained the rest of her data from the early draft version of Nirodharam's publication regarding women who received the ordination in October 2011. However, what the women wrote in the booklet may not necessarily be their motivations to be ordained. An example can be found in a story Mim told me about her motives to be ordained and what she wrote in the booklet (final version). See footnote 267.

see it as a great opportunity. [I can] “be ordained in the saffron robes” (*buat pha lueang*) for my parents. [I] can, moreover, do good deeds for myself. The time was also suitable for me to take days off [from her company]. [I] then decided to become ordained (*buat*).’ She emphasized that her parents did not have any sons, only her and her younger sister. She even used to think that her family must have committed bad deeds in past lives (*tham kam wai*) to explain why her parents only had daughters who could not be ordained for them. ‘We [her and her sister] want to do everything to express our gratitude [to our parents] and to repay what they have done for us (*thotthaen phrakhun than*). We believe that to “be ordained in the saffron robes” is the greatest thing that children (*luk*) can do for the parents’, she stated. According to her, her family was also happy when they knew that she and her younger sister decide to become ordained temporarily as *samaneri*. ‘Having only daughters, they could simply forget about being able to “see the hem of the saffron robes” (*hen chai pha lueang*) of their children, but now they can because we can also be ordained’, she said.<sup>267</sup>

It is clear from the story that the woman intends to be ordained specifically in the saffron robes in order to repay the debt to her parents and that it is very meaningful to her. The motivation of being ordained for parents is obviously not limited to women who become temporary *samaneri* at Songdhammakalyani Monastery.<sup>268</sup>

Moreover, the prevalent notion of being ordained for parents appears to also be shared among families of the temporary *samaneri*. Based on informal conversations with families of the *samaneri* at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the notion of ordination in order to

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<sup>267</sup> What Mim wrote in the booklet called *Kao Wan Atsachan Chai*, which is the final version of Nirodharam’s publication regarding women who received the ordination in October 2011, is different from what she told me. This is probably because what she wrote concerns what she had learnt from being a temporary *samaneri*:

I have learnt a lot of proper thoughts and practices in the way of *dhamma* (*thang tham*). [I have learnt about] the way to *nirvana* of the Buddha. Phra Achan Nanthayani has guided me along the way and kindness (*metta*) from all *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri* have supported me not to fall from the way. Although I have only begun to start walking, I will diligently and assiduously keep walking as the next life may come before tomorrow (Nirodharam 2012: 53).

<sup>268</sup> Actually, being ordained to repay the debt to parents also appear to be meaningful to long-termed female monastics. See, for example, Wanthani (2014), where Bhikkhuni Dhammavanna of Songdhammakalyani wrote about the feeling of being ‘a monk who is a daughter’ (*phra luksao*).

repay the debt to parents seemed to be rather common. For example, P Noi, an elder sister of a *samaneri*, who was in her thirties, had tears in her eyes when talking with me about her sister's ordination. She said that she, her sister, and her family all lived in Lampang, a city in the northern part of Thailand, and that they came here specifically for the ordination day. 'I will offer her the robes and my father [will offer her] the bowl', she said. Their mother had passed away the previous year, and she said her sister 'intend[s] to be ordained for [our] father and mother, particularly the deceased mother'. 'Our family only has daughters', she explained. P Noi also kept saying how happy and fulfilled (*ruesuek tuentan chai*) she felt and added '[I] also have a chance to touch the *samaneri*, to wipe away the blood stains [from the process of shaving their heads], and to help wash their heads.' During our conversations, her voice was trembling and tears were in her eyes. It was clear that the ordination of her sister was meaningful to her and she openly shared her feelings about the importance of being ordained for parents.

While all the women's families may not share this notion of ordination for parents, it was clear that *samaneri* ordination is meaningful to the women's families. On the ordination day at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, I saw families, and presumably parents, shed tears on seeing the women in the saffron robes. What I saw also appears to be a common scene on ordination days at this and other monasteries. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda lightheartedly remarked more than once that there had to be a person whose role it is to offer tissues to the *samaneri*' families to dry their tears.<sup>269</sup>

#### **7.4 Temporary *samaneri* ordination and women's empowerment**

This final section investigates the impacts of the new temporary ordination for women on changing Thai notions of gender. As discussed, temporary ordination for men embodies social functions such that it is a way for men to gain education, a rite of passage to adulthood, and repayment of the debt to parents (Keyes 1986; Swearer 2010:50–53). In the absence of similar temporary ordination for women, women could not enjoy these

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<sup>269</sup> I heard her say this during evening sessions at the monastery and also at public events such as 'Ten years of Thai *bhikkhuni*' held on 23 November 2013.

benefits. However, since 2009 women can also take temporary ordination and wear the saffron robes. Theoretically, this should mean that women can also access similar benefits. In practice, temporary *samaneri* ordination may not yet embody exactly the same functions. Nevertheless, the important functions that ordination does carry are already hugely empowering for Thai women.

Education is one of the benefits that men can access through being temporarily ordained (Keyes 1986; Swearer 2010). It is a channel through which poor rural boys can attain a basic education and even further their studies up to higher education if they are sufficiently able (Swearer 2010: 52–53). Girls from similar backgrounds do not have this opportunity and it is predicted that if there is a similar temporary ordination available for them, it is likely that they will also access education through it (Starkey and Tomalin 2013: 62–63). Education is also seen as a way in which temporary ordination can be empowering for women (Starkey and Tomalin 2013). While the prediction seems plausible, my data do not indicate that temporary ordination currently functions in this regard. As discussed, most female participants are already highly educated and few girls seem to participate. Nevertheless, the ordination may someday be able to function as a way to attain education, especially if more rural girls, for whom being educated can be difficult, participate. Empirical data from other *bhikkhuni* monasteries are also needed to support this claim.

Moreover, as few girls yet participate in the temporary ordination, it is unlikely that such ordination might generally function as a rite of passage to adulthood in the way that it does for men.<sup>270</sup> If more girls participate in the future, the ordination may at some point function effectively in this way. At the same time, it should be noted that for those few girls who are ordained, ordination may already functioned as an alternative religious rite of passage into adulthood. This in itself can be viewed as a significant change in that women are traditionally reported to attain adulthood through domestic activities

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<sup>270</sup> Temporary *samaneri* ordination may function as a rite of passage to other stages of life than adulthood for some participants. For instance, Luang Phi Su says that it is time for her to go inside herself as she is 49 and she sees the ordination as a mark for entering her 50s. However, it should be noted that very few participants make such remarks.

(Lindberg Falk 2007: 31–32). In addition, a new rite of passage can also potentially lead to social change.

Though rites of passage are not specifically a focus of this dissertation, it is interesting to note Turner's (1969) rethinking of Van Gennep's original triadic model in which individuals pass through in three stages: separation, the liminal state, and aggregation. While Turner agreed with Van Gennep regarding the importance in rite of passage of social separation from society, of the liminality of the rite itself, and of the rite's concluding with a reintegration into the society, he expands considerably on the basic structure set out by van Gennep. Turner (1969), in particular, focuses on the social cohesion of initiates within the liminal, transformation state, suggesting that the leaving past identities itself created communal coherence. For Turner, it is the so-called 'communitas' initiates experience as a group that not only seals their separation from society, but that creates social cohesion amongst those experiencing together a deeply meaningful form of psychological and social transformation. Importantly, Turner argues that the dialectic between communitas and the structure of the outside society is what makes it possible for society to function normally. Thus, successful forms of communitas not only bind initiates together meaningfully, but also facilitate the restructuring of society more generally. In this way, the temporary *samaneri* ordination can be seen not only as a means of religious fulfillment for those individuals who become female monastics, but also as a structure through which Thai society is itself transformed.

Importantly, my data reveal that similar to the function of men's temporary ordination the *samaneri* ordination currently acts as a channel for participants to repay the debt to parents. As shown in the last section, to be ordained in order to repay parental debt is widespread among the temporary *samaneri* and having the capability to do so is both highly meaningful and empowering. This significant function of the temporary *samaneri* ordination is, thus, the focus of this section in which we will see how the wearing of saffron robes allows women to repay the debt to their parents in ways they were never before able to.



#### 7.4.1. Access to sacredness and social values: the saffron robes that ordinary women can wear

The saffron robes in Thai society are often not seen as mere materials – they embody social values and can even be seen as inherently sacred. As a Thai Buddhist, I was regularly assumed by my informants to intuitively know about the importance of the saffron robes. Indeed, their taken-for-granted significance underlines their centrality and attests to their power and prevalence. Indeed, the literature has also noted the social significance of the saffron robes (e.g. Varaporn 2006; Seeger 2009). For example, Seeger (2009: 812) notes that the saffron robes in Thai society are a ‘powerful cultural symbol’ that are sometimes regarded as having magical power. Itoh (2013: 395) remarks that, while the saffron robes tend to be treated as insignificant in the *bhikkhuni* debates, they in fact have an importance that is ‘real and significant’ beyond being merely a form of clothing that symbolizes monasticism.

The saffron robes also appear to interrelate with the ordination in repaying the debt to parents. During the ordination ceremonies of male candidates becoming novices or monks, a story named the ‘Blessing of the Ordination’ (*anisong buat*) is often read (Keyes 1984: 227–228). The story mainly concerns how a mother is saved from hell through her son’s ordination and particularly by thinking about his saffron robes (*ibid.*). This story also seems to relate to the reportedly common belief in Thai society that mothers can ‘cling on to the saffron robes of their sons in order to ascend to heaven’ (*ko chai phalueang lukchai khuen sawan*) (Kunlavir 2006: 4; Suthada 2014: 23).

In spite of their deep social importance, before the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni*, the saffron robes remained inaccessible to women in general. Moreover, women and the saffron robes also usually have to be kept apart, as those who wear them are monks of the opposite sex. For instance, in offering alms to monks (who wear the saffron robes), men can give the alms to monks directly, but women have to put them on the monks’ prepared cloths for them to pick up (Terwiel 2012: 112). Most women have also been instructed to stay away from monks since they were young (*ibid.*: 50), which by default includes staying away from the saffron robes. When women happen to touch the saffron robes accidentally, they may become worried, and some even post their concerns on the internet (e.g. Pantip

Web Board 2015). Cook (2015, personal conversation) also told me that, while she was at a monastery in Thailand, she happened to accidentally touch the saffron robes, which made everyone who observed this just stop what they were doing and gasp. Coming into contact with the saffron robes is socially assumed to be traditionally forbidden for women; therefore, women wearing the saffron robes is beyond the imagination of many. Indeed, Varaporn (2006: 245) describes the wearing of robes by women as ‘counterintuitive at best’ and ‘at worst sacrilegious’ to many Thais.

What counterbalances the ‘cognitive dissonance’ from seeing women in the saffron robes, Delia (2014) proposes, is the shared thought that both genders can accumulate spiritual power through the practice of renunciation. Delia suggests that at Nirodharam the female monastics’ mastery of the practice helps negate the counterintuitive feeling arising from seeing women in the saffron robes. Thus, Delia implies that because these women are excellent at their spiritual practices, they are seen as deserving to wear the saffron robes.

I go a step further into making my argument. The availability of temporary *samaneri* ordination to the public indicates that the saffron robes are now accessible to women in general. Women do not have to be particularly outstanding in the practices of renunciation to be considered worthy of wearing the saffron robes. Ordinary women can also wear them and thus access the embodied values and sacredness once reserved only for men. Importantly, this also means that women can now be ordained in the saffron robes in order to repay the debt to their parents. The social implications of this significant act are discussed in the next section.

#### 7.4.2 The gendered notion redefined: women and repaying the debt to parents

As mentioned, in Thai society children are commonly thought to be in debt to parents and thus have to repay the debt to them (Lindberg Falk 2007: 82–83; Swearer 2010: 53). Repaying the debt is commonly seen as possible through the act of ordination (Swearer 2010: 53) and, as discussed, the saffron robes appear to be crucial to debt repayment as well. Merit accumulated from the ordination to wear the saffron robes can be gained by the monastics’ parents (*ibid*: 53–54), and mothers, in particular, can attain great merit (Ito

2007: 428). As mothers cannot traditionally be ordained themselves, it is also reported that being ordained for one's mothers is probably the strongest motivation for ordination of temporary male monastics in Thai society (Keyes 1986: 88). Pattana Kitiarsa, a Thai scholar, even expresses his feeling that being ordained for his mother is a 'moral obligation' (Pattana 2012: xiii).

Traditionally only men as sons can repay the debt to parents through ordination as women as daughters cannot do so. Instead, daughters are expected to repay the debt to parents through taking care of them, which includes supporting them financially (Mills 1997: 42; Lindberg Falk 2007: 83). However, as discussed, daughters' secular way of repaying the debt tends not to be as highly valued as the ordination of sons (Mills 1997: 41–42). It is even reported in an ethnographic work of Sinnott (2004:67–70) that a young Thai woman working in a bar nearly sold her virginity in order to help her family provide financial support for her brother's ordination to become a monk. Nobody was reported to be shocked by the woman's story (ibid.) and it is thus assumed that her case may not be uncommon.

Moreover, it appears ambiguous whether ordination of daughters to become *mae chi* can similarly function as the ordination of sons does to repay the debt to parents. As discussed, *mae chi* ordination tends to be private and uncelebrated, drastically different from ordination of men (Lindberg Falk 2007; Cook 2010). Lindberg Falk (2007) also notes that the social implications of male ordination and *mae chi* ordination are different, particularly in relation to the parent–child relationship. *Mae chi* she talked with claimed that their parents could also gain merit from their ordination (Lindberg Falk 2007: 83–84). However, mothers of the *mae chi* felt ambiguous and did not seem proud, unlike those whose sons had been ordained (ibid.). This ambiguity about daughters' ordination as *mae chi* probably stems from the absence of the saffron robes. As discussed, ordination in order to repay the debt to parents seems interrelated with wearing the saffron robes.

Not having the capacity to be ordained and wear the saffron robes to repay the debt to parents has notably negative implications for women. Indeed, the ethnographic data presented here show that many women who participate in temporary *samaneri* ordination used to have negative feelings about their own gender. For instance, many had wished to

be born as men in their next lives so that they could be ordained, and some linked their lack of access to ordination to past bad *karma* that had made them be born as women. These negative attitudes appear to relate to their prior incapacity to repay the debt to parents through ordination and the wearing of saffron robes.

The current availability of temporary *samaneri* ordination now allows women to be ordained in saffron robes, and in particular to have the capacity to repay the debt to parents in this valued manner. Undoubtedly, this new opportunity is proving hugely empowering for Thai women. Now the traditional gendered notion of repaying the debt to parents is redefined to also have positive implications for women as well as men.

First, negative attitudes about the female gender can be potentially altered and eradicated. For instance, the ethnographic data show that many temporary *samaneri* who used to have negative feelings about their own gender to the point that they wished to be reborn as men have changed their minds because of the availability of ordination. The relatively common belief that being born a woman was because of past bad *karma* is potentially also transformed through this opportunity to be ordained and wear the saffron robes. Mim, for example, who was temporarily ordained at Nirodharam, exemplifies this change of belief.

Second, the social categories of daughters and mothers, including their traditional roles, can also be positively transformed. Through the temporary ordination, daughters can also now repay the debt to parents in the same way that sons can do. This new opportunity stands positively to alter both the roles of daughters in the family and what it means to be or to have a daughter. For instance, it becomes more likely now that daughters no longer have to sacrifice themselves to support the ordination of their brothers. Daughters in families that have no sons, moreover, do not have to bear the negative feelings that stem from their parents wishing to have children ordained for them. Their parents similarly can feel satisfied having no sons as their daughters can now be ordained for them.

Moreover, women as mothers no longer have to wait for having sons to be ordained and dedicate merit to them. Motherhood of a daughter thus becomes more valuable than it was only recently. Traditionally motherhood is already highly valued in ordination ceremonies (Ito 2007: 428–429), but it is limited to motherhood of a son. As daughters can now also be ordained with celebratory ceremonies, the motherhood of a daughter can also be

revered in ways similar to that of a son. In addition, women as mothers can now be ordained themselves without having to wait for the transfer of merit from their ordained children. As Luang Phi Buppha, a temporary *samaneri* aged 80 years old, aptly remarks, ‘now I don’t have to wait for my son to be ordained for me. I can just be ordained myself.’ It is thus evident that temporary *samaneri* ordination in the saffron robes empowers both the social categories and the roles of daughters and mothers. The effects of this change are nothing short of profound.

As Alcano et al. (2015) aptly note, gender ideologies and identity constructions are being locally reworked – ‘some are reiterated [while] others are creatively manipulated to comply with change and new expectations’ (ibid: 2). The transformation of gender norms and categories can also occur not because they are superseded by globalized discourses but because of this reworking of local ideologies and traditions that remain salient in everyday lives (Alcano et al. 2015). The positive transformation of gender ideologies concerning women through participation in temporary ordination is also possible not because of eliminating local values and ideologies. Instead, this transformation occurs because existing local ideologies are redefined to be more gender inclusive. Local traditions and values attached to ordination and the wearing of saffron robes are thus crucial in enabling this transformation, which empowers women.

To summarize, in this chapter I have examined the new temporary *samaneri* ordination for Thai women and its impacts on gender in Thai society. The chapter initially provided a background and overview of the temporary ordination that has been available to the public through *bhikkhuni* monasteries only since 2009. Indeed, the number of Thai women who become temporary *samaneri* is constantly growing and a minimum of around 1,434 of them have received the ordination across the country.

Then, based mostly on my ethnographic fieldwork at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the pre-ordination ceremonies on ordination day were examined. I noted that these celebratory ceremonies seem to be a new occurrence in women’s ordination. The chapter then looked at the ordination in relation to social relations, focusing on the importance of

families and the motivation of the women to become temporary *samaneri*. I proposed that families are important in the *samaneri* ordination and that the prevalent motivation to become ordained is to repay the debt to ones' parents, an opportunity once exclusively available to men.

Finally, the chapter investigated the impacts of ordination on gender. Here, I argued that temporary *samaneri* ordination becomes a vehicle for social change and its social potential is enabled through the local traditions and values attached to ordination and the wearing of saffron robes. Through the availability of the ordination, women in general can access the saffron robes and their embodied benefits without having to be outstanding Buddhist practitioners. Importantly, women can now repay the debt to their parents through the ordination and thus the once gendered notion of repaying the debt is redefined more equitably. The temporary ordination is thus argued to be empowering for Thai women in general, as it acts as a channel to transform gender ideologies and gender roles in a positive way. In the long term, the temporary ordination of women may prove to be the greatest social impact of the *bhikkhuni* movement on Thai society.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

Throughout the thesis a multiplicity of voices, local traditions, and local modes of thought have been taken into account. The work focused on *bhikkhuni* in relation to lay women and investigated a relatively unexplored aspect of the *bhikkhuni*'s social impacts on gender in Thai society. Data for the thesis were derived largely from my 12-months of fieldwork in Thailand through the participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires. In analyzing the data, the thesis examined the values of ordination and the social significance of women who assumed the fully ordained form as *bhikkhuni* in Thai society. It showed that the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* is not only relevant to individual women and other Buddhist renunciants hoping to seek ordination; rather, I argue that it has much wider social impacts. In particular, it was the domain of gender, subsumed under the guiding force of Buddhism to which the thesis paid particular attention.

This concluding chapter is organized to show the contributions of the thesis, particularly on specific topics of: (1) power, freedom, and gender; (2) materiality and religion; and (3) religion in society and empowerment. It then presents a section on potential future research. Finally, the chapter provides a summary of the thesis and reiterates the arguments made.

#### 8.1. Contributions

This thesis focused on a relatively under-researched aspect of the *bhikkhuni*'s social impacts on gendered Thai society, considering a multiplicity of voices, and particularly the underrepresented voices of Thai laity. It, thus, clearly contributes to a literature on contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* and on Buddhist women more broadly. Its contributions also extend to areas in the anthropology of religion and gender studies, particularly those concerning religious materials and religious women. In this section, I discuss specific

aspects of the dissertation's contributions to the topics of: (1) power, freedom, and gender; (2) materiality and religion; and (3) religion in society and empowerment respectively.

### 8.1.1 Power, freedom, and gender

As discussed throughout this study, the fully ordained form that contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* are claiming embodies deeply important social values and is endowed, therefore, with significant power and meaning. The form was once inaccessible to women, and assuming it still remains a controversial act. It is thus tempting to simply see the *bhikkhuni* as feminists who uphold values, such as gender equality, and exist as they do to upset patriarchal oppression. However, by taking the voices of *bhikkhuni* and novices into account, a different story is revealed. Regardless of existing nuances in their views, the *bhikkhuni* and novices I worked with uniformly express their disregard for worldly power and status. They are also not concerned with being identified as feminists. In addition, feminist discourse on gender equality and women's rights as such do not appear apposite in understanding them, as they similarly see themselves as monastics who are engaging in Buddhist practices to transcend gender.

How should we then regard these religious women who attain a high status in society and yet claim that they have never concerned themselves with power? Of course, they can easily be fitted into the framework of resistance–domination and they can equally be seen as resisting dominant structures of power, and patriarchy in particular. However, what do we make of the fact that they nonetheless totally reject that framework and many even feel offended when associated with it? These questions make clear how crucial it is to take local concepts, categories of thought, and systems of value into account in any discussion of power, and also why we should resist any easy description of domination and subordination.

In this thesis, I have thus reviewed the relevant academic frameworks that can be potentially utilized to understand female monastics and their shared commitment to transcend gender. I have shown that if the voices of actors do not fit into the framework of resistance–domination, insistence on its use can potentially lead to losing a more



comprehensive picture of the phenomena in question. I then followed Mahmood's (2001, 2012) insight—that assuming a universal desire 'to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from [the] structure of male domination' (Mahmood 2001: 206) should not be taken for granted. Instead, voices of actors that may not universally conform to this assumption should receive serious attention. Mahmood, however, appears to further advance the argument that pious women seem to exist beyond the logic of 'liberal thought'. In this regard, I differ from her and instead follow Laidlaw (2013), her main critic. I acknowledge that the term 'liberal thought' encompasses a variety of ideas. Religious practitioners, including *bhikkhuni*, also should not be seen as existing beyond the boundaries of its operational logic. I then followed Laidlaw's suggestion that we consider forms of freedom in local settings. Here, I examined the forms of freedom understood by *bhikkhuni* and novices of the two monasteries where I carried out research. Indeed, the female monastics' shared conceptions of freedom shows a new vision of what freedom can be and also what gender can mean.

Because *bhikkhuni* and novices (as committed Buddhist practitioners) share a common goal of reaching the ultimate goal of Buddhism – *nirvana* – they also tend to see reaching that goal as their ultimate freedom (*itsara*). As discussed, if we take into account basic Buddhist concept of the Three Characteristics that they regularly evoke in everyday life, we can better realize what freedom can mean for them. All things are understood to operate according to the concept of the Three Characteristics: they have no essence; they are impermanent; and they constantly change. If one cannot accept the change and cannot let go, one will suffer from the attachment. Only in reaching *nirvana* will there be no attachments or suffering, and that is why it is seen as the ultimate freedom. Thus, for female monastics, attachments that cause suffering are what enslave humans and stop them from being free. Therefore, they practise to gradually lessen these attachments in order to move toward the ultimate freedom. Freedom here refers to freedom from attachments that cause suffering.

This conception of freedom is notably different from those discussed by Mahmood and Laidlaw. It is, of course, not a desire 'to be free from relations of subordination' or 'from structures of male domination', the very meanings that Mahmood (2001: 206) criticizes

as not necessarily being universal. But it is also different from Laidlaw's (2013) view of religious practitioners in relation to freedom. According to Laidlaw, religious people appear to gain freedom only when they reach their ultimate religious goal; their acts to achieve it are seen as resonating with 'positive liberty' as they indicate 'the realization of one's true self' (ibid 154–155). However, according to the female monastics' conception of freedom, one can also experience freedom along the path toward the ultimate religious goal that is the ultimate freedom. Indeed, in gradually lessening one's attachments through Buddhist practices, one can gradually be freer from suffering. This conception also appears not to be similar to the idea of positive liberty as Laidlaw suggests; for freedom is not gained through being able to act as one's true self but through lessening attachments that cause suffering.

Moreover, following the line of thought of the female monastics' shared view on freedom, we can also see gender in a new way. As discussed, the *bhikkhuni* and novices engage in Buddhist practices to transcend gender. They share a notion that being men or women is merely an outer form and the gender of the mind is more important as it can be trained to be genderless. In this regard, I have argued that gender is seen as a form of attachment that needs to be transcended, because it hinders one from reaching the state of *nirvana* in which there are no attachments. The female monastics and their commitment to transcend gender can be understood as aiming to attain a form of freedom from gender— an attachment — in their journey toward the ultimate freedom of *nirvana*.

My investigation of the *bhikkhuni* and novices in relation to gender, power, and freedom reveals a new vision of what freedom and gender can be. It also offers a way to analytically understand actors whose voices do not fit into the framework of resistance–domination. Therefore, I believe that this study has made a new contribution to academic discussions on power, gender, and freedom in general and specifically when the discussions concern religious women.

### 8.1.2 Materiality and religion

We have seen in this thesis multiple examples of the social importance of the saffron robes in Thai society. They embody important social values and can even be seen as inherently sacred in themselves, particularly by the laity. This section focuses on this perceived sacredness of the saffron robes as religious objects, and their relevance to academic discussions of materiality and religion more broadly.

Indeed, understanding Thai views of the saffron robes can contribute to and substantiate claims in the literature regarding the fundamental importance of materiality to the study of religion (e.g. Engelke 2012; Meyer 2015). Moreover, it suggests that we should refrain from sweeping definitions of materiality in religion that do not adequately take broad local perspectives in different settings into account. Some recent prominent literature on the topic tends to conceptualize materiality in religion only as media. For example, in a chapter titled ‘Material Religion’ in *the Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Engelke (2012) states that ‘All religion is material religion. All religion has to be understood in relation to its media of materiality’ (ibid: 209). ‘Materiality’, he adds, ‘is the stuff through which the “religious” is manifest and gets defined in the first place: how Gods, or the gods, or the spirits, or one’s ancestors can be recognized as being present and/or represented’ (ibid: 213). Meyer (2015) also echoes Engelke’s view in seeing materiality in religion as media. Meyer (who bases her work in Southern Ghana) proposes that we should approach religion as multi-media (in which the media are not only limited to the text) and treat visual culture as a main medium of religion.

Of course, I agree that ‘all religion is material religion’ and that in the contexts of religions practised in many places materiality can be conceptualized as media, as the scholars suggest. However, in Thai society this conceptualization and definition of materiality in religion as ‘media’ appears not to be relevant.

In local modes of thought—which can broadly be described as ‘animistic’—materiality and immateriality can coexist, which is probably why material objects can be seen as inherently sacred. Take amulets for example. Stories of miracles resulting from the protective power of amulets are reported to be popular among many lay Thai Buddhists

who happily focus on the power of the amulets themselves (McDaniel 2011: 189). Likewise, in the case of the saffron robes, lay Buddhists I worked with tend to view them as inherently sacred and even seem to take that perception for granted. Thus, it is clear that for them these religious objects are not mere media to feel the presence of, or to connect with spiritual forms of immateriality.

In addition, while committed Thai Buddhist practitioners (such as *mae chi*, *bhikkhuni*, and monks) tend not to see religious objects as inherently sacred, unlike lay people in general, their views also cannot be fully understood through the academic conceptualization of religious objects as media. Cook, for example, (2012) suggests that committed Buddhist practitioners she worked with said that those who practise meditation have already been protected by an even greater power than that of religious objects. They also told Cook that these objects could be powerful only when the wearers observe Buddhist precepts. Cook thus argues that these material objects are ‘protective media’ that are not antithetical to Buddhist practices. Here, we can see that committed practitioners in Cook’s work do not see religious objects as inherently sacred. However, importantly their views of the materials (as protective media) are also different from those of academics, who see them exclusively as vehicles for connecting with spiritual existence. Instead, committed practitioners view them as protective materials imbued with power generated from their own Buddhist practices and those of other practitioners who blessed the objects.

If we consider Buddhist premises and levels of commitment to them, the different views of religious objects between committed Buddhist practitioners and lay people in general (who are not as committed) can also be better understood. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is *nirvana*, the ‘state’ with no attachments. Committed practitioners who aim to move toward it have to gradually eliminate all attachments. In this line of thought, materiality, including the inherent sacredness of religious objects, can be seen as a kind of attachment that hinders individuals from achieving *nirvana*. This is probably why committed Buddhist practitioners tend to reject the inherent sacredness of objects and focus instead on the power of Buddhist practices. By contrast, those who are not as committed to Buddhist practices may not yet feel the need to eliminate such attachments. This may explain why they continue to view religious objects as inherently sacred.

It is acknowledged that some scholars have reported on the ways in which local lay Buddhists in Thailand treat religious objects as inherently sacred (e.g. McDaniel 2011; Terwiel 2012) and in which committed Buddhist practitioners view them as protective media (Cook 2012). However, they have not yet linked their work to a broader academic discussion on materiality and religion.

Considering the cases of religious objects in Buddhism through a multiplicity of voices and local ways of thinking underlines the significance of materiality to the study of religion. It also reveals a new and different understanding of religious materials, as well as suggesting that we should exercise caution in making sweeping statements about the meaning of material objects for all religions without adequate understanding of their diversity and meaning in context.

### 8.1.3 Religion in society and empowerment

The findings of this thesis suggest that *bhikkhuni* as female monastics can empower lay women; this empowerment is very much based on local values attached to full ordination and can contribute to certain academic discussions. These are the discussions on religion in society more broadly, and specifically those concerning religion's empowering capabilities when attached to local contexts.

This thesis substantiates the claim that religion is not necessarily privatized by revealing that in Thai society religion is not separated from other domains of everyday lives, such as gender. Some scholars propose that religion may never have been privatized in some societies, and that the attempt to privatize it is specific to post-Enlightenment societies (e.g. Asad 1993; Tomalin 2015). For example, Asad (1993) suggests that the tendency to separate religion from the public sphere and limit its proper space to 'the right to individual belief' (ibid: 45) is itself a product of Enlightenment thinking. Following such thinking, this thesis attempts to contribute to a more recent literature that shows how religion can play a public part in society and constitute as much people's ways of living and being with one another as their sets of personal beliefs and motivations (e.g. Mahmood 2005; Cassaniti 2015).

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to academic discussions on religion and empowerment. Related to the line of thought that religion should be privatised is a seemingly dominant view in literature that religion appears antithetical to women's empowerment. This is probably why the topic of religion in society and its potential capabilities, particularly for gender and empowerment, remains under-researched (Tomalin 2015: 76). It is also suggested that this area deserves more attention in academia (e.g. Evans 2014; Tomalin 2015). This thesis shows how the *bhikkhuni* movement is empowering women in complicated ways.

Moreover, the thesis's findings indicate that the existing definition and conceptualization of religion and women's empowerment could be productively broadened. 'Religious feminism' is the term often used to discuss empowerment and religion. It tends to be defined and conceptualized in terms of women's utilization of religion as a means and a strategy to achieve empowerment (e.g. Tomalin 2006; Gross 2013). For instance, Tomalin (2006: 385) defines it as 'a strategy [that] is attractive to women who wish to employ a religious narrative to guide their politics of empowerment, rather than relying on the secular rhetoric of mainstream (Western) feminist discourses'. This thesis' findings, however, point out that women's empowerment can happen because of religion but is not necessarily as a result of a feminist agenda. As discussed, none of the *bhikkhuni* and novices see Buddhism as merely a 'strategy' to use to achieve women's empowerment; instead Buddhism itself is revered. Moreover, it is also largely because of their disassociation from feminist agendas and empowerment strategies that female monastics in Thailand both gain social acceptance and prestige as fully ordained monastics, while at the same time contributing to the empowerment of lay women.

In the end, therefore, I believe it is important not to conflate the intentions of actors and the social implications of their actions in academic discussions on this topic. The existing definition and conceptualization of religion and women's empowerment should thus be broadened to take this caveat into account.

## 8. 2 Potential future research

As a result of this study, future research might be conducted to further investigate social aspects of the contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni* such as language and education. Focusing on more *bhikkhuni* sites could also potentially reveal further nuances of the phenomena described in this thesis, as well as potentially novel ways that *bhikkhuni* may influence Thai society.

In this thesis, language was introduced as a serious consideration in examining the social identities and positions of Buddhist practitioners. Interactions between the *bhikkhuni* and laity were the focus of much of the research. Yet, there is still room for further investigation into the uses of language between other groups of people, such as amongst female monastics at the same or different sites, and between the female monastics and *mae chi*. Future research may reveal additional insights into these relationships, their positions vis-à-vis one another, and how such relationships are constructed and negotiated linguistically.

With regard to education, this thesis discussed the idea that temporary *samaneri* ordinations offered at Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam did not function to provide ordination for deprived girls as most participants were highly educated. Nevertheless, related empirical data from other *bhikkhuni* sites are yet scarce if non-existent, and it remains to be seen whether their temporary ordinations provide education for poor girls as predicted in the literature (e.g. Starkey and Tomalin 2013). Future research might collect data from other *bhikkhuni* sites such as Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama to further investigate this topic.

Furthermore, this thesis invites questions for future research on Buddhist women in other Theravadin countries, such as Sri Lanka and Burma; for the phenomena of Buddhist women assuming the *bhikkhuni* form is notably transnational. Indeed, Sri Lanka was the first Theravadin country in which contemporary *bhikkhuni* have been revived (in a controversial manner, of course), and it currently hosts the largest number of *bhikkhuni* globally (Mrozik 2009; Ito 2014). Burma, on the other hand, currently does not have *bhikkhuni*, as the *bhikkhuni* revival attempt faced strong opposition from most Burmese

Buddhist stakeholders (Kawanami 2007). However, Burma once did host a Burmese *bhikkhuni* who finally had to leave the country to retain her *bhikkhuni* status (ibid.).

This thesis has shown that the social significance of the fully ordained form is very much influenced by local contexts and it is through considering Buddhism as lived on the ground through a multiplicity of voices that its social importance can be realized. Indeed, Collet's (2006) insights on the historiography of Western scholarship on women in Indian Buddhism can, in a way, support the claims of this thesis and the necessity to consider a multiplicity of voices, constituting lived Buddhism, in studies of Buddhist women in society. Collet (2006) notes that textual sources tend to be prioritized in modern scholarship and certain texts, in particular, are valued more than others. This, she proposes, can lead to some distortions in the research. Instead, she suggests that all texts should be given equal value, seen as situated in their local contexts, and the multivocality of a text and between various texts treated seriously. While Collet's remarks are directed toward the study of texts and those who focus on them exclusively, they are pertinent to the study of social lives as well. Voices from all groups of people should be treated equally, seen in their local contexts, and their multivocal, taken seriously.

Therefore, taking the approach and concern of this thesis seriously, questions can be raised for future research concerning Buddhist women in society. For example, how does the social significances of the *bhikkhuni* form manifest itself in various Theravadin countries and to what extent do they resemble or differ from each other? How do cultural diversities and traditions influence the social significance of the *bhikkhuni* form in various countries, and what are the implications of the rise of the *bhikkhuni* both for Buddhist laity and for Buddhist women engaged in other renunciant religious forms? In countries in which contemporary *bhikkhuni* already existed (e.g. Sri Lanka), what social impact do they have and what roles do they play in the lives of laity? And in countries (e.g. Burma) that do not currently host contemporary *bhikkhuni*, would Buddhist women taking alternative forms be able to craft their forms to be as socially important as the fully ordained one? These questions remain open to exploration and, if the approach of this thesis is adopted, future research may reveal interesting findings with respect to shedding further light on the roles of Buddhist women in contemporary societies.



### 8.3 Summary

The thesis was structured in three parts: (1) the fully ordained form and contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thai society; (2) the *bhikkhuni*, gender, and power; and (3) the social impacts of *bhikkhuni* on gendered society. Part I explored the social aspects of the fully ordained form in relation to contemporary *bhikkhuni* through Thai discourses on women's full ordination and through the lens of language. It examined Thai social values embodied by the fully ordained form, social perceptions of women assuming this fully ordained form, and the perceived status and identities of contemporary Thai *bhikkhuni*. Part II explored the contemporary *bhikkhuni* and novices in relation to gender and power, as the *bhikkhuni* form was shown to be associated with status and wider gender ideologies. It focused on *bhikkhuni* and novices' perspectives on gender and feminism, on their narratives of seeking renunciation, and on their everyday activities in relation to issues of gender and power. In short, Parts I and II examined the social significance of the fully ordained form for women and the perspectives of the women who are assuming this form of the *bhikkhuni*. Importantly, these Parts provided a basis for further exploration in Part III. In its final part, this thesis investigated the social impacts of *bhikkhuni* on gender in Thai society. To do so, Part III prioritized the perspectives of lay people who interact with female monastics, most of whom are women (including women who were temporarily ordained as *samaneri*). The focus here was on roles *bhikkhuni* play in the lives of lay women, and the impacts that *bhikkhuni* have on these women and on wider gender ideologies by examining their everyday interactions and the temporary *samaneri* ordination.

This thesis suggested that the social significance of *bhikkhuni*, who assume the fully ordained form, can only be completely understood when the values of ordination are fully realized in their Thai context. It was also through realizing the social significance of the *bhikkhuni* that their social impacts can be examined. I proposed that it is a necessity to take an approach that concomitantly considers a multiplicity of voices, local traditions, and local modes of thought to achieve a full understanding of the *bhikkhuni*'s social significance and their social impacts on Thai society.

The thesis argued that the emergence of contemporary *bhikkhuni* in Thailand has wider social impacts on society in which religion is not separated from the domain of gender, but remains its guiding force. In this line of thought, the rise of the fully ordained *bhikkhuni* I studied is not only beneficial for lay women, but can even empower them. Through both full and temporary ordination, gender relations and ideologies are thus changing in positive ways for Thai women. Notably, this empowerment and positive transformation is not the result of a feminist agenda. In contrast, the female monastics I worked with uniformly emphasized Buddhist engagement as a means of transcending rather than transforming gender. It was arguably this transcendental perspective, similar to their shared self-presentations, that largely secures them social acceptance in assuming, as fully ordained *bhikkhuni*, this most significant and consequential religious form.

## Appendix 1: Interview questions and themes

### แนวคำถามสำหรับสัมภาษณ์ภิกษุณี สิกขมานา สามเณรี

1. ท่านรู้จักวัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม/ ที่อื่น (ขึ้นอยู่กับว่านักบวชพำนักอยู่ที่ใด) ได้อย่างไร และรู้จักเมื่อไร
2. ทำไมท่านถึงมาบวช
3. ทำไมท่านถึงเลือกมาบวชอยู่ที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม/ที่อื่น (ขึ้นอยู่กับว่านักบวชพำนักอยู่ที่ใด)
4. ทำไมท่านถึงเลือกบวชเป็นสามเณรี/ สิกขมานา/ ภิกษุณี ไม่เลือกรูปแบบอื่นอย่างเช่น แม่ชี
5. ครอบครัวของท่านอย่างไรบ้าง เมื่อทราบว่าท่านจะมาบวช
6. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อเรื่องการบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาชาขยผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์
7. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อว่าการเกิดเป็นผู้หญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ไม่ดีมาเมื่อชาติก่อน

### แนวคำถามสำหรับสัมภาษณ์แม่ชีที่พำนัก ณ อารามภิกษุณี

1. ท่านรู้จักวัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม/ ที่อื่น (ขึ้นอยู่กับว่าแม่ชีพำนักอยู่ที่ใด) ได้อย่างไร และรู้จักเมื่อไร
2. ทำไมท่านถึงมาบวชเป็นแม่ชี
3. ทำไมท่านถึงเลือกมาบวชอยู่ที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม/ที่อื่น (ขึ้นอยู่กับว่าแม่ชีพำนักอยู่ที่ใด)
4. ท่านคิดว่าบวชเป็นสามเณรี/ สิกขมานา/ ภิกษุณี หรือไม่
5. ครอบครัวของท่านอย่างไรบ้าง เมื่อทราบว่าท่านจะมาบวชเป็นแม่ชี
6. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อเรื่องการบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาชาขยผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์
7. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อว่าการเกิดเป็นผู้หญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ไม่ดีมาเมื่อชาติก่อน

### แนวคำถามสำหรับสัมภาษณ์แม่ชีที่ไม่ได้พำนัก ณ อารามภิกษุณี

1. ทำไมท่านถึงมาบวชเป็นแม่ชี
2. ทำไมท่านถึงเลือกมาบวชอยู่ที่วัดแห่งนี้ (ที่แม่ชีพำนักอยู่)
3. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับการบวชภิกษุณี/ สามเณรี
4. ครอบครัวของท่านอย่างไรบ้าง เมื่อทราบว่าท่านจะมาบวชเป็นแม่ชี
5. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อเรื่องการบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาชาขยผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์
6. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อว่าการเกิดเป็นผู้หญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ไม่ดีมาเมื่อชาติก่อน

### แนวคำถามสำหรับสัมภาษณ์สามเณรีที่มาบวชในโครงการการบวชสามเณรีชั่วคราว

1. ท่านรู้จักวัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯได้อย่างไร และรู้จักเมื่อไร
2. ทำไมท่านถึงมาบวช
3. ทำไมท่านถึงมาบวชที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ
4. ทำไมท่านเลือกมาบวชเป็นสามเณรี ไม่เลือกรูปแบบอื่นอย่างเช่นแม่ชี
5. ครอบครัวของท่านว่าอย่างไรบ้าง เมื่อทราบว่าท่านจะมาบวช
6. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อเรื่องการบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชายผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์
7. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อว่าการเกิดเป็นผู้หญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ไม่ดีมาเมื่อชาติก่อน

### แนวคำถามสำหรับสัมภาษณ์ฆราวาส

1. ท่านรู้จักวัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม ได้อย่างไร และรู้จักเมื่อไร
2. ท่านมาที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม บ่อยแค่ไหน
3. ทำไมท่านถึงเลือกมาที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม
4. การที่ วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณีฯ/ นิโรธาราม มีภิกษุณี/สิกขมานา/สามเณรี อยู่ มีผลให้ท่านตัดสินใจมาหรือไม่
5. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อเรื่องการบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชายผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์
6. ท่านคิดอย่างไรกับความเชื่อว่าการเกิดเป็นผู้หญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ไม่ดีมาเมื่อชาติก่อน

### Translated into English by the author

#### Questions and themes for interviews with female monastics (*bhikkhuni/sikkhamana/samaneri*)

1. How (and when) did you come to know about Songdhammakalyani Monastery/ Nirodharam/other *bhikkhuni* sites (depending on where the interviewee resides)?
2. Why are you becoming ordained?
3. Why are you choosing to become ordained and staying at Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam/other *bhikkhuni* sites (depending on where the interviewee resides)?
4. Why are you choosing to become ordained as *samaneri/sikkhamana/bhikkhuni* and not another form of renunciant such as *mae chi*?
5. How did your family respond to your ordination?

6. What do you think about the belief of ordination in the saffron robes for parents ‘to ascend to heaven’?
7. What do you think about the belief ‘being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives’?

**Questions and themes for interviews with *mae chi* who reside at the *bhikkhuni* monasteries**

1. How (and when) did you come to know about Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam/other sites (depending on where the interviewee resides)?
2. Why did you become ordained as *mae chi*?
3. Why are you choosing to stay at Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam/other sites (depending on where the interviewee resides)?
4. Do you ever consider being ordained as *samaneri/sikkhamana/bhikkhuni*?
5. How did your family respond to your ordination as *mae chi*?
6. What do you think about the belief of ordination in the saffron robes for parents ‘to ascend to heaven’ ?
7. What do you think about the belief ‘being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives’ ?

**Questions and themes for interviews with *mae chi* who are not at the *bhikkhuni* monasteries**

1. Why did you become ordained as *mae chi*?
2. Why are you choosing to become ordained at the temple (where the interviewee resides)?
3. What do you think about *bhikkhuni/samaneri* ordination?
4. How did your family respond to your ordination?
5. What do you think about the belief of ordination in the saffron robes for parents ‘to ascend to heaven’?
6. What do you think about the belief ‘being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives’?

**Questions and themes for interviews with *samaneri* who become ordained in the temporary *samaneri* ordination project**

1. How (and when) did you come to know about Songdhammakalyani Monastery?
2. Why did you become ordained?
3. Why did you choose to become ordained at Songdhammakalyani Monastery?
4. Why did you choose to become ordained as *samaneri* and not another form of renunciant such as *mae chi*?
5. How did your family respond to your ordination?
6. What do you think about the belief of ordination in the saffron robes for parents ‘to ascend to heaven’?
7. What do you think about the belief ‘being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives’?

**Questions and themes for interviews with lay people**

1. How (and when) did you come to know about Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam?
2. How often do you come to Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam?
3. Why did you choose to come to Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam?
4. Does the fact that Songdhammakalyani Monastery/Nirodharam hosts the female monastics (*bhikkhuni/sikkhamana/ samaneri*) play a part in your decision to come to the monastery?
5. What do you think about the belief of ordination in the saffron robes for parents ‘to ascend to heaven’?
6. What do you think about the belief ‘being born a woman is due to bad *karma* from past lives’?

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire distributed to urban, ‘ordinary’ lay people

แบบสอบถามเพื่อประกอบการทำวิทยานิพนธ์ปริญญาเอกของน.ส.คัคณางค์ ยาวะประภาษ

ณ University College London (UCL) ประเทศอังกฤษ

เรื่อง ทัศนคติกับสังคมไทย เน้นเรื่องความเป็นหญิงเป็นชาย / เพศภาวะ (gender)

1. เพศ  หญิง  ชาย  อื่นๆ

อายุ ..... ปี มาจากจังหวัด ..... อาชีพ.....

การศึกษา

- ประถมศึกษา  มัธยมศึกษาตอนต้น  มัธยมศึกษาตอนปลาย  
 ปวช.  ปวส.  อนุปริญญา  
ปริญญาตรี ปริญญาโท ปริญญาเอก  อื่นๆ(โปรดระบุ).....

2. ท่านคิดว่ามีทัศนคติสายเถรวาท<sup>271</sup>อยู่ในประเทศไทยหรือไม่

- มี (ไปข้อ3)  ไม่มี (ไปข้อ 5)

3. ท่านทราบข่าวเรื่องทัศนคติสายเถรวาทในประเทศไทยได้อย่างไร (โปรดเลือกเพียง 1 ข้อ)

- ทราบจาก  จากครอบครัว/เพื่อนฝูง/คนรู้จัก  
 จากสื่อต่างๆ (โปรดระบุ)  
 หนังสือพิมพ์  นิตยสาร  โทรทัศน์  
 Social network (โซเชียลเน็ตเวิร์ค เช่น Facebook/Twitter)  
 สื่ออื่นๆ (โปรดระบุ).....  
 จากหนทางอื่น (โปรดระบุ).....

4. ทัศนคติรูปใดที่ท่านรู้จัก และท่านเคยไปที่ที่มีทัศนคติหรือไม่

ทัศนคติที่ท่านรู้จักคือ .....

- เคยไปที่ดังกล่าว  ไม่เคยไป

5. ท่านมีความคิดเห็นอย่างไรกับการที่ผู้หญิงบวชเป็นทัศนคติสายเถรวาทในประเทศไทย

- เห็นด้วย  ไม่เห็นด้วย  ยังไม่แน่ใจว่าจะเห็นด้วยหรือไม่เห็นด้วย

ได้โปรดให้เหตุผลว่าทำไมท่านจึงคิดเช่นนั้น

.....  
.....

<sup>271</sup> ผู้หญิงบวชในผ้าเหลืองตามสายเถรวาท

6. ท่านมีความคิดเห็นอย่างไรกับคำพูดต่อไปนี้

	เห็นด้วย อย่าง มาก	เห็น ด้วย	เฉยๆ	ไม่ เห็นด้วย	ไม่ เห็นด้วย อย่าง มาก	ความคิดเห็น
ลูกชายบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชาย ผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์ได้						
ลูกสาวบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชาย ผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์ได้						
ไม่ว่าลูกจะเป็นเพศใดก็บวชเพื่อ ทดแทนคุณได้						
ผู้หญิงเป็นศัตรูของพรหมจรรย์						
ผู้ชายเป็นศัตรูของพรหมจรรย์						
ไม่ว่าจะเป็นเพศใดก็มีศักยภาพใน การบรรลุธรรมได้						
ผู้ชายสามารถบรรลุธรรมได้ ง่ายกว่าผู้หญิง						
การเกิดเป็นหญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ <b>ทำ</b> <b>ไม่ดี</b> มาเมื่อชาติก่อน						
การรับผู้หญิงเข้ามาบวชจะทำให้ พุทธศาสนามีอายุสั้นลง						

ความคิดเห็นอื่นๆที่ท่านอยากกล่าว

.....

.....

.....

เบอร์โทร/อีเมล/Facebook(ถ้าสะดวกให้สอบถามเพิ่มเติมค่ะ)

.....

.....ขอบพระคุณมากค่ะ...



## Questionnaire distributed to urban, ‘ordinary’ lay people (translated into English by the author)

This questionnaire is collected as a part of a PhD programme  
at University College London (UCL), England, of Miss Kakanang Yavaprabhas.  
The topic is *Bhikkhuni* and Thai society, with a focus on gender.

1. Gender  Woman  Man  Other

Age ..... years old From ..... Occupation .....

Education level

Primary school  Junior high school  High school

Vocational certificate  High level of vocational certificate  Diploma

Bachelor’s degree  Master’s degree  PhD  Others (please specify)....

2. Are there Theravada *bhikkhuni*<sup>272</sup> in Thailand (in your opinion)?

Yes (go to question 3)  No (go to question 5)

3. How do you know about the existence of the Theravada *bhikkhuni* in Thailand?

(Please select 1 option)

From  Family/friends/acquaintances

Media (please specify)

Newspaper  Magazine  TV

Social network (e.g. Facebook/Twitter)

Other media (please specify).....

Other channels (please specify).....

4. Which *bhikkhuni* you know? Have you been to a place with *bhikkhuni*?

The *bhikkhuni* you know is .....

I have been to the place  I have not been to the place

5. Do you agree/ disagree with women becoming Theravada *bhikkhuni* in Thailand?

Agree  Disagree  Uncertain

Please give your reasons

.....  
.....  
.....

---

<sup>272</sup> Women who received ordination and wear the saffron robes following Theravada lineage

6. What do you think about the following statements?

	Strong-ly agree	Ag-ree	Neu-tral	Dis-agree	Strong-ly dis-agree	Comments
Son(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven						
Daughter(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven						
People of whichever gender can be ordained for parents in order to 'repay the debt'						
Women are enemies of celibacy						
Men are enemies of celibacy						
People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment						
Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women						
Being born a woman is due to bad <i>karma</i> from past lives						
If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened						

Other comments

.....  
 .....  
 .....

Phone number/email/Facebook (if you are willing to be contacted again)

.....

**...Thank you very much...**

## Appendix 3: Questionnaire distributed to lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam

แบบสอบถามเพื่อประกอบการทำวิทยานิพนธ์ปริญญาเอกของน.ส.คัคณางค์ ยาวะประภาส  
ณ University College London (UCL) ประเทศอังกฤษ  
เรื่อง ทัศนคติกับสังคมไทย เน้นเรื่องความเป็นหญิงเป็นชาย / เพศภาวะ (gender)

1. เพศ  หญิง  ชาย  อื่นๆ  
อายุ ..... ปี มาจากจังหวัด ..... อาชีพ.....  
การศึกษา
- ประถมศึกษา  มัธยมศึกษาตอนต้น  มัธยมศึกษาตอนปลาย  
 ปวช.  ปวส.  อนุปริญญา  
 ปริญญาตรี  ปริญญาโท  ปริญญาเอก  อื่นๆ(โปรดระบุ).....
2. ท่านรู้จักวัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณี (นิโรธาราม) แห่งนี้ได้อย่างไร (โปรดเลือกเพียง 1 ข้อ)  
ทราบจาก  จากครอบครัว/เพื่อนฝูง/คนรู้จัก  
 จากสื่อต่างๆ (โปรดระบุ)  
 หนังสือพิมพ์  นิตยสาร  โทรทัศน์  
 Social network (โซเชียลเน็ตเวิร์ค เช่น Facebook/Twitter)  
 สื่ออื่นๆ (โปรดระบุ).....  
 จากหนทางอื่น (โปรดระบุ).....
3. ทำไมท่านจึงมาที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณี (นิโรธาราม) แห่งนี้  
.....  
.....
4. ท่านมาที่วัตรทรงธรรมกัลยาณี (นิโรธาราม) แห่งนี้บ่อยแค่ไหน  
 มาครั้งแรก  เดือนละครั้ง  2-3 เดือนครั้ง  ครั้งปีครั้ง  ปีละครั้ง  อื่นๆ (โปรดระบุ).....
5. ท่านมีความคิดเห็นและรู้สึกอย่างไรกับภิกษุณี / ผู้หญิงที่บวชเป็นภิกษุณีสายเถรวาทในไทย  
.....  
.....
6. ท่านรู้จักและเคยไปสถานที่อื่น ๆ ที่มีภิกษุณีหรือไม่  
 ไม่รู้จัก  รู้จัก แต่ไม่เคยไป โปรดระบุสถานที่.....  
 รู้จัก และเคยไป โปรดระบุสถานที่.....

7. ท่านมีความคิดเห็นอย่างไรกับคำพูดต่อไปนี้

	เห็นด้วย อย่าง มาก	เห็น ด้วย	เฉยๆ	ไม่ เห็นด้วย	ไม่ เห็นด้วย อย่าง มาก	ความคิดเห็น
ลูกชายบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชาย ผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์ได้						
ลูกสาวบวชให้พ่อแม่เกาะชาย ผ้าเหลืองขึ้นสวรรค์ได้						
ไม่ว่าลูกจะเป็นเพศใดก็บวชเพื่อ ทดแทนคุณได้						
ผู้หญิงเป็นศัตรูของพรหมจรรย์						
ผู้ชายเป็นศัตรูของพรหมจรรย์						
ไม่ว่าจะเป็นเพศใดก็มีศักยภาพใน การบรรลุธรรมได้						
ผู้ชายสามารถบรรลุธรรมได้ ง่ายกว่าผู้หญิง						
การเกิดเป็นหญิงเป็นกรรมเก่าที่ <u>ทำ</u> <u>ไม่ได้</u> มาเมื่อชาติก่อน						
การรับผู้หญิงเข้ามาบวชจะทำให้ พุทธศาสนามีอายุสั้นลง						

ความคิดเห็นอื่นๆที่ท่านอยากกล่าว

.....

.....

.....

เบอร์โทร/อีเมล/Facebook(ถ้าสะดวกให้สอบถามเพิ่มเติมค่ะ)

.....

.....ขอบพระคุณมากค่ะ...

**Questionnaire distributed to lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam (translated into English by the author)**

**This questionnaire is collected as a part of a PhD programme at University College London (UCL), England, of Miss Kakanang Yavaprabhas. The topic is *Bhikkhuni* and Thai society, with a focus on gender.**

1. Gender  Woman  Man  Other

Age ..... years old From ..... Occupation .....

Education level

- Primary school  Junior high school  High school  
 Vocational certificate  High level of vocational certificate  Diploma  
 Bachelor's degree  Master's degree  PhD  Other (please specify)....

2. How do you know Songdhammakalyani Monastery (Nirodharam)? (Please select 1 option)

- From  Family/friends/acquaintances  
 Media (please specify)  
 Newspaper  Magazine  TV  
 Social network (e.g. Facebook/Twitter)  
 Other media (please specify).....  
 Other channels (please specify).....

3. Why have you come to Songdhammakalyani Monastery (Nirodharam)?

.....  
.....

4. How often do you come to Songdhammakalyani Monastery (Nirodharam)?

- First time  Once a month  2–3 times a month  Once every half a year  
 Once a year  Other (please specify).....

5. What is your opinion of the *bhikkhuni*? How do you feel when women become Theravada *bhikkhuni* in Thailand?

.....  
.....

6. Do you know or have you been to other places with *bhikkhuni*?

- No  [I] know [other places with *bhikkhuni*] but have not been there.  
 [I] know [other places with *bhikkhuni*] and have been there.  
Please specify the name of the place.....

7. What do you think about the following statements?

	Strong-ly agree	Ag-ree	Neu-tral	Dis-agree	Strong-ly dis-agree	Comments
Son(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven						
Daughter(s) can be ordained in the saffron robes for parents to go to heaven						
People of whichever gender can be ordained for parents in order to 'repay the debt'						
Women are enemies of celibacy						
Men are enemies of celibacy						
People of whichever gender have capabilities to reach enlightenment						
Men can reach enlightenment more easily than women						
Being born a woman is due to bad <i>karma</i> from past lives						
If women become ordained, the longevity of Buddhism will be shortened						

Other comments

.....

.....

.....

Phone number/email/Facebook (if you are willing to be contacted again)

.....

**...Thank you very much...**

## **Appendix 4: Buddhist precepts**

### **The five precepts**

1. Abstain from killing
2. Abstain from taking what is not given
3. Abstain from sexual misconduct (e.g. having affairs)
4. Abstain from speaking falsely and incorrectly
5. Abstain from drinking alcohol or taking other intoxicants

### **The eight precepts**

1. Abstain from killing
2. Abstain from taking what is not given
3. Abstain from not being celibate
4. Abstain from speaking falsely and incorrectly
5. Abstain from drinking alcohol or taking other intoxicants
6. Abstain from eating food at the incorrect time (i.e. after noon until the next morning)
7. Abstain from dancing, singing, playing music, or watching entertaining performances and from using decorative flowers, perfumes, or cosmetics for the sake of beauty
8. Abstain from sleeping on soft cushions or luxurious beds and seats

### **The ten precepts**

1. Abstain from killing
2. Abstain from taking what is not given
3. Abstain from not being celibate
4. Abstain from speaking falsely and incorrectly
5. Abstain from drinking alcohol or taking other intoxicants
6. Abstain from eating food at the incorrect time (i.e. after noon until the next morning)

7. Abstain from dancing, singing, playing music, or watching entertaining performances
8. Abstain from using decorative flowers, perfumes, or cosmetics for the sake of beauty
9. Abstain from sleeping on soft cushions or luxurious beds and seats
10. Abstain from accepting gold and silver (including money)



## Appendix 5: The other *bhikkhuni* sites

### Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama

Thippayasathandhamma Bhikkhuni Arama is located on Ko Yo, a small island connected to the mainland and the city of Songkhla via a public road. It is the first *bhikkhuni* monastery in the southern part of Thailand. The monastery also has a branch in Surat Thani, another city in the southern part. The abbess, Sikkhamana Dhammadipa (already a *bhikkhuni* as of 2017), was Mae Chi Natthip Tanuphan since around 1997 and became Samaneri Dhammadipa in 2012. She has established her monastery since being a *mae chi*.

The *pabbajja* ordination the abbess received was conducted by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda who travelled with other four *bhikkhuni* to the monastery to confer the ordination in January 2012. Eight other women received the *samaneri* ordination with the abbess. Then, in November 2012, six of them, including the abbess, went to Songdhammakalyani Monastery to receive *sikkhamana* ordination (Moddaeng 2012; Chatsumarn 2016: 60–66).

In total, there were 22 *sikkhamana* and *samaneri* under the supervision of the abbess (as of 2014). The female monastics here took turns to go on alms round every day and lay women who stayed overnight followed them to assist in carrying the alms. The monastery also offers temporary ordination as *samaneri* twice a year and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Songdhammakalyani Monastery come to confer the ordination at the monastery.

The female monastics receive support from some local monks. An example of the supportive monks is Chao Khun Phra Phisansikkhakit, a senior and respected local monk, of Wat Chaeng, who attended the ordination ceremony and gave a sermon to the newly ordained *samaneri* in December 2013.

The monastery has its own website and Facebook page (<http://www.thippayasathandhamma.com/frontpage> and <https://www.facebook.com/พิพิธภัณฑ์อาราม-New-เกาะยอ-สงขลา-1533179656922737/>). It also features in a Thai documentary called ‘Real lives are more than dramas: *bhikkhuni*, women with the saffron robes’ (*Chiwit ching yingkwa lakhon: phiksuni phuying pha lueang*), which was

broadcasted on a public channel, Thai PBS, on May 2015 and is currently available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQoMMKJNdgs>.

## **A place under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi at Phuttha Witchalai**

On a second floor of Phuttha Witchalai, a building of Phranakhon Rajabhat University in Bangkok, was a small room where one could find female monastics under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi. The entrance of the room was made of transparent glass with a picture of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi, who was also known as Luang Mae Manora. The room was roughly divided into a reception area and an area to conduct religious activities. Remarkably, there was also a statue of Mahapajapati Gotami, which was a gift from Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. The appearance of the statue seemed to affirm the fact that Bhikkhuni Rattananandi and her disciples joined the Thai Bhikkhuni Network (Theravada) established by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in 2013.

This place was one of five branches under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi. The other branches were in Lamphun, Mae Hongson (the main one), Nakhon Ratchasima, and Patthaya. There was also a plan to build another branch in Songkhla. In total, there were two *bhikkhuni* and around 10 *samaneri* in all branches under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Rattananandi (as of 2014). They also offered temporary *samaneri* ordinations, starting from June 2014.

Bhikkhuni Rattananandi, the abbess, has been famous for her supernatural power since she was a *mae chi*. She received her *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka in 2011 with the solid support of her teacher who is a locally respected monk, Phra Achan Chatsak Thawonthammo (Khru Ba Num Yingyuen). For further information, see Samaneri Supanya 2012 and her Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/maeshemanora>). (However, according to her Facebook page, Bhikkhuni Rattananandi disrobed in June 2017).

## Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan

Phuttha Chatu Parisa Uthayan was located on the outskirts of Bangkok. From the outside it looked more like an office than a monastery. We also had to converse with a security guard before being able to enter the place. Inside, there was a small garden in the middle with a remarkable tall pole, which I was told was called the Asok pole (*sao asok*). Notably, there were no Buddha statues here and Bhikkhuni X (pseudonym) told me that they do not pay respect to the statues, only to the Tipitaka.

There were 19 *bhikkhuni* and four *sikkhamana* (as of 2014) residing at this place and at their other monastery in Yasothon, a city in the north-eastern part of Thailand. The monastery in Yasothon is called Watr Phikkhuni Patimokkha Thammatipitaka and was still under construction (as of 2014). They also offer temporary *samaneri* ordinations, approximately once a year, which started in May 2013. Sri Lankan monks and *bhikkhuni* are invited to conduct the ritual.

The *bhikkhuni* and their followers come from a Buddhist club of government offices in the Ministry of Industry. The *bhikkhuni* and novices here do not join the Thai Bhikkhuni Network (Theravada). However, they still visit Songdhammakalyani Monastery from time to time to converse with Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. To my knowledge, they are also the only group of *bhikkhuni* in Thailand, who do not wear a long-sleeved shirt inside the saffron robes. When being asked why they did not do so, they told me simply that no *bhikkhuni* in the Buddha's time wore it. For further information, see their Facebook pages (<https://www.facebook.com/Buddhacatuparisa/> and <https://www.facebook.com/vattabhikkhuniTH/>).

## Appendix 6: Additional Figures

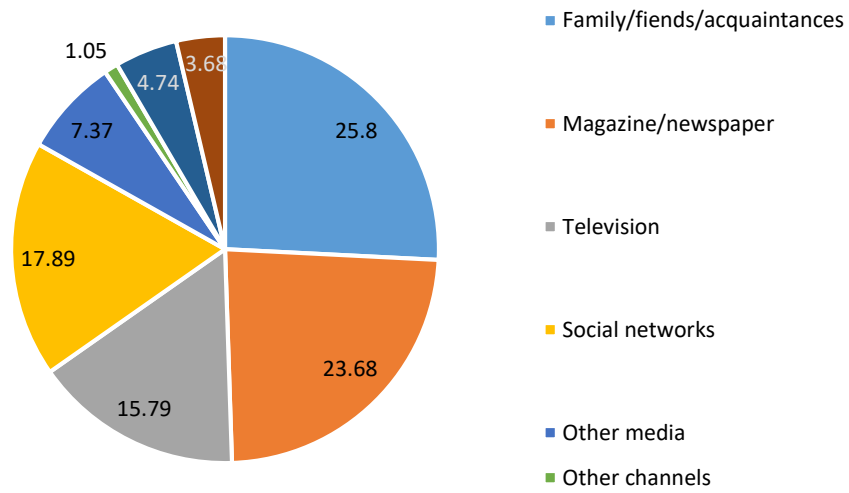


Figure 19: Channels through which ordinary laity came to know of the contemporary *bhikkhuni*'s existence (in percentages).

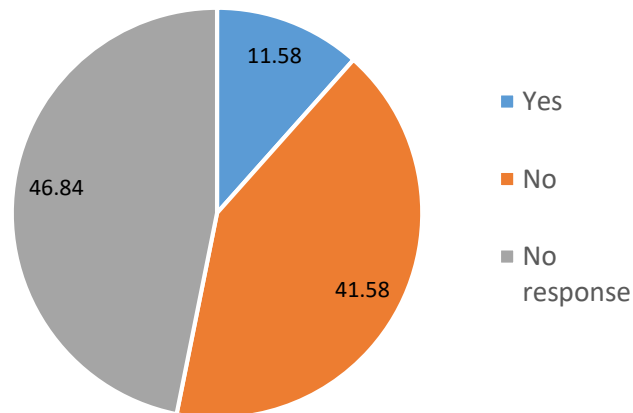


Figure 20: Responses of ordinary laity who know about the contemporary *bhikkhuni*'s existence whether they have visited a *bhikkhuni* site (in percentages).

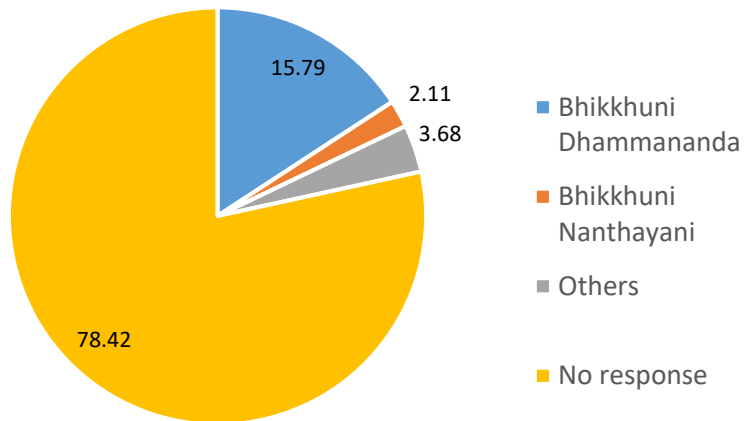


Figure 21: Responses of ordinary laity who know about the contemporary *bhikkhuni*'s existence about the *bhikkhuni* they know (in percentages).

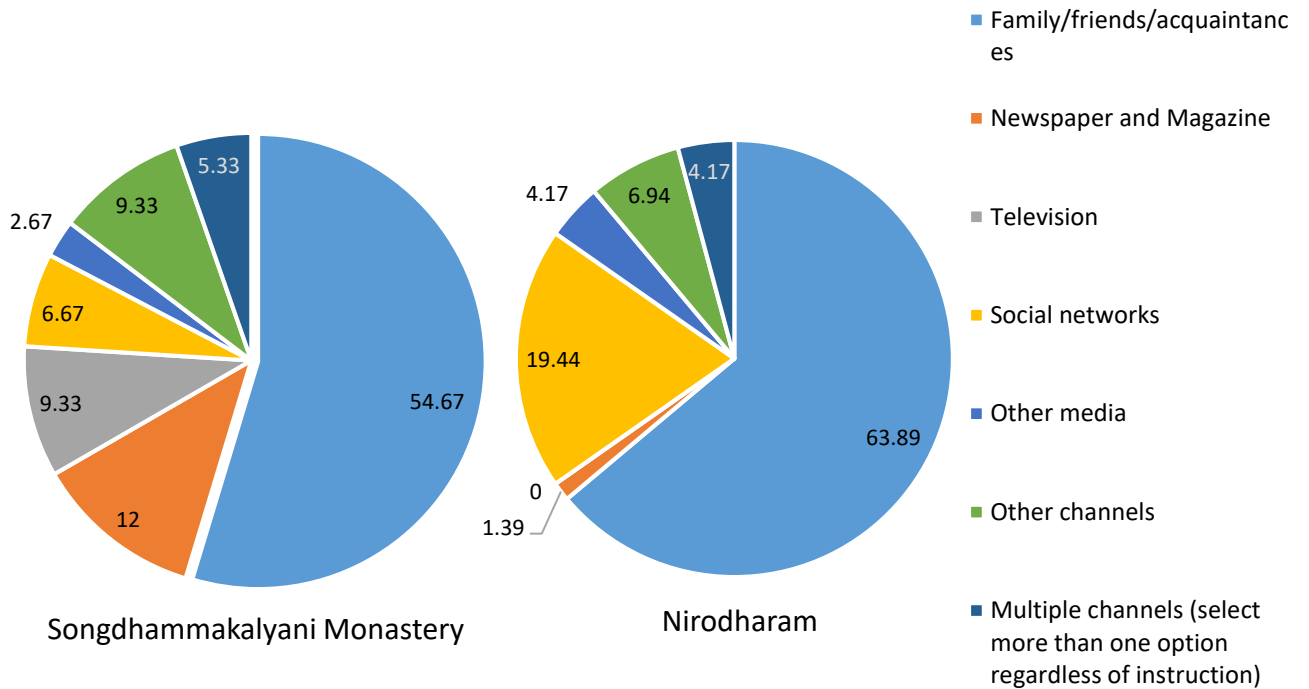


Figure 22: A comparison of channels through which lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam came to know of the monastery (in percentages).

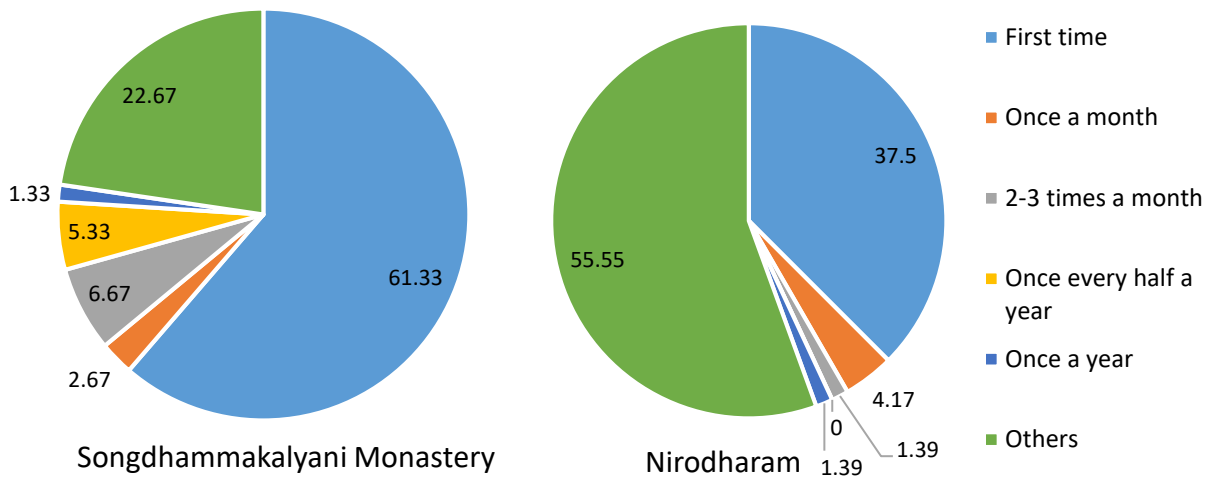


Figure 23: Lay visitors' frequency of visiting Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam (in percentages).

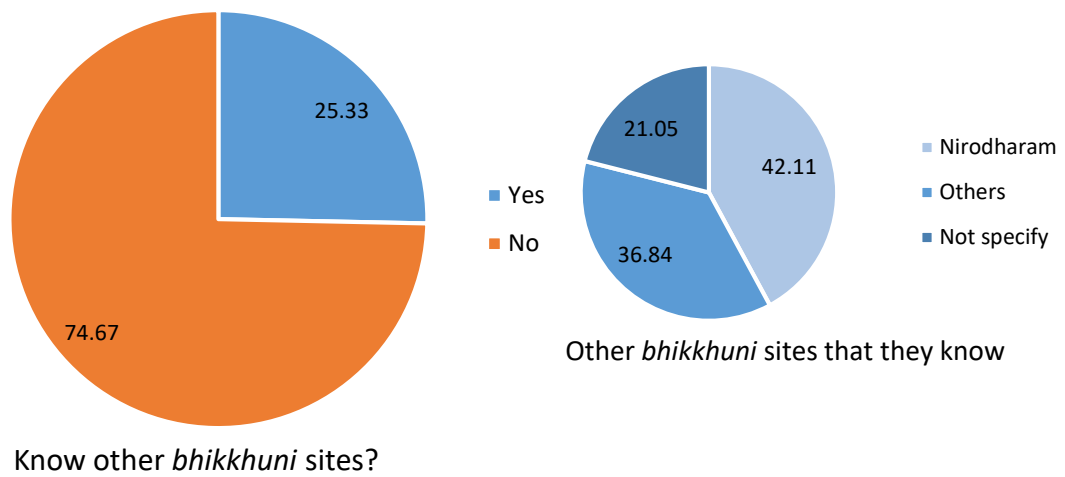


Figure 24: Knowledge of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery about other *bhikkhuni* sites (in percentages).

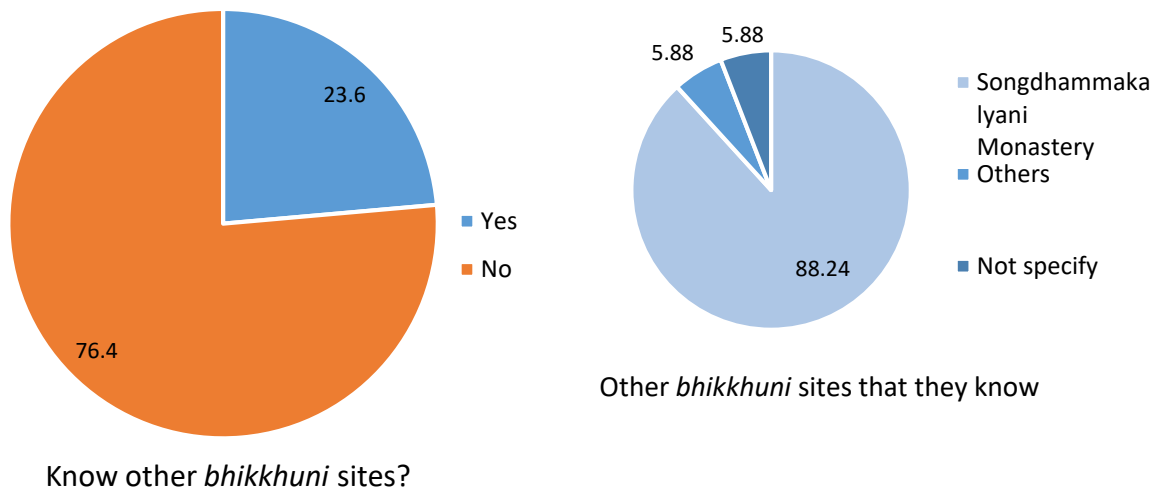


Figure 25: Knowledge of lay visitors to Nirodharam about other *bhikkhuni* sites (in percentages).

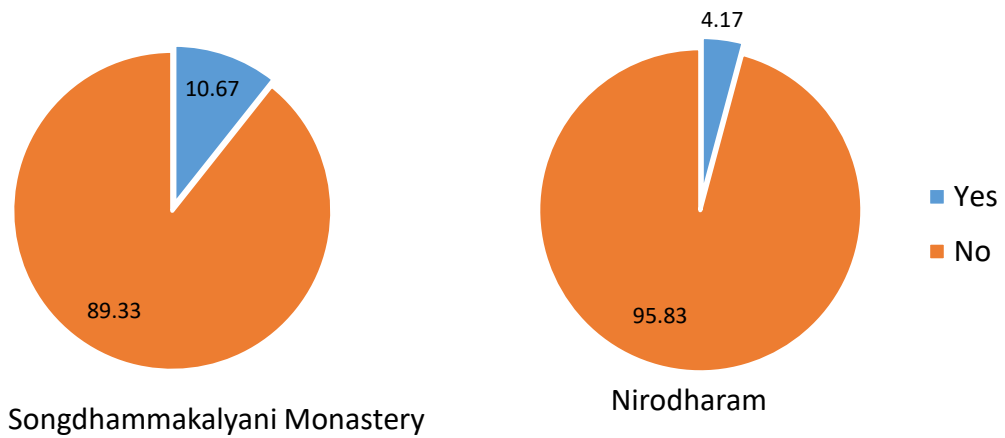


Figure 26: A comparison of lay visitors to Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Nirodharam about whether they have been to other *bhikkhuni* sites (in percentages).

## Appendix 7: Selected personal pronouns in Thai

### First person pronouns

<i>Chan</i> (rising tone) / <i>Chan</i> (falling tone)	Female speakers	The first is used mainly in writing. The second is used in verbal communication, particularly with friends.
<i>Dichan</i>	Female speakers	Used mainly in formal settings. Polite word.
<i>Ku</i>	Male or female speakers	Impolite word. Normally used among friends, particularly by male speakers. When it is used with people who are not close to the speaker, it can indicate anger.
<i>Nu</i>	Female speakers or male speakers who are young	Used when talking to a more senior person or a person of higher social status, such as a monk.
<i>Phom</i>	Male speakers	Used in nearly every situation. Polite word.
<i>Rao</i>	Male or female speakers	Used when talking to people of the same status, such as friends.

### Second person pronouns

<i>Than</i>	Used to show respect for the other person, normally suggesting that the other person is of higher status.
<i>Thoe</i>	Used with a person of a similar or lower status. Informal word.
<i>Yom</i>	Used by Buddhist practitioners when addressing lay people.



## Appendix 8: The eight *garudhamma*

*Garudhamma* (Pali), *Karutham* (Thai)

The eight specific rules for *bhikkhuni*

(Translated from a *Mahachulalongkon Ratchawitthayalai* version of Tipitaka in Thai, book 23, p. 334)

1. A *bhikkhuni*, even if ordained for a hundred years, has to bow down, greet, and properly pay respect to a *bhikkhu*, though he may have been ordained only for a day. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
2. A *bhikkhuni* should not spend the rainy season in a district where there is no *bhikkhu*. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
3. A *bhikkhuni* has to perform *uposatha* [special meetings of the *sangha* and for recitation of the Patimokkha rules] and listen to the teachings of a qualified *bhikkhu* twice a month. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
4. After the rain's retreat, the *bhikkhuni* must hold *pavarana* [to inquire whether they have committed any errors] with both *sanghas* [*bhikkhu sangha* and *bhikkhuni sangha*]. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
5. A *bhikkhuni* who has broken a serious rule must undergo *pakkhamanat* [a type of discipline] from both *sanghas*. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
6. A *bhikkhuni* has to make sure that a *sikkhamana*, who has completed her training in the six rules for two years, receives ordination from both *sanghas*. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.
7. A *bhikkhuni* cannot reprimand a *bhikkhuni* under any circumstances. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.

8. From now on, a *bhikkhuni* is forbidden to admonish a *bhikkhu*, but a *bhikkhu* is not forbidden to admonish a *bhikkhuni*. This rule is what a *bhikkhuni* should respect, honour, pay respect to, and strictly follow for all of her life.

## Appendix 9: Description of the project of temporary *samaneri* ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery

The data here are from the website: [www.thaibhikkhunis.org](http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org) [Accessed 27 December 2016]. Translation from Thai to English is by the author.

### History

Songdhammakalyani Monastery first held the project of *samaneri* ordination from 6 to 14 April 2009. On that occasion 36 women were ordained as *samaneri* and the generation was called *sam lo*. Every *samaneri* is trained to live as a monastic, for example, going on the alms round, eating from a bowl, and being taught the *sekhiyawat* [etiquette that monastics should follow]. Some *samaneri* have found solutions to their life problems and also brought *dhamma* back to their worldly lives (*chiwit thang lok*) to improve their lives. Relatives of the *samaneri* were also happy in a religious sense (*pluem piti*), at having the opportunity to take care of the *samaneri*. As the project has received very positive feedback, Songdhammakalyani Monastery offers it every year in order to produce Buddhist women who can be valuable human resources for the religion (*phra satsana*).

### Objectives

1. To offer the opportunity for women to receive *pabbajja* ordination according to the will of the Buddha.
2. To offer the opportunity for women to study the monastic rules (*phra winai*).
3. To create qualified Buddhist women.
4. To dedicate merit to the kings [of Thailand], both the current king and previous ones.

### Curriculum

- Basic Pali: read and write in Pali and the romanization of Pali

- Explanation of morning and evening chants
- History of the Buddha, and unique history of the Buddha (*phak phitsadan*)
- Tipitaka, the first teaching (*pathom thetsana*), important teachings, the Noble Eightfold Path
- Beliefs in Buddhism
- Deconstruction: elimination of misconceptions (*maya khati*) that shadow the beauty of Buddhism
- Herstory (stories of women in Buddhism)
- History of the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni sanghas*; the monastic rules; breaking the rules and the punishment; journey of the *bhikkhuni sangha*: sustaining the *bhikkhuni sangha* in Thailand and in other countries
- The First Buddhist Council (*pathom sangkhayana*). Sects: Theravada, Mahayana, etc.
- Development of Buddhism
- Buddhism in Thailand

### Target group

Thai Buddhist women who are ready to train themselves and to use the knowledge [gained from the project] to improve themselves and society.

They must be able to live a simple life with other women and to live harmoniously in the *sangha*.

### Cost

1,000 Baht

The candidates can pay on the orientation day or transfer the money to the monastery's bank account.

### Periods

6–15 April

5–14 December

Note: Please send the application in as soon as possible. There are limited places and the candidates will be considered on a first come first serve basis.

## Criteria

1. Permission to be ordained from one's father/mother or husband.
2. The monastery provides the candidate with the bowl and robes.
3. The monastery follows the way of vegetarianism.
4. Being trained in the monastery's Phutthasawika project is favoured.
5. Does not have a contagious disease. Does not have a disease that may be an obstacle to the ordination.
6. Does not have a publicly visible tattoo.
7. Does not use drugs (including cigarettes).
8. Does not have mental or spiritual problems (e.g. being disturbed by spirits).
9. Can attend the orientation day and other activities (those who are abroad can send their representatives on the orientation day but must follow updated data on the website).
10. Willing to join every activity during the ordination period and not alienate oneself from the group (those who have health problems can notify the monastics and will be assigned work accordingly).
11. Willing to act as 'an ambassador of *dhamma*' (*thammathut*) and create the correct understanding of the *pabbajja* ordination and the issue of *bhikkhuni* in society.
12. Willing to help in training the next generation(s) of *samaneri* according to one's own abilities.
13. Has attached a self-introductory letter to the preceptor [i.e. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda] (1 page of A4).
14. Can join in training for the ordination ritual (*fuek khan nak*) three days before the ordination day.

## Note:

- If a candidate wants a sponsor for the ordination [to pay the money], please notify the staff. The monastery will find a sponsor for the candidate.

- Write a self-introductory letter one page long (A4) describing one's life story, family background, education, work and, most importantly, 'why [the candidate] wants to be ordained'.
- Documents to be attached with the application: a copy of a national ID card, and one colour photo two inches in size.
- Application can be made in person at the monastery or through a registered postal service.
- If the application is successful, the monastery will contact the candidate to notify her of the date for the orientation.
- The candidate has to attend the orientation. If the candidate misses the orientation, it means that the candidate has resigned from being ordained.
- The candidate has to be able to join the training for the ordination ritual three days before the ordination day.

## Selected Glossary

<b>Thai</b>	<b>Pali</b>	<b>Sanskrit</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>Banpacha</i>	<i>Pabbajja</i>	<i>Pravrajya</i>	An ordination to become a <i>samanera</i> or a <i>samaneri</i>
<i>Bap</i>	<i>Papa</i>	<i>Papa</i>	Demerit, sin
<i>Bun</i>	<i>Punna</i>	<i>Punya</i>	Merit
<i>Binthabat</i>	<i>Pindapata</i>		Alms round
<i>Chi phram / Mae phram</i>			Women who temporarily stay at monasteries, dress in white, and keep eight precepts.
<i>Tham</i>	<i>Dhamma</i>	<i>Dharma</i>	The Buddha's teachings
<i>Kam</i>	<i>Kamma</i>	<i>Karma</i>	A Buddhist concept locally known in Thai society. Briefly, it relates to causes and effects determined by accumulated merit and demerit. It is interrelated with the concept of rebirth, the <i>karma</i> can cross past lives, this life, and/or future lives.
<i>Kilet</i>	<i>Kilesa</i>	<i>Klesa</i>	Defilements. The three most basic are greed, hatred, and delusion.
<i>Mae chi</i>			Thai female Buddhist renunciants who wear white robes, shave their heads, and keep eight to 10 precepts (usually eight precepts).
<i>Nak buat</i>			A Thai term which literally means 'ordained persons'. It is commonly used with Buddhist renunciants whose religious status is acknowledged.

<i>Nipphan</i>	<i>Nibbana</i>	<i>Nirvana</i>	The ultimate goal in Buddhism, the ‘state’ of a non-state with no attachments and no suffering.
<i>Nuea-na-bun</i>	<i>Punna-khetta</i>	<i>Punya-ksetra</i>	‘Fields of merit’. Merit fields. The customary notion which refers to Buddhist renunciant(s) who are worthy of receiving alms and thus generate merit for the alms giver.
<i>Phiksu</i>	<i>Bhikkhu</i>	<i>Bhiksu</i>	Monks. The Buddhist men, over 20 years old, who receive <i>upasampada</i> ordination and keep 227 precepts.
<i>Phiksuni</i>	<i>Bhikkhuni</i>	<i>Bhiksuni</i>	Fully ordained nuns. Female monks. The Buddhist women, over 20 years old, who receive <i>upasampada</i> ordination and keep 311 precepts.
<i>Phra</i>			A Thai term which is customarily used to refer to Buddhist monastics who have shaved heads and wear the saffron robes.
<i>Phra Winai</i>	<i>Vinaya</i>	<i>Vinai</i>	The monastic codes for Buddhist monastics based on the Pali Canon.
<i>Samanen</i>	<i>Samanera</i>	<i>Sramanera</i>	Novices. The Buddhist men who receive <i>pabbajja</i> ordination and keep 10 precepts.
<i>Samaneri</i>	<i>Samaneri</i>	<i>Sramaneri</i>	Novices. The Buddhist women who receive <i>pabbajja</i> ordination and keep 10 precepts.
<i>Sin</i>	<i>Sila</i>	<i>Sila</i>	Morality. (Moral) precepts.



<i>Phra Trai Pidok</i>	<i>Tipitaka</i>	<i>Tripitaka</i>	The Pali Canon. It literally means ‘three baskets’ and consists of three sections regarding (1) the rules for Buddhist practitioners ( <i>vinaya</i> ), (2) discourses ( <i>sutta</i> ), and (3) doctrines and teachings ( <i>abidhamma</i> ).
<i>Ubasika</i>	<i>Upasika</i>	<i>Upasika</i>	Buddhist lay women
<i>Ubasok</i>	<i>Upasaka</i>	<i>Upasaka</i>	Buddhist laymen
<i>Ubosot</i>			One of the main buildings in a temple. It is considered sacred and is where the ordination takes place.
<i>Upasombot</i>	<i>Upasampada</i>	<i>Upasampada</i>	An ordination to become a <i>bhikkhu</i> or a <i>bhikkhuni</i>
<i>Wihan</i>	<i>Vihara</i>	<i>Vihara</i>	In Thailand, the word refers to an assembly hall in a temple which usually hosts the main image of Buddha.
<i>Wai</i>			A common respectful gesture in Thailand, in which hands are pressed together in front of one’s chest before bowing. It is used both in greeting older people or people of higher status, and in religious activities, when the gesture is done more humbly and more respectfully.
<i>Wat</i>			A temple

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